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Editorial Note

This issue of SubVersions brings together work presented at *Frames of Reference 2016*, held in January 2017 on the theme *Neoliberalising Cultures- Media. Markets. Meanings*. FoR is the annual graduate national student seminar organised by the School of Media and Cultural Studies, which invites contributions from MA , MPhil and PhD scholars. This issue reflects upon LPG (liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation) and its repercussions across media and culture in contemporary society. Since 1991, also known as the point-of-no-return, rapid socioeconomic and technological changes have resulted in the spread of suburbanisation, the rise of an aspirational middle class, agrarian crises, marginalisation of indigenous and rural communities and new conceptions of space and individual identity. These papers explore this new nationhood in a globalised world in several ways. Two papers reflect on the space of art – through analysing the emergence of street art and construction of museum spaces within a neoliberal cultural paradigm. Education is another entry point, with a paper that looks at the politics of aspiration in private colleges of engineering. Another paper examines the changing dynamics of caste with a neoliberalised nation, as hard assertions of caste identities exacerbate processes of discrimination. Finally, we have a paper that looks at changes in walnut wood craft since 90s in Kashmir as a result of neoliberalism and militarisation.

With this issue of SubVersions, we shift from a biannual to an annual frequency. The present issue is the annual issue for 2017. We hope to catch up with the lag in publication and to produce the next issue, for 2018, before the end of this year.

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‘Art Participolis’¹: Neoliberal Governance and Urban Art Policy in Delhi

Sanchita Khurana

Abstract:

In the last decade, the metropolis of Delhi has witnessed a surge in urban aesthetic practice – ranging from murals to graffiti workshops and community art – that draws its intellectual value from being located in the public sphere, and in supposed critique of the elitist or commercialised art world. This paper uses analytical focus on the recent emergence of street art as a legitimate public art form, in order to understand the overall arts policy of the Indian state, locating it squarely within the ‘cultural economy’ (Pratt 2011) of Delhi. For this analysis, it places such art within the neoliberal ‘revanchism’ of cities today.

Keywords: Urban art, street art, participation governance, urban space, neoliberal urban, Delhi, urban policy, public art, cultural turn, creative city, creative class, citizenship, revanchism, cultural planning, Indian middle class, citizen artist, community art

The Neoliberal Urban India:

The 20th century has been witness to an urbanisation of the globe and a globalisation of the urban. After neoliberal reforms, an increased focus on individual cities as brands unto themselves is seen, as within the global the local is marketed, and at the ‘invisible hand(s)’ of the free market, places undergo reinvestment and regeneration in an almost cyclical pattern. Cities posit themselves in competition with other cities, where they are regarded as driving economic growth and development.

Doreen Massey ascribes the “changing forms of the spatial organisation of social relations” (Massey 1994:168) in cities the world over to globalisation. By the 1980s, America’s industrial economy had been completely discredited and cities were fast emerging as centres of a service economy. Cities therefore became tools to generate cultural, rather than productive, work forms

for a new, emerging service class. This warranted generating an economy based on cultural potential such as creativity and knowledge, which further led to the “specific transformation of culture into resource” (Yudice 2003: 28). As cities acted as the crossroad for various kinds of exchange, it became important - in this ‘cultural turn’ - to produce an image of the new urban; setting off a global narrative about the ‘creative city’.

By 2002, the construction of a ‘creative economy’¹ had become an acknowledged and stated policy goal of governments across the globe. Ever since, cultural industries have attracted attention not just from capitalists, but also from urban policy makers for their significant role in the post-industrial economy. They are valued not only for their ability to provide employment to a vast section of the urban population, but also for their aesthetic and symbolic value. With reputed positive by-effects associated with urban cultural industries, it is not surprising that this sector is deemed worthy of public investment and intervention.

In India, the definitive break from a welfare regime can be said to have occurred in 1991 when the state undertook macro-economic reform that, over a decade, liberalised trade barriers, privatised public industries and deregulated markets. It was in the 90s that the neoliberalisation of Indian economy can be said to have begun. It makes sense, therefore, to posit this moment in history as a turning point for Indian urban governance, and to locate in it the emergence of the urban in Indian political economy.

Gautam Bhan (2009) notes that contemporary India has been shaped by the transformation to liberal market economies, a focus on developing world class cities and increasingly aspirational attitudes of the middle classes (see also Nigam and Menon 2007). A close study of the impact of the New Economic Policy on Indian urban schemes reveals the change in nature of planning that Indian cities have received since the 1990s. Swapna Banerjee-Guha (2016) writes in her essay *Contemporary Urban Policy in India: A Critique of Neoliberal Urbanism* that:

Contemporary cities need to be analysed in their contextualities in terms of the wider economic restructuring, weakening of the State at the national scale, and its response to the priorities of the market. The process is closely connected with the neoliberal doctrine sweeping across the

¹ UNCTAD defines the creative economy as “an emerging concept dealing with the interface between creativity, culture, economics and technology.” Source: The British Council Creative Cities Project

world, characterised by an uneven and problematic inclusion of the urban process of the South in the global urban system and generalisation of gentrification as a universal global urban strategy.

(Banerjee-Guha 2016: 67)

In policy literature, the oft-referred to McKinsey Global Institute's (2010) report² on India's 'urban awakening' has been influential in both, highlighting the challenges facing Indian cities as well as restating a market-led approach to urban development. It charts the evolution of the Indian urban policy discourse, associating current policy approaches to India's overall political economy of urban development. Karen Coelho and Anant Mariganti also refer to how in Indian urban policy, "the language of inclusion has replaced earlier concerns with "distributive justice" and "equity", clearly signalling the shift from dirigiste to market-enabling modes of policy intervention" (Coelho and Mariganti 2012: 21).

Concomitant to the competitive growth of cultural industries in India, the Indian metropolis has undergone significant change in infrastructural and social set-up. No matter which city you pick – Mumbai, Bangalore or Chennai – the effect of neoliberal reform on urban structures and governance can be noticed. In this context, I quote Banerjee-Guha again, who believes that:

Cities of the (global) South have started showing signs of intense spatial crisis, reflecting contradictory processes of inclusion and exclusion, characterised by (...) heightening gentrification, conversion of a larger city space for elitist consumption and exposure to a global competitive framework leading to extensive place-marketing.

(Banerjee-Guha 2016: 67)

Dupont (2011) makes clear that the rise of urban entrepreneurialism in Delhi specifically, and its recent translation into a 'revanchist city'³ seems to replicate familiar trends of neoliberal

² <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/urbanization/urban-awakening-in-india>

³ Neil Smith in his seminal book *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* analysed the conditions of New York City in the 1990s and termed the city's conditions as revanchist. He described 'neoliberal revanchism' as an urban condition characterised by a political shift— from distributive and social justice based urban discourse towards an attitude of vengeance against minorities, women, the poor, immigrants, etc. This resulted in an exclusionary view of 'civil society' and also consequently of (city) spaces. I have drawn my understanding from Smith's connection of gentrifying spaces to revanchism, keeping in mind that he suggested that this phenomenon is not something unique to New York City, but is a general condition of the late capitalist city, although every urban scholar would do well to examine the specific meanings of and preconditions for 'revanchism' in their particular context, especially in post-colonial cities.

urbanism widespread in Western cities. The ambition “to make Delhi a global metropolis and a world-class city” is very clearly expressed in the Master Plan for Delhi 2021 (DDA report 2007: 2). It is with the status of Delhi as India’s most flourishing ‘creative city’⁴ in view, that one can study its aesthetic makeover since the 90s.

In the last decade or so, the metropolis has witnessed a surge in urban aesthetic practice – ranging from murals, graffiti workshops to collaborative public art – that draws its intellectual value from being located in the public sphere, and in supposed critique of the ‘elitist’ or commercialised art world. In examining the political economy of such urban art, one can understand the newly evolving street art scenario in Delhi as a potential creative industry that ‘cultural economies’ support and thrive on. Using Brenner and Theodore’s (qtd. in Kamat 2011: 190) framework of “actually existing neoliberalism” to understand the specificity of neoliberal manifestation across contexts, I analyse (the contradictions in) urban art projects in Delhi as an example of place specific neoliberalisation.⁵

City Creative: Delhi

David Harvey (1989), in his analysis of the “condition of post-modernity,” laid significant focus on the immaterial forms of the city, merging the urban political-economic perspective with the post-structural, linguistic one. The discourses around the creative city repeatedly suggest and enroll the arts as a driver of urban change and regeneration. It is in Harvey’s unique methodology that I find theoretical grounds to examine these discourses and forge links between capitalist enterprise and urban projects in the creative city.

Malcolm Miles writes in his book *Cities and Cultures* about how “in culturally led redevelopment, the arts are used to rebrand the built environment of city after city in the affluent world, but with

⁴ The Creative Index Report 2013, launched by the Martin Prosperity Institute, Institute for Competitiveness and The Prosperity Institute of India, has ranked Delhi as the ‘most creative city’ in India, with the greatest potential for success in today’s creative economy. (<http://martinprosperity.org/2014/03/03/understanding-india-cities/>)

⁵ For familiarising me to this approach I give credit to Sangeeta Kamat, who has analysed Hyderabad as a ‘global city’ as very much part of the neoliberal urbanism that India is witnessing. Kamat writes: “‘Actually existing neoliberalism’ has proven to be a very productive framework to study the particular evolution of neoliberalism at the subnational and national level in India, and the contradictions generated therein for the postcolonial state. The analytical shift to neoliberalism as process helps to make sense of why and how certain neoliberal policies and programs are chosen over others, how these intersect with existing socio-political configurations at the provincial level, and the particular strategies that the postcolonial state deploys to mediate contradictions and conflicts” (Kamat 2011: 190).

mixed impacts on the broader cultures of dwellers” (Miles 2007: 1). Further, Tim Cresswell (1992) re-affirms that the latest obsession with the ‘image making’ of cities is vital in cultural economies, and the new kind of street art seems to play a role in contributing to this ‘image’, thereby supplying positive force to cultural industries and ultimately supporting national agendas in building creative cities.

It is not incidental, of course, that contemporary street art has proliferated at such speed in global ‘world cities’, where the flow of capital and information is abundant. It is now often even an integral part of creativity and innovation clusters that have been proven to work hand in glove with neoliberal agendas of gentrification and place branding.

Rosalyn Deutsche (1996), in her essay *Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City*, reveals how the rhetoric of urban beauty, on the one hand, and utility on the other, were harnessed in the process of redevelopment in Battery Park City in NYC. In support of this claim, Deutsche suggests that discussions of the “new public art” attempted to build a new and peculiar image of the city. However, the real function of this new public art, she believes, was “to reify as natural the conditions of the late-capitalist city”. (Deutsche 1996: 19)

This kind of cultural planning triggers cities to re-develop, especially if they expect to be competitive in a global network of ‘creative cities’. Such employment of art and culture to the benefit of urban spaces has been noticed in Indian cities too. Rajeev Sethi, famous designer and chairman of Asian Heritage Foundation, Delhi, backs this claim in asserting that:

Culture-based initiatives built into the master plans and goals for the cities of the future have devised universal indices that position their rank as creative cities. ‘Culture’ and ‘the arts’ are often mistaken as an expendable resource... They are far from expendable, initiatives using the two have often assumed key roles in boosting local economies, renewing urban areas in decay, and promoting the type of active citizen whose pride and self-esteem is an asset to any community. To commit to these activities as an economic and social strategy is a smart form of investment for a nation state.

(Sethi 2014)

With globalising narratives of multiculturalism, street artists now are increasingly ‘allowed’ (encouraged and financed), by various cultural and diplomatic institutions to ‘aestheticise’ the city space. These initiatives, predominantly State-run, are augmented by cultural-planning processes at the local scale, giving way to proper public art policies. Within this de-territorialised

competition among global cities across the world, Delhi seems to have acquired a particular image that can be understood, deriving from Partha Chatterjee (2004), as a consequence of the increased access of urban middle classes to international travel and media representations of the post-industrial city.⁶

To better understand the politico-economic nature of this newly emerging image of an aesthetic Delhi, one can explore particular kinds of interests – political, diplomatic, careerist – that drive wall art projects in Delhi. Among many other murals, a case in point here are the murals in the revamped Lodhi Colony's Meherchand Market stretch, with focus on the Lodhi Art District, commissioned by the GoI's Swachh Bharat Mission.⁷ Additionally, in the context of Delhi's urban villages and the preparation for Master Plan for Delhi 2001-21, the Urban Arts Commission had presented in the DUAC's exhibition in April 2006, an approach towards integrating urban villages into the planning process. Interestingly, the first street art project in Khirkee village, Extension Khirkee, that was carried out by artist Aastha Chauhan (of 'Aapki Sadak'⁸ fame) in 2012 was largely supported and appreciated by the then chief minister of Delhi, Sheila Dikshit, and MLA Kiran Walia, for its function of fostering a sense of community and pride in times of disinvestment.

⁶ However, this de-contextualised drive for global competitiveness involving image-building has had negative consequences too, especially for the poor, through 'cleansing' the city of slums and other allegedly undesirable elements. It seems to have intensified socio-spatial polarisation (consider the image makeover of Delhi during the Commonwealth Games 2010 when hundreds of slums were demolished and barely any resettlement offered).

⁷ One must consider here that Lodhi Colony is primarily a residential area for government officers and Lodhi Road is known to house important diplomatic and cultural institutions.

⁸ <https://aapkisadak.wordpress.com/>



IMAGE 1: Buddha Mural by Yantr, Extension Khirkee, Delhi 2012 Source: artasiapacific.com

It is quite interesting to analyse the various kinds of ‘support’ that goes into these projects, bringing to light the different methods by which totalitarian and democratic regimes enroll aesthetics as a means of generating opinion (Alexander 2005). In a neoliberal democracy, one could view such ‘art statism’ as an experiment in political economy and problematise the aesthetic content, spatial choices and economic authorship behind these projects, believing that this can provide some insights about the potential of art to be used as state propaganda, or whether commissioned art holds the possibility of criticality at all.

One would also do well to analyse the role that diplomatic institutions of various countries play in funding aesthetic projects in Delhi. Considering the urban focus of such institutions, I view some of these ‘signature’ projects as tools in ‘soft diplomacy’ between countries. An example of this can be found in the Street Art Project BRINDA- Brazil and India in Art. BRINDA (started in 2012), a collaboration between street artists Sergio Cordeiro (Brazil) and Harsh Raman Singh Paul (India), has been supported by the Brazilian embassy in India to spread intermingling of the two cultures through wall paintings and murals. Aesthetically pleasing and culturally beneficial,

this project then acts as soft power - an ameliorating resource for both socio-political and economic negotiation.⁹



IMAGE 2: BRINDA, Delhi 2013. Source: graffitiinindia.com

For those involved in the post-graffiti world of street art or more generally contemporary urban art, the ‘creative city’ has a lot to offer. Not only is such creativity in the urban space duly recognised but is almost hailed as bringing about social integration through engaging with the community. While providing the artists with some level of vocationalism, such projects also initiate a discourse about a new kind of ‘cultural citizenship’ (Rifkin 2000: 251) that the capitalist narrative of culture-as-resource (see Yudice 2003) basically revolves around. In what appears to be a circular process, this identification of the artist as a global creative citizen is developed as a local response to the global policies of neoliberalism, which in turn is further adapted openly by neoliberal cities, in forms such as street art, that can be turned into commercial entities without encroaching on the citizen’s ‘right to the city’.

⁹ The project webpage describes the initiative as one that “seeks to expand the possibilities of bilateral relations between India and Brazil in addition to the diplomatic and business cycle, with projects that involve the people of both countries and that promote mutual recognition of cultural and artistic similarities and differences.”

But this cultural citizenship is also, as will be made clear, a sanitising and sanitised space made up of a particular social class. Leela Fernandes implicates the state in such civic programs of urban modification, saying that “state practices are engaged in political processes of spatial purification and the production of a new middle-class-based vision of the Indian nation” (Fernandes 2004: 2428). The central aspect of her argument is that the production of this new form of ‘cultural citizenship’ is linked to the changing relationship between the State and capital in the context of economic restructuring.

There is no doubt that the Indian State has been claiming public space for particular purposes that match and enhance the urban middle class lifestyle. Pushpa Arabindoo’s (2011) discussion of municipal transformation drives, aimed especially at the appeasement of the middle classes in Chennai, gives a cue about trends in major Indian cities, and provides a framework for viewing spatial changes in these cities as encapsulating both—a utilisation of various urban tactics, as well as a justified belief in the exclusionary nature of these practices.

It is due to the nexus between global capital and neoliberal modes of expression that a new (largely middle-class) civic culture, whose basis is valuing ‘creativity’ and art, is thus seen developing. While enabling the role of art as state-backed gentrifier, new forms of governance and citizenship are also activated to employ the creative potential of the artist to the fullest. Kanngieser and Shukaitis write eloquently about this:

The question is not whether the creative class exists as such, but rather what effects are created through how it is described and called into being through forms of governance and social action based upon these claims. Planning and shaping the city around a certain conceptualisation of the creative potentiality of labour, or the potentiality of creativity put to work, is not an unprecedented or unique development, but rather is the latest example of capital’s attempt to continually valorise itself through recuperating the energies of those organising against it.

(Kanngieser and Shukaitis 2010: 67)

Such a mobilisation of creativity that accompanies and justifies a renewal of urban space blurs the distinctions regarding public life, what was once, for example, illegal in graffiti is now allowed, even desirable, in this kind of commissioned, urban art that invites the citizen to partake in it.

Participatory Politics: Citizens/Artists of Delhi

If one views urban space as not just infrastructural but also social, it can be said that neoliberalisation has led to major reforms in the way in which not just cities are governed, but also in the manner that citizens are dealt with. One is looking therefore not just at new polities but also newer ideas and models of citizenship. Under the neoliberal State, the citizen is provided with and developed into a new kind of participatory subjectivity, by being called upon to fulfil his duties, leading therefore to a transformation in the meanings of what it means to be a citizen. Citizenship must not just be possessed anymore, it must be enacted.

To better fit the description of such neoliberal creative cities that must allow local participation and creativity in the urban (re)development process, Indian cities have lately followed suit in what has been called ‘tactical urbanism’. There is a felt presence of a certain kind of citizen intervention through artists, thinkers, urban practitioners in Delhi, coming together to form civic organisations (represented in project initiatives by/like KHOJ, Sarai, St+Art India, Unbox Labs etc.)¹⁰ and engaging specifically with the urban space. International funding agencies have, of late, displayed a preference for such civil society groups, prompting various collaborations to conduct artistic-cum-social experiments in Delhi. These experiments aim to envision ‘alternate’ ways of being in the city, by indulging in what has been called planning from ‘below’. Several artists/artist groups are seen engaging in community art that signifies what has been called the “social turn” (Bishop 2006) in the arts and finds conceptual solace in theories of social inclusion and participatory democracy.

Of such participation, Nancy Adajania (2008) speaks in her essay, *Public Art? Activating the Agoratic Condition*, in a rather utopian tone:

The monopolistic claim made on public space by the state – which marks it with legislations on usage, zoning regulations, and security measures – is increasingly contested by activists, architects, designers, and artists. In their approach to public space, the official fixation on objects is replaced by an exploratory, even a transgressive commitment in processes. The results of such a

¹⁰ The rationale behind such a grouping is threefold: a) Many urban artists collaborate these days with the community at Khirkee, Shahpur Jat etc. running different kinds of wall painting/ street art projects that sometimes employ local themes and indigenous aesthetics; b) Organisations like KHOJ or Sarai are generally known to propagate and support interdisciplinary research around the urban and all of these create art in direct material, as well as discursive, engagement with the city, thereby using the city as canvas/studio; c) All of these receive funding from international private organisations that ultimately view cities as competitive tools for economic growth under neoliberalism. A full treatment of the paradox inherent in the political economy of urban art is outside the purview of this paper, but has been done by me elsewhere.

*commitment are not monuments, but a range of effects: from documentation and status reports, to the re-wiring of the social, political and cultural circuitry of a neighbourhood.*¹¹

(Adajania 2008)

A shift in the definition and understanding of art from critique to amelioration, and from artist to artist citizen can be traced back, according to Adajania (2004), to the 1990s, when as a result of globalising forces, artists were forced to come to terms with an increasingly political Hindutva presence as well as neoliberal market reforms. It is in that decade that Indian contemporary art moved out from the gallery to the public sphere and from thence, there has been a significant artistic focus on urban space, participation and community. This has since given the middle class more political access and space in which to assert claims to the city (consider the Bhagidari Scheme initiated by the Delhi Government in 2000). Through increasing civic engagement, members of the middle class have often become agents of urban change and ‘betterment’, challenging issues such as illegality and urban aesthetics.

That explains why despite being ‘illegal’, wall murals in the urban villages are now evaluated as ‘public art’ and are not subject to removal. D. Asher Ghertner (2011) in his essay *Rule by Aesthetics: World Class City-Making in Delhi* provides an insight into this new aesthetic of legality:

In this new, more aesthetic framework, the law crafts fields of intelligibility by disseminating standardised aesthetic norms. Spaces are known to be illegal or legal, deficient or normal, based on their outer characteristics. A shopping mall, even if in violation of planning law, is legal because it looks legal. A slum, even if its residents have been formalised at their current location, is illegal because it looks like a nuisance. Here, the visuality of urban space itself is a way of knowing its essential features and natural standing within the “grid of norms” on which government can operate.

(Ghertner 2011: 288)

The discourse of participation that public art often enlists, however, has been critiqued for its potential to exacerbate urban inequality (Cooke and Kothari 2001). To begin with, one could

¹¹ The referenced essay was written as a reviewing glance at a now-famous public art project called ‘48 Degrees Celsius Public. Art. Ecology.’ This public art project, bringing together artists from various countries, targeted various sites in Delhi in order to bring focus to its deteriorating ecology. Commissioned by the Goethe Institut (in collaboration with the Delhi Govt.), the project seemed to be one of the many ‘artist-citizen’ initiatives that lead to the betterment of cultural economies while strengthening the way the neoliberal State functions.

refer to Grant Kester's (1995) critique of the artist as service provider, always positioned from a higher to a lower cultural level, or to Hal Foster's (1995) critique of the artist as ethnographer (1995). Kester in a harsh critique of contemporary urban politics has called community based-art, wherein a lot of local participation involves unpaid work, a kind of 'aesthetic evangelism': according to him, the logic of community-based art reproduces a reformist ideology that views personal transformation and growth as a corollary to the amelioration of social problems.

In what seems like sounding an alarm in the Indian context, artist and multimedia practitioner Deepak Srinivasan (2011) says, "Any investment from the State calls for high state of security and 'gatedness', ensuring selective inclusion of urban communities in Indian contemporary urban centres." So while the 'citizen' gets to participate in the urban process by 'taking back' space from government planners, these artistic urban interventions seem to be largely tilted towards one side in the class divide. This is exactly what one witnesses in the urban villages of Delhi that are either already gentrified (Hauz Khas Village) or are well on the way to be (Khirkee Extension).

Even the residents that are propelled to support and/or participate in such urban art, ironically, are often from the landed middle class that owns space in the village and has increasingly come to have excluding attitudes towards those that 'do not belong'. Despite the inclusive rhetoric of community and citizenship, there may often be a gap between intention and execution. This gap may have to do with something as simple as the interests of the funding bodies, or as complex as a difference between the artists' and the community's perception of the role of aesthetics, owing to social differences. One must therefore ask questions around what art means in this context to the artist, the funding body and the (resident) communities involved, the nature of participation that these communities are engaged in, and whether the projects that claim to be inclusive are not actually strengthening conditions of neoliberal exclusion. More importantly, one must examine both the geographic as well as moral boundaries that are blurred and redrawn as part of these processes in the urban space.

Interestingly, most of the work done as part of the annual street art festivals held now in various Indian cities by street art organisation St+Art India seems to represent the above-mentioned combination of 'responsible citizenship' and 'government investment'. The focus here specifically is St+Art Delhi 2014, a brainchild of street artist/ designer Hanif Kureshi, and the first international street art festival in Delhi held in the winter months of 2014. The festival, spread over 50 days with various events including a graffiti jam, a Pecha Kucha talk night, workshops, curated walks and an exhibition, officially launched on January 18 with a

documentary screening/opening gala that took place at Max Mueller Bhavan in Delhi on January 24. Some of the artists who were part of the festival are: Anpu (Delhi), Tofu (Germany), Yantr (Delhi), Tona (Germany), Alias (Germany), Sergio Cordeiro (Brazil), Inkbrushnme (Pune), Harsh Raman (Delhi), PCO (Delhi), Alina Vergnano (Italy), Amitabh Kumar (Bangalore), DAKU (Delhi), Hendrik ECB (Germany), Mattia Lullini (Italy), Ranjit Dahiya (Mumbai), Bond (Germany), M-City (Poland), Ano (Taiwan) among others.

What turned out to be the most talked about and viewed murals of St+Art Delhi 2014, were the painted walls of two significant institutional buildings in the national capital, which now qualify as the longest and the tallest murals in the country. The first, the boundary wall of Tihar Jail, sported murals that dealt with themes of imprisonment, growth, reformation, transformation etc. -- inspirational messages relevant, of course, to the background of the wall. Some artists painted in Hindi, a poem written by a female Tihar inmate across a relatively large portion of the wall, strongly localising the art to suit its location. The artists here, thus, became the citizen-reformers and the artworks became their exemplary message, ironically, for those Indian citizens outside the Tihar Jail.

The second project was a 150 ft. tall mural of Gandhi covering the façade of the Delhi Police Headquarters at ITO. Painted by German street artist Hendrik ECB, who is known for his life sized portrait murals, and Anpu Varkey, a Delhi based artist who started street painting in 2012, the Gandhi mural now stands as a major landmark in the heart of the city. On the experience of negotiating with the Delhi Police, Hendrik said in an interview in 2014, “It’s not only the head of police who had to decide, since it’s their wall, he had to explain the decision to other people in the government. So they said, ‘It’s going to be something the majority of people can agree on’.” Needless to say, it could only be the face of the ‘Father of the Nation’ that could stand as an undisputed image in Delhi, reaffirming a particular idea of India, reflected on one of the most important buildings representative of the Indian State.¹²

¹² A contemporary art reference comes to mind here. The way Gandhi has been dealt with in the works of contemporary Indian artists, Atul Dodiya and Ashim Purkayastha, for instance, shows a direct subversion of the public attitudes attached to the ‘Father of the Nation’. However, it must be remembered that these artists engage in a more private art practice, with no obligation to the State officials and their ‘views’. In direct contrast are these street artists who engage in a ‘non-commercial’ public practice, which relies not only on the State’s approval to be considered ‘art’ but also is subject to viewership at all times and by all kinds of members of the citizenry of Delhi, placing on itself the onus of sharing the public’s conscience.



IMAGE 3: Tihar Boundary Wall, St+Art India, Delhi 2014. Source: St+Art India 2014 project team



IMAGE 4: Gandhi Mural, St+Art India, Delhi 2014. Source: St+Art India 2014 project team

What stood, however, was the role and attitude of the State towards these two murals. Apart from mere spatial concession to the art start-up, there seemed to be an entrepreneurial investment in the artistic venture. An alternative, friendly, even appreciative, approach to street

artists, was noticed, which, one may say, might be informed by newer ways of thinking about public art as capital resource, located within a broader change in the governance of urban spaces. The following lines by St+Art Delhi 2014 Project Co-ordinator, Mridula Garg, should be able to explicate this: "...and I think St+Art was able to bring about *social investment* (italics mine) by the locals, artists and art enthusiasts in an inspiring way. Not only were the wall owners helpful but also the city's government bodies gave a heart-warming welcome" (2014).

One is reminded here of what Slater and Iles (2009) explain, "...in Foucauldian terms, governmentality uses aesthetics to penetrate the subject more deeply, to tap into our capacity for self-government. If power has become life-like, it has also become art-like." Michel Foucault (1977) viewed the management of populations, or "the conduct of conduct", as the matrix for the shift of services under neoliberalism from state to cultural sectors. From a Foucauldian perspective, the rise of neoliberalism must be understood as the culmination of a historical development that redefined the ontological boundary between economy and politics. The production of a new economic subject is a consequence of neoliberalism's political ontology: economic rationality must be the rationality of the entire society. Commenting on the relevance of Foucault's work to what he calls 'neoliberal subjects', Nikolas Rose (1999) depicts in his work the kind of government that can exist through the mentalities of individuals and groups, suggesting that relations of empowerment (often claimed even about neoliberal urban policy) are always double-edged. As Foucault (1979) writes in 'On Governmentality':

An enabling state that will govern without governing 'society' – governing by acting on the choices and self-steering properties of individuals, families, communities, organisations. This entails a twin process of autonomisation plus responsabilisation – opening free space for the choices of individual actors whilst enwrapping these autonomised actors within new forms of control.

(Foucault 1979: 20)

Under such a regime, successful citizenship is also characterised by actively giving something back to society. In this respect, many legal public art projects such as the murals part of St+Art Delhi 2014, require street artists to paint 'socially responsible' messages. The logic behind the public artist bringing art to 'everyone', as opposed to the 'selfish' gallery artist, is also what seems to drive the state-aided street and community art events in Delhi. Considering all this, one can place such art within the neoliberal 'revanchism' of cities, with due differentiation between processes of gentrification and regeneration here. Slater and Iles (2009) clarify that "regeneration

does not boil down to gentrification. Gentrification is about real estate. Regeneration is also about getting people to behave differently.”

This also prompts one to interrogate the idea of the ‘citizen artist’. In common usage, the term ‘citizen artist’ now describes artists or artists-in-training who bring aesthetic offerings into economically stressed areas or to groups who do not attend ‘art’ (one may refer to the rhetoric of accessibility surrounding street art events in Delhi). The impulse behind this view of citizen-artistry proposes that experiences of art are good for people, and artists who provide such experiences are better citizens for doing so. Delhi Street Art, for instance, is an organisation that “promotes creative expression among citizens” and aims at “turning a trashy neighbourhood into an artsy alley.”¹³ Interestingly most of their art is located in industrial areas (like Udyog Vihar, Kapashera, Narela etc.) that need aestheticisation and, of course, reinvestment.¹⁴

Since it is well acknowledged now that in the creative city, public art tends to act like a globally recognisable marker of urban success, even the presence of graffiti and street art can be seen as “both a sign and a medium of a district’s upwardly mobile reputation” (Zukin and Braslow 2011: 133), an image that is increasingly getting attached to certain areas in Delhi that are seen as hubs of alternative lifestyles and artistic movements. Such beautification and community projects, therefore, serve to entrench new urban aesthetics based on class purity, and upon examination, may reveal as their basis, narrowing and delimiting definitions of citizenship.

Conclusion

In describing the nexus between power and urban space, the focus here has been narrowed to the case of the capital of India, which has seen intense changes since LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation, Globalisation) both in its infrastructural set-up as well as social relations, the two being, according to me, never independent of one another. However, there is almost a universal assumption of democratisation based on the rhetoric of ‘accessibility’ of whatever happens in or is done to ‘public space’ under neoliberal governance. But it has been proved time and again that the democracy associated with public space is one limited to activation of the rights of only those belonging to a particular class and gentry. To conclude, I find it necessary to adapt Nancy Adajania’s (2008) take on responsible public art in India:

¹³ Source: Delhi Street Art Facebook webpage

¹⁴ The metaphor of the citizen artist also manages to reveal an expansion of focus that artist training has undergone: consider the fact that most of these artists are institutionally trained to be urban artists.

Art that uses the public domain as site and resource does not automatically become radical because it is made outside the hallowed confines of a gallery or because it sidesteps the commodity nature of art. It requires constant negotiations with the authorities and diverse publics it come into contact with. To perform one's citizenship in reality rather than have nominal possession of it in a country like India, we would have to define the nature of our public sphere – where discussions between opposed interests can be held freely and fairly (Adajania 2008).

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Beyond Narrative: Museum as Public Space in the Age of Neoliberalism

Noopur Desai

Abstract:

A museum is a public space and a site for spatial embodiment or the geographical location where public sphere emerges. The idea of museum making has become more complex with its reformulation as a result of economic transformation. In this paper, I examine the notion of public space in the context of contemporary art. Located in Dr. Bhau Daji Lad City Museum (BDL), I look at how this space is produced by neoliberal tendencies. Established in 1872, BDL houses colonial collections that defined the idea of heritage and nation but remained in wary conditions till the early 2000s. When other public art institutions displayed a lack of initiative to support contemporary art practice, BDL began to incorporate newer ways of exhibiting, installations by contemporary artists, educational initiatives, and public programmes since its restoration in 2009 with the help of INTACH and Bajaj Foundation. This got reflected in the building's refurbishments, improvement in the standards of museum facilities, new building extension, media coverage, and organisational changes. BDL has also become a site of contestation in the form of public-private partnership, engagement with cutting edge art practice, discursive relationships with different publics, privatising cultural practices, and formulation of public space. The paper will deliberate upon the position of the museum within the contemporary articulation of cultural capitalism specifically in the context of the post-industrial city of Mumbai.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Public Space, Contemporary Art, Museum, Public Private Partnership, Publics, Heritage, Curation, Edutainment, Participation, Place-making, Metropolis, Post-industrial city

Introduction

A museum creates a social or public space where it plays the role of a steward of a collection, a site for exhibition making and knowledge production, a space for informal learning, and also

functions as a project of city planning. It offers manifestations of cultural aspirations in the form of its collection being associated with different individuals as well as communities. Therefore, it needs to be cited as a public space for public address where the central concerns are its representation, history, collection, and display. The case study of Mumbai's Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, a city museum, is a significant example of how this space is being produced and constructed by neoliberal tendencies in the recent past. The paper analyses a select few exhibitions at the Museum that validate the shifts in the ideas of exhibition-making as well as its engagement with the public within the context of changing modes of contemporary art, heritage, and culture. It also questions the role of art making and heritage in the context of the idea of the creative city that has emerged as nomenclature of neoliberal city structures and processes of urbanisation.

Established in 1857 and opened to public in 1872, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad City Museum situated in Byculla holds a colonial collection that defined the idea of heritage and nation but remained in wary conditions till the early 2000s. Established as Victoria & Albert Museum, it was renamed in 1975 after Dr. Lad, a philanthropist, historian, and a surgeon who played a remarkable role in setting up the museum. Today, the Museum holds a large collection including miniature clay models, maps, lithographs, photographs, books, decorative objects, and natural history objects. The museum of colonial collection of objects has been transformed over the last decade with a renovation project, building expansions, and by entering into the arena of contemporary arts. The BDL Museum has incorporated newer ways of exhibiting works of contemporary artists, educational initiatives, and public programs since its restoration in 2009. This is reflected in the refurbishments, gallery displays, and improvement in the standards of museum facilities, and media coverage, and organisational changes. The tripartite understanding between the Mumbai municipal corporation, INTACH, and the Bajaj Foundation has led to a significant example of public private partnership in the field of arts, heritage, and museum making in recent times. The museum as a public space in neoliberal times embodies or represents the policies of cultural sphere which could be explored in the context of the discursive formulations of the notions of public and private and, therefore, the discussion here will be limited to matters surrounding the BDL Museum, its collections, newer ways of engaging with contemporary art, and the outcomes of public private partnerships.

In order to consider public space as a site of conception, production, and circulation of contemporary arts, it becomes imperative to think about the historical as well as spatial configurations that are determinants of the site. It becomes crucial, therefore, to examine the

recoding of the public spaces in a city like Mumbai as a result of these processes and consequently, what changes have occurred in the production and public circulation of contemporary art as well as heritage production. Museum becomes a site for creation and promotion of public discourses and, hence, functions as a space for the public sphere around ideas of culture, heritage, and art practice. This forces one not to look at the urban space as a symbol of progress and modernisation, but rather as a site of negotiations with differences and encounters with the other. One such example is BDL Museum's collaboration with ZegnArt Public, an art foundation from Italy. The project produced Reena Kallat's public artwork, *Untitled (Cobwebs/Crossing)* which highlighted the relationship between public space and the city's history. In *Untitled (Cobweb/Crossings)*, an oversized web made with hundreds of rubber stamp replicas wove a history of the city onto the façade of the Museum, with each stamp bearing a colonial street name that has been replaced by an indigenous one. By recovering the memory of one aspect of the process of decolonisation – renaming of anglicised British street names with Indian or regional ones – it forms a palimpsest on to which generations re-inscribe stories. “A cobweb is evocative of time,” explains Reena Kallat, “and just as a room is left vacant, stories that are not visited gather cobwebs that appear to hold dust from the past.” (Canziani and Menegoi 2014: 16) All this brings in a new cosmopolitan receptivity to the museum which had otherwise become a dusty relic of colonial rule. It is this new context of public culture that is transforming the museum-going experience for the audience within a new context of post-liberalisation transformations in the city and its spaces.

The Neoliberal Turn

Neoliberalism has become the central guiding principle today that determines political and economic thought which reflects on other aspects of social, cultural, and artistic practices.

The ideological position of neoliberal thought proposes that “human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (Harvey 2005: 2) The process, certainly, entails deregulation, privatisation, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision as it becomes a dominant conceptual apparatus that shapes contemporary ideas of freedom, desires, and aspirations. As Turan argues, the public space in cities becomes a focal point for economic transformations and cultural activity in terms of privatisation, internal reorganisation, and new institutional arrangements. With the retreat of

public authorities in welfare provision, private actors have noticed the potential in public spaces like museums that contribute to preserving and activating these spaces in a certain way. The porous boundaries between the state and corporate entities and their roles reconfigure these institutional practices reflected in the cultural sector. (Turan 2015). In India, it has percolated in art and culture organisations through the initiation of public private partnerships that rejuvenated spaces such as public museums. As arts and culture become commodifiable and valuable concepts, cultural specificities are considered economic assets that employ strategies of urban re-branding for place distinctiveness (Gotham 2007) According to Kratz and Karp, the globalising processes impact museum and heritage practice where museum-generated social processes and globalising processes intersect and interact while creating “museum frictions” within the space that incorporates “the idea of the museum as a varied and often changing set of practices, processes, and interactions.” (Kratz and Karp 2006: 2) They claim that the museums have become portable social technology, a set of museological processes through which claims of history, identity and values are represented, embodied and discussed. (Kratz and Karp 2006: 4) As a result, international connections and global orientation have been playing a crucial role in shaping the museum practice in recent years.

As a result of these processes, museums have begun to remodel themselves where various tensions emerge and negotiations take place while linking many local and global elements like regional, international and community-based projects. It becomes imperative to understand how the Museum reflects the local and global art and heritage discourse and creative economy that govern the space. Hence, I would like to argue here that the politics of public space in the context of BDL Museum exposes the contradictions of neoliberal globalism at various levels. Neoliberalism is an economic system that is developed under specific social conditions where competition becomes the essential force for progress and growth, and the proscription of public (read State here) interference with market forces. The process of economic liberalisation has privatised collectively or used state-run resources. It includes cutting of public funding for social services especially culture, encouragement to privatisation or partnerships for efficiency, emphasis on individual choices for consumption patterns and entrepreneurial initiatives. In recent years, the BDL Museum has been planned as a new creative area by conserving and renovating the old buildings and extending it to other parts. The Museum is circumscribed within the neoliberal landscape of the urban landscape of Mumbai where culture is being co-opted and reshaped and public space is being negotiated and constructed through processes of museum making, art discourse, display, collaborative actions and partnerships. The Museum, now a part of the Google Culture project, offers its collection on the online platform accessed

publicly all over the world. It is an illustrious model of creative city discourse made by state as well as private intervention and is taken over by the global capital with the intention to transform the cultural domain. Conversely, it remains an alternative space for cultural production which does not fall directly under the purview of corporate control or profit-making policies and does have to face economic marginalisation from the state. While commenting on the contemporary museum scene in India and the process of revitalisation of the cultural sector, the managing director of the BDL Museum Tasneem Mehta points out,

First and foremost, you make the institutions autonomous. Second, you invite experts to be on the board and you invite public-private partnerships. You bring in not just people with expertise, you bring in people with business acumen because in the end, what I do at BDL is almost entrepreneurial. We are still selling a product. We are selling the idea of India's heritage, we are selling the idea of India's art and that is what the art fair is doing too. It is a marketing exercise. At the same time, a lot of education happens to get people to understand the arts.

(Khurana 2016)

Originally, the museum has been an agent for the inscription of the universalising ideology of modernity as well as of imperial hierarchies of Western nations and world cultures, though it mounts exhibitions of contemporary art which are normally beyond their scope. The main museum space retains the grandeur of Victorian architecture while the newly developed special projects space resembles the contemporary white cube space. The space was originally used as workshops for model-making and production of replicas and figurines that are now displayed in the dioramas inside the museum. The museum plaza offers an open space for interactions, conversations, workshops, and other activities.¹ The newly developed constituencies of audiences and/or participants have constituted a new set of demands from the publics as well as the Museum. If we consider museum as a process of “placing public space within a disciplinary model of space [that] demonstrates how public space can function as a site for the surveillance of, and a stage for, public discourse” (Barrett, 2012), then, it is crucial to see how we understand the creation of contemporary art discourse in context of BDL's contemporary art exhibitions situated within its colonial collection. To take this point forward, I would like to discuss a couple of recent exhibitions curated and organised by the museum team in collaboration with other organisations or individuals.

¹ Interview with Himanshu Kadam, Assistant Curator, Special exhibitions program at Dr. Bhaui Daji Lad Museum in November 2016.

Capitalising (on) culture: Effects of Museum Making

By introducing newer ways of museum making, the spatial organisation of the museum dioramas and display is interspersed with contemporary art installations and objects. These insertions by contemporary artists come as a response to the museum's collection and are embedded within the larger framework of the museum display with subtle disruptions. One such display, *Woven Wonders of Varanasi*², created a visual dislocation within the space with its extravagant colours, textures, and display that belittles and ensconces the museum objects. Organised in 2015, *Woven Wonders of Varanasi* was an exhibition on the revival of Indian textiles organised in collaboration with the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, and Lakme Fashion week³ organized by Lakme, a cosmetic and beauty service brand in collaboration with IMG Reliance Pvt. Ltd, a venture to develop sports and media properties. As described in the catalogue of the exhibition and on the Museum website, the goal of the exhibition was conceived as a process of “bridging contemporary design and traditional craft, the exhibition aims to display the country’s textile tradition to a national and global audience, thereby providing a platform to showcase the best of India’s designers, weavers, and textile workers and to encourage the Make In India Initiative.” (November 28, 2016) As one would witness during the exhibition, the Museum did not offer any information about the artists, artisans, designers, weavers, as against its postulation during conception of the programme. The exhibition organised under *Engaging Traditions* was curated by Shaina N.C., a designer as well as a BJP leader from South Mumbai was included in the Make In India project conceived by the present Central Government. Prabir Purkayastha problematises the position of the Make In India initiative by understanding it in the historical context of India's policy of self-reliance which believed in the process of investment in its people through transfer of knowledge and technical capacities. According to him, Make In India is based on vacuous slogans which would lead to simply “handing over labour, land, and the Indian market to foreign capital.” (Purkayastha, 2016)

Though it is crucial to create avenues for production and circulation of these weavers with the

² “Woven Wonders of Varanasi” was curated as part of the series of exhibitions titled “Engaging Traditions” curated by Tasneem Mehta Zakaria. This series invites contemporary artists to engage with the museum collection, its history, and archive to intervene and produce contemporary art works situated within the context the museum's permanent collection.

³ March earlier that year Lakme Fashion Week's finale was shifted elsewhere (Palladium Hotel) after a protest by Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, a regional political party espouses parochialism and chauvinism, as they were against any kind of “commercial activity” in the premises of the museum which is a public institution that represents the people of the city of Mumbai.

idea of bridging the gap between the craftsmen and designers, is also important to study and investigate what happens in the process. The display of dazzling designs, colourful textiles, and garments created a spectacle for the viewers with a glimpse of heritage and culture. In the process of commodification of heritage by the neoliberal forces, heritage is actively used to increase the marketability of places, institutions and destinations concerned. While defining his notion of “sentimental capitalism”, Da Costa elaborates on “marketisation of cultural production as means of artisanal development and heritage protection” in city spaces. (Da Costa 2015: 88-89) She argues that in post-industrial formations of Indian cities, artistic production is organised for development while revalorising degraded land and space to reconstruct the city, and using it for process of place-making through sentiments of hope and nostalgia. (Da Costa 2015: 88-89) It is also important to see how the creative economy discourse is mobilised in the context of the metropolis of Mumbai. Creative economy indicates any form of cultural production that involves human creativity and intellectual property of individuals or groups that contributes to overall development. Pointing out fallacies of creative economy discourse, Da Costa takes a cultural politics approach to deliberate upon the complex interlinkage between cultural production and development planning in the city context. (Da Costa 2015: 75) It becomes a site of contestation where meaning-making and place-making take place through powerful discourses, speculations, and cultural production. These kinds of artistic productions become a resource where artists are conceived as service providers who create cultural capital through their projects which is made available to the communities (Yudice 2004: 332). Focusing on cultural activities and production as a primary factor, cultural capital creates consumption opportunities, and commodification of cultural elements (Žižek 2009). The communities can yield value for cultural institutions through various such activities where aesthetic practices are mobilised to promote heritage industries as culture has become a valuable resource to be invested in.

As Miwon Kwon observes,

While such an outlook contributes to some expansion of art audiences, strengthening the tie between elite cultural institutions and local constituencies normally disengaged from their activities, its effects also include the reification, and colonisation of marginal, disenfranchised social groups, as well as the concomitant reification and commodification of local cultures.
(Kwon 2002: 153)

Apart from the capitalising the heritage and culture under neoliberal structures, it is also crucial to problematise the idea of social practice in the context of museum making, and as part of our

discussion on public space. Here, I would like to discuss the BMW Guggenheim Lab that was organised in partnership with the BDL Museum in Mumbai in 2012-2013, one of the nine cities of the then planned Lab project. Though the project was conceived for nine cities across the world, it was closed down after three cities, New York, Berlin, and Mumbai. The entire project was funded by the BMW foundation and was aimed to re-look at the issues of metropolitan cities and urban planning. The project was conceived as an extension of the German car company's investment in R&D on the future of mobility and transport in metropolitan cities as part of their production and marketing strategies. The Lab had to face deep scepticism in Berlin where community groups and radical activists made the Lab withdraw from a proposed site which was on the front lines of gentrification. It eventually found a home in an upmarket Berlin neighbourhood but, under ensuing stress from corporate sponsors. (Holleran and Holleran 2015)

Situated within the original plan, the Lab was built in collaboration with the BDL Museum in Mumbai while achieving the multi-pronged motive, locating it within the old mill area, connecting with a museum space as a space representing the identity of the city, addressing the issues of urbanity in an upcoming area like Byculla, engaging with the multifarious histories of workers struggles, cultural movements, linguistic identities. Though designed to create an interface between cities, urban issues, and citizens, the Lab – as a social practice project, and design-based intervention – had very limited interface with the communities, and urban contexts that they claimed they wished to change. The museum moved out of its space to its neighbourhood and aspired for an in-depth engagement with its communities. The community became a site for experimentation; the neighbourhood became a lab where the urban interventions and experiments took place in order to find solutions to the problems of urban planning. Projects such as *Mapping Privacy* in public space or testing (*Testing! Testing!*) the effects of the city on the human brain and psychology were to gather evidence about the transforming city, its policies, and their viability. Developed by psychologist Colin Ellard, this project gathered data “which would then be available for application within urban planning and design to enhance urban comfort, increase functionality, and keep city dwellers' stress to acceptance level.”(BWM Guggenheim Lab Website 2012) These labs were pop-up museums, exhibitions or projects which did not intend to engage with the neighbourhood or communities on a long-term basis. On the contrary, it neutralised the radical elements and aspects of class struggle, labour, and protest. In the process, it became a site of cultural production that is to be viewed and reviewed with hardly any engagement with the workers, unions in the conception of the museum. As Miwon Kwon argues, “the community artist may legitimate the presumption that the cause of social problems rests with spirituality and culturally deprived individuals rather than with the systemic or

structural conditions of capitalist labour markets, stratified social hierarchy, and uneven distribution of wealth and resources.” (Kwon 2002: 143) Therefore, it becomes pertinent to discern the ways in which they argue to create alternative spaces for certain communities through these interventions or what happens to the spatial dimensions of these communities after the lab is moved away.

Moving Away from Dioramas: Educational Initiatives at the Museum

Though the spatial aspects of the museum, its display strategies, and diorama designs do impact the construction of the space and viewing possibilities, the process of museum making goes beyond those strategies and structures today. The creation of narratives through displays and exhibitions are balanced with other activities and spatial qualities. The geographical and cultural location of the museum plays a crucial role as well. The location of the BDL museum in the central neighbourhood of Byculla can be situated within the process of gentrification in the city where policies and patterns of reinvestment and development of an urban space would open it to a more affluent class. Byculla has become a new hotspot for real estate developers who plan to build theme-based gated community buildings which will replace the mill workers' quarters, low-rise buildings, and small commercial units in the area. There seems to be a shift in perspective of the Museum's focus and services where, along with meeting the needs of city residents, the Museum also aspires to help create a marketable place for outsiders in the neighbourhood. The museum is conceived here, not only, as a site for education, entertainment but also for tourism and part of a global art circuit by the means of various cultural productions including exhibitions, seminars, talks, courses, and workshops.

The Museum has also shifted from their earlier static task of accumulation of objects to more active ways of meaning making, knowledge construction and audience participation. In the real post-museum spirit (Hooper-Greenhill 2000), the museum ventures into different cultural activities; from performances, film screenings, workshops, walk-throughs, one-day curator initiative, art criticism courses to hosting birthday parties and get-togethers which have helped them engage with different kinds of audiences in ways that are contact zones. (Clifford 1999) One could notice that the museum has departed from management of historical objects to

edutainment⁴ and public awareness and has allowed people's participation (in a limited sense) in the physical and intellectual making of the museum. Though the museum endeavours to incorporate various cultural practices (*Wonders of Varanasi*) or movements, and politics of resistance (*Social Fabric*⁵), they enact the politics of neoliberal capitalism by making use of the politics of resistance, ideas of civic engagement, and privatising public space through collaborations with Lakme Fashion week, and hosting receptions and exhibition openings in conjunction with the private galleries that support and fund these shows. For example, the exhibition *Social Fabric* dealt with the impact of textile trade, closing down of mills on local communities, without building any relationship with the community where they could have had a stake in telling their tale. In that process, the museum incorporates these paradoxes into the very design of the display and the actual politics of incorporation and participation gets obscured.

Besides that, the previews of contemporary art exhibitions are generally organised for select audience including contemporary artists, donors, collectors, and critics. There are “private tours” at higher charges organised by the museum for specific groups as against their weekly walk-throughs which are open to public. The question here is what does this kind of segregation lead to? Does it create private spaces or zones within the public space of the museum, does the space remain completely “public”? Who organises this space and how? How does that help us revamp the idea of museum as a public space in contemporary times? The questions are at multiple levels. But it is important to understand how the notions of participation and civic engagement are produced, organised, and restricted within the museum context today where the museum visitor is considered as a consumer who is imagined to be seeking maximum satisfaction in exchange of their time and money. While discussing how art museum education supports neoliberal discourses, Rina Kundu and Nadin Kalin (2015) argue in their critical essay, *Participating in the Neoliberal Art Museum*, that the museum education and its methodologies reinforce neoliberal logics, and in a way, conceal the contradictions of neoliberal policies. The individuals are supposed to be making their own choices in these situations while reducing the need of the state to be responsible for the vulnerable and the marginalised. The museum becomes a site for creative capital which uses cultural knowledge and intellectual property to

⁴ Rina Kundu and Nadin Calin use the term “edutainment” in their article *Participating in the Neoliberal Art Museum*, *Studies in Art Education* where they address the shift in educational programs of the museums towards entertainment activities to incorporate wider audiences.

⁵ *Social Fabric*, an exhibition curated and organised in 2012, examined the impact of global textile trade on local communities and the rise and fall of Mumbai's textile industry. The artists included Sudhir Patwardhan, Archana Hande (India), Alice Creischer (Germany) and Celine Condorelli (UK).

produce products and services for cultural consumers which has certain cultural value and meaning. The visitors participate actively in various activities, by leaving their suggestions and comments in the scrap-book, by directly communicating with the museum staff while viewing the museum collection and exhibitions. Cultural consumption, therefore, becomes a form of investment within the format of the changed relationship between the museum and its public. One can find diverse representation of audiences, as I have mentioned above, that participates in the museum making and programming but nonetheless, knowledge and regulation continue to be in the hands of the Museum.

In conclusion, I would like to say that these programmes conjure up museum experience and economy created around it that demystifies the consumption of culture in the museum context through intersections between entertainment, interactions, and social exchange. (Pine and Gilmore 1998) With an emphasis on the management of audience experience and individualised experience that connects them to the space and objects in a sustained fashion, the structure of the Museum and its staff create an interface with the audience in a more public-oriented manner. They are differentiated into categories in order to serve and measure its tangible and/or intangible outcomes which give rise to a subtle tension between the museum and its audience, curator/organiser and participant, production and consumption. With the lessening of state's role in funding and supporting art and culture sector, the public private partnership began as a coping mechanism in case of Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, although it has proselyted the role of private entities in the shaping of contemporary art and exhibition making discourse. It entails a particular kind of engagement and displaces other modes of participation while validating the consideration that the public space of museum is being conflated with neoliberal logics in the disguise of participation, citizenship, and inclusion.

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Engineering Respectability: The Politics of Aspiration in an Engineering College

Nandini Hebbar N.

Abstract:

In this paper, I trace subjectivities under neoliberalism in a private engineering college in Tamil Nadu, especially those relating to employment prospects. Part of a larger ethnographic study on caste, gender and sexuality among youth in Tamil Nadu, this paper combines ethnographic description with film, policy and discourse analysis to explore the concerns of upward social mobility in the neoliberal context of a private engineering college. In doing so, I consider the affective connections between higher education, employment and strategies of upward social mobility used by middle-caste groups in semi-urban and rural Tamil Nadu. Rather than paint an image of the neoliberal college as being oriented towards supplying a ‘docile’ workforce for multi-national corporations, I suggest that such a model of aspiration exists along a continuum that values respectability at the local level above all else.

Keywords: Neoliberalisation, education, Tamil Nadu, middle castes, upward social mobility, private colleges, gender, ethnography, information technology, software, exposure, respectability, discipline.

Introduction

“Interview-la vanthu parunga nalu vartha sentha mari English pesa evlo kasta patrennu, vela kedaikala, vela kedaikalana epdi kidaiku?” (Come to the interview and see how difficult it is to join four sentences together in English and respond. You are all saying that I am not getting a job, but how will I?)

-- Raguvaran, unemployed engineer,

in the movie *Velleyilla Pattadari* (VIP)

(The Unemployed Graduate, 2014)

In the year 2014, when cinemas across Tamil Nadu (TN) were resounding with the above dialogue, the air at my field site was thick with its echoes. In what should have been the recruitment season at Chinna College of Technology¹ (henceforth referred to as CCT), disappointed and angry students clashed with the college management about who held the onus of ensuring jobs. In a college which had little to no organised student political activity otherwise, students surrounded the principal, and demanded that the college ensure better recruitment. The principal, a former professor at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Madras, told them that despite doing what they could, recruitment had dried up and companies were not responding to invitations to recruit on campus. “It is because of the quality of the students here, they are unemployable,” he counter-charged. Angry students put up status updates on social media, “How can the management blame the quality of students that they themselves have trained?” and “They promised 100 per cent recruitment!”

Needless to say, the film *VIP* was a runaway hit on my field site, and the ten months spent conducting participant observation research at the college in Salem district² (western Tamil Nadu) were replete with references to it. Like the protagonist in the film, the students of the college were dealing with the prospect of unemployment despite being qualified engineers, who had enrolled in college either by securing very high marks, or by paying high ‘management fees’ (euphemism for capitation fees). The college was one of more than 500 self-financed engineering colleges in the State, most of which advertise widely promising jobs at the end of the course.

The problem assumes greater poignancy while considering how an engineering degree is used by several upwardly-mobile families to climb up the social ladder, and many sell an acre or two of their agricultural land, or take a loan to afford a seat in an engineering college. Strategising for this is usually not done individually by the person concerned, but with the whole family’s deliberation and savings. Some of the students in these colleges are also beneficiaries of TN Government schemes such as the First Graduate scheme and Free Education schemes meant to bring members of disadvantaged groups into higher education and enable social transformation. Similar schemes exist in (undivided) Andhra Pradesh (Upadhya 2016). Tamil Nadu and

¹ All names in the paper have been changed to protect identities, including names of institutions.

² As part of my ethnographic study, I stayed in the hostel, met students, teachers, and members of the administration/management. I also audited classes with the students, participated in everyday life and special occasions/cultural festivals such as College Day, Sports Day, Women’s Day, etc. Even though the college was a co-educational institute, my paper predominantly discusses the narratives of many young women because I had better access; both, because I was staying in their hostel and the gender segregation between the sexes, partly produced by the college, made it difficult for me to spend much time with young men.

(undivided) Andhra Pradesh contribute about 40 per cent of the country's graduates, although many of them are considered 'unskilled' by industry standards, and therefore 'unemployable' (Jain 2015). Moreover, the growth of employment opportunities in the private sector has not been able to keep up with the growth in number of engineering colleges; even the Information Technology (IT) industry (the fastest growing private sector) grows only about 15 per cent a year (Jain 2015). Carol Upadhyaya and AR Vasavi, based on their in-depth study of the IT industry, suggest that such conditions of inadequate training and certain social backgrounds³ among students from "Category C"⁴ colleges (like my field site) "appear to have created a docile and submissive workforce" (2006: 36) for companies.

In this context, I explore the neoliberal subjectivities on campus, particularly those related to employment prospects and the conditions under which 'employable' subjectivities are produced in self-financed colleges. To do so, I combine ethnographic description with discourse analyses, and explore the concerns of upward social mobility in the neoliberal context of a private engineering college. I consider the connections drawn between higher education, employment and strategies of upward social mobility used by middle-caste groups in semi-urban and rural Tamil Nadu. I argue that, in the narratives of my respondents and in Tamil popular culture, there emerges an apprehension about entering private sector jobs among engineering students, despite four years of intense training to become 'employable' in the IT sector. Their reasons include employment prospects (or lack thereof), the communication skills needed, gendered concerns of safety, besides critiques of 'westernised' workplace culture.

Instead, respondents voiced a preference for employment opportunities that are considered respectable locally, which depend on existing social capital, equating success to hard work. Such aspirations are in sync with the older generation's toil for upward mobility (Chari 2004a, 2004b)⁵ and their own careful plans for their children as the following narrative shows.

³Without homogenising the student body, most students in the college were from "rurban" backgrounds, often the first graduates in the family and from lower middle class backgrounds. The students comprised children of a wide range of parents: prosperous groundnut and sago cultivators, poultry farmers, textile business owners/employees, construction business owner/employee, casual labourers, grocers, blue-collar government employees, teachers, college professors and even the daughter of a wealthy mall owner in Salem.

⁴Category A and B colleges include Indian Institutions of Technology, the state-run institutions such as the National Institute of Technology, College of Engineering Anna University, etc.

⁵As Sharad Chari (2004a, 2004b) explains in his ethnographic account of the textile Gounders in Tiruppur, toil does not translate only as hard work; but clever land use, exploitation of caste and gendered structures of labour, as well as the use of fraternal capital to start businesses.

'Employable' Subjectivities

Smitha joined the college as part of the management quota to pursue an engineering degree in the IT stream; her father had paid three lakh rupees as 'management fees' to admit her in CCT. She came from a community of Devangas,⁶ and community elders⁷ had already reproached her father for sending their daughter to study engineering in a college. She described how, in her family and community, young women did not often have access to higher education or employment, no matter what their circumstances. To explain this, she cited how her cousin (*periamma ponnu*/ mother's sister's daughter), a BBA (Bachelors in Business Administration) graduate, had to fight with her father to seek employment at a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) office even after he had suffered major losses in his Kanchipuram silk business and could not support the family anymore. The cousin had started earning Rs. 12,000 but the father did not touch the money and stopped speaking to his daughter. He considered it dishonourable for a man to run his household on his daughter's income. The family continued to suffer and the daughter had to look for strategies in order to help her family: she bought the school books for her younger brother, passed on groceries to her mother surreptitiously, etc.

However, her father was not like *Periyappa* (mother's sister's husband), Smitha said. Despite being advised not to send his daughter to college, her father had made higher education for his children a priority. Their lives had not been easy. There was a time when Smitha's parents could not even afford a primary education, but her parents had successfully overcome those hardships by returning to their caste occupation of weaving from formal employment in a factory, and now ran a successful spinning mill. In later years, they sent Smitha and her brother to a boarding school in a neighbouring district where students were even taught to ride horses as an extra-curricular activity. Fluent in English, she had scored good marks in her Class 10 and 12 board exams. But her father had not waited to see what would happen at the state-level counselling and had got her directly admitted to CCT, which had a good reputation in the area, by paying the requisite management fee. Her mother had also seconded this decision because it meant that she

⁶Devangas are traditionally weavers, classified as Sudra in the Hindu Varna system and an artisan class. Even though many, including women and children, still engage in the caste occupation of weaving, there are a few administrators, engineers and doctors among them today. However, they are generally educated only up to school level, with many of them dropping out of school due to poverty (Singh 1997, 379-386)

⁷ The Devanga have a traditional caste council that is hereditary and homogenous, headed by a kula guru. Under the guru are *pattagaras* in charge of *sthalas*. Under each *pattagaru* are several *chettigaras* who head 10-12 families each. The *chettigara* plays an important role in social and religious activities. The council organises religious festivals and social functions. The council has the authority to impose cash fines or excommunicate the guilty in cases of rape, adultery and intercaste marriage. They also have regional and local associations to safeguard their interests (Singh 1994: 118).

would be nearby; they would visit her every weekend. She was not allowed to take the bus to come home instead, just an hour away in Erode.

In addition to worries about lack of campus placement opportunities, Smitha, who was in the fourth year and standing at the threshold of the recruitment season, had to critically assess what course she should take in life. By her own assessment, continuing her studies by enrolling in an MBA or MTech programme would be more acceptable to the community elders who had cautioned her father against sending her to an engineering college. It was what her mother also wanted her to do. She would remain dependent on her father; he would not acquire the dishonour of tainting his hands with a daughter's earnings. A job in the IT industry would further complicate her marriage prospects: once she had earned some money and was working, her parents would have to find her a groom of higher or at least equal education qualifications to achieve a balance in status. She told me that grooms' families today were also being wary of brides with IT jobs, especially their workspaces in cities such as Bengaluru and Chennai, where teams of men and women often worked together late into the night, or travelled abroad. It was often heard that divorce rates were very high among IT professionals (also see, Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2006: 138). Moreover, if she took an IT job, she would no longer be living at home or hostel but probably in a rented accommodation or as a paying guest somewhere; all of which raised questions on the kind of lifestyles led by single young women in metropolitan cities.⁸ But she did not know yet what her father would like her to do. Having witnessed her parents' toil, however, Smitha wanted to do something for her family by getting job, and supplementing the family income.

A few days later, my phone buzzed in the middle of the night. It was Smitha calling from her home with happy news. She had been recruited by a well-known Indian IT company. I congratulated her and asked her how her parents had reacted to the news. "It is my parents' marriage anniversary today, and they said I have given them the best gift," she replied cheerfully. "They are so happy, Nandini. They have allowed me to go to Bangalore." As for the extended family and community members, Smitha's father would stand up to them, just as he had resisted them when it came to her higher studies.

⁸ I have discussed the vulnerabilities associated with living elsewhere. See my article, "The murder of two women techies reveals in Chennai reveals the deadly side of politics." *Daily News and Analysis* (online), 30 April, 2014. Available from: <http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-the-murder-of-two-women-techie-in-chennai-reveal-the-deadly-side-of-gender-politics-1983401> [Accessed: 30 April, 2014]

Placement – Contents and Discontents

Job prospects were not as easily reconciled for many of Smitha's batch mates. After the clash mentioned above, the college brought in a host of recruiters for jobs that did not necessarily need an engineering education: banks, call centres and coaching centres, among others. In the case of CCT, which had been accustomed to having well-known Indian IT companies coming in to recruit, this was unprecedented. Students were in shock. Many, who had been able to afford education in the college only because of student loans, had no option but to appear for the recruitment process by receiving offer letters to come and work at coaching centres, or clerks at banks, at a fraction of their expected salaries.

Sadly, their woes did not end there: several companies did not honour their offer letters,⁹ and the joy of at least receiving an offer letter quickly dissolved to disappointment again. A chagrined Rathna, a student of the Electronics and Communications (ECE) stream, who had received an offer letter from a bank, told me that her recruitment was fake. She fully believed that the whole recruitment process had been staged in order to tide over the crisis at the college, and money had exchanged hands in order to do so. The company had come and recruited against zero vacancies, she alleged. She has been waiting for her appointment letter, unsure of how to proceed further: should she wait or look for another job? For many educated unemployed youth such as Rathna, the route to enter the workforce would be long and arduous, spent gaining numerous additional certifications, and odd jobs in the informal sector (Nisbett 2009, 2013; Jeffery 2010). Perhaps ironically, such jobs also included visiting colleges to train engineering students to become employable.

In CCT, this training module was called Professional Advancement and Career Enhancement (PACE), which students, irrespective of discipline, had to compulsorily take in addition to their technical subjects. It consisted of one compulsory year of classes in English, two years of learning to solve logical and quantitative problems, and a year of Engineering Ethics. These were meant to craft them into 'employable' engineering graduates who were not just technically skilled, but also demonstrated a basic ability to solve problems, had good English communication skills, with a sense of etiquette and ethics. It was tailor-made to help students crack placement tests set by IT companies visiting to hire engineers who could successfully run

⁹Upadhyaya and Vasavi detail in their study that companies also play a 'futures' game by recruiting students in the third year of the four year course interviews. This system of advance recruitment has created problems in the past, such as during the downturn of 2001-02 when several companies did not honour the offer letters issued earlier, and fresh graduates were neither able to take up other jobs nor join the companies that had recruited them (2006: 31)

‘offshore’ operations (Vasavi and Upadhyaya 2007). As students approached the recruitment season, these sessions became more intensive as they were considered very important.

In fact, English teachers in the college explicitly stated in one of their published works that “students who are the future employees have to deal more with soft skills than with actual knowledge about particular situation because customers appreciate an employee who is willing to help and listen to the complaint... Hence, training the students in soft skills has become the main agenda in colleges.”¹⁰

However, rather than producing a docile workforce full of enterprising potential employees (cf. Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2006), the training sessions left students confused and bewildered. For instance, in English classes in the first year, in order to prepare students to handle offshore operations with foreign clients, they were asked to role play situations. This included engaging in a phone conversation in English, relaying a message received through phone, etc. This was meant to combine teaching social niceties with a grammar lesson in changing direct to indirect speech, converting a written statement to a verbal statement, etc. These situations were highly uncomfortable for the students, who were called to act out these situations in front of a class of 50-60 people, making them break into a sweat or appear paralysed by fear.

After one such session, I asked Bhuvana, a Dalit student, who travelled to Salem from the neighbouring town of Omalur, and in her own words “did not speak a word of English”, whether the class had helped her. She replied, quite upset at my question, “*Enda keelavi idhu? Neenge sollunu. English indha mathiri learn panna mudiyuma? Friends kittle, classmates kittle pesittu learn pannunnu.*” (What kind of a question are you asking? You should only tell me whether it is possible to learn English like this. We should learn by speaking to friends and classmates naturally. Not like this!)

As several studies of recruitment practices in IT companies show, companies sought an easy and direct communication style in their recruits, more than actual knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2006: 126). This was a style urban, middle-class candidates were more likely to have than those from lower socio-economic or rural backgrounds.¹¹ It is important to note that such a style is very different from the mode of communicating that my respondents were used to, which emphasised hierarchy between students and teachers, parents and children,

¹⁰ Citation details not revealed to protect anonymity.

¹¹ Fuller and Narasimhan (2006) also note that students from traditional families use a submissive style that tends to be more conscious of hierarchy rather than the easy, egalitarian, direct conversation style favoured by software companies.

and seniors from juniors. In fact, teachers in the college drew from a familial idiom of speech, addressing the students as ‘child’ or even ‘*Thambi*’ (younger brother), and it was common to see students address the teacher with their heads and shoulders bowed down in an image of docility. Therefore, the notion of what constituted ideal employability in the eyes of an IT employer, especially the kind of emotional investment (Hochschild 2003) needed to communicate with a foreign client during offshore operations, was bewildering to many of my respondents.

This was augmented by a sharp gap between existing knowledge and the college’s use of American and British resources to teach English: these included reading reports from British and American newspapers, the use of recorded speech in British and American accents in the language labs so students can learn to comprehend accents of future customers, and pop-management bestsellers such as *Who Moved my Cheese* by Spencer Johnson (1998), *You Can Win* by Shiv Khera (1998) and *Discover the Diamond in You* by Arindam Chaudhuri (2009). Movies such as *My Fair Lady* (1964) were also screened; students were asked to repeat songs from these films in order to “get their tongues moving in the English rhythm,” as the Head of the Department of English said. “All these resources have been chosen to motivate them,” she said, discussing the similarities of the Shaw adaptation and the situation in the classroom.¹²

Such an atmosphere in college, especially the orientation to learning English and importance given to cultural capital, left many students alienated. Such pedagogical emphasis was also markedly different from school, where the learning of Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics, had been stressed upon in order to enter engineering college (Sancho 2013). The dominant view that emerged was that the IT sector did not value technical knowledge as much as it valued communication skills. An impromptu skit performed by my respondents in their first year in college illustrates this awareness more substantively.

The skit was part of a bridge programme for Tamil-medium students in order to ensure their successful integration into the English-medium college. Students were divided into groups and given themes on which they had to enact skits; they were given about 20 minutes to prepare during which the teacher set up a small video camera which would record the happenings on stage. Capturing the skit on video would help them go back and correct mistakes, she said. A group that were assigned the theme of honesty put up the following skit:

¹² Personal interview conducted with Head of the Department of English. 30 Apr, 2014. Name not revealed to protect anonymity.

An English-medium schooled Aravind approaches a classmate schooled in Tamil, Kalaiarasu, for help: "I am an English medium student. I am weak in Maths. Kalai, you are a Tamil medium student, you are good in maths. Will you help me, da?" Kalaiarasu jumps at the opportunity to help his classmate. Soon after, an announcement is made by the English Club about a round of competitions such as 'Just a Minute', essay and debate. Excited and keen to participate, Kalai asks his English-medium-educated classmate whether he would help him, but Aravind turns him down saying these competitions are very tough, and there is no chance that a Tamil-medium student will be able to participate in these competitions. He goes on to be the only participant in the competitions and collects all the prizes. The scene then cuts to the alternative and more desirable scenario: one in which the English-medium student helps the Tamil-medium student to prepare for the competition and they both share the prize offered in the competition.

In the skit, it is interesting to note how the linguistic backgrounds of the two characters plays out in the realm of the ethical. Kalaiarasu's Tamil-medium school origins (with class and rural background connotations) is collapsed with remarkable knowledge of mathematics and helpful nature, indexing his culture and merit, while the English-speaking character emerges in opposition as a self-serving, elite individual who wins because of his language capabilities, and lack of competition from his Tamil-schooled peers. The scenario in which the English-medium student walks away with the prize should be read in the context of the employers' bias for English-speaking students. The teachers had constantly repeated in class that top IT companies such as TCS, CTS, Wipro, Infosys and Accenture recruited only students with good English communication skills, while students only fluent in Tamil would be left in the lurch, looking for jobs in the smaller IT companies or joining the informal sector (based on actual recruitment practices; see Fuller and Narasimhan 2006; Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2006; Nisbett 2009; 2013).

Perhaps this sense of rejection has also led to a situation where aspiring engineers resist prospects in the IT sector. One of the PACE trainers, Kumaran was a 25-year-old civil engineering graduate, proudly announced during one of his classes that he had not taken an engineering job despite an offer from a well-known Indian IT company. Instead, he had prepared for and cleared every single competitive exam offered in the country, including those that paved the way for banking, revenue and foreign service careers. However, since his dream was to enter the Indian Police Service, he had not followed up on any of the other career paths that had come his way; instead he had taken a day-job in a soft skills' training institute and spent the day going from college to college taking PACE classes for engineering students. Kumaran

emerged as a role model for many of the students for his rejection of the IT sector job, and his determination to become an IPS officer. Many students met with him after class for informal career counselling.

Students were also strongly encouraged to consider higher education; it would relieve the pressure on the college to find a job for them before they graduate.¹³ Engineering graduates with a Master's degree (MTech) are easily absorbed as teachers – earning about ₹20,000 a month – in one of the many engineering colleges in the state. My room-mate Chethana (tutor-in-charge of the hostel), whose father did not permit her to take a job soon after obtaining her B.Tech (Computer Science) from CCT, had gone to Chennai to take an MTech degree from another private college, and returned to CCT to teach. She stayed in the hostel, ate in the mess, and went home every weekend to visit her parents and grandmother who lived about 40 km away from Salem city. She seemed happy and content with her job, underlining how her parents were happy with it too, because she was nearby and her safety was assured as she was living in a girls' hostel in gated premises. In fact, she said, "This job is much more suitable for women. I have no respect for men who take up this job. I would never want to marry another teacher in an engineering college because the 'exposure' in such jobs is limited and good only for women like me to work from nine-to-five, teach a little but spend rest of the time gossiping in the staff room. I want a husband who comes home so tired that he cannot keep his eyes open." Chethana's family's preference for a teaching job echoes Smitha's trepidation about disapproval from kin for the alternative – a career in the IT sector. In her role as teacher, Chethana sees an 'appropriate femininity', living close to home, earning a small income, and eventually, finding and supporting a husband who toils hard (cf. Radhakrishnan 2011).

Finally, a real choice in jobs could be strategised mostly by students with pre-existing cultural and social capital: Monika, a young respondent from Andhra Pradesh, was pursuing an engineering

¹³ Who was eligible for recruitment was a carefully charted out process: this was done through a form circulated in class asking for students to state their future plans. Students were asked to fill out a form, and one of the following against their names: 'F' for further studies, 'M' for marriage or 'P' for placement. The category 'M' applied to women only; they had to be forthright about marriage plans. If they intended to get on the marriage market as soon as they graduated, they were asked to stay out of the recruitment process as the norms of patrilocality and the perceived husband's right to object to his wife's employed status increased the chance of the woman not taking up the job. "Leave the jobs for the needy," the placement staff reiterated. Companies, too, were known to strategise recruitment based on their understanding of each community's gender ideology that either restricted women's free movement outside the home, earning her own income, or whether she was likely to be get married and quit her job in the next few years. Therefore, the goal of securing 100 pc placement was, in reality, only for those who marked 'P' on the form.

degree in the Mechanical stream. Her choice of the stream had been motivated by the desire to improve her father's factory, a small fabricating unit. Her father's dream was that she take over the unit and turn it into something large scale, she said. She had aimed high and completed her schooling in Hyderabad, at an IIT entrance coaching centre. She had not managed to 'crack' the entrance test, but got admission into a second-rung institute, a State-run technological university. However, when she and her father had visited the campus to pay the fees and complete the enrolment formalities, violent protests for caste-based reservation had broken out, and left her father unconvinced about the suitability of the college for her. He decided to change tack, and on the recommendation of a relative, sought admission at CCT by paying a management fee.

Monika spoke good English and spoke disparagingly of having to move to Salem from a big city like Hyderabad, and study at a college like CCT when she had been aiming for the IITs. It took a long time, but had finally reconciled to her life in CCT after promising herself to do better in her career. During the recruitment process, she too received an offer similar to Rathna's — a clerical position at the same bank, but tapped into her pre-existing social capital to find herself a real engineering job. She contacted a cousin who worked in Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, Bangalore, to work out an internship in his division during her last semester. When she was in Bangalore, she hunted for other jobs and received an offer from an app-based coaching start-up to work as a Business Development Analyst. She started working there, but continued the job hunt. She contacted an uncle who worked for a large automobile firm in Chennai, and asked him whether she could get a job there. She also posted her resume on numerous websites, hoping to catch a foothold in a core company. When we last spoke, she told me that she had been made an offer by a well-known American automobile company. She would be paid 40 per cent of what she was earning at the coaching centre, but she was definitely going to take up the job, she said. Her future plans included applying for a graduate course in management abroad, mainly due to her family's insistence, to enable a better career. That could help her pump some money into her father's business, she said.

In such cases, even though spurred by perceived success and social mobility through engineering education, graduates' actual trajectories exhibit immobility – often settling for jobs for which they are over-qualified, or not paid well enough to move up the social ladder.

Thus, even as careers in IT have functioned as springboards for upward social mobility such as Smitha's, other career trajectories show disillusionment with engineering jobs in multinational companies. This disillusionment has gone hand in hand with recourse to older models of

increased status such as bureaucratic roles in the government sector, teaching, and increased investment in higher education.

To be or not to be an IT professional

Aware of the precarious situation in employment prospects, CCT's students, many of whose parents had paid a generous sum as management fees, were grappling with the future course of their lives. Although a return on their investments in the form of a lucrative job in the private sector, particularly in the IT industry, was on their minds, it was wrought with other aspirations and dilemmas influenced by caste affiliation, family businesses, marriage prospects, kinship relations, work opportunities, impression of cities, etc., as elaborated in the earlier sections.

The social imaginary of success was no longer synonymous with an IT job (cf. Upadhyā's [2016] Andhra study), and engineering graduates were no longer bent on chasing the IT dream (cf. Nisbett 2013, 2009). Instead, students armed with engineering degrees were relying on jobs that could be found locally, such as government service, the education sector, family businesses, and local industries. This ensured the advantage of credentialed cultural capital in the form of an educational degree, and career prospects that were not subject to the vagaries of the globalised IT market but based on contingencies.

Many respondents in Civil, Textile and Mechanical Engineering streams said that they and their parents had based their non-IT education decisions on a critique of the globalised culture of software/IT companies as being 'too Westernised' and 'having moral issues' and voiced a preference for the local. One of my respondents, Sowmya, pursuing the Civil stream, rationalised her preference for non-IT jobs as the "freedom from campus recruitment" for "jobs that would take them to distant cities". Instead, she could rely on local contacts and work while living at home, alongside people who would look out for her rather than the impersonal workspace of an IT office where they had to adapt to another culture. Another respondent from Thiruppur said that she had taken up the Fashion Technology stream because she could go back home and find a job in one of her own relatives' factories. Others such as Premila dreamt of taking over parents' businesses, determined to bring in technological advances to transform it.

Popular culture also reflects this change in social imagination. Posters of the film *Velleyilla Pattadhari* (2014), mentioned at the beginning of the paper, showed a fetishised image of popular actor Dhanush as an engineer, wearing a yellow hard hat, rugged jeans, baring his torso against

the backdrop of rising dust at a construction site. The buzz around the film reached a crescendo during the week after the film's release. Some of my informants claimed to have watched it multiple times in the first week itself, and were excited to discuss their favourite parts of the film. Many of my close respondents changed their profile pictures on social media to stills of the film. Downloaded copies of the film circulated widely on campus, and dialogues were promptly learnt and repeated. Even though several Tamil movies in the past had engineers as protagonists, this was the first time a Tamil film dealt with the unemployment of the educated as its theme, I was told. Comparisons were drawn to the Bollywood film *3 Idiots* (2009) that had advanced a powerful (and popular) critique of the craze for higher education in engineering as being driven by pressure to succeed, rather than genuine passion.

The title of the film refers to the character Raguvaran played by actor Dhanush. The film opens with a portrayal of Raguvaran's state of unemployment: trained in civil engineering, Raguvaran prefers to stay unemployed for four long years rather than 'sell out' to a job as a software engineer. This is contrasted by the life lead by his younger brother, an IT engineer, who works in one of the top firms in the city, and is already acquiring the trappings of a successful life such as a car, flat, etc. This distinction sets off a clear hierarchy in the home: his father is the primary breadwinner and the authoritarian patriarch. In front of his father, Raguvaran is emasculated, not even able to resist the local thugs who pick a fight with him (even though he is shown roughing them up in the father's absence). His younger brother as the secondary breadwinner supersedes him in status. Although detested by his father for staying unemployed which he interprets as a sign of laziness, Raguvaran is adored by his mother. His unemployed status allows him to spend his entire day with her, helping her with household chores, watching mega serials on TV, gossiping about the neighbours, etc. The film's oedipal portrayal of family dynamics is meant to further accentuate the dismal condition of the unemployed protagonist. Raguvaran is also a member of a social media group of similar educated unemployed youth called VIP; they function as a support group as well as a platform to circulate notices about job opportunities. Raguvaran's daily perusal of this group is ridiculed by his family as a waste of time spent wallowing in self-pity rather than retrieving a keen 'entrepreneurial self' to spend his life productively.

In the second half, through a twist of fate (Raguvaran's mother dies suddenly, and her lungs are donated to a rich, young girl who has worn her lungs out by chain smoking), and in gratitude to the family who donated the lungs that saved his daughter's life, Raguvaran is offered a job by the head of a construction company. Thus employed, he goes from strength to strength as a meticulous civil engineer, vindicating his earlier fastidious preference for a career in civil

engineering. In-charge of a large construction site, Raguvaran has to deal with many ills such as nepotism and corruption that plagues the construction industry. His antagonist is a fair-skinned villain with an upper caste name, Arun Subramaniam; the son of the owner of a corrupt rival firm who will stop at nothing in order to win building contracts. However, Raguvaran gains the upper hand in every situation through sheer talent, hard work and clever mobilisation of unemployed youth through social media.

I read *VIP* as an apt fable for the times. It re-works the notion of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ of neoliberal times (Gooptu 2013) into the world of the construction industry. However, as an archetype of the educated unemployed subject, Raguvaran openly contests the idea of a ‘consumer citizen’ subject as successful, preferring to treat his career instead as a knowledge-based vocation. This has become a matter of pride and assertion in Tamil Nadu, where one can sometimes see cars and bikes stamped with ‘Civil Engineer’ and ‘Mechanical Engineer’ in a manner similar to such assertions of caste pride. Moreover, in the movie, technological change is not linked to upward social mobility afforded through the IT industry, but the enfranchisement of groups through digital citizenship.

For my respondents though, the most appealing factor was that their own narratives were embodied in the dialogues. Many described watching one particular scene with goose bumps; in the scene, Raguvaran addresses the antagonist Arun Subramaniam thus:

If you, who have not worked or studied hard, and are here only because your rich father ensured this seat for you, can have this much arrogance...

Then, think of the one who came here, because his parents struggled to just pay the donation for school, who worked hard and passed every year from LKG to class 10,

And after class 10, instead of taking the easy groups,

Had to take the most difficult group so that he could become an engineer,

And enrol in separate tuitions for Physics, separate tuitions for Chemistry,

Separate tuitions for Maths, and spent so much time on the road,

Going here and there, so did his parents,

Who had to pay fees separately for each tuition class,

*The one who had to stay up studying through the night with a flask of tea by his side,
Wake up every morning to the sound of the alarm,
So that he can pass the class 12 exams,
And when he finally passed it, could not even glance at those marks,
By then he had to spend another two months studying for the TNPC Exam,
In which he didn't get enough marks to make the cut off,
And had to go to a college that was paid for by his mother's pawned jewellery,
And flunked every semester till the fourth year,
When he cleared every arrear from first to fourth,
Only to get beaten, as if by slippers, in each job interview he appeared for,
And lived as a disappointment to his father, under the father's roof,
As he cursed him for every grain of rice his son ate,
So he had to tolerate each grain of rice getting stuck his throat,
The pain of each grain of rice going down his throat,
The pain of disappointment.
At that point, one blessed good-hearted man gave him a job!
But he has to deal with you now, keen to snatch his hard-earned job!
But, don't forget the one who stands before you was once an unemployed graduate,
Just think, how much arrogance he ought to have!*

Delivered in the style of delivering a monologue as a punch line, which is generally used in Tamil cinema to prop up the hero (Sundaram 2016), this long monologue attempts to suffuse a certain heroism into an engineering student's everyday life, even if it is marked by failure. Arrogance, or rather, pride is centrally constituted in the narrative – in students working hard to pass school and college, parents toiling to pay management fees, staying unemployed, getting a break through a local contact. The lines firmly privilege pride, respectability and staying true to one's core

competence rather than science, rationality or aptitude as qualifications necessary for a good engineer (as in the case of *3 Idiots*). It is also squarely a common subaltern narrative, located firmly in self-financed colleges that run on management fees, where students have arrears, struggle with language, and jobs are not guaranteed – in Tamil Nadu, over 500 of them such as CCT, where students have to adopt multiple strategies to get a job, and the route to success is not as straightforward as imagined.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to explore young people's subjectivities and contingent strategies in a self-financed engineering college, particularly those that relate to employment. Struggling to remain buoyed with the imaginary of engineering education leading to successful private sector jobs, students were put under a strict regimen to emerge "employable". The process of acquiring these traits of cultural capital emerged as a tedious "disciplinary" project as the college attempted to train students into becoming "professional, globalised subjects" who would be comfortable dealing with foreign clients, even if they were struggling to master basic English grammar. Classroom practices and curricular frameworks were designed with an importance on self-management; unduly pressuring students. It was assumed that placement training would not only help them crack placement tests, but teach students to embody a globalised modernity. However, as the narratives show, these strategies left students alienated and resistant to embodying the 'ideal employable subject'.

Further, with the slump in employment in the globalised private sector and employment in the private sector not always resulting in upward social mobility, students voiced a preference for jobs that would ensure respectability at the local level such as in government service, higher education and local industries over westernised workspaces. This is also reflected in popular culture; a possible backlash against the mainstream social imaginary of success as merit-oriented, represented by consumeristic lifestyles. Instead, these narratives attempt to reconstitute self-pride and celebrate hard work as the measure of success.

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Caste, Common Sense and the Neoliberal Paradigm

Adwaita Banerjee

Abstract:

Caste, as a system and political formation, has historically left many imprints on the nation, both in the political and cultural senses. Post-independence discrimination on the grounds of caste was heavily influenced structurally, in terms of its manifestation and reproduction during the colonial period. The structures and formations that resulted from such a process came to be internalised through certain notions of 'common sense'. Within South- East Asia, and more specifically in India, common senses like caste became integrated within the fabric of post liberalism. Our belief in half-baked feudalism as well as our notions of the divine right to rule, largely shape what Gramsci described as 'stratified deposits' within our very ideas of India, Indianness, caste and difference. What then, happens to our common sense, within the framework of neoliberalism and globalisation? Is the market as obvious in its discrimination as Brahmanical feudalism? In this paper, I look at the four axes central to the neoliberal project, i.e., meritocracy, sexuality, consumerism and militarisation in the context of common sense. Using methods of critical discourse analysis, I will look at the articulations of the market in order to question whether the maintenance of such a structure is possible without a system of inequitable power relations fueled, in turn, by notions of common sense.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, common sense, market, caste, meritocracy, sexuality, consumerism, South Asia, India, consciousness

Introduction

This paper tries to intervene in the ways in which caste and neoliberalism are conceptualised in the framework of common sense. Rather than approaching these concepts as separate entities, the paper tries to examine their interlinked qualities. Peck and Tickell (2002) state that

There is more to be done, both theoretically and empirically, on the specification and exploration of different processes of neoliberalisation. This would need to take account of the ways in which

ideologies of neoliberalism are themselves produced and reproduced through institutional forms and political action, since 'actually existing'; neoliberalisms are always (in some way or another) hybrid of composite structures (see Larner 2000).

(Peck and Tickell 2002:383)

Thus, it becomes necessary to unpack the processes through which neoliberalism is actualised with common sense in terms of caste within the realms of meritocracy, sexuality and consumerism. By building interlinkages, the paper aims to observe and analyse moments of eruption of caste discrimination from the processes of neoliberalisation.

Articulations of the market, neoliberal or otherwise, are not in themselves entrenched in caste but are instead operationalised through common sense (not an obvious fact as the market deals in labour rather than human beings), the functioning of the global market economy within India is deeply enmeshed in the history and politics of caste. The market that functions is always formed within unequal power structures. Maintenance of a structure of inequitable power relations as far as possible has been a key concern of the global elite in India throughout the post liberalisation period. The construction of common sense becomes a key act of oppression in such market structures. The continuation of the notion of the dominant caste having power is taken to be a natural. This includes ideas of who is entitled to speak on behalf of the concerned parties. The concerned communities embody a kind of moral set of nationalistic values. All this forms important aspects within the process of securing consent for these unequal relations (Rustin and Massey 2014).

Such ideas that relate to commonsensical notions of being Indian play a key role within this process. For example, there are key differences that are generated between who is a barbarian and who is not. Similarly, a complete lack of democracy is seen as an acceptable choice to the loss of hegemonic power (often invisible) when it is part of the Stateist narrative: thus we can see that, the complete absence of democracy in places like Bastar are forgotten in the current debate about the lack of democracy within Kashmir or elsewhere .

The ways in which we come to understand migration is also under a similar rubric of common sense. This is structured by a hierarchy and shaped by a sense of entitlement. It is within this kind of an articulation that we see that people of privilege find themselves to be freely mobile within the country while the not so privileged are expected to stay within designated social spaces. The supreme example is the way we analyse the waves of Aryan migration, which led to the dispossession, subordination and eradication of complete populations (Phule 1873), with all

the resultant inequity that it brought on to the mainland and then on the other hand the way we look at migration in the senses of the Namashudras of Marichjhappi (Jalais 2005). At present, as the stranglehold of global capitalism strengthens, its wings spreading all across the world in search of both raw materials and ready markets, it produces levels of deprivation and displacement even greater than those caused during the nineteenth and twentieth century spatial transformations.

Pure market is a myth. Liberals may theorise that people and goods move freely, but difficulty arises when we see that such a movement in turn requires a huge investment and intervention. This is why liberals and conservatives have so often become part of very similar ideological clubs. Their alliance, although quite uneasy, requires the necessary law and order to be secured through the populist/authoritarian wings to enable the pursuance of free trade by the liberals. The seduction of cheap labour is balanced against the need to make coalitions of populists and conservatives which in turn ensures that the system of notions and common knowledge stays afloat. The ideas of caste and the nation that are articulated under this debate hopes to stitch together the alliance between the wealthy and the proletariat. This is addressed within the rhetoric of the nation rather than class and is usually a fact that is unspoken but nevertheless necessary to mention. Within India we see both the major parties including Congress and the Bharatiya Janta Party being enthusiastic about liberal policies such as the support for globalisation and privatisation, but within local regional parties, the division between conservatives and liberals become more pronounced, an example being Shiv Sena or Trinamool Congress.

Discourses on Savarna/Indian/Hindu superiority can be seen as a strategy deployed to help secure cross-class alliances between apolitical wings of the working class and the authoritarian populist right. This also goes on to secure neoliberalism as a basic structural framework at the global level, it is therefore seen to be playing a key role in domestic politics.

Conceptualising Common sense

Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea clearly state in their Soundings manifesto, that common sense is a form of everyday thinking that gives us the adequate framework of meaning that helps to make sense of the world:

It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection. It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience, reflecting only the realities of daily life and answering the needs of 'the common people' for practical guidance and advice.

(Hall 1982: 8-9)

The concept of common sense in itself is central to understanding the mechanics of culture. Gramsci (1971:419) proclaims it to be the core dynamic of social change: why has a particular kind of change taken place? How did it take place? How can it be brought out again in the future? He gives considerable attention to the complexities and contradictions inherent within the concept of common sense and how it helps, not only in reproducing and maintaining power regimes, but also on how it carries seeds of change. Resultantly, we see that 'Common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes' (ibid: 422).

Ambedkar recognises the problematic situation that would arise from collective consciousness contributing to common sense and feeding from a supposed cultural memory. He diagnoses these problems to be chauvinism and majoritarianism, among others. In the preface to 'Pakistan and the Partition of India', he writes thus:

Nationality is a social feeling. It is a feeling of a corporate sentiment of oneness which makes those who are charged with it feel that they are kith and kin. This national feeling is a double edged feeling. It is at once a feeling of fellowship for one's own kith and kin and an anti-fellowship feeling for those who are not one's own kith and kin. It is a feeling of 'consciousness of kind' which on the one hand binds together those who have it, so strongly that it over-rides all differences arising out of economic conflicts or social gradations and, on the other, severs them from those who are not of their kind. It is a longing not to belong to any other group. This is the essence of what is called a nationality and national feeling.

(1945)

As Ambedkar points out, there are no real bases for this notion of group solidarity between Hindus and Muslims. The way they come to view their worlds (and in turn viewed) is determined by the dynamics of their specific religions, histories and so on.

The common sense that society professes is one that is informed by a combination of historical elements and its inherent prejudices and ideas: every antecedent age informing the way the present think in terms of the popular (Gramsci 1971). Every preceding political formation drawing on a collection of elements to in-turn, manufacture its own set of hierarchy and inherent notions of inclusion and exclusion. In South-East Asia, more specifically India, the common sense that is caste is integrated with elements from our colonial past, as well as from other elements such as beliefs of half-baked feudalism as well as notions of the divine right to rule, a Brahmanical celebration of the happy few right from ancient times. These ideas have largely shaped what Gramsci describes as ‘stratified deposits’ within our very ideas of India, Indianness, caste and difference. Discrimination on grounds of caste in contemporary India remains heavily influenced structurally from the colonial period, when notions of Indianhood were put through legal frameworks and caste as a notion became a structure of the State.

The national narrative gets integrated with the global narrative, in turn creating invisible inequalities. Openly casteist ideas are rarely, if ever, expressed within our post liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation discourses, but caste nevertheless is an ever-present actor within the culture (most notably in articulations like ‘ban on beef’, ‘reservation’ etc). Images circulated by the Press further reinforce ideas of such articulation, those gruesome visuals from Khairlanji, war-torn Chattisgarh or one of the hundreds of atrocities committed against Dalits every single day reproduce the image of Dalit victimhood. These are, if ever, presented overtly as being ‘about caste’, but they become carriers of what can be thought as the common sense idea of the natural order of the world.

Ideas about Indian values and the general inferiority of Dalits are often mobilised in news debates by furthering the notion that our nation is overburdened by the non-meritorious, dependent lot, which poisons our notions of progress. One of the important reasons that this view is articulated is because we have had a long history of populist politicians and an increasingly corporatised media that draw from a treasure trove of Puranic stories of the good old days – the days before the Mughals, of imperial adventure, of springtime, of *soma* and *apsaras*. These also include a healthy supply of horror stories about people who went against the system – of beheadings, of boiling oil, of cannibals and men from unknown lands.

The broad outlines that we can draw within these stories is that ‘they’ are not like ‘us’, they are criminals, they are a threat, they will swamp us, they will take things that rightfully belongs to us and these strategies have been deployed in every attack at migrants (driven by the city’s need for cheap labour) or at subaltern citizens when they are perceived to be voicing their concerns.

These stories take particular configurations at the specific periods, but they go back at least as far as the transitory phase of pre-Turkish feudalism, and start with the concerns of Dalits and Bahujans occupying a space very close to Savarnas (Patil 2006). Migration, in fact, is seen as a compendium of tales of people who are not even considered completely human, or at least those who do not have the same rights as us.

The mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in Gujarat's Una district following the brutal assault on them by caste Hindus for allegedly skinning dead cattle has stirred anxiety among India's liberals. The reason that unites the liberals and the conservatives is the fact that the structure of common sense does not help them to rationalise this act on the part of the Dalits.

Blindness to caste realities and framing the narratives according to one's location results in the rise of phrases like 'Hinduism is respectful to all', seen all too frequently in newspaper op-eds, books, public discussions and everyday conversations. These convictions, steeped in the notion of common sense, go into a tizzy when Dalits choose to opt out of Hinduism, resisting and asserting that it is a system that has systemic inequalities.

Broadly speaking, it can be said that the upper caste status is to be associated with higher status and wealth, while a Dalit or a Bahujan identity is connected with poverty and abjection. In this manner, we can see that caste forms an important part of what might be called an ideological repertoire feeding into common sense that seems to assert a kind of rightness and wrongness that are associated with specific positions of power. Caste is as much about ideas of fit or unfit and Brahmin superiority as are most, often expressed these days in terms of a mainstream national narrative, hidden amongst its tales of superiority.

Neoliberal Meritocracy

A third way in which we see caste playing the role of common sense which helps in sustaining notions of neoliberal hegemony is through the naturalising of privilege. The active encouragement that we are continuously bombarded with is to not notice the kind of privilege one is born into. Caste based thinking is thus a close relative of a key aspect within the pedagogy of neoliberalism - meritocracy. The basic idea is this - those at the top are there because of merit which would logically imply that those at the bottom, those that are underrepresented in merit, lack it in some way. (The necessary corollary being that those who lack success must be

responsible for it, must not have worked hard enough through personal flaws like laziness, criminality or parasitism.)

This failure to understand the structures of advantage, privilege, patronage and power that is actively maintained through this is damaging for those whose lives are structured around inequality be it connected to caste, class or gender or any other form of structural inequality. David Theo Goldberg defines meritocracy as that which refuses to acknowledge the role of racism in everyday structures of society, it masks race through the stringent espousal of the normative need for opportunity for all. I think the same can be extended to our understandings of caste as well (1993).

Within the current political discourse, where we see that exclusion is a dominant form of the language that is spoken (which is also used as a means that is necessary to do away with any or every kind of welfare provision) feeds into this kind of institutionalised and structurally casteist commonsensical framework including the assumptions of who ought to be like us and who are not. It harms leaders who are deemed to be unfit for a particular post. It also includes assumptions of who does and does not belong in the top institutions.

Caste and Sexuality within the Neoliberal Paradigm

Cultural and social theorists like Wendi Brown (2005) have helped us widen our understanding of neoliberalism as a project, not just of an economic paradigm but also one of culture and common sense, in a way that all values becomes deductible to an economic, quantifiable value. We see that caste, within the subcontinent, functions as an important form of capital that is seen to emerge post the worldwide liberation movements of the mid-twentieth century.

Neoliberalism's relationship to sexuality is one that is characterised by accumulation of various caste projects, creating political and economic conditions for inciting and controlling caste-based gender and sexual formations of consciousness. In other words, neoliberalism becomes an extension of the recognition, validation and legitimacy in certain processes that include parallel increases in death and devaluation. Yet, rather than generalising neoliberalism as a totalising project, we view it as a contradiction that produces conditions that elaborate and negate contemporary processes of disenfranchisement and alienation. In the resultant process, neoliberalism becomes a process that is surrounded by anxiety and insecurity that is especially active in fields of culture, common sense and among the project of casteist hegemony.

To start off, Duggan (2003) calls neoliberalism a project that shows the distortions built within the social movements of the 1960s, exploiting the grammar of the language of social justice found within these movements calling for upward rather than downward redistribution of resources. On a very similar note, Hong (2011) argues that “In the contemporary [neoliberal] moment, certain aspects of 1960s and 1970s social movements have been mobilised for the aims of power and rendered legitimate, albeit in contingent and constantly vulnerable ways”. As Hong tries to look at the process, he sees legitimacy and creation of structures of common sense as one of the main strategies of neoliberal mobilisation. Ferguson, in his book *The Re-Order of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Difference*, affirms that distorted forms of subjectivity become the mainstay of this apparatus of power. He puts into view the emergence a new kind of power structure that he describes as a “political entity and object of love, a new article called minority culture” (2012:111). Yet, this not a sign of power receding but its transition into a very different form: “the arrival of this new object did not usher in a season of unbridled liberation but provided the building blocks for a new way to regulate” (ibid). The anti-caste rhetoric of post-liberalisation India rationalised the process of privatisation and consequent dismantling of the welfare State through the notions of individual achievement, merit, responsibility and the higher order notions of free trade and free markets. In other words, the Brahmanical state sponsored casteism is actually erased from popular memory. Its exacerbation of caste based atrocities, alienation, dispossession, exploitation and impoverishment, helped facilitate the caste capital as much, in a much more efficient and brutal manner. In a similar vein, neoliberalism’s project of upward redistribution and legitimacy have been undercut by the processes of violence and social death, processes that inequitably affect marginalised communities based on caste, class, gender and sexuality.

Within the very specific context of Dalits, Bahujans and Adivasis’ exclusion from the material privileges of citizenship, hegemony is seen to be working within the realm of sexuality. Sexuality becomes an important indicator of the Indian State’s benevolence and its legitimization of casteist practices. Conjured up as a sign of the modernising times, sexuality becomes the rubric through which the Indian identity and history become symbols for liberal progress and tolerance. A hegemonic deployment of sexuality within the State facilitates the persecution of Dalits, Bahujans and minority groups is seen.

Caste in times of Consumerism and Anti-Insurgency

India currently occupies a time in history when the amalgamation of private interests, neocolonialism and resurgence of Hindutva forces that bring into question the structure, if not the very process of a democracy, and consequently, paradigms of consciousness and common sense. Political culture organises around the modalities of privatisation and commercialisation (Brown 2005). The body thus becomes one that is seemingly devoid of caste. When the champions of the new neoliberal regime invoke their politics, they replace 'ideological certainty for reasonable doubt', and drain the nation of its political intelligence. Under attack is the social contract which has been slowly whisked away; services such as access to adequate health care, housing, employment, public transportation, and education- which were both a safety net and precondition extremely important for the functioning of democracy and critical citizenship. Liberal politics is further characterised by an active movement of anti-insurgency and cultural conservatism that has been practiced by both the Congress and the subsequent BJP regimes. These acts of an all-consuming anti insurgency totalises the politics of the citizens to moral absolutes, thereby robbing them of their politics and a consciousness of resistance is removed from the realm of State power, it also excludes certain groups or communities based on what it considers to be corrupt habits of those immoral actors. The appeal to such moral absolutes of consciousness have an effect where the culture of fear is created which reconfigures politics on very similar Brahmanical lines, but this time hiding its various alliances with particular ideologies and diverse relations of power. Politics becomes an empty shell, shaming the marginalised voices who make power to be accountable, eventually choking the voices of dissent (Giroux 2004).

The militarising of public space at home, leads to a narrowing of Dalit voices, to shrinkage of community space, increasing suppression of Dalit protest at very local and national levels, a growing escalation of concentrated, unaccountable political power which threatens to move the very foundations of the democracy. Authoritarianism moves forward with the political consciousness becoming one of fear based on national security, surveillance and control rather than critical questioning. Militarisation is increasingly not one that is directed outwards but something that is becoming the driving force for social change at home. Catherine Lutz articulates that the multiple registers and complex processes of militarisation have consequently shaped social life and common sense during the twentieth century. She states:

By militarisation, I mean ... an intensification of the labour and resources allocated to military purposes, including the shaping of other institutions in synchrony with military goals. Militarisation is simultaneously a discursive process, involving a shift in general societal beliefs

and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organisation of large standing armies and their leaders, and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay for them. Militarisation is intimately connected not only to the obvious increase in the size of armies and resurgence of militant nationalisms and militant fundamentalisms but also to the less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to the shaping of national histories in ways that glorify and legitimate military action.

(2002:723)

When Lutz looks at militarisation, it is an all-inclusive look at the discursive, ideological and material relations that power has in the service of hegemony and a consent building war. But militarisation also plays the role of a powerful apparatus of cultural control that works its way through everyday life spawning particular notions of purity, masculinity, creating a spectacle which helps in mobilising an affective investment in militarisation. In other words, we see ourselves being part of politics of militarisation, through a naturalising of the order by means of common sense that emphasises “social processes in which society organises itself for the production of violence or the threat thereof” (Kraska 1999: 208) and which in turn creates certain notions of militarisation that “inject[s] a constant military presence in our lives” (Duggan 2003: 40). This culture of profit and militarisation seeks to eliminate democratic spaces from the public sphere where self-reflection and self-interest become legitimised by a new and ruthless social Darwinism that is played out every night on the night time news as a metaphor for genocide, the celebration of structures of oppression and the promotion of war against the marginalised and their collective notions of solidarity and struggle (Bourdieu 1998).

Conclusion

The question that I posed at the start of this essay, about the seeming anomaly between the progression of neoliberalism and the deepening of the caste hierarchies, undoubtedly points towards the necessity of reading caste within different registers to help in accommodating the processes of neoliberalism and caste simultaneously. Members of marginalised communities have not had it easy with the incessant race for transnationalisation.

Thus, we see that caste becomes an important rubric through which we need to analyse globalisation and privatisation. We might add here that Brahminism could be thought of, not just as a creation of Manu, but a legacy of colonialism as well. If we see the power relationship

between the coloniser and colonised being clearly demarcated, the distinctions are to be seen just as clearly within the broad paradigm of globalisation, and an inertia within the continuation of colonial spaces in human motions.

Neoliberalism is to be seen with all its fascinations since the 1980s, as a project of transformation in the structuring of capitalism and emergence of new centers of both power and capital have made new in-roads within the notions of cultural practices in the subcontinent. Neoliberalism is then to be thought of as a historical product.

Further to this, the issues that are created at these crossroads through the contradictions which define modernity as it is globalised makes things more nuanced and make the geography of the phenomena increasingly complex. Caste becomes an issue, not of India, or South East Asia or even Asia, but a globality as notions of social and material become more blurred with a reification of the categories of nation, ethnicity, civilisation and culture. It also becomes clear to us that while casteism is globalised, its material conditionalities draw from very similar sources of both power and knowledge.

It is important in the struggle against casteism, to be reminded that the conceptualisation of caste should not be overdetermined by concepts of class, as we see caste to be seeping into the concept of class. The struggle against Brahminism is not just an intellectual struggle but a material project steeped in consciousness. Our discourses are of consequences where ideological and social formations are concerned and putting neoliberalism in its place is an important step towards this end.

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The Craft of Walnut Wood Carving: Production, Circulation and Vicissitudes

Nikita Kaul

Abstract:

This paper is drawn from my ethnography of the walnut wood carving industry that I conducted in the year 2014. It discusses an important shift in the learning, production and circulation of walnut wood carving work as a result of changes in the buyers' profile and consumption tastes that the artisans and traders of walnut wood carving craft encountered in early 1990s. I examine the shifts by describing the dichotomy between *asal* work and *fiṣṣool* work. Besides explaining how the work of walnut wood carving is reorganised, I discuss the attempts at preserving the traditional objects of craft.

Keywords: wood carving, craft, consumption, art, trade, preservation

Introduction

Downtown Srinagar, in the capital city of Jammu and Kashmir, is known for its crafts. Across the areas of Safa Kadal, Noor Bagh and Fateh Kadal are *karkhanas* (workshop) devoted to crafts such as *pashmina*, copper carving, embroidery and walnut wood carving. Mostly situated in the by-lanes of downtown Srinagar, it is easy to identify a wood carving karkhana from a distance. The periodic hammering of timber and the strong smell of shaven wood makes it distinct. A wood carving karkhana has four to eight people working at any given time. Each one of them holds a distinct skill set: carving, carpentry and polishing. The one who owns the karkhana is known as the *ustad* (master); he could either be a carver or a carpenter by expertise. An *ustad* is one with several years of continuous practice and a robust network of customers along with the capital required to setup a karkhana; factors that are crucial in transiting a *karigar* (artisan) into an *ustad*. A karkhana is either within the premise of an *ustad*'s home or adjacent to it, a property that is either of his own or rented from a relative or neighbour. The seating arrangement inside a karkhana is in a triangular fashion so that the *ustad* is able to closely monitor the progress made by the *karigars*. Its walls are adorned by Qur'anic verses; something that the *karigars* believe

would bring *barqat* (success) to their karkhana. On the corners lie several sandpaper rolls, adhesives and stencils. A karkhana is a site of production where orders for making a walnut wood carved item is worked upon and completed. It is also an institution of knowledge where novices work towards acquiring knowledge of carving through apprenticeship. Learning of the craft and its production are inter-linked. While novices learn to carve, they are also contributing towards the completion of orders. Since production and learning go on simultaneously, a way of understanding what is learnt is by looking at what is being produced in a karkhana.

My research interest in walnut wood craft took me to the karkhana belonging to Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, an ustad of the craft in Safa Kadal. I stayed with his family for a period of eight months, and spent most of my time in his karkhana, observing him and other artisans in the karkhana as they practised their craft, negotiated with their customers and discussed their orders. I also visited other karkhanas to interview other karigars, who worked with walnut wood, in order to understand the nuances of their practice, its production and circulation, as a part of my ethnographic study. Drawing from the study, this paper seeks to present the changes that have occurred in the walnut wood craft industry brought in by changes in nature of buyers and consumption practices (Liebl and Roy, 2004) since the 1990s as a result of neo-liberalism and militarisation. These changes have given rise to issues pertaining to craft authenticity and are analysed in terms of the dichotomy in walnut wood carving between *asal* (traditional crafts) and *fizool* (mass produced/ market-driven) that has reorganised the practice of walnut wood carving.

Locating Asal and Fizool in the vicissitudes of crafts

My initial inquiries about wood carving karkhanas in Srinagar evoked unexpected and mixed responses. Some said, “There are no karkhanas anymore,” and some counter-questioned me, asking, “Karkhanas? Are there any left?” These responses starkly contradicted the trade of wood carved objects and shops dedicated to their sale that I witnessed in market spaces. In the first karkhana that I visited through other sources, I shared my field insights with the ustad. He did not completely disagree with me, and said, “*ab asal kaam bobot kum hota hai, fizool kaam zyada hota hai*”- now there is very little real work that is undertaken; frivolous work takes place more rampantly. Asal and fizool are both Urdu language words. Asal translates into something which is considered to be authentic, beautiful and a practice that has become rare. According to this division, defined by the artisanal community, asal signifies an object that is produced following traditional processes of production, based on knowledge acquired through traditional mode. The

outcome of this is an intricate and refined craft. Fizool, on the contrary, suggests an inferior quality of work which is mass-produced. It caters to the modern preference of mechanised production that leads to an object of low cost and compromised quality. Such dichotomy in craft practice is by no means unique to wood carving in Kashmir. Weber (1999) in her ethnography of *Chikankaari* embroiderers in Lucknow, notes the prevalence of a dichotomy between *asli kaam* or *saaf kaam* and commercial *kaam*. *Asli kaam* in her study signifies the use of traditionally approved raw material, quality of embroidery done with minuteness, clarity and number of stitches. In addition, *saaf* (clean) is a characteristic of embroiderers control over her hands and quality of her work. Mohsini (2016), in her work on *zardozi* (metal thread embroidery) embroiderers in Seelampur area of Delhi, describes segmentation of work as *asli* (real)*kaam* done by artisans and *chalu* (cheap) *kaam* by labour employed in the *zardozi* industry. Mohsini differentiates them on the basis of training and practice. *Asli kaam* in her study is an outcome of long training period that has made them accomplished in their knowledge and practice, as a result of which they produce high quality work. Labour, on the other hand, is characterised by someone who after apprenticing for six months produces basic hand-embroidered work for the mass produced market. Bundgaard (1999) in her study explains that two categories of work, ritual art and tourist art, exist in *Orissan pattachitra* paintings, and the same *chitrakaars* (artists) in order to expand their livelihood possibilities mass produce paintings during the tourist season, and as tourists shrink they coalesce into producing ritual art.

Asli-commercial, *asli-chalu*, tourist-ritual are all synonyms of *asal-fizool* in the practice of wood carving in Kashmir. Taking this conversation forward, I argue that the difference between *asal* and *fizool* reflect changes in the profile of buyers and consumption practices (Liebl & Roy, 2004) brought in by neo-liberalism and militarisation in early 1990s. My research findings reveal that during this period, with the beginning of insurgency in Kashmir and army deployment to tackle it (Rai, 2018), the walnut wood carving industry encountered new buyers, the army officers who got posted in Kashmir region. They immediately took a liking for the craft objects made in walnut wood and also contributed to its material culture by demanding new kinds of products¹. As a response to insurgency, the local artisans and traders expanded their circulation network by focusing on bigger cities for sale. Later, with the internet boom, traders and artisans began to virtually connect with their buyers. These factors not just expanded the profile of buyers, but also horizons of their work. I discuss, in this paper, how these two factors have reorganised the work of walnut wood carving by embarking on new pedagogies of learning and modes of

¹ This included figures of soldiers in uniform with their weapons or soldiers in battle-field.

production and circulation. To do so, I discuss the trajectories of Ustad Ghulam Qadir Sheikh and Abdul Ahad, their karkhanas, apprenticeship, and networks of production and circulation.

In the subsequent sections, I discuss the work of two karigars, and through them, take the argument forward by explaining the modalities of circulation.

The two cases: values of work vis-à-vis values of market

In this section, I discuss the two cases of Ghulam Qadir Sheikh and Abdul Ahad to emphasise on the nature of their work space of a wood carving karkhana, and how it interacts with production. Through these cases, I intend to highlight the discursiveness in the work of wood carving and mark the aspects that segment the two kinds of work – asal and fizool. I explain how a karkhana is a microcosm of various relationships bound by production and exchange, and discuss how it is the ground for underlying tensions that prevail between the two groups that make asal work and fizool work. This section also works as a hinge; providing a context of space, structure, relations and processes that connect the arguments I raise in this paper.

Ghulam Qadir Sheikh: of a glorious past and true work

Outside his karkhana hangs a board that reads, ‘Sheikh Enterprise, deals in walnut carving’ with their complete address – a rare sight for a karkhana – as most operate anonymously. Ghulam Qadir sits in the centre, his eyes and hands in symphony making a *Chinar* leaf motif. His karigars sit around him. The karkhana looks bigger than most others I had seen. The room where work is being undertaken could accommodate many more people than it currently does; there is an adjoining showroom, which has all the finished products. A stairway leading to the terrace has several planks of walnut wood stacked for seasoning. The karkhana is owned by two brothers, Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, whose expertise lies in carving, and Mohammed Siddiq, who works as a carpenter. There are three other karigars in the karkhana. Rahim is a carver, Ahmed is a carpenter and Sabha polishes the finished product. The two brothers established this karkhana in 1975 as the first generation of karigars in their family; their father was a wholesale vegetable dealer. It was Ghulam Qadir who first got interested in wood carving work. When he told his father about his interest, he was initially hesitant, but eventually agreed. After a couple of years, his elder brother, Md. Siddiq, also joined a karkhana to learn the work of a carpenter. “You see, my father had great foresight. He knew that a karkhana would be incomplete without a

carpenter, so he motivated Md. Siddiq towards this work,” he said. To learn to become a carpenter one need not invest as many years as required to become a karigar. Two years of focused learning can make one an accomplished carpenter. A carpenter’s apprenticeship includes learning the nuances of work on wood, like cutting, shaping and smoothening, mostly undertaken mechanically. A carver’s learning is much more tedious because of the expanse of knowledge that one must acquire to become an accomplished carver. The knowledge of carving was methodically transferred following a composite body of knowledge that was, as per an ustad’s discretion, transferred step by step. Ghulam Qadir and other ustads of similar stature and past shared what this body of knowledge comprised of that I collate here into a more comprehensive form.

The knowledge of carving traditionally begins with the tools. This is after spending approximately one year on doing menial work in the karkhana. Thorough understanding of all the tools that include their role in carving, how to hold them, when to use them, pressure of hands it requires to give an aesthetic outcome, and most importantly, remembering their names are all a part of this initiation. So, if the karigar has to lower the base through the process called *zameen nikalna*, there are many tools that he would require to complete this process. A karigar must know each by name and must understand the role of each tool in completing the process of *zameen nikalna*. Secondly, the quality of raw material plays a critical role in the quality of the finished product. A karigar must have a good judgment of the raw material (walnut). By looking at the walnut log from the outside, he must be able to judge its quality from the inside². Once the log gets cut, it must be seasoned for at least two years before it is ready to use. A karigar must know exactly for how long the wood would require seasoning³. While working on the wood, he must be able to know if the wood needs more seasoning. If that is the case, he must exactly know when to stop working on it. His touch should tell him everything about the quality of wood. The fibre on the walnut makes it aesthetically appealing. The direction of fibres on the walnut must inform the karigar about the direction in which it should be cut and which portion of wood must be used for a specific portion of a product, so that the fibres are effectively visible. Lastly, the primary role of a karigar is to translate an abstract idea into a tangible item. He must have that imagination. The order that a karigar receives from a customer is a limited description of what the customer actually desires. With the limited information and the raw material that he

² There is no scientific way of knowing it. Some karigars depend on their intuition and others have some mechanisms like putting a stick inside to see if the stick goes in straight or breaks.

³ Seasoning is the process of keeping the log under sun for its moisture content to reduce. As the moisture reduces, the quality of wood strengthens. A non-seasoned walnut old or a log inadequately seasoned due to excess water content can be attacked by bugs, easily breakable and hence has a limited shelf life.

has, a karigar must be able to make an entire product. Also, before he begins to carve, he must draw the design on wood. This guides him to carve, so he must know how to draw. His efficiency at drawing manifests in carving; and drawing also helps a karigar in avoiding any irreversible damage to the wood. All these aspects of knowing the craft must be tacitly⁴ explained to and understood by the karigars (Senette, 2006).

A karigar who follows this system of knowledge thoroughly learns to perform each of these above-mentioned components of the body of knowledge. Mostly done through emulation and replication, it takes approximately eight to ten years of apprenticeship to acquire the knowledge. Apart from these pointed skills that a novice learns to perform, there are those skills that are invisible, as they do not leave a conscious sense of sedimentation. An example of this would be intuition, which plays a crucial role during the purchase of raw material. A strong sense of touch to judge how well the timber is seasoned is another invisible skill. Entwined with the four aspects are also his design skills. The motif that a novice learns to make depends entirely on the expertise of his ustad. Following this, Ghulam Qadir learned this craft from three different ustads. Like craft apprenticeship in other parts of the world, in walnut wood carving too, apprenticeship begins with apprentices doing menial work.

At the age of eight, my father requested our neighbour, Abdul Abad Malik to take me as his apprentice. He became my first ustad. Since I was a new apprentice, no remuneration was paid to me. I had to reach the karkhana early, before others came and clean it, it was also my responsibility to get tea and bread for everyone in the karkhana.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

This was done to acquaint an apprentice to the environs of a karkhana and familiarise him to the other aspects of this work. This kind of work was done for almost six months after which the skill transmission would begin, and the apprentice shifted from an observer to an emulator.

The ustad showed me to do Sumba⁵. He asked me to carefully observe and do as he did. Holding the tool, the posture of body and the position of the timber was all learned by watching him. But after I completed six months in the karkhana, I decided to leave this karkhana and join Ustad Abdul Salam Rishi's karkhana. In the second karkhana, I worked for four years and learned most of what I know in this karkhana while watching and following the ustad. This ustad was very particular about the pace at which his karigars work, yet not compromising

⁴ Sennett (2008) explains tacit knowledge as bedding in of a practice. With the bedding in of practice the action of hands become natural and smooth.

with the quality of work. After two years of working with him, he started paying me one rupee. We started work at seven in the morning and worked till eight-thirty in the night with only half an hour for lunch. It was a lot of hard work. After four years, I again decided to leave this karkhana, and joined Ghulam Rishi's karkhana. This karkhana added finesse to my work because the Ustad stressed on the aesthetic qualities of a product. Watching him do work, I realised what aesthetics is, and how beautiful things could bring money. I practiced and improved my drawing skills here. But he also scolded me a lot for petty mistakes. These bashings were like food, they made us strong karigars.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

The nature of apprenticeship in walnut wood carving in Kashmir is different from what has been described by other anthropologists such as Singleton (1989), Lancy (2012) and Terrio (2000), where the apprentice remains with the same master until he completes his apprenticeship. However, in the case of walnut wood carving, apprentices keep changing their ustads for reasons that could include lack of remuneration, quest to learn more or an argument with the master. They adhere to a verbal bond for a year after which they are free to change their ustad.

In 1975, Md. Siddiq and I decided to start this karkhana after consulting our family. We needed capital that was arranged by both of us, our father, and a brother also willingly contributed. The karkhana space was earlier our outhouse, but soon after, we extended it upwards to make space for storing and seasoning raw material. We received the first few orders through Ustad Ghulam Rishi, who did not have enough resources of his own to complete it. And subsequently, orders kept coming in from a trader in Polo View market, who liked my work. He also recommended me to other traders. Simultaneously, the neighbours also came to order furniture for their daughter's trousseau. In between, I also attempted to make some intricate pieces for the government emporium, but later discontinued because of their sheer negligence towards our needs, delayed payments and lack of respect. I have since then limited myself only to good traders who value this work, who understand the hardship of a karigar and respect them. Also, some families always come to me with their orders.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

An attempt to discuss about the 'other' form of wood carving work with Ghulam Qadir provoked a retort from him. He misunderstood my research interest to be lying there and sternly said, "If that is what you want to learn, then, go find some other karkhana. We don't do that kind of low work... other people do it in other parts (geographically), not us." Ghulam Qadir's

opinion about fizool work and its karigars was as stern as his response. He hesitated from calling them karigars and insisted that they be called labour, who undertook low quality work.

They have spoiled the pride of this work by working on their half-acquired knowledge and producing cheap things out of bad quality raw material. It is not just our pride, but it is through crafts that Kashmir is known to the world. Crafts carry the name of Kashmir throughout the world when tourists buy them. With so much affection for this place, they choose an object that they wish to carry back, something that shall keep reminding them about the beauty and glory of this place. And what do they get? When they are sold such low-quality object then they look at this work and us badly. They have made this work impure and corrupt. As it is Kashmir is so unpopular, they are making it even more unpopular.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

Ghulam Qadir's views can be easily seen as the collective opinion of karigars on this side of the continuum, similar to the responses of others. It highlights layers of discontent that karigars collectively feel about fizool work and those who produce them. But these views do not necessarily translate into a sharp binary between asal and fizool. During an informal conversation, he shared with me some of his concerns about not getting enough orders apart from trousseau orders and some from exporters which had also suffered a sharp fall. A sharp rise in the cost of raw material had also made the finished product expensive.

Some people come with an order but vehemently disagree on the cost estimate that we give them. They desire cheap objects, things that are not very expensive. Hand-made or machine-made does not make any difference to them. So, during such bargaining, we also sometimes agree to make low-quality products simply because of the dearth of orders coming in. How else can I sustain this karkhana and continue to do what I take so much pride in? Such orders are made using cheap, low quality raw material bought from a mandi (market) and are more mechanised than others.

(Interview with Ghulam Qadir Sheikh, 2014)

Underlying Ghulam Qadir's narratives is the notion that the customers' naivety does not allow them to differentiate between the traditional work and mass-produced work, hand-made and machine-made. The percolation of fizool and its availability and accessibility to them has rendered asal redundant and fizool more dominant.

Abdul Ahad: of displaced aspirations and alternate skills

I met Abdul through a trader in whose store I had seen animal figurines made by him. The trader had referred to Abdul as someone who was an expert in undertaking this type of rough work. “There is a huge demand for such kind of work in the Middle East and Abdul is one of the best that we have,” he said. Abdul Ahad is 35 years old, and lives in the Lal Bazar area in Srinagar with his parents, wife and two children. His father worked in a wood carving karkhana as a carpenter, but was now unable to work due to age-related illnesses. When I reached Abdul’s house, it was his father who received me at their karkhana, a small room at the entrance of the house. He spoke to me about his experience as a carpenter in a karkhana and how different and difficult the nature of work was when he worked in the industry. “It was tedious and took a lot of time, there was no provision for machines like today, and we did everything using the strength of our arms. But now, they are so quick. The amount of orders has also tremendously increased.”

The karkhana was a cramped space with all the corners filled with sacks full of figurines ready to be sent out to traders. The only space that appeared empty was his seat. The floor was spread with tools, sandpaper, polish, stencils and residues. ‘Allah’ was inscribed on the wall a few metres above his seat. Outside this room, was a patio where he keeps all the machines; he spends at least three to four hours working on them every day. There is a machine to shape the blocks of wood that would be shaped into animals, and a machine for smoothening the surface of the wood.

Abdul completed his schooling and aspired to complete his graduation. He could not secure admission in any college, so he enrolled in a computer course in the hope that the knowledge of computers would make him eligible for a job. He kept looking for appropriate opportunities at government offices and in shops, but to no avail. Finally, he resorted to learning basics of wood carving. His father’s experience as a carpenter affected his choice of work. Abdul started working at the karkhana of Abdul Rashid, who lived in his *mohalla* (neighbourhood). Rashid became his Ustad.

My father always believed that craftwork cannot improve the conditions of our family, and that is why he always encouraged me to stay away from it and focus on education. But on failing to find a job even after finishing the computer course, I decided to learn the craft. I had seen my friends doing it. They learned the work quickly and started making it. I started working in Rashid’s karkhana in the same neighborhood. It’s not like I knew nothing about this work, I

had always seen my father do it so the skill was there within me. Rashid helped me to bring it out. When I started working there, in the first four months I focused only on using the machine that cuts and shapes the wood. Next, I worked on smoothening the surface for about two months. Rashid then showed me how to carve. He made animals out of wood, so we carved some strokes on elephants and camels for decorative purposes. Lastly, he taught me to polish. In one year, I had learned everything that this work would require. In the year 2000, I started my own work but remained associated with Rashid for orders. Since I did not buy machines immediately, I used to get shaped wood pieces from him, carve on them, polish and return them to Rashid. Eventually, I bought these machines from a karigar who had decided to shut down his karkhana due to lack of orders. Therefore, it has only been seven years since I began to complete an entire order here in my karkhana.

(Interview with Abdul Ahad, 2014)

Abdul goes to Safa Kadal mandi to buy raw material. It need not be of high quality because of the low price that he must maintain for the finished figurine. “I sell them to traders who are interested in this kind of work. The small shops in Lal Chowk market, the roadside hawkers on Boulevard Road and Shikara hawkers⁵ mostly buy it for the tourists interested in Kashmiri souvenirs. Army officers also buy them regularly in bulk for gifting purposes,” said Ahad.

There are many karigars like Abdul with different areas of specialisation such as creating fruit trays, *shikaras*, houseboats, Chinar leaf curios, key chains, etc. They primarily cater to the large souvenir stores in the local and global markets. These souvenirs also make a transnational and transcultural leap to become a souvenir for other countries in the Middle East, from where a large share of orders come from. During our conversation, Abdul pulled out a few such pieces from one of the sacks lying in the corner. It had camel figurines with “I love Dubai” carved on the base. The transnational trade between Dubai and Kashmir is orchestrated by traders (mostly Kashmiris who have migrated), whom Steiner (1994) in his study on transnational trade of African arts, calls ‘cultural brokers’ and ‘mediators of knowledge’. The traders (of other countries) collaborate with the local traders in Kashmir in order to establish a market for Kashmiri crafts. Hence, traders play an important role in communicating to the clientele a particular image of crafts and culture (Steiner, 1994) that largely sets the terms of work, value of work and nature of production in transcultural trade. The skilled labour of Kashmir is an

⁵ Shikara is the traditional name for boats in Kashmir used to ferry local travelers from one part of the lake to another. They also ferry tourists from one island to another. Some shikaras are converted into sailing shops that keep varieties of crafts; small wooden objects are one of them.

important factor in the making of such networks. Under the terms of work, Abdul delivers approximately 6,000 pieces of homogeneous figurines in a year. The consignment that goes every month constitutes 500 pieces. Since a target of 500 is very difficult to achieve, Abdul relies on other karigars in his network to complete the order. Abdul's work must mandatorily be completed within the stipulated period, for which he must ensure timely completion of work by other karigars in his network. The network that Abdul is a part of has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is in the form of a pre-determined flow of commodities, a robust network and fixed returns. The disadvantage is that Abdul has no control over his work. It is all decided by traders and communicated to him. The karigars work on the set terms. I asked Abdul about prevailing tensions with old karigars who believe that this kind of work is a corrosion of skills and heritage, and represents Kashmir in bad light. Abdul, who is aware of such allegations against him and other karigars like him, said, "Old karigars tell me that I make bad quality items. What is bad quality when there is demand? It is better to do this work than become a sales boy in a showroom. There is demand, so we make. Who buys what they make?"

The two cases that I discuss, of Ghulam Qadir and Abdul Ahad, reveal the underlying tensions between the karigars practicing two kinds of work that arise out of conflicting notions of knowledge and work. Where are these notions embedded? What are the factors that decide the work trajectory that a karigar follows? Does he necessarily produce objects that he learns to produce? In the next section, I address these questions by drawing a connection between artisans and their social milieu.

The social milieu of craft

A karkhana is a structure that produces a karigar within its milieu. It plays a dual role as a site of learning, an institution where the knowledge of carving is passed on from one generation to another and a space of production for walnut carved products. An interplay of these aspects combines to form a unique milieu of walnut carving craft. The milieu of a karkhana determines all the actions that a karigar takes, the way he thinks, how he responds to events and incidents, decisions that he makes, what he learns, how does he learn it, products that he makes, spaces where he sells them and other factors, both explicit and implicit. The social milieu of wood carving guides the transition of a young boy into an accomplished karigar. It is instrumental in shaping the knowledge and skills that he acquires, bodily postures that he takes, routine he follows, the nature of networks and relations that he builds, knowledge of tools and several other

perceptions and actions that come along with it. These dispositions are inculcated schematically in a young boy by one or more experienced masters who have themselves undergone a similar process in different conditions.

Also, a karkhana is an entity that functions within a larger social milieu that affects its work. A social milieu also constitutes events that have the power of altering the social, economic, political and cultural values of a society, thereby influencing the objects in circulation. These factors also cause shifts in value of work and social relationships. That is why, it is more important to trace the shifts in the milieu rather than parochially tracing shifts in objects. This paper does not span the vast historical events that may have shaped the craft (wood carving) as we see them today. But it suggests seeing changes in the buyers' profile and consumption patterns due to militarisation that began in the late eighties as an event that played a crucial role in shaping the crafts.

There is a vast change in the profile of buyers in the domestic market. Liebl and Roy (2004) explain that earlier, the buyers of crafts used to be 'wealthy patrons' (for fine products) or 'ordinary villagers' (for items of daily use). But today, the buyers are from the middle-class with more flexible lifestyle and tastes.

The period of early 1990s brought about drastic and dramatic changes in Kashmir (Rai, 2018). It was a period when military penetration had intensified. A large population of army men started living here and became crucial customers to the karkhanas. During my interaction with artisans, they shared that this period also saw the surge of violence and bloodshed become an everyday mayhem. The conflict between the Indian Army and local militants trampled down every aspect of the routine with frequent announcements of curfew; people got mired in their homes. This conflict and the plunder that came with it majorly affected the movement of people for work and flow of commodities. A major setback was caused to tourists and tourist-based livelihoods, of which crafts production and circulation is a part. Karigars recall that amid curfews and cross-firing, jeeps would stop by their karkhana, confusing neighbours- if there was an arrest happening or sale. Immediately after the men in uniform left, people would drop by to get assurances of their well-being. In a society where military men are abhorred, karigars have tales of friendship and solidarity to share. They attribute the continuance of their work during the lull period to the army men, who refused to pay heed to middlemen and placed their orders directly at the karkhana. They bought furniture, wall panels and curios to adorn their homes and offices. In this process of exchange, they also started a trend of mass -production by ordering souvenirs in bulk.

Another change that occurred during this period was a shift in the notion of market as a restrictive local, to having no boundary. With militarisation at its peak, karkhanas and traders developed mechanisms to expand their outreach to customers. As a result, instead of customers travelling to the karkhanas, traders travelled to them carrying brochures or photographs depicting possibilities of production in their karkhanas. In some cases, they set up exclusive Kashmiri handicraft stores in prime tourist locations in India and abroad. Later, with the internet boom, customers were reached out through virtual platforms, as websites were developed to give a virtual tour of the production process and the collection. Ever since the expansion of the market and interaction of Kashmiri karigars and traders with societies beyond Kashmir, there has occurred a drastic diversification of demand. The new form of demand constituted not only traditionally made walnut wood carved products, but conferred more value on cheap, miniature renditions of traditional products sold as handy souvenirs.

In conceptualising these categories, I do not intend to attribute the emergence of the asal-fizool dichotomy in walnut wood carving only to militarisation or claim them to be a product of neo-liberalism. Making such claims would be undermining the crucial historical shifts that this craft may have undergone owing to various political regimes that ruled Kashmir, and the concomitant cultural shifts that they may have brought (Sufi, 1948). Though I could not come across any written account of their simultaneous existence, from the oral accounts of karigars that I interviewed, it became clear that these categories are much older. It is their meanings that have varied with the change of milieu of production and circulation of this craft. Karigars told me that in the past, the parameters of evaluation were different. Fizool defined the work produced by someone who lacked precision, stability of hands and overall neatness in motif. Lack of skills was an indication of poverty of family due to which the karigar failed to accomplish himself. Due to the flaws, they were less expensive, and catered to families who could not afford the asal. But its significance has now transitioned into something that is desired, altering the meaning and nature of the work. This work is no more a result of familial constraints, but people's deliberate choice to learn fizool over asal. It is easier to learn, and hence, more conspicuous and identifiable.

Circulation: Network, Market and Memorabilia

Objects with certain characteristics are valued more in some realms, and this value may be reversed in other realms. Similarly, asal and fizool in walnut wood carving also have separate realms where they are deemed to be more valuable than the other. This shapes the network they

are a part of for their production and circulation. This section focuses on circulation as a next level to production, also taking into consideration the lapse of time between production and circulation of objects.

When an object is made in a karkhana, based on its specifications (type and quality), it is sold to a trader. The trader⁶ further puts it up on sale to a customer. When a trader receives an order from a customer for making ten jewellery boxes, the trader passes it on to the ustad, whom he believes will do the best work in the given time and cost. The completion of the order then becomes entirely the responsibility of the ustad, who, in order to complete the order, may also loop in another ustad without the knowledge of the trader. Therefore, networks of sales are built on shared knowledge, taste and resources. They are porous entities with new members joining and leaving simultaneously, and built based on necessity of the moment with visible and invisible members in the network.

Igor Kopytoff (1986) explains that things have a 'social life' and commodities follow a 'process of social transformation' involving various phases and changes in status. Kopytoff (1986) argues that any commodity, in its social life, switches between the two phases of 'commoditisation' (stage of exchangeability) and 'singularisation' (prohibition of a thing from being commoditised). Asal and fizool are objects that are produced primarily for the purpose of commoditisation. Production leads to the metamorphosis of a commodity, the timber, into an object that has both, use value and exchange value. Its exchange value is based on certain crucial factors such as time invested on its making, application of knowledge, and to some extent the health implication of its making on the karigar. All these factors together decide the exchange value of a walnut wood carved object. Owing to these factors, the exchange value of asal objects is much higher than fizool. This gap relying on the skill of a karigar measured by investment of a karigar's time in both acquiring knowledge and producing it, claim on high quality of raw material and adherence to traditions, is presented as a rare and valuable commodity in the market. This is also teamed up with its glorification in the description of the one who sells it. In contrast, fizool lacks skill as well as prolonged investment of time and tradition, a manifestly poor quality of raw material. Going back to Kopytoff's description of social life of things, asal and fizool follow largely similar trajectories. However, the temporality of each phase differs. The intent of a karigar is to produce each object for sale in a karkhana. So, the commodity status of an object is inevitable. Once the production is completed in a karkhana, the karigar tries to sell it as soon as possible so as to get

⁶ A private shopkeeper in the market, an exporter or the state (through its various retail stores, including the arts and craft emporiums).

returns. This sale, to either a trader or to a more influential karigar, turns an object into a commodity. The phase of its singularisation or de-commoditisation does not begin until it is sold again. When an asal object is produced in a karkhana, its exchangeability takes longer because of its high exchange value. Hence, it not only takes longer to transit into a commodity but its phase of singularisation is also longer. Fizool, on the other hand, acquires its exchangeability faster. This is because of its quick production and inexpensiveness.

In the case of asal, there are also several instances of deliberate singularisation of a commodity. Kopytoff (1986) explains that it is important for societies to singularise certain commodities by 'pulling them out of their commodity sphere'. Some of the prohibitions are cultural and are upheld collectively, or are the work of the state. These singularised objects are treated as the 'symbolic inventory of the society' like monuments, state art collections, ritual objects, etc. In walnut wood carving, the instances of singularisation are more commonly found to be led by individuals. Some look at it as being informative that new generation can learn from, and others see them as a testimony of past practices, skills and knowledge. Below are some examples of objects being pulled out of their commodity phase:

Ghulam Rassol is a state award-winning artisan. The piece that got him the award was sold few years after he received the award. But he never sold the piece, a wall panel that got his father the national award. When I visited him, I requested him to show me the piece. It was carefully wrapped in a muslin cloth, kept in a paper bag in a suitcase that he pulled out from under a bed. I asked him the price at which he would sell it, but he said that this "piece is priceless". It can never be sold. He told me about several people who contacted his father to sell it to them but he never got the price that he desired. And after his father's death, Ghulam Rasool never desired to sell it. In this case, his desire to preserve the piece his father won the national award for, is an example of singularisation for memorabilia. He insisted that a piece like this would be testimony to the richness of the past to the future generation. A prolonged singularisation also gets operated at the level of an institution or people when they buy a commodity from a karigar with the intent of reselling it, but prohibit them from selling it because of its rarity and beauty that ought to be preserved. For similar reasons, several traders have converted a portion of their shop into a museum with a vast collection of products made in the past that cannot be replicated. Khalil Mohammad's (a renowned walnut wood carving artisan who has won the state and national awards) work was chosen for the art installation at the Mumbai International Airport

under the project ‘Conjoining Lands’⁷. For this project, Khalil made a wall panel that was a cartographic representation of the Hariparbat shrine in Srinagar. This piece carves the contours of structures and route to Hariparbat through the Makhdoom Sahab shrine and the Sikh Gurudwara. It is a depiction of syncretism in Kashmir, and is one of the pieces that adorn the walls of the Mumbai International Airport.

So, as the production of asal becomes rare, it is preferred to be singularised as an act anchored by individuals as well as the state. It is important to highlight here that asal work is not gone. It has become rare because of factors I have gestured towards in this paper. There are connoisseurs, collectors and families that continue to provide patronage to the karigars, who make walnut wood carved objects in its traditional form. However, the circulation of fizool continues to flourish. Karigars predict the evanescence of walnut wood carving as a craft and practice in the next fifteen years. As the new generation takes over the old, this skill will be wiped out from the landscape of valley, they often tell me.

This dichotomy between asal and fizool has inscribed new identity for artisans of walnut wood carving based on parameters of skill and the lack of it. Between the values of local Kashmiri society and global circulation of craft, what the society celebrates is the knowledge, skill and production of craft in its traditional forms, attaching to it pride, notions of heritage and necessity of its continuance. This reality gets reversed in relation to the global circulation of craft objects that supersedes the notions of heritage and skill to emphasise only on making possible the global outreach of these craft objects in large volumes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discuss the two forms of work in walnut wood carving in Kashmir – asal (traditional craft) and fizool (mass produced) – and explore the ways in which asal is being replaced by fizool due to change in the consumption patterns and buyers’ profile. My study reveals that insurgency in the valley of Kashmir led to deployment of the Army, who superseded the middle men to directly reach out to the karigars practicing walnut wood carving. As a response to insurgency, Kashmiri artisans and traders travelled to different cities to sell the products, gathering diverse demands, a large share of which depicted an inclination for less

⁷ Hasan, I & Gupta, G. (2013) “Mumbai airport to adorn Kashmir’s pride”, DNA [New Delhi edition], 31st May. Available at <http://www.dnaindia.com/>. [Accessed: 29 September 2016].

Narayan, S. (2013) “Airport mural to celebrate art of India”, The National [UAE edition], 18th June. Available at <http://www.thenational.ae>. [Accessed: 29 September 2016].

intricate carving and cheap pieces of work. A demand like this brought transformations in aspects of craft learning, production and circulation. I describe the parallel trajectories through two cases of Ghulam Qadir Sheikh and Abdul Ahad. Through their narratives, I discuss how, for craft work infused in capitalistic ways of work, such dichotomies are not as neat as they may appear to be. To sustain his asal work, Ghulam Qadir takes up opportunities to engage with fizool work, so as to ensure the flow of income, particularly during the phases of low demand for his work. On the one hand, we see this difference blurring between asal and fizool; on the other hand, we see how the state and the individual intervene to reinstate and reify this difference by singularising asal as a rare commodity and an example of past glory.

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