

*(This talk is extracted from a longer essay titled 'The City and its Commons' which will appear in 48<sup>0</sup>: Public.Art.Ecology, a volume on public space and art in Delhi edited by Pooja Sood, published by the Goethe Institute.)*

## **The City and its Public Spaces**

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The city's past lives with us in the present, in how we experience places at the intersection of our personal biographies and collective memories. This past, I believe, can also be a resource for claiming the future, for imagining Delhi not just as it once was, but as we might want it to be. The collective meanings of Delhi as a place are being radically redefined in the last ten years as the city seeks 'world-class' status. This aspiration has taken concrete shape as policies of economic liberalization have unrolled, creating a real estate boom in what used to be a sluggish, state-controlled land market. Land prices have risen more than five times in the last nine years. The city's economy has shifted more firmly towards the service sector as older manufacturing firms have been shut down, partly due to a crackdown by courts on environmental pollution. In the last ten years, tens of thousands of workers in these industries have lost their jobs; almost half a million people have been evicted from squatter settlements and pushed to the periphery. Much of this judicial activism has been prompted by upper-middle-class citizens, the prime beneficiaries of liberalization, for whom pursuing the 'public interest' by removing pollution is synonymous with protecting their lifestyles by ridding the city of its working-class population. And it is the driving beat of this lifestyle that powers where the city is going: sixty shopping malls built in seven years; cars that outnumber the combined total of the other three metros; entire books and magazines devoted only to

shopping, eating and drinking out. Every opportunity to consume is exploited to the fullest, for what is the good life but '*changa khao te changa pehno*' (eat well and dress well)?

Add to this already heady brew the ambitions of the Delhi government whose vision of a 'world-class' city is premised on its potential as a site for sports events, conventions and tourism. The Commonwealth Games of 2010 are regarded as a mere dress rehearsal for what is to come: the Asian Games and, possibly, even the Olympics. The games are an opportunity for mega-projects paid for by public money, all of which entail construction on an unprecedented scale and at breakneck speed. The Delhi metro, 24 new flyovers, a Signature bridge over the river Yamuna, the Games Village on the Yamuna floodplain, eleven sports stadiums, and an upgraded airport are just some of the big-ticket items on the state's shopping list. As we speak, construction is in full swing and the city looks raw and dug up, its drainage blocked and clogged, traffic jams and tempers worsened by diversions and blocks. Yet it's all supposed to be worth the wait, because by October we will be 'world-class'.

Becoming 'world-class' has meant shedding the city's rather rumpled and shabby image which, in retrospect, was a great part of its charm. Until the 1980s, Delhi was a *sarkari* city. Growing up in the red-brick houses of the university staff quarters in Maurice Nagar, we were willy-nilly conscious of social hierarchies: the professors lived in sprawling C-type bungalows and the *karmcharis* dwelt in F-type tenements. There was an air of rundown-ness about the place: the colonial-era wiring meant that if one switched on the toaster, all the lights in the house would flicker ominously. The standard jaundice-yellow whitewash, the draughty door and window fittings, the primitive kitchen—all contributed to a sense of decrepitude which we vainly tried to disguise with ethnic bedspreads and wall-hangings. But the run-

down-ness of our private premises was offset by the spaciousness of the public areas that surrounded us—even the F quarters had access to a large *maidan* for cricket and the community Ram Leela. And—it’s a cliché but still true—one knew people across social distances. The Nepali *chaukidar*, whose chief task was to swing a desultory *lathi* at the cows that wandered into the compound in the afternoons, also doubled as the morning milkman. We would occasionally visit his house to deposit milk bottles, just as we would go over to the dhobi’s quarters with its huge vat for boiling bed-sheets. Now, at the research institute where I work, most of the service staff is outsourced, employed through a contractor who, incidentally, pays them less than the legal minimum wage. Just when one begins to find out where a *chaukidar* or *mali* lives, they get replaced by a new set of faces. Perhaps nostalgia for the spaces and social fabric of the past cannot be separated from wistfulness about one’s own lost youth and I suspect that my present weather-beaten state of mind might play a part in limning the past with a happy haze. But when I remember the open spaces and gardens that we took for granted while growing up, I now know what I did not then: that our city was ecologically far superior to the place we now inhabit.

Being a *sarkari* city, large areas of Delhi were owned by the government and, until the 1990s, a lot of land just lay about in a state of benign neglect. On the higher ground of the Ridge, there were gnarled trees tangled with creepers, sweet-smelling shrubs and the insistent call of grey partridges. By the river’s west bank were tamarisk groves and tall grasses with white feathery plumes that caught the light. Mongoose and peafowl were commonplace. The wild and the rural existed in the heart of the built-up and urban. This paradox was one to be proud of. In which other city of this size could one sit in a tiny patch of garden and count more than fifty species of birds? Where else could you stand in the middle of a city and be surrounded by fields of vegetables, fruit and flowers? Despite the grievous assaults on its wilderness,

Delhi still encompasses all this and more. September last year, while walking along the *ganda nala* in Vijay Nagar I casually glanced at a *peepal* tree overhanging its spume-flecked water and saw a party of grey hornbills. Last spring I watched farmers plant melons on the sand-banks in the middle of the Yamuna. I enjoy these incongruities, but I appreciate even more their importance for the ecological well-being of the city. The Ridge and the river—the geographical parentheses that enclosed the city for hundreds of years—give us water and clean air, a space to breathe, a place to rest one’s eyes and soul. These are our commons—open to all, from the labouring women who collect firewood for their *chulhas* to the young boys who glean plastic bags for recycling from the river’s flotsam.

Crucial though the Ridge and the Yamuna are to Delhi’s ecology, few seem to care about them except as places ripe for redevelopment. Major sections of the Ridge in Delhi have been eaten up to make space for hotels and malls, and even larger areas are being built upon and quarried in neighbouring Haryana. The Yamuna floodplain is being constricted by embankments so that the land that accommodates the river’s monsoon swell can be used for luxury apartments, a shopping mall, a metro depot and the Akshardham temple complex. This commodification of the commons is also a privatization of public land. Places that, with a careless generosity, welcomed all—different species of living things as well as different classes of people—are now being parcelled out into the custody of the privileged few and made out of bounds to everyone else.

Instead, paying customers are invited to the new ‘public’ spaces—sanitized, surveilled and secure—where pleasure is conditional on spending money and desire consists of ogling at all the things that money can buy. Much moralizing has already been done about shopping malls and their exclusionary tendencies and I don’t want to add to this. Here, I would rather view

them as part of a city-wide assault on the commons by commerce and cars—the two ugly monsters we have sheltered and fed. Commerce and trade are not inherently evil, but they can suffocate a city when they take over every inch of space, as is the case today. In Delhi, wherever one looks, there is a new shop or a row of shops all selling apparently the same clothes, shoes and electronic goods. This repetition is both tedious and unhelpful. A good market is one that is useful and fun. Mukherjee Nagar market near where I live is both: it caters to all kinds of needs and people. Its potholed lanes and dingy buildings contain shops that will make you cotton mattresses and photocopies, repair a pressure cooker or a puncture, make hot *jalebis* and fresh fruit juice, and do special waterproof bridal makeup so that you can sob your heart out during *bidaai* and still stay unsmudged for the camera. This marvellous miscellany is the result of being surrounded by middle-class Punjabi households, where money has to be prudently husbanded and haggling with the *sabziwala* over the price of *desi timatar* is de rigueur. The market's proximity to the university makes it home to hundreds of coaching classes that cater to India's future civil servants, as well as bookshops where you can buy Pushkin and Premchand and every major literary figure featured on the university syllabus. This market will sell a pair of jeans to a college student and a hundred grams of cooking oil to a construction worker's daughter.

But as the city gentrifies, many of the humbler trades can't afford the rent. Or they have been targeted by municipal clean-up crews. The essential services that survive in the city's interstices: the artisanal economy of welders, dyers of cloth, sellers of *gobar ki khaad*, have all been pushed out or put on notice. The vegetable vendors and the *thelawala* whose mobile stall sells plates of rice and dal to cycle-rickshaw pullers keep a keen lookout for the *kameti-wale*—the municipal squads who might suddenly swoop in and confiscate the tools of their

trade. The raids are an occupational hazard that even assiduous *hafta*-paying can't insure against.

While the municipal pendulum swings between extortion and eviction, and small-time vendors fend off being bludgeoned as best they can, the government goes all out to legalize encroachment and unauthorized land use by the big guys. Thanks to recent laws designed to profit property owners and developers, all the houses that front wide roads in residential areas are now permitted to be put to commercial use. And all the pavements where one could walk have disappeared because they are being used to park the cars of shoppers. Our streets are social and ecological disasters. And they are getting worse with every passing day. One can give the malls a miss, but one can't avoid the constant clamour of commerce and cars which makes street life stressful and unsafe. A deluge of cars has swallowed up Delhi's streets, spitting cyclists and pedestrians out of its way. We walk in fear, scurrying across the road, squeezing ourselves onto shrunken sidewalks, striving for safety and dignity as the next wave of menacing motors screeches past. And, instead of discouraging them, the Delhi government welcomes cars, building wider roads, bigger parking lots, flyovers and underpasses, elevated roads and underground roads. This total surrender to large capital and the comfort of the car-owning classes is driving Delhi over the edge—there's a new shrillness to the city, a note of nerves stretched taut. Each commute is an ordeal; people venture onto the road like warriors going into battle.

In a city, it is the streets that witness collective life, the everyday and the extraordinary. Despite its diminution by the twin invasions described above, the republic of the streets somehow manages to survive. There is still the civilized oasis of the street *chai* shop. Under a tree, with seats made of salvaged paving stones and sometimes a felled electricity pole, it's

a space that invites you with its tidiness—the clean floor, the row of washed glasses, the line of plastic jars with savouries and biscuits. And even when the *chaiwala* has packed up and gone home for the day, the tidiness remains, a telltale sign that someone tends this part of the pavement. When the shop is open, auto-rickshaw drivers and clerks sit next to students and shop assistants—all mostly male, alas, for women don't generally get to hang out much in public spaces. Each tea shop creates a community of regulars, as do *paan* shops. And it's notable that, for men at least, these gatherings allow everyone in, for both *chai* and *paan* are modest pleasures that even ordinary folk can afford. A more anonymous sense of community—and one that includes even solitary women—can be found in Connaught Place, where the architecture of corridors and pavements is wide enough to allow striding, strolling, standing and sitting about looking at the world passing by. The metro, which has otherwise fuelled intense commercialization along its routes, has been kinder to CP, bringing in crowds of people who are there simply to enjoy the feeling of being there. This is also true of India Gate, where ice-cream and balloons are simply excuses, parts of a ritual centred on green lawns and a grand vista. Over time, the romance of these places has come to emanate not only from their stately buildings and pleasing environs, but from their place in our collective memory. This is what thousands of people do on 15 August: they go to India Gate, just to enjoy being part of a public on a patriotic holiday.

That new meanings can be found for older places is thus both a source of despair and hope. If one's heart sinks on seeing the Yamuna's shrinking riverbed, there's a measure of gladness at the new Millennium Park planted over what used to be a huge garbage dump on the Outer Ring Road near the Nizamuddin bridge. And fortunately, some parks like Roshanara Bagh in north Delhi remain local and ungentrified, the basics still untampered with. The rhythms of the seasons and the passing of the day bring different people to its overgrown lawns:

purposeful morning walkers, children messing about at play, ladies doing *satsang*, card-playing cronies on lunch-break—all casually sharing the space with the daughter of a Mughal emperor.

So, despite the incursions of capital, spaces of leisure that are open to almost everyone and that are relatively untouched by the urge to buy and sell can still be found in the city, albeit concentrated in its older and more affluent areas... This, surely, is what a city is all about—a whole that is greater than the sum of its citizens and their built environment. It was there before us and it will go on after we are gone. It is a living embodiment of what humans can create: the marvellous, the moving, the absurd and the awful. But first and foremost, this city is a *collective* endeavour, an ongoing public works project that involves us all. Yet we deny the interdependencies that make the city possible, forever seeking to undermine the dense fabric of social and ecological relations that gives Delhi its distinctive identity. If the Ridge and the river are destroyed, then so is the air and water and the habitats of other species with whom we share this place. If the republic of the streets is conquered by commerce and cars, we lose something precious that belongs to all of us, rich and poor—the chance to rejoice in our common humanity. The death of Delhi's commons will be the end of Delhi, and that will be tragic.