

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS FROM THE ARCHITECTURAL LANDSCAPE OF WORKING- CLASS SETTLEMENTS THE EXPERIENCE OF ANKUR-DELHI

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/astragalo.2020.i27.06>

ABOUT ANKUR

Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education has been actively engaged in working class settlements in the city of Delhi for over three decades. At present it is working in five locations. A vision of justice, peace, humanism and creativity, regard for diversity and faith in the intrinsic genius of ordinary people, informs the work of the organisation. Its pedagogical interventions involve children and young persons in research and writing on their neighbourhoods. They open doors to varied ways of 'seeing' and 'listening'. Young practitioners learn to 'see' new shades of colours and new contour lines in routine experiences. They start capturing nuances of sounds not heard earlier. The mystery of the architectural construct of the city is drawn out through diverse exercises. A new body of knowledge emerges. Ankur acts as a curator to document these texts and thereby produce a non-elite literature.

THE SETTLEMENTS AND THEIR SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

The residents of these settlements hail from different parts of the country. Distress-migration from rural to urban India is a continuous phenomenon. It is primarily due to erosion of traditional means of livelihood, which rides on the back of development projects. In streams and trickles people have been coming here for well over 50 years. They are from diverse religio-cultural and geographic backgrounds. Cultural signifiers like language, food and dress often continue for some time without creating any conflicts. However, the hybridity of Delhi soon overpowers many, especially youngsters. A lot of people keep in touch with their villages, visiting family members, particularly the elderly, during holidays, festivals and seasons of sowing and harvesting. The tendency of people from the same milieu to live

near each other is but natural. Hence, there are settlements of people professing one religion or belonging to one community, or speaking the same language.

These settlements are usually viewed through two stereotypical lenses. They are often seen as breeders of diseases and dens of vices, Second, they are seen as lacking everything, not just in terms of spaces and basic amenities, but also in terms of human worth and values. They are considered to be bereft of intelligence, talents, skills, sensitivity, empathy and compassion.

Ankur believes that these people are inferior to none. Ankur respects their capabilities and contributions. In fact, the imaginations that go into inventing newer modes of living and expressing are unique to the margins. Within the daily grind of survival, life here throbs with intellectual, emotional and cultural vitality.

We tend to forget that people of these colonies provide essential services to urban centres. Amongst them are cooks, cleaners, drivers, mechanics, waiters, chefs, vendors, cobblers, electricians, carpenters, masons, plumbers, painters, sales and security-persons, coolies, loaders and many others, without whom cities like Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi would come to a standstill.

People living in close-knit quarters know each other's worlds – births and deaths, joys and sorrows, skills and strengths. There may be fights over scarce resources like water. But more pronounced are help and support in times of need. Neighbours pitch in to look for a lost son. Four orphan girls living under a tarpaulin shed on the edge of a park are supported by families living around. A mother offers her

tiny verandah to children from the locality to sit and write. A grandmother and a father share their life histories with practitioners. Two mothers cooperate to undertake different tasks for their children – one takes all children from school to home, the other goes to the market/bank to do errands for both. Men and women tell each other about available openings of work and also share skills they know. Learning from each other is organic to them. Fulfilling needs and desires calls for individual as well as collective efforts. Social relationships are nurtured out of necessity as well as empathy. Experience teaches that social relationships are torn asunder when a settlement is uprooted.

SITES FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Finding a place within tightly woven settlements is a challenge. Spaces available in nooks and corners, alleys and lofts are put to multiple uses – cooking, sleeping, working, gossiping, storing, selling and playing. Modern forces convert real, living places into abstract spaces. People do the reverse. A space is renewed into a place through activities and conversation.

Ankur locates itself as a nodal point in the midst of these neighbourhoods. Sites are identified in a range of spaces – staircases, balconies, broken walls, windows, dead-ends of lanes, small shops, vendors' stations and of course corners in one's own homes. Terraces open to the sky are great places to converse, reflect, write and put up art-installations. Terraces and balconies are lifelines for girls and women. A lone tree with a pack of cards kept underneath or festooned with colourful bunnings and equipped with loudspeakers, invite young and old from the community to come and

converse, play and recite, write and share, sing and act. Then there are mobile structures like parked hand-carts and cycle-rickshaws, stalls in the weekly bazaars, rides in a train or bus. Ankur creates mobile booths for story-telling and slide-shows. Festivals like Eid and Diwali and celebrations like weddings and community feasts provide themes as well as presentation-opportunities for budding writers. Ankur organises events like 'Let us play' and 'Our Literary Festival' to open up a larger domain of sharing and confidence-building. The writers are also invited to events organised in the outside world - in the city, in the country and outside the country.

Thus ordinary spaces are turned into extraordinary places where the sky is the limit. Architectural constraints do not limit the aesthetic and intellectual outpourings. These vibrant sites host the flowering and exchange of ideas, feelings and expressions.

The Locations of the stories

These sites of Ankur's intervention are located in different settlements of Delhi. The topography of each colours the writings. The small settlement near Khichripur colony in East Delhi, adjacent to the garbage-hill (backdrop of the first story) is a recent one. The resettlement colony of Sundernagari is situated on the North-Eastern periphery of the city and another one, Dakshinpuri in South Delhi. Uprooted from other parts of Delhi, people started living in these settlements 1975 onwards. The so-called resettlement colonies have a common architectural pattern. Rows upon rows of one, two or three storeyed narrow houses are packed like match-boxes, each on 18-20 square-metres of land. The plots allotted by government were paid for by the settlers. Living conditions are

abysmal - open drains, lack of sanitation and potable water, poor medical and schooling facilities and long-distance commuting for work on bicycles or on irregular and overcrowded buses.

Sandwiched between two big hospitals in central Delhi the large unauthorised LNJP (Lok Nayak Jai Prakash) Colony got the first residents fifty years ago. Most of the hutments and tarpaulin-tin sheds have been gradually replaced by brick structures. Little partitioned corners and attics have been added to some houses to accommodate expanding families. Some houses can boast of tiny terraces. Many houses have jute-curtains as doors: these curtains speak through gendered voices. Girls and women steal precious moments to exchange jokes and gossip through the canvas. At some places, the meandering strips of lanes are just broad enough for two persons to pass. Basic amenities are pathetic - very poor sanitation, narrow open drains and one water-tap for dozens of families. Several houses are lower than the lanes. During rainy season water and slush enter inside. People build little barrages to keep the slush out. Even then, many buckets full of slush have to be thrown out. Most children go to nearby government schools. Being near two hospitals, medical help is more accessible.

The sword of eviction has been hanging over LNJP Colony for the last one decade. Every time an official comes, panic grips the people and there is a scramble to put together whatever documents they feel might be needed. The politics of votes and elections has somehow prevented the dislocation till now.

Livelihood opportunities for most people have to be squeezed out of whatever is available. The colony's outer edges have rows

of carpenters' shops dealing in packing boxes, cheap and old furniture. Another source of livelihood has been keeping mules which are useful carriers of goods. They are fast disappearing with the arrival of motorised vehicles. There are people who cook food items and sell in the market across the road and elsewhere. There are plumbers, electricians, painters and musicians, whose jobs are erratic. Opportunities are seized to do with less, to realise new avenues of work. Innovation is the name of the game.

The stories selected for this article emerge from these neighbourhoods. They are woven around themes of pollution, joys of childhood, gender and livelihood. The nuances of pollution are picked up in two texts. The joy and sadness of having and then losing one's pet cat has been captured in the next story. The happiness of seeing one's little brother obsessed with momos and then getting satisfied when the mother opens a momo-shop, is expressed in another text.

Gender has been addressed in four stories. A girl realises how having boys as friends in childhood is fine, but things change as she grows up. Then, a group of girls take off on a cycle-rickshaw enjoying their short-lived freedom. Another group does collective cooking and selling rotis (flat bread) for a bit of cash to buy a few trinkets. A teenaged girl ventures out to earn much needed money, working as an assistant to a doctor. The story on livelihood shows how people discover potentials of earning from discards. Thus, these small texts give glimpses of how people of the margins use their imagination to navigate through life and to write about their journeys.

THE STORIES

THE HOUSE NEXT TO THE GARBAGE-DUMP

The door of Rama's house opens towards the garbage-dumping ground, hardly a couple of metres away. Her hutment of 20 square yards has only one opening - the door. Rama gets up at 5.30 a.m. while her parents are still asleep. She cleans the room. The door is right in front of the cooking place. She puts her hand on her mouth while sweeping. She half-closes the door while preparing breakfast in the morning so that the foul smells do not waft in. As soon as she puts oil on the hot pan, a white powder-like smoke spreads all across. She starts sweating and feeling suffocated. Yet she does not open the door. Looking out, she does not feel like cooking.

Once they had gone to attend a wedding in their village. Upon their return after a week they found the house in shambles. There wasn't a dry spot to put one's feet on. Her mother held her head and sat down at the door. The air was heavy with foul smells and dampness. Before going to the village her parents had tied plastic sheets all around and over the shack. But the lashes and weight of rainwater had torn them apart. Bed, television, clothes - everything was wet. Lying down on wet beds with the foul smells wafting in from the ground, sleep was near-impossible. Everyone got up in the morning with a splitting headache.

Mother put her stove out in the street to cook some rice. She kept looking alternately at the stove and at the garbage ground. Papa continued to clean and sweep, wiping his sweat.

Rama got involved in opening out the damp clothes and sheets and folding them afresh. Their smelly dampness was hitting her nostrils and making her shut her lips tight.

Ritu, Grade X, Khichripur

THE CONSTRUCTION GOES ON

On the last day of school before summer vacation Ma'am wished us "Happy Holidays" and said, "You will see a change in your school when you return. Some more classrooms are needed. Construction will begin tomorrow".

Two months later, I walked towards the school in anticipation of seeing the new classrooms. Entering the school gate, I encountered a strong whiff of dust. I started coughing and rubbing my eyes and stopped near a tree. Opening my eyes I was taken aback at what I saw. Digging was going on apace. This was our beloved corner, full of trees and grass on the ground. During lunch-time we used to play here. There used to be shade all over and we could enjoy the cool breeze. But now most trees were gone. A bulldozer was busy digging the ground and dust was constantly blowing out into the air. Anyone entering the gate had to cover her nose with a handkerchief. The person sitting inside the bulldozer was also constantly opening and closing his eyes.

The Principal announced in the prayer meeting that since construction was going on, the children should not venture out to that side during lunch time. My class is not too far from the place where digging is taking place. We can see it from the window. The noise from the digging distracts us. Trucks laden with stones, sands and gravel come on a daily ba-

sis. When they are emptied on the ground the particles of sand and gravel are blown towards the classroom. Many of my classmates start having headache. Due to digging, the path to the school gate has narrowed down. When we walk on it, the dust starts blowing. I find it difficult to breathe and try to walk out fast.

Zeba Khatoon, Grade VIII, Sundarnagari

MY TINY FRIEND

It was a cold winter morning. My brothers, Shoyeb, Adeeb, and I were still within our quilts, despite Ammi's several calls to get up. Ultimately, she pulled away our quilts. We had to get up, and we started going down the stairs. Suddenly we heard a squeaky little voice "meow... meow...". All three of us started looking around and found a little, brown-kitten trying to hide behind the door.

Adeeb caught him and carried him upstairs. Ammi asked us to take him back from wherever he had come. I said, "Ammi, it is such a tiny thing. He is shivering with cold. Give him some milk." Ammi gave him milk in a bowl. I gave him biscuits. After eating he started running and I started playing with him, which became a daily routine. He accompanied me everywhere. Shoyeb built a little house with wooden planks. I painted it red and green. The kitten started living in it. He stayed with us for three weeks.

One day when I came back from school, the little house was empty. The kitten's mummy had come and taken him away. I became very sad, remembering my little friend.

Adeeba, Grade IV, LNJP colony

OUR MOMO SHOP

My four-year old brother Imran loves to eat momos. A couple of weeks back, he came running to Ammi, "Give me money Ammi, I will buy momos." Ammi ignored him. He pulled at her shirt and again pleaded for money. Ammi pushed him away exclaiming, "this has become your daily drama. I won't give you money." Imran started crying and beating his hands and feet on the floor. Ammi had to give in. He got his twenty rupees and ran outside. I suggested to Ammi, "Imran spends a lot of money on momos. Why don't we ourselves open a momo-shop. We had once opened an eggs' shop. Similarly we can have a momo shop."

Ammi started thinking, "Well, we can open one. But it will need investment of money. We don't know how much is needed." I said, "I will get information from the momo-seller who sits in Naeem's lane." Abbu was ok with the idea, but asked "Who will sit in the shop?" Ammi said she would. I could not stop myself from saying "Sometimes I can sit in the shop too." After pondering a little, Abbu agreed. Next day Ammi went to the momo seller and collected the information. He buys ready-made momos from Daryaganj, and fries or steams them at his stall.

Next day Ammi and I, after taking directions from people, reached the address given. We enquired about the rate and bought chicken momos worth Rs. 100 and vegetable momos for Rs. 30. Then we bought a counter for Rs. 150, some utensils and refined oil. In the evening we opened the shop. Curious children flocked around – "Aunty, how many momos will we get for Rs. 10?" Ammi said, "Four steamed and three fried." My friends also came. And in a corner, Imran was enjoying momos with his friends.

Nazia, Grade VIII, LNJP colony

MAHIRA LOVES HER FRIENDS

When Mahira was 5-6 years old, she had many cousins and neighbours – boys and girls - as friends. In their grandmother's house they played kho-kho and teased each other. Games were stopped when Papa's arrival was imminent. He never realised which were the boys playing with her. However when she grew a little older, Papa asked her not to play with boys, as people might make comments, even if he understands they are friends and cousins. Mahira's response was: "They are such nice friends and you should ignore people's comments."

But gradually when they became 16-17 years old, Mahira herself did not talk to them much, and if they started talking she became nervous and ran away. She thought "they used to be my friends and I was happy being with them. But now I also am aware about what people may say."

Very soon one of the friends said "Why are you so worried about people's words? Why should we break our friendship?" Mahira thought about it. She talked to her Papa also. She would not leave her friends because of what people say. Papa seemed to be ok with it.

Now she spends time with her friends - girls and boys. She also converses with them on whatsapp and does not feel lonely.

Falak Khan, GradeV, LNJP colony

THE RIDE ON A CYCLE RICKSHAW

The wedding tent was looking very exciting. It was echoing with the sounds of the band. But outside, the expansive road was also inviting us. We saw a rickshaw parked by the side of the garbage-dump. Several of us climbed on top of it. Kiran sat on the driver's seat and pushed the

paddle, all of us screamed. But Kiran had taken the rickshaw up on the road.

We kept on going at a high speed, shouting and screaming. Never had we girls been allowed to drive a cycle or a rickshaw. After having travelled quite a distance we heard several dogs barking. Suddenly we saw a light coming towards us, we stopped on the side. The dogs came near. But we laughed. We went on playing for a while - us and the dogs. The dogs left us, realising we were madder than they. We forgot our fears and felt free. Some drunkards walked around staggering, but not bothering us. Suddenly the chain of the rickshaw slipped out. We got scared. But Kiran said 'Not to worry, this is nothing. I'll put it right in a jiffy.' And she did.

We flew on the road and turned towards the tent. It was cold and dark, but our ride was joyful. We were riding so freely on an open road which is always crowded with traffic. All of a sudden we saw my uncle and brother come out. We left the rickshaw and tried to sneak towards the tent. But uncle saw us and beckoned in a threatening way to get inside the tent. Scarcely able to smother our laughter we went in. But the wedding tent was no longer attractive to us.

*Bhumi, Grade-VI, Vinay,
Grade-VI, Dakshinpuri*

COLLECTIVE KITCHEN

We were ten girls – Shafiya, Rukhsaar, Yashoda, Komal, Suneeta, Rabiya, Maya, Amreen, Reshma and Alisha. When we went to the shops we got tempted to buy small trinkets like earrings, hair bands or bangles. But we never had the money. Our parents would not give money for such trivial things. We thought to ourselves: Why

not do something. But what? No one seemed to know. None of us had any skill apart from household work. We could not go out of the colony; our fathers would have beaten us. For days we kept on thinking. One day we saw Suneeta taking chapattis (flat bread) for persons living on rent on the first floor.

An idea flashed across our minds. We could now do something within the colony itself. We could cook food and sell to such people. But we had no resources. We put our heads together and found answers. Required stuff was available for free, around us. We made a stove out of bricks and used waste material as fuel. We would gather around 6 a.m. Shafiya would bring the discards, so precious to us, from the nearby factories- pieces of cardboard boxes, heels of sandals and rags of cloth, which lit up the stove. Some of us put together the flour that each had brought from home and made the dough. The rolling pins and boards were brought out. Somebody would roll out the rotis, others would cook them on a griddle on the stove and yet others would sell them. One roti with a piece of pickle would sell for one rupee. Cooking, serving and eating would go on simultaneously and with many hands working together everything was done within a short time. We made 60 rotis at a time, which would sell off immediately. Later our rotis went to the factories also. People came to our houses to eat. We enjoyed it. Cooking twice a day we made a profit of Rs.1000/- in 10 days. Then we did not need more. We bought what we wanted and then stopped.

We had never imagined that an action fulfilling our desire would fulfil the need of others. The young men were poor migrants in search of work living on rent in the area. They

did not have the means to cook food. They seemed to have restricted our mobility. But now they became our customers. They started collecting at the site of the cooking space, pleading to us to continue with the venture. We wanted to run the service but we were trapped. We had earned a bad name by then. It is not proper for young girls to run a shop, and this was being talked about. People had started looking at us with suspicion, which was neither good for our families, nor for us. What could we do? We did not want to take risks. We closed shop. We wish we could have continued.

*Yashoda and Alisha, 20 years,
LNJP Colony*

DOCTOR'S ASSISTANT

Papa talked to his doctor-friend in the neighbourhood regarding a job for me. The Doctor's response on seeing me was "She looks such a simpleton, will she be able to cope with the work here? However, you are a friend. I will try her out for a few days and then decide." Standing there I kept thinking to myself, "I am a village-girl who has just come to the city. I have never stirred out of the house alone. How will I come here? I have studied only till grade six. Will I be able to work in this clinic?"

Despite my worries I resolved to do my best if I got the opportunity. Next morning I got up early, finished some household chores and got ready to go to the clinic. I did not have a purse, so I tied a little money in a piece of cloth, put it in a plastic-bag and accompanied Papa to the clinic. I did not know the route to the clinic. Papa took me there for 6 days. Then I told him "I can come and go on my own now. If I have to work, I will have to commute on my own." I ne-

ver felt afraid while going with Papa. But alone in a shared three-wheeler I was scared. Sometimes I was the only female amongst several males. That made me more fearful, but I never let my inner rumblings come out. Taking control of myself I kept looking at scenes on the road.

After a fortnight Doctor uncle taught me how to prepare admission notes for patients. Then he wrote down in English the names of different instruments used for surgery, in a small notebook. Sometime later he wrote down words like 'bottle of drip', 'O.T.', 'operation theatre', 'physician', 'surgeon', 'physiotherapy' and 'general ward'. Whenever I found time, I started learning them. I developed interest in the subject and started speaking without hesitation. Gradually I learnt how to measure blood pressure and administer a drip. After some time Doctor Uncle took me inside the operation theatre. With time and his encouragement I overcame my fear of watching operations.

Now I get up early every day, cook breakfast for everyone and wash clothes of my young siblings. Then I pick up my tiffin and get ready to go to the clinic. Mummy finishes rest of the household chores. Papa goes to work after dropping the younger children at school. Sometime later Papa got a new dress and slippers for me, which made me very happy. I thought to myself – "Is he the same Papa who used to be angry with me!"

A month later I got my salary and gave it to Papa. He gave back some of it saying, "Buy a suit (pyjama-shirt) of your choice." I went to the market with my friend, bought a suit-material of my choice for the first time and gave it to the tailor to be sewn. Now I walk out with a hand-bag and not with the torn piece of cloth

and plastic to keep money. Several women of the neighbourhood started commenting - "How will this emaciated-looking, uncouth girl work in a clinic! It takes time even for educated girls to learn this work. What will she do!" Listening to them I often felt anger and considered replying back. But the decorum of living in the same lane and the fear of being asked to vacate the flat where we lived on rent, made me hold my tongue. People do not know our financial helplessness. Mummy also asked me to keep quiet and continue working.

After two months the Doctor called my father and told him "I have now kept her on the job. Initially she will get Rs. 1500/p.m. When she has learnt the entire gamut of work, I will increase her salary." That day onwards I started working with greater enthusiasm.

Nazneen, 18 years, Sundernagari

DISCARDS AS PRODUCTS

Naeem Bhai had worked with various means of livelihood. For a while he had worked in one of the manufacturing units that used to be there. Often he regretted having migrated from the village. But what could he do. He would lose face if he went back to the village. So he decided to make a living through anything.

Then with a big bag slung over the shoulders he started rummaging through garbage sites, streets, empty plots, dumps of hospital waste etc. to pick up plastic, steel, cloth, paper, anything that would sell. By evening he reached the godown, where these things were bought. Gradually more people started rag-picking. The godown was no one's friend, things were categorised and the prices set by the owners. They knew that these rag-pickers did not have any choice.

Initially, Naeem Bhai earned well, anywhere between Rs. 70 and Rs. 120 per day. He was alone then and shared a room with nine others. Each one had come from a different part of the country but the job was the same. A person at the godown had arranged for a room. Ten people shared the room, the household chores and the expenses. Sleeping arrangements in the small room were interesting. Five people had their heads towards the door and five had their feet towards the door. Beddings were not needed. It was hot. The floor was cleaned thoroughly.

He was earning well, so he brought over his wife and children from the village. A room could be rented for Rs. 400. For a while things worked well. But gradually the garbage bags were becoming lighter. Was it that Delhi had suddenly been cleaned up? Food became problematic. One vegetable was cooked in the morning to be eaten in all three meals. Since they had come to the city, the children had to be educated. Getting them into school, feeding and clothing them were becoming difficult. Once while walking in garbage his feet got infected. He had to leave the job. Loans piled up. It was the first Eid (festival) that the children did not get new clothes.

One day he chanced upon broken soap cakes. He picked them up in a bag. The good ones were used by the family and the rest given away. He kept going back to the hospital bin for more soap pieces. People at the water tap took the soap pieces eagerly. One day he did not have anything to buy food with. He and his wife took out the good, clean soap-cakes. The weakly fair was on. They put out the soaps there selling each for Rs. 2. That was the day when this improvisation became the source of survival.

The process of collection, classification, cutting, shaping and refashioning involves the labour of the entire family and occupies the full space on the floor of the 12'x12' room. Naeem Bhai sits outside the hospital every day and brings home the sacks of soap when they come. His wife takes them out of the sacks, children sort them out and Naeem Bhai himself examines them with his sharp eyes, cutting them fast into fine square shapes or just slicing small

bits to give them a shape. He has become quite an expert at this. At a time there could be 100 good and 50 broken soaps piled up, with a few sacks lying in a corner. This is not a secure job or profession but a bridge of life for the family in difficult times. Now he also sells it by weight, on his cart. Most of the soap is bought by small manufactures, rickshaw-pullers, labourers and people living on the street.

Written by Lakhmi Chand Kohli, as told by Naeem Bhai, LNJP Colony

