The Day I Got Verified

Kilokri is a mixed locality. Planned Middle and Higher Income Group government flats coexist with settlements, dense unplanned residential areas and housing complexes built on encroached land. There is a profusion of clustered and cloistered neighbourhoods. I live as a tenant in Kilokri. Last Sunday, as I walked home from the grocer's, I ran into Mr. Malhotra, my landlord. He looked worried. He handed me a tenant verification form and said, "You must fill this, otherwise the police will create trouble."

I looked through the form. It was titled, 'Format for Information of Tenants'. It was bilingual (Hindi/English) and had three sections: landlord's, tenant's, and an acknowledgment slip. Landlords were required to give their name, occupation with details of office, their phone number and address. Tenants were to provide four addresses and phone numbers – present, previous, past and office. Other details required were: date of leaving, details of office, family details and details of any official documentation (passport, driving licence, arms licence, ration card, voter ID card, or income tax – and so provide their PAN or Permanent Account Number). The acknowledgment slip had: received from, son/daughter of, resident of, phone number, residence let out to, son/daughter of, date, number of the diary in which entry is made, name, designation, signature of the recipient. I, the tenant, was required to fill in very minute details about my personal life. I had to write the *naam* (name) and *umr* (age) of the person I was living with, and my *sambandh* (relationship) with him/her. I found this very intrusive. Nevertheless, I filled the form.

Mr. Malhotra was hesitant about filling his section of the form. For him, the landlord, the form was a cause of anxiety. He has built three stories on his plot, which he has rented out, but has never declared the income accruing to him from this to the authorities. He was apprehensive that the tenant verification form was a facade to elicit information about his property, most of which is constructed in blatant violation of existing municipal laws. After much consideration, he forwarded his widowed mother's name as the owner of the house, as she does not have a functioning bank account, nor a PAN – sources from which data about identity and income can be collated. Having finished filling up his section, an anxious Mr. Malhotra turned to me and said, "Now you must come with me to the police station. Lets go after lunch."

On my way to my room, I ran into the old couple who live on the second floor. I asked them whether they had been verified.

Uncle: I had to tell Malhotra the procedure from start to finish. He didn't know a thing.

Taha: I don't understand.

Uncle: On 2nd December there was a piece in *The Hindustan Times* city supplement stating that all landlords must verify their tenants by 23rd December, otherwise they will be fined. Maybe even face arrest.

Taha: So?

Uncle: What do you mean, 'so'? We are old retired people. We don't want any trouble. After reading the piece I went to the police station, got the form and told Malhotra about it. I told him to make sure that all the tenants fill this form, or we might end up getting involved with the police.

I thanked him and climbed up the stairs to my room. I wondered what would be done with the forms. What kinds of databases will be made? For what would they be used? For the moment, however, filling the form created within me frustration, anger, and a feeling of extreme vulnerability.

My mailbox at Sarai has recently been receiving a number of unsolicited mails with subject headers like 'Access Control', 'Biometrics', 'Workplace Watchdog', etc., from companies looking for distributors for various Physical Access Control, and IT Security technologies. Presumably they hope that I might be interested.
Meanwhile, my father was recently given a 'tenant verification form' by the housing society in which he stays, to be submitted to the local police station. He is disturbed about having himself verified after thirty-five years of abiding by the law.
Both these events – the emails selling surveillance systems and the arrival of my father's verification form – are pointers towards an increasing drive to collect information that will enable greater control over access and mobility within urban spaces.
What we are witnessing is a sophisticated compact between state institutions, public policy, businesses, voluntary groups and technologists to control 'populations' and erect fortresses (and *gulags*?) of data.
Information is part of a complex flow of a global traffic of investment, goods, labour, and instructions. Information, in its commodified form, travells towards new frontiers, pushes boundaries, making certain barriers obsolete, some porous, some re-configured, and creating more refined access regulators.

http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2004-December/004702.html
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http://www.sarai.net/journal/02PDF/10infopol/01infopol_intro.pdf
Jeebesh Bagchi, Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life, New Delhi, 2002.

Photo: Ashish Avikunthak, Delhi, 2002

The "CLAP!"

Connaught Place was crowded, busy with people on their way. Some lingered at the bookstalls laid out on the pavement. Others walked slowly, some rushed past. I smiled, thinking about how everyone managed without a traffic policeman directing the flow.

But then I realised the crowd wasn't really moving as chaotically as it seemed at first. Curiously, after reaching a unique point on the curving pavement, it was as if the crowd parted, made two semicircular arcs, and then met again at the other end of the enclosing circle.

I was intrigued. What inside that circle had power enough to choreograph the movement of a crowd of strangers? I shifted my gaze, curious to see who was directing its flow.

Right in the middle was a short, slight figure dressed in a faded pink *salwar kameez*. Her hair was tied in a bun. Below it, on her neck, a thin golden chain shone dully. Her shoulders were broad for her build, her *kameez* sleeves hung loosely on her elbows. A profusion of colourful bangles adorned her wrists. Narrow hips, and a pair of *hawaii chappals* on her feet. She stood very still, looking around her. Her back was to me.

I thought, how strange. By herself, she may never have drawn my gaze. But the crowd has tied my eyes to her.

At that moment, this slight figure, standing alone in the middle of the crowd circling around her, clapped.

CLAP! And the circle moved faster. Footsteps became quicker. Eyes turned shifty, unsure where to rest – anywhere but on her who pulled them in her direction.

CLAP! And the slender figure caught someone's eye and moved towards him. The young man's eyes widened with fear. He raised one arm, bringing the plastic and paper bags he was carrying between himself and the approaching figure, while flailing his other arm, gesturing her to stay away. Frozen in his tracks for a fraction of a second, he now fled the circle as she, unfazed, moved steadily towards him.

The circle shifted to enclose her within its boundary.

She turned around now, watching the circle. She had deep-set eyes, thick eyebrows and the thin stubble of a moustache beneath her nose. Her breasts were small and pointed. She wore neither *dupatta*, nor makeup.

CLAP! She moved again, this time towards a young couple. They stopped as she stood in their path, and moved closer to one another, suspicious of what she would say or do. She clapped noiselessly, and said something. Maybe a blessing for a long and happy married life. The young woman unbuttoned her purse wordlessly and handed her a ten-rupee note. The couple moved on, turning away from the circle.

What was it about the slight, obscure, singular figure that evoked such fear, such loathing, such suspicion? Was it a shared web of stories about what people like her do – they steal little boys and make them like themselves, they can bless and cast strange spells, if you don't give them money they will bare their genitals, they are queer and they beat their dead with *chappals*? But what could this lone figure do in a crowded centre of the city? What did she carry on her person that should cause such alarm?

Maybe it was the body she covered deep inside her clothes. The penis that was small, the organ that was cut away, the stub that was a mere remnant. She was a standing, moving, clapping testimony of our collective anxieties, a constant, recalcitrant, perplexing embodiment of embarrassed biologies. Loth to tussle with the power our own shame exercised on us, we scowled and shunned, growled and flailed, withdrew and fled.

And it was her CLAP that we most abhorred. She clapped to announce she was there, clapped to catch our attention, clapped to draw us to her ambiguous, morphed body. Her clap indicated her location, her closeness to our selves; it was her declaration that she was nearby – in the adjacent compartment of a moving train, at the next turn in a crowded bazaar, among us somewhere in the concentric circles of our tired circumambulations of the city streets. With her clap, she pervades and surrounds. With her clap she summons us to her, and drives us away.

She turns us from our path, causes a ripple in our course, marks an alteration in our time – her clap becomes an interlude to which there is a 'before' and an 'after'.

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Inside The Locality

"Outside the *pol* (locality), people don't even know each others' name. It is not so here. There is a lot of bonding and *ekta* (unity), especially at times of riots and even during the earthquake. During the riots, men and boys took turns to guard the *pol* round the clock. And women took turns to cook for them and give them tea and snacks round the clock.

"Everyone came together during the earthquake as well. At that time, the entire *pol* was sleeping outside, on the road. All of us worked together (to reconstruct the houses). We ate together.

"But when there is no crisis, there is no cooperation.

"For example, if I wanted to extend this house, everyone would object. You can see from here that this road runs into a dead-end. No one uses it and it can be of no use to anybody. So if I make some sort of construction, everyone would protest against it: 'You are blocking the path, blocking ventilation, your construction is illegal.'"

As told to **Aparajita De**, Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellow, 2003-04, project title: "Imagined Geographies: The Case Study of Ahmedabad". Text excerpted from submission to the Sarai archive.

Late Show

Inside a narrow lane, the entrance to Mala Theater was crowded by young men trying to buy tickets. Two men sat at the counter, busy selling tickets. One of them looked Tamilian, and the other was a young boy in his twenties.

"Do you screen Telugu films here?" I asked. Surprised, the young boy replied, "Yes, only on Sunday evenings, at 9.30 pm."

Text: http://www.hamilton-bellis.co.uk/articles.htm; Images: Video footage, Coordinates 28°28'N,77°15'E, 2001-2002, Raqs Media Collective

Naked Roads

Can unmarked roads be an alternative to speed humps? Urban planners claim that removing kerbs, traffic lights and signs as part of psychological traffic calming measures reduces speed and accidents. It encourages drivers to slow down, mingle and make eye contact with pedestrians and cyclists.

"How many come to watch the show?" Looking at each other, they said about 15-20.

Sensing their reluctance to speak, I smiled and started walking away.

The young man from the counter was following me. I turned back. He walked up, scared and anxious. Before he could speak I said, "I'm not from the police." "Madam," he said, "We own two Video theaters at Jogeshwari. Some one like you came and asked for some information and then clicked photographs. Next day, she came with the police and we had to shut it down. We don't do *ganda kaam* (dirty work) now. We at this theater don't show blue films. *Hamara naam bhi kharab hota hai* (We too get a bad name)." And so he got talking.

"My name is Vikas. We don't show Telugu films everyday. Telugu films are screened every Sunday at 9.30 pm. At least 50-70 people come to watch, and we show films they demand. We only allow one film per ticket. However if a man comes at an odd time, i.e. when a film is on, we allow him to get in and continue till the next film is over. We do not want him to go back. After all, where will he go till the film gets over?

"And we don't collect the ticket for the last show. Generally during daytime, once the film is over, we take the tickets back and tear them up. But for the last show, we allow them to keep their tickets. This is because the film gets over at around one in the morning. Very often, if it's late at night, these Telugu people are detained by the police and questioned about their movements. They do not have a permanent address or any contact phone number or ID card. So, they show the film ticket as proof of where they have been. We regularly get requests to stamp, seal and sign the ticket."

http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2005-May/005742.html
Madhavi Tangella, Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellow, 2004-05, blueskyandus@rediffmail.com

Photo: Monica Narula

"Do you want to study or not? What do you want to do in life? This world has no need for failures." The young boy stands quietly, his head lowered, his eyes fixed on his shoes. The teacher continues to admonish and shame him. But by now he is far away from the jeering glances and sympathetic looks of his classmates, away from the piercing voice of this punishing adult. Maybe he would join his friend who has started a small candle-making workshop in the neighbourhood. Was it a mere coincidence that the chance came to him only a week ago, and that the evenings that he had spent in the workshop were already his most memorable ones?

A young woman is at the crossroads of her life. Soon she must marry and start a new life. For a last outing, to momentarily push away the anxiety of the 'familiar unknown' of married life, she is allowed a trip to the local fair, with its giant wheels and fun shows and traders selling trinkets and other wares. She never returns home. She is lost in the *mela*. Her parents register a complaint in the *kotwali*, that she has been enticed away. But in hushed meetings, her friends call her '*urhari*', the one who has flown away.

How do we understand these acts of 'fleeing'? What exactly is at stake in this effort to construct a world away from its centres? Is it a "different thing" that is gained on the byways that lead, seemingly nowhere, through journeys towards making and living undestined lives?

Whose Hands are Sullied?

I'm interested in the public discourse on hygiene, sanitation and cleanliness – how this is linked to notions of good health not limited solely to medical criteria, but also includes notions of wellness, comfort/satisfaction, and the manner in which these discourses play out in public spaces, events and interactions.

The promise of a healthy life in a city is not measured, as it traditionally has been, in strictly medical terms anymore, but is connected to visions of space and openness, the absence of clutter and crowds, and the possibility of escaping urban perils while still enjoying the city's benefits. Interestingly, as the criteria for healthy/sanitised living change from medical to non-medical, the new criteria are themselves increasingly expressed through medicalised metaphors. Co-terminus with this is an urgency attached to acquiring certain lifestyles/products/services (such as air conditioners which filter out harmful microbes and pollutants).

There are parallel discourses which label a certain outlook/attitude/way of living as antithetical to health and hygiene, and label certain ways of occupying space as a threat to "clean and sanitised" environs. 'Segregation' is crucial in sustaining these narratives.

For instance, by what parameters is an outbreak of jaundice declared as an epidemic in Bombay? Which city areas are labelled as 'vulnerable'? What social biases are mobilised? How is the "other-in-our-midst" evoked in these narrations? Whose hands are sullied in the process?

http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2005-March/005289.html
Lakshmi Kutty, Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellow, 2004-05, lakshmikutty@rediffmail.com

Tasty Images, Inadequate Smells

It was a hot afternoon in Brooklyn. The Mexican diner that I was passing by was empty, just the staff strolling around, a lady wiping the floor. The whole place, and especially the floor, looked extremely clean, and so I asked if they were open at all. The lady behind the counter called me in and guided me to a table at the window. As I made my way through the room, I was hit by the incredibly strong stench of the chloride cleaner. It covered not just the floor but everything within ten metres. I was famished, so I sat down and ordered immediately.
I watched the lady mopping the floor.
The floor was clean. It looked clean to me. But from the wet trace the lady had left, I could tell she had just started mopping and she seemed far from switching to another task. She hadn't yet been in my area of the diner.
She mopped very carefully, slowly.
Once in a while she stopped to have a little chat with the lady behind the counter. They giggled.
The front door was open and the orange afternoon sunlight flooded in. The moist floor shimmered. What a nice and calm picture, I thought. The cook appeared in the open kitchen and started creating a delicious burrito. I sat in great expectation of inhaling the incredible odour of chopped onions, spices, herbs, black beans and hot olive oil.
But the odour couldn't make it. It was chopped by the power of the dictatorial chloride cleaner.
Disappointed, I tried to salvage the moment by focusing on the image of the juggling cook. It felt a little strange, like sitting at home, starving, the fridge empty, watching a Mexican cooking show on TV.
Tasty images, inadequate smells.
The dish was quickly made; when it was served, I'm sure my face had a "happily ever after" look.
After my first nip on the burrito, my sensory system sent out a warning:
Food Look + Food Smell => Tasting, Chewing, Swallowing => Digestion. Fine.
Food Look + Chloride Smell => No digestion. Bad.
I tried. Burrito-Burrito. Stomach roaring. No. Enough.
I went to the lady with the mop and asked her, in a very friendly manner, if she could stop cleaning till I had finished my food, since I was bothered by the smell of the cleaner. She was chatting with the lady at the counter. Both ladies were shocked.
"Excuse me, but this floor has to be clean! This is a restaurant and it has to be clean! It's the law!"
"But it's clean. It looks clean to me!" I said.
"But what about the germs and bacteria you can't see? They are there! But you can't see them! So we have to clean even if we don't see them! It's the law to keep this place clean!"
Got it.
I returned to my table.
Minutes later the law kicked me into the bathroom and demanded my lunch back.

http://www.snm-hgkz.ch/mailman/listinfo/driftwood
Monya Plestsch, Hochschule Fuer Gestaltung, Zurich, monya@gmx.at

Notes on Unsettling Memories

Memories lie dormant in hidden recesses of the city, whether in neglected papers found in dusty government files, or in the shifting vistas of urban landscape, or in the articulated experiences of many of the city's denizens. In these articulations, over the years, areas of silence get built – as moments not to be remembered in the history of the city. At other moments, multiple factors combine to cause such remembrance to atrophy: nationalist sentiment, party political interests, individual careers, expedient deaths and social unrest, which gain far wider currency than muted intellectual critiques. Of course there are also the short-lived narratives – propaganda literature, and testimonials produced in the years that follow an incident, a state-generated upheaval or repression. Like the Emergency, which has a heterogeneous discourse of resentment, guilt and accusation, drawn from a variety of sources including prison memoirs, underground resistance literature, public hearings, official commissions, fiction, journalists' observations/research, and personal experience. These tides of memory and forgetting leave their mark not just on library shelves but also on monuments and landscapes of the city. The museum that is created becomes a place of forgetting, for it diverts public memory onto a different, more pervasive master narrative, which is also inscribed in other parts of the city, in the form of gigantesque national edifices. As a historian, one moves about the city searching for memories, searching that which has since been edited out of history altogether. How can one interpret records, which are officially produced artefacts made not to provide information but to categorise, present and conceal experience in various ways; and so break the mythology of silence, trace how this memory is projected, guarded and denied. From my experience of researching the Emergency I have learnt that both personal narratives and government documents have limited value as evidence or fact. Set against one another, however, they provide an account that is disturbingly coherent, and alarmingly close to lived experience.

From Emma Tarlo's lecture, "Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi", at 'City Dwellers: South Asian Conference on the Urban Experience', Sarai-CSDS, 9-11 January 2003.

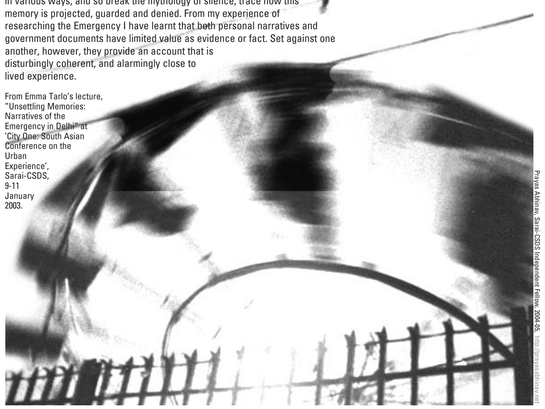

Photo: Ashwin, Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellow, 2004-05, http://sarai.net/fellows.html

Reading *Naukar ki Kameez*

Two questions have lingered in my mind for some time now – one, how can one understand the current tendencies of the middle-class towards the Right? And two, how is English implicated in this? Interestingly, a clue to these questions comes from a novel written in 1979 – *Naukar ki Kameez* by Vinod Kumar Shukla. The novel, which I read recently, brought in new permutations, spaces inhabited by people I have known – lower-middle-class houses. Not sunk into poverty, but in a continuous struggle to stay afloat, with dignity. People who have veered into right-wing Hindu thought (I do not know much about those who have not – though of course they exist, and I should renew my intimacies). Through the novel, I have tried to move in some small configuration towards "an ethnography of fascism".

A lower-middle-class Hindu family lives in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood in a town in western UP with a dominant Muslim culture. The family has a pride of education, a gentility of poverty, and an understated, but present pride of caste. The father holds a petty job in the bureaucracy. There is within him a strong consciousness of being a minority in the area. He also sees the conservative ways of families around him – not as educated, earning a livelihood through small business enterprises, and a demand on women to remain indoors.

Elsewhere in the city, in a more mobile middle-class area, a close relative of this family is prospering, slowly but surely. A better paid job, mobility in a somewhat liberal public sector organisation which is public sector but opening up, and the wife's timely (early '80s) insistence on an "elite" English education for the children.

The parents of family one attempt to give their children terms for dignity: pride in language (good Hindi), hard work, keeping your mind clean, learning from the success of the uncle. The distance, rather, is from the Muslim neighbour – from a fear of what brews behind those high walls. The children will find it hard to struggle out, as the '80s turn into the '90s. Because they do not manage engineering or medical or a bank job. And because two of them are girls. The struggle out is defeating, except for the providence of a good match for one of the girls.

The pride in Hindi is a myth maintained among the children to keep the real world at bay. The cousin who does not become bitter stays quietly in the class he was born into. With sincerity, he struggles at a job, refusing favours from his uncle. He is laughed at a bit and loved a lot from a distance for being a good man. He salvages his togetherness from this. The English-speaking cousins will grow with a sense of their privilege, some guilt and maybe they will live with the possibility of being downwardly mobile.

The father who built a life of relative privilege – though not prosperity – for his children, will work harder, be honest in his work, and tough on many people. It is a demand his job makes. He will try and help relatives and friends of relatives. He will look around at others in his workplace who have had it easier – who were to the manor born – and hold them in some contempt. His children have known opportunity, and the ease that comes with an education in English. He will feel somewhat distanced from them. The distance will wax and wane. Love, affection, a desire to love and comprehend will mitigate the process. He will tell his children about the worlds they have not known – the apples he wanted to eat as a kid but never could, how his mother would tell him they are given to people when they are ill, how he would long to be ill. Does he adhere to feelings of contempt and anger towards those who "had it easy"? By the mid '90s he will have labelled them as those who have easy secular politics. His own children too.

And the girls of the other family? In the book, one discovered some kind of conservatism in one of them, a bitterness at being denied opportunity, at the failure of Hindi to fulfill its promise, of the glory of school being very different from the situation outside. The conservatism probably increased with her good marriage into a reasonably well-off family, which was into private business.

The other one maintained her love for Hindi (and a culture rooted in Hindi) and would not be bitter about her relatives. She probably looks up to right-wing public figures who rose in national politics in the '90s as gentle, articulate, complex, as men who keep their word.

A novel is not reality. And this novel is definitely an artifice – a work of art. But it may be worthwhile to turn to fiction sometimes to be able to isolate the threads running through our lives that get tugged at, with time and in different situations.

http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2002-November/001975.html
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