

The walls of the new house have not been plastered yet. The threshold is without a door. Ataabul sits with his back to it, his legs folded under him. He is wearing a white *kurti pyjama*. Light is flooding in from the door-less threshold, hiding his face in darkness, loosing itself in the grey walls of the house.

His little daughter is walking around the room. Her doll house has broken, but she has brought it with her to their new house, even as her friends have all been left behind. From time to time she halts, picks something up, tries to piece it together, puts it back in its place, and resumes her quiet circling of the room. The journey to the edge of the city, and then beyond it to Ram Park, in a tempo filled with things from the house which lay in the centre of the city, was filled with the resolve to begin afresh, again. They reached here in the middle of the day. The roof of the house had not yet been laid, and forty-five year old Ataabul, after unloading the tempo and arranging everything along the four walls of their new home, went to the market to buy cement sheets. He covered the house with these. The walls and the bare floor found a roof, but the household things lay as they had been placed the first day, their backs to the walls, as if still trying to get used to their new surroundings.

Ataabul sat thinking about his setting age, and rising responsibilities. His other daughter, who was preparing fish in the kitchen, was almost his height now. And his son's feet had grown large enough to fit into his father's shoes. Grown accustomed to the proximity of those who lived near him, in his neighbourhood, Ataabul sat feeling like a vacant space, wondering how he would now begin filling himself again. His wife and children were with him, as was everything he owned and had gathered up in his house. But something had got left behind in the home of yesterday. What was that? Something kept calling from inside him, but he couldn't locate the sound. He turned towards his wife and said, "What can we do if something has got left behind! It doesn't matter. We will think of something new, again."

Someone walked to the door and said, "Is everything alright? Any problems?" Ataabul's beetle stained teeth shone through his lips as he smiled and replied, "No, there is no problem. We will see what comes our way." The slanting eyes of the son were receding from the house now. Ataabul pieced together, for the umpteenth time in the day, another morsel of courage. Time may slip out of his hands for now, but he knew he still had the capacity to bring it back into his home.

Rakesh  
Practitioner, Cybermahala Project, Sarai CSDS + Ankur  
<http://inanga.theurl.com/blog/archive/2006/04/17/the-journey-afresh-by-rakesh.html>



The close, densely knit, uneven rooftops of neighbouring houses crowd in on a conversation between a father and his son on the terrace of their home.

**Mother:** Today was your interview in the railways! You didn't go?

**Father:** I went. Pandeyji himself called and said, "Trivediji, before recommending your son, the least you could have done was to ensure that the boy will come for the interview." By calling on my 35 years of service, I have got them to agree to call him again tomorrow.

**Rakesh:** So what if they have agreed? I have to agree too. I will not become a ticket collector.

**Father:** Then what will you do? Spend your life hatching nonsensical schemes? Today the entire city knows you as "Sheik Chali".

**Rakesh:** Phursatganj is the abode of donkeys and donkeys don't understand anything besides grazing grass and bearing loads. And I will neither graze grass, nor bear loads. I won't ruin my life by getting trapped in a job.

**Father:** I have held the same job for 35 years. Is my life ruined?

**Rakesh:** *Bahuji*, all your life you have worked for the state. Did the state ever ask you before it did anything? For 35 years you have worn the same black, *khadi* coat and done up down up down on the same route. Does even one passenger remember your face? If you leave this town tomorrow, besides *Ammi* and I, will it have the slightest affect on anyone's health? Will the railways shut for one day? In your life there is neither respect, nor fun, nor any meaning.

**Father:** When I wear this black coat, of which you feel so ashamed, people bow down and greet me, shopkeepers stand up. All because his coat is testament that in my entire life I have never touched a single ill-gotten paisa. This is my honour, my respect. Tomorrow morning, at 9 o'clock in the interview. Either you reach there, or please forgive us and weave your life in whichever way you choose because we have not been able to make our house and our life worthy of you.

Translated from *Baeti Aur Baeti*  
Directed by Shaad Ali, 170 mins, Colour, Hindi/English, 2005

Jashoda, a woman in her mid-forties, lives on the rent from two houses in an industrial suburb. Jashoda lets out one of her houses to small income group families and reserves the other for single migrant males. The first is "a zoo", says Jashoda, and the second, "a homely mess". Jashoda is explicitly insistent on the non-*bhadralok* character of her "homely mess". An assemblage of browbeaten wage slaves, desperate job seekers and dispirited unemployed, Jashoda's mess refuses to grow into a "family" (a popular idea among the *bhadralok* mess-dwellers at the time, since many would have co-habited for years at a stretch).

Jashoda's constant attention to the happiness and comfort of her defaulting mess-dwellers is irreducible to motherly care and affection — her discourtesy, her matter-of-fact ways of dealing with indiscipline, her unbecoming and began speaking to someone we could not see. Everybody at home was puzzled. He suddenly awoke and ran towards the attic...

He whispered that the army had surrounded the house and the encounter would commence soon. We persuaded him that it was a nightmare and he must not panic. He said gunmen would shoot him down. The drama continued all night till morning prayers were called. Later in the day we took him to the hospital.

Arshad Hamid  
Independent Fellow, Sarai CSDS,  
2005-2006  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2005-May/014270.html>

"One evening, when he came home, he said he was feeling unwell and complained of a fever. We suggested that he lie down. Around 10 P.M. he fell unconscious and began speaking to someone we could not see. Everybody at home was puzzled. He suddenly awoke and ran towards the attic... He whispered that the army had surrounded the house and the encounter would commence soon. We persuaded him that it was a nightmare and he must not panic. He said gunmen would shoot him down. The drama continued all night till morning prayers were called. Later in the day we took him to the hospital."

Notes on *Shaharati* (Suburbia), Manik Bandyopadhyay, 1940-41.  
Bodhanatha Kar and Shabbirulakshmi Ray  
Independent Fellow, 2005-06  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2005-August/008128.html>



"When my father died a few years ago, we found, amongst his papers, an advertisement looking for a Burmese woman. Our father had been in Rangoon during the war and had escaped overland when the Japanese came...

What was of interest to me is not only his complete silence; we don't know who this Burmese woman was, there is no indication. But his complete silence about this person who had been so important that he had, for three years, constantly put these advertisements, in the paper, every month. It was quite expensive, and he didn't have much money.

What we really wanted to know is, did our mother know? How do we ask our mother whether she knew about this woman? How do we ask our mother, who is this woman? Is it a daughter, a lover, a wife? And we, all of us sisters, skated around the question trying to find ways to ask our mother without asking her. How do you ask the question that you can't actually ask? And I still don't know who the Burmese woman was. I will probably never find out."

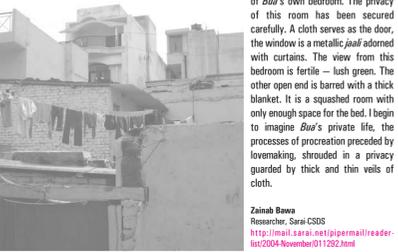
Notes from a discussion at the History Memory, Identity workshop at Sarai CSDS, 14-16 January, 2005.



The street comes alive in the darkness just before dawn when the pumps start to flow. Women, awakened by the sounds outside that signal the beginnings of the brief release, are instantly in the fray, churning urgently back and forth across the street, pleading, fighting, negotiating, building up or calling on favours, as one pump stops and another continues to yield. The whole range of social relations and norms are indeed and invoked to claim priority in the queue — age, property rights, states of ritual purity. Yet, always, the need for water, the right to water, is vociferously asserted to counter these claims.

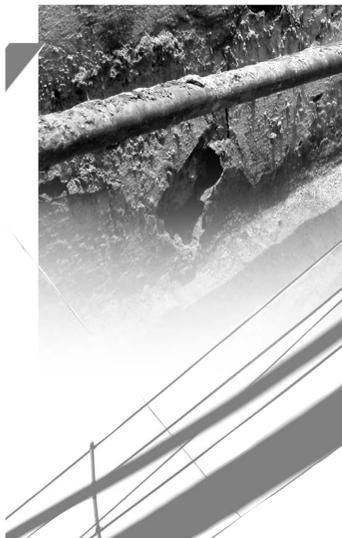
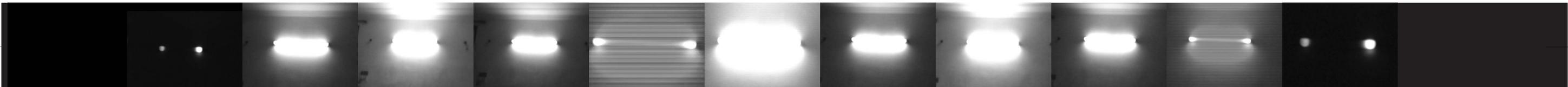
Jamuna lives alone in a rented room on the street. Her sister, Chaya, will be leaving the house and moving to a hostel. She obsesses — hotels and hostels were supplied with water from drums, rarely cleaned and "filled in the dead darkness from some decaying well. That water could contain rots, droppings, rubbish, leeches, snails, cockroaches, even frogs." Was this the water that Chaya would drink? Water drips into every conversation as medium, catalyst and metaphor. Subtle changes in the water situation mark the passage of time, or produce effects of timelessness — "It was now months since the water had stopped coming out of the taps."

Notes on *Thaweeb* (Water), AhsanKamran.  
Kareem Ceelha  
Independent Fellow, Sarai CSDS, 2004-2005  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2005-June/005799.html>



I step inside *Bau's* house. Each room has a long wooden bed and functions simultaneously as a bedroom and a living room. There are three rooms in all, each leading to the other. An attempt has been made to define the boundaries for each room, boundaries which are assertive as well as fluid. The most assertive boundary is that of *Bau's* own bedroom. The privacy of this room has been secured carefully. A cloth serves as the door, the window is a metallic *jaal* adorned with curtains. The view from this bedroom is fertile — lush green. The other open end is barred with a thick blanket. It is a squashed world with only enough space for the bed. I begin to imagine *Bau's* private life, the processes of procreation preceded by lovemaking, strodded in a vacancy guarded by thick and thin veils of cloth.

Zainab Bawa  
Researcher, Sarai CSDS  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2004-November/011282.html>



"We were primarily a home for destitute women. In 1999 we were woken up in the night by the arrival of police vans bringing girls they had rescued from a brothel raid. There was no place to house them, so they asked us to keep 160 of them. The girls were already angry and aggressive because of the way the police handled them. They mistook my brown saree and blouse for a police uniform. It was only the next day that they realised they are not in a police station and that I am not a police woman. One girl asked me, '*Kya tum log aag hai* [Are you different from them?]' I had no way to explain what a nun is so I said, '*Haan, main bhagwan ki aurat hoon* [Yes, I am a woman of god].'" Sister Cecily laughs as she remembers her awkward translation. The girls are happy and often runaway to do *majaa* [fun], a common past time with all Sr. Cecily's wards. *Majaa* is a quick escapade where a girl gets a boy to take her to the movies or buy her small gifts in exchange for sexual favours. Sr. Cecily confesses that she copes with the *majaa* sessions because she can't put a stop to it, and anyway most of the girls return to the home of their own accord. To herself she has found her own explanations.

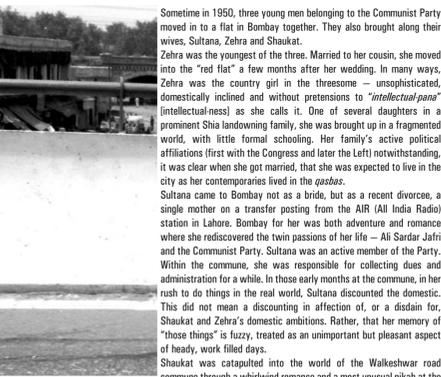
Miriam Chandni Menacherry  
Independent Fellow, Sarai CSDS, 2005-2006  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2004-July/010819.html>



"One day I was checking tickets in the first class compartment. I checked an office-going man. Next to him was a school boy. The moment he saw me, he started shriveling up. I asked him to show me his ticket. He said, 'Sir, I don't have a first class pass.' I knew something was wrong because he was travelling in the down direction, in school uniform, at 10 A.M.

I sensed something was wrong. I asked him, 'What is the matter?' The boy had gone to school but had not done his homework and was suspended for the whole day. He thought if he went home, his parents would shout at him. So he decided to go up and down the train all day, and kill time. I told him, 'Parents shout at you for your own good. Now give me your phone number and go home. I will call and check if you have reached.' The boy was scared. He said, 'Sir, I promise I will go home. I will call you. Please don't call my home.' He took my number and at about 3 P.M., he called saying he had reached."

Zainab Bawa  
Researcher, Sarai CSDS  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2005-September/005218.html>



Sometime in 1950, three young men belonging to the Communist Party moved in to a flat in Bombay together. They also brought along their wives, Sultana, Zehra and Shaikat. Zehra was the youngest of the three. Married to her cousin, she moved into the "red flat" a few months after her wedding. In many ways, Zehra was the country girl in the threesome — unsophisticated, domestically inclined and without pretensions to "intellectual *pana*" (intellectualness) as she calls it. One of several daughters in a prominent Shia landowning family, she was brought up in a fragmented world, with little formal schooling. Her family's active political affiliations first with the Congress and later the Left notwithstanding it was clear when she got married, that she was expected to live in the city as her contemporaries lived in the *gasbas*. Sultana came to Bombay not as a bride, but as a recent divorcee, a single mother on a transfer posting from the AIR (All India Radio) station in Lahore. Bombay for her was both adventure and romance where she rediscovered the twin passions of her life — Ali Sardar Jafri and the Communist Party. Sultana was an active member of the Party. Within the commune, she was responsible for collecting dues and administration for a while. In those early months at the commune, in her rush to do things in the real world, Sultana discounted the domestic. This did not mean a discounting in affection of, or a disdain for, Shaikat and Zehra's domestic ambitions. Rather, that her memory of "those things" is fuzzy, treated as an unimportant but pleasant aspect of *baad*, work filled days.

Shaikat was catapulted into the world of the Walkeshwar road commune through a whirlwind romance and a most unusual *nikah* at the commune itself, presided over by her father. She touches lightly over the grim realities of penury that followed her marriage, but it is clear that it was a difficult period of adjustment. Actively involved with the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA), her narrative straddles both the domestic and her professional life, which were deeply linked to the idea of being a communist's wife.

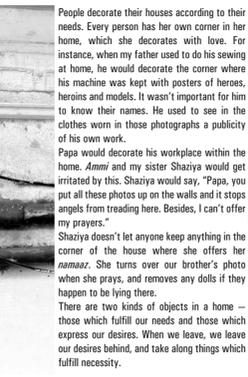
Taran Khan  
Independent Fellow, Sarai CSDS, 2003-2004  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2004-February/010286.html>



A hostel, for students preparing for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examinations in Christian Colony, called Sankalp, takes an entrance test and an interview before allotting a room. Once selected it provides to its residents food, coaching and reading material in a strictly disciplined regimen that entails allotted study time, coming back to hostel time, reciting the *Saraswati Vandana* and the *Gayatri Mantra* at certain fixed times in the day and a hymn to the food goddess *Amapurna* before every meal in *chaste* Sanskrit. It is a coveted hostel.

The room rents in Christian Colony are comparatively cheaper, in the range of Rs. 1000 to Rs. 1800, when compared to Mukherjee Nagar and Indira Vihar. The entire locality is immersed in the view that preparation for the UPSC exam is a "tagayya" (jnanak, for it leads to the greatest reward in life — a UPSC office. Motivational quotes of Vivekanand are plastered on the walls of almost all the students' rooms. Residents follow a highly disciplined life with robotic efficiency. An average room would have space enough to cram in a small table, chair and a mattress. The walls are embellished with feel-good and confidence building wallpaper, an absolute must for any civil service aspirant, books and magazines strewn everywhere, and a ceiling fan, the size of an exhaust fan, roaring at full speed.

Gaurav Dixit  
Student Stipendiary, Sarai CSDS, 2005-2006  
<http://email.sarai.net/pipermail/urbastudylog-rasp/2005-August/001369.html>



People decorate their houses according to their needs. Every person has her own corner in her home, which she decorates with love. For instance, when my father used to do his sewing at home, he would decorate the corner where his machine was kept with posters of heroes, heroines and models. It wasn't important for him to know their names. He used to see in the clothes worn in those photographs a publicity of his own work. Papa would decorate his workplace within the home. *Ammi* and my sister Shaziya would get irritated by this. Shaziya would say, "Papa, you put all these photos up on the walls and it stops angels from treading here. Besides, I can't offer my prayers."

Shaziya doesn't let anyone keep anything in the corner of the house where she offers her *namaaz*. She turns over my brother's photo when she prays, and removes any dolls if they happen to be lying there. There are two kinds of objects in a home — those which fulfill our needs and those which express our desires. When we leave, we leave our desires behind, and take along things which fulfill necessity.

Neelizar  
Practitioner, Cybermahala Project, Sarai CSDS + Ankur  
<http://inanga.theurl.com/blog/archive/2006/04/18/object-of-desire-by-neelizar.html>



Traditional Brahmin kitchens took pride in their collection of brass, bronze and copper utensils. Shining brass and bronze vessels were cleaned meticulously with tamarind and ash every day by the non-Brahmin domestic servants of the households, while Brahmin women spent considerable time acquiring and comparing their collections. The replacement of brass and copper vessels by "ever-silver" (stainless steel) was mainly on account of their "ever-silver" quality. Brass and bronze vessels tended to tarnish and their cleaning was a complicated, time-consuming process. As urban poverty made survival increasingly difficult for poor households, most domestic servants took up work in more than one house. They were the first to resist brass-ware. Also, the task of cleaning often devolved onto daughters or daughters-in-laws. Daughters took up the cudgel against brass and copper-ware and, either through tactful persuasion or aggressive initiatives, compelled their mothers to take them to the utensil stores that ran a profitable business repurchasing old brass-ware. For days after, mothers were still to reconcile with the parting, and the few hundred rupees concealed in the steel trunk were a poor substitute for their lost wares. They said to themselves and other family members that though they had not used those brass and copper vessels for ages, they had a store of memories associated with each of them, such as how their mothers had got them, from where, about how her other sisters wanted them, but she had been lucky.

U. Kalpagam  
"Gadgets and Subjectivity: The Making of the Tamil Brahmin Self", *Sarai Reader 02: Shaping Technologies*, Delhi, 2002.  
[http://www.sarai.net/journal/02PDF/03sharphology-s/05shetra\\_urban.pdf](http://www.sarai.net/journal/02PDF/03sharphology-s/05shetra_urban.pdf)

My mother enjoys going to the local market and the weekly bazaars. She moves around these spaces with confidence and poise. She bargains, weighs, buys and exclaims. But when she returns home, she has to describe the bazaar experience as "tiring".

Monica Narula  
"Discussing the Public Domain", *Sarai Reader 01: The Public Domain*, Delhi, 2001.  
<http://www.sarai.net/journal/01pdf/vi-009%2001%20sarai.pdf>

It is really difficult to say whether there was ever such a thing as a Monkeyman, or whether it was a person, or a group of people, playing mischief. The Monkeyman's appearances were in places where people sleep on terraces — and in lanes outside their homes — in the dark and hot summer nights. Densely populated areas with winding lanes and by lanes, where the creature could easily disappear into thin air. The Monkeyman was in the papers of course, but people also heard news of it from their neighbours who sat outside their homes on cots, or stood chatting at the paan and tea-shops in the locality. They gathered in small open fields in the vicinity to exchange notes after a series of attacks by the creature... Elusive though it was, who knows if it were not, instead, the encounter of a secret rendezvous in the darkness of the summer nights. A meeting following from initial furtive glances, and hurriedly written notes. A wait for arrival in nights of surreptitious wakefulness, when someone "accidentally" strays into someone else's terrace. A mysterious creature who merely gently scratched his victims on the back.

Ashya Nigam  
"Theatre Of The Urban: The strange case of the Monkeyman", *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life*, Delhi, 2002.  
[http://www.sarai.net/journal/02PDF/03sharphology-s/05shetra\\_urban.pdf](http://www.sarai.net/journal/02PDF/03sharphology-s/05shetra_urban.pdf)