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## **Thinking with Feeling: Children's Emotional Orientations to Public Life**

### **Abstract**

The article explores how the concept of 'emotional orientation' helps us to reimagine the relationship between childhood and public life. By comparing a subset of two ethnographic biographies of underprivileged children, aged 6-8 years from contrasting neighbourhoods in Hyderabad, India, we illustrate the ways in which 'emotional orientation' could mediate and signify children's experiences of public life. The analysis builds on the girls' common experience of 'scolding' to map out the visceral aspects of poverty, local belonging, place sensitivity, power, and social inequality in their lives; the implications for their engagement with public life is noted throughout. Thinking with feeling, we argue, offers crucial insights for (re)imagining the relationship between childhood and public life, and children's participation therein. In particular, the affective analysis provides the opportunity to tap into children's political knowingness: a knowingness that eludes normative discourses of public life, but which nevertheless is a vital source of children's everyday participation.

*Keywords: emotion, orientation, childhood, public life, participation, India*

## Introduction

Public representations of poor children in India are permeated with emotion. Representations of children in newspapers and campaigns to abolish child labour, child marriage, child poverty, child beggary, child abuse, and sexual violence, to give but a few relevant examples to the Indian country context, are designed to emote fear, distress, compassion, guilt, shame, and outrage in their audiences (for critiques see Balagopalan, 2014; Sircar and Dutta, 2011). These dominant images are typically constructed within the discourses of protection and vulnerability, the child as either victim or deviant in need of reform or remedy (see Sen, 2011), but little else. This paper challenges this narrow perspective of poor children by offering an analysis of children's own accounts of their emotional lives in ordinary spaces and times – what they identify as disappointments and how they navigate these. It does so by taking inspiration from Sara Ahmed's writing on 'emotional orientation' (Ahmed, 2006; 2014; see also McMahon, 2016) to show how affect structures poor children's encounters, experiences, and engagements with public life in the complex and diverse urban landscapes of Hyderabad. In particular, it explores the ways in which children orient themselves towards public life through bodies, objects, and feelings, themselves situated in complex sociocultural, political, and material realities.

Our analysis is located within the interdisciplinary literature of 'the affective turn' which seeks to cultivate other ways of noticing that foreground atmospheres, attention, memories, relationality, sensations, sentiments, perceptions, and listening (Blackman and Venn 2010; Lutz, 2017; see also Knudsen and Stage, 2015, Nolas and Varvantakis, in press and artist Sarah Browne's work on 'health and austerity'<sup>1</sup>). The affective turn encompasses the exploration of a range of forms and 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1961), locating public feeling, as a shared social reality, in what moves and matters to people in their everyday lives (Lutz, 2017). Drawing inspiration from this scholarship, and Sara Ahmed's work in particular, the terms affect, emotion and feeling are used interchangeably throughout (see also Stodulka, 2017). Furthermore, the analysis is a response to recent critiques on the normative, idealised form of children's participatory

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.incontext4.ie/projects/sarah-browne>

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discourse, which prioritises children's 'voice' over other modes of communication. As we (Nolas, Aruldoss and Varvantakis, 2019; Nolas and Varvantakis, 2019; Nolas and Varvantakis, in press) and others (Kraftl, 2013; Spyrou, 2011; Wyness, 2013) have argued restricting our attention to children's verbal articulations alone is not enough. Children express themselves idiomatically (Nolas, Aruldoss and Varvantakis, 2019) drawing on a range of auditory, sensory, visual registers. Therefore, we argue that a focus on affect, that runs through these multimodal forms of expression, offers crucial insights for (re)imagining the relationship between childhood and public life, and children's participation therein.

This paper draws evidence from two ethnographic biographies from a larger multimodal ethnographic study (the European Research Council funded Connectors Study), which explored the relationship between childhood(s) and public life in everyday ordinary spaces and times, in three cities (Athens, Hyderabad and London) between 2014 and 2017. We were particularly interested in investigating *what moves and matters* to children, their *relationships* of care and concern to the world (Lutz, 2017; Sayer, 2011), and how children *orient* themselves towards public life (Ahmed, 2006). The empirical analysis of this paper focuses on two girl children from Hyderabad: a 6-year-old girl from a migrant family, living as domestic help in an affluent area<sup>2</sup> and an 8-year-old girl living in a slum. Both girls share similar socio-economic attributes (low class, low caste) but live in quite different communities. The case selection is intentional because these two emblematic ethnographic biographies provide us with contrasting spaces of dwelling to explore the specificity of the girls' affective responses to their neighbourhoods and their belonging therein (see Bartos, 2013; den Besten, 2010), as well as offering a gendered analysis on the relationship between childhood and public life. The analysis focuses on the girls' experiences of 'scolding' as a form of disciplining of body and space, and the girls' range of responses to the 'scolding', and the political possibilities and limitations offered by the girls' affective landscapes.

In what follows, we first elaborate on recent scholarship in the study of emotion in

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<sup>2</sup> The culture of domestic servitude is typical only in the high-end, affluent residential areas in the city, where migrant employee/family lives in the servant quarter and offers domestic help.

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childhood and then provide a context of childhood and public life in India. We then describe how the concept of 'emotional orientation' offers valuable insights and new perspectives on children's engagement with public life. The methodological aspects of our research are discussed before we proceed to our analysis of the empirical material. Finally, we discuss our study findings' implications for children's participation and their right to everyday life in cities<sup>3</sup>.

### **Emotions and childhood studies**

How emotions matter and how emotional experiences are simultaneously constitutive and constituted in children's lives is receiving increasing attention in childhood studies (see the special issue by Blazek and Windram-Geddes, 2013). For example, studies that have foregrounded emotions provide vivid examples of how migrant children develop a sense of belonging (den Besten, 2010), how processes of 'othering' bifurcate lives in both painful and pleasurable ways (Haavind et. al., 2015), and how understandings of non-biological kinship emerge (Notermans, 2008). Many recent studies of preschool and primary school children highlight the role of emotion in performances of intersectional belonging and identities (Kustatscher, 2017), including: fear in play encounters (Procter and Hackett, 2017), sensory engagement with immediate environments (Bartos, 2013), and the role of emotional interdependence in building social and cultural capital in leisure spaces (Holt, Bowlby and Lea 2013). While such studies demonstrate how children's affective experiences are decisive in shaping their participation in communal life (see also Davies, 2014), studies of children's participation, activism, and political work, in which voice has been overly privileged, the analytical focus on emotion tends to slide into periphery (see Kraftl, 2013).

In our fieldwork in Hyderabad, we found this to be an unhelpful omission especially as we got to know the children in the study and started to become aware of their affective landscapes in relation to city life. Public life in India is organised, controlled, mediated, scrutinised, and/or legitimised by the social categories of gender, caste, class, religion,

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<sup>3</sup> UNCRC Article 31 enshrines the right of a child to play, relax, and participate in a wide range of cultural and artistic life. Inspired by Lefebvre's framing of city as an 'oeuvre' and also by bringing social justice perspective, various scholars used 'right to city life' as an analytical framework to analyse the relationship between space, power, and participation in urban life (see Harvey, 2003).

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ethnicity, and their intersectionalities; and gendered violence, both mundane and extraordinary, is often used as a moral force to maintain such differences and to assert authority over marginalised groups in India's fragmented cultural and ethnic landscape (see Hansen, 2018). Children are no exception to this violence, as we too began to discover (Aruldoss and Nolas, 2019), and neither is their affective labour that is involved in resisting and navigating such violence.

For example, Huberman's (2005) work on foreign tourism in the holy city of Banaras illustrated how children working as tourist guides, mainly with foreigners, were positioned as *awaarass* (loafers) by their own communities. Breaking away from social/family responsibilities within the local discourses in order to make a living left children navigating precarious moral terrains. Similarly, Sen's (2012) study on 'children's squads' in a religiously polarised slum in Hyderabad's Old City offers another critical insight on impoverished Muslim children's violent identity politics in public life. Her analysis illustrates how children's feeling of alienation in urban life experienced through poverty, history of violence, and disintegrated family life, resulted in violence being used by children as a source for reclaiming community pride. Similarly, Sircar and Dutta's (2011) study on children of sex workers from Kolkata sheds light on the discourses around suffering and compassion and, how children collectively navigate the culture of fear and stigma attached with their lives while fighting for the dignity of their mothers. In contrast, Chakrabarty's (2009) study of Muslim girls in a Kolkata slum illustrates how girls navigate and subvert the construction of ideal (Indian) girlhood at home, in the slum and other public spaces (see also Aruldoss and Nolas, 2019). Similarly, Dyson's (2014) research with working children, both boys and girls, involved in livestock activities like herding and collecting leaves in the Himalayan region, chronicles their everyday working lives in the forest, which are in turn shaped by gender, caste, nature, and culture.

The emerging empirical record demonstrates the ways in which children's affective responses to their historical conjectures both refracts and constructs public feelings as shared social realities. In this paper, we would like to push this empirical record further by tapping into the more speculative possibilities of the affective turn, which asks not only about the possibilities of the 'now' but also invites us to re-imagine what is

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possible (Knudsen and Stage, 2015; Hickey-Moody and Wilcox, 2019; Springgay, 2020).

### **Emotional orientations**

Sara Ahmed's (2006, 2014) writing on 'emotion' and 'orientation' is helpful here to illustrate how children's emotional orientation might mediate their encounters and experiences with public life. Ahmed's body of work, which is grounded in the phenomenological tradition, demonstrates the ways in which emotion is embodied, and circulates and moves within and between people. For Ahmed (2014), emotion is neither an individual property (inside out) nor a social form (outside in). Rather she claims that, 'emotions are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and the social as objects, a process which suggests that the 'objectivity' of the psychic and social is an effect rather than a cause' (Ahmed, 2014, p 10). Our emotions are shaped by the contact we have with others, so 'emotions are relational too: they involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness' in relation to such objects' (Ahmed, 2014, p 8).

Most significantly, emotions are not only about 'circulation'; they are also about what 'moves' us and about our attachments to the world – what connects us to this or that – those bodies, signs, objects, and others, that produce 'the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds' (Ahmed, 2014, p 117). As such, emotions are shaped by the 'contact zone' in which others impress upon us, as well as leave their impressions on us (Ahmed, 2014, p 194). The idea of impression combines the acts of perception, cognition, and emotion and situates them as entangled embodied 'experiences' as opposed to individual discrete experiences.

We orient ourselves in and towards the world (Ahmed, 2006) through emotions (Ahmed, 2014, see also McMahon, 2016). Orientation is 'a bodily habitation of space' (Ahmed, 2006) and we are always oriented or directed towards others. Likewise, 'emotions are directed to what we come into contact with: they move us 'toward' and 'away' from such objects' (Ahmed, 2006, p 2). In other words, if orientation is all about the 'intimacy of bodies and their dwelling place' (Ahmed, 2006, p 8) then emotion becomes an orienting device on how we 'feel at home' or 'feel our way' – a form of world making (Ahmed, 2014, p 12). We think with Ahmed's work because it allows us to rethink the interaction between emotion and orientation as to how children's

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emotional orientation to public life emerges in their embodied, spatial and social entanglements (Ahmed, 2006). This framing further provides a deeper appreciation of what emotions do and how emotions 'stick as well as move' between bodies, which also involve orientations towards others (2014, p. 4). This line of thought offers a powerful explanation on how the individual subject aligns or misaligns with collective subjects and, how others become a source for our feelings in public life engagements (see Ahmed, 2004). It also crucially, because of the focus on movement, enables us to look for and explore encounters that can put one 'out of line' disrupting the politics of inheritance and reproduction (Ahmed, 2006, p.12-22; see also Nolas and Varvantakis, 2019).

### **Research context and methodology**

The ethnographic biographies we draw on in this paper come from a subsample of children the first author worked with in Hyderabad, India in the context of the European Research Council (ERC) funded Connectors Study. The study received ethical clearance from the ethics committee of the University of Sussex (ER/SN264/1) and Goldsmiths, University of London (REISC/1359), and the ERC ethics committee, as well as being scrutinised by the ethics advisory board of the respective country to comply with the local ethical requirements.

In Hyderabad, the first author and a research assistant Madhavi Latha, carried out fieldwork with a heterogeneous group of 12 children, aged 6-9 years at the time of recruitment, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds living in different parts of Hyderabad. The longitudinal ethnographic data was collected over a period of three years (2014-2017) during which the research team spent time with the children 'hanging out', playing and carrying out research activities such as participant observation, drawing, neighbourhood walks, relational mapping, time-use maps, photography<sup>4</sup>, and biographical interviews with children and parents. Research activities took place mainly in children's homes, as well as occasionally in the local

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<sup>4</sup> All children in our project were given a camera at the beginning of the research to visually document 'what matters' to them in their everyday life. Children took photos on various aspects of their life on their own and they discussed their photos with us. The full photo-story methodology is described in Varvantakis, Nolas and Aruldoss, 2019.

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vicinity. The research was carried out in three languages: Telugu, Hindi, and English. Field visits and conversations were voice recorded and with the help of our research assistant recordings were rendered into fieldnotes in English by the first author. We acknowledge that some of the nuances of local affective grammars would have been lost in this translation process although every effort was made to mitigate the loss through ongoing conversations with our research assistant (see also Beatty, 2014).

As the focus in our research was to explore the relationship between childhood and public life and 'what matters' to children, we constantly reflected on the 'emotional reasons' (Sayer, 2011) that drove children to their worlds of concern. During the fieldwork we also asked children directly about the sorts of things that made them feel happy, sad, and/or angry, in an attempt to explore their orientations towards public life and, how emotion is implicated in notions such as social justice, morality and personal ethics. Expectedly, not all children were able to articulate their feelings and our analysis of emotion vis-à-vis public life, and given the critiques discussed earlier, did not confine itself to the verbal. Instead, children's feelings and emotions were expressed, and subsequently analysed, in many ways across our multimodal data set and at various points of time. To avoid misrepresentation, as Bondi (2005) suggests, we 'worked through' the data with the children at several points during the fieldwork, checking, discussing, and adjusting our interpretations. In situations where children offered less verbal articulation, we used the range of other sources collected in relation to each child in order to support our interpretations.

### **Children's emotional orientation to public life**

In what follows, we analyse the emotional orientation of two girl children from similar socio-economic backgrounds (low-class, low caste) but whose living arrangements, and therefore immediate urban environments and publics, were considerably different. We specifically focus on the girls' experiences of and responses to 'scolding' as a form of mundane violence, and an injunction to silence, and to the minimising of their presence in both private and public spaces.

### **Sujatha**

Sujatha (pseudonym), a 6-year-old girl, lives in Banjara Hills – an affluent area of the city of Hyderabad. Sujatha and her family migrated to the city 2½ years prior to us meeting her for the study, from a village in Nalgonda, a 'backward' district in the state about 90 km away from Hyderabad. Her parents did not complete their formal education. Her father works as driver-cum-assistant to a retired doctor that runs a home-based clinic, and her mother works as domestic help to the same doctor's family. Sujatha's family live on the top floor of a three storied building, above the doctor and his wife, in the servant's quarters. The servant quarter is considerably small in square meterage consisting of a single room without any partitions. There is hardly any physical space there for the movement of five people – Sujatha, her parents and her two older sisters. Sujatha gave us the impression that the place where she resides has always been quiet describing 'the colony' to us as 'very silent and calm'. She also tells us that '(we) should not go into anybody's houses as they would not allow, one should go only if called by the owners/residents, even if we do not know, we can introduce ourselves, should not roam or wander around'. Specifically, Sujatha communicates to the first author and Research Assistant that children 'should be very calm and silent without making any noise...' and 'no' they cannot play outside (Biographical interview, 07/05/2016).

Sujatha's description of the place as 'calm' and 'silent', and without visible signs of childhood in public, resonated strongly with her; it was an affect that 'stuck'. Throughout our fieldwork, lack of play space and freedom to move was Sujatha's biggest concern and it became a central motif in our conversations while drawing, mapping, taking photographs as well as during our neighbourhood walk. As the family stayed with the landlord-cum-employer, she was not allowed to speak loudly or play on the terrace as she wished. On a few occasions, she and her sisters were chided by her landlady for making noise on the terrace while playing (fieldnotes, 7/12/2014). During our neighbourhood walk, Sujatha and her elder sister, who accompanied us, told us that the residents of her locality generally discourage poor children playing on the street and curtailing their movements through verbal abuse, such as name calling or swearing, often moving them to tears: "Sometimes Sujatha cries if someone was too harsh to her, otherwise, she just ignores them" (Sujatha's sister, Fieldnotes, 14/12/2014).

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Sujatha and her sister's stories illustrate the micro politics of local belonging and emotions and echo studies of the social differences in children's engagement with public spaces (Elsley, 2004) and how poor children's lives in more privileged neighbourhoods are spatially defined and governed by the owners/residents of the neighbourhood (Oke et al, 1999). Ahmed (2014) writes that our sense of 'being' is constructed through 'feeling'. The metaphor 'feeling at home' means becoming intimate with where one is and becoming part of space. In contrast, Sujatha's feeling of 'not feeling at home' is filled with memories of discomfort and estrangement. These ruptures and tensions in everyday encounters, as Nayak (2017) argues, challenge the very idea of living convivially with difference. Moreover, the iteration of negative feeling experienced by Sujatha have created the very emotional experience of 'that which I am not' in the spatial register of her neighbourhood (Ahmed, 2014, p 67).

At the same time, inside the house, aware of the restrictions on her movement in her private space, Sujatha developed tactics so as to avoid unpleasant encounters. For example, on a couple of occasions, we were given the 'keep quiet' sign while climbing the staircase by Sujatha pointing her finger in the direction of landlady's house on the ground floor or by putting her finger on her lips and sussing us when conversing. Such emotional gestures are transient and non-verbal that could easily evade our attention when in fact they held considerable meaning and implications for the ways in which Sujatha was able to inhabit the communal spaces of the home and to manage her relationships with others.

Scolding can be read as a gendered demand to act in socially appropriate ways. Being silenced and feeling erased from city life became a refrain to our visits with Sujatha. In Ahmed's (2014) terms: it was an affect that 'stuck'. On a number of instances, Sujatha expressed her disappointment of not having freedom in her everyday life, telling us that she preferred her village to the city, where she found that she had more control or authority over her movements. Sujatha describes her village as an airy place where she can indulge in play and roam around, and where Madam will not shout: "(pause) if I play here, Madam will shout, but no one would shout there, I have full freedom there" (Fieldnotes, 01/11/2015). Her disagreement to the city status quo was expressed with a lowered face and a note of disapproval in her voice. Sujatha's narrations of her neighbourhood, however, also spoke about the joys of big city life.

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Describing her photography (see below) she told us that she was happy that she lived in a big city: she found the experience of living in a city, amidst tall, exquisite buildings, fascinating. In the city, her sense was one of modernity, unlike in her village.



Image (left): a painted wall from a new construction site, just opposite to her home... Sujatha vividly spoke about her liking of modern buildings and the modern appeal of the city.

Image (right): the jasmine plant kept in the terrace by the landlady... Sujatha likes jasmine and that was one of the reasons for her wanting to go to her village, where she can pluck jasmine from the agricultural field and use it....

Sujatha's frustration as a poor child living in a relatively affluent area are markedly discernible in her life. She showed awareness of the distance between herself/her family and their social milieu as well as the limitations that distance presented for her. Her strong feelings about environmental injustice in the area, for example, were mixed with feelings of powerlessness brought on by her social position:

Madhavi Latha: ok, ok.... you spoke about cutting of tree branches and untidy roads, which are happening in your area. Out of any of these, did you tell anytime to anyone that 'no, trees should not be cut or don't throw garbage on the roads?

Sujatha: no, they would scold (if I tell)

Madhavi Latha: they would scold you? Did you tell anyone (before)?

Sujatha: no

Madhavi Latha: then, how do you know that they would scold you?

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Sujatha: they would not listen to anyone and they do whatever they want, and like that.

(Biographical interview, 07/05/2016).

It is tempting to interpret Sujatha's response as a 'powerlessness' and 'passivity'. Ahmed (2014, p 2) explains *passive* in Latin means 'suffering' (*passio*) and 'to be passive is to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt as suffering'. Yet, when we pushed Sujatha a bit further, asking her to respond with feeling, a different story emerges:

Madhavi Latha: .... how do you feel while witnessing these kinds of activities?

Sujatha: get angry (facial expression suddenly changes in a way to show anger)

Madhavi Latha: become angry, what do you do then?

Sujatha: nothing, keep it to myself (says in a disappointing voice)

(Biographical interview, 07/05/2016)

Sujatha's anger felt measured to us. With us Sujatha tended to downplay her anger about environmental injustice at the same time as she expressed it unreservedly to her significant others in our presence, like her sisters and friends with whom she became much more animated. Anger can be considered an indicator of moral character (Solomon, 2002). Ahmed (2014, p. 175) describes how within black feminist literatures 'the passion of anger is crucial for producing 'the energy' to unpack the deep social and psychic investments in racism as well as sexism'. Solomon (2002, p. 125) describes anger as 'a natural reaction to an offense' and 'a moral force'. But there are other dynamics at play too. In the context of women's movements against domestic violence, for example, Haaken (2010) argues that women's feelings of anger as well as rage or violence, are often obfuscated in the interest of the figure of the 'good victim' who can mobilise collective concern. In the contemporary moment, angry boys and girls are largely pathologised through mental health discourses and sanctioned, especially in the institutional context, in the name of the 'good child' and a 'good childhood' (see Harden, 2012). Sujatha's moderation of her anger for different audiences suggests potentially an awareness of such dynamics. Yet, it also demonstrates a self-awareness

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and critical consciousness: a conduit of more political thinking, feeling, and being, and a way of engaging with public life.

## **Bhavana**

Bhavana (pseudonym), an 8-year-old girl, lives in a small concrete house in a slum in BK Guda, which is surrounded by a public park, a busy market area and a middle-class residential colony. Both her parents have no formal education. Bhavana's father migrated from a village in Karim Nagar district, which is a home for many granite quarries and small-scale industries in the state, as a teenager. Bhavana has two elder brothers and a younger sister. Her father manages a home-based petty shop that sells vegetables while her mother sells vegetables as a street vendor. The entire slum population live precariously without the security of land ownership. Bhavana attends a local private English medium school. She is part of a big playgroup and she enjoys being outside the home, hanging out and playing with her friends, as she cannot do much in her tiny house besides watching television. Her family appeared to be religiously devout and she shared with us many photo/stories of visiting various temples in and around the city.

The population of the slum is almost entirely homogenous in terms of caste, class and migration history. The vast majority of the slum population belongs to the Scheduled Caste (formerly known as untouchables), and they are mainly engaged in the informal economy as casual labourers. While talking, drawing and mapping, Bhavana revealed that she likes a lot of things in the slum, as people are generally helpful and friendly there. In fact, our field visits and photography discussions were filled with many moments of celebrating religious and cultural festivals within the slum, the year around. Bhavana shared how much she enjoyed these intergenerational gatherings and celebrations. In one of our visits, we asked her, like all the children in our study, what made her happy, sad, and/or angry:

Madhavi Latha: What makes you happy? When do you feel happy?

Bhavana: When festival comes. I feel happy when festival comes.

Madhavi Latha: Why?

Bhavana: Everyone celebrates. Everyone here celebrates. (Pause)....

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...

Vinnarasan Aruldoss: What is so special about festival?

Bhavana: People come together. Elder brothers here dance. It is fun to celebrate together (Fieldnotes, 07/02/2016)

Ahmed (2010, p 574) explains that happiness is not an autonomous descriptor, rather it is 'the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into world, and ... the drama of contingency, how we are touched by and what comes near'. Happiness also involves a specific kind of intentionality as against the belief that it is 'socially contagious' (see Ahmed, 2014). For example, Bhavana's feeling of happiness is not because she enjoys the festive mood of celebration or the feel of bodies coming together and dancing. Rather, as Ahmed (2006) would postulate, what cultivates Bhavana's happiness is, the way her body extends into the social space, her feelings about others that aligns her body 'with' others, and her intimacy with the collective that inhabits the social space.

Although Bhavana likes a lot of things about the local community, she did not like people squabbling with each other or adults scolding children for using public spaces. For example, the small open space (square) at the entrance of the slum was the only physical space for the entire slum to hang out in, and to hold communal gatherings/celebrations. Because of overcrowding, this physical space also became a contested space, particularly when demands were made on the space by adults/youth while children were playing. In our conversations, Bhavana highlighted these 'micro politics' of claiming the public space between the boys and girls, and between the adults and children. Children of the slum do not have the resources to access other places within the locality, instead they meander around and use the space despite its limitations. What transpired from our conversations with Bhavana was how the youth from the slum tried to subordinate children by scolding them on their use of public spaces. The act of scolding, as shown below, and its affective capacities of inflicting 'hurt', was used as a controlling device here. This is a prominent device for keeping the younger children 'in line' (see also Aruldoss, 2013; Varvantakis, 2016) and reproducing social order. Bhavana puts it as follows:

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“... if you do any wrong thing, brothers (of this slum) will scold... so don't play here. In case you want to play please go and play somewhere else. If you play here, they will scold again” (Biographical interview, 05/05/2016)

Similarly, reflecting on the feeling questions, Bhavana expressed her anger on the treatment meted out to children:

Bhavana: when we (children) walk around in the busti some aunties would ask us where we are going, and they would simply scold us for moving around, erm, that makes me angry.

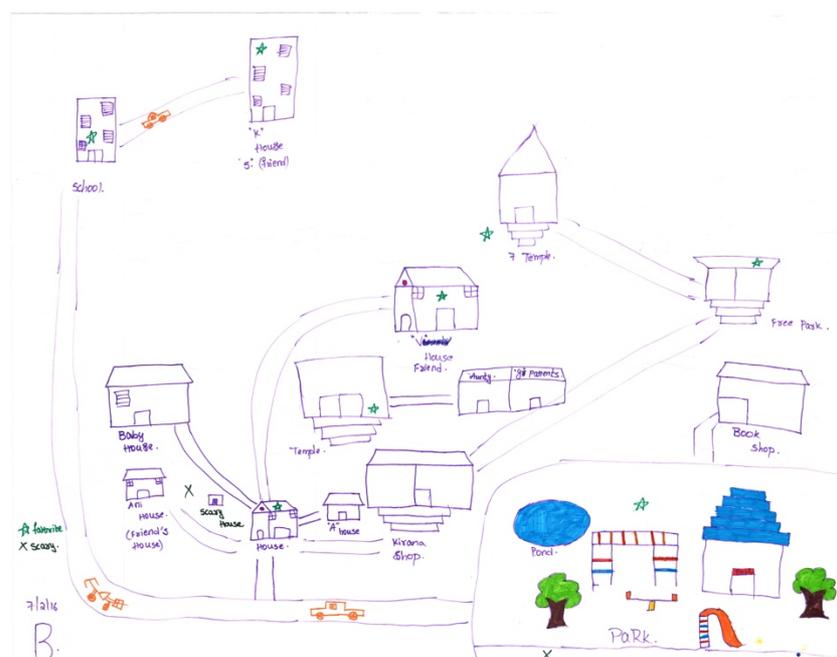
Vinnarasan Aruldoss: ... why do they do that?

Bhavana: They think we make noise even though if we actually don't make it (Fieldnotes, 07/02/2016).

The above two extracts clashes with Bhavana's accounts of community life in the slum. In her work on 'collective feelings', Ahmed (2004) analyses how feelings make 'the collective' appear *as if* it were a body in the first place (p 27, emphasis in original). It is a fact that emotional attachments could be a cause for social bond in Bhavana's community life, however, as Ahmed (2004) investigates, how the notion of 'collective' or 'individual' takes shape needs some unpacking here. Ahmed (2004) states that emotion itself creates the very distinction between individual and collective through the orientation we have towards others. This orientation is not only about our impression of others, it is also about the impression that is left on us. In this case, as narrated above, the impression the local youth and adults left on children in the past, evoke bad memories for Bhavana suggesting an impossibility of solidarity, at least with local youth and adults.

In the excerpts, it is also apparent that Bhavana's frustration and anger are a reflection of her inferior position, as a child, in the community. Her, and other children's status, as a 'minor' curtails her right to the public spaces of the slum, already limited and largely organised around adult interests and needs. In this light, Bhavana's anger towards the local women who try to control children should be read as a response, not a reaction, to an unjust situation; it is a political act, a demonstration, and a moral resentment.

Nevertheless, unlike Sujatha in the previous case, and through a safety offered by the group, Bhavana and her friends experimented with stepping out of lines (see also, Varvantakis, 2018 for a similar example from the same study in Athens). Despite her vulnerability, Bhavana and other children drew support from each other to disrupt the spatial politics of public place, something they could not dare to do individually.



Bhavana's neighbourhood map where she indicated her favourite and least favourite places in and around her neighbourhood

We experienced these disruptions during our neighbourhood walk and mapping activity. During the latter, Bhavana spoke about the neighbouring public park, one of her favourite places in the neighbourhood. As children have limited recreational opportunities and open play space in the neighbourhood, this nearby park was a great attraction for Bhavana and her friends in the slum. The entry fee for the park was 3 rupees. Unable to afford to entry fee every day, children, especially boys, would jump over the compound wall of the park adjoining the slum. When the watchmen of the park caught any of them for trespassing, they would lock them up in a room for a while to scare them. Bhavana, who also trespassed the park with the help of her elder brothers, described this predicament as follows: 'we knew they wanted to scare us. That's why they keep us inside the locked room. So, we also pretend that we were

scared but we were actually not, and we would continue doing the same' (Fieldnotes, 14/12/2014). Her words were accompanied by a laugh.

The narration above explains the intimacy and affective qualities of collectivity, and how Bhavana and her friends used solidarity to lay claim for accessing public space. Most importantly, children's interpretation of the watchman's act – its intention and its effects – also suggest that, following Ahmed's (2014) interpretation of emotions, we do not evaluate others as they are, rather, we judge how they affect us. Children here sensed the purpose of the watchman's action, so they approached the incident in a way it did not affect them negatively. With that, they keep challenging the authority and continually making claim for accessing public space (park) for recreational activities.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the foregoing analysis we illustrated 'what matters' to Sujatha and Bhavana and how their personal concerns, living arrangements and matters of common interest shaped their everyday emotional experiences in relation to public life. Both girls were subjected to the same disciplining ('scolding') that many Indian children experience, including the ones in our study. The power of scolding kept both girls 'in line'. Consequently, struggles with playing, with access to spaces of leisure, and with movement around the neighbourhood, surfaced as a major concern for both girls. These struggles also variably affected their sense of local belonging. Sujatha, whose parents' employment and the family living arrangements, left her more atomised, with little access to other children in the neighbourhood, and only her sisters for company. Bhavana on the other hand while equally deprived found companionship and solidarity in the company of the slum children, together with whom she was able to step 'out of line'.

In the educational, social justice, and children's rights discourses, play is recognised as central to children's development and wellbeing, and their interactions with the social world. The increased scarcity of physical play spaces in big cities, and the commercialisation of recreational activities (Oke et. al., 1999), and the lockdowns that accompany pandemics, all highlight the issues of children's unequal access to spaces outside the home. While this is important, what our affective analysis demonstrated is

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that children's relationship to public life is not a straightforward case of 'being outside'. Thinking through these inequalities with feeling, we have argued, demonstrates the messiness of how children encounter and experience public life. The city is accessed in different ways even under restrictions. The focus on the girls' emotional attachment to their places of dwelling helped unpack some of this complexity. The girls were not just 'stuck', they also 'moved' figuratively and actually: a camera lens becoming a device for the capture and exploration of the aesthetics of modernity; comradeship creating a safe zone to jump through fences and to disrupt the politics of social reproduction of inequality.

The analysis of the girls' anger and pleasure become points of entry for understanding their political orientation (Ahmed, 2014). Anger here is understood as prelude to action and it can be viewed as a morally legitimate force for any conceptualisation of social justice (Muldoon, 2008). The empirical analysis demonstrates how anger is socially oriented (power/social order), politically rooted (matters of importance), but marginally acted (with passivity). Pleasure on the other hand offers up a more speculative horizon to think through the ways in which children already circumnavigate restrictions to their agency; it offers up a way of imagining social practices with children that maintain, enrich and extend childhood publics depending on what might be necessary. In this light, while children were not always able to communicate feelings of injustice and to reach out to other bodies in their everyday life, the research space – in its liminality and with the relationships between strangers that it engendered – provided an opportunity for them to articulate these views and experiences through recourse to multimodal forms of expression and experimentation.

Finally, as Ahmed (2014) states emotion cannot simply be regarded as an individual property or an outcome of social practices, rather as our analysis demonstrated it shapes our orientation towards people, objects and public life, affording the capacity 'to embrace, revise or reject' a public sphere of whatever kind (Reddy, 1997, p. 331). Therefore, we argue that the epistemological presupposition in the discourses of the public sphere, wherein children are either absent or problematically treated as 'apolitical' has arguably failed to understand these idiomatic ways in which children communicate with the world (Nolas, Aruldoss and Varvantakis, 2019). What our empirical analysis demonstrates is the ways in which emotion in childhood becomes a

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key aspect of such idiomatic expressions and, how it surfaces and entangles 'matters of common concern'.

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