

Circulation and containment in working class Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad is a city divided—both metaphorically, as well as spatially. The eastern part of the city, once the site of the textile mill industry, is now dominated by small scale, informal enterprises. This paper draws from my fieldwork in the neighbourhood of Vatva, which grew around one of the city's GIDC (Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation) estates. Vatva, located in the eastern periphery of Ahmedabad, and now considered to be one of the city's largest Muslim ghettos, was constituted, in a sense, by the repeated episodes of violence that the city has seen. The first significant wave of new settlement in the area took place after the riots of 1969. With every horrific bout of violence, the area grew—adding more precariously placed housing arrangements to an already tangled landscape. Since 2005-06, when the town plans (which are the city's primary urban planning mechanism) were sanctioned for Vatva, the area has witnessed a new gentrification, with the construction of apartment complexes for middle class and lower middle class residents. This paper attempts to understand the location of Vatva within the larger landscape of the city. I propose to explore this, by engaging with three main themes.

i. Changing occupations and circulation: A large proportion of Vatva's residents were previously employed in the neighbouring industrial estate. A hub of mainly small and medium scale chemical industries, work in the Vatva GIDC was always hazardous. However, after the violence of 2002, many of the erstwhile links between the neighbourhood and the workplace were broken—through the strategic use of curfews, politics of discrimination, and because of the sense of insecurity that pervaded the area. From the relatively regular, though undoubtedly precarious work arrangements in the GIDC, many male Muslim workers shifted to auto driving. Through this occupational shift, I try to understand how routes of circulation emerge from this area. I examine how a seemingly 'mobile' occupation may effectively place limits on mobility.

ii. Circulation within the neighbourhood: This part of the paper engages with the social life of the neighbourhood. Through an understanding of gendered spaces, and the rhythms of women's worlds, I examine how boundaries are drawn in the area. A detailed exploration of women's mobility in the neighbourhood helps us to map out the networks formed with the larger landscape of the city, as well as the delimitation of social worlds.

iii. Imagining another world: Using a creatively misremembered life history of an old resident of Vatva, I attempt to draw out the possibilities that exist beyond the seemingly circumscribed world of Vatva. The narrator places himself as a central figure in several crucial moments, and describes in lengthy and intimate detail, the interactions that he has had with historically significant characters. Through this narrative, I try to chart out an alternative understanding of the contemporary social world of working class Vatva.