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30 POORNIMA DESIGNING RELATIONS

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THE TRACING OF ornate drawings with rice powder would seem to have little to do with relating to others, with how to mediate dealings, buffer forces, and sustain ties. Often, transactional activities in the city are reduced to brute expediency: getting things done. Social action rests on imagining and representing. Practical exchange and tactical maneuverability have an aesthetics and an ethics. Yet these aspects are often peripheral to mechanics.

Spend time with Poornima; she will help you see differently. She is a canny entrepreneur, helpful neighbor, profiteering intermediary, and wry social observer. Poornima lives in a lane of squat houses in Matunga Labour Camp. As a lower-middle-class neighborhood, it bears countervailing traces: of aspiration and comfort, of the makeshift and fragile.

This crystallizes the geographic location, between the secure middle-class enclave of Mahim, directly west, adjoining the sea, and Dharavi, a vast hive of a *slum*, to its east. Labour Camp, as it is known, derives its name from a period, decades ago, when it served as a transit camp for people being resettled by the city. Typifying a wider urban logic in India, what was temporary became enduring. This momentary space for floating figures was gradually sedimented into the city itself. During the post-Independence period, the

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area had a concentration of Dalit migrants, often working for the municipality. Its constituents, rhythms, and loyalties, naturally, blend into adjoining Dharavi, a vast, complex patchwork of industries and migrants from south and north.

Like women-heads of adjacent households, Poornima sometimes draws *rangoli*—called *kolams* in South India—on her doorstep. Rangoli is a ritual painting tradition in western and southern India. Auspicious symbols, religious figures, and favored motifs are traced on floor surfaces and at thresholds. They are a means of warding off bad luck, welcoming visitors, and marking ritual or life-cycle events.

These visual representations can be austere. Commonly, they are drawn with white rice flour and amount to a few lines and dots. Rangoli can also be mesmerizing, especially at festival time, when households compete for eyeballs with designs of colored powder. Galaxies—stars, peacocks, hexagons, Ganeshes, flowers—arrest your vision while you are walking through the tight, workaday lanes.

I was introduced to Poornima and her husband, Madhavan, after I began my ethnographic project in the area in 2011. I was introduced to them by Raman, a mustachioed moneylender and neighbor. Poornima and Madhavan were in their early fifties, their children now married off. Madhavan worked in the Pest Control offices of the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC). He was also an active member of the Municipal Mazdoor (labor) Union. He was often away on union business. This meant tending battles regarding the municipality, jockeying with other city unions, and, quite often, squabbling within his own union. They lived with Poornima's niece—her mother had died giving birth to another sibling—whose intellectual disability renders her dependent on them.

My visits to Labour Camp initially involved Poornima. She was quick with advice and opinions on whom to meet. She also had an intermittently endearing—and intermittently suffocating—possessiveness. Not necessarily do only anthropologists swarm their interviewees; informants, too, domesticate their ethnographers. She would call people for me but then quiz me afterward. She nudged me away from other matronly competitors. She emphatically dismissed other neighborhood busybodies about whom I voiced curiosity. After some time, I realized, as one does in fieldwork, that she was well connected, gregarious, and kindly, yet her shadow loomed large, and I learned to step outside it.

But while clearing the initial fog and coming to some routine knowledge of Labour Camp, I am grateful to have her shielding. Poornima's sedate

appearance suggests a respectable Tamil matron: black-and-white hair tied in a bun, sari starched and immaculate, a simple black pleather handbag hanging off her left shoulder. She is an alert, serious, well-respected, energetic, and powerful presence. If I meet her at her home in the evening, our discussions are constantly interrupted by business associates, political apprentices, and Labour Camp neighbors. In these dealings she moves easily among the many languages in which she is fluent: Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Hindi.

An evening in 2012 went like this: mid-afternoon, a courier named Raju who worked for Poornima's Amway-style direct-selling business arrived in his rattling Tempo. In the back, lashed with rope, sat several narrowly stacked boxes that Raju had brought from a warehouse. He quietly unloaded the boxes as Poornima, spectacles on, looked at the delivery manifest. Poornima's enterprise intertwines risk management, social assessment, and assiduous networking. She believes that brushed-steel kitchen containers and *tiffins*—a fixture in Indian kitchens—will soon go the way of the dinosaurs.

Poornima, you could say, is a believer in the desire for the disposable. In our interviews, she places emphasis on the relatively recent democratization, in India, of *bikta* (to sell) and *phenkna* (to throw away). She believes that young city people have a fickle mentality, a consume-and-dispose tic. More people getting more prosperous may not fetishize the inflexible and metallic as before (I note, in passing, that her rice and *dal* are in steel-lidded containers and that she has a copper vessel in a corner). Poornima fishes out, from one of the corrugated boxes, her contribution to species evolution: plastic sets of storage containers, nested like Russian dolls within one another. They still have a strong plasticky smell from the factory.

Poornima's business is largely tactical: she has an assembly of transporters, couriers, and saleswomen. Her labor is to direct them, say, toward new middle-class housing developments. There, aspiring housewives might be receptive to the idea of replacing steel lunch vessels with plastic ones. Poornima explained:

My contacts tell me when there is a set of good, new towers ready for occupation, all at least two БHK [bedrooms, hall, kitchen] or three БHK. They can be in Navi Mumbai, Thane, anywhere. The families move in over some months. You cannot send men, strange men in a new place. You send nice girls, college-educated, from Monday to Saturday, when the men are at work. They say to the gate guards that they are visiting a relative on the fifth floor, nineteenth floor, whatever, and then they spend the day buzzing the doors, taking the elevators, talking to those

homemakers, convincing them that a new apartment also means they must have new kitchen things. When you have shifted houses, husbands will give their wives more freedom to buy. Then they fill in the papers with the girls, give a deposit. At the end of the day my girls give me the sales and inventory numbers. . . . I send Raju or someone else the next week with the order.

Poornima spoke with a certain matter-of-fact-ness (that doesn't preclude relish) about her moneymaking acumen. She sells other household things in similar ways: by connecting various dots in Mumbai's landscape that weren't connected before or at least not in the place, or at the time, that she is doing so.

Later that same evening in 2012, a relatively prosperous neighbor—a salaried Reliance Industries technician—came to seek out Poornima's help. She offered him some salty, spicy potato wafers, and they chatted for a bit. Poornima was an acquaintance of the man's wife, a quiet woman with two young children. The husband had come to inquire about getting their elder child admitted to a nursery. They'd had no luck with the area's "better" places, he explained: "The spaces for next year are full; even I offered to pay the year's tuition in full, and they are saying no."

Poornima listened quietly. After some time, she picked up her Nokia and dialed a number (a priest in Mahim, she tells us; she's known him for years). Putting on her outside *chappals* (sandals), she stepped out the doorway into the lane. The reason couldn't be for privacy, for her voice booms; Poornima was broadcasting her intervention to neighbors. The technician and I sat listening to Poornima, sadly eyeing the empty potato wafer package. Returning, she announced: "The church has a good nursery on the premises, not too far from Mahim station; they can perhaps put you on the wait list. I will talk to the deputy in charge." The man's face showed visible relief at having found an option for his child. Promising to update his wife, he slipped on the shiny black shoes he'd left at the entrance and left.

A few moments later, we're joined by another fellow, a Congress Party worker fishing for assistance with some work in his constituency, the G/North Ward. The man's name was Puduru (I'd met him on previous occasions in Poornima's home). He explained to Poornima that he would like her help with assembling neighborhood women for a function the following week. The official purpose of the function was an *Aadhar* card registration drive (at that time, people in Bombay's popular neighborhoods were getting identity cards converted to a much-heralded biometric system). But I knew

from previous conversations that Puduru was less interested in actually registering Poornima's neighbors for the biometric cards. He wanted to corral the women at the Aadhar center—a makeshift table of laptops and technical staff at a secondary-school courtyard nearby—on the day when a Congress Party candidate for the BMC 2012 election would make an appearance. Hired photographers would snap shots of the man flanked by Puduru and the sea of women, which would then be used on party billboards.

Much of their conversation, in Tamil, was unintelligible to me, but after Puduru left, Poornima explained that she might be receptive to the request. She couched it not so much as a favor to him but as moral duty: "With Aadhar, the government will deposit money for children's medicine in the women's accounts. It will mean something to them."

Some months later, once I had settled into Labour Camp, my networks had expanded. Eager for a broader perspective, I evaded Poornima somewhat. It was then that I heard other interpretations of Poornima's motivation for helping Puduru: Poornima takes a commission from each woman who registers for Aadhar, one neighbor surmised. Given the ubiquity of such intermediary mercantilism in India, her theory might not be so far-fetched. What is "altruistic help" to one person is interpreted as self-interested "trade" (*dhandha*) to another. "Clean" (*saaf*) and "dirty" (*ganda*) work are differentiated not by any intrinsic quality but rather by a shift in perspective.

Poornima's life demonstrates how often this sort of gendered social activity is a kind of relational labor. Such work is often elided in male-centered analyses, yet it is critical to how urban sociality unfolds. Many studies and fictional representations of Bombay¹ focus primarily on the hustling of *men*—those whose charismatic and often violent potentialities are imagined to be at the center of how protean relations are produced and mediated. But as Poornima shows, male mediations are often bound up with a concurrent flow of women's relational work.² Indeed, in this sense, writing on social infrastructures in the global South repackages the relational labor that anthropologists have long described as kinship. But how are these intimate relations—ethically equivocal social engagements—imagined and represented? What aesthetics and ethics underwrite the forging of solidarities and relational possibilities in the contemporary city?

Many of Poornima's neighbors, like herself, trace their origins to some other place outside the city. Poornima is Tamil, and her parents migrated to Bombay at the prodding of her mother's uncle, who was in the leather trade. On the arterial roads that hug Dharavi and Labour Camp are innumerable small-scale shops displaying leather belts, bags, and jackets. These

are manufactured within Dharavi. The area is a center for tanning and dyeing animal hides, a trade that has dwindled in recent years but remains a core industry. In her childhood memory, the entire household was oriented around the work. Her father worked at cacophonous drums that mixed industrial chemicals and newly skinned hides. Her mother and other women would afterward brush them and lay them out on rooftop terraces, where they would harden. She and her brother, before school homework, after household chores, would brush the hides after the sun had baked them, remove stray hairs and detritus, bring them in, and, if necessary, stack them next to their sleeping mat during monsoon downpours.

Now is a long way from then. Poornima has not been near an animal carcass in some time; she conducts “clean” and vastly more lucrative work. One thing remains: the smell from all those years handling hides: “Ugh, you don’t want to know what kind of odor there was” [Eesh, poochna mat, aap ko nahin mante uska badboo kya tha]. But she has other, finer inheritances from that time, among them a fellowship, with other Tamil girls in the slum, in rangoli.

A YEAR OR SO LATER, sometime in December 2013, I turned up at Poornima’s house after a long absence. I thought that I might find her busy, but instead I found her more relaxed than usual. It was a slow morning; a planned visit to Mulund to check with a distributor for her direct-selling operation had been postponed. Poornima invited me in, saying that she had to prepare for dinner. We chatted a bit as I munched on some tea biscuits while she worked in her kitchen.

In our earlier interactions, I expressed admiration for the rangoli in the lanes outside. Recalling my appreciation for her skills, on this morning, rifling through containers in her kitchen, she brought out one round tin with a screw-on lid. As she lifted it, a fine dust cloud rose from chalky rice powder within. We stepped outside into the noisy lane. Small children sat pants-less on the ground, while women on their haunches splashed water from large buckets of laundry. She swept the dirt from the area in front of her place and then bent down, remarkably agile and sturdy while pivoting into place.

Poornima cupped the powder in one hand and deftly drew intertwining, symmetrical lines, squeezing out the powder so that it fell precisely. Two young boys arrived, smiling and whispering and enjoying themselves. Rangoli are often drawn as geometric figures and may contain triangles, diamonds, as well as dots of different colors. A few other houses in the lane already had designs—they are usually done quite early in the morning. She

laments, perhaps inevitably, of a decline in skill and ambition of the art: “The designs my aunt, my grandmother could do, girls today are simply ignorant.”

She instructs me now: an unschooled surrogate. Her head is down, fingers pinching some flour, as I attempt the same. She sucks air in sharply as if I am about to make an error, saying “Tight, hold it tight. You must not let it leak, *rup dena* [give it a shape].” I’m hopeless at it—my rangoli turns into an undifferentiated white sandbox for ants. As I watch Poornima’s hands, I am struck at her swiftness, the ways she squeezes a dollop of powder into a sphere, deftly turns it into the end of a line, and in this way fashions something, connects entities, gives form to what had none.

It is perhaps not so distant from what she does in life. In Margaret Trawick’s classic ethnography of Tamil poetics and relationality, she notes that the way Tamil women draw their kolams (the Tamil version of rangoli) reflects their social worlds: their marriage choices and family patterns.³ These are ephemeral miniatures of an intimate universe; friends, neighbors, and relatives become curvy lines and spaced dots.

Perhaps, in a looser way, Poornima, in her myriad relational projects—familial, neighborly, urban, entrepreneurial—is doing something like these powder designs. She is imagining and actualizing relations; she assembles them, links them, bends them into a desired silhouette. Social relations depend on imaginative representation, on aesthetic skills—of performing and projecting and connecting and dissimulating—that are often tersely viewed in rational-transactional or masculine-hierarchical terms. Urban sociality may be better understood as something like rangoli: as a universe, crafted and cut, an expression of skill and artistry.

Notes

1. See Thomas Blom Hansen, “Sovereigns beyond the State: On Legality and Authority in Urban India,” in *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, ed. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 169–91; Vikram Chandra, *Sacred Games* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

2. See Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Claire Snell-Rood, *No One Will Let Her Live: Women’s Struggles for Well-Being in a Delhi Slum* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

3. Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).