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## Subaltern Politics at Urban Borderlands

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### Abstract

Cities around the world are developed through modern/colonial boundaries between the formal/informal, private/public, vehicular/pedestrian, secular/religious, human/nonhuman, or new/old. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists have demonstrated how borders have served the colonial control of the city through the state apparatus, where differences have reinforced inequalities rather than engendering an open city. While politics between the two sides of the border is often explored, this article draws attention to the rather underacknowledged role of material assemblages at urban borderlands in making room for subaltern agencies to come into being. To do so, I first demonstrate the bordering effects of modern planning practices through an example of real-estate advertisements. Later, I focus on four urban borderlands, namely walls, *mandals* (socio-religious organisations), hillslopes and rivulet banks, and alleyways. Through ethnographic research on two slum rehabilitation projects in Pune, India, I show that the spatiality and temporality produced by these borderlands transcend modern boundaries while making room for subaltern agencies. Walls are used for bending the fixed spatiality of modern apartment buildings; *mandals* engender a spatiotemporal structure that straddles the religious/secular boundary; hillslopes and rivulet banks support the permanent temporariness of the self-built neighbourhoods; and alleyways allow the public and the private to flow into one another. Here, subaltern agencies effectively transgress modern borders, not by rejecting them but by inhabiting them to make an alternative and open city possible. In effect, this article argues that urban borderlands make visible subaltern agencies that have the potential to dislodge urban theory and practice from their colonial modernist legacy.

### Keywords

India; modern boundaries; modern planning; postcolonial urbanism; Pune; subaltern agencies; urban borderlands

## 1. Introduction

Like in many other cities in India and around the world, real-estate advertisements depicting a vision of a world-class living mark Pune's urban landscape. These real-estate advertisements are intended to allure the growing upper middle-class population of Pune into purchasing private ownership apartments in gated communities with amenities such as gardens, playgrounds, gymnasiums, and swimming pools. In a city with over 40% of the population living in self-built settlements, such real-estate advertisements unabashedly portray a desire for global competition and "conspicuous consumption of suburban space" (Chattopadhyay, 2012, pp. 1–3). Such symbolic representation of a global lifestyle that many in the city cannot afford also highlights the social and economic inequalities through their very materiality. These real-estate advertisements are often placed at the boundaries between the private/public, the vehicular/pedestrian, and the rich/poor. By their very placement at the borders, such real-estate advertisements manifest the "othering" that boundaries provoke. As such, a seemingly inconsequential material artefact such as the real-estate advertisement has the potential to—and often does—reinforce socio-economic inequalities by re-producing borders between spaces, times, and peoples.

As I walked towards a self-built neighbourhood for my ethnographic fieldwork of urban redevelopment projects in Pune, I noticed two very distinct real-estate advertisements at the border between the neighbourhood and one of the main vehicular roads in Pune. One advertisement was hung on a rentable hoarding managed by the Pune Municipality's Skysign and License Department. This hoarding was placed high, made up of a steel frame, and had LED lights to illuminate the advertisement at night. Moreover, this advertisement was directed towards the vehicular road, displayed one- and two-bedroom-hall-kitchen (BHK) apartments costing ₹2.6 million (around £24,500) and ₹3.4 million (around £32,000) respectively, and was written in English. The second advertisement was put up on a makeshift bamboo structure tied with a rope just below the taller billboard. This second advertisement was oriented towards the self-built neighbourhood with its back towards the vehicular road. It advertised one-BHK apartments costing ₹1.7 million (around £16,000) and was written in the local language of the region, Marathi. The materiality of these two real-estate advertisements positioned precisely at the border between the self-built neighbourhood and one of Pune's main vehicular roads makes visible the existing socio-economic inequalities while cementing them further.

Real-estate advertisements are often guided by the profit-maximising logics of attracting appropriate clientele for quick and maximum sale. The materiality of the real-estate advertisements also depends on the capital assets of the real-estate developers paying for the advertisements. Such profit-maximising logics can produce material artefacts that create bordering/othering effects (e.g., Ramírez, 2020). In the example highlighted above, though the English advertisement is positioned in a way that everyone can read it, most of the non-English speaking populations in the self-built neighbourhood cannot in fact read the English advertisement, thereby being precluded from considering buying two- and three-BHK apartments. Moreover, the Marathi advertisement was conspicuously oriented towards the self-built settlement. The British colonial past has indeed produced a culture in India where the English language continues to be symbolically associated with "elite-ness" (Chandra, 2012). Thus, notwithstanding the intentionality behind the placements of the advertisements, the two advertisements together generate an "othering" effect on the residents of self-built neighbourhoods through the material and symbolic reminder that they are Marathi-speaking and that they are poor. As the residents of self-built neighbourhoods walk in and out of

their neighbourhood, they are reminded of the stark inequalities between “them” and “others” who know English and can afford two- and three-BHK apartments. Therefore, borders and boundaries make visible differences and inequalities that exist and are reproduced in cities through governing regimes along multiple axes of power (Daher, 2018; lossifova, 2013; Roßmeier & Weber, 2021).

Borders and boundaries have been explored in urban planning studies at multiple scales and for various purposes. Borders have been particularly central in urban and planning studies for “understanding the structure of the city” (Jirón, 2019, p. 2). Borders have helped explore urban growth (Boussauw et al., 2013), urban-rural divides and flows (Hidle et al., 2009; Zeuthen, 2012), and urbanisation of refuge (Porter et al., 2019). Here, borders represent the city’s territorial limits of jurisdictional power (Newman, 2017; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Alternatively, intra-city boundaries between neighbourhoods and administrative units have been explored to demonstrate fragmentation and segregation (Breitung, 2011), urban politics (Bhide, 2020), or colonial control of space (Legg, 2007). Here, boundaries tend to appear more flexible and malleable than borders. Moreover, boundaries at a neighbourhood scale rely on Lynch’s (1960) emphasis on “lineal elements [within cities] that act as boundaries between two phases” (Jirón, 2019, p. 2), such as walls, railway crossings, fences, or pathways. Boundaries here tend to be conceptualised as territorial divisions between socio-cultural practices and functionalities within a city. More recently, another strand of literature in urban studies has focused on socio-cultural and political practices in urban *borderlands*. Borderlands are conceptualised as “areas straddling both sides of the boundary” or the border (Newman, 2017, p. 1). A borderland is a zone near a political border, a zone where jurisdictional norms of either side of the border do not strictly apply. Within urban studies, urban borderlands have been treated as “celebrated spaces in-between the different...that allow for the emergence of alternatives” (lossifova, 2015, p. 104). Urban borderlands are shown to act as “spaces of exception in the city” (Boano & Martén, 2013) and “heterotopias” (Suau, 2014) that help transgress the hegemonic structures of power. Applying border theorising to the scale of urban neighbourhoods also demonstrates the hybrid and shifting boundaries between ordering and othering processes, such as in inner-city restructuring processes (Roßmeier & Weber, 2021). In effect, the notion of borderland “assumes the existence, and impact, of a border on the human landscape” (Newman, 2003, p. 19) and explores the lived experiences of those inhabiting the spaces around the border.

In this article, I take the literature on “urban borderlands” forward by focusing on how subaltern agency disobeys modern/colonial border-making practices through the *material assemblages at urban borderlands*. I demonstrate through this article that people residing in the self-built settlements are not mere subjects of bordering practices of modern/colonial regimes manifested through *material assemblages* such as the real-estate advertisements I described above. Instead, people residing in the self-built settlements also exercise their political agency to thwart the bordering effects that certain material assemblages reproduce in cities. To explore subaltern agency that disobeys modern/colonial border-making practices, I link literature on urban borderlands to decolonial theory’s emphasis on border-thinking (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lugones, 2010; Mignolo, 2011, 2012). Decolonial theory makes visible border-making practices within colonial modernity along multiple binary divisions. Within urban studies, binary divisions have been shown to guide modern planning practices in cities around the world at least since the 1960s (Sibley, 2001). Some of the modern urban binaries I explore in this article include formal/informal, private/public, vehicular/pedestrian, secular/religious, human/nonhuman, and new/old. Binaries are not just any dichotomy but are necessarily hierarchical privileging one side of the dichotomy over another. In colonial modernity, the first side of these

binaries is privileged over the latter, thereby marginalising the latter side of the binary. Margins within colonial modernity are therefore “*the other, they are not the in-between*” (Iossifova, 2013, p. 1). That is, the latter side of the binary is included within colonial modernity, albeit with a subsidiary position. Alternatively, decolonial theory’s focus on “borderlands” as *the in-between spaces* helps explore what remains invisible and unrecognisable to the modern order of things. To elaborate on how and why such exploration of subalternity through urban borderlands can be mobilised in the context of Pune, I briefly summarise the debates around subalternity and borderlands in postcolonial/decolonial literature in the following section.

## 2. Subaltern Politics at Urban Borderlands

Intellectual interest in subalternity is shared among the postcolonial, decolonial, and subaltern studies (Grosfoguel, 2011; Guha, 1982, 2001; Mignolo, 2012; Spivak, 1988). Subaltern and postcolonial theory are quite directly relevant to India given their early developments from within South Asian scholarship. Here, drawing on Gramscian theory of the subaltern—who “by definition...are not united and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘state’” (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971, p. 202)—early subaltern studies focused on the peasant populations in South Asia (see Guha, 1982). However, Spivak’s (1988) critical interventionist essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” effectively brought the concept of the subaltern from “an empirical (normative) subject/object to an analytical (conceptual) domain” (Jazeel & Legg, 2019, p. 17). In other words, Spivak’s (1988) essay challenged such critical intellectual knowledge production that unproblematically assumes to have understood the “subaltern” perspectives. This analytical concept of “subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognisable basis of action” (Spivak, 2005, p. 475). That is, when political agency cannot be mobilised through formal or informal means to bring effective change, a practice becomes subaltern.

In urban studies, the problem of subalternity continues to be troubled by the epistemological problem of learning to listen to the subaltern from a somewhat distanced perspective of a theorist. Here, the analytical concept of the subaltern serves to theorise the “vanishing points at the limits of itineraries of recognition” (Roy, 2011, p. 235). Various concepts such as subaltern urbanism (Roy, 2011), urban informality (Alvarado, 2022; Darling, 2017; Roy, 2015), and occupancy urbanism (Benjamin, 2008) have been used to outline politics in the Global South beyond the prescribed formalities of state policies and programmes. Yet, Pune’s Slum Rehabilitation Policy (SRP) that seeks to convert the self-built neighbourhoods into apartment buildings already recognises the occupancy claims of those living under conditions of informality and proposes to formally rehabilitate them on the occupied land. Elsewhere, Chattopadhyay and Sarkar (2005) suggest focusing on the popular expressions at the margins of hegemonic structures of power. Though useful, since majoritarian nationalism has lately hegemonised India’s popular domain, subaltern practices are pushed towards the margins of popular politics. As such, the subsidiary side of modern binaries of formal/informal, state/popular, and civil/political already has a place in colonial modernity as presently practised in India. Consequently, heuristic mobilisation of subsidiary sides of binary divisions to transgress colonial modernity is challenging in a planning context where modern/colonial binaries are being co-opted by majoritarian nationalist politics (e.g., Govindrajan et al., 2021).

Therefore, to explore subalternity as the invisible and the unrecognisable within colonial modernity, I invoke a decolonial theoretical focus on border-thinking and link it to the literature on urban borderlands. Written from the Latin American context, decolonial theory distances itself from the postcolonial theory’s

epistemological problem of learning to listen to the subaltern by representing a critique of modernity/coloniality from the perspective of subalternised and silenced knowledges (Grosfoguel, 2011; Mignolo, 2011). Border-thinking comes to aid in the endeavour to provide a critique from the perspective of subalternised and silenced knowledges. Here, Mignolo (2011, p. 277) suggests that thinking against modernity/coloniality happens by “dwelling and thinking in the borders of local histories confronting global designs.” Consequently, decolonial theory’s focus on border-thinking to uncover the subaltern side of modernity/coloniality provides a more deliberate avenue. Here, borderlands engender the possibilities of epistemic disobedience against the *bordering* and *othering* power of modernity/coloniality (Grosfoguel, 2008; Mignolo, 2011). Such epistemic disobedience innately present at borderlands helps acknowledge the subaltern agency and politics. At the scale of the city, Ramírez (2020, p. 148) develops a borderland analytic to show how gentrification and urban redevelopment projects unfold through *bordering* practices “that create structural and cultural exclusion in city space.” In Ramírez’s (2020, p. 149) borderland analytic, borderland space is relational, it highlights the embodied and lived experiences of borderland inhabitants and shows how the city is fought for. As Anzaldúa (1987, p. 3) writes, “A border is a dividing line...A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.”

Taking decolonial theory’s emphasis on borderlands to Pune’s urban redevelopment projects, this article particularly focuses on material assemblages at urban borderlands to demonstrate how subaltern agency disobeys the material and symbolic border-making practices of modernity/coloniality. To do so, this article first traces the various borders and borderlands produced by the modernising processes of urban redevelopment in Pune. Here, I do not treat the subsidiary sides of the colonial modernist binary (i.e., informal, public, religious, nonhuman, old) as subaltern. Instead, I focus on the border-making material artefacts at *urban borderlands* to explore the spatio-temporal in-betweenness as the unrecognisable subalternity under colonial modernity. Consequently, building on narratives about the slum rehabilitation projects in two self-built neighbourhoods in Pune, I trace the lived experiences and practices of those subjected to slum rehabilitations at the borderlands produced by colonial modernity in Pune. In the subsequent sections of this article, I first elaborate on the context and the methodology in Section 3. Later, I expand on four types of material assemblages of urban borderlands in Section 4—namely walls, *mandals*, hillslopes and rivulet banks, and alleyways—where the residues of the unnatural modern/colonial borders are experienced. All these material assemblages at urban borderlands provide avenues for subaltern agency and politics. Finally, I conclude that a decolonial perspective on urban borderlands provides an avenue to recognise the subaltern agency and perform epistemic disobedience against the colonial modernist city-making practices.

### 3. Methodology and Context

This article builds on eight months of ethnographic research of two urban redevelopment projects in the city of Pune. Having been brought up in Pune, I carried out this ethnographic work from a UK higher education institution. Decolonial theory demands researchers to be accountable for the relations of their location and positionality (Manning, 2018; Naylor et al., 2018). Considering this decolonial imperative, my subjectivities persistently straddled between home/foreign, India/West, and colonised/colonising binaries throughout the fieldwork—as they continue to do while writing this article. Some of my ethnographic observations, such as the English/Marathi advertisements also hint towards my own borderland subjectivities. Likewise, the resulting

analysis is also influenced by my borderland troubles, though it also contains the imperative to represent the critique of modernity/coloniality from the subalternised and silenced knowledges.

Growing up in the city of Pune, I have noticed how Pune has modernised to make room for global capital in the past three decades. With a population of over 3.5 million, Pune is now India's eighth-largest city and second-largest in Maharashtra state. About 40% of the city's population lives in what the state calls slums. After 75 years since independence, the early post-independence state's desire to eradicate or modernise slums remains intact with Pune's recently formulated SRP. The SRP seeks to rehabilitate various self-built neighbourhoods into apartment buildings. After India's independence from Britain in 1947, the Indian state's attitudes towards slums have changed from treating "slums as nuisance" (1950s–1960s) and "slums as a solution to housing shortage" (1970–1990) to "government as enabler for housing provision" (1991–2005), and finally to conceptualising "slum lands as a resource for urban growth" (2005–present; Mitra, 2021). In line with India's market liberalisation reforms of the 1990s, the SRP invites private developers to provide free housing for the existing slum-dwellers in exchange for higher incentives in the form of extra buildable space to be sold onto the free market. Rehabilitating bodies from slums into apartments to free up city space for capital accumulation resonates precisely with the racial capitalist redevelopment projects in Oakland, California (Ramírez, 2020). Unlike race and indigeneity in Oakland, caste has acted as a logic for marginalisation of certain communities in underserved urban areas in Maharashtra (Shaikh, 2021). Many of the residents of the self-built settlements in Pune are from non-elite castes and minority religions and have migrated to Pune from nearby villages due to a series of droughts since the 1950s. As such, their historical and present-day marginalisation is made visible through bordering practices of racialised capitalism as manifested through SRP implementation.

Although the self-built neighbourhoods have their own spatiality, the apartment buildings are designed in the form of private apartments stacked on one another on a piece of land. The self-built neighbourhoods have developed over the years as a group of one to two-storied houses along meandering alleyways. In keeping with the SRP, real-estate developers demolish entire neighbourhoods to construct high-rise apartment buildings. As per the SRP, these apartments are allocated to all the residents collectively forming a cooperative. Like many urban development policies around the world, the SRP is primarily designed to rehabilitate human bodies from the so-called slums into apartments without specific policy guidelines for non-human beings. Where the state's policy mix does consider "nature," nature is separated from humans to be protected from human activities in the form of flood protection zones and biodiversity parks. Moreover, the policy only ever specifies guidelines for building apartments, notwithstanding the various non-residential activities taking place in the neighbourhoods—including religious or commercial activities. Finally, the high-rise apartment buildings provide vehicular parking spaces on the ground floor, ultimately separating the pedestrian zone from the vehicular one. Human activities are consequently expected to be confined to the apartment buildings giving priority to vehicles. All these binary divisions generate numerous borders in the neighbourhoods that I explore in this article.

The two projects being carried out on the self-built settlements are shown in Figures 1 and 2. The two projects were at different stages of implementation, which provided a methodological possibility of abstracting from the particularities of the two contexts and focusing on the politics engendered at the borderlands. This abstraction from empirical particularities helps understand the differentiated yet evidently experienced effects of colonial modernity's border-making practices in both the studied neighbourhoods.

That is, both neighbourhoods have material assemblages at borderlands that are produced at the material and discursive boundaries between the formal/informal, private/public, vehicular/pedestrian, secular/religious, human/nonhuman, or new/old. To explore the subaltern agency and politics through material assemblages at the urban borderlands, I make use of ethnographic observations, policy documents, and in-depth interviews with 60 participants engaged in slum rehabilitation projects. The participants of this research included residents of the two settlements, real-estate developers, landowners, local politicians, and experts. Focusing particularly on what participants *do* with the borders being generated by colonial modernity helps uncover the agency they exercise in disobedience to the colonial modernist border-making practices. The following sections specifically explore four material assemblages at urban borderlands—namely walls, *mandals*, ecological boundaries, and alleyways. These borderlands were chosen due to their significance to the residents' struggle to face the impending slum rehabilitation projects. In other words, I used the references to material artefacts mentioned by the residents along with my own ethnographic observations to extrapolate the logic of disobedience from people's narratives. The rest of this article demonstrates how borderlands become a fertile ground for subaltern agencies and politics to come into being in disobedience to colonial modernity.



**Figure 1.** Plan of self-built settlement 1.



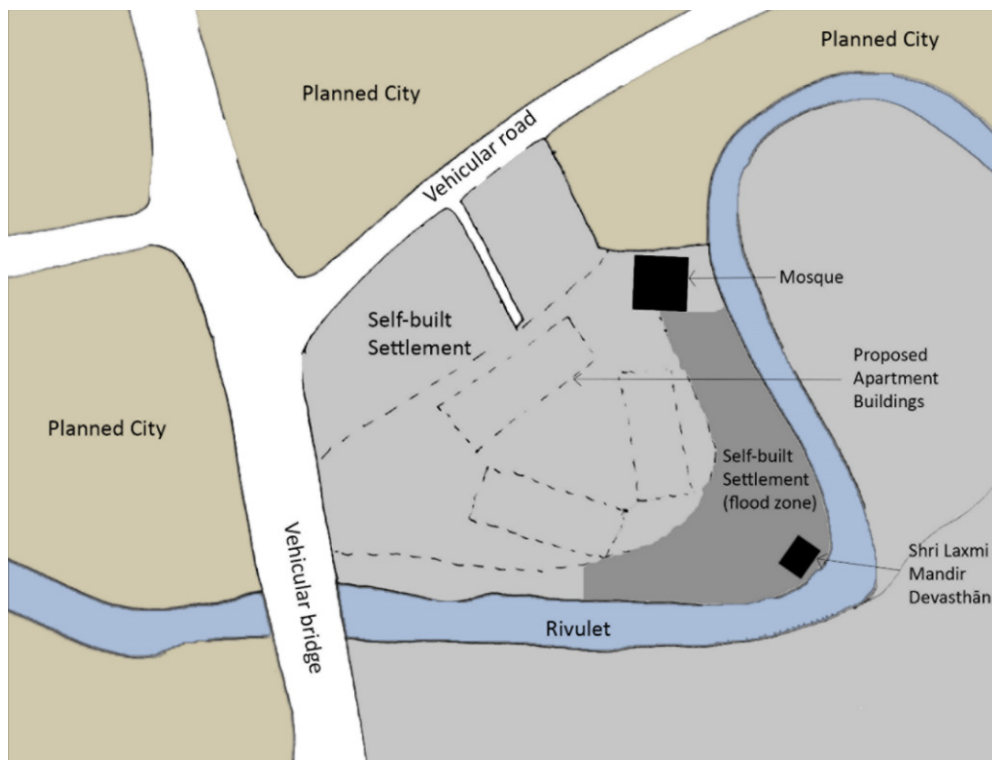


Figure 2. Plan of self-built settlement 2.

## 4. Material Assemblages at Urban Borderlands

Discursive binary divisions have material effects on cities and those living in them. The Indian state's efforts to modernise cities produce material artefacts such as walls, religious structures, ecological boundaries, and alleyways. These material artefacts are not constructed by the state institutions alone, but also by those subjected to state policies and programmes. Here, material assemblages at the urban borderlands allow the subaltern agency to disobey colonial modernity and produce an alternative city in its stead. In this section, I elaborate on the four examples of material assemblages at urban borderlands that make way for subaltern agency that transgresses colonial modernist binaries.

### 4.1. Walls

During a transect walk through a recently redeveloped self-built neighbourhood, one of the participants of my ethnographic research, Rambhau, told me about his struggle to secure an access road and a temple in their settlement by shifting a proposed compound wall a few feet sideways. We were standing at the border between Rambhau's recently rehabilitated building and the apartment buildings to be sold on the free market (free-sale apartment buildings) still under construction on the site. Here, free-sale apartment buildings are made feasible on the land where Rambhau lived by freeing up land by housing residents from slums into tall apartment buildings. I could hardly hear Rambhau amidst the sound of drilling through the basalt rock of the hilly site. The construction workers were building the foundation for a concrete wall that would separate the rehabilitation buildings from the free-sale apartment buildings (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Wall separating free-sale apartment building (on the left) and access road to rehabilitation building (on the right).

Rambhau told me that “the builder is building the wall for his benefit; the wall is not for slum residents’ benefit.” Rambhau’s remark resonates precisely with Breitung’s (2011) observation that market logic produces territorial separation for profit-making purposes. A private developer corroborated the fact that separating slum-rehabilitation buildings from free-sale buildings helps in making the free-sale apartments financially comparable to other non-slum development schemes in Pune. Without the conspicuous separation between the slum site and the free-sale site, the prices of the free-sale apartments are much lower. Consequently, the developer was constructing a wall to separate the free-sale housing units from rehabilitation units to attract rich buyers. However, the wall was initially planned to be constructed very close to the hill (on the right-hand side in Figure 3) and the rehabilitation buildings would not have gotten a decent vehicular access road. In effect, the wall triggered and perpetuated the secondary citizenship treatment that the identity of “slum-dwellers” also produces, even after the settlement residents had moved into rehabilitation apartments. Vlassenroot and Büscher (2013) argue that urban development at the borderlands generates a socio-political struggle for identity. But Rambhau’s struggle to shift the compound wall a few meters sideways was not to maintain the identity of a slum-dweller but to undo it. Rambhau said to me:

The developer had brought this wall till here [he gestured with his hand to show an imaginary line on the ground]. The developer said, “Remove all this!” [he pointed at a temple]. Then again, I quarrelled....But I have an intention that, with the help of the state representatives, we get to use this road. The developer was not allowing us to use this road, the state representative quarrelled and got permission for it.

As such, not having a wall between rehabilitation and free-sale apartment buildings would have eliminated the stigmatised identity of the slum-dwellers. However, the developer was intent on constructing the wall.

Therefore, Rambhau's attempt to secure a vehicular road and a temple was the next best attempt to provide the rehabilitated apartment buildings with similar kinds of amenities as the high-income apartment buildings. Rambhau's temple also helped secure a place to celebrate the religious customs of the Wadaar community (a historically marginalised community under the Brahmanical caste system).

Unlike the external walls separating apartment buildings, internal walls within houses also played a role in the making and remaking of households within the neighbourhood due to slum rehabilitation schemes. Given that the state's SRP provides only 25 m<sup>2</sup> apartments against one housing structure in the existing neighbourhood, slum rehabilitation is not a spatially just urban transformation for many neighbourhood residents with houses larger than 25 m<sup>2</sup> and large families. To circumvent the SRP regulations, Mukesh told me:

I have two kids. So, the developers had told us that "you put a partition wall, show two houses at the time of initial surveys. We [the developers] will put numbers on the houses, we will give two houses for two sons of yours." So, people have built walls and built on top. It has been 10 years since then; now some people have demolished the walls because the walls had started becoming cumbersome. What to do!? Let us see when the development happens, we will rethink about walls.

Mukesh's account shows the tactical use of walls engendered the possibility of securing a place in the modernising city. Using walls to increase the number of slum structures also increases the housing stock in the new redevelopment buildings. In effect, the developer can build more apartments, which proportionately allows them to get additional floor space and make more profit, and residents can secure additional apartments as per their household needs. However, since Mukesh's neighbourhood had not been redeveloped for more than a decade since the negotiations first started, the walls dividing families and houses had started becoming a nuisance. Another participant told me that their family had two kitchens separated by a wall even though it was a single family. The walls dividing the houses for the purposes of modern development are constructed temporarily, yet they acquire the status of permanence within people's lifespans. Over the decades, the housing stock within the settlement has grown multi-fold, and though some households are demolishing the walls to reunite families, others are using them to increase the size of the house. Seemingly inconsequential boundaries materialised because of the state's efforts to rehabilitate slums engender family divisions that are stuck between temporariness and permanence while making up more space in the city.

#### 4.2. Mandals

Walking through the neighbourhoods, it was impossible not to notice the numerous religious structures splintered in between various houses, including *mandals* (see Figure 4). *Mandals* are a type of religious structure in Pune that is located in between different spaces and times. *Mandals* are a social organisation created to organise and fund various religious festivities in Pune. During my transect walks, I noticed numerous Ganapati statues (a Hindu deity) placed inside small rooms constructed in between houses or on the edges of crossroads. Each of these statues belonged to a *mandal*, which collects funds for the Ganapati festival that takes place for 10 days every year. During the festival, the Ganapati statues are removed from the small rooms and placed onto temporarily constructed pandals with decorated interiors. In the analysis of a religious festival in West Bengal, Spivak (2008, p. 187) shows that a dualist episteme guides the arrival of gods and goddesses from "the transcendental semiotic" into this material world of humans during many

Hindu religious festivals. When the Ganapati statues are moved to the pandals, Ganapati is seen to temporarily inhabit the statue for the duration of the festival.

The Ganapati statues are traditionally expected to be immersed in water—lakes, rivers, or seas—at the end of the festival as the deity ascends back to his transcendental world (e.g., Spivak, 2008). The statues would have been made up of clay before the advent of quick-setting plaster. Since the modern-day plaster-made statues do not quickly dissolve into water and thereby pollute the water bodies, the modern state has now banned the immersion of big statues into Pune's rivers. Culturally, any other means of dismantling the statues would be considered sacrilegious. Therefore, most *mandals* choose to store the statue during the year until the next 10-day festival. The non-immersion of big Ganapati statues means that Ganapati does not fully ascend to the transcendental world at the end of the festival. This in-between status of a statue inhabited by a deity once a year and retaining the same sacredness during the rest of the year means that the statues must be respected no matter where they are stored. Many storage rooms constructed in between houses and in the corners of the crossroads consequently attain the status of a religious structure marked by the *mandal's* name, religious flags, and symbols. A sociality is produced among *mandal* members—which are mostly men—who gather at the *mandals* in the evenings, play games, organise social functions, and raise funds for the next year's festival. In the case of slum rehabilitation, many of my participants also mentioned organising the redevelopments as per different *mandals* where different members of a *mandal* would live in a single apartment building. Temporally and spatially in-between modern divisions between secular/religious, permanent/temporary, and material/semiotic, the *mandals* engender a spatiotemporal milieu of a socio-political organisation that is potent for generating an alternative city. Though *mandals* provide an alternative logic for urban development, it sometimes excludes minority



Figure 4. A *mandal* constructed at a crossroad.

religions and historically marginalised castes. In such contexts, other borderlands such as hillslopes and rivulet banks provide room for minority religious structures.

### 4.3. Hillslopes and Rivulet Banks

Both my fieldwork sites were located at the boundary between the city and nature produced through planning practices. One of the neighbourhoods was developed on the slopes of one of the nine hills in Pune and another was developed between a bridge, a vehicular road, and a rivulet flowing through the city. While the development of these neighbourhoods took place in the 1950s and 1970s due to drought-induced rural-to-urban migration, the hillslopes and rivulet banks became an environmentally protected zone in the 21st century. Consequently, the neighbourhoods became borderlands due to the direct enforcement of the modern planning land-use zoning policies. Because of the environmentally protected zones, the in-situ slum rehabilitation projects require higher floor area ratios to accommodate all neighbourhood residents onto a smaller available piece of land. As the real-estate developer of the hillslope neighbourhood aimed to accommodate all existing residents in rehabilitation buildings, the developer of the rivulet bank neighbourhood did not include the households located in flood protection zones in the new apartment buildings. At the time of my fieldwork in 2018, there were 50 houses between the newly redeveloped apartment buildings and the rivulet excluded from the city by a tall compound wall surrounding the redeveloped housing complex.

The 50 households on the rivulet banks had made repeated appeals to the state administration and the developer to get included in the rehabilitation scheme without fruition. Yet, these households had chosen to stay put even though the rivulet bank flooded every few monsoons. Moreover, the residents had made the rivulet bank into a space of sociality and religiosity. Rajesh, one of the residents of the 50 households, had recently constructed a Shri Laxmi Mandir Devasthān (Shri Laxmi Temple God-Place) on the rivulet bank behind the flood-protection wall shown in Figure 5. This Laxmi temple was constructed in *pakkā* (solid) materials such as brick-plastered walls and a tiled floor and was ornamented resembling the temple architecture of the region. Furthermore, a small area was cleared off in front of the temple as an open-to-sky *sabhāmandap* (gathering hall), encircled by state-funded metallic benches and trees.

The future of this temple remains uncertain since the proposals to rehabilitate these 50 houses are pending with the state authorities. If the environmental land zoning regulations are enforced stringently in the future, the temple will be demolished along with the 50 houses. Stuck between the prospective possibility of demolition and the present-day need for sociality, the borderland of the rivulet bank has become a space of socio-religious practice. Yet, above all, the construction of a solid temple structure is a tactical practice of solidifying people's claim to the place and staying put in the city (Weinstein, 2014). As precedence shows just a few meters away from this temple, a similar tactic had made a permanent space for a *masjid* (mosque) in the redevelopment site.

Likewise, when speaking of the hillslope neighbourhood development, one of my participants, Vithoba, told me that many residents had constructed temples on the hillside at the boundary between the neighbourhood and the hill—including himself. The borderland between the human settlement and the legally protected hilltop–hillslope is not barricaded by compound walls near Vithoba's neighbourhood. Given the lack of precise material boundary between human settlement and nature, the local elected



**Figure 5.** Temple constructed along the rivulet bank.

representatives themselves have supported many residents in constructing temples in these borderlands. Vithoba began building his temple by first securing a piece of land in the borderland and seeking electricity connection from the city electricity board. Vithoba anticipated that a state-recognised electricity connection would secure the tenure of his temple. However, when I probed further on his earlier remark about the state representatives, he told me:

The state representative asks [he spoke with a loud, deep voice], “With whose permission did you construct? Why did you not ask me?” So then, [he lowered his voice and said] “I have brought material, I was going to come to you, and now that you have come to us, what do I do? Otherwise, I have everything complete.” Meaning, everyone’s collaboration, i.e., asking everyone, is our necessity...what!?! Our actions are not stuck without them [the powerful elites?]; just we should keep going...like Gandhi.

Here, Vithoba was challenging the state’s formal authority over natural lands and the construction of temples. In challenging the state authority, Vithoba used the unregulated boundary between the city and nature to first build a temple and later seek approval for it. More importantly, he utilised the state’s electricity board approval and the materiality of the temple to challenge the state representative’s authority over their settlement, invoking freedom over their ability to make cities. Ultimately, the state representative conceded to his performative challenge to the formal authority over the informal and allowed the construction of the temple in the borderland. The hillslopes and rivulet banks in both sites have religious structures such as temples (Hindu), mosques (Muslim), and viharas (Buddhist). As such, hillslopes and rivulet banks engender a possibility of making a claim to the city and making the temporary permanent, transcending the modern boundaries between the city and nature.

#### 4.4. Alleyways

Alleyways are borderlands that act as a liminal space between the private/public and the vehicular/pedestrian. They can hold “a central place in everyday life and social interaction in a neighbourhood” (Imai, 2013, p. 59). The self-built neighbourhoods that are being redeveloped under the SRP have many meandering alleyways that connect various areas within the neighbourhood. These alleyways perform many functions. Alleyways are used for vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and they are used to celebrate festivities, weddings, and birthdays. As such, focusing on alleyways shows a peculiar emphasis on undoing the private/public or vehicular/pedestrian divide. I was speaking with Mukesh about being rehabilitated into apartment buildings when he brought up the topic of alleyways in the neighbourhood:

If there is Datta Jayanti or Ganesh Jayanti [public religious festivals], if we have functions like these, then prepare meals etc., park vehicles obliquely this way [one end of the alley], park vehicles obliquely that way [another end of the alley], clean the road and make seating for people there to eat. Ok? Village-like! Nobody says anything. People will not use this alley for the day as thoroughfare, but no bother...It is possible to do family functions as well; but for that, how? If imagine, we do a family function, then the second day we must sweep etc., if the plates are not removed then who will allow us to do functions? That is how it is!

Mukesh referred to the habitual practice where a public thoroughfare is temporarily converted into a place for celebrating festivities as shown in Figure 6. He also articulated the conditions for that possibility to arise, namely blocking the two sides of the street to stop vehicular movement, cleanliness, and permission from other members of the neighbourhood. The boundary between the private/public or the vehicular/pedestrian is drastically blurred under the conditions of an acceptable and contextually verifiable social contract, which here refers to the cleanliness of the streets. As such, the alleyway becomes a borderland that is adaptable, flexible, and shared among all neighbours on an as-needed basis.

Mukesh was not alone in mentioning alleyways in a positive tone. Ramabai, too, considered it worth mentioning while reflecting on the impending slum rehabilitation:

If they give us apartments, then fine! Whatever happens to everyone will happen to us, right? [But] free [open] feels good, right? The breeze comes, the water, everything is there. Vegetable *wālā* [seller] comes, everything *wālā* comes. No climbing down, no climbing up....Everything at the door....It is all fun! Meaning, how? It is fine. Let the apartment buildings be [we don't want it].

In Ramabai's articulation, the alleyway feels better than the apartment buildings because it brings day-to-day amenities to her doorstep. Instead, she notices that living in a multi-storied apartment building would require her to leave the house for public interaction. Ramabai associated the notion of freedom with the adaptability and porosity of the alleyway. Another resident expressed the same feeling by saying, “I do not understand much about [slum rehabilitations], but however it is in the existing neighbourhood, that way I feel proper. It is free/open. And there [in the new building] it is tied-like [constrained].” Residents do convey these feelings to the real-estate developers to articulate their dissatisfaction towards apartment buildings. That is, the in-betweenness of the alleyway is used to challenge the private/public and vehicular/pedestrian binary divisions advanced by colonial modernity through slum rehabilitation projects. As a transgressive



**Figure 6.** A vehicular/pedestrian road temporarily decorated for celebrations.

practice, residents of the rivulet bank neighbourhood had negotiated and secured one floor in the rehabilitation building for all the neighbours from one alley. Residents expected to celebrate birthdays and Ganapati festivals in the corridors of each floor, retaining the socio-spatial logics of the neighbourhood alleys, thereby transgressing the strict private/public and vehicular/pedestrian binary divisions.

## 5. Conclusions

Real-estate advertisements, walls, *mandals*, hillslopes and rivulet banks, and alleyways are material assemblages at urban borderlands that demarcate a division between the new/old, vehicular/pedestrian, rich/poor, secular/religious, human/nature, and private/public dichotomies respectively. Under colonial modernity, the former side of each of these binaries is valued more than the latter, as is the case of Pune's SRP. While reversing the binaries can help radicalise politics, such an attempt to reverse the hegemonic structure of power can often polarise divisions while exacerbating inequalities. Instead, seeing borderlands through the logic of border-thinking helps recognise subaltern agencies that undo modern binaries, not by rejecting them but by inhabiting them and transforming them from within (Anzaldúa, 1987). In effect, urban borderlands generate an alternative spatiality and temporality that produces a different city that transgresses colonial modernity.

This alternative city is not necessarily a new city, but a transformed city that does not abide by colonial modernist binary divisions. Such a city is made of dismantlable walls that produce space without dividing it permanently, *mandals* holding the spatially and temporally in-between deity statues that become a logic for alternative development, spaces between the city and nature that provide room for socio-religiosity, and alleyways that provide room for vehicles, pedestrians, public and private activities on an as-needed basis. Such borderland practices can be seen as a “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (Bayat, 2000, p. 533). Yet,



these borderland practices become a means to unsettle and transform the colonial modernist binary divisions produced by the SRP. These urban borderlands use the modern/colonial borders to unsettle their own hegemonic power—*unseen* and *unrecognised per se*. Attending to such practices that use the instruments of power to unsettle that very power helps understand subaltern agency.

This article traced subaltern agency's efforts to unsettle the binaries from within and transform binaries to generate an alternative and a more liveable city. It is because these borderland practices remain outside the purview of colonial modernity that they provide useful vantage points to see and uncover subaltern agency and politics. Exploring multiple practices in the urban borderlands and their innate transgressive potentials through the logics by which people inhabit borderlands would help uncover different forms of subaltern agency. The decolonial imperative to dwell at borders for transformative practice, rather than polarising the divide, is critical to such endeavour. Yet, to reiterate Gramsci's remarks (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971), the moment these subaltern logics become a manifesto for recognised forms of political practice they will have ceased to remain subaltern. That is, the purpose behind uncovering subaltern agency *in* and *through* urban borderlands is not to reveal it for co-option by hegemonic powers but to demonstrate its usefulness in other contexts. Effectively, learning from subaltern practices at urban borderlands would help dislodge urban theory and practice from its colonial modernist tendencies and generate a decolonial planning practice that supports a more liveable and open city.

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