Public Privations

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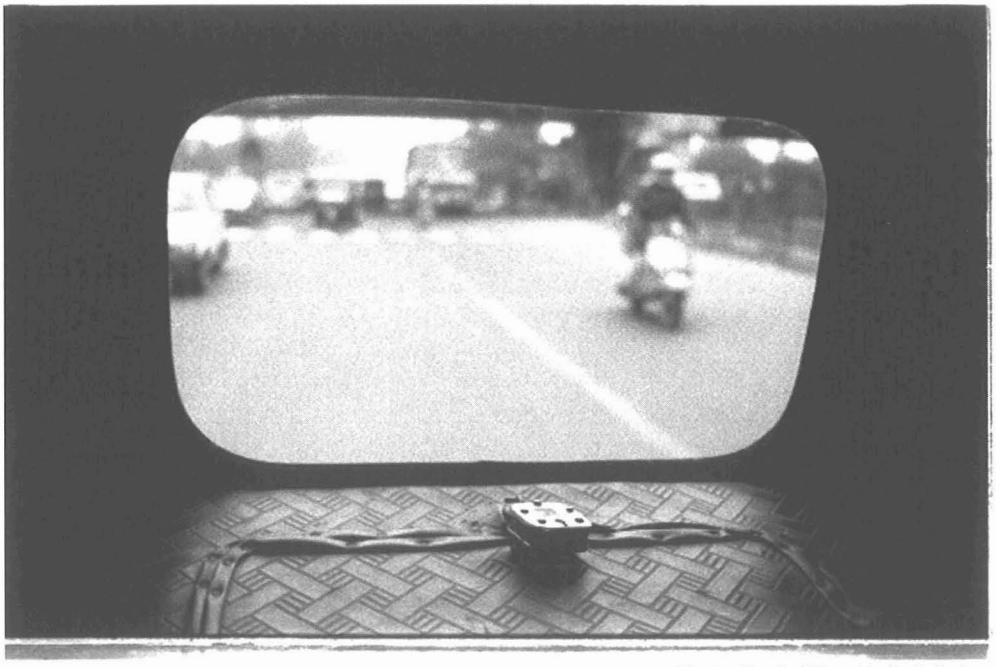

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The Public Private Conundrum

The fifteenth century mausoleum of a dead Afghan monarch in a New Delhi public garden is perhaps the unlikeliest of private spaces. Here, along with an itinerant vendor of snacks and savories and truant schoolboys, are a clutch of courting couples and a conspiracy of stolen intimacies, quiet seductions and secret trysts, ransomed from the grip of a heartless city: A collection of very private moments in very public spaces. They leave their inscriptions on the walls—defiant declarations of desire—that annotate the ornamental and sacred stucco calligraphy on the arches. "Raju loves Sunita." "Miriam loves Nusrat." "I love you Ram Dhan." "Rani + Rana = Sweethearts Forever."

Privacy and affection, separately or together, never come cheap in the crowded city. Public displays of affection are not necessarily encouraged in Delhi, and only the well-to-do can afford the luxury of seclusion in love. Rooftop apartments with independent entrances in family-owned town houses, love nests in hotels, the back seats of capacious SUVs, weekend getaways in hill station and guest-houses, or keys to the flats of pliant friends are conveniences that few can access. And those who can can also go to clubs, bars and parties where public displays of affection do not lead to instant assault. The public that displays its affections to its own charmed circle finds ways to do so behind high walls, high cover charges and high gates with vigilant watchmen in attendance.

This public does not carve love letters on the tombs of forgotten kings. They do not tarry at the milk booth to catch someone's eye, or make small talk across rooftops in a squatter settlement while hanging out clothes to dry. They do not take long rides on the afternoon bus that takes them nowhere close to where they live, work or study, where the space of the bus ride is also the only time in which to have a conversation, uninterrupted, veiled by an invisible film of brave indifference that guards against the mocking stares of co-passengers.

The abandoned cenotaph, the river-front walkway, the downtown underpass, the ruined urban fortress, the crowded or empty bus, the broken-down playground, the shade of a generous tree, the derelict back street of a commercial complex, the corner seat in the cinema that only shows B movies, the street corner snack stall, the park bench, the dank corridors of public toilets, and the steps of a public library. These spaces, rife with presence, riddled with curious gazes, and awash with the traffic of millions of human beings, become theatres of urban intimacy for millions of people in cities like Delhi. Here, public and private life become contagious, contiguous, continuous facets of the same messy reality. Public architecture and the accidents of urban planning yield themselves to the steadfast pressure of private life.

The Private Life of the Public Street

People fall in love, have sex, are born, defecate, cook, eat, sleep, work, play, read, sing, dance, pray, curse, quarrel, fight, riot, go mad, get possessed, enter trance states, cry, laugh, fall sick, get drunk, get arrested, get shot, get run over, and die on the street. The street is heaven and hell, factory and prison, morgue and nursery, market and office, boutique and salon, club and bar, library and university, high court and parliament, shrine and brothel, school and playground. The street is the city, the world, the bed you take your lover to. The street is the

epic that people narrate their life into. The street is cruel and generous and indifferent and curious and concerned and hostile. The street is the hyphen that conjoins every public stance to every private longing. The street redeems every privation, hears every prayer, and kicks every dream into the gutter. It should come as no surprise then that often the most intensely emotional, even melodramatic moments in Hindi cinema are precisely those that get to be staged on the street. Here, in full public view, the most intense desires, the most painful humiliations, the darkest anger, the greatest joy, the strongest love, and the most profound loneliness find their fullest expression. The street is where the public act and the private motive get to know each other.

A phone tap of a conversation on a crowded Delhi street between a Kashmiri lecturer in Arabic at Delhi University and his stepbrother in Kashmir about why his wife is not going back to her maternal home for a few days becomes evidence in a terrorism show-trial and the cornerstone of proof of a so-called conspiracy to attack the Indian parliament that prompts the largest military mobilization since the second world war. Its words, which point to banal domestic issues, are twisted and mistranslated to mean justifications of a terrorist attack. A very private conversation gets construed, retrospectively, as a very public statement.

A call centre worker in India, when catering to North American customers, is often expected to take on a different "private identity." Sunita becomes Susan, her places of work and residence glide over time zones. The weather report on her computer tells her of the climate in another part of the world, which she makes her own as she slips into a different accent to deal with her client. In the course of her conversation, she invokes her client's credit history, purchase decisions, and other private information.

The shift between one private identity and another and negotiating the contours of an "other's" (the client's) private life is the ground on which her public persona as a worker in the service sector of the global new economy is constructed.

Different Histories, Different Publics

The neat separation between public and private existence that is supposed to attend to the rise of the modern individual in the notionally European centre-stage of world history has never quite been able to live up to its own premises in South Asian societies. It does not do so today.

Yet even in Europe, historically, the distinction between public and private breaks has tended to break down the moment deviations from prescribed moral codes have occurred —thus behaviour outside the appropriate norms of marital heterosexuality has tended to invite public punitive intervention even if it has occurred in private spaces, between consenting individuals. The division ordained by the law and by moral conventions between crimes and vices (which are offences without victims) in the nineteenth century, and which remained operational through much of the twentieth century, suggested that an individual's act in the privacy of his or her own presence, or in the presence of other individuals, is not devoid of public consequences when it represents a deviation from marital heterosexuality.

It is one of the strange ironies of post-colonial societies that these European (and deeply Christian) heteronormative injunctions regulating "private" behaviour and sexuality

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through publicly laid down norms arrived in non-European cultures as "innovations," but have now become the mainstay of cultural conservatism in the same non-European societies. Hindu and Islamic fundamentalists both lead virulent campaigns against gays and lesbians in the name of tradition, neglecting to examine the actual historical record of South Asian and Islamic societies. In a remarkable act of cultural amnesia, the traditional liberality in the realm of the erotic and the sexual is forgotten to make way for a recent prudery that is then apotheosized as a newly constituted mark of "traditional" morality. This too has consequences on the relationship between private and public life in societies such as ours.

The terms "public" and "private" can then be seen more as placeholders for concepts that change their content over time, than as actual descriptions of ways of inhabiting space.

Having said this, it is not altogether fruitless to explore how different societies have realized the distinction in spatial terms. If the post-Renaissance European model of the public square, the public institutional building, the public park, the public street, and the very private homestead is an instance of a neat binary operation, then other societies and cultures have found other methods of articulating the public-private relationship. The rise of modernity in non-western societies has seen an overlay between different models of publicness and privacy. It is possible then for an individual to simultaneously inhabit an exclusively "public" realm as derived from a European heritage, and a "public-private" continuum that is more porous and flexible.

Traditionally, South Asian cultures have tended to arrange public and private aspects of life in a series of overlapping and concentric circles. Courtyards and kitchens, terraces and pavements, encroachments and annexes constantly re-position the line that separates public and private life by giving rise to permanently provisional zones of liminality.

The Outsideness of Inside—Considerations on Domesticity

The structure of a traditional North Indian "big" house represents such a complex zone, with its different entrances and exits for different kinds of people: its "meeting room"—the *baithak* or *majlis*—where menfolk do business and conduct public affairs, its inner and outer courtyards, its shrine, the *andar mahal*—where the women of the household can go unveiled—and the capacious beds that have room for more than a couple, the secret niches and hidden passages, concealed staircases, godowns and attics that become playgrounds of intimacy, the roof that can be the bedchamber under the sky on summer nights, and the back-garden overlooking a well or a pond. Within these spaces, different articulations of publicness and privacy are bound by rigid rules. However, these rules are rigid not because of the separation between publicness and privacy, but in terms of *which* term is applicable to *whom* and in *what* context. Let us take for instance the example of the "women's quarters." Here, the ritualized segregation of the sexes prohibits women from being exposed to adult men and the "public realm" that such men inhabit. But in many ways, the "inner palace" or the *andar mahal* is the most intense conduit of news and information from the outside world. Here, the gossip and rumours of the neighbourhood, court, city and district are conveyed by servants, artisans, nurses, friends and relatives and circulated with remarkable felicity. The women of the harem and the traditional household, though veiled, in *purdah*, in seclusion

from the world outside, would often be more "conversant" with what went on in the world than even the busy public men who dabbled in the affairs of the world from their noisy *baithaks* and meeting rooms. It was possible that female power, exercised from the depths of private space from within the innermost folds of domestic interiority, was able to change the course of outer, public events because it had access to unofficial, informal channels of information and communication. The commerce between ostensibly public and officially private would often lead to subtle alterations of the balance of power between them, with private acts leading on occasion to very public consequences.

There is no archive or history of private life. All that we glean of private moments comes to us from lived experience and from stories, from proverbs and songs, from myths and parables, told to children by women, servants, and old men. This is how many of us grow up to understand love and loss, longing and belonging, cunning and compassion, courage and discretion, and all the things that you need to have a sense of, to lead a life that constantly fluctuates between public and private registers.

If the public sphere is the realm of history, and private life the domain of interiority, then history and interiority get constantly dovetailed into each other in all sorts of complicated ways. Dreams, longings, revelations, instances of amazement and other intensely individuated moments become the foundations of public acts, performances, pronouncements and positions. Naturally, this leads to anxieties about propriety and appropriateness, and typically disputes about behaviour in public spaces tend to be about the fact that the actors concerned were seen to be acting in a manner that demonstrated their lack of regard for the "publicness" of the space. In other words, they were acting as if the "street" were their "bedroom." This objection to the inappropriate transposition of modes of behaviour is complicated by the fact that often the "street" is also the "bedroom." But even that apart, at issue is that the models of "public persona" and "private self" being contested are not consonant with the modes of living and acting of many people.

Public Mourning and Private Grief

Thus, the exhibition and display of grief, a very private emotion, through rituals of lament and self-mortification in very public *Moharram* processions by Shia Muslims in India are often instances where the whole "public-private" conundrum gets sharply foregrounded.

For the majority Sunni Muslim community, and many non-muslims, the rituals of Shia mourning are seen as "the private affair of that community." For Shias the mourning is meaningless if it is not "performed" in public view. Rivulets of private grief mingle to form a very public lament, which reinforces the sense of identity of a people that sees itself as a beleaguered community, as a minority within a minority. That the performances of mourning also often entail the making of ritualized accusations against important Sunni personages is a bone of contention that ignites Shia-Sunni friction with repetitive regularity. Here, the private grief of Shia individuals, the "private affair" of the Shia community, and the space of the street where these are made public come together explosively. Peculiarly, Shia Sunni riots over *Moharram* are a very modern phenomenon, and they date precisely to the moment where public spaces were seen as somehow separate and distinct from private life. The

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argument is as follows: if the street is a public space, then it is inappropriate that it be used for private purposes. If private claims are made on that public space, however temporarily, then they are likely to come up against counter claims made by other private parties. Thus it is best that no private claims whatsoever are made on public space or on public consciousness.

"Unspeakablilty"

The conditions of public life legislated through law and juridical convention are ultimately a code and a language unto themselves—acceptance of an utterance within the public realm is ultimately a matter of recognition that a speech act or an utterance is intelligible. Yet courts, and a variety of other constituted public spaces, routinely render different kinds of utterance as falling outside the circle of public intelligibility. Various kinds of utterance are processed into the "unspeakable." This forces these claims into a silence, an interiority, a privation that involves the stripping away of public status, and its reduction to a private and particular place. Thus, the claims of tribal community to their land, if expressed through myths and song, is seen as unintelligible ritual, unreadable in the domain of evidence and veracity, while the apparatus, staging, role play and paraphernalia of jurisprudence itself is not seen in ritualistic terms. One ritual wins over another precisely by stating that it is not in fact a ritual.

The public realm of the courtroom is then an arena where one "private agenda" (that of modernity and its institutional history) wins over another (a traditional claim to land by a tribal group). Perhaps we would do well to be wary of the fact that many public claims are energized by a complex web of private agendas disguised to the point of invisibility.

The Parable of Lions

The symbolic apparatus of the modern Indian nation state borrows heavily from a re-purposed ancient imperial past. The lion capital of Ashoka, a symbol of imperial power, is today the seal of the Indian state. It features four roaring lions standing in close proximity on a pillar. In conclusion, here is a parable of another image of a lion. Sometime in the summer of 2001, while working on a project that would be realized as "The Co Ordinates of Everyday Life," a multi-screen and cross-media installation on law, illegality and claims on urban space, we came across and recorded a broken down wall in what had been a central Delhi squatter settlement. The demolition, which was recent and incomplete, had exposed the inner walls of many makeshift dwellings. One such wall was inscribed with a child's drawing—a large, happy, blue lion.

The lion on the seal of the state roars at the lion on the wall of the makeshift dwelling. The two lions embody two ways in which a city can speak, and yet both speak of the way in which the hands of power transform a landscape. The imperial Mauryan lion marks urban space with an official order, designating what is legal and what is illegal. This official order comes across a dwelling and demolishes its outer walls, revealing its innermost core, on which stands inscribed a child's happy lion. The broken interior back wall of an "illegal" home becomes a public wall when the shell of the house is destroyed. An extant law forbids private inscriptions and acts of graffiti on public walls. The happy blue lion, hitherto the hero of a child's fantasy, expressed within the confines of a domestic space, becomes, post-demolition, a private inscription on a public wall. A wall is destroyed; a drawing becomes a fugitive. Private niches yield to the onslaught of public laws, are transformed into public spaces, and then are subject to further scrutiny. In the civil war that rages between the master plan and the moment, the walls of the population must be more circumspect and reticent, in keeping with the urgencies of our times. The privations of the public realm have their own urgent ways of demanding our attention.