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Invisible boundaries to access and participation in public spaces: Navigating community diversity in Leicester, UK

Abstract

This paper considers how institutions responsible for urban public spaces might promote more equitable access. Focusing on the Gujarati community in Leicester, UK it reveals multiple cultural sensitivities that are often not taken into consideration by institutions, even as they seek to enable participation. The research maps invisible boundaries which prevent ethnic minority communities accessing urban public spaces, including complex dynamics of ethnicity, caste and class. We suggest that considering how residents imagine boundaries traversing the urban environment, and how these bound them from others – including powerful institutions – explains why certain physical spaces and spaces of participation remain inaccessible to them. It finds institutional practices perpetuate these boundaries by not recognising such complexities and how they alter local participation. This research demonstrated that the perception of accessible spaces extends beyond distance and physical accessibility to a desire for power to shape those spaces. By critically examining the factors that delimit movement in space, this article extends understanding of access and participation, highlighting that the two are not in a straightforward linear or hierarchical relationship in which one precedes the other. Rather the two can be sought together, with participation a prerequisite for access. Secondly, effective participation does not just require power to be shared across the boundary between institution and ‘community’ – it should also be distributed across the community, and traverse social boundaries within it.

Key words: Access, participation, public space, boundaries, ethnic minority, community

1. Introduction

It is not as simple as to say that minority communities do not engage with river and canal [as public spaces]. How accessible are these places for us? Maybe, we can access them physically since there are no apparent barriers but how adaptive are these places in reality and do we really have a voice in shaping them? These are important points to be considered when you are talking about engaging people with places (BR3).

The above quotation from a research participant highlights the relationship between access to public spaces and participation in processes to shape them. Central to understanding these people-place relationships are perceptions of access and lack thereof. People's ability to access and shape a space is a complex process of social and political interactions and cultural factors (Low and Smith 2013). Yet, the dynamics involved in diversifying public spaces remain under-researched, with a particular lack of insight to the perspectives of people not accessing the spaces – those like our participant who feel they have no voice in shaping them.

Participation anchors planning and policy processes in public space. It is considered as empowering and responsive tool (Cornwall 2002, Mohan 2007) for active citizen engagement (Gaventa 2002). However, making sure that participation is not limited to few groups is a key attribute to the representation of the diversity and (re)engaging people to public spaces (Pateman 1970). The diversification of urban spaces is high on the agenda in cities of the Global North seeking to make them inclusive for everyone (Madanipour 2004) and ensure that the profile of those accessing them reflects population diversity. People-centred and process-oriented approaches (Hickey and Mohan 2004), aim to include local groups as equal partners at every stage of the development of public space. To ensure the inclusion of diverse groups, Chambers (1997) argues that it is important to encourage people to engage in the political decision making in ways that shifts the balance of power in their favour. Other authors also emphasise the role of re-orienting the power relations in participatory development to strengthening people's political capacities (Cresswell 2010; Gaventa 2005; Hickey and Mohan 2004). The concept of access is often used with participation – which is a plausible condition of participation but at the same time distinct because of less emphasis on the role of political capabilities in decision-making and power dynamics (Carpentier 2015). The idea of accessibility to space is often assumed to sit at a lower level in the hierarchy of participative practices (Agarwal 2001; Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995; White 1996). However,

this is challenged by narratives from our research participants who suggest that they need to feel involved in decisions (i.e. participate) prior to seeking access. People do not necessarily follow the assumed ladder of engagement proceeding from access to participation, gaining more power as they do. Sometimes they seek participation (i.e. influence and power) prior to or alongside physical access.

This paper considers how institutions responsible for urban public spaces might promote equitable access, focusing on an ethnic minority community¹. It reveals multiple cultural sensitivities that are often not taken into consideration by the institutions even as they seek to enable participation. The research maps invisible boundaries which prevent ethnic minority communities accessing urban space, including complex dynamics of ethnicity, caste and class. It finds institutional practices perpetuate these boundaries by not recognising such complexities and how they alter local participation. Further, the managers of urban space confused the seemingly accessible urban spaces with the notion of participation which we detail in the next section. We demonstrate that subtleties of ethnic minority groups' experiences can be masked by over-simplistic views of community which often fail to address the plurality of identities and practices in public space which impact people's capabilities and willingness to access public spaces.

Our research aims to trace the invisible boundaries of access to public space through a situated focus on the narratives and experiences of the Gujarati community of Belgrave, one of the largest Indian diaspora communities, in Leicester, UK. It sought to understand the perspectives of people not accessing particular urban spaces - waterways – or participating in

¹ We acknowledge that this term is problematic, particularly when referring to a community like the one discussed which represents a minority nationally but not locally. However, UK institutions like the ones discussed here, typically distinguish between the majority white population and those of other ethnic backgrounds or who are racialized as such. Research participants frequently used the term community to denote those they identify with, often in relation to ethnicity or religion, and described the cities' residents in terms of its many communities.

engagement facilitated by the organisation which manages the spaces (Canal and River Trust). The aim was to understand residents' perspectives to identify how more people might be enabled to benefit from these spaces. Through becoming familiar with how Belgrave's communities view urban space, participation and community it became apparent that there is important complexity and diversity which affects attempts to engage people with particular spaces. Previous work conceptualising the boundaries of ethnic minority communities tend to frame them as tangible, and homogenised for different groups (Campbell and Mattila 2003). The nuances within a group that apparently shares the same identity, and how these subtle variances create intangible and invisible boundaries of participation are often over-looked. Authors such as Mohan and Hickey (2004) argue that diversity within local representation holds significance in the participation of diverse groups in public spaces, yet there is surprisingly little research in this field. Our analysis shows that multiple cultural and religious expressions exist within Belgrave, which are critical influences on engagement in public spaces. However, institutional practices do not currently consider the nuances of everyday practices while negotiating users' diversity in public spaces. Our findings call for critical engagement by institutions managing public spaces to distinguish between access and participation, and not assume a direct pathway between them. People should be engaged with political processes of shaping an urban space in ways that allows symmetrical power relations between them and the public space managers. Further, to ensure diverse representation it is critical to understand public space within its unique context that can inform them of variances within minority communities such as ethnicity, caste, class, language, religious and cultural practices.

In the next section we review literature on access and the role of power relations in shaping spatial experiences. We then consider participation and (in)equitable access to participatory processes. The empirical material demonstrates the plurality of socio-cultural

identities affecting access, and provides insights into invisible boundaries which affect use of urban spaces and participation.

1.1 From Access to Participation

The notion of access has been interpreted variously in academic debates. Initially access was used predominantly in property theory to understand rights to access land or property. Ribot and Peluso (2003) advanced debate on access beyond its politico-legal interpretation to investigate social dimensions. They and others argue that access cannot be constricted to mere “enforceable claim” (MacPherson 1978, 3) which limited its scope to rights-based legal debates (Tawney 1978; Nelson 1986, 1995). The concept of access furthered beyond its legal interpretation, through exploration of social dimensions in other spatial domains including housing (Arundal and Doling 2017), public space (Mathers 2008), and access to services or provision such as food (Morton et al. 2008), health (Goddard and Smith 2001), and education (Shipton and Goheen 1992; Peters 1994). Access is also prominent in disability studies where accessibility is often treated as something people have or not (Neal 1998; Devas 2003; Titchkosky 2011). Research in this field has shown that experiential dimensions of place such as symbolic, visual and attitudinal aspects were excluded while designing places for people with learning disabilities (Prasad 2003; Ryan 2005).

Some authors hint at the complexity of the concept of access, for example understanding it as a complex social construction (Nind and Seal 2009). Others highlight that structural barriers are equally important as physical ones when considering what makes certain spaces (in)accessible (Emmanuel and Ackroyd 1996; Rummery et al. 1999). Referring back to the research participant’s quote that opens this paper, it was noticeable that they distinguish access and accessibility – that the means to access is not simply a quality of the space. Carpentier (1970) argues that gaining access could be a possible outcome of participatory process. However, the issues around access are complex in a community with

intersecting identities and power relations Accessibility, as seen by our participants pivots on power dynamics not only between ‘the community’ and institutions but also within a community. Outside organisations may not immediately recognise lines of difference by which communities organise themselves, and how these shape accessibility (Amin 2012; Gidlow and Ellis 2011; Mohammad 2013).

Access entails not just the ability to enter a space, but the capacity to shape and bound spaces. These capacities typically fall under notions of participation: discussion of access has tended to focus on presence (or absence) in physical spaces whilst participation considers involvement in processes to shape them. As our findings illustrate, this type of influence can be a key determinant of whether people access particular spaces. It is therefore necessary to consider interactions between participation and access.

Participation, as a tool ‘to give voice’ to marginalised groups and subsequently empower them is typically assumed to be ‘a good thing’, hence attempts to increase citizens’ involvement in political decision-making (Laderchi 2001; Morgan 2016; Narayan and Petesch 2002). Frameworks of participation locate it on a continuum from empowerment to tokenistic or manipulative (Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995; White 1995; Agarwal (2001) People-centric participation is are considered as ‘transformative’ (White 1996) and interactive (Pretty 1995). When people are informed after the decision is considered as ‘passive’ participation (Agarwal 2001) or ‘nominal’ (White 1996) which according to Arnstein (1969) is equivalent to non-participation. And when people are invited to participate and asked for their opinion without a guarantee that their views will have an effect on decision-making is ‘consultative’ (Agarwal 2001). Some authors also distinguish between participation with participatory development, the latter being a process of empowerment where people are politically involved in ways that deliver tangible benefits, and re-orientation of power relations to reinforce political negotiating capabilities (Agarwal 2001; Mohan 2007). -Our intention here is not to have an

exhaustive discussion on various hierarchical models of participation. Instead we aim to give background to understand the public engagement activities and processes adopted by the institutions that are informed by these framework.

Canal and River Trust (CRT) for example, has used an engagement pyramid to articulate how to increase people's involvement in their work. This suggests that people living near waterways should be encouraged and enabled to visit waterways, through which some will become supporters of the charity's goals. A subset of these supporters will become more involved in the organisation's activity, eventually gaining some voice in how waterways are managed and what the organisation does. Access is therefore assumed to be a precursor to participation, and as a supporter progresses through this journey they gain greater power over waterway spaces, with relatively few people reaching this level; physical access to a space precedes political access to decisions about it. However, as our opening quote highlights, people targeted by CRT see the two as intertwined: some people do not expect to begin from access, rather they seek influence over a space before regularly going there. This suggests that efforts to attract people within an ethnic minority community to public spaces will not succeed unless accompanied by influence over shaping spaces. This indicates the need for less linear and hierarchical understanding of categories of participation, and attention to the complexity of interactions between people, place and power. We consider dimensions of these interactions next, and how they are constrained by boundaries.

1.2. Boundaries of space and participation

So far we have suggested political and physical access to public spaces are intertwined, meaning that institutions assuming a hierarchical model of participation may not be targeting the most significant barriers between people and the spaces they manage. To understand how they can better enable access and participation we consider the nature of boundaries and how

they delimit people's relationship to public spaces. Boundaries are considered as delimiting or dividing physical territories on the ground (Lamont and Molnár 2002), more abstractly defining limits for social groups from each other (Lamont et al. 2015) and on a cognitive level segregating different states of mind (Barth 2000). At each of these three levels, there is recognition among authors (Goldsmith and Kettl 2009; Radin 1996; Williams 2004) that boundaries represent the 'sites of difference' (Abbott 1995, 862). The empirical work on boundaries present a wide range of social processes such as boundary-work (Gieryn 1983; Quick and Feldmen 2014), boundary relocation, crossing and shifting (Wimmer 2008), territorialisation (Zaidi 2019), politicisation and institutionalisation of boundaries (Gaventa 2006). It is not in the scope of this paper to synthesise the broader debates on boundaries; our focus is boundaries in relation to participation and access to space, particularly within ethnic minority communities which are less considered in empirical studies (Mohan and Hickey 2004; Mitlin 2004). We suggest that considering how residents imagine boundaries traversing the urban environment, and how these bound them from others – including powerful institutions – explains why certain physical spaces and spaces of participation remain inaccessible to them. The empirical material from Belgrave highlights multiple ways in which people shape and negotiate such boundaries, and suggests how they affect efforts to promote access or participation.

So far we have shown that access to public space is understood as the ability to enter particular spaces, to be present there. In contrast participation typically suggests the ability to influence decisions, including those which shape and bound public spaces. Diverse identities and variable access to power influence both, creating invisible barriers which constrain different groups' access and participation in various ways. There is a danger of overlooking this complexity by regarding marginalised or disempowered groups as homogenous, united by their exclusion. Effective participation depends not just on distribution of power across the

boundary between institution and community, but also across boundaries within the community. Next we explore these dynamics within one community which has been the focus of institutional efforts to increase access to public space.

2. The study

The research was initiated and funded by the Canal and River Trust (CRT), a non-governmental organisation which manages the UK's largest network of inland waterways. Their spaces represent a considerable amount of public space available for active travel and recreation, concentrated in urban areas which often lack other forms of recreational space. The Trust has been seeking to promote use of these spaces to enhance wellbeing, and to redress under-representation of certain groups amongst regular users (CRT 2017). Previous research with them uncovered some reasons for this inequality of use, highlighting the off-putting nature of the perceived and actual physical traits of urban waterways (Pitt 2018, 2019). The research presented here builds on this by focusing in detail on people who live alongside urban waterways but do not access them, seeking to understand their perspective. The focus population was selected as an example of a group known to actively participate in other urban public spaces yet largely absent from waterways or activities coordinated by CRT. Leicester was selected as one of the areas CRT are targeting with community engagement initiatives aiming to increase the number and variety of people accessing waterways. To achieve this they recognised the need to better understand people living around the waterways, in particular to identify how they might be able to enable people to access them more or for the first time.

The study focused on Belgrave, a neighbourhood dominated by the Gujarati Indian community. Belgrave runs alongside the city's waterway, with much of its population within

2 km of it. Residents therefore represent a core target group for CRT who expect most regular waterway visitors to live within walking distance of them. Leicester is often portrayed as culturally harmonious, and one of the UK's super-diverse cities. The inner city and northern neighbourhoods are dominated by people born outside the UK and their descendants. The representation of ethnic diversity in Leicester often highlights issues such as 'social cohesion' and 'social inclusion' – a widely debated dimension of the city (Winstone 1996). Belgrave plays a key part in representing Leicester's ethnic diversity because of its cultural pluralism and diverse local businesses, initially established by East African Asians which then later attracted migrants from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe (Singh 2003).

Two waves of migration are important to Belgrave. First, in 1948, the British government passed The Nationality Act, allowing Commonwealth citizens to move to the UK. Tens of thousands of people migrated to the old industrial towns of Midlands and the North. The migration to Leicester started in the 1950's and increased gradually until the 1970s when a second wave of migration brought a large South Asian population who filled labour shortages in the city's industry (Virdee 2009). This migration was dominated by the Gujarati Indian population from Uganda. As part of Africanisation policies, the then president of Uganda ordered the deportation of 80,000 Asians - most of whom were Gujaratis. This group is often referred to as 'twice migrants' as they first migrated from India to East Africa and then to UK. Belgrave remains a focus for these communities, and is home to successive generations of Gujaratis, alongside other ethnic groups. The South Asian population of Leicester is culturally, ethnically, religiously and regionally diverse. The multiplicity and diversity of identities makes Leicester's population complex and thus cannot be put into simple binaries of minority/majority and white/non-white.

Belgrave is in the north of Leicester city centre. The area is famous for its celebration of ethnic diversity and a large established population of British Asians and people of South

Asian heritage. Belgrave receives significant attention for Diwali celebrations and other cultural activities centred on the Golden Mile, a street famous for the visibility of South Asian culture and community. Belgrave has an interesting population of South Asian diaspora. – Gujaratis are an ethnic minority group at the national scale, and in the context of engagement with CRT-managed spaces. Locally they form a majority and are strongly identified with the locality. But underlying the Gujarati identity are differences along ethnic, religious and cultural lines. This presents interesting dynamics of boundary making at different scales, and along lines of difference which are not visible from everyone’s perspective. CRT has a community engagement officer based in Leicester, and runs events and activities on this stretch of waterway. The organisation has engaged in partnerships with local community associations in an effort to engage more of the local population in their work. Previous investigation has found that people currently using waterway spaces for recreation are not representative of Leicester’s diversity (Pitt 2019). Increased engagement with Belgrave residents has been identified as an opportunity to attract new users to waterways.

2.1 Research Methods

Researchers were asked by CRT to investigate Belgrave residents’ attitudes to and experiences of the local waterway spaces, with a view to understanding what might make them more accessible. The research was designed to gather insight from a range of people not currently engaged with waterways, reflecting some of Belgrave’s demographic diversity. The study is based on 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups with first generation Gujaratis who migrated from India and Africa at different point in times. Participants ranged from 25 to 90+ years, and included self-employed, employed and full time carers of dependants. The interviews focused on experiences around access to public spaces, including but not limited to waterways. No representatives of CRT are quoted here. The recruitment of participants was a challenging process for two main reasons; i) Participants’

non-engagement with waterways and its activities; ii) Distrust of external organisations based on past negative experiences with local institutions. Researchers built connections with a gatekeeper through a local temple who then provided access to residents in Belgrave, and enabled snowball sampling.

A mapping exercise was completed with 30 Belgrave residents recruited through interviewees and visits to local shops, library and temples, focussing on their experiences, aspirations and barriers regarding visiting public spaces. Questions included '*What places are important, attractive or valuable to you?*'; '*Why do you visit certain places and avoid others?*'; '*What activities do you like to do on waterways?*'; and '*Why do you not use waterways in their current state?*'. These provided insights to participants' everyday mobility and how these patterns are affected by socio-cultural and physical factors.

Most interviews were conducted in English, however, when participants were not comfortable communicating in English the researcher switched to a preferred language (Hindi) to enable in-depth discussions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed thematically to identify recurrent ideas and perceptions. During interviews it became apparent that residents had little awareness of CRT and its activities, meaning many were unable to comment on these specifically. Their views focused then on perceptions of waterway spaces in relation to other parts of the city, and on experiences of engagement with other 'outsider' institutions. We now present the key findings from the research as they relate to access and participation.

3. Results: Boundaries to access and participation

This section explores how participants experienced and identified boundaries in Leicester. Belgrave residents do not see boundaries as a simple dichotomy of accessibility and inaccessibility of public space; complex social processes embedded in history, identity,

language and political engagement in decision-making delineate them. Everyday lived experiences of the locality, and historical experiences associated with migration and establishing their identity in the city were mentioned as critical in defining spatial boundaries. For example, an old Belgrave resident shared that their negative experiences² during migration with Leicester City Council (LCC) affect the way they perceive boundaries. Herbert's (2006) study of migration and ethnicity argues Leicester City Council's celebration of civic unity in culture diversity underplays the struggles of residents in achieving the multicultural Leicester model. Our study also shows that people are carrying the past negative experiences while navigating contemporary boundaries of space and participation.

Analysis found that Belgrave residents perceive boundaries which divide and mark the area in ways not visible to outsiders. Data suggests institutions intensify these boundaries by not understanding complex layers of difference thus excluding certain people from public spaces. To negotiate these exclusions, Belgrave residents have shared various ways of dealing with the invisible boundaries of participation. Discussions showed that access to waterways and CRT activity is embedded in wider issues of representation and power. In the next section we present some lines of difference which mean Belgrave residents feel themselves to be multiple communities, then describe how these map onto local spaces to create invisible boundaries. Throughout we suggest how these spatial and interpersonal divides affect attempts to foster participation. Although Belgrave is often regarded as the home of Leicester's Gujarati community, it soon became apparent that this group includes diverse identities and groupings which make it impossible to consider 'a community'. Differences in history, economic status and political engagement were noted as important divisions, affecting attempts to increase engagement in public spaces. Lack of recognition of these

² LCC was not willing to accept the migrants from Uganda they had taken out an advertisement in the Ugandan newspaper 'Uganda Argus' warning the South Asians against coming to Leicester or they will face the expulsion (McLoughlin 2013).

distinctions within a community by institutions who approach them as monolithic subjects produces a narrative of otherness among Belgrave residents. In the next section we outline how Belgrave residents perceive themselves in relation to public decision making – boundaries around participation – before outlining several ways in which residents map invisible spatial boundaries.

3.1 Diversity and Participation

When discussing how people thought CRT could better engage them in their activity, it soon became apparent that such participation was associated with wider political processes from which they feel excluded. Research participants often referred to their area as a ‘forgotten part of the city’ which only receives attention during high profile events such as Diwali. Infrastructural improvement to the Golden Mile during Diwali was mentioned as the time when people are invited to engage in community-state deliberations. The significant increase in tourism during the event and its positive impact on the city’s economy were perceived as reasons local authorities addressed their interests during that time. In contrast, local participation in other decisions was felt to receive less priority:

We have got a major role in making this city an aromatic, lively and colourful... this brought back new economic opportunities to a neglected and run-down city. When city authorities require to bring new businesses they sell and promote this but when it comes to show it to the community they usually forget to celebrate with us (BR3).

The above quote from a Belgrave resident suggests that people do not feel represented within standard decision-making processes which they do not perceive to have their interests in mind. They perceive a tokenistic or even manipulative mode of participation (Pretty 1995; White 1996). Interviewees mentioned that when their community’s participation in decision making is sought, those with better social networks are consulted. Characteristics of those with better social networks include: ‘belong to higher caste’, ‘better financial status,

‘association within influential network/s’. Interviewees mentioned that institutions do not recognise these nuances within a community so members who lack socio-economic privileges are not included in participatory processes. This creates reluctance to engage, mirroring Vincent’s (2004) finding that excessive powers to decide who to involve in local deliberations are vested in external agents, creating doubt among locals that their participation is meaningful. This suggests that reluctance to participate in decision-making is a shortcoming of the process not the people.

Caste was said to limit participation as explained by an interviewee who belongs to a lower-caste³:

If you assume that everyone here [Belgrave neighbourhood] is same and belong to one community then people like me will most likely not be included in any discussion regarding development of my area (BR10).

The above concern highlights the power dynamics which exist within a community which are often ignored when institutions select voices to represent the community. According to BR10, those with better economic status and political networks usually belong to higher-castes and are the ones involved in participatory processes.

The privilege of belonging to a higher caste paves the way to negotiating access for a particular group, meaning others are excluded:

Sometimes what happens that many people don’t even know about development plans related to canal and river. For example, if I am running a group and I belong to certain group [ethnic group and/ or caste] and if council or any other organisation contacts me to discuss a plan with a community. I, being a part of particular group will only reach out to

³ The caste system is a social hierarchical structure in Hinduism that divides groups into ranked classes. The members of the higher caste have got higher social standing and privileges than members belong to lower caste

my people. You know, it will not be communicated to others... yeah so that's the reason why other groups feel left out (BR2).

Recognising different characteristics and bonds within a community is important:

Every caste has their own groups and sub-groups here. Within those groups they arrange various activities and events, some events are opened to groups from other caste but some are just celebrated within...(BR5).

It's not that they (various groups) do not get along with each other, but culturally it has always been like that... Everyone belongs to community of their own (BR5).

These experiences show that failure to address the community's plurality in participatory practice impacts marginalised groups most. The presence of over 400 ethnic minority associations in Leicester (Winstone 1996), 81 alone in Belgrave (Vertovec 1994) indicates the complexity of various caste and sub-caste groupings in the area. Hickey and Mohan (2004), argue that ignoring subjects' complexity is part of a broader politics of not devolving control over participatory processes. This accords with Gaventa's (2004) notion of 'provided spaces', controlled by formal actors with limited space for deliberations between groups, thus limiting the potential for inclusive participation.

Another variation within Belgrave is that associated with the period of migration to the UK, particularly as this affects economic position. People who migrated recently are typically in less favourable economic situations than earlier arrivals. Interviewees said those who arrived after 2011 have had difficulties finding work, with many earning incomes insufficient to support a family or working multiple jobs or shifts daily. Variances in economic profile has a direct impact on their degree of engagement with public spaces. For disadvantaged group, this is a niche activity outside their priorities:

So for the people who are new here and burdened with economic hardships are not likely to involve in any outdoor activities due to prolonged working hours and tough jobs (BNC8).

The above comment from a community group member shows that understanding the impact of economic difficulties on less advantaged groups and how they engage with public space is also important when designing participatory mechanisms.

Another line of difference across Belgrave's population is religious identity, with religious organisations a key focus for local participation. Participatory processes require sensitivity to these:

Initially it is going to be a big task to convince local temples, mosques, gurudwaras to educate people that visiting parks, river, canal will be good for them and enhance their wellbeing. You need to tap [at] the right network but once you gain their trust it is easy to include more people (BNC8).

This demonstrates that the work of promoting access and participation needs to understand processes of bonding and differentiation operating at micro-scales. However, according to another respondent once the socio-cultural nuances are understood, existing networks and social ties can be used as to reach wider groups:

Probably it just takes one group to kick-off the rest. They got to see someone doing, you probably have to hand hold them initially to do that slowly they can see that actually this group is doing it and it is safer to do so, we can do it as well. There are many small groups are working in this area and they are quite engaged within a community. Once they see others they will be enticed in doing something similar (BR1).

Given such subtle nuances of class, caste, and religious diversity, it is important to shape participatory process with people, based on understanding of the particular communities in order to be able to reflect the needs and aspirations of a diverse population. This includes

recognition that some people will be more focused on immediate basic priorities, and that socio-economic differences will affect attempts to engage people in public spaces,

This section has shown how diversity influences Belgrave residents' interactions with their area and with institutions seeking to engage them. Our research highlighted two key ways in which such differences bound spaces and people in ways which are invisible to others.

3.2. Invisible boundaries to access and participation

A first form of boundary is language and the ability to see one's preferred language reflected in interactions with the environment; understanding each other's expressions through a common language was highlighted as fundamental to bonding people together. A common language provides a feeling that one is understood and thus creates a sense of inclusion. Migrant communities' fear of stigmatisation and how common language can counter this is explained by an elder resident:

Language is very important to situate oneself in the context outside your own country... it gives you sense of belonging. If you have noticed, some signposting on Melton Road are now in Gujarati along with English. It feels you are in your area, particularly our older generation who is not familiar with English language. Another important consideration that many of us are living in an extended families with our elders as it is important in our culture to take care of them... and naturally they are important part of our socialisation, so if they are not comfortable in visiting places where they cannot understand other people we try not to go there (BR2).

Seeing a familiar language in the public realm provides a sense of belonging and community inclusion, promoting bonding to a place; where familiar languages are expressed, a community feels more at home. It was noted that for some people unfamiliarity of language poses more difficulties than others and they tend to align their movements accordingly. For

example, an older resident of Belgrave mentioned how language difficulties hinder people's movement:

Particularly South Indian people love to go to river and canal, socialise there, arrange activities and so on... because in India they have lived near water and it's in the culture to love doing things around water. But they are not well versed in English and they feel embarrassed about it and thus do not feel comfortable to go on the other side of the river and mingle with other people. Also, they don't feel connected in festivals that are not designed for them. They enjoy within their gatherings, they sit on the canal bring their food, play river songs...(BR3).

Fear of exclusion has created boundaries between places associated with familiar and unfamiliar language. Thus, knowing which local languages are favoured within an area is important to institution's community outreach, not just so people can understand information provided about access, but to convey that they are welcome in public spaces.

A second form of invisible boundary affecting how people traverse public spaces is their symbolic practices, cultural beliefs that connect people to places (Giuliani and Feldman 1993). Material objects such as religious and cultural ornaments symbolise belonging in a space. For example, in Belgrave some people place mala on front doors: these flower garlands express sentiments of purity, love, goodwill, honour and beauty and are part of a tradition of welcoming of guests based on ancient Indian dictum *Atithi Devo Bhava* that translates to 'may the guest be a god onto you' (Stephen 2016). Symbolic boundaries also relate to the performativity of cultural practices in urban realms. For example Rath Yatra – a religious chariot festival – is celebrated in the vicinity of Cossington Park which connects it emotionally and culturally to the community. Certain places signify symbolic bonding for the community, most prominently:

What brings us together is the Golden Mile – the Melton Road (BR5). The Golden Mile brings people together because Belgrave residents associate it with material and cultural

performativity of their symbolic practices. Culinary expression of Gujarati cuisine was mentioned as an important display of the community's enthusiasm for participating in the Golden Mile. Food is key to socialising for Belgrave communities as people see food as a significant component of their identity. Activities designed around food were proposed as opportunities to bridge across communities:

Food is central to our festive events like Navratri, Dandiya and Garba. We would love [to] celebrate these with other communities (BR4).

Such cultural practices are also seen to stimulate a desire to collectively (re)create the feeling of homeland, creating 'new geographies of belonging' to bridge a gap created by migration (Mee and Wright 2009).

Places that reflect cultural practices, along with distinct physical features become significant nodes that remind of the homeland. Rangoli is an art form, originating in the Indian subcontinent, in which patterns are created using materials such as coloured rice or flower petals. Often Rangoli is displayed along the Golden Mile during events like Diwali – a visible cultural gesture, one research participant associated with the spatial range of their community. Familiarisation with places, symbols, expressions and people were mentioned as prevailing factors (de)limiting people's mobility range. This illustrates that place and feeling connected to particular places is closely associated with social and cultural expressions which create invisible boundaries across the city and between groups. However, the mere presence of certain symbolic elements in a place are not enough for the community to associate with them. Participants expressed scepticism about cultural symbols being transported to public places or events by outside institutions without community involvement. For example, one mentioned the use of patterns from Indian folk arts at the Riverside Festival runs by the Leicester City Council as a display of community participation, whilst, in the event itself very few people were invited from the community. In contrast, spaces that contain cultural

expressions determined by the community are considered ‘their’ spaces where people feel included. This shows how the process of shaping a space is important in shaping belonging – participation precedes access, Invitations to participation must have a genuine motive or they will be received with scepticism.

Celebrating identity and re-asserting pride among migrant communities is critical in understanding people-place relationships (Bhambra 2006). Belgrave residents shared similar narratives of the importance of places which recognise and celebrate their cultural identity. This means that not all public spaces are regarded as the same:

Cossington Park is the park for Asian community, you wouldn’t get the same feeling with cultural events like Rath Yatra, Diwali celebrated in other areas. It is a central park for the community, they are there to experience it every day (BR5).

Everyday presence and sense of belonging alters how a space is experienced, creating a sense of connection which is an important basis for significant cultural events. Ongoing access and special events together influence whether groups feel a space is ‘theirs’. Conversely, lack of participation in designing events has created boundaries for Belgrave residents:

In past twenty years, the riverside towards Abbey Park have had majority Non-Asian events. If more events are organised that engage Asian community, people will go to that side (BR4).

In the case of Abbey Park, lack of events has contributed to lack of access for Asian communities. This is significant as organisations like CRT hope that running public events in particular spaces will attract new audiences who might then return to regularly use the space. Participants’ comments suggest this strategy may not succeed if the event is held on the wrong side of an invisible boundary significant to the target group. Involving people in the entire process of shaping a space helps them feel they belong there. Inclusion comes not just through inviting people to festivals, but through making them a part of the process so they

feel ownership and have influence in shaping the space. To promote wider access to public spaces including waterways it is important to understand the nature of multiple invisible boundaries which keep people away, and how these are entangled with a desire to participate in processes which shape the urban environment and activities which happen there.

3.3 *Removing boundaries to participatory spaces*

So far we have shown that Belgrave residents experience various boundaries which shape their relationship to city spaces and other people, including those in other sub-groups (e.g. a different caste). These spatial divisions and markers are significant influences on spatial practices whilst not easily apparent to outsiders, shaping interactions between different groups and influencing perceptions of particular spaces, for example through association with languages or cultural symbols. These interactions begin to show how groups develop a sense of belonging to some urban spaces but not others, and how these may affect efforts to attract people to public spaces. For Belgrave residents these social boundaries marked the edge of ‘territories of belongingness’ beyond which they find it difficult to traverse:

I would say canal divides communities, it’s kind of border which prefer not to cross...we can’t associate anything on the other side with us and thus we avoid to go there... (BR5).

The above quote suggests if diversity of social and cultural practices is not reflected in public space then it creates a boundary which is difficult for Belgrave residents to traverse, hence accessibility is compromised.

How might institutions address these experiences, to encourage access to particular spaces? Next we examine experiences of participation processes which have sought to engage Belgrave residents. Lack of representation of certain identities creates psychological and ideological barriers to accessibility (Gaventa 2005). This section considers the intersection of power with processes of participation and how asymmetrical distribution of power limits

participation. Research participants were familiar with attempts to engage them in decision-making or place-shaping processes led by external institutions, and expressed various reasons why such activity has failed to include or represent them. Processes used to engage Belgrave residents with public spaces are typically controlled by external agents, lacking local representation. According to Williams et al. (2003) such approaches concentrate control over knowledge and resources with elites thus disempowering its subjects. In Belgrave, gaining trust hinges on representation, particularly via established local networks. Failure to involve these in celebrating public space created doubts about institutions' intentions for the process and the community. For example, one respondent linked lack of local people participating in a CRT event with absence of local mediation:

[Local] council and other organisations have approached us in the past that they want our input in XYZ [any] development project and that's it, we did not hear [them] back. It's just a tick box exercise that they have consulted the locals; "yes OK job done" (BR2).

The event which was designed for the local people did not [taken] consider[ed] various ways to include diverse groups, such as advertising in the local Gujarati newspaper: Not everyone is familiar with CRT (and their website or Facebook page), if you will advertise it there, only those who know about it will be a part of it (BNC8).

More targeted communication may help engage some people, but participants suggested that this alone will be insufficient due to the significance of trust in promoting participation:

Activity initiated by a community member is trusted among the community and you see a success in organising any such activity. To engage local people in activities there has to be a representation from the community because if they see no familiar faces there is a less trust level and they will not engage until a local is mediating a trust between the community and an outsider (BNC8).

Trust also plays a vital role in how Belgrave residents traverse space. Perceptions of safe movement are linked with familiar networks of trusted people as one respondent said: “I don’t feel safe outside our area I don’t know anyone”.

Whether external institutions gain trust is in part dependent on whether they are perceived to engage in equitable participation processes. This is not always the case, for example when representation in decision making is steered top-down without considering diversity amongst the target group:

If the higher person is not from your community while you are the majority in the area it just doesn’t feel right, does it? So it is a simple equation make them feel they belong here otherwise they will withdraw (BER9).

If powerful actors do not represent community diversity it creates distrust towards institution’s participatory processes. Differential representation of the community in consultation meetings that aim to empower local voices creates the perception of boundaries around public spaces with ‘their’ and ‘our’ sides. Thus, participation lies less in what areas are accessible in the absolute sense, and more in how people are represented and whether participation takes account of socio-cultural interactions and invisible boundaries .

4. Discussion

A key strategy for creating spaces of participation is to involve local people in deliberations and governance (Cornell 2004; Mohan and Hickey 2004; Williams 2004). However, these spaces are infused with prevailing power relations which have to be negotiated in order to traverse them (Lefebvre 1991). For our research participants, social status and economic position divide the community, as do caste and migration history, creating boundaries around who is allowed to participate.

Inherent to the idea of participation is the construction of boundary to define its limits. Who can enter the space, with which identities, and what interests and incentives – all these characteristics are steered by power relations determining spatial hierarchies (Creswell 2010; Hannam et al. 2006). Although participation is about opening-up and inviting new opportunities to enter democratic practices, such opportunities are controlled by broader issues of representation and power (Cornell 2004). As Mohan and Hickey argue, “deconstructing the supposed homogeneity of self-defined communities” is central to ensuring representation (Mohan and Hickey 2004, 64). Plurality of representation is required to ensure participation of those with different identities and social status, and that influence is not restricted to those well connected with the powerful (Mitlin 2004). Similar to Mitlin’s case, our research found privileged members dominate participatory processes, suggesting that inviting participation does not easily undo pre-existing power imbalances.

Access to space is entangled with complex dimensions of power and representation that pose multiple structural barriers and influence the way people interact and move through space. Thus, the concept of participation should not be simplified to mean whether one has access or not; the journey from access, to presence to influence is key for a process to be transformative (Cornell 2004). Promoting such participation encounters issues such as diversity, local knowledge and continuous engagement of marginalised groups (Agyeman and Erickson 2012; Amin 2012). A tendency to homogenise marginalised group veils lateral divisions within a group which will affect any attempt to re-align power relations. Participatory approaches therefore require attention to heterogeneity within groups (Young 1993) – that is the boundaries between different people within a community. Such identity-based divisions are critical to understanding interactions with public space for two reasons: first, people’s ideology impacts the way they interact with place or activity and thus distinctive mechanisms suited for diverse groups are needed to engage them. Second, it is important to consider whether existing power hierarchies are adaptive and flexible enough to enable dialogue with diverse ideological practices. Our opening quote suggests that neither form of adaptability are apparent around Leicester’s waterways.

The models of participation outlined above suggest institutions pass some power to communities. To achieve a tangible impact through local deliberations, Holland and Blackburn argue that it is imperative “those in power disempower themselves” (1998, 1). But who should they pass power to? Too often, institutions assume one group represents everyone in a community, and fail to see how these higher status groups exclude the needs of others

(Masaki 2004). Thus, it is critical to understand that homogenising a local community could become problematic where socio-cultural and economic disparities exist. Any organization attempting to encourage participation needs to understand and take account of socio-cultural interactions and invisible boundaries which traverse places like Belgrave.

What does this suggest for organisations like Canal and River Trust, and initiatives seeking to encourage access to particular spaces? Our findings suggest a need for an approach which does not assume a particular hierarchy of engagement which begins with access as a foundation for deeper participation and rights to influence decision making. This requires a more nuanced and open approach to public engagement work. Practitioners might begin by taking time to understand people's relationship to and priorities for a particular space, and how these vary across lines of difference – ethnicity, caste, class, language, religion - within communities. Invitations to community representation in decision making fora or processes then need to consider how to account for this diversity, and be mindful that past (negative) experiences of such engagement will be carried into new relationships. Finally, organisations should be open to the prospect that sharing power with communities in this way – seeking true participation – may not lead to the types of wider access they hope for. The choice not to access has to be a potential outcome of participation.

5. Conclusion

This research illustrates how people experience urban spaces as being divided by various invisible boundaries which delimit spaces of belonging, and shape accessibility. What to outsiders seems like 'a residential community', is actually highly complex and diverse, comprising sub-communities associated with different histories and identities. Access can only be enabled through processes which take account of this diversity and how it affects peoples' interactions with public spaces. In particular, sensitivity to power differentials between groups, and between communities and external institutions is significant to any attempt to engage people in decision making. Fostering true community participation in

shaping public spaces requires relationships of trust between those involved. Contrary to common assumptions, this is not necessarily a result of regular access to spaces, rather can be a precursor to it. Participation in shaping public spaces requires institutions to have transparent motives, and be willing to transfer some power to residents through genuine, inclusive participatory processes. It is also important to recognise that accessibility cannot be shaped through a focus on specific spaces, practices or events held in them, because while inclusive to some groups, they can marginalise others. How Belgrave residents perceived one institution was highly influenced by experiences of other institutions similarly perceived as outsiders and powerful actors, demonstrating how power inequalities extend beyond the particular public space under consideration.

This research demonstrated that the perception of accessible spaces extends beyond distance and physical accessibility to a desire for power to shape those spaces. Mediating participation and presence is a dynamic process of understanding a community's social and economic differences, migration history, religious beliefs and political engagement, and how these create invisible boundaries which limit use of public space. When these nuances are disregarded, or misunderstood, by institutions promoting plurality in public space it affects how people engage and navigate spaces. By critically examining the factors that delimit movement in space, this article extends understanding of access and participation, highlighting that the two are not in a straightforward linear or hierarchical relationship in which one precedes the other. Rather the two can be sought together, with participation a prerequisite for access. Secondly, effective participation does not just require power to be shared across the boundary between institution and 'community' – it should also be distributed across the community, and traverse social boundaries within it. To return to the resident we opened with, rather than needing a voice in shaping public spaces, it seems that many voices should be heard.

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