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‘Mongrel City’

Cosmopolitan neighbourliness in a Delhi squatter settlement

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Abstract: This paper examines the construction of a ‘cosmopolitan neighbourliness’ which emerges in a Delhi squatter settlement in the context of communal violence. Through interviews with over 80 inhabitants, I suggest that an openness to ‘others’ in the settlement is produced in order to construct a home for oneself in an exclusionary city through a series of relational constructs – between the ‘cosmopolitan’ city and the ‘parochial’ village; between the ‘murderous’ city and the ‘compassionate’ slum; between the exclusionary urban public sphere and the ‘inclusive’ neighbourhood sphere. The squatter settlement is internalised as a microcosm of a ‘mongrel city’, a place which through its set of oppositional constructs becomes inherently ‘urban’. ‘Cosmopolitan neighbourliness’ on the other hand remains fragile and gendered. It is a continuous strategic practice that attempts to bridge across differences of caste and religion through gendered performances that avert and discourage communal violence even when the city becomes murderous.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, difference, squatter, Delhi, public sphere.

One afternoon in the early 1980s, Abeeda was sleeping inside her home in a squatter settlement in south Delhi when her Sikh neighbour’s sons came to her with four rakhis¹ and some sweets wrapped in paper. Those days, Abeeda had recently arrived from the village where they had lived in a separate area from the Hindus. She had only heard about a festival called Rakhi but did not know anything about its customs or meanings. In

the settlement however, she had become close to her neighbours. She began to call her elderly Sikh neighbour ‘Mummyji’ and used to leave her children with her. That afternoon as she was sleeping and Mummyji’s sons brought her the rakhis, her heart went straight to the sweets and she began to reach out for them. But the sons said ‘Aapa [elder sister] you have to tie it. If you consider us as your brothers then you will tie the rakhi and feed us the sweets’. Abeeda said ‘of course you are like my brothers’ and tied the rakhis on their wrists – a practice she has continued to this day.

Abeeda thinks with warmth about those days when she was a young bride who had followed her husband to Delhi, and notes that the presence of neighbours like Mummyji helped her cope with the separation from her natal family and the difficult conditions of everyday life in the slum which she had not been used to in her village. Since then, she even visited her family for over a month in a few occasions, when she relied on Mummyji to watch over her children who would feed and wash them. Since Mummyji had given her so much love, Abeeda too wanted to behave like a ‘true daughter’. She listened to Mummyji’s advice, kept quiet if Mummyji scolded her, and always cleaned herself from the meat smells before visiting Mummyji who was vegetarian. But Mummyji was also not the only neighbour who Abeeda was friendly with. During Eid, Abeeda would prepare seviyan² and meat and organise a small eating place outside her home where her Hindu, Muslim and Sikh neighbours would feast on all day. Such collective celebration of festivals produced a new kind of relationship between Abeeda and her neighbours who came from different castes, religions and ethnicities into the squatter settlement in Delhi. Their physical proximity in the congested environment of the settlement was productive of

a wider notion of home through fictive kinship ties, which performed parallel roles as one's biological family around rituals, childcare and food practices.

Abeeda's and Mummyji's squatter settlement in south Delhi is categorised as 'illegal' under Delhi's urban development plans and therefore denoted as a 'Camp'. This means that neither their families nor their neighbours who live in the settlement have rights to the land they have built their houses on. Most residents of this settlement came in the late 1970s from their villages or as a result of slum clearance programmes during Indian emergency (1975-77) when city centre slums were demolished and 'ineligible' squatters had no other option but to squat on public land. The state did not intervene in their growth since the land which they occupied was usually undesirable for capital investment due to their close proximity to resettlement colonies and to urban fringes.

The 80s was the start of some of the most challenging years of India's history of secularism since independence. In the early 1980s, a violent Sikh militancy took shape in the Punjab which became responsible for a number of civil disobedience movements against the state, and terrorist activities across Northern India. In 1984, Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India launched a military operation called 'Operation Blue Star' to purge Sikh militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Perceived widely as a deliberate desecration of a Sikh holy shrine, this resulted in the assassination of Mrs Gandhi in the hands of her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. Immediately afterwards, large-scale anti-Sikh riots took place across India where Sikh families were maimed, tortured and killed. Delhi was particularly affected by this communal rioting with a large part of violence erupting in its slums and squatter settlements. As Das (2007) notes, this violence was part of a locally

‘brokered’ subjectivity – for a few days, local relations in everyday life were transcended and distorted by the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

In this context, Abeeda and Mummyji’s story in the 1980s is easy to interpret as one in which local minorities (Sikh and Muslim families) attempted to create bonds across difference in order to counter the marginalising majoritarian (Hindu) politics around them. Yet as we shall see in this paper, these bonds were not just among ‘minorities’; rather they were constructed across caste, religious and regional boundaries. Indeed, the tying of Rakhi between Abeeda and Mummyji’s sons indicates a much more complex construction of the ‘self’ and ‘other’ than one of minority bonding during uncertain times. As a ‘process of the enlargement of social, cultural and personal agendas’ (Cohen 2004, 143) Abeeda and Mummyji’s relations were produced from everyday interactions within a space where difference was accepted and normalised as ‘ordinary’. Their story and many such similar ones in the Camp highlight what I shall call a ‘cosmopolitan neighbourliness’ – one that was not just involved in the banalities of survival in difficult conditions; it was also a moral transformation in their everyday values and beliefs about the ‘other’ (Appiah 2006). Such a transformation produced an alternative home in a city from which they were largely excluded.

Abeeda and Mummyji’s everyday interactions across their differences urges us to explore a spatiality of difference that moves beyond the public sphere into more private and affective spaces of the Camp neighbourhood, and that highlights the gendered nature of this openness to difference. Further, Abeeda’s evocation of the social and spatial ‘purity’ of the village is far from a romanticisation of the village as left-behind home;

rather it presents a relational construction of the urban slum as the ‘new’ home. Crucially, her construction of the slum in this context was indicative of the production of a ‘mongrel city’, where ‘mixing’ across differences was an ordinary aspect of everyday life.

In this paper, I examine how particular forms of openness to difference are produced within neighbourhood spaces of a Delhi squatter settlement, and how through such interactions, difference is constructed as a normalised aspect of everyday life. Such normalisation is possible only in the discursive construction of a ‘mongrel city’ (Sandercock 1998), which in its intensive ‘mixing’ produces a condition where the ‘other’ is not just familiar but also where the ‘self’ and ‘other’ becomes interchangeable. I suggest that attitudes towards difference and otherness in the urban slum are shaped through a set of relational constructs between the city and the squatter settlement; between the urban public sphere and the less ‘public’ neighbourhood sphere and between the city and the left-behind village. These constructions are important because they shape how differences are perceived, experienced and negotiated among subaltern actors in the city, in order to produce a wider notion of a ‘cosmopolitan neighbourliness’ within the squatter settlement. This construction is both gendered and intersectional in so far as particular forms of interaction across positionalities of gender, caste, religion and ethnicity acquire salience and validity during different moments and in different spaces of everyday life. But this construction is also fragile. It is fractured across a number of fault lines which erupt during certain moments of the everyday when local relations of neighbourliness are momentarily suspended. And it is in this sense that the production of a mongrel city is also part of a normative construction of ‘cosmopolitan’ neighbourliness within the slum.

These discussions are based on a wider study (which included more than 80 interviews with residents) of a squatter settlement in Delhi. This settlement housed around 5000 inhabitants and had been established during the 1970s when rapid urbanisation and lack of affordable housing meant that rural migrants to large cities developed informal housing solutions along roads, river banks, railway tracks, parks and other public or private land. Over the next few decades, waves of rural migrants from the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Bihar, arriving in search of employment put up their temporary hutments on this land.

My involvement with this settlement began in 2002, when I studied a particular version of ‘working-class feminism’ (Datta 2007) practised by the resident women’s organisation. In the second stage of this research in 2005, I examined the increasing anxieties of participants in the settlement around demolition of their homes and its impact on the politics of illegality, gender and agency in their everyday lives (Datta forthcoming). The fieldwork was based on recorded interviews, informal conversations and daily journals kept by myself and my research assistant. My funding allowed me to pay a nominal amount as remuneration to my participants for the time they spent on the project. It helped to build more positive relations with my male participants who were often more suspicious of researchers than the women. My funding also allowed me to recruit a research assistant on this project, a male doctoral student in one of the premier social science universities in Delhi. I have written elsewhere how our gendered positionalities, and the location of our bodies produced different types of interactions and different research stories in different spaces of the settlement (Datta 2008). The discussions in this paper therefore should be

seen as the product of varied interactions across our differences of gender, caste, class, religion and ethnicity – a process in itself of bridging across our differences during the research.

‘Murderous’ Slums?

Recent portrayals of slums in popular culture have tended to depict them as places of violence, crime and communalism. In the latest Danny Boyle movie ‘Slumdog Millionaire’, ‘otherness’ in the Mumbai slum is incorporated through communal violence. Here, slums are ‘murderous’ places where Hindus turn on Muslims. Indeed, the movie’s main protagonist, Jamal Malik, as a young Muslim boy learns about the Hindu God Rama through the violence enacted by radical Hindu groups in Mumbai where his mother gets killed.

Wider academic debates on difference in slums and squatter settlements abound in similar representations of slums as violent, murderous and hence ‘anti-cosmopolitan’ (Das 2007; Chatterji and Mehta 2007; Sen 2007). This is because of the numerous ways that radical religious parties mobilise violence from within slums – indeed India’s history of communalism is often linked to its marginal and working class spaces. Further, communal riots around disputes over religious shrines that have tended to increase in scale and severity since the 1991 demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists, have taken place repeatedly in Mumbai and more recently in Ahmedabad between Hindus and Muslims, and concentrated largely around more working class neighbourhoods.

One of the reasons why slums may have been represented as ‘murderous’ relate to their perception as a microcosm of the village – a space where caste, religious segregation and oppressive gender practices are still seen to prevail. This perception emanates from the notion that those who live in slums are peasants in the city, and are therefore out of place in the city. This fear of ‘them’, Appadurai (2006) notes is related to the ‘intolerable anxieties about the relationship of many individuals to state provided goods – ranging from housing and health to safety and sanitation’. Discussing ethnonationalism and genocide, Appadurai suggests that these anxieties are related to a large part on the ‘anxieties of incompleteness’ of identities – the incapability of peasants in squatter settlements to transform themselves into urban dwellers; and the incapability of the squatter to purge the parochial practices of the village from the self even as they live in the city. Violence in the slum is therefore attributed not to the urban dweller, but to a peasant who brings with him ‘anti-cosmopolitan’ practices of caste, kinship, religion and ethnicity from the village to the city.

While the squatter’s identity as ‘peasants in the city’ is debated in the wider public sphere, violence erupts within the slum because it calls identity into question, by exposing differences as malevolent in the bodies of ‘others’. For Nandy (2000), the spatial and material proximity of bodies and homes in slums, or what he calls the ‘pathologies of nearness’, produces fear. ‘Nearness’ becomes a condition that begins to carry ambiguity – there is always the possibility of neighbours turning into enemies, of betraying one to the mobs of communalism, riots and violence. The local then produces ‘affective violence’ that transforms everyday relations to lethal weapons (Das 2007). We see this during the

anti-Sikh riots when violence was embedded into the peripheral colonies in Delhi through abstracted social relations rather than the 'lived exchanges of commensality or occupational specializations' (Das 2007, 159). We see this also in the Mumbai riots through the presence of 'them' within 'us', when the slum was divided in metaphorical spaces of Hindustan and Pakistan corresponding to the Hindu and Muslim spaces respectively (Chatterji and Mehta 2007). Communal violence within slums then refers to moments when everyday life becomes 'spectacular' and results in a continuous sense of anxiety and fear of its return (Chatterji and Mehta 2007, 77).

Exploring notions of 'cosmopolitan neighbourliness' among squatters might seem unusual in the context of such widely established connections between slums and communal violence. McFarlane (2008) suggests however, that cosmopolitanism has far from disappeared from the slum. Examining the work of NGOs and women's organisations in the Mumbai slums, McFarlane notes that their outreach and exchange activities reaches across global spaces to create translocal links of solidarity. For him, the work of these NGOs is 'locally oriented but outward looking, against an exclusionary cosmopolitan modernism that is globally oriented and seeks to escape the local geographies of the city' (2008, 496). Despite this assurance of slum cosmopolitanism, attitudes or openness to difference among slum dwellers themselves has rarely been debated or scrutinised. Only recently has Williams (2007, 153) noted that the maintenance of 'everyday peace' among working class Hindus and Muslims in the Indian holy city of Varanasi 'confirm the centrality of 'civil society' in minimising the potential for communal violence'. This peace however, involves the construction of normative discourses of 'violence as an aberration'

(Heitmeyer 2009), as a form of collective strategy in containing the tension and mutual suspicion.

Given therefore that squatters cannot be seen as ‘murderous’, how are differences negotiated within the neighbourhood on a daily basis? How do their journeys across real and imagined boundaries of the city and village shape their interactions and attitudes to those different from them? And how are their relations with the ‘cosmopolitan’ public sphere of the city connected to their attitudes towards others within the neighbourhood?

Squatters and the ‘cosmopolitan’ public sphere

As the process of enlargement of social, cultural, and personal agendas, and as infinite ways of becoming open to ‘others’ (Pollock, et al. 2000), cosmopolitanism has been debated largely in connection with transnationalism and globalisation. Cosmopolitan attitudes and behaviours examined among those who regularly travel across national borders have privileged a North-South exchange focussing on elites, refugees, and expatriates (Beck 2002, Mohan 2006, Cohen 2004, Hannerz 2007, Koser 2007, Werbner 1999). This focus runs deep in cosmopolitan scholarship since the interaction across difference becomes relevant in the public sphere as the site of democracy and the production of civil society (Calhoun 2002). As Cheah and Robbins (1998) suggest, encounters in the public sphere shape constructions of the self and others within a domain of contested politics or ‘cosmopolitics’, produced on a series of scales within and beyond the nation.

Cosmopolitanism has recently been critiqued for its traditional focus on the practices and imaginations of the upper and middle-classes (seen in the works of Hannerz

2007 and Beck 2002). As Sandercock (1998) notes, it is actually the middle-classes who have limited engagement with the lives and practices of ‘others’. In their openness towards ‘others’, middle-classes are said to practice a cosmopolitanism that is primarily consumptive in nature. A number of scholars, note that a multiplicity of cosmopolitan imaginations and practices also exist among working-class immigrants (Werbner 1999). Articulations of ‘ordinary’ (Vertovec and Cohen 2002, Lamont and Aksartova 2002), ‘actually-existing’ (Malcomson 1998) and ‘working-class’ cosmopolitanisms (Werbner 1999), suggest that even those with limited choices are able to enter into something larger than their immediate cultures in order to survive and access basic services in new environments (Cohen 2004) . Yet national origin and transnational boundary crossings remain the basis of examining cosmopolitanisms among social actors. Squatters therefore have been largely excluded from these debates since their crossings are not transnational but across rural-urban divides – an issue that I will discuss later in this paper.

Alongside the above constructions of a cosmopolitan subject, there are now increasing debates on the ways that cities have been conceived and marketed as cosmopolitan spaces, and excluded particular forms of ‘otherness’ housed within migrants’ bodies and spaces (Binnie and Skeggs 2004). Scholars have shown how the ‘cosmopolitan project’ in cities have produced powerful and exclusionary politics around multiculturalism, inclusion, belonging, and the construction of difference (Fernandes 2006, Sandercock 1998, Yeoh 2004). Similar to Yeoh’s (2004) conjecture on cosmopolitan Singapore as positioned between an idealistic dream on the one hand, and an exclusionary neoliberal elitism on the other, Delhi’s public spaces too have been transformed by a

number of initiatives around the removal of ‘others’ from the city. Operation Pushback launched by the Indian state in 1992 aimed to remove all Bangladeshi ‘illegal immigrants’ and focussed on Delhi’s squatter settlements from where Bengali Muslims without documents were rounded up and deported (Ramachandran 2003). Like the ‘wannabe global city’ of Singapore (Yeoh 2004), Delhi has recently seen a resurgence of ‘clean up’ activities since the announcement of its hosting the 2010 Commonwealth Games. A variety of judicial rulings have constructed squatter identities as ‘encroachers’, ‘pickpockets’ of urban land and ‘illegal’ urban citizens in response to a series of litigations from ‘concerned citizens’ to clean up Delhi’s streets. The urban development response to this has been a normalisation of the location of squatters outside Delhi’s social and physical boundaries through demolitions of squatter settlements and resettlement of thousands of squatters in Delhi’s urban peripheries.

The exclusionary practices of Delhi’s imagined cosmopolitanism were evident recently in a statement made by the chief minister of Delhi, Shiela Dixit. While proposing a common economic tax zone for Delhi and its satellite towns, which she felt would reduce the ‘flow of migrants’ into the city she said, ‘Delhi is seen as a prosperous city. People from Bihar, UP and other places come here. What can we do? We can’t stop them. There is no law to stop them’³. Her reference of course was not to the elite global travellers – the non-resident Indians (NRIs) from the Silicon Valley, who are increasingly relocating to Delhi and fuelling its aspirations to become a world city. Rather, Shiela Dixit was referring to a particular kind of migrant who comes from India’s impoverished rural areas. Such constructions of the ‘migrant’ reinforce the connections between squatters and rural spaces,

through the selective marking of undesirable immigrant bodies within Delhi's squatter settlements.

For Mignolo (2000, 723) the cosmopolitan project is also a project of modernity/coloniality because 'cosmopolitan narratives are performed from the perspective of modernity'. Following this argument then, the cosmopolitan public sphere becomes a reflection of modernist notions of civility and rationality. For the middle-classes who are well educated and who relate to a Habermasian notion of public sphere, the presence of squatters produce the soiling of a civic space (Chakrabarty 2002, Gooptu 2001, Kaviraj 1997). Squatters are seen to incorporate an 'indigenous' notion of public space, for whom the public is the 'outside' – a space of common resource, which differs vastly from that of the urban elites. In these distinctions between indigenous and modernist notions of public sphere, squatters implicitly become constructed as anti-urban, parochial and provincial – or as anti-cosmopolitan. Removal of squatters from urban spaces becomes imperative to maintain cities as spaces of cosmopolitanism and modernity.

Such connections between cosmopolitanism and modernity however, carry subtexts of exclusionary attitudes towards caste, religion, language and ethnicity within the urban public sphere. While urban lifestyles and attire in cities like Delhi have made caste or religious differences particularly difficult to discern through visual markers on the body, this does not imply that such differences have lost significance in urban life. Firstly, caste or religion based spatial, social, or bodily discriminations are less visible in urban spaces because of the ways that the middle-classes have managed to distance themselves from the working-classes (who are mostly Muslims and lower castes) through physical and

social boundaries. Secondly, caste, ethnic or religious practices are often embedded within more intimate and affective family relations and rituals that largely take place away from the public sphere. For squatters, this is an important distinction, since their identification as ‘peasants’ in the urban public sphere is largely removed from the realities of their caste, religious, and regional identifications and differences within the slum neighbourhood. During the struggles to survive in an exclusionary urban public sphere, it is in the neighbourhood sphere that other differences beyond class become meaningful. And it is in the neighbourhood sphere, outside the gaze of the city that a ‘cosmopolitan neighbourliness’ is produced.

Delhi as the ‘mongrel city’

Discussions of cosmopolitanism in Indian cities have valorised exchange across differences as a result of trade and commerce. For example, millennial Bombay is noted as a ‘city of cash’, a cosmopolitan urban public sphere that made way for Mumbai – a parochial city remade through a militant Hindu nationalism (Appadurai 2003). In Bombay, money was ‘the guarantee of cosmopolitanism’ (Appadurai 2003, 634), but since 1992, after the destruction of Babri Masjid by Hindu nationalists, Mumbai was created through the cleansing of Muslim neighbourhoods, pavement dwellers and informal economies. Similarly, Cochin (now Kochi) is seen to retain fragments of its cosmopolitanism by incorporating a sense of ‘hospitality’ and by evoking memories of its past linkages with other spaces and places as a result of trade (Nandy 2000). For Nandy, a sense of ‘alternate cosmopolitanism’ exists in Kochi because unlike its nearby city of Mumbai, contemporary

Kochi has managed so far to avoid any violent bloodbath or large scale riot. This is also attributed to trade, a common language and a highly urbanised and secular population.

Narratives of urban cosmopolitanism in India that continue to make references to the banalities of economic exchanges as preconditions for cosmopolitanism seem to suggest that Indian cities before the communal riots were truly cosmopolitan. And they also suggest that cosmopolitanism is only possible among traders, entrepreneurs or secular urban populations. Delhi's case however, refutes these claims. Unlike Bombay or Cochin, where exchanges across differences were largely shaped by trade, inclusion of 'others' in Delhi occurred through the violence of partition in 1947, and militantism in other parts of India. As the eastern and western parts of India were divided by the British Raj to create a separate state of Pakistan, thousands of refugees streamed into Delhi's urban spaces – they were both highly urbanised secular groups as well as those from remote rural areas of territories ceded to Pakistan. Since 1947, Delhi has had to accommodate Punjabis, Sikhs and Bengalis who came as refugees, and flocked into its refugee colonies. Later, since the late 1980s, it has had to accommodate Kashmiri Hindus who came as refugees as a result of the rising militantism in the Indian state of Kashmir. Overlapping with these violent events, Delhi's economic success has fuelled a steady migration from India's rural areas since the 1950s. In the lack of affordable housing in the city, rural migrants moved into its slums and squatter settlements. Thus it was not that they learnt about the 'other' only in the urban public sphere; but also through an intimate 'mixing' within more private and affective spheres of everyday life.

Squatter settlements in Delhi and other Indian cities tend to be made of migrants who come from very different spatialities of caste, kinship, religion and language. The last survey conducted on slums and squatter settlements in Delhi in 1995, notes that most slum dwellers come from the neighbouring states of Uttar Pradesh (48.7%), Rajasthan (17.5%) and Bihar (15%) (Anthony and Maheswaran 2001). Of these almost 53 percent belong to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs), almost 21 percent to the Other Backward Castes⁴ (OBCs), and more than 12 percent identify themselves as Muslims. They follow a variety of regional, ethnic, religious and caste-based cultural and social practices in their everyday lives. Although most of them came to the city since the 1950s during massive rural-urban migrations, they still maintain social and economic ties with the left-behind villages. Compared to the negotiations of largely ethnic and racial difference among transnational migrants, squatters' negotiations of difference take shape across a very wide spectrum of positionalities of caste, religion, region, language and kinship. Thus while cosmopolitan Delhi might represent a particular type of middle-class urbanised and secular population, it is in its slums and squatter settlements that India's social diversity is truly reflected. When set in the context of a postcolonial state where the dialectics between law and disorder present a continuous threat to local communal relations (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006), 'cosmopolitan neighbourliness' in the slum becomes both a strategy of home-making in an exclusionary city and an everyday reality for squatters in Delhi.

Squatters' construction of otherness therefore, is conceptually different from the cosmopolitanism embedded in the elite global citizen (Hannerz 2007) or the working-class immigrant (Werbner 1999). This notion of difference is related to a condition of mixing –

of those previously considered ‘unmixable’ – from different cultural and social positionalities, religions, and ethnicities, and in doing so produces a microcosm of what Sandercock (1998) refers to as a ‘mongrel city’. Sandercock’s mongrel city is the site of hybridity, a ‘melting pot’ of cultural practices, where we begin to appreciate differences for what they are.

I will use the metaphor of the mongrel city to characterize this new urban condition in which difference, otherness, fragmentation, splintering, multiplicity, heterogeneity, diversity, plurality prevail. For some this is to be feared, signifying the decline of civilization as we know it in the West. For others (like Rushdie and myself) it is to be celebrated as a great possibility: the possibility of living alongside others who are different, learning from them, creating new worlds with them, instead of fearing them. (Sandercock 1998, 1)

While Sandercock describes the ‘mongrel city’ primarily through references to immigrants as racial ‘others’ in western cities, attitudes to difference in the slum take shape in a postcolonial city without experiencing transnational border crossings. These crossings are no less significant since they represent differences that are social, geographic and imagined – between the left-behind village and the city, between the city and squatter settlement and between the ‘homely’ slum neighbourhood and the exclusionary urban public sphere. In these border crossings, new kind of interactions take shape, new kinds of relations with the ‘other’ are forged and new attitudes towards difference are produced. For them then, ‘cosmopolitanism, as a repertoire of imaginaries and practices, involves

symbolically or physically crossing defined boundaries and claiming a degree of cultural versatility' (Jeffrey and Mcfarlane 2008, 420).

Discussing the notion of the village within the self in Indian popular cinema, Nandy (Nandy 2001) notes that in the Indian psyche, the city continues to remain as an aspect of the self, with the village as the other. Even when the village is no longer a reality, particularly for rural-urban migrants; it is always evoked as a counterpoint to the city. In other words, Nandy suggests that the journey from the village to the city has become a journey from a 'disowned self to a self that cannot be owned up'. Although the context of Nandy's discussion relates largely to the Indian middle-classes, this relational opposition between the city and the village is relevant for squatters increasingly threatened by exclusion from the city.

During their metaphoric journey from the village to the city, the village of their imagination has slowly become a place where sati and untouchability is practiced and where caste, ethnic and religious separation prevails. The city on the other hand, provides possibilities to anonymise the self and challenge the most violent and oppressive forms of difference. In this context, it becomes imperative for squatters to distance themselves from the village. The village is continually evoked to discuss and construct an urban identity; but significantly, instead of a nostalgic and idyllic return to the village, it is evoked as the place of spatial exclusion and parochialism – a place that cannot be returned to since it is irreconcilable with the urban self. As squatters are excluded and criminalised in the city, constructing the village in some metaphoric, symbolic and material counter-narrative to the city then becomes part of the production of an 'urban' self. While they continue to

maintain social and economic links with the left-behind village, it is also evoked in order to present themselves as capable of negotiating all forms of difference in the city, which were earlier unthinkable in the village.

'All are from outside'

For squatters then, Delhi is perceived as a bit of a 'mongrel' city – no one really 'comes from' Delhi and there is no singular cultural identity of those who live here. Delhi's 'mongrelisation' becomes relevant from the vantage point of the squatter settlement where they experience an intense mixing of castes, religions and languages, set against the relative spatial and social 'purity' of the left-behind village. The village is seen as a parochial space where different social groups and their everyday spaces are arranged into separate realms which do not usually intersect. In such ordering, everyone knows their space and remains within it. The squatter settlement in Delhi on the other hand, makes differences both visible and invisible. Visible, because in the physical proximity of houses and streets, they are exposed to a variety of social and cultural practices of the 'other', in ways not possible in the village. Invisible, because in the absence of the spatial ordering common in villages, it is not always possible to discern social differences in the settlement from bodily markers.

There are so many people living in this city. Only if we know that they are sweepers we can keep a distance. We can do nothing if we don't know who they are. In the village it's very organised. Everyone has a different area to live so everyone knows who one is. The customs in the village are different from that of the city. [Shenaz]

Nandy argues that the Indian city has always been constructed as the forced integration of its rural migrants into one anonymous mass. 'On this plane, the city that gave one refuge took away one's cultural location only to give one a stereotyped cultural image' (Nandy 2001, 135), which meant that while cultural differences on the basis of caste or religion were more subdued, it were the cultural stereotype of 'peasants in the city' that defined their urban identity. In my participants' understanding too, although difference was not eliminated, their intentions of avoiding sweepers could not be viewed as appropriate in the city. In other words, it was not that attitudes towards caste had changed – it was just that caste practices could not be sustained in the same way in the city. For participants, maintaining distance from those perceived as lower in terms of social hierarchy was therefore unacceptable and irrelevant in the city.

How can you say that you are a lower caste? These days it cannot do. Today you can't call a Bihari, 'Bihari' on his face. He will think that we are abusing him and ask 'How can you call me a Bihari. We live in Delhi and so we are Delhi-ites.'

Today we can't say anything directly to anyone. They will feel bad. And we should not do that also. We should keep it to ourselves. In Delhi, nobody bothers much what you are, so here, all are from outside, having come from here and there, all have got together. [Shama]

In its 'mongrelisation', Delhi was celebrated in that it was possible for participants to reject the encumbrances of caste, ethnicity or religion as against the 'parochial' village. The journey from the village to the city then was a metaphorical 'journey from a disowned self to a self that cannot be fully owned up' (Nandy 2001, 24). And this was also a journey

in time. Labels of ‘Bihari’ or ‘sweeper’ which were commonplace in Delhi during its rapid urbanisation in the 50s carried different meanings in contemporary Delhi⁵. While earlier, these labels (albeit inappropriate) were largely unquestioned and used as a mode of introduction among newly arrived migrants, these labels are now seen as exclusionary and parochial – they made undesirable connections with a system of identification viewed as rural in origin. On the other hand, being a ‘Delhi-ite’ did not mean that this erased social differences; rather the assertion of an urban identity provided a successful counter-discursive strategy for those seen as lower in the social hierarchy to stake their claims as equal participants in everyday life.

Yet, while spatial separations between families and neighbours are ambiguous, markers of caste, religion or ethnicity remain significant in the condition of close physical proximity within squatter settlements. Squatter homes are physically and social porous – their materials of construction are not able to contain conversations, their floor area is inadequate to contain everyday family activities. Family practices and interactions therefore ‘spill out’ into roads, lanes and squares in the settlement, extending the boundaries of home into ‘semi-private’ spaces. They therefore open up private spaces for neighbours to scrutinise, to observe, or interact with. Such close proximity produces a transformation in social relationships as neighbourhood spaces become the site of everyday practices of different social groups.

See, in our slums, people from many regions live together. Like I am a Rajasthani, someone is from Agra, someone from Gujarat, from Bihar. So their thoughts, ways of living, eating, don’t match. Now in relations with each other, they don’t

understand this; this is why there are fights. I am from a different place; he is from a different place. For one, there is a difference in accent and language. Some people will pronounce some words in a way that it sounds wrong. This is the thing, and there are fights over this [Ram Avtar]

In Ram Avtar's experience, difference does not mean its celebration. Indeed this difference is what he attributes to the production of conflict, where through body, food, language, attire and accent, those who live in close proximity become aware of their social differences. Everyday spaces become the site of contestation, because physical proximity reminds them that their daily practices which were normalised in the context of their villages could no longer be taken as 'normal' in Delhi. Rather their everyday practices and spaces where these took shape had to also accommodate other practices and other ways of leading everyday lives. Such an understanding of difference however is not necessarily pejorative, although as Ram Avtar accepts, these do lead to fights and conflicts over the use of space. For many like Ram Avtar, those who are different 'feel it themselves' when their language, attire and food do not 'match' those of their neighbours. But, significantly this feeling is not confined to a few but to all – in the mixing of such a variety of social groups; difference becomes a normalised aspect of everyday life.

'Cosmopolitan' Neighbourliness

In 1984, right after the assassination of India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Moinuddin, a truck driver claimed to have saved a Sikh man. That day, Moinuddin was driving his truck when he saw another truck on fire near the crossroads outside the settlement and a Sikh man caught inside. He claimed to have rescued the Sikh driver from

the burning truck and driven off with him. Later he brought him to his home in the settlement and kept him there for a few days before it quietened down on the streets. Moinuddin claimed it was safe to bring the Sikh man to his house because they would never let 'outsiders' enter the Camp.

Many male participants had a way of telling stories of saving Sikh families in the Camp in 1984 that made them sound 'heroic'. They spoke of how the men in the Camp, whether Hindu or Muslim, made campfires along its peripheries and took turns in standing guard with stones, bats and sticks day and night. They did this again in 1991 in the aftermath of the destruction of Babri Masjid by Hindu radical groups, when communal riots broke out across India. The men stood guard outside the Camp in order to ensure that no one came from outside, since it were the outsiders who were seen as the threat to the Sikh and Muslim families within.

I will tell you, when riots had occurred in 1984, my father was telling me – all of Delhi was fighting but nothing happened in this Camp. Many Sardars [Sikhs] had come to take refuge here, no Muslim touched them. Nobody was killed. They were staying in the neighbourhood but we called them to our houses. Even in 1991 – no riots happened here. No riot was bigger than the '91 riot, but nothing happened. But I remember, I was a child then and all these political parties were protesting on the road. They had saffron flags in their hands and they were shouting that we will build the temple, you must have seen it. And who were those people? Mostly those who have been paid Rs 50-100 by the politicians to create chaos. Most of them were from outside. Their idea was to create chaos. People like us, me and him; we

will not fight, because we know that we have to stay here. Those from outside will go away once the riots are over, but we have to stay here. Just look at this street – on this street we have both a Temple and a Mosque. Nothing has ever happened here, no fights. [Aslam]

In Aslam's account of surviving the riots, Delhi was constructed as the 'murderous city' against which the men in the Camp provided safety, security and refuge. The 'murderous' rioters in the city were pitted against the 'guardian' men within the Camp. Their 'heroic' performance was necessary because this was a home under threat. This notion of home included the Camp, and was produced by including the 'other' within the home, by normalising difference in everyday life. The evidence for this was presented by participants in the physical context of the squatter settlement – through the co-presence of a mosque and temple on the same street, through the sharing of food and festivals among neighbours, and through their neighbourliness in moments of crises in 1984 and 1991. In making campfires and standing guard on its peripheries, the men in the Camp were not just ensuring the safety of those most vulnerable within, they were also ensuring the sustenance of their wider home of the Camp. This included those they had known for a long time, whose cultural practices and values had ceased to be unfamiliar or fearsome, and who had been included in their 'family' through fictive kinship ties. This reduced anxieties around neighbours turning against each other – a feature so common in narratives of Indian partition (Chakrabarty 2002, Nandy 2001) or in other accounts of communal riots (Chatterji and Gupta 2007; Das 2007). Thus 'others' within the Camp became part of the

self, even as the city itself attempted from time to time to incite the notion of ‘other’ through riots, communalism and violence.

Examining accounts of violence in Delhi’s peripheral slums in 1984, Veena Das (2007) however finds that such acts of protecting minorities occurred only in those neighbourhoods where residents had lived together for a long period of time, were relatively better off and had established strong kinship ties. The fictive kinship ties established between Abeeda and Mummyji with which I started this paper is indicative of how Sikh families in the settlement went unharmed in 1984. Such neighbourliness was also evident in 1991 after the Babri Masjid demolition.

Jamila, a Muslim widow who lived in the settlement with her children claimed that she never felt anxious or fearful of her neighbours even after the riots started in 1991. She had lived in the Camp and had known her neighbours for over 20 years. Even when she was watching images of the riots across the country in her television, Jamila never felt that she would be ‘betrayed’ by her Hindu neighbours. For Jamila they had become ‘like family’ – they shared all the important occasions that families do – births, deaths, weddings and so on. Yet, as the riots escalated and L K Advani, a Hindu right-wing politician took out a rally in support of the construction of a temple on the site of the broken mosque, Jamila began to worry. She packed her belongings and took her children to live for a few days with her sister’s family in Nizamuddin, a Muslim majority area in Delhi. Jamila says,

We weren’t scared of our neighbours; but just the mahaul [environment]. If someone comes from outside and attacks us then what can the poor neighbours do?

My neighbours kept saying, you should have come and stayed with us. We would die before we let anything happen to you, what are you scared of? They were so angry with us that we went away. They are very nice neighbours. See, this lane has sweepers and dhobis [washermen], all castes. So they respect us so much that they do ‘Salaam’ to us whenever they meet us. [Jamila]

For Jamila then, fear of the ‘other’ was not vested in the body of her Hindu neighbours, but on those ‘murderous’ others in the city who she did not know, and who even her Hindu neighbours could not protect her from. Her reference to her neighbours as ‘like family’ again speaks of the multitude of fictive kinship relations that residents had made over the years. But Jamila also highlights another crucially important moment in the making of a ‘mongrel’ city in the Camp – that social relations across neighbours were still mediated across pre-existing social hierarchies. Jamila’s commanding of respect from ‘sweepers’ and ‘dhobis’ – those perceived as lower in the social hierarchy, indicates the making of a cosmopolitan neighbourliness that continues to sustain itself upon reworked social hierarchies within the slum. In this, Muslim subjects’ social positions are reworked within a caste-based hierarchy to place them above lower-caste Hindus. It is this social positioning that assures Jamila of her ‘respect’ within a Hindu majority neighbourhood. And the indignation of her Hindu neighbours when Jamila, a Muslim widow, left the Camp during a period of communal crisis in Delhi, also points to a wider gendered politics of the Camp as home, where its vulnerable members (as Muslims, women and widows) had to be ‘protected’ at all costs.

Fragile bonds?

One night, Ramnarayan heard noises coming from the street in front of his house. He stepped outside to investigate and saw that a group of ‘Valmiki⁶ youths’ who were well known in the Camp as pickpockets, were armed with heavy wooden bats and stones and fighting with some Muslim youths from the neighbouring street. Ramnarayan asked them to put down the bats and said to them, ‘All of you go back to your houses; I assure you nothing will happen. Arguments keep happening; you should not start fighting on small things.’ However, the fight started in front of him and both sides began to throw stones at each other. During this time, he was continuously shouting at them saying he will break everyone’s leg, abusing them and urging them to stop. Finally the Valmiki youths came running towards the Muslim youths and shouted ‘Saale katuwe bahar niklo, aaj to ek katuwa kaatna hai’ [bloody cut ones⁷ come outside, today we will butcher a cut one]. Ramanarayan remembers that he felt very upset at this form of abuse and told them not to use that word [katuwe] again ‘because it is a terrible insult’. Finally with the help of other older men on the street, Ramnarayan managed to stop the young men from fighting and sent them home.

This incident highlights that despite many residents’ denial of religious and caste based conflict in the Camp, they continue to simmer under the surface. While this incident has all the indications of communal violence, Ramnarayan refuses to accept this as such, since he claims that this conflict was not over religious practices as in the case of the Babri Masjid. Rather he claims that this fight started between two Valmiki and Muslim youths over courting a young woman. In the recounting of the incident, Ramnarayan asserted how

‘fighting over small things’ (women) in their neighbourhood had to be kept separate from the politicised identities of caste and religion that are usually the cause of conflict in the public sphere. Thus the fight between Valmiki and Muslim youths was not one of religious conflict rather as one that was based on everyday infatuations of young adults.

Incidents such as those described by Ramnarayan show the fault lines along which ‘small matters’ in the neighbourhood sphere embody the possibilities of communal violence within local contexts. In that sense, this echoes Heitmeyer’s (2009) observation in a Gujrati town of a collective strategy that underplayed communal tension as ‘aberration’ rather than the norm. Yet, Ramnarayan’s recounting of this incident through labels of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Valmiki’, suggests that attitudes towards difference were not always convivial; rather that in many ways the discursive constructions of these incidents of communalism in the Camp were strategically located within more ‘ordinary’ spaces by residents in order to prevent these from escalating into communal violence. Striking in this incident was how social power and subjective positionalities across social hierarchies were crucial to a normative production of the ‘ordinary’. Ramnarayan, an upper caste Rajasthani man who was also the locally elected leader framed the simmering religious tensions among young men in the slum as one between Valmiki and Muslim youth. This discursive construction of the conflict distanced upper caste Hindus such as himself from the source of violence (indeed it constructed them as mediators of this violence), and locates anti-cosmopolitanism within the body of the ‘other’ – among lower castes, Muslims and young deviant men in the Camp.

But these processes also underline a more subtle gendering of cosmopolitan neighbourliness. The downplaying of religious difference to the ‘small matter’ of women shows how women’s bodies became the ‘neutral’ spaces where conflict could be located as ordinary. This does not necessarily mean that gendered violence was ordinary, rather than gendered relationships and conflicts over these were constructed as personal or familial matters – one which should be confined to the home and not fought over in the neighbourhood. While a detailed discussion of gender and sexual violence as part of everyday social relations in the Camp is outside the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that sexuality or rather the control of sexuality through marriage was a crucial aspect of the breakdown of cosmopolitan neighbourliness. My point here is that conflict over gender/sexual relations across caste or religious groups was strategically constructed by participants as ‘private matters’ rather than as the breakdown of communal relations, and in this sense represents a gendered attempt to restrict violence and tension only within those families/individuals affected by these matters.

The inclusion of the ‘other’ within the cosmopolitan neighbourhood therefore was a collective gendered strategy. Men became the gendered ‘custodians’ of a cosmopolitan home in the Camp. It required combatant performances from time to time, where the men would ‘protect’ and safeguard the Camp and those vulnerable within from communal violence. Women on the other hand were silent in these ‘heroic’ practices of cosmopolitanism – they were included in the cosmopolitan neighbourhood as ‘sisters’ and ‘mothers’ – through more affective practices in their sharing of certain cultural or religious rituals across domestic spaces. These gendered interactions across difference produced the

Camp as a microcosm of the ‘mongrel city’ – as a wider home constructed through the gendered inclusion of ‘others’ into one’s fictive family.

Conclusions

‘What looks like a slum turns out to be, on closer scrutiny, a village that has survived the seductive glitter of the city. As an escape from the oppressive village, the slum captures, within the heartlessness of the city, the reinvented compassionate village.’ (Nandy 2001, 20)

Nandy was referring to a quality of the urban slum that is repeatedly constructed in popular culture, through which the connections between squatters and rural spaces are maintained, and which then reinforce the notion that squatters are out of place in the city. In such a construction Nandy notes, the slum becomes a microcosm of the village – where the last vestiges of the village as a place of compassion still remain. But representations of slums are also highly gendered and romanticised as a return to community and compassion – in ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ affection is found in the body of the woman in Jamal’s mother and later in his childhood infatuation over the Hindu slum girl Latika. Similarly, Kevin McCloud, the anchor of the British Channel 4 series on Mumbai slums ‘discovers’ community within its spaces and presents a highly romanticised image of neighbourliness and conviviality. In all these representations, the slum is constructed as a homogenous mass of people living in the compassionate village – an all too obvious fate of those excluded from the wider urban public sphere.

The narratives of the participants in this paper could not be further away from this notion – the village is evoked precisely to make a break from it. The squatter settlement in

the narratives of participants is a microcosm of a ‘mongrel city’, a place where the parochialism and anti-cosmopolitanism of the village are defunct, and a place which through its oppositional relation to the village becomes portrayed as inherently urban and hence cosmopolitan. Thus the slum is constructed by participants, as an ‘urban’ rather than rural product – a place where bridging across differences of caste, religion, ethnicity and language is an ordinary aspect of everyday life. Yet, while the wider city itself might lack in compassion or neighbourliness, these are not absent in the slum. Participants construct a notion of cosmopolitan neighbourliness where the ‘other’ is drawn into a wider home of the slum through a variety of gendered interactions during particular moments and in different everyday spaces.

Openness to ‘others’ in the slum is constructed through a series of relational constructs – between the city and the left-behind village; between the city and the slum; between the wider urban public sphere and the less public neighbourhood sphere. These relational constructs are important tools to highlight at different moments in their interactions with others, the nature of their openness to others, which despite its potential fault lines are strategically defended as ordinary and everyday. In these series of relational constructs then hides a politics of the ordinary which is able to respond to moments of crises through empathy, affection and humanity – qualities that even the wider city itself loses during moments of crises. Squatters do this not by aligning themselves to the village; rather by making a symbolic break from the parochialism of the village and internalising the notion of the ‘mongrel city’ within the slum. And in so doing, they present themselves

as urban citizens – a far cry from the state and public representations of squatters as peasants in the city.

As this paper highlights however, cosmopolitan neighbourliness in the slum remains inherently fragile and gendered, but very important in order to sustain a home in the exclusionary city. The story of Abeeda and Mummyji shows how the moral and affective transformations of neighbourly relationships around practices of food, festivals or childcare involve interactions between women. Yet, the communal violence that erupts during the surveillance of gender/sexual relations across religion is strategically constructed as a ‘small matter’ in order to consign it to more private familial spheres of negotiation. It is during those and wider moments of communal crises that men are linked to the cosmopolitan neighbourhood through their ‘heroic’ acts of protecting those most vulnerable within, and the roots of violence are marked on those bodies in the slum perceived as lower in the social hierarchy. This is not necessarily pejorative. The incorporation of Muslims within a caste-based hierarchy also provides them with a sense of security and protection during communal violence. Thus ‘cosmopolitan neighbourliness’ in the slum is also a strategic gendered construction of local social relations in the neighbourhood sphere, which prioritises the bridging of differences across caste and religion as more significant than gender. And it is through this strategy that ‘cosmopolitan neighbourliness’ begins to respond to the wider communal violence in the ‘murderous city’.

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¹ A thread tied by a sister on a brother's wrist during the Hindu festival (also celebrated among Sikhs and Jains) of Raksha Bandhan (or Rakhi for short). The tying of the rakhi symbolises that the brother will then continue to protect his sister from all harm.

² vermicelli rice noodles in sweetened and thickened milk

³ <http://pratyush.instablogs.com/entry/delhi-cm-says-to-stop-peoples-migration-in-delhi-from-bihar-up-regrets-later/>

⁴ Scheduled Castes, a legally identified category in the Indian constitution, consists of lower castes of sweepers, scavengers, and toilet cleaners (also known as untouchables). Scheduled Tribes similarly include a large number of indigenous tribes across India who belong to a number of religions. Other Backward Castes, included in the constitution since 1991 include those identified as both Hindu and non-Hindu 'castes' include gujjars (sportmen), dhobis (washermen), gwalas (milkmen), and kasais (butchers) who are placed at a higher social order than the untouchables.

⁵ Labels of 'Bihari' carry with them an embedded politics of caste-based regional differences. Working-class Biharis who migrated to Delhi slums belong to a lower caste of landless agricultural labourers. Similarly reference to 'Bengali' or 'Punjabi' caste among slum dwellers relies on a system of identification related to the region from which corresponding caste-groups largely come from. For further elaboration on the complexity of caste-based identifications read Gupta (2000).

⁶ Low caste, untouchables

⁷ Here the Muslims are called 'cut ones' – referring to their circumcised penis. This is an abuse that is used widely during communal violence as a way of denigrating and differentiating the 'other' through the body.