

Aesthetics of Civil Society

‘Fight the Filth’ Campaign in Mumbai

YOKO TAGUCHI

The relationship between India’s economic liberalisation and the rise of urban middle-class “civil society” movements has been critically analysed by several commentators, but few attempts have been made to understand what exactly this civil society comprises, not as a universal idea, but as an artefact created and evaluated in a specific situation. Through a fieldwork-based study of a Mumbai clean-up campaign initiated by a daily tabloid newspaper, this article examines the understanding of the terms “citizen” and “civil society” as used by Indian English-speakers.

Yoko Taguchi (yokotaguti@gmail.com) is at the Graduate School of Social Sciences, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo.

Civil society movements, as organised by urban middle-class Indians, have grown since the late 1990s, alongside the progress of economic liberalisation. In Mumbai, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs), residential associations and English newspapers have been working enthusiastically to protect the city, especially its public spaces, from various forms of encroachment and from residents lacking civic sense. These movements aim to create the beautiful “world-class city” (Prakash 2010) they deserve.

Partha Chatterjee has expressed worry about the recent trend of cleaning up Indian cities, and reclaiming public spaces for “proper citizens” by getting rid of squatters and encroachers (Chatterjee 2004: 131). Similarly, Arvind Rajagopal notes that the prevailing juristic atmosphere in Mumbai has recently grown more indifferent to the poor. The erstwhile “right to livelihood” for illegal hawkers has been eclipsed by the “right to ‘unrestricted’ public space” for citizens in the form of clean footpaths to walk on without the nuisance of hawkers (Rajagopal 2001: 67).

This trend can be seen as an attempt to change a harmoniously “corrupt” society into a transparent and market-friendly civil society. In her article in the *Hindu* on Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption movement, Arundhati Roy (2011) reminds us of the current neo-liberal tendencies of the Indian state, and points out that multinational corporations, the media and NGOs – all enthusiastic and generous supporters of the movement – are placed outside the scope of the anti-corruption bill. Instead of these powerful actors, she sympathetically describes the actors most involved in contemporary corruption (Roy 2011):

Imagine, for example, a city of shopping malls, on whose streets hawking has been banned. A hawker pays the local beat cop and the man from the municipality a small bribe to break the law and sell her wares to those who cannot afford the prices in the malls. Is that such a terrible thing? In the future, will she have to pay the Lokpal representative too?

These authors express concern that the neo-liberal state and civil society organisations working together to achieve more transparent and effective governance, which appeals to the aesthetics of global Indians, might also strengthen the oppression and exclusion of the poor by eliminating the gray zone in which they survive.

Anthropological Viewpoints

To consider Indian civil society at the micro-level, Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria demonstrates two different anthropological approaches. One broadens the

idea of civil society and applies it to a new situation, while the other focuses on analysing the people's discourse around civil society itself.

The first approach, in his article describing "everyday corruption", or the intimate interactions and negotiations between illegal hawkers, municipal workers and police, suggests the possibility of looking at the situation of corruption as a different kind of citizenship. The hawkers pay *hafta* in the form of a set fee or a portion of their merchandise such as vegetables in order to continue their business and survive. Meanwhile, they are also sympathetic to the police, who often also live in slums. Although the hawkers' shops are still periodically demolished, and their tools and merchandise confiscated, these confiscated items are often given back to the hawkers after familiar performances of protest. In these negotiations, Anjaria sees a new kind of citizenship, one "based on premises other than universal citizenship" (Anjaria 2011: 68). This is the author's interpretation, however, and neither the police nor the hawkers would call it civil society.

The second is found in an article on the "guardians of the bourgeois city" (Anjaria 2009). The members of this civil society work hard to fight against the encroachment of hawkers in order to protect hygienic, safe and beautiful public spaces. From their own perspective, civil society members are representatives of the universal and abstract citizen. On the other hand, they see the claims of hawkers unions as only reflecting the interests of a single interest group. Anjaria warns that these civic activists' practices ironically weaken the various possibilities of political engagement in the city. However, there is another twist that mitigates these ill effects: these civic movements do not succeed in their aims, because middle-class people, the very people whom the members of civil society organisations try to represent, selfishly continue to buy vegetables from hawkers, and the municipality remains apathetic and reluctant to regulate the illegal hawkers (Anjaria 2009).

Anjaria captures the scene of a meeting between the involved parties. In the middle of the discussion, a civic activist

addresses the hawkers, "We are citizens, who are you?" A hawker replies, "*hum log bhi citizens hain* [we too are citizens]" (Anjaria 2009: 402). When we investigate terms such as "citizen" and "civil society", discussed among the subjects of the study themselves, we cannot ignore these subjects' analyses, knowledge, and aesthetics (Riles 2000).

This article's attempt, accordingly, in common with Anjaria's second approach, focuses on narrowly defined ideas of "citizen" and "civil society" in popular Indian English. Moreover, it considers civil society not as a universal idea, but as a concrete material, or artefact, discussed and presented in a specific situation by the people involved. Aesthetics, the principle used to judge beauty, is an important guideline in the creation and evaluation of such artefacts.¹

Campaign as Artefact

For Mumbai's civil society, the role of newspapers is significant as both medium and actor. Newspapers initiate civil society movements and spotlight citizens in their coverage. Civil society organisations also esteem newspapers, displaying article clippings about their activities in their offices and sharing scanned articles (rather than links to online articles) by email among members or on their own websites.

Local tabloids are especially proactive in taking part in the city's civil society movements by publishing big colourful pictures, attractive headlines and sensational articles, just as they once invoked the "people" in the postcolonial cosmopolitan city of Bombay (Prakash 2010).

"City's Biggest Clean-Up Drive", declared the feature article headline of the *Mumbai Mirror*, a local English daily tabloid, introducing it at the top of the page as, "Fight the Filth: Seven Colleges, BMC and Mumbai Mirror Launch". The bottom of the page added ("And You Can Be a Part of It"). The article (Menon and Pawa 2011) read:

It is not enough to blame the civic body for the cesspool the city has turned into. We as citizens have a role to play. *Mumbai Mirror* strongly feels that a city teeming with the world's most talented, most beautiful and most charismatic people deserves to be clean, free of litter.

The authors began the article by highlighting the divide between the journalist (we) and the littering person (they), demonstrating that the journalist was considered crazy just for pointing out the right way. Praise for the city – "the financial capital of the country" and home to "the world's most talented, most beautiful and most charismatic people" – followed, with a hint of disgust towards the things that did not match "our" aesthetic sense. Continuing on page eight, the authors stated that the *Mumbai Mirror* and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), along with seven "top educational institutions", had undertaken to clean their "beloved city". The *Mirror* also called the readers to action: "Most importantly, the campaign will have to be driven by you, dear reader, as we embark on what we believe will be the biggest-ever citizen initiative" (ibid: 8). The *Mirror* chose seven colleges and seven "filthy spots", using their previous connections, and created the student groups that would comprise the main actors in the campaign. In the first phase of the campaign, the students would physically clean the filthy spots with BMC staff. In the second phase, they would "create awareness against littering", which the *Mirror* described as most important (ibid).

The *Mumbai Mirror* called for reader participation, invoking the second-person "you" as "citizens". However, it is unclear who the actual addressees were. Dubbed a "citizen initiative", the campaign's front-page headline only modestly added the invitation for citizens' participation in brackets: "(and you can be a part of it)". A similar statement was inserted at the bottom of page eight,

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after the plan was described: “During the camp, residents of the neighbourhood are also welcome to join in”. This wording shows that the readers are not core members, but rather that the campaign is conducted by the tabloid, colleges and BMC.

In fact, very few readers responded to the interpellation (“you”) and joined the campaign individually. Citizens’ participation came as moral support instead. Many readers praised the effort and agreed that the lack of civic sense was the most critical issue, and therefore, that creating awareness was the key solution. These voices, however, did not always share the attitude of the “citizen’s initiative”. Several people requested that the campaign team come and clean their neighbourhood because it was also dirty. Some people thought it was wrong to have students clean the filth created by the BMC. These reader reactions suggest that there is no consensus on the identity of the “citizens” who should take the initiative. During the course of the campaign, the *Mirror* reporters and student social activities clubs took on the role of representing these unclear and abstract citizens.

The opposite of “citizen”, however, was clearly defined from the beginning of the campaign. The actors who planned, conducted and supported the campaign shared an understanding of who the “targets” of the campaign were. Although creating awareness about garbage segregation and composting among housing societies was one of the listed objectives in the first article, middle-class people never became the main targets in the actual campaign. These were instead slum-dwellers, hawkers and vegetable market vendors, who were not considered part of civil society. These targets and the campaign actors would not work together to improve their social environment; rather, the campaign, as representative of the citizens and with the official help of the municipality, intended to educate and “create awareness” among its targets.

“Creating awareness” is the common journalistic way to put it, but in the field, more direct and confrontational expressions such as “make them aware” or

“aware *karna*” were often used. The method adopted was the “survey”. In these surveys, groups of students visited houses in slum areas or small street shops and asked questions such as “Do you use a dustbin?” or “Where do you dump your garbage?” When the targets answered that they were using their dustbins, the students thanked them and requested that they keep doing so and spread awareness themselves by telling other people.

The ideal scenario often presented in the tabloid was as follows: students educated people about the health hazards of littering. After listening to the students, slum residents and hawkers realised the importance of hygiene, and agreed to now be more careful about their behaviour; the city would become clean. In contrast to this ideal, however, the lack of basic facilities and public services such as toilets in slum areas and daily garbage collection were noticed. The targets clearly could not improve the situation by themselves. Nevertheless, these issues were not the point of the campaign.

Apart from awareness building, several other approaches were used. Planting saplings after removing garbage represented one such symbolic aesthetic performance. In these few cases, however, the saplings were eaten by cows and goats within a week. The pictures published in the tabloid were of course a significant part of the campaign. Photo shoots were conducted in each drive, and pictures of students wearing rubber gloves and masks or talking to slum-dwellers appeared in the next day’s newspaper. The pictures of the selected spots before and soon after the clean-up drive were used to show visible impact.

The Students’ Campaign

During the campaign, student clubs became representative of “citizens”, as groups and as members of clubs, and not as individual participants. Importantly, the term “civil society” was not familiar to many of the students of these English medium colleges.² The entity that the *Mirror* denoted as “citizen” was understood by the students as “community”, “nation” and “country”. Students often

described their motivation for joining the campaign in terms of national service: “You feel good doing something for the country”, and “We feel very nice serving the nation. We can’t help the people working on the border, but we are just doing what we can do.”

The BMC was understood as the closest and the most concrete entity through which students could serve the nation. They sincerely tried to help the BMC. In practice, this zeal sometimes carried them beyond a mere helping role; some students even playfully improvised steep fines as warnings designed to inspire fearful compliance. On the other hand, they relied on the BMC, and often preferred that BMC officers come along with them for the surveys. “If we go by ourselves, they [the vendors] will take us lightly”. Students were afraid that the targets would “argue back” and “abuse” them, so they needed the help of authority in the form of accompanying officers or of a BMC logo on their banners.

Meanwhile, the students accepted without difficulty an understanding of the target to be surveyed and educated. Among hawkers, *pan-wallahs* were one of the favourite targets, because customers often littered pan wrappers around these shops. Sometimes the campaign turned into a pan-wallah finding game with excited students shouting “target!” when they found one.

A gap between the students and targets clearly existed. As someone outside the club, the target was not someone with whom they could work together towards the same objectives. Nonetheless, some attempts to go beyond the gap were observed. Talking to slum-dwellers and hawkers was generally a challenging and scary prospect for most students; interactions were often awkward and highly formal or ritualistic. How to talk politely to targets was a challenge. One day, a girl who had just joined the social service club advised the other students before they conducted a survey in a slum: “Don’t use ‘aunty/uncle’. Use ‘sir/madam’. Be very polite.” Another group who did a survey on the same day, however, used “aunty/uncle”, following the common practice of addressing elders in Mumbai. These attempts themselves

may have the potential to foster new kinds of contacts among different social groups; at the moment, however, they did not appear successful, because of the form of the campaign.

The *Mirror* reported the progress of the campaign almost every day, with a gradual decline in the space allotted to it. The concluding article appeared in the *Mirror* on 5 September, with a triumphant picture of the students on the cover page. The reporter concluded that although there was still a long way to go, they had taken “one small but important step towards a clean Mumbai” (Chandrasekharan 2011: 1). The article praised the enthusiasm of the students, citing one conversation when students “very hesitantly” asked shopkeepers “to use dustbins and ask their customers to use them. One of them shot back, “kiske liye kar rahe ho yeh?” [for whom are you doing this?]. The eager students were quick to reply, “Bharat ke liye [for India]” (ibid). The students here were seen as nationalists rather than as representative citizens.

At the end of the article, two reviewers were introduced for the first time in the campaign. They had not participated in the campaign, but deemed to have the authority to provide an evaluation because they were eminent citizens long been involved in environmental and civic activism. Their feedback was primarily general advice to readers on eco-friendly lifestyles. The sudden appearance of outside experts at the campaign’s climax seemed to imply a hierarchical and closed civil society. The conclusion thus made it clear that the position of civil society was a privileged one and fixed somewhere far from common readers.

Conclusions

This campaign and other similar civil society movements in Indian cities do not assume a civil society open to all, and nor do they hide their assumption of exclusion. The campaign’s aesthetics also seems to support the idea that the “proper” members of Indian civil society belong only to some groups (Chatterjee 2004).

The representatives of the citizens were indeed reformed in the campaign by the use and exchange of artefacts such as phrases and images. The representatives

decided who the targets were and worked on creating awareness among them. Through the one-sided method of conducting surveys on problematic targets and creating awareness, the categories of the surveyor/educator and the surveyed/educated were maintained. These set categories also precluded the campaign’s final success as a transformative activity, since the target was set from the beginning as categorically not part of civil society – those in need of awareness would always remain in need of awareness.

The situation, however, might not be as unambiguous. The difficulty the activists faced in Anjaria’s case was that they had to fight against not only the hawkers and the municipality, but also against the middle-class residents they meant to represent (Anjaria 2009). Similarly, in this campaign, the students who were supposed to be representative “citizens” understood themselves instead as good servants of the nation, and the tabloid itself positively accepted their self-image in the end.

When a student struggles to talk to “target” slum-dwellers politely, there is a possibility that the preset categories will be formed differently. By interacting with other artefacts and people, the liberal vocabulary used in civil society movements creates new forms and aesthetics of both inclusion and exclusion. This article has tried to illustrate one such moment.

NOTES

- 1 My attempt here is to apply the concept of aesthetics used by Marilyn Strathern (2005) and Annalise Riles (2000). Strathern (2005: 10) defines aesthetics as “the persuasiveness of form, the elicitation of a sense of appropriateness”. This helps us to consider the artefacts, forms or patterns themselves rather than the ideas or meanings behind them.
- 2 When the author explained that her study was about civil society in India during casual conversations with students, one student responded by talking about traditional festivals. Another took the author to a crematorium in the neighbourhood to help her understand civil society.

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