

Policing the Urban Space

THE CASE OF THE
GROUNDNUT FAIR
IN BASAVANAGUDI

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In the Indian context, an urban space often becomes a temporal marketplace or a festival location and the city administrators assess whether it will be a safe place for the public or if things may go ‘out of control’. If they anticipate unsafe conditions, they ensure that the police will be present there when they are needed. This essay shares findings from researching one such urban space in Bangalore - Bull Temple Road which is pedestrianised for two days in a year for a Groundnut Fair around the temple at Basavanagudi. Here, as elsewhere, there are social, cultural, religious and economic practices that make the street a ‘container’ of these everyday practices, in addition to being a ‘connector’ for people and cars to move (Keswani & Bhagavatula, 2020). The research finds that during the Fair, police exercise control in different ways and urban spaces such as the Bull Temple Road can often extend from being ‘spaces as container’ to becoming ‘spaces of power’.



Figure 1. The Bull Temple Road in Basavanagudi is pedestrianised during the annual groundnut fair

The Groundnut Fair, colloquially called the *Kadlekai Parishe* is both a cultural festival and a periodic marketplace. It takes place once a year in the Basavanagudi neighbourhood, in close proximity to Gandhi Bazaar. Every year during November-December, over two hundred vendors come to the city of Bangalore offering for sale tonnes of groundnuts or peanuts. The legend goes that for some years, on every full moon day, a bull would charge into the groundnut fields located here and damage the crop. The farmers then offered prayers to the sacred bull Nandi to stop this and pledged to offer their first crop. Ever since, farmers and traders come here from the neighbouring villages and towns and there are visitors who come here from within the city as well as from outside. The Fair has been organised year after year by the growers themselves and is now also supported by two government institutions - the Department of Religious Endowment (*Muzrai* department) and the

Municipal Corporation of Bengaluru (BBMP). During this time, the entire stretch of Bull Temple Road is pedestrianised, vehicular traffic is reorganised and security arrangements are made.

In order to understand the space from an urban design perspective, we conducted research investigations of the precinct from 2012-2015. The first component of the research had attempted to answer the question: How do vendors mark and defend territory at the Groundnut Fair? In this component, which was later published as a book chapter, we had found that social capital and collective memory play an important role in how vendors territorialise urban space (Keswani & Bhagavatula, 2014 & 2020). In the second component, shared in this essay, the focus has been on analysing the data to understand how the Groundnut Fair whilst being an informal marketplace receives substantial facilitative support from the government including ‘police surveillance’. During the days of the Fair, there are several police on duty here to ensure that the Fair operates within a safe environment. The police have found over the years that the excessive crowds become a site for petty crimes like chain snatching as well as the stealing of vehicles. The purpose of the police surveillance is three-fold: to manage the excessive crowds, to prevent petty crimes and to pay heed to any untoward incidents resulting from overcrowding. This research examines the routine of surveillance which through exercising control and discipline also becomes an exercise of power.

Typically, on an Indian street, the ‘eyes on the street’ concept proposed by Jane Jacobs (1961) as a way of ‘natural surveillance’ works well since the pedestrian and vendor densities are high. However, during the Groundnut Fair, the excessive crowding makes it easier for miscreants to escape and therefore, control or ‘police surveillance’ becomes necessary. While



Figure 2. The police surveillance deployed during the Fair ensuring safety of the public

the Groundnut Fair has had 'human surveillance' in other parts of Bengaluru, on an everyday basis traffic authorities are increasingly adopting 'video surveillance' as a way to maintain law and order. In other parts of the world, it is found that the number of cameras and spaces under surveillance have grown immensely in recent decades (Koskela, 2000).

For this research, the methodology included participant observations and interviews with the groundnut vendors, temple priests, residents of Basavanagudi, traffic police and formal shop owners in the neighbourhood. The interviews were conducted in Kannada, the local language of the state. It was found that during the days of the Fair, approximately 200-300 police officers are present. Some of them are in uniform and others are in *mufti* or plain clothes. The duties of the police officers include keeping a check on the crowds coming in and out of the temple and also making the movement of people on the Bull Temple Road easier. In case of fire emergencies, they get the fire department to respond immediately. In case someone gets hurt, they ensure that they are taken to the hospital quickly and safely. The officers who are deputed here are from the three subdivisions of the South Division of the Bengaluru Police Department. There is the Jayanagar subdivision, Chamarajpet subdivision and Banashankari sub-division. Each of these subdivisions has seven stations under it. There are officers from about 21 stations here for the two days of the Groundnut festival.

The work distribution of the police personnel consists of involvement from both the 'traffic police' and the 'law and order police'. The traffic police supervise the Bull Temple Road and ensure that it is a pedestrian zone for these two days, not permitting vehicular traffic to enter from any of the connecting roads or from either ends of Bull Temple Road. The law and order police look after the internal movement of people and their safety, between these two ends. The



Figure 3. The excessive crowding during the Fair necessitates the policing of the urban space

arrangements made by the police department for the Fair include putting up barricades so that there is no vehicle interference where the pedestrians need to walk. The barricades are provided in a way that there is a clear demarcation of zones for supervision. For instance, if there is a line of barricades at one place, then from the next barricade another police station branch takes over the responsibility. Further, separate teams of officers are deputed on the sub-arterial roads that feed into the Bull Temple Road.



Figure 4. There is a strong power equation between the temple authorities and the vendors, with the vendors who have been coming here for generations being given precedence over the others

It is interesting to note that while surveillance of the Bull Temple Road through deploying a team of police personnel generates power relationships of a certain kind, there are other players as well who exercise control within this urban space. The Department of Religious Endowment also plays a role in organising the *Parishe*, sending extra staff to the Bull Temple in order to handle the crowds at the temple entrance. The Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Religious Endowment determines the nature of support needed. He writes out letters to other departments including the police force, municipal corporation, ambulance and medicine, generator and emergency power supply and so on. They are all expected to cooperate and work together. The local politicians direct the police force to coordinate the event. The municipal authority BBMP plays its role in cleaning of the streets during and after the Fair.

While the street becomes a space where power relationships are generated between the police and anyone who interferes with order, it is also a space where power relationships emerge due to the economic activities that take place here. The allocation of space for the vendors on the entire stretch of road is done by the temple authorities. The spots that are closer to the temple entrance tend to have higher footfalls and hence are priced higher.

The contract for collecting the rent for the spot on the footpath is given out as a tender. Often, it is the groundnut grower families who have been coming here for many generations who are given precedence over the others. Although the Fair is seen as a place for religious and cultural practices of people, the study reveals that economic activities play an important role. While there is spatial appropriation to enable these activities and the physical space is in a dynamic mode, as some vendor families draw upon collective memory to ensure a better spot, the social space also begins to work dynamically. Both the physical and the social spaces are embedded within the 'space of power' since they are controlled by the police and also the temple authorities.

There is the 'seen' and the 'unseen' within the Fair's public space, where what is visible is the power relationship between the police and the public. However, what remains unseen is that there is a strong power equation between the temple authorities and the vendors. This research through a closer investigation finds that what is less evident is that there are state players such as the *Muzrai* department and the non-state players such as the temple priests and local store owners are also involved. There is social influence and memory that play a role in order to access the spaces that are higher on the economic scale. In the larger context, there is a policing of urban space with surveillance being exercised for controlling law and order. However, there is also a subtle 'policing' where fellow vendors take care of each other's spaces for the brief absences during the Fair. Finally, one may say that at different times during the Fair, there are varying seen and unseen actors who play a role – the police, temple priests, vendors and so on as well as varying factors such as the need for order, memory or economy that impact the spatial appropriation. Hence, in understanding public spaces, it becomes important to study the everyday through ethnographic investigations so that both the seen and the unseen are made visible to us.

References

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