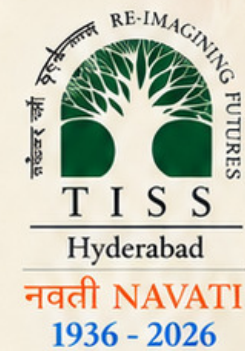


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*Theorising Leisure, City Life,
and the Urban Poor in India*

Aseem Prakash

School of Public Policy and Governance, TISS Hyderabad

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The Cultural Commons and the Subaltern City

Theorising Leisure, City Life, and the Urban Poor in India

Aseem Prakash *

Abstract

This paper theorises the leisure of the urban poor in India through the concept of the cultural commons of the Indian city: historically constituted, cross-class but internally stratified, collectively produced city leisure forms that are typologically distinct from the Western leisure apparatus and that the subaltern relates to in structurally specific ways. The framework operates at two analytical levels held simultaneously – the typological contrast with Western leisure, and the commons as stratified formation in which internal exclusions specific to context and geography coexist with the differential subaltern relationship of structural dependence, productive labour, collective practice, and defensive political claim. Examples are drawn from Varanasi, Lucknow, Kolkata, Mumbai, Sonipat, Delhi, Hyderabad, Patna, Moradabad, Bareilly, Rampur, Meerut, and Jodhpur.

Keywords: cultural commons, subaltern leisure, urban poor, internal stratification, *krīḍā*, *līlā*, *utsava*, *rasa*, political society, insurgent citizenship, India

Introduction: The Cultural Commons, the Subaltern, and the City

Leisure in Indian cities is only partly captured by the categories that the Western leisure studies tradition has developed. Its commonsense definition – rest, recreation, the negation of work – assumes a clear boundary between obligated and free time, a spatial infrastructure of parks and clubs, and a relationship to consumption that is class-specific and historically recent. Built for an industrial, clock-disciplined economy, the tradition was not designed to describe what most people in Indian cities actually do for pleasure, or the city forms in which that pleasure is produced.

The paper proposes a different starting point: the concept of the *cultural commons of the Indian city*. The *akhara* (wrestling ground), the *mela* (fair-festival), the *para Durga Puja* (neighbourhood-organised festival of the goddess Durga), the *Kavi Sammelan* (poetry gathering), the *Mushaira*

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(Urdu poetry gathering), the *baithak* (sitting-together for music and conversation), the *ghat* (river-side steps), the *haat* (periodic market-gathering): these are not subaltern leisure forms in any narrow sense. They are the cultural commons of Indian city life – historically constituted, collectively produced, cross-class city-based leisure forms whose typological distinctness from the Western leisure apparatus is the paper’s first analytical claim, and whose internal stratifications specific to context and geography – together with the differential subaltern relationship to them – constitute its second.

The paper is organised in four sections. Section 1 develops the conceptual framework. Section 1.1 shows that the Western leisure studies tradition’s four foundational assumptions – temporal, spatial-consumptive, individuating, and cultural – fail to describe Indian city leisure for four corresponding reasons. Section 1.2 proposes the two-layered architecture (typological contrast with Western leisure, plus the commons as stratified formation) as the analytical response. Sections 1.3 and 1.4 develop each layer: the six typological features that distinguish the cultural commons from the Western leisure apparatus, and the internal stratifications and differential subaltern relationship that constitute the commons internally. **Section 2** applies the framework empirically through the *akhara*, the festival, collective cultural gathering, contemporary digital and commuter forms, and women’s differential relationship to the commons, demonstrating in each form the framework’s analytical work. **Section 3** states the paper’s theoretical contribution at three levels – conceptual, architectural, and epistemological. **Section 4** concludes.

A note on terminology: the paper uses Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu terms because no English word captures their meaning precisely. All such terms are italicised throughout; their closest English equivalents are provided in brackets at first use.

Why Cultural Commons Signifies Leisure

The cultural commons forms are not primarily leisure activities in any conventional sense. The Sonapur *Mela* is historically a cattle fair; the *para Durga Puja* is religious devotion at neighbourhood scale; the *akhara* is physical training through the *ustad-shagird* (master-disciple) relationship; the migrant Sunday gathering is rest and the maintenance of family ties; the *Kavi Sammelan* is cultural performance; the *bawdi* (stepwell) was simultaneously water infrastructure and a primary site of female sociality and community gathering. If leisure is the Western residual – the non-work, non-obligated sphere bounded from productive activity – none qualifies, because each is constitutively

integrated with commerce, devotion, training, social reproduction, or infrastructure use.

The cultural commons framework operates with a different concept of leisure. Leisure here is not a separate sphere but a quality that suffuses certain collective practices – the quality of being engaged *for-itself* rather than purely *for-an-external-end*. Two Hindu textual concepts ground this.

Krida – Sanskrit for play, sport, pastime, amusement – names activities engaged in for the pleasure of the activity itself: children’s play, dance, sport, ball games, divine play, the playful behaviour of friends and lovers. The wrestler’s *akhara* practice, the festival’s processions and games, the *Kavi Sammelan*’s playful poetic exchange – these are *krīḍā*.

Lila – divine play, theorised in Śaṅkara’s commentary on the *Brahmasutra* – extends this to a philosophical principle: action performed from the fullness of being rather than from compulsion.¹

Where *krida* names the activity, *lila* names the metaphysical condition that all genuine *krida* instantiates. What makes the commons specifically *commons* leisure is that this for-itself quality is collectively produced and collectively experienced – what the *rasa* (emotional flavour) tradition of Bharata’s *Nāṭyasastra* names: the *rasika* (cultivated appreciator) is co-producer of aesthetic experience, not its consumer. Bharata declares in the *Rasadhyaya* of the *Nāṭyasastra*: नहि रसाद् ऋते कश्चिद् अर्थः प्रवर्तते – without *rasa*, no meaning or purpose can be accomplished.² The cattle trading at Sonapur, the Durga Puja’s devotion, the *akhara*’s training, the migrant Sunday’s rest, the *Kavi Sammelan*’s performance – each is leisure because its commercial, devotional, training, restorative, or performative function is suffused with this for-itself quality, collectively produced, rather than separated from it.

With the for-itself quality of the commons clarified, the framework’s first task is to clear the ground of the Western tradition’s inapplicable categories, then propose the architecture that replaces them.

1. A Framework for the Cultural Commons

1.1 Clearing the Ground: Why the Leisure-Studies Canon Looks Elsewhere

The Western leisure studies tradition built its foundational categories on the industrial, clock-disciplined, wage-labour economy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and North America. Four assumptions follow from this provenance. Pre-industrial Europe had its own

¹ Śaṅkara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965).

² *Nāṭyasastra of Bharata Muni*, trans. Manomohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951).

collective, task-timed, non-commodified leisure – the fair, the feast, the carnival – so what follows describes not a civilisational trait but the leisure form specific to industrial capitalism wherever it takes hold, including, as Section 1.4 will show, among the Indian urban elite.

The first is **temporal**: leisure is the time remaining after occupational, family, and social obligations. The canonical statement is Joffre Dumazedier's *Toward a Society of Leisure* (1967), defining leisure residually as what remains once work and obligatory activities have been subtracted.³ The British tradition that followed kept the assumption intact. Stanley Parker's *The Future of Work and Leisure* (1971) mapped the work-leisure relationship as three patterns – *extension* (the spheres are similar in form, as for the professional whose work identity continues into leisure), *opposition* (leisure deliberately differs from work, as in the miner who fishes), and *neutrality* (leisure differs but the difference is not chosen, as for the routine worker consuming what entertainment industries offer) – but in each pattern the two spheres remain analytically distinct.⁴ Kenneth Roberts's textbook *Leisure* (1970) institutionalised the residual definition as the starting axiom of British leisure sociology.⁵ Chris Rojek's *Capitalism and Leisure Theory* (1985) mounted the most direct internal challenge – refuting leisure's association with freedom and identifying four tendencies of leisure under capitalism (privatisation, individuation, commercialisation, pacification) – but his critique still operated within the wage-labour industrial-modern frame.⁶ The tradition's own historian, E. P. Thompson, in "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" (1967), had already traced how the factory clock replaced pre-industrial task-oriented time⁷ – yet his successors did not draw the implication that the work-leisure boundary is a historical artefact of industrial capitalism, not a universal feature of social life. The domestic worker moving between four households' schedules across a Mumbai day, the construction worker whose Sunday is the only fixed boundary in a six-day week, the street vendor whose "work" merges into the social life of the market – none can be described by Dumazedier's residual.

The second is **spatial and consumptive**: leisure is realised through dedicated places consumed through purchasing power. John Urry's *Consuming Places* (1995) made this the centre of analysis, showing how the post-industrial economy converts landscapes and cities into objects of

³ Joffre Dumazedier, *Toward a Society of Leisure* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

⁴ Stanley Parker, *The Future of Work and Leisure* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1971).

⁵ Kenneth Roberts, *Leisure* (London: Longman, 1970).

⁶ Chris Rojek, *Capitalism and Leisure Theory* (London: Tavistock, 1985).

⁷ E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56–97.

consumption-leisure through tourism and the service industries.⁸ Western tools to think beyond this were already available – Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984, French 1980) developed the concept of *tactics*, the operations of those without their own place who reappropriate the spaces produced by the powerful;⁹ Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991, French 1974) theorised space as socially produced rather than naturally given.¹⁰ But the leisure studies tradition kept its empirical attention on parks, clubs, stadiums, and resorts rather than on the lane that becomes leisure space during Durga Puja, the construction-site edge that becomes leisure ground on Sunday, the auto-rickshaw stand that becomes *adda* between fares. The assumption naturalises the linking of leisure to a market relation.

The third is **individuating**: the unit of leisure is the individual, with tastes functioning as expressions of class habitus and cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (French 1979, English 1984) is the foundational statement: what looks like personal preference in food, music, art, sport, and recreation is in fact a socially structured marker of class – the *aesthetic disposition* of the bourgeoisie (taste for freedom from material necessity), the *tastes of necessity* of the working class (the practical and functional), and the *pretension* of the petit bourgeoisie (aspiring to bourgeois distinction without the capital and habitus to achieve it).¹¹ Bourdieu’s intent was to attack the methodological individualism of taste studies, but the empirical unit of his analysis remained the individual’s taste profile – and this is how the Western leisure tradition absorbed him: as canonical demonstration that individual choices express class position. The Indian commons forms operate at a different social scale altogether: the *mohalla* (neighbourhood), the *para*, the *tola* (subcaste group), the religious community – the collective, not the individual, is the unit of leisure.

The fourth assumption is **cultural**: leisure is recreation, not cultural production. The entire tradition above – Dumazedier, Parker, Roberts, Rojek, Urry, Bourdieu – held this implicitly. For all of them, leisure is something individuals *do* in free time, not something through which culture is actively made.

The British cultural studies tradition partially corrected this. Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” essay (1980) argued that audiences do not simply receive what media producers intend – they

⁸ John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), first published in French in 1980.

¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), first published in French in 1974.

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), first published in French in 1979.

actively interpret, sometimes accepting, sometimes negotiating, sometimes reading against the grain.¹² If audiences are active interpreters, then what people do during apparently passive recreations is itself cultural production. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) read the styles of postwar British working-class youth – teddy boys, mods, skinheads, punks – as symbolic resistance to dominant culture, drawing constitutively on Black-British and Rastafarian style.¹³ Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977) complicated this: the counter-school culture of working-class lads looked like resistance but actually reproduced the class structure that contained them.¹⁴

The corrective was substantial. But cultural studies could see cultural production only as *resistance* to a dominant Western culture or as the *reproduction* of subordination through that resistance. What this frame cannot see is cultural production that is neither – the active making of community life, devotion, aesthetic experience, and political claim on its own terms. The Durga Puja is not resistance to a dominant Hindu culture, the Mushaira is not the reproduction of Muslim subordination, and the *akhara* is not counter-school culture. They are cultural production within their own traditions, which the resistance-reproduction binary cannot capture.

The feminist critique extended the analysis to gender. Rosemary Deem's *All Work and No Play? The Sociology of Women and Leisure* (1986) showed that women's leisure differs from men's because the domestic sphere – for men a site of rest – is for women a space of unpaid labour.¹⁵ Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron, and Diana Woodward's *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?* (1990), based on a Sheffield study of 700 women, extended this to social control: women's leisure is constrained by gender norms, men's attitudes, harassment in public space, and the negotiation required to claim leisure time.¹⁶ The corrective was decisive for gendered leisure but still presupposed what the Indian commons exits – clock-bounded time, dedicated facilities, the individual or family as unit, and a Western empirical field.

More recent work has extended the conversation but inherited the four assumptions. Robert Steb-

¹² Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–38.

¹³ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

¹⁴ Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977).

¹⁵ Rosemary Deem, *All Work and No Play? The Sociology of Women and Leisure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).

¹⁶ Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron, and Diana Woodward, *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

bins's *Serious Leisure* (2007) developed a three-part typology – *serious leisure* (the amateur or hobbyist pursuing a leisure career), *casual leisure* (immediate, short-lived pleasure), and *project-based leisure* (a short-term creative undertaking).¹⁷ Each assumes the individual practitioner as unit; the typology has no slot for the collective form where the gathering itself is the leisure: the *Mela* is not a hobby, the Mushaira is not an amateur career, the Durga Puja is not a one-off project. Karl Spracklen's *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure* (2009) drew on Habermas to argue that authentic leisure belongs to the everyday space of community and meaning, defending itself against the commercial and bureaucratic forces of the market and state.¹⁸ But this presupposes that the everyday and the institutional can be cleanly separated – and the Indian commons does not respect that separation. The migrant Sunday gathering is rest, social reproduction, devotion, and economic exchange at once; the Sonapur Mela is festival and cattle market at once. Tony Blackshaw's *Leisure* (2010) drew on Bauman's liquid modernity to argue that leisure is identity-construction in flux – people perform who they are through their leisure choices in a world without stable social structures.¹⁹ But the commons forms are not about individuals performing identity; they are about joining historically constituted forms – the wrestler at the Banaras *akhara* does not perform an identity, he enters a tradition. Each framework is valuable within its frame; none departs from the four assumptions, which remain in force.

Across all four, the Western tradition was never designed to describe leisure that is collectively produced through tactical reappropriation of city surfaces in the interstices of task-oriented time, organised around community rather than individual, and actively producing culture on its own terms. The cultural commons concept does not dismiss the tradition; it engages its insights critically while developing the conceptual vocabulary the tradition cannot provide. In Chakrabarty's terms, this canon is at once indispensable and inadequate:²⁰ indispensable because de Certeau's tactics, Lefebvre's produced space, Thompson's task-time, and Gilroy's convivial culture supply much of the vocabulary used here;²¹ inadequate because the leisure-studies subfield turned these tools towards parks, clubs, and individual taste rather than towards the collective commons. The argument is

¹⁷ Robert A. Stebbins, *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

¹⁸ Karl Spracklen, *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure: Habermas and Leisure at the End of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁹ Tony Blackshaw, *Leisure* (London: Routledge, 2010).

²⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²¹ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004).

therefore not that the West cannot think the commons, but that its leisure-studies lineage looked elsewhere.

1.2 Why the Two-Layered Architecture Is Necessary

If the Western tradition fails for these four reasons, what analytical architecture should replace it? The paper proposes a two-layered architecture.

The typological layer addresses the question: how does the cultural commons differ from the Western leisure apparatus? It identifies six dimensions – time, space, social unit, consumption, cultural form, political valence – across which the commons forms are organised by a different logic.

The stratified-formation layer addresses a different question: how is the cultural commons internally structured, and how do different participants relate to it differently? It identifies two inseparable aspects – the internal exclusions specific to context and geography (caste, gender, religion, language, time, sub-region, class-within-subaltern), and the differential subaltern relationship of structural dependence, productive labour, collective practice, and defensive political claim. The typological is comparative (the commons set against Western leisure); the stratified-formation is internal-relational (the commons as it actually works internally). Holding both is the framework's methodological specificity.

This architecture is necessary because the single-layered alternatives are insufficient. A binary that opposes elite leisure to subaltern leisure cannot account for the fact that the wealthy cattle trader and the landless labourer are both at the Sonapur Mela, that the *bhadralok* (educated middle-class Bengali) committee leader and the working-class *para* resident are both at the Kolkata Durga Puja, that the Nawab's descendants and the brassware artisan are both at the Rampur Mushaira. A celebration of the commons as inclusive cannot account for the fact that the *akhara* historically excludes women, that the upper-caste *baithak* excludes Dalits, that the Mushaira even in *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* (syncretic culture) cities is constituted within Muslim cultural memory in ways that position Hindu participation as guest rather than host. An analysis of subaltern leisure as a separate category cannot account for the fact that subaltern populations participate in shared forms but relate to them differently – through structural dependence rather than choice, productive labour rather than consumption, defensive political claim rather than aesthetic appreciation. The cultural commons concept holds all three realities together rather than collapsing them into a simpler picture.

Table 1. The Framework: Two Analytical Layers

Analytical layer	What it analyses	Primary theoretical resources
Typological	The cultural commons as a distinct city leisure formation contrasted with the Western leisure apparatus – six dimensions of difference in time, space, social unit, consumption, cultural form, and political valence	Thompson, de Certeau, and Lefebvre for the Western critique; <i>krida, lila, utsava, rasa</i> , Kumar's <i>bahri alang</i> , and Nandy's appropriation logic for the Indian and Global South corrective
Stratified formation	How each commons form is internally structured by exclusions specific to context and geography (caste, gender, religion, language, time, sub-region, class-within-subaltern), and how subaltern populations relate to it through structural dependence, productive labour, collective practice, and defensive political claim	Ambedkar's critique of caste within community; subaltern studies' insistence on heterogeneity; Phadke and feminist scholarship on public space; Scott, Holston, and Chatterjee on political life

1.3 The Cultural Commons: A Distinct City Leisure Formation

The *cultural commons of the Indian city* names a distinct city leisure formation constituted by forms that share six typological features distinguishing them from the Western leisure apparatus.

First, interstitial temporality. The forms operate in the gaps and pauses of task-oriented obligation rather than in clock-bounded non-work time. Thompson's account of task-oriented time shows that the clock-disciplined working day is a historical product of industrial capitalism rather than a natural feature of social life.²² Nita Kumar's ethnography of Banaras (Varanasi) artisans, *The Artisans of Banaras* (1988), among the foundational works of Indian city cultural anthropology, develops the concept of *bahri alang* (literally, going to the outer side: the practice of leaving the domestic and work interior for public space, in whatever time is available) as the temporal logic of artisanal leisure.²³

Second, tactical spatiality. The forms reappropriate available city surfaces through social practice rather than requiring dedicated facilities. De Certeau's concept of tactics names the operations of those without their own place;²⁴ AbdouMaliq Simone, the urban scholar whose work on African

²² Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline".

²³ Nita Kumar, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880–1986* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

²⁴ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*.

and Asian cities centres on the relational capacities of marginalised populations, argues in “People as Infrastructure” (2004) that in cities of the Global South, social density and human relationships function as the infrastructure that physical capital fails to provide.²⁵ Together they name the spatial logic: the gathering is the facility, the co-presence is the amenity. The *para* Durga Puja makes this visible. A North Kolkata lane that is a thoroughfare for three hundred and sixty days of the year becomes, for five days in autumn, the social and aesthetic centre of the neighbourhood’s life through the construction of the *pandal* and the gathering it draws. The lane was never designated as a leisure facility; the development plan shows it as a road. For five days, through the *para* committee’s organisation, the artist’s labour, the neighbours’ subscription, and the visitors’ co-presence, the lane is leisure infrastructure. After the immersion, the *pandal* is dismantled and the lane returns to being a road. This is tactical spatiality.

Third, collective social unit. The forms are organised around the *mohalla*, the *para*, the *tola*, the religious community – rather than around the individual or nuclear family. This is constitutively a different unit of leisure from the Western tradition’s assumption of personal recreation.

Fourth, non-consumptive practice. Leisure is produced through social density rather than market transaction. The pleasure of the *para* Durga Puja does not require purchasing power; the Kavi Sammelan on the *maidan* (open public ground) is free at the point of access; the *mela*’s pleasure is the gathering itself, even where commercial activity surrounds it.

Fifth, active cultural production. The forms are not recreation in the Western sense of rest; they actively produce community identity, cultural memory, political consciousness, and aesthetic experience. The Hindu textual tradition’s concepts of *krida*, *lila*, and *utsava* (festival, from Sanskrit *ut*, removal, and *sava*, worldly sorrows: the removal of worldly sorrows through collective celebration) provide philosophical grounding. Ashis Nandy, Indian political psychologist and one of the most influential thinkers of post-independence Indian social theory, demonstrates in *The Tao of Cricket* (1989) how cultural forms are transformed in being practised across class – cricket as the colonial form taken over, indigenised, and rebuilt as collective social practice.²⁶

Sixth, constitutive political claim. The forms carry political content that the Western tradition’s depoliticised conception of leisure cannot register. James C. Scott, American political scientist

²⁵ AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg”, *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407–29.

²⁶ Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

whose *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) developed the concept of the *hidden transcript* – the discourse of subordinated groups conducted in spaces the dominant cannot fully supervise – names how carnivals and festivals carry political meaning invisible to ruling discourse.²⁷ James Holston, American urban anthropologist whose *Insurgent Citizenship* (2008) studied São Paulo's peripheries, names how the urban poor convert their existing settlements and practices into political claims on the formal city.²⁸ Partha Chatterjee, Indian political theorist whose *The Politics of the Governed* (2004) developed the concept of *political society*, distinguishes between civil society (where citizens with formal rights interact through legal procedures) and political society (where the urban poor relate to the state not as rights-bearing citizens but as governed populations, negotiating their claims through ward councillors, party workers, and informal arrangements).²⁹ Together these three – hidden transcript, insurgent citizenship, political society – provide the vocabulary for the commons' political life.

1.4 The Commons as Stratified Formation

The typological layer establishes that the commons is distinct from Western leisure; the stratified-formation layer recognises that the commons is not a unified inclusive space. It is internally stratified by exclusions specific to context and geography, and the subaltern populations who participate in it do so through relationships structurally distinct from those of elite participants. The stratifications and the differential relationship operate together as two aspects of the same reality.

Caste exclusions vary by region and form. Cultural codes of membership – knowledge of literary references, ritual idioms, aesthetic register – function as caste filters even where no formal exclusion exists. Brahmin-dominated puja committees reproduce hierarchy through leadership and artistic direction. The most prestigious akhara lineages have historically been dominated by particular caste groups (Yadavs in eastern UP, Jats in Haryana). Temple festivals in many South Indian towns operate through caste-specific access where certain rituals, processional routes, and spaces are structured by caste hierarchy.

Gender exclusions are pervasive. Many commons forms are male-coded in their primary practice –

²⁷ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

²⁸ James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

the akhara, the auto-rickshaw stand adda, the pan shop, the *chaykhana* (tea shop) – and women’s participation operates through different timings or different forms entirely. The Mushaira and baithak in their traditional forms have been male-dominated. Committee leadership in festivals is overwhelmingly male even where women participate fully in celebration. The mela is differently inhabited: men move freely; women’s movement is constrained by family surveillance and timing. Even forms that served as women’s commons access, such as the bawdi, were caste-structured internally: upper-caste and Dalit women drew water at different times and from different parts of the well. Phadke, Khan, and Ranade’s *Why Loiter?* (2011), on women’s access to Indian public space, provides the contemporary feminist framework for analysing how gender structures access to city commons.³⁰

Religious exclusions operate context-specifically. The Mushaira welcomes Hindu participation in principle but is constituted within Muslim cultural memory and Urdu poetic tradition in ways that make full Hindu participation episodic rather than constitutive. Hindu festivals are Hindu in their religious frame even when Muslim neighbours attend. Sufi shrine festivals draw devotees across religious lines but are constituted through Islamic devotional practice. The *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* is historically real but uneven – strongest in courtly contexts and weakened by communal politics from the 1980s onward.

Linguistic exclusions matter particularly for collective cultural gathering forms. The Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi spoken primarily in eastern UP and adjoining Bihar) Kavi Sammelan reaches eastern UP and Bihar audiences but excludes those who do not understand Bhojpuri. The Awadhi (spoken in the Awadh region of central UP) or Braj (a dialect of Hindi spoken primarily in central UP) Kavi Sammelan operates within its specific literary register. The Mushaira presupposes Urdu literacy. The Tamil Kavi Arangam operates entirely within Tamil literary culture. These linguistic specificities are constitutive of each form’s cultural location.

Geographical and temporal exclusions further structure access within a single city. Some commons forms are concentrated in old-city neighbourhoods and absent from newer city developments. Menstruating women are traditionally excluded from temple festivals. The pre-dawn timing of akhara training is structured around male schedules that women’s continuing domestic labour cannot accommodate. Class exclusions within the subaltern itself are real: tiered access at major shrine festivals, separate sub-markets at large fairs, and the substantial scale difference between

³⁰ Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

chawl mandals and elite housing-society mandals in metropolitan festivals.

Within and against these stratifications, the subaltern relationship to the commons is structurally distinct from the elite or middle-class relationship. Five characteristics constitute it.

Structural dependence: for subaltern populations, the commons is the primary leisure infrastructure available because the alternatives – multiplex, gated compound, branded restaurant – are foreclosed by income, spatial access, or cultural belonging. The elite participates by choice; the subaltern participates because the commons is what their lives allow. The elite relationship – choice, consumption, dedicated facilities – is precisely the industrial-commodified leisure form described in Section 1.1, now operating domestically; the contrast this paper draws is therefore not finally between West and India but between that commodified form, dominant in the Western canon and among the Indian elite alike, and the collective task-time commons that the urban poor sustain.

Productive labour: subaltern populations build and maintain the commons through their daily and festival labour – the working-class and migrant labourers and Dalit craftspeople actually produce the festival, dig and maintain the akhara, set up the gathering's stage, run the small stalls.

Collective practice: the subaltern engages the commons by being present with others, not by individually consuming it. The elite attends the gathering; the subaltern is the gathering.

Defensive political claim: when the commons is threatened by enclosure, demolition, or amenity conversion, the political defence comes primarily from subaltern populations and their political society networks – because the elite has alternative leisure access while the subaltern does not.

Plural subaltern positions: the relationship is itself differentiated. The Dalit weaver's relationship to a Brahmin-led puja, the Muslim brassware artisan's relationship to a Mushaira, the migrant Bihari woman domestic worker's relationship to a *Chhath Puja* she organises at her settlement's edge – these are different relationships, and the framework holds these differences rather than collapsing them.

The framework now in place – the typological contrast with Western leisure, the six features that distinguish the cultural commons, and the internal stratifications together with the differential subaltern relationship – describes the commons as it exists in Indian cities. What remains is to demonstrate what this commons actually looks like in practice – in what specific forms, with what internal stratifications, and through what subaltern relationships – across metropolitan and smaller Indian cities. The next section turns to this empirical task.

2. The Cultural Commons in Practice: Metro and Small Town

The framework is now applied to demonstrate what the cultural commons actually is – its specific forms, its internal stratifications, and the differential subaltern relationship to it – across metropolitan and smaller Indian cities. Each subsection develops one major form fully, working through both analytical layers together.

2.1 *The Akhara: Across the Spectrum, Across the Caste Line*

The *akhara* (wrestling ground – from the Sanskrit *akhāra*, a place for physical training and contest) exists across a spectrum in contemporary Indian cities. At the informal end stands Nita Kumar's Varanasi:³¹ the *akhara* as a pit of earth dug in available ground in the lanes of Benia Bagh, Luxa, and Godowlia, maintained by users through the *ustad-shagird* (master-disciple) relationship, organised through the *tola* (subcaste group). The Swaminath Akhara in Varanasi, documented as among India's oldest continuously functioning wrestling traditions with a four-hundred-year history, exemplifies the form's persistence. Similar informal *akharas* operate in Delhi's traditional wrestling neighbourhoods, in Moradabad's Muslim artisan neighbourhoods where wrestling traditions persist alongside the brassware industry, and in Meerut's working-class wards. These are *akharas* produced entirely through tactical spatiality and relational infrastructure.

At the middle of the spectrum stand Delhi's institutional *akharas*. The Chandgi Ram Akhara in Delhi, founded by the Arjuna Award recipient and 1970 Asian Games gold medallist Master Chandgi Ram, has been central to the promotion of women's wrestling in India and continues to train wrestlers across gender lines. The Chhatrasal Stadium in north Delhi has emerged as a major training centre for Indian wrestling, producing multiple Olympic and international medallists.

At the formal end stands Sonipat in Haryana. Sonipat, along with Rohtak, Jhajjar, and Bhiwani, has emerged as India's most significant wrestling region – producing the majority of India's Olympic, Commonwealth Games, and Asian Games wrestling medallists over the past two decades. The Chhotu Ram Stadium, the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports satellite centres, and the dozens of village and town *akharas* constitute a publicly supported and partially commercialised wrestling infrastructure. But the practice itself remains continuous with the informal tradition.

The *akhara* is the cultural commons in microcosm. Its typological features: interstitial temporal-

³¹ Kumar, *Artisans of Banaras*.

ity (pre-dawn training), tactical spatiality (lane pits) or partially designated facilities (the Sonipat stadium, Delhi's Chhatrasal), collective social unit (the *tola*), non-consumptive practice, active cultural production through the *ustad-shagird* tradition, and political claim. The *akhara*'s practice is *krida* in its classical and proper sense – wrestling as play and sport engaged for the pleasure of the practice itself, alongside its training and competitive functions – and this is what distinguishes the *akhara* from mere physical exercise on the one hand and from purely instrumental labour on the other.

Its internal stratifications are equally clear. The *akhara* has been an almost exclusively male space; even Haryana's recent emergence on the international stage through wrestlers like the Phogat sisters from Balali, Bhiwani, has operated through separate, often privately organised facilities rather than through the *mohalla akharas* – with Delhi's Chandgi Ram Akhara constituting a partial exception. The most prestigious lineages have been dominated by particular caste groups – Yadavs in eastern UP, Jats in Haryana, Brahmins in certain Banarasi traditions. Religious community structures specific access: Muslim *akharas* exist in Moradabad and Delhi but operate within their community.

The differential subaltern relationship is itself differentiated. For the working-class Muslim brassware artisan in Moradabad whose son trains at the local *akhara*, it is structural infrastructure for masculine identity and community membership. For the Dalit agricultural labourer's son in a Sonipat village, the *akhara* is the pathway to potential national sporting recognition and economic mobility through wrestling scholarships and government employment. For women in all these communities, the *akhara* is largely closed except where institutional interventions like Chandgi Ram's have opened it. In Mumbai's Dharavi, informal cricket grounds – wickets painted on compound walls, boundaries by social convention, scheduling through WhatsApp groups – constitute the metropolitan equivalent of *akhara* tactical spatiality, similarly gendered.

2.2 The Festival: Cross-Class Form, Stratified Participation

The *mela* (fair-festival – from the Sanskrit *mela*, gathering) and the festival more broadly are the most analytically revealing forms of the cultural commons because they make the cross-class participation and the internal stratification simultaneously visible. The Pushkar fair in Rajasthan, held in the month of *Kartik*, draws hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, traders, and visitors across class lines. The Sonepur Cattle Fair in Bihar, the *Urs* (death anniversary celebration of a Sufi saint) at the Dargah-e-Ala Hazrat in Bareilly, the Chhath Puja along the ghats of Patna's Ganga: all are

cross-class in participation, all are constituted as cultural commons, all are internally stratified. The same logic operates across geographically distinct forms. *Bada Mangal* in Lucknow – the festival celebrated on every Tuesday of the Hindu month of *Jyeshtha* (May–June), dedicated to Lord Hanuman, said to have been founded in the late eighteenth century by Janab-e-Alia, the Hindu wife of Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah, when she built the Aliganj Hanuman temple after a vow – gathers some two to three hundred street *bhandaras* (community feasts) and *pyaus* (water stalls) across the city on a single Tuesday, with Sikh, Christian, and Muslim organisations among the hosts: a Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb* origin extended into contemporary cross-religious commons practice. The Ramlila in Delhi – the ten- to twelve-day theatrical re-enactment of the Ramayana during *Dussehra*, performed historically by Hindu soldiers of the Mughal army on the Yamuna floodplains behind the Red Fort, formalised at the Ramlila Maidan in the early 1930s, with the Sri Dharmik Ramleela Committee at Lal Qila Maidan (established 1924) among the oldest – operates today across multiple sites in the city, drawing audiences that cross class, caste, and political lines. *Jallikattu* (bull-embracing) in Tamil Nadu – the centuries-old bull-taming sport with Sangam-era textual references, held on *Mattu Pongal* (the third day of the *Pongal* harvest festival in January), centred on Madurai district’s Avaniyapuram, Alanganallur, and Palamedu, drawing some seven hundred native-breed bulls and three hundred tamers in major events – constitutes the festival as collective rural sport, structured around the Kangayam and Pulikulam breeds whose preservation the practice ensures. All these forms are cross-class in participation, constituted as cultural commons, and internally stratified.

The *para* (neighbourhood) Durga Puja of Kolkata is the paradigmatic case. UNESCO inscribed Kolkata’s Durga Puja on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2021.³² The *para* Durga Puja is organised by neighbourhood committees that erect *pandals* in every available lane and open space during the five days of Durga Puja in the month of Ashvin. The committees fund the puja through *chanda* (neighbourhood subscription), commission artists and designers (often from rural Bengal’s traditional craft communities) to build the pandal and the Durga idol, organise food distribution, music, and cultural programmes. In the days of Durga Puja, Kolkata becomes a city walked through by lakhs of pandal-hoppers crossing class and caste lines.

Its typological features and internal stratifications must be held together.

³² UNESCO, “Durga Puja in Kolkata”, Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, 2021.

Typologically: cyclical temporality, tactical spatiality (already described in Section 1.3), *para* as social unit, hybrid consumption with non-consumptive core, *utsava* as active cultural production, political claim through municipal negotiation that exemplifies Chatterjee's political society at the level of routine subaltern leisure governance.³³ Internally stratified: the puja committee in many *paras* remains dominated by upper-caste Hindu men – the *bhadralok* leadership – even when the *para* includes working-class residents, Dalit families, and Muslim neighbours. The hierarchy is not absolute: working-class Hindus participate fully in the labour of preparation. But visible leadership, artistic direction, and financial decision-making reflect the *para*'s caste-class composition. For Muslim residents in mixed neighbourhoods, the Durga Puja is a festival of the *para*'s Hindu majority – participated in to varying degrees but not constituted as their own. For Dalit residents, the puja's brahminical priestly ritual and upper-caste leadership are not erased by collective openness.

The differential subaltern relationship is precise. The Bengali working-class informal settlement resident depends on the *para* Durga Puja as her primary festival leisure. The migrant Bihari Hindu domestic worker employed in the *para* participates as marginal guest in a festival not of her cultural origin. The Dalit pandal artist commissioned to design the idol does productive labour that makes the festival materially possible for others' enjoyment, while his own caste position is symbolically reinforced rather than transcended by the festival's ritual structure. The same form, three different subaltern relationships.

In smaller cities, festivals demonstrate the same cross-class form with locally specific stratifications. The Chhath Puja organised by Bihari migrant domestic workers in Delhi's outer settlements and Gurgaon's labour colonies is a women-led, working-class-organised festival that reconstructs the social world of Bihar in the city migration context. The Gangaaur festival in Rajasthani towns, dedicated to the goddess Gauri (Parvati) and organised primarily by women, creates institutionally guaranteed female access to public space – but the access is caste-structured. The Bonalu festival in Telangana, primarily celebrated by working-class Telangana women in Hyderabad's old city, creates the same gendered public access with its own caste stratifications. The *Mata Jagran* (all-night vigil for the goddess) – a Hindu devotional gathering organised in working-class North Indian neighbourhoods through bhajan singing, aarti, and storytelling dedicated to Durga or Vaishno Devi – operates at smaller, household or street scale, but in the same logic of cross-class form with locally specific stratifications: the Jagran is open to neighbours but is constituted within the religious frame and the local power structure of its host.

³³ Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed*.

2.3 Collective Cultural Gathering: Lucknow, Moradabad, and the Hindi Belt

The Kavi Sammelan (poetry gathering – from *kavi*, poet, and *sammelan*, assembly), the Mushaira (Urdu poetry gathering – from Arabic for poetry council), and the *baithak* (sitting-together – from *baithna*, to sit) are the cultural commons in their most explicitly cultural-productive form. The first significant large-scale public Kavi Sammelan was organised in 1920; the form has been regularly broadcast on All India Radio since independence. The Hasya Kavi Sammelan (comic poetry gathering – *hasya* meaning laughter or humour) is the most widely attended contemporary form. The Gorakhpur Mahotsav regularly features major Hasya Kavi Sammelans drawing audiences of several thousand.

In Lucknow, the Ameeruddaula Jhande Wala Park in Aminabad – locally known as Jhandewalan Park, historically the site where the tricolour was first hoisted in 1928 during the freedom movement – hosts public cultural gatherings. Ravindralaya, the auditorium in Charbagh constructed in 1964 as Uttar Pradesh's principal Tagore commemoration centre, hosts dance, drama, music, and poetry events and ranks among the city's most important cultural venues. Pandeyganj's smaller public spaces sustain neighbourhood-level cultural gatherings. Beyond the formally organised event, late-night local song traditions emerge wherever working-class life concentrates – vegetable sellers at the Kaisarbagh Mandi singing folk songs and local film numbers in the small hours as the day's trading ends, the gathering produced not by event but by accumulated co-presence. The Sanjeevani Maidan in Bareilly and the Gandhi Maidan in Patna have hosted major Kavi Sammelan events. The Dalit Kavi Sammelan in Maharashtra's smaller towns and UP's Ambedkarite communities performs Ambedkarite poetry, songs of resistance, and accounts of caste oppression – Scott's hidden transcript made explicitly political.

The *baithak* in Lucknow's old city – Chowk, Aminabad, the lanes around the Bara Imambara – has historically been a central institution of the city's *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* (the composite cultural tradition of the Ganga-Yamuna region, blending Hindu and Muslim artistic practices): evening gatherings for *ghazal* and *thumri* (a North Indian classical and semi-classical vocal form), for *dashtangoi* (the Urdu storytelling tradition recently revived by Mahmood Farooqui and others), for poetic recitation in Urdu and Hindi. Similar traditions persist in Moradabad's brassware-trading neighbourhoods, in Rampur (whose Raza Library houses one of the world's most significant collections of Urdu and Persian manuscripts, and around which a Mushaira culture continues), and in the Muslim trading and artisan neighbourhoods of Bareilly. The Mushaira at the Bareilly Dargah-

e-Ala Hazrat during the Urs, and the regular Mushairas at the Raza Library in Rampur, represent the continuation of a tradition central to North Indian Muslim cultural life.

Internal stratifications are specific. The *baithak* in its upper-caste Hindu Brahmin or Kayasth form has historically excluded Dalit and lower-caste neighbours through cultural codes of membership. In its Muslim form, it has been primarily constituted within the Muslim community even in *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* cities – Hindu participation welcomed but not constitutive. Linguistic exclusions are constitutive of each form. Gender exclusions have been pervasive, with women's participation as performers being a recent development.

The differential subaltern relationship is precise. For the Lucknow working-class Muslim weaver, the Mushaira and the *baithak* are infrastructure of cultural belonging – the alternative is the multiplex he cannot afford and which has no cultural meaning for him. For the working-class Urdu-speaking Muslim in Moradabad, the Friday *baithak* in a neighbour's room is the primary site of community cultural life. For the Dalit poet who performs at the Maharashtra Dalit Kavi Sammelan, the form is simultaneously cultural commons participation and political assertion. The migrant construction workers' Sunday gathering in Gurgaon's peripheral labour camps – workers from Bihar, eastern UP, and Rajasthan reconstructing the social world of home through shared cooking, Bhojpuri and Rajasthani folk songs, video calls home – constitutes collective cultural gathering under conditions of extreme spatial and social dislocation.

2.4 Contemporary Forms: Digital, Commuter, Vehicular, and Edible

The cultural commons has evolved contemporary forms. Digitally mediated commons: IPL cricket matches watched on shared smartphone screens at construction labour camps in Gurgaon, Hyderabad, and Bangalore – workers from Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha gathering around a single device, paying for data jointly, commenting on the match in their home languages. WhatsApp groups as infrastructure for subaltern social life: village WhatsApp groups maintaining migrant communities from Bihar to Gurgaon or Telangana to Hyderabad; neighbourhood groups in Mumbai chawls and Hyderabad's old city lanes organising IPL viewing, scheduling cricket matches, circulating news of festivals. YouTube building audiences of hundreds of millions for Bhojpuri music videos, Haryanvi music, Punjabi rural music, and regional comedy content. The Hyderabad underground rap and hip-hop scene producing music on YouTube and Spotify addressing the specific conditions of Muslim and Dalit youth in the city.

The Mumbai local trains – carrying over eight million commuters daily between South Mumbai and the suburbs – have evolved one of the most distinctive contemporary commuter commons. Morning bhajan (devotional song) singing on the Central, Western, and Harbour lines is a tradition documented from the 1970s and 1980s, when groups of office-going commuters began organising sessions on long suburban journeys. The Shree Ashthavinayak Railway Paravasi Bhajan Mandal on the CST-Kasara local, in operation for over two decades, is among the most established – forty or more men gathering in a designated compartment for the two-hour journey, instruments (manjira, harmonium, pakhawaj) carried alongside tiffin boxes, leadership rotating among members. Evening journeys, particularly during festivals, are sites of collective Hindi film song singing, women’s compartment celebrations of birthdays and seasonal occasions, and card-playing in general compartments. These commuter commons are produced by the same logic as the older neighbourhood forms: tactical reappropriation of unintended space, interstitial temporality, collective social unit, non-consumptive practice, and active cultural production. They reproduce internal stratifications: bhajan mandals are male, predominantly Hindu; the women’s compartment forms its own commons under different gender conditions.

Vehicular commons: auto-rickshaw drivers across Indian cities developing *adda* (informal gathering) culture at their stand points – Hyderabad’s Charminar, Lucknow’s Hazratganj, Patna’s Gandhi Maidan, the various wards of Mumbai and Bangalore – where drivers between fares conduct interstitial collective leisure constituted through conversation, shared *chai* (tea), debate about cricket and politics. Truck drivers’ *dhaba* (roadside eatery) culture along national highways operates at long-distance migrant scale.

Edible commons: the evening *thela* (street food cart) culture and the neighbourhood *pan* (betel-leaf preparation) shop as the most pervasive forms of contemporary commons infrastructure. The *thela* cluster – emerging every evening at commercial junctions, market gateways, and middle-class neighbourhood edges – is simultaneously economic infrastructure, food provision, and site of collective subaltern leisure. The *pan* shop is the more intimate institution – a small kiosk at every Indian neighbourhood corner where men gather to exchange news, debate politics, and constitute a continuous interstitial social leisure.

These contemporary forms have their own internal stratifications. The digital commons is gendered – men have more time on the smartphone, dominate the WhatsApp groups, frequent the *pan* shop. The *thela* street is male-coded for extended sociality even when women buy food and

leave. The auto-rickshaw stand *adda* is closed to women. The Mumbai local bhajan mandals are male and Hindu. The contemporary forms reproduce many of the gendered and religious exclusions of the older commons in newly mediated forms.

2.5 Women's Differential Relationship to the Commons

The differential subaltern relationship is most acutely visible for women from income-poor, informal sector, migrant, and artisan communities. The commons is doubly stratified for them: by class, in shared subaltern dependence; and by gender, in specific exclusions from many commons forms.

The bawdi (stepwell – the traditional Indian architectural form of a well or water body with descending flights of steps) in Rajasthani small towns such as Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Barmer, and Pali was historically the primary commons site accessible to women from non-elite households. The bawdi served simultaneously as water-fetching infrastructure and as a site of female sociality, religious observance, and community gathering – water-carrying as obligation, but the journey to and gathering at the well constituting one of the few institutionally sanctioned spaces of women's public life. The systematic replacement of bawdis by piped water supply from the 1970s onward was a material improvement in water access and a simultaneous destruction of a women's commons for which no substitute was provided.

The domestic workers of Mumbai's Worli and Bandra, Delhi's Vasant Vihar and Greater Kailash, Bangalore's Indiranagar and Koramangala, Hyderabad's Banjara Hills and Jubilee Hills – moving between two, three, or four employers' households across long city distances – practise commons leisure in the gaps between households: sitting on building steps and low walls with others in the same situation, sharing food, exchanging news. Contemporary additions: WhatsApp groups maintained across the buildings of their employment, through which information about wages, employer behaviour, and family news circulates continuously. The interstitial bench commons is now also a digital commons conducted through smartphones during the working day.

Women construction workers – at every major Indian construction site, paid less than male workers, often migrating with husbands from Bihar, Odisha, Telangana, and rural Rajasthan – practise commons leisure in even more compressed forms. The Sunday gathering at the labour camp involves women in collective cooking, the maintenance of children's social life, and WhatsApp video calls to family at home – leisure inseparable from the social reproduction work that women carry within the migrant labour household. Women street vendors – selling vegetables, flowers, prepared

food at markets and street corners – practise commons leisure inseparable from their economic activity: conversations with neighbouring vendors and regular customers, shared meals during quiet hours, help with childcare exchanged across the vending row, negotiation of municipal harassment together. Women in weaving and artisan households in Varanasi's Madanpura and Lallapura, in Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh, in Pochampally near Hyderabad – combine domestic work, weaving labour, and the social leisure of the household courtyard in patterns that the Western tradition's clear work-leisure boundary cannot accommodate.

The empirical demonstration across the akhara, the festival, collective cultural gathering, contemporary forms, and women's relationship to the commons has shown the framework's analytical work in operation. What that work contributes theoretically – what concepts the framework offers, what conceptual gaps it addresses, and what epistemological commitments it makes – is stated in the next section.

3. Theoretical Contribution

The paper's theoretical contribution operates at three levels. The first is the concept of the cultural commons of the Indian city as a distinct city leisure formation – typologically distinct from the Western leisure apparatus through six dimensions of difference, internally stratified by exclusions specific to context and geography, and the site of a differential subaltern relationship characterised by structural dependence, productive labour, collective practice, and defensive political claim. The framework is generative – applicable to any Indian or Global South city leisure context – and it holds the empirical reality of cross-class participation together with the structural reality of stratified relationship. Implicit in this first contribution is the reconceptualisation of leisure itself: not as a residual sphere of non-work activity but as the for-itself quality of human practice that the Hindu textual tradition's concepts of *krida* and *lila* name, and that can suffuse practices that are simultaneously commerce, devotion, training, or social reproduction. The cultural commons is the social form in which this for-itself quality is collectively produced and experienced.

The second contribution is the two-layered analytical architecture: the typological contrast with Western leisure, and the commons as stratified formation in which internal exclusions and the differential subaltern relationship are held together as inseparable aspects of the same reality. The two-layered architecture is necessary because single-layered alternatives – celebrating the commons as inclusive, reducing it to subaltern leisure, treating it as merely a different universal leisure – all

fail.

The third contribution is epistemological: the insistence that Hindu textual concepts (*krida*, *lila*, *utsava*, *rasa*), Indian scholarly traditions (Kumar's *babri alang*, Nandy's appropriation logic, Chatterjee's political society), Ambedkar's critique of caste within community life,³⁴ the subaltern studies tradition's insistence on heterogeneity,³⁵ and Global South frameworks must be treated as theoretical sources rather than illustrations of Western concepts. Bharata's claim in the *Rasādhyāya* that without *rasa* no meaning can be accomplished³⁶ is a foundational philosophical claim that grounds the paper's account of the commons as a necessary social form, while the Ambedkar tradition's critique grounds its insistence on internal stratification.

4. Conclusion

The cultural commons of the Indian city is the leisure of the city – leisure understood not as the residual non-work sphere that the Western tradition defined, but as the for-itself quality of human practice that suffuses certain collective forms even where those forms are simultaneously commerce, devotion, training, or social reproduction. The *akhara* in the Varanasi lane and the Sonipat stadium; the *para* Durga Puja in North Kolkata and the Ganesh Chaturthi in Dharavi; the Kavi Sammelan on the Patna maidan and the Mushaira in Rampur; the *baithak* in Lucknow's Chowk and the *chaykhana* in Moradabad; the *bawdi* memory in Jodhpur and the Bonalu in Hyderabad's old city; the Chhath ghat in Patna and the *Mata Jagran* in a Delhi labour colony; the auto-rickshaw *adda* at the Charminar and the construction camp Sunday in Gurgaon; the bhajan mandal on the CST-Kasara local and the evening film song in the Mumbai commuter compartment; the Ravindralaya cultural evening in Charbagh and the late-night vegetable seller's song at the Kaisarbagh Mandi; the Ambedkar Park in Lucknow with its cross-class user base growing from its Dalit political origin – these are the cultural commons of Indian city life, and in each the for-itself quality that *krida* and *lila* name is collectively produced.

The paper has argued three things. First, the cultural commons is typologically distinct from the Western leisure apparatus – its time, space, social unit, consumption, cultural form, and political valence operate by different logics for which Hindu textual concepts, Indian scholarship, and

³⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (Bombay: self-published, 1936).

³⁵ Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

³⁶ *Natyasastra of Bharata Muni*.

Global South theory provide the precise vocabulary. Second, the commons is internally stratified by caste, gender, religion, language, geography, time, and class-within-subaltern in ways specific to context and geography – it is not a romantic space of inclusion but a complex formation that reproduces many of the social hierarchies it sometimes resists. Third, the subaltern relationship to the commons is structurally distinct from the elite or middle-class relationship – characterised by structural dependence, productive labour, collective practice, and defensive political claim.

Bharata declares in the Rasādhyāya of the Nāṭyaśāstra: नहि रसाद् ऋते कश्चिद् अर्थः प्रवर्तते – without *rasa*, no meaning or purpose can be accomplished.³⁷ The cultural commons of the Indian city is the social form in which *rasa* – the for-itself quality of human practice – is collectively produced. Its defence against enclosure, its democratisation against internal stratification, and its recognition against misrepresentation are simultaneously cultural, political, and class projects.

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³⁷ *Natyasastra of Bharata Muni*.

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