

## **Security and Agency of Women in the Hyper-Masculine Space of Local Trains in West Bengal**

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**Abstract:** *The essay focuses on the security and agency of women commuters in the mobile and contingent space of the rush-hour (colloquially called “office-time”) local trains – connecting the city to the surrounding suburbs – a space that can be construed as deeply ‘masculine’. Gendered discriminations or violence which take place in such spaces often threaten the general mobility of the female commuters compromising their security, and fundamental right to mobility. In the naturalised urban discourse in India, if on the one hand, women’s newfound access to “public” spaces, especially after the feminist reforms of various laws in the 1980s, is celebrated, in the mundane lived reality, on the other, their mobility is still being resisted by various degrees of gender discrimination. The essay is attentive to the plural and complex nature of the category that it takes as its subject, ‘women commuters’. In particular, the essay aims to address the question of whether the “women-only” compartments provide any sense of security, or aggravate gender-discrimination and/or unnecessary protection enacted by the state based on a notion of the “weaker sex”, especially in the context of the introduction of women-only trains like the Matribhumi local (literally, “land of the mother”, introduced in 2009).*

**Keywords:** West Bengal, women commuters, Indian Railways, violence by men, public transport, women’s agency

This essay focuses on women’s right to mobility in local trains in West Bengal, and the different forms of gendered violence which women experience in the course of their daily commutes. Freedom of movement or mobility rights is a basic human right in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, women in India do not fully exercise their right to mobility like their male counterparts due to existing gender barriers, which often result in sexual violence of varying degrees. Although the local trains act as an extremely important mode of conveyance in West Bengal, and the rest of India, bridging the rural and the urban in the state, they also posit as a potential site for gendered confrontation by relegating women to the status of mere *trespassers* who are gradually *encroaching* a male domain.

In India, transport is traditionally a male dominated sector. It is apparent that women and men have different transportation needs due to their respective travel behaviours, but unfortunately, the public transport space is unrestrictedly male, and it is only women who need to be accommodated a place in this androcentric domain. Although with the gradual increase of women's employment, this hyper-masculine transport space is being accessed by women commuters more frequently than before, it "has not automatically translated into greater *rights* to public space for women" (Phadke, Shilpa and Sameera 2009, 186; emphasis in original). The local train compartments tend to act like a microcosm in which the workings of the male/female, mind/body binaries play out in the open, and thus rendering the function of the space extremely complex. General Recommendation 19 of CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Committee states that violence against women is "a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men" (UN General Assembly 1992, n.p.). Therefore, violence which takes place in these spaces poses a serious threat to the general freedom of mobility of women commuters.

In West Bengal, two compartments (bogies) are allotted only for women in local trains, while the other bogies are designated as 'general', which are open to all passengers. Most women, however, prefer to board the women-only compartments. Why? Because the heterogeneous nature of the general compartments distributed throughout the space of the bogie posits a threat for women commuters who are always in fear of being physically (and verbally) harassed. Added to these fears, the women-only compartments get overcrowded due to the increased number of women commuters travelling every day. The personal spaces of women are always being intruded by leering, passing comments, and groping (by men). When women board the general compartments, they are often seen as *trespassers*, a space to which they do not *belong*. This particular space mirrors the broader picture of Indian society's pattern in general wherein women are given confined space to fit themselves in – be it in the household, schools, or in the public domain – while men enjoy an extensive space to go about with their lives. The public transport, too, is not exempt from exercising these systemic gender issues, which has been a result of constant conditioning. The way in which public spaces are designed in West Bengal further highlights the fact that women are not meant to move in such spaces freely, and even if they do, it should be for limited hours, and limited to particular places. The private/public dichotomy has been challenged ever since women started stepping outside their confined domestic sphere, but, as Phadke, Shilpa and Sameera note:

So long as women's presence in public space continues to be framed within the binary of public/private and within the complexity layered hierarchies of class, community, and gender, an unconditional right to public space will remain a fantasy (2009, 186).

The women in the severely and unapologetically masculine public space are always haunted by the “shadow of sexual assault” (Ferraro 1996, 670). CASA (Centre Against Sexual Harassment) defines sexual assault as

a crime that includes: stalking, unwanted touching, obscene gestures, voyeurism, unwanted sexual comments or jokes, sex-related insults, pressuring for dates or sex, indecent exposure, being forced to watch or participate in pornography, offensive written material, and unwanted offensive and invasive interpersonal communication through electronic devices or social media (CASA Forum 2014, 1).

Female commuters in West Bengal are daily prey to unwanted touching, obscene gestures, leering, groping, and getting secretly filmed and various other forms of sexual violence. A woman in the public space often feels vulnerable to unwarranted invasions of her physical self, vacillating from mere objectification on the one hand to violent crime on the other – a condition which contributes to women’s fear and insecurity in the hyper-masculine public space of the general compartments of the local trains in West Bengal.

In 1998, a Railway Campaign was launched by women groups based in Delhi, to ensure women’s safety in public transport. This was followed by a directive to the Railway authorities of India by the National Human Rights Commission to take action in order to ensure a safe travelling space for women commuters. The idea behind the campaign was to reclaim women’s right to mobility. The directive was triggered by a report filed by a Delhi-based women’s group, *Jagori*, which was of a personal experience:

As we were coming back from the Sixth National Conference of Women’s Movements in India in Ranchi on January 1, 1998, our group of ten women were harassed on the Tata-Muri Express. Three army soldiers, who consumed alcohol throughout the thirty-hour journey, sang rude songs, directed lewd stares, called out names and obstructed our paths as we passed by. Upon arriving at New Delhi Railway Station, one of the last women to get off the train (a member of *Jagori*) was physically assaulted by one of the drunken men. When she retaliated by slapping him, he shouted obscenities and hit her. Although we immediately located a Railway Protection Force (RPF) person, he was of no help and let the offenders go without even asking for their identification. It took ten of us four hours to file an FIR after this and ensure that the culprits be traced! The case was registered with the NHRC, and in civil courts, and then finally taken over by the Army’s Court of Inquiry (Bhattacharya 2002, 26).

Unfortunately, most of the time, such cases are not addressed. In a crowded local train, in a space that is steeped in anonymity, it is hard to figure out who exactly is the perpetrator. Railway authorities are rarely approached with complaints. The anonymity of the space being the mitigating factor, fellow passengers often retreat from extending a helping hand, hardly intervening in the matter, a condition that is typical of the “bystander effect”,<sup>1</sup> which can be defined as

the phenomenon [which] is not a reflection of human heartlessness; it’s more that our sense of personal responsibility is inversely proportionate to the number of people around us. When we see nobody else intervening, it normalizes and enforces an idea

that there *isn't* a way to help – or maybe that help just isn't needed (Bliss 2015, n.p.; emphasis in original).

The fact that the local trains are incredibly overcrowded makes such reaction, or rather non-reaction, an acceptable norm in an already polarised space. Because of this passivity to counter an act of crime, sexual harassments are on a rise in local trains: “This silence on the part of fellow passengers can be seen as communicating to the perpetrator that their behaviour is acceptable, hence not being challenged, which is likely to give them the confidence they require to continue” (Mitra-Sarkar and Partheeban 2011, n.p.).

The nature of the general compartments is by default male-friendly. There have been occasions when women were told to board the women-only compartment, pointing out to the fact that women have an exclusive space to travel in, and boarding the general compartment would only hinder the male passengers. In West Bengal, the general compartment is typically equated with “gents”, and women who get violated in that space would only have themselves to “blame” since they are the ones who *trespassed* into the “male zone”. Of the many offensive behaviours that women are made to experience, manspreading<sup>2</sup> – a neologism referring to the way men sit in public transport, spreading their legs wide apart, and taking up more than one seat – is a common one in local trains, the underground rails, buses and other modes of transport, which makes fellow women passengers sit uncomfortably. The issue is yet to be highlighted as a “serious” concern in India, especially in West Bengal, since it is considered “harmless” even by many women, and most of the times not even acknowledged as a “serious” enough problem to be given due attention. In a country where sexual offences are often trivialised, it is natural that a “casual” brush of a man’s thigh with that of a woman’s would only be downplayed in public discourses. As a result, misbehaviour, such as manspreading and other sexual violations in the scope of the local trains in West Bengal have been normalised to such an extent that most women are subject to self-censoring their feelings, i.e. whether an experience they feel wrong would at all be deemed wrong – legally or otherwise.

In West Bengal, and broadly in India, there is a dearth of awareness about such issues. In some of the cities in the United States of America, the transport authorities have put up posters discouraging manspreading, and demanding proper posture when travelling in public transport. In Spain, too, the transport authorities have been attentive to the issue and have requested men to do away with manspreading. Various feminist campaigns have been criticising manspreading, which of course invited counter-criticism from men’s group, calling it sexist. It would be erroneous to consider manspreading as just a casual misbehaviour. This, of course, has its origin in the gendered conditioning of how men and women are expected to behave: men spreading their legs wide apart, while women crossing their legs in a “lady-like” manner and squeezed into the tiniest of spaces, both literally and figuratively. In West

Bengal, women tend to avoid travelling in the general compartments unless they are accompanied by a male companion.

Increasing cases of women being teased, harassed, molested in public transport has prompted the West Bengal government to introduce an all-women train, named *Matribhumi* (land of the mother) local in 2009. Gender exclusive transport has been in existence as early as 1912 when it was first introduced in Japan but discontinued after the Second World War, only to be re-introduced in Tokyo in 2002. In India, gender-exclusive transport was first introduced in Mumbai, which marked its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2017. In West Bengal, *Matribhumi* local became an instant hit among women commuters since its inception, but much to the fury of their male counterparts. In keeping with feminist concerns, segregation on the basis of biological sex always raises more questions than it can answer. Research on gender and transport in developing countries has been on the rise, although most of the researches tend to ignore the socially and culturally constituted segregation that reflects upon the transport needs. Considering the precarious situation of women in the domain of public transport, the *Matribhumi* local initiative received mostly positive responses from women and the feminist circles, including some negative ones. Some thought that this benevolent gesture was degrading the purpose that women have been fighting for equality for so long. Interestingly, the introduction of *Matribhumi* local brought the effective positioning of gender and transport into the limelight as a crucial feminist agenda. Yet, what problematised this model was the recent introduction of three “general” bogies to the *Matribhumi* local by the Railway Ministry, which resulted in a massive resistance from female commuters who were reluctant to let go of their exclusive space, even though the “general” bogie is allotted for every passenger, irrespective of their gender. On this note, it is also important to point out that many protesting women were attacked by men. Tumpa Guha of Duttapukur, an employee of a private bank was quoted saying: “We are not against all men. But many ogled at us, made lewd remarks and even molested some of us on train. What is the assurance that men, if allowed to enter *Matribhumi*, will not resort to such behaviour?” (Yengkhom 2015, n.p.).

Having said that, among the protestors of August 2015, many women had no qualms about including general bogies in the *Matribhumi* local. In fact, some of the passengers themselves approached the Railway authorities to allow their male relatives and friends to board the *Matribhumi* local. How can, then, the question of segregated space in local transport be resolved? Is the call for segregated spaces, which refuses to blur the lines between men and women a viable one for the feminist cause? Or is it a step backwards from neutralizing such divided space?

According to Julie Babinard, a senior transport specialist from the World Bank, “women-only initiatives are not likely to provide long-term solutions as they only segregate by gender and provide a short-term remedy instead of

addressing more fundamental issues” (CNN 2014, n.p.). Babinard further emphasises that gender exclusive transport is not a solution to safeguard women from any sort of indignity. Across the world, the primary motive behind introducing women-exclusive transportation is to prevent sexual assaults. In West Bengal, however, there is another important factor that came into play in the *Matribhumi* local initiative, that is, the case of the economically challenged women. The *Matribhumi* local has encouraged many economically challenged women from remote parts of Bengal to commute to the city to earn their living, without having to worry about harassment. Although gender segregation may not solve the problem what women commuters face in local trains, it might provide a short-term solution for women’s safety. Yet, the fact that women-only trains or compartments are promoted as safe, is a glaring admission on part of the transport authorities that the general compartments are unsafe, a notion which has been normalised over the years. Again, the structural presumption here is that it is only women who need to be aware of safe or unsafe places, instead of keeping men’s behaviour at check.

Ironically, there have been reports of male passengers getting thrown out from the *Matribhumi* local. In November 2014, a 40-year-old man named Dipak Sharma was allegedly pushed off from a running train by a lady constable of the Railway Protection Force (Kolkata Bureau 2015, n.p.). Despite knowing that they would be fined, men board the *Matribhumi* local as an escape from having to travel in heavily crowded local trains. But there have been many occasions when men board the *Matribhumi* locals, or existing women-only compartments in the late hours just to harass women commuters. In a recent event that took place in January 2017, a woman, resident of Mathurapur in the district of 24 parganas, was thrown out of a women-only compartment by two men when she tried to stop them from gang-raping her (Chanda 2017, n.p.). No railway police was present at the time of the incident. Most of the time, during late hours, the scarcely populated women’s compartments become extremely unsafe for women to travel.

Yet, without a doubt, the women-only compartments and the women-only trains let women travellers feel at ease with themselves in the space they occupy, allowing them to defy gendered conventions in public spaces: keeping the chest fully covered in order to avoid physical contact, dressing in a way which would not “lure” men to make advances, and being responsible for their own behaviour and conduct that wouldn’t make male commuters violate them. Most of the times women keep their bags in front of their breasts to avoid being groped while boarding the general compartments or standing in a crowded space.

Not merely in terms of the gendered conventions, the local trains in West Bengal, as elsewhere in India, are fraught with other lines of divisions. For instance, the *Matribhumi* locals have, like other women-only trains, overlooked the fact that the LGBTQ commuters are also continuously teased, harassed,

and attacked in the homophobic space of the local trains, both by men and women. “In India, where 5.5 million women enter the workforce each year, more than 50 per cent express high concerns about the safety of their commute” (Villa, 2014) because of the lack of awareness to protest. Most women learn to live with it accepting that it is inevitable. Though there are a number of women’s support groups that are willing to extend a helping hand in the fight against gender discrimination in local trains, women commuters need to step forward without any inhibition to protest against offensive behaviour that they are made to face with while travelling in local trains. This is where another line of divide occurs between the educated middle-class women and the downtrodden uneducated domestic female workers. Both sections of women share the same space in local trains, same problems concerning their safety, but not the awareness that is required to combat discrimination.

Although not all educated middle class women go on to file complaints, they are able to articulate their experiences, and share them on social media and various other forums about women’s experience in public transport. The women domestic workers do not have the same privilege to make their voices heard. Such problems cannot be addressed by just creating women-exclusive public spaces, but by probing into structural problems concerning female literacy which would help women to protest against sexual harassment: “The literacy rate of West Bengal is 77.08, according to 2011 census. The rank of the state is 20th in terms of literacy among all Indian states. The rate is just 3.07% higher than national average” (Chattoraj and Chand 2015, 5). The women from Bongaon, Chakdah, Shantipur, Canning, Sonarpur, Bandel, Chinsurah and adjacent areas travel in the early hours to reach Shealdah and Howrah stations and return home late after work. During late hours, an all-women train does not guarantee foolproof security, as there have been instances where many men board women-only trains just to commit crimes. There are GRPs (Government Railway Police) at every station, yet crimes happen. In sum, the *Matribhumi* locals have only curbed sexual violence, but have failed to obliterate it. In a report published by *Parichiti* – a women’s organisation whose main objective is to assert the identities and claim the rights of women who are unrepresented and underrepresented in public discourse and action – a domestic worker named Parul, who travels daily for work from Diamond Harbour to Dhakuria, states the following in an interview:

We are poor people sir; there is nothing for poor people in India. If I don’t buy a ticket and get caught, I will be dropped in an unknown place where there are no trains, but we can’t complain about our safety and cleanliness (Roy, 2017, n.p.).

When women domestic workers are caught without tickets, the rail authorities behave atrociously, stripping them if necessary, to collect money from them. One of the domestic workers were reported saying:

Once I was caught by a ticket checker, paid Rs. 250 and was let go. A girl was once strip searched by lady ticket checkers during her menstrual period. If you’re caught, they strip you naked to look for money (WSA Final Report, 9).

*Parichiti* has been persistently working on women domestic workers who travel to Kolkata to earn their living, by reporting their experiences. They launched a safe travel campaign for women domestic workers, collaborating with *Jagori*. Women in general are victims of exploitation in local trains, and domestic women workers are treated in the most regressive manner possible. To make the space in local passenger trains safe for women to travel, authorities must be strict in implementing punishments against offenders. The *Matribhumi* local in West Bengal has been a welcome move that has made daily commutes for women relatively safe and comfortable. But a women-only train is a highly contested subject since it undermines women's space and functioning of their agency among men on an equal platform. To ensure women's safety, the space within the trains is not the only concern which needs to be addressed, but the general infrastructure of the railway stations which requires a major overhaul with well-lit areas, availability of clean public toilets, and proper security along the entire route of the commute. Considering that Indian Railways boast of being "the lifeline of the nation" – which is rightly so, since most of the people in Indian depend on the railway services for their daily needs – women commuters should be made to feel an integral part of that "lifeline" without having to fear for their safety.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term was first coined by psychologists in the US in the 1960s after dozens of people supposedly witnessed 28-year-old Kitty Genovese being stabbed to death in a brutal attack outside her New York apartment, but did nothing.
- <sup>2</sup> The word has been added to the Oxford English Dictionary in August 2015.

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