Typical portrayals of social relations in the Gulf states describe a nearly insurmountable divide between citizens and foreigners. The preceding chapters of this book certainly contribute to that portrait: the social divide between citizens and foreign workers in Bahrain is formidable, and although others have directed their attention to the many and interesting “exceptional” spaces—in marriage between citizen and foreigner, through the intimate and everyday contact between employer and domestic servant, or through the ongoing interactions between the elite classes of the different communities on the island—these arenas of interaction remain exceptions to the norm (see Nagy 2008). At the same time, one can delineate a public sphere whose boundaries encompass citizen and foreigner. In this chapter and the next, I examine two facets of this encompassing public sphere. In this chapter I explore the diasporic social clubs and a handful of other voluntary associations on the island. Those clubs and associations include long-standing regional clubs, such as the Kerala Club, as well as voluntary associations like the Toastmasters and Lions clubs that oftentimes convene citizens with foreigners of many different nationalities. In the next chapter, I describe another facet of this public sphere through an examination of the English-language newspapers on the island.

The theoretical foundations of the concept of the public sphere trace their genealogy to the work of Jürgen Habermas. In its most basic rendition, the public sphere represents an inclusive conceptual space where meanings are publicly articulated, produced, and negotiated (Habermas 1989). At the same time, the activity of this public sphere is more than a reflection or window to the public: it is a generative process by which
the public is constituted. Habermas (1989) envisioned this public sphere as overlapping—and strategically between—the private sphere and the state. In that public space, individuals develop a collective identity and a set of interests distinct from those of both the private sphere and the state. Although this conception of the public sphere remains foundational, more recent work has pointed to particular problems with Habermas’s formulation. More specifically, scholars have argued that the notion of an all-inclusive public sphere fails to grasp the nuances of social power: group formation is as much about who is excluded as included. Analyses often focus on the formation of “counterpublics” that challenge the hegemony of the dominant public sphere (Fraser 1992; Warner 2002). Overall, many contemporary scholars suggest that the public sphere is better understood by its frictions, divisions, and omissions than by its cohesion.¹

Habermas’s notion of a public sphere has been reinvigorated by the attention directed to the diasporic and transnational movement of peoples around the world. Ethnographers and other scholars attentive to these populations on the move have relied on his concept to delineate the cultural space where people distant from their homeland, and oftentimes distant from one another, forge some common communal identity (Appadurai 1996; Werbner 1998). Victoria Bernal’s work, for example, reveals how the Internet serves not only as “an arena of nonviolent conflict in a violent world but also as a multiplier of outrage and as a vehicle for mobilizing action in situations of conflict” (2005, 662). Generally speaking, these scholars agree that there is more going on within these public spheres than the “rational discussion” proposed by Habermas: these public spheres are the sites at which culture is produced.

This model suggests that the task before me is to examine the contours of the Indian diasporic public sphere—to investigate how Indians in Bahrain engage in a communal diasporic public discourse with Indians from Canada, India itself, the other Gulf states, Singapore, and the countless other locations where members of this long-standing diaspora now make their home. This model also suggests that the business of unpacking the other public spheres in the cosmopolitan Gulf states—say, the Pakistani diasporic public sphere, the Filipino diasporic public sphere, or the Bahraini public sphere—is the purview of other ethnographers and scholars. Rather than pursuing this model, I am interested in delineating the contours of the public sphere that overlaps the many communities present on the island—a public sphere where Indians talk with other Indians, but also with Bahrainis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Britishers, Americans, and the many
other peoples who make a home on the island. The idea that Indians become and perform their “Indian-ness” in discussion with one another (and across the transnational divide) is certainly true. Yet they also become and perform that “Indian-ness” through discussion and debate with the many peoples who also make their home on the island. An examination of this overarching public sphere tells us something about the experiences of each group, about the way they perceive themselves, about the relations among these groups in Bahrain, and about the ideas that underpin the structural forces described in previous chapters.

**Diasporic Social Clubs and Voluntary Associations**

The Bab al-Bahrain, or “door to Bahrain,” is a colonial-era edifice on the maritime front of the old souk in central Manama. Although infill and construction have pushed the actual shoreline well beyond the former wharf and customs house described by the oldest individuals with whom I spoke, the Bab al-Bahrain remains an important reference point in the contemporary city. From that central hub, the narrow roads crowded with pedestrians and slow-moving vehicles reach back into the heart of the market. Small hotels, mosques, countless stores, and restaurants line the close-quartered streets. By following these streets back from the waterfront, one eventually emerges into a dense residential neighborhood where residual members of the citizenry’s most impoverished classes live side by side with the burgeoning population of transnational laborers. Unlike their more fortunate brethren in labor camps or company-arranged apartment buildings, many of the transnational laborers in this beleaguered neighborhood are illegal workers. Through the confluence of circumstances described in previous chapters, the men in this neighborhood largely work on the black market, selling their labor to whomever they can find for a few dinars a day. In buildings rented from Bahraini owners, transmigrant laborers crowd into the small rooms. In some of the apartments men sleep in shifts.

On a hot summer night in 2003, one of these buildings caught fire. Sanjay, a South Indian laborer, had returned home some two hours earlier from a party at the company for which he currently works. He fell fast asleep. Shortly before midnight, he was abruptly awakened by the Pakistani men who roomed down the hall. Smoke had already filled the building. Together the men made their way to the roof. Finding a small ladder in the debris scattered on the rooftop, they laid it across the span between
buildings and slowly crossed. With smoke billowing all around them, they thought that the building next door might also be on fire. They made a second crossing and were finally able to descend to the street. Outside their former home they gathered with the other workers, most of whom wore nothing more than their undergarments, and watched the building burn. Miraculously, all of the building’s occupants survived. Sanjay lamented his own personal loss—80 dinars ($210) in savings, the air conditioner that he and his roommates had recently purchased, and the DVD player and television that he himself had purchased. Sanjay had been away from India for over ten years, and these last two items were his and his alone—the product of those many years of hard work, and items of significant symbolic as well as monetary value. Unlike the papers of many of his flatmates, his Central Population Register card and other valuable documents were with his current employer—part of his effort to again legalize his status on the island—and were hence spared from the flames.

For several nights the men slept on the sidewalk or in the beds of pickup trucks parked on the street. The owner of the building initially refused to provide any assistance, and few of the men had a responsible kafeel to which they might turn. Within a few days, several groups materialized to provide assistance. The Pakistani Club provided air conditioners and assorted items to the Pakistani men in the building. A group called Helping Hands and another called the Art of Living contributed various essentials to the building’s inhabitants regardless of nationality. Six days after the fire I received a call from my friend Santosh. He invited me to come down to Tamil Social and Cultural Association (TASCA), the principal social club for the Tamil contingent of the Indian community, and help with the allocation of essentials to the men displaced by the fire. Twenty or thirty of the now-homeless Indian laborers waited in front of the club, and over the course of several hours we distributed bananas, rice, fruit drinks, work boots, lunch boxes, small cooking stoves (or “cookers” in the Indian iteration), and a variety of other items. Some of the men were from Tamil Nadu, but many came from other Indian states. Later, Sanjay and his former roommate came to my flat for a light dinner, after which we talked about the fire, their experiences in Bahrain, and the role that the various institutions of the Indian community had played in assisting them with their ongoing plight.

Over the course of a year in Bahrain I spent many of my evenings at TASCA, the Indian Club, and many of the other social clubs and voluntary associations in the diasporic community. The constellation of diasporic social institutions in Bahrain is unparalleled elsewhere in the Gulf, and it
is around dramatic events like the one described here that many of them spring to action. My understanding of these clubs and associations began with an interest in how these social forms provided help and assistance to those transnational laborers most exploited by the system of relations in place on the island. In a sense, I remain tied to that analysis, for these clubs and associations provide the primary response to the periodic crises—both collective and individual—faced by members of the Indian community. As I came to know these clubs and associations better, however, I began to understand that these venues also constituted the primary social foundation for foreign workers’ participation in the complex public sphere of contemporary Bahrain. In the remainder of this chapter, I move from looking at these clubs as a counterbalance to the structural violence of contemporary relations on the island to an understanding of how members of the Indian community position themselves in the public sphere through their participation in these clubs and associations.

**Six Social Clubs**

The constellation of social clubs and voluntary associations one encounters in Bahrain is unique in the Gulf context. In several of the other Gulf states—Oman, for example—the state allows only a single umbrella organization to serve each national contingent. In Bahrain, however, the government has allowed the florescence of these clubs to proceed with only occasional hindrance. As Fuad Khuri (1980) described, Bahraini social and political clubs have a long and important history in the political landscape of the island as the principal site of the citizenry’s political activity under the authoritarian regime. Diasporic social clubs predate these indigenous clubs on the island, but today they also build on the legacy of those strong indigenous social clubs. The proliferation of these social clubs also marks Bahrain as more liberal and open than its neighbors, an identity that remains key to the state’s vision of its ongoing role as a service hub to the conservative neighboring nations. Many of the transmigrants with whom I spoke noted that these social clubs are one of the particular attractions of diasporic life in Bahrain—a social luxury unavailable across the causeway in Saudi Arabia, for example. At the same time, the analysis presented here demonstrates that these social clubs package diasporic culture behind villa walls—effectively moving the practice of foreign culture out of the public sphere and, in many cases, beyond the direct concern of a citizenry that
continues to struggle with the ramifications of the transnational presence on the island.

No simple accounting of these social clubs is possible, for the constellation of active clubs on the island includes not only those formal groups registered with the Ministry of Social Development, but also those informal groups active around the island. From the government’s perspective, all these groups are classified as nongovernmental organizations. Prospective clubs must provide the ministry with an abundance of information, including minutes from the meeting of the founding general assembly, the names and signatures of founding members, copies of their identity cards, and the club’s constitution. Registered groups also consent to regular monitoring by the state. As of 2008, the Ministry of Social Development recorded a total of 423 registered nongovernmental organizations. This number includes 46 diasporic social clubs and 19 religious organizations. The remaining clubs are predominately citizen-based organizations. I present brief snapshots of six different diasporic associations, which yields a fairly representative cross-section of the institutions that together make up much of the social fabric of diasporic life on the island.

The Indian Club

My first visit to the Indian Club occurred on one of the few rainy nights of my stay in Bahrain. Several weeks after my arrival on the island, an Indian professor and colleague from my institutional sponsor in Bahrain suggested we meet at the Indian Club for a drink and discussion. My gracious host had found himself on the tail end of a long career in academia, and so with a few years left in which to amass enough savings to retire comfortably, he and his wife had relocated from India to Bahrain for the opportunities it provided. The professor arrived at the club shortly after I did, and meeting at the entrance we moved from the densely urban streets of central Manama, bustling with South Asian workers, through the security checkpoint that ascertains one’s membership or, in my case, guest status, and onto the grounds of the club. Children played cricket on the twin tennis courts, shouting to each other in English as their parents sat around the tables between the courts and the bar.

Founded in 1915, the Indian Club is the oldest of the Indian expatriate social clubs on the island (Franklin 1985, 488). It has the largest membership (estimated to me at 1,200 families), and that membership is regionally and religiously mixed. Although a handful of Bahrainis and other non-Indians hold memberships, Indians—and particularly South
Indians—predominate. The club relocated to its current premises in the mid-1940s, and those premises, including tennis courts, meeting halls, and other open spaces, are the largest among the South Asian expatriate clubs. Along with the sizable auditorium at the Indian School, the premises of the Indian Club often serve the community’s need of accommodations for large meetings, celebrations, and other activities. The club’s reading room contains a wide variety newspapers and periodicals from India. Two bars serve as meeting points for the diverse membership, and in the smaller adjoining meeting rooms I observed various performances and activities during my occasional visits.

The Indian Club principally serves the diasporic elite. In his close examination of the Indian Club two decades ago, Franklin found that a long waiting list for membership, combined with a vetting process that focuses on “prestige, occupation, and influence,” serves to maintain a membership that, although from a diversity of regions within India, is fairly homogenous in terms of social class (1985, 490). Add to this calculus the fact that high membership dues screen the lower middle class from the membership rolls and we are left with a contemporary portrait similar to what Franklin described in the 1980s: the Indian Club remains a venue for the diasporic elite and their families.

Although its members may come from the middle and upper classes of the Indian diaspora, the club nonetheless includes individuals from across the categorical divisions—be they ethnic, regional, or religious—of the Indian community. As one of the former presidents of the club remarked, in many ways the trans-Indian identity fostered by the club is a vestige of social relations constructed in decades past: “In 1915…it wasn’t called the Indian Club, for there were very few Indians here [in Bahrain]…at the time it was the only club, and the population here were Indians. Not Keralite, not Karnataka, but Indians. So there was no need for these other clubs. It was only in recent years that they started forming these other clubs.” In contrast to the florescence of regionally and religiously specific clubs, the Indian Club continues to represent itself as a venue specifically aligned with a particular vision of India—one aligned with both the Indian School and the Indian embassy, which are seen as representative of the whole of India. Beneath the surface, however, regional frictions and other lines of tension continue to be exerted and performed in the context of the club. The former president, continuing his comments from above, added that “the Indian Club now has become very political. You have the north and the south—you have different groups….These are ethnic divisions that are played
out in the context of the club, and geographical too, because you have the South Indian group—the Malayalee group, and you have the north Indian group. And I guess at the Indian Club, there is also the Sindhi group.

Although the Indian Club, like the Indian School and a handful of other institutions on the island, is configured around the idea of a singular national Indian identity, these venues nonetheless provide space for the expression of regional, ethnic, religious, and class-based identities within the larger domain of a single Indian national identity. Unlike the smaller regional clubs, which, individually, can be conceived of as locations for transmigrants to reconnect with particularistic Indian identities, the Indian Club serves as a domain for the iteration or performance of those identities in relation to one another. It is a venue in which the diasporic elite can challenge, articulate, or support the idea of a singular national identity that transcends the regional, linguistic, cultural, and religious differences attributed to the Indian homeland.

The Tamil Social and Cultural Association

For nearly twenty years, transmigrants from the state of Tamil Nadu met together unofficially. The once-small diasporic constituency organized meetings in each other’s flats or borrowed larger spaces from existing clubs to produce the events and shows they planned together. At the turn of the millennium, the group finally secured premises in central Manama and registered with the Ministry of Social Development. The formalization of the Tamil Social and Cultural Association (TASCA) coincided with two decades of demographic expansion of the transmigrant networks between Tamil Nadu and Bahrain. Although the official numbers are not released by the Bahraini government, the Tamil community now claims to be second in size only to that of Kerala among the Indian communities on the island. Like many of the other regional social clubs, TASCA’s membership is composed of a cross-section of the Tamil population that extends lower into the economic strata of the transmigrant population than does the Indian Club. Reasonable membership fees ensure that even the diasporic lower middle class can join, and although the poorest transmigrant laborers are still unable to participate in the routine club activities, much of the club’s programming includes outreach activities to the labor camps and apartment buildings in which the poorest Tamil laborers dwell (see fig. 5.1).

Like many of the Indian social clubs, TASCA occupies a villa in one of the city’s central neighborhoods. A low wall separates the premises from the street, and the front porch typically contains various pieces of furniture or
boxed items either on their way in or out of the club. Inside, what was once a former residence has been converted to a busy and crowded social club. The majlis, or greeting room, where the former residents once entertained visitors, is now one of the main meeting rooms for the members. Upstairs is a small bar—the principal source of income for the club—a game room, and offices. Like all the regional clubs, foot traffic in the club surges in the evening hours as men and women finish their workday.

Like most of the Indian social clubs, TASCA organizes a wide variety of events for its membership. Committees plan for celebrations of Chithirai Thirunaal, or the Tamil New Year, as well as for Diwali (the Pan-Indian/Hindu festival of lights) and Pongal (a four-day celebration, originally linked to bountiful crops, and particularly popular among Tamils). Like most of the Indian social clubs on the island, TASCA also plans a celebration for the Bahraini Eid holiday. The club’s Ladies Wing demonstrates cooking techniques and spreads beauty tips among the interested members. There are dance classes for children, and the club maintains a library stocked with a variety of Tamil periodicals and literature. TASCA also fields sports teams in intramural competitions on the island. The Social Service Subcommittee of TASCA was particularly active during my time in Bahrain. Through that committee’s efforts, the club provided food, free clothing, and advice to impoverished men in some of the Tamil labor camps. The committee also
conducted medical-training and health education seminars in the camps, including various programs concerning good hygiene and the benefits of both yoga and meditation to the physiological well-being of day laborers.

TASCA is representative of the vast majority of the diasporic clubs in Bahrain. A handful of other clubs—the Pakistan Club, the Indian Club, and the now-defunct Indian Association—explicitly address their diasporic constituents at a national level. Conversely, numerous clubs are even more specific in their constituencies than TASCA: the Kerala Catholic Club, for example, draws individuals through the categories of both region and religion. TASCA, based on regional (and, in some senses, linguistic) affiliation, occupies the crowded middle ground between more specific and more general venues of affiliation on the island. That middle ground is perhaps best exemplified by the executive committee at the time of my research: the president, a Tamil Muslim, presided over an executive committee that included Hindu, Muslim, and Christian individuals.

**Toastmasters**

The Toastmasters Club was founded in the United States by Ralph C. Smedley, whose name was honored in the introductory remarks of every Toastmasters meeting I attended in Bahrain. Established in Santa Ana, California, in 1924, the club expanded rapidly during the mid-twentieth century and now includes 230,000 members worldwide. The club’s introduction to the Gulf occurred through a direct American connection. In the 1950s, Bahrain constructed a small enclave by the name of Awali for American workers, most of whom were associated with the oil industry. The Bahrain chapter of the Toastmasters formed in Awali in 1964, and although the initial members were for the most part American, a few Indian engineers and technicians also participated. As the active American members departed the island, Indian participants continued to fuel the club’s activity. Through the interest and dedication of this original diasporic cohort, the Toastmasters persevered and eventually flourished on the island. At the time of my fieldwork, there were twenty active chapters in greater Manama, and additional chapters have formed in the other Gulf states. The chapter I joined was the current manifestation of that original chapter from Awali, and my first meeting was the group’s 1,900th gathering.

Originally designed as a forum to “afford practice and training in the art of public speaking and in presiding over meetings, and to promote sociability and good fellowship among its members,” the chapters in Bahrain serve that purpose and more. For the diasporic elite, the Toastmasters meetings
provide an opportunity to practice and engage the discursive terrain of the global financescape—to, as the Toastmasters Web site suggests, give better sales presentations, hone management skills, effectively develop and present ideas, and offer constructive criticism. In other chapters, the activities of a typical meeting serve a much more practical purpose: the speeches and presentations provide an ideal opportunity to practice English, the lingua franca of the higher echelons of the global economy, which brought many of the men and women to Bahrain.

The Manama chapter’s membership dues ensure that only the elite can join this particular group. Meetings are held weekly at one of the nicest hotels on the island; men and women are expected to wear business attire. Although the majority of the members of this chapter were from the Indian diaspora, the membership also included individuals from Bahrain, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Bangladesh. Other chapters are regionally specific: TASCA, for example, has its own chapter of Toastmasters that draws from its Tamil membership, as do the chapters at many of the other regionally, linguistically, or ethnically homogeneous social clubs on the island. I attended meetings held by three different chapters, and at all three sets of meetings women were well represented in both the membership and the leadership.

In general terms, the topics presented and discussed during meetings centered on personal development and the tribulations of configuring a successful path through the cosmopolitan workplace in Bahrain. Members seemed to be reproducing, rehearsing, and reflecting upon the discourse they deploy daily in offices around the island. The Manama Toastmasters—the chapter I joined, and the most ethnically and nationally diverse chapter on the island—maintained an informal policy of omitting politically oriented topics (such as the policies of the Bahraini state, the Indian/Pakistani conflict, or the U.S. incursion in Iraq) from the presentations, perhaps because of the heterogeneous membership of the chapter. That there was no place for politics in their discussions is perhaps a reflection of the conditions and circumstances the members face in their everyday lives: politics, ethnicity, nationality, and religion confound the logic of the cosmopolitan and neoliberal workplace on the island.

The Lions Club

The original Lions Club in Bahrain, formed some twenty years ago, was the first of its kind in the Gulf. The Bahrain chapter grew rapidly, and the Lions Club of Riffa was formed in 1995 as an offshoot of the oversized
original club. The Riffa chapter also met with success: it had 75 members at its high point in the late 1990s, but Bahrainization and the subsequent departures depleted membership to approximately 40 members. Although all are welcome, the Lions Club of Riffa is predominately Muslim and includes successful merchants, businessmen, and professionals from both the Indian and Pakistani communities. Many of these individuals are also leaders or former leaders of other social clubs and associations on the island. Like the Manama Toastmasters, the Lions Club of Riffa has no quarters of its own but instead gathers regularly at upscale hotels. Attendees are expected to wear business attire, and meetings typically included a dozen or so individuals. Three women also regularly participated during my interaction with the club.

The Riffa chapter’s activities are largely oriented toward outreach. As the president stated, “we engage in social service regardless of caste, creed and color.” Over a single year (2002), the club provided food to the poor during Ramadan, donated sewing machines and computers to the needy, funded a life-saving operation for a Bahraini child, took blind children on a beach picnic, took mentally disabled Bahraini children to a dolphin marine park, cleaned beaches, greeted sick children during the Eid holiday, sponsored a Bahraini youth’s trip to a leadership training program in the United States, led a drug awareness campaign, conducted an essay contest for children, organized free dental hygiene and checkups for mentally disabled Bahraini children, and conducted a wide variety of other service and outreach activities. In pulling these activities together, members draw on the significant resources they command through their businesses and contacts: money, food, and a variety of other items are donated from their businesses to these ends.

Unlike many of the other diasporic associations on the island, the Lions Club of Riffa directs its outreach efforts primarily toward Bahraini citizens rather than toward the transmigrant underclass. In my discussions with the members of the club, several pointed to the history of the British presence on the island, whose legacy is now remembered by many as one of a group who “never gave anything back to the local community,” to quote one of the club’s members. The Lions Club of Riffa certainly will not suffer the same fate. Its coordinated efforts reach the lower classes of the Bahraini community, and the members are careful to always call photographers from the island’s newspapers to document these events. The club also hosts several fancy dinners and events during the year at which luminaries from the Bahraini government, the business community, and the various embassies serve as guest speakers or honorable attendees. These activities not only reinforce the club’s status among the diasporic classes but also counteract
the popular perception of the diasporic communities as parasites on the Bahraini economy. Careful not to articulate a message critical of the systemic inequities within the Bahraini social structure, the elite members of the Riffa Lions Club envision their activities as returning something to the society in which they have prospered.

**Ecumenical Council of Charity**

Bahrain is somewhat unique in the context of the Gulf in terms of the proliferation of non-Muslim religious spaces on the island. Noteworthy is the large Hindu temple located in the center of the city’s old market district. Invisible from the streets of the busy souk, the temple is entered through a long passageway, whose access is on a street crowded with Indian-owned businesses. This particular venue was established and is still controlled by the Bhatia segment of the Indian diaspora and mainly serves Hindus from Gujarat, Maharati, and Punjab; two other temples in other locations (both in large villas) serve other Hindu constituencies.

The Christian community in Bahrain uses the large Catholic church (with a school), the historic Anglican church, and several other compounds scattered in the central districts of the city. The Anglican church grounds include the church itself, along with several wings. The spaces in those wings are loaned to a number of non-Anglican denominations and various associated groups. After several months on the island, I began attending meetings of the Ecumenical Council of Charity (ECC), held monthly in one of the rooms on the Anglican compound. The ECC is a nondenominational Christian voluntary organization specifically configured to reach out to individuals in crisis. Monthly meetings are informal and begin with a prayer. The remainder of the meeting consists of reporting on outreach activities currently under way and planning future efforts.

In the several meetings that I attended, discussion largely focused on the hospital visits conducted by a team of ECC members. Although their primary goal was to console individuals amid difficulties—and to pray for those individuals—the hospital visits also allowed the ECC to identify particular scenarios in which they might provide monetary or other forms of assistance to individuals in need. Examples from one of those meetings included the following:

- A Sri Lankan domestic worker had been diagnosed with breast cancer, but her sponsor refused to release her passport until she paid him 300 dinars [$850]. She was languishing in the hospital and did not have the money
to pay for her release. The council decided to contribute 100 dinars [$265] to this end.

- A thirty-eight-year-old Indian male was injured by an automobile while riding his bicycle. He had a heart attack and suffered brain damage. The man needed to be repatriated to India, and although the sponsor was willing to pay for three seats (so he could lie down), two more seats were needed for a nurse and an assistant. The council decided to refer this case to the Indian embassy and to the Indian Community Relief Fund, as they have funds dedicated to this purpose.

- An Indian laborer suffered a heart attack on a construction site and was languishing in the hospital. His sponsor was unconcerned with the laborer’s welfare. The ECC had successfully contacted his family to let them know that he was now in the hospital in Bahrain. Plans to repatriate him were under way, but details remained scarce. The council concluded that they would continue to evaluate the situation.

Overall, the ECC’s efforts typically focused on contacting other agencies and institutions, thereby engaging the disparate and apolitical diasporic networks that take responsibility for the various transmigrant constituencies. Often this task is as simple as contacting the various embassies on the island. In many situations, however, the ECC also provided monetary support, particularly when injured, ill, or dead transmigrant laborers faced unresponsive sponsors. This assistance, while often framed in terms of a Christian ethos, was provided to individuals regardless of religion, ethnicity, or nationality.

**Indian Ladies Association**

As the former president and longtime member of the Indian Ladies Association stated, “we are a high-profile organization.” Formed in 1956 by a group of wealthy women from Bahrain’s Indian diaspora, the Indian Ladies Association (ILA) draws its membership from the Indian diasporic elite. Originally a forum for women to “hold a monthly tea and meet weekly to sew, make handicrafts, and socialize” (Franklin 1985, 487), the ILA in the intervening years has taken on a variety of more ambitious projects and goals, many of which are directly aimed at serving both the diasporic and indigenous populations on the island. The Kitchen Craft Committee and the Beauty and Fashion Committee of many years’ standing have been joined by a Community Service Committee and its Workers’ Subcommittee. Membership in the ILA fluctuated between 150 and 200 members over the
decade prior to my fieldwork, and together the members, which included both professional women and the wives of businessmen and merchants, represented the social apex of the Indian community. The ILA also has a structural arrangement with the Indian embassy: the wife of the Indian ambassador is the honorary president of the association.

During 2002 and 2003, much of the ILA’s energies were devoted to the ongoing support and maintenance of SNEHA, a center for mentally disabled youth from the diasporic communities on the island. The seed for this project was planted by a former ILA member. She and her husband brought their mentally disabled child on their professional sojourn to the Gulf, and because the government-organized centers for such children on the island were for citizens only, they found no institutional support for the care of their child. Together the women of the ILA founded the SNEHA center, whose headquarters were located in a large office building in central Manama. The center was fully funded and partially staffed by the members of the association. In granting a charter for the center, the Bahraini government imposed a limit of twenty children, and the center was operating at full capacity in 2003. The budget for the center was approximately BD10,000 ($26,500), derived through a combination of donations and fund-raising. The SNEHA premises were also used for other purposes, including a low-cost English course aimed at the transmigrant working class.

During my time in Bahrain, the ILA also conducted a wide variety of programs aimed at the men in the labor camps scattered about the island. Once a month the women, working closely with a set of labor camp supervisors, arranged for a home-cooked Indian meal to be delivered to a particular camp on Friday, typically the day of rest for most laborers. The members’ contacts in the labor camps proved useful for planning the annual workers’ talent show, held on the grounds of the Indian Club in 2003 (see fig. 5.2). This large event drew 1,600 laborers (along with a variety of luminaries from the diasporic community, all of whom sat in the reserved section in front of the stage). Laborers performed skits and songs for a variety of prizes, including a round-trip ticket to India on Air India. Performers from the Indian diasporic community and a few imported from India sang songs and danced, and food was provided to all the men. As the chairwoman of the Workers’ Subcommittee observed: “[The workers] are talented, and they have the capacity, but unfortunately the way they live…they have no chance to show these talents. You see, you have to become a member of a club to show these kinds of talents, but where will they
get the kind of money to become a member? So we do this for them. They sing, they enjoy, they are quite happy.”

Among its many other annual activities, the ILA also arranges a show for the Bahraini emir’s wife and a variety of her female relatives and friends. As many of the women in the royal family have a minimal public presence, the event is relished by both parties.\textsuperscript{10} The ILA arranges for the event to be held in a five-star hotel, and, as a former president of the ILA described, “we put on a colorful dance or fashion show for them, arrange raffle prizes for them—it’s an evening just for them. It’s only ladies—about 400 or 500.” The ILA’s interaction with the royal family also includes visits to the emir’s wife’s majlis, where, often, the association receives substantial donations that fund its projects. The interaction between the ILA and the royal family is unusual in comparison to the activities of other social clubs and associations on the island, and is a symbol of the status maintained by the members of the ILA.

As the tenor of the chairwoman’s comments about the workers’ talent show indicates, reaching out to the poorest members of the transmigrant
class is an act that provides the men with a welcome and rare break from the difficult conditions they face in the camp and, at the same time, affirms the class distinctions within the diasporic community. The activities of the ILA—from its outreach activities with the labor camps to the private meetings with the women of the royal family—assert a parity between the elite members of Bahraini society and the elite members of the Indian diaspora. In other words, many of these activities highlight social class as the primary logic of the culturally plural space of Bahrain and, in doing so, push religion, ethnicity, and nationality into the shadows.

Social Clubs in Context

The social clubs and voluntary associations on the island take many forms, but they all share a set of challenges specific to the transnational milieu of contemporary Bahrain. Perhaps the foremost of these challenges revolves around the cyclical and itinerant nature of the transmigrants’ stay in the Gulf. The nature of the transnational environment—where individuals are moving back and forth between India or moving onward from Bahrain to other locations—makes the retention of a core set of members difficult. Those with ample free time to organize, manage, and lead clubs or committees within clubs are commonly individuals in well-paid positions who observe typical work hours, either seven o’clock to three or nine o’clock to five. It is these very positions, however, that the collection of government policies known as Bahrainization seeks to replace with citizen-workers. Hence many of these social clubs must constantly cope with member attrition—and particularly the members most capable of devoting the time and energy to the club or association’s activities. As the president of the Riffa chapter of the Lions Club described, “We started with 75 members, and eventually came down to less than 40 members. The main reason for the loss of members is departures related to the Bahrainization scheme. I don’t blame the Bahrainis—this is their home, their place. But that’s certainly the biggest cause. Like my brother—he left the island and is in the States, and he’s started a new Lions Club in Chicago. But yes, departure is a problem. Last year we lost ten members. The year before that we lost even more.”

By the end of my fieldwork in Bahrain, the president of the Riffa chapter had finalized his own plans for emigration to the United States. Vaishali, a longtime member of the Indian Ladies Association, painted a similar portrait: “Our membership fluctuates. This year, for example, I’ll
have a set of members that withdraw, but I’ll have other new members that come…. Over the last few years, many have either retired and gone back—gone on to Canada or gone back to India because their husbands have lost their jobs. But the association is steady—we do the work! There are at least twenty members like me who’ve been constantly active since 1985. But with the others, you cannot say from year to year.”

While clear about the challenges presented by the transnational milieu, Vaishali is also clear about the important role played by the social clubs and voluntary associations. Together, these social institutions comprise the basic social fabric of diasporic culture and society in Bahrain—the only diasporic institutions with some degree of permanence in the transnational milieu. For Durkheim, institutions such as these were the basis of society in that they transcend the individual’s temporal existence; in the transnational milieu of contemporary Bahrain, it is not just the lifespan of the men and women that pales next to the permanence of these institutions—it is the transmigrants’ temporary existence in the conduits of transnational migration that makes the relative permanence of these institutions so important.

The social clubs and other voluntary organizations face additional challenges in the context of contemporary Bahrain. The Bahraini Ministry of Social Affairs licenses and registers all social clubs. As one former club president commented: “The ministry must approve all these new clubs, and to get a license for a fresh club is not very easy. There are already more than 200 clubs here in Bahrain, and it’s difficult to regulate. They want everybody to merge and form larger clubs. There are sports clubs, professional clubs, social clubs…and the government thinks this is a problem.” In recent years, the Ministry of Social Development has monitored, disciplined, and closed several active clubs on the island. Oftentimes these events are in response to complaints from citizens about drinking and “mixing,” the term generally used for open and public interaction between genders. Vaishali also reported that the ministry curtailed the transnational movement of funds collected by clubs: “Initially, and even through 1991, we [the ILA] used to send money to India. We collect money, and we have a fund, so our members used to bring all kinds of applications. Suppose in my village there is a fund, an orphanage that needs a little money. So I can probably suggest my center, and maybe the name of somebody involved, but anyway, in 1991 the Ministry of Bahrain stopped that. There is no need to send it [money] to India, they said—why don’t you spend it here?”

Relations between the diasporic social clubs and the government reveal another aspect of governance of the transnational populations on the
island. The social clubs, while providing an important venue for sharing information and participating in the diasporic culture, nonetheless do not provide a platform for challenging the hegemony of the state, for asserting some semblance of basic rights for noncitizens, or for challenging the systemic aspects of the structural violence many foreign workers endure. Some of the clubs and associations seek to assist laborers in particularly dire circumstances—the Ecumenical Council of Charity was engaged in a variety of outreach activities to the most impoverished laborers, and a dedicated TASCA subcommittee dealt weekly with delivering various forms of assistance to the most marginalized members of the Tamil community. Generally speaking, however, these activities posed no challenge to the structure of relations underlying the violence and exploitation many of these impoverished foreign workers endured. In paying off sponsors, providing food and shelter to workers abandoned by their kafeel, or raising funds to help sick or deceased foreign workers return to India, these clubs and associations sought to redress the detritus of this system without confronting its underlying cause. In short, the clubs and associations’ activities were to be cultural, not political, in nature.

Indian Culture behind Walls

These social clubs and voluntary associations provide a constellation of options for performing “Indian-ness,” although, as many of the men and women stated, outside their homes and social clubs they were simply treated as South Asians. In essence, the markers of more specific identities—class, region, religion, and so forth—were elided in the public sphere of Bahrain. In their descriptions, these homogenizing experiences in the public spaces and workplaces on the island took many forms. Newspapers refer to the nationality of foreigners, reporting them as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and so forth. Even those Indians who were born and raised in Bahrain observed that having a Bahraini passport would do little to change the nature of their interactions with the citizenry: they are Indians and foreign to the genealogical conceptions of citizenship that shape relations between individuals and the state. In the world of Bahrain, Indian workers are constantly racialized. Faced with a system that reinforces this singular identity, social clubs and voluntary organizations provide a key venue for reinvesting in the specificities lurking beneath the transcendent Indian identity. It is in those venues that one can perform being a Keralite, or a Christian, or a
Tamil Catholic. In these clubs and associations individuals reconnect with the particularistic identities that make them Indian, that make them something more than just foreign workers. As the former president of one of the largest social clubs on the island described,

[For Indians] away from those clubs, their life in the general world of Bahrain is a second class life. They have to obey someone, they have to do unpleasureable things to please someone. There’s a kind of humiliation, frustration in their work. When they come from that world to the club, or to the Indian embassy, which is their own world, then there they remember that I’m an Indian citizen, and I have a right to complain about the table being dirty, or the bathroom stinking. They write a letter. It’s the action of a person that’s not satisfied with life in the outside world of Bahrain. He goes to his own, he’s got no family here, he can’t shout at his wife that his tea isn’t ready. So such people, they take it out on someone somewhere. And the only people that will listen to them are their own people at the Indian School, Indian embassy, or Indian Club. If they did the same thing at their job, they would say pack up and leave the country.

Sheba George (2000) observed, in her analysis of the husbands of Keralite nurses within a community in the United States, that the men who accompany the nurses are disenfranchised and disempowered in the American workforce. Voluntary associations—and particularly churches—offer “a unique setting for men to restore their lost identity and their self esteem. To compensate for demotion in the labor market and family, they use the church in three significant ways: to assert their leadership, to develop a sense of belonging, and to secure their exclusiveness” (George 2000, 163). Voluntary associations in Bahrain serve a similar function: as spaces beyond the direct purview of citizens and state, social clubs and voluntary organizations provide key venues for the performance of “Indian-ness” and, at the same time, for the expression of the fissures in that identity.

For members of the Indian diaspora, social clubs and voluntary associations provide one of the principal venues for the articulation and, alternatively, the rejection of class. At one level, Indian social clubs provide a closed system, outside the purview of citizenry and state, and beyond the habitus of everyday interactions between citizen and foreigner. The social clubs and associations are spaces where the statuses native to India can be deployed and utilized. Alternatively, some of the voluntary clubs provide
venues in which citizens and noncitizens mix, and, occasionally, locations where the class logic of the global capitalist system can be affirmed rather than rejected. At one Toastmasters meeting, for example, I watched a club secretary of Indian descent browbeat a Bahraini member for his suggestion on the format for an upcoming award ceremony. The Indian member’s loud and angry tone was unusual—I had never observed any interaction like this outside the context of these social clubs and other voluntary organizations. Clubs like this chapter of the Toastmasters, designed for cosmopolitan English speakers from all the various communities on the island, provide not only venues in which middle-class and elite diasporic community members practice English. They also provide venues in which the discourse of the professional class is practiced and, simultaneously, in which statuses achieved under the logic of the global capitalist system are deployed and affirmed. Unlike other spaces on the island, at this meeting the Bahraini and Indian were on equal footing.

At other junctures, however, voluntary associations and social clubs provide a venue for rejecting class hierarchies of the global, capitalist political economy, for these social clubs also provide a venue for reaffirming the statuses and identities of the homeland. Although an individual’s caste or status in India may hold little sway with his or her sponsor or, alternatively, in the larger context of Bahraini culture, those categories may find traction in the arena of the social club. Performing “Indian-ness” can take the form of reinvesting in the social and cultural aspects of Indian life that find no traction in the larger public sphere in Bahrain.

Social Clubs, Voluntary Organizations, and the Public Sphere

At first glance, these social clubs and voluntary associations might best be understood as another component of the stark social and cultural divisions that characterize the Gulf states. Amid the strikingly plural context of the contemporary Gulf, the proliferation of these clubs and associations in Bahrain moves the collective performance of Indian culture behind club walls and into conference rooms of the large hotels on the island. Although these spaces provide an arena for the construction of meaning—for the articulation of what it means to be an Indian, a Catholic Keralite Indian, or an elite cosmopolitan Indian—the generation of these identities seemingly occurs in enclaves beyond the view of the Bahraini public. If that separateness is as absolute as this analysis suggests, perhaps these clubs are
best understood as nodes or venues in the Indian diasporic public sphere rather than as components of an all-encompassing public sphere located in Bahrain. Put another way, are these clubs and associations part of a heterogeneous Bahraini public sphere?

Several points can be brought to bear against this perspective. First, it seems obvious that as cloistered as much of this cultural performance is, nonetheless it is in constant dialogue with the experiences these men and women have outside those walls. The iteration of particularistic Indian identities is an act intricately intertwined with the world in which many of these men and women work and live. In the habitus of everyday interactions on the island, these men and women are homogeneously framed as South Asian labor; hence the act of seeking and performing more particularistic identities occurs against that backdrop. In other words, the meanings and identities they construct behind club walls are a response to their experiences and frustrations outside those walls: the Lions Club’s outreach activities to poor and disenfranchised Bahrainis is an assertion of the diasporic elite’s status, of the elite’s complicity with the vision of modernity promoted by the state, and, in the largest sense, with the neoliberal logic of a system that favors class over ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and culture. Or, in another sense, the intra-Indian political machinations of the Indian Club provide an opportunity to be political in ways that one cannot be beyond the walls of the club. As both of these examples suggest, the activities of these clubs are directly related to the experiences these men and women encounter in the larger public sphere in Bahrain.

Rather than think of these clubs and associations as components of discrete diasporic public spheres, I suggest we think of them as active participants in this plural and more comprehensive Bahraini public sphere. In this chapter, I have focused on how participation in that public sphere is filtered, constrained, and truncated by the social relations on the island. At times that governance seems external in nature. One can easily see, for example, how clubs and associations must avoid the ire of the state and citizenry, and therefore move their activities behind walls. At other times, however, it becomes apparent that these groups internalize the terms of this governance and collectively negotiate their representation to fit the public they imagine. These forces and tensions are threads we can continue to trace in an examination of the English-language newspapers.