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# De-constructing the Sense of Inside and Outside in a Chawl

## Abstract

The chawl is a housing typology from western India, known especially for its overwhelming population density and strong sense of community living, comprised of several small, tightly spaced units connected by a common veranda. Built predominantly in the early 1900s, chawls were commonly adopted in cities like Mumbai and Ahmedabad, which rapidly absorbed working-class populations migrating from villages to work in the booming textile industries. The Cotton Chawl, built in 1935 in Ahmedabad, is one such three-story chawl, housing 87 units. Comprised of only one room and a small kitchenette, generally used by 4-5 family members, the household units in the chawl often spill out onto the 3-foot-wide veranda. Activities such as sitting, conversing, performing everyday domestic tasks, celebrating religious ceremonies, and even sleeping take place on the veranda, which becomes a complex site at the intersection of personal and collective life. The close-knit architecture of the chawl gives people the sense of an extended home, outside the individual house unit, where language, behaviors, movement, and interactions are all shaped by people's perceptions of privacy, gender norms, and shared understandings of social and cultural codes. Understanding the spatio-temporal rhythms of these activities, I use oral history and ethnography to understand how terms like inside and outside, private and public, and the home and the world have deeply specific and relational meanings. I illustrate how physical demarcations of inside and outside are highly inadequate to understand how space is truly used. My central argument is that, in community settlements like the chawl, spatial demarcations of architecture don't necessarily correspond with the metaphorical, embodied, and ideological conceptions of place. Here, common spaces like the balcony are not merely containers of activities, but they are produced from the very activities and relationalities of time and people's acts, constantly imbuing new meaning within them.

**Figure 1: The Cotton Chawl, photograph by Aishwarya Morwal (author), 2018.**

## Introduction to the Cotton Chawl

At a glance, from one end of the Cotton Chawl, one can see a long line of house units extending along a 3-foot-wide veranda, which is dotted with a hustle of domestic activities. A three-storey concrete structure, the chawl comprises rows of sixty-eight house units, connected by common verandas on every floor, which lead to the staircase and the common toilets. Built in 1935 by one of the most influential trade guilds in Ahmedabad, locally called the Maskati Mahajan Sangh, the Cotton Chawl was one of the many tenement housing projects built as a response to the surging tide of working-class migrants in the thriving industrial hub (Bharat, 2019, p. 113). The Cotton Chawl is located in a Jain neighbourhood, Panjrapol, reflective of the settlement patterns in the old city where neighbourhoods were spatially segregated into homogeneous ethnic groups. Bharat (2019), in her study on the Panjrapol neighbourhood, notes that this concentration of families along lines of caste and religion was an accretive process that continued well into the twentieth century (109). Drawn by the employment opportunities in the expanding industries, migrants relied on their caste or religious networks to find housing in places like the Cotton Chawl.

In the Cotton Chawl, the house units, each comprising a room (3.6 x 4.5 m) and a small kitchenette (3.6 x 3 m), face each other with a courtyard in the centre. The only mode of ventilation is the two windows provided on either side of the main door of each unit, which provides clear views into the home to passers-by. Each unit houses about three to five members, and due to small, ill-ventilated rooms, many household activities spill out. Acts like sitting, reading, performing everyday domestic tasks and sometimes even sleeping take place on the veranda, which, as the threshold of the home, becomes a complex site set at the intersection of the public and the private.

According to Rosselin (1999), anthropologists in the west have defined the threshold of the front door as the border between the private and the public space- a liminal zone that separates and links two distinct territories: that of the inside, the personal, and the sacred home, from the outside, the collective and the risky space of the world (53-54). However, in community housing in India, the space of the threshold is not always a pre-defined transition zone, and it transcends the simplistic definition of being a boundary between the public and the private space. In the chawl, the veranda as the threshold simultaneously embodies two purposes: demarcating the public from the private and at the same time being the extension of the private into the public, blurring the lines between the two.

In the context of urban thresholds, most architectural analyses are directed towards developing design typologies that effectively negotiate the transition between the public and the private. The focus on analyzing the threshold space leans heavily on its physicality rather than its symbolic or ideological conceptions as a boundary. Determining the stages of entering a private property, Dovey

and Wood's (2015) typological analysis of urban interfaces, discusses how the spatial interactions between the public and private zones are negotiated by the materiality of the edge along legal cadastral boundaries. Kamalipour (2016) extends Dovey and Wood's typology analysis to explore the public to private transition in terms of proximity and connectivity.These frameworks are useful in understanding the architecture of the threshold as a public/private interface, but they assume the space is a fixed, unchanging entity that influences social relationships as a consequence of its physical form.

Studying the threshold in the context of their socio-cultural significance, Sadanand and Nagarajan (2020) analyse the thinnai, an extended verandah in traditional Agraham houses in South India, shedding light on ways in which culturally symbolic acts and social norms mediate the relationship between the inside and outside. Similarly, Marnane (2023) examines the architecture of the otla, a veranda-style transition space in the traditional Gujarati settlements called pols in the context of their socio-cultural role, identity formation, and the transition from private to public space. While this body of research recognises that the threshold has blurred boundaries that can only be understood with the specificity of acts and uses, they conceptualise space as a container within which activities simply occur, and the user's perception of the place is imagined as unchanging, or static in time. In built environment discourses, framing the threshold in its spatial configuration tends to blur the complexity and fluidity of gendered domains, perceptions of privacy and territoriality and more widely its patterns of inhabitation. In this paper, I explore the veranda as a site whose boundaries as a threshold are not fixed and bounded to the space, but which keep evolving in time based on use, access and habits through which the residents produce a sense of place within the chawl. This allows the illustration of how, based on gender, time of the day, occasion, and user, the rules of negotiating the publicness and privateness of this threshold keep shifting.

To understand this threshold, I use Setha Low's conceptualisation of analysing places as socially constructed, culturally relative and historically specific, theorised in a way that is process-oriented, person-based, and allows for agency. Low (2009) states that all places are embodied- i.e. a result of the ideology, language, behaviours, habits, practices and material acts. Conceptualising places as embodied enables us to understand them as sites of everyday life where attachment, emotion, and morality come into play grounded in a specific location yet derived from global discourses (Low 2009, 22). Further, drawing upon Anthony King's (1976) linguistic analysis on urban and spatial terms in the colonial third culture[1], I look at language as a mode of tracing the shifting perceptions of the veranda in the chawl. King (1976) suggests "how people talk about their own world of experience

[1] Anthony King defined the "colonial third culture" as a hybrid cultural formation in colonial cities, blending European and indigenous influences in urban forms, social practices, and power dynamics.

and what names they give to it gives us some indication of how they construe it," (73). This is where oral history and ethnography is an important method to study the threshold in the chawl, where I trace how everyday lived experiences disrupt the architectural understanding of the threshold, to create metaphorical and ideological boundaries of place. I also show how, over the past 89 years of the chawl's life, distinct shifts in the socio-cultural realm, impacts of modernity or events like the Covid-19 pandemic altered and re-negotiated these meanings.

## Mapping the gender territories of inside and outside

In the highly patriarchal milieu of the early days of the chawl, in the 1940s, household chores were considered the responsibilities of the young women of the home. Young women doing chores inside the home during morning hours was associated with the performance of a distinctly moral and ideal behaviour, as opposed to being outside on the veranda, among the men, who were seen reading newspapers, having tea, or socialising over local news. As the hustle of mornings quieted, men left for work and children for school, women informants recount stories of taking over the space of the veranda. They sifted grains, chopped vegetables, sewed, or pounded masalas in the natural light filtering through the courtyard. It is interesting to note that even today, while colloquially referring to the act of doing these things, inhabitants dropped the words "outside" or "in the veranda". For instance, saying that one was 'sewing', was synonymous with 'was sewing out on the veranda'. The understanding that certain domestic activities occurred on the veranda was so obvious in the chawl that it did not need to be mentioned. The extension of the household activities into the public zone did not always have to be distinctly defined in the form of actions but was conceptually always present.

In the afternoons, the veranda also became a distinct space of gossip, togetherness and friendship for women. Women share stories of hosting kitty parties[2] at this time, as they would be done with chores, and they had some free time before their husbands came back for lunch. Krupa ben[3], a resident of the chawl in her mid-fifties, recounts that this time of the day was quite freeing for women as rules of conduct slightly relaxed. They even held their sarees in a more comfortable and relaxed fashion around the waist instead of over the head (which was done out of respect for men or elders). The access to the veranda was rooted in an understanding of when it was culturally appropriate for women to be seen outside. Women informants also

[2] A kitty party, particularly used in the South Asian context, is a social gathering where women contribute a fixed amount of money to a common pool, with one member receiving the total amount each month, combining financial saving with socializing.

[3] In Gujarati, the term "Ben" (બેન) is used as a respectful way to address or refer to a woman, meaning "sister." Having addressed them as such in my field work, the names of all women informants are suffixed with this term in this paper.

recall that when they were menstruating, they were to keep away from ritually significant spaces like the kitchen or the room where the gods were kept. In the first three to four days of their period, women would be made to stay outside in the veranda, which also meant that everyone else in the chawl would suspect that she was menstruating- something that caused much embarrassment to the woman (Bharat 2019, 115). The use and access of the veranda was distinctly spatio-temporal in nature, determined by the time of the day and the occasion. The gender territories, following the thin line of inside and outside, were associated with the metaphorical value of morality and purity with regard to women's access.

It was understood that if someone, especially men, outside the chawl visited women would largely stay inside, coming out only to serve them water or food. Krupa ben shares that this inequality of access that was seen in earlier times, is not existent anymore. Today, women come out on the veranda in the mornings, meet for tea, and most even wear western or modern clothes, rather than the traditional saree. It is only when they come out in their nightgowns that they prefer to keep their dupatta (scarf) on. They ensure that

**Figure 2: Space of the Veranda in the Cotton Chawl, photograph by Aishwarya Morwal (author), 2018.**

their hair is appropriately tied up, and they have a bindi on.[4] This production of a disciplined form extends from the women's body to the physical site of the veranda, thus producing the latter as a space that, by extension, expects a 'moral' form. Instead of being a neutral site within which acts occur, the power relations and social constructs of gender and the space of the veranda are not mutually exclusive; they are continuously in a dialectic relationship (Ranade, 2007).

The restriction or disciplining of women's movement was never explicitly stated but was part of the social code within the chawl. However, people within the chawl also recognize the shifting orders of this code. Over time, not conforming to the conventional gendered codes of conduct, like wearing western clothes or being in the veranda in the mornings, women in the chawl have been resisting the cultural understanding of morality in the chawl- slowly transforming what it means to be moral in the first place. Thus, accessing spaces like the veranda not only complicates the notion of the threshold as simply separating the indoor and outdoor space, but it also reorganizes the meanings associated with being inside and outside giving rise to an interconnected, relational understanding of these binaries.

[4] A bindi is a forehead mark worn by Hindu women, symbolizing marital status, cultural identity, and respect for tradition.

## The affective boundaries of a home

In the 1950s, the Panjrapol neighbourhood was a significant Jain center in the city known for being the residence of elite mercantile families and housing numerous Jain religious institutions such as derasar (Jain temples), upashray (sermon halls and residences for Jain ascetics) with their affiliated kitchens and food halls. Even today, these places are often visited by the residents of the Cotton Chawl especially during festivals or auspicious days. The residents have a common social position in the city enabled by similar traditions, places of worship, and eating habits, which foster a common worldview, reinforcing the fact that the chawl is one big family and the house unit in the chawl is a home within a home. Informants recount that in times of emergencies, neighbours rushed to one another's aid without a second thought. The sense of belonging to the chawl is then not only forged by people's identifications and emotional attachment to the collective, but also by the ethical and political value systems with which they judge their own and others belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011, 5).

This idea of caregiving is also deeply enmeshed with the idea of ceding one's privacy in the chawl, as is clear from Sanjay Bhai's[5] account, "It is very common for inhabitants to be 'in and out' of the veranda," or as he puts it, 'aate jaate rehna (in Hindi),' suggesting one's constant presence, or activity between the veranda

[5] Similar to the term "Ben" mentioned earlier, "Bhai" is used as a respectful way to address a man in Gujarati, meaning "brother."

and the home. "If I don't come out for a long time, our neighbours tend to ask, 'Is everything okay? Why did you not come out?' In case someone's door is closed for the whole day, we check in and see if everything is okay with them or if they are ill. This is how much we care for one another!" Here, 'aate jaate rehna' is not simply a matter of stepping out onto the veranda, but also signals that daily life is running smoothly, the lack of which is often regarded as unusual.

From Sanjay bhai's narrative, what might be considered 'overstepping the bounds of privacy' in western sociology, is subsumed within a sense of caregiving in the chawl. Kaviraj (1997) states that the concept of public in local Indian settings was a historically specific configuration of the common that did not neatly fit into the idea of public in the Western sense (Kaviraj 1997, 86). Here, we understand the relationality of engaging with the space, where its access is not just moulded to time and place, but also to cultural subjectivities.

Inhabitants particularly recall the community bond being stronger in the early days of the chawl when there was a higher number of people residing here. The radio or the TV, which were rare commodities, would gather large crowds at the time of international cricket matches or beloved music shows. These crowds, often flocking the space of the veranda, would settle there for hours making it a site of relaxed conversation and togetherness.


**Figure 3: Visualisation imagining what the Cotton Chawl must have looked like in 1950s, image by Aishwarya Morwal (author), 2018.**

The spatial arrangement of the chawl, which fostered this familial relationship among inhabitants also made it impossible to keep personal life private. Knowing details from neighbouring homes of upcoming marriages, pregnancy, and even family problems was a naturalised part of being in the chawl. Krupa ben recounts, "When someone gets married, the bahu (daughter-in-law) is not only the 'bahu' of that family, but she is the bahu of the entire chawl!".[6] Before the wedding day, the family's relatives from outside the chawl would be accommodated as guests in neighbours' homes due to lack of space. Neighbours served food and attended to guests as if they were their own extended families. When sleeping out on the veranda, she notes, "We generally sleep in front of our doors, in our own verandas. If there's more of us, our neighbours don't object if we use some of their space. They say, you can sleep here, of course, consider it your space only! Just ensure you leave some room for passersby." The language here suggests a distinct connotation of usage of the veranda as a privatised space where, conceptually, people have a sense of ownership of the veranda space in front of their homes.

Based on the relationships shared between inhabitants, spaces could not be reduced to the arena of the veranda as 'public' and the arena of the home as 'private' simply based on the spatial demarcations of inside and outside. Chakrabarty (1992) suggests that rather than understanding how space is used, it is necessary to locate the metaphorical understanding of space for the purpose of making boundaries (543). Here, metaphorically, house units in the chawl were a home within a larger home.

[6] In his article on the paras, a neighbourhood unit in Kolkata, Sengupta gives a similar account of familial bonds and collective sense of security and belonging of inhabitants due to their similar social and spatial location within the city (Sengupta 2018).

## Negotiating privacy and territories within the chawl

Amid this deep-rooted sense of community in the chawl, notions of privacy and territory were continually negotiated through everyday acts. The veranda, at the intersection of public and private space, became a stage where the gaze played an important role in terms of seeing and being seen. The inhabitants' access here was always aligned with a shared understanding of what was considered appropriate with a view to conform to the social fabric of the community.

Jagruti ben tells me it is considered rude if inhabitants keep the main door of their house closed frequently for extended periods of the day. In the early days of the chawl, during afternoon naps or going out for groceries, people kept their doors lightly closed instead of locking them. It was often that in a game of hide-n-seek, children would come to hide inside the homes of neighbours without any specific permissions. The openness of the door symbolised the family's relationship with other inhabitants, reflective of their sense of being transparent with others.

**Figure 4: View of the veranda from a house in the chawl, photograph by Aishwarya Morwal (author), 2018.**

It is also interesting to ask who an outsider in the chawl is, and who is given access without scrutinizing their purpose of being in the chawl. Sanjay bhai tells me, "If an outsider is in the chawl, and they're on our floor, we check from our veranda. Often, we ask them, 'Whose house do you wish to go to?' It's often the case that we know the visitors as the guests of our neighbours, and we offer them a beverage or invite them in. If there is a doctor called at someone's house, then we see what the matter is, and check if they need our help." According to Rosselin (1999), the threshold is a place whose site of access is ritually controlled, involving a standard code of greeting, inquiring, and then deciding whether to allow or deny entrance within the home. In this way, with the threshold as a transitory space, the behaviours in it align with the expectations of that space (57). In the chawl however, rather than the architecture of the veranda determining

it as a threshold space that separates the public and the private, it was the social conventions that negotiated what the meanings of public and private would be. From Sanjay bhai's narrative, it is also clear that he felt obliged to enquire about an outsider's whereabouts when they particularly accessed his floor, rather than the entire chawl. This also illustrates that the space outside the house is not one homogenous public space but is located within hierarchical nesting of territories where the term public and private is relative (Habraken 2004, 10). This conceptualization was not explicitly mentioned or stated but was produced through everyday acts such as sitting or resting in the veranda or keeping a watch on who enters or leaves.

Over the years, this idea of privacy in the chawl evolved with cultural and economic developments in the city. During the 1980s, as the technology of textile mills became obsolete, most mills shut down, and almost 67000 workers were rendered jobless (Bhatt 2003, as cited in Mahadevia 2014, 10). During this time, informants recall that the search for new job opportunities led a number of old families to leave the chawl. Consequently, new inhabitants took their place looking for opportunities in the heart of the city. In the past, housing in the chawl was reserved exclusively for mill workers, but over time the occupational backgrounds of residents became more diverse. Protecting tenants against the high rental inflation in Ahmedabad, the Rent Control Act of 1947 froze all rents and later its amendment (1963) allowed tenants protection from eviction, such that they could stake stronger claims to their house units (Barua 2018, 178). Over the next decade, due to the significant reduction in rents vis-à-vis the land prices, chawl owners and trusts left the upkeep and maintenance of the chawl to the tenants. This was also a time when there was expansion of the western part of Ahmedabad, and the rise of modern apartment systems gave rise to the idea of insular homes. Simultaneously, privacy for every family and individual was recognised as a privilege. Although the infrastructure in the chawl deteriorated, inhabitants began to make architectural transformations within their unit, like the construction of toilets, retiling the floors, or installing modern kitchen counters. Having toilets within the home and making civil changes essentially meant that the house could now function as a self-sufficient unit, perceived to be comparable to the idealized self-sufficiency of the apartment systems popular in the western part of Ahmedabad.

One of the key changes made by the inhabitants in this context was the building of small, permanent seating blocks along one's home in the veranda, a site which inhabitants refer to as the otla. In Gujarati, an otla is a term used in the context of an elevated open step-up, that also functions as a seating and resting space, that overlooks the street. While the site of the seating block initiated the use of the term 'otla' for the veranda, most inhabitants now use the terms interchangeably.

This type of transformation of space was more evident on the ground floor, where partition walls were raised on the veranda giving rise to independent porch-

type house fronts. As we sit in front of her home, Meeta ben recounts, "It was a long running veranda before, and no one had a problem with this: we were like a family. We are one of the oldest residents of the chawl. Once these new renters entered, they started constructing these walls. Since everyone was building the partition wall, we too did it to have our own aangan (Hindi term for porch)." The use of the word 'aangan', a term that typically defines the front yard of a private home, became more commonly used for the houses on ground floors after the construction of partition walls. The interiority of the homes, sense of control and privatisation increased over the years and went hand in hand with changing social and economic shifts in the chawl.

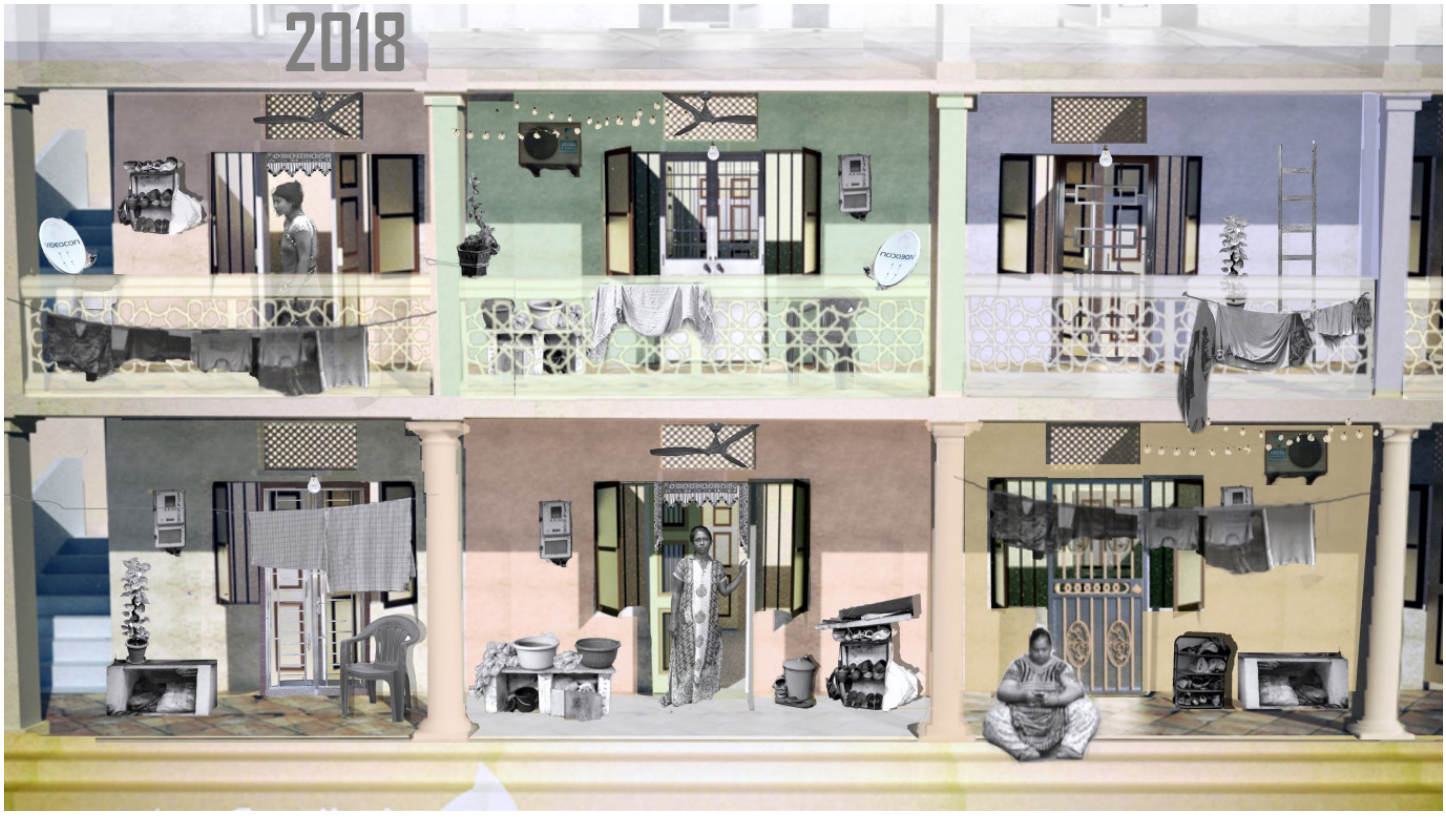


**Figure 5: Visualisation representing the Cotton Chawl, image by Aishwarya Morwal (author), 2018.**

After the 1990s, another one of the most common transformations in the chawl that residents pointed to, was the installation of the security doors outside the house doors. While inhabitants tout the sense of familial bonds in the chawl, it is clear that they also sought to guard their privacy. Although today it is still expected that inhabitants keep their wooden doors open, the security doors strengthened and redefined the bounds between the indoor and outdoor space simultaneously showing agency of people to gain a better sense of control over their environment.

Today, one can see that individual home exteriors are painted in vibrant colours, the tiling on exterior surfaces is renewed, or there are cabinets or storage spaces installed in front of some houses. In this way, residents create substitute thresholds or transitionary zones that denote the space in front of their homes as their own, which also happens to be a public place. Instead of flattening the notions of public, semi-public and private just in their spatial sense, we see that these meanings are reorganized over the course of time due to people's continually acting within them.

The coronavirus pandemic dramatically reordered the everyday rhythms in the chawl. Outsiders were strictly not allowed inside, and family life, which had been intimately tied within the space of the veranda, was absolutely relegated inside. Every home object on the veranda was taken back inside. Social interactions took place just by way of shouting a greeting across the veranda and nothing more. "The news media was a big influence in the early months of the pandemic. We were scared. We wore masks, but eventually couldn't not come out in the veranda," says Jagruti ben. According to her, inhabitants avoided touching and sat away from each other. During the two cases reported in the chawl, doors were shut, and quarantine boards were put up. The characterization of space as infected or dangerous not only affected how space was used, but dramatically hardened the threshold between inside and outside thus reconfiguring the meanings of public and private. Informants note that although this was the case in the first and second waves of the pandemic, most people's access to the balcony eventually returned back to the way it was before.

## Conclusion

In the Indian context, Kaviraj (1997) suggests that rather than the simple binaries of public and private, an apt categorisation of spaces stems from the differentiation between 'the home' and 'the world', closely linked to 'apna' and 'paraya' or mine and not-mine (93). In the chawl, in connecting families together, it is the architecture that gives the sense of an extended home outside the house unit. The veranda as a threshold is an interesting space to study because it destabilises our expectation of how a space must function. Rather than architecture presupposing or predefining the purpose a space serves, we see how place and people together co-construct the meanings and utility of space. Access in the veranda is not just rooted in being in one place at one time, but it is defined by specific conceptions of morality, purity, privacy, and social and cultural codes. Conceptualising the space of the veranda as embodied puts focus on inconspicuous things like people's mannerisms, language, everyday practices, behaviours, and ways of conducting themselves, as shaping the place in a community settlement. It also helps us understand how cultural subjectivities create alternate boundaries of space. Oral history as a method is crucial to understand the deeply specific and relational meanings of public and private in the chawl, continually shaped and configured due to people's acts and interactions. The threshold is not merely a container of activities, but is produced as either public or private, or as the men's domain or the women's domain, or as the home within the home from the very activities and relationalities of time and people's acts. These acts constantly imbue new meanings within them that penetrated into the terminology used for the veranda, and it, along with the conceptual association of the place, evolved with the access in this place over the chawl's 89 years.

The veranda as the threshold is a space of social liminality as much as it is a space of physical liminality. Physically, it is a balancing act of managing a household in the paucity of space and living in the gaze of the chawl's sixty-eight families. Socially, it is balancing the sense of caregiving with guarding the integrity of one's privacy. It is a space that straddles the aspirations of a privatised self-sufficient unit while fostering a sense of belonging within a common spatial and social location in the city. These tensions reveal the fault lines in our understanding of the threshold as merely being a separating border between the public and the private, the personal and the collective, and the home and the world. We see how language, perception of space, and its consequent usage is mutually co-evolving and shapes the way one informs the other.

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