

Micropolitics of Everyday Life and Agency in a Gendered Space: A Study of a Harijan Basti in Guwahati

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Abstract: *This study analyses how women in Guwahati's historically embedded slum, a Harijan Basti, negotiate the structural and spatial limitations manifested in the intersectionality of caste, class, and femininity. The study explores how home and domestic spaces become a contested domains of power, negotiation, and agency, with a focus on the notion of micro-politics of everyday lives, documenting how women see, understand, and behave within spatial constraints that are imposed from the outside and regulated by household dynamics using the existential phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty (1962) with an emphasis on embodied subjectivity and intersubjective meaning.*

The study attempts to frame the notion of agency of marginalised women as both situated in relationality and placed in accordance with a feminist spatial framework, which views subjectivity as continuously shaped by daily routine interactions, emotional labour, and social status in society. The paper claims that slums, which are frequently perceived in reference to precarity and hardships of everyday life, are also spaces where gendered agency is continuously engaged in symbolic production, reconstruction, and resistance.

Keywords: micropolitics, agency, negotiation, subjectivity, marginalised women.

Introduction

According to Lefebvre (1991), thinking about space transforms its existence and, thereby, social interactions continuously shape it. Because people think about ideas, words, and symbols pile up in real spaces, some places are brought back to life by imagined events or personal memories, even after

buildings vanish. From a social perspective, no space is ever really empty. They are shaped by dynamics of exclusions and inclusions, presences and absences. Therefore, the space is also influenced by gender. Datta reiterated Massey's 1994 observation that gender and space are closely related (Datta, 2005). The locations where people reside, travel, or stay are not neutral; they have gendered connotations.

Beauvoir's 1972 existentialist argument pointed out that becoming a woman occurs throughout life rather than at birth, demonstrating how socio-culture dictates what it means to be a woman. In keeping with that idea, Butler proposed in 1990 that gender is formed by behaviours that are repeated throughout time and space. Therefore, Space is more than just a setting; it influences how those performances take place. Female motion conforms to conventional patterns established by patriarchal architecture. Outside of private walls, their appearance is controlled and occasionally eliminated.

Slums in cities exacerbate issues related to class, gender, and caste. Living in precarity and marginalisation, people yet manage to resist and negotiate, according to Roy (2005) and Risbud (2003). Despite being referred to as chaotic, anarchic areas, slums contain areas where people behave purposefully. Women in slums, as Risbud pointed out, manage modest acts that subtly push boundaries despite being burdened by employment, household chores, and silence in public affairs. Slum dwellers are more than just passive victims; rather, they govern local affairs, create their own neighbourhoods, and challenge established boundaries. Through their daily choices and actions, women in these areas, especially those from marginalised groups, quietly oppose unfair city plans. Their work challenges dominant urban planning frameworks through negotiation and resistance that frequently overlook or exclude them. These acts of standing firm are based on their lived reality.

From a phenomenological perspective, women's lived experiences demonstrate the vital roles that emotion, memory, and embodiment play in the creation of space. Schutz contended that humans interpret their surroundings collectively rather than individually, deriving meaning from one another's perspectives, shared pasts, and intersecting realities. Everyday life of slum women involved routine, care work, informal labour, and negotiating with officials with power embedded in spaces which are oppressive as well as transformative in nature. This study tries to study how women reconstruct gendered spatial contexts through agentic expressions, ranging from emotional and embodied practices that attempt to challenge patriarchal spatial scripts to micro-acts of mobility and negotiation.

According to Simi and Futrell (2009), focusing on everyday resistance highlights the more subtle, often overlooked ways that women claim presence, autonomy, and purpose in settings where their visibility is regulated. This study investigates how gender and place contribute to one another through manifestations of power, resistance, and daily navigation by centring on the voices and experiences of women living in the marginality of urban slums. It offers a grounded, feminist critique of spatial injustice by challenging hegemonic urban imaginaries and attempting to highlight the lived reality of people at the nexus of numerous marginalities.

Gendered spatial marginality and the micro-politics of everyday life

In the premise of Harijan Basti, the discourse of subtle micropolitics of adaptation, negotiation, and agency, structural constraints impact women's daily lives. These include affective gestures, spatial silences, habitual rhythms, and bodily navigation, which are often imperceptible and microscopic behaviours that represent what de Certeau (1984) calls the "tactics of the weak." Rather than constantly being overt acts of resistance, these are nuanced interactions with space that exemplify women's embodied agency (Butler, 1993; Scott, 1990). The article adopts phenomenology to highlight women's lived experiences to comprehend how marginalised subjectivities are created both within and against caste, gender, and class frameworks (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Ahmed, 2006).

The study aims to map the structure of marginalisation as collectively internalised objectivity, or what Bourdieu (1997) refers to as the "structuring structure", rather than viewing it as an external institutional force. Women's perceptions of restrictions and surveillance are both individually and collectively held, leading to what could be called a "group subjectivity."

Because it shifts focus from large-scale, publicly visible forms of resistance to the regular power, constraint, and agency conflicts that occur in homes, the idea of micro-politics is essential to this study. In line with Scott's (1985) notion of "hidden transcripts" and Foucault's (1980) idea of dispersed power, micro-politics emphasises that women's actions, whether they be endurance, bargaining, quiet, or discreetly asserting, are not insignificant but rather essential survival and resistance strategies. The neighbourhood and domestic space (also known as the house) are disputed domains of micro-political negotiation rather than neutral or passive settings. In this context, "micro-politics" refers to the tactics, agreements, and modifications that individuals,

particularly women, use to exercise agency, negotiate hierarchies, or replicate control within constrained socio-spatial institutions. Actions like access, control and authority within spaces often don't appear overly political or transformational; however, women inhabit or exercise these spatial patterns through intricate experiences of agency and constraint, where roles, relationships and spatial boundaries are constantly reconstructed. The core premise of this study is to explore how their conscious awareness of their positionality allows them to strategically calculate and negotiate structures, some of which are flexible and others of which are rigid. Thereby, making the premise of home an important political site where power is distributed, contested, and reinterpreted in urban marginalisation situations, directing towards a deeper discourse about subjectivity, agency, and spatial agency. These practices of agency, despite being ingrained in social institutions, also highlight the prospects of subjectivation and resistance through the routine, embodied and relational of everyday. Parsons (1951), in his theory of social systems, argued that actors internalise "imaginative structures" that shape their behaviour and perceptions; these symbolic systems are selectively reinterpreted based on relational authority and positionality. The study emphasises how women's subjectivities are affected not only by the structure of urban poverty, caste-based marginalisation and patriarchal norms but also by the discourse of intra-gendered dynamics. Here, Talcott Parsons' (1951) concept of the "imaginative structure" helps to comprehend the contrast between structural determinism and symbolic plasticity. The discourse framework of Harijan Basti's gendered spatial politics sees subjectivity as both constituting and constituted. This study attempts to comprehend how even the most marginalised bodies engage in the symbolic production and reproduction of space, resistance, and community through spatial acts that are often overlooked. One of the main arguments this study looks at is how aware marginalised women are of their positionality within the structure of caste, gender, and class-based oppression. Even though many everyday instances of micro-navigation demonstrate the exercise of agency, it is still significant to ask from what source this agency arises. It does raise questions regarding whether her agency is relational, strategic, or reflexive, as well as whether these responses can be connected to a deeper phenomenological comprehension of self-in-structure (Parsons, 1951; Bourdieu, 1977).

This paper studies a phenomenological perspective which highlights women's subjectivity, consciousness, sense-making, and effective connections between space and power, bringing up the notion of how women in urban marginality try to navigate through a structure meant to keep them excluded

while restructuring their social and spatial reality. It acknowledges how women see, understand, and strategically react to and act on the limitations they encounter daily. The study adopted Alfred Schutz's micro-sociological approach in exploring how these women perceive the world from within, utilising their own typification, motivations and intersubjective understandings.

What this study focuses on is how women view, understand, and represent their marginality, as well as how they use micro bits of power in daily life, not just in what they do. The voids found in the structural domination and temporal rhythms of hope, precarity, and uncertainty ultimately give rise to these diverse and situational shades of agency. It is a dynamic, spontaneous and shared perspective of gender rather than a mere rejection of space. Thus, the slum, as a space, is a laboratory of gendered agency where women simultaneously negotiate visibility, mobility, safety, and domesticity rather than just being a source of precarity and dispossession.

Gendering the city, embodiment and production of space

Post-modern space theorists argued that social structure and space are always interacting in a dialectical relationship. As a result, space is constantly evolving from previous notions of a static substance that passively reflected the structures of society. Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977) stated that human agency and social structures are related. Agents reproduce the situations that follow social interactions in and through those actions. Social structure, therefore, is replicated by the repeated actions of individual agents.

According to Shilpa Ranade (2007), the body creates and experiences space. The discourse of the body adds to the preservation of social order and is not passive; cultural inscriptions are marked onto the body. Since the body is where everyday life is lived, carried out, and experienced, it becomes the locus of action where the structures of power are reinscribed through space by routine activities of moving through and occupying space. Space-time configurations create and re-create gendered bodies around which societal structure organises itself and continuously reproduces and is strictly regulated, and anyone who tries to disrupt the lines of legitimation becomes a threat to the social order. Aligning with Butler's (1990) argument that gender is performative, this manifestation is important to understand how gendered performances are spatially placed.

Here, Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" is analogous to the concept of "individual gender identity", which relates to the different types of socially formed individual identities with perceptions of sex differences. "Habitus" is defined as the system of schemes of dispositions, perceptions and appreciations emerging from the positioning in the social system that gives practice meaning as in a socialised subjectivity.

Women in urban India, to express and transform their identities within patriarchal institutions, navigate through symbolic boundaries, domestic work, and spatial constraints, as asserted by Chatterjee and Ghosh (2013). The space of home, which is often depicted as a neutral shelter, turns out to be a contested political terrain of agency, surveillance and limitation in their inquiry. It highlighted how the (re)production of gendered behaviours is determined by routines, spatial practices, and the micropolitics of domestic negotiation. However, within this limited area, women exercise agency by rearranging spatial choices, altering daily schedules, or using "marginal" spaces like balconies or kitchens for self-expression. One of the significant contributions of the article is to comprehend how gender and class interact to influence spatial agency. The study argued that women can renegotiate their presence and authority at home in many lower-middle-class households through their economic contributions. This aligns with a more extensive study on Kandiyoti's (1988) "Bargaining with patriarchy." The essay also builds on the notion of "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1985) by arguing that women's spatial presence can be profoundly found in their covert mode of political vocabulary that subverts hegemonic gender, which need not be overt and loud.

Chatterjee and Ghosh's article, in particular, focuses on the discourse of material and symbolic gendering of space. Female behaviour is governed by these spatial inscriptions, which reinforce moral surveillance, aligned with Foucault's (1977) concept of the panopticon, where discipline is internalised through visibility. For instance, a mother-in-law's presence in the living room signifies power, whereas an unmarried daughter sitting on the porch for extended periods of time may arouse. It supports Lefebvre's argument that space is a result of social ties; the domestic space cannot be isolated from the larger urban and sociopolitical context. As a result, the study of gendered home space provides a perspective on how conventional patriarchal norms are replicated and challenged daily, providing understanding into larger power dynamics.

Patriarchy, agency and everyday resistance

Anindita Datta (2021) implied Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "classic patriarchy" in India to understand the spatiality of agency, where women first submit to both men and older women when they attend to patrilocal households as new wives with little to no power. Women, initially, become compliant to these conventional appropriations so that they can obtain power and authority in their husbands' homes. By submitting to these patriarchal appropriations, women are later rewarded for their adherence and submission to the socially prescribed roles of good spouse, good daughter-in-law. Then, through "*doxic*" performances, these indigenous ideals are brought to life in everyday affairs. Pierre Bourdieu's *doxa* refers to the notion of ideas in society that are taken for granted, habitualized and appear natural and obvious.

To grasp the notion of how gendered actions become normalised in particular social and spatial contexts, it is important to comprehend the concepts of agency, habitus, field, and symbolic violence proposed by Bourdieu (1997, 1984). The term "agency", here, is used to describe the extent to which both men and women have control over their own lives. Human agency is a social engagement process that is both temporally and spatially anchored (Emirbayer and Mische, 1988). Bourdieu (1977) argued that the primary cause of women's subjugation is the gendered division of labour, which can be considered congruent with the notion of symbolic violence; it is a covert, euphemised, and imperceptible form of dominance that keeps dominance from being recognised. As a result, it is socially accepted as misidentified dominance (Krais, 1993). Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," which describes a dominating social group's propensity to generate consent by which individuals voluntarily accept a subservient status, can be compared to Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence (Gramsci, 1971). Moreover, Bourdieu (1977, 1984) argued that the best way to grasp the notion of gender relations is to understand habitual practices. According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus refers to the process by which a community's social norms and practices are gradually ingrained, initially through the "formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class."

The nuanced negotiation in "patriarchal bargaining" is captured by the idea of "embedded resistance," as put out by Ayala and Murga (2016) in their article *Patriarchal and women's multidimensional agency: A case study of a Mexican sending village*. Women rarely employ their work or household power as acts of resistance, and their agency is relational and

divided in local discourses of family, tradition, and morality. The article also argued that agency under constraint can take the form of subtle, ordinary behaviours that progressively challenge and reinterpret hegemonic norms, and that overt dissent is not necessary for this to be transformational. The notion of agency here is emphasised as a relational, contingent, and stratified process impacted by the interplay of patriarchy, class, migration, and ethnicity. Using a grounded theory approach, Ayala and Murga show how female labour challenges the strict spatial division both at home and in public. It demands an emic, contextualised understanding of women's lived experiences and resists rigid dichotomies. It also highlights that agency under constraints can be altered through subtle, everyday manoeuvres that progressively undermine and reshape hegemonic norms rather than through overt resistance. This argument aligns with Buitelaar's (2006) concept of the "dialogical self," in which women occupy several subject positions, and depending on the social circumstances, they selectively amplify or conceal identities.

James Scott's (1985) "everyday resistance" means hidden, silent, fractured, or seemingly unnoticed to others. This notion asserts that acts of resistance are so ingrained in society that they are considered normal. De Certeau (1984) also argued that the idea of "everyday resistance" describes individuals' application of their strategies in their day-to-day lives to influence events for their own benefit. These common resistance behaviours include humour, sarcasm, physical reaction, coping, avoidance, or accommodation. These behaviours can be utilised to define oneself as an "agent of change" since they help create perpetual identities.

Patriarchal expectations, internalised norms of subordination and limited mobility in highly gendered spatial environments are what influence women's habits in spaces like home areas. In terms of habitus, Bourdieu argued that the notion is not wholly deterministic or crises within that specific forms of agency are negotiated within strict patriarchal contexts by referencing the concept of feminist counterspace. These spaces emerge within hegemonic spaces of conventional patriarchal (e.g., women's collectives, self-help groups) or informal (e.g., kitchen conversations, communal water taps, rooftops, or lanes temporarily reclaimed by women) and function as spatialised zones of resistance. In these restricted settings, women negotiate and redefine the ingrained dispositions imposed by hegemonic institutions. These are strategic and corporeal resistances rather than revolutionary acts in the conventional sense of the term.

Haritas argued that women are not just victims of precarity but also active political actors in everyday social interactions that seem to blur the public and private domains. This argument aligns with Roy's (2003) concept of the "politics of poverty," which contends that women in their everyday struggles to survive, such as obtaining housing, water, or sanitary facilities, are intrinsically political. Haritas further expands on this argument by describing how women's political participation, especially at the local level, is based on gendered household chores. This is what Appadurai (2001) refers to as a "deep democracy" from below, where women are compelled to engage with local politicians, NGOs, and council members due to their caregiving responsibilities, especially in areas with poor infrastructure. Haritas, thus, contends that women are not passive dependents but rather participate in these informal networks as political voices capable of influencing local governance agendas. Haritas's work adds to the body of literature that the domestic realm is simultaneously redefined as a centre of political consciousness and mobilisation rather than acknowledging it as an apolitical setting. This neighbourhood activism of women arises from their marginalisation at home and their position in the household structure. This reversal of the public/private dichotomy opens up new theoretical opportunities to comprehend how subaltern political agency is created through care, bargaining, and survival strategies in addition to resistance.

Over the past few decades, the study of feminist resistance has moved from overt dissent, coordinated movements and public demonstrations to acknowledging the subtle, covert, layered and frequently undetectable acts of resistance embedded throughout everyday life. This political agency of women that doesn't come under the conventional conceptions of activism is crucial to recognise. Therefore, the lived realities of women who are structurally marginalised and are from urban slums in particular force us to reconsider how feminist politics, agency and resistance are carried out within sociocultural frameworks. This led us to a comprehension of mundane behaviours as political acts, especially those carried out by women in their social networks, households, and communities. Kazmi (2020) expands on James Scott's (1985) notion of "everyday resistance," which perceives resistance as hidden, silent and adaptive behaviours against overt defiance. Everyday resistance consists of bargaining, humour, sarcasm, evasion, quiet, and selective compliance. Such resistance becomes a crucial means of survival and transformation when overt rebellion is either risky or unsustainable. de Certeau (1984) argues that these strategies are an innovative response of the weak to the limitations imposed by the powerful hegemonic regimes. These actions are relational, relate to power, and are

intrinsically intersectional, differing according to caste, gender, age, and religion (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019).

Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology provides a significant epistemological breakthrough, particularly portrayed in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962), which contends that the discourse of subjectivity in the lived body (*corps vécu*) is not just an abstract awareness. The body is the primary focal point of perception and meaning-making rather than a passive object, as argued by Merleau-Ponty. He implies that motor intentionality, the body's directedness towards the world through action, feeling, and movement, is the foundation of perception and hence argues that "the body is our general medium for having a world."

This significant conceptual change enables us to move beyond objectivist interpretations of urban marginality in the context of Harijan Basti and instead focus on how Dalit women live, experience, and interpret space through bodily experiences. Their subjectivity discourse emerges through habitual and sensory interaction with the public and private spaces, and not just through public and private spaces.

By establishing an analogy between lived and geometric space, Merleau-Ponty argues that spatiality is experienced rather than abstract, while the lived space is intricately linked to a person's physical relationship to their environment, and the geometric space is abstract and Cartesian. This discourse could be understood in the basti, as women traverse the space using affective and sensory registers: the courtyard where solidarity is formed, the dark lane where harassment occurred, or the communal tap surrounded by chatter. These interactions show how space is not neutral but is produced and reproduced through gendered and caste-marked bodily actions. For example, a woman's choice to avoid certain areas during specific hours is a result of the phenomenological method of spatial negotiation rather than simply a response to danger.

Husserlian concept of intersubjectivity focuses only on the transcendental ego or rational empathy, which was rejected by Merleau-Ponty. Instead, he argues that the notion of intersubjectivity is to be located in bodily expressions and gestures, contending that we come into contact with people as embodied presences rather than abstract minds through their movements, facial expressions, or solitude. The concept of incorporeality is the mutual

imbrication of lived bodies in a shared perpetual field, used by Merleau-Ponty to rethink the notion of intersubjectivity. He emphasises the importance of perception as an embodied, pre-reflective way of being in the world, as against the Cartesian cogito, which locates consciousness in disembodied, introspective thought (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). His phrase, “I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it,” encapsulates this viewpoint (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:150) that subjectivity arises from one’s bodily interaction with the outside world rather than existing in an entirely separate inner realm. This perspective shows that subjectivity is purposeful, embodied, and directed towards the world through perception and movement rather than being the result of cerebral representation. Here, the body is more than just a commodity among others; it is a “body-subject” that makes the subject exist in the world. Merleau-Ponty, through this reconceptualisation, integrates the subject’s facticity and freedom within a dialectical unity, avoiding both idealist and empiricist reductions of consciousness. Social interaction happens through expressive bodies, such as glances, gestures, and silences, rather than as detached thoughts. Women in Harijan Basti’s spatial behaviours reflect a nonverbal negotiation of presence and power, such as sitting on doorsteps, hanging out in alleys, and avoiding eye contact; they may not always express agency or resistance verbally. These lived experiences of their bodily, nonverbal relationships co-constitute their social reality. This paradigm comprehends an analysis of how solidarity, resistance, or subordination are enacted through posture, movement, or retreat, where nonverbal communication plays a major role in the negotiation of agency. The theory of subjectivity by Merleau-Ponty challenges the extremes of social determinism and hyper-individualism. Low (1992: 45) argues that the subjectivity theory maintains that “the individual and the intersubjectivity are mutually defining.” This implies that subjectivity is always located within a historical and social context, and the subject is not passively influenced by it, but rather, the subject actively negotiates, appropriates, and opposes the social environment through embodied activities.

Field experiences

In Guwahati, *Harijan Basti* is one of the largest and oldest slums. Located in the *Uzanbazaar* neighbourhood, it is close to Guwahati’s oldest ship port, known as the old *jahajghar*. Basti comes under the governance of *Latasil Police Station*. The River Brahmaputra flows in the southern part of the slum. In 1936, the *Basti* made its appearance, and in 2009 Only it was officially recognised as a slum by the Guwahati Municipal Corporation.

As the majority of Assamese enterprises relocated to areas outside the state and used ships to convey their goods, gradually, Assam became a hub for a variety of migrant groups and was further enhanced by these transportation lines. Guwahati became the permanent home of migrants from various parts of present-day Bangladesh, Tibet, and India. Gradually, with time, these migrant labourers integrated into the larger Assamese community over time.,

57-year-old Sahida Begum, a marginalised woman from Mongoldoi, is an example of how marginalised women negotiate power and agency in a patriarchal and oppressive economic system. In the affluent neighbourhood, she works as a cook and earns a meagre amount of Rs. 3000 per month, contributing to her family dealing with domestic abuse and financial hardship. By becoming a contributor to the family's finances and a cautious negotiator of power, she demonstrates how she overcame domestic abuse. This study examines Sahida's experiences through frameworks of Bourdieu's social capital, Kandiyoti's negotiation with patriarchy, Foucauldian power and Mead's symbolic interactionism, in order to comprehend Sahida's empowerment and survival. .

Context and Background

Sahida's family comprises her husband, Mohammad Ali, who is unemployed, a son who works in the chocolate industry, and a daughter who, after failing her tenth-grade examinations, began stitching. Mohammad Ali used to be a shopkeeper, but when the government authorities destroyed his workplace, and he lost the only source of income which led to financial difficulties, tension grew as a result of this loss, and soon he indulged in the history of domestic violence and drunkenness in their marriage, before Sahida started working as a cook. This transition profoundly shifted the family's relationship and Sahida's position in her household. She was originally from Mongoldoi. Her transition aligns with Massey's (2005) theory, which argues that space is not merely a setting but rather the outcome of power struggles and social interactions. Her move from a dependent housewife to a wage-earning domestic worker is demonstrated by her marriage and subsequent employment as a cook in an affluent home.

Exercising Agency Through Economic Contribution

Her partner sought refuge in violence and alcohol after his place of employment went down; this incident, as argued by Dalit feminist authors like Kamble (1987), highlights working-class men's vulnerability. As a result of the loss of his economic dominance, her husband was faced with an identity crisis, due to which Sahida experienced physical aggression. However, the moment she started getting paid for domestic labour, the violence decreased, and the power dynamics shifted in the home. This aligns with what Foucault (1987) argues, that power is not only about oppression, but it may also be constructive and manifested in daily, ordinary behaviours. Sahida's employment of earning and contributing to the family's finances evolved into a subtle form of power that ultimately altered the dynamics of families. Her husband's temper decreased as her economic responsibility increased. Here, her employment became a significant source of agency, which challenges the conventional belief that women belong only in domestic roles. This stands parallel with Michael Foucault's theory that power is not held by a single authority but rather is distributed and demonstrated via everyday activities. How power functions in a negotiation is highlighted through Sahida's employment. Her agency is arising from her financial aid that ultimately alters relationships inside the home; this change didn't require any overt conflict. She negotiated and manipulated her husband's actions and gained respect (self-respect) by earning money, which serves as a reminder of the subtle but significant ways power is manifested in regular social contexts.

Relational Agency and Social Capital

Sahida's agency could be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital. Here, the use of familial social capital is highlighted in her son's proactive involvement in protecting her from domestic aggression and in managing household chores. This shift protects Sahida from overcoming patriarchal authority, which ultimately strengthens her position in the family. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of agency provides a perspective to understand Sahida's reaction, which became strategic and purposeful later. An aspect of agency based on social capital is highlighted here that allows her to negotiate for survival and dignity even in structures that challenge her presence.

Bargaining with Patriarchy

Sahida's experience exemplifies Kandyoti's (1988) notion of bargaining with patriarchy. She didn't try to challenge her husband's authority; instead, she strives for better treatment by seeking financial aid and strengthening her ties to her family. Her actions highlight the conflict between resilience and submission that is typical of patriarchal negotiations.

Meena Basfore, a resident of the Harijan Basti slum, 32-year-old. Her Husband is a 36-year-old, Akshay Basfore, who works at a fabric business, with two kids from her marriage, Raunak (6 years old) and Roshan (2 years old). Her case illustrates how women in marginalised communities negotiated power in strictly regulated patriarchal families. Meena's mother-in-law, a widow who is 55 years old, also lives with them. The majority of the authority to make decisions lies with her husband; this reflects a conventional patriarchal norm in the power of the home, where men dominate social interactions, household decisions, and financial matters. Meena's strategic actions in this arrangement describe what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) termed "patriarchal bargaining." She employs and negotiates with strategies to increase her security and standing within a patriarchal system by supporting and tolerating the very system that limits her. Meena subtly negotiates within the system by cooking her husband's favourite meals and staying away from eating out, demonstrating her love of home-cooked meals and thereby saving money; these acts, as a result, deepen her emotional bond with her husband by encouraging loyalty, trust, and dependence. These actions represent household responsibilities as an instrument to increase her presence by living up to the conventional standards of a "good wife." Upon asking who she would side with in a dispute between her husband and her mother-in-law, she unmistakably chose her husband. This decision highlights her awareness of how power functions in the dynamics of home relations and her quest to uphold protection and favour in a situation which is primarily dominated by men. Meena's application of essential tools for negotiating and claiming her authority at home includes emotional labour and compliance in a setting where women's autonomy and decision-making are restricted. It isn't always necessary for women to indulge in active and overt opposition to have agency under patriarchy. Rather, through cautious surrender and emotional control, it could be achieved. These discourses highlight women's intricate survival techniques in the face of intersecting issues of gender discrimination, caste, and class. This epistemology shows that women react to shifting socio-economic circumstances in response to dynamic patriarchal agreements.

Patiya Basfore, a 50-year-old widow, dwells in Harijan Basti. Her story highlights intricate relations that function in low-income urban regions between control over space, household economics and gender roles. She was married to Assam in an arranged setup from Muzaffarpur. She became a widow after her husband died of a long-term illness, after which Patiya took over primary responsibility for her family's financial and household matters. She lives with her four sons, along with their wives and grandkids. All four of them are working in the private sector. Rishi, 35 years old, her eldest son, attended school till an undisclosed grade, Anu, his 33-year-old wife, and their kids, Rahul and Rohini. Patiya's second son, Kiran, 33 years old, studied till seventh grade. His wife, Karan, is 30 years old, and they have two kids, Rashmi and Deepak. Her third son, Akash, is 29-year-old is married to a 25-year-old, Mausam; their kids are Mithila and Vineet. And her youngest son, Avinash, 27 years old, is unmarried. Despite the presence of other men, Patiya undeniably holds the authoritative figure of the household. She has a complete grasp of decisions made at home, which also includes grocery activities and financial management. The fact that all her sons hand over their salaries to her consolidates her strong grip over the household economics. On the other hand, the daughters-in-law are not allowed to participate in decision-making at all. They would be met with domestic abuse from their spouses if they questioned Patiya's position. This whole scenario highlights the power Patiya significantly holds over her sons and emphasises the gendered aspect of domestic violence. In addition to money, she has influence over social and physical facets of family life in addition to money, restricting her daughters-in-law's movement to their relatives. According to her, her youngest son says, "loves her too much," further consolidating her position and presence in the family hierarchy. The domestic dynamics in Patiya's home spaces align with what Kamble (1987) said about "the hypocrisy of Dalit masculinity and their female counterparts who internalise patriarchal beliefs and the desire to dominate." This argument discloses the arrangement they arrange for their own daughters-in-law to treat them as "slaves." If there isn't anyone else, at least they can manage them. Patiya, herself a marginalised Dalit woman, practised these patriarchal conventions by controlling her subservient daughters-in-law. This shows a hypocritical picture where women from the higher caste may oppress Dalit women, yet within Dalit communities, women like Patiya impose limitations and control mechanisms on younger women. The intersecting manifestations of space, financial aid, and individual agency are illustrated by Patiya's story. Here, she may feel more empowered and powerful as an individual, whose dominant presence and

authority, but her power also functions as a perpetuating tool and promotes hierarchical gendered dynamics. How women's authority can be complicated and paradoxical in a marginalised urban setting is showcased here.

Conclusion

The article attempted to study the subtleties of the gendered agency and daily spatial interactions of women residing in Harijan Basti. Marked by factors like overcrowding, informality, and inadequate infrastructure, the spatial environment of *basti* does not act as a passive backdrop but also as an active co-producer of social experience, subjectivity and resistance. Drawing on the ideas of scholars such as Doreen Massey, Bourdieu, and Merleau-Ponty, agency does not necessarily have to function through overt political struggle. Instead, it lies in the mundane manoeuvre behaviours of lived, embodied, and quietly etched into gestures, deferral, silences, and spatial routines. Urban marginalisation, therefore, is simply not a condition of pure victimisation but is a terrain of navigation, negotiation, recalibration, and partial autonomy, made possible by the idea of micro-political agreements. This study pushes for an advocacy of the complex, relational, and situational manifestations of agency, highlighting the phenomenological textures of marginalisation.

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