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THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE PEOPLE AT THE MALL:
Flashmobs and politics of technologised interaction in India

The new digital technologies came to India at a very significant historic moment of political and economic transition. The Indian state, after about 50 years of independence from the British colonizers, made a very deliberate move from a developmental socialist economy to a neo-liberal opening of its economic and cultural capital to the globalised world markets (Roy:2005). Unlike in the West, especially in the United states of North America and in some parts of Europe, where the internet technologies developed in a certain idealized ethos of open source cultures, free speech and shared knowledges (Himanen:2001), the emergence of internet technologies and new digital technologies of communication and transportation were signifiers of a certain economic mobility, globalised aesthetics of incessant consumption, availability of lifestyle choices and a definitive effort on the part of the state to reconfigure itself as a global player in the international markets.

Despite the state's efforts and investment in the physical infrastructure and proprietorship over Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the initial responses to the digital spaces were those of paranoia and pathologisation. The cyberspatial matrices in India have originally been looked upon with suspicion as creating a world of the forbidden, the dirty, and the desired. The first raging public debates over cyberspaces were about pornography, obscenity, and the need to control and censor the unabashed fantasies that cyberspaces were catering to. Some of the most critical preoccupation in the public domain has been about the governing, the administering and the containment of cyberspaces. The state has tried very heavily to monitor the content accessed, the information shared and the exchanges initiated through the use of ICTs. Over the years, some of the most popular imaginations and detrimental legal action around cyber-crime have revolved around these three figures in an attempt to contain, chastise and control the overflowing cyberspaces that affect the domains of life, labour and language as we know them.

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This paper tells the story of the flashmobs and their short lived history in India in order to examine the production of cyberspatial illegalities which are crucial to the state's imagination of the digital domain, the positing of the 'good' cyber citizen, and the production of new relationships between the state and the subject.

Flash in a pan

In the year 2000 a shopping mall in Mumbai created a furore amongst the people. It was the first 'genuine' shopping mall in India. The first all-American Shopping mall – *Crossroads*, with its promises of unlimited pleasure and brand-tagged shopping opened up in Mumbai in the new millennium and attracted the largest crowd in its first opening week. Everybody wanted to see what the mall was like. Everybody was curious what this space would be like. Everybody wanted to be a part of this exclusive space which clearly demonstrated that modernity and progress had finally come to us. Everybody found out that they were not allowed to enter the mall. As the director of the mall pointed out in his interview, '*Crossroads* is not meant for everybody' (*The Times of India* August 23, 2000). In those days when cellphones were still a novelty and definitely a curio for the upper classes - they were days when pagers were still struggling for a mass market - Crossroads passed a stipulation which restricted entry for people not carrying a cellphone or a credit card unless they paid extra Rs. 50. This was an instance when a 'public' space made clear that the public it was looking for and thus effectively created was not everybody. A Public Interest Litigation was filed against the mall. The doors were thrown open to the 'Everybody' who had been waiting to get in ever since they found out they were not allowed.

On October 4, 2003, the mall again came into limelight it had not accounted for. This time it was an email that started it. Mailers went off to people all around Mumbai and even beyond the city, to go and have a look at a new blog for Mumbai flash mobs. The blog had a form which took name, email and mobile phone number. On the 3rd of October several cell phones rang, asking people who had submitted their details in the form, to check their inboxes. The eager expectants glided to the inboxes and got a mail that agonisingly chalked out the time and space for a venue – a Flash site. SMS were also sent

to all the members who had volunteered. And then at exactly 5:00 p.m. a group of about 100 participants moved in to *Crossroads*.

Organise, congregate, act, disperse – that is the anatomy of a flash mob. Howard Rheingold, in his book titled *Smart Mobs,* suggests that the people who make up smart mobs co-operate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities. Their mobile devices connect them with other information devices in the environment as well as with other people's telephones. Dirt-cheap microprocessors embedded in everything from box tops to shoes are beginning to permeate furniture, buildings, neighbourhoods, products with invisible intercommunicating smartifacts. When they connect the tangible objects and places of our daily lives with cyberspace, handheld communication media mutate into wearable remote control devices for the physical world (Rheingold, 2000).

At the Crossroads Flash-Mob, the mobsters screamed at the top of their voices and sold imaginary shares. They danced. They all froze still in the middle of their actions. And then without as much as a word, after two minutes of historic histrionics, they opened their umbrellas and dispersed, leaving behind them a trail of bewilderment and confusion. This was India's first recorded flash-mob. People who never knew each other, did not have any largely political purpose in mind and did not really intend to extend relationships, got together to perform a set of ridiculous actions at Crossroads. They had come together for some serious fun, but they unknowingly marked Crossroads as a space that will be remembered as the site that hosted the first flash-mob in India.

This first flash mob sparked off many different flash mobs all around the nation – most of them marking out spaces like multiplexes, shopping malls, gaming parlours, body shops, large commercial roads and shopping complexes as their flash sites. The flash-sites proved to be an example of how cyberspaces spill over into the physical spaces, thus reconstructing them beyond the intentions and logic of the spaces. This anchoring of the digital aesthetics and spaces into physical spaces opens a set of political formulations of technoscapes (Appadurai:1996). While a lot of subsequent flash-mobs in India were

propelled by specific politics and activism, the first flash-mob was looked upon, by the organisers, the participants and the authorities as 'just some fun'. The organisers of the flashmob who started the website and sourced inspiration to the Macy's Flash-mob in NewYork[1], went out of their way to suggest that the particular Crossroads flash-mob was an extension of the 'fun and games' aesthetics that the digital technologies bring with them.

One of the most celebrated accounts of the flash-mob was by Bijoy Venugopal, a serious blogger and writer (Venugopal:October 2003), who also reiterated the fact that the intention of participation was to have some 'serious fun.' Subsequent experience-sharing by other members of the flash-mobs also endorsed the idea that the flash-mob was like an extension of online gaming or the tenuous digital communities which are a part of the lifestyle choices and social networking for an increasing number of people in the large urban wi-fi centres of India. The Flash-mob seemed to carry with it all the elements that digital cyberspaces have to offer – a sense of tentative belonging, a grouping of people who seek to network with each other based on similar interests, a growing sense of a need to 'enchant' the otherwise quickly mechanised world around us, and an exciting space of novel experiences and unmonitored, pseudonymous (except for the physical presence) fun.

In a country where organized processions for religious, social and political reasons, not causing harm or hindrance to public safety, are a daily sight, the Flash-mobs drew their excitement and attention from the fact that it was a collection of familiar strangers. Flash-mobs draw historic continuities not only with the Western idea of organised political protest but also with the regional street and performative theatre, with organised political

[1] Flashmobs trace their history to the early 18th century industrialisation, when a group of women working in the labour shops in Australia used coded messages to meet and discuss the problems they had in their workplaces. These meetings were organised at random, and the women used the very technologies of production that they engaged with at work on a daily basis to fight the oppression and the injustice of the people at the top. The first modern flashmob, however, is attributed to Bill Wasik, editor of Harper's Magazine, who, after the first failed attempt (May, 2003), managed to pull a successful flashmob where 200 people swarmed over the mezzanine floor of the Manhattan departmental store Macy's, pretending to buy a 'love rug' for their commune where they supposedly all lived together; they left a bewildered audience and a bemused store staff behind them (3rd June, 2003). Wasik, in his later interviews, professed that he orchestrated the flash-mob to look at the trends of 'hipsters' and how people joined in particular collectives because they are trendy.

and social campaigns, and religious gatherings and family ceremonies[2] which involve a huge number of people, though with slightly more warning time and with a clearer agenda, to congregate at a given time and place and perform into a set of activities which might often appear incomprehensible to the people outside of them. The particular flash-mob appeared in the silver city of Mumbai which also houses the largest Indian Hindi film industry and carries with it the imaginary circuits of fantasy, enchantment and playfulness. The flash-mob gained huge media coverage and local buzz and was talked about and debated upon quite furiously in popular media. The organisers of the flash-mobs became instant celebrities and were questioned repeatedly about the reasons for organising the flash-mob. The answer was always unwavering – the organisers insisted that the flash-mobs were a way for them to instil fun and novelty in the very hurried life in Mumbai. On the website, Rohit Tikmany very passionately argues:

> We are not making any statement here - we are not protesting anything - we are not a revolution, a movement or an agitation. Our purpose (if any) is solely to have fun… None of us is here for anything except fun. We will not have any sponsors (covert or overt) and we will never respond to any commercial/political/religious influences. (Tikmany, 2003)

There was a particular and specific disavowal of the 'political'. The organisers went out of their way to convince that they do not have any political cause that they endorse, that they are not affiliated with any socio-political organisations or parties in the city, and that their actions were guided only by the desire to have some fun and games. It came as a particular shock, in the face of this celebratory mode of looking at flash-mobs and the composition of the crowd (largely upper class, English speaking, Educated, and implicated in the digital circuits of globalised consumption), when the flash-mobs came to be banned in the city of Mumbai.

The state of the State

[2] As one of the respondents to the flash-mobs very entertainingly points out, in India, with the way joint-families are still a predominant lifestyle, just a family outing to a restaurant or a trip to the beach or other such public space means about 20-30 people getting together without warning at a public spot to perform their own personal set of activities.

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In less than a fortnight after the first flash-mob in Mumbai, it was banned in the city of Mumbai. The Mumbai police, invoking an archaic Bombay Police Act (the Prohibition Orders) Section 37(1), which makes it a criminal offence for any collective of more than four people for a common cause within the city to meet without prior police permission. This immediately rules out the possibility of organising a flash-mob in the city of Mumbai anymore. The Mumbai Flash-mob was suspended until further notice. Subsequently 14 other cities in India, after witnessing flash-mobs, also banned flash-mobs as detrimental to the 'safety situation in the city' and the 'sanity and security of public life' (Mid-day, 9th Oct. 2003). In the final reports on the suspension of the flash-mobs, Rohit Tikmany mentions how the police authorities in Mumbai asserted that they were not 'anti-fun' but that the flash-mobs were 'worsening the security situation of the city' (Mid-day, 12th Oct. 2003). Though a few of the mobsters insisted on flouting the law and still continuing with the flash-mobs, there were no concrete actions taken.

So, the flash-mobs came to live their very short lives in India. It would be absurdly easy to show how the professed reason for the banning of the flash-mobs was just a convenient public face used by the state authorities in order to achieve something else. In a city like Mumbai, large groups of people gather around many informal collectives and public commons regularly. Religious and political ceremonies like wedding processions, processions on religious festivals (which generally are the source of a lot of communal discord and tension), political rallies etc. are a daily sight in the city and around it. Similarly, large groups regularly assemble at restaurants, malls, public parks, the ocean front and large commercial roads for leisure and recreation. Most of the Bombay Police Act regulations are flouted by squatters, hawkers, people who smoke in public, people who sell and consume tobacco and alcohol near academic institutions; often to underage consumers, etc. It was evident that the flash-mob, when compared with these activities was fairly harmless, especially considering the composition of the flash-mobsters and the continued disavowal of political inclinations.

Why then, did the flash-mobs become so suddenly important and require containment? Why, in the face of so many other problems, it was 'fun' that was being regulated in the

name of public safety and security? Why and how did fun become illegal? What was the state seeking to control and censor in regulating the flash-mobs? These are some of the questions which need to be answered.

One of the ways in which these questions can find answers is by looking at the state's own investment and control over digital cyberspaces and their overflows and excesses in Indian history. Information and communication technologies stand as a specific marker of a historic transition in the narrative of the Indian state. Ever since its independence from the British colonial rule, the modern Indian state, in the first fifty years of governance, adopted a developmental regime for itself. There was a specific wedding to the logics of closed markets, capitalist economy and a socio-political reform on the part of the state. The focus of the state was on uplifting the socially and economically deprived, creating infrastructure for a developmental economy, producing infrastructure of social and public welfare, and providing a welfare economy aimed at erasing the discriminations of caste, class and religion (Saith and Vijaybhaskar, 2005). However, five decades of the developmental plans led to a severe economic and social crisis that led to a re-examination of the state's agenda and functioning. Illiteracy and unemployment were on the rise. The India rupee was being severely devalued in the international market. There were many sites of political unrest and dissent in the country. The standards of life in the cities as well as the rural India were declining. The developmental economy had produced monopolists who led to severe imbalance of distribution of wealth, property and resources in the country. It was at this time that neo-liberal governance, a global opening of the cultural and economic markets, and an information flow economy were posited as the panacea that might cure some of the evils spawned by earlier models of economy and governance (The World Bank, 1992).

The state's development policies were triangulated on the ideas of literacy, reform and 'uplift', focusing on 'rural India' and the 'peasant citizens' who needed to be 'educated' into becoming good citizens who would contribute to the national development. They were also looked upon as the solutions to the various problems of over-population, poverty and unemployment. This reformist rhetoric that carried on, in some ways, the

colonial-nationalist agenda, underwent a subtle but well-marked change with the liberal economy and the emergence of digital technologies. The digital technologies become significant because the arguments for the new policies were premised upon the advent of these technologies and the proliferation of the same. The state, instead of focusing on literacy campaigns and establishing schools and other public institutions like libraries, started concentrating on establishing neighbourhood networks across India. There were attempts made at introducing publicly accessible computer kiosks and terminals which offered free or inexpensive services to the population.

The buzzword changed from 'Education' to 'Training', where it was suddenly strategically more important to make a large section of the population receptive of and skilled in computer skills. Campaigns for 'E-literacy', 'One Home One Computer', 'Neighbourhood Networks',(Bagga et al, 2005) etc. introduced computer training in elementary schools across India, thus also promoting English as the desired language of communication, education and progress. The focus had clearly shifted from designing five-year upliftment plans to short term but more cost-effective programmes that equipped people with new skills that the global markets demanded. Hence, ever since the emergence of the ICTs in India, there has been a very serious attempt at controlling, containing and censoring the new spaces that have irrupted therein. The Indian state's attempts at trying to produce a sanitised site of cyberspatial activity has led to the production of three fetishised criminal identities which have become the figureheads of cyberspace and ICTs in India – the pirate in the network, the pornographer with his webcam, and the terrorist wielding a cell-phone (Shah, 2007).

The emergence of ICTs in India needs to be read as a part of this larger shift in the state's self reconfiguration. The state has a heavy investment (financial and otherwise) in the ICTs as a way of imagining the neo-liberal self, the globalised nation and the technologically augmented citizenship that is being posited as the new ideal. I present two significant instances in subsequent time-line of 'on-line fantasies' and how the state's interactions with them form an interesting narrative of the changing nature of the state's relationship with the technologically augmented citizen subject. The ban on the flash-

mobs is a ban, not only on the particular form of expression but is indicative of a disapproval of various other forms of cultural and popular expression that come into being with the ICTs.

Internet pornography[3], for instance, has been one of the most visible faces of public concern and state censorship throughout the world, especially in India. The state's initial reactions to the internet were also rooted in technophobia and pathology and a strong desire to police this new space. From attempts at blocking the ports that supply pornographic material to passing laws against the underage use of internet and the public consumption of internet in cyber-cafes[4], the state has tried and failed to monitor or thwart the proliferation of pornography on the internet. A particularly interesting case popularly dubbed the DPS MMS (The Times of India, Nov. 26, 2004), tells the story of this need to control quite illustratively. The DPS MMS is one of the now popoularised spates of sexual Multi Media Messages captured through low-res cell phones and other portable devices and spread through the viral networks of the digital technologies. It involved two underage students in Delhi, capturing themselves on a cell-phone video and the proliferation of the video clip through cell phones and cyberspatial sites. The video also found its way in the grey markets of piracy where it was sold clubbed with other such 'scandalous' material. A student, Ravi Raj, who received the video on his cell phone, decided to make money out of it and put it out for sale on an auction site – www. Bazee.com (Now sold over to ebay) – and thus propelled the matters into the attention of the state. When the state brought forward charges of obscenity, vulgarity, transmission of unregulated material and consumption of pornography (which is a punishable offence in India), there was an interesting passing around of the blame game. The two underage students who were the actual perpetuators of crime were acquitted of all charges and

[3] In another paper (Shah, 2007), I make a distinction between Internet Pornography and pornography on the internet, where internet pornography is a form that inherits the characteristics of the medium to produce sites which are pornographic in nature but are not necessarily restricted to the realms of the bodily or the sexual. Internet Pornography can be defined through identifying an interactive pleasure principle and the conditions within which different actors and their narratives interact towards a form of representation peculiar to the cyberspaces.

[4] In many Indian states, the cybercafés still demand a photo identity proof of age before allowing the users to access the net. In a recent discussion in the Indian parliament about the access to pornography in public spaces, the concerned minister declared that they are encouraging cybercafés to do away with private cubicles and display panels, thus not giving privacy to the users.

many attempts were made to hide their identities and protect their futures. The student Ravi Raj, who put it up for sale, was acquitted because he had not really made any sales and his possession of the object in question could not be proved beyond certainty. When all the three obvious suspects were acquitted, in a surprise move, the state ordered for the imprisonment and extradition of the CEO of Bazee.com – Avneesh Bajaj, who was in the USA at that time.

It is interesting to see that the state, for this instance of internet pornography, made a criminal, not of the direct actors, producers or nodes of transmission, but of the person who made available the conditions within which these actions were made possible. While Bajaj was acquitted of the charges as well, thus leaving us with a strange case of recognition of a crime and nobody to blame it on. Following the DPS MMS case, eventually, unable to predict or control the cyberspaces, the state took a new approach towards the internet and its users. The policing of these technologies was taken to a new level of 'responsible usage' and 'ethical consumption' of material, thus creating a 'Consuming Subject'. The consuming subject is looked upon as potentially a pornographer and a pirate and needed to be distracted away from those two roles. The consuming subject was an idealised fetishised responsible subject created and crafted through the ICTs, geared towards a particular imagination of economic labour and socio-cultural globalisation that the state had in store for the subject.

This subject is not allowed fantasies and role playing within the digital domains and the excesses or overflows are looked upon as perverse and illegal. The flash-mob became the focus of the state's particular attention and was so specifically banned because it was so obviously an extension of the game playing aesthetics of the online world; a world where you don't know anybody but collaborate to perform a set of actions which otherwise look terribly mundane or inexplicable to somebody outside of it. The idea that the fantasies conjured online can spill into the physical lives of the people has been a state concern. The story of the Lucknow gay-arrest incident tellingly demonstrates the state's attempts at curbing the creation of fantasies, and disciplining the subject behind these fantasies through very strict measures. Ever since the child-pornography legislations have been

initiated in 2000, the state has variously policed spaces and sites of fantasy on the cyberspaces. In India, where homosexual acts[5] are a punishable offence, fantasies of the queer kind have also come under a cruel and discriminating eye.

Hence, in December 2006, police men in the city of Lucknow, masqueraded as gay men and registered with a popular queer dating website www.guys4men.com. These policemen created profiles where they listed themselves as gay men and started interacting with the members of the site. They solicited sex and meetings and finally invited five men to come and meet them in a public garden in Lucknow. When four of the five men turned up for the rendezvous, they were arrested on charges of obscenity, of soliciting sex in public and of conducting homosexual behaviours. The men were punished, not for anything that they did in public or in the physical world but for their projected fantasies online. They were publicly humiliated, exhibited to the media as a 'homosexual coup' and put under arrest by the police.

Three observations emerge from this incident. Firstly, three of the four men were married and with children. This physical evidence of their apparently straight behaviour was discounted because of their turning up at the public parks. Second, the policemen who were luring these men towards an arrest were also projecting similar fantasies as the men. However, their fantasies were being authored by a larger state and hence gained validity and were sanctioned where as similar personal fantasies produced by the other men were disciplined and punished. Third, while the men were caught in the physical meeting space, the charges against them were all based on the activities online. While none of these activities immediately is criminal in itself, what was being punished was the fact that these men conjured fantasies in the medium and that these fantasies spilled over into the physical world. While there are several questions of ethics and morality, of entrapment and deceit involved in the case, what is particularly telling is the fact, that it was the production and spillage of fantasies and role playing that was being punished in this particular case.

[5] The ancient law drafted by the British Colonisers that looked upon all sex 'unnatural' that is not aimed at procreation; thus criminalizing sodomy between consensual straight couples as well, still remains in action in the contemporary India and is repeatedly used to censor and punish queer people. The interesting reading of this law is that being homosexual in itself, is not a crime. However, being caught in an act of Sodomy is.

In both the cases, the state had an active role to play in curbing fantasies, role-playing and unmonitored conversations that are produced using the ICTs. The state hopes to produce a complex and incessant model of surveillance that constantly fabricates the users of the ICTs as ethical consuming responsible citizens who cannot squander these resources of economic mobility and social expansion on just having 'fun.' It was necessary, looking at the state's investment into these new technologies and the affiliated spaces, for the state to discount fun and play as frivolous, perverse, illegal, and promote a certain ethos of work, skills and consumption through these technologies.

Subject to Technology

The citizen subject has always been subjected to various technologies of the self and of governance (Foucault, 1991). Different technological advancements have significantly shifted the flow of power and the politics of the governed. The citizen subject has traditionally and historically been a negative category of exclusion rather than that of inclusion. Exclusion is not simply a process of segregation and sorting but it is also a practice of imagining and reading. If we look upon the Indian state's negotiations with the new technologically augmented citizenships, we realise that the imagination is that of including and excluded citizen subject. To perhaps make it less ambiguous, in the cases of the flashmobs, the DPS MMS and the Lucknow gay scandal, the state has tried to look upon the excluded category of the criminal as integral to the imagination of the included citizen subject. The state looks upon the technologised conditions of production as the breeding grounds for potential criminalities. The state has a very perverse interaction with the ICTs where on the one hand, these technologies are deployed as modes of governance and citizenship rights and on the other they are looked upon as dangerous and producing conditions of social, cultural and political illegalities.

The Mumbai flashmob, and the subsequent domino effect of banning flashmobs across the country, needs to be read in the light of these diverse and complex negotiations. The Mumbai flashmob, often treated by the media as an attempt at fun, and professed by the

organisers as some 'serious fun' becomes politicised and an object of punishment because of the state's investment in the realms of leisure and non-work activities. It also becomes an area of concern because they indicate how cyberspaces are not merely contained within the digital domains but produce startling and unexpected effects in the physical spaces that we occupy and in the lived practices of urban survival. Moreover, unlike in earlier instances, when the criminal or the potential illegalities were specifically located in particular kinds of communities and neighbourhoods – slums, ghettoes, lower class dwellings, the innards of the cities, the borderlands etc. the new technologies force the state to make potential criminals of the very people it hoped to posit as the ideal citizens.

Especially in the case of the flashmobs, it was interesting to note that the people who made the flashmobs were indeed the very people who always had entry into the malls and the shopping complexes – people with cellphones and internet connections and skills, people who are educated, have purchase power and are global cosmopolitan citizens. The flashmob was not made out of the 'lumpens' of the society but of the respectable upwardly mobile young citizens. These citizens, in their quest for fun in the flashmobs, produced resistance to the motto of incessant consumption that spaces of globalisation bring with them. The first flashmob, though it might not appear political to the organisers, carried with it, the same impulses that drive open source movements and free information campaigns online. These measures are symptomatic of a transition that the Indian state has initiated and hence policing of the new spaces and forms of cultural expression is crucial and necessary for the state.

The story of the flash-mob, especially when considered along with the subsequent negotiations of the Indian state with the spaces emerged out of new digital technologies of information and communication, serves as an entry point into a complex set of issues around policing, governance, censorship and citizenship. It was the aim of this paper to illustrate how 'fun', when looked at through the lens of the new digital technologies of globalisation, becomes a category of strong political investment and control. The curious incident of the people at the mall in the Mumbai flashmob, was the first indication of how

the state envisioned digital technologies and how the state's integration of these technologies into its own fabric or governance and administration, creates fetishised citizens subject to technologies in conditions of potential illegalities.

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