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## The Democratic Street

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## THE DEMOCRATIC STREET

Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, PhD<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the devastation wrought by the massive Gorkha Earthquake (2015) in the traditional cores of the towns of Kathmandu valley, the local community's priority in reconstruction and restoration of the lost public goods was the restoration of the socio-cultural functionality of its streets - this prioritization was expressed second only to the reconstruction of its heritage monuments, which had been much more massively damaged in the earthquake. While, in the days immediately following the earthquake, the rescue, salvage and stabilization phase had sought to clear the debris and provide temporary supports to street side private and public buildings at risk to make streets passable and safe for general mobility, local community concerns had almost urgently shifted to getting the main streets back in play for the chariot and other street festivals, which followed close on the heels of the quake and which they wished to hold as close to usual as possible (Tiwari, Shrestha-Thapa, & Bjønness, 2016).

However, festive use of street is not a preserve and priority of traditional societies alone. Carnivals and other fun-filled processional celebrations happen in many contemporary societies - while they enliven city life, they also serve as a stage for mass socialization within conditions of diversities. We have also seen how, in many countries, whose sporting contingents were able to make medals in the 2016 Olympics, lay people poured onto the main streets of their towns in a show of solidarity for honoring, mass appreciation, cheering and sharing in the joy of the sporting icons. This shows that streets have frequently served as space for celebration for the multitude. How similar urban spaces also provide suitable community gathering places for informing and venting out dissatisfaction democratically in smaller groups is illustrated by the street and cross-roads protests, common in the towns of Kathmandu. Like in so many other politically unstable democratic countries, for the better part of the last three quarter of a century in Nepal, public expression of political discontent as well as the political activists' acts of raising political awareness and participation among the lay people have been focused in the urban streets space. That streets stoutly remain a most opportune stage and arena for political expression was also evidenced by the Black Lives Matter protests seen in the main streets of many big cities in the United States in 2016.

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The above story lines tell about socially valued function and usages of streets in the towns of the past and the present. The events themselves illustrates the success of streets as urban spaces in supporting mass communing, wide celebration and equilibrium seeking political barter gatherings. They indicate the efficacy of urban streets when used as a pedestrian stream of slow movement in creating bounded friendly group feel, supporting community sense and accommodating public expression of politically charged minorities. All of these also speak of the changing city and city life and the continuing need of making the urban life happen on the public open spaces of the streets and squares, much as was practiced in the days past. Past societies have cultivated the democratic urban spaces for community building by allowing for diversity to live together, facilitating the coming together of heterogeneity and providing for calm and harmony of extremes.

Urban history shows that streets have been more than just an artery of movement ever since the human society came out of the bee-hive like settlements of Catal Hayuk, possibly representing a narrow phase of settlement building transiting from aping cave-dwellings to using streets for access to free standing dwellings. With the humble beginnings as a provider of access to individual dwellings, streets developed gathering added functionalities like outdoor play space of children, walking neighborhood, mobility to other parts of town, etc. Streets went on to be an active and vibrant urban space and remained so as long as it was a pedestrian reserve. But when urban travel mode changed to wheeled carts and cars running in the same street space with the pedestrians, the demise of the street as a social space set in. Soon, pedestrians were taken off the center of the street space and vehicles were prioritized. The invention of the sidewalk could only serve half the purpose, the forced homogeneity apparently greatly reducing its qualities of moderation. Streets thus came to be rechristened: they became roads, arteries for rides. At present, increasing speed of rides have not only thrown the pedestrian to the sidewalks, the user has become a commuter, the roads, tubes and tube-like, and the sidewalks have turned into landings.

## **A PROPOSITION**

As our ontogeny transforms us into Homo sapiens *Urbanus* (Habitat, 2010) living in cities that are increasingly taking a form of homogeneous globalized entities of 'smart' compartmental enclaves/neighborhoods linked and served by transit tube mobility; and as we live indoors most of our time enveloped in a webbed virtual environment, urban citizens as well as professionals involved in the making and management of urbanism would naturally need to seek answers to such questions as: What will become of the idea of the *polis* itself? Where would the

public goods be debated and decided? Where and how would the citizen live their public life, which must indeed be one of the most democratic rights of the urban citizen. The danger to democracy brought into play by the tendency of the social media savvy global citizen to live in a virtual bubble of homogeneity to ones liking and the need to bring dialogical diversity into the virtual street or neighborhood are already strongly felt. It has been observed that “democracy depends to a surprising extent on the availability of physical, public space, even in our allegedly digital world” (Parkinson, 2012). This paper looks at the development of democratic character of public spaces in traditional towns with a hypothesis that the use of street as a pedestrian activity space could be the most immediate and local solution that can revive and save the democratic spirit of both the human and the urban.

### **OBSERVATIONS OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND DISCUSSIONS**

The roots of democratic thinking and action lies at the very heart of urbanism that came with the town itself where passages crossed to cause a dynamic convergence of people, ideas, activities, services and whatever else cultures cumulated (Tiwari, 2015). Heterogeneity, diversity and density of these entities populating the town fuse to generate a pallet of complex social tension, the management of which demand democratic action and a creation of understanding, acceptance, cultivation and nurturing of mutual interdependence and rules of living together in peace and progress. The process of social development as a move to the absolute is also kept alive by the impending residual as well as developing tension. The very word '*polis*' tells of the "space of the many, the space that exists in between individuals and groups of individuals when they coexist." It is in these very in-between spaces of the *polis*, that the urban man sought to apply what Aristotle called "*tecknè politikè* - the faculty of decision making for the sake of the public interest - decision making for the common good, for the way individuals and different groups of people can live together." (Aureli, 2011) If we look at the town as a spatial entity that thrives on the complexity, diversity and density of social, economic and cultural tensions between an individuals' life and a public life and as tensions are edge as opposed to core conditions, urban politics and policies need to be directed to the edges of the spaces where the differing stances meet. Clearly, the primary edges where the individual life meets those of the others and the public is the street. Streets have been and are the first order of laminar/threshold space that mediates between the individual life seeking maximization of individual good and the urban life that depends on the optimization of the public goods.

Community forming associations between individuals, so critical in priming the emergence, expression and realization of democratic processes and actions, start on streets and coalesce and build up further at the other public spaces of the town at the cross-roads, market squares and central places. Sennett has recognized that

“democracy has been a relatively rare way of life and a way of life that appeared mostly in cities.” His inference of “relative rarity of democratic way of life” appears more based on his conviction that “the essence of democracy lies in displacing conflict and differences from the realm of violence to a more peaceable, deliberative realm (Sennett, n.d.).” Instead, if one thinks of democratic way of life as made of a communing realm, of citizen intent, willing and enabled to see, say, and feel identities and diversities, and built around such values that makes individuals befriend each other, explore diversity, and evolve in togetherness as a peaceable community, then democracy may not have been as rare. What may have been rare in early history is only the present day notion of nation-states and the western idea of democratic political governance within that notion noted as a way of “participation in collective deliberation, decision-making and action” (Taha, 2016). The democratic way of life as such should be only as rare as urban settlements themselves are in a civilization.

### THE GREEK DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Historians have inferred that the way of democratic governance started with the *panyx*, the common assembly place and an open-air podium where the citizens met to consider the affairs of the state (Gallion & Eisner, 1969), debated and decided on the actions (Sennett, n.d.) that the city-state would take. The bowl shaped *panyx* had a perfect theatrical morphology and outlook that enabled a very effective visual, vocal and body-language communication and exchange between the citizen-speaker and audience. It had quickly developed into a feature that adjoined the *agora*, the market place and center of urban activity, the trade mark socio-economic and political space of the democratic city state built around the *polis*. The *agora*, the earliest of which was planned by Hippodamus at Miletus in 479 BC, was a market and a public gathering space and the *panyx*, a place of political debate and governance. These twin places drew upon the active citizen presence in either one to engage with each other in continuous exercise of collective public expression and deliberations. While the market square and its resting loggia, the *stoa*, provided a breeze-cooled physical environment soliciting short interactions between small groups in chanced togetherness while taking a breather between market activities, the *panyx* provided a bigger socio-physical forum for prolonged intentional dramatic exchanges between individuals and large groups of coalescing ideas or identities taking time out at the end of their daily market place or public institution activities. Sennett (n.d.) infers that “the square stimulated citizens to step outside their own concerns and note the presence and needs of other people in the city. The architecture of the theater helped the citizens to focus their attention and concentrate when engaged in decision making.” It should also be noted that the classical Greek city with its Hippodamian grid-iron pathways laid out on the slopes and shores of their island-sites also greatly increased the citizen interactions as the

stepped and sloped streets offered varied degrees of pedestrian pauses and movements complimented by a similarly varied and surprising restrains on the wheeled cart traffic in either grid directions. It appears to have offered an enriching pedestrian movement experience with repeated opportunities to the passers-by citizen to consider, weigh, and commune the divergent views of the neighbors-on-the-street. Such varied street spaces formed at the edge of the public and the private domains had provided a fluid liminality to prime a democratic community.

### **THE NEWAR COMMUNITY STREET**

From Kirat to Malla period, a span of more than fifteen hundred years of urbanism, Kathmandu Valley towns had progressively faced greater diversity of clan, class and caste with their varied economic pursuits and trades and ways of rest and recreation, while it welcomed Hindu and Buddhist faiths, traders, travelers and pilgrims alike. Amid this burgeoning density, heterogeneity and diversity of society, economy and culture, the indigenous Newars had cultivated a urban life, form and culture that successfully managed the accretions directing it to all potential places for community making in towns space, at the residential and working neighborhoods, at gathering places and institutions and along streets and at squares in the crossings (Tiwari, 2015). Their pathways made an intricate web in the town and their boundary edges met in the public spaces of the streets and the squares. Today, traditional towns of Kathmandu Valley still display this rich formation of streets and cross-roads squares that is matched as much only by the intricate community oriented life style. This high urbanism owes its development to practice of mass participatory reflex still seen in the populace when they seasonally play out the complex set of socio-religious performances and festivities at these public places. The community orientation and consensual interaction between the mono-cultural caste groups, albeit mediated by faith-based rituals, speak well of their democratic social upbringing that has been greatly assisted in by the informal spaces formed by juxtaposition of such formal elements as street-side houses, Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries, rest houses, and conduit pits located along the streets and about the squares. The disciplining nature of rituals and the geometry of the bounding elements contrasts sharply with the interaction seeking stance of the informal and irregular spaces, and the secularized religious stories staged there, to illustrate its democratic potential and practice.

Malla period streets and squares show a crafty use of the familiar, in expected as well as surprising locations and contexts, as props for active community living and pedestrianism. The selective mix of such props in space created a graded sense of private and public behavior in the citizen, thereby precipitating a varied democratic and community forming interaction between diverse families, clans and tribe/neighborhood.

The Kirat streets appear to have been formed as straight segments with right angular turns. Even ceremonial streets were kept quite narrow apparently just enough for the small *khat* (a palanquin for travel of god images) to move in ritual celebrations and making a two way pedestrian passage in regular living. The intentional uniformity and narrowness of the street created such proximity as to continually challenge and break socio-territorial habits and even precipitating elbowing and brushing situations during busy and crowded times. A widening of the street at the crossroads related to the function of negotiating the extended bamboo poles used to balance and carry the *khat*. Such widened cross-roads space attracted group gatherings and interactions, a precursor to democratic process. Similar effects on the society were made by the public water supply appurtenances such as the *jadhu* and the pit conduits placed along busy cross-roads. For a religious society stratified by a highly divisive concept of social impurity of water, the design and installation of conduits in deep stepped pits delivering pure flowing drinking water to the public at the cross-roads is itself an impressive democratic and harmonizing urban service technology.

The width of the street was not uniform in Malla period. The irregular narrowing and widening of the street in irregular stretches, the varying angularity of the bounding surfaces of street side houses and the provision of minor shrines or pedestrian furniture spaces in such opportune spaces presented the user with varied aesthetic experiences and potential for social and cultural dialogue with the site and the walking community. Voluntary set back of street side houses practiced by the Malla society had greatly augmented the socio-cultural as well as environmental quality of the street space by creating substantial public space called *lachhi*. The streets by virtue of their ritual and social mediation and the variety of elements located along the way, triggered memories, stories and myths that caused silent interaction with the thought processes of the passers-by. While the detailing and artistry of the element sought an interaction in a slow and pedestrian pace, provision of spots and spaces for social interaction and exchange between the passersby also proffered physical, mental and spiritual rejuvenance at the individual level and religious, social and cultural rejuvenance at the community level.

The streets appear to carry multiple myth and ritual stories offering choices and leading to varied alternative experiences as individuals or groups moved about their life in the town. The myriad of points of attraction along the street had continued to make it like a string of short segments between memory marked nodes. Each of the node told stories pointing to alternative directions to take as the passersby moved to their destinations. The standard behavior expected of the resident also made these nodes in streets calming points for the busy and others in a hurry. In any ordinary day, as the street transformed into to a social stream of people with diverse thoughts, desired directions and destinations, the nodal markers

induced calming and harmonizing thoughts and movement and helped manage heterogeneity and conflict situations. A Malla street socially starts at the *pikhalakhu*, a stone set in front of the main door of the street side house marking the edge of the family space and moves through to the intersection with the *chhwasa*, also called *kshetrapala* (Pant, 2002), the edge of the clan territory. A further segment away would be located the neighborhood deity (popularly Ganesh), which marked the edge of the neighborhood and the place of arrival at the *tole*. The gradient set by these markers along the street and the spaces at the edges solicited harmonious and communicative social behavior and largely shaped the community formation on the streets and its spaces.

It is also notable that the Malla towns developed the street crossings as secondary spaces for urban interaction at a scale larger than of the neighborhood street. With more of cultural memory precipitating markers like a temple, *chaitya* or 'power' stone, and urban utility outlets like a well or pit conduit, the street crossings also accommodate a *dabali*, a platform for staging socio-religious performances.

#### **THE BUILD-UP TO THE PRESENT**

Before *pnvx* showed up in the Greek city *agora*, earlier towns had usually been formed as a stage of celebration of kings and gods, recreation, and generally living together. With the markets and other services coming together in town, the urban space become as much an economic space as it was a socio-cultural and political place earlier. But with the coming of the industry city and the associated production economy geared to mass consumption, the city space saw an erosion of its socio-cultural and political roles. All four elements of the socio-political landscape, e.g., (i) boundary or edge, (ii) street, (iii) monument or marker, and (iv) meeting place were almost totally overwhelmed by the new economic order. With the further advent of motorized wheeled transportation, communication systems, and growing commerce, business and services in the city, the city lost more of its political landscape - even the streets and boundaries going out of sync with the idea of the city or the *polis*. Los Angeles, at one extreme culmination of this era, drew this observation of Edzard Mik: "Los Angeles is not what we in Europe call a city. It is an endless grid, a morbid growth without center and without boundaries. Los Angeles is an extreme example of occupancy of the car" (Archidea, 2012). The need to bring back the community and the symbols and spaces of the town, where the citizen can exercise their rights, responsibilities and obligations (Steinbacher & Benson, 1995) to continuously redefine their belongingness to it, for the city to be a city, is obvious.



Kevin Lynch has identified a physical city space's "lack of diversity, legibility and openness" as distressing as the perceptual stresses, as it reduces urban humanness, causes social estrangement, and consequent loss of communal and democratic nature of successful urbanism. He suggests that creating a diversity of urban centers each with its own identity focus such as "a plaza, a crossroads, a terrace or a public room" would humanize the spaces and augment their livability. The city center and the open spaces need to be made as truly open spaces, permitting freely chosen activity, allowing us to manipulate things and make our own mark (Lynch, 1970). Clearly, it is the social, interactive and communicative quality of space that determines the goodness of urban life. The discussion of Newar Street made above shows how properly provided streets can add to the democratic space characteristics of a town as they link up urban spaces and people.

It would seem from recent street protests in western countries that dissatisfactions caused by failure to manage diversity are best expressed in overflowing linear spaces; this may be because the bounded nature of street spaces allows the formation of small groups contained by a sense of safety in closeness to surge together as a larger group. This characteristic bounding quality that aids in forming groups or community imbued in the sense of safety in togetherness of small groups acting homogenous in reference to the issue at hand; the high accessibility the street offered even to the most marginalized and oppressed; and the streets' inherent ability to channelize and to streamline, make the street so attractive for community formation and democratic expression.

## CONCLUSION

A succinct look at the changes undergoing on the streets over history on to present times will reveal that added service and mobility efficiency of the street has proportionately translated as democratic deficiency. The simple act of making a side-walk for on-foot movement parallel to the vehicle on the road has reduced its democracy promoting characteristic, measured as a chance of contact of eye, voice and body between neighbors coming out of houses on opposite sides of the passage, to less than its one-fourth! Much of this loss can be recouped if we take the pedestrian back to the center stage of neighborhood streets. To that if we add proper furnishings and free pedestrian space, streets can be as opportune and as basic a "space of eye, voice and body," to borrow the words Sennett, for befriending, community making, and democratic interaction among the citizen as provided by the *panyx* and *stoa* in the Greek *agora*.

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