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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Politics of Presence: Loitering, Affect, and Reclaiming Urban Public Space in Post-Nirbhaya India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how women's engagement with Indian urban spaces shifted following the 2012 Nirbhaya case, moving from a discourse of state-mandated "safety" to an elective "politics of presence". By analysing Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade's Why Loiter?, Maya Krishna Rao's " Performance Walk, and Blank Noise's "Meet to Sleep" campaign, this study explores how the simple acts of walking, sitting, and sleeping in public become potent forms of resistance. While the Nirbhaya case intensified a culture of fear and restrictive "safety" narratives, these selected texts and performances champion the right to loiter without purpose. Utilising Sara Ahmed's affect theory and Lauren Berlant's "crisis ordinariness," the methodology employs close reading and performance analysis to argue that reclaiming the city is not merely a legal or infrastructural issue but an affective one. The findings suggest that by embracing pleasure and risk over survivalist caution, these acts of "ordinary freedom" challenge the systemic gendered boundaries of the Indian metropole.

Keywords: urban feminism, affect theory, loitering, public space, Nirbhaya case

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The 2012 Nirbhaya gang rape case stands as a definitive cultural and political turning point in the history of urban India. While the event triggered massive protests and significant legal reforms, it simultaneously produced a pervasive national climate of fear that fundamentally altered how women navigate the city. In the aftermath of the violence, the discourse surrounding women in public spaces became almost entirely centred on the concept of "safety". This focus on protection often manifests as restrictive warnings, where women are repeatedly instructed to be cautious or avoid being outdoors at night. This study argues that such safety-focused thinking does not merely protect women. Instead, it often restricts their movements and turns fear into a normalised, permanent feature of everyday life. Rather than viewing sexual violence as an isolated, shocking event, this paper proposes that violence against women in the Indian metropole operates through a "slow mechanism." It is a force that shapes the minute details of daily routine, controlling how women walk, sit, or rest within the urban fabric. To understand this phenomenon, the research utilises the theoretical lens of "crisis ordinariness" developed by Lauren Berlant (2011). This framework helps explain how women in post-Nirbhaya India live with a constant, low-level anticipation of harm rather than just a reaction to sudden shock. Furthermore, the paper employs Sara Ahmed's affect theory to trace how fear is not just an internal emotion but a sensation that circulates and "sticks" to certain bodies and spaces through social rules and news cycles (2014).

The central thesis of this work is that reclaiming public space is not solely a matter of law or infrastructure. Rather, it is about changing the "affective" experience of the city. By analysing Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade's Why Loiter?, Maya Krishna Rao's " *Walk*, and the Blank Noise collective's "Meet to Sleep" campaign, this paper explores how simple, non-purposeful acts become radical political statements. These works challenge the expectation that women must always be alert or afraid. By prioritising pleasure and the right to "be" in public, these acts of loitering and stillness offer a form of resistance that refuses fear as the only survival strategy. This paper seeks to demonstrate how these embodied responses turn mourning into a collective presence and offer a new vision of ordinary freedom in the contemporary Indian city.

Literature Review

The academic discourse surrounding women's access to the Indian city has historically fluctuated between the poles of protectionism and rights-based claims. Following the 2012 Nirbhaya case, this scholarship underwent a significant shift, with "safety" emerging as the primary metric for evaluating women's presence in public spaces. This literature review synthesises existing scholarship to identify how a safety-focused approach often inadvertently restricts female mobility, while contrasting it with emerging feminist theories that prioritise affect, pleasure, and the radical act of loitering.

The Problem of the Safety Narrative

Traditional urban scholarship in India has often focused on infrastructural improvements, such as better street lighting and increased surveillance, as solutions to gendered violence. However, as this research proposes, such safety-focused thinking frequently acts as a tool of exclusion. It produces a "fear in the ordinary," where women are socialised to view the city as a site of inherent danger. Feminist scholars have long argued that when safety is the only lens used to discuss women, the burden of protection is placed on the women themselves. They are warned to avoid the night and to move only with a clear, legible purpose. This "purposeful" movement ensures that women are seen as "respectable" citizens rather than transgressive bodies. This study engages with this scholarship by arguing that these warnings do not merely protect; they normalise fear as a part of the daily habitus.

From Trauma to "Crisis Ordinariness"

A significant portion of the literature responding to the Nirbhaya case utilises trauma theory to explain the lasting marks left by sexual violence. While trauma theory is essential for understanding the psychological impact of the 2012 event, this paper draws on the work of Ann Cvetkovich and Veena Das to argue that trauma is not always a single, explosive break in a life story (2003; 2007). Instead, trauma can be "ongoing" and embedded within routine habits. Lauren Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness" is particularly relevant here, as it describes how women live within a constant, low-level state of crisis rather than a sudden shock (2011). By synthesising these views, this paper identifies a gap in existing literature: while much has been written about the shock of violence, less attention is paid to the "slow violence" that dictates how a woman sits, rests, or moves in the city on a mundane Tuesday afternoon.

Affect, Pleasure, and the Right to Loiter

The most radical shift in recent Indian feminist scholarship is the move from a "right to safety" to a "right to risk." Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade's *Why Loiter?* serves as a foundational text for this transition. They argue that the quest for safety is a "trap" that ultimately limits women's freedom. Their work advocates "loitering" as a political act because it is without economic or social purpose. This scholarship suggests that for women to belong in the city truly, they must have the right to be "unproductive" and even to take risks (2011).

This study builds upon this by linking the act of loitering to affect theory. Following Sara Ahmed, this paper examines how fear is not just a personal feeling but an "affect" that circulates through news, warnings, and social rules until it "sticks" to female bodies in public (2014). While existing literature has analysed the sociology of the street, there is a need for more critical engagement with how performance and activist actions, such as Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk* or Blank Noise's 'Meet to Sleep,' function as "affective responses". These works do not merely ask for justice in a court of law; they challenge the very way fear is "made, shared, and learned" in the urban environment. By reading these performances alongside the Nirbhaya case, this paper addresses the gap between legal reform and the lived, felt experience of ordinary freedom.

Methodology

The methodology for this research paper is grounded in qualitative textual analysis and performance studies to examine how meaning is produced through the moving and still body in urban India. Rather than focusing on legal or policy-based shifts following the Nirbhaya case, this study prioritises cultural analysis, treating activist interventions and theatrical performances as primary texts. This approach is rooted in the belief that the city is experienced through feeling and habit; therefore, the analysis focuses on how bodies, space, and audience responses interact to produce social meaning. By adopting this interpretive lens, the research moves beyond statistical or criminology-based studies of public space to explore the "affective" dimensions of gendered mobility.

The selection of primary sources spans a spectrum of embodied responses to sexual violence, from literature to public activism. Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade's *Why Loiter?* is utilised as the foundational theoretical text that establishes the political necessity of non-purposeful presence in the city. This is paired with an analysis of Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk*, chosen because it was one of the earliest

performance responses to the 2012 case and uses the moving body to turn grief into a collective, visible protest. Finally, the study examines Blank Noise's "Meet to Sleep" campaign, which represents a shift from the "spectacle" of protest to "slow resistance" through the act of public vulnerability and rest. These specific works are selected because they focus on everyday, ordinary actions such as walking, sitting, and sleeping as the sites of radical political potential in a society where women are socialised to fear the public domain.

The theoretical framework integrates trauma theory and affect theory to analyse these sources. Trauma theory is employed to understand how sexual violence leaves lasting marks on the urban habitus, treating trauma not as a single historical break but as an ongoing condition embedded in routine habits. To complement this, affect theory, specifically the work of Sara Ahmed, is used to trace how fear "sticks" to certain bodies and circulates through social rules and news warnings (2014). Additionally, Lauren Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness" is applied to explain the low-level, constant state of anticipation women experience in the post-Nirbhaya metropole (2011). This combined methodology allows for a deep reading of how loitering and stillness function as affective tools to refuse fear and reclaim a sense of ordinary freedom.

Analysis and Discussions

The analysis of women's presence in post-Nirbhaya urban India reveals a profound tension between the state-sanctioned narrative of "safety" and the feminist demand for "unconditional access" to the city. This section explores how the acts of loitering, walking, and sleeping in public function as radical responses to a culture that expects women to be perpetually alert, purposeful, and afraid.

The Radical Act of Doing Nothing: Loitering as Resistance

In the wake of the 2012 Nirbhaya case, the discourse of "safety" became the primary mechanism for regulating women's bodies in public. This study identifies Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade's *Why Loiter?* as a critical intervention that challenges this protectionist paradigm. The authors argue that for women, the right to the city is currently conditional; they are permitted to be in public only if they have a legible, productive purpose such as commuting to work or shopping. This "purposeful" movement is a strategy used to avoid being labelled as transgressive or "loose" (2011).

However, the act of "loitering": standing, sitting, or wandering without an economic or social goal, refuses these conditions. When a woman loiters, she rejects

the idea that her presence in public must be justified by utility. This paper reads *Why Loiter?* alongside the post-Nirbhaya climate to show how fear became a tool of social control. By choosing "pleasure, risk, and freedom" over the sterile pursuit of safety, loitering becomes a way to dismantle the "safety-focused thinking" that has historically limited women's horizons. It is an act that turns the city into a site of possibility rather than a site of constant surveillance and potential harm.

Reclaiming the Night: Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk*

If *Why Loiter?* provides the theoretical ground for presence, Maya Krishna Rao's performance *Walk* (2012) provides the embodied protest. Created as a direct response to the Nirbhaya case, *Walk* utilises the moving body to confront the grief and anger that permeated the Indian metropole. In the performance, walking is stripped of its utilitarian function and is instead presented as a visceral refusal to be hidden.

Through the lens of affect theory, *Walk* does not merely tell a story; it produces a "feeling" of collective presence. The act of walking together in the city, especially at night, challenges the "crisis ordinariness" described by Lauren Berlant (2011). While women are socialised to walk quickly and remain alert, an affective state of "anticipation of harm"—Rao's performance invites a different kind of movement. It turns mourning into a visible, physical occupation of space. This performance analysis suggests that walking is a form of "embodied response" that resists the internalisation of fear. It is not a request for state protection but a declaration of a right that already exists: the right to move freely through the city at any hour.

The Politics of Stillness: Blank Noise and "Meet to Sleep"

Perhaps the most transgressive act of resistance studied here is the Blank Noise collective's "Meet to Sleep" campaign (2014). While most protests rely on noise and movement, "Meet to Sleep" utilises silence and stillness. Women gather in public parks to lie down and sleep, an act that represents the ultimate vulnerability in a public space.

In a post-Nirbhaya society where women are taught that they must be "always alert and afraid" to survive, the act of sleeping in public is a radical refusal of that mandate. This study reads "Meet to Sleep" as a form of "slow resistance" that works through affect rather than confrontation. Sleep is a state of non-productivity and total openness; by sleeping in public, these women are reclaiming the right to feel safe without having to perform "safety behaviours." This action challenges the idea that a woman's body in public must be vigilant. It refutes the "spectacle of trauma" often

found in plays like Yaël Farber's *Nirbhaya* (2012) and instead offers a vision of "ordinary freedom" through the simple, human act of resting.

Affective Shifts and Ordinary Freedom

The combined analysis of these texts and actions reveals that the "politics of presence" is built on changing how women feel in the city. Sara Ahmed's work on how fear "sticks" to certain spaces suggests that the city is not just a physical layout but an emotional map (2014). The Nirbhaya case added a layer of fear to this map, reinforcing the idea that certain streets and certain times are "off-limits" for women. Loitering, walking, and sleeping serve to "unstick" fear from these spaces. When women loiter or sleep in a park, they are rewriting the affective script of that location. They are transforming the park from a place of potential danger into a place of rest and pleasure. This change is not dependent on new laws or more police; it is dependent on the "embodied presence" of women who refuse to let fear dictate their habits.

These acts challenge the "respectability politics" that often govern women's presence in India. By being "unproductive" or "still," women are moving beyond the binary of being either a "victim" or a "safe" traveller. They are asserting a presence that is ordinary and mundane yet profoundly political. The significance of these works lies in their ability to offer a future in which women do not merely survive the city but inhabit it with pleasure and ease.

Conclusion

This research has examined the shift from a discourse of protectionist "safety" to a radical "politics of presence" in the post-Nirbhaya Indian metropole. As argued throughout the paper, the 2012 case was not merely a criminal incident but a cultural turning point that normalised fear as a permanent condition of female urban life. By analysing the theoretical underpinnings of Why Loiter?, the mobile protest of Maya Krishna Rao's Walk, and the stillness of Blank Noise's "Meet to Sleep," this study has demonstrated that reclaiming public space is an effective project rather than a purely legal one. These works suggest that the most potent resistance to gendered violence lies in the refusal to let fear dictate the rhythm of the everyday.

The implications of these findings for feminist thought are significant. By prioritising "pleasure, risk, and freedom" over the state's narrow definition of safety, these interventions challenge the traditional boundaries of respectable female behaviour. They move the conversation away from viewing women as potential victims in need of protection toward viewing them as citizens with an unconditional right to the city. The act of loitering or sleeping in public serves to "unstick" fear from the

urban map, replacing a climate of alert anticipation with the possibility of ordinary freedom. This study argues that the reclamation of the city is achieved through the persistence of the female body in spaces where it is expected to be absent or fearful. Future research should continue to explore how these affective shifts influence urban planning and how "slow resistance" can further dismantle the systemic barriers to gendered mobility. To truly change the city, the focus must remain on changing how women feel within it, moving from a state of survival to one of presence, rest, and pleasure.

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