

The Tarp Shed of Public Sp



Occupations spaces

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Tarpaulin is an intensely and diversely used material among the working class and marginalised populations in India. It features as a distinct visual element of cityscapes, and acts as a contrast to the huge shiny buildings. The site of towering, elevated buildings just beside the tarpaulin *chawls* (tenements) in Bombay is a typical image that comes to mind in understanding the nature of this material. Tarpaulin, commonly called *tirpal*, is used for a range of purposes, such as providing shade from the sun, rain, protection from dust, and making temporary shelters. Due to its affordability and durability, it is a popular choice especially for those who cannot afford permanent shelter. Tarp sheds serve as a shelter to “illegal” people, who are deprived of the right to a permanent roof of their own. It is commonly seen on the streets used by food cart owners, roadside peddlers, and by a variety of professionals that include barbers, cobblers, fruit sellers etc. Tarps are also a primary material used by the homeless and refugees for building makeshift homes. The practice of using tarpaulin, therefore, is deeply rooted in the modern history of the subcontinent, which could be traced back to the emergence of consumerism and modern capitalist class structures. However, in 2019 the use of tarpaulin gained new meanings and an implicit significance.

Tarpaulin as material of resistance

In 2019, India witnessed a unique protest strategy that transformed these same tarp sheds into important sites of resistance. The notorious CAA-NRC bill, which was passed in the Indian parliament, was met with massive opposition from the people. The bill was designed in a way that it threatened the citizenship status of some of India’s population, specifically targeting the Muslim population and the economically backward sections of Indian society, who were now required to prove their citizenship by means of written documents, whose ownership was of course a privilege reserved for the literate. For the Muslims in particular, it was a manoeuvre that put into question their sense of belonging in India. In response to this discriminatory citizenship bill designed to strip off the Muslim citizens in India of their rights, millions of people across the country came out in protest.

The unique counterstrategy developed during these protests was that of sit-in occupations of public spaces/roads, mainly led by Muslim women. Protesters occupied public spaces with big canopy sheds, made up of tarpaulins, blocking public roads and disrupting the normal life of the city using non-violent resistance. The first time this strategy was used, was during the famous Shaheen Bagh protest where a national highway was blocked by protesters for over one hundred days; it was later adopted in other cities and neighbourhoods as a mode of resistance against the discriminatory citizenship law. The tarp sheds served as a shelter for hundreds of protesters who occupied the roads. They also housed community kitchens, where protesters prepared their food – and later makeshift libraries and activity centres for kids that lasted until the end of the movement.

Spaces that do not belong to anyone

A tarpaulin, one that could be hoisted, adjusted, transported, one that could envelop the protesters who came together from a variety of backgrounds, symbolized the idea of unified resistance. In the context of the Shaheen Bagh protests, it symbolized a unity that dissolved distinctions between different classes and castes. Students from various institutions, housewives, labourers after their long working day, 9-to-5 job holders, all gathered under the tarps in the evenings to show their unbridled support to the resistance. More importantly, the tarpaulin was crucial to the performance. The state passed a bill that could render millions homeless

and hopeless. A tarpaulin represented an alternate way of being: of never giving up, of being adamant in staying in one's own country, even if under the shades of a tarpaulin. It gave out a clear signal that people from diverse backgrounds could gather around it to perform resistance. The simple acts of living, sleeping, eating, playing, cheering, singing, and conversing inside a tarpaulin became forms of resistance. A whole way of living, living against all odds, entered the framework of politics and resistance. A tarpaulin, on the other hand, also demarcates a space that does not belong to anyone. It runs strictly against the idea of ownership. No one participating in the performance inquired about the owners of the tarpaulin. It was there to comfort and reassure people of a roof over their heads. Not only did it protect against the harsh weather conditions, it also gave people a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging at a time when this very sense was being attacked, ridiculed, and threatened. Tarpaulins were homes in the potential state-enforced homelessness.

The tarpaulins, in very deliberate manoeuvre, also made sure that people become visible and united. They symbolized a moment that was against invisibilization of all kinds. Tarp sheds and the people who sat under them brought to attention a sight that the city-state nexus neglected for a long time. In these new conditions, this invisibilization of the poor who slept on the roads, in dire conditions, paved way to a massive wave of visibilization of people demanding to be seen and heard. They suddenly entered a frame of politics and representation. Though there were other, more structural, reasons behind the success of the protests, what cannot be denied is that Shaheen Bagh, which became the locus of anti CAA-NRC sentiments, and the successful mobilization of people at the site, is owing to ground-level organization in which tarpaulins had their own seemingly negligible, but in reality extremely significant role to play.

The movement also faced resistance from various agents who went as far as to bring lethal weapons to these sites of non-violent protests. The bill, which was part of a wider



authoritarian Hindu nationalist project, was passed by the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian parliament) on 9 December 2019 and by the Rajya Sabha (upper house) on 11 December 2019. The movement against the bill came to a rather abrupt end due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the movement marked a watershed moment in India which gave a new face to non-violent resistance against the authoritarian regime by gathering, reading, sleeping, or simply being under tarps, and by showcasing absolute determination against tyranny.

Illustrations

p. 118: A visual of the main area where women have been sitting for 32 days Shaheen Bagh, January 15 2020, DTM, CC0 – public domain.

p. 121: A roadside barber with a tarpaulin shed to work under, Simeen Anjum, 2021.