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INDIA DREAMS

CULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG YOUNG MIDDLE CLASS MEN IN NEW DELHI

PAOLO FAVERO
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By
Paolo Favero

Doctoral dissertation. By due permission of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Stockholm University. To be publicly defended in Reinholdsalen, Juristernas Hus, Stockholm University, on Friday February 25, 2005 at 10.00 a.m.

Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 56
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SE-106 91 Stockholm
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ISBN 91-7155-010-0

In 1991 the Indian government officially sanctioned the country's definitive entry into the global market and into a new era. This study focuses on the generation that epitomizes this new era and is based on fieldwork among young English-speaking, educated, Delhi-based men involved in occupations such as tourism, Internet, multinationals, journalism and sports. These young men construct their role in society by promoting themselves as brokers in the ongoing exchanges between India and the outer world. Together they constitute a heterogeneous whole with different class-, caste- and regional background. Yet, they can all be seen as members of the ‘middle class’ occupying a relatively privileged position in society. They consider the opening of India to the global market as the key-event that has made it possible for them to live an “interesting life” and to avoid becoming “boring people”.

This exploration into the life-world of these young men addresses in particular how they construct their identities facing the messages and images that they are exposed to through work- and leisure-networks. They understand themselves and what surrounds them by invoking terms such as ‘India’ and ‘West’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, mirroring the debates on change that have gone on in India since colonization. Yet, they imaginatively re-work the content of these discourses and give the quoted terms new meanings. In their usage ‘being Indian’ is turned into a ‘global’, ‘modern’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ stance while ‘being Westernized’ becomes a marker of ‘backwardness’ and lack of sophistication. Their experiences mark out the popularity of notions of ‘Indianness’ in contemporary metropolitan India.

The study focuses on how social actors themselves experience their self-identity and how these experiences are influenced by the actors’ involvement with international flows of images and conceptualizations. It will primarily approach cultural identities through labels of belonging to abstract categories with shifting reference (referred to them as ‘phantasms’) such as ‘India’, ‘West’, etc. The study suggests that the ‘import’ of trans-national imagination into everyday life gives birth to sub-cultural formations, new ‘communities of imagination’. Their members share a similar imagination of themselves, of Delhi, their country and the world.
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This book is distributed by
Almqvist & Wiksell International
Box 45022
104 30 STOCKHOLM
SWEDEN
E-mail: order@awi.akademibokhandeln.se

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ISBN : 91-7155-010-0

Printed by Jannes Snabbtryck, Stockholm 2005
CHAPTER FIVE

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT DELHI: CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE CITY AND AMONG ITS INHABITANTS

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Travel, text and acknowledgments

I acknowledge the generous funding received by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund, that supported the core of my research and also, later on, an ethnographic documentary film on the same subject. Fieldwork was made possible through the scholarships of SSAG (The Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography), HSF (Swedish Board for the Humanistic and Social Sciences), the Lars Hierta’s Minne Foundation and the Hierta-Retzius Foundation. STINT (The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education) funded a four months stay abroad during the phase of writing-up this work. The last part of work at this book was financed by the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.

I wish to thank all the colleagues at the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University for comments I have received during formal seminars and coffee-breaks throughout the years. In particular Christer Norström, Per Ståhlberg, Eva-Maria Hardtmann, Björn Alm, Marie Larsson and Charles Câmara (the SARI-network) for India-related feedback. Victor Alneng, Galina Lindquist, Fanny Ambjörnsson, Ronald Stade, Don Kulick and Johan Lindquist for their active comments and contributions to my work throughout the years. Thaís Machado-Borges, Katja Sarajeva and Hasse Huss for friendship and sweet insights. Maarit Hämäläinen, Riita Mettelä, Ann-Charlotte Krus, Lena Holm and Martina Aronson have given friendly assistance in all bureaucratic/administrative matters. Thank you Margaret Cornell for proof-reading and Reza Arjmand for layouting this book. Thank you guys and girls at Café Trean and Lamin Njie for keeping the academic spirit high.

The IHBAS (Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences, Delhi) was my institutional support in Delhi during fieldwork. Prof. Sharma, Prof. Bapna, Dr. Joshy and Dr. T.B. Singh always provided me with intellectual and field-related support and with loving assistance. My deepest gratitude to Dipankar Gupta, Pavan K. Varma,
Urvasi Butalia, Ashim Ghosh, Acchal Bhagat and Sunandan Roy Chowdhury.

Enrique Rodriguez Larreta and Augusto Ferraiuolo have always professed inspiring words in my direction, and for the same reason I send a grateful thought to the memory of Horacio de Marsilio. I wish to thank all my friends who have been exposed to the ups and downs of my travelling and writing. In chaotic order: Claudio and Giampaolo (my gurus), Jonas (who suggested me to study anthropology), Rohit (my Indian 'home'), Marco, Tobias, Vittorio, Anil, Neeraj, Faroukh, Niki, Jagdeep, Charlotte, Hemesh, Pragun, Elisabetta and Cordelia and their family. Thank you Zia Edda (always lovingly present), Zia Libe and Zio Aldo (your memory echoes in our mountains).

This research is a part of larger group-based project entitled "Modernities on the move". I wish to thank my project-companions Shahram Khosravi and Örjan Bartholdson for professional participation and precious (but very un-professional) friendship.

Thank you Ulf Hannerz, Karin Norman (for your loving tutoring during the first years of the Ph.D.-program) and Bengt-Erik Borgström (for the inspiring reading of my work at the very end of it).

I wish to express my warmest gratitude to my Ph.D.-supervisor Gudrun Dahl. Her loving care and attention with my work and her patience and acceptance with my continuous movements between Sweden, India and Italy (and my consecutive prolonged absence) have meant a lot to me.

As for most other anthropological works, this book is the result of a long period where study, travel and writing have moved confusedly sideways to just as many ordinary life-events. Abrupt changes of climate translated into new-born and temporarily forgotten friendships...loves, errors and airports... footnotes, memories and photogenic poses...happy and sad events dancing like "passistas" in a carnival.... Every chapter, line and word is a chaotic unleashing of people, events, places, smells, emotions...Phantasms.

...To Giuliana who shines through the most passionate words in each chapter....to my sister who decided to become a mother at around chapter three...to her son born at chapter five......to my father who, all along the writing of words, has been a father, has become a grandfather and has learned to be a mother...

...a mia madre...
One afternoon, as I am sitting on the low fence in Janpath market in central New Delhi, Sunil taps my elbow and puts a match-box in my hand, indicating that I should pass it to Bharat who is sitting on my left. Before I have the time to do so, Sunil taps me again calling my attention to a young woman passing in front of us. Dressed in a red and gold salwar-qamiz¹ she swings her long black plait around, looking at the merchandise exposed by the vendors in this popular market. Sunil comments on her beauty and elegance. His friend Satinder joins in with words of appreciation and desire. Suddenly Bharat distracts us all, calling our attention to another woman, a blonde tourist in shorts and t-shirt who is purchasing a Tibetan bag at one of the stalls. Their eyes cling to her for some time until they encounter a tall white man with long blonde hair and a long reddish beard. Wearing a colourful kurta² and a couple of heavy necklaces, he is just leaving one of the Kashmiri souvenir shops next to where the blonde woman is standing. They look at each other and laugh. "Yet another enlightened Westerner, huh?", Satinder exclaims. Bharat adds, "Yeah! Another one searching for his soul in India!" They laugh out loud and then start to comment on the stereotypical visions of India held by Westerners. Sitting there on the low fence facing the market, immersed in watching and commenting on the street spectacle I realize that I still have the match box in my hands. It carries the label ‘Delhi’ and the subtext ‘Export Quality’. Between the texts there is a small drawing of the Gateway of India, the well-known Bombay landmark which is a memorial to the visit of King George V and Queen Mary of England in 1911. In contrast to this ‘reassuring’ indigenous upper side, I discover that the back of the box displays the printed price surmounted by a drawing of Walt Disney’s Uncle Scrooge. I finally pass the box to Bharat who lights up his cigarette. We go back to looking at street life again.

The story of this match-box relates to that of places like Janpath market, one of the most popular markets in Delhi and a point of convergence for people, products and images from all over the world. The match-box mirrored this environment, epitomizing India’s capacity
to merge apparently contradictory signs within the space of a few square centimetres. With its collection of signs expressing different stories and visions of India and of its interactions with the outside world, it reminded me of the views held by my informants on their country, its past, present and future and on its the role in an increasingly interconnected world. India, the 'Export Quality' label on the match-box seemed to declare, is a country which is still 'catching up' with the rest of the world and for which whatever is foreign is superior. The presence of Walt Disney's capitalist hero on the back of the box underlined this, demonstrating how the 'West' still functions as an attractive symbol. In contrast, the Bombay monument chosen as the central decoration of the box highlighted 'Indianness' and seemed to declare that "India is a magnificent country, proud of its cultural heritage". It also implied that India has today absorbed the colonial heritage and made it its own, thus freeing itself from colonial subjugation. Also, India is India, one large inclusive whole, so why worry if a match-box labelled 'Delhi' in fact displays a symbol of Bombay?

The 'Delhi' match-box is a good example of the multireferential 'cultural habitat' within which my informants live and of the expressions of 'cultural identity' (see below) that I documented during my fieldwork among them. In 1999 I had set out to collect material for a book on young middle class men, cultural identity and globalization in New Delhi. My aim was to focus particularly on the cultural changes that the country had experienced with the implementation of the economic liberalization process that the Indian government pushed forward particularly around the year 1991. I was interested to understand how the generation that epitomized the entry of India into a new era experienced and constructed their identities, in the face of the growing number of messages and images reaching the country from all over the world. I created a network of informants among English-speaking, educated, Delhi-based men between twenty and thirty years of age who were, I supposed, particularly exposed to these changes. Somewhat randomly (cf. Chapter One), I became involved in networks of people who were primarily 'using' the opening up of India for personal purposes of career and independence. Tourism, the Internet, journalism, sport, multinationals, etc. became the work arenas through which I constructed my networks of interlocutors. I was pulled by each
Introduction

of my informants into his circle of friends and colleagues and became involved in a web of relations characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity.

In a society like that of India, where ascribed status and identities have been (or at least have been considered) of primary importance in the shaping of communities (cf. Dumont 1980), I was faced with groupings of friends and colleagues that crossed the conventional community boundaries. Within each group, the differences in background were obvious. Some were born in Delhi, some in Bombay, some in Punjab, Bihar, Bengal or other parts of India. Some were children of rich owners of companies and others of low-ranking government clerks. Some had studied abroad or had been abroad on holiday, and some had found the foreign world coming to them mostly through schoolbooks, the MTV and the BBC. Some had been sent to the best school available and some to the best school affordable (yet offering at least a decent degree of education and knowledge of English, see below). Some had grown up in the posh areas of a metropolis, some in its suburbs, yet others in one of India’s expanding ‘villages’.

However, by and large, my informants also had certain things in common. They had all received at least some schooling in English and were thus able to speak the language relatively fluently. They all possessed at least a high school degree (most of them a university degree as well) in spite of the varying sacrifices their parents had made to provide them with this. Despite the differences in financial possibilities and original status, they could all be labelled as members of the ‘middle class’ (see below for a discussion of this vague term): they possessed quite considerable cultural capital and occupied a relatively privileged position in society. They also belonged to the same generation and had passed their youth and early adulthood in the midst of the changes that had come about with the boost of liberalization (see the next section). Moreover, they nourished, for reasons that varied a lot between the different individuals, a desire for living a “different life” from that of their parents. All bachelors, they resisted their parents’ attempts to arrange a marriage for them, scared that this would turn them into “boring middle class people”. They preferred to find their girlfriends (and friends) on their own, and in these choices they ignored the conventional definitions of community affiliation. The people they
liked being with, they all suggested, were not necessarily those who had the same background as they did, but rather those who had a similar “attitude” and similar interests. All these young men welcomed the opening up of India to the global market and saw this event as the key change that had made it possible for them to fulfil their dreams, to get an interesting job, to earn more money, to get better films, TV-programs, music and hang-outs in the city, and to find more “interesting” friends and female counterparts to flirt with.8

**sub-cultural communities of imagination**

While doing my fieldwork I became aware that my informants shared a similar imagination of themselves, of Delhi, of their country and of the world. They communicated and understood their identity and what surrounded them by constantly invoking terms such as ‘India’ and the ‘West’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, mirroring the discourse that has characterized debates on change in India since colonial times9. They evoked elements of the discourse on ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’ carried on by Nehru and Gandhi (while heavily criticizing their legacy, cf. Chapter Three) and at times also that of the new Hindu nationalist parties (without, however, feeling ideologically linked to them). They echoed the recent public discourse promoted by Indian intellectuals and the mass media, addressing a number of situations through direct or indirect referrals to issues of ‘locality’ vs. ‘globality’. Yet, they imaginatively re-worked the content of these discourses, to give new meaning to the dichotomic categories that are their basis. In their usage, ‘being Indian’, for instance, did not coincide with being ‘traditional’ and ‘local’ but often implied taking a ‘global’ stance, ‘being modern’ and ‘cosmopolitan’. ‘Being Westernized’ and showing off a ‘modern’ attitude and outlook, was for them often a marker of ‘backwardness’, attributed to those who were not as familiar with a globalizing world as they themselves were. In my informants’ usage, ‘India’ and the ‘West’, were the central terms used for explaining a variety of issues linked to culture and change, but not always associated with the qualities they conventionally stand for in public debates. They no longer appeared as given dichotomic ‘entities’ with fixed meanings, but were, rather, fluid, constantly evolving and dialogically shaping each other (see the notion of the ‘phantasm’
below). Looking at my informants’ ways of addressing the ‘India’-'West' issue, I felt that the validity of Kipling’s famous statement “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” was somewhat shaky.

My interlocutors’ constant usage and questioning of the categories that have functioned as the foundation for the discourse on change in India intrigued me and became the main focus of my study. My interest was enhanced when, hanging around with these young men in Delhi, I observed how their stories mirrored those expressed in and by the places within the city to which they gradually introduced me. These places too seemed to be constituted by the exchange of elements coming from all over the world and by the production of novel forms of merging between the Indian and the foreign, twisting the conventional significance of ‘India’, the ‘West, ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. With my interlocutors I became a frequentor of kabab1 restaurants outwardly resembling MacDonald’s but offering experiences of ‘authentic’ Indian cuisine and culture (cf. Chapter Five). I attended ‘cosmopolitan’ parties culminating in collective bhangra11 dances where I could observe how being ‘modern’, ‘global’ and ‘cool’ today entails being able to appreciate local folk-music, to wear a kurta or maybe an Om-sign on the chest, and to be a connoisseur of kabab. I also noticed how advertisements, films and TV addressed to young people were constantly promoting images of ‘Indianness’, expressing the ‘coolness’ of Indian things and traditional symbols, as did the latest architectural trends that I would study and photograph during my walks and rides around Delhi (cf. Chapter Five). In parallel, the political scene dominated by the Hindu nationalist party the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)12, promoted, though from a different angle, a ‘modernity’ constructed on ideas of boundedness to roots and tradition. The global age in metropolitan India seemed to have turned into the age of the revenge of the kurta, a kurta that had been refurbished to suit a more complex and contemporary taste.

Following my informants, I became intrigued by their ways of moving within this context. I noted how they were able to switch frames of identification and reference even within the course of a single conversation (for a detailed description of this see Chapter Three). One moment they would appear as the ideal heirs of the Gandhi-Nehru legacy, another moment as ‘crypto’ Hindu nationalists and yet a
moment later as hard-core “Westoxicated” (Gupta 2000) youths. My friend and informant Satinder, for example, often spent hours expressing pity and disgust for fellow middle class men trapped in marriages with “boring unattractive Indian women”. He would then interrupt his lament by suddenly praising, as we have seen, the sublime beauty of a ‘traditional’ woman in a salwar-qamiz and with long black hair. Similarly, Ashwin and Vikram could spend an entire evening sipping whisky in a Chinese bar, talking about American night life and the boredom of Delhi, only to end up banging their fists on their hearts exclaiming: “I am happy I am Indian...Nothing like India, man, nothing like it!”

At the beginning I found such rapid switches of the conversation confusing. But my informants were obviously able to follow each other’s turns and understand the messages they were sending each other. Their capacity to shift referents and to identify with specific symbols and images marked out a shared sub-cultural identity located within the metropolitan middle class culture, one already characterized by contradiction, hybridity and ambivalence (see Chapter Three). The ability to move within a complex multi-referential “life-world” (Habermas 1997) and to carve out novel meanings for it appeared to me to be one of the characteristics of the present generation of young educated metropolitan men in post-liberalization India. Many (especially Indian) scholars and social critics maintain that metropolitan youth in particular, suffer today from exaggerated individualism, from “cultural schizophrenia”, or in the best case from a “blind aping of the West”. I did not find this a satisfactory explanation of their behaviour. Rather, the latter was a description of a subculture that has been shaped by exposure to the contemporary flow of travelling images and representations (what I shall shortly label as ‘the travel of imagination’). This flow, which today reaches locality through the enhanced technological possibilities for the transfer of information, provides social actors with new ideas and instruments for personal identification and social mobility.

The life-world of my informants, the Delhi I have looked at, is a context where different, and at times contradictory, messages co-exist and where the knowledge of ‘things foreign’ goes hand in hand with expressions of pride in ‘India’ and its culture. The exploration of this life-world is one of the aims of this study. The project was born out of
my wish to understand how young Indian people, growing up in a world made up of multiple influences and messages, construct their identities. I focused on urban educated men also because of my theoretical interest in 'hybridity', making a guess that they would be the ones most exposed to the flow of representations of, and discourses on, cultural identity. Inspired by the debates on 'studying up' and 'studying sideways' (cf. Hannerz 1998a), I was interested in offering a description of those people who seemingly 'gained' from the opening up of India and not of those who paid the price for that change. This perspective, focused on the life experiences of those who may become tomorrow's movers and shakers of Indian society, may, it is hoped, offer another point of view on a changing India.

Because of these young men's continual references to such 'terms' as 'India', the 'West', 'Westernization', 'modern', etc., and because of their original and seemingly inconsistent way of doing so, I became interested in exploring how social actors 'import' imagination into everyday life in order to make sense of the people, messages and images they encounter. This importation seemed to give rise to sub-cultural formations such as the ones I am analyzing in this study. It gave birth to new forms of communities of imagination, that were overcoming, at least in certain contexts, differences in status, class and caste. These communities, even though based on the sharing of a sub-cultural usage of symbols, were indeed also very 'concrete' ones. These groups of friends would help each other out in case of need. They would support each other emotionally and at times financially too, share potential work-contacts, introduce friends and girls and share moments of joy and sorrow.

Because of my primary interest in the interplay of identification and imagination I shall focus in this study mainly on the level of imagination and cultural identity, i.e. how social actors themselves experience their self-identity, and analyze how these experiences are influenced by the actors' involvement with the travel of imaginations. Moreover, I shall approach cultural identities mainly through abstract and shifting categories of belonging such as 'India', the 'West', etc., which are central to my informants' own discourses on personal identity and social change. The reader will not therefore find in this study any detailed analysis of social mobility, caste and class but rather an exploration of cultural identity, imagination and representation in
India Dreams

contemporary India. And, even though I identified my interlocutors mostly through career networks, it will not focus on issues of career and work *per se* but rather look at the ordinary experiences of my informants’ every day lives.

**a post-1991 generation**

The year 1991 marks the definitive entry of India into the global market and the beginning of a new era for the young middle class men whom I met in Delhi. The process of liberalization started much earlier under Rajiv Gandhi, but 1991 symbolically marks the beginning of a new hoped-for era for India, one in which the country would definitively reach the level of other industrialized countries. Liberalization and privatization became the mottos of this new epoch, witnessing an ever-growing entrance into India of foreign companies, products, people and medialized images. The young men I am writing about (all born between 1968 and 1976) are constructing their place in society in the midst of these rapid changes. Despite their differences in background, they are all at a similar stage of life where they are creating an adult position in society at a time of particularly visible changes. They share an agenda for the use of transnational and global inspiration for the purposes of creating a better and more interesting life in Delhi, and state that it is thanks to the definitive opening up of India that their dreams have come within closer reach.

My informants can be seen as small-scale cultural brokers intent on capitalizing on India’s ever-increasing interaction with the outside world. They are the “other transnationals” (Hannerz 1998a) that are seldom within the focus of anthropological research but who nonetheless constitute small links in the global chain of exchanges across national borders. The workers in tourism, for instance, ‘sell India’ on a daily basis to foreign clients, while they also sell themselves as interpreters of the ‘West’ to those who share their own social space. The situation of most of my other informants is similar. Nikilesh, foreign correspondent for the international press agencies, and Akash, the Internet manager, constantly translate ‘the Indian’ into ‘the foreign’ and vice versa. Their participation in transnational networks is part, however, not only of their working life but of their free time as well. Their choices of entertainment and fun also bring them in touch with
messages coming from all over the world. Their involvement in wider networks of career and leisure is a constitutive part of their identity and part of a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1990) that they carefully administer at work and in private life and through which they create and demarcate their status.

The openness to the new ideas and messages coming from elsewhere in the world is instrumental to these young men’s desire to escape from (or not fall back into) what they define as a “boring middle class life” (see Chapter One). However, in contrast to what we might expect, they do not express this escape by identifying with and ‘aping’ the ‘West’. Rather, as I have already mentioned, they are at a phase of life where they claim to have gathered enough knowledge of the foreign world and have started to feel (and express) pride in, and identification with, ‘India’, an image which, as I shall show in Chapter Two, is generated in an exchange between different images specific to time and place (such as Western and indigenous visions of antiquity, the colonial era, etc.) and which is constructed through their knowledge of ‘things Western’. In this book the reader will also encounter other young men, whom I have met while hanging around with my informants, whose idealizations of the ‘West’ stand in contrast to my core interlocutors’ attempts to decentralize and transcend the hegemony of the ‘West’ and to their idealized views of ‘India’ (see Chapter Three). In such encounters, my core informants have marked out their own higher competence, experience, status and age by emphasizing their pride and rootedness in India. Because of their exposure to the outside world, my core informants claim that they have learned to keep a balance between the ‘Indian’ and the ‘foreign’.

‘star-like’ Delhi

The site of this research is New Delhi (in this text ‘Delhi’), my point of continual return for the past seven years. I have chosen to conduct research in Delhi mainly for two reasons. The first is that this city, as compared with other Indian cities, has not been thoroughly explored by anthropologists, sociologists or other writers. The second is that during the 1990s Delhi has changed rapidly to become the banner of the post-1991 period. Traditionally, Bombay (now ‘Mumbai’) has represented
India’s modern face to the world, but today Delhi is emerging as India’s “New Boom Town” and “the epicentre of India's economic modernisation” (Saran 1999). Indian and foreign companies, colleges, entertainments and food chains have chosen to a growing degree to move to Delhi, finding in this location a convenient market. Delhi is, therefore, a symbol of post-1991 India.

The nineteenth-century poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib wrote: “I asked my soul: what is Delhi? She replied: the world is the body and Delhi its life.” Ghalib too saw Delhi as a place of convergence and condensation of many different influences from all over the world. True to this view, my way of ‘looking’ at Delhi is inspired also by John Berger’s ‘star’ metaphor. Berger has suggested a shift in imagining space, whereby one “point”, instead of being “an infinitely small part of a straight line”, can be visualized “as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star” (1974:40). The Delhi I represent in this book is such a ‘star-like’ entity (cf. Favero 2003), one where different flows meet, creating new and at times unexpected narratives of culture. This is the Delhi that I have been introduced to by my informants who are attracted by places where different people and messages converge. The sites within the city that I shall focus on will, accordingly, be those that show the continuous presence of external influences. They constitute entries to the life-world of people like my informants and can be seen as local expressions of a new “transnational public sphere” (Gupta 1997:193-94) defined by encounter, exchange and dialogue and where ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘past’ and ‘present’ merge to permit new identifications, fantasies, desires to be produced and constantly re-defined.

The Delhi that best corresponds to these definitions is the Delhi of such places as Janpath market (of which I shall offer a more detailed analysis in Chapter Five, see also the map at the end of the book). Janpath market (one of the main markets in central Delhi) is a star-like site, able at one and the same time to cater for poor Gujarati women selling handicrafts, East European Hare Krishna disciples begging for food, and vendors promoting Western fashioned Indian outfits to passing foreigners and India-made copies of Adidas and Nike to the local middle classes. In a cacophony of different messages Janpath, like other similar places in the city, questions our conventional notions of the relation between space and culture (cf. Gupta and Ferguson
It makes us wonder whether we are in India at all and whether the place is after all so very different from a market in any other city in the world. It also makes us question the meaning of conventional referents such as ‘locality’ and ‘globality’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, ‘India’ and the ‘West’ (“What is new in all of this?”, “Was not the Silk Route filled with markets like this one?”, “Should not the Hare Krishna be Indian?” and “Are these Adidas and Nike shirts Western products?”). 

The Delhi I shall represent in this book is a place where cars have electronic devices placed in the rear window to activate a ‘Jingle Bells’-jingle while illuminating small colourful Om-signs when the car is reversing. It is a place where Pizza Hut, in its Diwali advertisement, ‘indigenizes’ a pizza with the help of a ketchup Swastika. It is a place where villages are recreated in the middle of the city to function as trendy shopping spots (see the cases of Dilli Haat and Haus Khaz in Chapter Five). This is the Delhi of the pubs, eateries and discos where my informants have taken me, and of the intimate stories they have lovingly shared with me. This is the Delhi where images of the ‘West’ and ‘India’ meet and dance confusingly with notions of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ and with nostalgic dreams and imagined memories of the great Indian civilization of the past. 

Indeed, Delhi is much more than what I shall present here. I make no claim to provide an in-depth analysis of the city. Delhi is lack of water and electricity, it is overcrowded streets and houses, pollution and traffic, massive immigration, poverty and illegality. But that story has already been told. Moreover, that is a story that fits too neatly into a common Western stereotype of India that so much constrains the country to a secondary role in a globalizing world (cf. Chatterjee 1993). I am interested in depicting a different portrait of the city, one which is created by looking at it through the eyes of my informants, friends and acquaintances. This portrait, with all its defects, will, it is my hope, awaken the critical spirit of those who nostalgically search in India for the beauty of simplicity, poverty and spirituality and offer them a view, in tune with Chatterjee’s idea, of India as a producer of modernity.
travel, imagination, phantasms

Underlying this study is the assumption that today's world is fundamentally characterized by movement. The travel of goods, people, ideas, images and technologies is a main characteristic and metaphor of the contemporary world (cf. Lash and Urry 1994, Rojek and Urry 1997, Kaur and Hutnyk 1999). In this study too, everything is in movement. The anthropologist has travelled and keeps travelling, the informants move physically as well as figuratively through their choices of work and leisure. The places addressed, such as Janpath market, are also places of confluence of travelling messages, people and products from all over the world. "This is a world of flows" Appadurai argues (1996 and also 2000), and flows promote new identifications, problems and possibilities that are at once local and global (cf. also Frow 1997, Robertson 1995). The travel of imaginations (images, messages, ideas and representations of culture) across national and regional borders gives birth to new communities of imagination, such as that of my informants, based on the widening of ideas, opportunities and aspirations.

In order to grasp this characteristic of the contemporary world, many researchers have pointed to the need to deepen our understanding of the role of imagination in social life (cf. Appadurai 2000, Ivy 1995, Peters 1997, Mitchell 2000). A subject recognized in anthropology for many years, imagination has recently renewed its attraction for the social sciences in general. Probably the logic of the contemporary expanding global capitalist market, with its subtler and more diffuse means of information and control (cf. Deleuze and Parnet 1996, Cubitt 2001), has heightened the importance of understanding imagination. It is almost a truism that today we can see how the desires, identifications, wishes and plans enacted in an ordinary everyday world are created at the intersection of a "here, there, elsewhere, everywhere" (Comaroff in Weiss 2002). Ready-made representations coming to us via different forms of travel widen our imagination and bring us to experience and construct our understandings of what surrounds us. The present study relates itself to this renewed interest in imagination as a social practice and as the pivot of the construction of a "global modernity" (cf. Mitchell 2000). No longer just a matter of individual day-dreaming, or aesthetics, imagination presents itself here as a "form of negotiation between sites
of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996:31). It includes (mechanically produced) images, the idea of the “imagined community” (cf. Anderson 1983) and the notion of the ‘imaginary’ intended as “the constructed landscape of collective aspirations” (Appadurai 1996:31). It informs our daily lives and permits the creation of new alliances and forms of community which challenge traditional social boundaries.

The use of ‘imagination’ brings us to reconsider our approaches to representation, i.e. to the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are produced and which position us as subjects. Many scholars have pointed out the central role played by representation in contemporary life. Today our understanding of the world is “bifocal” (cf. Peters 1997), i.e. formed by the simultaneous experience of both the local and the global, made possible by social representation. Representation, as Mitchell (2000) suggests, is the principle ordering social reality, the realm within which modernity is ‘staged’ and subjects are shaped (cf. p. 17, see also Hall 1993) and thus needs to be approached carefully. The present study aims at looking further into the interplay of ordinary everyday situations and the representations that reach actors at local level through the travel of imagination. It aims at understanding what modes of identification this interplay shapes and the way in which representations can be interpreted, translated, moulded and used for personal purposes by social actors. It keeps alive the assumption that travelling messages are not univocal and unidirectional forces producing foreseeable universal effects but are moulded by actors at local level. Inspired by Deleuze, Shields (1997) argues that a flow should not be approached with a desire to fix points of origin, destinations or any underlying universal meanings. We should be wary of mechanizing and geometrizing these flows and of turning them into something obvious, natural and foreseeable. The signs and representations moving with the flows carry varied layers of meaning (cf. Volosinov’s notion of ‘polysemy’, in Cubitt 2001) that may produce unpredicted results during their travels. We may also be wary of attributing to conventional representations fixed meanings. Representations do more than present, Roland Barthes (1993) has suggested. They can not only denote, i.e. point out some specific referent, but also connote, i.e. offer a second order (for Barthes ideological) coding of the first (connotation,
or the order of the myth). The material I gathered in the field offered me examples of this open and dialogical character of representations (cf. Lash in van Toorn n.d.). My informants would interpret banal scenes such as the ones I described at the beginning of this chapter, by evoking and discussing larger social and political issues. To give one example, the man with the long beard and the kurta encountered in Janpath led them, later on, to discuss hegemonic Western views of India, globalization and colonialism and to re-define India’s position within the exchanges that have characterized its history (cf. the story of the white sadhu in Chapter Five).

To give a sense of this dynamic, i.e. of my informants’ open-ended interpretations and use of the representations that reach them in their everyday lives and of their twisting of the dichotomic character of the terms they constantly refer to, I have opted to use the ‘phantasm’ as a central metaphor and analytical instrument for my work. I shall use the phantasm to approach the way in which representations, that we would otherwise consider as distant from everyday life and as carrying a somewhat fixed and embedded meaning, are imported, given meaning, moulded and used by actors in the most banal situations. The phantasm is, in my usage, the ‘instrument’ through which my interlocutors approach, interpret and contextualize the images that surround them. The idealized visions of ‘India’ and the ‘West’ that they promote in specific contexts are ‘phantasms’ revealing their understanding of the contemporary world and of their own personal positions within it. The phantasm is not an established concept in the social sciences, and I shall, therefore, devote a few lines to my usage of it.

As a conventional metaphor, the ‘phantasm’ brings to mind frightening images belonging to the realm of illusion and deceptiveness. Dictionaries define it as an illusory mental image, i.e. as something belonging to the sphere of distorted perceptions. The latter connotation also characterizes the approaches to the phantasm of one particular philosophical tradition, namely, the Platonic one. According to Plato, the phantasm stands in opposition to the icon. While an icon expresses a sense of likeness to reality, the phantasm is a simulacrum deprived of any ground in it. Aristotle, in contrast, gives the phantasm a different significance. Emptied of Plato’s reference to a clear distinction between reality and illusion, Aristotle sees the phantasm as the
sensorial instrument used by human beings to grasp abstract concepts. Lacan added another dimension to the Aristotelian conception. For him the phantasm domesticates our perception. It helps us to make sense of, understand and accept the world that surrounds us (cf. Jovanovic 2001).

My 'phantasm', while not declaring any particular loyalty to any of these traditions, is indeed inspired by both Aristotle’s and Lacan’s approach, while it criticizes Platonic ontology. I use the phantasm to address the contextual, shifting character and the multiple layers of meaning of such abstract categories as 'India', the 'West', 'modernity', 'tradition', 'local', 'global'. The phantasm is what permits my informants to link the objects, situations and people they encounter in everyday life with larger narratives of cultural and social change. Acting like a streak of lightning, the phantasm crystallizes different discourses and representations within the glimpse of the moment, making available to the observer the understanding that social actors have of the situation they have encountered. Momentary and context-dependent, the phantasm is not, however, born in a void. Like lightning it is created by the encounter of different streams. When evoked by my informants, for instance, 'India' and the 'West', as phantasms, refer to historically constructed collective representations, but are played out through individual interpretations filtered by these actors' identifications, emotions and personal agendas.

Merging collective with individual images, and intellect with emotions, the phantasm is the link between everyday life and imagination. Denoting and connoting (in Barthes' sense) at the same time, it is a matter of both knowledge and desire. To give an example of my usage of this analytical term through the opening vignette, a 'phantasm of India' is evoked by my informants through the attractive black plait of the woman in the salwar-qamiz, and one of the 'West' in the exposed and tempting body of a Western tourist. The two phantasms appear together in the ascribed 'enlightened' look of the bearded man. Each phantasm evokes a series of representations with varied trajectories and evoking varied feelings. It leads my informants to reconsider the meaning of 'India', its history and its interactions with the 'West', and their ambivalent feelings towards their country and its former rulers. Through the phantasm they re-evaluate the significance of colonialism and globalization and relocate themselves within the
exchanges that have characterized Indian history. Yet, and herein lies the openness of the phantasm, for other social actors as well as for the same actor in a different context, the same objects may signify and evoke different sets of feelings, imageries and thoughts. Hence, the phantasm keeps alive a fluidity of meaning. A movement, a process, the phantasms need not be intended as something fixed in space and time but rather as constantly evolving. For this characteristic, I consider the phantasm to be instrumental in the widening of boundaries, in the broadening of understanding about oneself and the surrounding world.

During my return visit to India in 2004 for the purpose of making a documentary on my field (see the concluding chapter) I was able to observe, for instance, how the phantasmatic appearances of ‘India’ in my informants’ speech had taken on a new dimension. The new image of “India Shining” (that was also the name the BJP used for the 2004 electoral campaign), i.e. of an India in constant growth and destined to become one of the most powerful forces on the planet, had become a part of my informants’ talk on India. During one interview on video, for instance, Ashwin said: “I am sure that one day India can and will rule the world” specifying then that he was speaking of an economic rule. This kind of reference had indeed been hinted at during my main fieldwork two years earlier, but they were never spelled out as openly and with the same conviction.

Given these considerations, my use of the phantasm is mostly related to that of Agamben (1993), who suggests that the phantasm constitutes a link, and blurs the boundary, between the internal and the external, the real and the imaginary. It mediates not only between agents and their external space but also between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, the ‘now’ and ‘then’ of our daily experiences, bringing together discourses and memories (with different geographical and historical roots) that lie unspoken in our everyday life (cf. also Ivy 1995). A tool for acting on the world, the ‘phantasm’ permits the incorporation of the ‘Other’, the far away, the elsewhere and ‘elsewhen’, into locality and the present.24 For Agamben too, the phantasm is not fixed in space and time, but rather evolves, appears and disappears, leaving space for (and stimulating) imagination, experience, emotion, analysis and desire.

The phantasm may, thus, give us a sense of how my informants’ apparently banal playing with images and objects can display key
aspects of their construction of identity and their sense of community. As the product of local interpretations and experiences, it also functions as a conceptual tool to grasp how the travel of imaginations (which moves in both space and time) hits locality, how it is put to act in everyday life and becomes a constitutive part of people's everyday experiences. Because of its fluidity and idiosyncrasy, the phantasm prevents us from enacting a search within a realm of definite truths, origins, and authenticity and from ascribing an a priori significance to the images and messages travelling in space and time. To put it in different words the 'phantasm' escapes from 'Platonic ontology', i.e. the "priority of an original over the copy, of a model over the image" (Frow 1997:68, cf. also Deleuze 1997), that is, our need for objective truth and permanence. It permits us to address the changing meanings that my informants attach to 'India' and the 'West', 'modern' and 'traditional', 'local' and 'global' without taking for granted either their significance or the outcomes of transnational 'flows'. It also permits us to approach the new creative combinations of these otherwise stable and dichotomic labels. This is particularly important in view of the fact that, as I shall show in this book and as I have already mentioned, the participation in larger networks of imageries has resulted for my informants in strong identifications with 'India' rather than in copying the 'West' (an assumption made by many scholars). I must once again point out that throughout this book, unless otherwise specified, whenever I refer to 'India' and the 'West' I will intend the 'phantasms' of India and the West, i.e. my analytical rendering of the actors' emic conceptualizations.

a modern stage

This book deals with 'modern India' or 'Indian modernity'. Such labels are readily available instruments to enable any reader to locate my work. Yet, their meaning is far from given. 'Modernity' (with its adjectives and plurals) is in itself a particularly complex word that has been the object of many debates in the social sciences. When placed in a post-colonial or 'Third World' context, it both arouses the surprise of the layman (possibly expecting in any book on India yet another tale of the land of "spiritual purity and physical filth", Khilnani 1997) and
awakens the cultural relativist's questions regarding its analytical validity. In the Indian context the label 'modern' inevitably stimulates associations with other labels such as 'middle class' and 'Westernization', two words which also connote back to each other. Throughout this work I will deal with such labels at an 'emic' level. I will present what they stand for in the words and experiences of my informants. Needless to say, I have no intention in this book to define 'Indian modernity' (nor the other labels attached to it), nor to enter a delicate analysis of the notion of modernity per se. However, here, I will clarify my usage of this term hoping that this brief discussion will help the reader in understanding my conceptual referents.

As I stated above, 'modern' in the Indian context is generally associated with 'Westernized' and 'middle class'. The latter notion provides a good point of departure for addressing this chain of words. No clear definition of the Indian 'middle class' has ever been offered. Yet most people in India know exactly what they mean by it. In popular discourse the 'middle class' is vaguely considered to be that part of Indian society that has received schooling, speaks English, has a house made of bricks and possesses some kind of transportation vehicle (it is according to this 'popular' definition that I also label my informants as 'middle class'). The looseness of this definition is particularly visible in all the debates and plans regarding the opening of the Indian economy to the global market. The multinationals, for instance, rushed to make estimates of the size of this consumer class and reached the conclusion that it ranged from 80 to 250 millions. This was apparently a highly promising market. So, loads of refrigerators, TV-sets, stereos and cars were produced to satisfy this emerging class. And loads of refrigerators, TV-sets, stereos and cars have been left for almost a decade now to rust in the warehouses of the producers. The statistics and calculations did not properly correspond to reality proving the difficulty of setting a national standard for what was implied in the idea of 'middle class'.

During a personal conversation, sociologist Dipankar Gupta warned me about the difficulties linked to the analytical use of the term 'middle class' in an Indian context. According to Gupta, the 'middle class' (as a phenomenon and a term) is epistemologically linked to its European roots. "It has to do with consciousness, with a social movement, with respect for the law and with a certain standardization
of behaviours that are never to be found among members of the Indian middle classes." Linking the egalitarian ideals of the European middle classes to the idea of modernity, Gupta added that the Indian middle class is not the "harbinger of modernity" but rather a "pretender class" lacking in social consciousness, which always "tries to get away" with their responsibilities towards the other citizens and the state.

Besides showing how the Indian middle class constitutes an entirely separate phenomenon from the European and American middle classes, and besides providing an example of how ‘middle class’, ‘modernity’ and being ‘Western’ are discursively intertwined in an Indian context, Gupta’s comments also expressed the emotional and moral reactions that discussions of the middle class trigger in India. His views partly resonate with those of many other people I have met during my fieldwork. While no expectations are put on the extremely rich and the extremely poor, the middle class is expected to be an example to the rest of society. It is the repository of the morality of the nation, the link between the state, its institutions and the people. These expectations, shaped by the history of the birth of the middle class, provide a benchmark of evaluation that constantly puts the middle class under attack, accused of betraying the country. Paradoxically, middle class Indians often complain about the lack of social responsibility in their own class (in the same breath placing themselves either below or beyond it). The two most important books unveiling the contradictions of the Indian middle class and attacking it quite vehemently, are Gupta’s own Mistaken Modernity (2000) and Pavan Varma’s The Great Indian Middle Class (1998, note the condemning and ironical tone in these titles). They have both become major successes in Indian book-stores, and have been reprinted several times. Needless to say, the Indian book-buyer (and especially the English speaking book-buyer) is by definition a middle class person.

The middle class, with its ascribed moral burden, was intentionally created by the British who hoped that it would function as a link between colonizer and colonized (a more detailed discussion on this issue follows in Chapter Three). Its members were offered opportunities for study and travel, which placed them in a privileged position in the Indian social hierarchies. The middle class was born into ambiguity and paradox. At once a product of the colonial power and its enemy, its members brought about India’s resistance to the British
Empire by using the instruments they had collected from the latter and so laid the foundation for India’s future development. Hence, the Indian middle class (elite or intelligentsia) was destined to represent an ‘in-between’, or to put it in Jawaharlal Nehru’s words (quoted in Varma 1998:153), a “queer” category at one and the same time symbolizing the struggle of India against colonial rule and the Western soul of the country. Today, among my informants, as well as in broader public discourse, being educated and well-to-do is synonymous with being ‘Westernized’ and, to some extent, detached from India. Yet it also means being invested with responsibility for the future of the country.

In addressing terms associated with the Indian middle class, we should be aware that we are dealing with a series of notions with strong historical (colonial) roots. Akhil Gupta (1998) has labelled this set of synonyms as “colonial dichotomies”. In these dichotomies the ‘West’ is linked with progress, development, science, technology, rationality, order and modernity, and India (or the ‘Orient’) is associated with stasis, stagnation, underdevelopment, poverty, superstition, disorder and, thus, tradition (cf. Gupta 1998, also Spencer 1995:236, Cohen 1998). The terms contained in the colonial dichotomy are suffused with moral standpoints. They provide a language for talking about certain phenomena and ways to “subsume...the other great divides in the human sciences: urban vs. rural, science vs. religion, modern vs. traditional” (Spencer 1995:252). According to Akhil Gupta, these dichotomies “continue to operate quite freely in the present, although perhaps not with the same valences” (1998:9).

I suggest that this particular set of dichotomies, with their evocations and associations, constitutes the social field where the young middle class adults in my study negotiate their own status as ‘modern’ people (see below). This social field constitutes the ‘modern’ stage on which my informants enact their processes of identification and on which their ideas and visions are moulded. As I have already mentioned, my informants reproduce these dichotomies and in their usage ‘modernity’ often appears associated with the ‘West’, ‘Westernization, ‘global’, while ‘India’ stands for ‘tradition’ and ‘local’. Yet my informants also engage in a critical appropriation of these dichotomies, twisting their meanings and changing the combination of elements within these chains. In many situations, then, ‘Indian’ plus
introduction

'traditional' will become equal to 'modern' and 'global', and 'Westernized' plus openly 'modern' will become equal to 'backward'.

In this book 'modernity' when evoked 'emically' will be approached as one of the phantasms evoked by my informants in order to address and to understand themselves and the world around them. Yet, analytically my usage of 'modernity', inspired by that of Mitchell (2000) and Rofel (2001), will be that of a stage or an arena on which different cultural narratives and representations meet and reshape each other and where the daily experiences of my informants meet with travelling images. Rofel suggests that modernity is at best compared with the "floor of a boxing match" where different "rhetorics, claims, and commitments to modernity get put into play" (2000:638). In her words modernity is "something people struggle over" (ibid.). It is an arena in which different representations of what it means to be modern are involved.

Mitchell (2000) promotes a similar idea suggesting that modernity is basically a staging of differences enacted in a realm of representation. According to him the forms of difference involved here are mainly of two types. One type refers to geo-cultural differences. In its upholding of the divide between the modern and the non-modern, 'modernity' also upholds a distinction between the 'West' and the 'non-West'. Modernity is constructed through the marginalization and exclusion of those elements that question the norm (read 'modernity' and 'West'). This is the most recognizable trait of Indian modernity and one of the central dynamics in the shaping of an independent India. The Indian intelligentsia constructed the image of the country as a site of, to paraphrase Bhabha (1994), pure difference (the 'non-West' by definition) measured against British representations and interests. In Chapter Two I shall discuss further how this narrative of nationhood has not exhausted itself and is audible even today in the declarations of my informants as well as in the statements of politicians and intellectuals. The other realm of difference delineated by Mitchell is one that has been vividly analyzed within the framework of postmodernism, i.e. that between reality and representation, between what is staged and what is 'real' (cf. Mitchell 2000:25-7). As the result of these two types of differences, modernity appears as the creation of "a new world of multiple significations and simulations" (p. 26), in which the destinies
of models sent out by the centre of what Negri and Hardt (2000) have labelled the "Empire" are uncertain.

'India' is 'in'

Theorists of globalization have affirmed how, in times of 'disruption' of the equation place-culture-identity, the issue of particular, national or regional identities has been highlighted. Global flows, in the shape, for instance, of the 'scapes' delineated by Appadurai (1996), question the centrality of the nation-state and of national institutions (cf. also Lash and Urry 1994). As Robertson (cf. 1995) has suggested with the term "glocalization", parallel to a global institutionalization a construction of local particularisms is taking place throughout the world. The passage from 'industrial society' to 'informational world' (cf. Castells 1996) marks out at one and the same time "the negation of [conventional] identity" as well as the recreation of new individual and communal identities characterized by increasing particularism (p. 3). The creation of local identities does not stand in opposition to globalization but is rather a constitutive part of it (cf. Appadurai 1996, Hannerz 1998b, Giddens 1994).

My informants take part at the process of "global creation of locality" (Robertson 1995). By twisting the significance of words such as 'India', 'West', 'local' and 'global' they change and update the conventional significance of these terms. They evoke 'India' and the 'West' at times as geopolitical entities, at times as moral alternatives and at times as metaphors for talking about globalization and modernization. Yet, they often transform them into the opposite of what they stand for in popular discourse. In the sub-cultural habitat of these young men, pride in 'India' often becomes a marker of a 'modern identity' and of a high status, while an idealization of the 'West' marks out lack of knowledge and experience of the world and thirst for a social climb that my informants have already embarked upon. In their discourse the 'West' is thus not the goal of their dreams nor the centre in their views of the development of the contemporary world (this will be the subject of Chapter Three). As I gathered during my return to India in 2004 (cf. the final chapter of this book) their motto at the beginning of the third millennium became "This is India's millennium!"
The life-world of my informants is one single 'multivocal' (Bakhtin 1981) arena in which what are conventionally labelled as 'modern' and 'traditional', 'Indian' and 'Western' (or 'foreign'), 'local' and 'global' co-exist, meet and merge. This life-world mirrors a number of processes taking place in Delhi, that can be exemplified by the use by MacDonald’s and Pizza Hut of 'traditional' symbols such as Swastikas and Rajasthani folk musicians to market their 'modern' products. The dichotomy between 'modern' and 'traditional', in other words, needs to be questioned and possibly also overcome analytically. Gyan Prakash has suggested that:

"the story of Indian modernity...cannot be cast in modern/antimodern, inner/outer, state/community oppositions. Instead it has to be understood as a project that was bound to engage in a critique of Western modernity in the process of founding India as a modern nation" (1999:203).

From architecture to politics, to consumer goods and personal experiences and statements of identity, 'modernity' makes use of 'traditional' forms and symbols. An appropriation of the past is constitutive of the present, and a nostalgia for an imagined past appears central to 'modernity'. Rather than upholding the dichotomy and regarding tradition as having lost its power in the modern world, we should, as Thomson (1996) has argued, acknowledge that a shift has occurred in the role played by tradition in the contemporary context. Tradition, he suggests, has "been refashioned by the expansion of mediated forms of communication" (p. 91) to become an element of 'modernity'.

In this book I shall discuss from different angles the merging and twisting of these seemingly dichotomic and suffused terms 'India' and the 'West', 'local' and 'global', 'modernity' and 'tradition'. The chapters of the book are relatively self-contained and I hope the reader will find within each chapter the necessary information for approaching it. The exceptions are this introduction, setting the stage for my work, and Chapter One which delineates the main co-ordinates of the study, introducing the reader to my field, to the methodologies I have applied and to the life trajectories of my interlocutors. Chapter Two is devoted to the symbolic popularity of 'India', suggesting how, in the cultural habitat of young urban India, 'India', as an image, is in fashion. Shifting
between discourses belonging to the colonial period, the experiences and stories of my informants and aspects of public culture I shall reconstruct this new imagination of ‘India’. The young generation’s phantasms of ‘India’ are the result of a dialogue between visions of the past, images of the ‘West’ and international views on India mediated by debates on ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. This ‘India’, where the past is inserted into the present and then projected into the future, questions the colonial dichotomies of ‘India’ vs. the ‘West’, ‘modernity’ vs. ‘tradition’. Chapter Three will offer an exploration into identity-making among my informants. Arguing against conventional opinions on contemporary urban Indian youth and against certain scholarly notions of ‘identity’ and ‘hybridity’, I shall suggest that my informants’ experiences and practices of identity creation reflect their hybrid life-world, one which has been shaped historically by the encounter of different influences. Yet, I shall also suggest that my informants share a specific sub-cultural way of approaching these issues. The continual shifts that they make between essentialized positions such as that of ‘Westernized’ or ‘traditional Indian’ contribute to shaping a particular sub-cultural community of imagination. This chapter will also address how being ‘local’, ‘Indian’ and ‘traditional’ are used, in specific contexts, by my interlocutors as markers of a ‘modern’ and ‘global’ identity. Chapter Four will explore how this community of imagination relates to women, sex, love and marriage. I shall here approach the field of gender relations as an arena for the display of broader issues of cultural identity. In tune with the rest of the study I shall relate this analysis to that of those broader discourses and images present in the cultural flow that proved to be central in my interlocutors’ ways of approaching issues of cultural identity. Finally, Chapter Five will look at Delhi as a place from two different angles. From one angle I shall read in the city the signs of the interplay of ‘India’ and the ‘West’, ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’. From the other I shall look at how my informants interact with the urban space. Their choices of where to go, where to live, how to explore and use the urban space also constitute statements of cultural identity. My hope is that this book will provide the reader with a vision of the culture of contemporary young urbanites in post-liberalization metropolitan India and offer theoretical insights into the interplay of imagination and personal life experience.
1 The salwar-qamiz is the traditional dress for women in North India, consisting of a long kurta (a shirt) and a pair of trousers.
2 The kurta is the traditional Indian long shirt. In Chapter Five I discuss this clothing in more detail.
3 ‘Catching up’ is a key metaphor used to address India’s postcolonial struggle for development and realignment with the industrial world.
4 Here I adapt Bauman’s term “habitat of meaning” (1992 and cf. Hannerz 1998b) to indicate the web of meanings in which social actors live.
5 I must immediately point out that 1991 is primarily a symbolical date. The process of opening up the Indian economy started already in the mid-1980s under the leadership of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.
6 The only group that proved to be a little more homogeneous was that of the tourist guides who had a more similar class background.
7 Village is, in the Indian context, an ambiguous term that at times includes cities of more than 300,000 inhabitants.
8 Within each specific grouping, of course, I also found a more explicit sharing of tastes in matters of music, films and girls and common experiences of work and family relations.
9 It may be interesting to note the amount of literature on India which bears one of these terms in their titles. For a quick check the reader may just look at this book’s list of references.
10 The kabab is the generic term used for addressing dry, oven-cooked meat-based dishes in North India.
11 Bhangra is the traditional Punjabi folk music which today has been receiving international fame through the technological revivals carried on mostly by Indian DJs living abroad.
12 The writing of this book had just been completed when, in the spring of 2004, the BJP lost the elections to a coalition led by the Congress Party. All the references to the Indian political scene contained in this book refer thus to the phase in which India was governed by the BJP-led coalition.
13 This expression was used, among others, by Mr. Shankar, chief editor of the youth magazine The Sun (cf. also Srinivas 1995).
15 My notion of the ‘community of imagination’ is inspired by Anderson’s (1983) “imagined community” and Appadurai’s “community of sentiment” (1991). According to Appadurai, this is one of the types of community that have been made possible by globalization. I am also inspired by Malikki’s (1997) notion of the “accidental communities of memory”, even though she is applying it to an entirely different context from mine.
16 Diwali is the Indian festival of light, a kind of new year.
17 Here I refer to the ‘classic’ image of India found in most Western media, i.e. one inspired by an orientalist attraction to India as the land of soul and poverty. For a discussion of this representation cf. among others, Hutnyk 1996a, Hottola 1999, Rushdie 1992, Wilhelm and Rawlinson 2000, Ramusack 1995, Khilnani 1997.
18 Partha Chatterjee has written about the inevitability of this isolation of India: “We must remember that in the world arena of modernity, we are outcasts, untouchables. Modernity for us is like a supermarket of foreign goods, displayed on the shelves: pay up and take away what you like. No one there believes that we could be producers of modernity” (1993:280-1).
19 Imagination has proved to be central to the creation of identity (Bhabha 1990; Fanon 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a; Hall 1993 and 1996, Brosius and Butcher 1999), to the shaping of nationalism (Anderson 1983; Castoriadis 1998; Said 1995), and to most other arenas of life.
20 To put it according to Brad Weiss “fantasy becomes a medium through which to pursue the concrete processes by which consciousness is engaged in the world” (2002:97).
Mitchell argues against those popular theories, such as those of Jameson, Baudrillard and Appadurai, that label as ‘post-modern’ only those phenomena linked to the proliferation of forms of representation. According to him, “all the novel institutional forms and political practice of late nineteenth century... were organized around the simulation, diagramming and replication of the real” (2000:17, cf. also Mitchell 1991, Anderson 1983).

Similarly Appadurai has suggested that flows are ‘disjunctive’ (Appadurai 2000) and move in different directions and at different speeds with different routes and relationships to institutional structures such as state, region or society.

In this text, whenever I refer to India and West as phantasms, and not as geographical/political areas, I shall write ‘India’ and ‘West’ (within quotation marks). The same is valid for other phantasms such as ‘tradition’, ‘modernity’, ‘locality’, ‘globality’, etc. Throughout the text I will use a differentiation between single (’) and double (””) quotation marks. Single quotation marks will denote terms that are either phantasmatic, analytical or ambivalent, while double ones will either signal quotations or terms taken directly from interlocutors or other authors.

In her work on Japan, Marilyn Ivy has stressed this point suggesting that phantasms are a play with both the present and the vanishing. Phantasms, she states, “reveal an irruption of the other world that is beyond the control of the living, beyond the reach of memory, of the predictability of the senses” (1995: 165).


The phantasm, Ivy suggests, is “an epistemological object whose presence or absence cannot be definitively located” (1995: 22). Hence, it reveals an “inability to control representation” (p. 165). She writes that the phantasm “constitute[s] a discursive world which haunts this world with its exemption from meaning” (p. 22).

To engage in such a discussion would entail a philosophical reflection on the meanings ascribed in Western culture to the term ‘modernity’ and then to look at their translations into different local contexts. It would also entail an analysis of the distinction between modernity and postmodernity. The latter may, in fact, be even more suited to define contexts such as some of those in which my research has taken place (for instance, the market on Janpath that I described above). In defining a distinction between modernity and postmodernity I find Italian philosopher Vattimo’s (1991) discussion particularly enlightening. According to him the term ‘postmodernity’ can be approached in a twofold way. On the one hand, it is a phase in history characterized by the “dissolution of history” and the imposition of contemporaneity through the spread of instruments of information (cf. also Castells 1996). Vattimo suggests that in postmodernity everything tends to be flattened out on the plane of contemporaneity and simultaneity and that this leads to the “de-historicization of experience” (1991: 18). In this phase experiences of reality are based more on aesthetics and rhetoric than on the search for one ultimate truth (cf. p.20). This aspect is also stressed by Jameson (1984) when he suggests that during postmodernity aesthetics has obtained a central role within society and especially within the production of commodities. On the other hand, however, postmodernity also denotes a particular perspective on, or approach to, the changes that have occurred in recent years mostly in relation to the growing speed of movement of images, people and ideas, engendered by globalization. Examples of these approaches are to be found in the more so to speak, nihilistic, attitudes displayed in many works (such as Baudrillard 1994, etc.) where contemporary society is analyzed through an indirect comparison with a (pre-postmodern) world where the foundations were clearer, more stable and more coherent. I am aware that the use of the term postmodern in its former (and more empirical) sense may raise questions. The concept ‘postmodern’ could be regarded as being too heavily based on Western epistemology (cf. Tomlinson 1999) and Western modes of production and class relations (cf. Jameson 1984) to be used within the Indian context. Indian society, some
may state, has not really entered that phase yet. Nevertheless, I suggest that by contextualizing my analysis and description of certain sites in Delhi the term may be used in both connotations. My informants, in fact, work in a (global) setting, i.e. tourism, whose logic is based on the consumption of experiences, movement and images. The market where they meet, being the point of confluence of different influences, objects and people, is also part of that economy of signs.

28 For an interesting overview of the liberalization of India’s economy see the survey made by The Economist, June 2 2001, cf. also Saran 1999.
A late afternoon at Wimpy on Connaught Place, central New Delhi. Backpackers keep hurrying in and out of the fast-food restaurant. Kashmiri touts rush after them regarding them alternatively as business or erotic exploits. Upstairs there is a birthday party. Middle class kids are shouting among a sea of colourful plastic balloons. A man in his late twenties, wearing jeans and a Timberland tennis shirt, comes towards me. “Paolo?” he asks. I say yes and the man offers me his hand saying “Nice to meet you, I’m Satinder.” This is how I met Satinder, a tourist escort specializing in English- and Italian-speaking groups. I had been given his phone number by a friend when I asked her whether she knew some people who worked with foreigners. Satinder and I had talked once on the phone. This was the first of what would become a long series of meetings.

I visited the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, driven by a blend of research interest and personal curiosity. When I discovered that this foundation was listed among the partners of the Ministry of Youth and Sports Affairs, I could not resist paying it a visit, hoping to fulfil at one and the same time also my personal longing for the mountains. I was received by the director of the Foundation, who introduced me to the activities of his organization and to whom I described my research. The discussion, however, moved more and more towards questions of climbing and trekking. We talked about the situation in the Indian Himalayas and the policies for their development, rather than about my research. During our conversation a short young man, green-eyed and dressed in a nicely ironed blue shirt, walked in. He introduced himself as the project manager of a newly launched Internet company that was aiming at setting up ‘on-line’ tutoring and assistance for Indian students. I listened in silence to the conversation between the young manager and the director. When this was over, I hurried to conclude my conversation with the director.
Promising that I would be back very soon, I ran after the young manager. Just as he got back into his car, I introduced myself to Akash and we exchanged visiting cards. A few days later I was introduced to the Internet company, which became one of the sites of my research.

During an unpleasant evening of illness, I was called by a friend, an Italian political scientist carrying out research in Delhi. She asked me to join her for dinner at a young journalist’s place. I did not feel like going out and declined the invitation. Nonetheless, later on I asked her for the number of the journalist and called him. The very same evening we met. He picked me up at my flat in his old Fiat and took me for dinner at the home of Ashwin, another friend of his, a young manager from Bombay who lived alone not far from me in Delhi. The three of us had a long dinner followed by a session of video-games. Besides becoming close friends, Ashwin and Nikilesh turned into my most influential informants.

The four central characters introduced in these vignettes represent as many entries to my fieldwork in Delhi. This fieldwork became guided as much by coincidences and sympathies as by my interest in unravelling issues of cultural identity and imagination among young males in post-1991 urban India. I let myself be drawn into the life of each person I became interested in. As I followed them, I was gradually introduced to their families, friends and colleagues. Thus a ‘field’ was born, constructed by my moving around in the middle of Delhi. Always available through my mobile phone (just like most of my informants), I commuted between the north and the south of the city, turning up in different places within the lapse of a few hours, spending the morning with a group of tourist escorts, the afternoon with a journalist and the evening with a young manager. Once, during a seminar in Stockholm, I provocatively pulled my mobile phone out of my pocket saying “this is my field!” This metaphor was not far from reality, since my fieldwork required a capacity to be available in different networks at one and the same time.

In the ‘field’ I hung around, I interviewed, I danced, I photographed, I drank, I watched TV, I read the newspapers. When I first reflected upon this ‘variegated’ material, however, I could not help noticing that my ‘field’ contained very few of the characteristics of a ‘classical ethnographical field’. Even though I conducted it along the
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'classical' lines of day-to-day interaction and through an intense sharing of stories and situations across a relatively long period of time (more than a year), the people I met could not easily be collected together under one single label. The networks of people I became involved with while in Delhi offered me no clear boundaries, no obvious class and caste definitions, no mirages of a solid self-contained community. My informants would at times appear to be like one community (or at least category of people) sharing common interests, language and symbols. Yet, within the lapse of a few seconds they would split up and look like separate individuals all following their own idiosyncratic trajectories. However, they shared the common role of being actively involved in a cultural brokerage between the different influences that make up the cultural habitat of contemporary Delhi. My informants who were active in the field of tourism were the ones most visibly involved in this constant 'translation' of 'India' to foreign travellers and of the 'West' to fellow Indians. Yet, such activities of 'translation' were also present among my informants working in Internet and in journalism. For the others they were possibly less pronounced, but still part of a daily life where the continuous presence of the foreign was experienced through work, entertainment and leisure.

My informants' role as small-scale cultural brokers between India and the outside world takes place within a context defined by the economic reforms implemented in India in 1991. The 1990s came to symbolize India's definitive involvement in global networks of commerce, media and culture. New opportunities were opened up in the country for study, careers and social mobility. These opportunities contributed in blurring the boundaries between classes and castes and generated more varied patterns of solidarity, interpersonal relationships and group definitions. My informants, who were all born at the end of the 1960s or in the 1970s, constitute the generation that epitomizes this epoch. As they became adults they witnessed the opening up of India to the outside world and cultivated the new opportunities offered by this liberalization, using it to construct their own careers, independent lifestyles and identities. Simultaneously, Delhi also redefined its historical trajectory during this decade. Previously primarily a bureaucratic centre, Delhi during the 1990s has become the example and symbol of a new phase in the development of India.
Today it offers a renewed image of cosmopolitanism and openness to the outside world.

I must now, however, comment upon a potential paradox that the reader may perceive in my choice of informants and theoretical issues. Guided by an interest in cultural hybridity, I have been attracted, in the field, by individuals with particular experiences of the foreign world who have made their roles as cultural brokers a fundamental part of their cultural capital and identity. Also, I have orientated myself to those environments in the city that display novel forms of exchange between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ under the influence of the travel of imaginations. Consequently, the material I collected tends to have a bias towards discussions and experiences of merging and encounter between local and trans-local influences. It may, then, appear as a truism that I have such material on interlocutors and environments who have attracted me because of that very same characteristic. Yet, my informants are but a few among the many social actors in metropolitan India who are experiencing the contemporary exposure to the transnational travel of imaginations. Possibly, they simply have stronger and better articulated opinions about the exchanges that are taking place and also know them in more depth than other Indians because of their choices of career and lifestyle. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, they reflect in their statements and expressions of identity the wider discourse that has characterized public approaches to change in post-colonial India.

The sub-cultural habitat of my interlocutors is no exception in India. Rather, as I shall show in Chapter Two and Three, it offers interesting parallels with the historical trajectory of the development of the Indian middle classes in general and may provide a valid and explicit window onto broader issues of cultural change. The description of young men like my informants can, thus, be a potential resource for understanding better the changes that are taking place today among the inhabitants of metropolitan sites such as Delhi. In other words, the questions I address through my interlocutors are reflected in a variety of other situations. The reader will easily discover my interest in this broader context and realize how, in my writing, I do not aim at producing a monograph on all the facets of the lives of these young men but rather at addressing, through them, a number of broader issues relating to a changing India.
I must once again point out that I believe it is important to investigate actors such as my interlocutors who, as the ‘other transnationals’ and as the small links in wider networks of exchanges across national boundaries, are per se a valid means of access to the dynamics of a ‘globalizing’ world. My interlocutors constitute one of those ‘grey’ categories seldom in the focus of anthropological research or of the mass media. They are certainly not the classic representatives of ‘authentic’ Indian national culture (at least not of that stereotyped slice of Indian culture, with its peasants and holy men, that has become the flag of the country across the world). They do not stand out for their spiritual opinions and practices, nor for their communitarian passions, nor do they represent the lifestyles of one of India’s many villages, those depicted by the National Geographic and Lonely Planet. Yet, neither are they representatives of that opulent India that constitutes the other side of the Western representations of the country from the colonial era to the present. They are no Maharajas, no Amitabh Bachchan (India’s most famous actor), Ravi Shankar, or Arundati Roy. Moreover, they are not even among those people desperate to leave the ‘Third World’ country in the hope of a better life in the ‘West’. They do not want to become Bill Gates and have a gigantic mansion in Florida, or to have sex with Madonna, but consider India a valid and solid option for their future and the provider of good values and lifestyles. Neither ‘cooked’ nor ‘raw’, neither villagers nor Bollywood stars, neither hardcore nationalists nor ‘Westoxicated’, my informants may represent an ordinary slice of a changing world that is able and accustomed to adapt and merge the new influences coming to them, trying to make the best of the situation and using it for yet another leap in their social climb.

The present chapter outlines my ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’ and offers a first contextualization of my informants within the changes that have characterized Delhi (and India) in the 1990s. I shall start (and end) it by positioning my research within current debates and ideas on ‘fields’ and ‘fieldworks’. In between, I shall introduce the reader to the social circles, places and discourses within which my research has taken place. The first and second sections will be devoted to the city and to my informants’ life-stories, which they will contextualize within the societal logic that has dominated the 1990s. In the third and final part of this chapter I shall link my informants’ life-stories and the trajectories
of the city to current Indian discourses on youth and social change. This will offer the reader a perspective on the time and place specificities of the issues addressed in this study.

**the ‘field’ dilemma**

Classical anthropology starts with the definition of a field. Malinowski and Boas left us as inheritance a paradigm for field and fieldwork that still functions as a ‘natural’ point of reference for contemporary ethnography (cf. Marcus 2002, Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, Clifford 1997b, Hannerz 2003). A well defined, delimited and demarcated field of ethnographic research is what makes possible many of the statements made by anthropologists. Yet, what sadness! After all, a field is a field, i.e. some clean-cut, well defined slice of land collecting in and around itself people and activities ‘naturally’ linked to each other. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997a:6) remind us, the roots of the notion itself are biological and linked to anthropology’s origin as a naturalistic science. The ‘field’ evokes Malinowskian (un-reflexive) dreams (or nightmares?) of ‘pure otherhood’, of wild and self-enclosing environments far remote from ‘our’ everyday experiences. In this visualization, the anthropologist is the one who ventures out into this dark and unknown terrain armed only with his spirit of discovery, and ends up, paraphrasing Clifford, getting his boots “muddy” (1997b:185). Notwithstanding the reflexive project of the 1980s, the idea of fieldwork still brings along this adventurous and self-polluting dimension and is surrounded also by a certain mystique. How can we make this approach fit more contemporary fields and research topics?

Clifford suggests that classical fieldwork can be visualized as the “act of physically going out into a cleared place of work” where the act of “going out” supposes a sharp distinction between home and away (1997b:186). The “cleared place of work” is about finding a space emptied “at least conceptually, of tourists, missionaries, or government troops” (ibid.). Ironically, through such an approach the anthropologist appears closely related to the tourist whose movements too are characterized by a search for pure alterity and for an authenticity that cannot but result in a sad paradox. Through her/his very arrival, the anthropologist, just like the tourist, has already destroyed what she/he
was looking for (cf. Phipps n.d.). In contrast, my choice of fieldwork was guided by an interest in immersing myself in an environment where the flow of foreign polluting elements was at its maximum. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the places in my fieldwork, rather than being self-contained, appear ‘star-like’ (cf. also Favero 2003); they are defined by the convergence of different people, objects and messages displaying the presence of the flow of travelling imaginations. Hence, I did not attempt to ‘clear out’ anything, rather the opposite. Moreover, since I moved around with people of approximately my own age, carrying on lives guided by interests not so dissimilar from mine, I wonder whether I really ‘went out’ at all.

Since the time of Malinowski, anthropology has indeed changed a lot. Yet many anthropologists have questioned whether all the changes and debates regarding the status of anthropology have contributed to changing the approach to the dogma of fieldwork. Indeed, through the reflexive project initiated by Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986), anthropologists have gathered a deeper (reflexive) feeling of their own playings with power and representation. Their critical approach was also facilitated by the growing pressure of all those phenomena that we tend to label as globalization, hybridization and postmodernism. Yet, the changes in the ‘real’ situation of fields, which today, as the truism would have it, are more than ever connected with each other and in a state of flux, have not really contributed to a revolution in the approach to fieldwork. The paradigms for ethnographical research (that mystic-mythological moment of fieldwork, cf. Rabinow 1977, Hannerz 2003) have remained relatively untouched by this process, and what is needed today is a different “sense of the object of study” (Marcus 2002:192) altogether. To put it according to Gupta and Ferguson “this mysterious space- not the “what” of anthropology but the “where”- has been left to common sense, beyond and below the threshold of reflexivity” (1997a:2).

In terms of the “hierarchy of purity in fieldwork” (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997a) the present study would indeed be ranked very low. Even though I interacted on a day-to-day basis with my informants, I never really got my ‘boots muddy’, that is, I never felt that I was venturing into an unknown, dangerous and ‘dirty’ terrain. I never permitted myself to believe that I was dealing with an enclosed space of culture. I could not even really uphold the distinction between field
and home. I could see my informants as young men making similar choices to mine, struggling in the hope of creating a life that they would end up enjoying. Neither did I properly address the classical questions that have preoccupied the South Asia area specialists, such as caste, religion, etc. Even in terms of area studies and regional knowledge my research may thus stand a little outside of the conventional definitions.

However, the 'phantasm' of traditional fieldwork embarked with me on my flight to Delhi. It was at times an annoying presence that would make me question my work and tempt me into doing something more recognizable such as studying the growth of Hindu nationalism among young people or field-working in some specific self-enclosed community. For the purpose of conducting fieldwork among young middle class men in New Delhi, a city of almost 16 million people, the commonsensical (yet anthropologically so recurrent) suggestion of "just go there and hang around" did not really help me. Rather, it accentuated my own self-questioning. Especially in view of the fact that this project was born out of a theoretical interest in issues of contamination, hybridization and exchange, I needed some other ways of approaching the people and the city on which I wanted to conduct research.

When I began my fieldwork, my eyes were already directed towards a number of issues that had caught my attention during a short study that I conducted in 1997 in a mental hospital on the outskirts of Delhi (Favero 1998a). Wanting to analyze the way adolescents defined and experienced mental illness, I ended up getting interested in issues related to what we commonly call 'modernity'. A triggering factor was Rajan, a sixteen-year-old boy who was suffering from what was diagnosed as 'mania'. Whenever he had a chance, Rajan would talk about music, 'CDs' (a term that he actually used to refer to music cassettes), cricket heroes, shampoos, etc. i.e. about things generally considered 'modern'. Often he would tell me how his parents could not understand his interest in these things, imputing most of his confrontations with them to this cause. For their part, the parents considered some of the objects he liked as dangerous for his health. His mother once told me that "those things destroy him". Rather than a set of medical definitions, it was 'modernity' that provided Rajan and his parents with an arena for debating his illness.
Through my encounter with Rajan, I got the idea of looking at how new ways of imagining life were generated by flows from different inspirational sources. This interest was also reiterated by my daily interactions with the city. Leaving the hospital every day and driving back to my guest-house, which was located next to one of the most accident-prone crossroads of Delhi, I had to drive past two major slums along the Yamuna river, past part of the central business citadel of Delhi and then back towards south Delhi. The everyday visual impulses coming from watching for two hours a day the street spectacle made up by architecture, people, advertisements, clothes and cars strengthened my curiosity for exploring the construction of identity among young people who were growing up in the midst of this, and who had also witnessed the change from times when India was not so open to the external world.

My experiences in the mental hospital were juxtaposed to those I had had when I backpacked round India in 1995. When I reached Bombay after a few weeks among the classical attractions of Northern India I saw, for the first time in my life, a real skyline formed by skyscrapers. Where I grew up in a small town in northern Italy, skyscrapers were only part of our ‘American fantasies’. Imagine this young white ‘Westerner’ discovering the beauty of such high skyscrapers in a place where most other travellers were looking for the beauty of Indian spirituality and poverty. The paradox was rather amusing considering that, in the eyes of most Indians, I myself symbolized the value that struck me, namely ‘modernity’.

My approach to India and my definition of a field were generated by these paradoxes and in reaction to the ‘India’ that was commonly described by the Western mass media, i.e. the country that historian Sunil Khilnani (1997) summed up as a blend of “physical filth and spiritual purity”. Coming back to Delhi in 1999 for my major fieldwork I wanted to find people who could satisfy my theoretical interest rather than a particular community or a particular place. Delhi, as the symbol of a phase of change in India, seemed the perfect place.
New Delhi is a much talked about city, but at the same time a rather invisible and image-less one. Being the site of the Indian government, of foreign embassies, of many multinationals and the home of most foreign correspondents covering the South Asia region, Delhi often appears in the global “media-scape” (Appadurai 1996). The name ‘New Delhi’ introduces the news from India in most newspapers and stands also as a synonym for the political events taking place in India. Yet, apart from this exposure, New Delhi is, as compared with other Indian cities, little exploited from the point of view of research and writing in general. Bombay (or Mumbai, as the new wave of Hindu nationalism would have it) has, in contrast, been celebrated for a long time as the most cosmopolitan city of India, the “mecca for incoming peoples” (Tindall quoted in Conlon 1996:91) and the “metaphor of Indian modernity” (Patel and Thorner 1995). Calcutta (or Kolkata), on the other hand, is, ironically enough, popular mainly because of its power to scare people, by its poverty, over-crowdedness, filth and despair (cf. LaPierre 1990, Hutnyk 1996a).

The history of Delhi has seen a succession of different (often foreign) conquerors. It has given shape to a splendid blend of ancient Hindu ruins, Islamic mausoleums and colonial buildings. Notwithstanding this, Delhi is seldom presented as a major historical attraction and appears as a historical site with a rather ambivalent image. Delhi, so the rumour goes among foreigners, is not a place worth seeing. Nevertheless, lots of people keep going there: Indian and foreign businessmen and officials converge there to meet companies, bureaucrats and politicians. Foreign tourists make an obligatory passage through the city (generally hating it) and thousands of migrants reach the city every month in the hope of a better life.
looking at the past

To understand better the situation and the public image of Delhi today I must, for a little while, turn my eyes towards the past. What Ashish Nandy has described as India's "journey towards modernity and progress" (2001:101), began with violence. Independence started with riots in Calcutta in August 1946 (where 5000 people were killed) and ended at the end of the winter of 1947-8, after another massive riot in Karachi and the assassination of Gandhi in Delhi). India's period of greatest freedom and self-affirmation thus came to coincide with the loss of innocence for the whole nation. By the beginning of 1948, after the exodus of Muslims from India to Pakistan and of Hindus in the opposite direction, roughly 16 million people had lost their homes (more were to share the same fate in the months to come) and at least one million of people (according to unofficial estimates) had lost their lives. These years were central to the construction of modern Delhi. Within two months the population doubled and all planning of the city experienced a drastic break. New 'colonies' were created to host the thousands of refugees coming from what had just become Pakistan. The pain of families divided by the tragedy of partition characterized the first steps in the creation of post-independence Delhi. Delhi was involved in these processes at another level also. Being the capital of India, it was the centre around which all of this happened.

As is well known, Delhi is historically composed of seven cities (and today, many more than that) which all functioned as the centre for their respective kingdoms (cf. Jain 1990). Known as Indraprashta and home of the dynasty of the Pandava in the Mahabharata, Delhi first became known as a capital and a pearl of beauty during the reign initially of the Hindu dynasty of Tomar (around the year 1000) and later through a succession of kingdoms until the arrival of the Muslim conquerors. The Islamic Mughal period, that started at the end of the twelfth century and ended with the arrival of the British, was a flourishing period for Delhi. Best known is the period from the Lodhi dynasty (early sixteenth century) to Shahjahan (1627-58). The latter ruler brought the capital back to Delhi in 1638, after a long period of shifting it around, and founded Shahjahanabad (known as the seventh Delhi) which today is the heart of Old Delhi. When the British established a headquarters of the East India Company in Delhi in 1714, a new period was inaugurated. The British Crown took over from the
East India Company in 1858 after the revolt of 1857 had reduced the city to rubble. In 1911 King George V, as head of the British Empire, moved the capital from Calcutta back to Delhi and laid the foundation for the planning of an expansion of the city (Jain 1996).

The construction of ‘New’ Delhi was a grandiose undertaking. New Delhi was to become the major symbol of the Empire on which “the Sun would never set”. It was designed as a new, Western-style garden-city that would reflect the idea expressed by the colonial motto: “So all men may know the Greatness of India”. Clearly detached from the Old City, New Delhi was to develop as an area of low population density characterized by an amazing amount of open green spaces. At the time, a wall separated the Old from the new city between Delhi and Ajmeri Gates. Edwin Lutyens, the creator of the Imperial Delhi plan, opposed the idea of demolishing the wall, since the latter protected “New Delhi from the rats of Old Delhi” (Jain 1996:73). Instead, a new square, named after Admiral Connaught, was placed south of the wall so to demarcate even more clearly the distance between New and Old Delhi. Connaught Place (in short CP) was conceived by Lutyens and the architects of the Raj as a natural divide between Old/North and New/South Delhi. A topographical buffer zone between the ‘Indian’ and the ‘British’, the colonizers and the colonized (cf. also Jain 1990), CP helped the British, who inhabited what was south of CP, to keep a ‘safe’ distance from the Old City whose high population density, bad planning, lack of housing and hygienic structures, slums, poverty, and congestion, were seen as a potential threat to the order of the city. After partition these problems became aggravated and since then a wide gap has existed between Old and New Delhi. CP, however, not only constituted a divide. It was also a space for encounters and exchanges, especially between Indian traders, who mostly lived in former Shahjahanabad, and the British who resided mainly in the new developing south, close to the Viceroy’s house and the new Secretariat. Today CP is still one of the most vital points of encounter for the inhabitants of Delhi (cf. Chapter Five) and the favourite meeting place for most of my informants (especially for those involved in tourism). Hence, it is the place where I spent the largest number of hours hanging around and observing.
During the 1990s, Delhi emerged as India's "New Boom Town", "the epicentre of India's economic modernisation" (Saran 1999). From being a purely political centre, the city is becoming an attractive business and industrial centre, and, as one of my informants told me, "a city of aspirants". More than half of the multinational companies that have entered India in the past decade have, for instance, chosen Delhi as their base (Sony, Daewoo, Samsung, Honda, Motorola, Nokia). According to statistics published in Indian magazines, Delhi has the fastest rate of job creation in India at the moment (jobs have multiplied twice as fast in Delhi as in Bombay) and the country's most affluent market. The population of the city grew by 43 per cent between 1991 and 1999, and according to unofficial estimates, it is turning into a city of 15 million inhabitants.

Today's Delhi comprises size, variety and contrasts. It is a melting pot of ethnic identities and different cultures (69 per cent of its population were not born in the city). The continuous arrival of migrants from other parts of India generates not only an interesting blend of cultures, but also social problems. Squatter settlements form in all parts of the city and Delhi shows dramatic figures of urban poverty, pollution, tax evasion and lack of water and electricity. Delhi is thus surrounded by an aura of ambivalence. It is maintained that it has grown without any central planning but under the influence of all those different people who have come to the city to improve their living standards. Delhi, so its inhabitants say, is embedded in a spirit of nonchalance that is expressed by its unofficial motto 'sab chalta hai', 'everything goes'. It is not surprising that a celebrated and provocative author such as Kushwant Singh in his novel on Delhi lets the city be represented in metaphor by Bhagmati, a tempting but a the same time disgusting transvestite prostitute. Singh writes:

"I have two passions in my life; my city Delhi and Bhagmati. They have two things in common: they are lots of fun. And they are sterile...Having been long misused by rough people they have learnt to conceal their seductive charms under a mask of repulsive ugliness" (Singh 1990:30 and p.1).
life trajectories in the city: the interlocutors

The multiplicity of historical trajectories and influences offered by Delhi are somehow mirrored by the people making up my field. They too are a composite of the whole of India. Besides having different backgrounds, they also express the same contradictory statements on cultural identity, oscillating between essentialized positions ('real Indians', 'Westernized'), that I observed daily in the urban space (cf. Introduction and Chapter Five). Like the city itself, they show a capacity to make seemingly contradictory messages co-exist. When my informants make statements of identity, they refer to a hybrid life-world shaped by a multivocal urban context which constantly provides them with new inspirations. Due to my interest in the dialogue between travel of imagination and localized everyday life, I have found both Delhi and the people who actively mediate between the influences that converge there, particularly fascinating. The city has helped me to understand the referents used by my informants in their statements of identity, and my informants have functioned as "spies" (Ginzburg 2000) on Delhi's changes and on the changes taking place in post-1991 India.

Potentially in tune with Marcus' idea of ethnographies constituted in "fractured, discontinuous spaces" (2002:195), my field has taken shape in a blend of theoretical interest and of fortunate encounters such as those mentioned in the vignettes at the beginning of this chapter. As I mentioned in the Introduction, my interlocutors are a scattered and fragmented whole that I shall approach in this book through a number of issues such as the display and creation of cultural identity, the visualization of 'India' and the 'West', masculinity, the perception and use of the city, etc. Even though they come from separate trajectories, my informants share some commonalities in background and in particular attitudes in approaching and defining their cultural identity, gender issues and their country. They are also united by a common search and desire for living a "different" and "interesting" life. As I have said, at specific moments they look like a coherent community that shares a set of shifting collective representations, a common agenda to carve out an identity for themselves and to position themselves in relation to Indian society and to the globalizing world. Instead of making further abstractions about my field, I shall now offer a few glimpses into my informants' life-stories (more details on my informants will follow in the following chapters). These glimpses will
start with a description of the world of tourism, which has dominated my research.

**tourism as escape from conventional life**

In his book The Guide, Indian novelist R. K. Narayan (1991) tells the story of a sex- and money-corrupted tourist guide who, after having ended up in jail, becomes one of India’s great holy men. Coincidences at the intersection of love and fraud in his dealings with foreign clients turn this man into a steady believer in the power of God. The Guide highlights some of the central (and negative) characteristics of the public image of the world of tourism and tourist guides in India. The mass media present a dark picture of such people. During my stay in Delhi, for instance, news about guides and workers in tourism would generally focus on crimes: “Young Japanese man killed by Kashmiri agents”, “Guide killed by fellow guides at the Red Fort”, “Travel agents thrash old man to death in CP”.

The intellectuals and scholars I interviewed while in the field suggested that tourism in the best case “does not figure in the general perception” (as career consultant Parvin Malhotra told me). When I discussed my project with sociologist Prof. Srivastva, he reacted with suspicion and perplexity when I mentioned ‘tourist guides’. “Those are not really significant people, they are cheaters”, he said. Prof. Srivastva’s first reaction was linked to the image of the guide as the tout with a moustache standing outside temples and monuments offering to show tourists some rarities for a few rupees, or maybe as a young man standing on a street in central Delhi stopping tourists and offering them cheap tickets to different Indian destinations. Definitely, he did not think of educated people who have passed examinations as working on behalf of local tourist authorities and foreign charter companies. My informants in the tourist business, all tourist escorts and guides, are of course aware of and sensible to the public image of their occupation. They always react strongly to the reports published in the newspapers. Yet they also point out ironically that this publicity is somehow a good thing since it keeps the market free from too much internal competition.

Tourism in itself is a vast industry that should be given more attention by scholars in general. Besides being a major channel for the
movement of people across the world, it represents a significant source of foreign capital for countries such as India and a major conveyer of influences to the country. Tourist marketing, often relying on a reinvention of the past and of local culture, represents a precious entry into analyses of the imagination of culture and nation in the light of globalization. Indian authorities present tourism as "the industry of the future" (Bezbaruah 1999:17). With the liberalization manoeuvres of 1991, tourism has in fact grown in importance and has been labelled a "priority sector for foreign investment" (ibid.). The 1992 National Action Plan for Tourism stated that it is a key instrument not only for bringing more foreign investment into the country but also for creating a better image of India abroad. Moreover, tourism, the authorities suggested, is a "composite subject" leading to the improvement of air transport opportunities, internal transports, hotels and restaurants, monuments and major services at the different attractions, such as bars, toilets, etc. As a wide spectrum activity, tourism is an instrumental channel for keeping up the pace (or for 'catching up' as the old metaphor would have it) with the rest of the world. The logic of tourism fits nicely into the new liberal trends running through India.

The urge towards development of the tourist sector has been noted in a variety of different fields. In the most recent decades institutes for tourism management and other related activities have been founded all over India. These cater for the growing demand among young Indians to work within this industry. Tourism attracts many young men, in particular from the lower middle classes, who are searching for a remunerative career that will permit them to have interesting experiences of foreign cultures. Young women too are gradually becoming interested in this trade. But, as some of my informants told me, they often have to overcome the resistance of their parents who, in accordance with public opinion, see this environment as a semi-illegal, potentially immoral and dangerous one. Tourism not only attracts young people with a knowledge of foreign languages and cultures, but also directs many to acquire this competence. The profiles of the students attending schools of foreign languages such as the British School, or the cultural centres of the French, German, Italian and Spanish embassies as well as many private language institutes testify to this tendency. Besides these schools, many young men interested in tourism attend institutions like the Indian Institute of
Tourism and Travel Management (IITTMT) that was set up in New Delhi in 1983 (funded by the Ministry of Tourism). Since becoming a guide today is becoming rather popular among middle class men, the competition for entering the courses provided by the governmental institutions is becoming tougher.

Tourism offers dreams to a lot of young people. M.S. Oberoi, the owner of India's biggest hotel-chain, is the embodiment of these dreams. A former ‘servant’ of a small hotel in the Himalayan hills, Oberoi is today considered to be the pioneering figure of Indian tourism and by and large one of the most successful businessmen in India. Figures like Oberoi have inspired my informants too and have made them dream of becoming something big through tourism. Tourism, for them, is more than a job; it is a symbol of a certain lifestyle, of certain future projections taking them away from what they often describe as a “boring middle class life”. Tourism is a path towards a bigger breakthrough; it opens up contacts and opportunities that, some of them hope, will permit them to start up business ventures between India and the foreign countries with which they have contacts.

Coming from different parts of the country and having relatively different backgrounds in terms of class, caste and language, the life careers of my informants still overlap to some extent. They tend to talk about cultural identity and status in similar, often ambiguous, terms (I will discuss these in the chapters to come). A brief presentation of some of these young men's life-trajectories will be useful for my coming discussions on these issues.

Satinder was born in 1969 into a Brahmin family originally from Punjab. His father is a retired civil servant and his mother is a housewife. At the beginning of my fieldwork Satinder lived with his family on the northern outskirts of Delhi, in what he described as a “very low and dirty area that has nothing to offer”. Later on he moved to a new house that he bought together with his best friend Sunil (see below). Satinder has a degree in history from Delhi University and after a specialization course he started teaching there. Suddenly, however, he decided to leave academia to work in tourism (a choice that his family disapproved of for many years). Satinder talks a lot, seems to love to be the centre of attention and definitely has a habit of explaining things. Like most other tour leaders he loves “hunting” women. He speaks Hindi, some Punjabi, fluent English (with an Australian accent that he says he acquired during his early days in tourism when he was working with Australians) and almost perfect Italian.
India Dreams

The history of Satinder’s best friend Sunil has been similar. Son of a Brahmin family from the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, Sunil, who was born in 1971, lived with his family until he moved in with Satinder in their newly purchased house. Never having attended university Sunil joined tourism while he was working as a clerk for a Delhi-based company. At the guide course he met Satinder and some of the other people who became his good friends. Sunil is a charming handsome man always dressed in clean well ironed fashionable shirts and jeans or sport trousers. Always with his sun-glasses on the top of his head, Sunil carries a mobile phone that he spends quite a lot of time comparing with those belonging to his friends. When he is with Satinder, Sunil always keeps a low profile. Satinder is a kind of elder brother to him; he has always been there to help him out with work as well as in his private life. Sunil laughs a lot, looks at girls, turning his head here and there all the time, and cracking a lot of jokes. He works with mixed tourist groups using English as his working language. However, he also speaks some Spanish and is trying to improve his knowledge of that language in order to get more work.

The story of twenty-five-years-old Amar is rather different. A quite silent and polite guy, Amar does not carry a mobile phone nor does he wear trendy clothes. Amar grew up in a small town (which in the Indian context may mean up to 200,000 inhabitants) in central Uttar Pradesh. He did not have a particularly rich family but got the chance to study. In 1995 he came to Delhi in order to become “something different”: “I did not want to become an engineer like everyone else” he said. The opportunity for this came through a cousin who spoke Japanese and worked in Delhi as a translator. Amar came to Delhi with the help of this cousin and started studying business administration. However, inspired by his cousin, he decided relatively quickly to learn Italian instead, hoping that this knowledge would lead him somewhere interesting. One day he met by chance a man who worked in tourism and so he decided to try this work. Today, Amar works mostly with Italian tourists and is fluent in their language. English for him is more of a second language that he uses only for a few purposes.

Ramesh has had a troubled life. He was born in Delhi (in a northern extension of main Delhi) into a Brahmin family in 1972. His father died while he was still a child and since then he has carried the responsibility for his mother and sisters. Ramesh is the only vegetarian in the group. The others always make fun of him for this habit. Satinder in particular nags him continuously for being “traditional”, and often stages the impression of a pooja (the ritual offering in the temples) while talking to or about him. Ramesh calmly pretends to ignore Satinder on these occasions. Different from the others, Ramesh practises religion. His appearance too does not signal his being a ‘hard-core modernist’. Like Amar, he does not carry a mobile phone, nor does he talk about girls and sex. He is a sensitive man, described by his friends as “romantic” and “naive”. Once Ramesh himself told me that he believes in “pure
things” but that, with the years, and especially through working in tourism, he is now “slowly turning more and more into a bastard”. Ramesh met Satinder and Sunil at the guide course and they have stayed friends ever since then.

Baljit is twenty-four and the son of a garment-seller of North Delhi. He lives right in the middle of the overcrowded chowks (the narrow streets in the bazaar area) with his father, mother, older brother and a younger sister. He works for a travel agency that sells air tickets but also organizes charter tours for a number of foreign companies. At our first meeting Baljit seemed rather shy. Later on I discovered him to be quite an open and extrovert man. He speaks Italian and English. During our first meeting he was very humble, speaking of tourism as “just a job”. However, he confessed that he loved this work because it gave him so many different experiences. His dream is to marry an Italian woman and maybe to live for some time in Italy. He would love to end up eventually commuting between India and Italy just like one of his friends who, through his involvement in tourism, one day met a woman from Rome. Today he runs a shop in Rome that sells Indian handicrafts but goes back to Delhi for several months every year.

Bharat, twenty-nine, works mostly as a local guide. At times he also runs tours with English groups. He lives alone in North West Delhi and is originally from Uttar Pradesh. He has a moustache, curly hair and generally wears jeans and a t-shirt. His blue Nokia mini mobile phone always lies on the table in front of him while he blows away time, smoking one cigarette after another. He came to Delhi to study when he was nineteen. After a BA and an MBA in public administration, he took a post-graduate degree in travel at the IITTM and then joined the guide course. While still doing his post-graduate course he started guiding groups around Delhi. While I was conducting my fieldwork Bharat was studying German at the Max Muller Bhavan in order to broaden his circle of clients even further through knowledge of another language. There I also met Bharat’s best friend Shalini, who works with German tourists. Shalini is thirty-one (the oldest of the group) and lives in Noida. Earlier he was working for an export company but then started studying German and decided to quit the job because he had an interest in sculpture and needed more time for that. Shalini told me that he is planning to do more work in tourism because it gives him both the time and the money to pursue his artistic interests. At our first encounter Bharat and Shalini presented themselves as best friends. “We even fuck together!” they said and told me about one occasion when one of them brought home an Anglo-Indian girl with whom they both had sex. Yet they are a strange ‘couple’, Shalini very calm and introspective and Bharat completely restless and talkative.
A few more people constitute this ‘tourism field’. However, the stories described so far may have given an idea of the careers of life of those who end up in this business. They have all received a good schooling but not necessarily the privilege of access to the commodities that today characterize a ‘rich’ lifestyle. They have had to work at a young age, but their parents have made quite big investments in their studies. Some of them have gone through periods of relative poverty, and recovered thanks to the common efforts of family, relatives and friends. They are all bachelors more or less keen on maintaining their independence (which is decisively reflected in their choices of partners and lifestyles, see Chapter Four). As I mentioned above, a central theme running through all my informants’ descriptions of how they relate to their jobs is that tourism entails a promise of escape. They want a different life from that led by their families. One of them expressed this by saying:

“Looking back I really feel satisfied with what I am now. You see, my brothers are not able to eat properly with knives and forks...Maybe what to me is a small amount of money they would be dreaming of possessing...They would look down on me if they knew that I spend at least 100, 150 rupees a day for pure enjoyment”.

Relatively undisturbed by the low status of the tour-leader/guide occupation, these young men focus on how tourism offers the possibility of earning a lot of money and of leading a life which is more interesting and exciting than the one they could imagine when they were children. The tourist business has “saved” them from the “boring middle class life”, they claim, suggesting that if they had not got this job they would now be married (mostly in order “to have sex when I wanted to” as Bharat ironically pointed out) and have some tedious blue-collar job. A career in tourism has been a way for them to gain freedom and, as one of them said, to “enjoy more of life”. First of all, working with tourists is considered interesting in itself and permits them to learn new things, to deepen their knowledge of foreign languages and countries and also, through the contacts made there, to spend time abroad. Secondly, their occupation is well paid. Coming from less privileged backgrounds (as compared with some of my other informants) they enjoy earning much more money that they were earning before. Sunil
said that, with time, this aspect has become a thrill. Shalini pointed out that tourism is probably the best-paid occupation in India, although this is rarely spoken about. Thirdly, tourism also has an erotic side and provides my informants with many opportunities for sexual encounters. All of my tourist guide informants have had relationships with foreign women, ranging from casual one-night encounters to relationships lasting for years. Fourthly, all my informants appreciate the opportunities their occupation has given them to learn more about their own country. They spend their working life in a ‘cosmopolitan’ world of foreign tourists, five-star hotels, etc. Nevertheless, tourism has not taken them away from India. Rather it has even strengthened their sense of belongingness to, and pride in, India. These ideas on tourism are reflected in the rumours that circulate among young middle class men on what this business is all about. At the Max Muller Bhavan, where I used to hang around with some of my informants during the last part of my fieldwork in 1999, I encountered many young people studying German. More than half of them had tourism in mind. One young student, aiming at applying for the guide course, noted that, besides the money, tourism is “glamorous...with hotels and stuff, and many interesting people to meet”. Satinder commented on this: “If we told Indian guys that version of what tourism is all about, they would all go for it!”.

My other informants outside the tourism field are more scattered and diversified. These other ‘fields’ consist of networks of people whom I contacted at times for particular reasons and at other times simply encountered coincidentally.

Akash was born in 1977. It was he who introduced me to Learning Universe, the Internet company where I conducted a part of my research (see below). Born and having grown up in Bombay, Akash arrived in Delhi with his family five years before I met him. After having completed his MA, he joined the company which at the time had a staff of eight people (see below). Akash’s family had changed lifestyle entirely during his childhood and adolescence. His father was the son of farmers but had succeeded in making a big step up. He studied engineering in Poone and then, after having joined a number of different companies, was enrolled by an international organization in Delhi. Akash feels that this is why he likes Delhi: “Before, we were quite poor.
We did not have much money for doing things...Just six years back I could never have dreamed of taking an MA and today I have my own car!...Our life has really changed.” Akash’s mother runs an NGO in charge of schooling programmes in the slums. His older sister is married and has lived in London since a year ago. Akash reads a lot and is very well informed. At first Akash had thought of the job at Egurucool as a kind of “gamble”. He had no guarantees but thought that investing in a new sector could be a good idea. He did not want a traditional job and the Internet looked interesting enough to him. He earned relatively little at first but with the years advanced to a high salary level. The “gamble”, in other words, proved to be a good investment. Akash works at times up to 12 hours a day and spends his only leisure time going to a disco on Friday or Saturday nights. Akash is a true believer in the power of liberalization, which for him is the only thing that can save India.

The company Learning Universe is an interesting mirror of the new opportunities that have opened up in India in the 1990s. The project was created by young people for young people and is based on the idea of using new technologies and global ideas for local purposes. It started up in the basement of a private residential building in South Delhi in 1998 (less than a year before I first discovered it). A young manager (Ravi, aged twenty-nine) and a young engineer (Arjun, twenty-eight) created the company in an attempt to become “pioneers in the Internet sector”. The goal of Learning Universe was to establish an innovative and entertaining Internet site that would help young fellow Indians gather more information and thus orientate better in the competitive world of school and work. The site would be baptized Egurucool and presented as something that “aims at understanding young people as individuals – their lives, their dreams, their fears”. As stated in the official brochure that was presented at its launch in November 1999, the site was conceived of as “an attempt to bridge the gap between the knowledge imparted in classrooms and the demands of the real world”. The company marketed itself as “a group of young, enthusiastic professionals” seeing “education and career development [as] a subject close to their hearts”. Targeting people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five, Egurucool offers on-line testing, information about career opportunities, schools and universities, and counselling (both for careers as well as for other personal issues). It provides links to a number of international organizations such as AIESEC, Rotaract and Interact, and to Indian colleges and foreign universities. In 2000 Learning Universe was bought by an information multinational, and
today it has grown into a company with almost 300 employees in seven different Indian cities. Needless to say, the creators are no longer involved in it.

The people working for Learning Universe are, like my tourist guide informants, involved in a cultural brokerage between 'local' and 'global' sources. In the first place, they have started up the company with the idea of introducing something new in India, i.e. of applying a global technology for purposes linked to Indian youth. Secondly, in their daily activities, the people working there import from international sites ideas about personal growth, career opportunities and free time and adapt them to the realities of Indian youth culture. The site keeps a balance between the local and the global and its workers debate about the best ways to accommodate the needs of Indian youths while tuning in to their dreams and ambitions and offering them glimpses of new opportunities:

“You dream to be the next czar of the Indian industry, the Sabeer Bhatia of the Silicon Valley or the next Tendulkar. You say to yourself, “Yes I can do it”.”

A conscious playing with hybrid identities and realities (appealing at once to Indian culture and to global youth culture) is also expressed in the name of the site itself. Egurucool is an ironic adaptation of the Sanskrit concept ‘gurukul’ which means the family of the guru, i.e. the group of disciples that surrounds a guru, to the language of global youth culture (the Sanskrit term kul, i.e. family, is turned into cool). In the present study Egurucool figures as a research site that I have used in order to meet people exploiting this new kind of occupation to build up their own future and to channel the novelties offered to India by the global market. However, I shall not analyze Egurucool as such, but rather consider it as one of the arenas providing people with new messages and inspirations.
other fields

Besides these more localized social environments my ‘field’ has consisted of a lot of other people whom I encountered for different reasons during my stay in Delhi. Let me mention a few of them.

Leander, a twenty-four-year-old student of Spanish at Delhi University, was born into a family of farmers originally from Himachal Pradesh, in the Indian Himalayas. His parents migrated to Delhi twenty years ago because his father had heard that there were good job opportunities in the city. Nowadays the father directs a rescue company, and they live in a middle class area in East Delhi. I first saw Leander at Delhi University when he was wearing a kurta with jeans and Nike shoes (I shall say more about this meeting later on). Curious about his outfit, I stopped him and so we got to know each other. During that period Leander, after having applied to a few multinational companies, had found a part-time job at the Cuban Embassy. He told me that he had chosen to study Spanish inspired by a cousin who was studying Chinese, and because of a desire “to do something else” with his life. Still a bachelor, Leander feels that the future is wide open. He is interested in having experiences of foreign countries and cultures, but he has never expressed any desire to settle abroad.

Vijay was born in 1974 and is an opera singer (a baritone). He lives in one of the expanding middle class areas in South Delhi together with his father and mother. To live up to his career dreams has been a continuous struggle for Vijay. Being an opera singer is, as he said, a “bit of a gamble” since that kind of occupation falls outside the frame of normality for his family and close friends. There are no opera schools in India. These days his family are no longer pressuring him about his choices, but he feels that he will never receive their support. As he told me, his parents keep praising his younger brother, who lives in the United States where he is taking a Ph.D. in chemistry. They consider Vijay to be wasting his time. Besides music, Vijay has studied Italian and German, mostly for the purpose of singing. During 2001 he finally received a good scholarship in England to study at a prestigious music school. He left in a very happy mood, proud of his success and also happy to escape from Delhi, a city which, as he told me, he has never been able to love.

Ashwin, twenty-four, is a manager of the Delhi branch of a Bombay-based family business. Having grown up in Bombay, where he completed his college studies, he took a specialization course in business administration at an American university. He feels that Delhi is a somewhat “backward place”, even though he enjoys the pleasure of living on his own, and despite the fact that his house is, among his close circle of friends, “the” place at which to organize dinners and parties. When Ashwin came to Delhi he felt depressed and lonely at first. Within
a short time, however, he met Nikilesh who today is his best friend. Nikilesh, who is a journalist, is the same age and works as India correspondent for foreign press agencies. Nikilesh lives in a lower middle class area in North Delhi together with his father, a retired civil servant, his mother, a retired teacher, and a younger brother who recently became an army officer. Through a number of sacrifices his parents were able to give Nikilesh a good education. He studied journalism in Delhi while working part-time for the BBC, and then joined the Japanese Broadcasting channel. When I first met him, Nikilesh was hoping to take a step up in his career and go abroad to work as a foreign correspondent. A few years later he actually left for England to take a masters degree in journalism. For him going abroad is not a matter of desire for new experiences but rather a way of securing a better future for himself and his family. Even though they are each other’s best friends, Nikilesh and Ashwin have separate backgrounds and views on many issues. Like most of my travel-guide informants, Nikilesh has grown up under certain economic restrictions, whereas Ashwin is the son of a relatively wealthy business family. Ashwin is a self-declared atheist and is totally uninterested in politics, while Nikilesh is a devoted Hindu active on politics and social affairs front. Nonetheless they spend all their free time together.

Through Ashwin and Nikilesh I came in touch with a vast network of people (at times directly and at times indirectly by just hanging around with them). I met Dipankar (aged twenty-five) who had just returned from the US, where he was working for an international advertising company. “One day I had had enough, I bought a one-way ticket and I’m back home, man!” he told me at our first encounter. In Delhi, Dipankar revived an old interest and started making a living out of coaching tennis. He comes from an elite family (his father is a retired army officer and his mother a retired teacher) but not one that can give him much financial support. In contrast, his best friend Vikram (twenty-five) is the son of the owner of one of the most successful travel agencies in Delhi. Also a tennis player, Vikram spent a few years in a tennis academy in the US. On his return, he joined his father’s business where he now works full-time. Dipankar and Vikram do not therefore have a common background. Despite this, they have been best friends since childhood. They further introduced me to their friendship networks and, through them, I was able to meet people involved in very varied businesses and many young men belonging to Delhi’s upper class. Besides offering me a widening of my field towards higher strata, my friendships with Ashwin, Nikilesh, Dipankar and
Vikram helped me keep in physical and mental shape and made me return to Delhi over and over again.

Ranging from brief encounters to relationships lasting for years, my field has been inhabited by many more individuals than I have mentioned here. However, I regard those introduced above as life-stories that can give some understanding of the characteristics of my interlocutors. Even though they seem to have been left entirely out of the picture, young women too have provided me with precious information regarding the issues I address in this study. My research, however, focuses on men. These women will therefore appear, in a few cases in the following chapters, as either providers of points of view on young men or as objects of these men's interests and desires.

**debating youth and metropolitan life**

The lifestyles enacted by young urban middle class people such as my informants are often a matter of debate in contemporary India. Young men in particular represent for many a threat to the continuity of Indian values and culture. This threat is particularly felt in Delhi, which, as I described above, has witnessed a number of rapid changes within the past decade. The present section will unravel some of the (Delhi-specific) discourses that surround my informants. As I gathered through encounters with people from different generations and class backgrounds, people such as my informants are often used to symbolize the changes that have taken place in the city. I devoted a part of my fieldwork to documenting these discourses. I followed up all the major debates regarding the issue of youth and social change, collecting newspaper articles, advertisements, information about courses, etc. Moreover, I interviewed consultants, psychologists and social scientists involved in this field. The discourses I documented constitute a part of the life-world of my informants (who are aware of the views projected on to them by society) and will thus help in contextualizing (and understanding) their life-choices better. Moreover, they will offer another glimpse into Delhi. I shall introduce this discussion from a somewhat 'extreme' angle, i.e. the story of two murders that took place in Delhi during my fieldwork.
Midnight is closing in on 30 April 1999 at the Tamarind Court, a restaurant-pub near the famous Qutub Minar in South Delhi. The evening is winding up after an event during which celebrities like American actor Steven Seagal, Indian fashion designer Rohit Bal and other locally known 'socialites' starred among a crowd of between 250 and 400 guests.

It must have been at around 11 pm that Manu Sharma, the 24-year-old son of a well-known politician from Haryana, reached the "colonnade" (this is the name given to this refurbished haveli in Mehrauli overlooking the Qutub Minar), in the company of a group of friends. Already in a state of complete intoxication, Manu walked towards the bar for a round of drinks. Jessica Lai, a 34-year-old model hosting the bar on that particular evening, refused him the drink with the explanation that the whisky was finished and that the place was shutting down soon. Manu did not take the refusal lightly. He started arguing with Jessica until Malini (the daughter of the owner) came to her rescue. After a few verbal attacks on her, Manu pulled out a 22-calibre pistol. Someone shouted "it's only a toy!" but soon a shot was heard. Then, yet another shot was released from the gun (maybe, someone suggested, because of the fact that Manu suddenly lost his balance). Instead of hitting the roof this second bullet went straight to Jessica's head. She was taken to the hospital but died soon afterwards.

Faced by the 80 to 90 guests who were still at the club, Manu and his friends left the place. While the owners, allegedly, gave orders to their servants to "clean up" the place, the crowd started leaving. Manu remained in hiding in Himachal Pradesh until 6 May when he decided to surrender to the police and was arrested. Two of his friends, those who picked up the car, were investigated, while a fourth was never accused.

It is around four in the morning of 10 January 1999 in Lodhi Road, a posh area in central South Delhi. A BMW running at 140 km/hour rams into a group of people standing at the side of the road. Six people are left dead on the pavement, three of them were guards (two home guards and one CRPF constable) and the others workers who were moving a box. The crash was so violent that bloodstains and parts of the bodies of the victims were found at a radius of 100 metres from the place of the collision. Ramesh was driving the car and with him was his friend Manik.

These young men in their early twenties were driving home from a party and, as the blood test would prove just a few hours later, were drunk at the time of the accident. Both belonged to influential families: one was the son of the owner of an international arms firm and grandson of a retired Chief of the Naval Staff and the other the son of a wealthy
exporter. According to the survivors, the two young men were seen getting out of the car immediately after the collision. At the sight of the people lying on the street bleeding and screaming for help, they ran away; in a frenzy they drove over the bodies of two victims and disappeared.

Later on it was discovered that they had sought refuge at a friend’s place in the same block where the accident had taken place. Having been alerted, the young man’s father (who runs a finance company) opened the gates of the house so that they could quickly disappear from sight. He also gave orders to his servants to wipe the blood stains from the car. But, a small oil leak from the car guided one smart policeman to the house where they were hiding and the mystery was solved.

"Who was to blame for these tragic events?" was the question that haunted the media, sociologists, psychiatrists, psychologists and the general public for the period to come. The two stories offered striking similarities. Both crimes had taken place among urban, educated people. They were committed by young men who in both cases tried to flee the scene in the hope of getting away with what they had done (possibly because of trust in their respective families ‘connections’). Moreover, the crimes were not premeditated, but the result of a night of partying and ‘fun’. Society reacted with an octopus-shaped attack on Delhi and its culture. A feeling of being on the threshold of a total moral collapse was awakened. “Delhi could be marching towards anarchy...Delhi is a power centre and power breeds corruption”, stated psychiatrist Sanjay Chugh in one article. Summed up in the slogan “Party hard. Fall harder”, Delhi was presented as “India’s most violent and aggressive metropolis, with a uniquely rude culture” and as a society where “the nouveau rich is fascinated by the popular impression of how the rich live”. Details regarding Delhi’s “outrageous” party scene followed one another in all the major papers. Stories of models seen taking off their panties while dancing, of dragqueens, of the dead bodies of servants found in the pool the morning after a party at some private farmhouse, of people taken to hospital after having been thrown in a pool that had been filled with broken bottles and glasses, of the young actress who had oral sex with a man in the middle of a dance floor, filled the pages of the newspapers. As a reaction to these debates the public authorities of Delhi immediately enacted a plan to stop the opening of new pubs and restaurants and strengthened their control on all night life attractions.
In particular the new clubs flourishing in the (illegal) farmhouse-areas of South Delhi came under attack. They were gathering customers among “the new fun-loving generation” who could not receive membership for the main clubs of the city.

The debate widened to include a number of larger issues ranging from youth culture and the degeneration of values among rich, nouveau rich and middle class people, to the profound corruption of the Indian politicians and elites, to parenthood, to the new “individualistic value system” that breeds among the rich in cities like Delhi, to the lifestyle gaps between urban and rural India and to gender discussions. Moreover, they also led to a number of more particularistic explanations. One article, for instance, described the BMW case as a “class crime”. In an interview, social scientist Ashis Nandy blamed the growth of “gun-culture” in North India arguing that violence, together with the macho ideals reinforced by films, had become accepted norms in Delhi. Police chief Amod Khant declared that one of the reasons for the killing was to be found in the “disintegration of the joint family system”, and in the growing acceptance of the law violation in society, a phenomenon for which even the media, with their coverage of the party scene, were responsible. Moreover, an aura of sexual transgression and of vulgarity was commonly used to contour these stories. It was suggested that Jessica Lal was actually somewhat guilty for having teased Manu. Many articles chose to illustrate the content of these stories with provocative details regarding what one article described as the "uninhibited girls with their daring dresses, bare legs and provocative dancing" at bars like the Tamarind Court.

The Jessica Lal and BMW cases came to remain in the imagination of upper and middle class Delhi. In a mixture of violence, illegality, wealth, corruption, sex and beauty, these events were to be re-evoked by any new crime taking place among the urban educated strata for some time to come. These debates also reinforced the impression that young men were epitomes of the negative changes that Delhi and India were going through. For the mass media, Manu Sharma became the symbol of the young, educated, rich urban man. An average student with no
particular gifts in either studies or sport, Manu led, according to one article, "a double life. Low key at home, party friend outside". Manu and his friends were described as 'modernites', i.e. as people inspired by and reproducing a 'modern' lifestyle. Manu was just a symptom of the increasing violence and confusion of urban youths, of the "fallout of urbanization and a blind aping of the West".

Newspapers and magazines reported that young men were trapped in a "desire for fast cars, fast food and a fast life". Pages were filled with reports on youth criminality, where a new picture emerged in which the potential criminals were no longer only representatives of the urban poor but also the children of the educated who were trying to add some spice to their lives. Journalist P. Bidwai, in one article, argued for a link between extreme affluence and violence, suggesting that crime was a part of the changes belonging to the wave of consumerism and hedonistic lifestyles that had arisen in the 1990s as a result of neo-liberal economic policies. This point was also raised in a conversation I had with Mr Shankar (see below), chief editor of the youth magazine The Sun. He told me about the increasing number of cases of prostitution among college-girls. These girls, he said, are mostly middle class girls who basically have what they need in terms of food, education, etc., but who want more. This was, according to him, a "prostituting for enjoyment".

All these points of view, even though relatively extreme, mirror common ways of tackling youth and social change by Indian opinion makers. The cover of Pavan Varma's successful book The Great Indian Middle Class (1998) features a young man standing in front of a shiny new car in an evening urban landscape. This young middle class man is intended to embody the transformation of urban middle class India and its 'drive' towards modernity. During one of our meetings Varma expressed his disillusionment over the situation of contemporary society and its youth: "Youth is the end product of society's decline into cynicism", he said. According to him today's youth are very energetic, but lack awareness about social matters. They are "self-obsessed but agile", "amoral", "imitative, culturally adrift" and aim at "acquiring ends irrespective of the means". Being driven by the media, they only see the surface of things (a critique also formulated by many of my informants). They become "effortless clones of Western culture" and end up being dominated by a "wannabe culture" which makes them
The Young Face of Delhi

forget where they come from ("their knowledge of our own culture is nil" Varma said). In a nostalgic and ironic tone Varma argued about how a society like that of India, which was once built upon ideals of social cohesion, had now turned into one where salvation is imagined as a purely individual thing: “Liberalization has liberated particularly the young from notions of guilt, but there is a lack of obligation to society”.

Similar were the views offered by Mr Shankar, the chief editor of the monthly magazine The Sun: the Voice of Youth (the only youth magazine to have survived since the 1970s). A character reminiscent of Hindi movie heroes, with henna tinted hair, open shirt, gold chains and rings, Mr Shankar described his magazine as “a lifestyle magazine for serious youths”. He told me about the magazine’s beginnings during those days when “India was not open”. Then there was no Western stuff around and so The Sun set out to “sell the West” with its pop-music, David Bowie, Bruce Lee, etc. “The West was the thing and it was out of reach”. By offering it, The Sun became a big seller producing up to 100,000 copies a year all over India. Today, however, the situation has changed. According to Shankar, the youngsters of today are more competitive, educated, and selective but at the same time also more materialistic. The young have learned to live in a society where “everything is moving at high speed”. They are thus more complex and demanding consumers and difficult to attract to the magazine. This is the challenge for the magazine today.

The voices of other experts on youth that I interviewed in the field, echo with the views of Varma and Shankar. Dr Bhaghat is a psychologist running an organization that, among other things, provides telephone counselling for young people on all topics ranging from sexuality to careers and family relations. He thinks that the key to understanding today’s youth lies in acknowledging changes in the conceptualization of time. Contemporary young people no longer live in a frame made up by circular time where you basically let things happen around you, and let the days pass by. Instead, they live by a linear conception of time which gives them a clear goal for everything, whether it be job, career, studies or free time. Addressing the issue from a different angle, Mrs Jayal, chief director of Teens Today, promoted a similar point of view. What characterizes young people today, she said, is that they place a big value on the ‘self’: “By this I do not mean that they are selfish, but the self is the most important thing
to them. They want what concerns the self. They are self-absorbed.” Deeply pessimistic about the future of Indian youth, she said that young people simply reflect the lack of respect and civic sense that characterizes adult Indians.

“Today’s youth is a strange thing” said Parvin Malhotra, the director of a small publishing house producing material on school and career counselling. Young people have become conservative, less adventurous and much more materialistic. Her generation, she feels, was much more experimental. They were on the search for novelties and meaning, while the young people of today look instead for “security and quick money.” She explained this by saying that approximately 80 per cent of the people coming to her for career advice ask her right away “What can I choose to make a lot of money?” All young people, including the rich, go for the leading trends such as management and computers, experiencing at the same time a lot of anxiety. They feel that if they make the wrong choice they will not be able to get back and will be “branded for life”. All this is happening parallel with the rise in aspirations. Sounding like a slogan for Pepsi (a company which, by the way, is sponsoring her publications), Mrs Malhotra added that young people “want things and want them right now.”

These different views combined produce an image of the young urban generation in which they epitomize the larger changes that took place in India in the 1990s. The young are depicted as individualistic, inclined to maximize their experiences, inspired by new time conceptions and calculating. In the view of the critics quoted above, urban middle class young people seem to have internalized the dominant logic of the market economy and mirror contemporary global consumerist society.

aping the west or celebrating India?

During the interviews, the critics mentioned above expressed ambivalent views on young people’s visions of ‘India’ and the ‘West’. Accusing the young of ‘aping the West’, they also suggested that India has become for young people a symbol of pride. Since this will be one of the central issues in this book, I will briefly introduce some discourses on this issue.
Mr Shankar of The Sun told me that he considered today’s youth to be “very Indian at heart”, even though they were, in his words, “schizophrenically” divided between different influences. Comparing the present generation with his own, he said “We were only West, and very little concerned with India”. Such ideas regarding the nature of today’s youth are reflected in the content of his magazine, where more and more space is devoted to material concerning Indian society and culture. Mrs Jayal and Parvin Malhotra also felt that for today’s teenagers the foreign is no longer so important. Young people may go abroad but they are proud of being Indian. They no longer feel any urge to migrate abroad, but may still go there as an investment for their future. The West becomes more of “a necessary ingredient” of a better life than an unquestioned goal. This resonates with what one of my informants said about the West, that it is “a chemical laboratory that we should watch and then just take the good things.”

This change in the way young people identify themselves and their own aspirations has a potentially strong impact on the market. MTV, Pepsi, Sony and other multinationals have recently redefined their marketing strategies towards the young according to this trend. In the Youth Marketing Forum organized in 1999 in Bombay with the sponsorship of MTV, Pepsi and other firms, the companies underlined the importance of acknowledging the growing popularity of ‘India’. MTV announced that their slogan was to “Indianise, Humanize and Humorise”. They emphasized that their service, which was launched in 1996, consisted of 70 per cent Indian and 30 per cent in international music. They described their audience as young people who are “comfortable with their Indianness” and for whom “foreign is no longer the best”. MTV showed the results of the most recent top 10 list of young people’s favourite artists in which singer Mohamad Rafi appeared as number one. The only foreign artist in the list was Michael Jackson (who, however, came a decent second). An orientation towards ‘India’ is also visible in the choices of the mass media in general. Star TV, Sony and Discovery have started dubbing more and more programmes into Hindi. TV channels and publications in vernacular languages mean big business in today’s India. Indian mythology and history have proved to be marketable on TV and in cinema. The popularity of new TV serials with historical-religious motifs which, according to many, are being used strategically for heightening
the consciousness about the Hindu "saffron past" of India (cf. Chakravarty 1998a and 1998b) is today a certainty.

The idea of a revived popularity of 'India' was also of serious political importance in the 1990s. Parallel to liberalization and commercial opening-up, India witnessed in the 1990s the emergence of an urge for cultural closure pursued by the Hindu nationalists. The BJP, the party leading the government coalition up to 2004, belongs to the Hindu nationalist networks centring on the RSS (the Rashtrya Swamyasewak Sangh, i.e. the national organization of volunteers), a socio-political movement with strong nationalist undertones, launched in the mid 1920s. They participated in the freedom movement against colonial rule by proposing a militant agenda that opposed the moderate approach of the Congress Party. Since the 1980s the RSS has grown in popularity, with a related growth of the BJP in national and local politics gaining momentum particularly during the 1990s. The RSS has recruited young men from the (lower) middle classes, promoting an ideology built on notions of strength and manliness. Using the dominating moral discourses on the loss of cultural roots in contemporary times, the RSS has sought actively to build a Hindu nation (cf. Andersen and Damle 1987, and Basu et al. 1993). The enemies selected for motivating this project have been varied, ranging from Muslims to Christians, the 'West' and Sonia Gandhi.

At the beginning of my fieldwork I devoted some time to exploring this organization and in particular its student wing, the ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad), and its clerical organ the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad). During a visit to the Delhi central office of the VHP, I noticed a sign that summed up the agenda promoted in this circuit, saying 'Indiannes is Hinduness'. The agenda of Hindutva finds a breeding ground in nostalgia and the RSS directs its attacks against the apparent loss of values among Indian youth. This aspect was evident during an interview I had with a college professor who is a also strong RSS supporter. This professor explained to me the decadence of society by addressing the killing of Jessica Lal: 'The problem is this, Paolo, the five star culture, nice discos, hotels, bars, etc...Young people want Western things, American things. They no longer dress or behave like Indians'. None of my informants subscribe to the agenda promoted by the Hindu nationalist organizations. Yet, as I shall describe further in Chapter Two, their discourse on India at times
echoes that of these organizations. The political implications of the popularity of ‘India’ are, indeed, a delicate and intriguing issue. In this book I shall not analyze this link in depth but focus on the more banal expressions of pride in ‘India’ that take place in run-of-the-mill settings. Nonetheless, the reader will need to bear in mind that this political dimension also constitutes a part of the life-world of my informants.

Juxtaposing all these different voices offers a perspective on the cultural context of young people in contemporary Delhi and on the activities of identity-making in which they are involved. Apparently the daily exposure to Western things and notions has removed from the latter their aura of exotic foreignness. At the same time, ‘Indianness’ has emerged to become a symbol of something new (maybe because it is no longer taken for granted). A “national fantasy” (Berlant in Ivy 1995:17) engendered where national identification, politics and enjoyment meet and merge (cf. Zizek in Ivy 1995:61) is an important characteristic of contemporary young middle class culture and will be the subject of the next chapter.

**is this a field?**

Back to the beginning of the chapter now. Having offered a contextualization of my research within the Delhi of the 1990s, how can I present my field? As I stated above, my informants share a relatively privileged (even though variably so) position in society. All of them have, mostly by choice but at times also by upbringing, learned to occupy a position in which different sources of inspiration interact. They present a similar way of relating to the symbols and messages coming to them through the travel of imagination, and act like small-scale cultural brokers, intending to interpret and at times to capitalize on India’s ever increasing interaction with the outside world. Yet, as I have already described, they come from varied backgrounds, live in different areas of the city (cf. Chapter Five and see the map at the end of the book), have different occupations and occupy different positions in the local hierarchies. Often, in my field, I had the opportunity to observe how one single group of friends could contain at one and the same time people with very privileged backgrounds and others who had got the chance of studying only by means of great sacrifices on the part of
their parents. Maybe they met through work or school or maybe just happened to be in the same place at the same time. Nonetheless, these friendships would often turn into strong bonds of solidarity and change groups of friends into proper communities intent on helping out and supporting each other. I shall now offer one example of how bonds may be created between people with different backgrounds through a communion of imagination, by briefly describing the encounter between Ashwin and Nikilesh who, as I mentioned earlier, do not share any common class or regional background.

**JAPANESE CONNECTIONS**

A few months after his arrival in Delhi, Ashwin was still feeling lonely and depressed. One day, while he was in his office, which at the time was located inside one of Delhi's five-star hotels, he received a phone call. A man called Nikilesh, on the other end of the line, told him that he was a journalist preparing a piece on the growth of the car industry in Japan. Following the regular procedure Ashwin did not give him any particular information but told him that he was welcome to come and visit him at his office and gave him the address. While he was now packing up for the day, he sees a young man walking into his office. The man asks for Ashwin, introducing himself as Nikilesh from NHK. Ashwin was surprised as he had not realized that Nikilesh's office was there, too. Anyway, they sat down and started talking. Initially, Ashwin and Nikilesh did not seem to have much in common. Ashwin told me later that he was actually planning to get rid of his visitor quickly since he wondered who, after all, this funny guy was. Yet, while they were chatting Nikilesh noticed a CD lying on Ashwin's desk: 'The Best of The Doors'. Ashwin looked up at Nikilesh and asked him whether he liked the Doors too. Nikilesh expressed his deep love for the band. Suddenly they found themselves sitting at Ashwin's desk discussing rock, girls and pot. A long-lasting friendship was born.

The encounter between Nikilesh and Ashwin was made possible by Japan's business activities in India, and by a common interest in rock, girls and dope. Nikilesh and Ashwin shared a cultural space defined by a number of elements. In the first place, they shared work environments obliging them to link up with 'foreigners' on a regular basis. At the level of leisure, both had common interests in music, film, video-games and free time activities linked to 'Westernized India'. Hence, the context which made it possible for them to meet, regardless of their differences in background, was a common life-world created
within the framework of cultural hybridity that contemporary Delhi offers.

Nikilesh’s and Ashwin’s friendship is no exception in my field. I have often found myself in the company of friends sharing common life-worlds and common strategies of identity-construction but belonging to families with entirely different class and caste backgrounds. This is the story of many of my informants within the travel business, of the friendship between Vikram and Dipankar, etc. This phenomenon goes against common expectations regarding the separation of class and caste-defined communities in Indian society. Rather, it speaks of one of the main changes that liberalization has brought about in metropolitan India, namely the possibility of the erasure of ascribed status boundaries. Especially in the post-liberalization era it has become more and more common that children from very varied backgrounds go to school together. Even though their parents may live in quite separate worlds, some being low-class workers and some being upper-class company owners, their children may grow up crossing a long-lasting boundary.

In the area where I was living in Delhi, for instance, I was several times told the story of a pan-whalla, a tobacco vendor, who had located his business, a little wooden hut, in the new expanding market-area. Originally from Punjab, this man had come to Delhi on his own and had lived for several years under the roof of his little hut. All the money he was able to save he would send back to Punjab. One day he was able to take his older son to Delhi and send him to one of the best English-speaking schools. The son was now an engineer working in the US and the pan-whalla a happy retiree in his home town in Punjab. Even though I was never able to confirm whether this story was true or just a rumour, it still reveals the knowledge that people have of the new opportunities that the open market is bringing about. Young people in particular are considered to have new possibilities for social mobility which were precluded for their elders and which depend upon the individualistic capitalist order of things in which they live.

For these reasons I find the framing of a community of imagination more true to the life-world of my informants than forcing myself to definitions of class (which, as I have already mentioned, is an ambivalent parameter in Indian society). This brings me back to the discussion about the field that I carried on at the beginning of this
chapter. My field is located at a point of encounter of different flows of imagination brought into my informants' lives because of the careers and free time activities in which they are involved. My fieldwork as such follows this approach. It has been created through the collection of material gathered from varied sources, i.e. from public debates, visual representations, etc. Trying to link the lives of my informants to the broader context in which they live and to focus on their playings of imagination, I have created an ethnography in tune with Marcus's (2002) suggestion of an anthropology dominated by the metaphors of "following" and "tracking". Even though mono-local and steadily contextualized in post-1991 Delhi, my fieldwork also has a multi-sited angle. It looks at the multitude of different inspirational sources that can converge in a star-like place like Delhi.

1 I must add that I stayed in India for a longer period than the one and a half year of official fieldwork. I started ordering my material and writing the book in India itself, which gave me the possibly to double-check my material while analyzing it.

2 It has been suggested that the strong presence of Islamic cultural heritage has triggered uncomfortable feelings particularly among the Hindu-nationalists who have consequently, in particular during the 1990s, never promoted Delhi as a symbol of Indian culture.

3 'Colony' is the term commonly used in Delhi for 'block' or 'residential area'.

4 The reasons for the new attractiveness of Delhi is that it gives major companies the opportunity to have an administrative seat in a cosmopolitan setting and industrial production in a nearby suburb. Also it offers proximity to the government, better international air connections, embassy schools, cheaper and (supposedly) better housing, wider streets and thus better communications. Delhi can rely on the presence of booming suburbs such as Noida, Gurgaon, Faridabad (which today are turning into new middle class and business enclaves per se) and on vicinity to the poor states of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan from where cheap labour can be recruited.

5 The national average income for a family is at Rs. 9,321 a year, but in Delhi it is Rs. 21,830 a year. It has more motor vehicles than Mumbai, Calcutta and Chennai put together (40,000) and the largest market for both soft drinks and electronic devices. It also attracts artists and TV-stations and offers some of the best colleges and universities in the country (cf. The Economist 2001, also Saran 1999).

6 One-third of its population is reported to live in slums or in illegal colonies, cf. Vidal 2000.

7 During a campaign for the millennium the Ministry of Tourism published an advertisement in India's major newspapers and magazines stating: "In the past lies the fastest growing industry of the future".

8 The IITTM offers different diplomas ranging from Tourism management and Destination management. Moreover, the certification of guides and tour leaders is being more and more standardized by the government in order to structure the competence of guides and satisfy the needs of the market.

9 A biography of M.S. Oberoi (Dare to Dream) has recently been written by popular writer and columnist Bachi Karkaria (1992).

10 The age of the people described corresponds to that of 1999, when I started fieldwork.

11 Sachin Tendulkar is the best known Indian cricketer.

12 I shall not be able to develop in this book any argument about the different types of elites present in India. I must simply point out here that being the son of a highly positioned
government officer offers a set of privileges and a status very different from that of the son of a company owner. While the former may accumulate high cultural capital he will seldom be able to achieve a financial power such as that of the owner of a company. Hence, even though both are privileged, the informants I have referred to in the main text have conspicuously different backgrounds.

13 'Socialite' is a term used to refer to people who regularly show up at all fashionable events.

14 Haveli is the Hindi term for the old mansions typical of this city.


19 Ibid.


24 An India Today article proclaimed: "For India's elite, the moral codes governing right and wrong have broken down...India is suffering from shame and is lapsing into collective amnesia...It took one wild and intoxicated son of a politician to expose the lies, duplicity and depravity of India's cream layer" (Baweja, H. and Chakravarty, S., "Cover Story, Jessica Lal", India Today, May 17, 1999.)


26 Ibid.

27 Quraishi, S., "The brat pack", Saturday Times, March 13 1999

28 One article asked: "What about thousands of Jessicas being raped and burnt in India?" ('The guilty should not be spared', Times of India, May 20, 1999). Cf. also "Murder of a model and the death of values", Sunday Times of India May 9, 1999.


31 Social reasons cited for murder", Times of India, May 7, 1999, p 7. In this article Amod Khant attacked also the "inadequacy of the current education system in inculcating basic human values".


33 The debates on Jessica Lal and the BMW-case made up the context for the discussions on the rape of a young girl in which the grandson of a former Chief Minister was allegedly involved, on the case of the former Delhi Youth Congress president who allegedly killed his wife and tried to burn her in an oven (the Naina Sahni murder), on the murder of an Indian Express journalist and an Outlook cartoonist and also on the killing of a 28-years-old-fashion designer (Kunjum Budhraj).


35 Four killed by speeding car; three serious" Hindustan times, January 11, 1999, p. 3.


38 Ibid. This view I also gathered from many consultants working on the youth front.


40 The RSS was, among other things, responsible for the killing of Mahatma Gandhi.

41 The BJP formed two governments in the 1990s, the first one lasting only 11 days in 1996, the second lasting 11 months and falling in the spring of 1999 through a coup led by
Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, wife of Rajiv Gandhi. The third was in power during my fieldwork. At the time this text is being written, the Congress Party has regained power with the surprise victory in the 2004 elections.

42 Marcus preaches an ethnography able to be both “thick” and “thin”, “accounting for the differences in quality and intensity of fieldwork material” (2002:196)
Chapter Two

"I WISH YOU WERE INDIA" 1
visions of 'India' and 'the West' past and present

One night during the autumn of 1997 I encountered on a road in Delhi the phantasm of 'real India'. After a dinner at the Institute of Mental Health where I was at the time conducting research, I was offered a lift to my guest-house. Driving me through the nocturnal streets of Delhi was Manish, a young doctor in his late twenties who worked at the institute as a chemist. During our ride Manish asked me about my research and the origins of my interest in India. I told him about my first trip, a couple of years earlier, about my impressions of the over-exoticization of India among 'Westerners' and about how my interest in middle class culture and modernity had been born during that trip. Manish looked somewhat puzzled: "But people like me are not India, Paolo, you must understand that", he said. We were then on the outer ring road in South Delhi when Manish spotted something. He slowed down and pointed out a group of barefoot peasants (who judging by their clothing came from Gujarat or Rajasthan). Protected by the darkness of the night they were, like tens of thousands of other immigrants every month, marching into the city. Manish proclaimed emphatically: "Look at them Paolo, that's India, that's the real face of this country! You are an anthropologist, you should study them, not people like me!"

Besides questioning my position as a fieldworker in Delhi, the triangular encounter between me, Manish and the peasants raised a question in my mind. What did Manish, like so many others, mean by 'India'? During my years of engagement with India as a field for research, I have kept trying to answer this question. This chapter and
the following one are the outcome of this encounter and are dedicated to exploring the meaning of ‘India’ for the young men that I met during my fieldwork. My interlocutors readily used this term (and its ideal counterpart, i.e. the ‘West’) for referring to much more than just the geopolitical area it stands for. In their usage, ‘India’ is evoked for discussing social changes and globalization for addressing issues of modernity and tradition. ‘India’ is able to awaken emotions of both pride and frustration, and to function as an instrument for the construction of identity. In other words ‘India’ appears, as I explained in the Introduction, as a ‘phantasm’.

As I wrote in the last chapter, the main difficulty I faced while organizing my material has been the definition of the field and the fact that the individuals mentioned and described in this book do not constitute an obvious, coherent grouping of people but rather a ‘community of imagination’ that becomes particularly visible in relation to certain arenas and issues. What I shall address in this chapter, namely my informants’ relation to such hyphenated and essentialized entities as ‘India’ and the ‘West’, constitutes one such arena. These terms (together with the other terms attached to them such as ‘modernity’, ‘tradition’, etc.) constitute the basic discursive units through which my informants organize and explain their identity and community affiliation. Hence this chapter will focus on what these terms mean and stand for in the life-world of my informants. It will provide the basis for investigating in greater depth the relation between such phantasms and my informants’ everyday practices of self-identification and thus turn into a first step in my analysis of cultural identity among young men in Delhi (which will be the subject of the next chapter). Due to my ethnographic observations, I consider, following also the work of Hall, Gupta and Ferguson and others, representation and identification to be interconnected. Processes of identification take place within representation (cf. Hall 1993); they are ‘phantasmatic’ and shaped by images of places, cultures and epochs and by stereotyped categories of sex, age, occupation, class, caste and subculture. In this chapter I shall test this view, and look at how imagination contributes to the formation of sub-cultural identities.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first will look at the history of the image ‘India’ as a mythical ‘time-place’ entity², i.e. at the history of the phantasm of India that was born during the colonial
period in particular. Listening to how my informants talk during interviews and casual conversations, I became aware of the similarities between the discourse on India promoted by the (anti-)colonial intelligentsia and that produced by my informants. My brief outline of the history of this concept ‘India’ will, it is hoped, facilitate the task of understanding my informants’ discourses and images.

In the second section I look more directly at the place occupied by ‘India’ in the imagination of contemporary Indian urbanites. Shifting between aspects of public culture and the experiences and stories of my informants, I shall try to reconstruct the ‘India’ of contemporary urban imagination, which is the result of a dialogue between visions of the Indian past, local images of the ‘West’ and international views on India. This section will show how, in the cultural habitat of my informants, ‘India’ is trendy. An essentialized and idealized ‘India’, symbolized by the village, traditional life-styles and spiritual heritage, not only appeals to these young men, but is also used and reproduced by multinational companies in their marketing of products as well as by Indian TV, movies and political organizations. Many critics suggest that this new ‘India’, which has similarities to how India is represented in the ‘Western’ mass media, is an artificial and commercialized image that fits into the contemporary market logic but is devoid of any historical correctness. It is, as a Bombay-based journalist suggested (see below), a product that belongs to a Westernized youth culture and not to Indian history proper. Arguing against such criticism, I shall suggest in the third section that new identifications found in contemporary India must be understood as resulting from a dialogic relationship. The ‘Western’ imagination of ‘India’ and the Indian imagination of the ‘West’ are brought in touch in contemporary youth culture through references to the flow of travelling imaginations which reaches the country. The ‘West’ and ‘India’, in the life-world of people such as my informants, co-exist and shape each other, rather than constitute opposite and contrasting terms. In order to offer a more complete vision of this dialogic activity, the third section will therefore introduce the visions of the ‘West’ and of ‘Western’-inspired ‘modernity’ held by my interlocutors in the field.
the birth of 'India'

The British presence, first in the form of the East India Company and then of the colonial Empire, was an overwhelming experience for the Indian people. With the introduction of new systems of transportation and education, innovative trade, the printed press, etc. the British put forward to "India an alternative to her native systems" (Mukherjee 1948:24). They not only introduced technological innovations but also changes at the level of social structure and in how 'society' as such was understood. Colonialism meant for India the birth of a new way of perceiving people and places. While spreading knowledge of the 'West'’s amazing development, the British also introduced a new idea which would slowly mark the end of their colonial empire, i.e. "the idea of India" (Khilnani 1997), of a country, labelled as a nation-state, united under a set of common symbols and cultural elements.3

(anti-)colonial voyages of (re-)discovery

The British Empire administered India by relying upon a mixture of native and 'Western' categories. New categories of thought such as rationality, democracy, social justice, civil rights and egalitarianism (cf. Srinivas 1995) were introduced by means of schooling, print, etc. and rapidly spread throughout the subcontinent.4 At the same time the British maintained the old Indian institutions while carrying through some fundamental changes in them. In an attempt to take "advantage of the deep divisions within the society" (Srinivas 1995:88), traditional status categories such as caste and related ritual hierarchies were kept alive, and even strengthened. These permitted the British to classify and administer the local population but also, in their logic of divide and rule, to prove the superiority of 'Western' egalitarian principles over Indian traditional primitive structures. To put it according to Sheth, the colonial government played "the dual role of a super Brahmin who located and relocated disputed statuses of castes in the traditional hierarchy and of a just and modern ruler who wished to 'recognize' the rights and aspirations of his weak and pure subjects, albeit as social collectivities" (1999:339). The British presence spurred the emergence of specific requests for freedom and agency from different groups such as industrialists, agriculturalists and the educated classes.5 The result of this game was that suddenly "the nation as a whole demanded the
freedom of association and press, assembly, elected legislature...and finally complete independence" (Desai quoted in Singh 1988:20). Colonial subjection was, in other words, not only divisive and debilitating, but to a certain extent even liberating (cf. Navlakha 1989, Pietersee and Parekh 1995).

Besides creating deep rifts in Indian society the British never abstained from emphasizing what was to them the ‘natural factor’, which would definitely set Indian subjects apart from the British colonizers. This racial divide would prove central in uniting the whole of the Indian population (cf. Navlakha 1989:20). Among the Indian subjects, the sharing of the common status of subordinates to the colonial regime strengthened the idea of belonging to something particular and entirely different from the British.6 Hence, British rule started a profound but unwanted transformation, generating an “unprecedented level of self-consciousness” (Pietersee and Parekh 1995:2). It ignited a need for independence among the Indian population despite the internal divisions it had succeeded in creating or reinforcing, and so laid the foundations for the Indian nation.

By the second half of the nineteenth century Indian intellectuals had already set up an agenda to re-write Indian history in order to create a sense of community among the colonized Indian subjects (Seth 1992:37). The beginning of the twentieth century saw a boost in these activities. Under the slogan “We must have a history” shouted by Bankimchandra in an attempt to gain the right to self-representation (Tagore et al. 1983:76), all the members of the local intelligentsia such as Gandhi, Nehru, Azad, Tagore, Radhakrishna and Aurobindo united in an effort to create a sense of Indianness to serve as a point of reference for the entire nation. Ashis Nandy has written that “colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all” (Nandy 1983:xi). In colonial India these forces took the form of new dreams and new ways of envisaging the nation. The country’s anticolonial nationalists asked, in other words, for their own “freedom of imagination” (Chatterjee 1993:13).7

The Indian intelligentsia were, however, faced with a difficult task. They had to find symbols that could appeal to a large heterogeneous population (cf. Chakravarty 1998b). In addition, the country was split into a variety of regions with their own history, language and traditions,
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and there was a great gap between the English-speaking elites and the masses. The intelligentsia realized that the search for India had to develop along two paths. On the one hand, the educated classes had been made aware of their own heritage through the channels of education and the arts during British rule. They needed to be freed from the Orientalistic visions of India inculcated by the British. This was the path taken by Nehru who set out to revitalize a vision of India purified from British influence. Nehru’s book The Discovery of India (1999[1946]) can be seen as his own attempt to liberate his self, together with the nation, from the “enemy within” (Nandy 1983). On the other hand, the villagers and peasants had been selected by the elites as symbols of the purity and essentiality of India, but needed to be rendered conscious of their “given Indianness”, so that it could serve the cause of Independent India (Seth 1992:42).

the abstract construction of India

It was in such a context that a new vision of India was shaped, which would function as the ideal around which the opposition to colonial oppression could be organized. It would permit the nation not only to unite but also to cling on to dreams of modernity and future development. Following Nehru’s approach, India had to be ‘discovered’ in its past and then projected into the future. Looking into the writings of the anti-colonial intelligentsia, it seems reasonable to assume that, in order to create an ‘India’ that would fit the ‘fragmented’ (cf. Chatterjee 1993) character of the nation-in-the-making, there was a need for a quite high level of abstraction. Parts of Indian history were not available for this purpose. Medieval India, for instance, was too characterized by Muslim culture to be representative of a nation the vast majority of whose population was Hindu. Other periods represented too much fragmentation into different small kingdoms to boost the idea of union. Hence, a simple, rural and spiritual pre-colonial India in time became the natural symbol for modern independent India. The project of constructing a solid nation required the image of a strong united and centralized empire (cf. Chakravarty 1998b). This explains why attention was drawn to historical figures like Ashoka, Akbar, etc.

In the merging of history and fantasy India was imagined as a prosperous, culturally rich, morally healthy and politically stable place.
It was presented with grandeur and contextualized within a mythology filled with references to past (and future) greatness and spiritual enlightenment. This idealized vision of India and Indians became the focus of the writings of the intelligentsia. Acknowledging the eternal magnificence of India, Gandhi wrote:

“I believe that the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our ancestors. Rome went, Greece shared the same fate; the might of the Pharaohs was broken; Japan has become westernized; of China nothing can be said; but India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation” (Tagore et al. 1983:60, emphasis added).

In the Gandhian representation of India, which became popular at the time of independence, the peasantry, the masses and the villages, were chosen as symbols of India’s living past and expressions of whatever was natural about India. For Gandhi the purity and essential Indianness of India resided in the humility, freedom and antiquity of the village. He even modelled his own personal image on this vision. His way of conducting campaigns, walking barefoot from village to village, the humbleness of his clothing and diet, his insistence on the notion of ahimsa (non violence) as a major symbol for India’s resistance to the British, his (a)sexuality (cf. John and Nair 1998) his idea of morality and simplicity in conduct, etc. all embodied his vision of India. Nehru, described by Ashis Nandy as “one of the finest products of the cultural exchange of East and West” (1998a:14), shared with Gandhi the idea of the “special heritage” (quoted in Seth 1992:39) of the Indian people. Yet he did not agree much with Gandhi’s visions. An exchange of correspondence between him and Gandhi, dated from the period immediately before independence, gives us a real sense of how profoundly contested was the definition of India promoted by the intelligentsia. Here Nehru replies to Gandhi’s views stating:

“I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and non-violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent...There seems to be no reason why millions should not have comfortable up-to-date homes where they can lead a cultured existence.” (in Chandra 1994:46-47).
Nehru’s dream was one of a modern state founded on progress, science, technology and industrialization. Inspired by his atheist, socialist, secularist belief, Nehru felt that India had to overcome “the dead wood of the past...flout customs and traditions; put economic welfare before cow worship” (Nehru, quoted in Varma 1998:42). Notwithstanding this, even his vision contained an idealized past tinted with spirituality and antiquity. Nehru wrote extensively about the nobility and greatness of India, giving the country the anthropomorphic image of “Bharat Mata, Mother India, a beautiful lady, very old but ever youthful” (quoted in Varma 1998:34). Yet, in his eyes, it was precisely when evaluated in the light of a present made up of modernity, progress, development and change and projected into the future, that India’s past was useful:

“Proud of their heritage, they [the people of India] will open their minds and hearts to other peoples and other nations, and become citizens of this wide and fascinating world, marching onwards with others in that ancient quest in which their forefathers were the pioneers”. (Nehru in Tagore et al. 1983:221).

Amidst these visions, spirituality, one of the most common tropes in the ‘Western’ representations of India made by indologists, anthropologists and colonial administrators, became a useful instrument for self-representation in the hands of the Indian nationalists. The root of India’s greatness was found in the solid spiritual basis on which India was thought to rest. For sociologist D. P. Mukherjee, who was active during the time of independence, India was a civilization defined and ruled by ideals of adaptation, syncretism, tolerance and understanding. Mukherjee wrote that “India has never hated or excluded in the long course of her history” (1948:212). What made this possible was, according to him, India’s “intimate connexion with the Divine” (p. 210). Philosopher Radhakrishnan, in a similar vein, wrote “No country and no religion have adopted this attitude of understanding and appreciation of other faiths so persistently and consistently as India and Hinduism and its offshoot in Buddhism” (quoted in Srinivas 1995:76). Such quotations can be made from all parts of the intelligentsia. The spiritual roots of India, adapted to secularist ideals, were to function as foundations for the nation for a long time. From the second half of the nineteenth century until
Independence ‘India’, notwithstanding some contesting opinions, emerged as a secular yet spiritual simple and moral antique entity.

‘India’, a dialectic product

The intelligentsia’s discourse directed the country’s energies towards a peaceful liberation of India by emphasizing its embedded capacity for social adaptation and regarding the link between the person and the Divine as the core of Indian culture. The definitions they gave of India were not, however, born in a vacuum. A kind of subtext appears in all the statements mentioned above: the importance of India is evaluated in a comparison, or an exchange, with the British and the ‘Western’ world. Mukherjee’s India, for instance, is explicitly measured against the ‘West’. For him the Indian person has one great advantage over the ‘Westerner’:

“Here [in India], the common man is still a person, a whole, more integrated and more humanly cultivated than the English educated, westernized individual of his countryman. He has still a form, a structure, a style. In the West...the common man has been reduced to being an attendant of the machine and his humanity has been split and endangered. He has been debarred from culture and fed on its cheap substitutes”. (Tagore et al. 1983:100)

Similar was the position of Aurobindo. In his message on the day of Independence he wrote:

“The spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun. India’s spirituality is entering Europe and America in an ever increasing measure...amid the disasters of the time more and more eyes are turning towards her with hope and there is even an increasing not only to her teachings, but to her psychic and spiritual practice.” (Tagore et al. 1983:125-6)

‘Difference’ from the ‘West’ was central in the work of the anti-colonial intellectuals and marked out in various ways (cf. Bhabha 1994). Their aim, as Chatterjee has argued, was to “fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western” (1993:6). The ‘West’ constitutes a silent, yet very much present, frame of comparison. For example, Nehru’s attempts at building a national Indian identity upon the past, bears, according to Seth (1992:39), witness to his very deep commitment to European ideas. Along ‘Western’ lines of thinking,
Nehru attributed to history (already in itself an imported concept) the pivotal role for the construction of identity. Gandhi too built his visions at the interface with ‘Western’ influences. In what Richard Fox has labelled an ‘affirmative orientalism’ (cf. Spencer 1995:249) Gandhi attempted an inversion of the British logic of modernity and progress. What the colonizers considered to be the major problem of the country, i.e. its incapacity to adapt to changes and new technological improvements, was turned by him into an element of pride and resistance. Inverting the common British stereotype of the Indian as lazy, and translating the qualities of immobility into the secret of India’s success, Gandhi wrote:

"In the midst of all this India remains immovable and that is her glory. It is a charge against India that her people are so uncivilized, ignorant and stolid, that it is not possible to induce them to adopt any changes…Many thrust their advice upon India, and she remains steady. This is her beauty: it is the sheetanchor of our hope". (Tagore et al. 1983:61, emphasis added).

For Gandhi the secret of India was its capacity to sustain the past in the present and to maintain intact a number of values and lifestyles which belonged to the past. Moreover, Gandhi subtly created around himself an aura of ‘authenticity’ that, as some authors have pointed out (cf. Krishnaswamy 1998), can easily be attributed to an influence from British ways of envisioning India.

Hinduism too was inserted into this logic of inversion. The British first approached Hinduism as a set of superstitions and then tried to organize it so as to form a proper religion (cf. Inden 1990, Teltscher 1995). As such it was used by the anti-colonial intelligentsia as a symbol for the construction of India. The British could not immediately envisage that Hinduism would be a mobilizing force. In his book Empire Cinema Prem Chowdhry (2001) records that religious drama was among the most popular, and the few permitted, indigenous film products travelling around India in the first half of the twentieth century. The British did not realize that the mythological and spiritual genres were also channels for the spread of nationalist messages.

The ‘India’ created during those days was at its very core a contested (and dialectic) product. Colonialism had formed a new consciousness out of a blend of the old and the new, the local and the imported. Decolonization, Pietersee and Parekh (1995) have
suggested, had to follow the same path. It led to the imaginative creation of a new consciousness and way of life. The visions of India held by Gandhi, Nehru, and others were the result of exchanges between ‘Indian’ and ‘Western’ elements, involving as much a redefinition of ‘India’ as a redefinition of the ‘West’. While Gandhi, for instance, used the idea of the ‘West’ as “a way of talking about the modern” (Spencer 1995) and sometimes as a way of talking about the enemy, he still drew on ‘Western’ thinkers for inspiration in the articulation of his critique. Even when it was hidden, the ‘West’ was always present in this activity of representation. The pure ‘India’, for the anti-colonial intellectuals, was at times nothing but the natural reverse of the ‘West’. In an attempt to re-evaluate the East as a traditional, rural and religious site of tolerance and humanity, Gandhi and others used the same binary oppositions as the British had done, creating a list of equivalences where ‘East’ stands to ‘West’ as traditional to modern and as religious to secular. Spencer (1995) has shown how this seemingly ambivalent attitude towards the significance of ‘India’ and the ‘West’ has survived till today and is detectable in the writings of contemporary Indian thinkers such as Ashis Nandy. My study shows how this attitude is visible at a more mundane level among young men in contemporary Delhi.

the imagination of independent India

Under the power of this way of imagining India, the very liberation from colonial rule in 1947, enacted under the ‘spiritual’ guidance of Gandhi and Nehru, was represented as a basic expression of India’s greatness. In the dominant imagination of the nation, India had been freed by a united people, with the masses linked to the elite in a common fate. Moreover, the country had been freed by methods and values inspired by Indian tradition, such as ahimsa (non-violence), freedom, tolerance and equality (cf. John and Nair 1998).13 A feeling of faith and pride in Indian civilization gained momentum installing a feeling of moral superiority among Indians14. The romanticization of India’s past that struck roots in the Indian elite during colonial rule proved to be victorious. It boosted faith in the future and, as Varma said, “heightened [the] moral dimension” (1998:33).
Through the so-called “colonization of the mind” (cf. Nandy 1983, Varma 1998, also Gupta 1998 and Pieterse and Parekh 1997) carried out by the British, the Indians had, however, internalized the values of what they considered to be a “superior civilization” (cf. Varma 1998:153). This resulted in a particular and ambivalent situation where the emphasis on ‘Indianness’ remained subordinated to the respect for the civilizational values offered by the ‘West’. The achievements of India were evaluated in ‘Western’ terms. The intelligentsia was left to conduct a symbolic fight with the ‘West’ for chronological precedence regarding achievements considered to belong to the ‘West’ (cf. Chandra 1994:41). At the same time Indian intellectuals nurtured a feeling of hostility towards these values since they represented the intruder. The alternatives to the imported values were, however, few. Many Indians had learned to question the values put forward by traditional society, seeing them as the very same ones that hindered development and progress (fashioned indeed in ‘Western’ terms). This process had created “psychological blocks against those aspects of their culture which are likely to appear backward or ridiculous in western eyes” (Béteille 2000:342).

From the 1960s, Indian society underwent major changes that challenged the heritage of Nehru and Gandhi and heralded the passage from “Nehru’s idealism to unabashed materialism” (Ahmed in Sircar 1995:327). With the defeat in the war against China in 1962 and the death of Nehru in 1964, two of the main ideals of the Indian state were lost, namely Nehru’s ideal of a united ‘Third World’ and Gandhi’s non-violence ideals. Nehru was succeeded by his daughter Indira Gandhi whose advent signalled the beginning of a new culture of politics (cf. Frank 2002, Varma 1998, Khilnani 1997). The Congress Party, thus far the unquestioned symbol of independent India, reflected these changes by entering a period of lively internal contests. During this time India also suffered from major economic drawbacks. The rains failed in 1965 and 1966 and in 1972 came a third major drought in a period when the state’s economy had not yet recovered from the losses of the 1971 war with Pakistan. At the same time millions of refugees arrived in India from Bangladesh after its separation from Pakistan. Within a decade India had been hit by several major crises, and, as Varma puts it, faced the retreat of ideology from public life (1998:70).
The period to come would see a further delegitimization of the nationalist ideals in response to scandals of corruption involving large parts of the Congress Party. Large sectors of society got the impression that the politicians were condoning corruption, and lost their faith in the authorities. The declaration of a state of Emergency, that gave Indira Gandhi almost dictatorial power (cf. Khilnani 1997:45), her assassination in the aftermath of the 1984 Operation Bluestar against the Sikhs' Golden Temple in Amritsar and the succession by Rajiv Gandhi did not improve things. Good-looking, urbane, gentlemanly, 'Westernized' and cosmopolitan, Rajiv at first brought an atmosphere of renewal and internationalization to the Indian political scene. He gained support by promoting technology and liberalization of the economy. With the allegations of corruption over the import of the Bofors guns and with his involvement in the internal struggle in Sri Lanka, Rajiv Gandhi first lost his support and then ended up being assassinated at the hands of terrorists, marking the end of the Congress undisputed rule over the country. The 1980s and 1990s then saw the definitive opening of the Indian economy to the global market and the concomitant growth of the Hindu nationalists. The enhanced entry of imported goods and the related improvement of the links between India and the rest of the world led to the creation of a broader and more heterogeneous middle class and to a further reworking of the imagination of India.

The last traces of Gandhian idealism and asceticism and Nehruvian socialism and solidarity were, according to many commentators, lost with this new celebration of materialism. So, apparently, were their visions of India. Liberalization rendered this process even more visible. Richness and opulence, once stigmatized by both Gandhi and Nehru, had now lost, as a journalist reported, their negative connotations: “With the new Manmohanomics there are many more opportunities to make money and even more avenues to spend it” (quoted in Varma 1998:177). The visions of India inspired by Nehru and Gandhi lost power at the hands of the RSS, BJP etc. which preached the creation of a Hindu India (cf. previous chapter). Suddenly Bharat Mata was no longer the symbol of a secularist India within which every religion and community could fit, but the symbol of an ever more invasive Hinduism moving, with the help of TV, cinema, festivities, etc., from the public sphere into the private life of all citizens.
Channel V, together with MTV, is one of the two best attended music channels in India. During 1999, it hosted a show called Gone India where young, generally metropolitan, viewers were invited to travel to some remote part of India and act as programme conductors. The programme quickly became popular. One night, when I switched on to Channel V to follow one of its talk-shows (called Late Night V) I witnessed a round-table discussion on the latest episode of Gone India. The show was hosted by Gopal, a young VJ in the channel’s crew. The special guest was a journalist from the Bombay Times called C.Y. Gopinath. Gopinath was angry. Referring to one specific episode where the young crew of conductors were visiting a village in the Himalayas, he accused the young conductors of Gone India of being ignorant, superficial and vulgar. For Gopinath the worst aspect of the show was that it seemed to be created for and by “foreigners, not Indians”. He explained this by arguing that the conductors implicitly showed lack of respect for Indian culture; they were “unnaturally” fascinated by the cows in the streets, they always checked if there was water in the tap when entering a guest-house, despised the food, etc. They recreated, Gopinath said, all the behaviours that typically belonged to foreign backpackers and tourists. In other words, Gopinath basically stated that urban educated Indian youth, just like their counterparts in the West, are ignorant and foolish. “Village India is much more than those superficial things, that’s not why one goes to village India” he burst out after
footage from the show was shown to the viewers. The conductors, he said, present their own "countrymen as exotic objects, with a mixture of repulsion and fascination". The VJ now seemed to have had enough and started to defend his own generation. He replied that maybe this is what today's youth consider important: "Young people maybe like to have clean and not dirty water to wash in...would you like to wash your face in the morning with dirty water?" As the show went on Gopal attacked the authorities, the journalists and the opinions of people of earlier generations and Gopinath chastised urban youth for their detachment from India.

The same episode of Gone India was replayed a few days later. As I watched it, I too was struck by the conductors' exoticization of their own country. I did really feel as if I were listening to backpackers in Delhi's tourist district Pahar Ganj on their return from a visit to a village, obsessed by India's diversity, dirt and simplicity. After the debate, I became a regular viewer of the show and could note similar attitudes in other episodes as well. In one episode, for instance, a girl visiting the mountain areas of Nepal and Kashmir exploded with amazement when she discovered a pool table in a bar in a village. Still in a rush of euphoria, she then walked out on to the road expressing her amazement at this inversely exotic experience. There she attracted small children who immediately started begging. She made them sing for her and then rewarded them with a few rupees. As in a perfect backpacker drama, she then became caught in a dilemma of conscience that made her proclaim: "Giving money is not a constructive thing for them, it is a behaviour that should not be supported".

The attitudes displayed by the conductors of Gone India, all middle class young people from India's urban world, testify to a great distance between urban youth and the non-urban faces and voices of their country. So, why blame those who think that this generation of young Indians have no relation to their country and look at it as from the outside? Maybe Gopinath was right. His complaints were, moreover, made in a context where it is considered quite natural to see young people as detached from their mother country (a complaint that was already raised by Nehru, cf. Chapter One).

Yet, something has been overlooked by critics such as Gopinath. The very fact that Channel V, a popular youth-oriented channel, was hosting a show about India and not about the US or the UK is in itself significant. A few years back such a show would have been much less
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marketable. This change of trend can be seen in a variety of settings. Mr Shankar, the executive editor of the well known magazine The Sun: Voice of Youth, confirmed this when he told me that “Today’s youth want to rediscover India, they want to have Indian stuff”. As I already mentioned in Chapter One, the choices of MTV, Channel V and other producers of youth culture bear witness to this popularity of ‘India’. So also do the growing number of travel agencies specializing in offering young people exotic and adventurous experiences in their home country, and the popularity among young people of markets selling traditional handicrafts (see Chapter Five). What we see is the presence of a “national fantasy” (Berlant in Ivy 1995:17) with ‘India’ at its centre, a fantasy that is becoming ever more popular. Yet, this somewhat new ‘India’ is possibly different from the image that the earlier generations expected and recognized. It is constructed at the meeting-place of local histories and realities and foreign influences and representations.

In this section I shall look at the way in which ‘India’ is presented, re-produced and possibly re-shaped, in the context of my field. Through its continuous merging of innovations and ‘traditional’ forms, Delhi offers the most amazing range of testimonies to the encounter of the ‘new’ and the ‘old’, the ‘local’ and the ‘global’. I shall therefore look at my informants’ own notions of ‘India’ while casting a few glances at other signs of India that circulate in Delhi (a more detailed analysis of the city will follow in Chapter Five). The object of both criticism and love, ‘India’ is a reason for strong emotions and pride among my informants. Those who complain that young people distance themselves from India, imitating the ‘West’ in a superficial way, are blind to the place that pride in ‘India’ occupies in these people’s lives.

Just as we may find ‘copies’ of ‘Western’ ideas and products, we also find a search for ‘India’ in every corner of contemporary middle class society. My informants’ talk about India calls up a vanished past, possibly still present in the recesses of poor rural India. As in the case of the conductors of Gone India, their attitudes reflect fascination mixed with repulsion for the same ‘gone’ idealized India that was once the centre of attention for the colonial intelligentsia and that today still fascinates most foreign travellers. The ‘India’ of my informants’ is, to paraphrase Ivy (1995), vanishing…but not quite. It is a phantasm dreamt as being hidden in remote parts of the country. It becomes the bearer of the Indian heritage which they celebrate at a distance.
phantasm also permits young people to address the changes taking place in a globalizing world. It is the values of flexibility and simplicity associated with the phantasmatic 'India' of antiquity which can grant the country an important role in the contemporary world. This 'India', they suggest, can invert the logic of the global market. My interlocutors' phantasm of India is thus also a modern (I use the term analytically) ideal suited to fit contemporary life.

**defining India**

**A GAME OF POOL AT THE YMCA**

One day I followed two of my informants in the travel business, Satinder and Sunil, to the YMCA where they used to go every now and then to play pool. The YMCA was chosen as the venue because Sunil had worked there a few years earlier. After an hour's play we decided to go to Wimpy, the fast-food restaurant in central Connaught Place, for a drink. 'Chilling out', drinking coffee and talking about the pool game, Sunil started telling me about the YMCA and his experiences there. Slightly irritated, he said that a lot of his former work-mates (a few of them we met while playing) were jealous of him because he had started making money, having nice clothes and a cell-phone. "You know, Paolo, the YMCA discriminate, they give the best opportunities to Christians". "That's why they burned the Australian missionary!" Satinder added in agreement, "Christians are buying conversions, they offer jobs and study opportunities to people who are very poor, very backward." Suddenly we found ourselves debating conversions and Christianity in India.

In those days these were hot issues. An Australian missionary had been killed. The BJP led a campaign against Sonia Gandhi accusing her of being an agent of the Vatican. Satinder and Sunil, who generally revealed very detached and moderate views on politics, got very involved in this discussion. In a twist of excitement, Sunil exclaimed "Hinduism is superior, so why should one convert?" Satinder reacted, probably thinking that his friend was now stretching the issue a bit. "What are you saying?" he said. Sunil immediately toned down his remark: "What I mean is that it is the most ancient religion, this is what I am saying...Christianity is very young, it is a baby compared to Hinduism." Indeed, there was some historical correctness in what Sunil had just said about the relative ages of Hinduism and Christianity. I asked them more about their views on Hindutva. Both avoided answering my question directly and instead went on talking about Hinduism. Satinder replied that, even though he does not practise Hinduism ("actually in Hinduism there is nothing to practise!", he said) he has during the past few years developed a deep respect for the religion. Furthermore, he said, this respect is growing as time passes by. "The further people are moving away from tradition, the more they
feel its power and importance.” Sunil subscribed to his friend’s views and highlighted the risk of losing such an “ancient culture”. Picking up the phrase “superior religion” that he had earlier criticized, Satinder now almost made a speech. “I think that all Westerners are attracted to Hinduism because they have lost religion...Hinduism has such a logic that it appeals to anyone...if Hindus had money to put into missionary activity I swear they would make many more converts in the West than Christians are making here now...To convert Westerners you don’t have to eradicate anything since they have no religion, so it’s easy...all Westerners coming to India are here for that purpose, to find out and learn about Hinduism...in the West it is only materialism, superficiality that has a place”. I pointed to the way many of the Western influences they often complained about were actually promoted by Indians through TV, ads, etc. Satinder had an explanation: “It is all because of personal gain” he said “all about money...India does not have the economy to react to that...it’s economically backward so it cannot put up resistance to that”. Once again he repeated that the West had moved away from tradition and village life, on a path of no return. In contrast, even though Indian cities have moved towards a Western lifestyle, the villages have not. They are still there, representing a traditional life which is very much alive. Only Westerners and intellectuals in India think that the RSS represents “fanaticism and religious fundamentalism”. “Intellectuals, and I would not even call them that”, said Satinder “but they have been to convent schools and are exposed to Western ideas.”

During this casual and chaotic discussion Sunil and Satinder succeeded in evoking a particularly fascinating ‘India’ arising from the encounter of different discourses. The talk brought back to life the Indian National Congress’s discourse and glimpses of the key metaphors used by the RSS and BJP to define India. The quote also shows how the ‘West’ plays the role of a referent/counterpart and frames the notions and views on ‘India’ held by my interlocutors.

For Satinder and Sunil the Indian heritage is a resource able to strengthen their pride and belief in their country. In other words it gives meaning to the present. The solid core of the ‘India’ they depict lies in the traditionality offered by the village, in Hinduism, in spirituality, i.e. in the tropes encountered in the discourse of the anti-colonial intelligentsia. At the same time their description of ‘India’, so oriented towards finding authenticity, is also given form in an obvious dialogue with the ‘West’. A phantasm of the ‘West’ is constantly present in all the statements made during the conversation. The notions of the backwardness of India and of its spiritual/cultural magnificence are, for instance, measured in terms of India’s encounter with ‘Western’ culture.
According to Sunil and Satinder, India is trapped in the logic of the global economy. Due to its poverty, the country is forcibly obliged to live in the backwaters of the developed world. Yet, India offers what the 'West' has lost for good. To balance symbolically 'Western' economic and political dominance, Sunil and Satinder assert the magnificence and superiority of India in the field of spirituality and the embedded simplicity of its culture. Their proof of the country's superiority lies in the achievements of ancient Hinduism (as we saw, a main trope in the anti-colonial campaigns). Yet, what confirms this superiority is, paradoxically, the number of 'Western' tourists and intellectuals (and why not anthropologists too) who come every year to India attracted by its spirituality and culture. Even Hindutva is incorporated by Sunil and Satinder in this (dia-)logic. Seen more as a system of values than as an aggressive political agenda, Hindutva, they suggest, is misunderstood. The source of this misunderstanding, however, is once again located among those who are infected by the 'West', and who do not really understand the messages Hindutva promotes.

Our conversation that evening summed up most of the elements that I will discuss in greater detail below. I have been tempted to use this vignette as the only material for my discussion and analysis. For the benefit of ethnographic validity and to show the spread and other angles of such views I shall, however, pick up the arguments offered by Satinder and Sunil and supplement the image by describing other informants and situations.

**a dialogue with space and time**

Common to practically all my interviews and conversations with my informants about India, regardless of what point in particular we have been discussing, is the invocation of a remote and mythical past. These young men tend to look back in order to describe the present and to find projections for the future. But to what past do they look? What 'India' do we find there?

One day I interviewed Amar, the tourist escort specializing in the Italian language, with the purpose of exploring his views on a variety of different subjects related to cultural identity. Whenever Amar wished to explain something about himself or about the present situation of India he would invoke history. When, for instance, I asked him about what
his family would think if he decided to marry a foreign girl, Amar made the following statement: "You see, Paolo, to understand India you must go back. Marriage in India is not just between two people but it's about all the family." He added that his parents were relatively open-minded and then went on speaking about contemporary changes: "Today Indians are more open, they have a different character...To understand Indians, Paolo, to understand their character you must go in depth." Amar invoked the depth and past of India in order to explain the present, and summoned me to consider that "India is a place that tourists cannot understand. It's very different, if you go into it a bit in depth you will start missing it [India]...when I was in Spain I missed India, not the food, not the family, but India itself." With these essentializing words Amar was hinting at some vague but emotionally loaded characterization of the country. This was a phantasm he could not find a way to describe but which was still central to his experiences and identity.

Nikilesh, the journalist, offered me another essentialized vision of India. During one interview, he started to tell me about the changes that had taken place in the country in the last decade or so. They had been many, he said, but the foundations of India have stayed solid because of the characteristics of the country and its peoples. "I have seen a sea change in attitudes in India. But that's what India is all about, dynamism. Morals and ethics are time defined, they change, but the core is still the same." For Nikilesh the core was what he called "the crux of Hinduism", which he described by quoting the Sanskrit sentence "tat tvam assi" (a sentence from the Vedas generally translated as 'thou art that'). Hinduism has functioned as the organ of balance for India, and has granted the country its survival, he said: "Indians adopt everything and become dynamic, they take in everything new and still stick to the Gayatri Mantra." Then he went on talking about Hinduism which he said "has never been a religion but a way of life and a very open one".

Ashwin, who is a self-declared atheist and very sceptical about Indian culture, also offered a vision of India as a flexible and dynamic civilization. According to him, India has developed special qualities because of its exposure to foreign powers: "Everyone came here, Alexander, the Muslims, the British and the Portuguese, but Indianness has not gone. India can assimilate everything and still give a rounded
Indianness to it." According to him, it is precisely this exposure to foreign powers that has shaped India. Yet again, the solid basis for the adaptability is antique spirituality: "Hinduism of course offers the idea of tolerance and that is a stepping stone for all the rest".

In these examples a few aspects are evident. First of all, my informants' descriptions of India explicitly reflect the discourse on India of the anti-colonial intelligentsia. India is characterized by simplicity, flexibility and capacity to adapt, connotations that they apply to the Indian people as well. Qualities once rhetorically stressed by Gandhi, Nehru, D.P. Mukherjee, etc. are reified by these young men and raised to a mythological plane from where 'India' exercises, as Amar put it, a "magnetic influence" on their lives. The 'India' presented by my informants is explicable and comprehensible only in relation to its 'depth', its past and its magnificent antiquity. Its virtues have been shaped by the events of history and can grant the survival of the country and its people, my informants maintain. The India of the past is the core of today's India and functions also as an explanatory term of reference for understanding contemporary society. The qualities of past India can function as future resources for the country in times such as the present, when what is required from everyone is a capacity to adapt to change. Common among my informants, and constitutive of their identity (cf. Chapter Three), is a shared belief in the capacities of Indians to adapt anywhere else in the world. They always suggest that such capacities are not really shown by 'Westerners'.

In the interview quoted above I asked Nikilesh what his family's reactions would be if he decided to marry a foreign woman. Reassuringly he said that there would be no problems. But there would be one question: "Will she get along with my family? Will she be able to adjust to Indian customs and traditions and to 'gel in'? I don't mean that she should wear a six-feet-long saree and touch everyone's feet but rather... just gel in". I asked him why he never questioned whether he himself would be able to adapt to her and he answered emphatically: "Oh yes, I have been through these situations of adapting to certain environments. It's much easier for an Indian, especially an educated Indian to adapt to anywhere in the world than for a Westerner to adapt to India." He explained that this capacity was naturally rooted in him as in most "educated Indians" and illustrated it by describing the naturalness with which he used to switch from listening to Metallica...
while driving to the Gayatri Mantra before falling asleep. For my informants, this capacity to adapt to external changes is never a sign of a loss of roots in India.

Actually this is what India's greatness is all about: the capacity to remain Indian while absorbing what the world has to offer. Ashwin said: "The small core of Indianness is still there. You might have a cover of Westernization, but the core is still there." Nikilesh's reflections illustrate the link between the country and the qualities of its citizens postulated by these young men. They nostalgically claim that there is an essentialized link between the country and its people and position themselves as parts of that link (I shall discuss this further in Chapter Three). Their visions of the past are constructed around a nostalgic authenticity which "repositions them at the heart of a narrative of the nation" (Wright in Frow 1997:78).

**a case of nationalism?**

The history, past and culture of India have become marketable items, in particular for the young consumer. Television entertainment is today invaded by mythological soap operas narrating the lives of Hindu gods and Indian heroes (cf. Chakravarty 1998b). The film industry also displays a renewed interest in historical movies, a genre that during the last few decades had not sold particularly well in India. The attempt in 1982 with Razia Sultan turned into a major box-office disaster (cf. Kapoor 2001). It discouraged others, until the genre was launched afresh by well-known actor and film director Shah Rukh Khan. His movie Asoka topped the blockbuster records during a large part of autumn 2001. Asoka is based on the story of the Mauryan emperor who, in the third century BC converted to Buddhism and became known as one of the most enlightened rulers in Indian history.

The success of this film was accompanied by that of Lagaan (in English 'Tax') which was nominated for best foreign movie in the American Academy Awards in 2002. Situated in colonial India, this movie deals with a dispute over taxes between British rulers and Indian farmers. The dispute is settled by means of a cricket game won by the poor Indian farmers. Similarly, India continues to be celebrated as a magnificent nation and culture in all major popular Hindi movies and attracts consumers also in other areas than entertainment. The past of
India is very much present today. Yet, this past has strong (and controversial) political undertones. Communalism, regionalism and the increased demands for a Hindu nation have gained momentum in times of globalization (Menon 1993, Van der Veer 1996). Indian politics and public culture, Uma Chakravarti (1998a and 1998b) has stated, are today being “saffroned”, i.e. tinted with the colour of Hinduism.

The growth of Hindu nationalism, Varma has argued, can represent an attempt to compensate for the “middle-class insecurities about the state of ‘their’ nation and of ‘their’ hegemonic position within it” (1998:225). The essentialized statements about their identity and about India’s greatness made by my informants could easily be seen as instances of such contemporary nationalism (more specifically Hindu nationalism). Yet, the situation is more complex than this. With only one exception, none of my informants is an open, self-declared supporter of the BJP or any other Hindu nationalist organization. Few of them, however, openly opposed the BJP government. They considered Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee a valid and moderate representative of India and also a good change from those who had ruled India for the past decades. Yet the reason for this trust lay, as they put it, in the economic opportunities that Vajpayee granted them and the Indian middle classes rather than in his party’s ideological inclinations.

“I vote for whomever as long as they let me expand my business” one of my interlocutors once said. My informants all distrust in politics and parties in general and do not want to be involved in them. Gathering inspiration from political discourses on India and at times even reproducing political language, they nevertheless do not feel linked to the elites of India (either past or present). They reject the Nehru-Gandhi legacy and address it in a quite irreverent tone (such a position is widely shared in India, cf. Nandy 1998a). One evening at the beginning of my relationship with them, I asked Nikilesh and Ashwin about Gandhi. Before I had a chance of saying much, Nikilesh muttered: “Gandhi is definitely not a representative Indian subject!” Ashwin added, “Did the chap have to go to South Africa to realize that people are subjugated? He should have seen that here!” Nikilesh added that Gandhi always played a double role by telling his people “not to fight the Brits but to go and join them in the world war II”. And Nehru to him was nothing but an idealist:
India did not need that [Nehru as prime minister] at that time, Jinnah would have been a better choice for India at the time because he was anyway going to die. In that way partition might have been avoided and it is partition that has really created all the troubles in the Indian history of the future.

Two years after this conversation I was once again with them, watching the latest war reports from Afghanistan after the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York in the autumn of 2001. Looking at the scenes of a burning Kabul, Ashwin commented: “Can you imagine? We were lucky that Gandhi did not have more influence in India! Otherwise we would now have been a Hindu version of the Taliban!” Similar outbursts are the order of the day with most of my informants. Mistrust is shown in particular towards the successors of Gandhi and Nehru. Indira Gandhi, though respected for her proof of strength during the Emergency, is seen by my informants as the one who inaugurated the era of corruption in Indian politics (cf. Varma 1998, Khilnani 1997). For a while her sons Sanjay and Rajiv represented for them the birth of a new generation of Indians, but came to mark the death of a clean way of conducting politics.

The way my interlocutors imagine ‘India’ is thus based on an idealization of the past and of the country’s culture, but does not rest on seeing the political and bureaucratic representatives as symbols of the nation. Authorities, institutions and politicians are held responsible for the problems faced by the country and also for a number of personal problems that may happen to them in their daily life. My interlocutors evoke India’s elected representatives only when complaining about something, but never to express their belonging to India. Moments of crisis have shown me this with the greatest clarity. When I first met Sunil after the tragic sudden death of his mother after a one-day-long attack of fever, he was furious. He directed all his anger and criticism to the doctors, the hospitals and the working culture in the country: “You can’t trust doctors in this country”, he said repeatedly. He then described in detail their lack of involvement with their patients, their arrogance, etc., expanding the complaint to include the impossibility of trusting government-run structures and blaming the politicians for their lack of investment in public health and education.

Similar reactions were generated by the death of Sumit, a twenty-two-years-old friend and colleague of Akash at Learning Universe.
Leaving their boss’s house after a party, Sumit crashed his motorbike into a cow. He went into a coma and later died at the hospital. Reversing a number of statements he had made just a few days before the accident, Akash told me:

“India is beneath all standards. You have such an accident and nobody stops, they let you die on the streets. They say that in India a human life is worth less than a potato and that is true. People would not stop because the police might arrest you and believe that you were the cause of it [the accident]. Even at the hospital when I and Ravi [his boss] went there, the doctors just told us “you may go and look for him yourselves”.

Sumit, Akash told me, had crashed into the cow because of the absence of light in the street where he was driving. He was left at the roadside for a relatively long time before someone called an ambulance. This critical situation offered me just one extreme version of Akash’s general distrust of Indian authorities, infrastructures and also interpersonal relationships. He ascribed the death of his friend to Indian people’s incapacity to trust Indian institutions. Akash blamed the fact that nobody stopped, and attributed the passivity and detachment between Indians to the fear of authorities (in this case in the shape of the police). These statements resonated with what he had earlier said in an interview:

"I am so disgusted by Indian politics and society that I do not even want to know about it, I get depressed when I read the magazines and newspapers, I prefer to read Forbes or Newsweek…a conflict in Congo does not have any effect on me while the same things over here get me down…I care more about Learning Universe than about Kargil.”

Looking abroad or looking into his own private sphere are for Akash ways of escaping the sense of disgust with the Indian authorities.

In tune with the neo-liberal models that they are offered by the market, my informants tend to put more trust in private than government-run structures. This attitude may be strengthened by the opening up of the Indian market which has contributed in accentuating the values of individualism and private entrepreneurship in the country. My informants use private hospitals, private banks, private insurance, etc. but nevertheless keep expressing great pride in India and Indianness. Maybe we could interpret this paradox as a sign of the decreased importance of the state at a global level (cf. Trouillot 2001,
Or maybe we should accept Sumita Chakravarty’s invitation, and use this example to rethink Anderson’s metaphor of the “imagined community” in the present era, which has reached a “third stage of nationalism” that is “uneven, with no clear moral or political centre and with goals ranging from the ultra chauvinistic to the more traditional strivings for a designated nation-space” (2000:223).

Lacking faith in the authorities, my informants nurture an identification with the nation based on imagination and cultural belonging rather than on matters of politics and institutions. Their attitudes to the nation mirror those of young Italians who, as Segatti (2000) has pointed out, value the cultural features of national identity more than their institutional citizenship. In my field too ‘cultural myths’ have precedence over political alignments and loyalties. That “national thing”, to use Slavoj Zizek’s expression (quoted in Ivy 1995:6) is here associated with very abstract and essentialized civilizational values. In these concerns my informants represent a trend that is recognizable in many areas of Indian public culture where the celebration of Indianness suits the purposes of both market agents and political organizations.

**welcome to ‘fake India’**

My informants envision an India that lingers in dreams (and desires) of past greatness rather than on the actual possibilities that the country’s representatives are able to provide them with. Their phantasm of India results from a variety of different narratives in which notions of the past and images of traditionality and authenticity are influenced by the flow of travelling imaginations and by a market logic. How should we approach this ‘India’? In what relation does it stand to the ‘West’?
Diwali, celebrated by most Indians as the beginning of the new year, is probably the most important popular festivity in Northern India. It is the day on which humanity drives away ignorance and darkness, the day of lights, candles and colours. Statues of the gods Ganesh and Lakshmi are displayed in all houses, shops and stalls. Gifts, generally consisting of dried nuts and sweets, are exchanged among friends, family and relatives. Preparations go on for at least a week. Diwali is a great commercial opportunity for many producers, vendors and suppliers of a variety of different goods and services. The apex is reached on the night of the festival (generally at the middle or end of November) when families unite for the traditional ritual of lighting candles and letting off crackers. Starting with a few explosions here and there during the days before, when the sun goes down on the night of Diwali, Delhi turns into one long party. The city's soundscape trembles with explosions coming from all corners. The sky is made colourful and flashing as if was attacked by a psychedelic storm. The morning after, Delhi awakens under a thick mist of smoke that anticipates the winter to come with its fog, chill and humidity.
I was in Delhi during Diwali 2001. A few days before the celebration I was at home, hungry but unwilling to start cooking. I decided to call Pizza Hut for a home delivery. When I received my pizza, I was informed about the Diwali campaign and was handed over a few pamphlets by the delivery man in his uniform and baseball cap. The small pamphlets (see photo above) displayed Diwali greeting and a big pizza decorated with a red (ketchup) Swastika. The bigger ones, containing the menu, had also a text saying "Ho Jaye Pan Puja?" ("Would you like a Pan Puja?"). This pamphlet was indeed ironic. The substitution of the term 'Pizza' in 'Pan Pizza' with Puja, the ritual offering made in temples on special occasions, was an interesting and amusing play with tradition. The second, and more subtle pun, made fun of how the word pizza is pronounced in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar (areas considered to be backward). People coming from these areas are generally supposed to pronounce the 'z' as a 'j', so the word 'pizza' becomes 'pija'. Pizza Hut made clear the exchanges between local and imported stuff (if you will, 'India' and the 'West') in the world of marketing and commerce. It demonstrated the commercial value of (traditional) 'India' as an image, while also pointing out the large re-adaptation (and commercialization) to which this same 'India' has been exposed.

Diwali, being a contesting time for shops and other businesses, of course sharpens up issues. Companies compete with each other for a share of the market during the festivity. Newspapers are filled with advertisements where good wishes for a happy holiday blend with presentations of goods and services. Markets and shopping malls organize special events, with performances of folk artists, etc. to attract their clients. Obvious in all marketing events linked to Diwali is the attempt to keep a balance between the new and the old, especially in the choice of goods, ranging from imported ones to the more 'traditional' handicraft ones. "Why welcome Laxmi into a rented house when you can welcome her into your own sparkling new home for just RS. 8000 a month?" says Delhi's real estate industry in their "festival discount schemes" advertisement (Tandon 2001). Khan Market, one of the poshest and most cosmopolitan South Delhi markets, launched its Diwali activities by saying "we will have a whole variety of imported chocolates, fruits and other food items along with our Indian mithai." Very explicitly, an Internet site, describing the festivals of India, made
the statement "the festival of lights even to-day in this modern world projects the rich and glorious past of our country and teaches us to uphold the true values of life."27

During the same Diwali I observed that MacDonald's too had ventured into the realm of traditional symbols. For a moment they abandoned their clowns and Walt Disney characters, and advertised the Diwali menu by driving around the city with groups of Rajasthani folk musicians on their open trucks that usually carry around young 'cool' men and women dancing to the sound of techno music. A former journalist of NDTV (New Delhi Television) informed me that Pizza Hut, MacDonald's and other multinationals had lost a lot of the market in the mid 1990s by neglecting Diwali. "They wanted to invest only in Christmas and New Year but then realized that they were losing ground", she said.

The Pizza Hut advertisement, and the other situations described above, are to be understood within a context in which 'India', as a commodified image, sells. This image of 'India' is created by hyphenating it with 'tradition' (here a phantasm as well), spiced up with elements that attract the contemporary consumer. 'Tradition' is a necessary ingredient for a 'correct' contemporary evocation of the spirit of India. It is turned into a nostalgic fetish to attract metropolitan middle class people. 'India' as a 'trendy image' appears mostly in metropolitan commercial contexts and attracts urban people who are distanced from the rural, simple (poor) people who are the very symbols of this idealized 'India'.

To understand this image of 'India' we must therefore reconsider the way in which 'tradition' and 'modernity' entangle in the imagination of the urban young in particular. Instead of arguing that young people, or middle class Indians in general, are ignorant about Indian traditions, we could just remind ourselves of the fact that traditions are always "invented" (Hobsbawm 1992) and open to agency and change (cf. Heelas 1996). As John Frow has suggested, "even the most 'authentic' traditions are effects of a stylized simulation" (1997:77). However, I am neither really interested in advancing such a critique, nor convinced that young people have actually 'forgotten' what 'traditional India' is all about as the nostalgic moralist would say. Rather, I am interested in how 'tradition', as a phantasm, is a central element in the construction of this new ('modern') phantasm of India and in my informants'
envisioning of their identity. I do not wish to make statements about what is 'really' traditional and what is not, and especially not fall back into moralistic and nostalgic statements about the erasure of culture in times of 'globalization'. In the emerging vision of 'India', tradition, antiquity and authenticity are indeed of key value and mark out a modern stance. Tradition, as the Pizza Hut and the other examples have suggested, does not stand in opposition to modernity nor has it been excluded from the latter (cf. Giddens 1991, Jameson 1984, Beck 1999). Rather, refashioned by the expansion of mediated forms of communication and ascribed a new character and role (cf. Thompson 1996:91), it is a constitutive part of modernity and presents itself as a central feature in it (cf. Mitchell 2000).

What belongs to 'tradition' is, thus, also almost automatically inserted into a series of exchanges between the 'local' and the 'trans-local', i.e. in a field already characterized by ongoing exchanges and negotiations. 'Tradition' becomes one central marker of 'India' and one sign of detachment from the 'West'. In the next section I shall directly address the exchange between these seemingly opposing categories, by focusing on my informants' interpretations and uses of the dichotomy 'India' vs. 'West'. Analyzing the 'West' imagined by my informants, I shall show how the 'West' and 'India' (and 'modernity' and 'tradition') co-exist in the life-world of my informants. These urbanites reject (or rather transcend) the strict divide between India and the 'West', and see this rejection as a way of opposing 'Western' hegemony.

the troubled life of the India-West dichotomy

In one of the areas where I lived in Delhi, I was next-door to a man who repaired air-conditioners and refrigerators. I used to meet his eighteen-year-old son Hritik on a daily basis. We would often spend hours on the street talking about movies, TV-programmes, Italian cars, football and cricket. Hritik was interested in European football and American action movies. One day he told me that he would have liked to go to Canada, the US or Europe some day. However, he pointed out, only to travel but absolutely not to live: "India is still best...people are so rich over here...so why go anywhere else?" I found Hritik's praise of India and its opposition to the 'West' fascinating. Would we not expect such a young
lower middle class boy, who was daily devoted to watching TV, to
dream of living in the ‘West’? How accustomed are we, as ‘Western’
white anthropologists, to face a ‘West’ treated with so much
irreverence, nonchalance, yet without aggression, as if the subtext was
“I don’t really care”? What was Hritik’s vision of the ‘West’?

‘Western’ anthropologists and social scientists in general have for
some time now tried to question the taken-for-grantedness of the
The ‘West’ is too generalized a concept, they say. As in the case of the
concept of the ‘Orient’, it hides more than it reveals. It is indeed a
truism today in anthropology to state that entities like the ‘West’ and the
‘Orient’, or the ‘West’ and ‘India’, ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’, should not
be approached in terms of binary oppositions. Many scholars have
shown the dialogical shaping of such entities (cf. Fanon 1996, Inden
1990, Bhabha 1990, Nandy 1983, Taylor 2000). Yet we have to
acknowledge that outside the social sciences such entities may indeed
stand for something very essential and specific. The ‘Western’
anthropologists’ lack of comfort with the ‘West’ as an analytical concept
and as a description of empirical reality, is not always shared in former
colonies such as India (cf. Spencer 1995).29 There, writers,
anthropologists and laymen alike continue to refer to the ‘West’ and
use it ‘etically’ or ‘etic ally’ as a given point of reference. My field is no
exception to this. Even though my informants add a number of ‘twists’
to the significance of the concept, they still refer back to its
conventional meaning in order to explain their position regarding
certain issues.

The “colonial dichotomies” (Gupta 1998) are alive in Delhi. The
opposition between ‘India’ and the ‘West’ in particular awakens
passions in different arenas of social life and is central in all debates
about social and cultural change in India (cf. Cohen 1998, Gupta
1998). Besides representing the opposition of stagnation-progress,
religion-science, etc. delineated by Gupta, it also marks out the
distinction between ‘Hindu spirituality’ and ‘Western materialism’ and
between ‘local’ and ‘global’. From an ‘emic’ perspective, the ‘West’ and
‘India’ have indeed specific historical valences. They are loaded with
different meanings and values, suffused by moral standpoints. They
offer a way of keeping alive both difference and sense of locality, and
provide a language in which to talk about certain phenomena, in particular those related to social and cultural change.

Yet, this does not mean that we should approach them at face value as terms referring to 'real' 'existing' places possessing the connotations that are conventionally attributed to them, nor as fixed categories that have kept their significance since they started being in use. Even though they rely upon a set of oppositions that has a long history, the meaning of the 'West' and 'India' is contextual. They can signify several things at once, and with time their connotations change. While upholding a part of their earlier meaning, they evolve by adapting to the context in which they are evoked. My attempt to define 'India', the 'West' and the other labels conventionally attached to them, as 'phantasms', is a way of rendering the contextual and shifting character of these labels and of bypassing the divide between an 'emic' and an 'etic' perspective as well. While respecting their 'emic' validity (what I analytically label a phantasm is, after all, always someone's evocation), the phantasm offers an opportunity for approaching these labels and images analytically, capturing their multifaceted character. The phantasm, as I already explained in the Introduction, links imagination with geography and history, emotions with intellect, personal with collective representations and has the power to fluctuate between these different realms. While not being stable locations with stable characteristics, the phantasms of 'India' and the 'West' are nevertheless attributed the qualities of stable referents by social actors. This is, for instance, the way in which 'India' and the 'West' are used by my informants to give meaning to the messages and images they encounter in everyday situations. As phantasms they crystallize their evocations within a particular context. Then they vanish, leaving space for new crystallizations that evolve with time. The phantasm leads us, however, to question the divide between the real and the fake, the authentic and the simulated. In fact, we are generally brought to consider the relationship between the factuality of things (i.e. the 'real' concrete role of the 'real' concrete geographical locations called India and the 'West') and the imaginary role they cover in fantasy (the "idea of India" as historian Khilnani (1997) would put it, and the idea of 'West'). Yet, social actors seldom make this distinction. Rather, they experience them along both these dimensions at once, letting them penetrate and transform each other.
This approach is useful for understanding the contextual significance of the ‘West’, since the latter appears often surrounded by an aura of attraction or repulsion, as the dreamt-of destination for many Indians and an ideal to live according to, or as an object of criticism and at times almost of hatred. In the lives of my informants the ‘West’ has, however, gone from absence to presence and then been transcended. Many of them, like many other Indians who grew up in the 1970s and ‘80s, had dreams of the ‘West’ in their childhood. They longed for ‘Western’ music, clothes and women. As Satinder told me, as a kid, whenever a relative or acquaintance would leave for a ‘Western’ country, he would always ask her or him for shoes, jeans, records or posters. Growing up, they either went there or saw ‘Western’ things coming to India. The end result? The ‘West’ is still a referent, but they also need to point out that it has been surpassed as an ideal to pursue:

“Five years back or so Europe was a goal for me, it was a dream...then I went there and nowadays it no longer is something special...it’s like a beautiful woman, when you see her from afar you like her, you want to have her. Then when you have had her, she’s simply not interesting anymore”.

This was for Satinder the discovery of the ‘West’. Satinder’s first visit to Europe was one of disillusionment and surprise: “I expected skyscrapers and stuff but when I came there, especially in the south of Europe, I discovered that it was in parts just like here.” The experience of Ramesh was similar. He used to work for a British tour operator represented by a man who also ran a guest-house in Goa. The young man’s relationship with this employer turned out to be a real delusion. The employer used his services just in cases of emergency and, according to Ramesh, took some money off him. The sum of the story for Ramesh was that the ‘West’ deluded him: “You know, Paolo, I used to believe that Westerners were all very honest and decent, I don’t know why, but this has always been a part of my thinking.” Ramesh’s and Satinder’s disillusionment reflects the different facets of the Indian discourse on the ‘West’. The ‘West’ represents ambivalent values. It is at once a symbol of progress, richness and development, and also a loss of morality and a triumph of individuality and egoism. Both Ramesh and Satinder, by undergoing personal experiences, recognized the diversity between expectations and experiences.
The ‘West’ is not necessarily a dream nor an icon to pursue for the young men belonging to the generation that I focus on in this study. Yet, for most of them, it is an important resource and a central referent in their processes of identification. Symbolically as well as instrumentally (for what concerns work and career) they have kept it as a natural point of reference. Yet, living in a country belonging to the ‘West’ is not their goal. Akash, who works for Learning Universe, told me that he had several times considered going abroad to study. The reason why he has never done so is very simple: it would not be worth it. “If I move there and then come back and get the same job for rupees 10,000-12,000, then it is not worth it” he told me. Last year he had planned to go to a university in Holland for an MBA. However, it cost too much (Rs. 800,000) and the degree would probably not have earned much on the market. Akash’s goal is to have a decent life, regardless of where but preferably in India, so he calculates all his options very carefully. The ‘West’, in this perspective, becomes just one means to achieve the goal he has set himself. Yet, it is not the goal as such. Even more drastic and figurative is Rajiv’s position vis-à-vis the ‘West’. For this twenty-four-years-old exporter and tourist guide, the ‘West’ should be treated as a “chemical laboratory”. India should let the ‘West’ experiment with innovations and then “import the good things”. For all my informants in the tourism business the ‘West’ is the client, the obvious point of reference towards which all work activities are directed.

The phantasmatic character of the ‘West’ is displayed also by the fact that a variety of discussions among my informants refer to the ‘West’ even when they do not explicitly deal with it as such. I mentioned earlier the festival of Diwali. Every year the government engages in gigantic campaigns against the tradition of letting off crackers on Diwali, which is a cause of major damage on houses, people and the environment. The days before the 2001 Diwali I was watching TV with some friends. A number of ads and spots all aiming at raising opinions against crackers were shown on the popular cable channels Star TV, Channel V and MTV. Star TV had a spot where small children were urging the viewers not to let off crackers in the name of nature. MTV-India had long intervals between the programmes in which well-known VJs (video disc-jockeys), singers and actors were wishing the viewers a happy Diwali. All these celebrities, however, would end their good
wishes by inviting people to celebrate “a silent Diwali” referring, of course, to the use of crackers. After a while Ashwin exploded “What crap, we have to listen to that American stuff!” I asked what he meant and he retorted, “Come on, this is our tradition, they can’t stop it!”

On this occasion, the ‘West’ was invoked by Ashwin as the locus of a (hegemonic) perspective that criticizes India from above. An issue regarding Diwali and the environment was interpreted by him in terms of a struggle between India and the ‘West’ on the issue of keeping traditions alive. In this and other similar situations the reference to ‘India’ and the ‘West’ merges with the ‘modern’-‘traditional’ dichotomy. This way of using these categories marks out their sub-cultural identity. Ashwin expresses his pride in India (this issue will be described in greater detail in the next chapter) as the place where traditions have been kept. Yet, his is a ‘modern’ identity stance, a sign of his belonging to a specific subculture that has transcended the conventional divide between ‘India’ and the ‘West’. He refuses to be presented through labels such as ‘traditional’, ‘Westernized’, or ‘nationalist’, and shows how being a cosmopolitan, modern young man today can mean defending traditions and habits that belong to the past. In addition, he is no great lover of crackers and he generally calls those people who keep letting off crackers on the streets throughout the Diwali period backward.31

decentring the ‘West’

Notwithstanding their continuous references to the ‘West’, my informants express a new vision of the ‘West’ which has to be contextualized within their specific age-, gender- and status-based subculture. Possibly as a consequence of their personal experiences, many of my informants question the idea of the ‘West’ as an ideal to pursue and as the centre of this ‘globalizing’ world. They express this questioning in a variety of ways that at times offer real reversals of the hierarchies between ‘India’ and the ‘West’ reflected in the colonial dichotomy. Discussing the changes that have taken place in India in the 1990s, and replying to my questions about ‘Westernization’, Nikilesh attacked my usage of the latter term saying “Don’t look at it like the West, look at it like shrinking worlds...even though it started in the
West...if it started somewhere else we would all dress differently and talk about something else."

One afternoon I was exposed to a similar challenge by Manish, a thirty-five-year-old photographer from Delhi. Chatting over a beer and switching between subjects, Manish and I talked about the juxtaposition of signs of 'modernity' and 'tradition' in India. I said "It's funny to see all politicians wearing their kurta and then showing off a high-tech watch". Manish's reply was as obvious as sharp. "I don't find anything strange in that! Watches have always been here. Actually India has been producing watches for a long time. Then, for us watches are from Japan, not Western!" He went on: "We have had so many Western products here for so long which have been made in India. We keep calling them Western but Cadbury, Amul, etc. are Indian!". Akash, for his part, offered yet another reversal of these positions. He claims that the 'West' is more interesting and entertaining than India, but simply because India suffers from a bad economy:

"India has to become a big power if it is to have a place...See the USA. It has just 250 years of history. Still the whole world is aping it. But who is aping India? Basically nobody, because India is poor."

The labels 'West', 'Western' or 'Westernized' are never really taken for granted by my interlocutors. Rather, they are given a range of different meanings that are most often incorporated into India. Among my informants, as in much public debate in India, the word 'West' is often used to refer not only to a particular part of the world but primarily to a part of the Indian population, i.e. to the 'Westernized' (rich) people who live a modern, 'Western' lifestyle.

Let me clarify this with the help of some examples. Mira is a twenty-six-years-old psychologist involved in a care centre for cancer patients. Mira is always dressed in a salwar-qamiz and often uses labels such as "conservative" or "traditional girl" to describe herself. During a conversation she expressed how, according to her, most people in India live double lives today. On the one hand they are very cosmopolitan, dress 'Western' and go to discos, but back at home they return to their traditional roles. She feels that people have undertaken changes that are superficial, too fast and too often connected to aggressiveness. This is the reason why a place like Delhi today faces many social problems such as prostitution, violence, rapes, etc. and why the authorities have difficulty in facing these situations. However,
her opinion is that ‘Western’ culture and the media are only partly responsible for these changes. Indeed, the messages come from there but the problems are born within India with the interpretations given by the ‘masses’. For Mira the so-called “Western maladies” are not something related to the ‘West’, but to Indian citizens.

Amar’s point of view is similar to Mira’s. We were discussing the changes that have taken place in India, and I asked him whether he saw these as a kind of new colonization. Amar replied:

“What is the West that people and newspapers talk about? For me it’s a disgusting thing, when I see people in those types of hang-outs, speaking English even in the family. This Westernized generation thinks about nothing at all. Personally I don’t think there is anything wrong in Western culture. Actually I know it very well compared with most people here, but we must change our approach, keep what we think is good and throw away the rest.”

Ramesh made it obvious that he referred to the ‘Westernized’ rather than to the ‘West’ when he criticized the way in which society is changing. According to him, “Westernization is one of the great fallacies of contemporary India. Being modern doesn’t mean being Western.” Saying this, he immediately linked the discussion to a class perspective: “The problem is that today’s youth born in rich families are no longer aware of what certain traditions and values mean. You see, if I were to climb up and become upper class, I might not be able to transmit the values that I believe in. My kids would be involved in totally different things.”

These statements suggest how my informants tend to ascribe the “maladies of modernity” not to the ‘West’ but to Indians and their interpretations and uses of ‘Western’ influences. Giving back agency to their country and its citizens my informants carry out an ongoing questioning of the meaning of ‘India’ and the ‘West’. They repeatedly signal unwillingness to accept the division of the world in the way in which it is conventionally presented, i.e. with the ‘West’ on top engendering changes and ‘India’ underneath obliged to adapt to these. They express criticism of the contemporary discourse on development and globalization. Similarly to the BJP and the RSS, which compete for primacy with the ‘West’ in the fields of science, art and philosophy (‘we came first’), my informants challenge the traditional discourse of social change in which the ‘West’ is the source of innovation and change. For
them change is an ‘Indian affair’ undertaken by people who have the power and resources to administer the exchange with the foreign world. The ‘West’ is thus incorporated into India and envisioned as something that is defined and given meaning from within the country.

co-existing opposites

To return to the ‘Delhi’ match-box I described in the Introduction to this book. History (of Bombay), ‘Western’-centric statements about ‘export-quality’ and references to the world of Walt Disney all joined in a funny way to decorate this box. These signs, apparently in contradiction with each other, co-existed in harmony on this match-box, where ‘India’ and the ‘West’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, shaped each other without entering into conflict. A play of both maintaining and erasing the divide between these categories is to be seen in many different arenas. Rather than being the opposite terms of a dichotomy, these categories co-exist, merge and share a common space in which they constitute and give meaning to one another. Among young people in particular the co-existence between signs pointing outside and signs pointing inwards to ‘India’ is very visible. This was summed up during the Youth forum (cf. Chapter One) by the expression that Indian youths “stick to both Indian mithai and MacDonald’s”.

I shall give one example of this coexistence by analyzing the interpretations among my informants of the kurta, the traditional Indian long shirt (I shall offer another analysis of the kurta in Chapter Five). A piece of clothing commonly used by older people, workers and politicians and associated with a somewhat traditional lifestyle (cf. Bean 1991 and Chakrabarty 2002), the kurta has become ‘in’ again. Walking around in the markets and hang-outs of Delhi, it is easy to notice how young people have readopted the kurta as something of a novelty, a new style. One day, for instance, I met Leander on the campus of Delhi university. He is a twenty-two-year-old part-time employee at the Cuban Embassy. At the time he was completing his studies in Spanish in order to “get a job at some prestigious multinational company”. Leander that day was wearing a beautiful khadi\textsuperscript{32} kurta on top of jeans and Nike tennis shoes. I was curious about his choice of style and so I asked him questions about it. He explained his choice saying that “I wear it because it’s different, it’s new, cool.” For Leander the garment
that generally signals tradition represents something trendy to be worn proudly on the campus. Leander, however, reflected a larger trend. In the evenings it is common to encounter youths wearing more elaborate kurtas. For the purpose of celebration or for fashion, young men appear in discos with refined embroidered silk kurtas. One of these is twenty-seven-years-old Zakir (who runs an antique shop with his family in Connaught Place) who generally dresses in kurta, pijama (i.e. the trousers associated with kurta) and chappals in the most traditional manner. Zakir told me about his choice of clothes, “this is my standard dress, it’s me, it’s my culture.” Coming from a family with an interest in the arts, Zakir associates his style with a specific choice of identity, of displaying an almost aristocratic Indianness in an elegant way.

Quite frequently, however, I have also encountered youths wearing the hippie-informed kurtas refashioned to suit ‘Western’ taste, that are commonly worn by backpackers (cf. Chapter Five). These are shorter and generally made from printed cloth displaying religious symbols. Channel V one day had a special programme dedicated to the markets selling this kind of ‘trendy stuff’. All these different types of tradition-inspired garments contain interesting stories of the encounter of ‘India’ and the ‘West’, and co-exist, however, with the standard jeans and t-shirts, shirts, etc. The cultural space is able to accommodate all these different interpretations.

As in Leander’s judgment about the kurta, so in my informants’ life-world ‘India’ and the ‘West’ infuse value in each other. The presence of the ‘West’ in the imagination of my informants results in a co-existence that, rather than pulling young people away from India and its values (as many critics would state), can also give birth to strong identifications with India. The meaning of this ‘India’ is moulded by the meaning of the ‘West’. Once Ashwin revealed to me the moment when his pride in India had struck him. It was a few years earlier while he was attending a concert in Bombay. This is his story:

“The defining moment was three years back at Independence Rock, you know that concert that is held every year in Bombay. I was there and one of my friends worked for the organization so I was working as a volunteer as a bouncer in front of the stage. So there I was standing and then this guy comes up, starts playing the guitar and does to the national anthem what Jimy Henrix did to the Star Spangled Banner. There was silence in the crowd, everyone was just looking. At the end
everyone was just singing along. No other song in the concert was sung as much as this number."

This was an event which the media would characterize as modern and 'Western'. The musical setting was indeed a concept imported into India. The Shiv Sena, the Hindu nationalist party ruling Bombay, had vehemently tried to stop the concert, invoking the usual moral arguments. Yet, in its midst, Ashwin found reason to rejoice in his image of 'India', its people and their common history.

...summing up

In the cultural habitat of young urban India, 'India', as an image, is definitely in fashion. It is central in marketing campaigns, in the entertainment industry, in politics as well as in the life-experiences of people. The 'India' emerging out of this age is, however, a phantasmatic one that results from the encounter of anti-colonial nationalist discourse and 'Western' views of India. This 'India' merges a utopia of modernity and technology (cf. also Inden 1999:44) with an arcadia-inspired paradise (with its simple rural pastoral lifestyle). This 'India', where the past is inserted into the present and then projected into the future, challenges the colonial ordering of 'India' and the 'West'. 'India', although symbolized by its antiquity and spirituality, appears, in my informants' stories, as a phantasm of modernity, a new modernity reversing the existing hierarchies between the 'West' and the rest of the world. Generated in a blend of simulation and reality and designed by the encounter of small-scale localized realities and the flow of travelling imaginations, this 'India' does not permit us to keep the oppositions contained in the colonial dichotomies separated from each other. Moreover, in the process of creating a new imagined 'India' not only 'India' but also the 'West' ends up being redefined, as are a number of other distinctions such as tradition vs. modernity. 'Indian' plus 'tradition' become at times equal to 'modern' and 'global'.

I have maintained an exclusively discursive level and introduced the issue of cultural identity by presenting the imagery of the 'West' and 'India' within which processes of identification take place. This chapter may have raised a number of questions. If everything merges, and nothing constitutes anything entirely different and foreign to these
young men, how do they construe their cultural identity? Who is the ‘Other’ in their world? Is there such a thing? The next chapter will attempt to address such questions by looking at both more personal and practice-oriented aspects of identity-making and at the role played by the phantasms in this process.

1 This is the title of a song by a London-based DJ of Indian origin. I acknowledge my debt to my friend and colleague Angelo Fontana for having suggested this title to me.
2 I use this expression to indicate how the India that was constructed during the struggle for independence, and which survives even today, consists of the merging of temporal and spatial dimensions.
3 This idea has been so strong that today, I would observe, we even use it to refer to a pre-colonial epoch when what we today label ‘India’ did not even exist.
4 Srinivas (1995) reminds us that the introduction of these ideals had, however, started already at the much earlier with the arrival of the missionaries.
5 The industrialists, for instance, desired the protection of native industries and freedom to plan for the industrialization of India. The educated classes demanded the Indianization of public services (which were to a large extent in the hands of the British). The agriculturalists demanded the reduction of the land tax. The workers demanded better conditions of work and better wages, and so on.
6 This divide was indeed very deep, to the extent that Jawaharilal Nehru stated in his autobiography (quoting from G. Lowes Dickinson): “And why can’t the races meet? Simply because the Indians bore the English” (in Nehru 1936:28).
7 According to Chatterjee’s interpreting they created their own sovereignty by marking out a separation between two domains. The “inner” and spiritual domain carried “the “essential” marks of cultural identity” (1993:6) and the outer one related to the economy, statecraft, science and technology. The process of fashioning a nation began, according to Chatterjee, in the inner sphere when those who fought for an independent India started recreating a vision of India that restore back the dignity jeopardized by the British presence.
8 Gandhi described the village as a place where the inhabitants “embody pure consciousness. Men and women will live freely and be prepared to face the whole world... No one will live indolently, nor luxuriously” (Chandra 1994:45-46).
9 Nehru’s study in New Delhi, preserved with the original outlook, bears witness to his fascination with antiquity. There are small sculptures of Buddha in all corners of the room.
10 Jinnah and the Muslim League had a different agenda from that maintained by the Indian National Congress, sketching the idea of an independent Muslim country, i.e. Pakistan. The Hindu nationalist fringes (formed by the RSS, Subah Chandra Bose, etc.) in their turn disagreed on the secular view of Independent India (as it was formulated by the Congress). They organized their own more militant activities regardless of the Congress Party. There were also the competing and to a certain extent idiosyncratic, ideologically informed views held by the main representatives of the independence movement, differing between, for example, Gandhi and Nehru (cf. Chandra 1994) and Nehru and his father Motilal Nehru (Frank 2002).
11 About this Seth (1992) writes: “Nehru’s nationalist project accepted the universality of Enlightenment categories- and thus the desirability of “modernity” – while maintaining a polemical and contestatory position vis-à-vis European colonialism...Nehru’s quest for India and Indianness, then, was a search for a particular which could share in (even embody) the universal, and for an ancient past capable of becoming a “modern” future” (p. 39).
12 Appiah suggests something similar with his notion of “ersatz exoticism” (in Pietersee and Parekh 1995:9).
The reality of the facts, however, was one of centralization of power in the hands of the elite and of great distances between the elite and the masses. Looking at this in the 1930s Ravinder Kumar pointed out that “upper and middle class interests had crystallized within the national movement in a manner which ensured that the lowly classes, urban and rural, participated in nationalist agitations only under the hegemony of the propertied classes” (quoted in Varma 1998:10).

This feeling, I suggest in this book, persists even today (cf. also Varma 1998:33).

The fact that Rajiv had married an Italian woman may possibly initially have confirmed his cosmopolitanism and openness to the external world. In the 1990s, however, after his death and after the entry into politics of his wife Sonia, the Indian middle class would significantly change its opinion on the issue.

Among my informants too there is an interest in travelling to other, remote parts of India. Some, generally the more well-to-do, may take trips to Rishikesh for river rafting and trekking, others instead travel to a pilgrimage site, maybe not so much for the purpose of pilgrimage as for enjoying a break from everyday routine and to learn more about India.

In Chapter Five I shall suggest that this dynamic also characterizes my informants’ approach to Old Delhi, the part of the city that conventionally stands for ‘authenticity’.

Hindutva is the name given to the ‘Hinduization’ agenda of Indian culture enacted by the Hindu nationalist organizations.

As the above sentences have already anticipated, my informants draw a correspondence between the essentialized qualities of India and those of the Indian people similar to what is found in the discourse promoted by Gandhi and Nehru.

The Gayatri Mantra is a popular religious hymn.

To “gel in” is a slang expression commonly used by most of my informants that means to melt in, to merge with.

Jinnah, a contemporary to Nehru and Gandhi, was the secularist leader of the Muslim League.

Indira Gandhi declared the state of Emergency of India in the 1970s and implemented a number of strong manoeuvres to tackle the crisis situation that India was going through. For this she was accused of having started a dictatorship.

Kargil is the location on the border between India and Pakistan where armed conflict took place in 1999.

I shall not engage in a discussion of the ‘state’ which would lead me to direct the reader’s attention towards issues that I shall not be able to handle thoroughly.

Mithai is a generic term for Indian sweets. The quote is from South Delhi Times, Times of India feature, November 3, 2001.

Here I use modernity in an analytical sense to mark out that ‘stage’ within which this confrontation and differentiation take place. I may also remind the reader of MacCannell’s observations regarding how the quest for authenticity, found in tradition and the past, becomes a “marker of the spiritual self-reflexivity of modernity” (from MacCannel 1976:71).

Spencer quotes, for instance, how during a conference on globalization, non-Western anthropologists opposed the ‘Western’ anthropologists’ desire to abolish the use of ‘West’ as an analytical concept (1995:251).

Once again I point out the absence of such a real geo-political or cultural space called the ‘West’. As Italian comedian Beppe Grillo has ironically commented, the “West is not even geographically a point of reference” since it “shifts depending on where you are”.

At times, my informants also give the impression of living with the idea that ‘Westerners’ are constantly watching them critically as permanent counterparts in a dialogue. One evening, during a party on the rooftop of a South Delhi house, I was talking about music with Manish, my thirty-five years old photographer friend. I congratulated him on a song he had just played, a blues in Hindi. Out of the blue, Manish started talking about the similarities between ‘Western’ and Indian music and the misunderstandings ‘Westerners’
have about India. He said: "When we play a bhajan (a religious hymn) we are immediately suspected of being RSS but when someone in a movie sings Merry Christmas then for you it's just a song."

32 Khadi is the name of a nationally produced hand-woven cloth that was one of the greatest symbols of the Gandhian ideology of Indian independence and self-reliance (Swadeshi).

33 Chappals are the traditional Indian sandals.
Chapter Three

THE PREDICAMENT OF 'TRISHANKU'
expressions and creations of identity

"Ambivalence and paradox are not impurities
that can be cleansed from our thinking;
they are inscribed in human
identification and activity"

(Menon 1993:67)

At the beginning of my fieldwork I used to find my informants quite puzzling. The same person could switch from defining himself as a “Westernized Indian” or a “cosmopolite” to reiterate his position as a “traditional”, “average”, “plain middle class Indian”. “We are not like those upper class people, we wash the good old way!” alternated with “Look at those vagabonds! Average middle class people who have got nothing to do but hang around on the streets!” My informants were ready to generalize endlessly about the types of people we met, and alternatively to identify with both sides of the ‘India-West’, ‘tradition-modernity’ divides. One moment I would see them as disciples of Sri Aurobindo evoking the greatness of Indian civilization and the next moment as American backpackers making fun of India. Mira, the young female psychologist, once commented on these contradictions mentioning Trishanku, the mythological king who kept swinging between sky and earth. “Most people today are Trishanku anyway”, she said, signalling her belief in the internalization, naturalness and recognizability of this swinging of identifications.

I understood later on that my informants were offering me a window on to the predicament of Indian identity in a globalized world.
They faced what Uberoi has defined as the “contradiction between transnational location and the retention of Indian identity” (Uberoi 1998:306). Although Uberoi was speaking about Indian expatriates, I believe, for reasons that I shall develop further on in this text, that her analysis is instructive for the case of urban middle class Indians too who are constantly exposed to transnational influences even while they stay back ‘home’. According to Uberoi, this contradiction results in a dilemma to which there is no easy solution either in the world of the imaginary or in real life (Uberoi 1998:310). But is there no solution to this dilemma? And is it really a dilemma?

The present chapter will address the everyday experiences of cultural identity of my informants. It will start with a description of their switches of identification and proceed with a contextualization of the field within which these switches take place. When understanding processes of identification in the context of my field, one must return to the fact that the context itself, as I described in Chapter Two, is a ‘hybrid’ one, characterized by the co-presence of different discourses and representations of culture and identity. ‘Hybridity’ is a socially recognizable feature in urban India and a historically shaped feature of the Indian middle class. To be a ‘hybrid’ and to switch between seemingly opposed positions appears as a rule rather than an exception.

The first section of this chapter will end with a short discussion of the notion of ‘hybridity’ in which I shall introduce the analytical distinction made by Bakhtin (1981) between “organic” and “intentional” hybridity. While the first part of the chapter focuses on the first connotation of hybridity (i.e. on hybridity as the unconscious integration of new images, words and objects), the third part will approach ‘hybridity’ in its intentional dimension. The second section will bridge the two, discussing by means of an analysis of phantasms how the sharing of referents and labels for approaching other people may give birth to a visible community of imagination. My interlocutors are united by a common way of referring to and positioning themselves against the world that surrounds them. The third section will look further into this and focus on how this sharing of referrals can also serve to exclude people from the community of imagination.

The capacity to enact switches within a ‘hybrid’ life-world, even though a recognizable trait for many Indians, constitutes at times a
significant statement of a sub-cultural identity that is specific to the moment in life in which my informants find themselves and to the particular (career- and lifestyle-defined) life-worlds they inhabit. Faced with individuals, mostly male, who appear to inhabit the same cultural habitat and in consequence are assumed to share referents and experiences, my informants experiment with cultural identity and imagination emphasizing their consciousness about being hybrids. On these occasions switches can become weapons to grasp the competence of their counterparts in managing the contemporary ‘hybrid’ life-world and to mark out belonging to specific communities of imagination characterized by common references to the messages and symbols that reach them through what I have labelled as the travel of imaginations. Distancing themselves, through the means of ‘othering’, from these potential competitors (for the niche of trans-culturally competent modern Indians), my informants not only display but also strengthen their perceptions of themselves.

In this chapter I shall put forward the idea that it is only through an understanding of the ‘phantasmatic’ character of identity that we can make sense of the fluctuations in self-definition displayed by my informants. Vis-à-vis the images selected from the representational realm they categorize what surrounds them and construct an image for themselves. Imagination is thus a vital source for identification and for the formation of new communities. This chapter will also show how the identities nurtured by my informants are not those of hardcore Westernized ‘modernites’, as most Indian critics would probably call them. Their performances of identification show the importance of ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’ in the private lives of these young men. As already mentioned in Chapter Two, their expressions of pride and attachment to ‘tradition’ and ‘India’ signal ‘modern’ stances and a capacity to be in tune with the changes taking place in the contemporary world. In their self-presentations as “real Indians”, locality and boundedness appear as stances of openness to the outside world rather than of closure. Such self-presentations give us material to question, from a different angle, the meaning of the ‘West’ in contemporary ‘India’ and to further consider the meaning of the ‘local’-‘global’ dichotomy. Being part of globalizing India does not entail being Westernized, but rather ‘Indianized’ and thus, paradoxically, ‘local’. 

Expressions and Creation of Identity

Vis-à-vis the images selected from the representational
a hybrid cultural habitat

In their everyday life my interlocutors in Delhi make use of the phantasms evoked through the people and objects they encounter in order to make their own statements of identity. The following scenes will introduce my analysis of the switches of position and referents enacted by my informants and evoke the context in which these switches take place. Both these vignettes are taken from visits with the “tourist escorts” to Janpath market. The visits took place a month or so from each other.

"WE ARE TRADITIONAL"

A young European woman with an emotionless expression on her face is walking towards Amit, Sunil, Dipankar and me where we sit at our usual place in Janpath Market. She is accompanied by a man in his mid-thirties, slightly overweight, wearing a red polo shirt and jeans, with a pair of sunglasses perched on his head. Lightly tapping my elbow, Sunil points the woman out to me. He whispers in my ear, “She’s good looking, huh?” I suggest that she may be from Eastern Europe and he agrees, looking even more interested. The couple stop in front of the shoe-shine stand in front of which we are sitting. The man puts his foot on the shoe-shine box for a polish as he lights a cigarette. Sunil opens up a conversation with the man, introducing us as “tourist-escorts.” The man replies in a broad Indian-American accent, that he is a computer expert from Texas. Then he starts complaining about India - how everything is dirty, the air un-breathable. “This country is shit!” he exclaims. Displaying a big smile and adjusting the sunglasses on the top of his head, Sunil looks at the woman and tries to involve her in the discussion. The man in the red shirt tells us that she is from the Ukraine and speaks very little English or Hindi. Sunil smiles at her but gets no response. A few minutes pass with Sunil insisting on smiling at the Ukrainian woman. Once the shoes are polished, the couple take their leave. At that point, Dipankar turns around to Sunil and says, “He is not from the States”. Sunil adds “No, he is just using that to get her.” Amit nods in agreement. The usual chorus about the stupidity and superficiality of Westernized Indians begins again.

"WE ARE WESTERNIZED"

Late Saturday afternoon at the fence in Janpath Market. A young couple with two children pass in front of us. The man is carrying a baby while another child, holding his hand, is pulling him in all directions. The wife
is walking a couple of steps ahead. Dressed in a beautiful saree she walks slowly, gazing at the shop windows. The man is sweating, busy and preoccupied with keeping an eye on both kids. Staring at the couple, Satinder says to Sunil: "Those are our age...we could have been like them...I feel pity for these people...this is the only thing they get from life...they have spent a whole week with a big family, people everywhere. This is really the highlight of the week, to be alone and have this walk in CP." Sunil replies, "We were lucky to escape that!" Satinder also raises the comparison with his family, his brothers and their "very average life". Then both bless tourism and the possibilities for a "better lifestyle" it has given them. While discussing these things Satinder turns round to look at a young girl in a salwar-qamiz who is just passing by. Pointing at her he says "you see, when I see her like this I would like to fuck her, but then after a while it would turn into a nightmare, I could never imagine being together with this kind of woman." "This kind of woman" stands for the "traditional Indian woman", a woman, who, as they explained, stands for passivity, boredom and asexuality. Nevertheless, she is attractive to them.

These scenes show how Satinder and Sunil with a certain ease change ways of defining themselves and quickly ascribe stereotypical identities to people they encounter. The man in the red polo shirt, for instance, is, at one and the same time, presented as both an ‘NRI’ (non-resident-Indian, i.e. an Indian living abroad and a character generally associated with arrogance) and as a “wannabe NRI” (with all his stupidity, superficiality and obvious belonging to the average lower middle class India). The family is classified as a boring, typical, middle class one.1

Considered together, these scenes may indeed give the impression of a lack of consistency in matters of identity among these young men. It would be easy, from these first observations, to make hasty judgments about the general sense of “displacement” (Giddens 1991, cf. also Jameson 1984) into which this generation of young men is trapped. Exposed to the varied sources of information and influence (from within the country as well as from abroad) that characterize much of public life in a place like Delhi (cf. Chapter Five), these young men seem to have lost their points of reference for constructing a coherent identity. We could think of this as an example of the “postmodern condition” (Lyotard 1985) where identity, locality and other aspects commonly linked to ‘roots’ are confused and uprooted (cf. Clifford 1988 and 1997a).2 Yet we would not do justice to the depth of information that these scenes offer us if we stuck to such points of view.
My informants’ ascription of stereotypical meaning to the people and situations they meet in an ordinary public space such as Janpath market, is far from idiosyncratic. Their categories are shared, recurrent and recognizable by most of them, regardless of background. In the discourse of my informants, labels such as “Westernized Indian”, “Western”, “traditional Indian”, “NRI” and “upper class” represent recognizable categories of identity in the young men’s life-world and in middle class India in general. In the first scene, for instance, my informants share the immediate assumption that the man in the red polo is lying about being an NRI for a specific purpose, namely to get the girl. Relying upon a stereotypical knowledge of the NRI as an ambiguous embodiment of a new phase of Indian modernity (cf. Inden 1999, Uberoi 1998, see below), they all assume that the man in the red polo believes that being an NRI is more prestigious than being an “average Indian”. Their verbal statements convey a moral stance with regard to the attitudes and behaviour of those who have chosen a ‘Western’ lifestyle and define the man in the red polo as one more instance of those amoral, egoistic, self-centred and superficial individuals detached from Indian society. Similarly, in the case of the encounter with the “traditional couple” they bring to life assumptions regarding who these persons, briefly spotted in the market, actually are, how they live and what they stand for.

The invocation of these categories offers us a cartography of the life-world of my informants while it also reflects broader discourses which have historical roots in the colonial epoch (cf. Chapter Two). Both scenes show quite explicitly how my informants’ understanding of the people, objects and situations encountered is achieved through the phantasms. The encounter with the man in the red polo and the Ukrainian girl is framed in terms of an encounter between the ‘West’ and ‘India’. These two categories, together with the bridging category ‘Westernized India’, evoke strong feelings among my informants (one of the characteristics of the phantasm) and permit them to identify the identity and lifestyle of these people. The phantasms filter my informants’ approach to the environment in which they live and help them to define their position in society.

Both vignettes show the strategic positioning of the self engaged in an encounter with the other. By means of a continuous ‘othering’, they find a way to present themselves. *Vis-à-vis* the man in the red polo,
interpreted as the embodiment of ‘Westernized India’, they are themselves “middle class people”. *Vis-à-vis* the “more traditional Indian” people, they instead present themselves as “Westernized”, “cosmopolitan” and “educated”. The man in the red polo shirt and the couple are both placed in a tacit hierarchy on the basis of their supposed identities. In this same hierarchy my informants find a position for themselves and build their own self-images. These two scenes thus show how the apparently contradictory everyday practices of identification are constitutive parts of a process of identity creation. Enacted by means of what I have called the phantasms they reflect a field already defined by a capacity to merge apparently opposite messages. This merging is what I shall now discuss.

**A MEETING AT THE DUNGEONS**

Late one evening I end up together with Ashwin at the Dungeons, a popular South Delhi pub run by Rajesh, a twenty-seven-year-old Punjabi. I had already met Rajesh through a mutual friend at an engagement party in South Delhi. That evening, all dressed up in an elegant black suit, Rajesh had kept asking me questions about Italy and about his favourite subject, the Mafia: “Have you seen the Godfather? Did you like it? Have you met people like him?” At the Dungeons, however, Rajesh is dressed more casually and is sitting at a table together with Vikram, the manager of the family business. Vikram, in wide white rapper trousers, t-shirt and with a pair of dark sun glasses leaning against his forehead, is sipping whisky. Seeing us coming in, Rajesh orders some drinks for us too and Ashwin introduces himself to these new acquaintances. The usual ritual takes place. Questions flash in the air: “Where do you live?”, “What do you do?”, “Where are you from?” (a question that makes sense only in the light of the context of Delhi in which most people come from outside and where even those who have lived their entire lives there or were born there refer to the ancestral place of their family as “the place where they come from”). When the ritual is over, Vikram and Ashwin discover a common experience: Vikram has studied for two years in the US and Ashwin one year. Both love heavy metal and hard rock. Sitting next to them, and involved in a chat with Rajesh about Switzerland (where Rajesh had studied at a hotel management institute), I can observe a spark being kindled between the two. “I saw Metallica live in New York, man, that was awesome!” says Vikram. With evident excitement, Ashwin asks him about that concert. Vikram gives him all the details, adding that he was even allowed to go back stage and to join the post-concert party, thanks to the fact that he had met the drummer of the band. Enchanted, Ashwin tells more about his favourite groups, about the rock scene in Bombay, which according to him is “so much better than Delhi’s”. The two then join in complaints about the dullness of Delhi and about the fact that
India does not really offer much musical entertainment and night life. They name the different clubs where live music is played in Delhi and then shake their heads in disappointment. Suddenly a dramatic switch occurs. Vikram and Ashwin have started talking about their feelings when they moved back from the States. “Anyway, except for a few things, like concerts and stuff, I would not change India for anything” Vikram says. Rajesh joins in and underlines “What do we miss here after all? I loved Switzerland but what a fuck! Here we have everything, best nature, best cities, clubs, everything.” “You’re right man” says Ashwin. “I mean, I was glad to come back home, really glad!” says Vikram. “Me too man, this is home”, adds Rajesh. Banging his fist on his heart, Vikram concludes “Nothing like India man, nothing like it!”. Then we all raised a glass to salute India with Abba singing their successes in the background.

This scene may appear to express the pride in India among young men who all consider themselves to be ‘modern’, ‘Westernized’ and ‘cosmopolitans’, or to represent pretentious and competitive displays of cosmopolitanism among proud ‘local’ Indian youths. Delhi is presented as a boring place that irritates them for its lack of entertainment and for its marginality and provinciality on the global scene. This stance is, however, coupled with a shared belief in, and passion and love for India and not, as would seem logical, with a blind faith in the ‘West’. The ‘West’ is ‘simply there’ and contextualizes and gives meaning to experiences of India, with both its failings and merits (cf. my discussion in Chapter Two). As a phantasm, ‘India’ evokes passionate feelings among them.

The scene shows us the vast horizon of images and influences to which these young men are exposed. They refer to messages that testify to their constant exposure to travelling images and messages. The switches between a criticism of India and an open expression of love for it are abrupt and awaken a feeling of confusion in the observer. However, all the participants in the scene are able to follow the turns. What enables them to understand each other is the particular context which makes these apparently contradictory positions acceptable and natural. The communication between these three young men is made possible by common references to a ‘hybrid’ and phantasmatic life-world of imaginations where the ‘West’ and ‘India’ are made to co-exist. In the next section, I shall offer a brief historical description of this context and show how my informants’ own experiences of cultural
identity are to be approached in a historically situated discourse in which hybridity is central.

the hybrid history of the Indian middle class

That cultural encounters produce new lifestyles and identities is a truism. Nonetheless, this issue is made particularly evident, and needs to be problematized, when analyzing identity in the Indian context. India has been exposed to repeated invasions and aggressions. The supposed capacity of its people to absorb different lifestyles and ideas (of necessity but also as a virtue) has, as I pointed out in Chapter Two, been raised by many Indians as a symbol of pride. For the young contemporary urbanites, this exchange goes on today in the shape of globalization, the new phase in the interaction between 'India' and the 'West' that started with British colonization. The two centuries of the Raj, during which the British Empire had control of India, gave birth to historically recognizable categories of cultural intermixture that have been depicted with both irony and drama by Indian commentators. Anecdotes taken from the biographies of individuals famous during the colonial era often provide telling examples of this. To mention a couple of them, Raja Ram Mohan Roy³ was ironically said to maintain two houses, “one in which everything was Western except Roy and another in which everything was Indian except Roy” (quoted in Varma 1998:153). Jawaharlal Nehru explained his own doubleness⁴ with these sentences:

“I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. Perhaps my thoughts and approach to life are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern, but India clings to me….I am a stranger and alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile’s feeling.” (in Varma 1998:153).

Even Mahatma Gandhi, who passed into history as the embodiment of traditional Indian purity, decided to struggle against the oppression of the colonial system only in South Africa. Gandhi left India as a young lawyer in suit and hat and came back a freedom fighter dressed in dhoti⁵ and chappals. Examples of this sort could fill the pages of many books. For my purposes suffice it to note that the
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historical roots of hybrid identities in India are deep and contested. They are also part of young people's knowledge about their own history. Geeta, a student, once used these words to describe her middle class family from Calcutta whose head, her grandfather, was a colonial officer: "My family were those kinds of people who used to eat breakfast with their bare hands sitting on the ground and then eat dinner at the table with the most beautiful silver forks and knives."

In the colonial era everyone among the privileged of India had, to a certain extent, experienced at least a symbolic commuting between 'India' and the 'West'. The 'Westernized Indian' was part of the British plan to create what Macaulay had defined as a class of "Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, and in intellect" (Varma 1998:3). Created in order to support British rule from the inside, the Westernized Indian class constituted a privileged category that was immediately ambivalently evaluated (see below). The baboos (in older English dictionaries generally defined as a 'native clerk who writes English'), were among the first privileged 'natives' accepted by the British colonial establishment and the most obvious cases of the early incorporation of British colonial culture in India. Respected, yet at the same time looked down upon by both the English and their fellow Indians, the baboos represented an anomaly for everyone. In the eyes of the colonial masters they never really fulfilled the proper qualities of rationality and manhood that would permit them to fit into British culture. For the Indians, on the other hand, the baboos were symbols of success as well as objects of envy. Their ambivalence was described by freedom fighter and writer Bankimchandra Chatterji in 1873 in the following way:

"indefatigable in talk, experts in a particular foreign language, and hostile to their mother tongue...like Vishnu they will have ten incarnations, namely clerk, teacher, Brahmo, accountant, doctor, lawyer, magistrate, landlord, editor and unemployed...Baboo will consume water at home, alcohol at friends', abuses at the prostitutes' and humiliation at the employers" (quoted in Varma 1998:5).

Besides the baboos there were other categories belonging to the Westernized elite who had been given access to British culture through schooling and the new opportunities for studying and working abroad created in the colonial networks. This was the environment which formed Jawaharlal Nehru and other representatives of the Indian
National Congress (later on the ‘Congress Party’). The Congress itself can probably be considered the most brilliant result of the British project of creating a new class of Indians. Founded in 1885 by an Englishman, the Congress was in its beginning tightly linked to the colonial establishment. It was composed of an intellectual, well educated and English-speaking elite recruited mostly from the high caste groups, and supported by the dominant castes of landed peasants. Like the Indian elite in general (cf. Srinivas 1995:81), the Congress represented for the British establishment a kind of safety valve. The Congressmen were the native partners of the British to be mobilized as intermediaries between the colonial power and the masses in situations of crisis. The Congress, however, went on to live a life of its own. It became a political party and the major instrument of Indian liberation from colonial rule. Yet it remained hybrid even in its strong nationalist message. At independence, the party, despite being by then anti-British at its very core, recreated ‘Western’ categories of thought in its reconstruction of the nation under ideals of democracy and liberalism that had been imported from the British (see Chapter Two).

During the second part of colonial rule, British culture ventured beyond the boundaries of politics and bureaucracy, and spread among other categories of people who did not belong to the most privileged, like clerks, teachers, etc. Reflexive individuals from these categories began to criticize this culture, because it contributed to the creation of a small clique that kept its distance from the rest of society. Nehru, for instance, described it as an invasion:

“This official and Service atmosphere invaded and set the tone for almost all Indian middle class life, especially the English-knowing intelligentsia...Professional men, lawyers, doctors and others, succumbed to it, and even the academic halls of the semi official universities were full of it. All these people lived in a world apart, cut off from the masses and even the lower middle class” (quoted in Varma 1998:8).

In Nehru’s words we sense the feeling of irritation and disgust that British influence created among many Indians. Yet, Nehru pointed out several times how grateful he was for the instruments for growing up he had been offered by British culture. For him it was not a contradiction to
fight the colonial power while upholding friendships with former schoolmates in England (cf. Nehru 1936). Nor was it contradictory to send his daughter Indira to British schools dressed in *khadi* so as to signal her belonging to a family that supported Indian independence (cf. Franck 2002).

As illustrated by the example of Nehru, the Indian intelligentsia alternated distaste with appreciation for British culture. They attacked the British presence and criticized Indians who embodied this new hybrid culture. Yet they also saw as natural the ambivalence in which they lived. In his book *Modern Indian Culture* (1948), sociologist D. P. Mukherjee suggested that the educated middle class of India was of necessity trapped in this paradoxical situation. Since the middle class had been “artificially” (1948:205) created by the British for the consolidation of foreign rule, it was, according to Mukherjee, more than natural that they would turn out to be characterized by “much of the inner weakness of modern Indian renaissance, its nostalgia, its unrootedness, its haunting sense of inferiority” (1948:82). The presence in the Indian context of split identities (whether good or bad), and of split loyalties, is an integral part of the Indian imagination. Natural and obvious, but not always welcomed, such identities constitute the context within which the contemporary processes of identity creation also take place.

**Hybridity as a conventional stance**

The co-existence of things ‘foreign’ or ‘Western’ displayed in the vignette ‘A Meeting at the Dungeons’ above is to be located in a historical context where a diversity of positions and discourses is a familiar situation. Urban educated Indians have grown up surrounded by notions of doubleness, duality, ambivalence and ‘inconsistency’. The continuous shifts of my informants from a position where one criticizes India for its lacks and backwardness in the field of youth culture, to one where India is coupled with ‘hearth’, love and roots, lose a part of their awkwardness when seen in this light. Before I go further in my analysis, I must now, however, comment on the notion of hybridity.

Hybridity is a recurrent analytical term used to address the cultural history of post-colonial society in particular. Applied to the predicament of individuals, as well as to the analysis of works of art, public space
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and texts, hybridity permits the scholar to refer to new spaces of culture generated by the meeting and merging of different worlds and cultures. Once a pejorative term used to define the unwelcome encounter between colonizer and colonized,9 the term has in the last few decades gone through a deep transformation in use and connotation. In ‘Western’ popular debates ‘hybridity’ looks today like a flag for a new generation of politically correct statements on integration and immigration (cf. Hutnyk 1996c and 2000, Werbner and Modood 1996). Within academia it still persists as a common analytical term but is constantly subjected to criticism. To mention but a few, Spivak (1993), Ahmad (1995) and Hutnyk (1996b and 2000), find, for instance, the term too detached from power dimensions.10 Friedman (1996) and Jain (1998), instead see ‘hybridity’ as the solution for an intellectual elite that is positioned above the fragmentation of a postmodern world and is trying to define its own existence.11

These voices make it very clear that hybridity is far from a notion on which there is consensual agreement in the social sciences.12 When applied to my field, hybridity, as it is commonly used at present, appears to be a problematic term. Through scholarly work hybridity has become tightly linked with one particular focus on the processes of exchange that characterize post-colonial society. Especially in the tradition of cultural studies, it has mostly been empirically applied to educated ‘Third World’ expatriates in the ‘First World’.13 Always maintaining the metropolitan ‘West’ as the natural point of reference, hybridity has, in these contexts, been used to address situations in which actors are consciously aiming at representing and coming to terms with controversial identities (often their own) and to reflect upon personal experiences regarding the position of a group or society, in relation to migration and to a changing world.14 Due to this empirical focus, ‘hybridity’ has analytically been charged with connotations of intentionality and with a transgressiveness which only makes sense in certain contexts. Only against a background where ‘normality’ is a matter of fixed and bounded identities, localities and culture, can in fact the hybrid, as Bhabha (1994) suggests, come in from “the margins” and, armed with transgressive power, subvert the conventional categories that define identity discourse (cf. also Werbner 1996:5).

The question is how we should approach ‘hybridity’ and ‘hybrid identities’ when we acknowledge that cultures are always characterized
by a degree of merging of endogenous and imported elements. In my field this becomes particularly obvious. The fusion of elements, narratives and visions with varied historical trajectories is something all middle class Indians have both internalized and been aware of. It is something naturalized but which functions also as a marker of their identity. Yet, it is not something transgressive, since some level of hybridity is shared and acknowledged by all members of educated India. The declarations of hybridity given by my informants in a sense link them to the discourse of identity promoted by the anti-colonial establishment. Jawaharlal Nehru's statements on his identity are not far from Nikilesh's story about how he alternates Hindu chants like the Gayatri Mantra with Metallica.

The acknowledgment of such a hybrid context makes my informants' stances on identity reasonable (maybe almost banal) and not transgressive. Even though they are creative and innovative, these stances refer back to a life-world where being hybrid constitutes the core of both discourses and experiences of cultural identity. The very act of constructing and signalling a hybrid cultural identity in itself marks already their belonging to the community of educated Indians. How, then, can we approach agents who, while they obviously demonstrate an identity that results from the exchange of different influences, do not seem to express a transgression but rather to reproduce an identity historically recognizable in their life-world? How can we also explain the fact that at times, however, my interlocutors ostensibly emphasize and display their 'hybrid identity'? As I already said, socializing mostly with men of the same age and status, they carry out switches to test their counterparts' competence in managing the symbols and messages belonging to their 'hybrid' life-world. In such encounters, hybridity also has an instrumental and conscious dimension that marks the construction of a sub-cultural community of imagination.

In order to grasp this logic I need to distinguish between two main dimensions of hybridity. Following Bhaktin (1981), I suggest that hybridity is expressed in my field in both 'organic' and 'intentional' terms. The context in which my informants live speaks in fact of 'organic' hybridity, that is, of an unconscious integration of new images, words and objects. Within such a context my informants appear as 'banal hybrids' whose "hybridity is unconscious, organic, collectively
negotiated in practice” (Werbner 1996:12). Their hybridity bounces back upon an environment already in itself defined by a certain looseness in definitions, i.e. by a long history of exchange whose significance has recently been restored to attention through India's definitive entry into the global market. We may also find an element of ‘intentional hybridity’ among them, i.e. the conscious product of attempts to communicate a particular position within this hybrid context. The intentional play with hybridity is the foundation on which they construct and signal their sub-cultural identity. The capacity to move with equal ease in both a traditional home environment and a Westernized one is valued as part of the cultural capital of a modern successful young person. In many contexts this cultural capital is expressed by the capacity to switch referents. Switches can thus signal competence in striking a balance between seemingly opposed life-worlds.

the ‘others’, phantasms and cultural identification

Having suggested that, in the context of contemporary urban India cultural identity is acted out against a long history of merging and encounter, I shall now take another step into my analysis of the processes of identification of my informants. As indicated by the first two ethnographic vignettes of this chapter, my informants' identity statements are made by typifying and then ‘othering’ some of the people they encounter. This othering is framed by their evocation of ‘India’, the ‘West’ and ‘Westernized India’. Identity is, therefore, articulated within a “phantasmic imaginary” (Hall 1996:4) in which the phantasms of ‘India’ and the ‘West’ provide the actors, as we have seen, with the main framework for interpreting and categorizing what surrounds them and for positioning themselves within the flow of contemporary society.

Such an approach to identity necessitates a few considerations. Research in the field of identity has mainly moved from ‘identity’ to ‘identification’. Earlier considered as a possession of an individual ascribed from birth, and belonging to the realm of fixity, boundedness and stability in space, identity is today more and more approached as a process, a non-essentialist, strategic and positional form of individual
becoming. With the growing acknowledgment of the interconnected character of contemporary societies, scholars have raised awareness about the complex character of how social actors identify with their cultural habitats (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, Marcus and Fisher 1986). Personal cultural identification is recognized as an ongoing production (cf. Hall 1996:2) constantly open to modification and questioning. Identities are therefore incomplete, never achieving wholeness (cf. also Deleuze and Guattari 1995) and represent a continuous process of redefinition, “re-invention” (Bhabha 1990) and re-shaping of boundaries. Approached as a matter of positioning and repositioning vis-à-vis ‘the Other’ (what Derrida calls its "constitutive other", cf. Derrida 1981, also Hall 1996, Barth 1998, Mead 1974), identities are played out vis-à-vis other people and vis-à-vis the “dominant regimes of representation” such as literature, tourism, filmmaking, etc. (Hall 1993:400, cf. also Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, Peters 1997). They relate to the shifting practices that constantly redefine culture, place and history and thus also to imagination.

making ‘others’

Among my informants, as we have seen, ‘othering’ is the principal orientational device. They make claims of identity by finding and accentuating differences with what surrounds them. They read their cultural habitat in terms, roughly, of a basic triad consisting of ‘Real/Traditional Indians’, ‘Westernized Indians’ and ‘Westerners’. Constantly adapted and juxtaposed, these phantasms sum up the imagination of my informants and offer a link between their own imagination and elements of Indian public culture as they appear in advertisements and movies. Let me introduce these categorizations by presenting one particular instance, i.e. an encounter with four NRIs.

NRIS IN CONNAUGHT PLACE

Late one afternoon I am sitting on a fence in front of the Pizza Hut in Connaught Place with Bharat and Shalini, the two tour leaders. Shalini says he loves coming here. He does it almost every day, just to look at people. I am drinking a Coke bought from a stall, while Bharat is eating a pakora and Shalini is just looking around. Pretty soon we attract a small group of beggar children. They start walking round us in circles. One gets closer to us but Bharat tells him discreetly to stay away.
small kid stares intently at my Coke, but stands still. A cloud of colourful balloons rise in the sky behind our backs. The beggar children run now towards the balloons which, held up high by the vendor, reflect the electric lights of the night (with its neon signs and lamps). The balloon vendor shouts and waves his hands. Abusing the children, he tries to keep them away. We just watch. Not much talking is going on at the moment. Suddenly all the kids run away from the balloon-vendor and towards four young men, who stand outside the entrance of Pizza Hut dressed in a casual but trendy way (with tight t-shirts, cargo trousers and big basket shoes). One of them is walking around with a digital video-camera. Possibly that is what attracts the beggar children, since they surround the young man and start to smile and make grimaces in front of his camera. First the four young men try to scare the kids off with shouts and gestures. After a few seconds, however, the one with the video-camera starts recording them. The other three laugh at the young kids making faces and giggling in front of the camera, but try visibly to avoid any physical contact with them. With a certain satisfaction mixed with disgust, Bharat exclaims "NRIs!". Shalini adds: "I hate those people....it's OK if you go abroad for your studies or for a period of work, but just going abroad to come back and show off is really bad...some of these people live miserably in the 'West' but then come here and display the few dollars they have, I hate those people." Bharat replies: "They are neither here nor there, they are weird!" I ask them more about the NRIs and their character. Bharat and Shalini add that the NRIs are the same as the local rich. They are egoistic, self-centred and superficial. Then they tell me some amazing stories about the upper class, about young rich girls who force their servants to sleep with them only to see them being dismissed by their parents. Shalini says: "For them, other people [of lower class] are just a piece of flesh and bone." I ask them where they place themselves in this hierarchy. Both proudly state "the lower middle and middle middle classes". "You see, Paolo, we have bonds" Shalini says. Then he tells me, once again, about how in India the lower classes and the upper classes are permitted to do whatever they like, while the middle class has to meet expectations.

In this scene Shalini and Bharat are quick to make judgments and assumptions regarding the people they encounter. They categorize the four young men hanging out in the street as NRIs (i.e. non-resident-Indians), not on the basis of factual knowledge, but because of the qualities the group is supposed to embody. Their clothing and 'cool' behaviour make them immediately appear as NRIs. Shalini and Bharat's assumptions refer to a more widespread and socially recognizable imagination about the NRI. In movies, advertisements and TV, the NRIs have become popular figures who represent the contested embodiment of a new era of Indian cosmopolitanism (cf.
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Inden 1999) and symbolize the country’s future (cf. Uberoi 1998:307). Uberoi has suggested that their presence functions as a point of reference for the expanding middle class, but also generates feelings of betrayal (since they have not ‘come back’). The emigrant represents “the moral antithesis of the one who stays behind, the one whose values remain steadfast” (Uberoi 1998:308). The imaginary ‘NRI’, as represented in movies, epitomizes a dilemma which links the Indian diaspora with those who stay behind in a common economy of signs.

This dilemma is evoked by my informants Shalini and Bharat, when they look at the four ‘NRIs’ through the lens of their preconceptions about the ‘Westernization’ of India. It concerns social change and the preservation of values. In their views the NRIs merge with the local rich and the Westernized in general. Once again, this is far from just their own personal way of approaching those who are ‘Westernized’. In Delhi an ironic term has been created for the latter category. Some people use the term ‘RNI’ (i.e. resident-non-Indian) to indicate the Westernized urban rich. The concept connotes rich people who, because of their greater involvement with a Westernized lifestyle, no longer feel a commitment to the rest of Indian society. For my informants the ‘NRIs’ without doubt stand for the superficiality and materialism of a “Westoxicated” (Gupta 2000) world. They have pulled away from their roots and culture and fallen prey to ‘Western’ materialism with its tendencies to show off richness and status. NRI, RNI and other privileged Indians are all seen to share the qualities of immorality and detachment so much addressed by Indian public debates. A taxonomy based on moral judgments of lifestyles and values is therefore central to the way my informants map the social world that surrounds them. As against these ‘others’, Bharat and Shalini define their position in the middle class and present the latter as the repository of values (I shall return to this shortly). Shalini and Bharat find a way to strengthen their sense of belonging to ‘India’ through a moralizing ‘othering’ of the supposed NRIs. They find an opportunity to reaffirm their belonging to a more value-oriented ‘middle class’.

Among those of my informants who come from well-to-do families, whom we might well define as ‘Westoxicated’ themselves, a moral detachment from the ‘Westoxicated’ is nevertheless always present. Let me give an example. One night I went to the Sports Bar, the main
attraction of the Radisson Hotel in Delhi, together with Ashwin and Nikilesh. At the bar, there were some foreigners (probably hotel guests) and a small group of young people playing pool. Nikilesh and Ashwin commented on one of the players, who was wearing black trousers and an unbuttoned black shirt displaying a big pendant on his chest. "He looks like some stupid ad", Nikilesh said laughing. Ashwin joined in, commenting on the bad influence of "those idiots on channel V". Both saw the young man as trying to look like the trendy presenters of channel V who embody the NRI/RNI look and attitude.

Notwithstanding their differences in background, Nikilesh and Ashwin found a way to unite by marking their distance from that entire world. They lamented the sad fact that these ridiculous people were becoming idols for the young. Even the detachment all my informants show from debates such as that created by the murder of Jessica Lal or the BMW case (cf. Chapter One) bears witness to the creation of a feeling of community marked by distancing from the 'other'. They all talk about those events, as if they had taken place in a different world from their own. While the tourist escorts just replied saying "but we are middle middle class people, not those rich, upper class, bourgeois", my more privileged informants would shake their heads and impute what had happened to the ignorance of those who committed the crime. Both groups would position themselves above the people involved in the scandals, implying a greater awareness of the modalities of a changing world.

Akash, the internet manager, expressed the latter point quite explicitly when he remarked about Westernized Indian women: "They may have Gucci purses and maybe even a different attitude to sex, but they are not aware." In a generalizing 'othering' Akash put the NRI and the poor in the same category; "It is the middle class which is fucked...the low and upper classes are the same, no one expects anything from them; they have the same sexual behaviour, the same drinking and drug habits and they both lack awareness." As gathered from Akash's statement, local, traditional and poor people are also made into strangers. In spite of their idealization of real/traditional India, my informants are not particularly eager to identify themselves with the local poor. The India that I described in the last chapter, and that so much stimulates their fantasy, i.e. the India of simplicity, poverty and spirituality, is kept at a certain distance in the context of everyday
life. This may involve concrete physical detachment, such as in the case of encounters on the street where the poor are avoided or pushed away. My more well-to-do informants too, are often quite selective in their choice of where to hangout, to ensure that they avoid close contact with the local poor (cf. Chapter Five).

In sum, my informants often maintain a critical attitude towards other people in society. They categorize them by a number of small acts and statements of othering, informed by a classification of people and situations made possible by the continuous dialogue with the imagination. In categorizing the ‘other’, they evoke and orientate according to the phantasms of the ‘West’ and ‘India’. Doing this, they create a feeling of being one particular community of educated people, who do not fall into the trap of ‘Westernization’.

a matter of ‘middle classness’?

As I have shown, my informants claim, against the Westoxicated rich, the plain middle class, and the local poor, a greater capacity to understand the realities of both India and the West. Doing this, they express a certain rootlessness, constantly switching between opposite ends. Rather than taking these young men’s displays of their cultural identity at face value, we may see their constant switching in itself as a sign of their cultural identity. In their community of imagination, their subculture, the capacity to balance between different positions and to evoke phantasms is the core of internal cohesion. They all put great value on the capacity to place the people they encounter within their imagined hierarchies. The capacity to undertake this mapping (and its related distancing) can thus be regarded as a central feature of their identity.

I would now like to consider the social recognizability of the position my informants create for themselves. As I have shown, the position they take is always defined negatively, i.e. in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of a strong identification with one particular category or social group. Remember how Bharat and Shalini ended up describing their firm rootedness in a middle class defined by values, social acceptance and Indianness only when facing the NRIs. Satinder and Sunil emphasized their higher degree of education and openness when facing people such as those they defined as
"vagabonds". The fact of being a ‘traditional Indian’ may be given a positive connotation when one is comparing oneself to a "superficial upper class man driving a BMW", yet it may have a negative connotation when ascribed to a ‘plain middle class’ family man taking his children out for a Sunday walk.

This particular way of defining oneself is not unique to my informants but rather part of a much larger discourse on (middle class) identity in India. In the Indian literature on the middle class, modernity and social change, the middle class is generally defined by means of an avoidance of definition, i.e. in terms of what it is not. A common feature in this literature is the accusation against the middle class of being double, dual, in-between, false, superficial and hypocritical. The middle class is "shallow" says Dipankar Gupta (2000:7). It is “insular, aggressive, selfish, obsessed with material gain, and socially callous”, says Varma (1998:123). For André Béteille, the Indian middle class (or “the educated” as he puts it) “suffer from a peculiar form of myopia when it comes to an understanding of their own society” (2000:340). For Srinivas the class suffers from a form of “cultural schizophrenia” (Srinivas 1995:59). These statements are all flamboyant. Very seldom, though, do we see proper attempts at defining more precisely who the people they refer to actually are. Even less often do we find stances where these authors problematize their own position in the issues they are addressing. Paradoxically, the authors belong to the very same category of people whom they address in their works (i.e. the middle, educated, Westernized classes). They have all been extensively exposed to the ‘Western’ world through their involvement in the global intellectual circuit. Yet, the ‘us’ or the ‘we’ forms seldom appear in their writings.

Rather than criticizing these authors for omitting reflexive analysis in their work, I think their writings tell us something important about the constitution of the Indian middle class, i.e. of a class defined by its lack of definition and by its continuous acts of othering and distancing. Already in 1948 D. P. Mukherjee suggested that the middle classes have always been acting negatively. In his words they have always been, and will always be, on the look-out for an enemy. During the colonial era some had found this enemy inside (cf. also Nandy 1983) and turned to reform and rationalism, while more numerous others had found it outside and became ‘anti-British’, ‘anti-Muslim’, ‘anti-Hindu’
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(and the latest in his epoch 'anti-Soviet'). This observation leads us to draw a parallel with the tacit acts of othering vis-à-vis the middle class undertaken by the afore-mentioned authors as well as by my informants.

A lack of self-reflexivity and middle class self-identification unites the authors I have mentioned with their audience. I cannot but feel that the Indian middle class finds a particular pleasure in being attacked by its fellow countrymen (just as much as they vehemently strike back when attacked by foreigners). Mukherjee's Modern Indian Culture (1948) has become a 'classic' and Varma's and Gupta's books have been at the top of the best seller lists. Just as the above-mentioned authors never fully acknowledge the way in which they too are members of the middle class, so a lot of middle class people who welcome such books never really acknowledge that they themselves are the objects of the book's criticism. During my fieldwork I heard a lot of positive comments about Varma's book. But, I saw no one approaching the book with self-criticism. This reminded me of an occasion when one of my informants, while drinking a Coke in a park, expressed to me his disgust for how run-down India is and how Indians do not care about their cities. Having completed the sentence, he took the last sip of Coke from the paper mug and threw it away on top of a pile of rubbish situated next to where we were sitting.

My informants' acts of 'othering', their self-definition of identity in negative terms, their lack of reflexive stances and their moralization about 'other' people offer obvious parallels to the quoted public intellectual discourse on the middle class. The forms through which these young men express their identity make them appear as obvious representatives of the Indian middle class. In the following section I shall look in detail at how my informants stretch this characteristic of the middle class giving it a shape that is particular to their specific generation. In order to do this, I shall shift attention to what Bakhtin (1981) has called 'intentional' hybridity.

mobilized Indianness

Among my informants the capacity to show cultural competence in the act of switching demarcates the belonging to a particular community of educated Indians.25 This community does not share a unified and coherent self-definition; rather they are joined by a common way of
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defining themselves based upon a number of recurrent points of reference. Commonality is expressed by the repeated act of ‘othering’ and by a common use of phantasms. My informants ‘other’ the people they encounter by ascribing to them socially recognizable positions and connotations that they reject and in this way create a particular, negatively defined, position for themselves. In many contexts their hybridity is intentional and used as a ‘weapon’ against other people. This is most obvious when these young men encounter other men, more or less of the same age, who appear to share the same life-world. Provocations are used to test the counterparts’ cultural competence in inhabiting their own hybrid cultural space. They seem to use the capacity to switch in order to signal detachment from people whom they perceive as competitors and to claim at one and the same time a higher position in society. Doing this, my informants mark out their belonging to a specific sub-culture. This discussion will also bring me to the point that, among these young men, being ‘Westernized’ is not always the most prestigious position. Often it is more valuable to be ‘traditional’ and ‘essentially Indian’.

switches in the field of cultural identity

CONFRONTATIONS AT DILLI HAAT

One day I go to Dilli Haat with Rajiv, a 26-year-old man who runs a small import company and who is now planning to enter the world of tourism. Rajiv is about to leave for Italy and is looking for some handicraft products to take along. He has asked me to join him since he thought I could give him some suggestions about what people in Italy like. We walk around for a while. Rajiv is unable to find anything that he considers to be worth buying. Hanging around in the market, Satinder and Sunil, who had come there to watch girls, spot me and approach us. I introduce the young men to each other. Sunil and Satinder, who are generally very sociable and friendly, immediately adopt a new kind of posture and look very serious. Sunil is leaning back scratching his belly and adjusting his sunglasses. Satinder is silent and stays at some distance from us, his eyes exploring Rajiv. After a while, he says that he recognizes Rajiv as someone who had been studying Italian. Rajiv smiles and proudly acknowledges the truth of this assumption, adding that he has also received a scholarship and that his friend Raj, another tour leader specializing in Spanish, is to join him in a few days. Sunil and Satinder, who know
Raj, are surprised and say: "What? Really? Raj?" Rajiv confirms it. Once again Sunil asks "Really? No, come on! Does he have a visa, air ticket and all of that?" Once again Rajiv confirms it. Satinder looks at me and says: "That is so stupid, I told Raj not to do that." His point is that Raj will lose a lot of work by leaving India in the middle of the tourist season. "I even said that to Sunil earlier: if you want to leave, leave in the summer when there is no work" he says, still looking at me. Rajiv is now thrown into a defensive position. He replies that he actually considers Raj's journey to be a good investment for future seasons and that he himself is going to Italy for the same purpose, that is, to eventually join the tourist trade. At this point Satinder, still addressing me rather than Rajiv, says that Raj probably wants to work with Italians just because there is a rumour that they spend a lot of money while touring. He adds that, from his experience, this rumour is wrong. Moreover, he adds, people believe that the number of Italians is rising every year, but there is no guarantee of that at all. "There are already 35 Italian-speaking guides in Delhi so there is no need for more", he says, implying that neither Rajiv nor Raj has any chance of getting into that market. Rajiv again attempts to gain control over the dialogue, and says that anyway for him going to Italy is not something new, as he has already been there once. He asks Satinder if he has also been there. Satinder looks at him and says "three times." Rajiv now falls silent. Feeling tension in the air, I suggest that we go and have a drink. Following my change of topic, Satinder suddenly makes a joke about the fact that his English has become so bad (the conversation was in fact going on in English). During the previous week, he tells us, he was obliged to take an English group for a day. He had a really hard time doing his job in English: "The words only came to my mouth in Italian, that was weird." Rajiv, possibly sensing an opportunity for a quick revenge, proudly intervenes to say that he feels totally fluent in English. "In my family we speak both languages, English is in a sense also my mother tongue." Satinder turns to me and says: "Hindi is my mother tongue, no doubt about that, I'm more fluent in that."

This encounter ended up being a long confrontation between people who apparently occupy similar positions in the social hierarchy. All three of them have studied, all know a few languages, have experience of the foreign world and are, more or less, in touch with the world of tourism. Yet both sides attempt to get the better of the other. During most of the conversation Satinder and Sunil are the ones exercising most control. They keep contradicting and interrupting Rajiv: “No no, wait a second”, “No, it’s not really like that”, “You are entirely wrong about that”. In the beginning Sunil and Satinder promote an image of
themselves as more ‘cosmopolitan’ and experienced than Rajiv. They know more about the travel business. They also know much more about the foreign world, having been there, as Satinder points out, more times than Rajiv. Rajiv tries to do justice to his position by showing his competence in ‘things foreign’; he has already been to Italy, he knows someone at the Italian Cultural Centre, he knows about tourism and, lastly, he speaks English at home. Later on I discovered that his mother did not speak English at all. This shows how Rajiv too was enacting a strategy to obtain a certain status vis-à-vis Sunil and Satinder. The discussion about language marks a change of scene. Instead of striking back along the same lines of cosmopolitanism, Satinder simply states, with pride, that he is first and foremost a Hindi speaker. This permits him to gain control over the situation. The act of switching position here is visibly intentional and his statement ends up being a winning one. After that Rajiv is not really saying very much.

Summing up, during this encounter Rajiv, Sunil and Satinder recognize each other as belonging to a common category. They first study each other, trying to detect the counterpart’s capacity to move in the same life-world. This is tested by means of switches and by the evocation of a series of specific points of reference. Rajiv, at a certain point, is not recognized as being able to follow. Sunil and Satinder end up marking out the difference from him by means of the last switch which locates them as proud members of a traditional Hindi-speaking class.

**true Indianness as a modern stance**

Satinder’s ways of subverting the attempts made by Rajiv by stating that he himself is primarily a Hindi speaker is one example of the contemporary re-evaluation of the ‘local’ that I discussed in Chapter Two. The vignette of the encounter between Satinder and Sunil and the man in the red polo shirt testifies to the same. In that situation my informants (who probably belonged to the same category as the target of their conversation) reacted by positioning themselves as members of the “plain lower middle class”, while simultaneously hinting at their participation in a globalizing world. Vis-à-vis the red polo shirt man, framed as an example of NRI-‘Westernization’, Sunil and Satinder expressed a detachment from the category ‘Westernized’, to which
they otherwise often claimed to belong. Instead, they highlighted their being rooted in the tradition-oriented middle class. They also expressed a suspicion that the man in the red polo was just an average middle class Indian pretending to be something else. This innuendo is a sign of their attempt at gaining a certain superiority as against this man. In their eyes, he did not show their level of cultural competence. His pretending was too obvious.

Sunil and Satinder’s use of the self-definition of “plain middle class people” stands both for detachment from the ‘Westernized’ world and for a deeper knowledge about, and transcendence of, the ‘West’. This permits them to signal superiority and to claim a higher position than the man in the red polo. In the name of their ‘traditionality’ (and ‘middle classness’), yet from the height of their knowledge of ‘things Western’, they give value to their attachment to and rootedness in India. The positions of “plain middle class” and “average Indian” are here reinserted in the hierarchies expressed by the colonial dichotomies in a redefined fashion, where they can stand for superiority and not inferiority. In contrast to the man in the red polo, Sunil and Satinder do not have to pretend anything. The following scene may offer an even clearer example of this.

**CONFRONTATIONS AT WIMPY**

One Sunday afternoon Sunil and I go to Wimpy for a coffee and a chat. The place is quite empty. After a few tours around, looking for the best spot to sit and enjoy something to look at (read girls), Sunil finds a place upstairs. We start talking as usual in a mixture of English and Italian (a language that Sunil had started studying in the hope of getting some work with the Italian agencies). At the table next to ours are two young men in their mid-twenties. A few minutes after our arrival, one of them interrupts us and introduces himself as Deepak. He is wearing jeans and t-shirt and has a wispy beard under his chin. He tells Sunil that he speaks French. I find his statement a little ‘out of the blue’, but I assume that he must have heard us talking Italian. Deepak adds that he has recently come home from Paris. Sunil looks at me, quite unimpressed. Leaning back against his chair, gently scratching his belly, playing, once again, with his pushed-up sun glasses, Sunil seems to exude indifference and lack of interest in Deepak and his friend.

Deepak tells us his story. He was in France and then “overstayed” his visa. Now he wants to go to Canada, but he is scared that his application for a visa might be delayed the moment the authorities find out about his overstay. In a blend of English and Hindi, Sunil tells him loudly that he has committed a major error, and Sunil starts lecturing...
him, looking, however, quite uninterested. He plays casually with his mobile phone, making it twist around on the table, picking it up and then throwing it down on the table almost as if he did not care about this very precious object of his. Whenever Deepak speaks Sunil interrupts him to comment and interpret his remarks to me: "You see Paolo, what he actually means is...", "No, you see he doesn't mean that...". After a while Sunil turns to me and sums up the story. Right in front of Deepak he exclaims loudly in English: "You know, this guy has made all the mistakes one can possibly make, he has overstayed his time in Europe. Now he has to throw away his passport quickly". Then he turns back towards Deepak, shaking his head with patronizing superiority. Deepak changes the subject and starts talking about Paris. He mentions one street in Paris and Sunil stops him at once, correcting what he has just said: "I tell you, that street is not where you say it is, I have lived in France, I have been there so so many times!". Then Sunil adds that, after all, he has never experienced such problems: "I have, say, 150 friends in Europe, I want to go to Sweden? He will help me [pointing at me]. I want to go to Greece? Then I have some other friends there." Suddenly he suggests to Deepak that, since he knows French, he should go to Quebec. Deepak said he was already planning that. He shows us a brochure on immigration to Canada. Very humbly he now asks Sunil if he could have his phone number so that he can ask him questions. Sunil agrees and then Deepak and his friend leave their table. At this point Sunil says to me "He must be a Punjabi, these people, they all migrate."

In this scene too, the various actors involved try to get the upper hand over each other. Sunil first of all shows off how, compared to his counterparts, he is better acquainted with a global world, with its exchanges and mobility. Throughout the scene he displays his possession of higher status and cultural competence than Deepak. His bodily postures, his continuous corrections of Deepak’s statements (made possible by my presence) and his patronizing suggestions highlight the difference between him and Deepak and his friend. Yet, later on he too offers an inversion, showing how he transcends the ‘West’ that Deepak and his friend refer to as a goal to be reached. Like Satinder did in the other scene with Rajiv, Sunil takes a ‘local’ position here proudly stating his lack of interest in (yet deep knowledge of) things Western. Instead, he emphasizes his rootedness in India. Sunil’s closing remark, “they all migrate”, contains a lot of information in this direction. More than referring to stereotypical notions about Punjabis, this sentence is an indirect reference to his own position. It suggests: “I am not that kind of person, I don’t need to migrate.” His final point is
that he, in contrast to those other young men, does not need to go abroad in order to have hopes of a better life. After the conversation, in fact, Sunil stated several times that he does not aim to move to the West. Rather, for him the ‘West’, as he pointed out to me on different occasions, is a resource to be used for the purpose of having a better life in India. Deepak, on the other hand, needs, according to Sunil’s view, to go abroad to get a better life there. Overt attempts at going ‘West’ or as promoting oneself as Westernized are interpreted by my informants as signs of deep provinciality that make these people appear more backward in their eyes. People like Deepak or the man in the red polo shirt are assumed to know less about the foreign world, hence they yearn for it.

The exchanges described above also offer us the opportunity to observe how in matters of cultural identity as well, detachment from the ‘West’ is not put into practice through a demonization of the ‘West’ but rather through its incorporation into their everyday (Indian) life, its disenchantment and trivialization (cf. Chapter Two). Statements of ‘locality’ are, among my informants, made relevant only in relation to both a knowledge and a transcendence of things foreign. The significance of ‘locality’ is redefined by their own practices and statements. That pride and attachment to India are made possible only by an earlier movement towards, and incorporation of, the ‘West’ is suggested in an interview with journalist Nikilesh:

“I lived through that phase of going all gaga over Madonna, Wham and Boy George. But when the economy opened up I had already been exposed to all of that. I had experimented with being cool, dating three girls at a time but in 92-93 I somehow started to find myself appreciating folk-music and Indian art. Today I have a balance. I know I enjoy Rajasthani folk music a lot. I know that in the morning I would probably listen to shlokas because it makes me feel good, like raga and yes, I would like to listen to heavy metal in the evening and when I’m driving, it depends on my mood...Had I not gone through the phase of Madonna and Wham, of experiment, this would not have happened. As Rajneesh said, to be a yogi you first have to be a bhogi. Unless you’ve tasted something you can’t give it up. That’s what Hinduism is about, that’s what India is about.”

Nikilesh reinscribed his attachment to the ‘local’ into the logic of exposure and knowledge of the external world. Quoting the Indian spiritual leader Rajneesh, he shows how this double knowledge and the capacity to live naturally with both life-worlds are central aspects of
his identity. However, the two worlds are in reality integrated. For him, as for most of my informants, being Westernized and ‘global’ is not something attributable to the foreign world but rather an Indian affair denoted by a particular attitude and knowledge of things foreign. This kind of localization is not a matter of closure but rather the opposite, totally different from the one supposedly characterizing people like Deepak and the man in the red polo shirt. Such people are ‘local’ because of, to use Akash’s terms, “lack of awareness”; they do not know enough to be able to make a proper statement about either the ‘West’ or ‘India’. Neither have they had the opportunity to experience the outside world to the same extent.

Nikilesh’s story sums up that of his generation. Having passed through a phase of teenage longing for the ‘West’, he, like my other informants, has learned to incorporate it into their Indian realities. At the end of their twenties they feel that, because of the experiences gained through work and leisure, they have transcended the ‘West’ and find themselves at ease with ‘India’. During one interview Nikilesh expressed his loyalties: “My community is my family, my friends... this is my country, where my roots are, everything I can identify with. I obviously want to travel the world and see everything but this is home.” The stories told by other informants confirm a similar stance. Thirty-four-year-old artist Manish told me how, at the age of twenty-four, he decided to stop studying and reading books. He started to travel around India with his camera in order to “learn about himself”: “That was my school, to learn about my country. I realized I did not need to go abroad any more.”

It may be reasonable to believe that what allows the tourist guides to express identity in terms of traditionality and local belonging, is that they come from less privileged backgrounds characterized by greater interaction with family and the local community. My material, however, shows that this standpoint is shared by most of my informants, regardless of class background. Even among people like Ashwin, Vikram and Rajesh, who, as I said, are more privileged, I have witnessed situations in which someone promotes himself as ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘modern’ and ‘globalized’ only to fall back later on to reaffirming the importance of being firmly rooted in India. Asked whether he would prefer living abroad or in India, Ashwin said: “It doesn’t really matter. I feel comfortable in both cultures. If I had to
choose I would prefer to stay here...the smells, the sounds...this is home.” The example I offered at the beginning of this section devoted to a discussion of ‘hybridity’ is a case in point. A pride in ‘India’ and in being ‘local’ is a marker of a generation of educated young men. It is a standpoint generated by both age and individual background characteristics and highlighted by the practices and statements that I have described so far.

Indianness becomes even more explicitly displayed in situations where my informants are face to face with ‘Westerners’. Such situations also offer a good sense of the notions my informants have of ‘Westerners’. Let me give an example. Manager Ashwin once made friends with a Dutch girl doing her apprenticeship at a multinational in Delhi. Ashwin was fond of the girl but at times she annoyed him with her arrogant comments on how things ought to work out in India. Having been exposed to one last attack on Indian disorder, and particularly the lack of respect Indians show for their environment, Ashwin decided to react. His provocation was to drop some papers on the street right in front of the Dutch girl. As she immediately complained, he cynically replied “Come, on, it’s a good thing, I am giving other people some work!”

Dipankar and Vikram (see the vignette ‘A Meeting at the Dungeons’), who had both studied in America for a few years, told me that there they used to annoy Americans by flaunting their Indian identity. Dipankar gave one example of how they used to enjoy themselves. Once they were at the airport and had been feasting on some Indian snacks, with their strong mixture of spices, onions and garlic. They deliberately invaded the personal spaces of the American passengers with Indian odours. Using their knowledge of foreigners and teasing the negative stereotypes of Indians held by the latter, these young men play games of defiance and resistance to challenge what they see as quite unjustified ‘Western’ arrogance.

the meaning of ‘local’

The idea of the ‘local’ is acted upon by my informants in a variety of different ways and constructed through their exposure and references to the ‘West’. In their view, whatever is connected to locality signals limitation, backwardness and traditionality when it is applied to those
who have not yet had the opportunity to enlarge their horizons. Among college students I noticed that the word ‘local’ (in English) is used as an insult. It is applied to people who come from smaller places and who do not know how to behave in a ‘cool’ way. “Don’t be so local!” is a trendy expression that college students use to deride someone’s clumsy behaviour or old-fashioned ideas. Yet, in relation to those people who share a capacity to move in hybrid life-worlds, attachment to ‘locality’ can be read as the sign of a greater enlightenment and offers a higher hierarchical position that is still firmly grounded in India and Indian culture. This is why my informants proudly state their attachment to locality by calling themselves “real Indians” or “traditional”. Being local as the result of an intensive interaction with and knowledge of the foreign world is a sign of modernity and participation in the interconnecting world. It permits agents to maintain both openness to external influences and solid roots in Indian values and morals.

The ‘local’ is in this way ‘produced’ (cf. Appadurai 1996, Robertson 1995) vis-à-vis the ‘global’ and given a new significance. Through my informants’ own agency the ‘West’, for instance, ceases to be an opposite pole to ‘India’. It is inserted into an ‘Indian’ life-world and used to mark out the agents’ consciousness of the outside. So also does the ‘global’ in the face of the ‘local’. This re-elaboration of meaning makes possible statements like that made by Rajiv during one interview: “Rather than cosmopolitan, I am pan-Indian.” Promoting a redefinition of the meaning of Westernized and cosmopolitan, Rajiv meant that, having lived in many different parts of India during his childhood and adolescence (following his father who is an army officer), he had become ‘indigenized’ rather than ‘globalized’ or ‘cosmopolitan’. This he considered a major development in his life.

Satinder and Sunil offered me their reinscription of the ‘West’ in ‘India’ when they attempted to define what they meant by ‘Westernized’. For them being ‘Westernized’ is synonymous with being ‘educated’. Satinder and Sunil said that they had the good fortune to have “modern parents” who permitted them to study and grow up independently, making their own choices: “We both had the chance to take decisions and get an education; this made us more Westernized in a sense.” As Satinder pointed out, this was very much the result of their parents’ own development. His father did not come from a
Westernized environment, but “his ideas were those”. If Satinder and Sunil are themselves ‘Westernized’, they are so due to influences not from representatives of the ‘West’ but from actors who have already made Western-ness part of India. During these talks, Satinder and Sunil put forward a new way of imagining the relationship between India and the ‘West’ based on their personal experiences.

In the way they reinterpret and act upon their position in society my informants create situations that not only question the meaning of the ‘colonial dichotomy’ but also promote a new moral mapping of the world where India is solidly placed at the centre. The nation is here, to quote Sarah Ahmed “fleshed out as place and person” (2000:99) in an interplay of personal experiences and representations. Like their phantasm of ‘India’, my informants also keep absorbing, refashioning and expelling elements imported from the outside.

**a matter of auto-orientalism?**

Many scholars have analyzed postcolonial identity in terms of stances of “self-orientalism” (cf. Malik 2001) and “affirmative orientalism” (Fox-Genovese 1999) among the former colonized subjects. Others have found a more intriguing perspective in ‘Occidentalism’, which has been presented as an attempted reversal (maybe as Hendry [2001], has suggested, simply the other face of the coin) of the logic of ‘Orientalism’. James Carrier launched ‘Occidentalism’ as a notion able to collect the different “stylized images of the West” (1995:1) present in the non-‘West’ and to address “the collectivizing and characterizing of countries that grew from the European imperial endeavour into a now largely American hegemony” (Hendry 2001:6). ‘Occidentalism’, Spencer has suggested, is a label under which we can approach a varied range of responses to colonialism and modernity (1995:253).

My informants are producers of instances of both ‘self-orientalism’ and ‘Occidentalism’. Nevertheless, I do not find an interpretation of their cultural identity in these terms true to their sophisticated approaches to the ‘India-West’ dichotomy. While the notion of orientalism upholds a clear polarization of these two terms, ‘India’ and the ‘West’ have merged in the life-world of my informants, even if they are approached and referred to as separate realities. As I have shown above, my informants reinscribe ‘Westernization’ within India and its
realities. They at times speak about the ‘West’ as an external, invasive force, but also commonly treat it as part of Indian realities. As I have already said, ‘India’ and the ‘West’ constantly gather meaning from each other. Regardless of the essentializations that they expose us to, my informants thus present the ‘West’ and ‘India’ as entities that have merged so as to generate a new (“third” cf. Bhabha 1994) space. ‘Orientalism’ will not help us here since it keeps categories such as ‘India’ and the ‘West’ well localized and distinct from each other. In an orientalistic light these constitute solid centres from which to address and create representations. Instead, my informants show no particular signs of centring around only one of these two poles. They openly interconnect these poles with each other, switching between them depending upon the context while also cultivating their own versions of both Orientalism and Occidentalism. The latter function as points of reference in their coming to terms with, and talking about, changes taking place in society. Yet my informants have internalized them as extremities to a continuum.

...summing up

The apparently contradictory statements of cultural identity offered by my informants reflect a life-world that has historically been shaped by the merging and exchange of different elements. Similarly, their identity is characterized by a cultural competence in matters of exchange. For none of my informants are there any doubts regarding the fact of being ‘Westernized’, even though they often turn against the figure of the ‘Westernized Indian’. To be to a certain extent ‘Westernized’ yet truly ‘Indian’ at the core, is approached as something natural and obvious and, as I have shown, part of a historically situated discourse in which ‘hybridity’ is ‘organic’. Trishanku’s swinging has indeed become a natural act for this generation of people who have grown up internalizing varied influences. Displaying a capacity to occupy different stances at once is a statement of identity on its own which is at the same time a historical trait of the Indian ‘middle class’. However, these young men also consciously act upon hybridity in order to claim a belonging to a specific sub-culture which accentuates the act of swinging and highlights the importance of being ‘Indian’.
My analysis of these encounters has brought me to acknowledge the re-evaluation of the ‘local’ in issues of cultural identity. My informants are more eager to stress their belonging to ‘India’ than to emphasize melting into a ‘global Westernized world’. The ‘India’ with which they identify is, however, not any kind of India. Their emphasis on ‘Indianness’ is a stance of openness to the outside world, of constant dialogue with seemingly external referents (such as the ‘West’) and thus of cosmopolitan and modern identities in a new fashion. From the height of their knowledge of the foreign world my informants can cultivate an image of themselves as ‘real Indians’ and articulate a ‘modern’ identity shaped by the careful re-evaluation of the relationship between India and the rest of the world. They form a sub-cultural identity which is at once located within educated India and specific to the particular life-world in which they live and the phase in life and history in which they find themselves.

While assessing their own identity, my informants are doing something more than acting upon themselves. They are also re-defining the meaning of ‘India’ and of the outside world. During my interview with Mira she stated that “India has always given space to self-questioning and change.” Following her statement, I am sceptical about seeing the identity stances among my informants as instances of ‘self-‘ or ‘neo-orientalism’. The country is still struggling against the definitions of itself that were imposed on it by the British colonial system. Even today Indian notions about India carry traces of the long history of ‘Western’ domination of Indian thought. The contemporary importance of ‘India’, as a phantasm, in the Indian public sphere as well as in the sphere of my informants’ personal experiences, can be seen as a sign of revolt against this hegemony. In a nostalgic mood so typical of much of life in (post)modernity, India, after having lost itself in the name of the ‘West’, is now rediscovering the importance of idealized ‘roots’. The identity stances offered by my informants speak of new attempts to reconcile the opposed poles of the colonial dichotomy. This suggestion is in tune with McInnes (1998) conclusion that the hegemony of ‘Western’ views was never fully accomplished. According to him, India never offered a passive acquiescence to ‘Western’ rationalism or English education but only a rough-hewn compromise, some kind of balance or reconciliation between modern and traditional, foreign and local, Asian and ‘Western’ ideas. Even the
nostalgia expressed by some of my informants over the loss of values that come with 'Westernization' is a statement of their capacity to view India from different angles rather than a sign of the ontological homelessness that supposedly characterizes the condition of (post-) modernity. It is thus a statement of identity.

1 It may be worth noting the inconsistency in their use of the term middle class, which at times stands for privileged people and at other times for 'average' ones. I shall return to this issue later on in this chapter.

2 Scholars like Lash and Urry (1994) state that, with the enhanced transnational flow of people, artifacts and messages across national borders, signs and images dominate our experience and become our predominant means for identification. As a consequence, identities and places lose 'consistency' and turn into the idiosyncratic constructions of single autonomous sovereign individuals (Heelas 1996, Augé 1996, Jameson 1984, Beck 1999). Scholars have suggested that, in the commercialized postmodern world, we witness a generalized fragmentation of meaning that is expressed in the deterritorialization of space, the detradditionalization of traditions (cf. the articles in Heelas et al. 1996) and the fragmentarization of experience and identities (cf. Beck 1999, Giddens 1991).

3 Roy was the founder in 1828 of the *Brahmo Samaj*, a theistic society for the reformation of Hinduism which became central in the social history of India and especially of Bengal. Regarded as “the prophet of modern India” (Srinivas 1995:78), Roy offered a clear example of syncretism and acceptance of other religions. One of his books was, in fact, entitled *The Principle of Jesus: the Guide to Peace and Happiness*.

4 Nehru even went so far as to adapt his name to British 'capacities'. In order to make life easier for the BBC correspondents he divided his first name Jawaharlal into two, more pronounceable entities, Jawahar and Lal.

5 The *dhoti* is the typical Indian trouser consisting of a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist.

6 Notwithstanding their attempts at repressing the “feminine, childlike and traditionalist qualities of Indians” (Gupta 2000:21, cf. also John and Nair 1998:11) the baboons were suspected by the British of still possessing the qualities of the gentoo, i.e. the feminine, invertebrate man dominated by religion, superstitions and caste-mentality, cf. Gupta 2000).

7 A symptom of this split character of the Congress’s political elite is the fact that Nehru’s Independence speech (Tryst With Destiny) was given in English, a language known by only the select few even though it was intended to address the Indian nation in its entirety. This was an obvious signal that the Indian elite, by declaring Independence, envisioned not only India but the entire world as their audience.

8 Mukherjee colourfully described this class as “the wayward bull that came out of the cattle-breeder’s eugenic experiments to produce a docile cow which would not kick at the milk-pail” (1948:210).

9 As a concept, hybridity is, as Papastergiadis has suggested, “deeply inscribed in the nineteenth-century discourses of scientific racism” (1996:258).

10 Spivak (1993) maintains that the emphasis on hybridity has tended to gloss over issues relating to class and gender; to project hybridity on the subaltern in the Third World is, for her, misleading and also a potential source of global exploitation (cf. Papastergiadis 1996). Referring to a 'Western' context, Hutnyk (2000 and 1996b) suggests that the talk of hybridity is reaching a saturation level and that there is a risk of ending up in a cul-de-sac that will trivialize and undermine the political agenda of deterritorialized and marginalized social groups such as the immigrant communities in the 'first world'. Similarly Ahmad (1995) suggests that hybridity tends to mask both long-term social and political continuities and transformations: “hybridization can become a mechanism for the reconstitution of
dominant identities insofar as the hybrid subject...remains defined against the 'native subject'" (1995: 13).

11 We may also remember Friedman's criticism that "hybrids and hybridization theorists are products of a group that self-identifies and/or identifies the world in such terms...as an act of self-definition...those who can afford a cosmopolitan identity" (1996:81). Hybrid free-floating cosmopolitanism, Friedman says, may look like the equivalent of modernism, but "without the rationalist, abstract and developmentalist project" linked to it (Friedman 1996:76).

12 The flourishing of alternative terms, aiming at defining similar situations to those implied by hybridity, has also characterized scholarly attempts. Terms such as creolization with its more intriguing creative character (Hannerz 1998b), syncretism, contamination, etc. have been used for defining the birth of new cultural expressions derived from encounters and mixing. Hybridity is, however, the most central term in much of the literature on India and post-colonialism and thus the term I choose to refer back to.

13 This is the story of Bhabha's, Gilroy's and Hall's deterritorialized ambivalent and hybrid 'Third World' immigrant among localized, rooted and stable inhabitants of the 'First World'. The work of Homi Bhabha (1990 and 1994) is probably the most obvious example. Hybridity here, in a second level of abstraction, becomes also the analytical instrument of the researcher who aims at understanding these expressions. To this sector of research belong, for instance, the readings of Naipaul's, Rushdie's and Ghosh's novels or of the Asian underground musical movement (cf. Huntyk 1996c) and of a number of different social movements (Melucci 1996).

14 This is highlighted for instance in Ahmad (1995) in Hannerz (1998b) and many other works. In her essay on cultural hybridity, Pnina Werbner raises this question when she asks "what if cultural mixings and crossovers become routine in the context of globalizing trends?" (1996:1)

15 Hybridity, I would add, is acknowledged also by those who do not belong to the educated classes. Through relationships of employment and clientele or simply through the sharing of a slice of urban space it becomes, even though maybe just indirectly, a part of the daily experiences of the lower classes too.

16 Organic hybridity here resonates with Lotman's notion of the "semiosphere". For Lotman, the semiosphere is the totality of semiotic acts within the space of culture (in Alexandrov 2000). In a constant process of influence, transformation and co-existence, the semiosphere is characterized by hybridity and by an oscillation between identity and alterity. Similarly to Lotman's semiosphere, the context in which my informants live is crowded by idioms with different levels and forms of representation which link different epochs and places to each other. Even though this observation could be valid for any social actor in any context, I suggest that it is particularly obvious in a field such as the one I am describing in this book.

17 This view of identity is indeed indebted to the research conducted in the field of hybridity and of postcolonial societies. The articulation of identity in colonial and post-colonial societies highlighted how identities in these contexts were historically shaped in a continuous process of distance and proximity to the 'Other'. According to Papastergiadis, the notion of hybridity has helped to acknowledge that "identity is constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure" (1996:258).

18 This triad is recognizable also outside of the context of my informants. The movie Hyderabad Blues, for instance, is loosely based on the personal story of its director Nagesh Kukoonoor, a young man from Hyderabad who went to the US to study and then became a film director. The movie tells the story of Varun's return to India after twelve years, a story that will make him fall in love with a girl from Hyderabad and get married. Varun is the NRI on his return to India, a person who has lost touch with Indian reality. Asking too many questions, he displays an exaggerated interest in his looks and weight to
the extent that his parents keep getting annoyed with him. Varun’s two best friends represent the other two stereotyped characters of the triad. One is always wearing ‘Western’ outfits, T-shirts, jeans, etc. and the other one only a kurta though generally with jeans and training shoes underneath it.

20 The pakora is a fried wrap containing vegetables, cheese or meat.

21 By “bonds” Shalini meant that he and his friends were linked to their background and were still connected to the environments they came from.

22 I shall describe this dialogue with Akash in greater detail in Chapter Four.

23 Symptoms of the twisted situation of the Indian middle class are collected by these authors in the increased rates of suicide, divorce and stress-related diseases even among children (cf. Gupta 2000, Varma 1998, Srinivas 1995).

24 The only explicit exception is found in one book written by Varma (2001) entitled People Like Us which aims at celebrating, and for once not criminalizing, acts of social commitment by fellow middle class Indians.

25 If we are to follow M. N. Srinivas, an intentional use of hybridity has characterized the Indian middle class throughout its history. According to Srinivas, members of the latter category have always availed themselves instrumentally of their ambiguity in order to create a specific role for themselves in society. With one side of the face turned towards their society and the other towards the West, they became “spokesmen for the West as far as their people were concerned, and spokesmen for their people, as far as the rulers were concerned” (quoted in Singh 1988:140). Thus, my informants still represent a characteristic of the Indian middle class. I suggest that we also need to problematize Srinivas’ statement further and look also at how within the same cultural habitat, my informants recreate differences that place them even more specifically into contemporary society.

26 Dilli Haat is an open-air market in South Delhi (cf. Chapter Five).

27 Shlokas are sacred lines conventionally recited through music.

28 Bhogi stands for the person who lives life thoroughly in all its aspects. In some currents of yoga this is considered to be a necessity for achieving salvation (cf. Favero 1998b).

29 Better known abroad as Osho, Rajneesh was the leader of a spiritual movement that collected followers all over the world. Nikilesh has never been one of his converts, but considers him one of the great philosophers of modern India.

30 Most of my interviews and observations have offered explicit statements regarding this redefinition of the significance of locality and traditionality and their opposites. Once I noticed how Satinder and Sunil were criticizing their friend Pritish (who teaches Hindi to foreigners), for being so possessive about his friends, by saying that he is too traditional: “we have different lifestyles, he is so traditional.”
Chapter Four

"PLAYING KRISHNA"
women, sex, love and marriage

This chapter is about erotic dreams, desire, love, sex, couples, marriage and all those aspects of life that pertain to how my informants relate to young women. “Playing Krishna”,¹ an expression used by one of my informants for addressing the practice of collecting sexual and love relationships with women, is a central aspect of the everyday life of my informants. It occupies a lot of their thoughts and dreams as well as a lot of their time. Watching and commenting on women are prominent parts of their sociability among friends. As I shall describe below, my informants display an ambivalent relationship to women. Even those who, by the time this book is being written, have passed the age of thirty, and thus, according to Indian standards, could be old enough to be in a hurry to marry, are still reproducing a bachelor’s lifestyle. They avoid those women who appear to require too close a commitment. Nonetheless, they all, at least in words, confess to a desire to have a family, an experience they all consider remote for the time being. My informants’ notions and practices regarding these aspects of life denote the way they envision their role and cultural identity in Indian society. They signal the specificities of this post-liberalization generation, who have witnessed the increasing sexualization of Indian public life but who still try to reach a compromise with the life-world of their elders. Some of my informants complain that they missed the “MTV generation” by just a couple years. “Today in college, sex is open, and we just missed it!” Ashwin once commented. Ashwin’s words framed the rapidity of the changes in the field of sexuality and emphasized the differences with his own, more compromise-prone, generation.
I shall introduce this chapter with a *deja-vù* example by returning to the ethnographic vignette of the encounter between my informants and an Indian/European couple used in the last chapter. Whereas in that context I focused on how my informants evaluated the man within a framework of ‘Westernization’, this time I shall focus on the gender aspects involved in the encounter. Here is the description once again.

"SHE'S GOOD LOOKING, HUH?"

A young European woman with an emotionless expression on her face is walking towards Amit, Sunil, Dipankar and me where we sit at our usual place in Janpath Market. She is accompanied by a man in his mid-thirties, slightly overweight, wearing a red polo shirt and jeans, with a pair of sunglasses perched on his head. Lightly tapping my elbow, Sunil points the woman out to me. He whispers in my ear, “She’s good looking, huh?” I suggest that she may be from Eastern Europe and he agrees, looking even more interested. The couple stop in front of the shoe-shine stand in front of which we are sitting. The man puts his foot on the shoe-shine box for a polish as he lights a cigarette. Sunil opens up a conversation with the man, introducing us as “tourist-escorts.” The man replies in a broad Indian-American accent, that he is a computer expert from Texas. Then he starts complaining about India - how everything is dirty, the air un-breathable. “This country is shit!” he exclaims. Displaying a big smile and adjusting the sunglasses on the top of his head, Sunil looks at the woman and tries to involve her in the discussion. The man in the red shirt tells us that she is from the Ukraine and speaks very little English or Hindi. Sunil smiles at her but gets no response. A few minutes pass with Sunil insisting on smiling at the Ukrainian woman. Once the shoes are polished, the couple take their leave. At that point, Dipankar turns around to Sunil and says, “He is not from the States”. Sunil adds “No, he is just using that to get her.” Amit nods in agreement. The usual chorus about the stupidity and superficiality of Westernized Indians begins again.

In the previous chapter I did not address the sexual aura that surrounds this encounter. What made the man in the red polo shirt an interesting partner to get into conversation with for my informants was the company of a white woman. Without doubt she was the real target of their conversation and the focus of their attention. Showing their superiority over the man in the red polo, my informants acted according to a pre-assumption that he considered being accompanied by a white woman as something that would raise his status in the eyes of the people he encountered. This assumption was not made explicit, but was silently present in the gazes and questions put by my informants. On many occasions (which I shall discuss further later on in the present
chapter), I have heard them making comments about the ideas that “average Indian men” hold about white-skinned women. Several times they have stated with pride that “I did not have that attraction to the white skin! I have always known foreigners”, or “Well, these guys are attracted by the white skin!” referring to other men encountered on the streets such as the touts known for harassing female foreign tourists.

Attraction to white skin is for my informants synonymous with a certain kind of backwardness, one that they feel they have left behind, thanks to their occupation and their experiences. They have travelled and also had relationships with foreign (white) women and signal this by marking out their distance from common stereotypes. Being indifferent to ‘white skin’ is a sign of participation in a wider community defined by the continuous interaction between ‘India’ and the foreign world. Evoking phantasms of the ‘West’ and ‘India’, this time in sexual and gender-based form, my informants at one and the same time make statements about their own cultural identity, status and gender. Their attitudes towards white-skinned women function as markers of specific identities and status positions. In reverse, their identities and status act upon their gender identities. This is the way in which I look at gender relations, sex, love and marriage in this chapter, i.e. as arenas for the display of cultural identity.

In tune with the rest of this study I shall relate this analysis to broader discourses and images present in the cultural flow. I shall look at gender through the lens of the relationship between transnationally conveyed ideals of masculinity, femininity, sex and love and my informants’ own constructions of gender identities. Acknowledging that gender is shaped by social constructions specific to culture and history (cf. Foucault 1988, Connell 1995, Caplan 1987), I suggest that these young men’s attitudes towards sexuality, relationships and love express the traits of a specific Indian generation and mark the changes taking place in contemporary India (cf. John and Nair 1998, Mazzarella 2001, Osella and Osella 2000). I shall start by tracing the discourses on gender, sex and love that one meets in Indian public culture. Offering glimpses of history as well as of contemporary society, I shall map the stereotyped images of men and women that are reflected in the life-world of my informants. This mapping will permit me to contextualize my informants’ own notions and images of women, relationships, sex and family. I shall then proceed to analyze the typologies of women
used by my informants in everyday casual homosocial talk. These typologies too are constructed around phantasmatic evocations of ‘India’ and the ‘West’. Like in the last chapter, I shall ask how these issues speak of my informants’ position in a hybrid field. This will then bring me to look at how sex, love and marriage are experienced by my informants and into the interconnections between gender, identity and imagination. It is my hope that this journey into affairs of desire, love and sex will turn into an exploration of Indian masculinity.

sexualized visions of liberalization

Partially naked bodies of white women adorn the walls surrounding the hospital of Lajpat Nagar. Soft porn dreams for the passers-by. Blonde women, aggressive looks, big breasts. Indian macho men, big biceps, big guns, bullet belts.

Gandhi, the desexualized “eunuch for the nation”. He sleeps surrounded by young naked women, and with celibacy frees the nation from colonial oppression. The effeminate Indian man, subjugated, passive and repressed, defeats virile colonial masculinity.

A poster of a statue of a man and a woman embracing hanging on the walls of the Ministry of Tourism in Delhi. Standing behind her, his arms firmly surrounding her breasts, his fingers skim her nipple. The ‘erotic’ sculptures of Khajuraho, one of the great tourist attractions of India, were launched on the international market as “erotic temples in exotic places”. Today they are presented by the Indian authorities as “a celebration of life, belong[ing] not just to India but all humanity.”

One of the thousands of classifieds appearing in the local daily newspapers: “Convent educated, very fair, extremely beautiful, slim, willing to settle in USA, preferably very professional girl for very fair, handsome guy...”. A delicate balancing between sensual beauty and righteous behaviour. Other pages of the same paper show bikini-clad models tempting the eye of the male reader.

An article in the Times of India: “No kissing in public please, we are Indians!” The ruling party the BJP, struggles against the spread of sensuality in society. Together with its allies (the VHP and the RSS) it revives Swami Vivekananda’s ideal of the nation of heroes, accusing
Indian men of the passivity which has led the country to become ‘an emasculated nation’ always under the influence of external oppressors.

Every night on G.B Road in Old Delhi, the hands of women wave in a nightmarish blend of Dante’s inferno and a joyful Diwali atmosphere. From behind windows displaying different colours, the prostitutes try to attract the attention of potential clients waving and shouting behind the metal bars holding them enslaved.

As gathered from these snap-shots, the arena of gender and sex has a contradictory (and fascinating) character in the context of northern India. It has been shaped by the region’s historical trajectories at the crossroads of classical philosophical-religious ideals of masculinity, of Islamic culture and of Victorian prudery. On top of that, the ‘effeminizing project’ (cf. Krishnaswamy 1998) started by the colonial power in order to subjugate the Indian man and the colonial fascination with the hidden beauty of the Indian woman have left important traces. In light of these varied influences it is not surprising that, in northern India, anything linked to sexuality was destined to remain surrounded by ambivalence. In public contexts, sexuality has become a matter of “silence” (John and Nair 1998) and contradictions, always present but seldom to be addressed explicitly. It is not my aim here to offer yet another reading of the history of Indian sexuality nor to look at gender, sex and love as such. Rather, I want to point out how gender relations, sexuality, marriage and family are central topics (maybe metaphors) through which social change is approached and discussed by the Indian mass media as well as among the young men in my study. The following vignette (that I already hinted at in Chapter Three) is an example of this.

**SEX, GUCCI AND AWARENESS**

One day Akash, the young Internet manager, and I were sitting in a fast-food restaurant in South Delhi. Next to us were three young women and two young men. Dressed in the latest fashion, the women wore tight trousers, tops, and thick high heels and carried fashionable handbags. The men were exhibiting rapper-inspired baseball shirts, hippie batik kurtas and sports shoes. Akash and I both noticed the group and engaged ourselves in a discussion on ‘Westernized Indians’. Akash said: “The changes taking place today are only superficial...these kinds of girls even have sex at the first
date...but you know, they may have Gucci purses, maybe even have a different attitude to sex, but they are not aware." Akash argued that this lack of "awareness" is the major problem of his generation: "It does not matter if they wear these clothes and do certain things, they still don’t know about geography, politics, etc."

This vignette shows how natural it is for Akash to turn a conversation about changes in society into one about Gucci purses and 'one-night stands'. The theme of the sexual behaviour of fellow Delhi youths becomes a way for him to address the issue of social change. Akash's reflections mirror public debates in India in which sexuality, love, marriage and changing gender relations are inserted into discussions on the vanishing of morality, on social change, modernity and globalization. The public display of sexuality in advertisements, movies, music-videos, etc. signals the changes taking place in metropolitan India and especially among middle class people. In the context of the liberalization and opening up of the Indian market, "representations of private intimacy" (John 1998:383) as well as sexualized images of men and women have started to invade the public sphere. The urban middle class is the biggest consumer (as well as producer) of such images. It is also among this category of people that we find the greatest changes taking place in regard to institutions such as the family and marriage and in the perceptions of gender.

In contemporary urban India gender relations constitute ways through which social change, modernity and globalization are experienced and debated. They are constructed in response to intersecting discourses on the relationship between India and the outside world (and especially, of course, the 'West'), between 'tradition' and 'modernity', i.e. in a phantasmatic field. The case of the protests organized against the Miss World contest in Bangalore in the late 1990s is a good example of this (while it also shows the birth of a relatively contradictory alliance, i.e. that between the far right and the far left of the Indian women's movements). The women's front of the Hindu nationalist RSS was the most active promoter of the demonstrations against the contest. In their protest, the criticism of the commodified sexualization of women merged with a generalized critique of 'Western culture' and 'globalization'.

The feminist left joined these protests from another angle, rejecting the abuses of women as such and turning against the global market
and the commercialization of life in general. Together these (otherwise enemy) organizations articulated a common protest against the abuses of the ‘West’ on the Indian woman, ascribing, in their criticism, the purity of India to the body of the woman. The protests made it clear that images of the woman and sexuality are hot topics of debate, directly connected to critical discourse about globalization and social change. Moreover, they showed the presence of moral geographies in which explicit sexuality had been located within ‘Western’ culture. The Miss World protest, however, was by no means a unique event. Similar voices echo also in other settings. The authorities, social critics, artists and journalists have joined the crusade against the open change in sexual behaviour in contemporary India.

The fronts of the liberalization of sexuality in contemporary society are many and varied. Sandhya Mulchandani has written that the 1990s was the “Era of Almost Sex” (1999:139), hinting that the sexual revolution had not yet really taken place, even though the discourses had opened up to such an extent that it almost felt as if it had already happened. A report by the condom-producing company Durex confirms this analysis, and states that India has not reached the point of facing a ‘sexual revolution’, but that the changes in this field are many (cf. also Thapa and Raval 1998). The average age for the first sexual intercourse has become lower, the practices of dating and extra-marital intercourse more and more common (cf. also Suri 2000). “Sex has become as banal as shaking hands”, a school principal in New Delhi states, lamenting the growing openness of sexuality (in Suri 2000).

However, the greatest changes are probably found in the realm of the imagination and public representations. Newspapers have enhanced their production of partially naked bodies for the consumption of the readers, turning into tabloids filled with bikini-clad women (most often, but not only, white). Advertisements in newspapers and magazines as well as in the shape of street posters have changed along the same lines. With the decrease in the prices of VCRs, TVs and DVD-players the size of the erotic and pornographic movie market has also steadily increased, despite the fact that, according to Indian law, it is forbidden to sell, produce, display or stock sexually explicit material. The market for printed pornography, ranging from books and magazines (both in English and in vernacular languages) to reprints of
fashionable 'Western' magazines such as Playboy and Penthouse, has survived any prohibitions throughout the years. Last but not least, the cyber spaces for voyeurism and contacting have given signs of being "here to stay", as a journalist has stated (Prakash 1998). Young people fill the internet cafés for endless hours of chatting on sex chat lines and the like. Looking into lists of sites recently opened in the computers it is easy to discover how many (not to say most) clients visit sexually motivated arenas. New spaces for sexual fantasies co-exist today with the open displays of sexuality that appear in advertisements and films. Yet such fantasies are also coupled with the ideals of a romantic and pure (often desexualized) love that appear in movies, songs, music videos and literature (see below).

Mary John asks whether there is any connection between the changing public images of the couple and of sexuality and India’s entry into a new phase of global capitalism (1998). According to her, the entry of images and debates on sexuality, on couples and family life, into Indian public life signals a number of other changes. The new approaches to sexuality both mirror and contribute to question the divide between the private and the public in Indian society (John 1998, see also the next chapter), marking the changing perceptions of marriage and of the family and the birth of a new class of pleasure-oriented consumers (Mazzarella 2001).

The advertising of the *Kamasutra* condom is a good illustration of these changes among the middle classes. According to John, the marketing of this brand of condoms shows how, for the middle classes, "sexual pleasure is 'in' and population control 'out'" (John 1998:386). The *Kamasutra* condom highlights class differences, asserting ‘the right to pleasure’ of the new consumer classes while leaving intact the idea that sex among the urban poor is a sign of underdevelopment and backwardness. In the words of Mazzarella (2001), this marketing reflects and strengthens the idea that “citizens have sex, consumers make love”. Simultaneously, the campaigns also reflect the popularity of essentialized notions of India that I have addressed in this book. They signal “the inheritance of a Hindu erotic past” merged with “the pleasures of the global present” (John 1998:387). The cover of one of the packs of condoms reveals this intense play with phantasms of the ‘West’ and ‘India’. In the picture below, the Indian woman on the left represents a somewhat controlled passion. She is dressed, and losing
herself in the controlling embrace of a man in a pose resembling the erotic statues of Khajuraho (cf. the textual snapshot above). The blonde woman on the right, in contrast, embodies a more aggressive sensuality. Without a man to surround her, she displays her naked breasts in a voyeuristic pose. The package sums up the sexual content of the dichotomy 'India' vs. the 'West'.

My informants acknowledge that the changing attitudes towards sexual behaviour mirror broader changes in Indian society (see below). They also acknowledge that sexual behaviour is a matter of status differences. Recall when Akash said that "the higher and the lower levels of society behave in the same way in what concerns sex". For him, questions of sexuality made social differences visible and indicated that the middle class had historically been selected as the repository of proper moral. The "middle class is fucked", he said hinting at how it got trapped into keeping moral values alive in society. Among my informants issues of gender and gender relationships are thus approached as matters of positioning along scales of status, identity and background in which differences between social positions are put on displayed and played out. Attitudes towards sexuality are also experienced by them as markers of difference between different generations. At a discursive level, they often comment on the lack of moral codes characteristic of the younger generation. Unlike many public discourses, however, my informants perceive no danger or cause for anxiety in the sexualization of public life. Rather, they enjoy it.
They enjoy watching and commenting on the presence of more bodies, more flirts, etc. It gives them, to put it bluntly, more possibilities for "playing Krishna".

Their attitudes contrast with those of the young Hindu nationalists whom I followed at the beginning of my fieldwork. In the interviews I conducted among the ABVP (the RSS student wing) and the VHP (the RSS clerical organ), such reactions against the 'decline of morality' were stronger, directed against the 'West' and formulated in terms of defending Bharat Mata ('Mother India'). During one interview with a young sannyasi at the central office of the VHP, I was exposed to a long critique of the role of Buddha, Gandhi and others which, according to my informant, had led to the passivization of India and consequently to its continuous conquest by foreign powers. Yet, even among young nationalists like him, compromise and paradox were always around the corner. One day I went to interview the leader of the college branch of ABVP at Jawaharlal Nehru University. On the wall facing the main door of the room of this twenty-five-year-old man originally from Bihar was a poster of Bharat Mata in all her beauty, covering the map of the Indian subcontinent. I shut the door only to discover, behind the door, another poster where an Indian Marilyn Monroe look-alike was standing in front of a shining red sports car, holding down her white skirt from flying up.

gendered icons of change

Before I go any further into my informants' notions on gender and the societal discourses that surround them, a brief reference to the history of India's sexuality is needed. This admittedly non-exhaustive account aims at pointing out a number of elements helpful in contextualizing my analysis. Even though the reader will perceive a strong focus on sexuality, I must prevent her/him from treating this chapter as based on an exploration of sexuality as such.

'seminal truth': historical notions of gender

The preoccupation with sex and sexuality in Hindu culture is structured by striking contrasts. The erotic arts and rituals of earlier ages and of popular religiosity are countered by the ascetism and chastity of the
yogis and other ‘enlightened’ people seeking ahimsa (salvation), i.e. unification with the Spirit. Probably the most central concept in Indian theories of sexuality (and particularly important when discussing manhood) is brahmacharya. Brahmacharya is a rather complicated notion that is rooted in ancient meanings but is also of relevance to contemporary reactions to the sexualization of society. The concept refers to a phase in life, corresponding roughly to the period between childhood and adulthood, when the young man has to learn to conserve his energies for the purpose of excelling in physical strength and political skills (cf. Kakar 1981, Eliade 1995, Tucci 1992). It also refers to a practice of self-control and (spiritual) salvation that centres primarily on controlling the flow of one’s own semen. In semen, the theory states, reside both the physical and the mental strength of a man. Its emission is, consequently, a major obstacle on the path to the enlightenment of the individual, a hindrance to his spiritual growth.

The theory of brahmacharya (which Alter has labelled the “seminal truth”, 1997b) is at once medical-biological, a theory of personhood and a moral code that goes beyond the realm of body and sexuality. Yet, it requires the control of kama, the realm of sexual desire and lust, the most unstable aspect of life (cf. Kakar 1990). In the theory of brahmacharya, sexuality is inimical to the fulfilment of personhood in general.

The theory of Brahmacharya gained political and symbolical strength during the struggle against the British. Mahatma Gandhi referred abundantly to it in his campaigning against colonialism. Struggling against the emasculating British colonial power, Gandhi promoted an a-sexualized image of himself to epitomize that of India. He believed that this could be a potential threat to the sexualized certainties offered by the colonial establishment (cf. the textual snapshot above). Gandhi transcended the divide between the ‘real’ (white) ‘manly’ man and the effeminate, passive and emasculated (brown) man (cf. Krishnaswamy 1998). Celibacy, this historically loaded practice, permitted him to defeat at one and the same time both ‘the enemy within’ (the body) and ‘the enemy without’ (the British).

Gandhi was not the only one to bring back classical notions of manhood and celibacy as weapons in the struggle against the invaders. Swamy Vivekananda did so too, even though in a more militant sense, in order to build a ‘nation of heroes’. So also did the
leaders of the Hindu-nationalist movement. Through the speeches of Savarkar, Golwalkar and Hedgewar and the block-based meetings (shakhas) and other activities carried out by numerous sub-organizations, they worked for armed resistance against colonialism in the name of a strong manly Hindu body (Andersen and Damle 1987, Basu et al. 1993).

Brahmacharya is still a living ideal today. Loaded with new meanings, it has been taken up in different settings. Presented both as part of a ‘medical regimen’ (Alter 1997b:276 and 1997a) aiming at restoring health and as an exercise in morality the ideal of celibacy is promoted by yoga centres and Hindu-nationalist organizations, both attempting to attract middle class men supposedly disillusioned with the violence and sensuality of modern life. They try to capitalize on the feeling spreading in Indian society that the integrity of the individual is being undermined by the immoral and unhealthy lifestyles implied by ‘modernity’. To put it according to Alter (1997b and 1997a), the anxiety over the integrity of the male body runs parallel to the anxiety of India as a nation-state. Brahmacharya today symbolizes resistance to modern images of sexual temptation and freedom, offering at the same time a link to India’s proud historical heritage (cf. Chapter Two).

Yoga has become very popular in the urban middle class and among the rich as a way of coming to terms with the disadvantages of contemporary life, such as stress-related diseases, depressions, etc. My informants too are attracted to yoga for different reasons, even though only a few of them have practised it with any regularity. Sunil turned to yoga to overcome his sense of loss after a family tragedy. Getting up every morning at 5.30 in order to join the gathering of the local yoga society in his local park in order to ‘de-stress’ became, however, paradoxically too stressful to him. Even though he was proud of the practices promoted by what he called “an ancient Indian discipline”, Sunil left the group after a few weeks. Nikilesh practises yoga from time to time and sees it as a way keeping his “bad habits” in check and maintaining alive an important part of Indian culture. Nikilesh links yoga to his childhood and to the practices he learned when as a child he was active in the local RSS shaka. Vikram uses concepts drawn from yoga for coaching young tennis players. In the ancient Indian theories about the body he has found a way of attracting rich clients. None of these three young men, however, contemplate the
Hindu ideals of celibacy presented by classical Hindu theories. Rather, they experience them as disturbances and impediments to their pleasure-oriented lifestyles.

**the missing ling:** manhood under threat?

"Men are okay. It's just that women are more okay"

Shoba Dé

Today newspapers, films, etc. are putting forward new iconographies of both men and women that stand in contrast to classical theories of manhood. The new ways of imagining the young successful man and also the young successful woman (whom I will discuss here in terms of her being a counterpart and an image reflected in the eyes of my informants) reflect the changes that India is going through. Even though not equally popular all over Indian society, these new images nonetheless have a resonance among people such as my informants who are consumers of the magazines, newspapers, films and TV-shows where these images are promoted. In this section I shall focus on such essentialized images as they appear in the Indian media and look at the vast yet fragmented array of subject positions that they put forward to young men.

Popular discourse commonly presents the Indian woman as the embodiment of tradition. She is the natural link between the realm of family and culture and social change. The woman is, in other words, an element of balance. In most Hindi movies the good woman fits commonly into what is socially necessary for the reproduction of the community (cf. Uberoi 1998). She never breaks the rules of family and society and is silently subjugated to the will of man. Yet, if we look at the pictures below, which I have collected from Indian newspapers and magazines, we get a very different impression. The women presented there are sexualized and in no way appear as living embodiments of tradition. They challenge the viewer and seem to exercise a certain aggressive control over themselves and over the potential consumer of the image.
The young women depicted here appear as symbols of change and of increased agency, especially in the field of sexuality and sensuality. This is mostly visible in images where they appear side by side with men. A lustful woman is lying on top of a man in picture number three. A woman is caressing a man's buttocks in picture four. A woman is showing lust by closing in on a man in picture six. The young man in this picture demonstrates a certain softness; he looks languidly towards the camera and appears both more curved and shorter than her. There is no doubt that the women in the images express more agency and initiative than their male counterparts. This new woman is sexy and possibly even "naughty" (cf. Chowdhury 1998). She displays her body while keeping control of men. She is wholesome and intelligent but does not have to hide her sexuality, which in these campaigns is alluded to quite explicitly. John (1998) suggests that the female capacity to at once be sensual and have relations with men,
harmonizing home and career, is an ideal more and more recurrent in today's advertisements. We may argue, in line with Sircar's (1995) analysis of Hindi movies, that even if these women continue to be defined primarily in terms of their sexual attractiveness to men, in these pictures they do so in an innovative (foreign-inspired) way filled with agency and forwardness no longer simply reflecting the needs of tradition and family. Furthermore, these images also disrupt a historically recognizable boundary. A woman no longer needs to be white in order to be displayed in the mass media as attractive or sexually forward. She is a modern Indian woman, able to be Indian while dressed in 'Western' clothes.

The agency represented by these new women becomes even more explicit when we compare them with their male counterparts. In the context of the magazines that are read and viewed by Indian middle class people we are offered the following icons of the new middle class man.
Contrary to what one may expect to happen, it is the man who is inserted here in the context of the family. Domesticated and softened by children, teddy bears, bathrooms, grandmothers and fax machines, the new young middle class man is no longer the hard brat who 'goes West' and is surrounded by sexy blonde women. Rather, he is a soft character, offering a link between change and tradition symbolized by the recurrent presence of family scenes. He dresses 'Western' (or as in picture eight, in a hybrid ‘Westernized’ form), yet he embodies the goodness of change and strikes a balance between being modern and Westernized and being Indian. The director of a well-known modelling school in Delhi revealed to me during an interview that “most advertisement companies today are looking for slim, soft-looking men, they no longer want to have bulky aggressive types”.

These new images of man and woman articulate the theme of change. The woman is depicted as an immodest "desiring subject" (Sircar 1995:382) and the man is presented as tamed. John (1998:386) suggests that, in response to the demands of a globalizing society, women “are changing far more than men”. But, are not men changing too? When compared with the old-fashioned moustached rapist of Hindi movies (cf. Kakar 1990), what do these images tell us about the new identity of modern man? In this context of changing perceptions of gender identities it is not surprising to find voices complaining about the loss of a clear masculine identity (cf. Dé 1997, Mulchandani 1999).

One example of this is the photographic exhibition The Missing Ling to which the headline of this section refers to. Through a series of shots of deforestation in India, thirty-six-year-old photographer and film director Ashim Ghosh plays with the concept of castration. Ghosh created this exhibition as a provocation built on the theme that modernity at one and the same time leads to both deforestation (portrayed as many felled trees which resemble felled lingams, i.e. Shiva’s phallus) and the loss of gender identities. According to him public debates about women have meant that maleness has been lost from sight: “Personally I like the thing [the discussions on women] but then I feel that my role is unclear...there has been so much talk about women in the last few years that many men have started feeling uncomfortable with their position...they no longer know what they stand for.”
We need to understand whether these new images, besides each representing on its own a redefinition of specific gender identities, are actually mirroring a change in gender relations or creating momentum for such a change. To attempt to answer this question I shall now plunge back among my interlocutors, looking at how these images of men and women express themselves in their daily lives. I start by looking at their own ways of ‘cataloguing’ women and proceed, from there, to address their own displays and images of masculinity. I shall do this by approaching first the ‘sexual gaze’, then issues of love and marriage.

**looking at women**

"Indian men have more sex in their minds than in their groins"

Kushwant Singh

Among my informants different women awaken different types of thoughts on sex, love and marriage. Their discourses on women give another perspective to their views of their cultural identity, again making visible how imagination and ‘phantasms’ are evoked in everyday life in order to make sense of their life-world. ‘India’, the ‘West’, ‘modernity’, ‘tradition’, ‘local’ and ‘global’ are once again the terms through which they commonly define women as well. I must warn the reader that in this section women will appear as the ‘objects’ of my informants’ gazes, sighs, pains and longings.

Before I present how they categorize women, however, a few words are needed to describe the situations in which my informants encounter women. The public places that I often describe in this study are generally only places of voyeurism. There, my informants meet each other to look at and comment on women, but seldom have opportunities to approach the latter. These moments of homosociality, however, are central situations for observing both their typifying of women and their constructions of masculinity. In the comfort of a street environment where they feel at home (cf. Chapter Five), they are offered a vast array of bodies that can be looked at and that get
analyzed in the light of the phantasms. The women with whom they have closer contact are generally encountered in more ‘private’ settings. The tour leaders meet foreign and Indian women mostly through their job. I have also witnessed love affairs starting at the language schools they attend, or with neighbours or friends. My more privileged informants meet women commonly at parties, at work and through friends. Even though these young men do not spend time on the street (cf. Chapter Five), moments of homosociality are recreated in the setting of a disco, a pub or a coffee shop. Sitting in the company of men, they debate for hours sharing details about girls they have been dating or commenting on those passing by. Thus, among all my informants, regardless of background, discussions about women are recurrent and important moments of confrontation with their life-worlds and their masculinity.

categorizations of women

The dreams that my informants have of women condense a number of classical representations to be found in the accounts of Indian sensuality and sexuality. Classical Hindu treatises have presented women as ambiguous and subordinated to male control. The notion of brahmacharya, as I explained earlier, demands from a man the capacity to resist kama, the realm of lust, instinct and pleasure, and ultimately to resist women. The protection of male energy requires a certain control of the woman, which at times turns into her desexualization (cf. Kakar 1990). In classical India we find an image of the woman as a temptress (tempting the very core of masculinity, i.e. brahmacharya) but also as an idealized “object of worship or adoration” (Kakar 1990:107) represented by the role of the mother or the loving wife. Both these images re-appear in much contemporary public culture. In Hindi movies, for instance, it is common to find a female character who threatens male identity and who has to be dominated and subjugated either through violence (as in many rape scenes in many Hindi movies), or through denial and asceticism. This could be the case also of Deepah Mehta’s film Fire (which is, however, not a product of the Hindi movie industry yet of an Indian expatriate), in which a wife is ignored by her husband because of his search for mental peace. On the other hand, the woman is also commonly raised
to be a symbol of purity and love and made to represent the continuity of family and community (cf. Uberoi 1998, Sircar 1995). In a redefined fashion, such notions and images appear among my informants where they result in a typifying practice attributing different idealizations to different prototypes of women.

A walk in the back-streets of Connaught Place. Satinder, Sunil, Bharat and I enter a street where lotteries and gambling take place. Big boards display the winning numbers on the back walls of the buildings looking down on CP. We walk around in the street, finding no interesting place to sit and end up back on CP. Satinder and I get an ice-cream and Sunil a cake. A mobile phone rings. Not mine, not Sunil’s. The usual game of "whose phone is ringing?" takes place. Satinder answers and starts right away speaking Italian. On the basis of the smile on his face, Sunil and I guess it is a woman. Satinder smiles broadly and speaks softly, calling the person linked to him through the cell-phone "dear", "love". I hear him saying "Do you still have the bruises on your back, dear?". Then a pause. "Hope your husband doesn’t see them!". Then, laughter. Satinder chats a little more, while Sunil I and focus our attention on him. After several minutes of chatting, Satinder rings off promising to call her back. He turns to us, "She will call me back before I have time to do it". Satinder tells us that this woman was on the tour the week before. She’s 28, they had sex in her room and apparently, because of some accident while they were, to use Satinder’s words, "in the act", she fell and was bruised on her back. I have to admit that I had problems believing this story, as well as many other stories of love and sex with tourists they had been telling me. I must have looked doubtful since Satinder immediately showed me some letters written by her and some other tourists that he had taken with him that day. The writing of these ladies was perfect. The letters were full of descriptions that could neither be misinterpreted nor be fakes. They spoke about love, about Satinder being so mysterious, yet so charming, about India and love for that country. The letter by the woman that he had just spoken with on the phone was full of love, of attempts at understanding Satinder’s feelings and intentions with their relationship, of promises of coming back to India soon, and invitations for him to visit Italy. I asked him if he was in love with any of these women and his answer was very straight: "Absolutely not, I just want to try them". "Try them", a common expression, for him means having sex, enjoying women. Satinder added proudly: "I don't fall in love easily". The discussion slipped smoothly into stories of sex with tourists and Sunil delighted his friends with some details from his experiences. They told me that while on tour they generally have to arrange for their own accommodation. So, if they want to stay in the same hotels as their clients they have to pay for it themselves (even though they generally get a special price). Both
Satinder and Sunil said that they sometimes sleep in five-star hotels if they find a "nice lady who seems to be a possible victim". We had now reached the fence on Janpath market and sat down continuing our chat and looking around us. Satinder suddenly exclaimed ironically: "My ultimate dream is to fuck an Indian girl, not a Westernized one but a real Indian one." The evocation of this category of women inspired me to ask how one could distinguish between "Westernized" and "non-Westernized" girls. I first asked why he was dreaming of sex with a "real Indian" girl. He replied: "Basically, it's because they are difficult to get". Then I asked how one recognizes a "Westernized" girl. The answer was amazingly obvious: "Easy! They are those who fuck!"

The above scene offers a tight condensation of the categories of women referred to by my informants and of their attitudes towards them. Women too, just like they do with other people, are typified according to the categories 'real Indian', 'Westernized Indian' and 'Western'. Yet, in contrast to the broader generalization that my interlocutors make about people in general, these categories, when applied to women, gather moral momentum. They refer back to the phantasms of 'India' as the locus of morality, purity and romanticism and the 'West' as that of freedom and unconstrained sexuality.

**the myth of the white skin**

Among my informants as well as in much contemporary Indian public culture, there is a notion that white skin has a particular significance and is associated with particular moral values. Fair skin, to begin with, is something immediately associated with beauty, the 'West' and certain behavioural characteristics, such as being loose, immoral and 'fun'. Half naked, white-skinned women are displayed in the posters for blue movies hanging on the walls of Indian cities. White is also the skin colour mostly displayed in Indian magazines and newspapers. In the matrimonial ads of daily newspapers, fairness is used, aside from other qualifying factors such as education and income, to enhance the attractiveness of the young woman offered for marriage. Similarly, successful Indian actresses and models are generally light skinned.

Mrs. Jayal, the chief editor of the youth magazine Teens Today (cf. Chapter One) told me that Indian men are attracted by white 'Western' women. They link sexual arousal with skin colour. "Blonde and white is
mischievous” she said, and “Indian men like to be surrounded by these outrageous things”. White is nothing but the negation of black, a colour which in Hindu culture means fear and revenge and occurs in popular religiosity as the colour of the black goddess Kali who takes her vengeance on male demons, Mrs Jayal stated. Her words echoed those of Geeta, a twenty-one-years-old female student. Geeta told me that in colleges, schools and universities “girls nowadays don’t even say that another girl is beautiful, they just say she’s fair...oh, she’s so fair!” The disgusted reaction of a young female professional when one of her bosses at the company where she worked once told her in private “You’re very fair” testifies to the same associations. She immediately felt that he was “making a pass” at her. Just as she had felt and suspected, time proved her right. Skin colour is far from neutral in these matters.

My informants too take part in this discourse on skin colour making it clear that they think the attraction is felt by both men and women. A common statement made by young men in Delhi is that “Indian girls are mad about white skin”. At every new encounter, especially with young students, I have been exposed to jokes and comments about me and how easy it must have been for me to “get” an Indian girl. My skin colour in itself was assumed to open up opportunities for me. For instance, Nusrat, a twenty-five-year-old Kashmiri travel agent working on Janpath, one day joked in front of other friends that Indian girls would indeed be interested in my white skin. He added, “Still, they may think you are only interested in sex”.

Talk about white skin occurred mostly among my tour-leader informants. As I described in Chapter Two, tourism is surrounded by the aura of potential sexual encounters (cf. Wagner 1977, Dahles 1997). Since it is an occupation offering many opportunities for meeting foreign women, it is not so strange that my informants have developed a particular position on the issue of women and white skin. The tour-leaders, however, subvert the conventional meanings of the attractiveness of white skin. This subversion once again functions as a statement of their identity. When Sunil, Ramesh and Satinder discussed the killing of a ‘tourist-guide’ by two fellow ‘guides’ at the Red Fort (cf. Chapter One) Sunil pointed out that the man “must have been attracted by the white skin”, turning the attraction into a lack of sophistication on the part of the rick-shaw whalla.
In a different context, a young tourist guide from Khajuraho once told me, while presenting himself and telling his story, that he took up tourism only because of its economic opportunities. He explained this by referring to the common stereotype attached to people working in tourism: "I did not have that attraction to the white skin! I have always known foreigners." A certain attitude towards white skin is, thus, a marker of a specific cultural identity and status. Being indifferent to 'white skin' is a sign of participation in a community which shares certain values built on an interaction between India and the foreign world. Notwithstanding this, my informants use the term white skin to make themselves understood and to address certain ('Western') attitudes towards sexuality. The following vignette may offer an example of how 'being Western' is used, however, to refer to a supposed attitude towards sex rather than being an issue of race.

Sunil and I are standing on Janpath in the late afternoon when darkness has already fallen. Sunil notices a girl passing by. She is embraced by a Kashmiri man in his early thirties. "I saw that girl at 3.30 today, she was alone" Sunil tells me. Now she was hugging the guy and following him around. "I look up to these Kashmiri, they can fuck up whomever they want to", he exclaimed. Sunil pointed out that by that he meant that these men "fuck" female tourists both literally as well as symbolically (that is, cheating them over money). "By this time, you see, he has already fucked her and maybe taken her money or made her buy some ticket for double the price". He told me about a woman who dated one Kashmiri and spent up to Rs. 30-40,000 during a few days. "She still felt it was OK because she wanted to have fun", Sunil said. The girl we were watching now was rather overweight and dark skinned. She was a tourist for sure. Sunil, notwithstanding the colour of her skin, and without knowing her, called her a "Westerner". He said she was definitely not Indian but that she looked "kind of like a mestizo or something". We then observed the same Kashmiri guy leave the woman on the other side of the street and then hurriedly introduce himself to some tourists to offer to take them to the "Kashmiri-emporia street", the one behind Janpath market. I was puzzled by Sunil's quickness in making judgments about what was going on. He said that all this game was a matter of souvenirs, tickets, drugs and sex. "Everybody would go for that here."

Besides giving one more perspective on the stereotyped ideas of the 'Western woman' to be found in my informants' life-world and a sense
of the sexual aura that surrounds tourism, this vignette illustrates that the distinction between 'Indian' and 'Western' is not made just on the basis of race and skin colour. The presence of this girl in the company of the Kashmiri tout and perhaps her apparent looseness, classify her as a tourist and confirm the stereotype of 'Westerners' as morally unrestrained. The woman in question falls into the category 'Western', regardless of the fact that she is dark skinned, just because she appears to be loose and is easily "fucked" by their Kashmiri colleague. Not only white 'Western' women are the centre of a gaze defining them as easy sexual objects. The same happens to other women who are not white, but who belong to the category of strangers passing through India. Japanese girls, for instance, are a frequent topic of discussion among all the people I have encountered all over India. Bharat, the twenty-nine-year-old tourism worker, frowned: "they sleep with whomever, rickshaw whalla, whomever".

So far I have addressed mostly the tour-leaders, but the encounter with foreign women is an aspect in the lives of most of my informants. Being with a foreign woman represents for all of them freedom and escape from the bonds of Indian society. They suspect that traditional 'boring' lifestyles may be reproduced by Indian women. Yet, none of my informants cultivate an idyllic or idealized image of the foreign woman. She does not have any intrinsic qualities that go beyond those of Indian women. Only, she is more free and detached from Indian tradition and values. To my informants the 'Western' woman is not, however, just an icon or a topic of discussion, but also a part of their everyday experience. My informants have all had personal relations with 'Western' women, either in terms of friendships or client relations, or sex and love relationships. When they refer to these women they evoke the conventional imagination about them that appears in much Indian public culture, but they also question these myths. On the level closer to stereotypical representations my informants present the 'Western' woman as 'fun' (at least in comparison with Indian women) and as more free and independent than Indian women. Yet, due to the same representations, the 'Western' woman is also an object of suspicion and at times not to be trusted (see Ramesh's story below).

On another more critical level, however, my informants differentiate and problematize the notion of the 'Western' woman to a greater extent than appears to be done in public culture. To them, there
are ‘Western’ women who are “easy” and those who are not. My tourism informants often point out that, whenever they have been 'seriously' involved with a ‘Western’ woman, she has belonged to the latter category. This is evident in Satinder’s comment “But she was not the bitch18 type” when he was talking about a love affair he had with a tourist. Moreover, they state that when commitment is there, all the differences between ‘Indian’ and ‘Western’ cease to exist, in the name of love (see below). Their distance from conventional representations is mostly visible when these young men are faced with people like the man in the red polo shirt. On such occasions, as we saw, they show how the fact of having had personal interactions with foreign women has made them sceptical of myths such as that of the white skin.

The critical attitudes to ‘Western’ women held by my informants act as markers of their cultural identity and status and demarcate a cultural competence suitable for India’s growing involvement with the outside world. Their questioning of conventional representations of ‘Western’ women functions as a statement of the difference from those other young men who blindly attempt to have affairs with these women, guided by the expectations generated by popular movies and advertisements. Before I conclude this discussion I need to break down a stereotype. Young male tourism workers in the ‘South’ are conventionally expected to be fascinated by white ‘Western’ women. In an article on the “new gigolos” Dahles (1997) has argued that for such young tourist guides sexual relations with foreign women constitute opportunities for enhancing their living standards (through the financial support of rich foreign women, cf. also Wagner 1977) and for raising their status in local society. I do not aim here at questioning the validity of Dahles’ observations which are based empirically on material collected on tourist touts with a different background and education from my informants. Yet, I must stop the reader being misled by the common stereotype, partly reproduced by Dahles, of the sex- and status-hungry young tour-leader blinded by white skin. In contrast to that expectation, my informants gain higher status by distancing themselves from myths such as that of the attraction of the white skin rather than by reproducing them, and by idealizing the Indian woman in contrast. The attraction to the Indian woman is a sign of their cultural identity in contemporary changing India and also of the popularity of ‘India’ among them. This will be the subject of the next section.
The attraction of Indian beauty

If white 'Western' girls are 'more fun', we would expect them to be the central object of the appreciation of beauty and of sexual desire. Yet, it is often the Indian women who get most of the intense and transgressive looks and thoughts. Even though my informants always direct their gazes and actions first towards 'Western' or 'Westernized' Indian women, their deepest appreciations of beauty come when they meet someone dressed in a traditional Indian way, with long black hair gathered in a plait. Even though they appreciate the freer way in which Westernized Indian women display their bodies, they are ambivalent in their judgments and at times also unappreciative of their looks. The relation my informants have to the 'Indian woman' deserves some attention.

Indian women presented in the media, and especially those who dress 'Western' and look cosmopolitan, are not necessarily considered to be attractive by my informants, whether they are Hindi movie actresses, advertisement models or VJs (i.e. video disk jockeys). During the many sessions watching TV with my informants I have gathered that the dancers of the Bollywood movies are "vulgar", the VJs of Indian MTV and Channel V are "stupid", and so on. This contrast with the point of view promoted by many Indian critics who suggest that the idols of MTV work as points of reference for metropolitan people aged between 20 and 30 (cf. Varma 1998). My informants treat these women rather as anti-idols and as signs of the already discussed 'superficiality' of the Westernized Indians. One night, while I was watching Channel V at Ashwin's place, my host and two other young men started to attack the VJ running the show of the hour. A young girl in tight red trousers and orange top was delivering information about the latest clothing trends in India. Ashwin and Nikilesh broke out: "Look at her! She must be sixteen!", "She has no breasts!", "She's never seen a bra!", "She should go and hide!" Young women who imitate these different role models are considered even less attractive.

Remember the description of my visit to the Sports Bar at the Radisson Hotel together with Ashwin and Nikilesh (in Chapter Three). On that occasion my informants made fun of the group of young Delhi'ites who had gathered around the billiard tables. These young men and women were dressed in the latest fashion and displayed movements and gestures with the billiard-cue that appeared to be
taken, according to Ashwin, from The Colour of Money (the popular movie on billiards with Paul Newman and Tom Cruise). One would have expected my two informants to be attracted by the young girl dressed in tight black trousers and white top who was leaning against the table, sipping from a bottle of beer. Instead, Ashwin and Nikilesh, as I already mentioned above, burst out: “Those idiots on channel VI!” “Look at those people, they look like an advertisement!”

My informants keep a largely sceptical distance from such visibly Westernized Indian women, but they know that these women are their most likely potential partners. In order to understand their approaches to these women, we need to reconsider what they ascribe to the concept of ‘Westernized’ in these contexts. As one of my informants said in the vignette above, “Westernized are those who fuck!” That the dimension of sexual morals is the key to understanding the typology was obvious in the description Sunil once gave me of a friend of his, a girl he used to date for a while. According to him she was a “Westernized girl”. When I asked him what he meant by that, he said that she lived in a good residential area in South Delhi, that she had a car and used to go out at night to discos, pubs, etc. According to Sunil, she was “fun”. These superficially innocent details, conveying implicit assumptions based on where she lived and what she used to do in her free time, were charged with sexual meanings and made her at once both “Westernized” and (sexually) interesting.

Despite these sexualized comments on ‘Westernized’ women, most of my informants think that Indian women are more beautiful than most other women, and even more so when they wear traditional clothing. However, they also expect that an Indian woman, regardless of how ‘Westernized’ she may appear, will always ultimately represent Indian values: “A Westernized Indian goes out, has sex, etc. but she is still Indian”, Satinder once said. This is not an entirely positive expectation. Indian women are always suspected of wanting more than they appear to. Indeed, it is recognized that they have advantages over ‘Western’ women, one being that they move in the same world as these young men (as my informants often pointed out in these discussion, “After all, Paolo, we are also Westernized”). Yet, Indian women also constitute potential threats of a boring family life. As Ramesh told me, “Indian girls are investments”. A young man must give them certain guarantees before being able to have a sexual relationship with them.
Indeed the guarantees Ramesh referred to are those of seriousness and commitment. Whatever one does, "it takes time" to establish a (sexual) relationship with them. As Sunil added, the problem with Indian women is that "it takes too long, maybe one year and then you can never be sure" (...of having sex, of course). The fears they raise are grounded both in the essentialized idea of Indianess that I have discussed in earlier chapters and in the imputed superficiality of the changes taking place in India (see above).

Another assumed setback linked to Westernized Indian women is that, in spite of their openness, they are not considered to be as experienced in matters of sex as 'Western' women are. Referring to this Sunil once retold one of his first sexual encounters:

"I had an Indian girlfriend once, when I was working at the YMCA and we used to have sex...She loved sex, she was a great sucker, she used to do it in my office but we never really fucked since I could not find the hole. With Western girls it's easier because they help you with that."

Nusrat summed up all these details when he explained why he did not like Indian girls:

"When you have sex with them they are no fun...with Western women it's better. You enjoy, they enjoy...I would prefer to marry a Western girl, Indian girls are too demanding, they want to have you there all the time...Western girls let you have your own life".

My informants also base their judgments of attractiveness on simple physical evaluations of the bodies of these women. Bodies are "semiotic systems" (cf. Zarrilli 1996) that communicate something about a person's identity and about the influences acting upon her. 'Traditional' women and women of the upper class are commonly expected to be 'fatter' than Westernized ones. An overweight woman communicates to my informants a rootedness in values detached from their own. She definitely does not stimulate comments of beauty and arousal. Yet, even a girl who is too visibly following the latest fashion and whose body is too slim (such as the VJs on TV) does not match their taste and is experienced as distant from their life-world. The arena that probably expresses these attitudes the best is that of pornography. Indian pornographic movies and magazines display what my informants call "fat, ugly, disgusting women". My informants all show disgust for bodies exposed there while instead they find the bodies of
‘Western’ porno actresses “beautiful” and “sexy”. One of the funniest and most bizarre events during my fieldwork was when one of my informants handed over to me a video-CD containing what he called “a movie on Kamasutra” wrapped in a brown cover. When I watched it I discovered that it was a Penthouse production in which a blonde big-breasted woman, a slim Thai woman and two muscular men were ‘pedagogically’ introducing the viewers to the secrets of ‘the Indian art of Love’ (as it was called in the movie). When I expressed my amazement to the donor and pointed out the irony of the fact that he, an Indian, gave me, a ‘Westerner’, a ‘Western’ movie on the Indian Kamasutra, he simply said “yeah, but it’s beautiful, huh?”

My informants appreciate the beauty of a slim, but balanced, body. The “body beautiful” (Featherstone 1991) that marks the presence of global consumer culture and of ‘Western’ ideals of the body (cf. Johansson 1998, Bordo 1993) in my informants’ life-world, is their object of desire. They make aesthetic evaluations that are in tune with the ideals of beauty expressed in the new advertisements that I described above. Yet, these female bodies become even more attractive when they are devoid of the exaggerations (in slimness and clothing style) that characterize ‘Western’ consumer culture. Bodies need somehow to be a little ‘Indian’ to fit the taste of these young Indian urbanites. The apotheosis of beauty seems to be a not too slim, yet ‘modern’ and trim body decorated by signs of tradition such as a salwar-qamiz or long black hair. Their appreciations of beauty too are constructed within hybridity. A hybrid body containing and displaying signs of the encounter between India and the ‘West’ is what best meets their taste.
on love, couples and marriage

"The husband is the God which women have…

The husband’s grace and Heaven
are equal in the estimation of a woman…

If the husband that is poor or diseased
or distressed were to command the wife
to accomplish anything that is improper or unrighteous
or that may lead to the destruction of life itself,
the wife should without any hesitation accomplish it."

Mahabharata

For my informants as well as in mainstream Indian public culture, love belongs to a different sphere from sex and sexuality. Love is an idealized experience in which particular visions and dreams of women and culturally shaped notions of heterosexual family relations converge. Marriage and life as a couple are, in their view, also essentially different from love.

Contemporary Hindi movies sing the praises of romantic love. In the blockbuster movie Dil Chahta Hae (released in 2001) a young man and a young woman go to watch a movie together. They have earlier been introduced to each other, against the will of both of them, by their respective parents in an attempt to arrange a marriage. On that occasion the young man, after having panicked at the news of his parents’ attempt, confessed to the girl that he had no intentions of getting married soon. She agreed and told him that she was actually in love with someone else. Nonetheless, with time the two have become friends and one day they decide to go to the movies together. Walking into the movie hall the young man looks thoughtful. Recently he has discovered that he feels something for her, but has never dared to tell her so, in order not to intrude into her love story and her private life. The movie begins and there they are, sitting each with a can of freshly popped corn. Suddenly the movie shows a ballet. Men are tap dancing, dressed in white old-fashioned tuxedos. The two friends laugh and enjoy the show. But suddenly the young man recognizes himself as the main character in the ballet. He looks around and then sniffs the popcorn, wondering whether he had been drugged. Surrounded by beautiful
women and handsome men he is there on the screen, dancing and singing away in the 1950s. No one notices this but him. Then the movie offers a close-up of one woman who has only shown the back of her head. She turns round and there she is, the woman sitting next to him and the object of his recently discovered love. Love has thrown its first spark. Now it is her turn to be amazed. She jumps on the chair and her popcorn flies in all directions. The ballet goes on, travelling through a parody of all the major trends in Hindi movie history. In the last scene the two look at each other and then stand up staring into each other’s eyes. In a funny inversion of roles, the crowd sitting with them in the movie hall turn into a crowd of actors who start to dance surrounding the newly formed couple in a joint hymn to love.

In love

It is not particularly easy to carry on an anthropological discussion of something as vague as love. “Love is love. No definition of love can tell about love anything which is not already part of the term love itself”, says Lombardi Satriani (1994:145). Or as Deleuze and Guattari say, love is not a physical phenomenon or a particular entity, but it is “the essential reality of human beings and nature” (1996:5). Yet, as Lombardi Satriani points out, “the object of desire is the result of a cultural shaping, and thus, a precise historical formation” (1994:145). Love does not happen in a vacuum but rather expresses different visions and practices regarding gender relations, man- and womanhood.

In the case of India, much as sex is silenced and vague, love is such a prominent topic of discussion that it is difficult to describe it without falling into obvious stereotypes. A lot of work has been done on cinematographic expressions of love and gender relationships (cf. Uberoi 1998, Nandy 1998b, Kakar 1990, Derne 2000), less about how these images are mobilized in the everyday life of ordinary people. What I am interested in here is to look at how my informants characterize, experience and describe that vague essence called love. Like the characters in many movies, my informants experience a big gap between sex and love and between love and marriage.

Satinder, for instance, is always detached and cool when it comes to women. As I mentioned above, he likes “playing Krishna”, i.e. “trying” all kinds of women, never displaying to them his innermost thoughts and feelings. Yet, he has been deeply in love once. The woman was
from southern Europe. They had met during a tour of India and Nepal which he had guided. After that tour they kept in touch by letters and phone calls. A few months later she was back in Delhi in order to spend three weeks with him. When Satinder told me about this love affair, his best friend Sunil was with us. Sunil intervened during the telling, saying “That’s the only time I have seen Satinder really in love. You should have seen him!” Satinder confirmed: “I was really in love, you can imagine, during those twenty days I didn’t even try to kiss her.” This sounded a little strange to me, considering that when I had seen Satinder with girl-friends he showed an entirely different face. Never too involved with them, he could have these girls (tourists and Delhi’ites alike) gravitating around him without making any commitment. If they accepted the conditions, then okay, otherwise he felt he might as well just “drop the case”. The common answer given by Satinder about being in love with women he had sexual affairs with during the tours has been: “Absolutely not, I just wanted to try them...I don’t fall in love easily...the day I do fall in love, I shall automatically drop this kind of living and devote my entire life to that one person.”

Satinder draws a clear border between love and sex. His actions and words express two entirely separate ways of relating to women as well as two separate ways of staging the man’s role: sweet, thoughtful, respectful and desexualized when in love, but detached, cool and sexually straightforward when “playing Krishna”. This is not unique to Satinder. Most other informants have shown similar attitudes. Twenty-five-year-old manager Vikram would not even hold hands in public with the young woman from Bangalore he had fallen in love with. He stopped drinking and smoking ‘pot’ for her sake and even spent less time with his friends in order to be able to see her or chat with her over the phone at night. His attitude towards the female European tour leader he once met through his job was very different, however. He would kiss her in public, drink and smoke in front of her. He asked her openly to let them go back to her room, not how you appropriately express such relations in India.

Similarly Nikilesh spent many nights awake, writing love letters to a young woman from Calcutta he had fallen madly in love with. Measuring every word carefully, Nikilesh kept me and his other friends awake to discuss all possible angles of the story. Yet, with a young American exchange student he had met one day at university, he
would not think twice before asking her straight to spend a night with him in some hotel on the outskirts of the city. Regardless of whether these stories involve 'Western' or Indian women, they tell us something about the Janus-liked character of the relations between the sexes in the life world of these young men.

Telling me about their love affairs, my informants emphasize that their attitudes towards love are essentially 'Indian' and that they distinguish them clearly from those of 'Westerners'. The love affair between Ramesh and the Australian woman may provide an example of this. He met this woman during a tour. They spent a couple of years coming and going across the continents until the affair ended for reasons that Ramesh never properly understood. Discussing this with some mutual friends, Ramesh summed up his experience with the sentence “Westerners seem to be so pragmatic, so calculating.” To him, Indians are, in comparison, more “sentimental”. Passion and love are the most important things for them: “If you don’t have passion and feeling what is then left?” he said. For Ramesh there is, between Indians and Westerners, “a totally different concept of love...when I’m in love with a girl, I would stick to her for good”. And so he did. He had opened up his heart to her, yet, according to him, she kept looking for some “hidden things” in his life. For him this was inexplicable: “There was nothing more to learn about me, I’m just an average, plain and normal Indian man.” According to him, the explanation was that the woman was not really open about her feelings for him and was playing in some way. She would “let him in” only to then “push him out” of her life again. Ramesh said: “There is too much acting among Westerners.”

The phantasms evoked by Ramesh bring us back to a number of recognizable Indian cultural expressions of love. Love, in an Indian world, is more than human, it is intensely sublime, it is “luminous” (Kakar 1990:71). “True love has a lot of rasa (literally juice or flavour)” quotes psychologist Kakar from a female slum dweller in Delhi. The Indian imaginary is replete with idealized images of love. One of the greatest iconographic representations of the loving couple is that of Ardhanarishwara, i.e. Lord Shiva represented as half male and half female (the female shape being that of his wife Parvati). In this vision, the couple stands for the accomplishment of divine union (while it also symbolizes a certain degree of androgyny in the vision of Shiva).
Gandhi, too, wrote about the couple. For him the idea of the (married) couple involved something more than the union between a man and a woman; it was a union between human beings and God.\(^\text{19}\) For Gandhi the love between the couple had to be re-directed towards the real true ‘Universal Love’. When wrongly oriented, marital love could become an obstacle in the attainment of divine love and, thus, of salvation (\textit{ahimsa}).

Love in India has a historically shaped, highly idealized character and stands as a relation entirely different from other gender relationships such as those involved in sexual encounters. It is an all-encompassing external force that invades the life of individuals and one over which they can have no control. Love inserts the person who feels it into an idealized sphere. In the same way, in the stories of my informants, love is not only ‘that thing’ that happens between two people, but has something quintessential about it, something that comprises life itself. The feelings for parents or for one’s own country are also bearers of that essence and were often explained by my informants through the idea of ‘love’. So is friendship, which is loaded with a romantic aura nevertheless deprived of homosexual connotations. For instance, opera singer Vijay told me that love is the most fundamental feeling in life. Referring to the occasion when he had been selected for a big scholarship for a prestigious music school abroad, he told me how the only moment of real pure joy was when all his class-mates at the music school in Delhi congratulated him and asked him to sing an \textit{aria} for them. To him this was an expression of the love of his friends and colleagues and something that made him feel very moved. “The love of who is around you is what gives meaning to life”, he said. Similarly at the death of Sunil’s mother, Satinder was the one taking care of him. Sunil remembered that period saying: “he [Satinder] has been a brother to me, without him I wouldn’t have made it!”. Talking about their relation, Sunil and Satinder pointed out how theirs was more than a relation of friendship. They helped each other with work, shared common experiences and future plans and experienced each other as united in a common struggle. Nikilesh and Ashwin too as long as I have known them, keep looking after each other, solving each other’s problems. Ashwin in particular, the better off among the two, has always helped Nikilesh in all possible ways. He has assisted him financially as well as offering him refuge at his house.
whenever Nikilesh needed it. Yet, he never asked anything back from him. Between them, and between Satinder and Sunil, is a brotherhood which cannot but be explained in terms of ‘love’.

on marriage

“It is not like I am against marriage,
I just think that in particular
a man and a woman
are the least well adapted people
to marry each other”

Massimo Troisi^20

Love between a man and a woman is supposed to be translated into marriage. So everyone suggests and this is also what the parents of most my informants favour. But marriage is a major ‘headache’ for my informants and for most young urban middle class people. Hundreds of Indian films have celebrated this complex moment in the life of an individual when she/he has to fulfil at one and the same time her/his desires and the requirements of their families and communities. Dil Chahta Hae (which I introduced earlier) is one of them. Watching the movie together with Ashwin and Nikilesh, I could observe how they recognized themselves in the scene where the young man panicked at the idea of being obliged to marry by arrangement. Yet, they also appreciated the filmatized expressions of his love for the woman. The young couple’s abrupt falling in love in the movie hall led the two friends to talk about their own dreams of finding someone able to awaken in them the feelings expressed in the movie. “Lucky bastard!” Ashwin commented about the male character.

The discourse about marriage in India is commonly articulated around the dichotomy of ‘love marriages’ vs. ‘arranged marriages’. Often this dichotomy mirrors the dichotomy of ‘Western’ and ‘Indian’. All my informants, regardless of age or background, are reluctant to accept the logic of arranged marriages when applied to their own lives. Even though practically all their parents persist in making smaller or bigger attempts to get them married, they keep resisting. Nonetheless,
in discussions about social change in India they can at times relate positively to the idea of arranged marriage and even defend its value in the name of ‘India’. In these situations they recreate the centrality of the traditional marriage and of the family as symbols of Indianness (cf. Uberoi 1998). I shall give one example of this with the story of Deepah’s marriage arrangement. This example, besides offering a young woman’s point of view on these issues, will also show how the phantasms of India and the ‘West’ are central to how people experience and attribute meaning in the context of love and marriage.

DEEPAH GETS MARRIED

The scientist Deepah had spent most of the past decade abroad, and had just returned to India where she had been given a prestigious appointment at a university. At our first meeting in her new office she told me that she was about to get married. Her future husband, a manager of a multinational company, is resident in the UK and she is going to settle there with him. Having known Deepah for some years, I permitted myself to ask her some details about their encounter. When I asked her how they met, she looked down at her desk and said that their meeting had been arranged by her father. My reply, a simple “uh-huh?”, must have sounded doubtful since Deepah immediately launched into a frontal attack: “Listen, I have been in Europe and the US, I know how people live there...you guys have to go out every Friday night to look for someone else to sleep with...why should an arranged marriage be any worse?” At this point I suppose that I must have looked even more puzzled since Deepah immediately apologized for her reply. I then asked her how she was planning to carry on her work. Looking down once again, she said that her husband did not want her to work but that she was still trying to figure out a way to do that nonetheless.

This story displays the many compromises this young woman is obliged to make. She accepts both her father’s wishes and those of her future husband, but she is trying to find her own way to affirm her needs for a career and independence. Here, however, I want to focus on Deepah’s reaction to my questions. Faced by my questioning, she passionately invokes the ‘West’ as a (negative) point of reference. The ‘West’ stands for immoral behaviour, lack of commitment and respect for the family. Deepah’s reaction is far from unique. Whenever I have been involved in discussions with young Delhi’ites regarding love, arranged marriages or marriages in general I have been provided with statistics about how Indian marriages still hold just as well and often
much better than ‘Western’ ones, how you actually never know a
person until you marry her/him, etc. When opposed to the assumed
‘Western’ ideal of free love and loose sexuality, the arranged marriage
becomes a symbol of an Indian identity that must stand up against
‘Western’ hegemony, even if all my informants themselves struggle
against arranged marriages within their families. Marriage and family
thus provide arenas for the struggle between the images of ‘pure India’
and of the ‘West’.

In her book Indian Men, Sandhya Mulchandani (1999) writes about
how the crisis in middle class marriage is linked to a crisis of
masculinity. Men no longer know their role in the family and end up
being trapped between a traditional and a Western/modern way of
thinking about the marital relationship with a woman:

“...men find themselves at the crossroads: unhappy with too modern
and freewheeling a woman who demands equality and questions
authority and also unhappy with too traditional a wife who does not go
beyond cooking and dutiful sex” (1999:79).

Mulchandani, and many with her, argue that, as the woman has re-
defined her role in society, gathering more agency, she has also
contributed to re-defining men’s ideas of themselves and questioned
their notions of marriage. Whereas she suggests that men are “caught
in the tangled web of expectations” (1999:75), I argue, by looking at my
informants, that men’s ideas about marriage and about a potential
partner must be addressed through the identity context that I have
delineated in the previous chapters. I shall introduce this discussion
with the story of Nikilesh’s encounter with Soni.

**WHEN NIKILESH MET SONI**

One day, when I reach Ashwin’s house, he is in the middle of a lively
argument with his friend Nikilesh. When Ashwin sees me, he says
“Listen to this, Paolo! Nikilesh is getting married!” The story was that, at
a friend’s engagement party some weeks earlier, Nikilesh had met his
friend’s cousin, a woman in her fifties, who told him about her beautiful
daughter. She had shown him a picture of her and invited him to come
over for dinner with the girl’s family. The night before I arrived at
Ashwin’s place, this woman had called Nikilesh and invited him over for
dinner. In scorn, Ashwin was now repeating that this was indeed an
attempt to arrange a marriage. This was the reason for the argument
between the two friends. Nikilesh defended himself by saying that in the
picture she looked beautiful. She had black hair, green eyes and a
gentle smile, so he would certainly go for dinner. However, he
remarked: "I want to go as an experiment. Through Sajit [his friend who
had got engaged] I kind of understood that they want to get her married,
but I just want to see how they go about it...I shall tell them that I am not
planning to marry for the next two or three years." At this point, I was
asking him whether he would really be able to say that when Ashwin
interrupted us with yet another big laugh: "When he sees her, he will
start to drool and then will not be able say a shit!" he said, looking at me.
Nikilesh was getting more and more annoyed at Ashwin's constant
interruptions. He felt the need to add that since he was in love with
another girl he would anyway not be able to get involved with this one.
Moreover, he added "I cannot even screw her since that would ruin my
relationship with those people whom I really like." Becoming serious,
Nikilesh underlined that it was important that his mother should not hear
about this. Otherwise, she would immediately call the girl's parents and
"try to get it through". Then he started wondering what he would do if he
liked this girl, but if the only way to get her was marriage: "It is a big step
to go from a friendship to a love affair. One has to do some thinking
about it."

The following day Nikilesh went to dinner at Soni's place and at his
request I went along too. When we reached the family's villa on the
outskirts of Delhi. Nikilesh transformed himself into the gentleman that I
always used to meet on 'serious' occasions: "Good evening, Sir,
Madame...Sir, I hope we aren't intruding...Madame, such a wonderful
house..." he kept repeating to his hosts. The dinner proved to be just a
quick snack. After that, we decided to go bowling together with Soni, her
sister and her husband. At home we had only seen Soni walking
between the kitchen and her room in a training outfit. She never even
came out to say hallo. At the bowling hall, however, she loosened up.
Wearing jeans and a green t-shirt she drank beer from her sister's glass
and smoked some cigarettes. She also bowled pretty well. When the
game was over, on the way to the car, Nikilesh decided to stop by a
small shop in the compound, where he bought Soni and her sister each
a box of candies, asking them to select the ones they preferred. The fact
that they ended up buying imported ones made Nikilesh a little less
happy than he had been so far. But he continued to smile. During the
ride home he drove slowly, pointing out several times to Soni's sister "I
am driving slow because of you now". During the evening we had
learned that she was pregnant.

After having accompanied them home, Nikilesh and I started our drive
towards South Delhi. "What do you think? I did not really like her, she
was snobbish, an air-head", he commented. I told him that he seemed
pretty much "into it" with presents, candies and kindness. "Oh, no, I
always do that, even when visiting friends." Later on, he added that she
did not have green eyes at all (which was what he mostly remembered
from the picture he had seen).
Attending such a kind of meeting for experimental purposes is indeed one of the most provocative and transgressive actions I have seen being perpetrated by my informants. Nikilesh had no intentions of marrying (so, at least, he believed and so did I). He liked the girl, but at the same time he knew that without marriage this woman was beyond his reach. Nikilesh still approached Soni on entirely different terms from those he would have used towards any other girl. Before the encounter he spoke of her in idealized terms; she was an amazing beauty with green eyes. On meeting her he used the most gentlemanly behaviour, testifying that, regardless of his reasons for participating in this encounter, a meeting with a person of the opposite sex in a family context immediately triggers a different way of looking at the woman and behaviour dictated by a strict adherence to certain social rules.

Marriage is not a personal affair but a family one, framed in terms of respect for traditional values. This aspect probably amplifies my informants’ distance from and cynical attitude towards it. Family and community indeed play a central role in the love affair between two young people. This is visible also in the case of Ashwin. Ashwin was having a relationship with an NRI woman of his own age, who was settled in Canada. Despite the distance, they managed to keep their relationship going for some years. After a while, however, it came to an end: “the thing basically died because of lack of strength”, Ashwin said. A critical event, however, anticipated the end of it. One day Ashwin took his girl-friend home to introduce her to his parents. On that occasion she turned up dressed in a red and gold salwar-qamiz. She wanted to look like a proper Indian girl, she confessed to Ashwin when he expressed his surprise at seeing her dressed in such an unusual fashion. Ashwin’s mother found it strange to see a ‘Canadian’ girl dressed like that. She did not appreciate the girl’s gesture and found it almost provocative. On the next occasions she came, according to Ashwin’s story, in jeans, short skirts and tight tops. Ashwin’s parents did not like this way of presenting herself either and ended up not liking her at all. Ashwin was not particularly bothered about that and says that his parents’ attitude did not really influence him, but the incident became the final obstacle in a relationship already filled with hindrances because of the physical distance between them.
A similar event, i.e. involving an improper appearance at a meeting with the parents, saved Rajiv from an arranged marriage. A few years back Rajiv was having a relationship with a young Italian woman. His parents were never openly opposed to it, even though his mother worried that she would not be able to communicate with the girl, since she herself could not speak English or Italian. When the couple broke up, Rajiv’s father tried to arrange a marriage for him. Having found a woman who might be suitable, the father decided to go and “see” her. Rajiv, for his part, refused to go along with his parents to her place. Luckily for him, however, the girl showed up at this appointment wearing a pleated skirt and a white shirt. Rajiv’s father and mother disliked the girl’s appearance. According to them, Rajiv said, she should have been dressed in a salwar-qamiz or at least in a more formal manner. To the delight of Rajiv, the whole project of arranging a marriage collapsed due to the young woman’s dress.

Rajiv’s story runs parallel to the love affair between Ramesh and his Australian girl-friend related earlier. When Ramesh told me this story, we were with Sunil and Satinder. During the conversation Satinder intervened once to say: “Paolo, you must understand that the point here is that introducing a foreign woman to your home is a big deal, so one wants to be sure. Ramesh took a big risk by doing this, but the girl did not really realize that!” Families play a major role in decisions regarding “serious relations”. As my informant Amar said when discussing marriage: “You see, to understand you must go back, marriage in India is not just between two people but it’s about the whole family.”

As I have already said, my informants are themselves not at all interested in having an arranged marriage. Such a marriage symbolizes the boredom of that plain ‘average Indian life’ from which they are trying to escape. Among the tourist guides this distaste for the average family is very visible in one of their favourite voyeuristic pastimes. As they sit on the fence in Janpath, the sight of young families is one of the events that cause their major expressions of distaste. One day, while strolling around in the Connaught Place colonnade, Satinder reacted with disgust at the sight of a chubby young woman dressed in a saree. He stopped for a while and then said that the girl must have been younger than him. He then looked at the young man who was with her, who at the time was carrying a child in
his arms while being pulled in all directions by another small child that he was holding by the hand. Satinder exploded “That guy must be my age! See what a life he is having for that horrible fat lady!”. Sunil added that he felt sorry for the young man, and that they could consider themselves lucky to have escaped that situation. “Tourism saved us”, Satinder noted with an expression of satisfaction in his eyes.

This group of tourist escorts often hang out for a beer or a cup of coffee in the bars and coffee shops of CP. There they regularly come across families arranging marriages. These rituals, in which families let the prospective bride and groom meet for the first time and get to know each other, are major sources of entertainment for my informants. Unable to refrain from joking, laughing and cracking cynical comments about the people involved in the ritual, the young men watch the spectacle as if it was a TV-show. Amusement alternates with moments of pity for these young people who, according to my informants, are exposed to a sad and painful experience, for which they themselves can only express distaste.

When inserted into the logic of marriage, love acquires an entirely different meaning. It is no longer the luminous force that strikes one from above but rather something that has to be conquered by sticking to a choice that has been made, i.e. marriage. “Love happens after marriage”, says a woman in a magazine article when re-telling the story of her successful arranged marriage. “I fervently hoped I would fall in love with my future husband”, she says making it explicit that love is a somewhat secondary aspect of marriage (Jyothi 1999). This notion is widely reflected among my informants. During an interview Leander told me that, after all, there are no major differences between arranged and love marriages: “Love comes through knowing a person, you get to know each other, you make a decision to stick to that person.” Shalini, the tourist guide and sculptor, critically reminded me during an interview that marriage is “weird”: “With time, you learn to love even a doll.”

Ascribing to the present what is commonly ascribed to the past (and to traditional society), Nikilesh in one interview added yet another perspective to this. He argued that for many businessmen and professionals, marriage today has turned more and more into a practical thing: “They [Indian professional men] like to have someone cooking and cleaning the house for them and do not care about
closeness and feelings.” In his view, many families today stick together only because of their children. He questions the ‘realness’ of love between husband and wife when it is built on such premises and not on pure feelings. The voices of my informants, who I must remind the reader are only looking at marriage from the outside, clearly refer love and marriage to different spheres. Love turns their lives inside out, but marriage is a matter of practical choice and of adherence to certain social values. Moreover, arranged marriages stand for a lifestyle that they do not desire to reproduce. The refusal to accept an arranged marriage signals their attempts at gaining at one and the same time independence from their families and a detachment from the values of their parents.

**on life-partners**

Regardless of the stands they take in relation to love and marriage all my informants, either through fantasy or earlier experiences, have ideas about what a potential partner might be like. This ideal partner mirrors their stances towards the changing gender identities in contemporary society and also their claims to cultural identity. In general terms, the woman looked upon as a potential partner by my informants is a ‘hybrid’ between the stereotypical ‘Indian’ and the stereotypical ‘Western’ woman. She also constitutes a bridge between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Leander, for instance, told me that his wife should be “working, creative and different”. “Different”, for him, entails someone like him who “has made slightly different choices but still fits into society”. Even marrying a foreign woman would not be a problem for him. But the wife must be able to accept and respect his family and his culture (he has no doubts about his own capacity to understand her and her culture). Nusrat expresses the idea of a potential partner in yet another play with phantasms. He said: “I would prefer to marry a Western woman. Indian girls are too demanding, they want to have you there all the time. Western women let you live your own life.” Nikilesh believes that a wife should also be a friend, a person you can talk to and with whom you can go beyond the most contractual aspect of marriage. For Sunil a wife should have a life of her own and not be someone who sits at home and waits for you to arrive and then “tells you the same stupid things as usual”.
The woman who fits these young men's ideals is similar to the modern young woman depicted in the advertisements (see above) but more pronouncedly 'Indian'. The woman they picture as their only potential partner combines the qualities of agency, independence and fun commonly attributed to the 'modern'/Western world with those of the stability and continuity of 'India' and 'tradition'. Whether Indian or not, she must, as seen from the above quotes, permit them to come to terms with what they often refer to as "social requirements", i.e. she must be adapted to Indian society and their own families while never becoming a boring shadow of their male partners.

What sort of man comes out of all this? First, all my informants' statements and practices regarding love affairs bear witness to the fact that they envision their position as men as one of decision and power. My informants ascribe to themselves the right, opportunity and capacity to choose their partners. Much as they idealize love and the way in which love may strike them, they still carry on the idea of being able to control the woman with whom they may have a relationship. Similarly to what happens in most Hindi films, women appear as objects of my informants' desires. Yet, the content of this desire has changed and the attractive woman is no longer one characterized by passivity but an active and independent counterpart. My informants' practices and discourses in relation to women and love, however, never question the centrality of the patriarchal institution. By reserving the discussions on sexuality, love and relationships for a male environment made up of their closest friends, they keep alive the long history of representation of the Indian family. Manly arenas appear for them as the locus of their control. Secondly, the different attitudes they display towards women prove the presence in their life-world of a variety of representations of women ranging from those of Hindu mythology and Hindi films to the more contemporary ones visible in advertisements. Ideals of masculinity, of beauty and attraction, of love and marriage are thus also mediated by the phantasms and informed by the travel of imaginations.

If the attitudes held by my informants towards heterosexual gender relations still celebrate the centrality of patriarchy, we may wonder how young women experience their situation in today's India. The position and public image of women are slowly changing in India, yet all the women I have met have lamented the limited freedom they enjoy in everyday life. They experience discomfort in walking around in the
streets wearing ‘Western’ clothes, constantly feeling invaded by the sexual looks from the men at street corners. They structure their daily lives to avoid potentially unpleasant situations. They will go to a dinner party only in the company of men. If they wear fancy clothes, they will avoid having to walk through public space and prefer being driven straight to their destination. They complain about the continuous invasions of their privacy at the hands of their employers, friends and acquaintances. Often they feel that their parents do not understand their situation. “My father accepts and wants me to adapt to the male abuse I have to suffer at work, and my mother accepts my father’s views”, one young female manager commented. I do not want to tarry any longer on these delicate and complex issues, but they have to be mentioned in order to consider the broader context within which my informants’ attitudes to relations with women are articulated. Their freedom is to quite a large extent the obverse of the lack of freedom by women of their generation.

...summing up

Gender relations mark out the changes taking place in contemporary India. As Ashwin said, my informants belong to the age-group that just missed the “MTV-generation” with its assumed freedom to express sexuality. Yet, with this generation they share the pleasure of living in a society where sexuality is being talked about and displayed more openly. At the same time, however, they emphasize their difference from that generation, reproducing certain aspects of the public discourse about the loss of values in contemporary society and heightening the importance of ‘India’.

The notions that my informants hold of sexuality and heterosexual gender relations provide one more instance of how they bridge ‘Indian’ values and participation in a globalizing world. The flow of travelling imaginations provides them with new models that they adapt to local realities and requirements. As in the case of cultural identity in general, my informants frame gender identities through phantasms of ‘India’ and the ‘West’. The phantasm of India takes the positive form of idealized, morally valuable and sensual romantic love, while the phantasm of the ‘West’ appears through the negative form of rational and egoistic love.
and ambiguous open sexuality. Yet, India also stands for closed relations and ‘West’ for greater freedom. The phantasms permit my informants to make sense of the changes taking place around them. They constitute links between public representations of gender identities and sexuality and their personal experiences of these.

In the field of sexuality and love also my informants merge ‘local’ and ‘global’ influences within their families with regard to issues of marriage and girl-friends, and try to strike a balance between their own interests and values and those expressed by their families. However, they use this capacity in order to signal also a particular status position constructed around their direct participation in global networks of career and leisure. My informants claim to know about foreign women and foreign visions of love and that they can go beyond conventional stereotypes. For them, attraction to ‘white skin’ is a marker of backwardness. Fascination with the styles promoted by trendy young VJs is something for the ‘Westoxicated’ who have lost their knowledge of and involvement in India. Neither of these stances is part of their own life-world and sub-cultural identity. If they appreciate a slim modern body it has also to represent Indian values and beauty ideals. Their desires and dreams of ‘India’ translate into desires and passions for Indian women. Just like themselves, the partners they dream of should be products of the contemporary dialogue between the Indian and the Western. A girl-friend, they suggest, needs to embody both ‘Western’ attitudes of freedom and agency and Indian respect for social values and morals.

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1 A common representation of Krishna shows him playing sensually with courtesans.
2 Quoted from John and Nair 1998:16.
3 This sentence is taken from an interview with Mrs Poddar, owner of one of the largest travel agencies in Delhi.
4 The quote is from Minister of State for Human Resource Development Mrs Uma Bharti’s address at the Khajuraho Millennium During his address to the Khajuraho Millennium President Narayan described the sculptures of Khajuraho as a reflection of "an eternal philosophy relevant to all mankind."
5 From the Hindustan Times classifieds, October 17 1999.
6 For an analysis of this case see John 1998:373.
7 http://itways.com/Health/sexualbehaviour.htm
8 A sannyasi is a disciple, an adept.
9 An interesting ‘Western’ parallel to this theory can be found in the hydraulic views on male sexuality (cf. Gavanas 2001).
10 The movement of semen (i.e. virya, the centre of attention) up the spinal chord into the brain leads to an increased clarity and strength, while its emission is a debilitating waste of precious energy, a loss of stamina and, thus, a form of emasculation.
11 I do not have space here to devote to a discussion of concepts of body and mind, personhood etc. which would still be of help on these issues (cf. Alter 1997a, Obeyesekere 1981, Daniel 1984, Favero 1998b).

12 Standing there, leaning on his stick, old, malnourished and partially naked in front of the Viceroy, Gandhi was someone that the British authorities did not know how to handle. Inspired by images drawn from classical knowledge on sexuality Gandhi succeeded in disorienting his far stronger enemy. Following the precepts of brahmacharya, Gandhi also enacted a broader re-construction of the body. His intense preoccupation with his sexuality was coupled with a general control of food habits, personal hygiene, clothing, relationships, etc. (cf. John and Nair 1998, Kakar 1990).

13 Parallel to these developments, brahmacharya has received new popularity also in the field of folk medicine which has started offering a variety of ‘scientific’ calculations to explain its importance (cf. Kakar 1990): “each act of copulation is equivalent to 24 hours of concentrated mental activity or 72 hours of hard physical labour” (Kakar 1990:102). Celibacy is promoted as longevity, creativity, physical and mental vitality.

14 I use this catchphrase, which is the title given by photographer Ashim Ghosh to one of his exhibitions, with his permission.

15 The rumour of Gandhi sleeping surrounded by naked virgins for the purpose of exercising control is probably the best example of this ambivalent relation to women.

16 Kakar (1990) states that one major way of symbolizing the relationship between women and men in Hindu culture is relating to Devi, the great goddess, who also stands for mahamaya, i.e. the great illusion.

17 Kakar (1990) has suggested that "Hindus...share this widespread orientation wherein the image of woman as mother is sought to be superimposed upon and thereby to obliterate the picture of woman as sexual being" (p. 122). Even such an enlightened person as Ramakrishna lived and promoted this ambivalent view of women. In the words of D. P. Mukherjee: "He respected women, in the only way open to Indians, by calling them ‘mother’ and avoiding them" (1948:28). The loving wife, instead aims at subordinating her life to her husband’s welfare and offers the fertility needed to grant continuity in the husband’s family.

18 By “bitch” he means here a woman of loose morale, not a nagging woman.

19 On this subject Gandhi wrote: “If the married couple can think of each other as brother and sister, they are freed for universal service. The very thought that all women are his sisters, mothers and daughters will at once enable a man to snap his chains” (in Kakar 1990:83).

20 With this line I pay tribute to the memory of Italian comedian, actor and film director, Massimo Troisi.

21 An “air-head” means that she was not particularly intelligent.

22 As Sandhya Mulchandani writes, from the point of view of women, “in India... you marry the family and the man is incidental, part of the package deal” (1999:74).
Chapter Five

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT DELHI

cultural identity in the city and among its inhabitants

Delhi is a place of many attractions and many repulsions, so they say. It has the power to confuse, charm, irritate and leave people numb all at once, so they say. Yet Delhi, in my eyes, is also, and maybe first and foremost, a saturated city. A ‘star-like’ place (cf. Favero 2003 and Introduction), it is overcharged with visible signs, messages, buildings and people who speak of different times and places at once. Delhi has been given shape through a succession of Hindu rulers, Muslim conquerors and British colonial power. Today, it spearheads the entry of India into the global market and appears as India’s “New Boom Town”, as “the epicentre of India’s economic modernisation” (Saran 1999). Contemporary Delhi is the result of this long history of dialogue between local and foreign influences. It is a modern metropolis, while it keeps history alive amidst its chaos. To visitors and observers this saturation of messages makes the city appear as a place of madness, chaos and dirt.

The idea of having a whole chapter devoted to Delhi and to the interplay between Delhi and my informants arises from an interest in this saturation. Through its urbanistic outlook, its architecture and its public life, the city brings its inhabitants in daily touch with the travel of imagination, and different representations of India’s national identity and history in touch with the external world. An expression of the new Indian “transnational public sphere” (Gupta 1997:193-4) of the age of globalization, Delhi epitomizes a number of the processes that I have addressed in this study. It is both a mirror and a provider of the messages and images through which my informants construct their identities in society.
In this chapter I will look at this interplay between Delhi and my interlocutors, approaching the city not only as a physical space but also as "a conceptual arena" evoking a variety of different non-geographical meanings (Hutnyk 1996a:128). Alterning between observations regarding the city as such and the comments and ways of using the city displayed by my informants, the chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first section I shall consider some discourses surrounding the planning and construction of the city, and how the city itself can be approached as a living gallery that displays the representations of cultural exchange and identity. Debates and practices regarding urban planning, architecture and the administration of the cultural heritage are once again founded on the dichotomies 'West' vs. 'India', 'traditional' vs. 'modern'. The development of the city is framed and understood according to the logic within which my informants and society at large address issues of identity and social change. Taking the discussion further from these observations, the second section of the chapter will show how the city, through the design of its houses, new commercial centres and leisure places, reflects the popularity of the icon 'India' that I have discussed in earlier chapters. The first two sections will focus mainly, but not solely, on places I have visited with my informants, and will match my observations with their interpretations.

In the third section, I shall deal more explicitly with my informants' various ways of being in the city. Looking at Delhi as an "existential space" (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Augé 1996) I shall discuss how my informants' ways of moving about in the city and of conceptualizing it express their identities within society and offer an opportunity to observe imagination put at play in everyday life. Departing from the example of the tourist market on Janpath, I shall also analyze in greater detail how issues of identity are actualized by the people, objects and messages encountered in the city. The city, in other words, offers its inhabitants instruments for identity work. Introducing the three sections of the chapter, there will be a short conceptual discussion clarifying my usage of its central concepts.
There Is Something about Delhi

'space' and 'place' in India

Recent research has suggested that the meanings of places are constantly reinterpreted and reconstituted by the practices that take place in and around them under culturally and historically shaped conditions (cf. Edensor 1998, Shields 1991, Soja 1989). Places are 'processes', not 'essences'. Their meanings accumulate through what Massey (1993) calls a "progressive sense of place", i.e. through the activities that centre upon them and the routes that bring people and objects to meet there. They are 'texts' (cf. Barnes and Duncan 1992) whose readings depend on the different ways in which actors interpret and use them. The significance of places is therefore created in an interplay with imagination. Places are inserted by actors into different "imagined geographies" (Edensor 1998), i.e. into different ways of conceptualizing geographic identities. Places, in my usage, are therefore a matter both of representation and of praxis (cf. Rodman 1992). The present chapter, however, does not focus on places per se nor on the construction of place. It looks mostly at public places and how their star-like character can provide my informants with new ideas and messages forming the material for their construction of identities. Before going any further, I therefore need to discuss briefly the meaning of notions such as 'public place' and the 'public'. Being linked, as Habermas pointed out, to the processes of European democratization (cf. Calhoun 1993), they appear problematic when applied to an Indian context.

In his analysis of Calcutta, Kaviraj (1997) has suggested that colonization brought along a new set of ways of organizing the relation between people and space. The idea of the public entered India during the British era, together with that of the 'modern city'. The latter was the symbol of the British presence. The "orderly, hygienic, scientific, technologically superior, and 'civilized'" city (Kaviraj 1997:84) was designed and promoted in opposition to the 'natural' and 'uncivilized' Indian village. Within the cities, colonial administrators exercised and demonstrated their control over the territory, introducing policing and street surveillance and posting signs that demarcated what could and could not be done in public (cf. also Pratt 1992, Mitchell 1991, Southall 1998). This control inserted the idea of a regulated 'public space' and brought along a questioning of the meaning of the 'private'. The introduction of a controlled public space also rendered evident the gap
between the different classes of the city. The middle classes were the first, and possibly the only ones to internalize the values represented by the British rules. Most information about the new regulations was, in fact, communicated in English and was not accessible to the less privileged whose behaviour thus became visibly different from that of the middle-classes. The city, somehow, epitomized the strategies followed by the British to control India.

This new idea of the 'public', however, did not land in a space left vacant of conceptualizations. It was juxtaposed to the local pre-colonial idea of the “common” (Kaviraj 1997:88). Different from the ‘public’, which implied clear boundaries marked out by authorizations, laws, state sanctions and a clear ascription of individual responsibility, the ‘common’ was built in terms of oppositions such as “mine/not-mine”, “self/not-self” (p. 89). The idea of the common was linked to the strong sense of shared responsibilities which could be found in pre-colonial villages and households. Mixing also with the Brahminical idea of purity, the old and new notions of private and public overlapped in colonial India and resulted in a strengthening of the conceptual boundary between the house and the street. Whatever was external to the house became, from colonial times onwards, treated as a kind of non-space, “an empty, valueless negative of the private” (p. 105) for which no individuals or collectivities below the level of government had any clear, well-defined responsibilities and obligations. The encounter between new and old ideas of private and public, of inner and outer, led, in particular among the middle classes, to a distancing from the world outside their domestic boundaries. In the first post-independence period that which was outside the domestic sphere came to represent danger and otherness. It stood, as Kaviraj suggests, at once for “the large-scale operation of modernity” (p. 94), where nature and antiquity had been domesticated by the rationality of the state, and for a place inhabited by dirt and poverty. In contrast, the home became more and more the focus of middle class attention. No longer the expression of belonging to a specific community, the home became a marker of the identity of the specific family inhabiting it and no longer of a wider community (I shall discuss this in greater detail below).
mapping Delhi

During the autumn of 1999 I followed Sunil and Satinder on their search for a house. Having saved enough money, they were finally facing the opportunity of living an independent life. Their plan was to buy a flat together, or alternatively a small house. Neither of them had plans for setting up a family, so the idea of sharing a house appeared the best option. The purchase of a house followed that of a personal car (each his own, obviously) and constituted yet another step in their growing up and climb up the social ladder. With them I travelled around the city, visiting property dealers and looking at a variety of different premises. Their search was guided by a specific conceptual mapping of the city and specific choices of taste. Certain areas were to be avoided at all costs, resembling too much the "low and dirty" areas where they had grown up. Other areas were eliminated because of bad infrastructure and shortage of electricity, or because they were too crowded. The presence of a nice view, and the vicinity of green areas were criteria orienting their choices of location. The houses they considered attractive had also some common design characteristics. In contrast to the older conventional Delhi houses, whose interiors generally appear as long corridors with windows only at their extremities, the houses Sunil and Satinder liked were light, spacious and had, of course, the necessary infrastructure for the installation of facilities such as a refrigerator, TV, air-conditioner, etc. In choosing a flat, Satinder and Sunil were marking out their identity as members of an up-coming class. Their choice was inspired by the international taste they had been exposed to through their interactions with the world of tourism. "I want to have a bathroom like in the five-star hotels", Sunil told me at the beginning of the search. The search ended with the purchase of a two-storey house in Noida, one of the new booming residential suburbs of Delhi (see below and the map).

Through my travels through Delhi's housing market together with Satinder and Sunil I became aware of the strong divisions that characterize the city. In the pages that follow I shall offer a general overview of these divisions, arguing that Delhi's architectural outlook and urban planning are expressions of the discourses on cultural identity taking place in contemporary urban India. The interpretations and debates surrounding them mark out the centrality of the
phantasms of ‘India’, the ‘West’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ in contemporary Delhi.

**a city of divides**

The question “where do you live in Delhi?” introduces almost every encounter in the city between people who do not know each other (cf. Chapter Three). This question is also among the first my informants ask whenever they get to know a new person. In the case of Delhi, guessing a person’s status and background on the basis of where she/he lives is particularly easy. The city is characterized by areas and ‘colonies’ (the Delhi-term for blocks) clearly demarcated in economic, ethnic and class terms.

Many scholars consider contemporary Delhi to be the result of failed urban planning (cf. Menon 2000, Dupont 2000a and 2000b, Jain 1990 and 1996). The differences in access to electricity (which is enough for only 40 per cent of the population), water supply and sanitation are great between different areas and different colonies. Moreover, illegal settlements and slums grow, as an answer to immigration, in the most diverse parts of the city without control of the authorities (cf. Singh 2000, Haider 2000). Architect Menon (2000:152) suggests that, since the Delhi Master Plan of 1962, the authorities in charge of the city’s development have shown a lack of capacity to interpret the needs of its inhabitants. According to him, this plan, which was undertaken by a team of foreign experts recruited by the Ford Foundation, promoted an ideal of urban development detached from indigenous patterns. It gave the authorities the right to acquire almost all land within the boundaries of the city capable of being urbanized and led to the implementation of large-scale projects⁵ that reproduced the monumental aura of Delhi as a capital city (cf. Menon 2000, Khilnani 1997:122-3) but did not respond to the city’s needs. However, strong divisions in areas with different lifestyles, incomes and ethnic profile were present before that. In the immediate post-independence period Delhi presented itself as already clearly divided (cf. N. Gupta 2000). The areas with the most evident special character were the relatively rich West Delhi (Punjabi Bhagh, etc. founded by Punjabis who had arrived there after partition), South Delhi (with its wide streets and greenery), Civil Lines and Delhi University (equally peaceful and
green), and, at the other end, an increasingly commercial, polluted and congested Shajahanabad (i.e. the Walled City, and roughly today’s Old Delhi). In the middle of the city is the Imperial Area (which in the 1970s was declared a ‘National Territory’ with its own jurisdiction and institutions)\(^6\) flagged with its completely unique and detached character.

Throughout the years, the divide between Old and New Delhi has become the most distinguishing trait of the city. While the inhabitants of New/South Delhi consider themselves the most successful and ‘modern’ inhabitants of the city, the Old Delhi-whallas present themselves as the more authentic and genuine ones. In the words of Purnima Mankekar (who was born and grew up in Delhi and today conducts research in the city):

“people from Old Delhi characterize themselves as laid-back, courteous and cultured, in comparison with the allegedly aggressive, rude, and brash residents of New Delhi. Old Delhi, they say, has “traditions”; New Delhi is a place where everything is in disarray” (1999:13).

The voices of the inhabitants of Old Delhi echo with the standard representations of the city to be found in the tourism industry, with the descriptions given of the city by the local authorities and with my informants’ views. Old Delhi is the ‘Indian Delhi’ with its folkloristic narrow lanes and bazaars but also its poverty and congestion. Foreign as well as local guidebooks claim that this is the proper area to be visited in Delhi.\(^7\) Their pages are filled with images of the crowds of Chandni Chowk (the main road in Old Delhi). The local authorities also acknowledge Old Delhi’s ambivalent character. According to the Delhi Master Plan, for instance, Old Delhi is at once “full of the dust and fragrance of the past and pulsating” and “a planner’s nightmare with its multiplicity of conflicting uses and its million problems created by acute congestion insanitary conditions, dilapidated structures, narrow lanes and high land prices”. South Delhi, on the other hand, is regarded as the ‘Westernized’, ‘modern’, ‘middle-class’ part of the city. It evokes the colonial and modern era with its more structured streets, its flyovers, its spectacle of architecture ranging from the modernism of the 1960s and ‘70s to the famous “Punjabi Baroque” (Bhatia 1994) and to the most recent styles echoing the materials and shapes of the village. In the markets of North Delhi one mostly finds cheaper products sold on the streets. In South Delhi, in contrast, the markets shine with
bakeries, DVD-movie rentals and boutiques selling imported products, such as Pasta Barilla, English biscuits and Swiss cheese alongside shops offering more traditional products.

The views of the city held by my informants reflect this dichotomic mapping (I shall return to this later on). Only one of them (still a marginal one to this study), Baljit, the tour leader cum-travel agent, lives in Old Delhi, right in the middle of the chowks. Baljit praises the beauty of his area but also complains about the difficulties of living there. He is, for instance, obliged to drive a motorbike to reach his South Delhi office. With a car he would have to spend hours trying to get out of his neighbourhood. The others, regardless of where they live, go to the Old city only for specific purposes, such as shopping (rumour has it that many items are cheaper there), enjoying a proper North Indian meal (choosing a proper place though since they consider many of its restaurants to be dirty) or when they are visited by foreign friends. “I don’t like coming here, it’s too dirty, polluted and crowded” said Nikilesh, “I only come here when I have friends visiting or for taking photographs for my reportages.” Like most of my other informants, Nikilesh has been to Old Delhi only a few times. But he considers it the most symbolically loaded area of the city.

Delhi, the living art installation

Bhatia (1994) has suggested that, in order to understand Delhi, one has to look at it as an “urban gallery” or an “architectural canvas on public display” (p. 32). This is how I shall look at Delhi in the following pages. I shall try to unravel what its architectural styles tell us about the context surrounding them (cf. Kusno 1998). A look at Delhi as a living art installation will show us different cultural trends at play and the frames within which the identities of the city have been negotiated by the actors involved in the field of architecture.8

Being the home of people originating from all over India, Delhi has developed into an eclectic space that represents a sum of the different styles and trends present in the country as a whole. In contemporary Delhi one finds the co-presence of Mughal buildings, colonial architecture and functionalist constructions. As shown in the pictures below, we find side by side the lime-washed surfaces of functionalist character (picture two), baroque decorations such as the angel in
picture one, and Roman details such as the pillars at the main entrance of the villa in picture four. The stylistic range extends from futuristic experiments (such as in picture six) over good examples of Punjabi baroque (picture five) to Mediterranean/American villas (such as the one in picture three which is called The White House).

Architecture in postcolonial India has been a field of contest between attempts at representing and glorifying the newly independent nation (with its re-writing of the past, cf. Chapter Two) and at 'catching
up' with international ideals of modernity and development. Roughly, the architectural development of modern Delhi can be divided into two different stages. The first period began with the colonial creation of Lutyens Delhi, the so-called 'baroque' plan of which (Menon 2000) set the stage for the monumentality and "landscaped order" (p.147) that would become one of the defining aspects of the city. With independence, efforts were instead made to forge a new Indian architecture shaped by ideals of blending past, present and future. In the latter period we have examples of buildings, most commonly government ones, that recreate the colonial style alongside structures aimed at creating a model for an Indian modernism. Both these trends, even though strongly guided by the government, developed under the influence of international ideas of 'style' imported by foreign visiting experts as well as by a growing number of architects who had studied abroad. Indian post-independence architecture was a hybrid project at once mirroring the nationalist character of independent India and openness to the outside world.

In the 1950s and 60s architecture was mainly characterized by the logic of austerity promoted by Nehru's government. The mantra of the time was that the country needed to modernize quickly while administering its scarce resources. Nationalist at its core, the architecture of this period was a product of intensive collaboration with foreign (Western) ideas, architects and designers. A distinctive architectural mix of styles characterized the immediate post-independence period. It involved, firstly, a form of "utilitarian modernism" (Bhatia 1994), which displayed poor design, lack of innovation and abundance of conformity. The constructions inspired by this approach presented Delhi as a city with immensely long lines of flat buildings with flat roofs and bland lime-washed façades. These buildings were, however, intercalated by the impressive monuments of 'modernity' that the government built in order to represent the nation.

Secondly, this epoch witnessed the birth of a popular trend favouring opposite ideals. The members of the elite adopted an Austrian architect, Joseph Heinz, to construct homes that would reflect their ambitions. Heinz's work gave birth to the extravagant styles that are today summed up under the label 'Punjabi Baroque'. An expression of the visions of the upper classes, these styles became typical of the urban landscape in Delhi. They constitute an interesting example of the
re-elaboration of different cultural influences at play in the city at that time. The new styles offered a continuity with the colonial past, reflecting notions of 'home' and the decorative choices of the bungalows of the colonial establishment.\(^1\) Heinz's clients reacted against the logic of 'austerity' by claiming a freedom from traditional and regional histories and by importing foreign elements into their homes. As Bhatia says, Heinz “was destined to move whole sections of Baroque Rome and the Italian countryside to India. To a free India, hungry for new ideas” (1994:43). The new styles testified to the fact that the idea of the home had changed for the middle and upper classes. The home had become a symbol of the owner's identity, a refuge from the intrusive and frightening outside world (cf. the discussion on the notion of the private above). The development of private architecture in postcolonial Delhi mirrors the changing relationship between the individual and society among the educated classes. As I described in Chapter Two in relation to cultural identity as such, the educated categories could construct privileged positions in society by administering the exchanges between 'India' and the 'West'. 'India' and the 'West' appear as central frames for the debates on architecture in post-independence India and the ways the latter turned into practice.

‘Punjabi Baroque’ is still popular today. However, none of my informants is an admirer of this style. They address it in terms ranging from “disgusting” to “lousy”: “It is typical of Delhi”, said Vijay, the opera singer, “It is as pretentious as people are here.” For Vijay, as for other informants, ‘Punjabi baroque’ represents the exhibitionism of the nouveaux riches from which they distance themselves. The fact of not sharing that taste marks out how they envision themselves as possessors of a higher cultural capital in the exchanges between things Indian and things Western.

As demonstrated in other contexts these young men do not have to show off their knowledge of foreign worlds. Nonetheless, some of my informants also reveal attitudes towards housing that mirror those of Heinz's clients. Like Sunil and Satinder, those among my informants who are able to have an independent standard of living, invest a lot of attention in their choice of housing. They experience it as a marker of their identity (which is expressed in the wish for a bathroom like in a five-star hotel expressed by Sunil). They emphasize the new
significance ascribed to one’s house, introduced by the elites for whom Heinz built his houses. A house is no longer just the property of an extended family and the banner of a specific community, but a mirror of the owner’s own individual possessions, aspirations and position in society. Their attention to the home recreates the divide between the public and the private that I described above and that was emphasized by the post-independence elite.

**Delhi and the Indian renaissance**

I ended the above section by briefly discussing how the attitudes towards style and housing marked the changing attitudes towards identity in Delhi in postcolonial times. Taking off from this discussion, I want to offer a view on the contemporary outlook of Delhi and show how the city today offers us obvious signs of changing perceptions of identity among its inhabitants. Starting with private houses and then looking at commercial settings and cultural heritage I shall analyze how the boost in the popularity of ‘India’ is expressed in the contemporary city landscape.

**housing ‘India’**

If houses are, as Bhatia suggests, “a parade of fancies” (1994:34) where cherished memories and identifications are translated into physical space, then the recent trends in private housing in Delhi may confirm to us the present popularity of ‘India’ among the metropolitan middle and upper classes. While from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s the middle and upper classes displayed by their choice of housing an openness to foreign countries and cultures, today the trend seems to have turned. Observing and photographing the city and talking to young architects, I discovered that today there is a desire to re-evolve ‘village India’ in contemporary private housing. One example is displayed in the image shown below (picture seven) which I took in a posh residential area in South Delhi. There, the outer wall is rough and built of traditional countryside materials. Small holes in the wall constitute the windows and bells hang above the main gate. The
appearance of this house reminds one of the culture of northern Indian villages.

![Image](image_url)

This house is far from a unique example. In the homes of rich South Delhi inhabitants I was shown many examples of this: houses with wooden doors and iron windows typical of some village areas in Gujarat or Bihar, tables and chairs from Madhya Pradesh, etc. Many of these houses are also built (as in the picture seven) to resemble village houses in exterior appearance and structure. I noticed, in the furniture shops in Hauz Khas (see below), how the local rich invest money in sofas, tables and beds representing village life from diverse parts of India. The vendors diligently emphasize the 'authentic' origins of all the pieces, often hiding the fact that many of them are relatively new and are made to look old.

"They want houses that merge the best of India and the West", one young architect that I spoke to commented. His customers' expectations were increasingly generated at the interface of 'Western' comforts and Indian values. In an article on interior design in the Hindustan Times we read, among the usual complaints about lack of style among Delhi's inhabitants, that "if there is a trend, it is to blend the contemporary with the traditional" (Singh 1999). It is, however, a priority among the new middle classes that their houses must look specifically Indian. Prakash (1997) argues that this trend has been gradually increasing during the past twenty-five years. According to him, it reflects the "renewal of interest in traditional or vernacular space and culture" (p. 48) in contemporary India. The interest in 'Indian' iconography carries on a continuity from the colonial discourse on identity that was expressed materially in the architectural projects of the government. Yet, in the sphere of private housing its visibility and popularity have definitely increased in the last decade at the juncture of
India’s entrance into the ‘global’ market. The growing flow of money, generating among the privileged a willingness to spend, and the heightened exposure to travelling images and models of global lifestyles, have turned houses into statements of Indian identity in times of globalization. Sunil described these attitudes towards housing in terms clearly expressing how the new ideals are the result of today’s processes of exchanges:

“Middle class people buy traditional furniture from the villages, but for them it means something else. They have seen people abroad buying that stuff, so for them it means being cosmopolitan to have those things in their houses. When villagers have those same objects it is just a sign of backwardness.”

**buying and watching ‘India’**

The popularity of ‘India’ as a symbol, a style and a particular orientation in taste is not only visible in private spaces such as houses but also in a number of other commercial settings such as shopping malls, restaurants, etc. A particular example is the shopping area called Dilli Haat.

Located in South Delhi, Dilli Haat, meaning the Delhi open market, is a popular attraction for Delhi’s middle classes. I went there for the first time quite late in my fieldwork, together with Rajiv (cf. vignette in Chapter Three). Rajiv was just about to go to Italy to study and wanted to take with him some ‘Indian’ items as presents. He asked me to join him since he was interested in understanding what kind of items would be appreciated by Italians. During our visit, he confessed that these gifts were also instruments for him to find out whether there were any opportunities for starting up an export business to Italy. Walking around with Rajiv looking at pillows, textiles and other handicrafts, I met Sunil and Satinder who were having a drink with two girls they had met a few weeks earlier.
That day I discovered the charms of Dilli Haat. The place offers an interesting public display of the re-evaluation of India. Conceptualized as a reconstruction of the traditional Northern Indian rural weekly market, Dilli Haat is a commercial place which 'welcomes' you with an entrance fee of one rupee (in order to keep beggars out of the market premises). Inside you are met by a wide central plaza delimited by a yellow colonnade built in materials resembling those of Indian villages. On the central square merchants display their goods on the ground (see picture eight). Artisans come here from all over India and are allowed to occupy one selling space for a maximum of three or four weeks at a time. Thus, at Dilli Haat you may find traditional items from all over India at a reasonable price. During my visit with Rajiv, the main
attraction in the square was a group of Rajasthani folk musicians who had been invited for the celebration of Diwali (see picture nine).

Middle class people flock to Dilli Haat, especially during festivities. Notwithstanding its folkloristic character, very few tourists come here. With few exceptions only foreigners who reside in Delhi attend the market, possibly because of its location far from any tourist attractions. However, for the middle class Delhiites, this is not just a place for shopping and for having a drink or a bite in company of friends and family at one of the stalls inspired by the different regional culinary traditions of India, but for voyeurism too. Among young people this market has become a free zone where couples can share moments of romance away from the gaze of curious street dwellers (as reported to me by a young couple). It is also an arena for self-display and for organizing campaigns of different sorts. During my later visits I observed theatrical plays, small scale concerts and protests organized by students (picture eleven shows one of these occasions where the place became a stage for a protest against the situation of women in rural India).

Similarly to other institutions such as the Crafts Museum (cf. Greenough 1996) and the Crafts Emporium this market promotes the heritage of rural India in packaged form. "The Dilli Haat offers you the Indian experience in a microcosm. A destination in itself...your window to a land filled with myriad colors and vibrant contrasts" recites Delhi
Tourism information. A hybrid between a museum and a shop, Dilli Haat emphasizes a phantasm of India constructed within the logic of consumption. Indian history and culture are consumed by the visitors who gather here to shop and have fun but also to get the taste of traditional Indian lifestyle and culture. As one man carrying his young children around the market remarked, referring to his son: “So that they learn something about India!”

**eating ‘India’**

Young people’s ways of visiting restaurants and bars mirror their ongoing modes of identification and their fascination with ‘India’. Popular leisure places also offer us a view on the co-existence and exchange of messages between ‘Indian’ and foreign worlds that I am focusing on in this study. My informants eat alternately at the dhabas (the traditional street eateries) and at the establishments of international chains such as Thank God It’s Friday (“TGIF”), fast-food MacDonald’s and Wimpy, or Indian Barista coffee-shops. Wimpy at Connaught Place has been one of my regular hang-outs in Delhi. Introduced to the place by my tour-leader informants, who use it as one of their meeting points, I conducted many of my interviews there. Popular among middle-class families, Wimpy hosts birthday parties for children on a daily basis and functions as a meeting point for youths from the different parts of the city. ‘TGIF’, where I was taken for the first time by my more well-to-do informants, is, in contrast, a hang-out for the more privileged. It has an American-British outlook, the interiors decorated with icons of baseball and American and British football. It is a place where the clients can both enjoy a dinner or a lunch or just hang around for a drink. During the evening hours the soundscape is filled with the latest international music successes and at times people may also dance.

Barista (see pictures thirteen and fourteen), a more recent chain that is now to be found in many different Indian cities and in several different locations in Delhi, is the most cosmopolitan of these hang-outs. Its name means barman or bartender in Italian and the place has pastel-coloured walls, seats placed along the windows looking out to the street and posters of famous jazzmen and movie stars. Barista is a meeting point for different categories of Delhiites. It caters for both
the local upper class as well as for intellectuals and artists. The food at Barista is a blend of Indian and Western: Indian chicken patty, chicken tikka sandwiches, etc. are offered along with a variety of coffees, from Italian espresso and cappuccino to American vanilla, hazelnut and caramel flavoured coffees and original South Indian coffee. The waiters (quite often young people) walk around in baseball caps and colourful overalls and display generous smiles.¹³

One eatery that I found particular interesting, though, belongs to a recently started chain called Zila Kakabpur (meaning roughly ‘the city of kababs’). Zila is slowly breaking into the Indian market and has already become ‘a must’ among middle class youths (picture fifteen).¹⁴ I was first introduced to Zila by Dipankar and Vikram. One night we had decided to have a few drinks at the Mezz, a small disco-bar located in one market area in South Delhi. They told me that we could meet up at
this eatery, which was next-door to the local Barista, and grab a bite before going to the club. On my arrival, Zila looked to me just like one more cosmopolitan eatery. Glass walls surrounded the restaurant, the interior design was minimalist, with simple but colourfully designed chairs and tables. Those serving walked around in red and blue mechanic’s overalls and baseball caps, and an electronic sign-board, displaying the numbers of the clients to be served, was posted over the entrance to the kitchen. Below that was another sign saying “Self Service Only”.

When I walked in I discovered small signs of ‘India’ beautifully mingled with the other modernistic elements. On the shelves on the walls there were glass containers filled with different types of legumes. A big poster showed Indian varieties of spices and lentils. When Dipankar and Vikram arrived, they told me that this was one of the best kabab places in Delhi. Together with dhabas such as Aap ki khatir (a particular Hindi expression for ‘taking care of the guest’), or Karim’s in Old Delhi and also the Great Kabab Factory at the Radisson Hotel next to the airport, Zila was one of the ‘musts’ for kabab lovers, they told me.

The search for and fascination with the best kabab among my informants was another expression of their fascination with (and consumption of) ‘India’. Zila, however, also permits other observations regarding the exchange between local and imported ideas in the field of food and consumption. Zila looks like the commercialized result of a planned integration of ‘Western’ and Indian food habits and rules of sociability. In the ‘Western way’, the employees are supposed only to prepare the food and keep the place clean and not to serve at the tables (following, so to speak, the MacDonald’s model). When called by the number display, the clients are supposed to collect the food themselves. Yet, Zila’s food offers put the accent on Indian authenticity. The menu consists exclusively of lentil soups (dal), different types of North Indian bread (roti and naan), and kababs characteristic of Lucknow (a city in Uttar Pradesh considered to be the heart of Mughlai cuisine in North India). With direct reference to Indian ways of eating, Zila’s kakabs are served without knives and forks. The clients are invited to eat with their hands in the proper traditional way. Notwithstanding this demarcation, the food comes served on small colorful porcelain plates and trays (and not metal ones as in a regular dhaba). Zila has also adopted the small paper container that fast-food
dealers use for serving French fries. However, here these contain the raw onions and raw green chillies that are compulsory in northern Indian cuisine.

‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ elements are juxtaposed and fused at Zila. The practices of the clients contribute to this fusion. Most people adapt to only a few of the regulations of the place. The number display has, for instance, turned into an empty message board, since the employees are constantly asked to serve food at the tables. As Vikram told me, this is “because of the alien nature of the clients’ concept of queuing and self service; Indians wants to be served when they sit down to eat”. Looking at first sight like an ‘Indian MacDonald’s’ (I have heard foreign visitors to Delhi commenting upon the un-authenticity of the place), Zila can be seen as a classical Indian dhaba renewed with inspirations gathered from travelling images. In order to attract a newer and richer clientele it has added a ‘global’ outlook, improved the hygiene and also, of course, increased the price, even if it is still very affordable for average-income middle class families. However, it may also look like a ‘modern’ restaurant, that is capitalizing upon the popularity of ‘India’. Regardless of the key interpretation, Zila questions the predictability of the travel of imagination around the globe and shows the richness of novel hybrid expressions of culture that do not fit into dichotomic interpretational schemes. Neither a dhaba nor a MacDonald’s, Zila contains a bit of both at one and the same time. It shows us how eateries such as MacDonald’s may at times, instead of producing a “MacDonaldization” of the world (Ritzer 1996), be reworked to inspire the creation of new displays of local identity.

**living ‘Indian’ history**

I have addressed above how my informants ‘consume’ with great pleasure places that are constructed around the idea of ‘India’. Linking up with that discussion, I now want to focus on how they also consume ‘India’ and its history through the physical cultural heritage of Delhi. I shall frame my discussion with two examples. The first will lead me to discuss how places loaded with the aura of antiquity are used by young people as stages for artistic events and, thus, given a new ‘modern’ meaning. Through the second example, I shall look at how my informants understand buildings representing the history of the city. It
will be suggested that their interpretations can show us how relics of Indian history are used to frame India's role in the contemporary world. My informants’ views of the past are informed by their present views of India and of its relations with the outside world and linked to their experiences of identity.

**SHAKESPEARE IN THE HAVELI**

Gaurav is a 36-years-old actor. Some ten years ago he studied in England for a couple of years, but came back to India with the idea of starting up a career. Things have not really gone right for him as an actor. He has styled himself as a voice trainer and spends his time teaching school-children, managers from multinationals, actors and the like, the correct pronunciation of “Indian English”. “Indian English is a real language just like British English and we should be proud of it”, he told me during one conversation.

The first time I met Gaurav was when a friend of mine invited me to join him to see Hamlet played in an old *haveli* in Old Delhi. From South Delhi the drive took me an hour or so. When I reached the *haveli*, that was hidden in one small street inside the *chowks* of the Old city, the audience were seated in the inner courtyard of the *haveli* but the play had not yet begun. Instead I was met by a bizarre scene. A village magician was performing some tricks in front of the young crowd. To their joyous applause the magician twisted the head of his young assistant and produced *tulsi* trees out of empty metal glasses. Everyone was enjoying the ease with which the magician was making everything happen under big pieces of cloth and no one really seemed to be bothered about the obvious deception involved. Suddenly I spotted my friend and went to sit next to him. The play began. South Indian music spread with great strength from the loudspeakers and out came a man dressed in the typical clothing of the South Indian *Katakhali* dance. He stared at the crowd and after a while shouted, with a self-consciously exaggerated Indian-English accent: “You were expecting Hamlet, no? So why are you giving me those looks?” The play, a reinterpretation of Shakespeare in *Katakhali* style, then began properly. “Desdemona”, Gaurav-Hamlet told us in his monologue, “once told me, why are you looking at me with those big *Katakhali* eyes? Why are you dressed like a woman? Are you not a man?” In his acting, Gaurav succeeded in ironizing Western views of India, while making credible his Indian version of Shakespeare (at least as much as I, not being educated in an Anglo-Saxon world, could gather). I was very pleased with the beauty of the recitation and also with the setting. The courtyard of the *haveli*, with its rich and graceful decorations, the candle lights, the street sounds from outside made the evening into something that I would remember for a long time.
Through this play Gaurav succeeded drawing attention to the old *haveli* in Old Delhi. Owned by a friend’s uncle, this mansion had been converted by a circle of young artists into a place for artistic activities, such as plays, exhibitions and projections. During this particular event Gaurav, with his Shakespearian play, commented with irony on the ‘Westernization’ of India. He communicated his pride about being a ‘Westernized Indian’, while making fun of Indian ways of looking at the ‘West’ as well as ‘Western’ ways of looking at India when, talking as Hamlet, he made jokes about the *Kathakali* outlook. Gaurav reflects the changing attitudes towards Indian history that I have already discussed in earlier chapters. Here, however, I want to deal with one particular aspect of this performance, namely the choice of place. Gaurav and the spectators with whom I talked, ranked the mansion as one of the most important architectural symbols of India. The *havelis* stood for India’s greatness in the past, Gaurav meant, and therefore needed to be re-evaluated. His play was one such attempt at drawing attention to the fate of this part of Indian culture.

Gaurav’s ideas reflected ongoing debates on cultural heritage in Delhi. Notwithstanding the ‘monumental attitude’ that has characterized the developments of architectural style and urban planning in Delhi, historical monuments, and the teaching of Delhi’s history related to these, have received quite varied fates. A common critique among scholars and artists in Delhi is that the city has not been able properly to evaluate and protect its rich heritage (cf. Menon 2000). However, the 1980s marked a change in attitudes held by both people and authorities and people’s attitudes towards the city’s heritage (Gupta N., 2000). Often inspired by commercial interests, public awareness of the cultural heritage and a certain sense of local pride rose in particular among the upper and middle classes. Delhi’s mixture of world-class architecture and the shabbiness engendered by the presence of the poor (who had taken possession of many monuments left vacant) slowly became an attraction. Some monument areas were transformed into ‘ethnic’ commercial blocks with a boom in businesses such as restaurants, shops, bars, etc. The urban villages surrounding them were turned into commodified arenas for voyeuristic entertainment. In Hauz Khas, to mention but one example, restaurants ranging from Chinese to Mughlai were constructed inside the old *havelis*. Jewellers, prestigious designer boutiques and furniture shops border the village.
streets which lead to a heritage area built in the fourteenth century. Hauz Khas is a curious reverse of Dilli Haat. While it too is inspired by a fascination with 'India', it is built around the commercialization and refashioning of pre-existent buildings. To protect the feeling of authenticity the streets are not controlled so that peasants and local poor people can move freely ("they are also part of the charms of the area", I was told by the mother of one of my informants).

While being big successes among the Delhíiites, these places have nonetheless become a matter of debate. Without going into details, I can state that, in contemporary Delhi, the significance of heritage is addressed by critics from a variety of angles. I shall offer an example of the issues involved in these debates by discussing the case of the Delhi Imperial Zone (in short the DIZ) which was designed by Dutch architect Luthyen during the Raj. The views held by Nikilesh on the DIZ speak of the processes of re-inscription of history among young Delhíiites.

One evening I was offered a ride by Nikilesh from central Delhi to the place in South Delhi where I lived. As we drove through the Parliament area, the setting winter sun lit up the buildings of this old colonial site making their red stone even more lively. Nikilesh suggested that we should drive around in the area for a while and I agreed. "It's beautiful, huh?" said Nikilesh. "Incredibly so", I agreed. We kept watching, enjoying the sight of the old colonial palaces changing nuances with the change of the light from the setting sun. After a few more moments of contemplation I asked Nikilesh "Doesn't it feel strange to like such a place? After all, it's the greatest sign of the British oppression of India." Nikilesh replied "Of course, but now it's ours!" After that he elaborated, as he did on many other occasions, on how India had managed to survive in spite of all its invaders and conquerors, showing how the incorporation of this area into India symbolized also the spirit of the country: "This is India as much as the Mughal buildings and the Hindu temples, we have absorbed them and now they are ours!"

Nikilesh's inversion of the conventional significance of buildings such as the Parliament building, the Rashtrapati Bhavan, is a sign of his imagination of 'India'. The remnants of colonial domination were reincorporated by him into today's India and turned into symbols for the country and its capacity to stand against all external force (I addressed this particular perspective on history also in Chapter Three). Nikilesh's
comments resonated with the age-old debates regarding this area. At Independence Gandhi proposed that the site of the Viceroy’s House (what today is the President’s residence) should be transformed into a hospital complex (cf. Vidal 2000:18). This view was not shared by Prime Minister Nehru who, despite his functionalist approach to public space, struggled to keep this area as it was. According to him, it ought to be used as a space for parades and celebrations of the independent Indian nation, demonstrating the greatness of its newly obtained freedom. For decades the DIZ was left relatively untouched but remained the object of public debate.16

During my stay in Delhi in 1999, I had the chance to follow an updated version of this debate. Prime Minister Vajpayee had proposed the substitution of circa two hundred dilapidated bungalows of various sizes at the DIZ with new residential blocks. There would be room, Vajpayee suggested, for multi-storey houses that could host many more people. INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Architectural and Cultural Heritage) replied with a firm “no”. They stated that such a change would significantly shrink the city’s air corridors leading to an increase in pollution and temperature (cf. Vedoon 1999). Architect Ravindran intervened in the debate in one newspaper, addressing the issue from a less functionalist standpoint. He reminded the readers that the bungalows were nothing but a British adaptation of an Indian item, namely the *bungla*, the hut of Bengal, and thus symbols of a two-sided exchange between India and the West.

The debate quoted regarding the DIZ reflects different currents of thought about India’s cultural heritage, but also ongoing debates on the relationship between what is old and what is new, and contemporary Indian visions of modernity. The past of foreign invasions and oppressions is today protected as part of Indian national identity. The struggle for history and for keeping the memory of India’s past alive is part of an agenda engaging both contemporary youth and commercial interests as well as political parties.
the use of Delhi

The planning and aesthetics of the city mirror the broader debates on social change in India. These public discourses refer to the same categories and frames of reference that my informants adopt for describing their own identities (cf. Chapter Two) or for talking about their relationship to the nation. In the present section I want to look in more depth at the relationship between my informants and the city. I shall explore their cultural identity through the lens of how they live in, experience and use the city. By looking at tourists, Edensor (1998) has shown how the way social actors move in and around specific places signal their own understandings of the places they visit. They mark out the “imagined geographies” (ibid.), i.e. how places are inserted by actors into culturally and historically specific understandings of the world. Inspired by Edensor’s approach I shall suggest, in the first part of this section, that identities can be read by looking not only at patterns of residence but also at modes of moving and being in the city. While this part will show how places express my informants’ identities and their modes of imagining and representing ‘India’ and the ‘West’, the second part will be devoted to an analysis of how their interactions with places not only mirror but also shape their identities. Through an example gathered in one of the places where I have conducted fieldwork among my tour-leader informants, i.e. Janpath market, I shall focus on how public places provide them with the messages and images they use for constructing their identities.

In Chapter One, I mentioned that my informants live in different areas of the city. My fieldwork-geography therefore covers quite a bit of Delhi (see the map). The locations where my informants live reflect differences among them in background, status and income. Most of the tour-leaders, who come from less privileged backgrounds, live outside main Delhi in neither poor nor wealthy areas. The same is true of Nikilesh, Vijay and Dipankar as well, who come from educated but less privileged families. My more privileged informants, in contrast, live mostly in and around South Delhi in areas considered to be posh or at least middle-class. The most concrete example I gathered in fieldwork regarding the relation between residential location, identity and social position is that of Satinder and Sunil. As I described above, before finding a home of their own, they both lived with their families in lower middle class areas. The house they finally bought together was located
in Noida, a growing suburb planned during the 1960s as a satellite town to prevent the flow of immigrants from entering Delhi. Today this area houses members of the emerging middle classes. It has a nicely planned structure with access to all the main infrastructure and with a lot of green areas. The change of residence of Sunil and Satinder marked both their personal growth and their change in status and income.

**Maps of leisure**

A map of the places my informants go to within the city would be more complex and more significant. Their trajectories were structured around consumption and leisure, and offer us an entry into the ways they identified themselves in their status and gender positionings and their imagination of ‘India’.

In the first section of the present chapter I mentioned how my informants, regardless of background, try to avoid Old Delhi, which for them is too congested, confusing and dirty. They seldom visit and when they do it is for some specific purpose, for the purchase of some specific items, for some cultural activity (like the Kathakali-Hamlet), or to get a good kabab. Notwithstanding their personal detachment from this area, all my informants consider Old Delhi to be the ‘authentic’ part of the city. This is the place where, as I said before, they take all their foreign visitors. Every time I have met a Delhi’ite for the first time, I have been asked whether I had been to Old Delhi. At times, the questioner would have seen less of that part of the city than I had. Ashwin once told me, “you should go there, it’s amazing!” Later, when I proposed that we should go there together, he said “I would rather avoid going there, but if you want…” Old Delhi is, in the imagination of my informants, an epitome of their ‘phantasms’ of ‘India’. Their conception of ‘Old Delhi’ is a mixture of ‘Western’ views of India and the official representations produced by the Indian government (see above). Like the stance taken towards ‘India’, my informants approach ‘Old Delhi’ with ambivalence. They praise its beauty and feel an emotional connection with the place, yet keep away from it.

Connaught Place, on the other hand, offers the tour-leader informants a more comfortable and less threatening context for the play of identity and imagination. When I first met them, Sunil, Satinder,
Amar and Ramesh would always meet up on the fence at the Janpath market. This place, next to CP, was selected because of its strategic location and its character. For them, living as they did in diverse areas of the city, CP could function as a mid-point equidistant for everybody. Many travel agencies also have their offices at CP. During one single visit, my informants could get new work assignments and spend hours chatting and drinking tea with friends and colleagues. The place was, however, something more than just an instrumentally strategic location for this group of young men and exercised a particular attraction on them. Some of them had to travel for 40 or 50 minutes to reach this place, but they would still gather there even without a work-related purpose. Sunil once described CP and the Janpath market as “interesting” and “amazing” places. He said: “Here you have everything, women, tourists, everything”. For him, as for his friends, CP had an appeal because it condensed the variety of people, messages and objects to be found in Delhi. It reflected both the private life of the guides and, because of the presence of tourists, their work. What I have labelled the ‘star-like’ character of this place, characterized by the co-existence of ‘things foreign’ and ‘things Indian’, was what attracted them, as people who saw themselves as cultural brokers between ‘India’ and the ‘West’.

maps of class and age

Not only the choices of where to hang around but also the ways in which hanging around is carried out can tell us something about the identities of the social actors. On many occasions my tour-leader informants have pointed out to me how the act of meeting up in a public place, right in the middle of the street, is a part of their “culture”. This is what they used to do as children, they told me, and they felt comfortable in the streets. When I got to know them, one of their first statements of identity was that they never went to discos or pubs: “That’s for those upper class people”, Satinder once said. With time, I nevertheless noticed that they started to visit places such as the pubs and bars of CP. At the beginning of my fieldwork, however, they considered the visits to pubs as simply breaks from the conventional routine based on sitting in the market enjoying street life. Their moments of relaxation would be spent on the fence, where they would
be sitting and chatting, then taking short walks around the CP colonnade looking at the shops and the people and then back to the fence to watch the sun go down on Delhi.

The roots of this form of gathering, i.e., the practice of sitting for hours in the same spot in a public space, drinking tea, watching, commenting and debating, are indeed clearly located in north India’s lower middle class culture. Considered a characteristic form of male gathering (cf. Kaviraj 1997, also Chatterjee 1993) “adda”, literally meaning ‘place’\(^1\), has constituted an arena for debate and a “site for self-presentation” (Chakrabarty, 1999:129). Historically, the *adda* has had the power to shape tastes, views and opinions and to encourage instances of cosmopolitanism even among the lower middle-classes.\(^2\)

According to Chakrabarty, *adda* is today “a particular way of dwelling in modernity”, and of adapting to capitalist modernization while retaining a sense of being at home in it (1999:113). In colonial times *adda* came to mark the divide between the educated classes, who could retire more and more into the private spaces of their homes, and the lower middle classes who spent more time in ‘public’ places.

As I mentioned earlier in this book, my tour-leader informants proudly present themselves as “plain middle class people” and distance themselves from the privileged, cosmopolitan rich. Spending time in public places seems for them to turn into a statement of identity which distinguishes them from the higher strata of society. A few comparisons between my informants may be useful to further clarify this point. Those who have a more privileged background seldom ‘hang around’ in public outdoor places. Instead they select pubs, restaurants, bars and shopping malls where they can be undisturbed by the crowd. Their favourite resorts are located in residential areas not far from where they live and their favourite shopping areas are the new malls of South Delhi. The ways of moving around in the city also mark out a difference between the richer and poorer. As already mentioned, my tour-leader informants used to walk a lot during the afternoons spent at CP. De Certeau (1984) has described strolling around as a particular inventive practice through which social actors construct common narratives by “weaving laces together”. The practice is in itself a marker of difference. My more privileged informants seldom spend time walking around. Going by car, they reach the place they have selected, spend some time there and then get back into their cars and drive somewhere else.
Their movements in the city are thus more directional and instrumental than those of the tour-leaders.\(^{19}\)

The different ways of using the city displayed by my informants are a matter of both class or status and of age and the particular moments in these individuals' life-phases. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I noticed that my tour-leader informants had started moving away from CP. They met in new settings such as at coffee shops and bars in other parts of the city. Sunil and Satinder started this detachment from the Janpath market, by limiting their use of it to a place where they made appointments and then moving further to the YMCA, the Indian Coffee shop, etc. Bharat and Shalini instead spent more time at the Max Muller Bhavan (the premises of the Goethe Institute in Delhi), where they would attend German lessons and then join other students at the school's coffee shop or in other bars around the area. They began to visit places such as Dilli Haat, or the bars and pubs of South Delhi. Their movement away from CP was also a movement away from outdoor spaces and marked a contemporaneous passage to a life-phase based on more solid economic foundations. They could afford drinks in the bars, they could move around in cars and no longer used motorbikes. In the case of Sunil and Satinder, the move from CP coincided with the purchase of their new house.

**public places, phantasms and identity**

The apparent chaos of certain areas of Delhi makes them appear similar to Augé's non-places (cf. Augé 1996). To my tour-leader informants this chaos is a sought-after element of daily life and a provider of entertainment and new stimuli. Public places penetrated by the travel of imagination, such as Connaught Place (CP), are particularly popular among them. Hanging around there provides a continuous exposure to messages that can become part of the identity work of these young men. For them, places such as CP are "existential spaces" (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Augé 1996) rather than just physical locations. There, they can redefine who they are and analyze the changes taking place in society. I shall focus on the small market in Connaught Lane, an extension of Janpath market near CP, that my tour-leader informants used as a meeting point for many years, and see what this case tells us about the interplay of places, imagination
and identity. I shall show how CP functions as a good example of the presence of different inspirational sources in contemporary Delhi and how my informants’ experiences and understandings of their position in society are mediated by phantasms evoked in the most banal everyday situations.

IN THE MARKET

Connaught Lane is a small alley located in the heart of central New Delhi (see the map at the end of the book). Its market is part of the Janpath market, the most popular souvenir market in Delhi situated along the main road called Janpath. Together with Rajpath, Janpath was one of the two central arteries in colonial New Delhi. It crosses Delhi from Connaught Place to the area of the Parliament and the India gate, two major historical sites and tourist attractions. Connaught Place (CP) was originally designed as a central commercial space. Today, together with its surroundings, it is still one of the most vital areas of the city. Tall, modern business and administrative buildings and skyscrapers surround CP. Connaught Lane market is separated on its northern side from CP by the Jeevan Bharati, a tall building of red brick and glass, headquarters of the Life Insurance Corporation. On the southern side it is shadowed by the older and more modest Janpath Bhavan that has, on its lower level, a shopping colonnade.

CP and its surroundings were created as an ambivalent space in the very planning of New Delhi (after the designation of Delhi as the capital of British India in 1911). The square was conceived by Edwin Lutyens and the architects of the Raj, as a natural divide between Old/North and New/South Delhi. It was inserted into the “hierarchical space” (Kaviraj 1997) of Delhi as a topographical buffer zone between the “Indian” and the “British”, the colonizers and the colonized (cf. also Jain 1990). CP constituted a functional prolongation of the separation line offered by the fortified walls of Shahjahanabad, built by the Mughals and today part of Old Delhi. The British were keen to maintain this separation in order to keep the "Indian" part (with its diseases, crowds, manifestations and rats) separate from the areas in which the colonial establishment lived. CP constituted, however, not only a divide, but also a space for encounter and exchange between Indian traders who mostly lived in what was once Shahjahanabad, and the British who resided mainly in the new developing south, close to the Viceroy’s house and the new Secretariat. Even today this division is alive, and so is the dialogic character of this central part of Delhi. The image of CP as a border zone characterized by the encounter of differences and yet a marker of differences in the organization of the city, can still be detected today even though the actors in the exchange have changed. Today there are representatives of North and South Delhi, different classes, vendors and buyers and tourists and locals. Clerks come here from the surrounding office buildings to enjoy a snack or a coffee (most popular is DePaul's
cold coffee). For people who live in South Delhi, the CP area is a meeting-, entertainment- and shopping-point. The area has a large supply of shops and outlets, ranging from "traditional" jewelry and handicrafts, to electronic and official Nike, Lacoste and Adidas boutiques, and of Indian, Western, Chinese and Mexican restaurants and pubs. In CP, and more specifically in the underground market "Palika bazaar", one may find cheap electronics and pirate copies of CDs, DVDs and VCR cassettes, catering for young people who gather here in groups from the different parts of the city. Tourists end up visiting CP, drawn by its vast array of restaurants, hotels and guesthouses, travel agencies, and souvenir shops. The backpackers come to CP from nearby Pahar Ganj in order to purchase souvenirs or to experience, with a degree of nostalgia, a little 'taste of the West' in some of the area's Western-style restaurants. The better off tourists and foreign business people, who may stay in the nearby five-star Imperial Hotel or Le Meridien, also gather here for their last shopping tour before jumping on the home-bound flight. All these tourists, as I said earlier, represent a major attraction for my informants. They also constitute a market for a number of other people whose activities are linked to tourism, such as travel agents, souvenir vendors, taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers. Moreover, large numbers of beggars are daily attracted to this area by its blend of well-to-do people. CP is thus the heart of the encounters and exchanges taking place in Delhi. It is within this apparent chaos that my informants find a relative sense of peace and familiarity.

The Janpath market presents an interesting internal division reflecting the phantasmatic interplay between 'India' and the 'West' that I have addressed so far. Along the part of the lane that is closer to Janpath Road are most of the stalls that sell 'ethnic-fashioned' clothes such as Indian kurtas (the traditional Indian long shirts) refurbished with a touch of 'Western' design (decorated with elephants, "Om" signs, Sita-Ram or other Hindu motifs). Other items are Tibetan-styled bags and jackets, paintings, incense holders and other ornaments. At these stalls selling 'real-Indian-stuff-the-way-Westerners-like-it', it is mainly 'Westerners' who stop but also a number of young Indians (I will get back to this later on). Just a few steps away from these stalls are vendors of cheaper outfits fashioned in 'Western' styles, i.e. copies of Adidas, Nike, etc. as well as standard so-called 'middle-class' shirts and trousers. These stalls selling 'Western-clothes-the-way-Indians-like-it' are mostly patronized by Indian families. There is an intense (inter-) play of the phantasms of 'India' and the 'West' here. Phantasms of the 'West' are evoked by the vendors for the purpose of selling copies of
Nike, Adidas, etc. to Indian families, while orientalist phantasms of spiritual and ancient 'India' underline the market's attraction for the foreign tourists. These phantasms interact with each other. The 'West' makes the 'Indian' more explicit and vice versa. The young generations of urban Indians place themselves at the centre of this exchange and question the clear divide between what is 'Western' and what is 'Indian'. Among them it has become popular to buy the orientalist goods originally aimed at the tourists to denote participation in global modernity.

One day, one particular object, representing these exchanges, stimulated my interest. This was a saffron-coloured batik kurta decorated with a number of red/brown 'Om'-signs that I saw on display on one of the stalls of this market and also, on another occasion, worn by a young Indian man in a South Delhi market (one of these kurtas is worn by the young man in picture twelve). This kurta possesses an interesting biography. It is manufactured in India and its conceptual origin is indeed Indian. Like most of the kurtas that are worn almost like uniforms by backpackers, however, it has been refurbished to suit 'Western' and 'modern' taste. It is shorter and tighter than the traditional kurta, worn by Indian workers for convenience or by politicians as a symbol of Indian identity (cf. Bean 1991, Chakrabarty 2002). The bright colour makes it different from the 'traditional' kurtas which are generally white, gray, beige or in Gandhian khadi-cloth. Saffron is a colour which in the contemporary context evokes not only 'traditional purity' but also the recent wave of Hindu nationalism. Nevertheless, it may still be emptied of contradictory meanings by back-packers who wear it unproblematically as a 'typical' and 'authentic' Indian colour. The Om-sign, the symbol of Brahma, the all-encompassing spirit of the universe, in itself speaks of Indian spirituality and is a nice, recognizable and authentic souvenir for the tourist to take back home.

This kurta has, thus, symbolically travelled not only in space but also in time. It links not only different places (or representations of places), such as India and the 'West', but different epochs as well. Through shape, colour and the Om-sign it evokes the 'Western' phantasm of India constructed by colonial and indological visions of traditional Indian society. At the same time it reproduces the style and culture of the hippies of the 1960s and 70s, evoking their search for the
'meaning of life' in the land of spiritual enlightenment. The 'India' that the *kurta* refers to is, however, readily re-appropriated also by young Indians (at least by those generally addressed as 'Westernized') who wear these shirts as symbols of a new global modernity.

None of my informants, however, has ever shown any particular fascination with such items. For my tour-leader informants this particular *kurta* was somewhat distasteful. When worn by Westerners, it was read as a sign of their ignorance and superficiality, or, at times, as a proof of the superiority of Indian civilization and spirituality (since these foreigners are, according to my informants, willing to do anything to come to India and learn about its culture and spirituality). When worn by fellow Indians, a hippie-inspired *kurta* is, as one of my informants told me, a sign of the "superficiality and imitational spirit of Indian youth who do whatever Westerners do". Some of my informants themselves would occasionally wear a traditional *kurta*, considering it both comfortable and elegant. Among my informants the *kurta* is loaded with different meanings. Zakir, the antiques seller at CP whom we met in Chapter Two, wears the *kurta* on a daily basis as a symbol of identity, displaying an almost aristocratic Indianness in an elegant way. Leander, for his part, was wearing, as we saw, a beautiful colourful *khadi-kurta* on top of jeans and Nike tennis shoes when I met him for the first time. He told me that for him wearing a *kurta* was something "different, it's new, it's cool". The garment that generally signals tradition signified for him something trendy to be worn proudly on the campus in order to mark out difference and 'coolness'.

An object such as a *kurta* can evoke a variety of interpretations that depend on the notions and identity of those who look at it, wear it, or buy it. For the back-packers, it is a sign of insiderness in the community of those who follow in the Indian strands of the "banana-pancake trail" (Phipps quoted in Hutnyk 1996a). For an Indian worker or official, it is instead the usual wear that in the eyes of the public represents a link with tradition. For Leander and many other young urban Indians, it signals participation in a global modernity. The presence of items such as this *kurta* show how a place like Janpath market is a provider of a variety of representations and a sign of the ongoing exchanges of meaning between places and epochs. It offers us an opportunity for understanding people's re-elaboration of these representations and the construction of new identities and
interpretations of the relationship between India and the outside world. I shall now develop this argument further by offering another angle represented by another ethnographic example. This little story, besides describing once more how phantasms are constitutive parts of my informants’ experiences of this public place, will show how they may also become instruments for questioning the power asymmetry between India and the ‘West’.

THE WHITE SADHU

A thin white man in his late forties, with a long beard and long brown hair, wearing only pyjama trousers and a couple of thick necklaces round his neck is sitting on the grass surrounded by a dozen Indian men. Satinder, Sunil and I are captured by the scene, which resembles a meeting between a guru and his disciples. We automatically stop for a while and look. Standing a few meters away, since we dare not get too close, we observe the Indian men (workers in dhoti) asking questions and the white man answering with an engagement detectable in his intense gestures and facial expressions. Walking on, Amit comments, “there was a time when you would see Westerners surrounding an Indian guru and look at this...now it’s the other way around!” A few days later, sitting on the same spot we returned to that scene. On this occasion Satinder commented, “Indian spirituality is a Western business!”

Satinder’s comment mobilizes the phantasms of the ‘West’ and ‘India’ in order to make sense of and contextualize the scene, and addresses, with a touch of irony, the changes that are occurring in India as well as in the world at large. During our later conversation, when we were sitting in the market looking at the usual flow of tourists and vendors and Satinder was talking about spirituality as a ‘Western’ business, he projected the phantasms on to the story of his life. Recalling memories of his childhood, he told me that when he was growing up he had become sceptical about spirituality. He rediscovered it later on only by having to explain it to foreign tourists. Still an atheist, today Satinder feels respect for “this aspect of Indian civilization”, and actually experiences it as a relevant part of his identity. Satinder then proceeded to make some observations on India’s role and image abroad. The very fact that so many ‘Western’ travellers, writers, researchers and artists are interested in India, he said, testifies to the
superiority of Indian philosophy and spirituality and to some extent even to the superficiality and materialism of the West. This, he said, has further contributed to strengthen his pride in India, even though the ‘India’ he envisions as an object of pride does not include those young Indians who tend in their clothing to imitate Westerners, nor the poor (or traditional Indians) who, in his view, dwell in unawareness and backwardness (see below).

The encounter with the ‘White Sadhu’ awakened in Satinder a variety of considerations regarding India and its role in the contemporary world. He evoked an ‘India’ close to a stereotypical ‘Western’ vision of it. Yet, instead of going ‘West’ he used this vision to show his appreciation, love and pride in his own civilization. On the other hand, he evaluated and explained the backwardness of India as well as its spiritual/cultural magnificence by a direct reference to the West: India is trapped in the logic of the global economy, it is poor, and because of this it cannot counter ‘Western’ hegemony. Sunil and Satinder made sense of the scene with the White Sadhu by using a blend of phantasms of ‘here’ (‘India’) and ‘there’ (‘West’), ‘now’ (the situation of the global market) and ‘then’ (colonial discourses and antiquity), personal life-stories and national history. The White Sadhu thus becomes more than a “weird firangi” (firangi in Hindi stands for foreigner). He stands as one of the faces of the historically and politically located encounter of India and the ‘West’. Through the evocation of the phantasms produced by looking at this man, my informants redefined the borders between India and the ‘West’. Through the market, phantasms of ‘India’ and the ‘West’ meet to become a part of the process of reflection, experimentation, debate and invention that characterizes my informants’ lives. They offered a new cartography of the world with India as the centre and the West, far from disappearing, as one important referent, but not its obvious centre. At the market, phantasms of ‘India’ and the ‘West’ meet to become a part of the process of reflection, experimentation, debate and invention that characterizes my informants’ lives. Mobilized in the market by the different actors through the items that appear there, they renew the content of categories such as ‘India’ and the ‘West’, questioning their significance and, at the same time, also the hierarchical structure of the ‘colonial dichotomies’ that I referred to above.
...summing up

In this chapter I have shown how Delhi’s planning and aesthetics speak of a historically situated interaction between inner and external influences. The debates and practices surrounding the city mirror the larger Indian debates about social change that I have addressed elsewhere in this book. They highlight the centrality of ‘India’ and the ‘West’ and resonate with the discourses on identity produced by my informants. This travel through Delhi has emphasized how ‘India’ influences contemporary options of housing and public entertainment as well. The aesthetic choices of domestic architecture, the preferences in style for shopping malls and restaurants and the debates regarding the city’s cultural heritage all prove this point. I have attempted to present the city as a space in which the identity claims of social actors can be observed and analyzed. Watching how social actors move within the city, their choices of where to go for fun, and their modes of being in space we learn how they experience their place in society. The city is a major source for identity work. The places I have introduced in this chapter, besides representing examples of what attracts my informants, are also environments that provide them with inspirations for questioning and assessing their views of themselves, their city, a changing India and a changing world. Places such as Janpath market or Zila or Dilli Haat, all funnels for the flow of travelling images, are vital arenas for gathering inspiration for identification.

1 Cf. also Simmel 1995 on the juxtaposition of cultural meaning in the metropolis.
2 Up till the 1960s street signs in India were predominantly in English.
3 The public, Kaviraj writes, is a “historically specific configuration of the common” (1997:89); “the conceptual maps of modernity make an impact not on previously empty conceptual space but on a different conceptual mapping embedded in different practices of space” (p. 112).
4 The history of parks is a good illustration. The parks were, to begin with, under the control of the middle classes, who used them for the purpose of morning and evening strolls. In the 60’s they became, in most of India’s cities, the realm of the poor, of refugees and immigrants. The latter categories of people exploited these spaces for their own survival and by doing so repelled the local middle class people. Filth and disorder became signs used to demarcate this appropriation of space, a kind of “declaration to the middle classes of their unwelcomeness” (Kaviraj 1997:107). Today parks have received yet another twist of fate. Since the 1990s local companies, restaurants, neighbourhood committees and also multinationals have ‘adopted’ the parks. Sponsors invest money in the park they have adopted, keeping it clean and neat but also using it as an arena for marketing. At the entrance to a park, signs publicize the protector of the park, inviting the visitors to adapt to rules of common respect and responsibility.
5 Menon (2000) names the District Centres such as Nehru Place and Rajendra Place, public housing complexes such as Vasant Kunj, Saket, Kalkaji (all in South Delhi), sub-
cities such as Rohini (in north-west Delhi), campuses (Jawaharlal Nehru University in South Delhi) and a number of other parks, urban forests and other infrastructure facilities and amenities.

Administratively Delhi is run by three entities: the Delhi Legislative Assembly (which represents Delhi as a state and passes laws pertinent to a number of subjects which have been accorded by the Constitution), and the two Municipal Authorities; one the DMC (elected locally, also called MCD) for the whole of the territory of Delhi excluding the NDMC-area and the other the NDMC for the DIZ (Delhi Imperial Zone).

Not by coincidence, the tourist district of Delhi (called Pahar Ganj) is also located in this part of the city near attractions such as the Jama Masjid (the Mosque of Delhi), the Red Fort, etc.

As Kusno (1998) suggests, architecture is "a social and political means of representation in which a postcolonial nation forms a dialogue with its colonial past" (p. 551).

The government's "rationalist and interventionist approach", Menon (2000:149) suggests, led to preferences based on theories of architectural style which became secondary to the social and economic priorities.

German architect Walter Gropius, who in the beginning of the twentieth century had launched a functionalist approach to houses, and Frenchman Le Corbusier were in tune with the ruling idea of austerity. Their works came to symbolize the official view on architecture held by the Indian government.

The taste satisfied by Heinz's style was influenced by the bungalows of the colonial establishment, which constituted the first examples of embellished houses (cf. Bhatia 1994). There, the living space had been enlarged with the addition of gardens and open-air offices in the lawn. Investments were made to decorate the exteriors with elements imported from the most varied sources and places (cf. also Khilnani 1997).

I was amazed when I discovered that Barista recently launched plans to open an outlet in Rome. An American-inspired Indian vendor of Italian coffee in Rome is indeed a celebration of deterritorialization and of the twists of 'globalization'.

Certifying its middle class orientation Zila has placed its outlets in standard middle class colonies such as Defence Colony, New Friends Colony and East Patel Nagar.

Tulsi is a plant that belongs to the family of basil and is charged with spiritual significance in India.

One of the most crucial debates, started in 1968, concerned the removal of the statue of George V from the cupola on Rajpath where it had been placed since the late 1930s. Some suggested that a statue of Gandhi should replace that of the king. Nothing happened to this proposal until, in 1989, it was passed by the Parliament. The Gandhi statue that had been produced for the purpose proved, however, to be too big for the cupola. The cupola thus remained empty, as it still is today, and the sculpture representing Gandhi was installed in the precincts of the Parliament building. At this point some suggested that the whole cupola, instead of standing there empty, should be removed. Protests led, however, to the maintenance of the cupola since it constituted, the conservationists suggested, an integral part of the designed landscape of Delhi. This debate, according to Narayani Gupta (2000), has resurfaced so many times that it has become evident that the real attempt concerns 'hijacking' personalities like Gandhi for political purposes rather than debates about the aesthetics of the area. She writes: "It is clear that the Central Vista is seen as the axis of national political power, and that Gandhi' Samadhi at Rajghat will never have the same significance" (N. Gupta 2000:169). From the 1980s the perception of the Imperial Zone started to change slowly. The area lost its "kitsch" character and became a constitutive part of what could be labelled as 'good architecture' in Delhi (p. 168).

Adda can also be defined as "careless talk with boon companions" or "chat of intimate friends" (Chakrabarty 1999).
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India Dreams

18 According to Chakrabarty (1999) _adda_ has also represented a way of resisting to middle-class notions of discipline (which in some specific periods in history turned _adda_ into "idle-talk, waste of time"). Thus it presents itself as in tension with the developmentalist, utilitarian logic of capitalism.

19 I must again warn the reader again that the situation is never clean cut. The different constellations of friends I have followed are relatively heterogeneous in terms of class, upbringing, education and income. The same person may change his/her choice of hangouts and ways of interacting, depending on the company in which he/she is at the moment.

20 The Om-sign is one of the most popular symbols to be found on souvenirs (from jewels to posters, postcards and incense burners). It constitutes a central part of the 'Western' imagination of India, starting from the indological tradition down to hippie-culture and new age.

21 A way of looking at this _kurta_ could be in terms of "the social life of things" (cf. Appadurai 1986). Nevertheless I prefer to avoid the chronological order implied by the concept of biography and remain within the realm of juxtaposition and simultaneity. I thus attempt to render the critical and sometimes paradoxical story of this object in terms of the influences than converge in it.

22 I remember from my travels in India as a backpacker how the purchase of a _kurta_ and _pyjama_ trousers and of some kind of ethnic/religious necklace, was one of the first 'musts' in order to become accepted as a 'real' backpacker 'on the road.

23 _Sadhu_ is the term used to define the so-called wandering holy men.
Through a small LCD display on a digital video camera the world reveals its most explicit charms and its dullest banalities. Visually, not everything is interesting or understandable. If you have to capture on camera images able to direct the eye of a potential viewer towards, let us say, a red neon sign in a city landscape, then that red sign needs to be strikingly red, explicit, direct, impossible to miss. In the editing phase one has to work towards making the meaningful details in the material collected available to the viewer. The red neon sign must therefore be carefully measured against the context within which it is going to be presented. Possibly one can consider coupling it, rhetorically, with something not so colourful and attractive. Or maybe, one can anticipate it by using something recalling it or contrasting with it. Yet, it must stand out, it must capture the eye. And so must the story told by the images as well.

Such a filmic gaze directed my return to Delhi at the beginning of 2004. After two years of physical absence, during which I had nonetheless been in touch with my informants and friends, I was once again back among them. This time, the purpose was the production of a visual ethnography of my ‘field’. Together with a film director colleague and friend, I set out to capture on video the discussions, experiences and dreams that I had collected through my research across a five-years period. This project had to result in a documentary making my research intelligible to larger crowds than the academic one. The logic of the red neon sign guided this work. My friends’ notions, ideas and phantasms had to be translated into pixels. They had to be understandable, explicit and convincing, but also beautiful, captured under good light and sound conditions. The working situation was markedly different from that of fieldwork, with a tighter schedule and higher costs. Within the lapse of half an hour or so I had to collect the meaningful experiences and stories of each person I interviewed.
The statements of that person needed to be self-explanatory and well formulated. As a plus they had to be expressed in a visually stimulating place, one that could either mirror or contrast with what the interviewee was telling me. The stories told had indeed to be interesting enough to capture the attention of the viewer and to convey a meaning. Yet, what meaning would they convey? What meaning did I want to convey with the documentary?

The working title of the film, Riding the Global Wave, was constructed around the themes of this book. I was planning to discuss these young people’s experiences and interpretations of the opening up of India to the global market. How could I translate critically into film my informants’ notions about a changing India and their enthusiasm for its ‘ride along the global wave’? I already knew that if anything could have been easily made explicit and visible to a viewer, it would have been the glorification that my interlocutors make of the opportunities that the opening of the Indian economy had given them. The documentary would then have turned out to be a hymn to, and a defence of, ‘globalization’.

Not being myself a ‘fan’ of what the newspapers call ‘globalization’, but rather someone whose work is to problematize and question that vast and undefined phenomenon, I was a little worried by this potential outcome. But I also knew that my informants would have offered me their unquestioned tribute and praise to India and its greatness alongside a questioning of Western hegemony. This could indeed strike a balance with the hymn to globalization. But what film would result from that? Were the contradictions not too many and too thick to be translated into a fifty-minute film? What story was I to tell those viewers who were neither experts of India nor of globalization nor for that matter of anthropology? My answer was simply to abandon myself to the logic of fieldwork. I decided to ‘track’ and ‘follow’ my interlocutors (as I had done in my fieldwork) and see where they would take me and what stories they would share with me. Something would have to come out of that. And so it did.

One of the first things that happened during the shooting was that Dipankar, who by now had become one of the best known tennis coaches in Delhi, took us to Gurgaon (see the map), one of the growing suburbs of Delhi. He wanted to show us, he said, the “amazing development” that had taken place there. After having just left the city-
limit, at the beginning of the suburb, the road displayed one shopping mall after another. Twenty-five new shopping malls had been built in this area since I had left. We walked into one of them, to find a cavalcade of shining surfaces, trendy-looking people, background music and goods of all sorts. As I had documented before, jeans and sarees were still side by side, co-existing and sharing a common space. One shop displaying the sign “Indian fashion, Global style” caught my attention. It seemed to confirm what I had documented a few years earlier: images of India cast as parts of a ‘trendy’ globality. In this recently built commercial centre the Indian had not been removed. Rather it shone out in its importance, charm and popularity. The revenge of the kurta (cf. Introduction) was thus still going on and had actually gathered momentum.

After the visit to the shopping mall Dipankar told us that he wanted to take us for dinner at his new favourite restaurant, the one replacing his old-time favourite Zila Kekabpur (cf. Chapter Five). We drove to Noida, the other growing suburb of Delhi, where a conspicuous number of companies had now moved in, and where new villas and shopping complexes were popping up like mushrooms. In the middle of one of these complexes Dipankar stopped the car. Climbing out I was struck by a red electric sign-board (sic!) displaying brief items of news. “India fastest growing market in the world: Ericsson” recited one of the messages appearing on the board. This sign reminded me of the presence of Walt Disney’s Uncle Scrooge on the back of the ‘Delhi’ match-box that I described in the opening of the book. The fact that the statement was signed by the Swedish multinational Ericsson seemed to give authority to the widespread rumour about India’s brilliant future. It certified how the phantasm of the ‘West’ was still around and how it was used to substantiate and comment upon India and its growth.

Dipankar took us into the restaurant, an outlet of a Delhi chain promoting Punjabi cuisine. Having been recently started by Puja, a 28-years-old Punjabi woman, this chain was one of the top-ranking kabab eateries in town. In her interview Puja told me how this business was the result of the changes that had taken place in Delhi: “Now there is more money flowing and people are open to eating out more.” Relating these changes to herself, she said later on: “With the entrance of MTV and other influences, things have become a lot better. Ten years back my father would never have let me work in a bar or a restaurant but
now he has got nothing against it!" Well, that sentence did follow the red neon sign principle; it was straightforward and simple. The trendy name of the restaurant too contained an important message. Highlighting its Punjabi roots, it was called Punjabi by Nature which I later on discovered was the name of a Sikh militant movement based in Toronto. Modern but 'Indian'.

We left Noida only to come back a couple of days later. Sunil had now bought a house there after having left the old house to Satinder who had got married (the only one among all my informants to have done so). Sunil, like Dipankar too, had visibly turned into a symbol of the new ascending middle class. He was now the happy owner of a two-and-a-half-storey villa in a modern Punjabi baroque style with marble floors and beautiful "five-star" bathrooms (two on each floor). He had decorated his house with antique furniture from Indian villages. One afternoon I had to follow him to Hauz Khas (cf. Chapter Five) in order to give him some advice about buying a beautiful sofa. I interviewed Sunil in the car driving from Noida to central Delhi. In our conversation he told me about how India was becoming too Westernized these days and how he felt that, knowing Europe well, the 'West' was not the best model to follow. When I opposed his statement, mentioning the growing popularity among people in Indian cities (by the way, like him himself) of traditional products, of yoga and ayurveda, etc. he mumbled that the Indian rich like to "be surrounded by traditional things, but they do not want to be associated with tradition and traditional people. They buy those products because they are copying the rich in Europe and the US who are doing the same thing [buying Indian 'ethnic' things]." In tune with what he had used to say years earlier, Sunil then commented on how it was reasonable that Westerners should become fascinated by India because of its resistance to materialism and its nurture of traditional values.

In contrast to Sunil's lament over the 'Westernization' of India, Ashwin, still a manager at the same company and still "happily unmarried", during one interview entirely rejected my question about Westernization. He said: "What Westernization! It's all becoming Easternized! Look, the national dish in Britain is curry!" Updating what he used to say already years earlier, Ashwin with that sentence struck a beautifully explicit point about what another interviewee called the "Indianization of the world". Ashwin was still hanging around with
Nikilesh, who had been to London for a one-year master’s course in journalism and was now struggling to get back to professional life in India. Ashwin too, for his part, was seriously planning to leave for Europe in order to take his own MBA. Notwithstanding their ‘European plans’, they confirmed, in front of the camera as well as during casual talks, their belief in India and its future. “This is India’s millennium!”, Ashwin said during one interview, “I believe that within some decades India can and will rule the world!” This sentence, pronounced one late January evening while we were discussing the coming celebrations for India’s Independence day, led to a long round of confrontation between him and Nikilesh. The latter corrected him, saying that ruling the world was “something totally against Indianness”. Ashwin bounced back stating that he meant of course economically: “I don’t mean it has to become an America for fuck sake!” was his riposte. This long argument between the two, happily captured on my camera, became a central chapter in the documentary. It proved that ‘Indianness’ was still important among my informants and it was also ‘red’ enough to be put on camera.

The phantasms of ‘India’ appearing through Ashwin’s, Puja’s and Nikilesh’s comments as well as in the shopping mall in Gurgaon were reminiscent of those appearing in the new campaign advertisement that the Kamasutra condom (cf. Chapter Four) had launched during 2003. While I was in Bombay, for the purpose of doing a small set of interviews on video with young people working in the media, I met a photographer who had authored the shots for this popular ad. The pictures, that were adorning every new pack of condoms, were signalling a mythologized India carried forward, however, by modern, sculpted bodies (see picture below). The photographer and his make-up artist told me how they were asked, by Kamasutra’s marketing company, to capture an “Indian past and Indian beauty fit for modern people”. It needed to appeal to the Westernized sections of Indian society as well as to a potential foreign market. The advertisement no longer upheld the division between an ‘Indian’ and a ‘Western’ ideal of beauty and sexuality as the earlier ad did. The phantasms of ‘India’ and the ‘West’ were here merged into one single multivocal picture.
What I was documenting visually was thus an updated version of the material that I had collected during my fieldwork. All the young men and women whom I involved in the documentary were enthusiastic about India's further involvement with the global market. And they seemed indeed to have good reasons for that enthusiasm. The ones I knew from before had all 'jumped on the right train'. Their capacity (and inherited opportunity) to adapt to the opening up of India and their acting as cultural brokers had been rewarding investments. Yet, they had all kept alive the feeling that this opening need not entail a process of 'Westernization'. True to the statements they had made years earlier, they still considered the 'West' a given point of reference. Phantasms of the West would show up quite often during our conversations. The 'West' was a resource for obtaining better opportunities in India, a market to exploit, and so on and so forth but, just as I documented years before, not a goal to pursue nor an ideal to follow. The phantasm of 'India', on the other hand, was still mostly attractive and shining. As gathered from the few scenes I have described above, 'India' was still a selling image and something to evoke with pride.

True to how I delineated the characteristics of the 'phantasm' as shifting and constantly evolving (cf. Introduction), the phantasms of both 'India' and the 'West', as they appeared in our video conversations, had renewed their shape compared with my earlier material. The phantasm of the 'West' had been further contaminated by the ethical, moral and economic failures of the American-European wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The phantasm of India, on the other hand, had now accommodated new dimensions of future growth. My
informants invoked images linked to an “India Shining” (that was also the name of the campaign that the BJP had launched during its 2004 political campaign), i.e. of an India bound to become one of the most powerful forces on the planet. Just as in Ashwin’s statement about the country’s future as a ruler of the world, this ‘India’ was packaged in a blend of dreams of high-tech utopia and nostalgia for arcadia. It was a phantasmatic merging of an antique civilization and a modern, technologically developed country able to reach and surpass the level of the US, Europe, China and Japan. This was an India proud to be both the “fastest growing market in the world” and at the same time the preserver of ancient values. In the eyes of my informants, the terms in the colonial dichotomies had been re-combined. In their equation, ‘India’ plus ‘tradition’ was now equal to ‘global’.

1 I owe these insights to my friend and colleague Angelo Fontana with whom I made this documentary.
2 The film was funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund and the Ax:son Johnson Foundation.
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India Dreams focuses on the generation that epitomizes India's entry in the global market. Based on fieldwork in Delhi among young 'middle class' men who construct their role in society by promoting themselves as brokers in the ongoing exchanges between India and the outer world, it is an exploration into the realm of cultural identity. Focussing on the role played by imagination in everyday-life, the study addresses issues of identity-making, of masculinity, sex and love, and of urban space. The book offers a window onto a world where images of 'India', 'Indianness' and 'traditionality' are becoming popular markers of 'global' and 'modern' stances.