Shrinking Public Spaces

The Writing on the Wall
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In a bid to curb writing on the compound walls by the public, the Bangalore Municipal Corporation is painting monuments, wildlife, landscapes etc. on them denying the underprivileged and marginalised groups spaces to express themselves. The public spaces to which common people had access to have now become the close preserve of either the government, or private entities.

I was a witness to two incidents recently in Bangalore. First, slogans against privatisation of higher education written by a student organisation on a compound wall near Mallewshwaram were whitewashed, and a picture of the Bangalore Palace was painted on the same space with a line asking the citizens to keep the city clean. Second, a small group of people who had gathered at a park in Rajajinagar to discuss problems in their neighbourhood was asked to leave by a security person because such gatherings were no longer allowed there.

Public spaces have been shrinking both in physical and metaphorical terms. The public spaces to which common people had access to have now become the close preserve of either the government or private entities. In order to ensure “order” and “control” the spaces that were frequently used for expressing ideas, opinion, anger, dissent and protest are now inaccessible.

No Writing on the Wall Please!

For those who wanted to communicate something but had no access to the mainstream media, one way of reaching out to the citizens was writing on the wall. Compound walls of cities and towns provided spaces through which several poor and marginalised groups expressed their plight and put forth their demands before the public. In the absence of resources to gain publicity through pamphlets, advertisements and press conferences, these groups resorted to expressing their grievances on the walls. Writing on the walls was an attempt to transmit messages into an otherwise inaccessible public domain. Of course, the walls became dirty and discoloured, but they served as means of communication when the conventional media never took notice of the grievances of the marginalised and the
underprivileged. For several movements in Karnataka, as in other states, walls have served as means of public communication and tools of mobilising people’s support. Movements of workers, farmers, backward classes, students, dalits and other oppressed communities in the past have used wall writings to express their demands and seek public support. The dalit movement which grew into a vibrant movement in Karnataka in the 1970s and 1980s used walls to educate people about the oppression and humiliation which they suffered at the hands of the dominant classes. Voices against inequality, injustice, exploitation, discrimination and state oppression have been raised from outside the boundaries of the established media institutions. At times these voices have been spontaneous, informal, unauthorised, illegal writings in shared public spaces. But they are important indicators of political, and social trends. For those excluded from the political power and ignored by the mass media, public spaces provided the only means of communication.

In its drive to ‘beautify’ the city of Bangalore, the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation (Brihat Bengaluru Mahahagara Palike) began painting the compound walls with pictures of monuments, wildlife, landscape and places of tourist interest in Karnataka three years ago. Officials believe that these pictures were needed to replace “ugly” posters and wall writings that disfigured the compound walls. While the dominant groups, government and private organisations have put up banners, flags, flex boards and hoardings in every bit of space on both sides of the roads causing inconvenience to pedestrian and to the traffic, the compound walls and walls of public utilities like bus shelters have been kept out of the bounds for the poor and the marginalised.

By getting the walls rid of slogans, appeals and messages, the Corporation has denied the only means of communication for the organisations which lack resources and ability to reach out to people through mass media. Many organisations of the oppressed communities gave call for strikes, protests and agitations on these walls. The corporation-sponsored paintings are now being used to mask the failure of the government in providing basic civic amenities.

**Inaccessible Common Spaces**

Inaccessibility of walls as public spaces for communication is only one aspect of the shrinking of public spaces. The bus shelters which also provided space for communication to several organisations engaged in activism have been dismantled and rebuilt to meet the needs of the advertisers and the publicity drives of governments. Since bus shelters are basically advertising facilities they virtually give no shelter to the passengers either from the sun or the rain. MPs and MLAs have also been using their Local Area Development Fund to erect such shelters as publicity tools. The bus shelters no longer belong to the public. They are publicity facilities for politician and private corporations.

Premises at public buildings, parks and town halls which served as common places of
gathering for the common people have also become inaccessible. There are gates and walls everywhere and entry is restricted. Decades ago the open space at the Gandhi Bhavan on the Mysore University campus had become a centre of activities for students and teachers as they often met there to discuss contemporary issues and plan programmes of protest. Inter-caste and inter-religion marriages were also held with writers, scholars and students taking part in them. Such occasions were celebrated with short speeches, biscuits and coffee. They were a tribute to Gandhi. But some years ago a barbed wire fence was raised around the premises and an iron gate was installed. Students and teachers no longer had free access to the premises. The university campus of Kuvempu’s is full of fences and walls today.

Several years ago the wide open space in front of the town hall in Mangalore city used to be a place where people, especially the old, met in the evening and chatted. For some, squatting on the wide steps leading to the entrance was a regular evening habit as there were no free spaces around that area. For many years that was also the space where people listened to radio and later watched television. Several groups of common people who did not have their own spaces to hold their meetings often met in front of the Hall. All that was over once the authorities decided to renovate the Hall and “manage it better”. The gates which used to be open throughout the day are now guarded by security men and opened only when a programme is held in the hall. What was once an open space in the heart of the city is out of bounds for the common people today.

Democracy weakens when private corporations and the government encroach on public sphere. With shrinking of public spaces the voices of dissent and protest are fading.