

Where is the Public Sphere?

Political Communications and the Morality of Disclosure in Rural Rajasthan

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The public sphere has been centre stage in celebrations of India's political triumphs. Leading commentators tell us that the astonishing post-independence surge of democracy has been contingent on the rise of a new kind of sociopolitical formation: the public sphere. This paper takes a closer look at the popular deliberative terrain in North India to question this claim. Drawing on research conducted in a provincial town in the North Indian state of Rajasthan, we see that where metropolitan political theorists see 'transparency' as promoting discursive and political possibilities, Rajasthani villagers see an exposure which prevents expression, communication and the making of political choices. In their view, it is secrecy and social seclusion that enable political interactions and elicit political judgments. 'The public sphere' is an unfit heuristic for locating popular politics within (and beyond) Rajasthan, where it obscures much more than it reveals.

Keywords: democracy, market, North India, political communication, public sphere, Rajasthan, secrets, transparency, vernacular politics

Disclosure is a social achievement. It is the outcome of communicative effort, not a natural or free-standing state in which people may simply happen to find themselves. All public things – statements, images, persons, acts – stand at the end of a transmission process; they have to be prefigured elsewhere, off stage, before they are put on display (Shryock 2004; also Herzfeld 1997). Public disclosure requires a dual will to reveal and receive revelation. Extreme publicity, on which the culture of transparency, auditing and mass media now insists, assumes the presence of that will and the espousal of a particular set of values that privilege revelation. This sprawling contemporary 'audit culture' (Strathern 2000) requires people to eschew secrecy and social difference in favour of visibility and social inclusiveness, the values of the public sphere as advanced by metropolitan theorists and activists of the political Good Life.

This essay takes its readers from the hub of metropolitan political theory to a very different world – the marketplace of a provincial town I shall call Fararpur in the North Indian state of Rajasthan.¹ As in most rural townships in northern India, literacy is sparse, electrical supply unreliable, and access to the Internet available to

very few, making the bazaar the principal site for political negotiations. The bazaar is rural Rajasthan's homologue of the public sphere – a sociospatial location of popular political deliberation. It is the key local 'talking sphere' (e.g., Narayan 2011: xxv) where news, views and rumours circulate wildly, political alliances and careers are made and unmade, and political opinions and decisions take shape. This is where aspects of local democratic process, some of which may in the end reach public view (the calculus of party loyalties, voter turnouts and election results), are in fact configured.

But, as I will show, these apparent resemblances between bazaar and public sphere are misleading. The bazaar in Fararpur may look like the local equivalent of the public sphere – an arena for socially mixed and discursively open, critical debate. In practice it is nothing of the sort. For the residents of Fararpur, visibility and inclusion do not pave the way to effective political interaction. They do not think social openness and visibility successfully elicit and enable political views and decisions. On the contrary, visibility is a threat. Secrecy is the predominant value and seclusion the main force that structures discussions. Thus the logic of the public sphere is turned upside down. What metropolitan theorists of the public sphere see as the virtue of *transparency*, conducive to greater discursive and political possibilities, Rajasthani villagers treat as the threat of *exposure*, which inhibits expression, conversation and ultimately the making of political choice. Declarations made in the open are treated as slogans, not invitations to dialogue. Real conversations take place elsewhere: off display, behind closed doors.

India and the Idea of the Public Sphere

Leading commentators on Indian politics today applaud the verve with which Indian citizens embrace democracy, political activism, and institutions of civil society, among other goods of global political civilization (e.g., Khilnani 1997; Banerjee 2008; Kaviraj 2011). The post-independence surge of democracy on the subcontinent has been remarkable, perhaps even miraculous (Sen 2005; Guha 2007; Desai 2011). A country which a few decades ago was fragmented into myriad kingdoms, castes, sub-castes and sub-sub-castes, with people speaking different languages and venerating different gods every fifteen miles, has turned into a vastly energetic democratic state boasting almost a billion active voters. Voter turnouts on all levels consistently outdo those in most of Europe and the U.S., making Indian national elections the single largest organized event in the world. What is more, counter to all expectations, tribals, untouchables, ethnic minorities, villagers, and the urban poor vote no less enthusiastically than the middle classes, upper castes, townspeople, and urban elites (Yadav 2000). How did this happen? How could a society recently deeply divided so readily rise to the task of mass political participation which democracy sets?

There are no clear or comprehensive answers, but a general consensus has begun to emerge: at the base of India's democratic boom lies a tectonic shift in the structure of its society. Before, it was ordered hierarchically into unequal and interdependent status groups, known by old convention as 'castes', and the balance of political agency was heavily tilted toward those with status, money and power. The arrival of political modernity unsettled all this. Analysts tell us that provisions of equal citizenship and universal adult suffrage alone have mobilized unprecedented participation among

the poor, the marginal and the oppressed in domains of explicit political action (e.g., Narayan 2011). And such domains have grown. Since independence, India has been the site of a remarkable proliferation of mass protest movements, vernacular media (Rajagopal 2001; Neyazi 2011), political parties, and NGOs (which numbered 3.3 million in 2009) – the characteristic institutions of modern associational life we call ‘civil society’.² Such a society has been operating in a growing politically conscious, openly vocal and increasingly mixed sociopolitical arena, or the ‘public sphere’ (Sen 2005; Nussbaum 2007).³

The old logic of social difference has not altogether vanished, critics tell us: old castes have closed their ranks and new castes, caste associations and even conglomerate ‘super castes’ have emerged (e.g., Rudolph and Rudolph 1960; Michelutti 2007). But castes have gradually transformed from the ranked, interdependent communities of old into increasingly free-standing, internally mixed and egalitarian associations, akin to ethnic groups, competing for political and economic resources (Chandra 2004: esp. 47–51). In other words, caste has persisted more in form than substance, gradually displaced by miscellaneous mixed publics linked by political and economic concerns. This transformation is by no means complete,⁴ but the drastic changes have forced the old structures of social difference to buckle and fold under their weight.⁵

These accounts extend to India the story already told about Europe. Its most influential living narrator, Jürgen Habermas, proposed that the rise of democratic governance in eighteenth-century Europe was inexorably linked to the emergence of a bourgeois sociopolitical domain he called the ‘public sphere’.⁶ This new domain was a communicative space where people congregated to discuss shared concerns and potentially form collective judgments. Under feudalism, public disclosure was no more than a spectacle, as royals and aristocrats performed the dramas of grandeur before their subjects. In the emergent bourgeois order, publicity acquired a different sense, becoming the key aspect of political communications. The new public arena was a space where differences of status were suspended in favour of differences of opinion expressed in open and rational debate. Total discursive openness and rejection of status was initially no more than a bourgeois conceit. Locations of ‘public debate’ in early modern Europe – cafés and literary salons – were the exclusive haunts of the urban middle class. In time, however, the culture of publicity spilled out onto the street, where people of all classes increasingly gathered to voice their views, engage in debate and make collective political decisions. This seismic shift, Habermas tells us, shook European political life to its very foundations. Whereas previously social position determined political decisions, now it was the rational-critical arguments of open and mixed assemblies which formed the authoritative basis for political action and consent (Habermas 1962).⁷

Habermas’s case is not only historical, but also normative: the public sphere was as foundational to the rise of democracy in Europe as it continues to be around the world today. The logic of this claim is easy enough to follow. Democracy, as rule by the demos, is governance by the governed, whose political involvement requires discursive space. In today’s democracies, this space is formally provided by the institutions of universal adult suffrage and political representation. But for a democracy to flourish this is not enough. In its primal and ideal form, democratic governance relied substantially, as it should, on face-to-face debate of the kind once staged in ancient Athens, eighteenth-

century salons and nineteenth-century market squares. Most of today's democracies are at some remove from the ideal of direct and open deliberation, but the ideal remains the widespread basis for judgments about how far any given democracy succeeds or fails.

The ideal of complete social disclosure, which requires total social inclusion and visibility, is basic to the very idea of 'public' (or a public, or the public). Whether defined as 'the people as a whole' (a university, a nation, a state, the body politic, Christendom, or the human species); as property belonging to, or as those who are representatives of, this whole; as an audience of a play or a book; or as a public house, 'public' implies (1) total, undifferentiated inclusion and (2) wholly unobstructed visibility. These are the basic 'institutional criteria' of the public sphere, as described by Habermas, for whom whatever the 'size and compositions of their publics, the style of their proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations', the early public arenas were defined by their social inclusivity and discursive openness ([1962] 1989: 36ff).

The liberal theory of political emancipation elevates the virtues of inclusion and visibility to master principles of good governance – participation and transparency – which supposedly expand political possibilities and ensure better political outcomes for all. NGOs, watchdog organizations and the Occupy Movement protesters alike prescribe these principles as remedies for most political ills.

As a deliberative institution, the public sphere presupposes a theory of communication which describes a space completely open to debate and shaped solely by practical reason. In the public sphere the individual transcends society, as all social barriers are removed to allow the free flow of individual opinion. This picture of a communicative vacuum with no social divisions or interactional rules, filled with pure individual opinion, may strike a social scientist as odd. But for an individualist, it is precisely this picture which carries appeal.

The Marketplace and the Gaze

For ordinary Rajasthani villagers the word 'public', or rather its vernacular homophone *pablik*, carries a very different sense. First of all, it is never an adjective: linguistically, there are no public meetings, toilets or intellectuals in rural North India.⁸ Secondly, there is no vernacular 'private' to which *pablik* can be opposed. Anyone who has ever needed a public latrine while travelling in the region will readily perceive this linguistic and conceptual gap. Latrines are only one aspect of the general layout of North Indian towns and villages which strike a European visitor with the absence of what they recognize as public space. Few streets in northern India resemble the ordered, open spaces of European cities; most of them are chaotic, dirty and dangerous, open to everyone yet belonging to none. There are few places where one can congregate or even walk freely (pavements are a colonial introduction); pedestrians, rickshaw drivers and housewives, who sweep their rubbish out directly onto the street (where hardly anyone ever collects it), use streets as cesspits into which detritus can be freely disgorged. Homes, in contrast, are kept fastidiously clean at the street's expense, as much in small-town India as in its metropolitan centres (Rajagopal 2004). Only 'bazaar people' loaf about in the streets – uncouth youths, rickshaw drivers, beggars, and other riffraff. Respectable people move quickly and cautiously across roads from one familiar place to the next.

As a noun, *pablik* does not refer to any communicative sphere, but to a grand, external and perhaps even mystical force, an all-knowing source of authoritative knowledge which stands apart from society and above ordinary men. In rural Rajasthan, people imagine it as one of the constituent powers in the triumvirate of the Indian state: 'Public, Government and Administration' (*pablik, sarkār aur prashāsan*). Reporters and politicians who insist that India is governed by the 'public' confirm the popular sense of *pablik* as a discrete and distant entity. And in so doing they join political analysts in their celebrations of the rise of the Indian public sphere. Ordinary villagers also join in the festivities. If you asked them 'who governs India?', they might reply 'public, government and administration'. What will make much less sense to them is the idea that the villagers themselves are somehow included in this *pablik*, or a 'public' where their own expression, interaction and decision making really take place. Yet the lack of a vernacular word that may be neatly translated as 'public' (either as noun or adjective) need not prevent us from tracing the contours of its local sense.

Just as in Ancient Greece or in eighteenth-century Europe, in northern India the marketplace, the bazaar, is the ultimate 'public' environment; like the English term 'market', the word 'bazaar' refers both to a physical location and a conceptual space. In rural North India, any sizeable village or town must have a bazaar, the heart of its commercial and social activity. This is where farmers come to sell their produce and catch up on the latest gossip, gangs of boys roam in search of girls to ogle, public buses crowd at stations, sellers lounge in tea stalls, and politicians do much of their business. Conceptually, the bazaar is any space in principle available to all, where one can observe, and be observed by, anyone who happens to be there.⁹ The bazaar and the public sphere share two key characteristics: in principle, both are internally unstructured and wholly available to all. In everyday speech, the 'bazaar' refers not just to the marketplace as such but to the general chaos of life on the streets. Moral ambivalence over the bazaar is reflected in several Hindi phrases and words. A *bazārānī* is a 'loose woman' and unreliable rumour or corrosive gossip is commonly known as *bazāru chīz* (marketplace thing) or *bazār kī bāt* (marketplace talk).

Why is the bazaar such a disquieting place? Its real dangers are not the risks of slipping on cowpats, being bitten by dogs, or run over by a bus (real though these may be). Its menace is social, not physical. The marketplace threatens with its potential for complete openness. It threatens exposure. The very conditions that might appear to make it an ideal public space, alarm villagers in Rajasthan. Here total, unmitigated exposure is a threat and many ordinary villagers avoid excursions to the bazaar; when they do venture out, many prepare for the trip for days on end and go finally in trepidation and preferably in familiar company. One must emerge at one's best and the dressiness of the marketplace – the immaculately pressed (if tattered) shirts, the starchy whiteness of dhotis, the special brightness of turbans and saris, the oiled hair – communicates as plainly as anything that the marketplace is a stage. Because the stage is so completely exposed to promiscuous inspection, the performance must be tightly choreographed. Women lower their veils, children quiet down and the otherwise boisterous young boys from reputable families suddenly take on an air of poised maturity. The general rule for respectable people is that in the bazaar all personal

expression must be subdued: one must not speak much, gesticulate wildly, laugh loudly, or even smile broadly enough to show teeth.¹⁰

Why this apparent agoraphobia? Rajasthanis are not reclusive by custom or culturally taciturn but the permissiveness of the bazaar as a place changes all that. Instead of promoting expression, it gets in its way. And the extreme veiling vigilance among women in the bazaar is but one obvious expression of anxieties at unrestricted exposure. Appearances matter, particularly when close to home. To speak out in the open, at once to no one in particular and to everyone, is to speak out of turn. And casual visitors to the bazaar eschew speaking almost entirely, lest they say the wrong thing, in the wrong way, at the wrong time, to the wrong person, and reveal a lack of social competence – a vital virtue. This is what children and foreigners may do, not sane and respectable adults. In the words of a Fararpur vegetable seller, ‘only madmen babble in the bazaar’.

This attitude to public exposure may seem peculiar but all instances of speech are shaped minimally by considerations of speakers’ and listeners’ identities, their relations to one another, and the circumstances in which they take place (e.g., Goffman 1959; Hymes 1974). Whether, how and what one says is dependent on social context. This is as true of communication in Europe or the U.S. as in India or anywhere else. However intimate and comfortable the environment, there are always constraints on what can and cannot be said and prescriptions for what ought to be said, for what purpose and how. The Habermasian picture of opinion which is cleanly one’s own and flows unreservedly in the public domain suppresses all this and would sound peculiar to the residents of Fararpur, at ease with the thought that how people express their views, and indeed how they form their judgments, is socially embedded.

In the Bazaar

The marketplace is also a place of many opportunities. An entire class of men (they are mostly men) make being in the bazaar their principal business. Aside from the shopkeepers, most of these men are political entrepreneurs: party bosses and their acolytes, members of village councils, caste community leaders, village headmen, and other political fixers, pushers and go-betweens. Tea stalls, jewellery shops and tractor showrooms in the bazaar are usually full of such men sipping tea, chatting, watching. These men are not idling. They are doing important business, which we might call ‘politics’, although locally it is rarely called just that. The word ‘politics’, *rājñīti*, as circulated in official circles and the press, is both too vague and narrowly formal for an activity with such a vital presence in everyday lives. Usually it is simply called ‘business’, *dhandā*, the elusive yet all-pervading preoccupation of local aspiring men. Once one’s eye is attuned to its subtle movements, one can see it at work all around the bazaar.

Just what is this business? Whatever the aims of any particular political entrepreneur, the business of politics, as locally conceived, is essentially a communicative enterprise, perhaps better glossed as politicking. The bulk of political practice – what most politicians of all stripes spend most of their time doing – consists of negotiations to forge alliances with businesspeople, make deals with bureaucrats, arrange administrative favours, and secure electoral loyalties.¹¹ Naturally, people ‘talk politics’ in all sorts of

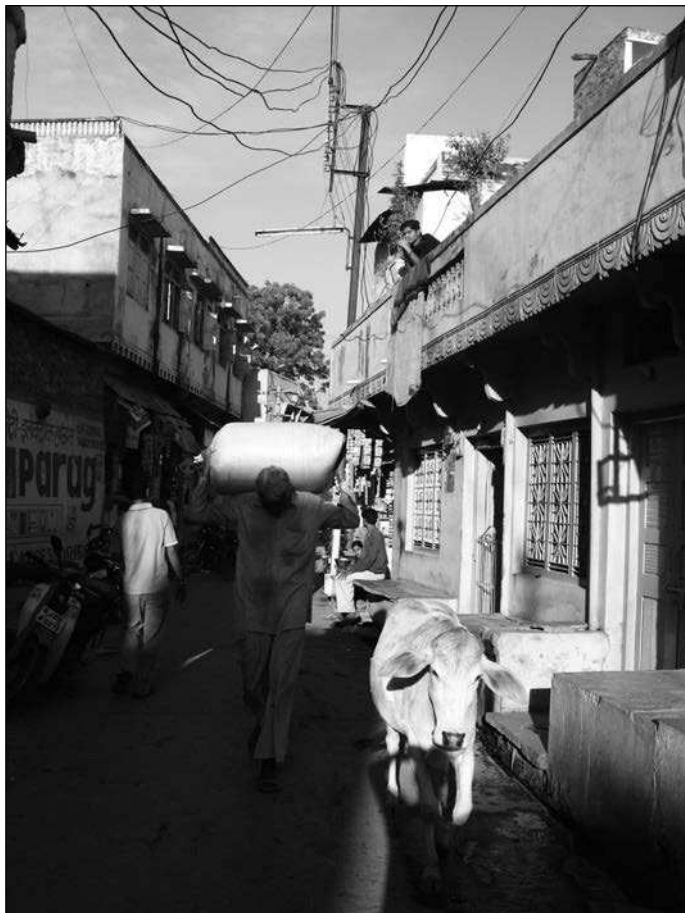


Figure 1: A street in the Fararpur bazaar

places: at homes, in temples, police stations and offices, and while working in the fields. But the marketplace is the real hub of political discussion, abuzz with talk of parties and candidates, rumours of village council politics, and chats that forge and break political coalitions and deals. This is where ‘talking politics’ turns from abstract reflection and idle rumour-mongering into focused discussions where political views and desires are forged and outcomes intermittently secured. This is as close as rural Rajasthan gets to late eighteenth-century European town squares, alive with face-to-face debate.

This claim is no contradiction of my argument thus far. If public exposure impedes expression, why should the bazaar, the most exposed public space, function as the hub of political communications? The contrast between bazaar as a *conceptual space* and as *physical location* is important. Whilst, in principle, the bazaar is a completely open space, as a location it is deeply divided (see Gell 1982; Yang 1998). People of respectable standing never just wander about it. They follow their own well-established routes. Only visitors from afar with no connections in town roam the streets and buy

things from whichever seller happens to offer better products or price. Anyone taken shopping in rural North India knows that the process follows social associations, not economic advantage. Your Indian host will take you not just to any shop, but to their own vegetable or bangle seller, sweets monger and tea stall. Political entrepreneurs who spend most of their waking hours in the bazaar do not mill in the open among the lowly and free-range 'market people'. Instead, they hide from sight in their own circles of associates and regular haunts, their 'stations'. As my research went on and as I gained a sense of the political topography of the marketplace, I realized that most cafés and shops in the bazaar teem with politicians.

In 2005, when I first did field research in Fararpur, I met a man I shall call Gopal. He is a Brahman by caste, a lawyer by profession and an owner of a tractor showroom. He is an important player in the local unit of the Janata Party (one of the two major national political parties at large at the time in Fararpur and Rajasthan) and is also involved in the local 'land mafia' (*bhūmī dal*), the local name for the loose cartel of wealthy and politically connected men who buy and sell land. The land mafia business is brutal, often extortionist, and Gopal certainly has a dark side. His son and several of his nephews are members of the Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu youth organization, which often provides the muscle required by the land mafia. But Gopal himself operates less through muscle than political acumen. Politically astute and witty, he was always instructive company, and I spent a great deal of time in the marketplace 'station' where he can be found throughout the day.

The station is a medicine shop run by his nephew. In most respects it is identical to a dozen others in the Fararpur market, if smarter: immaculately clean, centrally located and with a colour TV, it is pricier than most others and attracts a finer clientele. Like most other local shops, it is still a crammed little place, no more than four feet wide and receding several feet back from the street. It has a counter that faces the street and some storage space in the back, but most of the space is taken by a bench that stretches into the shop's depth and, although meant to seat no more than three men, usually bears at least five. Gopal's usual place is on the far end of the bench, where his figure is barely discernible in the darkness of the shop's interior, made blacker by the blazing light outside. I knew that on most days I could find Gopal in his station, but often walked past the shop, and sometimes peered right into it, but did not see him at all. For him and his friends this was a source of endless amusement: 'What, can't you see me, Asia [my local nickname]?' he would call out to me, chuckling: 'It is more difficult to see a Big Man than to see Lord Krishna himself.' I would confirm that he was indeed as magnificent as the God Krishna; he would laugh in response and carry on: 'Darkness, Asia, is where politics happens, and the bigger the politics, the darker the darkness.' Or: 'In politics, you never see what is actually going on ... what you see on the streets is not politics. It may be dirty, but it is not politics.' Gopal's witticisms were only ever half jokes. They point to something at the heart of local political communications: seclusion and the business of politics go hand in hand. Politics is quintessentially something that happens off-stage, behind screens, 'in the dark'. This may sound like spy novel talk, but there is more to it than the rhetoric of intrigue.

It is no coincidence that local political entrepreneurs haunt the interiors of shops, not the open space of the market square. Although most shops open directly onto

a thoroughfare, their contents are closely guarded and prying strangers who linger outside are briskly moved on. What goes on inside is not for public disclosure. As the Muslim butcher, whose eatery provides the local Muslim community leader's station, put it: 'We don't like all sorts of people hanging around here. This is a place for conversations (*bāt-bāṭchit*). It should stay closed.' Suitably enough, his establishment looks dark and cavernous, more like a Hindu temple than a mosque. Most politicians' haunts have this womb-like feel. Political entrepreneurs seek seclusion. They deal in conversations and conversations need screens.

Not everyone can hide within a shop. Only men of consequence, like Gopal, are so well positioned. Others spend their time in roadside teashops and snack stalls, open to the flow of all and sundry and full of younger folk of lower standing. Men of Gopal's stature rarely enter such dives. They have tea and snacks delivered to their stations. The teashop with all of its street traffic is still preferable to the wide-open places in the bazaar, where only the lowly mill. On closer inspection, however, even its most open areas are full of screens concealing conversations. What at first sight appears like a chaotic human mess is a very orderly and deeply divided interactional sphere. Whenever there is need for conversation, 'screens' go up. A wide repertoire of communicative means – oral, proxemic, commensal – is at hand to screen such discussions. The commonest type of enclosure is a formation seen throughout the bazaar: a tight huddle of men with their backs turned to the rest of the world. Another widespread communicative barrier is commensal. Wherever a group of men are seen drinking tea together, 'business' is afoot. Another tool for creating momentary enclosure is the cigarette. Whenever men wish to 'talk business', they share a cigarette, often lighting it for the others, to give a 'do not disturb' sign. Others simply leave the larger group to speak in confidence, a manoeuvre which might offend a Euro-American sensibility (it is rude to whisper in company), but a common and wholly unobjectionable practice in North India.

Seclusion is such a crucial condition for conversation and the ability to converse is such a key function of a political entrepreneur's life, that the degree of seclusion marks rank. The more important a man, the less available to the public gaze. The most important 'VIPs' (Members of Legislative Assemblies, party bosses, aristocrats) hide inside shops, behind doors and curtains of offices, beyond the tinted windows of their cars, only coming into full view on special occasions (major holidays, election campaigns). Even then they are usually ring-fenced from crowds by their henchmen.

This hierarchy of seclusion among politicians rests on the much more general value placed on secrecy or discretion in North Indian social life. Highness and hiddenness go hand in hand. In villages, this idea underpins the convention that higher castes veil more fully than lower castes.¹² It structures devotees' dealings with divinities in Hindu temples, where the idols remain screened from sight except for moments of *darshan* (holy vision), when Gods are unveiled before the crowds.

Politicians do appear before public audiences. But their public appearance is never the occasion for dialogue. The speeches they give from podiums are neither meant nor treated as invitations to dialogue or contributions to debate, but as sermons. At political rallies in Farapur and other cities and towns I have visited across northern India, people often sit with their backs to the stage. Few actively listen to the noises floating down from it, even if these are not distorted beyond comprehension by loudspeakers.

Most, in fact, neither understand the officious Hindi politicians use nor know who the speaker is. In any case, the content of such speeches hardly matters at all and most people treat them like the cacophony of party slogans blaring out by megaphones during elections. Many are corralled in such rallies by local politicians eager to display large crowds of voters to their superiors. Others come out of curiosity. Those who see political significance in attending the rallies do so to show loyalty and to receive the darshan of this or that VIP. The schedule list for the 2013 BJP electoral 'pilgrimage' (*yatra*) across Rajasthan lists the appearance of Party President, Vasundhara Raje, before the people as 'darshan'. One young friend in Jaipur explained: 'People come to political rallies to see the politicians. Their own [community leaders] explain why they should vote for him and they tell them to come [to the rally]. So, they come and see what sort of a man is he. Most of them don't even understand what he is saying.'

Substantial conversations which affect political choices take place off-display, behind closed doors, where discussions can range beyond slogans or polite conversation. The idea that discussions require enclosures – clearly defined circles of intimacy and trust, not a socially open arena – is clear and explicit in local imagination, in which conversation is only possible with two or three people, definitely not with five. Of course, most conversations are not literally limited to three people, but they are limited indeed. If you wish to step into a full teashop and start a discussion of politics (as I did many times), you will run into uncomfortable silence or declarations of generalities akin to political speeches. Occasionally, you may succeed in eliciting views. But if views clash, debates become quarrels, which must be smothered quickly lest they turn into brawls. At this point, you may be told: ask people separately, take them aside; only then will they tell you what they think. Political discussions require people to close ranks. If we wish to find a 'public sphere' – where people express political views, formulate judgments and make decisions – we need to look off-stage.

Consider a pair of sketches of what actually happens behind the scenes. They took place during elections to the State Legislative Assembly in 2008. At the time, the Assembly representative from Fararapur, whom I shall call Mr Kishan, was in his third term of office. He was a member of the Janata Party and belonged to the locally dominant farmer caste, who provided most of his vote bank. Over his last term in office, he had distanced himself from his constituents, losing much of his electoral clout, even with his caste. The Janata Party had to re-win voters' favour and Gopal was busily at work. While outside loudspeakers blared out party slogans and candidates marched through the town, Gopal stayed inside his station, which he scarcely left in the week before polling day. The party strategy was to build support for a handful of dummy candidates who could steal a few Congress votes.

A man of many trades and more connections, Gopal was well-suited for the job – to pull in votes. Leading up to elections, he stretched his web of connections to its full reach to net the maximum number of votes. Most politicians secure voters' favour by recruiting a hierarchy of political leaders who bring votes from 'their own' people. These may belong to caste and village councils, be large landholders, or influential or popular among their caste mates or in their villages. Some are heads of large families. All undertake to sway 'their people's' electoral choice in return for political favour, whether they bring several hundred votes or a handful. Gopal called on as many men

as he knew, filling his station from morning till night in the days before the elections. Many were disaffected farmers from Mr Kishan's caste whom he hoped to bring back into the fold. He promised that, if elected, the Party, if not Mr Kishan himself, would take their interests in hand. These were often men from the margins of the Congress vote bank, from whom he hoped to acquire votes for the dummy candidates. He assured them that, if their people helped Congress lose enough votes to put Janata on top, the Party would not fail to repay the debt. Gopal received each of these men individually. He worked hard and I doubt he slept that week at all.

Despite all the effort, the Janata candidate did lose, giving Gopal a moment for pause, which I crowded with my hoard of questions. Why did he not join processions on the streets and candidates on their podiums? Why hide away during such a vital moment in the campaign? Why hold individual instead of group meetings for such negotiations? And, if politics really happens off stage, not on it, as he assured me earlier, what are the public speeches and street parades for? This was his answer:

What you see on podiums is not politics. Just look who is at the rallies: women, young men ... The young men go there for a good party; they get booze and then go into the jungle to drink. Children love these; they run around with caps and stickers. They love all the noise. My wife loves these. She dresses up and goes there with all her friends to bring back all the gossip. But does anyone really talk politics there? These are just shows. Nobody ever decides anything there.

It was true that at rallies no one really 'talked politics'. Few listened and fewer argued or held forth about a political issue, figure or party in the way Rajasthanis in cities and villages do in chai shops and in the evenings at home. It is clear that, contrary to what Gopal claimed, public political events were certainly not inconsequential to 'real politics'. But, whatever such events were – exhibitions of loyalty, festivals, gossip swaps, or simply good parties where one could catch sight of local celebrities – they were not arenas for dialogue, deliberation or reasoned debate.

Open discussions are no more a feature of political communications in the town's back alleys and outlying villages than they are in the bazaar. Every village has what may look like public spaces – open platforms (*chabutarās*) and temple verandas where men congregate, as well as caste and village councils – but do not be fooled. In the past ten years of research in rural Rajasthan, I must have spent dozens of hours catching up on gossip on village platforms. Occasionally, a big man would hold forth with a sermon on the state of national politics, the price of onions or the fate of the universe. Occasionally, the audience was treated to two or three simultaneous speeches. Village councils, several of which I observed and which are supposed to be nodes of political debate, were also spaces of projection rather than of debate, where members announced decisions instead of putting forward questions and problems for debate.¹³ Decisions here, as in the run up to polling days, were reached in huddles and homes. This is also how Gopal's leaders operated: door-to-door and over cigarettes they lit for each cousin and neighbour they ran into on the side of the road. Gopal's 'real politics' was about loyalties – as he often said himself – not deliberation.

Beyond Fararpur

But if meaningful political communication is not meant for the market square and village council, what are we to make of the celebrated repertoire of public 'agitation' – *rokās*, *dhārnas*, *geraos*, *bandhs*, and *hartāls* – as central to the making of the Indian nation as they are to its politics today? As in Europe, the idea of populism in India immediately invokes images of mass protest, associated equally with the founders of the nation (Gandhi, Ambedkar) and its defenders today (Anna Hazare). Much has been written about the ideologues and formal ideologies of Indian public protest, but we lack ethnography to elucidate how and why ordinary Indian citizens across the spectrum of contexts and causes organize themselves. Public protest is not evenly distributed around the country: it has hotbeds like Delhi, Calcutta or Darjeeling, where street protests have become routine, but there are other places like rural Rajasthan, Bihar or Madhya Pradesh, among many others, where they hardly ever occur. In Fararpur, as in all other rural towns I visited in Rajasthan, most public demonstration is confined to party rallies (mostly at election times), not protests. And the general attitude to such events is pretty well aligned with Gopal's: they are displays not of opinions shared by demonstrators but of loyalties to political parties, organizations or leaders. Some may suspect that an anthropologist working in the backwaters of the most culturally conservative Indian province is ill-placed to comment on cultures of mass protest. But most of India still lives in villages¹⁴ and, if we wish to see widespread local attitudes in this regard, and not merely the *hartāl* cultures of Darjeeling or Delhi, the back row may not be a bad place from which to view it.

Beyond Rajasthan, consider the view of a young woman from a village in Western Uttar Pradesh whom I met on a road construction site in North Delhi, a city perennially ablaze with public protests. In her words: 'Political leaders (*netās*) organize strikes (*hartāls*), people go to these to show the leaders that they are their men. Sometimes they also get paid; sometimes they are afraid of *goondas* (gangsters). That is why people go.' This was also a commonly held understanding among students in the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur, who saw student protests as the stuff of student union politics and competition among its leaders, not expressions of ordinary students' views (for a parallel from Uttar Pradesh, see Jeffrey 2010). Or listen to the words of a Delhi University student: 'Public agitations are just about politics, they don't have much to do with what ordinary people think. It's all about loyalty to your party leaders. Very few protesters have their own opinions. These things are not about ideals, they are about politics only.' Not everyone is so sceptical, but the view, from Fararpur to Jaipur and the University of Delhi, is clear: public demonstrations do not, overall, contribute to political debates.

On India's independence, Ambedkar complained that the plebeian masses occupying the newborn nation had no 'constitution consciousness' to make of them proper citizens and political agents. Today, the growing literature on popular politics in India assures us that the masses have now acquired this consciousness, abandoning centuries of indigenous bemusement for the true beliefs of Ambedkar, Habermas and Amartya Sen. To a large extent, the source of this view is indeed empirical: most research on Indian popular politics centers on formal political institutions and processes like elections, or on political activists, and on NGOs. Many of the 'people's voices' are employees

of organizations which orientate themselves, sympathetically or adversarially, towards the state. Their conclusions are endorsed by the most influential political theorizing emanating from Columbia, Harvard, or Cambridge, where the cream of India's social and intellectual elites are now to be found. Off the beaten track, such judgments sound far less convincing. Ordinary villagers who speak the vernaculars (*kharī bolī*), and still constitute most of India's population, do not for the most part speak the 'language of officialdom' (*sarkārī bolī*) and do not necessarily espouse the ideology it reflects. This is not to say that terms from *sarkārī bolī* – democracy, public sphere, civil society, citizenship, human rights, and so on – are absent from everyday speech, but their meanings are often drastically transformed in the vernaculars. A proper map of the vernacular language of formal governance is yet to be plotted, but my sketch of the term *pablik* gives a sense of the gap dividing official and vernacular political discourse. Resilient beliefs about communications, politics and the nature of political debate do not easily yield to commitments to the national constitution or global principles of good governance. This is not to say that nothing has changed since 1947, but if we wish to get a better sense of the distinctly Indian modes and spaces of demotic political assertion and debate, we need to look to the demos itself for answers. Its voice is easily drowned out by noisy celebrations of India's political modernity, making it all the more urgent to listen more closely.

One may wonder whether the culture of discursive concealment, which I describe, is confined to the backwaters of rural India, still not fully part of the global ecumene of public disclosure. Reports from the other India – the India of aggressive mass mediation, electronic governance and Internet hype – suggest otherwise. As William Mazzarella argues, this 'transparent' India is no less full of opacities and enclosures than the marketplace of Farapur (2006). Orientation toward concealment rather than unremitting publicity is not a peculiar feature of Rajasthan or northern India, but resonates with experiences of popular political life across the globe. Peter Lienhardt, whose ethnography describes the Arabian marketplace (*suq*) as a place where people shy away from exposure and hold political debates behind closed doors, within closed circles of associates, might be writing about Rajasthan (2001: 52–53). As might Michael Herzfeld (1997), writing on Greece. Insistence on discursive secrecy is not confined to the Middle East or the backwoods of Europe; it structures equally the heartlands of the public sphere: Western Europe and the United States. There it is less openly acknowledged. The public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe was as much a secret of the bourgeoisie as any place of debate in the *suq* or the *bazaar*. Discursive openness and social tolerance in the West today do not guarantee, but often thwart, reasoned debate (Strathern 2006). Communicative enclosures seem integral to Western cultures of publicity and mass mediation. Disclosure demands, indeed depends on, enclosures from which to emerge.¹⁵

The Very Idea of the Public Sphere

The novelty of mass mediation technologies and the speed of global communication prompts us to think about global modernity in equally novel ways. New kinds of ethnography and fresh analytical concepts, we are often told, are needed to study 'global

communities' connected by discourses of nationalism, telecommunication networks, or transnational commercial, political and cultural flows. Political modernity's shibboleths like the 'public sphere' readily present themselves as ideal heuristics for social life today. Criticisms of the neoliberal vision of human society thus inadvertently endorse it. The success of Habermas's idea of the public sphere is symptomatic (as well as generative) of the current habit of treating neoliberal sound bites as categories of analysis. Habermas convinced social scientists that post-1945 modernity made a very singular type of community – bound by commitment to discursive openness and social inclusiveness – blossom suddenly across the world. Many have felt uneasy at the reproduction of this European bourgeois conceit in reports on the rest of the world. Much has been written about alternative public spheres: 'vernacular', 'subaltern', and 'intimate', as well as 'postpublics' and 'counterpublics'.¹⁶ For all the well-documented variation in the social location of these public spheres, and the communicative styles and discursive techniques operating within them,¹⁷ the term itself persists.

The public sphere is a sleight of hand. The trick begins with collapsing two discrete objects – a spatial location and a social body – into a single phenomenon. The public sphere refers both to a spatiotemporal location where discussions may happen and to a particular kind of collectivity, constituted through discussion: 'the public'. When the two fold into one, magic happens. The magician can invert the causal relationship between the two or represent either one as the other without the audience even noticing. In the story Habermas tells about early modern Europe, the cafés and salons came to be defined as 'public' spaces for political debate in specific socioeconomic circumstances, including the political aspirations of the bourgeoisie. Here the site was determined by a distinctive emerging notion of collectivity: a politically minded community of individuals bound by rational-critical debate. Habermas's case is not only historical, but also normative, and it is the normative case that retains momentum in the concept's circulation today. When the historical case becomes normative, the causal relationship between the public sphere as spatial location and as social body is reversed. The space itself becomes the force that shapes collectivity. Communities of rational-critical individuals form naturally if the appropriately open spaces – market squares, newspapers, chat rooms, and so on – are put in place. But if we return to its historical context, sites like cafés became part of the public sphere only insofar as they were thought to promote a particular style of communication and constitute a particular type of community.

The suitability of any setting for discussion depends on how people conceive disclosure: where it is possible, appropriate or necessary, and whether and in what forms it achieves successful political communication, action and outcomes. In principle, anyone should be able to speak with equal freedom from a scaffold, a theatre stage or a street corner. But they don't. There are no physical conditions preventing Indian villagers from engaging in a free and unstructured debate right in the open. But they don't. On the contrary, the more open a space, the less can safely be said within it. Here full disclosure is neither the precondition for discussion nor its aim. Instead, disclosure is a carefully managed process which unfolds incrementally, as things are revealed to one closed circle at a time. Instead of the atomized mixed collectivities, there are relationally situated and tightly structured interactive circles where discussions are very

far from the Habermasian zero-gravity zones of rational thought held together by ‘the forceless force of a better argument’ (1970: 137).¹⁸

If the ‘public sphere’, as spatial location and social body, differs so much around the globe, where then should we expect to find it? And should we look for it at all? As a vague and general reference for any site of popular political communication, the ‘public sphere’ does little analytical harm. But since most people everywhere usually come together in one or another way to voice, debate and authorize political choices, it adds little. It has analytical force only as a term of art: a distinct notion of a sociospatial location organized through the values of inclusiveness and visibility. When used in this way, as it usually is, the term obscures more than it reveals, causing us to look in the wrong places for the wrong things.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Rhodes Trust; the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research; Wolfson College, Oxford; the Oxford Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology; King’s College, Cambridge; Kyoto University; and the European and British Research Councils for their support. The paper gained from discussions at the Kyoto University Center for the Study of Contemporary India and the Magic Circle Seminar in Cambridge, and from exchanges with Paul Dresch, Piers Vitebsky, Julie Kleinman, Andrew Shryock, and especially John Dunn. My greatest debt is, as ever, to my hosts and interlocutors in Rajasthan.

Notes

1. This essay draws on twenty months of field research in ‘Fararpur’, conducted between 2005 and 2008 and in Jaipur in 2013. Fararpur is a medium-sized market town in southeastern Rajasthan, with a population of c. 40,000.
2. Partha Chatterjee replaces the bourgeois concept of ‘civil society’ with ‘political society’, which he defines as a subaltern sphere of political action not confined to civic norms or law (1997, 2004: 27–51). Despite a shift in class sympathy, ‘political society’ replicates the basic shape of civil society: it is a socially mixed and open deliberative domain. It is, in effect, civil society for subalterns.
3. The idea of the public sphere has come to become so indispensable for understanding Indian democracy, that a Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, has been driven to make a historically speculative case for the existence of an ancient, if ethereally situated, South Asian culture of rational, public debate as a forerunner of political modernity (2005).
4. A large number of Indian citizens remain just as politically excluded as they were before independence, if not more (Chatterjee 2004; Kaviraj 2010).
5. Studies which argue for the decline of caste as hierarchy are too numerous to name individually. Representative works include Bêteille (1965), Kothari (1970), Harriss (1982), Frankel and Rao (1989–90), Fuller (1996), Panini (1996), and Seth (1999). For a recent overview of this literature, see Manor (2010).
6. Although there were others who contemplated open deliberative spheres before Habermas, most notably Immanuel Kant (1788), the phrase ‘public sphere’ (Öffentlichkeit) comes from Habermas.
7. Habermas has written a great deal about public deliberation and democratic process. But since this essay is not about Habermas and concerns him only insofar as he launched the concept of the public sphere into global circulation, I confine my references to his seminal *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere* (where he first developed the concept).

8. There are Hindi synonyms to the *pablik*, including *jan*, *janatā* or *lok* ('people', 'the people' or 'folk'). But these have a heavy flavour of the 'government language' (*sarkāri bolī*) and are almost never used in casual conversation.
9. On this in Ancient Greece and beyond, see Geuss (2003).
10. There is another side to exposure in the bazaar, which can thrill as much as it can intimidate. The bazaar is titillating to many young people. For them, its promise of promiscuity holds a kind of hypnotic lure.
11. A full discussion of the types of exchanges or 'deals' which preoccupy local political entrepreneurs is beyond this paper. For work on this, see Anjaria (2009), Jeffrey (2002), Berenschot (2010, 2011), Piliavsky (2011), and Witsoe (2012).
12. This structure of veiling is most visible among women, but it applies correspondingly to men: traditionally, Brahman and Rajput men have been much more covered, wearing longer tunics and loincloths, and larger turbans. Men of lower standing wore less, often under pressure from status superiors.
13. A fuller engagement in the discussion of cultures of debate in Indian *panchāyats* is beyond the scope of this article and will be pursued elsewhere.
14. According to the 2011 *Census Report*, out of 1.21 billion Indian citizens, 833 million, 69 per cent, still live in villages.
15. See Shryock (2004), Graham (2005), Yurchak (2006), Ssorin-Chaikov (2008), Graan (2010).
16. On the 'vernacular public sphere', see Eickelman and Anderson (1999), Emirbayer and Sheller (1999), Hauser (1999), Asad (2005) and Smith (2007). In the Indian context, see Naregal (2001), Orsini (2002), Bate (2009, 2010), Narayan (2011), and Mantena (2013). In Indianist scholarship, this work appears in the context of a more general increase of interest in 'vernacular' forms of political modernity (Tanabe 2007; Michelutti 2008). On the 'intimate' public sphere, see Berlant (1997); on 'counterpublics', Fraser (1990), Negt and Kluge (1993), Warner (2002) and Hirschkind (2006).
17. See Cody (2011) for an overview of this literature.
18. Thanks to Jonas Tinius for this citation and its translation from the German.

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