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Rifah-e Aam Club, Lucknow:

Public sphere and public space in urban India

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Abstract: Public space comes under threat, is contested as much as shared, an arena for power and hegemony, leaving little hope for interaction across social divides. At the same time, each reincarnation of our fragmented public sphere necessarily builds on historical precedent, inadvertently inscribing public space with fresh hope as it expands the scope of the term's original promise. Over time, this process creates iconic infrastructure such as the Rifah-e Aam Club, the "Club for the public good" in Lucknow, North India. From the initial stirrings of associational culture under British colonialism through key moments of the national movement down to today's *goonda raj*, or rule of thugs, this unruly space came to host the most unlikely republic of letters, reuniting a public across time and space that often seems irredeemably fragmented. It is when buildings like this acquire a life of their own that cities realise their creative promise.

Keywords: Public sphere, public space, infrastructure, memory, India

What is it about urban space that frequently fosters creative, chaotic, innovative and potentially transformative political progress even in the face of stark inequality, rampant exclusion and socio-spatial fragmentation? In Richard Sennett's definition, going back to Georg Simmel, "a city is a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet" (Sennett 1974, 39; cf. Simmel 1997) and it seems that precisely this relation of urban dwellers as strangers – rather than neighbors, colleagues or kin – sparks fruitful irritation and inspires change (Young 1990, Appiah 2006, Isin 2007, Evans 2018). No matter who these strangers are, though, that is to say: across which intersecting axes of difference and exclusion they are estranged from each other, they arguably need a distinct kind of locale to sustain those meaningful interactions that make cities the cradle of public life; it is not only relevant that urbanites be strangers – they also have to meet. Jürgen Habermas famously envisioned them to meet in a Parisian salon in whose republican atmosphere the bourgeois citizenry escaped the ossified structures of feudal politics and began to craft an alternative vision for enlightened public life (Habermas 1989). Today, one could identify similar "public spaces that are open, crowded, diverse, incomplete, improvised, and disorderly or lightly regulated" (Amin 2008, 8) in a contemporary bookstore (Urla 2001), a town plaza (Low 2000), "Adda Calcutta" (Chakrabarty 1999), or indeed the subject of this article: the Rifah-e Aam Club in Lucknow, North India (pictured in figure 1).

[Please insert Figure 1 here]

My first exposure to this derelict building was through the story of a *bhuta*, a ghost. That the Rifah-e Aam Club is haunted was a well known fact across the neighborhood of Wazirganj.

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Upon my first visit to the dusty plaza, a youngster casually mentioned that he sometimes hears the *bhuta* recite Urdu poetry at night, suggesting that it goes back at least a century (nobody quite knows whose spectre it actually is). I brushed the comment off as cliché embellishment, but soon another bystander chimed in to inform me that the *bhuta* also guides shuttlecocks on the Badminton court inside to ensure that Nammu, the local strongman, always wins. And apparently, the *bhuta* feeds on ballot paper – at least that's how several of my middle-class neighbors explained Nammu's original rise to power in a mid-1990s election during which numerous voting slips disappeared from the strong room, sealing the fate of upper caste domination. Only much later, upon reading Taneja's (2017) account of Delhi's ruins, did I realize that these ghost stories prefigure the wider argument I want to make in this article: that public infrastructure matters because it houses influential memories beyond its contemporary uses which acquire a life of their own that's difficult to reign in.

In what follows, I thus use the prism of this haunted, liminal and 'hybrid' building (in the sense of Bhabha 1994's take on postcolonial ambivalences) to demonstrate how a seemingly fragmented public can come together, how the meeting of strangers gets facilitated by iconic infrastructure. I do not intend to use this case study to develop generalized assumptions about the public sphere, neither in urban India nor elsewhere. My aim is more modest: to show, at one example that I happen to be intimately familiar with, how widespread claims of the fragmentation of public sphere and public space, though not wrong in themselves, might be overlooking the utopian potential of urban infrastructure. Whether and how this applies to similar buildings in different contexts is for others to discover – even though recent work on Clubs elsewhere on the subcontinent makes similar claims (e.g. Cornea 2019).

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After outlining broader geographical debates on public space and elaborating my methodology, I will introduce the Club's contemporary spatial setting and then develop my argument through three historical moments. The first is the initial emergence of an elite public in the late nineteenth century when the Club was founded. The second is the shift towards mass-based nationalist politics in the decades before India's independence. The third is the rise of the lower castes and classes into political and cultural prominence after the agrarian reforms of the 1960s and the end of Congress hegemony. I will demonstrate how each of these moments left a distinct mark on the building, prefiguring its various contemporary uses and layered access arrangements, and imbuing the Club with a growing sense of resilient publicness that resists both state appropriation and private encroachment. Quite appropriately, 'Rifah-e Aam' even literally translates as "the public [common, ordinary] good" (cf. Stark 2011, 26), a name that became a self-fulfilling prophecy as seemingly distinct histories became intensely interwoven over the Club's 150 years' existence.

Public sphere and public space

Geographical engagement with the concept of the public sphere, its relation to public space, and more specifically the infrastructure underpinning it is wide-ranging (see Madanipour 2003 for a recent overview). Most accounts go back to Habermas' (1989) initial vision of Parisian salons as the space in which bourgeois civil society was able to emerge in central Europe; in many ways, this article is an attempt to unearth how such a locale might look elsewhere. His original conception of the public sphere as a primarily deliberative, talking

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space neatly distinct from both the state and the market and related assumptions about spatial dichotomies between public and private have of course immediately been complicate (Fraser 1990 being a prominent example). As Kurt Iveson (1998, 22) pointed out, the term 'public' has multiple meanings, it 'can refer specifically to the state, in distinction to the "private" market. It can refer to all things beyond the "privacy" of the home. People might be spoken of collectively as "the public". Getting "publicity" describes the process of bringing an event or person to the notice of this "public"'. To conceptually structure the debate, Iveson (1998) thus suggests two moves: abandoning the clear dichotomy of public and private to attend to more gradual expansion or erosion of either space – and differentiating between 'four models of public space commonly employed in literature from a range of disciplines: ceremonial public space; community public space; liberal public space; and multi-public public space' (22).

The latter, 'multi-public public space', a term inspired by Iris Young (1990) but equally resonant with Nancy Fraser's (1990) critique of the exclusivitiy of Habermas vision, Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2006) assumptions about the light preconditions of cosmopolitanism or even Richard Rorty's (1989) contentment with *ironic* liberalism, seems to be the most fruitful framing of publicness for the purpose of this article as well. This is for the same four reasons that Iveson (1998) highlights. First, such a differentiation between the stage of public life and its inhabitants does not presume homogeneity; it makes less demanding assumptions about the characteristics of public life than either 'communal' or 'liberal' conceptualizations require. Secondly, it rather insists that 'one of the things that keeps cities interesting is […] the possibilities for the interaction of groups created by social spaces which facilitate

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multiple use' (28). As I will demonstrate, this is particularly so over time, as different users and uses come to occupy iconic infrastructure in their own way – yet also building on what was before, and leaving a residue for what comes after. Young (1990) thirdly points out how such spaces engender pleasure and fun, which very much reflects the contemporary uses of the Rifah-e Aam grounds by youngsters of the neighborhood, as well as the building's long-standing association with poetic pursuits. Last but not least, she locates such spaces slightly off-center, not quite hyperlocal but not as central as major ceremonial public space tend to be to the city. As pointed out in the section on the Club's contemporary spatial setting, this is precisely how the Rifah-e Aam is embedded in Lucknow's urban fabric.

In sum, what Iveson's fourth type of public space, building on Young and others, achieves is to think of public spaces as infrastructure without making strong assumptions about the uniformity, inclusiveness or liberal nature of the public sphere support and enabled by it. For India in particular, Anastasia Piliavsky (2013) recently proposed distinguishing more carefully between public spaces and places as part of the material environment—she called it the *agora*, evoking ancient Greek democracy—and the social composition of those who speak, interact and perform there, namely the public. The body public may be fragmented, she argued with Fraser (1990) and other critics of Habermas – but the *agora* is one. Iveson goes one step further though: he does not merely treat public space as the container or stage that hosts public interaction, but points out how such spaces develop a life of their own and *produce* the public sphere. At the example of the Rifah-e Aam Club in Lucknow, North India, I intend to set out just how this works.

By upholding the promise of spaces like the Rifah-e Aam Club, I do therefore not deny their dialectic implication in unequal power relations, nor the fact that estrangement is itself a product of these power relations, that urbanites don't simply *find* each others as strangers but also *make* each other into strangers. Scholars such as Sandria Freitag (1990, 1991, 2015) or more recently Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, Akio Tanabe and Shinya Ishizaka (2014) amply pointed out that the public sphere in India as elsewhere is fragmented along caste, class and gender lines. Equally fragmented are the urban spaces in which these intersecting axes of difference and exclusion plays out: 'urbanization proceeds not in spite of sociospatial and economic fragmentation but *through* it' (McFarlane 2018, 1007; cf. Dillon 2011). Consequently, the Rifah-e Aam Club, too, is not just accessible but also guarded, its memory is not always shared, but also forgotten, and a mere rhetoric of inclusiveness does not necessarily extend to a practice of welcoming everyone equally.

Nonetheless, I wish to demonstrate how shared space, memory, and rhetoric prepare later appropriation of the public sphere by others, how iconic infrastructure develops a life of its own that cannot be ignored: 'residents and activists do not only inherit the debris of fragments, but […] fragments are also put to work as political tools […] and become grounds for politicing the city in different ways' (McFarlane 2018, 1008). With Ash Amin (2008) I acknowledge the argument for fragmentation by refining Simmel's, Sennett's and Appiah's emphasis on the promising meeting of strangers as the precondition of publicness by "locat[ing] this promise, however, in the entanglement between people and the material and visual culture of public space, rather than solely in the quality of social interaction between strangers" (8). In the end, I argue, it is precisely the historically acquired sense of publicness

of such seemingly ruined and haunted locales as the Rifah-e Aam Club that holds the creative potential that cities are famed for.

Methodology

I got drawn towards the Club soon after my arrival in Lucknow—a regional state capital in North India, political powerhouse, and clichéd epitome of bygone cosmopolitan refinement—in late 2011 for 16 months of doctoral fieldwork (see figure 2 for a locational map of Lucknow). Situated at the edge of Wazirganj, the Muslim-majority old city neighborhood where I settled down (see figure 3), the Club formed the center of many of my neighbors' activities, whether private, public, or any of the various shades between. This was where votes were cast and marriages celebrated, where political rallies took place and Ifthar dinners were arranged, where local goons and policemen played badminton, and young men spent their evenings in "timepass" (Jeffrey 2010), flying kites and drinking tea.

While the following section of this article on the Club's contemporary spatial setting and the section on 'State-led public, informalization of the state, *goonda raj'* rest on long-term ethnographic work in the neighborhood, the two historical sections complement this with Ulrike Stark's historiography (Stark 2011) and Congress records from between 1900 and 1940, respectively. As a red thread, the oral history of the Club's then caretaker Pandey-Ji weaves all four sections of the article together, building on almost weekly, often hour-long conversations with him throughout 2012. To mitigate the danger of romanticising his perspective, I also draw upon the perspectives of local political and economic elites based in

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the adjacent middle class colony, those of litigants in ongoing court cases related to the property, and those of lower class young men with whom I spent extensive time on the Club's plaza almost every evening during my fieldwork. Despite such broad eploration, I was unfortunately unable to shed much light on the fate of the Club during the immediate post-independence period in the 1950s and 1960 and thus chose to omit the whole period from my narrative; the best I can say is that this seems to have been a period of slow, incremental decay.

Like all ethnographers, my positionality in this space was complicated. As Pandey-Ji took me under his wings with grandfatherly habitus and introduced me to many of the Club's contemporary users, others saw me primarily as a fellow neighbor, someone who enjoyed the shade of the Rifah-e Aam as much as everyone else. Some of the young men I hung out showed me off as a token of global connectedness; others became genuine friends with whom I still exchange jokes and news over social media. For Nammu, the current political strongman of the neighborhood, I primarily remained an intrusive outsider, a white man asking odd questions that he answered with lectures, rebukes or condescension; ultimately, he chose to tolerate me as a harmless fool, partly out of respect for Pandey-Ji's tutelage.

I have since returned to Wazirganj almost annually, and discussed drafts of this and other articles with several of my former neighbors. While some agree and some disagree – as can be expected – all were keen to see my take in print, proud that their neighborhood receives such attention, and almost everyone found themselves in one facet of the Club or another, testimony to my overall argument: the public may be fragmented, as is my account of it,

given my own positionality and also my partiality towards Pandey-Ji – but it does come together, because it has the Club at its center.

Contemporary spatial setting

Lucknow is a city of around 3 million people located roughly in between Delhi and Kolkata (see figure 2). It is the capital of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous and politically influential state but reels under a dysfunctional economy and underperforms on many development indicators compared to other parts of the country (see Graff 1997; Susewind and Taylor 2015 for recent portraits of the city and Susewind 2019 for an interactive mapping portal including a number of demographic and socioe-economic data layers). As a city of historical format, the spiritual centre for Shiism on the subcontinent boasts centuries of exchange with the Persian world and is often portrayed as the stereotype of an Islamicate, North Indian urban centre (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012). Today only about a quarter of the population are Muslim, roughly a third of which are Shi'a (Verniers 2012).

[Please insert Figure 2 here]

While Lucknow's earstwhile rulers were among the first to take advantage of British colonialism and lavishly spent whatever they earned from imperial purses on poets and craftsmen, culinary refinement and erotic pursuit, the tides turned in 1857, when Lucknow became an important center of India's 'first war of independence' or the 'great mutiny' as the British saw it. After the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, heavy in-migration reshaped the

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face of the city as it expanded across the river Gomti in several phases of planned and not-so-planned outgrowth. While Lucknow always oscillated between grandeur and melancholy – influenced, no doubt, by popular Shi'a piety – the latter now became pervasive in the old city, in stark contrast to new entrepreneurial spirit elsewhere. Seen from old Lucknow, little is happening where everything of relevance already happened in a past long gone: former Muslim elites have long lost political clout as the lower castes and classes gradually rose to prominence and made the city into a rather different political powerhouse.

[Please insert Figure 3 here]

In many ways, the neighborhood of Wazirganj exemplifies this social, political and spatial transformation. Originally the home of the *wazirs* or advisors of the ruling Nawabs, it morphed into a crowded popular area over the last century, situated just between the old and the new city (see figure 3). While only about half Wazirganj's population today is Muslim, the neighborhood is still perceived by many as an essentially Muslim *mohalla* (quarter). It also became a known hub of criminal activity, dominated politically by the local strongman Nammu and his family, to the extent that almost no one dared contest his seat in the municipality, where he represents Wazirganj, something unheard of in India's notoriously crowded local elections (Banerjee 2011). In recent years, an increasingly resurgent Shi'a middle class began to challenge his largely lower-class Sunni power base, sparking violent tensions (Susewind 2015b). However, this has barely reduced Nammu's grip, and contemporary Wazirganj in many ways exemplifies the clichéd decline of Lucknow's *tehzeeb* (polish, civilization, refinement) into *goonda raj* (the rule of thugs).

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While this decline is mourned with much nostalgia, a more mundane explanation for the *mohalla's* contemporary state can be found a kilometer to the East, in the cluster known as the Balrampur district hospital. Here, significant chunks of Wazirganj's political economy are built around the various needs of the convicted politicians and under-trial legislators lodged there because of one headache or another. While they escape the hardships of jail, many of their foot soldiers are enrolled for "higher study" in the adjacent Christian College, another local landmark. Further East is the High Court, the former British residency, and the upmarket shopping district of Hazratganj. The core of the old city and traditional *bazaar* areas lie in the opposite direction.

[Please insert Figure 4 here]

How does the Rifah-e Aam Club fit into the contemporary neighborhood? Figure 4 draws attention to its more immediate surroundings. In the middle of this satellite picture is an open plaza with a few trees and teashops in the North, trucks parked temporarily towards the South, and the Rifah-e Aam Club as the dominating structure in the East. Despite old Lucknow's booming real estate sector, the other main source of black money in the neighborhood alongside the supply of Balrampur hospital, and a business in which both Nammu and his Shi'a competitors excel (Susewind 2015a), the plaza remains barren, an "urban village" (Bach 2010) markedly at odds with ubiquitous multistoried expressions of middle-class aspiration. Nobody dares to encroach upon it in a permanent way; the plaza remains at least somewhat open to newcomers. To the Northwest, beyond a major

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intersection, for instance, lies Lucknow's City Railway Station, where seasonal migrants arrive from the rural hinterland and at times camp for a few days on the Rifah-e Aam compound in search of labor. They share the plaza with youngsters from the old popular neighborhood of Wazirganj that begins on the other side of Jagat Narayan Road towards the Southwest. In the Southeast, finally, the plaza borders a small middle-class enclave called "Mathur Compound," squeezed between the Club, Christian College, and Balrampur hospital. This is also where I lived during my main doctoral fieldwork.

[Please insert Figure 5 here]

If we zoom in again, the Club itself comes into clearer focus. It mostly still adheres to its original architectural layout; figure 5 presents a sketch of the ground floor and backyard. The front porch with its impressive triple archway is a favorite meeting spot for the public, providing enough shade to enjoy a cup of tea from a nearby stall and engage in the latest chitchat. The porch (and the plaza at large) is the most explicitly public feature of the Club's contemporary spatial setup. Mostly, its main doors remain firmly shut, however, and contemporary access to the building is through the Club's backyard. Here, a verandah stretches across the length of the building, cut in two parts with an improvised boundary wall. This wall further splits access into a semi-public and separate private entrance reachable through the garden and home of Pandey-Ji, the contemporary caretaker-cum-manager of the Club, whom I introduce in the next section. Generally only select and powerful people are allowed through the small gate into his abode, either to meet under Pandey-Ji's favorite Neem tree—where he brokered many deals for *mohalla* and municipal politics before the advent of

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Nammu—or to enter the actual building through a small door on his verandah.

Thus, most visitors use the semi-public entrance at the other half of the verandah to access the Club when it is rented out for functions such as marriages in the great hall – or when Nammu or one of his cousin-brothers hold court to settle neighborhood affairs. Usually set during a game of Badminton in the evening breeze, these *darbaars* (cf. Gupta 1995, n. 19) allow people who wish to see him to enter, even if they are not in Pandey-Ji's good books. Finally, the semi-public verandah—not the public front porch, as one would assume— becomes the Club's main entrance when it temporarily transforms into a polling station at election time, an oddity discussed in detail in the penultimate section of this article.

Regardless through which verandah one enters, one immediately reaches the most splendid room of the building, now used as a badminton court. From this central hall, doors open to the former Bar and Billiard Room—currently unused—and a small residential unit. At the time of the fieldwork, young families occupied this unit and a similar one in the Northwestern part of the building, subletting from Pandey-Ji. The Club's first floor is partly residential, partly dilapidated library (discussed further below), and the top floor remains mostly empty. The building's wider structure includes a buffalo shed, a small gate in the boundary wall that separates it from the adjacent Mathur compound, and a couple of gardening areas (the last authentic lease agreement for the structure, signed in 1967, stipulates these as the Club's only 'private' areas).

Any gate has a double function: it's 'gatekeepers' can open it for privileged access, but also

close it to mark a decisive distance. In ordinary times, the gate towards Mathur compound thus allows the compound's middle-class residents (and myself) somewhat privileged access to the Club's backyard without having to venture out on the main road and be seen in the public plaza. However, at other times, it remains firmly shut. The last time was during the tumultuous aftermath of what's locally referred to as the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack', when confrontation between an increasingly assertive Shi'a middle class and Nammu turned violent (Susewind 2015b). Besides ensuring the physical security of the compound, closing the gate allows its middle class residents—many of whom, including the family that controls the gate, are descendants of Wazirganj's erstwhile elite—to create a moral buffer to Pandey-Ji, Nammu, and his lower class and lower-caste following, in other words, Wazirganj's powers-to-be. Once tension cooled and attention faded, privileged access to the Club was silently restored, re-uniting what was briefly made to look fragmented.

This particular episode and my survey of the contemporary spatial layout of the Rifah-e Aam Club and its surroundings already point to its multiple uses and users and indicates some of the changes that have taken place since its inception in the 1860s. Significant to my wider argument is that the main entrance, where the nobles of Lucknow would have stopped their carriages over a century ago, has been shut and replaced with layered access through the backyard. In fact, the only time I saw the front porch opened was during the municipal elections in 2012, but even then, it was used as an alternative exit rather than a main gate. Today, the Club features both a semi-public entrance, shielded from view but still accessible in principle to almost everybody if opened from the inside, and a private one, carefully guarded by Pandey-Ji and his associates. It is also linked to the adjacent Mathur compound

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through a dedicated gate, which creates a flexible link between the neighborhood's old and new elites, who can choose to appear fragmented or united depending on the specific political circumstances of the time. Overall, then, the 'Rifah-e Aam' is not quite public – but it isn't quite private either. The following three sections of the article position this liminal and hybrid space in a historical perspective, starting with a discussion of the Club's inception.

Tehzeebi Lucknow and the racist Raj

Early on in my fieldwork, I was urged by a group of young men to meet Shri Cakrapani Pandey, or Pandey-Ji, as he was deferentially known around Wazirganj. He was the self-appointed manager-cum-caretaker of the Rifah-e Aam Club (there was also a formal grounds keeper/guard (*chowkidar*), but he has practically no say in any of the affairs of the Club). Pandey-Ji vetted me thoroughly, asking about my research, family, finances, and religion. Apparently, I passed his tests, for when I returned a few days later, he greeted me warmly and arranged for one of his daughters-in-law to prepare tea. He had abandoned the beverage long ago upon the death of his beloved wife, when he decided to give up his criminal/political past and embrace romantic poetry instead. However, he insisted that I take a good cup full, for he had quite a story to tell.

Born to a landholding Brahmin family from a rural district close to Lucknow, Pandey-Ji fell out with his brothers decades earlier over the question of land reforms, moved into the then largely deserted Club in the late 1970s, and became a power broker. Before the advent of Nammu in the 1990s—with whom he enjoys a largely complicit relationship—Pandey-Ji had

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dabbled extensively in municipal affairs himself. By the time we met, however, he had resigned from active politics, even if the wall of "his" verandah remains plastered with campaign material from various political parties, random notes, and posters of Hindu deities. Whenever I came to the Club, which I did with increasing frequency, he sat on his cot at the back of the building, guarding the entrance to the main hall, writing poetry, whiling away time, and enjoying the shade of the Neem tree that he planted upon his arrival in Lucknow. Worried over his waning political clout, he had religious idols installed under this tree to make it legally more complicated to evict him, but otherwise, he lives the life of a retiree.

His recollections of past and current court cases related to the Club first prompted me to dig deeper into its history and one memorable afternoon, Pandey-Ji began to narrate the Rifah-e Aam's beginnings. His story sounds somewhat nostalgic and certainly hagiographic in its portrayal of resistance against an ignorant and racist British Raj. However, at its core, it was not too far from the written archives, as we see below:

> You know, in 1860, when the English lived in India and ruled in Lucknow, they opened their Club in Chattar Manzil, which by the way, derives its name from the numerous umbrellas—*chattrae*—providing shade on its rooftop sleeping area. With few exceptions, the Nawabi elite of Awadh soon joined and was seen frequently at social functions there. One particular afternoon, Raja Sahib Mahmoodabad, one of the city's finest, was embroiled in conversation and forgot about an important event at the Club. When reminded by one of his servants, he rushed to the street, fetched the nearest donkey cart, and arrived at Chattar Manzil about half an hour late. Even

though a member of the Club, he was rudely refused entry, and beaten up by the

gatekeeper for not being properly attired (he had no time, given the rush). He was

even compared to a dark-skinned monkey by the British! This incident left its mark on

the Raja, and soon after, he and a couple of his Nawabi friends figured they were rich

enough to afford their own Club, acquired some land, and thus Rifah-e Aam, the Club

for the Public Good, was born.

Indeed the inception of the Rifah-e Aam Club was part of a wider emergence of an

indigenous public at the time, a bourgeois civil society in which (increasingly politicized)

poetry was discussed, the decline of Lucknow's allegedly exceptional "civilizationary"

refinement (*tehzeeb*; cf. Jones 2015) mourned, and in small and tentative steps, political

demands for representation articulated. Ulrike Stark (2011) described these first stirrings of

"associational culture" in Lucknow in detail, using the example of the Jalsah-e Tehzeeb,

which, it turns out, held most of its meetings at the Rifah-e Aam. Founded in 1868 by an

emerging middle class of urban professionals, the Jalsah was intended to counter

Ta'alluqedari or landowning interests in Lucknow's local politics. These were propped by an

increasingly imperialist Raj against the erstwhile Nawabi elite in an attempt to divide and rule

Awadh after the events of 1857, setting a relatively fragmented associational scene,

confirming the worst allegations against "native" politics under colonial rule.

Thus, noteworthy is that the Jalsah diligently avoided appearing partisan, rather acting in the

name of a wider, more encompassing if not quite universal public, using "this most

prestigious of all British political idioms [...] for advancing claims to political power"

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(Haynes 1991, 108, 145; cf. Stark 2011, 26). Positioning itself as an arbitrator between the British Raj and growing domestic unrest, one of the association's stated purposes was "to generate good thoughts between the government and its subjects (sarkar va ri'aya ke ma'bain acche khayal paida karna)" (Stark 2011, 8). Significantly, the Jalsah chose not to transliterate the English term "public" into "pablik," as some associations did at the time (Perkins 2011). Instead, it spoke of aam (as in Rifah-e Aam) or used the Urdu term ri'aya, which could be translated as "peasants," the "lower order of people of all kinds," or simply as "common people" (cf. Platts 1884).

As this hierarchical terminology indicates, the Jalsah's claim of wider social representation should not be confused with the actual composition of its membership, a point already made in response to Habermasian assumptions about the public sphere elsewhere: 'a discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction' (Fraser 1990, 60). Indeed most protagonists at the Club of the time were firmly rooted in the new professional classes: "The middle class was the public, and vice versa" (Joshi 2001, 44; cf. Pernau 2013). The Jalsah even included some of the Ta'alluqedar landowners it outwardly resented, since they had financially backed the construction of the Club where it met. It was "a cross-communal and secular institution, based upon common interest rather than religion or caste" (Stark 2011, 11), but it was not considered universal. Rather, it rested on a "'rich repertoire of concepts of common responsibility, obligation, and action, that did not share the characteristic features of a bourgeois publicity'" (Kavraj 1997, 89). Though perhaps not articulated in the idiom of 'public' (or even 'pablik') and certainly not fulfilled in lived practice, the Jalsah's aspiration

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nonetheless was to establish a united public sphere.

Its strategy to maintain social exclusivity—which contradicted its political investment in the public good—thus had to be based on its second, literary dimension. Not only was the Jalsah engaged in opening up early civic politics to more constituents, it also saw itself as a space for poetic refinement – and some of its poetry is still recited by the *bhuta* at night, as mentioned in the introduction. "Next to propriety and moral integrity, a prospective member was [thus] expected to have sufficient linguistic competence and erudition to be able 'to read and write and express his views on the arts and sciences in some language'" (Stark 2011, 11). Even today, the Rifah-e Aam Club houses the Jalsah's comprehensive library on its top floor, for example, though this is now guarded by Pandey-Ji, who hails from a different time and social milieu. Unfortunately, the room is only opened once a year after the monsoon to let the wet papers dry and bury those irrevocably lost in the Gomti – and Pandey-Ji remained firm in his refusal to grant me access, because as a poet and writer himself, he was too ashamed of the library's rapidly deteriorating condition (Stark 2011, n. 53 reported similar problems).

Ultimately, however, the frequent evocation of *tehzeeb* in the context of the Rifah-e Aam Club quickly boomeranged; as Fraser (1990) noted about Habermas' idealisation of Enlightenment public spheres: 'virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech' (61). On the one hand, the empty signifier of *tehzeeb* helped and helps to exclude the "uncivilized" (non-Urdu-speaking, illiterate, etc.) from the Club; however, as Ange and Berliner (2015) note of nostalgia more broadly, "when

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used for social and political concerns, nostalgic discourses and practices [also] bond diverse categories of actors and constitute a source of mnemonic convergence" (9; cf. Dubrow 2018). Thus, Stark's account of the Jalsah-e Tehzeeb ends in the 1880s, when it was sidelined by the new "Rifah-e Aam Association," which met at the Club in Wazirganj and "in 1890, sent a letter to the Government of India [staking its own claim at] 'representing all classes of the native community in the City'" (Joshi, 2001, 30). It was known that the Rifah may have been more political than the Jalsah, but had its roots in the same professional classes and met the same fate some years later when associational culture in Lucknow further proliferated. This up and down continued for a while, until the meaning of the public and its social composition changed more decisively with the advent of the nationalist movement.

In terms of my wider argument about the fragmentation (or not) of the public sphere, this first historical vignette demonstrates how social exclusion built on the premise (and promise) of the public can never be stable; it risks that unwanted segments of the said public begin subscribing to its ideals, including by joining in producing and reproducing nostalgia. The next section thus discusses how tehzeeb became an ironic point of reference 50 years after the Club was founded and provided a basis for a different set of politics. As Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) notes of Calcutta, in the early twentieth century, the commons "underwent a change of character. From being a large open space, a fixture of green beauty in the city's official center, and the relatively inaccessible place of recreation for the wealthy, it became a place owned by the ordinary people and the poor—admittedly not always or continuously, but occasionally. [...] These places were increasingly seen as places of crowds" (97). This observation holds true for Wazirganj as well, and catapults us into a second historical vignette, into a time when

the public was imagined in terms of politicized masses and identified first with "the nation"—and soon with "two nations."

Public as the nation, nation as the public

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Rifah-e Aam Club became the center of seminal moments in India's early independence movement. Here, the Khilafat conference took place, the "Lucknow Pact" between the Congress and Muslim League were probably drafted in its halls, and the Progressive Writers Movement convened its first meeting. After arranging a second cup of tea and allowing me a brief break to digest and note all that he had told me so far, Pandey-Ji continued his narrative of the building's fate:

> The Club soon developed into the center of nationalist politics in Lucknow, became a Congress hub, and attracted famous speakers such as Premchand and repeatedly, Gandhi-Ji in the 1920s. He once stopped here in Wazirganj on his way from the railway station to Farangi Mahal in Chowk (where he usually stayed) for an impromptu speech, during which this very building inspired him to the now famous remark that he does not want to see luxury, but rather poverty in Lucknow. Actually, even Pandit Nehru and the Mahatma met here for the first time in 1916, you know.

Gandhi's 1916 remark on luxury and poverty is probably authentic. However, the local folklore that he and Nehru met for the first time in Wazirganj cannot be verified, as Congress' records of the time only mention that Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad collected the Mahatma

from the main railway station and that they passed through Wazirganj en route to Farangi

Mahal. That Nehru was part of this reception committee seems plausible, though. In any case,

the Rifah-e Aam Club and plaza were already too small to accommodate the rapidly growing

crowds of the Congress. The building thus primarily served the nationalist movement as a

locality for smaller and preparatory gatherings, as Sajjad Zaheer (2006, 55) remembers in

Roshnai (enlightenment), his memoir of the cultural politics of these years (cf. Robinson

1997, 209; Hasan 1990):

> There was a time when historic meetings and conferences used to take place in the
>
> Rifah-e Aam Hall. It was here that during the First World War, the meeting of the
>
> Home Rule League, called by nationalists to protest the arrest of Mrs Anne Besant,
>
> was organized. However, the British government designated it illegal, and in the first
>
> incident of its kind in Lucknow, armed policemen took over the Rifah-e Aam, sending
>
> a wave of terror through the city. In 1920, Rifah-e Aam was the venue for the Khilafat
>
> Conference, in which the Ali brothers and all the other big leaders of the country
>
> participated. Maulana Mohammed Ali spoke continuously for six hours on that
>
> occasion. Large heaps of British-made cloth were burnt in the Rifah-e Aam
>
> compound. Then, in connection with the Non-Cooperation Movement, members of
>
> the Congress and Khilafat parties rioted and occupied the hall during a conference of
>
> the Liberal party, from whose very platform they managed to pass resolutions against
>
> the Liberals.

As Zaheer's last example shows, the shift from associationalism to a mass-based movement

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was not without problems. Initially, Congress saw Awadh as a lost cause. The report of its

first annual meeting in Lucknow in 1899 notes that "The darkness of a most appalling

ignorance rested upon [Awadh] and people clung with blind obstinacy to the rags and

remnants of old and dying ideas and institutions" (Indian National Congress 1900, i). For the

writer of these lines, "the meeting in Lucknow of an assembly of men of light and leading

[that is: the Congress], drawn from different parts of India, with the object of deliberating

upon Imperial and National questions, was [thus] the greatest and most significant

manifestation of the political spirit to which British rule has given birth" (ibid, ii). While

oblivious that "men of light and leading" had already gathered in Lucknow 30 years earlier in

"the political spirit to which British rule has given birth" (namely in the Jalsah-e Tehzeeb, the

Rifah-e Aam Association, and their successors), Congress eventually took root in Awadh,

though. When the annual national meeting convened in Lucknow for the third time in the late

1930s, all ill feelings were thus replaced with unabashed enthusiasm (evident in the lengthy

accolades reproduced in Indian National Congress in 1936).

The Congress' early misgivings could reflect that not just Congress came to Wazirganj. The

competing Muslim League also held crucial meetings there, with several key notables hosted

barely 200 m down the road at Saltanat Manzil, where the second wife of Raja Mahmudabad

lived, a key benefactor of the League. During the 1899 Congress session, "an anti-Congress

demonstration was [...] held on the Rifah-e Aam ground, and 900 Mahomedans attended.

After the speeches, certain resolutions [...] were passed in the name of the Lucknow public"

(Indian National Congress 1900, iv). This angered the chronicler of the 1899 convention so

much that he spent much of his introduction to the annual report ridiculing the opposition

from the Rifah-e Aam and Muslim political sentiment. Not all was gloom: in late December 1916, the "Lucknow pact" between the Muslim League and Congress was confirmed here, which prepared the ground for the civil disobedience movement, the first of three major waves of Gandhian activism, followed by non-cooperation and ultimately "Quit India!" However, rapprochement between Congress and the League soon fell apart again, and Wazirganj turned into a veritable battleground with competing visions for the nation's independent future playing out almost at opposite corners of the plaza, with the Rifah-e Aam Club on one side and Saltanat Manzil on the other. Again, this microcosm mirrored developments across India, where the public first became associated with the masses, then with the nation, and ultimately with two nations.

Reflecting on the wider argument of this article, noteworthy is that the Club remained the focus of a largely inclusive publicness. I do not want to uncritically subscribe to the Congress' self-representation as a secular and encompassing alternative to a communal and splintering Muslim League, but the latter undeniably drove fragmentation in the 1930s. Perhaps more to the point, it remained a firmly upper class affair at a time when the Congress had become a truly mass-based movement. That the League's initial attempts to appropriate the Club for its own purposes ultimately failed, and that the resistance organized from there in 1899 subsequently shifted to Saltanat Manzil, may be a first sign that the building had already acquired a history of its own. Apparently, the Rifah-e Aam succeeded in providing an increasingly resilient memory of "public purpose" that could not easily be usurped for an agenda meant to split the nation in two.

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This reading gains further strength if we consider not just the political, but also the poetical uses of the Rifah-e Aam in these years. While politics evolved from tentative demands for civic amenities and elite participation in urban governance into a more mass-based freedom movement (with increasingly tense religio-political overtones), the literary role of the Rifah-e Aam Club in cultural politics also transformed. In 1936, the Club saw the constitution and first meeting of the Progressive Writers Association under the auspices of Munshi Premchand. Its goal was to transform Indian literature from a stylized, often devotional, and upper class and caste affair into a modernist, realistic, socialist, progressive engagement with the challenges faced by the poor. It was a poetic rebellion against the emptiness of *tehzeeb* and systemic violence it masked, a literary assertion of the different type of public that had already shaped Indian politics. The movement's founding conference in Wazirganj is described in detail by Zaheer (2006, 55) in R*oshnai*:

> We put all our efforts into acquiring the Rifah-e Aam Hall for our conference. This attractive building had been bequeathed to the nation to serve as a venue for public meetings and conferences by an eccentric potentate of Lucknow. This progressive-minded gentleman had been dead for several years, and after his departure from the scene, city lawyers and barristers had appropriated the building and set up their club there. The hall now served as a billiard and bridge room and location for a bar.

Indeed, this bar room is still proudly shown to visitors today, and many of my older neighbors —some of them barristers—hold fond memories of the billiard table. Interesting is how memory morphs history in such nostalgic accounts. My neighbors may mourn the loss of a

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bygone watering hole, but the progressive writers projected their own agenda onto the past. As seen in the last section, the original intention for the establishment of the Rifah-e Aam Club was not to "bequeath" a venue in which a "progressive-minded" public could convene in the form of a nascent nation. Quite the opposite, it had remained an elite affair, especially regarding its literary uses. However, a generation later, memory changed and allowed Zaheer to write these lines. Importantly, his memory and the historical record remain entangled through the building itself, if only in opposition. Zaheer (2006, 60) thus felt it necessary to describe at length how the progressive writers declined the luxurious amenities that came with their chosen locality:

> The dais was a humble contraption, made of unpolished planks, a foot high, six yards long, and four yards wide, on which a wooden table of indifferent quality had been placed. There were four armchairs too on the dais, but their wood had lost its varnish. The rest of the chairs in the hall had no arms. There was no carpet or rug either on the dais or in the hall.

He continued with a lengthy mocking commentary on how he and his friends attempted to reconcile the demands of Lucknow hospitality and proper conduct in public with the progressive aims of their movement and the paucity of its financial means. In the slightly ironic undertone that runs through Zaheer's account of this memorable event at the Rifah-e Aam Club, one cannot help but detect how nostalgia had already transformed from earnest mourning for the loss of the Lucknow *tehzeeb* into self-reflexive irony. As Ange and Berliner (2015, 6) note, there are "nostalgias that are 'restorative,' aiming at the 'transhistorical

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reconstruction of a lost home' (Boym 2001, xviii), and those that are 'reflective,' ironic, and longing for the longing itself." With the advent of the Progressive Writer's Association, the memory of Lucknow's grand past entered the second stage, an attitude still reflected today in how Pandey-Ji continues to play with the aesthetic repertoire that his building provides. Thus, it is to his times that the third and last section of this article now turns, before I weave the three historical junctures together into my wider conceptual argument.

State-led public, informalization of the state, *goonda raj*

As the independent Indian state increasingly sought to identify itself with the public, a counter-public comprised of lower caste minorities became increasingly assertive, and ultimately managed to appropriate the Rifah-e Aam Club for its own ends. The setup in which the Progressive Writers left the building mirrors its contemporary appearance: tattered armchairs, unpolished wood planks, and not even a blanket, let alone a carpet. However, while Zaheer and his friends set out to bring awareness of poverty into a world of upper-class luxury, it is wrong to assume that such aesthetic continuity would speak of a successful lower-class politicization through literature. More likely, the Club's decrepit state is simply the material result of independent India's land reforms in the 1960s, which dried out the funds from which the ta'aluqedars drew their wealth and means of patronage.

It struck me that it might be the contested ownership and confused legal form of the building that enables it to serve as the public sphere's infrastructure in the midst of a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood (court cases contesting the original lease from 1886 are pending in

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Lucknow courts since at least 1967). Roy (2009) and others forcefully argued that such legal processes are indeed designed to keep urban land unmapped, dynamic and informal; in this case, Pandey-Ji himself managed to move in, took control of the building, and came to shape its political and poetical role for the next four decades. In his own words:

> During partition and independence, the Club was briefly used for military purposes, later as a marriage center for both Hindus and Muslims. In the 1970s, the government took over, because the property ownership came under dispute, given that so many people acquired it in a joint effort. I was appointed [sic!] as caretaker back then through one of my contacts, 15 years after I had left my family in an epic feud and was forced to hide in another village with my wife and then two children. Later, I also became manager of the Sports Club, and for a while arranged poetry events there. I am also a senior poet, you know.

In Pandey-Ji's account, memory again morphs in interesting ways. In the 1970s, during the reign of Indira Gandhi and the emergency years, the government became close to synonymous with the public, and the state took over a building that was once acquired in a joint elite effort and later served as the cradle for the nation. In other words, both the social composition and the institutional context of the public sphere changed once more. However, this did not diminish the appeal of the Rifah-e Aam brand. In fact, the government's takeover marked a loss of public space that demanded recovery and was immediately subverted by Pandey-Ji. It can still be acquired by the government to hold elections, but in other times, the Neem tree provides the space from where schemes to topple this (local) government emerge.

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As the Janata and other political forces empowered by the "green revolution" of the 1960s fought back against Indira Gandhi's emergency and ultimately terminated Congress hegemony (and with it the postcolonial state's attempt to identify itself entirely with the public), Pandey-Ji thus did not simply recreate the Jalsah or the National Movement. History does not repeat itself that way, and in any case, this "first democratic upsurge" had been achieved by the introduction of universal suffrage. Rather, over the next decades, Pandey-Ji managed to carve out a space for the country's "second democratic upsurge" (Yadav 1999), the rise of the lower classes and castes into political and cultural power, a process that Jaffrelot (2003) described as "India's silent revolution."

It is due to these efforts that the Rifah-e Aam remains a space that reaches beyond the private concerns articulated in civil society, but remains outside the purview of the state, even if oriented towards it in that the lower classes and castes attempt to get their piece of the cake (in this regard it resembles the neighborhood clubs that Cornea 2019 studied in Kolkata, as spaces between the party-state on the one hand and pure private interest on the other). Until today, for example, both Hindu and Muslim marriages are celebrated there, in stark contrast to "private" marriage centers in other parts of the city including in Wazirganj, the contemporary reincarnation of Saltanat Manzil, where the Muslim League had to retreat almost a century ago. In short, the Club continues to serve as the basis for a public sphere, being available, at least in principle, to all and everyone.

This is not to say that access is equal and universal at each single moment. The Club's more

immediate attraction for instance remains its Badminton court, on which men from the neighborhood convene to play for two or three hours in the mornings and afternoons, protected by the pleasant shade of thick walls. At night, when policemen and key figures from the local strongman's family come to exercise and receive visitors, this serene scene increasingly morphs into a colorful display of masculinity and power play, a veritable example of what is called Uttar Pradesh's *goonda raj* (rule of thugs; cf. Michelutti 2010). The first three questions asked of me when I first appeared for such an evening game were aggressively fired away with each strike over the net, interrogating me as much as impressing the audience of local acolytes: What is your name? Are you Muslim? Then, with an intentional transgression that led to smirks and halted breath all around: Are you circumcised? Clearly, the contemporary version of the public in Wazirganj is an expressly and chauvinistically male one, in contrast to both its *tehzeebi* beginnings and the heyday of the national movement. And of course I lost every single game of Badminton – the *bhuta* made sure of it.

But the publicness of the Rifah-e Aam space shines through at other times – for instance when the Club transformed into a polling station. Given the essentially public character of any election, and especially their role as a source of "communitas" in Indian ones (Banerjee 2011), it is worth dwelling on this use of the building. I was fortunate to witness the last municipal elections in 2012 from up close. In many ways, including their outcome, they were a demonstration of strength for Nammu, who had to face fewer competitors than any other municipal cooperator—three to be precise—with a citywide median of 15 and up to 50 hopefuls in some other wards.

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On polling day, Nammu and Pandey-Ji used their clout with the local police to ensure that the porch was merely used as an alternative exit under the pretense of public convenience. The main entrance therefore remained through the semi-public verandah at the back, which everybody in Wazirganj knows as the way "to get things done." While the building was pro forma secured by policemen—including a relative of Pandey-Ji at the local station—real control rested with Kaleem and Saleem, two cousin-brothers of Nammu. As Kaleem was standing at the entrance in long and flowing white garments, he reminded people whom to vote for and offering his assistance should they be confused. Saleem meanwhile took care of removing "indelible" ink from the fingers of his family's most ardent supporters, and arranged a steady supply of liquor. When I arrived at the opposite end of the plaza around lunchtime, he first got me a drink, and then insisted on accompanying me to the Club so that I could cast my vote in favor of Nammu. I desperately protested, arguing that I was a foreigner, the police would notice, I did not even possess an ID card. All to no avail: "I have voted a dozen times already today," he brushed aside my reluctance.

Unsurprisingly, Nammu won Wazirganj ward with 2535 votes, more than 6 times as many as the runner-up did, giving him one of the largest winning margins across Lucknow. In a wise subsequent decision, the Central Election Commission (which controls elections to parliament and legislative assemblies, but not to municipal bodies) chose to avoid the Rifah-e Aam Club for polling purposes. Against the backdrop of his strong grip over local politics, it thus remains remarkable that Nammu still had to observe ritual decorum, for example, by opening the main gates of the Club under the front porch at all – arguably a nod to the day's

epitome of publicness – or by refraining from overt threats and violence, bowing to a rather different, and certainly more civil performance of his clout (besides, of course, enlisting the assistance of a ghost hungry for ballot paper).

Likewise, Pandey-Ji takes his liminal position as caretaker seriously and is taken seriously by others including those in power. For example, I once witnessed how Ravidas Mehrotra, the local MLA, asked him (rather than Nammu!) for permission to hold an Ifthar dinner at the plaza. Pandey-Ji later admitted that he was not in a position to decide upon this, nor could he enforce any conditions vis-a-vis such powerful people. Mehrotra chose to ask nonetheless, if only out of courtesy or respect for Pandey-Ji's former clout. Pandey-Ji is also usually consulted and paid a symbolic fee for marriages and other semi-private or semi-public functions on the plaza, even though he cannot grant or refuse access. Regarding the wider argument of this article, this clarifies that the contemporary public at the Rifah-e Aam is far from the Habermasian ideals of universal access and an exchange of views unencumbered by political power play. It is quite the contrary. However, the moments of resistance are also worth noting.

In addition, Pandey-Ji keeps the nostalgic memories of the Club as a space for poetry alive, and uses them to bolster his credentials as a power broker and legitimate heir to the building, playing on the fact that 'the malleable landscape and dense population [of urban space] confront people with mnemonic materials from the past, although the means of reading this landscape are themselves contested (Legg 2007; cf. Johnson 2005). While politics changed from cautious elite associations to the national movement to lower-class assertion and

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goonda raj—each with its own sets of access rules, pathways and "consultants," but each also public—the club's literary function transformed once more.

As mentioned, Pandey-Ji is a prolific writer himself, and keeps a cherished collection of hand-written notebooks, mostly with short poems, many of which he made me translate to improve (and purify) my Hindi. Some of his best were recently published and hailed in the preface by the former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpai as "a collection of poems without flaws," which "was so heart-touching that the body rose in excitement" (Pandey 2003). He also published a subaltern rewrite of the Ramayana, for "Balmiki mixed it all up" (Pandey 1994). Who would have thought that a building that started as the meeting place of the Jalsah-e Tehzeeb, partly a cultural association of Urdu poets, and later gave birth to the progressive writers and their agenda of socialist literature, now harbors *shudh* Hindi poetry endorsed by a former BJP prime minister? For Pandey-Ji, this is the natural extension of his role as caretaker of a building with such a distinguished history of combining politics and poetics in the public interest.

The role of iconic infrastructure

Throughout the 150 years of its existence, the Rifah-e Aam Club in Lucknow witnessed wide-ranging changes in the composition of North India's public sphere, in both political and poetical terms. This article captured these changes at three historical junctures: the initial emergence of an elite public in the late nineteenth century, the shift towards mass-based nationalist politics in the decades before independence, and finally, the rise of the lower

castes and classes after the end of the Congress hegemony and advent of *goonda raj* in Uttar Pradesh. To conclude, I elaborate the wider implications of my narrative.

Academic discussions on public sphere and public space in India tend to oscillate between optimism about the democratic potential of "political society" (Chatterjee 2004) on the one hand, and a strong emphasis on the socially fragmented character of publics in contemporary times on the other, especially in postcolonial settings. Recently, the focus shifted from highlighting fragmentation along caste and communal lines to the study of class enclaves in increasingly "privatized" cities, but the idea remains the same: in India, one can only speak of hyphenated public spheres (semi-, vernacular, indigenous, etc.), and consequently should use the term "publics" in the plural, or opt for a different vocabulary altogether such as Sandria Freitag's "public arenas" (Freitag 1990; Freitag 1991; Freitag 2015).

This mirrors wider geographical and political science literature, as I outlined in this article's second section at the example of some prominent critics of Habermas' initial conceptualisation. I then introduced Iveson's (1998) conceptual take on 'multi-public public spheres', going back to Young (1990). His perspectives makes weaker assumptions about the social composition and power dynamics of the public sphere (mirroring arguments by, among others, Rorty 1989, Fraser 1990 or Appiah 2006) by differentiating more clearly between public spaces and those who inhabit them (mirroring arguments by Piliavsky 2013 for India in particular). Atr the same time, he does not merely treat public space as a neutral stage either, but as an infrastructure that can obtain a life of its own, producing rather than merely hosting public interaction and debate.

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Based on the ethnography and oral history presented throughout this article, I demonstrated just how such productive infrastructure might look like – and thus complicate narratives of straightforward fragmentation. Some may dominate the public sphere to the exclusion of others at any point in time. However, if one layers such temporal snapshots on top of each other, fragmentation blurs. Importantly, these seemingly different publics are also substantively entangled, with each reincarnation building on historical precedent to widen the scope of what (and who) can be considered public. Once out of the bottle, one cannot prevent others from appropriating the universalistic appeal of the public as a trope. This becomes apparent both in the historical "longue duree," as more segments of society claim space at the Rifah-e Aam Club, and in more quotidian fluctuations of the building's multiple uses across the private-public continuum, never quite one nor entirely the other.

Initially the Jalsah could operate in a more exclusive atmosphere because its backers had the financial means to erect the Rifah-e Aam Club, and because they shared a certain memory of *tehzeeb*—entangled with the building and its poetic uses—that bonded them as they embarked on the new enterprise of civic engagement. But already then, the British colonizers delivered the Jalsah the trope of the public, which they could take up and turn against its inventors, claiming a role at least in civic administration.

In turn, the nationalist movement found a building devoted to "public service," and the progressive writers could use this brand to negotiate an affordable meeting hall. They could also take up the historical thread by sharing in the nostalgia of *tehzeeb*, though they gave it a

new ironic twist. Without romanticising the achievements of socialist literature, its ironic

elements did open cracks in the exclusionary nature of *tehzeeb*, and allowed more people to

dwell in such 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym 2001), illustrating how 'memory can challenge

dominant interpretations of the past and […] exist as an embryonic public sphere in

oppressive societies' (Legg 2004). Above all, the rhetoric of the Rifah-e Aam, the 'public

good' thus offered Lucknowites a space to bring in the masses and start a conversation about

potential futures independent from the British Empire. When this conversation soon split into

two, the Rifah-e Aam Club remained firmly in the more inclusive camp, suggesting that the

building had already begun to acquire a powerful history of its own that could not easily be

usurped.

Last, during the contemporary period of the second democratic upsurge, Pandey-Ji managed

to once again re-appropriate the building after it was deserted by bygone elites and "taken

over by the government." He maintained it as a space for poetry and politics, honoring its

history, but also introducing his own twist to both dimensions, making space for Nammu and

his lower-caste following while maintaining social exclusivity through his *shudh* Hindi

poetry.

I also demonstrated how the notion of fragmentation not only appears a-historical, though – it

also and crucially seems aloof from the built environment. Rather than serving as a mere

passive backdrop that can be used one way or another throughout time, public space creates

its own material archive in places like the Rifah-e Aam Club, a building that preserves history

and provides an anchor for memory, and consequently continues to spark the imagination.

While the complicated legal cases around its ownership structure keeps the courts busy, a different and truly public array of contemporary uses (and users) have taken root. Such resilient publicness is sustained by the layered access arrangements of today, never quite fully public, but not really private either. Its material consequences also include the gate between the Club and Mathur Compound that serves as a flexible link between old and new elites. It includes the open plaza that nobody dares to permanently encroach upon, even in one of Lucknow's most rapidly gentrifying areas. And it even includes the *bhuta*, the ghost that may well be the true inhabitant of the building and is locally known to not only benefit Nammu's Badminton (and indeed electoral) record but also recites Urdu poetry and generally plays mischief with any attempt at sustained interference. While fresh elements of closure were introduced during Pandey-Ji's tenure —the back entrances, the raw and violent domination of Nammu over the neighborhood, and so on—the building could thus never be properly closed down again, as became evident when it served as a polling station during the municipal elections.

Without prejudicing generalizability of this case study or, importantly, presuming a unified public sphere – an assumption that would run contrary to much scholarship on India and elsewhere – I thus illustrate that iconic infrastructure can acquire a history of its own that is remembered, enacted, and powerful across social divisions and the private-public continuum. Once initiated as such, the Club remained a public institution, a preserver of history and provider of memory, an unruly space in which the most unlikely South Asian republic of letters was to unfold, combining politics and poetics in increasingly entangled ways. Ultimately, it is spaces like the Rifah-e Aam Club that preserve the utopian potential to

reunite what is so often divided and that enable the meeting of strangers through which cities realise their creative promise.

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Figure 1: Picture of the Rifah-e Aam Club and plaza, taken by the author in spring 2012

Figure 2: Location of Lucknow within India, with the state of Uttar Pradesh in grey, drawn

by the author (source: GADM; the national border in Kashmir reflects neither India's nor

Pakistan's sovereign claims but instead the temporary Line of Control)

Figure 3: Location of Wazirganj within Lucknow, with old city limits in grey, drawn by the author (sources: OpenStreetMap, ML Infomap)

Figure 4: Google Earth screenshot of the Rifah-e Aam Club and plaza, taken in summer 2016
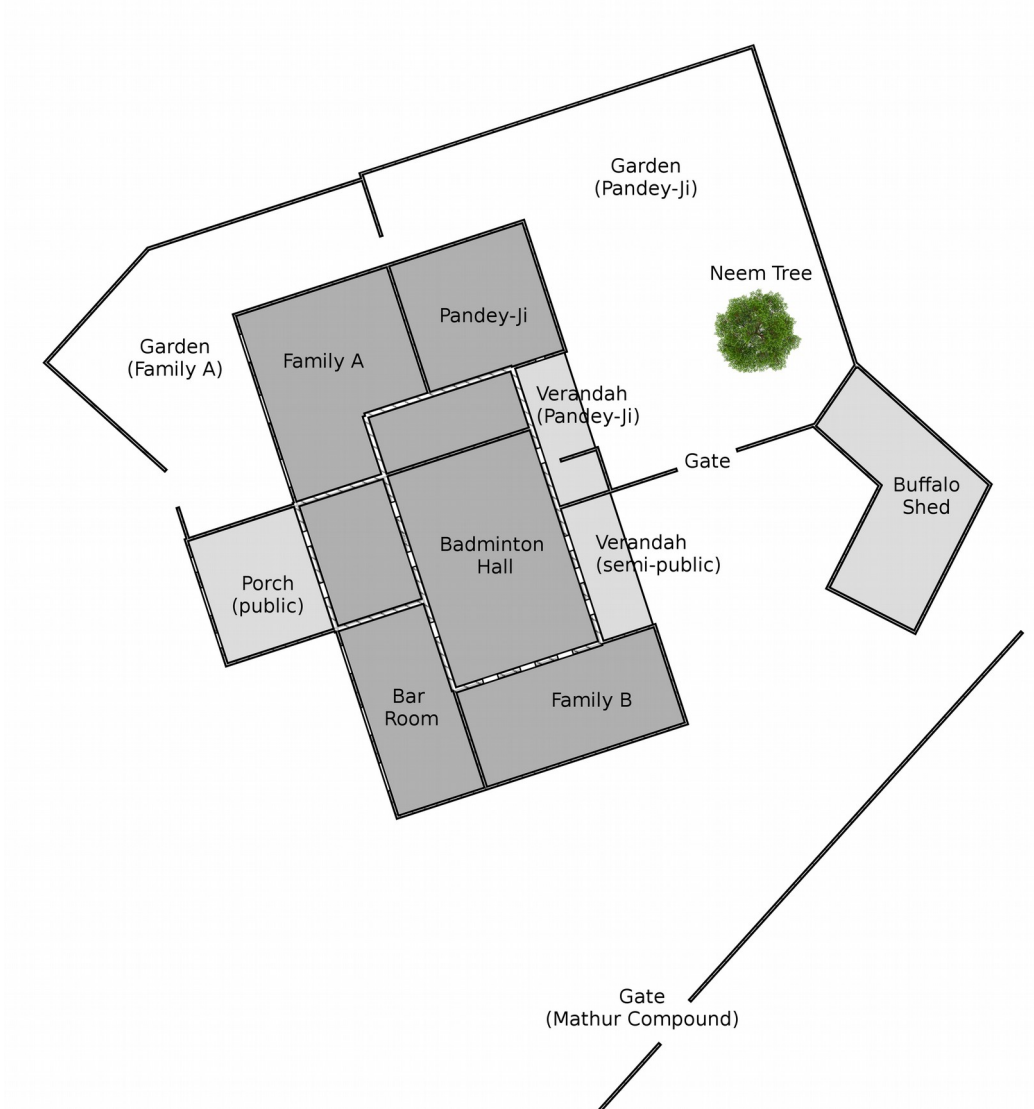
Figure 5: Sketch of the Club's floor plan and immediate surrounding, drawn by the author