Delicious Delhi: nostalgia, consumption and the old city

Ajay Gandhi

(Received 6 February 2014; final version received 13 March 2015)

This article examines how Old Delhi is represented and recreated in contemporary India. Delhi’s old city was once the locus of pre-colonial Mughal sovereignty. It is now often encountered via nationalist spectacles, mass-media images and consumption practices. Paralleling neo-liberalism’s onset in the 1990s, its street food, bazaar spaces and historical monuments have been avidly appropriated by reigning institutions and classes. Old Delhi suggests that which the new India has left behind; yet this displacement also elicits longing for what has been lost.

This medieval remnant can therefore be considered the site of nostalgia consumed by a globalised middle class. This article presents an ethnography of Old Delhi’s invocation in New Delhi’s cultural landscape, including malls, newspapers, heritage sites, hotels, and food courts. In triangulating among the realms of nationalist nostalgia, middle-class identity and mediated consumption, it emphasises how India’s neoliberal emergence is bound up with the co-opting of the past.

Keywords: nostalgia; middle-class; consumption; heritage; Delhi; India

I. Introduction

One day in 2007, I travelled to west Delhi to meet a journalist who, for many years, had lived in and reported from the historic core known as the old city. At the time, I was conducting an ethnographic study of that dense and layered space. The journalist wrote a regular newspaper column where he dissected the lore, habits and mythology of Old Delhi. A wealth of contacts and stories, I was eager to meet him and receive guidance. Now retired, he lived in a colony in Rajouri Garden, while I stayed a considerable distance away, in the south of the city. I took the Metro from a point where the trains are recessed in the deep darkness of the earth. By the time I got to west Delhi, the tracks were elevated, hovering over rooftops studded with prong-like mobile towers. Misjudging the journey time, I arrived an hour before my appointment.

The Metro station at Rajouri Garden sits right next to the City Square Mall. With its aluminium panels, glass walls and large advertisements, it is not so much a unique place as a general type. With its generic name and chain stores, it resembles any number of such malls across the country. To while away the time, I disembarked from the Metro and, after the obligatory security check, wandered inside. I thought to get
something to eat at the food court, located on the uppermost floor. Among the stalls selling pizza, noodles and gelato, I found one called *Paranthe Wali Gali*. It specialised in *paratha*, a north Indian snack. This unleavened bread, usually stuffed with savouries or sweets, is fried on a griddle.

The self-aware Delhi resident knows that the *Paranthe Wali Gali*, inside the old city, is the ‘alley of *paratha*-makers’. It is a clump of four restaurants in a tiny lane, off of Chandni Chowk, a major Mughal thoroughfare. These eateries are adjacent to Kinari Bazaar, a packed, winding series of jewellery and sari shops. An iconic space within Old Delhi, I visited the alley early on in my fieldwork. The restaurants, all descended from a single eatery established in the late nineteenth century, were self-effacing and self-conscious at once. They were open to the street, with gas cylinders and water buckets clogging their entryway. Passing crowds, moving slowly in the congested lane, kicked up dust clouds, which mingled with the acrid smoke produced by frying in a heavy iron wok. The cooks, simply dressed, sat cross-legged in front of mounds of potato, radish, peas, cauliflower, and cottage cheese; inside, teenage boys hurriedly wiped down tables with darkened rags. Customers washed hands in a sink that had a sliver of soap left on the edge, then sat tightly squeezed, elbow-to-elbow, on steel benches and plastic chairs.

Humble décor notwithstanding, the restaurant proprietors were aware of their elevated symbolism. The *Paranthe Wali Gali* featured in tourist guides, and the men kneading, rolling and frying vegetable-filled discs obliged visitors seeking a photo. Their hands speckled with dough and coated with shiny grease, these men paused dutifully for tourists, before refocusing on the *parathas* bouncing in the bubbling oil. Inside, photos of famous customers, such as former prime minister Indira Gandhi, Bollywood actors and deposed Maharajas, embellished the soot-covered walls.

The City Square Mall’s version of the *Paranthe Wali Gali* was rather different. A hospitality chain, Friend’s Restaurants and Hotels, managed it, like other food court eateries. On a weekday afternoon, the surroundings were quiet, with two teenage couples sipping soda and chatting. The loud banners hung from the frosted-glass ceiling, exhorting customers to have fun – with smiley young people and multi-coloured fonts – were tempered by the sedate mood. At the *Paranthe Wali Gali* stand, a dark, thin young man leaned on the counter, preoccupied with his mobile. I approached and examined the menu. It listed familiar *paratha* staples, such as those stuffed with potato or radish. The menu also veered, by straining for cosmopolitan allure, into conceptual confusion. One item read: ‘Italian PIZZA Parantha (Cover with Imported Mozzeralla [sic] Cheese with Different Topping)’.

This encounter with a quintessential feature of Old Delhi – reinterpreted and relocated to New Delhi – made me curious. What was the significance of the shop’s presence in a mall, a consumption space that, insulated by private security and class codes, excluded a wide section of the public? Was this air-conditioned incarnation of the beloved *paratha* an education in middle-class identity, in knowing thy self through thy city? Did such cash-dependent nostalgia for the
old city intersect with nationalist spectacles and mass-media productions of the same space? Three elements seemed to triangulate in the food-court: the elastic middle-class subject, at once actor and audience; their nostalgia for the historical, urban and popular; and the necessity of engaging Old Delhi via mediated consumption.

These questions recurred in my mind during my 19 months in Delhi, from 2007 until 2009. I commuted from a comfortable south Delhi colony northwards to the old city for my project; yet when I returned to New Delhi, I could not escape it. I often stumbled upon Old Delhi’s defining food, landmarks, people, commodities and trades – far outside its seventeenth-century walls. This re-enactment and re-creation by New Delhi’s reigning institutions and classes is this article’s focus. I will examine how nostalgic appropriation and middle-class consumption mark the relationship between the medieval and modernist city. This article draws substantially on observations made in a shopping mall, at a nationalist parade, and in a heritage-cum-consumption space. It is supplemented by reflections on texts, films, advertisements and news stories encountered during fieldwork. Finally, I draw on impressions gleaned when socialising in New Delhi with a wide circle of relatively privileged, well-travelled professionals. Many people I encountered had strong feelings about, and varied opinions on, Old Delhi. Their desires and fears were dispersed along a wide spectrum of appropriation and apprehension. These experiences help illustrate some of the contours of widely reiterated middle-class attitudes concerning Old Delhi. Most strikingly, the intermittent consumption of the old city affirms a notion of urban authenticity, and validates a discourse of cultural superiority.

Let me briefly delve into the conceptual triangulation among consumption, nostalgia and the middle class that informs this article. This study allows us to understand how, in Ravinder Kaur’s terms, spectacle and image-making have an elevated primacy in contemporary India (2012). Ads, brands and campaigns now distinguish the modernising, neoliberal present from the socialist, moribund past. Mediatised forms evoke poles of confident aspiration – for glitzy consumables and foreign investment – and impatient frustration at seeming legacies of the past: poverty, mismanagement, corruption. I demonstrate how this dynamic plays out in nationalist spectacles and consumption-driven nostalgia vis-à-vis Delhi’s old city. As I show, the selective appropriation of Old Delhi excludes popular masses and hinges on classed codes, which signal intimacy with its culture yet disavow proximity to the unevenness and inconvenience of the actual place. This is a form of aspiration that nominally looks to the past but deepens a prospective sociality that is policed, segregated and has a steep price of admission.

The Indian middle class, as is often noted, is an elastic category incorporating groups with varying kinds of political, economic and symbolic capital (de Neve and Donner 2006; Brosius 2010). In Delhi, parts of the middle class – for example private entrepreneurs, and those employed in government service, and the lower rungs of the service economy – regularly access the old city, primarily
because its commercial bazaars offer variety and value. Yet a much larger segment living in the broader metropolitan area has diminished intimacy with it. These people primarily engage with Old Delhi via a once-removed barrage of images, re-enactments and spectacles. Nostalgia and consumption mediate their interface with Old Delhi, encoding a comfortably delimited middle class and beckoning those aspiring to the status. As Appadurai and Breckenridge put it in their foundational discussion of ‘public modernity’ in India, the ‘middle class – both actual and potential – is the social basis of public culture formations’ (1995, 7). This is a nexus of status, respect and comfort that is at once settled and in-motion, that shuts some out and includes others within. In Delhi, Sanjay Srivastava has likewise written of an amorphous middle class whose marginal fractions become self-fashioned via consumption-driven spectacle (2009). Christiane Brosius, also drawing on ethnographic research in Delhi, has noted that pleasure, exclusivity and taste are central to the middle-class imagination (2010, 24). Because of its diffuseness, this class relies on intangible codes of discernment and knowingsness.

It is my contention that a diffused wistfulness and fashionable eagerness towards an imagined patrimony suffuses these middle-class codes. Nostalgia vis-à-vis the culturally essential includes, in my reckoning, the fetish for prior historical dispensations and urban formations. It is, in this sense, both a universal and particular story. Marilyn Ivy has written of how in contemporary Japan, a modernity that displaces pre-modern culture is paradoxically twinned with a nostalgic urge to evoke and inhabit authentic forms (1995). In this view, nostalgia is a doomed route to recuperation, as it necessarily distances contemporary subjects from their desires. The elusive reification of what has been necessarily bypassed can be seen in how elites relate to historic cities. Sharon Zukin demonstrates how industrial decline, entrepreneurial capital and urban gentrification converge to produce a heightened ‘symbolic economy’ in cities such as New York (1995). The fetishising of certain iconic neighbourhoods as authentic, and the legitimacy accorded to those partaking of ‘original’ spaces, shows how nostalgia underwrites class formation. Indeed, as India has globalised and liberalised, it has witnessed the hectic redefining and cannibalising of historical, folk and classical forms (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, 5).

Here we may consider how nationalism undergirds nostalgia, for the state is a key vehicle for articulating a broader sentiment that is, in private spheres, appropriated and consumed. ‘Cultural intimacy’, Michael Herzfeld maintains, is ‘the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (1997, 3). In such a milieu, embarrassment comingles with idealisation; local traditions are both appropriated and dismissed. As we will see, while Old Delhi, for some elites, is an antiquated and unhygienic relic, it is at the same time a shared touchstone, a guarantor of common feeling. The simultaneous valorising of, and disdain towards, Old Delhi in the collective
imagination makes sense given that, as Svetlana Boym notes, nostalgia, as a historical emotion, is not opposed to modernity but its contemporaneous double and mirror (2001, xvi). Further, Boym argues, nostalgia is ‘not retrospective, but prospective’, providing the grounds for future engagement (ibid., 141).

Following this logic, it makes sense that Old Delhi, in a rapidly modernising city, is a coeval presence that guides prospective leisure and consumption. This is especially true because Old Delhi is at the nexus of a ‘generalised, mass-media-provoked preoccupation with heritage and with a richly visual approach to spectacles’ that comprises ‘nationalist realism’, ‘an array of images, symbols, scripts, and plots in which the nation is figured as central to the project of modernity’ (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, 9). In Delhi, a religious temple that employs Disney-like entertainment to valorise cultural icons (Srivastava 2009, 340), and a crafts museum that insists on ‘the static equivalence in form and function between the present and the past’ (Greenough 1995, 223) demonstrates how the past is employed to prefigure modernity. In this way, nationalism is the feedstock of a nostalgia disseminated via the media, and enfolded into classed codes of discernment.

If nostalgia requires the selective heightening of memory, it also results in institutionalised amnesia. As Leela Fernandes has written, in contemporary Indian cities, ‘cultural-spatial purification’ undergirds a wider ‘politics of forgetting’ (2004, 2421). The ersatz, sanitised spheres where nostalgia can be pleasurably imbibed deliberately exclude the unsightly evidence of undesirable classes. Public modernity is in this way both exclusionary and inclusionary, involving ‘the marginalization of those who cannot afford the price of entry’ and, with a middle-class retreat from unruly public spaces, ‘the privatization of leisure’, whereby ‘the stadium and the cinema hall are being replaced by the living room as the setting for spectacle’ (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, 10). As we will see, the spaces where Old Delhi is enacted in New Delhi – restaurant chains, corporate offices, heritage-cum-consumption spaces – embody these features.

Finally, a word about the specific kind of consumption that this article elucidates. The nostalgic intake of Old Delhi is manifestly non-utilitarian. That is, it is not geared towards functional needs, but is rather located in a realm of non-instrumental expenditure that projects belonging and entitlement. In this sense, this is a version of ‘surplus consumption’, depending on ‘cultural symbols, meanings, and strategies generated across a number of time spans’ (Srivastava 2009, 341–342). As I will show, the middle-class appropriation of Old Delhi relies on a past–present compression and spatial relocation that signals a fragmentary, detached invitation to consume. This style of consumption is different from myriad other ways of inhabiting Old Delhi; residents who engage in traditional wrestling, labour migrants who conduct street-based ‘time-pass’ and traders who hawk bazaar goods remain outside the purview of this article (cf. Sundaram 2010; Gandhi 2011).
The article is organised as follows. In the following section, I provide some context for how and why the relationship between Delhi’s old and new city unfolded as it did after independence in 1947. I show how the relationship between New Delhi – built in the early twentieth century, and encircling the old city – and Old Delhi was from the outset ambiguous, at once marked by seduction and repulsion. The rapid and unwieldy growth of New Delhi after 1947, through the influx of Hindu and Sikh Partition refugees, built on an institutionalised attraction to, and alienation from, Old Delhi (Kaur 2007).

The section thereafter builds from this historical foundation and encompasses the period between 1947 and the 1990s. Here, I discuss the appropriation and objectification of Old Delhi alongside the evolution of the contemporary nation-state. Old Delhi was selectively evoked to anchor historical claims, because New Delhi, built by the British and saturated by Western architecture, lacked an authentic, autochthonous character that could be embraced as its own. Yet at the same time, the old city was a stubbornly backward foil against which New Delhi’s modernity asserted itself. Being the nation’s capital, this process had heightened symbolic and institutional resonances for India’s developmental ambitions. By summoning Old Delhi as stagnant and regressive, state development was naturalised as a prevailing discourse.

The penultimate section – focusing more specifically on the two decades between India’s liberalisation in the 1990s and the present – discusses the contemporary period. I argue that Old Delhi is now not often invoked for the state’s modernising purposes, or as a reflection of its developmental ambitions. Rather, Old Delhi is often sublimated into a pattern of nostalgic consumption that is detached from the place itself. In spectacles, advertisements and consumables, a form of distanced propriety, of arms-length ardour, is evident. These notions emerge in nationalist and nostalgic forms that are mediated and consumable, and palatable for reigning institutions and classes.

**II. The historical relationship between Old and New Delhi**

A brief historical survey is in order, before we examine the contemporary relationship between Old and New Delhi. In the eighteenth century, a schism between an older and newer city would have made little sense. By this point, greater Delhi had witnessed the rise and fall of several cities over numerous centuries. Ruins of these earlier, largely Islamic formations dotted the landscape. The nucleus of Delhi by the late 1600s, *Shahjahanabad*, was arrayed along the Yamuna River. It was named after Shah Jahan, who built a new capital for his Mughal Empire. Like dense medieval cities elsewhere, this was a walled city, fortified against regional competitors. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the British Empire had consolidated rule over many kingdoms and principalities. The Mughal Emperor had been rendered a symbolic figurehead. Colonial administration reflected segregationist and contaminant notions of race, hygiene and
governance. The influence of this on Delhi’s city-space crystallised after a native rebellion in 1857.

The fallout of this rebellion was decisive in three ways for the elite understanding of, and relationship to, *Shahjahanabad*. First, colonial authorities turned against Muslims, who were blamed for spearheading the insurrection and were killed, jailed or exiled (Metcalf 2009, 22). The city’s walls were punctured, its mosques razed and neighbourhoods demolished (Gupta 1981). The Mughal Emperor, rumoured to have supported insurgents, was banished to Rangoon. This reaction thus voided Muslim legitimacy and belonging in Delhi.

A second enduring effect concerned a wider shift in the planning and control of cities. An ethos of management, separation and control between elites and masses became hegemonic (Legg 2007). British administrators and privileged Indians moved out of medieval urban areas. The latter were now termed the ‘black town’, native quarters, or old city, where the mass of Indians lived (Gandhi 2011). The winding alleyways and congested bazaars of Delhi, Lucknow and Patna were counterpoised to the ‘white town’ or new city (Oldenburg 1984; Yang 1998).

Urban improvements were concentrated in the segregated areas where European and native elites resided. In contrast, the old city was an inconsistent object of reform, not quite remade and never fully embraced. Infrastructure improvements bypassed these quarters, leading to further decrepitude and confirming prevailing discourse. The old city was seen as opaque and dangerous, a site of communal unrest. Places like *Shahjahanabad*, once seen as the locus of Indian culture, were now inverted in negative terms: what they lacked, or the threat they posed, was of consequence.

By the turn of the twentieth century, this teleology of progress and order, and an authority selectively invested in upkeep, was well established. Prevailing discourse bifurcated spaces and people: the antiquated and backward versus the modern and advanced. This foreshadowed a discourse of two Indias, the one stagnant and out of step, and the other dynamic and worldly, that was to take centre stage in the twenty-first century (Kaur 2012). The distinction was cemented by the official unveiling, in 1911, of New Delhi as the capital of the British Raj. The Mughal capital, now relegated to the past, was henceforth known as Old Delhi.

Yet a third factor – nostalgia for Old Delhi’s high culture, and desire for its objects, monuments and spaces – also resulted from these historical conditions, and qualified the strict demarcation of the old and new city. One effect of the 1857 rebellion was to foment native melancholy for the loss of Mughal patronage, and subsequent decline in art and craft. The high manners and refined traditions of the nobles and artists who flourished under the Mughals were seen to have been irrevocably lost (Dalrymple 1993). This refrain, to a certain extent, was internalised in successive waves of migration, even in the public imagination of Punjabis themselves who purportedly corrupted Delhi’s civilised façade with uncouth, aggressive manners (Kaur 2007). Moreover, Old Delhi retained a class
of educated and wealthy residents after Partition, and vestiges of the bazaars of yesteryear were seen in the cloth, jewellery and footwear markets that remain until today. Thus while alienation from Old Delhi, for the two reasons mentioned above, is a major component of the elite relationship to the space, so is attraction.

To further flesh out these points, I now return to contemporary India. In the next section, via a vignette of a Republic Day parade, I will demonstrate how nationalism and nostalgia converge to condition the middle-class relationship to Old Delhi.

III. Nationalism, modernisation and development: appropriation and objectification

In January 2008, I had an appointment in Old Delhi, and made my way north from my home in south Delhi. My auto-rickshaw reached central Delhi, so that I could take the Metro for the remaining distance. But I was soon hopelessly ensnared in traffic. It was the day before the Republic Day, and rehearsals of the annual parade that mark it – a time of national spectacle and intense security – closed nearby roads. Taking a circuitous route via the city’s Ring Road, I got as far as the southern walls of the old city. I could not cross any further; a large security contingent, comprised of the Delhi Police and national security agencies, had set up an elaborate cordon on Netaji Subhash Marg. Camouflaged men with machine guns were stationed every few feet; steel crash barricades were set up at entry and exit points; and makeshift towers were set up, topped by men in black combat gear, talking on their walkie-talkies.

With no other option available to me, I called my contact inside the old city, explaining my inability to meet, and waited. Around me, curious onlookers, bundled in shawls and woollen hats against the cold, low-lying fog, lined up. Netaji Subhash Marg was a long arterial road that swung from New Delhi to Delhi Gate, the old city’s southern gate. It then went past the Red Fort and Jama Masjid, and on through the north-eastern edge of the old city, skirting Kashmiri Gate.

I knew that the Republic Day parade was structured in a deliberate spatial and temporal fashion. It begins at the symbolic and practical heart of the republic, the secretariat buildings and President’s residence originally built as the British imperial capital. Set against these looming edifices, the parade provides a kind of national tableau, a theatrical confirmation of Indian might. The parade moves past dignitaries seated close to the India Gate, a monument to the nation’s war martyrs. Military contingents stomp past politicians sitting in elevated stands and the public corralled inside bamboo enclosures. Moustaches neatly trimmed, boots and rifles gleaming, police, military and paramilitary battalions are interspersed with large decorated platforms on trucks, each representing a different state or territory. These floats are often adorned with a mash-up of hydro-electric dams, steel factories and locals in traditional costumes. They signal how both development discourse and multicultural diversity are central to Indian self-consciousness.
The floats and marching contingents are punctuated by processions of weaponry. These conjoin Hindu mythology and national militarism: the *Prithvi* (Earth goddess) missile, the *Arjun* tank (named after a central character in the *Mahabharata*), and the *Agni* (Fire) ballistic missile roll past. The parade then snakes northward through the old city, and ends at the Red Fort.

In 2008, on the day before the official parade, the rehearsal had begun. I saw columns of men in ceremonial uniform, marching in formation. The crowd was subdued but clearly riveted by the spectacle. The man next to me, a shawl wrapped tightly around his head, murmured to a friend, ‘look how straight they stand’ (*dekho ek dum seedha*). More than the cavalry on horseback, or the synchronically strutting gunners, I was struck by how the parade had radically if temporarily altered this area of the city. The parade constituted, in numerous ways, a state appropriation of Old Delhi. The blocking of traffic, the stationing of security personnel and the erection of metal barricades interrupted the normal flow of life. On the road, elevated on viewing platforms, I could see cameramen from TV channels adjusting their equipment, draped in plastic to ward off the fog and moisture. The parade, in effect, was primarily conceived for television viewers, not in-person spectators; Old Delhi would serve as a prop for national pomp, as mass-media circulation was conjoined to state fealty. I later learned that sniper teams, on days leading up to the parade, occupy the rooftops of houses in Daryaganj; in some years, the old city is put under complete curfew. Seen from the old city, the Republic Day parade is less an occasion to celebrate than an occupation to endure.

For the wider public, however, the Republic Day parade, in moving from the locus of the modern nation to the seat of an earlier sovereign, retrieves the past for the present. Srirupa Roy, writing of this event, highlights the temporal conflation: ‘The soldiers, floats, and school-children move past the now-empty viewing platform, and march on toward their final destination: the ramparts of the Red Fort, the seat of the Mughal empire. An observer given to flights of fancy may imagine she sees the tents of the imperial assemblage swaying gently in their wake’ (2007, 102).

This is a recurring feature of how the middle class and governing authorities relate to Delhi’s old city. The past, after colonialism’s end, is overlaid by state rituals of appropriation. This is not something unique to India. Many modern nation-states, especially those emerging out of colonialism, self-consciously recovered an imagined pre-colonial sovereignty (Anderson 1983). This discourse emphasises retrieval and recovery, of a culture seen as repressed by alien influences or corrupted by modernity (Ivy 1995). The modern nation-state needs to naturalise its legitimacy by anchoring itself in the imagined abundance of a previous dispensation. Symbolism, such as that of the Republic Day parade, therefore selectively conflates history and the present, to naturalise a political vision of the future. Here, Old Delhi is not merely the weathered residue of a long-expired sovereignty, but the stage for the nation-as-spectacle.
Let me further this point via other examples from Old Delhi. It is striking, for example, that the Indian state, during the other major nationalist holiday – Independence Day on August 15th – returns to appropriate Old Delhi. Its defining symbol, the Red Fort, hosts the prime minister’s annual speech to the country, after the national flag is unfurled. This ritual echoes Jawaharlal Nehru’s address to the nation, made from the fort’s ramparts upon independence in 1947. The Red Fort was home to India’s last pre-colonial sovereign, whose humiliating exile was emotionally invoked by independence leaders. Nehru’s address to the nation in 1947 from this very spot reasserted indigenous sovereignty over it once again. Every August 15th, the nation thus re-enacts Indian dominion over a quasi-sacred space. Here, nostalgia extends not only to the pre-colonial city, but to an imagined time at the genesis of the nation, when, in common parlance, politicians were self-sacrificing and corruption was negligible (Hansen 1999). Implicitly, such a contrast casts a nostalgic glance at an unsullied earlier time.

If the state has co-opted Old Delhi as part of its wider effort to naturalise nationalist sentiment, private parties have consolidated the emphasis on heritage, and invoked it along lines of nostalgia. The Red Fort again looms large in these efforts. It has, since the 1950s, been the venue for poetry recitals (mushairas) sponsored by organisations such as the Delhi-government supported Urdu Academy. The mushaira is a vestige of Mughal patronage, and, as a difficult art to master and appreciate, is considered an example of high culture. Some of these events have been held on Republic Day itself.

The numerous Hindi films that use Old Delhi as a setting often reiterate these ideas. For example, Black and White (2008) focuses on a Muslim bent on bombing Independence Day celebrations at the Red Fort, recycling a familiar conflation of Islam and terrorism in Old Delhi. Dev D (2009) uses the old city to frame the self-destruction of a dissolute, heart-broken man, and Dilli-6 (2009) uses it for a study of Hindu–Muslim tensions. These films use the area’s monuments, cramped alleys and fraying buildings to atmospheric effect. Such Bollywood films on Old Delhi echo the hopeful paternalism of unity in diversity that saturates Indian politics and institutionalised culture (Greenough 1995, 217). They thus appropriate – in line with the Republic Day parade – familiar monuments, figures and spaces to create a consumable tableau with national contours.

Thus far, we have examined how the state, organisations and commercial media appropriate Old Delhi so as to historically anchor the nation. Through the Republic Day parade, the prime minister’s speech from the Red Fort, patronage of pre-colonial forms such as the mushaira, and Bollywood films, Delhi’s old city is cognitively captured in the service of the nation. Yet, alongside appropriation, Old Delhi, through the discourse of development, is also a foil for the nation’s modernity.

We see this strand emerging early on in the republic’s history. By the 1950s, the Bharat Sevak Samaj (India Service Society), a well-connected civic organisation, was focused on reform in the old city. After 1947, and the partition of India
and Pakistan, Old Delhi was the site of repeated sectarian violence. Between 1947 and 1951, over 329,000 Muslims left for Pakistan, and nearly 500,000 Punjabi refugees arrived in Delhi (Krafft 1993, 95). Some Hindus and Sikhs threatened Muslims who did not migrate from the capital, leading to violent evictions (Zamindar 2007). Responding to this surge, the group drafted reports, one with a foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru. The group considered the old city to be ‘dark and dingy’, to contain ‘extreme congestion’, with residents’ living quarters violating ‘all principles of sanitary housing’ (Bharat Sevak Samaj 1958, 6–7). Defining the entire old city as a ‘slum’, they consolidated the link between physical dreariness and social pathology, emphasising its ‘blight and insanitation’ and the population’s ‘lack of social awareness’ (ibid., 34).

This sense of mental stupor, moral contagion and biomedical hazard soon extended to the profiling of Old Delhi’s residents. The area, of course, had a variegated population, including historically rooted and financially prosperous communities of Jains, mercantile Hindus and Mathur Kayasthas, who served as pre-colonial intellectual and administrative authorities. In the post-independence period, vital Punjabi and Hindu-dominated markets emerged in the old city, such as the Bhagirath and Lajpat Rai electrical bazaars (Sundaram 2010). Yet in the popular and governing imagination, this demographic complexity and entrepreneurial vitality was elided by a focus on Muslims. Wealthier, better-educated Muslims had mostly gone to Pakistan, and those who remained were generally poor and low-caste. Old Delhi was often coded in the English press, and read by the middle class, as a ‘sensitive area’ with a ‘minority population’, meaning a Muslim locality with subversive elements. For example, a more recent story from a popular news magazine, India Today, ominously references Nehru’s speech to the Constituent Assembly in 1947 when he spoke of the nation’s ‘tryst with destiny’:

‘The walled city of Shahjahanabad. The Jama Masjid area… These days it is keeping its tryst with a somewhat less romantic destiny: terror. This teeming ghetto opposite the Red Fort is a welter of clogged streets, bustling bazaars and shady hotels. It is also a convenient sanctuary for jehadis. Through 2000, agencies ranging from the Delhi police to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) arrested Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agents, many of them Pakistanis, with strong links in Delhi’s old city’ (Chakravarty and Menon 2001).

In sum, state, commercial and media representations of Old Delhi have oscillated between appropriation and apprehension. These competing sensibilities are best exemplified by the 1975–1977 Emergency, when the prime minister suspended democracy. During these two years, Delhi officials implemented long-desired programmes of population control and urban beautification (Tarlo 2003). Old Delhi became a repeated locus for these draconian measures, backed by police authority. Protests regarding the demolition of 500 hawker stalls in the Meena Bazaar turned violent; when bulldozers razed 150 Muslim houses in Turkman Gate, spurring further riots, police killed a number of protestors (Krafft 1993).
Recent representations geared towards the middle class nostalgically juxta-
pose Old Delhi’s rich past and imperfect present. William Dalrymple, in a
popular book on Delhi, explicitly makes this contrast, calling Shahjahanabad
an ‘earthly paradise praised by the poets’, and noting ‘its wide avenues, its
elegant caravanserais and its fabulous Mughal gardens’ (Dalrymple 1993,
53–54). He then recounts a contemporary visit to the old city: ‘As you sit
stranded in a traffic jam, half-choked by rickshaw fumes and the ammonia-
stink of the municipal urinals, you see around you a sad vista of collapsing
shop fronts and broken balustrades, tatty warehouses roofed with corrugated iron
and patched with rusting duckboards… all is tarnished, fraying at the edges’
(ibid.). Shashi Tharoor, a prominent writer and politician, echoes this, saying that
Old Delhi is a ‘moribund place steeped in decay and disease, ossified in com-
munal and caste divisions, exploitative and unjust’ (Tharoor 2005). What is the
relationship of this varied appropriation of, and apprehension towards, Old Delhi
in the contemporary period? In the following section, I demonstrate how a pattern
of mediated consumption among Delhi’s middle class allows for an affectionate
and recurring – if sanitised and exclusionary – relationship to Old Delhi.

IV. Consumption and nostalgia: 1990s and onwards

In the spring of 2008, a friend from abroad visited me in Delhi. Seeking a nearby
place to have lunch, we took an auto from my home and bumped along
Aurobindo Marg. After crossing a large government hospital and an interlaced
flyover, we arrived at an open-air enclosure, outside of which was a ticket
window. The place was called Dilli Haat, a heritage-cum-consumption venue
inaugurated by the city in 1994. At the entrance, we paid an admission fee, evidence that it was not an
undifferentiated public space, but one whose pleasures were segregated. Like
other private spaces in Delhi, security guards screened visitors. We entered a
long, rectangular space bracketed by low brick walls. On each side, crafts vendors
had set up wares – brass pots, camels and elephants embroidered in mirrored cloth,
leather slippers – inside small enclosures and on the ground. Unlike other Delhi
markets, the mood was sedate; no aggressive salesmen calling after noncommittal
browsers; no stray dogs that one had to step over; no lumpen elements catcalling
women. Towards the back was a cluster of food stalls showcasing cuisines from
different regions. Dilli Haat was a kind of ersatz India, a country packaged in
miniature that could be imbibed in an afternoon. The diversity of crafts – leather
slippers from Maharashtra, hand-embroidered tunics from Lucknow – and food
from different regions – pork ribs from Nagaland, fermented rice pancakes from
Kerala – mimicked the logic of the Republic Day parade. Each group had its
designated space, against a self-consciously multicultural panorama. The key
difference was that the parade invited national identification through sombre
spectacle; Dilli Haat, in contrast, made diversity incumbent upon bodily consump-
tion. In this sense, it was not unlike the diversity of options offered in a mall: a
food court for culture, as it were. Like other museums and temples in India’s capital, *Dilli Haat* conflated the nationalist-modernist ideal of unity in diversity, a selective veneration of culture and tradition, and spectacle-driven consumption (Greenough 1995; Srivastava 2009).

The use of the term *haat* evoked images of India’s weekly village markets, a flexible format for exchange in many regions; on certain days, commodities sellers converge, for economic and social transaction (Yang 1998, 185–186). *Dilli Haat* vendors tried to approximate an authentic feel: sellers of bangles and shawls and trinkets gamely bargained with urban dwellers and tourists. But the hawkers’ laminated identification proofs affixed on stalls, and the private security, made clear that this was not a public space. It approximated the feel of an open market, but also tamed its disparate energies; it steered a visitor’s amorphous desires towards awareness and appreciation bracketed by the nation.

What was striking about *Dilli Haat* was how it symbolised the estrangement from, and domestication of, the popular. Generally, Delhi’s upper classes avoided food at its diminishing roadside stands. Indeed, the city’s prospering classes, through their housing needs and zeal for hygiene, were abetting the demolition and displacement of street hawkers. Yet the distancing from street life – embodied nowhere as densely as in Old Delhi – comingled with a desire for its re-creation, as a sanitised simulacrum. The popular, defined by implements or objects, food and groups, was being relentlessly recreated within the metropolis, with *Dilli Haat* absorbing these contradictions.

*Dilli Haat* regularly hosts thematic programmes, manifested as fairs and festivals. On the occasion of my visit, the theme was ‘*Dilli ka Khana*’ (Delhi’s Defining Chow). Stalls had been set up selling *jalebis*, hot, fried red swirls of dough, covered with a gooey syrup; *chaat*, a savoury and sour mixture of potatoes, boiled chickpeas, and crushed flour and lentil discs; and *kebabs* of mutton and chicken. A young woman with a wireless microphone stood before these stalls and pointed out the food under preparation. She made special note of two middle-aged men making *parathas*, pointing out that ‘they have come here all the way from the old city’. The dozen onlookers clapped at this comment. Once more, as at the City Square Mall many months earlier, I felt a sense of déjà vu. Old Delhi had – in a fractional, convenient, bite-sized form – been teleported to New Delhi. In its stagey re-enactment, certain differences stood out. In Old Delhi, street vendors tended to use regular water and their bare hands to prepare food. At *Dilli Haat*, the purveyors of the same food served them in clear plastic dishes.

*Dilli Haat*’s appropriation of the old city still had a patina of public-mindedness about it. A wide section of the public could pay the modest entry fee. This was not the case at other Old Delhi food festivals, in five-star hotels and upscale restaurants. Some time before my visit to *Dilli Haat*, in the February 8, 2008 issue of the English newspaper, *Indian Express*, I saw an advertisement for a café recently opened at the posh Select Citywalk mall in south Delhi. This mall, the first of several to sprout up in the area, hosted a number of upscale international brands. On the upper floor, local restaurateurs had opened several expensive eateries. One
of these, Café Sattvik, advertised a food festival. Against an illustration of a curved Mughal door, a caption read ‘Delhi’s Courtyard’ (Dilli ka Aangan); below it were the words ‘Old Delhi’s Delicious and Special Dishes’ (purani dilli ke lazeez pakwaan). These words and visuals evoked longing for the courtliness and prestige of a now-extinguished past in Old Delhi. Attending such a festival, a prosperous person might authenticate their class and urban privilege, but without breaking a sweat. In this way, the old city becomes, as during the festival at Dilli Haat, a floating referent for authenticity.

Another example is the evolution of Old Delhi’s best-known restaurant, Karim’s. A simple eatery, located next to the Jama Masjid and Meena Bazaar, Karim’s claims that its founder cooked for Mughal nobility. Its menu notes that ‘cooking royal food is our hereditary profession’ and that its mission is to bring ‘royal food to the common man’. Over the years, Karim’s has benefitted from the middle-class desire to consume, which is linked nostalgically to Old Delhi. It is often hyped in the media, appearing in Time’s ‘Best of Asia’ list, and in innumerable ‘foodie’ blogs and newspapers. Its fame thus secured, Karim’s has become a vast chain. While the original version is humble, lacking air-conditioning or parking, its avatars elsewhere in the city are sleek. New versions of the restaurant now exist in the suburbs of Noida and Gurgaon, which house information technology companies and gated communities.

Karim’s transition from an Old Delhi haunt to a New Delhi chain encapsulates a broader transformation in how elites relate to space. As the city has enlarged, sprawled and gentrified, the actual feel for the old city has decreased. Of course, a broad cross-section of Delhi’s population makes active use of the old city as a commercial space, for its bazaars sell indispensable items at a reasonable cost, contributing to an ongoing vitality I have explored elsewhere (Gandhi 2011). Yet while classes rooted in government employment or in private entrepreneurial activity still periodically travel to Old Delhi, a majority of people are still more likely to encounter the old city in a film, restaurant, commodity or spectacle located outside its medieval walls. Thus, unlike earlier periods when civic parties sought government intervention, and when more of the population had familial ties to the space, there is comparatively little public interest in living standards and infrastructure development in Old Delhi.

Nostalgic representations and spectacle-driven consumption, however, allow for Old Delhi – in a commoditised, detached form – to retain energy. Let me conclude with an example from my time in Delhi. The February 27, 2008 issue of a local newspaper, Metro Now, had an intriguing title: ‘Old Delhi in Gurgaon’ (Gurgaon Mein Purani Dilli). Gurgaon is far removed from the old city, a wealthy suburb that has prospered through the information-technology and business process outsourcing tasks that define the new India. Whereas Old Delhi is comprised of alleys, low-slung buildings, and pedestrians, Gurgaon’s gated communities and shiny malls are accessed by car. Convergys, a major American firm with thousands of Indians working in cubicles and on headsets, is characteristic of Gurgaon. The newspaper reported how, in early 2008, its
employees, perhaps to buoy morale, turned its offices into a simulacrum of Old Delhi. A bicycle rickshaw was brought into the office; employees pretended to be tea and Paranthe Wali Gali vendors; and some created replicas of wedding card and sari fabric shops, characteristic of the old city.

Food festivals import chefs from Old Delhi; restaurants promise the authentic flavour of the old city; and corporate offices recreate its bazaars. These contemporary practices, I have argued, serve an important purpose, namely the consolidation of a middle-class urban identity predicated on nostalgic consumption of the old city.

V. Conclusion

This article has examined the symbolism and public practices associated with Delhi’s old city. I have focused on how its culture is represented and recreated in New Delhi. After 1947, Old Delhi’s monuments, such as the Red Fort, were appropriated by the state to validate secular rule. Via a host of state-sponsored and mass-mediated rituals, such as the Republic Day parade and the prime minister’s Red Fort speech on Independence Day, Old Delhi was incorporated into a nationalist mythology venerating the past and championing unity in diversity. Conversely, Old Delhi has frequently been objectified as a site of backwardness and stagnation. This ambivalence was evidence of the contradictions inherent in India’s nationalist and developmental discourse. Old Delhi, on the one hand, was selectively fetishised to anchor historical claims; on the other hand, it was the foil for an assertive modernity that sought to distance itself.

Since neo-liberalism’s onset in the 1990s, Old Delhi has been a persistent signifier in middle-class consumption practices. As part of a broader turn within popular culture, art and media, its street food, bazaar spaces and material objects have been turned into consumable kitsch. Old Delhi is increasingly evoked in tones of irony, affection and anxiety. It suggests that which the new India has left behind; yet this self-conscious surpassing also elicits concern, couched as nostalgia for what has been lost. This article has presented an ethnography of Old Delhi’s invocation in New Delhi’s media and cultural landscape (malls, newspapers, hotels, food courts). I have triangulated my analysis by focusing on the interlinked realms of nostalgia, consumption and the middle class. In so doing, this article has maintained that a defining feature of how reigning institutions and classes in India’s capital relate to the past is appropriation and consumption of Delhi’s old city.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
References

Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

Appadurai, A., and C. Breckenridge. 1995. “Public Modernity in India.” In *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, edited by C. Breckenridge, 1–22. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Boy, S. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Broz, C. 2010. *India’s Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity*. Delhi: Routledge.

Chakravarty, S., and A. Menon. 2001. “Hideouts of Terror.” *India Today*, January 8.

Dalrymple, W. 1993. *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi*. Delhi: Penguin.

Fernandes, L. 2004. “The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India.” *Urban Studies* 41 (12): 2415–2430. doi:10.1080/00420980412331297609.

Gandhi, A. 2011. “Crowds, Congestion, Conviviality: The Enduring Life of the Old City.” In *A Companion to the Anthropology of India*, edited by I. Clark-Deces, 202–222. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Greenough, P. 1995. “Nation, Economy, and Tradition Displayed: The Indian Crafts Museum, New Delhi.” In *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, edited by C. Breckenridge, 216–248. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gupta, N. 1981. *Delhi between Two Empires, 1803–1931*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hansen, T. B. 1999. *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Herzfeld, M. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. London: Routledge.

Ivy, M. 1995. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kaur, R. 2007. *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kaur, R. 2012. “Nation’s Two Bodies: Rethinking the Idea of ‘New’ India and Its Other.” *Third World Quarterly* 33 (4): 603–621. doi:10.1080/01436597.2012.657420.

Kraft, T. 1993. “Contemporary Old Delhi: Transformation of a Historical Place.” In *Shahjahanabad/ Old Delhi: Tradition and Colonial Change*, edited by E. Ehlers and T. Kraft, 93–119. Delhi: Manohar.

Legg, S. 2007. *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi’s Urban Governmentalities*. London: Blackwell.

Metcalf, B. 2009. “A Historical Overview of Islam in South Asia.” In *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, edited by B. Metcalf, 1–39. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Neve, G., and H. Donner, eds. 2006. *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*. London: Routledge.

Oldenburg, V. T. 1984. *The Making of Colonial Lucknow 1856–1877*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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

Samaj, B. S. 1958. *Slums of Old Delhi: Report of the Socio-Economic Survey of the Slum Dwellers of Old Delhi City*. Delhi: Atma Ram & Sons.

Srivastava, S. 2009. “Urban Spaces, Disney-Divinity and Moral Middle Classes in Delhi.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44 (26–27): 338–345.

Sundaram, R. 2010. *Pirate Modernity: Delhi’s Media Urbanism*. London: Routledge.

Tarlo, E. 2003. *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*. London: Hurst & Company.
Tharoor, S. 2005. “In Praise of Delhi.” The Hindu, August 28.
Yang, A. 1998. Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Bihar. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Zamindar, V. 2007. The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia. New York: Columbia University Press.
Zukin, S. 1995. The Culture of Cities. Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

AJAY GANDHI is a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.
ADDRESS: Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, D-37073, Göttingen, Germany.
Email: ajay.gandhi@mail.mcgill.ca