

Bringing the *Haat* to the City: The Socio-Cultural and Commercial Dynamics of Dilli Haat

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Abstract

In the midst of the metropolis and urban center of the capital city Delhi stands Dilli Haat, serving varied purposes for the visitors who throng it, and the artisans, craftspeople, and shopkeepers who sell their products. Envisioned as a glimpse into the richness of rural India for the urban dwellers and a market for display and selling of indigenous crafts sans middle-men, Dilli Haat has transformed and metamorphosed with time in a complex grid of market forces, market players, consumers, and the accompanying constant role change. The paper takes a wholesome look at the *haat*, its changing dynamics, and purported influence over the cityscape and citizens through a research study to understand the nuanced questions of urban-rural divide, confluence, and the role played by created-and-designed spaces like Dilli Haat.

Keywords: Dilli Haat, Urban-rural divide, Dastakar, Museumification

Dilli Haat (established 1994), a crafts village in the heart of South Delhi, has acquired an iconic status as a socio-cultural space in the metropolis in the twenty-one years of its existence. It has been immensely popular with the urban middle classes not just as a market place for authentic traditional crafts but also as a place of leisure with family and friends. For an outstation visitor, a trip to Dilli Haat is mandatorily fitted into the itinerary whether it is to purchase unique and artistic household items, or to pick up trinkets or even to get *mehndi* (henna) patterns on palms and hair-braiding done. For the foreign visitor, Dilli Haat is a one-stop place (recommended strongly as 'Top Choice' by *The Lonely Planet*), which showcases the diversity of non-urban India and offers it in the form of a capsule. At the same time, it also offers an immense range of

traditional Indian products and souvenirs for family and friends back home. Dilli Haat has always had something for everyone, snugly fitting the size of each pocket. What makes the experiment of Dilli Haat unique is the curious amalgamation of the vibrant country fair with urban sensibilities as aptly phrased by its founder, Jaya Jaitly, in an article in *The Indian Express*, titled “Not just rural not just urban” (2015, January 9).

It is important to note that Dilli Haat was established soon after India's economic liberalisation in 1991, at a time when India had just begun to open its doors to globalisation. The community of the middle classes in India had begun to expand and so had its desire for material, visual and cultural consumption. Many observers of the South Asian scene had begun to notice that Indians were engaged in forms of consumption, recreation and entertainment that resembled cosmopolitan cultural forms in other parts of the contemporary world. The palpable growth in domestic tourism, the dynamism of the food and restaurant industries and the general commodity slotting of cultural objects are all part of this process, which has many other expressions as well (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1996). Dilli Haat at INA can, thus, also be viewed as a site which has played its role in creating a public culture, reflecting the negotiations between tradition and modernity by bringing together a crafts bazaar where the seller would not be a merchant or a middleman but the artisan himself, and where the urban middle class buyer would feel a sense of national pride in promoting indigenous craft traditions, a food court where there would be regional cuisines to educate the urban palate and recreational areas for leisure and other forms of live exhibits of cultural productions.

In its essence, Dilli Haat was an attempt to bridge the gap between *Bharat* and India in a manner, which would be beneficial to both¹. As such, this situation of cultural contact between the two may be termed, as what D.P Sinha describes as “acculturation or cultural change in process” (1968, p. 94). Socio-economic processes taking place within the *haat* also contribute to this change. The present paper attempts to understand the processes of acculturation and its outcomes when the indigenous and the folk came in contact with urban subjectivities at the *haat*.

The Evolution of Dilli Haat

The objective behind Dilli Haat was laudable; it aimed primarily at helping rural artists of the country to preserve the rich heritage of traditional arts and crafts and sustain their livelihood. It was due to the initiative and persistent

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efforts of its founder, Jaya Jaitly, also Chairperson of DastkaariHaat Samiti (regd. 1986), which was closely involved with rural artisans for their economic empowerment that the *haat* came up over a covered drain opposite INA market in the heart of South Delhi. It was a joint collaboration between Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (DTTDC) and New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), along with other organisations like D.C. (Handicrafts) and D.C. (Handlooms), Government of India and Ministry of Tourism. The project was funded by Ministry of Textiles. Conceived as a crafts village, Dilli Haat offered a permanent structure where these artisans could display their wares on a mainstream platform and at the same time carry out their trade with dignity under hygienic conditions and secure surroundings.

To ensure equal opportunities to all, an artisan would be allowed to display his goods only for a stretch of a fortnight once in every three months, a system which exists till date. In the words of Jaitly,

Dilli Haat was conceived ... in 1990 when India was opening its markets to global players, to address rural disparities and create market space for rural crafts people. Brilliant out-of-the-box assistance by a bold bureaucrat helped convert a wide storm-water drain into usable land by making a lid from a concrete slab with overlaying soil, on which only light structures could stand. Needy artisans thereby got a marketplace for themselves in the capital without depriving anyone of precious real estate. (Jaitly, 2015)

Dilli Haat, thereby, incorporates a vital feature of traditional *haats* where the temporary nature of the market translates into savings on land investment or permanent infrastructure like shops, electricity, water, etc. which also enables sellers to cut down on rent premium leading to a lessened price of goods for sale.

Particular attention was given to the architecture of the *haat* which was very thoughtfully designed by Delhi based architect, Pradeep Sachdeva. To some extent it replicates the systems and structures of the village *haat* with an ambience typical of an Indian village: thatched roof cottages installed without any concrete structures, shops laid on platforms in the Bazaar design, the in between spaces made of stone flooring with grass fillings to maintain visual comfort, the landscaping of the area laid out with rich multi coloured flowering shrubs and trees, providing harmonious and pleasing environment. But according to Mr. Sachdeva himself², it neither carries purely traditional village type architecture of clay and mud nor does it have a very sophisticated, state of

the art urban design. *Jaalis* (lattices) have been used to give the *haat* a traditional look. Red bricks common in North India were extensively used in an exposed form. It was to be a national market so a tinge of modern look was also given to avoid a completely rural look and give the craftsmen a sense of importance. Furthermore,

City additions like ticket booths, banking facilities, STD phone booth (in the days before mobile phones), an administrative office, an official meeting room, open-air stage and a children's play area were provided. Regional food stalls offering good quality, inexpensive fare were deliberately located at the far end to ensure foodies saw the crafts on offer before heading for the open-air cafes. These informal facilities were inviting to visitors and did not culturally alienate rural sellers. (Jaitly, 2015)

Clearly, attention to aesthetics, adequate foliage within the *haat*, provision of hygienic convenience facilities, and an integrated developmental approach were considerable improvement on the dirt and dust of the rural *haat*. This also provided a feeling of well-being to the crafts person who felt upgraded in a genuine and permanent environment (Jaitly, 2007).

Bridging the Gap

The most significant aspect of the layout of Dilli Haat is the principle of “democratic space”³ that governs it. The rural craft-persons and urban visitors, young or old, able bodied or physically challenged, all feel comfortable and at ease at Dilli Haat. According to Jaya Jaitly, one of the achievements of the *haatis* is the sense of equalisation⁴. A fashion designer might be found rubbing shoulders with a college-going student at a Chanderi weaver's stall, purchasing similar kind of fabric. Also, the low-income rural seller shares the same kind of market space with a rich urban *kaarigar*. The Assamese cane artisan could have a stall of equal dimensions adjacent to a prosperous silver craftsman from Jaipur. Urban craft-persons too could have access to a stall in Dilli Haat, as long as their product was traditional. Respect for each craft, however small in terms of economic returns, is the byword.

Socialisation⁵ is another important aspect of the *haat*. Traditional crafts have been running in families of artisans for generations and it very often involves the entire family. So when the artisans come to Delhi or to Dilli Haat, they come with their family. Thus, it has brought out purdah-clad women from villages; they could be family members managing the stalls or could be *kaarigars*

themselves. As part of economic and commercial acculturation the artisans are exposed to the market directly, eliminating the need for middlemen. They learn about the demands of the market and also to ask for a reasonable price for their product. Jaitly points out how artisans themselves are conscious of other products and designs as also skills available within the *haat*. For instance, a handloom bag maker is known to have approached a leather craftsman to make handles in leather for his bags. Skills are thus exchanged and shared within the market, leading to innovative product designs.

The processes of adaptation are clearly visible within the *haat* as artisans have learnt to cater to the changing fashion sensibilities of the urban customer over the last two decades. Some of the fortnightly fairs surveyed during the winter months of 2013-2014 and 2014-15 threw up interesting observations. A *Madhubani* artist revealed how contemporary motifs now exist alongside mythological motifs from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in their paintings. An *Ikat* weaver/seller from Orissa had more of *ikat* stoles than dupattas stocked in his stall. On being questioned, he mentioned it as the more popular trend. Same was the case across the stalls of Kashmiri, Himachali and Kutch weavers. While the older generation preferred dupattas and shawls, stoles have clearly become the preference for the young and those conscious of global fashion trends. Stoles, thus, become a classic example of the happy fusion of the traditional weave with modernity. Similarly, a *Sanganeri* weaver stocking quilted bedcovers shared the story of how the design, stitch and fabric patterns found their way from bed-linen to the very fashionable cotton quilted jackets demanded by the hip and happening crowd.

The '*haat*' in Dilli Haat

As a *haat*, Dilli Haat performs multiple functions. Various agencies use the *haat* to create awareness on the socio-cultural issues and it is also a favourite venue for launching and propagating various awareness and developmental schemes launched by the Central and the State governments from time to time. In his study of an inter-tribal market in Chhota Nagpur district in the present day state of Jharkhand, D. P Sinha (1968) observes how government agencies set up stalls on a regular basis in the weekly *haat* to propagate the ideas of family planning and spread awareness regarding diseases like tuberculosis. At Dilli Haat awareness camps are conducted in the form of dedicated 'celebrations' such as AIDS Awareness Day, Cancer Sahyog Day, the Braille Day, Earth Day, Meatless Day, International Women's Day, Organic Festival and goodwill

activities such as health check-up camps, blood donation camps, etc., are organised. The Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India organises 'VatsalyaMela' during the month of November every year. In addition, non-commercial promotional stalls are allotted to dedicated persons/organisations, like Prayas, AWWA, CASP, CRY etc., working for the upliftment of disabled people and under privileged sections of society according to the Dilli Haat Operation and Management Rules—2006 (p. 11). Thus, in a cumulative sense Dilli Haat is also an apt space for social sensitisation of people visiting the *haat* towards those under-privileged citizens of the city who cannot enter the precincts of this boutique bazaar as also to generate awareness in people about Government social schemes.

An integral part of the annual cultural calendar at Dilli Haat is the celebration of various Indian festivals. Theme based craft *melas* or 'festivals' are held to coincide with these festivals. The crafts and handloom products on display reflect the flavours of the changing seasons. So the year begins with Dastakari Haat Mela in the first fortnight coinciding with the celebration of Lohri. Since it is at the peak of the winter season, woolen products occupy a sizeable chunk of the market apart from other textiles and crafts products. Cultural programmes and *melas* are also organised to mark the advent of different seasons such as spring with the Basant and Baisakhi festivals followed by Holi Utsav; the summer with the Sherbet Mela and Mango festival, the monsoons with the Teej festival and Onam, autumn with the Navratra/Dussehra festival alongside India Weaves; Deep Utsav around the time of Diwali, and finally Master Craftsmen and Winter Carnival which celebrate the advent of the Christmas season.

By their very nomenclature these *melas* are not only a means for craftspersons to make profits during the festive season, but are also an endorsement of the cultural agenda of Dilli Haat which encourages traditional cultural practices associated with the celebration of these festivals. For example, the use of traditional and organic colours for the Holi festival instead of harmful chemical ones, has gained popularity with the local city people because of its availability at Dilli Haat. A stall of the NGO Navdanya that sells organic food harks back to the 'connect with nature' and 'back to the roots' philosophy underlining the *haat*. By reviving traditional practices and at the same time exhibiting contemporary ones in the same locale, Dilli Haat provides a meeting point for the two.

Public Culture and Modernity at Dilli Haat

A look at the division of the 201 stalls at Dilli Haat and various spaces around it and the kinds of products that are put on display and sale show an intriguing co-existence of the crafts with urbanity. At the same time a differential pricing structure in renting and use of premises keeps up with the initial aim of Dilli Haat i.e. to promote rural craft and craft-persons. While craft stalls, allotted by D C (Handicraft/Handloom are available at the minimal daily rent, the allotment of space near amphitheatres for Government agencies and NGO's costs fifty percent more. In addition, Dilli Haat has provisions for Brand Promotion Stalls/Promotion of products as well as fashion shows and display of vehicles—motorcycles and cars for promotion and branding for a premium amount. On the fringes of these mega occupants are the clay product sellers, toy cart makers, *sarangi* players and sellers, caricature/portrait makers, tarot card readers, astrologers, hair braiders and *mehndi* artists who also pay a minimal rent for a 'Value addition Art promotional stall' in open space, adding to the rural ambience of Dilli Haat as outlined in the Dilli Haat operation and management rules. (2006, p. 10)

To understand Dilli Haat's influence and appeal for its urban middle class visitors a study⁶ was carried out to understand the perceptions of visitors towards Dilli Haat. Variables that play a role in bringing people to Dilli Haat were identified to understand the different appealing aspects of Dilli Haat for different people. These variables were both demographic such as age, gender, and income; and product based like crafts, clothes, food, entertainment and style quotient of Dilli Haat. The product-based variables were understood to be further governed by factors like the extent of addition to knowledge about cultural diversity as well as perceptions of authenticity, quality, and price of products in Dilli Haat. The study was carried out by means of a specially designed questionnaire⁷ aimed to explore the nature of the alliance between rural/folk and commerce that has come to exist in Dilli Haat. In the analysis of the study it was found that demographic factors have a surprisingly insignificant influence on bringing visitors to Dilli Haat. This implies that age, gender and income have a negligent role as a determining factor for visitors to Dilli Haat. Also, contrary to popular perceptions that the *haat* as a cloth and handicraft market caters primarily to women customers, the results being equal for both the genders shows that the *haat* is appealing to both men and women. The study also pointed out that age cannot be a determiner, thus making Dilli

Haat a space for a range of adult age groups to visit. That income is not an important marker also indicates the democratic nature of Dilli Haat where there is something for everyone.

Depending on the objective of the visit to Dilli Haat, the factors taken into consideration were craft, clothes, food, entertainment or style statement. The visitor's decision to buy a product is dependent on the price, quality and authenticity of a product. Similarly, the price, quality and variety of food available play an important role in the decision of purchasing and consuming the wide range of regional cuisine available at the *haat*. The responses were graded into five levels. For instance, to grade satisfaction level, options ranged from very dissatisfied, dissatisfied and average to satisfied and very satisfied.

The entertainment factor takes into account the emergence of Dilli Haat as one of the 'hang out' places in the city; a place for family outings, get-together of friends and shopping sprees. The fact that Dilli Haat also gives space to folk artists and performers as well as renditions of popular culture like fusion music and Comic Con, establishes the *haat* as an interactive hub of the city's pop culture. Finally, the style quotient as a factor assesses Dilli Haat's presence as a unique style icon in the city and of its products making a style statement of their own. Interestingly, for the younger generation the appeal of both entertainment and style quotient emerged as significant factors, which draw them to Dilli Haat.

Commoditisation and Museumification

That Dilli Haat has carved a distinctive niche for itself in popular public imagination is evident. But the question is, to what extent has Dilli Haat been able to sensitise the city to the rural and the folk? In the two decades of its existence, Dilli Haat has undergone a tremendous change. With the *haat* coming to the city, it has also had to cope with the perils of urbanity and the hawkish commercialism associated with it. The corruption prevalent outside in the city has crept within. The city and its demands on its markets have impinged on the evolution of Dilli Haat. When the specialised fairs are not taking place, especially in the lean hot summer and sultry monsoon months, the question arises if Dilli Haat still holds the promise of a rustic oasis for its citizens and tourists. Footfalls of locals, visitors and the foreign tourist continue, but it is especially at these times that Dilli Haat seems to be 'losing its sheen' (Bhatia, 2014). Because of the high popularity of the *haat*, genuine craft-persons are very often beguiled into selling the tenure of their allotted space for petty

amounts to middle-men and city-based traders. The document 'Dilli Haat Operation and Management Rules 2006' defines a craftsman to mean 'an accomplished person possessing the theoretical and practical knowledge of items made by him without the help of automatic machines and properly registered with DTTDC, office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts/Handlooms), Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, or any other Government Agency' (p. 2). But the several heads under which Dilli Haat allows sellers to enter makes for a fraction of the physical and thematic space within the *haat*. Thus, Dilli Haat, though modelled and created for a glimpse of the rural within the urban, is not the extension of the rural into the urban.

A popular article describes a staple visit to Dilli Haat,

As you walk around the open-air space, the same old *chikankari kurtis*, Naga shawls, Kashmiri *phirans*, organic pickles and block printed *saris* lie on show in the stalls, waiting to charm buyers for the umpteenth time. The artist that you had seen sketching profiles of young kids a month or two ago is still there. So is the man who engraves names on rice. (Bhatia, 2014)

It is these perpetual, inexpensive time-pass items and cheap imitations of the authentic products, which as the *Sanganeri* artisan⁸ lamented, distract visitors from appreciating fully the original craftworks that crafts-persons bring from the interiors, thereby grossly undermining the primary thrust behind Dilli Haat. In fact, over-familiarisation with the same kind of cheap crafts and textile products on display at most times has even diminished the image of Dilli Haat. A telling pointer in the study reveals that about 69% of the visitors surveyed felt that the products were too highly priced for the quality, and that they could find the same elsewhere at cheaper rates!

Unlike a rural *haat*, the political economy of Dilli Haat does not permit just about anyone who wishes to visit either as a seller or a buyer. Crafts-persons and other sellers need to go through a process of validation and selection before being allotted a stall. The visitors pay to enter the market. Though the charge is nominal at Rs 20/- per adult, it is still premium as an entry ticket to a marketplace. Dilli Haat's ambience also lends it a museum-like appeal where the articles for consumption include visual access to beautiful hand-crafted articles akin to window-shopping with the supposed objective of enhancing cultural exposure to indigenous art and crafts and the multi-state cuisine available in the food-stalls.

Equally important are the foreign tourists for Dilli Haat as its policy document

envisions 'to promote and develop it as a tourism promotion centre with a market place where the tourists visiting Delhi can be provided with a direct access to India's real and original craftsmanship, introduction to richness of India's diverse cultural heritage, the taste of regional delicacies in the leisurely convenient and rural ambience.' In fact, Dilli Haat's museumification, for tourists from both India and abroad, enhances the commercial side of the *haat*. As a living museum, Dilli Haat preserves an image of rural India inaccessible otherwise in the metropolis. The rural and the indigenous of India comprising of numerous tribes, are collapsed in a few artifacts, crafts and crafts-persons, whose presence in Dilli Haat is at best a rarified view of the immense diversity of cultures and people of the country. It is reminiscent of the folk-life museum movement that emerged in 19th century in Europe and USA as a result of industrialisation and declining peasantry. The setting up of Dilli Haat at INA (as a successor phenomenon to the Crafts Museum, Delhi, a dedicated space for display of the process of craft in making by the crafts-person and the sale of the witnessed hand-made product to the urban/foreign buyer) and its eventual promotion by the government as a tourist spot, so much so that its policy document claims Dilli Haat as an 'access to India's real and original handicrafts', alerts us to the danger of Dilli Haat becoming a museumified entity eventually.

Conclusion

Following its immense success, the model of INA Dilli Haat was replicated, albeit with certain variations, with the establishment of two other DilliHaats: one at Pitampura (2008) in north-west Delhi and a recent one at Janakpuri (2014) in West Delhi. These two *haats* reflect the changing nature of physical spaces in the modern public cultural sphere as the processes of globalisation and its consumption find new architectural expressions. DilliHaat's replication of its model at Pitampura or at Janakpuri includes amphitheatres and air-conditioned auditoriums and exposition halls for holding cultural events and exhibitions as well as fun zones for children such as are available in modern day shopping malls. Crafts and crafts-persons become incidental, and seem to be brought in merely to add colour to the visual contours of these spaces. Other than the specialised melas like Dastakari Haat, Master Craftsmen, India Weaves etc., at INA, neither of the later Dilli Haats have an exclusive dedication towards the initial goal of bringing crafts-persons directly in touch with urban customers.

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The changing consciousness and demands of the city's metropolitan population today makes Dilli Haat more of an amusement and recreational centre with only a few glimpses of the rural hinterland. Rather, its present role in the representation of rural India can be better understood through the metaphor of the bioscope. The bioscope, a rather enlarged version of the view-finder, was a box with a mechanism for picture slides inside, that could be viewed through circular holes on its three sides. In rural fairs and *haats* in India, the bioscope was a regular sight as it charmed the viewer with exotic images of the outside world (Chaturvedi, p. 78). Traditional *haats* functioned as a bioscope for the rural populace as it was through the news and products of the city available at the *haat* that they were exposed to the world beyond their village. Dilli Haat as an urban *haat* reverses this gaze. The images in the bioscope of Dilli Haat are that of rural India and the folk, and these few glimpses that the city dwellers and foreigners get in Dilli Haat are assumed to be representative of the wide and dynamic Indian rural and folk heritage.

Endnotes

1. The present paper is based upon a study conducted as part of University of Delhi's Innovation Project (2013-2015) titled, "Impact of Dilli Haat as a Socio Cultural and a Commercial Oasis on Urban Youth: Exchanges and Negotiation" (MAC 201) with the present authors being its Principal Investigators.
2. Personal interview with Pradeep Sachdeva, January, 2014.
3. Ibid
4. Personal interview with Jaya Jaitly, September, 2014.
5. Ibid
6. Innovation Project MAC 201.
7. There were 54 questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to 300 adults of different age groups out of whom 123 were males and 177 were females. Out of this, the data of 204 people was found to be proper wherein there were 102 males and 102 females.
8. Personal Interview, December 2014.

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