

CTS 2025 Symposium

# Commuting Solidarities and Conflicts

Reflections from the Ladies' Compartments of Mumbai's Local  
Trains

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# Introduction

- Mumbai, a city on India's western coast, also known as the country's financial capital
- Suburban rail network notorious for "super dense crush loads" (Bhide et al 2016), carries an average of 7.06 million commuters daily (Rao 2024)
- Preferred by women due to the presence of ladies' compartments exclusively reserved for them
- Three compartments in each 12 or 15-car train are reserved for women, with two of them reserved 24/7 for women and one of them reserved for women till 11 pm



# Mumbai's Suburban Rail Network

- Three parallel lines (Western, Central and Harbour) with branch lines
- Air-conditioned and non-air-conditioned services
- First and second classes
- Ladies' compartments also have first- and second-class sections
- Ladies' special trains



# Literature Review

- Public transport as public space (Tuvikene et al 2023)
- Staging mobilities and public transport as the realm of encountering strangers and/or difference (Jensen 2009)
- Means of public transport may impose a certain form of cosmopolitanism (Butcher 2011) leading to a “sensitivity to difference” but no “engagement with difference”
- Understanding conflicts on public transport as a manifestation of “anti-social behaviour” (Bissell 2009)
- Limited literature on conflicts resulting from aspects of identity



# Methodology

- Ethnographic study conducted over 6 months
- 25 in-depth interviews (23 middle and upper middle-class and 2 lower class women; 19 Hindu, 3 Muslim, and 3 Christian women)
- Participant observation
- Travel alongs
- Thematic analysis





# Commuting Solidarities

- Practices developed by passengers to ease the commute for oneself and others
- Seat claims
- Seat rotation (the aisle to window movement)
- Development of train friends and groups
- Extension of “commuting solidarity” dependent on exhibiting characteristics of mainstream femininity (Hindu, middle class, certain forms of embodiment)



# Conflicts and Embodiment

On this fourth seat also, women will want to accommodate both their butts. They will not try to accommodate just one butt. If you are fat, you cannot sit. People like me who are relatively thin, if we ourselves can't accommodate one butt, how can someone else who is bigger? Even in the complete line also, seven people can sit comfortably. If there are thin people and you're also thin, then the eighth person can just manage to fit part of their butt, that's it. You cannot sit with your back resting. But still in that also, people want to sit in the ninth space. — Shubhi, 29 years

So many times, the women would give me their seat, you know? I used to feel bad because they would jump in and take the seat and then give it to me. — Betty, 62 years

Once there was this Muslim woman with a really small baby in her arms, travelling during the morning rush hour. The other women started scolding her, saying things like, don't you know about the rush hour? Can you not travel with the child in the afternoon? That poor woman was completely taken aback and couldn't respond. Nobody even paid attention to how small the child was. They continued chiding her, saying, don't you understand the right time to travel? If you want to travel with children, you should travel in the afternoon. This is the time for work, and working women travel at this time. Housewives have a different time for travel. This is our time. — Yumna, 40 years

- Pregnant women at the receiving end of solidarity, but heavily-built women fat-shamed
- Travelling with children frowned upon

# Religious Conflicts

Yes, we wear burqas, not hiding our religious identity. Even women of other religious groups cover their faces. Many times they do so to protect themselves from sun damage. And when they say that we hide our faces, I ask, don't you hide your faces as well?...Sometimes they make such disgusted faces when they see burqa-clad women, as if we were stinking, even if we are wearing the cleanest, freshly-perfumed burqas. — Kareeman, 32 years

Actually, I don't wear a burqa. But I did see some discrimination against people in a burqa. With my attire, you won't know I'm a Muslim because I wear all kinds of outfits and I don't wear any symbol that reveals my religious identity. There was a lady, unknowingly—she didn't know I'm a Muslim—and there was a lady in a burqa and that other lady must have been a Gujarati, and she told me, these Muslim people stink and I hate them. I was actually lost about how to respond to her. How can she talk about a community as a whole on the basis of one individual? But I didn't really say anything because my saying something won't change her mind and a person who is aware will not speak such things. So, I didn't confront her. — Alisha, 28 years

- Islamophobia and the rise of the Hindu Right wing
- Ambivalent attitude towards Muslim women



# Class Conflicts

Fisherwomen, they used to fight like anything. But now you know gradually over the years, they have stopped coming in second class. During the peak hours they go to the luggage compartment. Otherwise, they will come with all their fish baskets and everything, sitting there and fighting. — Naina, 57 years

The type of crowd that comes in, they are little more cultured in first class. They will fight in English, whereas in second class they will fight and abuse in Hindi and Marathi. And they try to get their own problems in between unnecessarily while fighting with others, whereas in first class they will not bother much. Even if you're fighting, they will ignore and let it be. They are more worried about other things probably, I am not sure. In the second class, the ladies tend to constantly continue the fight, and unnecessarily argue more. — Shubhi, 29 years

- Overlaps between caste, class, and indigeneity
- Role of the English language in determining class and notions of culturedness



# Suburban vs Urban Women

Sometimes, if someone is wearing something weird, then we often point to them and tell our friends, “Look at what she is wearing, it’s almost transparent.” Then someone will respond saying, “Thankfully there are no men here.” Sometimes there are these college-going girls who board at Andheri, and they wear these skimpy clothes. It prompts us to remark that don’t their parents check what they are wearing when they leave home. You see this is the Vasai local train, and Vasai is a village, and all of us have a rural mentality. Vasai is full of villagers, and we don’t see such fashions there. — Melanie, 55 years

- Role of the train in bridging/widening the rural-urban divide
- Changing notions of acceptable femininity



# Conclusions

- Conflicts witnessed in public transport spaces throw light on larger social issues
- Conflicts are also an indicator of public transport functioning as public space, especially as other spaces for free interaction shrink
- Homogeneity is not a guarantee against conflict

