individual commercial developers—higher densities triggering off higher land values, and vice versa, in an increasingly vicious spiral, like a serpent that feeds off its own tail. Today, almost the entire building industry in all our major cities is turning out a product that only the middle and upper classes can afford, forcing half of our society out on to the pavements. In their confusion and desperation, architects and engineers start searching for new ‘miracle’ technologies (rather like the medieval alchemist’s fevered hunt for the elusive touchstone which would convert dross into gold). Too long have we struggled for these answers, when all along the land-use planners have stated the question wrongly to begin with. The problem of housing the vast majority of our urban people is not one of finding miracle building materials or construction technologies; it is primarily a matter of density, of re-establishing land-use allocations.


Arjun Appadurai

Street Culture

In our concern for the preservation of India’s cultural and natural heritage, we have tended to concentrate excessively on her arts and her crafts, her traditions of thought and performance, her monuments and mausolea, her birds and her beasts. But we have tended to ignore some of India’s more obvious cultural resources, resources found in settings which do not fit our preconceived notions of high culture or unspoilt nature. The Indian street is one such setting, whose cultural ambience is changing in troubling ways today. Street culture is about to become an endangered resource.

Streets, and their culture, lie at the heart of public life in contemporary India. Especially in those many cities where urban housing is crowded and uncomfortable, and where the weather is never too cold, streets are where much of life is lived. Streets are many things: thoroughfares, bazaars, theatres, exhibitions, restaurants. They encompass a huge range
of activities from worship and business, to political protests and funeral and marriage processions.

Streets intensify the culture experience of urban life at the same time as they facilitate its logistics. With the possible exception of the railroad, streets capture more about India than any other setting. On its streets, India eats, works, sleeps, moves, celebrates and worships. The street is a stage that rarely sleeps.

Genuine street culture occurs neither on the great highways of India nor in the narrow lanes that characterize neighbourhoods in villages or in very small towns. When a thoroughfare is too dominated by vehicles, especially modern vehicles, it is no longer hospitable to the complexities of street culture. Such thoroughfares are just instruments of travel and transport. They do not have sufficient human traffic, and sufficient concentrations of spectators and hangers-around to meet the key requirement of street culture: a sheer density of human interactions. The great tarred highways and their rural counterparts are not the sites of street culture.

Nor can one expect to see the culture of the street in the lanes and gullies of restricted neighbourhoods in villages and towns. Here the problem is a different one: when a street is insufficiently open to the noise of commerce, the drama of seeing strange persons, sights and sounds, when it is too much an extension of the intimacy of families, castes or other small groups, then too street culture is not likely to be found in full bloom.

Yet the seeds of contemporary street cultures do lie in great thoroughfares and the tiny gullies of pre-modern India. Historically, it is in such streets and thoroughfares that Indians have learnt to traffic with the world, unprotected by the certainties of the family, unrestrained by the proprieties of caste. The great highways of colonial India, such as the Grand Trunk Road, have always symbolized the romance of travel, adventure, even danger. In Kipling’s *Kim* or in the romances associated with the thuggee phenomenon of central India, the great thoroughfares and highways that linked cities, villages and regions, were the seedbeds of cosmopolitanism. They brought together travelers, officials of the state, brigands, itinerant priests and pilgrims, men and women, and groups that would otherwise never encounter each other.

Pilgrimage, of course, was one of the principal historical contexts for the emergence of these regional and national thoroughfares. Scholars have paid considerable attention to the end-points of these journeys: the *tirbas*, the sacred places that enticed the pilgrim to travel far from home. But
have we paid enough attention to the journey itself, to the logistics and cultural challenges that travel must have implied in pre-modern India? It was in these lengthy road journeys that urbane travelers had to negotiate with local villagers for their sustenance, where roadside shrines must have emerged to satisfy the needs of itinerants, where codes of conduct must have emerged for dealing with strangers.

How did roads and highways in pre-modern India function? What was the culture of provisioning and of worship along them? Did the dharamsalas and early eating operations along these roads contain the seeds of contemporary restaurant culture, along with the royal courts? Did the needs of travelers provide a significant stimulus to inter-urban commerce? To what extent did travelers seek self-sufficiency and to what extent did they see travel as an occasion for exploring the foods, clothing, and shelter of new regions and groups?

Whatever the answers to these questions, they are likely to confirm the intuition that in the great thoroughfares of traditional India, especially those that provided the arteries for religious travel, we have the beginnings of contemporary cosmopolitanism in India. It is in these settings that Indians, both wealthy and poor, are likely to have developed a taste for the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of those different from them. Contemporary Indian street culture, in all its aspects, must owe a good deal of its élan to these early public thoroughfares.

Equally, however, the tiny lanes and streets that characterize the mobullas of the north, the agraharams of the Tamil south, the wadas of Maharashtra, and the other semi-insulated zones of rural and small town India, have provided the historical beginnings of street culture. In these small lanes and byways, often too narrow for vehicles of any sort, domestic life simply spills outside and encounters the larger world. It was in these small lanes that the commercial impulses of the wider world penetrated small markets, largely in the form of itinerant vendors and merchants, carrying fruits, vegetables, textiles, combs, bangles and prepared foods to householders in small urban neighbourhoods and to villages.

Here too, in these small lanes and streets, public festivities, both religious and secular, would take place, and occasionally street performers would come through, entertaining, soothsaying, importuning the householder at his doorstep. This humble end of street life still exists in the villages and in the mofussil, a mild echo of the hurly-burly of mainstream street culture, reflecting one of the historical streams that have fed contemporary street cultures. The domestic end of R K
Narayan’s Malgudi captures this backwater street culture as well as any other representation.

In these diametrically opposed settings, Indians developed a taste for the dramas of life in public. Today, these two types of thoroughfares continue to play an important role in supporting public life, but they are no longer the key arenas in which to observe street culture. The great thoroughfares, often replaced by modern highways, now are instruments for the rapid movement of goods and people and thus constitute part of the infrastructure of cosmopolitanism, not its front stage. The small lanes and gullies are the backwaters of cosmopolitanism, pale reflections of what goes on elsewhere. Where street culture really exists today is in the crowded urban and urbanizing settings of contemporary India, in the roads and streets that, throughout India, constitute the core of the cities and towns. Their models are Anna Salai in Madras, Pherozesha Mehta Road in Bombay, M G Road in Pune, Town Hall Road in Madurai, Chowringhee in Calcutta, and their many counterparts in these and other cities. It is the culture of these streets that lies at the heart of public culture today.

It is worth emphasizing that street culture is not a homogeneous thing throughout contemporary India. The street cultures of the great colonial cities of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta are different from those of the railway cities like Nasik, Renigunta or Bilaspur, or those of the industrial cities like Jamshedpur, Pimpri or Dhanbad. These in turn are different from the street cultures of the old royal centres like Madurai, Varanasi or Pandharupur. Even within each of these types of city, the great main streets can differ from the specialized ones, some of which might be dominated by entertainment, others by commerce, yet others by the ambience of religion.

But for all this variation—which makes it essential to think of street cultures in the plural—there is something shared, which justifies the use of the singular. The two most important features of what is shared are the great range of activities that occur on Indian streets and give them their ambience and the way in which street culture blurs the line between private and public life.

Although Indian streets are essential to public life, they have not, till recently, been antagonistic to what we would think of as private activities. Roadside shrines and trees are often the scene of intensely personal acts of worship or meditation. Barbers, ear-cleaners and fortune tellers conduct intimate transactions with their clientele on the street. Clothes are washed, baths are taken, meals are cooked in the full view of passersby. This is
sometimes the product of sheer exigency. But Indian streets are a reminder that the sharp demarcation of public from private spheres is a recent addition to the Indian consciousness. Though important changes are afoot in this regard, Indian street culture is an example of those classical Indian designs for living that did not rely on sharp breaks between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, private and public, personal and collective activities.

The street is above all a commercial space. The world of goods is a central part of the experience of street life in urban India today. The eye is everywhere assaulted by billboards that hawk movies, political parties, fancy goods and services. The billboard is the central device of capitalist realism in urban India, the place where the icons and messages of cosmopolitanism are etched into the public imagination. Under the gaze of these billboards and posters are the many settings for buying and selling.

Hawkers and vendors are the base of street life, selling everything from food and ballpoint pens to aphrodisiacs and calendars. Shops and their store fronts, especially in commercialized streets, dominate the texture of street culture, with their displays often spilling on to the pavements, pushing their way into the space of the street vendor and the roadside stroller. In the traditional shopping areas of urban India, these streets are indeed bazaars in the classical sense: settings where goods and specialists are enclaved, and stretches of brassware shops are followed by stretches of clothing, further stretches of leather goods and so forth.

The Indian street shopper typically operates in an economy of small differences, where nuances of display, personal style or supply can make a good day for one shop rather than another. Shopping in these bazaar streets is a noisy, social activity, where the cold forces of supply and demand are still encased in the human drama of bargaining, seducing, cheating and cajoling. The commercial dimension of street culture is thus enormously complex, stratified and multi-layered. The products and images of the billboards may be directed to the affluent, Amul Butter, Nirula’s Fast Food, Khaitan Fans, while the store fronts are targeted to the middle class, and the hawkers and vendors target the working classes and the truly disenfranchised.

Yet, all these kinds of products and images occupy a single aesthetic and auditory space. In this space, while a range of goods and services do change hands, the key cultural fact is that the street is an emporium of commercial images and temptations, in which the casual stroller is exposed to the seductions of consumption. The street is the guerilla theatre of commerce in contemporary India.
But this should not suggest that Indian urban streets are simply marketplaces in disguise. For shoppers, and for the many persons who simply hang around, live or work in the streets, streets are also places for organized idleness. Hanging around is a highly cultivated aspect of street culture, and here certain settings, such as the paan and cigarette shops, are key backdrops. While one stream of human traffic is purposive, going from one place to another, and another stream of vehicles is equally purposive, there is always a steady audience of those who are in no hurry to go anywhere.

They are there just to watch, perhaps to talk, perhaps to sell, but mainly just to pass the time. This audience includes the occasionally employed, the under employed and the unemployed of India’s cities, as well as those wealthy or idle enough to afford not to be in a hurry. For this audience, who provide the counterpoint to those in motion, there is a series of things to watch, for Indian streets are natural stages for spectacle.

Such spectacles fall into many categories. Streets are the favoured haunt of itinerant entertainers, some of whom feature trained animals, particularly bears and monkeys, some of whom perform various forms of gymnastics, others are magicians. These street entertainers are always surrounded by a circle of spectators, who frequently melt away when the routine is over and the hat is passed around. During Ganesh Chaturthi in Pune and Bombay, Durga Puja in Calcutta, and Makar Sankranti in Ahmedabad, streets become the settings for elaborate processions and pageantry, displays of floats and mock ups, religious sermons and performances in temporary structures of every sort.

During these religious processionals, streets are still public space but they become marked by the claims of various communities and interest groups. In these latter contexts, as we have seen frequently in recent times, the street becomes a potentially contested space, where the tiniest affront can set the tinder of community divisions ablaze.

These spectacles can also be explicitly political. Often groups of workers take out their protest marches through streets. Politicians often, especially when they are only local figures, give speeches to local constituencies on street corners, and political rallies and processions are a frequent part of street action. Such processions and rallies are matched by displays of state power and pageantry, which occur often on public thoroughfares. The grand example of the latter type of spectacle is the Republic Day parade in Delhi, but there are many humbler replicas of these spectacles, which involve the police and military forces of cities, states and localities.
Street cultures bring together spectacle and entertainment with state power and community identity. This is the dimension of street culture which is peculiarly volatile. Beneath the traffic of commerce, and the relaxed aesthetics of hanging around, lie the potential for highly ritualized displays of power, potent challenges to the power of others, and the recklessness that can turn crowds into mobs.

Streets provide not only circuses but bread. The provision of food on Indian streets is a topic worthy of a monograph in its own right. Street food is increasingly essential to the feeding of India’s urban workforces. Cities are famous for their distinctive street foods: Delhi for its Punjabi dhabas serving chola bhathura and for its chaat shops; Bombay for its bhel puri vendors and sugarcane juice; Lucknow for its kababs and parathas. These foods threaten the sanitary sensibilities of the upper middle classes, but they constitute the key to the aroma and graphics of street culture.

Some aspects of street food are rapidly spreading throughout India: most notably the juice-bar, where the modern technology of electric blenders and the large scale marketing of fruits enable a national consumption trend. Also, it is often street vendors who are the vanguard of inter-regional culinary adventures: the masala dosa of the south now competes with traditional Punjabi foods in many streets in Delhi, just as the puris and vegetables of the north have hit the streets of Madras and Madurai. City street vendors are always looking for new culinary ideas in their own hinterlands: the phenomenal rise in popularity of the Goan pao bhaji in the streets of Bombay in the last decades is an excellent example.

Streets also cater to special culinary interests in restaurants, ranging from small and dingy tea stalls to fancy ‘Grade A’ restaurants. The clientele for the humbler restaurant is essentially the same clientele that patronizes street vendors. Providing food for the human traffic on Indian streets is a challenging business. These guerilla entrepreneurs have to deal with the uncertainties of police harassment, the problems of water supply, the challenges of storage in the open, and the always present threat of excess rain or sun. But the incentive is also great: without the encumbrances of a large staff, fancy equipment, or a fussy clientele, street vendors can concentrate on high turnover, low overhead transactions. All they have to assure is that they provide something that is cheap, tasty, seductive.

Streets, of course, are also residential settings. Many of India’s urban poor live on its streets. Living on the street is the fate of a very wide range of people. These street dwellers include vendors and shopkeepers who in effect live with their businesses; securely employed persons who cannot
afford any other type of dwelling; itinerant traders, performers, and holy men, who would not think of spending money on a space to sleep in; the young men and boys who work as mechanics, busboys, cleaners and low paid helpers in a host of street establishments; and the truly indigent, refugees, beggars and the destitute, who live entirely in public spaces, such as streets, stations, maidans and the like.

This population, for whom the street is not a thoroughfare, nor even a spectacle, but shelter, is the most complex part of the ecology of street culture. These individuals are least visible during the day and the evening when the street is dominated by traffic, by commerce, by work and by the presence of those who go indoors to sleep. But at the very late hours of the night, and in the very early hours of the morning, these are the bodies that lie shrouded on the street, making the street a human space even when it is least active. These street dwellers, often looked upon with irritation and contempt by civic authorities and by the affluent urban classes, constitute the infrastructure of much that these dominant groups take for granted: the sweeping of public spaces, the provision of human services for the working class, and the dirty work of those restaurants, stores and workshops whose existence is taken for granted by the affluent. For these groups who survive in the interstices of street culture, the street is both their prison and their salvation.

Street cultures are not just visual cultures, where people, goods and performances are on display for each other. Streets are also supremely auditory settings, in which the radio and loudspeaker compete with the sounds of car engines and horns. Film music and political speeches, the songs of street performers and the shouts of hawkers form the auditory high points against a steady backdrop of human and vehicular noise. Yet for those who routinely navigate Indian streets, whether as consumers, as passersby or as businessmen, the noise of the street is not disturbing: these are the sounds of vitality, of spectacle, of life. They constitute the auditory counterpart to the sights, colours and visual drama of the Indian street.

The sort of street culture I have described is not likely to last forever in India. As shopping becomes more interiorized, as entertainment moves from the street to auditoria and permanent structures, as political pageants and speeches increasingly come through radio and TV, and as the middle class finds its pleasures increasingly ‘at home’, or away in less crowded suburban settings, street culture is likely to become steadily impoverished and less pluralistic. This process is part and parcel of the deepest social and cultural changes occurring in contemporary India.
Over the last century in urban India, there has been a steady increase in the separation of work place and residence. This applies both to shopkeepers, who prefer to live away from their places of business if that is economically viable, as well as to the urban middle classes, who aspire to ownership of flats in colonies and suburbs rather than to stay in the crowded ‘old’ sections of many cities. Thus, the pluralistic, rather complex, class composition of many such ‘old’ cities, is giving way to a more fragmented and polarized population, where businessmen, regular residents, and casual hangers-around, no longer have multiple social ties.

This segregation of work from residence is exacerbated by the new ecology of shops and shopping, where even the lower middle class is increasingly seduced into large indoor or underground complexes, in which commerce is insulated from the rest of the action of the street. Of course, the growth of glass and steel storefronts, the steady sharpening of the boundary between store front and pavement, the eclipse of casual soliciting by shopkeepers of customers, the emergence of the airconditioned shopping space, all reduce the commercial vitality of the public space of the street.

Finally, the steady privatization and interiorization of entertainment is doing a good deal to impoverish the street as a setting for leisure. More urban households and buildings own or share television sets, more spectacles are available on the television or cinema screen and more auditoria, stadia and other permanent structures are emerging to rope off spectacles, and the income generated by them, from everyday life. The street is thus in danger of becoming one of two things: just a thoroughfare for getting people and goods from one place to another, or a staging area for lumpen violence.

It is this latter process that we need to guard against. It may seem unduly alarmist to suggest that the great cultural and aesthetic plurality of India’s streets is gradually being reduced, and surely public violence in urban India has many causes. But the interiorization of key aspects of commerce, entertainment and family life in urban Indian surely is a part of the picture. The cultural ecology of streets in places like Meerut, Ahmedabad and old Delhi has many dimensions. But one of the messages of street violence may be that we need to be cautious about putting our cultural life behind closed doors and moving ourselves into the sanitized settings of new suburbs and colonies, for the streets may then become settings for public confrontation alone.

This is not just a cultural issue, but a social and political one. To resolve it, we do need to notice that we are impoverishing an important aspect of
our cultural lives, but we also need to ask who we are abandoning to the
dramas of public violence in our urban cores, why we are commoditizing
and merchandising entertainment in an increasingly privatized manner,
and how we are defining property and space so that the dramas of the
Indian street are increasingly violent ones.

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P. Thankappan Nair

*A History of Calcutta’s Streets*

The evolution of streets is an interesting chapter in the urban growth of
Calcutta. The nomenclature used in Calcutta for designating a street is
indeed bewildering. No less than thirty one terms are in vogue to
12. 1st Bye Lane, 13. Cross Lane, 14. 1st Lane, 15. 2nd Lane, 16. 3rd Lane,
17. 4th Lane, 18. Park, 19. Path, 20. Place, 21. Range, 22. Road, 23. Row,
Village, 31. Way. The most common designations applied are Avenue,
Lane, Road, Sarani, and Street.

Half a dozen designations are used to denote an enclosed place where
the public have the right of recreation such as 1. Bag, 2. Garden, 3. Kanan,
4. Maidan, 5. Park and 6. Square. We are, therefore, called upon to
banish from our mind any preconceived notion about a street or park
as the designations in Calcutta have little relevance to their accepted

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1 Calcutta means Municipal Calcutta, as defined in the Calcutta Municipal
2 The word ‘Street’ in this study means any road, street, square, court, alley, or
passage, whether a thoroughfare or not, over which the public have a right of
way, falling within one of the 31 designations applied to it.
3 There are 12 villages included in Calcutta which are located in wards 57 & 58.
4 The following abbreviations are used: 1. Ave. (Avenue), 2. Le. (Lane), 3. RD.
(Road), 4. Si. (Sarani) and 5. St. (Street).