Urban Navigations

politics, space and the city in south asia

Editors
Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria
Colin McFarlane
Urban Navigations
Cities and the Urban Imperative

Series Editor: Sujata Patel, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad

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Urban Navigations
Politics, Space and the City in South Asia

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<tr>
<td>ANVC</td>
<td>Achik National Volunteer Council</td>
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<td>APHLC</td>
<td>All Party Hill Leaders Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDA</td>
<td>Bangalore Development Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>BMC</td>
<td>Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BWSSSB</td>
<td>Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI(M)</td>
<td>Communist Party of India (Marxist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRPC</td>
<td>Code of Criminal Procedure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDA</td>
<td>Delhi Development Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLS</td>
<td>Department of Land Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMA</td>
<td>District Metering Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DWM</td>
<td>Delhi Waste Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DYFI</td>
<td>Democratic Youth Forum of India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EWS</td>
<td>Economically Weaker Sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FKJGP</td>
<td>Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, Garo People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBWASP</td>
<td>Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HNLC</td>
<td>Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPKF</td>
<td>Indian Peace Keeping Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JI</td>
<td>Jhuggi Jhompri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNNURM</td>
<td>Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KSU</td>
<td>Khasi Students Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KUIDFC</td>
<td>Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development Finance Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPG</td>
<td>Liquefied Petroleum Gas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTTE</td>
<td>Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD</td>
<td>Municipal Corporation of Delhi</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoEF</td>
<td>Ministry of Environment and Forests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPD</td>
<td>Master Plan for Delhi</td>
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<tr>
<td>MQM</td>
<td>Muhajir Qaumi Movement</td>
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<td>MQM</td>
<td>Muttahida Qaumi Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>NBBBS</td>
<td>Nepal Basobas Basti Bikas Samaj</td>
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<td>NBBSS</td>
<td>Nepal Basobas Basti Samrakchan Samaj</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCTD</td>
<td>National Capital Territory of Delhi</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDMC</td>
<td>New Delhi Municipal Corporation</td>
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<td>NMES</td>
<td>Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRN</td>
<td>Non-Resident Nepali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCN</td>
<td>Peitgnor Cable News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PET</td>
<td>Polyethylene Terephthalate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIL</td>
<td>Public Interest Litigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLACE</td>
<td>Participatory Local Area Capital Expenditure</td>
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<td>PM</td>
<td>Particulate Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Public–Private Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PVC</td>
<td>Polyvinyl Chloride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RWA</td>
<td>Residents Welfare Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RWS</td>
<td>Residents' Welfare Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAARC</td>
<td>South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAPRC</td>
<td>Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA</td>
<td>Sri Lankan Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLAF</td>
<td>Sri Lankan Air Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLN</td>
<td>Sri Lankan Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TULF</td>
<td>Tamil United Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ULB</td>
<td>Urban Local Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTHR</td>
<td>University Teachers for Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLR</td>
<td>Vishnumati Link Road</td>
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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria and Colin McFarlane

Conceptualising the City in South Asia

We are witnessing a new, globally circulating imaginary of the South Asian city. India’s embrace of a globalised consumer culture, controversies over outsourcing, the US-led ‘war on terror’, and more recently, the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008 and the box office success of Slumdog Millionaire in 2009 have brought unprecedented attention to South Asian urban landscapes. Through iconic images of call centres, shopping malls and burning buildings, the diverse urban spaces of cities such as Bangalore, New Delhi, Karachi, and Mumbai are now on the worldwide journalistic, policy and popular culture ‘map’. How are we to make sense of this unprecedented attention being directed at urban South Asia? Does it reflect something new in these cities, such as reconfigured urban landscapes and transnational connections, or does it reflect merely momentary prominence in a fickle world imaginary, a chance conjunctural alignment of South Asian urban transformations and Euro-American policy priorities? Is this attention animated by new urban arrangements that urban South Asia might offer as a model to the rest of the world, or is this no more than a passing phase? Whatever their answers, these questions demonstrate the need for a renewed attempt at a scholarly engagement with contemporary urbanism in South Asia; it seems there has never been a greater imperative to critically investigate the complex processes underlying the making of city spaces and everyday urban life in India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

Ironically, transnational popular attention towards the urban South Asian landscape does not have its equivalent in the academic realm, where it remains a relatively unexplored topic. This volume brings together urban scholars from diverse disciplinary and analytic
perspectives that have in common a shared sensibility, a street-level emphasis on urban space-making that sees global processes as being contingent, and that privileges the complex, contradictory and multi-layered qualities of urban landscapes over neat stories of urban change. The articles in this volume are animated by actual experiences of the city rather than generalised theories of large-scale sociological processes. From this perspective the urban landscape becomes less an inert backdrop to social and political change than a site in which political contestations themselves are embedded. We hope this volume provides a sense not only of the new forms of urbanism emerging in contemporary South Asia, but also sheds light on new theoretical possibilities and directions to make sense of transnational processes and urban change.

This book argues that the new prominence of urban South Asia on the world imaginary raises important questions about how we know urbanism in South Asia. For instance, what is the episteme of the contemporary South Asian city and its historical antecedents? And, what is at stake in contemporary urban scholarship for knowing urbanism in South Asia? In this introductory article we attempt to address these questions as well as lay out the intellectual context of the book. First, we explore how transnational urban imaginaries might operate as lenses through which the politics of urban space is studied; second we outline what we mean by ‘urban navigations’ and elaborate on the relationship among urban contestations, space and knowledge; and third, we explore the implications of this book for thinking the city in South Asia comparatively.

The articles in this volume examine the diverse lived experiences of urban South Asia through a focus on contestations over urban space, resources and habitation. Each article provides new insights into the dynamics of urban space-making in the region, but taken together, this collection serves another purpose. In addition to describing instances of urban spatial politics, the articles put forward the argument that urban contestations are the grounds on which new urban knowledges are produced. Central to living in, coping with, managing, attempting to dominate or write about urban landscapes is a process of not just acquiring and producing knowledge of the city, but producing the city itself as a set of changing knowledges and imaginaries. In this way, urban spatial politics and urban knowledge might be understood together as acts of city navigation.
Transnational Urban Imaginaries

Transnational urban imaginaries produce fantasies. This should not be seen as a problem but rather a challenge. The value of urban scholarship — of South Asia and elsewhere — is not merely in trying to debunk fantasies or reveal their hidden agendas, but instead in its ability to critically engage with them and to see how they work in the world. Most importantly, urbanists have the tools to explore how fantasies shape lived experiences to produce the actual or ‘concrete’ urban landscape. Take, for instance, the globally circulating imaginary of cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai and Karachi. How these cities are popularly understood around the world now is radically different compared to a generation ago. Images of call centres, shopping malls and terrorist strikes conjure a city of dynamism, movement and change. Global business culture, consumerism and violence have merged to form a new fantasy of urban South Asia, wherein these cities are imagined as spaces of action. This imagined ‘city of action’, as we call it, overlaps with, if not replaces, the older imagination of urban South Asia dominated by tropes of poverty and despair.¹ This imaginary, which can be called a ‘city of stasis’, conjures a lethargic and passive urban landscape that neither threatens the First World nor offers any potential models for urban living in the future. In the contemporary era, however, images of the poor, hungry and homeless no longer have the same currency within worldwide media circulation. Poverty persists in this new South Asian city of action, but it now indexes potential for growth and progress. As something with which the new globalised consumer citizen of the Third World is juxtaposed, material lack no longer suggests the need for charity but now represents a promise — the first step on the road to progress, the potential for a better future. The city of action is thus potentially threatening to places elsewhere — in the form of exported terrorism — but, in its seeming inexorable movement towards accommodation within a world capitalist system, also has the potential to achieve a familiar western globalised modernity as well.

The prominence of the global imaginaries of urban South Asia has an additional significance: cities, as recent writings on urban

¹ Our concept of a ‘city of action’ is related to, but quite distinct from, Jim Masselos’ The City in Action: Bombay Struggles for Power (2008).
imaginaries show (Ginar and Bender 2007; Huyssen 2009), are lived through the diverse ways in which they are conceptualised. Not only do imaginaries shape how people understand their own city, but they also shape how cities are actually made. How people work, live and play in a city, as well as how a city should look, how local government should function and what kinds of development should be prioritised are all shaped by urban imaginaries. This is no more apparent than in Karachi, whose inhabitants must deal not only with the material realities of everyday violence and infrastructural deficiencies, but also with a powerful transnational imagination of Karachi as a dystopic city. For instance, in their account of the charitable work of the Edhi Foundation, whose tentacles spread across Karachi's vast urban landscape, Oskar Verkaaiik and Yasmin Jaffri (this volume) provide a compelling counter-narrative to the dominant framing of Karachi as an unlivable urban space. This work, along with Huma Yusuf's chapter on contemporary Karachi residents' use of the past to make sense of a tense present, shows how abstract concerns such as 'what does it mean to be a Karachiite?' are acts of urban navigation that are just as vital as the informal acquisition of resources and spaces of habitation. Verkaaiik, Jaffri and Yusuf's writing also suggests that urban imaginaries are the grounds of contestation over a city's identity. This is a theme addressed by Amita Baviskar in her vivid account of the run-up to the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi. As Baviskar shows, transnational urban imaginaries and subsequent conflicts over the 'branding' of a city are inseparable from the material processes that go into the making of urban landscapes. Baviskar's work shows how the goal for urbanists should not be to simply point out the fallacy of urban fantasies but instead initiate analyses of the realities they produce.

We begin with this discussion of transnational urban imaginaries for an additional reason: the inability of popular writings to accurately capture the dynamics of life in South Asian cities is in some ways a reflection of scholarly difficulties in conceptualising material urban processes in the region. Take, for instance, the film Slumdog Millionaire, directed by Danny Boyle, which came out as this book was being written. The unprecedented worldwide success of this genre of film, set in India, produced a swirl of commentary, critique and celebration that become a phenomenon in itself. The artistic or intellectual merits of the film aside, the critical response was quite
Introduction

significant. For, both its celebrants and detractors saw the film not as a love story set in a contested and diversely lived city, but as a rags-to-riches tale that reflects the ascendancy of global capital. The fact that commentators writing from diverse perspectives arrived at the same interpretation speaks to a larger problem relating to how scholars and critics understand urban landscapes more generally; how can we (at least momentarily) bracket the available narratives of urban transformation and understand the actually occurring processes in urban South Asia in terms of the national, regional and transnational histories and trajectories that might be different, if inextricably connected to, those found in Europe and North America? We believe that the challenge, and promise, of urban scholarship on cities in flux is precisely in their unfinished quality. We cannot foretell the urban arrangements that, while immanent, have yet to transpire, but we can attempt to make sense of the contemporary moment in all its complexity and possibilities.

Navigating the City

There is now a rich seam of literature within urban studies that seeks to develop an understanding of the economic, political and social life of the city predominantly through the lens of neoliberalism and globalisation. Writers in these fields often focus on how the city might be constructed with reference to foreign investment (Grant and Nijman 2002, 2004) or state withdrawal from public services and basic infrastructures in favour of high-end globally oriented services (Banerjee-Guha 2007). Contributors to this volume do not contradict these formulations, but do offer a different approach that emphasises the contingent particularities of urban transformation in practice. Indeed, several contributors view their grounded accounts of the political, economic or social life of the city in practice as an alternative to the increasing predominance of accounts of neoliberalising or globalising city. This approach resonates with, for instance, volumes such as Patel and Masselos (2003), Hust and Mann (2005) and de Neve and Donner (2006), that demonstrate the particular, and at times limited, impact of economic liberalisation on urban India.

This volume argues that urban transformation must be understood through grounded research on the politics of urban space. The sense that neoliberalism and globalisation — often viewed
as key drivers of the political, economic and social life of cities in South Asia — need to be destabilised and contextualised in relation to the diverse agents and practices that produce the city, echoes an emerging trend in urban scholarship. For example, McGuirk and Dowling (2009), writing in the context of Australian urbanism, seek to conceive neoliberalism not as a universal and coherent project, or even as a generalised hegemonic process characterised by local contingencies, but as a loose collection of urban logics and processes that may or may not structure urban change in different places. They seek to conceive urban change through the lens of ‘situated assemblages’ of different logics, actors, histories, projects, and practices that seek not to reify neoliberalism as hegemonic and ascendant, but as one set of possibilities among many. This argument suggests an inherently empirical focus, a call to examine practices ‘on the ground’ in a way that remains ‘open to the practical co-existence of multiple political projects, modes of governance, practices and outcomes generated by and enacted through’ specific urban strategies (ibid.: 4). Similarly, this volume argues for an approach to transformations in city space as a contingent set of arrangements produced by a diverse mix of historical and contemporary actors and processes. Through an emphasis on varied political projects, rationalities of rule and ways of inhabiting the city that produce the urban landscape, contributors not only reveal the urban processes that exceed neoliberalism, but demonstrate a wide range of possibilities for knowing the city.

This book suggests that a more productive view of urban landscapes is one that instead takes a palimpsestic view of the city, i.e., a view of the city that emphasises how the present experience is simultaneously shaped by accumulations of the past and varied practices in the present (cf. Çinar and Bender 2007; Huyssen 2009). It is by looking at how people navigate the multiple layers the city’s built environment, forms of politics and ways of knowing, that we can understand some of the seeming contradictions in the way people engage with and make meaning from, for instance, liberalisation (e.g., articles by Andrew Nelson, Malini Ranganathan, Vinay Gidwani, and Bharati Chaturvedi, this volume). It is with this view in mind that one of the organising themes of this book is urban navigations. By navigations, we mean how people make sense of and work their way through diverse urban environments, often in contexts of deep political, economic and social inequality. The book explores how people navigate the diverse physical spaces of their cities, as well as
how they navigate the accumulated historical layers of the city that comprise the present. By navigating the city, we are referring to the ways in which different people actively move through, practice, cope with, seek to dominate, and learn how to live in the city. Navigation connotes the coordinates through which people move through the city, and the trajectories and tendencies — both contemporary and historical — that produce and contest urban space. The examples in the volume are wide ranging: from attempts to navigate the city through blurred distinctions of legality and illegality (D. Asher Ghertner), to people coping with livelihoods based on waste in Delhi (Gidwani and Bharati), to Karachiites making sense of the tense present through historical recreations of an idealized past (Huma Yusuf), or the role of cosmopolitanism as a resource for negotiating life in Shillong, north-east India (Daisy Hasan). These articles and more emphasise the range of ways in which contemporary city life is produced through contestations over what ways of knowing the city will remain useful or valid.

It is important to keep in mind that the production and contestation of urban knowledge does not take place in a vacuum. If the accounts in this book are grounded in everyday practices, they bring sharply into view a wide range of urban materialities through which the city becomes known. The urban navigations in this volume reveal a material geography of how things get done in the city. For instance, Gidwani and Bharati draw attention to how livelihoods depend on discarded plastics and other ‘waste’, Anand reveals the crucial role of pipes and water in mediating urban inequalities, Perera describes the performative role of new housing architectural aesthetics in the urban imagination, and both Anoma Pieris and Yusuf reveal the inescapably material geographies that constitute urban violence and war. In this sense, the book connects with a broader momentum in urban studies to ‘rematerialise’ the city, i.e. to attend to the crucial role of urban materials — housing, infrastructure, water, waste, internet, commodities, money, etc. — that shape and are shaped by political, economic and social processes in the city (e.g., Graham and Marvin 2001; Gandy 2008; Jacobs and Smith 2008 and McFarlane 2008). What this diverse work shows is how materials like sanitation blocks, water pipes, discarded plastics, guns, and internet cables play a central role in how cities are known, lived, imagined, and contested — in short, how they are navigated.
This volume’s focus on urban knowledge extends an important emerging trend in urban scholarship. Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik (2009: 12–13) have recently posed the idea of ‘urban infrapower’ as a way of understanding the entangled official and unofficial practices of the contemporary city. Put simply, ‘urban infrapower’ refers to the way things actually get done in the city. It is animated by the ‘urban specialist’, a term Hansen and Verkaaik aptly use to describe the people who deftly navigate the legal and illegal realms of the city: ‘the hustler, the hard man, the wheeler-dealer’ (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009: 15). Although rarely catching the attention of the media, and even lesser so, scholarship, these men (for, this is a highly gendered kind of urban practice) are not minor characters but in some way are the central protagonists of the city. For they are the people who, ‘by virtue of their reputation, skills and imputed connections provide services, connectivity and knowledge to ordinary dwellers in slums and popular neighbourhoods’ (ibid.: 16; see also Ferguson 1999). Hansen and Verkaaik’s writing is significant because it directs us away from ‘informality’ — a concept whose misleading connotations of distinctiveness have lead to academic dead-ends (e.g., Hart 2006) — to the more flexible realm of urban knowledge. The articles in this volume show how tracing the formation of urban knowledge, like ‘urban infrapower’, will enable the urbanist to weave in and out of the formal and informal domains of the city. For instance, as Urmi Sengupta (this volume) show us in her study of Kathmandu, gaining access to and creating knowledge of the city is an essential form of political practice for slum organisations. In this case, organisations for slum residents’ rights have become increasingly proactive in documenting settlements through digital mapping and household surveys, which they use to successfully negotiate with local ward offices. The article by Hasan, although in a different register, shows how particular middle-class urban activists in Shillong deploy a progressive imaginary of the cosmopolitan city — the mobilisation of an alternative knowledge of the city — as a basis for an inclusive urban identity in the face of xenophobic ethno-religious movements.

Comparative Urban Analyses

As a collection of articles on diverse urban environments, this book presents the question of how we might consider comparison as a
means of producing urban knowledge. The comparative element matters to this volume in two key senses. First, for the individual authors, comparison features both temporally — comparing different moments of urban production and contestation — and spatially, comparing different trajectories of urban production across cities in South Asia. Second, the book as a whole presents the question of how comparison functions as a means of conceptualising urbanism in South Asia. In this latter regard, it contributes to an emerging agenda in urban studies around urban comparison that seeks to theorise the city outside of the Euro-American context (e.g., Robinson 2006).

In all the comparative talk of India and Pakistan — whether in scholarly, public or political domains that certainly go well beyond the theme of urbanism — we see relatively few attempts to bring other South Asian countries into broader conversations about South Asia, a lacuna particularly jarring in relation to cities. The history here is clearly part geopolitical: tensions between India and Pakistan drive much comparative talk about them, whether amongst political scientists, in the media, or between political agencies. But there is also a deep set of structural reasons at work here to which this volume is itself testament. For instance, despite our efforts, we could not secure contributions on urban Bangladesh, or chapters on cities in Pakistan other than Karachi. At the same time, getting past the sheer volume of potential contributors working on urban India posed quite a difficulty when we issued our call. In addition, the focus of potential contributors was often on the larger cities, in particular Mumbai and Delhi.

This being said, we believe that the articles in this volume reflect a wide range of urban contexts, disciplines and histories, and the book as a whole presents a diversity of South Asian urbanisms in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India. Authors in this volume consistently deploy comparative moves themselves, both temporally — for instance in the comparison between colonial and postcolonial debates on waste in Delhi (Gidwani and Chaturvedi) — and spatially, in the charting of war and violence in different Sri Lankan cities (Sasanka Perera). As a whole, the book offers possibilities for readers to consider what is specific to certain cities and what might reflect a larger trend, as well as what comparison prompts for how we understand the constitution of urban epistemologies.

We should make clear here that the approach in this book differs from some recent attempts in urban studies to compare the city
outside the ‘West’, such as Josef Gulger (2004). Gulger’s volume seeks to trace the emergence and nature of world cities in the world’s poorer countries by focusing on ‘second-tier’ cities. The book builds on world city literature by considering not just the economic, but also the political and cultural dimensions of world cityness. However, its strengths notwithstanding, the book remains focused on a narrow range of particular valuations of world cityness: their role as command functions and key locations for finance and specialised services for firms, the location of international or whether or not they contain their home country’s stock markets.

Certainly, as Gulger points out, much of the world city literature ignores what goes on outside cities such as London, Tokyo and New York. And yet, there are certain limitations to this critique. The goal of world city literature is not to understand cities per se, but the nature and extent of international connections among cities that is almost by definition exclusive. Instead, the problem lies in where the urbanists’ focus should lie. In tracing the effect of transnational connections on cities should we focus on the ‘formal’ economy of the elite — the banking system, stock market and corporate headquarters — which Gulger and his world city interlocutors see as indicators of globalness? Or, might we instead focus on the mundane economies of the city and the practices of both the rich and poor that, while being ‘informal’ or even illegal, nevertheless comprise the bulk of the everyday life of a city (e.g., Simone 2004). For, as the contributors to this book show, it is in the ordinary negotiations over how the city works, for instance, how water connections are made (see Anand, this volume) or how plastic waste is attributed value (see Gidwani and Chaturvedi, this volume), as much as in the decisions of corporate elites, that ‘globality’ comes into being.

More generally, the formulation of comparison that is deployed in this book attempts to move beyond a tendency in urban studies to make generalisations based predominantly on understandings of the North American or Western European city (see, for example, Robinson 2006). This tendency is sometimes explicit, as in the ‘LA School’ (Soja 1989: 223) claim that Los Angeles is the ‘epitomising world city’, a ‘paradigmatic city’, ‘the archetype of an emergent post-modern urbanism’ (Dear 2000: 99), a city often depicted as, in Keil’s (1998: xiv) critical discussion, ‘the archetypal twentieth century form’ (on Las Vegas, see Curry and Kenney 1999; Dear 2002; Gottdeiner, Collins and Dickens 1999; on Miami, see Nijman 2000; also Scott 1999;
Scott and Soja 1996; Storper 1999). This rhetorical move, which some claim blurs the link between urban theory and publicity (Beauregard 2003), diminishes the analytic possibilities of comparative study. As Beauregard argues, ‘by holding one city up as a model, by suggesting a universal narrative, comparative analysis [in this vein] is reduced to a perfunctory and unenlightening assessment of how the “others” compare to the paradigmatic city’ (ibid.: 190).

By putting together studies of varied cities, a goal of this book is to shift urban studies away from this emphasis on charismatic urban paradigms and to allow new kinds of analyses to emerge from diverse urban contexts; for, the pressing question for urban studies in South Asia and elsewhere is how best to investigate urban processes using the valuable analytic tools that have emerged from the prominent cities of the world while avoiding ‘methodological projection’ whereby experiences of ‘the periphery are framed by concepts, debates and research strategies from the metropole’ (Connell 2007: 64). Indeed, given that the authors in this volume pay particular attention to contingency and specificity in the urbanisms they examine, whatever generalisations that might emerge do so not in spite of the differences between the cities, but through them. What these different narratives of urban change show is the incessant struggle to know the city either as a means of getting by, or as a means of dominating the trajectories of urban change.

Transnational Cities

This volume’s focus on urban navigations also challenges some assumptions in recent scholarship on the role of transnational processes in contestations over urban space. The last decade of research on South Asian cities, like research on cities in the South more generally, has been profoundly shaped by the idea that the late twentieth and early twenty-first century represents a ‘globalized’ era (e.g., Shaw 2007). This literature suggests that urban landscapes and political economy are undergoing a massive restructuring owing to new transnational connections. This perspective offered by globalisation is understood as a reflection of changed urban conditions characterized, for instance, by increased transnational connections in terms population movements, capital exchanges, forms of governance and activist alliances. Although there is some confusion over what ‘globalisation’ means, studies conceptualised in terms of the ‘city in
an era of globalisation’ usually refer to both the ideological ascendency of a transnational economic arrangement in which states’ primary roles are to facilitate capital movement over welfare concerns (i.e., neoliberalism) as well as globally-scaled cultural and political phenomena. In this way, the global city is conceptualised as an urban landscape in flux (Brenner and Keil 2006) that requires an analytic perspective that does not take the geographic space of the city, and most of all the nation-state, as the taken-for-granted scale of analysis.

It is often assumed that the global city analytic perspective is inspired by the new interconnectedness of cities around the world. In this way globalisation and its conceptual corollary, neoliberalism, is understood to produce new transnational connections that intensify, if not create, contestations over urban space and livelihood (e.g., Bannerjee-Guha 2009). For example, Leela Fernandes (2006) shows how economic liberalisation has weakened poor populations’ claims to the city because urban elites, out of a desire to attract foreign capital, feel the need to reconfigure urban landscapes according to a transnational norm. While this may be the case, it is misleading to assume that the violent removal of the poor from India’s cities is a late twentieth century phenomenon (cf. Tarlo 2003; Kidambi 2007). Indeed, studies of global connections to contemporary urban contestations might benefit from a longer historical view of struggles over slums in urban India. As struggles in Bombay from the 1960s through the 1970s over the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre’s plans to expand on land designated as a slum (Arputham 2008; see also Deshpande 1976) show, much before economic liberalisation, elite desires to be a part of global modernity have resulted in the political marginalisation of the poor.

The explanatory potential of the global city concept aside (for, when was a city such as Bombay or Karachi ever *not* global?), it appears that there is an assumption in the global cities literature that pre-globalisation studies only had the city or nation as the scalar frame of reference. Did the global city concept put the global into city research, or might it be possible that the ‘global’ was already present in urbanisation studies, albeit under a different epistemological guise? Modernisation and urbanisation was, of course, always understood in globalised terms (Tsing 2000). For instance, when the conveners of the landmark 1962 Berkeley conference on urbanisation in India described the event as ‘India’s Urban Future’ (Turner 1962),
this was surely not meant to refer to a localised process but to Indian cities’ dense involvement with a global phenomenon. Indeed, the larger premise of the studies of sociological and demographic changes due to urbanisation in India was that they were investigations of local instances of a globally-scaled process (cf. Ghurye 1962; Rao 1970; Madan 1973; D’Souza 1977; Pocock [1960]1992).

Like their globalisation studies counterparts of today, few researchers claimed to be documenting a uniform experience, instead claiming they were studying how this large-scale process plays out in different contexts. For instance, by asking the classic question of urbanisation studies, ‘what happens to people’ (Rao 1991: 5) in the city, scholars were also implicitly addressing a larger concern: what happens to people when they participate in a world modernity (see also Ferguson 1999). In this way, ‘local’ sociological questions associated with post-independence urbanisation studies, such as whether caste gets transformed into class, whether joint families get replaced by the nuclear family and how religious practices change in urban contexts were, in a way, also questions of global significance. Seemingly old-fashioned, these are nevertheless similar, if reformulated, to questions in studies of globalisation and urban change. We might no longer see studies framed around the question of whether caste turns into caste, but we do see studies of urban caste-based political mobilisation; the city is no longer understood as secularising engine, but we do see studies of the globalised city as a space producing new kinds of religious conflict and chauvinism; while few scholars would accept a modernisation teleology implied by the joint family to nuclear family question, studies of new subjectivities produced by a globalised consumer culture (and its effects on family arrangements) share a sense that these are local sociological manifestations of a globally-encompassing process.

It is by now a truism that the lived experience of cities in South Asia, as elsewhere, is shaped by transnational connections. But does this mean our analysis should be framed around an idea of a single, globally-encompassing process, as is implied by writings on cities in a ‘globalised era’? Perhaps, as Anna Tsing (2000) suggests in her discussion of the parallels between talk of globalisation and modernisation in the social sciences, the connection of greatest significance between writings on globalisation and writings on urbanisation is a shared propensity to see world-spanning processes as tools to explain local experiences. According to Tsing, talk of
an ‘era of globalization’ (2000: 328) — among scholars who would otherwise disavow their predecessors’ far-reaching claims of modernisation — reflects how ‘seductive’ (ibid.) the idea of world-wide processes is to social scientists. We might take this as a warning for urban writing: to be aware of allowing the ‘charisma of social science globalisms’ (ibid.: 330) to cloud the messy realities that contradict them. The point here is not that the ‘global’ concept lacks analytic potential or that we should do away with the globe as a scale of inquiry. This critique is instead intended to open new kinds of research agendas that entail a shift from seeing the global as a category with descriptive qualities to investigating ‘globe-making projects’ (ibid.: 335). For urban research specifically, this would mean moving away from seeing the ‘global city’ category as a descriptive term (as in the role a city plays in the transnational movement of capital) to a focus on ‘global’ or ‘world’ cities as a project that is continuously being made and contested over.

A number of contributors to this volume (Baviskar, Ghertner and Ranganathan) show that the ‘world class’ city is a new domain of struggle in South Asia. Studies such as these demonstrate the need to explore not the literal ‘globalness’ of cities, but how urban globality — or membership in a global urban modernity — is made. As an aspirational condition, rather than an empirical reality, ‘world class’ cities will necessarily entail conflicts over ‘dreams of a better life’ (Baviskar 2003: 97) among urban populations with highly differentiated access to power. Rather than assume that we know what a global city is, we might instead ask, how does the vision of a global city translate into actual changes in urban experiences? And, how do people engage with global visions, and how transnational processes are manipulated, transformed and productive of new effects and material conditions in specific places? It is through questions such as this that we might ‘investigate globalist projects and dreams without assuming that they remake the world just as they want’ (Tsing 2000: 330).

A number of contributors to this volume show how the dream of creating a ‘world class city’ is a significant new domain of contestation over land and resources. In this globally-oriented vision of the city, certain populations are rendered irrelevant. Less clear, however, are the particular mechanisms through which these populations are removed from the city. In Baviskar’s article on the transformations of New Delhi leading up to the 2010 Commonwealth Games, she shows how dramatic reconfigurations of the urban landscape — often
in direct contravention of the law as well as against all environmental and financial logic — are enabled by the organisers’ conflation of an abstract sense of ‘world class’-ness with patriotism. While specifically a study of an ‘event-in-the-making’, Baviskar’s work is also an investigation of the kind of ‘globalist project’ described above that powerfully shows how studies of urban political economy must also attend to the seemingly immaterial (in both senses of the word) realms of imagination, dream, aspiration, and anxieties. Relatedly, in his chapter on the juridical discourse on slums in New Delhi, Ghertner analyses the particular way the courts provide legal justification for slum removal. By moving away from broad-brush framings of the court’s slum demolition orders as simply anti-poor, he reveals some of the new legal mechanisms that deal with urban space. In this instance, a new legal view emerges that reinterprets nuisance law to see the slum itself, and not just the individuals living within them, as illegal, rather than its effect on the city (such as the garbage or pollution it is presumed to produce). Here, the globalist project to aesthetically reorder of the city to make it ‘world class’ are animated by nineteenth-century notions of the inherent immorality of the slum space itself.

Infrastructural development in South Asian cities has always been a product of the transnational movement of people, ideas and technology. A Persian water wheel pumped water through Shahjahanabad (Fisher 2009), while British engineers in the nineteenth century played an essential role in developing Calcutta’s sophisticated drainage system that continues to function today. However, as Nikhil Anand shows in his article, transnationalism matters not so much in the importation of foreign water technology, but in the way a particular fantasy of ‘world class’-ness shapes how state officials envision urban water distribution. Anand traces how some state officials, over the objections of engineers and local politicians, insist on major Indian metropolises having continuous, twenty-four hour, water supply. The goal of water conservation and the realities of how these cities are lived are disregarded in favour of a fantasised vision of how a ‘global’ city functions.

From Anand’s account, it is clear that ideas associated with neoliberalism and market liberalisation do not reflect a ‘rolling back’ of the state but a rearrangement of the relationship between the state and its citizens. As Ranganathan shows in her chapter on the introduction of ‘cost-recovery’ in Bangalore’s water provision, commercialisation does not reflect the removal of politics from the
sphere of urban infrastructure, in favour of the market, but the transformation of urban politics. Through a fine-tuned ethnographic study of Residents' Welfare Associations' engagement with the idea of commercialised water, Ranganathan shows how, ironically, parts of the population see paying for water as a way of gaining legitimacy in the city. Rather than representing a retreat of politics or the state, middle-class residents ironically see paying for water a way to legitimise their claims to city space and to enable greater access to state institutions.

By showing how Bangalore residents see water privatisation in terms of the relationships it produces with state institutions, Ranganathan inverts the underlying claim of neoliberalism to be anti-political, and purely market-related. For its advocates, the primary role of economic liberalisation is to add value and increase efficiency by introducing a new market-oriented ethic to society. The introduction of capital-intensive waste collection in New Delhi, for instance, was justified on the grounds that corporate involvement will improve this vital infrastructure by introducing new notions of waste as value. However, as Gidwani and Chaturvedi show in their chapter on New Delhi's vast population of the people who make a living collecting, trading and selling waste, the notion of garbage as wealth preceded the involvement of corporations. Given that the entry of large corporations was only made possible by massive state intervention, it appears that privatisation is not an appropriate word to describe the transformation, which seems to be less about new ideas of profit than a consolidation of control over a valuable product. Moreover, by ignoring the small-scale recyclers' highly developed skill at segregating plastic, paper and other waste products, capital intensive garbage collection practices are far more inefficient. In this way, Gidwani and Chaturvedi show, at stake in this project to make a 'world class' city is a struggle over knowing and navigating the city as well.

In his article on Kathmandu's new fortified enclaves for the wealthy, Nelson similarly shows how a fine-tuned ethnographic exploration of how people inhabit urban landscapes questions assumptions regarding how large-scale urban processes affect actual lived experience. Departing from studies that read enclaves in terms of the larger fragmented urban landscape it produces, Nelson explores the meaning people ascribe to the interior spaces of the enclave. Here, separate habitation is understood as separate
not just from the poverty and dirt of the outside urban world — as is usually the argument in related studies (e.g., Caldeira 2000; Falzon 2004) — but a separation from the messy and in their view, dysfunctional, politics of Nepal. In a profound irony, residents understand the highly exclusive space of the enclave to be their only hope to create a truly responsive democratic space. As this work shows, habitation is never simply about the question of where one lives, but how politics should be carried out and how one is oriented on a global scale. This point is made especially salient by Perera in his discussion of new wealthy enclaves in Colombo. As in Nelson’s account, the appeal of the enclaves lies in the separation it offers from the messy surrounding environment. But here, the significance of living in a gated community lies not in the physical security it offers, but in the dream of being in the world without having to leave Sri Lanka that it seems to satisfy.

We have organised the book into three parts. Part 1 focuses on ‘Contested Landscapes’ and draws out different ways in which urban space is produced out of struggle, whether in relation to the politics of slums and legality (Ghertner), trade in ‘waste’ (Gidwani and Chaturvedi), contestation around land (Sengupta), the discursive construction of ethnicity (Hasan) or in the remaking of the city for a globalised spectacle (Baviskar). Part 2, ‘Infrastructures and Materialities’, carries this theme of urban contestation into the realm of materiality more specifically, including the governance of water infrastructures (Ranganathan and Anand), and the production of elite urban aesthetics through new housing complexes (Perera and Nelson). Finally, Part 3, ‘Imagining the Urban’ turns to how imaginaries of violence, modernism and progressivism structure urban life (Yusuf, Jaffri and Verkaaik, and Pieris). Taken together, these three parts of the book — contestation, materiality, imaginary — focus on the different ways in which various groups, living in contexts of unequal power, resource and wealth, navigate the city through an always-in-process form of urban knowing and action.

References

Introduction

Part I: Contested Landscapes
The Nuisance of Slums: Environmental Law and the Production of Slum Illegality in India

D. Asher Ghertner

Between 1998 and the present, more than one million slum dwellers in Delhi have been displaced, a period during which the pace of slum demolition has increased starkly. The combined number of slum, or *jhuggi jhompri* (JJ), clusters demolished by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and Delhi Development Authority (DDA) over the five years leading up to 2000 (1995–99) rose more than tenfold over the next five years (2000–04) (Ghertner 2005). This increase is the direct outcome of the judiciary’s expanded role in demanding slum clearance. Whereas the decision to raze a slum was previously the almost exclusive domain of Delhi’s various landowning agencies, in particular the DDA, these wings of government now have little say in determining the legal and political status of such settlements. Instead, the primary avenue through which slums are demolished today begins when an association of property owners in a locality, called a Residents Welfare Association (RWA), files a writ petition requesting the removal of a neighbouring slum, proceeds with the court’s granting of the RWA’s request, and ends when the landowning agency abides by the court’s direction.

Whereas recent analyses of the courts’ slum-related decisions have attributed the current round of slum demolition to a new anti-poor judicial orientation (see Bhushan 2006; Ramanathan 2006; Roy 2006), in this article I seek to identify the legal and technical mechanisms

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1 This article is based on an earlier writing titled ‘An Analysis of New Legal Discourse Behind Delhi’s Slum Demolitions’, published in 2008 in *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(20): 57–66.
by which court-issued slum demolitions are actualised. That is, rather than attributing causality to a macro ‘class interest’ — an anti-poor or neoliberal bias within the judiciary — I will discern the evidentiary requirements the courts deem necessary for demonstrating a slum’s illegality. I do so by engaging in a discourse analysis of both (i) the orders and judgments of the Delhi High Court and Supreme Court of India related to slum demolition over the past 25 years approximately, as well as the (ii) original civil writ petitions filed in five different cases that directly led to the demolition of a slum in Delhi. By highlighting key words and phrases that arise within the proceedings of slum-related cases, I set out to show that the basic statement that ‘slums are illegal’ is a very recent juridical discourse, despite its widespread circulation in India today. I further argue that proving this statement in the courts rests on a less rigorous evidentiary procedure than other types of truth claims: to prove a slum’s illegality, one must demonstrate that it appears to be a nuisance. I find that the rise of court orders to demolish slums is occurring not simply because the judiciary is suddenly ‘anti-poor’, but more because of a reinterpretation of nuisance law, the main component of environmental law in India (Jain 2005). Nuisance has thus become the key legal term driving slum demolitions and has been incredibly influential in resculpting both Delhi’s residential geography and how the city’s future is imagined.

While the documents I examine here relate primarily to Delhi, rulings in the Supreme Court and High Courts establish precedent across the land, thus determining how cases pertaining to slums are to be judged in all cities. Therefore, in addition to making a set of specific claims about the discursive reconstitution of legality and citizenship in Delhi, I suggest a set of more far-reaching implications for Indian urbanism. In particular, I show how the category ‘nuisance’ is fundamentally aesthetic, tied to dominant perceptions of acceptable conduct and visual appearance. The ability to criminalise, punish and expel populations (of the poor, informal, migrant, etc.) that do not conform to the aesthetic norms of Indian cities — i.e., those that look like nuisances — hence presents a new, or at least newly significant, arena for urban struggle in the post-colonial Indian city. This is especially the case given the observation that India’s elite have cultivated a ‘world-class’ aesthetic that they are using to try to create ‘bourgeois cities’, largely through the language of ‘environmental
Th e Nuisance of Slums

improvement’ and ‘beautification’ (Chatterjee 2004: 143–44; Baviskar 2005; Fernandes 2006: xxii). Building on these studies, I show how the reinterpretation of nuisance law has reconstituted the meaning of ‘public interest’, defining distinctly (bourgeois) private interests as public matters and projecting a vision of urban order — i.e., a world-class aesthetic — founded on property ownership. Thus, I specifically show how Indian cities’ embourgeoisement is taking place not through a simple assertion of elite power, but rather through the more subtle production of a new aesthetic ordering of ‘the public’ and its ‘proper’ uses.

In section I, I proceed by describing the basis of nuisance law in India, with special emphasis on how it was understood and implemented through the 1980s and much of the 1990s. In section II, I analyse key rulings in the courts that led to a re-problematisation of ‘the slum’ in terms of nuisance in the early 2000s. In section III, I examine a set of recent petitions filed in the Delhi High Court praying for the removal of slums to show how the interpretation of nuisance has been used to mark informal settlements as polluting and thus illegal. Specifically, I describe how the courts have consolidated a ‘new nuisance discourse’ that codifies a world-class aesthetic and provides a visual basis for removing slums and visible signs of poverty. I conclude in section IV by drawing out the implications of this new nuisance discourse for the future of urban development in India.

I. The Foundations of Nuisance Law

A nuisance is legally defined as ‘any act, omission, injury, damage, annoyance or offense to the sense of sight, smell, hearing or which is or may be dangerous to life or injurious to health or property’ (Jain 2005: 97). In common law, nuisances are of two types: public and private, where the former is an ‘unreasonable interference with a right common to the general public’ and the latter is a ‘substantial and unreasonable interference with the use or enjoyment of land’ (ibid.). The primary statutes in the Indian legal system that provide channels to redress nuisance are Section 133 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (hereafter CRPC) and Section 91 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908. Section 133 CRPC was written more recently, with the intention of providing an independent, quick and summary remedy to public nuisance by empowering a magistrate to order its removal (Sengar 2007). The nuisances referred to in Section 133 include:
obstructions to a public place or way, trades or activities hazardous to the surrounding community, flammable substances, objects that could fall and cause injury, unfenced excavations or wells, or unconfined and dangerous animals. Nuisances are thus limited to two categories: (i) objects or possessions, and (ii) actions — categories that we will re-examine in section II below.

The landmark case pertaining to slum-related nuisance was decided in 1980 in Ratlam Municipal Council vs. Vardichan. In this case, the Ratlam Municipal Council was directed by a magistrate, empowered under Section 133 CRPC, to construct and improve drains in a municipal ward to eradicate nuisance caused by stagnant, putrid water. Following appeals in the lower and high courts, the Supreme Court declared Section 133 CRPC to be the primary remedial mechanism for dealing with public nuisance: 'Wherever there is a public nuisance, the presence of Section 133 CRPC must be felt and any contrary opinion is contrary to law'. The judge further stated that Section 133 CRPC should be the main channel by which courts ensure that municipal bodies carry out their duty to provide clean and safe environments for city residents.

In this judgment, the court also clarified that the municipal authorities and not slum dwellers are the party responsible for nuisances arising from slums with inadequate municipal services. The judgment explained:

[The grievous failure of local authorities to provide the basic amenity of public conveniences drives the miserable slum-dwellers to ease in the streets, on the sly for a time, and openly thereafter, because under Nature's pressure, bashfulness becomes a luxury and dignity a difficult art...Providing drainage systems...cannot be evaded if the municipality is to justify its existence.]

The removal of public nuisance in slum-related cases, then, takes place through the application of positive technologies (e.g., building drainage systems). That is, instead of removing or disciplining those denied adequate sanitation services, the government here should

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3 AIR 1980 SC 1622. See also, AIR 1979 SC 143, Govind Singh vs. Shanti Sarup.
4 Ibid.
operate through positive means to manage and mitigate waste and effluents, and thus improve the population subjected to the same. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the Ratlam decision set a precedent for upholding the statutory duties of municipal authorities to ensure public health, particularly that of slum residents.5

In this context, it is useful to examine the character of petitions filed during this same period by private RWAs seeking judicial intervention to address slum-related nuisances, the type of petition that has become a major instrument of slum demolition today. As an example, take the case of K. K. Manchanda vs. the Union of India, a matter that appeared before the Delhi High Court regularly until 2002 and that became the lead petition in a summary ruling of 63 related slum matters that we will discuss in detail in Section II.6 The petitioner, the Ashok Vihar RWA, submitted that residents were aggrieved by the squalid conditions of a vacant piece of land in front of their colony that, according to the zonal plan, was supposed to be a ‘Green Belt-cum-Community Park’. The petition states that the primary source of grievance is ‘public nuisance’ and ‘health hazard’ created by nearby slum dwellers’ use of this land as an ‘Open Public Lavatory’: ‘Adjacent to this Green Belt…there are large number of jhuggies and jhopries situated in the said vicinity…. [and that] people residing in these jhuggies…make use of this Public Ground…. for easing themselves throughout the day [sic].’7 The petition goes on to say that this has made the lives of the RWA residents ‘miserable’ and has ‘transgressed their right to very living’ because thousand of people easing themselves pose such uncultured scene, besides no young girls can dare to come to their own balconies throughout the day [because] obnoxious smells pollute the atmosphere [, thus] the entire environment is unconducive to public health and morality [sic].’8

The petition thus clearly states that the source of public nuisance faced by the petitioner is slum dwellers’ misuse of public land. Yet,

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5 See, for example, CA No. 1019 of 1992 in the M.P High Court, Dr. K.C. Malhotra vs. State of M.P.
6 CWP No. 531 of 1990 in the Delhi High Court.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
because the petition was written in a discursive context structured by the Ratlam decision and the strict definition of public nuisance provided therein, the petition does not target the slum itself, as similar petitions filed a decade later would. Rather, it states that the petitioner is aggrieved ‘Because the inaction on the part of the Respondents [the Delhi Administration and DDA] has posed various problems like public indecency, public immorality, health hazard etc. which the Respondents are statutorily liable to control’. Following the norm set forth in the Ratlam decision, the petition thus states that the slum residents are forced to ease themselves on public land because ‘there is no provision of latrines (Public Toilets) for the people residing in these jhuggies’. Again, the blame for the public nuisance falls upon the authorities, as is clear from the petitioner’s prayer that the court order the authorities to build a community toilet near the slum, develop the vacant land into a community park, and control access to the park by building a boundary wall. In 1992, the court disposed the petition while ordering the respondents to prevent the slum residents from defecating in the park and to build public latrines.

The problem defined and targeted in this case, therefore, had nothing to do with the presence of the slum or its legal basis; rather, it merely concerned the nuisance-causing activities of slum dwellers. Furthermore, the courts used nuisance law to provide municipal services to this community. In the following section, we will examine how the concept of nuisance has been redefined in such a way that this same category of the population gets re-read as a nuisance.

While cases through the mid-to-late 1990s continued to rely on the Ratlam decision in dealing with slum-derived public nuisances, a new problematisation of the slum begins to emerge within juridical discourse, a trend that portends how slums would be seen by the beginning of the next decade. This trend begins to surface in B. L. Wadehra vs. the Union of India, a case addressing the problem of inadequate waste disposal in Delhi. Although the original petition concerned the failure of the MCD to dispose of municipal waste across the city, and the final orders directed the MCD to fulfil its statutory duties to ‘collect and dispose of the waste generated from

\[9\] Ibid.
\[10\] Ibid.
\[11\] 1996 2 SCC 594.
various sources in the city’ by increasing the efficiency of waste collection, the judgment makes occasional mention of a growing ‘problem’ of the slum. The MCD in particular presents slums as a key problem obstructing it from carrying out its duties, stating in its affidavit that because of ‘problems of Jhuggi Jhompri Clusters [and] floating population,…, it is not possible to give the time schedule regarding the cleaning of Delhi as directed by this Court’. While such a statement does not yet target slums for demolition, it forms the basis on which future decisions equating slums with nuisance will rely.

II. Equating Slums with Nuisance

In 2000, highlighting the need for Delhi to be the ‘showpiece’ of the country, the Supreme Court’s judgment in *Almrita Patel vs. the Union of India* radically altered the discursive terrain of nuisance law. Without mention of the Ratlam decision, this judgment begins where the Wadehra case had left off by hauling up the municipal authorities for failing to improve Delhi’s waste disposal situation. However, the court here quickly introduces a new problem in addressing this citywide nuisance: ‘when a large number of inhabitants live…in slums with no care for hygiene, the problem becomes more complex’. Based on the inherent deficiencies of the slum population, this sentence declares, slums are spaces of filth and nuisance, lacking a basic concern for health and environment.

These words set the tone for the following paragraph, wherein the distinction between slums and slum-derived waste is blurred:

Instead of ‘slum clearance’ there is ‘slum creation’ in Delhi. This in turn gives rise to domestic waste being strewn on open land in and around the slums. This can best be controlled…by preventing the growth of slums. The authorities must realize that there is a limit to which the population of a city can be increased, without enlarging its size. In other words the density of population per square kilometre cannot be allowed to increase beyond the sustainable limit. Creation of slums resulting in increase in density has to be prevented…. It is the garbage and solid waste generated by these slums which require to be dealt with most expeditiously. (Emphasis added)

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12 2000 2 SCC 679.
13 Ibid.
And so emerges the new definition of nuisance. Nuisances in the city, it is stated, originate from overpopulation and slum growth; not from the government’s failure to provide municipal services or low-income housing as guaranteed by the Delhi Master Plan. If we examine the two italicised word clusters shown above, we find that this paragraph not only redefines nuisance, but also proposes a new solution: ‘waste generated by these slums’ can be dealt with ‘by preventing the growth of slums’.

The formal definition of nuisance described in Section I included only particular categories of objects possessed, or actions performed, by an individual or group, whereas the current interpretation includes individuals or groups themselves as possible nuisance categories. This vastly expands the range of procedures that can be administered: no longer simply regulating the nuisance-causing behaviour of individuals, we will find that nuisance law can soon be used to remove individuals themselves. The final orders of the same judgment set the stage for this very strategy in future cases:

We direct [the respondent authorities] to take appropriate steps for preventing any fresh encroachment or unauthorized occupation of public land for the purpose of dwelling resulting in creation of a slum. Further appropriate steps be taken to improve the sanitation in the existing slums till they are removed and the land reclaimed.14

(Emphasis added)

Here, it is clear that the court sees the need to remove all slums to resolve the problem of municipal waste in the city. Thus, within the space of a few paragraphs, the strategic implication of nuisance law shifts from a positive technology of building municipal infrastructure to a negative and disciplinary technology of elimination and displacement. The MCD’s lackadaisical approach to installing public waste bins, the main problem raised in the Almrita Patel petition, leads to a court order to eliminate the residential spaces of the working poor, and the ‘polluting poor’ discourse is (re)born.15

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14 Ibid.
15 Anti-poor environmental discourse has circulated widely in India since colonial times (see Prakash 1999; Prashad 2001; Sharan 2006). For a discussion of contemporary bourgeois environmentalism in Delhi, see Baviskar (2003). For historical uses of nuisance law to facilitate industrial development, see Anderson (1995) and Rosen (2003).
The statement ‘slums are illegal’ and references to slums as ‘illegal encroachments’ gained widespread circulation in judicial discourse only after the Supreme Court’s equation of slums with nuisance in the early 2000s. If we look back at petitions and court matters filed before the main orders from Almrita Patel were issued, for example the Manchanda petition we examined in the previous section, there is little or no mention of slums as ‘illegal encroachments’. Where encroachment or misuse was alleged, it was buoyed by concrete evidence related to a land use violation. Such is not the case with contemporary petitions filed against slums, as we will see in section III.

While the Almrita Patel judgment inaugurated a key discursive shift regarding slums and nuisance, and marks a critical break from previous case law, it was a case proceeding before the Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court in the early 2000s that gave technical traction to this new discourse by designating a programme of slum removal capable of re-inscribing Delhi’s landscape according to the moral grid of filth and nuisance.

In 1999, the petitioner in the Manchanda case filed a contempt motion against the municipal authorities for failing to improve the environment in his neighbourhood. Prior to the continuation of this matter, however, numerous writ petitions ‘mostly filed by various resident associations of colonies alleging that after encroaching the public land, these JJ clusters have been constructed in an illegal manner and they are causing nuisance of varied kind for the residents of those areas’ appeared before the court.16 Therefore, the court lumped these 63 related petitions together under the lead petitions of Pitampura Sudhar Samiti17 and K. K. Manchanda18 while embarking on the stated goal of taking up ‘the larger issue of removal of unauthorised JJ clusters from public land which were in the vicinity of various residential colonies’. Here, we already find a stark contrast with the court’s approach to the Manchanda case in the early 1990s. The introductory comments to the judgment (hereafter called the Pitampura judgement) issued in September 2002 clearly enunciate the purpose behind bringing these 63 cases together: to rid Delhi of the persistent nuisance of JJ clusters. An interim order passed earlier

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16 CWP No. 4215 of 1995 in the Delhi High Court.
17 Ibid.
18 See note 6 above.
in 2002 justified this goal by invoking the problem of overpopulation in controlling slum-related nuisance: ‘the agencies…have not taken any effective steps to check the growth of these jhuggies which are still mushrooming on public land’.

However, the task of removing the more than a quarter of Delhi’s population living in slums required a far more complex assemblage of justificatory argumentation than the simple description of their ‘uncontrolled growth’. This is so because Delhi’s more than 1,000 JJ clusters did not surreptitiously crop up, like mushrooms, in Delhi’s shady, vacant corners. Rather, they have a complex legal and political history that includes formal entitlement to 25 per cent of residential land, only a fraction of which they were provided.\textsuperscript{19} Further, the Delhi Government’s various resettlement policies protect slum residents from demolition without compensation. In fact, just months before the Pitampura judgment was passed, the Planning Commission published a report explaining Delhi’s slum problem as the direct outcome of the DDA’s failure to implement the mandatory 25 per cent housing provision for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). How then was the court able to flout the poor’s legal and regulatory protections in favour of the more recent and seemingly offhand remarks of the Almrita Patel judgment?

The Pitampura judgment begins by discursively dividing ‘the problem of the slum’ into two individual dimensions: ‘One is the removal of JJ clusters and the other is their rehabilitation’.\textsuperscript{20} Because the second aspect was pending before a different bench of the High Court\textsuperscript{21} during the proceedings of this case, the court here determined to focus on the removal of JJ clusters alone. Uncoupling

\textsuperscript{19} Although the Delhi Master Plan entitles the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), the lowest income category defined by the state, to 25 per cent of residential land, this population today occupies less than 2 per cent of Delhi land (Batra 2007). See Verma (2002), for a discussion of Delhi’s slum population as what she calls ‘Master Plan implementation backlog’. Verma deftly shows how the current slum population is equal in size to the gap between the EWS housing stock the DDA was supposed to build according to the ‘Delhi Master Plan 2001’ and the DDA’s actual EWS housing provision.

\textsuperscript{20} CWP No. 4215 of 1995 in the Delhi High Court.

Delhi residents' entitlement to land and the right to live in the city from their present place of residence was an unprecedented twist in logic. In hindsight, however, this uncoupling appears the only way that the courts could simultaneously sustain the position that slums are spaces of filth and nuisance and that slum dwellers are entitled to land and livelihoods. Once the question of the entitlements of the urban poor to public land (i.e., the question of 'rehabilitation') was bracketed off, the court could easily proceed to summarise the entire history of slum settlement in a single sentence: 'There is large scale encroachment of public land by the persons who come from other States'. That is, slum dwellers are alien, come from 'other' places, and deprive the true residents of Delhi of what is rightfully theirs. Despite 45 years of the DDA's existence and a longer history of informal settlements in Delhi, the court disregards the messy conditions that led to the development of slums and declares: 'There is no denying the fact that no person has right to encroach public land...[I]t is the statutory duty cast upon the civic authorities...to remove such encroachments'.

From this text, we see that legality is primarily gauged by the character of a settlement — is it on public or private land? Is it a formal or informal colony? The question of a settlement's legal status now ignores (i) the economic and political context that led to the use of public land for informal housing, (ii) the fact that residents of these spaces have been de facto formalised by receiving various forms of state-issued residence proof (e.g., ration and identity cards, registration tokens), and (iii) the DDA's patent failure to fulfil the statutory housing provisions of the Master Plan. Separating the question of entitlement from one's present residential status, then, does not treat these two issues as logically distinct, as the tone of the judgment would suggest. Rather, this discursive separation makes accessing one's housing entitlement incumbent on his current settlement status.

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22 This logic has been applied to subsequent cases as well. For example, see Federation of Paschim Vihar Group Housing Societies vs. MCD, CWP No. 17869 of 2005 in the Delhi High Court, order dated 6 October 2005.

23 During previous cases, judges considered the circumstances leading to the settlement of a slum before passing judgments. For example, see Olga Tellis vs. Municipal Corporation of Greater Bombay, AIR 1986 SC 180, and Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation vs. Nauab Khan and Ors., AIR 1997 SC 152.
The judgment next briefly acknowledges the second aspect of the slum problem — slum dweller’s entitlement to public land — but denies its relevance by referring to the logic of nuisance: ‘No doubt, shelter for every citizen is an imperative of any good government, but there are cleaner ways to achieve that goal than converting public property into slum lords’ illegal estates’. ‘Cleaner’ is of course the key word in this sentence, here used as if it had a specific legal referent. However, it is not clear to which statute this word may be referring. One might think that the legal procedure for addressing cleanliness would derive from nuisance law, but the entire judgment makes no reference to section 133 CRPC, the key nuisance statute. Rather, this word, ‘clean’, derives its effectiveness from the dominant discourse of nuisance we have been describing. That is, ‘cleanliness’ becomes a symbolic code of settled meaning within judicial discourse, agreed upon without explication of its origins or legal foundation.

If it is not yet clear that the new discourse of nuisance is the primary mechanism of slum demolition in the Pitampura case, consider the judgment’s final paragraph before the bench’s orders are recorded:

The welfare of the residents of these [RWAs’] colonies is also in the realm of public interest which cannot be overlooked. After all, these residential colonies were developed first. The slums have been created afterwards which is the cause of nuisance and brooding [sic] ground of so many ills. The welfare, health, maintenance of law and order, safety and sanitation of these residents cannot be sacrificed and their right under Article 21 [of the Indian Constitution] is violated in the name of social justice to the slum dwellers. Even if the government and civic authorities move at snails pace… for the rehabilitation of these clusters, this is no excuse for continuing them at the given places [sic].24 (Emphasis added)

This paragraph provides the logic upon which dozens of JJ clusters would be demolished in the subsequent five years. The declaration that slums are ‘the cause of nuisance’ completes the discursive reworking of nuisance and establishes a new legal precedent for informal settlements.

24 Ibid.
Let us now examine three components of the Pitampura judgment’s discursive work. First, this paragraph divides ‘the public’ into two categories: ‘normal’ residents of formal colonies and slum dwellers, the former owning private property and the latter occupying public land. The judgment states that because the former category own their property, came ‘first’, and suffer from the nuisance of the latter’s presence, their ‘right to life’ under Article 21 of the Constitution should trump the latter’s. This marks a change in the interpretation of rights, away from a framework envisioning the even distribution of rights across a population and in favour of a zero-sum conception of rights in which the enhancement of one’s wellbeing necessarily detracts from another’s. It is in this vein that the judgment defines slum dwellers as a secondary category of citizens whose ‘social justice’ becomes actionable only after the fulfilment of the rights of residents of formal colonies.

This decision reversed the prevalent interpretation of the ‘right to life’ in Article 21 regarding slum dwellers that was established almost 20 years earlier in *Olga Tellis vs. Bombay Municipal Corporation*.25 Whereas the Olga Tellis judgment emphasised the (alienable) right of the working poor to occupy public land to fulfil their livelihood requirements, the interpretation advanced in this judgment elevates the quality of life and enjoyment of land for propertied citizens over the livelihood of slum dwellers.26 This is the transformation of Article 21 lamented by most critical legal studies of slum demolitions (see Ramanathan 2005; Bhushan 2006). However, the Pitampura judgment clearly shows that it is only through the new mechanisms of nuisance law that this reversal is enacted. That is, the reinterpretation of Article 21 is a legal effect of the new nuisance discourse, not its cause. The new construal of Article 21 becomes an implicit and necessary effect of this discourse because, once it is established, this discourse inheres a set of assumptions about (i) what defines the proper citizens of a city — residents of formal colonies, (ii) who constitutes the ‘public’ in whose interest ‘public interest’ is defined — private property owners, and (iii) the elements of a ‘world-class city’ — an urban environment that is clean, nuisance-free, and thus, slum-free. Nuisance discourse is so powerful, then, precisely

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because in performing the simple semiotic task of transforming what everyone knows — ‘slums are dirty’ — into the new truth statement that ‘slums are a nuisance’, it simultaneously carries out much deeper ideological work. By rendering the statements ‘slums are illegal’ and ‘slums are nuisances’ acceptable, it reorients the terrain of citizenship, social justice and access to the city — categories that would typically fall in the domain of Article 21. Once these categories have been re-engineered, the reinterpretation of Article 21 becomes but a logical extension of the new nuisance discourse.

The second effect of the new nuisance discourse, which derives from the first, is a blurring of the distinction between public and private nuisance. If we return to the above quoted paragraph from the Pitampura judgment, it becomes clear that the court is concerned with removing impediments to the security and welfare of private colonies. This concern perfectly overlaps with the definition of private nuisance provided in section I — a ‘substantial and unreasonable interference with the use or enjoyment of land’, meaning private property. Yet, each of the cases discussed in this article was filed as public interest litigation (PIL), a requirement of which is that the matter affects the broader public, not only a private party. Whereas the cases in question are ostensibly treated as matters of public nuisance, many of the actual grievances fall under the strict definition of private nuisance; it is thus apparent that the distinction between public and private is breaking down in the course of these hearings; or, as Anderson (1992: 17) found in the colonial context, nuisance begins to serve as ‘the coercive arm of property rights’, defending private interest in the name of public purpose.27

27 Anderson (1992: 15–16) notes of colonial jurisprudence in India: ‘Propertied groups were able in many instances to invoke public nuisance provisions against anyone threatening the value of their property’. However, he found that such claims, in which ‘public nuisance complaints were blatantly driven by private material interest’, ‘gave rise to some alarm in judicial circles’ prompting some judges ‘to issue warnings of abusive or improper litigation’ (ibid.: 16). Such litigation was dismissed outright in the post-colonial period until approximately 2000, when the defence of private property owners’ civic sensibilities (and land values) started to be treated as a matter of public interest. Indeed, contemporary applications of nuisance law closely resemble those under British rule, in which nuisance was a category invoked to maintain the boundary between native and European, public and private (see also Kaviraj 1998; Legg 2007; Sharan 2006).
To better grasp the import of the blurring of private and public nuisances taking place today — and to understand how it is used to impose a distinctly bourgeois sense of social order over public space — let us return to the distinction between ‘normal’ society and slum dwellers, which we found above to rest on the variable of property ownership. This was even more categorically stated when the High Court distinguished between ‘those who have scant respect for law and unauthorisedly squat on public land’ and ‘citizens who have paid for the land’.28 Once land ownership is established as the basis of citizenship as such, the defense of private property becomes an elevated concern. That is, when ‘the public’ is defined by its ownership of property — and those without private property are excluded from this category — the minimisation of private nuisance or the defence of private property becomes a matter of public interest. Thus, whereas the first effect of this judgment was to divide ‘the public’ into two categories — property-owning citizens and others — the second effect is to reinvest ‘the public’ with the attributes of the first of these groups. This is nothing less than the juridical embourgeoisement of Delhi, a privatisation of the definition of public life and interest: the public’s right is to act according to private interest, and private interest is what earns one the right of public life (cf. Marx [1844]1994).

This construal of ‘the public’ has stark implications for the prosecution of nuisance and the overall manner in which land use is legally treated because, as Diwan and Rosencranz (2001: 97) say in their review of environmental case law in India:

The test which has always been found to be useful in distinguishing… [whether a nuisance exists or not] is the test of ascertaining the reaction of a reasonable person according to the ordinary usage of mankind living in a particular society in respect of the thing complained of.

That is, nuisance is defined as conduct that the court determines to be outside the range of what a ‘reasonable person’ would do. Once

28 Okhla judgment, see note 21. The judgment goes onto say that the former occupy areas of land adjacent to the latter, making the latter ‘inconvenienced’: ‘An unhygienic condition is created causing pollution and ecological problems. It has resulted in almost collapse of Municipal services’. Thus, we come full circle: inadequate municipal services are not the cause of nuisance, but rather the outcome according to the new nuisance discourse.
a reasonable person’ and ‘ordinary usage of mankind’ are defined in terms of residents of formal residential colonies, who make up less than 25 per cent of Delhi’s population (GNCTD 2004), the conduct of slum dwellers can easily be labelled deviant and unreasonable, be it even their mere existence. Whereas the Ratlam decision discussed in section I sympathised with the compulsion slum dwellers face to defecate in the open, this same act in the current legal environment comes to represent the behaviour of a population with ‘no care for hygiene’, a clear affront to urban order; and, as the Delhi High Court declared, an impediment to the ‘building of modern India’. This construal of legality flows from the view that the protection of private property is a component of public nuisance prosecution.

Coming to the third effect of the new nuisance discourse, we find that once slum dwellers’ lives are defined as being outside the normal range of citizen conduct, their access to legal appeal is also questioned. For, if they are outside of normal citizenship, then the procedures for administering their conduct will also fall outside the normal domain of civil society. It is in this capacity that the final order of the Pitampura judgment states: ‘We may also note that some petitions were filed by various occupiers [slum residents] against whom Orders for removal were passed….Since they are encroachments of public land…they have no legal right to maintain such a Petition’. This statement militates against the position established by the Supreme Court in 1996: ‘When an encroacher approaches the Court, the Court is required to examine whether the encroacher had any right and to what extent he would be given protection and relief’. Here, the possibility that an ‘encroacher’ has a ‘right’ to occupy public land is maintained. That is, an encroacher of public land is not presumed ex ante to be illegal. However, the definition of citizenship does not extend as far in the present context as it did in 1996, for the new discourse of nuisance has adjusted the procedures of natural justice.

29 See note 12.
30 CWP No. 6553 of 2000 in the Delhi High Court, order dated 16 February 2001, an order banning open defecation.
31 CWP No. 4215 of 1995 in the Delhi High Court.
Today, as we will see in the next section, slum residents have become objects to be managed and disposed of, not citizens with rights. This recalls Partha Chatterjee’s (2004) distinction between ‘civil society’ — the privileged domain of citizens, wherein rights are defended through law — and ‘political society’ — the extra-legal domain through which non-citizens informally negotiate political representation and security. Only, whereas Chatterjee describes these as stable categories springing from the configuration of the post-colonial state, the analysis here shows how they are actively produced through struggle over the public/private divide. The contemporary bourgeoisification of Indian cities, then, cannot be summarised as a simple oscillation of power from ‘political society’ to ‘civil society’. Rather, we have to trace how the division between these categories is maintained and given meaning through the mechanisms of law and state.

III. Nuisance Discourse as Mechanism

The previous section tracked the emergence of what I have been calling the ‘new nuisance discourse’ and how it has recalibrated the factors used to determine a settlement’s legality. In this section I will show how petitioners’ invocation of slum illegality along the parameters of nuisance has become an effective mechanism of removing slums. Specifically, by submitting petitions against slums as nuisances, petitioners are able to bypass typical eviction procedures. Here, I analyse the factors that drive this nuisance-based demolition mechanism by examining five civil writ petitions filed in the Delhi High Court, each of which uses the new nuisance discourse, was filed by an RWA, and led to a slum demolition in the mid-2000s.33 To understand how the new nuisance discourse is activated, I begin by briefly identifying discursive devices — turns of phrase producing a specific effect — that were common across the petitions. These reveal the patterns by which ‘nuisance’ gets identified empirically and is summoned as a key term that transforms

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the identification of 'slums as dirty' into the legal claim that 'slums are nuisances'.

The first discursive device used by all five petitions is reference to slums as a problem of overpopulation: 'the area has virtually turned into a slum and the illegal and unauthorized encroachments has not only double, tripled over the years but has attained mammoth proportions and is threatening to burst at its seams [sic]'.34 The words 'bursting', 'infesting', 'infectious' or 'mushrooming' are invariably used to evoke neo-Malthusian fears that the poor's mere presence will endanger the welfare of society at large: 'The slum dwellers are living in highly infectious and contagious conditions thus exposing themselves as well as the residents of the society to epidemics'.35 Three of the petitions goes so far as to dehumanise slums by using the word 'slum' not as a noun, but an adjective. Slums are then not places in this discourse; 'slum' is a condition or a disease that infects certain spaces and must be eliminated, lest it spread to purer places. One concrete discursive device that plays upon this fear of 'society' becoming slum-ified is the emphasis in four of the petitions on the special problem of slum dwellers' open defecation; two of the petitions go so far as to include photographs of residents 'caught in the act': 'these people defecate in the open creating ghastly scenes and spreading foul smell and infection'.36 Overall, the overpopulation device is used to show the un-civic conduct of slum dwellers and the importance of removing them to maintain Delhi's 'world-class' image.37

The second discursive device shared by all five petitions is the description of the dual categories of citizenship explored in section II: one, rightful, tax-paying citizens who live in formal colonies and the other, unlawful residents of slums. Four of the petitions bolster this viewpoint by explicitly relying on the interpretation of Article 21 that prioritises private property owners over all others (see section II). Further, alluding to the second-class status of slum dwellers the courts' reference to Delhi as a 'showpiece', 'heritage', 'world class' and 'show window' city are widespread since the early 2000s, showing the importance the judiciary places on the outward, aesthetic appearance of the city.

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34 CWP No. 593 of 2002.
35 CWP No. 9358 of 2006.
36 Ibid.
37 The courts' reference to Delhi as a 'showpiece', 'heritage', 'world class' and 'show window' city are widespread since the early 2000s, showing the importance the judiciary places on the outward, aesthetic appearance of the city.
the petitions describe formally non-evictable actions like slum dwellers' un-metered use of electricity or hosting of 'mass celebrations' that deprive RWA residents of resources and 'tranquillity' as a justification for slum removal. Three of the five petitions also argue that slum dwellers are alien by citing the presence of 'anti-social' or 'criminal' elements and people of 'Bangladeshi origin' in slums.

These common discursive devices reveal the petitioners' middle class anxieties over urban environmental order, but more importantly show the channels by which slums are equated with nuisance in contemporary petitions. However, to see how 'nuisance', once established, gets calibrated to a legal framework that requires slum demolition, let us look at the basis on which illegality is adduced in the petitions.

Each of the five petitions makes reference to 'illegal slums' or describes 'illegal/unauthorised encroachers' more often than it provides any specific details or discussion of what makes the slum in question illegal. None of the petitions state an explicit statutory basis for eviction. So, although 'illegal' is used as if it was a precise term, it does not actually carry any statutory precision. Therefore, to determine what these petitions infer when they describe slum illegality, I conducted a line-by-line analysis by marking lines in the petitions' text, based on the justification they provide for requesting demolition. Since the primary statutory basis on which slums can be, and historically have been, demolished is their violation of land use codes, I tracked lines in the petitions that make explicit mention of land use as a basis for the petitioner's demolition request. The second category I tracked consists of lines referring to the slum as a nuisance. Before presenting the results from this analysis, let me clarify that the argument here is not that nuisance is the only basis for slum demolitions cited in the courts today. The land use category of the land on which slums are settled continues to play a role in slum demolition cases. However, petitions targeting slums for land use violations were filed regularly before the current round of slum demolitions. What is new and dominant about current juridical discourse about slums is the import accorded to nuisance.

Likewise, nuisance-based petitions are not the only type used to target slums.
In the five petitions analysed, lines referring to land use as the basis for demolition appeared 139 times, whereas lines referring to slums-as-nuisance appeared 346 times, or two-and-a-half times more frequently. In all of the petitions, nuisance-based lines appeared at least 50 per cent more frequently than land use-based lines. This shows that these petitions rely most forcefully on nuisance-based argumentation for declaring slums illegal. We can therefore say that the declaration of slums as a nuisance performs their illegality, and conversely, declaring slums illegal presumes their ontological status as a nuisance.

Related to the treatment of ‘slum illegality’ as an ontological given is the petitions’ extensive use of photographs showing slums-as-nuisances. These images appear in the petitions’ annexures and show both the presence of the slum and what the petitioner considers are ill effects of the slum’s presence: accumulated trash, standing water, open defecation, etc. The manner in which these images are described makes it clear that the petitioner expects the court to agree that the photos demonstrate a need to remove the slum: ‘The acuteness of the situation can [be] seen clearly from the photographs of the affected area’. All of the petitions’ bold, dehumanising claims about slums as spaces of filth are given moral license upon the presentation of a few photographs. It is useful to note here that the Manchanda petition examined in section I, which was submitted prior to the rise of the new nuisance discourse, did not include such photographs. This type of depiction, therefore, appears as a new visual technology that puts the bench in a position to see slums and slum-derived nuisance as one in the same.

The power of this technology is revealed in the case of R. L. Kaushal vs. Lt. Governor of Delhi, the petition for which differs from the five nuisance discourse-based petitions examined here, in that it neither prays for the removal of a slum nor uses any of the above discursive devices. This petition was submitted ‘for better civic amenities and for nuisance caused by open wide drain [sic]’, but does not make a single mention of a slum. Only in the petition’s annexures containing letters to elected representatives and photos of the drain is it revealed that a slum exists beside the drain.

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40 CWP No. 1869 of 2003 in Delhi High Court, order dated 14 November 2003.
Nonetheless, the court, noticing the slum’s presence in the photos, ordered its demolition without inquiring into the details of the settlement’s size, location, history, or legal basis.41

Each of the five petitions examined here was met with a positive response by the Delhi High Court, which not only ordered the neighbouring slums to be cleared, but in many cases also adopted the language of nuisance. As the court stated in an interim order in the Vikas Puri case:

The encroachment has not been removed and it is this lackluster approach of the DDA which has resulted in unscrupulous elements to make encroachment on government land…[W]e only observe that on the one hand a citizen has to pay handsome price for acquiring land… for his habitat and on the other hand unauthorized encroachment and habitat on government land is allowed to go on, [which]…deprives the rights of citizens of Delhi to water, electricity and other civic services. The right of honest citizens in this regard cannot be made subservient to the right of encroachers [sic].42

Here, we see the same process of dehumanisation found in the RWAs’ petitions repeated by the bench: slum residents are called ‘unscrupulous elements’, whereas the RWA members are called ‘citizens’. And, in constructing the second sentence quoted above in the passive voice (i.e., without a subject), the court completely erases the slum subject from the order. This makes the solution to the ‘problem of the slum’ appear purely technical, despite its deeply ethical and political nature. In reiterating the reasons for needing to remove the entire slum in question, the order further states:

We have seen from the photographs filed as to how illegal electric connections have been taken, the Delhi Vidyut Board has been used as a junk yard, service lane has been completely blocked [by carts and supplies], the encroachment has been made on road and footpath….The whole area has been converted into a garbage landfill. No legal right is vested in the encroachers [sic].43

Here, with the exception of ‘the encroachment…on road and footpath’, none of the activities mentioned statutorily permit the

41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
removal of the slum. The huts built on the roads and footpaths, as shown in the drawing submitted by the petitioner, made up less than 10 per cent of the total area of the slum and were the most recently constructed. However, the court lumped the entire settlement together while passing its demolition order. The court’s other observations here must then constitute the only reasons for clearing the entire settlement. On what basis do these activities — i.e., illegal electricity use, blocking a service lane with carts, and using vacant land for dumping garbage and scrap material — add up to a demolition notice? 44 ‘Illegal electric connections’, according to the Electricity Act, 2003, require imposing a fine. The remaining activities are nuisances whose removal is governed by Section 133 CRPC, which nowhere states that the party responsible for a nuisance is to be displaced. However, nuisance law today clearly has new legal and moral coordinates.

The overall thrust of these five petitions shows that nuisance has today become the predominant discursive justification for slum demolitions, even when a land use violation is also identified. Further, even in the absence of petitions that specifically target slums for demolition, like the Kaushal petition just described, the courts themselves have taken up the task of identifying slums-as-nuisances and ordering their removal. This pattern emerged in the proceedings leading up to the demolition of the Yamuna Pushta, a slum housing more than 150,000 people on the banks of the Yamuna River. In a March 2003 order in the Okhla case, the bench arbitrarily took cognisance of the problem of pollution in the Yamuna River, despite the lack of any mention of the issue in the original petition. While referring to other causes of pollution, the bench quickly identified the true source of the problem: ‘In view of the encroachment and construction of jhuggies in the Yamuna Bed and its embankment with no drainage facility, sewerage water and other filth is discharged in Yamuna water [sic]’. 45 In the total absence of any evidence demonstrating the Pushita settlement’s contribution to the Yamuna’s pollution levels, the court passed its demolition order. After these orders were passed, the court continued to target slums as the primary source of Yamuna pollution by

44 There is no indication that the slum residents alone were to blame for the improper garbage disposal.
45 See note 21, order dated 3 March 2003.
launching its own *suo moto* case. 46 And, like the RWA petitions we just examined, the most ‘scientific’ evidence presented in this case was a series of photographs prepared by the Ministry of Tourism ostensibly showing slum dwellers as ‘polluters’. 47

While the final judgment in this case does refer to the fact that Pushta existed on the Yamuna floodplain and thus violates the layout plan for the area, a handful of other developments with a different, what we might call a more ‘world-class’, ‘look’ than Pushta — including the Akshardam Temple (the world’s largest and most ‘modern’ Hindu monument), the Commonwealth Games Village, an IT park, and a Delhi Metro Rail depot — similarly lie on the floodplain. That the court targeted Pushta and ignored these developments proves that the nuisance logic formed the strongest basis for the demolition.

Closing with the Pushta case is useful because it neatly captures key characteristics of how nuisance has altered the terrain of judicial argumentation pertaining to slums. This case shows that the courts do not have anything close to what could be called a sound calculative basis for assessing whether a slum is a nuisance or not. Rather, if a slum appears to be polluting or filthy, based on a judge’s subjective view of acceptable, ‘clean’ conduct, then the slum is deemed polluting, a nuisance, and therefore illegal. This, as I will conclude by arguing, shows the extent to which today’s planning decisions are primarily aesthetic.

IV. Conclusion

The goal of this article has been to move the conceptualisation of Delhi’s current slum demolition drive away from the abstract discussion of ‘anti-poor’ or ‘neoliberal’ courts and into the concrete domain of legal mechanisms and argumentation. Stating that the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution is no longer interpreted in the pro-poor tradition of the past provides little insight into the actual legal means by which slum demolitions are carried out. The argument put forth here is that a discursive regime does not change

*46 CWP No. 689 of 2004, *The court on its own motion vs. Union of India.*

*47 In contrast, research by the non-governmental organisation the Hazards Centre (Roy 2004) found that Pushta contributed only 0.33 per cent of the total sewage released into the Yamuna.*
based simply on a new outlook of judges or the entry of a new type of petition. Rather, such a drastic reorientation of juridical discourse requires an altogether new set of problems, a redefinition of terms, and a re-engineering of legal procedure and evidentiary practice. That is to say, rather than seeing the weakening of the right to life in recent court decisions as the cause of slum demolition, it might be more useful to see this weakening as the effect of a whole series of prior contestations across India over the meaning of citizenship, the correct land disposition, and the vision of the city. Here, I have shown that the reinterpretation of nuisance law has been the key mechanism by which these contestations were, first, carried forward and, second, discursively justified by constructing the truth that ‘slums are nuisances’.

As we saw above, the discursive portrayal of slums as nuisances is radically transfiguring Delhi’s physical landscape and political economy. It is enforcing a private property regime that has never existed before and redefining the terms of access to the city through the construction of property-based citizenship (cf. Roy 2003). This conclusion has serious implications for the future of Delhi and Indian urbanism more generally, and may be used to more broadly explore contemporary processes of urban change in India. For one, discourse depicting Delhi (or other Indian cities) as an aspiring ‘world-class’ city has been little analysed to date. Yet, the coordinates of the moral grid created by the new nuisance discourse closely align with the vision of a world-class city. That is, spaces that appear polluting or unattractive — which unfavourably represent Delhi in its ‘world-class’ pursuits — are being criminalised and cleared via nuisance law, even in the absence of accurate information about those spaces. Alternatively, developments that have the ‘world-class’ look (e.g., the Commonwealth Games Village), despite violating zoning or building by-laws, are granted amnesty and heralded as monuments of modernity. Returning to one of the formal definitions of nuisance laid out in section I — ‘any...offense to the sense of sight, smell, or

48 The same process is underway outside of Delhi too. For an example from Calcutta, see Chatterjee (2004: 60).
49 Numerous other examples of the DDA and courts allowing blatant land use violations for capital intensive development can be cited, including — perhaps most famously — the construction on Delhi’s protected ‘ridge area’ of India’s largest shopping mall complex in Vasant Kunj.
hearing’ — we see that ‘nuisance’ could be broadly construed as *anything aesthetically displeasing*. In the context of cities driven by an elite aspiration for ‘world-class’ status and in which the economy of appearances is of elevated importance, has nuisance become the legal foundation for a new aesthetic hegemony?

Recent studies of Indian cities in the post-reform (1991-) period posit that a bourgeois, consumerist, and globalist aesthetic is responsible for the rapid remaking of the Indian urban (e.g., Chatterjee 2004; Fernandes 2004). These works often presume that the constitution of a new elite — the ‘new Indian middle class’ — in and of itself explains the consolidation of such a ‘world-class’ aesthetic. The mushrooming of malls, commercial complexes, flyovers, gated communities, and designated infrastructure — and the concomitant demolition of slums, expulsion of hawkers and vendors, and banishment of industry — is simply the supply to the ‘new middle class’s’ rising demand. ‘World-class’ discourse, here, is described as powerful, without showing how it derives and consolidates its power. While descriptions of the aspirations and political goals of the middle class are useful, we should not confuse a class’s political goals with its strategy, nor the ideology of a class with the institutional mechanisms by which its ideological position is consolidated. In other words, in asking what the forces remaking Indian cities today are, our conclusion should not be the political aspirations or urban visions of the elite. This tells us very little about how change occurs. Instead, we have to show the specific political mechanisms through which these goals get translated into real outcomes. In this article I have examined how the law has codified middle class aesthetic norms, giving them material leverage over urban space. The new nuisance discourse, as a concretised inflection of bourgeois aesthetics, has given propertied residents of cities increasing power over the lives of the non-propertied, threatening to destroy the last vestiges of planned, integrated and socialistic urban planning and, perhaps more importantly, public space.

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50 As Chatterjee says, ‘I suspect, however, that the idea of what a city should be and look like has now been deeply influenced by this post-industrial global image everywhere among the urban middle classes in India’ (2004: 143).
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Poverty as Geography: Motility, Stoppage and Circuits of Waste in Delhi

Vinay Gidwani and Bharati Chaturvedi

Urban poverty and inequality can be conceptualised in terms of two variables: first, how smoothly or speedily one is able to tap into and navigate various circuits of flow (water, electricity, sewage, transportation, capital, and means of production) that structure urban existence; and second, how effectively one is able to sequester and regulate these flows. To put it another way, livelihood and accumulation anywhere depend on the ability to balance circulation and internment — but these imperatives become especially pressing in urbanising contexts where competition for ‘land’ and ‘territory’ (as defended area) are intense. This implies that the less effectively one is able to manoeuvre and regulate the circuits that carry urban flows the more likely one is to be among the urban poor. It follows that urban poverty and its visible symptoms (such as precarious employment, insecure access to housing, poor health, stunted literacy levels, etc.) are resolutely geographic phenomena connected to the singular, evolving patterns of movement and blockage that traverse and splinter urban formations.

This article charts a contemporary spatial history of municipal solid waste management in Delhi. We show how urban upheaval combined with the ambivalence of urban administrators and planners toward waste collectors has recurrently produced poverty as geography within this segment of the urban population. The city emerges in our narrative as an informal, intricate meshwork of people and waste matter, where the ability to generate waste — waste as excess — becomes the marker of social distinction for some; and the ability to capture waste — waste as incipient value — becomes the source of survival for others. Our argument draws on an array of
Those who handle wet waste (or *kooda* in general) are more stigmatized than those who exclusively handle dry waste (or *kabad*). Kaveri Gill (2010: 113) describes how such hierarchies permeate the self-perceptions of waste collectors.

Delhi today has a sub-population of 150,000 to 200,000 non-formal sector waste collectors, who generate livelihoods by laboriously sequestering, sorting and selling an array of recyclables found in the approximately 7,500 tons of municipal solid waste the city generates every day. Their working conditions are often abject, and are compounded by the social stigma attached to the handling of waste. Some, who are able to territorialise work and living spaces by warding off rival efforts to territorialise — these include efforts by various state apparatuses (such as municipal bodies, urban development authorities, courts, and police) — are able to store and sell, and occasionally become entrepreneurs who can take risks, capture gains from spatial and temporal arbitrage, and accumulate. Our argument pays close attention to the experience and micro-geographies of poverty against the backdrop of a global trend toward privatisation and formalisation of municipal solid waste management — a development that is well underway in Delhi and which threatens to jeopardise the economic futures of its vast army of non-formal sector waste collectors.

### The City of Waste

Among the discarded things lived a community of discarded people — people who had been marginalised, or who had willingly discarded themselves, people who had tired of racing all over the city to sell and buy new things that were destined to go instantly out of date, people who had decided that the things that had been thrown away were the only real riches of the world.

Italo Calvino, *The Daughters of the Moon*²

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¹ Those who handle wet waste (or *kooda* in general) are more stigmatized than those who exclusively handle dry waste (or *kabad*). Kaveri Gill (2010: 113) describes how such hierarchies permeate the self-perceptions of waste collectors.

The non-formal recycling sector (Figure 2.1) in Indian cities is structured in the form of a pyramid, with waste pickers and scrap collectors at the base and re-processors perched at the apex. Waste pickers gather garbage from households and road sides in designated areas, often through internal negotiations of territory and, increasingly, on the basis of institutionalised arrangements with Residents’ Welfare Associations (RWAs). They also engage in the ‘free’ collection of scrap from municipal garbage bins and dumping (dhalaos), as well as municipal landfills. Their labour, often hazardous, exemplifies David Harvey’s (2000) adage of ‘the body as an accumulation strategy’. Between the scrap collectors and the re-processors are various other actors, mostly all involved in trading. Marginally above waste pickers in the hierarchy of non-formal recyclers — and commonly risen from their ranks through small savings and painstaking investment in social infrastructure — are the itinerant buyers who purchase small quantities of scrap from households. Paralleling these is a layer of petty traders called thiawalas, who buy waste paper and electronic waste from commercial establishments and frequently operate from jealously guarded pavement ‘establishments’.

The scrap dealers or kabari’s shop (with larger kabaris, this can be a godown or warehouse) is the cornerstone of the recycling system. Typically, it is a dingy, poorly lit, one-room establishment tucked away in a bylane in an old city neighbourhood or in one of Delhi’s several ‘urban villages’. Like petty traders lower in the hierarchy, these larger scrap dealers are most often former waste pickers who have crawled their way up the commercial ladder by dint of toil, savings, bribes, opportunism, entrepreneurship, networks, and even violence.3 Every waste picker dreams of owning a business, however small (for readers of Karl Marx it comes as no surprise that capital sustains

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3 A 2003 in-house survey of kabariwalas by Chintan Environmental Research and Action revealed that 78 per cent of them began their careers as sellers of waste. The importance of caste networks in entry and control of niche rural and urban markets in India, particularly in the non-formal sectors, is well documented. Gill (2010: Chap. 6) shows how the plastics scrap trade in Delhi (which used to be concentrated in Mundka on Delhi’s western border until the massive April 2010 fire) has been dominated since its efflorescence in the 1980s by low-status Khatiks from Rajasthan, who employ a mix of collusion, guile, interlocking markets, and embodied knowledge of plastics recycling to exclude others from entering the trade.
Poverty as Geography

Figure 2.1: Structure of the Waste Recycling Sector in Delhi

Source: Chintan (2003: 13).

itself by recruiting bearers of its drive to accumulation from the ranks of the proletariat and semi-proletariat). The lesson for critics of contemporary urbanisation is that the urban poor frequently view capitalist enterprise with a great deal more ambivalence than them. Waste pickers, for instance, experience capitalism’s injustices—drudgery, exploitation, punishment—intimately, everyday; they can deliver razor-sharp critiques of it; yet they also find in its solvent energies opportunities to dislodge sedimented social orders and fabricate a life that is more. To own a kabari’s dukkaan (shop) is to possess an engine of arbitrage: the node where ‘raw’ waste is purchased, segregated and stored, before being channelled into secondary circuits of value.

Soaring property values and the creeping corporatisation of waste management in metropolises like Delhi have exacted a toll on precisely this cornerstone of informal recycling. In the early 1990s, a kabari in Delhi had more space to operate as well as more clients. And there were more kabaris in the centre of the city, where the urban elite lived and worked. Today, most kabaris have been evicted from areas in the city’s centre that fall under the jurisdiction of the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), one of three municipalities that regulate municipal functions in the National Capital.
Territory of Delhi (NCTD). Where kabaris continue to operate, they do so under severe space constraints, averaging no more than seven waste pickers as clients. Although this means razor-thin profit margins they are unable to recruit more clients. Where is the space to store their goods? The inexorable logic of the ‘rent gap’ has convinced municipal authorities and real estate developers that land can be put to far more profitable uses. The potential displacement of kabaris and waste pickers from their livelihood catchments barely registers in their calculus. Land values have shot up so steeply that non-formal sector entrepreneurs have come to be viewed as hindrances to urban re-development. In an era of partisan judicial activism, the ‘constitutionality that ensured every citizen the fundamental rights of livelihood, housing and shelter has now been revised, reinvented and supplanted by a legality that sees the urban poor as encroachers and a threat to civic existence’ (Ramanathan 2006: 3193). Many kabaris have been branded ‘trespassers’ and ‘encroachers’ within an evolving jurisprudence that willfully forgets the repeated neglect of Delhi’s waste recycling needs in its Master Plan documents. Rather than viewing kabaris and waste pickers as political subjects with claims to the city’s amenities and spaces or, even simply as economic service providers, judges and planners have instead branded them a ‘public nuisance’.

What is effaced in these operations of judicial power is the virtuosity of labours that are summarily de-valorised by the judges. If the justices of the Delhi High Court could summon the inclination to step into a kabari’s shop they might be struck by the metis – resourcefulness, practical wisdom, embodied skill – that organises its workings. The trick lies in segregation, volumes and timing. The economics are simple. The finer the category of recyclables into

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4 The ‘rent gap’ thesis owes to Neil Smith (1987; 1996). In his formulation the ‘rent gap’ describes the sequential process of disinvestment and urban blight followed by gentrification. The disjuncture between use value and exchange value that lies at the heart of the ‘rent gap’ is anticipated in Ch. 5 of David Harvey’s Social Justice and the City ([1973] 2009). In the Indian context, Whitehead and More (2007) invoke the ‘rent gap’ thesis to examine Mumbai’s recent history of spatial restructuring. While there are significant historical differences between Delhi and Mumbai in form, functions, and the unfolding of urban processes, there is also striking similarity in their emerging class topographies.
which the kabari is able to sort his purchases from waste pickers, the more he is able to build up volumes and store each sub-category of waste until sufficient to overload a truck, the greater his income. The typical small kabari buys all kinds of waste. But when he sells it, it is by the ton, and to several different dealers, each specialising in one particular material. It might be the glass dealer, the hard plastics dealer, the PVC (Polyvinyl Chloride) dealer, the PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate) dealer, the cartons dealer, the fabric dealer, and so on. Geography matters in hard ways. For the business to work, segregation is the key. For segregation to work, space (for separation and storage) is key.

A trader who deals only in PET bottles will underpay or cut advances if he finds the bottle caps on. A cardboard dealer will do the same if he finds bits of paper in the bales. In the intricate afterworld of waste, purity matters for discarded objects to re-enter the universe of capitalist value. The big scrap traders find profit in volume sales to re-processors. Given that transportation is expensive, these traders prefer and pay better prices to kabaris whose accumulated stocks make it worth their while to pick up waste in sufficient volume from one location. Single-stop shopping yields scale economies; multiple stops mean added time and effort to fill a truck, and steeper fuel costs. For the kabari, the ability to store separated waste not only translates into higher resale price from volume but also the possibility of selling when demand escalates. In short, storage opens the door to arbitrage in space and time. The artful kabari plays the scrap market with the guile of an equities trader who plays the stock market.

There is artistry in arbitrage, and artistry in assorting. Waste segregation is almost always drudgery, and often dangerous. Bruises, nicks, cuts, and infections are commonplace. But occasionally segregation can acquire the texture of an artisanal skill, becoming a form of virtuosity. Kripa Shankar Gupta is the linchpin of his godaam, the junk shop where the wastepickers come to sell their waste. He is the one who sorts the waste and prepares it for resale to larger downstream dealers. But to call his work labour is to diminish its accomplishment. His nickname, Gupta kalakar, suggests an artist with magic coursing through his hands. A kalakar's cache is his talent,

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5 From interviews conducted by Chaturvedi in December 2005.
a skill so distinctive that it incites the senses of its beholders, sometimes to the point of awe.

Gupta’s kalakari — the performance of his art — is not for public exhibition. It occurs in a dingy godaam, and owes its existence to the consumerism that is sweeping contemporary India. The products of K. S. Gupta’s craftsmanship are never displayed, praised, or preserved. Their fate is disfiguration and disintegration. They end up in various commodity chains for recuperated waste, to be pulped or melted. His artwork takes the form of minute segregation. It is back-breaking work. Older kalakars claim that solid waste can be segregated into a vector of 360 types, or ‘qualities’, of recyclables. Paper, plastic, metals, and glass are all finely subcategorised. According to these old timers, there is currently no one in all of Delhi who actually knows all the sub-groupings (although there is some agreement on the total number of sub-categories). Gupta kalakar’s mentor, Babloo, a revered teacher and waste artiste, knew of over 50 types. But he carefully guarded his secrets, fearful of ungrateful pupils who might want to dislodge him. ‘He taught me as teachers are supposed to — by being strict’, Gupta recalls with a dry laugh. ‘First he told me what was what. But if I didn’t get it, he beat me. It was like our village school teacher’. Now, several years later, Gupta has used his patiently acquired sorting skills to find a third job, at minimum wage and part-time at that. ‘A good kalakar should be able to sit almost in the dark and be able to tell one kind of plastic from another, one metal from another, without having to see them all the time’, he explains. Thus, Gupta kalakar listens to the plastics. Does it making a cracking sound? Or is it a soft, air-filled shuffle? You feel it and hear it announce its quality. ‘Silicone is the nicest sounding’, he says. ‘It’s so gentle sounding and so smooth. You won’t ever think it’s plastic’. Some sorters bite plastic to ascertain its quality. Hard and not chewy? It’s got to be PP. Sharp and brittle? It’s nothing but crystal. Don’t chew it again, it could injure you.

The artist who segregates ‘knows’ his materials through sound, touch and taste. Eyes, the privileged sensory apparatus of Enlightenment epistemologies, are subsidiary to his craft. Before it ever retakes shape and form, plastic waste will have been heard and tasted by its human intermediaries. But for all these finer nuances, even the most trained ear and practiced teeth cannot relate to chemical names such as High Density Polyethylene, which simply becomes HDP.

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6 PP, or polypropylene, is a linear hydrocarbon polymer that is semi rigid and translucent.
Sometimes waste continues to be called by familiar generic names. Loha (iron) in Hindi remains loha. But within the trade it could be ubiti kandoot (a ‘conduit’ pipe), black kandoot, neela (blue) kandoot, lal (red) kandoot, kaskut (screws, nails), or GI (Galvanised Iron Pipes). The terminology becomes more bewildering with plastics: milky (for disposal coffee cups), dibba balti or box bucket (for plastic with the texture of a hard plastic bucket), kanga pen or comb pen (for thinner plastic, that is more flexible, like the pockets combs men carry in back pockets), guddi, momjama I and II (thin and thick plastic bags respectively), sheet, doodh (milk pouches), nylon (nylon ropes), PP (polypropylene), kali PP (black PP), rangeen PP (colored PP), raincoat (PET bottles), and hard (for shampoo bottles). Such intuitive nomenclature extends to other materials as well. Recut is thick, printed paper with a glossy finish, like labels on a matchbox. Silver refers to aluminum. And colgate is a nearly extinct, because it refers to metallic tubes of toothpaste and ointment that went out of fashion around the time toothpaste became fluorescent.

Not yet 25, Gupta kalakar has already peaked in his vocation. And it wasn’t even his profession of choice. Like many other non-formal sector recyclers in Delhi, he was a struggling peasant who was forced to migrate to the city for survival. In his home village Gupta’s family continues to cultivate their three bighas of land, relying on remittances to see them through. After three years of apprenticeship and toil, Gupta has managed to install a small water pump to irrigate their tiny plot. They hire in a tractor and driver, now that both parents are old and much less able to work. Gupta isn’t around to help them. ‘My uncle just took me away to Delhi one morning. “Maybe you can do something useful”’, he said. ‘What do you do in the village? The roads were so bad you couldn’t even go riding your cycle. I used to eat and just roam around. It was time pass’. The first time he came to Delhi, Gupta was no kalakar. He worked with Dharampal Kabari in his shop, hating every minute of the large, impersonal city. ‘I missed my parents’, he explained. Homesickness pulled him back to the village three months later. But a persistent uncle dragged him back within six months. Despite being at the same godown, it was more fun the second time. ‘I began learning more things. I enjoyed earning my own money’, he recounts. ‘Now

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7 The bigha is not a uniform unit of land. In many parts of north India, 1 acre = 6.25 bighas. So Gupta’s family owns slightly less than half an acre.
I find the village so boring. I can’t go back and just hang around with a gang, doing nothing’. He no longer finds sifting through trash humiliating. Gupta takes pride in his embodied skill to make intelligible what often begins as a haphazard mess.

Gupta is unique. Not everyone in a junk shop is a kalakar. It is precisely because the phenomenon is relatively rare that Gupta is recognised as a kalakar in his profession. The remaining workers are simple sorters, a grade below. The average kabari shop employs seven workers to reclaim trash and bale cardboard and plastics. At night, the numbers expand. Some waste pickers, usually single and male, come to the shop or sorting area to sleep. These cramped spaces are their ‘home’ in the city. A space for waste becomes a space for toiling bodies that survive and regenerate by waste to rest, congregate, dream, and desire. A space of association, even intimacy, in a frequently hostile city.

A Tale of ‘Two’ Cities

Since the 1990s, the ‘efficient management’ of Delhi has emerged as a prime concern of its three municipalities and of the government of Delhi State. It has also been a growing concern of its residents, although differently enabled sections of the population harbour different ideals of efficiency. The wealthy, for example, have been vocal in demanding more reliable supply of electricity, water, unclogged roads, and a clean environment. The poor too want reliable access to drinking water; but they also want reliable public transportation.

Against this backdrop, ‘waste’ in its literal and figurative sense has come to mark both, the excessive and the expendable but also the productive and the profitable in present-day urban India. As society’s excrement ‘waste’ has become an immanent limit to its well-being and reproduction, as well as a vector of realised and potential value. Consider that Delhi generates 7,500 tonnes of municipal solid waste — garbage — every day, a figure that is expected to rise to 16,000 tonnes per day by 2021. The bulk is collected, sorted, stored,
and sold or disposed by a socially stigmatised, informal army of waste-pickers who, as previously noted, number upward of 150,000. This is beginning to change. Since 2005 the three municipalities that oversee Delhi have begun to privatise various infrastructural services, including collection of municipal solid waste. Three large companies — Delhi Waste Management (DWM), AG Enviro Infra Projects and Metro Waste Handling Pvt. Ltd. — have been awarded contracts to collect garbage from neighbourhood collection points and transport it to landfills. The privatisation of waste collection in Delhi was essential as the MCD was unable to handle the massive volumes of waste generated by the city, explains Rakesh Mehta, former Commissioner of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.\(^{10}\)

Predictably, the privatisation of waste collection has adversely impacted the livelihoods of Delhi’s waste pickers. Prior to privatisation, several waste pickers used both a territory and a *dbalao* (municipal bin-space) to generate a living. While some picked waste in the morning, others would sit at a bin for a predetermined number of hours. Time-shares were informally negotiated between waste pickers who shared a catchment area. With privatisation, the bin-space has become the purview of waste management firms. A salaried bin guide, whose first allegiance is to his corporate employer, now maintains the bin-space. The informal social sharing mechanisms that promoted a certain degree of equity in earnings across waste pickers have begun to wither. The same quantity of waste per unit is now distributed across fewer workers. Worse, because a bin guide’s work hours are inflexible (set by the private firm that employs him) women, who must juggle household work with waste picking, are invariably precluded from the position.

Privatisation has also led to poorer segregation of municipal solid waste. Whereas waste pickers gather and segregate 15 to 59 per cent of the waste depending on their area of operation, municipal contracts allow private companies to segregate at much lower levels. Thus, in the eight year of their contract the private operator is only required to segregate 20 per cent of the waste. Privatisation of waste
collection has aggravated a longstanding problem faced by Delhi’s informal sector waste pickers: a secure space to efficiently segregate their laboriously gathered waste. Previously, many used the municipal collection point (dhala) as a space to segregate. Although they were occasionally harassed by municipal field staff and beat cops, the situation appears to have worsened after privatisation. According to Chintan, a Delhi-based advocacy group that has been working for several years to organise waste pickers and highlight their adversities, many pickers have begun to complain that the privately-employed bin-guide, on orders from management, no longer permits them to segregate their own waste in the bin area; nor dispose the remains of post-segregation waste in the dhala. As such, they are forced to travel longer distances to find spots where they can sift through their maal (‘stuff’) and throw post-segregation chaff.

Finally, as private contractors have begun to sell waste directly to the recycling factories or large dealers, a legion of small junk and scrap dealers — most of whom had risen, as previously noted, from the ranks of waste pickers — now finds itself out of work. These fears were anticipated in a report published in the newsmagazine Frontline in April 2006, when privatisation of waste collection was just a year old. The reporter, Aman Sethi, wrote at the time:

At present, waste companies in Delhi are paid on a ‘per tonne’ basis, with the fee ranging from Rs.500 to Rs.700 a tonne. This, many feel, acts as a disincentive for recycling and segregation and puts the newly created formal waste economy in direct conflict with the existing informal economy. The informal work of rag pickers may be curtailed on the grounds that it compromises the profit of the waste operator.... Officials involved in the framing of the contract with private operators have explained that specific provisions have been incorporated in the contract to ensure an incremental 5 per cent segregation of household waste annually. A ‘40 items clause’ (a list of 40 ‘restricted items’ that shall not be counted as tonnage), officials say, has been specifically designed to protect rag pickers. But waste operators, speaking on the condition of anonymity, have feigned ignorance of the ‘restricted items’ list. While recyclables such as plastics and iron shall not be counted as tonnage, the contract does not disallow the private operators from selling recyclables. Thus, the privatisation of waste collection might provide the portal for the entry of corporate interests into the waste sector. ‘Taking over waste collection is just the first step’, feels Santosh Kumar, a godown owner in Takiya Sarai. ‘Soon waste companies will
build sorting stations, then godowns and finally recycling factories. Then they will own the entire sector.\textsuperscript{11}

The privatisation of municipal waste collection is only the latest salvo in a tense relationship between Delhi’s waste pickers and municipal authorities that extends back to 1863, the Delhi Municipal Corporation’s (DMC) founding moment. In 1867 a cholera epidemic swept the city, inciting panic among Delhi’s native elite (\textit{rais}), who, as law-abiding taxpayers of the British government, ‘vociferously demanded the right to live in a clean city’ (Prashad 2003: 3). The DMC did not repudiate the rais’ allegations concerning the inadequate provision of municipal services. Instead, as Vijay Prashad observes, it deflected responsibility and ‘blamed the poor conditions on the sweepers whose strikes, it argued, prevented the DMC from doing its work’ (ibid.).

This strategy of pitting the desires of the urban elite against the unruly conduct of its poor continues into the present, as municipalities plot their modernising agendas. There is evidence that it worked in 1871, as Delhi’s native elite unleashed their misdirected ire against the city’s dalit sweepers, who cleaned Delhi’s \textit{mohallas} (neighbourhoods) in return for daily dues in food and monthly dues in cash; as well as the right to household waste, whether discarded items or human and animal excrement, which they sold for cash to cultivators in villages abutting Delhi’s boundary walls. The \textit{Urdu Akbaar}’s 1 December 1871 edition fulminated:

The haughty and overbearing behaviour of sweepers is another nuisance. In all cities, they have divided mohallas among them so that each is the sole and hereditary lord of his circle, and troubles poor persons by refusing to remove filth from their houses, and in many cases leaving them uncleaned for several days till his demands are satisfied….This conduct of sweepers is the cause of the houses of the people constantly remaining in a dirty state. (Ibid: 6)

The \textit{Akbbaar} went on to claim that the ‘wicked behaviour of the sweepers’ had left the houses of people ‘in a filthy state, in consequence of which children contract diseases and die in numbers’ (ibid.). It was a declaration of class war: \textit{who} had superior rights to the city?

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
The DMC had no doubts as to the answer. It was strategic in planning its strike against sweepers, concluding that the most effective way to undercut their power was to annex its economic source: nightsoil. Prashad (2000: 6–7) unpacks the DMC’s reasoning: ‘If the DMC took charge of the nightsoil, it would both undermine the sweepers’ independence (their earnings from the sale of manure and other…recyclable trash) and enable the DMC to profit from the sale of manure’. As advance planning, the DMC assembled a supply of carts to remove refuse and warehouses to store the nightsoil. Then, in 1884, ‘it passed a resolution to “enforce their right to the monopoly of all the nightsoil and sweepings of the city proper” (ibid.: 7). The sweepers resisted.

To thwart ‘surreptitious removal of nightsoil’ by them the DMC urged its native overseers to exercise renewed vigilance over the mohalla’s sweepers, and erected dhalaos (trash depots) on each street as a means of regulating the movement of nightsoil. Sweepers were required to deposit filth in dhalaos. The dhalao, now ubiquitous in Delhi, was born as a disciplinary instrument designed to regularise in space and time, both, human conduct and nonhuman flows of waste. Alongside, the DMC pursued a more conventional strategy of co-optation: sweepers were gradually inducted as salaried municipal employees and wrenched from their previously personalised work relations in mohallas. Over a period of 40 odd years a relatively independent population of service providers was transformed into servants of the State.

Over a century later the class tussle between the urban elite who generate the bulk of waste and waste pickers who gather it, and efforts to regulate the latter, is repeating with difference in Delhi. In the late 1990s Delhi’s middle classes began to protest the inadequacy of municipal waste collection and advocate for better waste management with upgraded technologies, in order to achieve a ‘modern’ city. These elite protests were registered via public interest litigations (PILs), a judicial device that was originally intended to ‘reach legal and constitutional rights to a “person or determinate class of persons (who) by reason of poverty, helplessness or disability or socially or economically disadvantaged position (is) unable to reach the court for relief”’ (Ramanathan 2006: 3194). One of the most significant outcomes of the PILs was to push municipalities to re-examine their delivery mechanisms.
Delhi’s municipalities concluded that their existing waste management capacities were inadequate for handling the delivery standards mandated by courts in response to PILs. Nor, oddly, did they consider upgrading them. Instead, they determined that only segments of the private sector, with large capital outlays at their disposal, were in a position to meet the delivery goals mandated in judicial orders. Capital requirements that were stipulated in the eligibility criteria for municipal waste management contracts sparked a form of capital-intensive privatisation that excluded lesser private entrepreneurs from the fiscal concessions granted by Delhi’s municipalities as part of public–private partnerships (PPPs), an institutional arrangement that has become the dominant vehicle for urban ‘reform’ initiatives the world over. In Delhi, PPPs in the waste management sector have had the salutary effect of evicting the non-formal recycling sector from several pockets of economic activity that it has historically pioneered and occupied. What used to be nominally ‘informal’ — an arbitrary demarcation to begin with (Roy 2005) — has now become ‘illegal’ under the new regime of urban governance. How did this unfold?

The plague of 1994 was a turning point in urban waste management. Blamed (some claim, incorrectly) on the lack of adequate waste management in the city of Surat in south Gujarat, where it originated, the plague provoked a series of official responses to waste management — particularly by the non-formal sector. In Delhi, the MCD’s initial reaction was to ban waste pickers. The ban was lifted after the plague subsided and vigorous NGO protest drew attention to the unfairness of the ban and the livelihoods jeopardised by it. The Planning Commission of India’s response, by contrast, was more positive. In 1994, it established a High Power Committee — the Bajaj Committee — to study how waste management practices in urban India could be improved. The Bajaj Committee was unusually attentive to the role of waste pickers: it recognised both the health hazards associated with their work and its service to the city. It recommended improving their working conditions. Unfortunately there was no follow-up; and waste pickers were not discussed again in national policy on solid waste until 2006.

The Bajaj Committee’s report did, however, instill a sense of urgency in planning for waste. After years of indifference, authorities and civil society actors were spurred to action. Shaken by media images of garbage and fleeing populations, the renewed spectre of a
medieval disease, and fear of international ridicule, there was a flurry of activity to ‘clean up’ India’s cities. Ironically, it was the haste to overhaul urban waste management systems that prompted neglect of waste pickers. In spite of the Bajaj Committee’s recommendations to the contrary, municipalities and civil society groups failed to see waste pickers as critical relays in cities’ attempts to manage their multiplying waste. Instead, in a repetition of tired prejudices waste pickers were typecast as ‘inefficient’, ‘unhygienic’, and ultimately ‘superfluous’ to modern waste management solutions. The wisdom that prevailed saw the technological upgrading of existing municipal waste management systems as the quickest route to success. This prescription was based in part on an important cognitive shift among decision-makers, who now came to perceive waste not as ‘filth’ but rather as a form of commodity ‘wealth’. Inevitably, their discussions involved considerations of technologies and products that would allow for waste to be profitably harnessed. Powerful political and private interests influenced this agenda, and its terms of participation meant that non-formal sector waste recyclers would be excluded from access to waste.

Concurrently, as the judiciary’s understanding of ‘public interest’ shifted — coming to encompass agendas as disparate as corruption, abuse of public power, and environmentalism by the early 1990s — the original constituency of PILs, the poor and the vulnerable who were to be afforded constitutional and legal rights, receded in importance. PILs rapidly became the preferred channel of remediation for middle class grievances around urban amenities. Two in 1996 pertained directly to the issue of solid waste — B. L. Wadhera vs. the Union of India and Others (1996) and Almitra Patel vs. the Union of India and Others (1996). In Wadhera vs. the Union of India, the plaintiff, Dr Wadhera, contended:

the MCD and the NDMC had been totally remiss in the performance of their statutory duties to scavenge and clean Delhi city, as it was their mandatory duty to collect and dispose of the garbage/waste generated from various sources in the city.12

The plaintiff also argued ‘there were inadequate facilities to dispose of hospital wastes and only a handful of hospitals had incinerators to burn the hospital wastes’. Lastly, the plaintiff claimed that his ‘constitutional rights guaranteed under Articles 21, 48A and 51A(g),

12 http://www.ielrc.org/content/e9604.pdf (accessed 7 September 2010).
which place responsibility on the state to provide for protection and improvement of the environment were also being violated. Meanwhile, Almitra Patel, a retired MIT-educated engineer running a family-owned business in Bangalore, explained her decision to go to court as follows:

Frogs sang in the twilight on our scenic country road until 1991, when Bangalore City Corporation began daily dumping truckloads of city garbage on both sides of the road and into the marshes and stream banks. That led me on a long and lonely path, via 2 years of chasing Govt files to secure dumpsites for Bangalore, and two Clean India Campaigns led by Capt. Velu of EXNORA in 1994 and 1995, during and after which I have personally visited 86 Indian cities to date and their open dumpsites (or lack of them). What we saw, and the urging of fellow INTACH Conveners, led me to file a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) to protect India’s peri-urban soil and water and the health of its urban citizens through hygienic practices for waste management, processing and disposal.13

The Wadhera petition led to the enactment of the Bio-Medical Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 1998. It also produced several dramatic moments in court, when top-level functionaries were summoned to explain the non-performance of their municipalities. Such public humiliation of municipal officials had a salutary effect: it drew unwelcome attention to the underperformance of public bodies (an issue of persistent concern at a time when India was unrolling its New Economic Policy) and, by the same token, ratcheted pressure on Delhi’s municipalities to find new answers to the city’s compounding waste. Privatisation of waste handling became a real possibility for the first time.

Shortly thereafter, Almitra Patel vs. Union of India resulted in the Municipal Solid Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules, 2000 — the first set of rules ever on solid waste, and the most widely used and important ones till date. The Municipal Solid Wastes (MSW) Rules emphasise the need for recycling, but conspicuously fail to acknowledge the right to livelihood of non-formal recycling sector workers.14 The importance of incorporating these workers in urban waste management initiatives, thereby granting legitimacy to their skills and toil, appears not to have been a priority either for the

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plaintiff or the three-judge Supreme Court bench that presided over
*Almitra Patel vs. Union of India*. This policy of neglect, deliberate
or benign, by state and civil society actors toward non-formal re-
cyclers has resulted in a farcical situation where the latter, having
waited years for official recognition of their livelihood rights, were
finally granted these by oblique means — through the National
Environment Policy of 2006, under the mandate of soil pollution!
This belated recognition, unfortunately, has amounted to little.
Since the legal weight of legislation far exceeds that of a policy, it
is the law — the MSW Rules, 2000 — that has remained etched in
municipal memory.

To wit, the absence of reference to the non-formal recycling sector
in the court’s judgment in *Almitra Patel vs. Union of India* had the
effect of effacing the contributions of these workers to the urban
economy and environment, and therefore, consideration within
future policy debates. But there was a more pernicious outcome
that threatened not just the livelihoods of waste recyclers but their
access to a living space within the city as well. During a February
2000 hearing of the Almitra Patel PIL, one of the judges referred to
Delhi as the country’s ‘showpiece’ and issued a call for ‘cleaning up
the city’. Declaring that slum dwellers were encroachers on ‘public
land’ he dismissed, both, their right to habitation within the city on
‘free land, at the taxpayers’ expense’ and to official resettlement,
contending that ‘[r]ewarding an encroacher on public land with
an alternative free site is like giving a reward to a pickpocket for
stealing’ (quoted in Ramanathan 2006: 3195). Delhi’s chronic — and
according to some, deliberate — undersupply of low-cost housing,
combined with unaffordable rents in authorised neighbourhoods,
often leaves its urban poor, including the army of waste pickers who
serve the city, no option but to become pavement dwellers, squat
on public land or rent a sliver of space in unauthorised slums from
slumlords (Dupont 2000; Verma 2002).

The judge’s unwarranted observation in *Almitra Patel vs. Union
of India* speaks to the prejudicial workings of judicial activism in

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the shelterless situation of so many as good business opportunity, rent out
sleeping place and bedding facilities to pavement dwellers. Quilts are avail-
able for hire for an average rate of Rs 5 per night, and cots with bedding for
an average rate of Rs 15 per night’. 

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advancing an anti-poor agenda in Delhi (Baviskar 2003; Ramanathan 2006, 2008; Batra 2008; Ghertner 2008). The process envisions a ‘clean and green city’ for those propertied citizens who are not squatters. Thus, the 2021 Master Plan for Delhi (hereafter, MPD 2021) calls for a ‘slumless’ city as part of a vision to transform Delhi into ‘a global metropolis and a world-class city, where all the people would be engaged in productive work with a better quality of life, living in a sustainable environment’ (Puri 2007: 1). Over 40 per cent of the city’s residents who live in slums are effectively excluded from this frame of reference. Middle class environmentalism criminalises Delhi’s urban poor — its unwanted inhabitants — in the name of cleaning the city of unwanted effluents, industries and built structures. Within this exclusionary agenda, waste recyclers have been forced to bear the brunt of injustice twice over: first as workers whose contributions to the city are de-valourised; and second, as a lower rung of citizens whose political claims to the city are suppressed in favour of upper-class demands.

This class bias has been reinforced by various judicial and municipal orders that have resulted in multiple episodes of mass demolition from 1990 onwards as part of ‘slum clearance’ drives. And although it is estimated that nearly 100,000 houses were destroyed between 1990 and 2007, fewer than 25 per cent of those evicted in the later phases have received alternate plots of land (Bhan 2009). Most of these were 20–30 kilometers away from their places of work. This not only made it difficult for relocated persons to stay employed, but in fact created a perverse incentive to be homeless as a way of remaining in the city and preserving a ‘survival niche’ that was frequently the culmination of arduous labor and years of hardship. Waste pickers and itinerant buyers, whose work is strictly territorial, were amongst those whose livelihoods were most jeopardised by slum demolition and relocation.

Furthermore, the process of relocation has been both arbitrary in its treatment of evictees as well as geographically uneven. Of 14 designated relocation sites, at least two — Bhalsawa and Bawana — are sites of an existing and proposed landfill respectively. Global data shows that even the best landfills are engineered to be functional for a finite period, typically 50 years. They leak, producing leachate that severely contaminates the groundwater. The landfill at Bhalsawa is not an engineered one. It is in fact, no more than a dump. Studies have shown that the ground water here is
severely contaminated. Bawana, on the other hand, is the main relocation site for a slew of small industries that were forced out of Delhi’s residential zones at the fin de millénium by judicial orders, on grounds that they posed a pollution hazard to area residents. Such concerns of exposure to pollution have apparently not figured in the decision of municipal authorities to site the slum relocation area near an industrial zone with potentially harmful levels of environmental toxicity — a move that is likely to intensify the health burdens of the resettled poor, and adversely affect their capacities to earn and lead productive lives. Studies investigating morbidity rates and rates of birth defects around landfill sites in Europe indicate that living near landfills may lead to higher incidence of, both, illness among children (sore throats, severe headaches, nose-bleeds, and fatigue), as well as mothers giving birth to babies with serious birth defects such as spina bifida and heart malformations. Proximity of residence to landfills has also been associated with higher miscarriage and cancer rates. In short, relocation can have a profound inter-generational impact. That Delhi’s planners are willing to let its poor residents bear a disproportionate share of the city’s toxic burden speaks to the differential value of life and hierarchy of citizenship that informs the middle-class urbanism reshaping contemporary Delhi.

The war against Delhi’s poor has been conducted on other fronts as well. Consider, for example, the 2006 order by the Supreme Court of India, sealing a wide range of commercial establishments located in residential areas. The judicial order pre-empted the 2021 Delhi Master Plan, which had not yet come into effect (in part because the previous bi-decadal 2001 Master Plan was belatedly implemented in 1990, instead of 1981 as originally scheduled). The city had changed enormously in the interim, and a combination of new economic forces and large capital inflows had radically transformed the nature of urban consumption. Several shops and commercial enterprises had arisen to cater to the steep increase in disposable income among the city’s rich and middle classes. Since they were not anticipated or sanctioned by the existing 2001 Master Plan they were all, technically, illegal. So were many small shops and roadside shacks, set up to cater to the urban poor who serviced these areas. By late 2006, over 13,000 commercial units were sealed. Subsequently, about 1,500 areas and wider roads were declared exempt from demolition. Large shops in de-notified areas were told they could continue to function. To help ensure that the predominantly middle
class residents were provided for their daily household needs in their vicinities, the MCD also exempted a special list of 24 ‘essential services’ (including ATMs) from demolition. Consistent with the anti-poor agenda, kabari godams (recycling shops-cum-storage facilities) operating in residential areas were absent from the list of 24. In a punitive move, they were also prohibited from areas designated as ‘mixed zone’ in the Master Plan.

Curiously, the MCD exempted glass and paper recyclers from this ban in ‘mixed zone’ areas. And there hangs a tale. In 1996, the plastics industry projected a 10 per cent per annum increase in consumption. Of this, over 50 per cent was expected to be used in packaging. The data was noted in the report of the National Plastic Waste Management Task Force, set up by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) in 1997. Yet, recycling of plastics was not allowed. Nor was there an acknowledgment of the various plastic markets that supplied plastic from all over India to factories in the periphery of Delhi. The city’s earliest market for trading and recycling plastics arose at Tank Road in Karol Bagh in the early 1970s. It was removed in 1981 after a serious outbreak of fire and complaints from residents. The new market, in Jwalapuri, was itself destroyed by fire in 1995 — not one of its 2,500 shops emerged unscathed. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) planned a new PVC market several kilometres away, in Tikre Kalan; but it found few takers because of poor infrastructure, plots that were considered too expensive and a perception among established traders that it was too far away to allow the trade to operate smoothly. The flourishing market subsequently dissipated and dispersed into several clusters in and around Delhi, the largest of these in Mundka.

On the face of it, the state’s multiple apparatuses appear to have precipitated an absurdity. Lack of coordination between central, state and local bodies managed to undercut decentralised initiatives to recycle plastics in urban areas, a result at least outwardly at odds with the government’s awareness of rising plastic consumption and its potential environmental consequences. If the intent was to enable sustainable cities, it was poor judgment on the part of Delhi’s municipal authorities to make the recycling and trading of plastics by neighborhood kabari/junk shops illegal. After all, the MSW Rules of 2000 had made recycling mandatory. But, if the intent was to pursue an urban agenda at once compatible with middle class environmentalism and corporate visions of an investor-friendly
‘world class city’, then the government’s apparently haphazard stance toward non-formal recyclers becomes intelligible. The MSW Rules, 2000, which omit mentioning the services rendered by these workers to the urban economy, dovetail with the MCD’s omission of kabaris in its list of ‘essential services’. In tandem they endorse an urban imaginary cleansed of waste pickers, petty junk dealers and other categories of the urban poor, who jeopardise Delhi’s livability.

Who’s Waste?

The stage was set, therefore, for large private entities to take over the recycling and handling of the growing quantities of garbage generated by Delhi’s rapid increase in consumption. Privatisation of waste collection and transportation had already been initiated for 6 of the 13 zones under MCD’s jurisdiction in 2005. These zones, which accounted for almost 50 per cent of the MCD administrative area, found their waste being picked up and taken to landfills by three corporations — DWM, AG Enviro Infra Projects and Metro Waste Handling Pvt. Ltd., none with substantial prior experience in solid waste management or recycling.

Thus, privatisation entered Delhi on the backs of municipalities looking for waste management plans that would allow them to monitor solutions rather directly implement them. Proximately, they were driven to this by the PILs. But privatisation also appealed to municipal decision-makers because it is the dominant practice in most Western countries, promising efficiencies on a large scale. Repeated disregard of existing informal recycling enterprises that were cost-effective, engines of employment for the urban poor and remarkably efficient in terms of waste recovery was critical in making way for corporate management of Delhi’s waste.

The large private companies were contracted to gather waste from neighbourhood collection points and transport them to landfills. Hired after an (ostensibly fair) international bidding process, their contracts included the Ownership and Control of Recyclable Wastes (Article 5.15 of the Contract) and Control and Rights over the Dhalao Space, including advertising rights. The agreement, in essence, gave the corporate contractors three sources of revenue: waste matter, the bin space or trash depot and payments for collection and transportation. Civil society groups and political activists have criticised the new system on numerous fronts.
Initial assessments indicate widespread displacement of waste pickers and junk dealers in MCD zones where waste collection has been privatised. Chintan, the Delhi-based group that advocates for waste pickers, surveyed R. K. Puram (Table 2.1), a residential area now under DWM's mandate. It found the following before and after scenario:

The overall impact of privatisation is likely quite substantial given that over 150,000 persons depend directly on recycling for a livelihood. Privatisation in the MCD area has resulted in approximately half of all waste pickers losing their livelihoods or witnessing a reduction in income. Many migrated to nearby areas that were yet to be privatised, but in the process have undercut the earnings of pickers in these areas, prompting conflict.

The blow to waste picker communities has been severe. Prior to privatisation, several waste pickers used both a territory and a dhalao to generate a living. While some picked waste in the morning, others would sit at a bin for a predetermined number of hours. Time-shares were informally negotiated between waste pickers who shared a catchment area. With privatisation, the dhalao bin-space has become the purview of waste management firms. A salaried bin guide, whose first allegiance is to his corporate employer, now maintains the Table 2.1: Privatisation of Waste Collection — Before and After Scenario in R. K. Puram

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Self-employed waste pickers were able to use waste to sustain livelihoods.</td>
<td>Waste pickers no longer have access to dry waste, the primary source of recycling income, resulting in loss of livelihoods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Waste pickers identified as a community and would share waste in the dhalao in order to generate incomes.</td>
<td>Only one waste picker gets a lowly paid job from DWM, to guard and clean the dhalao.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Work was hazardous.</td>
<td>Work continues to be hazardous, and gathering from the dhalao is now criminal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Waste pickers used to share the dhalao space to segregate waste.</td>
<td>Waste pickers are no longer allowed to use dhalaos for segregation of waste, hence face new conflicts and hardships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Entrepreneurial waste pickers were able to set up shop, become junk dealers, and buy locally from waste pickers — enabling livelihoods for many.</td>
<td>Junk dealers’ operations have been severely jeopardised.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

bin-space. The informal social sharing mechanisms that promoted a certain degree of equity in earnings across waste pickers have begun to wither. The same quantity of waste per unit area is now distributed across fewer workers. At the heart of the privatisation controversy, then, sits a crucial political and legal issue: Who controls/has rights over the waste?

Driven by this understanding, several NGOs across India have collaborated with impacted waste pickers and junk dealers to produce a charter of demands that seeks to restore control over waste to non-formal sector recyclers. The charter stems from a premise that formal ownership of waste is essential to the livelihoods of recyclers and they must be able to determine what to do with the waste if they are to add value to it. Essential to this stance is the claim that the non-formal sector has also operated as a conglomeration of private actors, who have been harnessing their labour, skills, entrepreneurship, and social networks to provide private waste management services to the city, long before Delhi embraced privatisation as a paradigm shift. Call it ‘informal privatisation’, ‘democratised privatisation’ or ‘privatisation-from-below’. The basic argument remains unaltered: that what is new about contemporary Delhi is not the idea of privatised waste handling but rather the kind of privatisation, requiring large capital outlays, that has found favour with municipal authorities. This ‘privatisation-from-above’, according to the restorative charter of demands, unjustly disqualifies other existing private entities, able to offer different forms of equity (such as knowledge and social networks), from managing Delhi’s waste.

A significant element in the NGOs’ opposition to corporate privatisation is the risk it poses to non-formal recyclers: in shrinking or outrightly eliminating their painfully improvised survival niches in the city and transforming them from petty entrepreneurs with some dignity of work into daily wagers or, sporadically, into salaried employees of waste management companies, afforded neither independence of work nor meaningful economic security. Tellingly, while Delhi’s municipalities have consistently resisted granting the city’s kabaris designated spaces to segregate and store waste, citing land shortage, the MCD was quick to allocate land to private waste management companies for the purpose of separating and warehousing stocks of recyclable waste. Such policy decisions reveal the institutionalised bias of urban planners against the informal sector, and the reason why they have never bothered to incorporate them in municipal waste handling solutions.
The competing ideas of control, employment and entrepreneurship described above draw attention to the manner in which the political rights and economic contributions of the poor are overlooked by policymakers and affluent residents who have embraced the tenets of ‘urban entrepreneurialism’. The MCD’s response to these criticisms has been to point out that it has, in fact, tried to be inclusive of the informal sector by inserting a series of clauses in its contracts with private concessionaires:

- Article 5.19t: Endeavour to employ the informal Municipal Solid Waste collectors within the concession area to carry out the work of collection and segregation of MSW, in accordance with this agreement and applicable law.
- Article 6 — MCD Obligations: Give all assistance to the concessionaire to employ the existing informal Municipal Solid Waste collectors including rag pickers and assist the concessionaire in solving issues arising from the redeployment and employment of such waste collectors by the concessionaire.

It is reasonable to assume that the MCD is aware of the service work of informal sector recyclers, since it has listed them by name in the contract. Yet, the clauses manage to relegate waste pickers and sorters to the status of generic labourers, merely another segment in Delhi’s pool of surplus labour. The obvious option, which the MCD willfully effaces, would involve recognising the waste pickers’ intimate knowledge of discarded materials — indeed, their kalakari in collecting and sorting — and how it might be put to work in recuperating value from waste in far more effective and socially equitable ways than corporatisation accomplishes.

The alternative charter of demands, by contrast, seeks control by informal recyclers over, both, space and the flow of materials. In principle, this could co-exist with the privatisation of collection from central points for transport to landfills — without requiring transfer of control over materials and bin spaces to corporate entities. The latter could continue to receive payments for waste transported and income from advertisements on the walls of the dhalaos. The informal sector has pressed its demands through dharnas, street protests, media campaigns, political lobbying of legislators and ward councillors, and dialogue with Delhi’s municipal authorities. Its primary demands have been as follows:
A) Renegotiate the contract

- Article 5.15, regarding sale/distribution of recyclable substances must be scrapped. All rights to dry, recyclable waste as enumerated in the list of 40 items in the contract must belong to the city’s waste pickers as a matter of right.
- The contractor must not be given the rights over dhalaos, but should be able to collect waste at fixed times from it. Waste pickers must be allowed to use dhalaos to segregate waste.
- Additionally, large dhalaos that are underused must be assigned to junk dealers to carry out their business. A case-by-case decision must be undertaken in every single zone.
- As long as contractors are paid on the basis of low segregation rates and total weight alone, there will be no incentive for them to work with waste pickers. The contractor must be paid on the basis of segregated wet waste alone, and should not have rights over dry waste.

B) Recognise organised waste pickers

- Many waste pickers in Delhi have already organised themselves directly and indirectly. Grant them formal recognition and allow them to handle waste until the stage where it is ready for transportation to landfills.
- Encourage waste transportation efforts by waste pickers and other ‘bottom-of-the-pile’ actors by legalising their forms of transportation.

C) Recognise and facilitate junk dealers

- Junk dealers’ contribution to saving waste from landfills should be recognised. They must be given both space and licenses to operate in a formal manner.

D) Incorporate development and social components into waste management

- All solid waste management policies must be examined within the context of poverty reduction. India has 700 million people who live on incomes under USD 2 per day and 267 million
who live under USD 1 per day. Approximately 3 out of every 10 Indians are poor. Unfortunately, privatisation of waste in Delhi is threatening to force over 100,000 urban poor into dire poverty.

The foregoing model of ‘privatisation-from-below’ understands waste as a source of income and wealth not merely for large corporate entities, but as means for large-scale poverty alleviation in cities that has the added benefit of building urban environmental sustainability.

**Conclusion**

The exclusionary urbanism that is transforming cities like Delhi today is repeating with difference an old battle against ‘waste’. In its negative figurations ‘waste’ has continued to function as a placeholder for material excess; or to put it another way, excess matter. Wasteful ‘natures’ — bodies, spaces, conducts — have to be territorialised for ordered ‘society’ — the society of law that safeguards property and value — to be possible.

Law, working through its sovereign exceptions, has become the bio-political tactic par excellence for achieving social order. Propertied urban residents, fearful that Delhi is sliding into chaos, file environmental litigations to preserve green areas and heritage sites, curb polluting industries within city limits, and evict squatters and street hawkers. Property developers, construction companies, and the DDA employ old and new ordinances to acquire ‘old and dilapidated areas of the city’ for the purposes of urban ‘up-gradation’ (Puri 2007: 1) — code word for retail commercial and upscale housing projects. The judiciary actively collaborates in conjuring up a state of emergency to justify punitive actions against the urban underclass as evidenced by its history of recent rulings.

Although the informal recycling sector has been disenfranchised by a variety of formal manoeuvres all across India, it has tried to defend and even recover its spaces of work. In Delhi, waste pickers are learning to tactically represent themselves not just as demanders of rights but also as service providers, as a means of staking their

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16 As per the most recent World Bank and National Poverty Line data.
legitimate presence in the city. Although such tactics are not consistently successful in securing legitimacy, livelihoods or a survival space, it is nevertheless emerging as a key approach, because it comports with and yet adroitly subverts the new entrepreneurial ethos of urban planning.

On a more general plane, our article argues that ‘waste’ is not a trans-historical given, either in form or content. Rather, it is mobile description of that which has been cast out or judged superfluous in a particular space-time. It is a technical and political artifact. With the exhaustion of an external frontier, ‘waste’ in most parts of the world has come to mark an internal frontier — to be either sequestered or enrolled into new circuits of surplus accumulation. Hence, as we have seen, waste can spur new forms of petty capitalist and corporate enterprise that transforms barriers into profit opportunity. Various forms of municipal and commercial waste can be recuperated as value within secondary circuits of capital — providing a survival niche for urban sub-populations such as waste pickers and scrap traders.

Delhi’s population today is about 22 times what it was about nine decades ago. Anywhere between 300,000 to 500,000 migrants are estimated to migrate into the NCTD every year. The fortunate end up living in authorised and unauthorised slum colonies and jhuggi jhopri (JJ) clusters that encircle the metropolis. At last count, there were about 1,500 illegal colonies and 1,000 slums in Delhi accounting for nearly a third of its 15+ million inhabitants — that’s 5 million people, give or take a few hundred thousand. The unfortunate become pavement dwellers. Living conditions in Delhi’s slums are squalid: 44 per cent have only open, makeshift drainage or none at all; 69 per cent have no waste disposal amenity; and almost 90 per cent of inhabitants are forced to use either ill-maintained and overcrowded public toilets or open spaces to urinate and defecate (Sundar, Mahal and Sharma 2002). Lack of civic amenities such as clean drinking water, sewer systems and access to clean cooking fuels such as liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) means high risks of morbidity for slum residents, over and above the travails of daily employment. Slum dwellings are also characterised by poor ventilation, leading to extremely high levels of indoor air pollution resulting from cooking with ‘dirty fuels’ such as biomass and kerosene. Smoke emissions from these fuels are a significant source of indoor pollutants such as particulate matter (PM), carbon monoxide, polyaromatic
hydrocarbons, such as benzo(a)pyrene, as well as sulphur oxides and trace metals (Kandlikar and Ramachandran 2000). In short, sickness, depression, violence, and death are quotidian realities for Delhi’s poor.

To put it starkly, contemporary Delhi has emerged as an uneasy joining of two ecology-sets: on the one side, a way of life that churns out growing quantities of ‘waste’; on the other, lives that live off this commodity detritus. On the one, lives whose labours are valued and rewarded; on the other, lives that are peripheral to global circuits of capital. Lives worth preserving, lives easily abandoned. Valuable lives, wasted lives; and mapped onto these, valuable spaces and spaces designated as wasteful. The annexation and enrollment of wasted spaces into capital’s circuits of value, and exclusion from political citizenship of those whose labours are deemed unworthy: this is the new face of enclosure. It is the juggernaut we confront and must relentlessly question. Or else poverty becomes geography. To bend Neil Smith’s old dictum: ‘The question really is how we produce space and who controls this production of space’.17

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17 The original dictum went: ‘The question really is how we produce nature and who controls this production of nature’ (Smith [1984] 2008: 89).


Shillong: The (Un) Making of a North-East Indian City?

Daisy Hasan

Cities in north-east India have received little critical attention in the ongoing South Asian urban scholarship perhaps because of the predominant focus on globalisation — a phenomenon that this region is often mistakenly regarded, as being somewhat remote from.¹ This is very much the case with the city of Shillong,² the capital of the North-Eastern state of Meghalaya, with a population of more than two hundred thousand.³ Shillong has traditionally been hailed as a cosmopolitan haven in an otherwise conflict-torn region. A survey of the historical development and contemporary life of this city, however, reveals that at crucial moments, its cosmopolitan character has been challenged and proven fragile. Like other recent re-examinations of the post-colonial city have argued, Shillong did not, as is commonly thought, evolve as an idyllic, cosmopolitan and modern town in an otherwise ‘savage’ region. Deep divisions were ingrained in its social and cultural relations and have affected its social geography from the very start. However, Shillong’s multi-layered colonial and post-colonial history, lends it to the varied imaginings of

¹ I am extremely grateful to Colin McFarlane and Jonathan Anjaria for their patience and insights while editing this chapter. Dr Philip Bounds’ extreme clarity of thought has also helped me think through many critical issues in this chapter.

² Geographically located at 25 34’ N latitude and 91 53’ E longitude, Shillong lies on a mountain basin which is bound in the south by the Shillong range, in the north-east by the Mawpet hills and in the east by the river divide of the Umrkrah–Umshing water divide. See http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/meghalaya/shillong.htm (accessed 11 February 2010).

³ Shillong’s population was estimated at 260,000 at the last census, conducted in 2001.
different interest groups. While extremist groups challenge the liberal and normative idea of the city as an inclusive space equally open to all its peoples, and lobby for adherence to a ‘pure’ local culture, other organisations have a more complex approach to ideas of indigeneity and cultural plurality.

Emerging local television networks in the city present one example of the more progressive organisations. The cultural ‘texts’ they generate provide important ‘archives’ for studying the city. Nandy (1998: 7, cited in McFarlane 2008: 483) has suggested, referring to Hindi commercial cinema, that it captures ‘modernizing India in all its sophisticated, and raw aspects’. McFarlane, who studies representations of Bombay (and the idea of cosmopolitanism) through film, argues that by linking ‘two seemingly distinct registers of experience, narrative and portrayal: film and civil society’ we can arrive at a more politically and culturally wide ranging analysis of urbanism (ibid.).

In addition, responses of the middle class local population in the city to questions of culture, identity and cosmopolitanism suggest that because a majority of the indigenous people in Shillong recognise that their own identities are the product of hybrid histories and cultural influences, mobilisations in the name of exclusive homelands can have limited success. Progressive social and political movements can build on people’s slow but sure inclination to acknowledge their different and fluid cosmopolitan cultural identities. These arguments address recent scholarship which has argued that an exclusive and often xenophobic identity politics underpins social movements in Shillong today (McDuie-Ra 2009).4

4 While my experience of being born in and having lived in Shillong until early adulthood, plays a crucial part in this article’s understanding of the city, this experience is supplemented by extensive fieldwork. A year (between October 2003 and October 2004) was spent studying and documenting audio-visual production and reception in the city and the implications this had for cosmopolitan identities. In 2006, another research trip was undertaken in the region for six months. Research questions about media culture, cosmopolitanism, ethnic identity and nationalism were addressed by conducting in-depth interviews and group discussions with cultural practitioners, academics, students, journalists, government employees, filmmakers, and activists in three cities of the region. Archives of local, regional and national television channels were also quantitatively and qualitatively studied to address the research questions posed. Fieldwork over the years has yielded a wealth of material which captures some of the flux and complexity of urban life in the region.
Shillong is, in many ways, similar to other celebrated cosmopolitan cities in India, particularly Bombay. There was never, as a scholar of that bigger imperial Indian city puts it, ‘a “golden age” in the career of the modern city, when it was free of the conflicts generated by the deepening hold of market relations, state power and politics’ (Kidambi 2007: 9). Shillong’s reputation of inclusiveness has been challenged with the rise in communal violence in recent years, quite like the bombing of prominent Indian cities has encouraged scholars to draw attention to a resurgence of parochialism that has compromised the cosmopolitanism of cities like Bombay (Appadurai 2000; Varma 2004, cited in McFarlane 2008: 481). Recent scholarship on Bombay has, however, complicated the ‘rise-and-fall’ approach towards understanding cosmopolitanism, bringing new methodological insights to bear on our theoretical understanding of the nature of cosmopolitanism in the global south (McFarlane 2008).

Colin McFarlane (ibid.: 482, 497), who discerns different ‘cosmopolitan imaginaries’ at work in Bombay today, argues that rather than approaching cities as either wholly cosmopolitan or communal, it is more useful to study how people might be excluded or included in the workings of ostensibly cosmopolitan agendas. These understandings of cosmopolitanism inform my approach towards the issue of cosmopolitanism and culture. I work with a notion of cosmopolitanism as political and cultural freedom that allows the individual to affiliate freely with collectives other than that to which

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5 These include the cosmopolitanism discernible in the post-independence Nehruvian developmental and progressive vision for modern Indian cities echoed in the cinema of Raj Kapoor which, he argues, is an instance of the cosmopolitan project ideologically informed by colonialism’s global designs and therefore ‘a cosmopolitan imaginary that emerges from the interior rather than from the exterior’ (McFarlane 2008: 482). The second kind of cosmopolitan vision is exhibited in representations of the globalised elite (in the ‘family films’ produced by the Hindi commercial film industry). This vision or ‘imaginary’ is exclusive and eschews representations of the urban poor. The third cosmopolitan imaginary is described by McFarlane through the work of civil society groups working among the urban poor. McFarlane examines the way cosmopolitanism is produced by an umbrella organisation of community-based groups and non-governmental organisations, arguing that in contrast to the kind of cosmopolitanism that emphasizes individual liberty, this cosmopolitanism is “social, reproduced through the frames of group learning and solidarity” (ibid.:482).
s/he belongs by the accident of birth. Such a conception of collective pluralism has been championed by influential writers like Amartya Sen who argues that cultural diversity (and the cosmopolitan impulse) flourishes in situations where people are allowed to choose the kind of life that is most worth living ‘instead of [their] being restrained by ongoing tradition’ (2006: 115).

This approach towards cosmopolitanism becomes relevant in the context of Shillong where people are divided by the tussle between cultural pluralism and exclusive affiliation almost everyday. At the same time people also have a complex but discernible inclination to belong to different groups and nurture different identities. In such a situation, theoretical arguments about cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity, such as those proffered by Sen, become relevant if one is to resist surrendering to the growing view that cosmopolitanism is in a shambles in modern Indian cities today.

**Surveying Urban Studies on North-East India**

Cities in north-east India have received some amount of academic attention from departments of anthropology and sociology where scholars have looked at issues of urban planning and development. The strong historicist and developmentalist discourse of the state often underpins these examinations. Thus scholars have examined how cities in north-east India have fared in terms of developmental indices. Apart from these studies, the focus of academic research has largely been on the life, systems of land use and cultivation, and community and kinship patterns of the several indigenous groups of the region who inhabit largely ‘underdeveloped’ rural areas. In the autumn of 1991 as part of a seminar series organised by the North-East India Council for Social Science Research, several academic papers on various aspects in the growth and development of Shillong were presented. While the issues examined in these papers were varied, looking at things like the organisation of the city along ethnic lines, the status of working women in the city, causes for social instability in the city, the role of the media and the ecological implications of urbanisation in Shillong, yet these papers were disappointing in terms of the quality of research and the questions raised. Attempts to map and interrogate the haphazard unfolding of urbanisation in the region are sporadic. Globalisation has sparked
off academic interest in, among other things, the ‘Look East Policy’\(^6\) of the government and its impact on the economy of the north-east or, on the journalistic front, in the development of tourism and the combating of insurgency — a preferred ‘lens’ through which the region is viewed by both academics and journalists. Urban study centres have, in the recent past, funded some research on Shillong, which raises interesting questions about cultural interaction and conflict in a city that has often flaunted its cosmopolitanism. However, research along these lines is comparatively ‘young’ and very often not publicly available.

**Shillong: A Critical Historical Introduction**

Like many cities in South Asia whose contemporary character was significantly shaped by colonial enterprise, Shillong, which was no more than a cluster of villages in the pre-colonial era, also came into its ‘modern’ being during the period of intense colonisation in the region in the late nineteenth century. The territory, known today as ‘north-east India’, was historically a much larger region whose borders with Southeast Asia were nebulous and fluid for much of its pre-colonial history. In 1826 the region was incorporated into the British Empire and became a ‘frontier’ area, marking off Indian territory from the rest of the continent in the south-east. The region, now called ‘Assam’, became the site for an important colonial venture — the production of tea. This would transform the economy of the region as well as its social and cultural identity. For British administrators, Assam extended from Sylhet in the south to the Himalayas in the north. It thus included the Brahmaputra valley and its surrounding hills. The Khasi Hills (where Shillong is located), a part of these hilly tracts, came into prominence as a district of Assam when the latter was restructured into a new Chief Commissioner’s province in 1874.

What British administrators, anthropologists and missionaries saw in the hills of Assam, was ‘ethnographic chaos’ (Jacobs 1990: 23, in Baruah 2002: 3). Imbued with what might be called a colonial

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\(^6\) This policy — formulated soon after the Cold War to improve trade relations with nations of South-East Asia — is now ensuring the growth of significant trade between India and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Baruah 2005: 1).
mentalité: they set out to organise hill peoples into ideologically devised categories such as ‘primitives’, who were to be incorporated into an emerging list of ‘tribes’ in India. Tribes were relegated to the very bottom of the emerging social hierarchy and distinguished from their more ‘civilised’ neighbours in the plains. A ‘hard boundary’ in the form of an Inner Line was imposed between the hills and plains (Baruah 1999). ‘The experience of colonial rule in these areas’, was therefore ‘profoundly different from that of the regularly administered parts of British India’ (ibid.: 28). Over time the Inner-Line regulation helped to crystallise the identity of hill tribes as distinct from those of the plains people and (by extension) from the rest of India.

Growth of Shillong as a colonial centre

With the formation of the Chief Commissionership of Assam in 1874, the political and administrative headquarters of the Chief Commissioner, Col. R. H. Keatings, was shifted to Shillong. Shillong’s picturesque setting and salubrious climate were found very suitable for maintaining the sanatorium and holiday homes for British civilians, who were plagued by the heat in the plains. Cool, moist and with a temperate climate all year round, Shillong came to be known as ‘the Scotland of the East’.

British administrative intervention rapidly changed Shillong as colonial officials negotiated for land with landowners including the traditional ruler or Syiem of Mylliem. The British built modern and semi-modern bungalows in Shillong as well as administrative buildings, and residential areas that housed government employees.

7 Shillong was covered, at that time, by deep forests and until 1864, subsumed an obscure set of villages administered by the United Khasi State of Shyllong (Pakem 1984: 1, cited in Purkayastha 1991: 1). The search for a location for the District Headquarters of Khasi Hills led the last commissioner of Assam, Col. Henry Hopkinson, to the valley of Yeodo, a corruption of the local name Iewduh. Yeodo was renamed Shillong after a sacred peak by Col. Henry Hopkinson on 28 April 1866. Shillong was thought to be an ideal place for building a cantonment that would allow vigilance over the entire region and a sanatorium (Baruah 2004: 8).

8 Writing about the Government House, Imdad Hussain, a historian of colonial buildings in Shillong, says, ‘at five thousand feet in the heart of the
There was an increase in the population of Shillong as people arrived from the rest of the region as well as the rest of India to take up employment opportunities created by the growth of Shillong as a British station. Colonial records show that the indigenous population, among whom literacy levels were low, did not take up government posts. These were usually filled by reasonably well-educated Bengalis (Hazarika 1983: 46, in Baruah 2004: 8).

To accommodate its rapidly increasing population of business persons, journalists, doctors, teachers, clerks employed in government offices, and other working classes, Shillong began to include newer villages. In 1910 Shillong was organised into a municipality with ten wards. As in other cities in India, Shillong’s modernisation and its cosmopolitan reputation paralleled each other for as Shillong became an urban centre, there was a significant change in the demographic profile of the area as people flocked in large numbers to take up government jobs, establish shops and other business establishments. Hill people now came into contact with ‘plains people’ in a more immediate fashion than they had been accustomed to. The next hundred years saw the steady growth of Shillong not only as an administrative and military centre but also a centre of judicial organisation, trade and education. While Shillong was then ostensibly multicultural, yet there were cultural and social divisions among its population which were mirrored in the organisation of middle

Khasi Hills the British created a hill station, the product of their imperial imagination, that was to become, as one civil servant phrased it, “as near a chip of England that could be conceived outside the British Isles”. See http://www.easternbookcorporation.com/moreinfo.php?txt_searchstring=7305 (accessed 11 February 2010). In this British enclave in the midst of tribal territory ruled by elected chiefs was their seat of authority, the government house, designed, built and nurtured to complete that illusion. See http://eagersnap.blogspot.com/2007/01/charming-shillong-town.html for photographs of such houses. The major 1897 earthquake destroyed many buildings and monuments in Shillong. However, Shillong was quickly rebuilt and many old buildings from the colonial era still dot the city although they are being rapidly replaced by concrete multi-storied structures.

The ten wards were Laitumukhrah, European Quarters, Jail Road and Haneng, Police Bazar, Mawkhar, Jhalupara and Mawprem, Laban, Mission Compound and Jaiaw, Qualapatti, and Malki.
class localities in the city. Different localities housed largely homogeneous ethnic communities. The indigenous Khasi population was largely confined to the less populated areas, designated as ‘tribal areas’. These parts were administered by Khasi ‘chiefs’ or headmen and local councils or Dorbars and consequently saw little British interference. The coming of the Christian Missions in the mid-nineteenth century also created a sense of distinctiveness among Shillong’s indigenous people.

Christian missions and the rise of a Khasi intelligentsia in Shillong

Colonial modernity reached the hills through Christian missions which were patronised by the British administration and allowed to work in the hills to ‘enlighten’ the tribals. The Welsh Calvinist Methodist Mission operated in the Khasi Hills between 1841 and 1962. The missionaries played an active role in establishing schools and hospitals and reforming the society by abolishing what they saw as decadent social practices. The Christian ‘impact’ was also visible in other cultural areas such as dress, music and gender roles (Vergheese 1996: 284). A lasting legacy of the Christian missionaries in the hills was the conversion of oral languages into Romanised scripts and standardised print forms in the late nineteenth century. Print culture played an important role in creating community consciousness among the Khasis. The community that was being ‘imagined’ now extended beyond the family, clan and village to include all Khasis in the various

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10 While Jail Road housed the Bengali ‘babus’ who were largely employed by the government, Police Bazaar saw the flourishing of the Marwari business class. Lachumeire, one of the most well-planned and architecturally pleasing areas of Shillong, was inhabited by high ranking European officials. Hence from its very inception Shillong was organized along ethnic lines.

11 The Dorbar Shnong is the lowest level of governance in the state of Meghalaya. According to the contemporary narrative of the traditional political system of the Khasis, it is a village level assembly of the Khasis around which the life of the community is organised. In the context of emergence of cosmopolitan communities in many parts of the Khasi Hills, traditional authorities are losing their tribal (community-centred kinship-based) character, and chiefs of all ranks are now becoming territorial chiefs instead (Baruah 2004).
‘himas’ or ‘kingdoms’. The Khasi middle class, which had begun to emerge as Shillong became the British headquarters of Assam, was chiefly responsible for shaping this identity which subsumed local variations in language and cultural customs.

The efforts of many an indigenous reformer, educationist and philanthropist also gave Shillong a progressive identity. The English-educated Khasi intelligentsia operating within Shillong tried to modernise Khasi society and do away with what were thought to be its fundamentally regressive aspects. This notion of what was desirable and what was not was ironically informed both by a modern (colonial) outlook that emphasised industry, education and thrift and also by a desire to revive and maintain the Khasi cultural heritage.

The nature of the civil society that began to emerge in Shillong as the nineteenth century came to a close was then predominantly shaped by indigenous efforts and outlook. The English educated Khasi intelligentsia, who had been exposed to new forms of knowledge, fashioned Khasi identity in a way that set them apart from other ‘Indians’. The emergence of a print culture in Shillong, which this intelligentsia both produced and read, helped forge a modern Khasi community which, while it was conceptualised in an urban centre, invested in the pre-industrial rural hinterland. Shillong would find it hard to transcend this pastoral vision even as its reputation of cosmopolitanism was growing.

The awakening of cultural, social and political distinctiveness on the part of the Khasi intelligentsia was challenged by the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature of Shillong society. The immigrant Anglophone intelligentsia who established newspapers (such as The Shillong Times, which was founded in 1945 by S. B. Chaudhuri), and were employed in All India Radio, the government controlled radio station, were active in some inclusive community activities in post-independence Shillong. But the Khasi elite participated sparingly in

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12 Prominent Khasi reformers included educationists like Jeebon Roy who started the Ri Khasi Press, established several schools and helped in setting up a cultural organisation called the Seng Khasi.

13 The Seng Khasi, for instance, emphasised the need to revive the ancient Khasi language. Another prominent figure who mobilised people and romanticised the Khasi homeland was the poet So So Tham, whose work pioneered a secular Khasi literature.
these endeavours. Thus, even as new forms of urban public culture were consolidated through the setting up of clubs, societies and other associations — organisations that allowed culturally different people to mingle and ‘negotiate the pressures and possibilities of modern life’ (Kidambi 2007: 12) — yet, unlike in other cities, these associations did not see full-fledged local participation. Local people were often hostile to ‘outsiders’. At the same time, ‘outsiders’ treated the indigenous population with scepticism and often condescension. While subtle and sometimes overt negotiations then took place between Khasis and non-Khasis, the city had been transformed into a ‘veritable theatre of popular politics’ (ibid.: 12) from where the indigenous elite launched the Hill State Movement — a peaceful constitutional struggle for autonomy. This movement, very much a product of the urban context, was part of a dynamic change ‘in the public [and political] culture of the Indian subcontinent that had started in the late nineteenth century’. These movements,

14 A former Station Director of All India Radio who was posted in the Shillong–Gauhati station in 1949 reminisces that there was only ‘one tribal member’ on the programme staff. Thus, though several elite groups co-existed in Shillong there was minimal interaction: ‘...one of the great charms of the Shillong station was the unusual people we met. My job brought me into four different groups. There were the officials, members of the ICS and other senior services. As elsewhere, they kept to themselves, went to the club and played bridge...Mr Fakhr-ud-din Ali Ahmed, later to be our President is one I would classify as belonging to this group.... Then there was a group of old-time British residents. Most of them had been in tea, and had settled down in Shillong. This group also kept mostly to themselves.... The third group we met were the Khasis. Some were on the second rung of the official ladder...these three groups hardly interacted. Not a single member of the Khasi group belonged to the Shillong club. In the true sense of the word Shillong society was not cosmopolitan’.

15 These years witnessed a spectacular surge in associational activities, ranging from caste societies to nationalist organisations, as well as the rise of a dynamic print industry that churned out books, newspapers, journals, tracts, pamphlets, and posters. There also arose new forms of collective action in public arenas; reasoned debates in the press, as well as memorials, meetings and public demonstrations.... It was in the city that Indians encountered and came to terms with new definitions of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ and it was here to that they began to recognise the potential of novel modes of association and sociability (Kidambi 2007: 12).
though predominantly egalitarian and committed to discussion and
debate, were not free of internal conflict and tensions (ibid.: 13).
Often these modern collaborations reinforced deeply primordial
feelings of belonging to traditional pre-industrial and pre-national
communities.\footnote{The Hill State Movement: The indigenous political leadership had
been lobbying for the right to self-rule on the grounds that their societies
were culturally and socially distinct from the rest of India almost as soon as
the nation attained independence. A prominent Khasi leader, J. J. Nichols
Roy, invoked Gandhi’s idea of village self-governance to argue for political
autonomy in the hills. Nehru’s views on the region and the wider political
consensus among national leaders about the need for democracy, economic
development and integration initially encouraged a devolved political set-up
for the north-eastern region (Singh 1987: 21). A section of the Indian
constitution, now famous as the ‘Sixth Schedule’, ensured a federated
political structure in the form of Autonomous District Councils that were to
administer the hills.
Nichols Roy eventually persuaded the Dorbar of Khasi States — a body
of Khasi heads formed to negotiate the merging of the hills with India —
to accept the Sixth Schedule. The Khasi–Jaintia and Garo Hills, therefore,
became part of the Indian Union as an autonomous province of Assam on 26
Bengal sharpened the boundaries of the region. The term ‘north-east’, which
had earlier been used rather loosely to refer to Assam and its surrounding
hill tracts, now came to designate a ‘distinct geo-political region’ (ibid.: 285).
These strict boundaries were in no way advantageous to the north-east.
They hindered communication and transport networks and put an end to
the thriving trade that had flourished between the hills (in Assam) and the
plains of Bengal. By 1953 the demand for separate and new states based
on linguistic and cultural homogeneity had increased. Indigenous leaders,
keen to acquire power over their own lands formed the All Party Hill Leaders
Conference (APHLC) which became engaged in a prolonged but peaceful
struggle for autonomy from Assam (Singh 1987: 21). The Khasi leadership
lobbied for a separate state for the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills.}

In 1972, under the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act,
the Khasi Hills achieved full statehood and Meghalaya — the state
for the Khadi, Jaintia and Garo people — came into existence
(Lyngdoh 2003: 27). Shillong now became the capital of an ethnically
demarcated state, an identity that would limit the multicultural pos-
sibilities that had been set in motion by colonial modernity. The
coming years saw Shillong’s painstaking movement towards
modernity as political groups struggled to reconstruct pre-modern pasts. Post-colonial Indian policies had legitimised the authority of pre-modern indigenous political institutions such as the Dorbar. These institutions now played a vital role in adjudicating conflicts between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’.

## Communal Riots, Insurgency and Consumerist Cosmopolitanism in Shillong (1970s–2000s)

The constitutional path adopted by the Hill State Movement, gave way in 1979 to a more confrontational street politics. The immediate cause of the communal riots in Shillong in October 1979 was the alleged denigration of a Hindu goddess (being worshipped during the annual Kali Puja festival) by a Khasi youth in the locality of Laithmukrah. This skirmish soon became a fully-fledged riot as Khasi leaders tried to mobilise young people, particularly students, against the immigrant Bengali community. Bengali shops were forced to close and members of this community became the target of mob violence. The immigrant community retaliated as much as it could. Shops were burnt, processions and political meetings were organised, some Bengalis were evicted from homes, curfew was imposed and the army called in. While the elected government made desperate calls for peace, calls that were reported avidly by the Bengali-owned *The Shillong Times*, the Laithumkrah Dorbar defended the Khasi boys who had started the immediate riot even as it ‘expressed its respect for all religious beliefs and condemned any attempts to infringe the religious rights of any community by anti-social elements’ (Baruah 2004: 3).17 This incident marked the rise of an indigenous discourse in urban governance that challenged constitutional and judicial processes. Baruah (2004: 3) writes,

> [The] Dorbar’s intervention made it impossible for the police to investigate the case and instead the police tried to appease the Dorbar.

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17 The Dorbar also demanded closure of all non-tribal shops in Laitumkhrah from 23 to 29 October, decided to disallow the performance of Puja in any place other than temples, demanded compensation of Rs 5,000 each for the two assaulted Khasi boys and withdrawal of armed police from Laitumkhrah. Their claim that the two Khasi youth were innocent was refuted 21 years later by a publication by the Dorbar itself (Baruah 2004: 3).
outcry by making an equal number of arrests and then releasing all...the police were forced to act politically...the Dorbars played an important role in bringing an ethnocentric perception to administration at the local level.

The crisis of modern governance in Shillong increased in the following years as did the police and army presence. These years saw the growth of the Khasi Students Union (KSU) a political front that opposed, among other things, the extension of the railways into the state as this would lead to further immigration and a consequent reduction in job opportunities for the region’s indigenous population. In the early 1990s, the agitation was spearheaded by a united front of Khasis, Garos and Jaintias under the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, Garo People (FKJGP), which demanded, among other things, the expulsion of non-indigenous traders not holding licenses (Purkayastha 1991). Dorbars continued to play a partisan role in these conflicts. The 1990s and early 2000s also saw the rise of several insurgent groups in Meghalaya which operated underground. These groups had varied ideologies and financial backing, but the demand for greater autonomy remained a constant in all manifestos.

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18 In 1998, the situation in Shillong deteriorated and the police requested the ‘Dorbar Shnongs’ to help maintain law and order. But the help the Dorbars began to render in itself became a more serious problem. They organised volunteers to keep vigil at night in the respective localities. Most of the localities then experienced unprecedented atrocities committed by the volunteers who were mainly Khasis. The Shillong Bench of the Guwahati High Court directed the state government to immediately tackle the deteriorating law and order situation. The court directed the government to protect the life and liberty of the people of the state, particularly in the capital city (Baruah 2004: 4).

19 In 2005 there were about ‘eight indigenous militant outfits operating from Meghalaya, of which two [were] proactive: Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) and Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) with varied aims and ambitions. While HNLC aims to transform Meghalaya as a province exclusively for the Khasi tribe and tries to free it from the domination of the Garo tribe, by fighting against the outsiders, the ANVC aims to carve out a homeland called “Achik Land” in the areas of Garo Hills comprising the Garo Hill districts of Meghalaya, Garo dominated Nongkhlaw area in the Khasi Hills and the Garo-Inhabited Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam’ (Roul 2005: 5).
The growth of violent political movements was paralleled, ironically, by a concomitant economic boom after the liberalisation of the Indian market in 1991. Shillong, which until now, had straddled both descriptions of ‘town’ and ‘city’ decidedly became a city with the growth of commerce and a new interest in the region generated by the Indian government’s ‘Look East Policy’ which promised to create production units that would lead to more local employment. The combined effects of the intensified circulation of images of global cities through cinema, television, and the internet and the urgent pressure to connect with the global economy and attract foreign investment...’ (Chatterjee 2004: 143–44, cited in Kidambi 2007: 8) influenced government spending on beautification projects such as the Khyndai Lad beautification project which cost about Rs 5 crore and revamped the commercial shopping area of Police Bazaar in the heart of Shillong. This was in keeping with the new image of Shillong as a part of a global ‘space’. In 2007, the city had a chance to flaunt this new mood of commercially induced cosmopolitanism again when a local Bengali boy from the city catapulted into national fame by being one of the finalists on ‘Indian Idol’ a singing contest aired on Sony TV, India. Amit Paul was given a hero’s welcome by the state government, dressed in Khasi regalia reserved for select occasions and worn only by Khasi dancers and chiefs, and was widely photographed. But even as life-size images of Amit Paul flooded the city with slogans like ‘Amit Paul, Pride of the North-East’, the Nepali community in Shillong was mobilising support for his rival, Prashant Tamang, a Nepali boy from Darjeeling in West Bengal. As the hour of the final contest approached and big television screens were set up in key points of the city, tensions between the Nepali community and the rest of Shillong were palpable and security was tightened following the victory of Prashant Tamang. This incident, however, proved that Khasis in Shillong were now willing to accommodate their ‘accidental’ Indian identities along with their Khasi one.

Audio–Visual Media and Negotiation of Sectarian Identities in Shillong

Shillong bore visible marks of political and cultural confrontation not only in its ethnically segregated localities but also in more public places such as the walls of school buildings and shops. Stark political graffiti — ‘we are Khasis by blood; Indians by accident’ — leapt out at onlookers, sitting oddly with more placid political posters and exuberant commercial hoardings. The insurgency lent itself particularly well to live dramatisation on local television channels. Encouraged by the growth of cable television in households in the city of Shillong, media entrepreneurs had started producing Khasi news and entertainment on a regular basis since the mid-1990s. The growth of these media ventures led to a significantly different view of contemporary Khasi society from what was available on state-owned television. Khasi journalists, equipped with lightweight video equipment, were able to capture and relay important political and cultural events live, as they unfolded. Very much in keeping with the new ‘pace’ of journalism, encouraged by the privatisation of Indian television, this new electronic journalism was largely investigative — aimed at uncovering governmental corruption which had drastically impeded national development.

The insurgency received, in its early years, the implicit support of a majority of the indigenous public. However, while the state-owned national and local media eschewed the representation of this popular groundswell, as well as the reasons for the insurgency brought about by, among other things, lack of industrial investment and consequent unemployment, corrupt local governments and the mismanagement of public funds, the privately owned media in Shillong was often a conduit for the expression of the ‘insurgent’ viewpoint. The detailed and candid coverage of the insurgency received a mixed response from the public. Some people felt that Khasi channels showed intrusive and unethical video footage of the shoot-outs in order to sensationalise their stories and increase viewership. The proprietor of Peignor Cable News (PCN) reacted to this allegation by saying ‘it’s not that we construct reality…it’s happened on the spot…if a body is lying covered with blood…we cover that’.22 Despite

22 Personal interview in 2004.
scepticism in some quarters, these channels came to acquire a new credibility. The presence of these channels seemed to say, as a producer of PCN, an immensely popular channel, put it, ‘we are not lagging behind...we are in the age of technology...we should catch up with this particular age’. Interestingly, most of these channels programme in the Khasi language. The age of technology has empowered the vernacular.

Despite appearing to project ‘the Khasi cause’ as elucidated by the HNLC, an in-depth study of news reports on the insurgency revealed that most channels had adopted a ‘middle path’ position. Stories related to the conflict occupied the third, fourth and fifth largest chunk in the news programmes of Media Plus, Ri Khasi Channel (RKC) and PCN respectively and formed only 10, 7 and 5 per cent of the total news stories covered by these channels during the monitoring period. Though producers expressed a desire to communicate both sides of the story in reporting the conflict, actual news stories appeared to espouse a public interest position and did not hesitate to condemn extremist attacks. A close scrutiny of the most significant stories on the insurgency revealed that in the use of language and framing of issues, the channels adopted the normative position expected of journalists in a modernising democracy — that of unbiased observers working in the interests of the public at large.

23 Ibid.

24 Some of the stories studied in close detail included reports on (i) The Aristo Dhankheti shoot-out by the HNLC (PCN, 5 January 2001); (ii) Umkaliar Shootout (PCN, 24 February 2002); (iii) HNLC, 36-hour bandh on Independence Day (PCN and Media Plus, 18 August 2002); (iv) 15 August night, Shillong shootout; (v) Message from surrendered HNLC militant (PCN, 18 August 2002); (vi) Police seize Hynniewtrep mafia arms (PCN, and Media Plus, 17 August 2003); (vii) Surrender of HNLC militants — 28 more HNLC cadres surrender (PCN, 8 August 2003, and RKC, 1 February 2004).

25 Reports studied, therefore, tilted in favour of more democratic, state-oriented and non-extremist approaches to the issue. At the same time, channels like RKC and PCN reflected and encouraged Khasi society’s growing impatience with the dissidents through stories that explicitly denounced the HNLC for curbing development and destroying the harmony of the community: ‘State–militancy related violence: A heavy toll (PCN, 3 March 2002); ‘The workings of the militants need to be curbed’ (RKC, 10 February 2002); ‘Militants hindering development’ (RKC, 17 February 2002); ‘Militants a hindrance to the harmony of the community’ (RKC, 10 March 2002).
National celebrations such as Independence Day and Republic Day — especially volatile occasions which the HNLC either chose to boycott by declaring public bandhs or violently disrupted by shoot-outs and grenade attacks on police stations — were covered by the local channels through largely factual reports about the disruption of public life as a result of the bandhs and cautious celebrations by the Meghalaya government. However, as the insurgency waned, reports on the public mood on such occasions became more frequent. A PCN feature reported that people had come out in large numbers to celebrate the occasion ‘of their own free will’ and ‘as Indians’.26

Apart from the coverage of the insurgency, other aspects of programming on local television channels also give us some indication of the way the local media negotiate the city’s cosmopolitan cultural identity. Producers emphasised, in personal interviews, that they were aware of their multicultural audience and wanted to emphasise the cosmopolitan credentials of their channels. While channels emphasised indigenous language, symbols and cultural codes in local programmes and appeared to be striving to keep Khasi heritage alive through television by regularly covering local festivals and rituals, they also seemed to encourage various other non-Khasi affiliations. Reacting to the fact that his channel made an appeal to a pan-Khasi identity that reflected the cultures of all Khasis and not only the dominant groups,27 a channel’s owner insisted that this did not mean that the channel was communal:

…we are not raising our community at the cost of others but we want to retain our identity…as far as possible…we are just a handful of people…you can’t expect two lakh people to compete with one billion people in the whole of India…we have to find a way to retain our own culture in the best possible way we can…so that people have a sense of belonging to a culture and tribe.

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27 To this end the channel has introduced a segment at the end of its news programme called ‘Na Rynsan Ka Ri Khasi’. This is meant to be ‘a kind of stage of Ri Khasi…or the Khasi people’. Explaining the purpose of this segment, the proprietor of RKC said ‘channels like RKC have special features on things that are specifically meant for the Khasi people, Khasi land, Khasi culture…’. (Proprietor, RKC and retd. Head of Khasi Department, St Anthony’s College, interview, Shillong, 12 April 2004).
But while Khasi cultural identity is certainly emphasised, its expression is not seen as incompatible with participation in a larger ‘national’ Indian community.28

Mixed messages are, therefore, communicated by the three channels from the very start of programming. This can, for instance, be seen in the opening montages of PCN, which prides itself in being ‘the people’s channel’. It eschews the more traditional images of Khasi culture in favour of a fast-paced sequence of visuals for its opening montage. Shots of armed conflicts, political speeches, processions, sporting events, music concerts, fashion shows, and folk festivals cut to a racy instrumental signature tune dissolve into each other on a split screen. Such visual montages have also been disseminated by the Indian state through its audio–visual wings. National integration promotional videos use images of national celebrations, science and technology projects and national ‘heroes’ edited to sentimental tunes meant to evoke identification for the ‘motherland’.29 It can be argued that the local media in Shillong adopts the same ‘formula’ for promoting pluralism. McFarlane (ibid.: 482) has argued that this kind of cosmopolitan imaginary is ‘linked to the nationalist vision of open, tolerant, and well-planned cities’. Yet Khasi television channels can also ‘puncture’ this vision by bringing to the fore different identities at different points. McFarlane (ibid.: 497) points out that inclusivity and exclusivity can be discerned in all cosmopolitan practices and that ‘one important role for the critic is to illuminate the politics, limits, and exclusions of different forms of cosmopolitan imaginary and practice’. While the local Khasi media undoubtedly foregrounds one identity at the expense of others in certain instances (such as its cultural coverage) at other times it is dispassionately cosmopolitan, lobbying for the idea of cultural plurality as guaranteed by the Constitution of India. Instead of making a simplistic opposition between tradition and modernity, or between cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan societies, it is useful, then, to view the media as participating in a

28 This was ascertained through an in-depth study of selected political and cultural stories from the three Khasi channels which showed that stories are framed in terms of the liberal discourse adopted by private English language Indian media.

29 Such videos include the _Mera Bharat Mahan (My India is great) _series made in the 1980s (Brosius and Butcher 1999: 38).
transitional’ developing society’s]…deeply uneven and painful movement towards modernity’ where ‘memories of pre-modern pasts’ are rendered ‘variously as idyll and nostalgia, critique and manifesto’ (Rajagopal 2000: 294).

**Negotiation of Identities in Shillong:**

**Research Findings**

**Understandings of Khasi identity**

Talking to selected respondents revealed complex and varied understandings of indigenous identity and the way in which global, national and local cultures are thought to affect it. In describing modern Khasi identity, it is common for most people to hark back to the formative years in the mid-nineteenth century when the area was under colonial and Christian influence. In recent years, however, there has been a move to invoke pre-Christian (and pre-modern) concepts of Khasi identity, not only by political groups but also by cultural organisations like the Seng Khasi. Acknowledging the complexity of discussing Khasi identity, an interviewee pointed out that any person who wished to call himself or herself a true Khasi faced the immense task of ‘becoming pure Khasi. Life is such that we cannot just move on to something new without using lessons from the past’. Others feel that this memory of the past has led to ‘a curious mix’. Citing the example of modern Christian hymns that have recently incorporated traditional Khasi beats, another interviewee pointed out that ‘now with a certain kind of reawakening they are saying that we are Christians…but at the same time we can be Khasi Christians’. There is a certain fluidity to the concept of Khasi selfhood and there is no consensus on the question of a unified Khasi identity.

Interviewees, however, lament the passing away of traditional society and look nostalgically towards rural Meghalaya where it is believed the ‘people…identify themselves very strongly with the land,

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31 Additional District Magistrate, West Khasi Hills personal interview, Shillong, 4 April 2004.
the ethos, the heritage'. However, some people critique the symbols that have come to stand for Khasi cultural identity in modern times:

For most of us culture means dances, costumes, dialects, but what about the intrinsic part of our culture? Our value system. All the dress and dance... does not impinge on my life and...I can remain without all that. But if I lose my values, some of which are very much pertinent in life today, then I think I've lost something.

Given that the predominant sense of being a Khasi is anchored in a traditional, pre-modern past, some respondents feel that there is a real threat to the Khasi way of life from the forces of modernity and globalisation: 'Khasi culture is under siege today. In the urban sphere we can see the influence of western culture and in the rural segment it is the mainland Indian culture that has influenced Khasi culture...'. This is the argument most commonly proffered by members of Khasi political and cultural organisations seeking to mobilise people in the name of a rigidly defined and bounded ethnic identity for political and cultural gain. To the extent that Khasis identify with pre-modern pasts, these groups can achieve a certain degree of success in mobilising them. But others do not entirely believe that 'there is a danger of local identities being wiped out'. Most respondents are therefore disinclined to take an extreme view of the perceived or real threat to Khasi identity. This slowly emerging

32 Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, personal interview, Shillong, 9 April 2004.
33 Director, Indigenous Women’s Resource Centre, personal interview, Shillong 1 April 2004.
34 Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, personal interview, Shillong, 9 April 2004.
35 College Lecturer, personal interview, Shillong. 19 March 2004.
36 Respondents point to the sizeable proportion of the Khasi population (about 35 per cent) who have not converted to Christianity and to organisations like the Seng Khasi which are devoted to the revival of traditional Khasi religion and way of life, arguing that Khasi identity is being kept alive by such groups and institutions: ‘socially, in spite of all the winds of change, we are still maintaining a very strong social system. Culturally, all the dances still exist till today. Religiously the traditional religious beliefs are still being held. The religious rites are being conducted till today. So Khasi society has not been a closed sort of thing, it has been open but it has ensured that it retains its core identity’. (Chairman and Spokesperson, Assembly of Hynniewtrep Nations, personal interview, Shillong, 4 May 2004).
cultural self confidence has allowed most people to accept more inclusive notions of what it means to be Khasi.

**Negotiating a ‘national’ identity**

Almost 75 per cent of the respondents argue that despite what some people believe, there is no threat to Khasis in accepting that they are a part of India. ‘Khasi culture and Indian or western culture are not antagonistic. I am an Indian because Hynniewtrep is in India. We want to survive with dignity and contribute to the rest of India and the world’.37 Most respondents are also in favour of adopting democratic means for the expression of cultural and political identities, eschewing the more extremist measures promoted by organisations like the HNLC. Though some respondents chose to refer to members of extremist organisations as ‘good boys’ who ‘stand for the cause from the roots’,38 yet the majority opinion appears to be in favour of a ‘middle path’ for the expression of Khasi identity. A Khasi politician and former student union president pointed out that:

> today the Khasi intelligentsia has reacted against this sort of cultural militancy because they know that you can’t ram culture down a person’s throat. So to that extent a cultural movement should be based more on convincing people that a lot of things are worthwhile in one’s own culture. It doesn’t have to take the form of (for instance) banning Hindi movies….39

It is reasonable to conclude that Khasis are strategically taking on multiple identities, which enable them to relate to cultures from different contexts without necessarily eroding their sense of being Khasi. Khasi urban society, as one interviewee put it, appears to be ‘caught in the middle. It’s like me having long hair and at the same time wanting to play Khasi music...(laughs)’.40 The ability to take on multiple cultural identities while retaining a sense of a core or essential ethnic identity has been a unique feature of historically oppressed cultures in India. Writing about the cultural responses to colonialism

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37 Convenor, Mait Shaphrang Movement, personal interview, Shillong, 19 March 2004.
38 Retd. Head of Khasi Department, personal interview, Shillong, 29 March 2004.
40 College lecturer, poet and musician, personal interview, 19 March 2004.
in nineteenth century India, Nandy points out that Indian culture ‘protects itself — against cosmologies which are proselytising, hegemonistic and committed to some secular or non secular theories of cultural evolution — by projecting the idea that the Indian is compromising; he has a fluid self-definition’ (Nandy 1983: 104). He also notes that ‘the uniqueness of Indian culture lies not so much in a unique ideology as in the society’s traditional ability to live with cultural ambiguities…. Probably, the culture itself demands that a certain permeability of boundaries be maintained in one’s self image and that the self be not defined too tightly or separated mechanically from the not-self. This is the other side of the strategy of survival – the clue to India’s post-colonial world view….’ (ibid.). Khasi culture, one might argue, appears to exhibit the very same cultural reflexes that colonized Indian society once did under cultural duress.

Implications of multiple Khasi identities for cosmopolitanism in Shillong

The ability of colonised societies, which have historically lived with cultural ambiguity and plurality, to be more resilient to and accommodate hybridity better, can be politically empowering. Today the expression of ethnic identity is being encouraged by both globalisation as well as by political groups in quest of ethnic homelands. Globalisation encourages the expression of often fragile local identities and cultures which are emphasised (especially by local cultural entrepreneurs) in order to attract ‘mobile capital’ (Morley and Robbins 1995: 37). My study of local television channels found a similar emphasis on what Morley and Robbins (ibid.) have called ‘a culture of enterprise’ and of ‘heritage’, which in its enthusiasm to emphasise the importance of localities can play up indigenous identities at the cost of other more inclusive affiliations. While the construction of localised spheres for public discourse and the representation of local culture which the Khasi media is doing in Shillong are useful, it is also important to stress the limits of a focus on ethnic expression. Apart from being vulnerable to the incursions (and exclusions) of global capital, the representation of the local as largely the preserve of one ethnic group (and the television channels studied can border on this), can restrict civil liberties and more plural notions of the city.

Cultural enterprises and the media can be used for such identity politics, giving chauvinistic cultural and political organisations a
forum for their exclusionary agendas. These channels can also be appropriated by the latter as channels that are exclusively meant for ‘the Khasi people’. Representations on these channels, of locales (though celebrated from a cultural perspective), can speak to extremist political ideologies, which ‘transforms the geography of an area into primal, homelike, or sacred space and transforms a people into a collectivity with imagined ties of shared origins and kinships’ (Baruah 1999: 8). Critics have, in fact, drawn our attention to the necessary exclusion that any identity involves. Thus Schlesinger (1987: 235) argues that ‘identity is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion, and the critical factor for defining the ethnic group therefore becomes the social boundary which defines the group with respect to other groups…not the cultural reality within these borders’ (emphasis in original). Schlesinger (ibid.: 230) emphasises the importance of seeing identity-making as a ‘dynamic’ process as ethnic groups continually invent and re-invent themselves. ‘Tradition’ or traditional identities then become vulnerable to the manipulations of influential institutions and political processes which use past values selectively to suit the needs of present-day politics. It has also been widely recognised that issues of identity are closely linked with feelings of fear, anxiety and violence. These eventually self-destructive tendencies need to be contained through meaningful collectivities such as the community. However, communities are also, more often than not, unwilling to change. The media are also implicated in this resistance to change since they reinforce dominant ideas of community and identity bound to such communities. Though some form of community and communal affiliation is undoubtedly desirable, however, as Iris Young (1990) has argued, since any communal affiliation also brings with it a desire to retain identity and practically excludes people who might pose a threat to that identity, the need to find a way to reconcile the competing claims of different communities is pressing in Shillong today.

By offering an arena for public debate — one that encourages democratic participation in the local and national community — Khasi television adds to what Sen (2006: 53) calls ‘government by discussion’ for, as he points out, democracy is not just about ballots and votes but also about public deliberation and reasoning. These deliberations can also be seen in the work of a number of civic groups in Shillong who have, in recent years, organised themselves
around issues of ecology, gender and the right to information demanding greater transparency and accountability in urban administration. While some groups adopt constitutional and modern democratic forms of resistance, others have chosen to invoke tradition as a just and equitable means of governance. The Khasi Dorbars, organised under the Federation of Khasi States, have emerged as vociferous defenders of political tradition and constitute a strong lobby against the ostensible corruption of modern day District Councils. Civil society in Shillong, then, appears to be extremely fragmented; constrained not only, as a recent study argues (see McDuie-Ra 2009), by the Indian state, but also by various pressures and lobbies within itself.

Conclusion

The politics of urban cosmopolitanism in cities regarded as peripheral by Indian mainstream discourse resonates with political struggles in the rest of India and in South Asia. Cosmopolitanism and citizenship in a post-colonial context, where exclusive indigenous identities can be powerfully mobilised, is necessarily a negotiated and fraught process. The case of Shillong, however, confirms scholarly arguments about the existence of cosmopolitan practices in cities where parochial politics threaten inclusive affiliations. In the course of this article urgent questions have also been raised about whether people ought to be viewed and categorised only on the basis of their ethnic identity, in terms of the traditions and cultures they are born into or on the basis of their other social, cultural and political affiliations. This is also an important question for scholarship on citizenship in the rest of India today. The success of cosmopolitan India should be assessed, as Sen (2006: 150) argues, not only by the extent to which people from different cultural backgrounds are ‘left alone’, but by the extent to which their ability to make reasoned choices is positively supported through social opportunities of education and participation in civil society and the ongoing political and economic processes in the country. The future of cosmopolitan Shillong (as elsewhere) inevitably lies in discerning and encouraging citizens from diverse

cultural and political backgrounds to relate to each other in various ways 'including as citizens' (ibid., emphasis in original).

References


The Divided City? Squatters’ Struggle for Urban Space in Kathmandu

Urmi Sengupta

Squatter settlements and slums have become widespread in many Third World cities. The number of urban dwellers living in slums and squatter settlements is swelling every year in the rapidly urbanising cities of low-income countries (UN-Habitat 2003) and Kathmandu is no exception. Squatter or unauthorised settlements account for up to 2 per cent of the city’s population. Although this figure is low compared to some of the megacities in Asia, it is on the rise owing to growing housing affordability problems, shortage of land fuelled by investor-led land buying activities, coupled with a general rise in urban poverty. In particular, since the Maoist movement began in 1996, the influx of migrants has been significant, leading to the emergence of new and the consolidation and expansion of some of the established squatter settlements. Recent studies on their growth and proliferation also consider factors such as the politicisation of rural–urban migration and growing socioeconomic disparity aggravated by steady growth of middle class (Sengupta and Sharma 2006). There is an acknowledgement that the city’s growth in early years has occurred without effective planning, causing severe infrastructural pressure and the proliferation of squatters (His Majesty’s Government of Nepal 1969), and this trend has continued. The city had 63 squatter settlements in 2003, comprising a population between 15,000 and 20,000 (Pradhan 2003). Studies documenting their origin, organisation and struggle for land are however limited (Karki 2003; Moffat and Finnis 2005; Sengupta and Sharma 2006, 2009; Tanaka 1997, 2009).

Internationally, the growth of slums and squatters has been linked to the apparent failure of the formal system meant to address the housing and land issues of the poor. This view is followed by
increasing criticism of the post-globalisation environment that has fostered polarisation, exclusion and deprivation, causing the living conditions of the poor, particularly in the global South, to further worsen (Pugh 2001; Kundu 2003; Roy 2003). In response to this intellectual development the United Nations Millennium Declaration brought slums and squatter issues back into the forefront through Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7 Target 11 which has an aim to create ‘cities without slums’ through ‘significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020’ (UN-Habitat 2003: XXVI). Whilst the MDG has a pronounced ‘policy emphasis’ for committing more investment to improve slum conditions, it also seems to create a role for the ‘alternative process’ of urban development through the need to make concerted efforts, wider stakeholder involvement and inclusionary processes to achieve that goal.

In recent years land and housing in Kathmandu have been in short supply and therefore are vigorously contested resources. Especially with the new migrants, both rich and poor, a phenomenal increase has been witnessed in assertion or claims made over space. In particular, a triangular contest for urban space has risen in recent years. The government — through opportunistic clearance and evictions symbolising city beautification and safeguarding of public interest (Rademacher 2008); the organised upper class — through institutionalised corruption and misappropriation of ownership details and; squatters — through grassroots dynamism, firepower and support from civic society bodies and NGOs (Sengupta and Sharma 2009). Assertion of space and territoriality has many strands — the politics of space (Sharma 2000; Baviskar 2003), segregation and citizenship (Holston and Appadurai 1999), urban governmentality (Scott 1998; Chatterjee 2004), and cultures of consumption and class formation (Rex and Moore 1967). Each strand, however, need not distinguish itself from another, and instead may reflect an eclectic medley of theories related to politics, power and class struggles as evident in Kathmandu. Interestingly, whether coping or competing, claims from squatter communities have emerged strongly both spatially and symbolically, covering all aspects of territoriality. On one hand, the ideological basis of their claim is impossible to contest (Ward 1983), on the other, it displays potential for an alternative process, using a new form of grassroots activism, to create and shape a new urbanism. When viewed against recent
political changes in the country (Maoist movement, sudden collapse of monarchy, rise of Maoist to power in quick succession) this trend seems likely to continue and grow. Although links to wider political movement are tenuous and no studies exist that explicitly link civil society movements with Maoist resurgence (as an urban and social movement), they share a common ideology connected to land hierarchy of different forms that exist in Asian society. Landlessness and unfair practices connected to it are considered to be at the centre of rural unrest fanning the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Mursheed and Gates (2003) argue that the movement for land rights forms the basis of Nepalese communism, and the modern Maoist movement. The other commonality is seen in the ethnic dimension of both movements, which acts as a catalyst for collective action or group mobilisation. Ethnicity, whether based on religion, caste, language or some other form, is a powerful organising principle that overcomes the collective action problem (Olson 1965).

Within the broad context of political movement and a tripartite contest for urban space in Kathmandu this chapter focuses on recent experiences of squatters' struggle for establishment, resistance to clearance as well as their quest for recognition and formality through resettlement. The chapter aims to draw some insights into how such processes are changing the way urban spaces are being viewed and contested in Kathmandu, leading to a rebranding of urbanism as we know it. The changes in urban landscape and the development process engineered by this process provide a useful case for exploring the importance of squatters' claim on urban spaces. Internationally, empirical examples exist on the concept of grassroots achievements of urban poverty reduction, tenure regularisation and resettlement around the world (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2004; D'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005; Tanaka 2009) making them a subject of wide interest. Further, anecdotal evidence of the general lives of squatters and their organisation are also emerging strongly (Davis 2006). Other studies have focused on the process, highlighting certain

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1 The origin of Maoist movement is explained by different authors differently such as structural and institutional factors (Pyakurel, 2007), persistent economic deprivation (Deraniyagala, 2005), spatial and caste dimension to horizontal inequity (Mursheed and Gates, 2003) and poverty (Thapa and Sijapati, 2003; Sharma, 2006; Muni, 2004).
broader constraints that inhibit local action (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2004). Often, the narrow scope of grassroots-led projects overlooks the broader citywide or national-level constraints. External agencies' own institutional interests also become more fundamental as the scale of such activities grow. Mukhija and Sanyal (1998), citing Dharavi redevelopment project in Mumbai, stress that institutional pluralism aggravates the intensity of conflict to a level where efficacy is adversely affected. Conversely, NGOs such as SAPRC (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres) have been successful in challenging government decisions at the relocation and design levels and in introducing local priorities, representing silver lining in the cloud.

In recent years India has provided a number of diverse and useful case studies on community mobilisation that illustrate both the constraints and prospects (Sen 1998; Sanyal and Mukhija 2001; Appadurai 2002; Patel, D'Cruz and Burra 2002; D'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2006; Patel and Jockin 2007, 2008). NGO involvement in housing too has been portrayed positively (Sen 1998). The alliance of SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan in particular, has been at the forefront of community-driven resettlement programmes that have \textit{inter alia} strived to achieve a realignment of roles between state agencies and communities (Patel, D'Cruz and Burra 2002). This comes in contrast to experiences from Latin America which saw NGOs reinforcing the notion of the 'co-optation' of the poor by the local state or political parties to gain social control over squatters (Sen 1998: 248). Notwithstanding the positivity surrounding such processes in India, the future of hundreds of millions of ‘slum’ dwellers in the country's other urban centres is also likely to be influenced by the form that Dharavi's redevelopment takes (Patel 2007: 2).

Each instance of grassroots mobilisation is thus unique and lessons drawn from any case study will add to our knowledge base. On the whole, the process and the strength of the new activism for redistribution of urban resources remains under-researched, particularly in countries such as Nepal, where urbanisation is relatively a new affair.

This chapter comprises four sections. Section I presents a brief overview of the urban context of poverty and inequality in Kathmandu, followed by historical development of the city's urban growth in section II. Section III outlines the tripartite contest for urban space that is currently discernible in the background of severe housing and
land shortage in the city. Section IV takes an anatomical perspective on squatters’ claims on urban space in Kathmandu with special reference to the Kirtipur Housing Project. The final two sections conclude the discussion.

I. Urban Context of Poverty and Inequality

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income (purchasing power parity) at US$ 100 and Development Index ranking of 142 (2007–08 estimate). Urbanisation in the country started late but the rate of urbanisation has been high showing 6.6 per cent average annual growth rate of urban population against 2.25 per cent of the national population (CBS 2001). Likewise, the population living in municipalities is expected to increase to 24 per cent in 2011 from 14.2 per cent in 2001 (ibid.). This level of urban growth is accompanied by equally high level of poverty, physically manifested in slums and squatter settlements across many urban centres. Bryld (2001) estimated the population of urban poor will reach 15 million by 2035. A third of the population in the country is currently below the poverty line.2

The failure of urbanisation view has narrowly focused on explanations such as urban sprawl and migration (Sharma 1989) but missed other important social, economic and institutional considerations. Even after 50 years of planned development,3 the country is still struggling to overcome structural deficiency, rigidity and development disparity. By virtue of its role as the capital city, Kathmandu has witnessed the highest concentration of capital and steady rise of affluent population with the median per capita income being over three times the national figure.4 However, income disparity within the city is evident (Table 4.1) and growing, reflected

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2 The extent of poverty is often measured through a benchmark called the poverty line. The poverty line is defined as the income required for providing adequate calories (2250 kilocalorie) for an average Nepalese to remain active. Based on this, the National Planning Commission has endorsed that NRs 4,404 per person per year as the poverty line.

3 Planned development in the country began with the First Five Year Plan (1956–1961).

4 The median income for Kathmandu was NRs 33,333 (a mean of NRs 45,816) in 2003, whereas the median per capita national income stood at NRs 9,606 (CBS 2003–2004).
in the bottom 60 per cent earning only 5.8 per cent compared to the 85.4 per cent by the top 20 per cent. This mirrors the national trend, which shows 70 per cent of the country’s wealth is in the hands of the top 12 per cent households, and only 3.7 per cent percent of the national income reaches the poorest 20 per cent households (CBS 2003–4). Wealth inequality is particularly worrisome with implications for urban–rural migration and the rise in the number of squatters. In recent years there has been an overall increase in the pressure created by urban poverty, in tandem with a rural exodus as a result of Maoist insurgency.

II. Urban Growth in Kathmandu: Historical Perspective

Like many other cities in South Asia, Kathmandu has a rich and long history. According to local folklore the city was once a lake which was drained by a Buddhist monk named Manjushree and thereafter the settlement began. Historical evidence suggests the existence of Kathmandu goes back to 200 BC and King Gunakamadeva is said to have founded the city in AD 723 (Throndsen 1989). Soon after and for the next eight centuries the Malla dynasty ruled the city whose legacy lives on in the form of the city’s pagoda style temples, palaces and squares. This period is marked by the city’s prominent rise as a merchant city providing a crucial link between India and Tibet, made possible largely by its enterprising Newar community which excelled in trade and culture. A wealth of natural resources, fertile agricultural land, thriving trade with India and Tibet, and a hardworking indigenous populace made medieval Kathmandu a prosperous, powerful and growing city (Gallagher 2008: 250). The modern period

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in Nepalese history began with the invasion of the Shah king Prithvi Narayan who consolidated numerous small kingdoms across the country to create a unified Nepal with Kathmandu as the capital. This marked the formal beginning of influx of immigrants to Kathmandu Valley (Pradhan 2004). The city grew outwards from the historic old neighbourhood to accommodate the new population and accordingly the urban form changed dramatically.

Kathmandu has enjoyed geopolitical significance since medieval times and achieved great heights throughout the twentieth century. During the pre-World War era, the country was a strategic partner of the British who were ruling India and Kathmandu’s importance in the region’s geopolitical landscape grew. Subsequently, the city became the epicentre of labour and capital due to the lack of any conscious efforts to disperse urbanisation to other regions in the country. The growth of unplanned urbanisation began in Kathmandu Valley in the late 1950s. However, the pace of growth picked up only after 1970s (Karki 1995), particularly with the new road construction linking Kathmandu with various parts of the country. A gradual but consistent migration led to a rise in the city’s urban population (Table 4.2), alongside the de-agriculturalisation of the city’s hinterland, resulting in a five-fold increase in built up area between 1955 and 2000. The old city, however, continued to survive infiltration due to the close-knit community, reflecting strong territorial control by the indigenous Newar community. The traditional built form, with its courtyard layout and tightly controlled entry and egress and dedicated communal spaces, limited access to new migrants. Rich migrants established themselves in peripheral but strategic locations such as central open space (Tudikhel) and Rani Pokhari that had benefited from new roads and infrastructure. Major roads such as Kanti Path, Dharma Path and Royal Palace-Thamel were developed typically as major through roads to link other parts of the city and housed many palaces (Narayanhiti, Singh Darbar) for the former royals and other members of influential ruling class. Construction of the Ring Road (27.6 km) served the outlying areas which were occupied by new migrants. An informal but distinct territorial articulation thus emerged across the city (Figure 4.1).

However it was not until the widespread political movement of the 1990s and subsequently Maoist insurgency witnessed in rural parts of the country that led to an unprecedented movement of people
Table 4.2: Population Growth and Urbanisation in Kathmandu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of municipalities</th>
<th>Urban population</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Urban population as percentage of total</th>
<th>Average annual growth rate</th>
<th>Total population in Kathmandu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>238,275</td>
<td>8,256,625</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>181,082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>336,222</td>
<td>9,412,996</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>202,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>461,938</td>
<td>11,555,983</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>249,563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1,695,719</td>
<td>18,491,097</td>
<td>9.17</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>549,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3,227,879</td>
<td>22,736,934</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>907,380</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


to Kathmandu for security, livelihood and shelter, and completely redefined the city’s landscape. In-migration from all parts of the country has been phenomenal, representing 40 per cent of the nation’s total urban migrant population (Karki 1995). Much of this additional population is believed to have been accommodated through owner-built housing in the city’s hinterland and through densification of the old city, somewhat diffusing the social or communal nature of territorial control. A new form of territorial control is now emerging, led by powerful groups and private developers, that has its roots in the property market explosion and the rise of economic paternalism. Investment in raw land has seen a phenomenal growth and, as a result, the city’s agricultural hinterland is being rapidly replaced by a growing number of housing estates. However, a larger increase in property incomes, as compared to wage incomes, has made access to affordable land and housing difficult for the poor. Further, the absence of social housing and a serious under-provision of housing at large (Table 4.3) has made housing one of the most valued commodities in Nepalese society. In 2001, the recorded housing deficit in Kathmandu was 48,545, which has since grown in tandem with the proliferation of squatter settlements from 17 to 63 between the years 1985 and 2003. Their population during the

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5 A study conducted in 2003 reported some 200,000 internally displaced people, distributed across different urban centres, with 100,000 in Kathmandu alone (Pokharel 2005).
same period rose from 2,134 to 20,000 (Karki 2003; Pradhan 2003). The city’s spatial disposition now represents peripheral accretion punctuated by squatter settlements, representing a vast urban area of 900 sq. km.
II. The Tripartite Contest for Urban Land in Kathmandu

The wider urban landscape of Kathmandu today features the legacy of a contest that involved three core actors — squatters, the government and the private sector. Urban squatters (Table 4.4) have emerged as a formidable force in the city, both in numbers and in their actions. Since 1991, squatter housing in Kathmandu has been growing at the rate of 12 per cent annually (CBS 2001). A conservative estimate suggests their population reached up to 20,000 in 2003 (Karki 2003; Pradhan 2003), whilst others believe up to 40,000 squatters live in Kathmandu city alone (Pradhan 2004). Although their population is small by international standards, their influence on the city’s sociopolitical landscape is growing along with their claim on urban space, which shows that their strengths and strategies have changed over time. Much anecdotal evidence exists that explains the organisation and tenure of squatter settlements (Davis 2006; Flood 2006) but two general observations specific to Kathmandu are pertinent. First, older squatted lands were usually marginal and underdeveloped, with limited or no access to basic services. These settlements were located in riversides and lowlands, perennially unsafe from natural hazards and with dubious or no land titles, reflecting the ‘low-key’ nature of these processes and a need to avoid attracting public attention. Second, while squatting has often occurred on vacant public land, recently, much squatting has also occurred on private land. New communities are increasingly making bold statements by squatting on private land. Private land may remain vacant for several reasons, including speculative landholding or regulatory barriers that make investing on that land unprofitable (Jimenez 1984), but nevertheless

### Table 4.3: Distribution of Housing Consumption in Kathmandu by Degree of Adequacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Less than adequate</th>
<th>Just adequate</th>
<th>More than adequate</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kathmandu</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other urban areas</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall urban (including Kathmandu)</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

makes it naturally attractive to squatters. The heavy-handed approach of the government to squatting in public land has also triggered hasty switch to squatting on private land.

Systematic documentation exists showing how the government in Kathmandu sought to enhance its territorial strength through an opportunistic clearance of squatters in the name of city beautification and public interest. Citing specific examples of eviction attempts along the banks of the river Vishnumati, Rademacher (2008) argues that the state has exercised excessive coercion, branding it ‘public interest’. Understandably, ecological damage associated with dredging and filling river land is a serious environmental issue to prompt such actions. There are, however, large-scale, donor-assisted projects, aimed at upgrading the overall urban fabric and promoting tourism, that have led to some high-profile eviction attempts. Grabbing the opportune period of the state emergency of 2001–2004, the local government in Kathmandu organised well orchestrated eviction attempts in a number of strategic locations such as Tin Kune, Shankhamul and Thapathali, best described by opposition parties as ‘bulldozer terrorism’ (Sengupta and Sharma 2006). The growing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of settlements</th>
<th>No. of households</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>3665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>4295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1271</td>
<td>6355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1783</td>
<td>8927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>10,323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>2031</td>
<td>11,862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2600</td>
<td>15,000–20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


6 For example, in Shankhamul, the government has been trying to clear a site proposed for a park to commemorate the United Nations’ 50th anniversary (‘UN Park Stalled Due to Squatters’, Kathmandu Post, 17 November 2003). Out of total 156 Ropani park land, 56 Ropani is under squatters’ occupation who have been fiercely objecting to any form of eviction or relocation attempt. Several other smaller projects under Kathmandu Valley Urban Development Project (KVUDP) have had similarly affected other squatter communities. One such project was Vishnumati Link Road Project which led to eviction of communities which is being discussed later in the chapter.
interest in urban land from the state also comes vis-à-vis their real estate value. Some of the sites owned by quasi-public organisations such as Sanchay Kosh (a provident fund) in central locations have been redeveloped as shopping malls, thereby signifying an intense state interest to realise profit from public land (Figure 4.2).

The private sector in Kathmandu increasingly feels that squatters are ‘squeezing’ the real estate market by occupying land that could be developed for formal use, making an implicit connection with De Soto’s (2000) views on land locked in informal and illegal arrangements and the need to reclaim this land by mainstream economics. Further, this form of squeezing also raises the formal price (Brueckner and Selod 2008) by creating a ‘shortage’, making land even more lucrative. The reversal of slums and squatter land to the formal system has been at the heart of ‘slum real estate’, currently being pursued in Mumbai and Kolkata (Mukhija 2001; Sengupta and Tipple 2007). Such international trends are increasingly shaping the mindset of developers in Kathmandu vis-à-vis real estate growth in recent years.

Understandably, the land-hungry private sector, owing to the general shortage of land, increasingly sees itself contesting for the land that is under squatter occupation. Land speculation is aggravating planned invasion in such a way that in some areas there are organised ‘land grabbers’, called the ‘land mafia’, colluding with the government and political machinery and vying for urban land whether in private or squatters domain. There are examples of squatter communities with land titles being targeted by land speculators and enticed to sell out cheaply in Manila and Cambodia (Gravois 2005). Such actions by the organised private sector has reminisces of Cuthbert’s (1991)
Figure 4.2: Shopping Malls in Sanchay Kosh Sites in Sundhara and Putalisadak

thesis that, in cities power is expressed largely through its economic parameters and used repressively to support and intensify class divisions and achieve hegemony for the use of urban space.

The wider population in the city appears to endorse the private sector’s view, visible in their reactions to squatters’ action, mainly due to its effect on their property prices. Up to 20 per cent drop in the price of the developed land parcel was observed in Chabel land pooling site due to the presence of squatters in the vicinity. As a result people have generally avoided purchasing lands in such locations. There are also notions of misappropriation, issues of equity and social justice that turn the wider community against squatters. The number of fake squatters targeting compensation money has increased (Tanaka 1997) since the early 1990s, often supported by an organised clique within the political and administrative machinery. Further, there are examples of squatters’ actions generating scope for corruption and malpractice, politicians exploiting squatters for their political survival by offering protection against eviction pressures.8

The foregoing discussion pre-empts that urban contest, as a consequence of actions from different urban actors in the social and economic arena, is now an emerging phenomenon in Kathmandu. It has been long recognised that competition may not be intrinsic to urban life but arises out of the individual or a group exercising rights as consumers (Harvey 1988). This competition has come out rather strongly, following squatters’ entering the fray by way of accentuating the interests of other social and institutional groups. However, access to land and housing for the urban poor continues to underpin such a contest. In Kathmandu, the dominant source of housing supply is private owner–builders (Joshi 1997), while the public and quasi–public land supply system is far too small to make any impact on the land market.9 The government-initiated programmes such as site and services, guided land development and land pooling have not been

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8 Malpractices among the lower level officials of the Department of Land Survey (DLS) have also been common. In Chabel and Gongabu settlements the plotting of land and distribution was done upon the payment of fairly insignificant amount to the officials and citizens (Shakya 1998).

9 Between 1977 and 2002, the state-supported land development schemes had created a total of 7,685 developed plots (Karki 2004) and none of them were targeted at the urban poor.
implemented in illegal settlements (Mattingly 1996). Further, unlike its South Asian counterparts, public housing was never considered by the Nepalese government. Out of this context has emerged an overall shortage of land and housing, thereby pricing the majority urban population out of the system. What also underlies this dramatic deficiency is the lack of real income for the majority population. A recent study demonstrates that it takes a minimum of 13 years to buy a residential plot of 79 sq. m. (Sengupta and Sharma 2006).10

Land ownership is a central and emotive issue to people in Nepal, owing to their inherently agropolitan mentality. In urban areas, land gives people a sense of economic stability as the property right offers scope for profit maximisation and economic development, thereby making urban land one of the most contested commodities. Up to a 20 per cent rise in land transactions has been observed annually in recent years, signifying a phenomenal degree of public interest in the land market in Kathmandu.11 In this context, when ignoring the unlawfulness of their actions, squatters can be seen indulging in the same land grabbing as their urban counterparts. Amis (1984: 85) observes a similar phenomenon manifesting through the commercialisation of squatted land in Nairobi, which gives their actions greater credence.12 On this basis squatters appear to be the strategic actors operating within a rational environment and their actions are

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10 This accounts for an average monthly household income of US$ 74 and a monthly outgoing of 25 per cent with the average land value at US$ 35 per sq. m (based on government valuation). The average market value of land in Kathmandu was US$ 63 per sq. m, whereas the income of the majority population is far lower (Karki 2004). The minimum size of a buildable plot in Kathmandu, as recommended in the city’s buildings by-laws, is 79 sq. m.

11 Take for instance the total revenue mobilisation in the three land revenue offices of Kathmandu which was US$ 9 million in 2003 from 42,380 transactions. Whilst the number of transactions rose by 23 per cent compared to what was recorded during the real estate business peak year of 1993–94, the increase in land revenue has not been as much, even when land value has soared. The Revenue Office at Dillibajar in Kathmandu alone had an annual average income of US$ 6 million until recently (‘Real Estate Business Boomed Last Fiscal Year’, Kathmandu Post, 4 August 2003).

12 Studying the commercialisation of Nairobi’s informal settlements, Amis (1984) observes that ‘squattting’ is actually not much different in any relevant economic sense from renting.
just a new variant of the actions of the larger community. The way land and housing is acquired in Nepal lends support to this view. Traditionally, people built their houses themselves, marking it as an individual effort. Access to a plot of land thus is the first step in their search for shelter. The next section presents an anatomical perspective on squatters’ claim on urban land in Kathmandu.

III. Squatters Claim on Urban Space in Kathmandu: An Anatomical Perspective

In Kathmandu, the squatters’ claim on urban land is a recent but a rapidly growing phenomenon. In the 1970s and 1980s, squatters were almost invisible because of the abundance of land availability and the relatively small size of the squatter population. This led Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1981: 67) to make a rather modest comment that ‘urban growth (in Nepal) has been low comparatively and so there are no rapidly expanding squatter settlements’. The austerity of the then ruling political system under the monarchy allowed little scope for any resistance. By 1997, over 60 settlements of varying sizes had been firmly established on riverbanks and in the peripheral woodlands, most of them formed during the mid-1990s when the Maoist insurgency began. The proceeding discussion takes an anatomical view on the squatters’ claim and the resultant urbanism based on recent experiences in Kathmandu. The claim is articulated through three distinct but interrelated aspects — tenure development process, resistance to eviction and attempts to join the formal sector, each of which occur over the life cycle of an informal settlement. This discussion also makes a special reference to the Kirtipur Housing

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13 The squatters’ dynamism and their stake in identity and security today owe themselves to Maoist insurgency in the mid-1990s. Observers see a strong correlation between the rise in squatter activism in the urban space to the rise of the Maoist movement, given that both processes are a byproduct of a deeply divided society, speaking both socially and economically. The Maoist party’s eventual accession to power further provided a sense of optimism among those who have long faced the ire of society and lived as a shadow urban unit, neglected and impoverished.
Project, the only successful example of a struggle for a share of the city’s urbanism, both figuratively and metaphorically, through a planned resettlement of 44 squatter households (Table 4.5).14

Table 4.5: Communities Affected by the Vishnumati Link Road Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Year settled</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Number of households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dhumakhe</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chagal</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khussibahil</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tankeswor</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaukel</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Claim through tenure development process

A discussion on the squatters’ claim on urban space entails an understanding of the tenure development process and associated security given that squatter communities are considered unlawful in Nepalese law and no formal recognition is conferred on them. It then makes it imperative that their claim is manifested through a careful balance of material and metaphorical strategies directed towards reinforcing their tenure security. In squatter settlements in Kathmandu, this claim emerges from a staged process. As a general rule the key stages include: initial occupation stage (identification of boundaries), transitional stage (makeshift structure and reinforcing

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14 The project originated as a response to the government’s eviction attempts of five illegal settlements occupying the western bank of Vishnumati river in order to facilitate the construction of the Vishnumati Link Road (VLR), an important bypass being built to reduce congestion of internal city roads, first proposed by The Kathmandu Valley Physical Development Plan, 1969. At the time when the proposal was being drafted three communities had already established themselves, one formed as early as in 1952. Subsequently, two new communities were formed in 1993 and 2000, and together they accommodated 142 households. None of the households had formal title to the land or to planning or building permissions and were officially regarded as squatters. The launch of the project in 1999 with Asian Development Bank money kickstarted the process (Sengupta and Sharma 2009).
boundaries), stage of struggle for tenure security (resistance and territorial defence), and finally the stage of eviction from or assimilation into the larger community. In this process, squatters are gradually transformed from a stage of insecurity and lack of organisation (due to ethnic diversity, place of origin), absence of commonality (in terms of skills/occupation, etc.) to an implicit stage of permanence, driven by a self-proclaimed right to the city’s urbanism. However, a diversity in terms of nature of settlement pattern and level of tenure security can also be found, which need not refute the apparent structure of these different stages. For example, despite their existence since 1952, Dhumakhel settlement along the banks of the river Vishumati has never actively grown beyond the transitional stage. In the same vein, the length of time each settlement stays at each stage of the process also varies, often influenced by external factors such as settlement conditions and socio-economic characteristics of the households, including the general prosperity of surrounding areas. The Dhumakhel settlement thus represents a much slower progress in terms of their claims on the city and residents have consistently remained vulnerable until the campaign for resettlement under the Kirtipur Housing Project began.

Nevertheless, the transition through different stages, their perceived sense of permanence and their claim on the space that they occupy are manifested in physical improvements and a certain sense of territorial control, including economic activities. Often there is a gradual improvement of their huts (from shanty plastic-roofed bamboo structures to mud mortar brick structures), tidying up of pavements and taps, drain channels and toilets. This is accompanied by a glorification of their settlement, either by flying the national flag or by naming the settlements after a religious figure or national leader such as Devi Nagar, Budha Nagar, Khadga Bhadra Kali, etc. Some older settlements and strategically located new settlements consist of small businesses (such as tea/cigarette stalls, vegetable vendors, etc). Further, in some of the established settlements an assortment of real estate activities, reflecting varying degrees of tenure (rental-tenant or subtenant), has been observed (Sengupta 2000), carried out through unofficial contracts and personal arrangements making them a whole new social sub-system within themselves (Sengupta and Sharma 2006). Conversely, in new settlements such as Chabel, and to some extent in Shankhamul, tenure insecurity has manifested
itself in an disinterest in investment (for upgrading physical and environmental condition) and fewer Pacci houses\textsuperscript{15} and lack of service infrastructure, as reflected from the lower number of taps, absence of proper drainage system and access roads. It is plausible that with age claim on the squatted land becomes more permanent. In most squatter settlements tenure security has a direct relationship with the length of stay and the number of times they have faced the wrath of nature (through flooding or landslides) or survived eviction attempts engineered by the government. These comparisons point to the critical role security of tenure has played not only in establishing a structure of economic incentives for squatters for investment in land-based activities (Brandao and Feder 1996), but also in translating it into a formal claim on the spaces they occupy.

Quite apart from symbolic expressions, there is growing evidence of squatters using systematic methods to boost their tenure security in recent years. Grassroots organisations on shelter, such as Nepal Basobas Basti Samarakchan Samaj (NBBSS) and Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj (NMES), have become more proactive in recent years in documenting settlements and residents profiles through digital mapping and survey of households and getting these validated by local ward offices. Documentation also includes pictures of families with their dwellings. Each household is then given cards that record the number of family members, their sex, age, length of stay, and the condition of their dwellings. Such a move may not guarantee ownership but helps to establish what Bromley (2008) calls ‘possession’ — an intuitive evidence that the object belongs to the person now using it — and for that matter can be useful in the event of evictions. The Kirtipur Housing Project constitutes one of the first projects to be documented systematically which has proved useful also to filter fake squatters from the community (Sengupta and Sharma 2009). Apart from its practical usefulness, this form of self-styled invoking

\textsuperscript{15} For simplification purposes, structures are classified as Katchi (temporary) and Pacci (permanent). Katchi houses are single-storey structures with walls made of bamboo strips, scrap timber, mud floors and roofing made of galvanised iron sheets, thatch or plastic. Pacci houses are one or two-storey buildings with walls made of brick on mud mortar or cement, often with concrete floors and galvanised iron sheet or reinforced cement concrete roofing.
of ‘identity’ and ‘ownership’ is naturally intended towards limiting the use of these spaces by some ‘other’ and is driven by the concept of self-governance.

**Resistance: Defending claim**

In Kathmandu, the squatters’ claim on urban space is also evident from their resistance to evictions, which serves as a tool to defend their territorial and ownership integrity. In recent years the government’s approach to squatter settlements has shifted from ‘benign neglect’ to ‘opportunistic evictions’ as is evident from a number of eviction attempts particularly in strategically important sites, mainly under the local government’s ‘clean green and beautiful Kathmandu’ agenda. The local government of Kathmandu has been taking advantage of the ongoing political turmoil in the country to apply some draconian measures against squatters using police force. For instance, over 100 make-shift huts at Banshi Ghat, located on the banks of the rivers Bagmati and Vishnumati, which not only house squatters but also give shelter to some government registered social organisations (such as NBBSS and Sahara Sewa Sadan), have suffered eviction pressures from the government on the grounds of improving the city environment for a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit. Successful resistance to evictions is often a factor of how quickly communities can mobilise themselves, making it an example of collective action against systematic aggression from the government. This was evident in the communities affected by the Vishnumati Link Road (VLR) project. Often resistance relies on tried and tested methods such as protests, blockade and lying down in front of bulldozers, etc., which are common forms of resistance in Nepal. Whilst there has been a rise in eviction attempts in recent years, there have only been few cases where squatter communities have been actually uprooted. Instead, government’s eviction attempts have, rather than disintegrating squatter communities, engendered collective response and solidarity among squatter communities to successfully provide an effective defence of their territorial claim.

Such resistance in Kathmandu, however, owes its due to the general rise of organisational strength through NGO support. As in many cities in developing countries, Nepal too has witnessed an increase in what is often referred to as ‘civil society’ activity, including actions by grassroots organisations and NGOs in urban development
processes, that have strengthened much of the resistance to eviction in recent years. In particular, the Kirtipur Housing Project demonstrated a concerted support system in the form of Lumanti, a network of squatter federations operating in the city, and local and international NGOs, not only to resist demolitions of unauthorised shelters but also to apply pressure on the government to the significant advantage of the affected communities. In particular, the squatters–NGO partnership became increasingly effective during eviction attempts, with the NGOs handling press coverage, promotional material and media campaigns, and grassroots organisations engaged in generating more support on the ground. The Homeless People’s Federation, which is active mainly in savings and credit schemes, apart from extending support to ‘resistance’ to evictions particularly in high profile cases, has grown to cover 29 of the country’s 75 districts and was instrumental in community mobilisation against the forced eviction of those affected in the Kirtipur Housing Project. Local and international NGOs have thus become partners in their territorial defence by way of funding such resistance, through their control and manipulation of the media and by internationalising the issues. This form of partnership seemed to touch the right chords as the consortium of NGOs were able to influence the mindset of the officials in the central and local government and secure a resettlement commitment (Sengupta and Sharma 2009). While the reliance on partnerships with the private sector and NGOs and local community organisations has also been actively promoted by the UN (Habitat Debate 2001), in particular, this transformation has occurred as a result of the growing recognition of the role that can be played by grassroots advocacy in empowering the community in terms of making decisions regarding the choice of relocation, level of housing quality and the capacity to generate and manage funds within the context of institutional pluralism as quite aptly exhibited by the Baan Mankong model in Bangkok (Boonyabancha 2005) and Mahila Milan in Mumbai in recent years.

Proposal for alternative: Squatters attempts to join the formal sector

One of the most significant aspects of squatter communities staking their claim in the city is being manifested through their attempts to join the formal sector. The corollary of this view is that there is a
desire within the squatter population to conform to the mores of the larger community in Kathmandu. Whilst this marks a transition from an informal and illegal to a formal and legal status, this also reflects their intent to cease to be called, or perceived, as squatters. Apart from the economic benefits of the legal titles this change could ensure, it would also help squatters avoid the stigma attached with them. There are social and economic costs being borne as a result of this stigma for it reduces their employability (mainly in domestic help) and debars them from entering major social and religious functions. There has also been evidence of violent clashes between the local residents and the squatter community.

International trends in policy making have increasingly favoured the formalisation of squatter communities (World Bank 1993; UN-Habitat 1996) and empirical studies demonstrating the marked economic benefits from such an approach have been on the rise. For squatters, arguably, one of the biggest challenges in trying to maintain their claim on urban land is to go through a reality check in terms of choosing between informality and formality, financial commitment and financial laxity, respectable citizenship and being a non-entity. In the Kirtipur Housing Project, this reality check came early on in the process. The protracted negotiations with the government on rental compensation and a resettlement package for the evicted households came with the precondition that free riders must be excluded from the project. Fair to say only a small number of the residents opted for the resettlement, the rest were either free riders or chose to go to live elsewhere. This exercise, apart from expediting a transition from informal to formal, also introduced the concept of ‘self assessment’ or a ‘scoping out’ of the magnitude of the problem through the squatters’ own effort.16

16 However, caution has to be exercised while interpreting this finding from a planning perspective. Among those filtered out were people owning more than one dwelling (for example, some residents in Dhamakhel), and others who just did not bother to apply for compensation or relocation. The lack of interest of some households to join the scheme can be explained by the nature of relocation package, which is not necessarily free and did not appeal to everyone equally. These households vacated the properties to enable demolition and moved elsewhere. Some, however, were seen to have returned later due to difficulties in finding a suitable accommodation. It can be argued that the ultimate list, potentially, missed other equally needy people.
Increasingly, squatter communities, with the aid of national and international NGOs, have been asserting their claim for resettlement of some sort, whether in situ or elsewhere, which is symptomatic of their willingness to join the formal sector. Such claims are often presented in the form of political protests and general strikes, with much of the effort relying on grassroots dynamism. The significance of this assertion is more pronounced than discreet squatting or even active resistance. The power of alternative proposals is both figurative and metaphorical for two fundamental reasons. First, with an attempt to join the formal sector, squatters achieved a rare goal of local and international acceptance. It can be argued that the level of engagement from local and international NGOs in the Kirtipur Housing Project (Figure 4.3) was largely a function of the squatters’ desire to join the formal sector. Second, alternative proposals are often drawn through active participation from the squatter communities and are typically community-driven, bottom-up, and subscribe to a wider ethos of good planning and management that is promoted by the UN-Habitat and World Bank.

The Kirtipur Housing Project featured a number of the best practices of mainstream resettlement programmes even though it catered to illegal squatters. Apart from agreeing to a repayment programme, the beneficiaries were actively involved in site selection, master plan preparation and determination of the nature and type of houses, materials and the level of facilities based on their ability to pay. During the construction phase, a Housing Management Committee was formed under the aegis of Lumanti to manage all transactions associated with the project (including making payments to contractors and consultants) and for all other associated decision-making on the design and layout all, signifying a remarkable change from the way squatters have operated in the past.

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17 Drawing from recent political movements an organisation of landless people — Nepal Basobas Basti Bikas Samaj — had called for a nationwide general strike demanding proper rehabilitation, constitutional guarantee of rights to land and the setting up of a Commission to look into the issues of the landless squatters. Such protests involved traffic blockades in various parts of the city.

18 A monthly repayment of Rs 2,000 (US$ 28.5) was agreed for a period of 15 years based on 3 per cent interest by the beneficiaries themselves.
This paradigmatic shift is all too real and progressing briskly with active intervention from the NGO sector in Kathmandu. For example, an Asian Coalition of Housing Rights-appointed Thai architect spent a couple of months working with Lumanti and the squatter communities to help plan a community upgrading strategy.
for settlements located along the Bagmati River. His work included a series of alternative upgradation plans for the squatter communities in Shankhamul. Proposals included communities developing land sharing plans, in which part of the land would be used for building new housing for the community, and part would be returned to the city for public parks. There were similar proposals at various stages of production for squatter settlements in Manohara and the banks of the river Bagmati that determined the changing face of their settlements. The resultant proposals that came out at the end of these processes helped build a formidable alternative to the stereotypical urbanism as we know it. For example, in the Shankhamul proposal, low-cost housing replaced a river-side park as the preferred public (local) good, thereby reinforcing emerging norms and forms. Here the changing rationality accompanying the new urbanism was clear. Interestingly, such alternatives are introduced via the localisation of the vision, rarely are they an outcome of a top-down bureaucratic decision-making process, lending further legitimacy and credence to the squatter communities’ cause and claims. The Kirtipur Housing Project, now called Naya Basti (‘new settlement’) today stands in the neighbourhood as something that has defied convention. The symbolic expression of such movement is thus difficult to ignore.

Squatters Claim on Urban Space: Redefining Urbanism

Cities must be conceived as the plurality of of the people who dwell in it; it must be for all, each having equal rights to it. Divided spaces, evicted places and fragmented notions of space in city building processes signify what Beale (1997: 3) calls the ‘collision and collusion’ of social identities for power for some and survival for many others. In particular, this land contest points to the emergence and unfolding of new economic and political conditions in the country in recent years, and changing interests and power relations among different social groups. In that context, the squatters’ action in Kathmandu has rapidly intensified to make a formidable claim on urban space. This claim, somewhat sublime and hazy until just a decade ago, is today much more systematic, organised and persistence. Further, experience from the Kirtipur Housing Project has demonstrated that their claim for urban space has seen the full cycle of eviction–resistance–protest–rehousing process. It is not necessarily a one-way
process as described by Miller (1964) and Turner (1976) about the different stages of progressive consolidation. The claim is a staged process and a victorious chapter, if not the ultimate, of the squatter’s claim over the land, the city and a superior life. It took the squatters in Kathmandu 50 years to complete the cycle, from the initial occupancy stage to reach the stage of acceptable livability. This progression from an unauthorised agglomeration of huts in the city to a recognised urban entity points towards an emerging alternative urbanism, which is influencing the developmental process in Kathmandu and is also gaining momentum. At the time of writing, in the current fiscal year budget speech the government had announced a programme to build new apartment blocks on each side of the Bagmati river for squatter communities from Shankhamul.19 The proposal is awaiting the approval of the Ministry of Physical Planning and Works. These are undeniably the offshoots of the insuppressible collective actions of the squatter community. They are coming forth with an incredible amount of energy and creative rebelliousness which is powerful, contagious and politically charged. These expressions also prove that certain fundamentals have emerged as useful reference points for squatter action to continue and grow in the future through grassroots mobilisation in Kathmandu.

Recent experience illustrates that the settlement-building process is path dependent and shows how and why factors such as power, perception, networks, and institutions matter. There is an articulation of the political dimension of the struggle, which points to the new spaces for citizenship being created in the wake of collective action. Their actions, manifested through organised protests and advocacy at each stage of the process, lend further legitimacy to the political dimension of the emerging alternative urban development process. Whilst different spaces and different practices transmit different kinds of power and the resultant configurations of space (Brodin 2008) the transparency embedded in such political actions make them difficult to ignore. The growing strength of these alternative processes thus points to what Smart (1989) calls ‘limitations’ on the autonomy of the government’ (in this particular case) arising from the potential risk of destabilisation through wider political protests from the Maoists. Nevertheless, the process does signal a reorientation of the urban

social movement as it responds to the changing political climates, especially as a tactical reaction to traditionally non-responsive governments as reflected in their ambivalence toward squatters actions.

Second, the growing synergy between organised civil society and squatters has meant that enough firepower can be generated to successfully defend their claim. Notwithstanding the claim that civil society and the poor co-exist like oil and water (Chatterjee 2004: 23), the NGO-networking proved that the potential to improve the undertakings of grassroots organisations can be largely attributed to effective role playing and a successful client–patron relationship that has gradually developed between NGOs and the beneficiaries (Sengupta and Sharma 2009). At a broader level, this reinforces the notion of a ‘third sector’ exerting a successful claim on the urban space through what Dhakal (2007) calls a ‘conceptual shift’ in the politics of urban govermentality. NGOs and civic bodies remain central to conflict mitigation strategies. However, there have to be checks and balances on how these institutions operate. Quite apart from the actors and sub-actors, the process within which these claims are made and justified and strengthened is bottom-up, user-driven and unpretentious. Although flimsy, it has its link to the tenets of an enabling framework (World Bank 1993), such that in the context of institutional pluralism it is collective synergy that becomes the ultimate tool to make a claim.

Third, the recent experiences demonstrated by the Kirtipur Housing Project illustrate the capacity of the ‘community’, quite apart from lobbying and protests, in terms of offering a practical alternative. Social capital as an expression of an organisation that enables collective action leading to citizen empowerment is a well-established principle. Especially, the community ‘self reliance’ that underpins this collective action has been best demonstrated through the ‘voluntary acceptance’ of the transition from informality to formality. This introduces a sense of empowerment within the community as also a sense of righteousness and accountability for their own actions. This is one area where both state and private sector actions have fared poorly. Mattingly (1996), citing examples from land pooling projects in Kathmandu, argues that targeted beneficiaries are often ignored, entrenched top-down patterns of decision making are enforced and community roles are confined to activities of priority to the government machinery.
It has to be understood, however, that the new urbanism emanating from squatters actions is limited in terms of two powerful preconditions that have become a hallmark of such processes elsewhere. First, its distinctiveness and the degree of assertion lacks the institutional infrastructure crucial for fostering and extending this process. Even when such a governance structure is in place people may not necessarily participate effectively in the new or revamped structures without a supportive political culture/climate. Second, it lacks the firepower to attract national and international attention and to be able to influence policies at a strategic level. This has been especially experienced in India, where most significant changes in government policies can be traced back to the ability of grassroots organisations to apply pressure in a range of different ways (D’Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005). Further, given the tripartite contest for urban land in the city squatters’ claims are likely to be faced with more resistance from other actors in the future. Yet it can be claimed that both the state and the market (organised upper class) may not be entirely unified as we imagine in the new liberalised era, and instead, give some hope to squatters’ claim.

**Conclusion**

Evidence of civil society initiatives that work on a bottom-up principle and support grassroots organisations are on the rise in many Third World countries. In line with this international trend, grassroots activism in the housing sector is growing and becoming increasingly successful in Nepal. Squatter communities in Kathmandu have shown a remarkable ability to organise themselves and develop their own solutions and effectively negotiate better deals with organisations delivering infrastructure, services, credit, and land for housing with active support from external agencies. Within the broad context of empowering squatter citizens, the squatter movement in Kathmandu subscribes to what Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2004: 18) call ‘claim making on the state’ by local organisations and external agencies for urban poverty reduction. Rather than representation through vertical structures, the process has entailed a horizontal expansion and enhanced ‘networking’ within flexible and decentralised information structures to articulate the reduction of powerlessness of the poor.

A contextual understanding and interpretation of the characteristics of the new intervention from squatters has never been more
interesting and is now a useful research area. As in many parts of
developing countries, increasing assertiveness of squatter communities
has provoked new episodes of urban contest in Kathmandu. The
extent with which they are able to make and perpetuate this claim
through a combination of symbolic, spatial and political expressions
has meant that squatters can be defended as strategic actors, making
the best of austere circumstances rather than becoming gullible
subjects of elite manipulation. The underpinnings of its thematic
relevance and the intellectual roots of squatters activism today make
it sufficiently complex to incorporate into the existing sociopolitical
consensus. What is certain, however, is that in the process other
dominant actors — state and private sector — also play a crucial role
in continuing to energise the new urbanism. What is also significant
is that the context of institutional adjustment, essential in terms of
accepting the new actors and their role in urbanism, may be slow to
capture the full potential of this new paradigm. Notwithstanding all
these limitations, there is an increasing acceptance that today Nepal's
urban squatters can no longer be ignored; they are there in sufficient
numbers to be a visible presence (Tanaka 2009) making a claim on
the urban space and modifying urbanism as we know it.

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Spectacular Events, City Spaces and Citizenship: The Commonwealth Games in Delhi*

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Since the adoption of policies of economic liberalisation in the 1990s, successive governments have instituted spatial and social changes that converge around a common vision: making Delhi a ‘world-class’ city. This ambiguous yet evocative term has become a potent rallying point for state agencies, corporate capital and bourgeois citizens, who use it to authorise and endorse political action across a variety of scales. From clearing an ecologically-sensitive green area in south Delhi to build luxury hotels and malls, to demolishing the homes and workplaces of hundreds of thousands of urban squatters and migrants to curb air and water pollution (Baviskar, Sinha and Philip 2006), the project of making Delhi ‘world-class’ is radically restructuring the city’s landscapes, livelihoods and lifestyles.

This article focuses on one particular juncture in the life of the city, when processes of economic and political transformation of the kind described above have become crystallised around a spectacular

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The Commonwealth Games in Delhi

I argue that the study of such extraordinary events is a useful supplement to the focus on social structure and process which has been the mainstay of sociology and cultural anthropology. For urban India, the study of events has largely concentrated on communal riots and disasters such as the Bhopal industrial disaster and the Bangalore illicit liquor deaths (Hansen 2001; Hazarika 1987; Manor 1993). These crises have been treated as revelatory moments, condensing and crystallising the symbolic and material structures that constitute the everyday, taken-for-granted aspects of social life (Das 1990). That is, most analyses have tended to concentrate on the continuities between events and the everyday. I would like to suggest another way of interpreting these events, especially those that are not sudden, unexpected moments of crisis but are occasions both anticipated and planned for. Such moments can be understood as a ‘special time’, to use David Gilmartin’s phrase about the period of parliamentary elections when routine politics is suspended by the Election Commission in order to effect a transaction between the state and its citizens, a sacred period set apart within the temporality of secular politics (Gilmartin 2009).

What is significant about such events is not only their continuity but their disjuncture from business-as-usual. As Veena Das (1995) points out, these ‘critical events’ bring into being ‘new modes of action’ and understanding, and enable political actors to acquire new forms and meanings. This article uses this perspective on critical events to explore the relationship between the everyday life of the city and the extraordinary moments when that life is not only illuminated but transformed, using the example of the Commonwealth Games 2010 as a spectacular event-in-the-making.

I argue that spectacular events cause normal planning procedures and understandings to be set aside in order to speedily accomplish large-scale social and spatial transformations of dubious economic and social value, changes that would be more difficult to achieve through routine processes. This speed and efficacy is enabled by promoting the belief that national prestige and status is at stake, and by the idea that cities must vie with each other for recognition within a globalised economy, striving to increase their ‘stickiness’ in the fast-flowing world of mobile capital. Yet, spectacular events are more than simply means of hurrying along the ordinary business of political economy. Regardless of their success in garnering international...
capital or prestige, the hosting of mega-events generates a buzz, a collective excitement that changes how citizens orient to the city as a ‘happening’ place. Mega-events manufacture solidarities around an urban place by imbuing it with an affective charge, a structure of feeling that is generated by the scale, compression and celebratory content of the event itself. Exceeding the concerns of political economy, these events provide the affective glue that makes the urban exciting and desirable. By re-presenting the city to its citizens, the Commonwealth Games act as a spectacle that conjures up consent even to the most egregious waste of public money and to the spatial and social exclusions that they engender.

The anthropological literature on state spectacles (see Mbembe 1992; Piot 1999: 91–92; Sundar 1997: 59–75; Hansen 2000; Osella and Osella 2000; Roy 2007) has largely focused on their significance as performances of power that make visible the might of the state and that invite citizens and subjects to consent to and collaborate in the affirmation of an imagined community, usually the nation-state. This article contributes to this field of research by highlighting the spatial dimensions of the community forged by spectacular events. It also shows how the community formed and affirmed by the Commonwealth Games is at once abstractly national and intensely local and, perhaps most important, distinctively urban.

### Producing New Urban Spaces and Citizens: Stadiums, Streets and Social Etiquette

In 2003, India successfully bid to hold the Commonwealth Games 2010 in Delhi, beating the other contender Hamilton, Canada, by a wide margin. The keenly-contested bid was led by the Indian sports ministers and included lobbying by internationally-renowned sports figures like cricketer Sunil Gavaskar. India’s bid projected the country as the most populous member of the Commonwealth and a developing economy that deserved to be given a chance to host an event usually held in the White settler nations of the Commonwealth. The clincher was the Indian Government’s offer of US$ 7.2 million, or US$ 100,000 to each of the 72 member-nations of the Commonwealth, to cover all training, travel, board and lodging costs for athletes and officials. Jubilating over the ‘win’, the president of the Indian Olympic Association, Suresh Kalmadi, said, ‘This is very important
for my country…. It's a big business opportunity, many jobs for many young people'.

From the beginning, discussions about the Games in Delhi have focused almost entirely on two aspects: hosting the Games represents the coming of age of India as a super-power and Delhi as a 'world-class' city. This symbolic value accompanies a related discourse about the Games as an opportunity to create an infrastructure that would attract tourists, boosting local jobs and incomes. Missing from the media coverage is any discussion of sports, or the Games as an opportunity to inspire and invest in athletic talent. However, much attention is being given to improving Delhi’s sports infrastructure to standards that meet the specifications of the Commonwealth Games. This includes building four new air-conditioned stadiums and refurbishing eight existing ones built for the Asian Games in 1982, and creating a new Games Village complex to house the 8,500 athletes and officials who will be in Delhi during the two-week period of the Games.

More construction is entailed to provide 'world-class' transport for Games participants and tourists. The Delhi airport is being expanded and upgraded by a joint venture between the Airports Authority of India and GMR Fraport, a German firm. The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, a public sector firm with Japanese collaboration, is laying new underground and overhead rail lines to link the airport to the city and the centre to its eastern and southern suburbs. The Delhi Transport Corporation is buying 4,000 low-floor buses of ‘international standards’. To provide suitable conditions for their operation, private contractors of the Public Works Department and the municipal authorities are re-laying roads to ‘world-class specifications’ and also sprucing them up with new lights, redesigned

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2 Mani Shankar Aiyar, Union Sports Minister, was removed from his post for his outspoken criticism of the Games as a colossal waste of money which would have been better spent in creating sports facilities across the country for ordinary citizens, especially students. See interview in Covert, 18 July 2009.
bus-stops, dustbins and other ‘street furniture’. The same agencies are building new flyovers and underpasses around the city to ease traffic flow. The Delhi Tourism Development Corporation is in charge of constructing a ‘Signature Bridge’ across the river Yamuna in north Delhi, and converting the surrounding 1,000 acres of land into parks and recreational areas. Another major spurt of construction involves hotels. According to the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India, Delhi needs 20,000 more hotel rooms to cater to the foreign and domestic visitors who will descend on the city during the Games. To meet this demand, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the state agency responsible for controlling, developing and managing land in accordance with the city’s Master Plan, has allotted plots of land on concessional terms to private firms, in the process allowing green areas in south Delhi and along the Yamuna riverbank to be converted to built-up commercial spaces.3

While rapid construction on an unprecedented scale is the greater part of the preparations for the Games, improvement of the ‘hardware’ of the city is accompanied by initiatives to reform its ‘software’ as well. The Home Minister, P. Chidambaram, asked Delhi residents to ‘change their mindset’ and to behave better in order to make a favourable impression on visitors during the Games. Delhi has a reputation for rudeness, aggression and poor civic sensibilities, qualities manifested in public practices like spitting, urinating, ogling and harassing women, pushing, shoving, and driving dangerously. According to the Home Minister, people ‘will have to adhere to the behavioural requirement, the discipline of the city’.4 The Chief Minister of Delhi, Sheila Dikshit, has also urged residents to be good hosts, launching a radio and television publicity campaign on the subject of being courteous to tourists and announcing a civic education programme in partnership with the Confederation

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3 To accommodate ‘budget’ tourists, the Delhi government has launched a ‘bed-and-breakfast’ scheme enlisting private home-owners with spare rooms.

of Indian Industry to teach bus and auto rickshaw drivers as well as volunteers to be ‘more caring and sharing’. Such attempts at an ‘attitude makeover’ — to use the Home Minister’s phrase — emulate the steps undertaken by the Chinese government in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

State attempts to improve public conduct primarily focus on city streets as the major problem area that visitors are likely to encounter. Initiatives to reform how citizens behave on the road are matched by campaigns to remove reminders of India’s ‘Third World’ or ‘backward’ status. Before the Games, Delhi’s beggars, whose numbers are estimated to exceed 100,000, will be caught, tried in mobile courts and sentenced to detention in special beggars’ homes. Stray dogs are also targeted for stringent discipline. In 2002, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi in partnership with animal welfare NGOs began a major drive to sterilise stray dogs before the Commonwealth Games. However, despite their efforts, ‘the number of stray dogs also kept increasing at an alarming pace’. Besides beggars and stray dogs, visual embarrassments such as unsightly slums are to be kept out of sight. While Delhi has witnessed large-scale evictions of squatters from public lands since 2002 (Baviskar 2006), a few working-class settlements still remain in the vicinity of the sports venues. The Delhi government has approached the governments of the north-eastern states of Assam and Mizoram to purchase bamboo screens to ‘hide slums and other unsavoury sights, including rundown colonies, from

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7 ‘A Boost for MCD Stray Dog Sterilization Drive’, The Hindu, 12 July 2009, http://www.thehindu.com/2009/07/12/stories/2009071260270500.htm (accessed 7 October 2009). Among the more bizarre jobs created by the Games is that of the municipal official appointed to count ‘the organs that are removed’ when dogs are sterilised, to ensure that NGOs do not make fake claims to get money from the municipality.
the eyes of visitors’, once again borrowing a technique employed by the Chinese government during the Olympics.8

While a range of government authorities invoke the Games in order to legitimise their projects of remaking and reforming the city, the strategy has acquired wider social currency as well. For instance, the Indian Medical Association has demanded action against the estimated 50,000 quacks operating in the city, arguing that ‘India is organising the Commonwealth Games next year and the Capital is a popular medical tourism centre with foreigners coming over in large number for treatment. Delhi cannot afford to have so many quacks working here’.9 The fact that unlicensed medical practitioners mainly serve the poor and are unlikely to be encountered by foreign tourists did not deter the Medical Association from hitching its cause to the Games bandwagon. In another instance, vegetable vendors whose stalls line a lane in a north Delhi DDA-built ‘commercial complex’ were removed in November 2009 without any prior notice. The vendors had been selling their produce at this site for more than a decade and many had municipal receipts to back their claims. Although they were in violation of the law, their longstanding presence, history of paying off the authorities, and providing useful items of everyday use without obstructing traffic or creating ‘nuisance’ brought them political and popular support as well as tacit tolerance from the municipality. Hence their unexpected removal by the police took most people by surprise. On enquiring from the legal shop-owners in the area, I was told ‘Games hone vale bain na, tistiye bataaya hai’ (They have been removed because the Games are going to happen). It was unclear to me how a row of vendors in a distant north Delhi market represented a threat to the Games but, as I discovered later, the shop-owners had approached the police to evict the vendors because they occupied potential parking space for their customers, and a newly-appointed chief of the local police station was willing to oblige them so that he could negotiate more

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favourable commissions from the vendors once they were allowed to return. In the negotiation of these long-standing conflicts over space, the Commonwealth Games were seized as an opportunity by shop-owners and the police to ‘clean up’ the city, blending personal benefit with public-spiritedness.

Instances such as this reveal that the desire for control over the external images of India’s national culture and Delhi’s urban culture extends beyond state agencies to society at large. Statements by state officials and corporate bodies, as well as discussions in the media, exemplify what Michael Herzfeld (1997: 3) calls ‘cultural intimacy’ or ‘the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’. Commenting on the loutish manners of road users, Raj Kishore, a 35-year-old auto rickshaw driver, offered views that reflect those of many Delhi residents who express their shared sociality through statements that accept their collective flaws — ‘Yahaan ki public to aisi hi hai: sab apna sochte hain, doosron ka kaun khayal karta bai? (The public here is like this only: everyone thinks about their own interests, who cares or looks out for others?) — and approvingly endorse state attempts at civic improvement as urgent and necessary — ‘Achchhi baat bai jo sarkar kar rahi bai; babut zaroori bai’ (It is a good thing the government is doing; it is very necessary). At the same time, they are cynical and irreverent, convinced of the strong likelihood that these initiatives will fail — ‘Arre, sarkar kuchh bhi kar le, koi farak nahin padta. Log nahin sudharenge (The government can do what it likes, it makes no difference. People won’t improve). Such commonplace comments that acknowledge collective failings as well as attempts to overcome them are articulations of cultural intimacy (cf. Hall 1996), at once joining together and enunciating a shared sensibility between the state and its citizens.

Challenges and Contestations

From the start, the Commonwealth Games in Delhi have been dogged by controversy. An early conflict between Suresh Kalmadi, the head of the Indian Olympic Association who championed the cause of bringing the Games to Delhi, and Mani Shankar Aiyar, Union Minister of Sports and a strident critic, led to the latter being
removed from his post. The governments at the Centre and in Delhi state came out clearly in favour of the Games as an event meant to showcase the nation’s new image as an emerging superpower. Despite this support, key projects have been extremely slow to take off. Delhi is notorious for the multiplicity of its regulatory institutions, which hampers coordination around issues of changing land use, environmental clearance, land development and construction. After land was made available and contracts awarded, the economy was hit by the global financial crisis of 2008. Its most severe impact was felt by the construction industry which found that its contracts for sports-related development were no longer profitable due to the rising costs of steel and other raw materials. Private firms were also affected by the decline in credit availability, making planned investments harder to finance. The difficulties of undertaking large capital investments in an adverse economic climate were acutely felt by the tourism industry which also had to drastically downgrade its projections of the number of visitors expected during the Games.

The government has dealt with this unexpected crisis by making good the financial shortfall experienced by private firms and stepping in with additional support. The biggest bail-out occurred with Emaar MGF, the Dubai-based real estate developer contracted to build the Games Village. Under a Public–Private Partnership (PPP) arrangement, the DDA had allotted 27 acres of prime land for free to the company to build 1168 luxury flats to house athletes and officials. Under the terms of the contract, the firm would sell two-thirds of the flats while DDA would sell the remainder. After the financial downturn, the cash-strapped company appealed to the government for help and the DDA responded by giving it an interest-free loan of US $ 100 million (Rs 500 crore), to be repaid in the form of additional flats. This arrangement directly contradicted the Urban Development Ministry’s previously held position that there was no provision for extending a loan to the contractor under the PPP model.

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10 See footnote 2.
Even before the global financial crisis, it was clear that the cost-effectiveness of the Games or the burden that they would place on the public exchequer were not major concerns for the government. In 2007, the estimated cost of the Games and related construction was estimated to be US$ 1.35 billion (Rs 6,783 crore), equal to a third of the entire annual budget for Delhi state in that year. Such expenditure on Games-related items represents a huge opportunity cost in terms of forgoing urgently-needed investments in sanitation, education, health, and low-income housing in a city of 14 million people. Public expenditure to create gigantic sports infrastructure that is likely to fall into disuse, as has been the case with the stadiums built for the 1982 Asian Games, offers no possibilities of economic return after the initial spurt of job creation during the construction phase. Nor was there any discussion of exactly how much revenue would be generated by the Games through broadcasting rights, corporate sponsorship, tickets, tourism, and related spin-offs. According to the Delhi Chief Minister, ‘People say the Games will pay for themselves’, a claim that is belied by all the available data.13 In 2009, the estimated cost of Delhi’s makeover for the Games had shot up to US$ 13.3 billion, 10 times the estimated amount in 2007, and 31 times more than the bid estimate of US$ 422 million in 2003.14 The actual expenditure is likely to be far greater. However, no questions have been asked in the media about the wisdom of spending on this scale on what is, at the end of the day, a non-essential activity. Nor are there any calculations about how the costs will be recovered and from whom.

Such insouciance about the economic viability of the Games is striking since other government expenditure is stringently monitored and critically appraised. For instance, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the flagship programme of the United Progressive Alliance government at the centre, was allocated US$ 78 billion (Rs 39,000 crore) in the 2009 budget.15 This amount, which is only

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six times the 2009 estimate for the Delhi Games but will benefit 44.7
million of the poorest households in the country, has been at the
centre of enormous controversy with reams written in policy and
media reports about how such massive spending threatens the fiscal
stability of the state. Similar critical analyses can be easily found
for all other major items of government expenditure. Yet no such
standards are applied to the Games. The consensus seems to be that
the Games are above such mundane concerns; their importance
for securing national prestige places them beyond the calculus of
economic benefits and costs. However, an examination of the flows
of government subsidies and concessions shows that, in the name
of national honour, the Games’ chief financial beneficiaries have
been corporate firms in the real estate development, construction,
transportation, and hotel sectors. For them, the Games represent an
accelerated and expanded opportunity to profit without having to
undergo the rigours of regulatory processes or of media scrutiny.
The delays in undertaking the projects and the consequent anxiety
about meeting the October 2010 deadline have enabled the remaining
vestiges of project evaluation and monitoring to be swept aside.

Among the major benefits claimed for the Games has been the
prospect of expanding employment opportunities. According to a
study by Building and Woodworkers International, a total of 500,000
jobs were likely to be created in Games-related activities. Of these,
100,000 were estimated to be for unskilled construction workers.16
In India, at the best of times, the rights of construction workers to
fair terms, safety measures, social security, and collective bargaining
are respected only in the breach. With the rush to finish Games-
related projects on time, while worker compensation has risen
slightly, work conditions have become more hazardous with safety
standards being set aside and workers urged to work round the clock
to push the projects ahead at top speed. Human rights organisations
have documented the unsafe and exploitative conditions under

16 'Citizens for Workers, Women and Children: Fact Sheet’, produced by
the Commonwealth Games Coalition-Citizens for Workers, Women and
7 October 2009).
which construction workers labour (PUDR 2009). There has been a consequent rise in fatal accidents on construction sites such as the Games Village, including those of the highly-respected Delhi Metro Rail Corporation. Activists had hoped that the spotlight on the Games would enable them to push for the implementation of the welfarist Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act of 1996, but have met with little success, even though a committee appointed by the Supreme Court investigated working conditions at the Games construction sites and found serious violations of labour laws.

Beyond the economic viability of the Games and immediate questions about economic and social changes before and during the event lies the larger issue of long-term impacts. Concerned about the destruction of the city’s green areas to accommodate the Games Village and the Siri Fort stadium, NGOs in Delhi petitioned the courts in order to stop ecological changes that may do incalculable harm to the city’s climate and water regimes. In the case of the Siri Fort forest in south Delhi, 10 hectares of a designated green belt were cleared by the DDA to build basketball and squash courts and a parking area.

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17 A similar effort to highlight the grim circumstances of migrant construction workers from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh was started before the 1982 Asian Games when the spurt in building activities brought an estimated one million labourers to the city (Baviskar 2003; also see People’s Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India and Others [A.I.R. 1982 S.C. 1437]). Denied legal, affordable and adequate shelter, most migrants ended up improvising housing close to the sites where they worked. These settlements in the shadows of gigantic stadiums and flyovers flourished for the next 20 years until they were demolished and their residents evicted to make way for the next round of construction before the Commonwealth Games 2010.


20 See http://2010commonwealthgamesindia.blogspot.com/ for coverage of all Games-related news coverage, including environmental controversies, and www.yamunajyeeabhiyaan.blogspot.com for details of the debate regarding construction of the Games Village on the Yamuna floodplain.
In response to a public interest petition filed by local residents, the Supreme Court of India sought reports from the Central Empowered Commission (a court-appointed advisory committee of environmental officials and experts) and from Charles Correa, noted architect and head of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission. Both the reports criticised the DDA for ignoring all norms while giving the project a go-ahead. The Correa report noted that ‘the site selection was not proper and the design far from satisfactory’ and recommended that the structures be relocated and the original forest area restored. However, the Court decided to allow the construction, remarking that, ‘We do not want people to say that India is unsafe for Commonwealth Games [an apparent reference to the fact that the IPL T20 cricket tournament had been shifted from India to South Africa due to security concerns after the Mumbai bomb blasts of 2008]. We will deal with the environmental concerns after the Games are over’. By bringing up the threat of terrorist attacks, the judges introduced an entirely extraneous issue into the litigation on the long-term environmental impact of locating specific Games venues in green areas. The juxtaposition of these two unrelated matters showed that the judiciary regarded both — environmental and security challenges — only as impediments to a project whose overall validity was beyond question.

21 It is a matter of no small irony that the local residents opposing the clearing of the Siri Fort forest happen to be the beneficiaries of exactly the same process in the 1980s when the first large piece of forest was cleared to construct the Games Village for the Asian Games. After Asiad 82, the DDA sold the flats to public sector firms and individuals, converting the Siri Fort Games Village into an affluent enclave housing some of the city’s top bureaucrats and other members of the power elite. It is the same residents who now oppose further construction for fear that it will adversely affect the quality of their life.


The suspension of environmental regulations in order to facilitate the smooth passage of Games-related projects was justified by the judiciary as a matter of national interest, driven by anxieties about the loss of face in the international arena if the Games were to be cancelled or relocated. Such intermeshing of concerns about symbolic and material capital — public prestige and private profit — has been exemplified by the political and economic processes around the construction of the Games Village on the floodplain of the river Yamuna. The floodplain of the river runs through the centre of the city on a north–south axis and is a critical expanse for accommodating the swollen girth of the river in the three post-monsoon months during which 70 per cent of the annual flow is concentrated. The rest of the year, the area supports small farmers, many of them on long-term leases issued by the Flood and Irrigation Department which owns the land. The expansion of the city eastwards since the 1970s has shifted the relative position of the floodplain out of obscurity to centre-stage, a process accelerated by the rise in real estate prices since economic liberalisation in the 1990s. The floodplain, too valuable now to be left to farmers and wilderness, is being gradually converted to built-up property by constructing embankments that channel the flow of the river. As the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan (Keep Yamuna Alive Campaign), an alliance of environmentalist NGOs, points out, canalisation of the river not only increases the risk of floods but also prevents groundwater recharge, a major issue in a city that now relies on bringing water from distant Himalayan dams.

When the Games Village site was announced, the Campaign organised a satyagraha at the location, involving displaced farmers as
well as environmental movement stalwarts such as Rajendra Singh of the Tarun Bharat Sangh, an organisation renowned for its pioneering work on community-based water harvesting in Rajasthan. The Campaign’s arguments primarily focused on the ecological impact of construction on the floodplain, mustering support from a number of government studies that had been critical of this location. As these reports pointed out, a number of other potential sites, closer to the main sports venues, were ignored on vague or flimsy grounds. The unsaid consideration appeared not to be that athletes be provided suitable accommodation for their fortnight-long stay, but that the floodplain be developed permanently as real estate. The Games Village is thus a keystone in a long-term strategy to transform public land along the floodplain into a privately-owned commodity. This process exactly replicates the experience of the 1982 Asian Games when large parts of the Siri Fort forest, an ecologically sensitive area in south Delhi, were cleared to build the Games Village. Today, these luxury flats are home to Delhi’s power elite, as will be the case with the Commonwealth Games village.

In 2007, when their satyagraha against the privatisation of public land and the ecological degradation of the floodplain proved to be ineffective in stopping or slowing down the Games Village construction, the Campaign decided to petition the Delhi High Court, citing the irreversible damage that permanent structures would cause to the ecological integrity of the floodplain. The Court refused to stay the construction but appointed a committee to examine and monitor it. In response, the DDA appealed to the Supreme Court, which summarily overruled the High Court’s orders with the astonishing claim that ‘the Commonwealth Games Village site is neither located on a “riverbed” nor on the “floodplain”’. With this, all further debate about the adverse economic, social and ecological impacts of the

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25 At the same time, the distance between the Games Village and the main stadiums necessitated the building of elaborate road works, including a brand-new elevated corridor, another opportunity for an infrastructure project that benefits private contractors in the guise of ‘decongesting’ roads. On the politics of traffic and road management in Delhi, see Baviskar (forthcoming).

Games was closed. The only topic of discussion since has been whether Delhi will manage to meet the October 2010 deadline and make a respectable showing before the rest of the world.27

Cities and Sports Mega-Events:
The Political and Economic Analysis

The suppression of debate and the suspension of disbelief about the impacts of the Commonwealth Games are all the more remarkable given Delhi’s previous experience of hosting a sports mega-event, viz. the 1982 Asian Games. Asiad’82 triggered a similar spate of construction in the city and, driven by the same imperative of deadline-bound nationally prestigious projects, created costly and sub-standard concrete edifices that became obsolete and under-utilised once the Games were over. Among the white elephants was the Players’ Building, a hostel for athletes which was not completed in time and which remained an unfinished shell for the next fifteen years until it was refurbished as the Secretariat of the Delhi government (Baviskar 2007). Like the Commonwealth Games 2010, the Asiad’82 legitimised the commodification and privatisation of the city’s commons. While it provided jobs to migrant workers, it incorporated them into the urban economy under terms that reproduced their vulnerability. And in a debacle that, at the time of writing, seems all too likely to happen with the Commonwealth Games, the anticipated hordes of foreign spectators and tourists for Asiad’82 turned out to number a grand total of 200 (Uppal and Ghosh 2006: 10). Yet, despite these striking resemblances, the experience of Asiad’82 was not referred to in media discussions of the Commonwealth Games 2010; in fact, media coverage echoed the same tropes of national pride and anxiety without exhibiting any critical awareness of history. So similar is the tone and substance that news reports from 1981 and 2009 seem interchangeable. It is as if the city has no memory, as if the past has faded away, burnt off by the blazing promise of the future.

While most people seem to have forgotten the 1982 Asian Games and their crumbling concrete traces, the economic, social and

27 The Opposition leaders from the Bharatiya Janata Party kept trying to raise the issue of corruption and wastage of public funds, but did not get much media attention.
ecological problems associated with the Commonwealth Games in Delhi are not particularly novel or surprising to sociologists. Nor is the manner in which they have been addressed by state agencies, including the judiciary. As the literature on the sociology of sports shows, ‘the allure of global games’ is often justified in terms of their ‘legacies’ — whether social, cultural, environmental, political, economic, or sporting… At the same time, it seems evident that forecasts of the benefits are nearly always wrong’ (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006: 9). In fact, sports mega-events conjure up a ‘fantasy world [marked by] underestimated costs, overestimated revenues, underestimated environmental impacts and over-valued economic development effects’ (ibid.: 10). Another analyst points to the ‘predictable patterns of hyperbolic promotion, collective gullibility and underappreciated opportunity costs and distributional impacts that deserve much closer attention from responsible policy-makers than they typically receive’ (Black 2008: 472). However, ‘once a “Games train” has left the station, there is an almost irresistible incentive to spare no expense to ensure success, because the costs of failure become “too ghastly to contemplate”’ (ibid.).

What then explains the irrational enthusiasm for hosting mega-events like the Commonwealth Games among national and city governments as well as their citizens? Why do governments vie to out-bid each other? Why do citizens become excited at the prospect of an event that is likely to change their city for the worse? Part of the answer lies in understanding how powerful groups profit from the Games. The leaps in telecommunication technology since the 1980s — the so-called third Industrial Revolution — have brought sports to global audiences on an unprecedented scale. Businesses have seized this opportunity and packaged sports events through a ‘tri-partite model of sponsorship rights, exclusive broadcasting rights and merchandizing’ (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006: 5). This is the basis of the sports–media–business alliance that has transformed professional sport since the late 20th century. Another part of the answer lies in how such events are valued as promotional activities for cities and regions, part of a strategy to repackage the city as an ‘urban entertainment destination’, a trend that has been growing since the 1980s (ibid.: 8). As Gruneau argues, local politicians and the media focus on the interests and desires of developers, property-owners and middle-class consumers as ‘synonymous with the well-being of the city’ (2002: ix–x). As a result, which social groups actually
benefit, which are excluded and whether these decisions can be contested through a transparent and accountable process, are not questions that are addressed in public discourse.

This explains the phenomenon of large subsidies from public funds to private developers as in the case of Emaar MGF. It also sheds light on agreements such as that between the Indian Olympic Association and the Confederation of Indian Industry to use the Games as an opportunity to promote ‘Brand India’, showcasing the nation’s business potential, an activity that would otherwise appear to be tangentially related to sports. The sports–media–business triumvirate and its support by the state ensures that issues such as the displacement of the urban poor by the clearing of squatter settlements to make way for sports venues and to generally ‘clean up’ the city, the environmental consequences of building on the floodplain or clearing green areas, and the lack of safety of construction workers, do not get addressed at all. At the same time, routine regulatory and judicial processes that offered some scope for public contestation and critique stand suspended. The games serve as a ‘special time’ (Gilmartin 2009), marked off from the everyday, yet transforming the everyday-yet-to-come with their long-term legacy of economic, social and ecological change.

To a large extent, a discourse of urban improvement through sports mega-events that primarily reflects corporate interests is a relatively recent development. Although the nexus between contractors and politicians must have been a significant factor in the preparations for the 1982 Asian Games in Delhi, such connections have acquired far more influence in the period of economic liberalisation when there is a general re-orientation of economic and social policy to the ‘needs’ of business firms. It must be noted that this discourse has become prevalent in a context of intense global ‘place competition’, where mega-events are perceived as a mechanism for attracting mobile capital and people. They are one of the means by which places become ‘sticky’ — nations, regions and cities use the attention generated by mega-events to position themselves in the international

However, these connections were vehemently denied by Jagmohan who, as the then Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi, was the chief architect of the city’s makeover at a time when it was still a Union Territory with a bureaucrat at its helm (interviewed by the author, 21 June 2007).
tourist, migration and business market-place (Hall 2006: 59; Black 2008: 470). According to Michael Hall,

Sports mega-events emerge as central elements in place competition in at least three ways. First, the infrastructure required for such events is usually regarded as integral to further economic development.... Second, the hosting of such events is seen as a contribution to business vitality and economic development. Thirdly, the ability to attract events is often regarded as a performance indicator in its own right of the capacity of a city or region to compete. (Ibid.: 64)

However, place competition has the potential to be a zero-sum game. The investments and innovations aimed at making particular cities more attractive are soon adopted elsewhere, neutralising any competitive advantage in infrastructural or cultural distinction. Paradoxically, place competition renders all cities similar even in the ways in which they mark their cultural difference.29 It is not established that such re-imaging strategies necessarily pay off in terms of long-term economic benefits. But what the discourse of global competition does create are public–private alliances — ‘booster coalitions’, to use Black’s term (2008: 470) — that seek to coerce or co-opt dissidents by creating a ‘community of interest’. Thus the Save Yamuna Campaign found that, while it could object to the Games Village being located on the floodplain, it could not question the larger decision to hold the Games in Delhi because doing so would have led to its being branded as ‘anti-national’ and unpatriotic. This conflation between the hosting of the Games and the honour of the nation mobilises civic jingoism such that the Games ‘act as a catalyst for change by persuading people to work together around a common objective and as fast track for obtaining extra finance for getting building projects off the drawing board’ (Law 1993: 107, quoted in Hall 2006: 63). An ‘event of this magnitude concentrates minds and resources in ways that few other stimuli can do’ (Black 2008: 476).

Besides speeding up growth, sports mega-events like the Games also accomplish what may be described as the willing suspension

29 That is, while the cultural content of what is on offer may vary — different styles of food, handicrafts, performance, or architecture — they are packaged and presented in the same format. Thus, street fairs in Bangkok or Delhi or Edinburgh will be identical in their structure. For a different interpretation, see Black (2008: 471).
of disbelief. That is, the scepticism and scrutiny around the issue of ‘public purpose’, which takes institutionalised form in mandatory procedures such as benefit–cost analyses and environmental impact assessments, is set aside. For instance, before the Sydney Olympics of 2000, the New South Wales government passed a law in 1995 banning city residents from going to court on grounds of environmental and planning violations by the proposed Olympic projects. Ironically, for an event promoted as the ‘Green Games’, all Games-related projects were waived the required environmental impact statements (Hall 2006: 62). In the case of Delhi too, as with the Siri Fort and Yamuna floodplain instances, the requirement of ‘due process’ has been suspended to accelerate projects which are implicitly assumed to be in the public interest and therefore beyond criticism.

By their construction of a ‘community of interest’, the Commonwealth Games generate social solidarities, mobilising consent and collective action around urban space. These solidarities demand closer consideration because they provide important insights into the life of a city. Even when they mainly benefit elites, mega-events are image- and identity-building exercises that signal a city’s upward mobility from ‘Third World’ to ‘world-class’, where the host is re-positioned as ‘accomplished, cosmopolitan and business-friendly’ (Black 2008: 470). They are also occasions for the ‘promotion of a celebratory sense of national [and urban] unity and pride’ (ibid.). In that sense, their audience is as much local as global for, in the process of representing the city to the world, the Games transform the urban body politic’s sense of itself.

This is partly a consequence of the character of sports as a set of ‘ritualized, rationalized commercial spectacles and bodily practices that create opportunities for expressive performances, disruptions of the everyday world and affirmations of social status and belonging’ (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006: 1). As Hall points out, ‘criticizing the hosting of mega-events is…to be doubly damned. For one contends not only with the neoliberal discourse of competition…but also with the mythologies of the social benefits of sport…. The inherent belief of many that sport is good for you, makes for better citizens, creates pride in the community, and generates a positive image is hard to overcome’ (2006: 67). These assumptions are so pervasive and taken-for-granted that, in the case of the Commonwealth Games in Delhi, they have not even been raised in public debate, let alone challenged.
Spectacular Events and the City

To the commonsensical notion that sports, in general, are socially good is added the potent charge of the sports mega-event as a singular, spectacular occasion concentrated in an urban space at a particular moment in time. The spectacle of the Games is fused with the spectacle of the city. Their audience is at once global and intensely local for urban citizens see themselves reflected in this economy of appearances. Significantly, it is the affect inherent in this cultural politics of image and representation — the glamour and excitement — that is crucial for summoning a sense of belonging.

In the Delhi state assembly elections of 2008, the Congress party was handsomely voted back into power. The victory was generally attributed to popular support for the project of re-making the city by hosting events like the Games. Citizens from a wide range of social locations pointed to the expanding metro rail network and other transport-related construction, grumbling about the inconvenience of traffic diversions and dug-up roads but in the next breath describing these as temporary frustrations to be tolerated because of the long-term improvement they would bring. In interviews, working-class voters expressed their approval: ‘Achchhi baat hai, sheher mein kuchh bo raha hai’ (it’s a good thing, something happening in the city). Even though the Games may not directly benefit them — and, in fact, for a large section of Delhi’s working class, the Games have redirected resources away from them, besides causing extensive displacement — these events create ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1977: Chap. 9) such that even those who are excluded or marginalised experience the city as a ‘happening place’. A small shop-owner in north Delhi said, ‘Haan, raunak aayegi’ (Yes, it will bring brightness), using the term for the celebratory mood created by artificial lights. This urban ‘buzz’ — the pleasurable sensation of excitement and anticipation — conjures up consent across social scales in order to swiftly effect symbolic and material transformations. It imparts to cities their charisma, ‘the vaguely magical power of presence, style, seduction and performance [which] is now a widely marketed and desired object of self-making’ (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009: 6). The charisma of the city, heightened by the spectacular nature of the

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30 See Ghertner (forthcoming).
mega-event, makes corporate projects of urban transformation not just acceptable but even welcome across social scales.

What implications does this analysis of spectacular events have for our understanding of the metropolis and its micro-politics? It shows that focusing only on the political economy of economic interests in not sufficient for it does not allow us to appreciate the fundamental irrationality of mega-events, or the fact that people want both bread and circuses. Circuses are significant because they allow citizens to participate in a sense of communitas that they find meaningful, however ephemeral or illusory it may be. Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian philosopher, discussed the irrationality of high-stakes gambling. So too do mega-events seem irrational except for those who profit by them. Clifford Geertz (1973: Chap. 15) rebutted Bentham, pointing out that certain forms of gambling were about displaying status; their logic lay in making meaning rather than making money. This also holds true for spectacles in the city: they are extraordinary moments that make manifest the meanings of urban being and belonging. Thus, the legacies they leave behind take the form not only of decrepit concrete but also civic solidarities that survive despite the cynicism born of systematic abuse.

References


PUDR (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights). 2009. *In the Name of National Pride (Blatant Violation of Workers Rights at the Commonwealth Games Construction [sic] Site)*. Delhi: PUDR.


Part II: Infrastructures and Materialities
As cities in India are continuously stretched and redrawn to encompass agricultural land, the responsibility for providing infrastructure in new peripheral settlements is increasingly being transferred from the state to the market, neighbourhood and household. In order to lobby for services and regularisation, there has been a surge in neighbourhood-level initiatives in the form of residents welfare associations (RWAs), party- and trade union-affiliated groups, and inter-neighbourhood federations. Despite the salience of peri-urbanisation for the trajectory of Indian cities, little social science research has investigated these new geographies, the nature of such neighbourhood associations and their class identities, and the types of claims they make on the state — particularly under a scenario of neoliberal reform and restructuring.

Since the turn of the millennium, Bangalore’s urban periphery — a collection of unauthorised settlements, villages and the offices of global corporations — has become the site for ambitious reform-oriented infrastructure projects. One project in particular, the Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project (GBWASP), presents a moment of rupture in the history of state-led water supply in India. Whereas in the past, the state water board invested in new water

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1 In urban India, ‘regularisation’ refers to the process through which illegal or unauthorised settlements (i.e., not part of or conforming to the master plan) are brought under the purview of the local city administration. Regularisation is also a highly political process in which local-level and high-ranking politicians frequently intervene.
infrastructure through government loans and grants, this project transfers part of the financial burden of extending water to the periphery to residents themselves via the payment of a mandatory ‘beneficiary capital contribution’. The financial model of the project, shaped in part by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank, is now dubbed a ‘best practice’ in India’s water sector because it adopts a market-based approach (MoUD 2006; Vaidya and Vaidya 2008). That is, it initiates a move away from public funds to financing through commercial debt and the users themselves. Accounting for over 35 per cent of the project’s total budget, payments by residents represent a key terrain for claim making and negotiation over citizenship rights by RWAs in Greater Bangalore.

In this article, I investigate how neoliberal development projects and their programmatic goals play out in cities today, how they are contested and constituted through neighbourhood-level politics, and how the particular disjunctions between intent and effect engender new types of claims. My overarching argument is that the seemingly simple and straightforward economic calculations of ‘cost recovery’ carry a much deeper set of political, social and legal implications. We therefore have to understand how market-based reforms become embedded in a terrain of civic life and meaning, and importantly, are inscribed in particular spatial histories and politics in the places in which they unfold.

I focus on the role of RWAs in peri-urban Bangalore, whose strategies of mediating between residents, politicians and bureaucrats, I will argue, challenge existing theorisations of the middle class, associationism and civil society in India. I further contend that an understanding of the history of associational politics and socio-spatial relations in this context provides insight into why people consent to market-based reforms despite how costly it is to do so, as well as appropriate and rework the terms of the project to make claims on the city. It is ultimately engagement by associations

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2 In 2006, the Government of India approved the establishment of a pooled financing development fund, which, according to C. Vaidya and H. Vaidya (2008: 1) — both closely connected with USAID — was ‘based on the success’ of municipal bond issuances in Karnataka (for GBWASP) and Tamil Nadu (for a sanitation-related project).
that allow market-based reforms to endure and take hold in cities today. This is not because, unlike how some have argued, there is a natural convergence between the politics of the middle class and the goals of market-based reforms per se. Rather, the stakes attached to participating in a ‘user pays’ project like GBWASP extend beyond water access to issues of tenure security and membership in the city — stakes that lie at the core of peri-urban struggles in contemporary India.

This research resonates with recent work that explores the interplay between the political economy of liberalisation and middle class politics (see for instance Fernandes 2006; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2008). However, I seek to move beyond broad-brush framings of liberalisation to an analysis of the particular workings of market-based reforms in the urban water sector. Such a situated analysis, I find, is a powerful way of underscoring the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in projects of reform, as well as the specific points of interaction and contention between reforms and a tremendously variegated, spatially differentiated urban middle-class politics.

The analysis draws on in-depth interviews conducted in 2007–08 with peripheral middle class RWAs and politicians, and the engineers, consultants and bureaucrats involved in the implementation of the project. My research was primarily concentrated in three of the eight erstwhile urban local bodies (ULBs) selected for the water project based on their high concentration of unauthorised layouts and diverse forms of associational activity: Bommanahalli lying at the southern edges of the city, Byatarayanapura to the north and KR Puram to the northeast. In what follows, I examine the type of development being witnessed at the urban fringe and the politics of the groups involved. Thereafter, I explain the rationale behind the cost recovery architecture of GBWASP, and further discuss how neighbourhood

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3 Interviews were carried out either entirely in Kannada or using a mixture of Kannada, Telegu, and English. Only a small proportion of interviews were carried out only in English, which provides some indication of the linguistic composition of Bangalore’s peripheral neighborhoods.

4 As of January 2007, these eight ULBs (Bommanahalli, Byataranapura, KR Puram, Mahadevapura, Yelahanka, Rajarajeshwari Nagar, Dasarahalli, and Kengeri) became officially part of the Greater Bangalore City Corporation.
politics intersect with the project, and conversely, how the market-based reforms deployed through the project engender a particular set of claims related to urban resources.

The Making of Bangalore’s Periphery

Between 40–70 per cent of urban Indians live in settlements that fall outside the purview of formal planning institutions, mostly concentrated on the urban periphery (ALF 2003). This is not a surprising statistic given what we know about cities of the Global South. Caldeira’s (2000) research shows how illegal subdivisions (loteamentos) proliferated on the outskirts of Sao Paulo to the extent that they were four times the number of legal settlements by the 1990s. But what is perhaps more surprising, as discovered by AlSayyad and Roy (2004) in a comparative study of urban informality in the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America, is that such forms of housing are increasingly being demanded by middle class residents, in addition to the groups generally associated with illegal settlements at the periphery.

The growth of ‘revenue layouts’ — the term used to describe subdivisions of agricultural land developed into informal residential settlements — on Bangalore’s fringes from the 1960s, and especially rapidly from the 1990s onwards, are a clear example of this trend. Bangalore-based Alternative Law Forum (ALF 2003: 91–92) describes revenue layouts as:

- the illegal settlements of the middle and upper middle class, (basically those upwardly mobile on the money ladder) as well those at the lower end. They access political patronage for services, can invest money in developmental processes and are more concerned about tenure security and access to basic services than the urban poor.

Today, 90 per cent of residential settlements on the outskirts of Bangalore are revenue layouts characterised by varying shades of legality. Typically, because the private developers involved do not obtain formal approval from the state-level master-planning agency, the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), the layouts are considered ‘unauthorised’. However, revenue layouts may still be ‘authorised’ at the district level if they have been converted
from agricultural to residential land-use upon payment of a fee to the Deputy Commissioner, a process known colloquially as ‘DC conversion’. In other cases, the layout may be pending approval from the BDA, and in others still, the layout is neither ‘BDA-approved’ nor ‘DC-converted’, but the local municipal or village government provides tacit sanction for its existence (ALF 2003). These differing degrees of legality exist in part because of the varying interpretations and applications of land laws by multiple levels of the state.

In terms of socio-economic characteristics, and in line with the research of Kamath et al. (2008), I found that these peripheral layouts cater to a range of groups that can generally be classified as lower-middle class to middle class, although as ALF (2003) notes, a small proportion of the very poor and very wealthy also inhabit revenue layouts. Among my interviewees, occupations ranged from retirees of public sector industries such as Indian Telephone Industries and Bharat Electronics Limited — Bangalore’s pre-eminent industries from the 1950s–1980s — to lower-end service sector jobs (e.g. nursing or the technology industry), to working-class jobs in the garment industry.

Physically speaking, revenue layouts can be starkly differentiated from planned layouts. Unlike ‘planned’ layouts in the core city or in isolated pockets of the periphery, revenue layouts possess little grid-based planning. Residential and commercial buildings in revenue layouts often encroach on roads, making it difficult to locate an address, let alone lay a piped water network. Since no piped drainage facilities are provided, most houses have individual pit latrines and sewage is discharged in open drains or in empty plots (see Figure 6.1). Less than 10 per cent of households have access to piped water provided by the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB). Instead, many rely on tankers that truck groundwater.

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5 It should be noted that compared to Mumbai and Kolkata, where 50–60 per cent of the population is considered to be poor, in Bangalore approximately 30 per cent of the population are officially classified as below poverty line. However, in terms of absolute numbers, slum and urban homeless populations are on the rise largely because of migration from rural areas and neighboring states. Of the 400 slums in the city, approximately 60 are on the periphery (personal communication with BWSSB, 2008). For a deeper understanding of urban poverty in Bangalore, see Schenk (2001) and Benjamin and Bhuvaneshwari (2001).
Figure 6.1: Two Adjacent Neighbourhoods in Peri-Urban Bangalore

Source: Photographs by author.

Note: On the left is a picture of a revenue layout and on the right, a BDA-approved layout.
into the city from private land, private and municipal borewells that are rapidly running dry, and purchased bottled water.\textsuperscript{6}

Recognising the periphery’s dire water supply problems, and identifying it as a locus for current and future economic and population growth, in 1998, the state government announced plans to extend piped water supply from the river Cauvery to the outskirts. Today, surface water from the Cauvery accounts for the main source of supply by the water board (approximately 900 million litres per day today) to the city’s core areas. With all of its promises and perils, this project and its unprecedented payment model became the basis for a contentious set of debates, actions and reconfigurations between citizens and the state.

In the absence of quality drinking water or any other service for that matter, revenue layouts incrementally negotiate access to services over time, most commonly through the help of RWAs.\textsuperscript{7} The large membership, funds pooled by residents, and the clout and enthusiasm of their main organisers (usually older male retirees) are such that RWAs carry far more weight than individual household efforts. Moreover, residents in these areas live under constant threat of needing to pay ‘betterment fees’, periodic fees levied by the state and local governments with the promise of being regularised, and RWAs frequently become the focal point of struggles over these fees. As Roy (2003) argues in the case of Kolkata, the very regulatory ambiguity that enabled middle-class subdivisions to proliferate on the fringes of the city in the first place was also the reason why these areas continued to face multiple threats and uncertainties. I turn next to a discussion of the specific mechanisms through which services and regularisation are negotiated. This discussion will provide the context for understanding how and why a market-oriented project like GBWASP was perceived and renegotiated by residents and their associations.

\textsuperscript{6} Some families spend up to Rs 2,000 per month on procuring water supply, a very significant proportion of the average income.

\textsuperscript{7} The incremental acquisition of infrastructure is procedurally the opposite of how planned layouts obtain services. While planned layouts are connected to roads, water, electricity, and sewer lines upfront — i.e. prior to home construction — revenue layouts must negotiate access to infrastructure and make improvements to their neighbourhoods over the span of several years.
The Politics of the Peri-Urban Middle Class

There is a growing literature on middle class associational life in urban India. Several studies suggest that the strategies and discourses of these associations are predicated on a politics of exclusion and the reproduction of distance from slum dwellers, street hawkers and other 'unclean' or poorer elements of the city (Baviskar 2002, 2003; Fernandes 2004; Anjaria 2006). Amita Baviskar (2003: 89) notes, for instance: ‘bourgeois desires for a clean and green Delhi have combined with commercial capital and the state to deny the poor their rights to the environment’. In John Harriss’ (2007: 2722) survey of RWAs in Chennai, he notes that such civic organisations are largely ‘of and for “consumer-citizen” subjects of the neoliberal state, and much of the activity that it sustains is directed at disciplining the urban poor’.

I find that such conceptualisations of middle class politics do not accurately reflect the priorities, aspirations and strategies of middle class associations in Greater Bangalore, stemming from the intense heterogeneity of the urban middle classes in India, as also noted by Satish Deshpande (2003). In much of the existing literature, the ‘middle class’ refers to the English-speaking, securely propertied elite — what has been referred to in some studies as the ‘new’ middle class. In reality, however, the actual middle middle class and lower middle class bear little cultural resemblance to the elite, as evidenced by the fact that ‘large segments of the middle class continue to rely on networks of political patronage, party connections and mobilisations, as well as ethnically based social movements’ (Fernandes 2006: 196). Moreover, the lower middle class groups living on Bangalore’s periphery do not distance themselves from the working class poor so much as they tend to identify with the common plight of residents living in Greater Bangalore. Very few of my interviewees revealed antagonisms directed at the poor or slums. On the other hand, frustration against the ‘IT brigade’ (see Rao 2005) and the ‘moneyed’ and ‘wasteful’ of Bangalore was evident both in my discussions with RWAs, and lower-level bureaucrats at the water utility and municipal offices who are also part of the lower middle class social grouping. This is particularly true with respect to water: the consumption disparities between the wealthy and poor in Bangalore are acute and were often criticised by the middle class groups that I interviewed.
Another area where my research departs from the existing literature is in understanding relationships with and demands on political parties and bureaucrats. In perhaps the most well-known theoretical treatment of relations between society and state in India, Partha Chatterjee recasts Gramsci’s (2000) ideas of civil and political society, and argues that the domain of civil society is, in reality, restricted to a small section of elite citizens who demand ‘the attention of governmental authorities as a matter of right, because they represent citizens who observe the law’ (Chatterjee 2004: 137). Further, making a turn towards Foucault, Chatterjee differentiates ‘civil society’ from ‘political society’ in that the latter is often treated as ‘populations’ that are ‘classifiable, describable, and enumerable’ (2001: 173) and the target of governmental welfare programs. Most often, the demands of political society are founded on a violation of the law. They thus consist of:

groups that on their part accept [that] their activities are illegal and contrary to good civic behaviour, but they make a claim to a habituation and a livelihood as a matter of right…. What happens then is a negotiation of these claims on a political terrain where, on the one hand, governmental agencies have a public obligation to look after the poor and underprivileged and, on the other, particular population groups receive attention from those agencies according to calculations of political expediency. (Chatterjee 2004: 40)

In a similar vein, Harriss (2005: 5), commenting on middle class associational politics in Indian cities — what he calls the ‘new politics’ of civil society — says the “new politics” in practice is strongly associated with a technocratic, rationalising modernism. It is about “problem-solving” rather than about democracy — which is indeed messy and often involves “dirty politics”.

I find that in such renderings of state–society relations, the middle class/elite are often mapped onto a law-abiding, rights-bearing, technocratic-oriented ‘civil society’ and the poor/vernacular subaltern classes onto the legally ambiguous, politically manipulable realm of ‘political society’. These portrayals leave little room for hybrid variations of the two, or groups that simply do not conform to either political or civil society. As I show below in the case of a large inter-RWA federation in south Bangalore, it is my contention that peri-urban RWAs demonstrate characteristics of both political and civil society. Using Harriss’ (2005) terminology, these groups
may be seen to engage in both the ‘new’ politics of civil society and the ‘old’ politics of party alliances and mass movements. This is because, while accepting that their settlements are illegal, they also make claims on the state, both as a matter of right (through payment of property tax, betterment fees and, as I found out, the beneficiary contribution) and through negotiating regularisation and access to services through deals with politicians and bureaucrats via RWAs. For instance, with respect to paying taxes, one Greater Bangalore RWA member told me:

Once the government allowed us to stay here, their minimum duty is to provide amenities such as streetlights, water, and roads. The municipality was also in need of revenue, so they started collecting taxes. We all paid taxes, since once you start paying taxes, you can start demanding things.

James Holston’s (2008) work on ‘insurgent’ citizenship describes a similar set of legitimation practices by the working class in Sao Paulo’s periphery. He finds that new forms of associational activity, civic behaviour and uses of the law emerged as the working class struggled to legalise their housing. These actions included payment of taxes and bills and the use of the courts to lay claim to their land. As I argue here, Greater Bangalore’s RWAs’ historic role in collecting and leveraging a variety of payments to assert the legality of their settlements and demonstrate that they form a legitimate part of the responsible citizenry, is one reason why consent for today’s neoliberal water reforms agenda can be explained.

Anthropological understandings of the ‘everyday state’ (Fuller and Harriss 2000) are particularly useful in understanding how RWAs perceive, come into contact with, and manipulate various layers of the bureaucracy. Ideas of the ‘everyday state’ remind us

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8 One clear example of this is the involvement of the Democratic Youth Forum of India (DYFI), a cadre-based group of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] in Bommanahalli’s civic issues. Organised under the banner of the Bommanahalli Nagarika Hitarakshana Vedike, or the Bommanahalli Citizen’s Welfare Platform, this group mobilises both working class and middle class residents in revenue layouts around compensation for rain and flood damage, ration cards and urban services.

that most people in India learn to experience the state and build a rapport through their meetings with particular lower and middle-level government officers, such as the revenue officer or assistant executive engineer (Corbridge et al. 2005: 19) and their *darshans* with local politicians.\(^{10}\) As Pranab Bardhan (1997) notes, most people approach their encounters with the bureaucracy with a mixture of deference, caution and guile, knowing that it is possible to ‘milk the cow’ and that disproportionate benefits go to those who have connections and the ability to ‘manipulate the milking process’ (Bardhan 1997: 190). In the context of cities, Benjamin suggests through the notion of ‘politics by stealth’ that marginalised groups ‘work city systems, institutions and politics (Benjamin 2004: 183)’ on an everyday basis.

In Greater Bangalore, I witnessed the ‘everyday state’ in action at the local municipal offices and in the divisional offices of the BWSSB. These interactions often occurred through telephone conversations made in my presence or during face-to-face meetings with officers. In a two-hour interview with an RWA president who, interestingly, was also the ex-councilor (from the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) for one of the largest wards in Bommanahalli, the BWSSB’s maintenance engineer was telephoned and put on speaker phone several times both to gain clarification on the payment structure under GBWASP, and as a way of flaunting the power equation between the RWA president and the engineer to my research assistant and I. When questioned about this, the president replied: ‘That is the power of pressure. We pressure the government officers to carry out works here. We never let them go!’\(^{11}\) Not only are the boundaries between state and society porous and flexible as seen through this example where an RWA president is able to leverage his political position for civic improvement, but the ‘power of pressure’ also works through both bureaucratic and electoral avenues. To further explore how these avenues are exploited, and why insights into the internal

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10 ‘Darshan’ literally meaning ‘sighting’ in Sanskrit and is most commonly used with reference to viewing a deity during worship at a Hindu temple (many Hindus believe the act of seeing confers a blessing). However, it was frequently used in conversations in Bangalore to suggest that the public sometimes treats politicians as if they were gods and, in turn, politicians behave as if they were, in fact, gods.

11 Interview with Bommanahalli RWA, 8 July 2008.
workings of RWAs, their histories and their politics are critical for understanding how neoliberal water reforms play out in Bangalore, in the next section, I provide a case study of one south Bangalore RWA federation.

The Case of a South Bangalore Federation

This case study is of a middle class resident welfare federation that represents several revenue layouts in Bommanahalli and has fought for years for schools, road connectivity and water supply. Its mission statement is ‘to represent the resident welfare associations as also other associations affiliated to the Federation in matters relating to infrastructure, civic amenities, legal issues with civic authorities, service providers and the government, conduct cultural programs and festivals…etc’. Members of this Federation are resentful of their uncooperative gated apartment complex neighbours as revealed by their statements that the latter ‘destroyed the road and environment when they were being built’ and ‘should not be allowed to close off public thoroughfares or spaces’.

Because the Federation represents an influential number of approximately 200,000 people, politicians frequently court it for votes. In an interview with the RWA president, I was told that the Federation organised a large pre-election convention in 2008 in which all major party candidates were present. He described the event in his own words as:

Just before the elections, we told the candidates that you are free to come to our layouts and canvas. We have grown to such a stature that candidates come to us and ask us to help them out. We are ourselves thinking of putting up a candidate for election! We don’t have any political ambition, none of us — at least not the present office bearers. But they really got scared. They came to talk to us and they even

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12 Obtained from the mission statement of a south Bangalore resident welfare federation in July 2008.
13 Interview with Bommanahalli RWA, 21 July 2008.
14 In May 2008, Bangalore held elections for seats in the state legislative assembly and legislative cabinet.
15 One from the Congress Party, one from Janata Dal (Secular), and one from the Bharatiya Janata Party.
offered us money. So we told all three candidates, if you don’t do whatever we ask for, you guys are going to get into trouble. That is why we are a sangataana [association]. We make sure we strengthen ourselves.16

When questioned specifically about the organisation’s stance on electoral politics and whether this is used as a strategy to obtain services, I was told:

See, for the past 14 years we have been living without sanitation, roads, water, and drainage. For people like us, when someone gets the work done, we vote for them. If tomorrow someone comes and does sanitary work here, we’ll vote for them. If MLA Krishnappa gets things done, he’ll win next term as well.17

When it comes to lobbying for improvements and demanding the attention of politicians, the sheer size of their organisation provides leverage with vote-seeking politicians — a facet that Chatterjee would contend belongs to ‘political society’. Moreover, the Federation fully recognises that deals must be struck with politicians. In one conversation, the RWA president tried to convince the local politician that there were many potential public works contracts in the neighbourhood, and that getting this work done would be mutually beneficial to both the politician and residents of the area — even if that meant embezzlement of city funds, which is unfortunately the norm rather than the exception in Bangalore, demonstrating that the revenue layout dwellers know how to manipulate city officials and politicians:

We told our MLA that he knows the situation in our area well; he knows that there is plenty of work to be done, so there are plenty of opportunities to make money! You understand what I’m saying, right? More work = more contracts = more money! So we openly told him: There’s a lot of work to be done here (sikkaapatte kelsa ide). Your work will get done and our work too will get done (nimduu kelsa aagathe, namduu kelsa aagathe) — so, please, just do the work (maadkodi ni)!18

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16 Interview with Bommanahalli RWA, 9 July 2008.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
I found that although organisations like this one are aware of how to manipulate politicians, they are still wary of them as depicted by the president's statement: 'I use my connections to get the job done for our Federation. But we don't entertain politicians in office bearer posts because the only intention of politicians is to win elections'.\textsuperscript{19}

In his research on discourses of corruption in rural India, Akhil Gupta (2006: 230) finds that perceptions of the competence of government shape and are shaped by popular accounts and mass media. The idea that politicians are corrupt and only want to win elections is almost commonsensical in Bangalore, yet revenue layout organisations are particularly skilled at accessing and communicating with politicians.

Importantly, exploiting political channels and threatening politicians are not the only tactics that this Federation uses. For instance, when asked to describe the reasons for engaging in activist work, one member spoke of how important it is to act with the government rather than against it, saying: 'We have to work with the government not against it. We act as a catalyst between government and residents, and then the government takes us into confidence'.\textsuperscript{20} For this organisation, claims of working with the government and serving as a ‘catalyst’ between the state and citizens is a strategic manoeuvre that provides some assurance that their demands for regularisation and services will be met. It is also the reason why this Federation organised consent by members about beneficiary capital payments under GBWASP.

In sum, the politics of Greater Bangalore’s associations have three important features that explain the nature of their involvement in and the stakes they attach to market-based water reforms in the city discussed next. First, departing from the findings of most studies on the urban middle class, they do not distance themselves from the poor so much as they commonly share resentment towards the ‘IT/BT’ sector, particularly around the latter’s ‘wasteful’ consumption of water. Second, because their illegal settlements are surrounded by constant regulatory ambiguity, many RWAs have leveraged taxes and betterment charges in order to negotiate regularisation

\textsuperscript{19} Interview with Bommanahalli RWA, 18 September 2007.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
and services over time. Third, RWAs in Greater Bangalore exert pressure on the state through bureaucratic and political channels. Blurring the boundaries between civic activism, electoral politics and political party affiliation, I argue that these associations exhibit traits of both the ‘new’ and ‘old’ politics of civil society using Harriss’ language, or ‘civil’ and ‘political’ society using Chatterjee’s. These findings are significant in light of recent scholarship that points to the convergence of an anti-poor, consumer-oriented, technocratic middle class politics and projects of economic liberalisation and neoliberal spatial practices in Indian cities (Baviskar 2003; Fernandes 2004; Harriss 2005; 2007). By opening up the category of ‘middle class’ as I have done here, we see that the spatially peripheralised middle class in Bangalore use a different set of discourses and practices than that commonly portrayed in the literature. Moreover, although it is through revenue layout politics that market-based water reforms are shaped and take hold, it is not necessarily because of a natural convergence between the former and latter. A deeper and historically informed understanding of the types of struggles, anxieties and stances towards politicians and bureaucrats reveal that the reasons for participation in GBWASP are much more complex as I show in the next two sections.

Turning Citizens into Stakeholders

First announced in 1998, the Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project (GBWASP), commonly known as the ‘Cauvery neeru (water) project’, involves the extension of piped water from the Cauvery to over 2 million people living on the outskirts of the city in eight different peripheral municipalities. The main difference between this and previous water projects, however, is the model for financing the distribution infrastructure — components such as feeder mains, pump houses, overhead tanks, which earlier projects failed to emerge as a result of political and bureaucratic infighting.

21 These are Bommanahalli, Byataranapura, KR Puram, Mahadevapura, Yelahanka, Rajarajeshwari nagar, Dasarahalli, and Kengeri. In January 2007, these, along with 110 villages were merged to form the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, or the Greater Bangalore City Corporation.
and over 2,000 km of distribution pipelines. The project’s financing structure was designed by the Indo-USAID Finance Institutions and Reforms Expansion through Debt program, implemented by the Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development Finance Corporation (KUIDFC, a special purpose vehicle for channeling domestic and international finance for infrastructure projects), and executed by the BWSSB. The cost of water distribution infrastructure was first estimated at around Rs 340.55 crores (US$ 80 million) of which 35 per cent is expected to come from citizens themselves, 22 per cent from grants from the state government, 14 per cent from a loan from the central government, and 29 per cent through market borrowings through municipal bonds. Subsequently, the project experienced cost escalations of over 30 per cent and was delayed for several months for reasons discussed at length in Ranganathan et al. (2009).

In line with recent trends reflecting a corporatisation of governance in Bangalore (Ghosh 2005; Kamath 2006; Nair 2005) and approaches in development agencies that uphold the citizen-as-client as the harbinger of accountability in service delivery (e.g., World Bank 2004), GBWASP deploys a language of ‘citizen-as-stakeholder’ (GoK 2005a). In this rhetoric, participatory governance is equated with financial contributions to new infrastructure from ‘beneficiary citizens’ (ibid.). The idea that once citizens contribute financially to assets, they will be enabled as more informed and powerful managers of those assets is currently popular among development agencies and citizen groups alike. This also mirrors thinking at the global level where, in the aftermath of the Latin American water privatisation experience, the World Bank has retreated from its earlier dogmatism on privatisation as the solution to a newfound pragmatism that concedes that cost recovery, financial innovation and public–private partnership in the water sector are just as critical. For instance, the World Bank’s World Development Report (2004) contends that the ‘short’ and more efficient route to holding providers of services accountable is through ‘client power’, which involves payment for services, whereas the ‘long’, less efficient and traditional route constitutes indirect and electoral avenues where citizens leverage politicians and bureaucrats to obtain services. What this framework fails to acknowledge, however, is that the short route of market exchange is embedded in and implicated in the long route as this research finds.
GBWASP is nevertheless justified along the ‘short route’ line of reasoning. After three revisions, the government finally settled on a system that categorised beneficiaries according to the area of their property (considered to be a proxy for income) and demanded financial contributions based on this scheme (see Table 6.1). In this scheme, the lowest block of below 600 sq. ft. is deemed exempt from payment, a decision taken following protests by pro-poor coalitions and the Campaign Against Water Privatisation decrying potential privatisation and the costliness of the capital contribution. The next block of between 601–1,200 sq. ft. must pay a one-time fee of Rs 5,000 (approximately US$ 125, or 20–60 per cent of the average monthly income for households in this area), the next block Rs 10,000 (approximately US$ 250), and so on. In addition to this fee structure, a monthly penalty of Rs 100–200 (US$ 2.50–5.00) for late payment must be paid starting 31 July 2005 in order to ‘enforce compliance’ (GoK 2005b).

Table 6.1: Water Charges (in Rupees) Per Dwelling Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Up to 600 sq. ft.</th>
<th>601–1200 sq. ft.</th>
<th>1201–2400 sq. ft.</th>
<th>&gt;2400 sq. ft.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(now waived)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>8 per sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penalty per month (starting 31 July 2005)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(now waived)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (GoK 2005b).

22 In the first iteration of the beneficiary capital contribution structure, the government set the connection fee at Rs 8,500 for all households and Rs 17,000 for non-domestic users, regardless of income category. This was revised upwardly in 2004 to Rs 10,000–15,000 plus a Rs 5,000 in penalty for domestic connections depending on property size. Finally, following counsel by World Bank (2005) experts, discussions with local government and citizens, and criticisms by pro-poor alliances, the fee structure was revised as per Table 6.1.


24 The project implementers also included an institutionalised programme for citizen participation known as the Participatory Local Area Capital
The project also demands that certain documents be furnished before the payment is made, such as three copies of the building plan, the property registration number and a copy of the title or sale deed. As we learned in the preceding section, these were property documents that several revenue layout dwellers did not possess, which shows how fundamentally out of touch this water project is with the realities of organic urban settlement in India.

Renegotiating Reforms

The collection of beneficiary capital contributions commenced in March 2004 and grew steadily over a period of four years. By the end of 2007, approximately Rs 500 million (US$ 11 million) had been collected in Bommanahalli alone; across the eight peripheral municipalities participating in the project, the number is estimated to have crossed Rs 2 billion (US$ 50 million) (Ranganathan et al. 2009). The higher-than-expected payments by citizens mean that their overall contribution to the project’s capital costs is likely to be greater than 35 per cent, the proportion originally allocated to citizens.\textsuperscript{25} In some cases, the contribution amounted to a whole month’s household income, while in most cases, it comprised 10–30 per cent of monthly household income.

Several RWAs were involved in encouraging their members to contribute to the project and several more put pressure on water board engineers, their MLAs and the chair of the water board to modify the upfront terms of payment, remove the penalty requirement and prioritise water to their areas. RWAs also became the focal point for information dissemination — until then severely lacking because of the centralised decision-making processes of the implementing and executing agencies for the project. When questioned as to why

\textsuperscript{25} Developers of new apartment buildings were also big contributors to this amount because they were required to pay the beneficiary contribution before their building plans were sanctioned.
they had embraced the terms of the project, despite the high costs:
I was told by one RWA:

> We are the best taxpayers in this CMC [city municipal council] and also we feel that we are responsible citizens. We know that to get work done — to avail of services — we have to pay. These things don’t come free! So, immediately, when the government announced [the GBWASP] scheme, we paid and we told everyone else they must pay too.\(^{26}\)

At first glance, such a statement about needing to pay for services that ‘don’t come free’ may suggest that associations are exhibiting a ‘shift from the identity of the middle class as workers to that of consumers’, which, in turn, ‘captures the politics of the new middle class in liberalizing India’ (Fernandes 2006: 189). A closer reading of associational discourses vis-à-vis GBWASP reveals, however, that this is not the entire story. I argue that discourses around ‘responsibility’ in this context are less related to consumerist sensibilities than they are to strategic forms of negotiation between citizens and the state entailing payment as claim making. Upfront payment for piped water supply as per the demands of the current neoliberal moment is thus part of an ongoing process that allows illegal revenue layout dwellers to fight for state recognition and material benefits on behalf of their members as reflected by this statement:

> We were involved in raising awareness and in educating the members about the Cauvery water scheme. We do the same not only for this scheme, but for any that the government announces. We told everyone that they must pay. See, if we all pay we can raise our voice in a better manner! That’s why we get involved.\(^{27}\)

In revenue layouts that are frequently relegated to an illegal status by the state and that lack quality services, RWAs have historically collected and utilised property tax payments as a way to demand attention from municipal authorities and make claims related to regularisation and legality — in short, they ‘raise [their] voice’.

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\(^{26}\) Interview with Byatarayanapura RWA, 16 August 2008.

\(^{27}\) Interview with Bommanahalli RWA, 15 July 2008.
Today, payment for GBWASP is being added to the list of payments that are used to justify the legality of their settlements as this newspaper article reports:

I have paid development charges at Dasarahalli CMC for my property, I am paying property tax regularly…and I have paid beneficiary contribution for Cauvery water connection. But how fair is it to say that the property is illegal?  

Thus, I argue that payment is not because residents are consciously acting via the *World Development Report*’s (2004) ‘short route’ wherein customers become more emboldened as stakeholders, and service providers more responsive to stakeholder demands as a result of payment. In fact, as one particularly shrewd revenue layout resident put it:

There is no meaning in the word stakeholder in this Greater Bangalore water project. If they are calling us ‘stakeholder’, then that means we are on the same level as the government. But we are not on the same level. We cannot pay for the service and be a stakeholder!  

Nor do I concur on this point with Foucauldian critiques that acts of payment are shaped by neoliberal projects of moral ‘responsibilisation’ — the self-management and self-regulation of individual behaviour based on ‘rational’ assessments of costs and benefits in line with the market logic (e.g. Rose 1999; Shamir 2008). Rather, my reading of participation by RWAs in GBWASP is Gramscian in that the claims and acts of revenue layout dwellers expose political agency beyond an internalised and morally driven market calculus. As Donald Moore (1998) reminds us through his analysis of resistance struggles in Zimbabwe, for Gramsci (2000: 337), conceptualising the *agency* of the subaltern subject — one that is formed in relation to and embedded in multiple fields of power — is critical.

In Greater Bangalore, I found that the reasons for participating in GBWASP are multiple and have shifted over time in response to the particular powers that revenue layout dwellers are forced

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to confront. That is, the terms of GBWASP were differentially and unevenly appropriated and made to work for revenue layout dwellers depending on the larger matrices of power in which they were circumscribed. For instance, in 2007, the Greater Bangalore City Corporation was formed by merging the existing city with peripheral areas. Shortly after, in one fell swoop known as the *Akrama Sakrama* (meaning ‘make right what is wrong’) legislation to regularise unauthorised construction and development, revenue layout dwellers (who were the prime targets of the scheme) were mandated to pay exorbitantly high fees in order to be considered legitimate residents of the newly formed corporation. Interestingly, associations leveraged payment of the beneficiary contribution, in addition to historic payments of property taxes, betterment charges and conversion fees as a way to resist paying the *Akrama Sakrama* fees and, further, to make claims about the legitimacy of their settlements. As a result of protests and petitions filed by associations, the Karnataka High Court is currently holding the scheme in abeyance (Jacob 2008).

Another example demonstrating the agency of associations and how their appropriation of the project is their involvement in reworking the terms of payment. Owing to the history of unauthorised development described earlier, most residents did not possess the documentation necessary to be eligible for the project (e.g., title or sale deeds and sanctioned building plans). Faced with a flood of petitions from RWAs, a new chair of the water board appointed in 2007 waived the requirement of producing a title deed; to be eligible now, an ‘address proof’ (e.g., a bank statement) will suffice.

Similar to what Gupta (2006: 130) observes with respect to how state-led development programmes often engender contestation — ‘…it is here that seizing on the fissures and ruptures, the contradictions in the policies, programs, institutions and discourses of ‘the state’ allows people to create possibilities for political action and activism’ — I find that GBWASP’s disjunctures, too, were seized upon by RWAs in order to renegotiate the project’s terms. The rhetoric of treating beneficiaries like ‘stakeholders’ who are purported to have a role in the ‘management of the assets created under the project’ (GoK 2005a) provided a particularly stark contrast — and hence a rallying point — when held against the poor information flow, untransparent decision-making structures and delayed delivery of water. In total, the project experienced delays of over three years
due to prolonged tendering processes and inaccurate or outdated engineering designs that did not account for growth rates and settlement patterns in the periphery. This prompted associations to leverage bureaucratic channels to question why residents had been forced to pay late penalties when water delivery itself was delayed and demand interest payments from the water board on their capital payments.

To avoid a growing stand-off and to restore some faith in the project that had been severely eroded by the end of 2007, the BWSSB took a decision to waive penalty payments altogether starting 1 January 2008 and further allowed payments to be staggered over 24 months rather than be paid as a lump-sum. In some areas, connections have been provided regardless of payment based on associational pressure on MLAs. One BWSSB maintenance engineer described this in his own words as:

After this newly elected government what has happened is that it seems the city MLAs insisted that we give water first, then collect payment. Otherwise people were saying ‘We don’t know when you are giving the water. Why should we pay?’ Associations also put a lot of pressure on MLAs. So to change that scenario, [the MLAs] said: you give water for one month; you service the line. If they don’t pay, then we will think of other alternatives.30

According to the engineer, newly elected MLAs recognised that revenue layout residents had been an important source of votes and were eager to appear to be fulfilling the promises made during their campaigns. The ‘power of pressure’ — in this case, extending from the association to the MLA to the BWSSB — succeeded in convincing the water board to start supplying water for a short duration without upfront payments, and as such, also managed to restore some of the credibility the project had lost due to delays.

Conclusion

An assessment by one of India’s leading urban research institutes based in New Delhi states: ‘The innovative financing structure adopted in the GBWASP is path breaking and its success should pave the way

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30 Interview with maintenance engineer at BWSSB, 4 August 2008.
to many such initiatives in future from the ULBs...’ (NIUA 2005). As market-based models in India’s water sector are deemed ‘successful’, there is a need to understand their workings on the ground and their mutual imbrication with urban politics — particularly the politics of the periphery where water projects will be increasingly concentrated, and on which little social science research exists.

In this article, I have attempted to contribute to a theoretical and empirical understanding of peripheral urban geographies, and how particular claims of associations that inhabit tenuously legal settlements known as ‘revenue layouts’ shape and are shaped by neoliberal water reforms. The discussion reveals that in the contemporary Indian metropolis, where social and land relations are historically sedimented and water and land are intricately connected, the implications of ‘cost recovery’ reforms in the water arena extend well beyond that sector.

I argue broadly therefore that cost recovery reforms must be understood as being deeply implicated in civic life and meaning. That is, the stakes attached to water reforms in Greater Bangalore today and the calculations underlying participation by the middle class residents that are the target of these reforms cannot be understood outside of the history of socio-spatial relations, civic activism and associational politics in this area. Relegated to an illegal status by local planning authorities, revenue layout associations have historically made deals with politicians, put pressure on local bureaucrats and leveraged a host of payments to negotiate regularisation and assert the legitimacy of their settlements. These strategies — not sufficiently explained by the existing literature on the ‘new’ middle class nor ideas of neoliberal moral responsibilisation — account for how and why associations are involved in participating in and renegotiating the terms of GBWASP. In effect, the interlocutor role that RWAs play succeed in sustaining the reforms agenda. This is not because of a natural convergence between the politics of middle class RWAs and the neoliberal agenda, as some have argued, but rather because the stakes attached to a project like GBWASP extend beyond water access to issues of tenure legality and the strategic deployment of ‘responsible’ citizenship. Such a Gramscian lens is useful for urban scholars attempting to analyse why and how particular types of neoliberal reforms are gaining traction in cities today.
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Over the last few years, urban water utilities have, as a result of federal and international initiatives, been compelled to start projects to provide continuous water supply to all urban residents. A profound contention marks such initiatives. On the one hand, administrators and bureaucrats see continuous water supply as a necessary marker of world-class cities. On the other, water engineers see continuous water supply as difficult, if not impossible. This article focuses on the stakes of this debate and the ways in which Mumbai's hydraulic engineers work with the everyday challenges that water supply presents. Why are hydraulic engineers, who spend their professional lives operating and maintaining the infrastructures of urban water, opposed to its continuous passage? Why are those pushing for urban 'reforms' so invested in 24-hours-a-day water supply? And finally, what does the failure of 24/7 water supply say about the ways in which the authority to govern and manage infrastructure is produced and maintained in Indian cities?

In a recent essay, Matthew Gandy (2008) points to the ways in which Mumbai's water infrastructure, like other urban services of the post-colonial state have been effectively captured by the middle classes in Mumbai, who perpetuate the dualities of colonial governance regimes. Nevertheless, elected representatives of the urban poor, who secure tenuous, incremental and yet significant connections to the public system for their constituents, significantly compromise such control. An attention to these 'microspheres of negotiation' (ibid.), will point to an expanded theorisation of power and the ways in which resources are managed in post-colonial cities.

Based in and out of a settlement in the northern suburbs of Mumbai, this article is based on 18 months of fieldwork in Mumbai,
which I conducted between July 2007 and December 2008. During this period, I spoke with and learned from slum residents who had a range of connections to the city’s pipes. I also conducted semi-formal interviews with the city’s field engineers and accompanied them through the many worlds in which they work — from the field office to the head office, through the mundane tasks of expanding the network and attending to resident complaints, and to local and national conferences of technocrats and experts, where they spoke of the challenges of their city’s water supply. In these journeys through the city, and its lives and its water, I focused on the words and work of those who make water flow to the city, and particularly to some of its marginalised homes.

I begin this article by focusing on the rationalities of the national programme to restructure water utilities in urban India towards delivering water on a 24/7 basis. I focus on the contestations among experts at a training programme I attended in 2008, that was intended to educate state officials about the changes necessary to effect 24/7 water supply in urban areas. Although the 24/7 project seemed to present officials an opportunity to further their control over the city’s infrastructure, engineers were against several proposals presented at the workshop. They frequently disrupted the training sessions with objections that were difficult to respond to. I suggest that while engineers objected to 24/7 water on technical grounds, the difficulties in implementing 24/7 water projects have more to do with the material practices and politics of public water supply systems.

Therefore, in the second section of this article I focus on describing the reasons for their objections, by describing the ways in which Mumbai’s public water supply system works. Through an ethnography of intermittent water supply and the effects of its daily appearance, I propose to show how the exigencies of the city’s hidden and aging infrastructure on one hand, and its democratic politics and claims on the other, challenge engineers in their efforts to control the system.

\[1\] The programme, organised by a federal training institute for bureaucrats, and supported by the World Bank and the Ministry of Urban Development, was designed to structure the ‘conversion’ of Municipal water systems to deliver ‘continuous water supply’.
In the words of Mumbai’s senior hydraulic engineers, ‘water supply is an event driven process’. Far from a technocratic management of the system, engineers try to manage by coping with the multiple claims made on the pressure points of the city’s power-soaked infrastructure. As functionaries of a public system that is driven not by corporate profits, state officials negotiate with the political representatives of slum dwellers to make discrete and discreet connections to the system. Discreet, because they are frequently pressured by councillors to give water connections to the urban poor despite city rules. These connections are surreptitious, unknown arrangements that are not the result of a hydraulic master plan. They are incremental, modular additions to the network that are variously sanctioned, tolerated or are unknown to the local authorities, and are motivated by diverse discretionary political and financial arrangements.

I argue that Mumbai’s water network is the product not only of anonymous planning from ‘above’, it is also made by its experts and subjects through the cumulative accretion of special considerations — a series of hidden transcripts co-produced in consistently exceptional circumstances. They point to a different and differentially inclusive public system, one that is made through the powers of personal connections, ignorance, rights claims, and money. With their control compromised by the exigencies of democratic politics and its discrete claims, engineers in Mumbai have expressed an inability to convert the city’s system to one geared to 24/7 supply. Their inability points not only to the limits of technological expertise over natural resources, but also the compromised, yet significant effects of democratic politics in Mumbai.

An impressive body of scholarship on the developmental state has pointed to the ways in which the state attempts to render complex practices visible, legible and predictable (Scott 1998). In his wonderfully lucid work, James Scott as shown how bureaucratic state practices, such as enumeration and map-making, produce the realities they seek to represent. These modern representational practices allow officials to govern from a distance. While their designs may seem elegant, significant omissions are central to their production. For representations to do their work, administrators are required to ‘white out chaos’ from their designs (Scott 1998:35–45).

An attention to Mumbai’s water supply reveals state practices where this is true — where agents of the state conceal, or avoid a calculated and comprehensive knowledge of the system.
The uncertainty that is generative of ignorance also authorises its saviours (Thompson, Warburton and Hatley 1986). Ignorance is constructed, and is also constructive. It produces the state institutions that are required to manage it (Ferguson 1994; Sivaramakrishnan 2002), and is central to how projects of rule are accomplished (Li 1999). Thus, ignorance not only indexes the practices of knowledge making, but also is an effect of power, particularly state power (Mathews 2008). With access to the means of making or breaking circuits of knowledge, “not writing down is as much a part of bureaucratic practice” as writing down is (Coelho 2006; see also Hull 2008).

Following on this literature, in this article I will show how bureaucrats conceal, or avoid, a calculated and comprehensive system knowledge of the system. Seeking to extend this work, I show how the knowledge of leakage is not only unknown, but also that it is not knowable. I focus on the work of ignorance and ignoring to suggest that these are forces critical to the work and the workability of the state; perhaps if the city’s infrastructure worked according to the rules, i.e., if it didn’t leak, it would burst with unmanageable claims and political demands.

Continuous Water Projects

Development projects are always situated in a field of competing claims, and sometimes seek to effect new kinds of power relations (Mosse 2003). For example, in her history of the construction of Mumbai’s modern water supply system, Dossal (1991) provides a lucid account of the ways in which the colonial government’s first public water projects were not only a response to debilitating drought, but also a way for the British to establish their leadership. As such, they were met with stiff resistance from the city’s merchant class. Colonial water supply projects to pipe water from Vihar (Mumbai’s first dam) shifted the locus of authority and prestige in the city from the merchant-patrons of the city who financed its public tanks through charitable contributions, towards the colonial government, which, especially in the middle of the nineteenth century, had been seeking ways to secure its legitimacy. When viewed from this perspective, the production of a public water delivery system for Mumbai’s residents served at once to institute the colonial state as the leading patron of water delivery in the city, to shift the costs of this delivery onto
merchant residents and in doing so, to establish a biopolitical system of liberal governance in an emerging centre of empire.

In most Indian cities, water supplies have been rationed by the state, wherein daily quotas are calculated and delivered to residents via a few hours of service a day. In Mumbai, nearly 150 years after the colonial state founded the existing paradigm of water supply to the city, multilateral lending agencies and the central Ministry of Urban Development are arguing for a new paradigm of service delivery via the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). The mission has identified the existing system of intermittent water supply — where residents get the entirety of their daily supplies in a few hours of service — as a dangerous and incomplete form of urban services. Instead, the JNNURM insists that urban utilities try and deliver water throughout the day, or ‘24/7’ as it is commonly referred. As a ‘benchmark’ and international standard, the achievement of 24/7 water supply is seen as critical to the making of a world-class city.

To understand the stakes and contentions around these projects, I attended a training programme at a reputed institute set up to train public services officers in India. The programme was attended by hydraulic engineers from all over the country, and was meant to help them ‘convert’ their utilities to ensure 24/7 water supply. The significance of continuous water is not simply the new water availability it offers city residents, but also a new kind of infrastructural rationality it enables. As articulated by Srinivas Chary, Director of the Centre for Energy, Environment, Urban Governance and Infrastructure Development, and one of the prominent proponents of continuous

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2 The central government funded JNNURM seeks to restructure Indian cities via a reform-driven grant-making initiative. Water infrastructure projects are central to the JNNURM. Together with drainage and sewerage, water supply accounts for nearly 75 per cent of the JNNURM’s spending nationwide. As of January 2009, over a third of the US$ 8.3 billion sanctioned thus far had been allocated to water supply alone. Much of this spending is for developing new sources as well as for the laying of new infrastructure — pipes, canals and treatment plants, but such investments come with some stringent conditions.

3 In an act of generosity that I came to associate with the many who have spent their professional lives working on water, the Programme Director agreed to let me sit in on the four-day programme that was intended for administrators and engineers of city governments from all over the country.
The process of converting to 24/7 supply seeks to move the urban water system from those in which consumption quotas are mandated by the state, to one in which consumption is moderated by the market. The effects of such steps, therefore, are as much a system of delivering water as they are a system of making a new kind of water subject — the careful consumer who is aware of and moderates his/her consumption based on the cost of water (see Schnitzler 2008).

There is as yet little indication that ‘privatisation’ projects are either more efficient or effective at serving the needs of settlers in cities (Sangameswaran 2008; Ranganathan 2009). To help engineers see the benefits of these structural transformations, the workshop featured different experts who had worked on 24/7 projects. Our first fieldtrip was to one such project in a middle class neighbourhood of Hyderabad. As we arrived at the small substation, there was a considerable buzz among engineers to see the project, but it was for reasons that I did not anticipate.

As we crammed into a small room at the substation, I noted how it had been used for such exposure visits in the past. Photos hung on the wall with smiling engineers fielding questions from other visitors. The session began with the station sub-engineer, Nagaraj, telling us about the project’s achievements: 5000 connections with 24-hour water supply in the first phase, three new District Metering Areas (DMAs), and a professional consultancy company’s technical advice. Engineers listened attentively, periodically interrupting the presentation with technical questions — were the DMAs new or did they exist before? How were the boundaries marked?

But as the session wore on, the engineers’ questions became more pointed and critical. Nagaraj sweated and stammered as Tanveer asked him about production figures, Chatterjee asked about the inconsistency between the number of connections and demographic information and Divekar asked about the production costs and consultancy fees that were paid. Another engineer ridiculed the

\footnote{I have changed the names of engineers, plumbers and residents to protect their identities.}
Ignoring Power

way in which 24-hour water supply was being attempted without replacing the cast iron pipes. As he was engulfed with sharp questions, I felt sorry for Nagaraj. The engineers forced him to deviate from his comfortable success story and talk of his biggest challenges. Per capita usage had shot up, he confessed, and residents were relentless in their complaints. Goaded on by the others, Nagaraj described how his residents were upset and relentless in their complaints about high bills — they were ‘a big headache’, he confessed. Satisfied by his honesty, the audience nodded sympathetically. They too would rather focus on the technical aspects of their work. Like him, they too were more comfortable debating the feasibility of 24/7 on technical grounds (see Ferguson 1994).

When engineers contested the 24/7 pilot project, they interrogated not its politics, as much as its different technical arrangements. After we returned, I spoke with one of Mumbai’s engineers about the visit. Karmarkar pointed out that it was not a question of the technical ability of engineers to make 24/7 water flow. He insisted that he knew what it would take to design such a system. Instead, he complained about the everyday difficulties he faced; the ways that concrete, pipes and politicians, their leaks and protocols, consistently made his work difficult. Karmarkar suggested that where the director of the training had alluded to the technical, financial and social structures of 24/7 water, he had left out the political structures it draws on and produces. In Mumbai, as in several other cities, water is primarily a political subject. Karmarkar had alluded to this in his introduction at the workshop:

For going 24/7, whatever network infrastructures are there, they need to be modified. We require some time. It depends on constraints of space, of people working. And getting sanction from the political committees. They are also having a major role. Individually [city councillors] are acting and supporting [us], but for taking any [major] decision then they are going by the party motto. So for any political project, we have to get it cleared from them… So these things take time, they may get delayed, and we may not achieve our goals… And regarding awareness among the public for making payments, or for new tariffs, these go to the [city council] for approval… For their vote banks [councillors] are not willing to revise the rates. That is also to be considered.

In the post-colonial city, water supply is not just a question of technocratic expertise, of pipes, payment systems and pedagogy.
Karmarkar points out how, in Mumbai, as in most other cities, water is saturated with political claims and cultural meanings that compromise its administration. As a political–technical system, Mumbai’s water department does not lend itself easily to large structural shifts. Saturated with many interests, Mumbai’s system changes through incremental, modular adjustments. In not recognising the state of the system, the proponents of 24/7 water supply overlooked the politics of urban infrastructure, and the reasons for which infrastructure improvements are consistently slowed. It is to these situations of infrastructure in Mumbai — to its present histories and politics — that I now turn.

Mumbai Water Works

Mumbai’s water department traces its history back to 1860, during which time the colonial government sought to alleviate Mumbai’s water problems through the construction of dams (Klein 1986; Dossal 1991). In the century and a half since, the city’s water authority has appropriated and impounded the water of three more rivers in neighbouring Thane district, to deliver approximately 3.4 billion litres of water to the city daily. This prodigious movement of liquid material does not happen only ‘by gravity’ as engineers suggest, but requires also a series of policy and financial structures to make water flow, and is helped along by the topography of the capital (and capitalist) city in its state. Elsewhere, I describe the effects of this daily passage of water on the social life of those who live around its sources. Here, it would suffice to say that it requires a series of policy and financial structures, close to 500 engineers and 7,000 labourers, to move this liquid material. Through these structures and agents, water is first moved through the primary network to the treatment plants. Following treatment, water is made to flow through the secondary network to one of the 27 service reservoirs in the city, from which the city’s residents and businesses are rationed their daily quota of water through the tertiary network.

In practice, the tertiary network is managed by field officers and water works labourers knowns as chaviwallas (key men) who dart around the city every day turning its approximately 800 subterranean valves on and off according to a predetermined schedule. The time and duration for which most of Mumbai’s residents get water depend on these schedules, drawn and changed periodically by the city’s
planning department in consultation with field engineers. Yet it is an effort that always falls short. As Karmarkar explained to me when we returned to his offices from Hyderabad:

There is a water shortage and we have to balance the water. One day we give short supply here, the next day over there. We warn the councillors; one day they will get less supply. Then they can manage the people [for one day]... If one place gets short supply everyday then people would come on the streets.

‘Water shortage’ is frequently enlisted in private and public conversations as a critical constraint on the city and its future growth. In such a scenario, intermittent water supply is both an index and effect of water shortage — a marker of the city that cannot develop to world-class status because of insufficient investments in water source development. At the workshop in Hyderabad, engineers expressed concern at the equity implications of moving towards 24-hour supply in a city that does not have enough water. In a city as large as Mumbai, which parts of the city would be the first to get 24-hour water projects, they asked? As engineers spoke of water shortage, they described how these schedules are frequently rearranged to ensure some kind of equity across the city. Engineers take the schedules very seriously — combining their intuition and experience to work out how particularly bewildering combination of valves, pipes and timings will work for their districts. Engineers repeatedly reported inadequate sources and the ‘scarcity problem’ to explain why 24/7 projects cannot work. Yet, through preliminary calculations based on government documents that I have reviewed, it appears that there is enough water entering Mumbai for all residents of the city. Consistent with the diagnosis provided by the director of the training programme, I believe that the problems of ‘water shortage’ have more to do with the leakages in the city’s largely unknown and unmetered water mains that connect the reservoirs to people’s homes.

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5 The network arrangements for water supply are in a state of constant strain, as engineers express how network expansion projects are always completed behind schedule. The water authority makes this work appear necessary by projecting the city’s demand at levels over twice that of what it actually supplies so as to justify new source development projects.
Subterranean Leakage

Engineers are constantly and consistently managing water leakages in the tertiary network. Formally, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) reports leakage figures of approximately 25 per cent. The veracity of this figure is questionable, not least because over half of the city’s water meters, including those on the mains, are non-functional. The city is not counting its water. Nevertheless, leakage figures are a powerful fiction necessary to establish that the BMC is doing its work well and is an efficiently functioning water utility. The fiction begins to unravel when those familiar with the system (including the World Bank and its consultants) point to the fact that leakage is in fact likely much higher—between 40 and 60 per cent.

Of course, engineers strongly contest the veracity of such results, but what is interesting is that besides commissioning studies, they as yet have not measured how water flows in the system. Why are city engineers unable to know how water flows in the system? Several of their bulk meters and pressure meters (necessary to calculate leakage) have remained non-functional for years. One consultant went so far as to tell me, ‘instruments are the government’s enemies’. Trained to learn of how the state likes to measure and map, to calculate and know (Scott 1998), I found this statement both accurate and surprising. It provoked me to ask, why are they not counting water? What does the absence of counting enable the engineers to do?

In practice, the department’s engineers have little time to think of measuring the system, for instead, they are consistently dealing with leakages. Leakages may be physical, or social, each presenting a

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6 In Mumbai, as in many other places, metering problems account for a significant quantity of water that is considered ‘non-revenue water’. With nearly half the cities consumer meters not working, the department generally bills residents an approximation of what they deliver to residents.


8 The Water Supply Department cares deeply about maintaining their leakage figures at a respectable number. So much so that when a consultant reported much higher figures, the Department sought to repress this figure through every means they had available — and even went to the extent of threatening to cancel the study.
particular kind of difficulty, and legitimation, to the work of engineers. Physical leakages are virtually impossible to detect. Because the city is largely built on wetlands, much water leaks from the mains without giving notice. Even when leakage is noticed, engineers have a hard time finding its source. Here, engineers complain of the ways in which their leakage detection efforts hit an opaque and impermeable wall — the road — that is already loaded with cars, cables, commuters, and bazaars and presents an inhospitable ground for their work.

Urban water exceeds the control of city engineers. Their difficulties point to the material limits of hydraulic systems (both of water and the urban infrastructure that seeks to contain it). In their many conversations with me over the course of my fieldwork, engineers frequently referred to the difficult work of leakage reduction. Leakage detection work can only take place when no one is using the road, and when no one needs water from the city’s pipes, engineers say. They argued that leakage reduction was difficult not only because of the odd hours in which engineers were required to undertake maintenance operations, but also because leakages were hard to locate.

Regardless of their seniority, the city’s engineers have only a partial, experiential knowledge of the system, and rely on field engineers to reveal its local state. I talked about these difficulties one day with Mr Surve, one of the Department’s seniormost engineers — referred by his juniors as one of the five rajas (kings) of the city’s water supply.

Working between the phone list, government documents and the network map, Surve started by telling me Mumbai’s water story. This story, which I had by now heard several times, began with the catchment of Mumbai’s water several miles away. To help me understand, he tellingly referred not to the network map on the wall, but drew me one of his very own, enlarging and extending it as the story went on. The story was filled with pipe diameters and place names, pumps and filtration plants. People, even engineers themselves, were almost entirely absent from the account. This was a story of careful management and massive control — of directing water from dammed rivers to water treatment plants — a massive feat of techno-scientific achievement by any standard.

The story got considerably more complex as he drew the secondary network, in which water subsequently flowed from the
treatment plant through the secondary network to the 27 service reservoirs. Until here, water is generally counted, and metered. But by the time it enters the tertiary network, from the reservoirs to the service mains, Surve’s map-making skills and knowledge of the system had reached their limit. It is these networks that are the subject of much dispute and dissent. Proponents of 24-hour supply argue that tertiary networks should be continuously charged with water. But this proposition is the source of much anxiety for engineers like Surve; 24/7 water supply requires a state of knowledge, a system of understanding the system, that he simply does not have access to.

We just don’t know the alignment of mains in the city. [Although there are maps], how far and how deep from the road [the pipes are], no one knows. There is no exact GIS to tell us this. Then, we have been searching for equipment to tell us where the leaks are. There is no equipment anywhere in the world that can tell us this. Mumbai sits on reclaimed land he said. Therefore the water just goes away, it does not come to the surface…. There are pressure monitors…. But for these questions the person in the field is the best judge.

With most of the tertiary network underground, engineers have trouble locating exactly where its many parts are. Talking with engineers throughout the administration, I was surprised how often they described their struggles to find the pipes and leaks that the city stood on. The maps they had were clearly not up to the task, and were sparingly used. According to a consultant, the maps do not have any elevation information either — a critical feature of water supply. Therefore, it is the experience and knowledge of field engineers that is drawn on for any major or minor works. They need to know where the pipes can be found: how far from the sidewalk, how deep in the ground, whether water will climb hills, and how it can do so. Field engineers are the city’s pressure monitors and geographic information systems.

In a city of consistent breakdowns and hydraulic difficulties, engineers consistently have to gauge and judge individual problems, and fashion solutions to each of them. I frequently followed engineers through such work. One morning, I accompanied Patankar, an experienced area engineer through his day ‘in the field’. I talked to him of the different challenges, as we wove through the traffic on
his motorcycle. He begun by attending to the loud and persistent complaints of women living in a rehabilitation colony. For hours, Patankar had struggled with his men to find the reason that the sump of the building colony was not filling. As women gathered and began protesting even louder, Patankar was able to locate the problem in one of the taps; just in time. Before dithering much longer, we were on to a second site, where a leaky main was being fixed. The labourers had dug quite a large hole, but were unable to locate a valve that was necessary to close before they could begin repair works on the line. They had called him for advice. He first thought of maybe sending a man into the pipes during non-supply hours to find the valve, but then, following some protests from the workers, arranged for a camera to be sent in their stead. At lunch, I asked him to speak more about his work and its peculiar challenges. He repeated what he had said frequently through the day. ‘We have to find and solve the problem’, he said simply.

While doing fieldwork, I was struck by how hands-on and intuitive the process of expanding and fixing the water system was. The solution to every water problem was seldom found in formal procedures or manuals; it was derived experientially. Such solutions had to comply not only with the daily water needs of nearby residents, but also the working conditions of municipal labourers and local topography. Negotiating such specificities, the engineer would find solutions not through formal procedures, manuals and maps, but through improvisations, and the social–material negotiations that such improvisations entailed.

Patankar never consulted a map nor, I am sure, would he detail or update new connections on city maps. ‘They are no use’, he told me when I requested to see them one day. At first, I thought this was a way of keeping me from critical and confidential information. But later, as I noticed the consistent absence of formal maps in his everyday work, I realised that what lay in the cupboard had less meaning for him than the knowledge he had gathered through his everyday experiences of his district’s network. Neither did his everyday work make it onto the city’s maps; his improvements were invisible to the central planning office. No one person or map can describe or fix Mumbai’s water system. Mumbai’s water is made and delivered by solving problems, one after another — fixing leaks, restoring supply and making new connections.
Social Leakage

While physical leakages are hard to fix in some ways, social leakages present a different kind of complexity. Social leakages are surreptitious connections, and the effects of the city’s exclusionary rules. Made illegal by state policy and its tortuous rules, residents who are denied formal access to the water supply often set up unmetered connections. These connections are frequently made with political patronage — city councillors, local leaders, plumbers, and social workers — and sometimes even with city funds. Many leaders have working relationships with water engineers, who out of ‘humanitarian reasons’, sometimes out of fear and at times for financial considerations, maintain a selective ignorance about where such leakages are. As I sat in the engineers’ offices, I was witness to councillors frequently calling in their requests — for new lines, new customers and requests to waive certain unpaid bills. Engineers worked to accommodate them, even if such requests were sometimes quite unusual.

For instance, I arrived at Patankar’s office one day to find the city councillor there with a party worker. Patankar was being courteous and receptive, as always. At first I didn’t know what the matter was, but I later learned that it was about an illegal connection. Months before certain tenements had been in the news. They were threatening the sanctity of a site of symbolic importance and the court had ordered that the water connections of the tenements be cut. Patankar was compelled to follow the court’s order and cut the pipes. The worker had come for permission to reconnect the lines. ‘What did I tell you then’, he told the party worker, ‘I said I have to cut the connection. After I cut it, you can do what you want’. As such the state’s water engineer had fulfilled his duty as a public officer twice over. He had carried out the court’s order while allowing its contradiction, water supply, to continue by other means. As functionaries of the state, engineers like Patankar are constantly guiding councillors and plumbers through and around its rules; and marshalling the powers of ignorance, when the rules prove too exclusive.

Councillors often access their discretionary development funds to construct 2-inch water connections for their constituents. These arrangements often lie along side legal connections, and are not metered.
In the course of doing fieldwork, I was struck by the influence councillors had over water supply. In a telling re-arrangement, the bureaucratic structure within which field engineers work has recently been changed so they may better attend to the quotidian needs of city councillors. They are expected to cater to councillor requests. When councillors would come to their offices, engineers would quickly smile, get up from their seat and offer them tea and biscuits. They would listen attentively, and agree to solve many problems. Almost daily, councillors had requests to make of the engineers — to send more water to their ward, waive unpaid bills or provide new connections to those who were or were not otherwise eligible for water services. Such quotidian interactions reveal critical shifts in the relationship between the technocratic and democratic state. In Mumbai, particularly as it pertains to water supply, it is municipal councillors and their various demands that also rule its water system.

As artisans of Mumbai’s water system, city engineers are not very happy with its popularised state. They frequently grumble of ‘interference’ by councillors. They complain when water — a technical issue for them — falls into the world of politics. ‘People use water to do politics and to win in elections’, says Gupte. ‘They use the department as an instrument…without water they cannot win’. According to Gupte, politicians continuously insisted and demanded their constituency get more water. ‘But the politicians have no foresight’, he said, ‘they don’t want to understand the system, its problems…they only want more water for their ward’.

In private, city engineers like Gupte resent the constant and consistent intervention of councillors, who always have special and specific requests for identified constituencies (see Chatterjee 2004). Nevertheless, because they are dependent on councillors to approve their works contracts and careers, they work to satisfy their multiple requests, marshalling the powers of procedure, ignorance and techniques, to do so. Some of the connections they give on behalf of councillors are metered, documented and counted. Some are just documented but not metered. Some connections they permit do not even exist on paper. Engineers knew of some such connections, but are completely unaware of most others, nor is it entirely in their interest to know of them.
Known Unknowns

Scholars have pointed to the powers of ignorance — a process that requires us to collectively know what not to know (Zerubavel 2006; Ross 2008). Like knowledge, ignorance recognises power relations and social conventions. M. T. Taussig (1999: 7) points out that ‘it is not that knowledge is power, but rather that active not knowing that makes it so’. ‘Active not knowing’ of Mumbai’s leakages is central to the authority and power of hydraulic engineers in the city today. It allows for the knowledge of the engineers to appear authoritative and responsible.

Unknown leakages are central to the power and influence of councillors and engineers. On the one hand, not knowing physical leaks produces a degree of water scarcity critical to the existing urban hydraulic system. Further, it necessitates a regime of water rationing, and a discourse that sanctions giving water only to residents of the city that are deemed by its government to be legitimate.

Combined with exclusive water rules, unaccounted physical leakages make social leakages necessary. Composed of special and exceptional considerations, such connections reproduce not only the authority of engineers but also city councillors, who are required to manage and be responsible to the heterogeneous demands of the public. Mumbai’s social leakage is a public secret often glossed and summarised by development agencies using words like corruption, inefficiency or non-revenue water (Davis 2003). Nevertheless, in the existing regime, it is these informal and para-formal arrangements that are critical in delivering water to the millions of residents in the city today. Therefore, while physical leakage ensures that enough water is lost to prevent the possibility of 24-hour water supply, those living in informal settlements depend on these systems of social leakage to access water. Taken together, the systems of both physical and social leakage paradoxically reproduce the power of Mumbai’s engineers and councillors, who

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10 I take the title of this section from an infamous quote of former US defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld. Speaking of the (as yet) unknown compulsions of the Iraq war, he described a methodological problem for actionable intelligence ‘There are known knowns. There are known unknowns. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know’ (12 February 2004).
are required to move pipes and papers to push water through the
city to deserving populations.
For those living in informal settlements, to be included into the
public system requires a combination of cultural competency, social
connections and varying amounts of cash. For instance, with sufficient
cultural competency and the right sociopolitical connections, the
urban poor sometimes do not need to invest their own money in
the system. Paying attention to these arrangements requires that we
reconsider dominant accounts of corruption, in favour of a more
nuanced understanding of how the public works system operates
in Mumbai. The multiple locations of power and authority in the
system produces many different locations at which residents can
make claims. The success of the poor in joining the system depends
on their ability to mobilise their social relations with BMC workers
to provide water connections, their access to political leaders, and
finally their ability to grease, with money the engines and palms
of the state.

Plumbing the System

Maqbool, a plumber by profession, has a nuanced sense of how the
system works. As we sat at a roadside chai (tea) shop one day, amidst
traffic and the setting sun, he explained how many slum dwellers get
water from the system. 'It all depends on the councillor', he said.

Because Shinde [the councillor] fights [with the engineers], the
people here get water. He has been a councillor for fifteen years. The
engineers fear him and do his work. Nearby, Khan is a new councillor.
Its not even been 5 years. She has no chance [to wield that kind of
influence].

Maqbool foregrounds the importance councillors in his account of
how slum dwellers get water. Describing the process of setting up
water connections, he pointed to how engineers pay close attention
to which councillor's letter of support (an unwritten requirement)
was attached to applications for new connections to be approved.¹¹
Chances were further improved if you engaged the services of

¹¹ Indeed even when I was at the BMC's offices, I noticed several appli-
cations came with endorsements from representatives of political parties.
certain plumbers. Each councillor had his own plumbers, who submits applications to BMC, he told me. These plumbers knew how, where and to whom money had to be passed, under the gaze of the city councillor.

They [the plumbers and the councillors] have an understanding, and [the engineers] make sure that with Shinde’s blessings connections are granted. Residents are free to choose another plumber. But they would have to deposit fees in the office for Shinde. Councillors pressure the BMC to ensure they do not give water to anyone without a letter.

From the conversation, it appeared clear that Maqbool was not one of the councillor’s preferred plumbers. His description of the public system reveals its very personal nature, one that is tied to, but not determined, by money. In a world of connections — the involvement of the councillor and the desirability of his consent produces an intimate relation between the governing and the governed. The ability of the poor to get water depends on who they are, who their councillor is, and whom councillors prefer as their plumbers and residents.

Therefore, the moral authority of councillors is produced by their success at mobilising water connections for residents (cf. Appadurai 2002). For those living in the slum, the system consists of claims made through personal relations — between residents and councillors, councillors and engineers, and the plumbers that connect the two. It is a public system of favours, marked by relations of patronage, inequality and money. While slum dwellers are often quite successful in mobilising water from the public system to their homes, their inclusion in this system reproduces its inequalities and reinscribes the power of its authorities.

Recognising the state of Mumbai’s infrastructure, informal residents here are constantly trying to find its legitimate patrons, cracks and fissures so as to survive in the city. With friends and relatives, they petition city councillors and volunteers to write letters on their behalf. With money, they approach plumbers for new connections to pipes that have more water. With plumbers, they arrive at the water office with a long list of documents, letters, and copies of bills and ration cards. With these connections and contacts they know the network — frequently drawing pen diagrams for engineers on the backs of envelopes to argue their case. Engineers listen, and consider the political geography of the proposed connection on
those very same maps. Who is presenting the proposal? Who is around? Who will get less water as a result? In Mumbai, you need to exert pressure to make water flow. If residents apply the right kind of pressure — through an eclectic mix of protest marches, phone calls, and petitions in the correct languages of belonging (i.e., Marathi), and if they sometimes introduce financial considerations — they can get water through a public system of patron politicians and their compromised experts.

**Conclusion**

In her article, *The Ethnography of Infrastructure*, Susan Leigh Star (1999) describes the particular nature of infrastructure networks. She argues that not only does infrastructure have to be ‘learned’, but also that it can be fixed and expanded only in modular increments. It can never be changed from above. Indeed, much of Mumbai’s infrastructure follows her description. Though it is formally planned in the head office, Mumbai’s infrastructure has been built through acts of improvisation, assessment and accretion through field encounters over the last 100 years. In part, it is for this reason that engineers have expressed an inability to effect a paradigm shift from intermittent to continuous water supply. Expanded discreetly and discreetly, Mumbai’s water supply system is not only in the control of its technocrats, but also its plumbers, politicians and field officers.

Star further argues that infrastructure is invisible and becomes visible only on breakdowns. Seeking to extend her insights, in this article I argue that the breakdowns, stoppages and leakages characteristic of Mumbai’s intermittent system not only make its hydraulic infrastructure visible, but are central to the reproduction of the sociopolitical relations that constitute it. The system of relations and obligations that characterise Mumbai’s water supply are enacted particularly when water is not flowing in the taps, in order to make water flow in them. As slum dwellers mobilise relations, councillors and money to include themselves in the public water system, they produce the power of its engineers and politicians.

The moral authority of councillors today depends on their effectiveness in pressuring engineers to deliver more water to their constituency, and to make connections for its voting population. City engineers, mobilize their ignorance and knowledge to include the councillor’s requests. Inundated by these demands, intermittent
supply becomes a critical way for engineers to re-establish control over the system. Pipes leak less, both physically and socially, when water does not flow in them for 24 hours. Intermittent supply also makes the system more amenable to negotiation and special considerations. Depending on the pressure, and need to placate councillors of particular neighbourhoods, engineers can control the water system through the mundane, and hyper-interested activities of deciding a water schedule, directing water into particular neighbourhoods, and subsequently attending to complaints of pressure/timing-related problems that these schedules produce. In this way engineers not only keep buried their incomplete knowledge of the system, but also exercise discretionary power over which parts of their wards get water and which do not. Intermittent supply enables engineers to exercise their expertise over a system that otherwise — with its multiple leaks and flows — would be even less in their control.

Therefore, while most residents in Mumbai already consume more water than those living with 24/7 water supply, a staggered water schedule is necessary to ensure that they can consume water from an established and reliable system. Intermittent supply is a distribution paradigm that not only reduces leakage, but also produces a certain kind of state authority. The system is made reliable through the languages of control, scarcity and management, which firmly situate engineers as its expert authority. Narratives of scarcity provide the legitimizing frame for not only for lucrative new river development projects, but also state water rationing through intermittent supply.¹²

In assuming that leakages need to be brought under control, advocates of 24/7 water supply overlook the state of social and physical infrastructures in the city, where the unknown and the not knowable are critical forces in producing and legitimising the everyday work of the water department. In Mumbai’s water system, leakage is not so much an exception, as it is both a cause and a condition of possibility for many of those excluded by its rules. The extremely personal and intimate negotiations between engineers, residents and councillors that foster such leakages, trouble the boundaries separating the public from the private. In such arrangements, the poor

¹² The languages of scarcity also articulate with an acerbic, anti-immigrant, urban politics.
are not customers nor are they citizens. They are ‘helped’ through special favours, exceptions and considerations — through relational practices that sit not within, but alongside the universes of citizenship, markets and the law.

In their dreams of continuous water for all who can pay for it, advocates of 24-hour water supply propose to make these relations unnecessary. They argue that shifting the locus of decision-making from state employees turning valves to market regulators determining tariffs, is more inclusive of the poor’s water needs. Yet as was evidenced in the strident opposition to continuous water supply, such arguments posit a hydraulic state and an uncompromising world of technological expertise that are inconceivable to both residents and engineers in the city. Unlike the marketised 24/7 system that is being proposed by the World Bank, the system of intermittent supply does not reproduce inequality by exclusion. The public system in Mumbai reproduces inequality by differentially including the poor in its cracks, crevices, fissures, and leaks. This is not substantive citizenship, but a somewhat effective, personal and compromised citizenship which has been enabled by democratic politics and its leaking state.

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Upon entering through the gates of Pleasant Housing Phase II, one sees the sign ‘No Horn Please’. In a city where honking is the primary mode of communication on the street, the sign is essentially stating: ‘You are no longer in Kathmandu; different rules apply here’. In spite of the sign, drivers of motorbikes and cars continue to honk when approaching turns or leaving the colony (to inform the guards to open the gate). In this example lies the anxiety of living within Pleasant Housing. While the colony’s wall and the security guards symbolise physical separation from the crime, unreliable services and social disorder of the ‘outside’, they cannot guarantee the stability of such a separation. Against the threat of becoming just like other neighbourhoods in Kathmandu, it is the residents of Pleasant Housing who must maintain the higher quality of infrastructure, governance and sociality within the colony.

The rapid development of housing colonies represents just one realm of exclusion to recently emerge in Kathmandu. In the last 10 years, the city has witnessed an unprecedented growth of segregated spaces designated for residences, shopping, work, and leisure. These developments open the door for a new kind of research in

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1 Pleasant Housing is where I lived while conducting ethnographic field research during parts of 2008 and 2009. For the sake of anonymity, I have changed the name of the colony and the names of informants and included quotations from interviews with informants who live in other colonies. This fieldwork was funded by a dissertation research grant from Fulbright-Hays.
Kathmandu that speaks to the literature of ‘fortified enclaves’—physically isolated, guarded and enclosed private property that cater to socially homogenous (often upper class) populations (Caldeira 1999: 87). In the literature of fortified enclaves and gated communities, scholars tended focus on how elites in ‘post-industrial cities’ use certain discourses and strategies to segregate themselves from lower classes. These range from the discourses of ‘urban fear’ of crime and violence (Davis 1990; Low 2001; Grant and Rosen 2009), and the deterioration and ethnic diversification of the city (Caldeira 1999), to the strategies of armed security, surveillance, and fortification that solidify class boundaries (Waldrop 2004) or codify higher status (Caldeira 1999).

In Pleasant Housing, these discourses of fear and strategies of fortification certainly play a role in motivating residents to relocate to the colony. However, as Grant and Rosen (2009) demonstrate, similar reasons for relocation do not necessarily translate into similar forms of gated communities. Rather, ‘local producers interpret and implant [gated communities] in ways that reveal their own histories and cultural values’ (ibid.: 576). Thus, the broader analytic of fortified enclaves needs to be contextualised within the particular social and spatial configurations of housing colonies, class and neighbourhood associations in South Asia.

The specifics of the Kathmandu case encourage us to not only consider the unique form of housing colonies, but also to push analysis beyond questions of fortification and exclusion to consider a new set of theoretical concerns. Instead of focusing on how the colony walls separate the inside from the outside, the particular arrangement of Nepal’s weak state and Kathmandu’s recent realignment of class and urban space allow us to analyse a rarely investigated area of inquiry — the social dynamics inside the colony’s walls. Particularly, I argue that the residents of Pleasant Housing confront the anxieties of Kathmandu’s urbanisation, democratisation and class formation through practices of self-governance and upper class sociality that symbolise the colony as a shared inside space in opposition to two notions of the outside — the political and the social.

The political outside is represented foremost by the failure of the state to not only provide security, but also sufficient allotments of basic services such as water, sanitation, waste management, and electricity. Moreover, the instability of recent political history — the 10-year Maoist insurgency, 1996–2006, the royal massacre in 2001,
royal coup in 2005, and the unstable governments of the Constituent Assembly\(^2\) — have decreased the public’s already shaky trust in government institutions and representative democracy. In this context, colony residents have turned away from the state to rely on private housing companies to provide ‘public’ services, and on each other, to ensure rights of membership. In preparation for the eventual ‘hand over’ of colony control from the company to its customers, the residents form elected management committees to resolve residents’ problems and organise social events. Despite this turn to the private, however, residents claim to model the colony’s self-governance on democratic ideals of open exchange, participation, and shared access to goods. How, then, do these ideals translate into practices that overcome the flaws of the ineffective and corrupt representative democracy that exists outside?

The social ‘outside’ stands for the economically and socially mixed neighbourhoods of the urban centre. Housing colonies, thus, represent one of the newer forms of escapes for those able to relocate to the urban periphery. Since the 1980s especially, wealthy villagers and townspeople have migrated to Kathmandu in search of bikas\(^3\) (development),\(^4\) education and employment opportunities. More recently, particularly since the Maoist insurgency began, these rural elites have joined Kathmandu’s traditional elite in relocating to the urban periphery of the city centre. Considered a ‘jungle’ and ‘unsafe’ just 10 years ago, Kathmandu’s ‘new middle class’ (Liechty 2003: 52–58) has shifted to the city’s outskirts, the urban periphery, in record numbers and has started to establish class enclaves. Housing colonies, with their expensive prices and steep monthly maintenance fees, are one of the more explicit forms of class enclaves. When discussing the relationship between the ‘new middle class’ and space in South Asian cities, scholars have tended to highlight middle class strategies that appropriate public spaces ‘in and for consumption’ (ibid.: 147) and ‘reclaim the “public” in ways that have intensified

\(^2\) Elected in April 2008, the Constituent Assembly is a body, and temporary government, of representatives formed for the purpose of writing Nepal’s new constitution.

\(^3\) Unless designated with a ‘New.’ for Newar language, all italicised words are Nepali.

\(^4\) See Pigg (1992) for the production of bikas as a Nepali-specific understanding of development that distinguishes those who have it (usually urban) from those who do not (usually rural).
social inequalities and exclusions' (Fernandes 2006: 174). In the case of the private residential spaces of housing colonies, the question is not how is space claimed as middle class, but rather how is space maintained as such.

Land Pimps, Uncivilised Migrants and Corrupt Politicians: Kathmandu’s Narrative of Urban Decline

When asked to describe the city or to explain their reasons for leaving the city, residents of Pleasant Housing often presented a narrative of urban decline. According to this narrative, state negligence and rural–urban migration have gradually destroyed what was the well-organised urban structure and vibrant culture of the Valley’s three Newar cities: Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. Urban anthropologists have long referred to these cities as examples of the ‘sacred city’ — urban patterns that embody cosmological designs and evoke religious meaning for inhabitants. Established as three separate city-states between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Malla kings and high priests of that era had endeavoured to produce cities as ‘maps of the cosmos’.5 Specifically, this meant the inclusion of three features: concentration of political and ritual authority in the palace–temple central square; concentric social organisation whereby the higher castes occupy the centre and the lower castes occupy the periphery; and well-defined urban boundaries symbolised by shrines dedicated to the protective/dangerous mother goddess (Gutschow and Kölver 1975; Slusser 1982; Shepard 1985; Levy 1991; Toffin 1991; Parish 1994; Gellner 2001; Pant and Funo 2007).

5 Steven Parish (1994) reminds us that although some credit is due to the designs of the Malla kings, it would be erroneous to mistake the Newar cities as ‘planned’. Rather, he prefers to call them ‘organic’ and emphasises their ‘as if’ quality: ‘While shaped in some cases by royal will and priestly conception, Bhaktapur is not the city of an imperial state, or the product of modern bureaucratic rationality, where agents of the state could and would simply dictate urban form, as if they were simply drawing lines in the sand. Like the people of Bhaktapur today, the kings and priests of Bhaktapur past were content for the most part to act “as if” the actual space of Bhaktapur conformed to the ideal space of their religious conceptions. The city they imagined was a sacred, a moral, order’ (ibid.: 21).
Contemporary Kathmandu is characterised by a ‘relentless growth’ (Parajuli 2008) of urban sprawl that has left the Newar cities accounting for less than 5 per cent of urban area (Hollé 2007). Starting with the invasion of Kathmandu as the capital of Nepal in 1768–69,6 urban Kathmandu Valley has experienced a gradual shift in physical structure. Especially during the Rana rule (1846–1951), rulers created massive palaces on what was then the urban outskirts.7 It was not until the removal of the insular and repressive Rana rule in 1951 that the population of Kathmandu started to multiply. The new Panchayat government (1960–90) built an international airport and roads linking Kathmandu to India and China, and implemented an economic ‘open door policy’, which opened the country to foreign commodities, tourists, diplomats, and international NGOs (Liechty 2003: 47). The ‘opening up’ of Kathmandu, coupled with the growth of a state bureaucracy, education and trade sectors attracted migrants from the hinterland to the capital in unprecedented numbers. More recently, the Maoist insurgency became a major ‘push’ factor in rural–urban migration. Many rural Nepalis moved to Kathmandu after having their property seized or as an escape from the violence of the insurgency. Even in the post-insurgency era the prevalence of highway banda (strike) and political unrest in the southern plains bordering India — the Tarai region — have made travel unreliable and dangerous, thus encouraging many to stay in the capital. In addition to the migrants’ needs for land and housing, the ‘suburban instinct’ of Kathmandu’s growing middle class (Liechty 2003: 54) to relocate from the city centre to the periphery has precipitated urban growth.8 Writes Parajuli (2008), ‘The rice paddies were swallowed up — initially by suburban compounds and bungalows, then by the

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6 It was during this period that Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha forcefully ‘unified’ Nepal and shifted the capital from Gorkha (located in Nepal’s central mid-mountains) to Kathmandu. The Shah dynasty would last until 28 May 2008 when Nepal become a republic.

7 Whereas the Kathmandu Malla palace accounted for just 1/25th of the old city’s physical space, the Rana’s largest palace, Singha Durbar, which now serves as home to the parliament, covered an area equal to half the size of the old city (Korn 1976: 5).

8 Recently, however, the construction of multi-storey apartment complexes has initiated a return to the city center for many.
congestion of unplanned modern shelters, and finally, in the last few years, by the establishment of gated housing colonies and apartment blocks. Consequently, from the sky, Kathmandu looks like a ‘fried egg’ — a dense urban core surrounded by a ‘sprawling ring’ of post-1950s growth (Liechty 2003: 5).

In contrast to the sacred centre, boundaries and social integration of the Newar city, Kathmandu’s periphery seems to be defined more by the characteristics of urban sprawl (Ingersoll 2006): centreless, unbounded and socially fragmented. The newly settled localities have low residential density (as opposed to the high density of the old cities); many dead-end roads (in contrast to the serpentine yet connected roads of the old cities); reflect a variety of house sizes, styles, income levels, and caste–ethnic groups;9 and tend to be located in river valleys which were traditionally reserved solely for agricultural purposes (as opposed to the old cities’ position on elevated land).

Two sources in particular have promoted and benefited from Kathmandu’s growth and subsequent ‘housing boom’: land brokers and banks. Land brokers, or ‘land pimps’ (as the Nepali term for brokers, dalal, implies), sell land on a ‘plot by plot’ basis with little concern for infrastructure and utilities, building and land transfer by-laws, not to mention community cohesion. While brokers have profited from the growth, banks have made it increasingly possible. Since the entry of banks into land and housing finance in the early 1990s, inter-bank competition for customers has made loans increasingly popular and easy to obtain. According to one estimate, home loans account for over 40 per cent of all bank loans (Neupane 2009: 9).10

9 Broadly speaking, Nepal consists of three caste groups — the Bahun-Chhetri and occupational castes of the mid-mountains; the Newar of Kathmandu Valley; and the Madhesi of the lower plains — and many non-caste or ethnic groups, also known as the Janajati. Most residents of Pleasant Housing are Bahun-Chhetri, upper caste Newar, or Janajati.

10 According to one estimate, house loans account for over 40 per cent of all bank loans (Neupane 2009). Given the recent experience of the 2008–09 US housing loan crisis, the heavy dependence of Nepali banking on land and housing sectors has given many economists reason to worry about the economic stability of the country.
Rather than attributing the disorder of the housing boom to ‘land pimps’ and banks, however, popular opinion has tended to blame other factors for the urban sprawl, such as ‘uncivilised migrants’\(^{11}\) and ‘corrupt politicians’. For instance, S. R. Tiwari accuses outside groups ‘with no urban history’ for ‘destroy[ing] the Valley urbanism’ (1992: 6–7). Or, in the language of the former vice-chairman of Nepal’s Planning Commission, it is ‘peasants’ that are hindering Kathmandu’s entry into modernity: ‘Isn’t Kathmandu supposed to be a modern metropolis? Still, you will find plenty of peasants around’ (Shrestha 2006: 36). Kathmandu’s architects and planners lament that migrants will relocate to wherever land is cheap (usually on the periphery), build a house anywhere (even in the middle of a paddy field) without any care for blending in with surrounding houses or establishing water pipelines, erecting electricity poles and constructing roads.

Since the Nepal government issued its fourth five-year plan (1970–75), urban planning has been a central goal of the state. However, the state’s plans to control Kathmandu’s spiralling growth have rarely been realised due to corruption and the lack of enforcement. According to Anne Rademacher (2007: 306), Kathmandu residents are quick to blame democracy and politicians for uncontrolled urban expansion and environmental degradation, especially decreasing water and air quality. Specifically, environmental activists argue that the arrival of multi-party democracy in 1991 brought corrupt politicians into the city (from villages) and allowed for the new bureaucratic elite to ignore by-laws and building codes when constructing their homes.

In the few instances of implemented planning, the government has failed to create sustainable residential communities. In 1977, the government initiated ‘town planning’ projects to satisfy the growing housing demand. The state developed one such project, Kuleshwor Avas Chhetra (KAC), in 1978 to provide government employees a residential community that had separated commercial and residential zones, open spaces, paved roads, and consistent supply of water and electricity. Thirty years since, water is scarce, public spaces have not been preserved, the building code has not been enforced,

\(^{11}\) It is common to hear urban dwellers refer to new migrants in the derogatory terms of \textit{pakhe} (wild; rude; savage; uncivilized) or \textit{kathe} (uncivilized; uncultured).
and the commercial area has encroached into the residential zone (Dangol 2008). As one former resident stated, KAC could have been called ‘planned plotting’\(^{12}\) but certainly not ‘planned housing’. This particular resident left KAC in 2005 to move into a housing colony, which he describes as ‘what the government had wanted to do with town planning’.

### The Birth of Housing

Amidst the uncontrolled pollution, growth and shortages of the city, Kathmandu’s upper classes have sought the private sector to provide services, infrastructure and even pre-made houses and gated communities. The urban elite’s desire for segregated residencies and exclusive services stems from a shift in class expectations and practices. Mark Liechty (2003: 56–57) has documented how the Kathmandu middle class shifted from productive and agricultural labour to tertiary and cash-based employment, from extended to nuclear family living arrangements, and from central to peripheral residential neighbourhoods.\(^{13}\) Housing colonies and apartments located beyond the one-time urban boundary of the Ring Road, have become the elite addresses of today’s Kathmandu. With prices starting at NRs 5 million (US$ 62,500), such housing is available only to the ‘affluent few or the diaspora that are earning big in foreign lands’ (Gautam 2009: 59). The advertisements for such houses and apartments make explicit references to the prospective buyer’s desire

\(^{12}\) ‘Plotting’ refers to a procedure by which real estate companies and brokers will purchase a large parcel of land, flatten it and organise it into rectangular parts to be sold for the purpose of house construction. Although such ‘plots’ often include pipes for incoming water and outgoing sewage, and electricity poles, this is not always the case.

\(^{13}\) In one particular telling narrative from an article in a Kathmandu ‘living’ magazine, the writer describes how her uncle was initially mocked for his decision to build a house in Bhaisepatti, a peripheral area considered too isolated and unsafe. However, by now it has become ‘second only to Boudhanilkantaha as a site that promises cleaner air and posh villas’ (Rana 2009).
for exclusive living arrangements. For example, Cityscape Apartments asks customers to ‘Stake your claim at city’s most exclusive address’. In the case of two newer building projects, Status Enclave and Prestige Apartments, the name itself draws on the connection between one’s residence and social status.

With the passage of the Joint Housing Act of B. S. 2054 (1998; B. S. refers to Bikram Sambhat, the official calendar of Nepal until 2008 when the Maoist-led interim government replaced it with Nepal Sambhat), the Nepali government set guidelines for the building of multiple housing units within one building or site. Soon thereafter, one of Nepal’s leading industrial companies, Chaudhary Group, built Nepal’s first housing colony, Kathmandu Residency, in southern Kathmandu. By 2004, there were over 20 housing colonies under construction, and at the time of writing, 72 housing colonies and apartments had been built or were under construction. Housing colonies, or simply ‘housing’ in Kathmandu’s everyday vernacular, have come to represent a new form of residential social organisation whereby a private company plans and builds residential units and provides the colony with infrastructure, services, a security system, and an enclosing wall. Once construction is completed, the company will ‘hand over’ the colony to the residents who are expected to form management committees that handle residents’ problems and organise other social activities. Although enclosed and guarded communities existed prior to the arrival of such housing projects, none of those enclaves possessed such committees and planned social events.

The advertisements for housing and apartments appeal to a preference for ‘local modernity’, separation (or exclusivity) and ‘all-in-one’ cities. They are almost always published in English and reference the appeal of ‘modernity’ or Western living standards. Thus, Guna Colony suggests ‘Living in a world that redefines privileged

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14 Similar to Waldrop’s (2004: 99) observation about a housing colony in New Delhi, in contrast to the heavy security and surveillance of gated communities in North and South America, the guards employed at Pleasant Housing do not use an intercom system or CCTVs. They permit vehicles to enter on face recognition and often ignore rules of visitation (posted just inside the colony). Moreover, the colony’s iron and cement wall can hardly be considered impenetrable.
living in the age of grace’, Silver City ‘truly reflects the moods of a modern mind and elegant lifestyle’ and Central Park claims ‘the future has arrived’. The modernity that is thus advertised is in fact a specifically Nepali modernity that enhances, rather than contradicts, local conditions. For instance, Retreat Apartment advertises itself as the ‘best of both worlds: modern amenities for modern living and quiet/mystical scenery throbbing with festivities and spirituality’. Vinayak Colony has ‘minimalist western architecture…attuned to local context’. Also, these housing and apartments claim to be removed from the city and one with nature. Thus, while Central Park offers ‘an oasis of green living’, Civil Homes ‘secludes you from the hustle and bustle of the city’, ‘blends in with surrounding greeneries’, and is ‘instrumental in one’s spiritual upliftment’. To emphasise this point, many of the advertisements depict the housing or apartment complex as being surrounded by greenery, with the Himalayas in the background. These housing and apartment complexes claim to offer what Teresa Caldeira (1999: 89) calls a ‘total way of life’, in which they profess to meet every need of the resident — from a swimming pool to department stores, a beauty parlour to the doctor’s clinic. Not only can you find every service and product you need inside the housing community, they also purport to satisfy social needs. In a recent magazine interview, Hemanta Golchha, director of Shangri-la Housing Company, stated ‘We want to not only give houses, but also give a lifestyle’ (Rai 2009: 62). Silver City goes so far to boast that ‘we give you friends, beyond neighbours’.

The Case of Pleasant Housing, Phase II

Pleasant Housing is one of the older housing companies in Kathmandu. Started as a land investment company by the name Pleasant Finance, Pleasant Housing built its first housing colony in 1999 and is in the process of beginning its fourth colony, as well as a mall and apartment complex in the city centre. The company prides itself for being composed of bankers and engineers who can therefore deliver financial, physical and aesthetic expertise. The company’s second housing colony, Phase II, was started in 2004 in what used to be terraced fields owned and farmed by inhabitants.
of Kirtipur, a large town directly to the south of the colony that is predominantly Newar. Significantly, the colony’s location stands outside of the municipality of Kirtipur. In an interview, the Phase II ‘in-charge’ Shyam Amatya explained that not only is the land cheaper outside of the municipality lines, the building by-laws for the gau bikas samiti (village development committee) are much less rigorous than the municipality. He claims that the company has benefited the local community by building roads to the colony, and by generating a number of employment opportunities for local construction workers, furniture makers, local store owners, as well as domestic servants, gardeners and drivers. Nonetheless, locals worry that once construction is completed and the department store and restaurant open inside the colony, colony residents will depend less on the business and services offered by those living outside the gates.

Although the company promised to finish construction in 2008, the ‘public buildings’ for residents, such as the department store, swimming pool, restaurant, sauna, party palace, and pre-school have yet to be built. The company broke its promise in order to increase the colony size from 96 to 125 houses. Residents complain of the disturbances caused by construction, such as the company’s tendency to store building materials (bricks and sand) in the street and work late hours in the evening. In spite of the unfulfilled promises and complaints, however, Pleasant Housing continues to receive bookings. Amatya maintains that buyers are attracted to Pleasant Housing for several specific and general reasons. Particularly, he believes that ‘everyone loves the traditional look’ of the colony’s uniform architecture of exposed red brick facades and sloped roofs, a style many now refer to as ‘post-modern Kathmandu’ or ‘neo-Newari Renaissance’.16 Also, he adds that despite the uniform architecture of the exterior, the company allows each buyer to design the interior lay-out and orientation of his or her house. Beyond these specifics, housing in general is popular because it offers reliable facilities and security to Kathmandu residents, particularly to those escaping threats of Maoist violence. Amatya adds that insecurity caused by the Maoist insurgency was the strongest reason for Pleasant Finance moving into the business of constructing housing colonies.

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16 I am indebted to Kunda Dixit for suggesting this second phrase.
'Kathmanduma pani chhaina': The Appeal of Privatisation

When asked why residents moved to a housing colony, inevitably one of the first reasons given has to do with services and security. In the winter of early 2009, there was hardly a day without a media story about the decline of the city’s quality of life. From the shortages of water, electricity and oil to the rise in traffic, air pollution and crime, colony residents had no shortage of reasons for leaving behind the public services of the city. Most emphatically, one informant stated, ‘Kathmanduma pani chhaina’ (there is no water in Kathmandu), ‘that is the number one reason ma Pleasant Housing ae’ (…I came to Pleasant Housing). The move to the colony represents a shift away from the unreliable services provided by the state to reliance on a private company to ‘fulfill public functions, but in a segregated way’ (Caldeira 1999: 96).

The shift to relying on a company for services, however, should not be understood as an aberration from an older tradition of a democratic state providing services. Prior to 1950, neighbourhood water taps (New. bitti) and roads were maintained according to cultural traditions. The little urban infrastructure that the state provided was given free of charge (Halcrow Fox and Associates 1991). The partyless rule of Panchayat ‘democracy’ (1960–90), ushered in a new era of development projects and foreign aid that supported the state in its attempt to provide electricity, roads, telephone service, and drinking water pipes for some Kathmandu houses. Although most expected state services to improve after multiparty democracy replaced the Panchayat in 1991, 18 years later such optimism has turned into disappointment. In fact, there is a growing sentiment amongst Kathmandu urbanites that the democratic state has failed them. Rademacher (2007) has shown how the failure of democracy to control environmental problems has created a situation where

17 Since the majority of my interactions and interviews in Pleasant Housing took place in a mixture of Nepali, Newar and English, I have quoted informants in direct speech with parenthetical translations following Nepali and Newar phrases.
18 For instance, for the Newar festival of Sithi Nakha, the cleaning of local water taps is understood to be a ritual duty of the neighbourhood.
urban dwellers welcome temporary authoritarian rule. For instance, Nepal’s brief emergency rule in 2001–02 allowed for an ‘authoritarian environmental management’ to make urban parks and remove squatter settlements in the name of ‘urban beautification’. These undemocratic moves by the state faced little opposition and in fact received support from environmental groups. In the case of housing colonies, individuals shift their support away from the state altogether to the private companies.

The residents’ reliance on the company should only be considered partial in that it can only do so much to insulate residents from the problems of the city. For instance, unlike some housing colonies and apartments, Pleasant Housing does not provide power backup through generators. Many residents have bought solar panels to install on their roofs and battery inverters to provide electricity during outages, which reached a high of 16 hours per day in the winter and spring of 2009. For the many residents with transnational connections, living in housing represents the only plausible living arrangement in Nepal. While abroad, they can leave their houses for months at a time without fear of burglaries. For some, the shift to a housing colony is just a temporary shift as many hope to leave Nepal altogether. As Puskar, a retired factory owner puts it, ‘If given a chance, I will also go abroad to anywhere’. Several residents, who work for the UN and the US Embassy, have accepted offers to transfer to Kabul and Baghdad where, as they put it, several years in a ‘war zone’ will guarantee visas and employment in North America or Europe for them and their families.

In the meantime, while still residing in Nepal, residents must demand services from the company before it hands over responsibility of maintenance. Once the company finishes construction, residents will no longer have a legal right to require assistance from the company. At this point the residents will have to rely on each other as a cooperative. For this reason, a management committee, called the Residents’ Welfare Society (RWS), was established to prepare for the inevitable ‘hand over’. The RWS consists of 11 members chosen via elections conducted every two years where each house has one vote. In addition to discussing colony-related problems and planning social events, the RWS also raises funds. Each resident is required to pay NRs 1000 (US$ 12.50) as annual membership fee, and NRs 100 (US$ 1.25) per month or NRs 150 (US$ 1.88) per month if using the
The reason for funds collection is two-fold: to pay the security guards and other workers, and to establish a contingency fund for future problems after the company leaves. However, as the president of another colony pointed out to me, the legality of fund collection is not entirely clear. Since a colony management committee is neither a NGO nor a business, bank accounts must be opened in individuals’ names, requiring the trust of their neighbours.

In Search of ‘A More Real Democracy’:
Colony Self-Governance

In interviews with RWS members, they stressed the need to base colony self-governance on principles of democracy, participation and equality. In the words of the RWS vice-president, ‘here we practice what you [referring to me, the US citizen interviewer] would call democracy. A more real democracy’. They all quickly point out that gender (four of the 11 members are women), caste, religion, or perhaps most importantly, political party affiliation, are no barrier to joining the RWS. They also emphasise the need to make RWS decisions and actions transparent. For instance, all meetings are recorded and when decisions are made, a letter is sent to each resident to be signed. Beyond the RWS-only meetings, members stress the need for participation from each colony house. As one former president argued during a recent RWS election, ‘hami sabai adhyaksha chhau’ (we are all adhyakshas)\footnote{Although \textit{adhyaksha} is often translated as ‘president’ or ‘chairman’, due to the lack of a precise direct translation, I leave this term in the text untranslated.} and in this participation, ‘sabai saman bahu parchha’ (all must be equal).

The desire for equal and representative self-governance of the colony offers an interesting twist on the typical critique of fortified enclaves. Mike Davis (1990) and Caldeira (1999) have each argued that the exclusion and insularity of gated communities diminish public sphere values and opportunities for the democratic exchange

\footnote{After the ‘hand over’ fees increase drastically. For instance, one post-hand over colony charges NRs 50,000 to join and over NRs 1,000 per month thereafter.}
of ideas. Rather than representing a retreat from the public sphere, the RWS sees itself as producing the values of an inclusive and equal public sphere for the first time in Nepal. According to this logic, the colony’s walls and exclusivity are not barriers to, but rather necessary conditions for the production of a space conducive to the ideals of a public. In this sense, the public sphere values of inclusion, equality and democratic exchange would be untenable if attached to open or public spaces. Instead of a division between public and private space, many scholars of South Asia refer to a conceptual divide between inside and outside space. Whereas the ‘inside’ is commonly associated with ritual protection and the enclosed and intimate relations of the house, the ‘outside’ represents the unknown moral dangers of the street and bazaar (Chatterjee 1994; Kaviraj 1997; Dickey 2000; Chakrabarty 2002; Seizer 2002; Waldrop 2004). In Nepali ghar/babira (house/outside) and Newar dune/pine (inside/outside), a similar attachment of moral value to ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spaces is stressed. For the RWS, the process of defining the governance of the inside is framed in opposition to what it should not be — the corruption and division of the ‘outside’.

Members of the RWS describe the group’s existence as an opportunity to challenge the faults of ‘old-style Kathmandu politics’. When residents refer to rajniti (politics), they allude to the politics of political parties, the parliament and elections, which connote division and corruption. Rather than ‘politics’, residents favour ‘democracy’ and ‘nationalism’ to connote unity, service and the equality of society. Bikram, a lawyer, explains that ‘Politics is not appropriate inside the colony. We don’t go looking for political things. We are all Nepali’. This follows Rademacher’s (2007) observation of how public opinion, particularly among elites, sees post-1991 multiparty democracy as a failure. Instead of uniting and representing Nepal, elected politicians and their parties have only divided the country and produced an ineffective and corrupt state.

Although defined in opposition to the ‘politics’ of party ideology and membership, in what follows, I highlight certain political practices typical of the RWS’ governance. The RWS meets regularly,

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21 I borrow this phrase from a Martin Chautari policy brief (2009) to reference the division, corruption, patronage and exclusionary practices for which Kathmandu’s national politics is known.
once every month, but during particularly ‘crisis’ situations, it calls the entire colony to attend general meetings. In January 2009, due to a sudden increase in power outages, the colony experienced a severe water shortage. One of the principle reasons behind moving to the colony, abundant water supply, was threatened. After a few days of irate residents demanding to speak with the company’s chief executive officer (CEO) and the RWS’ adhyaksha, Surendra, the RWS called a general meeting. Surendra introduced the agenda of the meeting by stressing two ideas: that the problem could and should be solved by colony residents and that each resident must participate in the problem-solving process. Towards the first point he asked what he called the ‘experts of the colony’, residents who have employment experience or education in engineering, to speak. While one person suggested raising the price structure to be closer to that of another colony, another stressed the need to have the company provide a comprehensive report of the colony’s physical infrastructure to the residents prior to hand over. Surendra devoted the second half of the meeting to demanding greater participation of residents in all communications with the company and greater attendance at meetings. He condemned the residents who spread gossip and rumours instead of speaking up at the meeting. He then went around the room and demanded that each attendee share his/her opinion. For him, the success of the RWS required ‘100 per cent representation’ — one voice from each house. The meeting concluded with a decision to form a sub-committee of resident engineers to fix the problem. Interestingly then, it was a small group of resident ‘experts’, and not the general meeting or even the elected RWS who decided to raise the cost of water from NRs 40 to NRs 80 (US$ 0.50 to US$ 1.00) per thousand litres to fix the problem, a decision that was unpopular with many.

Two months after the ‘water crisis’ Surendra resigned, only one year into his two-year term, after allegations of corruption were levelled against him. The allegations stem from a gift that the company, Pleasant Housing, gave to Surendra during the peak of negotiations between the RWS and the company. The company invited Surendra to a party where they gifted him a microwave. According to the RWS secretary, the invitation was addressed to the ‘RWS adhyaksha’, not to Surendra the private citizen, and thus he should have given the microwave to the RWS for community events. Since he did not donate the gift, his act was considered to be an acceptance of a bribe (‘ghus khaivo’) to be quiet. When the RWS secretary confronted
Surendra about the letter during a RWS meeting, the latter claimed there was no such letter. He resigned one week later, which happened to be a few days before Nepal’s Maoist Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (‘Prachanda’) resigned after just nine-months in office. In the wake of these two resignations, many residents joked that Pleasant Housing politics was just like Nepali politics — the leaders are corrupt and never complete their terms.

After Surendra's resignation, the RWS decided to dissolve itself and hold an election to appoint a completely new 11-member committee. For many, this election represented an opportunity for the RWS to start over and redeem its claim to democracy. One night before the election, all of the residents of the colony gathered in the parking lot to hear the two candidates for the post of adhyaksha speak. The first candidate, Dipendra, spoke little about himself and instead asked everyone to be involved in the RWS. The second candidate, Uday, meanwhile, devoted his speech to promoting himself as a capable leader. After listing his experience living in the colony and participating in the RWS, he defended himself against potential criticism. He admitted to not being very religious, not speaking great Nepali and, most interestingly, since he is known as the Maoist in the colony, he asked the colony to know him as a manavbadi (humanist) rather than as a maobadi (maoist). In a surprise conclusion, he finished his speech by suggesting that if the colony wanted, he would run for the secretary's position in order to allow a third candidate, Narayan, to become adhyaksha. This suggestion was quickly condemned as ‘coalition rajniti’ that would lead to division and bring harm to the colony.

The next morning, colony residents started to gather at 10 a.m. in the colony’s meeting house, but the meeting did not begin for another hour when a group of 15 men comprising former RWS members and other well-known residents, entered the building. They admitted to the election committee that they had yet to establish a list of candidates and would need an additional 30 minutes. Soon thereafter, they returned with a list of adhyaksha, vice-adhyaksha, secretary, and eight members. The outgoing adhyaksha read each name, asked if there were any objections and then proceeded to call up each new member, give them a certificate and a tika blessing to him or her. Thus, after several weeks of speculation and campaigning, finally there was no election. The new adhyaksha and RWS were appointed without a vote. Uday, who became secretary, would later explain to me that this process of non-voting was essential to
guarantee colony unity and the participation of women (two) and different castes (seven Bahun, one Chhetri, one Newar, and two Janajati) on the committee.

The selection of candidates by a few powerful men and their uncontested election requires a rethinking of RWS’ form of democracy. Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (2007: 55) describes a similar type of local governance in the Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) of Delhi. She documents how RWAs are controlled by male elites, favour consensus and uncontested voting, and define themselves in opposition to electoral politics. Following Pierre Rosanvallon’s concept of counter-democracy, she argues that RWAs practices are not necessarily undemocratic, but rather a different kind of democracy that distrusts and contradicts the legitimacy of representative and electoral democracy. Similarly, the RWS’ condemnation of electoral politics does not mean that politics is absent from Pleasant Housing. Rather, it is the politics and processes of ruling by *sahamati* (‘consensus’)22 that ensure the continuance of colony unity and participation. This view of politics echoes the Panchayat-era notion of ‘Nepali democracy’ in which political parties (*dal*) were banned for being divisive and alien to the nation (Burghart 1996: 256–58). During this period, King Mahendra and his advisers defined ‘Nepali democracy’ as based on a ‘sameness’ maintained through nationalist symbols and social service.23

‘Kura Bujhne Manchhe’: Class and Social Inclusion

Beyond the RWS, maintaining the unity of Pleasant Housing requires appealing to the residents’ everyday concerns regarding their status and the kind of people who enter the colony and become their

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22 My gratitude to Amanda Snellinger for suggesting *sahamati* to describe the politics of the Pleasant Housing RWS. When discussing politically negotiated agreements in contemporary Nepal, politicians tend to prefer the term *sahamati*, an agreement by consensus, to the term *samjhauta*, an agreement by compromise. Particularly, in the consensus agreements of the RWS, the terms of the agreement tend to be controlled by a few strong men leaders of the colony.

23 Symbols of *nepalipan* (‘nepali-ness’) were defined according to the cultural features of Bahun-Chhetri, such as their dress, Hindu religion, Nepali language, and monarchy (Burghart 1996: 258–259).
neighbours. While the high cost of houses guarantees a certain level of income of the newcomers, the residents cannot choose who moves into the colony. Additionally they cannot dictate whether residents will stay or leave the colony. Such uncertainties serve as threats to the social cohesion of the colony and its very existence. As the new president Dipendra admitted in his acceptance speech, ‘ma pani chhadera jane socheko chhu’ (I have also considered leaving). He went on to urge residents to think of the colony as their home (‘ghar’) rather than as an investment (‘lagani’). Similarly, residents often describe colony social relations as ‘pariwar jasto chha’ (just like a family). Another resident explains that she can share her ‘beartko kura’ (things of the heart) with the neighbours. As the Society’s first adhyaksha, J. B., explains, ‘personality divisions cannot happen. The colony needs to be one samuha [group].’

The emphasis on an intra-colony community requires reconsidering our understanding of class in Kathmandu. Liechty (2003) describes Kathmandu’s middle class practices as a precarious game of maintaining one’s place in the unstable middle that requires appearing separate from the upper and lower classes and aligning oneself with members of the middle class. In the site of his study — Kathmandu’s ‘new public spaces’24 — the objective is to identify oneself as a member of the ‘suitable middle’ as someone who ‘counts’ (ibid.: 140). However, in the colony where everyone belongs to an elite economic class, ‘interclass exclusion and competition’ becomes less important than ‘intraclass inclusion’ (ibid.: 114–16). If owning a house in a housing colony ‘codifies upper status’ (Caldeira 1999: 88), purchasing a house in the colony brings along with it some prestige stability; that is, as long as the colony symbolises class distinction. In this sense, one’s status not only indexes one’s own class position or gharo sthiti (house and family condition) (Leichty 2003: 135), but also that of the entire colony. At the previously mentioned pre-election meeting, multiple speakers alluded to the colony as a rock on which every house shares a position. If ‘ek jana dubchha, hamai sabai dubchhau’ (one person sinks, we all sink). Thus, it is the individual’s responsibility to maintain his/her status, just as it is the collective’s responsibility to help neighbours from sinking.

24 By which Liechty means cinema halls, restaurants, hotels, and malls as opposed to the ‘old public spaces’, such as temples, squares, water taps, vegetable markets, and public rest houses (2003: 145–47).
Maintaining the colony's unique collective status requires the colony to be physically and socially separate from Kathmandu. Residents achieve such separation through narratives of an elevated sameness, employed when describing the sociality of the colony. ‘Elevated sameness’ refers to statements of shared moral superiority between neighbours, which typically begin with ‘we all’ (hami sabai) and end by describing the sophistication of fellow residents. ‘Here we all have sabhyata [civilisation]…. We are all educated people, we don’t fight, we respect each other’, states J. B. Residents maintain such unity by emphasising the distinction of residents from former Kathmandu residences. In the words of Ganga, an NGO founder, colony residents are ‘kura bujne manchhe’ (people who understand things), as opposed to the unsophisticated attitudes and practices of previous places of residence. The ‘things’ that the colony inhabitants understand range from a greater concern for community than profit and respect for private space to a tolerance for differences of political party affiliation and caste.

Residents tend to describe the communities of their previous residences as anti-social (‘where people living in the same house might know each other’) and profit-driven. There, people chose the new neighbourhood for economic reasons — the land was cheap and they could open a store or rent out a flat — not for social reasons. Although some Pleasant Housing owners do rent out their houses, no one rents out rooms or flats within houses and more importantly, with the exception of the soon-to-be small store inside the colony, the community is purely residential. As one informant explained, he could have built a house in the bustling neighbourhood of Naya Bazar, where he could turn his bottom floor into a store and rent it for a considerable amount of money. However, he did not want to contribute to the ‘messiness of the city’, by which he meant the mixing of commercial and residential spaces.

Just as Civil Homes marks a clear division between inside residential space and outside commercial spaces, private spaces are also clearly marked and respected by residents. Each house is surrounded by a short wall and gate, which is rarely penetrated by outsiders without invitation. One resident remarks that ‘You have to ring the house’s gate bell before entering. Not like elsewhere in the city where people just walk in to your house without invitation’. Another resident compares the formality of housing sociality with that of Europe and the United States where neighbours maintain
‘respectful distance’ from each other. He gleefully admitted that in contrast to his previous residence in the central neighbourhood of Naxal, ‘Here, no one bothers me, and I don’t bother anyone. I have time and space to think, write, and live a retired sort of life’. For others, however, the clear demarcation of private space does not represent a division between neighbours, but rather a sign of class distinction.

Since the distinction is shared between neighbours, it serves as a symbol of unity and equality. The other possible symbols of division such as politics and caste need, therefore, to be downplayed. Political party affiliation is a matter of discussion, but not of conflict as is too often the case on the ‘outside’. While walking with one neighbour, he sees someone in the distance and tells me, ‘There goes the Colony’s Maoist’ (Uday, soon to become secretary of the society). ‘Oh’, I say, thinking this might be a sensitive piece of information, to which he responds, ‘no, just a matter of joking between us. We are all professionals’.

This professionalism is expected to extend even to caste and ethnic differences, despite the active politicisation of identity occurring in post-insurgency Nepal. In the political debates surrounding the Constituent Assembly, claims to states and rights based on ethnic, linguistic, regional, and caste difference are central. Amidst an increase in assertions of communal identities, however, are the colony residents’ attempt to de-emphasise such differences. Waldrop suggests that, in the case of a New Delhi housing colony, the exclusive gate should be read as a replacement of the disintegrating caste hierarchy with the physical boundaries of class segregation.

The spatial layout of caste and class has never been a simple issue in Nepali society. As previously stated, in the structure of the old cities, the double-headed (Buddhist and Hindu priests on top) Newar caste system maps status onto location. Closer to Hocart’s King-centered view of caste than Dumont’s non-spatial theory of caste (Quigley 1995), higher castes and landholders reside near the royal centre and lower castes and the landless at the periphery — some even outside the city’s walls. Although the Gorkha conquest did not immediately supplant the Newar spatial–caste model, the implementation of the all-Nepal caste system in 1854 did officially subjugate most Newars to Bahun-Chhetri (Höfer 1979: 111–17). However, the control of trade routes and bureaucratic knowledge kept many upper caste Newar groups close to economic privilege and power. Similarly, transnational
concludes that class practices — consumption and material display, narratives of honour and progress — encompass and increasingly overwhelm ‘traditional’ forms of kin and caste-based affiliation. When discussing caste, residents base their unity not on class ties, but rather on nationalism. When asked to describe the caste of neighbours, often residents state ‘We are all one jat — Nepali’. Or as Puskar states, ‘Yes, sabai jati yaha chhan’ (all castes are here), but then corrects himself, ‘Pode ra Kasaiharu babek’ (with the exception of Pode and Kasai, lower Newar castes of sweepers and butchers). In addition to the few lower castes mentioned by Puskar, one does not find any residents belonging to any of Nepal’s many Dalit groups. Actually, similar to Waldrop’s description of the Delhi colony’s ‘upper caste flavour’, Pleasant Housing is dominated socially and numerically by Bahun-Chhetri and upper caste Newars. This point was emphasised in Uday’s campaign speech when he promised to put all castes on his committees, and then specified what ‘all castes’ meant — ‘Bahun matra hoina, Newar pani’ (not just Bahun, but also Newar).

In between the supposed unity of Bahun-Chhetri and Newar residents lies a clear assertion of distinction by the latter. Newar residents are quick to point out that all of Kathmandu’s ‘culture’ belongs to the Newar and that they are the true urbanites of Kathmandu. One resident has turned his house into a ‘living museum’ of Newar gods and bittis (New. water tap) as a conscious attempt to demonstrate and maintain his Newar-ness in the colony. In fact, for one Newar resident, Indira, who is married to a European social scientist and splits her time between living in Kathmandu and Europe, most colony residents buy houses in Pleasant Housing in order to appear ‘urban’ and ‘modern’. She adds, ‘They wake up at 5 a.m. and start yelling. Just like in a village. Only the Newar here are really from the city’.

Economic opportunities have long favoured certain ‘ethnic groups’ ranked below Bahun-Chhetri, such as Thakali and Manangi traders, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, and Magar Gurkhas (British military), Tibetan carpet makers, and Sherpa mountaineers.

The particular shape of this ‘nationalism’ reflects what Bajracharya (2008: 61) calls ‘Panchayat utopia’ — an idea of ‘a brave nation of authentic Nepalis who were united beyond ethnic, gender, and caste differences’.

I am reminded of Partha Chatterjee’s (2004: 146) comment regarding the desire of Kolkata’s suburban middle class to assert their Bengali-ness ‘over a city they have physically abandoned’.
Conclusion

When residents of Pleasant Housing praise the colony, they tend to phrase it in terms of potential and possibility. Although the colony has the potential to be great, it has not yet arrived. As one resident explained, 'I think, and I don’t say this because I live here, that the housing colony is the future of Nepal', but then he adds, 'if it works'. Before the colony arrives at the future, however, it must eliminate threats that could sink it to the level of contemporary Kathmandu — a company that fails to fulfill its promises; an RWS afflicted by politics and corruption; and a community fragmented by traditional differences. Rather than being a fixed symbol of distinction defined by an enclosing wall and security guards, the housing colony is a work in progress.

In the residents’ attempt to overcome these threats and anxieties, they provide several unique ways to think about fortified enclaves. Scholars have tended to approach fortified enclaves from the outside looking in, whereby colonies represent class exclusion, social inequalities and are a threat to the idea of a public sphere. Indeed, amidst the political and social transformations of contemporary Nepal, the emergence of Kathmandu’s housing colonies represents a shift in class-based social organisation away from the state and public sources of governance and services. By requiring fortification to establish a so-called equal society, residents contribute to and strengthen the class inequalities of the greater society that lies outside the colony. Nonetheless, to stop our analysis at these conclusions overlooks the precarious ongoing anxieties and conflicts occurring within the colony’s walls. I have argued that we extend our analysis beyond the interpretation of the wall as a symbol of exclusion to consider what it means for those living inside it.

Just as the ‘no horn please’ sign does not guarantee silence, the wall does not ensure the colony’s separation from Kathmandu. It is necessary for the RWS to safeguard self-governance and for the residents to each maintain the appearance of living by a morally superior code, one that transcends profit and politically-driven motives, not to mention social divisions. Consequently, maintenance of the colony’s separation from the flaws of the political and social world outside requires not merely solidifying the boundaries surrounding the colony, rather, more crucially, maintaining the prestige of the community living inside.
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Gated Communities as Packaged Fantasies: A Meeting of the Local and the Global and the Standardisation of Taste in Urban Sri Lanka

Sasanka Perera

When reading through the literature available on the phenomenon of gated communities located in a multiplicity of global centres, the need for an academic engagement with the comparable Sri Lankan housing development sector becomes a palpable one. Such an engagement has not taken place thus far in the Sri Lankan context due to two serious absences in the local intellectual environment. These are the absence of a theoretically sophisticated interest in a sociological analysis of the city, urban space and urbanity, and the non-existence of an intellectually robust local tradition in critical architecture. This article develops a reading of gated communities in the local context and attempts to engage with the aesthetic, architectural and developmentalist connotations of this specific kind of housing development that has emerged in Colombo and the suburbs over the last 15 years. Due to the absences noted above, ‘gated community’ as a specific term is absent from both popular as well as academic discourses dealing with housing in Sri Lanka. In this context, all housing developments, including gated communities, are identified using generic terms such as ‘housing complex’ without any specific reference to their internal characteristics or

* I would like to acknowledge with much appreciation help received from Bob Simpson and Colin McFarlane in acquiring some essential comparative literature not readily available in Sri Lanka and the latter for providing very useful comments on earlier versions of this article.
other identificatory markers. Despite the liminality of gated communities as a terminological entity in local discourses on housing, their physical presence can be felt quite significantly across city and suburban landscapes.

My exploration is two-fold: the playing out of the global within the local in terms of what is built and how it is packaged and marketed, and the language of development in relation to upward mobility, class belonging and luxuriously safe living that buttresses the phenomenon is one aspect; the standardisation of space and taste, which connotes an expelling of individuality while simultaneously clamouring for a sense of the ‘unique,’ is the other. The type of housing complex generally known in comparative literature as a ‘gated community’ or ‘fortified enclave’ discussed in the paper gains existence in the local context through a goal defined by a group of architects, real estate developers, interior decorators, and financiers. Of both local and foreign origin, these groups are promoting a ‘developed’ or ‘globalised’ sense of place and marketing it to a group of people who belong to an affluent or ‘wannabe’ affluent class. The inhabitants of these spaces or the members of these communities, on the other hand, have their own preoccupations and requirements to fulfill while living in these places.

The concept of taste dominates my mind in this scenario as I observe a form of standardising of tastes through these housing projects: they ‘inform’ potential buyers about what is considered ‘good’ taste, and thereby constitute or ‘form’ the tastes of a cross section of an upwardly mobile middle class. In a sense, when I attempt to explore the emerging affluent housing market in Sri Lanka by focusing on gated communities, I am also simultaneously exploring the introduction, restructuring and standardisation of a specific taste preference. Notwithstanding the critique that is offered of his work, Bourdieu (1984) has been successful in sociologically locating the notion of taste and in communicating the idea that taste is socially constructed. To put it differently, it is possible to ascertain an individual’s taste from the way he has defined and chosen his social practices and properties out of an available range of such practices and properties. These activities or objects are vested with a certain cultural capital or value, as defined by powerful sections within the larger society (Perera 1999: 69). Further, according to Bourdieu, ‘in order for there to be tastes, there have to be goods that are classified as being in “good” or “bad” taste, “distinguished” or “vulgar” — classified and thereby classifying, hierarchised and
hierarchising — and people endowed with principles of classification, tastes, that enable them to identify, among those goods that suite them, that are “to their taste” (Bourdieu 1995: 108). It is from such a perspective that one would have to look at the gated communities I have selected for this reading in order to ascertain the role taste plays in their design, marketing and acceptance.

**Housing and Urban Development in Sri Lanka**

Many types of housing complexes have emerged over time in Sri Lanka, initiated by both the state and the private sector, to serve all levels of the class structure ranging from the poorest to the most affluent. Some basic sociological and architectural information has been put together about some of them, such as the complexes built for the poor under government-sponsored poverty alleviation schemes. However, very few of them have been systematically studied, and none have been conceptually contextualised or theoretically interrogated.

The state’s intervention in housing, either urban or rural, has mostly been an endeavour to provide housing to the poorer segments of the country’s population. With the establishment of the Ministry of Housing and the National Housing Department in 1953, along with the heavy welfare agenda introduced in 1956, successive post-Independence governments were eager to be seen as addressing the needs of the poor for better homes. The Urban Development Authority and the Greater Colombo Economic Commission were established in 1977, which also played a significant role in urban development and housing, particularly in terms of policy-making and monitoring. In the post-1977 period, when the ‘hundred thousand houses program’ got underway, its main purpose was to initiate direct government intervention to build houses mostly for the rural poor. The subsequent ‘million houses program’ launched in 1983 and the ‘1.5 million houses program’ of 1993, were follow-on programmes. With the last census in 2001 showing Colombo to be the most densely populated city with more than 2.2 million people and a 3,330 person density per sq. km,¹ it is no surprise that the housing issue has been a

real challenge to successive governments, both in the urban and rural sector. However, this has primarily to do with low-income groups and semi-permanent housing, for public sector involvement in the up-market housing sector has been non-existent. This is one of the features that sets in direct contrast the case of Sri Lanka to that of Singapore, a country that successive Sri Lankan governments in the post-1977 period have claimed to emulate as a model for development. Interestingly, the Housing and Development Board of Singapore was established with similar intentions of providing housing for the poor even though the Singaporean case was different from the very beginning in the fact that the government was determined not to let public housing become a social welfare institution even though it was providing subsidised housing to almost the entire nation (Chua 1991: 29, 35). The intention to provide housing for the poor, though later expanded to an objective of providing housing to 85 per cent of all Singaporeans (Chua 1991; 2000, 2003), provides another contrast to the Sri Lankan case where the government did not, even to a small extent, attempt to take over the housing sector in this manner.

However, in addition to providing housing for the poor, various Sri Lankan governments did build apartments, known locally as ‘flats’, for government officers who belonged mostly to the middle class and were upper level employees of various state agencies. Many of the more recent ones, built between 1977 and the mid-1980s, are located in Colombo 5 and Colombo 7. These could be purchased through very affordable loan schemes and, legally speaking, access to these units depended on one’s position in the hierarchy of the state bureaucracy. However, in real terms, one’s personal political clout and ties with the parties in power made a significant difference in acquiring these housing units. These kinds of housing complexes were exceptions rather than being the norm in the absence of a clear-cut policy for non-poor housing.

The regulatory and legal framework within the country is one that has been progressively supportive of, and conducive towards, private sector investment in the real estate sector since the introduction of liberal economic policies in 1977. Having introduced the case of Singapore as a comparison, it is worth noting that this aspect too stands in contrast to the policies adopted by the Singaporean government which was determined to restrict private housing to approximately 15 per cent of the national housing stock and even hoped to reduce it to 5 per cent by the year 2030 at the outset (Chua 1991: 26). However, it did change this stand when the higher income strata of
society began to aspire for housing of more affluence than what was provided either by the government or by the restricted private sector. It is at this point that the government made its move to support — through the 99-year leasehold land parcelling programme — the private sector in contributing up to 25 per cent of the housing requirement (Chua 2000: 52). In comparison, the ‘Regaining Sri Lanka’ policy document of 2002 addresses the construction of condominiums as an area that requires particular government intervention to support the private sector. It states:

Under the present law, titles to a condominium property are issued only after the local authority issues the Certificate of Conformity, thus limiting the ability of the developer to pre-sell apartments and buyers from raising mortgage loans on any finished apartments. The law should be implemented to allow property developers to pre-sell apartments. Also a system of rating developers should be introduced and the local authorities need to supervise and ensure enforcement of building standards by developers. 2

The Ceylinco Homes3 website quotes a Central Bank report of 2005 that states,

[the] private sector continued to play a vital role in the housing sector...Construction of condominium housing is the increasing trend, with corporate property development being encouraged with various direct and indirect fiscal incentives, mostly under BOI status, and the growing interest of expatriate Sri Lankans to invest in the real estate sector.5

Therefore, while governments themselves have not been involved in the provision of housing to the middle and upper middle classes in any significant manner, a very conducive policy and fiscal environment has been supported by them to encourage private sector

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3 Ceylinco is a large private sector group of companies with significant investments and interests in housing development with an emphasis on gated communities.
4 BOI = Board of Investment is a government agency that facilitates foreign investments in various sectors.
investment. What I describe below has to be located in this policy and fiscal environment created and fostered by successive governments since 1977 as the entire private sector housing boom finds its genesis in this environment. On the other hand, this is not a mere ephemeral moment. The private sector housing market and industry in general, and luxury housing industry in particular, has seen steady growth since 1977, but in a more pronounced manner since the mid-1980s. In this context, the number of companies involved in construction activities has steadily expanded in recent times, apart from the many other companies providing associated services, amenities and advice. Ample evidence for this is found in the advertisements appearing in major weekend newspapers as well as in the clutter available on the internet. At least two glossy English language magazines, *Hot Property Sri Lanka*, which claims to be the ‘magazine of unique properties’, and *Real Estate Partner*, cater to a particular clientele and offer numerous general services in the private sector housing markets as well as specialised services for potential buyers of luxury houses. The most important reason for this expansion is the existence of an affluent segment of people with the ability and need to purchase these luxury houses. Among these are top executives of private sector companies; businesspeople; expatriate Sri Lankans currently resident in regions of Western Europe, North America and Australasia who want to have a ‘local’ base; foreigners, many of whom are from business backgrounds, who want to use Sri Lanka as a retirement place or business centre; and local politicians whose affluence has increased in recent times with the expansion of the local black economy.

**The Fortified Enclave/Gated Community:**
*The Global Home with All Amenities and a Sense of Security*

In the general context I have outlined above, I would restrict myself to an initial reading of the large housing estates and high-rise apartment complexes financed by large-scale developers that have emerged

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6 This magazine has been reinvented in 2009 under the name *Top Properties*, and has as its self identity the following slogan: ‘Sri Lanka’s No. 1 Real Estate Magazine’.
mostly in Colombo and its suburbs. Both types of complexes are demarcated from the older communities in these localities by a wall or a robust steel fence, and are often accompanied by a 24-hour security system that ensures no outsiders have direct access to the residents and are first screened by security personnel or systems at the point(s) of entry. Well-known examples of these from the recent popular discourse on housing, include Lotus Grove in Attidiya, Eden Gardens in Talawatugoda, Paradis and Olympus in the Millennium City Township Development Scheme in Aturugiriya, Royal Park, Fairway by the Water and Fairmount Urban Oasis in Rajagiriya — all of which are located in the Western Province and in close proximity to Colombo. These local complexes are quite similar in many ways to the housing units referred to as 'gated communities' in some literature (Dovey 2001: 150) and 'fortified enclaves' in others (Falzon 2004). Falzon (2004: 146) cites Caldeira (1999) in stating that these “'gated communities' or 'fortified enclaves' are privatized, enclosed, and monitored spaces for residence, consumption, leisure, and work”. Atkinson and Flint, with reference to gated communities in England, have described them as ‘residential areas or a development that is fenced or walled-off from its surroundings, either prohibiting or controlling access to these areas by means of gates or booms’ (2004: 878). Other words used to describe this phenomenon include ‘security villages’, ‘fortress neighborhoods’ and ‘exclusive leisure developments' (ibid.). Harvey notes in relation to the global phenomenon of gated developments that ‘what is remarkable is not that urbanism is so different but that it is so similar in all metropolitan centers of the world in spite of significant differences in social policy, cultural tradition, administrative and political arrangements, institutions and laws, and so on’ (1973: 278, quoted in Falzon 2004: 146). These similarities get further emphasised and entrenched through the advertising campaigns that are carried out to draw the upwardly mobile mindset towards owning such properties. I will take a visual and cultural tour through some examples of such residential complexes in an attempt to try and situate and problematise them in terms of a sociology of urban space.

The interesting phenomenon in a context such as Sri Lanka is how claims of comparability with gated communities in more affluent parts of the world are made using descriptive language, although in fact features may and often do contain sometimes minor and at times significant differences to them. Take for example the cases
discussed by Falzon (Bombay), Genis (Istanbul) and Caldeira (Sao Paulo) in relation to Sri Lanka's Millennium City, Eden Gardens, Hazel Glade, 6th Avenue, etc. While Sri Lanka's commercial capital Colombo generally may not be considered in the same breath as Mumbai, Sao Paulo and Istanbul regarding some other aspects within the general development discourse, these are some of the places that offer examples that can inform a discussion of the gated communities and condominiums located in Colombo. In a sense, these gated communities are physical markers of the notion of development being offered by mainstream developmentalist discourse and to which they offer Sri Lanka a chance to enter. How does the local up-market housing industry that produces these complexes tap into and maintain such a discourse? Are these complexes in fact similar in every respect to the ones they claim allegiance through implication?

In what follows I shall consider architectural features, the provision of 'all amenities' and the preoccupation with security — features that define these residential communities both in their global and local manifestations.

In terms of the architectural features of what is built, of the internal zoning as well as the outward appearance, these gated communities reveal a great deal of similarity. Dovey comments on how domestic spaces have been programmed through a somewhat predictable process of naming the interior segments of a unit located within such housing developments (2001: 141). These 'names are framings of places which may or may not be enclosed and are often clustered into zones within the house', and it is possible therefore to identify a certain genotype that dominates them to a significant extent (ibid.). This genotype can be presented as a 'set of structured relations between four primary clusters of space' (ibid.):

- a formal living zone incorporating living, dining, entrance, stairway, and den or study;
- an informal living zone incorporating the kitchen, nook (area for meals), family area, games, and terrace (deck or outdoor living area);
- a master suite incorporating the master bedroom, bathroom, dressing, and sometimes a retreat area and deck or court;
- a minor bedroom zone incorporating the children's and guest bedrooms, bathrooms and recreational areas (ibid.).
Internal zoning features of this genotype can be found in comparable housing complexes in Sri Lanka with some minor variations. For example, the zonal demarcation in the floor plans of the different complexes such as Paradis, Olympus, Heartland, Development Scheme such as Da Vinci in Northern California, and The Chenin in Western Australia such as Sherwood Glade and Eden Gardens, show similarities with complexes such as The Millennium City Township Development Scheme at the Millennium City Township Development Scheme. In this sense, this genotype has now become a global phenomenon, extending from the affluent countries of North America and Western Europe to Australasia and countries like Sri Lanka. Eden Gardens (to provide one example from an array of possibilities), which boasts of being 'a garden of paradise with 97 aesthetically designed luxury houses with 3 or 4 bedrooms with modern and exclusive architecture to suit your unique lifestyle', on closer observation has a range of only four themes called Cedar, Pine, Ebony, and Maple. The developer still claims that these houses go with distinctly different lifestyles. Each range offers a choice of different outer appearances and sizes. These uniquely built houses with distinctive architecture await only for a privileged few, who would value the tranquility of nature. Each category within this range includes what is called a 'cottage', 'nest', and 'home', and 'home' and 'nest' houses have the exact same ground floor and 'cottage' and 'nest' houses also have similar upper floors. Not even the wood used in the three houses is different as may be inferred from the house names. The claim to provide all amenities is an oft-repeated marketing slogan that is as much a part of the local gated housing developments as it is in the global comparables. Let me present a few select descriptions of gated developments from elsewhere in the world to proceed with my argument. In a discussion of the Hiranandani Gardens development scheme of Mumbai, Falzon (ibid.: 149–46) discusses this phenomenon.
that housing colonies of Mumbai have their origin in British colonial period and should not be understood exclusively as part of the global phenomenon that has more recently originated in the US. He points out that while the ‘gated’ nature of the modern phenomenon is new to Bombay, the existent traditions of housing allows us ‘one way of looking at gated communities […] as extensions of the mohalla principle that has for centuries kept residents apart along lines of religious, ethno-linguistic and caste affiliations’ (Falzon 2004: 150). The distinction of the contemporary phenomenon then lies in the degree of ‘inward orientation’, wherein ‘residents do not merely reside but live within the protective walls’ of the community (ibid.). Let me briefly state what it offers for ‘living’: a business park with 70 corporate offices; a school modelled on the English public school system; fitness clubs that include swimming and wading pools, health spas, jacuzzis, steam, sauna and Turkish baths; a Nirvana Park for environmentalists; shopping centres that are ‘paragons of global consumer culture’; food courts that boast of food from all over the world and a ‘Culture Shop’ that offers Indian products (ibid.).

Let me now draw on another example, located in Istanbul. In a discussion of the discourses and practices of a ‘new urbanism’ in Istanbul and its sociopolitical ramifications, Genis contends that the ‘emergence and spread of gated communities have been facilitated by the neo-liberal policies of the state which redefined the housing sector and changed its dynamics and actors’ in Turkey (2007: 771–73). He describes several types of gated communities, and in a scenario quite similar to that of Hiranandani Gardens states:

in the large upper class gated communities located in the periphery, which I call the ‘private towns,’ private amenities, in addition to elite sports facilities hitherto unimaginable, include but are not limited to shopping, entertainment, and education facilities, and domestic and social services. (Ibid.: 776).

Caldeira describes a much more complicated array of ‘fortified enclaves’ in SaoPaulo, which include ‘closed condominiums’ and ‘luxury enclaves’ that articulate ‘five basic elements: security, seclusion, social homogeneity, amenities and service’ (2000: 258–64). She observes that while condominiums have existed since 1928 in SaoPaulo, ‘changes in financing and the resulting construction boom’ in the 1970s resulted in their proliferation (ibid.). She notes significant differences in the ones that have come about since the
1980s and 1990s: in their location away from the centre of the city, their closed nature — being cut off from streets around them, and in the availability of a large number of facilities for common use that had not existed in the earlier type (ibid.).

The language that describes these developments locally also uses the same or indeed very similar vocabulary. The phrase ‘all amenities’ is fluidly utilised, applied to the diverse types and levels of housing in the middle and up-market development projects that are advertised on the internet and in local newspapers and magazines. The website for Eden Gardens, a gated community located in close proximity to Colombo, boasts:

> to add more value to your investment, a swimming pool, gymnasium, squash, badminton & tennis court, mini market and café are set within the premises exclusively for your convenience. Moreover, to create a safe & tidy ambiance the street lights, solid waste management and a manned security service of high vigilance are also at your service.9

The Ceylinco Homes website also claims that ‘The Sanctuary’ at Attidiya consists of a ‘nature obsessed ambiance complimenting unparalleled convenience, lavishly absorbed into every grain of our luxurious designer homes’, and further adds that it exceeds ‘design paradigms than those found in the most discerning cities, globally’.10 Perth Paradise, Horana, one of the furthest gated communities from Colombo, is said to be a ‘town within a town’ that has many facilities for games and recreation, and the ‘24-hour security provided, tarred roads with street lights, daily garbage collection and maintenance adds up as icing on the cake’.11 Housing & Construction Lanka (Pvt) Ltd, the developers of the project, state that it is the ‘only housing project of this extent currently being developed in the outskirts of Colombo with all the amenities’.12 While the 6th Avenue luxury tower can only claim ‘convenient access to the best in fine dining, shopping,
schools, and other facilities due to the fact that it is one building in the centre of the city housing a small number of apartments, a place such as Hazel Glade, situated in suburban Pelawatte and Maharagama, claims that 'every facility is available for your convenience, be it a choice of super markets, banks or restaurants' and it is also 'in close proximity to international schools and places of worship.' What of 'every facility' is available within the developed site itself and what is situated outside of it are not so clearly differentiated even though a space issue does not hinder the latter site. Interestingly, the same developers, Peoples Merchant Bank, did not see the need for similar claims for Sherwood Glade, a development project carried out at an earlier stage.

The language of luxury, opulence, convenience, uniqueness, leisure, and self-sufficiency manifested in the local popular discourse on gated communities cloaks the realities of what amenities are actually made available through their development and what are not, i.e., they are merely situated at a convenient distance from the project. Mazumdar (2007), discussing the representation of 'interior spaces' of houses as escapist and spectacular spaces in Bollywood family films, notes that in the South Asian urban context, the attraction to and representation of such interiors simultaneously denotes a crisis in belonging, a fear of the street and a desire for good life. The collapsing of what actually exists within the site and what can be reached easily creates the illusion of the existence of a globally marketed reality within the local context allowing those who aspire, to achieve such a 'good life'.

A fear of the street or a preoccupation with security in the context of a real or perceived threat to the self from the exterior world seems to accompany the expansion of gated communities everywhere. This has also come about due to a transformation in the notion of safety — from being rooted earlier in notions of public good to that of a commodity available for purchase (Hope 1995). The recently developed Empire Luxury Housing Project, a high rise, gated enclave executed by CT Properties Limited in Colombo 2, spread over 1.03 acres, emphasises safety and privacy among its other features.

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Its attention to security is established by the presence of a ‘state of the art security system with CCTV in the lifts and lobby area’ while restricting floor access only to those with elevator floor cards (Chandrasena 2009: 7–8). Atkinson and Flint have pointed out that an important reason that has prompted individuals to move into gated communities in England is a need for ‘total and absolute security’ even though a local police officer in one location had pointed out that ‘residents of the gated communities in his operational area regarded the surrounding neighborhoods as crime-prone localities, despite the fact that they had very low crime rates’ (2004: 879).

While the concern for security cannot be disregarded out of hand as an exaggeration, it is also clear in studies such as that undertaken by Atkinson and Flint (2004) that the offer of security can often be part of a package rather than constitute a response to a specific local phenomenon, which nevertheless, in the long run, becomes part of the mindset of the residents.

How does the Sri Lankan context compare in a consideration of safety and security? Petty crime in Colombo has increased in recent times, while the presence of an underworld has also become more visible mostly due to the linkages powerful politicians have with crime and the minimal or non-interference on the part of the police. While the news media has been reporting these activities since the 1980s, allowing for the emergence of a popular discourse on these issues, an academic exploration of crime, the underworld and related matters is yet to emerge. The popular discourse is being fuelled by coverage in sensationalist newspaper columns and works such as one mass-circulating Sinhala language novel called ‘Gini Avi Saha Gini Keli’15 (Firearms and Fireworks) and at least two very popular Sinhala language action movies in recent years where the hero acquires his identity by defeating well-connected criminal elements. All these point to the existence of a dynamic and popular discourse on criminality and criminals in the country. Apart from these developments, the civil war that continued for nearly

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15 The original book was written by a local journalist, Anura Horatious. Later the book was made into a film under the same title directed by Udayakantha Warnasuriya. Clippings of the film are readily available on the internet including at the following location: [http://www.srilankafilmcorp.com/theatre/video1.htm](http://www.srilankafilmcorp.com/theatre/video1.htm).
30 years (1980–2009) also ensured a great degree of political and social instability within society, which fed into a sense of personal insecurity, felt more acutely by the affluent. In this scenario, one could see the emergence of three new kinds of industries on the Sri Lankan economic horizon. These are: private security firms, providing both personnel and technology; insurance programmes specifically targeting riots and violence-related damage; and finally, the expansion of gated communities, which adopted the issue of security as one of their central marketing strategies. Therefore, the preoccupation with security in local gated communities stems from such concerns packaged as inherent features of gated communities as well as real local concerns regarding security.

It is this sense of fear and siege that was expressed by the following owners of luxury apartments in high-rise gated communities in Colombo and Rajagiriya:

It is dangerous to move around; too many check points and everyone seems to be armed. One does not know when a bomb might go off. In the streets life is uncertain; so we try to think of our place as a castle where we can control our security and have a better sense of our destiny…16

Out there is absolute chaos; One cannot deal with that kind of thing all the time. We go out only to work and when we have to visit places or friends. We exercise in here, we read in here and from up here even when we look down at the mess out there, we don’t see it.17

In these instances, the regular but somewhat normalised lack of order and insecurity which most people have learnt to deal with constitute the main concern that drove these particular individuals and their families to the safety of gated communities. The ‘unsafety’ in the exterior world is considered so threatening that the ‘safety’ inside cannot be compromised. It thus becomes apparent that the security

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16 Personal interview, Colombo 4, 2 March 2002. Throughout this article, gated community names have been withheld in instances where interviewed residents indicated a preference not to be mentioned in any public documents. The interview material for this article is drawn from a cluster of 42 interviews, conducted in 2002 and 2009, involving 10 housing sector sales executives and 32 residents of gated communities.

17 Personal interview, Rajagiriya, Colombo, 22 June 2009.
systems in place in gated communities, along with their enforced social segregation, are not aimed only at providing protection against serious crime; such systems also meet ‘an apparent desire’ (Atkinson and Flint 2004: 880).

Linked to the above is the issue of separation or segregation of gated communities from the city or older communities around them. Social segregation is not a new phenomenon previously unknown in Sri Lankan housing or urban space just as Falzon points out regarding the case of Mumbai where the *mohalla* (neighbourhood) principle was in operation for centuries. Prior to the advent of colonial rule, caste segregation in residential allocation was entrenched in Sri Lanka. Today this exists only in some locations of the rural hinterland as an invisible phenomenon. Similarly, in all the main urban centres, including Colombo, affluent neighbourhoods can be easily recognised by people. Ethnic segregation has also been a reality in Sri Lanka for a considerable time, in the context of which Colombo 6 and a number of other areas within Colombo city limits have a high concentration of ethnic Tamils, which has increased in recent times with the expansion of the civil war. This trend increased in recent times with the expansion of the civil war, while other neighbourhoods similarly have higher concentrations of Muslim or Sinhala communities. Nevertheless, a preference for segregation is not something that is easy to detect in public discourses or pronouncements, but is very much evident in private communications:

> It is a zoo. That is what the society has become. It has become a zoo. It is crazy, there is no discipline, no style and above all, there is hardly anyone to talk to in your own terms — Here, we do not interfere in other people’s affairs. We mind our business, spend quality time and in the evening most of the people here meet for a chat or at the gym or the rooftop. Some of us go for holidays together abroad or often to the coast down south. This is a very cozy place.18

What this individual narrates is her preference to live among people she considers her social equals. Given the historical presence of ethnic, religious and social segregation in patterns of residence, it has also been taken for granted by many as being something ‘natural’.

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18 Personal interview with gated community resident, Rajagiriya, 26 June 2009.
As a result, the kind of debates on the sustainability or suitability of gated communities due to their promotion of practices such as segregation that have emerged elsewhere (Atkinson and Flint 2004), have not emerged in Sri Lanka in the public domain, while intermittent local conversations do take place at an informal level. These local conversations are, however, mostly not so much hostile as indifferent towards gated communities.

The emergence of gated communities has definitely added a new dimension to this segregation. With the entry of gated communities into the housing sector, segregation became more pronounced and organised, externally enforced and technically monitored, and also much more widespread as a phenomenon. The earlier kind of segregation was the marking of residential areas which others could visit during festivals or other such occasions but could not aspire to move into except under exceptional circumstances. Gated communities on the other hand, began to emerge quite suddenly and that too often in places that were not traditionally considered affluent. Many suburban areas where such developments have been established in recent times, such as Rajagiriya and Thalawatugoda, were simply suburbs with no specific status marking. They contained large open spaces, bodies of water and rice fields that provided the new gated communities a spectacular view. In the process of this transformation, local people became mere spectators to a completely new phenomenon that in many cases also did not bring economic benefits to them once the construction phase was over and the new residents had moved in precisely due to the conscious and in-built practices of segregation. In other words, the concentration on self-sufficiency within the complexes and their linkages with the exterior world of up-market shopping areas and schools and medical facilities in the form of a network of 'safe corridors' beyond the gated communities and their immediate localities entrenched segregation in the long run. The aforementioned security concerns also further buttressed this segregated existence.

What’s In a Name?

The process and politics of naming gains additional significance in this context, marked by allusions to luxury, opulence, convenience, safety, and uniqueness. Names and the process of naming are impregnated with multiple meanings and politics that have to do with
power, image-making, satisfaction of desire, and the production of envy. In the larger political and cultural context of a society, place names often inform us as to what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten, who is dominant and who is marginal, and are replete with multiple meanings encoded with their own politics (Perera 2003). That is, when a place is named after something or somebody, it becomes part of a process of representation. At the same time, this process of naming links the newly named entities to the familiar or desired as opposed to the non-familiar and undesired. Naming, in this context, becomes one of the ways through which all types of housing complexes draw direct allegiance not only to the places they signify through the name itself, but also to the development projects in other localities of which they are meant to be a simulacrum, though they might not share epistemological and experiential foundations.

Interestingly, very few gated communities as well as other kinds of housing complexes developed by the private sector for the middle and affluent classes have Sinhala or Tamil names; it is as if the mere reference to such perceivably well-appointed enclaves in the local languages would diminish their exclusiveness or ‘global’ appeal. All of the gated enclaves under discussion and the numerous other apartment and housing complexes in Colombo and beyond bear names such as Sherwood Glade, King Arthur’s Court, Kensington Gardens, Windsor Park, Eden Gardens, Santino Valley, Olympus and Spencer Boulevard. Through naming, these complexes are deliberately and literally (dis)placed, and in that process are made epistemologically and semiotically porous in terms of time, space and experience.

Eden Gardens, designed by Australian architectural firm Harvie and Abignano in collaboration with Colombo’s Design Consortium Limited, is an expensive upscale housing development project. It is more typical of gated communities around the world, and its Australian collaboration, which is partly responsible for the choice of name, the developers consider an added value. Even though its promotional literature does not make the point, I was informed by a sales executive of Ceylinco Housing International that the complex ‘has an Australian theme accompanied by picket fences’.19

19 Personal interview, conducted on-site, 22 January 2002.
What is the relevance of this theme and such fences in a suburban site in Sri Lanka’s Western Province? The idea of the Garden of Eden, given its central importance in Christian mythology and theology, is perhaps quite familiar to a cross section of local people given that Christianity is a major religion in the country. However, in a rather ironical twist, the theme of ‘paradise lost’, so closely associated with the myth of Eden, does seem to make sense at this site given the barren nature of the land where there are no large trees and all other kinds of vegetation have been removed as part of the development project. Yet, it is precisely the pre-‘fall-of-man’ notion of earthly paradise that the Eden Gardens housing project attempts to conjure through its promotional material. For example, consider the following statement:

What beholds when you first enter? It is the lush surroundings. On one side, a majestic king coconut growth with its green tops and golden fruits that dot the horizon. On the other, golden fields of paddy swaying in waves as the gentle breeze caresses it. And beyond stands a sprawling rubber estate that appoints the landscape with a green belt. Within all this, lies Eden Gardens. The haven for your home.20

It is amidst these very tropical surroundings that the Australian dream of paradise is situated. Nevertheless, by the very nature of their being, these three green zones which constitute the central point of departure for the notion of paradise in Eden Gardens are also a sign of the fleeting nature of paradise in the biblical sense of the word. The paddy field, the rubber estate and the coconut plantation (not part of the complex and owned by other people), can easily disappear in the wake of the kind of over-development that is taking place in this area. If so, the only reference to the Garden of Eden left would be the area allocated for a common park within the complex and not any vistas of foliage and vegetation beyond.

Naming and conceptualisation also indicate a process of famil-iarisation, as mentioned earlier. Dovey clusters the project and house names he encountered into the various provinces of meaning they evoke. He points out that the most common and consistent theme is linked to nature and to Mediterranean, Spanish, French, and Italian

20 Quoted from brochure published by Ceylinco Housing International (no date).
settings, while others are linked to ‘British ancestry, such as Ascot and Mayfair, capturing connotations of tradition, class privilege and heritage’ (Dovey 1999: 148–49). Falzon states in relation to Hiranandani Gardens of Bombay, ‘there is a section with botanical names…one with US suburbs — Birchwood, Brentwood…a Gaelic one…and an Italian section’ (2004: 152). It is quite a similar phenomenon that takes place in Sri Lanka as well. Naming has resulted in achieving a kind of familiarisation with a particular package of fantasy and desire that housing developers have created for potential house owners. This package is now being considered a goal, a collective ideal, one that is steeped in a hazy memory of the colonial past and popular notions of greatness that are willingly accepted by clients. We may also note that despite the existence of a long tradition of monumental and religious architecture in Sri Lanka, which are often emulated in the construction of contemporary public buildings, there is no such influence of tradition in the construction of individual homes because, it would appear, that beyond a point these cannot be used to convey notions of greatness and uniqueness.21 Taken in the sense of D. B. Massey’s argument for place, it is ‘precisely through the particularity of linkage to that “outside” [through naming in this instance] which is therefore itself part of what constitutes the place’ that such spaces define their place while maintaining ‘internal conflicts’.22 That is, in this particular context, more than the local, what is in fact needed is a reference to an ‘outside’ or ‘exterior’ reality of uniqueness that then becomes a readily marketable entity as well as a coveted consumer product. In this scenario, whatever

21 The *walaunu* or manor houses are homes of the traditional elites that may vary in style, elegance and uniqueness depending on the fortunes of the individual families concerned. They tend to incorporate aspects of traditional pre-colonial Sri Lankan architecture, including the use of inner courtyards, as well as Dutch and later colonial influences. However, as a housing model or in terms of naming, waluwas are not a readily useable model or tradition that can be drawn upon to establish and convey such notions as uniqueness and affluence. In the contemporary socioeconomic scenario, it is the mass-produced gated communities and other such community properties that are considered more suitable for use by the affluent.

contradictions that may emerge in real terms tend to disappear in so far as the consumers are concerned.

At this point, let me refer to an observation made by Paul Carter in his discussions of the dynamics of place naming, with particular reference to the naming of Cape Inscription in Australia. According to him, ‘this metaphorical way of speaking is a pointer to the way spatial history must interpret its sources’ (Carter 1995: 137). At the same time, ‘it also indicates, concisely and poetically, the cultural place where spatial history begins: not in a particular year, nor in a particular place, but in the act of naming’ and ‘by the act of naming, space is transformed symbolically into a place, that is, a space with a history’ (ibid.). It is in the context of Carter’s observations that the above place names become further problematised. For instance, when in contemporary Sri Lanka housing communities are named King Arthur’s Court, Eden Gardens, Kensington Park and the like, how would their spatial history interpret their sources? If the act of naming transforms space into place — a space with a history — what would be the history of Sherwood Glade with references to mythical Robin Hood in Malabe and Eden Gardens in Talawatugoda? Where and how does that history begin? An interpretation of these spaces based only on the realities of their inceptional moment will invariably remain partial or will be replete with contradictions because rather than being a history that has progressed over time, such an account will only be a compilation of ideas represented as fantasies that became cultural artifacts and spaces of desire and envy with no historical reference to their local context. The local realities begin not only with the budgetary and spatial needs that impinge on the construction of these houses, but also with their consumption.

The Lived Reality

How are these domestic spaces defined in the process of consumption by the local? The acts of owning, occupying and habitation can and will constitute a process of redefining these spaces to a lesser or greater degree. Since my first encounter with gated communities in the local context, in subsequent visits to both the descriptive and theoretical literature on the subject from other locations as well as to the physical manifestation of the phenomenon locally, I have been urged to explore this redefinition. This exploration has resulted in an unearthing of both the redefinition that takes place within
the gated communities as well as the limitations placed upon such attempts by the very nature of these developments.

One aspect of defining the specificities of these spaces is to do with the introduction of features such as pictures of religious or political icons hung on walls, furniture, flower arrangements, family portraits, and certain structural modifications where they are allowed. These places then, are re-defined through the act of consumption and acquire, to a greater or lesser degree, a history for themselves. Since the 1990s, many high-rise gated communities have come up in and around Colombo 6\textsuperscript{23} where there has been, at least since the 1960s, a significant ethnic Tamil presence. Many of these housing developments, which never carried any Tamil names, were exclusively marketed for and in many cases purchased by Tamil residents who were displaced since the early 1980s as a result of the expansion of the Sri Lankan civil war in the north-east. In many cases, the houses were bought for relatives in Sri Lanka by their kin living in diasporic communities in Western Europe, North America and Australasia. The expectation was that they could be secure residences located in a relatively safe ethnic enclave. In almost all housing units that I have seen, a sense of both communal and personal histories have been created by reproducing what was once familiar and was lost as well as what is today’s aspiration in the interior of the housing units, while the exterior remains relatively untouched. These include religious icons, personal portraits of family members lost in conflict, photographs of those who had migrated abroad often posing in decidedly ‘foreign’ locations that serve to re-establish their diasporic identity. It is the remittances of the latter that made it possible for their local kin to purchase the housing unit concerned. In some cases, the pictures hung on walls included familiar photos or paintings of landscapes from their original home

\textsuperscript{23} It must be noted that the apartment towers that have come up in Colombo 6 encompass significant variations in terms of price structure, aesthetics and the consumption ability of those who own them. Nevertheless, security and control of outsiders’ access to the interiors remain a primary concern for most of these places given the fact that many of them are occupied by people who have been at least once displaced or otherwise touched by war. Quite simply, one could say that some of these housing developments are ‘more gated than others’.
locations. It is a similar situation that Cheran describes with regard to the recreation of space in Tamil diasporic communities in Canada. According to him, the ‘landscape and nature that have been left literally and metaphorically reemerge as interior landscapes in the living rooms of Tamils’ (Cheran 2007: 190). In this situation, what has happened is the moving of the once familiar exterior of the locality that has been left behind into the interior of the new diasporic space in the context of which jasmine and hibiscus trees along with other perceptibly ‘appropriate’ plants decorate rooms while photographs depicting once familiar landscapes of the ‘homeland’ adorn the walls (ibid.). In the diasporic space described by Cheran as well as in the situation I have referred to above marked by war, the interior of housing units become a surface where multiple memories of both individuals and nostalgic landscapes familiar to entire communities are inscribed.

These instances exemplify the defining of the house space into one that makes sense to the occupiers; they do not in any way contradict the intentions of the developers by subverting or undermining the discourse that markets these homesteads. My quest for such subversions was driven by a preoccupation with what I termed the ‘standardising of taste’ that these developments have managed to institutionalise. It was also fuelled by theoretical expositions put forward by scholars like Massey, that show the very real nature of the ‘placed-ness’ of communities that inhabit comparable developments elsewhere. It is in this quest that I encountered the limitations placed on the inhabitants of these spaces in achieving such a sense of placedness.

For instance, many occupants re-organise the space within, as the existing pre-defined and seemingly ‘universal’ spaces do not serve the needs of their specific lives. One occupant of a house had converted her ‘den’ into a miniature Buddhist shrine with a statue of the Buddha and images of a host of popular deities while another had transformed his extra bedroom into a fully equipped home theater where his family would watch Bollywood movies in the evenings. Similarly, in an act not too often seen, another resident changed his imported light fittings into locally manufactured clay and brass fittings accompanied by photos of ruined temples from the ancient citadels of Sri Lanka’s dry zone in a frenzy of cultural nationalism, while another unconsciously transported the interior of his thoroughly contemporary and globalised home into the colonial era grandeur by the placement at strategic locations of select pieces of period
furniture he had inherited from his family. Another example is of an occupant who chose to re-name her house ‘Ranabima’ which literally means ‘war front’ or ‘battle ground’ in Sinhala, shedding the original ‘globalised’ name that accompanied her house. Nevertheless, the word Ranabima in itself is replete with complexities when chosen as a name for one’s home. However, according to the narratives of neighbours, the act of renaming makes sense in this specific personal context as the owner experienced numerous conflicts within her family circle during the acquisition, and may have opted to indicate her triumph in a family feud through the name.

Of course a discussion of this process must invariably address the constraints placed on the processes of consumption by the developers themselves. The trend apparent is that the more expensive and exclusive the complex, the greater the restrictions on clients regarding modifications and changes to housing units. Such complexes make it a part of their contracts with clients to ensure that the exteriors remain the same for a considerable number of years with no changes in colour, adornments and other such modifications that a person might carry out to a house owned by them. Veiled in the guise of a maintenance package that provides cleaning and security, these contracts hold residents to conditions that are otherwise unacceptable to a person who holds legal rights to the space similar to the cases presented regarding Sao Paulo, Istanbul and Mumbai. Lower end complexes allow much more space for adjustments and modifications.

It is in the longer term process of inhabiting and grappling with the names and their allusions that the significance of the genotypical structures will pale, and become one more socio-historical fact about an era when certain types of architecture were globalised. Just as the name and type dominate the analysis when they are initiated for purposes of capital, other lived realities too begin to constitute the narrative at some point. It is in relation to such a phenomenon that Massey argues that ‘what gives a place its specificity is…the face that is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus’ that ‘allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local’.  

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Conclusion

Let me now attempt to bring this initial reading to an interim conclusion. I stress the word interim because my reading is neither complete nor exhaustive. For me, and especially in the context of contemporary Sri Lankan sociology, it is an ongoing process that needs to be further researched, contemplated, debated, and theorised. My attempt has not been to dismantle the idea of gated communities. It is clear that they are now as established as any other kind of abode in the local context, irrespective of the nature of their spatial, aesthetic or behavioural impact on society. However, as such mass produced housing units 'represent an apotheosis of the dream, where suburban mythology surfaces in a manner that makes it available for interpretation — as text, as spatial program and as place' (Dovey 2001: 140), my attempt was to initiate an opening for such an interpretation with regard to the up-market housing sector within the Sri Lankan context.

In terms of that interpretation, I draw a number of conclusions. The emergence and the rapid expansion of gated communities in Sri Lanka has taken place in response to specifically local conditions as well as due to influences of global discourses on housing in general and gated communities in particular. In this situation, when one talks about the preoccupations with security and segregation as well as the lack of uniqueness in architectural attributes of gated communities, it becomes apparent that many of these issues are simultaneously both local and global. At a certain level, the consequences of war and the general sense of insecurity felt in the country as well as the global packaging of gated communities as ‘safe havens’ contributed to the expansion and popularisation of these housing developments. On the other hand, the global stress on separation of these communities from older more organic communities conflated with the locally established patterns of social segregation. In other words, gated communities are new kinds of texts where one could discern very clearly both local and global influences from the dynamics of design to patterns of consumption.

On the matter of taste, the mass production and resultant standardisation of taste in relation to these housing complexes is a given. That is, it is not merely a practice, but an omnipresent discourse in which the developers and architects hold sway with unrivalled authority while the consumers of these gated enclaves become willing and
at times passive participants in this discourse and in the ultimate process of consuming. In other words, the present social realities experienced locally, which I briefly outlined earlier, privilege housing developers and architects to such an extent that they are allowed to be fountains of a certain kind of taste. In the context of Sri Lankan gated developments, the manner in which this kind of taste is formed and made to inform the potential acquirer of this taste is through a not-so-subtly veiled language that alludes to sophistications and riches that are always a step beyond one’s own present reality. An allusion to all-encompassing comforts and amenities, exclusivity, uniqueness, affordable prices, and to nature and its beneficial effects are further buttressed by the ever-present need for security — all of which work well in making these housing options attractive to the upper and upwardly mobile classes of the country.

The popularity of these complexes indicate one thing very clearly: uniqueness or individualised taste is not what they offer. As we have seen, personal idiosyncrasies of taste can only manifest themselves within the interiors of these houses, in a domain of relative innocence and invisibility, through acts of consumption. At the same time though, by accepting the subversion of these qualities and by becoming willing partners of a powerful discourse, the consumers of these housing complexes acquire a sense of personal security, affluence and distance from the ‘ordinary’ dynamics of the city and its suburbs. In a society unsettled by civil war and violent politics, and in a context where social hierarchies are pronounced and part of a long established way of living, that oasis is what many consumers of these housing units look for in order to ‘live happily ever after’.

References


Part III: Imagining the Urban
Sri Lanka: Terror, Anxiety and the Unstable Nation — A Physical Biography of Violence

Anoma Pieris

On 1 December 2006, a bomb-laden trishaw travelling into oncoming traffic, rammed head-on into the convoy of Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Sri Lanka’s secretary of defence and brother to the president, in the city of Colombo, the country’s commercial capital. The vehicle exploded causing several casualties, although Rajapakse remained unhurt. The physical inscription of the incident on the city would take two forms. First, the face of a screaming man was temporarily painted on the shrapnel ridden boundary wall of the house closest to the junction.1 By the end of January the residents of that house would repaint and repair their wall underlining Colombo’s determined erasure of evidence of the ongoing conflict. Second, a traffic system described as ‘uniflow’ was introduced in Colombo with major roadways devoted to six lanes of one-way traffic. The militarisation of urban life already evident in the form of army checkpoints at politically sensitive areas of the city became a pervasive everyday reality, structuring school-bound traffic and reorganising everyday activities. As the fighting escalated in the north and east of the country and the threat of reprisals through further suicide bombings increased, Colombo’s residents followed circuitous paths around their city.

This article studies how terrorism operated outside designated conflict zones to erode the routine bound stability of everyday urban life in Sri Lanka’s prominent cities, arguing that it exploited the insecurity associated with urban modernity. In Asian cities, where

1 The Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence commissioned an artist from an advertising agency to paint this image (The Sunday Times, Sri Lanka, 31 December 2006).
the dialectical operation of modernity is otherwise blurred by pre-industrial economies and lingering colonial practices, the suicide bomber deploys guerilla tactics in an urban jungle that is often more opaque and sinister than those in the rural hinterland. In fact, the messy hybridity of the Asian city enables such attacks by providing a camouflage for sleeper-cells and as in the case of the bomb-laden trishaw, by concealing deadly weapons in the most basic apparatus. Such violent and messy encounters with modernity underwrite the technological transformation of Asian cities. They resonate with Stephen Graham’s (2008) argument that under the prerogatives of the ‘War on Terror’, urban operations or counter-insurgency warfare has increasingly oriented US defense strategies towards alternative systems and technologies capable of dealing with cities in the Global South into which refugees and insurgents retreat in the face of offensive military action. Colombo is an example of such a city, and was the target of suicide bombers and a safe haven for minority groups fleeing peripheral towns and jungle battlegrounds in the north and the east. It was an equivalent space of embattlement, of guerilla warfare and strategic militarisation that became increasingly entrenched during the 25 years of Sri Lanka’s civil war. Colombo was the site from which the nation’s ‘war on terror’ was launched.

As a former national capital Colombo has always been an anomaly: a city underwritten by colonial history and commercial interests. The city is devoid of the cultural symbolism, ethnic significance or religious importance that may be considered useful for hegemonic constructions of identity. In fact, with the creation of an alternative administrative centre in Sri Jayawardenepura, during the 1980s, Colombo lost its political significance as the centre of the nation. Yet, throughout the ethnic conflict, it remained the repeated focus of suicide bombings, whereas other indigenous capitals attracted fewer such attacks. This contradiction begs a comparison between several Sri Lankan cities in order to understand what is really at stake in the militarisation of urban life and the displacement of urban populations. Its wider context is a study of the materiality of both physical and virtual spaces of the Sri Lanka conflict. Accordingly, accounts in the media, on diasporic websites and in secondary literature on the conflict inform the approach used in this article, which links urban geography, history and material culture studies. Such interdisciplinary discourses have reinvigorated the field of architecture post 9/11.
Traditionally connected to the history of public and private institutions, which are containers for specific social, cultural or political programmes, urban histories offer a chronology of spaces occupied by built form. Violent encounters due to war or terrorism present an alternative history, emptying cities of their symbolic cultural content and precipitating the erasure of connected institutional templates. Citizens often reoccupy these spatial and social voids with memorials and monuments in efforts at recovering their lost cultural terrain. Reconstruction functions in two ways, either to erase dystopian memories or to eulogise them.

In the anthology *After the World Trade Center*, editors Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin (2002: ix) comment on what they describe as ‘the task of history, the responsibility of architecture, and the needs of a living city, the whole city’, in an effort to seize the opportunity for redefining the city post 9/11. Sorkin’s vision of a polycentric metropolis with Manhattan at its centre is nostalgic for the microspatial ‘village’ experiences long cherished in that city before the construction of the twin towers (Sorkin 2002: 198–200, 202). However, as the collection acknowledges, its global economic significance, its multicultural users and its political centrality will be the determinants for the projects selected (Sorkin and Zukin: xi). While for New Yorkers, Ground Zero opens up a discursive and interactive civic space that might move beyond the boundaries of global private capital, reparation is also necessary due to the cognitive disorder caused by the disruption to everyday routines and emotive spatial practices (Low 2002: 165, 167). The politicisation of memory is also inevitable in the desire for a fitting memorial for a ‘wounded skyline’ (Boyer 2002: 109). As argued by Neil Smith, there has been a ‘powerful nationalization of grief, anger and reciprocal terror’ (2002: 98). The patriotic inscription of the physical memorial risks hardening these sentiments.

The unravelling of these arguments of trauma and memory around an empty site demonstrates that urban environments are highly complex registers of violence, and that the destruction of a shared sociality is far more critical than physical or infrastructural damage. Although the Sri Lankan examples do not bear comparison with 9/11 they do offer variations on the same theme albeit dealt with very differently. These differences offer important insights into urban society in South Asia.
Terrorism in Asia

During the post-colonial decades, terrorist activities and government responses in many Asian nations have periodically closed down access to public spaces and impacted the operation of a consensual public sphere. War, terrorism and the militarisation of quotidian life has propagated a pervasive culture of fear that is inscribed on the city and the nation. A very different politics of reconstruction results, due to the often brutal tactics of surveillance and punishment that is integral to the operation of the nation-state, producing levels of violence that are also mirrored in the activities of terror groups — as evident in the recent attacks in Mumbai and Lahore.

Although infrastructural networks such as road systems, water systems, ports, and power stations remain central to battle strategies that incapacitate an urban environment, for example the imposition of an embargo related to medical equipment and personnel, or its reverse in a suicide attack on a strategic urban facility — an oil refinery, an airport, a power plant — it is important to note that the dismantling of social networks appear to be far more significant for strategic gains (Graham 2004). This is possibly because in Asian cities, like Colombo, infrastructure is not networked to the same degree as in post-industrial cities and power failures, road closures or water cuts are ordinary rather than extraordinary occurrences.

The urban experience of terrorism in Asia offers a very different methodology for urban history, and produces forms of subjectivity for which the meaning of place is fundamentally conflicted and internal to national experience. Whereas political power struggles over resources or territories have traditionally identified an external enemy, terrorism, in contrast, posits an enemy within; an unpredictable foe that targets civilians along with other political, economic or military targets. The protagonists in such covert forms of conflict are often identified as religious or cultural minorities marginalised by majoritarian democratic systems and further radicalised due to economic, racial or cultural discrimination. While providing the categories of difference against which proper citizenship is measured, these groups hold up their neglected subjectivity as a mirror to the erring nation-state and offer clandestine forms of resistance to it. The neighbourhood, the city and the nation, each become the geographic stage for their operations, displacing fixed and consensual battlefields of the past with a familiar territory shaped by everyday social practices. In doing
so, the violence of conflicts fought at some relative distance is literally brought home to civilian populations, disturbing their complacency towards and complicity with the dominant political order. At its best, terrorism uses the language of fear to demand reparation for deep-rooted cultural injustices. At its worst, it is a form of violent retribution sought by groups who are unwilling or unable to explore political solutions for their grievances.

The Sri Lankan Conflict

In the Sri Lankan conflict, which was primarily fought by members of two different ethnic communities, namely the Sinhalese Sri Lanka Armed Forces and Tamil separatist groups, terrorism was a much disputed term used to describe a prolonged and violent political confrontation. The main opponents in the conflict were the Sri Lankan government, who defend a unitary state run from the southwest of the island, and the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who demanded separation for the north and east. Although both these parties deployed terror tactics in varied forms, the army is backed by a democratically elected and predominantly Sinhalese nationalist state. Its expansion and increasing military strength occurred through successive attempts at recapturing lost territory underwriting its growth from a ceremonial force to a 200,000-strong establishment. A protracted military conflict also impacted media freedoms, silencing varied forms of political critique.

In comparison, the LTTE as a militant organisation remained outside the political system, despite several failed attempts at including it. This group, which was originally one of many separatist fractions, ruthlessly eliminated its competitors to emerge as the sole representative of the Tamil nationalist cause. Although its administration and institutions paralleled those of an independent nation-state, its line of command and operations continued to be military rather than political. The LTTE is/was supported by a bourgeoisie Tamil diaspora with genuine grievances against the nation-state, whose contributions funded the armed conflict. By silencing other

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2 SLA refers to the Sri Lankan Army, SLN to the Navy and SLAF the Air force.
3 In March 2004 a breakaway faction from the east under General Karuna was drawn into the political process.
dissenting voices within the Tamil community it became the sole representative of minority claims, at home and abroad. LTTE terrorism took varied forms, outside the realm of armed confrontation, including suicide bombings.

Inaugurated by an exclusionary linguistic nationalism of the post-Independence period and historically linked to pre-colonial enmities and divisive colonial policies, the Sri Lankan conflict pitted two cultural nationalist positions against one another, of a Sinhalese-Buddhist majority (74 per cent) and a Tamil minority (18.1 per cent). Key events in the conflict included ethnic riots in 1958, 1977 and 1983, invasion by Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) in 1987, a military campaign to claim the northern city of Jaffna in 1995 and ceasefires in 1994–95 and 2002–06. The years 2007–09 witnessed protracted military offensives in the face of which the LTTE retreated and was defeated militarily in May 2009. The milestones of the Sri Lankan conflict are thus varied and are marked by political assassinations, suicide bombings, internecine conflict, and foreign military intervention. Furthermore, the effects of the conflict were impressed on the island’s geography at many levels. National territory was remapped in relation to ethnicity and culture. Intense military conflict took place in peripheral spaces, such as jungles and border villages, with the urban center as the prize. While cities in the conflict zone, in the north and east, were impacted through continuous bombardment from the air and by the activities of occupying forces, suicide bombings provided a form of counter-attack that destabilised everyday life in the south-west. Both emotional and material losses from these confrontations are inscribed as visible wounds in urban space and in the aftermath of violence, physical memorials such as graveyards and monuments emerge to fill the resultant social voids. In short, the competing cultural nationalist ideologies and the varied terror tactics produced by the Sri Lankan conflict are variously inscribed on its cities in a physical biography of violence.

As argued in this article, the physical inscription of violence occurs across Sri Lanka’s major cities, which respond according to the meanings and symbolisms ascribed to them, both historically and

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Footnote:

4 Figures prior to ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka Census of Population and Housing 1981, Department of Census and Statistics. A subsequent census in 2001 was incomplete due to the conflict.
Sri Lanka

cusp

post-nationalism. While Colombo remains dominant as the economic and commercial centre and the home of the media and English-speaking elites, its colonial origins and lack of cultural significance for nationalist discourse makes it reliant on other urban sites for symbolic discursive content. The hegemonic cultural meanings that are typically constructed through the dominant city in a nation are thus displaced onto alternative cities — Jaffna, Sri Jayawardenepura and Kandy (Map 10.1).
The Prehistory of the Conflict

Between 31 May and 2 June 1981, during a visit of two government ministers accompanied by several high-ranking officers and security forces to the northern city of Jaffna both uniformed men and groups of hooligans went on a rampage destroying the market area of Jaffna, the office of the Tamil newspaper, the home of the member of parliament for Jaffna, and the Jaffna Public Library (Figure 10.1). They targeted those institutions for which the predominantly Tamil city was renowned: its erudite population, strong political will and commercial robustness. The attack sought reprisal for the deaths of two police officers and a United National Party (UNP) candidate by Tamil militants, who had been consolidating their positions since 1975, with bank robberies and armed confrontations with the local police. The news of the destruction did not appear in the island’s newspapers until much later and when raised in parliament exposed the deep-rooted racial prejudices of Sinhalese parliamentarians and growing tension between ethnic parties. The burning of the Jaffna Public Library and reportedly 95,000 volumes was the first of several pivotal moments in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. It targeted the institutions of the Tamil minority in their ethnocultural capital.

The political context for the rising tensions with Jaffna was the liberalisation of Sri Lanka under the right-wing UNP. Brought into government through a landslide victory in 1977, the UNP faced an ethnically Tamil opposition (Tamil United Liberation Front or TULF) in parliament for the first time in history. Concomitant with their desire for liberalisation was the UNP’s attempt to camouflage its modernity through traditionalist ideals. President J. R. Jayawardene had embarked on a project to deliver a ‘Free and Just Society’ (Nivahal haa Dharmishta Samajaya) by following the model of the righteous king Ashoka (Dharma Ashoka), and giving a Buddhist face to economic liberalisation. As observed by John Richardson (2004: 48), Jayawardene responded to ‘concerns that reforms emphasizing individualism and entrepreneurship would threaten Sri Lanka’s traditional values’.

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6 Ibid.
Figure 10.1: The Jaffna Public Library following Renovations in 2010

*Source:* Photograph by the author.
A constituitive act in establishing this new society was the relocation of the administrative capital at Sri Jayawardenepeura, a marshland south-east of the capital, symbolising a break from colonial history. It was the city whose past glory was associated with the unification of Sri Lanka under a single monarch, Parakramabahu VI, who famously defeated the Tamil king of Jaffna, Kanakasooriya Cinkaiariyan, incorporating that kingdom into a unitary state. He was the last Sinhala king to do so. The creation of Sri Jayawardenepeura in 1978 as the new locus of political power drew historic parallels with the shift of the Indian and Pakistani capitals to New Delhi and Islamabad (respectively) on the path to decolonisation. However, it also revived ethnic enmities of the pre-colonial era. A new parliament was commissioned and completed in 1983 in a regionalist aesthetic derived from the indigenous vernacular. Designed by a local architect, Geoffrey Bawa, the parliament (Figure 10.2) was conceptualised as a democratic cluster of pavilions nestling in a picturesque island on a lake. Sri Lanka thus had a new indigenous capital derived from its pre-colonial past.

In July 1983, following the return to Colombo of the bodies of 13 soldiers killed in Jaffna, ethnic riots broke out in the city and its suburbs and to a lesser extent in other cities and townships. There is little doubt that the violence was politically instigated and that it victimised middle-class Tamil families. Wandering mobs equipped with electoral lists looted and set fire to Tamil homes and properties and on some occasions killed Tamil civilians who were attempting to escape. As recounted in 2004 by the Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, ‘casualties amounted to nearly 1000 dead, 18,000 properties were destroyed, mainly by fire and thousands of others were injured in incidents of violence’.7 The burnt out shells of middle class houses continued to interrupt the picturesque landscape of the city for over a decade, reminding Sinhalese neighbours and visitors of a shameful encounter that would act as a catalyst for change.

Both these incidents, which were reactions by the Sinhalese population to rising sectarian conflict in the north and east, were disproportionately violent and built on majority resentment regarding the perceived advantages afforded to minority groups during the

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Figure 10.2: Parliament at Sri Jayawardenepura

Source: Photograph by the author.
colonial period. Responses such as these, which victimised a minority, converted political resistance to ethnic conflict and polarised the nation along communal lines. In time, the burnt out buildings were rebuilt. Although the Jaffna Library was partly reconstructed in 1984 it was once again caught in the crossfire between the Sri Lankan army and LTTE in 1985. It was repaired once more during the 1990s. Similarly, Tamil residential properties in Colombo were rebuilt or sold, thus covering up the shame of the July 1983 riots, but its effects would remain intransigent. The rioters’ aim of destabilising a minority community and delivering a political message regarding the intolerance of sectarian resistance produced a bitter Tamil diaspora of refugees and economic migrants escaping the conflict. The riots were the trigger for the consolidation of a resilient Tamil nationalism.

These two incidents effectively imposed a political conflict onto civil society. The conflict was no longer a battle between the government and a political resistance movement but had identified ethnic difference across class. Reflecting on the government’s response to the riots in the Broken Palmyrah, Rajan Hoole and Daya Somasundaram observed of the politician Lalith Athulathmudali (later to become minister of national security):

He had not a word to say in sympathy for frightened Tamils crowded in indescribable conditions in refugee camps…neither the President nor the Cabinet, nor even a single Sinhalese politician visited to commiserate even briefly, or to promise relief or rehabilitation. (Hoole et al. 1990: 69)

Educated, relatively wealthy and connected to a wider Tamil diaspora, middle-class Tamil emigrants would soon publicise what they interpreted as their betrayal at the hands of the Sri Lankan government. Cultural destruction, meted out in the burning of the library would be compared to Nazi acts of genocide, in what seemed a disproportionate reaction to the escalation of conflict. Armed conflict between the LTTE and the IPKF (1987–90), India’s response to rising refugee numbers in the country’s south and the resultant acts of violence attributed to them, augmented these grievances. This violent prehistory saw the reshaping of social democracy as

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ethno-nationalism, while the reticence of the majority Sinhalese regarding the riots and the ambivalent response of the justice system revealed growing political insularity and ethnic prejudice. Although visual evidence of the riots was erased over time, its insidious politics festered, launching the Sinhalese majority, represented by the Sri Lankan armed forces, into a protracted military conflict with Tamil separatist groups.

**Bombardment in the North**

Urban warfare, as defined by the many geographers who have recently revisited this term, takes multiple forms with the rapid urbanisation of the Global South. In their discussion of the relationships between cities and war, Campbell, Graham and Monk (2007) differentiate between war with unintended urban impacts; urban war or the city as the theatre of war; and urbicide — where urbanity is the strategic objective of violence. In their work, the term ‘urbicide’, which originally described the destruction of local neighbourhoods through large scale urban development — Haussmanization or Battery Park City — was usefully extended to study military tactics during the Iraq War. Whereas all three of these types of warfare were apparent in Jaffna and northern/north-eastern Sri Lanka, theories of ‘urbicide’, described as the ‘complex mutual interpellation of violent politics and metropolitan existence’ (ibid.) are most applicable. The city of Jaffna, which had been the capital of a Tamil kingdom for long periods during pre-colonial times, became the prize being fought over in the military conflict, during the early 1990s, emerging as the projected capital of the separatist state due to its centrality for Tamil culture. Internecine conflict among rival militant groups, army bombardment and cross fire, and government embargos and curfews converted the city into a perpetual battlefield as separatists took arms against the SLA and used the city as a refuge and a shield.

Early University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) special reports on the bombing of Jaffna provide us with examples of the effects of mortar shelling. Buildings caught in the crossfire between the army

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and militants were invariably destroyed (Figure 10.3), while residents fleeing the conflict often abandoned their homes completely. The conflict between the LTTE and the IPKF in 1987 is described thus:

The famed cadjan fences of Jaffna were burnt; sometimes whole settlements of huts were burned. Invariably houses, or public buildings were shelled or bombed. Kondavil, Kokuvil, Urumpirai, Kopay, Manipay, Sandilipay, Pandatheruppu, Chavakachcheri, Suthumalai… there was hardly any village to tell a different story. (Hoole et al. 1990: 358)

From 1990 to 1995 the LTTE established itself in Jaffna, running a de facto administration complete with judiciary, postal services and taxation — the skeletal infrastructure of an independent nation-state. These new institutions had typically occupied existing structures but in a few instances new structures were built. During the aerial bombardment of Jaffna, several institutions would suffer the same fate as the library. 

As observed by Karthigesu Sivathamby (2005: 19–20):

the environs of the library that lie on the east, southeast and south are in ruins. The one busy main street is an area with broken walls and overgrown shrubs. It is a picture of desolation. The Rest House is not there, the former Town Hall, an example of exquisite Victorian architecture is rubble…

In October 1995, following the breakdown of a previous cease-fire agreement between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, the army marched on Jaffna in what was variously interpreted as an attempt at liberation or occupation. This dual interpretation would accompany all subsequent offensives, following the LTTE retreat from the north to north-east. Fearful of the consequences and encouraged by the LTTE there was a mass exodus of the population of Jaffna into the surrounding jungle. Moreover, the LTTE began to dismantle buildings and transport the material for reconstruction in the jungle camp thus physically removing elements of the city. 

The UTHR who maintain that the exodus out of Jaffna was coercive observe that:

As the first two weeks of November wore on, the LTTE got about removing things in the houses of what they regarded as valuable
Figure 10.3: Damaged Buildings near the Jaffna Public Library

Source: Photograph by the author.
Teams of boys worked like termites to gobble up houses in about two hours.  

The exodus out of Jaffna in 1995, and from towns subsequently administered by the LTTE in 2007–09 — their capital Kilinochchi and Mulaitivu — reveal this additional strategy of depopulation in the face of the Sri Lankan army advance in order to deliberately empty out the significance of the urban centre, deflating the army’s sense of victory or conquest. These two forms of coercion institutionalised to different degrees by the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE and instrumentalised through actual or threatened forms of violence cast ordinary civilians as perpetual and transient victims in Eelam’s symbolic ethnogeography.

Conversely, in the cities outside the military zone ‘urbicide’ manifested itself in two very different forms: first, LTTE suicide bombings generated reciprocal patterns of violence in the cities of the south, forcing Sinhalese civilians to also experience material losses, displacement and grief. Second, the cities themselves adopted a defensive armature and increased surveillance, constraining urban life and the civil public sphere.

### Suicide Bombings in the South

The removal of the administrative capital to a politically and culturally significant site undoubtedly diminished the role of Colombo, the former colonial capital and contemporary commercial capital. However, in the minds of Sri Lankans it remains the most powerful city, home to the Presidential Secretariat, the financial district, the country’s premier institutions, the port, and residences of many political elites. Multiple suicide attacks on Colombo over the years have reiterated this perception. Between 1986 and 2000, Colombo’s airport, central bus stand, esplanade, World Trade Centre, and Independence Square each were the site of suicide bombings. However, in some of these instances the locations of the blasts were only incidental to political assassinations. Sri Lankan President R. Premadasa died in a suicide attack on 1 May 1993. An abortive attempt on the life of the former President Kumaratunga in front of the

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Colombo Town Hall, in December 1999, left her partially blind. The assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, in 1991 took the LTTE struggle across to Indian turf.

While public buildings such as the Town Hall or Independence Hall provided the institutional backdrop for assassination attempts, two suicide attacks in Colombo made the link between the economy, the nation and its institutions explicit. A vehicle bomb explosion by suicide cadre in front of the Central Bank (Figure 10.4), Colombo, on 31 January 1996, can be interpreted as a direct hit on the national economy. Fifty-five civilians were killed and 1,200 injured in this incident, which also destroyed adjacent commercial buildings and crippled the main thoroughfare of the Central Business District. Michael Roberts (2004: 32) interprets this incident as ‘a multi-purpose project’, which ‘sought to destroy the country’s gold reserves and told the Sinhala-dominated bureaucracy and Colombo’s elite, who allowed the lower classes to do their fighting, that the LTTE’s reach was unlimited’.\footnote{A comment made by Roberts while explaining a photograph showing ‘Wounded civilians after bombing of Central Bank, 31 January 1996, plus background view’.

An attack on the World Trade Centre, the tallest building in the city and a symbol of corporate power and private capital was targeted in 1997. The issues at stake in this second incident are not dissimilar to those that governed the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York on 9/11, although at a more local scale. The separatists targeted Colombo’s centrality in the national economy and the continuous economic discrimination that had marginalised minorities at the nation’s geographic periphery.

As described above, suicide attacks on Colombo can only be interpreted in economic or political terms. The city had no symbolic value from a cultural nationalist viewpoint because 443 years of colonisation (1505–1948) by successive European powers had shaped it differently from indigenous culture. For the majority Sinhalese, cultural symbolism is largely concentrated in pre-colonial religious sites related to Buddhism. In an attempt to draw religious issues and prejudices to the surface, and reinforce ethnic divisions, the LTTE next shifted its focus to the historic city of Anuradhapura and the last indigenous capital, Kandy.

The reasons attributed to the attack on Anuradhapura (14 May 1985) in the North Central Province, which has several SLAF bases,
Figure 10.4: Bombed out Shell of the Central Bank building, Colombo

Source: Courtesy Lanka Monthly Digest digital photo archive.
The target, the Sri Maha Bodhi tree, which is believed to be a branch from the original tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment (planted in Sri Lanka in 246 BCE) is one of several sacred sites in Sri Lanka and a gathering place of pilgrims to this ancient monastic city. In the attack, 120 pilgrims were killed and 85 injured and the site continued to be a target, as revealed by one of its cadre captured in 1996:

Identified by the nom de guerre Kalaivaanan, he confessed he was responsible for making mock up models of targets which the LTTE planned to attack. They were used by guerrilla ‘instructors’ to brief suicide cadres. In doing so, the ‘instructors’ would also take into account information on the targets gathered by guerrilla spies during reconnaissance missions.12

The models built by Kalaivaanan were of the Ratmalana Airport (south of Colombo) and the Sri Maha Bodhi. It is noteworthy that maps, models and reconnaissance tours were often used by the LTTE to plan their suicide attacks, thus demonstrating their deployment of architectural and visual tools. A direct hit on a religious building would take place two years later in the city of Kandy.

As the capital of Kande Udarata, the mountainous region in Sri Lanka, which resisted colonisation until 1815, Kandy was the site of numerous anti-colonial rebellions and is the symbolic counterpart to Jaffna, in terms of an indigenous cultural capital (see Roberts 2004). More importantly, it closely follows the cosmic cultural template typical to South Asian cities and is modelled on a mythical heavenly landscape. A manmade lake representing Lake Anotatta (a lake in the Buddhist heavens) lies in a valley at its centre and the city and its palace are organised around it. Both are surrounded by a cloud wall, signifying the heavens. The royal palace, the most dominant building in the city, includes the sacred Dalada Maligawa (Palace of the Tooth) where the tooth relic of the Gautama Buddha is deposited. The relic traditionally conferred legitimacy and authority on its protector, the King of Kandy, who resided in the palace. It was here, from the Paththirrippuwa (hexagonal turret), that kings, colonial officials and prime ministers addressed the nation.

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The Dalada Maligawa featured politically as part of the ceremonies related to the ‘Liberation of Jaffna’ by the Sri Lankan Army in 1995 when the president visited the temple to invoke the blessings of the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). She is reported as having said ‘We are following that tradition by paying homage to the Sacred Tooth relic on this occasion when our security forces have liberated Jaffna’ (ibid.). A few days earlier, on 2 December 1995, ‘armed forces penetrated the Nallurkovil in Yalppanam’ and photographs of the uniformed generals in the kovil (temple) were published in the newspapers.

The LTTE attack on the Dalada Maligawa occurred within this climate of heightened religious identification and differentiation. Planned for the week before the Prince of Wales visited Kandy in January 1998, its objective was to remove the site from his itinerary and draw attention to the separatist cause. Although few civilian losses were incurred by this incident it ensured that religious difference would become firmly imbricated in the politics of the conflict. Yet, unlike in 1983, ethnic rioting did not result.

The true cost of the suicide attack on the Dalada Maligawa (Figure 10.5) was fully realised in the transformation of Kandy in anticipation of future acts of terrorism. In its wake, the city would barricade its temples and demand security checks of all pilgrims entering the premises. Steel fences would wrap around the ethereal cloud-wall that encircled the palace and its image of heaven. They would stop short the circumnavigation of the historic Kandy Lake, so central to the experience of the city, forcing its citizenry to refashion their daily routines around an urban obstacle course.

In the quiet aftermath of a suicide bombing the city went to war by setting up barricades, fencing off public buildings and defending itself against subsequent attacks. Warfare thus adopted various guises in the built environment — offensive and defensive. Barricades obstructed and interrupted city life, halted public activities, reconfigured routine journeys, and caused citizens to censor their

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14 Daily News. 2 December 1995. The front page photograph showed barefooted senior military officers leaving the kovil after the ceremony.
Figure 10.5: Fences Around the Dalada Maligawa

Source: Photograph by the author.
everyday activities. Just as periodic shelling from government aircraft caused the civilians in the war zone to retreat into makeshift bunkers the suicide bomber provoked a parallel retreat of citizens elsewhere.

Interpreting Terror

Our discussion of the suicide attacks on Sri Lankan urban space has, so far, been presented as counter terrorism related to the defence of a geographic territory, the separate state of Tamil Eelam. In this wider context of attack and counter-attack the suicide bomber was a weapon, an extension of a military machine aimed at destabilising the centre and disrupting civilian life. In fact, international reports on suicide attacks take great care to identify the assailants as separatist cadre rather than terrorists, thus rendering their cause politically valid. The distinction between and use of the term ‘separatist’ versus ‘terrorist’ has consequently exposed media biases. ‘Terrorism’, observes Allan Pred (2007: 363), ‘consists of those deeds and statements, those material practices and discourses, those enacted policies and pronouncements, which are meant to terrify’. Pred goes on to expand on his definition by referring to the Oxford English Dictionary definitions: ‘government by intimidation’ and a condition resulting in ‘political coma’. All these conditions are true of the Sri Lankan case where both sides appear to be aggressors and victims, capable of deploying terror tactics when advantageous. The effects of terror, however, are best encapsulated by Gray and Wyly in their ‘Terror City Hypothesis’ (2007: 329–61). They describe how ‘more and more aspects of everyday life and death now take place in the shadow of horror and fear, sustained by the manufactured certainty of uncertainty’ (ibid.: 330). They argue that the symptoms of this condition, namely, the excessive militarisation of urban space, surveillance at street level and an ever-present anxiety provoke a re-conceptualisation of urban space under the spectre of terrorism.

On reflection, post-9/11 proposals by urbanists failed to fully explore the resultant and highly contested subjectivities that emerge through the ensuing processes of national self-construction. Whereas the restoration of the World Trade Center site in New York is directed at memorialising diverse civilian casualties, these were conflated with urban (New Yorker) and national (American) identity in ways
that could be usefully harnessed for patriotic zeal surrounding the Iraq War. In contrast, civilian memorials are markedly absent from the Sri Lankan example, whether Tamil or Sinhalese, whereas military memorials predominate.

**Myth and Remembrance**

*The Essential Guidebook to Jaffna and Its Region* (2003) highlights two memorials.¹⁵ The Gajaba Memorial constructed by SLA soldiers with funds raised by the soldiers and officers of the Gajaba Regiment bears 2,898 names and is located on the road from Anuradhapura to Vavuniya in Sri Lanka’s North Central region.

On the left side of the entrance there is a palmyrah tree symbolising the north of the country. On the right side a *goda kirala* or Indian Elm (*Holoptelea integrifolia*) symbolises the south. The flower on the sculpture, a *manel* (blue lotus), represents the motherland. It is protected by the hands of the people and ultimately by a gun.¹⁶

The iconography of the memorial justifies the role of the military in defending the motherland, signified through a Buddhist symbol — the blue lotus. The *Mahavirar* Memorial to the Tamil Tigers documented in the same guide book is located on a small dirt road outside Kilinochchi, off the main route to Jaffna. It is described as a cemetery holding close to 2000 graves ‘a sad record of the young lives lost during the civil war’.¹⁷ *Mahavirar* stands for ‘great hero’ and as in the case of the many LTTE cemeteries and memorials found in the north and east, records the sacrifices made by separatist cadre and Black Tiger suicide bombers. The cemetery was bulldozed following the fall of Kilinochchi in 2009 and can no longer be seen. The site is overgrown and a few scattered stones are visible through the weeds.

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¹⁶ Ibid., Description 1.

¹⁷ Ibid., Description 5.
Anoma Pieris

The distinction between discussions of terrorism post-9/11 and those in Asian cities, most specifically in Sri Lanka, remain linked to two forms of subjectivity expressed through erasure and memorial. In the case of Sri Lanka’s southern cities it became necessary to erase evidence of a terrorist attack through reparation and reconstruction and no significant acts of memorialisation followed (see Goonewardena 2002: 141–56). Monuments to civilians are very few, among which are ‘the monuments to the disappeared’, ‘the innocent victims of war’ and to ‘Dr Neelan Thiruchelvam’, a critic of the LTTE.18 In this respect, Colombo’s response differs from that of the US in engendering forms of amnesia that cause the bitter experience of war and bereavement to recede from the national imagination. The heavy cost to the military and to civilians in the south was largely recognised at village level and seldom acknowledged in urban spaces or by the international media. In the north and the east, however, where the ethnic conflict was more immediate and more devastating, the separatists were eager to occupy the contested land with memorials to their resistance.

Following a successful suicide attack the photographs of deceased members of the Black Tiger cadre were taken on tour in the villages of the north and east where their heroism was put on display. The following is a caption that was attached to one of the photographs:

A travelling arrangement, on the back of a truck, of the photos of at least half the nearly 300 male and female LTTE suicide bombers (‘Black Tigers’) who’d sacrificed their lives in the hopes of creating an independent Tamil state.19

These tours culminated in the monuments and graveyards designed for the separatist cadre, whereby the conflicted political geography was ultimately claimed through burial. Nineteen images of warrior statues are to be found online in the image gallery at


They include decorative gateways, cemeteries, tomb-like structures and statues, one of which resembles the Iwo Jima memorial. Whereas the victims of suicide bombings in the south or civilian casualties in the north were not memorialised in this manner and the losses to their families receded from public knowledge, the sacrifices made by the suicide cadre would be sanctified by the separatist movement.

Michael Roberts (2004: 37), in an explanation related to a photograph of Tuyilam Illam (Resting Place) for Mavirar at Vadamaradchchi near Valveddiththurai (VVT), describes the shift from cremation to burial, which occurred during this period, as having the strategic advantages of '1) establishing a sacred topography and 2) an emotionally charged means of mobilizing the populace and securing legitimacy'. He traces the rites of Hero's Week to embodied practices of Tamil Saivaite worship rather than the more secular interpretations of LTTE ideology (Roberts 2005: 493–514). Moreover, as observed by Roberts, although the ritualistic patterns underlying the LTTE's self-construction through burial and memorialisation follow Saivaite traditions ingrained in Tamil culture, their physical contexts are often recreated through modern forms of symbolism. While referring to a photograph of Mavirar Mandapam at Thirunelvelli, during Heros Week, November 2004, Roberts (2004: 34) notes that western-style palaces and bungalows formed the background tableaux to the photographs of Mavirar on display. The proliferation of images of LTTE memorials was also enabled by various websites that mythologised and commodified Eelam ideology. They provided the diasporic community with material evidence of the ethnic conflict.

Extra-Geographical Representations

The physical public realm constructed through peripheral and temporal sites in the war zone have a further performative reach, beyond the boundaries of the Sri Lankan nation, in diasporic political activities and its cyber public sphere. In fact, the public realm of the conflict increasingly moved to extra-geographical sites, including the internet, where the Sri Lankan diaspora reproduces their cultural

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polemic. The real and virtual public realms are co-dependent as evident in photographs of Tamil diasporic rallies in front of No.10, Downing Street, the White House, Trafalgar Square, and other prominent urban and institutional spaces in Europe and America (displayed on www.eelamweb.com).21

During the last months of the conflict, rallies by Tamil diasporic groups protesting the Sri Lankan government offensives (e.g., in Toronto, June 2008, in Washington D.C., February 2009, in London April–May 2009, and in Geneva, May 2009) disrupted the benign environments of Western cities with reminders of violence elsewhere. A pro-LTTE rally in Melbourne (Figure 10.6), on 1 November 2008, for example, was headed by a group of individuals dressed in T-shirts streaked with red who acted out the roles of injured civilians, limping and staggering along the sidewalk. As fighting escalated, the symbol of guns on the LTTE flags carried in rallies were removed concealing militant identities in a civilian discourse; in a bid to attract international sympathy (Jeyaraj 2009). In May 2009, following the LTTE defeat, black-clad participants in Melbourne carried coffins and walked to the sound of a funeral drum under the LTTE banner. Public hunger strikes were held concurrently in Jaffna, Coimbatore, Karur, Changalpattu, Rameswaran, Sydney, Washington D.C., and the UK in early 2009 and several violent encounters between Tamil and Sinhala members of the diaspora were reported at rallies.

The conflict within the diaspora is largely instigated and enacted online in the cyber public sphere. As noted by Kasun Ubayasiri (2004: 474–513), apart from official media operations, pro-Eelam lobby groups published 30 unofficial pro-LTTE newspapers and maintained 60 websites worldwide. Largely engaged in chauvinistic propaganda, many of these websites offered daily news bulletins and followed military strategies constructing an alternative virtual public realm from afar, a public realm being increasingly countered by Sinhala nationalist websites. The city entered this realm as a backdrop to battles and suicide bombings and as an inventory of monuments and memorials. It was captured in postcards, souvenirs and memorabilia marketed through such sites, injecting the materiality and spatiality of real sites into the urban diasporic imagination.

Figure 10.6: Pro-LTTE Rally in Melbourne, 2006

Source: Photograph by the author.
Conclusion

Unlike in New York where the memory of 9/11 will manifest itself materially, Sri Lanka’s memorials are temporal and ephemeral. The impact of urban warfare is learned through an inventory of destruction accumulated over time and we interpret the effects of terrorism via its physical biography. Meanwhile the threat of consecutive or simultaneous explosions carried out by suicide bombers and their circumnavigation of the southern cities eroded a putative public sphere capable of addressing the collective anxieties of civilians. Terror was experienced by civilians on both sides of the conflict through the dread of the suicide attack and the terror of residents under-fire in the war zone. Public gatherings such as political rallies and the route taken by motorcades from Colombo to Sri Jayawardene pura were classified the most sensitive sites for suicide bombings. In fact, the separation of the parliament complex on an island can be reinterpreted as symbolising the compromises necessary for securing the Sri Lankan state. Similarly, in early 2009, as the Sri Lankan armed forces gained ground in the north and the east, breaking down the earthen fortifications hastily erected by the LTTE, a special exposition of the sacred tooth relic was planned in Kandy, to bless the country and the war heroes, with the expectation that up to 4 million pilgrims would visit the city (Abedeen 2009).22 Accordingly, meat and liquor stalls were temporarily closed and 3,000 police, army and navy personnel and police dogs were deployed to secure the area.23 The performance of urbanity signalling the putative rebirth of urban territory in a sovereign state after decades of ‘urbicide,’ was achieved under tight surveillance. Buddhism was being symbolically reinscribed in the identity of the nation — and minorities were being forewarned to tailor their expectations accordingly.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the performative inscription of the city through everyday spatial practices and the cultural knowledge produced thereby was disrupted and reshaped on far more unstable terms during the course of the ethnic conflict. The city, while

22 The exposition was scheduled to take place on 6–18 March 2009.
providing the space for contestation and violence, did not provide opportunities for self-reflexivity or critique. The withdrawal of the public realm and the individuation and privatisation of the traumas of the conflict produced various forms of apathy and disempowerment while chauvinist voices in both ethnic communities silenced a more inclusive discourse. As a result, Sri Lankan residents in the four major cities described here have increasingly fashioned their lives around a private sphere that reinforces reliance on the very ethnic solidarities that brought about the conflict. These heightened anxieties restrict the performance of urbanity and normalise quotidian strategies of self-preservation.

The urban anxieties outlined here are insignificant when compared with the greater agony of displacement and loss of life experienced in village areas where conflict was more immediate and confronting. Outside Sri Lanka’s major cities, barren landscapes, derelict institutions and rural refugee camps gathered the displaced subjects of bombardment. The end of the conflict saw 300,000 in IDP camps. Colombo too is host to large numbers of Tamil and Muslim migrants from the north and the east. Their presence is visible in the sudden increase in apartment buildings (buildings that provide a collective and secure environment) in suburbs like Wellawatte. Ultimately, when compared with the objectification of a site, architecture and traumatic memories in the WTC site in New York, which invariably reduces the critical scope of the memorial, the Sri Lankan case provides an example of how contested subjectivities are spatialised over a much wider territory beyond the limits of the capital city or an urban public sphere. Although the material responses to an ongoing history of violence are dispersed more randomly in the Sri Lankan examples they do ultimately inscribe the national geography and open up spaces for the reception of multiple narratives of terror and resistance. Cities become stages for the performance of violence and these same cities are staged as its media backdrops.

Colombo, Jaffna, Sri Jayawardenepura, and Kandy, reinscribed as they are by the politics of conflict, produce and deliver different historical messages about the performance of culture and its contestation in South Asia’s urban spaces. They also question our assumption that modern urbanity is secular and a-cultural — or

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24 IDP (Internally Displaced Person).
that urban identity in South Asia might supersede faith or kinship. Conversely, in terms of the nation’s violent modern biography, these four Sri Lankan cities contradict the historic promise of urbanity by revealing the constituent interplay of economy, ethnicity, politics, and religion.

References


It is fitting that Tony Casino still uses a cigarette holder. Unlike most smokers in Karachi who drag on their imitation Dunhills until the butt glows in protestation, Tony taps on his tortoise-shell holder, its gold tip glinting in unison with the trim of his onyx-and-gold cufflinks. In fact, Tony is a vision in black and gold: his starkly dyed jet-black hair sets off the chunky insignia of his designer sunglasses and the gold heft of his oversized Rolex. These accessories, along with his moniker, are some of the vestiges of Tony Casino né Tufail Shaikh’s previous incarnation as Karachi’s premium nightclub owner.

Today, Tony manages various business interests and land holdings, but he still considers himself, first and foremost, a high-end hotelier and indisputable don of the entertainment industry. Between 1965 and 1977, Tony owned and managed the Hotel Excelsior, which offered several floors of restaurants, dance floors and bandstands as well as Lido, Karachi’s first cabaret. In 1972, he became the sole investor in what would have been Pakistan’s first casino. Unfortunately, the casino had not yet opened when prohibition was enforced in Pakistan in 1977. Despite some official mumbles about retaining the casino as part of Karachi’s landscape to attract foreign investment and tourists, it never opened its doors. The building, which is still referred to by Karachiites as the casino, has served over the years as an auditorium, a video game arcade, and is now being renovated as an office space.

Tony Casino may seem like an unlikely character with which to begin an exploration of the urban identity of Karachi, Pakistan’s
Stephen Cohen describes how Z. A. Bhutto forged a new identity for Pakistan: ‘Bhutto took on the Establishment by cynically merging the two ideologies that had been anathema to it, socialism and Islam, proclaiming a vision of Pakistan as an Islamic and socialist state…. Bhutto approached the Islamic world for aid, offering nuclear technology in exchange. This conversion was so transparently insincere that it fooled few people. His portrayal of his policies as Islamic as well as socialist made no impression on Pakistan’s Islamist parties, further alienated his leftist supporters, and set a precedent for successors: when in trouble turn to Islam’.

The Violent City

Very often the claim that a city is shaped by violence obviates a discussion of urbanity since the two are believed to negate each other. For example, Sophie Body-Gendrot points out ‘if violence is associated with the urban, there is a collective and philosophical element implied, referring to a failure of the social cohesiveness which the city, in its political sense, is supposed to generate’ (2002: 85). Indeed, violence is generally considered antithetical to urbanity and in this sense, most rubrics through which cities are framed have yet to consider violence as constitutive of city culture, rather than merely destructive.
This article argues that Karachiites like Tony Casino negotiate their city through fragile memories of a very different past. Reading nostalgia as a consequence of urban violence, this article examines the memories of Karachiites who participated in the city’s nightlife until 1977 as a way to understand how they experience their city in the present. What emerges is that Karachiites conceive of their city as a space of violence. Rather than negate the urban experience, however, this conception informs the way they inhabit and imagine Karachi.

Writing about nostalgia, Susan Stewart has suggested that it is a ‘sadness without an object’ (1993: 23). She states:

Nostalgia is...a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. (Ibid.)

In Stewart’s reading, nostalgia is necessarily inauthentic, an ideological construct that is ‘hostile to history’ and ‘distinctly utopian’. This article aims to complicate Stewart’s position by showing that for Karachiites coming to terms with the violent reality of their city, nostalgia, rather than merely ‘threatening to reproduce itself as a felt lack’, enriches lived experience in the present by playing a role in the active production of the ‘ideological reality’ of the contemporary moment. Indeed, this article reveals how many Karachiites narrativise their past, yet in such a way that the past becomes the ‘authentic’ site through which they experience their city. Within a certain community, nostalgia does not ‘seek’ a past that ‘has never existed’; instead, it engages with a past that did exist, and exuberantly so, in an effort to render the violent reality of the present.

In other words, the urban imaginary of Karachi, informed by the nostalgia of some Karachiites, sustains itself in relation to a real, material space in which violent acts occur with undue frequency. In a reversal of teleology, the imaginary of present-day Karachi as a violent city is central to and constitutive of the imaginary of Karachi.
as a cosmopolitan hub, the inimitable City of Lights. References to Karachi in this article, then, point to a collectively imagined environment, a ‘shared mental image’ of a violent city. This is not to say that the city’s violence is only imaginary or conceptual — there is no denying the reality of bullets and bloodstains — but this chapter shows that the city’s violence, rather than its cosmopolitanism, is the urban characteristic that makes the most profound impression on its residents and shapes how they inhabit and conceive Karachi.

Cataloguing the layered sociopolitical factors that provoke urban violence is an effort well beyond the scope of this article, which focuses less on the causes of violence than on the place and function of violence in the idea of Karachi. The intense ethnic conflict that resulted in a government-sanctioned military operation in the early 1990s, in which thousands of Karachiites were killed has been well documented by L. Gayer (2007), A. B. S. Jafri (1996) and Farida Shaheed (1990). Here, a brief summary of the long-standing causes of violence must suffice.

The influx of refugees at the time of Partition, commonly known as muhajirs (migrants) created a city of displaced people seeking housing in unplanned settlements. Until the 1980s, informal muhajir entrepreneurs managed and apportioned illegal subdivisions of the settlements. This status quo was challenged, however, by the arrival of ethnic Pathans to the city. The muhajirs resisted the Pathan entrepreneurs’ attempts to control squatter settlements as well as the means of public transport in the city, leading to Karachi’s first
citywide ethnic riot in April 1985, which claimed over one hundred lives. Since their unofficial hold on the city was being threatened, the muhajirs felt the need to distinguish themselves along ethnic lines. In 1987, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM, known then as the Muhajir Qaumi Movement) won its first electoral victory, giving muhajir students a political party based on ethnic differentiation to rally around. Shows of ethnic solidarity led to widespread violence, especially since the ‘large-scale influx of firearms into [Karachi], courtesy of the Afghan jihad, turned [the university’s] campus into battlefields’ (Gayer 2007: 528).

Indeed, the transnationalism of the Afghan jihad [struggle] throughout the 1980s provoked ethnic tensions and ‘brought to Karachi a flow of arms and drugs which gave birth to a culture of ultra-violence amongst the city youth, for whom Russian TT-pistols became the hottest commodity in town’ (ibid.: 519). The city was increasingly fragmented as ethnic enclaves controlled by private militias multiplied. Operation Clean Up, a state-directed military intervention saw army troops infiltrate muhajir neighbourhoods to rid the city of its ethnic blight.

Since the mid-1990s, Karachi has also been affected by sectarian violence as Sunni mosques and Shia imambargahs (congregation halls) have been attacked and Shia professionals, especially lawyers and doctors, have been assassinated. The rivalry between the muhajirs and religious parties that was born of criminalised campus politics in the 1980s flared again during the October 2002 elections: battles raged between the armed, organised secular ‘brothers’ that comprise the backbone of the MQM and the equally well-armed and well-funded activists of religious parties. The city’s volatile ethnic, entrepreneurial and sectarian landscape has led Gayer to conclude that ‘Karachi will undoubtedly remain a violent city in the future’ (2007: 543).

Nostalgic Narratives

This article primarily draws on the oral histories of Karachiites who lived through the ‘swinging sixties’ and ‘disco seventies’. I interviewed nightclub owners, musicians, restaurant and nightclub managers, and waiters employed at bars and clubs, a retired madam who used to run a kotha (brothel) near the infamous Napier Road, journalists, and many nostalgic Karachiites who used to frequent the nightclubs. I focus more on the oral histories of those who had
a financial stake in the city's nightlife — the owners, managers, and employees of different establishments — because they were prone to contextualising Karachi's nightlife with regard to the city, society and Pakistani politics at large. For those who merely frequented bars and nightclubs, recollections of the establishments are mostly enmeshed in personal memories.

No doubt, the nostalgia presented here is shared only by a segment of the city's population and is by no means universal — not everyone was frequenting the discos that peppered Karachi's historic centre, Saddar. That said, the voices featured here are socio-economically and religiously diverse. I also draw on print media archives — newspaper and magazine articles and print advertisements — to time travel and consider how Karachi's nightlife was perceived before 1977.

This use of memories and media artifacts is spurred by the fact that there is not much else to go on: the clubs, cabarets and cinema halls have largely been abandoned, demolished, renovated, or forgotten. The Samar nightclub at the rooftop of the Hotel Metropole, where Karachiites discovered Pimms, Paul Anka, and their own pretensions to cosmopolitanism, was briefly converted into a bakery until the hotel was demolished two years ago. Meanwhile, the 007 disco in the Beach Luxury Hotel has been transformed into a busy exhibition and conference hall.

The transformation of Karachi from the City of Lights to a city of violence has been almost literal: what was once the hub of the city's nightlife has now been demarcated as a maximum security zone that cordons off several five-star hotels, the Sindh High Court, the Governor House, and the US consulate from the rest of the city. The former merry haunts of courting couples are now the stomping grounds of diplomats and dignitaries, and are thus targeted by snipers and suicide bombers. Despite the fact that high-ranking police officials proliferate in this area, several fatal bomb blasts have shattered windows in the last few years. On 26 May 2004, two bombs were detonated within an interval of 25 minutes near the US consul general's residence, killing one and injuring more than 30 people. On 15 November 2005, a high-intensity car bomb killed three people and injured more than a dozen near the historic PIDC (Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation) building (Kaleem 2005). A few months later, another blast triggered by a suicide bomber exploded outside the US consulate killing four people and injuring 45 (Bakhtiar 2006). These recent blasts have killed diplomats and security guards, journalists and bystanders.
Several decades ago, however, the debris from such blasts would have included stilettos and saxophones since these blasts occurred in the vicinity of what used to be Karachi’s most successful nightlife venues. The 2004 blast was a stone’s throw from the location of the Hotel Excelsior, where 20-somethings would limbo and lambada on weekend nights. The PIDC blast, meanwhile, occurred 30 feet away from the Pearl Continental Hotel, where live bands such as the Four Tops, the Talismen and The Bugs had Karachiites swinging and twisting the night away in the legendary Nasreen Room. And the 2006 blast occurred a stroll away from what used to be the Taj Hotel — home of the infamous Oasis nightclub, where the music blared all night.

Given the transformation of these sites from dance floors to battlegrounds, it is not surprising then that some Karachiites are incurably nostalgic about the city in its previous incarnation as the City of Lights. Until the late 1970s, Saddar was ‘the heart of Karachi’, housing the city’s best cinemas, hotels, nightclubs, cabarets, and coffee houses. Writing about that era, film fanatic and music journalist Asif Noorani admits, ‘Saddar has lost much of its importance, but there are still a good number of people who drift down memory lane. The Saddar of the fifties and the sixties is firmly etched in their memory’ (1997: 275). Similarly, Anwer Mooraj — a respected essayist and editor — concedes that he could fill a book with vignettes that take me back to the Karachi of the early fifties and sixties, a city that was safe and peaceful and where nobody ever seemed to be in any kind of hurry…. What a pity those lazy, carefree days are gone forever, like picture postcards, yellowed with age, stored in a half-forgotten trunk, never to be opened again. (Mooraj 1997: 367)

Indeed, when describing the ‘swinging sixties’, many Karachiites interviewed for this research resorted to binaries, presenting pre-1977 and present-day Karachi as diametric opposites: a city of sex as opposed to a city of violence; a city of fun versus a city of fear; a city for all against a city for some. Mohammad Rafiq — a waiter who was employed at the Nasreen Room in 1967 and continues to work in the Chinese restaurant that has replaced it — insists that ‘there is a day and night difference between then and now. It was a beautiful environment; we never had to worry about any trouble. Then, the men were gentlemen; now, they are goondas (hoodlum).’ Hilary Furtado, a saxophonist with the Talismen who performed for crowds
of over 300 people on consecutive nights at the Nasreen Room, backs up Rafiq’s account:

There were no fights back then, you’d barely punch someone. Bands would quibble among themselves if someone played the wrong chord, but other than that there was no fighting, and definitely no guns. That’s why no security was needed back then. Now, the way the security is at hotels, they check you everywhere, they even x-ray my sax.

Implicit in Furtado’s statement is the sense that violence — the frequency of fighting and the prevalence of guns — is normative. For that reason, he frames his description of the past, when security measures were unnecessary, through the lens of the present, when heightened security is the norm. Furtado’s rhetorical choice makes the past dependent on the present by describing it as what it was not, a place of ‘no guns’ and ‘no security’. The way he introduces the Karachi of his youth, then, says as much about contemporary Karachi as it does about the city before 1977.

Vinoo Advani, the former owner and manager of the Playboy — ‘the gentleman’s favorite cabaret’ — and the Taj Hotel, home of the Oasis nightclub, echoes Furtado’s words along with his framing of the past. Attired in a tan safari suit, Advani resembles a Bollywood villain with his slicked back hair and fingers adorned with chunky gold-and-ruby rings. His office is in disrepair — carpets chewed on by rats shrink away from water-stained walls — but his flair for pomposity and profanity remains. Punctuating his earnest yearnings for a more tolerant society with expletives, Advani explained:

when the nightclubs were there, people had a drink or two then bloody well went home, unlike now, when they kill themselves drinking. Today, everyone is crying, but back then we had a bloody good time. It was a time of tremendous fun; now there’s fear.

For his part, Byram Avari complicates this dichotomy of fun and fear by suggesting that there was a progression — rather than a sudden inversion — between Karachi then and now. Currently the chairman of the Avari Group, Avari began his career as the manager of the 007, the nightclub housed in the Beach Luxury Hotel, a time he remembers well:

We went out to party every night, to different places, to each other’s clubs. I used to date a lot, and cannot remember going out in two
consecutive weeks with the same girl. The worst thing we’d heard of at that time was a knuckle-duster. My friend Zaffar Zaidi went to Baluchistan in the sixties and came back with a small knife and that was a big deal. Then in 1977, Nawab Akbar Bugti’s son fired a pistol and we knew it was the end of something. Now we have Kalashnikovs. Back then, we never thought of having a guard, we never saw a gun. We had never heard of Shia–Sunni violence. We were relaxed.

Avari’s language does not allow for a neat dichotomy between Karachi then and now, demonstrating instead that the city’s security situation has been evolving to account for the present circumstances. That said, his use of knuckle-dusters and Kalashnikovs to distinguish between pre- and post-1977 Karachi is similar to the framing devices employed by his contemporaries, indicating the extent to which present-day circumstances shape his nostalgia. Avari emphasises his description of Karachi as a non-violent place where knuckle-dusters and knives were anomalous, threatening items. Indeed, his nostalgia can be read as a critique of the present — the realm of the Kalashnikov — rather than a celebration of the past.

The fun/fear, play/paranoia dichotomy pitting Karachi then against Karachi now has also been concretised in print. One of the very few books dedicated to the city, *Karachi: Megacity of Our Times*, aims to capture its ‘contrasting moods’ by juxtaposing accounts of life in the 1950s and the 1990s. Introducing his idyllic vision of the ‘good old days’ Mooraj (1997: 357) writes:

> Ethnic violence was unheard of, and public enemy number one was the bicycle thief, a close relative of the nocturnal burglar. The urban armed dacoit [robber], mercifully, had not yet appeared on the horizon. What a contrast to the roaring nineties where first information reports at police stations are simply littered with details of armed robbers forcibly taking away cars and motorcycles at gunpoint or robbing householders while holding women and children hostage.

The need to draw a sharp contrast between the past and present is similarly evident in poet-turned-columnist Kaleem Omar’s prose. He wrote:

> In the Karachi of the old days, the city of my youth, one often used to hear people whistling a jaunty tune as they cycled home at night. Many things in Karachi have changed since then, mostly for the worse. Which probably explains why nobody in Karachi whistles anymore....
The carefree Karachi of that happy-whistler era has gone forever, lost in the mist of time. Today’s Karachi is a beleaguered, angst-ridden city, where most urban problems seem bigger and more intractable than those in any other Pakistani city. (Omar 2006: 27)

Although Omar does not specifically name the city’s ethnic conflicts, lawlessness and infrastructural collapse as the reasons for widespread angst and the demise of ‘carefree Karachi’, he does choose to describe the city in terms of a lack. By describing the city as a place where no one ‘whistles’, to the oppositions we have already encountered, he adds another: a city of musicality against one of silence. Omar’s rhetoric thus preserves the binary and oppositional relationship between the city’s past and its present.

To unpack the binaries that pervade the nostalgia of Karachiites, we can turn to Michel de Certeau’s (1984) analysis of the activity of reading, which also relies heavily on remembering. In his discussion on strategies and tactics in The Practice of Everyday Life, to which this article will return later, de Certeau suggests that the tactical reader ‘slips into’ the place of the author through an act of ‘silent production’ facilitated by ‘the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance’ (ibid.: xxi). De Certeau adds that the ‘production’ and ‘arrangement’ that the reader effects while perusing a text are an ‘invention of the memory’ because ‘the readable transforms itself into the memorable’. Unable to ‘protect himself against the erosion of time’ and recall exactly what he has read, the reader insinuates himself into the author’s text, using his interpretation and arrangement of what is remembered to create a ‘different world’, an alternative or ‘anti-text’ in the author’s place. Since this process creates an invented past, nostalgia can be regarded as a ‘silent production’ enabled by the activity of remembering: when deployed tactically, it allows a ‘different world’ to slip into the place of a lived past. In the context of Karachi, then, we have seen how recalling the city before 1977 enables some of its residents to tactically create a ‘different world’ through which they address the violence of the contemporary city, either by effacement or by mitigation.

Through the testimonies of Omar, Rafiq, Furtado, and Avari, we also see how Karachiites make their memories tactical by preventing the ‘different world’ they create from remaining in detached
isolation, a phenomenon from another time and place. Indeed, tactical nostalgia responds to and engages with the present in its ‘invention’ of the past. It is for that reason that Karachiites frame their memories of the past in terms of the present, which, as we have seen, is consistently perceived as violent.

In this practice, Karachiites resemble the residents of Maurilia, one of the imagined cities that Italo Calvino conjures in *Invisible Cities* (1974). Those who travel to Maurilia are invited to visit the city and simultaneously to examine old postcards showing the city as it used to be. Calvino writes:

> If the traveler does not wish to disappoint the inhabitants, he must praise the postcard city and prefer it to the present one, though he must be careful to contain his regret at the changes within definite limits: admitting that the magnificence and prosperity of the metropolis Maurilia, when compared to the old, provincial Maurilia, cannot compensate for a certain lost grace, which, however, can be appreciated only now in the old postcards, whereas before, when that provincial Maurilia was before one’s eyes, one saw absolutely nothing graceful and would see it even less today, if Maurilia had remained unchanged. (Calvino 1974: 30)

Much like the residents of Calvino’s Maurilia, Karachiites prefer the ‘lost grace’ of the 1960s and 1970s Karachi to the present city. And just as the old, provincial Maurilia in Calvino’s account is made attractive through comparison, Karachi is nostalgically revered for what it was only through the lens of what it has become, the present creating the condition of possibility for an imagined past of fullness and ‘grace’ whose loss defines the reality of the present. As a ‘different world’ that was not violent, that knew knuckle-dusters rather than Kalashnikovs, and that was populated by gentlemen rather than goondas, pre-1977 Karachi only comes into being by way of comparison with contemporary Karachi. This nostalgia thus allows Karachiites to negotiate present-day violence by inventing an alternative to it, producing a ‘different world’ or ‘anti-text’ into which they can escape.

**Urban Fragments**

Returning to the ‘different world’ of pre-1977 Karachi as evoked by residents of the city is helpful in revealing other dimensions of their nostalgia. It becomes apparent that, in their memories, the dance
floor serves as microcosm for the city. Tony Casino, for example, describes a diverse and cosmopolitan Karachi by saying:

Muslims, Christians, Parsis, Hindus all danced together. People from the interior and foreigners who wanted to see what Karachi was about would come to the clubs. And it wasn’t like today when no one goes anywhere else in the city. Anybody could come to the parties; people from North Nazimabad came; people from Defence and Clifton came, and they all met up at the cabaret.

Through references to North Nazimabad — a working class part of the city littered with unplanned settlements — as well as the elite residential areas Defence and Clifton, Tony suggests that socio-economic diversity complemented religious pluralism to make the dance floor representative of the city as a whole. This conflation makes the nightlife of pre-1977 Karachi and the venues where the fun unfolded central to the urban experience of that time at the expense of other locations, industries, issues, and processes of urbanisation. In other words, by focusing on the clubs and cabarets, Karachiites ensure that they need not address anything that happened in the rest of the city. In this way, Karachi’s residents ‘select fragments’ to tell a new story in which violence plays no part, thus inventing the perfect ‘anti-text’ to the present (De Certeau 1984: 35).

Absent in these narratives are the violent confrontations that occurred during the height of the disco era in Karachi. Even as the dance floor symbolises a utopian, multicultural harmony, it ignores, for example, the sectarian fighting initiated by the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a religious political party, in the 1950s. To mobilise public support, members of the JI declared that a small indigenous sect of Muslims, the Ahmadis, were not in fact Muslims, but heretics. Brewing anti-Ahmadi sentiments then led to sporadic rioting throughout the 1950s (Shaheed 1990: 196). Subsequently, in 1964, when the Nasreen Room and 007 were at the peak of their popularity, boasting lines out the door most weeknights, ‘bloody clashes’ erupted in various localities between the Pathan supporters of General Ayub Khan — a military dictator eager to legitimate his six-year-long rule — and the muhajir community, members of which resented the general’s orchestrated success in widely rigged elections that year (ibid.: 198). Moreover, the early 1970s saw sustained ethnic conflict between Sindhis and muhajirs, exacerbated by the ascension to power of Z. A. Bhutto, a feudal Sindhi landlord. Policy changes and shifting
power dynamics initiated by Bhutto unleashed simmering ethnic tensions and led to violent flare-ups in 1972 that came to be known as the ‘language riots’. That same year also saw fatal upheavals in Karachi’s two major industrial areas: SITE (Sindh Industrial Trading Estate) and Landhi-Korangi. Instead of being ethnically inflected, these upheavals occurred in the context of Pakistan’s labour movement, which had been gaining momentum throughout the 1960s (Ali 2005). For instance, in the first six months of 1972, periodic lockouts of industrial units in Karachi’s two major industrial zones led to heightened worker frustration, culminating in a police firing that left three dead and dozens wounded. Given the potential volatility of these ethnic and economic issues, it is no wonder that in his 1972 address to the nation, Bhutto felt the need to warn against ‘lawless behaviour’ and ‘gherao’ and ‘jelao’ (encirclement and burning) politics.

Even a solitary instance that acknowledges violence in pre-1977 Karachi, normalises and familiarises it. Remembering the night in 1964 that Le Gourmet closed its doors, Omar suddenly broke into wheezy laughter. After regaining his composure, he narrated a story about a fight that erupted on the dance floor:

The missus of Iqbal Butt — Mr Pakistan that year and the country’s top body builder — went to the bathroom. On her way back, her sari got caught in Akram Sultan’s chair revealing her bosom. Next thing we know, a free-for-all fight is in full swing. Everyone was taking swings at everyone, Humanyun Beg Mohammad was punching about; even his wife hit someone. Anwer Mooraj, Naazi, all of them; people were hitting each other on the head with jugs, the whole works. The hotel called the police and they carted everyone off to the thana [police station], which was a jolly good time.3

The comedic nature of the altercation resembles a screwball comedy or cartoon, thereby undermining the violent dimension of a club-wide brawl. The decision to mention specific people by name — even when speaking to someone who would not recognise the individuals — makes the perpetrators of violence seem familiar and thus less threatening. Highlighting the use of domestic items such as jugs in the place of ‘real’ weapons, meanwhile, renders the violence absurd rather than menacing. The sense that this act of violence is

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3 Kaleem Omar in discussion with the author, 12 August 2007.
without consequence is further conveyed by Omar’s description of temporary incarceration as a ‘jolly good time’.

No doubt, a dance floor punch-out bears little affinity with street violence, but Omar’s anecdote nullifies violence even as it recounts it, thereby maintaining the ‘different world’ of pre-1977 Karachi. By eradicating or undermining violence, Karachiites create an alternative or, as de Certeau puts it, ‘anti-text’ to present-day Karachi. More importantly, by selecting fragments through which to recall the past, they create the reassuring option of one day remembering present-day Karachi as a violence-free space. Indeed, nostalgia comes to have redemptive potential, showing that present-day violent Karachi, when produced through the ‘drifts’ and ‘leaps’ of memory that de Certeau privileges, can be purged of violence and experienced much like the ‘different world’ of the past.

Karachi’s Cosmopolitanism

The challenge of Karachi’s urban imaginaries in part stems from the fact that post-Partition, politicians, planners and the residents of Karachi have not prioritised building a city with a unique urban identity that would promote a strong sense of urban ownership or identification. The first master plan, crafted in 1952 by the Swedish firm MRV, called for the complete separation of the city and the Federal Capital Area. Although never implemented, the plan set a precedent for future master plans, which all emphasised cleaving the city, rather than making it a cohesive entity. The Greater Karachi Resettlement Plan from 1958, for example, aimed at relocating the city’s migrant and working class population along an urban periphery away from the city centre, calling for the development of two satellite towns at a distance of 25 kilometres to the north and east of the city proper. The relocation of the inner-city population to the periphery transformed Karachi from a diverse, high-density city into an area of low-density sprawl. The previously vibrant centre of the city was reconfigured as a point of transit, as people moved between the port, the central business district, the old city wholesale markets, and the new satellite towns.

This is not to say that a vision for Karachi has never been articulated: throughout the twentieth century Karachi has been periodically conceptualised as a cosmopolitan city. This notion of Karachi as a cosmopolis extends to the pre-Partition era, when the
first airport in British India was constructed in Karachi in 1924. It was this detail — a sense of the city's global connectedness and accessibility — that Bhutto latched onto when he came to power. According to Arif Hasan (2002: 30):

[Bhutto] saw Karachi as a cosmopolitan international city whose economic interests could be served if it could cater to the entertainment and business needs of the newly independent Gulf states. To this end, five-star hotels, cabarets, casinos, an active race-course, and similar activities were planned and some of these plans were executed.

The success of Karachi’s cosmopolitan imaginary is evident in the testimonies of Karachiites. Tony Casino and Advani both refer to Karachi as the ‘Beirut of Pakistan’, while others interviewed likened it to Dubai, Las Vegas, Bombay, Paris, and Rio de Janeiro. ‘Go to Dubai now, and you’ll see what Karachi was on its way to becoming in the seventies’, said Tabassum Jabeen, a Karachi-based housewife in her late 50s who used to frequent the nightclubs in her youth. Along the same lines, a man who at the time of being interviewed was serving as the president of the exclusive gentleman’s club, the Sind Club, and therefore asked not to be identified by name said:

at night, you’d drive through Saddar, you’d see the lights flashing, you’d know which girls were dancing at the cabaret, and you’d think to yourself, why should I ever go to Europe. I’m already in Paris. I’m already in London. Give it a few years and I’ll be in Vegas.

Saxophonist Furtado, too, recalled, ‘back in those days Bombay was nothing, Karachi was the Bombay of [the subcontinent]. People came here to shop and party and mingle with Americans’.

In fact, many interviewees emphasised the cosmopolitanism of the streets, describing the centre of the city as being populated with Europeans, Arabs and even African–Americans. These Karachiites seem to have had the sense that their city was interchangeable with any other global city. For example, Furtado, who tried to emigrate eastwards in the 1950s and spent several years bouncing between Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia said, ‘I came back to Karachi eventually, only to realise that it was like all those places, but better’. Rafiq, who as a waiter has not had the opportunity to travel abroad, also shares the sense that pre-1977 Karachi could rival any foreign destination. He assures those who ask him about the era before
prohibition, ‘if you had been alive then, you would have felt like Karachi was New York, and you wouldn’t have wanted to leave’.

The pride that Karachiites took in the worldliness of their city is exemplified by Tony Casino, who claims that he wanted to participate in the creation of a cosmopolitan Karachi: ‘Mr Bhutto wanted Karachi to be the Switzerland of Asia. By making the Hotel Excelsior world class and pitching the idea of a casino, I wanted to help him realise his vision’.

Advertising from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s reveals the aspirations to identify Karachi with cities that were defined not by particular cultural or architectural or political parameters, but by the very promise of urbanity itself. Indeed, internationalism seemed to be the only thing guaranteed to sell, with Karachiites wanting to experience the best that all cities had to offer in the space of their hometown. No wonder then, the names of entertainment venues — Lido, Imperial, Palace, Oasis, and 007 — hearken beyond Pakistan to iconic European venues and Western popular culture. Indeed, the ABC restaurant — with its acronym standing for American, British and Chinese — remained a favourite with Karachiites until it closed its doors in 1979. More explicitly, advertising for the city’s nightlife truly fostered the notion of Karachi as a cosmopolitan chimera. One advertisement published in the daily *Dawn* on 15 December 1959 promises:


The Orient, Turkey, Holland, the Latin World, and France: one evening thus offered Karachiites a whirlwind tour of the world. A 1971 show at the Hotel Excelsior — the ‘House of Selected International Artistes’ — boasted the appearances of ‘Jones and Liana (Miss Greece)’ along with ‘The Bomb Busters: The American International Attraction of Radio and Television and The Stars of the Sullivan Show’ in ‘two programs totaling over one hour’. The Bomb Busters were to be accompanied by ‘Rosella Giacotto at the mike’ and ‘Gianni Spadacini and his stereophonic sound Italian Orchestra’. The fact that these advertisements highlight performers’ mastery of several kinds of dance suggests that adaptability — the ability to be
equally at ease in different cultures — was thought to be attractive by cosmopolitan Karachiites before 1977. Just as Karachiites in the present would prefer to inhabit a city of the past, Karachiites before 1977 seemingly desired to inhabit nothing less than the world.

The cosmopolitan urge of Karachi of the past presents a problem for those hoping to use nostalgia as a way to validate another version of Karachi, one that counters its current incarnation. To understand how Karachiites navigate this conundrum, we must first return to Calvino’s Maurilia and learn more about its residents’ approach to their city’s past and present. After pointing out that Maurilia’s residents prefer their ‘postcard city’, Calvino (1974: 30) warns:

Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves….It is pointless to ask whether the new ones are better or worse than the old, since there is no connection between them, just as the old postcards do not depict Maurilia as it was, but a different city, which, by chance, was called Maurilia, like this one.

Despite earlier comparisons, it seems Karachiites are unlike the inhabitants of Maurilia in one respect: they are quick to distinguish between pre- and post-1977 Karachi, arguing that the two are indeed ‘different cities’ that have ‘followed one another on the same site…without communication among themselves’ (ibid.). This distinction allows Karachiites to present themselves with a choice. They then posit that pre-1977 Karachi — the city that had not claimed its identity as such — is more authentic and valid, the place truly signified by the signifier ‘Karachi’. This sense is best articulated by Advani when he says, ‘Karachi is a peaceful city, really. It’s a city of freedom, lights, it’s not meant to be a city of guns’. His words imply that present-day, violent Karachi is a place other than the Karachi he knows, which is a ‘peaceful city’. The notion that Karachi then and now are ‘different cities’ is even more apparent in Advani’s desire to return to pre-1977 Karachi:

I wish we could take it back, just for one day a year, to before things really failed and went upside down. I wish we could return for a bit. There’s such a sense of nostalgia for those who passed through it, they should get to go back. For those who haven’t seen that Karachi, they should see it just once.
Advani’s words set up the Karachi of yesteryear as another place, a foreign, exotic, distant locale that is worth visiting. Indeed, his words imply that one version of Karachi that continues to exist somewhere apart from the present-day. This spatial and temporal schism is echoed by Furtado who believes, ‘the city has stopped dancing. Everyone misses those days; things were different then. It was a different place. I don’t recognise this Karachi’. Even Akbar Khan, the manager of the Nasreen Room between 1969 and 1977, who now works as a doorman at a hotel, distinguishes between the two ‘different’ Karachis. Grumpy and officious, perpetually clad in an immaculate dinner jacket, Khan dismissed questions about whether he enjoyed working at the nightclub:

What can I tell you about that job. You won’t know what I’m talking about. You’re too young. You can’t understand. You weren’t there and that world doesn’t exist anymore. You can’t know, since you’re seeing a mad person’s version of the city I used to know.

Khan’s description of present-day Karachi as a ‘mad person’s version’ of the city implies that it is a warped imagining that follows no ‘sane’ norms, rather than being a real place. For his part, Tony Casino makes the club and the city interchangeable through a slippery rhetoric, thereby reinforcing the idea that Karachi no longer exists. He delights in the memory of organising a private cabaret show for the Shah of Iran, who visited Z. A. Bhutto in the latter’s ancestral village of Larkana. ‘The Shah really wanted to see Karachi’, explains Tony, ‘but he had to remain with Mr Bhutto. So Mr Bhutto told the Shah that he would organise to have Karachi come to Larkana. Next thing I know, I’m loading a truck with a bar, dancers, performers — the works’. By equating the cabaret and the city, Tony implies that the closure of the nightclubs was equivalent to the closure and conclusion of the city, Karachi as it existed before 1977.

De Certeau’s assertion that remembering is a tactic that enables a ‘selection’ of fragments that produce a ‘different world’ is once again useful as he extends his argument to say, ‘the space of the tactic is the space of the other’. Suggesting that the ‘different world’ of their memories, the other Karachi, reflects the city’s true nature — the sane person’s, ‘right side up’ version — allows Karachiites to distance themselves from the violent realities of present-day Karachi. By speaking of the city that they inhabit in terms of what it used to be,
they can reject or undermine what it has become: present-day Karachi is thus negated and negotiated, made to seem less real, an accidental deviation from the norm, a sociological and geographical anomaly that has occurred in the space of an otherwise vibrant City of Lights. Through their (re)invention and reification of the past, then, tactical Karachiites create an other city, one that is repeatedly described as ‘swinging’, safe, diverse, cosmopolitan, tolerant, and fun. Present-day Karachi, on the other hand, is reduced to a separate space of fear and violence, intolerance and instability, yet one that can be transcended through the ‘drift’ of memory. As such, nostalgia enables the conception of two Karachis that can neither be separated nor reconciled, each the obverse of the other, the one providing respite from the other even while being produced in relation to it.

Conclusion

To finally understand how Karachiites conceptualise and experience their city, one should recognise that the multifarious accounts of the city also fuse into something else: an urban imaginary that is, ultimately, real in its effect. Thomas Bender and Alev Çinar (2007: xii) argue that cities are ‘located and continually produced through orienting acts of imagination, acts grounded in material space and social practice’. The consequence of such acts of the imagination in an urban context is a ‘shared, if not unitary, mental image of the city’.

The value of perceiving Karachi’s imaginary as expressed by nostalgic, club-hopping Karachiites as a concrete response to a violent imaginary can be teased apart by deploying the framework provided in de Certeau’s writings — in particular, the distinction he draws between strategies and tactics. This opposition allows us to see Karachi’s violent urban imaginary as productive and constitutive rather than only destructive. De Certeau is interested in ‘ways of operating’ that are ‘unsigned, unreadable and unsymbolized’ but that nevertheless ‘compose a culture’ (1984: x, xvii). With regard to consumers of products, urban spaces, ideologies, he suggests that these ‘ways of operating’ help people transcend the ‘ways of using… imposed by a dominant economic order’ (ibid.: xiii). He terms these ‘operations’ as tactics and explains that they are practices articulated in the details of everyday life. Tactics are thus understood to be subversive, temporary, ad hoc, and negotiated means by which to oppose dominant strategies and prescriptive ‘ways of using’.
Extending de Certeau's strategy/tactic binary, one can recast the memories of Karachiites as refusals of the dominant imaginary of their city as a space of violence. De Certeau suggests that the operations of walking, naming and narrating the city are spatial practices aimed at eluding the discipline of urban planning and policy. Remembering can therefore be understood as an 'unsymbolised' practice — an activity that Karachiites engage in without being reflexive — that nonetheless 'compose[s] a culture'. Indeed, the oral histories of Karachiites presented here suggest that the practice of remembering is meant to defy or to serve as a counterpoint to the persistent violence in the city today.

From this perspective, everyday practices such as remembering pre-1977 Karachi can be understood as ways of negotiating violence: they let Karachiites insinuate themselves into the urban fabric of a tense city that otherwise threatens to obviate all ordinary activity. Through their reminiscences, Karachiites conjure an urban world that inverts the predominant dystopic imaginary of the city. In this way, just as de Certeau shows how tactics enable the 'productivity of consumption', this article has sought to show how tactical nostalgia enables the 'productivity of habitation' that enables people to live in a violent, urban present.

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Sacrifice and Dystopia: Imagining Karachi through Edhi

Yasmin Jaffri and Oskar Verkaaik

Contradicting the predominant image of Karachi as a hub of international terrorism and ‘fundamentalist’ Islam or as a failed city of urban squalor (e.g., Davis 2006), the city is also home to one of the world’s biggest charitable organisations, the Edhi Foundation. Named after its founder and charismatic leader Abdul Sattar Edhi, the Foundation began in the early 1950s and has since become a household name in Karachi. Based on a tradition of non-violence, the Foundation runs the largest ambulance service in Pakistan as well as public kitchens and shelter homes with schools and medical facilities. It also assists in relief efforts for people affected by war or natural disasters around the world, such as the civil war in Lebanon (1983), the famine in Ethiopia (1986) the Gulf War (1991), Bosnian refugees in Pakistan and Croatia (1993–94), the earthquake in Bam (2003), victims of the tsunami in Sri Lanka and Indonesia (2003) and of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (2005).

It is not only outside Pakistan that the Edhi Foundation serves as a counterpoint to imaginaries of Karachi as an example of urban disintegration. In the port city itself, Edhi is a symbol of hope and sincerity that stands in stark contrast with a dystopic sense of the city’s future. Whereas at Independence, Karachi — then the capital city of Pakistan — was a relatively small and manageable port-city with ambitions of modernity, its recent history is one of uncontrollable growth, lack of urban planning, increased poverty, corruption, ethnic and religious violence, and most recently, fears of ‘Talibanisation’ and terrorism. Amidst all this, Edhi stands for religious–nationalist ideals of sacrifice, selflessness and solidarity. As such, Edhi cuts across divisions of class, ethnicity and language; as one of our informants put it, in a statement that to some would be idolatrous: ‘Edhi is God in disguise’.
Insofar as Edhi evokes a nostalgic notion of the early decades of Independence, when religious–nationalist feelings of solidarity were felt to be much more common than in the present times, he does so in a non-elitist manner. It has become something of a trope among Karachi's well-to-do middle classes to melancholically mourn over the lost sense of idealism and freedom that retrospectively characterised the 1950s and 1960s. In these narratives, Karachi was a clean, lively, beautiful and — thanks to the influx of migrants from all over India — cosmopolitan city, the modern cultural centre of the new nation-state as well as its administrative capital. Edhi, however, transforms this imagination of the city by infusing it with a more subaltern optimism of livelihood, social justice and equality. As people commonly say, Edhi speaks to the *bary log* (big people) and the *chotey log* (little people), to men and women, to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Whereas there are some journalistic accounts on the work of the Edhi Foundation, in this article we primarily focus on the meaning of the organisation as an urban phenomenon that is central to understanding what it means to live in Karachi and to be a Karachiite. In order to do so, we draw on a relatively new and as yet underexplored perspective of cities as a cultural experience. By this we mean that a city is not just a built environment that to some extent limits and directs people's movements and opportunities. A city also has a certain reputation or ‘soul’ in which inhabitants can take pride. Inhabitants enter into a certain relationship with their city, turning the city into an object or ‘other’ which (or should we say ‘who’) evokes feelings of compassion, anger and pride (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). This notion of the city as a personal emotion comes through in collective narratives that portray the city in a particular way.

In this article we identify two such narratives: one utopian and one dystopian. The former tells a story of Karachi as the city of post-colonial, modernist optimism and is rooted in the experience of migration and arrival of many of Karachi's inhabitants who in the early 1950s settled in the city after coming over from India (Zamindar 2007). The latter portrays Karachi as a city constantly threatened by total disintegration, ruin and civil war. Perhaps the two come together in the popular conception of Karachi as a resilient city (Budhani et al. 2010). Although seemingly under constant threat of (self)-destruction, and despite its obvious failings, life in the city remains one that is worth living.
In this chapter we argue that Edhi acts as a kind of ritual purifier of the city that counterbalances the prevailing sense of living in the *Qayamat ka daur* (End of Times). Insofar as Edhi bespeaks egalitarianism and selflessness, it is hard to resist the temptation to interpret the Foundation’s meaning in Karachi in terms of the perhaps somewhat outdated notions of anti-structure and liminality developed by Victor Turner (1969). Turner’s work draws heavily on the somewhat problematic distinction between political power and ritual power that relate to each other in a similar manner as structure and anti-structure. Despite its limitations, which we will discuss in the paragraphs below, Turner’s work offers a particularly powerful explanation as to why a seemingly politically marginal phenomenon can at times play a crucial, indeed central, role in the formation of identity and community. When we say that Edhi functions as a ritual purifier, we mean that its presence in the city serves as a reminder of the earlier religious–nationalist ideals that seem largely absent in the encounters of everyday life. In this way, the mundane act of donating to the Edhi Foundation — as many Karachiites do on Fridays or on Islamic holidays — is, in a way, an act to keep alive the possibility of a post-colonial utopia.

Turner’s notion of anti-structure as non-hierarchical egalitarianism ritually separated from the realm of the politics and social differentiation of everyday life, has of course been criticised as being too rigid and romantic. In an article entitled ‘The Romance of Resistance’ (1990), Lila Abu-Lughod has offered a particularly important critique of Turner’s model. What occurs to us as anti-structure, Abu-Lughod insists, is better labelled an alternative structure. That is to say that the ideologies of egalitarianism and solidarity create their own divisions and hierarchies that may be different from those found in dominant ideologies or structures, but are not necessarily more egalitarian (Abu-Lughod 1990; see also Abu-Lughod 1986). In the same vein, we consider the Edhi Foundation as standing in a South Asian ideology of religious–nationalist activism that is profoundly political, even though it evokes values of religious sacrifice, nationalist selflessness and human solidarity. That ideology has a genealogy that goes back to Gandhian politics and theosophical notions of the oneness of religion. Within the realm of the political imagination, the main significance of Edhi in Karachi today perhaps lies in the fact that it keeps alive that particular ideology, gives it a palpable appearance in the form of its ambulances and homes, and turns it
into a name and foundation to which one can relate in the form of donations. In that way it can be said that in a less than perfect city, Edhi carries on a utopian notion that would otherwise invoke feelings of loss and nostalgia.

**From ‘City of Lights’ to ‘No Man’s Land’**

Before 1947, Karachi was a small town by South Asian standards and was the capital city of what was generally considered one of the most backward and marginal provinces of British India. On 14 August, however, it suddenly became the capital city of the new state of Pakistan, attracting some 600,000 emigrants from India. While Punjabi Muslims migrated to what was then West Punjab, most of the emigrants from the urban centres of north India headed for Karachi. Although many opted for Karachi for more secular reasons, expecting better economic and political opportunities in the new state or simply following family decisions, their migration fitted into a discursive construct of the *hijra*, the Islamic exodus of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from the city of Mecca to Medina.\(^1\)

The Arabic term *‘hijra’* literally means ‘to abandon’ or to ‘break ties’ of kinship or personal association. The *hijra* of the Prophet and his followers symbolises a personal sacrifice for the greater cause of Islam; it enabled the *mubajirs* (migrants; lit. those who take part in the *hijra*) to establish a new brotherhood amongst themselves and with the *ansar* (the inhabitants of Medina). Right from the start, the massive displacement of Muslim migrants after 1947 was translated in terms of religious sacrifice and nationalist solidarity. The sacrifice of the *muhajirs* from India expressed both a nationalist commitment that transcended linguistic, regional or territorial attachments and a religious choice to move out of a state of disbelief into one of purity (Masud 1990). In the 1950s and 1960s, therefore, the term *‘muhajir’* connoted a measure of agency that other terms such as *panahgir* (refugee) did not. It also did not deny dignity to those who had been forced to flee (Verkaaik 2004: 47). The migration from India was in fact likened to the sacrifice of other communities of ‘cosmopolitan believers’ within Islamic history (Masud 1990).

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\(^1\) For an analysis of the religious debate concerning the demand for Pakistan, see Ahmad (2005).
By implication Pakistani nationalism lacked a territorial base. The emphasis on their qurbani (sacrifice) for the religious-nationalist cause ascribed to muhajirs a kind of moral leadership of Pakistan and, therefore, of its prototype Karachi.

In terms of the manner in which migration redefined the city of Karachi, there is a strong parallel with the way in which the hijra transformed Medina into Medinat-un-Nabi or the city of the Prophet. As the epithet Medinat-al-Munawwarah (radiant city) suggests there was an expectation that the new capital of Islam would become a place of religious enlightenment. Thus, because the founder of the new nation-state of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, chose to have his residence in Karachi, many muhajir from India opted to settle in the shehr-e-Quaid (city of the founder) that was also the capital of the new nation and a seaport with a developing industrial base. The city’s moniker, roshnion ka shehr (city of lights), emphasised this expectation of progress and modernisation, simultaneously resonating with the notion of religious renewal and purity. The spirit or ‘soul’ of Karachi was the desire for Muslim unity and solidarity shared by the local Muslims and emigrants from India.

In a short memoir of the early Karachi, Zia ul Islam Zuberi (2008) describes how migration created ‘a spirit of brotherhood amongst all communities and religions’ in the city. The author lived with his family in a locality called Jacob Lines, where army barracks had been turned into temporary living spaces for the muhajirs. There were as little as two and as many as 12 houses to a barrack.

A complete sense of comradeship prevailed between the different households no matter what their ethnic origin. Everyone knew each other and if there was any problem in one household the entire barrack would pitch in to provide a solution. This was the closeness and understanding with which the early settlers of Karachi lived and enjoyed this serene and beautiful city. In times when forty people die of gunfire in a week it is hard to imagine that Karachi was once a peaceful city by the sea but it was and those that have seen its early days cannot forget the sights and sounds of early Karachi. (Zuberi 2008)

The barracks here are a metaphor of the resilience and reliability, which gave people a sense of security and faith in the future. Such openness is also symbolised in spatial terms by the culture of reading rooms that was kept alive especially by the Hindu community. People would throw open a room that faced the street for a few hours in
the morning and late afternoon where one could read a collection
of books, magazines and newspapers.

However in the utopian narrative of the city it is the cinema hall
that is the epitome of modernist optimism and religious–nationalist
spirit. Cinemas, with names that were global in their imaginary,
were fast becoming a part of a cityscape of five-star hotels, cabarets
and casinos that catered to a developing consumer class. Rex, Rio,
Reno, Bambino, Eros, Palace, Kohinoor, Capitol, Paradise, Jubilee,
Odeon, Ritz, Regal, Kismet (destiny), Rivoli, Mayfair, and Dreamland,
which was the country’s first drive-in, put up films from all over
the world. Elahi remembers watching *La Piscine* with Alain Delon
and Romy Schneider, *Blindfold* starring Rock Hudson and Claudia
Cardinale and *The Adventures of Marco Polo the Magnificent* with
Horst Buchholz and Anthony Quinn that had been retitled ‘Kublai
Khan’ to pull in the Muslim crowds (Elahi 2009). Nasreen Abdullah
distinctly remembers how East Pakistanis — hailing from then East-
Pakistan, now Bangladesh — ‘stormed’ the yearly film festival at
Rex to watch *Mahanagar* (The Big City) that was set in the Calcutta
of the 1950s and 1960s and engaged with the theme of increasing
independence of middle-class women. Two extra shows were held,
the last one ending shortly before sunrise (Abdullah 2008). Most
regular shows started with a bulletin by the Government of Pakistan
to report on issues of national progress and development, and during
the month of Ramazan, some halls, Palace in particular, came up
with the gimmick of selling two films for the price of one in order to
pull bigger audiences.

The pious theatre-owners were kind enough to give the audi-
ence a 10-minute break so that they could break their fast, after which
the film restarted from where the brakes (sic) had been applied. Some
film aficionados were even kind enough to pass their dates to their
neighbours (Elahi 2009).

These nostalgic narratives, particularly those of the old colonial city
centre of Saddar, repeatedly describe a cosmopolitan heterogeneity
and the urban figures that featured in them. Take Mr Mobeed, a
Zoroastrian who owned cinema halls like Capitol and Paradise and
who was affectionately called Khan Sahib, or the newspaper hawk-
er at the street corner who sold the *Photoplay Film Monthly*. Agha
Sahib from Lucknow was the owner of Kitab Mehel (book palace).
He only sold Urdu literature and offered booklovers generous
discounts. Outside busy restaurants and coffee houses there were
the Pathan shoeshiners who would holler *sheesha banayga!* (will turn those shoes into mirrors). They would bang an empty polish box as a sign to the customer that he needed to put his other foot up on pedestal.

Saddar is no longer the multi-class, multi-ethnic, multi-religious space that it used to be and the recession and inflation of the past decades have meant that lower classes no longer have access to consumer items that the formal sector produces. Most goods such as soap, shoes, automobile parts, and cosmetics carrying the original brand name are now produced in small workshops in lower class neighbourhoods and squatter settlements. The symbols of a global consumerist lifestyle such as mobile phones, fast food and cable television are all available at budget prices. That does not mean, however, that the general expectation of progress and increased standards of living as well as a sense of belonging to a global world of consumerism has not been heavily frustrated by a malfunctioning state and a local economic crisis. Instead of the optimism and hope of the 1950s and 1960s there is gloom and bitterness about the mess the city is in today. The mythical gaiety and safety of post-colonial street life has turned into a chimera and a counterpoint to the city that has been running amok since the 1980s. Note for instance how Zuberi (2008) contrasts the city of his youth to the Karachi of today:

One evening after sunset there was a great hue and cry in Jacob Lines and Para military personnel flooded the entire area. Later it was known that someone had seen a person with a pistol in hand. Imagine just one person with a pistol caused such havoc and concern! Today there is hardly any locality at any time of the day or night when the air is not ringing with gunfire of submachine guns and even heavier firearms.

The latter statement is clearly an exaggeration, meant to get the message across that Karachi today differs like night from day when compared to the Karachi of 50 years ago.

Zuberi concludes his article with the regret that those who knew the early Karachi have been unable to preserve it in its pristine glory for future generations. Indeed, the army barracks in which the muhajirs lived upon arrival have been demolished, as have many old buildings that were a space for the multi-class cultural and intellectual scene that was at its height during the 1960s and 1970s. Saddar, the old city centre has been transformed by cheap construction, while its importance has lessened due to the rapid urban expansion that has
shifted the city centre to Hasan Square, in what used to be Karachi’s outskirts. As Karachi-based architects, urban planners, transport and traffic engineers argue, the city’s development has followed an illogical path because its basis has been political patronage rather than proper urban planning. For instance, the flyover in front of the Finance and Trade Centre is rumoured to have been the desire of former president of Pakistan General Pervez Musharraf, as was the flyover at Hasan Square that was built on the orders of Altaf Hussain, the charismatic leader of the locally powerful Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). There is a general sense that powerful politicians and military figures can do what they want. The city municipality, which was said to have cleaned and washed the streets every night in former days, now only collects 20 per cent of the garbage that is generated by the city. Everyday about 400 million gallons of raw and untreated sewage is emptied into the surrounding sea (De’Souza 2007: viii). There is also a kind of hopelessness about the problems that are clearly visible and multiplying such as the growth of katchi abadis (squatter settlements) in which almost half the population of the city is housed, and the widespread lack of access to clean drinking water or electricity.

The muhajirs in particular have become increasingly paranoid of losing the privileges and power they used to have in Karachi. The fear that set in after President Ayub Khan, himself a Pakhtoon from the Northwest Frontier Province, stripped Karachi of its status as the capital city in the early 1960s has since then increased into a general distrust that the ‘locals’ will not grant the migrants a place in Pakistan. This migrant fear was largely absent when the muhajirs far outnumbered the local Sindhis in Karachi, but the sense of vulnerability has grown with the growing numbers of migrants from other provinces, particularly from the Northwest Frontier Province, who have been settling in Karachi from the 1960s onwards. The Pakhtun from up north are a vital part of the city’s workforce. The fact that the Pakhtoon are perceived to be prone to support radical fundamentalist and anti-Shia religious leaders and parties has led to a growing fear of ‘Talibanisation’ in Karachi. This fear is skillfully manipulated and endorsed by the MQM, the main representative of muhajirs in Karachi. The Pakhtoon and more recently IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons, a result of the war against terrorism in the northern areas) settle mainly in the neighbourhoods located...
on the fringes of the city, such as Qasba colony (the only hill in the
city) and at Sohrab Goth. Despite its size Karachi has only three entry
and exit points (Super Highway, National Highway and Lasbella) and
there is a growing sense that the Pakhtoon ‘control’ all three. The
area of Sohrab Goth at Super Highway is imagined as an arms depot
where illegal, heavy weaponry comes in from up north. Karachi-
based news magazine The Herald reports that tensions in the area
have run so high that recently clashes between ethnic groups erupted
when one group opened fire to test a dozen new kalashnikovs they
had received and a rival group retaliated thinking it was under attack
(Khan 2009: 31).

The violence being reported and experienced implies that people
navigate through the city in a constant state of alert. People listen to
the news before leaving their homes or offices and regularly tune into
their car radio. ‘There is no place these terrorists cannot strike', says
Wasim Abbas, a local shopkeeper. ‘It could happen anywhere, at any
time. How can we feel safe?’ (Hashim 2009). In the days following
instances of heavy violence people do go out to buy groceries and
household goods at the local Sunday Bazaar and neighbourhood
shops, but public events and spaces such as festivals and shopping
malls are generally avoided.

The constant circulation of news of violence in the city and the
coverage of militancy on 24-hour news channels have made the viol-
ence almost banal. A journalist who grew up during the late 1980s and
early 1990s says: ‘I remember reading headlines such as “300 killed in
Karachi” when I was growing up and my first reaction after a while
became, “Oh, that means no school tomorrow”. The only difference
is that back then there were only newspapers and now we have got
television channels’ (ibid.). Since the 1980s, when Karachi earned its
nickname as ‘a second Beirut’, a generation has grown up in what
could be called a culture of latent and omnipresent violence.

On the other hand, much violence and crime also goes unreported
so that each new gruesome story serves as an affirmation of the
idea that things are getting worse. Urban myths usually start off as
warnings to family and friends of places of the possibility of a mishap
and telling signs of danger. People are very wary of white Toyota
Corolla’s with tinted windows and motorcyclewalla’s (motorcycle
drivers) with a helmet on as both are the most frequently used
vehicles by criminal gangs. People forward text messages and emails
that do not only enhance the speed with which rumours spread but
also creates a sense of a community of city-dwellers bound together by the experience of permanent danger. The moballab in the post-Partition city represented a spirit of Muslim unity, but ties in many neighbourhoods are becoming more and more anonymous (Verkaaik 2009). To an extent the virtual community of Karachiites increasingly lives side by side with face-to-face relations within the moballab (neighbourhood) and to some extent replaces them.2

At the height of its popularity during the late 1980s, the mubajir MQM movement saw itself as the ritual purifier of Karachi that would restore to the city its founding ideals of sacrifice. When the party won its first election in 1987, people went out into the streets in an atmosphere that was reminiscent of the days of Independence. Karachi-based newspaper Dawn described the event as ‘a spectacle of cultural liberation’ (Verkaaik 1994: 10) but the MQM soon became associated with an image of intimidation, corruption and ethnic violence. Although never officially banned, the party suffered immensely from an army operation meant to eliminate MQM workers that started in 1992 and that forced most party leaders to go in exile, including the charismatic MQM leader, Altaf Hussain. From the mid-1990s onwards, new proselytising religious movements took advantage of the growing disillusionment with politics in general and with the MQM in particular. But even such movements have been discredited because of the increase in religious violence and hatred they promoted between Sunnis and Shias.

While it is clear that over the last few decades life in Karachi has increasingly become more violent, unsafe, unpredictable, and hectic, these experiences have also served to affect people’s expectations of the future — both of the city and their personal lives. Just as James Ferguson (1999) notes in his ethnography of the Zambian Copperbelt, optimistic ‘expectations of modernity’ have been replaced by a general sense of a future denied. Nationalist prospects of progress have made room now for a widespread sense of despair that also affects people’s personal expectations from their lives. It is in this context that Edhi emerges as a powerful symbol of hope. By manoeuvring within the framework of political power, while also eschewing institutional politics, Edhi has managed to become a

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2 See Oskar Verkaaik (2009) for a fuller discussion on the shifting ‘at home’ feeling in Karachi.
symbol of sincerity and selflessness. As we discuss in the following section, Edhi and his Foundation’s work exploit the utopian narrative of sacrifice and the dystopian narrative of corruption and ethnic violence to achieve their humanitarian goals. In this way, Edhi offers a sense of egalitarianism and sacrifice that together serve as a powerful anti-structure to the everyday experience of betrayal and loss in the city.

**Edhi in Karachi**

In Pakistan an estimated 6,000 people live in 17 Edhi homes located across the country. Orphans, battered women, old people, and mentally incompetent people are able to receive a basic education and vocational training, as well as basic medical services in these homes. The *langar* (free kitchen) service provides poor people, mostly male labourers on day wage, with a hot meal in the evening. The Edhi Ambulance Service has an estimated 1,300 vans in Pakistan, of which approximately 150 are stationed in Karachi. Unclaimed corpses are registered at the Edhi morgue and kept for three days after which they are given a decent burial at Mawachh, the Edhi graveyard. The Edhi Information Bureau or Edhi Tower, operates the Edhi emergency number 115, it issues press releases to electronic and print media on emergencies, accidents and disasters within Pakistan, and it is open to the public for queries. People in search of missing relatives are received, donations are collected, there is a first aid doctor and medical supplies such as wooden crutches and steel commodes can be purchased at a nominal price.

The foundation also makes significant monetary donations to trusted hospitals and medical institutions such as the Sindh Institute for Urology and Transplantation and the Civil Hospital. In a crib that stands in front of most Edhi centres, unwanted babies can be left. These babies are nursed at the Maternity Clinic at the Mithandar Head Office.

The head office is where the organisation started, just a few years after Abdul Sattar Edhi, who was born in Bantva, India in 1922, migrated to Karachi with his family. The religious–nationalist movement against British rule had been all around him and so he was already very politically aware by this time. He had learnt about the ideas of Marx and Lenin, he had read the Gujarati newspaper *Bombay Samachar* and *Gujarat Sandesh*, the first nationalist newspaper of
Gujarat to cover the freedom struggle against the British. He had also read Maxim Gorky’s socialist–realist novel *The Mother* (1907), that, in a parallel of the evolution of Mother Russia, describes the development of the main character’s mother Pavel Vlassov from a passive, working woman into a revolutionary. Edhi’s notions of social order and morality were also shaped by mythical, religious and political figures. To him the story of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain is important and relevant even in contemporary times. For him, the *zalim* (oppressor) Yazid stands for the capitalist system and the *mazloom* (oppressed) led by Imam Hussain are the poor people of today. According to him the *maulvi* (Islamic clerics) and *padri* (priests) are all *dalals* (agents) of the *sarmayadar* (rich people).3

Edhi is also inspired by the famous *Khaksar Tehrik*, a semi-military volunteer organisation that emerged from the lower classes in 1931. The movement opposed the call for Pakistan and engaged itself with social welfare projects. Dressed in khaki, the colour of the earth and armed with *belchas* (spades), the volunteers would walk from one village to another village to solve people’s problems. Another movement that appealed to Edhi was Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s Khudai Khidmatgar Party (those sacrificing their lives for God), a non-violent political movement against British rule centred in the Northwest Frontier Province (Edhi 1996: 35). Ghaffar Khan knew that the Frontier could never win independence from British power through force and therefore led an army of non-violent soldiers called the Red Shirts, who would stage peaceful demonstrations and walk from one village to the other, educating people about health and sanitation. In this way the movement hoped that it would give people a sense of empowerment and that it would raise their political and nationalist consciousness. Ghaffar Khan opened a number of schools in the Northwest Frontier Province in 1910 but when the British sensed revolt against their rule these were shut down. Ghaffar Khan’s movement was also resisted by Islamic clerics who saw an increase in education levels as a challenge to an interest in religion.

In 1951 Edhi bought a small shop in Mithandar where he set up a dispensary. He hired a physician and put a small tin moneybox outside for donations. He called his organisation the Memon Voluntary Corp. The name, however, carried the suggestion that he served only

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3 Personal interview with Abdul Sattar Edhi, 17 March 2009.
his own community of Memons and he therefore renamed it Medina Voluntary Corps two years later (Edhi 2006: 50). ‘I am not a Muslim’, says Edhi, ‘but I have faith in Allah’, implying that he supports a practical rather than an ideologically driven stream of Islam. He chose steel grey as his trademark colour and completed this uniform with a cap that was characteristically worn by Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. The sale of sacrificial hides that had been donated to the Corps became their main source of income.

Whereas Edhi is a name that resonates with the purity of sacrifice and sincerity, both its day-to-day activities and the way in which the organisation is run provide a much more secular, even political, picture. To provide an example of this, we will present an impression of the activities that take place at the Information Bureau, the nerve centre of the foundation that is located in downtown Karachi. The office is a single room that looks like it fell into disrepair a long time ago. The ceiling was once broken away, and the walls have not been plastered to cover up the traces. Halfway up the back wall, a door hangs idly on its hinges. Cupboards and windows are covered with posters of Abdul Sattar Edhi and notices in Urdu: ‘Sadqa of a cow Rs 15,000’. ‘One meal for an orphan Rs 20’. ‘Notice to the general public: deposit your marriage form here. It is not neccessary to go to the Edhi head office or anywhere else’.

The room is roughly divided into two: the first half with a reception and the second half with five desks facing each other. A small television is tuned into local news channels. This is where Anwar Kazmi sits. The secretary of Abdul Sattar Edhi is a wearied-looking man with piercing green–brown eyes and a hawkish nose.

Anwar Kazmi usually sits sideways with his back against an arm of his chair and his feet resting on the lid of the dustbin next to his desk. He spends the morning reading his newspapers and incoming letters and e-mails that the younger workers print out for him. Today Kazmi sahib is busy writing corrections in a draft for what is to become a full colour poster. ‘What do you say?’ he asks no one in particular. He holds the paper up in the air, ‘Photograph big enough?’

Fareed chacha, who has been double-checking ambulance log books all morning, looks up from his work and decides it is time for a break. He walks over and takes the draft from Kazmi sahib as

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4 Personal interview with Abdul Sattar Edhi, 17 March 2009.
he sits down across him. The text is a warning notice to the general public that Abdul Sattar Edhi no longer has any relation with Rizwan, the son of Mehmood Ghaznavi. Rizwan is a nephew of Abdul Sattar Edhi. ‘I say the bigger his mouth gets the bigger we blow up his photograph’, Kazmi sahib quips. He has everyone in the office grinning now. Fareed hands him back the draft and Kazmi sends it off for final correction and printing. He rubs his tired eyes, folds his arms and sinks into quiet contemplation.

Kazmi sahib tells us that Rizwan was refusing to admit that it was he who stole the money. His father had also rung Kazmi the previous night and threatened to get even with the people of the Foundation if they did not restore his son to his position soon. Kazmi says he is afraid that they might even open fire on the bureau. So he retaliated with a threat to bring the whole affair out into open. And that is how the idea for the poster was born. By the afternoon a polaroid photograph of Rizwan will be up at all the Edhi centres in Karachi as a clear demonstration that the foundation will not let itself to pressure tactics. Fareed Chacha tries to lighten the mood. ‘You need to pin these up at the hospitals too. Put them up on the bathroom doors’. But Kazmi is done joking. He stands up briskly, pushing back his chair, and leaves saying ‘I’m going for a shave’.

Like most people in Pakistan, Edhi does not pay taxes and after all these years he still refuses to register the foundation as a welfare organisation. He says he gets away with it because, ‘all over the world my organisation is an example of God’. He continues saying: ‘We receive a huge amount of donations from a qaum [nation] that is generally known in the world as a nakami qaum [failed nation], Even America does not have such an organisation’. Edhi also sounds rather astonished about the fact that he is not jailed for his statements against the corruption of the political system and their lack of concern for the poor. ‘They just cannot catch me’, he says, ‘because I do not lead a tehreek [movement]’.

Edhi’s son Faisal, who is to lead the foundation in the future says, says: ‘I told him you have done a lot but we need to become political if we really want to change society’. Edhi agrees that things in Pakistan will not change unless the nizaam (system) does — a

5 Personal interview with Abdul Sattar Edhi and Faisal Edhi, 17 March 2009.
dominant discourse in Pakistan today — but he refuses to become politically active. Whereas his son Faisal wants to change the political system from within, Edhi is devoted to a politics of anti-politics, based on the notion that real change is always spiritual and social.

Many people who grew up at the foundation later take up a job here. Such as Yasin who spent several years in an Edhi home where he was brought as a missing child. His name was broadcast on Radio Pakistan but it was after only several years that he was reunited with his parents. The family lives in Karimabad, in North Karachi. Yasin takes the W-giyara (W-11) bus from Allahwali Godra in New Karachi to Merewether Tower in Kharadar area, where he works as an errand boy to support his parents and unmarried siblings, including three sisters. His father spends his days at a Memon mosque close to home; it is unclear whether he goes there to beg or to pray. ‘That is why I say, I have been saying it since I was a child: Jab tak suraj chaand rahehga Edhi tera naam rahehga (As long as the sun and moon are up in the sky Edhi’s name will never die)’. In the original song, mostly sung on Independence Day, it is Pakistan’s name that will never die. ‘Forget about Pakistan’, Yasin says. ‘Edhi is the one who should be remembered. Where would I be without him?’

The death of Abuzar Ghaffari is an important story to Edhi. Abuzar was a close companion of Prophet Mohammad until his death in 11 AH. He was also the imam [spiritual leader] and administrator of Medina whenever the Prophet was engaged elsewhere in battle. He is said to have been a strong supporter of zakat (alms-giving or social work) as a way of redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor. When his concept of equal distribution of wealth was resisted by the rich in Medina he was asked by Hazrat Usman to leave the city and to live in Rabza, a village that was located on a caravan route from Iraq to Medina. When Abuzar Ghaffari died in 32 AH he was alone with his wife. Narrating the story of Abuzar, Edhi says: ‘A caravan passed by his dead body. There was nobody to even bury him. This is how Muslims treat each other....When the caravan found out that this was the body of the companion of the Prophet they got down and buried him’.

The mausoleum of Jinnah stands on a hillock in central Karachi and its white marble dome can be seen from afar. Edhi wishes to be

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6 Personal interview with Abdul Sattar Edhi, 17 March 2009.
buried outside the city, in front of Edhi Village, on the Super Highway where he has reserved a piece of land for himself and his wife Bilquis. It is a smart idea, he says mischievously. People will be scared that something bad will happen to them if they drive by without dropping some money. That way I will be earning money for my mission even when I am in my grave.

The position of Edhi as a peripheral figure, who quite literally lies outside the city gates and yet has some sort of moral and spiritual power that is felt by all those who come in and go out of the city, is perhaps also an apt image for the position that Edhi has always wished and managed to maintain during his lifetime. In informal conversations with people about Edhi we learnt that for some people it is actually insulting to talk of the Edhi Foundation as a ‘professional business’. Business, they say, is always dirty, a realm to which Edhi does not belong. The same is true for the world of politics. Although not afraid to criticise politicians, Edhi has always managed to maintain his apolitical reputation. One informant wondered how everyone who works for Edhi becomes honest, devoted and committed. His explanation was that Edhi must definitely possess spiritual powers. Again and again Edhi is transformed into a symbol of the sacrifice and purity of a Karachi that no longer seemed to exist, having managed to survive amidst a dystopic present.

Discussion

It is not difficult to see that the romanticised picture of Karachi in the 1950s and 1960s was not only related to expectations of modernity and progress, but also to Pakistan’s and Karachi’s relations with the West, primarily the US. After Independence, when the Cold War gained momentum, Pakistan became an important and loyal ally of the Western powers, in return for which not just the army, but the economy in general was heavily subsidised. The new culture of the early decades after Independence — cinemas, book shops, music — also reflected an aspiration and desire for modernisation fostered by Pakistan’s and Karachi’s political position. Since the mid-1970s, and especially after the war in Afghanistan started in 1978, the dominant political ideology began to change, even though Pakistan remained firmly within the Western bloc. A renewed focus on Islam as a political and nationalist ideology disconnected Pakistan culturally from the West, while simultaneously intensifying
the military and political alliance with the US. In Karachi, the so-called Islamisation of society, propagated under the rule of General Zia-ul Haq during the 1980s, went hand in hand with an emerging melancholia about an eroding modernism. Zia’s project of a cultural revolution was not considered very favourably by most Karachiites. Instead the muhajirs of Karachi turned massively away from the parties that supported Zia’s administration, notably the Jamiat-i-Islami, and rallied behind the new MQM, the Muhajir Qaumi Movement, that continued to depict Karachi as an essentially modern city, even though it did so in a less nostalgic manner. For the MQM, Karachi was home of the ‘middle classes’, a concept that came to be identified largely with the muhajir population of Karachi. In MQM ideology, the urban middle classes were modern and educated Muslims. For the MQM, the turn to a more purist Islam, that began with Zia and resulted in the Islamic militancy of today, was foreign to Karachi, imported by Pakhtoon migrants and supported by the state. The fear that this new ideology will take over the city, forcing Karachiites to live according to standards that are seen as being typical for backward, rural and tribal parts of the country, has only increased since the so-called war on terror is fought out on Pakistani soil.

There is, however, an ideological shortcoming in the narrative of Karachi’s decline. Modernism seems a thing of the past, whereas radical Islam, being the most powerful alternative, does not mesh well with the actual lived experience of the city. In this mix, Edhi stands out, as he is highly critical of both perspectives. Edhi distances himself from both modernist consumer societies and the puritan rule of a fundamentalist Islam. The way he works is informed by an ideology that self-consciously wants to be an alternative to both ‘Westernisation’ and ‘Talibanisation’. He already offered a South Asian alternative for hard-boiled modernism and Westernisation in the 1960s, and now challenges fundamentalism by dismissing it as wrong politics and wrong Islam. He is, to be sure, not the only celebrity in Pakistan or Karachi who has continued the tradition of social work and non-violence reform. The famous leader of the Sindhi separatist movement, the late G. M. Syed, did the same by becoming a vegetarian and wearing humble, home-spun clothes. But G. M. Syed was too involved in ethnic politics to be accepted as a sincere reformer. Edhi, however, has managed to constantly revive the egalitarian and spiritual traditions within the Independence movement precisely because he has always stayed out of the field
of politics. Paradoxically he represents an alternative for the present predicament, an alternative that is at the same time impossible to realise. He reminds Karachiites of the idealism of the immediate post-Independence period as well as the failures of contemporary times. While politically marginal, he nevertheless represents the charismatic ‘soul’ of Karachi.

References


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