

# Theatre Of The Urban

## The strange case of the Monkeyman

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### DELHI / NIGHT AND DAY OF PANIC AND HORROR

## The monkeyman mystery deepens

In April-May 2001, the eastern outskirts of Delhi were suddenly gripped by a strange fear, occasioned by widespread reports of a creature said to be stalking lower class neighbourhoods. Not many had actually seen the creature – or at any rate, not seen it well enough to be able to describe it, though quite a few claimed to have actually been injured in its attacks. Consequently, it was described by different people in many different ways, though generally *kaala bandar* or *bandar aadmi* – that is ‘black monkey’ or the ‘Monkeyman’ – was how it came to be described in popular parlance.

In about a month and a half of its existence the Monkeyman had acquired the character of an urban legend, going through many mutations through the various tellings of the stories of its exploits. The creature was variously described as a “half-monkey, half-man”, “a strange creature with a machine-like body with glowing lights” and in some cases, a “man with a mask”. According to one news report, although the first complaints were filed at the Vijaynagar Police Station in Ghaziabad, starting from April 5, records do not show any mention of a “man wearing a mask”. Except for one, “all the complaints... are about nocturnal monkey attacks, mainly on people sleeping in their terraces, a common practice in the summer”.<sup>1</sup> The first complaint at the police station, that suggests anything out of the ordinary appeared as late as April 30, when a local resident Anil, alias Kapil, claimed that he had been attacked by “a dark shadow-like creature which seemed like a monkey”, and which had hit him “through his stomach”. The report adds, “His wounds seemed to correspond with his version”.

The police however claimed that on investigation they found that Anil had made a false complaint “to save himself from arrest as he had actually had a violent fight with his brother, and disturbed the peace”. In order to mislead the police, therefore, he had created the story of the Monkeyman.<sup>2</sup> According to the report, however, this angle was revealed much later, by which time the rumour of the Monkeyman had acquired a life of its own. “After the story appeared in the press, people became desperate despite the fact that victims of attacks such as little Guddi’s father in Ghaziabad, positively identified the attacker as a monkey, but with black hair”, says the report.

As the stories began circulating, with new accretions at every step, the Monkeyman began taking shape in popular imagination. The Hindi daily *Amar Ujala*, reported that on May 2 residents congregated at an open field near Vijaynagar, after someone claimed having seen a “monkey like shadowy figure”. Gradually, the terror of the creature also built up. So much so that on May 10, the district administration gave shoot-at-sight orders in order to control the situation.<sup>3</sup> From May 13 onwards, the Monkeyman carried on his activities in the capital, especially in the eastern outskirts bordering Ghaziabad. By this time, interestingly, the creature had mutated into a kind of cyborg – a kind of computerised/robotised figure with almost supernatural powers. It was claimed that it had green eyes, that it presumably had a springboard under its feet and a green belt with buttons for navigation.<sup>4</sup> Some other reports however, showed that at least some of these characteristics had already been acquired by the Monkeyman by the time it entered Delhi. The Superintendent of Police (City) of Ghaziabad, Mr. R.K. Chaturvedi, for instance told *The Hindu* reporter that while initially most reports came from Vijay Nagar, Raj Nagar and Sanjay Nagar – areas with “a high simian population” and people mostly “reported attacks by a dark monkey with lips cut”, descriptions soon changed to those of a “masked figure”.<sup>5</sup> Very soon, according to Chaturvedi, people were speaking of how it “could jump off tall buildings and move at great speeds”, even though there were no first-hand accounts.<sup>6</sup>

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## ‘When I grabbed it, it turned into cat’

Whatever the point at which the new features may have got added to the Monkeyman, there is little doubt that by the time the scare became rampant in Delhi, this mutant cyborg was ‘in existence’. In my discussions with ordinary folk, a kind of deductive reasoning was offered for the claim that the creature had intricate electronically operated/computerised systems to keep it going. They claimed, for instance, that at one house where the Monkeyman attacked, a pitcher of water got spilt in the course of the attack and seeing the water ‘he’ took to ‘his’ heels. Water, they reasoned, would have destroyed his electronic system, which was why he ran away.<sup>7</sup> In one version, this was then extended into a diffe-

rent narrative that is already available these days for any such oddity, namely the narrative of the Pakistani enemy: it was claimed that the creature was a robot with remote control that had been sent in by Pakistan to create terror.<sup>8</sup> The episode thus became the occasion for the externalisation of a whole series of latent fears – often of a deeply pathological nature. Some of them may not even have been entirely innocent, as for example the one expressed in the Shiv Sena's bizarre claim that the Monkeyman was a handiwork of the Pakistan secret service, the ISI, which had sent "131 monkeys from across the border to create terror".<sup>9</sup> So great was the scare that for some days people stopped sleeping on the terraces, night patrols of neighbourhood youth were formed to reinforce the patrolling by the police. *Havans* and *yagnas* (Hindu rituals) were performed in different parts of the city to exorcise the evil.

Undoubtedly, once the legend took on a life of its own, it seems that a whole series of otherwise unconnected, often innocuous incidents started getting inserted into the larger

## Police caught between rumours, facts

stories of the Monkeyman's exploits. Descriptions about its height varied, indicating that either people had not seen the creature or that they were generally mistaking different creatures for the elusive Monkeyman. One person in NOIDA claimed, for instance, that he had been attacked by it but when he turned to catch it, it turned into a cat with glowing eyes. Some others claimed that it came on wings and disappeared into thin air when attacked.<sup>10</sup> One of the rare 'sightings' in a well off middle-class colony, for instance, occurred when a gentleman standing on his balcony at 5:30 in the morning, "saw a speeding Maruti Zen which braked suddenly" and "a man dressed as a black monkey reportedly stepped out of the car which then sped away". Injuries that may have been caused by entirely unrelated incidents now came to be cast within the larger narratives about the Monkeyman.

While speaking to *The Hindu*, the SP of Ghaziabad, Chaturvedi also made some other perceptive observations. Some things, Chaturvedi claimed, remained unchanged through the changing narratives. For one thing, "all cases were reported from lower-middle-class [and] jhuggi clusters with a very high population density". And in all cases "the attacks took place within about half an hour of a power breakdown after nightfall". He further stated that, "all cases were reported from residential areas and there was not a single incident in which a person travelling home alone on a road at night had been attacked".<sup>11</sup> This last feature of the Monkeyman's exploits remained unchanged through all its excursions in Delhi too. Settlements of the poor, largely labouring populations, living through prolonged spells of power cuts and darkness, sweating it out on the terraces that join together with those of other houses, was the theatre of its activities.

There have been many occasions in the past too, when Delhi has witnessed the sudden eruption of rumours that have had large sections of the city on its feet, running around

in panic and/or excitement. One of the most recent ones, of course, was the rumour of the Ganesha idols 'drinking milk', in 1995. That was, however, a rumour that had a much wider spread both within the city, enveloping within its ambit its more affluent sections too, and outside – reaching out to expatriate Hindus living abroad. The Monkeyman, on the other hand, confined its activities to the subaltern neighbourhoods of Delhi.

### The space of subaltern existence

One of the distinctive – and interesting – things about the recent episode of the Monkeyman is the spatial span of its activities. In a sense, the very fact that the activities of this creature were limited to the lower and lower-middle-class neighbourhoods indicates its close link with a subaltern imagination and existence. What are the kinds of spaces invoked in the course of these descriptions? What do they tell us about life in subaltern Delhi? Let us look at the spatial descriptions more closely. These descriptions continuously refer to densely populated settlements of labouring populations, usually located on the peripheries of the city – in this case, the eastern outskirts. These constitute the theatre of the Monkeyman's activities. The Ghaziabad police chief in fact, reminds us that on no occasion was anybody attacked while returning home at night – that is to say on the main roads – open spaces – leading to the residential areas. The Monkeyman's appearances were in places where people sleep on terraces – and in lanes outside their houses – in the dark and hot summer nights, densely populated areas with winding lanes and bylanes, where the creature could easily disappear into thin air. We hear of small open fields in the vicinity, characteristic of suburban, relatively 'undeveloped' areas, where people collect to exchange notes after a series of attacks by the creature. We also hear of 'tall buildings' that the Monkeyman is able to jump off with ease – which probably mean, in this context, low-rise three or four storey buildings of Delhi's 'urban' villages, and 'unauthorised' and resettlement colonies. Stories of



these sightings thus provide a glimpse of one kind of space of subaltern urban existence. We can also see that these areas are entirely segregated from the affluent colonies – most of which are located in New Delhi, especially its southern parts. Even when there are some relatively affluent areas nearby, they remain effectively cordoned off by huge iron gates and a certain social distance. The spatial re-ordering of the city that has taken place in the last two decades has now made this segregation almost complete. As a result, the only reported 'sighting' of the creature in a middle-class colony is when somebody 'sees' a "man wearing a mask" from the balcony of his house, from a considerable, safe distance.

From my own observations of these neighbourhoods over the years, what I have found interesting about these spaces is that subaltern life here continues to reproduce the patterns of *qasba* of small-town life. The internal spatial layout of these areas gives a strange sense of distance from the speed and movement that characterise the life of the metropolis, embodying as it were, almost a different sense of time. Life inside these colonies and neighbourhoods provides a kind of refuge from the hectic pace of life that the mostly male workers – especially factory workers – experience from the moment they step

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## Rumour evolution: It was a

out for work and within which they live till they return. The spatial organisation, as well as the specific histories of these neighbourhoods, also ensures a kind of life where a community existence is reproduced on a daily basis and one that stands in sharp contrast to the atomised existence of middle-class and affluent sections of the city. Networks of communication here, therefore, tend to be quite active and live, organised as they are around certain kinds of sociality centering mainly on tea shops and *paan* shops. The lanes and bylanes where people simply sit outside on cots and spend their free time provide another mode of exchange of information, gossip and rumours. Unlike the middle-class and affluent colonies, where contact with the locality is minimal and where the routine trips to the markets too are likely to be purely commercial transactions with minimal human interaction, in these subaltern spaces the rapidity with which information travels through informal channels can often be truly mind-boggling. Interesting however, are the ways in which, through repeated tellings and retellings of stories and news, different angles emerge, new accretions take place and occasionally, some things are also lost. If the representational mechanisms through which information gets broadcast in the mass media transform their object in some, often predictable, ways, the transformations here are likely to take very unexpected directions – as some of the descriptions above reveal. The easy insertion of the ISI/Pakistan angle into these transmissions also indicates the activity of certain

right-wing political groups that exist there and make good use of such opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

It is really difficult to say, for instance, whether there was ever such a thing as the Monkeyman or whether it was somebody – or a group of people – playing mischief. In one early instance, as we saw, we did hear of a “false complaint” being registered after a fight between two brothers. In a sense, the question as to its actual existence is not really as interesting as the glimpse that the episode might provide into the daily existence of subaltern Delhi. Take for instance the following reading of the episode. Extrapolating from the life of small towns, where joined and continuous terraces become, in the monotonous lives of people, a theatre for the playing out of sexual desire, noted Hindi intellectual Sudhish Pachauri, in fact, perceived a libidinal dimension in the matter. Pachauri alludes here to the *meaning* of the space that we can roughly translate as the roof or the terrace that appears in countless ways in small town or *qasba* life as the site of the play of a generally unrequited desire. The *chhat* or *baam* (as Urdu poetry would have it) and in some cases the *chhaj-ja* (an extended ‘balcony’ or roof) becomes the place where initial furtive glances are

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## monkey till April 30, man after

exchanged, often developing into bolder exchanges leading up to written notes setting up secret rendezvous. The continuity of the terrace provides the place where the rigidly guarded boundaries of sexuality and domesticity stand potentially threatened. It is not uncommon therefore, or so Pachauri suggests, for such transgressive acts to be played out in the darkness of the summer nights – nights of surreptitious wakefulness when someone ‘accidentally’ strays into somebody else’s terrace.<sup>13</sup> The suggestion in Pachauri’s reading is that there was, in all probability, one such angle in the initial incidents that led to the appearance of this mysterious creature who merely gently ‘scratched’ his victims – often women.

Whatever be the case, it seems unlikely that the Monkeyman’s exploits can be separated from the specific spatial layout and structure of the lower-class neighbourhoods. The Monkeyman could not have animated the imagination of the middle and upper-class residents of the city of Delhi in the way the self-fulfilling story of the Ganesha idols drinking milk did. Ganesha was fixed to his place in the temple and you had to go out, to see him ‘drink milk’. The location of the action was in the temples not in the isolated homes of the rich, where there is a singular absence of the networks that animate life in subaltern settlements. The networks of communication mobilised in the Ganesha episode characteristically, were long-distance telephones and the rudimentary electronic mail service that was available those days, not as with the Monkeyman, spatially internally situated networks within and between localities.

# Hysteria on the wane

## Another space

There is another kind of space that this episode draws our attention towards. We can begin to outline this space by looking at the reaction of rationalist public opinion to the episode. It was in some senses classic. The key spokesperson of the Indian Rationalist Association, Sanal Edamaruku dubbed the entire episode a "mass delusion". Similar opinions were expressed by many others too. *The Hindu*, for example, editorially commented on the entire episode, as did many other newspapers – apart from a flurry of articles that appeared subsequently. This editorial in a way sums up best what came to become the rationalist consensus on the issue. "It is not for the first time in recent memory", it averred, "that *civil society in Delhi has shown signs of cracking up*". It recalled the Ganesha incident when, it lamented, "even those from affluent sections" were seen moving about with glasses of milk, and marked these incidents out as occasions when "rational behaviour took a beating". It criticised the instruments of the state and the police in particular for adding to the crisis.

After trying to give a rational explanation of what might have happened, the editorial added that, "The only way to put a stop to such things is to deal firmly with the rumour mongers". However, it also underlined that this will not be sufficient. Therefore, it is important "to infuse the fundamentals of a scientific temper among the people" so that they learn to react in a rational manner. It concluded by observing that "*this is where institutions of civil society... will have a role to play...* A vibrant civil society is the only way out of such situations". An editorial in the *The Indian Express* too expressed concern at the "galloping spread of unreason" which it saw as a global phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

Civil society – or its conscience keepers – lashed out at the institutions of the state, particularly the police force, for falling prey to the same "irrational forces" and forced it to intervene, in order to rein in "the galloping spread of unreason". And sure enough, the state fell in line – one of the very rare occasions when it showed inclination to do so. Within a month, the Delhi Police produced a 200-page report debunking the "monkey business" as a myth.<sup>15</sup>

What, we might ask, has all this got to do with space? My argument here is that this comment is also about a different kind of space – what we might call a social or conceptual space.<sup>16</sup> There is a certain spatial imagination that becomes evident in our theorisations of the social when we start dealing with modernity and the urban transformations that it brings forth. These are abstract spaces but terrains nevertheless, on which we situate different layers of the social. There are three distinct social/conceptual terrains that the comments above, for instance, identify. At one level is the terrain of *civil society* – the ground that is the bearer of rationality and scientific temper. Even though the editorial commentator is worried about its occasional "cracking up", s/he sees it as the high ground

of modernity on which alone can 'unreason' be reined in. This is also the ground, we can see, that is inhabited by the atomised, individuated, rights-bearing citizen. The other terrain in this narrative is the state and its instruments like the police, who seem too, to occasionally slip into roles not quite becoming of them. Even though the comment does not make it explicit, we could say that the occasional 'lapsing back' by the state into such behaviour has to do with the fact that it is not quite insulated from the third and most problematic terrain. This third terrain is relatively unnamed and unspecified. Its existence here is acknowledged merely as 'the problem': 'the people' who inhabit this ground, figure in this discourse as the objects of the pedagogical activity of the state and civil society – into whom 'scientific temper' is to be infused. The agency of its inhabitants goes unacknowledged for they have to be taught to "respond to such situations in a rational manner". Following from our discussion above, we could say that this terrain is also the domain of community existence. At any rate, it is the terrain where the imaginative power of smaller, face-to-face communities is still quite strong and is reproduced daily in the life conditions of these subaltern settlements. Because they are seen as the domain of the pre-modern and the irrational, their very existence constitutes an always-present threat to both civil society and the state's 'instruments'. This third terrain, if it cannot be eliminated, must at least be controlled and assimilated.

The terrains identified here function as *sites* of the theatre of the urban. The simple representations of the non-urban/rural spaces as in some sense continuous, linked to a kind of singular temporality and rhythm of agrarian life, give way here to a more complex, layered, segregated and somewhat enclosed spaces where the 'modern' and the 'non-modern', the 'enlightened' and the 'irrational' live.<sup>17</sup> The city represents what Foucault calls "the epoch of simultaneity". The urban, especially the post-colonial urban, brings together these different rhythms and times within the space of a single city, inaugurating a highly mobile and dynamic arena of contestation. To be sure, these conceptual representations are problematic insofar as the first domain, that of 'civil society', does not really correspond to the middle class and upper middle class living an atomised existence, in its entirety. For there too, in the post-colonial scenario, notions of community existence have a continuing power. The difference, however, is that here communication is mediated through technology – telephone, electronic mail, Internet – and ceases to be a locally grounded face-to-face community, as we saw in the case of the idols drinking milk. That kind of community, however, does not seem to present a 'problem' for the modern city. It is the existence of

## **Monkeyman a case of acute stress, feel experts**

the subaltern, constructed through different imaginations of a spatially situated community life that presents a problem that the city and its citizens must deal with. If physical entry into the city cannot be prevented, there certainly are ways by which the enlightened citizenry insulates itself within this space and within the conceptual universe made possible by this experience of the city. In any case, there certainly are ways by which entry into the representational/conceptual domain of the 'civil' can be controlled. Civil society, as the domain of the rights-bearing individual citizen marks itself out as the domain where entry is predicated upon a certain prior pedagogy: the rustic must first be 'civilised' before s/he can claim entry into its hallowed precincts. In a sense, this bifurcation of the abstract conceptual space of the city parallels efforts to cordon off and segregate its real-physical spaces.

## NOTES

1. Nistula Hebbar, "Rumour evolution: It was a monkey till April 30, man after", *The Indian Express (Express Newslines)*, 17 May 2001, 3.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar, "Ghaziabad terror enters Capital", *The Hindu*, 14 May 2001.
6. Ibid.
7. Conversations with a *paan* shop owner in Rajpur Road.
8. Narrated to me by a resident of Shastri Park area.
9. "Monkeyman gives power to the people: parties score points", *The Hindustan Times*, 17 May 2001, reported that the Shiv Sena's Delhi Unit claimed that "The ISI is behind it; 131 monkeys have come across the border to spread terror". I am grateful to Prakash Upadhyay for this reference.
10. This last story was told to Sanal Edamaruku of the Rationalist Association, "It is a mass delusion, say rationalists" *Express Newslines*, 17 May 2001, 3.
11. Ibid.
12. Of course, these kinds of narratives draw on certain mindsets that are already in place and do not require organised political intervention. However, in this case, the fact that the Shiv Sena did take such a public position indicates that such might have been the case.
13. Sudhish Pachauri, "Naye zamane ki vaanar leela", *Jansatta Ravivari*, 3 June 2001.
14. *The Indian Express*, 19 May 2001. I am only referring here to some of the articles out of a much larger number which came out in those days. Also see, for instance, Ashok Vardhan Shetty, "Imagination on the prowl", *The Hindu Magazine*, Sunday 10 June 2001.
15. *The Hindustan Times*, 18 June 2001.
16. See also Henri Lefebvre, *Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1990).
17. Premodern spaces too, undoubtedly have rigid hierarchies and many like those in and around temples or the residences of the upper caste and landed gentry are physically separated and inaccessible. Modern spaces of the city are not, in that sense, inaccessible. What is different however is that modern, urban societies, precisely because they are not in principle inaccessible to lower orders, need to be protected from them. They therefore call for a continuous activity on the part of 'civil society' and the state to discipline them. However, it seems to me that these premodern agrarian spaces, even when segregated, are marked by certain common rhythms and pace of life.