



URBAN KALEIDOSCOPE

अर्बन कैलिडोस्कोप

A JOURNAL FOR SHIFTING
PERSPECTIVES ON CITIES

VOLUME 1
RIGHT TO THE CITY



Urban Kaleidoscope: A Journal for Shifting Perspectives on Cities
Volume 1

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September 2023

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Published by People's Resource Centre (PRC) [www.prcindia.in]

H. No. 7, Lane no. 6, Block-A, Himgiri Enclave, Pepsi Road,
Main Burari Road, New Delhi-110084.

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together. By recognizing and embracing a place's collective identity, we honour its distinct history and create environments

that are more inclusive and robust, encouraging a sense of cohesion, resiliency, and belonging for future generations.

An emerging language of 'Urban Commoning'

Nidhi Batra , Bharat R.***

Cities , their Commons and Act of Commoning

Cities are what, if not a 'collective' of commons. Urban residents need to share a number of local resources. It often gets debated, if, in terms of ownership they have any stake in it? but for sure they do have a stake in the use of resources. If you are a frequent visitor or resident of Delhi – you have for sure heard or yelled - 'tere baap ki sadak hain kya'? And that is right, streets are 'commons', like parks, public places, and shared neighbourhood amenities. Some commons even have a 'collective right', such as sacred groves managed by the community in peri-urban villages, or ponds in urban villages.

However, managing the commons, and that too managing them well – doesn't happen 'automatically'. We know that well from the example described by Garrett Hardin in his Tragedy of the Commons tale. Through the overgrazing of a plot, Hardin's theory

has been used to suggest that the only way to avoid the tragedy of the commons is to privatise both losses and gains. Property rights will make individuals accountable and by extension society sustainable.

Elinor Ostrom, on the other hand, debated the notion of the 'tragedy' of commons and gave us a list of principles for managing the commons – collectively and effectively.

We suggest, however, that

collective and effective management of commons, can only happen when 'commoning occurs'; Kisi ke baap ki sadak nahin hoti - Sadak apni banani padti hain..

Ostrom defined commons as a physical entity with boundaries that came to be known as Common Pool Resources which

which later gave way for common property rights in governance, such as community forests, wetlands, common agricultural land, johads etc. However, later she also recognised that commons are not only 'subtractive' with a limited boundary or a limit that is consumable, but are also reproductive, that can grow such as knowledge.

"There is no commons without commoning," said historian Peter Linebaugh. Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation, in short, known as 'Sehreeti' works on 'commoning'.

It is our contention, that it is only when a community observes, understands, and appreciates the commons can form a relationship with it, to then take care of those commons.

Through our recent placemaking interventions at Raahgiri events in Delhi-NCR, we have experimented with this 'act of commoning'.

'Commoning' by Sehreeti at Raahgiri

Raahgiri is a car-free citizen initiative that advocates for safe, accessible, and inclusive public streets. The central idea of 'Raahgiri Day' events is to allow people to experience a street without cars which can help them reimagine what our streets can be, and inculcate important behavioural changes in how we see our streets and our environment. Sehreeti has been one of the activity partners of Raahgiri, which has been held in Delhi and Gurgaon this year.

As an activity partner, Sehreeti has taken the platform of Raahgiri to engage in issues of urban development and interact with the public, towards improving their own cities

Sehreeti has been making public installations with recycled cardboard boxes (owing to their spirit of sustainability), in Gurgaon and Delhi, centred around an urban and social theme. These themes cover a wide variety of the urban condition such as loss of biodiversity, climate change, heat island effect, migration, belongingness, model of privatised development, child-friendly cities, women and leisure spaces, women livelihood cyclists and lost culture of 'shayari and poetry' about the city and city life.

Generally, These aspects only remain in elite academic circles – being discussed in IICs and IHCs of the city rarely on the public streets.

Is there enough discussion among the public on issues such as the heat island effect that Delhi is generating, or what can be done to make a neighbourhood child friendly? does it even notice that women – the 'respectable ones' don't really 'loiter'?

On the theme of child-friendly neighbourhoods and child-friendly cities, especially in an urbanising neighbourhood of Gurugram, Sehreeti held an open-air exhibition of artworks. The theme was "How can I make my neighbourhood Child



Figure 1-4: Pictures from C.P. Raahgiri held in February 2023 (Source: Sehreeti)

Figure 5: On the theme of "Ird-Gird" – knowing your environs, Sehreeti created an installation on sustainable and resilient Delhi at Connaught Place (C.P.) in February 2023. A public art of biodiversity around the Semal tree – popularly spotted in Delhi, other flora and fauna of Delhi, transportation woes, climate change and heat island effect, history of C.P., iconic buildings of C.P., and asking what people 'want' from Delhi was part of this installation. (Source: Sehreeti)

Friendly?” and the artists were children themselves from five neighbourhood schools. The Raahgiri event gained a lot of traction and was even visited by the Chief Minister of Haryana, Manohar Lal Khattar.

Furthermore, most installations were made to be bilingual, offering a moment of pause for all kinds of people. The issues Sehreeti chooses to raise are very contextual to the place where the installations are being set up and arguably have never been raised before. On the theme of safe cities and safe



Figure 6-8: Students looking at their and their friend's artworks, Raahgiri held in May 2023 at Gurugram (Source: Sehreeti)

streets, Sehreeti made an installation called Pankhon Ka Mela (translates to Festival of Fans) in Chandni Chowk in March this year. This theme was very contextual to Shahjahanabad, which in a historical sense, gave the city- a place for leisure for women at the erstwhile Begum Ka Bagh. In this place, the Mughal Queen Jahanara was infamous for holding Pankhon ka Mela, which was recreated by Sehreeti. Through the recreation of the Mela, Sehreeti was able to tackle matters of concern around inclusivity, addressing issues faced by



Figure 9-10: Students looking at their and their friend's artworks, Raahgiri held in May 2023 at Gurugram (Source: Sehreeti)

women as they navigate and negotiate the city. It has been found that women stop accessing public spaces, including parks after the age of 12. Leisure becomes a taboo and women get out of the house only with a 'purpose'.

Respectability and safety tend to be a double-edged sword for women and excludes them from experiencing the city and its public spaces like men do.

We interacted with men and women to find what the city could do – to change this phenomenon.

In June 2023, Sehreeti brought shayari, poetry and art through its placemaking





*Figure 11-13: Pankhon ka mela – women and leisure spaces in the city, at Raahgiri
(Source: Sehreeti)*

installation called “Shehr-e-Mehfil” in the streets of Chandni Chowk. Shehr-e-Mehfil is an initiative by Sehreeti, to give a platform to ‘engage’ with the city through prose, poetry, written text, art, and photography. The installation reminisced Delhi through famous writers and poets of Old Delhi such as Ghalib, Mir, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Daag Dehlvi, and more contemporary writers such as Amrita Pritam, Nirupama Rao, Gulzar, and Ravish Kumar. There were also writings and artworks from the community too as they were invited to participate in their ‘word or emotion’ for how they relate to the city. Through this installation, Sehreeti was able to discuss the ‘state of affairs’ in Delhi, providing a sort of scaffolding for the individual, in their attempt to unpack the legacy of Chandni Chowk and Old Delhi.

*Figure 14-17: Shehr-e-Mehfil in Chandni Chowk,
(Source: Sehreeti)*





The Commoning Practice – Interdisciplinary and Intermediary.

Stavros Stavrides, in his book *Common Space: The City as Commons* (2016) argues that, “Expanding commoning will need all the power that such proliferating images may carry if it is to become a creative force in the transformation of contemporary cities”. Stavrides suggests that if the practice of commoning is to have a transformative impact on cities, it will require the power of images to catalyse this very change. Sehreeti has done just that, it utilises relatable information, research that is consumable, art and interactive posits as

an active proponent of social change, and awareness, and a very effective communication tool. These tools have allowed people to linger at the installation, take pictures of the installations, take some instagram-able selfies and have even been encouraged to co-create art.

We believe that there is a new commoning practice on rise. A growing number of design researchers engage with communities, with their own varying practices and methods, to support communities in their own development. This discourse traverses a wide spectrum of practices in interaction design and participatory design, and opens up new directions rooted in the understanding of the relations between people, communities, institutions, and commoning practices (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019).

Sehreeti, coined from the words 'Seh' which means together/collective and 'Reeti' which means practices, envisages itself as a 'collaborative platform' that engages and empowers various stakeholders, especially the community to actively participate in shaping the future of the cities. Cities are always a 'contestation' and 'commoners' are never homogenous. Thus, this act of 'commoning' is an active process of engagement, extending beyond the physical installations described above, but rather about sparking conversations and inspiring informed 'asks' by the community and thereby responsive decision-making.

**Founder, Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation*

***Architectural Intern at Sehreeti Developmental Practices Foundation*

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