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A Class Act: Bourgeois Ordering of Public Spaces in Chennai

Introduction

For a city that in casual talk is frequently referred to as the ‘sandy metropolis’, Madras, or Chennai as it is now renamed after the official decree of 1996, has displayed an ambiguous and sometimes even a dubious relationship with its seaside. Despite all the tall claims of tourist brochures declaring the possession of the world’s second largest beach, the presence of a national park within the city boundaries, etc., for many decades, the attitude of the city (including the State, the wide-ranging coterie of public and private institutions, and the citizens in general) towards its open spaces remained frustratingly whiny and stunted. This scant regard for public spaces was not peculiar to Chennai alone, but a characteristic helplessness of any Third World developing city – partly because the socio-spatial reality of the postcolonial world and its conditions of hyper-urbanisation would not allow for a clear construction of such a discourse. In India, in the years immediately following independence, waves of immigration from the countryside to the city meant that any unoccupied open space could be squatted and settled upon by the incoming communities, creating what Kaviraj has referred to as ‘a precedent of a soiled conception of public space’¹ (1997, p. 104). Any feeble attempt at creating a legible blueprint for the cityscape had to be restricted to the built environment, and this too could only be partially executed, as shanty towns and slum settlements sprang up cheek-by-jowl with the middle and upper class residential areas and colonies to service their needs. In a condition where the city is not only a reflection of an unequal and unjust social order but as well a terrain for contestation and struggle, public spaces could not be a matter of collective pride – it could only mirror the desperate range of uses it could be put to from free riding to vandalising (Kaviraj 1997, Chandoke 1991). Public spaces under such conditions were considered an indulgence one could least afford.

Yet, in the past decade, attitudes have changed. The initiation of economic liberalisation in the early 1990s was an official cue for signalling-in globalisation, and as cities are the structurally essential component of globalisation, its dynamics have created a demand and condition for ushering in urban transformations that weren’t possible before. This is what Boschken (2003) had referred to as the ‘unfolding of a new urban habitat’. Until recently, the urban structures and life worlds of the metropolitan cities in India were primarily conditioned by their roles as

¹ In fact, to admit the truth, it was just not the rural immigrants who had no semantic conception of the public space, but also many of the state institutions or organs, such as the housing authorities as well. In a desperate attempt to meet the burgeoning housing needs, all available land, including prominent open spaces, irrigation tanks and lakes, and environmentally sensitive areas were urbanised both legally and illegally.

national centres of economics, politics and culture. Now, these very same cities ranging from Mumbai (Bombay) to Bangalore, with Chennai located hesitantly somewhere in between, are beginning to illustrate the spatial embeddedness of economic globalisation. These cities are linked more to the transnational than to the national as they become locales or nodal points in a transnational space, involving as Abbas (2000) would say, 'not so much imagining a transnational state as reimagining the city' (p. 786)². They hold heightened aspirations for a world-class status that will allow them membership in a global interaction. The urban geography of economic globalisation ensures that the urban development projects are now shaped by global agendas. In order to advance the position of the city economically, the political actors are discovering the need for a symbolic assertion – images of a place are crucial for attracting capital investment – and public spaces are turning out to be a crucial ingredient of the new visual repertory that can speak in the name of the city to the potential investors and transnational actors, as well as raise their international profile.

As the public spaces become crucial to the new modalities of encounter and recognition, they are subjected to a renewed process of scripting, and the result is 'a political project that seeks to produce a sanitised vision of the economic benefits of globalisation' (Fernandes 2004, p. 2416). In this context, the new urban development policies turn out to be nothing more than the development of new urban aesthetics based on a new nexus between the State and capital. There is a shift from the earlier idealisation of poverty alleviation and egalitarian notions of development, to new discourses that reify the visibility of the emerging elites such as the new middle classes as the representative citizens of liberalising India³. Thus, 'state practices are engaged in political processes of spatial purification and the production of a new middle-class-based vision of the Indian nation' (ibid, p. 2417). In Fernandes's politics of forgetting, state power is exercised in convergence with the desires and interests of middle class civic organisations. This new urban politics echoes the rise of 'bourgeois urbanism', wherein bourgeois prescriptions of aesthetics and order have come significantly to shape the disposition of urban spaces. Baviskar (2003) had referred to this trend in Delhi as the force of 'bourgeois environmentalism' which converges with the disciplining zeal of the state and its interest in creating legible spaces and docile subjects.

² Appadurai (2000) has cautioned that even though Third World cities are the loci of the practices of predatory global capital, their place in the stories that link capitalism, globalisation, post-Fordism, and the growing materialisation of capital is not very clear. Thus, the images of globalisation that they strive to embrace and seduce are cracked and refracted.

³ These trends are also visible when one examines the changing attitudes of the judiciary in their recent judgements. In the 1980s and the 1990s the Supreme Court in recognizing the right of every person to constitutional relevance had ruled that housing constituted a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution – the right to life, specifying that it was the state's duty to construct houses at reasonable rates and make them easily accessible to the poor. But by 2000, the tone had reversed as the court observed that to reward an encroacher on public land with a free alternative site is like giving a reward to a pickpocket.

On hindsight, the onslaught of this bourgeois politics seems understandable, and actually a historical continuum, one that was partially disrupted in between. While discussing the embourgeoisement of the civil societies and the public spheres in India, one often forgets the Indian nation-state is very much bourgeois by itself, born as it is out of bourgeois nationalism, and ruled as it is by the middle class voices (Deshpande 2003). The democratic framework that came into being at independence was primarily a bourgeois one. Vanaik (1990) had warned that the state and the middle class seem to be part of a single dialectic of mutual benefit, and Stern (2003) described the dominant pattern of change in India today as a “bourgeois revolution”. The logic of the argument here is that the middle classes after providing for itself through the Nehruvian development process is now trying to harness for itself the benefits of globalisation, as the Indian state and the bourgeoisie turn towards closer reintegration into the world economy. It is in this context that Chatterjee’s (2003) distinction between the civil society and the political society gains seminal importance. Differentiating between the ‘proper citizen’ and the urban poor, Chatterjee postulates that the relationship between the former and the state was worked out on the terrain of civil society, while the one between the urban poor and the state was determined on that of political society. For a while, due to populist measures based on electoral mobilisation and the logic of welfare distribution, the terrain of the political society and the urban poor gained prominence, and the middle classes and their civil societies disengaged themselves from the hurly-burly of urban politics. But with the liberalisation in the 1990s, there is a concerted attempt ‘to reclaim public spaces for use by proper citizens’ (p. 171). He wryly comments that if ‘this is the new global bourgeois vision of twenty-first-century urbanity, then this time we may have successfully grasped it’ (p. 182), and thus his titular quip: *Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last? Or, if you prefer, we could exclaim: Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois, alas?*

The objective of this essay then is to examine the role of the bourgeois state and civil society in the reassertion of public spaces as a prominent domain within the Indian cityscape and the creation of a new bourgeois urban imaginary. While it cannot be denied that the dynamics of global processes are operated through both the state institutions and the civic associations that enhance the visibility of their institutional status, the essay will also question whether the convergence of the state and the civil societies in the process of embourgeoisement is as wholesome as Baviskar and Fernandes have asserted? This questioning is based on the assumption that bourgeois conceptions of space in general need not pursue a universally applicable jargon, and that there is room for the visions and imagery of the state to conflict with the civic institutions. Appadurai (2002) has suggested that globalisation is producing new geographies of governmentality, where, instead of the classic tensions one normally witnesses between the state, the civil society and the economy, a new politics of partnership emerges, as a result of which traditionally opposed groups such as the state, the corporations and workers form alliances. As complex relations are established between the state, the official public sphere, other civil society initiatives,

and local communities, the affiliations between the different actors reach new levels oscillating between coalition, collusion and collision. As class conflicts are superimposed on this exercise, it becomes evident that the debate doesn't stop at simple polarities of dominance, subordination and resistance. Instead it reveals that the domain of both the state and the civil society cannot be understood solely as institutions subordinated to bourgeois culture but is one that is characterised and constantly challenged by a plurality of social struggles.

The above questions and premises are tested against an analysis of the debates and discourses surrounding the transformations of the beaches in the city of Chennai. In discussing the public realm of a city, Beauregard and Bounds (2000) had differentiated between the *public* and the *parochial* spaces based on the presence of strangers and acquaintances. For them, public spaces are the ones where interests and identities are publicised to city wide and even national audiences (now, one could add transnational as well). Whereas, in the latter, deliberations of social collectivities remained restricted to similar interest affinity groups. While they discounted the role of the local government and placed emphasis on the civil society organisations, this essay will the role played by the state and the extent to which it casts its shadow in determining whether a particular space is public or parochial, as well as the ability of the civil society organisations to develop from an associational to an institutional status. For this purpose, three stretches of beaches have been selected in particular – the Marina Beach, and the South Beaches, comprising of the New Beach (also known as the Thiruvanniyur Beach) and Neelangarai Beach. This comparative assessment also helps to illustrate not only the varying ranges of complex affiliations and conflicts alluded to earlier, but as well the manner in which spatial struggles that are rooted in locality and territoriality change with the superimposition of larger claims of a globalised aesthetics, one that by itself produces variegated forms of discourse.

Development of beaches in a colonial port city

It is only ironical that the very morphology of a colonial port city which sought the coast for the purposes of initial settlement precluded a proper development of its beaches in the early phases⁴. Even as the fortified factory enclosure adjoined the waterfront and served as the nucleus for further urban expansion and growth, the waterfront was developed for purely commercial purposes. After securing the Coromandel (eastern India) coast against French incursions, a boundary was drawn for the first time in 1798 to mark the city of Madras. In the following year, the port moved from outside of the fort to the settlement north of it (Georgetown). It was thus

⁴ The initial grant from the local Hindu Nayak to the Company for establishing a factory in 1639 mentions three square miles of beachfront land. But this strip was chosen not for any scenic aspect. In a coastline that had few natural harbours, Madras offered a point where the ships could come closest to the shore.

that the North Beach was commercialised for mercantile activities. This beachfront, according to Neild (1979) had ‘by the 1830s formed an impressive façade of two and three storied neoclassical buildings housing mercantile and administrative offices, [which] stood as a symbol of British political and commercial power in Madras’ (p. 245). In 1858, after the termination of the East India Company and the establishment of the imperial government, Madras became a Presidency town. Administrative and institutional facilities such as the Government House, the customs house, high court, the central post-and-telegraph building, municipal offices, banks, newspaper offices, and university buildings were built along the beach, now extending south of the fort as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the municipality of Madras had approximately nine miles of sea frontage, serving commercial, administrative and institutional activities.

A prominent feature of the transfer of power to the Crown was the creation of a municipal apparatus, in terms of governance, administration, and city development through infrastructural investments. In the beginning the amenities were concentrated in those areas where the Europeans lived – this meant the inland sites along the rivers, and those on a higher plain⁵. Soon, the neighbourhoods in other parts of the city, such as those along the beach began to dilapidate so much that they were referred to as the Rotten Row. Also, echoing the nineteenth century development of beaches in Victorian England⁶, the English discovered the potential to create a promenade along the South Beach, south of the Fort and the Cooum River. Visions of reclaiming the foreshore along the South Beach and laying it out as a public garden with rides and drives were outlined. The sea view and air was considered refreshing and corresponded with the desires of the English to educate the native with notions of hygiene, health, class and civic life. Echoing the fashionable habits of England, walking, driving the carriages and riding on horses along the promenade in formal attire became a favourable pastime. A bandstand where military music was played in the evening proved to be a major attraction. By 1884, the beach promenade was fully developed. Initially, the term Marina was used loosely and generically to refer to the promenade, but soon began to denote specifically the beach south of the river, terminating at the Santhome beach, corresponding to the Portuguese settlement already in existence⁷ (Srivatsan 2003, Muthiah 1990).

One of the objectives of the development of public spaces in Europe was for the spectacles that could display the state’s authority and coercive power through

⁵ Ellefsen (1966) in quoting Love (1913) attributes the desire of the Anglo-Madrasis to reside in the interiors and along the riverfronts for two reasons – first of all, they were tired of sand and water in their daily life at the Fort, and secondly because they desired good quality water for their gardens.

⁶ It must be noted here that although the colonial English liked to emulate the lifestyle patterns that were in trend in England, it couldn’t be replicated ditto but improvised to the colonial context. For instance, instead of the beach resorts of England, what became trendy in the tropical climate of the colonies was the development of hill stations as places of summer retreat.

⁷ The main colonial city expanded southwards of the Cooum River extending up to the Adayar River in the extreme south. Nestled between these two rivers are the two beaches of Marina and Santhome.

marches, parades, military assemblies, etc. In the colonial context, spaces such as the *maidans*, esplanades, and the beaches served to display in ceremonial style the power and pageantry of the British Raj. But with the rise of the nationalist pro-independence mass politics, these spaces began to be appropriated for public meetings, rallies, protests, and demonstrations. Spaces like the Marina beach became sites for spectacles of inversion endorsing the crowd not as passive spectators to the display of colonial power but as active protestors challenging their dominance and hegemony. With its great symbolic effect of openness, the beach served well for a defiant anti-colonial stand, and augured positively to a narrativisation of collective nationalist memory. In her introduction to *The Unhurried City*, Lakshmi (2004) recalls that 'Marina beach itself was always a beehive of political activity and often the voices of orators thundered across the expanse of white sand filled with people. From the inspiring speeches of Bipin Chandra Pal and Tilak to the present times, Marina beach is the natural auditorium for all political speeches.... Often Marina beach was the culmination point of activities and ideas that had taken shape in other parts of the city' (p. xxix). This continued into the post-independent period, for instance, when, during the 1965 linguistic agitations against the imposition of Hindi from the Centre on the non-Hindi speaking states, Hindi books were burnt on the beach in front of a large gathering. Public spaces, in this context, became a means of not only decolonisation but also vernacularisation. Thus, in 1967, when the pro-Tamil Dravidian party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power, the Marina beach served as a good backcloth in their attempts to map a Dravidian geography onto the cityscape. Alderman (2000) had noted that geography is not simply an incidental backdrop but plays an active role in the construction of the meaning, one that becomes crucial as the past is memorialised and memory is spatialised. Symbols of memory are first conceived, and then the spaces in which they are to be situated mapped out afterwards. Thus, in 1968, the DMK government organised the Second World Tamil Conference, as a part of which, statues of ten Tamil scholars were erected all along the Marina. Soon, the beach was subject to a second wave of memorialisation, when it became the foreground for the erection of memorials to political leaders⁸.

In the postcolonial era, the public spaces were subjected to yet another cycle of inversion, when, they came to be viewed as places of crowds. It needs to be noted here that while the imagery of a crowd was often associated with the poor and the lower classes, it wasn't necessarily so. The crowd on the beach was a perennial presence assured by the different groups putting the beach to good use at different times of the day. Uncontrolled and unregulated urbanisation of the city in the post-independent years left the urban areas not only congested and reeling with unmanageable densities but also quickly erased the footprints of all conceivable open space within the built environment. Thus, irrigation tanks (crucial for groundwater

⁸ Two of the previous Chief Ministers of the state, Annadurai and MG Ramachandran are buried on the Marina beach with their glossy memorials serving today not only as landmarks on the beach strip but also as prominent tourist attractions.

recharge), environmentally sensitive marshlands and wetlands, parks and the semblance of any available vacant land were encroached and concretised. In this condition, the beach proved to be the only available natural lung for a city that was struggling to breathe. Thus, for the poor and the lower classes, the fresh sea breeze, especially in the evening, came free of charge with its associated offerings of leisure and recreation that was available for cheap prices (this included the temporary food stalls, carousals, horse-riding, etc.). The middle-aged middle classes in the meantime converted the colonial habit of promenading on the beach into an early morning exercise, as the 3.5km of uninterrupted stretch is used by the fitness enthusiasts for walking and jogging. For the regulars, this routine even connotes a status signifier – to be seen and to socialise. The presence of the university, colleges and educational institutions along the Marina also ensured a consistent presence of youngsters, who at the end of the day towards the evening hours, made a habit of congregating on the beach, joined by friends from other parts of the city. But none of these groups claim the beach so much as their own backyard as the fishermen communities living along the beach did.

When the colonial city expanded in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, the new boundaries subsumed and absorbed the existing precolonial agrarian and town societies, accommodating a highly complex urban structure as a result of which the expanding city seemed to be hardly more than an agglomeration of urban, suburban and rural settlements drawn together in differing degrees of colonial policies and practices. One of the existing communities with whom the British practiced a policy of minimal disturbance was the fishermen settlements or the *kuppams* that were sprinkled along the shoreline. The fisherman *kuppams* are generally separated by distances varying from 0.5 km to 2 km according to the traditionally established and strictly observed rights of fishing zone in the sea. It was thus that while the Marina was being developed as a promenade, *Ayodhyakuppam*, *Nadukuppam*, *Nochikuppam* continued to exist along the Marina beach as the major fishermen settlements. Their use of the beach was related to their lifestyle pattern as they parked their catamarans on the beach, dried their nets, the fish, clothing, utensils, etc. on the sands, dug shallow wells for drinking water, washing and cleaning purposes, and used the wet sands close to the water as open-air defecation areas.

In developing the promenade, the British had to very carefully balance their desire to create a public space that could be used by all against the existing use of the beach as a common space by the fishermen communities. Kaviraj (1997) had explained that the modern idea of public is a historically specific configuration of commonness that emerged in the capitalist-democratic West in the course of the eighteenth century. It was introduced into colonial India by the British administration, and was later internalised by the modernist Indian elites. Besides the crucial distinction drawn from the private, the characteristic features of a bourgeois publicity included 'a recognisable source, proper authorisation, impersonality, legality, state sanction, and clear ascription of individual responsibility' (p. 89). These are in sharp contrast to the

pre-colonial forms of common spaces which 'did not have clear boundaries marked legally and officially, precisely because collective decisions lacked the crucial modern quality of officiality' (p. 88). Obligations attached to common activities were never documented or proclaimed, but were implicit and observed. While in the colonial period, the conscription of publicness on what was perceived to be common could be authoritatively asserted. Whereas in the postcolonial years, such an exercise proved to be one of tightrope walking, one that only got worse with time, as the aspirations of a public space demanded and sought after by the citizens of the city has completely wiped out the chances of co-existence of a common space for the localised fishermen settlements.

Even as the beach was juggling the juxtaposition of pleasure (for many), and economy (for the fishermen and the hawkers), the presence of the increasing crowd led to heightened expressions around the accumulating concerns of dirt and danger on the beach. In contrast to the colonial modernity that laid out the western dichotomy of the public/private was the pre-colonial code of using social space based on a different cosmology of the inside/outside. Kaviraj (1997) has explained that typically what happens is not that one of these dichotomies overwhelms the other but something more complex and subtle whereby, both ideologies are forced to negotiate and modify, troubled by the proximity and subtle invasion of the other. For people accustomed to living in caste societies where social hierarchies could easily be established even in a crowd, this overlapping of ideologies created a new situation on the outside sparking fears of miscegenariton and unpredictability, presenting a world that was inhospitable and dangerous. At the same time, Hindu dichotomy of the inside/outside was associated with a concept of cleanliness and purity which precluded one from responsibility or obligation to the outside. On a crowded outside, it is difficult to superimpose the value of a civic or public space requiring subscription to the bourgeois norms and regulations. It was thus that Gupta (2001) exclaimed that Indians may be capable of personal cleanliness but not of public hygiene. Chakrabarty (1992) had gone a step further by insisting that as long as the outside was treated as a malevolent space that could be rubbished, there could be no way of according it a symbolic meaning or enclosure. 'People in India, on the whole, have not heeded the nationalist call to discipline, public health and public order. Can one read this as a refusal to become citizen of an ideal bourgeois order?', he asks, adding further as to whether the "non-moderns" should 'have the freedom to die in their "ignorance" or should we intervene with our "knowledge" and the police?' (pp. 544-45). It was using the excuses of dirt and danger that the postcolonial state, thus, embarked on a project of regulating and disciplining the public spaces. Glaringly, the initiatives began with the fishermen settlements.

Bourgeois diktat 1: From *kuppam* to slum

In the 1970s, at the heights of economic and political populism, the State Government of Tamil Nadu had constituted the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board

(TNSCB) to undertake the clearance or improvement of slum areas with the objective of eventual elimination of slums within the cities. Without much definitional speculation, the *kuppams* were classified as slums and chosen for resettlement. Some of them involved demolition of the existing huts and construction of tenement structures on the same location, while others were relocated more inland farther away from the beach. This includes those along the Marina and Santhome beaches, but many of them have chosen to ignore the new housing allotments made to them by the government and have returned to their original locations closer to the beach and reconstructed hutment dwellings. This is not the space to undertake a 'culture of poverty' analysis as to why the fishermen or in that case any slum dweller make such decisions. But what needs to be observed here is the way such reactions are noted as acts of thanklessness and ingratitude. A write-up in a leading daily newspaper⁹ noted on the Marina that

The 3.5 km long beach, which boasts of a breathtaking broad expanse of sand, should automatically lead to visions of beach umbrellas, Frisbees and plain fun. Yet, the Marina has never made it to the big league of world famous beaches....A fresh danger threatens the beachface now. It could well acquire the dubious distinction of being the "*longest slum*" if the mushroom growth of huts all along the shore continues. (emphasis added)

Noting the question of tourist interest versus the convenience of fishermen, the reporter subverted the hutment cluster to one sheltering clandestine and deviant activities. Referring to the fishermen as 'slum dwellers', the article also insists that they have made the beach less attractive for the visitors, ignoring the tenements allotted to them, and continuing to live in huts on the shore.

Bourgeois State: Imaging the offender

In one of the earliest initiatives to reconstitute the beach as a 'proper' public space, the State formed the Marina Development Committee in 1979. This committee asked the Madras Metropolitan Development Authority (MMDA, which after the city was renamed was rechristened as CMDA) to draft an integrated development plan for the beach. Schemes for beach beautification were drawn up with recommendations to improve access and amenities in the area, making it attractive for both the domestic visitors as well as international tourists. Part of the suggestions involved the regulation of the use of the beachfront by the fishermen, including the parking of their catamarans and the drying of their nets and catch. After several directives, things came to a head when on 4 November 1985, the catamarans and fishing gear were seized by the police from the beach. Within a month, the fishermen's agitations had turned violent, and in December, in an encounter with the police, six persons were killed and about a hundred injured. Finally, the Supreme Court directed the

⁹ See Vydhanathan, S. (1996). Squalor on the shore. The Hindu, Madras: 1.

government to return their catamarans and gear, with the first attempts of the State to beautify the beach leaving behind a bloody trail.

Over the years, open accusations against the fishermen as defilers of the beach have considerably toned down. This is partly because the fishermen have themselves gotten defiant against such assertions¹⁰, and partly because the identification of deviants on the beach has diversified. Eunuchs are accused of pestering the visitors, who are also waylaid by solicitors (prostitutes) and criminals¹¹. The bitterness of the violence in its initial attempt at beautification did not deter the State from making subsequent efforts. What is interesting to note in this process is the way the imaginary has evolved, particularly in the use of vocabulary and jargon, and the manner in which it has become more assertive and demonstrative.

Bourgeois Diktat 2: Authority on the beach

After the economic reforms began in 1991 paving the way for a new liberalised era, the State in 1992-93 tried yet again to resurrect a new development plan in 1992-93. Announcing a Madras Vision 2000 strategy, a Marina Beautification Plan was drafted. By the mid-1990s, the regional states in India had taken on an aggressive entrepreneurial role, rebranding their cities and regions to attract global capital and transnational investment. Beautification of the city was no longer about paying lip service, and it was there to see – flyovers, expressways, removal of encroachments, etc. – the State meant business. The responsibility of the beach was consolidated under the Corporation of Chennai¹², and efforts to make a *Singara*¹³ Chennai did not stop at the campaign level. Neither did it meet with resistance from the civic associations in the city. When a beach amenity plan to provide improved walkway, pedestrian plazas, additional parking space for vehicles, children play spaces, high mast lights, lawns and police patrolling was announced, most bourgeois bodies concurred, declaring that it was about time. The Marina beach was no longer the public space of Chennai, it was *the public face* of the city. The beach was being subject to a new imaginary, and this time it was being done with a transnationalised imagery, one where the State and the Civil Society in their pursuit of a new revamped bourgeois vision for the beach were seemingly in coalition and collusion.

In 2002, a series of high-profile advertisements appeared in the English dailies like *The Hindu*, calling for revised attitudes to the beach. Using the idyllic images of

¹⁰ In a recent interview, the president of the Nochikuppam Association protested against such a representation, saying '[a]fter all, we are not the people who make it filthy. Every day about 3,000 people who do not live here litter or use the beach as a public toilet'. See Kamat, A. (2003). 'Beautification' at what cost? *Frontline*, **20**: n.p.

¹¹ See Subramanian, K. (2002). *Pride of city under neglect*. *The Hindu*. Chennai.

¹² Earlier, the responsibility had been shared between the Corporation, the Revenue and the Public Works Department (PWD). But with the restoration of the Corporation as an elected body in 1996, it was deemed fit to bring the beach entirely under its control.

¹³ *Singara* means beautiful in Tamil.

beaches from around the world in juxtaposition to the image of Marina being used as an open toilet, a campaign called *Marinavai Maathalam Vaa* (Come, let us change the Marina) was launched by the Citizens Rights Action Group (CRAG), a non-profit organisation based in the city. The vocabulary used in this campaign was extremely aestheticised, and here was one clear attempt by the transnationalised professionals in the city, who in responding to the opportunities of globalisation were trying to organise the public spaces of the city. The head of this organisation is a convener for the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), and the resonance in the bourgeois thinking of the State and the Civil Society could be clearly seen here. In 2003, the state set up a 19-member high level State Beach Management Authority (SBMA) for the preservation of various beaches in Tamil Nadu, with individual committees for beaches in Chennai Metropolitan area and its districts. The Chennai Metropolitan Beach Committee has jurisdiction over the Marina, Santhome, Elliots, Thiruvanmiyur and Neelangarai beaches. The members include the district collectors, commissioners of the corporation and the police, a landscape architect, and representatives of CII and the Chamber of Commerce.

This bourgeois marriage of the visions of the State and its civic professionals is still an uneasy alliance, one that is easily shaken and rocked, mainly due to two reasons. First of all, the State has adopted an overbearing authoritative stand on the beach, practising often a politics of act first and reveal later. Secondly, the State has come increasingly to lock horns two of the objectives of the civil societies in terms of issues on the beach – environment and heritage.

Bourgeois imaginary: Colliding visions

In 2003, the State announced two proposals in relation to development of the Marina beach, and in no time both of them snowballed into unmanageable and unruly crises. In January, after reviewing the ten year old plan of the CMDA for the beautification of the Marina, the government signed a memorandum of understanding with the Construction Industry Development Board of Malaysia to implement the project. Considerably revised to a mega-scale with a clear ‘we are going global’ tone, the proposal covering a 1.5km stretch along the Santhome beach envisioned the development of multi-storeyed complexes of international standards providing office accommodation for multinationals and embassies. For a city that was aspiring to world-class status, it was only natural for it to change itself with global collaborations, employing a global architecture. But the plan had also openly acknowledged that the *kuppams* would have to be relocated, and this did not find favour with both the fishermen and the environmentalists.

Over the years, many environmentalists have aligned themselves with the fishermen’s cause, particularly those from the Marina beach southwards, who were considered as ‘artisanal fishermen’ fishing with their catamarans as against the mechanised, industrialised fishing practiced from the special fishing harbour on the

north of the city. The livelihoods of the former category had suffered seriously with the decreasing catch brought about by the industrialisation of fishing activities as well as the climatic changes in the seas and oceans that were affecting the fish population. It was also alleged that since many of the State politicians had a business (and therefore, a vested) interest in the fishing industry, they could care less about the smaller fishermen communities. In light of their dwindling trade, the position of the State was that they were better-off relocated elsewhere than remain in a place with little economic promise. Loud and vociferous support for the fishermen came from the environmental groups raising objections to the erection of tall structures along the beach. Medha Patkar of the National Alliance of Peoples Movements, an environmental activist of repute who has for many years rallied against the construction of dam projects in India, came to the city in February to lead a protest against the proposed eviction of the fishermen, and demand their participation in any plans to beautify the beach. Dust hadn't so much settled on this issue when a few months later a second crisis erupted blowing this time into absurdity.

On 3 April 2003, the Chief Minister J Jayalithaa informed the Assembly, in a suo motu statement under Rule 110 that does not allow a discussion, that the "run-down" buildings on the 30-acre, 88-year old Queen Mary's College (QMC) on Marina beach would be razed to make way for a brand new secretariat complex. Since the 1980s, the State has expressed itself to be inadequately housed in the Fort St. George complex¹⁴, also located on the beach, and has time and again looked for alternative sites and accommodation, but nothing had come to fruition. This time there was an immediacy and urgency to the realisation of the proposal, and it seemed for real¹⁵. At a time when Chennai was making all-out efforts to place itself on the network of global cities, architectural projects that endorsed its commitment to the new-age technology and development¹⁶ were considered necessary. Nothing could be better than the State to set an exemplar in this case, and too on a strip that was becoming the banner of a globalising Chennai. Unfortunately, this time, the aspirations were way off the mark, provoking protests beyond anyone's imagination.

Within hours of the statement being made in the Assembly, students organised themselves to protest on the Marina drive, bringing traffic to a halt. The 'Save QMC' movement was soon organised with support from the heritage supporters in the city. 9 writ-petitions were filed in the Madras High Court from various organisations including the Citizen, Consumer and Civil Action Group which claimed violation of

¹⁴ Under the purview of the Archaeological Survey of India, this site is extremely regulated in terms of renovations and constructions that could be undertaken within the complex.

¹⁵ In January 2003, the assembly had passed a motion allowing the demolition of all buildings on the QMC campus, and in February 2003, the oldest building on site, The Capper House had been demolished.

¹⁶ A statement had been made by the Chief Minister that the new Secretariat would be an exquisite mix of the façade of the Vidhan Soudha in Bangalore, and the modern interiors of the Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi. In March 2003, architects invited to submit proposals revealed that the brief called for multi-storeyed structures on the site.

a host of existing development laws including provisions of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ), The Town and Country Planning Act, and the Constitution, bypassing the role of the CMDA. The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) which in 1996 had been instrumental in saving the Directorate General of Police (DGP) Headquarters, and coincidentally a neighbour to the QMC, from the demolition axe, also filed a petition arguing that in the Draft Heritage Regulation of the CMDA, 12 buildings on the Marina including the QMC were listed as heritage buildings. But according to the State, heritage was a spanner in its globalisation drive. The Chief Minister countered that there were no “problems” related to the coastal regulation zone, heritage norms and development control rules, and that these buildings did not attract the TN Ancient Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act 1966. They were ‘only a cluster of dilapidated buildings, which have no archaeological value’¹⁷

In the 1950s, when the question of the direction of urban development of the city was being discussed amidst pressures to decolonise the cityscape, the then Chief Minister C Rajagopalachari had banned high-rise constructions along the Marina, insisting on their preservation, stating that ‘we must resist such tendencies’. Yet now, the State was determined to change the skyline of Marina. Was the State merely infected with a Severe Acute Demolition Syndrome (SADS) as one of the protest banners read?¹⁸ The controversy raged for a month, expanded into the political circuit and was finally sealed with the imposition by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests of a blanket ban on the demolition and reconstruction of all public use buildings along the coastal stretches.

Both the controversies had left behind some bitterness in an attempt to converge the vision of the State and the civil society. One could possibly argue that this is an example of an extreme-case scenario given the global stakes that the beach supposedly carried for the developmental aspirations of the city. The beautification of Marina left the bourgeois civic institutions clearly more sympathetic with the fishermen and history than with a modernising state. This was partially due to the uneasiness of the glare created by the State’s stare (or vision, if one chooses to call it). It would be useful to complement the above analysis with an examination of the alliances and dalliances in a more parochial context, where the State is not so domineeringly involved. For this purpose, the focus in the following paragraphs will

¹⁷ Cited in *The Hindu* on 9 April 2003.

¹⁸ Besides these controversies, the State had virtually reincarnated itself as a demolition machine in its drive to beautify Marina. It had demolished the Kannagi Statue (one of the ten statues erected in 1968 for the Second World Tamil Conference), the Seerani Arangam (an auditorium structure for holding public rallies, which were now banned on the Marina), and the Buhari Hotel and other associated buildings along the Swimming Pool complex. It has to be noted here that in these events, the State had the support of the judiciary, when the judge in hearing one of the writ-petitions questioning the demolitions asked why the Marina beach should not be restored to its old glory, and what was wrong in clearing the beach of structures and beautifying it.

turn to the developmental debates surrounding the two southern beaches of Thiruvanmiyur and Neelangarai.

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