Survival in a Patriarchal Landscape: Everyday Life in the Basti

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In Film Nagar Basti, an informal settlement in Hyderabad, time is organised around infrastructure, not calendars or clocks. Here, the start of a woman's day depends on whether water arrives. If the tap flows, the morning proceeds from bathing, cooking, getting children to school, and leaving for work. If it does not, everything stalls. What might seem like a delay is in fact a pattern of disruption that shapes daily life. Feminist geographer Sultana (2020) describes this as the embodied experience of citizenship, where infrastructure failure is absorbed through the body. In the basti, water is a form of moral accountability. It marks a woman's adequacy, her ability to hold the household together, and her place in it.

Long before offices open or school bells ring, women in the basti are already working. By the time the city begins its day, they have made half a dozen calculations: how many pots can be filled, how long the queue will take, whether there will be enough water for bathing, cooking, and cleaning both at home and in the homes where they are employed. The flow of water determines everything: when meals are made, whether children go to school clean, whether employers will scold them for arriving late. Infrastructure here is relational and moral and its failure is never anonymous. When taps run dry or schedules collapse, it is the woman who absorbs the blame. While the city does not answer, she does.

Radha, who stitches saree falls in the narrow corridor outside her one-room home, has adapted her body to the limits of this place. She eats sparingly to avoid needing the toilet. Her house has no toilet and after dark, there is no one to accompany her to open areas to defecate. So, hunger becomes a tactic mapped carefully onto the risk of movement. Radha explained to me, "If I don't eat, I don't need to go." Her calculation reflects a broader form of embodied

risk management that shapes daily life in the basti. Pain (2014) describes this as chronic fear, an ongoing condition that slowly reorders routine, habits, and the body itself.

Rafia, another woman in the basti, has learned to navigate silence with precision. Her husband drinks. So, she times her words carefully measuring when it is safe to speak. She said, “I don’t talk unless I must, if I talk he gets angry. I wait for him to sleep.” The children often wake to his shouting. Her task is to manage the escalation from calming him, shielding them, restoring order by morning. Datta (2016) explains this as the aesthetics of speech under domestic violence: a learned performance of calm, rooted in protection. Rafia’s silence is a method of survival. A maternal strategy rehearsed daily, designed to prevent something worse. In a household shaped by volatility, her silence is the infrastructure that holds everything together.

In Film Nagar Basti, public space is occupied unequally. Men gather in loose clusters on parked autorickshaws, plastic chairs, tea stalls, or parapet edges. They drink, watch, comment. Their presence is routine, unremarkable, and unchallenged. Leisure, for them, is visible and unmarked. For women, the same streets require calculation. They do not walk freely; they reroute. Swathi, a salon worker who returns late from her shift said, “It is not about light, it is about who is sitting there.” Streetlights do not guarantee safety when the risk is male entitlement. In the basti, the geography of fear is shaped less by infrastructure and more by who watches, who comments, who stays too long in one place. The map is drawn by the anticipation of male behaviour.

Kern and Mullings (2013) describe this condition as a perpetual state of gendered vulnerability, where the city is structured to be so. In the basti, a shortcut is only a shortcut on paper. If it means walking past a corner where boys are drinking, lingering, or watching, it becomes the longer route, the riskier one. A broken streetlight or an indifferent police outpost

confirms danger. In this context, the absence of state protection amplifies the everyday presence of male entitlement. What appears as silence is, in fact, complicity.

Not all drinking happens in public. Some men drink inside the home, behind closed doors, where its consequences are more intimate and more difficult to escape. Here, alcohol becomes infrastructure again. Saidamma's husband insists she must leave if she challenges him. He tells her "I'm the earning member," although she earns more, working long hours across three households. Alcohol, in this context, is a vector through which masculinity is performed and dominance restored. It allows men to reclaim control when they feel it slipping, to assert authority when it is materially unfounded. Violence is legitimised by routine, by silence, and by the enduring belief that being a man is reason enough.

This pattern resonates with what Pandey et al. (2009) observe in their work on Kolkata's slums: when men experience a loss of control over their economic roles, they often reassert authority within the household. Alcohol, in this context, becomes an accelerant for the performance of masculinity under pressure. For women like Saidamma, the harm reshapes the rhythms of the day, constrains speech, and saturates domestic space with volatility. Violence becomes woven into the ordinary.

Outside the basti, these same women cross into Hyderabad's most elite neighbourhoods where they cook, clean, and care for children. But their bodies remain marked by caste, class, and geography. Anjamma said, "They give us tea, but in different glasses. We sit on the floor, near the wash area." The segregation is quiet but exacting. Even within the domestic space, infrastructure becomes a moral instrument. The placement of chairs, the separation of utensils, the boundaries of movement all signal who belongs and who contaminates. A maid's presence is necessary, but never neutral. Her labour is welcomed; her touch is not. The homes she maintains must not bear traces of her.

Sen and Sengupta (2016) describe this dynamic as unequal intimacy, a closeness between domestic workers and employers that sustains rather than softens labour hierarchies. A woman may be called amma (mother), but she still enters through the back door. She may be offered money in an emergency but is still rebuked for arriving five minutes late. The language of care coexists with everyday discipline. These contradictions are how inequality is reproduced through gestures that appear generous but never threaten the boundary.

Even inside the basti, mothering becomes a form of spatial labour. Viji, a mother of three, locks her daughters inside their one-room rental before leaving for work. The eldest is just nine, but she cooks, cleans, and keeps her sisters safe. The door stays shut. Viji explained, without pause or elaboration, "Once, my neighbour tried to come in." There is no language for grief here. Only procedures: lock the door, leave early, come back before dark. Survival, in this context, is methodical.

Out of necessity, many mothers in the basti choose to send their children especially daughters to hostels. Safety, not proximity, becomes the measure of care. Keeping them, close means exposing them to risks that cannot always be mitigated. Parreñas (2001) explains mothering from a distance as a form of care shaped by strategic separation. In this context, love is expressed through the effort to secure absence: of danger, of scrutiny, of harm. Sometimes, keeping a child safe means not keeping them near.

Some women in the basti send away their sons in the hope of protecting others from them. Rama, a mother of two sons told me, "Better they leave before they learn drinking and smoking," These decisions are spatial critiques. As Meth (2013) argues in her work on Durban, when parents remove their children from violent or unstable environments, they are making a political statement. They are saying: the state has failed to create safe futures here, so we will make our own, elsewhere. Even if it means distance. Even if it means separation. Protection becomes something crafted by withdrawal.

Scholars have long reminded us that the city is not only made of roads and pipes. It is also made of silence, judgment, fear, fatigue. These are not listed in budgets or master plans, but they shape how people live. You see them in the woman who walks the longer route to avoid being seen, who waits to bathe so others can go first, who keeps quiet to keep the house calm. These choices are patterned, repeated, expected and the city is built on them. In Film Nagar Basti, women must know how to wait: for water, for safety. for the right time to talk, for the body to heal, for the light to return, for the child to grow safer. Women here plan, care and hold the cities rhythm.

To understand what creativity looks like in urban spaces, we have to start here in the everyday strategies of women rather than cafes, co-working spaces, or planned smart zones. In the woman who stores water in six pots, planning for failure. In the girl who maps fear through footsteps. In the mother who manages risk through silence, routines, locked doors. These are creative responses to abandonment which are improvised, repeated, and refined over time.

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