



# Bazaar aesthetics: On excess and economic rationality

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## Abstract

For more than a century, social theoretical writings on consumer culture and commodity aesthetics have concentrated on the world of capitalist commodities and commercial spaces: on brands, shopping malls and global media culture. Popular commodity aesthetics have had a marginal presence in the literature. However, today, as the popular masses are entering commercial culture to an unprecedented extent, through cheap electronics, ubiquitous internet connectivity and accessible knock-offs, popular commodity aesthetics have increased in importance. In this article, I use fieldwork in Delhi's electronics bazaars to develop an inside perspective on the popular aesthetic of the bazaar. I argue that bazaars are characterized by excess: the excess of a seemingly chaotic architecture, household objects, and unhindered sociality. The excess is not simply a symptom of an underlying irrationality. It is deeply embedded in the social and economic life of bazaars and contributes towards the ability of small-scale commerce to endure and survive.

## Keywords

aesthetics, bazaars, commons, excess, piracy, rationality

In July 2018, I met Sanjay at Nehru Place. He was at his usual corner, next to a pillar with Shiva's image attached to it. I began to recognize Sanjay's spot by the pillar and his black duffle bag filled with pirated games and software. That day, we spoke about his business and the problems he is facing with his trade and plans. While the conversation was going on, I could not help but notice the pattering of the rain that interrupted our conversation. The dripping came from a leak in the roof and a small puddle formed in front of us. Our conversation adjusted to the noise as we kept our feet out of the dripping water.

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Over the years, whenever I visited the three marketplaces in Delhi where I did my field-work, I became aware of their particular aesthetic. Sometimes it was in the background, as in the case of the conversation I had with Sanjay in the summer of 2018. At other times, it came to the fore, becoming part of, and often playing into, the ongoing commerce. It is not for nothing that most classical descriptions of bazaars have alluded to their aesthetic elements. In Geertz's (1979) account of the suqs in Morocco, these places' unique aesthetic came alive through the wide diversity of goods sold, in his case, goods as varied as pharmaceuticals and 'prostitutes'. In his description of a north Indian marketplace, Fox (1969: 127) refers to the 'seemingly unrelated kinds of commodities: a bizarre combination of saleables in the same shop'. In the present day, street businesses mirror the aesthetic of traditional marketplaces, with a wide range of commodities and a cacophony of sights and sounds (Rajagopal, 2001).

In many of these accounts, the aesthetic dimension appears separate from the people and practices that constitute the bazaars. It is as if bazaars naturally appear a certain way, and not much consideration is given to why a particular aesthetic has come to define bazaar-like places. Dominant aesthetic descriptions of bazaars often make them exotic or openly rebellious places. For instance, in the 19th century, the charity bazaars in Soho were described as a refuge for sorcery coming from the East (Dyer, 1991), a trope that Said (1978) pointed out developed from a colonial construction of the East as an inferior and somewhat morally ambiguous place. Colonial writings about bazaars in India had a similar formulation when the question of the morality of bazaars was substituted by another type of framework – of looking at them as eternal places. In this depiction, bazaar aesthetics were a 'reiteration of an earlier description' and were seldom about detailing what was happening in front of one's eyes (Pinney, 1995: 96).

If we focus on a contemporary rendition of bazaars, in the literature of the digital commons they became a metaphor for the open and participatory culture of knowledge production (Raymond, 1999). Even when the focus has been on physical bazaars *per se*, a sustained account of their aesthetic component has been missing. In the academic literature, particularly in economic sociology (Aspers, 2011) and anthropology (Geertz, 1963), bazaars emerged against a more economics-based understanding of a market or a firm. With this emphasis, the aesthetic element did not get full consideration. One exception has been the literature on piracy in a postcolonial context. Many of these works have emphasized the bazaars' aesthetic presence through a subterranean media reality of popular lives (Larkin, 2004; Sundaram, 2010).

Overall, the theoretical and analytical focus on bazaar aesthetics has been skewed. This neglect perhaps stems from how mass aesthetics developed as a controversial project in the 20th century. The critical take on aesthetics was created as part of the postmodern drive to explore the chaotic and unorthodox potential of the human condition. One can see the postmodern turn as a resistance to decades of European history, where the modern aesthetic of disciplining and deference reinforced some of the most violent forms of oppression (Harvey, 1991; Jameson, 2015). Classical writers on mass aesthetics, like the Weimar republic theorist Siegfried Kracauer, along with his contemporaries in the Frankfurt School, elaborated on the shortcomings of mass aesthetics. Siegfried Kracauer's idea of the 'mass ornament' alludes to the dangers that emerge from the mass's readiness to participate in a spectacle. He writes: 'The masses are forced to see themselves everywhere (mass

gatherings, mass pageants, etc.); thus, they are always aware of themselves, often in the aesthetically seductive form of an ornament or an effective image' (Kracauer, 1995: 62). His famous reference to the American 'Tiller Girls' became a way to illustrate how masses were experts in perfecting a bodily discipline that enabled them to become objects of capitalism and political agendas.

The problematic aspect of mass aesthetics stood in contrast to the philosophical and liberating potential of aesthetics; aesthetics as an exploration in the field of art (Marcuse, 1978). As a product of art, aesthetics is a creative exercise of representing beauty and the symmetry of nature and capturing the 'aura' of human creative excellence (Benjamin, 1969). Seen in this light, aesthetics can alter human existence by lifting banal sensory experiences to a more refined and contemplative state. Instead, aesthetics as a process, or what Mandoki (1995) describes as 'prosaic aesthetics', is about investigating ordinary life as an aesthetic project. Such an approach brings into play diverse objects, bodily demeanour and architectural 'honky tonk' (Venturi, 1966) elements. Popular marketplaces everywhere embody a prosaic aesthetic, whether in the lives of street vendors in Chinatown in Vancouver (Pottie-Sherman, 2013), the hustle and bustle of makeshift kiosks in Indonesia (Yatmo, 2008), or the constant haggling of the peasants in the Caribbean (Mintz, 1973) and Morocco (Geertz, 1978). This article goes into more depth regarding some of the tropes of mass marketplaces – crowds, gossip, and everyday objects – and analyses how these aesthetics interact with the vendors' and traders' lived universe in popular marketplaces. Bazaar aesthetics, in particular, have more of an ontological preoccupation with the role that sights, sounds, smells and objects play in everyday life.

The article's focus has been to detail a life that exists outside, or rather, despite, the presence of a dominant aesthetic in cities. The article shows that the fundamental problem that bazaar actors face is not with the lived aesthetic universe, but their physical landscape and commercial enterprises coming under the purview of a 'bourgeois environmentalism' of middle-class residents and urban planners (Baviskar, 2003). Bourgeois environmentalism has been led by middle-class residents' welfare associations in Delhi, whose ideas of the city emphasize order and discipline; the temporary arrangements that bazaars encourage have proved an eyesore for such a vision. Nevertheless, bazaar aesthetics continue to be a signature of ordinary lives, where commerce and sociality develop a unique relationship to temporality and spatiality. Unlike places of capitalist consumption, such as malls and shopping centres, bazaars spill over to the outside of the marketplace and this relationship is temporally governed. There are days when certain kinds of encroachment make an appearance while on other days, bazaars might withdraw to their innermost parts. Bazaar excess exhibits the possibility of everyday commerce to incorporate spaces outside the physical boundary of the marketplace. Such spillover happens as bazaars work with constraints of other kinds: not everyone who comes to the marketplace has the resources to rent a shop. It is convenient for individual traders to conduct daily trade on pavements adjacent to the main marketplace.

The excess is calibrated into the everyday economy of trade. Throughout the article, we see how bazaar excess is different from the excesses of capitalist consumption – the former starts from a lack (Ledeneva, 2008). The latter manages excess to create a more selective urban experience.

The article focuses on a neglected field in cultural studies – the aesthetics of bazaars – at a time when the main focus is on capitalist consumer cultures and branded modernity. In practice, a branded consumer lifestyle affects only an elite minority in the Global South and most people obtain their consumer items from street-level bazaars. By detailing ordinary aesthetics, this article offers an alternative perspective on city life. It shows a somewhat different rationale of aspiration and accumulation to a capitalist one. Throughout the article, we see how bazaars develop a unique relationship with the aesthetic universe in which they are enveloped, which is at the same time different from capitalist consumer spaces, as it is closer to the consumer demands of ordinary people. The importance of cheap and cheerful goods, chaotic architecture, and decadent spaces is a stark contrast to the temples of capitalist consumption, branded products, orderly shopping spaces and disciplined consumer subjects. The article delves into the particularities of a bazaar aesthetics to frame it as an important component of an urban experience that touches a wide variety of lives.

### **A note on the fieldwork**

The empirical material for this article comes from a 16-month long ethnography in Delhi's three electronic marketplaces: Lajpat Rai Market, Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place. Located in central Delhi, Palika Bazaar is a retail market for electronics, as well as garments, books and toys, and so on. Nehru Place, situated in south Delhi, is primarily a computer retail and hardware market. I did a year-long ethnography in these marketplaces between September 2012 and 2013. I have continued to visit these places over the years; the most recent visit was in July 2018. In total, I have conducted 38 interviews among traders in the Lajpat Rai Market and Palika Bazaar, and 50 interviews among street vendors in Nehru Place. All interviewees were men between the ages of 19 and 55. Although consumers, distributors and importers were part of the ethnography, this article focuses on the lived world of the traders and street vendors, as they spent the maximum amount of time in these spaces, and it is their voices that will be highlighted. The focus of the ethnography has been to study the marketplaces through rituals of commerce and sociality. This has meant that a considerable amount of time in the field went into recording the constant 'higgling and haggling', and the rhythm of a marketplace when business was slow. A range of methods came into use to map the different activities in the market. Intensive interviews were carried out when traders had time to focus on my questions. A significant part of the fieldwork went into observing transactions and also taking part in conversations between the traders, customers and bystanders. Overall, the data was gathered from semi-structured interviews, observations and casual conversations in order to get an overview of life in Delhi's three marketplaces.

Throughout the article, I use the term 'bazaar' and 'marketplace' interchangeably to emphasize that Delhi's electronic market place is a particular type of commercial place, where together with face-to-face trade, a feature of the daily marketplace (Braudel, 1977), there is information asymmetry, a lack of formal 'market devices', and bargaining exists as a model of price setting, all of which fit into the anthropological definition of bazaar-level commerce (Anderson, 2019; Geertz, 1978).

## Understanding Delhi's bazaars in the overall aesthetics of the city

Regarding Delhi bazaars in relation to the city's physical geography, and historically, they have changed tremendously, both in their physical layout, and contributions to the economy. In the Mughal era and the British colonial contexts, bazaars formed part of the local and national commerce through a circuit of *haats*, fairs and *mandis* (Bayly, 1983). Simultaneously, bazaars were part of globalized trade networks via coastal trade, connecting primarily to the Middle East, Europe and Africa (Roy, 2013). In the late 19th century, bazaars formed part of the capital market through practices of speculation (Ray, 1999). After India's independence, traditional bazaars acquired a more defined role in the city's geography through their customer base. These bazaars – which formed a mainstay of the commercial landscape – gradually began to cater to the country's lower middle-class and economically disadvantaged consumers (Deka, 2016).

There has been a strong resentment expressed in the academic literature at seeing Delhi develop into a faceless functional city where traditional livelihoods are fading away. For instance, Ghertner's (2015) book, *Rule by Aesthetics*, argues that the bourgeoisie formulates a 'common denominator' when legitimizing slum demolition and evictions. The story that Delhi encountered as it developed into a global city is the same as elsewhere. Street vendors and peddlers worldwide routinely have to negotiate their place of work as city spaces become more regimented and uniform. Notably, in postcolonial cities, intrusive state planning and, more recently, private capital-led infrastructure, are superimposed on diverse and, at times, pre-capitalist and 'provincial' ways of life.

Lajpat Rai, Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place were part of the project of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, of creating functional places. One of the principal architects of Delhi's 1962 Master Plan, Jagmohan, imagined Nehru Place thus:

It will really be a focal point of cultural synthesis and crucible of intellectual ferment from which will radiate new ideas and new thoughts. On piazzas, Tamilians and Kashmiris, Punjabis and Gujratis, Biharis and Bengalis, will rub shoulders with one another, exchange glances, and make friends; in its coffee houses and restaurants, poets and writers will gather from all parts of India, bubbling with passion and poetry, and engaging in animated discussions; and on its theaters and community halls will appear musicians and artists from all States and regions, presenting different facets of our life and society. The new centre will truly be a confluence of our diversities, cross-roads of our country, harbinger of cultural synthesis and national integration for which Pt. Nehru worked all his life. (Sundaram, 2010: 100)

Nehru Place, at present, does not have any of the refined characteristics that Jagmohan proposed. The rows of buildings with large open spaces have a piazza-like feel. However, the buildings have not seen a fresh coat of paint for some years. Instead of the bohemian artsy place of Jagmohan's imaginings, the walls are covered in spit and street vendors congregate against *gutkha*- (tobacco infused betel nut) stained pillars. There is a chaotic mash-up of wires, as several shops steal electricity from the central line. There are water leaks and rubbish gathered all around the market.

If we focus on Palika Bazaar as well, the mismatch between state plans and people's practices is again evident. Established in the 1970s by the New Delhi Municipal

Corporation, Palika Bazaar represented India's dream of high modernism. The dome-shaped underground market was the first air-conditioned market in India. It had multiple entrances and going down the well-manicured lawns to the rows of shops beneath was an experience in itself. Indeed, in its first years, for most Indians, and people living outside Delhi, Palika was more than a marketplace. Tourists who visited the place got a taste of the country's vision of modernity.

After the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, Palika lost its novelty. The state-led modernizing project gave way to private and corporate actors. Instead of mass-based commercial complexes, upscale malls dotted the city's skyline (Fernandes, 2006). Globalization opened a floodgate of possibilities for new business ventures; an air-conditioned underground market like Palika Bazaar was not liberalization's poster child. Today's Palika Bazaar reeks of dampness. The air-conditioning breaks down quite often. Wire connections are loose, and there are occasional blackouts. Even with the air-conditioning working, without proper ventilation, the air was hot and humid. Further, there are leaks from the air vents. To avoid puddles, traders put buckets underneath the leaking pipes.

A certain type of decay resulting from state neglect is a characteristic feature of the Lajpat Rai Market. The market was built to host Sikh and Hindu refugees after the partition of India in 1947. Today, the market is in decline and, with the extension of Delhi's metro line, blue fences blocked the market's once magnificent view of the Red Fort. As far as one can see, there are lines of fencing, with only a peephole to see the workers and machines on the other side. Cut off from a historical site that represented the best of Mughal architecture, the sensory experience of Lajpat Rai is throngs of shops in narrow lanes in front of one's eyes.

The modernist architectural journey of bazaars in Delhi is similar to that of popular marketplaces across the globe. At a certain point, more enduring ties and traditional forms of life became neighbours of orderly consumer havens. Street vending and bazaar commerce became 'out of place' elements, and a 'nuisance' (Bob-Milliar and Obeng-Odoom, 2011). The capital-rich pockets of a city multiplied to the extent that the chaotic and messy assemblages of the bazaars became an eyesore to as far as city planners were concerned.

Stories about building walls to hide slums or removing beggars and kiosks from the streets are good examples of the contrasting aesthetic universes of high-rise consumerism and the streets. The antagonism is seen in relation to major global sporting events, when the host country puts on a show of removing unpalatable elements from strategic locations. For instance, in the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics (Bowater, 2016) and the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games (Burke, 2010), state actors took hurried measures to remove 'disorderly' lives from international visitors' sight.

## **Learning to live in 'capitalist ruins', the art of surviving in a messy architecture**

Delhi's electronic bazaars are symptomatic of how ordinary people survive on derelict state infrastructure. None of the bazaars lived up to the expectation of being ideal consumer spaces, which includes the orderly display of commodities and becoming centres of cultural exchange. Even though bazaars were initially seen as places to educate

consumers on modern subjectivity, discipline and decency, those ideas started to crumble as ordinary people's lives, affected by national adversities became focused on more basic survival concerns. In recent decades, bazaars have learned to exist in the decaying architecture of the 1970s state projects. At the same time, they are coping with the competition of capitalist consumer spaces, such as upscale malls. One way the bazaars have continued to keep their hold on the urban consumer is by using the excess around them. The excess, created by damaged edifices and ad-hoc arrangements, allows the mushrooming of new economic activities. As the edifices became unstable and scaffolding structures emerged, it was difficult to distinguish new commercial spaces from encroachments. Lajpat Rai Market, as a marketplace, does not have a fixed boundary. This has to do with the physical layout of the market. It is situated on an elevated plane. Some stairs go up to the market and below them is a footpath that connects the marketplace to the main road. The main building is single-storied and meanders into a number of interior corridors and lanes. There is a passage in front of the shops for the easy movement of people.

The physical layout of Lajpat Rai makes it easier for the traders to create economic opportunities outside of the designated shops. Today, there are several temples in the marketplace. Other extensions gradually came in the way of tarpaulin roofs covering the passage and open space outside the marketplace. This development brought space under commercial activities for the commuting traders, who bring their goods or tools each day. A simple bench and table with a bunch of everyday tools were sufficient for a repairperson to have a small trade in the passage. It was not that these transgressions never ran into trouble with state authorities. There were times when such encroachments were caught on the authorities' radar and there were threats about legal recourse. In most cases, these encroachments were temporary, built with everyday objects and tools. Even if a shop had to let go of additional commercial space, they did not lose much in terms of investment. Often, heavy rains determined the future of a makeshift shop. The flexible relationship of the *bazaaris* to their physical environment is not unique to Delhi. Yatmo (2008) describes a similar relation that street vendors in Indonesia had with the marketplace and the surrounding street. Particularly with semi-permanent structures, such as kiosks, mats, and tents, they easily appear and disappear.

Palika Bazaar has a history of dealing with excess. Originally, the Delhi municipal authority subsidized shop rent to help ordinary traders in finding a spot in the marketplace. A system of subletting developed over the years. The person whose name the shop was registered under made a lot of money by renting out the shop to other traders. This has resulted in many traders sharing the same shop to divide the cost. A single shop now accommodated many petty businesses selling wristwatches, spy cameras, mobile covers, toys and video games. The excess of trading did not stop at the shop. Many shopkeepers extended their businesses into the courtyard. Pirated DVDs/CDs of games and movies lined the exterior walls of the shops. Almost every pillar had objects hung on the walls that peddlers sold.

Over time, Nehru Place has learned to survive in ruins. Although the European piazza-inspired infrastructure did not translate into an Indian bourgeois public sphere, it provided an economic opportunity to many street vendors from the neighbouring Madanpur Khader JJ colony, where slum-dwellers were moved when their homes, close to the market, were cleared to build the subway (Batra and Mehra, 2008). The street vendors gathered under spit-stained pillars and used the balconies in the buildings to target consumers.

Their possessions included old duffle bags and used cartons on which to arrange their pirated CD/DVDs of software and games. At times, wooden boxes held the street vendor's stock. The rundown infrastructure hosted a number of odd trades: street vendors selling laminated computer and cell phone covers, clothes and games on the pavement. Recently, there has been a sustained effort to formalize the marketplace, particularly focusing on the labour of garment vendors being normalized through the work of non-governmental organizations, whose contribution has made it possible for many street vendors to have permanent spots on the pavements. However, most of the marketplace serves as a kind of 'no man's land', where street vendors with a couple of CDs can carry on their business. When there were occasional police raids, the ensuing chaos and overflowing garbage heaps provided easy cover for the street vendors to protect their stock and avoid being arrested.

### **Nothing goes to waste: an aesthetic of ordinary objects**

One of the most acute manifestations of capitalist accumulation has been the desire to hoard expensive consumer items, such as branded electronics, designer clothes and luxury automobiles (Arvidsson, 2005; Butalia, 2013). The desire for the new has meant that top fashion designers, among others, have been coming out with a new collection every three to four months. Recently, even top fashion houses, such as Burberry, have been experimenting with more sustainable routes of recycling by making older products available to small designers. Bazaars have been recycling goods for a great many years. The graveyard of consumer products is where bazaar traders find inspiration for their next big innovation. Every innovation in the market, such as the decision to sell second-hand DVDs and old consoles, involves the excesses of consumption of the middle and upper classes, who have the disposable income to replace old items quickly. Through various channels, used items reach the bazaar. Sometimes, consumers sell their used DVDs in the bazaars to get hold of a game's latest instalment. Many shops have rows of abandoned consoles that consumers brought with them for repair and did not collect later.

A principal component of bazaar aesthetics is the excess of abandoned goods and everyday tools. When it came to tools, bazaar traders developed an economic relationship with a host of stray objects. For instance, in the repair desk one finds the ubiquitous tool of any household, the screwdriver. The traders used it to open and close consoles and fix broken lenses or repair switchboards. They worked with a toothbrush to clean the motherboard of consoles. Also, bazaars resuscitated 'zombie' media (Parikka, 2012), not merely as collectables, but brought them back into circulation by turning them into cheap and cheerful alternatives of original gadgets. For example, many shops had 1980s portable TV sets. They were part of the paraphernalia of repair. Traders used the monitor to identify the faults in a broken console. In the same way, safety pins, glue-sticks and scissors assisted in repairs. These objects were readily available and existed beyond a proprietary regime, making them suitable tools for sharing.

Every shop has some kind of ruins attached to them. There would be a visible tower of old consoles of various kinds – Sony PlayStation, Xbox or Nintendo – stored at the back of the shop. Or a shop desk crowded with all kinds of objects some of which were common household tools. That is why it is difficult to explain a certain bazaar aesthetics



without outlining the vivid connections that it has with waste and excess. The juxtaposition of the old and the new, commodities and household objects, cheap and cheerful accessories, is a characteristic feature of the bazaar economy. In traditional peasant marketplaces, legumes and grains intermixed with medicines are sold, and in street markets in Asia and Africa, vendors sell purses and knock-off phones alongside electronic items (Gao, 2011). In Delhi, we witness similar characteristics of disarray and excess when traders assemble and disassemble computers with screwdrivers. The excess of commodities and everyday products is not an artificial one. It points towards the possibility of day-to-day economies working around the scarcity of capital and infrastructure by trading in objects and resources of another kind – objects and skill sets that are easily acquired, because they either exist outside of a proprietary regime or not much investment is needed to procure them.

### **Bodily aesthetic and face-to-face trade**

The prevalence of a speech pattern, more coarse and freer than bourgeois codes, has enabled bazaars to stay true to their wide consumer base. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1991) described bazaars in colonial India ‘as a den of lies and rumours’ and elaborated how bazaar gossip became a way for the superstitious and ‘credulous’ mass to spread militant sentiments against a foreign government. In recent years, Ajay Gandhi (2016) has suggested that the language aesthetics of Delhi’s bazaars guided ordinary people to tactically employ a set of words to mean different things under different contexts. Bargaining practices in China (Orr, 2007), Morocco and Sri Lanka (Heslop, 2016) have similar ways of carving out language schemes and informal patois, especially to attract consumers into the marketplace. One of the earliest representations of bazaar speech came from the work of Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin. Describing the peculiarities of marketplace interaction in Rabelais and his world, Bakhtin wrote:

The familiar language of the marketplace became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official intercourse could freely accumulate. In spite of their genetic differences, all these genres were filled with the carnival spirit, transformed their primitive verbal functions, acquired a general tone of laughter, and became, as it were, so many sparks of the carnival bonfire which renews the world. (Bakhtin, 1984: 17)

In Bakhtin’s work, passages similar to this became a way of manifesting popular lives separate from and often under-represented in the European Enlightenment and reformist movements. In particular, by focusing on the grotesque body of the prostitute, the tramp and the vagabond, and the excesses of their speech, dressing and gestures, Bakhtin (1984) drew a vibrant picture of marginalized groups. He further argued that the abundant body represented in folklore and oral tradition was antithetical to ‘economic man’. On this latter point, my observations of the bazaar’s bodily aesthetics differ from Bakhtin’s analysis. In the bazaar, bodily excesses are not separate from economic life. Gossip could serve as information by assisting haggling or helping traders cope with times when business was slow. The excesses of jokes, taunts and insults are an integral part of how traders deal with an economy of face-to-face trade.

### *Bazaar gossip and empty time*

A vital component of bazaar speech is its unregulated nature and orientation towards having a good time. Constant leg-pulling helped traders confront slow business hours by taking their minds off empty shops and unsold goods. For instance, if a trader got tricked by some customer, bazaar traders would discuss that particular person's naivety and invent all sorts of stories about his ineptitude. It was also quite common for traders to pass personal judgement on one another, their annoying habits and quirks. 'Bowing [their] head in front of the temple' was a colloquial phrase to indicate a visit to the local liquor shop. Lalit, a repairperson at Palika Bazaar teased Mohan, a shop assistant from another shop. He alleged that Mohan could acquire his 'daily quota' even if all the '*the-kas*' (liquor shops) in the city remained shut. Lalit joked that Mohan would pass an extra 100 rupee note to buy alcohol in the black market in a desperate situation. These conversations were not a one-way street. Mohan responded to the accusation, saying that Lalit spoke a lot of gibberish and that he was getting a headache just by listening to him. He prompted in Hindi, '*bahut dimaag khata hain, koi jake disprin leke aao*' ('He eats my head, I am waiting for someone to get me a painkiller').

When traders had no customers in their shops, they distracted themselves by playing pranks on one another. Govind, a trader in Palika Bazaar, borrowed my phone and called another trader in the marketplace. He immediately asked if 'pakora' was on the line. Pakora is a fried Indian snack made of flour dough. This particular trader was called 'pakora' as he had a prominent nose. I could distinctly hear an agitated voice at the other end, crying out, 'Who is it?' The giggle and sneers went on for a while. 'Pakora' understood that it was Govind playing one of his usual tricks and hung up.

The unhindered sociality disguised the underlying anxiety that many traders felt, in that they had so much free time to gossip. Often, the bodily excess in the manner of speech created a jubilant atmosphere. Still, the traders were quick to mention that this leg-pulling was not a particularly fun activity and that they were only distracting themselves in the face of slow business hours. The occasions when traders were visibly okay with ongoing conversation were when a customer was in front of them. They would go to any length to have a successful bazaar transaction aided by riveting discussions.

### *Storytelling and trade*

Traders' bodily excess is on full display when they are bargaining with a consumer. Traders' hands and mouth moved in tandem; they would not miss a beat. In the matter of a minute, conversations went from exchanging pleasantries to luring consumers to buy the latest product. The traders wove stories about the product's various features, how the new product was far superior to its older versions, that its battery worked far better, and that several other products have already been launched as accessories to go with the new product. Sometimes, the product they were trying to sell might not even be present in the shop. But through fascinating conversation, a particular trader got the consumer so intrigued that they did not mind waiting a couple of minutes for the shop assistant to bring the product from a neighbouring shop.

Lauermann (2013: 65) writes about vending practices in street markets in Yemen:

After a few minutes of small talk, depending on the relative noise and customer traffic in the market, the haggling begins. Lengthy debate about quality and price ensue. . . . Vendors project indifference to any one customer, yet always seem to know exactly who is holding on to their wares.

In Delhi's bazaars, if it is a regular customer, then the first 5–10 minutes went by exchanging pleasantries, inquiring about the family's health, ages of the children, etc. Even if a regular customer says that she is just there in the market, without looking for a particular thing, the trader will not show disappointment. He continues to engage the other person in conversation. He would often mention the topic of corruption that struck a chord with the Indian public. Then another 15 minutes of vilifying the government in power, the contractors, the bureaucrats and social media, they run out of culprits in the circle of corruption. Somewhere, in between all this, the trader made an observation about the phone, 'Oh, you have not put a cover on your phone? Do you want one?' This simple question led the trader to show many phone covers and increase the possibility of a successful transaction.

There is a seamless way in which bodily excess blends with trade. It would be problematic to say that the conversations do not carry any meaning for the traders apart from their instrumental use for trade. Some friendships develop out of long-term associations. The general abandonment of bourgeois rules and morality also puts different people at ease. No person or topic appears foolish or hurtful outright. There exists a real possibility that all kinds of conversation find an audience. There was usually someone at the shop who got hooked no matter how idiosyncratic the topic was. In one conversation, a shop assistant at Palika Bazaar went on about visiting a cemetery at night to see a ghost. One night, he saw a ghost and came down with a high fever. He said that the incident did not stop him from going back to the cemetery, as he wanted to gain supernatural powers. The bizarre conversation went on for a while, until we were interrupted by a trader showing a photograph of his bride on the phone.

A nuanced analysis of bazaar speech lays bare certain divisive elements, such as the traders and street vendors using communal lingos or portraying misogynistic viewpoints. While these were not the dominant speech patterns in the marketplaces, they nevertheless exist. Once, Jatin, a trader in Palika Bazaar, pointed out to me: 'Survival concerns come first, once that is sorted, there are possibilities to focus on religious battles.' In the present day, coarse humour mitigated day-to-day trade anxieties. The bodily aesthetics of speech and gestures were common resources that traders had at their disposal to aid transactions.

## **Bazaar actors on lived architecture, and wayward objects**

When bazaar actors commented on the chaotic architecture and stray objects, the aesthetic of congestion was not an issue, but what came up regularly was the judgemental viewpoints of elite actors – police, bureaucrats, corporates – within these places. Many traders observed how, gradually, they faced more and more pressure from government and civil society actors to accept a more ordered version of the city. This pressure came in the form of raids, particularly for street vendors selling pirated DVDs and CDs. The bazaar actors

also had to face a bad press, as many local media channels publicized these marketplaces for selling pornographic content. In fact, one of their questions was about the mirror work in my bag that resembled a camera lens. Sonu, a trader in Palika Bazaar said: 'Are you sure it is not a camera you are carrying in your bag! We had a journalist last week that carried out a sting operation. We cannot afford to get more bad publicity.' Another way traders presented their annoyance at elite actors was to do with how they did not support petty businesses. Their account of using household tools and objects for repair was a testimony to how little the government thought of such marketplaces as lucrative and innovative places. Most of these concerns were raised by alluding to China as a desirable alternative. As Vikash, a video game trader in the Lajpat Rai Market points out:

If we were doing the same work in a country like China, we would receive much more respect. In China, the government is not thinking about what type of business you have, they are more interested in the success of a business.

New competitors like e-commerce platforms were further evidence of the government's dwindling support for informal work arrangements. The shrinking of the consumer base due to home delivery created an added layer of anxiety. The sociality of the bazaars reeled under the pressure of keeping businesses afloat in difficult times. Chintu, a shop assistant in Palika Bazaar observed: 'For us, it is not much fun to tease someone. Yes, we do it all the time, but we would rather attend to customers. Fooling around reminds us that we have so much time to kill.'

Whatever reservations bazaar actors revealed towards the aesthetic conditions, in terms of traders' behaviour and appearance, there was never a sense that they wanted simply to mimic more dominant places. This came out most vividly through their caricatures of traders in shopping malls with their put-on attitude. Rajat describes the image of an 'arrogant' trader, 'Have you seen how the traders in Select City Mall won't even move a finger when a customer comes to the shop?' The shopkeeper at a mall or shopping centre was a laughable figure, whose standoffish nature had no place in the everyday sociality of popular marketplaces.

## **Conclusion**

This article has drawn an aesthetic picture of Delhi that does not feature in middle- and upper-class aspirations and official plans. Bazaar-like places have continued to exist, despite their mismatch with modernist state plans and their divergence from capitalist consumer spaces and objects, like shopping malls and branded goods. This has been possible because bazaars have been close to the rhythms of ordinary life and they have been true to the constraints and desires of the average consumer, in a country like India, where one rarely earns more than US \$10 a day and is likely to earn much less. As the article showed, bazaars have managed to do this because they have brought rejected and abandoned items from formalized consumer spaces into the fold. Unlike shopping malls and supermarkets, bazaars don't depend on a continuous flow of brand-new company products. They compensate for their limited capital and assets by innovating upon existing products. This has been exemplified when vendors repair old items, as well as when they

make small changes to available electronic products. These cheap and quick technical fixes have enabled the bazaars not only to survive with limited resources but also remain accessible to a large pool of cash-strained consumers. The unique use of public spaces, where bazaar traders and vendors can easily traverse between street, commerce and everyday life, has given them the leverage to confront changes to the urban map. Although official planners are more inclined to develop neoliberal commercial places, such as malls and shopping complexes, the ability of bazaars to resuscitate neglected modernist state architecture has given them a refuge in a hostile urban landscape. By swiftly turning non-commercial places into day-to-day exchange portals, bazaar traders and vendors have managed to create avenues for ordinary people to trade in an otherwise strongly regulated city space. The prevalence of a colloquial and less assuming sociality has sustained the bazaar's mimetic character (Bhabha, 1984). The primary rationale of trade is not to suffocate ordinary life, but rather, for *bazaaris* to have their ears close to the ground, in order to understand the anxiety and needs of an average consumer.

Even though a great deal of urban trade happens through bazaar-like places for the majority of the population in the Global South, their relative absence from the literature contributes to perversely framing the role of capitalism in shaping our futures. A lifestyle of shopping malls, brands and surveilled spaces inform public debates that affect only a handful of people in a given country (approximately 6% in India). In reality, most people do not hold to the idea that every new product has to be branded or exist in gilded environments. Many of them enjoy the experience of unhindered sociality and the possibility to play around with a product. Within such an aesthetic universe, newness is not a necessary attribute, instead novelty might come from seeing a certain addition or modification to an existing product. The article has highlighted the nuances of bazaar aesthetics to show the increasing need to separate the aesthetics of capitalist consumer spaces from bazaar exchanges. By systematically discussing capitalist aesthetics rather than those of the bazaars, we have created false ideas of collective futures, which, in reality, only remain relevant to a handful of urban elites. The rest of the society has a different idea of the utility, use and rationale of consumer spaces. The bazaars might not conform to an abstract idea of beauty, but their particular aesthetic dimension is evidence of the struggles and ingenuity of ordinary lives at the margins of global capitalism.

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