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Drishti Gombes in Bangalore: The Perceived Gaze of the Anonymous Urban Dweller

Abstract: *The intersection of traditional folk practices and urban spatiality is a source of interesting contradictions – especially when one considers it within the context of the Indian silicon city of Bangalore, which lends itself to multiple interpretative gazes. Therefore, the main aim of this paper has been to study the aforementioned practices and the resultant production of a deconstructed city space through a socio-cultural analysis of the Drishti Gombe– the mask that wards off the “evil eye” as per the folk belief of Kannadigas. The paper considers the persistence of these masks in the metropolis by engaging with its perceived significance amidst the urban population, while drawing upon Bhatti and Pinney’s concepts of urban visibility. Through such an analysis, it is thereby established that the engagement of the “practitioners”, as put forth by Certeau, with such elements of the city reflects upon the prevailing, Debordian sense of the spectacular and how it has come to constitute the gaze of the urban dweller. Thus, the presumed anonymity of the urban dweller challenges and is, in turn, challenged by the non-Western “cityness” of Bangalore as a polysemic space, functioning ambiguously between the urban-rural divide.*

Keywords: Folk practices, Urban Spatiality, Drishti Gombe, Visuality, Practitioners.

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Keerthana Vinay and Annie George

Introduction: The City of Interest

“Spectacle is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity.”

– Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967

One walks through the city of Bangalore with the strange impression of occupying warring positionalities– of being a wanderer and a practitioner and occasionally, of being both. Walking in the city, deemed a counter-visual, epistemological practice by Certeau, leads one to hail the city as a site of contradictory, often paradoxical multiplicities. It is through these walks that one begins to take note of the object of study– the *Drishti Gombe*– which, in its native (Kannadiga) tongue, literally translates to ‘evil eye doll’. However, it is presented more so as a mask-like talisman used traditionally to ward off the evil eye. It is surprising that the modernity of the city has not impeded the use of the *Drishti Gombe*, found in some expected places and some entirely unexpected ones, which has inspired the conception of this study as a socio-spatial analysis of these local artefacts. Keeping this thought in mind, the twin objectives of the paper have been firstly, to locate the *Drishti Gombe* as a cultural register of a specific ethno-visual tradition and secondly, to understand its multifaceted connotations as rendered by the dwellers of Bangalore, the ‘silicon city’ of India.

To navigate through these objectives, the paper begins with a diachronous account of the relevance of these masks in the local– and to a large extent Indian– folk culture before it proceeds to examine how the gaze of the *Drishti Gombe* is shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors. In this manner, the study also explores whether it retains its protective symbolism in modern contexts through a sustained appreciation of its original cultural meaning. Alternatively, the research puts forth the idea of the utilisation of the *Drishti Gombe* purely for its aesthetic value and its subsequent role as a re-signifier; a detached, purely decorative symbol within the space of the urban environment. Thus, the study hopes to understand the evolving role of such objects in the lived spaces of the city, by taking into account what *Drishti Gombe* reveals about Bangalore's urban identity; it proceeds with the belief that the cultural artefact has become a site for the interplay of tradition and modernity in Bangalore’s visuo-cultural landscape.

Hence, the study is centred on understanding whether the belief system surrounding the *Drishti Gombe*, which is meant to ward off negative influences and misfortunes attributed to jealousy, still carries over to the urban context of the city. If it does so, then does it actively reflect the cultural psyche

of its mythological origins? How does the anonymous urban-dweller, who is meant to engage only in segmental roles, whose gaze is spatially and socially oriented and even sometimes restricted to modern conventions of spectacularity, perceive the *Drishti Gombe*? In such privatised spaces such as fast-food outlets, or in contextually distant spaces like social media, does the talisman lose its earlier significance? What then is the narrative that re-signifies it and how does it reflect on the “city-ness” of Bangalore?

Method and Methodology

The researchers have come across various sites of use of the *Drishti Gombe* through the practice of walking. Therefore, the analysis makes use of a number of sources for a comprehensive view of the subject matter at hand; the primary data was collected through a couple of visits to nearby spaces which include TacoBell, an American food outlet in the Royal Meenakshi mall, Bannerghatta, nearby student residencies (i.e. PGs) such as Ostellar, as well as residential houses or apartments in areas such as Wilson Garden or Indiranagar. Predominantly, it was observed that the demon-like masks were placed right in front of the building entrance or the boundary walls. Our study has also been enriched by the theories proposed by towering figures in the field of spatial studies like Certeu, Debord and Lefebvre, while the concepts of urban visualities and the ideologies underlying it have been taken from Saskia Sassen as well as Bhatti and Pinney. The essay also supplements the understanding gained therein by touching upon niche topics, like the ‘public gaze’ of South Asian societies as presented by Appadurai and Breckenridge, and the politics of recalled tradition as explored by Marcuse.

Review of Literature

“The evil eye is a widespread... folk belief complex according to which the gaze or praise of one individual at or for another may cause illness or even death to the second individual or to an object belonging to that individual” (Dundes 7). The *Drishti Dosha*, or the evil eye, is a mythical belief– shared globally as the following tradition of literature will show– that manifests in unique folkloristic practices. In South India, especially in the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the evil eye is negated by the talisman called the *Drishti Gombe*, *Drishti Bommai* and *Drishti Bomma*, respectively. By taking this talisman as the object of study in the context of Bangalore, one finds that “folk life, as an aspect of social life in general, may be conceived as consisting of a number of social actions and interpretations” (Lykiardopoulos 221). Interestingly, even within the Kannadiga culture, “the evil eye is perceived... as one of the most dangerous forces that can interfere in their lives, and they invest much energy in a variety of methods to counteract it” (Abu-Rabia 241) although not much has been studied about the production or circulation of the *Drishti Gombe* apart from a brief semiotic analysis of its different visual designs (Thiyagarajan & Kulkarni) or its currently declining artisanal industry (Sophia & Rajalakshmi). Hence, the perception of the talisman and its skewed symbolism in the multi-cultural

site that is the Indian city (in this particular case, Bangalore) is a fairly new idea that this paper aims to explore. Owing to this reason, the study also draws several observations or lived experiences from non-academic, multi-disciplinary sources like electronic media (i.e. e-newspapers like Medium) or digital forums like Reddit, Instagram and WordPress blog posts shared by Indian users. The researchers believe that this is necessary and, in fact, essential to the development of the paper as it serves to become a synchronous understanding of the Gombe, by reflecting on the everyday practitioner's discourses about it.

Analysis

In the twenty-first century, there are several meanings attributed to the aspects of space and how it is constructed in the city. Amidst all these meanings and perceptions, the *Drishti Gombe* serves as a poignant example of how cities are not merely physical spaces but complex repositories of diverse meanings and interactions. By analysing the various interpretations of the *Drishti Gombe* as it is presented and perceived by practitioners of an Indian urbanity, this study underscores the importance of recognising and valuing the multiplicity of cultural narratives that shape contemporary urban experiences. The following sections reveal the intricate ways in which tradition and modernity intersect, offering insights into the broader dynamics of urban identity and cultural resilience in a globalised world.

Returning the Gaze: How People See Drishti Gombes

In most essays, like Mumford's "What is a City?", the city casts itself as a congruous existence only by creating a synchronous perception of itself. For such a perception to be maintained, one also notes that the city presents itself in the form of spectacles, instating that the practitioners of the city must only participate in it as spectators. In this manner, the anonymity of the urban-dweller is considered to be the prerequisite to the formation of cities. Yet, the use of the *Drishti Gombe* persists.

When asked about the creation of this mythological manifestation, one must ironically begin at the cross-section of several origin stories; just as it exists now, under many gazes, it also begins then with a multiplicity of ontological tales. As Thiagarajan and Kulkarni note in their semiotic analysis of the *Drishti Gombe*, its roots "can be traced back to the classical art of South Indian temple architecture". This line of observation links "the depictions of the face [the *Drishti Gombe*]... found as an embellishment over the lintel of gates that mark the entry into the temple compound" to the figure of the kirthimuka, a figure that was also studied by Heinrich Zimmer in "The Face of Glory" (175-85). The kirthimuka holds an uncanny resemblance to the Greek symbol of the Ouroboros; a cyclical destruction of the self which, in turn, ties back to the idea of the kirthimuka as being borne by the Lord Shiva, who himself "periodically annihilates the created universe" (Zimmer 181). Another creation

story stems from legends that attribute the characteristic face of the *Gombe* to “the face of a Tuvārapālākā— a door or gate guardian who is often portrayed as a warrior or fearsome giant, usually armed with a gada (mace)” (Thiyagarajan & Kulkarni 1). Yet another narrative expresses the belief that the *Gombe* depicts the figure of Bhootarajaru (Guruprasad, “Bhootarajaru”), the reincarnation of a brahmana named Tapodhana, as a result of the karma he gains from mocking his peers. In this case, the form (*roopa*) of the demonic identity (*raakshasa*) is ordained by Lord Shri Rama. But, at the root of all these systems of beliefs lies a singular principle— the very existence of the talisman revolves around the aspect of gaze; “The evil eye belief originated and persisted as a useful heuristic under conditions in which envy was likely to trigger destructive behaviour and the avoidance of other people's envy, effectively prescribed by the evil eye belief, was a proper response to that threat” (Gershman 119–44). Therefore, “in order to prevent accidents and bad fate, [the *Drishti Gombe* was] hung on construction sites, terraces of houses and multistoried buildings” (Sophia & Rajalakshmi 666-667). This evil lies in reference to the age-old texts of Hinduism, the dominant religion of India, according to which the *Drishti Dosha* (evil eye) of a person is believed to carry a supernatural harm that usually stems from their jealousy. *Drishti Dosha* is, in fact, still maintained as a reason for the physiological disorders that might befall an envied person, as per certain studies in Ayurveda (Rathore & Kavita 15). The study has amassed a number of recently established *Instagram* accounts, as shown below (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) which continue to propagate the utilisation of the *Drishti Gombe* as an attempt to ward off this evil eye. Online forums such as the subreddits *r/IndiaSpeaks*, *r/Hinduism*, and even *r/Bengaluru* or Quora posts, like those made by “U/Ramasubramanian Chellaperumal,” also produce several accounts of practitioners who believe that the talisman protects against a range of disasters— from minor accidents to major misfortunes, such as death. As can be seen in the video recording of Dsource Ekalpa India, the production of the *Drishti Gombe* is also said to be very much rooted in local traditions, with craftsmen continuing to produce them as the basis of a generational occupation.

At the same time, one can also just as easily find the contrast to be true; there is a certain sense of disengagement with these masks, whether it be in mind, body or practice. The words of Santosh, a potter in Thyagaraja Nagar, Bangalore, encapsulate the declining visibility of the masks as “these are no longer fast-moving items. We keep them on display just to let any passerby or customer know that they are available. Only one or two are sold in a month, maybe because now everybody lives in flats and not houses of their own” (DHNS). Furthermore, within postmodernity, one finds that surviving traditions have only ornamental values. Separated from their own histories and meanings, they may be used indiscriminately and arbitrarily, according to an individual architect's or builder's aesthetics and “thus juggled for alien purposes, [their] destruction need not be physical, but may simply involve an ‘emptying’” (Marcuse 9). Such an appropriation of the *Drishti Gombe*, as seen in this Taco Bell outlet (Fig. 3) in Bangalore's Royal Meenakshi Mall, thereby serves as an “opposition to really existing or

recalled, or authentic, traditions” (Marcuse 9). Straddling the fine line between these aforementioned viewpoints are the social media posts as well as reels gathered by the researchers. In *Instagram*, for example, “#drishtigombe” takes one to more than a hundred posts featuring Drishti dolls of various colours and designs (Fig. 4).

The ‘Cityness’ of Bengaluru

Thus, the *Drishti Gombe* is a spatial feature specific to the concept of the ambiguous “cityness” (Sassen & Lewis 1) of Bangalore, a term coined by Saskia Sassen. “Cityness”, as per Sassen’s conceptualisation, suggests that different kinds of urbanity exist which do not fit into the epistemic definitions that have been developed in the West. It points to a kind of urban-ness that is non-Western in nature and that does not align with the traditional notions of urban constructions produced by the West. Considering these points in mind, the *Drishti Gombe* is a spectacle that captures a different perspective on urbanity with respect to the city of Bangalore. In fact, its very existence in the middle of a random city like Bangalore stands as a testimony to the existence of an urbanity that cannot be captured, in terms of its experience as well as its conception, within the Western context. In other words, the findings reveal a complex intersection of multiple narratives, where the cultural artefact embodies a spectrum of meanings, oscillating between its traditional role as a protective symbol and its appropriation as a decorative object devoid of the aforementioned regional, historical context. This reflects broader themes in urban studies, particularly the tension between local traditions and globalising forces. Therefore, the polysemic narratives of the object of study and its sustained usage in Bangalore become a nexus where one will find a contradictory blend of traditional practices and modern experiences in the city; therein comes the idea of the integration of traditions into the narratives of the modernity of Bangalore. It becomes difficult to ascertain where modernity ends and where tradition begins, or if there are such clear beginnings and endings at all. Nevertheless, the spatial genes of the *Drishti Gombe* stand as a counter-narrative to the Western notions of urban-ness, thereby offering to the reader a unique narrative of socio-cultural and spatial dynamics.

Additionally, Certeau’s concept can be employed again to examine how the city reveals unexpected ways of distinguishing between the space as planned by urban designers and as experienced by its inhabitants. The visibility of *Drishti Gombe* in diverse settings - ranging from houses and small shops to high-end stores in malls that symbolise modernity and globalisation - highlights its significance across various social and economic spaces. This suggests that *Drishti Gombe* holds value in a diverse range of contexts. Thus, the *Drishti Gombe* becomes a site for various contentions.

The Spaces of Drishti

It is also interesting to chart how this narrative of the traditional belief system has manifested itself in the everyday urban life of Bangalore. Often regarded as one of the fastest-developing cities, what one, especially someone new to this Silicon Valley of India, might not expect in this urban space is the coexistence of old and new spatial narratives, where the age-old traditional beliefs and practices blend with the modern lifestyles of the contemporary world. It can be noted here that the rational thinking associated with modernity interferes with these traditional beliefs, in the same way the latter interferes with the former.

In reality, one can spot the *Drishti Gombe* wherever there is a human presence. As mentioned earlier in the essay, these sites vary from apartments, shops and vehicles, to student PGs and hostels. Even if one fails to spot them hanging on a physical wall, one might now notice them through various other media; modern methods of visibility allow people to have the masks as their wallpapers and screensavers. Some even go to the extent of getting them tattooed on their body. At the same time, one must also notice the aspect of this spatial feature playing a role in the very existence of the city. *Drishti Gombes* recall popular traditions in that they are not only manifestations of ‘lived space’ but also cultural artefacts used to resist, as Marcuse would put it, the twofold characteristics of an urban space— hegemonic power and globalisation. Apart from its existence in multiple realms - physical, digital, and symbolic - highlighting its appropriation into modern contexts, it also brings forth an idea of the ‘branding’ of the talisman in various transcultural contexts. This is best observed in the case of cultural exhibitions like the workshop conducted by Kreativkonsum (Fig. 5) or in spaces like the factory in Adilabad (Fig. 6).

Taken in this manner, it would suggest that there are practitioners of the city who are truly ‘seeing’ the *Drishti Gombe* and thereby, actually reacting to the same as is intended by popular belief. This act of ‘seeing’ requires a seer, a culturally-informed individual who resists the anonymity of urban life. This ‘seeing’ practitioner exists side-by-side with the wandering consumer, a subject of the greater globalising, neoliberal power that has already subsumed this popular tradition of the *Drishti Gombe* into a spectacular, negative tradition.

Conclusion: The Many Drishtis

Drishti, which refers to gaze, thereby becomes an important aspect of everyday life. Here, the very idea of gaze can have multiple meanings; it serves as a means of artistic expression for the artist, a source of livelihood for sellers, a decorative element for spaces, and, most importantly, a protective measure against misfortune caused by the evil eye. However, if one pertains to the gaze of an individual (the spectator in this case), who is not exposed to the meaning of *Drishti Dosha* (downfall caused by evil eye), the *Drishti Gombe* might seem like some kind of artistic work. For the artist who creates them, it

is their hard work—the final output of their talent and dedication - and might not necessarily be related to any kind of evil intent. Thus, there is no single gaze but multiple gazes forming the different narratives of *Drishti Gombe*. No one can decide which is the appropriate narrative because ultimately, there are no correct or incorrect narratives. Even if the spectator knows the purpose behind hanging the talisman in domestic and economic settings, they might interpret it and come up with multiple meanings based on their own individual perspectives. For an atheist, they might associate the talisman with superstition; for a spectator who believes in *Drishti Dosh*, it becomes an important practice of their culture and traditions. The Gombe, therefore, is associated not with one meaning but with a multiplicity of meanings. Each spectator thus identifies with the urban space based on the narrative they encounter while interacting with the artefact of *Drishti Gombe*.

To conclude, cities are not just physical landscapes but repositories of different perspectives and meanings. Thus, in the course of the essay, the narrative of the *Drishti Gombe* has been taken as an example that subsumes the “cross-referencing” element of seeing, in which the visual field is influenced by migrating genres (narratives, styles, textures, objects) between media and technologies that are local and transnational, creating new contexts and meanings for each” (Bhatti & Pinney, 2011, 230-231). The researchers have thereby identified the multiple perspectives that contradict each other, even as they operate at different levels of urban-ness in order to provide everyday experiences within the spatial DNA of Bangalore.

Appendix



Fig. 1. @juliaandsita. “Drishti Gombe”. *Instagram*. 16 March 2022.

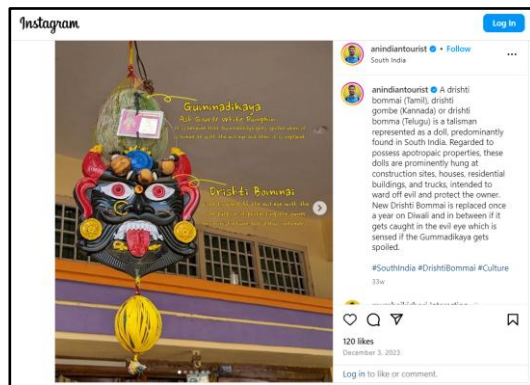


Fig. 2. @anindiantourist. “Drishti Gombe”. *Instagram*. 3 December 2023.

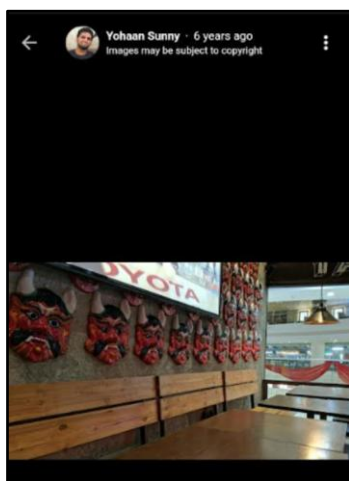


Fig. 3. Sunny, Yohan. “Drishti Gombe”. *Google Images*. June 2018.

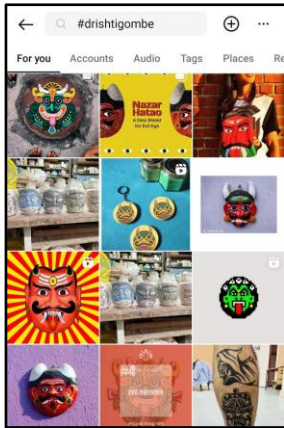


Fig. 4. Screenshot (from researcher’s device) of Instagram search findings for the prompt #drishtigombe

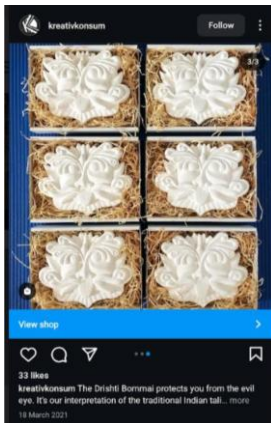


Fig. 5. @kreativekonsum. “Drishti Gombe”. *Instagram*. 18 March 2021.



Fig. 6. Singh, S. Harpal. “Warding off the evil eye.” *The Hindu*, 22 Nov. 2009, www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/Warding-off-the-evil-eye/article16893589.ece.

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