

'Turn left from the community centre and walk fifty yards'

Raqs Media Collective

In Delhi, most neighbourhood residential 'colonies' have a building (or a set of buildings) haphazardly labelled 'Community Centre' abutting them. Usually this is little more than a faded sign affixed to a more or less shell-like concrete structure. Empty rooms waiting to be filled with elusive acts of 'community'. Sometimes, the precincts of a 'community centre' evolve into a bustling local market. Other times, they remain mainly abandoned, apart from the period of the annual *Dussehra* festival when they become festooned with the ersatz performativity of the *Ramlila* cycle of plays, or the wedding season when tinsel and electrical decoration make dramatic appearances. In all cases, the idea of the 'Community Centre' persists as the anomalous mandated space for 'community' to come into being in a large, anomic city.

It is like an otherwise nondescript bird that periodically comes into rich mating plumage. The word 'Community' veers between suggesting an abandoned facility and an erratic, ephemeral festivity, or stable but low intensity commerce, and the mundane transactions of daily life. Paradoxically, the community centre is never really 'central' to the life of the neighbourhood; it occupies what could be called a significant proportion of its margins. Its centrality, if any, lies in the fact that people recognize it as a constant, if not very spectacular, landmark that helps them orient their immediate urban micro-landscape. So when giving directions for someone's house one could say, 'Turn left from the community centre and walk fifty yards'.

It may not be inappropriate to think of online 'Communities' with the metaphors and concepts gleaned from a reading of Delhi's 'Community Centres'. Some online communities are like evolved neighbourhood markets (community centres in mercantile or transactional drag) – spaces of low intensity but ongoing interaction, which deepen the life of a space and its inhabitants by providing a platform for regular contact and transaction. Others are communities that ebb and flow, or swing between poles of relative inactivity and occasional, or periodic exuberance (with a wide and graduated spectrum in between); still others are places where people can perform their varied socialities, sometimes in a manner that involves radical subversion of given social roles, or by cohabiting for a moment a charged and liminal space. This may involve traversals of the thresholds that frame everyday life. In such cases, the space of the community may be energized (or even brought into being) momentarily by the enactments that constitute what in ritual dynamics has been called '*Communitas*' by the anthropologist Victor Turner.

Online 'communities', like neighbourhood community centres in Delhi, are not central to the act of communication. But they do and can act as the stable landmarks that help orient a communicative landscape. Peer-to-peer networks can be like the markets that encrust the space of the 'community centre'. A mailing list can be like one in which the kids of the neighbourhood hand out in relative anonymity, but which also sometimes becomes the stage for grandstanding and performative excess. Collaborative blogs can be seen as

analogous instances where community centres actually end up being used as neighbourhood clubhouses, where people gather to play the odd game of carom, or talk about the problems affecting the electricity or water supply in their street.

Each of these instances points to a heterogeneity of usage and modes of cohabitation, which somehow gets overshadowed by the relatively conceptual clumsiness of the term 'Community'. One lineage of the term comes from the act of enumeration. A headcount establishes a group of people as a unit which can be thought about, which can be named – a 'community'. Typically, such headcounts are undertaken by the state (and sometimes by well meaning 'civil society' stakeholders), and the 'communities' so established become social facts only following the exercise of enumeration. These 'census' operations erase distinctions between the people counted, and draw distinctions with other people, grouped together in other acts of head-counting. Here the word community has little to do with what people do (either by themselves, or together) and more with how they appear to officials undertaking the headcount. The opacity of their actions is compensated for by the desired transparency of their mere appearance. Community, then, becomes a social statistic, an object of planning, development, reform, scrutiny, taxation and occasionally, punitive measures.

We prefer to think of the word community more in terms of the associations that can be gleaned from 'community centres'— as spaces always waiting to be filled with things that people do, which can be quite separate from the purposes for which the spaces were built in the first place. 'The idea of Community' as a shell, waiting to be filled with actions (both normal as well as transgressive), or contested by different claims, or lying just short of abandonment, may be more interesting in the long run to think through than the fulsome and perennially optimistic sense in which it peppers the discourse of new media. Meanwhile, the 'Community Centre' nearest to where we are in Delhi has become a shelter for people taking a breather from the early showers of a late monsoon.

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