

# Mediated Guilt

The Illusion of Participation in Delhi's Social Welfare Advertisements

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I begin this essay by narrating a banal personal experience. On November 14, 2002, in the midst of my morning routine of tea, toast, and the newspaper, my attention was seized by a large image of Jawaharlal Nehru in *Dainik Jagaran*, a Hindi daily. The black and white close-up of his head and shoulders made India's first Prime Minister look striking, emphasizing his sharp features by exaggerating the dramatic contrasts of the natural lighting. The line of his rather long nose steered my eyes towards an elaborately laid out column of text

to the right of the photo. Near the text were two somewhat less carefully presented photos of Delhi's Chief Minister and the Minister of Social Welfare. It turned out that Nehru's image was part of a well-designed advertisement inviting public participation in Children's Day, an event conducted annually by the Delhi Department of Social Welfare on Nehru's birthday. I immediately felt a slight pang of anxiety. My research concerns made me interested in attending the event, but it was scheduled for ten o'clock and it was now nearing nine. Short of cancelling my existing plans and, more painfully, interrupting my breakfast, attendance was impossible.

If one pays attention to social welfare advertising in Delhi, one notices something ironic. The ads in the newspapers are designed to publicize programmes and achievements, as well as solicit *public participation* in certain welfare-related events, so as to get the citizenry involved in the labour of welfare provision. However, the timing and composition of the ads themselves make it extremely difficult for any ordinary resident to actually take part in these programmes. The ads usually appear in the paper the day of the event, and can lack all the information required to get to the venue at the appropriate time. While giving short notice and careless information for public lectures and cultural events is certainly not unique to the Department of Social Welfare, social welfare ads are otherwise well designed, large (sometimes full page) and relatively expensive; thus their ineffectual character is worth consideration. Of course, it would be easy to dismiss their inadequacy as government incompetence, but this paper will suggest that the failure, whether intended or not, is the most socially consequential aspect of these ads.

To be strictly fair, some advertisements do provide sufficient notice and information. Still, when in the course of research I arrive at these events and introduce myself to the organizers, they are often surprised to hear that I found out about the program through the newspaper. No one else, they often tell me, comes because of the ads. Attendees of social welfare programmes, such as informational camps, tend to be either the department's own professional social workers and affiliated NGO personnel, or the intended beneficiaries. The latter are not notified about the event through advertisements, but through the network of local child development field staff (*anganwadi workers*). In other words, the mechanisms that bring people to welfare events are personal, local and directed. Very few people, if at all, come because of mass media advertising. Indeed, it appears that the ads are not intended to attract 'the general public'. What purpose, then, could a mass advertising campaign serve?

Representatives of the Delhi Department of Social Welfare claim that advertising attracts some people to some events, although they are unable to produce any supporting data. When asked why they continue to spend money on advertising that seems to attract so few new participants, representatives invoke the widespread distrust towards a government that is blamed for corruption and wasting money. The main objective of the advertisements, they claim, is simply to make people aware that the department exists and is active. Off the record, one official gave a more complex account of the department's motivation for all publicity activities: "You have to do something so that people vote. You have to reach their doorsteps. The motive is political, but it does some good in the process".<sup>1</sup> The main purpose of these advertisements, it is clear, is not to attract public participation

but to bolster the image of the government by flaunting its social welfare programmes.

Distrust of the government is now so common that virtually any Indian would likely offer a similar explanation. This account, however, is not sufficient. The incompetent nature of social welfare requests for participation may well be the result of short-term political concerns, corruption and inefficiency, but these ads nonetheless have profound social consequences. As I shall argue, these unanswered, and, in some cases, unanswerable solicitations have a pragmatic consequence despite their utter failure to attract participation. The very act of reading them produces the affect of guilt – even if only a momentary, languid guilt – that serves an interpellative function for the neo-liberal social imagination currently hegemonic in global political-economic discourse.

### **Hollow Solicitations**

Indian newspapers are filled with ads from government agencies that follow a similar pattern: they proclaim the achievements of the given agency and attach that success to the faces and names of incumbent politicians. Railways, highways, electrical lines and even sewers can become the object of a current government's boasting. Government advertising is an inescapable feature of Delhi's political landscape. However, social welfare advertising often does something that other government advertisements do not: it invites public participation. In language that is often dramatic and moralistic, these ads implore the reader to take action; specifically to come forward and help the government provide welfare to beggars, the handicapped, children, impoverished women and the elderly.

Considering the obvious ineffectiveness of the welfare advertising, significant amounts of money are allocated to their production. The Delhi Department of Social Welfare, for example, spent Rs. 5.9 million in 2002-3, over 1.4 per cent of its total expenditure, on 'Advertisements and Publicity'. This is not insubstantial considering that only Rs. 183,000 was allocated to 'Training Courses', Rs. 235,000 to 'Schemes for Adolescent Girls' and Rs. 3.1 million on 'Fuel and Lubricants'.<sup>12</sup>

I have already argued that social welfare advertising is not particularly effective in attracting people to its events. Not only are the advertisements ineffective, the events to which readers are supposedly being invited have no facilities for welcoming the general public. One such advertisement in *The Hindustan Times* for a workshop on the problem of beggary announced: "The toughest part of a journey is taking the first step. Come forward and be part of a movement". But when I attended the workshop, my inquiries once again indicated that I was probably the only person there who was not otherwise already associated with begging related issues. The conference room was small and overcrowded. Participants were not allowed in without registering. Only after establishing my credentials as a foreign researcher was I given a nametag and an information packet. The workshop consisted of a panel of NGO personnel, social welfare officials, legal personnel, police officers and an audience filled with activists and social workers who were mainly hostile to the government's anti-beggary campaign. As a member of the general public, I felt I had no role to play. This advertisement had presented itself as a call to action, but there was in fact no action that an uninitiated person could take.

Many of the ads prominently display the Department of Social Welfare's logo, "We Care, You Share", but it is not clear exactly what is to be shared. The Department of Social Welfare does not accept donations and does not work directly with donations, yet a request to share something is being made. The language of sharing is reminiscent of Charles Titmus' *The Gift Relationship*, in which he argues that the gift of blood to a generalized other (i.e., society at large) emotionally bonds the individual to an otherwise abstract thing called 'society'. For Titmus, the real act of donating blood produced the affect of social belonging that he considered crucial to a successful welfare state. In the case of Delhi's social welfare advertisements, however, real acts of giving are not possible. The ads thus make requests, but they seem to be peculiarly uninterested in a response.



An advertisement for another function called "Kalyan Week" makes the hollowness of these solicitations even more apparent. Kalyan Week consisted of daily events designed to publicize the various activities of the Department of Social Welfare. Curiously, except for the inaugural function at Delhi, the starting times of each individual event are absent. Nevertheless, the advertisement calls forth in bold language: "You also come and join this flame of volition, volition to combat the forces, which undermine the dignity of human beings, their childhood, womanhood, old age and disability". Further down in the advertisement, there is an explicit invitation: "Be a proud Delhi Citizen. Join us and make the Kalyan Week a Success". The ad, however, does not explain how a citizen could contribute if he or she were to actually attend the functions. Like the other events I attended, these programs had no facilities for volunteering, joining organizations, or donating money.

What social consequences could emanate from advertisements that so obviously fail to achieve their express purpose? There are at least three obvious ways one could account for this failure. First, it would be possible to argue that the makers of the advertisements have no interest in attracting public participation but are simply vehicles for incumbent politicians. Second, one could also attribute their failure to simple government carelessness and incompetence – the Department of Social Welfare makes an effort to involve the public, but does not properly follow through on its own goals. Finally, one could portray these ads as simple propaganda for a liberal social imagination. Each of these accounts is a plausible explanation for either intentional or unintentional failure of these ads, but none of them provides any account of the possible social consequences of the failure itself. None of these accounts, in other words, help us answer the most important question: what is the effect of a public request that cannot be fulfilled, a solicitation that cannot be answered?

### **A (Neo) Liberal Social Imagination**

When I use the term 'liberal', I mean it in the classic sense of private property, rational individuals, freedom of exchange, and a minimalist 'night watchman'

state. Post-independence India tried to negotiate a path between liberalism and socialism, ending up with a set of policies that simply protected the domestic bourgeoisie and invented a new regime of bureaucratic privilege. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the architects of independent India genuinely intended to develop their country into a welfare state. Unfortunately, entrenched political interests in conjunction with conditions of under-development prohibited India from performing a welfare state's most basic function – propping up aggregate demand by providing unemployment insurance, pensions, health care and a range of other social benefits. Rather than the rights that they were supposed to be (see Article 41 of the Indian Constitution), these benefits became the exclusive privilege of government employees. At the national level, the Ministry of Welfare (which began as the Central Social Welfare Board in 1953 and became the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 1998), performed a limited set of functions, namely the distribution of miniscule benefits to designated groups of 'deserving poor', including the abandoned elderly, street children, beggars, the handicapped and also, notably, women, the lower castes and tribal populations.

Given this limited mission and the (perhaps misunderstood) Gandhian legacy of voluntary service and self-help, it is not surprising that the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and its Delhi counterpart continue to adopt liberal policies vis-à-vis the poor. That is, they adopt policies, which, albeit sympathetic to the plight of the poor, still treat poverty as an essentially private problem and implicitly assign blame to the poor. The majority of schemes are structured around self-help and financial independence. They fund programmes that provide services such as small business loans, *crèches* (day-care centres) to allow women to work, and a variety of training courses that teach people various crafts (e.g., tailoring, beauty care, handicrafts, etc.) and business skills.<sup>3</sup> These methods of upliftment strangely ignore larger economic dynamics, such as the level of demand for these very traditional industries. Instead, the central Ministry and its Delhi counterpart assume the basic liberal conception that wealth is generated through a combination of thrift and hard work.

The advertisements of the Department of Social Welfare communicate this liberal social imagination in two ways. First, as the ads describe the Department's programs, they make it clear that most of the benefits they distribute are to various categories of deserving poor (e.g., the handicapped, widows, underprivileged women, street children, etc.) who are entitled to assistance because, unlike the rest of the poor, they cannot help themselves. Second, by appearing to solicit participation, these advertisements suggest to the reader that individual volition in the form of voluntary labour and charity is an effective method for economic development. Implicit in all of this is that poverty is not rooted in property relations and economic systems but in individual failings.

### **Languid Guilt**

Let us pause for a moment and imagine the experience of the readers whose attention is captured by such ads. These people are likely to have little interest in social service, the poor, or the Department of Social Welfare. They simply happen to notice the graphics of the ads and suddenly find themselves scanning a text that is not promoting a product but calling them to action, asking them to fulfil their duty as both citizens and human beings. Yet,

as we have seen, the ads are almost impossible to respond to. We can further conjecture that these readers are not going to examine the ads adequately enough to realize the difficulty of response, but will simply notice the fact of their own inaction and then quickly move on to other, more interesting parts of the newspaper. If this scenario is valid, then we can deduce that the advertisement does register with the reader, even if only in some remote corner of the unconscious.

It also seems safe to assume that our imaginary Indian reader thinks of social service as a universal good, although he or she may never participate in any such service. The moral value of selfless service to society is inculcated through history lessons on Gandhi and other nationalist leaders, as well as from exposure to India's many famous voluntary organizations such as the *Harijan Sevak Sangh*, the *Bharat Sevak Samaj*, the *Ramakrishna Mission*, the *Servants of the People Society*, the *Samta Sainik Dal*, the Hindu nationalist *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)*, Mother Teresa's *Sisters of Charity*, and the myriad of more contemporary NGOs. Given the value placed on voluntary service in India, it is not difficult to believe that social welfare advertisements could initiate an associational chain that ends in guilt: I am being asked to help, I should help, it is possible to help, others are helping, but I am not going to do so because I am too lazy, too selfish, or too concerned with my own family and friends.

I want to be clear about the modesty of my claim; no one is losing sleep over the Department of Social Welfare's advertisements and my argument by no means depends on the guilt experience being profound, enduring, or even memorable. On the contrary, my argument is precisely that the reader experiences a mere fleeting moment of guilt, an episode so short and trivial that it has no motivating force. However, it is in that momentary transpiration of affect that the reader comes to feel him or herself to be a part of a liberal world – a world in which poverty is a private problem that is solvable through the force of volition. To use Lacanian terminology, guilt acts as a 'suture', or a 'quilting point', that stitches the signifier (the language of private property, individualism, and volition) to the signified (the supposedly real world in which these things exist).<sup>4</sup>

The fact that this is an un-motivating, languid guilt is crucial to my argument. If it were actually a galvanizing force, it would magnify the risk of mass-scale critical engagement, in so far as large numbers of involved people might also begin to ask deeper questions about the origins of poverty. The languid guilt produced by social welfare advertising, I am suggesting, secures the reader's self-perception as 'normal' (i.e., not psychotic) because their feeling of guilt serves as evidence of their own induction to a symbolic order that everyone else takes to be 'real'. To not feel guilt would be the symptom of a terrifying pathology – a lack of basic human empathy and moral orientation. Thus, these banal, highly forgettable moments of guilt are, intended or not, effective mechanisms for suturing subjects to a liberal symbolic order by making them feel like caring, empathetic, and hence normal human beings.

My argument about languid guilt could be extended well beyond the rather incompetent advertising of the Delhi Department of Social Welfare to even the best charitable advertising in the world. I appeal here to my own personal experience of watching Sally Struthers on American television make her impassioned pleas for the world's needy children. I feel a twinge of guilt at the images of unclothed, sickly children and, though a combination of

Marxist criticism and selfishness keeps me from ever making a donation, I find myself comforted that someone, somewhere is doing something about this problem. Unlike the ads of the DSW, most American advertisements for charity contain very clear instructions about how to respond ('Dial the number at the bottom of your screen and have your credit card ready'), and yet millions of first-world residents see such solicitations but do not, for whatever reason, respond. This uncountable group of non-respondents must also be experiencing an ephemeral moment of languid guilt that sutures them to a liberal social imagination.

### **Languid Guilt and the Historical Trajectory of Participation Discourse**

Returning to the Indian context, we must bear in mind that the specific instance of languid guilt under analysis is situated in a historical trajectory. The rhetoric of participation is by no means new, but its authorizing conditions have changed significantly. In the fifties and much of the sixties, Indian development planning had as one of its major components the Community Development Program, which was based on the idea of citizen-state 'co-operation'. The project of development, it was argued at the time, could only be successful if the common Indian villager understood its long-term goals and benefits. Equally important, the voluntary participation of villagers in local projects – irrigation, land utilization, etc. – would provide a free source of labour, thus releasing large amounts of capital for allocation to heavy industry and infrastructure. Moreover, it was believed that the process of involving the villagers in development projects would inculcate them with a 'scientific temper' and social-democratic values. The challenge, then, was to mobilize the villagers. 'Village Level Workers', equipped with hardly anything except a training manual, were dispatched throughout rural India to initiate this great endeavour to 'urbanize the village'.<sup>5</sup> The state, as we know well, was the main agent for carrying out this civilizing mission. Hence, the project of participation in this period was very closely aligned with state aims. The point I wish to emphasize is that this phase of participation rhetoric was about modernization, about spreading the word of modernity, about taking the values, worldviews, habits, and institutions labelled 'modern' to the people and places they had not yet reached.

By contrast, the current wave of participation rhetoric is not about building something new but about repairing what already exists. Solicitations to participate in social welfare events in Delhi, for example, are part of the Sheila Dikshit (Congress) government's '*Bhagidari*' ('Participation') campaign, as each ad proudly proclaims. The campaign is designed to promote solution-oriented dialogue between citizens, NGOs, trade associations, and Delhi's many municipal agencies.<sup>6</sup> The core of the campaign consists of Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), which are local bodies that serve as liaisons to the government. Their function is not, in general, to build new infrastructure but rather to force the municipal corporation and the Delhi government to maintain existing amenities properly. RWAs mainly concern themselves with things like broken streetlights, clogged drains, blown transformers, potholes and other mundane issues. When they are involved in the implementation of new technology, it tends to be simple, non-expert driven technologies like garbage separation and rainwater harvesting – technologies that are designed to solve the problems created by urbanization. In addition to RWAs, *Bhagidari* also emphasizes greater transparency and communication as a partial solution to the problem of corruption. Hence,

the government makes efforts to publicize its activities through the old media as well as the new. Again, the problem is one of reparation rather than construction – corruption is seen as a problem that results from an overly powerful government rather than a lack of state structures.

The programme has, on the whole, been well received and has earned international accolades as a model of participatory governance.<sup>7</sup> Its free-market detractors, however, criticize *Bhagidari* for creating an illusion of citizen involvement while masking the inherent inefficiency and corruption of big government.<sup>8</sup> For them, minimizing state power through the privatization of government services is the solution, but the assessment of the problem is the same: modern institutions exist aplenty in India, but their damaged nature is retarding India's development. Thus, we can conclude that whereas participation rhetoric used to be about becoming something we are not, it is now about refurbishing that which we already are. The grand narrative of progress, in other words, has been replaced by a much less ambitious narrative of reparation.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the languid guilt produced by social welfare advertising is unique to the current phase of capitalist development. Any instance of mass mediated solicitations for public participation can produce this affective state. However, perhaps a guilt that fails to motivate action but nevertheless seals subjects into a neo-liberal social order is ironically appropriate to contemporary historical conditions. If this is an era that has dispensed with grand narratives of radical social change – an era that tries to cope with its own pathologies rather than curing them – then perhaps languid guilt is the optimal affective instrument for exercising hegemonic control.

## NOTES

1. Interview with Public Relations Officer of the Delhi Department of Social Welfare (name withheld) conducted on December 3, 2002.
2. Roy, Shubajit. "Social welfare staff keeps largest share", *The Indian Express (Express Newslines)*, (24 October, 2003) p. 1.
3. Notably, these programs do not appear to be rooted in a larger economic plan. Thousands of men and women, for example, are trained as tailors every year, yet there is no indication that this is a growing field.
4. Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-56*. Transl. by R. Grigg (1993, New York) p. 290-2.
5. Cited in Ravi Kalia, *Chandigarh: The Making of An Indian City* (Oxford University Press, 1990, Delhi) p. 30.
6. See interview with Sheila Dikshit in *Frontline* (web version) 19,11 (May 11-24, 2002).
7. "Bhagidari scheme goes global", *The Hindu* online edition (July 24, 2003).
8. Chakravarty, Sudeep. "Loose Change: The Citizen's Stock Option Plan", *India Today on the Web* (October 2003).