Urban Physiognomies

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Whether it was matter of fact, observation or cynicism that prompted V.S. Naipaul, that sour scribe of Indian modernity, to define Bombay tersely as "a crowd", it was undoubtedly an illuminating insight into the modern urban experience.[1] Certainly crowds, whether cast as the teeming millions of a growing population, as the citizens of the largest democracy, as the violent mobs stoked to communal hatred, or even as a source of annoying fascination for the tourist, occupy center stage in any account of India. They inevitably govern any discussion of its cities, often painting a picture of urban decay due to overpopulation, overcrowded housing, and crises of public health and sanitation; and equally, crowds gesture at the problems of diversity and difference in urban India.

However, by equating the city with the crowd, Naipaul casts the crowd as more than a metonym of the city; he makes it the very texture of its experience. In so doing, he follows the hunches of earlier writers of other modernities such as Walter Benjamin in his unfinished opus on the Paris Arcades, writing on the urban experience through an examination of the lyric poetry of Baudelaire.[2] Not only was the nineteenth-century crowd of which Benjamin writes poised to become a reading public and a consuming mass, it was also to leave an indelible imprint on the very sense of self of individuals in the modern city. For the city dweller who succumbed to "the temptation to lose himself in a stream of people", the crowd was not an external phenomenon to be observed but part of the perceptual apparatus of experience.

This experience was marked by shock and to parry these shocks, the human sensorium had to master a new series of strategies. No longer was it possible to approach the world through attention and studied contemplation; in fact, the rapid rush of images and sensations in the metropolis demanded a mode of apprehension that was much more indirect and deflecting. As the unblinking stare of concentration gave way to a distracted apperception that was incidental, unthinking and fleeting, the relationship of the masses to the everyday became tactile and ultimately absorbed as a matter of habit.

This point about tactility and modern urban perception cannot be understated. With it, Benjamin puts his finger on the unique configuration of technology, consumer culture and amorphous crowds that galvanised and transformed modern cities. New modes of representation arose to meet new perceptions. It was into this landscape that the mass mediated technology of film entered, and with its shock effects – the edits, juxtapositions, and changes of place and focus that hitherto could not have been conceived – it responded to

as it moulded a state of distracted reception. A relationship to the world established through abstracted, habitual and kinaesthetic patterns inspired a type of physiognomic reading of the city and its spaces that was close, enlarged and shifting, not distanced, stable and contemplative. The senses were being retooled by new structures of experience and knowledge.

Surely this insight of Benjamin's into the relationship of film to the distracted collectivity of the city is particularly pertinent to Bombay whose crowds and crowded spaces are assailed by the myriad magnifications of Bombay cinema. Its sensory onslaught is as much on the streets as in cinema halls. Towering billboards with the gigantic reddened faces of film stars are accompanied by car horns competing with blaring film songs from transistor radios and cassette players at every *paan* and tea stall, while in darkened theatres wisecracks punctuate the crackling of peanut shells underfoot. The jumps and rhythms of cinematic representation register the jostle and press of the Bombay crowds just as the images and sounds of Bombay film that saturate the city are its allegories. If it is cinematic representation that frames perception in the city, then certainly the experiential basis for this perception are its crowds.

My entry into the crowd, and this was provided by the force of the events themselves, came with the violent incidents of 1992-93, in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, that have come to be known as the Bombay Riots. The perceptions that arise at the crossroads of habitual interactions and everyday understandings were made most visible for me as I returned to Bombay some years after the riots to listen to people talk about their experiences of the city. To many, that violence of December and January appeared as a betrayal, mainly of Bombay's crass, commercial optimism and cosmopolitan character. A Muslim writer, with whom I spoke in November 1995 of what he had lost in the riots during which his house had been burnt down and his family forced to flee up north, told me that he grieved most for the demise of his trust in the city. With it, he felt he had lost his right to the place. No longer, so it seemed, could one ask a question of the city in the same way. Its history, its people, its streets, all became signposts in a sequence leading up to this moment and leading away from it. *Bombay has changed*, I was repeatedly told, *it is no longer the Bombay we have known. Nor the Bombay you knew*. And this, as any know who have lived and imagined belonging somewhere, strikes at the supports of memory and, in fact, of identity. It was clear that identity was at the core of any understanding of these events.

Reading the city through the signifiers of sectarian identity was a powerfully remembered experience of the period. In a city whose crowded trains and streets prevent little escape from the other, swiftly determining the affiliations of people around one is an important prediction of risk or an assurance of safety at times of tension. Such practices of 'telling', through a complex constellation of clothing, language, facial features and demeanour, political or religious insignia and residential locations, says Allen Feldman in his revealing analysis of the body in the political violence of Northern Ireland, are a significant component of everyday life in zones of violence.[3] The city that emerged in the narratives of reading and telling fluctuated between familiarity and unease. People who had lived alongside each other for years began to mark the religious affiliations of their neighbours. Railway commuters pressed against each other on the packed locals began to notice clothing, caste marks, jewellery, facial hair, station stops, and other such markers not as idle signs of daily life but as signals of belonging, affiliation or uncertainty. The everyday encounter with crowds of anonymous strangers that was part of the routine uncertainty of urban life was now brought into new focus. The 'types' and 'characters' that were the customary and habitual features of such interactions had to be continually evaluated for it was through such evaluation that either safe passage was ensured or an alarm raised.

In the press of these crowds, the interpreter was also being interpreted. It was impossible to escape the snare of surveillance and marking. This meant that people distinguished themselves with badges of identity while simultaneously attempting to erase these contours and disappear into the anonymity of the crowd. They mobilised the visual and auditory signifiers of identification in contradictory and unpredictable ways. At the university, a professor began to notice that her Muslim women students started to wear *burqa*s to the classroom. They saw it as identification with community. When she questioned them about their heightened visibility, they countered that this identification granted them a sense of protection.

Such overt affiliation was read by others as a sign of vulnerability. Watching the responses of fellow train travellers to traditional women in *burqa*s, a Muslim woman noticed they cringed, moved away, and often nudged and whispered and gestured surreptitiously towards the women. Little did these travellers know that they had a Muslim sitting right next to them because in her *salwar kameez*, she said, she "looked like everyone". A Muslim man in Bendi Bazaar who had avoided the stares of other commuters by substituting his daily Urdu papers with a Marathi or Hindi language newspaper realised that there were other masquerading Muslims on the train with him when he noticed a bearded Muslim get into the compartment. Suddenly, a small cluster formed around him of people who had previously not drawn any attention to themselves. His hyper-visibility was read as an assurance of community and of protection. Despite the mask of his newspaper, the man said, he too would sometimes stand with one of these *daadi wala*s because it felt safer.

As these accounts point to the complexities of affiliation, distinction and safety, they also expose another significant practice, that of dissimulation. People faded into the crowd because they took special care to blend in. Language, clothes, and appearance were wielded as props so one could "look like everyone". The elements of this 'everyperson' were

shifting composites that varied depending on the routes traversed, the social contexts of interaction or personal histories and the experiences of individuals. Accounts that gesture both to the necessity and to the secret pleasure in such 'passing' abound in descriptions of life in Bombay both during and after the riots. In passing, people rely in large part on the swift, routine marking of external, visible and often over-determined markers. Therefore, a Hindu man might recount how he put on his friend's *namaazi topi* in order to evade a marauding mob, or a Muslim woman might speak of marking the part in her hair with vermilion in order to evoke the signs of Hindu matrimony. These experiences were recalled with fear but they were also remembered as masquerades that provided an entrée into different memberships. The techniques employed for such a strategy are inventive and improvisatory, relying in large part on the constellation of common-sense beliefs, daily perceptions, and sensory observations that nestle in the unremarkable eaves of habit and form a part of the everyday uncanny of the city.

As much an indication of the wily stratagems necessary for narrow escapes, passing was evoked by many as a path out of the experiential ghettoes of victimhood and isolation, a strike for individuality, as well as a commitment to keeping lines of communication open with members of the 'other' community. Journalists and social workers, for instance, insisted that they were able to craft generic personae that allowed them to interact with politicians, municipal corporators, policemen, trade unionists and middle and working class people with a range of community and ideological affiliations. Even as they insisted on a type of professional mobility, their personal lives might betray their sense of insecurity or mistrust. People moved to neighbourhoods where members of the same religious community predominated forsaking other histories of neighbourliness or other forms of comradeship.

But surely what is most disquieting in these narratives, what strikes deepest into the singular sense of unease and terror in a big city crowd, is the parallel existence of the systems of both passing and of telling. It is not enough, therefore, to bring to the fore the commonplace information about others in order to 'tell', it is as necessary to look behind the surface signifiers to establish if the telling is indeed accurate. Physiognomists had to be detectives. Such detection was tricky because clearly the toolkit for establishing identity was worthless if the same tools could be manipulated to pass. It would seem counter-intuitive to assert that one can *always tell*, as people repeatedly do, when one is passing oneself. The knowledge that one is passing undoubtedly raises the spectre of possibility that everyone around who has been 'identified' is passing as well. This would seem to overturn the security of the structures of telling. However, even as it undermines the practices of telling, this discourse of passing is still inextricably bound to these practices through the logic that the surface signifiers that mark racial and ethnic identities are indissolubly tied to internal truths, to essences, to blood, to slips of the unconscious that will ultimately betray one. Exposure remains a constant threat. This exposure is as much of the self as of others around one. This is a culture of open secrecy where passing, telling, unmasking, masking, recognition and misrecognition are recurrent themes that reinforce the atmosphere of suspicion.

Physiognomic practice during this period of violent uncertainty was that of unmasking,

and in its continual repetition it was fundamentally paranoid. Paranoia, suggests Canetti's subtle and unique formulation of knowledge and power, is a classic phenomenon of the crowd since the experience of the paranoiac is that of being hemmed in by deception.[4] Paranoia is characterised by the simultaneous operation of dissimulation and unmasking. It is the wearer's own masking that grants him or her insight into the strategies of others. Familiar faces become masks that hold a secret within; the façade is always suspect. Such surroundings are inherently hostile and suspicious as the interpreter is always already convinced he or she knows the truth behind the mask. No matter what metamorphoses are penetrated, says Canetti, they are dismissed as irrelevant in the excavation of the truth. This truth is no more than a reflection of the deception of the dissembling interpreter. Not everyone was dissembling and nor could or did everyone pass, of course, but the recalled experience of fear, hostility and unease existed largely within the framework of deception and continual unmasking.

If it is the seething, jostling crowds of the city that generate this proliferation of paranoid suspicion, it is in this very same multitude that the sources of a return to a habituated everyday lie. And this return to a distracted daily life manifest most visibly in the dismissive, seemingly absent-minded narrative recall of the events of 1992-93 by those whose lives had been significantly disrupted, is perhaps the most startling realisation for any listener. Repeatedly, people shrugged away the events or took them as routine. They would insist that nothing had happened in areas where there had been considerable violence, or they would fold them into long narratives of historical oppression, refusing to grant them the status of the unusual. Sometimes, remembering was substituted with a stolidly sociological listing of perceived causes, derived from externalised analyses. Communal riots are a long-standing feature of India I would be told, as if there had been no personal experience of the violence of riots. Or the person might speak of the opening up of the Indian economy, the Shahbano case or the problems of the civil code as factors that contributed to the outbreak of communal hatred while making little mention of the loss of personal property, or of family members or of friends. Such a remembering was often ruptured by the linking of seemingly disconnected events, in time and space or the identification of banal everyday events as reasons for the violence. Historical events such as the invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni which have formed part of Hindutva demonology were invoked as causes for the riots while at the same time, ordinary experiences such as a difference in cooking practices between Hindu and Muslim neighbours would also be cited.

What such erratic observations, ephemeral suspicions, rumours and fragmentary tales demonstrated was not only the ways in which experiences, ideas and histories entered individual and social systems of meaning but also the ways in which collective memory and historical imagination teeter on the sensory foundations of daily habit. These foundations, whose task is to apprehend the shocks of daily urban life in a state of distraction function precisely at the crossroads of constant remembrance and a distracted forgetting.

Seremetakis in her discussion of the senses and memory in modernity suggests that the sensory structures of everyday life are perceived as naturalised, against which backdrop sensational events are profiled.[5] Because of their foregrounded relationship to the everyday, they can be narrativised in a way that is denied to the shapeless mundane

everyday. This formulation points to the crucial role of perceptual structures in memorialising, but where I would like to push it further is in pointing to the possibility for resilience and recovery that these same structures may hold. If the building blocks for the structures of suspicion that underlie practices of telling and passing are found in the unremarked and unvoiced experiences of everyday crowds, how do such suspicions recede to the spaces of inattention even when the external structural conditions for discord may still be present?

In this again I take my cue from Benjamin's formulation of the habituated perceptions of modernity. Habit, he says in a fragment from *One Way Street* entitled "Lost Property Office", obliterates a sense of landscape, disallowing the ability to discern foreground and background which the latter perspective promotes. As a tactile mode, it meant a kinaesthetic and proprioceptive, not visual, sense of one's surroundings. "As soon as we begin to find our bearings, the landscape vanishes at a stroke like the facade of a house as we enter it. It has not yet gained preponderance through a constant exploration that has become habit. Once we begin to find our way about, the earliest picture can never be restored". Since the constitutive elements for the beliefs, as banal as they are wild, about the other that provoke acts of violence or feelings of fear and unease, are learnt through habit, their ability to remain hyper-visible in consciousness is limited. The constellation of habit obliterates their contours and returns them to the peripheral spaces of attention where they are invoked, jostled and banished in the daily encounter with the crowds.

This returns me to the relationship of the crowd to urban life. Theories of the crowd have pivoted on a set of paradoxical images: the urban crowd, as a rioting mob, has been considered destructive, violent and a threat to peace and democracy while simultaneously, in its guise as the heterogeneous mass of the metropolis, it has been touted as the source of cosmopolitanism, plurality and tolerance. A simple resolution would be to say that there is no single crowd formation; rather, there are many different sorts of crowds and that these two form two different types of crowd experiences. True enough. Yet it is precisely in the tensions and transformations of these phenomena that what we call the urban experience gets crystallised. If this experience is to be read as a text, then the crowd is its interpretative paradigm. This implies that such a text cannot be read as a set of events and objects that can be said to say something else about the space and its people; rather, it must keep in mind that the crowd is the epistemic medium of the urban imaginary. The physiognomic reading of the city requires the lexicon of the crowd.

NOTES

1. V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (London: Vintage, 1998), 1.
2. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 155-200. See also "The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, 217-252.
3. Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
4. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, Trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).
5. C. Nadia Seremetakis, "Intersection: Benjamin, Bloch, Braudel and Beyond" in *The Senses Still*, C. Nadia Seremetakis ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 19-22.