Social History

Volume 47 Number 3
August 2022
Routledge

Social History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rshi20

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To cite this article: S. Harikrishnan (2022) Making space: towards a spatial history of modernity in caste-societies, Social History, 47:3, 315-340, DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2022.2077521

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2022.2077521

SOCIAL HISTORY
2022, VOL. 47, NO. 3, 315–340
https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2022.2077521

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Making space: towards a spatial history of modernity in caste-societies

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ABSTRACT

A vibrant public sphere has come to be recognised as a necessary condition of modern democracies. Jürgen Habermas's work has been a convenient point of departure for studies concerned with the concept of the public sphere and modernity, despite evidence mounting from feminist, postcolonial and subaltern studies that its despatialised nature and universalistic assumptions render invisible large groups that remained – temporally and spatially – outside the 'mainstream'. Using examples from colonial and early modern India, this article demonstrates how these limitations play out in complex societies and why 'space' is pivotal in studying the public sphere, especially in caste societies. Following the spatial (re)turn within academia in the last decades, I argue that Henri Lefebvre's work on social spaces provides a theoretical alternative that treats space with analytical rigour, allowing us to problematise the concept of the public sphere and to move away from Western Europe as an 'ideal type'. The article demonstrates how an approach that is informed by Lefebvre's framework is particularly useful in societies where caste influences spatiality and, consequently, lived experience – as well as having broader resonance and application.

KEYWORDS

Lefebvre; caste; social space; public sphere; Habermas

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of rapid socio-political change across the Indian subcontinent. In the early 1920s, Kerala, a region on the south-western coast of the subcontinent, witnessed a *Satyagraha* – a form of non-violent sit-in protest made popular by Mohandas Gandhi. The agitators demanded that the roads around the Vaikom temple be thrown open to members of the oppressed castes. On the first day of protests, leaders belonging to upper and lowered castes walked past a board that prohibited lowered castes from entering.[1] The Vaikom Satyagraha, as it came to be called, has since etched itself in regional history for more than one reason. Firstly, although the leaders were arrested

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[1] I use the term 'lowered caste' in the article, joining others in recent years who are choosing to use 'lowered' over 'lower' since the former implies a position forced upon certain castes by members of the 'upper' caste rather than an inherent status of being 'low'.

and the final settlement was only partial (three roads were eventually opened up to all castes while one remained restricted), the agitation brought together people from across caste and class differences into physical spaces in a way unimaginable only half a century before. Secondly, it reflected the winds of change that blew across the subcontinent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Space and spatiality were coming to be redefined across the subcontinent as a result of the colonial modernity taking shape. Already in the nineteenth century, a form of 'modern public' was emerging and the newspapers, journals, periodicals, youth clubs, political parties and associations all played pivotal roles in developing it. Meanwhile, religious reform movements challenged centuries-old customs and ways of life, forging new forms of social relations and political mobilisation. By the early twentieth century, waves of anti-colonialism and nationalism had further expanded this public, reaching out to oppressed sections that for centuries had been kept on the margins of society by the upper castes. Together, this period is commonly perceived as the time when an Indian equivalent of a 'modern public sphere' emerged in the subcontinent.

The emergence of a modern public sphere is also the emergence of a new spatiality, since 'social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*'.[2] This warrants the question: is 'space' given the analytical rigour it deserves within studies of modernity – and, specifically, the modern public sphere?[3] This question is important for two reasons. Firstly, by turning attention crucially towards space – and thereby human experiences – one can help expand the scope of the public sphere beyond the 'mainstream' to include the counter-publics. Secondly, and consequently, this could provide a theoretical alternative to the limited view of the public sphere as being restricted to the Habermasean one, especially in diverse and complex societies. This article argues that such a reconceptualisation allows us to problematise the modern public sphere since social relations are contingent on human experiences which in turn are shaped by spatiality. Caste, I argue, can be added to the particular forms of embodied difference, such as race, gender and sexuality, which can benefit from a critical phenomenological reading of the work of the twentieth-century French thinker Henri Lefebvre. Caste, as we know, has determined social

[2]H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991), 404, emphasis in original.

[3]There has been much deliberation on the intertwined concepts of 'space' and 'place' within academia. This article is less interested in the separation of place and space than in an attempt to reconcile the two as being forged together in a 'dialectical unity'. For more on the similarities and differences between place and space, see M. Saar and H. Palang, 'The dimensions of place meanings', *Living Reviews in Landscape Research*, 3 (2009), 3–24; A. Merrifield, 'Place and space: a Lefebvrian reconciliation', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 18, 4 (1993), 516–31; E. Jacobsen, *The Space Between (Cultural Exegesis): A Christian engagement with the built environment* (Michigan, 2012).

relations in India for many centuries through bracketing and differences, and its nuances cannot be understood by a despatialised public sphere.

The article will, firstly, engage with the major theoretical limitations of Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere and demonstrate these limitations as seen within the time and space of colonial India. Looking at the nascent modern public sphere from the perspective of three regions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I make the case that space remains crucial to understanding how modernity was shaped uniquely in each of these regions and demonstrate why the Habermasean public sphere fails to encapsulate these differences. I then argue that Lefebvre's work on social spaces has the potential to open up an alternative lens with which to study the public sphere. Finally, I suggest that this approach is particularly useful in societies where caste influences spatiality – and, consequently, lived experiences – as evident from Gopal Guru's comparison of the lives of Gandhi (belonging to the Hindu upper caste) and B.R. Ambedkar (belonging to the caste-oppressed Dalit community).[4] In this way, I suggest that the theoretical limitations that continue to plague studies on the public sphere may be overcome to some extent by (a) problematising the definition of 'public sphere' and expanding its scope to define its abstract and physical spaces; and thereby (b) treating space with the analytical rigour it deserves.

Revisiting the Habermasean public sphere

While studying the modern public sphere in Western Europe, Habermas borrows from Immanuel Kant's idea of the 'public use of one's reason' which, to Kant, was a precondition of the Enlightenment project: to be considered credible one was expected to convince one's public, one's world.[5] This 'world' that Kant alludes to is the public sphere – constituted at the time by the (invariably male) educated, aristocratic classes. 'Public will', it was presumed, would be unanimous and shaped by these elites. The French Revolution and emerging class conflicts demanded a revision of the Kantian view that a public sphere of bourgeoisie created a public discourse that reflected the perspective of society as a whole and that there was even a singular 'public will' to begin with. This idea that the public can have more than one opinion later found voice in the works of G.W.F. Hegel. As Habermas summarises Hegel's view on the issue, 'the public opinion of the private people assembled to form a public no longer retained a basis of unity and truth; it degenerated to the level of a subjective opinion of the

[4]G. Guru, 'Experience, space and justice' in G. Guru and S. Sarukkai (eds), *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian debate in experience and theory* (New Delhi, 2012), 71–106.
[5]J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1991), 106.

many'.[6] Thus, there was a shift from what Kant called 'public *agreement*' towards 'public *opinion*'. Karl Marx, Habermas argues, uses this separation of Hegel's and goes further to argue that public opinion was false consciousness, and the public sphere was the arena of conflict of class interests.[7] To Marx, the public sphere can only realise its ideal conditions – accessibility and the subjection of political domination – by the destruction of class differences.[8] Habermas disagrees with Marx here, suggesting that a public sphere can be realised 'without recourse to the violent overthrow of the existing social order', but rather by democratising it to improve its quality (rational–critical debate) and quantity (accessibility).[9] This is the crux of Habermas's argument: that in a liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere (which he presented in his early works as an ideal type), we as a society can conceive of a single comprehensible public sphere where interlocutors participate *as if* they were social equals and public will can be shaped. He concedes that in their earliest forms, these spaces claimed a sphere regulated 'from above' – by the gentry and aristocratic classes – against the public authorities themselves.[10] The early bourgeois form of society meant that consequently, the public sphere thus developed was limited to the aristocracy and intelligentsia in society, keeping the large proletariat masses outside its purview. In other words, public opinion was shaped in the elite spaces, controlled by the intelligentsia, and a new sociability and emphasis for a rational–critical discourse grew in spaces like coffee shops (in the United Kingdom), salons (in France), literary and table societies (in Germany) and similar institutions.[11] With time, these spaces also began to embrace the 'wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers'.[12] Soon, coffeehouses sprang up across Europe and were outlets for streams of newsletters, pamphlets, commodity and share prices, news and gossip. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, there were over a thousand coffeehouses in London alone, and in them occurred the gradual emergence of a 'civil society' – separate from the ruler or the state – where public opinion was formed.[13] Further, religion was relegated to the realm of the private, since it was expected that its traditional societal and public functions had lost relevance in modern society.[14] Yet 'democratisation' does not always imply inclusion, insofar as the spaces continue to be owned and controlled by a privileged section. This is true within Western societies studied by Habermas and even more so, as we shall see, in societies where

[6] *ibid*., 119.
[7] *ibid*., 123–24; R. Holub, *Jurgen Habermas: Critic in the public sphere* (New York, 1991), 5.
[8] Habermas, *op. cit*., 127–28.
[9] Holub, *op. cit*., 27.
[10] Habermas, *op. cit*., 27.
[11] *ibid*., 32–34.
[12] Habermas, *op.cit*., 33.
[13] C. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1992), 7.
[14] J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994), 19.

dominance of the public sphere for many centuries by certain castes has had far-reaching consequences on the lived experiences of large sections of the population. In other words, much like Kant's and Hegel's earlier endeavours, Habermas's attempts to answer the question of what it means to be modern ascribed to it a certain 'truth and universality' of modern knowledge that continued to be carried forward uncritically.[15]

Ever since his works were first translated into English three decades ago, Habermas's conception of the public sphere has been a matter of much debate and discussion within academia and has raised several theoretical challenges. Even in the West, critics have argued that Habermas's public sphere is a proleptic ideal type at best, or, as Nancy Fraser put it in 1990, a bourgeois masculinist conception at worst.[16] Fraser points to Habermas's failure to problematise the dubious assumptions that underlie his bourgeois model, which leaves us at the end of structural transformation 'without a conception of the public sphere that is sufficiently different from the bourgeois conception' that he begins with.[17] Moreover, the public sphere has since its beginnings been not a homogeneous space but an arena where different and opposing publics contest for space. What is more, some groups of people – women, urban poor, lowered castes – have remained outside the purview of the mainstream public sphere that Habermas studies.[18] Boaventura de Sousa Santos argued that the (Habermasean) public sphere is an entirely Eurocentric concept that the Global South cannot relate to: a 'tribalism of the European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the eighteenth century' converted into a universal theoretical concept by colonialism and capitalism.[19] Broadly, critics of Habermas draw attention to the despatialised nature of his conception of the public sphere and the lack of clarity about *where* this public sphere can be situated, or to the weaknesses of his assumptions that (a) democratisation will eventually bracket out differences and make the public sphere inclusive; and (b) a single comprehensive public sphere is preferable to a nexus of multiple spheres.[20] Over the years, these critiques have been enriched by mounting empirical evidence that has alluded to the non-homogeneous nature of public spheres, the fact that the mainstream public sphere is exclusionary and the evidence that there is no one-size-fits-all model of the modern public sphere. Yet very few academic works have focused critically on how the Habermasean public sphere

[15]S. Seth, '"Once was blind but now can see": modernity and the social sciences', *International Political Sociology*, 7, 2 (2013), 136–51, here 139.
[16]Fraser, *op. cit*., 62.
[17]*ibid*., 58.
[18]G. Eley, 'Nations, publics and political cultures: placing Habermas in the nineteenth century', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1992), 3–13; Fraser, *op. cit.*
[19]B. Santos, 'Public sphere and epistemologies of the South', *Africa Development*, 37, 1 (2012), 43–67, here 62.
[20]Calhoun, *op. cit*.; P. Howell, 'Public space and the public sphere: political theory and the historical geography of modernity', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 11, 3 (1993), 303–22; Fraser, *op. cit*.; M.P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between banners and ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore, 1990).

deals with the question of space. Arguably, this relationship between the public sphere and physical spaces is central to debates around inclusion/exclusion and notions of mainstream and subaltern publics. The problem, Craig Calhoun argues, is that in his attempt to create a universal transhistorical theory, Habermas turns away from a historically specific grounding for democracy.[21] Philip Howell points out, in a similar vein, that social theory must engage with a historical geography of modernity – something that Habermas leaves as implicit, or is dismissive of.[22] In other words, while Habermas positions the public sphere 'between civil society and the state', he does not clarify *where* this place is. As a result, studies of modernity often conflate the spheres of literature, media and deliberation that shape public discourse, but leave out the physical spaces where such discourse is shaped.

Even as Habermas's works were being debated within Western academia in the 1990s, similar discussions of what 'public' means in the postcolonial context were taking place in the Indian subcontinent. For instance, in 1992 Ranajit Guha pointed towards the exclusion of certain sections from colonial Indian history – and, consequently, from postcolonial understandings of modernity.[23] Writing on subaltern publics, M.S.S. Pandian suggests that this exclusion amounted to a 'disavowal of caste identity as part of the political', narrowing the 'already restricted and qualitatively insubstantive colonial public sphere' which renders invisible the lived experiences of a large portion of colonial subjects.[24] Consequently, he opined that the authorised colonial public sphere was confined to 'a thin layer of the colonized, that is, sections of the indigenous elite' and that the first move towards 'recovering these [lost] voices is to have a critical understanding of the authorized colonial public sphere'.[25] In 1991, the journal *South Asia* published a special issue bringing together six articles from the subcontinent that attempted to 'reconstruct understandings related to "the public" from India's colonial past'.[26] These essays problematised concepts such as public space, public interest and public opinion, as well as constructions such as the public good, as did the works of many postcolonial and subaltern scholars in the years that followed.

In academic literature since that time, many words have been coined by scholars working on the public sphere to address these limitations – from Fraser's 'subaltern counter-public' and Catherine Squires's 'marginal

[21]Calhoun, *op. cit*., 35.
[22]Howell, *op. cit*., here 304–05 and 318.
[23]R. Guha, 'Domination without hegemony and its historiography' in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian history and society, Vol VI* (Delhi, 1992), 305.
[24]M.S.S. Pandian, 'Beyond colonial crumbs: Cambridge school, identity politics and Dravidian movement(s)', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30, 7/8 (1995), 385–91, here 386 and 388–89.
[25]*ibid*., 388.
[26]See special issue of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 'Aspects of "the public" in Colonial South Asia', 14, 1 (1991); S. Freitag, 'Postscript: exploring aspects of "the public" from 1991 to 2014', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38, 3 (2015), 512–23.

publics',[27] to terms such as 'semi-public'.[28] Yet a scan of recent academic publications in the subcontinent – as elsewhere – suggests that there is a dearth of theoretical alternatives to Habermas's conception of the public sphere as a point of departure. This limitation means that most works fall short of engaging critically with components of the public sphere that lie outside mainstream definitions of it; studies are left to choose between avoiding endless neologisms on the one hand and being confined by the language of the Habermasean public sphere on the other.[29]

This article explores an alternative vocabulary grounded in social interactions and human experiences. Emerging scholarship from within India in the last decade has already emphasised the importance of both space and experience in shaping social relations.[30] I aim to bridge these phenomenological endeavours with critical readings of the modern public sphere. While others have pointed out that control of space is crucial to understanding the emergence of the colonial public sphere in India, this article goes a step further and makes the case that this observation can be strengthened by using Lefebvre's framework to study how social spaces are produced and reproduced in societies. As we shall see, two things become evident when we look at the colonial experience. Firstly, the different regions point towards non-uniform trajectories of the evolution of public spheres. Secondly, 'space' becomes an important arena where counter-publics resist power and social relations are (re)produced through experience. Both these reasons allow us to conceive an alternative framework for a historical geography of modernity.

Modernity and the public sphere in colonial India

As a concept, the public sphere has become indispensable to any critical reading of democracy and modernity. Even critics of Habermas do not object to the analytical capability of the concept of the public sphere; only to Habermas's narrow definitions of it. Pandian, for instance, argues that the Habermasean notion of the public sphere is useful, but criticises its exclusion of the subaltern.[31] If we concede that the bourgeois liberal public sphere

[27]Fraser, *op. cit*.; C.R. Squires, 'Rethinking the Black public sphere: an alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres', *Communication Theory*, 12 (2006), 446–68.
[28]H. Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit movements and democratisation in Tamil Nadu* (Delhi, 2005), 180.
[29]S. Thiranagama, 'Rural civilities: caste, gender and public life in Kerala', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 42, 2 (2019), 310–27; N. Mannathukkaren, *Communism, Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Theory: The left in south India* (Oxford, 2021).
[30]G. Guru and S. Sarukkai, *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social* (New Delhi, 2019); S. Waghmore, 'From hierarchy to Hindu politeness: caste atrocities and Dalit protest in rural Marathwada' in S. Jodhka and J. Manor (eds), *Waning Hierarichies, Persistent Inequalities, Caste and Power in Twenty-First Century India* (London, 2017), 113–39; S. Mohan, 'Creation of social space through prayers among Dalits in Kerala, India', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 2, 1 (2016), 40–57; A. Jaaware, *Practicing Caste: On touching and not touching* (New York, 2019).
[31]Pandian, *op. cit*., 385.

is but one of many possibilities of the public sphere – that there is a wider 'public-at-large' that includes the bourgeois public sphere but also other possibilities of it – then we turn to more relevant and interesting questions. In this section, we explore the public sphere as it emerged in colonial India in the west (Surat city), north (Hindi-speaking region) and south (Tamil Nadu). As we shall see, these cases elucidate that each region evolved its own unique public sphere rooted in local spatiotemporal characteristics. Each region shows a different 'type' of public sphere not necessarily reflecting the Western ideal type, but sometimes as alternatives to it. Each of these types would, further, have a number of smaller counter-publics that may or may not be obviously visible. As already mentioned, this argument – that there is no one universal homogeneous public sphere in societies – has already been made by many scholars in the last decades. By comparing the three cases, my intention is to focus on how the production, use and/or appropriation of public spaces that shape experiences may provide a theoretical alternative which can strengthen our understanding of the modern public sphere and, more importantly, address the spatial limitations of the Habermasean model.

In his very detailed account of the creation of a 'public culture' in Surat city in western India, Douglas Haynes alludes to the presence of an elite public sphere – one relatable to Habermas's ideal type from Europe – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[32] Haynes states:

> Surat's Civil Culture was … an elite culture; it marked a narrow sphere where educated Indians bargained with and cajoled their colonial rulers, a sphere with its own special terminology and rituals … for many Surtis, the language of civic expression proved to be inaccessible and esoteric, sterile and unemotive.[33]

By 'civil culture', Haynes means the aristocracy, traders and educated Indians who engaged closely with the colonial authority and influenced policy – what Pandian called the 'authorized public sphere' – as well as being very much like the 'civil society' mentioned by Habermas.[34] Even as they cajoled the colonial rulers, this 'narrow' sphere of notables simultaneously demanded the patronage of the locals in a way that helped them retain their control over civic life, but also ensured that the 'plebeian society remained distant from the public sphere and that no truly counterhegemonic culture emerged from below'.[35] This they did by navigating between the mainstream public sphere of the colonial elites and the 'indigenous' publics of the locals. Consequently, colonial Surti elites produced a 'novel style of

[32]D. Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The shaping of a public culture in Surat city, 1852–1928* (California, 1991).
[33]*ibid*., 293.
[34]Pandian, *op. cit*., 388.
[35]Haynes, *op. cit*. 143.

political action, one which formally accepted the legitimacy of the colonial rulers and of the modernizing impulse but at the same time served to blunt the impact of reform, at least for the city's most prosperous groups'.[36]

This separation between bourgeois public sphere and the indigenous subaltern public in Surat began to weaken – much as it did in other parts of India – with the spread of the nationalist movement and, specifically, the non-cooperation movement in the early twentieth century. For the first time, non-elites would find a space within political rhetoric following Gandhi's call to young leaders to democratise the freedom movement by reaching out to the masses through public meetings and speeches. However, Haynes notes that despite the brief period in the 1920s when the public sphere took this relatively expansionary form, little changed within the fundamental nature of civic culture in Surat during the period: 'despite tremendous enthusiasm for certain aspects of non-cooperation, the underclasses always maintained a certain distance from the nationalist leadership even during the most intense moments of struggle'.[37] The underclasses continued to be excluded from the public sphere in Surat 'on the one hand by their lack of access to that arena's critical idioms, and on the other by leaderships who conceived of politics in terms that only indirectly and partially addressed the citizenry's material and psychic needs'.[38] Even when the locals were invited to meetings and other events, their role remained mostly passive. Discussion and debate – seen as essential components of a vibrant public sphere in Western liberal societies – found little place in public meetings held in colonial Surat from which the experiences of the underclass remained excluded. Far from shaping an inclusive democratic public sphere, the notables' excessive reliance on the religious rhetoric of Gandhian politics resulted, in fact, in the leaders drawing on primordial loyalties – especially religion – to instil a sense of nationalism among the public. No remarkably different spatiality emerged at the end of the 1920s, and the result was that class, caste – and now, religion – remained crucial in determining who accessed the mainstream public sphere and its approved spaces.

Compared to Surat, the public sphere in the Hindi-speaking regions of north India already present a marked difference, as the works of C.A. Bayly (1996) and Sandria Freitag (1991) have shown. Even before public associations and newspapers played an important role in shaping public opinion, Bayly argues, there existed in north India an Indian *ecumene* – a space for political and cultural debate, which borrowed from Western ideas, but also from local understandings of Hindustan.[39] Here, we also see signs of a 'pre-modern' public sphere:

[36]*ibid*., 115.
[37]*ibid*., 245.
[38]*ibid*., 259.
[39]C. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996), 182.

> The learned and respectable elites kept up a constant conversation on matters of religious wisdom through ritual and official *darbars*, mosque schools, the Sufi orders and private homes …. Congregational meetings among the Muslim community during the nights of the month of Ramadan provided a forum for wider discussions on matters concerning the community, and the consensus of these meetings might be conveyed to the rulers. Alongside this, the educated maintained a debate on literature, language and aesthetics through poetry-reading circles or *mushairahs*.[40]

Already, the notion of *sarkar* (government) came to hold a virtue beyond the will of the king and embodied sophisticated concepts of 'just and unjust rule, *zulum* (oppression), which could be introduced into popular debate on the merits of rulers through poetic satire, handbills, speeches and by ironic visual displays during popular festivals'.[41] The role of festivals was also the focus of Freitag's reading of open-air performances in public spaces as 'collective activities' that constituted a fundamental expression of 'the public' in colonial north India.[42] These performances, she argues, shaped shared experiences and were expressions of the values and viewpoints held by the collectivity, avenues of debate and deliberation, and even the focus of contestation.[43] The colonial administration kept a close watch on these events, which it saw as a measure of public opinion. All aspects of public events – from the venue, to the route of a procession, the date and time chosen and the duration of exercises – had to pass government scrutiny and receive prior approval.[44] In other words, the creation of a narrow public sphere that constituted the local elites was a carefully curated process in nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial India. The administration developed newer forms of communication and institutions to maintain control over public rhetoric through nurturing a bourgeois public sphere that could be controlled and that accommodated selective sections of the population.[45] Any anti-colonial – or, indeed, anti-caste – movements were seen as a challenge to the existing discursive and physical public sphere and a threat to the status quo.

Freitag observes that by the early twentieth century the processions and public performances in the region had started to reflect 'significant issues, personalities and debates of the day as played out on an India-wide stage – in much the same way that they incorporated stories of local excitement and

[40] *ibid.*
[41] *ibid.*, 184.
[42] S. Freitag, 'Enactments of Ram's story and the changing nature of "the public" in British India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 14, 1 (1991), 65–90, here 87. Freitag alludes to Lynn Hunt's study of Revolutionary ceremonies, Thomas Crow's work on Parisian fairs and John Brewer's study connecting the development of consumerism with John Wilkes's political strategies in London, to argue that *even* in Western Europe, civic-enactments and popular participation were crucial in shaping 'the public' beyond Habermas's narrow definitions.
[43] *ibid.*, 67.
[44] *ibid.*, 71.
[45] Bayly, *op. cit.*, 373.

scandal'.[46] This development was the result of the new 'imagined community' that emerged as part of the nationalist movement. Similar to the development in Surat, there also appears to have emerged an 'alternative' sphere of the 'Muslims' or the 'other community' alongside the nationalist space, which hindered the possibility of a secular public.[47] Bayly argues that the cleavages and inequalities of participation that emerged between the different communities in the nineteenth century were accentuated with the emergence of print media, owing, among other things, to the 'desire of editors to grasp and hold abstract constituencies of readers' opinions, now more distant from the face-to-face, or pen-to-pen, relations of the ecumene'.[48] Bayly's observation of the role of print in accentuating religious identities supports works by others such as Francesca Orsini and Anupama Rao on how print capitalism hardened gender, caste and religious identity in colonial and postcolonial India.[49] While it appears that in north India a vernacular public emerged that appropriated spaces earlier reserved for the local elites, this 'new' public was a conflation of Hindu populist notions and nationalist ideology in both Surat and parts of the Hindi-speaking belt.[50] Arguably, this strengthening of class and religious identities in the early twentieth century was a consequence of the nationalist movement trying to 'accommodate' lowered-caste communities without radically altering the upper castes' control of spaces in these regions. As we shall see next, in regions where the anti-caste and working-class movements were stronger, social spaces either opened up radically or were appropriated assertively by the oppressed sections.

Some parts of colonial India saw in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the emergence of movements that were both anti-colonial and anti-caste.[51] The Tamil-speaking region was one such, and can offer a third example of vernacular publics that deviate from the two cases discussed above. The vernacular public sphere that emerged in the Tamil-speaking regions developed an anti-caste rhetoric that built on a linguistic and cultural (sub)nationalism. Both Pandian and Bernard Bate (2013) have argued that it would require a re-reading of colonial history – an expansion of the gamut of the 'political' to include alternative public spaces – to understand the emergence of the Tamil public sphere in the twentieth century. Writing in 1995 when the debates around the spatial limitations of the Habermasean public sphere had only started to emerge, Pandian

[46]Freitag, 'Enactments of Ram's story', 80.
[47]*ibid*., 85.
[48]Bayly, *op. cit*., 211.
[49]F. Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and literature in the age of nationalism* (New Delhi, 2002); A. Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the politics of modern India* (California, 2009), 39.
[50]Freitag, 'Enactments of Ram's story', 80; Haynes, *op. cit*., 220–36.
[51]G. Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of anticaste intellectuals* (New Delhi, 2011), 246; D.M. Menon, 'Writing history in colonial times: polemic and the recovery of self in late nineteenth-century South India', *History and Theory*, 54, 4 (2015), 64–83, here 79.

observed, in no uncertain terms, the tendency of historians to exclude subaltern public spheres from their readings of colonial history and of modernity in India.[52] He asserted that only by giving due importance to the experiences of caste-oppressed communities can we attempt to understand the true nature of a public.

Much as in other parts of the subcontinent, the mainstream Tamil 'public sphere' mostly meant a narrow bourgeois version of it until the turn of the twentieth century:

> In 1900, if you were engaging in 'politics' in Madras City, you would bear a Brahmin surname such as Aiyer or Aiyengar (or perhaps one of the socioeconomically forward non-Brahmin communities such as Chettiar or Pillaimar), you lived in the neighbourhoods of Mylapore or Egmore, and when you engaged in politics in what were called public meetings you spoke in English.[53]

There was a deviation from this in 1905 with the Swadeshi movement, when a young file of nationalist leaders emerged across the subcontinent and systematically took to public spaces to address larger and larger crowds in vernacular languages such as Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Telugu and Tamil.[54] As in other regions of colonial India, the nationalist movement thus led to the expansion of the public sphere; this was a conscious attempt by the nationalist elites to 'reach out' to the masses and to take the gospel of *swaraj* (self-rule) to the ordinary Indian. In 1918, Theosophist and labour organiser B.P. Wadia wrote: 'We want to bring the masses into line with the educated classes . . .. The masses do possess political outlook; they have lost the art of making themselves heard, and our task should be to persuade them into speech and action'.[55]

In the Tamil regions, the catalyst for change, Bate argues, was the emergence of a new vernacular communicative medium in the early twentieth century, which transformed public action.[56] By 1920, Tamil (or Telugu) became the language of choice at meetings in the region. Political speeches were either made in a vernacular language or were translated into one. This development had begun to change political participation in other regions of colonial India, as we have already discussed above. Yet there was a second development in Tamil Nadu that marks a difference: the leaders had managed to tie their politics to the concerns of the ordinary people, 'especially to the economics and dignity of the new proletariat toiling in the cotton mills around Madras'.[57] The result was the emergence of a new form of mass politics, at once nationalist, vernacular and anti-caste. By the time

[52]Pandian, *op. cit.*, 388.
[53]B. Bate, 'To persuade them into speech and action: oratory and the Tamil political, Madras, 1905–1919', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55, 1 (2013), 142–66, here 146.
[54]*ibid.*, 149.
[55]Quoted in Bate, *op. cit.*, 148.
[56]*ibid.*, 145.
[57]*ibid.*, 154.

the first Gandhian Satyagraha was organised in Madras Presidency during 1919, some signs of the emerging public sphere were evident: 'the crowd was quite mixed and not limited to the upper-caste Hindu and Christian boys and men, the students and educated classes that had been the usual participants up to the most recent times'.[58] A report from the time noted that about 200 women also attended the meeting. The mobilisation of the subaltern working class through the labour movement and the new communicative medium that emerged in the early twentieth century together facilitated a new definition of politics itself – a 'secular, or at least self-consciously political, avatar of the Protestant sermon'.[59] The nature of this new political representation also meant the opening-up of spaces – both physical and discursive – where new rules of engagement were either being drawn from scratch or being negotiated. This public sphere had its own limitations and exclusions, but its characteristics varied from the kinds of politics that were emerging around the same time in other parts of the colony.

I have only discussed three cases here, but forms of public sphere that drew from local contexts had emerged across the subcontinent by the early twentieth century. The argument made is not whether or not one region had a more 'progressive' public sphere than the other. The discussion is aimed, on the contrary, at suggesting that the public sphere must be studied not as an 'end' but as an ever-changing space of constant negotiation and contestation between those in power (the colonial administration, the upper castes, the bourgeoisie) and the common masses who inhabit them (especially the lowered castes, working classes and, indeed, women) and who constantly assert their own place within spaces controlled by the former. Germane to the endeavour of this article, the next step is to identify characteristics from within these cases to arrive at a theoretical alternative that studies space in and as itself.

While their diverse nature is evident, one aspect remains central to each of these three cases: how public spaces facilitated – or hindered – the participation of people in 'the public spheres' and shaped social experiences of people across castes and classes. In all three cases, the narrow scope of the colonial public sphere had at its core the control of social spaces by the few people who formed the notable elites and/or the colonial administration. This is why a call to 'invite the masses' automatically meant, in all three cases, a change in the communicative medium towards the vernacular, but more importantly, a simultaneous move away from the clubs and private estates into public spaces like the beaches, *bazaars* and public squares. This was crucial because it did something that the literary public sphere and

[58] *ibid.*, 144.
[59] *ibid.*, 145.

media could not: it physically brought together a crowd that in principle cut across religious, caste, class and (less often) gender differences, changing how large sections of the population experienced spaces that had remained restricted to them. For instance, while the vernacular oratory in Tamil regions made political discourse accessible to the popular masses, the moving of the meetings from community halls, clubs, private homes and temples into the public grounds, beaches, *bazaars* and public squares was important in bridging the gap between (mostly upper-caste) leaders and (majority lowered-caste) masses – between the bourgeois public sphere and the commoners.[60] The anti-caste movements soon gathered strength even in the smaller towns and villages of Tamil Nadu, not just through the many magazines and journals but also through public meetings organised along riverbanks, the staging of plays, and the many reading rooms and gymnasia that soon mushroomed in the region.[61] Together, these spaces ushered in a new spatiality that was central to the vernacular public sphere that emerged. Similar developments were also occurring in neighbouring Kerala where, by the 1930s, centuries-old caste structures that gave the Brahmins absolute control over spatiality were being seriously challenged through protest marches, with the opening up of libraries and teashops, and by inter-caste dining and community-reform associations.

In his study of northern India, Bayly notes how stalls and sweetshops emerged as spaces where people met and exchanged gossip and news. Similarly,

> political demonstrations were made at or near mosques. The shrines of saints, or of deceased rulers popularly revered as just men, were also the venue of demonstrations – an indication of the relative importance for the subcontinent of tomb worship and Sufism in both elite and popular life.[62]

Bayly mentions how public recitations in *bazaars* or near the platform of the police station spread news quickly in the villages, and how stalls selling tobacco, betel nuts, medicaments or sweets served as spaces where people congregated for gossip and news.[63] It was where the elites and the common people gathered for a common cause. Haynes's study points out a contrast in Surat, where institutional spaces like the Surat Municipality and Bombay Legislature played a major role in shaping (and maintaining) an elite public sphere in the city. The failure to develop alternatives to liberal representative systems or social spaces that transcended such class differences was one of the reasons the colonial hegemony was not challenged successfully in Surat.[64] This is not to say that public spheres of the underclass did not

[60] *ibid*., 150–51.
[61] Pandian, *op. cit*., 390.
[62] Bayly, *op. cit*., 202.
[63] *ibid*., 202.
[64] Haynes, *op. cit*., 295–96.

exist, but that in nineteenth-century Surat there was a lack of social spaces that seriously transcended the various conceived, perceived and lived spaces of the people. In contrast, Calcutta's intelligentsia, who related more to Western writers and philosophers, reportedly also frequented the local tea-shops and football games to nurse their need to 'stay connected to the masses'.[65] The presence of intelligentsia and the use of public spaces to deliberate and discuss matters of public interest are characteristic features of public spheres – both Western and non-Western. Space – physical space – is, therefore, an important component of the transformation of the modern public sphere, because it has the ability to fundamentally influence and alter human experiences.

Space, in other words, should be studied as *itself* – a dynamic sphere where social relationships are (re)produced. Insofar as we attempt to critically study the public sphere and treat the transformations in lived spaces seriously, Habermas's conceptualisation could at best only be a point of departure. As I have argued, empirical examples from colonial India suggest that even while the *type* of public spheres that emerged might vary, public spaces remain central to understanding these variations. In other words, the evolution of the modern publics in India is also the story of how and by whom public spaces were controlled and how this control came to be challenged by the oppressed sections. Seen thus, the public sphere is a site of constant struggle where various groups – castes, classes and genders – try to negotiate rules of engagement and control. A theoretical alternative to the Habermasean public sphere must, therefore, account for these complexities. For this, I turn to Lefebvre and his work on the production of (social) space. A Marxist thinker, Lefebvre was interested in studying how modernity can be better understood if we put 'space' under a critical lens, making his framework relevant to the present discussion. As we shall see, his study of how spaces are essential in both maintaining and resisting power resonate directly with caste-ridden societies as much as they do with others, because human experiences everywhere are shaped by and through physical social spaces. Before a more detailed discussion on using Lefebvre in the Indian context, the next section will expand on Lefebvre's theory of space.

The (social) production of (social) space

The despatialised nature of the Habermasean public sphere was arguably a continuation of the extraordinary subordination of space (relative to time) that plagued Western social theory.[66] As Michel Foucault

[65]D. Bhattacharya, 'Three narratives on modernity in a colonial metropolis: Calcutta during the early twentieth century' in D. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Of Matter Modern: The experience of modernity in colonial and postcolonial South Asia* (Calcutta, 2008), 261–62.
[66]E. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory* (London, 1989), 123.

observed, 'devaluation of space has prevailed for generations …. Space was treated as dead, fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic'.[67] Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, there was, as Edward Soja argued in 1989, a reassertion of space (and spatiality – the relations dictated by and in space), a growing awareness about spatial praxis and a recognition of the need to rethink social theory and incorporate the fundamental spatiality of social life: to introduce, in other words, a spatialised ontology.[68] From being a mere backdrop – a silent spectator of the changing world, an empty container to be filled with actions – 'space' came to be redefined as an analytical tool at once both 'a product' and 'productive'.[69] This turn was first seen most clearly in the works of thinkers like Lefebvre (in *The Production of Space*) and Foucault (in 'Des espaces autres', also extended in *Discipline and Punish* and other works), but has since influenced research in geography, urban studies, architecture, sociology and political science, as well as in philosophy, literature and cultural studies.[70] Foucault, in his work, undertook a systematic study of experiences mediated through (and in) space, tracing the genealogy of social institutions – most notably the mental asylum, the clinic and the prison – as spaces of material instantiation of hegemonic discourse. He was interested in the legitimisation of power (governmentality and the power of the state over birth and death) in maintaining hegemonic power structures through the control of space. Lefebvre, by contrast, was interested in studying space as a site of contestation. Although both Foucault and Lefebvre argue for the theoretical importance of a structural study of space in affecting (and being affected by) power relations in society, Lefebvre provides the framework to separate the hegemonic and resistive potentials of space. This is what makes Lefebvre's work on space relevant and interesting in the context of the debate on the public sphere.

Theorising space

Lefebvre's critical engagement with the concept of 'space' came in *La production de l'espace*, published in French in 1974, eight years after Habermas's work on the structural transformation of the public sphere,

[67]M. Foucault, 'Questions on geography' in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (New York, 1980), 70.
[68]Soja, *op. cit*., 118–37.
[69]M. Foucault, 'Des espaces autres', *Empan*, 2, 54 (2004), 12–19 (original lecture from 1974); M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York, 1995) (originally published in French in 1975); Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit*. See also Soja, *op. cit*., 3–5; R.T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (London 2013), 119–20.
[70]Tally Jr., *op. cit*., 116.

although it made no direct mention of the latter.[71] Like Habermas's, however, Lefebvre's work was also an attempt to understand modernity in its complex form. In fact, Lefebvre's comments on the importance of ideas to be justified in a public space closely resemble Habermas's very definition of the public sphere. Lefebvre says:

> nothing and no one can avoid trial by space – an ordeal which is the modern world's answer to the judgment of God or the classical conception of fate. It is in space, on a worldwide scale, that each idea of 'value' acquires or loses its distinctiveness through confrontation with the other values and ideas that it encounters there.[72]

Here, *space* is understood as the arena where public consciousness is formed and where opinions must be validated. Lefebvre's interest, however, was not in arriving at a universal theory, but in producing a grounded one that pins down the experience of modernity in a specific space and time. He pointed out that 'space' remains a concept never fully conceptualised in social sciences. It continues to be used in myriad ways without being critically engaged with and as such we are confronted with a 'multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental and global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on'.[73] Why is it, then, he asks, that there is no spatial criticism on a par with the criticism of art, literature or music? This question guided Lefebvre in his endeavour to theorise space and to conceptualise a unitary theory that separates physical (nature), mental (including logical and formal abstractions) and social space, to discern their mutual relationships and differences and to open up space to critical enquiry. Such a critical enquiry was contiguous with a Marxist analysis of any society:

> the social relations of production have a social existence only insofar as they exist spatially; they project themselves into a space, they inscribe themselves in a space while producing it. Otherwise, they remain 'pure' abstraction, that is, in representations and consequently in ideology, or, stated differently, in verbalism, verbiage, words.[74]

The idea is not to arrive at a universal theory but a unitary one – to force social sciences to think about space seriously – and 'analyse not things in space but space itself, with a view to uncovering the social relationships embedded in it'.[75] Here, Lefebvre argues that the limitation of Marxist

[71]H. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (1974, Paris). The 1991 English translation of Lefebvre's book by Donald Nicholson-Smith has been used for this article; Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit.*
[72]Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit.*, 416–17.
[73]*ibid.*, 8.
[74]Translated by and cited in Soja, *op. cit.*, 127–28.
[75]Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit.*, 89.

theory is in failing to consider space as a means of production in itself, thereby limiting the scope of studying social interactions in places like markets by prioritising exchange-value over use-value.

In lived reality, the line drawn between the economic and social roles of public spaces like streets, markets and squares is not clear (as we have already discussed above), and a study of spaces is necessary to account for these nuances.[76] Lefebvre attempted to do this by separating space into three interconnected realms: representations of space (conceived space); spatial practice (perceived space); and representational space (lived space). This conceptual triad formed the core of Lefebvre's theory of social space. Representations of space refer to the space of the experts – the planners, social engineers and technocrats – who conceptualise social spaces. It is space as conceptualised and defined by traditional theories,[77] or controlled by the administrative authorities, local elites and dominant castes. In contrast, a representational space is the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', the 'dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate'.[78] In other words, this is the space formed by everyday life. Lefebvre argues that any dominant power attempts a total control of conceived and lived spaces. The spatial practices define the routines and norms that dictate the spatiality of any given society (at a specific time and space). The subject – an individual member of a given social group – inhabits these spaces, moving from one to another in their everyday lives. Yet these realms may or may not constitute a coherent whole.[79] Lefebvre argues that in modernity – and more so, under neo-capitalism – such coherence is unachievable.[80] Dominant social theories fail to completely encapsulate the struggle between constant attempts at control of social spaces by the hegemonic powers on the one hand and resistance on the other, because they fail to engage with all three conceptions of space, instead focusing on one or the other. He argues that when political scientists and sociologists study the material and social relations in any given society, they often jump from the 'mental' to the 'social' without any hesitation, presuming the link between epistemology and the practical to be self-evident.[81] Instead, Lefebvre's attempt is to explain a sort of 'spatial dialectic' – to separate abstract space from social space. Abstract space is strongly influenced by our imaginations and ideas and is often open to transformations, while

[76]D. Chakrabarty, 'Open space/public place: garbage, modernity and India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 14, 1 (1991), 15–31, here 23.
[77]Tally Jr., *op. cit*., 118.
[78]Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit*., 38–39.
[79]Jaaware, *op. cit.*
[80]Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit*., 38–39.
[81]*ibid*., 60.

physical spaces are designed to reinforce the status quo and are therefore more rigid structures.[82] This separation opens up many possibilities for problematising the Habermasean public sphere because it leads us to acknowledge that the abstract and physical social spaces that constitute the public sphere can – indeed, should – be studied separately.

The attempt to control spaces – the conceived, perceived and lived – becomes an important part of a dominant ideology, power structure or government: 'according to the perspective of politics, no part of space can or may be allowed to escape domination . . . power aspires to control space in its entirety'.[83] Space is what provides the necessary conditions for those in power, who can then use this dominance to produce particular kinds of experiences in people.[84] Administrative and sovereign powers often do this by appropriating religious and political sites to create social spaces where a society can achieve a cohesive form through self-representation.[85] This is the space where philosophy or religion, ideology or established knowledge, capitalism or socialism, state or community are put radically into question and must validate themselves.[86] This importance given to the social space as an arena where ideas must gain legitimacy is strikingly similar to the Habermasean conceptualisation of the public sphere as the arena where competing thoughts are rationally deliberated. However, the separation of representations of space (conceived by the experts and those in power) from representational space (the lived reality of these spaces) allows us to study the public sphere as an arena of constant struggle for legitimacy and meaning. Lived social spaces may be 'produced' by transforming natural or existing spaces to serve the needs of the people that inhabit the space.[87] Such *appropriated spaces* can often be a structure – a building or monument – but can also be a street, a site or a square. Another closely related practice in the production of space is that of *diversion*, when an

> existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d'être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, re-appropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one.[88]

Such an analysis offers many possibilities for the study of change in early twentieth-century colonial India that has been outlined above.

[82] *ibid.*, 26–30.
[83] *ibid.*, 387–88.
[84] Guru, *op. cit.*, 71–106.
[85] Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit.*, 34.
[86] *ibid.*, 417.
[87] *ibid.*, 416–17.
[88] *ibid.*, 167.

Studying space has two additional advantages that address other shortcomings of the Habermasean model of claims to universality and the presumed private–public binary. Firstly, unlike Habermas, Lefebvre concedes that it is not clear whether such distinctions (between physical and social spaces) can be generalised: 'lacking adequate knowledge of the Orient, I shall offer no definite answer to it'.[89] In fact, he argues that one cannot claim to comprehend completely non-Western modes of production – its space, its towns, or the relationship it embodies between town and country – by using Western conceptual tools that confine us. Each society is unique, historical and spatiotemporal: 'every society . . . produces a space, *its own space*'.[90] Secondly, by using 'space' in itself as his category of analysis, Lefebvre escapes the private–public debate that studies of the 'public sphere' often find themselves entangled in. For analytical purposes, Lefebvre's framework studies space as the connections between the public realm (the spaces of social relationships and actions) and private areas (spaces for contemplation, isolation and retreat) through 'mixed' areas (such as linking thoroughfares).[91] These relations, however, cannot be studied as binaries, but as levels of spatial and temporal organisation bound together by relationships of reciprocal implication: 'The "public" realm, the realm of temple or palace, has private and "mixed" aspects, while the "private" house or dwelling has public (e.g. reception rooms) and "mixed" ones. Much the same may be said of the town as a whole'.[92]

The limitations of a public–private binary in understanding modernity have been discussed by academics in south Asia for many years now.[93] In her recent work, Sharika Thiranagama points towards the need to understand experiences of forms of civility in contemporary Kerala as constituted in private publics, separate from formal associational publics.[94] As I have argued elsewhere, these negotiations between private and public have been crucial to the very shaping of modernity in the region.[95] Theoretically, this takes us a step further towards understanding spaces not as public–private binaries but rather as dialectical unities. Increasingly, social spaces transcend such divisions.

Once we problematise space, we can attempt to understand the underpinnings that support social relations in lived spaces. Then, public grounds, meeting places, intersections and crossroads become important components of studying the public sphere. Lefebvre's framework of theorising

[89] *ibid*., 42.
[90] *ibid*., 31.
[91] *ibid*., 363.
[92] *ibid*., 153.
[93] See, for instance, Freitag, 'Postscript', *op. cit*.; Chakrabarty, *op. cit*.; P. Chatterjee, 'Our modernity', *Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa* (1997), 3–20.
[94] S. Thiranagama, *op. cit*.
[95] S. Harikrishnan, 'Negotiating caste: a matter of the public and the home', *Inter-Actions*, 2, 4 (2020), https://lilainteractions.in/negotiating-caste-a-matter-of-the-public-and-the-home/, accessed 31 December 2021.

space concedes that space needs to be analysed critically and that the meaning of space itself changes across time and space; social space is grounded in specificities. How space is produced (and reproduced) plays an important role in shaping social relations in a society. In other words, space is an inevitable component of a society's public sphere, and any study of the public sphere is incomplete without a study of its (social) spaces. In a multicultural society, this becomes even more important, since any claim regarding the possibility of a homogeneous public sphere would be ill-informed. This is because in a society like India that is multicultural *and* caste-conscious, any attempt at social theory must begin – as Guru and Sarukkai argue – from experience,[96] and experience, in turn, is shaped by and in social spaces. Such an analysis is contiguous with Lefebvre's work on social space, which emphasises difference as being produced from exclusion.[97]

Again, such an understanding of the importance of experience is aimed not at dismissing the ideational sphere, but at strengthening our understandings of a society by treating lived realities as part of the political.[98] A brief discussion of this relationship between space and experience is important to complete this attempt at developing an alternative framework to the Habermasean public sphere, and Guru's discussion of the lives of Ambedkar and Gandhi helps bring out this nuance.[99] Both Ambedkar and Gandhi were well-educated leaders of national importance. Yet, as we shall see, their caste backgrounds continued to influence what spaces opened up to them and which ones they could traverse, both horizontally and vertically. This ultimately shaped their experiences and shaped their worldviews.

Space as experience

The control of spaces also means the control of bodies and experiences. Space is where power manifests itself, not just physically by possession and control of access (as in private estates and clubs), but also through formulations of norms and rules that dictate social relations. In India, this 'power' includes state and capital, but also the invisible social hierarchy of caste. For centuries, upper-caste Brahmins have controlled social spaces, which meant control over both the abstract spaces of social discourse and lived spaces.[100] Through this, they controlled human experiences. As a result, space – and consequently, experience – became an important component in understanding social transformations. In *The Cracked Mirror*, Guru and Sundar

[96]G. Guru and S. Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory* (New Delhi, 2012).
[97]E. Kinkaid, 'Re-encountering Lefebvre: toward a critical phenomenology of social space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38, 1 (2020), 167–86, here 169.
[98]Pandian, *op. cit*., 391.
[99]Guru, *op. cit*.
[100]Mohan, *op. cit*., 43–44.

Sarukkai explore the politics of space through experience, arguing that for a long time, mainstream social theory – including most postcolonial and subaltern literature – has considered *experience* subordinate to *ideas*, in a conflation of abstract and lived spaces.[101] In real life experience precedes theory, and social theory cannot but engage with this creatively and comprehensively.[102] The first step in deconstructing this understanding of the colonial public sphere must begin, then, with stepping outside the '"councils, ministers and electorates" … into a sphere saturated with the politics of everyday life, where caste, among other inferiorised identities, was experienced'.[103] Once the focus is on experience, any claim of universality is automatically lost. Moving away from the study of abstract space (which has long dominated social theory), Guru and Sarukkai encourage us to consider space in all its complexity. While accepting that there exists *a* public sphere, as Habermas argues, they open up the need to look at social spaces that *also* constitute public spheres. A separation of space into conceived and lived spaces allows for an analysis of the similarities, differences and relations between the two.

In a chapter titled 'Experience, space and justice', Guru conceptualises space in the context of Indian experience and argues that 'an effective expansion of ideas rests on the fluidity and flexibility of spaces that are inhabited by people who are socially and culturally fragmented. The expansion of modern ideas therefore is coextensive with the expansion of spaces'.[104]

For centuries, caste relations dictated how spaces have been distributed and experience controlled; and any study of the transformation of social relations and the public sphere needs to account for changes that happen in these spaces and to these relations. To Guru, a study of space is intrinsically a study of human experiences. Here he attempts to extend, to India, Lefebvre's framework of the body as space. To Lefebvre, the three elements of space – the perceived, conceived and lived – are mediated through the body: one's space is 'first of all [one's] body, and then it is [one's] body's counterpart or "other", its mirror-image or shadow'.[105] In India, the prohibition – or invisibility – of lowered castes is the ultimate foundation of social spaces and the mainstream public sphere. This is why, ultimately, caste can be understood as a matter of self (internal space) and its possession of territory (external space).[106] To Lefebvre, a study based on prohibitions –

[101]Guru and Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror*, *op. cit.*
[102]*ibid*., 1–2.
[103]Pandian, *op. cit*., 389.
[104]Guru, *op. cit*., 80.
[105]Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit*., 184; C. Butler, *Henri Lefebvre: Spatial politics, everyday life and the right to the city* (London, 2012), 125. A very similar understanding of the body as sacred space was used in the teachings of Narayana Guru in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kerala. See U. Kumar, 'Self, body and inner sense: some reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan', *Studies in History*, 13, 2 (1997), 247–70.
[106]Jaaware, *op. cit*., 33–34.

the 'unsaid' in communications between the members of society; the gulf between them, their bodies and consciousness; the difficulties of social intercourse – is limiting because it puts these prohibitions (and not the productive activity) at the origin of society.[107] Here, Guru would disagree with Lefebvre, because in India, the all-encompassing caste dictates both prohibitions (exclusion of oppressed castes from the public sphere) and productive activity. More importantly, upper castes control not just the representations of space, by controlling ownership over land, but also the spatial practices (perceived space) and representational space (lived space).[108]

Guru somewhat clarifies this argument by comparing the politics of Ambedkar and Gandhi. Gandhi was born a *bania* (trading caste), which helped him to access spaces in a way Ambedkar (who belonged to the oppressed Dalit caste) could not. Gandhi's ability to travel freely was quintessential to his understanding of India. His call to unify the nation around peasant struggles and village communities was based on his experiences of interacting with people from all corners of the country and his ability to transgress spaces vertically – to engage with the scavenger and the untouchable, but also with the kings and the gentry. Furthermore, Guru argues that being an upper-caste Hindu opened up to Gandhi spaces not just of experience, but also of articulation:

> Spaces provide a necessary background condition for the comprehensive representation of ideologues and their ideas . . . Gandhi, through a favourable social space such as, the public *maidans* ceases to be a *bania* (trading caste) or a Gujarati, and becomes a Mahatma . . ..[109]

We have already discussed how the opening-up of public spaces to the oppressed castes in the early twentieth century ushered in an era of new political action, but Guru reminds us that even such transformations were ultimately dependent on an individual's caste background. Space thus becomes important for two reasons – first in shaping personal experiences and then in the public articulation of ideas and politics. In comparison to Gandhi, Ambedkar's social spaces opened up to him more horizontally than they did vertically. His travels across the country were not as easy. When he did travel, he generally stayed with Dalits and addressed gatherings of Dalit communities, in sharp contrast to Gandhi who enjoyed the hospitality of upper-caste aristocracies even while he addressed large public gatherings of people across caste and class. For a Dalit, any travel or interaction with a caste-Hindu would have meant needing to penetrate the dominant Hindu public sphere

[107]Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, *op. cit.*, 35–36.
[108]Mohan, *op. cit.*, 43–44.
[109]Guru, *op. cit.*, 102–03. Punctuation is reproduced here as in the original text.

and its spatiality. This is why a judge based in Dhule (Maharashtra, western India), having found it difficult to invite Ambedkar to his school or home, decided to converse with Ambedkar in a moving car – the cost of fuel burnt would have been lower than the social cost for the judge if he had invited Ambedkar to either the school or his home.[110] In another instance, Guru writes that Ambedkar's own teacher, who wanted to invite him home, could not do so for fear of possible opposition from his wife.[111] Here, one sees the prohibition and exclusion of Dalits not merely from the larger public sphere, but also the private space of upper-caste Hindu homes. Upper-caste Hindus who showed the courage to invite Ambedkar home had to pay social costs, such as social boycotts or the wrath of their caste.[112] Such differences in access to spaces – and, thus, experiences – led to Gandhi and Ambedkar having different understandings of India.

The experiences of Gandhi and Ambedkar are useful to understand the nuances of the spatiality of the public sphere that a purely Habermasean conception of the term would fail to grasp. After independence, discrimination based on caste was made unconstitutional in India. With this, structural discrimination was abolished, if only on paper. Within representations of space (conceived), discrimination based on caste is illegal. Within representational spaces (lived), however, caste continues to actively affect human experiences in India. Insofar as there is one power – caste, class, state, capital – that controls social spaces, an inclusive public sphere of the kind that Habermas envisages will never be achieved. The public sphere is, instead, to be understood as a space of constant struggle between those in power to control spaces and the resistance they face within lived spaces. Social space – where hegemony is (re)produced (as Lefebvre argues) and resisted (by those prevented access to it, as Guru and Sarukkai, and Jaaware point out) – and the transformation of space must, therefore, be treated as pivotal in any study of the modern public sphere. The traversal of spaces becomes important, as does the interaction (touching and not touching) of the people who now share a (modern, secular) common space. The modern public sphere, in other words, is an attempt to reduce the differences between the multiple societies that exist *within* it. Consequently, social relationships and forms of socialisation are best understood within spatial contexts.[113]

[110]*ibid*., 105.
[111]*ibid*., 105.
[112]Surbha Tipnis and Panwalkar from Panwel faced a social boycott and S.B. Tilak of Pune faced the social wrath of Brahmins for inviting Ambedkar home. See Guru, *op. cit*., 105.
[113]V. Cattell, N. Dines, W. Gesler and S. Curtis, 'Mingling, observing, and lingering: everyday public spaces and their implications for well-being and social relations', *Health & Place*, 14, 3 (2008), 544–61, here 547; Freitag, 'Postscript', *op. cit*., 520.

Spatialising the public sphere

One of the shortfalls of modern knowledge is that it limits us from engaging with a critique from wholly outside of it.[114] The now obvious limitations of Habermas's work and the possibilities opened up by the framework developed in Lefebvre's writings allow us to introduce space as an analytical category in theorising the public sphere. In doing this, the intention is not to argue that the public sphere as a concept needs to be replaced entirely but to demonstrate that we need a vocabulary that problematises the spatial component of the public sphere. Secondly, the idea is not to place 'space' in opposition to 'time', but to argue that a better understanding of the transformation of the modern public sphere will require a study of both its temporal *and* spatial elements. Recent works on space and experience in India have pointed out the contradictions within a seemingly 'democratic' public sphere by exposing how the politeness and civility of upper-caste Hindus always hinged on a non-confrontational public life.[115] These works suggest that insofar as representations of space remain controlled by upper castes, any facade of a democratic public sphere renders invisible the everyday struggles of marginalised communities – nuances that can only be uncovered through a spatial history of modernity. The discussion in this article of the emergence of a modern public in three regions of colonial India illustrates this point that a spatial re-reading of history is important to better understand the transformation of the public sphere in the subcontinent. This becomes all the more important in the twenty-first century, when digital spaces are quickly replacing physical ones and the tools for control of these digital spaces are constantly expanding, allowing for the neoliberal state and/or capital to pose an imminent threat to new forms of social space.

Finally, emerging literature on the interwoven histories of communities that were historially relegated to the margins of 'mainstream' societies across the world opens up the possibility to explore cross-border solidarities and to have conversations on the 'silenced voices that constitute the archive of global caste'.[116] While Lefebvre's works were used in the 1980s primarily within critical geography and urban studies,[117] there is much in his works on space, *autogestion* and *rhythmanalysis* that can assist such an endeavour, and his works are are increasingly being applied to studies of territory and international relations, cultural politics and colonial identities.[118] Over the

[114]Seth, *op. cit*., 149.
[115]See Waghmore, *op. cit*.; Jaaware, *op. cit*.; Thiranagama, *op. cit*., 310–27.
[116]A. Rao, 'The work of analogy: on Isabel Wilkerson's 'Caste: The origins of our discontents'', *LA Review of Books*, 1 September 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-work-of-analogy-on-isabel-wilkersons-caste-the-origins-of-our-discontents/, accessed 3 October 2021.
[117]See, for instance, D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford, 1990), and Soja, *op. cit.*
[118]See Brenner and Elden, *op. cit.*(for international relations); A. Parameswaran, 'Excavating the remains of the left: radical geography and political affirmation', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* (2019), 1–17 (for cultural politics); and Mohan, *op. cit*. (for colonial identities).

last decade, a 'third wave' of Lefebvrean scholarship has specifically attempted to revisit the phenomenological themes in his work, arguing that the resilience of the modern public sphere depends on its ability to have inclusive and well-functioning public spaces.[119] More empirical research on the spatiality of the public sphere that focuses on lived experiences can embolden this effort and 'make space' within studies of modernity for a critical engagement with questions of social spaces, not just in caste societies like India but around the world.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr Kenneth McDonagh, Prof. Caroline Osella, Prof. Dilip Menon, Prof. John Doyle, Daniel Carey and the anonymous *Social History* reviewers for their input and comments on earlier versions that significantly improved this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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[119]E. Kinkaid, *op. cit.*, 170; C. Cassegård, 'Contestation and bracketing: the relation between public space and the public sphere', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 32 (2014), 689–703.