



*Absence of decisive methods to incorporate manhole into pavement stumps pavement makers and pedestrians alike*



*Manhole caught betwixt the pavement and the road; two mutually exclusive levels*



*Magnum mismatch between round manholes and square tiles that plagues our city*

# circle in the square: the maladjusted manhole

As part of the Power of Seeing Project, where we detect one feature at a time that might be contributing to the chaos in our city, we will today look at the maladjusted manhole. The manhole, a window to a seamy under-city that we are connected to, but know very little about, seems to be in discordance with the scheme of things on the ground level.

## POWER OF SEEING

**Navtej Johar**

Actually, the idea of a manhole is loaded, and for good reason, a cause for discomfort. At a later date, I would like to invite experts to talk of the politics - almost akin to caste politics - of this 'inconvenient truth' that runs under the city: an elaborate labyrinth of 5,600 km of sewers with about 1.5 lakh manholes, which flushes 2,781 million litres of sewage that Delhi generates daily; but at this point, I will limit myself to its very superficial signifier of this 'under-city' that carries my/our ordure down-river somewhere: the manhole.

Of all urban elements, the manhole and the storm drains seem to be particularly maladjusted in our cities, and totally shrouded by indecision. Although they cause accidents, and even deaths, each year, no decisive method seems to have been collectively devised to find a solution to comprehensively incorporate the manhole into the scheme of things at the ground level.

In this column, I would like to cite examples of how the manhole is maladjusted and adds to chaos. It is not uncommon to see a raised manhole sticking out like a stub on a carriage way. It is a little bump on the road, which may seem negligible, but can prove to be a road block. Somewhere, we have become conditioned to accept such minor deterrents and overlook them with a classic shrug of a shoulder with the '*ki pharak paida hai*' attitude. But it does matter. These little stubs that appear abruptly on roads can actually prove fatal, apart from slowing down traffic and abetting traffic-jams. It is not just vertical obstructions on the road or the vehicle(s) in front of you that hamper traffic flow, but it is also the quality of the levelling of the road that you are driving on. Smooth levelled roads with no obstructions of any kind, minor or major,

are imperative to the smooth and speedy flow of traffic. And if traffic jams are a concern, then we also need to look at the ground below for solutions.

Another common fact pertaining to the maladjustment of the manholes is their placement, as though they were an afterthought! City planning obviously involves a synchronicity between various grids of operations that make a city, that is, water, transport, electricity, drainage, telephone, *et cetera*. When the labyrinth of drains below and the grid of roads above does not match, then the manhole ends up falling between the pavement and the road and has to deal with two levels. As simple as it may sound, there never can be a happy meeting ground between the two. The manhole that is shared by two levels will either cause a dip in the pavement or a rise on the carriage way, in both cases becoming an obstruction to flow of traffic, remaining a constant irritant.

There is no doubt that coordination between different departments responsible for various civic amenities is a mammoth task, but they still have to find ways to work in tandem, in order to complete jobs that are being done for the convenience of the citizens. New Delhi is virtually being paved anew; new pavements, however debatable, are being constructed all over. But the paving does not concern itself with the treatment of the area surrounding storm drains and manholes. To date, no effective ways of framing the manhole seem to have been devised. The manhole remains an enigma, shrouded by indecisiveness that disables any adequate action. The new pavements are punctuated with either abrupt dips, or a mound of rubble, or else left with a gaping hole, wherever a storm drain or manhole is encountered.

In most cases, the manholes happen to be circular in shape, but these fancy tiles that are being used to beautify the city are square. And this takes the profound question of the 'circle in the square' to yet another insurmountable dimension. Till our city invests in tools that will cut the tiles to shape (see *FC* July 2008 issue), the framing of the round manholes will be either left to improvisation or '*jugaad*', as we have become synonymous with, or else left untreated.

Each of these examples cited here surrounding the manhole are but minor deterrents to the smooth flow of city life. And each requires just a little thought and attention to detail to respectfully incorporate the manhole into our ground reality.



*The Power of Seeing is a Studio Abhyas project initiated by dancer and yoga exponent Navtej Johar. It questions the absence of the human body as a central point of reference in urban design, making our cities inconvenient, unsafe and hazardous. Log onto [www.abhyastrust.org](http://www.abhyastrust.org).*



**Storm drain left unpaved collects rubble in the middle of an otherwise perfectly paved pavement**



**Raised manhole on road - a traffic hazard**



**At home and happy - a well adjusted manhole off Africa Avenue that adds to the order around**