

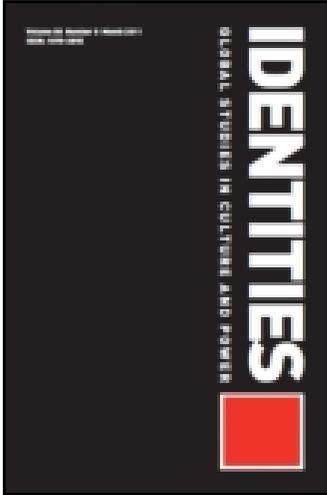
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Publisher: Routledge

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Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gide20>

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Published online: 01 Jun 2015.

To cite this article: Ravinder Kaur & Thomas Blom Hansen (2015): Aesthetics of arrival: spectacle, capital, novelty in post-reform India, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2015.1034135](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2015.1034135)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2015.1034135>

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Aesthetics of arrival: spectacle, capital, novelty in post-reform India

Ravinder Kaur and Thomas Blom Hansen

(Received 16 February 2015; final version received 13 March 2015)

India's celebrated 'arrival on the global stage' as a desirable 'emerging market' for global investors signals the spectacular moment that is said to have ruptured the barriers between the first and third worlds. If the notion of arrival anticipates the long-awaited acceleration in the pace of history, it also harnesses a euphoric India to the limitless future promised by the new. In this special issue, we set our focus on the *aesthetics of arrival* that signal novelty, visibility and celebration of post-reform India within and outside the nation. We ask how novelty is manufactured and experienced when the majority of the population remains excluded from new India. The answer probably lies in the way in which this other India is signified as the past, as 'old India' that holds back the nation. The novelty, we propose, is not only experienced in the promise of the future, but also in the aesthetic force of the promise to overcome a humiliating past, tainted by colonialism, in order to realise a truer and more timeless 'new' India

Keywords: spectacular economy; globalisation; aesthetics; novelty; neoliberal reforms; India

Introduction

This special issue addresses the moment when India was said to have 'arrived on the global stage'¹ adorned, crafted and repackaged as the seductive 'India Story' in the eyes of the world. The India Story – shorthand for prosperous, techno-friendly, enterprising, middle-class beneficiaries of the gains of economic reforms in 'new India' – signals the spectacular event of transformation that seemingly ruptured the barriers between the first and third worlds. India was not only spoken of as a desirable 'emerging market' but also a 'rising power' that had seemingly joined the high table of global politics in a dramatic upset of established power hierarchies. The event conjures the long-awaited acceleration in the pace of history recalling what Reinhart Koselleck (2004) designated the 'epochal threshold' that marked the temporal shift into modernity (*neuzeit*). The German term *Neuzeit* (new time) captures this sense of a time 'completely other, even better than what has gone before' (2004, 233) perceived to be an unstoppable force heralding the new. The 'now' or the eternal present in this imaginary reoriented towards a limitless future could hence be relocated within the horizons

of expectation and hope.² The very sign of India was now no longer representative of deprivation and dystopian collapse, but a signifier of a new world of affluence, enterprise, techno-mobility, consumption and fresh market opportunities that an economically stagnant Western world is in search of. Thus re-signified, the 'new' India seemed to have arrived on the global stage, propelled by a breathless rhetoric of ascent, escalation and acceleration. To use Dipesh Chakrabarty's memorable phrase, India finally appeared to be moving out of the 'waiting room of history' (2000) as if on its maiden journey to seek afresh fortune, recognition and destiny in a world that had long denied it its rightful due.

This special issue engages with the *aesthetics of arrival* when India swept by the force of history seemed to have 'made it' in the world. If 'making it' signifies a kind of global race, then the end-goal remains both enigmatic, enticing and in need of constant celebration³ – conspicuous consumption of branded goods, new forms of leisure and entertainment – and as a nation to gain respect and recognition as an authentic sovereign power in the global scheme of things. It invokes a landscape, at once, familiar but not yet wholly intimate upon which India's fantasy of becoming a 'full player' – the one who makes rules and remains exception to those – in the global game would be performed. The world that one had become familiar with as a post-colony does not completely exist in the same way as before. The names, events and places that one had longed to inhabit, the worldliness one had desired to experience, may turn out to be less recognisable upon arrival. Thus, the renewal of the sense of familiarity with the world requires re-experiencing the global landscape first hand in completely raw form where old-time desires cohere with anxiety and nervousness of a newcomer global player. Or to put it differently, to participate in what is called the high stakes 'global game' on a world-scale means that the level of expectation and anxiety may also be high. India's familiarity with the world was profoundly shaped by colonialism and later decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century. In the post-colonial world order, India was categorised as a Third World country lagging behind the developed world. India's arrival on the global stage, then, was not a pure adventure in the unknown, rather, to speak with Naipaul in *The Enigma of Arrival*, it was 'like tearing at an old scab' (1986, 8) that unsettles and rearranges everything that was familiar before. But how can such rearranging ignore and occlude that the majority of the population was never part of this new India? We propose that the answer lies precisely in signifying this other India as the past, as 'old India', and in the aesthetic force of the promise to overcome a humiliating past, tainted by colonialism, in order to realise a truer and more timeless 'new' India.⁴

We explore three interrelated aesthetic forms of 'new India' in this special issue. *First*, the manufacture of India's arrival on the global stage as a spectacle, celebration of the nation meant for a global audience. We ask in what ways is the rupture and disassociation from the immediate past publicly performed for a global and national spectatorship? *Second*, we draw attention to the exclusionary model of social experience that characterises the idea of new India. If the

European move to aesthetic modernism was integral to the formation and consolidation of a new form of class domination,⁵ the aesthetics of ‘newness’ in ‘new’ India are similarly tied to the reformulation of an earlier nationalist project of paternalist inclusion. ‘New’ India is premised on a muscular nationalism espousing a (Hindu) civilisational narrative of the nation and celebrating the achievements and cultural predilections of a largely upper caste Hindu elite and middle class.⁶ The ‘newness’ is created by separating all that does not belong to this frame (the so-called ‘backward’ communities and the many cultural and religious minorities) and consigning their forms of life to the past. And *third*, just as the event of arrival reveals the true extent of one’s longings and desires, it also has the effect of sharpening the awareness of one’s own strangeness in a new place. How does that refracted vision, that makes one look back at one’s own body through the eyes of the world, rearrange one’s being in relation to oneself? We are interested in how the tension between the old and the new map onto other tensions – familiarity and strangeness, desire and anxiety, shame and pride – that are articulated around the projection of India onto the global stage.

A word on aesthetics before we proceed. The root *aisthikōs* is the ancient Greek word that means ‘perceptive by feeling’ out of which aesthetics is born as a form of cognition that invokes the entire corporeal sensorium (Buck-Morss 1992). Aesthetics is a sensory experience of perception or what Terry Eagleton (1990) has called the ‘discourse of the body’ that emanates even before it can be articulated through speech. Much of the engagement with aesthetics in the nineteenth and twentieth century revolved around the belief that art and the beautiful can improve, cultivate and uplift the self. However, it is only by acknowledging the ‘uncivilised and the uncivilisable trace’, Buck-Morss suggests, that we can make sense of tensions and contradictions in the social experience of newness (1992, 6). It is through aesthetics as sensory and embodied perceptions and social experience that we approach the moment hailed as an epochal change of India’s recent history.

Global threshold?

In 1990s, the word ‘globalisation’ signified very specific meanings in India. In 1991, India on the verge of international debt default on repayments had to ship its national gold reserves to the Bank of England in order to secure immediate cash flows.⁷ This moment highlighted the failure of the promise of Independence that would guarantee autonomy and sovereignty befitting a great nation. The structural adjustments of privatisation and disinvestment that followed were not a matter of careful economic ‘choice’, rather conditions demanded by the International Monetary Fund for securing loans.⁸ The globalisation debate in India, unsurprisingly, was conducted in terms of ‘loss of autonomy’ and erosion of hard won sovereignty (see for example, Jalan 1996, 187–8). The prime opposition to globalisation was articulated via the Gandhian principle of *swadeshi* (of one’s own country) calling for self-reliance in the domain of economy.⁹ In

short, the economic sphere was the new theatre where the anxieties and desires of the nation would now be performed in full public display.

The concerns about India's sovereignty – politically, economically and culturally – were at the centre of this theatre. The anxieties about impending cultural homogenisation and 'Westernisation' were part of this discourse (see William Mazzarella's paper in this issue). The pro-market proponents also invoked sovereignty to make a case for India's integration into the world market. The 'new economic policy' was summed up in a 1991 policy brief on Trade Policy 'most countries ... are competing in an increasingly integrated, highly global market place. India cannot afford to ignore these changes. India can grow faster only as part of the world economy and not in isolation' (quoted in Dandekar 1992, 89). In other words, the question was how to restore the erosion in India's standing and reputation on the global stage? The choice was to either fully 'embrace' the benefits of globalisation by getting 'rid of the deadweight of the past' (Jalan 1996, x) or risk being 'left behind' in the march towards progress and development in the new times already visible on the horizon. It was about shifting the weight of history in favour of future possibilities in a way that the Nehruvian model was deemed to have failed to achieve.¹⁰ Meanwhile, prospects of the availability of latest branded commodities in clothing, fashion, food and entertainment had created a palpable excitement.¹¹ An entirely new world that so far only seemed possible in the realm of the imagination now appeared to be within India's reach. It is this historical consciousness and social experience of being on the epochal threshold in post-reform India that we explore in this special issue.

Spectacular economy

India's emergence in the global market was linked to the trope of 'growth potential' that is frequently used in the speculative language of global capital investments (see Kaur 2012). The possibilities opened up for India via economic reforms were spectacularly amplified when Goldman Sachs in 2003 recognised its untapped potential in a futures projection analysis.¹² The key factors that indicated a shift were a large territory with yet unexploited natural resources and a vast population that also happened to include the world's largest youth demography – a statistical fact that ranked favourably in contrast to China's ageing population. The old fears of population explosion and earth's unsustainability were instantaneously banished as population was now seen as a precious asset – India's 'demographic dividend' as it is called – a large population could not only provide techno-friendly, cheap labour but also serve as a vast consumer base (Kavita Philip's paper in this volume). In short, India was gaining attention and visibility in the eyes of the world in radically new ways, now fully integrated into a world of commodities. To invoke Debord (2005), this was the materialisation and mediatisation of a dominant worldview where India was finally seen as integrating into the circuits of global economy.

We suggest that the extensive and never-ending mediated projection of India's re-formed self is not merely confined to extraordinary events – mega cultural displays and extravaganzas – that command the global gaze, but also below-the-radar transformations ranging from conspicuous patterns of consumption to forms of leisure and entertainment that appear in and transform the everyday life. The genre of spectacle we suggest here is what Ranciere (2011) calls the 'theatre without spectator', that is a performative space where the gap between actors, spectators and the stage is blurred so that spectators become actors in a theatre that can be performed without spectators. The nature of the spectacle of India's transformation into an investment destination is such that its ultimate success lies in inviting the participation of those who look at it desirously from afar – investors, tourists and global capitalists – to come and invest in the India Story.

The spectacle of India's 'rise' as a global player – mediated via branding campaigns, beauty pageants, massive infrastructure projects, sports extravaganzas, mass political movements that help showcase the 'world's largest democracy' in action – is predicated not only upon its capacity to attract *attention* but also on crafting *appearances* that can attract the global gaze (Crary 2001, 2013). The function of the spectacle is not only to mediate between the eyes and sense-perception of the spectators, but to hold, arrest the gaze. The ability to attract and hold the gaze to oneself is one of the most highly valued commodities in a competitive global market. It is directly connected to the making of social or commercial prestige, trustworthiness and credibility – the qualities that in advertising parlance are the key ingredients in creating brand value (in the case of 'emerging markets' this translates into drawing in foreign investments, appreciating value of commodities).

In the *Society of the Spectacle*, the market society negates its own essence when 'all that was once directly lived' is turned into spectacular representation. This is what Debord called the 'colonization of the everyday life' to suggest an increasing submission of the previously unoccupied areas of social life to the market forces. This idea is premised on the spectator as a passive consumer of illusions, and it reflects older anxieties of *alienation* and *negation* – the separation of the humanity from its essence and its projection on to God, nation or other ideological fantasies.¹³

While recognising the persuasive and fantasmic dimensions of media representations and commodity aesthetics, the contributions in this special issue share an interest in the spectator-consumers' capacity to *see* but also co-perform spectacles, interrogate them, deface them, and at times, even manufacture alternate spectacles. This means to acknowledge the productive and promissory value of the spectacle in creating dream worlds for future investors – often on the basis of nothing but a promise – that also possess the capacity to turn the potential into reality. The spectacular manufacture of the 'India Story' is such a promise extended to global investors. Yet, as the recent victory of Narendra Modi's BJP on the basis of a promise of 'acche din' (good days), the 'India Story' also

resonates with a enormous range of radically heightened expectations within the nation for better standards of living, for global recognition, for social mobility, justice and for equality.

Social experience and class

A distinct feature of ‘new India’ is its claim to represent a collective dream even when a major part of the population remains outside of it. The perception of newness, we argue, is precisely created by ‘leaving behind’ that which does not fit in with the imaginary of a prosperous, techno-friendly, mobile consumer nation. The paradox here is not just about the elite domination of the collective dreams, aspirations and representations. It is about sections of the elite masquerading as the ‘common man’ whose claims to political legitimacy is entirely dependent upon speaking on behalf of the dispossessed and the powerless citizenry. The new political party, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), brought to power in Delhi with sweeping majority in 2015 upon the disaffections of those unable to bear the cost of liberalisation – privatisation of public amenities in the name of efficient services, rising cost of essential goods and the lack of trust in the state machinery.¹⁴ The core constituency of this formation (which won only a few per cent of the national vote in the 2014 general elections) is in fact members of the nation’s technocratic, intellectual and bureaucratic elite who have long categorised themselves as ‘apolitical’ and for whom electoral politics itself a dirty cesspool of corruption dominated by unworthy populist politicians. Their claim to political power lies in erasing their elite identity and adorning the garb of the common man in order to oppose the ‘insiders’ or the traditional political elite.

Herein lies perhaps an arresting feature of the class dynamics underpinning the ‘New India’. Virtually every major and successful project of national modernity in the world has worked through, and depended on, a certain hegemonic appropriation and celebration of the imputed virtues, values, thrift and resourcefulness of the ordinary citizen. This is true of Japan, South Korea, China as well as Europe and North America. Not so in the ‘New India’ where the culture of the poor majority, including a fecund mass-culture and low-brow films, a vast informal sector, proliferating caste politics and a vigorous popular democracy all are seen as obstacles to economic growth, innovation and political accountability. While the dominant social formations in East Asia, North America and Europe captured and hegemonised national culture while commandeering resources to restructure the economy, urban space and everyday life, the real prestige good in ‘New India’ is exactly the opposite: separation from mass politics, from the sensibilities of mass culture and in its stead mastery of global culture and a claim to full membership in the global elite. While earlier generations of Indian nationalists saw the ‘foreign’ as both a promise and a danger, as something powerful to be domesticated, today’s ideologues of the ‘New India’ envisions a country built on a whole new foundation, abstracted and alienated from its most recent past. Most of the advertising campaigns promoting ‘New

India' (see Ravinder Kaur's contribution) were indeed aimed at a foreign audience, or an Indian audience seeing and admiring itself through an imputed foreign gaze. Even the valorisation of the virtues of the aam admi and the ordinary is performed within a middle-class universe that presumably respects the rule of law and appreciates impersonal procedures. The actually existing 'ordinary person' is too tainted by her class, and the impurities of the past, to be deemed properly and ethically aam.

This attempt to *erase* one's upper- and middle-class identity in some ways parallels what Satish Deshpande (2013) has called the paradox of 'castelessness' in India. To claim to be casteless, or to belong to 'general category' in contemporary India is to profit from one's upper caste privilege without having to acknowledge that privilege. In this upper-caste discourse of merit and intellect, the bearers of caste identity are those who have historically suffered discrimination, and are seen to be gaining (unduly?) from it through caste-based reservations. Incidentally, the very same social group that claims castelessness now also claims to be classless in this re-conception of the common man.¹⁵ The popular category of the common man in this sense has blurred the blunt edges of class distinctions even as the poor are increasingly excluded from the benefits of the growth in new economy.¹⁶

Yet for all its claims of being beyond the confines of class and caste, the social experience of the much longed for 'new times' largely remains exclusive in post-reform India. The spaces often identified as the 'face of new India' – shopping malls, multiplex cinemas, hi-tech call centres, new multi-lane toll highways, world-class airports – are precisely designed not to be mass culture. It is this restricted access that gives them value as 'world class'. It is noteworthy that Bollywood, the mediator of mass entertainment, in the post-reform era constantly seeks to escape the popular in favour of exotic and outlandish themes. As was apparent in Narendra Modi's appeal to the electorate as patriotic Indians, the new elite and the upwardly mobile who was at the core of the BJP's 31% of the popular vote, appear to be increasingly impatient with any minority claim and with the demands and interests of the poor. Conversely, it is not obvious that the multiple impoverished communities, the regional formations and the many minorities that together make up the majority of the Indian electorate are ready to accept the moral authority of the rhetoric of newness in India. There is dominance but no hegemony.

The contributions

In the first piece in this issue, Kavita Philip asks how the 'Indian geek' became a new trope in the imagining of India. Philip begins by showing how India has played a central part as a site for projections of potentially scary futures: from Paul Ehrlich's projection of a 'population bomb' in the 1960s, to Thomas Friedman's recent depiction of a massive workforce of tech savvy graduates undermining the supremacy and prowess of America. Domestically, the 'Indian

geek' has emerged as the new ideal citizen, linking techno-scientific aptitude with higher castes communities and their claim to represent pure 'merit', untainted by the murky world of political favours and job quotas for the lower castes.

William Mazzarella focuses on the contested Miss World pageant in Bangalore in 1996. This event illustrated many of the birth pangs around projecting a new image of India to the world. The challenge was, Mazarella suggests, to develop a new 'performative dispensation' – that is a discursive and legal framing that allowed the event to appear both legible and legitimate, global in content and local in flavour. The paper traces how the organisers, spin doctors and the police department tried to pull off a 'world-class event' that ended up as a highly securitised affair almost entirely cordoned off from the city and the country.

Ravinder Kaur explores how vital parts of this new performative dispensation were put together in the marketing of a 'post-exotic India'. Beginning with the slogan 'India 2.0', Kaur shows how image makers and marketing professionals struggled to get rid of the profusion of images associated with the Indian present – poverty, chaotic cities, environmental degradation, religious conflict – in favour of a new and 'smart image'. The answer came in the 'Incredible India' campaign that connected timeless natural beauty and mystique with a modern and dynamic present. This 'remixing of history', Kaur argues, required erasing the history of minorities, of the poor, and of the colonial past along with a literal 'scrubbing' of footage and images, making them stand out clearer, 'cleaner' and less adulterated.

Such highly media borne spectacles predicated on a story of triumphant modernisation are not the only spectacular forms that are enabled by the forces unleashed in Indian in the last few decades. Kajri Jain points out that the rise of new commercial and political elites across India have also produced a proliferation of 'mega statues' of gods across the Indian landscape. Most of these are sponsored by business groups and tycoons and are often put up near highways or other corridors of mass transit. Unlike the exquisite figures in traditional temples and places of worship, these structures cater to a gaze from a car, or from afar. The statues signify a certain technological and economic force of its sponsor while 'cutting down to size' both the authenticity of the divine, and rising above the dispersed power of the state.

Ajay Gandhi takes us to the strange 'teleportation in convenient bite sized forms' of famous street food and eateries of Old Delhi to fancy, hygienic food outlets in new shopping malls and elite spaces in South Delhi. Once the centre of refinement and elite culture, Old Delhi became in the colonial era synonymous with traditional artisanal production, markets, religious festivals and the remnants of Muslim high culture. Today, Old Delhi condenses all the social problems of India, and in the 1990s it could add a haven for 'Pakistani spies' and terrorists to its dubious reputation. Gandhi explores how the multiple fears and stereotypes about Old Delhi in the past decade have been creatively reversed, if not sublated, into a nostalgic yearning for a richer and more authentic past. The famed foods of Old Delhi, not least its meaty fare that continue to fascinate and repel even the

most pious Hindu, are now valorised as enjoyment, a shared past can be both disavowed and incorporated as 'commodified kitsch'.

In the last contribution, Srirupa Roy traces the lineages of the anti-corruption movement in 2011 that eventually morphed into today's AAP. At the heart of this movement stood the figure of the angry citizen, the respectable and patient law abiding person who 'has had enough' of abusive and corrupt politicians and lax bureaucrats. This movement relied on the idea of what Roy calls 'curative democracy', the idea that the ills and excesses of public life can be fixed through the determined action by activist citizens and upstanding members of the press who, as it were, 'take back democracy' from those unworthy leaders who had usurped the reigns of power and legitimacy. Roy traces this sentiment back to the upheavals and protests of the 1970s when police incompetence in spectacular murder cases led to sustained press campaigns. In its current form, 'curative democracy' tends to turn against elected representatives as a whole class and locate the only source of redemption and justice in the professionals in the legal system and the administration. This widespread sentiment tends today to turn on democracy itself.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. The phrase 'India's arrival on the global stage', usually in present or past perfect tense, gained wide currency – from official policy papers to opinion columns – after the economic reforms. See for instance Ashutosh Varshney, 'India has nothing to fear, a lot to gain', *Indian Express*, 11 November 2010 <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/india-has-nothing-to-fear-a-lot-to-gain/709470/>.
2. Peter Osborne (1992) via Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project reminds us that this reorientation was made possible by material progress in science and technology as well as the awareness of the New World opened up new possibilities where the future appeared to be limitless.
3. Indian newspapers are full of such celebratory news – the most recent example is the celebration of an Indian engineer, Satya Nadella's elevation as the CEO of Microsoft Corp.
4. The lived consciousness of the new is not only predicated upon a celebration of the present but also negation of the recent past. For Benjamin, it is precisely this paradoxical abstract quality of newness that makes it an ever renewable event of 'eternal recurrence' and a hallmark of modernity (Benjamin, Spencer, and Harrington 1985, 36). He links this aspect of aesthetic modernism, fashion and mass production with Marx's the logic of commodity production and capital accumulation.
5. On aesthetics and class, see Williams (1989).
6. See Hansen (1999) for the history of the rise of Hindu nationalism.
7. India shipped around 50 tonnes of pure gold to England to raise \$405 million. Rangarajan (2001).
8. Significantly, this fact is seldom mentioned in the debates on economic reforms. The new economic policy is presented as a matter of choice and careful planning rather than coercion by international lenders such as IMF. See Basu (1992).

9. The RSS affiliate Swadeshi Jagran Manch (Forum for the Awakening of Swadeshi) led by S. Gurumurthy became an outspoken critic of LPG. The Gandhian principle of Swadeshi that had been used effectively during the anti-colonial struggle was appropriated by RSS/BJP to create an indigenous economic policy (see Hansen 1999) 'The Ethics of Hindutva and the Spirit of Capitalism' in Hansen (1998).
10. The notion of *naya zamana* or new time was used liberally in Nehruvian era.
11. The logic of the new, say in terms of Benjamin's characterisation of fashion or aesthetic modernism as 'eternal recurrence', precisely reveals these linkages between the social experiences of temporality with Marx's logic of commodity production. Fashion is an apt example here given that aesthetic trend even within the same temporal structure is identified with movement of time. Significantly, the change of fashion season twice yearly is now increasingly replaced with new fashion items issued on weekly basis by clothing chains specialising in mass production. Or as Benjamin reminds us 'the idea of the eternal recurrence transforms historical events into mass produced articles' (1985, 36). Also see Buck-Morss (1991).
12. Note on Goldman Sachs report 2003. India's economic growth in the first decade of reforms was not particularly noteworthy. It reached near double digit growth only in the second decade as the foreign investors turned their attention in full force.
13. For a detailed critique on the shared themes of negation, falsity and irreducible essence of humankind in Debord's work on consumer society, publicity and markets and Feuerbach's work on Christianity, see Regis Debray (1995).
14. A range of disaffections were assembled under the catch all term 'corruption' that became the vehicle for popular mobilisations in 2011.
15. Incidentally, Arvind Kejriwal and several other leaders of AAP were actively involved in anti-Mandal Commission protests in early 1990s which granted reservations to 'Other Backward Castes'.
16. On socio-economic gaps and levels of poverty after the reforms, see Alkire and Seth (2013), Harris-White and Prakash (2010).

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