

A Hijra, a Female Pradhan and a Real Estate Dealer: Between the Market, the State and ‘Community’

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The history of 20th century Delhi is an intertwined history of the city and the slum. Investigating strategies of being and belonging deployed by the urban poor in the Delhi basti of Nangla Matchi, which was demolished in 2006, this paper explores three varied individual biographies as sites of meanings regarding processes of the state, the unstable contexts of livelihoods, and histories of intra-national displacement. This paper further seeks to make an ethnographic contribution to studies of the urban margins by examining the overlapping careers of “margin” and “centre” as cultural, political and economic contexts. The life-stories described in this paper, thus, concern the ways in which the metropolises of power, comfort, pleasure, and hygiene are built over, and through, the provinces of powerlessness, pain, suffering and displacement.

The modern history of urban “improvement” schemes in Delhi is closely tied to colonial and postcolonial projects of producing “clean” spaces through projects such as “slum clearance” and the demarcation of “criminal” spaces. Indeed, the Delhi Improvement Trust (DIT), vested with monopoly powers over purchasing, selling and “improving” land and dwelling in Delhi was established in 1937 in the wake “of a report by Mr A P Hume, [Indian Civil Services] 1cs, on congestion in Delhi city”.¹ Soon after, in February 1938, DIT “notified” its first (and best known) urban improvement scheme, viz, the Delhi Ajmeri Gate Slum Clearance Scheme (Mehra 1991; see also Hosagrahar 2007; Legg 2007).

Notwithstanding the contrary opinion of the state-appointed Birla Committee set up to inquire into the workings of the DIT,² the postcolonial state substantially appropriated the “clean-up” agenda formulated by the DIT. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA), established in 1957 as the successor body to the DIT, also sought through a variety of means to cleanse Delhi of unwanted spaces such as slums (Baviskar 2006; Ramanathan 2006; Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008). The DIT also administered “reclamation colonies”, such as those near Karol Bagh in west Delhi, where members of “criminal tribes” were confined within well-defined geographical boundaries, with their residents requiring permission from the police to travel beyond.³

The history of 20th century Delhi is, then, an intertwined history of the city and the slum. For projects such as the building of New Delhi (King 1976) and a variety of other infrastructure-related activities – public housing, construction of the Pragati Maidan exhibition grounds, and the various projects associated with the 1984 Asian Games, to name just a few – have invariably attracted poor migrant labour from different parts of the country (Rao and Desai 1956; Dupont 2000; Tarlo 2000). Also, DDA’s monopolistic and speculative activities have led to artificially inflated land prices in Delhi, thereby disenfranchising large sections of the urban population from the housing market (Dasappa Kacker 2005; Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008). The history of the growth of Delhi’s slums (or, “bastis”) is also, then, the history of the policies of urban development. To paraphrase Richard Sennett (1996), the flesh that drapes the stone in India’s national capital, is veined with “informal” settlements that are home to approximately 30 lakh people, in a city of some 1.4 crore, “living in six lakh jhuggis in 1,100 jhuggi jhompri clusters” (Ramanathan 2006: 3195).

This paper seeks to utilise life histories from the cultural and economic edges of the city as a tool for investigating urban and

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national processes. While I provide a gloss on the narratives below, I hope also to leave open the possibility of reading the “negotiated possibilities” (Roy 2003: 89) of being in the city in as many different ways as possible. The stories below are of migrants to the city and offer possibilities of tracking a variety of cultural, political, and economic histories across the different life strategies. A serious attention to biography, as Judith Brown (2009) suggests, has much to tell us about “the nature of individual and shared identities and the ways these develop over time in different contexts, the nature of agency in the historical process, and the local and global webs of connection within which people live and work, within and across national boundaries” (2009: 588).

The Multiple Histories of Nangla Matchi

Before it was demolished in June 2006, the basti of Nangla Matchi (“Nangla”) stood on Delhi’s Ring road, on the western banks of the Yamuna river near the International Trade Fair grounds known as Pragati Maidan (literally “the field of progress”).⁴ The term “basti” is Hindi for “settlement” and, following Menon-Sen and Bhan (2008), I adopt this usage in preference to “slum” in order to avoid spurious judgments regarding illegality, criminality, and lack of industriousness inherent within the latter term. Use of the term “slum” denies the fact that as home to workers, producers, and consumers, such spaces are “inextricably bound up with the morphology of the city” (Tarlo 2003: 15), and are “not so much marginal to [the city’s] history as *marginalised* by it” (ibid; emphasis in the original); the idea of illegality that attaches to slums is not, of course, applied in the same manner to residents of richer localities such as those that contain Delhi’s “farm houses”. “Considered in terms of the livelihoods of their households”, the basti of Nangla was among “the products of the strategies of low-income groups to position themselves in the labour, consumption and production sectors of the metropolis and the neighbourhood surrounding them” (Askew 2002:143).

The biographies I present here are narratives of modern histories of work and unemployment, settlement and displacement, intimacies and stranger-hood, and the myriad erratic cultural economies of the city through which poor women and men negotiate life, death and the pleasures and sufferings that fall in between. They are accounts from the cultural and economic margins of the city. However, they demonstrate that “margins” are “sites that do not so much lie outside the state but rather like rivers, run through its body” (Das and Poole 2004: 13). As narratives of “concrete practices in which life and labour are engaged” (ibid: 15), these life-stories are about the significance of the margins – both as life and labour – to the making of the centre. They concern the ways in which the metropolises of power, comfort, pleasure, and hygiene are built over, and through, the provinces of powerlessness, pain, suffering and displacement.

Chamkili Pradhan: Sakhi, Leader

Stretching across approximately five acres of riverfront land in the shadows of the coal-fired Indraprastha power plant, Nangla rested on the fly ash remains of the raw material that lit up and warmed Delhi. The land had been the dumping ground for the

plant’s waste products. By the time I got to know Nangla, in 2004, the ash had been cemented and bricked-over with houses, mosques, temples and narrow pathways, though pools of green-coloured liquid – discharge from the plant, I was told by some – still surrounded the basti on one side. But before the cement and the yellow-brick paths, when the entire stretch was a sea of fly ash, there was Chamkili Pradhan. Almost everyone I met in Nangla told me that it was Chamkili who founded the settlement, and that she had been instrumental in settling people there from the late 1970s. When the first settlers began to arrive, the ash was exquisitely fine – like dull-coloured butterflies that slowly descended upon the riverbank and were easily stirred into swirling grey clouds by the slightest gust, flavouring all food, and smearing the freshly bathed.

Chamkili Pradhan (literally, the “bright/shiny chief”) described herself as a *sakhi*, or literally, “girl-friend”. Kalu Ram, who owned a cigarette shop in Nangla, once said to me: “That *hijra* [eunuch] is called Chamkili Pradhan since she has the [illegal] contract for supplying electricity to Nangla. As long as I have known her, she has been the bijlee supplier.”

There were two versions regarding how Chamkili came to be Nangla’s founder. In the first, she came to Delhi in the mid-1970s and worked for a contractor who built *bundhs* or embankments along the Yamuna. Though originally from Bihar, Chamkili had left her home state as a teenager in search of a job, moving to different parts of the country, finally to settle in Delhi. “At that time”, she told me, “there was no one at Nangla”. She built a hut for herself on the riverbank, not far from the original (and still existing) village of Nangla Matchi from where the basti got its name. In addition to building the Yamuna embankment, Chamkili had also worked in other parts of the Delhi, including in Pragati Maidan. As she moved from one part of the city to another, she met individuals and families newly arrived in Delhi and told them to come to Nangla and set up home there. These families were keen to do so as the area is in a central location and very well connected to public transport. The second version regarding Chamkili’s arrival had it that she was employed as a driver for a prominent Congress politician who held the contract for collecting ash from the power plant and dumping it at Nangla.

What is common to both accounts is that Chamkili would charge a “fee” for “allotting” a plot of land. No one could say how she was able to take money and give “permission” for new hutments to be built on land that, as everyone knew, was owned by the government. But then no one – not even the men – ever said anything about Chamkili’s obvious demeanour as a *hijra*, that she wore a sari but spoke in a heavy male voice, and that she wore large earrings and peppered every second sentence with expletives. In the manly world of basti pradhans, Chamkili held her own in Nangla as well as in those places and systems – police stations, for example – that impinge upon basti life.

Nangla was a hybrid kind of space – not solid earth but fly ash, owned by the state but actually under Chamkili’s provenance, and within the city but also at its cultural and economic margins. A *hijra* as its progenitor was, then, an appropriate lineage. Of course, it may also say something about the levels of tolerance regarding gender and sexual identities in bastis that can be

contrasted to the “heterosexist normativity” (Butler 1999: 186) of the wider city. A long time resident of Nangla told me that Chamkili, “could deal with anyone...the police were scared of her... if ever they wanted to arrest someone from the basti, they first went to ask for her permission...she would swear at them, and they would beat a hasty retreat!”

Chamkili Pradhan mentioned that her “ashram” was in the city of Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh (UP) – the putative site of Krishna’s love-play – where, she said, “hundreds of sadhus and sants [ascetics] are fed”. Chamkili had an aura of sacred power that was also part of her appeal to the people of Nangla, where the sacred sits alongside stories of witchcraft, headless men who hunt for children, and mysterious thieves in the night with thickly oiled bodies that evade all attempts at capture. Chamkili’s sacredness drew upon the ritual position of the hijra in Indian society (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005), but also exceeded it inasmuch as she could, seemingly, best secular forces. In the city, you never knew which of your powers you may need to call upon.

Pradhan

The word “pradhan” translates into “chief” or “head”, and the village pradhan headed the panchayat (the traditional all-male village council), settled disputes among villagers, and mediated between the village and higher levels of authority, such as regional or more powerful rulers. Virtually all bastis in Delhi have one or more pradhan, indicating a continuing familiarity with rural power structures, as well as their deployment within a hostile urban environment (see also Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008, on the role of the urban pradhan). The number of pradhans in any one basti depends upon competing ambitions as well as the politics of identity. So, several men may stake claim to being pradhan and possessing the capacity to mediate with the outside world on behalf of basti residents. The demonstration of such capacity – either consistently or in stray cases – can lead to these claimants being elected to the position, or being proclaimed pradhan by a group of basti residents. If there are several men who aspire to the position, then it is not unusual for a basti to have more than one pradhan, each with his own factional following, competing for authority and respect among residents and seeking to expand his sphere of influence. Attempts to “show-up” competitors are intense and never-ending; however, just as frequently, one pradhan may relinquish his title in favour of another, ceding his authority and following to the latter. Second, if a basti contains more than one ethnic community, as is common, then each community also elects its own pradhan, who may or may not recognise the authority of other pradhans in the locality (see also Jha, Rao and Woolcock 2007).

The urban pradhan, usually a middle-aged man, is a master of the hybrid cultural and power economies of the city that relate to the poor; or at least that is what he tells his fellow residents, on behalf of whom he negotiates with the world beyond basti boundaries.⁵ Chamkili’s life-story is a combined history of the structures of power, and the erratic possibilities, half-chances, strategies and limitations that making a living for rural and the urban poor involve. Chamkili was pradhan of Nangla Matchi for a period of seven years, having been elected three times by popular vote.

Basti pradhans have specific qualities, those located on a continuum that includes charisma, kindred warmth, persistence, and the ability to issue promissory notes that have no maturity date. They must always promise to get things done, and must simultaneously have a bagful of reasons for lack of success. Their position in the urban political economy – economically marginal inhabitants of the city, illegal occupiers of “public property”, among others – makes it impossible to fulfil all promises. When elections come around and politicians ask for a truck-full of votes in return for paved roads or delaying basti demolition, then the pradhan is on surer grounds in terms of her power. Otherwise, she must constantly dissimulate.

Pradhans usually have a modicum of education, and, most importantly, a deep familiarity with the bureaucratic geography of the city. Their city is occupied by the premises of Ministry of Food and Supplies (that deals with the variety of ration cards for purchasing food at subsidised rates) and that of urban development, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, slum bureaucracies, the DDA, offices that issue voters identification cards, police stations, court houses, and offices of politicians. Not only must the pradhan be intimate with these official geographies, he must also know how to gain access to their corridors, offices and cubicles. Gaining access to such spaces is usually quite a difficult affair, and a pradhan must also be versed in the arts of passing and faking in order to inveigle the sentries of such spaces into allowing entry. Indeed, the ability to convince those who guard the portals of bureaucratic power that someone who looks and talks like a poor person might actually carry some indefinable weight of authority – “perhaps he knows someone who knows someone” – is worth many votes in basti elections.

The pradhan, and those who would aspire to be pradhan, must move across a number of erratic and uncertain contexts of making contacts and connections. She must carefully map out those interstices within bureaucratic checkpoints where strategies of dissimulation can secure access to the offices of key officials. In the midst of a neo-liberal state that seeks to build a “global city” by removing the working poor from it, the pradhan – in her deep intimacy with the state – is the unexpected Nehruvian urban subject. She knows that at the edges of bureaucratic and political formations, and at those points where these meet the basti, there are ways of gaining access through the seemingly impenetrable walls of permission slips and departmental checkpoints. That is what makes a pradhan.

Connections

By the time I met her in early 2005, however, Chamkili was no longer a pradhan. In fact, she no longer lived in Nangla and occasionally visited to keep an eye on the electricity business that had become a significant source of her income.⁶ By then, there were several people who were referred to as “pradhanji”. The people of Nangla recognised three distinct settlements within the locality – Devi Nagar (the earliest), Sant Nagar and Kali Basti. Different pradhans tended to have uneven jurisdiction over these areas. The population in Sant Nagar and Kali Basti was quite mixed, both in terms of religion and place of origin, whereas Devi Nagar was predominantly Muslim. It was

in Devi Nagar that Chamkili began her “settlement” activities. At the time of its demolition in 2006, Nangla had a population of approximately 25,000.

Before coming to Delhi, Chamkili had worked for a company that manufactured electricity transformers and poles in the town of Panki, near Kanpur. She travelled around India as member of the group that installed the equipment. “I have helped to supply electricity to all parts of the country”, she once told me. By the time she arrived in Delhi in the late 1970s, she was worldly-wise: her search for a living had taken her all over the country, she had acquired a modicum of technical expertise through making and installing transformers and other electrical equipment, and had met a wide variety of people with whom she learnt to defend and negotiate her ambiguous gender identity. In Delhi, Chamkili utilised her rapidly growing urban connections to secure a “contract” for supplying electricity to parts of the burgeoning Nangla basti. She installed a mini-transformer in her pucca house, bought electricity from the Delhi Electric Supply Undertaking (DESU), the government-owned electricity body, and sold it at a profit to Nangla residents.

Chamkili was one of three such contractors in Nangla. According to Nassim, who owned a small teashop, Chamkili had got the electricity contract during the chief ministership of the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) Madan Lal Khurana (1993-95); Chamkili had been a BJP supporter and activist for quite some time. After some years of sole ownership, she went into partnership with another Nangla resident, Bilkees Begum. Nassim mentioned that a few years ago, some DESU officials had come to Nangla and charged everyone Rs 320 for permanent and direct electricity connections, bypassing private suppliers such as Chamkili. However, he said, Chamkili used her political connections to ensure that the government supply did not materialise. The cost per unit in 2005 was Rs 3.50 which, many residents complained, was far more expensive than in other parts of Delhi.

Around 2002, Chamkili moved out of Nangla, appointing a man everyone called “masterji” – he provided private tuition to schoolchildren – to look after her electricity business. Masterji supervised new connections, the maintenance of the equipment, and the collection of tariff. Chamkili visited about once a fortnight to collect the money. Chamkili built a house near Sonia Vihar in the northern extremities of Delhi, about 40 kilometres from Nangla. She also started a real estate business there. Nassim thought that Chamkili had been aware that Nangla would be demolished and so bought elsewhere. Others said that Chamkili and some others were directly responsible for the demolition by getting residents to take part in the government survey that determined who would be eligible for alternative land in a proposed resettlement colony near the village of Savda-Ghevda, some 40 kilometres away, on the northern edges of Delhi.⁷ These informants thought that the pradhans had been bought off by the same politicians who in the past had saved the basti from demolition as it was an important vote bank (see also Batra and Mehra 2008; Risbud 2009). However, the government agency that owned the land (and wanted it back) paid the politicians, who paid the pradhans, who, in turn, convinced many in Nangla that it was in their interests to be “surveyed”, paving the way for the basti’s

demolition. For instance, Suraj Chandra, a former pradhan of Nangla, now living in Savda-Ghevda, said that:⁸

Well, we didn’t know who owned the land on which Nangla was located. However, later we found out that in 1986 or so, Pragati Power Company had paid [named three prominent Congress Party politicians, an MP (Member of Parliament), an MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly), and a municipal corporation functionary] around nine crores to buy the land from the DDA However, Delhi Jal [Water] Board also put up a sign that part of the land was theirs. Then we found out that that the land actually belonged to the people of Nangla village nearby. ... Now there is a case going on between the village residents and Pragati Power. That’s why nothing has been built upon that land. There was a dispute over the property when it was being demolished and if we had known, they could not have removed us.

Erratic Passages

Sonia Vihar, where Chamkili now lived, lies at the north-eastern extremity of Delhi, on the banks of the Yamuna river, near the locality of Wazirabad. Located at the border with UP, it is perhaps best known as the location of a large-scale water treatment plant that is touted as the solution to Delhi’s perpetual water shortages. The locality is an extended settlement of red brick pucca houses, small shops, repair workshops, and small-scale factories. Chamkili’s own house was a triple-storey structure, with a single room at the top. It had high ceilings, and religious posters stuck to the wall almost at ceiling level. The house was surrounded by farmlands.

Normally, I would run into Chamkili as she rushed around Nangla collecting dues for her electricity business. My visit to her Sonia Vihar residence was the first chance I had of meeting her at leisure. I began by saying that I had heard that she had a reputation as a very successful businessperson. But she interrupted me, saying that she started her working life in a “*sarkari naukari*” (government job) in the electricity department in Dehradun, later moving to work on “electric trains”. She then joined a “company” that offered to send her to Saudi Arabia as a practitioner of Unani medicine, in which she had undertaken a course of study. However, this did not work out:⁹

The company used to train people to become doctors and then send them to videsh [foreign lands]. But [about me] the company said “this man has an illness”, so we can’t send him overseas, so I left and moved to Kanpur.

Chamkili’s erratic passages across professional and geographical registers reflect the conditions of life for many in her situation. Additionally, as a poor sakhi, she was disadvantaged both on economic and sexual grounds.

In Kanpur, Chamkili joined the Swadeshi Cotton Mills:¹⁰

At the time, Morarji Desai was the Prime Minister, and there had been firing by the PAC [Provincial Armed Constabulary], so I left that job and I managed to get a job in DDA ... then I left that job and got a job at Pragati Maidan, as a chaukidar [security guard], whereas in the DDA, I used to work as a gardener. At Pragati Maidan, I worked in Karnataka [state pavilion] as a chaukidar during trade exhibitions.

The “firing” that Chamkili speaks of most likely refers to an unprovoked attack by the police on striking workers at the Swadeshi Cotton Mills in Kanpur on 6 December 1977 (Chakravarty, Roy and Saberwal 1978).

It is not clear whether Chamkili ever actually worked for a government department or for contractors who supplied a department. Her position both at the DDA and Pragati Maidan was most likely as casual daily wage labourer. Indeed, Pragati Maidan was a significant source of casual (or “*kachcha*”) employment for many residents of Nangla when they first arrived in Delhi. Later, in the mid-1970s, a major strike at Pragati Maidan resulted in permanent jobs for some, and retrenchment for others.

Chamkili’s invocation of the *sarkar* (government/state) as part of her professional biography was significant in the context of the precarious job market for rural migrants to the city. Everyone at Nangla knew that Chamkili had once been a “government officer”, and hence was a person of some importance. Just as the state is pronounced a blight for its arbitrary and opaque dealings with its citizens, there is also simultaneously a desire for its intimacy and gaze. Just as the ambivalence of Chamkili’s gender identity was counterbalanced by her past as a state “official”, her professional biography converted easily into a personal one: Chamkili could “handle” the state because having worked for the state, she had secured some of its aura.

The aura of the state derives, in part but significantly, from its ability to lay claim to land, as well as the ability to allow or restrict its usage. In the late 19th century, the colonial state was quick to declare vast tracts in Delhi as *Nazul* (“crown”) land, thus proclaiming an unambiguous spatial sovereignty. Moving within the axes of a subaltern modernity of modest technical expertise, postcolonial hybrid corporatism, the developmentalist state and its public works, and an ambiguous gender and sexual identity, Chamkili’s passage from itinerant job seeker to urban “*bada aadmi*” (literally “big man”) also unfolded through spatial politics. Upon arriving in Delhi, she met a man called “Arjun”, who “lived at Turkman Gate” in Old Delhi. Arjun was a contractor and “involved in the construction of a *pushta* [stone embankment] from the Wazirabad bridge to Badarpur”:¹¹

...and I started working there. There were other labourers who then started living on what is now Devi Nagar. Then, slowly, others began to arrive. In this manner, I started settling people. They came from Bihar, Bengal, UP, Madras, and many other places. Slowly, I got plans passed for the *kharanja* [brick-paved laneway], public toilets, water connection, ration cards... I got the place settled.... Then, the *netas* [politicians] started coming and vote cards [election identity cards] were made, and eventually things became *pucca* [i.e., there was greater certainty].

The fragile certainty of basti life – oscillating between politicians’ promises, court judgments ordering their removal, and middle-class aspirations for a global city – came to an end in June 2006, when Nangla was demolished. It is the difficult task of the *pradhan* to make the illusion of permanence last. Everyone loves suspense, though some pay more for it than others.

Almost all my conversations with Chamkili drifted towards stories of her kindness towards those around her. She was, she suggested in different ways, both a protector against the state’s depredations, as well as a translator of its rules and regulations. If bureaucracies savage the hapless, they also make for the creation of the web of neighbourhoods, kin-like relationships and intimacies of various kinds. She narrated how she arranged for electricity and water supply, built temples, paved the lane-ways,

fought with exploitative contractors and the police on behalf of residents, and performed “*dharnas*” (or sit-ins) against demolition.

Desire and Distance

The basti that rose out of the ashes of the power plant had a complex relationship to the spaces represented by the plant, the *pucca* localities and the state. It is one aligned to narratives of desire as well as distance from the state. Both Tarlo (2003) and Das (2004) urge that the manner in which we think about the relationship between the poor and structures of state power must move beyond the sterile binary of “passive victims” and “heroic rebels”. However, given the inescapable relationship between the poor and the state, it is a relationship that does not quite present in the same manner as for other class fractions in the city.

While Tarlo (2003) is right to point out that the market “far from operating outside the state, often features as the vernacular idiom through which ordinary people negotiate with local agents of the state” (2003: 12), for basti people, the market is a *via media* rather than destination. That is, it is the state that is the most significant site for the dramas and desires of having, being, relating, consuming, acquiring, and social mobility. Basti residents are statist in an unwitting manner. The market only seeks their attention when they display the ability to consume. However, even as basti residents are at the mercy of the unpredictable pastoralism of the state, there is also great disdain for its corrupt and arbitrary ways (Osella and Osella 2000). Given this context, as I discuss in the concluding section, there is an identity politics that is in the nature of a relay between “statism” and “communitarianism”. This suggests another line of theorising beyond the victim/rebel dichotomy.

Chamkili would repeatedly tell me how the *mahaul* (or atmosphere) in Nangla had deteriorated. Whereas “earlier”, the police hardly visited the locality, “now they are there twenty-four hours”. However, the regulatory presence of the state was not its only form. For, “the police used to come and demolish [the *jhuggis*]; this would keep happening, and we would rebuild”. But now the *mahaul* had become so bad, Chamkili insisted, that the only solution lay in another act of state: it was now best to demolish the locality. The state, simultaneously a site for all that was good and bad, was ultimately inescapable. “All those who say that they will not allow the ‘survey’ to proceed’ [in the hope that this may stall demolition]”, she said, “are only fooling themselves. Is there anything that can stand in the way of the will of the *sarkar*?”

I have noted earlier that Chamkili was a member of the BJP, and that she became an electricity contractor during the reign of a BJP-led state government in Delhi. So, during this period, and at least for Chamkili, the nation and the *sarkar* coalesced into a coherent and favourable configuration. However, ironically, it was the intense presence of the state in her life (and in that of fellow basti dwellers) that precluded any straightforward relationship with it. I asked Chamkili if she thought the BJP would come back into power. She replied:¹²

It’s going to come back like a giant wave, all over India. They lost because they opposed foreign capitalists... also because of coalition politics... this [names senior BJP politician] is no good, that sister-fucker... mother fucker, he is of the [names ethnic group] community...when

you were 15, did you ever hear of Babri Masjid? Instead of making a mandir or a masjid, they could have just made a government hospital, and anyone could go there.... Nowadays the country is full of Muslims from Bangladesh...the politicians only want votes, whether it's [from] Pakistanis or Bangladeshis... how will they fly in their helicopters if they don't get the votes? But one day, Ravan will be punished...Kans was killed one day, Hitler was gotten rid of one day....

It is perhaps appropriate that statist, national, party-political, ethnic, mythic, communal, xenophobic and transnational imagery intermingles in the same discursive breath. For it is the double bind of the relationship with the state – wanting and not wanting its embrace – that engenders both the intensity of the relationship as well as the desire to “expose” its duplicity and ferocity across multiple registers. If it is to the state that one must turn for securing bodily, territorial, legal, and sexual integrity, then the relationship with it is bound to be of a loving hatefulness. Chamkili said:¹³

I came to Delhi at the time when Indira Gandhi had imposed *nasbandi* [enforced sterilisation, see Tarlo 2003] and *chakbandi* [“land consolidation”, referring to slum demolitions]... during the Emergency... the *mahaul* was wonderful... there was no robbery and thieving ... the police didn't hassle anyone, there were no terrorists.... During *nasbandi*, the poor didn't suffer in Delhi, though they may have outside Delhi...even if something had happened, I really don't know.... I mean when I didn't suffer at all, what can I tell you?

Under Suspicion: Bilkees Begum

There are, however, others who are more willing to speak of the suffering that accompanies intimacy with the state. Bilkees Begum, who had earlier shared in the electricity contract business with Chamkili was one of them. I met Bilkees Begum in 2005 during preparations for a rally to welcome the newly elected chief minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, to Delhi. I had been wanting to meet her for quite some time, but none of the men I had become friendly with had ever offered to introduce me, despite the fact that she was an elected pradhan. Bilkees's position within Nangla society outlines a narrative of gender and ethnicity within the political economy of the city's margins. Her identity as a *Muslim* female Bihari pradhan was at the centre of her struggle to exert authority and gain respect.

Nangla residents were informed soon after his election in November 2005 that Nitish Kumar was coming to Delhi. Bilkees Begum gathered a large group that was to form a welcoming party at the airport. As others clambered on to mini-vans, Bilkees directed me to a Maruti Gypsy vehicle owned by the district chairman of the Janata Dal (JD), the political party to which Kumar belonged. We were told to proceed to the party office in Connaught Place in central New Delhi. Sitting in the front seat and giving the driver directions, Bilkees was in charge.

We reached the JD office and waited for instructions on proceeding to the airport. Amid all the hubbub, I found Bilkees sitting in one corner of the office compound and asked if she knew when we were to go to the airport. She shrugged. Here in Connaught Place, Bilkees seemed lost, bereft of the bluster and self-confidence I had seen at Nangla. We finally left for the airport around 4 pm, along with another truck-full of “supporters” from another part of Delhi. Bilkees mentioned that she was earlier with the BJP, and had now “joined” the Janata Dal. En route, our

convoy got lost as no one appeared to know the way to the domestic airport where Nitish Kumar was arriving. “What is ‘domestic’?” Bilkees asked me, as we wound our way around the pylons of the (then) under-construction Delhi-Gurgaon toll-way.

Arriving at the airport, neither Bilkees nor any of her followers knew when Nitish Kumar was to arrive. It was getting dark and there was still no sign of the politician. Then, suddenly, a man was heard shouting from a gate that was some distance from where we stood: “He is here! He is here!” “There?”, Bilkees turned around to me, “what gate is that?” It was the VIP gate. We ran towards it. Police sirens sounded, the gate opened, and a cavalcade of white Ambassador cars drove out. We caught a fleeting glimpse of Nitish Kumar as he went past and in a flash, he was gone. Bilkees just about managed to throw some flowers in the direction of the speeding vehicles. “*Garibon ka masiha!*” she muttered to no one in particular. By now, the vehicles that had been part of our cavalcade had also disappeared and the Nangla group scrambled to find the nearest truck to take it back home. Bilkees said she did not want to miss the truck, as she did not know the way back from the airport.

Female and Pradhan

In Nangla, Bilkees had a double-storied, and, by Nangla standards, very commodious house. She lived with her husband, four sons, their wives, and a daughter. Two of her sons worked for her in her electricity redistribution business. During our first meeting at her house – soon after the airport visit – Bilkees was besieged by an unending stream of visitors with a variety of requests: help with getting new identity card made, replacement of lost ration cards, removing “encroachers” from property, etc. To each, she offered a terse word or two, before dismissing them from her presence: “have you been to the Food and Supply office?”, “did you not know you had to fill this form in triplicate?”, and, “why did you go those bastards [the police], rather than come to me?”

About 45 minutes into our conversation, she fixed me with a stare, and said “now, tell me who you *really* are. Someone told me that you work at a university, but I told him that that's not your real identity, and I know that I am right.” I was taken aback, as much at the image I might have presented, as Bilkees's forceful directness. I asked her who she thought I was: “You're a CBI [Central Bureau of Investigations] agent!” she said, “I can tell.” I spent the next half-hour explaining who I was.

“CBI” and “vigilance people”, Bilkees told me, are very frequent visitors to bastis such as Nangla. They come, she said, to collect information on “terrorists” and other “security” issues. And, she added, “they look more or less like you”. In the past, some of them had accused her of hoarding arms, selling drugs, and being a “Pakistani agent, because I am Muslim”. But, she said, “I know so many CBI and vigilance people myself, and they never believe these accusations against me”.

Bilkees came to Delhi from Bihar in the late 1970s and her sister Razia Begum was married to local resident Ranjan Kumar, who converted to Islam in order to marry Razia. In the last elections for pradhan, Bilkees defeated Suraj Chandra for the position; Suraj Chandra maintained that this was because she was Bihari and now “Nangla [was] 50% Bihari”. Though elected the

pradhan of Nangla, Bilkees had to compete with others of equal – though unelected – rank in dealing with the state on behalf of her fellow residents.

In addition to negotiating (to whatever extent possible) with the state, pradhans also seek to mimic it. So both Suraj and Bilkees frequently carried out a variety of surveys that asked for different kinds of information, blurring the line between the disciplinary and classificatory practices of the state and individualised attempts to sequester some of its aura. Sometimes the survey was for the “issue of new ration cards” and at others for “making new identity cards”. Bilkees’ surveys were located within the contexts of kinship, neighbourliness, conjugal arrangements and other domestic details, property rights, and ethnic and religious identities, positioning her as a progenitor of the different worlds of urban possibilities. The surveys also established her as someone with the capacity to mediate and establish connections between these worlds and the state: the surveys were robust promises of putative entitlements.

Within the confines of Nangla, my most enduring memory of Bilkees is of a booming voice, a slim erect body, long confident strides and expletives that carried to the boundaries of the basti. Even as she coaxed her Nangla neighbours to part with a variety of information based on her status as quotidian compatriot and classificatory kin, no one quite knew how the information thus gathered was to be used. But hardly anyone ever refused. There was always some survey or another at Nangla, each offering the hope of recognition by the state, contextualised by a deep – and potentially empowering – desire for classification; to be surveyed was to have proof of entitlement. The uncertain validity of the processes through which the information was gathered hardly affected craving for the certainty that the survey promised.

It was as if the acts of surveying and gathering information transformed Bilkees into a powerful male, exercising control and guiding the destinies of her fellow residents. Her situational masculinity was, however, frequently disputed. The questions mostly asked concerned her ability to pass as male within the multiple geographies of power she sought to occupy. One day, Suraj Chandra gleefully related a tale that, to him, demonstrated the pitfalls of operating in that porous zone of mimicry and impersonation where knowledge of borders – of identity and processes – was crucial. It concerned a survey Bilkees had carried out to enable a group from Nangla to apply for a below poverty line (BPL) card issued by the government to enable holders to purchase food and other household items from government-controlled ration shops at below-market rates.

Having gathered the information required to complete the application procedure, Bilkees marked the application forms with a newly acquired stamp that said “Bilkees Begum, Pradhan”. However, according to Suraj, the examining sub-divisional officer (SDM) “objected saying that government stationary was made void if stamped by a non-government authority”. So, after that, “people realised that they had made a mistake in electing someone like Bilkees”. Seeking to consolidate her several identities – mediator with the state, urban potentate of diverse basti worlds, classificatory male – through an insignia of uncertain authority, Bilkees suffered a symbolic setback. She had not so much

overstepped her authority as pradhan – for such *faux* symbols of authority are common enough – as transgressed the rules of gender. I will return to this theme in the concluding section of this essay.

Rakesh Kumar: From Journeyman to Man of Means

Beyond the contested arenas of political leadership, there are, of course, other strategies of sustenance that have something to say about relationships between “community”, state and commerce.

Rakesh Kumar, around 52 years of age, came to Delhi around 1972 from Meerut in western UP. Rakesh’s father had worked as a “composer” in a printing company. However, in mid-life, he lost his job as a result of “union-baji” (trade-unionism). When Rakesh came to Delhi he had recently completed class 8th and his father wanted him to learn “composing” as well. However, he wanted to be a “businessman”.¹⁴

Rakesh set up a small stall near Town Hall in the Chandni Chowk (Old Delhi) area, where he sold stationary and handkerchiefs. He was convinced that he had launched himself on successful career. However, Indira Gandhi put paid to that aspiration. When Emergency was declared in 1975, the Old Delhi area particularly suffered the brunt of the slum clearance drives initiated by Sanjay Gandhi and overseen by the then vice-chairman of the DDA, Jagmohan. The street traders of Chandni Chowk were also drawn into the demolitions net; Rakesh remembers being severely beaten by the police as part of the drive to cleanse the footpaths of “encroachments”. Soon after, he had to abandon his stall.

Now unemployed, Rakesh decided to complete matriculation. However, after four years of further study, and with a matriculation certificate in hand, he was no closer to finding a permanent job. Desperately short of money, Rakesh took up plying a cycle-rickshaw. However, “being educated”, he soon managed to get a three-wheeler autorickshaw licence and worked as an autorickshaw driver for about 20 years. As he ferried passengers around the city, he would engage them in conversation. What did they do? Where did they live? Were they, like him, migrants to Delhi? What was a good business to be in? Could they tell him anything about other ways of making money?

The erratic traffic of conversation between Rakesh and his passengers led to the next rung of Rakesh’s career in the city. “Someone” told him about the Kuber Finance corporation, a “chit fund” company that had a huge clientele among the urban poor. He joined the company as an “agent”, charged with securing “investment” funds from the residents of Delhi’s bastis. This was in 1997. He says he got the company “a lot of business” by convincing many in the bastis to invest their savings in fixed deposit in return for the promise that it would “triple in three years”. “The basti people”, Rakesh told me, “had a great deal of faith in someone who was just like them”, and the business prospered. He quit his autorickshaw job in order to devote more time to it. During the first year of his job with Kuber, everything went according to plan: there were an increasing number of clients, and the company gave him frequent bonuses.

Then, sometime in late 1998, government regulators discovered several “irregularities” in Kuber’s business practices and the apex regulatory body, the Reserve Bank of India,

ordered it to close business (Mathew 1999). More importantly, it appeared that Kuber was not in a position to pay back either the principal or any returns to its investors. Almost overnight, the company shut its doors. Thousands of investors – including those in bastis – suffered very significant financial losses. Rakesh lost about Rs 50,000. When Kuber folded, Rakesh Kumar was back on the streets.

However, as Rakesh once noted, “something good also happened during this time”: around 1988, he had met an Assamese woman who was living with her relatives in Delhi. She mentioned that she was having “problems” with them and turned to Rakesh for advice. They got to know each other well, resulting in a “love marriage”. Shanti, his wife, trained to be a crèche worker and became part of a government scheme to run a crèche in Nangla. At the time of the demolitions, she looked after 30 children. Since around 2000, Rakesh has mostly been unemployed, surviving on odd jobs and “fees” for “social work” such as filling out forms and directing and accompanying fellow basti dwellers to various government offices. This had been the most specific outcome of his enhanced education.

Real Estate

Ironically, it was the demolition of Nangla Matchi that led to an unexpected but highly lucrative source of employment for Rakesh. In May 2006, before the Nangla demolitions began, Rakesh and some of his friends decided to visit the village of Savda-Ghevda where, they had heard, they were to be relocated. I was invited to join them and the six of us make our way there on an autorickshaw. Savda-Ghevda is at the northern end of Delhi, off the highway that leads to Rohtak – beyond the metro line, the shopping malls, the traffic lights, regular bus services, schools, hospitals, police stations and government offices.

Coming off the highway, the autorickshaw turned off onto a dirt road, coming to a stop near some bulldozers and road-rollers. There are men measuring the ground and inserting pegs at different distances. It was vast open farmland. A Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) board told us that around 265 acres of land were to be used for “transit camps” and a resettlement colony for about 22,000 families. We approached a man to ask if land has been allotted for Nangla people. He said no. He was an assistant engineer of the MCD Slum Wing. Two men approached us and wanted to know about the locality. They say that they were interested in buying *kachchi parchis* (temporary documents indicating entitlement) from allottees. They were real estate dealers.

In the past few weeks, Rakesh and his friends had been saying that Savda was “the other end of the world” and that, among other things, they would find it very difficult to find schools for their children. However, as we walked around the locality, the group began to change its opinion. Rakesh said that the place was a far better deal than, say, the resettlement colony of Bawana in north-west Delhi: it was closer to urban localities, and there was a rail-line nearby that connected to Delhi. By the end of the visit, everyone felt quite pleased about the place, and the prospect of moving there.

In January 2007, I was sitting with Rakesh at Savda where he has been allotted a plot. He had built a temporary shack on it but

did not live there. Instead, he had taken a room on rent outside the resettlement colony. There was a vacant plot of land right next to his shack. Rakesh was hoping that he would be able to buy it. As we wandered around the locality, he pointed out various plots and current prices. Corner plots were particularly valued, as were adjoining plots that were vacant and could be made into “*judwa*” (twins) and sold either for a shop or for someone to build a larger house. Plots on the main road fetched the highest prices. There was now an active real estate market: many original allottees had never moved in and had sold their “pink” (allotment) slips to dealers, others had sold and moved closer to their place of work; still others had sold and gone back to their villages.

Rakesh had become a real estate dealer. He said he tried to convince people not to sell and to ride out the tough times, because “Savda [would] become as well-connected as Nangla”, especially now that there was a metro line around six kilometres from the settlement. However, if they still wanted to sell, he bought their plot with money borrowed from a “financier”. When selling, he got a small cut. He told me that this was the “best investment” and asked me to seriously consider putting some money into it, as many “middle-class” people from nearby localities had done. He was happy to act on my behalf. He said he was now fully occupied with his new business. He flourished a “receipt book” that had rows and columns for listing the names of buyers and sellers, the amount of deposit paid, amounts to be forfeited in case either party decided not to go ahead, and dates of “settlement”. But buying and selling land here is illegal, right? I asked him. Yes, he said, of course, “but I mainly get my information on what is available via MCD officials. So, we are all in it together.”

Between the Chandni Chowk footpath, the Nangla dislocation, and settlement at Savda, Rakesh had learnt to mimic both the state and the market. The real estate negotiations produced a curiously warm sociality, for Rakesh mostly bought plots from those he had known well and who were now in financial distress. An ex-resident of Nangla, who had been lent money by Rakesh for medical treatment, eventually offered his plot as he was unable to pay back the loan. He repeatedly spoke of Rakesh’s “kindness” in agreeing to the transaction. In a hostile urban world, better to suffer the ravages of one’s acquaintances and further cement ties of community, than be exploited by strangers and get “nothing” in return; basti residents, as Menon-Sen and Bhan point out, seek out “friends and family members”, as “preferred” providers of credit (2008: 133).

By the end of 2007, Rakesh owned two plots of land, one through the original allotment and the second bought from another man who wanted to sell to go back to his village. The second plot was near the main road and hence more valuable. “The best way to make money”, he told me, “is through buying and selling land”. As we walked around the locality, he stopped to chat to another man on a scooter who told him about the availability of saleable land in Savda. “If I had more money to spare”, he said, “I would invest it all in land in Savda”. Plots of land which were given by the government at Rs 7,000 were, in 2007, selling for up to Rs two lakh, if they happened to be near one of the main

roads that ran through the locality. There were no pucca roads yet, but a flourishing real estate market.

Conclusion: Between the State and the Community

Within bastis such as Nangla Matchi, those who acted as the state – the pradhans, for example – did so in a manner in which they both deferred to it, as well as treated it as an unwanted accretion upon the “real” community or the *samaj*. Aditya Nigam suggested that “[t]he spatial organisation, as well as the specific histories of [Delhi’s poorer neighbourhoods]... 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” (2002: 26). The remaining part of this discussion seeks to extend this insight through a modification. I will suggest that basti life is characterised by contexts of intimate entanglements with one’s neighbours that produce the basti as different from as well as linked to the “formal” (here, the state) machinations that surround it.

The imagination that produces the basti as of the city but also beyond it, makes for a situation of state mimicry as well as a rejection of the state in favour of community life. Let us return to Bilkees Begum – the woman who would be a man – to comment on this aspect. Suraj Chandra’s comment on Bilkees’s abilities (or, rather, their lack), above, was linked to a number of long-running disputes between the two. This *mise en scène* tells us something about the strategies of moving between ideas of the state and the *samaj*. Sometime in 2003, a woman had come to seek Suraj Chandra’s help, stating that her plot of land in Nangla had been “taken over” by a group that claimed allegiance to Bilkees. Sensing a political opportunity, Suraj and some of his followers filed a police complaint against Bilkees. Bilkees, who never tired of telling me about her contacts with “the police and CBI officials”, retaliated by filing a counter-complaint against Suraj, accusing him of the murder of the woman’s husband. The husband had indeed been murdered some years ago, and the police had been unable to solve the crime. His body, as if, lay in wait for Bilkees to conjure its ghost to her cause.

In April 2005, a meeting was called to resolve the imbroglio. It was presided over by Sohrab, a man in his early-40s. Sohrab began by informing the gathering he was earlier a resident of

Nangla and now lived elsewhere. “In 1987”, he said, “I lived here and ate *raakh* [ash]... but now I am a rich contractor and employ 200 people.” He lived near Nehru Stadium, and had come to mediate between Suraj and Bilkees as he “spoke on no one’s behalf”. What interests me in the following is not Sohrab’s dispute resolution skills. Rather, it is Bilkees’s contingent self-positioning as an active agent in the interstices of the state and the *samaj*.

Sohrab began by asking about the dispute between Bilkees and Suraj. The latter responded that Bilkees had been carrying out a number of surveys “without permission from anyone”. There was now an argument between Sohrab and Suraj, with the latter suggesting that Sohrab favoured Bilkees. Suraj went on to say that neither Sohrab nor Bilkees could be trusted (perhaps because they were co-religionists?) “Do you follow the rule of law”, he asked, addressing Sohrab and Bilkees. “I do”, said Sohrab, “but if nothing else works, I use force, I have 200 *londas* [hefty young men] to back me”. Bilkees smiled, nodding. The implied violence in the term “*londa*”, as Cohen (1995) points out, is infused with masculine sexual meanings. Specifically, it combines the contexts of masculine “fun and violence” (see, for example, Verkaaik 2004).

As the arguments for and against different positions unfolded, Bilkees sat pensively in one corner of the hut. Finally, Sohrab turned to her, and then to Suraj: “what I can’t understand”, he said, “is why you had taken recourse to the law and not solved this problem at a *samajik* [community] level”. Bilkees – the bearer of the pradhan rubber-stamp, police confidante, and overseer of countless faux surveys – smiled expansively. “Exactly”, she said; there are times when you must become the state, and at others convey your role as guardian of community, at one with it. For it is the community that possesses the norms and standards of behaviour, whereas the state is seen as “inherently corrupt” and without any norms (Osella and Osella 2000: 150). For basti residents, the search for intimacy with the state and assertions of distance from it constitute enmeshed strategies of securing the material means of life as well as the emotional comforts of fellow-feeling in a hostile urban environment. This constant calibration of identity – the relay between strategic statism and quotidian communitarianism – is the irreducible condition of life at the margins of the city.

NOTES

- 1 *Annual Administration Report of the Delhi Province for 1937-38* (Delhi: Government of India), pp 26-27.
- 2 The Birla Committee pointed out that the DIT’s strategy of selling land to the highest bidder had only exacerbated the “housing problem” (1951:4), that “slum clearance” should only take place once alternative accommodation had been found for the evictees (not always the practice with DIT), and that evictees should be resettled at sites not far from their place of work. See Birla Committee (1951): *Report of the Delhi Improvement Trust Enquiry Committee*, Volume I (New Delhi: Manager, Government of India Press).
- 3 “Proposed Transfer of Ganga Sahai, son of Kanori Aheria from the Aligarh district to the Delhi district”, File 189/1938/General/Delhi State Archives.
- 4 The fieldwork on which this article is based took place between 2005 and 2008 at a variety of

sites, of which Nangla Basti was the most significant.

- 5 However, the claim by Jha, Rao and Woolcock (2007) that the urban pradhan furthers the ends of participatory democracy for the urban poor seems somewhat impressionistic.
- 6 Nangla residents estimated Chamkili’s income to be around Rs 40,000 per month
- 7 The pre-demolition survey is one of the most momentous events in the life of a basti, engendering fear, anxiety, hope and a variety of relationships with the state. See Batra and Mehra (2008) for a discussion of the survey and other processes leading up to demolition and eviction.
- 8 Interview, 2 May 2007.
- 9 Interview, 15 March 2006.
- 10 Interview, 15 March 2006.
- 11 Interview, 6 April 2006.
- 12 Interview, 6 April 2006.
- 13 Interview, 6 April 2006.
- 14 Interview, 8 November 2005.

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