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Lotte Hoek & Ajay Gandhi

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Provisional Relations, Indeterminate Conditions: Non-Sociological Sociality in South Asia

Lotte Hoek[a] and Ajay Gandhi[b]

[a]Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; [b]Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany

ABSTRACT

In the introduction to this special section, we present six ethnographic articles that explore the sites and forms of 'non-sociological sociality' in South Asia. Set in urban spaces where the familiar vectors of relations, such as ethnicity, class, gender or age, may be attenuated, the articles examine how social and political entanglement is suffused with ambiguity, indeterminacy, provisionality and contingency. In these sites, opaque conditions, open-ended play, double meanings and interpretive scrutiny abound. Spaces such as the racecourse, the bazaar, the university campus or the nocturnal street suggest undetermined conditions and fleeting collaborations which have a wider bearing on cross-cutting forms of sociality in South Asia.

Introduction

In February 2015, India's Central Board of Film Certification issued a 28-point list of 'objectionable' and 'abusive' words. Regional officers were directed to withhold certificates from films containing the proscribed terms. The Board's inventory of disallowed expressions mostly comprised sexual epithets. Included in the list was the phrase 'double meaning any kind of words': the ambiguously all-encompassing targeting all that could be ambiguously all-encompassing. The directive met with public ridicule and film industry resistance; the list was soon withdrawn.

The prevalence of, and ferment attending, double meanings in film is intriguing. The Board's actions suggest how often public culture in South Asia provides evidence of fraught semantic transgression. In a heterogeneous, rapidly-urbanising and highly-mediated milieu, what something is and what it means is not obvious and unarguable, but floats on parallel possible streams. The presentation and representation of selves, relationships and texts is therefore subject to competing interpretations. Hence the anxiety of moral custodians, such as India's censorship board, who wish to steer what can and should be said. This aborted attempt to engineer meaning underlines how sociality is steeped in ambiguity and indeterminacy.

CONTACT Lotte Hoek ✉ lotte.hoek@ed.ac.uk; Ajay Gandhi ✉ ajay.gandhi@mail.mcgill.ca

Conventional approaches to the study of South Asia have generally elided these dimensions. Quite often groups, adhering to settled sociological profiles, seemingly inhabit and reproduce their worlds from uncontested vantage points. In the influential work of Louis Dumont, for example, the contemporary instantiation of social and political life is telescoped into immemorial patterns; the rigid immutability of hierarchy overwhelmingly conditions sociality.[1] Social science analysis that is more positivist in orientation may presume that people experience their worlds via a definitive set of conditions and constraints; that these settings have shared presuppositions and clear co-ordinates; that there is a shared recognition of social imperatives and personal objectives; and that blurriness and border-crossings are fought, regretted or peripheral. Thus, we often find in studies of South Asian sociality a kind of reductive circularity, with emergent relationships, ambivalent readings and contingent interactions bracketed within familiar sociological parameters.

If, for some scholars, sociality unfolds as on a clear canvas, foundational elements of South Asian society suggest a more subtle reckoning. In Hindu myths and Sanskrit narratives, gods are profoundly ambiguous, and doubling, splitting and passing abound.[2] Such tales frequently revolve around the difference between true and fake entities, or between real figures and imposters. In popular folklore and women's songs, irony is employed to comment on the subterfuge and contrivances that suffuse normative gender relations.[3] In rituals linked to the cosmic notion of *lila* or play, the perpetual creation and undoing of the world is suffused with risk and uncertainty, as well as pleasure and beauty.[4] And in the history of folk theatre and popular performance, clashing meanings and moral contradictions are displayed, but are often unresolved.[5] In these traditions, social performance and interpretation are put under pressure as intentions are probed and appearances are questioned.

Such research, mainly emerging from the humanities, has unearthed a rich vein of reflection on these topics from the subcontinent. The articles gathered here are animated by the conviction that social science has more to offer in examining such realms. An anthropological approach with ethnographic texture can illuminate the irreducible dimensions of provisionality, ambiguity and indeterminacy in social life. There are precedents for such exploration: Gerald Berreman has noted the preoccupation among North Indian urban dwellers with dissimulation and passing through speech and dress;[6] Margaret Trawick has described how ambiguity in South India, far from being destabilising or threatening, is actively desired and cultivated;[7] Caroline and Filippo Osella have likewise emphasised how young people in South India engage in equivocal, open-ended play with gendered hierarchies;[8] and Veena Das and

1. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

2. Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

3. Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 73−120.

4. Stanley Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

5. Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and James M. Wilce, *Eloquence in Trouble: The Poetics and Politics of Complaint in Rural Bangladesh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

6. Gerald Berreman, 'Social Categories and Social Interaction in Urban India', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 74, no. 3 (1972), pp. 567−86.

7. Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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

Jacob Copeman have noted how practices of naming, far from simply fixing persons, are flexible and fungible, critical to how one navigates situational contingency.[9]

Yet more remains to be done. It is to this end that the articles here contribute. These writings explore social and political arenas marked by relatively indeterminate conditions: actors operate with limited information, navigate a world that is somewhat opaque, and seek to exploit ambiguous possibilities. They describe milieux where relationships between people are provisional: ties are tenuous, sometimes fleeting, and consciously contrived. And they emphasise a generalised orientation to emergence: a prospective sensibility where what will unfold, and how conditions might ripen, are key preoccupations.

This leads the authors to address certain questions. What kinds of sociality are evident in settings marked by diverse players, competitive odds and limited means, such as an urban bazaar, a university campus, an artist enclave, a night-time street or a racecourse? How do plural papery forms, such as film posters and caste certificates, sanction certain readings and engineer desired outcomes? What kinds of relationships—love, friendship, solidarity, complicity—are possible in milieux saturated by competition, loneliness, jockeying and prohibition?

These empirical questions in turn open up conceptual questions regarding the social science of South Asia. How is sociality oriented in settings where outcomes are unclear and hope and risk abundant? How does the prevalence of scepticism, doubt, mistrust and calculated appearance condition what is possible and what might emerge? How are relationships understood when they may be either evanescent or durable, of limited shelf life or potentially profitable over the long term? What does it mean to undertake a hermeneutical dispensation, with words, documents, friendships and loyalties subject to perpetual second-guessing? And how does this interpretive modality, this everyday process of divination, relate to the fecundity of such relationships, the newness possibly generated through interaction?

Article Themes

The six articles collected here are by anthropologists who attend to provisional relationships and indeterminate futures. In large part, they describe a realm of sociality outside the sociological silos of class, religion, age or ethnicity.

Lotte Hoek describes the routinised nocturnal wanderings of *posterwallahs* in Dhaka. These young men traverse a sunless sphere of intermittent calm and tumult, encountering gangs, policemen and others, as they adorn walls with titillating, aggressive film advertisements. Hoek underlines their careful selection of walls, how their posters radiate visually to enfold a large urban public, and how their imagery creates unintentional resonance with proximate projections. The incessant evanescence of the posters makes emerging messages more important than what had earlier been there; as 'shards of signification', they underline the importance of exegesis, of divining meaning out of potentially plural messages.

9. Veena Das and Jacob Copeman, 'Introduction: On Names in South Asia: Iteration, (Im)propriety and Dissimulation', in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (SAMAJ)*, no. 12 (2015) [https://samaj.revues.org/4063, accessed 20 Feb. 2016].

Pradeep Shinde examines the present-day predicament of the Kunchikorves, a 'Denotified Tribe' (DNT) in Dharavi, Mumbai's largest slum. Shinde demonstrates how they mobilise kin and affine relations, and engage with different organs of the state in an effort to procure official documentation of their caste status. These 'caste certificates' are required to take advantage of reservations policies—in the case of the Kunchikorves, to land permanent jobs or gain promotion within Mumbai's Municipal Corporation. Yet obtaining such certificates is no easy matter, as many lack domicile certificates and other proofs; thus begins an often protracted affair, implicating kin in other cities as well as bureaucratic officials. Affirmative action's demand to authenticate oneself coexists with an illicit infrastructure for manufacturing certificates that prove one's 'backwardness'. The Kunchikorves are called upon to earnestly present themselves in a milieu where concealment and display are messily intermingled. Dissembling and sincerity, official status and contrived paperwork, blur together, perhaps not antithetical, but rather inextricably intertwined.

Stine Puri examines the possibility, as well as the impossibility, of male friendship among gamblers at the Delhi racecourse. These 'relationships of chance' are cultivated through the exchange of credit, food and betting tips on horses. Yet while such transactions bolster mutual loyalty and feeling, they are freighted by the unavoidable fact that all gamblers are self-interested competitors. Relationships of solidarity among punters are thus shadowed by dissimulation and suspicion. Gambling friendships come to embody the contingency on the racecourse, rather than sociological or ritual certainties that may anchor relationships outside it.

Ajay Gandhi's ethnography of the planned redevelopment of Old Delhi's Meena Bazaar examines the extensive interpretative labour that goes into social performance. As bureaucrats, traders, hawkers, politicians and the police are drawn into the vicissitudes of the plan, motives and intentions are probed, often in ironic and dramaturgical terms. Their entanglement is viewed through the analytical metaphor of the *chakkar* or rotational wheel. Gandhi terms this interpersonal preoccupation with professed intentions and performed action the 'hermeneutics of the bazaar'. This reading of others' designs, he suggests, often revolves around 'structured sincerity', the symbolic potency and practical efficacy of civic virtue in India's public and political life.

Olga Sooudi's article demonstrates the ways in which 'makeshift' practices by Mumbai's artists, gallerists, educators and collectors come to produce the art world there. Informed by market hyperbole and comparative anxiety as regards Indian art's relatively recent emergence, practitioners narrate their art world as both incompletely achieved yet full of potential. She situates the Mumbai art world's specificities within wider discourses about India's 'emerging' economic transformations, drawing on an ethnography of private galleries in the city's arts hub as well as of an artist-run alternative space in the suburbs. She conceptualises practitioners' engagement with this moment of potentiality as a series of makeshift measures that constitute the art world in the present moment, rather than as a deferred possibility or a historical failure.

Mihirini Sirisena describes how young Sinhalese who move to attend university in Colombo transform hostile and lonely urban spaces through various modes of intimacy. Their bodily inhabiting of the city—on buses, benches, stairwells and university buildings—suggests that evanescent encounters literally transform the city. Absorbed in one another, student lovers redraw the urban sites to which their embraces lend intimacy and

care to the world around them. Intimacy in Colombo is seen to temporarily re-engineer urban space, even as these sometimes temporary lovers internalise and react to the presumed or actual gaze of others.

Non-Sociological Sociality

In these papers, provisional relationships and indeterminate futures are embedded in what we could term 'non-sociological sociality'. By this, we highlight forms of entanglement that do not necessarily map onto prevailing analytical categories such as religion, ethnicity, gender, age or class. These cross-cutting relations are not exclusively found in cities; yet, it is clear that they owe much to urban sites that can be seen as undetermined or continually in flux, such as the bazaar, street, racecourse, university campus, film world or artist enclave. These are non-normative sites of sociality where familiar vectors of social relationships are often attenuated. Existing certainties within settled spaces—the classroom, workplace, car, home—are called into question. Indeed, entanglement across profile markers is a necessity or an inevitability.

To those inhabiting such realms, these worlds suggest a circumscribed topology: they can seem bounded by interior logics and time-sensitive imperatives. Participation and navigation require being attuned to tacit norms as well as shared goals distinct from other normative spheres. In these articles, we see the unique parameters of agency and collaboration in discrete worlds. *Posterwallahs* scramble to complete their rounds before dawn; migrant students seek a temporary salve for the wounding loneliness of big-city life; racecourse punters scour sources for profitable leads before the next race; bazaar traders and hawkers feign and posture with an eye to a better deal; and artists and gallerists, in the absence of an elaborated professional structure, undertake improvised patronage and *ad hoc* mutual assistance.

At the same time, the students, artists, gamblers, *posterwallahs*, hawkers and Kunchikorves described here make ample use of the diffuseness of urban life. City living is unpredictably interlocking, yet frequently walled off. By playing with and against these realities, upward mobility, monetary success, tenuous commerce, true love and artistic glory remain possible. Metropolitan existence is also inherently unstable, as open-ended spaces are refreshed by new entrants, and operate divergently at discrete times. The character of a street in the daytime is different from that at night; a campus' annual student intake throws up different partnership permutations; artist galleries and enclaves work without a template to codify diverse creative processes.

To traverse and inhabit these continually rearticulating city sites requires an interpretative stance. In the articles in this special section, we consistently encounter a hermeneutical disposition. The art critics, gamblers, university students, *posterwallahs* and bazaar traders ask themselves: are they really my friends? Are they true to their word? Do they love me? What do they want from me? Who rightly belongs in this world? These questions may bring only provisional answers, as the interpretative stance divines both promise and disappointment. Scepticism may impart greater durability to relationships and prospects, and also be a means of risk management. Alongside the ethnographers, who ask their own orienting questions, the people in these texts interrogate and interpret the urban world through which they move and which they activate.

With the parameters of interaction opaque and the manner of social reproduction somewhat uncertain, the hermeneutical modality is oriented by objects, spaces, words, gestures and exchanges. Works of art and surveillance cameras, walls, benches, plans and documents constitute orienting devices. Through such materials, from the ubiquitously banal (the wall) to the officially endorsed (the certificate), actors seek to decipher what action can be undertaken. The uncertain, unstable and unknowable co-exist with the certainty that opportunities and worlds will yet emerge. Chains of events that may be hard to predict and contain are interwoven with practices that are oriented towards greater durability.

Cross-Cutting Themes

In attending to spheres of non-sociological sociality, these articles demarcate certain areas of scholarly inquiry. In particular, the following themes are evoked here.

Contingency

The contingent nature of sociality—what may or may not unfold—repeatedly appears in these articles. The lack of certainty in life suggests freedom from what might be prefigured, but it also evokes anxiety, and thus methods to predict the future's flow. Here, chance is that which is serendipitous and welcomed, as well as what is calamitous and to be hedged against. This stochastic sensibility is necessarily intertwined with possible permutations in meaning, as seeming certainties are pushed against and ambiguously exploited.

This domain of the possible but not pre-ordained is described in different ways. Stine Puri notes how among Delhi's racecourse gamblers the fuzziness between loans and bets necessarily involves an exchange of chance. Bookmakers and bettors become entangled in communal risk-taking, yet engaged in an inherently self-interested speculative enterprise, they question the veracity and genuineness of others at the racecourse. Thus, the question of which friendship is real comes to resemble the unknowns of which horse will come first. Ajay Gandhi sets off the seeming solidities of a government redevelopment plan against the contortions not just over its implementation, but over how the plan and its executors are to be read as mapping the future in the first place.

Limited Intelligibilities

In places marked by contingency, the information on which sociality hinges is not total in the cosmological, Dumontian sense. Rather, the information required to build social aptitude is necessarily partial, fragmentary, evanescent, speculative and conjunctural. Social actors across a wide range of milieux operate with only partial knowledge of how the overall puzzle fits together.

In Olga Sooudi's article, the boom and bust of India's art world in the early twenty-first century constitutes the shaky foundation on which artists and gallerists craft what they understand as a 'proper' art world. Lotte Hoek describes the *posterwallahs*' speculation about the nature of certain urban walls and their capacities for communicative action. The gamblers in Stine Puri's account thrive on tips and inside information from friends

and bookmakers, but must always weigh the value of, and intention behind, such insights and 'favours'. These bettors, *posterwallahs* and artists find themselves in a position similar to that of the bazaar traders who must negotiate a moving situation of temporary solidarities and potential fission that Ajay Gandhi describes in the Delhi bazaar. Given the opacity of the intentions, positions, desires and capacities of the 'other', and the changing nature of the street, the art world, the bazaar and the racecourse, these articles describe the incessant interpretative labour that bears on ordinary interactive relationships.

Limited intelligibilities and an interpretative posture are accompanied by forms of active scepticism. In both Pradeep Shinde's study of Kunchikorves who work, or aspire to work, for Mumbai's Municipal Corporation, and Ajay Gandhi's account of the proposed Meena Bazaar redevelopment in Delhi, state officials perceive citizens with considerable scepticism. Whether reflexively doubting the sincerity of bazaar traders or the validity of Kunchikorve documents, interpretive pressure is applied to subjects' claims. The hermeneutical disposition, then, suggests a habitual hardening of attitude towards others' agendas, as well as a possible openness towards an ambiguous world. It also suggests that scepticism and suspicion inform the social life of institutional bureaucracies as much as of the bazaar, street, racecourse or art gallery.

The Implicit and Illicit Rules of the Game

These articles describe milieux in which the parameters of interaction are often illegible, implicit and illicit. In Mumbai's art scene, gallerists and artists bemoan shoddy, *ad hoc* art production and consumption. In Dhaka, film posters are only put on certain walls; their placement adheres to an unspoken topography of permissibility. At Delhi's racecourse, bets hinge not on a particular horse's fitness, but on a baroque set of presumptions among jockeys, bookmakers and bettors about human intentions. Among Mumbai's Kunchikorve community, obtaining a stable municipal job is incumbent on circuitously manufacturing official documentation of their caste status. Among Colombo's university students, norms of propriety and gender performance are outweighed by the requirements of love and security. In all of these examples, there is no obvious, transparent set of rules about how public sociality functions. Rather, relationships and entanglements hinge on complicated, compartmentalised understandings deliberately inscrutable to outsiders.

Transient Sociality and Tactical Solidarity

Sociality across ventures—entrepreneurial, romantic, professional, political—evinces a desire for greater durability. Yet might there be value accorded to relationships that are irreducibly in play—that may not lead anywhere, that are valued and pleasurable precisely because of their imminent expiry date? The papers assembled here probe the desire for, and the value accorded to, relationships of transient sociality and tactical solidarity.

Mihirini Sirisena's student lovers seek out intimate relationships within the limited time-frame of university careers to ward off the vagaries of the unfamiliar, alienating metropolis of Colombo. Lotte Hoek's *posterwallahs* require the complicity and acquiescence of police, private guards and other poster crews to execute their night-time duties. Ajay Gandhi's bazaar hawkers and traders enter into chancy alliances that may be opportunistically abandoned. Stine Puri's bettors have friendships whose character is entwined

with potential collaboration and competition. Pradeep Shinde's Kunchikorves deliberately blur the boundaries of genetic and fictive kinship as they collaborate as families to access reservations benefits. In these articles, these are not immutable and inescapable loci of tradition, kinship or community; rather, these modes of sociality are strategically engineered, time sensitive and contingent on the whirlwind of wider processes.

Fungible Presentation and Representation

We find that the public articulation of oneself and of important relationships is a highly flexible and fungible affair. Multiple possible selves and parallel hypothetical networks are hinted at or tactically demonstrated. The point of the dissembling and feints is less to be true to one's self, or enact conventionally-approved relationships, as it is to keep different personae and networks in abeyance. These plastic, sometimes interchangeable projections of socialised potential are produced via speech, gestures and practices, but also through mediated fantasies and official representations.

Our ethnographic accounts describe the ways in which loyalties, friendships, affairs and identities are pliable in their capacity to be re-articulated and transformed. Pradeep Shinde's case of the caste certificates Kunchikorves require to obtain municipal jobs and promotions shows how individuals must work to establish their caste identities within the domain of the state despite lacking the requisite documentation. The plural selves they make use of, as Hindus, as nomads (*bhatka samaj*), as DNTs and as Kaikadi, illustrate how public articulation of the self and its formal documentation is ceaselessly plural. Such fungible selves are inherent in a social milieu that is not determined by fixed and immutable roles and rules of engagement.

Circulations and Transactions

Among 'known strangers', as Puri phrases it, within contexts that are undetermined, the shifting relationships among friends, lovers, business partners, crews and collaborators grow out of and are sedimented through circulation and transaction. On the racecourse, gambling friends may do each other favours, such as lend and borrow money, exchange tips or bet on behalf of absent gamblers. Through such transactions, money and information moves among them, tying them together in ways that are entirely dependent on the particular circulations of the racecourse. But food and metaphors are also shared among them, grounding their interactions within shared, but time and space limited, domains. Lotte Hoek's ethnographic account of the circulation of poster crews around the night-time city of Dhaka shows how their nightly routes through the city open up its urban spaces to daytime visual transactions with a vast urban public that moves very slowly through Dhaka's gridlock. Even in the domain of kinship, Pradeep Shinde shows how the external requirements of the caste certification process entice a series of circulations within and among families aimed at inscribing relationships officially. To make informal intimacies into public ones, daughters are exchanged in marriage and monetary transactions accompany them.

Provisional Perches

When traversing and inhabiting shifting relationships and undetermined contexts, a hermeneutical disposition is accompanied by a capacity for finding temporary toeholds. Provisionally positioning oneself within a given space or set of relations, such perches are temporary as shifting alliances and changing time-frames require relocation. Pradeep Shinde's Kunchikorve caste certification, while providing an apparently durable route to government benefits, is often only efficacious for the moment. Certification imparts a provisional status, which is not automatically passed on to descendants or kin. The process requires continual readjustment and labour. Olga Sooudi, in a very different Mumbai context, describes this as a disposition towards the makeshift. In the open-ended conditions of the art world, she shows how gallerists are preoccupied with producing recurring events and proximate spaces in which the art world may 'take effect'. While the gallerists hope that their actions will produce and solidify the art world in Mumbai, which they feel is always in the making, Sooudi shows how it is the very makeshift nature of these activities, the finding of provisional perches, that end up being the practice through which the art world itself comes into being.

In a different vein, both Lotte Hoek and Mihirini Sirisena show how the material forms of the urban spaces they work in, seemingly unassailable concrete surfaces of benches and city walls, provide fleeting sites of intimacy and projection. Through acts of love and intimacy, or through the working-over of the surfaces with film posters, these walls and benches host fruitful expressions and entanglements. They are temporary perches for homesick students and for the engrossing aesthetic of the film industry—that is, until someone else occupies the bench or a poster is ripped down.

Provisional Relations, Indeterminate Conditions

The articles gathered together in this special section move ethnographically through spaces and relationships where often taken-for-granted vectors of sociality are tempered, suspended or irrelevant. The racecourse, the bazaar, the nocturnal street, the university campus, the art world, the city corporation—each setting emerges in these texts as open to, and formative of, social relationships and interactions that may not be clearly determined at the outset. Such entanglements of potential lovers and friends, competitors and collaborators, officials and entrepreneurs, develop through chance, in temporary alliances, and via makeshift practices. An interpretative disposition and questioning stance is one filter with which to encounter the sites and people whose potential is not determined at the outset, the contours of which are not fully prescribed by ritual or hierarchy, whether of class, age, religion or gender. It is this *lila* or play, the ceaseless flicker of illusion and reckoning, of performance and scepticism, by which social and political life is created and dissolved, that we aim to open up through this set of immersive ethnographic accounts.