culture matters
Guftugu
ISSUE #1
OCTOBER 2015
Contributors

About Us

Culture matters. And it *has* to matter in India, with its diverse languages, dialects, regions and communities; its rich range of voices from the mainstream and the peripheries.

This was the starting point for *Guftugu* (www.guftugu.in), a quarterly e-journal of poetry, prose, conversations, images and videos which the Indian Writers' Forum runs as one of its programmes. The aim of the journal is to publish, with universal access online, the best works by Indian cultural practitioners in a place where they need not fear intimidation or irrational censorship, or be excluded by the profit demands of the marketplace. Such an inclusive platform sparks lively dialogue on literary and artistic issues that demand discussion and debate.

The guiding spirit of the journal is that culture must have many narratives from many different voices – from the established to the marginal, from the conventional to the deeply experimental.

To sum up our vision:

Whatever our language, genre or medium, we will freely use our imagination to produce what we see as meaningful for our times. We insist on our freedom to speak and debate without hindrance, both to each other and to our readers and audience. Together, but in different voices, we will interpret and reinterpret the past, our common legacy of contesting narratives; and debate on the present through our creative work.

Our Team

Editors

K. Satchidanandan
Mala Dayal
Githa Hariharan

Associate Editor
Souradeep Roy

Editorial support
Parboni Bose
Nishad Bailey

Site
Shweta Jain

Design, art and layout
Chandan Gorana
Shoili Kanungo

Legal Consultant
Rishab Bailey

Contributing Editors
Antara Dev Sen
Gulammohammed Sheikh
N.S. Madhavan
Orijit Sen
Shohini Ghosh
Shubha Mudgal
T.P. Sabitha

Contributions: Guftugu welcomes contributions from writers, academics, artists, cartoonists, film makers, performing artists and scientists. Please email us at guftuguejournal@gmail.com with your ideas and / or work, and we will get back to you.

Contents

From the Editors **5**
K. Sachidanandan: Pardon **7**
Gulammohammed Sheikh: Man II **10**
Perumal Murugan: The Narrow Room **11**
Unny: Scrawl **13**
Githa Hariharan in Conversation with T.M. Krishna **14**
Orijit Sen: Sotto Voce **21**
Malayalam Fiction Special: M. Mukundan, N.S. Madhavan and Anand **22**
Vivek Narayanan: Chitra Kuta **41**
Githa Hariharan-- Mishtakes 2015: Revisiting India with Manto **45**
Robin S. Ngangom: A Civilized Monologue **56**
Shashi Deshpande: The Writer as Activist **59**
Pinky: Pinky's Bed **65**
T.P. Sabhitha: Stones **66**
S. Vijayaraghavan: Between Two Edges **68**
Zai Whitakar: Roots **70**
Contributors **73**
Terms and Conditions **75**
Copyright **78**

From the Editors

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.

Bertolt Brecht reminds us that we can sing in the bad times too; we can sing about the bad times. This Brechtian paradox is apt for the literatures and arts of the present time in India.

If singing and dancing, poetry and prose, film and painting have all been possible even in the most brutal times history has witnessed, we can believe our situation today too cannot subdue what we can do with artistic practice of all sorts, as well as education. Every day we see new evidence of authoritarianism in India – the sort of tyranny that impinges on our cultural work, and on those who wish to partake of what we imagine for them. Even the day-to-day cultural practices by the wide range of people who make up India are vulnerable to the aggression of the "cultural police" in different guises. These policemen want to tell us all what to eat, wear, read, speak, pray, think. They want to tell us how to live.

The writer is more important in times of siege, said the South African writer Andre Brink. He knew what he was talking about; he was writing about apartheid South Africa. We know how cultural spaces are shrinking in India. And we believe that writers – and any practitioner and partaker of culture – are more important in the times we are living through. Writers, artists and educators may not be soldiers; but they too have weapons, weapons that are often more effective.

We believe this. We believe in the transformative power of the word, the image and the class room. This is why we have set up the Indian Writers' Forum for all of us; and launched the Indian Cultural Forum site as well as Guftugu, an e-journal of literature and art.

When setting up the Indian Writers' Forum, we had said: "As committed readers and writers, we see ourselves as part of a rich and plural literary heritage. In our own times, our dream is to build on this heritage for a more just, egalitarian and humane society. We aspire to perceive, understand and celebrate difference even while breaking down the barriers created by caste, class, religion, race and language. But we are painfully aware of the ways in which our literary culture has been challenged in recent times. It is critical, at the present juncture, to resist the range of threats faced by our culture of free expression, exchange, dialogue and debate. It is crucial that we fight for ourselves as readers and writers, and for all the readers and writers in our country. Whatever language and genre we write in, we insist on our right to freely use our imagination to write what we perceive as meaningful for our times and to speak and debate without hindrance, both to each other and to our readers. This includes our right to interpret and reinterpret the past, and our common legacy of contesting narratives…"

Every word of this applies to Guftugu – a journal that will feature counter-cultural expressions in poetry, prose and images. Guftugu aims to reflect and critique present-day aggression against culture; to articulate creative resistance against the degeneration of democratic values and institutions; and to achieve this by freely doing what we do best: writing, painting, imagining, speculating and debating.

The Indian Writers' Forum and Guftugu are happy that so many writers, scholars and cultural practitioners have expressed solidarity with our venture. One of our first supporters,

U.R. Ananthamurthy, is no longer with us. But we are confident that more writers, thinkers and readers from every Indian language and region, and more artists from every medium, will join us to make what

the Malayalam poet Vyloppilly called “a golden opposition”.

K.Satchidanandan
Githa Hariharan

October 2015

K. Satchidanandan

Pardon

This poem is dedicated to the Tamil writer Perumal Murugan who was forced into silence by anti-social communal outfits.

Pardon me
for what I have written,
for what I could not write,
for what I am likely to write
and for what I may never write.

Pardon me for the trees' flowering,
for the flowers' fruiting,
for having hoarded so much of
gold and water and spring
inside the earth.

Pardon me for the waning moon,
for the setting sun,
for the movement of the living,
for the stillness of the non-living.

Pardon me for filling the earth
with so much colour,
the blood with so much red,
the leaf with forest,
the rain with sky,
the sand with star
and my ink with dreams.

Pardon me for filling words
with so much meaning,
dates with so much history;
for having hidden today inside yesterday
and tomorrow inside today;
for creating the Creator
who fills gestures with dance
and nature with symbols.

Pardon me for the earthquake
and the tempest,
the wild fire and the raging sea.

The Earth is a damaged machine.
I am not someone who can repair it.
I am a king without a country,[1]
A god without a weapon,[2]
a life without a tongue.

Invent a god
Who doesn't ask for your head.
Invent the fearless man.

Invent
language,
invent
the alphabet.

They

You are writing about love
and the vast emptiness that
precedes it.
They seize your paper
and tear your poem into pieces
before it is born, and say:
"This is treason; you have
lost your right to live."

You are meditating over colours
surprised by the strange forms
they assume on your canvas.
They burn your
incomplete painting and
pronounce their judgment:
"This is heresy; you must
leave this country."

You are narrating
the tales of Buddha's kindness
to the children around you.
They crush your tender voice,
scare the kids with open knives
and shout at them:
"This guy is mad;
stone him to death."

You are humming
a song of love and hope in tune with
the breeze, the brook and the bird.
They point their tridents
at your singing tongue, and scream:
"You are conspiring with nature
against man; yours is the destiny
of the traitor."

You are praying for peace
silently to your formless god, alone,
or with your friends,
raising your fists for justice.

They come with swastikas
and flags of different hues, and ask:
“Which is your god? Your
religion, your country, your language?”

No, no kisses.
No prayers to other gods.
No truth-telling. Not a word
on non-violence. No talk about
the great light beyond
races and religions.
They put embers in your mouth,
gouge your eyes out.

They won’t be strangers:
your friends or neighbours,
your own brother or beloved,
or , who knows,
maybe you will find yourself among them.

Click here to read originals in Malayalam http://guftugu.in/k-satchidanandan/

Notes:
1. In the original ‘Perumal without a country’. ‘Perumal’ means ‘the Big Man’, the King.
2. In the original ‘Murugan without a vel’. Murugan is Lord Subrahmanya who travels on a peacock and has a ‘vel’- a kind of spear- for his weapon. The two words together make the name of the writer.

© Poems and translations, K. Satchidanandan

Gulammohammed Sheikh

Man II

© Gulammohammed Sheikh

Perumal Murugan

The Narrow Room

The one confined in the narrow room
does not know that the room is narrow.

There is light there, and darkness too.
There is the earth as well as the sky.

It is his great fortune that
he does not know it is
a narrow room.

Kali

Here is a woman gazing into the mirror
wearing a garland of intestines
after disembowelling herself:
Kali.

Masters

Five dogs were following them.
A little fear was enough
to guide them in the right direction.
Each dog was different
in breed, complexion and name.
But they all used
the same language.

Fire

So playful it is, this fire.
It suddenly emerges from its hiding place
and races toward me.
My body and mind
are now its hide-outs.
At first it preferred my body.
Now it's blazing its way into my mind.
It's spreading everywhere, this fire.

Impossible

Impossible
to share anything with anyone;
Impossible
to befriend anyone forever;
Impossible
to tolerate anyone saying anything;
Impossible
to completely pardon anyone;
Impossible
to grow anything from seed.
Better to wander alone, all alone.
All the better to grieve alone, all alone.

Click here to read the Tamil originals.
http://guftugu.in/%E0%AE%AA%E0%AF%86%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%81%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B3%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%81%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%81%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%A9%E0%AF%8D/

© Poems, Perumal Murugan; © translations, K. Satchidanandan

Unny

Scrawl

© E. P. Unny

Githa Hariharan in Conversation with T.M. Krishna

Githa Hariharan interviews T.M. Krishna on the nature of tradition, the classical, exclusions in music practice and more.

Photo by Prakash Bala

T.M. Krishna, an innovative vocalist in the Karnatik tradition, is also an articulate examiner of cultural history. His book, A Southern Music, (2013), has been highly acclaimed as the first of its kind, combining actual music practice, technique, history and polemics.

Githa Hariharan (GH): I want to ask you about the apparent conflation of "traditional" and "classical". Would you say there is an illusion that current practice has a continuous link with "antiquity"? And that chunks of the "traditional" have actually been shed in the shift from traditional music and dance communities to a nationalistic Indian classical music?

T.M. Krishna (TMK): There is the image of Karnatik music, and there is the truth of Karnatik music. The image of Karnatik music practice traces its origins back over several centuries with a largely unchanged core character. Almost all theoretical and philosophical narratives of this musical form end at the doorstep of Bharata's *Natya Shastra* (between 2nd centuries BC and AD), or pushing back to the Vedas themselves. Using a short ruler and a blunt pencil, we have drawn a single line from the ancient era to the 20th century. As with the theory of Hindu religion and philosophy, unconnected ancient musical traditions, counter-movements and deviations have all been fed into this linearisation, giving Karnatik music a sense of musical and philosophical "hoariness", an antiquity.

But if we were to really look at the reality of its musical history through the treatises of the past, and what we know of its practice, it is quite clear that what we call Karnatik music today is a result of complex interactions between people of different regions and different musical lineages over the last 500 years. In its aesthetic evolution, what directly and incontestably connects the Karnatik with the music in the *Natya Shastra*, *Silappadikaram* (2nd century AD), *Brhaddeshi* (9th century) or the *Sangita Ratnakara* (12th century) is not much. Ideas embedded in theory and practices of periods much before the 16th century may have influenced some of the foundational principles of this melodic form. But

beyond that, there is very little that connects Karnatik music as we know it today with the ancient world. Karnatik music is indeed a modern idea with its present form being only about 300 years old.

To come to its "communities". Karnatik music has been practiced, presented and patronised by the elite of South Indian society. What is "the elite"? Basically, the "select", often self-selected, in positions of authority and influence. The communities that practiced Karnatik music included the isai vellalars, the devadasis and brahmins. Isai vellalars and devadasis were part of the same musical community. Isai vellalars came in as vocalists, instrumentalists (nagasvara and tavil being a specialty), tutors of dance, and conductors of dance performances. Devadasis were dancers (performing sadir, which in the 20th century was transformed into Bharatanatyam), and musicians. The brahmins were involved in singing, instrumental music, composing, and the construction of Karnatik musicology. The brahmins, along with the royalty, used their positions of influence in temples and otherwise, to patronise and become the "blessers" of the form.

"The Tanjore Nautch Party", Courtesy http://ethnomusicologie.revues.org/276

The revolving wheel of Karnatik music as we know it today was given another vigorous "turn" – an increasingly important one – by the upper-class Hindu nationalist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their spirit transformed Karnatik music into a quasi-religious, bhakti-based presentation. Kirtana (a form of composition) became the anchor-sheet of the music, and its lyrical meaning became the basis for bhava in the music. The lyrical import being religious, philosophical and ritualistic, Karnatik music became a representation of brahmanical Vedic culture with "purity and sanctity" as a central notion. The influence of the brahmanical harikatha tradition, a musical storytelling of mythological stories that evolved in the Tanjore district during the Maratha period, cannot be underestimated in the evolution of 20th century Karnatik music. Many Karnatik musicians were also exponents of the harikatha tradition. So there is a cross-pollination of ideas in the content, presentation and stylisation of Karnatik music. The concert structure and presentation were the result of the structuring zeal of the urban brahmin male governed by these principles, with Madras becoming the hub.

It is around the same period that the devadasis lost their hold over the dance and music world with the "anti-nautch" legislation. The last generation of influential devadasi artists emerged in the early 20th century. Afterwards, things changed so much that some of these devadasis even shed their own identity to become brahmin women in the eyes of the Karnatik music fraternity. Musically, an independent feminine musical aesthetic was lost with the disappearance of the devadasis from the Karnatik cosmos.

The nagasvara vidvans who possessed a parallel instrumental narrative to Karnatik music were also slowly sidelined. They did try to conform to the kirtana-based musical presentation finalised by the early 20th century brahmin practitioners. But they were unable to establish themselves like their brahmin counterparts, who were vocalists or instrumentalists playing the flute or violin. The caste discrimination faced by nagasvara vidvans, including widely acknowledged maestros such as T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, is part of Karnatik lore. Today the nagasvara is only found in temples or at marriage functions. There were isai vellalars who were violinists and mrdangists, and a few prominent vocalists. But they too faced distinct handicaps at social levels. Though the stature of their musicality had to be recognised, appreciation of their work did not mean they were accepted as "one of us". Here again, the last generation of isai vellalar vocalists, violinists and mrdangists emerged in the 1940s. A lot of musical ideas were appropriated from the isai vellalars and the devadasis, but they were not made intrinsic to the 20th century "purified" Karnatik.

Tavil vidwan Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Courtesy
http://srutimag.blogspot.in/2013_10_01_archive.html

With the isai vellalar and the devadasis more or less gone, the music came under the control of the brahmin community. Needless to say, this means the Brahmin males, with their own very particular sense of what was "proper", what was "pure", what was to go onstage, and what was to be kept away from it, with women being the special subject of taboos. Brahmin women themselves had to struggle against their "own men" for their right to be public performers. Only devadasis were meant "for the stage", and "for the pleasure of others". This social norm brings back the idea of devadasi impurity. To receive acceptance, talented brahmin women had to strictly follow the principles and restrictions laid out by the male Brahmins who designed 20th century musical practice.

GH: For those who don't know much about "modern" Karnatik music, could you give us a brief background of the variety of exclusions in music practice on the basis of caste, gender and community? How do these exclusions actually work on the ground?

TMK: Today the Karnatik music world resembles a gated brahmin enclave. This includes practitioners, connoisseurs and impresarios. Most of the minority non-brahmin audiences come from the Tamil diaspora – from Jaffna and some (non-brahmin) communities from Kerala. Non-brahmin musicians today are mostly isai vellalars who continue in the nagasvara and tavil tradition. Very few come from other caste groups. A view contrary to this would lose no time mentioning names that "disprove" this. But those names are, essentially, the exceptions that not only prove, but shout out the rule.

The reason for this is plain. The performance and the articulation of Karnatik music is deeply entrenched in the brahminical ideas of religious practice. This is an intimidating cultural roadblock for most other caste groups. This subliminal undertone has very little to do with the music. It is more a social identity marker. But this construction is like an iron covering. It makes it very difficult for those not part of the brahminical environment to break through. The music is held captive to this Brahminism. It is also true that we wear this identity on our sleeves. Visit any of the Tyagarajaaradhana concerts, and you will see the overt manifestation of this ritualism embedded in the musical environment. It is almost as if you need to be anointed into this religiosity if you want to understand the music.

The places where the concerts take place – "sabhas" – are geographically public spaces, but culturally private conclaves. Most members of the inner circle don't seem to understand that sabhas may have an "All are welcome" board outside, but this does not mean that it is a welcoming public space. I can only imagine what would happen if suddenly, one day at a concert, most seats were occupied by people of a Chennai slum. This would certainly make every person, including the musicians, extremely uncomfortable. Therefore this "All are welcome" actually addresses the "All" of a certain cultural community and we do not want "All and sundry" to come in. Being welcoming is very different from saying we don't stop anyone!

Today there are very few instrumentalists or vocalists who are not brahmin. And even those have not really made it to the top rung of the musical ladder. Saxophone Kadri Gopalnath and the late Mandolin U. Srinivas are two musicians from outside the brahmin fold who broke the "B" barrier. Interestingly, both of them took up western instruments – the electric mandolin and saxophone. I wonder whether the elitism of their "western instruments" somehow helped them break through the casteism in the Karnatik substratum.

Without doubt, we brahmin practitioners have a different attitude towards the "others". This separation is seen in the way musicians bond and share beyond the stage. It is in these spaces one can clearly see groups forming with the non-brahmin musicians (usually isai vellalars) almost always in a different group from their brahmin colleagues. It is also true that the few people of other castes, whether they are practitioners or listeners, have had to internalize the brahminical texture of Hinduism which we believe gives Karnatik music depth and direction.

We can clearly see this in the way Tamil Nadu's music colleges stay apart from the general Karnatik music scene. These music colleges are where the maximum number of non-brahmin students study Karnatik music, yet few of them ever make it to the mainstream circuit. In fact, there is very little connection between us the "control group" and those students. They remain in the periphery, and most of them disappear.

We, as the control group, have done little to make this music more accessible. Nor have we consciously considered accepting students from other communities. I do believe that such affirmative action is essential. Very importantly, we should look at communities beyond even the traditionally musical isai

vellalars so that this music may touch a larger cross-section of society. The traditional notion that the "classical" (a purely sociologically created term), can only be appreciated by a certain class of people, needs to be challenged.

Digging this music deeper into the Hindu belief system has also made it very difficult for people of other religions to come into the system. A few traditional Muslim musical families that have produced nagasvara vidvans have made brahminical religious practices a part of their lives. This only strengthens the religious rigidity that informs the music. I wonder whether a devout Muslim who rejects the Hindu would be acceptable to us.

In the early 20th century, some attempts were made by Christian scholars such as Abraham Pandithar and H.A. Popley to create Karnatik kirtanas with Christian themes, but these compositions are not even known to the mainstream Karnatik community. K.J. Yesudas is frequently cited as an example of the openness of the Karnatik world. But the "real" Karnatik fan does not accept Yesudas as a serious musician. In fact, if you were to attend his concerts, you would find that the members of the audience are distinctly different from the people you would find at the concerts of many accepted Karnatik musicians.

The gender bias in Karnatik music is blatant and obvious. Many senior musicians who accompany vocalists on the violin or mrdangam, including many leading lights, have refused and continue to refuse to "accompany" women musicians. Accompanying women singers is acceptable up to the point when leading male vocalists induct these violinists and mrdangists into the "men's club". In fact, many male vocalists have told accompanying male musicians that they should stop accompanying women, or not do it too often, if they want the patronage of the leading men! Organizers too play along with the wishes of the men. The common talk among the male musicians is that in general, women's music is not as tough and rigorous as "men's music". Accompanying musicians claim that the women do not "challenge" them. Other arguments include complaints from accompanists that the high pitch of women's voices makes the strings of the violin and the membranes of their mrdangam taut, so that it is hard to freely express themselves. Of course, this argument flies out of the window because these very same musicians accompany male instrumentalists who tune their instruments to the very same high pitches. The point is that there is a clear disdain for "women's music", and such generalizations are, let us face it, purely sexist. For a woman to receive respect from the men she has to indulge in complicated mathematical or technical musical presentations, traditionally considered the man's domain, too difficult for the "weaker sex"! Another effect of influential musicians only accompanying "the boys" is that young women do not get the professional support of these stars, while the young men of their generation are able to reach the top tier with greater ease. Ironically, even female star lead-musicians prefer to have male accompanists. Like their male counterparts, they are "fine" with female accompanists until they become stars. Once that happens, they prefer male accompanists whom they can control, and display the same machismo their male counterparts flaunt. The officialdom of Karnatik music is also a male bastion, making the environment quite difficult for women in general.

GH: In otherwise well-intentioned attempts to critique "commercialization" of music performance, do these exclusions you are talking about get masked?

TMK: Interestingly, even with the commercialization of the music, these exclusions do not get masked. The main reason is that the aesthetic being commercialised is built on the edifice of discrimination. To be saleable, the "product" has to conform to these standards. The receivers have built their musical receptors based on what musicians have constructed as being the music. From the format of the music, to the way the content is explored, explained, discussed and shared, these sociological exclusions are built in, co-opting all of us knowingly or unknowingly in this practice of discrimination. And don't we all know how well religion and the "spiritual" sell?

GH: You once used a telling metaphor about access to Karnatik music today, its “exclusiveness”. You likened this music world to an island that people in the mainland are cut off from. How is this transforming the development of music practice, and the alleged “Indianness” (as in pluralistic) nature of the “tradition”?

TMK: Though Karnatik music has by and large been an elitist art form, the sense of cultural exclusivity that we practise today has sharpened over the last 100 years or more. We hold, at the core of Karnatik music practice, the philosophical un-questionability of the Vedic tradition. This idea envelops our complete understanding of the form. Once we describe this music in such terms, we make lyrics and their linguistic meanings central to the experience of the music. This makes us overburden musicality with artha-bhava, which, to me, has very little or no space in an art form such as Karnatik music. But this has greatly influenced the way this music is practiced and experienced. Consider the numerous so-called Karnatik music PhDs awarded for religious topics, religious theme based concerts/presentations and esoteric lec-dems proliferating in the Karnatik sphere. From being an abstract exploration of raga, tala and text, the music has become a creative extension of bhakti sangeet! The number of purely bhajan-like pieces in the concert has increased over the last 40 years, with many members of the audience only waiting for that religious or spiritual upliftment. My point is that there is no place for religious or spiritual directionality in this music. In fact, there is no room for any literalism.

Photo by Prakash Bala

There is another trap in this religious-spirituality. We, the practitioners of Karnatik music, believe that we are singing a sacred form of music that rises above everything tactile and temporal. We give ourselves the status of being conduits to the divine. This self-created and self-appointed position allows us to ignore the very real discriminative nature of our musical practice, by saying that “music is beyond all this” or “once ‘in music’ all these separations don’t matter.” We feel we shouldn’t distract ourselves with such externalities. So we forget that the very idea of the internal is the result of these external manipulations.

In all this religious entrapment we have lost the purely abstract musicality – the soul of the music. We are unable to experience language as a creation of sound and its aesthetic interactivity with raga and

tala. Every one of us experiences this beauty, yet we constantly bury it inside a religious/spiritual discourse. And that discourse is almost canonical.

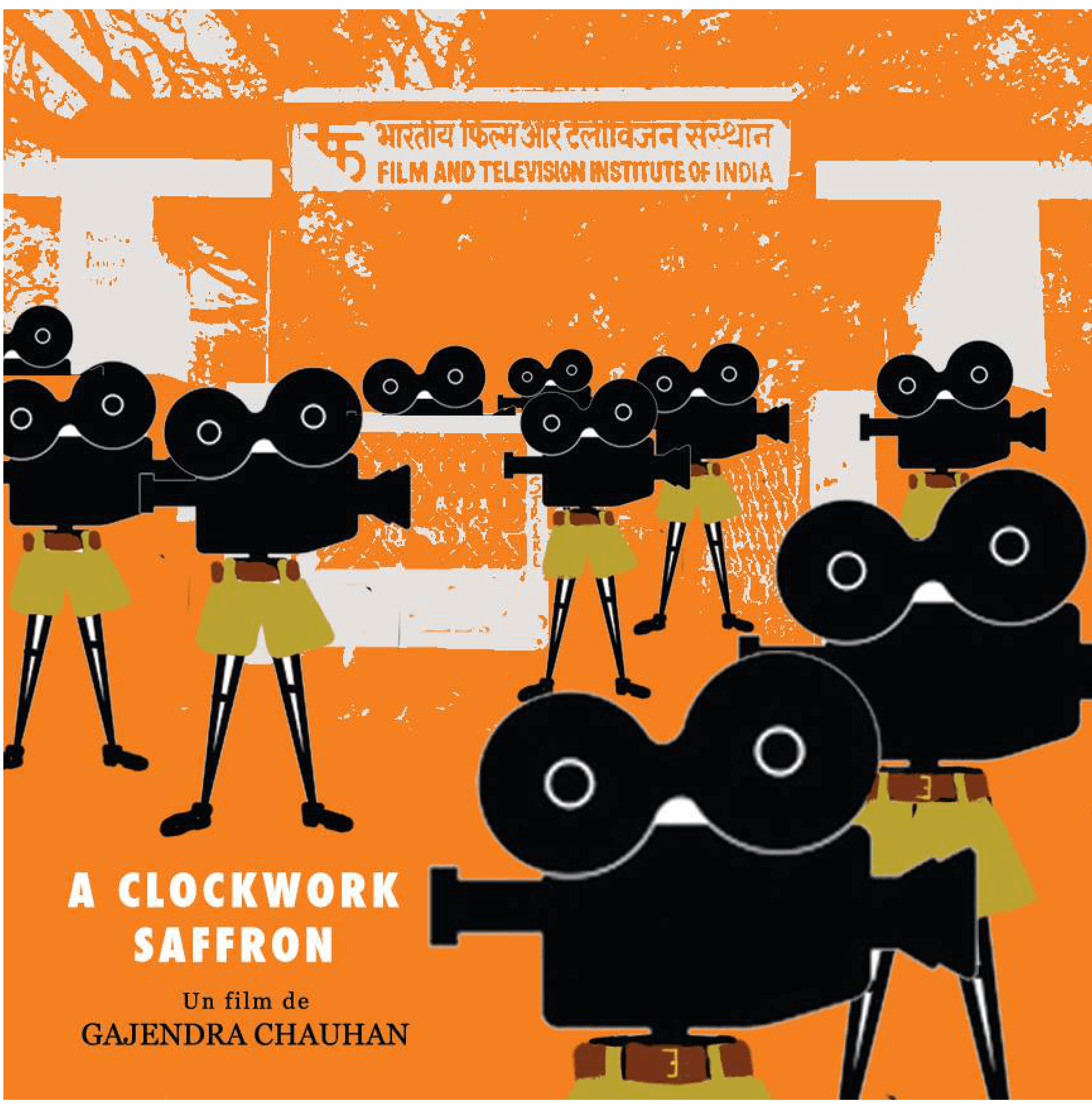
GH: Finally, the question, as always, of modernity. What is the space for the modern in “traditional” music, “classical” music, and, in sum, present-day practice of Karnatik music?

TMK: I have a serious problem with the word “classical” since it really does not describe the art form to which it is attached. All it tells us is that a certain upper class or caste of society practice and patronise this art form. There is a need to either rediscover its meaning, or replace this word with some other expression such as “art music”. The view that the traditional is not modern needs to be corrected. This delusion is the creation of the practitioners and patrons themselves. We proclaim cultural superiority, placing ourselves as caretakers of a certain antiquity. Almost every form that we call traditional is a modern creation. The only exceptions to this statement are probably some purely religious art practices that have, aesthetically, not moved beyond the bounds of their ritualistic function. Every other form is modern, and the modern is recreated in every generation. This discomfort with the word modern that we practitioners of the traditional have, once again, goes back to our obsession with sanctity and purity. By constantly placing – or shall I say “reposing” – the art in an enshrined past, we imply that it is distanced from the vulgarities of modern times, conveniently forgetting that vulgarities have always existed, irrespective of the era.

© Guftugu, 2015

Orijit Sen

Sotto Voce



© Orijit Sen

Malayalam Fiction Special

കഥ

M. Mukundan
N. S. Madhavan
Anand

M. Mukundan

Photo

Once, two children wanted to have themselves photographed. Their tender minds had wanted this for quite some time. This desire had been induced in them by the photos appearing in newspapers with the caption “Wedding Today.” When her mother bawled at her from the kitchen as she prepared to go to school in the morning, she would run to the front verandah now and then, and check whether the newspaper had come. If her father failed to get the newspaper along with his cup of morning tea, he wouldn’t be able to go have a wash or even a shave. On days when a bandh was declared, he would pace about restlessly, unable to take a look at the newspaper. Though not very rich, he subscribed to

many newspapers and weeklies, and he read them all. She knew in which publications "Wedding Today" appeared and when. She had even cut out some pictures slyly and pasted them inside her bound notebook.

"Which of these photos do you like?" On her way to school, she opened her bound notebook and showed them to him. His eyes roved over the newly pasted photos.

"This."

He touched one.

Bridegroom: Satish K. Nambiar; S/o Karunakaran Nambiar; Poykayil House, Kadinjumoolam, Neeleshwaram. Bride: K. R. Swapna, D/o K. R. Govindan Nambiar; Theravath House, Koyampuram, Neeleshwaram.

"I like this photo too. It'd have been better without the man's moustache. Why do people sport big moustaches like this?"

"Moustaches suit some people very well."

"Will you too have one when you grow up?"

"Why not?"

Noticing a group of children walking up to them, she closed the bound notebook. They were near the school. The road was full of school children. The Government Higher Secondary School in which she and he studied was not far from St. Antony's Public School. The children with maroon ties and matching skirts or trousers were from St. Antony's.

"They are all so puffed up, those children," she said.

"Don't they have their own school bus? That's why," he said.

"Good thing they keep their boasting to themselves," she said.

They had reached the school. Its compound walls, the tops of which were spiked with glass shards, were covered with film bills and scrawled slogans. Someone had tried to scrape away the sign "Stick No Bills" written in lime. The latch of the gate must have fallen off; it had been removed from its hinges, and now stood leaning against the wall inside the compound. A crow perched atop the flag staff on which the headmaster would hoist the National Flag on Republic Day. When the crow slipped and lost its balance, it flapped its wings and flew up, hovered, and alighted on top of the flag staff once again. The children were playing, dashing about in the compound. Some boys avoided the urinal and pissed against the walls from the outside.

"Let me just take a look."

"What?"

"The bound notebook."

"Oh, no. The children will see."

"No."

She looked all around her anxiously, and slipped the bound notebook over to him. He quickly hid it in his satchel.

"You must return it during the Second Period."

"Yes, I will."

"Don't show it to anyone."

"No."

She ran to the cluster of classmates standing around in the compound. Though he knew that the bell may ring any time, he went into the urinal. There he opened the bound notebook. There were a lot of photos of newlyweds. Among the pictures she had pasted the day before, the one he liked best was that of Satish and Swapna. He looked at that photo till the bell rang. He could hear the noise of the boys and the splashing of urine against the walls outside. When the bell rang, he put the bound notebook back into the satchel and came out. Yelling along with the other boys, he rushed into the classroom.

"We too must have a photo, like that of Satishettan and Swapnedathi," he said as they were returning home after school.

"But aren't we just children?" she asked him.

"What's wrong with children getting photographed?"

"I feel shy."

Her face flushed. Moving away from the other children, they walked home together, chatting about the day. His home is past hers, a five minute walk from the post office.

"Okay," she said. "Let's do it tomorrow."

"Do you have money?"

"What's the money for?"

"Will anyone take photos for free?"

They walked on together, silent. He didn't dare ask his mother or father for money. He had heard his father telling his mother when the milkman asked him for money: "Why do we need so much milk? I have to pay the insurance premium, the electricity bill and all kinds of things. I can't bear it any longer. I'll run away somewhere."

They reached her house.

"Ask your father for money. Isn't he very rich? Doesn't he go to office on a scooter?"

She went past the fence, the satchel heavy on her back. The fence was covered with tiny white flowers blossoming in unison. Though she liked the flowers, she didn't stop near the fence. He had told her that there was a green snake nearby that could fly toward anyone and bite them.

She didn't have the courage to ask her father or mother for money either. If she asked them they would ask her a hundred things. But she had a piggy bank. When he bought the piggy bank, her father had told her that she could open it when it was full and buy whatever she liked. But no matter how many coins she put in, it never filled up. One day she solved this mystery. Her mother was taking out coins from the piggy bank with the pliant midrib of a coconut-leaf! She saw it happen several times. She decided she would follow her mother's example. She took hold of the piggy bank as she was doing homework. It didn't weigh as much as it should. She shook it to make sure it was not empty. She heard a slight jingle. She used a coconut-leaf-rib and finally managed to extract a few coins from the piggy bank. Then she sneaked the coins into her satchel.

"Did you get the money?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"Fine, let's go in the afternoon and have our photo taken."

"Where do we take our photo?"

“In the studio. Why, you don’t know a thing, even after growing so big.”

“Am I a big girl? I’m only in the third standard.”

She walked by his side, pulling a long face.

He knew that the studio was near Vijaya Talkies. He remembered having gone there once to have a photo taken along with his parents. That photo still hung on a wall in his house. In the photo, he sat on his mother’s lap. He had thrown a tantrum about a photo of him alone, but his mother had silenced him by pinching him hard on his thighs and arms.

They went into the same studio with their school satchels. There was no one else there. A lean sort of person came out from the interior of the studio. His face was like that of a child sporting a fake moustache.

“What do you want, children?” he asked, with a seemingly guileless smile.

“We want a photo taken.”

“Whose?”

“Of both of us.”

He looked at them closely. His smile was bland, and the expression on his face innocent. Looking at his face, the children felt relieved. They were not tense anymore.

“Come.” He took them in. They put their satchels down and went with him.

“Have you got parents’ permission?”

They didn’t say anything.

“I knew it the moment I saw you. Never mind. Don’t be afraid, children,” he said compassionately.

They looked around, perplexed.

“Go to the mirror there and comb your hair. And put a little bit of talcum powder on your faces.”

He adjusted the bulbs fixed on a stand, turning them this way and that. The children combed their hair and stood ready.

“Do you want a full or a half?”

The two of them looked at each other. They didn’t understand his question.

“Why don’t you say something, children?” he persisted. “What type of photo do you want?”

She took out the bound notebook from her satchel and pointed at the photo of Satheeshan and Swapna. The photographer beamed.

The children sat on the stool. The screen behind them was painted with stars and a full moon. He adjusted their faces several times, turning them a little to this side and that, catching hold of their chins and the back of their heads. Then he walked backwards and looked at them through the camera eye. Not satisfied, he once again came near them, lifted their chins and kept their heads upright and steady. He did this several times. The children had no idea that taking a photo would be so troublesome. At last, he told them to keep still and switched on all the lights. Their eyes were blinded for a moment. She couldn’t even open her eyes in that intense light.

“All right. Ready. One, two, three….” Click!

He lifted his head from behind the camera and switched off the lights, one by one. The children realised that the photo had already been taken. They felt relieved.

"Mol, you didn't tell me your name."

"Her name is Sheena and mine is Abhilash," he said.

"Beautiful names."

He stroked their heads with great affection.

"Dear children! You can leave now paying twelve rupees. Come the day after tomorrow about this time and collect the photo."

She untied the knotted kerchief, took out the coins and gave them to him. There were three and a half rupees.

"Where is the rest of the money, children?"

They looked at each other.

"A fine trick! Are you trying to cheat me? I won't give you the photo unless you pay the full amount."

She began to sob. There isn't a paisa in the piggy bank. Where would they get the rest of the money from? Who can they ask?

"Ayyayyo, are you crying, Mol? Don't cry. Just do as I say. You don't have to pay a paisa. I will give you the photo."

Both of them looked at his face eagerly. He laughed like a child.

"Come. Come right in."

He began to set the lights right once again. After adjusting the lights, he looked at them and laughed once again.

"I will not ask for even a single paisa. And you don't have to give any, either. Both of you strip and then stand there."

The children gaped at him.

"Didn't you try to fool me? Didn't you say you didn't have money after having your photo taken? Just you watch, I'll hand you both to the police."

The children stood speechless.

"Shall I call the police?"

"No," he said, afraid. "I'll strip."

He was afraid of just hearing the word "police." He would sometimes see policemen in his dreams and wake up with a start.

"Why are you not taking off your clothes, Mol?"

"I want to go home."

She began to sob again.

"Take off those clothes," he whispered in her ear. "Aren't we just children?"

"I feel ashamed."

The photographer laughed again, a contented laugh, and switched off the bulbs one by one. Only one dim light remained. They could no longer see each other's faces. She moved to where it was darker.

"That won't do," he laughed. "Remove all the clothes."

He went behind the camera and did many things for a long time. He changed the lenses, and switched the lights on and switched them off. The children didn't understand what he was doing. She said again and again, "I want to go home." The camera clicked many times. He finally lifted his head from the camera. His smile shone like lightning in the dim light.

"Now you can go home, children." He switched on the lights one by one. "There's one thing, though… Don't breathe a word to your parents about what happened. If you do …"

They got dressed quickly. With their satchels hanging on their shoulders, they came out like sparrows let out of a cage. All their excitement was gone. They walked home with drooping heads, silent. They didn't see any other school children on the road. They must have all reached home. They walked alone, along a road of grown-ups. Then they saw her mother standing outside the fence, her eyes fixed on them.

"Where were you loafing around?" her mother asked. "You must come home directly from school. I'll break your legs otherwise."

As she went into the house with her heavy satchel, her mother came after her. "Why do you go around with that Abhilash? Don't you have girls as friends?"

She didn't reply. She dumped her satchel on the chair and went into the bedroom. The bed was tidy, all dusted and laid out. The books and papers on the table were also neatly arranged.

"He is a bad man," she said to herself as she changed her clothes. "A really bad one."

She couldn't sleep that night. She usually slept by the window, but tonight she got up and lay down in between her father and mother. The mother mumbled something in her sleep and tried to push her away. When she lay close to her father's cigarette-smelling, rough face, she felt reassured. But still the click-click sound disturbed her sleep. She got up only when her mother shook her awake in the morning.

"He will be run over by a bus, just you watch," she told him when they met.

The photographer was waiting for the children, in a secluded spot beyond the copra mill. He had a bicycle with him. He smiled at them.

"Don't you want to see the photo?" he asked.

Their hearts leapt. He pulled out a photo from the large pocket on his shirt. She snatched it from his hand. The photo made her extremely happy. She had never imagined that her face was so pretty. His face looked serious as usual, as if he was angry with someone. He gave the children two more copies of the photo.

"We need only two. One for me and one for Abhilash."

"Never mind. Keep all three with you, children."

Their satchels slung across their shoulders, the two of them walked alongside the barbed wire fencing of the copra-mill compound looking at the photo all the while.

"Are you leaving, my children? How can you go away like that? Mol, stop."

He came after them, pushing the bicycle.

"Mon, you can leave. I have to tell Sheena something in private."

When Abhilash remained, he asked softly: "Shall I call the police?"

A breathless Abhilash moved away, and hid behind a tree.

"Did you see this, Sheena?" He took out another photo from his pocket and showed it to her. She froze. When she was about to run away, he caught her by her hand.

"I want to go to school."

"Oh yes, you can. Who said you can't? But Mol, you must come with me to the studio first."

"No, I won't come even if you kill me."

"Don't come if you don't want to. But I am going to stick this photo on the wall of your school."

He walked on, pushing the bicycle. She stood there for a moment, not knowing what to do, unable to suppress her sobs. Then he took her satchel from her, hung it on the handle-bar of the bicycle, lifted her up, and sat her on the frame.

"Hold on firmly to the handle," he said.

With his usual smile, he tied the dhoti firmly round his waist and mounted the bicycle.

Abhilash looked on from behind the tree till the bicycle vanished from sight, Sheena slowly getting smaller and smaller.

© M. Mukundan; © translation A. J. Thomas

N. S. Madhavan

Blue Pencil

Chulliat's office window looked onto a road which wore a different look that night. At ten in the night the traffic was already taking a curtain call. The light of the roadside sodium lamps looked more zestful than usual. Laced with an unearthly sheen, it reminded Chulliat of his childhood evenings, especially that yellow hour when shadows lengthened to ten feet.

Chulliat gave up the window to rest his pipe on the table. Though long put out, he had been persisting at it, sucking on it absently. Its hard tip lactated the viscously bitter saliva of fever. Whenever history was at a fork, Chulliat felt a fever coming on. On the night of August 14, 1947, when the Union Jack came down for the last time, it was malaria. Gandhi died with the thin red line on the thermometer touching 103.

"Mullik, I am done for the day. A touch of, ah well, more than a touch of fever," Chulliat spoke into the intercom.

"Then the editorial?" Mullik asked.

"Editorial? I thought it was Viswanathan's job."

"But, today?"

"Viswanathan is fine." Chulliat raised his voice in feverish impatience.

"All of us at the desk were wondering if there would be a front-page signed edit by you."

"For God's sake, no. By Viswanathan, at the usual place."

Mullik put the phone down and looked vacantly at the sub-editors seated around his half-moon table. All evening they sat there, like a frieze of a moving trail of refugees with their heads down. Not all of them; Zuhra stuck to the computer on her table.

"I can't believe my ears," Mullik addressed no one in particular. "K.K. Chulliat has to go home. Fever."

"Today?" Chitra Ramakrishnan asked.

“Yes, today,” Mullik said.

“What’s the fuss about today? A couple of domes came crashing down in Ayodhya,” said Abhijit Sanyal, the oldest hand among the subs. “That’s all today is to Chulliat”. He checked himself when he heard a sharp pitter-patter over a computer keyboard. Zuhra was punching it like an old typewriter.

“Tortoise,” Vijayan said lazily. “Tortoise?” asked Chitra Ramakrishnan, a fresh recruit, yet to be initiated into the news room argot.

“Believe me, no one here has seen Chulliat’s body.” He sticks out his bald head through his cabin door. That’s it, like a tortoise,” explained Nakul Kelkar.

News Editor Mullik picked up the phones. “Viswanathan, the Chief is asking you to go ahead with the edit.” Mullik put on Chulliat’s Oxford accent. “Ah yes, no need to get emotional. Mark it with a gentle beat of considered opinion. And do not write that today is the darkest day in Indian history.”

Mullik put the phone down and almost immediately Vijayan asked, “What made Tortoise say a thing like that?”

“Tomorrow you will read this line in every paper,” Mullik said.

“Must be a rub-off from his Oxford days – Tortoise’s ability to pre-empt a cliché,” Nakul said admiringly.

“Shh… Tortoise,” Vijayan cautioned when Chulliat showed his head through the door. He and Nakul kept their eyes down, reading patterns in scattered bits of newsprint on the floor. Chitra cupped her mount to suppress a giggle. Abhijit looked at Chulliat, his eyes cold.

“Mullik, get on with the lead story. I’ll see it before I go,” said Chulliat and quickly withdrew his head. He homed to his window. A couple of army trucks passed by, followed by a police jeep with an angry Shiva’s third eye on its forehead. The road was emptying when a fire retender rushed past, its bells tolling in a frenzy.

Chulliat breathed into his palm, trying to measure his fever. He walked over to the bathroom and took out a couple of tablets from the cupboard. Standing near the pot to urinate, he couldn’t help leaning against the wall; all of his seventy years chose to visit him in these vulnerable moments.

Oh his way back to the window Chulliat paused before the computer. Alphabets streamed in trickles. The cursor twinkled its green light like an amorous firefly’s bottom. He felt another presence in the room and turned. An office boy was sneaking out after carefully placing the lead story’s printout on the table. Chulliat went through it quickly.

“Get the car please, I am leaving,” he said to his secretary through the intercom.

“Chulliat has flown,” Mullik informed the sub-editors around his table.

“Anyone for tea?” Abhijit Sanyal asked. Vijayan, Nakul and Chitra got up immediately. Chitra went over to Zuhra and patted her shoulder: “Coming for a cup of tea?” Zuhra surprised them into silence by getting up. Suddenly finding himself alone, Mullik panicked. He hurried to the sports desk.

Abhijit and the others felt the layers of cold air thickening as they went down the stairs to the basement canteen. Tea stains and pockmarks left by stubbed-out cigarettes were scattered over its grey cement floor; some stale samosas were pitifully stacked in the glass case. Four of them sat on the chairs around a portable steel table; Chitra drew in a chair and sat next to Zuhra. Abhijit knocked on the table with the pepper pot and soon Phool Chand came in.

“Phool Chand, five cups of tea, quickly,” Abhijit said.

“No help today, Sir, everyone has gone home to stock up on things.”

"Why?" Chitra asked.

"If and when there is a curfew it hits us the hardest."

"Then why didn't you go?" asked Chitra again.

"I borrowed some money and asked Mewaran of the Cash Section to get my stuff-twenty kilos of wheat flour and a half bag of potatoes. Where will you go for tea if I shut down? The roadside stalls are all closed."

Phool Chand went back to the kitchen. Soon the buzz of the paraffin stove pervaded the canteen. Abhijit ran his fingers nervously through his greying curly hair. He stared at Zuhra and asked: "Why are you so quiet today?"

Zuhra raised her head and looked at Abhijit with uncompromising ferocity. Vijayan conjured up a smile and said: "When Phool Chand and his friends were scurrying about to buy groceries, know what Abhijit was up to? He scooted off to buy three bottles of rum. Suppose the shops are closed tomorrow?"

Chitra smiled charitably. Abhijit held the pepper pot in his hand and played with it. Then he said, "I am a midnight's child. Like Rushdie, I was born in 1947. In Calcutta. A Nehruvian childhood, you know, not much religion, but plenty of reason. I got my love for Rabindra Sangeet from my mother. But sometime in the 60s Tagore gave way to the Beatles."

"The Beatles? Abhijit, you must be ancient," Chitra said, "for my generation the Beatles is classical music."

"Chitra, before you were born, there was someone in Vietnam who answered to the name of Ho Chi Minh. Sartre held forth at Sorbonne. So did Tariq Ali in London. Here, in Bengal we had Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal. When I first met Charu Majumdar, he lay on a string bed, struggling to breathe with the help of an oxygen cylinder. He baptised me then. I was studying in IIT Kharagpur, near the forests of Bihar. So I didn't have to go that far to ferret out class struggles. Oh yes, with the customary sling bag over my shoulder. A season, a terrible season, of retaliation followed. Many disappeared. Those who surfaced feigned not to recognize you. Madness claimed some. I kept suicide and madness at bay with a bit of self-deception and… er… an occasional drink did help. It all ended when I caught the Kalka Mail to leave Calcutta for Delhi."

"My childhood was less intricate," Nakul said, "In Bombay's Shivaji Park, we wanted to grow up to be Gavaskar."

All eyes were trained on Vijayan. He hung down his head and said, "I have nothing to say. Remember those people who shut themselves up in an inn against the plague? Should we also tell stories like them – like the Decameron tales?"

Chulliat lowered the car window by a crack. At first he felt refreshed by the rush of cold wind; but soon he began to feel dizzy with the vicissitudes in temperature. Chulliat tapped the driver's shoulder: "Bahadur, you know Dr. Iqbal's house? Take me there, I am not feeling good."

Iqbal always brought back memories of the day Masood, his father and Chulliat's friend from England days, took him to meet his firstborn. Chulliat found an embarrassed little boy lying under a small white tent, freshly circumcised.

Iqbal's house was dark from the outside. When Farah heard Chulliat opening the cast-iron gate, she came out and switched on the portico light.

"Iqbal at home, dear?"

Farah went in without a word. Soon Iqbal came out in a light blue salwar suit – a true Pathan, in his father's mould.

"Iqbal, I feel feverish."

The thermometer, as usual, tasted of metal. Chulliat felt tired deep inside his bones when Iqbal relentlessly pumped air into the BP apparatus strapped around his arm. Iqbal went inside and came back with a syringe. At the moment the needle pierced him, Chulliat could not help shutting his eyes.

"By tomorrow you'll be all right," said Iqbal. Then Farah and Iqbal relapsed into what Chulliat feared would be an eternal silence. He got up to leave.

"Thanks, Uncle," Farah said.

"For what?"

"You were our only Hindu friend who did not mention what happened today. We got a lot of calls. Some people even dropped in. Like death visits."

The car stuttered in wintry reluctance. Iqbal opened its door. Chulliat got in and hurriedly waved at the couple. "Bahadur," Chulliat told the driver, "back to the office."

The news room, shaken out of sleepiness, was getting ready for the final burst before bringing out the next day's edition. Mullik made several trips down to the press. The sub-editors, except for Zuhra, stood before the telex and fax machines, soaking in the last bits of news.

"Vishwanathan did not pack much punch in his edit," Vijayan remarked.

"Tortoise wanted it this way. Remember, the gentle beat of considered opinion," Abhijit said.

"Tortoise must be asleep by now," Chitra said.

"Mullik!" Chulliat's voice suddenly boomed in the newsroom. Chitra couldn't believe her eyes that this pipe-smoking old man in a dark-coloured suit, rapidly striding across the news room, was Chulliat. The first sight of the Chief Editor in the newsroom brought the sports editor and financial correspondent to their feet. The bleary-eyed cartoonist finally gave up his day's efforts to draw a congruous cartoon and ambled to Mullik's table, making his way through the crumpled balls of India-ink stained paper. Mullik gazed at Chulliat making his way purposefully to his table. Zuhra did not move. Downstairs, the machines of the press rumbled like the north eastern monsoon over distant hills.

"Mullik, who did the headlines for the lead story?" Chulliat put the printout on Mullik's table. Slowly, the subs began to move towards Mullik's table; Zuhra remained where she was.

"Mullik, I am talking to you. Who wrote the headline? If you choose to remain silent, I wish to tell you that he can quit this paper from now." Chulliat's lips betrayed an angry quiver. All the employees in the newsroom, including Zuhra, now crowded around Mullik's table.

"Sir, I did," Zuhra said softly.

Chulliat drew deeply on his pipe. He gestured to Vijayan to pick up the printout from the table. Chulliat moved towards Zuhra and patted her on her head. "Fetch me a pencil, dear."

Mullik handed over a ballpoint. Chulliat addressed all of them: "When I started my career at the Manchester Guardian, my old Welsh editor used to say that blue pencils are an editor's weapons. Blue pencils are now extinct, but that shouldn't stop me from using this pen."

Chulliat leaned over the printout on the table and, with the pen gripped like a chisel in his shaking hands, scored off the first two words of Zuhra's caption: 'Disputed structure demolished.' Above these words he wrote in bold, each alphabet painfully undulating with tremors of Parkinsonism, 'Babri Masjid.'

Tears overflowed from Zuhra's large eyes and trickled down like sap from a freshly wounded tree. She looked at Chulliat and said: "Thank you, sir."

Chulliat walked away, bowing to another lunar pull of fever. No one stirred in the newsroom till he went into his office and the door shut behind him.

©Story and translation, N.S. Madhavan

Anand

Unscheduled

What came to my mind when I arrived at that small town after a gap of several years was, interestingly, not my reasons for that previous visit, but a relatively minor and unrelated incident that occurred then. Certain things are like that. They wait quietly somewhere in the recesses of our brain only to jump out when you least expect them. Our mind might perhaps be reminding us that one should not delete everything that is not currently on the schedule. Especially since schedules and charts take over the control of our life as a matter of course these days.

It was the very same PWD rest-house where I had stayed the last time. It had aged as everything does in time. Door bolts did not fall properly and water taps leaked perpetually, as they always seem to do in government guest-houses. The walls made room for cobwebs and the cracks in the floors turned into an abode for insects.

Last time the chowkidar had been waiting at the gate as our jeep drove in, perhaps because we were officers from the army. We were there to conduct a court of inquiry on the accidental death of a jawan in that town. There were three of us forming the court. We got down to the job as soon as we arrived.

When I got a little respite from the schedule of the investigations, on a warm afternoon I settled on a wooden chair in the verandah of the rest-house. The uneven floor of the verandah was taken care of by the heaviness of the wooden chair. I had developed a habit of freeing the mind from all the bindings of work during such breaks; so I sat watching the grass growing in the yard as the saying goes. But soon the growing grass was displaced by the cry of a child. He was walking along the road in front of the rest-house. He must have been around three years and was wearing only a pair of shorts which was sliding down his waist. The sun was hot but he was not trying to take shelter under the odd neem or sheesham tree along the road. Leaving out a lonely donkey which stood still in the middle of the road, there was no living being anywhere there. On the field beyond the road, dust rose in small whirls and gradually disappeared in the sky.

The boy stopped crying intermittently to relapse into sobbing to get back his breath. This was perhaps the only means for him at his age to let the world know of his state of helplessness. He seemed to be not aiming at any particular place for he had none and was very well aware that there was no one around to listen to him.

I worried that the heat would strike him down somewhere on the road and that could mean his end. I left my wooden chair, crossed the yard and opened the gate to reach the boy. He did not reply to my questions except with some grunts or sobs. I figured out that he was a child abandoned on the road and he was helpless. He followed me without hesitation when I took him in and made him sit on the verandah.

We, along with the driver, were the only three residents at the rest-house, so the chowkidar-cum-cook had stored not much food. Yet I managed to extract enough provisions to quench the boy's thirst and

hunger. With that the boy looked satisfied as if he had solved all the problems of his life. Children, after all, are existentialists living from moment to moment.

The chowkidar did not know anything about the child. Such trivial matters did not deserve much attention according to him. You took care of his hunger and thirst, now let him go his way, he suggested. Now when he said "his way" I did not know whether there was anything like a way in front of him. Like a mechanized toy, had I put him on the road he would simply have gone along the direction in front of him. And after some time, when the pangs of hunger and thirst revisit, the old helplessness and reprobation will return. I did not pay heed to the chowkidar's suggestion. I took the child with me and went to the police station which was merely a stroll way. I had already made a rapport with the police officer in connection with the investigation I came for.

The rest-house was located in a secluded place, by the side of an open field. The market of the town was a few minutes' walk from there. And next to the market was the police station. There were a few houses scattered around these. And then a temple, a masjid, a school, and hospital, all the essential things needed to make a human settlement.

The market lay under the canopy of large tamarind trees. Two rows of pukka shops, a number of ramshackle ones, and the rest of the trade was all on unpaved ground. The town's transport consisted mainly of a few horse-driven carriages and quite a few cycle-rickshaws, which would normally be parked on one side of the market. The cries of the hawkers in the market and the ringing of the bells of the tongas reached the rest house.

The police station was a modern concrete building, one of the very few of that kind in the town. Aside from the police station there were living quarters for the staff. For some reason, the police had received some extra attention in this town from the government. There was ample space for the officer in charge, staff, the report writer, and the other men on duty in the police station. There were three lock-up rooms which were not occupied. In the matter of attention received from government, the police station and the hospital were polar opposites, as I learnt when I visited the latter to record the evidence from the doctor for the inquiry.

When I barged in, on such an unwholesome hot afternoon, the officer was enjoying a siesta, and had stretched himself on the easy chair by the side of his office table. He immediately got up and asked me to sit down. Policemen always show respect to us army men.

As soon as he noticed the child standing by my side holding my middle finger, he guffawed spontaneously.

"Where did you get this one, sir," he asked.

I told him the story.

"You are the fourth person to bring him here," he said shaking his head. Then turning to the boy he asked raising his voice: "Where is your mother, rey? Even in this hot afternoon she is –" Mindful of my presence he did not proceed to complete the sentence.

The boy did not bother to answer the question. Nor did the cry he had been stifling escape his lips at the officer's shouted words. Instead he held my finger more tightly and came closer to my side. Feeling a new sense of security, he returned the look boldly.

Summoning a constable, the officer ordered him to go to the market and find Lachmi. Then he said to me in explanation: "I will tell you one thing, Sir. Those who brought this chap here every time were outsiders. The people of this town couldn't care less what happens to this boy. They only need his mother. And even she doesn't need him. Discarding him like this again and again, I fear one day she would dump him in a well or…"

"Don't, please don't, officer…" I stopped him, cautiously glancing at the boy.

I understood all that he said. As well as all that was left unsaid.

The constable did not take much time to get Lachmi. She was a young, attractive woman, even in her rags.

Lachmi ran to the boy and took him in her arms. "Where were you, re? Where haven't I looked for you? Are you hungry, my rajabete?" As for the boy, he broke away from my finger and rushed to his mother with tears in his eyes.

"Enough of this drama," the officer scolded her. "If this happens again, I will lock you up!"

Drama!

On the one hand, the indifference towards an unwanted birth. On the other, the insecurity of an abandoned child. I did not know how to relate to the hide-'n-seek relationship between that mother and child. Are we not trained to describe this kind of relationship as a kinship of blood? Blood is thicker than water, etc.? How many imaginative stories and plays have been written on this topic! If what I saw were a drama, one of them had been acting even while being a real-life character in it, the mother. The other, the child, had not been acting, but really and fully living. His tears were genuine. There is yet another character, the father. Though an essential actor in the story, he never appeared on the scene. Not even standing aside in the wings and watching like the writer or director. Acting, reality, absence — how many different compositions are there for blood?

Lachmi obeyed the police officer in a habitual manner. Her wailings stopped suddenly and she walked away with her eyes cast down.

I had no role there hence. But the officer asked me to take a seat and beckoned for tea. While drinking the tea, he suddenly turned philosophical.

"Father, mother, brother, sister, wife, husband, children, all these are roles imposed on the base material of human beings, is that not so, sir?" he said, his face turning pensive. "Mere labels stuck on the basic form we are: with two legs, two hands and a trunk on which a head is stuck?"

I waited for him to open up more.

He did: "On animals those labels stick for a few days and then peel off. On humans, we try to keep them on by adding more and more glue as they try to fall off. Pastes too have a life, you know. And on some surfaces the pastes do not stick at all."

It was on such a note, unusual to find in a police station, that our conversation and the event came to a close that day. I returned to my investigation, recording of statements, collection of evidence and other such matters. After a day or two I returned to the drills and exercises of a peace-time army unit. Two legs, two arms, and a trunk on which a head is stuck – the identity the police officer gave to a human being came back to my mind often in my days in the regiment, especially while watching the jawans march in the parade ground. The havaldar majors conducting the drill too saw them likewise, I felt while watching them correcting the movements of their legs, arms, and heads continuously.

These days, soldiers come to my mind very rarely. Almost the span of a generation has passed since I shed the uniform. And I had now come to this place without any kind of halos of officialdom around me, just as a private citizen, following a private interest I had acquired recently. The place had been recently in news with the discovery of cave dwellings of primitive humans nearby. I was somehow drawn to this.

The archaeological department had actually recommended a bigger town a little away from the site as the halting station for visitors, considering the facilities of stay and conveyance. But the nearest railhead

on the map was this town. A small rail station as it is, I changed at the junction where express trains stop, and took a passenger train to get here.

I hailed a tonga from the railway station and arrived at the rest house to discover that it was locked. I could, however, locate the chowkidar in the market. Like the previous watchman, this man too was quite old, nearing the retirement age. He had of course received the message I had sent through the PWD office. He said he was in the market to buy provisions for my food. His job was of course chowkidar-cum-cook.

While the rest-house had visibly grown old, with the department taking little interest in repairs and maintenance, the town too had not advanced a step forward. The same horse-driven carriages, cycle rickshaws, and market. As soon as I entered the room, electricity went off. Load shedding, the chowkidar told me with a candle and a stick ready in his hand. The power could be expected back only in the evening, he informed. I settled in the verandah on the same old wooden chair contemplating how while some places, say, cities, march ahead to catch up with the new world, globalised or whatever you call it, some other places stay where they were decades ago. The chair, made of solid wood as it used to be before, had not fallen into disrepair, but the floor seemed to have sunken further. The month was January. And so unlike in my previous visit the air was cool and pleasant.

The lights came as scheduled and when the chowkidar brought rotis, dal, and subzi in the evening, I took a good look at the man. Did he look like the old one? I could not say as the face of the old man had faded in my memory. In any case, he was yet another chowkidar. Roles may not change, although the people do. In that sense, the tongas, their drivers, horses, dogs straying on the road, donkeys, could all claim to be new.

The tamarind trees sheltering the market were but the same. I strolled through the market gazing at the potatoes, onions and vegetables laid out by the sellers. Was I looking perhaps for Lachmi and her son? It was nonsense. But the place I was heading for, nevertheless, was the police station.

The station building of course had not deteriorated. With a fresh coat of paint it stood stern, out of step with the surroundings. The officer was young and smart. Although it was midday, he had not gone on a siesta and was working. The staff too was alert though no emergency was in sight. A man was standing inside the lock up holding the bars. There was no light inside his room, though the power cut was over. That was perhaps the custom.

Paying due respect to my age and attire, the officer offered me a seat. I had gone there with the intention of introducing myself as an amateur archaeologist, but I found myself narrating the story of how I had taken a boy abandoned on the road to the station once upon a time. The officer, it seemed, had missed the 'once upon a time'.

'But sir, it was not you,' he wrinkled his eyebrows.

'Sorry?" I was confused.

'It was someone else who brought the child here yesterday. Taller than you, with a French beard… Or, maybe you too had had the same experience. I was away on leave last month. As for the boy, it was not the first time it happened, you know!' he laughed.

'Oh I see now,' I nodded. I could now follow what he said. My coming to the station and broaching the topic have not been a waste of time, I reflected.

'What was the name of his mother?' I was curious.

'Gowri,' he said. 'I have warned her, sir. Not to…'

‘Go on, say it again. That you would lock her up if she did. Your predecessor had said the same.’ I too laughed. ‘But he must be over seventy now. Surely retired. That boy too must be a young man now, of course if he managed to survive. Lachmi can’t be alive now…’

I narrated the old story to the officer to his amazement. He was a young entrant to the force. Educated and interested in doing good things. It wasn’t long before we became friends.

‘Sir, about you now…’

‘I left the uniform long back. Now my interests are quite different.’

‘You might be thinking that nothing has changed here,’ he said, confirming what I had noticed. ‘The rest-house, market, and then of course the Lachmi-Gowri story… Some places are like that. In fact I have been longing for a better place of posting, some place more lively and active. Then I felt that the experience I can get from places such as this would be more rewarding in the long run of service.’

‘Officer, can I meet that child once? The child and his mother as well? I feel a strange kind of kinship with them, with their lot.’

‘Let’s see. In the meanwhile, you have not told me of your present mission here. Let’s get that over with first.’

I told him of the work that brought me here.

‘I will arrange a tonga for you,’ he said. ‘You can get only that here. The road is not good. But then it was your choice!’

The next day I proceeded to the caves in the tonga he arranged for me.

The road was not good for sure. But the carriage, the driver and the horse were all good. It seemed the journey going back ten thousand years captured the interest of the horse even, he was in sprightly spirit. For, to whatever I and the carriage driver were talking between us, he seemed to be paying attention. The journey took about an hour. With a break for tea en route.

The site was a hill a little away from the road. Although the magnificence of it, the huge imposing rocks, pulled our eyes from the road like a magnet, somehow neither the passers-by nor the villagers who were cultivating the land around it had failed to note that in its cavities lay the signatures of generations of human beings who lived there several millennia ago and then walked out and disappeared into thin air at some point of time. It was only around twenty years ago that a historian who passed by for reasons only known to him decided to go and have a look at those rocks closely.

They were not, it was certain, man-made caves. Those who took shelter there would have had no technological skill to carve out caves from rocks. The weather or running water had shaped them in such a way that they provided a secure shelter to humans. There were about twenty or thirty of them. Wedged together as they were, the inmates must have found security there.

Under the huge blocks of rocks hanging above, menacingly, a society of men were protected from the rain and the sun. They were perhaps scared of wild animals more than the hanging rocks. Their togetherness must have ensured the might they needed for fighting them. At the same time they would’ve needed the animals for food. Animals and their behaviour naturally occupied their minds and imaginations. The images they drew on the wall show how they were obsessed with them.

The archaeological department’s men were still engaged in cleaning and marking the sites. Several things had yet to be done to make it attractive to the visitors. A young and energetic archaeologist who was superintending the work came to my help. He guided me around from cave to cave.

The major attraction was the panoramic rock paintings that depicted the everyday life of the dwellers of the shelters. The scenes showed hunting and dancing. There were horses, elephants and deer. Animals fought one another as men fought with them. The weapons were spears and bows and arrows. All lively but in crude line diagrams. In fact, these diagrams were the only sign that humans lived there once. There was nothing else left behind: tools, weapons, or even bones. But the red, white, green, and yellow paintings had survived thousands of years.

My guide drew my attention to the fact that apart from hunting and dancing, there were no depictions of family life. These men lived in communities and not in families or as individuals, he said. 'They did not know of family relationships. Father, mother, wife, husbands, children, siblings— all that was unknown to them. You would not be able to distinguish between man and woman or the young and old in these portrayals. They were just humans beyond relationships and sentiments, or say, living before such things started to appear.'

'One line in the centre and four lines on the sides!' I suggested.

'Precisely,' he concurred. 'They lived in these shelters for about twelve thousand years like that. As one vertical line in the centre and four lines on the sides.'

'Until when, you reckon?'

'The archaeologists here estimate that until about fifteen hundred years ago these cave men inhabited this place. Are you not amazed?'

'That's amazing!' I agreed. 'Just a few kilometres from here, at that time, the artists of Ajanta had retired from their caves, caves they themselves had carved out of the rock. After sculpting magnificent chaityas and exquisite works of art that we still do not stop wondering at, and leaving behind literature and unsurpassed philosophical treatises.'

'The truth is that the different ages and periods we recognise in human development do not provide a faultless scale to understand our past since they occur simultaneously at different places. Life has not moved according to one linear narrative in the past, nor is it following a singular schedule in the present. Do not humans go naked and live in caves even now with nothing other than stone tools to their aid in parts of the world?'

He paused for a moment and then added, 'Our scales shrink or stretch. Stepping out of the tables and scales that we scientists set, or even without appearing in them, certain things peek out and stare at us always. Do all the people living in our cities share the same level of living from the perspectives of civilization or social development? Some tutor and coach their children in elaborate systems to turn them into managers or engineers or archaeologists while others sell them or break their legs and send them out begging to eke out a living from it…' He stopped abruptly as if he had gone beyond discretion and added, 'I am sorry, sir.'

'We all structure our lives and neatly create separate domains and feel embarrassed when, by chance, we step out of them. But you don't have to say sorry now, my young friend', I patted the young man's back. 'The discovery of these caves, though grand in its own way, is surpassed by the discovery of the fact that these shelter-dwellers and the artists of Ajanta lived at the same period of time a few kilometres apart. You became a real archaeologist when you said that. While we adorn and embellish ourselves in countless ways, and clothe ourselves in fashion and style for the world to see us in refined and distinguishable characteristics of gender, beauty, and vitality, several of our kind live just in line diagrams. Diagrams with a vertical line in the middle, and four lines on the sides, which do not differentiate man from woman or the young from the old.'

My friend gave a considered smile. 'I am not an archaeologist, Sir,' he said. 'My job here is of a conservationist. A chemical engineer in plain terms— sent by the department of archaeology to preserve these paintings. As we talked, we strayed into unrelated fields, out of our domains, if you please. And I had an uncanny feeling that what I am doing is the preservation of a contradiction, or in terms of art, an oxymoronic discourse. 'I do not know what you are. You may be an artist. A writer. If so, what you do too would not be different from what I do. The conservation of contradictions.'

I picked up some pieces of stones from the site that looked like Stone Age tools. My friend's work was perhaps one stage higher than mine. I am just a collector. Someone who doesn't even know how to label my collection.

A crowd of humans unidentifiable as man or woman, young or old, stood on either side of me and bade me farewell. If a havildar major suddenly appeared on the scene and gave a command— Tej chal! — would they have started marching? No, I knew. My conservationist friend is freezing them not just in their forms but in time too.

On the broken floor of the rest-house, was seated the chowkidar wrapped in a shawl and coughing intermittently. Muttering 'hey Ram' he lifted himself up by pressing his arms on the knees and enquired what I would have for dinner.

'Dal roti,' I said. 'And, bhaiya, I am leaving tomorrow. Buy only what is needed.'

Turning the palms of his hand in a manner of showing indifference, he disappeared into the darkness inside. As the lights opened their eyes, I also joined him.

The next day I called on the police officer to thank him for the help he extended during my stay. As we talked, his telephone rang. His expression became grave as he listened. 'I have to go… to the railway station,' he said keeping the handset back. Then he added, 'You too can come along.'

'Whatever is the matter?' I enquired.

'We will see there. Or, why should I keep you in suspense? Didn't you tell me that you wanted to see that mother and child? They have both been run over by a train.'

'My God!' I exclaimed.

On our way to the station in his jeep, he became more explicit: 'An altercation occurred in the market last evening. Some bad characters beat her up. Perhaps when she asked for payment. The bastards think that free service is their right in every aspect. She got beaten up and walked away crying. Certain self-appointed moral guardians of the society took over the stage afterwards and asked her to quit the town without spoiling its morals any more. She naturally made a quip on morality as only someone in her position could do. That led to further squabbles and violence. I believe that a prostitute too has her own rights and dignity, and intervened, to make the moralists back off. This morning I heard that late in the night, some, perhaps the same gentlemen who were piqued by her words, threw stones at her. The stones hit the child. She is not a stranger to such things, but this time it pushed her limits. After all, she is a mother, you know. Of course she had tried to get rid of him several times. But not now. She took him with her.'

'You mean to say she…'

'We have to think so. The train had not run over her. She deliberately jumped in the gap between the coaches as it pulled off, to avoid the driver's notice. There are people who witnessed that.'

'My goodness!' I cried.

My mind ran back several years with the speed only a train could pull off. The distance of a generation. To the court of inquiry for which I came here the first time.

My regiment was in Lucknow then. It was a jawan of an army unit, also stationed in the city, who lost his life under the train, at this small station, on his way back from annual leave. I was asked to inquire into the incident and to give a report. I had two other officers with me, one from the jawan's unit and another from an infantry unit.

It is not necessary to say that the life of Lachmi did not go according to any schedule. Nor did Gowri's appear in any table or chart. The accident of the gunner, Raghunath Hari, too had an element of unscheduled-ness. The train in which he was travelling had no stop at this small station. It was detained here for some technical reason. Raghunath Hari got out to collect some drinking water is what we had heard. And while getting into the train, which had by then pulled off, he slipped and fell between the coaches. The military police brought his body and luggage to the unit. His body was cremated with military honours as the custom was. However, an inquiry was to be carried out to formally close the case.

The inquiry did not turn out easy for us. The evidence was mainly by the way of statements of witnesses to the incident. The station master, the police officer, the medical officer of the town hospital, and eye witnesses. There were eye witnesses, mainly railway employees, we came to know. In addition we found that there was one bag that belonged to Raghunath Hari lying in the station which the station master had missed to send to the unit, which turned out be an important exhibit. We had thought that the whole procedure could be done in two days. But as the statements started coming in, it became evident that it could not be.

For, the witnesses one and all were emphatic that Raghunath Hari did not accidentally slip between the coaches. Nor had he got out to fetch water. He waited until the train started moving and then deliberately jumped into the gap between the rails, they said. Why did he do that?

In order to know that we were compelled to open his bag lying with the station master. At first we could not find in it anything other than the usual kit one carries while travelling. Upon searching further, we saw a note running into two pages in an inner pocket. Written in Marathi, the note did not have any regular form or order. At some places it read like a letter. And some others, like a story or article autobiographical in nature. The structure was fragmented. The language turned ornamental and metaphorical in places, and then highly sentimental and personal. Then obscure. A name — Shakuntala — appeared in a number of places. A lover, perhaps. But the description was that of a little girl in a few places. There were indications that she was an inmate of an orphanage. One could not be sure of her actual status. Towards the end, there was a description of a shell fired from a gun. The gunner does not see the target in front of him while firing. He is only told of the direction and the distance at which it is located. He fires without knowing on what object it falls. God too could be one such gunner. And what are we to think of the helpless shell? Who knows about its loneliness and desolation? Where it is going to explode and what it is going to destroy? It was on that note that the writing ended. The pen was still in the pocket. Its cap was not closed.

The information given by the officer of his unit also baffled us. According to the records, Raghunath Hari was married. But the fellow soldiers who had gone to his village with his belongings were told that he was not. He had given his wife's name as Shakuntala, but a woman of that name could not be traced there. In fact, the home address entered in the records was that of an orphanage. They confirmed that he had grown up there. The orphanage, however, declined from receiving his belongings. The messengers returned with the trunk.

No one in the unit had anything ill to say about Raghunath Hari. No one had noticed anything unusual in his behaviour either. And yet he had decided to end his life, like a shell fired at an unknown target with no direction and distance given by anybody. At an unscheduled stop of a train in a nondescript town, far from his village and workplace. Superfast trains cross passenger trains at such nondescript places, that

do not reflect in the railway time tables, where no one boards or detrains. Highly stylised Ravi Varma portraits and the line-men of caves too might have some such intersections in time and space to talk to each other. But the issue before us was a different one. The officer from Raghunath Hari's regiment said, in fact he insisted, that the soldier's death could not be written as a suicide in the report. Dead though the man was, it would be slighting him, a slur to the regiment and to his relatives, if any such person turned up any time in the future. They would stand to lose the benefits upon death from the government. The jawans' morale would be affected… we sat arguing the whole night. In the end we decided to re-write the script for Raghunath Hari's life, the act he had deliberately carried out and wanted to keep to himself at a small station that did not reflect in the time tables and would not catch anybody's attention.

We had to approach the witnesses for that, and request them to restate their statements. Each and every one co-operated. Even our own consciences did. For a good purpose—what we thought to be good purpose. Although held up for a few more days, we returned with a report as was intended.

We took back Raghunath Hari's bag with us. The note found in it had better not be there, we thought. I kept it with me. For several years. Like a conservationist.

Today, while standing before the bodies of Gowri and her little boy, suddenly Shakuntala came to my mind. Who really was Raghunath Hari's Shakuntala? Had he imagined her? If so, why he did he give her the name 'Shakuntala', the abandoned child of the myth? Had she been real, who was she to him? If not, in which role did his imagination want to cast her? Individuals, characters, destined to shoot in unknown directions, to unknown distances, to fall at unknown places.

Curious onlookers crowded around the badly mangled bodies of Gowri and her child removed from the railway tracks and placed on the platform. Although the accident had reduced them to an indistinguishable mass of flesh and blood, everyone there identified them. They had seen them taking a leap. Just as the railways staff had seen Raghunath Hari.

'There are several gaps in the relationships of human beings,' the young educated police officer told me. 'Sometimes they are stitched together in this fashion – through blood. With the needle and thread of blood and mangled flesh. Don't we have a figurative way of describing it – a relationship of blood?'

'Like the left-out spaces in railway time tables,' I spoke what came to my mind immediately. 'Unscheduled stops of the trains stitch them up'

'But this was not an unscheduled stop,' the officer wanted to correct me, 'for Gowri.'

'In the case of Raghunath Hari, it was.'

'Who was Raghunath Hari?'

I did not tell him the story of Raghunath Hari.

I felt guilty of transforming what Raghunath Hari had intended to be scheduled as unscheduled.

I returned, leaving to the police the job of pronouncing the verdict on the death of Gowri for whom a good repute was never an issue.

© Story, Anand. © Translation, Chetana Sachidanandan

Vivek Narayanan

Chitrakuta

And to that mountain paradise set on fire
by the red blossoms of the kimsuka tree,
honeycombs hanging like buckets,
marking-nut trees, the cry of the moorhen,
the bleat of the peacock, the herds
of elephants and the echoing of birds,
they arrived with open eyes. Sita
gathered firewood and fruit while the brothers
caught and killed some quick deer, rabbit,
wild fowl. Famished, they ate on the riverbank.

The next day readying for the long darkness
ahead, Lakshmana sacrificed a black antelope
with a splotch of red on the skin between its horns.
Arrows removed, bleeding stanched, the animal
was gently strangled then laid down
with its legs pointing North, then stroked
and pleasured, washed in all the openings
by which its life-spirit had fled: mouth, nose,
eyes, ears, navel, penis, anus, hooves.

In the beginning, the gods accepted man
as victim. Later, the ability to be sacrificed
passed from him into antelope and horse.
From horse into cattle, from cattle
into sheep, from sheep into goat, then from
goats into the earth, so all the world
was touched by our humility, our
complicity. Outside the leaf-thatched hut,
the animal was raised on a spit and roasted
until it had attained a deep, dark brown colour.
Then, chanting the appropriate verses, taking care
not to split the bones, Rama carved the animal
limb by limb, cut by cut, setting aside the grain
of its hair, the pumice of its skin, taking into him only
the fire of its flesh, the sublime fat of its marrow.

(After Valmiki's Ramayana: Ayodhyakanda, sargas 55-56 in the vulgate/Gita Press edition)

Tataka

Sage, tell me, who is she, this
disfigured one with the rage
and force of a thousand

elephants? How does
a woman come to be this strong
that whole armies
crossing into her forest are simply torn
to strips of skin and lumps
of half-chewed flesh?

Rama, she is Tataka,
once the most beautiful and tender woman
in the world, jewel of a daughter
to the virtuous and powerful Suketu,
wife to the gentle Sunda,
mother of the fearless Maricha.
It happens that her husband
was killed and
she and her son cursed
with these, the hideous
unbearable forms you see.
Now she hates Agastya and all of us
with every drop of her being.

Sage, who killed her husband Sunda?
Who disfigured Tataka's body?

Rama, you must never hesitate
to kill a woman, not
for a second. This is the
immortal unwavering
rule for men charged with
the burden of kingship.

(After Valmiki's Ramayana: Balakanda, sarga 25)

Rama's Servants

Punisher's hooked discus	Dharma's bladed discus	Time's hooked discus
Vishnu's bladed discus	Indra's bladed discus	Vajra (h-bomb)
Siva's lance	Brahma's Crest	Aishika (guided missile)

Brahma's artillery	Time's noose	The Tower
noose of Dharma	Vengeance's noose	noose of chemical rain
The Drier	The Drencher	Pinakin's ballistic missile
Agni's long range fire thrower	Vayu's air to air missile	The Drainer
The Horse-head missile	Vilaapana (bomb)	The Wrester
Kankila (death machine)	The Peacemaker	Kaapaala (sniper rifle)
Mohana (poison gas)	Kankana (assault rifle)	Taamasa (cruise missile)
Nandana (gilded sword)	Saumana (tactical missile)	Varunastra (heavyweight torpedo)
Maanava (anti-tank missile)	Brah-mos (hypersonic missile)	Prasvapana (anti-ship missile)
Sudarshan (laser–guided bomb)	Saura (thermobaric bomb)	Maayaadhana (cluster bomb)
Nirbhay (subsonic missile)	The Dispossessor	The Cooler
Tvastr's deadly Sudaamana	Prithvi (short range ballistic missile)	Agni (intercontinental missile)
Sagarika (submarine-launched missile)	Raudra (rocket launcher)	Aindra (sub machine gun)
Paasupata (interceptor missile)	Gaandharva (fire bomb)	Dhanush (anti-ballistic missile)
The Yawner	The Humidifier	Vidhwansak (anti-material rifle)
Aakash (surface-to-air missile)	Brahma's cordon	The Monster (missile)
Vaayavya (artificial weather machine)	Shivalik (multi grenade launcher)	Shaurya (glide missile)

Calling his servants in, Rama
caressed their heads, their
shoulders, their
elbows and knobs, blowing
lightly on their deadliest
points, their sharp
mouths still, licking
the thought of human
bodies with the last
life-sparks leaping
out of them; and when
as Rama's loyal
servants they drew
close letting themselves
be touched and touched so,
he closed
his eyes
whispered:

form into name into kill

(After Valmiki's Ramayana: Balakanda, sarga 28)

© Poems, Vivek Narayanan

Githa Hariharan

Mishtakes 2015: Revisiting India with Manto

Sadaat Hasan Manto wrote searing fiction about India. His short stories make up a double-edged legacy all of us share, whether we read the stories in the original or in translation. Manto's stories were about a nation-in-the-making, but they force us to confront the "ideas of India" battling in the already-made nation, now more than ever.

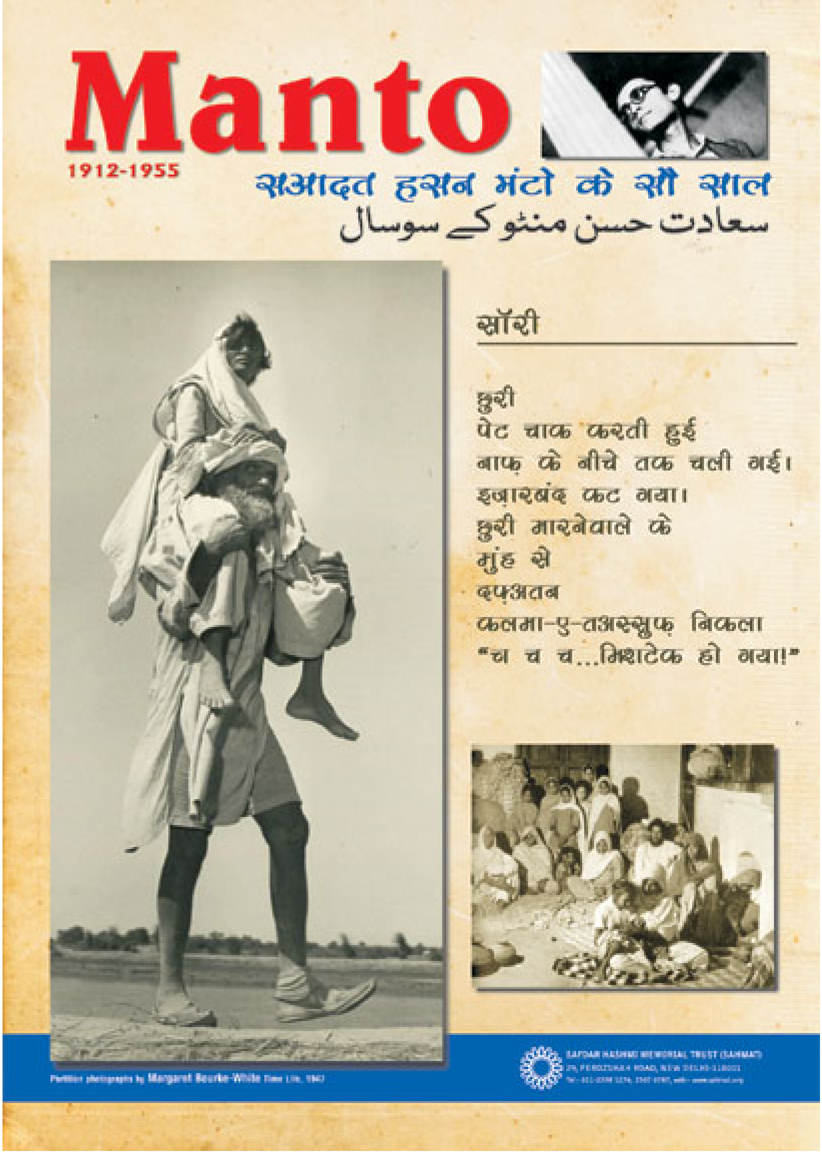
All images courtesy SAHMAT exhibition on Manto 1912-1955, http://www.sahmat.org/mantoexhibition1.html

Manto was also a film and radio scriptwriter and a journalist – he did not live in a writerly ivory tower. He was very much a man of the real world, of the streets of his city and country. He was a thinking man of his times, driven to anguish by the partition that killed, raped and looted; destroyed lives, homes, histories and roots; and stained almost every aspect of what makes people human. It wasn't just visible upheaval Manto reacted to. He was equally concerned with hidden tumult, both in the minds of actors

of violence and of those acted upon. An English translation of his story "Mishtake" provides a sharp illustration.

Ripping the belly cleanly, the knife moved in a straight line down the midriff, in the process slashing the cord which held the man's pyjamas in place. The man with the knife took one look and exclaimed regretfully, 'Oh no!… Mishtake![1]

Here, in a few graphic lines, Manto captures communal prejudice, and the hatred and violence it breeds. Here's the division and heartbreak communalism creates; not just in the minds and hearts of the "subjects" – whoever happens to be the "victim" of the moment – but in the perpetrator's psyche.



The Kannada critic and cultural commentator D.R. Nagaraj wrote, with great insight, you can get to know a society through its metaphors: "To read fiction is to know the fate of a society through its metaphors."[2] In Manto's apparently small story, the metaphor of the story is also the metaphor of a society. This double-role metaphor is a big, bloody, fatal mistake. A mistake in history that can never be undone; a mistake that has multiplied itself so it is replayed in the present; a mistake that hangs darkly

between us and the future. This many-armed mistake will live as long as the ideology that moves that knife across "different" skin flourishes.

But the word "society" seems to have lost much of its power; it has become a somewhat comfortable abstraction. We criticise "society" or even the "system" quite easily – they seem, in practice, only to include everyone else, not the self. What about the word "nation" then? The word "India"?

India – the idea of India, my idea of India, yours, theirs – is still sharply contested territory. All of us are on the battlefield, part of the struggle to name this thing called India, describe the nation we are part of, that belongs to us, and that we belong to. It's hard to be too detached from home.

This two-way belonging, which includes us in the nation by telling us who we are, can also become fraught with an exercise of exclusion – a learned, constructed sense of who is *not* one of us:

> The making of the nation involves the shaping of a Self, but also, therefore, the making of an Other. The geography of the nation is not so much territorial as imaginative, for it deals with what constitutes a people or a community, with ways the land has been lived on or worked over, with boundaries that include and exclude, with centres and peripheries… The discourses of the nation encode belonging and alienation… Literary and historical narratives, as well as various other imaginative artefacts, set up and consolidate the logic of the nation. Despite its disavowals, culture is also politics and play a key role in the shaping of civil society.[3]

How then do we look at our home, our nation and, most of all, this act of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, through Manto's stories?

Like "Mishtake", "Khol Do" is a communal battle fought on an individual body. But here the battle for dominance takes place on the site of the female body.

"Khol Do" contains more irony, more suffering, than it would seem possible within the confines of a short story. It is set in the riot-torn times of partition, when life meant surviving trains full of bodies, some dead, some half-alive; refugee camps; and a constant sense of menace, with danger or death round the corner. In the story "Khol Do", Sirajuddin runs with his daughter Sakina to escape the rioters. Sakina's mother has begged her husband to let her die –her entrails are already hanging out – and save their daughter. As they run, Sakina's dupatta falls, and her father tries to retrieve it. Let it be, she screams, then he loses her, though he has the dupatta. In the refugee camp he is in, he tries desperately to find her, then asks a band of "social workers" to help. They find her, but they don't rescue her; she is raped; and Sirajuddin finally finds her in a hospital. At this point, the story forces him, and all of us, to name the unnameable damage a combination of communal and gender violence is capable of.

> There was no one in the room. Only the body of a girl lay on the stretcher. He walked up closer to the girl. Someone suddenly switched on the lights. He saw a big mole on the girl's face and screamed, "Sakina!" The doctor, who had switched on the lights, asked, "What's the matter?" He could barely whisper, "I am… I am her father." The doctor turned towards the girl and took her pulse. Then he said, "Open the window." The girl on the stretcher stirred a little. She moved

> her hand painfully towards the cord holding up her salwar. Slowly, she pulled her salwar down. Her old father shouted with joy, “She is alive. My daughter is alive.”
>
> The doctor broke into a cold sweat.[4]

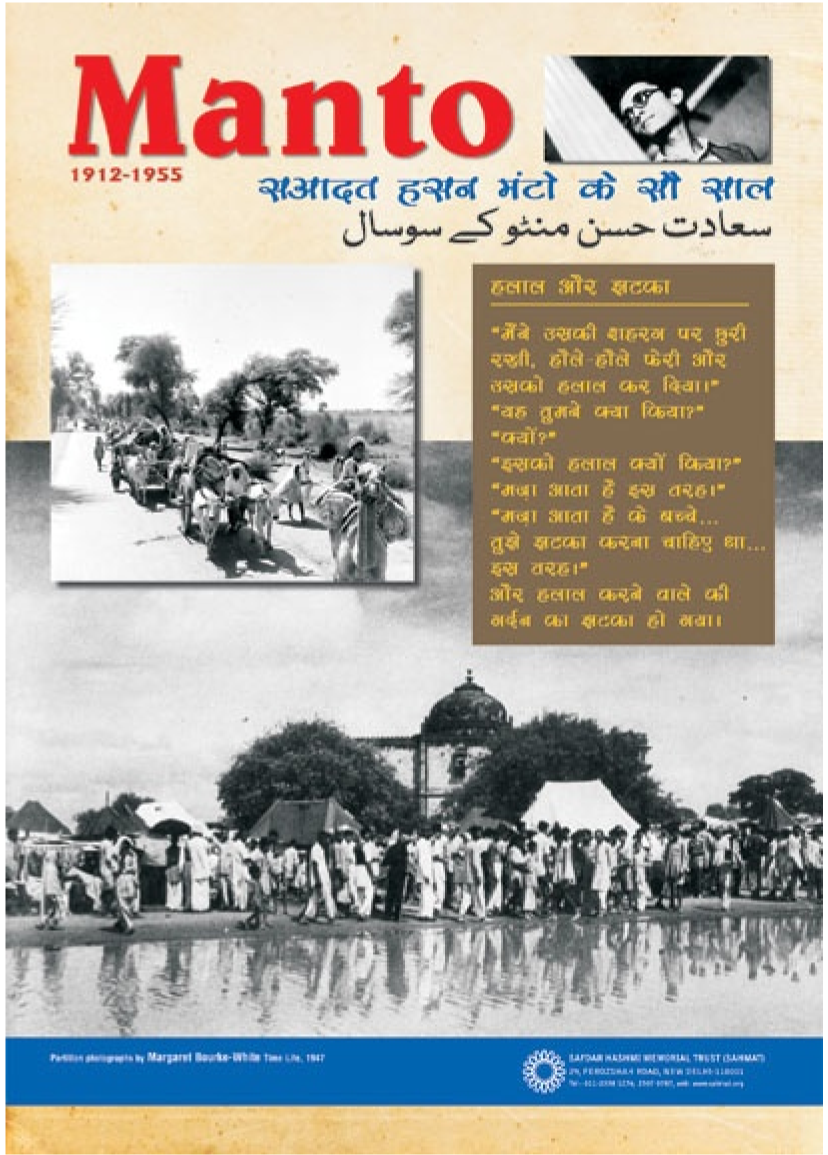
The object of the violence between man and man, and, as collateral damage almost, the violence between men and women, is for Sakina to be completely subdued. To hand over possession of her body, and the territory of self, to men – not just the men who raped her, but *all* men. This is the chilling suggestion of the story: when men fight their battles of hatred on the site of a female body, even the father becomes just another man. A man she has to open herself up to, untie her pyjama strings for. The world is divided and subdivided, into religious communities, into men and women, into attacker and attacked. And so upside down is such a world, that not only do we have to take in her response – pulling down her salwar for any man, even her father; but also the fact that Sakina’s father does not see what she is doing. All he sees, joyfully, is that she is still alive.

Violence against women in general, and violence against women of certain castes, communities, tribes and classes, continues in our India all these decades later. Sakina’s ravaged body and Sirajuddin’s ravaged mind are not yet memories.

The story “Socialism” moves from this perennial site of conflict in the nation – then and now – to another.

> He loaded all his belongings onto a truck and was driving to another town when he was waylaid by a mob. Eyeing the goods greedily, one man said to the other, ‘Just look at all that booty he is decamping with.’
>
> The owner smiled proudly, ‘What you see here is my personal property.’
>
> Some of the men laughed. ‘We know.’
>
> There was a yell from the mob, ‘Don’t let this capitalist get away. He is nothing but a robber with a truck.’[5]

The mob is greedy, but this time the mob is correct. All these years later, we recognise the man. We can update the make of the truck and the nature of the personal belongings. But the man is the same; so is his protest about the sanctity of personal property; and so is the “scary” mob that is telling the truth about him. In fact, the word “mob” could, arguably, be replaced with “crowd”. This crowd, perhaps on its way to becoming a mob, is still speaking for the “masses”. At any rate, Manto knew his crowds, masses, mobs, and all the in-between versions. He knew the open and hidden transactions that take place across classes.



Then there's Manto's masterpiece, "Toba Tek Singh", which pulls us back to the nation, our idea of India, and our daily struggles with both old and new manmade borders. If Saadat Hasan Manto were alive today, would he write his story "Toba Tek Singh"?

He would probably write it again, word for word.

In a writer's world, history is not an extraneous, "objective" outside force. History is not abstract or official. It lives, it is capable of pain and suffering, it can bleed. History takes on the shape and skin of people, their unofficial and unheard thoughts, fears, hopes. History is in the girl who is raped so often she pulls down her salwar and spreads her legs like a zombie even though it is her distraught father who has come to see her. In the man who realises, but only after he has committed murder, that he has made a "mishtake" because his victim belongs to his own community. In the mad man Toba Tek Singh, who prefers to die in a no man's land to living in a country where borders can spring up overnight.

"Toba Tek Singh" is set two or three years after partition; it was first published in 1955. But the story speaks to us like today's news, its pain and truth not blunted by the years. All these years later, Toba Tek Singh, like his creator, lives. If he stood at Wagah Border today, between the gates of India and Pakistan, we would understand every mad word he says. Why? The story of partition is not the story of a moment because it does not stop at 1947. It is part of the subcontinent's stories of exile, movement and resettlement.

When fiction writes history, literature becomes a unique source of historical data. Fiction records violence; but it also hints at the unnamed and often unnameable guilt and shame of it all. It does more. In its human embodiments of history, it considers the possibility – and the impossibility – of coming to terms with partition, borders, lines, parameters, maps, insiders, outsiders, us and them. Once again: "To read fiction is to know the fate of a society [or nation] through its metaphors."

The story "Toba Tek Singh" does this by first insisting that places have to be named. Names explain places, what they are and how they came to be. And a new place that suddenly unfolds before you so your next step may take you *into it* has to be named. How else will you begin to know it?

Writing and naming the upheaval of nation-splitting and nation-making involves the anxiety of naming places that were other places till yesterday. The lunatics in the asylum Toba Tek Singh lives in are confronted with the bewildering but inescapable question: What is Pakistan? "One Muslim lunatic, a regular reader of the fire-eating daily newspaper *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, replied after deep reflection: 'The name of the place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured.'[6]

His answer, the definition of a nation on the basis of religious identity by a lunatic, may still need to be decoded on both sides of the border. The question "What is Pakistan" also alerts us to the fact that like traditions and works of art, nations are created, imagined, then built and consolidated. "The geography of the nation is not so much territorial as imaginative…"[7] Governments, official bodies, draw the borders; people have to imagine the nation into being. The idea of watan is not just a house, or a country or a land; it is a *sense* of place, of belonging, of rootedness. This sense means imagining a collective – a nation – while keeping alive difference and diversity.

With the somewhat shaky answers to the question in the story, "What is Pakistan", we move on to the next task in the narrative of both story and nation: the new place with a new name has to be located. But the question "Where is Pakistan located?" dislocates Toba Tek Singh and his fellow inmates. It is, at first, a literal dislocation; then it is a dislocation of an essential sense of belonging:

> If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India?
>
> … Sialkot, which used to be in India, was now in Pakistan. …Lahore, which was currently in Pakistan, …could slide into India any moment. It was also possible that the entire subcontinent of India might become Pakistan. And who could say if both India and Pakistan might not entirely vanish from the map of the world one day?[8]

Confronted by the human (or philosophical) dimensions of naming but also the *politics of naming*, one lunatic climbs a tree and says he does not want to live in either India or Pakistan but in that tree.

The hero of the story is an unlikely hero called Bishan Singh. But the times are so uncertain that even the names of people don't stay fixed. Bishan Singh comes to be known by a name that leaps from the metaphor of naming places in times of violent change to that of naming people in the throes of dislocation. Bishan Singh is called Toba Tek Singh, the name of the village he comes from; a village significant only because no one is quite sure where it is – in India or Pakistan.

The narrative moves on from names – a word or two – to a whole sentence, a paragraph, a language. What language can express the madness of borders becoming more important than people? Of borders taking over people's homes, families, past and future? Toba Tek Singh speaks in variations of a secret formula: *"Uper the gur gur the annexe the be dhyana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittey moun."* His "nonsense language" articulates the madness, the incomprehensibility, of what he is living through.

If we probe the language metaphor, we find some vexing layers of meaning. The story – and real life – lead a "bilingual" existence. Both government-speak and human-speak – what should be citizen-speak– are part of life. But only government-speak seems to make literal sense, though it does not make actual sense; that is, it is essentially meaningless in human terms. (Parenthetically, we must remember that it is this official language that will create and disseminate "the vocabulary of the nation"). And human-speak, when not allowed to be citizen-speak, becomes lunatic-speak. The incredible irony of "Toba Tek Singh" is that it is his lunatic-speak that yields the meaning of the story to us.

So both uncertainty and hatred hang poisonously in the air in Manto's story, a story where language itself is rendered insane by the disturbing questions raised. Even as the nation is created, and its language tested out, its narrative is challenged.

When fiction writes history, we look at the other side of the embroidered cloth. We see the upheaval in human terms, in terms of human costs. What about the great driving force of the time, nationalism? There's very little of this in the story. In fact, Manto prophetically gives us a whiff of today's false nationalism. There is a sharp little hint of a perverted nationalism that turns the call of the freedom movement, patriotism, into jingoism. Manto would probably expand on this theme if he were with us today. But even then, he knew that an exclusionary nationalism was best relegated to the lunatic asylum. "One day a Muslim lunatic, while taking his bath, raised the slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad' with such enthusiasm that he lost his footing and was later found lying on the floor unconscious."[9]

But the sane inmates (and most of the outside world) are spared this sort of accident. "Not all inmates were mad. Some were perfectly normal, except that they were murderers… They probably had a vague idea why India was being divided and what Pakistan was, but, as for the present situation, they were equally clueless."[10] Bishan Singh asks a guard, "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" The guard says "…where it has always been." Bishan Singh persists: "But in India or Pakistan?" The sane guard knows as little as Bishan Singh. "In India… no, in Pakistan."[11]

The story seems to be asking us some basic questions about the formation of the modern nation state: is it imposed "from above"? Are the human constituents of the nation accidental constituents, kept in the dark about what they are to think of as their country and their home? To which they must commit loyalty, maintain a bond of love? Such questions create an impasse in the story, and in the real life of making nations and borders. What "resolution" does the story offer?

At the end of the story, when the exchange of lunatics takes place at the border, Toba Tek Singh is pushed and pulled by the border guards. But Toba Tek Singh refuses to move. They give up; he is "only a harmless old man". Left there overnight, this pathetic old man stands in "no man's land on his swollen legs like a colossus". Toba Tek Singh grows, through the long night, into the wounded but still standing figure of humanity. And when he collapses in the morning, "There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh."

In real life, the search for resolution continues, whether it is between "us and them" as in India and Pakistan; or "us and them" as in the borders being drawn within India day after day. Manto lives, because we still cannot confine his words, his fiction, to the safety of a museum, a library; or to what was true, but is now past. Manto lives in 2015 because his fiction still holds up a faithful mirror to the India we live in today.

Notes:

1. Translated by Khalid Hasan for *Mottled Dawn, Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition*, Penguin India, 2004.

2. Introduction to Kannada section in *A Southern Harvest*, ed. Githa Hariharan, Katha Regional Fiction, Katha-Pupa, 1993.

3. Introduction to *Women Writing in India*, Volume 2, eds. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, OUP, 1994.

4. Translated by Alok Bhalla. See https://zjeddy.wordpress.com/2012/05/11/thanda-gosht-by-saadat-hasan-manto/.

5. Translated by Khalid Hasan, 2004. See http://indiauncut.blogspot.in/2006/10/saadat-hasan-manto-and-socialism.html.

6. Translated by Frances W. Pritchett. See http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/tobateksingh/translation.html.

7. Tharu and Lalitha, 1994.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

© Essay Githa Hariharan; ©Images, SAHMAT.

Robin S. Ngangom

A Civilised Monologue

D: We'll develop everyone. Happy days are here for the poor. They can now dream realistically about becoming rich.

CP: What about our forests, our two meals of the day?

D: These are trifles. Soon you'll be driving a vehicle, living in your own house with guards and secure walls, feasting on exotic out-of-season fruits.

CV: What about our raped and murdered daughters, our disappeared sons?

D: They've made the supreme sacrifice for the country. To reciprocate with the humanity of our hearts, we've earmarked handsome rates for martyrs even before their deaths. The considerable sum we've set aside will not bring them back, but know that your sorrow is our sorrow.

CC: How about the poison in our soil, our rivers, our plants, the poison we were not told about?

D: Don't believe in these rumours from the West. Have any of our own flag-kissing scientists substantiated these allegations?

CI: How about our farmers who committed suicide?

D: We never encourage foolhardiness. They actually succumbed to greed, borrowing beyond their means. Our motto has always been: If you don't borrow, you will not lend.

Roots, © Merlin Moli

With our Guns

Before they shoot us#
let us have the thrill of shooting them first.

Love, let us push aside this muzzle
which keep our lips from meeting,
let us free the bullet stuck in our throats
which prevent our hearts from speaking.

Watching their tears of joy
in solidarity's revelries saluted by guns,
our tears have gone quiet now.

A prostrate future riddled with revolution's bullets,
the never-to-return, fatally wounded by democracy's rifles,
and yet our hearts have not yellowed on boughs,
your breasts still smell of the golden leihāo.

Even cold blue metal can become a reassuring hand
when nothing's left to defend our naked flesh, and
for the sake of the mutilated present
we will befriend a gun for a while.

And one day like animals we will be shot
either by fiendish hands or
the age's nonpartisan bullets.

Before they shoot us
let us have the satisfaction of shooting them first.

© Poems, Robin S. Ngangom; © image, Merlin Moli

Shashi Deshpande

The Writer as Activist

Of what use is creative writing? The general understanding is that it comes under the umbrella term of culture – something you enjoy when you have time, money and nothing more important to do. But there is also the idea of the writer as a thinker, an intellectual, a shaper of opinions. In India, especially, because of the long connection between literature and religion, writing has been imbued with a special aura, and writers with a greater wisdom. So here we have two completely different pictures of the writer's work and her role.

But the writer looks at herself differently. For one thing, writers, like all artists, find great joy in their work. This is something denied to most people, for whom work is drudgery. This joy may mean a sense of guilt which raises questions: why am I so privileged? And what makes me deserving of such a privilege? But it is during times of crises, of national or international turmoil, that writers confront a more fundamental question: of what use is my work? At times, there is a sense of being a bumbling amateur among soldiers –like Tolstoy's Pierre in *War and Peace*. Pierre knows his curiosity and questions to be futile in the midst of savage suffering and death. In the same way, writing seems a self-indulgent activity. What I am doing is of no use to anyone, perhaps not even to me, because there is always the possibility that I may not earn any money from the work. I am then forced to ask myself, of what use am I? Do I have any role to play in society?

When we talk of the writer's role, we have to bring in the intent, because you can't have a role unless there is an intention to play the role. Therefore the question becomes why do you write – a question often addressed to writers, but rarely, I think, to other professionals. If a writer asks herself this question, an answer would be impossible, since the urge to write comes from some unknown source. Writers, however, do try to explain themselves. And when they do, various interesting reasons emerge: that they write out of anger, out of curiosity, from a desire to create order out of chaos, to escape from this world, or to create a world over which they have more control. Let me give a personal view: when I look back to the beginning of my own writing, I see that it came out of both anger and confusion. Something, I felt, was not right with the world, with my world. It was hard to get a clear sense of what was wrong; there was only confusion and anger. It was only much later that I was able to connect my anger to the sense of denigration I was made to feel about being a female, about the roles that my gendered identity seemed to have locked me into, roles I often chafed against. Worst of all was the idea that this gendered identity, and the roles that came with it, seemed to deny my intellectual self, a self which was as important to me as my emotional self. It was out of this turmoil that my writing was born.

There are, however, a few common threads that run through the fascinatingly diverse and contradictory statements that writers make. Almost all of them refer to the mystery of the time when they began writing; they often admit that they don't really know where the writing comes from. Writers also speak of finding meanings, of learning things in the course of writing; the word 'discovery' resonates in most accounts. In other words, you don't start off from a position of knowledge; writing is a process of discoveries, often serendipitous ones, a groping in the dark, during which unexpected gifts fall into your hands. And since, most often, you write to make things clear to yourself, it is mainly a process of self-learning. One begins with questions; in fact, sometimes, even the questions are formulated only when you start writing. The questions are then pursued, not theoretically, but through human lives.

The third common aspect is a love of words, something that is inextricably linked to the urge to say something. Ideas and words are yoked together; it is a symbiotic relationship; one cannot exist without the other. And the love of words goes beyond linguistic pleasure, beyond a need to communicate, or an

aesthetic need to communicate as perfectly as possible; it is a love of words for their own sake. When you look for the right word, you are in fact examining the soul of the word itself. Only when you discover this will you know whether the word is appropriate, whether it conveys exactly what you want to say.

Now, what place is there for the social role of a writer in all this? If, when you begin writing, you don't know where it comes from, if you don't know where you are going, how can a purposeful role be a part of writing? In fact, amazingly, writers very rarely speak of wanting to play such a role. It all seems an entirely self-contained activity, work pursued for its own sake. Writing, it seems, is the thing. Nevertheless, the fact remains that writers have written to express their anguish about social evils and human problems. In our country, writers in the latter part of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century were preoccupied both with social evils and the enslavement of the nation by a foreign power. Religious orthodoxy, the problem of child marriage, of widowhood, our enslavement by a foreign power – these formed the subject of the literature in many languages. Coming into contact with another nation, with another culture, one which believed in individual liberty and individualism, sparked off a great deal of introspection about what suddenly looked like flaws in our own social structures.

Undoubtedly, a writer writes not only out of herself, but out of the society she is living in as well. But the basic focus is always the human being; it is the individual's response to society, it is what society does to the individual that the writer is really concerned with. People are both complex and complicated, and therefore writing, good writing that is, ultimately provides a complex complicated picture, not the simple picture that would emerge if the writer was writing with the intent of speaking against social evils or in favour of social reform. In Tagore's *Binodini*, for example, even if Tagore gives vent to his views on the unfortunate plight of widows, Binodini is not portrayed wholly as a victim: she is manipulative and flirtatious, she is a temptress using her charms, very skillfully, on men, and she almost destroys a marriage. Ultimately, this is not a novel about widows, but about one woman, Binodini. And, as it always is with creative writing, characters take on lives of their own. In fact, they take over the story, bringing in complexities which have no place in a merely moral narrative. In a novel, human truths emerge and artificial constructs fall apart. Almost no creative writer is interested in conveying a message, whether political or social. Nadine Gordimer, whose work is so closely connected with apartheid, says: "Politics influences my work only as it influences the lives of people". And even Tolstoy disdains the idea of writing a novel to express his views on social questions; his aim as an artist, he says, is not to resolve a question, but to compel one to love life in all its manifestations. The truth is that the writer is not writing of social evils, but merely expressing a personal, an intensely personal anguish sometimes. It is difficult, almost impossible I would say, to control the flow of creative writing within the narrow banks of political and social reform, or of any message at all.

Where is the reader in all this? Does the writer never think about the reader? Surely, even if the writer is not thinking of reforming society as a whole, she is thinking of a reader whom she can influence? But many writers, or most writers, deny that they think of a specific reader, or even of a species called readers when they are writing. For some reason, this seems difficult for the world to understand. The writer writes to communicate; surely, then, the writer cannot be satisfied with just writing? But as I see it, the reader enters the picture only after the writing is complete. Before that, I am my own reader. When I write, I split myself into two: there is the writer who is writing and there is the other self who is the reader. In fact, when I am writing, I am telling myself things. But to say "I am my own reader" is not enough; the matter is slightly more complicated than that. Since an important aspect of the urge to write is the desire to communicate, it presumes someone who will receive this communication. It is only with this connection that the writing becomes real. Borrowing Shankaracharya's terminology*, there is a chain: vak-speech, sphota-apprehension and dhvani-meaning. Without the apprehension, there is no meaning and without meaning, speech has no existence. In fact, again using Shankaracharya's idea, words are transient and ephemeral; it is the meaning which makes them eternal. And therefore the

enormous importance of the reader, because it is only when the reader apprehends the word, that it is invested with meaning. But, if writing is to communicate with a reader, the question is: communicate what? No, not a message; what the writer is trying to do, rather, is to make sense of life – for herself and, incidentally, for the reader. It is a kind of self-communing, of which the reader becomes a part. What is ultimately communicated is a picture of the world as the writer sees it, a picture that comes out of somewhere deep within, often taking even her by surprise. It is almost like hypnosis: things one didn't know were there, things one wouldn't have expressed in ordinary life, emerge. It is also a little frightening, almost like an emotional and intellectual strip tease; there is a sense of standing exposed and bare under the spotlight.

Once again there is nothing in this picture that speaks of the writer as one who wants to play a positive role in society. In fact, it is clear to me that rarely, almost never I should say, does the writer set out to achieve something. What the writer is doing, instead, is to set out on a very personal quest, one that leads her on to wholly strange and unknown paths. It's a solitary quest, involving, at least in its intentions and its beginnings, no one else. Nevertheless, the idea of the writer as some kind of an activist, as a social reformer, is very strongly entrenched in our minds. It is because of this belief that the writer is often criticised for not performing such a role adequately. I myself have often met with disapproval for not adhering to some standards of feminism – the message I am supposed to be conveying through my novels. The presumption is that I am writing to solve women's problems, or, at the least, I am dealing with these problems. And therefore, my novels need to be faithful to the feminist agenda. That, as a writer, I am interested above all in an individual human being; that her understanding of her own self is, for me, the real goal, is rarely understood. In our country, the idea that the writer should adhere to a cause, is, actually, a pointer both to the importance of the writer and the need for social reform. Certainly, no one, least of all a writer, who is supposed to have a greater sensitivity, can ignore the social and political realities of our lives. And most writers, good writers, that is, do not ignore them. But once again, I have to emphasise that it is the effect of these things on a person that interests the writer. Nevertheless, the idea of committed writing is one that refuses to go away. Any writing that espouses the cause of the downtrodden, the poor, tribals, or women is much applauded. It gains in significance because of this alone. In fact, a great number of writers, especially in the last century, were activists. But their activities were part of their personal agendas; they did not make these issues the subject of their work. And if they brought any issues into their writing, it was indirectly and through human lives.

Nevertheless, there is a deep suspicion in our country of what is called "art for art's sake". Of what use is art if it is not wedded to a social purpose? To my mind, this whole argument does not understand that the artist is committed to the art itself and that any purpose will be achieved only if it is good art; whereas, if the work is flawed artistically, it will not reach anyone at all. Good art is powerful and can communicate much, whereas bad writing, even if carefully structured for a purpose, will fail to move a reader. To me, the writer's integrity is far more important than any avowed purpose. The word integrity, as applied to writers and writing has a special meaning. Virginia Woolf expresses it best when she says that integrity is "the conviction that the writer gives the reader that this is the truth". But I see it as something more: it means believing in what one is saying. Clearly, if I do not believe in what I am saying, how can I convey any conviction to the reader?

It is important, I think, to understand the way a writer works before giving the writer the role of a social activist. As I have said earlier, it is not the events per se that are of interest to writers; it's what events do to people that really interests the writer. Secondly, writers need to distance themselves from events before they can make them part of their writing. Facts are stored, they are sifted through memory, transformed by the creative imagination and articulated in a way that expresses best what the writer wants to say: this is how the writer works. Certainly there is a problem if the writing in this country has

not taken note of major events, like the partition of the country, for example. But, if this has happened, I would rather be interested in knowing why, than use this lack as an accusation. And in any case, the accusation may only mean that the writing has not dealt directly with the event. Because, even in the course of my own severely limited reading, I have come across excellent creative writing which deals very skillfully with contemporary issues: a Hindi story which brings in the issue of reservations for women in the panchayats, for example, or a Kannada story that centres round the Babri Masjid demolition, or an English one that takes in the rise in fundamentalism. Nowhere in these stories is there a direct comment on these events; they are concerned, rather, with the involvement, or even the chance or tangential connections of the people to the events. One needs to understand that basically the creative writer works very differently from the historian or the social or political analyst. The writer explores the gaps, the silences, the ambiguities, the complexities, the contradictions – and this, is not done to get to any kind of a conclusion, because often there is no conclusion. As far as a writer is concerned, what matters is understanding and reconciliation; this is what human life is all about. And when it comes to activism, I am on the side of those who declare that writing is the writer's form of activism. Centuries ago, a writer named Kalidasa declared that "drama is not a popular method of preaching. Drama, he says, is the study, not the moral of life".

However, there is no doubt that writers can play a role in another way: they can make an impact on the social and political life of the nation through their ideas by using their reputations as thinkers and writers, a reputation which gives them a privileged place. Have our writers done this? Have we made any impact as thinkers and opinion makers? I am forced to admit that writers in our country are, unfortunately, not playing the role that they should be playing; perhaps I should say, the role we should be playing, for I have to associate myself with this failure. When I look at the contemporary scene, it seems to me that nowadays, writers make no impact at all. Of course, there are many reasons for this, some of which are outside the writers' control. One of these is that there are too many voices speaking out today: the voices of politicians, journalists, celebrities, the media, of the many specialists in each field. There is nothing wrong with this; on the contrary, it is a good thing. But it does mean that it is hard to hear the writer's voice in this cacophony of voices. Also, the writer's words and opinions, being one of many, no longer carry the authority they once did. There's this too- the mystique surrounding the writer has all but disappeared. This is inevitable in an age of enormous media coverage; it is, in fact, the flip side of publicity. Writers are now seen at so close at hand, that there is no longer any awe surrounding them. In fact, by making the writer a celebrity, the media has weakened the writer's role. The media has also taken away, to some extent, the writer's freedom: to want to be known and to be known – both these erode the writer's freedom. Sadly, to be known, to become a celebrity and be constantly in the public eye, seems to have become a much-desired role for writers. But fame brings about its own pressures which are hard to cope with. Virginia Woolf's words about Shakespeare say it beautifully: "Now I think Shakespeare was very happy in this that there was no impediment of fame, but his genius flowed out of him."

But the media is not the only instrument that puts pressure on the writer. There are many others pressures. The myth of the writer's freedom is as strongly entrenched in human minds as that of the pen being mightier than the sword. "Behold there is no calling without a director except that of the scribe and he is the director" – these words come from ancient Egypt and tell us that the idea existed even then. However, I am sure they were as little true then as they are now. Freedom comes only with money – and no writer can be free if she has to depend on someone for money. In earlier times there were patrons who helped writers to survive, to live. This did, perhaps, curtail the writer's freedom, but only to some extent. A small acknowledgement, a salaam, was enough to keep the patron happy and the writer could go on with her work; I'm quite sure a clever writer was able to write what she wanted. But, today, the writer has to please many more people – publishers, readers, journalists and reviewers, etc., for

writing is as much a market-driven profession as any other. In addition, there is also an urgent need to be on the right side of the government. For, to write, to be published and to be read is not enough; these are no longer the only ambitions of writers. There are prizes and awards to be won, committee memberships to hanker for, political appointments, possibly travels abroad – all these benefits depend on pleasing the right people. I spoke earlier of writing being a self-indulgent activity; now I am afraid it has become a self-promoting activity. To see writers hankering for rewards is to lose faith in their ability to play any role beyond a selfish one. I must say that I am extremely suspicious of awards – especially government-sponsored ones. I see them as a kind of slow poison destroying the strength of literature, which comes from the direct response of readers to the writing. When awards – which are always subjective and too often political and biased – mediate between the writing and the reader, this necessary connection between the two is destroyed.

But, to me, a problem greater than all these external pressures is the way writers have lost confidence in themselves, in their ability to play any role at all. I myself am consumed by enormous doubts about my writing making any impact, or influencing anyone. Does anyone read what I write? Does it mean anything to a reader? I remember my own anguished helplessness after what happened in Gujarat. What could I say? Who would listen? In any case, how often do we hear writers speaking out on major issues? Individual voices may speak, but does it make any difference? When I see a letter to the editor signed by a list of august names, I am filled with despair; it seems to spell out the pathetic limit of the writer's role. Politicians have, I think, very accurately gauged the impotence of writers; they don't give a damn for their opinions. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that there is no place for the intellectual, for the reasoned balanced opinion in a democracy. A single voice has no value; only numbers matter. Appealing to passions works; reason and sense stand no chance. In our own country, we are seeing how gradually and insidiously the fabric of our society is being damaged by dividing people on the basis of caste, religion and language. What have writers been able to do about this? I am frightened by the way the idea of this country as one of multiplicities is being eroded, of how slowly the idea is being circulated of a country of one people, one religion etc. I am frustrated too by the inability, the impotence of writers and intellectuals to contest this idea.

In any case, I doubt whether writing can change anything. For example, even after so much has been written about feminism, people still equate it with hating men, abandoning families, lesbianism, etc. Nevertheless, only a cynic would say that writing is totally impotent. The truth is that writing by itself, a writer by herself, can achieve very little. Nothing, in fact. Virginia Woolf, speaking of masterpieces, says that they are not solitary births, but the outcome of many years of thinking in common by the body of people; the experience of the mass, she says, is behind the single voice. I know how true this is when I think, once again, of the feminist movement. It was the effect of the voices of writers, academics, journalists, lawyers, activists, and ordinary women speaking together, that finally made some impact. One Simone de Beauvoir, one Germaine Greer, could never have done what was achieved by so many people coming together. The writer matters as part of a group and in the group the role of a writer is a very important role, because the writer can spearhead a movement. By articulating ideas with great clarity, she makes it possible for others to identify with what she is saying. And often, the writer, by first articulating an idea, builds a platform on which others can stand. The writing may give expression to a very personal emotion, but when readers identify with it, it becomes universal and symbolises human emotion itself. It is through giving expression to human feelings that the writer becomes part of a movement for social change. However, there is this too: unless the time is ripe, unless people are ready to hear what is being said, the words make no impact at all. Over two centuries ago, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman". But her plea for women's rights remained unheard. In the last century, however, such voices fell on fertile ground. The world was ripe for a change and therefore feminism gathered strength. A writer's role, then, is to work as part of a community, to be

part of a body of voices. It happened in our country in the dalit movement, where the writing kept pace with the general trend of feeling; it happened with the women's movement, where the writing by women became part of a whole movement. But these are rare examples. Writers have not been able to use their stature as writers and thinkers to form a collective voice and speak on important issues, a collective voice that carries weight. There is no forum in which writers come together and make an impact. The trouble is that the writing community in our country is a splintered group – caste-ridden, as well as language and gender divided. Yes, sadly, writers too look upon women's writing as being less significant, less intellectual.

However, I do believe that there is a role which writers continue to play, a very important role which is not connected to society as a whole, but to the individual human being. For one thing, a writer gives voice to the voiceless and speaks on behalf of people who are unable to articulate their ideas, their thoughts, or their fears, the way a writer can. I don't think a book can change a person's life, though blurbs often make this grandiose claim. But sometimes a book, through a kind of identification, can spark off an understanding of herself in the reader which becomes part of the process of healing, of moving on. If writing is a quest, the reader is part of the quest, a partner who travels with the writer. The reader may diverge at some point; nevertheless, it is that book it is which started the reader off on the journey. As Kafka puts it, "A book ought to be an axe to break the frozen sea within us".

I have no doubt that no writer sets out to actively play a role in society through her writing. For a writer, as I said, writing is the thing; in fact, it is the only thing. But in exploring ideas, in teasing them, in stretching them and trying them on, the writer helps others to open their eyes to what they have not been able to glimpse on their own. The writer's imagination is a very powerful tool; it has both muscle and vision. I would compare it, not to the butterfly's flitting, but to the eagle's swoop and soar in flight. There is something daring about imagination, about the way it can go into the dark, leap over a yawning abyss and make connections which never seemed to be there. It is imagination that allows the artist to get to the inner truth, which goes beyond the facts, behind the presumed reality.

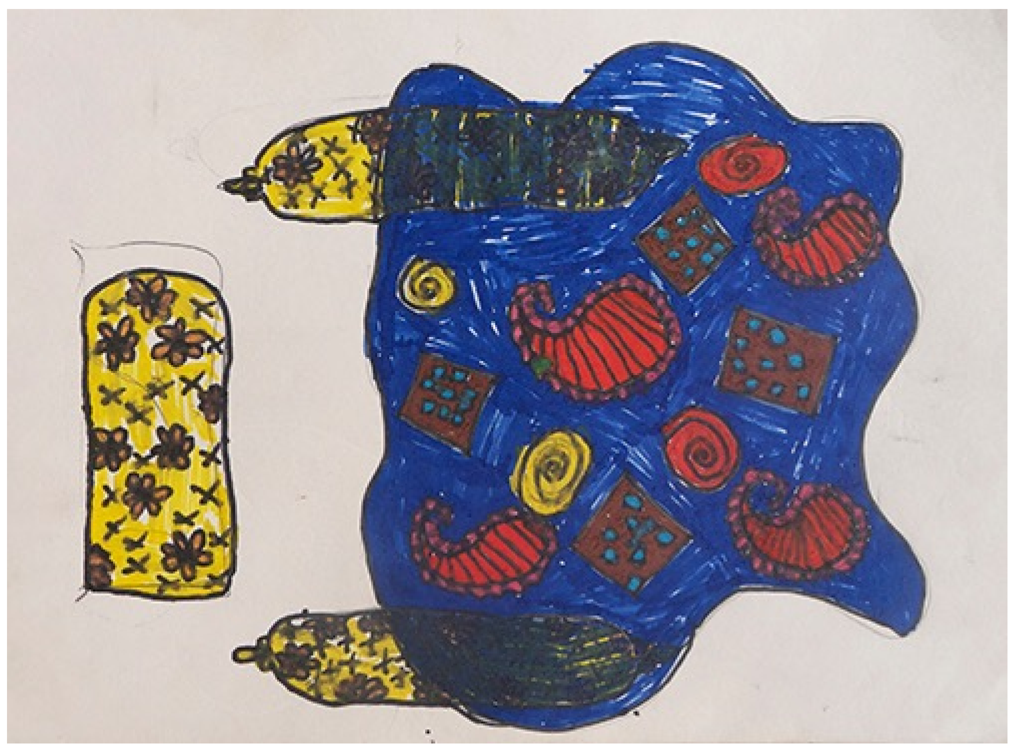
How do we live? This is the question which, above and beyond all questions, has plagued the human mind. We have found answers to a great many questions, but this one continues to elude us. This is the question all serious writers address; there is little hope of getting an answer, but to pursue the question itself is to understand a little more of life, to get some glimpses of possibilities. To me a writer's main role is in providing these glimpses. And there is this too, that a writer is different from all others in that at the moment of writing, she steps out of the room, so to say, stands at a distance, a little away from her own humanity and sees the world from a vantage. This gives a unique perspective, the larger picture which is closer to the truth than anything else. This perspective also allows for much to fall away – our accepted ideas about ourselves and the world, for instance. It also lets us see clearly our strengths and weaknesses, our flaws and follies, our dreams and nightmares. This is what the writer has to offer a reader, this, perhaps, is truly the writer's role.

Note:
I have used information from Ganesh Devy's *After Amnesia* and Adya Rangacharya's *Drama in Sanskrit Literature*.

© Shashi Deshpande

Pinky

Pinky's Bed



This drawing by Pinky was made during sessions of the Kolkata Women's Dialogue, a series of social art events initiated by artist Joan Marie Kelly and Shikah Das in the brothels of Kolkata.

© Pinky, Joan Marie Kelly and Shikah Das for the Kolkata Women's Dialogue.

T. P. Sabitha

Stones

The first stone
against the military man who trained
his gun-muzzle on the eleven-year-old.
The second stone
thrown at the forehead of the khaki-clad man
who forced himself on the young girl next door.
The third stone
against the policeman who interrogates
the kneeling humiliation of my seventy-year-old abba.
The fourth stone
at the shrill throat of the television reporter
who called bare chinar trees towering terrorists.

The next
a memorial stone at the tomb
of humanity that oozes blue, little
by little every day, into the frozen palette of the Dal.
Then a stone
for the unblinking translucence of kashmiriyat
that glittered, glass-like, in Faiz's fragile dreams.
Then one
for the resurrection of the unceasing swirls
of the white tunics of Sufi dervishes.

One
for the steaming saffron cups of kahwa, sipped
sitting on the carpet with the sardar friend.
One
For that sharp-nosed shikara that darts
every evening towards them, a hurried dirge.
And one
For the multi-hued gardens, floating cloud-like

on the wearied waters of the lake.
One
For all the missing letters in all the mailboxes
in Shahid Ali's country without a post office.
One
for the sorrowful lol of the separated lover
In Habba Khatoun's hand, yielding to the lust of words.
One
For the infinite blue sky over Mount Kailasa
where Lal Ded's Shiva dances a frenzied tandava.

The one hundred and eleventh stone
For the lost times of all childhoods that never were#.

For Time.

© Poem, T. P. Sabitha ; © image, Githa Hariharan

S. Vijayaraghavan

Between Two Edges

Procession

Charcoal on paper

Zai Whitaker

Roots

The bag was heavy with rats, enough for the festive meal the next day. Important relatives were coming from Seneri, another Irula village. They would be tired and hungry after the half-day walk. Thenee and her father struck home through the rice paddy, satisfied with the day's success. The girl hummed a tune; after all, her name meant bumblebee. It had been a close call: not a paisa in the house, and news of this invasion of five hungry relatives! Now, after the long day's hunt, they not only had two kilos of field rats, but almost as much rice as well. Being harvest season, rat burrows had been industriously stocked with paddy. Thenee felt a bit sorry for the poor rats as she scooped up the grain, but then reminded herself that they were soon going to be eaten too, so it didn't matter. Amma would roast half the rats, and make a curry with the other half to eat with the rice.

And that wasn't all. They had been lucky – extremely lucky – in finding a plant of the karupp-pottu, the medicinal root that was now fetching almost five hundred rupees a kilo. It was being tested as a cure for the new disease that was killing millions of people around the world, and especially in India and Africa. It was rare, and couldn't be cultivated, and the big medicine companies had sent messages to the Irulas to bring in as much as they could. Some of the older Irulas were not sure this was a good idea. It was a sacred root, they said, and shouldn't be touched. But Thenee's father was a practical man. "Sacred, bacred," he growled. "Whenever there's a chance for us young hunters to make some money, it suddenly becomes sacred. First it was wild primrose, and now, this."

He peered into the bag filled with the spotted, twisted roots and gave Thenee a friendly cuff on the head. "You go tomorrow. Early morning, understand? I'll be helping Amma with the cooking, you know I'm a much better cook."

Thenee gave him her sideways look.

"And remember to tell them you have been to school, and know everything. Don't get cheated! It's 500 rupees a kilo, and this is definitely one kilo. I want to see at least 500 in your hand when you return."

"And if you don't?"

"Well. You know that rod in the corner, the one I use for stoking the fire." They both laughed, because Thenee's father was no beater. The closest he got to anger was tugging at his moustache and mumbling a few words under his breath. Thenee skipped around to his other side and took his free hand.

"Appa, how can I say I've been to school? One week in school doesn't mean I'm educated." Her father pretended to be hugely shocked. "No? Well, anyway, you learnt something, didn't you? And when you decide to go back, you can learn some more. It's never too late."

Thenee looked far off into the distance, where the sun was spreading an orange mess before burrowing into the low brown hills of the Eastern Ghats. Yes, she thought, it's sometimes too late. She was too old now, about fifteen or fourteen, or perhaps twelve; Amma told her a different age every time she asked. Appa had no idea what was involved in learning. Those five days at school had been awful. The panchayat president had wanted to fill the schools before the Collector's visit, and Thenee had been forced to go. The alphabets had shocked and surprised her. So many of them, what was the use? And each one as difficult to copy as the next, except 'm'.

The stares of the other children when she said she was an Irula and her father caught snakes and rats! The looks of pity and contempt when she said, at lunch time, that she hadn't brought anything but wasn't hungry! Appa just didn't realize that going to school was more than just copying down numbers

and letters on a slate. The following week, she had refused to go and thrown her slate into the high-caste well when no one was looking. It had shattered against the wall in a most interesting pattern.

The next morning, Thenee was up early and drank a glass of kanji from last night. It had just the right amount of salt and soothed her empty stomach, making her feel a little less horrible about going to the pharmaceutical company. It wasn't far; if you trekked through the fields it took an hour. It would open only later, when the sun hit the tamarind tree, but she'd start now and wait in the shade of a tree near the building. That way, she'd avoid walking in the heat both ways.

"Remember what I told you!" said Appa as she hitched up her half-sari and took the bag of roots. Thenee smiled, rolled her eyes as if to say "Easier said than done, my friend!"

It was a pleasant walk. A short sprinkly drizzle made the water drops glisten and shine in the early sun. A kite swooped down near a family of lapwings; the mother and two chicks. The little ones marched brightly towards the kite, unaware that Death was about to strike. But Thenee knew what the mother lapwing would do, and she was right. She began limping away in the opposite direction, leaning on one side and pretending her wing was broken. Sure enough, the kite crash-landed nearby; after all, why take a mere chick when you can get a bigger meal? Thenee clapped her hand to her mouth in delight as the lapwing flew away, leaving the kite to blunder off, feeling rather ashamed of itself. The clever lapwing shot back to the chicks and herded them under a bush. Mothers, thought Thenee, are a clever lot.

Turning this thought over in her mind as she walked, she reached the suburbs of Chinglepet town and the ugly yellow building where the medicinal plants office was located. To her surprise, there was already a bustle going on; people walking in with bags and lunch boxes, scooters being parked, loud greetings. It must be later than she'd thought. Should she wait under the tree? No. Clutching the bag, she went in and walked up the first flight of stairs and into Nataraj Pharmaceuticals. Not everyone had arrived yet, but the man she and Appa had met last month was there. Thenee waited near the door as he shuffled papers about on his desk, picked up the phone and put it down, opened and closed a drawer. He knew she was waiting for him, and that he had nothing at all to do. But like all good office workers, he liked to show his importance.

Pushing a few more things about, he waved her into a small room to the side, dominated by a large electronic weighing scale. He knew what she'd brought – the Irulas only came with this one medicinal root. Fewer and fewer Irulas came, with less and less of it, and the demand for this "magic root" grew and grew. Its price had doubled in this last month, but Mr Krishnan had not mentioned this small fact to the Irulas.

The green electronic numbers flashed prettily as Thenee's bundle was placed on the steel platform. Mr Krishnan extracted a key from his pocket, opened a steel locker and took out a hundred rupee note. "Got change? You owe me 25."

Thenee's pulse raced and blood rushed to her head. She felt dizzy. Her voice stopped working. She couldn't speak. After a moment's hesitation, she managed to produce a few soft words of protest. "Only? I thought… My father said… At school, they taught me…"

Krishnan said he was busy, didn't have the time to explain numbers to her. He rattled off a long calculation. Did she understand that? No? Well, he couldn't spend the whole day trying to explain. It was less than one-third of a kilo, the machine never told lies, and at 500 a kilo, this came to so much.

Did she want to sell or not? He didn't want problems later. "Take it away if you like," he said, "the other company will give you half this. Quickly, do you have change or should I…Okay here, there is some change after all, and here's an extra five rupees to buy yourself some sweets on the way home."

Her legs felt they couldn’t, wouldn’t work. Blood rushed to all the wrong places and at the wrong speed. She was dizzy and wanted to sit down. Not a bad idea at all. Squatting under the tree, she tied the money into a knot at the end of her sari, and wiped the sweat off her face. She remained seated for a long time, staring into the bus terminal but seeing nothing. When she got up fifteen minutes later, there was a new strength in her legs and she walked home with a spring in her step.

It didn’t matter how much the other children laughed and sniggered at her. They would get bored of it and stop at some point. And it didn’t matter how difficult the alphabets were. She would learn them at some point. And it didn’t matter that her slate lay broken at the bottom of the well. Appa would simply have to buy her a new one. Because she was going to read and write the numbers and letters, however curly they were, and no one, no one, was ever going to be able to cheat her family again.

It would actually be a good idea to buy the slate on her way home, from the grocery store near the bus stop. She changed direction, and turned into the small village bustle where the high-caste people lived. Funny how she didn’t feel nervous at all.

“Want some chalk too? And a duster?” asked the shopkeeper.

“Yes, why not?” said Thenee. She began walking away, then turned round.

“Also, a small comb, please. How much?”

© Zai Whitaker

Contributors

A.J. Thomas is an award winning Indian English poet, fiction writer and translator. Formerly the editor of *Indian Literature*, his publications include the collection of poems *Germination* and numerous translations, such as Paul Zacharia's stories translated as *Bhaskara Pattelar* and *Other Stories* and *Reflections of a Hen in Her Last Hour* and *Other Stories*. For more on the author and his work, see www.ajthomas.in.

Anand (P. Sachidanandan), a much-awarded Malayalam writer, is the author of short stories, plays, essays, and novels such as Aalkkoottam (The Crowd), Samharathinte Pusthakam (The Book of Murder) and Apaharikkappetta Daivangal (Stolen Gods). Two of his works, Desert Shadows and Vyasa and Vighneswara, are available in English translation.

Chetana Sachidanandan, a biologist by profession, is a senior scientist at the CSIR Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology, Delhi. She is also the daughter of Malayalam writer Anand, whose works she has translated from Malayalam into English. Her translation of Samharathinte Pustakam (The Book of Destruction) was short-listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.

E. P. Unny is a well-known cartoonist who has worked for a range of newspapers, from the *Hindu* in Chennai to the *Sunday Mail*, *The Economic Times* and the *Indian Express*, where he is currently Chief Political Cartoonist. His most recent publication is *Business As Usual*, *Journey of the Indian Express Cartoonist*. He received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Indian Institute of Cartoonists in 2009.

Githa Hariharan has written fiction, essays and columns over the last three decades. Her most recent book is *Almost Home*, *Cities* and *Other Places*. For more on the author and her work, see www.githahariharan.com.

K. Satchidanandan is a widely translated Malayalam poet and a bilingual writer, translator and editor. His most recent works available in English are *While I Write* and *Misplaced Objects* and *Other Poems*. For more on the author and his work see www.satchidanandan.com.

Merlin Moli, a Delhi-based artist, has three decades of sculpting experience with various materials. She has participated in exhibitions both in India and elsewhere.

M. Mukundan, novelist and short story writer won the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Daivathinte Vikruthikal* (God's Mischief) in 1989. Four of his novels were made into feature films, with *God's Mischief* winning the State Award for the best film. He was the President of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi for three years. His stories and novels have been widely translated into various Indian languages as well as in French.

N. S. Madhavan is a Malayalam writer, commentator and columnist. He has published six collections of stories, two plays, a travelogue, a book of literary criticism, and a novel. The English translation of his novel, *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, won the annual Crossword award for the best Indian fiction in translation. His most recent work is a collection of stories, *Pancha Kanyakakal* (Five Virgins).

Orijit Sen Graphic artist, cartoonist, muralist and designer, Orijit Sen is the author of the graphic novel *River of Stories* as well as many other works of graphic fiction and non-fiction. He is one of the founders

of People Tree – a collaborative studio and store for artists, designers and craftspeople. Sen is also Mario Miranda Chair Visiting Professor at Goa University.

Perumal Murugan is a well-known Tamil novelist, short story writer and poet. Three of his novels have been translated into English: *Seasons of the Palm*, which was shortlisted for the prestigious Kiriyama Prize in 2005, *Current Show*, and *One Part Woman*. He has received awards from the Government of Tamil Nadu as well as from Katha Books.

Pinky lives in Kolkata. She was one of the participants in the Kolkata Women's Dialogue, a series of social art events initiated by artist Joan Marie Kelly and Shikah Das in the brothels of Kolkata.

Robin S. Ngangom is a bilingual poet and translator who writes in English and Manipuri. He describes himself as "a politically-discriminated-against and historically-overlooked poet who, nonetheless, believes that poetry cannot do without love in all its outlandish manifestations".

Shashi Deshpande has written novels, short stories, essays and books for children over several decades, and has also translated work from Kannada and Marathi into English. Her most recent novel is *Shadow Play*.

S. Vijayaraghavan holds an MFA degree with a major in painting from the College of Art in New Delhi. He had participated in various shows, festivals and residency programmes, in India and elsewhere. For more on the artist and his work, see http://vijaysvhavan.wix.com/vijay.

T. P. Sabitha, poet, essayist and art critic, teaches English at the University of Delhi and has been a Commonwealth Scholar at UCL, University of London and a Paul Mellon Fellow at the Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven.

Vivek Narayanan is a widely published poet whose books include *Universal Beach* and *Life and Times of Mr S.* Narayanan is co-editor of *Almost Island*, an India-based journal, literary organisation and publisher. He has been a fellow in creative writing at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, Harvard University, and is now a fellow at the Cullman Centre for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library.

Zai Whitaker is the Director of the Madras Crocodile Bank, where she lives. Apart from her interest in conservation, she loves teaching and learning, and has taught at the Kodaikanal International School. She has also been the Principal of two schools. She plays an active role in the Irula Tribe Women's Welfare Society in Thandari near Chinglepet.

Terms and Conditions

I – Terms and Conditions

1. Use of this website is governed by the following Terms and Conditions, which include the Privacy Policy, and Copyright Terms.
2. The website is designed, developed and maintained for and on behalf of the Indian Writers Forum Trust (IWF), Delhi, India – indianwritersforum@gmail.com. For a list of board members of the Trust, see About us on www.indianculturalforum.in.
3. Your continued use of this website (www.guftugu.in) constitutes acceptance of the Terms and Conditions of this website, from the time you first began use of the website. If you do not agree to the Terms and Conditions (including the Privacy Policy and Copyright Terms) please navigate away from this website or close your browser window.
4. Guftugu reserves the right to change these Terms and Conditions at any time by posting changes online. You may not receive a personal notification to this effect. Your continued use of this site after the changes are posted constitutes your acceptance of this agreement as modified.
5. You agree to use this website (and the content provided therein) only for lawful purposes (i.e. purposes that are not fraudulent, illegal, unauthorized or harmful in any manner), and in a manner which does not infringe the rights, or restrict, or inhibit the use and enjoyment of the site by any third party. In particular, you agree to follow relevant copyright laws as applicable domestically and/or internationally and as specified more particularly in the Copyright Terms. In particular, by continuing to use this website you agree not to utilise any of the content available on this website without the prior permission of Guftugu. For more information on the use of content from this website please refer to the Copyright Terms.
6. To provide notice of material alleged to infringe a copyright or any other rights please refer to the Copyright Terms and, in particular, the form for Notice of Infringing Material.
7. The websites www.indianculturalforum.in and www.guftgu.in constitute two distinct and separate websites. The Terms and Conditions of Use, copyright terms and notices are accordingly separate and distinct for each of the two websites. Please refer to the relevant legal documents on each individual website for further details.
8. Guftugu reserves the right to moderate any user generated content on the website including comments, suggestions, etc.
9. Guftugu reserves the right to suspend, or discontinue the provision of any individual service on this website or indeed suspend or discontinue this website all together without any notice or liability on its part.
10. This site and the information, names, images, videos, pictures, logos regarding or relating to Guftugu/the ICF website are provided "as is" without any representation or endorsement made and without warranty of any kind whether express or implied. In no event will Guftugu be liable

for any damages including, without limitation, indirect or consequential damages, or any damages whatsoever arising from the use or in connection with such use or loss of use of the site, whether in contract or in negligence. Guftugu does not warrant that the functionality of this site will be uninterrupted or error free, that defects will be corrected, or that this site or the server that makes it available are free of viruses or bugs.

11. The website uses cookies and reserves the right to collect your information for the purpose of processing payments as well as to analyse traffic, as more particularly described in the Privacy Policy.
12. You may create a link to this website, though should you do so, the same is at your own risk and the terms of this agreement will apply to your use of this website by linking to it.
13. The content on the Guftugu website is provided for educational and informational purposes only. Guftugu makes no representations about the content and suitability of the information presented online for any purpose.
14. Guftugu uses reasonable endeavours to ensure the information on this web site is current and accurate. To the extent permitted by law, Guftugu makes no representations or warranties as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness or currency of the information within this website.
15. The use of the website and any information contained on the site is at your own risk. Guftugu, its employees, agents, consultants and representatives do not accept any responsibility whatsoever, including responsibility for negligence, physical damage, personal injury, economic loss, costs or expenses of any kind, or any other loss or damage suffered or incurred by anyone as a direct or indirect consequence of errors in or omissions from the site, or related action or inaction taken in reliance upon the contents of the website.
16. The views expressed in, and the information and materials published on the Guftugu website, are those of their authors (or as indicated) and not of Guftugu. The inclusion of any links on the website does not necessarily imply Guftugu endorses the views expressed within them.
17. The Guftugu web site may contain information sourced from third party blogs, external systems and social media platforms. As Guftugu does not moderate such blogs, systems and platforms, it does not take responsibility for that content, which must adhere to the terms of use of the relevant blog, system or platform. On occasions Guftugu provides links to other sites on the Internet. You should be aware that third party sites are not under the control of Guftugu. Therefore, Guftugu is not responsible for what appears on other (third party) sites and makes no representations concerning the content of these sites.
18. Breach of any of the Terms and Conditions, in any way, gives Guftugu the right to take any lawful actions to deal with such breach, including, but not limited to, suspending your access to the website, prohibiting you from accessing the website, blocking computers using your IP address from accessing the website, contacting your internet service provider to request that they block your access to the website and/or bringing court proceedings against you. Failure by Guftugu to strictly enforce any of the provisions set out in this agreement or failure to exercise an option to remedy a breach shall not be construed as waiver of such provisions and shall not affect the validity of the Terms and Conditions or of any part thereof or the right to enforce the whole or any part thereof. No waiver of any of the provisions of this agreement shall be effective unless expressly stated to be the case in a written document signed by both parties.
19. You hereby indemnify Guftugu and undertake to keep Guftugu indemnified against any and all losses, damages, costs, liabilities and expenses (including without limitation legal expenses and

any amounts paid by Guftugu to a third party in settlement of a claim or dispute on the advice of Guftugu's legal advisers) incurred or suffered by Guftugu arising out of any breach by you of any provision of these Terms and Conditions (or other illicit or unlawful use of this website), or arising out of any claim that you have breached any provision of these terms and conditions.

20. This website and the Terms and Conditions are governed by and are to be construed and interpreted in accordance with the laws of India.
21. In the event of any dispute arising out of the use of this Website or interpretation of these Terms and Conditions, the Parties shall attempt to mutually resolve the matter through negotiations. In the event no resolution is possible, the Parties shall proceed to arbitration, before a single arbitrator, to be appointed by Guftugu. Guftugu shall make the appointment of the sole arbitrator within two weeks of notice of the failure of negotiations (which may be given by either party). The decision of the sole arbitrator shall be final and binding on the parties. The arbitral seat shall be in Delhi and the Indian law, as applicable, shall govern proceedings.
22. The Courts at New Delhi, India shall have exclusive jurisdiction to adjudicate any dispute arising under, out of or in connection with these Terms and Conditions or any usage of the Guftugu website.
23. If any part of the Terms and Conditions is found unlawful and/or unenforceable the rest of the Terms and Conditions, to the extent separable, shall continue to be valid.

IWF, which is the owner and administrator of the Guftugu website, is registered as a trust under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882. IWF may be contacted through its administrative office at Khasra No: 258, West End Marg, Gali No. 3, Saidulajab, New Delhi 110 030, India

II – Privacy Policy

1. Guftugu does not collect personal information for any purpose other than to respond to your queries and to process payments (subscriptions and donations). Personal information may be provided to third parties in the normal course of business (such as our bankers, for the purpose of processing payments) but shall otherwise remain confidential except for any disclosures required by law.
2. The Guftugu website uses cookies. By continuing to use this website you consent to Guftugu's use of session cookies. Guftugu may record ongoing access and use of the website (for the purpose of improving content). The cookies used by Guftugu will collate non-personally identifiable information for analytics purposes i.e., to examine the number of views received by any content, to collect log in details, length of session, etc. Guftugu may also track your IP address and browser type.
3. Guftugu does not collect information or create individual profiles for commercial marketing. Your details will not be passed on or sold to any third party for any commercial reason whatsoever.
4. Any communication or material that you transmit to, or post on, any public area of the site including any data, questions, comments, suggestions, or the like, is, and will be treated as, non-confidential and non-proprietary information.
5. This website contains links to third party sources and sites. These are provided solely for information purposes. When you select a link to a third party website, you are leaving the Guftugu website and are subject to the privacy policies of the third party website.

Copyright

1) Terms of reproduction of Guftugu content:

All rights in the content carried on the Guftugu website are reserved. Unless otherwise indicated, all information, text, images, designs, layouts and any other content in the publication are copyrighted to Guftugu or the artist / author in question. No part of this publication may be used, modified, reproduced, distributed, or published by any other means, including printing/ re-printing, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the relevant copyright holder.

2) Notice of copyright violation:
Guftugu publishes content on a best efforts basis and only after checking the relevant rights in each work carried in the publication. However, if you are a copyright owner (which can be an exclusive licensee), or their agent, and if you believe that a work is available in the Guftugu publication / on the Guftugu website in such a way that constitutes an infringement of copyright, or a breach of an agreed license or contract, you can notify Guftugu of the same in writing, preferably at indianwritersforum@gmail.com; or posted to Khasra No: 258, West End Marg, Gali No. 3, Saidulajab, New Delhi 110 030, India.

Your notification must include:

(i) Information reasonably sufficient to enable us to identify the copyrighted work that is the subject of the claimed infringement or, if multiple copyrighted works are involved, a representative list of such works;
(ii) Information reasonably sufficient to permit us to locate and access such material;
(iii) Information reasonably sufficient to permit us to contact you, such as your name, address, telephone number, and email address;
(iv) An indication of whether you are the owner of the content, or if you are acting on their behalf (details of all parties must be supplied including the relationship between them);
(v) An indication of the law, license, or contract that you claim is being transgressed;
(vi) In the event the content constitutes Third Party Content and / or has been linked through the Guftugu website, an undertaking that you will file an infringement suit against the violator of your copyright, in the competent court having jurisdiction, and produce the order of such a competent court, within a period of 21 days from the date of the notice.