

What can

AROOP

A Series of Arts, Poetry and Ideas

Volume 3 | Number 1 | January - June 2018

TOTEMS AND TABOOS

What can and cannot be done

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AROOP: A Bi-annual Series of Arts, Poetry and Ideas
Volume 3 | Number 1 | January - June 2018

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Subscription Rates:
Single Issue: Rs. 500
4 issues subscription — Individual: Rs. 1,500; Institution: Rs. 2,000

Published by:
The Raza Foundation

Printing: Archana - www.archanapress.com

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Sudharak Olwe on the taboos of caste and their exactions. From the Conservancy Workers' series. One of the 'perks' of the job of a conservancy worker is getting a *kholi*, a house. Families living in the same 10 x 12 feet room is not an uncommon feature. In many of these *kholis*, a line drawn on the ground demarcates each family's territory. With 20-25 people in one room, fights and arguments often break out resulting in family members not speaking to each other for years.



Guest Editor's Note

TOTEMS AND TABOOS

What can and cannot be done

Nancy Adajania

The totem and the taboo are important – perhaps the most important – modes of marking out what is included and what is excluded in any group or society: what is sacred or acceptable, what is profane or proscribed.

The totem is what you rally around, identifying what is yours and no one else's. The taboo is what you mark as the border between yours and what is not yours. Both are legitimising and exclusionary devices: symbols around which to build strategies of identity-formation, enforced positively by belonging and negatively by marginalisation, even annihilation. Together, they spell out what can and cannot be done.¹

The totem and the taboo form an extremely powerful pair of consciousness-structuring tropes in political scenarios across the world in the age of *gau-rakshak* lynchings, Brexit, Erdogan's neo-Ottoman rhetoric, the rise of the far Right in Eastern Europe, Putin and his reliance on ortho-fascism, and Trump's xenophobia and sexism.

When I began work on this lexicon a few months ago, a new folklore redolent with familiar and not-so-familiar animal totems had seized our imagination in India. The Right fed us a bizarre myth about the mating rituals of our national bird, the peacock. Suddenly, the peacock was presented as a 'lifelong celibate'; the peahen achieved pregnancy by swallowing his tears. The Right also fed us a sinister myth: the sacred cow, whose by-products were compared to *amrit*, the food of the gods, was said to be in danger. In the name of protecting her, vigilantes set upon the vulnerable Other – Dalits and Muslims – whose livelihoods in the livestock, dairy and tanning industries were threatened with extinction.

This issue is dedicated to the courage and political acumen of the adivasis of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha, whose Pathalgadi rebellion has spoken truth to power.



The Pathalgadi Rebellion. Photo by Priya Ranjan Sahu. Image courtesy <https://scroll.in/article/878468/the-constitution-set-in-stone-adivasis-in-jharkhand-are-using-an-old-tradition-as-a-novel-protest>

The peacock and the cow in these accounts are totems of a neo-tribalism, destructive and divisive. But as I was completing production work on this lexicon, news of a new totem installed by the adivasi communities in the villages of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha presented itself as an optimistic augury for the future. The Pathalgadi ('stone implantation') rebellion is a rallying call for self-governance amongst the adivasis.² While the Mundas of Jharkhand are traditionally known to install a tombstone inscribed with a family tree, these green stone slabs – more than ten feet high, and inscribed with Constitutional safeguards to protect the adivasis' *jal* (water), *zameen* (land) and jungle – signal an invented tradition. It asserts adivasi autonomy from a rapacious Indian state that, in collusion with corporations, has been strip-mining the region and destroying its ecology.

It is ironic that this contemporary totem, which is the most public and accessible guarantee of democratic rights, has been created by the adivasis, who have generally been stigmatised as a backward and primitive people. The Pathalgadi totems could also be interpreted as a historical corrective to the famous Ashokan edicts inscribed on rocks and pillars. Although these public proclamations of emperor Ashoka preached tolerance among different sects and belief systems, his grand political vision was not particularly tolerant of the dissenting forest-dwelling tribes. Today, the legatees of those forest-dwelling tribes have constructed their own edicts to reprimand the Indian State for selling its land and resources to the highest bidder.

*

I do hope that the entries in this lexicon will carry forward this provocative, emancipatory impulse of the adivasis of Jharkhand. I have invited 43 contributors, including visual artists, architects, anthropologists, historians, critics, cultural theorists, novelists, poets and actors, to provide a keyword each, arising from their own urgencies and persistent preoccupations. One of the talismans behind this lexicographic project is Walter Benjamin's notion of 'felt knowledge' rather than an academicised or fossilised approach to knowledge and reality.

In these pages, you will find entries on taboos

related to caste, class and tribal identity –

'adivasi', '*jati*', '*poromboke*', '*haisiyat*', '*dougla*', 'village', '*mid paris re bapla*' and 'banning'

to gender and sexuality –

'breast', 'clit', '*in situ*', '*lihaaf*', 'Kali', 'menstruation', '*mushkil-shuda*', 'the wandering heart/ love', 'self-defence', 'self-expression', 'veil/ *niyat*', '*zai*', 'love', and Mary Beard on the first recorded instance in Western literature of a women's speech being restrained publicly (an extract)

and to religion –

'dog', '*hirsiya*', 'veil/ *niyat*', and 'discrimination'

On a cursory look, the reader might feel that the lexicon is dominated by taboos of one kind or another. This is true; perhaps it speaks for our conflictual and precarious times. But I would like to emphasise that taboos are presented under a dual sign here. The journalist and activist Aarefa Johari's entry on the 'clit' both exposes the taboos associated with this female organ, which has been subjected to grotesque forms of mutilation, as well as emphasises the need to reclaim it from religious superstition and patriarchal socialisation. The mythologist Vidya Kamat's entries on 'breast' and 'menstruation' perform a similar action of critique and reassertion of female agency. Art critic Rosalyn D'Mello, artists Vidha Saumya and Sakshi Gupta, and critic Deepanjana Pal write in a confident and unapologetic manner about female desire and passionate rage. The architect Kamalika Bose questions the invisibility of women architects in a canon dominated by male practitioners. The tonality varies from page to page – from an intimate whisper, to a proclamation or a declamation, to critical analysis.

The artist Ranbir Kaleka writes a surreal political fable; the artist Shakuntala Kulkarni nests her mentor K G Subramanyan's fable on proscription within her own contribution. The curator Laura Barlow writes on the Qatari artist Hana Al-Saadi's work, which pushes up against the edge of the unsayable in a context that must navigate between feudalism and modernity.

The artist Madhvi Subrahmanian turns the taboos associated with the shadow into a totemic presence in her work. The author Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar writes about a rare taboo in the Santhal community, which is otherwise open-minded in its attitudes, and does not look down on pre-marital sex or a love child.

The writing methodologies are deliberately diverse, in the belief that homogeneity kills expression and creates a fatuous sense of unity. While the photographer Sudharak Olwe ('*jati*') provides meticulous case studies, or rather his field notes, to expose the horrendous discrimination faced by

Dalits, the photographer Ram Rahman ('Nehruvian') shares images from his family archive (his father, Habib Rahman, was a pioneering post-colonial architect) to annotate the Nehruvian legacy, making good on the slogan, "the personal is the political".

The Nehruvian and Ambedkarite visions of India punctuate the pages of this book (Nehru is a totemic presence that has been turned into a taboo subject by the Hindu Right today; Ambedkar, a Dalit icon, has been appropriated by the Left and Right alike). The commentator Pratap Bhanu Mehta eschews hagiography to contextualise Nehru's contribution. The historian Sonal Khullar critiques Nehru's developmental policies that displaced adivasis from their land and livelihood. Olwe and Adajania, through their respective entries, annotate Ambedkar's argument regarding the Indian village, it being neither harmonious nor static. And Khullar, Adajania and the artist Nilima Sheikh map the struggle of non-metropolitan and non-academy-trained artists to assert their subjectivities.

The curator Sumesh Sharma ('dougl'), in his part memoir, part political commentary, writes about the poison of the Indian caste system, which Indian indentured labourers carried with them into the diaspora and have projected onto the Afro-Caribbeans in their new habitus. The former director of the Crafts Museum, Jyotindra Jain, who has championed the rights of the subaltern artist, writes a delightful and instructive memoir on how he developed a hierarchy-free approach to the visualities of popular culture, while also resisting censorship.

These entries are meant to read as portraits of different practices and trace the contours of a variety of thought processes. Like Jain, the artist Atul Dodiya weaves together personal memoir, artistic practice, political and spiritual belief, crowning Brancusi's 'Infinite Column' (which has a totemic significance in western art history) with a defecating goat. And the artist Manish Pushkale's '*kinchit anvitam*' offers an aphoristic meditation on art and abstraction, triggered off by the prehistoric rock paintings of Bhimbetka. Art historian Ming Tiampo and artist Anju Dodiya variously parse the taboos related to 'cultural appropriation' from an art-historical, transcultural and personal lens.

The Slovenian art historian Beti Žerovc takes the debate on entitlement into the heart of the global art world, which often pays lip service to questions of social inequity without critiquing its own worship of 'private property'. The historian Ananya Vajpeyi's entry on Carnatic music uses the metaphors of the ocean and the beach, which changes caste in

the course of a walk, to slip-slide between notions of entitlement and a shared commons.

The totems and taboos associated with violence take on different avatars. The British political anthropologist Gwen Burnyeat, who has worked with the victims of the Colombian armed conflict, the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, interprets their cultivation of the 'organic' cacao crop as a totemic symbol of resistance – against violence and displacement – affirming the principles of self-organisation and food sovereignty. What cacao is for Burnyeat, permaculture is for art historian Atreyee Gupta, who offers the Arabic word '*sumud*' as a form of silent resistance and recycling of value by the Palestinians against the horrors perpetrated by the Israeli defence forces.

While the artist Ali Akbar Mehta has contributed an illuminating annotated atlas of the colours of violence, the US-based Vietnamese artist Tiffany Chung has created embroidered maps tracing the forced migration of people globally; the author and illustrator Samhita Arni offers the Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar's magical totem '*simurgh*' as a talisman of healing; the Beirut-based artist Marwa Arsanios analyses the landscapes of 'self-defence' and 'self-governance' produced by the Kurdish autonomous women's movement. The Bangalore-based artist Pushpamala and the Yogyakarta-based artist Nadiyah Bamadhaj, albeit from different locations, offer a trenchant critique of caste, religion and gender-based discrimination (telepathically, the dog as victim and perpetrator of violence appears in both). Pushpamala has also contributed a moving tribute to the assassinated journalist Gauri Lankesh, whose advocacy of rational and secular principles enraged a newly emboldened and violent orthodoxy.

The chief editor of LeftWord Books, Vijay Prashad historically contextualises the taboos related to 'communism', even as the Belgrade-based artist Darinka Pop-Mitic illustrates a tragicomic poem on 'Lenin'. Vishwajyoti Ghosh has made illustrations on taboos related to sex in the Indian context; Mithu Sen has contributed a graphic poem full of black holes, where totems and taboos tumble into a state of un-becoming.

Translation is a political act. We have the scholar Rakhshanda Jalil ('*jism/lihaaf*') and the poet Ranjit Hoskote ('*barq*') translating poems and prose by Shahryar, Ghalib and Ismat Chughtai from Urdu (a language that has been forced into oblivion in independent India) into English. Both Jalil and Hoskote emphasise the literary culture of Urdu as a domain where the

questions of artistic freedom, social sanction, and aesthetic experiment were fought out vigorously.

Most of the entries in this book, even when they seem to be cast as either a totem or a taboo, are not presented as binaristic entities. A totem can shade into a taboo in the act of writing, and a taboo may come disguised as a totem. And then we have the totem and taboo appearing side by side in a subtly textured dialogue that is marked by lament and blasphemy, rebellion and surrender, choice and imposition: the storyteller/actor Danish Husain's '*alam/ hirsiya*', the novelist Belinder Dhanoa's '*proscription/ play*', the filmmaker and columnist Paromita Vohra's '*the wandering heart/ love*' and artist Soghra Khurasani's '*veil/ niyat*'. The artist Jitish Kallat contributes a deeply ambivalent term, '*homeostasis*', that twins against itself, acting as a mediatory device and a guarantor of balance between totem and taboo.

I am grateful to Ashok Vajpeyi, managing and life trustee of the Raza Foundation, for reposing his trust in me yet again. And also the artist Manish Pushkale, trustee of the Raza Foundation; Sanjiv Choube, member-secretary of the Raza Foundation; Bharti Sikka at Archana Press, Delhi, and Khorshed Deboo in Bombay, for their steadfast support in the production of this issue.



Group photo from the book launch of 'Some things that *only* art can do: A Lexicon of Affective Knowledge' (*Aroop*, Vol. 2, No. 1, July - December 2017) at the Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai. Front row (left to right): Shilpa Gupta, Ashok Vajpeyi, Archana Hande, Sampurna Chattarji, Navjot Altaf, Smita Dalvi. Back row: Jahangir Jani, Reena Saini Kallat, Nancy Adajania, Ranjit Hoskote, Mustansir Dalvi, Ranjeeta Kumari, Chandrachud Choudhury and Sudhir Patwardhan. Photo by Jitish Kallat.

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1. The title of this anthology might seem to point to Freud's contentious 1913 book, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. However, I reject Freud's unsubstantiated ethnographic evidence and his prejudicial equation of the psychic lives of supposedly 'primitive' societies with those of neurotics. There is a larger cultural and political field in which the dynamics of totems and taboos may be discussed afresh – the spirit of this anthology is to take back discursive authority from certain schools of anthropology and psychology that have long monopolised it.
 2. Priya Ranjan Sahu, 'The Constitution Set in Stone: Adivasis in Jharkhand are Using an Old Tradition as a Novel Protest' in *Scroll.in* (May 14, 2018) Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/878468/the-constitution-set-in-stone-adivasis-in-jharkhand-are-using-an-old-tradition-as-a-novel-protest>