In the city, the presence of the stranger and the culture of mutual indifference can be comforting. You are never alone in the crowd; yet it may provide respite in anonymity. Of course, there are other aspects of city life: one can become alienated from others who are so different from oneself. It can happen that the crowd, far from being indifferent, becomes too interested in specific subjects and particular bodies. We know from research on sectarian or communal violence in Indian cities that mixed demographics and collective sentiment can be expressed as fixations, as the drive to identify, punish, and purge (Das 2006). The crowd on the street, at one moment relatively calm, can turn, during ethnic or religious clashes, into a vengeful mob. In mixed city areas, neighbours who share water taps and gossip can, and have, killed one another over banal differences that become intolerable ones.

Given how common this has become in urban India, especially since the late 1980s, neighbourliness and urban heterogeneity have been little explored. Diversity is an unassailable fact in such places in terms of caste, religion and language. A visitor to an Indian metropolis will immediately be struck by the sheer variety of body shapes, skin tones, dress styles and dialects. Yet anthropological studies of Indian city life often organize life into discreetly bounded socialities. Even when populations live and work in mixed, fluid settings—such as the market or factory—the lens on the city tends to be sociologically compartmentalized (cf. Kumar 1988, Lynch 1969). These studies unfold within relatively homogeneous families, shrines and alleyways, even when people spend much of their daily life dealing with those who are different from themselves.

I think this may be why a commonly asked question in the aftermath of communal violence in Indian cities is: why do neighbours kill? We tend to read mixed spaces as ones where people clearly understand each other, or at least leave each other alone. This is a classic liberal sentiment: people should present themselves transparently, and avoid intervening unduly in another’s affairs. Yet it is worth dwelling on whether people actually
present themselves in public in such a manner; and if they do think they know one another, why familiarity should not breed resentment (Zizek 2005). On the first point, on the neighbour’s similarity or alterity, consider, even during peaceful times in relatively prosperous areas, how much one really knows others.

In Sylvia Vatuk’s study of a middle-class Hindu mohalla or neighbourhood in Meerut, a city in Uttar Pradesh, residents talk uncertainly about the boundaries and norms of their neighbourhood:

one man’s mohalla is large, another’s very small, and each man has his own mohalla, which overlaps rather than exactly coinciding with his neighbours. Reference to fellow-residents of the mohalla in their role as neighbors is rarely intended to include every resident of the bounded space within the named neighbourhood. The mohalla is commonly referred to as a moral community, a group agreed as to right and wrong and having a body of custom and a character. But what the agreed values or the mores of the mohalla really are, is uncertain. Much contradiction attends the subject. (1972: 150–151)

The question of who one’s neighbours are, and the degree of one’s commonality with them, can indeed be vexing (Appadurai 1998). It seemed similarly uncertain when I conducted my fieldwork in Old Delhi, between 2007 and 2009. In the area’s male-dominated bazaars, most traders and white-collar professionals (such as accountants and brokers) live outside the old city. During the day, these bazaars are both tightly interlinked in terms of these merchant trading networks and scenes of swirling difference, with customers, truckers and migrant workers flooding in and out. The bazaars are not strictly policed; at most, a rather skinny and bored-looking security guard, complete with rumpled uniform and makeshift baton, is stationed near an entrance. At night, the bazaars are more clearly taken over by migrants, who keep loading, processing and shipping goods, and by others who sleep in upstairs storehouses. Amongst these workers too there is a great deal of difference, with discrete teams of labourers from particular villages or even extended households bumping up against those from another state, speaking a different language and of a different caste. The labour mandis, where construction workers sit waiting for specific jobs, are also mixed, with a variety of Muslim and Hindu castes and sub-groups present.

Even in the old city’s more residential and less commercial parts, there is much flux in the demographic composition. Since the 1970s, many Muslims who had roots in the old city before Partition in 1947 left the area. This was partly the product of what was seen as an increasing anti-Muslim