The city of Gurgaon in the north Indian state of Haryana has undergone profound changes in the past 15 years. At the time of India’s economic liberalisation initiated in the early 1990s, it was an unremarkable medium-sized city on Delhi’s periphery. Subsequently, unprecedented growth in business process outsourcing (BPO) and information technology-enabled services (ITeS) transformed Gurgaon into a key node linking India with the global economy. Gurgaon has truly become a global city. Visitors marvel at its wide boulevards lined with ultra-modern entertainment plazas and luxurious gated residential complexes, while futuristic glass office towers are home to a who’s who of multinational corporations, including Microsoft, IBM, Dell and Motorola.

Gurgaon’s rapid transformation into a global city has resulted in the emergence of a completely unique urban environment. The construction of vast tracts of global space has indelibly altered the urban landscape, while traditional rigid social structures have given way to new class structures based on consumption and access to space. These spatial and social changes are consistent with trends occurring in global cities worldwide, yet they can most accurately be characterised as examples of cultural hybridisation particular to the city. Thus, when one enters Gurgaon one is traversing a frontier into a unique urban landscape. Visitors to Gurgaon are struck by the city’s skyline.

As India becomes an increasingly integrated into the global economy, the pace and scope of these social and spatial changes in Gurgaon are likely to increase, and we may witness similar transformations in other global cities in India.

Spatial Change: Global Signs and Symbols in Gurgaon’s Landscape

Perhaps the most dramatic change in Gurgaon over the past 15 years has been the construction of global space. Much of this has been developed by private firms such as DLF and Unitech that specialise in property and construction. Both companies emphasise a business strategy based on a notion of holistic community building. DLF claims that its “aim is to be a lead facilitator in integrating all aspects of life in terms of social and physical
infrastructure in Gurgaon such as Power Plants, Hospitals, Hotels and Clubs” (DLF City – Work, Live, Grow: Infrastructure and Amenities, 2007). This strategy has led to the construction of a series of self-contained, privately administered cities within cities.

Both DLF and Unitech have taken measures to brand their developments as cosmopolitan and global, and thus distinguish the newly developed areas from ‘Old Gurgaon’. Even the Gurgaon municipal government acknowledges this difference on its website, stating: “… new Gurgaon is the modern part of Gurgaon. It has modern facilities and a planned infrastructure. Old Gurgaon, on the other hand, has its own aspirations” (Modern Gurgaon, 2007). The names of property developments in ‘New Gurgaon’ overwhelmingly allude to global or cosmopolitan signifiers: Sahara Mall, The Park Place, The Bellaire, The Summit, Fresco, World Spa, etc. The online prospectuses for these properties serve as archetypal examples of branding – for instance, The Aralias offers “the best features and facilities on par with those available internationally” (DLF Homes: The Aralias, 2007), and The Summit is “in tune with international benchmarks” (DLF Homes: The Summit, 2007). The most ostentatious claim to globality is made by Unitech, which boasts that its Uniworld City offers the “indulgence of Western architecture, the oriental charm of Asia and find elements of American lifestyle [sic]” (Uniworld City, Gurgaon, 2007).³

Unitech and DLF’s branding strategies are examples of ‘scale jumping’, a process that involves widening the scope of one’s action to a larger geographical scale, in this case the
global (Gibson-Graham, 2002). This is commonly referred to as ‘going global’, and an example would be a local retailer using the internet to market its products globally. The global scale is generally portrayed as active, strong, mobile and modern, and dialectically opposed to the local, that by comparison assumes a passive, weak, sedentary and backward position.

Thus, firms engage in scale jumping in an attempt to appropriate the qualities associated with globality. The most obvious way to jump to the global scale is to act globally, but in Gurgaon most retailers attempt to become global by locating their outlets in ‘global’ space, using ‘global’ visual imagery and subscribing to ‘global’ service standards. Their action is still confined, however, to a very local geographical scale. The vast majority of retailers in Gurgaon's shopping malls are domestically owned and lack any inherent global quality, yet by adorning themselves with global signs and symbols they aspire to appropriate some of the global scale’s symbolic power. Even the names of many of these retailers serve to purportedly add to their global image, such as American Model, Mode de Italia, Global Jewels, Numero Uno, and Le’ Home. Anyone who has visited Gurgaon’s malls knows that most of these shops carry the same products as retailers located in large local Delhi markets such as Sarojini Nagar, but they charge twice the price. This is because they are not simply selling a product; they are selling the image of globalisation.

The result of the rapid proliferation of global space and the rush by local firms to jump scales has been the creation of a unique form of cultural hybridisation in Gurgaon, obdurately suspended between global and local. The phenomenon of cultural hybridity refers to the constant state of flux of all cultures, as they continually adopt practices from other cultures. Sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2004) argues convincingly that cultural hybridisation has always occurred, but in global cities such as Gurgaon the pace of contemporary hybridisation is staggering. Restaurants provide us with innumerable examples of this hybrid space. From fast food outlets to the most exclusive fine dining establishments, Gurgaon's restaurants are engaged in scale jumping. The DLF City News calls Sahib's “the best address in town”; it serves a mixture of traditional Indian cuisines, fused with Kenyan and Continental influences (DLF City News 2005, p. 42). But perhaps the most interesting restaurant from a sociological standpoint is Indian Street Food. While located in a posh entertainment complex, it offers food found chiefly in India’s ubiquitous and unpretentious roadside dhabas. This is undoubtedly ingenious scale jumping par excellence! While most Indians will passionately argue that aloo chaat and other cheap traditional spicy snacks taste better from the pushcarts of street vendors, it is significant to note that this restaurant has jumped several geographical scales by adopting an internationally recognised business model – ‘McDonaldisation’.

The term ‘McDonaldisation’ was created to denote the homogenising force of globalisation (Ritzer, 2004). It not only refers to the proliferation of McDonald’s restaurants worldwide, but also to the replication of its formula, which is based on speed, standardisation, and a synthetic atmosphere. While many restaurants, such as Indian Street
Food, have attempted to replicate the success of McDonald's by embracing its business model, McDonald's itself has been engaged in a process known as 'global localisation' (or glocalisation), whereby it attempts to embed itself in unique locales worldwide by adapting to local customs. McDonald's was forced to alter its menu significantly in order to achieve success in India. For example, in place of the Big Mac and Quarter Pounder, one finds the Maharaja Mac, the McAloo Tikka and the McCurry Pan. Interestingly, McDonald's also emphasises its global credentials by offering items such as the Crispy Chinese and the Mexican Wrap. Although the authenticity of these items could be called into question, they serve the purpose of reinforcing the restaurant's global image.

Pizza Hut has also tried hard to appeal to local tastes in India, and it has introduced the 'Great Indian Treat Menu' which offers customers a variety of Indian-style pizzas such as the Teekha Paneer Makhani and the Tandoori Paneer Chutneywala. Many Indians may scratch their heads in wonder, unable to understand why someone would rather pay exorbitant prices for these bizarre pizzas rather than eating authentic tandoori paneer at a local restaurant for a fraction of the cost. The reason is that Pizza Hut's customers are not simply eating a meal, but also purchasing and consuming the image of globality. One important part of this image is the global standard of service, the most consistent dimension of global fast food chains. 'Local' employees are required to assume a 'cosmopolitan' persona, and to always act in a cheerful, acquiescent, efficient and anonymous manner.

Other firms are also engaging in 'glocal' strategies in order to appeal to people who live and work in Gurgaon. This raises numerous questions about the 'locals'. Why do they find Gurgaon's entertainment plazas and shopping malls so seductive? Why have so many 'global' professionals and other people rushed to buy apartments in terribly expensive gated communities? Perhaps the answers lie in Gurgaon's emerging class structures.

**Evolving Social Relations**

It is fair to say that the current scope of social change in Gurgaon is comprehensive, and involves all aspects of life. There is clearly a break with the past, as people spend their leisure time in new ways, alter their diets, and exercise an increasing amount of control over deciding a marriage partner. These transformations have emanated from a radical and visible change in work culture dominated by 'captive' industries such as call centres and other BPO offices owned by a multinational. Many MNCs prefer not to outsource these operations, in order to have increased control. This is further evidence of how MNCs want to regulate the minutiae of each operation; this is also why call centre employees are subjected to rigorous training (accent, culture, etc.), and are forced to conform to microscopic details in every aspect of their work. BPOs operated by multinationals are still more likely than domestic BPO operations to promote employees on the basis of merit and ability, but domestic BPOs are rapidly adopting international human resource policies (Budhwar et al., 2006). This trend has created an entirely new class structure, in which individuals are increasingly mobile and responsive to a much wider range of social choices.
Whereas one's social position was previously more or less determined and regulated by the class into which one was born, new class structures allow for increased social mobility. This is not to say that the new class structures are based on equality, however, because fresh exclusionary entry barriers and class markers have emerged. The ability to consume, and access to space, are the two most notable features that determine one's class in Gurgaon. Yet these developments are not as liberating as they appear at first glance.

Individual consumption is currently one of the main determinants of a person's class in this global city. An estimated 25-30,000 people throng to Gurgaon's shopping malls on weekends (Ahuja, 2006). In a recent BBC series titled India Rising, businesswoman and Gurgaon resident Preeti Reddy commented, “The shopping mall represents the new Indian mindset of indulgence, of spending, of enjoying oneself, of enjoying your money” (Arney, 2007). In another segment of the same series, a BBC journalist interviewed call centre employees at Cybercity; they claimed that they earned a “phenomenal” salary, and that “the chunk of our salaries goes to shopping and just to keep ourselves, you know, updated” with branded goods (ibid.). Another call centre employee interviewed for the same programme said that everything must be branded, and that “ipods, nice phones, nice jeans, you know, everything must be valid” (ibid.). This obvious commitment to practices of consumerism is not indicative of all call centre employees, but it does illustrate how consumerism has become a class marker. Individuals display their class affiliation by wearing certain types of clothes, riding a certain type of motorcycle or using a certain type of mobile phone. These choices are consistent with the broader trend of the aestheticisation of everyday life, in the sense that the value of people and places is increasingly determined by visual signs and symbols. It has been noted that this trend is occurring in global cities worldwide (Lash and Urry, 1994; Featherstone, 1991).

The emergence of class structures based on consumption is a common feature of the information age. Sociologist Mike Featherstone argues that “the competition to acquire goods in the information class generates high admission barriers and effective techniques of exclusion” (1991, p. 18). Therefore it is no surprise that Gurgaon's young professionals are the driving force behind shifting class structures. Many falling into this group are highly motivated, career-oriented individuals, who welcome human resource policies based on merit and ability rather than family connections and caste affiliation. Thus, for most of Gurgaon's young professionals these new social structures are liberating. Since identity and class affiliation are based on appearance and lifestyle, one can theoretically move into a higher social class quite easily if one conforms to certain parameters. For example, if a call centre worker moves into a management position, he/she can use the pay raise to acquire new goods that will display this higher status.

Most young professionals in Gurgaon do not know their colleagues' caste backgrounds, but they know what types of clothes their colleagues wear, and whether they arrive at the office in an autorickshaw or a chauffeured car. They know what their colleagues eat for lunch, whether they bring tiffin from home or order Pizza Hut's Tandoori Paneer
Chutneywala. This illustrates why access to space is so intimately linked with status in Gurgaon – the individuals who eat at Pizza Hut are engaging in a ritualistic display of acquired class status.

The relationship between space and class calls for further analysis.

A striking feature of Gurgaon’s shopping malls is the presence of security guards at every entrance. One gets the feeling that they are not only scanning the crowd for potential troublemakers, but are also on the lookout for people whose profile does not match the mall’s carefully crafted cosmopolitan image. When was the last time you saw an auto-rickshaw driver at a shopping mall? Theoretically he may be able to afford an occasional Coca-Cola, but he would be discouraged from consuming it within the precincts of Gurgaon’s malls, because he would not be able to display the signs and symbols commensurate with ‘global’ space. People who cannot assume a cosmopolitan identity are meant to eat food on the street, while professionals eat at Indian Street Food. However, class structure in Gurgaon is not a facile division between haves and have-nots; there are innumerable and complex, coded gradations. But indubitably, access to space is one of the main ways Gurgaon’s elites differentiate themselves from one another.

Gurgaon’s ‘global’ professionals can be divided into two groups – those who reside ‘locally’ and those who commute to work in Gurgaon from Delhi or other places within feasible driving distance. Exorbitant property prices prevent all but the wealthy from residing in Gurgaon. Thus, living there has become an important class marker differentiating residents from the vast majority of professionals who commute from Delhi. Membership at DLF’s City Club is limited to Gurgaon residents; and the online prospectus for DLF’s exclusive gated residential complex Espace says that it is a community “for those who want to distinguish themselves from the masses” (Espace, Nirvana Country, Gurgaon, 2007). Another community, Fresco, is advertised as “a nurturing refuge from the bustle of the city, a refreshing oasis where residents enjoy peace of mind” (Fresco, Nirvana Country, Gurgaon, 2007). The DLF City News is rife with testimonials of Gurgaon residents that serve to reinforce this differentiation. One resident claims that life in Ridgewood Estate is pleasant because it is far removed from “speeding vehicles and dust, dirt and foul smell [of Delhi]” (DLF City News 2005, p. 4). Delhi is often portrayed as anarchic and dirty, while Gurgaon is portrayed as civilised, clean and cosmopolitan. As stated by one satisfied resident: “Removed from the chaotic traffic and noise of Delhi, we have our own small happy world here” (ibid., p. 4). The amount of one’s time spent in this “small happy world” depends on one’s class. Some people only work in this world, while others spend their entire lives within its tangible ethos of global aspirations.

**Traversing a Frontier**

Most people who work in Gurgaon’s expanding BPO industry commute to their offices on a daily basis. Many of them come from areas of Delhi where traditional social structures persist. Thus, they cross a border every day, into Gurgaon’s unique urban landscape of
proliferating global signifiers. Suddenly their caste background and family connections are meaningless, and their social standing is determined by their consumption patterns and the spaces they may/may not access. Many of these young professionals work in call centres where they traverse geographical borders figuratively, with the help of advanced information and communication technology. They receive Western names, accent and culture training, and spend the majority of their workshifts negotiating particular scripts with people around the world. All of this has contributed to a complex social landscape where tradition meets modernity and local meets global.

A great number of women are employed by BPOs, and this too is consistent with global trends. Manuel Castells recognised almost two decades ago that “there is a direct relationship between the rise of services and the feminisation of the labour force” (1989, p. 127). In the summer of 2006 I interviewed numerous female call centre employees, and they unanimously felt that while they enjoyed the salary, mobility and autonomy that came with their job, conservative local society was still not ready to accept women in the workplace. This is reflected by countless articles that portray call centres as “dens of moral corruption”. In an effort to counter this perception, some call centres have begun to allow their employees’ families to visit during work hours, and others have instituted policies barring women from working the night shift (Misra, 2006). All the women interviewed said that dating between co-workers is a common occurrence, and that they felt accepted as equals by their male colleagues. However, some subjects claimed that these newfound freedoms are illusory. They felt that their value in the marriage market was diminished because they worked the night shift at call centres, and they also feared that this would conflict with potential in-laws’ traditional notions of an acceptable partner for their son.

On the other end of the economic spectrum, there are three main slums in Gurgaon, and their occupants, employed in various capacities by the elite ‘glocal’ class, cross borders within the city on a daily basis. I interviewed members of one of these communities in the summer of 2006, and they estimated that roughly 5,000 people inhabited this particular slum. It was spatially very well planned and consisted of long rows of shacks made of cardboard and plastic, with each family occupying a single room. All my subjects were Bengali, and had been drawn to Gurgaon by the city’s rapid economic growth which has created many jobs in construction and domestic services. Thus, most were engaged in work that continually exposed them to Gurgaon’s global spaces and cosmopolitanism. According to Pieterse (2004, p. 31), many people in the global South are “within reach of global mass communications and advertising, within the reach of the message but not necessarily the action”. In other words, this very large group is regularly exposed to the signs and symbols of globalisation, yet they are unable to consume or display them. They are keenly aware of their predicament; the people I spoke with said that some of the young members of their community visit the malls “clandestinely” (this was the word used by my translator).

Although actually less than a kilometre, the figurative distance between slum and global space is vast; and by sneaking into shopping malls such ‘locals’ must bridge an enormous psychological gulf of aspiration, as well as a literal gulf of social norms and rules. They must
disguise themselves by mimicking the behaviour of their upper-class peers. This is crossing a border in the truest sense.

Most experts agree that in the near future, Gurgaon is poised to take advantage of the expected growth of knowledge process outsourcing. If this happens, we will see an even more dramatic and diverse irruption of signifiers on the urban horizon. The city is truly unique, defying classification as either Indian or Western. It is undeniably linked with the global economy, yet it exhibits strongly local forms, social structures and traditions that persist and manifest themselves in new ways. For theorists and consumers alike, it is an open question today as to whether these hierarchies will prevail within the commodity- and profit-driven 'glocal' environment; or whether the global and the local, embedded within and containing each other, will somehow work themselves into a more democratic and mutually supportive relationship.

Notes

1. The term 'global city' denotes more than a large agglomeration of urban space – it refers to a city's status as a premier node in the global economy. Scholars in this field, such as Saskia Sassen, argue that the global economy is increasingly articulated by these cities, rather than by national economies. Sassen claims that global cities are the "command points" of the global economy (1991). Thus, they serve to link geographically distant economic zones. The most comprehensive introductory text on this subject is the Global Cities Reader, (eds.) Neil Brenner and Robert Keil (2006); see also the website of the Globalization and World Cities Study Group and Network (www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/).

2. The term 'global space' is problematic because there is no single definition, as it is always a mixture of global signs and symbols and local influences. Thus, Tokyo's Roppongi area and New York's Times Square are both examples of global space, yet they differ on many accounts. However, there are characteristics that all global spaces exhibit, such as the existence of high profile mega-projects, access to which is highly regulated. These zones are characterised by ubiquitous global signifiers and the visual presence of multinational corporations. Finally, all 'local' global space is linked with global space worldwide by sophisticated information and communication technology enabled by 'local' infrastructure.

3. The built infrastructure in Gurgaon's global space was designed by renowned Indian architects and high-profile international firms. One example of particular interest is Unitech's Global Business Park, co-designed by Oru Bose, master planner for Disney's elite private community Lake Buena Vista in Florida.

4. Indian law currently requires that all retail outlets be domestically owned. Thus, international chains such as McDonald's are franchises in India.

5. Many scholars have been critical of the rigid categories of 'global' and 'local' (Swyngedouw, 1997; Herod & Wright, 2002). Edward Soja (1996) argues convincingly that we must expand our sociospatial imaginations and create new scales of analysis, which more accurately describe hybrid urban forms emerging in global cities such as Gurgaon.

6. Many scholars have taken a more nuanced view of 'McDonaldisation'. Pieterse (2004, p. 51) argues that it is "a form of intercultural hybridisation", and gives numerous examples of the franchise's 'glocalisation' strategy. Interestingly, McDonald's restaurants in Germany have recently introduced some menu items that are ostensibly Indian, yet they are designed to appeal to German tastes. None of these items are to be
found on McDonald’s menus in India! The ‘Chicken Delhi Katess’ and the ‘Pork Rajahal’ were the two featured ‘Indian’ sandwiches, and Indians may be surprised to learn that Chinese-style spring rolls were sold as ‘Indian food’ under the auspices of ‘Fakir Roelichen’.

7. The recent phenomenon of the proliferation of signs and symbols worldwide has been well documented. Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) give the most thorough account of how these symbols are disembedded from their original cultural contexts, and then assume new significance as they are reintroduced in other places. For a discussion on the importance of signs and symbols as class markers, see Mike Featherstone’s Consumer Culture and Postmodernism (1991).

For a detailed discussion of the impact of ‘global’ signifiers, see Warren Neidich, “The Neurobiopolitics of Global Consciousness”, Sarai Reader 06: Turbulence (CSDS, 2006, Delhi), pp. 222-36 (online text at http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader_06.html). Using theorist Paul Virilio’s concept of “phatic signifiers”, Neidich explains that the word “phatic” shares the same root as “emphatic” (Gk. emphanein, ‘to exhibit, display’) – “it means something that forces you to look at it”. Fields of phatic signifiers are linked up in “large conglomerates of signification… The brand is only one part of a large landscape of interconnected signifiers”. Phatic signifiers are produced according to the rules of cognitive and visual ergonomics, “and as such have greater ‘attention-grabbing’ qualities than those stimuli not so engineered… If one superimposes the effect of global capitalism on this perceptual system, one begins to understand its staggering proportions, for it has the potential of producing and disseminating these stimuli worldwide, and sometimes to bizarre excess”. Neidich concludes that brands are a “distinctive form” of phatic signifiers, that become “attentionally intensified” when they are linked up to global campaigns in which they participate in other global phenomena, “such as the global flows of money, people, ideas, raw materials; and through which they interact with local food, languages and cultural customs”.

8. Graham and Marvin’s Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technical Mobilities and the Urban Conditions (2001) is slightly outdated but still an authoritative source on the theme of the fragmentation of global cities. Isin (1999, p. 280) argues that marginalised groups in global cities routinely engage in “counterhegemonic practices, which are practices of insubordination, refusal and resistance”. The example of youths I interviewed who live in ‘local’ slums and “clandestinely” visit Gurgaon’s ‘global’ malls would be an example of this. Mittelman (2004, p. 27) calls such activity a form of “microresistance”. He argues that these acts are overlooked by scholars who give undue attention to large politicised events such as the World Social Forum; and also suggests that when considered in depth, these acts “send forth streams of doubt and questions concerning the viability of neoliberal globalisation”.

References


