

REVIEW ARTICLE

Aesthetic politics in contemporary India

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Michiel Baas. *Muscular India: Masculinity, mobility & the new middle class*. New Delhi: Context, 2020.

Alice Tilche. *Adivasi art and activism: Curation in a nationalist age*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022.

Sanderien Verstappen. *New lives in Anand: Building a Muslim hub in Western India*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022.

I first encountered Deana Lawson's photographs in an essay written by Zadie Smith. I was "in the field" at the time, living in a moldy room, high in the hills of the Indian Himalayas, where I was studying experiences of distress among Gaddi women. I had spent many months sitting in their homes, listening to accounts of alcoholic husbands, domestic violence, meager incomes, mounting hospital bills. "Life is full of *tension*." They repeated this familiar refrain. And yet, these stories seemed incongruous with the careful performances of housewifery and hospitality that they offered me. In almost every household, I was led to the corner of a mud or concrete room (see figure 1) and told to sit on a small couch draped in ornate cloth. The table in front of me was almost always adorned with a plastic vase full of bright, fake lilies that sat atop a doily or tablecloth. The peeling walls were covered with garlanded photographs of ancestors, or posters of Bollywood heroes. "The compo-

sition reminded me of Deana Lawson's work," I wrote in my fieldnotes in September of 2018 after visiting a Dalit woman in a village south of Dharamsala, who recounted her husband's recent hospitalization in the local psychiatric unit. She served me tea in her best cups, kept only for guests (see Simpson 2019).

Deana Lawson's photographs are primarily, in her words, of "people that come from a lower- or working-class situation." They are almost all Black—from the United States, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia—and captured in intimate, domestic settings. They gaze directly at the camera, unflinching, surrounded by everyday things. The setting might be bleak—a motel room, a dilapidated house—but the subjects display a resounding strength. "Outside a Lawson portrait you might be working three jobs," Zadie Smith (2018) writes, "just keeping your head above water, struggling. But inside her frame you are beautiful, imperious,



unbroken, unfallen.” For Smith, Lawson’s genius is akin to voodoo, an ability to connect mundane material objects and spaces to the spiritual realm. This was the same careful curation of objects and spaces that I saw as I was invited into the homes of Gaddi women.¹ While these women might sit at the fulcrum of regimes of patriarchy, caste, or tribal discrimination, while they might not formally see themselves as resistant, their aesthetic practices offered an alternative way of living that, in Alexei Yurchak’s words, allowed them to “be political beyond the current definition of the political and to challenge the current ethical and political norms without identifying [their] actions as a form of opposition” (2008: 214).

Three new books—Alice Tilche’s (2022) *Adivasi art and activism*, Sanderien Verstappen’s (2022) *New lives in Anand*, and Michiel Baas’s (2020) *Muscular Indian*—take up this thread, showing the political potential of aesthetic practice. In each of these books, people make, create, shape, preen, and cultivate material things, and in doing so they find a sense of agency that defies their structural conditions. The authors, like Lawson, capture this agency, all the while keeping the persistent precarity of life on the edges of the frame. In doing so, they offer an important challenge for anthropology’s own aesthetic politics. In this essay, I will begin by assessing the peopled terrain into which these books land, before examining the theoretical potential of the aesthetic in each of these ethnographies. I then turn to the limits of aesthetic agency, as explored in these three books, before concluding with a short meditation on the aesthetic responsibility of the anthropologist.

These three ethnographies are firmly rooted in a vast literature that seeks to investigate the experiences of those historically excluded from or living on the margins of the Indian state. Tilche, Verstappen, and Baas build on a strong Indian ethnographic record that charts the practices by which Adivasi, Dalit, Muslim, and other groups strategize to improve their social position through direct political activism or in their everyday lives. There are a number

of “strategies” that have been the focus of this conversation in recent times. The first and most obvious are forms of direct action. The absence of politics from early Indian ethnographies has been corrected by rich studies that focus on youth mobilization (Jeffrey and Dyson 2020), policing and legal challenges (Fuchs 2022; Macdonald 2009), lobbying for reservations (Christopher 2020; Kapila 2008) and land and forest rights (Shah 2010; Steur 2017; Sundar 2016), municipal and electoral politics (M. Banerjee 2021; Jakimow 2017), and revolutionary action (Kunnath 2017; Shah 2019). A second thread of recent ethnographic studies investigates the religious strategies that marginalized groups use to improve their social position, such as conversion to Christianity (Mosse 2012; Roberts 2016), adoption of more mainstream Hindu practices (Baviskar 2005; Moodie 2015), or transnational Islamic practices (Evans 2020; Stadlen 2022). A third thread of ethnographic inquiry has been focused on strategies used in everyday life. This literature has been dominated by investigations into marginalized groups’ marriage practices (Kapila 2004; Grover 2011), domesticity and consumption (Longkumer 2018; Nakassis 2013; Still 2014), and education (Dyson 2019; Froerer 2015).

Against this landscape, these three new books pull a different thread—one related to the aesthetic practices used by marginalized groups to cultivate respectability.² While aesthetics has been a focus in Indian anthropology for some time (see Gell 1998; Pinney 1997), what is so significant about the thematic focus of these books is that they land in a moment where the aesthetics of India’s public sphere are significantly changing (see Jaffrelot 2021). Since the turn of the millennium, and particularly since the election of Narendra Modi in 2014, India has seen a new nationalist movement grip the public sphere. This movement is marked by a particular aestheticization of politics that sees a national flourishing as framed by militarized, masculine values, against a colonial image of India as weak and feminine (see S. Banerjee 2006). While marginal groups such as tribals, Dalits,



FIGURE 1. A Gaddi woman in her beautifully cleaned kitchen. Photograph by the author.

lower classes, and Muslims have always been seen as “internal others” in the Indian national project, this new aestheticization of politics marks them out in new ways. There is, hence, more at stake in aesthetic politics at the margins of the Indian state. Rather than presenting a grand narrative of the rise of Hindu nationalism, each of these books tells the story of change from a worm’s eye view. The results are startling—in each case we see how people scale upward from their bodies, homes, and localities toward wider symbolics of the nation. We find that marginal groups are not always resistant

to Hindu nationalist aesthetics, but sometimes mimic, appropriate, or even participate in them.

Tilche’s account of Hindu nationalism, through the eyes of Adivasi interlocutors, centers on practices of socioreligious reform in the place where they have been most aggressively rolled out. Gujarat, she tells us, was the birthplace of both Mahatma Gandhi and the current Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi. She shows how, since her first visit to the Gujarati region of Chotta Udaipiur in 2005, Rathava Adivasis have been undergoing an “aesthetic revolution.” Instead of resisting the nationalist

discourses that frame tribal groups as “fallen Hindus,” they are distancing themselves from aspects of their identity such as meat eating, alcohol consumption, and ritual sacrifice, and joining powerful Hindu religious sects such as the BAPS Swaminarayan sect “to avoid social stigma, bachelorhood, and social exclusion” (Tilche 2022: 7). Against this context, aesthetic projects of Adivasi art and museum curation both extend and resist forms of Hinduization, and involve a kind of “time tricking” (Moroşanu and Ringel 2016)—reframing Adivasi culture as a resource for the future, while also framing it in the past. There are points of “conjecture and overlap” or even a distorted mimicry between Hindu nationalist and Adivasi movements, “opening the possibility for participants to seemingly shift from one to the other” (Tilche 2022: 74).

If the Gujarati Adivasi aesthetic project involves a splitting of identities, the Gujarati Vohra Muslim project involves their consolidation. Verstappen shows how violence against Muslims in the 2002 Ahmedabad pogroms has led to the resignification of space in Gujarat, rendering some areas of the city, and some villages, “Muslim” and others “Hindu.” Seeking security, many Muslims from Gujarat and abroad have moved to the Muslim area of Anand, thus consolidating their Vohra Muslim identity. However, this does not mean that all Vohras resist Hindu nationalism, there are ways that some accommodate it. Verstappen’s use of multisited, transnational ethnography is commendable here, as she shows how the relationship to the national imaginary is contingent on the geographic and economic position from which one encounters it. Some of her most enlightening analysis comes from her encounters with diasporic Vohra Muslims that she interviewed in the United Kingdom or the United States, who see the exclusion of Muslims in India as a matter of perspective. One interlocutor, Samir—a businessman from Baltimore who regularly visited Anand—put this most clearly to her when she asked if he had experienced any difficulties in India. “There is a resistance in [India] against

Muslims in general,” he admitted, “but I don’t get delayed by that. It’s all a matter of how you handle a situation. When I was in trouble, I called Modi myself! And he helped me out” (Verstappen 2022: 85). Verstappen shows how Vohra Muslims, especially those in the diaspora, present their Muslim identity as a “communal hurdle” to overcome, often by foregrounding their economic value.

Baas’s interlocutors, bodybuilders in India’s urban centers, appeal to inclusion in the nation through their economic potential and embodied masculinity, and in doing so overwrite their caste or class identities. Most interestingly, Baas weaves film and life to show just how his interlocutors experience their own bodies in mediated ways. The national imaginary for urban bodybuilders is crystallized in the image of the Bollywood hero, its vitality drawn from his specific type of muscular body. The cultivation of their own bodies in line with Bollywood images is in itself an appeal for inclusion, Baas argues, in a particular middle-class modernity. As such, the body is seen as a site of innovation, potential and skill, qualities that are largely denied to lower-middle-class Indians in blue or even white-collar jobs. This is particularly important against a historical masculinity that previously associated muscular bodies with the physical labor conducted by lower castes, but also with criminality and violence. Such meanings attached to the muscular body have shifted, Baas suggests, especially as Hindu nationalist organizations eschew the colonial presentation of the Indian body as weak and seek to recuperate the Hindu masculine body as a national ideal (Baas 2020: 107).

For Tilche, Baas, and Verstappen, the emancipation-oriented theoretical framings of structural Marxism do not capture the ways their interlocutors carve out a space for themselves in this Indian national imaginary. Rather than seeing their interlocutors as experiencing false consciousness, these authors frame such practices as agentive, even if their actions play into logics of oppression and ultimately exacerbate suffering. Read together, these books show us a

rich picture of contemporary Hindu nationalism, displaying a public sphere whose symbolic language and semiotic ideology is not unified, but is negotiated in complex ways by groups it nominally excludes.

It is Tilche, in her analysis of Adivasi art making and curation in Gujarat, who frames these practices most explicitly in terms of the aesthetic. Referencing Jacques Rancière (2004), she writes:

The term *aesthetic* describes a particular “distribution of the sensible”: the relation between that which we hear, see, smell, do, or make and those who can hear, see, smell or make in a particular society. Politics in this analysis is an aesthetic practice that is different from the aestheticisation of politics. If the aesthetics of politics is the description of a certain regime of intelligibility given, for example, by fascism or Hindu nationalism, the politics of aesthetics refers to the processes by which a certain distribution of the sensible is established. (2022: 146–147)

A focus on aesthetic politics allows Tilche explicitly, but also Baas and Verstappen more implicitly, to investigate the ways marginal groups frame and reframe their own identities through practices that render them intelligible in the Hindu nationalist public sphere. The sites of this aesthetic practice, and their audiences, are different in each case. For Tilche, aesthetic politics is present in the formal curatorial projects of Gujarat’s tribal museums and art institutions where Adivasis seek to preserve and renew public interest in tribal culture. It is also present in the informal curatorial projects of the home, body, and landscape—shifts in Adivasi religious practice, diet, clothes, language, alcohol consumption, sexual behavior, and collective ritual—that allow them to shed stigmatizing associations with “primitivism” and “savagery.”

For Verstappen, the site of aesthetic politics is the city and aesthetic agency comes through the signification of space. She traces how Vohra Muslims migrate to Anand from rural areas,

seeking both security and economic opportunity; and how diasporic Vohra Muslims return to Anand, bringing social and financial capital with them. Eschewing a simplistic understanding of such spatial change as “ghettoization” or “segregation,” she calls this process “re-centering” and its social implications “reorientation.” While these theoretical terms tend to oversimplify her detailed and extensive ethnography, they show how the remaking of space and place works to consolidate identity and resignify Muslim belonging.

For Baas, the site of aesthetic politics is the body itself. Baas argues that the aesthetic practice of the body issues a form of subjectivity that emerges out of economic growth—where inclusion on the lower rungs of India’s middle class is deeply precarious. His interlocutors “invest” in their bodies as forms of capital in this fraught game, appealing to the muscular aesthetics of Bollywood masculinity to attract personal training clients, win body building competitions, land roles in movies or ads, and earn from sex work. While Baas’s choice of a Bourdieusian framing, in line with seminal work on embodied masculinity, inhibits his engagement with the more visceral aspects of embodied masculinity, it allows him to foreground the strategic choices of his interlocutors.

But these aesthetic projects, and particularly those that involve self-objectification, have a sharp cost, as all three of these books make apparent. Tilche faces the shortcomings of self-objectification head on. She shows us how museums have become sites where tribal people internalize and perform the categories and identities that others create for them (2022: 49–50). But her inquiry runs deeper—if tribal people do this of their own volition, if performing such identities gives them access to resources, who are we to judge? Verstappen shares this reflexive voice and holds herself accountable to the often-contradictory stories that her interlocutors tell about their relationship to communal violence. The threat of violence is still present as a binding force, but processes of social change are made livable by a new aesthetics of mobility and

connectedness. But it is Baas who perhaps most skillfully shows just how fragile such forms of aesthetic agency are, how vulnerable they are to the gaze of others. We see how bodybuilders are goggled at in public places, objects of ridicule and sexual shame, their bodies appropriated and sometimes even abused.

In each case, the authors' reflections showed the partiality of the anthropologist's own aesthetic politics and the moments where the authors were proved wrong, too quick to judge, or forced into reflexivity. "Looking back through the photographs that I took during my visits to Chotta Udaiput district in 2005 and in 2008," Tilche writes, "I realised that my eye had unintentionally edited out images of modernity, which I must have considered uglier and less photogenic than the primary, bold and simple aesthetics of tribal tradition" (145).

Tilche's use of the word "edit" is important here. When we attempt to understand the lives of our interlocutors, to render visible forms of oppression and inequality, what do we "edit out"? Through the reflexive voices in each of these ethnographies we are guided beyond an anthropology that tends either toward an aesthetics of suffering or an aesthetics of the good. As in Lawson's photographic compositions, Tilche, Verstappen, and Baas achieve a specific aesthetic politics through open and honest reflection—keeping both dignity and travail in view, maintaining a view of what they are editing out. A focus on the aesthetic, to return to Yurchak (2008), offers a representation of suffering and agency that cannot be generalized or codified, for it is a response to a particular situation. As such, investigating the aesthetic politics that we encounter as anthropologists, and pursuing our own aesthetic politics through the representation of those who are marginalized, seems a project that requires both humility and hope.

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Notes

1. Lawson's photographs speak to a particular experience of Black and African culture—of slavery, dispossession, and deprivation. It is not my intention to connect or even parallel such historical experiences of racial oppression to those of marginalized groups in India, as others have attempted. What I would like to explore in this essay is the source of this agency against the odds, and specifically, the ways in which marginalized groups find politics in aesthetics.
2. My focus on aesthetics is not limited to that of aesthetic value, but of aesthetic practice—meaning the cultivation or curation of the way things look, smell, taste, feel like, and sound; and the objects of aesthetic practice, such as art pieces, bodies, or homes, mediate such social action (see Gell 1998).

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