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The Act of Leisure

IRAM GHUFTRAN + TAHAN MEHMOOD

ACT I

[By a cemented bench and a crooked tree in an MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) park in Kilokri Village. A few days ago.]

IRAM: It all began in 2003, with a fountain on a winter evening.

TAHA: The fountain is a good place to sit. Especially when you're broke. It dominates the main square in New Friends Colony Community Centre. Surrounded by shops, restaurants, cafés and pubs, there is enough room in the square ‘to move through and not be in’.

A typical circular structure with four cemented swans rising from its centre, the fountain has become a landmark to indicate direction; a meeting place before one goes somewhere else. No one comes to the fountain to look at the water, the grass, the flowers or the swans. It is enclosed by an iron grille with a few gaps, large enough to allow a child in.

Small, semi-circular, cemented seats outside the iron grille are used by people to sit, chat, smoke. One evening last winter we sat there, as we had on many earlier occasions. Bikas, Gaurav and I were having one of our usual mind-numbing conversations on life, ‘forelife’ and afterlife, and looking at what was formerly Ramlal’s chai shop – one of its kind in the entire Community Centre, a perpetual embarrassment to its more stylish neighbour, Bon Bon the pastry shop.

IRAM: However Bon Bon’s prestige is now redeemed. With Ramlal’s death, the teashop has changed hands. It now sells momos, kathi kababs, chicken rolls etc., and is so much neater. Ramlal was no urban legend. Still, quite a few people in community centre remember him as the obstinate guy who ran an old dhaba-style shop in the ‘posh’ market. Some say that he even went to America but came back and opened this chai shop where you could have tea even if you were broke.

TAHA: As we sat, sipping cold tea from plastic cups, reminiscing about Ramlal, Gaurav saw a man in khaki filming us with what looked like a semi-professional camera. We stopped
talking. There we were – three very average specimens of the human race with no
glorious/ignominious past nor any such hopes or plans for the future, and this man, this
police constable, was filming us.

What had we done?

This was the first thought that sprung to my mind. We had been learning about
cameras, filming perspectives and points-of-view as part of our college curriculum, but here
was a man of law, with a revolver in his holster and a camera in his hand, face partially
hidden, shooting us!

He made routine enquiries; and after we confirmed that it was not us in particular that
he was shooting, and that such photography was routine, we proceeded to him ask a few
questions of our own – albeit tentatively at first. As law-abiding students of Jamia Millia
Islamia University, we thought it wiser not to aggravate the Delhi Police (DP).

Pandu (not his real name) proudly told us that the Delhi Police had initiated this unique
programme for citizens’ safety and in the interest of national security. The programme
entailed shooting video of ‘suspicious characters’ (like us!) thronging the New Friends
Colony Community Centre market, and generating profiles from the material.

A few days ago, DP had caught an alleged terrorist; he had apparently had dinner at
this location prior to his arrest. Since prevention is better than cure, therefore the police
drive to film ‘suspicious’-looking people, and keep a tab on them. Who knows what they
might do, and when?

We saw the footage, appreciated the reality TV-like material and went on our way.
I don’t know how far this exercise would go in curbing crime, but I, a regular visitor to
the Community Centre, avoided the place for a long time.

IRAM: Something changed…

TAHA: Yes, I am always a little conscious…

IRAM: Why? What happened?

TAHA: A uniformed Delhi police constable shoots you…it’s not a good feeling…you
immediately think, what have I done? Was there a notice that I haven’t read, a law I’m
unaware of?

IRAM: When you realise that it’s not you in particular that Pandu was filming, then why
this ‘not a good feeling’?

TAHA: It’s not me particularly, but imagine that footage in some databank just
lying…waiting to be used…for what?

IRAM: So, what did you do when you saw that Pandu was filming you?

TAHA: We all became very conscious of his presence. We immediately lowered our
voices...in fact I just didn't know where to look...should I look into the camera? The three of us stared into the lens as if to say, “Look, we are clean. We haven't done anything illegal”. I was wondering, though, if it was me that he was after. He knows...he's seen me buying grass from the paanwala in Taimur Nagar...At the same time, we were trying to make sure that our gestures of 'non-hiding' would act as proof of our law-abiding nature. Exams were around the corner and I didn't want any involvement with the police.

IRAM: Why didn't you question him?

TAHA: That is precisely the reason why, no one thought of questioning the guy too much...

IRAM: Why?

TAHA: Because I was afraid. I can say it now...

IRAM: Why fear?

TAHA: It was a genuine belief in the irrationality of the system – as if it were a school principal, snooping on students in the playground. Is an act of sitting by an innocuous fountain in a very public place and a belief in the virtues of idleness, a transgression of a law?

IRAM: Why do you think he filmed you? Was he filming everyone?

TAHA: I don't know. Maybe it was my appearance – a big shawl that hid my face, three days of overgrown stubble, height...I can only guess. What was uncanny was that I went there almost every day, as did most of my class. I'm sure a regular constable would recognise regular visitors to CC. I sometimes think he knew we were students of Jamia...maybe we did trigger a sort of 'categorical suspicion'.

[Soon after this conversation we posted the episode on the Sarai Reader-List and Urban Study Group list, in an effort to understand the overlapping trajectories of surveillance and leisure as they manifest in our lives. Some responses follow.]

From: Bikas Ranjan <bikasranjan@rediffmail.com>
Date: 10/ 01/ 05
Subject: [Reader-list] The Act of Leisure

This was not an isolated incident; Taha would remember how we were asked to vacate the same area during Diwali and on Republic Day. Once a loudspeaker was put there announcing of the menace of the (seemingly so likely) terrorist threat. This made conversation impossible. I remember Pandu mincing no words to reveal the truth about the
cam to us – it’s meant to discourage the people who habitually come here and hang around without any purpose (though, still it leaves me wondering how he can interpret purposefulness, and lack of it; perhaps, and in all probability, he was talking about the people who don’t come there to spend).

It was not only a surveillance cam put at a public place covering the crowd. It’s a deadly combination of technology and human bias. This cam had the advantage of mobility. It can zoom into faces, go closer to them, spend more time on one particular face rather than another. Who decides if the faces are suspicious? Who decides to zoom into some one and not on the other? Who decides what is worth shooting and what is not?

Surveillance cams are now a part of our everyday existence. We might object to their intrusion in our lives, but a cop with a movie camera is a different proposition altogether. When we as a society hand over a cam to a cop we also validate his subjectivity (or his bias). This is not only the question of what happens to the footage this Pandu shoots; rather, what I find more compelling is the question of who authorises him to do it.

Whenever we step out of our private spaces, we come under the scanner – subjected to public gaze. We’re being watched. In a public space one cannot stop anyone subjecting you to his/her staring eyes. However, when one of these staring eyes becomes a tool in the hands of the state, it is justified on the grounds of some perceived threats. And when this gaze can be technologically reproduced, it sounds an alarm bell.

There is another aspect of the encounter. We were sitting at a seemingly public space (as the name justifies – Community Centre). Despite this, the cop wanted us to leave. He informed us that this was a place to shop. If we want to hang around, there are cafés and bars. Is this the agenda of the state (it reminds me of Huxley) – that time should be spent in spending/consuming? We work to earn, and leisure is meant for spending, there is no third possibility.

ACT II, Scene 1

[A sunny October morning. New Delhi. Taha is walking past Jantar Mantar towards the Connaught Place police station. Reference letters for police permission to shoot in the area in one hand, and a soggy samosa wrapped in old newspaper in the other. Through the oil and remains of a half-eaten snack, he can see the newspaper advertisement on how to identify a terrorist.

- By clothes unsuited for the time of the year; e.g., wearing a coat or jacket in summer.
- A person trying to blend with his surroundings by his dress and behaviour, though he doesn’t belong to the group.]

Taha: No wonder Baburam, a security guard, six feet tall, stockily built and with a moustache and beard, says when asked to describe a terrorist, “I know one when I see one”.

I walk past a camera.
It looks beautiful.
It is mounted on a 15-foot pole. A semi-spherical glass cover protects the camera; a
pre-arranged mass of plastic, glass and some silicon.

An automated Cyclops.

It looks almost benign. I feel like paying obeisance but I carry on. I eat my samosa as I walk by, conscious of the camera’s presence but ignoring it. I cross the road and I am confronted by another camera, then another, then another.

I reach the police station.

A camera atop a window welcomes me. I go near the door on the left. The camera pans to its right. I look up at the camera. The camera tilts down to respond to my gaze.

I am inside the station now. Three cameras watch me. I walk though the corridor. There is a flight of stairs on the right. On the first floor I walk past a room. The sign there tells me its some kind of a control room. Through an open window I see a man sitting in front of a panel. There are four monitors on the panel. Each monitor is divided into four screens. The man is working with buttons and switches. Each time he presses one, the image on the panel changes. I am still standing there, riveted.

The man senses something. He looks up at me. A faint glint of recognition comes to his eyes. I smile at him and move on. Validated subjectivity.

ACT II, Scene 2

[A November afternoon. Inside the Nicholson cemetery, near Kashmere Gate. A crew of four aspiring filmmakers pleading/cajoling/bribing the son of the chowkidar (watchman) to allow them to shoot a few graves. Near by, a bereaved family is submitting papers that would allow them to bury their departed one. Iram breaks away from the group and sits by a grave...]

IRAM: ‘Leisure’, derived from Old French leisir, ‘be permitted’, from Latin licere, ‘be permitted’, the -u- making its appearance only in the 16th century, means, among other things, “be permitted”. Therefore, leisure might mean permission to: go to parks/have fun/entertain oneself and others /enjoy/ have pleasure/indulge/recreate/do things at one's convenience/buy, wear, touch, feel...The embedding of authority in the imagining of the word ‘leisure’ adds a dimension to our understanding of the phenomenon.

To be permitted.
Entry by permission only.
Reserved.
Preserved.
Is it this obsession for privacy, which ‘produces surveillance’?

TAHIA: And then surveillance produces its own ‘assemblage’ of apparatuses, the security guard at the gate of the club, the cameras inside it, the metal detectors at the cinema houses, the body searches at the auditoriums, the police checks on the roads, the attendants at the malls and bouncers at the pubs.

It redefines power and changes the way we approach spaces.
We constantly enact dramas of acquiescence/defiance at being surveilled.
We lower our voices.
We holler, shout, whisper.
We exhibit; we cover ourselves.
We open our bags, empty our pockets and show our pens, mobiles, lighters and key chains, become shifty-eyed when the red light atop a metal detector goes up producing a sharp beep... we smile, mutter, “Oh! Sorry!”
We display our small toy penknives, our loose coins. We unbuckle our belts to reveal the culprit metal studs.
At other times, with much annoyance, we produce our licence, with irritation we let the guard scrutinise our cars; with a little embarrassment we let him do a physical check of us, hands sweeping down our body as if it were an object, a container to be checked/a packet to be scanned/a thing to be examined/an item to be appraised.
What makes us comply with being examined, checked, identified? The sheer boring/mundane/trite/commonplace existence of this constantly mutating and multiplying ‘assemblage’ is making it an unalienable leitmotif of our times.

Act III, Scene 1

[Lying on the grass at India Gate. Soaking up the warm December sun. A pretence of reading Foucault’s Pendulum, with eyes closed. A cricket ball rudely shakes the loafers awake. Children playing some distance away as ice cream vendors and balloon sellers roam through the lawns hawking their goods.]

Taha: I read somewhere that the consolidation of the idea of nation after the First World War led to an embedding of the notion of surveillance in governance. Anonymity led to visibility as a marker of a ‘legible people’.6
To be marked, identified, registered, enumerated, accounted for, stamped, measured, classified, audited, patented, licenced and surveilled, all that meant, in a way, to be governed.
Passport regimes restricted the movement of peoples across international ‘borders’, while intense legislative practices made sure that perennially shifting mobile populations are grounded, marked, identified, controlled and regulated.7

From: Anand V. Taneja <radiofreealtair@gmail.com>
Date: 01/12/04
Subject: Re: [Reader-list] The Act of Leisure

Here is a brief history of the death of a professional loiterer at the Humayun’s Tomb Complex, or, The Grass Belongs to the Aga Khan...
1998 – I jump an old, crumbling medieval wall and land up in the walled garden surrounding Isa Khan’s Tomb, an enclosure just off Humayun’s Tomb; and so far, ‘free entry’, whether you jump the wall or enter through the gate.
2000 – A hot summer. I have to see off a friend at Nizamuddin Station, but am a bit
early. So I go to Isa Khan’s Tomb, still free entry, climb onto the roof, and lie down in a small window cut into the eight-foot-thick drum supporting the dome for light and ventilation. Atop cool thick stone, I have a beautiful, undisturbed hour of sleep, waking up to see the names of many lovers carved into the plaster, evidence of other loiterers who lounged around here at peace. Many families loll around on the green lawns of Humayun’s tomb, in the evening. It is a popular picnic spot.

2000 – Winter. People from the Narmada Valley have arrived at Nizamuddin Station in the morning, to protest against the Supreme Court’s recent decision to raise the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Volunteers from Delhi have been told that there is police surveillance on, and in order for the proposed dharna at the Supreme Court to be successful, we have to disperse all over the city. We tell the inquiring guard we’re here for Deve Gowda’s Kisan (Farmers) Rally, and thus are left in peace.

2001 – Railings go up around the Humayun’s Tomb Complex. The entry to Isa Khan’s Tomb is now also ticketed. I get used to being asked the potentially profound question, “Kahaan se aaye hain? (Where are you from)?” The Jahaan-e-Khusrau Festival starts; the cheapest ticket is priced at Rs. 100.

Sometime in 2001 – There is a shootout in the parking lot at Humayun’s tomb. The police kill an alleged terrorist.

2004 – Much money has come in to the Humayun’s tomb complex from the Aga Khan trust over the past few years. Part of the money has presumably been spent on the hi-tech entry turnstiles with magnetic strip cards, operated manually, by the security guards. And on the computerised ticketing. Inside, there are notices that warn you not to sit on the grass, and there are many guards patrolling to ensure that you do not. And last Sunday, I noticed that men, in plain clothes, were noting down the number of each and every vehicle parked at the complex.

From: Zainab Bawa <coolzanny@hotmail.com>
Date: 30/11/04
Subject: Re: [Reader-list] The Act of Leisure

An experience, which I very clearly remember, had taken place with my sister, a friend and me. This was three years ago.

After watching a movie in the Excelsior Theatre near Victoria Terminus (VT), the three of us proceeded towards VT station. We stood by a corner of a shop in the subway and were chatting. The private security guard came up to us and said, “This is not a place to hang around, get away from here”. My friend, who was male, was irritated and replied that since we were not creating any trouble and were neither in the way of the people or the shop, he had no right to shoo us off. We stood there for some more time and I think the guard kept watching over us. Normally, in Mumbai, I cannot imagine hanging around in a street that has private residences and is quiet. I think this is how New Friends Colony is, having been there once. It is not surprising that you would get shooed off just for hanging around there. If I have to wait for somebody outside Regal Cinema at Colaba, the guard of the cinema will keep a watch over me, wondering what I am doing – am I soliciting clients,
i.e., am I a prostitute? If I am dressed like a South Mumbai yuppie, then I am okay because it means that I am waiting for my bunch of friends to join me for a movie.

ACT III, Scene 2

[Christmas Eve. Late evening. Taha buying cigarettes from the paanwala near the Ego Thai restaurant in the Community Centre. He deliberately sits at the fountain. The restaurant security guard in a khaki uniform walks by.]

Iram: Leisure also means, “opportunity to do something”. Which means that not doing anything even when there is ‘opportunity’ might constitute ‘non-leisure’. So, what happens when you engage actively in ‘non-leisure’ – if you loiter, dally, dawdle, hang around, linger, loaf, skulk, straggle, or wander? Should I expect to undergo an experience similar to Zainab’s?

Taha: Spaces like community centres, malls, cinema halls, theme parks etc., are workspaces for some but leisure spaces for most of the people who throng them. Here, there is an active intertwining of surveillance and leisure, of inclusion and exclusion, of access and regulation, of denial and entry.

At one end, there is Manisha, our mutual friend. Well, since she is a ragpicker/street kid/beggar here, she can’t go inside Ego Thai or Italia or any restaurant, even if she produces enough money to avail of exotic delicacies. At the other end, those who can afford these are looked upon by the gaze of close-circuit cameras.

Many sites of leisure with nodal attachments to surveillance are also spaces of ‘reproduction and reinforcing of social divisions’. Societal apportioning is experienced at other places too. A simple act of walking through a gated colony like Maharani Bagh at night, for instance, would require you to be situated within the narrow parenthesis of a particular socio-economic profile.

I read in a newspaper that public parks falling within the premises of these areas will be handed over by the authorities to be managed by private residents. Many Resident Welfare Associations like the one in Vasant Vihar have asked the MCD to hand over the colony park, and sought permission for displaying advertisements there to earn revenue. Maps and metal plaques at these sites signify a quasi-legal sort of “ownership and establish rights of access”. Like the park maintained by residents of Maharani Bagh.

Iram: Then, does ‘access’ becomes the keyword with which the script of governance is written? Is this latest initiative by the Delhi state government part of the schema to set terms of entry to places?

Taha: I also wonder at the purpose of initiating actions to aerially map the city, of which the newspaper informs me. Imagine, small drones fitted with a dozen cameras deployed to click thousands of photographs of every piece of property: houses, buildings, hotels, office complexes, colleges, religious structures, jhuggi (squatter) clusters, lanes, colonies,
housing societies, malls, schools, cinema halls, stadiums, ramshackle edifices, ruins, shops, streets, by-lanes, universities or bus stands.

Such technology could have multi-purpose uses, such as enforcing building by-laws or keeping in check any unauthorised construction. But an act like this would account to a blatant violation of the amendments to the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, which prohibits the MCD inspectors from entering any building to calculate the covered area!

A curious change is shaping the city's landscape. Unobtrusively. Creeping into our lives, our selves.

The Janus-faced state subverting its own law.

_Bhagidari_ (partnership)\(^1\)\(^3\) with its own divided self!

_**Iram:**_ Mapping acquires significance in diverse terrains. When a land is mapped, it becomes territory. A land possessed. Imaginings of that space change and acquire divergent dimensions.

It becomes a marked domain.

It gets an identity that is sanctioned by power.

It becomes visible to the agency of the state.

Conversely, if a land is not mapped it remains a non-space. Something that exists, but is not seen. An imagination of it, then, becomes difficult. It lies beyond the logic of principles, of duties, of the Constitution, of expectations, of acts, of plans, of laws, of regulation, and of 'legitimacy'. People may inhabit it, but one wonders in what form the state would delineate them when it fails to visualise the land they live on. The Delhi Road Map, 2003,\(^1\)\(^4\) is a case in point. It does not have any markings of Kilokri, an area where we reside.

_**Taha:**_ Kilokri is home. A small village, or what I call an urban village, on the edges of Yamuna just off the Outer Ring Road. It is inhabited primarily by upper-caste Hindus, who have been living here for ages; the Sikhs who came here after the 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms; and some Muslim families. There is a sizeable Tamilian and Keralite population here too, besides a substantial shifting population of migrants: students, call centre workers, professionals, and skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labourers from all over India. We have a police station, which maintains a check on all the tenants by maintaining databases acquired through tenant verification forms. All of us had to fill out that form and give proof of permanent residence, office address, phone numbers, family details, etc.

_**Iram:**_ Kilokri has a huge _gurdwara_, a small mosque and a temple. But none find mention in this map, even though places of religious worship are listed on the map in other areas. This not to say that Kilokri is not mapped at all, it does find a mention in the more detailed cadastral or estate maps, the Delhi master plan or the Delhi Police maps. But the conspicuous absence of an older place like Kilokri in a map of Delhi, where all recently developed enclosures, such as Jeevan Nagar, Bhagwan Nagar or Siddharth Extension are named, seems intriguing. Here, the conjecturing of a piece of land swings between the
obtuse terrains of cartographic invisibility and an extremely policed and surveilled reality.

Situations where one is not legitimately mapped but ‘legitimately’ controlled, lead to an intensely fought, almost daily, routine low-intensity conflict with the authorities. The Delhi Police, in the case of Manisha. She might not have a PAN card, a voter’s ID card, a driving licence, an arms licence, a passport, a birth certificate or even a ration card. The police constable feels no compulsion to restrain himself from hurling abuse and at times using physical force to hurt a seven-year-old girl, because she dares to ask for alms from passers-by. The space accorded to Manisha becomes a space like Kilokri; something that is looked at, but not marked.

The unavailability of the souvenirs of legitimacy is tantamount to a person being deemed illegitimate/invisible in the eyes of the state. This absence leaves these persons/spaces unguarded, making them vulnerable to experimentations of master plans, policies, policing and regulation, even while “reinforcing the status quo and freezing social interactions within charted lines”. These ‘conditions’ influence the interiority of those who wish to avail of a space. Thus, going to cinema hall/mall/theme park/colony park would call for a certain type of behaviour. Failure to comply will result in rejection. Usually a language of non-legal/high morality is used to oust the non-conformer.

**Taha:** I remember, almost a month after the Pandu incident, I’d gone to the Community Centre to get some photocopying done; but this time I had taken care to shave, comb my hair properly and wear ‘presentable’ clothes. I took great care over my appearance. The motto was: “Taha Mehmood, you can’t afford to look threatening/not normal/out of place”. Bikas, I remember, would not sit on the footpath, the way we used to in our first year. He would always say, “Cops will bug us…” When I was called to the local police station for tenant verification, I was at my affable best. Low-voiced, sweet, ever-smiling, obliging, articulate and well behaved. Even though I was fuming! I hadn’t done anything wrong/illegal, etc. Yet I was careful to not to incite the anger of the constable.

Moreover, I feel that putting in place zones of influence expands the notion of territory. At the community centre at New Friends Colony, security guards not only act as gatekeepers but also as policing agents to ward off even a temporary acquisition of space by ‘non-actors’ like street children. So an upmarket restaurant like Ego Thai will place a security guard to prevent any loitering around its premises; and will appropriate public spaces by putting flower pots on seats.

**ACT IV, Scene 1**

[A cold January morning. Travelling on a bus to Sarai. Trying to read the newspaper as a hawker tries to sell Taha Bharat Sarkar ke Naye Qanoon (New Laws of the Indian Government) for Rs. 5. A headline says, “Shiela for mapping vulnerable areas: Steps towards disaster management.”]

**Iram:** Shiela Dikshit, the Chief Minister of Delhi, plans to map ‘vulnerable’ areas of the city. The discourse invoked is one of disaster management and of demarcating the landscape into categories of ‘vulnerable’ and ‘non- vulnerable’ areas.
Taha: I have a feeling that her concerns might be followed by, first, an identification of 'undesirable'/‘dangerous’ spaces, and then by the reordering and restructuring of space along socio-economic lines. Where ‘pollutants’ are pushed to the margins of the map while ‘non-pollutants’ acquire the recently vacated space.

But experience shows us that there is a spin to this phenomenon, when the ‘pollutant’ negotiates its way through the system and refuses to disappear.

An average Delhi Street might be an example of this. Extremely contested and regulated space, filled with all sorts of people who come under the ‘category’ of ‘illegal’: migrant workers, vendors, chaiwalas, barbers, bootpolishwalas, beggars, etc. People who come from everywhere – mostly poor, acutely vulnerable people – who live precariously on the thin outer margins of society, make streets their home and get involved in daily, intensely fought and protracted battles with the powers of the land.

From: Solomon Benjamin <sollybenj@yahoo.co.in>
Date: 28/12/04
Subject: [urbanstudygroup] Surveillance in the Cities of the South

A few years ago in Delhi, on the way from the airport to Connaught Place, the driver of our taxi explained in great detail how giving a beggar money would get him fined via the interlinking of driver’s licences with an electronic addressing system. There is also a Bombay NGO, part of ‘Good Governance’, where on seeing ‘misplaced’ hawkers, you can zoom onto coordinates and lodge a complaint (inspired by the Iraqi bombings?); in zips a special squad from the Bombay Municipal Corporation to evict them and seize their belongings. In Bangalore we also now have, as part of e-governance, a foundation funded by the country’s foremost IT company honcho, to redo the land titling and to get it to American standards in 52 towns in the state. Words from the head of the organisation: “I can then, sitting in New Jersey, click and check out my property status, or identify which one to buy or trade in”.

ACT IV, Scene 2
[Republic Day, 2005. At home. Watching children play cricket in the park below.]

Iram: An alternate etymological meaning of leisure is ‘time at one’s disposal’, from the Old French leisir, French loisir. For me, leisure would constitute a walk through the market looking at things that I would never buy, having a fabulous meal at a really stylish restaurant, a drive on the toll bridge to NOIDA, drinking a cup of hot coffee specially when it makes me late for work, gossiping with friends...

Or sometimes listening for a sound of silence amidst the din of crowds at the railway station, looking at the squirrel that alternatively lives in a banyan tree and on my neighbour’s wall, cleaning my old book rack, dusting the books I would never read...
Taha: I was once talking to a friend who works in a prestigious call centre in Gurgaon. Let’s call her Hazel. For her, free time at the office was a performance. Often she would know that she was being watched in the canteen by a CCTV camera or her superiors. She was always conscious of her language, action and behaviour. She says that her job changed the map of the city for her. Hazel and I live in different Delhis. Night is a workday and the day is sleep-time for her. Even having a cup of coffee together is a luxury.

Earlier she would hop on the bus and was off to Central Market, Lajpat Nagar, every week. Now it’s usually NOIDA or Gurgaon. Gift vouchers to shopping malls, discount slips for branded goods, free tickets to multiplexes, parties organised by the company, rule her life. Very much like Aniruddha, who, even though he celebrated New Year’s Eve with me, remarked that, “It required balls to miss the office New Year bash”. Hazel, for instance, will never carry the kind of mobile that you and I use. She would taunt me jokingly, “You can’t even MMS…no fun”.

From: Aniruddha Basu <abose25@hotmail.com>
Date: 28/11/04
Subject: Re: [Reader-list] The Act of Leisure

Leisure to my mind is entirely contextual. Leisure in the private sector is often a part of official policy. They are recreations formulated by the HR in an organisation to help employees de-stress and unwind. So that they can perform better and increase productivity. My friend who is working in American Express was asked to go to a resort in Rajasthan for a few days, for a ‘change of scene’. Any refusal to go would be met with frowns and disapproval. Another friend in The Times of India has a compulsory yoga session in the mornings on weekdays, due to which he has to reach office one hour earlier. Ad agencies are hosting an interoffice cricket tournament, with match practice on weekends. Most schools have their own extracurricular activities after school hours. The list is endless.

From: Avinash Kumar <avinash@sarai.net>
Date: 08/12/04
Subject: Re: [Reader-list] The Act of Leisure

From my personal memory of school days, I recall certain teachers who would always ask us to ‘read’ during our ‘leisure period’ (that was when a teacher was out of station or indisposed, etc.). These readings could be anything, from a novel to something for mathematics homework (for which I was always tracked skilfully by a certain teacher who had taken a liking to me and who thought I should devote more time to practising sums). It was here that I tended to agree more with the idea of ‘leisure’ expounded by a certain geography teacher who talked about Bimal Mitra’s novels, and a certain Hindi teacher who kept egging me on by asking what novel I was reading those days. And sure to earn brownie points, I would always oblige him with a certain exotic-sounding name. Actually, all my free periods would be spent in reading some novel or the other.
ACT V, Scene 1

[One evening, last week. Sitting in the Café Coffee Day veranda at the NFC Community Centre. Going through the recent purchase of CDs and books from South Extension.]

Taha: This CD probably has an RFID tag...

Iram: Yes... Maybe... Probably your Metro card and passport also have it... you could have one in your jacket too. But... do you care?

Let us look for Manisha. The last time I came she was not to be found, and I spoke to her aunt instead. I heard the story again. Of Faizabad, of snooty relatives, of selling all the land...

But she looked worried. We spoke for quiet a while and she told me of the time when a security guard here had kicked her. She was pregnant at the time, and lost the baby.

Maybe it was an accident.

Maybe it didn’t matter.

Taha: You will not find Manisha today. She has gone with an NGO for some camp.

NOTES


2. Lyon, David. Everyday Surveillance, Surveillance and Society (online surveillance studies journal; ISSN 1477-7487).


4. Lyon, David. “Understanding Visibility, Mobility and the Phonetic Fix”.

5. Lyon, David. Everyday Surveillance, Surveillance and Society (online surveillance studies journal; ISSN 1477-7487).


7. For more on this, see Caplan and Torpey (eds.), op cit.

8. Lyon, David. Everyday Surveillance, Surveillance and Society (online surveillance studies journal; ISSN 1477-7487).


13. The Citizen's Partnership in Governance
   * is a means for facilitating citywide changes in Delhi
   * utilises processes and principles of multi-stakeholders (citizen groups, NGOs, the Government) collaboration
   * applies the method of Large Group Interactive Events
   * aims to develop "joint ownership" by the citizens and government of the change process
   * facilitates people's participation in governance http://delhigovt.nic.in/bhagi.asp (as accessed on 9 December 2004).