

## **Exploring Choice Preferences and Safety Perceptions of Women Hostellers: A Case of International Hostel for Girls, Panjab University, Chandigarh**

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**Abstract:** The present paper describes some choice preferences and safety perceptions of students staying in the International Hostel for Girls, Panjab University, Chandigarh. It explores how the notion of space, place and location arise in the mind of the girls' hostel students in their everyday living. These concern the choice of the hostel, hostel room, and places to be visited on the campus and outside. It also gauges the perception of spaces of fear on the campus and in the City of Chandigarh. It is an empirical study wherein data were collected using a structured pre-tested questionnaire. The analysis lends itself to clues on planning and designing any infrastructure and creating public spaces with features that enhance women's safety and feelings of security. However, safety centric planning and design of any infrastructure involves concrete and physical attributes of space.

**Keywords:** Geographical, international, hostel, University, security, preferences

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Date of submission: 30.07.2021

Date of review: 27.10.2021

Date of acceptance: 18.01.2022

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### **Introduction**

The increased visibility of women in educational institutions and among the professionals and discussions about space and time-space relations brought feminist attention to 'space'. In an article, 'Women in the city', Suzanne Mackenzie (1989) suggests that the feminist approach has become almost focal in geographic studies in today's social and economic reconstruction era, making it crucial for future urban policies.

Recent decades have seen an ever-increasing number of females in higher education. The number of women enrolled in undergraduate courses was only 1.48 million in 1991-92, rose to 3.29 million in 2002-03 and then to 16.0 Million by 2015-16. Also, the same trend has been noticed in graduate, post-graduate and research degree programmes. For example, the number of women enrolled for research degrees was only 8,780 in 1980-81, nearly doubled to 15,018 in 1988-89 and then rose to 23,609 in 2002-03 (for details, see Chanana, 1990; Singh, 2008). According to figures available from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2019-20, the gross enrolment ratio in higher education in India is 27.1 (18-23 years). Gross enrollment for men is lower (26.9) than for women (27.1).

It means that public spaces now are more intensely shared by males and females. In a society with strong patriarchal values, it is not uncommon to witness the display of male chauvinism, especially in the north Indian states of Harayana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan having highly imbalanced sex ratios. With the spread of education and women empowerment, educated and working women are becoming assertive. The combined effect of all this is that women in India are now more exposed to crime. Cruelty against women, assault on them to outrage their modesty, kidnapping and abduction, stalling their path in public places etc., are the crimes

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that the women face pretty commonly. As a protective measure, the parents don't allow them to move alone in the market or public places. Instead, they move in a group to the market, public gatherings, attend classes, travel in buses, etc. Also, the parents would like their daughters to stay in college/university hostels/women working hostels instead of paying guesthouses (PGs) during their studies in higher education or as single working women. Notably, the PG accommodations are considered risky for security reasons and expensive, especially for middle-income group families.

The existing literature reveals that several factors are involved in choosing a particular hostel facility or accommodation to rent (Adesoji, 2010; Russell, 2010; Li et al., 2005; Amole, 2009). Such factors can be grouped into four categories: (i) Characteristics of the dwelling unit, (ii) Social amenities, (iii) Neighbourhood conditions, and (iv) Management (Adesoji 2010). Oladapo (2006) observed that a dwelling that is adequate from the physical or design point of view might not necessarily be sufficient or satisfactory from the users' point of view.

As the warden in one of the girls' hostels at Panjab University Campus, the present author realized with time that the security concerns of the women students and their parents don't end with getting hostel accommodation at the Panjab University campus. Such considerations continue further to issues like the hostel location (both in absolute and relational space) on the Panjab University campus, where the hostel room is allocated, the floor on which the allotted room exists, the study department and the market. All such issues are geographical and pertain to space, place and location.

In light of the above statements, the present study attempts to study perceptions of girls hostel residents at the Panjab University, Chandigarh campus about the choice of the hostel, hostel floor and the room, security concerns and spaces of fear on the campus and outside the campus. The International Hostel, located in Sector 25 at the University's South Campus, has been taken as a case study with the following research objectives.

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of the study are to-

- (i) Study the notion of space, place and location in the mind of the girls' hostel student residents at Panjab University, Chandigarh, about the choice of the hostel, hostel room and places to be visited on the campus and outside it; and
- (ii) Perception of spaces of fear on the campus and in the City of Chandigarh

### **Data source and Methodology**

Having closed and open-ended questions, a questionnaire was formulated, tested, and then used to collect data/information from all the ninety-five women students residing in the hostel. However, the filled questionnaire was not received from five of them. In this way, data/information acquired from the ninety women students were collected, compiled and analyzed.

In framing the questions, asked through a questionnaire from the respondents, the following four components of accommodation were given due focus: (i) Design and other features of the accommodation, (ii) Preferences of residents, (iii) Security of residents within the accommodation, campus, and City, and (iv) Options for recreation within the City for Hostel Residents

The author conducted the survey in February 2020. In addition, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also held with the residents of the International Hostel to understand their perceptions on many aspects of life associated with hostel living. Parts covered included information about the native places of residents, the hostel's location, the perception of the sites of fear, and the favourite places within the City and its surrounding areas. After the data collection, the responses were analyzed and interpreted to draw inferences. To represent collected and compiled information, the author took the help of tables, bar graphs, and pie charts.

### **Sarvadaman Chowla Hall: The Study Area**

In the 1970s, there was only one hostel for women students on the Panjab University, Chandigarh campus. With the increase in teaching and research courses and the growing number of female candidates admitted to such studies, the demand for girls' hostels increased. As a result, there is a massive demand for hostel accommodation for women students. The overwhelming majority of women students demanding hostel accommodation at the Panjab University campus come from neighbouring states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and NCT of Delhi. Nevertheless, there are a few students from abroad. With grants available from the University Grants Commission and other sources, the University has been trying hard to build new hostels to cater for the fast increasing demand for campus hostel accommodation. Panjab University currently has eight boys' hostels, and ten girls' hostels, besides one working women's hostel and one international hostel exclusively for girls. One more hostel for girls is under construction. There is, however, a shortage of hostels as per demand.

Sarvadaman Chowla Hall, popularly known as the International Hostel, is one of the recently constructed girls' hostels on the campus. It has been named after Professor Sarvadaman Chowla, the renowned Indian mathematician who worked on the Number Theory. He was an illustrious alumnus of Panjab University, Lahore (pre-Independence). Located in Sector 25 (South campus), this hostel has a unique character. Infrastructurally, it has five floors. There are five guest rooms on the ground floor. Each floor has ten rooms with an attached bathroom and kitchen and five rooms without a kitchen. The hostel's top (or the fourth) floor has only ten rooms with an attached kitchen. The 5<sup>th</sup> floor, though available, reserved for a particular department in the University, is currently unoccupied. Also, there are fifteen rooms on this floor of the hostel. The Sarvadaman Chowla Hall is the only hostel on the campus with air-conditioned rooms with attached washrooms and a kitchenette. The residents are allowed to cook their food here. While LPG is not permitted, the student and other residents can use hot plates, induction cooktops, heaters and microwave ovens for their cooking/ heating requirements. Some of the facilities in this hostel are not available in other campus hostels. For that reason, this hostel may be termed a luxurious one compared to other women's hostels on the Panjab University Campus.

Before proceeding further, we briefly discuss the place of origin and early education of the ninety women students forming the part of the present study.

### Place of origin and early education of hostel residents

Interestingly, more than two-fifths (41 of total 90 respondents) of women students residing in the International hostel are from Punjab. On the other hand, more than one-seventh (or fourteen) are from Haryana. In this way, the states of Punjab and Haryana contributed six of each ten students residing in the International hostel. Of the remaining, nine are from Himachal Pradesh, eight are from Delhi, eleven are from different parts of the country, and seven are from foreign countries, including Canada, Thailand, Mauritius, the USA, and Kuwait (Table 1). The overwhelming majority of the residents are, thus, from neighbouring states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and NCT of Delhi.

Sr. No.	State of origin	Number	Per cent to total
1	Punjab	41	46.0
2	Haryana	14	15.0
3	Himachal Pradesh	09	10.0
4	Delhi	08	09.0
5	Other states/UTs	11	12.0
6	Foreign nationals	07	08.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

In line with their places of origin, the dominant majority of the hostel residents had their previous education from the neighbouring states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and NCT of Delhi. Thirty-two (about 36.0 per cent) had their last education in Punjab, eight ( about 9.0 per cent) in Haryana, twelve (13.0 per cent) in Himachal Pradesh, and ten (11.0 per cent) in NCT of Delhi (Table 2).

Sr. No.	State/country of previous education	Number	Per cent to total
1	Punjab	32	35.6
2	Chandigarh	16	17.8
3	Haryana	08	08.9
4	Himachal Pradesh	12	13.3
5	NCT of Delhi	10	11.1
6	Other States/UTs	08	08.9
7	Other Countries	04	04.4
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

A comparison between Table 1 and Table 2 is quite revealing. The second -largest number of hostel residents did their previous studies in Chandigarh, but none of them was a resident of



Chandigarh. Secondly, as many as seven residents were foreign nationals, but only four had studied before in foreign countries. A substantial number of resident students originally belonged to other states, especially Punjab but were previously studying in Colleges/institutes located in Chandigarh. The same is true for nearly half of the foreign nationals residing in the International hostel.

### **Room Preference: Geographical Considerations**

There are residents whose first preference was this hostel. However, several of them were admitted here as they could not get access to any other hostel. Many parents do not prefer to have their daughters in PG accommodation. They are greatly concerned about their children's safety and security in selecting a hostel where will be admitted their ward.

As far as the geographical placement of students within the hostel is concerned, a preference is observed for particular rooms. However, none of the residents reported any individual floor preferences because of the availability of lifts at the hostel. The hostel has three kinds of rooms.

- a) Diagonal Rooms: These rooms do not have a kitchen and sink
- b) Sun Facing rooms: These rooms are bright throughout the day as they face the sun. There are fewer chances of their being damp during the monsoon and winter.
- c) Park or Lawns Facing rooms: These rooms face the greener areas where lawns and trees are visible and give a pleasant view to the residents.

After looking at different types of rooms available, the students were asked to reveal their choices for room preferences. It has been observed that the maximum number of residents preferred sun-facing rooms as they found it convenient to dry their clothes on the balcony, especially during the monsoon and winter seasons. Furthermore, these rooms were experiencing less dampness than the non-sun facing rooms. About 50.0 per cent of the residents of the hostel reported their preference for these rooms. The next priority was the rooms facing the lawn with a beautiful garden view despite less sunlight. These rooms were considered better than the diagonal rooms, which were taken up only by those residents who did not get any other accommodation.

Twenty-nine residents occupied sun-facing rooms, and 11 resided in the lawn facing rooms. Thus, there were 40 residents occupying rooms that had access to sunlight and were also lawn facing besides being bigger. Ten residents did not have any specific preference (Fig 1).

### **Places of Fear and Insecurity: Perceptions and Geographical Realities**

The places of fear had relevance for the girl residents of the hostel, especially during the dark hours after 7 pm. Of the 90 girls, sixty did not fear moving within the hostel or the City (Table 3). Three girls feared going out on the balcony at night, especially those on the first floor. Some thirty-one girls considered the main gate near the Alumni house unsafe for inadequate light arrangements. Also, eight girls feared the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> floor as they suspected that the 5<sup>th</sup> floor was lying vacant, probably for some sinister reason.

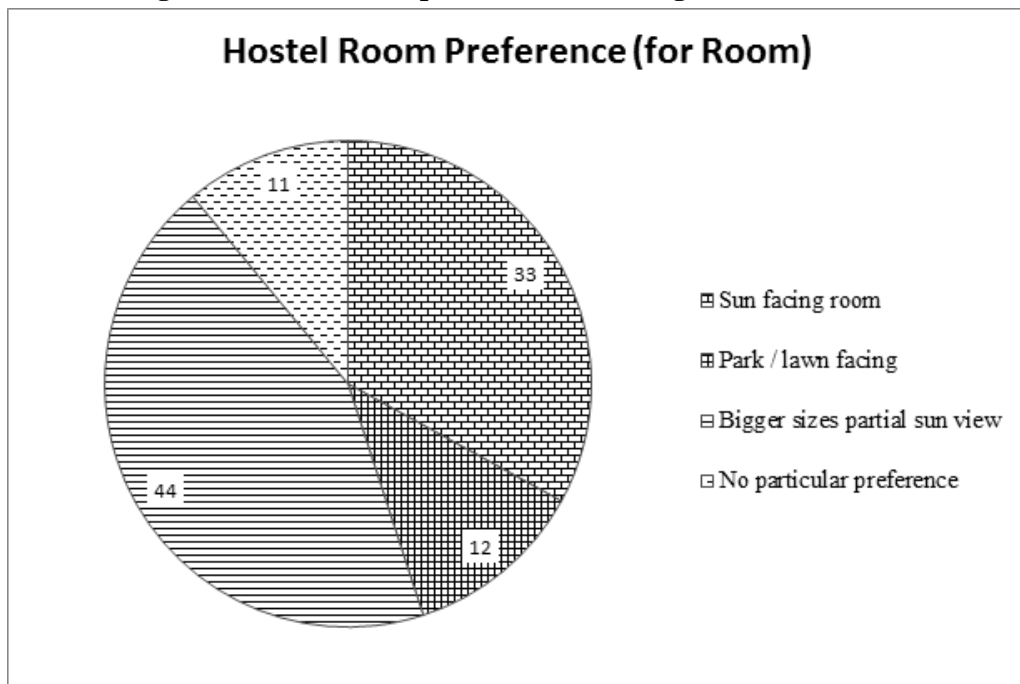
arrangements. Also, eight girls feared the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> floor as they suspected that the 5<sup>th</sup> floor was lying vacant, probably for some sinister reason.

**Table 3: Places of Fear as Perceived by Residents**

Sr. No.	Location	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Within the hostel premises	11	12
2	Within the campus	46	50
3	Surrounding Near Campus	11	13
4	Within the city as a whole	16	18
5	No perception of Fear	6	7
	Total	90	100

Source: Based on Field Work 2019-2020

**Fig. 1: Preference for Specific Rooms among Hostel Residents**



Source: Based on Field Work, 2019-2020

Fifteen girls reported that the University of the Institute of Engineering and Technology (UIET) area was rather unsafe as there was no habitation and lighting during the night hours. Another 11 felt that the nearby Sector 25 slum area was a hazardous area in case they had to venture out at night. Only one or two girls were uneasy that the hostel was proximal to the City's cremation grounds. They were afraid of going out even to their room's balcony for fear of meeting a ghost or 'Atma'. Thus, while most of the girls had no idea about any safety concerns while dwelling in the international hostel for girls, a significant proportion was uneasy about some of the areas in the vicinity.

in the company of male friends during the late evening hours and late night than being all alone or with their female friends.

Further, the hostel residents of the International hostel found Chandigarh far safer than Delhi and other metros. But, Chandigarh city was also considered unsafe for girls after 11.0 pm. Chandigarh, mainly an administrative city, has little movement on roads after 10.30 pm.

### Preferred places of visit in the City and its surroundings

It is interesting to analyze the responses of the international hostellers regarding favourite places for an outing inside the City and its surroundings. Nine of every ten students, who responded to this question, prefer to visit places within Chandigarh. Chandigarh, a rare epitome of modernization co-existing with natural preservation, is called India's 'City Beautiful'. Hence, it attracts both city residents and tourists from all over the world.

Only 10.0 per cent of the total 169 hostel residents registered their preference to visit Pinjore Garden, a tourist spot in Haryana, or Kasauli, a small hill station in Himachal Pradesh, for recreation and entertainment (See Table 4).

**Table 4: Preferred places for recreation and entertainment**

Sr. No.	Preferred Place for Recreation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Sukhna Lake	55	33.0
2	Sector 8 eateries	40	23.0
3	Elante Mall	35	21.0
4	Sector 17 (City Centre)	13	08.0
5	Sector 26 eating joints	6	03.0
6	Indian Coffee House	4	02.0
8	Kasauli (Tourist spot in Himachal Pradesh)	9	06.0
7	Pinjore Garden (Tourist spot beyond Panchkula in Haryana)	7	04.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>169</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Work, 2020

In Chandigarh, Sukhna Lake, an artificial lake located on the northern side of the City, is the most popular choice of students residing in the International Hostel. Fifty-five or one-third of the total 169 respondents in our survey visited Sukhna Lake for boating, a stroll, a camel ride and even Bungee jumping at times. The next favourite place of hostellers is Sector 8 Market, which they visit to enjoy the variety of foodstuffs served at numerous eateries concentrated in the sector market. Forty of 169 respondents making more than one-fifth of the total respondents, claimed their regular visits to eateries in Sector 8 market. Some contended that the food served is tasty and relatively cheaper than other places in the City. The Elante Mall, a large retail complex containing a variety of stores and restaurants and other business establishments housed in a single building in the Industrial area (Phase-I), is the third popular choice of the hostellers, visited by thirty-five or more than one-fifth of the total respondents. The Mall was visited for shopping, movies, and simply hanging around for window shopping and enjoying the multicuisine on offer.

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More than three of each four women residents of International Hostel visit any one of three places, namely the Sukhna Lake, Sector 8 Market and the Alante Mall, for recreation, entertainment and shopping/eating. The hostellers' fourth popular destination for amusements and entertainment has been Sector 17, the City Centre. Once, Sector 17 Market was the most popular visiting destination among the boys and girls students staying in different hostels at Panjab University campus. However, with the emergence of Shopping Mall culture in the City and its surroundings coupled with the availability of motorized personal vehicles with hostellers, it has lost its attraction, especially among young girls and boys. Only thirteen of the total 169 respondents visited Sector 17 market frequently. Of the remaining 26 respondents, six preferred eating joints in Sector 26, four the Indian Coffee House, seven the Pinjore Gardens, and nine the Kasauli hill station. The former two were located inside Chandigarh, and the latter two were outside Chandigarh in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. A few respondents mentioned the Rock Garden and the Rose Garden as their preferred places.

The women residents of the hostel, Indian and non-Indian, were also asked to state their preferences for sightseeing locations/places during vacations. They were asked to limit their discretion in order up to the third place. Unfortunately, the spatial scale of their preferred sites differed from as large as the region/zone (e.g. Northeast), state (e.g. Kerala), Sub-region (Ladakh), and forested area in the river delta (e.g. Sunderban) to a particular city (e.g. Agra). Since the spatial scale of locations/places differs widely, it may be possible for us to pinpoint the most preferred locations/places at a similar spatial scale.

Interestingly, the maximum respondents reported Kerala as the first and the second and Goa as the third preferred destination for sightseeing. Northeast India, especially Assam and Sikkim, is registered as the second-best choice after Kerala in all three orders (first, second, and third). The third position jointly goes to Goa and Kashmir Valley. Interestingly, Goa is reported as the third choice under the second option and the first under the third option (Table 5). Under the first choice, fifth, sixth and eighth positions have been accorded to Ladakh, Mumbai and Andaman & Nicobar Islands, respectively. It is abundantly clear from the above discussions on sightseeing preferences of the hostellers in International Hostel that the locations/places/areas having natural scenic beauties are the most preferred sightseeing destinations. If we add Shimla, Kullu, and Manali from Himachal Pradesh, Sunderban from West Bengal, and Dehradun from Uttarakhand, 80.0 per cent of the respondents registered their first preference and about 75.0 per cent their second preference for places having natural scenic beauty.

For the remaining 20.0 per cent of respondents, places of religious (e.g. Pushkar, Mathura and Benaras) or historical (e.g. Agra, New Delhi) importance and metropolitan cities (e.g. Bengaluru) made the first preference. Notably, the hostel residents from abroad find interest in visiting the Golden Temple at Amritsar. On the whole, places of natural beauty distantly followed by religious and historical importance made the preferred sightseeing locations.

**Table 5: Preferred locations/places during vacations of the Boarders in International Girls Hostel, 2020**

Sr. No.	Preferred location/area/place to visit	Preference		
		First	Second	Third
01	Kerala	21 (23.0)	15 (17.0)	08 (9.0)
02	North East India (especially Assam & Sikkim)	11 (12.0)	14 (15.0)	14 (15.0)
03	Kashmir Valley (J & K)	08 (9.0)	04 (5.0)	08 (9.0)
04	Goa	08 (9.0)	12 (13.0)	15 (17.0)
05	Ladakh (J & K)	07 (8.0)	10 (11.0)	05 (6.0)
06	Mumbai (Maharashtra)	07 (8.0)	04 (5.0)	05 (6.0)
07	Pushkar (Rajasthan)	06 (7.0)	08 (9.0)	05 (6.0)
08	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	05 (6.0)	01 (1.0)	04 (4.0)
09	Bengaluru (Kernataka)	04 (4.0)	-	05 (6.0)
10	Shimla, Kullu, Manali (Himachal Pradesh)	03 (3.0)	01 (1.0)	08 (9.0)
11	Any part of India	03 (3.0)	02 (2.0)	04 (4.0)
12	Puducherry	02 (2.0)	02 (2.0)	-
13	Agra/Mathura/Benaras (Uttar Pradesh)	05 (6.0)	06 (7.0)	04 (4.0)
14	Sunderban (West Bengal)	-	03 (4.0)	-
15	Dehradun (Uttarakhand)	-	02 (2.0)	-
16	South India	-	02 (2.0)	-
17	Amritsar (Punjab)	-	02 (2.0)	-
18	New Delhi (NCT of Delhi)	-	02 (2.0)	04 (4.0)
19	Patna Sahib (Bihar)	-	-	01 (1.0)
<b>Total</b>		<b>90 (100.0)</b>	<b>90 (100.0)</b>	<b>90 (100.0)</b>

Source: Based on Field Work 2019-2020

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the percentage of total preferences

### Conclusions

The dominant majority of women hostellers residing in the International Hostel of Panjab University, Chandigarh, belonged to neighbouring states of Panjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and NCT of Delhi. Only a miniscular number of seven women hostellers making less than one-tenth of total residents, comprises foreign nationals. The nomenclature of the hostel is thus a misnomer. A substantial number of resident students originally belonged to other states, especially Punjab but were previously studying in Colleges/institutes located in Chandigarh. The same is true for nearly half of the foreign nationals residing in the International hostel.

Most residents preferred sun-facing rooms as they found it convenient to dry their clothes on the balcony, especially during the monsoon and winter seasons. The following preferred location was for the lawn facing rooms with a beautiful garden. While the dominant majority of hostellers did not fear moving anywhere inside the hostel/campus/city, several students feared specific locations. The three feared going to the balcony of their hostel rooms at night, thirty-one considered the gate near the Alumni house unsafe, eight were afraid of the hostel's 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> floors, fifteen found the University of the Institute of Engineering and Technology (UIET)

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unsafe for an evening walk, for eleven slum area in Sector 25 was a dangerous place, and a few were uneasy with the thought that City's cremation ground is near to their hostel. The majority of the residents considered it unsafe to go out of the hostel after 9.0 pm. They believed that Panjab University's South Campus is insecure compared to the North campus. Interestingly, several girls found them safer in the company of male friends during the late evening hours and late-night than being alone or with their female friends.

Ninety per cent of the girls preferred to visit places within Chandigarh. Only 10.0 per cent or eleven of the total 169 hostel resident students like to visit Pinjore Garden, a tourist spot in Haryana, or Kasauli, a small hill station in Himachal Pradesh, for recreation and entertainment. Within Chandigarh, the Sukhna Lake, Sector 8 Market, the Alante Mall and Sector 17, the City Centre, were the most preferred places for recreation, entertainment and shopping/eating.

The maximum respondents reported Kerala as the first and the second and Goa as the third preferred destination for sightseeing. Northeast India, especially Assam and Sikkim, is registered as the second-best choice after Kerala in all three orders (first, second, and third). The third position jointly goes to Goa and Kashmir Valley. On the whole, places of natural beauty distantly followed by religious and historical importance made the preferred sightseeing locations.

Finally, the study recommends planning and designing safe public spaces for women and girls should analyze the various uses of public spaces, especially regarding who uses them, when, and how long. Hence, the planning and designing of safe public spaces for women and girls require constant attention and evaluation of the social and physical implications for the entire planning and design process. The women and girls will not use spaces where they fear or experience violence. The specific safety needs of women and girls are necessary to be incorporated into all infrastructural geographic planning and design (especially in the case of hostels on campus) to create women-friendly spaces. These aspects include (i) easy access to and from the campus, (ii) ease of movement within both campuses, (iii) good lighting, (iv) clear, well-kept paths for ease of movement, and (v) general visibility of the entire space.

*Acknowledgements:* I express my gratitude to my revered teacher Professor Gopal Krishan for suggesting the theme and for constant motivation, guidance and support throughout the process of writing this paper. Thanks are also due to the anonymous referee of the journal for rendering useful suggestions that helped me to make the paper focused and sharp.

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