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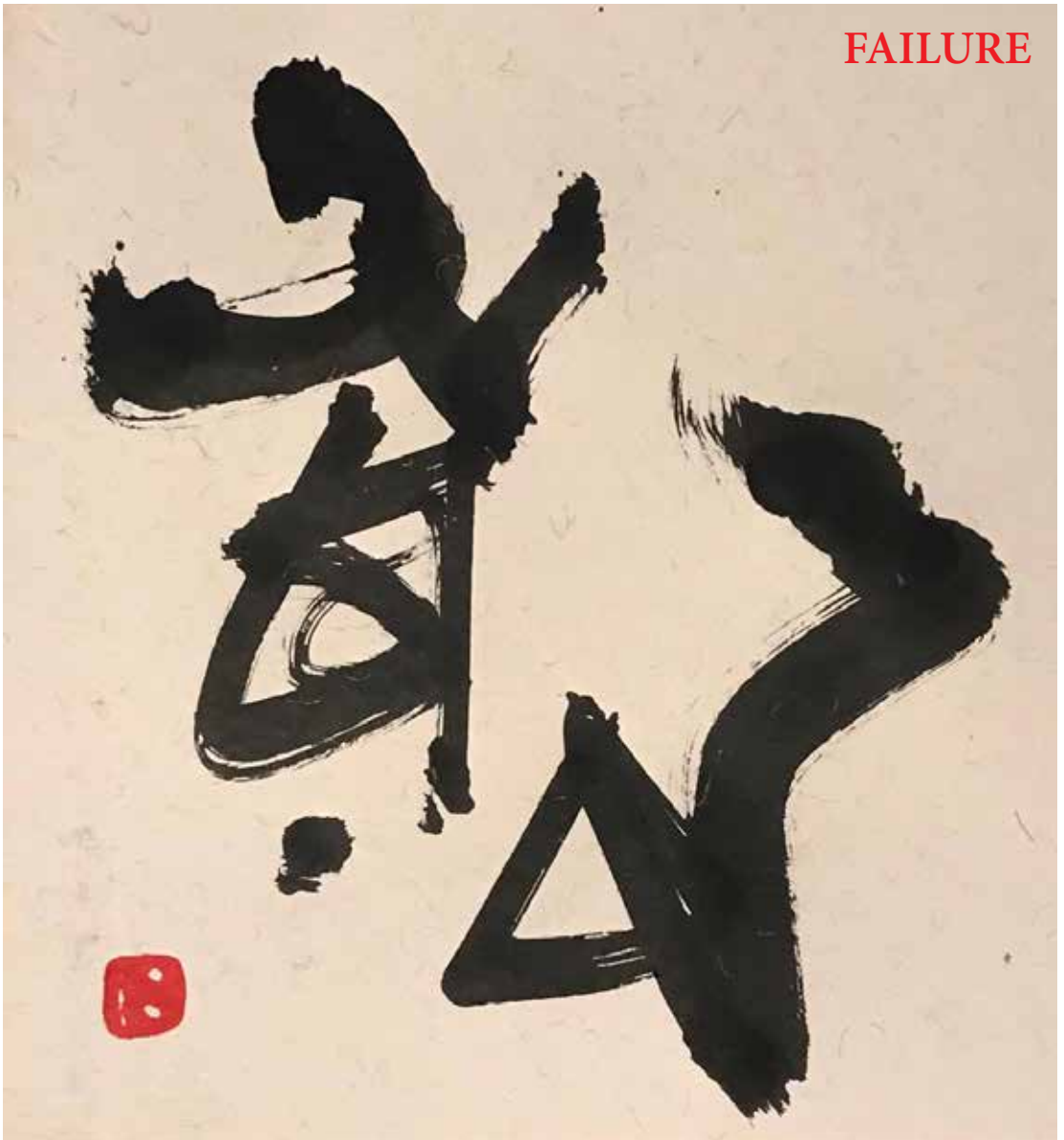

Anoop

A Journal of Arts, Poetry and Ideas

AROOP

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Volume 4 | 2020

FAILURE

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Foreword

FAILURE

Ashok Vajpeyi

We are in times when failure is oppressively present in many areas; in daily life, in social discourse, in politics, in creative endeavour. These are not only troubling times, but also, more crucially, failing times. Some of the hitherto sustaining and nourishing sources such as democracy, liberal ideas, economy, spirituality, dialogue and solidarity all, more or less, seem to be failing us. Or, maybe we are failing them. It can be argued that one should not confine oneself to measuring success or failure. There may be significance in both of them. Equally, the notion of significance itself is under severe assault.

To understand and explore failure, 'Aroop' journal of arts and ideas, requested the eminent social thinker Ananya Vajpeyi (who is deeply interested in contemporary forms of creativity and imagination) to guest-edit an issue on 'Failure'. The next issue, also under her guest-editorship, would explore 'Future'.

The Raza Foundation is happy that Dr. Vajpeyi has gathered substantial material which reveals the multiple, complex and illuminating ways in which some of most interesting minds from varied disciplines view failure both in personal terms and in the broader imaginary and reality.

Guest Editor's Note

FAILURE

Ananya Vajpeyi

In *Hind Swaraj*, Mahatma Gandhi delineated two currents of human culture in history: *sudharo* "the appropriate way", and *kudharo* "the harmful way". He translated these Gujarati words into markers of identity and difference – Indian civilization (*sudharo*) versus Western civilization (*kudharo*). He could think in terms of these two paths in 1909 because there was still at that time a real dilemma, despite 150 years of British colonialism already having inflicted deep and lasting injuries on India. Some recovery, some healing was still imaginable; India could even then stay on its own course, which was the auspicious and beneficial one for it (implied in the positive prefix "*su*" before "*dhara*" or stream). Not only was it the right way for India – it was a universal claim Gandhi made, that this was in fact how all of humanity ought to proceed. But through the 20th century, despite decolonization, in fact only *kudharo* prevailed. What was merely Western civilization became global civilization, and in the process, from a Gandhian perspective, the whole world lost its way. And this we now know to be true.

Between fascism and populism in politics, global warming and climate change in the environment, neoliberalism and inequality in economics, and finally, an utterly debilitating and intractable public health emergency in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, we are plunged into the darkest possible phase of recent memory. Democracy has failed. Ecology has failed. Feminism has failed. Socialism has failed. Capitalism has failed. Not just in the United States or Russia, not just in China or India, not just in Germany or the United Kingdom, not just in Israel or Brazil, not just in Iran or Turkey, not just in Pakistan or Sri Lanka – the failure is comprehensive, all encompassing, and complete. Gandhi's *swaraj*, *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, flaring like brief beacons of hope in impenetrable darkness, are now difficult to even recall, in their meaning, in their purpose, in their promise of that other word, *sudharo*, and of the world it could have stood for. We can ask who is to blame but we are better off asking if anyone is blameless, because the answer is simpler – no. We are all, each and every one, complicit in the failure of the human endeavor that appears to be unfolding all around us.

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The thought of dedicating this issue of AROOP to the theme of "Failure" came to us last summer. The outcome of the 2019 general elections suggested that most Indians no longer believed in a plural, diverse, and egalitarian India. Events throughout the latter half of 2019 – the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, the bifurcation of the state of J and K into two union territories, with the larger portion going to Ladakh, the indefinite incarceration of the entire political leadership of the state, and the imposition of a complete and utter communications and mobility ban in the region that lasted many months, seemed to usher in a dark chapter in the unraveling of India's liberal democracy. The subsequent introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, soon passed into an Act of Parliament; and the Supreme Court verdict on the Babri Masjid case, agreeing that the mosque had been wrongfully demolished in December 1992, and yet a Ram temple could be constructed at the site, came as seismic shocks, shaking the very foundations of the Indian Republic. The ideological defeat of the 'Idea of India' and the failure of state secularism seemed everywhere in evidence.

Many of those we invited to meditate on failure – whether scholars, writers, artists or poets – decided to take this invitation as an opportunity to reflect very broadly on the idea of failure. They did not respond in a superficial way or as a reaction to current events, disturbing as those were. Rather, they did as Gandhi had done, tried to take a long view, or see from a distance what sort of pattern was emerging in the world, whether politically, environmentally, economically or culturally. Manash Bhattacharjee developed themes already alluded to in his book, *Looking for the Nation: Towards another Idea of India*, taking two key concepts – *satya* from Gandhi and *karuna* from Ambedkar – to return to the twin burdens of modern India: communal violence, and caste inequality.

Vivek Narayanan shared a long passage from his forthcoming poetry about Rama, exploring, revisiting, and "writing through" the Ramayana poems of Valmiki and Kamban. He chose an episode of the epic where the themes are bewilderment and illumination, resonating intensely with our conjuncture. Brinda Bose brought together many strands of contemporary experience centered around debates on equality, sexual violence, the legality and legislation of gender identity, the perennial relationship between desire and death, and at the heart of all of this, a fundamental question about how our being is by definition a pulsation from *eros* to *thanatos* and back, a continuous fluctuation that is perhaps ultimately as intractable to language as it is to the law.

Dancers Astad Deboo and Aranyani Bhargav, he contemporary and she classical, one a doyen and the other a rising star; arts journalist and impresario Devina Dutt and her partner, the filmmaker Pepe Gomes; passionate and eloquent environmentalists Jane Da Mosto (in Venice) and Ashish Kothari (in Pune);

Indian-American writer of both fiction and non-fiction Rani Neutill (in Boston); leading intellectual historians of modern and pre-modern India Manu Devadevan, Tridip Suhrud and Maya Joshi; photographer, designer and chronicler of Indian art and culture Parthiv Shah; artists in many media and adepts at word and image alike, Mithu Sen and Samit Das; poets Bhuchung D. Sonam (a Tibetan living in Dharamshala), Sumana Roy (a Bengali living between her home state and elsewhere) and K. Satchidanandan, originally from Kerala but one of the great living voices known all over India and the world; scholar-activists Kavita Krishnan, Anirban Bhattacharya, Umar Khalid and Banojyotsna Lahiri; Sanskrit philologist and gifted storyteller Arshia Sattar; linguist, musician and fakir, Madan Gopal Singh – all responded to our call. From distant a diverse fields, genres, languages, sensibilities, practices and experiences, they agreed to face the wall or look in the mirror, however we may put it, the opaque / reflective surface of failure.

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From mid December to mid February there was an unexpected reprieve from this tsunami of failure. Protests and defiance erupted spontaneously in every corner of the country – against the blow to Kashmir's autonomy, against the CAA and its dire implications for religion-blind and equal citizenship, against a rising majoritarianism, and indeed, against Hindutva ideology that negated both the pluralism and tolerance of traditional Hinduism, as well as the secular principles enshrined in the Constitution. As police, paramilitaries and saffron storm-troopers swept in to progressive and left-wing campuses like JNU, Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Millia Islamia; as Kashmir's Internet shutdown was extended beyond anything ever seen in the democratic world; as gigantic and multiple detention centers were built for those who would fall out of the category of "Indian citizen" once the National Register of Citizens and the National Population Register were launched – even as these measures were hitting the news one after the other, all of a sudden Muslims, students, farmers, Dalits and women came out on the streets to resist peacefully but persistently.

Marching in the hundreds of thousands, they sang Faiz and Tagore's anthems; they carried photographs of Gandhi and Ambedkar; they swore allegiance to the tricolor flag and recited the Preamble to the Constitution of India; they courted arrest and staged sit-ins at the iconic India Gate in Delhi, Park Circus in Kolkata, Parivartan Chowk in Lucknow and squares and parks in every town and city, returning to the massive tactics of non-violent non-cooperation and civil disobedience reminiscent of the freedom movement in the first half of the 20th century. The difference this time was there were no political parties, no organized leadership, no opposition forces, no ideologues of left or right giving directions to the protestors. The only call which people heeded was that of their own conscience, their own love for their nation.

It seemed for this brief moment that the real India – the familiar and intractable mélange of languages, cultures, faiths, ethnicities, identities and histories – the India so hard-won through nearly a century of anti-colonial struggle – the India enshrined in its Constitution of 1950 – the India of Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar and Azad – the India that "we the people" cherish – had erupted once more into a festival of self-assertion. Shaheen Bagh became the crucible of a new *swaraj*. The fear of failure was banished from all our hearts. As Delhi approached its assembly elections in February, and the incumbent political party looked set to make a comeback, the stakes rose ever higher. Somehow, in an atmosphere filled with menace and tension, the election was held and won – but then the retribution was swift and unmistakable.

A Muslim-dominated part of northeast Delhi exploded in the worst communal violence seen in the capital since the pogram against Sikhs in November 1984. Muslims – and all of the defiant "minorities" that they came to represent – especially students and Dalits – were to be taught a lesson. Homes and businesses were attacked, looted and burnt; thousands of vulnerable members of the minority community fled the locality or the city, as they had been forced to do in Gujarat in 2002; the law and order agencies either abetted the violence or looked the other way; ordinary people from other parts of Delhi who tried to organize relief were blocked from entering the affected area. Under the pretext of containing this so-called "Hindu-Muslim riot", strict curfews were imposed and the long-running sit-ins against the CAA broken up. The newly re-elected Delhi government too, acted against a traumatized citizenry, seeming no different from the central administration and its brutal and communalized police force.

Then came the pandemic, and all of India ground to a halt by late March. In subsequent months, under cover of Covid-19, all routes and sites of protest were completely shut down – especially university campuses. (They are yet to reopen as this issue goes to press in late-August). Dozens of activists, students, journalists and academics were arrested and jailed, denied bail, prevented from speaking out on one pretext or other – even the pregnant, the aged and the unwell were not spared. This draconian process is still ongoing. No exception has been made to date for the mortal danger to inmates of crowded prisons or over-stretched hospitals in the time of Corona Virus.

Under the lockdown, Kashmir experienced an extension and intensification of its already ongoing shutdown. More armed forces than ever before were deployed in the Valley; there are deadly encounters every week; private homes have been torched and burnt to the ground. Further, a plan to demolish and rebuild central Delhi, destroying its historic colonial and independence-era architecture, most especially the Lutyens and Nehruvian heart of the capital, was announced and cleared for commencement. All objections by historians, planners, architects, conservationists and concerned citizens were over-ruled.

Despite a disastrous military run-in with China in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh, a reverse-migration crisis of staggering proportions, a comprehensive mishandling of the Novel Corona Virus outbreak, and a ruination of the Indian economy, the incumbent powers and their vision of a *Hindu Rashtra* continue to assert its unchallenged dominance over Indian public life and political opinion. Twelve months from August 5, 2019, with the grand ritualistic inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and the final dissolution of Kashmir's erstwhile special Constitutional status, the year of monumental failure has come full circle.

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It was no wonder then that this edition of Aroop focused on Failure threatened to become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. For the over two dozens invited artists, authors, critics and poets who submitted their work, another dozen failed to turn in what we had asked for, or indeed anything at all. Some of the issues we wanted most urgently to be addressed – the assault on JNU, the siege of Kashmir, the collapse of so many of India's public institutions that have found themselves in the crosshairs of the Hindu Right over the past 6 years, the scattering of the gains of the #metoo moment in the arts, the many failures of Indian cinema, the hollowing out of the Indian media – in the end, were not addressed.

Neither the political thought nor the literary theory around the theme of "failure" materialized as we had hoped. People said they tried, but gave up. People said they felt too daunted to even try. What appears to be the most significant failure of all, the failure of Indian secularism, sent many of its staunchest, most fierce proponents and defenders into a silence from which they have yet to emerge, from which they might never emerge. So many of our friends who have written at our behest before, familiar voices in public debate, felt that this time they just could not surmount the crushing weight of the circumstances. The *annus horribilis* of 2019-2020 took its toll on our project, as it did on everything else all around the world.

Yet despite the odds, so many contributors came through for us. Not only did they reflect, write, compose, make, speak, testify, recall and imagine, in doing so they in fact managed to both defy and defeat the looming threat of failure. "We shall overcome", they seemed to sing, and in this way, they did. From personal experiences to global challenges, from art to the environment, from fiction to photography, from poetry to painting, from dance to music, from history to criticism, from the abstract to the empirical, from the mundane to the sublime, the brave souls whose work fills the pages ahead in one sense refused to fail, and in another sense, gamely acknowledged, embraced and confronted failure when we insisted that they take it on. They failed to fail, if you will. They tried, they revised, they redrafted and they went at 'failure' until they succeeded. As Brinda Bose writes in these pages, quoting Samuel Beckett, each one felt compelled to "Fail again. Fail better".

As a first responder, so to speak, Prasanta Chakravarty took the bull by the horns – he wrote about something that concerns at least half of our contributors, if not almost all of them, namely, the state of academia, and especially the humanities. And it is telling how the metaphor of "civil war" – writ large in politics across the world – enters into the campus and the classroom, tearing apart teachers and students, male and female academics, public and private institutions, provincial and international universities, every axis of dialectic and engagement turning into a red line and an electrified fence. The devastation to the academy, whether Indian or Anglo-American, need hardly be spelt out.

And yet, living in Karachi, across the India-Pakistan border, theorist-theologian Nauman Naqvi sent a remarkable meditation on failure and divinity from a standpoint that is truly civilizational – which means not nationalistic, but rather standing in that Tagorean clearing "Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls". He draws sweet waters from the deep wells of Shia philosophy and Indo-Persian literary traditions, trying to staunch the fires of modernity by going to the long history of the pursuit of self-knowledge, liberation and transcendence that is perhaps the distillation of "our way", our borderless civilization, our record of what it is to be aware of and engaged with the human condition, Gandhi's *sudharo*.

Since failure has consequences, it cannot be addressed without taking responsibility. If our universities are in crisis, if our democracy is letting down its minority citizens, if our environment is reaching a point of no return, if our farmers and workers have no source of livelihood, if Dalits have no dignity, if women have no safety, if our cities are unsustainable, then we must acknowledge that somewhere the fault lies with us. We have failed to give ourselves the institutions and the leadership we need to not just survive, but also flourish. This is true not just in India, but in country after country. The slide towards authoritarianism, the undermining of liberal values, the ecological collapse – these are all planetary afflictions. Are we ready to face our own complicity in bringing about this situation? Are we able to fight back and rebuild, or are we prepared to surrender? Or, to quote the philosopher Charles Taylor, is what we can do describable only in terms of the expression of human dignity, that we stand "unconsoled and uncowed in the face of the indifferent immensity of the world"?

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Sincere thanks to Ashok Vajpeyi for his patience with me and with my contributors; he must have felt through the course of this difficult year that he was herding fish. He was especially kind to wait as I moved countries not once but twice since the time he first invited me to edit Aroop. Thanks to my quirky and gracious comrade in arms, Manish Pushkale, whose aesthetic acuity and visual skills I trust so completely as to have left all issues of design to him. Thanks

to Shachi Seth for all sorts of help, timely and untimely, with the unruly copy I managed haphazardly to assemble.

Thanks to my able predecessor Nancy Adajania, who is as generous as she is brilliant, as energetic and she is kind. Thanks to the gifted artist, poet, calligrapher, architect and curator Nilanjan Bandhyopadhyay, or Neel Babu, as I prefer to call him, for fashioning a cover for me with his inimitable fusion of Bengali and Japanese sensibilities, so beautifully embodied and reflected in every aspect of his life in Shantiniketan, on which he has also written an essay in these pages. And thanks most of all to the vision and legacy of the great Sayed Haider Raza (d. 2016), who started Aroop, naming it for formless abstraction. The Raza Foundation underwrites this truly experimental, unexpected and free-flowing venture since 2015.

Slouching Toward an Aesthetics of Failure

Brinda Bose

Even those who have not encountered much of *Samuel Beckett* or ever heard of *Worstward Ho* usually know a counterintuitive phrase from that short prose text: '*Fail again. Fail better.*' Indeed, these words have become so much of a commonplace that they are seen as akin to such frustrating nuggets as 'failures are the stepping stones to success' which, souping up sympathy with encouragement, are of as much worth as a passing warm handclasp on icy fingers in deep winter. But Beckett's words are not an echo of such pious homilies, exhorting one to learn from mistakes or not be derailed by non-achievement, nor advice to await success in some distant future after an ignominious experience. Nor is he being facetious here, trying to lighten disappointment with a joking punch in the gut. He is serious. He is cryptic, and contradictory – almost combative – but he is dead serious. In lines that follow on this short phrase in his text, he writes: *Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all.* (2009, 119)[1]

Not all of Beckett is ever clearly interpreted, but a sharp sense of these lines wafts over and through the reader. There is grimness, and despair. And then, strangely, some wit, and a shimmer, perhaps, of ironic hope: *Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all*. So what then might it mean to 'fail better'? I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's 'failed' experiments with hashish.

'to read what was never written'

This phrase from Hugo Hofmannsthal haunted Walter Benjamin, and found its way into three of his essays, the first time in his 1933 fragment on the origin of language, 'On the Mimetic Faculty'.[2] This craving, to go where language can never take us, sits at the very core of literature, a metaphor for the dialectic between silence and word, speech and meaning. How can one read what was never written? It would be a most unusual failure, we must assume, to enter a world of words that does not exist.

Benjamin's experiments with hashish, beside being inspired by Baudelaire's, were impelled by his anguish at the failure of language to put images into words to convey its meaning. At its best moments, hashish rose to the occasion: 'For a time I had visions of gigantic cakes, larger than life, cakes so huge that it was like standing in front of a mountain and being able to see only part of it. I went into detailed

[1]Samuel Beckett, *Company/Ill Seen Ill Said/Worstward Ho/Stirrings Still*. Faber and Faber, 2009.
[2]Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. London, 1983, p.162

descriptions of how these cakes were so perfect that it wasn't necessary to eat them, because the mere sight of them was enough to still all appetite. And I called that "eyebread."" (2006, 60)[3]

Like all ecstasies, Benjamin's struggle to conquer language through substance-induced visions left him bereft when they faded. He wished for words that would propel him to grasp what could not be captured in any dialect at all; this wish pushed him to where not many would dare, in sleeping and waking and walking. But it also exposed to him the immense possibilities of overreaching, and it gave him snatches of both euphoria and despondency that underpinned the rest of his life's work. Hashish failed him again and again; and he became better and better at failing it. But it gave him "eyebread" for cakes he could devour with his eyes and feel replete.

'I have in me like a haze/Which holds and which is nothing'

Fernando Pessoa, the poet of disquiet, grasps that which lingers and disappears at once, in love as in life, 'like a haze/which holds and which is nothing'. An affair soars, and falls. Amour is unrequited. An intimacy fades or grows unhappy. A passion exceeds reason, as passion is wont to do. Wanting becomes violent or vengeful. Consent wavers, or is given, withheld, refused, re-issued. Then, a bizarre paralysis of vocabulary begins to conflate the entire gamut of emotion, desire and action in human relationships to a baseline of hate and violence. There is not an iota of doubt in assertions that begin with a shout, '*All…*'; there is no recognition of decades of political, psychological and philosophical thought that validates a sense of rich life, thick description.

What of the formulation of genderqueer, that challenges the normative and the schematic? What of a liquid sense of good and bad, moral and immoral, success and failure, love and hurt and rage and tenderness, when they swirl and merge and diverge? What hangs under the sign of patriarchy, exactly? In a definitive age such as this, there is no time for traces, fractions, fragments: there are no spaces left for thinking about patriarchy as a perplex, for it has consumed all consciousness. Even queerness turns 'woke', though queering is a refusal to see the world as cognate, holding that no two sidelong glances spell the same desire. To queer patriarchy one must first stick a pin into the mammoth shadow of its utterance, and reduce it to its sharply-drawn fleshed contours: for a spreading over is also a thinning out.

'Resistance', says Judith Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 'takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read failure, for example, as a refusal of mastery… Really imaginative ethnographies depend upon an unknowing relation to the other.' (2011, 11)[4] A

[3]Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*. Belknap Press, 2006

movement cannot take flight on the basis of *all*-knowing. And so a significant movement against rapes in India begins to deflate, despite vastly increased social/media reportage of sexual violence against women, and in the face of unwavering and consolidating determination to find ways for its redressal; massive, raging occupations of the streets after Delhi 2012 gives way to largely social media fist-shaking after Hyderabad and Unnao 2019[5]: perhaps the politics of a crusade against 'rampant patriarchy' and 'everyday misogyny' increasingly flattens public reaction into a blur of vengeance, sacrificing focus and goal? Hashtag solidarities and beliefs turn helpless in the face of real, rampaging rapists who also strangle and mangle to destroy evidence. Because real criminals are beyond shaming.

It is astonishing that even then, the cry for law's intervention is prefixed by a caveat that 'the rapists must hang'. What need for due process then, if all have been judged and quartered first? The arts have gifted us a wealth of passions, that dart unsoftly into the vengeful and the monstrous, but this is a measliness of rage in waste land, Eliotesque: 'I think we are in rats' alley/Where the dead men lost their bones.' It is a travesty of feminist and queer thinking, hopping like rabbits from one arrogation to another with neither consistency nor logic, and a demeaning of our entangled and enigmatic selves sans emotional grandeur.

It is a dangerous moral instinct that cannot understand the irrationality and singularity of passions, and so seeks to condemn all. 'If I weren't fixated on Vincent, I would want the whole world… Writing about him is an appeasement.' (2017, 53)– so declares Hervé Guibert of his lover[6]. How would one enter such a world, where writing about a lover is 'an appeasement'? There is little question that Guibert's and Vincent's delight in the very being of the other is obsessive, transgressive, emotionally and sometimes physically violent. The printed text, *Crazy for Vincent*, mirrors this volatility, fragmented and delirious; it is a paean to passion, the kind any of us might dream of inspiring in a lover at least once in a lifetime, hoping we can stand the torment.

On the other hand, there are specific economic, psychological, social and emotional reasons for heinous rapes and other sexual violence. We are unable to stop their escalation because we have deliberately ellided these distinctions, to ferret out criminal acts amid a welter of irrational acts of passion. What is needed is a strategic defeat of the moralizing axis, to regroup critically and work toward reversing sexual violence case by specific case, addressing region, community, religion, culture, sexuality, tradition and class all intersecting with gender – and above all, through education (both formal and informal), overturning blind belief. This defeat must

[4]Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.

[5]The gang-rapes of Jyoti Singh in Delhi (2012), the Unnao minor (2017) who was burnt to death in 2019, and Priyanka Reddy in Hyderabad (2019).

[6]Hervé Guibert, *Crazy for Vincent*. Translated Christine Pichini. Semiotext(e), The MIT Press, 2017

fold into itself the multiple possibilities of density, tensile elasticity, compactness and durability in the emotional spectrum – of human emotions that exist in a range of exquisite greys and scarlets, of our own responses that flicker and change, of our understanding that regressive moral strictures do not a dynamic society make.

It was once a truth universally acknowledged that most of us were partial to being admired, or flirted with, or loved, or touched with tenderness. When we desire these intimacies, we also take the risk of them failing us; when they do, how do we make them 'fail better'? Desire is innately an impulse to transgress and overreach; to contain our own ardour or rebuff an unwelcome one are the toughest lessons that life in the everyday teaches us. So poetry, cinema, art, theatre tell us over and over – not how easy it is, but how difficult. Iago's words warn of only one of love's many maladies, 'O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!/It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock/The meat it feeds on.' (*Othello*, 3, iii)

And so we are to distinguish between consensual passion (even if or when gone wrong) and non-consensual criminal sexual violation; so Gayatri Spivak writes somberly in the autumn of 2019, drawing a lesson from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: 'Complicit withholding of rape, sustained by education against mere belief, that is all we can hope for. It is a great deal, for all laws fail otherwise.'[7] Education (or indeed, the lack of it) has, over and again, failed to hold us up against belief, and belief has caused laws to fail. 'We believe' – fake godman or fellow in caste/class/gender/race identity – is a dogma that can only hurtle us down to the burial-ground of all 'movements', fourth wave or fifteenth wave.

What we need now, urgently, is a refusal to believe anyone or anything blindly, and the nurturing of a sceptical, critical eye. And with it we need a creative imagination, and the ability to dream, so that we do not expel passion along with pain… 'I speak of love awake/I speak of love in my dreams/To the water, the shadows, the mountains,/To the flowers, the grass, the fountains', Mozart's operatic *The Marriage of Figaro* promises us. To always be able to conjure up the magic of love and laughter and touch, and not consign ourselves to becoming creatures bereft of pleasure. Not to believe that all loves fail, but to learn the hard way that some may. 'For all laws fail otherwise', as Spivak sums up in pitting 'education against mere belief'.

If we can acknowledge that we have failed to give ourselves a wide and deep enough education to nuance us against graceless, lumbering, overwhelming belief, then we can pull ourselves out of this deep well of anti-criticality that we have fallen into, and envisage lives that are stitched out of varying swatches of bliss and loss, always in ebb and flow. Indeed there is monstrous violence and vengeance all around us to be

[7]Gayatri C Spivak, 'Citizens, Complicity and Violence'. *Frontier*, Autumn 2019.

defanged. But there is also tenderness to be embraced, and when the old fail, newer, perhaps better, loves and desires to be foraged and found, if only for a while. Till we can 'fail better' – that is, till we are impelled to search for other unreachable dreams.

'I never knew how to love… I only knew how to dream of loving'

To return to the inimitable Pessoa, poet of more than seventy heteronyms, writing of an imagination of love more dream than real: 'In the wide and dusky corridor that's at the back of the palace I often strolled with my fiancée . . . I never had a real fiancée . . . I never knew how to love . . . I only knew how to dream of loving . . . One day I was found dressed up as a queen . . . I was dreaming I was my royal wife . . . I liked to see my face reflected, for I could dream it was someone else's face—namely that of my beloved…

It isn't me who's telling you this . . . Who's speaking is what's left of me.'[8] What is left of Pessoa is the remainder of loving when it fails, as all loving must – and when it ascends to dreaming. The beloved is a ghost, the beloved is a queen, the beloved is oneself dressed up as a queen, the beloved is someone else's face and one's own. How does one convey all of this at once, both real and unreal? One cannot. One must not. And so the speaker is not whole, but diminished, 'what's left of me'. Literature, says Jacques Rancière, 'has the misfortune to have only the language of written words at its disposal to stage myths of a writing beyond writing, everywhere inscribed in the flesh of things.'[9] But it is not only literature that has this misfortune; so has the lover the misfortune of possessing only a finite number of ways to stage myths of a love beyond love, everywhere inscribed both in the flesh and the dream of things.

'*for henceforth you will always keep something broken about you'*

Marcel Proust set out 'in search of lost time' with a simple caveat at the starting line, that memory was made and impelled by loss – or failure, if we wish. All we can do to 'fail better' is to recognize the finitude within which we draw and redraw the circles that will move us toward our quest for human perfection. In a 1907 letter to his friend Georges de Lauris, Proust writes about grieving thus: 'Let yourself be inert, wait until the incomprehensible power... that has broken you restores you a little, I say "a little" because henceforth you will always keep something broken about you. Tell yourself this, too, for it is a kind of pleasure to know that you will never love less, that you will never be consoled, that you will constantly remember more and more.'

The poet Tennyson had said, in Ulysses' voice: 'that which we are, we are'; this then is the tempered steel of the one who fails better, this sharpened sense of self,

[8]Fernando Pessoa, *The Notebook That Never Was*. Translated by Richard Zenith.
[9]Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*. Translated by James Swensen. Columbia UP, 2011. p.175.

a reflexivity that does not allow for the fine division between public and private, performing activism and restoration at once, unhappy with both one's avatars. Here there is no room for abjection or facile empathy: the will is 'not to yield', despite much that is taken – for much abides. 'For it is a kind of pleasure to know… that you will never be consoled', says Proust. The real reckoning is with oneself, to keep those fragments – all that is 'broken' about one – always within sight and sound and sense, like a touchstone.

On Failure and the Experience of Divinity: A *Noha* in Prose

Nauman Naqvi

Perhaps among the most well-known of his innumerable elemental insights, there is a remarkable testimony on the subject of failure by Imam ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, upon whom be eternal peace together with the Prophet himself, who called him the face of God. The original sage of Islam who follows the Prophet of peace, the only one ever to have been born in the House of God, the Kaaba itself, in whom divinity is manifest in deed and word, as much as in divine visage and accent – the one who the Prophet designated his inheritor, and nominated the portal to the city of knowledge that he himself is: thus through whom the cognitive content of Islam, the expansive compendium of its essential contemplative, reflective and analytical, as well as ethical, literary and spiritual discourses and techniques, is transmitted and inherited in nuce – whose name resounds in our inner ears with the call of the divine in an ecstatic din of discourses and chants, shouts and melodies, the name they say is luminously inscribed on the lovely face of the gentle full moon, the very name of exaltation and theosis itself, Ali was asked the most essential existential question of all: 'How have you recognized your Lord?' Given his extraordinary powers and abilities, his matchless stature, the answer given by the impeccable Imam – preserved in the *Nahj ul-balagha* (the 'Limit of Eloquence/Sapience'), the main collection of his discourses – is truly astonishing, at least or especially to the modern ear: "I came to know the Glorious God through the shattering of my intentions, and the dissolution of my commitments, the waning of my resolve."

Imam Ali, unmatched in the sagacity and wholeness of his intentions, as in the depth of his commitments and the indomitable strength of his resolve, testifies here not only to a shattering experience (no doubt repeated) of failure on all of these essential existential fronts, but also bears witness to the essential relation of this enervating experience to the intimation of Divinity. Truly it is said that Ali is *mazhar-ul-ajaib*, the 'revealer of strange wonders', and *gharib-ul-ghuraba*, 'the strangest of the strange'.

Ali's essential existential insight is subtly expressed in the 20th c. by one of the great ghazal poets of its first half, Yagana Changezi, whose lovely *takhallus* ('essential poetic name') was 'Yaas' ('longing'), and who was also a Shia ('partisan') of Ali:

بجز ارادہ پرستی خدا کو کیا جانیں

وہ بد نصیب جنہیں بختِ نارسا نہ ملا

bajuz irada-parsti khuda ko kya janein
vo bad-nasib jinhein bakht-e-narasa na mila

what do they know of God but the worship of their own intentions
those unfortunate ones who weren't given a destiny unreachable

The distich is, in fact, a reiteration or re-citation in verse, of Imam Ali's insight into the experience of failure as essential to any intimation of Divinity: an intimation, it must be said here (if only briefly), that at once necessarily implies refreshment, for Divinity vivifies and begins (*al-hayyo* and *al-qayyum*, 'the vivifier' and 'the establisher', that are among the most common of divine names, recited together) – a beginning however tempered, yet rendered more inwardly intense for having intimated divinity, having touched, been touched by the divine precisely in the moment of failure.

Yaas is, of course, hardly alone in this intimate inheritance (however singular he might be – 'Yagana', 'the unique one', being his other *takhallus*). Indeed, in some sense a large part of the tradition and ethos of the ghazal per se is a reflection on failure, unattainment. The beautiful, divine beloved, forever out of reach – or who, in any case, you never ever can get enough of: this is the essential experience of the ghazal, ultimately derived from the scene of the lover pining in the desert, bereft with longing and memory, in the wake of the departure of the beloved's caravan from the site of their acquaintance, the essential mise-en-scène of the *nasib*, the Arabic poetic genre from which the *ghazal* is said to be inherited.

It traces an *enervating experience*, an experience captured with sublime simplicity, an elemental concision, in a distich by the 13th-14th c. poet, Amir Khusraw. The distich is from a marvelously simple love poem, of which the charming scene is a dialogue of question and answer between the passionate and committed lover, and the elusive, demanding beloved. It is, in fact, at the very end of this dialogue, in the length of which the lover has been asking the beloved questions about herself – the *maqta*, the final distich in which the poet conventionally either addresses, or otherwise refers to himself – that the lover asks, as it were, the essential question about his own 'identity':

گفتم کہ خسرو ناتواں
گفتا پرستارِ منست

guftam ke khusro na-tavaan
gufta parastar-e-man ast
I asked, who is this enervated/impotent Khusraw
She said he is my worshipper

An 'identity' that is not one. The true lover, the one who lives and dies by the ethos of love, is an *enervated being*. The potentiality for love is born of an impotentiality – i.e., a potentiality that is not one. The ethos of this poetic tradition is the pedagogy and cultivation of enervation, the way of the gentle lover, his energies consumed by the demands and strictures of the ethics of love. Thus the *ghazal* is the song of an enervated subject, the loving lament of 'impotentiality'.

Why might one need such an education in enervation, such exhausting instruction in impotentiality? I might refer to the ladies here to settle the question of whether men, at the very least, require such instruction. But a rigorous philosophical answer has long been available via Aristotle – '*Arastu*' in Arabic, that great Muslim philosopher, who Ibn Sina called, *al-mu'allim al-awwal*, the First Teacher – and who Agamben explicates and appropriates here:

In its originary structure, *dynamis*, potentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own *sterēsis*, its own non-Being. This relation constitutes the essence of potentiality. To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality;* and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being.[1]

It's not just about love, then – or rather, it is about loving in all its forms: thus about being in general – a loving being that is, *being as loving*, an intensive being that, at once, continually withdraws into its own non-Being. Impotentiality is essential to potentiality. This paradoxical experience might perhaps be better intimated by the demanding experience of articulation, that is, in the analogous relation between language and silence – silence, that is, its own absence from which speech continually emerges, the abyss language encounters throughout its own articulation: as the very condition and resource of its own possibility. This is also why the most eloquent expression (like the most loving gesture) comes literally from nowhere, or as the poet Ghalib said, from '*ghayb*', 'absence' – but also the 'world of the Unseen', conviction in the vertical existence of which is an essential article of faith, for this occult vertical space contains the entire set of beings and conditions essential to faith and to 'cosmologic', the logic of the existence and being of the cosmos, starting with God, the angels, the after-/ultimate life, the demonic, etc. The limit of language, of eloquence, bears an all but palpable trace of this absence from which it arrives, even as it is at once, pregnant also with an intimation, the promise and destination again, of *ghayb*.

There is, indeed, a very starkly obvious relation between the experience of failure and the intimation of divinity: it is the necessary difference *and* relation, difference

[1] Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Edited and translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

in relation, between finitude and the infinite. Only in the experience of finitude may the infinite be intimated – and, indeed, vice versa: only with an intimation of the infinite may finitude be grasped, or to put it by practical implication, only in and against the measureless measure of the infinite, may the finite itself find (its own) mortal measure. And without a sense of limit, finitude and measure there is no sense of self – which is to say, there is no sense of anything at all, only a senseless world without limit, measure or rhyme. How could it be otherwise?

For all its magnificent eloquence and elemental contemplative intensity, this is a world of extraordinary humility. It corresponds deeply with another astonishing and revealing insight offered by Imam Ali, where he locates the foundation of *shirk* – i.e., the association of non-divinity with divinity, the mis-ascription of divinity that is the ultimate transgression against tawhid, the *gravest* violation of the absolute singularity of divinity – in narcissism. The misascription of divinity, Ali tells us, is rooted in its appropriation, i.e., in the *self-ascription* of divinity, however occult. In this world, narcissism is the greatest enemy, a surrender to the diabolical fiend whose mode of operation the Quran describes as *waswas-ul-khannas*, 'the retreating whisperer' who speaks to us through the egotism of our own tormented souls.

It is a world that could not be further from the one we now inhabit. From the point of view of *this* world – our world, now – all of the foregoing can only appear as nonsense, insanity. In this world, as far away as possible from any intimation of divinity, failure (*not shirk*) is the greatest sin of all: thus 'loser' is increasingly the foremost term of vicious abuse globally, even as it is audibly stamped with its modern American, Anglo-Saxon origins. It is a world utterly, willfully devoid of the fear and the love of God, a world void of any apprehension of a certain justice of the living, loving God.

Indeed, how could it have been otherwise? The age of humanism and Enlightenment – of the glorification of the human and its powers – could only have ended in this dismal insanity; where the most essential of human experiences, that of failure, coextensive indeed with the human's mortal existence, indeed with its ultimate destination, the finitude essential to its experience, to the very possibility of experience, failure becomes the anathema of anathemas. The age of progress – the senseless idea of a historical, secular salvation, the monstrous child of Western Protestant Christianity that now holds the planet in its demonic spell, enchanting humans with their own contraptions, cures and comforts, as if any of these had the slightest salvific significance – could only have ended in Trump, whose befuddled view of existence is a kind of secular-historical gnosticism: Providence as an existential battle between 'winning' and 'losing', a bare-bones presentation of the secular theological dogma of Progress. Nothing is after all, more secular than money and power.

Not to mention sex: nothing could be more violently opposite to the ethos of loving impotentiality invoked earlier, than Trump's (ultimately comic) pompous virility – the obscene culmination of the valorization of 'virile' masculinity throughout these modern centuries of ambition. Nothing also could be more viciously antithetical to the reflective and religious essentiality of failure discussed above, than Trump's insane and revolting mantras of 'winning' – the central prospect he offers to his voters: ruthlessness. Trump, who for all the limitless debasement of his soul, is held as the 'hand of God' by modern American evangelical Christianity, the supremely obscene incarnation of the 'prosperity gospel', itself the most vulgar apotheosis of the dogma of material progress, of secular-historical 'success'. It is a world of vainglorious victors and sore losers – a world in which all veils have been stripped from the basest of human impulses, an obscene world, devoid of grace: a pornographically dark world. Imam Ali warned: 'Beware of the world, for verily it is deceptive, delusive and deceitful. It is a provider that deprives, and one who clothes you yet leaves you naked.' Trump is, indeed, the most pornographically naked of emperors, and with him America – the 'greatest' of empires in world-history, in its long history of imperialism – now the most obscenely naked of empires.

Trump is, of course, only one symptom of the vertiginous collapse of the modern world, one in a list that now grows sky-high by the day. But what a massively obscene carbuncle of a symptom: it is as if, in his excruciatingly comprehensive obscenity, if he didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent him – making him a kind of exquisite, if darkly comic, poetry of history. In any case, as POTUS, he enjoys preeminence, and shows in his aforementioned 'gnostic' obsession with 'winners' and 'losers', the essential ethos of this age, and points us both to an essential point of its origin – the modern valorisation of ambition – and of its destination: the hollowness and doomed senselessness of this ambition.

I find it endlessly astonishing and thought-provoking that as late as Shakespeare – as recently as Shakespeare – 'ambition' in the English language (which else?) was anathema, as is famously evident from the repetitive use of the word in Brutus's speech justifying his murder of Caesar to the Romans on the grounds that Caesar was 'ambitious', i.e. vain and selfish, a usage subsequently repeated in the play by Anthony, in his refutation of this fatal charge.

Even Adam Smith, recognizable to us as fully modern – indeed one of the well-known 18th c. founders of modern thought, of modernity – was ambivalent about vanity and ambition, thanks to his inheritance of Stoicism, even as he saw it as essential to the growth of commerce, hence to progress. By the 19th c., all such reflection and restraint had vanished, and Thomas Babington Macaulay, for instance – that great pedagogue of colonialism and the civilizing mission – could see as an essential pedagogical charter of colonialism, the instilment of ambition,

historical as much as individual, in the lazy natives of India. Indeed, such was the magic of the times that even such a critical and cautious observer as Tocqueville could put his faith in 'meritocracy' in America – that modern breeding ground of ruthless ambition – as that which might redeem the destruction of aristocracy, no doubt because despite his misgivings, Tocqueville saw progress as providential, thus inheriting the fatal flaw of modernity, collapsing as it does, the difference between the finite and the infinite into a monstrous absurdity hurtling across the planet, wrecking all in its wake.

This grand historical charter of making men ambitious for their own and the world's progress, their own and the world's secular-historical salvation – a senseless oxymoron if there ever was one – was of course transmitted to, and taken up enthusiastically by, a class of the colonised themselves, to whom we owe not only our own modern postcolonial personal and historical energies, but also our national existences – nationalism being ultimately nothing more than personal and historical ambition, individual and collective narcissism. Needless to say today, on this register too, the destructive hollowness of ambition and narcissism is no less evident, as nationalism seems to irrevocably proceed, virtually everywhere, towards its abyssal *reductio ad absurdum* in fascism.

This catastrophic turn in nationalism, too, is but a symptom. Everywhere, and in everything today, the world of ambition – the world where failure is anathematised – hurtles, as if by the most rigorous and urgent karmic logic, towards total collapse and fathomless failure: nowhere more evident than in the horrifying spectacle of biospherical disintegration. Only now, thanks to Progress and the destruction of experience, it appears that there is nary an intimation of Divinity in the increasingly palpable, shattering experience of imminent and unprecedented world-historical collapse and failure.

There will be though – there is bound to be. It is not only logical, but promised by God, who tells us that once everything passes in the wake of its destruction, only the Face of God shall remain – or in Faiz's words: *bas naam rahega Allah ka*.

Satya and *Karuna*: A Critique of Reason in Indian History

Manash "Firaq" Bhattacharjee

If you do not tell the whole truth about your past, you allow others to tell lies about it.

The popular history of post-Independent India has gone way past this warning. Take, for instance, a book on Partition published as late as in 2000 that made a huge buzz in the country. Few questioned why it took fifty-seven years for such a book to appear. The fact that Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* became an event in India's postcolonial publishing history shows how long people waited to read about the horrors they had only known about in passing.

Professor Rajeev Bhargava once narrated a story regarding a conference on Partition he had organised in 1997 at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. A Punjabi Hindu man shared an incident of his childhood during the riots. He heard cries of the Muslim woman next door, where a Hindu mob had entered. The iron in his soul kept him unmoved. He carried the guilt in his heart since. It dissolved into tears in that cathartic moment. The sight triggered off a wave of outpouring among other men in the hall. These men, Bhargava said, were not given to exhibiting emotions in public. But they cried like babies.

It was a dormant, but real side of silence that erupted on that occasion. The public confession of guilt soothed an old wound in the heart. It however, did nothing to history. India's post-Partition history had to record such stories. Our textbooks and public culture did not device a way to address the pain. There was no healing, no reconciliation. People's wounds were forced to go into hiding after Independence.

The time marking the beginning of Indian nationhood was framed by the image of Nehru flying white pigeons after his historic Independence speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort. It finds a privileged corner in school textbooks as the liberating symbol of India's freedom. Images of scavenging birds feasting upon piles of dead bodies in divided Bengal and Punjab were considered too stark for children or the public gaze. The damaged side of the coin of freedom had to be kept out of view. What couldn't be represented was erased from the nation's syllabus, deserving nothing more than a footnote. Partition got sidelined as a small episode within the larger story of anticolonial struggle and freedom.

It allowed space for organisations sensitive to Hindu sentiments alone, to thrive, and prolong the communal narrative. Their foot soldiers were among my father's

friends, who distributed pamphlets on Hindu-Muslim conflicts. My father was a refugee from Mymensingh (in erstwhile East Bengal), who came to work in Assam in 1951. One of his friends, a mild mannered but wily old man, often told us stories how Hindus defended themselves against Muslims during Partition riots. The motive was to keep the fear of the enemy alive. But I never understood who the enemy is.

My closest friend in school was a Muslim. During Eid, I never missed the magic of his mother's mutton curry and sevai. His Eid wasn't complete without Kishore Kumar singing on radio, "Aye Khuda Har Faisla". There was childlike curiosity about each other's religion. Our religions did not come in the way of our seeing many things in the world from music to love similarly, as friends tend to. As schoolchildren, we suffered the trepidation of the Anti-foreigner's movement in Assam from 1979 to 1983. Our contempt for the communal hostility around us, however, never translated into hate. We had enough music in our souls, to be lured by ugliness. Beauty, and friendship, saved us. When my friend was scared to return home from his engineering college after the Babri Masjid demolition, I went to the bus stop to pick him up.

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The national syllabus of history rightly highlighted Gandhi bringing the concerns of the peasantry into the freedom movement. It was the year of the Russian Revolution, when Gandhi led the peasants of Champaran. But the syllabus did not invest with equal keenness, in Gandhi's political commitment towards Hindu-Muslim unity.

In a speech at Johannesburg in March, 1905, Gandhi mentioned the 13th century weaver-saint, Kabir, who tried a "fusion" between Hinduism and Islam in Benares, but failed. The failure did not stop Gandhi from making a *political* attempt in the 20th century to reconcile the two communities.

Writing the *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, Gandhi articulated the idea of social history based on the "force of love" that he contrasted to the idea of political history based on conflict. His experiments with truth aimed to test the force of love in politics. Gandhi's most memorable gesture was his support for the Khilafat movement by Indian Muslims in the 1920s. In reply to a question on the Khilafat in January, 1921, Gandhi said, "Hindus should help the Muslims as a matter of duty". In the words of scholar Shabnum Tejani, for Gandhi "the Khilafat was a Hindu question *because* it was a Muslim question." It was probably the most promising moment in the beleaguered history of Hindu-Muslim relations, during the colonial period.

Two decades later, Gandhi did not waver from his initial commitment towards Hindu-Muslim unity. On 27th January, 1940, he wrote in *Harijan*: "My belief is

unshaken that without communal unity, Swaraj cannot be attained without non-violence. But unity cannot be reached without justice between communities... I can disarm suspicion only by being generous. Justice without generosity may easily be Shylock's justice." Gandhi associated Swaraj with Hindu-Muslim unity. Freedom, in this specific, *political* sense, was a restoration of ties between the two communities.

India achieved freedom on 15th August, 1947. But in the Gandhian sense, India never attained Swaraj. Partition was not justice. It was a juridical compromise that took endless lives. Generosity was impossible in an atmosphere ruled by the politics of self-interest. Hindus and Muslims measured their rights and the equation of power through the colonial logic of instrumental rationality.

In her diary, *The Lonely Pilgrim*, Manubahen Gandhi recounts asking Gandhi during their Noakhali sojourn in 1946, why he cleared with his own hands, the dung and human excreta thrown into the streets by Muslims who were opposed to his visit. Gandhi said, "I don't mind it. There's nothing wrong if they let off pent-up steam against me in this way." Gandhi did not decry expressions of animosity. His political ethic was to transform affective relations.

While reading this episode, I remembered my father complaining how Gandhi always reached out to Muslims, when riots broke out during Partition. I shared this in my political philosophy class in JNU. Professor Rajeev Bhargava asked the class, with rare intensity, "Tell me, if Hindus and Muslims are killing each other, as Hindus who will go with empathy to – *first*?" There was a flutter of silence in the room.

In fear, the heart beats for the self. In desire, it beats for the other. Ethics is a matter of priority, but one that is not based on reason, or self-interest. Ethics is a destitute of violence, looking for the intimate "enemy".

Today the Hindu right-wing government cleans Gandhi off his ethical politics, while it uses him as a hollow icon for cleanliness. It is a cunning attempt to clean its hands off Gandhi's murder by the man who belonged to the nationalist school of banality.

Truth be told, it was the Congress regime since Independence that was responsible for taming and reducing Gandhi to a moral figure, devoid of his central political concern. Lenin, with his sense of history, had called Gandhi a revolutionary. But M.N. Roy, in his ridiculous bid to be more Bolshevik than Lenin, dismissed Gandhi as reactionary. The Indian left, like a bunch of fools, followed Roy.

French philosopher, Étienne Balibar, in his essay, 'Lenin and Gandhi: A missed encounter?' (2012), considers Gandhi's dialogic politics making an ethical insistence that "all political struggle must involve *a moment of opening to the*

adversary that conditions the transformation of his point of view." It goes into the heart of Gandhi's politics of risking. Gandhi had declared at the YMCA in Madras in 1915, that "in the doctrine Ahimsa, there was no room for the enemy". It enabled the opening up of endless room for a mutually transformative – and non-coercive – politics.

India's liberals and Marxists largely remained circumspect about Gandhi's spiritual politics. The dogma of scientific-rationality they borrowed from Enlightenment thinkers prevented them from approaching Gandhi.

The 18th and 19th century critiques of religion in Europe, divided the world between faith and reason. Hegelian reason justified Europe's intellectual and cultural hegemony over the world. Marx was sensitive to human suffering under colonialism. But he believed it as a *necessary* stage in the progress of historical reason and emancipation.

Marx's ethical ambivalence was a norm among the converts to secular modernity. They sacrificed thinking at the altar of reason. Reason did not eliminate the historical prejudice against the other. Nor did reason offer the best arguments for a cultural (and, why not – spiritual) resistance of colonialism. The idea of freedom and a political movement against subjugation was based on a spirit other than reason.

Nehru, in *The Discovery of India*, said regarding the question of a "real settlement" between Hindus and Muslims, that to achieve "goodwill" both communities must find a "common objective" and for this, "*any sacrifice of reason is worthwhile*" (my emphasis). But forced to consider territorial matters before Partition, Nehru said at the Shimla Conference in 1945, "The Congress was prepared to do anything within the *bounds of reason* to remove fear and suspicion from the mind of any Province or community" (my emphasis).

The idea of a new territory that will divide the lives of people establishes a new rationality that causes fear and suspicion. Partition was the new territory of reason (and the new reason of territory). Nehru's rationalist sensibility failed to understand that fear and suspicion needs to be removed by love (the force of Gandhi's political ethic). Not by reason that causes it.

Nehru was so obsessed with the superiority of reason, his description of the Buddha made the saint and teacher appear a modern, reformist figure, "Buddha had the courage to attack popular religion, superstition, ceremonial, and priestcraft, and all the vested interests that clung to them." Nehru mentions Buddha's "appeal… to logic, reason, and experience", and defined his "method" as "a psychology without a soul."

Nehru reimagines the Buddha as a secular figure, and brings his teachings closer to our times.

Ambedkar would have nodded to Nehru's description. But Nehru goes too far in his rationalist interpretation, painting the Buddha as a man of reason and modern psychology. He misses the non-rationalist aspects of Buddha's teaching.

In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar dwells on Buddha's emphasis of "*Karuna*" (compassion, or as Ambedkar puts it, "love for human beings") and "*Maitri*" (fellowship, or what Ambedkar calls, "love for living beings").

Love is the primary mover and primary healer of the human spirit.

Karuna and *Maitri* are ethical *responses* to the alienating, discriminating and cruel conditions of human life and society. They help us consider the other, *first*. It is also true of our affinity for other species.

In 1953, three years before Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, he aired the provocative wish to burn the Constitution, when he found the Hindus lacked the commitment towards constitutional morality. He said, "We built a temple for a god to come in and reside… but… the devil had taken possession of it". Ambedkar imagines the Constitution as the secular shrine of a new law for the Hindus to follow. But the devil of the old law, residing in caste hierarchy, prevented Hindus from embracing the three principles dear to Ambedkar: liberty, equality and fraternity.

In an All-India-Radio broadcast in 1954, Ambedkar clarified that his understanding of the three principles did not come from the French Revolution. He said, its roots are "in religion and not in political science… derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha." This is quite an interesting claim. Ambedkar saw the principles of modernity as derivatives of Buddhism. To claim religious roots for modern principles upturns – and destabilizes – the hierarchy of secular knowledge. Ambedkar's radical move suggests, modernity offers us clues to reconnect with liberating sources from our own cultural past.

Both Ambedkar and Gandhi believed in the politics of Satyagraha and the method of Ahimsa/nonviolence. For Gandhi, Ahimsa was rooted in the *individual* self/soul that resisted the law of the (colonial) state. For Ambedkar, who led untouchables to use water in a public tank in the Mahad Satyagraha of March 1927, Ahimsa was a *social* force to annihilate the law of caste. Ambedkar did not spare Gandhi's reluctance to challenge the hereditary structure of labour based on birth (the *Varna* system). Gandhi gave a bad analogy in February, 1933, in the *Harijan* that it is "wrong to destroy caste because of the out-caste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth…" The Hindu (social) body is constituted by hierarchy, where each caste out-castes the other *within* itself.

Gandhi's opposition to Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes in 1932 took them apart politically. The central issue was representation: Gandhi did not approve of Dalits as a separate constituency of power. If Gandhi was guided by the principle of generosity with Muslims, with Dalits he displayed a stubborn paternalism.

Yet, both Ambedkar and Gandhi drew on India's spiritual resources to counter the limits of modernity. Gandhi was the only leading political thinker who engaged with Ambedkar. In *The Discovery* that Nehru begins writing in 1942, he passes by Ambedkar's movement against caste and untouchability, in silence. To Nehru, only Gandhi's critique of caste deserved mention, apart from his own. Indian historians followed Nehru's silence on Ambedkar for decades.

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In *The Discovery*, Nehru appreciates Gandhi for being the symbol to "shame us into truth". Gandhi introduced truth as a confessional practise in the world of politics. Nehru goes on to say: "I do not know of any person who holds to the truth as Gandhi does. That is a dangerous quality in a politician…"

Nehru is right. Truth is a risky proposition in politics. Gandhi's *Satya* was the moment of truth, an act of facing the adversary in politics without any screen of prejudice and fear. It was possible for Gandhi to conceive such a politics because he did not believe in the enemy. The moment politics desires – and invents – an enemy, truth disappears. The enemy replaces the truth. All lies are produced, circulated and justified in the name of the enemy. Fascism believes in enemies alone, and hence, in a politics of lies.

The current political move to redraw the rational (and acrimonious) boundaries of identity that led to Partition needs to be challenged. We need a Gandhian mode of truth-telling, regarding what Salman Rushdie calls the "translated" selves of Hindus and Muslims, our deeply entwined past. Truth is the only prerequisite for reconciliation.

During the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar raised the trembling question: if the untouchables "insist" on entering a temple and a public lake, something they had never done before, "will it be right; will it be considered *Satyagraha*?" What for Gandhi was the force of truth to be used against power, for Ambedkar was the *insistence* of truth facing centuries of prohibition.

It was a grave error, an ethical failure, to ignore the *Satya* of Gandhi and *Karuna* of Ambedkar. That honesty and touch must be recovered in Indian history and politics.

After the Civil War

Prasanta Chakravarty

When time feels out of joint, it is entirely natural to lose sight of the meandering and plastic nature of time itself – that is to say, it becomes harder to maintain a historicist distance from our subjective involvement with the contingent moment. Indeed, the more political polarities congeal and the battles over socio-cultural space become shrill and savage, the more we begin to think in terms of success and failure, sanity and derangement, gain and loss. Wallowing in such a mood may quickly lead to listlessness and nostalgia about the world we have lost, to borrow Peter Laslett's pregnant phrase. In times of crisis, stock-taking is a sound idea. But stock-taking need not devolve into self-flagellation. In fact, as the contours of the various players in the current battle become clearer and starker, we must not lose sight of the underlying possibilities of engagement in our respective areas. The regnant mood has many dimensions and stock-taking means precisely that- to evaluate and be realistic about loss and gain, but to also seek avenues where there appear to be none. In other words, only at the nadir can one imagine a future in its full utopian dimension. At our lowest, we lose all fear and begin to recalibrate options. Real crisis helps us to encounter our own selves, for the masks are off from every visage, including our own. Once we realize that we are in for a long haul, perhaps we shall begin to follow Terry Eagleton's prescription: to hope without optimism.

I can only talk about a limited domain with which I am familiar: academia in the Indian metropolis, and more pointedly, the situation in the humanities. The archaic and clannish nature of the academic universe on the subcontinent is a fact. We feel secure with, and within, cartels. Hallucinations of liberalization have just made such inherent archaism baroque, that is to say, its dimensions and contours have become 'smart', elongated and 'wannabe' in the new millennium. Very small minorities among the old-school freethinkers still invest in the combination of curiosity, taste and logic. Mostly, that breed looks at the ruins of their own universe with incredulity and that too, askance. Most others have always been either flexible, unsure or both, with choices. So, when the baroque cliques of the millennium —newly dressed traditional-bureaucratic powers and the so-called emerging precariat—gradually and ruthlessly wanted a pie in the academia with little competence to show, the liberals flinched and began flashing mixed signals. On one hand, they sought the harvests of speculative capital and wholly abandoned the vestiges of welfare mechanisms, for that smacked of moribund socialism. On the other, since they saw themselves as the moral guardians of a disappearing world, projecting themselves alongside each passing radical cause as 'concerned citizens',

it provided them with the sense that they are still at the cutting edge of social justice. It was and is a matter of sheer survival. They did not envisage the fact that unless they set the standards and the agendas of the game, the world of curiosity, criticality and justice shall disappear regardless.

More significantly, the humanities people wasted their energy in joining the paltry skirmish between law/procedure and the world of belief, behavior & identity. And this happened at a time which demanded imaginative breadth and an agile critical outlook like never before! Buffeted by large political forces, the clan instead went deep within silos and echo chambers. Cartels produced reverse cartels, each invoking assurance and safety in its wake. The more vulnerable ones drifted. All this leads to the conclusion that we are not merely in any direct confrontation between an old argumentative universe and a crass populist regime. We are rather in a fin de siècle civil war where several sects are vying for power and visibility. In times of civil war, normal rules of conflict are suspended. The very distinction between the principle and the personal blurs. Civil wars not only lead to the disintegration of society, but to a disintegration of trust. There is a sense of willful estrangement of parties that already know each other.

I can think of three available recourses that the academia has opted for, under such trying circumstances. And I shall tentatively offer a fourth one.

Withdrawal is the foremost choice that a number of people make in times of uncertainty. Hounded by ordeals, people begin to harbour a sense of disgust and irony for the world at large: contemptus mundi. Do not squander your being and be a slave to fortune and desire, the wise one hath said. A classic example is Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy. Implicated and imprisoned with unmerited accusations, Boethius delineates a method, a spiritual journey: from a state of self-pitying lament to a moral understanding, by rejecting the Wheel of Fortune. He eventually accepts and celebrates divine providence in times of casualty and contingency. In a similar mood, even the man of perennial negotiation—Will Shakespeare, can sometime despair and consider seceding: "Tired with all these, for restful death I cry" (Sonnet 66). On the face of it, during cataclysmic times, the reasons for a stoic withdrawal from the world of exchange and participation may seem valid and pragmatic. Exposed to and tarred by unforeseen calamity that already has or may potentially engulf their lives, fear of repercussion from power blocs, polarized and emotional warfare among friends and relatives— all make many people wary of joining the debate itself. The situation is doubly tricky since in the current times we are not witnessing a straight battle between forces of conservation and forces of progress. Far more complicated struggles and negotiations are happening at the micro level. The standard notions of political right and left have muddied. At the roots is a renewed battle between dogmatic

belief and thoughtful consideration. The basic criteria of truth are up for grabs and objectivity is being riled at.

But it is also impossible to tell, with ever-shifting positions, as to where each warring army stands at any given moment of time. A multipronged civil war, which is also sectarian/factional in nature, extracts both a tangible price and a psychological toll. In such a climate, most people wish to take precautionary measures so that they are able to hide from the tentacles of spreading fire. Better to be safe than sorry, they ponder. And hence we can 'feel' an eerie and despairing silence from diverse quarters on matters that otherwise ought to have fostered debate and discussion in the public sphere. This watchful scenario extends among acquaintances. This is a calculated form of detachment, one that hopes to buy security by skirting the issues at hand. This approach hopes that one can successfully slink away in times of crisis. This method may or may not work. But it does not address and confront the issues at hand. At best, this is a way of postponement and deferral. At worst, a personal way of gaining traction in times of crisis.

The second recourse is to take extreme and violent steps, which is a natural but perilous thing to do in a time of social polarization. The peril is not in jumping violently into the fray since other moderate means have failed. That may be a brave thing to do when others are silent. The problem has more to do with deciding the political nature of such extremism. Now, this is a conundrum, since spontaneous forms of outburst precisely happen when the votaries feel that other options have been exhausted or are meaningless. For rage and violence to lead to some kind of politics of transformative action, there must be a clear idea of social justice, so that one is able to deliver and actually wrest the initiative from existing power structures. Only in such a scenario is a modicum of genuine cultural recasting and political change possible. But during times of exception and civil war, outbursts may quickly turn into a way of extracting retribution from one's projected enemies. The result is a perpetuation of methodological sentimentalism that must lead to a kind of impasse rather than any transformation. The algorithmic certainty with which violent sects and herds begin to target one's enemies, quickly turns into a game that ends up merely proving loyalty to one's chosen sect. Fascism fosters counter-fascism, until it becomes a zero-sum game. Politics becomes an end unto itself.

This is then at risk of indulging in moral purity and a politics of outburst, trolling and real/social lynching. After a point, the cycle of violence can neither be leashed nor relinquished. Any politics of extreme righteousness and 'incorruptibility,' unless the nature and scope of social justice is worked out at some juncture, also works under the assumption that one is buying an indemnity from possible attacks from other initiated trolls/mutineers/buccaneers who are competing for radical

politics. In this manner the climate of civil war is further exacerbated, without achieving any lasting political overhauling. Worse, festering wounds keep on erupting for time to time, years after the actual battle lines were drawn. This is strategically dangerous for those who play with immediate extremist tactics since political equations may quickly alter and new power blocs emerge in a volatile world. Life is a marathon and often various players cross paths several times in differing and different circumstances.

The third alternative is to keep calm and stay the course. In times of 'pure' or 'raw' calamity we realize that the world is about certain critical junctures and the clash of temporalities. Large forces must arrive to pulverize our known world. Passing though such phases is a cognitive experience. We realize the forces are so wide ranging and overwhelming that one way to tackle those is to inculcate a certain stoic constancy and yet keep negotiating with the outside world. Niccolo Machiavelli, for instance, talks a lot about the necessity to acquire certain skills in order to simply know and realize the moment of opportunity, in order to seize the initiative in war. Meanwhile, in times of adversity, you consolidate. Ordinarily, the idea of opportunity is often appreciated in the context of regret, when the opportune moment may have passed us by. But only slavish minds entertain regret. Encounters with heightened conjunctures are a different thing altogether: one strives until the right moment arrives for striking. At that point only the one who stays the course is able to force an encounter with time, by truly and actively intervening in it. A new order emerges. However, the greatest pitfall of this method is to wallow in a mode of perpetual deferral, for the opportunity to seize the right moment may never arrive. It may prove to be way too prudent a strategy for any action to take place.

The three responses in chaotic times that I have just outlined, though apparently antithetical in nature, have a few things in common. The foremost is that the recourses are all primarily subjective and solipsistic in nature. The second is that security and order, rather than freedom, is the bedrock aim that drives these resolutions. Finally, all three options are initiated from a sense that it is impossible to reach out to others, be dialogic and form larger political and social collectives in times of crisis and uncertainty. The polarized and opinionated historical time, such as the one we are passing through, is accepted and naturalized. They mark a caesura in time, as it were. But we tend to forget that nothing is sempiternal.

At this point we are in a position to consider a fourth possibility: "to establish relationships on the basis of nonrelationship, upon a situation of rupture and estrangement," as Jean Starobinski says about Michel de Montaigne's method of engagement with his interlocutors and readers. This recourse is a wager, a leap that paradoxically develops out of distrust and betrayal. A time of contingency means lives begin to exhibit themselves in their full starkness. Each one of us passes

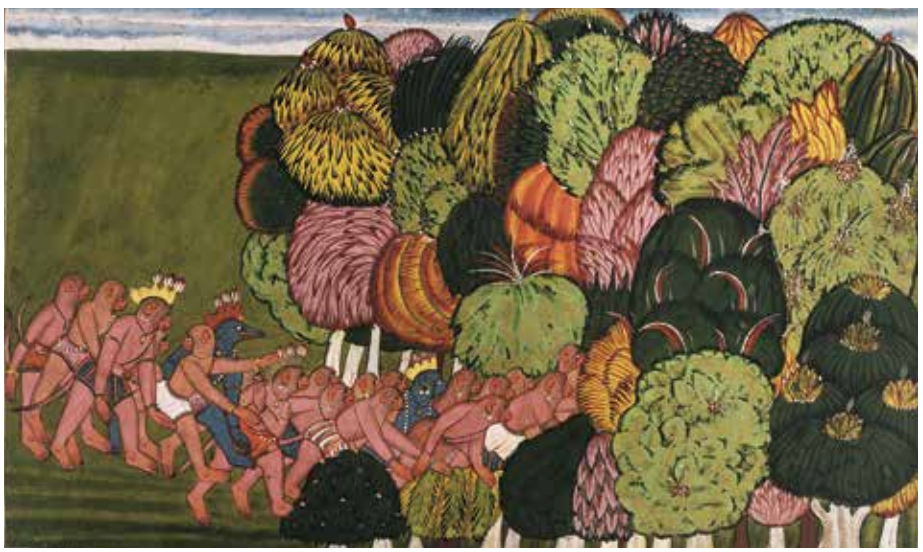
through certain ordeals and therefore undergoes extreme forms of negativity and a kind of purgatorial experience. But it is only through such ordeals that we acquire our full personal identity: "By showing ourselves we lose a part of what we are, we expose ourselves to risk, we entrust ourselves to the safekeeping of others, we mortgage our lives." One begins to realize the common human vulnerabilities only after the aftermath of warfare takes its full toll. And therein lies a sliver of hope. There is a chance that one renews a kind of fresh communication with oneself and with one's interlocutors and adversaries. By taking risks of this kind we accentuate relationships. This method can only work if we realize that the ego can only perceive itself through distance and disparity if we are able to reach out to those whom we think as our obverses—personal enemies, cultural opposites, political adversaries.

Such a form of reciprocity is the very opposite of restoration and reconciliation, which are merely behavioral in scope and nature. To candidly address one's supposed opponents means to digress from the set pattern of one's cozy existence and belief system. It means one acknowledges and takes full responsibility for difference and non-identity, instead of getting into sectarian silos. And to radically differ with other ontological drives, and to come to terms with such variations, is to acknowledge another kind of communication. It is a communication with the divergences and diversities that life brings us. By acknowledging difference we celebrate the sameness of existence. For that to happen we must be honest about our own thoughts and ideas with our supposed adversaries and hope the reverse will happen too. The mediation happens through a kind of good faith, a certain candor and directness with which we begin to address misgivings and distances. Good faith is the opposite of dogma. It is about practicing relationship with others who are not exactly like us. One begins to level with the multiplicity of positions and viewpoints. This form of reaching out destroys identity and egotism, a scourge that is eating up the academic fraternity too, much like other spheres. Aniket Jaaware has called such a leap of faith a product arising out of the realization that we are all same in this world, vulnerable, tactile and destitute beings—living as one. Antagonism and gradients sure remain and yet one brings differences to light rather than obliterate those as one addresses the structural inconsistencies of life.

With all our struggles, only felt and cumulative interaction shall matter eventually. The Humanities are not about interpreting texts. Nor is it about learning to become good critics of art and literature. Its obligation lies elsewhere. It is about steadfastly keeping away from all that is faddish and delving headlong into the essentials of human and creaturely experience. Humanities celebrates our variegated and therefore collective experiences of living. In a recent essay, Swapan Chakravorty has called this capacity "an openness to consider and accept error and errancy in living." It is a training that teaches us to acknowledge life in motion—that we

confront the depths of the abyss and come out anew with power and innocence alike. That is true discernment. And genuine historicity. Such invested discernment provides us with another kind of return. It makes us free. Once this paltry, temperamental and factional warfare extracts its price from each one of us, perhaps we shall realize the power of our large creaturely collectivity, which is finally based on the splendour of difference.

In a recent talk/essay titled *Chintar Durdosha* (The Predicament of Thought), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has iterated the spirit and ability to hope without optimism. Hardened by life, she has suggested that it is perhaps not possible to change everything that one wishes to. But it is possible to rearrange certain minds and bearings if one is able to carry on in extreme and difficult situations, knowing full well that one will err and falter. Things will not happen and yet we shall proceed and participate in life's wondrous existence by hoping that things must happen. This commitment is other-regarding: a wish and hope that one can reach out to other fellow beings and by reaching out collectively grope, fail, unlearn and begin anew.



Un Trou

Vivek Narayanan

The men of the Simian army fanned out
across and beyond the villages of the Vindhyas

searching for Sita, or some trace of where
or by whom she might have been taken.

Entering exhausting the forests
day by day

regrouping each night in growing despair
leavened only by intoxicants

and the gloam of companionship, they strayed
into a more arid zone of rocks and boulders—

barren, denuded
red or orange craggy foothills

scraggly trees
with whitened leaves or rattling seedpods.

It was a land that had once been lush,
scourged by the blind anger of a Brahmin

grieving the loss of a son.
Now he too

had died but his legacy of
drought remained.

Weathered in the harsh noons and dirty winds
thoughts of Sita scrambled

by a more literal thirst
climbing the bare rock faces

scrambling to shade
where they could find it

sniffing furiously

for signs of water

they grew weak
and slowly crazy.

By and by in such tortured
faltering exploration one day

going round a hill
they glimpsed

green foliage entwining
into the rock that

dūrgarkshabila: first just
a hint of night in the coils

of a creeper grove but
further guarded as if by

demonic curtains
of shade.

There bees circled in
a honey haze, fragrance flung

from flowers brightly
red or purple

superfluous strewn or
hanging heavy

from stems.
Suddenly

explosions of wing
kraunchas swan cranes crows

shooting from that grove
pink geese dripping dew

and crimson pollen.
Dizzy and bewildered

those alpha apes aroused

by such wet thoughts

those monkeys – teeth
grinding – hastened towards

the wonder
with strength

renewing. Hanuman sent
a tentative first foot in the hole;

deeper and deeper disappeared
that leg.

Evidently there was
a drop in there, an opening out

a cave, a cavern. Tree roots
twisted hungrily into it

the foot-grass
a deep deep green.

Like the obscene zone of the Daityas
looking, hearing all the world's creatures

echoing from inside
and too those

who had simply arrived at this same threshold,
hard to see but harder

in every way
to leave.

Nor faintest trust
of sun or moon.

Anyway. In. Sliding down.
Fall to a glassy

mossy knoll somewhere
dark so dark you doubted

you were there.

Yet cave water's unmistakable scent

made you move
through the passage at first

like wind unhindered –
then when the press

of limb to stone
became all you'd known

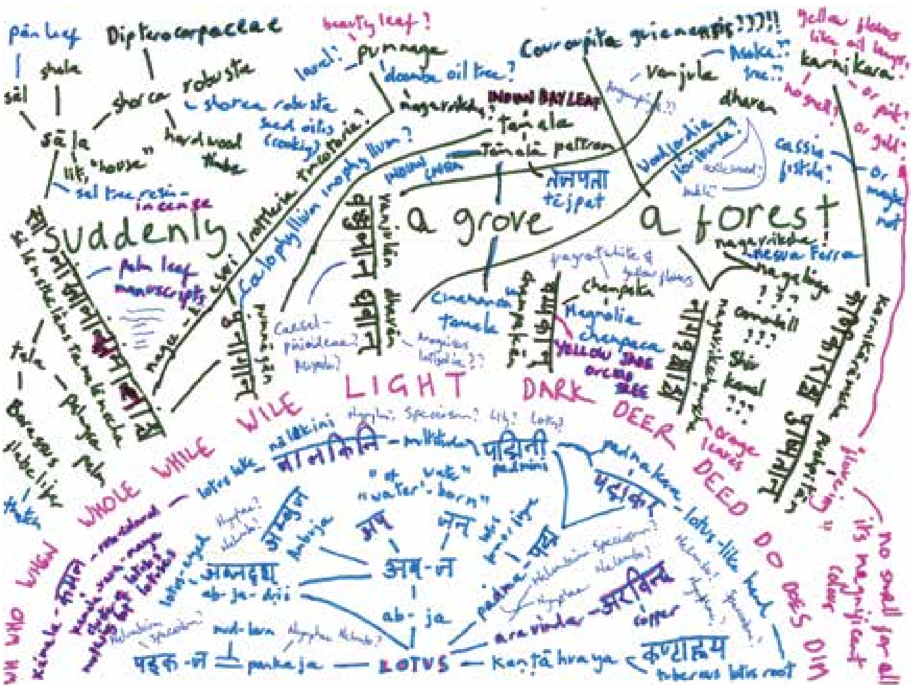
under such curtained atrament
skin hairs erect

knotting arm to arm
eight miles or more

clinging close crawling
dry throat

judgement addled
where was it that water

deep in the cave
saw a light



Dipterocarpaceae
Couroupita guianensis???!!
suddenly
a grove
a forest
tejpat
LIGHT
DARK
WHOLE
WHILE
WILE
DEER
DEED
ab- ja
LOTUS

ददृशुःकान्चनान् वृक्षान् दीप्त वैश्वानर प्रभान्
dadṛśuḥ kāñcanān vṛkṣān dīptavaiśvānaraprabhān

सालान् तालान् तमालान् च पुन्नागान् वंजुलान् धवान्
sālāṃs tālāṃs tamālāmś ca puṃnāgān vañjulān dhavān

चंपकान् नाग वृक्षान् च कर्णिकारान् च पुष्पितान्
campakān nāgavṛkṣāṃś ca kaṛṇikārāṃś ca puṣpitān

तरुण आदित्य संकाशान् वैदूर्यमय वेदिकान्
taruṇādityasaṃkāśān vaidūryamayavedikān

Young and tender the sun at dawn
Cat's eye studded in silver seats

Sealed in light from that cat's eye blue
Flocks of birds over hidden ponds

Overgrown trees with gold leaf bark
Glittering like the sun at dawn

Hidden ponds flashing bronzing fish
Recurring mirror of your desire

Airplanes and chariots with fat gold wheels
Now you need my body so we can be free

Softly we fall in the silver dust seas
The planets they spin in the minds of gods

For in this new dimness so bright
it needle-pierced the eyes produced astringent

whines, noises in the ear drugged
the proximate senses

the image of a carpet was a carpet
the image of a lotus-blue silk shawl

was a blue silk shawl in caress of the hairs of your skin
the image of gold amphoras plates of bell metal

heaps of the finest aloe sandalwood figurines
wine reposed in silver bowls the sweetest tartest

fermented honeys caviar silk cushions filled
with swan feathers the juiciest roots shoals of rippled fruit

in palanquins deerskins all instantly
the very things themselves

Though sucked
by their own smothered

desires our valiant alpha-apes
were a long while unable

even to move gaping in
the dazzling growing

crowded terror of it.
Was this paradise – with

its gods still in hiding – or
had the poor Simian soldiers

stumbled into the bylanes
of death itself?

A woman appears
mendicant in deer buck skin

hair in tattered locks
her taut and stringy body

breath pulsing through rib bones
born of penance. Doomed at the centre

as if from within feeding the light
that follows her.

Hey, no worries, of course. Yes, I'm doing better today.
The dictionary won't give tons of information on how to understand the name, but it does give something, and the parts are
Synonyms: beaming
clear. Put in svayamprabhA for the specific name entry (altho I don't think the MBh apsaras is the right woman), and put in svayamprabha (short a) to get the more general meaning: self-shining, or inherently-luminous, etc.
Svayamprabha
self-[radiant] bright, luminous
prabhA is a noun meaning 'brilliance, shininess', and svayam is an adjective or adverb meaning '(by) one's self or spontaneous(ly)'.
glittering, glorious, glowing
lustrous, radiating, refulgent,
brilliant, effulgent, gloaming

Shiny Yogini
    where have we landed?

Tell us, tell us who
    you are

--I am Swayamprabha. Maya
is my father, who had this place built

to the exact specifications
of his dreams and the dreams

of others, with the careful
application of all

of Usana's arts and sciences. Now
I mind it purely by my

sound thought.
--Yogini,

be straight,
are we dead?

--O pitiful Simians
this is neither the place

of death nor that
of life nor

of anything
between:

it is what it is,
O poor Simians!

Not easy to leave
but if you so choose

I can try to help.

How to know
what it meant

to decide to
leave if they

still didn't know what
it had meant

to enter?
Each

thought like dew
collecting on the inseam

of a lick of stone. A place
for the eyes, that

sapphire cave, though
often dark

in secrets. Anything called
to mind could be

enjoyed there among serene
lakes so completely echoing

the ceiling they seemed
to rise up in points

to meet it. The tunnels unfolded in
spirals – were you going up

or down? – and alternating
phases of blue & pink

& black light –
fruit groves pleasure coves

nested nooks miniature rock holes
dissolve & reform around

your fingers. They gorged
themselves, got fat

apples bananas almonds
winged termites honey brewed thick

as gruel or delicate as aperitif
button mushrooms fragrant

thyme and cannabis
wild potatoes a mouse

or a baby boar
they'd catch. They groomed or made love

to each other on warming floors, they
slept, they slept. To know this

vacancy at
any given instant

seemed already
a knowledge

of the long past.
Half second. A second.

Or a hundred? A million?
We Simians

have never been
much good

at measuring time. Visions
in plain sight:

a riff of Sita's yellow sari
dancing in the wind

hooked on a branch. Silk
bruised your cheek. How

come my love,
how come? But boredom,

always the boredom. And
oddly, as its aftertaste

in this prison beyond
seasons: guilt. Somewhere

out there was still
Sita just a skeleton perhaps

Rama a galaxy of anguish
Sugriva a tall

petulant ruthless
gilded executioner's sword:

his threats, once spoken, had
mysteriously followed them

even here
in time's hollow. If

there was any hope
of finding Sita

they ought
to get back.

Turned a corner
and there she was.

Swayamprabha,
guide us.

-- If you so much
as peep your eyes open
before it's done…

Lids shut,
the dark of the outside

and the dark of the inside
were one and the same.

Clutching limb to limb again
transported

into a fine clear sun-kissed
blossom-floating windy day

on a green foothill of the Vindhyas,
the ocean's rolling beat and rattle audible

from down and beyond where met,
nearing the horizon,

crusty white lines of surf.
The end of the world?

And Sita?

The shoreless ocean,
the ocean without limit,

the ocean as limit,
abode of Varuna,

roaring and wild
with angry billows.

And while
they'd been busy ransacking the mountain

of Maya's design,
King Sugriva's ultimatum

of a month had
slipped away. He'd be

on their trail.
It was spring.

Nothing could make them happy.
Not the scent of wildflowers,

mango and guava trees
drooping down

and covered with climbers, not
the pooling light,

rousing winds. This very beauty
planted fear in the Simians' hearts.

-- (Tara) Let's go back
in the bila, that amazing cave. We

Were fools to leave.

-- (C horus of Simians) Yes,
yes, back in the bila, back in the bila.

-- (Nila) Idiots! Do you think
Lakshmana won't find us there?

-- (Chorus) Yes, yes, oh no! He'll

find us there, find us there.

-- (Tara) But at least going back
will give us a chance, perhaps

save us from being executed.

-- (Chorus) Yes, o yes, going back,
going back will give us a chance.

-- Enough! Sugriva will always
have dominion over us

in the land of the living.
Saying this Angada sank to the grass in sobs.

For we have opened door upon door
come out from that darkness

only to settle in this new here
that too will never be fully

illumined.
And there is one way

to walk beyond that tyrant's reach:
fasting to death, on those sands below.

Immune to the arguments of Tara
and the judicious Hanuman,

Angada, slowly followed by most
of his army – who could

so easily see the clarity
of his words – made their way

down the hill
to the jeweled beach.

They began to prepare themselves
for the long days

of the fast.
Seated

calmly on gathered nests
of kusha grass, faces

turned East and
the blades of that grass-nest

on which they sat,
like tapering fingers

pointing South; talking
talking at first

into the night until
the strength to speak

began to falter, talking
of the long event-chain

that had somehow
stranded them here on

the continent's tip
this final shore

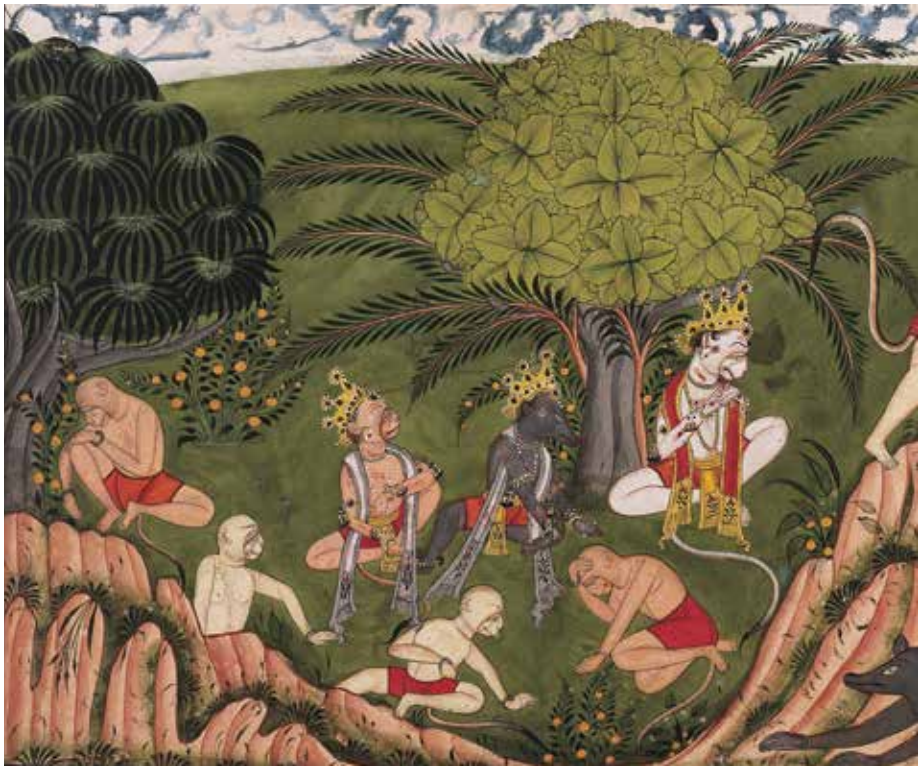
telling the story of Rama's exile

Dasaratha's death
the carnage in Janasthana

the abduction of Sita –
that jewel of Videha –

and the killing of Jatayu
the killing of Vali

Rama's wrath
the wrath of Sugriva



that sea of
sorrows, unrelenting in

its waves
the storm that had

swallowed all and brought us
to this final resolve.

Then the emptiness of
the words themselves,

the translucent shells
of their souls.

To ascend
truly, you had to be

gradual in the emotions drained
of colour, in the precise

sequence of
disavowal: first no meat,

then no nuts, grains or pulses
then no fruit or veg or juice, then no sweet

of any kind, then no
salt or sour

and last only water
sapped from the air

and drawn
with the breath

from hole to hole.
Taste of wood

unrelenting. Those
Simians seated

like mountains
inner caverns

roaring in despair.
Glowed like the honey-

cream of
a second sea, that army prone

against the waves.
The sun's

glitter thrown
like sparks of fire

the great serpents
roiling in the hell-

depths below. And
the sea married into the sky

and the sky so completely
in the sea and

the sea-like sky and
the sky-like sea –

the king of the rivers
the mouth of the universe

and those star-rushed waves
thick with multitude

suspended like lisps
in between.

At first the nights
were restless, restless

to the wake of sun.
By the second rise

their vision sharper
hearing clearer.

Each
dustmote hung in the air as if waiting

to be seen.
By the fourth

the limbs
slack.

The soldiers
on their

backs or sides
stomach

a discarded begging
bowl.

The clarity
once come now

departed.
And long since

the first lines of ants
investigating the craggy

feet, the caves of ears
and noses, the first

fly on a forehead
leaning back as if

to better read
the fate written

there. O come End
did you not

always reside
in me, casting your sleep

in every cell
and membrane? Do you

not prowl like
an innocuous stranger

at every father's bed
every kingdom's

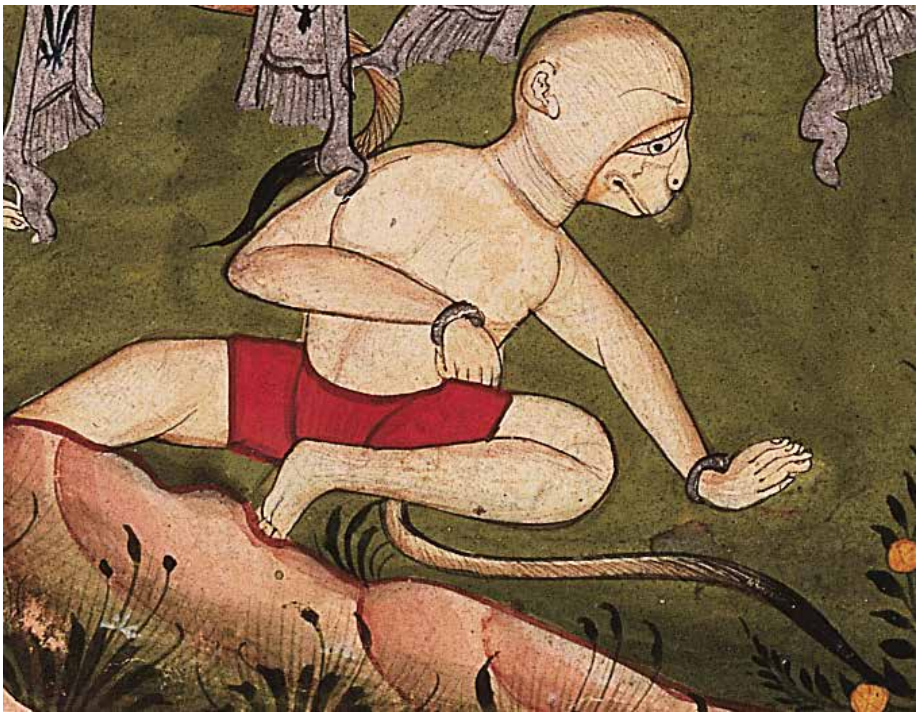
border? And the meteor
shall know us

by our purpling smoke
darkened clouds

the shrouds,
paradox of existence

that in going together
we go alone. And the hillside

to the beach was for a long while
a graven feast.



After Valmiki's Ramayana: Kishkindakanda, sargas 49-54 in the Baroda Critical Edition. With a few inputs from Jean Améry (*On Suicide: a Discourse on Voluntary Death*), trans. John D. Barlow.) The "bila" which is the focus of this incident can be translated as broadly as "cavern" or simply as "hole". The French translation of the Ramayana by Alfred Roussel (1903), as Jeffrey Masson points out, elegantly folds in the different possibilities:"*une cave, une caverne, un trou*"; but finally it was the simple terror of the word trou that seemed fittest of all.

The circular diagram featuring potential translations of Swayamprabha's name also features an email exchange about the name with Tyler Neill. I'm very grateful to Tyler and to Ben Williams, who, as my research assistants, took me on a series of deep dives into the text while I was a Radcliffe fellow at Harvard in 2013-14. Tyler taught me a tune by which to recite the text in Sanskrit, which turned out to be an invaluable lesson.

The paintings used are from the Mankot Ramayana (ca. 1710-25), collection of the Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

Snafu

Bhuchung D. Sonam

One

In the market square
Amidst the din of
Swarming masses,
Under the stool of a *momo* vendor,
Sits a puny dog
Un-enticed by
The sounds, sights and smells
Wafting through
The turbid air.
At a corner
Between a sweetshop
And a tea-seller is
A small stage draped
In faded green carpets,
On which
A svelte man in a white turban
Hauls out his *tanpura* and starts to sing:
'How do you,
asks the chief of police,
Patrol the city …
Where frogs keep snakes
And jackals
Go after lions?
Does anyone know
What I am talking about?'
But in the enhanced gabfest
To sell their wares,
The market has
No ears
For Kabir.

Only the dog listens
From underneath the stool
Where he nibbles at leftovers
The vendor chucks at him.
After the performance
The singer
Bows down expressionless.
Five young men march onto the stage
To perform a popular dance:
The clinking of coins stop –
Purveyors of trinkets,
Peddlers of junk foods,
Hawkers of plastic wares
Cease their activities,
Giving their ears and eyes to
The stage where the young men
Swing their arms and legs
To a sound booming from
Invisible speakers,
Driving
The scrawny dog into a
Dreamless sleep.

Two

An old dog
Sits under a blackened oak tree
On an autumn day,
The sky studded with spots of sparkling
White clouds gazes down.
Hours stretch like an inter-state highway.
Clouds dawdle.
A breeze charms the tree.
A bored leaf detaches from a branch
Vacillating left and right,

Lands,
On the dog's head.
The old chap goes berserk,
Growling and biting
At the solitary leaf.
A primitive owl atop the tree
Half-opens his eyes and says,
'Attack! Attack!
A dead leaf is dangerous.'
The dog goes on shredding the leaf.
The owl goes back to his sleep.

Three

Gandhi keeps stroking the head of
A dog fresh from its fugitive flight
Through the city streets.
'One cannot run away from
Life's challenges and dangers.
One must face them to the
Bitter end,' he mumbles.
Mahatma isn't talking to the dog.
He is thinking out loud
As often he does.
But the dog, having been chased
By a bunch of fanatics,
Rattles in anger like a boiling pot of *thukpa*,
And yelps gibberish like a failed meditator.
'No one can face their foes
With rage, fury and wrath.
One needs strategies and tactics
Suitable to overcome them,' says the great man
With a thick sediment of compassion.
The dog stumbles on its exhausted legs
And stomps out of Gandhi Ashram.

‘No problem in life can be solved
By running away from it.
He who runs away is
A dry leaf
To be crushed by marching boots,’
Gandhi continues to think out loud.

Four

The headman stands on,
The podium to read out
Verses in praise of the Splendid Sir,
The sugar-coated diabetes-causing
Panegyric was written by a boot-licking
Scum of a poet, owner
Of the Twelve-Set Dictionary of Superlatives.
After the recital, the audience
Standing on their wobbly feet
Emits thunderous applause.
An emaciated dog sitting
At the back of the auditorium
Gets up,
Squints his eyes,
And Howls,
‘The toadyism is mounting by the day!’

On Failure: The Venice Paradox

Jane da Mosto with Carolyn Smith and Kasia Ruszkowska

Venice can be said to have suffered a succession of deaths. Does that necessarily mean that Venice is immortal? As a global economic power, the Republic was dealt a significant blow when Vasco da Gama discovered the route to the Orient via the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. *La Serenissima* saw its demise as an independent political entity in 1797, at the hands of Napoleon. As an island nation, Venice capitulated with the construction of the causeway connecting the city to the *terraferma* (mainland) in 1846. In 1926 Mussolini decreed that Venice become incorporated with other mainland settlements as a single municipality despite great physical and social differences. Today, the historic city dies a little more each day, poisoned by the exponential growth of tourism, and by institutional and administrative failure to address these problems.

I didn't think twice about accepting the invitation to address failure with specific reference to Venice for this magazine. The theme is fully within the remit of We Are Here, Venice (WaHV) - an NGO with a mission to change the future of Venice, i.e. avoid failure at least as regards this beacon of humanity. It ended up proving almost impossible to settle down and actually connect all our thoughts and write the piece, something which may be attributed to subconscious reluctance to address the ever-present possibility of failure, given the existential fragility of a place like Venice.

Unfortunately, the reluctance to address problems until they become critical (from the overdue article submission to unsuitable economic paradigms) seems to be part of the human condition. Only when something breaks or the system fails, are we forced to act. It is even more painful to write now about something that was a Venice-specific possibility until a short time ago, and is now a planetary reality. Will this be the dawn of processes of re-evaluation and repair?

Photo: Eleonora Sovrani

Venice from above - satellite image

Venice on the other hand has been perennially and chronically on the brink of disappearing, by virtue of its unusual and unique context made up by many small islands in a dynamic lagoon system between the upper Adriatic Sea and the north-east corner of the Italian peninsula. During the city's 1000 year republican era it was the succession of plagues, floods and fires which highlighted its vulnerability. The modern resurrection of the Death of Venice is, by contrast, based on key parameters tied to the exodus of residents from the historic centre, mass-tourism and acqua alta (the increasingly frequent floods). This fatalistic prognosis has become a self-fulfilling prophecy which hangs over the city, driving its decline and catering to the nostalgia of mass tourism - "Venice is in peril", "See Venice now before it disappears".

Venice's iconic history contributes to its current structural failures. Overshadowed by its rich past and laden with so much of its cultural heritage, it is in continual tension between demonstrating its viability in the contemporary world and meeting the needs of global tourism as if it were a theme park. The iconic city occupies a privileged status within the global imaginary but, to quote John Updike, "celebrity is the mask that eats into the face". Constrained by the burden of global fascination, Venice has been obliged to parody a persona from the past.

Simultaneously sustained and destroyed by tourism, the historic city is trapped between not quite thriving but not quite dying.

The last 70 years have seen the displacement of two-thirds of Venice's resident population to the mainland settlements of the municipality. Before the coronavirus pandemic, visitor presence each year approached 30 million, or an average of 77,000 tourist presences each day as opposed to 53,000 inhabitants. This transient population is characterised by different demands and rhythms. Moreover, the city has been abandoned by a large number of economic enterprises unrelated to either tourism or the maintenance of Venice's built heritage which reduces the range of employment options and drives the residential exodus further. As the socio-economic mass of the city thins, the costs generated by tourism but borne by Venice's resident community become proportionally greater: by one estimate, the cruise industry alone results in a cost of €3,300 per capita each year in terms of environmental damage and other externalities, despite only accounting for 10 percent of the city's tourist load.

Tourism can be a major economic resource, but the current monoculture is unsustainable. Concerns regarding the maintenance of the city's intangible cultural heritage and social fabric become irrelevant if Venice loses the critical mass of residents required to maintain the soul of the living city and constitute a critical mass for decision making in a political and economic sense. Yet without a resident population, Venice would be reduced to a commercialised carcass, marketed as a historical theme park or a ruin.

Venetian governance has been failing for some time, tending to the priorities of the majority of voters living on the mainland rather than the complex challenges of the historic city due to a growing demographic imbalance currently in the order of a 3:1 ratio. Consequently, Venice has been reduced to a lemon to be squeezed and is one of the least regulated tourism destinations in Europe, yet one of the most visited. This has accelerated the spiralling cost of living, taken away several basic services and conveniences and exacerbated depopulation trends: in 2018, an average of six to seven evictions took place within the *Comune di Venezia* every day; in 2019 the number of beds available in the tourism sector outnumbered the beds occupied by inhabitants (and add day trippers to this). Rather than adopt effective regulations- which is the only way to rebalance free market forces- the local administration has bluntly addressed "over-tourism' by intensifying police presence and introducing makeshift turnstiles on very busy days, running marketing campaigns to spread the tourist load, while also (schizophrenically) dedicating considerable resources to the organisation and promotion of mass

events. These events- like the concerts in Piazza San Marco and boat shows- are disconnected from the endogenous cultural life - not to mention the way the Venice Carnival has been totally denatured. Venice's issues with tourism should instead be seen as a symptom rather than a cause. As the coronavirus pandemic virus has shown, unless the living city is weaned from its dependency on mass tourism and the need to protect and promote a broader range of productive activities is addressed, Venice will continue its spiral of decline.

Crowds of tourists on Saint Mark's Square.

The sensationalism which surrounds the city generates polemics. When people hear I live in Venice they no longer comment how lucky we are, surrounded by such beauty, but ask how we cope. Venice has become the "canary in the mine" for humanity - people look at us to see what will happen to them. There is no image as potent as Venice under water.

This presents Venice and the lagoon as mortal enemies, pitted against one another, a fiction perpetuated by the lobby for heavy infrastructural interventions on top of the myth that Venice is sinking initiated by Ruskin and Byron. One of WahV's central missions is to correct this misconception. *Venezia è Laguna*. They evolved in symbiosis so Venice and its lagoon depend on their co-existence. The health of the dynamic lagoon system is integral to protecting the city.

Photo: Anna Zemella

Venetian lagoon

Venice has experienced flooding since the sixth century, but the extreme flooding known as acqua grande in November 1966 triggered a spike in national and international attention. Periodic flooding occurs when strong winds push a greater volume of water from the sea into the semi-confined area of the lagoon. Thousands of homes were inundated and photographs of the submerged city have cemented the fragility of Venice in the imaginary.

This accelerated the exodus of residents to the mainland where the modern housing in areas like Marghera, Zelarino, Favaro and Mestre constitute some of the worst examples of Italian urban development and couldnt be more of an antithesis to the fabric of Venice. Another failure associated with the great flood of '66 (the year of my birth) is the next highest flood that occured last November. The city was struck by a freak combination of meteorological factors that suddenly generated powerful winds and waves that violently submerged most of Venice for a few hours in the middle of the night, leaving extensive physical destruction in its wake. The material damage was estimated at €1bn according to the mayor. The tragedy also rammed home the complete failure of the scheme implemented post 1966 to build flood defences for Venice (referred to above as the large infrastructure lobby).

Photo: Eleonora Sovrani

The famous Riva degli Schiavoni during the 2019 floods

Crises imply facing choices. Failure needn't be final so long as we choose to acknowledge it, learn from it and ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated. The failure in the responses to Venice's acqua alta crises is therefore three-fold: although impossible to ignore, there was a failure in the critical assessment of the events and their context, a consequent failure of imagination in their future mitigation, and a failure to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Following both the 1966 and 2019 extreme flooding events, there were institutional appeals for funding to address the damage and preventative measures. In 1966 this took the form of the Special Law for Venice (1973 and its iterations in 1987 and 1992), which sustained the city for 30 years, as well as a large web of corruption interests that were partially revealed in the 2014 scandal. This is also what gave rise to UNESCO and the international community's preoccupation with Venice. It was declared a World Heritage Site in 1987 while a number of charities run from different countries around the world were established (collectively known as the Private Committees for Safeguarding Venice).

The MOSE project - as the flood barrier initiative has become known - is the primary, tangible result of the 1966 crisis. This system of floodgates, hailed as the salvation of the city, was designed to block the influx of water from the sea during extreme weather events. Construction of the system has still not been completed,

marred by political inertia and corruption, as well as notorious design weaknesses. Planned in the 1980s on the basis of a 1970s concept, the construction phase began in 2003 and MOSE was due to be operational by 2011 and cost €1.5 billion. To date it cost somewhere €6.2 and 8 billion. The parts which have been completed have begun to corrode in the water and, despite devouring a third of the public funding allocated to protect and maintain Venice since 1986, it would be logical to assume that if the floodgates were ever going to function, they would be functioning by now.

One of the fundamental flaws in the project lies in the design brief, which prioritised minimizing the visual impact of the floodgates albeit that the inlets are far from the visual range of the historic city, other unsightly changes to the Venetian landscape have been authorised and the final result is, nonetheless, impacting with large concrete structures and an artificial island. This stipulation drove the need for a 'pioneering' and 'innovative' solution to the problem and resulted in an extortionately expensive and technologically unproven design. The planned (increasingly seeming like a purely hypothetical) operating regime would still cause more than 10% of Venice to be periodically flooded, forecast operating and maintenance costs have ballooned from €10m to €100m, nothing has been decided in decades as to which public agency will run the system, many individuals implicated in the corruption scandal are still significantly engaged in the project and, among other critical issues too numerous to list, there is the sea level rise factor. It is likely that the barriers would have to be raised twice a day within 50

The MOSE mobile flood barriers

years, disrupting the ecology and shipping activities of the lagoon. A mistake that is repeated is no longer a mistake, but a choice. Rather than address the total system failure revealed so dramatically by the 2019 flood, the mayor of Venice doubled down on the project.

While the city is still trying to recover from the destructive acqua alta of November 2019, used by the administration as an alibi for falling tourism numbers rather than considering the need for a better tourism strategy based more solidly on the features integral to the life of Venice rather than the attractiveness of special events, the Carnival was halted a few days early due to lockdown prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Fears for Venice's future have never felt more prescient with the city reduced to the surviving local population - we see clearly that it's not a problem of lack of tourists but a lack of residents. Imaginative and innovative responses to the city's challenges, generated by community groups and local associations, are derided and stifled, inertia is accepted, and meaningful change seems a remote possibility unless there is structural change in the governance system, i.e. a dedicated administration for the historic city and lagoon settlements.

Instead of accentuating the damaging impacts of extreme flooding events, they can be considered to demonstrate Venice's resilience, rather than its vulnerability. Even in the context of rising global sea levels, Venice remains far more adaptable than other cities; the enclosure of the lagoon makes preventative measures feasible. Residents and workers are well practiced in reducing the impacts of forecast floods that typically last a few hours and are remarkably quick to recover from flood events. It was heart-warming to witness the broad community response last November - a clean-up effort that involved thousands of teenagers and young adults, spontaneously coordinated by a youth group, who assisted in clearing shops, churches and the homes of lonely and elderly. This also served to highlight how out of touch the city authorities are with the real needs. Nonetheless, Venice is far more likely to survive rising waters than the long stretches of coastline which will disappear around the globe, submerging swathes of Shanghai, Osaka and Miami.

The fact that historic city still stands is a testimony to its resilience. Flooding has cemented Venice's association with environmental issues in the global imagination; the early environmentalism of the 1960s has matured to become a pressing international concern. Far from signalling a premonition of its death, this represents a lifeline. This association expands the scope of the historic city beyond a place of memory, to become a scenario of the world's contemporary conflicts; a paradigm of the postmodern condition.

Survival in the Venetian lagoon has always required innovation. Indeed, the city's persistence over the centuries is the result of the constant, conscious management

of interrelated physical, human and natural factors. This defines Venice as the ultimate city of the future rather than a city locked by its past. In the wake of the trauma from November 2019, pressure is growing to build a deeper understanding of Venice's challenges, for institutional accountability and public consent. Rather than justifying why the world should save Venice, we are striving to change the narrative and explain what Venice offers the world.

Venice's socio-economic vulnerabilities have now become undeniably conspicuous: with tourism stripped away, the city's emaciated, depopulated form has been revealed, along with the fallacy of diplomatic inertia. We have been consistently told that change is inevitably slow, too complicated, or impossible. And yet, here we are: the seemingly impossible has become commonplace. If we had been told a month ago that schools would be shut, entire nations would close their borders and that it would be necessary to sign a declaration to leave the confines of our homes it would have seemed ridiculous.

As we are confronted by another crisis, we face another choice: do we choose to continue down the path of resigned inertia, or do we utilise the significant knowledge resources that are available to bridge the gap between global markets and local priorities, and to ensure that qualitative judgement and social sustainability are balanced against quantitative measurement, competition and price?

There has never been a better moment to implement regulations to ensure that when tourism returns, it is sustainable. Change was difficult to achieve while the former city metabolisms proved profitable, but the current state of lockdown offers Venice the chance for a fresh start. Once the crisis has passed, the administration has a unique opportunity to implement adaptive and innovative measures which properly address Venice's specific challenges. These could include policies which facilitate the renovation of abandoned spaces through temporary use; incentives to attract new residents; housing strategies to provide homes for people who work in the historic city but cannot afford to live here; fiscal leverage to support the city's remaining institutions; and tax incentives to encourage enterprises unrelated to tourism to relocate to the city, as well as pensioners from other countries. Adequate regulation on the short-term rental of properties and the taxation of vacant buildings and apartments will be vital, as will the consultation and involvement of the local community.

'We are here Venice' endeavours to provide reliable, fixed points of information to frame meaningful debates, helping to articulate long-term solutions which work for the city, and relate to the rest of the world. Over the years, we have both drawn upon and fostered the wealth of local knowledge present in the city; we have

campaigned consistently for better governance and evidence-based policy. Our aim is to develop a vision for Venice which honours the city's rich past, without discrediting its present and limiting its future.

I choose to be cautiously hopeful: I choose positive constructiveness over negative resignation. Venice was founded in a marshy lagoon 1599 years ago by refugees fleeing the barbarians of northern Europe; borne from desperation, built on hope. Through innovation, imagination and ingenuity, these tenuous timber settlements became one of the greatest empires in the world. I believe if the city is supported by appropriate policies that address over-tourism, promote the growth of the local population and the economic fallout of Covid-19, a stable socio-economic balance is possible for Venice. With more attentive management, by administrators connected to the local realities, the historic city could again become a hub of creativity, intellectual thought and trade.

Civilisational Failure and its Discontents

Ashish Kothari
(dedicated to Smitu)

If the tight slap that the COVID-19 crisis has given us is not enough to wake us up to the civilizational crisis humanity faces, I don't know what will. Dramatic images of wildfires in Australia and the collapse of ice sheets in the Arctic should have already done this, but it did not. Nor did the 2008 global financial crisis. And here in India we still don't seem to have connected the dots; floods, droughts, farmer suicides, air pollution related deaths, socio-religious conflicts, labour distress, and much else is taking place around us but we think they are just anomalies, soon to be sorted out if we simply go about business-as-usual. Well, now that b-a-u has been rudely crushed by a tiny virus, can we reflect a bit on how we reached where we are … what failed?

We fail to respect our own home

I started working on environmental issues in the late 1970s, helping initiate the group Kalpavriksh (www.kalpavriksh.org). While on a steep learning curve travelling to Tehri Garhwal to the Chipko Movement villages, to Goa's mining areas, and to the Narmada Valley to study the impacts of several mega-dams, my

Malanjkhand

brother Smitu showed me a photo he had taken that has remained stamped in my memory. The devastation caused by copper mining in the Malanjkhand region of (then) Madhya Pradesh. This is the only image I'm using in this essay that is not mine, in memory of someone who taught me so much … including the essentials of photography … and left us all too soon.

Since those early years I have remained astounded by how we abuse our only home, sully our own bed: the earth (eco = oikos = home; ironically, economics has become an exercise in mismanaging our home!). In nearly every part of India I've seen the horrific scars of open-cast mining, such as this one extracting coal in the forest-rich region of central India, also home to the country's biggest adivasi concentration. Across the world mining is one of the biggest sources of conflict, and the direct cause for the murder of hundreds of environmental and human rights activists.

Coal Mining in Vidarbha

Land is not the only one to be scarred, so is the air. One of Kalpavriksh's early campaigns was against the horrendous pollution from the Indraprastha Power Station; I took this image in the early 1980s. And then in the mid-1980s, helping the village of Molad Band raise a voice against the Badarpur Power Station that was raining down coal dust on their houses and fields. As evidence of the high levels of respiratory illnesses and deaths amongst children in Delhi piles up in the late 2010s, these early images remain vivid. It is no comfort that Delhi is amongst the 15 Indian cities figuring in the 20 most polluted cities of the world!

IP Power Station

Molad Band

We've failed the land, the air … and also the water

Two-thirds of India's rivers, lakes, and other water-bodies are badly polluted, drained out, or diverted- in other words, killed or being killed. It has to be one of our civilisation's biggest ironies that rivers, considered holy and revered in every religion, are also violated in all sorts of ways. In 1983, I was part of a team that walked, boated, and bussed the length of the Narmada river. Our quest (other than sheer adventure and fun!) was to learn what we can about what a series of

HE project, Reni

proposed mega-dams would do to the river basin and its inhabitants. What we found was shocking: in the name of 'development', an ancient river valley with rich forests, agriculture, archaeological and cultural history, was in the process of being drowned. Lakhs of people were to be uprooted or dispossessed of their livelihood resources. Since then I've seen many more sites where rivers are being blocked, diverted, and in other ways converted, from being the arteries of the earth to becoming deadened, power-generating factories. This one at Reni, Uttarakhand, was particularly distressing, gashing the hillside just below the village where the iconic Chipko Movement to save Himalayan forests was born.

We fail to respect life … or do it in elite ways

Amongst my earliest passions was animal rights, and wildlife; birding has remained a favourite activity. I remember the horror of going into a room full of skins, bones, antlers, skulls, and other remains of wild animals confiscated by the wildlife officials in Delhi, and being struck by the sheer length and breadth of a python skin, pictured below. And of course heads of leopards, tigers, gaur, lions, and myriad other 'game' animals killed even up to very recent times for 'trophies'. Coordinating India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan in the early 2000s, I learnt that up to 10% of India's wildlife is threatened with extinction; in 2019, I read that about a million species could be pushed into oblivion by human activity. The Pinkheaded duck is already gone; the photo here is one of the few dead specimens left, preserved at the Bombay Natural History Society. Whatever happened to all our religions and indigenous faiths enjoining us to respect all of life; where during our rush to modernity did we forget that?

Illegal Skins

Pinkheaded Duck

Of course, we pretend to care by establishing laws protecting wildlife, setting up national parks and sanctuaries. Still, biodiversity loss continues apace, as we log or 'divert' forests for industries and dams and mining, treat grasslands and wetlands as wastelands, spread invasive alien species, and illegally hunt for global markets. It does not help that we create enemies of the communities that have co-existed with wildlife for millennia, pushing them out in the name of the tiger, dispossessing them of essential livelihood resources, and ignoring their own sophisticated ecological knowledge. Since the early 1980s I've been part of advocacy on changing conservation paradigms to be community-led and inclusive, but even as this is happening in many other countries, and despite a glimmer of hope from laws like the Forest Rights Act, India's conservation policy remains stubbornly colonial.

Deforested Hill, Kashmir

Periyar Gate

Conservation also remains highly elitist, as areas blocked off to villagers are opened up to tourism. I've been repeatedly shocked by how, on any given day, tiger reserves (like Bandhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh, pictured here) are likely to have many times more tourist vehicles than tigers! And this is not just with wildlife areas; tourism has become the bane of many an area, causing ecological and cultural disruption on a mass scale. Bollywood films add their bit to this; after '3 Idiots', the number of tourists to Ladakh jumped manifold, with tons of garbage (as here at Tsokar lake in Ladakh) being just one consequence.

Tsokar Garbage

Bandhavgarh Vehicles

There is another crucial way in which we've failed life. Modern agriculture has swept aside the incredible diversity of crops and livestock generated through an equally impressive diversity of agricultural practices and knowledge across India. It has replaced tens of thousands of rice varieties, for instance, with a small handful; and monocultured the land so badly that millions of hectares have lost their fertility. The only way to sustain these is pumping in tons of fertilisers and pesticides, as with this tea plantation in the once-thriving Western Ghats landscape.

Development as Violence

All this raised the basic question- is 'development' the biggest failure? Since World War II it has been the single most seductive concept for the whole world, dividing it up into 'developed' and 'undeveloped' using narrow economic criteria. Collapsing the complexity of life into one single digit so that a country that has far worse family relations and has destroyed much of its original natural habitats is considered 'developed' because it has higher income levels and more cars per capita, compared to one that is lower on these economic criteria but much deeper social and cultural relations, is simply stupid. But dangerously so, because such 'development' is such a holy cow, anyone questioning it (or its roots in patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism, and anthropocentrism), is considered anti-national and even some form of terrorist!

Dodsal Ad

Child Amidst Garbage

What the last 40 years of work has shown me however, is that development is violence. Violence against nature (as in the Dodsal ad below), against communities and cultures (over 60 million people physically displaced by 'development' projects!), against each of us as individuals. As we destroy nature-based livelihoods and replace them with mechanical jobs in mass production systems (including in modern sectors like IT), we move towards 'deadlihoods'. And we magnify inequalities to abysmal levels, with the rich 5% earning as much as the rest 95%, and over 90% of the workforce unorganized or informal, now horribly hit by the government's draconian measures in response to COVID-19. The child forced to play in a garbage depot does not belong to a 'good-for-nothing' family, as India's elites prefer to believe, but rather a victim of the country's shameful caste-class-gender inequities.

And meanwhile corporations laugh their way to the bank, spinning out doubletalk meant to convince us they are in the business of doing 'public good'. The advertisement below by Vedanta in Bhubaneshwar airport is a classic example of this duality (though inadvertently they may have been very honest about how they are *under*mining Orissa's happiness!). I have been a couple of times to the Niyamgiri hills where Vedanta wanted to do bauxite mining; their subsidiary Sterlite already have a refinery at the foot of the hills, displacing adivasis and polluting their water and air.

Resistance and Alternatives: Undoing Civilisational Failure

Fortunately the 'primitive' Dongria Kondh adivasis (does the photo of them dancing below suggest they are backward and need 'development'?) refused to allow the mining proposal. And in fact it is this kind of resistance that provides hope; it starkly brings out the failures of 'development' and its structural roots, and provides counter-narratives and worldviews. I can never forget this rally of 300 adivasi villages (with people like Baba Amte present) at Hemalkasa in the mid-1980s, forming a human chain across Indravati, declaring that as 'our mother, we will protect the river'. Nor my involvement in the inspiring Narmada Bachao Andolan, connecting me to our 1983 *yatra*.

Dongria Kondh Dance

Hemalkasa Rally

Tosamaidan Group

Vinodamma

Along with resistance, I've been privileged to have witnessed or supported a range of incredibly innovative solutions to human needs by 'ordinary' people. One of these is at Tosamaidan, a breathtakingly beautiful Himalayan grassland scape in Kashmir which a local movement (some members pictured below) managed to free of an army firing range in 2014-15. The movement is now propagating a model of community-led ecotourism and local resource-based livelihoods. Similarly there are thousands of these across India (and millions across the world), and my current journey as part of Vikalp Sangam (www.vikalpsangam.org) and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (https://wiki.globaltapestryofalternatives.org), is to document and help network them, building collaborations and greater critical mass. In response to the COVID-19 and other global crises, can we slowly begin to turn our collective failures around, establishing co-existence with the rest of nature, and harmony within ourselves? Can we be inspired by Nadimidoddi Vinodamma of Deccan Development Society below, growing 40 kinds of crops on her 2.5 acres of dryland in Telangana, quietly transforming her life as a Dalit woman into one of dignity and self-reliance, re-asserting the sanctity of life?

Narmada

Poems

K Satchidanandan

An Old Poet's Suicide Note

Walking in the dark
I grew blind
Wading across silence
I turned deaf

Teachers who speak ceaselessly about light,
how far above is it?
Prophets who taught me about revolution,
how remote is it?

My legs have grown weary
My heart beats are slow
You still tell lies
Don't lie to children, said the poet
who just died of the world.

I searched in all the books,
for a word of truth
I dug every drought
for a drop of tear

I can no more speak of earth's beauty
sitting on a sinking land.
Cannot speak of trees sitting inside a storm
Cannot speak of beginnings sitting inside a deluge

I had a country when I was born
Now I am a refugee
I was born in a single chain;
several chains fetter me now

I raised my hands to scream against injustice
I said 'don't' to the vile hunter.
My life is a collection of vain deeds.

This is the first poem I write
without corrections and revisions
This is the first song of the night
I sing without faltering.

The spring of my dreams has gone dry
I draw the curtains on this shadow play,
quickly, easily, like switching off a TV set.

Farewell. Call me when the world changes.
I shall come back if the hungry worms
and the obstructing angels permit me.

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

Distances

(To Asamaa Azaizeh, poet from Palestine)

Landless one, I know the secret
of this hair, curly like the Arab script:
you hide in this your
severed Palestinian roots.

Homeless one, I know the secret
Of your legs, lean like sugarcane:
They are full of the aching memories
of your walks in search of your house.

Your eyes grew so dark and moist
watching kids draw gallows
instead of olive trees.
Your limbs grope and reach up to
Jerusalem, Ramallah, Kibbutz and Tulkarm
And come back stained with the blind
blood of children from their streets.

You write a script for a film
unlikely to be played in an
abandoned theatre in Beirut;
it is full of the heart beats of ghosts.

On your body they draw red lines
as on a cadaver on a surgeon's table
to be cut into pieces.
Blood flow from every line;
they draw the map of a country
that does not yet exist.

You have stopped talking
about freedom so that the children
have no illusions; instead you
show them the sunflowers
blooming on your belly.

And then you sit alone and
mark the distance between
the body and the bomb.

(Walking around the St Naum Church with Asmaa; from the sequence, Western Canto)

Letter From A Soldier

(On watching the letters sent by the soldiers from Punjab in the First World War forming part of an installation, 'The Memorial for Lost Words' by Bani Abidi at Khoj, Delhi)

Dear Ma,

Kindly send me the following items by return post:

1. *The song of the sparrow on our courtyard to sweeten my ears as I cross the desert on my tank*
2. *A parrot and a rainbow in the sky while hiding in a bush*
3. *A few Gurbanis to warm me as I shiver in the cold*
4. *A matchstick to set fire to the heap of the General's abuses*
5. *A spinach leaf from my mother's kitchen to lull my infinite hunger*
6. *A cloud floating over Panipat to squeeze out the rain-juice to quench my thirst*
7. *A woof of Jagtar, our pet, so that I can tell east from west*
8. *A chain to bind my feet together to stop me from running to Samira*
9. *A kiss from my unborn daughter as I fall to the bullet of my helpless comrade across the border*
10. *A quilt woven with my little sister Jugnu's tears to shroud my brother and me as the last breath leaves our flesh*

P S Don't forget to tell my brothers in arms not to cover my coffin with the flag and not offer a gun salute at my burial. Don't ever let the children at home wear a uniform.

Yours,

Surjit

My Motherland

I live inside the cold, fetid,
mossy language of a cemetery.

Fresh, dark, dead bodies
arrive here every day.
At night they slightly raise their heads,
unsure they are dead like the dead.

Darkness will scare some
whose memory is still alive.

The corpses of the lynched
at times turn to the other side
groaning as if their bones
on one side ache still.
Some eye-sockets fill
with tears thinking of
their children who have
abandoned them.
It is from those sockets that
tulips spring in the cemetery.

The women raped and killed
don't even look at the dead men,
afraid they will turn them into
hard rocks with no springs within.

It is the voices the dead hear
that the living call silence;
and the light they see, night.
Leaves' murmur is their speech.

The scent of flowers and

the chirping of birds frighten them.
They have seen fangs on roses
and blood on birds' beaks.

They feel the laughter of the living
is a downpour that drowns them.
Mushrooms are born from them,
but they are far from edible.

Don't insist that the dead should
respond to everything around them;
don't approach them with your
microphones; they fear news.

The only hope of my rotting
patriotic flesh is the happy day
when I too will be lifeless like them.
Let none pray for my survival,
for, death frees us from every border,
it is truly international.

This cemetery is my motherland:
The only country shaped like a skull,
whose national flag is black
and whose national anthem
is but an endless scream.

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

Questions from the Dead: An Essay on Nationalism

Which country's border was Hiuen Tsang crossing
when, on a donkey, he crossed the Himalayan pass
with a sack full of Buddhist texts?

Whence came the races that spoke
Dravidian and Aryan tongues? Was there no one in India
when they landed here? Not even a tribal?

Where did the Bharatvarsha of Mahabharat and Meghdoot
began, where did it end? Did Bhasa and Kapilar
belong to the same country?

Where were the borders of the India of Fahien
and of Al-Biruni? Where was Taxila? Which was
the India Alexander set out to conquer? Which
country did Ashoka and Akbar rule?

Who created India: the East India Company
Or Mountbatten? Or was it Gandhi? When
Did 'Hindu' become the name of a religion?

When did Earth come to be in the history
of the universe? When did nations come to be
in the history of Earth? How many nations
make a human body? What is the kinship between
human soul and nations' maps? Did all the births of
Bodhisattva take place in India? How many oceans
are there in each language? How many skies
in winds? How many seasons for love?

I had been guarding the borders till yesterday. All
my life I had arguments about borders. My living flesh
bled, caught in their barbed wire fencing. I went
to court in their name, killed many times, died many times.
They said I would become a martyr if I died
for the cause, that it would secure Heaven for me.

My land, I do not loathe you, nor do I worship you.
Had I been born elsewhere I would have lived another
life; I would have needed a passport to enter you.

Today at last I am going to cross all the borders
and become part of the Earth. Do not cover me with flags.

Today I know, we are a creation of coincidences,
like our body, like the Solar System. We have
no scope for pride, and war does not have even
that scope. Bury me deep without an anthem.

No one ceases to ask questions
just because one is dead.

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

On Failing to Write about Sadness

Sumana Roy

We enter life as if we were entering a room, not knowing where the light might fall.

We enter a poem as if we were walking over a puddle, not knowing where the stress will fall.

I think about the phonetic similarities between failing and falling, and how a fall has come to be idiomatically associated with failing. Just as the sense of failure is always retrospective – one knows one has failed as only a function of the past – similarly I find myself noticing, only now, that I have been writing poems about failure without being conscious of it. These are poems that began life with a different kind of ambition – I wanted to write about the Hill Cart Road, a road that takes its name literally from its purpose of having been built to ferry goods from the plains of northern Bengal to the Darjeeling hills, poems that would commemorate stops on the way, stops I'd made and stops that I imagined construction workers, missionaries, and travellers had made since the construction of the road began in 1839. They were not meant for publication – as most poems aren't – but to chart for myself the history of this road that connected mainland India to the Darjeeling hills. It wouldn't be the first time I'd turn to the road for creative energy. Kabir, a doctoral student in my novel *Missing* (Aleph, 2018), goes to study in England – the subject of his research is the Hill Cart Road. Someone – a historian, his mother's colleague – tells him that this is the sad fact about research in former colonies: one had to go to England or America to be able to discover their histories even if one was researching about the street one lived on. This failure of the archive had set me on the path, literally as it were.

I was looking at the poems, about twenty of them, part of an imagined series about the road, when it suddenly struck me that most of these were poems that had come from that amorphous place we call sadness. Sadness is, at least in these poems, and perhaps in my own life as well, a function of failure. I think of failure as a *rasa* in itself, but the *Natyashastra*, of course, does not list it as one. And yet we are intuitively aware that the sense of failure is as much a 'bhaava' as the other rasas. I do not know where the rasas come from or where to they disappear. But reading these poems long after the impulse that gave birth to them has evaporated or dissolved into other emotions, I feel that I have become both – forgetful of the failures, but still proprietorial about owning their peculiarities. For that is the thing about failures – success might be generic, coded as it is with the exteriority of the world, but our failures are uniquely our own.

Two poems from the Hill Cart Road sequence:

Margaret's Hope

Just as it's actually the gun
whose soul and intestines
we feel in the sting of a bullet,
it's the retina of the mountains,
their beams of air
and the homesickness of their soil,
that we taste in a cup of tea.

The car stops here, throwing a fit,
as if it were a flower that's done for the day.
Our desire acquires a surname: tea.
And so we walk to this tea garden.
There's a stump of sadness in its name –
the spire of a wound,
a father's windy heart.
The daughter, left permanently little by death,
is now the name of this tea.
'Margaret's First Flush':
as if what we're drinking is the English girl's blood,
or the pickled sap of death.
A child's death on sea,
the father planting her name on a hill –
history raises its hind legs like a dog,
tea soaks itself into spit,
I stub out the rest of my thoughts
and close my eyes,
scared of seeing the genitals of grief.

δ

Samdrup Darjay Choling Monastery, Sonada

Colour must've existed before history;
the mind too, at least its shyness?
I think these with twilit-belief,
and so the mind withholds its rewards.
In my eyes, though they're being pushed out,
are maroon and yellow, slipping and falling.
(The child monks are playing, like fingers on a hand.)
Colour leaks – we see it in the sky,
the sun a messy child; in water again,
its centrelessness, its lack of constancy.
That Buddhism, a religion of the moment,
should try to trap the pentatonic colours,
their panting breath, is as much a surprise
as goddesses with expectant breasts.
Blue, yellow, red, green, black …
Mumbling mandalas, the barking spires.
Anitya couldn't be colour-laden,
I think, without affection for life –
but a rainbow shivers and faints,
translucent impermanence.

Behind the monastery are conifers,
dutifully evergreen,
without sleep, without humour.
Flower, colour, caress, breath of a bell –
dukkha is here, in this homeless beauty,
in its liquid life, in its devotion to death.
Dukkha is here, in this hunchbacked flux.
Flux perhaps reveals itself only in colour,
for when I close my eyes to pray,
light dies, scalding my prayer.
I look around,

scared of attaining nirvana,
its monochrome famine.

Life bursts inside me –
a wound, a dense, creaking wound.

δ

Gayabari

I got down here –
my heart couldn't move uphill.
The road is a horse on which I'm sitting.
My hands hold my face like a bowl.

My heart's a wet cloth
that's being wrung for dryness.
Pain clots and forms slums.
But the wringing never stops.

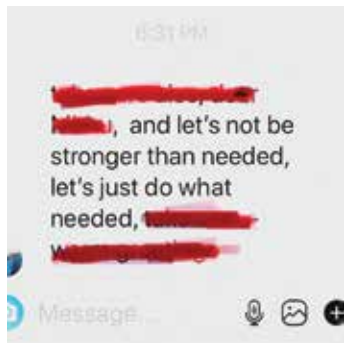
I think of hiding it in a bunker,
throwing it out of my body –
'Rust there,' I want to shout.
The heart's quest for pain is relentless.
Pain forms canopies, colony, colic.
The heart casts no shadow.
Only things that cast shadows can die.

Notes on (Un)Failing Language

Mithu Sen

The world we live in is breaking down and we are all broken up. We are marked by these disorders of break-downs: of communication, of democratic systems, of the market, often, of language. What happens when language is out of order? Break-down, an obvious diagnostic for failure has become a tool for me to train my focus on the fragment(-ation) of language. The dysfunction of language has over time become an important area of artistic inquiry for me, an exploration of affective affinities that an aphasic performance fuses together.

Un-poetry is a work-in-process to speculate on the possibilities of an unstable, unformed language. I scrape at the surface and structure of a poem, fusing vocabularies of text and non-text, visual and non-visual. In my un-poetry, I say, **I # You**. I am not interested in punctuating speech or writing. Punctuation marks crawl out of their functionality –– they are not accessories here, but part of the lexicon of un-language. I don't scratch over the text to erase but to reveal through scratching, the formation of newer textual beings. Un-poetry unleashes a formal confusion and revels in it; it creates Extra Textual Beings.




POLITICALLY
UNCORRECT
'POLITICALLY UN-CORRECT'
psychological restless time

In so many ways, the paradigm rests on failing language –– failing the conventions and forms of poetry by inducing a self-generated break-down of language by literally breaking down syntactic structures. I am constantly dragging language away from its volubility and working in an economy of language. This contraction of language into signs that are neither fully visual, nor fully textual, neither completely legible nor completely illegible creates a confusion of transitivity. As lone fragments, they are not bridges but a sprawling network of associations. There is no grand investment in Metaphor or Meaning. In fact, as a half-formed thing, it frees these signs from Meaning.

The world inhabited by my un-poetry is a dismantled un-reality where nothing and everything has meaning. Every level of composition is a gestural performance where I work towards complicating reception. Un-poetry is a way of refusing gratification and obstructing consumption. Enacting this online, a terrain on which any act of creative production becomes content for consumption becomes all the more significant. So the performance is also that of trickery, of serving these unappetizing fragments on a platter. To offer something, but to also demand an engaged reception.

The crisis of cognition that I invoke here is accompanied by a crisis of linearity. The semiotic structure gets toppled in this un-world. It asks for an involvement that goes deeper than cognition, not an immersion in the monolith of poetry but an active, subjective meaning-making. Breaking through the density of semiosis, I create conditions for osmosis. Semiosis through osmosis is how I imagine the absorption of un-poetry, through a flux of porosity.

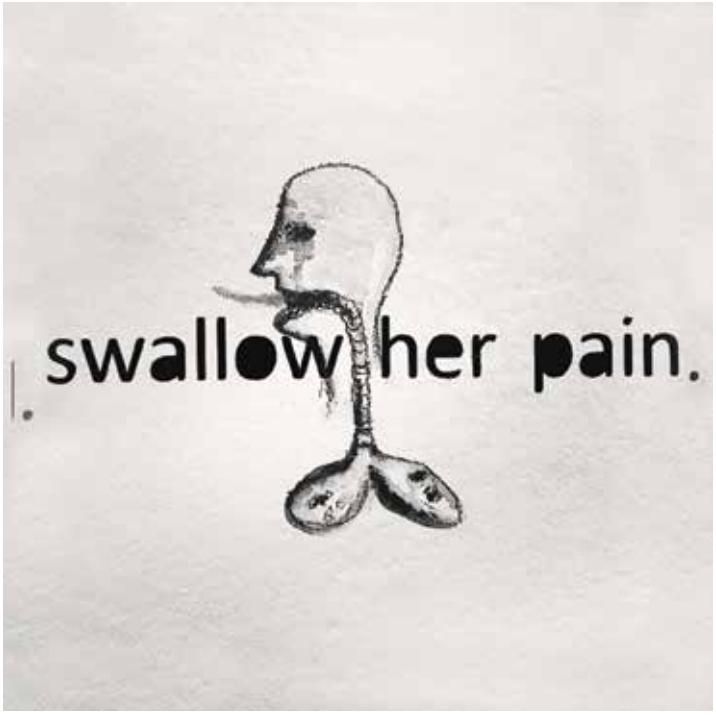
Social media is an incomparable tool to speak to people across geographies, in no time at all, through the un-languages of image and affect. The algorithms and patterns that undergird and pace our virtual interactions invite us to play with and against them. It presents me with the opportunity to both create and undo patterns and projections of static artistic identity. My un-poetry is an active assemblage, which floats into the digital ecosystem propelled by the algorithm, and its algo-rhythmic tensions, confusing the code. This confusion and breakdown let me navigate through the data surveillance online, not bind myself in folds of self-censorship. These signs that I present are out-of-context, out-of-frame, out-of-sense –– to baffle and enrich the digital matrix and tap into a greater shared subconscious.

It is here, in these possibilities that one can imagine a realm of communication and mutuality that diffuses and distributes language, that parcels language up into codes and ciphers, that melts the order of poetic structure and yet suffuses poetry in every sign. It creates a collective vernacular vocabulary, a dictionary of subjectivity that keeps shifting its form –– gathering like a cloud, a mass of meanings bursting into precipitation, but always, always flowing into each other.


आज का शब्द
Illegal
अवैध

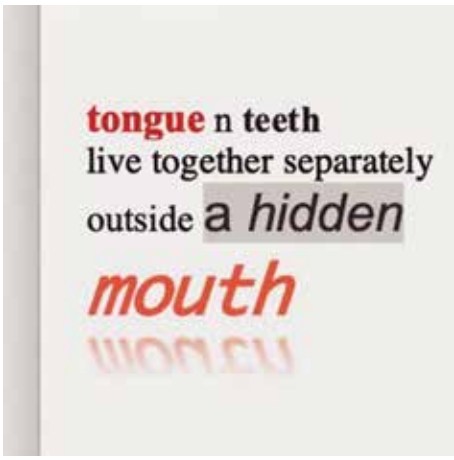

dystopia
ps: exit poll


might camp forever
in a Temporary courtyard
[redacted]
Mistake me for somebody else
#how to not belong


swallow her pain.


~~Singularly~~
vulnerable
ps: I bleed river


Nowhere I not know
un exist anymore
ps: ~~Known~~ World
Withdrawing


tongue n teeth
live together separately
outside a hidden
mouth


world

Kokoro: Imagining Japan in Santiniketan

Nilanjan Bandhyopadhyay

As I step into this house, a strange silence envelopes me. Wooden screens and a vase at the entrance, a split curtain on my right, a step chest on my left. As I move forward, a kettle hanger greets me at the hearth facing an alcove. I have named this house *Kokoro*, being drawn to its meaning, which is 'heart' in Japanese, and also to the script that represents it—a favourite of many calligraphers. The wide door of the living space, when opened, invites the surrounding nature inside. An ancient rock, possibly shaped by rivers over ages, is now a sad gravestone in the garden. In the quietude of a small city in India called Santiniketan or 'the abode of peace'-- *Kokoro* is constructed as a house of memories with stories to tell.

Sensei

Sensei, which evokes immense respect in Japan, means teacher in Japanese. My Japanese teacher at school, Padmaruchi Mukhopadhyay, introduced me to Azuma Kazuo and I addressed him as Azuma-*sensei*. At the time, he was a Professor of Reitaku University and also Professor Emeritus at the University of Tsukuba. I would assist him in editing his Bengali books and essays whenever he visited Santiniketan. He wrote primarily on Poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) – the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize, in literature, – and his exchanges with Japan. I owe my interest in Japan to Professor Azuma and would also trace my desire to have a Japan-inspired house, to him.

An ardent admirer of Bengal and India, Azuma-*sensei* remained engrossed in the mission of introducing Japan and India to one another, over five decades, closely supported by his wife Keiko. My discovery of Japan steadily progressed in close guidance of the Azuma family, including Azuma Kazuo's wife Keiko and sister Minako -- a professor of traditional Japanese clothing at a women's university. Over the years, they accompanied me to innumerable cultural destinations in Japan, introducing the best traditions of the land that had built a close kinship with India.

Rabindranath Tagore and Japan

I was educated at Visva-Bharati, founded by Rabindranath Tagore. The Indian poet and educator had set up a school for children at Santiniketan, a key aim being to educate children in close proximity to nature. Tagore's Santiniketan School evolved into Visva-Bharati—an international university—where he desired to assimilate

the best of the East and the West, believing in a universal brotherhood of nations based on the principles of cooperation and harmony. Okakura Kakuzo, the celebrated Japanese art-historian and aesthete, widely known for his three books in English — *The Book of Tea, Ideals of the East* and *The Awakening of Japan* — ignited an interest about China and Japan in Tagore during his first visit to Calcutta in 1902. Tagore grew to become a great admirer of Japan, specifically praising its social, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual strength and uniqueness. He visited Japan five times between 1916 and 1929, which included two brief stopovers. In 1916, he stayed at the house of the legendary Japanese painter Yokoyama Taikan in Tokyo before spending nearly three months at Sankeien-- the beautiful garden-estate of Hara Tomitaro, a wealthy silk merchant and patron of art in Yokohama.

In a letter written from Japan, he expressed a desire to import a Japanese house to Santiniketan with its entire set of furniture. Although Rabindranath's dream of bringing a Japanese house to India remained unfulfilled, at least three Japanese carpenters are known to have worked closely with him at Santiniketan to introduce a sense of 'Japan-ness' to the aesthetic of Santiniketan. One among them, Kasahara Kintaro, built a tree house for the poet at Sriniketan. 'Udayana', the principal residence of Rabindranath at Santiniketan, also bears Japanese influences that, among other elements, are strikingly visible in a *marumado* (circular window), a *tokonoma* (alcove) and a *fusuma* or sliding door. Traditional joineries of Japanese carpentry are noticeable in several houses in Santiniketan that are associated with the memory of Rabindranath Tagore and his family.

A Japanese house in Santiniketan

I visited innumerable traditional and modern Japanese houses, temples, and gardens, trying to understand their inherent aesthetic and spiritual qualities. I decided to build a Japan-inspired house in Santiniketan with indigenous materials that were easy to procure and maintain. The idea was not to miss the spirit of Japan even while being away from it. Each of my departures from Japan used to fill me with a strange sadness. Faces of my favourite people, the fragrance of temple incense, shadows of *shoji* doors, the silence of moss-covered gardens, quivering bamboo groves, narrow evening alleys adorned with paper lanterns, the sound of burning charcoal in a wintry brazier, tranquil ponds rattled by fleeting and colourful *koi* fish, floating yuzu lime in a hot bath-tub, fragrant *mitsuba* leaves in a bowl of clear soup, old step chests with wears and tears of time — all these memories of Japan kept haunting me everywhere.

It was difficult to find an appropriate piece of land which would not be surrounded by unwelcome structures and noises. After procuring the land, I started nurturing a garden with my favourite plants.

A *wabi-sabi* life

Okakura Kakuzo's *The Book of Tea* is a treatise on Japanese aesthetics, contextualised in the discussion of 'teaism' that was introduced from China to Japan. Influenced by Tao, Confucian and Zen doctrines, *chyanoyu* or the Japanese

tea ceremony was perfected and democratised by the Japanese tea master Sen no Riky in the sixteenth century, and since then has significantly influenced Japanese architecture. In his book, Okakura describes an ideal tea room that illustrates the spirit of the *wabi-sabi* style of architecture celebrating the beauty of simplicity, imperfection, and incompleteness.

Inspired by Okakura's interpretation of Japanese aesthetics with tea-culture at its centre, I began developing the plan of a house based on my own perception of Japanese architecture, together with my friend and Santiniketan-based architect Milon Dutta. Dutta, who has a considerable interest in Japan, started consulting visual and cultural references to design a compact house that could be built and sustained in India. The first plan of the house was developed by him, suggesting a void at the entrance, based on my specific requirements. Meanwhile, I befriended Sato Kengo, a young and very promising Japanese architect, who happily agreed to help me with the idea of the house.

The three of us constantly engaged in dialogues to finalise the plan of *Kokoro* — my house-cum-poetry and calligraphy studio in Santiniketan. I was a little surprised when Sato-*san* asked me exactly what I meant by a house that invoked the spirit of Japan for me. I would later understand that my idea of 'Japan-ness' is probably the result of an 'external gaze'.

I explained to Sato Kengo, a top graduate in architecture from the University of Tokyo and Waseda University, that my intended house should be imbued with the

spirit of Japan. It should be simple, beautiful, modest, inexpensive, incomplete, and should always be engulfed by a certain sense of emptiness. I was probably reverberating the idea of a house that Okakura would define (in the context of a tea room) as an 'Abode of fancy', an 'Abode of vacancy' and as an 'Abode of the Unsymmetrical'. Okakura held a tea room as an abode of fancy as it was built on the basis of an individual's poetic impulse. It was an 'abode of vacancy' for him, as the room was not cluttered with unnecessary objects that served no aesthetic purpose. A tea room for Okakura was also an 'Abode of the unsymmetrical', "inasmuch as it is consecrated to the worship of the Imperfect, purposefully leaving something unfinished for the play of the imagination to complete."

What I expressed to Sato on the idea of my house precisely corresponded to the idea of having a space suitable for a *wabi-sumai* or a *wabi* life. *Wabi-sabi* is a concept central to Japanese aesthetics, which is more to be felt, discovered, and practised than to be comprehended only by its literal meaning. Whatever is beautiful, elegant in its utter rustic simplicity, imperfection, and incompleteness, can be represented by *wabi. Sabi*, on the other hand, is manifested in the beauty and grace that time and age bring. Refined taste, loneliness and melancholy, the patina of age, a sophisticated austerity, and tranquillity are commonly associated with *wabi-sabi*, which also brings about the joy of finding greatness in small things. The idea of *Wabi-sabi* is inseparable from the tea master Sen no Rikyū.

Sato ensured that he would not design a house as a mere replica of any existing work, nor one that has the fake pretence of being 'Japanese' in spirit. We started

chasing a common dream. The original plan of the house was modified more than fifty times by Sato, who kept sending me new drawings at the end of every discussion. Based upon the drawings of Sato, Dutta developed its structural details.

It took about six months to construct the superstructure of the house under the supervision of my father, along with Milon Dutta, and Rathin Biswas, a landscape and interior designer entrusted with the actual construction of the house. Sato closely monitored the progress of the work from Japan, occasionally introducing minor changes on the basis of collective decisions.

The Japanese novelist Tanizaki Junichiro elaborately discusses how -- from lacquerware to toilet, No theatre to cuisine, alcoves to gardens -- darkness plays a significant role in Japanese aesthetics. He says,

> "The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's ends."

While visualising my house, I desired to cultivate the charm and secret of shadows instead of direct and bright illumination. Sato, while allowing sufficient natural light into the house, accepted my idea of having small and narrow windows at different heights.

Sato always held that the project of building this house in India would be unsatisfactory without the touch of a Japanese carpenter. He revisited Santiniketan with a team of Japanese artists along with Aoshima Kazuhiro, a gifted and generous carpenter to work on the interior of the house.

Kokoro: concept to materiality

Some key ideas underpin the spatial and material characteristics of the house and its outlying landscape. Primary among this is the aspect of 'flow'. The house's envelope affords opportunity for varying and multiple encounters with its interior's intimate spaces and the landscape. These are manifest in treatments of

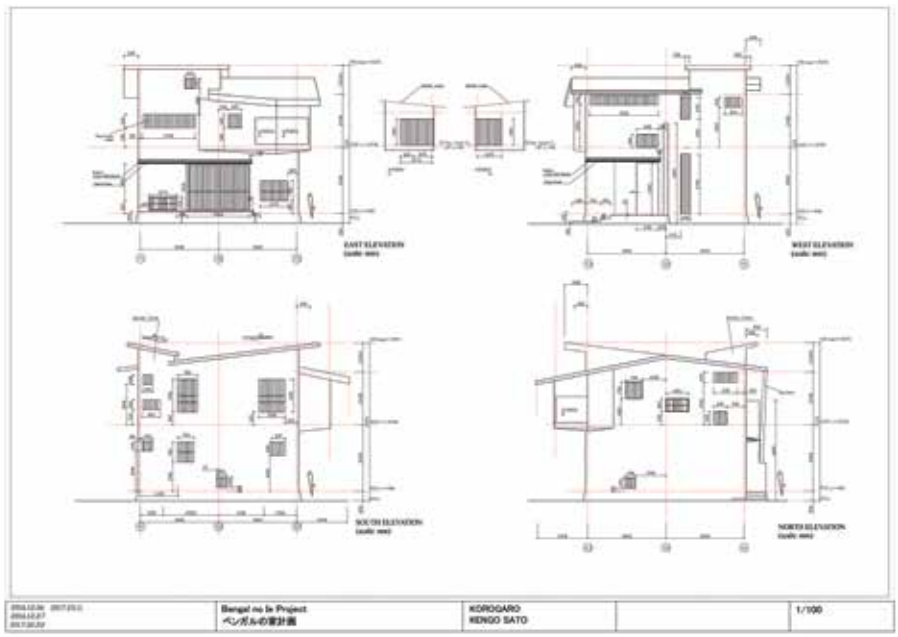
the *genkan* (entrance) both to and from the garden, as well as the scattering of dissimilar windows of varying sizes and heights. Furthermore, the idea of rooms is dismantled to render spatial continuity between nooks, alcoves and the exposed staircase. There are very few walls and subtle suggestions of various functions through screens -- wooden, fabric or paper. In addition, the varying experiences of light and shadow in each space, even when continuous, provides a richness of textures and experiences.

The other underlying thought interrelated with flow is the deliberate choice of keeping the materials as exposed as possible. This choice was made to humanise the textures and celebrate their true qualities, including imperfections. As a result, the concrete surfaces, wood grains and textures are all 'unfinished' and not painted over. Even the plaster is exposed (often to the consternation of some visitors!). Paradoxically, in *Kokoro* this embodies the inherent vitality of continuity and growth that is promised by the lack of completeness. Just as Okakura Kakuzo eloquently articulated in *The Book of Tea*, "the Tao is in the passage and not the path", *Kokoro* is always to be seen as a process and not a product.

Both Okakura and Tagore agreed emphatically on how emptiness is not 'nothingness'. This is another final philosophy underlying the materiality and objects of *Kokoro*. The home veers away from being superfluous, although composed of many objects acquired over time. Nonetheless, rather than an act of 'conspicuous consumption', these converge upon memory and utility - blurring the sharp lines between their emotional and functional existence. The minimalism embodied in the furnishings and objects in *Kokoro* is, therefore, another deliberate and conscious choice.

Structure

Kokoro is built with reinforced concrete and brick. The walls of the building have been plastered. The two-storied, square-shaped house with tilted, exposed concrete roofs has a thick and wide concrete column at its centre, dividing the space into



four equal squares. Traditional Japanese architecture attempts a synthesis between *nomono* (structure) and *kesho* (surface). In the entire planning of Kokoro, the Indian superstructure of the house represents *nomono*, while the Japanese wooden elements contribute to the textures of the surface, fulfilling the requirements of *kesho*. While some walls of the house have been painted white, grey predominates the rest of the building, including the floor and the ceiling. Two overhanging eaves laid in earthen *kawara* (roof tiles) protect two doors of the house from rain and also control the flow of light.

Genkan

The *genkan* or the entrance is a transit between the inner and the outer world. A pebbled pathway, with hand-crafted and round stepping stones, leads to the main entrance of *Kokoro* from the gate facing a bamboo grove. *Kokoro* has a narrow and sunken entrance paved in rough-surfaced black stone. A wooden *getabako* (shoe rack) stands between the *genkan* and the *otearai cum furoba* (toilet-cum-bathroom). Two movable wooden screens partially hide the *genkan* from the dirt floor and the living room.

Doma

The *doma* or the dirt floor in traditional Japanese architecture is the space between the *genkan* and the actual living space. An anecdote is worth recalling here. The floor of the house was being laid, and no doors had been installed yet. I was away, and my father -- then at the site -- frantically called to report how a stray cat had walked across the wet floor, leaving random paw marks. I suggested that the imprint be left untouched. The cat's paw marks on the floor were the kind of imperfections I desired to let remain. The long trail of paw marks of an unknown cat resonated with me for the old and deep surgical scar on my neck with which I have learnt to live without any sense of shame or loss, like many other imperfections that constitute me, my conduct, and my surroundings. A form of art known as *kintsugi* in Japan aims to repair broken ceramic ware with gold lining, making them more precious and beautiful. At *Kokoro*, imperfections, both intended and accidental, are treasured instead of being hidden – cracks on floors and walls, insect bitten wood, rusted metal, leaves and moss gathered on the garden pathway, scratches on a lacquered *suzuribako* (calligraphy box), a gracefully soiled paper lantern, a hand-crafted wooden door bolt, and so on.

Spatially, the *doma* of *Kokoro* is a void punctuated by the stairway, leading to the first floor. Beneath the floating flight of stairs, a *kaidansu* (step-chest) has been placed. The step-chest was made by a local carpenter incorporating four *kiri* (paulownia) chest-doors bearing the memory of Sato's grandfather, which he had

brought from Japan to be recycled in any graceful manner. The step chest has ceramic drawer-pulls designed by a studio-potter Lipi Biswas, who herself lives a *wabi*-life in a tribal village adjacent to Santiniketan.

Daidokoro

In his book In *Praise of Shadows*, the Japanese novelist Tanizaki Junichiro observed,

In the Kyoto-Osaka region a particularly thick variety of soy is served with raw fish, pickles, and greens; and how rich in shadows is the viscous sheen of the liquid, how beautifully it blends with the darkness. White foods too—white miso, bean curd, fish cake, the white meat of fish—lose much of their beauty in a bright room.

He went on to state, "Our cooking depends upon shadows and is inseparable from darkness."

The *daidokoro* or the kitchen of *Kokoro* is a relatively darker space within the house, with a single window above the kitchen sink to allow natural light. A large brass bowl has been used as the kitchen sink. Partial wood panelling helps cooking accessories hang on the wall. The tiny kitchen of *Kokoro*, is meant for preparing small meals. A long, indigo-dyed *noren* (split curtain) designed by Watanabe Miku visually separates the kitchen from the *ima* and the *doma*.

Ima

The *ima* or the living space is a long, rectangular room at *Kokoro*. Glass panelled doors in the middle of its eastern wall leads to the back garden. Windows are placed at various levels, complementing views of the garden and eye levels according to the low seating heights. Apart from a piano that stands beside an *andon* (lantern), the furniture of the room comprises two low tables placed beneath a hanging cane-basket lamp, and a legless chair with a red box designed by Sato Kengo and crafted by Aoshima Kazuhiro. The walls of the *ima* are almost empty. One among the two tables have a small storage with sliding paulownia doors, which is being used for keeping incense and essential oils.

Irori

Irori, in a traditional Japanese house, is a sunken hearth widely used in the winter to keep the room warm, burning wood or charcoal, and also to use the fire to boil tea-water or grill fish, meat, and vegetables. The *irori* in Japan is considered a sacred place, where the *hi-no-kami* or the fire god resides. The *irori* becomes the centre of attraction in winter for sitting around with family or friends, and having

meals while chatting. To the south of the *ima*, a slightly elevated wooden platform holds an *irori* table (table with a fire hearth underneath) with a pair of hibashi (metal chopsticks), *gotoku* stand (a stand to hold kettle) and *haikaki* (a spade-like tool to draw patterns on ash). A metal *jizaikagi* (an adjustable kettle hanger) designed by Sato steadily suspends a *tetsubin* (cast iron kettle) on the *irori.* While not in use, the kettle can be pushed upward. A pendant light hangs over the *irori*, in close parallel to the *jizaikagi*.

Tokonoma

The *Tokonoma* or the alcove in a Japanese house is a relatively dark, near-empty recessed space with a raised dais. A *tokonoma* is considered a very special place for display of exquisite art objects, which may include a hanging scroll – commonly a calligraphy or painting -- a flower vase with flowers arranged, an incense burner, or a candle holder, among other objects. The guest of honour at the house is usually offered a seat with their back facing the *tokonoma*. It is customary for the guest, after sitting at the seat of honour, to turn around, discover the art objects exhibited at the *tokonoma* and to appreciate them. Sato designed a *tokonoma* (alcove) for *Kokoro* at the enclosure housing the *irori* table, and installed a wooden structure within it, replacing a *tokobashira* (a post made from a whole skinned tree). The wooden structures show traditional intricate Japanese wood-joineries. Apart from an elegant shelf at the top, the structure has a wooden hook to hang a *kakemono*. I was keen to keep an insect cage at *Kokoro* without live insects. Sato designed a *mushikago* (insect cage) that holds a paper moth designed by Uchida Lina as a part of the wooden structure of the tokonoma of Kokoro. A finely polished piece of aromatic *hiba* wood (Thujopsis) has been used to rest a *kabin* (flower vase) or an incense burner at the relatively dark *tokonoma* to which a tiny window, low to the ground, provides indirect and soft illumination.

Furoba

Kokoro has two bathrooms. One is located next to the entrance, and has a rustic sliding door. A white basin on a subdued concrete shelf has been installed beneath an imperfectly finished round-mirror. The only one window invites diffused light to the bathroom, intensifying the colours of the cement-finished walls.

The floating concrete stairway or the *kaidan* leads directly to the bathroom cum toilet on the upper floor. This space has three windows and a concrete *furo* (bathtub), used for a deep bath after rinsing the body with a hand shower. An *ishi* (rock) has been kept inside the bathtub, and another piece of rock acts as a stepping stone to climb into the tub. A traditional Japanese bath stool, a wooden bath pail with copper hooves, the wood-clad *ofuro*, and soothing lighting techniques create the atmosphere of a traditional Japanese bathroom.

Small room

A small room adjacent to the *ofuro* is the only space in the house with a simple wooden bed. The large window, the bamboo blind modulating light and ventilation, the black sliding door, natural wood flooring, subdued tones and the matte texture of the walls make the room cosy. The side table for the room, capable of holding a glass, a bottle of water, a bed-side lamp, or a flower-vase, was designed by me and crafted by Aoshima Kazuhiro.

Guest room

The guest room, right next to the small room, has been kept as empty as possible. The room, with an unpolished wooden door, has an *oshiire* or closet primarily to store *futon* (bedding) and other everyday items so that it can be used for other purposes during the day. The large *mado* (window) of the room offers a view of the greenery around it, while the top window provides an emergency-access to the roof. The room is floored in a large-grid in natural wood. An unpolished mango-wood door with a rustic wooden latch keeps the room private.

Study

Protected with thin lines of metal barriers the study of *Kokoro* is bathed in natural light from three sides. It primarily houses a small library of books on Japan. A *kotatsu* (table with a foot warmer) serves as a reading desk. A wooden structure emerging through the void diagonally crosses through the study, suggesting a continuity between the two floors. Three closely placed wooden book racks or *hondana* separate the tearoom from the study, acting as a partition wall. High on a wall of the study, a small *kamidana* (a portable *Shinto* alter) is hung, which is commonly found in many Japanese houses besides *butsudan* (Buddhist alter).

The *Kakoi* of Kokoro

Tea-houses and tea-rooms built for the purpose of Japanese tea-ceremonies are important components of traditional Japanese architecture. The early form of the Japanese tea room, known as *Kakoi*, was actually an enclosure built within the living room of a house. *Sukiya*, on the other hand, is an independent tea house with a mid-*suya* or ante room to wash tea utensils, a portico for guests to wait before entering the tea room through the garden path or *roji,* and a garden attached to it. Explaining the distinguishing features of a tea-room, Okakura writes,

> The tea-room is unimpressive in appearance. It is smaller than the smallest of Japanese houses, while the materials used in its construction are intended to give the suggestion of refined poverty. Yet we must remember that all this is the result of profound artistic forethought, and that the details have been worked out with care perhaps even greater than that expanded on the building of the richest palaces and temples.

A triangular projection at the north eastern corner of the house holds the smallest room of the house, which serves as a *Kakoi* or a tea-enclosure, with an exposed concrete pillar supporting the slanting roof. The *Kakoi*, meant for two guests and the tea master, has large *shoji*-like transparent glass-panelled windows offering views of the greenery around the house. Three wooden bookshelves in the study separates the tea-room from the rest of the house.

The minimalist interior of the *Kakoi of Kokoro* has been achieved through a careful selection of objects keeping in mind that there is no repetition of colour or form between any two objects. A cast iron kettle or *chagama*, a *kakemono* (hanging scroll) in a simple *tokonoma*, a flower vase, and an incense burner are the only objects in the tea-room, alongside a raised wooden floor and three half-tatami mats. A candle illuminates the room in the evening while the *rousokutate* (candle holder) is removed from sight during daytime.

The garden

A *wabi*-life cannot be imagined without a *niwa* or garden. The principal garden of *Kokoro* is located in its backyard, suggesting a forest, a stream, and mountains with shaped trees, rocks and natural bushes. The house and the garden become one when the doors of the house open wide. A few small water bodies with aquatic plants are spread over the garden, divided by a serpentine pathway in exposed brick that accumulates moss in winter and monsoon. Japanese master gardener Tsukamoto Fumio designed a *karesansui* (a still stream) for the garden during his visit to the house, with rocks, pebbles and a bridge. The dry stream runs from a hillock that represents a mountain and disappears into a bush at the north side of the garden. Japanese tea-masters introduced stone lanterns to gardens, primarily for the purpose of guiding guests in the evening. Gradually, stone lanterns of varying shapes and sizes, became an important element in Japanese gardens. *Yukimi-gata* (types of lanterns with open legs) are usually noticed near water bodies with their roofs delicately holding snow in winter. A snow viewing lantern faintly illuminates the garden at *Kokoro* in the evening, while another *tachi-gata* type pedestal lantern welcomes one to the garden pathway with round stepping stones floating in a stream of pebbles.

The philosophy of *Kokoro*

Every object I touch at Kokoro has a story to tell, with a memory of Japan attached to it. After de-cluttering my tea-room and retaining only a tea-brazier, a flower vase, and a hanging scroll, I sent the photograph of a locally made tea-bowl, slightly smaller than the usual Japanese *chawan*, to tea-master Ajioka Sousei, asking if such a bowl would be appropriate to use for tea at *Kokoro*. His answer was, "Whatever you want. You can use everything". This freedom is the guiding spirit of *Kokoro*, instead of any strict rule-book.

Asymmetry and imperfection, silence and emptiness, loneliness and refined poverty, light and shade, simplicity and beauty define *Kokoro* in the spirit of Japanese *wabi* and *sabi*. *Kokoro* is an expression of the internalised aesthetic spirit of Japan in pursuit of a simple, easy, and beautiful life.

No arrangement is static or permanent at *Kokoro*. The minimalist interior of the house keeps on changing with the passing of seasons and my mood. Every corner of the house is the result of a conscious choice. The legless chair with a red box, designed by Sato, has a significance. The red box attached to the chair was initially used by Sato to carry the gift of the paper-moth to Santiniketan. The box, as Sato says, symbolises Japan's gift to India. For Sato, the whole idea of designing *Kokoro* is like importing the paper-moth in a gift box from Japan to India, and then to release it into an Indian structure. The paper-moth of *Kokoro* symbolises the spirit of Japan that flows through the house.

A question that haunts me ever since I built *Kokoro* is that how should one, having developed a taste for things of profound aesthetic value, deal with different or poor aesthetic judgement. The instance of Sen no Rikyu is probably helpful in addressing this problem. It is said, as the castle of Rikyu's master grew larger, his tearoom became smaller.

I look at *Kokoro* with a sense of detachment, almost with a sense of the Buddhist evanescence. When asked about the fate of this house, nurtured as 'freedom from vulgarity', I can only recall what Okakura had to say about the destiny of tea-houses after the death of their masters: "The tea room is made for the tea-master, not the tea master for the tea-room. It is not intended for posterity and therefore is ephemeral."

Love, the last word

My fascination for Japan revolved around Professor Azuma Kazuo and his family. I felt sad that he could not visit *Kokoro*, although his wife Keiko and sister Minako paid a visit to the plot before the house was built, paying tribute to the memorial that I had erected in my garden for Professor Azuma. The three of them were great friends and inseparable.

A parcel from Azuma Keiko reached my home in Santiniketan in the middle of October, 2019, with the gift of three calligraphic pieces including one of *ai*, meaning 'love' in Japanese. It also contained three large brushes used by Kawamata Nangaku that the master-calligrapher had very kindly sent to Azuma Keiko to be resent to my address in India. I had no idea that Keiko-sensei died in Japan on the day I received the last parcel from her. I spoke to Azuma Minako, Keiko-sensei's companion since the passing of Professor Azuma, over phone. My voice choked while I urged her to send me the mortal remains of Azuma Keiko, to be buried under the same rock where her husband's soul rests in my garden. 'Love' was the last message that I received from Keiko-sensei and hence it found an important wall next to the entrance of *Kokoro*. Many years ago, Rabindranath Tagore published a book of short verses titled Stray Birds, written in China and Japan, and dedicated it to his generous Japanese host Hara Sankei. As I step inside *Kokoro* and look at Kawamata's bold, black lines on an off-white piece of cloth, it transports me to Tagore's last poem in the book:

> Let this be my last word
> That I trust in thy love.

A smiling photograph of Azuma Kazuo captured by Mitomo-san used to be an all-time exhibit in he living room, welcoming everyone to *Kokoro*. The wedding portrait of Mr and Mrs Azuma replaced the same in sad monochrome, while I lit a tea-candle before it, listening to the song of silence in the middle of eternal emptiness — 'a vacuum into which others may freely enter.'

Eyes Wide Shut

Devina Dutt and Pepe Gomes

It has been six years since we founded First Edition Arts. Our vision was to run a lean and very spare performing arts organisation, with a focus on tastefully presented music, mainly in the Hindustani genre, with the occasional theatre, poetry and dance performance. We also hoped to make it an open minded organisation that over a period of time would begin to actively seek collaborations with other organisers, community groups, students, listeners and all others who constitute the wider arts ecosystem across genres.

Rank outsiders in the world of Indian classical music (ICM), a cultural space that thrives to a very large extent on the cult of the insider and often inscrutable patron and connoisseurs' networks, we were, in the first flush of idealism, keen to hold on to a very contemporary idea of the multidisciplinary. In fact, we began by organising two very successful jazz concerts in Mumbai's St Andrews Auditorium and the Jamshed Bhabha auditorium at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA), with the great Jazz guitarist John Mclaughlin and his band, the Fourth Dimension. We would have liked to have jazz and Indian classical music coexist in our programming. But we realised that since musicians abroad booked their dates at least a year in advance and sponsors in India were not willing to commit in advance and often kept us dangling till a month before the concert, it would never really work out.

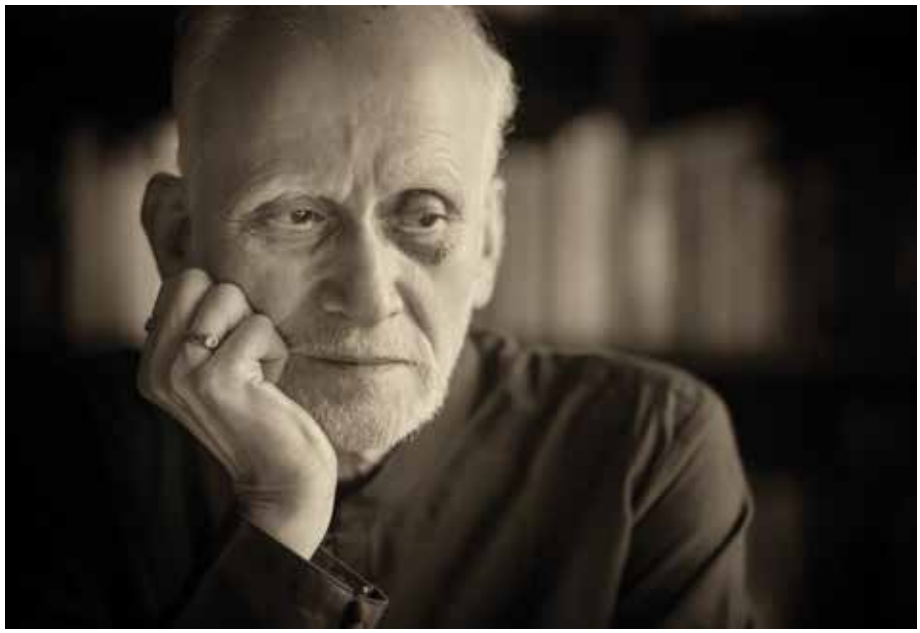
It is another matter that within months of having stepped into the fraught world of the urban classical music concert circuit in Mumbai we were sucked into a series of setbacks that our inexperience in the field hadn't prepared us for. We found ourselves in the midst of contentious conversations with venues, big organisers, sponsors, as well as musicologists, patrons and sundry experts. While the former exerted an overt control, it was the latter who represented a hazier but deeply embedded power structure and who sought to impress upon us the merits of particular musicians and lineages. They were also capable of making some truly abhorrent arguments about musicians who weren't among their favourites. As an arts journalist who had covered contemporary theatre, literature and the performing arts, I hadn't bargained for this toxic mix of hubris and viciousness that seemed to afflict sections of the ICM world.

But at the heart of it all was the music. Difficult, but pleasurably so, it remained one of our most profound and stimulating experience of the arts. It was however, also simultaneously capable of evoking the most volatile and extreme reactions from not just musicians and their students but also from patrons and connoisseurs.

After having spent decades as avid concert-goers in our hometown Kolkata and later Mumbai, with careers as musicians, business and arts journalism, advertising, filmmaking, we felt we had the skills to try and contribute along with many others, to the making of a new, more modern and equitable ecosystem for Hindustani music. Over the last two decades and more, we had begun to feel disillusioned with the way concerts were presented in the urban concert circuit. In the newly unleashed neo-liberal fantasy world that was to become the India Story, ICM concerts, had, without a doubt, begun to acquire a loud, exhibitionistic and brassy sheen. They centred around star musicians who for the most part believed in dazzling their audiences in short bursts, moving from one concert stage to another across the country, rather than nurturing and building their interest in the music more gradually and tastefully. We were disappointed too that a small set of these star musicians were ubiquitous at all large stages and festivals and were clearly dominating the circuit and the sponsorship pie. This acted to the detriment of a wider set of fine musicians who remained unknown and unheard. The Indian Classical Music (ICM) concert was being repackaged and marketed in a manner that seemed more suited to a competitive high stakes sport than a subtle, exquisite and quiet art form.

Outsider perspectives

We began with a few low key but critical changes. Our concert stages were minimal and as soon as we could, we dispensed with the mandatory large backdrops



Arun Kashalkar

Abhishek Borkar

emblazoned with sponsor logos, on stage. We wanted to emphasize that the stage was the domain of the artist. We persuaded our sponsors that this was better and our concert videos on our YouTube channel- which was growing steadily- carried their logos in the opening credits. These had a far greater reach, sophistication and longevity than a logo on the backdrop. We wanted, in every way, to draw attention to the primacy of the music and the musician, and their bond with the listener. We had begun to hear a lot of older rasikas say they were disappointed with the concert scene and preferred to stay at home and listen to dead musicians. This was alarming. Our tagline "We love it Live" was an affirmation of that special relationship between musician and listener crafted anew every time, in the moment.

We had always disliked the flat stage lighting that was typically used on most concert stages and we took pains to light our stages more subtly to help focus on the artist and the music. We put some thought into designing our posters, moving away consciously from the typical fusty ICM look. Since Pepe has been a filmmaker, we were always clear that we would document each concert, lec-dem or conversation with musicians and treat this as an exercise in aesthetic filmmaking which meant working with multiple good quality cameras and professional editing. All of this was shared on our YouTube channel for free as a wider effort at documenting and promoting the art form.

We also felt that the entire piece of music ought to be shared and not just randomly selected excerpts. We were disappointed with the kind of films we found on YouTube and felt we had the expertise to create a high quality, serious,

living public archive of ICM on the digital platform. This, at a time when most premier organisations and well-funded institutions were quite content to hire a couple of neighbourhood videographers to record their programs by way of a very perfunctory documentation exercise which never saw the light of day. Today our channel on YouTube has over 450 films on Hindustani and Carnatic concerts as well as a few lec-dems and conversations with musicians, with 65000 plus subscribers worldwide, and almost 12 million views. According to Google, we are one of the most sought after channels for anyone looking to discover Indian music worldwide, and we engage with 5 to 6 lakh unique viewers on a daily basis.

New spaces

Gradually, we made more ambitious shifts. We had begun to find the typical proscenium halls (designed mainly for mainstream commercial theatre going audiences by governments and municipal bodies usually) dull spaces and began to locate our concerts elsewhere. In finding these new spaces we tried to make the music fit naturally into the specific historical and cultural contexts and also the bigger arts ecosystem of a particular city or region. We set up concerts at the Knesseth Eliyahoo Synagogue in Fort, Afghan Church in Colaba, the Sovabazar Rajbari in North Kolkata in which we invited a conservation architect to also lead a walk in the historic neighbourhood on the morning of the show. Working with Kolkata's Experimenter Gallery on their tenth anniversary, we located one of our lec-dems in a disused old home in South Kolkata as part of Experimenter's Outpost series which sought to reanimate such abandoned sites through art. This space was quite literally brought to life by Narayan Kumar Sinha's installations which comprised a heap of industrial debris and mangled scrap material and simulated the nervous system of a being coming back to life. But setting up concerts in

alternate spaces presents challenges for our sound, film and production crews. At places of religious worship, such as the Synagogue and the Church in Mumbai, the actual event was preceded by months of discussions and assurances that the concert would be a tasteful presentation. We were fortunate to have the support of the JSW Foundation for the Concert for Peace at the Synagogue in Mumbai. Other challenges were more mundane; fixing sound and lights for our film crew and making stages for the artists in the restricted spaces within.

We also organised concerts aimed at drawing a younger, newer set of listeners who had never heard classical music. The venues for these ranged from a popular bistro in Mumbai's Café Zoe and at an intimate Black Box like the G5A Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Mumbai or Rangashankara and Jagriti theatres in Bangalore and as part of the Kochi Biennale.

A set of competing ideas

Without a question, the journey has been a steep and rocky ride. If one was to look at our work through the prism of financial profit and loss alone, FEA has unambiguously been an utter failure. But I suppose it isn't as if we weren't prepared for this kind of failure from the very beginning. We knew we had waded into unfamiliar and very tricky waters and it was very likely to come to a crashing end. But we continued walking on the road to ruin, not because we were woolly romantics, but because by now we had begun to feel very strongly that we wanted to demonstrate a set of competing ideas, another way of doing things, and in so doing, question the cynical business model that bound big impresarios, corporate sponsors and a clutch of super branded self centred musicians together. From the time we launched our Secret Masters Sessions, which was akin to a moment of truth for us, we had worked with wonderful but lesser known musicians for the most part. But even when we have worked with musicians from among the more established and well-known, they have always been those who haven't bartered their artistic integrity away. Our feeling is that all musicians sense that our audience, eclectic though it is, would like to hear some serious and honest music.

When we started out eight years ago we had hoped to collaborate with other like-minded partners to co-create and scale up an alternative model for the promotion of classical music that was anchored in the modern world. One that was equitable, open and transparent and in touch with the rest of the world, and that discarded the carefully cultivated image of a difficult and arcane art form and which justified its outdated hierarchies.

Reading the politics

Although we haven't been able to do all that we had planned, I think we have managed to start a few important conversations and these have had some effect.

The Secret Masters Sessions which ran for a year in 2016 with Arun Kashalkar, Narayan Rao Bodas, Jayashri Patnekar and Sharad Sathe remains one of our most significant programs. We presented four wonderful musicians who seemed to have been hiding in plain sight and away from the mainstream view in the Mumbai, Pune region all along. We did photo shoots and designed the posters, made video promos and worked on the publicity of the concerts, stage décor and program flow carefully. We chose to not follow the logic of the market, which dictated that instead of being focused on the quality of the music we were hearing from these wonderful musicians, we should have treated these concerts as throwaway marginal events, subjected to the special kind of indifference and even contempt reserved for artists who lacked celebrity or connections.

This experience, two years after FEA was founded, taught us to look at the Hindustani music landscape from the margins and to read the politics. We now knew why we had felt so dissatisfied with the music we were hearing for the most part, on the big festival stages. We felt very strongly that these musicians and countless others like them should have been heard more often in their prime and allowed to play a greater, more visible role in the eco system. They might have helped promote better, finer music and aesthetic values and helped build more refined and mature listeners. They might even have encouraged critical thinking and improved the public discourse on ICM which in turn could have held the impending market dictated distortions in the music at bay.

The problem of fundraising and sustainability

Even if we accept the abysmal funding available for the arts in India as a given, the situation with classical music is strikingly dodgy. This is especially true in recent years when large groups of very talented musicians have been swelling the numbers of artists looking for a concert. Impresarios, corporate sponsors and patrons who also influence the functioning of institutions and schools of music exercise a sort of almost feudal and disproportionate control on the lives and careers of musicians which seems out of joint in the modern world.

We tried to move away from the typical sources in our fundraising and approached philanthropists and patrons who have done splendid work across the social and arts networks. But here too our hopes were dashed. Not being interested or exposed to the music, these fine individuals struggled to understand why ICM was important and deserving of their attention or even why it was so important to keep it alive. Our impassioned pleas that the Hindustani art form was hanging by a thread and another decade of apathy would deliver a fatal blow to it (if it wasn't too late already), was not understood. At numerous meetings I have tried to explain the many parts of this complex issue and I have had to invariably wind down my presentation as I watched the eyes of numerous prospective donors glaze

over. When one such high placed corporate functionary met me in his smart office in Mumbai's former cotton mill district and supressed a yawn more than once as he impassively listened to me, I had a distinct feeling of endgame. Most of these individuals told us sheepishly that this music just wasn't their thing, and that funds must come from among those industrialists and patrons who felt deeply for this music. Indeed, there are a few gracious old world patrons who have supported us but sadly their numbers are too few. Besides, most industrialists today prefer the company of sportspersons and film stars to classical musicians.

One of the suspected reasons for the weak interest in ICM from the wider arts network is that it really can't be made to fit into the smart, contemporary global discourse on the arts, and this has a direct bearing on its inability to raise funds. The thing about ICM is that it just is. To those who don't inhabit its universe and feel its value, making a nuts and bolts case for it is extremely difficult. There is no easy or apparent rationale that can come close to explaining how vital it is in our lives. There really is no way of underscoring its deep and unremarkable relevance to the modish, and to those alert to issues of social justice in the politically charged artistic circles of the day. We can only reiterate that Hindustani music is supremely beautiful and artistic and that it can reveal to us many shades of our multiple cultural pasts and civilizational ideas that can tell us who we are as a people.

Deep mistrust

A former CEO once asked me if we had a sort of forum or association of organisers which could seek assistance from the government. Another CEO wondered how

they could evaluate if the sponsorships they were granting to different sets of organisers of Hindustani concerts in Mumbai were making a difference to the ecosystem, given that there was no concerted attempt by the organisers to come together with a vision for the music. I told them we had tried for four years to invite smaller and independent organisations to set up an annual festival together under the banner of indie organisers of Mumbai. This did not come through. I did not tell them this was because of the deep suspicion and mistrust among different players. We have often wondered what the roots of this venal mean spiritedness are.

In our experience, venues and spaces, even the ones that start off with very progressive ideals begin to change. Perhaps because it is almost impossible to find an aesthetically designed space with good basic acoustics, they begin to have a keen sense of their monopoly like position and tend to lose their generosity over time.

An undifferentiated market

In the current context, it is absurd that organisers who prefer to work with musicians irrespective of their star status, are vying with the established big ticket organisers for a share of the sponsorship funds that come from the marketing departments of large corporations including public sector organisations. These organizations themselves have contributed to creating the star system and have a stake in it. Many a times we have had our already paltry funding slashed at the last minute. The message is clear: since we by and large represent musicians who are

not the big stars we don't particularly deserve decent corporate sponsorships, and we must be pleased with what comes our way. I have faced marketing managers who have questioned our choice of artistes and our choice of venue. We have been told that if we were to fashion our concerts in conventional "big" halls and feature top artistes we could get bigger budgets cleared quite easily.

By now we were beginning to connect the dots, and as the full picture of the devastation emerged, we became even more stubbornly idealistic. Specially after the Secret Masters Series and Khayal Rang, a festival we have run for 5 years now, for which we had struggled to explain why these four musicians deserved a well mounted concert along with a professional documentation of their concerts, we felt we had paid a high price and earned a reputation for being contrarian or at least not submitting. Why dilute this hard earned distinction?

A special case

Our belief is that this is not an art form that can or should be left to market forces. The case for state and societal support for classical music is similar to the case for arguing for funding of universities and the humanities. This art form deserves a special enclosure into which perhaps gradually a combination of many kinds of support including state funds, individual patronage, community funds, CSR and corporate sponsorships, but for that wide ranging support we do need a sufficiently broad spectrum of listeners from diverse backgrounds who feel strongly about this art form, with a steady influx of new and younger listeners too. We don't see this happening in the present context. For it is a fact that the influence of classical music in contemporary Indian cultural life has declined; as India has changed, so has the interest in the music from the wider artistic, cultural and intellectual worlds.

Then there is the matter of concert fees. At the moment the difference in concert fees charged by the stars of the Hindustani circuit and the multitudes of fine musicians who are prevented from or are unwilling to play the self-promotion game is unconscionably high. There is also a huge clamour among even the top league musicians for a more mainstream and glitzy success. We are not advocating that classical musicians ought to harbour a superior air vis-a-vis the more popular musicians, but perhaps instead of visibly emulating the Bollywood lifestyle and aesthetic they could set new standards for a definition of success and glamour that draws from their own musical and aesthetic traditions- reimagined for the present day, perhaps. Is this clamour only an expression of a legitimate and pent up insecurity in the Hindustani world for earning a living? After all stories of the horrific poverty endured by great musicians are real and part of the collective folklore of Hindustani and Carnatic music. We would like to think that if and when musicians have a more equal and modern ecosystem, many will learn to take

pride in the music they practice and not feel the need to be quite so servile to the ways of the popular mainstream, which expects competition with the stars of the neoliberal fantasy world of Indian entertainment today.

We hope that being a successful classical musician will afford a wider set of musicians a means for a good, fair, steady income that is sustainable over a period of time, and that reflects a solid engagement with a small but interesting mix of people who have begun to feel for the art form across society. This quest for a sustainable income model becomes all the more urgent in the times of the pandemic.

A sense of urgency

We feel eviscerated by the problem of poor funding support for this music but there are other more intricate issues. Given the scale of inequities in the sector there is no idea of a central unity among musicians or a plan for collective action that could benefit everyone in the eco system. Thirty five years ago, an entire generation of young Carnatic musicians in Chennai came together to form the Youth Association for Carnatic Music (YACM). Many leading musicians today including TM Krishna, Vijay Siva, RK Shriramkumar, Sanjay Subrahmanyan, Bombay Jayshri, Sangeetha Sivakumar, Unnikrishnan and others were part of YACM and worked together for more than two decades to create a space for themselves. This meant taking their music to schools, devising raga based games, convincing sabha managers to feature them in afternoon slots, enlisting the support of senior musicians like DK Pattamal who graciously attended their programs and a great deal more. Over the years YACM's monthly concerts featuring younger artists became so popular that leading sabhas including the Music Academy included them in their programs. It was this collective and sustained effort that paved the way for a vibrant and resurgent Carnatic music scene with a host of new names, from the early 2000s onwards.

It was the Carnatic music eco system itself that initiated a discussion on "Me Too" with a public debate, when the issue came up last year. None of this is conceivable in the Hindustani ecosystem because there is no notion of unity or the advantages of collective action or fair play. For instance no big musician that we know of has ever asked an organiser to promote a disciple who is not a son, daughter or niece. It is terrible to witness disciples well into their 30s, ending up doing odd chores in an institution while the crown prince or princess get all the concert opportunities. By modern standards these institutions would fail on every index of transparency and fair play and yet this is how it works.

Then there are the minders, as we discovered to our surprise when we were once required to meet a leading doctor who wanted to set up a charity concert. We saw

this as an opportunity to attempt a tough balancing act by suggesting a different but brilliant musician who would keep South Mumbai's rich and privileged, but largely disinterested audience entertained, without compromising artistically with the concert. At the risk of sounding nativist, we could say that this is the very audience that will throng a tier 2 or 3 symphony orchestra relishing the uber western trappings and ceremony of Western classical music, but are unable and unwilling to move beyond the four or five celebrity musicians they are familiar with on the Hindustani side. Our suggestions for new artists were countered by the executive assistant to the Chairman of one of the largest industrial groups in the country, who insisted that we work with a well known young celebrity and scion of a powerful musician. The concert finally went to the scion who also brought in his father at a token fee and everyone was very happy.

Other missing gaps

Reviewing of the arts and specially of the classical performing arts is for the most part left to those willing to work for very low wages and cadging free travel and stay from event organisers. What kind of objectivity or specialisation is possible when writers and publications are willing to compromise their ethical standards in this manner? And yet national publications offer their pages to these socially well connected freelance writers whose main interest is in being seen and heard and enjoying access to artistes. These publications are therefore not to be relied upon for journalistic principles of objectivity, and yet, they enjoy the reputation of being supporters of the arts. It is an encomium that is earned too easily in our view and

without really doing much. With a view to improve the quality of arts writing, I had once suggested to an Editor who was a friend for several decades, that a new crop of intelligent arts writers could be created from among the well-educated and well-travelled younger musicians. In the face of his thick silence on the phone I hastened to add that I was not suggesting this as a plug for my concerts. Imagine my surprise when I was told that they would rather use their own bad writers than those suggested by an organiser of dubious intent! I came close to giving up that day.

Similarly, we had been trying to arrange a concert featuring two sets of young and emerging musicians in two day-long sessions. We approached Mumbai's premier performing arts institution with an offer for working on a collaborative model in which all we sought was the use of their auditorium and tech support. For our part we would arrange for all the funding towards fees, travel, accommodation, publicity and filming for twelve musicians and co-artistes. The promise of having well made films on the FEA channel had excited many young musicians who use these as marketing tools when they go out looking for concerts. All we needed was two Sundays any time in the year. It took us months of following up before we received a terse one line reply. This has been the fate of at least two other proposals offered to the organisation in the last four years.

Failure is a liberating feeling

In the early days of his career in Mumbai the brilliant actor and theatre director Satyadev Dubey had in all seriousness postulated a theory for his amateur group. Of course, this was only possible in another time- when theatre was a side activity and people did not depend on it for their livelihood. Dubey felt that any play that earned a profit was problematic and ought to be folded up immediately. Success of this kind for an amateur theatre group meant that it would be tempting to repeat a work rather than work on a new production.

Even if this sounds quaint today, moving away from conventional market mandated notions of success and stability is actually liberating. The well known Theatre director Sunil Shanbag founded Studio Tamaasha in Mumbai four years ago as an unconventional and informal space that would nurture and seek collaborations with practitioners from other fields. Among the most effective and satisfying programs were the residencies offered to eight to ten young and exciting contemporary theatre groups who could use the theatre space to create a new work over several weeks. This was a drain on the resources with no possibility of making back the investment but it is the kind of work they would like to do more of.

We see parallels in the kind of work and outlook FEA and Studio Tamaasha have attempted in two different eco systems. It is also striking that our most wonderful

working experiences have been the times we have moved away to attempt new projects. Our initial set of programs in the Karnatic Modern series in Mumbai with the brilliant Carnatic musician TM Krishna were set up in Dadar in the very heart of the Hindustani music subculture. This was the start of our engagement with Carnatic music. We also made it a weekend of four engagements at different spaces

in Mumbai, culminating in a rousing concert featuring the Jogappas (a community of transgender musicians from rural Karnataka and Maharashtra) and Krishna and his Carnatic co-musicians. Subsequently we worked with many wonderful Carnatic artistes including Vidushi Rama Ravi and Alalmelu Mani, Sanjay Subrahmanyan, Ramakrishnan Murthy and Ramana Balachandran.

Later, working on Karnatic Kattaikkuttu a first time collaboration between Carnatic music and Kattaikkuttu was a new high. The 20 member production featuring Kattaikkuttu Sangam's P Rajagopal, Hanne De Bruin and Carnatic vocalists TM Krishna, Sangeetha Sivakumar along with young professionals and Carnatic co-artistes were part of a five city tour ending with a sold out show in Kala Kshetra in Chennai. Without a doubt we have found the experience of working with Carnatic musicians very energising and satisfying.

Earlier this year we invited five wonderful musicians to co-curate an inter disciplinary arts festival titled, Cusp in Chennai. Hindustani vocalists Ranjani Ramachandran, Priya Purushothaman and sarod artist Abhishek Borkar as well as the Carnatic vocalist Brinda Manickavasakam and mridangam artist Praveen Sparsh were co-curators of the festival and they worked with us on this festival deciding on how to integrate visual arts, literature, dance and sessions on the philosophy and aesthetics of music to create an intimate and rich three-day

festival. We had Sundar Sarukkai, Ganesh Devy, AR Venkatachalapthy, the brilliant Tamil writer Imayam, as well as young graduates from the Chennai College of Art working with the visual artist and curator CP Krishnapriya. We also had an exhibition and live art sessions by individuals affected by leprosy from the Bindu Art School in Chingleput, founded by the social activist Padma Venkatraman and the artist Werner Dornik. There were also a set of films on the performing arts of South India and a great deal more. Very briefly, we were able to realize a long cherished idea for a dialogue between the Hindustani and Carnatic systems when Abhishek Borkar's sarod and Ramana Balachandhran's veena came together in a duet. The musicians had discussed this in advance and put in some practice sessions too; it was very promising and we hope to help this grow into a full-fledged concert, perhaps.

The Cusp festival was one of the high points of our six years in this line. We feel we are moving in a more contained sphere but working with more intensity at the intersections of various art forms. We feel that ICM probably has a better chance if it is positioned not as a heritage art form but as a part of the wider arts and humanities stream. It will still require careful nurturing, distancing from the market, and it will also probably need to be in proximity with divergent survival models for the more "here and now" art forms, so that a more delicately nuanced form of cross support between the arts might be attempted. It will all need a special calibrated effort and we hope to catch our breath, find new partners and be back after a long and pragmatic pause.

The Night Stalker

Rani Neutill

It all began with a visit from a woman. She rang our doorbell. *Diiiiiiiing Dooooong*. My widowed Bengali immigrant mother opened our large wooden door. It let out a small creak. Maybe a warning, like in a scary movie, the first mistake, never open your door to a stranger. A skinny white woman was standing at our doorway—blonde hair and blue eyes. She was carrying a petite *Louis Vuitton* purse which she held onto tightly.

"Hi, I'm part of a city committee that is raising awareness about safety precautions. You are aware that there is a serial killer at large?"

My mother looked at the woman, her expression blank.

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In graduate school, I became obsessed with Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali writer who grew up in Calcutta and received his doctorate in social anthropology from Oxford University. He didn't become a traditional academic going on to teach at a University; instead, he became a novelist and essayist, writing beautiful and intelligent stories about the fall of empires, national upheaval, environmental changes and nonfiction essays that contemplate our geopolitical landscape. He wasn't my only Bengali inspiration, there were others, like Jhumpa Lahiri, but he held a special place in my heart. His descriptions of Calcutta brought me back to my childhood. My emotional attachment to his novels exceeded those of many other South Asian writers I read and studied—his characters reminded me of my relatives, they were more real to me, grounded in my past and described in ways that other writers could only gesture towards.

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It was May of 1985. I was almost 8. We hadn't been watching the news. We had travelled to India that winter to see Sai Baba, a man my mother followed—she believed he was a prophet. We were isolated, recovering from our travels, my mother already planning the next trip to India. The local news cycles didn't hold in our reality.

The woman looked over at me and then my mother.

"Should we speak somewhere private? This may be too disturbing for a child."

"No, no. It's okay," my mother responded.

The lady wasn't wrong. It was too disturbing.

She told us about Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker. He was my introduction to extreme fear.

My boogey man. But he was so very real. Not the fictional man behind the bushes. He was actual flesh and blood and he consumed people. The woman told us about his victims. How he was walking into people's homes and shooting them in a face. Raping people of all ages. He had no fear. Killing folks while they were asleep. Overpowering men who tried to protect their wives and children. He bludgeoned, raped, decapitated, butchered, stabbed, mutilated, sodomized and shot people. He inflicted every form of violence upon them. Richard Ramirez was like Freddy Krueger. He stole my sleep.

My mother was terrified too. We formed a bond through our mutual fear. A connection through waves of tension that kept us roused each night. Me holding her hand as we lay awake on her bed, our bodies curled up on her burgundy and black sheets. Two females, alone. The perfect prey.

That summer was a sleepless one. Ramirez was on a killing rampage, moving in and out of all the towns that bordered us- Glendale, Sierra Madre, Arcadia. He

inspired crank calls. Heavy breathers. People who wanted to scare other people. *I am coming for you next*, or, *I'm gonna rape your dead rotten corpse*. Teenagers who really got a kick out of terrorizing other people.

My mother had a burgundy phone that matched her burgundy sheets. It sat on top of a wooden side table. Sliding doors lined the back of our home. Windows overflowing our house, gateways to our future murder. I hated all that glass, scared to look through it at night. We kept the curtains shut in her bedroom all the time, shielding us from where the Night Stalker might be lurking. When night came, all the curtains in the house would close. We took every precaution necessary, checking to see if all the doors and windows were locked. Doing this over and over throughout the night. My mother walking over to each lock, unlocking and locking it, tugging at the handle of each glass door to make sure it didn't slide open.

One day we heard on the news that Ramirez had stolen a white car. His killings were occurring almost nightly. When we went to bed, we were on high alert. Around midnight the burgundy phone rang.

Both of us jumped out of bed as my mother reached over to answer it.

"Hello?"

We shared the line ear-to-ear and listened, waiting for an answer, there was nothing but deep deliberate breaths.

"Hello?" my mother said, again.

The breathing became even heavier.

One more time, "Hello?"

Nothing but forced breath. My mother hung up. At that very moment a car drove by. I felt all the hair on my body rise. We rushed to the kitchen to peer out the window, me holding my body behind the wall next to it so only my nose could be seen by the outside world, if even. There was a white car driving up and down our cul-de-sac. Back and forth and back and forth. It must have done it five or six times. I knew it was him. He was searching for his next victims. For a moment, I was frozen. But then a sense of methodical urgency came over me. I walked towards the phone on the kitchen wall, one foot in front of the other, slowly, ready to call 911. It felt like forever as he ran his laps up and down our street.

Eventually, he drove away. My mother took my hand and led me to the bedroom. We were shaking.

It was impossible to sleep. I spent that night curled up on the floor against the curtains that lined the glass doors of my mother's bedroom. My hand gripping

them, pulling them together tightly, pressing my eye against the opening so I could see outside. I was waiting for him. My mother on the bed, her hand near the burgundy phone in case I saw him, so we could call the police. Every few minutes my mother would ask, "Rani, do you see him?"

We were vigilant and filled with anxiety. He never came.

We rented a cop for a week. He slept on the floor next to our big wooden door. We still didn't sleep.

Our seclusion was highlighted by the Night Stalker's presence. No relatives to call us who weren't far far away, no one to check in on us every day to see if we were still alive, no close community of friends or neighbors, just a rental cop that we could only afford for a brief period of time. Ramirez exposed the most petrifying thing about our world—that we were all alone.

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Of Amitav Ghosh's nonfiction work, one essay in particular moved me deeply, "The Greatest Sorrow." In it he writes about the evolution of modern violence, how new forms of horror have come to fill our collective imagination; events such as 9/11 have been incorporated into our consciousness, they've become normalized. We've seen the twin towers fall so many times that it's no longer shocking.

There have been so many mass shootings, they have become commonplace. This means the next horrific act of violence can only exceed what came before, that it will be worse, something unthinkable, because it is outside the realm of lived experience. He submits to the fact that the future is completely unknowable and utterly inscrutable and yet urges us to tell stories. To know our histories. To always historicize. He ends the essay with part of a poem by Michael Ondaatje titled, "The Story."

With all the swerves of history
I cannot imagine your future. . . .
I no longer guess a future.
And do not know how we end
nor where.
Though I know a story about maps, for you

I read these lines over and over, comprehending them in all their wisdom, knowing so deeply their accuracy. At some point, during the course of my time as a graduate student, I realized that my infatuation with Ghosh's work didn't just come from

sharing the same ethnicity as him or from pure admiration. It also came from how different his beliefs were from my mother's, how his argument was in such stark contrast to my mother's obsession with knowing and controlling the future. How markedly different she was from him and him from her, despite their shared history.

My mother's difference from Ghosh manifested in her travels to India to meet astrologers and holy men like the trip we took right before our summer of The Night Stalker. My mother was riveted by the idea that she could predict everything through various metaphysical and spiritual avenues. You see, Ghosh's submission to history and the future was something my mother couldn't stand for. She charged towards the future like a child, unknowing but filled with a determination.

I was not much different from her in this respect. My love for Ghosh's essay might have come from a desire to be like him, to submit like him, but it is also precisely because I couldn't.

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On August 30, 1985, Ramirez was captured in East LA. He was identified by a group of residents who beat him senselessly (or with all the sense in the world). They were screaming, "*El Maton! El Maton!*" The cops had to rescue him. In the end, the Night Stalker was just a man who could get beaten up by a crowd. He was human. The entire city breathed a sigh of relief, but the aftershocks of his presence remained. My mother and I would always check the locks of our sliding doors, over and over throughout the nights. We would always leave a light on. The burgundy phone would always be just within my mother's reach. She installed a security system in our home.

Ramirez's effect on me wasn't just the nightly regime of safety precautions or an introduction to insomnia. What the Night Stalker really did was teach me to pray. And I did, every night as I lay down to sleep.

I didn't pray for my soul. I was way more specific than that.

Dear God, please don't let anyone come and kill us. Dear God, please don't let anyone rape or rob us. Dear God, please don't let there be a fire in our house. Dear God, let Dida1 be safe. Dear God, please don't let there be a flood or mudslide. Dear God, please don't let there be an earthquake.

I enumerated every possible terrible thing I could think of and asked for it not to happen. I laid out every fear in hopes that if I imagined it in the form of prayer, I could prevent it. Of course, my preoccupation with the future wasn't something Ramirez gave me. He may have given me prayer and an awareness of my isolated

existence, but it was my mother who taught me to try and control the future, to try and predict it, all the while knowing it was impossible.

x x x

I still try to imagine every horrible thing that could happen in hopes that imagining it will prevent it. I count things as if it will predict good luck. I cannot shake the compulsion to try and prevent the horrific possibilities the future holds—the death of a loved one, my husband or dog, a friend and even myself. When my husband leaves me to go to work in the morning, when he leaves to walk our dogs or shovel the sidewalk, I say the same words each time, "please be safe." I say them as if they are a safety mechanism, something that will ensure that he, my only remaining family, will be exactly what I ask him to be—safe. That I will not become a widow, just like my mother. Still, every month, I pull out *Incendiary Circumstances*, gently removing it from my bookshelf, careful not to tear a page or break its spine. I turn to "The Greatest Sorrow" and read. A monthly prayer. I linger with Ghosh's words, trying to absorb them, tracing each sentence with my fingers, underlining them with my pencil, pausing at every word. I absorb them but they do not hold. I always seem to sweat them out.

[1] Bengali for mother's mother

Anomaly

Parthiv Shah

I juxtapose awe-inspiring grandeur, vastness and beauty, with a derangement that is located in denial; a reflection of detachment from historic legacies, one that condenses our lived contradictions into perplexing, confusing coexistence in the three constructed images.

In this landscape, the plastic bag creates an aberration, a disturbance I feel in the spaces around me, literally. My photographs, which celebrate the beauty of the monument, remain static, and the bag is the anti-aesthetic intervention. The static and the moving image are from different worlds that differently occupy our conscious until they come together in the same frame creating an anomalous discordance; where representations of beauty collide with perversion.

The three monuments featured here, are not just flawless works of architectural design but are also symptomatic of socio-cultural and religious diversity, panning different eras of civilization. They are representative of how generations of the past seamlessly inculcated elements of nature in the legacies they built, such that man and nature worked in tandem to sustain a harmonious relationship- be it the old fort with its jharokhas that provide passage to the wind, the sun temple devoted to fire, or the Adalaj step well, that guaranteed sustainable access to water.

Somewhere down the line however, there was a paradigm shift in this delicate balance, and man in his greed tried to establish his supremacy over nature. Cultures of materiality and consumerism have taken precedence over sustainability. The plastic bags embedded in these photographs show a sharp contrast in dominant ideologies of the past and those of the present. Plastic here is symbolic of the contemporary world, and all the ideologies it espouses- those that are intolerant, stifling and undoubtedly unsustainable.

The photographs provide a narrative on how human beings, though capable of creating beauty, are steering towards the opposite to create a world of inequality that is dangerously close to destruction.

This series engages with the memories, metaphors and symbols of failure with which present day communities create, cope and evolve their quotidian lives.

The Limits of Universalism: Culture, Tradition and the Failures of the Indian Left

Anirban Bhattacharya, Banojyotsna Lahiri, Umar Khalid

Joining Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) often becomes the stepping stone for many people to get involved in politics, particularly, politics of the Left. For many of us, it opened a world of possibilities built upon a socialist dream. The political discourse in the University, the wall posters, slogans, torchlight processions, protest demonstrations, confronting the administration, new world of literature, films and arts, gibberish and jargons, polemics and rhetoric were all pretty overwhelming. Yet they made us unlearn a lot, challenge acquired sensibilities and question our privileges. It democratised relationships and instilled a new sense of justice and equality that was almost alien in our native households. Yet that liberating world was a world in itself. The language that we developed and the folklores that made sense to us would sound alien and empty right outside the walls of the university. This alienation, from the masses on whose behalf we were dreaming of an equal and just world, was not specific to JNU alone. The Left movement, over the past few decades, has been on a downslide. This is a global story. However, the reasons for the decline of the Left in India also have specific reasons. We cannot possibly address all of those in one article. But we attempt here to trace one of the reasons, which lie in the failures of the Indian Left to engage with the cultural specificities that were indigenous to India.

While the secular scientificity of Marxism that we adhered to took us closer to rationality, criticality and an egalitarian ethic, we failed to strike more vertical roots. We suffered because of a mechanical understanding of Marxism that fell short of applying it in our own context and unravelling the contradictions in our own society. The effect of this was two-fold. We remained in a world of rhetorical polemic engaged in a hair-splitting (and Euro-centric) race towards the "pure Left". But we failed to give ourselves an indigenous vocabulary to articulate our politics of transformation.

We have not been alone on this path. This is a tragedy that is common to the India Left movement per se. Creative and critical engagement with our past, although flourished well within the realm of academia, didn't really inform Left praxis in the political realm. Since its inception, the Indian Left dismembered to several factions, on many crucial debates that pertained to the nature of the state in India, its mode of production and the questions of strategy and tactics. But at the same time, a serious engagement with the historical materialist reality specific to the Indian subcontinent remained inadequate and elusive.

History, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels have pointed out, is the history of class struggles, which manifests in economic, social, cultural, religious and political domain. Viewed from this perspective, there are bound to be events, instances, characters or struggles in our historical past which one could build upon, for a discourse that challenges the status quo. But the abjuring of such an exercise, has offered, on platter, the entire realm of our own history or tradition for the right-wing populists. They championed the ones that were dominant, distorted and co-opted the ones that were subversive, and obliterated the ones that were stubborn. In the realm of the popular, the right-wing portrayed themselves as Indic while it portrayed the Left as a 'borrowed' artificial implant. Let us seek a demonstration of this in one of the right wing web mouthpieces – *Swarajya*. We find a piece titled 'Why Does The Left Ignore India's Indigenous Intellectual Traditions?' It is written by one David Frawley, an "American Hindu teacher and author".

> "India's Left has long claimed that Hindus are not intellectual and are unscientific, mindlessly repeating old racist colonial and missionary propaganda. Yet the Left has not produced any original thinkers, much less sages. It hasn't even understood India's own vast culture, which is the saddest commentary on its endeavours. India's Leftist scholars are largely Lord Macaulay's children, promoting Western thought, disowning India's older and more extensive cultural heritage".[1]

The right wing exaltation of our cultural heritage, for example the Vedic scriptures, are of course oblivious and mostly celebratory of their deeply discriminatory foundations. But alongside, what is also dangerous, is the fact that while recounting the "glorious past", they take the names of the Vedas and Buddhism and other *dharmic* traditions in the same breath. Many of these traditions have had thoroughly anti-brahmanical foundations. There is a lot in our past, and all of it cannot be relegated as obscurantist. Our history is replete with many intense struggles between the forces of status quo and those representing relatively more egalitarian values. None of these subversive traditions may have been devoid of some or the other regressive tendencies, but an exercise of cultivating their latent potentials and weaving an Indic repertoire of resistance and egalitarian ethos for today is possible. The fact that such a possibility eluded us is again, owing to a mechanical understanding/application of the idea of class struggle that makes it impossible to unravel the complexities of this subcontinent. The dominant strand in the Indian Left kept looking for a borrowed variant of the '19th century English working class' as its agent of change. But that was not to be found, in large part because of the semi-feudal social relations defined by caste. Instead of engaging with it, an easier recourse was taken – to ignore and relegate the question of caste to just being "remnants" of a decadent past that would simply magically

[1] Frawley, David (2016) "Why does the left ignore India's Indigenous Intellectual Traditions?" *Swarajya Magazine*, Oct. 4, 2016.

disappear one day, as the contradictions of capitalist social relations sharpen. But far from petering away, caste kept reinventing itself in amalgamation with capital. An equally neglected terrain remained that of gender based struggles as it was imagined that the revolution would automatically liberate women, and till any emphasis on it would only entail a 'distraction' from the more important question of class struggle. The manner in which capital here thrived by its collaboration with our semi-feudal social relations makes it imperative that the fight for the annihilation of caste and liberation of women, must be considered very much internal to class struggle. The Left have had to pay dearly for its failures to realise this.[2]

Some serious efforts to engage with existing historical traditions can be seen after the Naxalite movement penetrated into the forests of Bastar and Odisha and built its base within the adivasi population there. We witnessed engagement with both languages and legends of the adivasi population in the sporadic bastions of the Maoist movement. There were genuine theoretical engagements with the question of caste too, opening up possibilities of a holistic understanding in certain areas. But these remained tactical moves or rudimentary forays which have not substantively been reflected in the Communist praxis elsewhere.

Academics of the early subaltern school of history writing in India such as Ranajit Guha, who creatively applied Marxism to write the histories of peasant insurgency in 19th century, had alerted us to the perils of ignoring the domain of the religious way back in the early 1980s. According to Guha, the Left/nationalist reading of India's anti-colonial past till then had relegated several important protest movements as pre-political and millenarian, since they articulated themselves in a language that was not universalist. For example, the protagonists of India's many adivasi insurrections from amongst the Mundas and the Oraons, expressed their anti-hierarchical, anti-colonial aspirations in the language of the world of spirits. This earlier scholarship was more comfortable in delineating the political significance of movements that were led by a vanguard – either the Indian National Congress or the Communist Party - informed by the traditions of Enlightenment. But such an approach, as Guha and his early subalternists wonderfully delineated in their various works, grossly limited the realm of the political that lies in the interstices of the relations of power and domination, that are mediated in our society by religion, culture and tradition. This realization within the academia, unfortunately, did not trickle down to the political training imparted to young political workers and activists within the Indian Left. The latter continues to be trapped in the same old logic of the early Left/nationalist historians. It is

[2] For a more detailed critique of the question of gender dealt within revolutionary left in India, see our critique Raiot collective (2016) revolutionary Sexisim: A critique of Indian Maoism, Raiot.in, Jan. 11, 2016

[3] Guha, Ranajit (1982) ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982)

as if, unless the masses express their demands in a universalist language of Enlightenment, they don't deserve our engagement.

We read about Rosa Luxemburg, which was great in its own right, but alongside we failed to learn about Savitribai Phule. The life and teaching of Savitribai Phule, as an OBC woman in the nineteenth century, trying to propagate education and fighting against untouchability, bigotry and patriarchy never inspired the Indian Left as it should have. She never found a place among the pantheons that the Indian Left upheld. Neither did Ambedkar or Jyotiba Phule, for the longest time, till they were forced upon us by the anti-caste movement that emerged from, not so coincidentally, outside of the Communist fold. Or take for example, Raidas, an anti-caste crusader of the Bhakti movement. His imagination of Begumpura, is a city which did not have class, caste hierarchy, nobody is taxed and nobody owns wealth. In Begumpura, there is no injustice, worries, terror or torture. That was probably one of the oldest socialist dreams that emanated in the Indian subcontinent with utmost clarity. Yet Raidas was never recognized as a leader or inspiration by the Left movement in India. Bengal, had been a hotbed for Left movement of various ideological shades. But the Dalit mass leaders like Harichand-Guruchand Thakur, who led movements of rationalism and dignity for the largest Dalit community, the Namahshudras, forever remained as icons within the community itself. Their life and messages were never celebrated or engaged with by any Left formation.

The radical Left movement, which saw fractures and even fratricide on the question of Chinese communist leader Lin Piao and his supposed deviation, did not deem it fit to even engage with these anti-caste leaders and their ideas and ideology. In subsequent decades too, these anti-caste crusaders were not in our pamphlets, not in our slogans, not in our wall posters, not in our quotable quotes, not in our pantheon of icons, and of course not in our imagination, till less than a decade back. As sincere students of Marxism, this should bother us.

A failure to do this remained an obstacle to engage with our present. And simultaneously we also squandered the opportunity to tap into the million mutinies in our past that were after all various manifestations of class struggles – be it peasant struggles, anti-caste struggles or struggles against Brahmanical-patriarchy. The resultant distance manifested itself in the disdain and condescension towards any articulation that did not fit our limited vocabulary. For instance, had we focussed upon understanding the dialectics between material circumstances and belief systems in society, we would have discovered the many internal contradictions within them to build upon. Our past and our texts are replete with such strife- Buddhism vs. Brahmanism, Eklavya vs. Dronacharya, Bhishma vs. Shikhandi, Akka Mahadevi vs. Kaushika, Bhakti/Sufism vs. religious dogmatism, and so on.

The last decade, however, has seen some significant change in the political repertoire of JNU, as well as in the Left movement in India. We have also seen a broadening of our political discourse. Our generation witnessed the debates around reservation that brought to fore the masked meritocracy and casteism of even the best of our Marxist mentors or comrades. We questioned the caste and gender blindness in our application of Marxism and through tedious debates, are still trying to rectify the same.

When these questions were already in the horizon, three events catapulted them onto the frontline- the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula, the forced disappearance of Najeeb, and a third event that happened outside campuses- the Una agitation in Gujarat. These events forced several of us to not only respond to the questions already lingering, but it also reiterated questions of caste. Rohith's murder raised questions about caste presence at the intrinsic levels of academia, and other spaces. For a society that chooses to be caste blind, the question of caste was thrown onto us through these tragic events. The questions of caste could no longer be merely lip-serviced. These questions forced the Left movement to take notice and catapulted these questions in the centre stage of our everyday battles. Rohith and Najeeb brought to light the institutional injustices intertwined with the lives of Dalit and Muslim students, Una brought into light the question of land and hold over resources- thereby expanding concerns around identity. Una started with the visuals of four Dalits being beaten badly, but as the movement grew, the issues didn't remain limited to the assault. The slogan, *"gai ka pooch nu tambe rakho, humein apna jameen aapo*", wasn't asking for radical land redistribution, but for the land allocated to Dalits to be actually given to them, along with basic dignity. The language of these movements provided us insights into aspects of the Ambedkarite movement which had been ignored in the question of identity.

Rohith's murder forced Left organisations to look at Dalit representations within the so called safe spaces, including the party. The imagery that came up from the art movements spoke of Eklavya, but for the Left, these approaches were not ideologically sought. This brought us to a juncture where certain questions of the expression of identity and political agency could not be ignored. All these issues, in the span of one year, brought to fore the caste blindness in various streams of democratic thinking. It was a period of learning and unlearning, and opened a possibility for long-term impacts. All student and democratic movements since have borne the impacts and the language of the questions that began during this time.

We grew up reading both Marx and Ambedkar. We also negotiated with the reductionisms that can come with both class and identity. In the last one decade, the slogans of *Jai Bhim*, *Lal Salam* became common within Left student movements. Earnest efforts were made to look at the intersectionality of caste and

gender even within the organizations and the members. Theoretical engagements with the writings of Ambedkar, Phule or Periyar, along with Marx and other Marxist scholars were done with more rigour. It's a strenuous and still, a foliating understanding. Nonetheless, it is a momentous beginning and there are miles to cover.

Interview with Astad Deboo

You have been dancing for -- how long? About 50 years? Has the Indian dance scene become better or worse over time? What has changed most about it since you first started out?

I came to dance as a five-year-old, so I can look back upon 68 years of engaging with what my heart wanted me to do. Of course, I did not know that at first, even as a trained exponent of Indian classical dance. Of those 68 years, 51- a little over half a century, have been as a professional, that is, someone who is making his living in the field. I left India to travel abroad and returned only after eight years, having drunk at the waters of inspiration, innovation, aspiration, and how it changed me! By then I had decided that it was going to be Contemporary dance in which I would live out my life of performing art. I knew it was going to be difficult to achieve respect and recognition, but I had no idea that at times it would throw me into despair.

My first performance was in 1978 at the Prithvi Theatre in Juhu and it was met with a wide range of responses, very little of it positive. You could say failure stared me in the face. But at no time did I consider giving up. Something keeps me going – perhaps my stubborn refusal to regard the respond to my early performances as anything but minor setbacks. For me, contemporary dance has been the deepest expression of joy and commitment to the finer things of life. I have never lost sight of this truth about myself.

How naïve I was! When I started, I believed that Indian classical dancers would want to and eagerly welcome the chance to participate and create something new. Most of the time it was flat refusal. At times, I noticed, even when there was an interest shown by the dancers, there was this fear of being rusticated by their gurus that prevented them from coming forward. So much time lost, so much frustration and anguish needlessly sown. And the attitude of the gurus was shared by those running cultural institutions like the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the ICCR. I remember a Secretary in the Department of Culture telling me that I would be recognised – posthumously.

The Metro cities were always far more welcoming of my efforts. But it took me a decade to build an audience for the kind of work I wanted to do. For that, I needed to create new shows almost every year and in this, I was helped enormously by the media. They were supportive, wrote about my work and increased the numbers who came to look forward to what I was going to present.

In 1995, I received a Sangeet Natak Akademi award and it was sweet. By then, my obduracy had worn down the gurus as well. But the toll could be tremendous, for nothing was ever handed to me on a platter and at times, it felt I couldn't continue the heavy lifting I was doing. While the pace may have been glacial but as each decade went by, there was an improvement, in attitudes, and in awareness. There were other dancers who stepped into the arena and they were given a platform to perform and their work was being accepted.

At first, these "early birds" in the history of contemporary dance in India all came from a background of classical dance. They married their training in various forms to their own style, and created work in the technique that they were familiar with. Then it gradually changed. As more and more young dancer-choreographers began exploring the genre and experiences what was being offered overseas, they unmoored themselves from the past and chose to choreograph in the present. Audience reception also improved. We see a lot of this kind of work now, and for Indian classical dancers today, I see an increasing eagerness to work with contemporary techniques, and I get more mails now seeking collaborations. Sometimes I accept!

Much of these developments, however, have been a mixed blessing. In the past couple of decades, we should have developed traditions for contemporary dance training at least. That is entirely missing, and the result has been a huge number of mediocrities, churned out by schools headed by mediocrities themselves. There is more spectacle than theatre, an exploration of movement and space. Some of the

Photo: Amit Kumar

performances that one sees make me cringe. With travel and technology making this world a global village, we can learn so much. We can also be more aware of what the world of contemporary dance feels about most of the work masquerading as the art form in India.

The other concern for me is the cavalier treatment of time spent and experience forged by the older artists from the cultural institutions themselves. So audiences might be more accepting of contemporary dance performances, but it is the institutions that play a role in refining sensibilities and creating appreciation of the nuances of what discerning aficionados should look for. The excuse is that the younger dancers need support, but to what extent does this justify the neglect of that time and experience I mentioned earlier?

Have Indian cultural institutions, audience preferences, government patronage, corporate sponsorship etc., generally encouraged and enabled the way in which an artist like you would like to practice your dance forms, innovate, experiment and expand your repertoire? Or have you encountered difficulties in dancing the way you have wanted to dance, over the years?

What do you think? Over the past five decades that I have been dancing, the audience has grown. In some cases, the awareness is present, and a name is enough to fill a hall. Would I say this audience has grown satisfactorily? Not at all, there is no comparison with the kind of audiences drawn by popular art forms.

Against this background, I must say I draw much encouragement from seeing how Indian classical dancers and other dance practitioners appreciate my work and attend performances. About government patronage, there has been nowhere near enough. There have been a few tours sponsored by ICCR. There were plenty of occasions where one could have participated much more but was kept out by either dance gurus or bureaucrats. This is true of both the SNA and the ICCR.

Definitely, I have begun to encounter ageism. The fact is, one must temper the wind to realities and my interpretation of communicating through full length works has met with some difficulties. Then there are those who resent the fact that at the age of 72, I still get solo performances. Corporate sponsorship has always been difficult, but those who support me have been steadfast. I would have appreciated commitments made over a period of time but largely I have had to be content with the one-off performances. This translates into unending fundraising jags, taking away from the time I would have liked to fine tune and hone my offerings. Hence, it is with great pleasure that I can now say I have received a three-year commitment from a corporate- and it is for working with the deaf. This is something I started way back in 1988, working with deaf dancers in Kolkata,

Photo: Neelesh Kale

Chennai, Washington DC, and teaching them to perform on stage using a variety of innovative toold including counting. The group I am currently working with in based in Mumbai.

It is not that corporates are not appreciative. For instance, along with my work for the deaf, since 2007 I have been involved with the Salam Balak Trust, teaching street children contemporary dance, and we have received amazing acclaim. As have my works with the Pungcholom drummers of Manipur and the use of martial arts Thang-ta in some of my works, which have been received equally ecstatically both in India and in the West. This helped me with financial support do that I can get my works off the ground.

But I can only think of one corporation who has supported me through the years once every two to three years, which is Tata Steel. And here I must doff my hat to private individuals as well, who have who have been supportive. It's increasingly hard not to compare with the scenario in the West where artists of long standing get commissions to create. For me, there has been only once where I was asked to create a work for the Coronation of the King of Bhutan. This was through the ICCR and I was informed that the honour was so great that I must work for the bare minimum as an honorarium.

Last year the school principal of a Royal Academy in Bhutan asked me to come to conduct a three-day workshop for which expenses were paid but no remuneration was offered. This included a workshop for the deaf. But for me, not everything is about money. If I had not accepted the terms I would not have been able to share my art with students who would have never got an opportunity to experience my dance.

As an artist, what has been your experience, personally, with success and failure? How do you begin to measure success and failure; do you feel it makes sense at all to think about dance in these terms?

I have never ever thought that my art was a failure. Each of my creative endeavours were created with honesty and the certainty that I was ahead of my time. This has sometimes led to moments of doubt and even tension. I still recall one such moment in 1972 when I choreographed a work with a young group of college students. The underlying theme was loving one's own gender and I did a sequence with another performer as a shadow dance.

Not all the members of the audience were appreciative, though some did salute my boldness. When I think of what can pass public scrutiny now, I think back at the sequences that caused such raised eyebrows and wonder where I got the courage!

In 1989, I created a work titled Broken Pane which dealt with drug addiction and one of the sequences saw me take a needle in a syringe and actually guide it into a vein. I incorporated the pain and agony into my performance and this was such a shock for the audience that even a French critic said it was too much! That this could have been passed off symbolically.

A little later in the same performance, the audience reacted again with a sense of shock when I banged my head against the stage, as I portrayed the agony of withdrawal. When I created the work, I did not think in terms of success or failure. I was communicating the truth as I saw it. For me, truth has been a talisman. I look up to it, I wear it, and this helps me keep my goals in place.

Success itself is relative. No era has been aware of its power as a double edged sword more than this one. I offer the world my unique, individual medium of expression, working constantly to develop that art form that will live beyond me. Is that success? My work is appreciated and applauded, and it feels good. Is that success? Or is it the awards bestowed on me? Or the approval of gurus and peers? I recall a very senior guru in Chennai who was vehemently against my art and as soon as I got the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, he took this as a validation and condition of his own grudging approval. I was baffled by this approach. Surely, the leader must not be the led.

I have never been averse to using popular influences as an index of the zeitgeist of our culture at any moment in time. However, I never allow these influences to influence my own perception of my art. So, another work of mine, titled Mangalore Street, saw the use of Bollywood music in some of the sequences and it was thoroughly enjoyed by the audience. But after the performance, the head of the cultural Institution called me and gave me a dressing down for going so "lowbrow" as to use this popular expression of art in my choreography. This same gentleman became the Chairman of SNA and when I was given the award, took the trouble to inform me that each and every one on the awards committee was unanimous in their decision to give it to me.

After all, the trappings of success are ephemeral and what remains is one's own definition of it.

What remains a constant for you about the practice of dance, regardless of whether this or that performance succeeds or fails? What motivates you to keep going, no matter how your viewers are responding or what your sponsors are spending? Tell me about the inner compulsions and rewards of dance, for you, as a creative artist?

Photo: Ritam Banerjee

What remains constant is that my body wants to move and it moves in rhythm and so far, by the grace of God, I still have the stamina to do a one man show and there are ideas which still excite me to create if not a solo then with a group.

What stimulates me, gets me going, is the process of creating, which is the challenging part. As mentioned earlier, virtually all my creative works from the late 70s till the latest 2019 creation, have all been received well, with a generous audience that has applauded me and that has given me the strength to go on. There is a moment in every performance which is electrical because you feel completely connected with the audience and you are sure that both are seeing the same thing. My perception about how a work should be developed and presented to meet audience expectations, which to me is success.

What do you see as the most glaring systemic failures of modern and fusion dance in India in recent decades, and at the present time?

The most glaring systemic failures are the lack of platforms, the lack of monetary support, the lack of an academic and practical infrastructure which will enable the growth and development of the contemporary dance culture in India, to the point where it is accepted on equal to other dance forms. It is time now to create schools that will award certificates, diplomas, perhaps even degrees in contemporary dance and choreography. What is most frustrating for me is that presenters themselves

are often unaware of what I am doing. The approach is usually from me. And on at least two occasions, one in Delhi, the other in Bengaluru, young organisers whom I have approached for inclusion have actually asked me to send them "copies of my videos" to see whether it was "worthwhile".

The consistent exception to the rule is the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Mumbai, who have presented all my creations from 1978 till 2019.

Photo: Ritam Banerjee

You have experimented a lot in marrying dance with different art forms, like literature, painting, theatre and music. How would you describe these experiments, perhaps giving a few examples?

I would much rather call this collaboration rather than experimentation. I have collaborated, joined hands, with theatre directors, musicians and painters. The poetry of Bulleh Shah, Rabindranath Tagore, Mukti Bodh, performances based on the sayings of Mahatma Gandhi, worked on Manto's writing- light, space, puppetry, sculpture, all have been grist to my creative mill. Each of these various forms have challenged me and the approach has been different.

For my first performance at the Khujaraho Dance Festival, the brief was to either create a work on the temple sculptures or look at a poet from Madhya Pradesh. My friend, the late Satyadev Dubey recommended that I read Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh and the "Lakdi ka Ravan" poem spoke to me. My interpretation

involved looking at Ravan as the politician and how his constituency rejects him when he appeals to them for his vote again.

It has always been a joy to work with theatre directors in London, Seoul and Mumbai, as acting comes naturally to me. Sometimes I feel boxed into my identity as a dancer. Yet I have done three Shakespeare–inspired works. In the King Lear adaptation, I played the cameo role of a servant-eunuch to the spear bearer of the king who was modelled on an ailing film director with three daughters. It was called Film Film Film and it premiered at the Shaw theatre in London.

I had a chance to perform in Hamlet, with Korean Theatre Director Hyoung Taek Limb. I played Hamlet's father, the ghost, as well as the head of the clowns. And there was Tempest, in which I took part with an Australian Based Dance Company. Each event helped me stretch my imagination and rounded me off as a performer. That was not all. With British actor Meera Syal of Goodness Gracious, I did a two- hander for the Tara Arts Centre called Cousins, the two cousins meeting in England one coming from India and the other one living in London. Mangalore Street, of course, happened fairly early in my career, but it gave me an appetite for more.

I have collaborated widely with singers and instruments players in India as well as in Europe, USA, Japan and Korea. I have found it easy, for their medium speaks to me, whether saxophone, piano, flute both Indian as well as Japanese, the Korean Kayegam, the Japanese Koto, the Rudra Veena, Dhrupad singers Amelia Cuni, Uday Bhavalkar, the Gundecha Brothers, Carnatic musicians, percussionists like the Pungcholom drummers of Manipur, Siva Mani, and painters like Jayashree Chakraborty, Sunil Gawade with his art installation on lights, Dancers Thomas Mettler, Padmini Chettur, Puppet. All of these collaborations that have been done were because, most of the time, I wanted to see how other disciplines could impact my own.

And my use of space as an element of the performance, which has driven me to dance at places like the Mehrangadh Fort, the Champaner Fort , the Alhambra in Granada, a Chettinad home in Chennai, in museums, art galleries like the NGMA in Mumbai. It is tempting to go on and on.

Increasingly, I have found that dance is not just dance but an elemental expression of truth and individuality that brings various performing disciplines together in a magical cohesion of talent that produces art of a very high level. The more I keep doing this, the more I will consider my success underlined. For even failures are nothing but pit stops on the journey to the ultimate goal of creativity. This is to be true to yourself and your art.

The Responsibility of Failure

Kavita Krishnan

For the past several years, it has felt as though every battle is a losing battle. India is ruled by a regime that is waging war on every vestige of democracy. Kashmir has been caged, gagged and muzzled. Universities face a daily onslaught - physical and ideological. Dread in the pit of one's stomach - about Muslim minorities being killed, friends and comrades being jailed or worse - has become a familiar sensation. It is impossible to watch television news any more - the choice there is between unrelenting Islamophobic and anti-democratic poison, and liberal "both sides" pusillanimity. And for the vast majority of Indians, is there any hope at all of realistically being able to keep safe from the coronavirus? Our public health systems are weak, private hospitals and hotels alike are trying to make a killing offering quarantine spaces for a price (subsidised by the Government), even as most of India's citizens have no access to the most basic means of hygiene and safety. In the mind game that the fascists play with us, they jeer at our utter irrelevance, and triumphantly flaunt their victory over democratic values.

In such times, despair is tempting and even comforting. Many have found it easy to "give up" on India's people, to say "India is irredeemably communal, casteist, patriarchal" and the fascist Hindu Nation was inevitable for the past century. While the impulse to "give up" on our people is tempting, I also think it is lazy and politically defeatist. And defeatism is a luxury we cannot afford. Berating Modi voters, and the country itself as immoral and fascist is inaccurate and politically unsound.

People hold contradictory forms of consciousness - multiple versions of themselves. Hindutva politics calls out to people to identify as Hindus, defining "Hindu" identity as hatred for Muslim and other minorities, and pride in Brahminical patriarchy. It asks people to identify as loyal subjects of a benign, all powerful state - and to view dissent against the state as disloyalty to the country. Left movements and other people's movements call out to people to identify as workers or peasants, as women, as Dalits, as Indians committed to transforming India by challenging its oppressive structures and ideologies. These movements ask Indians to be the best version of themselves, as individuals but especially as collectives.

In these times of profound failure, then, what is the best posture for anti-fascists to adopt? The first step must probably be to resist self-congratulation, and admit that right now, the enemy is winning. Next, we

should avoid despair and its comforts - that sweet ache like worrying a wobbly tooth. Resist the temptation to say, as a friend and very fine activist once did to me, "लोगों में ही लोचा है" (*the fault/flaw lies in people*). We can't afford petulance, can't stamp our feet in disgust at the "bigoted multitudes" who voted Modi and deserve what they get. Instead, we need to invite ourselves, and all our fellow fighters to summon up greater empathy for those for who don't share our sense of urgency about the rise of fascism in India.

I spent a good part of February in Bihar, campaigning against the CAA, NPR and NRC. We campaigned mainly amongst non-Muslims, who had tended to accept the BJP propaganda that only Muslims need fear this corpus of policies. The campaign had a considerable degree of success. Nationwide, too, the Government propaganda over NPR, NRC, and CAA has not got the success it hoped for. The government has been forced to take a step back - dilute NPR and put NRC on the back burner, in order to save the CAA.

I also took time to speak at some of the Shaheen Baghs in Bihar. In conversations, I would hear the question, "We Muslims are out here protesting. But why are so few Hindus joining us?" I asked them to approach the problem differently. When Dalits or Adivasis or landless workers held protests on "their" concerns, “how often did we join them?” I asked. Was it any surprise that they too do not join this protest when they think they may not be directly affected by the new citizenship measures? Instead of berating Hindus for staying away, it is on us to reach out to all sections of vulnerable Indians. We can ask them what their concerns are, offer solidarity and support there and also explain how the CAA, NPR, NRC threatens to disenfranchise Muslim Indians and dangle the Damocles sword of "Doubtful voter" status on all other Indians, effectively putting us all at the mercy of the State and the ruling party. Empathy and solidarity are infectious.

So in effect the posture I find useful, effective, and ethical is not one of a brave lonely voice of sanity going down fighting even as they are betrayed by foolish masses. This posture, I would venture to say, is elitist and fundamentally undemocratic even when adopted by the victims of fascism who may indeed be fighting a lonely battle right now.

Instead, we need a posture of openness and empathy, believing that even those who may possibly have voted for the BJP, or who may not have felt the need to join the protests yet, have a capacity for openness and empathy. We need to find ways to call out to that capacity in ourselves and in everyone else.

I will end with a passage from an essay titled "The Urgent Relevance of Hannah Arendt" (Richard J Bernstein) - a passage that serves as a sort of mantra for me these days:

"The deepest theme in Arendt is the need to take responsibility for our political lives. She warned against being seduced by nihilism, cynicism or indifference. She resisted false hope and false despair. She was bold in describing the darkness of our times – lying, deception, self-deception, image-making and the attempt to destroy the very distinction between truth and falsehood."

The bravest and best of us need to resist false hope and false despair, refuse to be seduced by nihilism and cynicism. We need to gently remind ourselves to put in the hard work of empathy and openness, of working to build the solidarities we need, rather than succumbing to angry, petulant despair.

Lakshmi, the Goddess, Doesn't Walkout Anymore

Manu Devadevan

It is not easy for students of history to comment on the present without assistance from the historical archive. This owes as much to their disciplinary upbringing as it is due to methodological preferences and the prejudices engendered in their worldview. One can of course violate this principle in an age when there is so much talk of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. Nonetheless, dwelling in the past for long periods of time has its own heuristic advantage. And I'm in no mind to forego this advantage. More so when the purpose is to reflect upon the failures of our times.

One of my areas of interests is the history of religious traditions in India, and a habit I have developed in recent years is to speak of the town of Puri in coastal Odisha, whenever an occasion presents itself. Here is one such occasion. There is no dearth of historical material from other sites and from other periods of time with which to make my arguments, but I will remain with the Jagannatha temple of Puri. This temple is of considerable academic interest to me. I have written about it at some length, producing an article in English and a monograph in Kannada serialised in a historical studies journal. A student of mine is now working on a doctoral dissertation on the religious history of the Odia-speaking region, with the Puri temple as one of its focal points. This temple is dear to me for another reason; my father and my daughter were both born on the day of Jagannatha's annual *ratha yatra*. Let's then go to Puri.

In the early decades of the sixteenth century, a fascinating set of events unfurled in the Jagannatha temple. This was the time when the temple's priestly establishment and its arch patron, the Gajapati rulers of the Suryavamshi line, were in bitter competition with each other for hegemony over affairs of the temple. The priests wielded great authority owing to the extent of land they had come to control by way of royal grants and other means from the time of the Ganga ruler, Anangabhima III, in the thirteenth century. In what appears to be an attempt to hold the priests in check, the Suryavamshi king, Prataparudra, began to patronise Vaishnava saints in the early sixteenth century, creating a powerful counterweight to priestly power. Chaitanya, the exponent of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, is the best known among these saints. Scores of saints from within Odisha, coming from diverse caste backgrounds, assembled in Puri in these years. Five of them—Jagannatha Dasa, Balarama Dasa, Achyutananda Dasa, Yasovanta Dasa and

Sisu Ananta Dasa—worked closely with Chaitanya and with one another, and have attained renown as Panchasakhas, the five comrades. They rejected caste and advocated equality and commensality. Their challenge to the orthodoxy is best exemplified in the act of Jagannatha Dasa, a brahmana, obtaining initiation (*deeksha*) from Balarama Dasa, a shudra. Together, the Panchasakhas produced hundreds of religious and philosophical works, including Odia versions of the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavatapurana* and the *Bhagavadgita*. In this enterprise, they drew inspiration from Sarala Dasa, who in the latter half of the fifteenth century had rendered the *Mahabharata* into Odia.

There is much to be said about the work of the Panchasakhas, but I want to limit myself to one of their radical texts, the *Lakshmipurana* of Balarama Dasa. This short text, less than 1100 lines in length, has been a favourite with the womenfolk in coastal Odisha in living memory. Women read or listened to its recitation at regular intervals, especially during Thursdays in the month of Margasira. Until the invasion of television a few decades ago, it was not difficult to find women who had committed the complete text of the *Lakshmipurana* to memory. Not much is known of this text outside Odisha, except from occasional comments that feminists have made. I recommend interested readers to look at Satya P. Mohanty's essay, 'Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: The Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* as Radical Pedagogy,' which appeared a decade ago in the journal, Diacritics, (vol. 38, no. 3, 2008). This is among the few scholarly studies of the text. And for non-Odia readers interested in the *Lakshmipurana*, there is now an English translation by Manorama Tripathy, published in a book I edited recently (*Clio and Her Descendants: Essays for Kesavan Veluthat*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2018).

The *Lakshmipurana* is in the form of a story which the sage, Parasara, tells Narada, the son of Brahma. On one occasion, the two sages are wandering in the world. One day when they reach a village, they find everyone, from *brahmana* to *chandala*, celebrating the Lakshmi festival. Narada is curious to learn of the festival in which all castes participate with a sense of equality. Parasara tells him the story behind the festival.

It is a Thursday in the month of *Margashira*, a day auspicious to Lakshmi. The goddess asks her husband, Jagannatha, to allow her visit the town to meet her devotees and offer them blessings. Jagannatha agrees but cautions her not to delay the day's food preparations in the name of the visit to her devotees. The Lord of the World is quite a foodie, and so is his elder brother, Balarama.

Lakshmi takes the form of an old *brahmana* woman and moves from street to street to see how her devotees are observing the festival. There is no sign of ceremonies anywhere. Women are lazy, laid back, fast asleep or callous. Few of

them show a sense of duty and piety. When the goddess in disguise reaches the door of a seafarer and asks the lady of the house why she has not observed the *Lakshmi Pooja*, the woman tells her that she is not aware of it. What festival is this, she asks Lakshmi, tell me of it and I will observe it if it appeals to me. Lakshmi describes to the seafarer's wife how the festival has to be performed. This is followed by a fairly long discourse on the duties of a pious woman, and this part of the text—it must be said to the dismay of feminists who have often regarded the *Lakshmipurana* as a manifesto for women's liberation—is a piece of unadulterated patriarchy as it were. It ties down a woman to the domestic sphere, turns her into a docile body that submits to her husband and parents in law, never speaking against them or swerving from obedience to them, come what may.

After instructing the seafarer's wife, the goddess moves to the street of the *chandalas*, an untouchable group traditionally placed outside of the caste system. Here, Lakshmi meets a woman, Sriya, who has bathed early in the morning, put on clean clothes and with her body and mind pure, performed the worship of Lakshmi as laid out. The *chandala* woman appears to be an embodiment of devotion, piety and purity. Lakshmi is pleased. She accepts Sriya's devotion and showers her with wealth and riches. Sriya's hut transforms into a palatial mansion with its pillars and railings made of gems and precious stones. The woman—she was childless—is blessed with many children and her cattle shed is now filled with kine.

It is time for Lakshmi to return home now. In the meantime, Jagannatha and Balarama have gone to the forests for hunting. Balarama is a great yogi who can see what others can't. And in his yogic eye, he has a glimpse of Lakshmi entering the house of a *chandala* woman. He tells Jagannatha that he cannot allow Lakshmi to return home. She does this every time, he tells Jagannatha, she enters the house of untouchables and gets back without bathing. She has been polluting us for too long. It cannot be allowed anymore. She has to be driven away. If you can't drive her away, you shall leave the temple too. Go to the *chandala* street and make a palace for yourself and your wife there.

Jagannatha is in a fix. He doesn't want to abandon Lakshmi. He can't disobey his elder brother either. Presently, he decides to call it quits with his wife. When Lakshmi shows at the temple gate, he asks her to leave. Lakshmi is taken aback. There is a heated exchange of words between the couple, the two trading a variety of bizarre charges against each other. Lakshmi discards all her jewellery in the temple and leaves the place. All her attendants follow her. They reach the seashore.

Lakshmi is what she is, the fickle minded goddess. Homeless, humiliated and all too powerful, she is keen on vengeance. She summons Visvakarma and gets a palace built for her on the seashore. She then charges the eight *vetala* goblins to

raid the temple at night when the two brothers are asleep. The goblins carry all wealth from the treasury and empty the temple's granary to the last grain. They place the loot at Lakshmi's service and in reward, earn a place for themselves in Vaikuntha.

The two brothers wake up the next morning to find the temple deserted. There are no attendants, and the wealth and grain have all gone. The brothers are in utter confusion. With nothing left to eat, they remain hungry for a day. The next day, they can't take the hunger anymore. Balarama and Jagannatha disguise themselves as *brahmana* beggars and wander through the town. But they find no food. At one place, people drive them away, calling them thieves. At another place, when a family offers to feed them, Lakshmi makes the food vanish miraculously. Elsewhere, when they are offered popped rice, Lakshmi summons the wind and has the food blown away. And when they go to a pond, the goddess sees to it that the water has disappeared!

Hungry, thirsty and tired, the brothers learn that a woman living in a palace on the seashore offers food to everyone who visits her. When they set out for the seashore, Lakshmi urges the sun to heat up the sand so the two brothers can't walk. There is much drama at Lakshmi's house when the brothers reach there braving the burning sand. Lakshmi informs Balarama and Jagannatha through her maidservants that she is willing to offer them food, but that she is a *chandala* woman and accepting cooked food from her will make them lose their caste. "We'll cook for ourselves," Balarama tells the maidservants, "give us a new pot and some foodstuff". Lakshmi asks the maidservants to give the brothers all they want. And then she charges the fire god that the fire kindled by the brothers should generate no heat. The brothers' attempt to cook is a failure.

In the end, Balarama concedes defeat and agrees to accept the food the *chandala* woman has cooked. The two brothers bathe, and are served a sumptuous meal. It is now revealed that the *chandala* woman is none other than Lakshmi. Balarama requests Jagannatha to invite her back to the temple. The Lord of the World pleads before his wife to return. Lakshmi has been waiting for this day; she is only too eager to return to her husband. But she won't give in so easily. I'll come back, she tells Jagannatha, but only if you accept my terms. Everyone, from *chandala* to *brahmana,* shall feed each other and eat together from the same pot in the temple. If you agree to this, I'm coming with you. Jagannatha agrees, and Lakshmi returns to the temple.

The *Lakshmipurana* tells us of a time when lower castes were not allowed entry into the Jagannatha temple. Did this change in the sixteenth century after Balarama Dasa's powerful critique of caste discrimination? We do not know. If it did, the change did not last for long. We have testimony from the colonial archive to the

effect that as many as nineteen groups were not allowed into the temple in the early nineteenth century because they were polluting. And if things in the temple didn't really change in the early sixteenth century, the critique was certainly not made in vain. The *Lakshmipurana* turned out to be one of the best loved of texts ever written in Odia, its popularity second only to the *Bhagavatapurana* of Jagannatha Dasa. A bitterly comic piece of criticism of a mighty lord became a part of the region's ritual life.

This is the story of a religious tradition that had within it the resourcefulness and power to challenge beliefs and conventions that were oppressive and discriminating. Balarama Dasa knew that there was a problem with religion in the way in which it was practiced in his days. The solution to the problem was in recasting religion in radical ways, not in casting religion away. The saint-poet worked within the tradition, as did several of his contemporaries and successors within Odisha and elsewhere. There are also instances of breaking with the existing state of affairs to charter a new religious course altogether, the Buddha and Basava being the best known exemplars of this trend. Religion had the power to reform religion. Not often was it reformed in this manner, but when it was attempted, the results were there in most cases for all to see.

Colonial intervention introduced us to the rule of law, but as long as the colonial master administered this new principle, the old legacy of religion continued. From Rammohun Roy and Mahima Gosayi to Ayya Vaikunthan and Narayana Guru, there is a rich history of the critique and reform of religion from within the sphere of religion in colonial times. What became of this power of religion after independence? How did India's religious traditions turn incapable of doing what the Buddha, Basava or Balarama Dasa had done in their days? Why has religion been impervious to the ills of religion after the colonised subject rose to freedom and began to administer the rule of law? And why is it that the most learned of men and women from among us rightly recognise religious obscurantism, caste-based inequality, and oppression against women, dalits and tribal groups as structural problems but seek solutions only in the rule of law rather than directing their energies to transform the structures of religious life?

We do not have reassuring answers to these questions. And that is not because religion has failed us. It is because we have failed religion. We know that the intellectual traditions that formed the basis or justification for 'modern' life in India were fascinated by the rule of law and its ideational charms. That this happened in the name of ideals such as rationalism, freedom, equality and justice should bewilder us, when we look back at it in retrospect. Were these ideals foreign to the story that the *Lakshmipurana* had recounted? Was Balarama Dasa—or Tukaram, Basava, Kabir and Ezhuthachan—working with an ethic or a sense of truth that had little to do with egalitarianism, emancipation, fairness and reason?

And what has become of the rule of law, which was thought to embody these ideals as substance as well as symbol? It is as clear as daylight, whether or not we admit it, that the rule of law has only become another article of faith, much like religion.

In our times, Lakshmi, the goddess, does not walk away anymore. Much remains to be cleansed from within, and it will not be cleansed unless she walks out. Cleansing, however, has been outsourced to the rule of law, and the rule of law being what it is, the goddess is left to dwell in filth. Religion has lost its ability to reform religion today. And this is no mean failure.

Doing Justice to Past and Future

Aranyani Bhargav

The Indian classical dance world is revered and respected the world over for its ancient origins, its diverse and rich cultural history, its ability to survive through the centuries in some form or another, not to mention its stunning beauty, architectural grace and all its technical complexities.

On the surface, it seems impossible to find "failures" within something that appears to be so seemingly flawless. But then nothing in this world exists without its flaws. Indian classical dance is no different.

Throughout my training as a Bharatanatyam dancer, from the time I began to learn it as a child, it was difficult for me to find anything wrong with it. I unconditionally adored every aspect of it - my teacher, the dance classroom, the *adavus* (steps), *mudras* (hand gestures), the pieces we learnt, the stories they told and so on. But as I entered university and started digging its archive on my own, I started to discover elements of Bharatanatyam's history that disturbed me.

In fact, these discoveries rattled me so much that they entirely changed the way I viewed the dance form and its practitioners. They deepened my own research on it, and radically transformed my understanding and performance of Bharatanatyam. From then on, I questioned everything. Today, I believe it has made me a better dancer (and person) – more critical and reflective, and also sensitive towards the history of my art form and all of its practitioners through the centuries. Further, it has led me to more deeply explore Bharatanatyam. Both as a solo performer and through my dance company 'Vyuti', I have discovered Bharatanatyam anew, through deconstruction, questioning of space and time, exploring alternative narratives, and challenging the socio-political contexts under which Bharatanatyam exists today. I can safely say that all that happened to me because of my discovery at the age of 18, of the "failures" I am about to expound below.

I had known something about "*devadasis*" as a teenager, but admittedly, not much. I first began to question the brief, intermittent mention of them around the age of seventeen, shortly after my *Arangetram* (loosely translated as 'solo dance debut' - the first time a young dancer performs a full length solo performance in public, symbolising her entry into the world of professional dance) at the age of sixteen. Having completed it, I considered myself (rather naively, although technically I was right) to be a serious professional dancer. Therefore, I believed it to be my responsibility to know more about my dance form. That's when I scratched under the surface of the largely rose-tinted story I had known of Bharatanatyam so far.

Through my own reading and research, I learnt more and more about the hereditary artist communities - their erstwhile "glorious" history, their silent, deliberate and deadly erasure and their ultimate disappearance from the dance world. Today, while the communities still exist, sadly very few of them are dancing.

Very briefly put, they were once considered highly respected bearers of a cultural tradition - strong, independent and free from the traditional and domestic roles that bound other girls or women of their time. Dr Yashoda Thakore, acclaimed exponent of Kuchipudi and "*devadasi nrityam*", as she calls it, and a dance scholar who herself belongs to one of the hereditary dance communities, explains - "They were very, very respected". According to her, they were given a place to stay by the temple, "land and many riches", and were provided food. So "all they had to do was dance, and look after God". In fact, she goes on to say that they were so important, that they were seen as the "protectors of god". Further, not only were they the only women to be given full access to the deities, they were also looked after by the kings of the Nayaka and Maratha periods. Although it was not a regular feature, some hereditary dancers even sat in courts and gave opinions on important matters.[1]

Historically, hereditary dancers were indeed "bestowed with social respect" and had many other rights, which were revoked as the *anti-nautch* campaign gained momentum.[2] The *anti-nauch* campaign which began in the late 19th century, demonstrates that by this time, the hereditary dance communities were being viewed as undesirable reminders of an India that didn't fit the then current ideas of Indian national heritage. Through the period of colonialism and the nationalist movement for India's independence, the perception about the hereditary dance communities underwent a dramatic change[3]. I have stated in earlier articles, public talks and in my dissertation on dance, that Victorian ideas of sexuality and femininity had slowly invaded the Indian mind during colonialism. These ideas that were imbibed by upper caste and middle class Indian nationalists did not support unmarried women dancing freely, having non conjugal relationships or being liberated of domestic roles. Dr Thakore further states that "the print media of the time had already started reporting the hereditary dancers as fallen women",

[1] See Dr Yashoda Thakore's webinar on the Facebook page, "Samyoga - Coming Together, 10 June 2020 and Dr. Swarnamalya Ganesh's article "Kshetrayya and the legacy of erasing women's voices from erotic poetry", The News Minute, February 14, 2020 where she says "For example, in the court of Raghunatha Nayaka were Ramabhadramba, Madhuravani, Krishnatvari and others. During the reign of Vijayaraghava Nayaka thrived Pasupuleti Rangajamma who wrote prolifically in eight languages alongside Krishnajamma, Candrarekha, Rupavati, Lokanayaki, Bhagyarati and others.

[2] "Srividya Natarajan on researching the traditions of the Isai Vellalar community, and the appropriation of their art" by Aishwarya Sahasrabudhe, Firstpost, 6th December 2018. Natarajan says - "Historically, Devadasis were bestowed with social respect, property rights, artistic self-expression, public admiration, and a sense of involvement in important communal celebrations, rights which were revoked in the wake of the anti-nautch movement"

[3] Dr Thakore explains that this is because the British, during their long colonial rule over India, "had worked on the minds of the Indian pysche" (Source: Samyoga - Coming together, Facebook live talk, June 10, 2020)

because anyone who was not married was considered as fallen. In other words, the nationalist movement, which was led largely by upper caste men and women, was forced to project Indian culture in a way that affirmed colonial notions of femininity and fit in with that imbibed mindset of the Indian nationalists.

One big failure, then, of the Indian classical dance world in the post-colonial era is to properly acknowledge the monumental role that hereditary dance communities played in nurturing and keeping alive what we now know as 'Bharatanatyam' through the centuries, and to deny the dancers of that time the respect that they richly deserved.

Very soon after "*Sadir*"/"Bharatanatyam" fell into "non-*devadasi*" hands, a "sanitisation" process took place. The narratives of dance shifted from *sringara* (sensuality/erotica) to *bhakti* (devotion), the social class of dancers shifted from members of the hereditary dance communities to Brahmin girls and women. Members of these dance communities like the renowned dancer, T. Balasaraswati fiercely defended their dance form as being perfect the way it was, while the nonhereditary practitioners expressed an urgent need to "sanitise" it. The tragic insinuation was made and successfully established that these dancers, their culture, way of life and the way they danced was unworthy of post-colonial India.[4]

A concomitant failure was to have not properly rehabilitated the hereditary dance communities after ousting them from their respected positions and roles in Indian polity, culture and society.[5] Indeed, Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy is said to have written a letter to Mahatma Gandhi expressing her desire to turn the hereditary courtesan dancers into "chaste wives, loving mothers and useful citizens".[6] In my view, while Dr Reddy must have had good intentions, the assumption that they needed to be chaste wives, and weren't already loving mothers and useful citizens starkly contradicts historical accounts.

It has to be said, however, that the "*devadasi* system" was not without problems. The act of dedicating young girls to temples and as a matter of tradition and heredity is also troublesome. Of course it is a worrying possibility that these young girls were possibly not given a choice about being dedicated, and could not pursue any other vocation even if they wanted to. However, those "*devadasis*" that danced were not forced into this profession. They chose it.[7]

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[4] As Dr Thakore said, when the nationalist movement was setting in, it was necessary to show India's strength - and India's strength lay in its culture - so that had to feature strongly in the nationalist movement for independence. But the dancers that represented India's culture clashed with the colonial notions surrounding femininity. So, "the art form was needed, but not the dancers". She adds - "Very quickly, the art was weaned from the devadasis. The women were side-lined and completely forgotten about, and a new art form called 'Bharatanatyam' - cleansed, antiseptic, sans sringara was formed".

[5] Srividya Natarajan notes that "the only alternative that reformers piously advocated was being a good Hindu wife".

[6] See Kalpana Ram, "Phantom Limbs: South Indian Dance and Immigrant Reifications of the female body", Taylor and Francis Online, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Volume 26, 2005

[7] My limited knowledge on this is somewhat clarified by Dr Yashoda's explanation that these "devadasis"(Isai Vellalar and Kalavanthalu communities) chose to be dancers. They were a group of mostly educated girls who came together to dance and sing, and perform important temple duties.

Having said that, the fact that despite their independence and freedom, they remained in some ways, under the control of a triad of men - the male guru, priest and patron also betrays that they perhaps didn't enjoy as much freedom as we some would have us believe.[8]

In short, the "*devadasi* system" was definitely itself not faultless. The reasons for its abolition do include humanitarian grounds. This is because when the British categorised its colonised population, it put all unmarried, working women (the dancers, the joginis, matangis, and sex workers) under one category - that of the "*devadasis*". Some of these women were indeed subjected to sexual oppression and exploitation.[9]

So, I am not arguing that the "*devadasi* system" should not have been scrutinised or was flawless. I'm arguing that any system should not be forcibly shut down, without the consent or consultation of the people that inhabit it, survive and thrive within it. And if such a decision is indeed taken, then the least that can be done for those who had so much to lose, is proper rehabilitation.

In all my years of studying the history of this dance form, I have not come across much information about rehabilitation efforts made for these original masters of dance. One reads about how their temple duties were suddenly taken away and given to people from other communities, and that temple dancing was banned. One also reads that dancing in the proscenium theatres came about soon after. But one doesn't read much about any efforts that were made to facilitate the entry of hereditary courtesan dance community into this new system - an initiative where hereditary courtesan dancers themselves were encouraged to take their hereditary art form to the proscenium stage. Yes, T. Balasaraswati did perform on the proscenium stage, and there is evidence of a few feeble attempts made to exhibit "*devadasi* dancing" on stage immediately after independence. But there is no significant evidence to suggest that this was done in a comprehensive manner, and it is nowhere close to rehabilitation, considering the magnitude of what these dance communities were robbed of. I have also not come across any literature that suggests that there were offered an alternative source of livelihood.

Instead one reads extensively about how prominent members of other socio-economic classes learnt the art of "*Sadir*" and then distanced themselves from the hereditary dance communities. For instance, members of the Brahmin communities learnt from the original masters, and also learnt from them how to teach - then started passing down the knowledge themselves instead of retaining the *nattuvanars* of the hereditary dance communities as teachers in dance schools and institutions that popped up. This essentially left the already ostracised hereditary gurus and practitioners of the form even more alienated.

[8] "Dancers were vulnerable to exploitation by male teachers, for instance, or by priests," says Srividya Natarajan

[9] This in itself is a very complex and sensitive issue and requires more attention, but is not the focus of this essay.

For all the efforts made to sustain and "revive" the dance form - comparatively little evidence, if any, can be seen in efforts made to sustain the dancers of that time. The dance was separated from the dancer - the former was elevated to a divine level while the latter was condemned to stigma, neglect and taboo.

Finally, practitioners, performers, teachers and therefore their students continue to mention "*devadasis*" (in the context of dance) in passing as existing in a brief "corrupt" period of "decline" in Bharatanatyam's history. This is not only deeply offensive towards the hereditary dance communities of the past and their living members today, but is also disrespectful to the history of Bharatanatyam as a whole. Despite scholarship on this having existed in oceanic proportions for decades, many current booklets and readings for Bharatanatyam students diminish or simply ignore the contributions made by the women of the Isai Vellalar dance community , in subscribing to this warped narrative of a glorious mythical past, a brief period of decline under the "fallen devadasi" and its "revival" by upper caste nationalists who elevated the dance form to the position of respectability that it holds today. A counter-narrative found in a lot of serious scholarship on this history fails to reach a wider public. In a recent conversation with me, Dr Avanthi Meduri shared my worry about this scholarship not reaching many dance students. It is indeed disappointing that conversations about this dance history do not take place in many dance classrooms, and is unavailable in chapters relating to culture in mainstream textbooks in schools.

Dance theory must not be limited to an explanation of hand gestures and selected readings from the *Natyashastra* (a text that was rediscovered in the late 1800s and is not even primarily a text on dance). Similarly, while there is nothing wrong with mythical narratives, the same cannot be said for teaching myth as history. Or indeed, replacing historical narratives with mythical ones. Dialogue and discussion around these multiple narratives, especially among the current generation of dancers is imperative. Given the scale at which Bharatanatyam is taught in India (and indeed, the world) - this incomplete, even distorted historical narrative is widely prevalent. In comparison, only a small number of practitioners acknowledge the real history of this dance form. The growth of a small but strong minority in the dance world insists on a reflexive, dialogic approach to this history is welcome and should make a difference. More and more people should join this conversation.

However, correcting this distorted history does not mean that we now commit the opposite mistake of demonising artists from the early years of post-Independence India. A balanced perspective on this issue is incredibly necessary for the entire dance community to move forward. It is grossly unjust to ignore or disregard the history of the hereditary dance communities, but it would also be unjust to diminish or disregard the contributions of dancers like Rukmini Devi Arundale,

Indrani Rahman and many, many others made to making what Bharatanatyam is today. For instance, Dr Avanthi Meduri argues that the "secularisation" of Bharatanatyam led it into a new era of intellectual awareness. Without this, we may have lost a meaningful cultural experience of it today. But she also adds that because of it, we have lost the "inner spiritual exuberance or fullness" that hereditary dancers, indeed dancers like T. Balasaraswati embodied.[10]

Dance forms - or indeed any cultural art forms – are not static, they change according to constantly changing socio-political and cultural surroundings, as they should. In fact, I would argue that the Bharatanatyam we see today is not the same dance form that was practiced and performed by the Isai Vellalar dance community - it is different in form, structure, content, and presentation. In a sense, they are two very different dance forms. The Bharatanatyam we see today, I have argued in my graduate dissertation, is a multiply-modern dance form, severed in many unfortunate ways from the traditional dance form of the Isai Vellalar community, but also therefore quite distinct from it. My grouse is not with modern day Bharatanatyam or its many variants, nor do I reject this Bharatanatyam. In fact, I'm quite devoted to it. After all, I've been practicing it for 30 years, and have taught and performed it for over 15 years. Rather, my grouse is with its unacknowledged debt to the dance practices of hereditary dance communities and our collective failure to assess and repair damage done to the hereditary dancers.

To conclude, in my view, despite all its achievements, three failures stand out when examining Bharatanatyam and its complex history. One, a momentous failure on the part of the nationalist movement to acknowledge the role of the hereditary dance communities and to subsequently offer them the same degree of respect as the dance form that was taken from them. Two, another tragic failure of the 'revivalists' during the post-colonial nationalist era is not to have properly rehabilitated members of this community, instead separating the dancer from the dance, neglecting the former while nurturing the latter – thereby rewriting a false history of this dance form and a distorted image of its origins in public imagination. And three, a failure on the part of many contemporary practitioners, teachers and students who have bought into this imaginary or distorted narrative, and further perpetuated it, despite a wealth of scholarship challenging it.

In sum, the erasure, selective amnesia and distortion of Bharatanatyam's history over generations starting from the period of colonialism right up to today, is a singular collective failing in the dance world, because while we claim to be the important bearers of a great tradition, we also disrespect it by not honestly and respectfully acknowledging its complete story, and that of all its protagonists. By acknowledging this failing, the world of Bharatanatyam can only get enriched

[10] Avanthi Meduri, "Bharatanatyam – What are you?", *Asian Theatre Journal,* 1988, Vol 5, No.1

further as this acknowledgement is the first step towards an honest understanding of its complex history, a sensitive engagement with living members of these original dance communities, and an open, constructive, and democratic space for Bharatanatyam and all its diverse dancers.

Author's note : I would like to thank Dr Yashoda Thakore and Dr Avanthi Meduri for stimulating conversations on issues raised in this article. I would also like to state that this essay is a brief overview of some aspects of the history of Bharatanatyam, and to cover all of the many layers of this history would require an entire book. This essay provides just a glimpse of my current understanding of some of the failures in the dance world.

‘Yeh Kahan Aa Gaye Hum’ or How our Present Dystopia Fails a Bygone Utopia

Maya Joshi

In the dystopic now, one might turn to imaginations of utopia from another time. Revisiting the past, an exercise against amnesia, is an imperative in times of deliberate, even diabolical, forgetting. So, I (re)tell in English a story that was told in Hindi a hundred years ago.

A century is a minor blip in an ancient civilizations’ history, but the twentieth was a formative one, the first half of which witnessed a great churning, a *manthan*, that calls for attention. It was the century that in its first half saw a great struggle againt imperial rule, and in the second half showed up the challenges that lie before a nation and its peoples in pursuit of the promised dawn of freedom. There were those, of course, who saw that dawn as mottled at its very inception, marred by the violence of the Partition and the perpetuation of those very forms and structures of power that closely mimicked some of the rot that had ostensibly been gotten rid of. And then there were those who were a tad more optimistic about that tryst with destiny. Eloquence characterised both sides, and the language of the political and the poetic overlapped. It was a time for dreams: for some deferred, for others, incipent. A dream of Freedom was the shared foundation. The contours of that freedom varied. What also varied was the intuition about how far in the horizons of the future that freedom lay, as also the most desirable routes and road maps to those freedoms.

And it wasn’t just on this sub-continent that this played out. Globally, there were churnings, with the ‘global south’ particuarly poised for taking its place in the world.

What is offered here is a glimpse into a part of that national psycho-drama, inspired by one literary work that was born of that moment. It is a work that bears witness to a utopian imagination birthing dreams, dreams that may seem quotidian and terrestrial to our post-human, post-modern imaginations today, but to dismiss them as naïve would amount to acting at our own risk. As we sit poised at the brink of the dissolution of even the most attenuated forms of those dreams, paradoxically, the utterly utopian reasserts itself in slogan and song. The dream of utopia that is here explicated thus appears to be both fantastic and necessary. For, unlike some fantasies, in its attention to the quotidian, it is also marked by an arresting and poignant terrestriality. This is especially moving as we watch *terra firma* slip, often quite literally, from under our feet in the dystopic ecological

present of our planetary home. But it is a fantasy that harnesses a decidedly local imagination, even as it emrbraces the global.

So, a flashback to a hundred years ago. In 1918, In colonially governed India, a young man who then went by the name of Kedarnath Vidyarthi found himself so inspired by events in distant Russia that he thought up a book. He was not a writer of fiction, being an ardent Arya Samaji prosleytiser at the time, having left more orthodox forms of the faith of his ancestors for this more rational, reformist creed. Fired by the enthusiasm of youth -- he was all of 25 at this time-- and galvanised by the events that followed the Jallianwala Massacre on 1919, like countless other young men and women in North India, he found himself responding to Gandhiji's call for Satyagraha. This led to the honor of imprisonment. Colonial prisons being fecund spaces for intellectual and creative activity, he had no difficulty in using that time and that space to give shape to a fantasy that he had been harboring since late 1917, when news of the revolution in Russia had first fired his imagination.

And thus began work on *Baisvin Sadi (The Twenty Second Century)*, a striking work by a young man who would soon go on to become a Buddhist bhikshu in Sri Lanka, taking on the name he would be known by for the rest of his eventful and prodigiously productive life -- Rahul Sankrityayan. Today we remember him—when we do, and depending on where we are located along the literary and ideological axes—for his epic Tibetan journeys in search of lost Buddhist manuscripts, for his work in the peasant movement and then the communist movement in Bihar, for his vivid historical fiction such as *Volga se Ganga* and *Singha Senapati,* for his massive survey of world philosophy *Darshan Digdarshan*, for his Sahitya Akademi Award winning *Madhya Asia ka Itihas* and a large body of works that can be classified as travelogue, lexicography, drama, novels, biography. It's a prodigious life, almost epic in scale, both of its time and transcending it, as only the unsually gifted and dedicated are able to be. That we – the academy, literary establishment, general readers—have quite failed to do justice to Rahul Sankrityayan's remarkable legacy is itself a form of failure, a willed amnesia, that I have been engaged in decoding for over a decade. But this is not the place for that story. Here, I limit myself to what this remarkable mind started his writing 'career' with.

Politically, ethically, even aesthetically, it is a dream of decency, an imagination of equality, a vision of wasteless, wantless elegance, of fundamental freedoms from hunger and humiliation, war and violence, the depredations of caste and class and gender and race as divisive, dangerous, degrading. It's a dream of a poised modernity. Geographically, it is a fantasy both national and global, remarkable in its perspicacity. Temporally, it is also janus-faced in looking both to the deep past and the future, but unlike atavistic variations on dreams of the past glory, one could say it seeks to sip selectively of the best, like the proverbial swan.

So what does B*aisvin Sadi imagine*? Generically, it is best described as a series of connected 'stories' (it's not quite a novel) that are set some two hundred years into the future from the time of the writing of the book. Thus, it is a dream of a future, except that the dream is an awakening from a sleep of centuries that its protagonist 'enacts' via a literal waking up. The time-travelling protagonist through whose eyes we witness the future is named Vishwabandhu ('Friend of the World'). Now a grey-bearded but agile 266 years old, he was, we soon learn, a teacher in his pre-somnolent life, who, when travelling along the hilly regions of what would now be Uttarakhand and Nepal, manages to fall asleep in a cave. This hibernative sleep lasts two whole centuries! When he wakes, he walks into a changed reality. Here we could imagine echoes of Plato's famous cave-analogy, in which denizens of a cave, chained to limit their vision to a restrictive façade of a wall, on which play shadows of a secondary reality, are contrasted with an awakened one who is not only unchained and thus capable of seeing more fully, but also able to walk *out of* the cave into the blindingly clarifying light of the sun's Truth. The philosophical Idealism of Plato/Socrates is not Rahul Sankrityayan's though. For the ideal world he walks into is figured in solidly material terms. Although self-admittedly unaware of the full range of Socialism's philosophical foundations at the time of the book's writing, he grounds the vision of the ideal, enlightened world in a practical vision that acknowledges in its attention to detail the experiences of folks who have seen poverty, filth, hunger, and war at close quarters.

The local ideal is enabled in its very being by a revolutionary change in the global one. It's a world in which war is history, humanity has harnessed its best instincts to create a modestly affluent world for each person. There are no classes, no castes, and the genders are equal. There is a kind of United Nations. Its head is an Indian, with a Japanese, an American, and a Russian fillng other posts, by rotation. Globally, religion is a relic of a benighted past, as is poverty. Farms—neatly organized and gladly worked by happy agriculturalists ably aided by technology—produce abundant and superior crops. The 'farm workers' are so well-fed, dressed and behaved, that the newly awakened one mistakes them at first for members of the Nepal royalty, only to subvert that idea by pointing to the absence of any luxurious excess in their garments. Men and women sit and eat together, wear modern, sensible, and largely gender-neutral attire, and engage in their free time in developing their minds. This extends to trains—impeccably clean and entirely lacking in class differentiation—which come equipped with hospitals and libraries for the mental stimulation of the passengers, who are seen reading, engaged in deep philosophical discussion or impromptu musical gigs. There is, universally, a four-hour work day.

Villages are pristine places. This pristineness comes with a clear vision of what technology can and should do. It is not insignificant that one of the first details

Viswabandhu notes about the village he is taken to, is the experience of the village morning. Floral fragrances waft to him as he makes way to the mechanised toilet which, we are told pointedly, comes equipped with a well-thought out system of waste disposal and recycling. What it achieves most of all is the abandonment of manual scavenging and the infrastructure of caste it rests upon. The text is clear (Bezwada Wilson was surprised when I mentioned this to him). Such imagination is itself an achievement given how miserably we have failed in an age of space travel to muster the political will to ensure the basic technology for the elimination of this degrading practice. That manual scavenging still exists—a hundred years after a 'vernacular' writer offered a solution and over seven decades after 'freedom' was achieved-- speaks volumes for 'our' India, the deep failure of its liberal and even progressive intelligentsia. Lest we fall to the claims of identity politcs, let be said that Rahul Sankrityayan was born into a Brahmin family. His ideal village, however, is not a Brahmin village. It is not the Gandhian ideal either, though there are elements of local government (village panchayats) and attention to the basics of village renewal that Gandhi's Constructive Programme envisaged. But no, there are no 'harijans', and no soul-stirring call to clean toilets manually. Rahul Sankrityayan makes a clean break with all that, and introduces straightforward technology to remove any need for that kind of morality play.

News of his arrival in a village reaches all corners of the globe complete with visuals via a kind of "wireless wire". His first conversation with the Village Head is via a version of video calling. Cloud-seeding, artificial leather, genetic manipulation to get superior crops and animal breeds, and other technological marvels that bear testimony to his remarkable imagination startle the reader. So do some other suggestions, that in hindsight seem more anthropocentric and instrumentalist towards nature and other species, not unthinkable in one who saw deep human degradation at close quarters. Today we have a dystopian view of technology as contributor to ecological degradation. But this technologically ambitious utopia speaks to that anxiety, in ways that are humbling. It is modest in its focus on the earth, even as it anticipates many inventions. Incidentally, there is no space for a space program here or Musk-ian dreams of colonising other planets. This one seems enough. In this enough-ness, there is an ecological dimension to this futuristic vision. Newspapers are systematically recycled, as is human waste, facilitated by machinery.

Altogether, perhaps, this work is more sanguine about technology and its helpfulness than we have come to realize since then. However, in his boundless optimism about the capacity for human reason to organise life for the good of all humanity, when run along socialistic principles, he holds up a mirror for thinking about why exactly the technological revolution has had such a deletrious effect in the last few decades. Is it, one dares to ask, human greed, and desire for petty

profit that vitiates the utopian possibilities of technology? Might capitalism be the problem after all? Dare we, or must we, ask this question in 2020?

In his utopia, the children of villagers-- rosy cheeked and well-fed—are taken care of by the collective. The family as a unit is witness to the release of women from domestic drudgery. Relations between the sexes run on an even keel as marriage is a voluntarily arrangement capable of being nullified by either party, upon mutual consent. Private property, of course, does not exist to vitiate the personal.

Interestingly, the village-bred youth who writes this book sitting in a British colonial jail post-Jallianwallah massacre, has no time for romancing the traditional Indian village in the spirit of nationalistic euphoria. One would look in vain here for a nostalgic evocation of the enchanted countryside. He wishes to sweep the slate quite clean, so convinced is he (at 25!) of the sedimentation of caste and class and gender oppression in tradition. However, the book is not without its nostalgia for a past. And that is a very specific nostalgia. Vishwabandhu, we are told, was a teacher at Nalanda, and in the ideal future he wakes up in, he is highly revered for that association. He also learns that the ancient universities of Vikramshila and Taxila have been revived as great centres of learning. He is deeply moved to see a revived Nalanda, a secular center of state-of-the-art interdisciplianary learning but with a Buddha statue! Astonishingly, it is an Arya Samaji Satyagrahi who is writing this, anticipating his future as a Buddhist deeply invested in undoing the long inherited amnesia of India's Buddhist past; one who will eventually find his resting place in Marxism as the ideology of the times.

Just how this state of apparently stateless—or atleast minimally statist-- utopia is arrived at is not something the text concerns itself with. It is also historically anachronistic to charge it with 'whataboutery' of the kind that cites Stalin, for instance, to discredit the vision it is born of. To fault it on those grounds as a groundless fantasy is to miss the point of the utopian imagination. Its value lies in its ability to imagine an alternative, and to compel a confrontation with our willed blindnesses and, yes, our failures of will and imagination.

When the King Fails: Stories from the Hindu Epics

Arshia Sattar

At a time when we are at the mercy of highly dysfunctional political and economic systems and governed by men who have clearly abdicated their responsibilities to the office that they hold and the people that elected them to power (as well as to the citizens who voted against them), the idea of failure must surely be uppermost in our minds. This article looks at a few instances from the Hindu epics where the king is perceived to have failed and describes how the people around him react. The modes of kingship depicted in the epics (one of which, the *Ramayana*, claims to lay out the parameters of ideal kingship) clearly allow for the king to be criticised publicly and to be shamed for his actions. Sometimes, the king retracts and makes recompense for his mistake or transgression. At other times, the king acts in order that justice be served, if only in the most immediate way. Quite often, the king continues as before but the fact remains that he has been criticised, he has been shown up as fallible – the common citizen has upheld their responsibility of *praja-dharma* even if (or perhaps, because) the king has failed in his *raja-dharma*.

In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Dasharatha fails as a king when he sends his beloved son, the man he had appointed as his heir, the man destined to be king, the man who should have been king, Rama, into the forest for fourteen years. Rama takes his father's wishes to heart and without a murmur, agrees to go into the forest. But Lakshmana, Rama's younger brother, is angry – he tells Rama that the old king has lost his mind and that he does not have to be obeyed. Lakshmana says to Kaushalya, Rama's mother, '"How can he be banished into the forest? There is no man on earth, even if he is Rama's enemy or someone that Rama has insulted, who could speak badly of him. How can someone, who treads the path of *dharma*, reject a son without reason, that too, a son who is so god-like, so upright and so restrained? Which son would honour the word of a father who is so patently in his second childhood? Rama, seize the kingdom with my help before the news of the king's change of heart spreads! When I am by you side, protecting you with my bow, there is no one, not even death, who can get the better of you!"'

Lakshmana is doing two things here: he is challenging the power of his father, the old king, who, he claims, is no longer thinking correctly and therefore, should be challenged. And he is also challenging the decision of the man who would/should be king, i.e., Rama, who has decided to go into the forest to obey the wishes of his father. For Lakshmana, neither of these decisions is worthy of respect or obedience

and certainly, for him, both decisions are against *dharma*. Lakshmana sees it as his duty, his *dharma*, to oppose what he believes to be both injustice and improper behaviour. But Rama persuades him that he is wrong and Lakshmana chooses to stifle his anger, smother his sense that justice and *dharma* have been violated and acquiesces to his older brother's wishes. Before Dasharatha dies of grief, he is able to express remorse for his actions but evades responsibility for what he has done by citing an incident from his past, the karmic residue from which has brought him to this sorry pass.

The *Ramayana's* antagonist, Ravana, king of Lanka, must also face criticism for what he has done. This mighty sovereign of the *rakshasas*, invincible in battle, irresistible to women, has abducted Rama's wife and kept her prisoner on his island. He treats his captive honourably and does not physically assault her in any way. One day, a giant monkey mysteriously arrives on the island and in a fit of rambunctious energy, sets the city of the *rakshasas* on fire. He is captured and brought to Ravana, bound hand and foot. The monkey speaks boldly to the king of the *rakshasas* – he says that his name is Hanuman, he is the son of the Wind and he has come to Lanka as Rama's messenger and he warns Ravana about Rama's might and that he has sworn to rescue Sita and kill her abductor.

> "The woman who is now in your power, the one you think of as Sita, she is the long night of death that will destroy you and your city! Don't place your head in death's noose! Think about how you can save yourself! You will have to watch as Lanka is consumed by Sita's effulgence and the fire of Rama's wrath!' Ravana listened to the unpleasant truth that Hanuman placed before him and was incensed. His eyes rolled with anger in his ten heads and he ordered that the monkey be put to death immediately."

But Ravana's brother, the noble Vibhishana, cautioned the great king and argued against killing the monkey. He said that it was against the rules of *raja-dharma* to kill a messenger and that one as wise as Ravana should know this. Besides, what would he gain from the death of a monkey. Although Vibhishana flattered the king by reciting his many virtues – his strength, his courage, his knowledge of the sacred texts and his knowledge of the rules of kingship – Vibhishana questioned the king's judgement and his decision. Ravana knew his brother was right and decided to let the monkey live and take a message back to Rama. As it becomes clear that a war is inevitable and as the monkeys demonstrate time and again that they are hardy and skilled in battle, there are numerous occasions when Ravana is advised by his closest family members and councillors -- his wife Mandodari, his brother Kumbhakarna, their grandfather, Malyavan -- to return Sita in order to save himself and his people. Each time, Ravana stubbornly refuses and as predicted, Sita does turn out to be the cause of Ravana's death. Ravana is killed in battle and his virtuous brother Vibhishana is placed on the throne, not simply as Ravana's surviving male kin, but also as a reward for having defected and fought on Rama's side during the war. Ravana paid the ultimate price for his stubborn refusal to return

Sita and his failure to protect his people from war.

From the *Mahabharata*, we can consider two incidents where the king is challenged by a woman. After the dice game in which Draupadi has been staked a lost, a courtier is sent to fetch her from the women's quarters as she is now a Kaurava slave. Draupadi asks one question: "had Yudhishthira staked himself before he staked me?" The implication is that if Yudhishthira had already lost himself, then, as a slave, he did not have the right to stake his wife at all. The courtier brings the message back to the assembly and Draupadi is summoned so that she can ask the question herself. Her challenge to the royal establishment is acknowledged and accepted.

> "Vidura, who knew everything there is to know about *dharma*, raised his arms and hushed the assembly. He said, "Draupadi has asked a question and now she weeps as if she has no protectors. If you do not respond to it, members of the assembly, *dharma* will be injured!
>
> If a troubled man comes to an assembly and asks a question about *dharma*, the members must respond, giving up their personal stakes. Kings! Vikarna has answered the question according to his wisdom. Now you, too, must respond to it, according to what you think.
>
> A man who sits in the assembly, and though he knows *dharma*, does not respond to the question, he obtains half the guilt that accrues if the answer is unsuitable. And he who sits in the hall and knows *dharma*, and still resolves the question inappropriately without any remorse, to him accrues the entire guilt of injustice!
>
> Draupadi said: "I, who was seen by kings only when I chose my bridegroom, never before or after, I have now been brought into public. I, whom neither the sun nor the wind saw before, even inside my own house, I am now seen in this assembly of the Kurus! I, whom the Pandavas protected from the touch of the wind in their house, I am now permitted to be touched by this wicked man. The Kurus allow their daughter and their daughter-in-law, who is blameless, to be man-handled! I think Time itself has become confused! What could be more shameful than the fact that I, a woman true and beautiful, should be made to enter this assembly hall? Where is the *dharma* of kings? Down the ages, we have heard that virtuous women are not brought into public – this ancient and eternal *dharma* has been destroyed in the midst of these Kauravas! How can I, wife of the Pandavas, sister of Dhristadyumna, friend of Krishna, be brought into public like this? The wife of the king of the *dharma*, equal to him in birth, is she a slave or not? Speak, Kauravas! I will abide by what you say!"

Draupadi's humiliation continues with the silence of the Kaurava elders and Duhshasana, egged on by his brothers and Karna, attempts to strip Draupadi of her clothes. Finally, it is the king, Dhritarashtra, who intervenes. Shamed by the behaviour of his sons, he offers Draupadi a boon. She asks that Yudhishthira be freed and with her second boon, she asks for the freedom of her other four husbands.

The other story about a woman who questions a king's right to rule in the *Mahabharata* is the story of Shakuntala. King Dushmanta is hunting in the forest and gets separated from his entourage. Hungry, thirsty and exhausted, he stumbles into a forest hermitage where he is taken care of by a young woman, the adopted

daughter of the sage whose ashram it is. His spirits restored, Dushmanta asks the young woman, Shakuntala, to sleep with him. He overcomes her reluctance by saying that their relationship can be sanctified by a gandharva marriage. Shakuntala is persuaded but on one condition: that the son born to her will be Dushmanta's heir. The king readily agrees. Soon, the king must return to his royal duties and as he leaves, he promises Shakuntala that he will send for her. Years later, when there are no summons from the court, Shakuntala decides to go to the city along with her son and reclaim the promise that he would be king after his father. When she arrives at the court and presents her son, Dushmanta will have nothing to do with her. Even though he remembers everything and recognises her, he asks her to leave. Shakuntala is incensed.

> "O king, you know everything and like a low person, you say that you know nothing! . . I am a virtuous wife and it is true that I have come here of my own accord. Do not treat me with disrespect because of that. I am your wife and worthy of respect. In the presence of so many, why do you treat me like an ordinary woman. If you do not do as I ask, Dushmanta, your head will burst into a thousand pieces! . . Even ants look after their own eggs and do not destroy them, why can't you, a virtuous man, support your own child? I am ready to return to my father's hermitage. But don't reject this child who is your own!' Dushmanta responds and says, "Shakuntala, I know I did not produce this son with you. Women are generally liars, who will believe you? Your mother, Menaka, was a whore and she discarded you on the mountain they way one would discard flowers after they have been offered to the gods. Your father, Vishwamitra, was a lecher. He was a *kshatriya* who wanted to become a *brahmin*. But Menaka is foremost among the apsaras and your father was also a great sage. You are their daughter, how can you speak like an immoral woman? This child is huge. How did he grow so quickly, like a *sala* tree? Your words deserve no attention. Go away, wicked woman disguised as an ascetic! I do not know you. Go wherever you please!'
>
> 'My mother was an apsara and my father a sage. My birth is higher than yours. O king, you see the fault of others even though they are as small as mustard seeds but not your own, which are as large as the *bilwa* fruit. There is no virtue greater than truth, there is nothing superior to truth. Truth is the highest vow. Do not violate your promise, king! Unite yourself with truth. If you do not credit my words, I shall leave of my own accord. In any case, your company should be shunned.'

As soon as Shakuntala leaves, a disembodied voice speaks from the sky and validates everything she had said. Dushmanta quickly claims Shakuntala's son as his own, saying that he had never doubted her but he needed this confirmation for his people who would now regard Sarvadamana as his legitimate heir.

The *Mahabharata* stories both have the king repenting, as it were, and as a result, acting such that justice is done. Draupadi is able to release her husbands from slavery and Shakuntala reclaims the promise that her son will be king. The king, in both cases, is restored to some kind of honour. But in the Ramayana, neither Dasharatha (who does feel remorse for his actions) nor Ravana (who appears to feel none) redeem themselves. Dasharatha dies without making up for what he has done to Rama and Ravana is killed in battle, fighting desperately to save the last vestige of his glory, if not his life.

But there is something else that should notice about all these incidents together: each of these kings has already been presented to us as flawed in some way or, transgressive in his behaviour. Dasharatha is old and tired and utterly captivated by his young and ambitious wife to whom he had given two boons in the past. Dhritarashtra is blind literally and metaphorically, deluded in the devoted protection of his problematic son. The ghastly dice game is, in some sense, the result of his inability to deny Duryodhana anything. Dushmanta's name already tells us that he is not the most honourable of men. His seduction of the girl in the forest and his hasty departure to his kingdom indicate that he is unlikely to honour his promise. Ravana is an outsider to the *dharma*-guided realm of humans, he is a *rakshasa*, governed by such appetites as greed and lust. Moreover, he has abducted the wife of another man and is determined to go to war to assuage his ego, if nothing else. These kings deserve to be criticised and held accountable for what they have done.

But what of the ideal man, the ideal king ruling the ideal kingdom? Could such a person be above criticism? Apparently not, as we learn from the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's Ramayana, where Rama spends much of his time listening to stories of the past that are being told to him by the great *brahmin* sages who have taken up residence at his court. One day, they are interrupted by a poor *brahmin* who has come to seek audience with King Rama. He is wailing, carrying the lifeless body of a young boy in his arms.

> 'Overwhelmed by an immeasurable grief, he babbled as he wailed. "My son, my son!" he cried and then he said, "What misdeeds did I commit in my previous life that I now have to see my only son dead! O little boy, you were only five years old, you did not even become a young man. Your untimely death leaves me bereft. There is no doubt that your mother and I shall soon die as well, grieving for you! I don't remember ever having spoken unlawfully, nor do I remember causing any harm. For what misdeed, little one, did you, my own son, go to Yama's realm today, even before performing the funeral rites for your father? Never before in Rama's realm have I heard or seen anything as awful as this, this untimely death! There can be no doubt that Rama himself has done something terribly wrong. You, king, you are the reason for the death of this living creature. You, along with your brothers, shall have a long life, king. Mighty one, we have lived happily in your kingdom. But now, the realm of the great-souled Ikshvakus is without a protector. Rama has become responsible for his people and children are dying. In this perverted reign, the king's faults bring misfortune to his subjects. Common people suffer untimely deaths when it is the king who acts wrongly. When city-dwellers and country-dwellers are not controlled and are not corrected, the fear of death abounds. Without a doubt, this child has died because of the king's failures, whether in the city or in the country." And so the *brahmin* continued to criticise the king in different ways. Burning with grief, he embraced the body of his son.'

Rama is deeply moved by the *brahmin's* grief and sends spies out into Kosala to find what it could be that he has neglected to do, what is so against the natural order of things as to have caused the death of a young boy. His spies tell him that there is a *shudra*, a low caste man called Shambuka, performing austerities that are

only permitted for *brahmins* – this is the great aberration that has caused a child to die without reason. Rama goes off in search of the *shudra* who is violating the laws of caste and disturbing the universe. When he finds him, he cuts off his head. At the exact moment when Shambuka's head is cleaved from his body the *brahmin's* son comes back to life in Ayodhya. A child has died for no reason because Rama, the best of all possible kings, has failed to uphold the laws of the universe. The abomination that Rama has ignored is that of a low caste man practising austerities that are above his station. Shambuka is punished but the onus for this egregious behaviour still lies with the king.

There is one more instance in the *Uttara Kanda* where Rama is spurred to action after being criticised. Rama urges Bhadra, one of his courtiers, tell him what his people are saying about him. Quoting the people, Bhadra says,

> "(Rama) killed Ravana and rescued Sita. He placed the intolerable past behind him and took Sita back into his own home. But how could he take Sita back into his heart? How could he live with her again so happily when she was abducted and had even sat on Ravana's lap? How can be not be repelled by her? She was in the *ashoka* grove for so long and was under the control of the *rakshasas*. Now, we will have to do the same thing with our wives in a similar situation, for subjects must do as their king does!"

Here, too, the people's criticism is not of Sita but of Rama himself. His conciliatory behaviour towards his wife is not an example that his people feel they can follow and so, as the king, he needs to behave differently. As in the Shambuka story, Rama acts swiftly to address the problem and redeems himself in the eyes of his people through his actions. Rama hardens his heart and does the impossible: he sends away the person that he loves most. It is another matter entirely that Rama's actions reinforce the caste system in the killing of Shambuka and the patriarchy by banishing Sita.

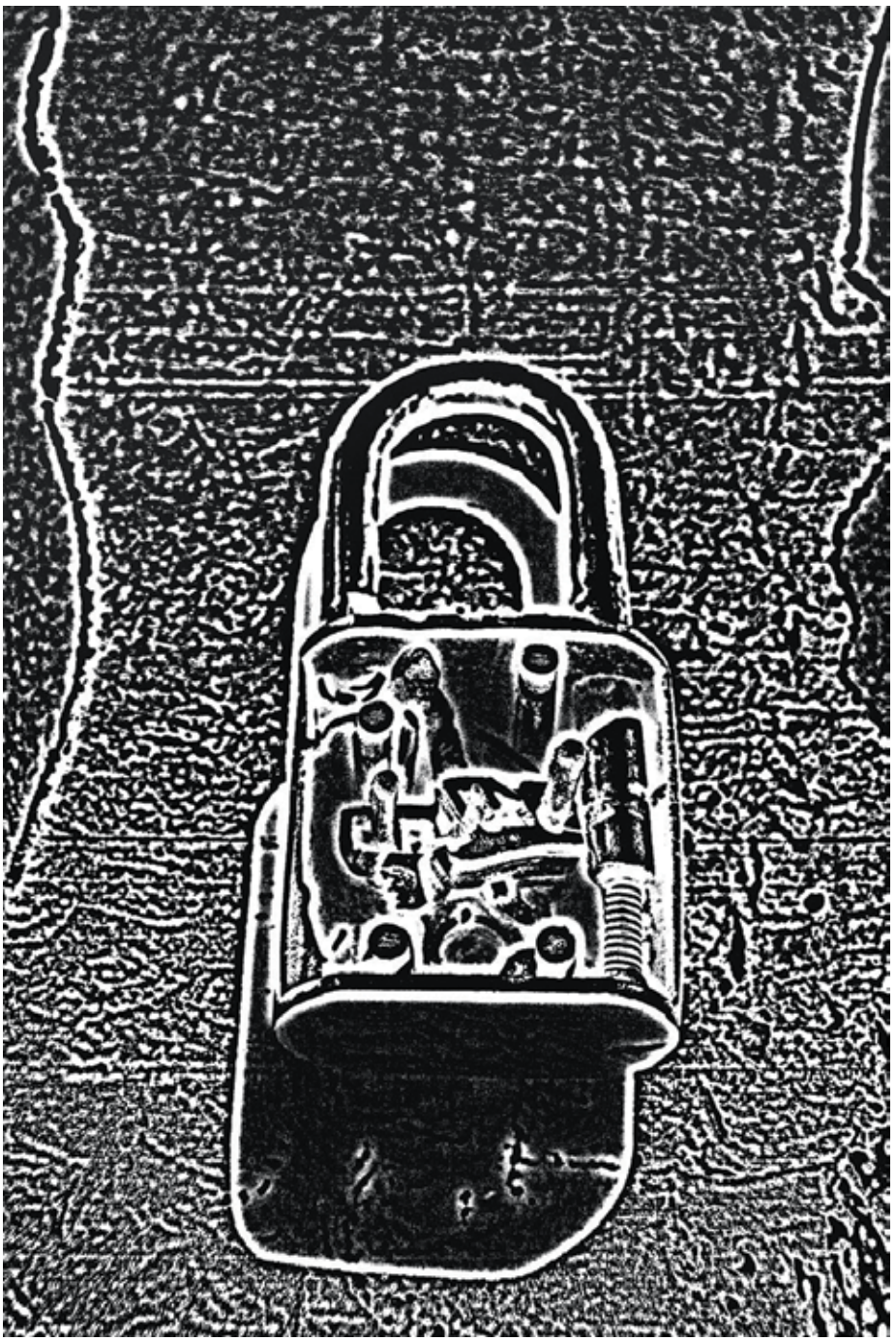
We are used to regarding the *Mahabharata's* primary characters as providing examples of what we must not do and so, its kings stumble along, making their mistakes which have far-reaching consequences. Every now and then, a few kings are able to compensate for their misdeeds, albeit with motivations which may not always be exalted. In the two incidents that we have considered, for example, Dhritarashtra reacts to the assault on Draupadi with what is left of his nobility while Dushmanta needs a celestial voice to prod him into acknowledging the son who will secure his throne and his dynasty. In the Ramayana, on the other hand, Rama is flanked by kings such as Dasharatha and Ravana (and Vali), each of whose words and deeds throw the perfection of Rama's own actions into heightened relief. The more the kings around Rama fail and are criticised, the more righteous Rama appears. Dasharatha loves his one of his wives so much that he betrays his son and his people for her. Despite a harem overflowing with beautiful women, Ravana abducts Sita out of greed, anger and lust. In contrast, Rama has only one

wife whom he loves more than anything in the world, he does not remarry after she leaves him and above all, he is willing to sacrifice his great love for the good of his people.

Unlike the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* tries hard to show us how to be righteous, if not good. And so it is, that we can be asked to consider the failures of the ideal king in the epics differently from the way we would those of an ordinary king or a king who is 'other.' Valmiki's *Uttara Kanda* (a later addition to the central books of the Sanskrit Ramayana) is where we see Rama as king and it is in this book that notions of *ramrajya* are implied, if not fully articulated (as they are in the later *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas). Stern Agastya has replaced the gentle, intellectual Vasishtha as the royal priest and his conservative brahminical influence is visible in what he persuades Rama to do as an ideal king – kill the transgressive shudra and banish the wife whose virtue is being questioned. The *Uttara Kanda* is clear about what elevates a king from failure – it is the firm re-establishment of hierarchy and a return to prescribed behaviours both for his subjects and himself.

But I believe that Rama subverts the ideal to which he is asked to conform. Sita's final and irrevocable departure persuades Rama to do one more thing and perhaps it is this act that redeems him, makes him more than a king who, in the latter part of his life is controlled by the conservative brahmins that have taken over his court. When Sita leaves him of her own accord after she is asked once again to prove her chastity, Rama has a golden statue of Sita made and places it beside him for all public ceremonies and occasions. Of course, the statue is there because Rama has refused to marry again and the presence of his queen is necessary for many sacred rituals. But we can understand the statue in another way as well – that it is reminder to Rama of all that he has lost and a reminder to his people of all that he has given up for them in order to be the ideal king. The golden statue stands for all that Rama has sacrificed for a life of unwavering righteousness and for him, it is a symbol of his failure.

An earlier version of this paper. "Questioning the King: Dissent in the Epics," was delivered as a talk in the lecture series "Dissent in the Arts" at the Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival 2018, 'Plays That Almost Weren't.'



Act of Mind

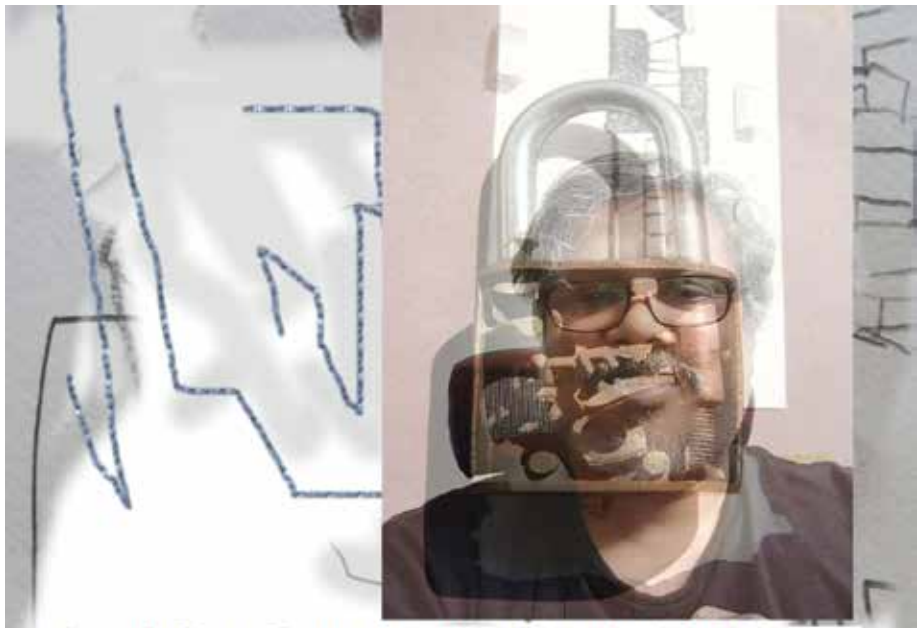
Samit Das

Relating to the time of parting, the flow of existence and facts become fractional forms. There may be losses of fragments for any parting acceptance. Those accumulate traces of a life that has been lived. Perhaps that becomes an inspiration to start a new journey of creation. Any form of visual art and culture fuses the philosophical reflection with aesthetic composition, to begin a, new narratives that may re-emerge as a modern epic of the human condition. Visual language remains a profoundly human achievement- an embodiment of structural harmony and spiritual intensity, which stands alone as a unique language.

From a few words of Saint Kabir -

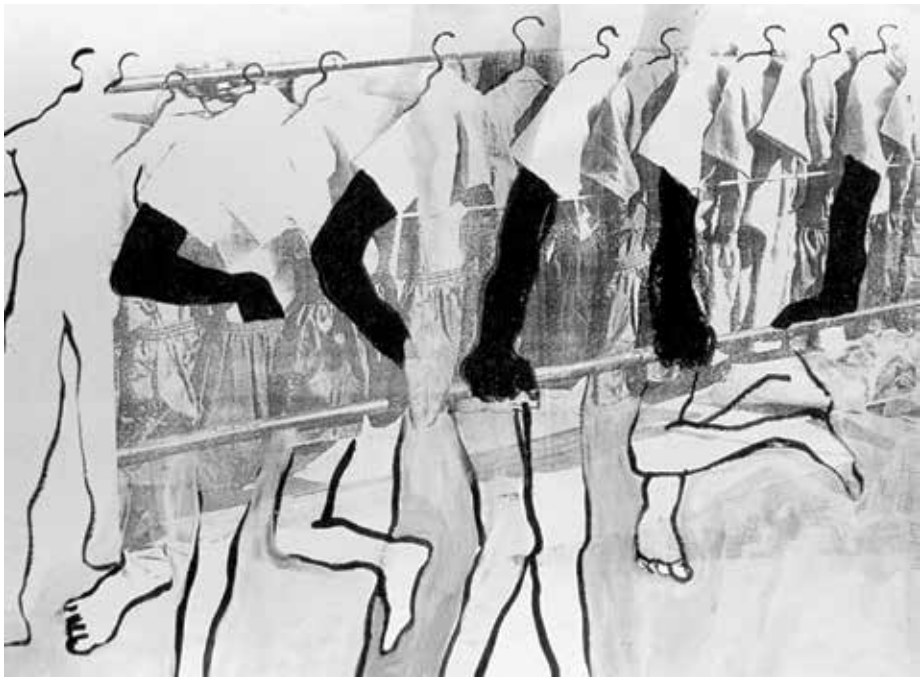
तजो अभिमान सीखो ग्यान
सतगुरु संगत तरता है
कहे कबीर कोई बिरला हंस
जीवत ही जो मरता है

Tajo abhimān sīkho gyān
Satguru sangat tartā hai
Kahe Kabīr koi birlā hans
Jībat hī jo martā hai



Samit Das, Born at midnight during the 1970s in an Industrial Town. The mind is still working with Nuts and Bolts. AI has not programmed in mind. Believe in looking forward through looking at the back. Collect Jigsaw puzzles from History and Archives. Try to put together on the staircase and look for the right steps!

Still in the learning process but unable to see the horizon. Nerves got complex knots during this pandemic.



The Man who Failed to Die (Even when we Mistake him for a Balloon)

Tridip Suhrud

As he walked hurriedly across the lawns (he hated being late), we were quick to seize the opportunity, and assassinated him. We were certain that we had killed him. This certainty was not misplaced. We had used a Beretta M1934 semi-automatic pistol to lodge three bullets in his body, almost at the very place where he would point to his heart, to his *Antaryami*, the dweller within, to say that the seat of authority lay within him. A Foreign Hand – specifically an Italian one -- had unmistakably and unfailingly come to our aid. We had kept him alive for 168 long days in independent India, almost against his wish – the man had fasted unto death at least twice in this period. Instead of letting him go, some of us had made public pledges of 'brotherhood', of 'collective non-violence' and kept him amidst us.

The reason why some of us still felt the need to have him with us was not clear then, and passage of time has not made it any less obscure. He had become somewhat slow to take hints. Ba and Mahadev Desai both decided to leave him (by dying). It would have been most convenient if he had followed after them. The Aga Khan Palace in Poona was grand enough to accommodate three *Samadhis* instead of two. But he wanted a final demonstration of his *brahamacharya*, of his devotion to Rama, of his capacity to urge us to *ahimsa*, of obtaining both *Moksha* and *Martyrdom*. (It would be too much to suggest that he could foretell that his brilliant philosopher grandson would one day speak movingly and most insightfully of this and that this was all done to further the *Ota Bapa No Vadlo*). It was not for us to grant *Moksha*. At that point our relations with Ram Lalla were not so firm that we could make such promises on Ram Lalla's behalf, and in any case the man claimed to have found a home for Rama in his heart.

But martyrdom we could contribute to, because this was to be a temporary arrangement. We were clear that he was never to be called "*Shaheed*" and we also knew that soon enough the nationwide siren would become dysfunctional and the need to remember him by observing a forced silence on a busy working day would end. Decades later, someone sitting in Dewas might sing *Ud Jayega Hans Akela* but we were certain that we could chant "*Goli Maro…*" even louder. To cut a long story short we found a young man, appropriately Chitpavan Brahmin, to pull the trigger, and when the deed was done we heaved a sigh of relief.

Some spoke of his passing in terms of "load shedding", of electrical failure in a major grid, as light having gone out of our lives. Such men and women with

poetic sensibility -- mere versifiers they were -- had little understanding of the resilient civilization that we are; when electrical failures occur we use a borrowed newspaper to fan ourselves for comfort. And thus we did our duty, gave expression to our collective need for patricide and hoped that his conscience -- that thing which like a bad sofa spring came up at the most inopportune times to make us uncomfortable -- would die with him. We knew that of all the miraculous powers that he thought he had, as well as those that we had attributed to him, but the entry of a soul gone from one body into another body, *para-kaya pravesh*, was not among them.

Finito. Pancha Mahabhuta and all that. We are an ancient people with many ways of knowing. We knew that our ancestors do not go easily. They need to be looked after, propitiated and fed even when they become crows – the same crows of *Kauve aur Kala Pani*. We decided to do a proper *Shraddha* for the old man.

First thing that we did was to start naming expensive real estate after him. He was a landlord of no mean territory: some 100 acres of Phoenix Farms and 1100 of Tolstoy Farms in South Africa, and 120 more acres of the Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat. We knew that despite his protestations to the contrary, he liked real estate, roads, *chaurahas*. Cumulatively, he became the longest stretch of road, for Grand Trunk Road was renamed MG Road. We also knew that he had a thing for prisons. If only Jeremy Bentham had consulted him – participatory observation, dear reader -- the panopticon would have been perfected much sooner, to the delight of a certain French philosopher (who was really a pendulum). So we decided in memory of Bentham to give him a panoptical vision.

We made him stand at every possible chauraha; *Khade Raho*, we told him. *Khade Raho aur Dekhte Raho*, just please don't speak, no whispering in people's ears either. We knew that eventually he would become a traffic hazard, we would honk at him, *baaju hat na* we would tell him and curse him. We also knew that eventually in the town of his Ashram he would be made to stand under an overbridge for interminable years as those charged to look after him had begun to look the other way, to greener pastures as they say (such bovine metaphors are not always misplaced.) We had done the best thing ever (after pulling the trigger, that is) -- made a statue out of him. Frozen in movement, time, place, gaze, (covered in bird droppings and surrounded by noise), we could dust him occasionally and ceremonially. He had become an ideal father – take that, Harilal! -- distant and hanging up on a wall.

That bearded psychoanalyst who holds the key to our collective unconscious would later tell his student that the best way to forget someone, to kill someone, is to make a fetish of them, make them a photograph, a statue. This was a harmless way of killing someone. The other way was more devious, he warned. It is to emulate

them, make a nostrum out of them, a rosary, a litany, our own *Imitatio Christi*. Find enough men and women to get up at 4:20 am and recite eighteen verses of the Gita, drink warm water mixed with honey, administer to each other with loving care an enema, spin some yarn, write post cards with bad spelling of 'kettle' in an illegible hand, generally be recalcitrant -- constipated would be another expression, but for that beloved enema -- allow no joy or beauty, and most importantly, claim that the slum of politics is not for them. In short, find enough people willing to lead a subsidised life and occupy the very same places where he lived – other than the prison, of course. This, the teacher assured was fail proof. It would turn generations away from that impish man who walked like a ballet dancer, who laughed at himself and had a great sense of the aesthetic. A bad imitation is a very good antidote to the original, was the logic.

And we have done that. We found willing followers of another bearded man; the man who laboured under the belief that he was the original author of *Discipline and Punish*, and characterised the violation of our Constitution as something akin to a Hindi week observed in the State Bank of India, as *Anushashan Parva*. They went out and occupied institutions, never to leave (and they all wish to live up to 125). These men and women were literal minded -- not to be confused with literate -- and claimed that he (the original one) was against the colour Indigo and imposed a uniformly dull white on all. They were also gifted with being tone deaf. They banished music, locked up libraries and almost succeeded (this despite a young woman who claims 'he was quite a bowler') and made him #un-cool. These POP followers did something that even the British could not do: take politics out of him. His *Ahimsa* became vegetarian (pakodas are allowed, they are good to eat even when there are dentures in the steel container); the one with a seditious heart became toothless; his charkas became behemoths to be placed at airports or so magical that visiting men who like wall décor could spin without a sliver. The sandal maker became almost brahminical and eventually we were told to go and protest where he is not, without not within.

We also went a step further and said, holding up the very same dictionary that he helped create, that "Bapu" was a generic term and each village had its Bapu, each sect had one, each teller of *Katha* became one. *Naam Gaya, Kaam bhi Gaya*. And then Google Maps made sure that Bapu's Ashram meant Asaram's abode of crime.

Thus we were making good progress -- yes, the same *Vikas* -- till *Vikas* came in our way. As part of our *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* of educating ourselves we came to realise that a man may die but his books survive, ideas have a way of persisting and multiplying. We decided to take revenge on his books, but *pyar se*. We reprinted them, infused modern technology to make them computer friendly –CD Rom and all that jazz -- and while doing that we forgot to include some pieces, even changed the Index (only the pedantic read a book through to the Index), deploying the generally sloppy editing that we had perfected.

We were certain that nobody would notice such a thing, whoever compares editions of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* in our country. We knew that the imitative men and women who had come to occupy his institutions had acquired *anaasakti*, a perfect detachment to his writings. All they wanted to remember were aphorisms, things that he should have said but did not; like the seven deadly sins-- which Gandhi himself never outlined but appear on the envelopes of many Gandhi Institutions, including Sabarmati Ashram. They would remain perfectly *anaasakta* (detached) with regard to everything else. But we had not factored in one thing: an almost two dimensional woman (Dina Patel) who insisted that it had to be the way it was before, each word, nay each letter of each word had to be in that order and with her eyes clouded with cataract she began to restore all the deleted words.

Despite such setbacks we had made good progress; there was not a municipality that did not have a road and a statue, no courtroom in our cinema that did not have his photo -- not in his barrister's silk but toothless and in colour (the source of all coloured photos of this man originate of course from the photo-shopped images sent out by his former Ashram). Our public men became Manly and spoke of bodily measures as signs of courage, no school text book that did not ensure boredom about the man, we sang bhajans as *besuraa* as possible -- we should note that the difference between *besuraa* and *asura* is not much in our land -- and when we had exhausted all possibilities internally we took the project overseas; every country should acquire a statue and our creativity reached its zenith in Pietermaritzburg where we installed a golden statue of the man, with two faces. We were inviting people to call him Janus faced, two-faced and they did. Voilà!

Despite all our endeavour and hard work there was something that bothered us. He refused to disappear or appear only when it was comfortable for us to have him make an appearance. He came when women hugged trees, when Dalits refused to eat a carcass or twirled their moustache, when the fishermen spoke of the ethics of fishing, when *adivasis* spoke of the gods that resided in the mountains or of mountains as gods, when farmers walked, when his namesake singer -- the one who fancies printed shirts and has diamantine eyes and smells cowhide when the Mrudangam plays -- sang of Rama and Rahim, when Vaishnava Jana became a Muslim Jana and at times Khristi Jana; he would make his appearance much to our annoyance. He came even when his Sabarmati turned red in 2002 -- although it was rumoured that he was turned out of the house of his *Sahodara* -- a brother born of the same womb -- by the name of Imam Saheb Abdul Qadir Bawazir.

We are justly annoyed and we decided to shoot him again; if we do it often enough we would succeed -- we know that as a nation trained to write and rewrite civil service examinations. We are – in the present continuous – doing so diligently. But we have a new problem on our hands. His old friend, the beareded bard Tagore

(we have a thing about men with breards in this country, which only the beareded psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy can unlock for us)-yes, the one with the flowing robes and silken footwear, declared that the man is a "Mahatma". We got somewhat irritated and told the bard that yes we knew that it was he who had given such fancy ideas to the man. But the bard said to us -- these Bengali types are persistent -- that we had got the meaning wrong. Mahatma is not a great soul; a Mahatma is one who resides in our hearts. It is a case of *I am Thou*. The other is me, me the other and S/He in each one of us. Too much Advaita, but we got the point. S/He is the one who tells us the right from wrong, the just from unjust, light from dark, makes us care, makes us love, he is the one that agitates us despite ourselves. If we must kill him – like *Finito* -- we must kill each one of us. *Hum honge kaamyaab, ek din. Insha'Allah.*

A Stitch between Insights and Obscurity : The Ontology of Contested Failure

Madan Gopal Singh

Words on the Parapet

The parapet wasn't quite inside the house and yet it never felt like a space that stood excluded, othered or even markedly unhoused…

Words had for long travelled through hostile territories, withstood varying shades of plunder, gone recklessly across rivers without even a hazy thought about returning home one day. They were impelled by a drive to overlap, repeat and to never take their own seepages seriously. And words that stayed back kept on changing till the day they met those who had left - like strangers with a past now delectably smudged. It was, as if, their destiny to get staged as gifts, to get plagiarized as harmless or even desirable thefts, to be misinterpreted in an order of renewals, to be continuously surprised by the invisible excess they carried in their seams, to be overwhelmed by pockets of forgetting and remembrance that seemed to fade away gradually but never quite did.

We often saw them approaching our homes from across doubtful horizons. They appeared in seductive haze before acquiring a body. Once arrived, they stayed back like settlers in varying degrees of erasures. They melted, got sacrificially chipped here and there and before one knew became the very grain of myriad lands they carried in their seams but stopped short of calling their own.

We met them in the halfway houses on the outskirts of our habitation – on parapets, culverts, plinths, pavements and very often within the reassuring comfort of the inns where the antechambers belonged to the traders who always worked within the newly coined structures of exchange. Here was a mammoth edifice of structures – of knowledge that was determined to win. Always. With clergy and mandarins of power hiding in their predictable shadows. In mock respect and a bit out of breath.

The foyers were occupied by the mendicant poets and seers whom no one seemed to take seriously except perhaps as unwanted but necessary lures till they unexpectedly emerged as dangerous distractions. The threshold always belonged to the beggars whose discourse was the discourse of cleft tongues and uncontrollable chaos. The mornings belonged predictably to the sanctum sanctorum/s of trade, the evenings often opened on a numinous note before swelling into pagan nights as the poets took us through heady potions of inspired delirium and inexpressible

pathologies. Succeeding often as badges of distended livers and blocked arteries. Only the beggars belonged to a timeless destiny… that no one dared take away from them…

The word of trade was rooted in the symbolic, was spatially contained and socially tied into a functional compact. The word of the poet was cast in an impossible mirror image where the outside was disavowed by a lingering narcissism. It was forever eliding in the twin realm of ecstasy and trauma. Its universe was an unending imaginary. Its margins became dangerously open to either poaching or, voila, infiltration. The word of the beggar was the unspeakable real where the stranded ghosts of unresolved histories often found recluse and were hence excluded… without being exorcised. The patriarchic track that wasn't much concerned about the unhoused ghosts and the son was perpetually perched between a deferred choice. This was an honorable position as long as the disagreeable failures resided in silence across various spaces… Overall it was a universe full of spies and part of the game was to never fall under their gaze…

Stepping out of the room was a mildly liberating experience even if the parapet was a bit of a transit space where one was not meant to overstay. For, there was a lingering fear that an overstay might open up a gaze that could disorient the person sitting there waiting without a reason, lapsing into an addiction of looking at almost nothing of importance for an entire lifetime…

Parapet merely indicated the inside as a perpetual absence. It stood ignored on the edge of a cosmology from which it had been deferred as a necessary outside as something that had at best an undefined purpose. Hence, it could never have been a signpost of success. It stood in its ritualized loneliness eschewing stabilities of formations. It was an opening onto impermanence/s that refused to go away. And yet it somehow stood outside the pale of memory and possibly of time. Like all transits it acted as a potential smithy of hidden exchanges and once in a rare while of implicated glances.

Anā al-Ḥaqq (I am the truth, am I) and the Self-mocking Bard

"If I am the truth, then why don't I see you in this chiasmus," the bard merely whispered the question and moved away mumbling to he/rself on the flyover to nowhere. S/he didn't expect an answer. Or, perhaps, it wasn't even a question…

In a manner of speaking, Mansur's was the original dissonance that found its rhetorical acceptance within Cartesian arrivals. It was now cast beyond tales of willful death and barely formed hagiographies. This was when the parapet of the unrelieved landscape had nearly found its sanctioned chambers. The abyss between jurisprudence and philosophy opened up like a desirable mirage. Many an elision

remained unacknowledged, though. There was an adamant refusal to recognize the elision of a cloistered Héloïse in he/r largely epistolary existence. There can be a narrative about love which is woven almost entirely within a conversation about words – a libidinal reaching out between Héloïse and her Abélard… The case of the slave-poet of Basra who quietly and perhaps innocently looked away from the structures of prudent causality in he/r prayers became even more of a casual méconnaissance… till it got restored only within the registers of wrong but necessary forgetfulness… But Rabia keeps returning…

So, here were two words that had kept hopping away every time the bard tried to eavesdrop. How else would a discourse on failures begin except through two words in varying modes of conversational pleasure beyond symbolic censorship? It was a conversation in sound that mocked the pragmatic interiority of certitude. Did it willfully eschew the production of meaning to stay a while longer within its sensuous grain? An act, as it were, of viscerality? Between the single-image memory of success – an unwavering focus, as it were - and the multiply dispersed failure, there existed a veil of words that could have threatened to go out of control were they to let out their inchoate secrets. Theirs was a bit of playful ellipsis like a performance that wasn't quite ready yet! But then this remains a tangential guess.

There were just two of them from a distant language that had travelled and acquired the lure of as yet a mild seduction. The bard felt the rebel waking up in a lazy rustle. Once in a while one loves words for the sheer aura of sounds they carry like an overripe fruit. Here they were sitting together as birds would in euphonous whispers. For a moment s/he imagined the twin sounds building up as a phonic affirmation of a desire to say 'no' in affirmation of a life that defied death. The singularity of 'anā' was barely able to contain the movement that it unleashed through hyphenated conjunction to a 'right', to existence, to truth, to sentences that had no chance of succeeding, to the lure of failure…

The bard he/rself was a bit of intended superfluity in which truth found its seductive annulment. Performing on stage, s/he had often felt intrigued beginning with meem and recalling Mansur calling out in lingering breath a wave of selfhood that was distant and aloof. 'I am' would keep on turning around in searing irony till the time to fly and part company had driven decisively close in a moment of 'truthful' unity. Life was after all such an untenable paradox. This was perhaps the seventh caesura in Shakespeare's world conceived as a stage. The performative space was, despite all its mise-en-scenic energy of a near carnival, a terribly lonesome proposition.

The words kept he/r in volatile isolation refusing to bring any relief to an existence so inquisitively ensnared. S/he would have liked to look at the insolence of words as an endearing game that children play sitting on benign parapets under the

unreasonably loving gaze of parents. They would play without a visible syntax and move a little away like birds just as the long arms of wisdom sneaked in. These two words were not exactly engaged in a conference of birds. They didn't seem weighed down by an express need to fly across the proverbial seven valleys during times of forced incarcerations. Nor, for that matter were they in any hurry to get back to the nests that had ceased to exist long ago. Their 'I am' seemed to have eschewed plurality even if they existed in a state of erotic elision - basking in the sunshine of their own inadequacy and the ephemera of love. Theirs was a duologue of silence - one word next to another. Just that. Their self-exclusion indicated now a code of civility, now a fear of undesired nearness and often just a joyous apprehension of the unknown. Here were words meeting without being weighed down by the absence of utterance. It felt like a dialogue without the lingering aroma of warmth that seemed to defy in sheer desperation the image of time. They seemed to exist happily in an acceptance of incompletions. Such incompletions would leave he/r deeply moved at times.

He had also known words almost aimlessly perched at the threshold of grand arrivals. He often found them standing before doors of deadly wisdom of Yama like a reluctant Nachiketa who seemed to wither in shame under the gaze of passers-bye. He would think of them standing in inchoate defiance or, perhaps, in utter indifference outside the high gates of blue-throated knowledge not wishing to go in to ask what he had painfully nurtured as the ultimate oneiric riddles. This was a moment of willful failure where the words were beginning to malinger not being able to sustain a visible interest in what might have appeared to them as false continuities. The idea of giving up on accursed knowledge was still unborn. It was beginning to be trifle too late to abort. The pragmatic domain of meaning making was intact like the pillars that simultaneously of mocked and supported the empire of the timeless. The words had to deal with their own transience and melting histories. They were beginning to behave like mendicants whose being had become simultaneously porous and unavailable. They carried a somnolent excess of elements inside. They stood defiantly against the sanctioned edifice of meanings looking instead at the playful impermanence of the sensuous – the very life of the wind that carried invisible moisture, the inner sound that returned from auratic fields outside, a self that was no longer one's own on the mystical pad of living. Words as uncertain traces, as fading memories of things impossible to recover…

CONTRIBUTORS

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Mithu Sen works in a variety of media to explore and subvert hierarchical codes and rules, with particular reference to sexuality, language, the value of art and objects, and experiences of marginalization. *(Un)poetry* is a continuing project that speculates on possibilities of an unstable, unformed, and hybrid language –– overturning the poetic structure. Her practice incorporates painting, poetry, social media, instructional exchanges and performance to demonstrate how language and social conventions can restrict our capacity of expression. She has exhibited and performed widely at prestigious museums, institutions, galleries and biennales across the globe. Sen received the Skoda Award for Best Indian Contemporary Art in 2010, and the Prudential Eye Award for Contemporary Asian Art in 2015.

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Devina Dutt has been a business and arts journalist. She began working in Kolkata with Sunday magazine before shifting to Mumbai in the early 90s. She worked as a business and development writer at Business India before setting up a specialised communications consultancy while continuing to write on theatre, literature and the performing arts for national publications. She co-founded First Edition Arts (FEA) in 2014.

Pepe Gomes has been a musician and Western music reviewer for The Telegraph in Kolkata. After shifting to Mumbai in the early 90s he has worked in advertising as a filmmaker and music composer. As co-founder of First Edition Arts he is the man behind the concert films that are shared on the First Edition Arts you tube channel. FEA has organised Hindustani and Carnatic concerts in Mumbai, Pune, Kolhapur, Chennai, Kolkata, Kochi and Bangalore.

Rani Neutill was a professor of ethnic American and postcolonial literature at Harvard, Yale, and Johns Hopkins University. She currently teaches classes in memoir at GrubStreet in Boston and creative writing and literature at Emerson College. Her work has appeared in *Salon*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Catapult*, *Hobart*, *Redivider*, *Longreads*, *The Rumpus, ELLE. com, Refinery29, Redivider,* amongst other places and has work forthcoming in *Al Jazeera English.* She has been nominated for two Pushcarts for her work in *Redivider and Longreads*. She is a 2017 Pauline Scheer Fellow and graduate of the Memoir Incubator at Grub Street in Boston. Rani is currently working on a transnational memoir titled *do you love me?,* a story about fractured identity and her relationship with her mentally ill Bengali imigrant mother. She is represented by Erin Harris at Folio Literary Management.

Parthiv *Shah* is a photographer, film maker and a graphic designer. He has made several documentary films, curated exhibitions and has several photo-books to his credit. An alumnus of the National Institute of Design, India, he was invited as visiting scholar at the SOAS, London University and at the University of California, Davis. Growing up in a family of artists and through his own professional training, he brings an interesting intersection of art, photography and design to his work. He has been awarded a senior fellowship in Photography by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Charles Wallace Fellowship, UK and Fulbright Lectureship award to teach photography at the UCLA, USA. He is the Founder-Director of Centre for Media and Alternative Communication (CMAC).

Dr. Umar Khalid was a student of history and completed his PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University. His PhD is *Contesting claims and contingencies of the rule on adivasis of Jharkhand* wherein he deals with the complex interplay between the state, community and land relations in colonial Chotanagpur. He is a democratic rights activist and a political commentator advocating for a more egalitarian and socially just tomorrow.

Dr. Banojyotsna Lahiri has done her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University. The title of her thesis was "Struggle over Forests: State, Adivasis and Political Economy in Jharkhand". She has taught sociology in Ambedkar University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Lady Shri Ram College and IP College for Women, DU. She is currently Senior Researcher in Center For Equity Studies, New Delhi.

Dr. Anirban Bhattacharya currently heads the research team at the Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi. He was a student of history at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. His PhD is on the history of plantation labour in the Duars exploring the contours of class and community consciousness. As a researcher, activist and writer, he concerns himself with issues of political justice, democratic rights and equality.

Astad Deboo is a dancer, choreographer, and pioneer of contemporary dance, has been in the profession for the last 51 years. He is known for his work with the Hearing Impaired community, for the last three decades, with the Traditional Performing Arts of Manipur for over two decades.

Kavita Krishnan is a CPIML Politburo member, Secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association, and the author of *Fearless Freedom.*

Samit Das specializes in painting, photography, interactive artworks, and artist's books creating multi-sensory environments through art and architectural installations.He has a broad interest in archiving and documentation and connecting past and present through artistic interventions. His work appears as a conceptual collage with a broad vision.

Manu V. Devadevan teaches History at the Indian Institute of Technology, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. He is author of "A Prehistory of Hinduism" and "The 'Early Medieval' Origins of India".

Aranyani Bhargava is a Bharatanatyam dancer and founder and Artistic Director of Vyuti Dance Company, an ensemble that does exploratory work within the Bharatanatyam framework. She also researches and writes on dance, after having written her Master's thesis on the multiple modernities in Bharatanatyam at the University of Oxford.

Maya Joshi Teaches literatures in English and Critical Theory at Lady Shri Ram College. Her PhD explored autobiographical narratives that highlight issues of religious and cultural identity East and West, against the backdrop of India's anti-colonial struggles. Over the years, she has researched and published on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, aspects of Buddhist history, philosophy, and sociology, and has for several years been focusing on translating and unpacking Rahul Sankrityayan's remarkable and diverse oeuvre. She is currently working on a comprehensive intellectual biography of Sankrityayan, a project for which she was awarded the Fulbright-Nehru Post-doctoral Scholar Award.

Arshia Sattar has a PhD from the Department of South Indian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. Her work on the epics and story traditions of the Indian subcontinent focuses on the Valmiki Ramayana.

Tridip Suhrud is a Professor and the Provost at CEPT University, and the Director of CEPT Archives Ahmedabad Previously the Director & Chief Editor of Sabarmati Ashram Preservation and Memorial Trust, he was also responsible for setting up the Gandhi Archives. He has worked extensively on the writings and idea of Gandhi, and translated multiple texts between Gujarati and English, for which he has also received the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Madan Gopal Singh is a reluctant and untrained singer-composer, lyricist, translator, and script writer.

Brinda Bose | Nauman Naqvi | Manash “Firaq” Bhattacharjee | Prasanta Chakravarty | Vivek Narayanan | Bhuchung D. Sonam | Jane Da Mosto | Ashish Kothari | K. Satchidanandan | Mithu Sen | Nilanjan Bandhyopadhyay | Devina Dutt and Pepe Gomes | Rani Neutill | Parthiv Shah | Umar Khalid, Banojyotsna Lahiri, Anirban Bhattacharya | Astad Deboo | Kavita Krishnan | Samit Das | Manu Devadevan | Aranyani Bhargav | Maya Joshi | Arshia Sattar | Tridip Suhrud | Madan Gopal Singh | Sumana Roy

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