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The Hermeneutics of the Bazaar: Sincerity's Elusiveness in Delhi

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ethnographic study of a redevelopment controversy in Delhi's old city. It considers the perspectives of traders, hawkers, politicians and officials on the proposed revamping of the Meena Bazaar. The paper illustrates how hermeneutic and aesthetic dimensions suffuse public and political life in India. Specifically, sincere intentions, evoked in speech and performance, are seen as a prerequisite of public presentation and as a locus of interpretive scrutiny. In an ambiguous and indeterminate milieu, promises and motives are probingly assessed, often in ironic and dramaturgical form. The paper foregrounds the 'hermeneutics of the bazaar', an interpretive sensitivity to intentionality, and 'structured sincerity', the efficacy, and reflexive steering, of performed conviction.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; ambiguity; dissimulation; dramaturgy; hermeneutics; indeterminacy; India; irony; performance; sincerity

Introduction

'They are not all sincere', the official said, and 'they make a mockery' of the plan. He had good reason to be agitated. He was a Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) deputy commissioner and oversaw bureaucratic matters in the old city. His job was to plan and administer; the problem was that Old Delhi could defeat plans and administration. No matter: the commissioner, in 2008, was determined to proceed with his pet project.

It was known as the Jama Masjid Precinct redevelopment plan. The city's High Court had prodded the Delhi Urban Arts Commission, among others, to conceive it.¹ The commissioner had later amended it—arbitrarily and insensitively, said some. The makeover was certainly ambitious: it would comprise an underground air-conditioned shopping mall, a tiered parking garage, and a history museum, art gallery and food court. The visitor with surplus energy to expend could also go to a proposed gym. All of this was to fit into a densely uneven area, cluttered with rubble, where the Meena Bazaar now stood.

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1. Municipal Corporation of Delhi, *Jama Masjid Precinct: Redevelopment Plan*, Dec. 2007, pp. 1–124; Municipal Corporation of Delhi and Pradeep Sachdeva Design Associates, 'Redevelopment of Jama Masjid Precinct', Aug. 2007, Powerpoint presentation, MCD.

The bazaar was a discontinuous set of simple covered stalls, interspersed with open-air hawkers. It was bracketed by two legacies of seventeenth-century Mughal rule: the Jama Masjid (or Great Mosque) and the Lal Qila (or Red Fort).

In this area were smaller mosques, subsidiary bazaars and Sufi shrines—not to mention a ladies' park, wrestling ground and traffic thoroughfare. Working-class men, Muslim residents, students, junkies, aphrodisiac-sellers, pigeon-fanciers and tourists ceaselessly jostled in the cacophonous space. Stuffed beyond capacity, the area gave the impression of coming apart at the seams. With its blaring music, hawkers' cries and sharp smells, the bazaar imparted simultaneous excess. The plan's hectic ambition likewise sought to do everything at once.

Its audacity recalled an earlier, now-notorious, intervention. In the 1970s, during the national Emergency, modernist planners had eyed Old Delhi's dilapidation and congestion.² Their 'beautification' vision was similarly incongruous; concrete commercial complexes would rise near the mosque. In 1975, the state dispatched bulldozers to raze hundreds of stalls abutting the Jama Masjid. Jagmohan, a key planner and vice-chairman of the Delhi Development Agency, had anticipated this overhaul.³ Amidst political tumult, the high-rise construction was abandoned and about 370 entrepreneurs were allotted new stalls at the mosque's base. To observers, the bazaar reverted to and remained stubbornly afflicted by illegality and congestion.⁴

Despite this history, the commissioner—over objections from heritage and legal authorities and misgivings in the Muslim community—remained devoted to his plan. Lavishly illustrated books on Delhi's history sat on his office coffee table, while in a back room, his staff compiled architects' reports and historical photographs of the redevelopment site. Of a scholarly mien, the commissioner took pride in his diligence and sensitivity. As we conversed, he turned his desktop computer towards me and clicked through an upbeat website promoting the plan. He mentioned the plan's backing by Imam Bukhari of the Jama Masjid, who, as befitting his Mughal-appointed lineage, was called the Shahi Imam. Politically opinionated and ambitious, the Imam was a power broker in the bazaar, and he strenuously promoted redevelopment.

Yet the commissioner did not feel that his sincerity was reciprocated by those affected by the plan. Roughly seven hundred traders and hawkers inhabited the bazaar, along with various helpers, relatives, brokers and fixers. Vendors sold such diverse offerings as liver kebabs, advice manuals, polyester blankets, on-site massages and jungle birds. These entrepreneurial activities were subject to varying degrees of legal legitimacy and political cover. Authorised hawkers paid *tehbazari*, a vending licence-cum-municipal tax, which they understood as an enduring right. Illegal vendors, less secure, spread their wares on the pavement (Figure 1).

2. Thomas Krafft, 'Contemporary Old Delhi: Transformation of a Historical Place', in Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (eds), *Shahjahanabad/Old Delhi: Tradition and Colonial Change* (Delhi: Manohar, 1993), pp. 93–119; Ajay Mehra, *The Politics of Urban Redevelopment: A Study of Old Delhi* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991), p. 84; and Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* (London: Hurst & Co., 2003).

3. Jagmohan, *Rebuilding Shahjahanabad: The Walled City of Delhi* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1974), p. 74. The Emergency offered Jagmohan an untrammelled opportunity to pursue old ambitions, which, in Old Delhi, involved extensive demolition and displacement. His urban planning concerns were interwoven with family planning targets, for which sterilisation camps were installed. The Emergency's excesses still cast a shadow when entrepreneurs describe contemporary officialdom.

4. Krafft, 'Contemporary Old Delhi', p. 104.



Figure 1. Hawkers of tonics for the body, Meena Bazaar, Delhi, January 2008. Source: Photograph by author.

Most purveyors worked in provisional and precarious conditions. Some traders inflated their stall quarters beyond the prescribed boundaries, risking demolition for ‘encroachment’. Others accumulated fines, tokens and papers from Delhi’s numerous municipal bodies, by which they argued, with varying success, for the legitimacy of their presence. Still others had manufactured counterfeit licences and depended on influential patrons to remain in business.

During my time there—a nineteen-month period between 2007 and 2009 during which I conducted ethnographic interviews and observation—the redevelopment plan was intensely debated. City officials told bazaar representatives that only some traders, properly authenticated, would obtain new commercial premises after the redevelopment. Others would be relocated to marketplaces outside the old city. Many of the bazaar’s

entrepreneurs, especially hawkers, would simply be displaced without compensation. The redevelopment would thus accommodate only a fraction of the existing merchants.

As if to buttress this stark message, the police stepped up raids on hawkers and city bulldozers demolished more encroachments in the area. These were not unanticipated moves; between 2004 and 2006, the municipality had gutted a coat market and a fish market in the bazaar area. The city's public notices and orders to vacate in the bazaar also had precedent. Unsurprisingly, the plan's uneven risks and benefits and the conflicting, sometimes contradictory, information swirling around induced tensions in the area.

The responses of the bazaar entrepreneurs were varied: they arranged advance agreements with the police so that the hawkers could return after a raid; working through municipal brokers, traders paid to get the demolitions stayed; and many vendors, working different angles, sought to better their deals, trying to get onto the list of those allotted commercial space after the redevelopment. They also called in favours from connections: the Muslim Personal Law Board, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Delhi Minority Commission spoke out against the plan; the Delhi Wakf Board, embroiled in a long-running dispute with the Shahi Imam over the mosque's custodianship, expressed unease; the Archaeological Survey of India, likewise possessing a legal stake in the precinct, suggested amendments.⁵ Politicians representing the old city in the Delhi Legislative Assembly (MLAs) threatened to protest on behalf of those displaced. Historians and heritage activists inveighed against excavating close to a pre-colonial mosque.⁶ Traders' allies in the Delhi government were encouraged to get the commissioner transferred. In short, many of those who would be adversely affected sought to subvert the plan. This challenge was not expressed in direct terms. In letters collected by the commissioner's team, bazaar shopkeepers generally promised to abide by the rules and regulations and professed their readiness for co-ordination and co-operation. Yet according to the commissioner, they were 'making a mockery' of the plan: they pledged loyalty, they professed adherence, and then systematically undermined him.

He described how democracy and development, the Indian state's basis for legitimacy since Independence, had a normative component: the good-hearted 'common man' (*aam aadmi*) and general 'public' (*janta*) were to be led by selfless politicians and diligent bureaucrats; progress depended on the rulers and ruled being in lockstep, a synthesis of national targets and personal desires. Sincerity—implying a stylised conviction and selflessness, a commitment to consistency in word and deed—could be seen as a civic virtue, a prerequisite of political performance.

Bazaar entrepreneurs echoed this emphasis on high principles and proper conduct. Many of them agreed with the necessity for *taraqqi*, development and progress. They too bemoaned the area's unsightly conditions. Pools of urine sat amidst ragged chunks of concrete and defunct fountains, while clusters of solvent sniffers huddled nearby. Each evening, a 'sleep mafia' and low-end prostitutes bargained with itinerants and labourers who required respite. Locals also knew that reports to the middle class, who might otherwise

5. The Jama Masjid's custodianship and the imam's public role have been contentiously debated since the 1970s. Political dimensions of this issue, including struggles with the Wakf Board and the Archaeological Survey of India, are described in Hilal Ahmed, *Muslim Political Discourse in Postcolonial India: Monuments, Memory, Contestation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 140–91.

6. 'Mall Mania Hits Jama Masjid', *Hindustan Times* (15 Jan. 2008), p. 2; and 'Outrage Growing over Jama Masjid Mall Plan', *Hindustan Times* (11 Feb. 2008), p. 9.

embrace the area, were couched in disdainful terms: ‘A walk through the bazaar is not for the faint-hearted...the lanes are narrow, the shopkeepers and customers loud, there are lecherous men hanging around and there are very, very persistent beggars’.⁷ Aware of this antipathy, the bazaar merchants agreed with the plan in principle despite unsuccessful precedents for redevelopment.

But they distrusted the *sarkar*, the state’s compact of politicians, officials and police. The bazaar’s vendors worked under onerous and competitive conditions, and they felt entitled to work without harassment. Though the commissioner found them to be untrustworthy interlocutors, for them, it was the state that dissembled, backtracked and abruptly imposed new conditions. In conducting police raids on hawkers, in enforcing laws against encroachment and unauthorised building, and in arbitrarily and unevenly doling out benefits, the government had cancelled its promise to work for the people.

The traders had some reason to be sceptical. In the past, some old city bazaars have been redeveloped or relocated, to general dissatisfaction.⁸ Some entrepreneurs did not receive the plots pledged to them, and the new commercial sites, at a distance from Old Delhi, were haphazardly built and inconveniently located. The hawkers had even more to lose: a public space with guaranteed traffic. If the new plan materialised, the bazaar’s hawkers would have to wheedle and bribe their way onto another, no doubt spoken-for, stretch of pavement. One man, who sold small plastic toys from China, asked me: ‘They are making an upscale market for rich people, but what is going to happen to us? (*Yeh khas bazaar khas logon ke liye hoga, toh hamara kya hoga?*)’.

Yet the commissioner and the traders were not opposites, despite initial impressions. The official overseeing Delhi’s old city questioned the wayward intentions and lucrative corruption of his bureaucratic inferiors. The bazaar’s businessmen likewise questioned their peers’ claims and positions. Factions for the plan or against it developed, and these alliances too were prone to splinter and recombine. Jockeying for position amongst the bazaar’s traders was complicated by entrenched politics, as earlier grudges between the Shahi Imam, the Wakf Board and MLAs were newly inflamed. In short, social relations and political conflict in the Meena Bazaar were marked by opaque motives, clashing agendas, mutating alliances and uncertain consequences. In its ever-transitional invocation and unpredictable progression, the plan catalysed makeshift alliances. The proliferation of rumour also amplified distrust, scepticism and dissimulation. This state of affairs was not so very different from other aspects of public and political life. In Delhi, a common refrain was that nothing worked, yet someone was working on it. Public discourse was suffused by talk of conspiring authorities, conniving contractors, thieving officials and unscrupulous residents.

In what follows, I delve into the Meena Bazaar redevelopment controversy. I describe how government—entrepreneur encounters unfolded via equivocal speech and indeterminate performance. I depict how sincere intentions were conditioned and scrutinised while navigating a contested realm. I suggest that performances were revealingly and reflexively expressed in ironic and dramaturgical idioms. To evoke this dynamic entanglement, I employ the analytical metaphor of the *chakkar* or rotational wheel.

7. ‘Market Report: Meena Bazaar’, in *Time Out Delhi* (21 Sept.—04 Oct. 2007), p. 33.

8. Mehra, *The Politics of Urban Redevelopment*, pp. 138–9.

By the ‘hermeneutics of the bazaar’, I refer to interpersonal interpretation that concerns professed intentions and performed action. This can be said to be an exteriorised preoccupation with interiority. The reading of others in opaque conditions, I suggest, often revolves around stylised intentionality, which may be termed ‘structured sincerity’: the symbolic potency and practical efficacy of civic virtue in India’s public and political life. Such virtuous self-styling may be compelling even when it is knowingly contrived and sceptically received. A richer sense of these dimensions, I propose, allows us to capture pervasive features of public sociability and political interaction in contemporary India.

The *Chakkar’s* Rotation

As I became familiar with the bazaar, I spent more time at the Jama Masjid, reached by nearby stairs. A vendor might meet me there after prayers, and on the cool stone floors of its outer walls, where other visitors napped or chatted, we could talk at a remove. From that elevated vantage point, one could observe the bazaar below. Its frenetic energy and noise were dampened, single cries and specific sales dissipating into an indistinct hum.

Once, during the holy period of Ramzan, I had a conversation with Fahim, the manager of his ailing father’s bazaar shop, which specialised in luggage.⁹ Afterwards, we collected our footwear outside, and he motioned to the stairs, where others sat overlooking the street. Now engrossed in a second lengthy conversation, we looked down at a jittery tangle of cycle-rickshaws, pedestrians, hawkers and beggars. They clogged a tiny artery just outside the mosque’s perimeter. At the bottom, where one would encounter this gritty flow, sat two policemen who indifferently monitored entry. Bombs had exploded at the Jama Masjid in 2006, and the Shahi Imam, who had some enemies, had a superior grade of security protection; his armed men were always nearby. Public security was perhaps a lesser priority: the policemen, comfortably sunk in their plastic chairs, ignored those entering and exiting.

I saw a television cameraman and reporter outside the mosque gate. Nearby was a white utility vehicle belonging to a news channel, its transmission beamer sitting heavily on its roof. Because it was Ramzan, the reporter was likely reporting on the festive aspect of the fasting period. But what Fahim and I noticed was the policemen’s sudden change of disposition: they stood up and, under the camera’s unremitting gaze, were now assiduously checking bags. Their metamorphosis—and insistence on checking those arriving *and* those leaving the mosque—made us laugh. Fahim smirked and imitated the solemn intonation of a news announcer: ‘The common man can sleep well seeing such efforts to better our protection (*suraksha*)’.

The Meena Bazaar’s entrepreneurs often talked this way about the *sarkar* and the redevelopment plan. Their tone was sceptical, often ironic, and sometimes amusingly caustic. As with Fahim’s comment, they were reflexively alert to the different readings of public presentation. Sarcastic invective could be a gloomy chorus to the prevailing order, yet biting commentary clearly built rapport and oriented reflection. The plan had not actually been implemented. Despite ongoing legal and bureaucratic deliberations, as of this writing, it still has not been. It therefore existed primarily as signs to be decoded: in municipal

9. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

documents; website text; media columns; architect's reports; and, most of all, in ordinary speech, in the deliberations and reflections of the bazaar and state parties to the dispute.

Thus a focus here is on the actual or expected effect of speech on social arrangements and political outcomes. Certainly, words do important things, but they do them in unexpected ways. Words may not simply describe or refer to a world. As J.L. Austin argued, certain kinds of 'performatives' constitute a world: 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action'.¹⁰ Such speech acts, including commands and vows, must adhere to relevant conventions and appropriate circumstances. Stanley Tambiah, adapting Austin's theory to ritual performances, makes an apt distinction: when saying is doing, it 'is subject to normative judgements of felicity or legitimacy and not to rational tests of truth and falsity'.¹¹

Such language-based performance will be legitimated on grounds that include rhetorical skill, creative ingenuity and aesthetic aptitude. And compelling performance—evident beyond speech, in bodily disposition, self-styling and public action—relates to convincing repetition: it is through repeated iteration that social selves skilfully cohere.¹² The relevance to power and publics is apparent. Hannah Arendt has written about politics as the 'space of appearance': speech and action, dynamically interrelated and continually reiterated, constitute the *polis*.¹³ In this vision, sovereignty and legitimacy are inherently provisional and rest on perpetual performance. This is relevant to democracies, where speech and performance disclose intentionality so as to secure persuasion. We see this in India in the mastery of public speaking, the capacity to mobilise bodies, and the ritual signalling of legitimacy.¹⁴ Such performance may be unconsciously reproduced or acutely self-aware, and it may invite straightforward obedience or circuitous mockery.

This invites the question: how are social skills and political tactics assessed? If politics is about the prospective, and couched in propositional speech, how are intentions and convictions evaluated—as and against outcomes? This is pertinent because the Meena Bazaar, as a social form, frustrates clear-cut intentionality. Like bazaars elsewhere, it has well-grooved divisions of kin, patronage, class and religion that lend themselves to off-stage concealment.¹⁵ Moreover, the interpretation of calculation bears on India's politics at large, where transparency initiatives target the opaque mechanics of governance.¹⁶

10. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 6.

11. S.J. Tambiah, *A Performative Approach to Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 127.

12. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

13. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 198–9.

14. Bernard Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Thomas Blom Hansen, 'Politics as Permanent Performance: The Production of Political Authority in the Locality', in John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt and Vernon Hewitt (eds), *The Politics of Cultural Mobilisation in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 19–36; Lisa Mitchell, 'The Visual Turn in Political Anthropology and the Mediation of Political Practice in Contemporary India', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, no. 3 (2014), pp. 515–40; and Uwe Skoda and Lidia Guzy, 'Power Plays—An Outline', in Lidia Guzy and Uwe Skoda (eds), *Power Plays: Politics, Rituals and Performances in South Asia* (Berlin: Weissensee Verlag, 2008), pp. 1–19.

15. C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770–1870* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, [1983] 1998); Clifford Geertz, 'Suq: The Bazaar Economy in Sefrou', in Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz and Lawrence Rosen (eds), *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 123–264; and Anastasia Piliavsky, 'Where is the Public Sphere? Political Communications and the Morality of Disclosure in Rural Rajasthan', in *Cambridge Anthropology*, Vol. 31, no. 2 (2013), pp. 104–22.

16. William Mazzarella, 'Internet X-Ray: E-Governance, Transparency, and the Politics of Immediation in India', in *Public Culture*, Vol. 18, no. 3 (2006), pp. 473–505.

Such sceptical exegesis of displayed designs has been observed before in India. R.S. Khare writes about the practical responses of Lucknow Chamars to degradation and deprivation.¹⁷ For community activists, distinguishing sincere intentions from dissembling deferral is a key issue. *Rajniti* or contemporary politics is described as follows: ‘We have to accept with a lot of caution now what people say, do, and mean. For they either do not do what they say, or do so, but for their own covert purposes, or say vigorously what they actually never mean’.¹⁸ This suggests the inherent inexactness of speech, a hermeneutic doubt of deeds, and the prevalence of dissembling as a practical strategy.¹⁹

Such a disposition also underlines how social and political life is suffused with ambiguity and indeterminacy. This may seem peripheral, for contests are often viewed through structure, representation, ideology, identity or citizenship. Such analysis may presume rational motives, stable roles, clear stakes, knowable values and probable outcomes. Yet this view of contestation—retrospectively panoptic and instrumentally oriented—can be unsatisfyingly teleological.

I suggest that we profit from underlining different baseline conditions. In many settings, knowledge and agency is inherently limited, unpredictably distributed, strategically leveraged and complexly coded.²⁰ This emphasis runs counter to a certain strand of thinking about India: it was hierarchy, purity, auspiciousness and unity that were long considered reigning values.²¹ In contrast, my focus is on performance and interpretation in ambiguous and indeterminate contexts. A range of South Asian milieux can be seen productively through this lens.

Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella describe how Kerala romantic exchanges—flirting, teasing, joking—thrive on the unspecified and equivocal.²² Exchanges between men and women abound with multivalent codes that elude poles of normativity or inversion. Margaret Trawick writes about ‘intentional ambiguity’ as a meta-semiotic mode in Tamil Nadu: it ‘requires a kind of relativism with respect to language and a kind of agnosticism with respect to the psyche’.²³ F.G. Bailey depicts inter-caste jockeying in Orissa state and notes the ‘polysemous communicative virtuosity’ of performances: political theatre telegraphs parallel meanings to varied audiences.²⁴ Bernard Bate registers ‘double meanings’ in Tamil oratory, where sexual references are interwoven with political critique.²⁵ Matthew Hull observes that in Islamabad, modern statecraft’s paper forms, far from clearly

17. R.S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology, Identity, and Pragmatism Among the Lucknow Chamars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

18. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

19. F.G. Bailey, drawing on political episodes in Orissa, identifies similar aspects of manoeuvring there under the rubric of ‘collusive lying’. See F.G. Bailey, *The Prevalence of Deceit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 35–64.

20. For example, authorities and subjects are often described as unified agents enacting dominance or resistance. Yet, political conflicts over urban expropriation often involve a more heterogeneous, intermingled and unsteady array of actors. See Matthew Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 163–4.

21. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (London: Paladin, 1966); T.N. Madan, ‘Concerning the Categories Subha and Suddha in Hindu Culture: An Exploratory Essay’, in J.B. Carman and F.A. Marglin (eds), *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 11–29.

22. Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, ‘Friendship and Flirting: Micro-Politics in Kerala, South India’, in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (1998), pp. 189–206.

23. Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 267.

24. F.G. Bailey, ‘Cultural Performance, Authenticity, and Second Nature’, in David Parkin, Lionel Caplan and Humphry Fisher (eds), *The Politics of Cultural Performance* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1996), pp. 1–18.

25. Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*, pp. 173–5.

inscribing official power, induce unpredictable and ambiguous effects.²⁶ Thus we do well not to overstate consensus and clarity regarding intentions and interpretation.

This shift in analytical perspective can be registered through a metaphor. Rather than see units and values in India as part of a tiered, stable whole, I suggest the figurative representation of the *chakkar*: a rotational circuit, whirling cycle, or spinning wheel. *Chakkar* derives from the Sanskrit term *cakra*; it resonates with derivatives for circulating energy in the body, and the regeneration of life through successive births. A *chakkar* can be visualised as the *chakra* or spinning wheel on India's flag, and the successive pirouettes that Kathak dancers perform.

Officials, entrepreneurs, police and politicians in the Meena Bazaar are entangled in a *chakkar*. They operate within a bounded circumference, are in perpetual circulation, seek a perfected aptitude and are alert to possible instability. The image of a *chakkar* is also apposite because it serves as an ambiguous and ironic idiom in everyday speech. Applied to romantic relations, it denotes concealed liaisons and drawn-out feelings, 'being caught up about a girl' (*ladki ka chakkar*). It can dryly signal interminable entanglement, as in 'the endless marriage affair' (*shadi ka chakkar*). It telegraphs intrigue and critique, as, for instance, when involuntarily embroiled in a lengthy court case, 'a never-ending legal matter' (*kachehri ka chakkar*), or when one has to return repeatedly to complete bureaucratic paperwork, 'three rounds to get it done' (*teen chakkar lag gaye*). Finally, it is an expression of giddiness and unease; a *chakkar*'s dynamic sweep implies possible loss of bearings and non-teleological immersion.

As an analytical metaphor, a *chakkar* stresses the world's unceasing, entangled and multifaceted quality. Social life is experienced and expressed in an ever-evolving now whose prospective shape is not foreordained. To relate is to be enmeshed with others such that reflection and navigation will incorporate plural perspectives. Speech and exegesis, therefore, elude being flattened into expressions of hierarchical power or intermittent resistance. In this way, my approach differs from writing that emphasises carnivalesque suspension, resistance or anti-structure.²⁷

I cannot resist a final figurative elaboration: a *chakkar* also evokes the spinning fire-works (*chakri*) sold near the Meena Bazaar. Their festive appeal suggests the domain of play, which implies open-ended improvisation and excited uncertainty. Politics, often described as a dour, desperate scramble for entitlements, can generate tactical enthrallment and pleasurable commentary. Indeed, this reliably surprising and sometimes sordid theatre is often accompanied by an ironic play-by-play. Irony, an expression of verbal playfulness, is also a means of navigating volatile inequity and standard scripts. Student politics in North India, for example, is seen as an opportunistic kind of play (*khel*), where political tropes are irreverently undermined.²⁸ Delhi labourers employed in punishing factory work engage in satirical and sarcastic humour (*vyang*), a ludic inventiveness that is

26. Hull, *Government of Paper*, p. 244.

27. Mikhail Bakhtin (trans. Helene Iswolsky), *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1965] 1984); James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969).

28. Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 125.

also managerial critique.²⁹ Women's songs and tales in South Asia are replete with aesthetically dextrous irony, a polyphonic display of contrasting perspectives.³⁰

I have shown how speech, performance, intentionality, interpretation, ambiguity, indeterminacy and irony bear on social and political life in India. The analytical metaphor that condenses these hermeneutic and aesthetic dimensions is the *chakkar*. Let me now clarify two rubrics that orient the ethnography. By 'hermeneutics of the bazaar', I mean an interpretive posture whereby the meaning of speech and intention of action is subject to reflexive scepticism. This paper describes speech and activities that are put under hermeneutic pressure: they are rendered and reviewed diversely. Little is taken for granted—actions are veiled, speech is coded—and things may not be what they seem. This use of hermeneutics departs from the Western epistemology of the Bible, where authorial will contrasts with received comprehension.

My concern is the interpretive labour—the perpetual perplexity—surrounding ordinary interactive relations. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the Protestant theologian who grounded hermeneutical scholarship, emphasised this dimension. Hermeneutics, in his view, could be applied both to everyday discourse and to the Scriptures: 'Who could move in the company of exceptionally gifted persons without endeavouring to hear "between" their words, just as we read between the lines of original and tightly written books? Who does not try in a meaningful conversation...to lift out its main points, to try to grasp its internal coherence, to pursue all its subtle intimations further?'³¹

My contention is that such a hermeneutic pursuit saturates social and political life in India.³² It is certainly manifest in Old Delhi. As I detail, bazaar entrepreneurs, seeking assistance from public and political figures and unable to reach them by telephone, express doubt about the latter's 'missed calls'. Police in the area, exasperated by 'fake' criminal complaints filed by antagonists in the bazaar, pretend to follow up by dispensing 'bombs' or 'bullets' (*golas, golis*), better known as big and little lies. Those who may be displaced by the redevelopment project ponder officials' words or *baat*: whether they are true (*sach*) or roundabout (*lambi*); whether speech is straight (*seedha*) or crooked (*tedha*). A similar explicatory stress differentiates the state's promises (*vaada*) and its will (*iraada*), what it says (*kahti*) and what it does (*karti*). This hermeneutic disposition emerges in performed words as well as in the surfeit of dialogue. Suspicion of officials' intentions is amplified when they do not conduct the requisite meetings for persuading or convincing (*samjhaana*).

29. Shankar Ramaswami, 'Masculinity, Respect, and the Tragic: Themes of Proletarian Humor in Contemporary Industrial Delhi', in Rana Behal and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *India's Labouring Poor: Historical Studies, c. 1600–c. 2000* (Delhi: Foundation Books, 2007), pp. 203–27.

30. Laura Kunreuther, 'Married to Dukha: Irony in the Telling of a "Traditional" Newari Tale', in Jennifer Dickinson, James Herron, Laura Kunreuther, Mandana Limbert, Ellen Moodie and Penelope Papilias (eds), *Linguistic Form and Social Action (Michigan Discussions in Anthropology 13)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1998), pp. 12–38; Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 73–120; Anja Wagner, "'This is How we Joke': Towards an Appreciation of Alternative Values of Gender Irony among the Gaddi of Himachal', in *European Journal of Himalayan Research*, no. 41 (2012), pp. 100–19.

31. James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Picador, 2010), p. 35. A later Protestant theologian, Wilhelm Dilthey, likewise argued that interpretive reflection was central to human interaction. On the relevance of Dilthey's hermeneutics to the anthropology of performance and experience, see Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 2001), pp. 12–9.

32. For example, evaluating a politically theatrical standoff in Orissa, F.G. Bailey finds the actors to be engaged in 'forward-looking exegesis...calculating the likely pay-off from their performance'. Bailey, 'Cultural Performance, Authenticity, and Second Nature', pp. 13–4.

The other rubric that I introduce here is ‘structured sincerity’. Sincerity, like hermeneutics, is associated with the Protestant tradition. As Lionel Trilling showed, it was elevated into an ethical domain of interior virtue in Europe after the sixteenth century.³³ Its purchase rested on ordinary ideals such as practicality, simplicity, frugality and consistency. I suggest that sincerity is one strand of the web of valuation that undergirds public and political life in India.³⁴ From the late colonial period onwards, Indian public figures were influenced by missionary activities that highlighted sincerity’s self-questioning and self-accounting.³⁵ Mahatma Gandhi, influenced by Protestant thinkers such as Ruskin and Thoreau, praised their emphasis on sincerity, frugality and utility. His writing unceasingly twinned individual and civic virtue, personal morality and national regeneration.³⁶

By using the term structured sincerity, I emphasise the legacy of these influences on the performative conditioning of conviction. The truth or falsity of such postures is not at stake, only the desirability and efficacy of their evocation. The routinised display of sincere intentionality can thus be said to enact certain effects even as it arouses scepticism. We see this equivocal effect in the simple dress and pious manner generally expected of political figures. In the 1920s, Gandhi popularised *khadi*, the coarse homespun cotton, as a sign of integrity and virtue.³⁷ Whereas foreign cloth signalled colonial rapacity, native cotton was a sign of moral goodness. *Khadi* became the politician’s uniform, a badge of humility and empathy. In more cynical contemporary times, the ‘Gandhian semiotic’ still broadcasts simplicity and selflessness; at the same time, it has been inverted into a ‘semiotic of corruption’, an emblem of hypocrisy and greed.³⁸

Beyond bodily self-styling, the shaping of sincerity can be seen in the incessant words and stylised deeds expected of prominent people. Political figures in India are commended, for example, if they are convincing orators, profess religious piety, or can command refined poetry. Legitimacy is also cultivated through ritualised appearance and communicated diligence. Philip Oldenburg, studying political interaction in Old Delhi in 1969–70, observed that ‘it is the councilor’s duty to demonstrate—by exposing himself to public contact—his sincerity and desire to get things done, and this excuses to some extent any failure’.³⁹

This bears on sincerity’s expected congruence between inner belief and outer presentation—virtue is enhanced by the visible desire to align feelings and expressions.⁴⁰ In the North Indian context, no single Hindustani term adequately translates sincerity: however, there is a cluster of terms used in enacting intentions and divining designs, including *vishvas* (trust, belief), *sachchai* (truthfulness, faithfulness), *imandari* (honesty, probity) and *bharosa* (faith, trust). It should be stressed that I am not concerned here with interiorised creeds *per se*, though there are intriguing connections between ideas of religious belief and the grammar of public sincerity in North India.⁴¹ Understanding the contingent

33. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

34. A full account of the genealogies and translations of sincerity as a resonant ideal is beyond the scope of this paper.

35. Peter van der Veer, ‘Conversion and Coercion: The Politics of Sincerity and Authenticity’, in Jan Bremmer, Wout Jac. van Bekkum and Arie Molendijk (eds), *Cultures of Conversions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp. 1–14.

36. M.K. Gandhi (Anthony Parel, ed.), *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1909] 1997).

37. Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (London: Hurst & Co., 1996), pp. 88–93.

38. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 52–3.

39. Philip Oldenburg, *Big City Government in India: Councilor, Administrator, and Citizen in Delhi* (Delhi: Manohar, 1976), p. 98.

40. Webb Keane, ‘Sincerity, “Modernity”, and the Protestants’, in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (2002), pp. 65–92.

41. Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 33.

epistemological distinction between internal beliefs and external renderings, one can borrow Margrit Pernau's insight into the evolution of public emotions in North India, spun in the dynamic between people, rather than originating within them.⁴² What is at stake, then, is the performative purchase and interpretive suppleness of purposive conviction.

When we stress relational expression, the contradiction implied in structured sincerity—ostensibly uncontrived expression that is self or subconsciously steered—emerges as an insoluble tension. This meta-dramaturgical dimension is implied in Trilling's comment that 'we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person'.⁴³ The audience, however, may not 'buy' the act: a study of the Meena Bazaar post-Emergency notes the shopkeepers' disappointment with redevelopment in hermeneutic terms: 'they questioned the integrity and the intentions of the officials'.⁴⁴ Structured sincerity thus suggests an entwined emphasis on the necessary expression of, as well as inevitable limits to, civic virtue. This would accord with the observation that in India, sincerity is seen as desirable but insufficient in a world constituted as fallen and amoral.⁴⁵

A grounded way of imagining this tension is by contrasting the realms of *dikhana* and *dikhawa*. One might translate them, imperfectly, as points on a spectrum of demonstration and dissimulation. Both terms relate to *dikha*, to see or show; the difference between them resides in what, exactly, is registered. The distinction between *dikhana* and *dikhawa* initially echoes Erving Goffman's dramaturgical distinction between the front stage as contrived, and the back stage as unaffected,⁴⁶ yet these Hindustani notions are more subtle and pliable. For example, they interestingly blur the distinction between revealing and posturing, between unaffected display and contrived exhibition. *Dikhana* is used when someone must be convinced or something must be proved. It implies the public rendering of one's purpose so as to persuade others. *Dikhawa* can imply a performance that is normatively necessary, but interpretively excessive. Both terms underline an interpersonal hermeneutics that hinges on displayed intentions. The presentation of one's design to others is *dikhana*, and it may simultaneously be seen as—instead of being opposed to—*dikhawa*, or showing off. Political legitimacy and longevity is contingent on demonstrations of strength (*dikhana*), and also on skilled transcendence of *dikhawa*, or farce. To our point, the domains of *dikhana* and *dikhawa* are intriguingly blurred: audience-oriented demonstration shades into deceitfulness and dissimulation. With this discussion in mind, we now return to the Meena Bazaar and see how ambiguous performances of persuasion unfold.

42. Margrit Pernau, 'From Morality to Psychology: Emotion Concepts in Urdu, 1870–1920', in *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2016), forthcoming.

43. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 11.

44. Mehra, *The Politics of Urban Redevelopment: A Study of Old Delhi*, p. 103.

45. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'The Return of King Mahabali: The Politics of Morality in Kerala', in Chris Fuller and Veronique Benei (eds), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2000), pp. 137–62.

46. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959). Studies of managing impressions, feigning identities and wearing masks in India, inspired by Goffman's dramaturgical approach, include Gerald Berreman, *Behind Many Masks: Ethnography and Impression Management in a Himalayan Village* (Ithaca, NY: Society for Applied Anthropology, 1962); Gerald Berreman, 'Social Categories and Social Interaction in Urban India', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 74, no. 3 (1972), pp. 567–86; and Veena Das, 'Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (1976), pp. 1–30.

The Credibility Gap

When I first met the commissioner, he was making the rounds of the Meena Bazaar. He was talking to a cluster of traders who were agitating against the redevelopment plan. The traders, nodding attentively while he spoke, treated him with respect and commended the plan. They were attentive when the commissioner explained how some would benefit from the new marketplace. He said to them: ‘Put your trust in me (*hum pe bharosa rakho*)’. *Bharosa* was a necessary but scarce commodity in political transactions. As soon as the commissioner left, the traders huddled together. They praised the commissioner’s ideas and reflections (*vichar*), and even called him an ‘honest man’ (*imandar aadmi*), but belief in the commissioner’s guarantees of just commercial allotments was another thing. One would be remiss to believe in something that was not likely to materialise. As Nizar, a seller of Mecca-themed wall hangings, noted, no matter how sweet the official’s promises, ‘there is a very big difference between saying and doing (*kahne aur karne mein bahut antar hain*)’. This credibility gap, the chasm between earnest intentions and convincing proof, was repeatedly articulated. Another trader, Ahmed, sold blankets and towels, mainly to pilgrims who visited nearby Sufi shrines. During important cricket matches, I found him reclined on a cushion, absorbed in the radio commentary. He was among those lacking authenticating documents and so not entitled to new commercial premises. Still, he had lived in Old Delhi long enough to see other proposed ventures that had never got off the ground. As Ahmed put it: ‘one thing is the promise (*ek hota hai vaada*), and the other thing is the will (*aur ek hota hai iraada*)’. The government always pledged the sky, but who knew if it had the desire to act?

These comments foregrounded the elusiveness of sincerity: the government made emphatic guarantees (*bharosa*) and dispensed promises (*vaada*) frequently. But people were rarely convinced; they did not accept the truth of the performance. This suspicion was amplified by the government’s reticence—periodic visits by the commissioner and junior officials notwithstanding—to engage in dialogue. Persuasion would not be secured without displayed intentions. As Zafaruddin, a purveyor of second-hand automobile parts, told me: ‘The government never asks before doing anything (*sarkar kuch bhi karne se pahle poochti nahin hain*). If they ask us something, then we can tell them what ought to be done, what not. If they have to implement a project, they have to convince the people, or at least talk to them (*kuch bhi kaam karne se pahle logon ko samjhaana chahiye, ya baat karni chahiye*)’.

At a slight remove from the main bazaar, adjacent to Dargah Kalimullah, was the demolished coat market. The government had promised new premises on-site to affected traders, then proposed an alternative location in Shastri Park. Nothing tangible had emerged from these proposals. During my time in Old Delhi, some of these frustrated clothing vendors went on a relay hunger strike. A microphone, speaker and cushions were set up on a jerry-built wooden platform that straddled the rubble from the old market. The hunger strikers did not make for good public relations for the commissioner’s plan. For months, traders lounged on the hard surface, looking lethargic and unhappy; above their heads, a hand-painted sign proclaimed: ‘Hunger Strike—Till Death’ (*bhookh hartal—marte dam tak*). Yet it was not exactly a suicide mission; the men played cards vigorously, and several had large paunches. Still, the hyperbolic tone did reflect disappointment in the *sarkar*, an authority that was posited, however imperfectly, as the

people's patron. Sometimes I spoke to the aggrieved traders on the platform. I got to know Zakir, who spent his afternoons there. He complained that the municipality had promised new trading facilities within two months of demolition. However, only the soil had been laid down in Shastri Park; no one knew when the facilities would be finished. The government, Zakir fumed, was making 'gullible fuckers' (*chutiya*s) out of the traders, raising their hopes and then dashing them. A *chutiya* is someone associated with a *chut* or vagina. Following this logic, the government was 'screwing' the traders. Zakir therefore articulated demolition and displacement in terms of betrayal and losing face. The authorities, he said, had 'deceived all of them (*sab ne dhokha kiya*)'; they had given a bad name (*badnaam*) to the traders and insulted their standing (*izzat*). Zakir's greatest frustration was that the government's strategy was impossible to divine: 'The way that the government is behaving with us, it can only be considered tyrannical (*balki atyachar hain*). The government says one thing and does another (*kahti kuch hain, aur karti kuch aur*). The ones who traded there, today they are forced to ply rickshaws to fill their stomachs. Until yesterday they were giving alms to beggars—and now they must receive them!'

Once again, the credibility gap asserted itself in cynicism engendered by state exhortations and fickle follow-up. Ubed, an influential trader of kitchen utensils—his stall packed floor to ceiling with implements to roll, grind and juice—was a good example. Like others, he voiced support for the redevelopment plan; nevertheless, he aligned himself with those against it. He was regularly involved in meetings with municipal officers and policemen, mediating personal conflicts and procedural issues. Sitting amidst his wares, I asked him why he supported the plan if he had no intention of adhering to it. He responded that one had to keep up multiple appearances while deducing the odds: officials who initially spoke straightforwardly (*sachi baat*) could turn out to be doing so circuitously (*lambi baat*). The commissioner's claims echoed the ambiguous potential of policies more generally: they could be *seedha* or straight, but they could also be *tedha* or crooked. Ubed hedged his bets while trying to divine what was *sachi* or *lambi*, *seedha* or *tedha*.

Political intentions fizzled in the dissonance between the state's professed responsiveness and its selective delivery. This suggested that officials and politicians were, in the language of the traders, *chalaak*, crafty and sly. Cleverness was a quality, like *jankari* or 'street-smarts', that not everyone possessed in equal amounts. Those who were *chalaak* would appear straight and correct, but later emerge as crooked purveyors of roundabout speech. Not surprisingly, therefore, some traders referred to municipal officials as *chalu insaan*, or cunning, manipulative humans.

There will always be people who are inscrutable or untrustworthy. The point of the meetings Ubed attended was less to clear opaque conditions than to keep things in play. It was better to remain in dialogue than not—to have a relationship where parties to the dispute may have been feigning moves towards a protracted end—than to close off relations and so be unable to manoeuvre.

Unstable Appearances

If words strained credibility and invited scepticism, actions too were put under hermeneutic pressure. On one occasion I arrived at the Meena Bazaar to find dozens of police standing around in riot gear. Clusters of hawkers, their goods wrapped in sheets or stuffed into cloth sacks, stood nearby. Pressure from the authorities had manifested itself in a raid on

pavement hawkers and bazaar encroachers. Between the police, vendors and curious onlookers were brokers, now walking a few steps to consult with the presiding police officer and then strolling back to the hawkers. There was definitely going to be a raid, but the intermediaries were to shape it. They negotiated how the 'raid' was to happen, how many people would be taken away and what fines would be paid. The language I heard here captured how the state's supposedly resolute action was riddled with quotation marks. The raids were unarguable demonstrations of the state's sovereignty, yet they were also, in parallel, theatrical meta-performances.⁴⁷

The raids had to take place as part of Delhi's urge to remake itself mimetically into a Singapore or Shanghai. But they were shadowed by the perennial collusion of 'nexuses' and 'vested interests', both inside and outside government, who dissembled. Elsewhere in Delhi, municipal squads, cracking down on unauthorised buildings, found that where the day before a market had flourished, there were now boarded-up empty shops; incriminating merchandise and signage had been pre-emptively removed.⁴⁸ The traders of that illicit but profitable place bluffed; the government inspectors, knowing full well what had happened, counter-bluffed. The best way to locate such shadow play was through the terms used by the affected parties. For example, observers deemed raids in the Meena Bazaar to be *natak*, theatre or drama. *Natak* refers to *nautanki*, a genre of folk theatre and popular entertainment formerly widespread in North India.⁴⁹ *Nautanki* could affirm reigning norms and values, and also express social inversion and moral transgression.

Mimics, fools and shape-shifters no longer satirised elites on Indian streets; rather, the *sarkar*, through contrivances such as municipal raids, enacted a different spectacle. Like *tamasha*, another vanished form of popular theatre, *natak* often referred to politics and the state. A *tamasha* was a frothed-up spectacle; *natak* was redolent of melodrama and over-acting. They could be used to describe government commissions of inquiry, a frenzy over caste reservations, serial political party defections and the 'wink-wink' of a municipal raid. Watching the recurring pseudo-raids in the Meena Bazaar—which did not result in enduring changes on the pavement—I heard 'this is all just a performance (*yeh sab natak hain*)' or 'what a show! (*kya natak hain!*)'.

Such theatrics were common: 'laws broken and bribes exchanged, authority preserved, if only in quotation marks'. The dramaturgical idiom was used by the bazaar's hawkers, who suffered loss of income during the raids. They spoke of an official's mask or *mukhota*: anyone working for the *sarkar*, I was told, 'dons a mask (*mukhota lagate hain*)'. When police officers and municipal officials, previously conciliatory towards hawkers, were found overseeing raids, I heard the traders murmur, 'Now their masks have come off (*unke mukhote utar gaye*)'. The pseudo-raids unearthed another expression for political pretension and public performance: *dikhawa* or dissembling. Conventional expressions of intentionality were dependent, by contrast, on *dikhana* or demonstrating. As traders said to me, if the Municipal Corporation was really interested

47. For an analogous example of political confrontation as theatre, marked by diverse scripts and audiences, see Bailey, 'Cultural Performance, Authenticity, and Second Nature', pp. 1–18.

48. Diya Mehra, 'Campaigning Against its Eviction: Local Trade in New "World-Class" Delhi', in Melissa Butcher and Selvaraj Velayutham (eds), *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 148–67.

49. Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

in the area's development, 'they should show it (*dikhana chahiye*)'. Whereas *dikhana* implied unveiling, *dikhawa* was akin to obfuscation, like 'eyewash', an analogous term for political dissimulation.

This public performance of political combat ambiguously operated at different registers. Once when I was walking in the bazaar, men came rushing past the stalls shouting, 'The committee is coming! (*Committee aa rahi hain!*)'. The hawkers hurriedly put away their wares as a municipal committee with politicians and a phalanx of constables strolled by. The VIP of the group was a large man with a thick moustache, smiling jovially. The committee passed by, and after the group sped away in jeeps, the hawkers who had scampered away returned. I asked Akhtar, whose stall contained all manner of audio-visual entertainment—records, tapes, CDs, VCDs, even some old vinyl records—about these incidents. In a tone of weary familiarity, he said: 'The municipality wants to demonstrate that it is improving the city. They arrest some people, to show that they are stopping encroachment (*Yahan pe MCD ko dikhana hain ki woh kuch kar rahe hain. Kuch logon ko pakadna hain, dikhane ke liye*). They will grab the smallest people, the pavement hawkers. They will feed money to the police, who feed money to officials, then those people will feed others superior to them, that is why the area never gets cleaned up'. Here, Akhtar used *dikhana* insofar as officials had to prove their diligence in following orders and demonstrate their belief in beautification to the public. I later asked another trader, Saleem, about the raids on the hawkers. He said: 'They will imprison some small-time people. But it is just for show, a smokescreen, to convince the public that things are sorted [out]. Afterwards, they always let them go... (*Kuch chote log ko bhi band karte hain. Lekin yeh sab dikhawa hain, taaki public ko lage ki sab barabar hain. Baad mein sabhi logon ko chhodte hain...*)'. Here, *dikhawa* signalled how people, expecting the efficient performance of governance, remained sceptical about the sincerity of such spectacles. This tension between *dikhana* and *dikhawa*, between varied interpretations of what is seen and what is shown, saturates public and political life in India.

Missed Call

What were the consequences of dissimulation by the state, of its inscrutable facade and double-talk? During the 2007–08 winter, the simmering tension over the Meena Bazaar redevelopment boiled over. The press reported disagreements over the commissioner's plan: the Jama Masjid might be structurally damaged by nearby excavations; the police would not be able to maintain public order and security with so many additional cars and visitors; the commercial aspects of the plan had trumped public use and heritage interests.⁵⁰ During this backlash—in which architects, historians, Delhi MLAs, the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Archaeological Survey of India and the Muslim Personal Law Board expressed reservations—I interviewed two traders whose bazaar shops operated side by side. They sold beat-up generators, dusty lathes and cast-off machinery that an optimist might resuscitate.

One, Rafi, was completely against the plan, while the other, Zuhair, was contemplating allegiance to a faction that supported it. Each had an unwieldy set of papers confirming

50. 'Mall Mania Hits Jama Masjid'; and 'Outrage Growing over Jama Masjid Mall Plan'.

their lengthy presence in the bazaar, but which the city did not see as proper proof; their legal fight against eviction had dragged on for years. Zuhair's reasoning was that a trader could negotiate—via patrons, fixers and a good amount of money—to be included in the allotment of commercial spaces if one signed on early. Rafi, worried by the steep odds against deriving any benefit, intimated that the early supporters would simply get 'played'. He warned ominously: 'Don't get caught in that vortex (*Inke chakkaron mein na pado*)'. He referred to the *chakkar*, or rotational circuit, as akin to being in a maelstrom.

This meaning resonated with other uses of the term. Those who became dizzy, or said that their head was spinning, felt *chakkar*. Spiritual healers in Delhi treat the problem of *uppari chakkar*: 'the idea that one is caught in forces that are beyond one's control because someone, out of jealousy, envy, or other hostile emotions, has performed some form of sorcery or magic to cause harm'.⁵¹ *Chakkar* was also a metaphor for the opacity one saw, and the disorientation one felt, when dealing with the *sarkar*. There were relatively few people who had not experienced the humiliation of running 'from pillar to post', careening between government offices, and enduring interminable queues; they were in the holding pattern of the *chakkar*.

In 2006–07, Delhi was engulfed in a beautification 'sealing drive' when court authorities forced the city to crack down on illegal encroachments and unauthorised buildings; many merchants found the locks on the shutters of their shops sealed with red wax. This beautification drive soon gained the title 'the sealing charade' (*sealing ka chakkar*). The coat market traders, their premises demolished earlier, also referred to their protracted problems as a *chakkar*. For them, the subtle valences of *chakkar* were compressed: inextricable entanglement, unceasing circumnavigation and cognitive disorientation.

State intervention is sometimes described as a *fait accompli*. Yet, in its irresolution, the redevelopment plan suggested that sovereignty, while periodically brutal, is also tentative and incomplete. In the spring of 2008, I spoke to Rehmat, an ex-Municipal Corporation councillor who lived in the old city. A respected community elder, he had become involved in the redevelopment negotiations at the request of a faction of traders. Amidst the fog of war in the Meena Bazaar, I thought he would know how things would play out. But Rehmat too shared the sense of bafflement regarding motives and intentions; despite his wealth of experience, like many involved in the controversy, his predictive powers were weak: 'No one knows now what's going to happen (*Ab pata nahin kya hoga*). The municipality says that we will construct and give traders proper modern shops. But when they will be made, who will be given them, and in between all of that, what the trader will do, no one knows. That is why people are pissed off (*Lekin kab banakar denge, kisko-kisko denge, aur is beech yeh dukandar kya karenge, kisi ko pata nahin hain. Isliye log gussa huwe hain*)'.

That such opacity surrounded the redevelopment plan was confounding. Delhi's government was in thrall to global trends in governance-branding. Its signature campaign, the 'Bhagidari' or 'Partnership' initiative, emphasised bureaucratic transparency and citizen participation. The commissioner seemed the very embodiment of clean, responsive governance. Yet the protracted negotiations over the Meena Bazaar, the offers made or intimated, and the illustrations posted on the project's website did not impart clarity; far

51. Veena Das, 'If this be Magic...: Excursions into Contemporary Hindu Lives', in Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 267.

from being reassured, traders doubted official intentions even more. For example, several versions of the redevelopment plan circulated in official documentation, private meetings and bazaar rumours. The original concept drafted by the Delhi Urban Arts Commission differed, many said, from later versions, including the commissioner's favoured interpretation. Public and political figures involved in the imbroglio assured their constituencies that favourable 'tweaks' could be made, although the traders remained sceptical.

Thus much depended on which version of redevelopment would proceed. A prevailing feeling was that the myriad options were chimerical. As one trader told me, 'The plan that is going to be implemented is the one locked away in their cabinet (*Plan to woh implement hoga jo unki almarhi mein band hain*)'. Another trader, Arif-bhai, said: 'These officials don't tell us anything about the plan, and anyway, the plan is always changing. No one even tells us how much rent we will pay in the new premises, how many shops there will be, or even where they will be (*Yeh log hamen plan ke bare mein batate nahin hain, aur hamesha plan badalte rehte hain. Koi hamen nahin batata ki naye bazaar mein kitna kiraye hoga, kitni dukaane hogi, aur kahan pe hogi*)'.⁵²

The inconsistently realised terms of exchange—loyalty for patronage, trust for development—demanded that people had to jockey for opportunities and alliances. The bazaar's cannier operators possessed ever-alert antennae and they assiduously attended meetings and placated those with influence. This often involved depending on unreliable public figures. At any given time, there would be a prominent *mohalla* busybody, religious figure or politician standing up for a particular issue, fighting for this or that, but for entrepreneurs who needed to plead their cases, it was hard to discern their motives. Rizwan, a trader in music cassettes, CDs and DVDs, was among those seeking assistance from local politicians. He told me about his frustrations with their unresponsiveness: 'They tell us that we are talking to the officials, reassure us that negotiations are ongoing (*Baat kar liya hain, baat chal rahi hain*). But when there is some urgent problem and you phone them, you realise that they're never around—they're always out (*Lekin jab koi musibat pad jati hain, aur phone karo to pata chalta hain ki wahan nahin hain—bahar gaye hain*)'.

Both the apparently sincere promise of assistance and the unanswered phone calls were an ever-present fact of life for the traders. Representatives of the state (officials and police) and representatives of the people (municipal councillors and MLAs) were, in theory, responsive to a constituency. As we will see in the next section, they felt that, as far as possible, they lived up to this ideal, but they also knew their hands were tied by innumerable constraints. So, hemmed in by the demand to demonstrate civic virtue, they would dissemble, 'fudging' here and there to placate an aggrieved public.

The 'missed call' is an ironic symbol of this structured sincerity. A particular economy attaches itself to the call, made from one mobile to another, but not meant to go through. It signals a desire to talk to another party (the recipient sees the number and name on the display), but not to pay for the call. Servants and drivers make missed calls to their employers; students make missed calls to their parents. The expectation is that the more established party will ring back.

52. For an analogous conception of the state as duplicitous in Delhi, see Sanjay Srivastava, 'Duplicitous, Intimacy, Community: An Ethnography of ID Cards, Permits, and Other Fake Documents in Delhi' in *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 113, no. 1 (2012), pp. 78–93.

However, the missed call took a different course for the traders in the Meena Bazaar who tried to reach so-called ‘big men’. Local councillors and MLAs each had several mobile phones, often looked after by their underlings; talking to constituents and assuring them of action was part of their job. But in the Meena Bazaar, in order to placate a trader who called insistently, staff were said to give a one-off ring back, usually at an inconvenient time. Then, when the trader tried to return the call, the politician’s phone would be busy or turned off. Nevertheless, the effort to ring back had been established; when the politician was asked, next time he met the trader, why he had not answered the phone, he could truthfully reply that he had later returned the call. Why had the trader not picked up? This charade formed part of the modality of earnest responsiveness.

Such a missed call was like a government hotline, enthusiastically advertised, that was invariably busy, or a ministry website that was mysteriously frozen and repeatedly crashed. The state’s steadfast (and perhaps uncomfortably proximate) nature was encapsulated by the Delhi Police slogan: ‘With you, for you, for always’. But state mendacity was suspected every time someone called an influential politician and heard ‘caller unavailable’. The authorities that promised to be there were, all too often, off-line.

‘Bombs’ and ‘Bullets’

It may be tempting to conclude that the Meena Bazaar redevelopment simply illustrated the state’s deceitfulness. But however deceptive officials appeared to be, bazaar entrepreneurs were no less complicated. Many pavement hawkers were protected by, or even related to, traders with legitimate stalls. They had a symbiotic, if not conflict-free, relationship: hawkers might sell surplus or cheap items for traders who saw them as footloose extensions of their social largesse. Although professing disdain for such illicit commerce, traders nevertheless aided and abetted the hawkers (Figure 2).

Moreover, both traders and hawkers were under the police ‘scanner’ for selling counterfeit (*nakli*) goods or adulterated (*milawat*) consumables. A browser in the bazaar might encounter Like (not Nike) runners, Pheleps (not Philips) stereos and Sonny (not Sony) video recorders. Ostensibly of foreign provenance, these were generally manufactured in East Delhi factories. These not-quite, somewhat-like goods reflected the words and deeds of those selling them: of relevance was hermeneutic and aesthetic efficacy, not truth and authenticity.

Further, many stall leases, denoted by *tehbazari*, the municipal hawking licence, were illicitly manufactured. Various municipal bodies also issued written proofs to traders that could become tokens of legitimacy. City officials asserted that ascertaining which entrepreneurs had legal rights in the bazaar would be time-consuming and produce unrest. But since the legality of the permits was contested, state revenues were correspondingly diminished.⁵³ In sum, those who would be affected by the bazaar’s redevelopment were hardly passive victims. Protests over proper conduct and authentic proofs struck many as disingenuous. As Rizwan, the music vendor, sarcastically noted, everyone professes

53. Gérard Heuzé provides an analogous example from Jharkhand in eastern India. There, the state is similarly disdained: tax revenue is low and fiscal evasion is rampant. Partly, this has to do with a similar sense of the state as duplicitous: ‘everyone has the impression that they are being duped by the local institutions’. Gérard Heuzé, *Workers of Another World: Miners, the Countryside and Coalfields in Dhanbad* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 48.

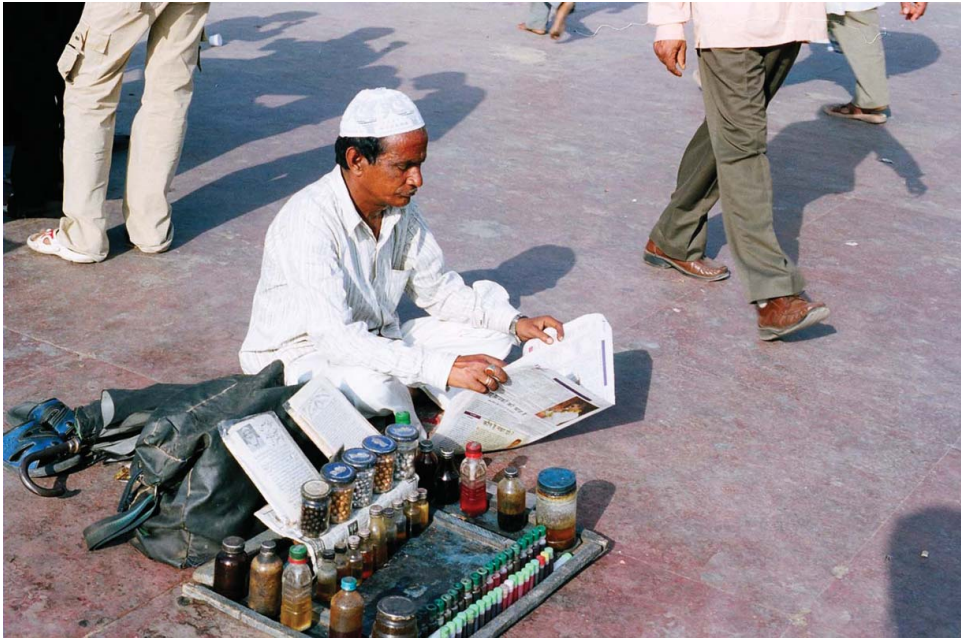


Figure 2. Meena Bazaar pavement seller of bodily tonics, May 2009. Source: Photograph by author.

‘service to nation (*desh seva*), whether they are wrong or right (*chahe woh galath ho ya sahi*)’. This reflected a wider distrust of supposedly corrupt traders and anxiety that other factions were negotiating slyly for better terms on a privileged basis.

Such ambiguity emerged in a discussion with Abdul, a merchant specialising in household textiles. We were talking about a prominent bazaar trader who, allied with the commissioner, was a vocal supporter of the plan. He was also the chief patron of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose advertised aim was the ‘uplift’ of local vagrant children. It was unclear where the NGO was located; the address on the flyer was that of the trader’s house. I was also unsure what the organisation actually did. Abdul flatly distrusted the man, noting that he simply protected ‘his own interest’ (*apna fayda*). Abdul’s use of *fayda* was intriguing. It is widely used to signal profit, benefit or advantage. When one took medicine or invested in property, it was only natural to ask ‘What will I get out of it? (*Kitna fayda hoga?*)’. Similarly, the anthropologist’s request for an interview could elicit the response: ‘What good will it do? (*Kya fayda hoga?*)’. The problem with the bazaar’s redevelopment, Abdul elaborated, was that it was advertised as being in ‘everyone’s interest (*public ka fayda*)’, yet, like most official initiatives, it would ‘benefit big people most of all (*bade logon ka fayda hoga*)’.

In such public matters, it was difficult to separate instrumental self-interest and generalised benefit. Consider the practice of politicians donating *saris* to the poor or giving out sweets on their birthdays: the recipient gets something, but so does the patron. So the practice is profitable both for the politician and the public. A former city councillor brought up this shading from selfishness to selflessness. He had watched the proceedings from some distance and reflected: ‘In today’s world it is always me, me, me, what is my

interest? (*Hamesha main, main, main hota hai, isme mera fayda kya hain?*) Only when this is made clear will people do anything. Everyone knows this.... [The priority is] first me, then my [political] party, then my community, and only then my country (*tab hi kaam karoonga. Aur yeh sab jante hai.... Pahle main, phir mera party, phir mera community, phir mera mulk*).

The trader that Abdul had disdained as self-interested had ‘accessorised’ himself with an NGO.⁵⁴ This demonstrated various motives: self-interest (*apna fayda*) tangled with public interest (*public ka fayda*). Abdul noted that opportunism and magnanimity were inextricably intertwined in such a figure. He gave as an example the periodic flare-up of communal violence: ‘When riots happen here, then both Hindus and Muslims suffer and on both sides the big people benefit (*dono taraf ke bade logon ka fayda hota hain*). Some want to make their name, or to make money, so they give blankets to riot survivors, or arrange to feed them, so that their name gets established (*to unka naam ho jata hain*)’.

Where motives were unclear, or where intentions could not be determined, talk turned to conspiracy. Arif-bhai told me that after the Emergency, wealthy traders had taken over the new market, leaving those displaced by official action without recourse to compensation. He brooded that the contemporary plan was a plot: ‘I always get scared that perhaps this is all a conspiracy to lift the big men and to finish us smaller guys off (*Hamesha darr laga rahta hain ki kahin yeh bade logon ko uthane ki aur hame khatam karne ki saazish nahin hain*)’.

From the perspective of the state, the management of disparate and conflicting interests did not mean conspiracy, but it did involve deceit and dissembling. I interviewed policemen at the nearby Jama Masjid police station and struck up a good rapport with Pradeep, a voluble young constable.

As tensions rose in the Meena Bazaar, complaints filed by factions against one another became common. Pradeep explained how the police dealt with such ‘nuisance’ cases: ‘Whenever complaints arrive at the police station, you have to see which ones will be manageable and which ones are not. According to that you write a First Information Report. If you think that a case will not be resolved easily, you don’t register it and instead give them a “bomb” (*Jitne bhi complaints aate hai, unme se hum yeh dekhte hain ki kaun se work out ho sakte hain, kaun se nahin. Usi hisab se FIR likhte hain. Agar hame laga ki work out nahin ho sakta, hum nahin likhte aur unko gola dete hai*)’. The *gola* or bomb that Pradeep referred to was the habit of intentionally dissembling. *Golas* were ‘whoppers’, big lies that it took some nerve to ‘pass off’. *Golis*—bullets, a less lethal munition—were smaller lies, of the kind daily employed to save face. The policemen who dispensed *golas* or *golis* to agitated complainants may not, in their own minds, be acting hypocritically or disingenuously; such dissembling could instead be a way to accommodate varied constituencies and political risks.⁵⁵ Those receiving the *gola* may know it is a lie; they may even,

54. There are historical precedents that underlie such braiding of commercial self-interest and public selflessness. In colonial Calcutta, Marwari traders implicated in bazaar gambling formed community welfare organisations and began to speak of civic duty and respectability. See Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 187–93.

55. Officials in Islamabad engage in similar deceit and dissimulation when adhering to regulations; this can be analysed in terms of navigation of entangled relationships, rather than fidelity to a singular truth. See Hull, *Government of Paper*, p. 107.

seeing a 'fast one' pulled on them, grumble about it at the time of receipt. Yet the need to appear sincere, the value accorded to responsiveness, endured.

This primacy accorded to convincing intentions was not only an official burden, it was required of the public as well. And state actors, reflecting on the bazaar intrigue, often questioned the public's intentions. For example, I interviewed one municipal councillor, Mr. Jatav, from a ward neighbouring the Meena Bazaar. He maintained that the government was 'helpless' when it came to enforcing municipal rules. He could be sympathetic, for example, when a resident neglected to obtain a permit to modify a building; in the cramped pre-colonial *mohallas* (neighbourhoods) of Old Delhi, a good many structures had been creatively partitioned and built upon without municipal approval. Such illegal re-engineering, carried out to accommodate small-scale manufacturing, storage or trading facilities, had long been a source of official frustration.⁵⁶ But activities in the Meena Bazaar, where vendors sold counterfeit goods, traded fake licences, built dangerous extensions and took over a huge swathe of pavement, went too far: 'What is happening there is complete encroachment, which is wrong (*jo galath hain*). The courts gave the redevelopment order to fix the place. But it's like any neighbourhood: there may be five thieves, but five hundred residents rushing to save them. So can anyone take action against the thief? (*Lekin jaise kisi mohalle mein panch chor rehte hain, aur panch sau use bachane wale hain. To koi chor ke khilaf action kaise le sakte hain?*)'

Mr. Jatav's analogy was intriguing. In Old Delhi's neighbourhoods, certain 'Bad Characters', colloquially termed BCs, live freely. A term dating back to colonial rule, a Bad Character can, in police parlance, be an 'auto-lifter', 'chain-snatcher', 'smuggler' or 'opium-eater'. They are seen as a menace, but are largely free to live their lives, often protected by family connections. The police are generally reluctant to do more than keep a Bad Character list at the station. In this way, a petty criminal will be publicly known and purposely ignored. If the police jail them, their families may create a row, bringing unwanted attention from political bosses. According to Mr. Jatav, violators of municipal dictates from the bazaar were like these common criminals in having support from others. The government could not enforce its mandate for development if its constituency was willing to dissimulate. These sentiments were echoed elsewhere in discussions with the police. On one occasion, as I was sitting in the Jama Masjid station talking to a senior officer, a subordinate came into the room and informed his boss that a local man wanted to speak with him urgently. The man, a middle-aged Meena Bazaar trader, seemed to be familiar to the officer. Visibly agitated, he accused another bazaar trader of having set his scooter on fire. Unexpectedly, the officer immediately lost his patience. Standing up, he shouted at the trader and asked why he was making fake (*nakli*) complaints against others. Despite a half-hearted attempt to stand his ground, after a few minutes of brow-beating, the complainant was escorted out of the office. The officer explained that the redevelopment plan had amplified animosities between bazaar traders, leading to false accusations and character assassinations: 'These people don't come for genuine police cases, but to cause tension for their neighbours (*Yeh genuine cases kum, aur apne padosi ko pareshan karne ke liye zyada aate hain*)'. If diligent police work was being distorted by feigned accusations, then real (*asli*) development would prove impossible to realise.

56. Mehra, *The Politics of Urban Redevelopment*, p. 92.

Conclusion

Whether as a first-time visitor or long-time trader in the Meena Bazaar, one puts on a face. Hagglng over a particular item or dealing with municipal redevelopment, this face will be relentlessly scrutinised. It may betray the words of its owner. It will surely hint at another set of possibilities than those immediately apparent. Among a range of people in this space—long-established traders, footloose hawkers, curious customers, hassled bureaucrats—parallel and contradictory dispositions exist. The seemingly straightforward official may have no intention of keeping his word; the outwardly dishevelled trader may actually live in a mansion; the apparently scruffy street hawker may turn out to have powerful friends.

In such a world, it may not be definitively possible to segregate demonstration from dissimulation, the genuine from the fake, or the self-interested from the civic-minded. I have termed ‘structured sincerity’ as the prerequisite performance of civic virtue, and its simultaneous steering in ironic and dramaturgical modes. Most of the people I have described in the Meena Bazaar easily inhabit this reflexive, polyphonic grammar; by contrast, conventional analysis of public and political life in India can seem impoverished. The officials, politicians, policemen, traders and hawkers who jostle daily in this space exceed their sociological markers; what informs life there, and helps give it an ambiguous, prospective momentum, is the interpretive sensitivity to professed intentions that I have called the ‘hermeneutics of the bazaar’.

It is entirely possible that people can be both deeply sincere and strategically untruthful; that they can believe their promises, but know them to be unfeasible; and that the facial expression they don today and the face they present tomorrow will be different. I have sought here to describe social relations and political conflict as being in indefinite motion, rather than inscribed in advance. In the Meena Bazaar, sincerity and insincerity are not zero-sum positions—one belonging to the virtuous citizen, the other to the strategic dissembler—so much as they are coeval presences. The blooming disorientation of the bazaar demands both conviction and concealment. It is only natural that we should avoid leaching out its many-faceted complexity.

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