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Technotopias, Consumer Cultures, and the Gendered City¹

Abstract Discourses of post-colonial urbanism are characterized by a pervasive emphasis on technology as panacea to problems of governance, policy, and social interaction. The idea that technology will overcome deep-rooted structural malaise and lead to administrative “efficiency,” “clean” governance, and “reformed” urban spaces where everyone has equal access, has wide currency. This chapter explores how this “technological turn” in Indian urbanism plays out in relation to the politics of gender and, particularly, anxieties relating to single women in the city. The discussion deploys two key theoretical frameworks—“postnationalism” and “moral consumption”—to characterize processes peculiar to contemporary Indian modernity and, subsequently, to think through them about relationships between techno-positive discourses of the city and gender. It proceeds through exploring three interlocking processes—at national, city, and neighborhood levels—through which meanings of urban spaces, autonomy, and gender are produced. These are the discourses of “smart cities,” an app intended to be used by women to mark out “safe” and “unsafe” spaces, and a “guideline” produced by the University Grants Commission of India (UGC) on the “appropriate” ways in which young (single) female students should conduct themselves within university campuses. The chapter draws attention to the entanglements of the different kinds of discourses operating at multiple levels of Indian life, that are, in turn, grounds for producing the idea that technology is a “solution” to social problems. This techno-politics, the chapter argues, effaces the functioning of power as far as relations of gender are concerned.

Keywords urban techno-politics; gender and technology; city and women; masculinity and the city

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Introduction

This chapter explores contemporary narratives of gender by focusing on two analytical concepts, namely “postnationalism” and “moral consumption,” and their relationships with certain new formations of and discourses on urban spaces. The latter have to do with an imagination of the city as a “technotopia”: a place that has been made “better” and whose problems have been resolved through the intensive application of multiple technologies, including those of communication and surveillance. In a contiguous discussion on “smart cities,” Ayona Datta refers to this tendency as “technocratic nationalism,” where “to be patriotic is to believe in the power of technology.”² Within this context, my broader discussion centers on the ways in which ideas regarding gender journey across specific ways of imagining the urban, including the “technological turn.” In particular, the chapter investigates how a combination of processes—of regional, national, and global significance—serve as grounds for imagining the place of gender in the city. The discussion seeks to locate relationships between city and gender within new notions of citizenship and how they are imagined to relate to the state and the market, particularly consumer cultures. The two concepts that I use to ground the discussion will, I suggest, be particularly helpful in excavating these contexts.

In the second and third sections of the chapter, I introduce the ideas of postnationalism and moral consumption.³ The discussion is interspersed with specific examples of urban social processes that, I suggest, are both connected to these two concepts and also help to illuminate their meaning. Sections four, five, and six provide three separate examples of urban life-worlds imagined as technotopias and discuss how they relate to the ideas of postnationalism and moral consumption.

Postnationalism

The sense in which I invoke the term “postnationalism” is different from other recent studies that use the concept. Within the present discussion, the use of the term “postnational” is *not* meant to imply that the nation-state is insignificant as a context of analysis. I also do not suggest that we now live in a “postpatriotic” age where the most significant units of analysis are certain “postnational social form[ation]s,”⁴ such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that supposedly problematize nationalist and statist

2 Ayona Datta, “A 100 Smart Cities, A 100 Utopias,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5, no. 1 (2015): 50.

3 I have adapted these concepts from Sanjay Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community, and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.

4 Arjun Appadurai, “Patriotism and its Futures,” *Public Culture* 5, no. 3 (1993): 411.

perspectives. Further, my use of the concept also differs from another recent usage. In the latter, it is posited as “a distinct ethico-political horizon and a position of critique” and a concept that “can be instantiated... by suspending the idea of the nation as a prior theoretical-political horizon, and thinking through its impossibility, even while located uncomfortably within its bounds.”⁵ Postnationalism, in the context of my discussion, refers to relationships between nationalist emotions and the robust desires engendered through new practices of consumerism.⁶ In my discussion, the state continues to be an important unit of analysis.

A brief comment is also required to differentiate my use of the term “postnationalism” from that of “neoliberalism,”⁷ which might be said to describe the same set of social and economic circumstances. While I cannot dwell on this aspect in detail, the key point I wish to make is that neoliberalism “is unable to account for the specific *national* histories that transform into postnational ones”⁸ and that there is no “universal neoliberal moment”⁹ that allows for a “global” view. As Terry Flew points out,

[the] debate about neoliberalism as *one of a number of competing ideas about the organization of capitalist economies and societies* has been largely overwhelmed by those arguments that present neoliberalism as the ascendant ideology of global capitalism, so that the world is seen as being, or becoming, more and more neoliberal in its institutional structures and policy choices.¹⁰

My deployment of “postnationalism” seeks to avoid the “too-easy application of models of capitalism and neoliberalism that obscure the variety of local experience.”¹¹ In particular, the term seeks to capture the nuances of local histories—of capital and its cultural and economic fields—that produce locally inflected relationships between capital, the state, and citizens. I will have more to say on this later. However, a fruitful way of approaching the topic, and providing concrete illustrative examples, is through a brief exploration of the contemporary politics of urban spaces in Delhi.

5 Malathi de Alwis, Satish Deshpande, Pradeep Jeganathan, Mary John, Nivedita Menon, M.S.S. Pandian, Aditya Nigam, and S. Akbar Zaidi, “The Postnational Condition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 10 (2009): 35.

6 See also Nandini Gooptu, ed., *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India: Studies in Youth, Class, Work and Media* (London: Routledge, 2013).

7 Terry Flew, “Six Theories of Neoliberalism,” *Thesis Eleven* 122, no. 1 (2014); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8 Sanjay Srivastava, “Divine Markets: Ethnographic Notes on Postnationalism and Moral Consumption in India,” in *Religion and the Morality of the Market*, ed. Filippo Osella and Daromir Rudnyckij (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 99; emphasis original.

9 Srivastava, “Divine Markets,” 99.

10 Flew, “Six Theories of Neoliberalism,” 55; emphasis mine.

11 Daniel Mains, “Neoliberal Times: Progress, Boredom, and Shame Among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (2007): 660.

In 1999, soon after being elected to office, Delhi's erstwhile Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, "called for an active participation of Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs) in governance."¹² The rationale for this was the apparent "failure" of "civic agencies" to carry out their normal tasks. The Chief Minister's Secretary noted that the call to actively involve RWAs in urban governance heralded a new era, marking "the first step towards a responsive management of the city."¹³ Positing a distinction between the state and the "community," the Secretary further noted that such a "failure" of "civic agencies" meant that "it's really time for the community to be given direct control of managing the affairs of the city."¹⁴ The government subsequently decided to "empower" RWAs to "take certain decisions on their own."¹⁵ It was proposed that RWAs be given control over the management of resources such as parks, community halls, parking places, sanitation facilities, and local roads. A more direct relationship between the state and RWAs was also mooted through the idea of joint surveys of encroached land—that is, land that had been "illegally" occupied, usually by slum-dwellers—with the possibility that all illegal structures would "then be demolished in a non-discriminatory manner."¹⁶ Finally, it was proposed that RWAs be allowed to impose fines on government agencies, which failed to carry out their assigned tasks.

In 2005, the Delhi state government announced that it would raise electricity tariffs by ten percent. The Delhi Residents Welfare Association Joint Front (RWAJF) was formed in the same year in order to protest against the measure. The Front consisted of 195 separate RWAs from around the city. The increase in power rates for domestic consumers was the second one since the state-owned electricity body was unbundled in June 2002 as a part of power sector reforms. As a result, three privately owned companies secured contracts for electricity distribution.¹⁷ There was vigorous protest over the price raise and, in addition to the RWAJF, NGOs such as People's Action and another group known as Campaign Against Power Tariff Hike (CAPTH) joined the collective effort. Individual RWAs asked their members to refuse payment of the extra amount, while RWAJF lobbied the government and organized citywide protests. The protests gained broad coverage in both print and electronic media and, echoing Gandhian anti-colonial strategies, the organizers were reported to have deployed "the ideas of 'civil disobedience' and 'people's power.'"¹⁸

12 Abhilasha Ojha, "RWAs Will Soon Have Direct Control Over Sanitation and Community Halls," *Indian Express*, January 12, 1999, 1.

13 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."

14 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."

15 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."

16 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."

17 Aman Sethi, "The Price of Reforms," *Frontline* 22, no. 19 (2005). For a more benign view of privatization, see Ravi Kanbur, "Development Disagreements and Water Privatization: Bridging the Divide" (working paper no. 127010, Department of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University, New York, 2007).

18 Sethi, "Price of Reforms," 5.

Indeed, the parallels drawn between the Gandhian anti-colonial moment and the present times were even more explicit, with the Convener of the RWAJF referring to the protests as “non-violent Satyagraha.”¹⁹ The term *satyagraha*, made up of the words *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (insistence), was used by Mohandas K. Gandhi to refer to non-violent resistance in his struggle against the colonial rule. Eventually, the Delhi government backed down, and the price raise was shelved. According to Sanjay Kaul, the President of the People’s Action NGO, the success of the protest heralded the making of a “middle-class revolution.”²⁰ Kaul is one of many who has re-discovered and deployed anti-colonial vocabulary on behalf of the people at a time when representations of the colonial era are part of the sphere of mass consumption. Hence, in the wake of the 2011 anti-corruption movement led by the social worker Anna Hazare, yoga guru Baba Ramdev invoked “Gandhi in calling for a ‘*satyagraha* against corruption.”²¹

The circulation of ideas of civil disobedience, *satyagraha*, and revolution, as well as the consolidation of the notion of a “people” contesting the state, occur in a context that might be called postnational. By this, I mean a situation where the moral frisson of terms such as *satyagraha* and revolution, provided by anti-colonial sentiment and action, no longer holds. In an era of post-Nehruvian economic liberalization characterized by consumerist modernity,²² the ethico-moral universe of the anti-colonial struggle is no longer part of popular public discourse. In fact, the so-called colonial ambience is the stuff of popular marketing strategies. Hence, the Spencer’s department store in the privately developed DLF City in Gurgaon outlines its history through a series of billboard-size sepia photographs placed at the entrance.²³ The photographs, depicting fashionable European women shopping for fine goods at Spencer’s stores, date from the colonial period and represent an efflorescence of colonial chic in the Indian public sphere. Other contiguous sites include the five-star Imperial Hotel in central Delhi, liberally decorated with a series of photographs of the “Delhi Durbar” (consisting of images from a 1911 ceremony held in Delhi to commemorate the coronation of King George V), and themed restaurants such as Days of

19 Tanvi Sirari, “Civil Uprisings in Contemporary India” (working paper no. 161, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, 2006), 5.

20 Sanjay Kaul quoted in Sethi, “Price of Reforms,” 4.

21 Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, “Guru Logics,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 1 (2012): 318.

22 Leela Fernandes, *India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, “Muslim Entrepreneurs in Public Life between India and the Gulf: Making Good and Doing Good,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1 (2009).

23 Sanjay Srivastava, “National Identity, Bedrooms, and Kitchens: Gated Communities and New Narratives of Space in India,” in *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing through Ethnography*, ed. Mark Liechty, Carla Freeman, and Rachel Heiman (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2012).

the Raj and Sola Topee, also in Delhi. Within this new context, the earlier emphasis on the ethics of saving money and delayed gratification for the national good—indispensable ideological accompaniments to civil disobedience and *Satyagraha*—do not find any resonance in contemporary popular discourses on the role of the state.²⁴ As I have noted earlier, the term postnational does *not*, in my usage, mean to imply that the nation state is insignificant as a context of analysis. Rather, it refers to the new ways in which the nation state relates to the citizens, the contexts within which it relates to *different* groups of citizens, and the manner in which it relates to capital.

In light of the earlier discussion and to pre-empt an aspect I discuss here, this chapter suggests that there is a significant middle-class discourse that seeks to rethink the idea of the state as such that it is increasingly thought of as a “friend” of the middle classes. The postcolonial state in India has most significantly been imagined as a benefactor of the poor, with “development” as its most important policy focus. Indeed, the so-called development focus of the state has been a defining feature of perceptions of postcoloniality itself.²⁵ As Akhil Gupta has pointed out, “development became the chief ‘reason of state’ in independent India.”²⁶ Investment in heavy industry was, further, seen to be an important aspect of postcolonial development²⁷ and this, in turn, led to a perception of the state as being pro-industrialization and anti-consumerist. RWA activities such as those discussed above have become significant sites for the reformulation of these well-entrenched notions of the state and its relationship with different class factions. These neighborhood and city-level activities unfold in tandem with the broad national thrust towards “de-regulating” the economy,²⁸ including a shrinking public sector and easy loans for consumer purchases, and produce a palpable sense of amity between “the people” and the state. I refer to these aspects as characteristics of postnationalism.

Finally, in this context, one of the most significant ways in which the postnational moment resonates within the politics of urban space, concerns the repositioning of the language of anti-colonial nationalism from the national sphere to the suburban one. This, in turn, also indexes the move from the idea of the “national” family to the nuclear (gated) one, and

24 See, for example, Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke*.

25 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

26 Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments*, 107.

27 Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

28 Atulan Guha, “Labour Market Flexibility: An Empirical Inquiry into Neoliberal Propositions,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 19 (2009); Steve Dorné, *Globalization on the Ground: New Media and the Transformation of Culture, Class, and Gender in India* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2008).

the translation of the notion of nationalist solidarity into (middle) class solidarity. Indeed, the most significant manner in which apartments in gated communities are advertised is through the trope of the nuclear family, heralding a new kind of national identity.²⁹ It is important to add here that this also has specific consequences for how the *single* woman is imagined in an urban context, for the shift in gaze is from the national *family* to the new nuclear *family*. There is, in other words, no symbolic space for imagining a woman out of the context of the family, or including ideas of her non-reproductive sexuality. The single woman's being "does not meet normative standards of feminine beauty, reproductivity, and heterosexuality [and hence] becomes excluded not only from marriage but also from social recognition."³⁰

Discussions about changes in the nature of the family in India are also significant contexts for debates regarding gendered subjectivities. In particular, within popular discourse, putative changes in the family form—from joint to nuclear, say—are frequently invoked both as signifiers of a change from older ways and traditions, and of the changing role of women in society.³¹ In some instances, these discussions serve to introduce ideas regarding putative changes in attitudes regarding single women:

Singles form part of a new demographic that is changing the way women are perceived in India. They are either never-married or divorced, unabashedly celebrating their singledom, not giving into either the arranged marriage conundrum or the ticking biological clock.³²

However, celebratory (or, perhaps, just hopeful) narratives do not usually match the far-more complicated situation that characterizes the quotidian experiences of singleness that have been observed by other researchers. The Indian city, while offering certain freedoms unavailable in a non-urban environment, is a long way off from being a utopia of the solitary life, particularly as far as women are concerned. It is important to remember, for example, that far-reaching changes in urban life that concern the nature of work, leisure, residence, mobility, and commerce have also been accompanied by a national-level movement towards religious conservatism. Hence,

29 On this, see also Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012), chapters one and two.

30 Sarah Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities, Class Mobilities, and Personhoods in Flux," *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (2018): 65.

31 Ravinder Kaur and Rajni Palriwala, ed., *Marrying in South Asia: Shifting Concepts, Changing Practices in a Globalising World* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2018); Jonathan Parry, "Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 4 (2001).

32 Rekha Balakrishnan, "Why Single Women above 35 in India are saying 'Yehi Hai Right Choice, Baby!'" *HerStory*, November 25, 2019. Accessed November 30, 2022. <https://yourstory.com/herstory/2019/11/single-women-india-dating-sex-life>.

while on the one hand, gated communities and their “modern” lifestyles proliferate across the country, they are also sites of an efflorescence of Hindu religious activities that take their cue from a national mood marked by Hindutva politics. The recent proliferation of the *Karva Chauth* ritual, where women pray for the wellbeing of their husbands, is a case in point.³³ The rise of religious conservatism as a political strategy has also led to the re-fashioning and consolidation of new forms of social conservatism where gender continues to play an important role in the making of “Indian traditions.”

Urban spatial changes which at first glance might project an air of a new world of possibilities, are in fact, circumscribed by wider social norms that continue to affect how women in general, and single women in particular, are regarded. Specifically, gender continues to be a site of expression of “Indian traditions,” “morality,”³⁴ and “urbanness” itself is just *one* context affecting women’s lives. As Patricia Uberoi points out, while bridal magazines in India narrate stories of “modern relationships,” they circulate in contexts where “descent, succession and inheritance are in the male line; post-marital residence is ‘patrivirilocal’... and authority resides with [the] senior males of the family or lineage.”³⁵

Notwithstanding media boosterism that speaks of new worlds of opportunities for women, postnationalism is also a context where ideas of national traditions and morality continue to hold fast and where “choice” is usually about the goods to consume rather than, say, spousal choice.³⁶ The moral life of the nation now finds expression *through* consumer culture, rather than against it. Moreover, debates on “‘westernisation’ and associated perceptions of transgressions of normative gendered comportment and spaces such as the domestic and the public”³⁷ continue to be part of a new context that I refer to as moral consumption.

33 See Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism* (especially chapters five and seven); Smitha Radhakrishnan, “Professional Women, Good Families: Respectable Femininity and the Cultural Politics of a ‘New’ India,” *Qualitative Sociology* 32, no. 2 (2009).

34 On single women living as tenants in Delhi see, for example, Lucie Bernroider, “Single Female Tenants in South Delhi—Gender, Class and Morality in a Globalizing City,” *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 25, no. 5 (2018).

35 Patricia Uberoi, “Aspirational Weddings: The Bridal Magazine and the Canons of ‘Decent Marriage,’” in *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2008), 245.

36 Uberoi, “Aspirational Weddings.”

37 Christiane Brosius, “Regulating Access and Mobility of Single Women in a ‘World Class’-City: Gender and Inequality in Delhi, India,” in *Inequalities in Creative Cities: Issues, Approaches, Comparisons*, ed. Ulrike Gerhard, Michael Hoelscher, and David Wilson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 245.

Moral consumption

This section outlines the second of the two concepts I use as a background to this discussion, viz., “moral consumption.” Moral consumption is a context “where...active participation in consumerism is accompanied by an anxiety about it and its relationship to ‘Indianness.’”³⁸ The term refers to the context where consumerist activity is accompanied by explicit and implicit discourses on the possibility of exercising control over consumption activity. This is different from viewing consumerism as a threat to established life-ways, which, as some scholars suggest, is a significant reaction to consumerism in India.³⁹ Hence, I would suggest that recent contexts of consumerism indicate that the long-standing cultural discourses of the sacrificing and nurturing mother that actively proscribe “indulgent” consumption⁴⁰ can be encompassed *within* acts of consumerism by women. Let me provide two examples here. Firstly, women visitors to the Disneyfied (and hyper-consumerist) Akshardham temple complex in Delhi can move seamlessly between being consumers and devoutly religious persons precisely because the same space provides opportunities for both consumerism and religiosity.⁴¹ That is to say, the (masculine) anxiety over female consumption is assuaged through a process of moral consumption whereby women take part in hyper-consumerism, and are also able to withdraw to the realms of religiosity. Though each realm is interpenetrative, each is imagined as separate. Hence,

[t]he 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 “de-racinated” (or “Westernized”) middle class might only be able to consume the products of capitalism.⁴²

38 Sanjay Srivastava, “Urban Spaces, Disney-Divinity and the Moral Middle Classes in Delhi,” in *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 381.

39 Margit van Wessel, “Talking about Consumption: How an Indian Middle Class Dissociates from Middle-Class Life,” *Cultural Dynamics* 16, no. 1 (2004).

40 See, for example, Henrike Donner, “Gendered Bodies, Domestic Work and Perfect Families: New Regimes of Gender and Food in Bengali Middle-Class Lifestyles,” in *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life*, ed. Henrike Donner (London: Routledge, 2011).

41 Brosius, *India’s Middle Class*; Srivastava, “Urban Spaces.”

42 Srivastava, “Urban Spaces,” 381. All italics in the original.

The relationship between the new and the old middle classes, as represented earlier, is of course, relevant to the politics of gender in contemporary India, but it is also of more general significance. It is, for example, at the heart of contemporary discourses of anti-elitism that speak in the name of an "ordinary" middle-class citizen who has been denied his (*sic*) rights due to "appeasement" of, say, religious minorities and the poor.

My second example of moral consumption comes from gated communities in India. There is a long-standing discourse of "publicness" in India within which the place of women is a fraught one. The woman in public is seen to have abandoned her natural task of being the guardian of tradition, a task connected to the domestic sphere. Gated communities, however, are where the "street" is not the street; (and for precisely that reason) they are sites of intense middle-class activity, and represent a "public" where women can be both the guardians of tradition *and* take part in sexualized representations of the self. So, while on the occasion of the festival of *Karva Chauth*, women dressed in traditional (and elaborate) Indian clothing pray for their husband's welfare, they can also be found pacing the condominium grounds on their exercise rounds dressed in skin-hugging clothing. And, unlike the constraints placed on women at public celebrations of *Holi* (the festival of splashing colored water), at the Bacardi-sponsored *Holi* festival at one of the gated communities, men and women dance together to Bollywood songs on an open-air stage. Consumerism, here, is the grounds for the making of a moral middle class within which women are not determined by modernity, but are able to take part in it and "return home" when required. Postnational consumerism provides the *grounds* for the making of moral consumption, for one must take vigorous part in consumerism in order to display one's ability to withdraw from it. The relationship between postnationalism, moral consumption, and the new urban spaces of gated communities also speaks to the long history of anxiety about the "public woman" through the question: How can the "public woman" belong both to the world as well as to the home?

My discussion so far has outlined certain contexts that point to the relationships between the cultural and political economies of contemporary capitalism and urbanism that, in the Indian case, have specific spatial dimensions. I will now use these contexts as the background to the next part of my discussion, which focuses on current discourses on urbanism and women in public spaces.

Technotopia 1: smart cities

A key aspect of the *discursive* spaces created by the contexts I am referring to as postnationalism and moral consumption, is a specific manner of viewing relationships between private and public spaces. Furthermore, this translates into certain ways in which a social relation such as gender

is imagined as playing out across such spaces. I will illustrate this through three specific examples.

My first example relates to concerns about urban spaces and processes at a very broad level. I refer here to the so-called smart cities project launched by the government of India. The document called *Smart Cities: The MoUD's* [Ministry of Urban Development] *Note for the Parliamentary Panel on Urban Development* outlines the following definition for smart cities:

Smart Cities are those that are able to attract investments and experts and professionals. Good Quality infrastructure, simple and transparent online business and public services processes that make it easy to practice one's profession or to establish an enterprise and run it efficiently without any bureaucratic hassles are essential features of a citizen-centric and investor-friendly smart city.⁴³

It is important to point out that the discussions that surround the smart city program in India proceed from the perspective that technology as a tool of urban planning is "gender-neutral," and that in fact, it can have a positive outcome on gender inequality by promoting women's safety in public places. However, I will later suggest that the smart city discourse has quite an opposite effect.

One hundred cities across India have been selected to be converted into smart cities. The smart cities idea is built around a host of technological processes that, it is suggested, will address issues of infrastructure, housing, "IT connectivity," "e-Governance and citizen participation," and safety and security, particularly that relating to "women, children, and the elderly."⁴⁴ The "safety and security" aspects relate mainly to the provision of a greater number of surveillance devices, such as CCTV camera in public places, as well as, street lighting. Each selected smart city will receive around INR 100 *crores* (a *crore* denotes ten million; approximately 11,067,021 euros) per year for five years. Further funds are to be raised via municipal bonds, "leverage borrowings from financial institutions," both Indian and global, and Public Private Partnership schemes. Most significantly, smart cities are to be developed through "constituted boards" known as Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs), each of which will have a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), as well as nominees from the central government, the state government, and urban local bodies. The smart cities project, Datta (2015) suggests, is characteristic of an era of "technocratic nationalism... in which to be patriotic is to believe in the power of technology."⁴⁵ The smart cities plan was developed through the assistance of Bloomberg

43 Lok Sabha Secretariat, *The MoUD's* [Ministry of Urban Development] *Note for the Parliamentary Panel on Urban Development* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2014), 4.

44 Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD), *Smart Cities: Mission Statement and Guidelines* (New Delhi: Ministry of Urban Development, June, 2015), 4–5.

45 Datta, "A 100 Smart Cities," 50.

Philanthropies, which also assisted the Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD) in selecting cities for funding. Among other global corporations, IBM and Cisco SmartCity Dubai have either expressed strong interest or signed agreements to convert selected cities into “smart” ones.

There are specific aspects of postnationalism as it relates to the conceptualization and planning of smart cities. First, there is the changing relationship between the state, private capital, and imagined urban citizens. This relationship is being recast, as I have noted earlier, by imagining the state as a friend of the middle classes. This is a significant development in the history of the postcolonial nation state. To begin with, there is the potentially problematic relationship between the SPV, elected bodies, and non-professional and non-middle-class citizens. If the city (the smart city) is imagined as a corporation, then how might urban spaces, those thought of as secure and insecure, be imagined? The social complexity of Indian cities lies in the kinds of asymmetries of power, identity politics, and the politics of gender that, in effect, are sought to be effaced through recasting this complexity as a mechanical relationship between technology and global capital. I will suggest below that the smart cities idea is an entirely novel form of governmentality that paves the way for future thinking about relationships between spaces and subjectivities, and as in the case of this chapter, gendered subjectivities.

The next rung of my argument, and my second example, comes from a variety of surveillance mechanisms suggested for Delhi and the proliferation of mobile apps (applications) that seek to contribute towards women’s safety in urban spaces.

Technotopia 2: CitySafe

In early 2015, the Delhi government floated a tender to install 18,300 “smart poles” in the New Delhi area. These smart poles “would have CCTV cameras, WiFi and LED bulbs.”⁴⁶ The idea of public safety for women has been particularly urgent in Delhi after the brutal—and globally reported—rape of a young woman in Delhi on December 16, 2012. City-wide surveillance through CCTV cameras has found great favor with the Delhi government, which is frequently confronted with media reports that play up the idea of Delhi as the “rape capital of India,” one that is understood to be an affront to “national dignity.” While there is no reliable data on the numbers of CCTV cameras installed around Delhi as part of the *official* efforts to ensure public safety (and other aspects, such as traffic management), a recent interview with a senior employee at a Delhi government body charged with the task of establishing a variety of urban digital infrastructure indicates that this

46 Aneesha Mathur, “Smart Poles in Central Delhi: NDMC to Issue Fresh Tender,” *Indian Express*, August 22, 2015.

is a major preoccupation.⁴⁷ The official recounted that there were “thousands of cameras around Delhi, installed on a variety of buildings.” He also added, however, that a very large number of these are not operational due to lack of payment of dues by the government to the private companies contracted to install and maintain the equipment. However, apart from state-sponsored measures—such as “smart poles” and CCTVs on government-owned buildings—there has also been a proliferation of non-state activity that seeks to address concerns of public safety for women through electronic surveillance and tracking mechanisms. A mobile application that was launched in Delhi in 2013 is one example. This app, which I will refer to as CitySafe, is a “map based... app... the core of which... [is] the Safety Audit... which consists of a set of nine parameters that together contribute to the perception of safety. Each audit results in a pin on the specific location where the audit was performed and also records the time and date.” (*CitySafe Information Booklet*, n.d.)⁴⁸ Further, “citizens can view (and contribute) information and comments on Audits, Harassment, Hazards and Places.” Some of the nine parameters are lighting, “openness in the area,” “visibility,” “people density,” “gender diversity,” and “feeling.”

The advisory group for the CitySafe app consists of “software developers, an urban planner, a self-described “technocrat and entrepreneur,” global consultants on “women’s issues,” and a former employee of a prominent Indian NGO that works on issues related to women. Localities that are audited receive a score, and red and green pins indicate levels of danger and safety. Heat maps indicate “your city’s safe and unsafe clusters ... [a]nd the safest locations and routes in your city. Green color in the heat map is for safe, amber for less safe, and red for unsafe.”⁴⁹ Users are invited to compare the safety score of their locality with that of other localities. The application’s promoters have been requested by the police and various RWAs, among other groups, to demonstrate how it works. The development of the app and various activities to support its popularization have been funded by international corporate philanthropies as well as government-funded aid-giving bodies.

CitySafe “provides information about infrastructure to promote safety for women and other groups, to citizens at large and important stakeholders including the government, NGOs, corporations, and RWAs.”⁵⁰ Continuing my argument about technotopias and consumer cultures, I would like to suggest that, following on from the broader smart cities discourse, there are additional processes beyond the realm of state action, which, nonetheless, draw on it. These processes interpret the idea of urban safety

47 In order to preserve confidentiality, I am unable to reveal either the name of the official or the organization within which he is employed.

48 This description and that which follows is taken from the *CitySafe Information Booklet*. As I have anonymized the name of the app itself, I will only refer to it by this title. *CitySafe Information Booklet* (New Delhi, 2016), 2.

49 *CitySafe Information Booklet*, 2.

50 *CitySafe Information Booklet*, 2.

in the language of the consumer-citizen,⁵¹ who has access to the goods of high-tech modernity that mark out dystopic (red pin) urban spaces. This version, or vision, of urban safety emerges from both a technologization of feminist concerns and an overwriting of the asymmetries of Indian urban life through producing “heat maps” that visualize certain localities as dangerous. In most cases, it is not difficult to work out what kinds of localities become identified as “dangerous.” This manner of mapping the city as a series of more or less dystopic spaces is also based on a set of relationships between the state and its organs (such as the police), constituents of civil society (such as RWAs and NGOs), and private capital on local and global scales. While the professed aim of CitySafe is to contribute towards improving urban infrastructure which would lead to greater safety for women in public spaces, I suggest that the app, as well as the gloss that accompanies it, institutionalizes and normalizes long-standing power relations.

The broader theoretical point I wish to make, is that, in this instance, the combined politics of gender and urban spaces is produced through an alignment of specific social and class formations that contain the seeds of an exclusionary vision of the city. The key aspect that undergirds this aspect of safety for women is a version of “urban fear”⁵² that is based on the logic of identifying populations under threat and spaces from where such threat might emanate. Even if unwittingly, gender becomes the site of an unspoken fragmentation of the city into its “dangerous” and “safe” spaces, rather than a social critique of, say, urban masculine cultures and the uneven development of city spaces. This alignment of factors that produce visions of the dangerous city and its dangerous populations, does not, to reiterate an earlier point, derive from a logic of “neoliberal urban development.” Rather, I seek to capture a process where ideas of “technological nationalism,”⁵³ the role of global capital and technologies, the safety of “good citizens,” and the efforts of a concerned state combine to produce a deeply problematic view of urban life. It is this complex landscape of action and behavior that I refer to as an aspect of “postnationalism.”

Technotopias and moral consumption: The “UGC Guidelines for Safety on Campus”

This section of the chapter outlines the third and final context—a set of guidelines for women’s safety issued by India’s higher education regulator, The University Grants Commission—which will serve to round off the discussion about postnationalism, moral consumption, gender, urban space, and discourses of safety.

51 Fernandes, *India’s New Middle Class*.

52 Setha M. Low, “Urban Fear: Building the Fortress City,” *City & Society* 9, no. 1 (1997).

53 Datta, “A 100 Smart Cities.”

The invariable backdrop to recent discussions about gender and safety in public places, and particularly to discussions that refer to single young women, is the rape and brutal violence inflicted upon the young woman known as Jyoti Singh in Delhi on December 16, 2012. The twenty-three-year-old Singh was returning from a multiplex in a shopping mall and was accompanied by a male friend. As is the case with many young single women who have arrived in the metropolis to pursue a better future than that offered by their smaller hometowns, Singh worked in a low-paying job (in a call center) in order to train for a profession she hoped to enter, in her case, physiotherapy. The potential risk she was exposed to as a single woman in the city was magnified by the fact that someone of her background might not have been able to afford private transport for a late-night journey and opted for a public bus instead. She was raped and violently beaten by the bus driver and five of his companions. Two weeks after the assault, Singh died of her injuries.

In early 2013, in the wake of the massive outcry over the rape, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the government body charged with overseeing the higher education system, established a committee to consult the universities about ways of improving security at university campuses. The committee, consisting of feminist academics from a variety of disciplines, consulted widely among students and faculty at university campuses across the country and provided its report towards the end of 2013. Among other things, the committee's report included discussions on "the nature of power, the problem of violence, countering sexual harassment and issues of equality and freedom,"⁵⁴ "the entrenched patriarchal practices/structures and mindsets and the corresponding cultures of impunity and silence that sustain them, and conspire/militate against gender justice and perpetuate pervasive violence in society,"⁵⁵ and the "multiple fault lines of caste, class, religion, and disability."⁵⁶ Together, these statements amounted to a criticism of the discourses of "protection" and policing of young women, as well as of cultures of masculinity. By considering urban spaces and young women in particular, the report sought to rethink the relationship between being single and personal autonomy by imagining different kinds of freedom as rights rather than concessions made by different authority figures such as parents and college principals.

I have already noted that at the current time, in addition to postnational discourses, the Indian context provides us with a significant discourse regarding gender, consumerism, and autonomy. This is the discourse of moral consumption, and it is this, which is reflected in a document released by the UGC in 2015 with the title *UGC Guidelines on Safety of Students on and off Campuses of Higher Educational Institutions*. The provenance of the

54 "Saksham: Measures for Ensuring the Safety of Women and Programmes for Gender Sensitization on Campuses," (working papers id: 5756, New Delhi: University Grants Commission, 2013), 4.

55 "Saksham," 19–20.

56 "Saksham," 82.

document is shrouded in mystery, given that the UGC had already released the *Saksham* report in 2013 that dealt with exactly the same topic. In any case, the contents of this document are significantly different from the recommendations contained in the *Saksham* report. Some familiarity with some aspects of the *UGC Guidelines* might provide some clues as to why the UGC thought it prudent to release a report of this nature, rather than be seen as solely endorsing *Saksham* as a means towards gender rights.

The UGC's *Guidelines* document can be analyzed in terms of moral consumption as I have defined the term above. In order to do that, I begin by quoting some of its the key parts:

- Any physical infrastructure housing students, whether HEI [Higher Education Institutions] or hostels, should be secured by a boundary wall of such height that it cannot be scaled over easily. In order to further fortify it, a fence of spiraling barbed wires can be surmounted [sic] on the wall so that unauthorized access to the infrastructure is prevented effectively. The entry points to such housing units should be restricted to three or less and they should be manned by at least three security guards, sufficiently armed, CCTV cameras, identity verification mechanism and register of unknown entrants / visitors with their identity proofs and contact details. At least one woman security personnel should be deployed at such entry points so that physical security check of girl students or visitor can be undertaken. The bags and other belongings of students/visitors can also be examined, manually and/or by metal detectors, in order to secure a weapon-free and violence-free campus.
- Biometric way of marking student attendance, both in HEI as well as hostels, can be an effective way to overcome proxy. Such digital mechanism can enable HEIs to keep an eye on a student's movement and whereabouts in [a] failsafe manner.
- Setting up a university police station *within* the premises of the HEIs, wherever feasible, can go a long way in instilling a sense of security amongst students and scare amongst nuisance-makers and petty criminals. (emphasis added)
- HEIs should organize quarterly parents-teachers meet (PTM) so that grievances and gaps in the system can be addressed and resolved. Online complaint registration system (*sic*) can also be launched so that issues can be addressed before they slip out of hands of authorities....
- It is mandatory for institutions to elicit consent letters from the parents/guardians of the students who are embarking on tour.⁵⁷

57 *UGC Guidelines on Safety of Students on and Off Campuses of Higher Educational Institutions* (Delhi: University Grants Commission, 2015), 2-5.

There is, most obviously, an aspect of patriarchal tragicomedy in the way the UGC's *Guidelines* imagine university spaces and gendered subjectivities, and it hardly seems worthwhile to dignify the recommendations with serious discussion. However, beyond the patent absurdity of the guidelines, where the discourse of care masks certain fears regarding young and single women's autonomy, it is worth locating the document within the broader process that I have referred to as moral consumption. This, I suggest, allows us to think about the imbrication of gender with the multiple processes of contemporary modernity and postnationalism.

Moral consumption is a process of dealing with consumerist modernity. In the Indian context, it refers particularly to the imagined, potentially destabilizing effects of consumer culture. Consumer culture presents a double bind in the context of gender. Consumerism is both a structure of desire that marks the making of new identities and a site of anxiety insofar as it carries the promise of individuation for both men and women. The *UGC Guidelines* addresses this anxiety through a discourse of moral consumption, no doubt additionally stoked by the earlier *Saksham* report by a committee established by the UGC itself. That is to say, the guidelines create specific notions of an "outside" and an "inside" where the subjectivities of single young women are allowed to travel between consuming cultures of the world while, ultimately, being commanded to return to the spatialized gaze of traditional structures of power at/of home. Thus, consumption is good, but it must move along specified moral contours. The *UGC Guidelines* addresses that fraught territory that lies between the dis-embedding effects of contemporary modernity, for example, new forms of technology or changing norms of young women's sexuality, and embedding processes of power and authority. The *Guidelines* occupies a very specific discursive space. It presents the following question as one of fundamental importance: What are the ways of allowing young women who may choose to occupy the streets and other public spaces as part of a general public culture of consumerism, but also countering the potentially threatening culture of their publicness through a process of delimitation? The answer is, through moral consumption.

The *Guidelines* provides a solution to the problem of finding a balance between the home and the world.⁵⁸ Young women should be of the world, a world that is (approvingly) marked by changing relations between the state and the middle classes, "technocratic nationalism," exclusionary urban processes exemplified by gated communities, and the rise of consumerist nationalism. However, the unpredictable manner in which these factors, either singly or in combination, might produce uncontrollable female subjects, can be managed through a discourse of moral consumption. This discourse stipulates that there should be an *Indian* way of being

58 Ujithra Ponniah, "Managing Marriages through 'Self-Improvement': Women and 'New Age' Spiritualities in Delhi," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2018).

in the world, which primarily entails defining the contours of being in the world. Urban young women must strike a balance between being and behaving, going out and staying at home.

Conclusion

I will conclude with an account of the past in order to contextualize the present.

As historians have noted, the colonial era in India was marked by attempts to produce the kinds of public spaces that the colonisers knew, where, unlike in India, there was no confusion between the “private” and the “public.”⁵⁹ The apparent public in the Indian context did not appear to have its own rules and regulations of social order, hence presenting a problem for a clear differentiation of the private and the public that lay at the heart of the “domestic values of bourgeois privacy.”⁶⁰ The British set about then, to create clearly demarcated public spaces that would erase the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private. The Western notion of “public” in the Indian context has translated into a history of public spaces that, since the colonial period, has been about lessons in civility and an education in modernity. The making of a public is also the attempt to distinguish the public, which is imagined to be rational, from the “crowd,” imagined as irrational. Contemporary discourses on space move us to an interesting context of the making of new publics and the educative discourses of space in the late postcolonial period. Whereas the colonial and early postcolonial discourses emerged out of a dialogue between the state and the elite citizens, the provenance of the current discourse is wider, and more complex, and involves a greater number of interlocutors.

The three contexts outlined above, namely the Smart City program, the CitySafe App, and the *UGC Safety Guidelines* overlap. What they seek to produce is a new kind of urban spatial discipline, one that is anchored to the imperatives of postnational modernity and moral consumption. The smart city program seeks to create a public out of the changing relationship between the state and national and global capital through the intensive deployment of technology. This public is to be distinguished from the crowd that might disrupt this relationship. It lays the groundwork, in turn, for a *techno-politics* of population management. This techno-politics provides the context for addressing a specific section of that population, that is, women. This is where we might locate the CitySafe app, which refracts techno-politics at an oblique angle so as to institute women’s safety as a relationship between “civic” citizens and bodies. It refracts asymmetrical urban spaces and processes as problems of technical and

59 Sudipta Kaviraj, “Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta,” *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (1997).

60 Kaviraj, “Filth and Public Sphere,” 98.

infrastructural shortcomings. In the process, it institutionalizes a colonial map of the city where crowds congregate and “publics” are absent. Finally, the recently-released *UGC Guidelines* on the public safety of single young women seeks to insert the social back into techno-politics. However, this is on the terms of techno-politics itself. The *Guidelines* seeks to address and engage with the unintended consequences of a technological cornucopia: the effect of new public cultures that accompany consumerism and discourses around personal autonomy. It addresses the issue through the vocabulary of techno-politics insofar as it seeks to promote “appropriate” use of techno-modernity through the model of moral consumption. The *Guidelines* document approves of participation in techno-modernity, but the approval is circumscribed by the rules of propriety. In the context of women, the guidelines provide an answer to the question of how to be of the world but also return home when required. Consumerist modernity is, here, set on a course of becoming “appropriate” *Indian* consumerist modernity.

My discussion has attempted to point to three interlocking processes through which meanings of urban spaces, autonomy, and gender are produced in India. Firstly, there is a national-level discourse, that of smart cities, that imagines spaces as collaborative ventures between different forms of capital, governmentality, technologies, and “knowledge-workers.” At this level, the discourse of gender is absent as the contemporary processes of producing cities are seen as necessarily “untainted” by the messiness of the social. The smart cities idea, though ostensibly about a reorganization of the relationship between populations and technologies, is, I suggest, about instituting a certain kind of de-socialized—that is to say, de-politicized—subject at the heart of urban life. The second level is that of the CitySafe app. This is the level where the politics of the city—already redefined by the smart city discourse—is instituted as another level of techno-politics that speaks of “danger” and “safety” in terms of relationships between Indian NGOs, international NGOs, technocrats, the corporate sector, Residents Welfare Associations, government bureaucracies, and the police. Finally, the *UGC Guidelines*, the final rung in my argument about the making of technotopias, provides a guide to local and individual action and behavior in a time of technotopias. In particular, the booklet seeks to outline the manner in which contemporary female bodies might occupy the spaces and processes created by modernity. It seeks to address the following question: If contemporary modernity creates or accommodates heterotopias, what are the ways in which meanings of space are reduced to manageable proportions within existing structures of power? The management of space through an invocation of time is a specific task of power in the contemporary period. It is in this sense that I speak of moral consumption as a specifically Indian way of dealing with the dis-embedding processes of the present.

Moral consumption, then, is a chronotope of modern life in India. A chronotope, as literary and cultural critic Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out, “is

a way of understanding experience; it is a specific form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and actions."⁶¹ The term "chronotope," Bakhtin says, is given "to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."⁶² Bakhtin speaks of several types of chronotopes that might populate a novel and signify different types of experiences. So, in novels where the road serves as a chronotope, "the image of the road [comes to signify] ... 'the course of a life,' ... 'the course of history' and so on."⁶³ I take the liberty here of resorting to a term from literary theory in the analysis of non-literary contexts in light of its inherent power as a tool of social analysis. Moral consumption comes to signify the fusing of putative Indian and Western spaces and Indian and Western times to produce an idea of propriety in a time of change. It produces this notion through a relationship with the concurrently circulating discourses of smart cities and CitySafe.

My discussion does not wish to suggest an "iron cage" of deterministic action where behaviors across spaces can be characterized as resulting from meta-discourses about spaces. Movements across space and actions upon space take place in both socially determined but also erratic, "extra-social" ways. What I have tried to think about is the manner in which spaces, and specifically, urban spaces, are both objects and processes,⁶⁴ and the ways in which the history and politics of a specific postcolonial present plays out in the Indian case. In the context of the present discussion, this allows us think about the relationship between processes connected to economic and cultural globalization, changes in the form of the state, and changes in its relationship with private capital, new policy formulations, and older structures of power such as the family. In order to think about the "Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters, and Gendered Identities,"⁶⁵ I have outlined certain relationships between society and economy rather than relying upon characterizing the present as a "neoliberal" one which, perhaps, has simply come to mean a "conceptual trash heap capable of accommodating multiple distasteful phenomena without much argument as to whether one or the other component really belongs."⁶⁶ Rather than resorting to "neoliberalism" as a catch-all explanatory device, this chapter draws attention to the entanglements of the

61 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 36.

62 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 84.

63 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 243-244.

64 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, [1972] 1994).

65 My reference is to the title of the conference organized by the University of Heidelberg where an earlier version of this paper was presented.

66 Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44, no. 1 (2009): 156, quoted in Flew, "Six Theories of Neoliberalism," 53.

different kinds of discourses operating at different levels of social reality, that are, in turn, grounds for producing ideas about new and old spaces, new forms of politics and relationships between freedom and constraint.

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