Abstract

Ulsoor (historically known as Halasuru) is a neighbourhood in the eastern part of Bangalore, with a history dating back to the 10th century A.D and a mythical past that crosses time cycles. The Purple Line of the Bangalore Metro which was commissioned in 2011 flows over it. On Old Madras Road, that runs through Ulsoor, the presence of the heavy grey metro pillars and solid overhead rail dominate the view. The street is almost obscured by the concrete structure. For a rider on the Metro, Ulsoor appears as a blur passed on the way. On the day of Ulsoor’s Car festival, an annual event celebrated on the onset of summer, its temple Car (teru) fills the street; its colourful canopy brushes past the grey rail as it trundles on its ceremonial path, pushed and pulled by residents. While neighbouring MG Road and the swathe of new developments being constructed along the Metro line echo the new spaces of a global city, Ulsoor’s spatial design and sociality (as displayed in its three key festivals analysed in the thesis) evokes an older form of dwelling such as the mohalla (Srivastava 2015).

The thesis takes a bifocal view of the street, which encompasses two seemingly disparate aspects of Bangalore: an old neighbourhood (Appadurai 1996) and the Metro, a transient ‘non-place’ (Auge 1995) and a symbol of the future city (Sadana 2010, 2018; Siemiatycki 2006). They appear not as binaries i.e., ‘archaic’ vs hypermodern/global, but as loci to ‘think with’ (Levi-Strauss 1962) so that a more nuanced understanding of the life of the city can be gleaned. A two-sited ethnography, enabled by a bi-focal view, offers a perspective to observe the parallels as well as the differences in the means and modes by which these two worlds are made: the meanings, practices, myths through which individuals construct belonging and inhabitation of places within them.

Overall, the thesis speaks against a totalizing narrative that presents cities as reified entities characterized by a name or an ‘essence.’ The city as a ‘proper noun’ (de Certeau 1984) designates an identity defined by administrative boundaries which subsumes its multiple life-worlds and reduces it to ‘brand’ which is used to attract investments, especially in the global market (Dirlik 1999). In this thesis, the ‘city’ (as a physical and discursive site) takes on multiple meanings that feed shifting desires and needs, all of which are fulfilled in specific places – the mall, the factory, the park and local mohalla or neighbourhood eateries, temples and streets, all of which constitute the city at large.
The focus on neighbourhood and the Metro attempts to shift the gaze from ‘the city’ as a ‘singular’ entity or a ‘proper noun’ and into its micro-spaces of dwelling where ‘the city’ is found and ‘urban life’ is lived and experienced. While gated communities, apartment blocks, and informal settlements (Boo 2012; Ring 2003; Srivastava 2015) or workplaces, places of leisure and worship could each be valid locations to explore urbanity and ‘find the city’, I focus on neighbourhoods as my interest is to understand dwelling and place-making as processes through which bodies are linked materially to landscape, community and nature. The research is driven by the need to make sense of how belonging is produced and re-produced in specific places. I suggest that belonging is forged through inhabitation i.e., quotidian rhythms lived by bodies, grounded in the landscape, and mediated through rituals – sacred, mundane, everyday, and of cyclical significance.

A neighbourhood like Ulsoor which has been inhabited across generations, and also continues to be a source of identity and roots for those who no longer dwell there, offers a rich site to explore these questions; the Car festival in particular, enables a conceptualization of how both bodies and place are produced and re-produced through the process of inhabitation. It is also a vantage point from which the processes through which the neighbourhood, while being located in ‘the city’ also produces the city at large.

The Metro line that runs through Ulsoor is an alternative site for exploring the meaning of the ‘urban’ and city of the future, given its significance as a metaphor and a catalyst for ‘the worlding of Bangalore’ (Ong and Roy 2011: xv) over the last decade. Attention to the production of Metro spaces and the subjectivities they engender, as well as techno-social relations that drive the Metro line provide insights into particular ways it produces the ‘urban’ and defines urban subjectivities.

Both the temple Car and Metro are viewed as assemblages of technology, humans and affective relations (Latour 1990, 1993; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Fox and Alldred 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2009). In these stories the assemblage comes together in unexpected ways that link both sites to the city, hinterland and lives of people. For instance, we find the ‘industrial-worker’ and subjects produced through embodied regimes in the ‘hi-tech’ workplace of the Metro, while we see the centrality of Car technology as the engine that produces the neighbourhood and belonging in Ulsoor.
The thesis also speaks to scholarship that calls for an enquiry into infrastructure that goes beyond ‘function’ (Anand et al 2018; Graham and Marvin 2001; Gupta 2018; Harvey and Knox 2015; Larkin 2013; Starr 1999). The ethnography reveals aspects of the Metro world that muddies the façade of ‘efficiency and rationality’ and reveals the ‘obfuscations, slipperiness, and ambiguity of the relations that go into making infrastructures a bedrock for society’ (Harvey and Knox 2015: 181). It brings attention to the techniques of production of the neighbourhood and contributes to an understanding of dwelling, belonging and ‘neighbouring’ (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010; Ibrahim 2018; Ring 2003; Thiranagama 2013) located in the physical terrain of place (Halbwachs 1980; Low 2003; Srinivas 2004) and produced by bodies (Bear 2013; Bourdieu 1977; Connerton 1989; Srinivas 2004; Stoller 1997). The thesis also lays out the particular ways in which both sites produce the urban through connections with the hinterland.

The thesis proposes that thinking about the city through the neighbourhood and the Metro may initiate a conversation between the two sites at the level of city planning and ‘development.’ In the wake of infrastructure development, neighbourhoods are glossed over and the impact of a passing metro is not considered relevant in the ‘larger interest of the city’ (Sadana 2010; 2018; Siemiatycki 2006). Foregrounding the story of neighbourhoods as sites of inhabitation, belonging and conviviality produced through shared rituals, in public spaces like the market, the playground or the street, may impact the terms in which city infrastructure is planned and viewed. It is hoped that attention to the material and ecological threads that constitute the urban will bring focus on imagining places for dwelling (Srinivas 2015) that are more ‘liveable’ in a world that is already approaching ecological or natural limits (Bennet 2010; Chakrabarty 2008).