

Urban Spaces, Disney-Divinity and Moral Middle Classes in Delhi

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A presentation of an ethnography of the relationship between urban spaces, new cultures of consumption, the state, and the making of middle class identities in India. Firstly, the discussion explores the making of new urban spaces by focusing upon the Akshardham Temple complex on the banks of the Yamuna river in Delhi. Surrounded by a network of flyovers, highways, toll-ways, and residential developments, the complex is designed as a hi-tech religious and nationalist theme park. The Delhi government-sponsored *bhagidari* (sharing) scheme that brings together representatives of the Residents' Welfare Associations, Market Traders Associations, and key government officials at periodically organised workshops forms the second site of focus.

This paper is about the uses of space in the making of urban identities and, in particular, some ideas that might gather around the notion of a modern middle class identity. "Middle class" is, of course, a very vast and somewhat amorphous term, so the unstated background to my discussion is the idea that in India there are several self-definitions of what it is to be middle class, and that a very large number of groups, with quite different socio-economic characteristics, describe themselves as such (see, for example, Favero 2003; Fernandes 2006; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Rajagopal 2001). As considerable scholarship for both western and non-western contexts demonstrates (King 1976 and 2004; Kusno 2000; Low and Lawrence-Zúniga 2003; Massey 1996), "spatial strategies" (Deshpande 2000) constitute one of the most significant ways in which social processes are both expressed and experienced. Hence, through the construction of New Delhi, the activities of the Delhi Improvement Trust (DIT, established in 1937) (Hosagrahar 2007; Legg 2007) and the Delhi Development Authority (DDA, established in 1957), as well as real estate behemoths such as the DLF (set up in 1946), urban space has been a significant site for expressions of numerous ideologies of modernity and community life.

In this paper, I focus upon two sites of the making of certain contemporary urban middle class cultures and identities. These are (1) the Akshardham Temple (AT) complex located on the banks of the Yamuna in Delhi, inaugurated in November 2005 and (2) the Delhi government's *bhagidari* scheme for citizen-state partnership. Through these ethnographic contexts, I explore some meanings of "middle class", and the ways in which these two sites might be related to each other.

Akshardham Temple Complex in Delhi

The AT complex, spread over an area of 100 acres, was completed in November 2005 by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), one of the major subjects within the Swaminarayan movement. The Swaminarayan movement is located within the Bhakti tradition, and its founder, Bhagwan Swaminarayan, was born into a brahmin family in 1781 in a small village near Ayodhya. A BAPS information sheet tells us that "having mastered the scriptures by the age of 7 (Swaminarayan) renounced home at 11 to embark upon an 11-year spiritual pilgrimage on foot across the length and breadth of India". And that, "eventually settling in Gujarat, He spent the next 30 years spearheading a socio-spiritual revolution" (BAPS Document nd: 3). During his travels, he was bestowed with several names, including Neelkanth. At the turn of the 18th century,

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Neelkanth met the ascetic Ramananda Swamy and was anointed as his spiritual heir. However, he was to establish an independent following that culminated in the Swaminarayan sect. Neelkanth's travels ended in Gujarat, where he built several temples, and which, along with Rajasthan, provides the largest number of devotees.

BAPS is one of several subgroups of the Swaminarayan movement, all of whom have a global following, with a predominance of Gujaratis. There are Swaminarayan temples in various cities in north America, the UK and Europe. Dwyer (2004) points out that the movement has become "the dominant form of British Hinduism" (2004: 180), as well as "the dominant form of transnational Gujarati Hinduism" (ibid: 181). Williams (1984) estimated the global following of the movement to be around five million, though this figure is now likely to be much higher with BAPS itself estimated to have a following of over a million (Dwyer 2004). The organisation's backbone is an order of all male, celibate, "swamys". Only university graduates over 21 are accepted into the order. The current head of the Delhi temple complex studied at the Indian Institute of Technology (Delhi). There is another AT complex in Gandhinagar (Gujarat), set up on 23 acres of land with 15 "interactive exhibitions, surround settings... 14-screen multimedia show – Integrovision... the world's first spiritual multimedia show... (and which) received the Bronze award at the International Audio-Visual and Multimedia Festival in 1993 at Munich, Germany" (BAPS Document: 15). The Delhi temple, though on a larger scale, is modelled on the Gandhinagar one.

Design, Construction and Layout

The temple complex is situated on the eastern banks of the Yamuna. There had been considerable public controversy over the manner in which such a large parcel of ecologically sensitive area had been allotted for temple construction. So, during 2003 and 2004 newspaper reports suggested that the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) – of which the BJP was the dominant partner – had smoothed the way for BAPS to take over the land through violation or amendment of building and planning norms. However, in 2005, the Supreme Court came to the decision that the construction had been "lawful", and that "all the Land Use Plans have been adhered to".¹ Construction of the complex began in November 2000 and was completed in 2005.

From Delhi, the most direct approach to the temple is via the Hazrat Nizamuddin bridge that spans the Yamuna. On the western (or Delhi) end of the bridge is the new Sarai Kale Khan flyover, and as one crosses over (eastwards) towards the localities of Mayur Vihar and then into Uttar Pradesh, in the distance, to the right of the bridge, is the Delhi-Noida-Delhi (DND) tollway which provides high-speed access between south Delhi and NOIDA. Located in Uttar Pradesh, the New Okhla Industrial Development Area, or NOIDA, has become an important residential and commercial locality, gradually evolving into an outlying suburb of Delhi.² The massive dome of the temple is visible from some distance, and the turn off to the complex is immediately before a new clover leaf flyover that is another route to NOIDA. Not far from the temple complex is the site for the 2010 Commonwealth Games "village". From the Games' as well as the temple

sites one can see the rubble-remains of a recently demolished riverside jhuggi-jhopri (JJ) (slum) colony, Nangla Machi, whose residents have been mostly "resettled" approximately 40 kms away on the northern borders of Delhi, near the village of Savda Ghevda. Nangla Machi was demolished on the orders of the Delhi High Court.³ Earlier rounds of slum removal from the banks of the river were intended, according to government sources, to pave the way for a "beautification" drive, which would see the construction of shopping plazas and arcades, promenades, and various leisure facilities (Baviskar 2004). In 2004, the then minister of urban development and tourism, Jagmohan, noted that "The over 220-acre Yamuna bed will... be redeveloped as a 'national hub', with memorials, tourist spots and historical monuments", and that he intended to "connect the river to India's ancient history which is the Indraprastha ruins, medieval history which means the Red Fort and contemporary history, which is represented by the August Kranti Park from where the prime minister addresses the nation on 15 August" (ibid).

Visitors arrive at AT by chartered bus, taxi, auto-rickshas, or private vehicles. Buses and cars are directed to a massive parking area, not unlike those that surround large shopping malls in western countries. Temple volunteers check underneath all cars with reflective security devices. Others are at hand to direct vehicles to vacant parking slots. Frequent announcements on the public address system inform visitors that they may not carry into the complex electronic goods such as mobile phones and cameras. There are three security checks, including body frisking, and inspection with metal detectors. Beyond the security enclosure is the Mayur (Peacock) Gate, decorated with 869 peacocks, which forms the entrance to the main complex. Also on display at the entrance are eight water screens. Passing through the gate, visitors move into a large covered hall with marble flooring, dim lighting, potted plants, and information counters. Behind the counters, sit well-presented young women wearing "corporate" saris. Along the walls are various displays regarding the complex and the sect. The hall has the feel of a five-star hotel lobby. Beyond the Mayur Gate and the lobby, the complex is divided into different sections, and some of these attract an entry fee. In particular, a combined ticket for the Hall of Values (also known as Sahajananand Darshan), which is an "audio animatrix show" depicting various scenes from Swaminarayan's life, *Neelkanth Darshan* (an IMAX theatre show), and Sanskruti Vihar (a boat ride through "10,000 years of Indian history") costs Rs 125. A musical fountain – Yagnupurush Kund – with an entry fee of Rs 20, a 27 feet high brass statue of Neelkanth (the young Swaminarayan), the "Garden of Values", and the temple itself, surrounded by a moat, make up the remaining key attractions.

'Mystic India' in a Hundred Thousand Ways

Ramesh Swamy (RS; name changed) is in charge of four of the major attractions at Akshardham. He oversees the running of the hi-tech Hall of Values, the IMAX cinema, the "10,000 years" boat ride, and the musical fountain. RS was born in south London and is in his early 30s. He joined the order at the age of 18. During the course of fieldwork, I was told by another swamy – the public relations in-charge – that Ramesh Swamy had earlier done some

modelling for “Jo Jo Armani” in the UK. Ramesh Swamy’s office is a massive, air-conditioned room, and at our first meeting, he sits behind a desk at one end of the hall, occasionally receiving calls on his mobile and giving instructions. My work at the complex was made easier by the fact that Ramesh Swamy is an acquaintance of someone I had come to know through fieldwork on an earlier project on schooling. The temple complex is open on all days except Mondays, the day for maintenance as well as “shivir” (literally “camp”; gathering or meeting) for all the volunteers who work there. For six busy days of the week, Ramesh Swamy must ensure the smooth running of a host of technologically complex machinery and computer systems that form the backbone of Akshardham’s key attractions.

Most of the structures within the complex are made of pink sandstone, with the temple itself in white marble. Ramesh Swamy was keen to emphasise that all the design work during construction had been undertaken by the Swamys, with the experts as assistants. The other important aspect, he reiterated, concerned their ability to take quick decisions, using technology to achieve the planning objectives they desired. So, at various times, Ramesh Swamy would show me computer-generated photos that were used in the design and construction process. “Several years ago”, he said, “... (the BAPS head) noticed that it was very difficult to recruit Swamys and he wanted to keep with the times in order that people were attracted to the order. Hence, he insisted on the introduction of the latest technology.” Ramesh Swamy tells me that the Swamys visited Disneyland and Universal studios during the planning of the complex and that many of the ideas in the exhibition hall are based on what they saw there. However, he adds, “our boat ride is 12 minutes long whereas the one at Universal Studios is only five minutes”. Those who choose to visit the fee-attracting sections begin with a show in the Hall of Values. The show begins in a semi-circular hall – dimly lit in the manner of a cinema-hall – where the audience faces a large back-lit mock-granite monolith that shows a hand chiselling away to reveal a face. “Your life is in your hands”, the narrator intones. The Hall of Values, which actually consists of a series of halls, contains 15 3-D “walk-through” dioramas and presentations from the life of the founder. The life-size mannequins in each diorama are animated through a combination of robotics, fibre optics, and light and sound. As the audience takes its place, the mannequins – startlingly – spring to life, portraying scenes from what we are told is 18th century India. There is the young Neelkanth performing miracles, giving wise counsel, being acclaimed by kings and poor farmers, and rewarding those who stayed faithful to his cause. We arrive at the village tableau – the last exhibition in the Hall of Values – by crossing a mock-rickety bridge, past a series of waterfalls and scenes depicting rainfall. The idealised-village exhibition uses spot-lights that light up different tableaux involving Swaminarayan. One can choose either the English or the Hindi commentary.

Neelkanth Darshan, an IMAX show on an 85’ × 65’ screen is next. The film charts the life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan from childhood to adulthood through focusing on certain key events. A little boy acts as young Neelkanth, and then an androgynous teenage actor takes up the role of the adult Swaminarayan.

Both actors are slim, have high cheekbones and full lips. The story itself is a kind of a travelogue that ranges across India, starting at Ayodhya, Neelkanth’s birthplace, and ending in Gujarat, where he was to eventually settle. A map of India, with colonial spelling of towns flickers across the screen, with footprints appearing in chronological order to indicate the places Neelkanth/Swaminarayan passed through. There are spectacular shots of the Himalayas, valleys, rivers, and coastal locations and extensive use of aerial photography. The Indian and German filmmakers used computer generated shot of Mansarovar lake, as the Chinese authorities did not give permission for shooting on location. Re-titled “Mystic India”, the film has also been screened in IMAX theatres around the world. RS explained the system of crowd-management at the fee-paying venues as follows. “At the start”, he said, “we have about six or seven shows of about seventy people each in Hall 1 (i.e., Hall of Values). At the conclusion of these shows, we have gathered around 500 people. They are then allowed into the IMAX, and when this finishes, they move on to the boat ride, and the whole crowd is cleared in about fifty minutes.” He is keen to emphasise the significance of “time-management” in the smooth running of the venues. This, he says, helps to maximise the volume of the traffic. This aspect came up in our various discussions, including the “record time” in which both the musical fountain and the brass statue of Swaminarayan had been built. So, as he put it, “experts” were amazed that the entire temple complex had been completed in just five years. Temporal modernity is, however, interwoven with an ancient one, which itself presaged the modern present. So, a temple document, amidst a numerical listing of the fountain’s features – 2,870 steps, 108 small shrines, etc – notes that “its perfect geometric forms testify to ancient India’s advanced knowledge in mathematics and geometry” (www.akshardham.com, viewed on 12 February 2007).

Following the *Neelkanth Darshan* IMAX show, we move on to Sanskruti Vihar for the boat ride.⁴ These are long-boats that run along underwater tracks. The fore and aft sections are designed such that the vessels look like swans, in keeping with the “ancient Hindu” theme of the complex in general. Once again, either English or Hindi commentary is available, describing the variety of life-size tableau along both banks. So, we move from the ancient period depicting, among other things, Indian “achievements” in the fields of astronomy, medicine (including “plastic surgery”), armaments manufacture and warfare, astrology, “democratic governance”, debating, schooling, “the world’s first university”, mathematics, cattle rearing, maritime trade, and “inventions by the great rishi-scientists of India”. There are also tableaux representing significant religious figures, and various famous personalities from Indian history. There are no representations of Muslims, or Islamic contexts. The boat ride ends at a tableau where cardboard cut-outs of modern Indians look out from houses and other urban locations, and the commentary asks that “we” build upon the heritage of ancient civilisation for a better future. Visitors can also wander around the Garden of Values and, of course, the supposed centrepiece of the complex, the temple monument. The Garden – also called Bharat Upvan – consists of manicured lawns containing a series of themed tableaux with life-size bronze statues. The themes include “India’s Child Gems”, “Valorous

Warriors”, “Freedom Fighters”, “National Figures”, and “Great Women Personalities”. As in the case of the boat ride, the children, women, and men are exclusively drawn from Hindu contexts. From the relatively serene surroundings of the Garden, one can observe the hurly-burly of the traffic as it comes off the Nizammuddin bridge, heading towards the vast new privately developed residential complexes of Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh, or, taking the clover leaf flyover towards NOIDA.

According to Ramesh Swamy, some 11,000 volunteers, artisans and sadhus contributed “300 million man hours” towards the construction of the complex adorned by the temple. The temple itself consists of:

234 ornately carved pillars, nine ornate domes, 20 quadrangled shikhars, a spectacular Gajendra Pith (plinth of stone elephants) and 20,000 *murtis* (idols) and statues of India's great sadhus, devotees, acharyas and divine personalities (www.akshardham.com viewed on 12 February 2007).

And, the plinth that surrounds it is called Gajendra Pith. It

...[weighs] 3,000 tonnes, has 148 full-sized elephants, 42 birds and animals, 125 human sculptures and decorative stone backdrops of trees, creepers and royal palaces (ibid).

In conversations with the Swamys, in temple information brochures, and on its web site, the complex is presented as a slew of numbers: made concrete by hundreds of this, thousands of that, and millions of those.

Surplus and Moral Consumption

Akshardham embodies a number of separate processes that are collapsed into the making of a new culture of consumption and urban space. How do we think about Akshardham in terms of a “particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey 1996: 154)? To begin with, I would like to refer to the processes of consumption that gather around Akshardham as those of surplus and moral consumption. Secondly, I suggest that another way of understanding the making of this new urban space is to see it as one strand within broader processes of contemporary urban developments that relate to the idea of *becoming* “middle class” through certain practices of residence and housing.

The AT complex is part of a wider – and massive – socio-spatial transformation that is taking place in Delhi and various other Indian cities. In particular, the making of “clean” spaces such as Akshardham proceeds apace with the removal of “unclean” spaces such as JJ colonies. So, according to one estimate, between 2000 and 2006, 53 different JJ colonies were demolished in Delhi. These forced evictions affected approximately 79,000 families (between 4,00,000 and 5,00,000 people), with the majority being “resettled” in outlying areas of Delhi (Hazards Centre 2006). The “cleared” land is to be put to various uses, including new leisure and commercial activities. As mentioned above, Akshardham sits just across the river from the erstwhile JJ colony of Nangla Machi, demolished in 2006. There is a telling relationship that each of these sites has to discourses of legality and illegality. Whereas the politico-spiritual clout enjoyed by AT effaces the notion of “encroachment”, for JJ colonies, there is no such room for manoeuvre.

Based on observations over a number of months, it is possible to outline certain characteristics of the visitors to AT. First, they are – apart from the sundry foreign visitors – almost exclusively non-English speaking. In addition, unlike visitors to theme parks such as Disneyland, the visitors do not appear to be those from “the upper-middle classes, bosses rather than workers” (Zukin 1993: 232). While on weekends and public holidays, the car park is frequently full, a large number of vehicles are buses and taxis that have been hired by groups. Second, extended family and larger groups predominate, individual and “nuclear” families being rare as visitors. Finally, there are substantial numbers of women, and, all-women groups are not an uncommon sight. If the temple complex is part of the making of urban middle classness, it is a very particular fraction that is its audience and patron. It is in this sense, perhaps, that we might speak of a “new” middle classness that brings together the various strands of a new consumer culture, relations with the state and with religiosity, the discourses of clean and unclean urban spaces, and, as I discuss below, certain anxieties about the relationship between consumption and “true” Indianness.

Scholarship on shopping malls in the United States suggest that mall designers incorporate a specific motif in their design brief: viz, the ability of the mall “to contrast positively with the experience of everyday environment in the surrounding space” (Gottidiener 2003: 131). Though Akshardham is part of the larger configuration of urban spaces which also includes Delhi's shopping malls, its relationship to its patrons is different. This theme park with its appeal to Indian antiquity and “ancientness” is not, in fact, a context of nostalgia that separates its space from that outside. Akshardham's appeal lies in that it is able to present its tableau of consumption (of objects and spaces) as contiguous with the world outside. Its self-representation in terms of technological mastery, efficiency, punctuality, educational achievement, and the broad context of contemporary consumerism link it with the world of toll-ways, highways, shopping malls, city “beautification” and slum-clearance drives, and the creation of spaces of middle class identity. Akshardham is a space of passage, a threshold space, rather than a model of sharply differentiated “inside” from an “outside” (cf Chakrabarty 2002). The inside-outside model, one with a long history in anthropological theorising, bears reappraisal in light of contemporary strategies of consumption that fashion behaviours that undo the boundaries between the “inner” and the “outer”.⁵ The contemporary urban subject – ensconced within the various processes we now label “globalisation” – is one located upon threshold spaces, which are in themselves both the sites and products of these processes. The temple complex is one such space, in the midst of, rather than removed from, the processes of contemporary modernity; nostalgia has little appeal for an audience whose only memory of the immediate past is of the license-permit regime of the five-year plan state where material benefits were largely sequestered by an industrial-bureaucratic elite.

This theme park is based around the process of *surplus* consumption: the collapsing of time and space, and the refusal to consume “rationally”. Surplus consumption refers to consumption behaviour that unfolds through recourse to cultural

symbols, meanings, and strategies generated across a number of time spans. The goods and experiences that are the objects of consumption are, as if, wrenched from a number of different contexts which are then effaced through the contemporary acts of consuming them. Surplus consumption is the “strategy of engaging with the intensity of social and cultural changes introduced by [a number] of global forces” (Srivastava 2007: 185).⁶ Surplus consumption unfolds in a number of ways, and is part of the processes of the making of contemporary urban identities. To begin with, consumption is part of the Akshardham experience in the most literal sense. I have noted above that the entrance lobby to the temple is designed in the manner of a five-star hotel. This – to impart the sense of a five-star hotel lobby – appears to be its key function. Further, visitors can supplement their experience through eating at the food hall that has the ambience of a localised McDonald’s. There is also the well stocked Akshardham shop which sells a wide variety of temple related goods including audio and video cassettes, calendars and diaries, DVDs, books, key chains, and baseball caps. The shop also sells ayurvedic and other herbal remedies.

Other, more abstract, forms of consumption also unfold at AT, and those expressed through the relationship between the audience and the attractions calls for some comment. As noted above, the Hall of Values consists of a number of tableaux from the life of Swaminarayan and at the conclusion of one “episode”, the crowd moves to the next room in order to view other parts of the story. However, after a while, a pattern of viewing is established: the audience senses when a particular show is about to conclude and, even before it is finished, the entire crowd rushes out of the hall into the next one in order to get the best seats. This carries on right till the last show. By this time, it is not clear if anyone is actually interested in the “message”, since no one stays around till the end of a particular “episode”. The rush to get the best seats in the next performance space largely obliterates the notion of a contemplative audience awaiting spiritual enlightenment; the audience seeks the experience of the “ancient” through the strategy of contemporary market behaviour.

The Garden of Values, the manicured series of lawns with its tableaux of “famous” Indian men, women and children is another key attraction. In order to get to the Garden one must pass a small water pool with a pair of large marble footprints symbolising those of Swaminarayan. Some onlookers stand in reverence, eyes closed, then throw money into the pond, while others discuss what boon they might ask for, and still others merely read the plaque and then move on to the Garden of Values. On one of my visits, a group of male National Cadet Corps (NCC) cadets wandered around the Garden, with its members offering various loud comments, typical of which was the directed at Mahatma Gandhi: “what a body!”.

Visitors to AT traverse spatialised sensoria marked by, among other things, intensely grounded mnemonics that foreground the body of the Bhagwan Swaminarayan, (Hindu) nationalist interpretations of Indian history and its “values”, and globally inspired – and sourced – hi-tech religious robotics and other visual displays. One of the most significant aspects of the overall experience of the interaction can be captured through the notion of

“glancing” where the relationship between humans and gods is not structured by intensity – defined in terms of a sustained and focused temporal relationship between the devotee and the divine. Rather, the relationship is in the nature of an “extensive” – or, surplus – relationship. So, Akshardham provides a space for building cultural identities through consolidating the capacity for multiple engagements: with nationalism, technology, concrete, educational achievement, the cultures of diasporic Hinduism, modern building techniques, the management of time, the dominance of Hindu spirituality over modern technology, the beauty of flyovers, global leisure industries, and, of course, “ancient” Hindu culture. It is a threshold space for our times and those who occupy it move in and out of a number of what were earlier separable temporal – and hence cultural – domains; nothing is now out of fashion, and time unfolds in swirls of possibilities, rather than as linear periods and eras.

Also in this contexts, the interaction with the visual, aural, and concrete aesthetics at AT is also the making of a moral middle class through a process of moral consumption. This is a context where the active participation in consumerism is accompanied by an anxiety about it and its relationship to “Indianness”. So, Ramesh Swamy often resorted to a very particular discourse of the relationship between frugality, which he perceived to be a significant aspect of Hindu religiosity, and the opulent nature of the complex, and hence the expenditure that would have been incurred in its construction. His explanations cohere around what could be called “retractable modernity” and the making of a moral middle class (Srivastava 2007). The making of a moral middle class, one that has control over the processes of consumption, and hence modernity, is, in fact, located in the processes of (surplus) consumption itself. For, it is only through consumption that one can demonstrate mastery over it. So, one consumes a wide variety of products of contemporary capitalism – IMAX cinema, the Disneyfied boat ride, Akshardham baseball caps – in combination with “spiritual” goods such as religion and nationalism. What differentiates the moral middle class from others is its capacity to take part in these diverse forms of consumption, whereas a more “deracinated” (or, “westernised”) middle class might only be able to consume the products of capitalism. Here, the refashioning of urban space tells us something about ideas of different kinds of middle-classness and their perceived relationship to consumption practices. It is also a narrative of the imagined relationship between space and identity. I have explored this idea elsewhere in a discussion of “women’s” magazines such as *Grhalakshmi* and *Grhashobha* (Srivastava 2007). There I have suggested that the side by side positioning of extraordinarily explicit articles on sex and sexuality with those on religious “values”, rituals, and texts should be understood in the context of the process of moral consumption. That is to say, as the activities of a class that sees itself as “truly” Indian because it is not defined by foreign modernity, but is, rather, able to define its own version; this middle class can take part in the processes of modernity, but also “pull back” and return to “tradition”. And, the process of consumption is simultaneously that of establishing its “morality”: for it is only through an intense engagement with consumerism that the ability to withdraw to the realms of

tradition can be demonstrated. Hence, it is in this sense that AT represents a space for the making of a moral middle class identity, simultaneously as it is located in the various processes of surplus consumption. Finally, moral consumption, while it applies to both men and women, is particularly able to account for women as new consumers. They revel in the spiritual-commodity space of Akshardham, roaming in family groups or with other women, secure in the knowledge of their capacity to withdraw to the realm of the family etiquette and “true” Indianness. So, we might say that in this context, the class politics of “distinctions” (Bourdieu 1992) takes a detour through the post-colonial politics of “tradition” and “modernity” (Chatterjee 1993).⁷

Surplus consumption – the collapsing of leisure, religiosity, “work-ethic”, sacrifice (“volunteering”), ideas about new urban spaces (highways and toll ways, flyovers), nationalist heroes, filmic landscapes, and, slum clearance – is, then, a manifestation of the socio-spatial transformations currently underway in Delhi. These transformations unfold across a number of sites, which in turn form the unified grounds for the elaboration of a specific – and new – narratives of urban life. In the next section, I provide a brief outline of another such site – concerned with housing – in order to provide a broader outline of the mutually reinforcing nature of the spatialised narratives of contemporary urban developments in India.

‘Interesting Findings from Sleep Research’ and Urban Citizenship

The Delhi government-sponsored bhagidari scheme – described as a citizen-government partnership programme – was inaugurated in 2000. Through this, representatives of the Residents’ Welfare Associations (RWAs) and Market Traders Associations (MTAs) interact with key government officials (and some times, the chief minister) at periodically organised workshops. The scheme has recently (2005) been awarded a UN Public Service award. The “authorised colony” – registered with the registrar of cooperative societies – is the unit of affiliation within the scheme, and is represented at workshops and other bhagidari-related events by office-holders of the colony’s RWAs.⁸ Typically, the workshops bring together RWA and MTA members, officials of the police, and bureaucrats from a number of government departments such as water and electricity boards. At the current time, the scheme involves around 1,600 “citizen groups” representing some three million of Delhi’s population. Bhagidari workshops are organised according to administrative zones, and officials and residents connected with different zones are expected to interact over a period of three days through following a set agenda. The workshops are facilitated by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) (Asian Centre of Organisation Research and Development (ACORD)) that has been specially contracted for the purpose. There is also interaction between RWA and MTA representatives and state functionaries beyond the workshops.

The bhagidari idea, I would like to suggest, produces its own version of urban citizenship and space. Inspired by global theories of corporate governance, and psychological theories of human interaction, bhagidari workshops produce significant visions

of the contemporary city. Here, participants sing and dance to a specially written bhagidari anthem (praising citizen-state “cooperation”), while wearing specially designed baseball caps, and waving colourful flags. It is a vision that marries the idea of the consuming – perhaps “Macdonaldised” (Ritzer 1993) – citizen to a transparent and responsive state machinery. Here also, the citizenry and the state are tightly entwined through the ideas of legality, cooperation, criminality, transparency, and the right and responsibilities of the citizen with respect to the city. In the Foreword to the first Bhagidari Working Report (2001), Chief Minister Shiela Dikshit noted that “The participation of citizens in governance is fundamental to democracy... Successful and meaningful governance cannot be achieved without their [citizens] participation. To this end, I had initiated the concept of ‘bhagidari’: the citizen-government partnership”. The bhagidari workshops were to be organised around the principle of “the large group interactive event (L.G.I.E)... [and] must span at least two-and-a-half days (if not three) with two nights in between. This is based on interesting findings from sleep research, that during sleep, the day’s discussions and experiences in the small and large group, are ‘processed’ by the participants (sic) “sub-conscious minds. Only after such ‘subconscious’ processing for two successive nights does the phenomenon of ‘paradigm-shift’ (or ‘change in the mind-set and attitude’) take place in 80% to 90% of the participants at the ‘experiential level’” (Working Report 2001: 7).

ACORD, the NGO in charge of managing the event, has experience in the area of “Real Time Strategic Change”. Further, the report noted, “Since people do not function based only on logic and reasoning, the L.G.I.E smoothly processes both reason and feeling simultaneously, to create ‘consensus’ and ‘ownership’ (‘Left-brain/right-brain integration of logic and emotion’)” (Working Report 2001: 9). The L.G.I.E, it goes on to say, has been tested in a number of global contexts, including the Municipal Corporation of Mexico City, the public health department of Minneapolis, Boeing, and Ford. Bhagidari workshops are usually held at a venue owned by the Sri Sathya Sai Baba sect, located in central Delhi and the following discussion concerns the workshop involving the RWAs of north and north-west districts of Delhi, held in May 2005. The workshop began with the “bhagidari song”: *Hawa sudhar gayi, sadak sudhar gayi...har mushkil ki hal nikali, Bhagidari se bhagidari nikali... Meri Dilli main hi sanwaroo... officer aye*, etc (“The air is cleaner, the streets are better... a solution has been found for every problem, Bhagidari has led to sharing...I will nurture my Delhi... Officers visited, etc”). An ACORD employee told me that the song was based upon a “village/folk” tune, and that it had been devised in order to encourage a view of the city as a community of village-like neighbourly bonds; the song, she added, could well be imagined as being sung by a wandering bard. Following the opening ceremony, senior officials of various government departments were introduced and the audience was encouraged to write down issues it wanted addressed. At the end of the day, these were handed over to the officials present, who are expected to provide responses on the third (and final) day. Subsequently, on the other days, there were discussions on a number of issues, including: (1) police and RWA

cooperation; (2) servant verification; (3) RWAs informing police about those houses where both husband and wife went out to work (i.e., where houses are vacant during the day), and “inspection” of all unoccupied houses; (4) drawing up lists of maids, hawkers, plumbers, etc. in order to only allow “authorised” people into the locality; (5) the “security threats” from JJ dwellers; and (6) surprise check (by the police) on the private security personnel employed by the RWAs. It was also suggested that the MCD and the police should be informed about “those families that don’t pay attention to RWA”, and that these should be “challaned” (penalised). The RWAs, it was further agreed, must have a list of all families within their purview.

Over the three days, the participants drew flow-charts, shared tables with their local police official (the station house officer) as well as various other state functionaries, and listened to responses to their queries. So, for example, on the third day, the deputy commissioner of the MCD reported that by 2006, “all JJ colonies along the Yamuna banks would be demolished”, and that the area would be transformed into a “tourist spot”. The MCD deputy commissioner was followed by the deputy commissioner of police (north Delhi) who informed the audience about police activities regarding regular surveillance of “bad characters” and “history sheeters”, and police cooperation with RWAs and Nagarik Suraksha Samitis (Citizen Security Committees, a police-sponsored network). He asked the RWAs to be a regular source of information on strangers and “young men with mobiles and motorbikes, but with no obvious source of income”. The police, he concluded was very active in “JJ clusters”, trying to prevent crime. The chief minister arrived an hour before the closing time on the final day and addressed the gathering as well as mingled with it. The workshop ended in a party like atmosphere with all participants donning bhagidari base-ball caps and waving flags of different colours. The official bhagidari song was played and the entire crowd joined in the singing. Some in the crowd climbed on to the front-stage and performed a version of *bhangra* dance. The group managed to get the CM to join them and the whole group then led the rest of the hall in the singing and the dancing. The final song, in Hindi, extolled the virtues of bhagidari, and was played to the tune of “Old Macdonald Had a Farm”, along with enthusiastic clapping from the gathering.

Carnivals of Caring, Showgrounds of the State

For the past four years, the Delhi government has also been organising a “bhagidari utsav” (bhagidari festival) at Pragati Maidan, the exhibition grounds established in 1982 on the eve of the Asian Games. The utsav is normally held in either January or February. The maidan is the venue for a large number of “trade” fairs, including the annual India International Trade Fair (ITTF) that attracts mammoth crowds. From its inception, the ITTF “showcased” Indian industrial and commercial achievements, with exhibitions organised in the manner of a nationalist tableau. So, states are allotted separate pavilions, each containing displays that highlight their industrial as well as “cultural” aspects. Pragati Maidan shares some history with the venues built for the “great” industrial exhibitions and fairs of the 19th century (Bennett 1988; Breckenridge 1989; Hoffenberg 2001). However, it has

now transformed into a concentrated site for engagements with a transnational consumerist modernity. So, perhaps more than the state pavilions, it is the independent stalls that display and sell a wide variety of consumer goods – mobile phones, MP3 players, TVs, clothing, etc – that attract the most enthusiastic crowds. And, while this is only an impressionistic observation based on visits to the ITTF from the 1980s onwards, the vast majority of the visitors appear to be people of modest economic means. Not poor, but certainly not the well-off. In fact, I visited the 2006 ITTF on a “free” pass provided by a young man who lived in the JJ colony of Nangla Machi; his uncle worked at the grounds as a guard and had managed to get several of the passes that were distributed to friends and family. As in the past, visitors to the 2006 bhagidari utsav were those who had been sent invitations by their RWAs. Along with these, they were provided with meals and beverage coupons. In addition to the invitees, there were also schoolchildren, and “helpers” wearing red coloured “Team-Delhi” t-shirts and baseball caps. Outside the halls, there were dance performances by dance troupes from Rajasthan and Haryana, a Hindi film-song performance, a street-play on the theme of AIDS, and schoolchildren making collage-art.

A giant stage had been set up inside one pavilion, and a series of abstract, electronically projected images danced on the screen that formed the backdrop. Cameras at the front of the hall transmitted the stage shows to large plasma screens placed around the cavernous building. All around this and other halls were stalls of the various departments of the Delhi government including electricity, registrar of cooperatives, the fire brigade, Delhi police, ministry of women’s welfare, ministry of youth affairs, and the Delhi Jal (Water) Board. Another hall contained the stalls of a number of RWAs, with small-scale models of their “colonies” that showed the “positive” effects of being part of the bhagidari scheme. So, one tableau featured a model of an “encroached” piece of land which was earlier used as a dumping ground and a commercial area, and which, after bhagidari, had become a children’s park. The scene was depicted through a “before” and “after” split. In the “after” model, there were miniature fountains, miniature swings, and miniature cars that sat neatly upon miniature roads. The two days of the utsav were taken up in “cultural” performances, outdoor shows, speeches, and award ceremonies chaired by the chief minister. On the final day, the CM visited the RWA stalls and gave out a number of awards. Throughout the day, there was a festival-like atmosphere, and visitors appeared to enjoy the spectacle. Among the award-winners was the Sadar Bazar Traders Association for “Best Upcoming Citizens Group”.

It is perhaps appropriate that the bhagidari scheme borrows the cultural capital acquired by Pragati Maidan as a space of progressive spectacles of the nation state, earlier in its industrial phase, and now a facilitator of a globalised consumerist modernity. Here, through the utsav, the city is experienced as a lively place, an electronically advanced space, a welcoming space (viz, the provision of free beverage and meal coupons), a place of collective effort (the RWA stalls showcasing their achievements), a place of transparent governance (various government departments advertising the ease of availability of information about

their activities), and a space of hope and transformation. The utsav provides a space – both symbolically and literally – where the city is experienced as undergoing transformation through integration to global cultural and commercial economy. Pragati Maidan is a short distance from the Akshardham complex, and a stone's throw from the now-demolished Nangla Machi JJ cluster from where it drew a very large number of its service staff. The spaces and relationships imagined and created by the bhagidari scheme form the larger context for the establishment and fostering of the Akshardham temple complex. Both spaces address a similar audience, a class in search of middle-classness, and involved in the process of defining it through certain sets of personal strategies that relate to consumption, religiosity, spatial modernity, housing strategies, and relationships with the state.

So, as the bhagidari scheme foregrounds the notion of the caring state through defining citizenship as acts of partnership between its various organs and the occupants of legally defined neighbourhoods, it also endorses and creates realms of illegality and exclusions. Further, these notions of legality and illegality are gathered around the trope of the consuming family. In turn, the consuming – middle class – family is seen to be the rightful

claimant of strategically situated spaces of leisure such as Pragati Maidan, and the residential spaces of “colonies”. Finally, the family is endowed the right to separate itself from the processes of labour through seeking removal of labourers as “threats” to its life-ways.

Secondly, there is a particular relationship between citizens and the state that while it is mediated by the market – where the Market Traders Association wins citizenship awards – also constitutes a dialogue on moral consumption. So, within bhagidari, the consuming family is the moral fulcrum, one that will promote as well as keep check on a variety of activities such as co-operation with the state and consumerism. And, at Akshardham, the state, the market, and a religious sect come together to establish an urban space where ideas of moral consumption unfold.

In sum, there is now a conjoined urban topography of moral middle-classness – which is only one of various other kinds – that stretches across the city, and is produced through a number of processes. This landscape is both a product as well as a process and relates to the procedures of the state, the manoeuvres of the market, the anxieties of urban life, and, the positioning of the family within these contexts.

NOTES

- 1 “Akshardham Construction Lawful: SC”, *The Tribune*, 13 January 2005. The “Hindutva” angle, though a significant backdrop, is not the explicit focus of this paper. I have, however, noted below how it plays out in aspects of the temple's spatio-national discourse.
- 2 Since the mid-1980s, when it first began to be popular as a residential destination, NOIDA has experienced marked increases in real estate values. The virtual monopoly of land by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA, established 1957), has meant an increasing number of private real estate developments in the bordering states of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.
- 3 “No Slum, Walk Along Yamuna”, *Indian Express*, 14 January 2004. The high court order was passed in 2002, though Nangla Machi was only demolished in 2006.
- 4 Given the obsession with precise enumeration, it is not clear why the 12 minute boat ride is advertised as lasting for 10.
- 5 This has been more fully explored in Srivastava 2007.
- 6 My use of “surplus” is not intended to draw upon its Marxist connotations. Rather, I seek to explore those notions of “class” which involve *perceptions* of choice and self-making through “life-style” strategies (Turner 1988).
- 7 I am grateful to Amita Baviskar for suggesting this interpretation.
- 8 In 2007, the Delhi government also started the “Sajha Prayas” scheme-based on the bhagidari model – for slum and resettlement localities.

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