

This little book emerged as a capstone project from my experiences working in participatory community development . I worked in India with PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia) for 6.5 months. I spent most of my time in Visakhapatnam located in Andhra Pradesh working with rural communities in Anandapuram Mandal (an area located about one hour from Visakhapatnam).

I am deeply grateful to the communities of Anandapuram Mandal who showed me indescribable kindness and shared with myself and the PRIA team their joys, struggles, and ideas for improvement in their communities. I am also so grateful to my kind-hearted co-workers who helped me with things big and small; from out how to eat with my hands to explaining complex community relations and sharing lessons, culture, stories, food, and so much more. Thank you, PRIA.

Thank you to UVic's Centre for Asia Pacific Initiatives for giving me this opportunity and supporting me throughout and to this day. I have learnt more than I thought was possible! This was funded by the QEScholarship Program.

It was a humbling experience for me filled with challenges, lessons, joys, and discoveries. To this day I still am figuring out how to express the experience as a whole with the complexities, intricacies, and feelings that wove together the time I spent in India. This little book is a collection of thoughts and beyond in which I am have tried to do that. I hope you enjoy!

- Kenda



Place, Belonging, and Home (s)



The ideas of place, belonging, and home (s) were thoughts that came up for me a lot while in India; particularly as I experienced so many new people and places. I am grateful that I was able to step into the homes of many different kind and gracious families, particularly during field work in Anandapuram. These experiences of places, homes, and people so new to me made me re-examine the way I conceptualize place, belonging, and home in my own life and others' lives.

It has made me think a lot about what a privilege it is to have a safe and secure home both physically made of of secure foundations, built for withstanding weather, running water, a place to cook, go to bathroom, and so on. Further, what it means to have a home and a place where one feels loved, cared for, safe, belonging, and more.

Home and place can be a physical space, but it also can be with certain people or feelings--such as being loved or safe.

In a world where so many people are displaced from their homes, and countless many more live without proper housing, amenities, and access to basic needs for living I keep turning thoughts over in my head about what it privilege it is to have a place, of belonging, of a safe, secure home, however that may look or feel for each one of us.

Where do you feel at home?

What does home mean for you?

In local and global contexts, how can we work to ensure every person is able to find a place where they are safe, secure, and cared for?



Filling My Belly, Filling My Heart

The way food and nourishment is used to show love, care, and kindness is something I experienced over and over again while in India. Around the world, our foods are so much more than just fuel for our bodies—food is a complex language of meanings and understandings.

Food is embedded within cultural understandings, social interactions, power, and more. Yet my own experiences around the foods of India personally are deeply tied to experiences of kindness and the sharing of not only food but also of cultures, stories, experiences, and more.

While sharing a meal with my friends and their families I also learned through the food and conversations about their own stories, traditions, values, and much more. Favourite childhood sweets of my friends were shared with me and with them, stories of their childhood experiences. My roommate brought me special foods from her home-town a state away from where we were living in Andhra Pradesh. While on a train ride in Rajasthan I had two aunties share their packed snacks with me. We spoke barely a few words of the same language in common yet managed to laugh and goof our way through the train ride--the entire interaction through their kindness in sharing their home-made goods with me.

Food allowed me to move beyond my limited language skills and experience and communicate in new ways I didn't know were possible for me. This provided me with sense of connection and new way of understanding the communities I was encountering. I will always value the experiences of sharing meals or a simple cup of chai with the different people I met during my time in India.



A kitchen set-up in one of the lunch spots in Anandapuram Mandal.

Samosas from my favourite samosa stall that I passed by on my way home from work.



A delicious "thali" which includes different dishes usually with different curries, a dessert, a rice, and other dishes.



The picture above is from a 35 hour train ride from Visakhapatnam to Delhi that myself and a co-worker took. His family packed enough food to stuff both of us for the whole journey including some of my favourites like lemon rice, chapatis, and various homemade chutneys. The train passed through multiple towns where my co-worker had family and friends and they met us at the train station as we pulled through to pass more food for the journey. I was blown away by the generosity and care shown by my co-worker and his family/friends...and the home-made food made the journey pass enjoyably.

Rajasthani snacks are pictured in the top right corner where I picked up a favourite snack called Bhel Puri. Street stalls provided not only delicious foods, but also a chance to chat and meet all kinds of interesting people. Street stalls on every corner and street in urban India provided endless smells, sights, and sounds as people visit their favourite stalls with familiarity and chatter.

Indian sweets were a delight for me. All different varieties and kinds. From milk based to coconut to deep fried. I lived across the street from a sweet shop and sweets became a way that I could express thanks to friends who would invite me over. Expressing thanks through food is something that I feel played a huge role for me in India, as well as at home here in Canada in a different yet similar way. Pictured in this photo to the right is a famous sweet shop in Jaisalmer!



Public Space, Loitering, and Gender



Gathering during community focus groups in Anandapuram Mandal

Public space, loitering, and gender may seem like disjointed entities. So, it might be even more confusing for you as a reader, if I say that what I'm talking about is all wound up in a chai stall.

Yes, I am talking about the delightful chai carts that can be found on almost any corner in a busy Indian city. Served in wonderfully small cups, the delicious chai is made hot (a lesson I learned after burning my mouth the first time) and fresh through a complicated process of straining and boiling accompanied with an incredible aroma. Even in the limited spaces that chai stalls are set up, such as street corners or the side of a road, there is always a sense that a chai stall is a "hang-out" place. The one I stopped today had a few stools set up and newspapers to read while sipping on the heaven-in-a-cup that is a chai in India. Yet I can't help but feel the gendered dynamics of the chai stalls I visit. There are exceptions of course, but in general a chai stall is a male-dominated space. The people sipping on chai while reading newspapers, chatting in circles, sitting on benches near the stall, are *mostly men*. This is a pattern not just limited to chai stalls. The public parks and sports fields are often a male held space. Cafes and restaurants and other kinds of food stalls are also highly gendered with the significant presence of men in comparison to women. Even out on the streets men often hold more space than women. Through my conversations with women here in India and my own experiences, the more I have become interested in the gendered dynamics of public space and how this is embedded in wider systems and forces in India. A public space historically has meant "open space" such as parks or sidewalks that are publically owned and managed spaces in opposition to private spaces such as the home.

Yet, the social management of these 'public' spaces are often contested through dynamics such as class, race, or gender to name a few. In India, the conversation around public space and women is often linked to the lack safety of women in public spaces as well as connected to social norms and cultural values about gender. Interestingly, although they acknowledge that the safety of women in public space is a serious issue, writers of the book *Why Loiter* Phadke et al. (2011) argue that the way in which safety of women in public space is discussed is problematic.

They argue that stressing safety without acknowledging the structural violence that makes safety a gendered issue is to turn a blind eye to the many dimensions at play. Furthermore, it also works to construct women as agentless victims who may end up 'in the wrong place' at the 'wrong time' and experience violence. The authors further discuss how although safety of women is key, it should not be used as a way to justify their lack of presence and engagement in public space. To do so, is to reproduce the same kinds gendered ideas that make public spaces more unsafe for women in the first place.



A chai stall in Delhi, one of the countless places I stopped for chai during my time in India.

The authors write that “most debates on public space are disproportionately focused on danger rather than pleasure...Pleasure or fun is seen as threatening because it fundamentally questions the idea that women’s presence in public space is acceptable only when they have a purpose” (Phadke et al., 2011). So, this is where loitering is connected. The authors emphasize that loitering, such as hanging around a chai stall, can be a part of shifting from a politics of safety to a politics of pleasure. In this way, the public space can be re-claimed as a space of enjoyment for *everyone* and contest many ideas of what a woman can or cannot do. The authors describe how the “right to loiter has the potential to change the terms of negotiation in city public spaces and creating the possibility of a radically altered city, not just for women, but for everyone” (Phadke et al., 2011).

Discussions about public space and women takes place in both in the online and real world of India as well. Feminist activists in India have engaged with public space in a many inspiring ways. Inspired by Phadke et al.’s (2011) book *Why Loiter* women have used social media to take action by posting pictures of themselves in public spaces by using the hashtag #whyloiter and claim space both physically and online.

In the online sphere, in 2012 following the horrific rape of a female student in Delhi after boarding a bus, a campaign called #Boardthebus aimed to create a public conversation around the safety of women and their right to public spaces. This trended online through its hashtag and raised awareness as well as solidarity for women’s “right to mobility and public spaces” (Eagle, 2015). This online activism was also coordinated with a call for women to ride public buses on March 8, 2014 (International Women’s Day) to take up *more* public space rather than *less*.

To wrap things up, I’d like to share some words from my friend Sudha Samyukta reflecting on public space and gender in India:

We (Indian Women) live in a situation where we have accepted and institutionalized "gendering" of spaces. How else could a chai stall be a "space" only for men? Where else will I feel like an achievement going to one of these little chai stalls around the corner and feel like I have conquered something? Why do I even accept it within my head, that this particular "space" is not for me/other women? As I ponder, it makes me sad and angry at once. I feel an achievement when I enter the space, when I return, I wonder, in amazement at the way I have gendered a space. Women need to claim public spaces, reclaiming is a later stage. If we can ensure that a group of girls in their most comfortable clothes can walk around the cities without fearing for their safety even if they are not in a group, maybe we can start a discussion on reclaiming any lost space. At this stage, women don't have a claim to any space whatsoever, forget the "male" spaces. I would however add that it is not just the corner chai stalls. Any public space, including the upper class spaces are not fully accepting of a woman. A woman that walks in alone is stared at, sized up and made to feel uncomfortable. Somehow, as a society we have not been able to make women feel safe, secure and contented. She is somehow uncomfortable and worried for herself, and that is acceptable. How else do you justify women only in groups, accompanied more often than not with male companions and seen only in the acceptable spaces which are not essentially "male" and definitely never alone?

For me, gender has also become a way in which public space, feminist activism, and 'loitering' are intertwined as well as raises further questions. What kinds of lens am I biased with when looking at these issues based on my own culture and socialization? How does 'loitering' in public space operate in diverse cultural contexts? What are the impacts of feminist activism around public space in India? How do these actions affect how women and men feel about public space?



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Participatory Community Development



Participatory approaches and an emphasis on participation, grassroots involvement, and bottom-up approaches to development have become accepted in the field as being best practice in this kind of work. I got the chance to engage in PRIA's participatory research working to listen to community members themselves and use their experiences as a starting point for development.

Although language was a challenge, I am deeply grateful for the time spent in Anandapuram Mandal when I sat with community members in circles or observed children drawing maps of their communities and self-identifying the issues they wanted addressed. It was exciting to see those who closest to the problems in the community sit together to not only identify the problems but also possible solutions.

Yet despite this, as I learned during my work with PRIA, there are many complexities and challenges to what participation can actually look like in action. Ideally, solutions will emerge from community members themselves who are most intimate with local issues and the context they occur.

I saw firsthand the way that participatory approaches can be difficult: Power relations within communities, arguments about issues that should be prioritized and raised, gaining of trust of community members to work together, and more. Participation of many community members is hard within a system that often privileges certain kinds of knowledge, voices, and ways of understandings issues and finding solutions. This can collide locally with issues of power such as gender and caste as well as with broader forces such as political influence or economics.

I learned through my work in participatory development that work must be done to create special platforms for *all* voices (specifically the marginalized). Only by truly listening and involving community from the very beginning to the end, can solutions then be moved towards that work for those at the local level.



Pictured above are community members working collaboratively to create a community map.



School children in this photo work in small groups to create community maps and identify their needs as children.

We used various participatory methods while working in Anandapuram in community development. For community needs identification we used various forms of community mapping, focus group discussions, and transect walks.

In particular, the community mapping shown in these pictures in it's diverse forms allowed community members to highlight physical aspects about their community along with discussing and identifying needs of their community. Along with adults, children and teens also took part and drew detailed community maps. I was blown away by the details and energy the children and teens put into their community needs identification. Their maps intelligently demonstrated the way in which as members of their community, their voices are valuable and powerful for addressing issues in the community.



Community maps can take on a diversity of forms including on dirt, paper and markers, chalk on pavement, or whatever community feels best working with.

India, Grazing Your Surface



From here, to there.
The spaces between
 the shades of grey
lightness and dark
 joy and pain

Arrival tastes like humid air and chaos

My centre is no longer a centre
Up is down

Swirls
of sarees in every colour
of autos weaving patterns back and forth
in and out
of sweet lychees, mangos, papayas
of chai stalls and panni purri
of mothers feeding babies on love and resilience
of sanitized shopping centres
 just over the wall, a community
of informal settlements
(unmarked, yet everyday proclaiming *we exist*)

of tangled wires overhead; sparks of electricity

 defying the odds
Like many humans I meet
 defying odds
Still there,
tangled perhaps
yet powerfully alive
 sparking

of coconut trees bending in the wind
of small hands and feet playing
dancing eyes
curious fingers

voices that echo during pooja
 goosebumps,
 despite the swelter.

A little palm presses against my palm
Skin to skin
Tentative
Yet bold

Of angry voices and fear
Of shadowy corners

Of resilience
 strong roots and many hands

Of Marigold fields, swelling seas of fire
Of open doorways
 laughter filling rooms
Of happiness, contentment,
Of struggle and strength

To leave is a bittersweet goodbye
 ripe with shadows and sunbeams
 rippling
 dancing
 feelings slippery to grasp

 I try to hold firm
hold steady
hold close
filling my cracks, crevices
Exhale
 Breathe.

Of heaviness, of abundance
A place where shades of light and dark
Joy and pain
 fill
the spaces in between.





Thank you for taking the time to peek through the pages of my capstone project.

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For more information on the UVic Centre For Asia Pacific Initiatives:

www.uvic.ca/research/centres/capi/

For more information on PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia):

<https://pria.org>

