
culture matters
Guftugu
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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.

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Cover, Issue 3: "We Sinful Women", mixed media, 2013, © Saba Hasan

Our Team

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

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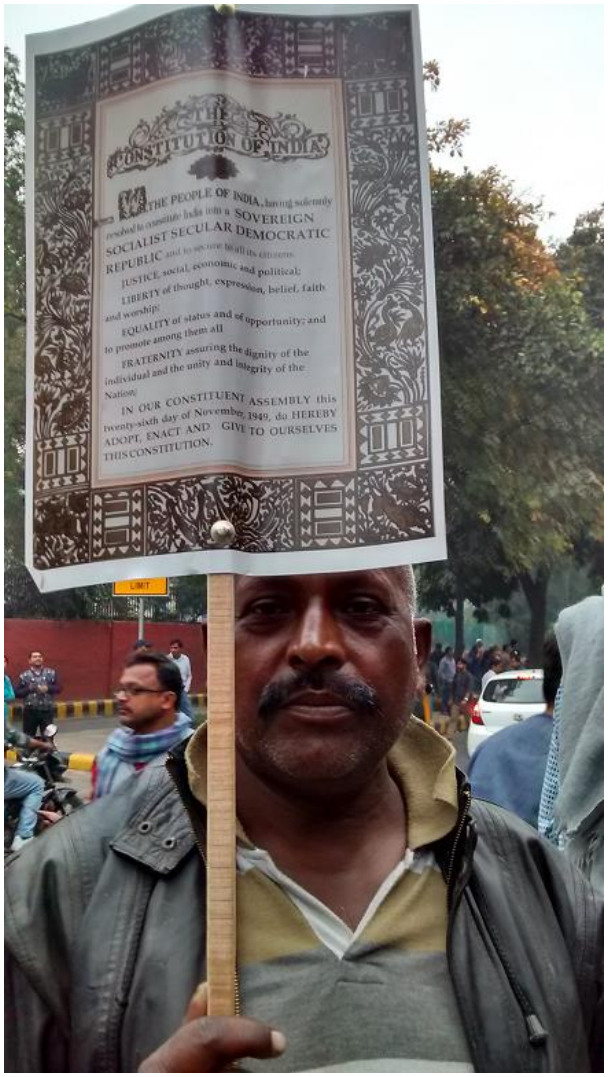

Photos by Githa Hariharan

You who have wronged the simple man
Bursting into laughter at his suffering…
Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
You may kill him – a new one is born
Deeds and talks will be recorded
Czeslaw Milosz

Over the last year, we have seen a churning in campuses, from the Film and Television Institute (FTII) in Pune to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chennai. The ill-qualified Gajendra

Chauhan was appointed Chairman of the FTII, Pune, and the students' resistance to the appointment was ruthlessly suppressed. The ban on the Periyar-Ambedkar Study Circle at IIT Chennai was directly imposed by the HRD ministry. This was part of a pattern of official responses to students' questioning the saffronisation of their institutions. It was part of a pattern to curb their right to criticise the institutions and society they are part of.

Next, the cultural, academic and scientific communities spoke up, with large numbers of writers, academics, artists, filmmakers and scientists issuing statements and returning their state awards in protest against the increasing victimisation of minorities, and the crushing of dissent.

The churning continues this year. The Ambedkar Students' Association at the University of Hyderabad was attacked by the BJP student wing, the ABVP, with the strong support of the local BJP MP and the concerned minister. This led to the suspension and ostracism of dalit research scholars. The suicide of one of these research scholars, Rohith Vemula, brought centre stage the continuing caste-based discrimination in our society in general, and in our educational institutions in particular. In a moving letter he left behind, Rohith said, "I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan…"

But this is what this aspiring, yearning young man experienced in real life: "The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living…"

"My birth is my fatal accident," wrote Rohith, and this is an indictment of the collective failure to live up to our Constitution that promises all Indian citizens equal rights.

The government and its Hindutvavadi friends have been anxious to downplay this indictment. They quibbled about whether Rohith was dalit or backward caste. (It was reminiscent of the quibbling about whether it was beef or mutton in Mohammad Akhlaq's fridge last year when he was lynched.)

But Rohith was not so easily forgotten. Nor was the "grand design" of increasing onslaught on the idea of India this nation's makers have left us. Campuses grew more turbulent. The word increasingly being heard is azaadi – freedom – freedom from caste, communalism, gender discrimination and capitalism.

In an effort to draw attention away from the caste issue, the right wing took up one more mode of attack: imposing a narrow, exclusionary form of "nationalism" on citizens. On the basis of an event in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, students were detained on the basis of doctored videos, and the entire academic community was vilified in a variety of ways.

The students are now out on bail, though the judge who granted student Kanhaiya Kumar bail spoke of their free debate as a “disease” that needed urgent treatment. The pitch increased with the release of Kanhaiya Kumar who spoke powerfully for the young and the marginalised people of this country. Teachers and students of the university organised a path-breaking series of “sit-in” talks on nationalism and freedom. More recently, students Anirban Bhattacharya and Umar Khalid have vowed not to accept the report of the so-called High-Level Enquiry Committee which found them “guilty of violating the norms and rules of the University”. While 20 students have been charged with violation of rules, five students have been charged with sedition for burning the Manusmriti, the text that legitimises the Varna system. (The Hindu Mahasabha activists who burnt the Indian Constitution and observed Republic Day as a “dark day” live free of trouble.) The new Vice-Chancellor’s appointment has only helped add fuel to the fire, much like the return of the vicious Appa Rao as VC to the University of Hyderabad.

The fire has spread to many other educational institutions in the country, and the government will find it hard to douse this uncompromising battle for academic freedom. The ABVP has already declared its next targets: Aligarh Muslim University and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay. This follows the takeover of all public cultural institutions, the latest being IGNCA, by RSS nominees.

The issues at stake are many: the continuing discrimination against Dalits in institutions of education; the bullying versions of nationalism and patriotism; the autonomy of universities; the secular character of public institutions; the sanctity of the Indian Constitution; and the liberal character of Indian democracy. India's argumentative tradition has always had space for dissent despite certain periods of violent conflict.

Here are the dangers we are now facing:

- The nation is identified with the government in power, and defined by its ideology and religious inclination. Anyone who questions these is labelled a "traitor".
- Even those in power openly challenge the Constitution.
- The State intervenes directly in Universities' internal affairs.
- Dissent is perceived as heresy and sedition, and public institutions taken over by those without merit because they believe in a militant Hindutva ideology.

These are symptoms of what Umberto Eco called "Ur-Fascism": a monolithic idea of the nation, "othering" and demonising minorities, seeing dissent as betrayal and opposition as enemy, and hatred of reason and democracy. It is a matter of pride for us that the academic and cultural communities are boldly confronting this growing fascism. We salute our students, the sons and daughters of this nation, who have not fought shy of being in the front ranks.

K. Satchidanandan
Githa Hariharan
Mala Dayal
April 2016

When Women Play the Ghatam

A still from the video 'Vidushi Sukanya Ramgopal and Sumana Chandrashekhar on the Ghatam'. See Gallery Guftugu in guftugu.in.

A Breakthrough in Music Practice

Subject to the politics of patriarchy and hierarchy, the female artist and the ghatam have had interconnected histories. Carnatic music as a gendered space was one of the key outcomes of the anti-nautch and nationalist movements that intensified between 1928 and 1947.

These movements sanitised and classicised Carnatic music, created strictures around its transmission and performance, and formulated and formalised certain societal values and stereotypes, especially those concerning women. It soon became common practice for girls from upper castes to be trained in singing or playing melodic instruments like the veena, violin or flute, while percussion, almost exclusively, became a male domain. Since then, there have been spaces where women are not allowed; spaces where women percussionists are not

allowed; and spaces where the ghatam is not allowed. Therefore, in a context like this, to be a woman ghatam player is to be doubly marginalised.

But let us first look at the history of the ghatam in Carnatic music. “Ghatam” is the generic Sanskrit name for a pot. Although the earthen pot is the most common instrument found in musical cultures across the world, it was only towards the mid-nineteenth century that it came into Carnatic music. Entering at a time when most other Carnatic instruments had attained a degree of musical sophistication, this rustic, humble instrument struggled to find its own voice and space.

Initially used for comic relief in a music performance, the ghatam was the jester. It was never taken seriously. Both the ghatam and the ghatam player were deemed unfit for, and incapable of rendering complex rhythmical compositions. In concerts, they were always under-priced. Further, due to its non-skin material and circular structure, which was different from the mridangam’s flat, skin surface, the ghatam posed a huge challenge to the hegemony of the established mridangam pedagogy. It is classified as an upapakkavadya — a sub-accompanying instrument (arguably, additional instrument), in relation to the mridangam. Even today, in a conventional Carnatic concert, the ghatam’s secondary status (along with that of the khanjira and morching) is reinforced by its position, diagonally behind the main performer.

Interestingly, even from its “female” marginalised position within the percussion matrix, the ghatam, through the manner in which it is played, defies all existing stereotypes about “the female body, language and space”. Placed on the woman’s lap, it challenges all notions of the “slender” female body. As an extension of the stomach, it is either an ugly “pot-bellied” female body or a pregnant body. Further, it defies all conventional descriptions of a woman’s delicate fingers. Strong arms and rough fingers and palms are signs of good practice and must be maintained at all times.

Sukanya Ramgopal

My own inquiry into the history of the ghatam began when I started training in it a few years ago under my guru Sukanya Ramgopal, the country’s first woman ghatam player and still the

only woman to play the instrument professionally. In the 60s, when it was no longer acceptable for women to play percussion, as a 16-year-old passionately in love with the ghatam, she had asked her guru Sri Vikku Vinayakram to teach her the instrument. He had gently tried to dissuade her saying it would be too difficult for women to play it. But he eventually gave in to her passion and wholeheartedly accepted her as his student. However, the tougher challenges began only after Sukanya ji started performing, where she had to face varying levels of discrimination. However, instead of vacating or rejecting that space, she has, over the years, pushed the limits of the ghatam as a percussion instrument and reinterpreted it by giving it a melodic dimension. This has brought the ghatam and the ghatam player from the margins to the centrestage, giving both a new identity.

Overlapping my guru's journey is my own — in her career spanning 40 years, I have been her first and only female student. And together we confront the male space in our own ways.

Sumana Chandrashekar; Photo © Rajkumar Rajak

A parallel inquiry into the making of the ghatam layered my experience further. It was a revelation when I discovered that the person who breathes life into the ghatams my guru and I play on is 67-year-old Meenakshi, a ghatam maker based in Manamadurai, a small town near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Meenakshi ji is another guru to me, drawing me into her philosophy of the ghatam as she teaches me how to make one. In her own words, making a ghatam is like giving birth to a child.

As I unravel the magic of the ghatam through these two incredible women, I am often reminded of Shishunala Sharif's poem:
Kumbaaraki eeki Kumbaaraki
Brahmandavella Tumbikondiruvaaki

Here is the woman potter
Who holds the universe within her

Sumana Chandrashekar

Notes:
1. George, T.J.S. 2007. *MS: A Life in Music.* New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India.
2. Lakshmi, C.S. 2000. *Singer and the Song*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
3. Rao, Vidya. 1999. "Thumri as a Feminine Voice" in Nivedita Menon (ed.) *Gender and Politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Acknowledgments:
I am deeply indebted to my gurus Sukanya ma'am, Vikku Vinayakram sir, Ghatam makers Meenakshi-*ji* and her son Ramesh-*ji* for their valuable insights into the the cultural history of the ghatam.
This piece draws from a more detailed essay "Notes from the Margins: The Feminine Voice of the Ghatam" that was published by India Foundation for the Arts in their magazine *Art Connect*: Volume 6 Number 2, July-December 2012.

Romila Thapar

Rethinking Civilisation as History

MS 5297
Suryaprajnapti Sutra; astronomy. India, ca. 1500

Image courtesy boundless.com

Let me clarify at the outset that I am looking at the concept of civilisation as it has been used in reconstructing world histories. The term has had philosophical and other connotations that introduce dimensions other than the historical. I am, however, confining myself to the historical perspective.

The history of the world from pre-modern times has, in recent centuries, been projected in the form of stages, some culminating in civilisations. However, in the light of recent studies of history, civilisation as it was earlier defined is becoming rather paradoxical. The concept is a construction that emerged at a particular point in European history in the eighteenth century. It was a way of comprehending the past. Other theories of explaining the past that are now emerging in historical analyses may lead us to rethink the concept. Historians today try and peel events, viewing them as part of larger, and often diverse contexts, as I hope to show.

A civilisation implies a kind of package with specific characteristics. Thus the territory of a civilisation has to be demarcated; civilisation is identified with a period of high intellectual and aesthetic achievement – what some call “high culture”, including an emphasis on humanism and ethics; associated with this is a premium on refined manners exemplified by the elite; civilisation is articulated in a particular parent language; it is symbolised in a single religion; it assumes a stratified society, evidence of a state and governance; its elite is distinctive and dominates its surroundings; there is a marked presence of what are described as aspects of culture – art, monuments, literature, music, all of a sophisticated form; and above all, a civilisation records its knowledge of the world and attempts to advance it.

I have two concerns here. One is that a civilisation draws on the identities of its creators and its participants, but the identities of both change in the course of history. The other is that

concepts help us understand social reality; but they, in turn, have to be investigated, and more so when they claim to be foundational to understanding history.

The somewhat spare definition I have just given needs enlargement. The territory is expansive, resulting from the ultimate success of one from among a number of competing others. The dominant culture monopolises the constituents of civilisation to the near exclusion of the lesser cultures that then tend to be sidelined. What are taken as the constituents of a civilisation reflect the dominant culture, whereas there is much more that goes into the making of a civilisation that has historically as yet remained in the wings.

Change is endemic to most societies, either from within, or from contact with other societies. This can disturb the social equilibrium, either increasing or decreasing the integration of its various units. A civilisation, therefore, cannot be static as its constituents inevitably change.
Let me begin with how and when the concept of civilisation first came to be constructed. Used in France in the eighteenth century, the concept assumed a departure from a prior condition. The Enlightenment understanding of history, together with social Darwinism in the subsequent period, placed human society in an advanced evolutionary stage. It underlined humanistic values as embedded in the literature, and the belief that rational beings could control the world around them.

German writers differentiated between civilisation and *kultur*/culture. Culture referred to what was thought of as intellectual and artistic in terms of value and ideals, and to morality. Cultures, again, were not compact, enclosed and static. Civilisation however, had a broader spread and included more, as the definition suggests.

Why was it given a specific definition? Perhaps we need to keep in mind the ambience resulting from historical change at the time. Europe was moving from the imprint of an aristocratic feudal society to being gradually remoulded by the start of industrialisation and the emergence of new social categories. Entrepreneurs of various kinds were reformulating society, but at a slow pace, since the mores of the previous society were still viewed as exemplary. The emerging vision required pointing up the glories of the European past in a more insistent way than had been done earlier with the Renaissance.

This change coincided, and not accidentally, with the acquisition of colonies. When control over these colonies by European powers became more direct and fruitful, it had to be conceded that the colonies had their own cultures, but with the caveat that the European achievement in the past had been by far the highest. The colonies may well have even had civilisations, although these had been partially marred by the presence of the primitive in their midst. This took away somewhat from the achievement. Recognising this perspective on their past, the colonised also began to register among the evolving new groups of people their new ambitions, anxious to identify with a praiseworthy past to compensate for their subordination in the present.
In a sense, the seed of the idea of civilisation may have existed in the differentiation that past societies made between the dominant society, and those that used a different language and had a different way of life. One's own society was always superior. But the growth of the idea

into a concept of civilisation was associated with historical change, and the need for emergent social groups to claim new identities and a clearly defined heritage.

Civilisation assumed that the historically preceding societies did not qualify. These were labelled as barbarian. This dichotomy was present in the self-perception of ancient societies as well, but with a different connotation. Those regarded as "the Others" were assumed to be uncivilised. For the Greeks it was the non-Greeks, for the Chinese the non-Han, and for the aryas it was the mlecchas. If the Greeks called those that were their "Others" barbaros/barbarians, Sanskrit speakers referred to some as barbara-karoti, or those speaking in a confused way. The barbarians, irrespective of whether they lived as nomadic hordes threatening the civilised, or in the midst of the civilised, were recognizable by their markers – difference of language and custom. The concept of civilisation assumed the existence of the barbarian as a kind of all-purpose counterpoint to the civilised.

In the nineteenth century, the dichotomy was further elaborated. Human society was said to go through three stages of change. Starting with savagery, it improved somewhat when it reached barbarism, and this was prior to civilisation. Only some societies evolved to the third stage. It was thought of, essentially, as a process of evolution, and used to point to the distinction between the stages.
The other more effective route was seen in the imposition of the civilised on the barbarian through conquest, an obvious attempt to justify contemporary colonialism. A classic example was that of the Aztecs of Mexico. They were thought of as being less civilised, therefore performing human sacrifice, and the civilised Spanish conquest brought this activity to an end.
The concept was now used in two ways. One was its role in colonial thinking. The other was the appropriation of social evolution by theories of explanation in anthropology, archaeology and history.

Colonial thinking was clear about the distinction between the civilised and its alternate – the primitive. The coloniser, as the representative of a superior civilisation, introduced it to the colonised, the uncivilised primitive. In India, two divergent views – the Utilitarian and the Orientalist – emerged from colonial writers. James Mill and the Utilitarian thinkers writing on the Indian past saw the territory of India as hosting two nations, the Hindu and the Muslim, each intensely hostile to the other. Its governance conformed to what was called Oriental Despotism, pointing to the absence of a civilised society. The colonised therefore required correcting to be civilised.

The Orientalist view differed. It began with William Jones in the late eighteenth century, enquiring of the learned brahmanas as to the texts he should study to understand India. He was directed to the Vedas and to classical Sanskrit literature. Significantly, the Buddhist and Jaina texts were largely ignored. Jones' comparative studies of language and religion were a search for parallels to the Greco-Roman.

The Orientalists and Sanskritists in Europe disagreed with the Utilitarians. They argued that India did have a civilisation that needed to be recognized. Influential among them was Max

Mueller, who focused on the Vedas, especially the Rigveda. Such studies led to the theory that the Vedas were the foundation of Indian civilisation, and that it reached its crowning point in the golden age of the Guptas, extending into a few later centuries. Seeing India as a single unitary civilisation, specifically defined, made it easier for the colonisers to understand the colony, irrespective of how problematic these definitions were. We have inherited these colonial views about religion, language and history, views with which we still grapple.
Dividing the world into civilisations provided portals to the study of global history. Association with a single language and, preferably, a single religion, meant that each civilisation could be more easily monitored as compared to non-structured history.

Asia, it was said, could boast of three civilisations: the Islamic, with Arabic as its language; the Sanskritic Hindu; and the Chinese, associated with Confucianism. I have often asked myself why Buddhism was lost sight of in this typology. It was once the inter-connecting thread through most of Asia. It was made to disappear in India; it faded in Central Asia; and was, on occasion, actively persecuted in China; yet it emerged as a crucial Asian link in civilisation markers and ethical values. A deeper investigation of the critique posed by Buddhist thought to many existing Asian cultures may help us redefine some aspects of Asian civilisations.

The concept of civilisation, however, took a different turn when associated with anthropology and archaeology. Patterns in the development of human societies drew from the theory of evolution, moving as a trajectory from simple to complex societies.

It was held that human society began with the stage of savagery in the bands of hunter-gatherers. Subsequently there were societies of agro-pastoralists. Many took shape as highly efficient herders of animals – especially cattle and horses – and in systems of cultivating crops. The institution of the family, and notions of property that radically changed societies, emerged slowly. This took them to the stage of barbarism that was extensive and diverse. They were identified by the typology of the material goods they produced, such as pottery and metal-ware.

Some remained at that stage; others moved to the third and highest stage, that of urbanism. As in the case of animal life, evolution did not move in a vertical line for all societies. For some, a horizontal movement became permanent. Those not recognised as civilisations were described as cultures. A culture was defined as a pattern of living. There could be many cultures encompassed in a civilisation, but its definition was based on the features selected and said to be its markers. The primary features of the civilisation stage were urban centres, literacy, and the existence of a state; high culture alone, therefore, did not suffice.

This archaeological-anthropological trajectory, formulated in the early twentieth century, has lately been extensively debated. The critique has suggested alternate ideas, but not annulled the theory. It has, however, been problematic in a few instances where earlier definitions of civilisation were already in use, as, for example, in India. According to the archaeological definition of the twentieth century, the Harappan cities are the foundation of India's civilisation. These predate the generally accepted date of Vedic culture by quite a few

centuries. For some of the Orientalists of the nineteenth century, it was Vedic culture that was foundational to Indian civilisation, since the Harappan cities were not known at that point. But this culture lacked some of the fundamental components of the civilisation stage, urbanisation and literacy for instance.

Harappan cities were not only elaborate urban systems, but were carefully planned by people who understood the working of urban centres. The location of public functioning was concentrated in one area, in some cases on an artificially constructed mound, and was distinct from an expansive residential area. Other features are familiar to us from our school textbooks – a sensible lay-out with planned roads, a remarkable drainage system, warehouses and granaries, and complicated defences at the city gates. Among the other aspects of an advanced culture was the central role of a system of writing.

We now have a somewhat contrary situation: archaeology informs us that the foundations of Indian civilisation lie in the pre-Vedic cities of the Indus Civilisation; but the Orientalists, half a century earlier, had projected the Vedas as the foundation, and this continues to be preferred in some circles today. There is a significant difference between the two. Whereas texts are absent in the Harappa Culture even though a writing system is in use, the Vedic corpus boasts of oral compositions of a high order, composed over a millennium; but it has left no evidence of a writing system. It is difficult to identify the urbanism of the Harappan cities in the descriptions of settlements in the Rigveda, the earliest of the Vedas. Inevitably, there are controversies today about the origins of Indian civilisation.

The concept of civilisation popular among nineteenth century historians was, of course, not the archaeological one, since that was worked out in the early twentieth century. Yet it is the nineteenth century definition that is, more often, in many people's minds when they refer to Indian civilisation. Hence I would like to discuss the definition of Indian civilisation that has prevailed in many works on the subject since the nineteenth century.

The territory chosen was that of British India. The confidence of colonialism made it seem that it would be permanent and stable. Earlier names for parts of the subcontinent, such as Jambudvipa, Aryavarta, Bharatavarsha, or even al-Hind, had shifting boundaries. But even British India broke up into three nations in the twentieth century. This was not unusual, as every century has seen changing alignments in the borders of the many states and kingdoms comprising the subcontinent. There were no permanent boundaries in history.

In pre-cartographic times, defining boundaries with any precision was problematic in the absence of maps. The more common usage was that of frontier zones marked by geomorphological features, such as mountains, rivers and forests. For instance, Manu describes Aryavarta as the land between the Himalaya and the Vindhya, and the eastern and western seas. A study of frontier zones suggests that sometimes the more interesting historical interactions took place in such zones. Frontier zones have the advantage of looking both inward and outward, and they even had the choice of deciding which was which.

For a variety of reasons, the geographical focus of high cultures shifted. The Harappans occupied the Indus plain and its extension, but their artefacts are found as far west as the Gulf and Mesopotamia. The authors of the Vedic texts settled in the Punjab and the north-western borderlands, and moved eastwards to the Ganga plain. The second urbanisation had its epicentre in the middle Ganga plain. In general histories of India, the peninsula and the south are sometimes off the radar in this period, probably because the archaeology of their impressive Megalithic cultures differed from the cultures of northern India, as did the Dravidian language associated with that area.

Speaking of frontiers from the sub-continental perspective, the Kushanas were half in and half out. Their fulcrum was the Oxus valley. We may well treat them as integrated into north Indian history, but it would be worth asking whether they, in effect, may have looked upon north-western India as a frontier zone of their own Central Asian kingdom? And if so, how did they see it? Did Kushana polity focus more on Central Asia and China? Indian texts have less to say about the Kushanas but they are a presence in the Chinese annals of the time, the *Hou Han Shu*. The Indian writing of early times lacks curiosity about frontiers and beyond, compared, for instance, with Chinese inquisitiveness on the subject.

In controlling territory within India, the Guptas and the Cholas were virtually mirror images, one having a northern perspective and the other a southern one, separated by a few centuries. The Turks, Afghans and Mughals, irrespective of their origins, were firmly ensconced in northern India. Interestingly, the Mauryan and Mughal states incorporated the north-west borderlands, but not the entire peninsula. Territorially neither made it to being a fully sub-continental empire. Identifying people with territory has now become complicated, with the frequent inputs of those working on DNA analyses to determine migrations and the mixing of populations.

So in terms of the territorial base of the civilisation, we are not speaking of a compact sub-continental area, but of parts of it that hosted a variety of cultures. The variations are pertinent to the notion of constructing a civilisation. But these are frequently ignored when selections are made of what goes into civilisation as a package. This applies not only to India, but to other civilisations as well. In Asia it would be as true of West Asia and China. What this suggests is that we should be sensitive to changes in the frontier areas, both overland and maritime. We should be open to how they may have contributed to the creation of what we call civilisation, since this would be pertinent to evolving cultures in various parts of the sub-continent. The view from the other side cannot be overlooked.

It is interesting that there was such a substantial interest in Buddhism among Chinese scholars but comparatively much less in Brahmanism, if, as we like to believe, the latter was central to Indian civilisation. At the same time, cultures also evolve over time within themselves. This makes it necessary to see civilisation, not as a permanent entity, but as a continuous process that also registers historical change.

Language is often a good barometer of historical change. We know that all languages mutate. Given the array of Indian languages, the change was impressive, both through mutation and through contact with other languages. This poses a couple of questions for the historian.
One is that we don't yet know what language the Harappans spoke. Attempts to read the Harappan symbols as Indo-Aryan or Dravidian have not succeeded so far. The Vedic corpus refers to the mlecchas and the dasas as different from the aryas. They either spoke the Aryan language incorrectly, or not at all. They worshipped other gods and observed unfamiliar customs. There is also the puzzling group referred to as the dasi-putrabrahmanas, something of an oxymoron. Can the sons of dasis be brahmanas? But there they are, and respected by the brahmanas. It seems that more than one language was being spoken, and more than one cultural group involved.

But let's leave aside the yet inexplicable, and turn to certainties. For almost a millennium, the most widely used language was not Sanskrit, but Prakrit, though they co-existed. The Jaina texts were initially composed in Prakrit, the Buddhist in Pali. Prakrit is, of course, related to Sanskrit, but its use was sharply differentiated. Discussions on causality in thought, dharma and ahimsa, rationality, the existence of deity and such ideas, were discussed, not by all, but by a number of people, in Prakrit. The evidence of inscriptions points to Prakrit as the initial common language used even by royalty, and Tamil in the south. The earliest inscription in correct Sanskrit dates to AD 150 with a lengthy statement by a ruler of Central Asian origin. Prakrit travelled to Central Asia, Southeast Asia and, together with Tamil, to the trading centres of the Red Sea. It was the language associated with those who came from India.

Learned *brahmanas* continued to use Sanskrit. But its use on a larger scale, or the emergence of what has recently been called "the Sanskrit cosmopolis", dates to a later period, from the Guptas onward. This was when it came to have a monopoly as the language of learning, creative literature and administration; it was also the language of those aspiring to status. It expanded further with courtly culture in newly established kingdoms. This required its use by local court poets, but also in official documents, in which, occasionally, the scribe could even make mistakes. However, in Sanskrit drama, women and lower castes continued to speak Prakrit, presumably as befitting their inferior social status. Newly established kingdoms from the late first millennium AD onward, would use the emerging regional languages when hard pressed, especially when new castes of local origin became upwardly mobile. But Sanskrit was pre-eminent for a millennium in virtually every branch of learning, and more so in courtly literature and in religious scholarship, composed more frequently by upper caste authors.
The history of this prior patronage explains, in part, its high status at the Mughal court where brahmana and Jaina authors interacted with scholars of Persian, also patronised by the Mughals. There was more than one translation of the Mahabharata and the Bhagvad Gita from Sanskrit to Persian, done jointly by brahmana pandits and Persian scholars. Such activity was not limited to an interest in religion, but was, more effectively, a form of translating cultures. Medieval patronage to Sanskrit as one of the languages of learning and formal religion is borne out by the numbers of literary texts, commentaries and digests that were composed in the last thousand years under multiple patrons.

This continued into modern times with patronage from the colonial state, conscious of the upper caste connections of Sanskrit. The literature in other languages received less attention as carriers of civilisation. It might be worth doing a survey of what was composed in these languages throughout history, to gauge the lineages of thought and articulation. This in itself would be insightful in evaluating the role of the single language as a civilisation idiom.
Any text of any kind, and in whatever language, assumes an audience. All composition is, in essence, a dialogue. If a text is written by the elite and uses the language of the elite, it reflects the elite culture and can, at best, reflect the participation of other cultures only indirectly. To that extent, it curtails our understanding of the civilisation.

Much the same can be said about choosing a particular religion as the single one to represent a civilisation. The colonial readings of religions in India described them as monolithic. But were they? Many colonial scholars tended to see Indian religions through their knowledge of the medieval European past, with its single monolithic religion of Catholicism and later Protestantism. It is debatable whether religions in India were monolithic and unitary. Virtually every religion was articulated and propagated through a range of sects, each with the choice of being autonomous, or associated with another.

These religious sects have a long history. Their survival is also partly conditioned by their closeness to particular castes or caste clusters, and not unconnected to the patronage of the royal or wealthy. This highlights the interface between religion and society, an aspect seldom given enough space in the concept of civilisation. By bringing together virtually every religious articulation other than the Muslim and Christian under the label of Hinduism, the extensive divergence characteristic of religion in India, with its unique qualities, was denied.

That Indian civilisation was characterised by a singular and monolithic religion is unlikely. Dharma, which we today take to mean religion, was viewed as consisting of two streams. One was Vedic Brahmanism. This required a belief in Vedic and other deities. It insisted on the sanctity of the Vedas authored by the gods, and held that each mortal had an immortal soul. Strongly opposed to these beliefs were various groups jointly referred to as Shramanas, who doubted or rejected deity and the immortal soul, and treated the Vedas as authored by humans. Across the centuries, dharma was defined as the two streams of the Brahmana and the Shramana, or the astika/ believers, and the nastika /non-believers, which we today regard as the orthodox and the heterodox. The nastika consisted of Buddhists, Jainas, Ajivikas and those of such persuasion, including the Charvaka, with their philosophy of materialism. Interestingly, the initial social context of the Shramanic rejection of Vedic Brahmanism was urban.

This dual division was referred to in the edicts of Ashoka Maurya (bahmanam-samanam), in the account of Megasthenes (Brachmanes and Sarmanes), as well as in that of Xuanzang, and continued up to the time of Al-Biruni – a period of fifteen hundred years. Patanjali, at the turn of the millennium AD, mentions it in his famous grammar, and adds that the relationship between the two is comparable to that of the snake and the mongoose. The Shramanas in some *Puranas* are called the great deceivers – mahamoha – who deliberately mislead people

with the wrong doctrines. They are therefore pashandas – frauds. The Buddhists sometimes refer to the brahmanas with the same epithet.

We are told that on some occasions, the relationship between the two became violent. A deeper investigation of our history of religion may show us as being less tolerant and more violent than we claim to be. We can certainly take pride in the absence, so far at least, of something like the Catholic Inquisition that forced people to make statements or to recant. Nevertheless, the degrees of intolerance and non-violence that prevailed in the past need to be re-assessed.

Intermeshed with religion and society was social oppression and the exclusion of those declared to be without caste, or of the lowest status and polluting. Caste discrimination linked to pollution was the Indian equivalent of the observance of other forms of discrimination in other civilisations. In practice, this was observed by every religion in India and by most communities. Surprisingly, it is rarely mentioned in discussions on ethical values and humanism in Indian civilisation, neither in the texts of the high culture nor in later descriptions of Indian civilisation. We owe our current highlighting of this aspect to the writings of Ambedkar and some of his predecessors. The practice of treating demarcated members of the society as polluting negates the idea of a tolerant society, signifying as it does extreme intolerance and a lack of social ethics.

Yet, at a different level, there was a dialogue and much discussion between brahmanas and shramanas on philosophical questions, on, for instance, the definition and use of logic. By the mid-first millennium AD, the Shramanas were also using Sanskrit in philosophical discourse. But soon Buddhism was to be swept away in most parts of India.

The last thousand years have been quite striking in terms of the changes introduced at various levels in what we would regard as aspects of civilisation. The landscape changed. Temples and mosques replaced Buddhist monasteries and stupas. Some of the most magnificent Hindu temples dedicated to divergent sectarian deities, and also Jaina temples, were constructed in this period. These were endowed with land, and their committees of control were engaged in substantial commerce, as had been the case with some of the Buddhist monasteries in earlier times. Economic enterprise was open to all religious institutions and places of worship, and they did not hold back, since many had substantial wealth to invest.

The religion that we today refer to as Hinduism also had roots in the teachings of the medieval Bhakti sects. These encouraged new forms of worship, some reflecting ideas from the presence of other religions, and they taught in the regional languages. In the transition from the Vedic to the Puranic religions, a distancing of the later from the earlier took place, and this was acknowledged only among some. For the majority of people, Vedic belief and ritual as such, although patronized by royalty, became peripheral. Much of the teaching, attracting substantial numbers, was oral, since the larger numbers were not literate. The result was a multiplicity of sects of every kind, either drawing from, or opposing, the more formal religions. This receives less space in the classic descriptions of religion in Indian civilisation.

What I am suggesting is that the conventional description of what constitutes Indian civilisation is partial. It does not sufficiently include the reality of the substantial contribution beyond that of the elites and the upper castes. The concept of civilisation needs to draw from a far wider spectrum if it is to represent more than just the dominant cultures. This critique applies equally to descriptions of other civilisations. One could argue that the concept itself is therefore limited. Let me try and explain this.

The compactness of civilisation is partly due to its land-based and demarcated territory and the social origins of the cultures it encapsulates. But many of the achievements resulted from the co-mingling of groups, elites and non-elites, both within this territory and those on its frontiers and, sometimes, beyond. The commissioning of a monument or a cultural object may lie in the hands of a wealthy patron, but its creator is often a lower caste professional. Styles can therefore be a reflection of localities and popular trends, either of the elite or of others.
Icons of the Buddha illustrate this. The Gandhara image from the north-west is Indo-Greco-Bactrian in features and style, whereas the one from Mathura has no element of the Gan-dhara style. It is strikingly different, as is the one from Amaravati in the south. It changes again in Borobudur and Angkor in Indonesia and Cambodia, as also in Dunhuang and Lung Men in Central Asia and China. The images do not conform to a single aesthetic, but do suggest the richness of the dialogues that must have taken place among those sculpting them. These are, unfortunately, unrecorded. But surely some shilpins and sthapatis, as artisans and craftsmen, also travelled with the traders, brahmanas and Buddhist monks to Southeast Asia in the early periods, to assist with constructional problems, or the precision, if not also the aesthetics, of iconography ?

How are forms transmitted to distant cultures? Surely the idiom in a new context should be read in its own context as well? The diversity points to the inspiration's not being limited to a single elite source, yet the creators of the icons find little place in discussions of civilisation. How were the complexities of the Sanskrit manuals converted into visual forms by artisans not educated in Sanskrit? This is the interface that civilisation is all about, not the separation of the two.

Texts requiring scholarship travelled with brahmanas, Buddhist monks and traders. Many ventured beyond the frontiers, creating innovative mixed cultures that would have challenged the existing civilisational models. This would be more marked in the formation of new states, especially in distant lands. Some Indian texts were rendered into local languages and adjusted to local perspectives, in an effort to imprint their own culture and influence patronage. The variations speak volumes. In the controversial additions to the Hikayat Seri Rama of Malaysia, the patriarch Adam carries messages from Ravana to Allah. Other variations are similar to those known in India, but what these say remains outside the delineation of civilisation.

Adaptations provide another perspective. It is argued that the original Javanese version of the Ramayana story did not draw on the Valmiki text, but drew on the narration of the story in the much later grammatical work, the Bhattikavya. The question is why. The choice of one from a

diversity of sources needs explanation, especially now, when some insist on cultural singularity. Even if it is a transaction between high cultures, the cultural presence of the Other is crucial to explanation.

Central Asia provides parallels. The carriers of the cultures were the same as those that went to Southeast Asia, but the Buddhists drew greater attention. Buddhist monasteries marked the staging points of the trade routes that went from China through Central Asia and northern India to the Mediterranean. This was the Old Silk Route. A healthy patronage encouraged each monastery to host murals of the highest quality, illustrating narratives from the Buddhist texts, in the context of local history. Their versions become, in a sense, a commentary on the Indian texts, an attempt to see a part of India from the other side of the border. Do their perceptions confirm our current view of Indian civilisation?

The involvement of Indians in this trade continued until the last century, although latterly in segments because of historical changes. For over a millennium, it had cut across what were identified as the separate civilisations of Asia, civilisations whose distinctiveness we have thought of as being crucial to their identity. But in each case, the achievements, be they in philosophy, religion or the arts, drew on the interaction of these cultures rather than originating in isolation. The initiative was taken by the traders, and the rest followed.

In the past, Indians and Chinese came to Southeast Asia through maritime exploration. This linked up ports and hinterlands, and required traversing the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the South China Seas – an Indian Ocean route, linking the segments of the chain from North Africa to South China. This is not a compact land mass but the contacts it nurtured impacted civilisations. Like the Silk Route, it virtually created its own cultures. Can we call it a maritime civilisation? It boasted of multiple cultures – high and low, literature in various languages, architecture and art that competed in quality with those in what we call established civilisations. Above all, it demonstrated that ultimately, knowledge advances when there is an exchange between those in the know, irrespective of where they come from.

This is superbly demonstrated in the study of astronomy and mathematics across Asia, dependent on this exchange for many centuries. This was not just a casual mixing of ideas. It involved the careful sifting of what goes into any knowledge system so as to understand it better. This, surely, is the more essential requirement of civilisations. The ascription of origin to a single author was not the point. Authorship was the contribution of more than one. Nor was a there a desperate competition to claim that one's own civilisation got there first.

When we begin to think of the concept of civilisation as something that is not either territorially compact or pertaining to a limited period of history, we will, perhaps, recognize the limitations of singularity and isolation in the current concept. We can either dispense with it; or we can redefine it. Redefining it will require that some existing ideas be unpacked and rejected, some repacked, and some replaced.

Civilisations as we know them now tend to segregate rather than integrate. Colonial conquests the world over, with their new and precise boundaries, ended existing inter-connections between cultures. A case in point is that of contacts between India and Southeast Asia. Various regions of India had connections with various parts of Southeast Asia. Colonialism split Southeast Asia into colonies held by the British, French, Dutch and Spanish. This carving up terminated the earlier links.

Colonialism reformulated cultural identities with new hierarchies of status both within a society and across its frontiers. This, in part, accounts for what are erroneously described as civilisational clashes. What is striking about the swathes of cultures that we study from the past is their porosity. Territories, languages and religions, however stable we would like them to be, are in fact constantly taking fresh shapes. The change comes from many sources: internal pressures that alter social hierarchies; alien cultures that accrete to them and take on new identities; diversities that transform even the cultures of the frontiers; and the ensuing perceptions that those beyond the frontiers have of us.

Civilisation is a process that evolves over a long period, mutating as it goes along. We have to recognise the mutations and discover their source. In focusing on the culture of the elite, the construction of civilisation overlooked its dependence on the cultures of others as participants in the same society. The essential concerns with the "why" and the "how" of history did not find space in the concept.

Overlooked in earlier histories, these perspectives can provide revelatory insights by forcing us to peel the layers, and refrain from insisting that civilisation is a uniform entity. Cultural articulations have to incorporate the dialogue among varying social groups in the societies that constitute the players. How did the participants in a civilisation perceive themselves and their own activities, and in relation to the social hierarchy? Did they all see themselves as part of one civilisation? This is a tough question, but we may find answers if we are willing to enquire.
If we choose to redefine the concept, can we think of civilisation, not as a self-contained homogenous entity valid for all time, but as a process of tracking cultures, even those perpetually in transition? The perceptions that this may provide can, perhaps, translate the past in ways that will enable a new understanding of both the past and the present.

This is the text of the 8th B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture delivered in Delhi by Romila Thapar and organised by Ambedkar University Delhi on 14 April 2016.

Listen to Romila Thapar delivering the 8th B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture

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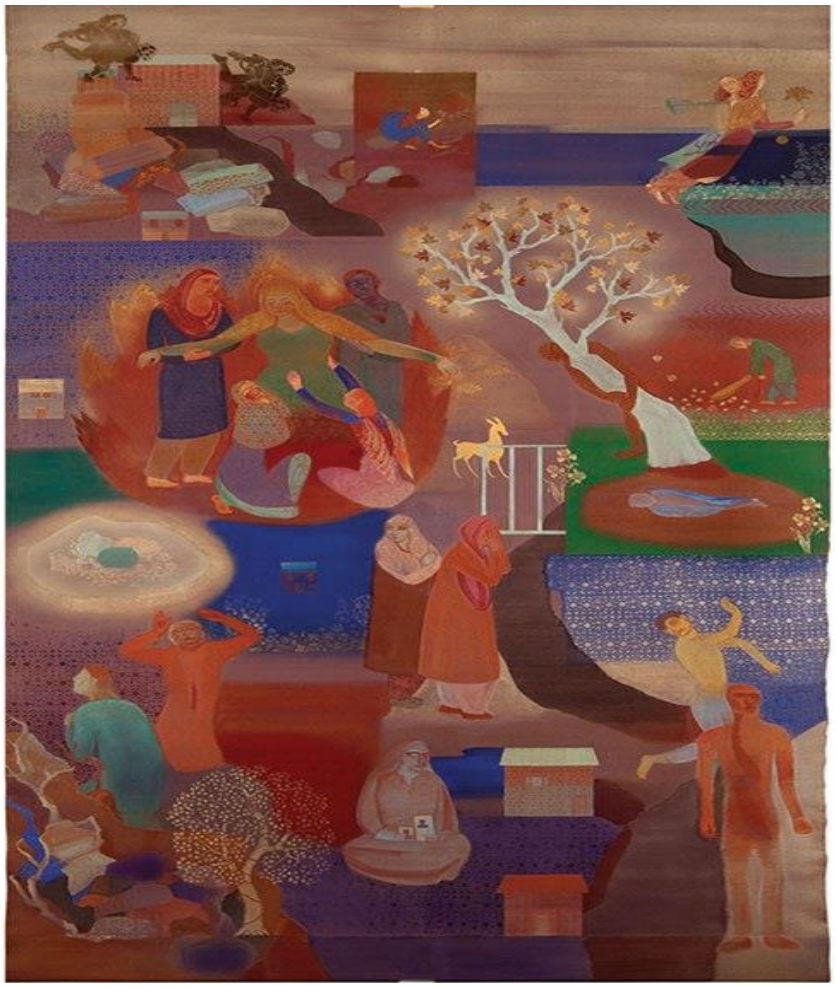
Essay: JNU and Our Democracy
Interview: The Protests by JNU Students and Teachers have been Remarkable
Interview: The Battle Now is between Religious Nationalism and Secular Nationalism

Lecture: Why Can't an Academic Deliver a Lecture on Secularism Without Police Protection?
Lecture: Hindu Rastra is Drawn from the Scholarship of Colonial Historians

Nilima Sheikh

Each night put Kashmir in your dreams

Going Away



2009-10, Each night put Kashmir in your dreams series,
scroll painted on both sides, 187×59 cm, casein tempera on canvas

Son et Lumière

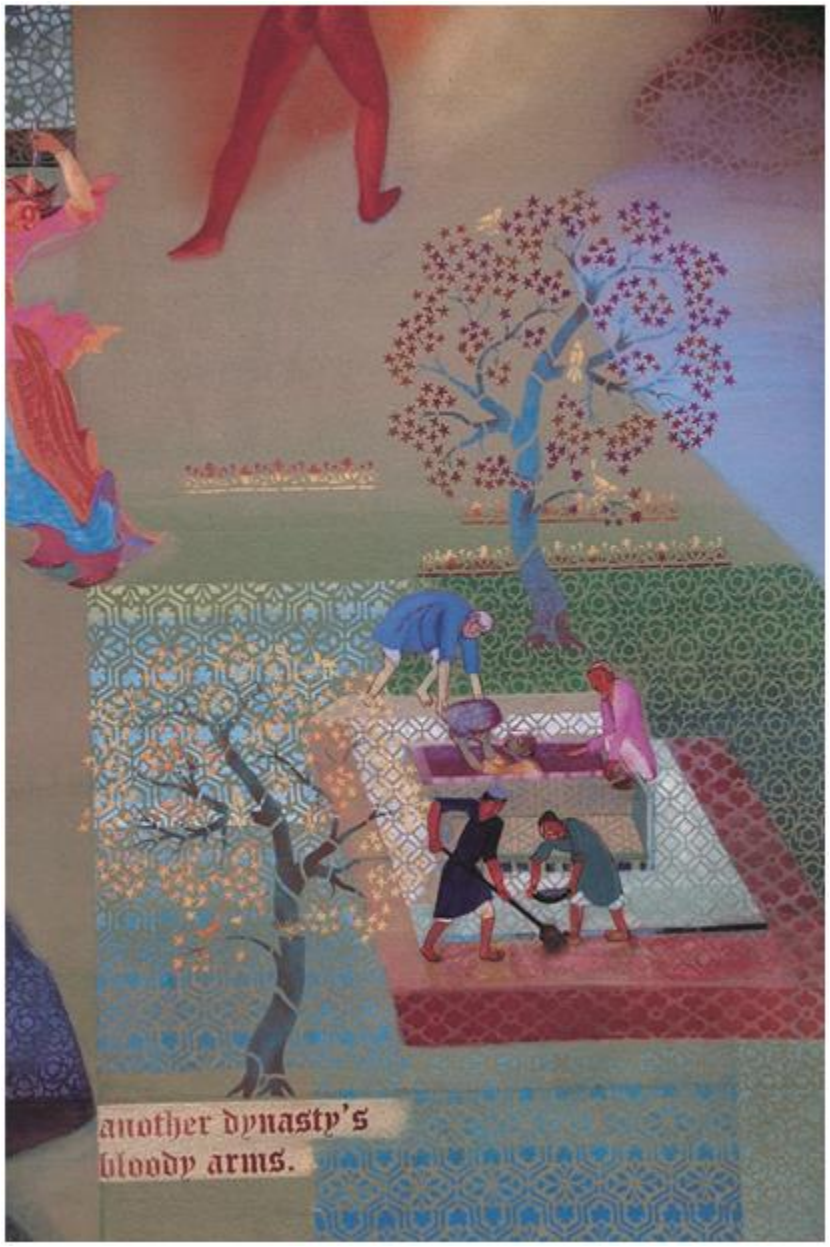
2006-10, Each night put Kashmir in your dreams series,
scroll painted on both sides, 305×183 cm, casein tempera on canvas

"Going Away" and "Son et Lumière" are two of the nine painted scrolls that make up the work "Each night put Kashmir in your dreams". Each scroll is a tapestry of stories that constructs the many histories of Kashmir. Together, the scrolls weave the artist's complex personal take on

the history of Kashmir, with fragments of medieval, historical, religious, mythical and fictional accounts.

Detail from “Going Away”

Details from “Son et Lumière”



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Special Feature: Poems from Prison

Translated by K. Satchidanandan

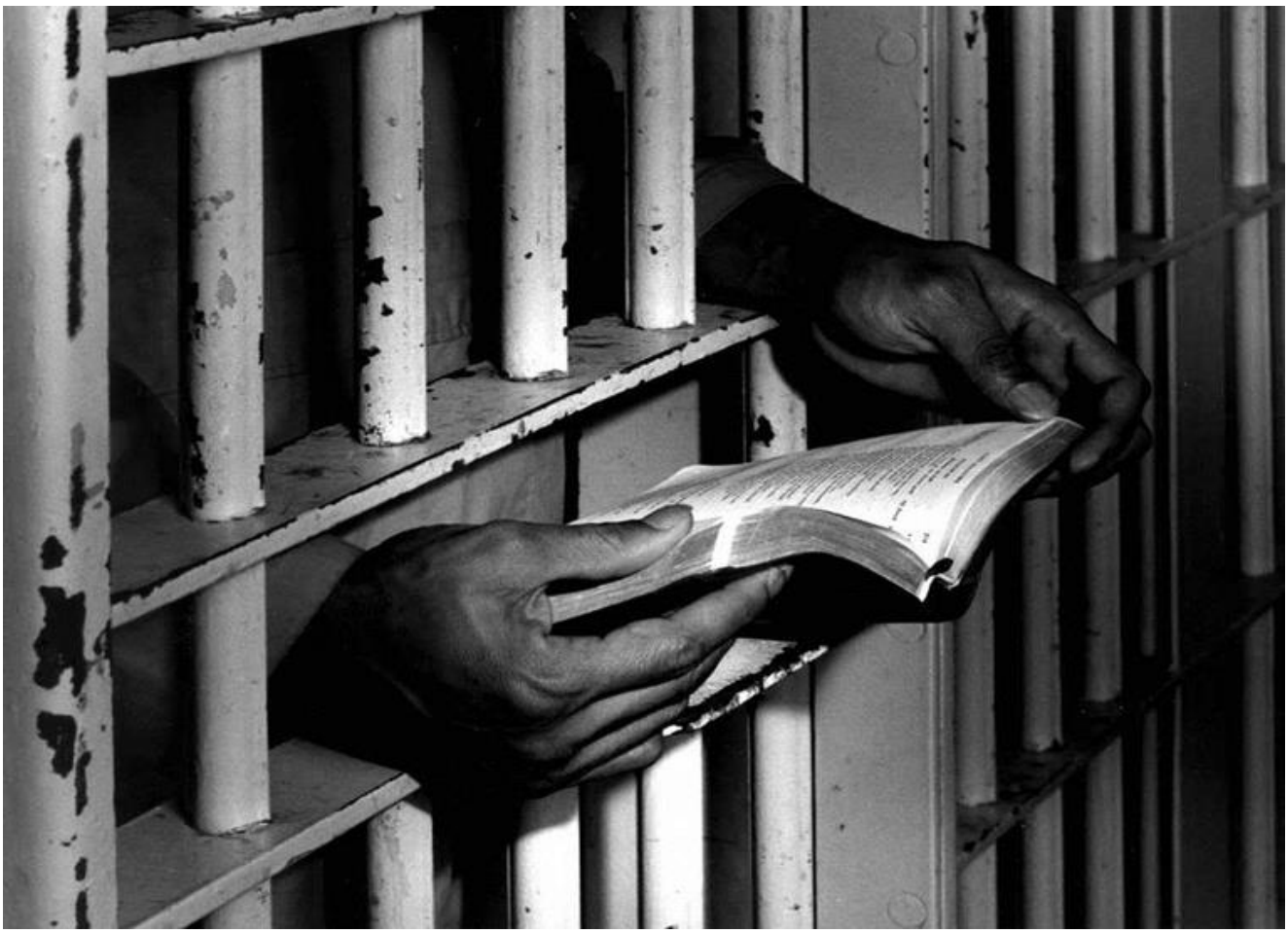

Image courtesy Wellspringroseburg.org

An Evening Note
P. Udayabhanu

Death had always haunted
my peace of mind,
turned turbid my sleep and dream,
surviving torture was beyond me.
Yet now, when I look ahead
through the rusty bars of this prison,
through the branches of the tree
spreading its shade on the courtyard,

and discover the scattered shreds
of the purple evening sky,
I recall with a start the news
I read yesterday: those two men
on the gallows challenging death
miles away on the banks of Krishna
give me a tremor.
A saying etched long ago
on my mind's black stone
restores my peace of mind:
"Death courted for the people is
heavier than the Thai Mountains."
The waves of Krishna opening
the copper plates of memory
may be covering their eyes
watching Telangana's tragic turn.
Sure, they will now scream aloud
to convey their last message.
On my mind's dry shore
the memory of River Bavali
lies writhing: the fire of the two eyes
plucked out in the valley of Brahamagiri,
the bleeding nails of the severed hand:
they will pierce the Red Fort like daggers
and be reborn as raging flames
above the wasteland's wrinkled dreams.
Today it dangles like a sword of death
from the palace top, echoes as the
music of ruin in the ears of the guards,
retrieves tempests from the
depths of the earth.

Click here to read the Malayalam original: http://guftugu.in/2912-2/

The People of My Village
V. K. Prabhakaran

We pass between your swinging hands
in the rhythm of a marching song.
Iron fetters decorate our hands.
Khaki eyes carrying rifles on either side.

Yet we see in your eyes
the quiet before the storm.
Seated on the jewelled throne
studded with the pearls from New York
and the diamonds from Kremlin,
under the shady trees planted by native kings,
they try us with guns and tanks
in the name of ahimsa.
Then they ask us to sleep
listening to the thousand and one tales
from the Arabian Nights.
But your eyes are marked by sleeplessness
and your armed thoughts travel
from ears to ears like guerrilla fighters.
We pass between your swinging arms
with the tumult of a procession
announcing war.

Click here to read the Malayalam original: http://guftugu.in/2917-2/

About Our Little Sister
M. M. Somashekharan

The chill wind, sharp like the needles
pushed into the nails of the thief
in the lockup.
It sobs gently like the love song whistling in
the oak trees in harsh nights.
She felt nothing, her naked body like
the senseless corpse of a counterattack.
Death smiles from the raped lips.
I too mourn silently with her brothers
who work in mines and fields.
Our little sister had fought against
the authority, grown obese, rotten.
“Thousand scapegoats and one wolf”:
that’s the game today.
Her blood, her naked blood,
floods the streets.
Her dead body dragged along the road
goes on growing beyond the streets.
It spreads the foul smell of fear
in the seats of power.

Click here to read the Malayalam original: http://guftugu.in/2921-2/

To the Post-War Generation
Muhammad Ali

You shameless guys opening your mouths
only to hurl abuses, you who made love to
language when she had contracted syphilis,
don't try to speak for the whole world!
Don't universalise that tragic angst
and those fears of war and death!
You have had your day
and you were then with history;
today when history has ousted you,
just howl and fidget for a while
and leave the scene!
You have that stick that you always carry,
that usage, "We": forget it!
And even if you won't, we know,
there is no "ours", it is only "mine" and "yours"
Now we have the upper hand in history,
the initiative is ours and the tragic sense yours.
Didn't you hear one of your Jewish friends say,
"This choking twilight we have to decide
Not what we should do,
Not how we should live
(we cannot decide all that now:
we had decided long ago what to do),
but what is the life with the least painful dreams
available to us in the coming nights."
Yes, try something like that.
Still with so much of power and so many bombs,
you are the helpless and anguished ones!
You say you are now in the choking twilight:
then take it from us.
We are in the rising golden dawn.

Click here to read the Malayalam original: http://guftugu.in/2923-2/

The Deluge
Civic Chandran

The day's feathers are falling.
The guards have arrived for their night duty.
The whirlwind starts abruptly,
no one knows from where:
could well be from under the earth itself.
The sky's udders look full.
"It'll rain today," says someone,
"this year's first rain, the new rain."
But it's the chill wind
that comes screaming.
It must be raining somewhere, for sure.
The night arrives in a hurry.
Electric lights open their eyes outside.
Light peeps in, reluctant.
Now we cannot see the sky,
but can hear the thunder.
We lean on the iron bars and listen:
yes, it will rain today.
As we watch, comes a drizzle.
It rains pitterpatter.
The rain is getting stronger with
the power of the moist earth.
If only they would open the cells,
we would have bathed in this rain,
rolled over the wet earth.
But we are in prison:
we just stand holding the bars.
It's still raining.
Suddenly a tree falls down.
The wind has broken its chains.
Lights are out: streetlights
must have gone out too,
and all those wayside lanterns.
It must be raining heavily outside:
The city's drains must be overflowing.
It's a deluge: the rain is getting mightier,
we can't see anything.
The guards are shouting:
they don't have raincoats.
The lanterns they swing too have gone out.

Everything is drowned in darkness, everything.
Only the scream of the rain
and the roar of the wind.
Some things are flying: are they
the tiles of the prison roof?
Don't know, don't.
It's a deluge. The rain is pouring.
It was the flood of Ninetynine that had
carried away my grandpa.
My grandpa was a saint in loin cloth
who had reined in his senses
taking only raisins and cream of milk.
It is he who is standing in front of the prison,
his bent body supported by a walking stick.
It was sculpted long ago by a prisoner
sentenced to death. He was sent to the gallows
before he could complete it.
It was someone else who completed it.
Holding the bars of the jail, we wonder:
Has the old man fallen,
to be carried away by the deluge?
It's a deluge. It's raining cats and dogs.
The wind is blowing hard. It's a deluge.
We are behind the prison bars.
Can't see a thing, anything.
All the lights are out.
The guards may be lying huddled
somewhere on the verandah.
They've no raincoats.
They too know this is a deluge.
Yes, it's a deluge; the rain is still pouring,
the wind is blowing hard,
can see nothing, nothing at all.

Click here to read the Malayalam original:http://guftugu.in/2926-2/

Note:
All the poems have been translated from *Thadavarakkavithakal* (Prison Poems), originally published in 1977, and republished with extensive notes and memoirs in 2010. The anthology includes 25 poems by ten poets. These are only samples. They are marked by certain recurring symbols such as the storm and the rain, and most have a rather loose structure. Many of these poets began to write poetry while in prison; some stopped after coming out, and others continued. Muhammad Ali and P. Udayabhanu are no more. Others are still active as writers, theoreticians, editors and activists. They have moved away from the Maoist ideology that stirred them in the 1970s, but their social commitment remains intact.

Unny

Scrawl

Saba Hasan

Haqeeqat/The Truth Project

Video still

Burnt Book 5

Mixed media

Gaza

Oil on canvas

Language of Forgetting

Six Translations from Hindi by Akhil Katyal

K.K. Muhamed

Language of Forgetting
Rajesh Joshi

A river brushed against me
in the language of water,
and suddenly, in the language
of flight, the birds
moved below the clouds,
on trees written in a hieroglyphic script,
leaves stirred together, and in their movement
was the language of rustling –
it felt as if you are somewhere close,
drawing near in the language of the body
and whispering a language of forgetting
to those you could not.

Click here to read the Hindi original:
http://guftugu.in/%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%9C%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%B6-%E0%A4%9C%E0%A5%8B%E0%A4%B6%E0%A5%80/
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I Want to Believe
Ashok Vajpeyi

I want to believe that
after my defeat in love
when I mourn in the utter loneliness of a poem,
then somewhere at least a leaf will tremble for me,
that somewhere a bird will resent that her world is, despite everything, so green,
that for a moment, a planet will slow down somewhere in the universe,
and in some invisible vein of the earth, the lava will cool a little,
that the ancestors spread over centuries will try and give solace to each other,
and the tears of gods will fall in untimely rain;
that I will cry
and through the whole universe
will run a cry of sorrow.
I want to believe that in my defeat, and in my grief,
the world will not leave me alone.
Grief surrounds me as if
that is the only body I have to live in and die in
as if that is the real colour of living
which has become visible to me only just now.
I want to believe that
when I try and find my way through

pain's long corridors,
then the light at the end of that tunnel will be of grief,
that the window from which a hand will show me the way, will be grief's window,
and the house, whose porch I'll rest in, to gather strength to keep on going,
will be the house where grief lives.
I want to believe that
just like the other name of laughter is often kids or flowers,
just like the other name of hope is poetry,
like that, the other name of love will be grief.

Click here to read the Hindi original:
http://guftugu.in/%E0%A4%85%E0%A4%B6%E0%A5%8B%E0%A4%95-%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%9C%E0%A4%AA%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%AF%E0%A5%80/

Murder
Uday Prakash

After he dies,
he thinks
nothing.
After he dies,
he speaks
nothing.
When he does not
think or speak,
he dies.

Click here to read the Hindi original:
http://guftugu.in/%E0%A4%89%E0%A4%A6%E0%A4%AF-%E0%A4%AA%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%95%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B6/

Cocky Abdul
Rahul Rai

Just imagine the cockiness of poor Abdul:
Poor Abdul says – "I will be a big man one day."
Poor Abdul says – "I will go to school."
Poor Abdul says – "I will eat till I am full."
Poor Abdul says – "I want to be free."
Poor Abdul says – "I hate to pull the rickshaw."
Poor Abdul says – "I hate overtime."
Poor Abdul says – "I don't like being scolded by the babus."
Poor Abdul says – "I hate unpaid work."

Just imagine the cockiness of poor Abdul,
so many demands, despite being poor.

Click here to read the Hindi original:http://guftugu.in/3092-2/

Riots
Gorakh Pandey

This time there were massive riots.
There were heavy rains
of blood.
The coming year
will yield a good crop
of votes.

Click here to read the Hindi original:
http://guftugu.in/%E0%A4%97%E0%A5%8B%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%96-%E0%A4%AA%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%A3%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%A1%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%AF/

The Farm is Sad
O.P. Valmiki

The bird is sad
for the emptiness of the forest.
The children are sad
for — *hammered like a nail*
on the doors of the big houses —
this grief of the bird.
The farm is sad —
that even after a full harvest
he, with mortar on his head,
is going up and down the ladder
against that wall being built.
The girl is sad —
till when can she hide the birth?
And the rented hands
are writing on the wall
“To be sad
is against the spirit of India.”

Click here to read the Hindi original:
http://guftugu.in/%E0%A4%93%E0%A4%AE%E0%A4%AA%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%95%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B6-%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B2%E0%A5%8D%E2%80%8D%E0%A4%AE%E0%A5%80%E0%A4%95%E0%A4%BF/

Shriranga

From *My Memories of the Theatre*

Translated by Shashi Deshpande

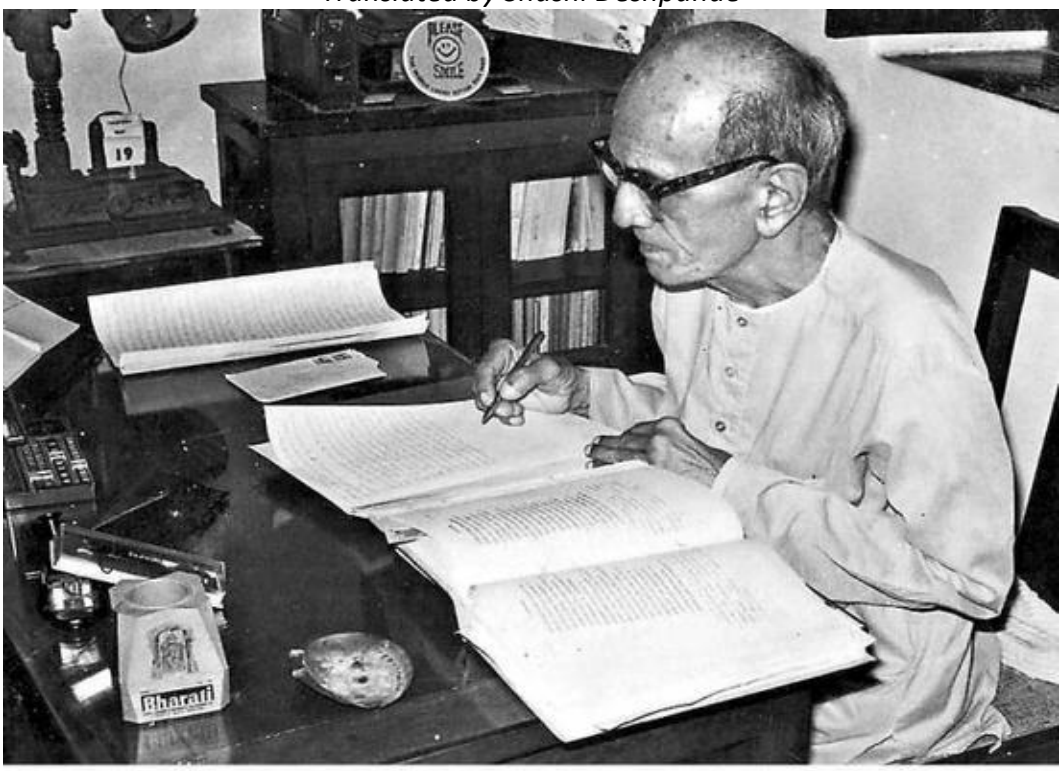


Image courtesy The Hindu

Shriranga was the pen name of Adya Rangacharya (1904-1984), one of India's most eminent dramatists. He wrote 40 full-length and 67 one-act plays, as well as books and articles on the theatre. The following extracts are from Shriranga's Nanna Natya Nenapagalu *(*My Memories of the Theatre*). Although the book is about his personal experiences, it gives a picture of the theatre of the times he speaks of.*

The book begins with his fascination for the theatre from the time he was a toddler, watching the plays performed in his village; moves on to his exposure to professional theatre (Marathi and Kannada) in Bijapur, then the theatre in London's West End. It ends with his becoming a dramatist and a founder of the amateur movement in North Karnataka.
The first extract is about his experience as a spectator of the dramas (called aatas) in his village Agarkhed; the second is about the plays he saw in Bijapur.

I

I am not sure what my exact age was then. But I remember I wanted to kill Ravana – and I could not. I decided I would kill him with an arrow. I could not control my eagerness, which drove me into contriving an arrow out of a cane, with a thorn stuck into wax at the tip. With this I "shot" Ravana. Fortunately Ravana did not die, though, poor thing, he was badly hurt where the thorn pierced him. Ravana, by the way, was a boy of my age.
There's a story behind this "Ramayana". It was the custom in our village to dress up in costumes during Holi. (Or was it Rangapanchami?) I had often looked at the costumes of Rama and Ravana with delight and longed to wear them myself. But how could I, a Brahmin boy from the Jagirdar family, have done such a thing in those orthodox times? It was this disappointment that drove me into acting the drama outside the village with some friends. Actually, I didn't know the word drama (nataka) at first. What I knew was aata – a performance. The first aata I saw was Harishchandra. Saw it? No, I was fast asleep even as it began. I opened my eyes when Vishwamitra entered, slapping down his deerskin mat. In fact, I remember nothing of the entire play except Vishwamitra. There are vague memories of Taramati kneeling, her body swaying; of her singing and weeping. When the snake that bit Rohidas appeared, (the snake was a piece of twisted black cloth) they tried to wake me up, saying "Look, the snake! Look, the snake has come!" By the time my sleepy eyes opened, Rohidas was dead and Taramati was weeping. My eyes closed once again. On our way home, when I heard the adults discussing a good scene, I complained, "Why didn't you wake me up?" and began to cry.

Such are my early memories of drama – distant and vague, as if I'm seeing them through a dark curtain. Yes, there's another aata I remember called "Dakshabrahmana-aata". I slept through this entire drama. But at about two or three in the morning I woke up in fright to the terrifying sounds of war drums. The sounds were not coming from the stage, but from somewhere far away. It scared me. The sounds gradually came nearer – not only drums but trumpets, and flaming torches as well. In the midst of all this, a character danced in a very strange way. He danced the entire distance, jumped on to the stage with both feet, and made some hideous sounds. He was Virupaksha. I have no idea what he did later, or whom he killed, because I went back to sleep.

As a sleepy child, I saw only a few scenes that dazzled my eyes and stunned my ears. Actually, I got the real taste of the performance later, when I chatted with the young farm labourers who took part in the aatas, and they spoke their lines to me. I was fascinated by the way the words were put together, by the beauty of the rhymes, and the wonderful way the words were pronounced. When I was sixteen, I wrote a play called "Dharmavijaya", which is, fortunately, lost. Here are two sentences from the play (as well as I can remember them); they clearly show the influence of the aatas I saw in my childhood:

Adhama atmagedi iduvarege ishavannu udurisi urolage ene illavendu eri airavtanante oduri odadi autukondeyellave? [1] (I guess at that age I did not know any words beginning with um and aha!) *Karkasha, kakanante kitavanagi kelujanara kusangadalli kudikondu kettu Keshavannanu kai-inda kollicchisida kotiye, Kauravadhama, kangalanagi kuhpurushanadeyellave*?

I think I understood the words I wrote in this play as little as the villagers understood the lines they spoke. Whatever it is, I must have been powerfully impressed by the discovery of how words could add to the artistic charm of the play.

Finally, I will speak of another performance. There is a reason for my using the word “finally”. None of the performances I have spoken of were staged by a drama company; they were generally put up by our villagers. The performance I am going to speak of now was also of this kind. This drama was called “Jayadrathavadha” (The Killing of Jayadratha). A village Gowda played Jayadratha; perhaps because the drama had Jayadratha’s name in the title, he thought Jayadratha was the hero of the drama. Which is why he was unwilling to die when Jayadratha was supposed to!

But before Jayadratha’s death, he had a dialogue with Duryodhana (I was sitting right in front) during which Jayadratha (the Gowda) forgot his lines. Poor Duryodhana, with great humility, whispered “Gowd-re, you have to speak.”
The Gowda, whispering in the same way, solemnly said “Yes.”
Duryodhana pleaded, “You have to speak.”
“I know, man. You speak,” the Gowda replied. And before Duryodhana could again say “Your lines, Gowd-re,” the Gowda said, “Will you speak, or do you want me to kick you?” Duryodhana then spoke Jayadratha’s lines as well as his own, after which the Gowda said, “The sun has set.” The scene ended and the curtain came down. I don’t know how many people enjoyed the humour of this incident like I did. Possibly the others didn’t understand it at all, because the performance generally had a religious purpose. People came to see Krishna’s glory and his Maya. What did it matter if an actor forgot his lines?

II

I came to Bijapur, the capital of the district, as a high school student. For a village boy, it was a very strange atmosphere; but fortunately for me, a few of my friends from the village came to Bijapur at about the same time and became our neighbours. In this place, there were no aatas. I didn’t find them necessary for some time, either. I have a vague memory of seeing a Marathi drama in the company of adults soon after going to Bijapur. Since I did not know the language, my attention was more drawn to other things, like the attractive costumes, the curtains, the lights and the classical music. I don’t remember the theme of the drama, but the acting certainly impressed me. Apart from this, the drama made no impression on me at all. And the songs, which were sung repeatedly in response to the audience’s applause and “once more’s”, bored me. If a song was to be sung over and over again, how would the story progress? Maybe it was all right for me, because I didn’t understand the language, but what about those who did? Didn’t they mind? Did drama mean nothing but songs to these spectators? I was quite dissatisfied. Perhaps, as the psychologists would say, I had a complex which came out of my own ignorance of music. The theatres were packed with spectators, but I was not interested in what I could not understand.

It was in Bijapur that I saw a real company drama for the first time. I had seen the Rastapur Company in our village. In spite of the costumes and makeup, it hadn’t seemed very alien. This

Marathi drama, however, was very different. If there really were people in the world like these characters, well, they were not part of my world. The Vishwamitra in our village drama seemed a person I knew, but the people in these Marathi dramas were wholly unfamiliar. At that age, of course, I couldn't possibly have fathomed the reason for this difference. Of all the company dramas that I saw in the next few years, both Marathi and Kannada, it was the Kannada drama "Shani Prabhava" that I enjoyed the most. One of the reasons for this was the "transfer scene". To me, a village kid, it seemed like magic. One moment, there was King Vikram's palace. Then bang! The stage became dark. And a moment later we saw trees instead of pillars, a boulder instead of a throne, and Vikram standing clad in rags – all this because of Shani's curse. Each time I saw this scene, I was astonished. But once, something happened. The scene changed as usual. "Oh, what is this?" Vikram cried out sorrowfully. "Has my palace vanished and become a forest?"

A spectator from the back of the house called out, "Look! There's still one pillar left. Hold it tight."

The house exploded with laughter, but I was filled with uncontrollable rage, my mood shattered. When I next looked at the stage, one of the stagehands ran across, turned the pillar around and ran out. I now knew the secret of the transfer scene. Wooden planks had pictures of pillars of one side and trees on the other. All the curiosity, expectations and joy with which I had watched this scene before left me. However much I tried to forget it, I could see the pillar behind the tree. My enjoyment dissolved.

In these couple of years, though I saw a number of Kannada and Marathi dramas, no play enchanted me as did "Shani Prabhava". One more reason for my enjoying this play was the character of the oil-crusher. His dress, his behaviour and the way he spoke – all these were very natural and made me forget the outside world. Generally the characters spoke in a high-flown literary style. Perhaps I felt that this was not my language, that it had nothing to do with me, because I never listened to such speeches as attentively as I listened to the oil-crusher. And when I heard the sound of the oil-crushing mill as it revolved, I was in a state of absolute bliss. I don't think I have words to describe how I felt. For a long time I didn't know that the man himself was producing these sounds.

One more reason that prevented me from enjoying other Kannada plays was that they were carbon copies of the Marathi plays I had seen, especially the music. I have never had an ear for music. Even today, I think I lack the emotional chord that will help me to understand it. But some of the songs in our village dramas did appeal to me, and I used to hum them all the time. When my friends and I staged our own plays, I sang them with the right emotions and expressions. And if I forgot some of the words, I would make up my own; despite my ignorance of the taal, they would somehow fit in. But the songs in these dramas were quite different. The actor would come to the edge of the stage and sing as if the songs had no connection with the play. Very often he sang till he was exhausted. And when you sighed in relief, thinking it was finally over, a "Once more" would come from somewhere in the audience and, alas, he would start singing all over again.

I was upset because this stalled the drama. Maybe I could have enjoyed the music as a child, but then I used to fall asleep. The music was an imitation of the music in Marathi plays. In fact, even the names were copied from the Marathi theatre. There was a “Kannada Gandharva” in a company – a response to the Gandharva in the Marathi theatre. I saw this Kannada Gandharva, but I have no memory of his music. Soon the imitation went further and came out into the open. The Kannada theatre openly converted Marathi plays such as “Sant Sakhubai”, “Bhakta Damaji”, and “Mahamaya” into Kannada. After seeing companies put up these imitations like stale left-overs, I lost the desire to see them and gave up the habit.

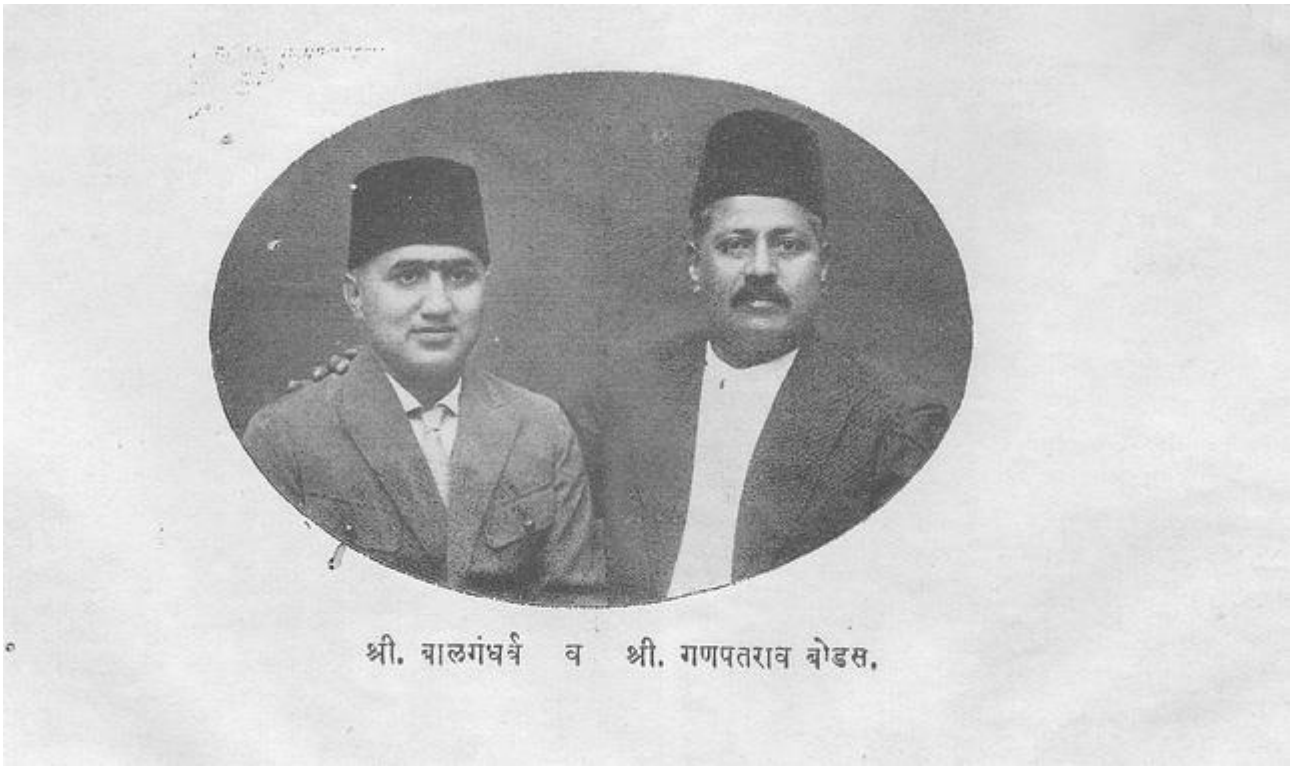
When we were high school students in Bijapur, it was not only a matter of pride to see Marathi dramas, it was also considered fashionable. This was the attitude of the adults, and we naturally followed them. The day after seeing a Marathi play, we strutted about among our friends in school. There were other reasons for this pride too. Like the oil-crusher, who even today seems to me one of the great actors of the Kannada stage, I had the good fortune of seeing some of the great Marathi actors of the time. First, Bal Gandharva. As I said earlier, I had no knowledge of Marathi. But the moment this actor stepped on the stage in a female role, it was a feast for your eyes. In your joy, your eyes triumphed over your mind and it never occurred to you that this was a man playing a female role. His dress, his behaviour, his laughter, his speech, his facial expressions – all these were easily and comfortably female. Though I had no knowledge of either the language or the music, he made me understand him merely through the modification of his tone and his expressions. Such was the skill of this great actor! Why shouldn’t I, a mere schoolboy, be proud that I had the chance to see him? But I have no idea how this pride, which came out of having been able to see something rare, was affected by the fact that he was not one of us – not a Kannada man. I can only remember the facts now.

Bal Gandharva, Image courtesy i.ytimg.com

There are two more unforgettable Marathi actors I saw on the stage at about this time. One of these was Ganpatrao Joshi. As a writer now, I have a large vocabulary at my command and can describe his acting with a shower of adjectives. But it will not satisfy me; on the contrary, it is possible that it may work against my intentions, for my words may impress you more than his acting. And so I will speak of Ganpatrao through my memories of the happiness of a child who did not have a great many words at his command.

The first sight of the short stout man with sunken eyes was not impressive; but this was just for a moment. As soon as he began to speak, you sat up. By the time he had completed his first sentence, you forgot the world. What a voice! What awesome control he had over it! When he spoke, your hair stood on end. Joshi had the power to evoke different expressions even on the faces of the spectators. They say he drank a lot, that he was, very often, not in his right senses. Let that be. This world has never had a good word for an actor. When you watched Joshi on the stage and became part of that wonderful world, you realised how trivial such things were. God, if he is truly wise, will give him enough to drink, so that he can witness rare acting skill.

The other Marathi actor I remember is Ganpatrao Bodas. There have been times when actors flaunted labels such as “hero” and “comic actor”. But when I first saw Ganpatrao Bodas, such categories did not exist. The company, following their tradition, used to have shows on Wednesdays and Saturday nights, and also on Sunday afternoons. And so Bodas, who wrung our hearts with pity and terror on Saturday night, made us laugh on Sunday, laugh so much that we could not sit still in our seats. But yes, I forget, I could say this about Ganpatrao Joshi as well. He usually acted in a drama of about two and a half hours. But since the audience wanted a four hours show, a short comedy was tagged on to the main drama. And so Joshi displayed, in just one night, the same versatility that Bodas revealed on two different days. I have still not forgotten how Joshi, after a thrilling performance in a serious drama called “Rana Bhimadeva”, reduced us to hysterics in a short comic piece based on a story in the Arabian Nights. (It was called “Jhopi gelela jaga jhala”, or “He Who Fell Asleep Wakes”). We laughed and laughed till we were breathless; tears poured down our cheeks and our bottoms grew sore with all our twisting and turning in our seats. Even the bugs biting us must have become unconscious with the constant slapping of our thighs!



Bal Gandharva and Ganpatrao Bodas
Image courtesy Theatreforum.in

Joshi died soon after, but I was able to see Bodas a number of times on the stage. He had a very clear voice which he could raise to any volume, to any decibel, yet he knew how to control it so that it dropped to a tiny whisper. His acting depended less on actions and more on facial expressions. He could draw attention to himself even when he was in the midst of several actors. He had the ability to arouse our emotions the moment he stepped on the stage, even before a word was spoken. It was because of such qualities that his acting held us entranced.
When I speak of these actors, I feel the need to bring up the subject of voice control. For various reasons, actors today, whether amateurs or professionals, lack both a good voice and the art of modifying it. Microphones cause this unfortunate situation. We spend crores on constructing large theatres instead of building smaller ones which will do away with the need for mikes. This, according to me, is tantamount to destroying the theatre. It is because of their voices and their voice control that Ganpatra Joshi and Ganpatra Bodas were such great actors. They excelled equally as heroes and as comic actors. The truth is, there is only one category – a great actor. You can't have different categories like the heroic and the comic.

The Marathi stage at the time had some pure prose dramas as well, and a few drama companies performed only these. Music had no place in these dramas. Some of these were historical, relating the past glory of the Maratha Empire. These plays influenced me in another way. Bijapur was the capital of the Adil Shah Kingdom – a Muslim kingdom. The Marathi dramas I saw depicted the struggle of nationalistic Hindus against Muslim kingdoms. Inevitably, I, a resident of Bijapur, identified myself with the patriotic Hindus of the past. The town was littered with ruined forts. And I remember that it was here that I, along with some friends,

enacted scenes I created out of my imagination. (I never wrote these pieces.) This was done in the daytime, without costumes, spectators or even any expectation of spectators. My early interest in watching dramas, the aatas and the influence of individual actors – all these took a different form after I saw the historical dramas. The shape became clear after I saw a sparkling performance of "Narangi Nishan" ("The Saffron Flag"), a drama that was the combined effort of some Marathi writers and actors. It was then that I discovered myself. I was a dramatist.
This is a freshly edited extract from Opening Scene*, translated by Shashi Deshpande, and published by Penguin Books, India in 2006.*

Notes:
[1.] These lines are in the florid style of the early mythological plays, a series of grandiose words strung together. In the first line, each word begins with a consecutive letter of the alphabet (a, aa, e, ee u uu). In the second line, each word begins with the letter k. These are angry and reproachful speeches, and most of the words are condemnatory.

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Bama

Revisiting the Dalit Experience

Image courtesy Indian Cultural Forum

On January 20, 2016, Tamil writer Bama Faustina Soosairaj, or Bama, as she is popularly known, was part of a panel discussion on caste, religion and lived culture at Ambedkar University Delhi. The occasion marked the launch of the second issue of Guftugu*. The following edited excerpts are from Bama's responses to a range of issues. Read with her path-breaking autobiography* Karukku*, it is clear that little has changed for Dalits since 1992 when the book was published.*

"Dalits are born and brought up with the sky, water, fire, air, earth – the pancha mahabhutas, the five elements. Every day they touch the bhumi – the soil – as they work. And most Dalits live in the open. Some of those who have small huts may not even have doors. In villages, they sleep on the streets even today. Sleeping on the street, looking at the sky and the stars and the moon, really lightens their day's hardship and burdens. They almost become one with the air and the sky. So that is the kind of life they have in villages even today…"

> At dawn and at dusk, the eastern and western skies are splendid to see. When we used to go out in the early morning to relieve ourselves, a bright red sun, huge and round, would wake up in the east and climb into the sky. It would make its way, peering

> between the trees, glowing, its light spilling and sparkling. And in the same way, at evening time, when it went and dropped through the mountains, all the fields roundabout would be luminous with a yellow light. A cool southern breeze would blow through the fields. The crops glowing, swaying in the breeze, filled the heart with delight. To look at the light in the western sky was like looking upon a revelation of God. And at that very moment herons and crows and all other birds would wing their way home to their nests.[1]

"Then there's water. Although they live in villages and work for everybody, Dalits produce food for everybody. To collect water for themselves they have to walk kilometres and kilometres. So it is an ironical thing: they produce everything but they don't have anything. They work hard for the rest of humanity and they are left to starve. There is scarcity of water. They don't have enough nutritious food. This is the passage of life for Dalits. This is the life, the way of life we have, at least in the villages…

"Their basic knowledge about agriculture – the soil, climate, growing crops, and animals – is the only knowledge Dalits have. This traditional knowledge is not respected and acknowledged. They are skilled labourers. They know when the rain will come, when the wind will come, what crop should be sown in what season, at what time, and how long it will take to sprout. They have all this practical wisdom, but nobody respects that. So now they are landless and they have no work. They have been scattered to different cities, to urban areas, where they live without proper shelter or in slums, and go without proper food. The Dalit community is now scattered in cities because of globalisation. Globalisation has brought much harm to Dalits. In the name of privatisation and free economy, fertile lands have been changed into real estate, or into land for horticultural crops. So there has been a lot of change.

"As a result, all that traditional knowledge is being forgotten, and also the oneness with nature, the art forms, the performances, the folk tales and songs, and the stories. Dalits have a lot of knowledge, but as they are excluded from society, they don't consider whatever they have to be precious. And now we are losing this knowledge. We are talking of ecology and global warming these days. Definitely, there are changes in the climate, but why? If we really love this earth, we have to go back to the life of these farmers, the agricultural labourers, all of whom are invariably Dalits. And this knowledge is not imparted through education, in our schools and universities. I have one thing to say: now, our schools, our colleges, our universities, they don't produce real human beings with emotions and a heart. They are producing machines: machines to fit into different companies for earning money, either in India or abroad. So there is no human touch in the knowledge, or whatever is given to the younger generation."

> How long will they deceive us, as if we are innocent children, with their Pusai and their Holy Communion, their rosary and their novena? Children, growing up, will no longer listen to everything they are told, open mouthed, nodding their heads. Dalits have begun to realize the truth. They have realised that they have been maintained as the stone steps that others have trodden on as they raised themselves up. They have become aware that they have been made slaves in the name of God, the Pusai and the

> Church. They have experienced a state of affairs where, in the name of serving the poor, these others have risen in power while actually treading on the poor. Dalits have learnt that these others have never respected them as human beings, but bent the religion to their benefit, to maintain their own falsehoods.
> But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion.[2]

"Education is supposed to be an agent for social change, but what happens? Caste discrimination is very, very aggressively practised in universities and colleges and schools, rather than in villages. In my village, if anybody calls me by my name or my caste name, or if anybody degrades me now, I will give it back. But here, in the universities and colleges and schools, caste is practised in a very subtle, satirical way. Whenever I have gone to different universities and given lectures, there is invariably be one question about reservations. Everywhere. So much so that lately, in one of the colleges, a very famous college in Chennai, I said, Please stop asking that question. I was fed up. Because people think Dalits are buddhus, they don't have anything in their heads, they are not intelligent people. They have come up in life only through reservations. Yesterday I was talking to someone. He was talking about Rohith, and was indirectly telling me, "This PhD, this higher thing, they need to work hard and achieve through hard labour. Research work – it needs merit you know." So this is the mindset people have – Dalits are not capable of doing research, or capable of getting a doctorate degree.
"The same thing happens in schools. Even in a primary school, the teacher says "Oh, a Dalit – you won't be able to do this." I'll give you a concrete example: one additional education officer visited a classroom from our fifth class. He asked one of the boys to stand up and read Tamil – his mother tongue. He was not able to read properly. So he scolded the headmaster, "Why is this boy not able to read even Tamil – the mother tongue? English, I can understand, but why isn't he able to read Tamil?" And the headmaster told him, "He is an SC, sir, he can't read." If the headmaster has this in his mind, how will he teach that boy? This is how Dalits are excluded. I have personally seen this condition. In Tamilnadu, whether you read or write, everyone is promoted up to the 10th standard. Then, in the 10th standard, students have to appear for the government exam. They fail and drop out. Then they go do some menial job in their village.

"This is the condition. From the beginning, Dalit children are rejected. And the system of education we have is so rigid and so inhuman that it doesn't allow children to show their creativity or their originality. This continues in higher school, and colleges and universities also. Competition. Getting good marks. Good marks, so that you can earn a four-digit, five-digit, six-digit salary, and become well settled in life. That's it. Then competition. We don't have that sensitivity to the other person. I'm not talking only about caste. There is also gender exclusion. That's what has been happening in different places.

"So what is the role of education? If education could really liberate us, Rohith would not have died. Eight persons committed suicide in the same university. Where were we then? How can we call ourselves educated people? I'm really fed up, I really hate this system of education which produces machines to suit corporate companies. Without the human touch, what is the use of education? So instead of liberating us, the education we impart now is again enslaving us. That is the condition we are in. Now we all feel that Rohith has gone. I saw a poster outside. It said "We are more than five". Yes, we are more than five. But for what? It should not be this momentary sensational issue. We are more than five to create equal chances for everybody, and create a society where everybody matters as persons, not as commodities.

> I have met several people who work with zeal for the single objective of Dalit liberation. And it has been a great joy to see Dalits aiming to live with self respect, proclaiming aloud, "Dalit endru sollada; talai nimirndu nillada: Say you are a Dalit; lift up your head and stand tall."[3]

For more from Bama, visit the Indian Cultural Forum website.

Notes:
[1.] Bama, *Karukku*, Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Macmillan India Limited, 2000, pp. 3-4.
[2.] Ibid., p. 94.
[3.] Ibid., Afterword by Bama, p. 106.

Latha Viswanathan

Brittle

Father's dusty, old, black Ambassador burped to a halt in front of Grandmother's house. I wanted to meet Ammini, my friend, the old woman who lived across the street, but I didn't want to face the dragon yet. Ammini was also Grandmother's childhood friend. Two summers ago, when I was twelve, Ammini's husband, a bad-tempered man whom I secretly called the dragon, had caught me and Ammini in the kitchen playing house. He flung the miniature vessels, making her cry. I had stuck my tongue out instinctively, making my Goddess Kali face, scraping feet on the floor, imitating the shuffly way he walked. I heard Ammini howl. The dragon turned; I froze. By the time I realised he'd left the house, Ammini was gone. I found her in the garden, muttering to her toes, squashing black ants. I retraced my steps and picked up the broken toys, stiff arms of tiny ladles, and a cracked kadai. Climbing on a wooden stool, I put the toy basket back. The dragon said nothing to Ammini, his wife. He told Grandfather I was a high-strung, spoilt child.

I peeked into a window of Ammini's house. The dragon lay on a bare wooden cot, snoring like a speeding scooter. An English mahogany grandfather clock tick-tocked in the background, an absurd accompaniment to the grating sound. I stifled my giggles with the large cotton handkerchief I'd brought to collect gooseberries. A detour through the back, I decided. The dilapidated house had a wild, overgrown garden. This garden was of particular interest to me. Every summer, I collected gooseberries from the bushes in the back so Grandmother could make my favourite pickles. I loved sucking the tart fruit till goose bumps raced down my spine. Then I would rush to drink a glass of water to savour the sweet taste.

Before the dragon caught us, Ammini and I had spent hours together, playing house. High on a granite shelf, she hid a cushion-like bamboo basket filled with miniature sandstone replicas of cooking utensils: woks, saucepans, tureens, griddles and minuscule ladles. We prepared elaborate gourmet feasts. Thick lentil sauces mixed with ground coconut and chillies, roasted baby potatoes, deep-fried vadais sprinkled with tangy red onions, jaggery dosai sizzling in ghee, yoghurt so thick and rich you could cut it with a knife.

When it came to picking the dishes we made, Ammini had no discrimination. Except for kadalai urundai, what I thought of in my Bombay English as peanut brittle, like chikki. That was mandatory. "Yes, let's," she'd say, pouncing on every suggestion I made, her glazed eyes doing a dance of desire. Then she divided the unseen portions, one fourth for me, three fourths for herself.

It was the summer after my ninth birthday, when I'd received a new doll.

“Ammini, what about the children?” I asked, glancing at my doll, pink and plastic, decked out in a frilly frock. I adjusted the shoulder folds of a faded checked towel that substituted for a sari. Ammini’s face filled with the benign expression that endeared her to the women in my family, especially my grandmother. I marvelled at how her oiled, slicked back hair seemed to stick to her scalp like latex paint. Her skin had a permanent yellow tinge from vigorous use of turmeric. The eyes, with their slightly out-of-focus pupils, wore a filmy, milky sheath. She had a bad case of cataracts. “But, Ammini, what about the children?” I repeated impatiently.

“No children, no, no, no, it’s all for me. I’m the child,” she smiled, baring her receding gums.
“You’re too old to be a child. You’ve got to be a grown-up,” I wailed. She was just a shrunken old woman, all doubled over, always muttering to her toes. I couldn’t picture her deformed body, her webbed flat feet and the sheer curtain-covered eyes belonging to a child.

“Grown-up? Oh, I play that all the time. Wife, husband…pretending for the best… I want to throw a tantrum; kadalai urundai for dinner, sugarcane juice at tiffin time. Like her,” Ammini said. She pointed to her lumpy rag doll, no separate fingers or toes, barely wrapped in a filthy sari, half-torn woollen eyes. She plucked the kitchen towel tucked into her sari pleats and blanketed the doll, lifting it gently, pressing it to her chest. I stared as she rocked back and forth, patting the doll’s back as if burping a child.

I approached the centre of the backyard. Away from the shade of the trees and their spreading canopies was a small vegetable patch. Ammini grew flowers in raised beds on either side for the dragon’s morning prayers. Ruby hibiscus, fiery petals drooping like dogs’ tongues in the heat, champa with their cloying scent, sweet tulsi, coral firecrackers with a single gold speck in the middle. Early in the morning, heaped high in a filigreed brass basket, Ammini carried the flowers to the main room of the house. The wall was covered with pictures of gods and goddesses. Lakshmi perched daintily on a pink lotus; pot-bellied Ganesha sat nearby. Shiva danced in blissful ecstasy. Circles of vermilion eyes and sandalwood paste adorned each picture.

From the year I learnt to cross the street by myself, I had watched the dragon pray. He chanted his mantras loudly, in typical full-throated, sing-song fashion. The tinkling of the little bell meant that others had to lower their voices, talk in hushed whispers. All of a sudden, “What’s for lunch?” he snapped at Ammini. “Has that wretch of a man delivered the two sacks of rice?”
“Yes. Don’t worry, I’ve taken care of it,” Ammini said, running to the main room, wiping the sweat off her face with the edge of her crumpled cotton sari. It wasn’t considered wifely conduct to speak from the kitchen. She walked briskly back to her cooking. In the kitchen, where it was beastly hot, Ammini threw her head back, tilting a stainless steel tumbler at least four inches from her face, pouring water into her mouth. Her throat made gurgling pigeon noises as she swallowed fast. When I tried this later in Bombay, I poured water all over myself.
“A man needs to know if rice has been delivered. A man needs to know what is going on in his own house,” the dragon muttered under his breath. The forgiving gods waited while he attended to earthly matters. Renewed by the interlude of trivial information, he plunged deeper into his mantras, his sonorous voice rising to a crescendo, reverberating in the

uppermost room in the house. Ammini was frantically busy. Banana flower and jackfruit in kadais hissed and sizzled as she scraped coconut, moving frenziedly to get rice and three vegetable dishes ready for lunch. The dragon refused to wait a single minute after his prayers for lunch. The banana leaf had to be washed and placed in a corner of the main room floor, the wooden palagai seat dusted and leaning against the wall, a steaming mound of rice ready and waiting on the leaf so he could make a well for fresh ghee. If lunch was late, he yelled at Ammini, making her cry.

The well in her backyard was hidden behind pillars of banana stems. Leaning out of the kitchen window, the last time we played house, I had watched Ammini draw water from the well. Clutching the shiny brass vessel to her waist like a squirming toddler, she slipped the twisted rope around the rim of the container. It went down, deep down, as she pulled the braided jute towards her heaving chest. The dome-like vessel gurgled, drank deep of the cool liquid. I ran outside. I begged my turn; I tried hard to emulate her style. My soft city hands made the vessel a clumsy, graceless diver; the rope chafed my skin. Ammini made a chortling noise. I glared at her gums, those familiar pink-purple stripes. Then she hugged me, a gesture of consolation.
"Here." She held out a piece of juicy sugarcane.

I shook my head.

"Mmm. Sweet and good," she teased, tossing an imaginary piece into her mouth. "How can a mother of so many children be this stubborn? You're the mother, remember?" I grabbed the sugarcane from her hand. The sweetness raced around my tongue. My grandmother forbade sugarcane in our house, believing it made our tonsils swell. I chewed and chewed till the fibre was a bleached, wrung-out stuck-together bunch of strings in my mouth. Squatting near the washing stone by the well, she chewed as I chewed.

"Tell me a story," I begged. "The one about the mongoose."

I leant against the washing stone and pressed my knees to my chest.

"Years ago," Ammini began, "long before you were born, there was a mongoose in this garden." The sudden gust of breeze felt good on my face. I watched banana leaves fan like elephant ears. As the story rushed out of her mouth, Ammini's face creased and ironed itself out. I knew the plot well. I told it to myself as she told it to me.

Grandmother, her best friend, was helping her make jasmine gajra for her hair. They heard an eerie sound, a mongoose snarl. A cobra had slithered down the bamboo fence. My grandmother put her forefinger to her lips and held Ammini's hand. The cobra swayed its raised hood; the quivering, hissing tongue darted out in a hypnotic wave-like dance. The mongoose bared its teeth with hair bristling at the nape of its neck. Eyes leaking red, he rocked, then traced a circle with his jumps, flying up – down, up – down. The cobra raced after him flinging itself – thwack here, thwack again on the ground. With liquid coral eyes, the mongoose flew and saddled the scaly back, riding wildly, being thrown about. For Ammini and grandmother,

the moment became so oppressive, it had to burst. The strike was cathartic. The snake lay punched with mongoose teeth marks.

I shuddered; Ammini chortled. “I remember getting up in the middle of the night. That was the time I bled first,” she said.

The dolls were napping.
“When I was a girl,” Ammini said, “I had kadalai urundai every month, on the lucky day before the full moon. I sat near my brother’s cradle, holding a cane tray filled with raw peanuts.”
I pictured Ammini flipping and tossing the nuts in the air, a Chinese dancer’s ribbon, going up with skin, coming down stripped clean. In front of me, her face creased and ironed itself out. Those pink purple stripes widened and came close. I smiled to myself.

“When Baby Brother fell asleep,” Ammini continued, “Mother and I slipped into the kitchen. Thick coffee-coloured molasses was boiled and seasoned with sweet-smelling cardamom. A cup of water was fetched; a bit of the syrup dropped in. When it congealed into a glistening caramel pearl, the nuts were tossed in. We shaped peanut-balls, dancing from the heat on our palms. How we joked and laughed,” Ammini said.

Her mother teased her about her husband-to-be. “Will you share your sweets with him? Will you let him ply you with store-bought confections?”

The dragon came out, breaking into my reverie, spotted me by the well. “Is that you?” His eyes widened at the way I’d grown. I adjusted my half-sari. “What are you doing here? Go home. Ammini can’t see you now.” He waved his walking stick at me. “She is tired. Lying down. Wild city child, almost fully grown, still coming and bothering my wife.” He hadn’t changed a bit. I ran back to Grandmother’s house.

Every summer, uncles, aunts and cousins, all of us skinny girls, travelled to this village in Kerala, crowding the old house. In Grandmother’s house, the noise and crowds of Bombay, where I lived with my parents, disappeared into some black hole in my adolescent mind. After our final exams, my sister and I filled our suitcases with pavadais that reached our ankles, laying aside the pinafores, skirts and dresses we wore the rest of the year. My parents crammed our boxes with educational supplies – books, blank notebooks in case we felt the urge to work.

Fat Goat, my ten-year-old male cousin and his family arrived from Madras. He followed me everywhere, refusing to leave me alone. A whole week passed before I went again to Ammini’s house. I remembered the dragon and crouched beside a hibiscus bush. The nearest window was high up, a small rectangular opening that barely lit up the pantry inside. Climbing up the uneven edges of the bricks on the outside wall, I looked inside. There were sacks of rice, wheat, coconuts, pumpkins and gourds, jaggery, tamarind, jackfruits, a row of cylindrical stainless steel containers. Like the other houses in the village, anything bought in large quantities was hidden away in the dark of the storeroom, away from the prying eyes of servants. Some households like Ammini’s and ours put away homemade sweets in steel containers.

Standing on my toes, I grabbed at one of the rusty horizontal bars that striped the window. I thought I saw someone inside. I heard the metallic click of a lid. As my eyes plunged into the darkness, I could barely make anything out. I shook my head, sweeping away the blurred coloured ripples that veiled my vision. The swirling circles dissipated, outlining the familiar hunched silhouette. Ammini was intensely examining a small object in her hands. I stared hard. It was a ball of peanut brittle, about the size of a golf ball. I watched, spellbound. She began to lick it frantically, making frenzied slurping noises. Popping it deftly into her mouth, she closed her eyes in ecstasy. Rummaging through a corner knot of her sari, she brought out the next one. The ritual began all over again. The close scrutiny, the slurping, the closing of eyes. This was not an appropriate time to meet my friend. I was intruding, watching her. The moment felt private.

From Grandmother's house across the street, I could hear my cousin shouting my name. That idiotic fat boy. Till he was born, we girls had Grandfather to ourselves. I only minded a little that Grandmother plumped up my cousin with extra ghee and curds. Standing on my toes, I heard him call again. I was anxious to meet Ammini, give her my special gift. But I didn't want to be caught here.

Back in our house, I cheated and let Fat Goat win at Ludo to shut his bleating mouth. When I beat him at board games, he ran whining to Grandfather. I was sorry half an hour later, when Grandfather suggested he give Fat Goat swimming lessons. "Grown-up girls from our family don't swim here, you know that," Grandfather said when I joined them at the village pond. I watched coconut husks bob up and down, help float chubby arms and legs. I made a face and walked around, enjoying the cool breeze. If I stood facing Grandmother's house, the village temple was on the east. To the west was the village pond with murky green water edged with hyacinths and lilies. Elephants, buffaloes and cows bathed here in harmony with village folk. Young men bicycled around the pond hoping to catch sight of a bare-breasted woman. This rarely happened. Most young women were modest and discreet, they bathed with snug-fitting midriff length blouses and ankle length skirts. The water made the cotton blouses and skirts cling like a second skin; the men pedalled harder. The veiled view was erotic; glimpses of outlines of shapes; your imagination filled in the rest.

Grandmother waved to me from the porch. She went to the temple at this time. I waved back and lingered by the pond, watching a baby elephant. By the time I remembered Grandmother and the temple, she had gone ahead. I ended up walking with my aunts, the ones who loved to talk and laugh. They were talking about a plate of barfis they had sent Ammini. "That awful man and that dirty squirrel," they said, "I hope she doesn't share any of it with them." They were talking about the squirrel I had seen last year in a basket.

I had gone to Ammini's backyard, hoping to spend time with her. She was there with the dragon, both of them fussing over something in a basket. I was reluctant to join them but Ammini insisted I come and see what they had. An abandoned baby squirrel nestled in a basket layered with leaves and straw. The dragon fed it milk with an ink dropper, the kind I used at

school to fill my fountain pen with Quink ink. Ammini covered her mouth and laughed as the baby drank the milk. She then took the basket from the dragon and rocked it gently, singing a Malayalam lullaby. The dragon helped Ammini hang the basket on a branch that ran across the kitchen window. Ammini promised to share her peanut brittle as the baby grew big and strong. This was the only time I had seen Ammini and the dragon together that way. I stared at him open-mouthed. But soon he turned away and said to Ammini, “Coffee! Where’s my coffee, woman? I want it now.”

The temple saw a daily gathering of the faithful, young and old who came there for some air, gossip, and a brief respite from their daily chores. Elderly women like Grandmother, heads bowed in reverence, carried small jars of ghee, flowers wrapped in starkly veined leaves and tied with banana fibre. Visitors like me were greeted with curiosity and interest. Village women asked, “Where are you from? Whose child are you? Have you begun menstruating?” I shrank back from them, then glared in defiance.

I came out of the temple and walked back to the pond.

Fat Goat was swallowing water and struggling. I saw a shuffling figure proceed towards Grandfather. Dressed in a filthy dhoti, the dragon’s eyes darted everywhere. Aside from his nasty temper, there was this strange walk. He transferred his weight from side to side, reminding me of one of our pre-badminton exercises at school.
The dragon’s obsession with bodily functions was common knowledge. Some fateful mornings, he could be seen swaying back and forth along the front porch, stroking his hairy belly. He agonized loudly over his inability to experience a satisfactory “motion”. Bowel movement was, absolutely, the first order of the day. The urge to first defecate was considered supreme; the day could not proceed in disorder. He would not shave; he would not bathe. He cursed Ammini; he fumed. Passersby on the street were informed of the problem; they commiserated. This compulsion for evacuation was transferred to neighbours and their descendants. He asked the mothers in our house: “Have they gone today? Have they done their job?” The women never answered him.

The front door of Ammini’s house was open. In spite of the light outside, the inside was cave-like. On the stone shelf in the kitchen, I left a Cadbury’s chocolate “Nuts and Raisins” arranged in a fancy tin. A squirrel was racing around an open dish of rice. The tin of chocolates was sealed shut, I consoled myself. I glanced up at the topmost shelf. There was the cushion-like bamboo basket with the minuscule cooking utensils. From this angle, it formed the base of a triangle, cobweb lines growing on the sides, crisscrossing, travelling up to wooden ceiling beams.

I found Ammini way back in the garden, leaning into the well, covering her mouth with her sari, pointing to something inside. “What is it?” I asked, hugging her, then peering into the water. Pink boxes floated everywhere.

“Can’t eat like before. Hurts,” she said, pointing to her gums. “Let it make the water smell sweet.”

“What is it? What’s going to make the water smell sweet?”

From inside the house, I heard the dragon’s voice. “What’s this?” I heard him shout. “Who brought this?” Ammini crossed her eyes and mimicked, “Who brought this?” Her fingers pinched a banana stem, then gestured urgently at me to leave. I ran without looking back, taking the roundabout way to our crowded house.

Grandmother sat spread-eagled on the floor, slicing raw plantains to be made into banana chips. “Tell me about Ammini,” I said. Grandmother sighed. “Now that you’re grown-up, almost fourteen, I suppose it’s time for you to know. If I tell you, you must promise not to bother her. She hasn’t been feeling well.”

“What’s wrong with her? She’s all right?” I asked.

“She’s getting old, she tires easily. You understand, don’t you?”

I nodded yes. Grandmother sighed again and began to reminisce. Ammini had been a cheerful child. “She was sure to make a great wife,” her family said. Married at nine, she came to the dragon’s house in the village with festive pomp and fanfare. She chattered and laughed with abandon, played pranks on her doting father-in-law. They played hide and seek in the garden, the old man gasping for breath as he ran. He slipped coins into her palm for shaved ice and syrup. At mealtimes, he placed her little palagai next to his. His wife wanted a Calcutta handloom sari like her friend in the next village. His son begged for a cricket set. Father-in-law scolded them both. He said there was no money for their whims. Others in the house watched with pursed mouths, shook their heads. Mother and son cornered Ammini in the garden. Was this proper behaviour for a wife? A Hindu daughter-in-law? Grandmother’s eyes turned liquid; she dipped her fingers into a bowl of coconut oil to remove the dark stains the peels left behind.

“And then what happened?” I whispered.

“After a year, the old man died. With her father-in-law gone, the elders in the house unleashed their pent-up anger. They snatched her toys; they took away all privileges. They drummed wifely sense through a routine of penance. No sweets. No kadalai urundai for you, they said. A Hindu wife learns to shed attachments from her past. She learns to please, prepares to be a mother. Show respect when we talk, bow your head, drop your eyes. Scared and nervous, Ammini ran to her husband for help. ‘What’s a sixteen-year-old boy to do? He was nicer to you than he ever was to me or my mother,’ her husband said, and went to join friends waiting by the pond.”

I don’t know what my face looked like, but Grandmother was silent for a while.

“Months later,” Grandmother continued, “Ammini came running to me one day, teary-eyed. They were not feeding her properly in that house. All she had was a bit of squash, a piece of pumpkin, watery rasam, rice. After that, I saved treats for her, sweets Ammini knotted into the edge of her sari. She learned to be sly, to eat in secret.” Grandmother smiled. “When others slept in the afternoon, she sneaked into the pantry. If they saw her, she said she had to clean the rice, wipe the shelves, the tamarind pulp had to be dried in the sun. Even later, when she no longer had to, Ammini continued to eat in secret. The pattern could not be broken.” I remembered what I had seen, Ammini eating in the dark.

So the years passed with Ammini plotting and deceiving, running to Grandmother for an hour of friendship on the rare evenings when the elders went out. I pictured Grandmother and Ammini stringing jasmine gajra, holding hands while the mongoose and cobra fought.

“That was then. We weren’t like you city children are now,” Grandmother said. She turned purposeful; slicing, dipping fingers into oil, dropping a pinch of salt and turmeric into the smoking kadai. “Grandfather will be returning soon,” she said, meaning later – this was no time to talk. Looking at Grandmother’s face, I guessed the reason was something else. Perhaps she felt I wasn’t ready to hear it all. She looked at my determined face, raised her eyebrows, realising I would pester her relentlessly till I found out.

“I was pregnant with your father at the time,” Grandmother continued. “Grandfather brought me green mangoes from the fruit vendor. I’d been craving them, you know,” she said. Embarrassed, I smiled and bit my nail. “I was rubbing mango slices with chilli and salt in the kitchen when Grandfather said Ammini’s husband had not turned up at school. We heard from neighbours he was ill. Grandfather wanted to see for himself but visitors were shooed away. Weeks later, Grandfather said his friend had recovered and was back at school. Ammini came to visit me one afternoon. We were seeing each other after a long time. She laughed and placed her palms on my hardening, round stomach. How thin and tired she looked, as if she was the one who was ill. She smiled coyly and said the mother-in-law had given them more time.”
“For what?” I asked. Grandmother stared as though I were slow. I continued to chew my nails. “Grandchildren. What Ammini must have felt, seeing me swell with child. Then again I did not see Ammini for a long time. I wanted to visit her but her mother-in-law shooed people away. Finally, Ammini came to see me. She was sobbing. The dragon couldn’t walk normally. He shuffled about, dragging his legs. Before the fever, they had been together a few times at night but since the illness he ignored her, refused to touch her, called her an ugly child.”

Grandmother shook her head. “What can women like us do? The word spread – something must be wrong with Ammini. No wonder the poor boy spurned his bride. Isn’t it always the woman’s fault? When Grandfather came home, I repeated what I had heard and we fought terribly, calling each other names. He said I should keep out of it. We did not speak for days. It was a whole week before we made up.”

Poor Ammini. It was so unfair. Now that I knew, I hated the dragon even more. How could Grandfather talk to him, be his friend? I needed to get out of the crowded house. My sister and cousins were such children, absorbed in tables and sums.

A fat sweetmeat vendor fanned his wares to drive away flies that travelled from the animals at the pond. On the mossy stone steps that led to the water sat the dragon. I noticed a bright pink cardboard box from the sweetmeat vendor on his lap. Holding the cheap paper packet tied with a string under his arm, he got up and began shuffling towards the temple. Watching him sway a little, I wished he'd trip and crack his skull. Running to the vendor, I plonked coins from my pocket, grabbing the banana leaf packet he handed back. I'd get to Ammini first.

"No sweets now," Ammini said and left the packet on the kitchen counter. I'd forgotten that she'd said, peanut brittle hurt her gums. "Why do you look so sad? Want to play?" she asked, yawning, glancing at the toy vessels. I felt silly, a girl my age, still playing house. But if Ammini wanted to… I'd play along… I watched her yawn and shake her head, fiddle with the things in the toy basket, count cowrie shells for rice. I hadn't noticed it before, but Ammini's hair looked different, tangled and bushy. No turmeric yellow on her wrinkled face.

"You look different. Are you all right?" I asked.

"You're the mother, I'll be the child. It's Baby's nap time," she said. Ammini lay down and covered her face with her sari, falling asleep in minutes, forgetting to pretend. I stared at her for a while, then threw a shell in the air, counting, clapping hurriedly before it came down. Could I clap fast like last summer before when I'd counted to eleven? Too bad I was so slow. My fourteen-year-old hands had grown heavy. Even my counting and clapping had not woken her up. I stared at her.
"Get up, Ammini." Her milky eyes twitched, refused to open. I was suddenly scared. Why was my friend behaving like this?

"I want to sleep. Tired. Go home to Grandmother, your Amma and Appa."

Behind me, Grandmother had crossed over the threshold of Ammini's house. She spoke in an annoyed voice, "Do as she says. Leave. Go wash your hands and feet and say your prayers. It will be dinner time soon." Grandmother bent down and pressed her palm to Ammini's forehead. "You rest. Why don't I send a tiffin carrier with food for you and your husband? I'll go see to it now."

I felt a nagging discomfort, things were not going as I had planned. Ammini and I had not laughed and talked enough this time. Of all the people in our family, I hoped Grandmother would understand. But she was adamant. Walking towards me, she hissed, "Can't you see Ammini needs peace and quiet? No more silly games." I followed Grandmother out of the house. I didn't explain that it was Ammini who had suggested we play house.

Fat Goat waited outside, looking smug. So he had bleated that I was at her house. I wanted to scare the ghee and curds right out of his stomach. I watched Grandmother enter the kitchen, call the other women of the house.

I said to Fat Goat in a teasing voice, “I know something you don’t know.”

“A secret? I won’t tell,” he promised.

“Come,” I said, walking towards the garden, a duplicate of Ammini’s backyard. Most days, only Grandfather pottered here, pruning and clearing, making sure sunlight drenched his lemony pumpkin flowers. “See there?” I pointed to the outhouse. “Behind that there is a ghost. The ghost of a cobra that never rests. It waits for someone whose flesh is juicy and plump.” I saw that his nose was beginning to sweat, he was standing very still.

“Ghosts don’t eat. I know that.” His face relaxed, he narrowed his eyes.

“That’s what you think. Grandmother says snakes don’t attack girls. They only attack boys. Everybody knows that. Haven’t you seen your mother join the women near the temple going round the big tree? She’s praying to the snake god, saying, ‘Spare my son.’ The snake ghost goes all over the village at night. Of course, it never used to come here…so many skinny girls. Until…” I stopped in mid-sentence. Pupils fattening like tamarind seeds, he hurried inside.

Fat Goat tattled; and refused to use the outhouse. My parents banned visits to Ammini. They said she was sick; it could be contagious. They consulted grandfather about a temple tour for us girls. “Culture – history,” they said to us. I told Fat Goat I was going to be a swami, grow a third eye.
“I’ll open my forehead eye, curse you, and it will all come true. Remember the Mahabharata? Everybody knows the power of a swami’s words. My special words are: ashes to enemies, Ludo boards and dice.”

“Girls can’t be swamis,” he said uncertainly, holding his stomach, putting off swimming lessons with Grandfather; too much ghee and rice.

Outside the temple in Guruvayur, the first on our itinerary, a woman was selling stuffed cloth dolls. I saw one that looked like Ammini’s, only this doll wore a shiny sari, whole buttons for eyes. “Let’s buy it for Ammini,” I said to Grandfather.

“No gifts for anybody. Your parents got them mangoes from Bombay, that’s more than enough.”

“But please,” I persisted, “She has always wanted one like that. I know her better than anybody else.”

“No. I’ve heard enough from you,” Grandfather said.

“That friend of yours, mean and nasty dragon, he will never get her one.” It was too late, I didn’t mean to say it out loud. My father squinted at me, my mother shook her head.

“Don’t call him that, you rude child,” Grandfather said. “Grandmother and you think only of Ammini. A man also suffers.” The dragon? Suffer? We walked away without buying the doll.
When we returned to the village from our temple tour, Grandmother looked teary-eyed. Ammini was ill with a burning fever. “She’s dying,” Grandmother whispered to the adults.
“I want to go to her,” I said. I promised to water the plants in the garden, shell the peas heaped in the straw basket. I even said no to my favourite tiffin.

“Tomorrow,” my parents said “First get a good night’s rest. Besides, Ammini needs to be with her husband, her family. Do you think they want a neighbour’s children around?”

“But…” I began. Father gave me that look, the one where he stared without blinking. It began like a staring contest, only this was more serious, I understood. When I played this game with my friends, I could outstare the best. But Father always made me lower my eyes. I heard my voice falter. Ammini would understand how I felt. The men in my life were almost as bad as the man in her life.

I woke to a continuous thumping on the front door, the sound of wailing from across the road. Everybody in our house was up. Grandfather opened the door. Grandmother looked terrible; hair loose, the pottu on her forehead smeared into a shapeless red stain, eyes and nose just as red.

“Ammini died in her sleep,” she said. I watched her walk to the back of the house. She sat there on the washing stone by the well. It was time for the cleansing ritual to wash away the contamination of death. The maid poured water over her head. I watched Grandmother but I was thinking of Ammini. I never got to hold her hand, slip a cowrie shell into her palm for luck. Grandmother was using a towel on her hair. Fat Goat walked up to her and said, “Grandfather says the men want coffee.”

Before I could stop myself, I shouted, “Why don’t you men jump into the well?” Everybody was silent. I yelled again, “You want coffee? Why don’t you men jump into the coffee well?” I was pounding my fists on Fat Goat’s chest, my voice shaky and quivery.

“That’s enough. Let the poor boy be,” Grandmother said.

“What’s going on here? What’s all the commotion?” Grandfather came out of the house. The women, speeding shadows, left the backyard and entered the kitchen.

The dragon had sent a messenger to the house. “They want you and the others to prepare her body for cremation,” Grandfather told Grandmother.

This time, I didn't wait for permission. I was out of the door.

Ammini lay in her lumpy bed on the floor, mouth hanging open like the flap of a purse, her eyes rolled back, staring at nothing. My aunts bathed her and sprinkled Ganga water on her body. They shut the stubborn eyelids; tucked a folded towel under her chin to close the gaping mouth. It was considered a great blessing for a Hindu woman to die a sumangali. Young wives trooped into the house and prostrated themselves before the body, asking that they too be thus blessed. Death had given Ammini special status, a status she never achieved in life.
Grandmother decided to drape Ammini in a red sari. Red was the auspicious colour for brides. I was asked to fetch the sari from a trunk in the front room. The corroded little metal box had been part of Ammini's trousseau. Her parents had filled it with toys, rainbow-coloured skirts scattered with bits of mirror that caught the sunlight and gaudy glass bangles – a little girl's treasures. I noticed a trail of black ants, their circuitous path starting from a small hole in the wall, curving past the dragon's rickety old chair where he sat with his snuff box, into the once shiny suitcase. The dented lid curved out like a swollen lip, making the job easier for the little creatures. Curious, I lifted the lid. The red sari with the gold border lay on top. I tossed it aside impatiently. I was looking for something, I did not know what. I wanted to take a bit of her away from here to the city. Underneath her blouses was a suspicious brown lump, wrapped in what had once been a white cotton handkerchief. I picked the lump and untied the childish knots. Inside were two sickly looking, mouldy peanut brittle balls. Dropping the sweets back in the trunk, I grabbed the kerchief and stuffed it into my pocket.

After the usual ten-day mourning period, I entered Ammini's house. In the main room, the gods with their pottus still hung on the wall. The flower basket was empty, the brass bell silent. On the granite shelf, the bamboo cushion squatted, cradled by cobwebs. Outside, the water lay flat in the waiting well; the pink cardboard boxes had travelled, somewhere to the depths. A creature darted in the bushes. I heard a chortle, pictured receding gum stripes.

I felt an urge to peek into the pantry window one more time. Somebody moved inside. The dragon? A muffled sound, then the figure swayed a little. My knuckles jutted like pebbles as I clasped the rusty bars. The dragon was holding something in his hand. He sensed my presence blocking the window light. For a moment, we were still. Then he walked towards me. I saw the squirrel leap onto his shoulder, holding a peanut brittle ball. Through a gap between the corroded bars, the dragon offered me one too, holding out his filthy hand.
"You loved her, didn't you?" he whispered, eyes glistening wet. All I could do was nod my head as I took the peanut brittle from his hand.

Back at Grandmother's, I ran upstairs to our family room. I opened the empty kerchief and saw the design. Two brown circles like the outline of a pair of spectacles from moist peanut brittle balls. I placed the dragon's offering in one of the circles and tied the kerchief tightly, placing it behind my pile of books. At dinner, the dragon told Grandfather I was a nice young woman, not a high strung, spoiled child. Father smiled and gave me a look, a soft one this time. It was my turn to be difficult, to look away because I wanted to.

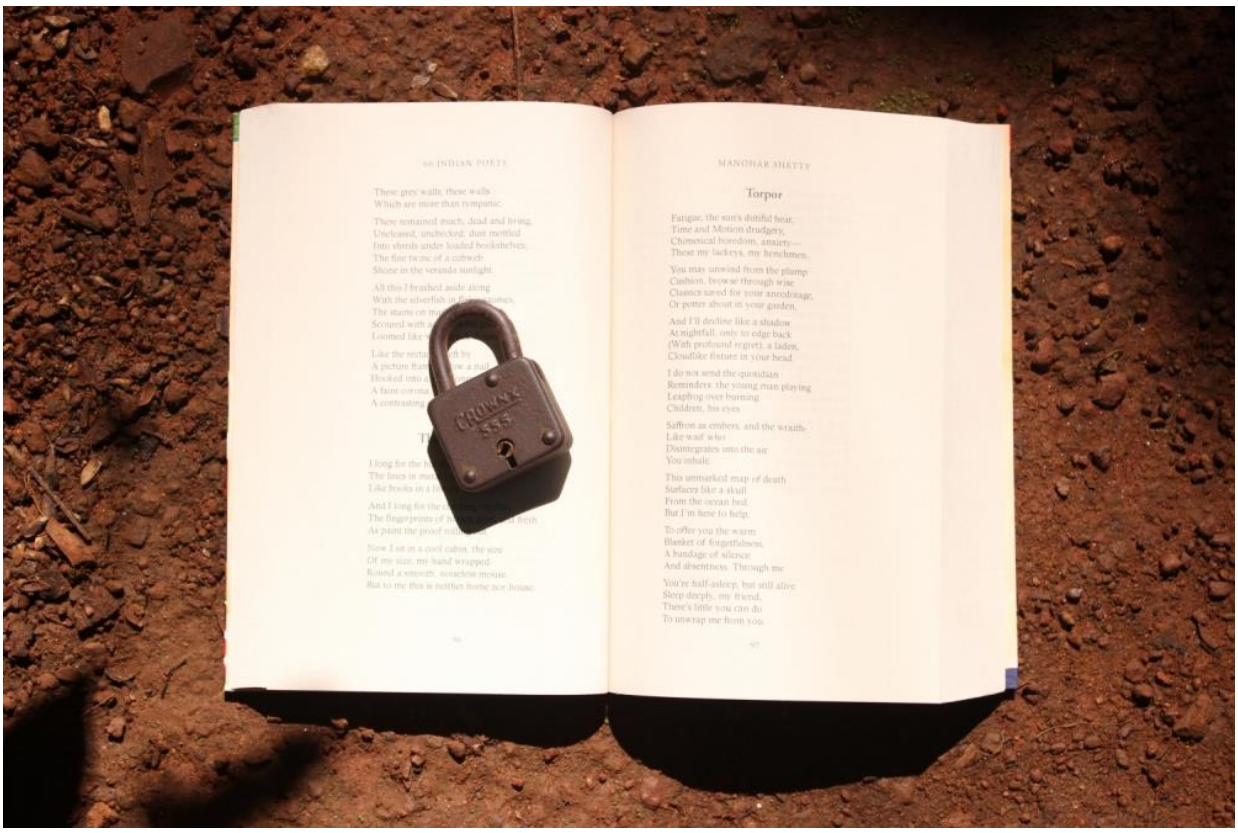
Upstairs, I watched my cousin lay out his Ludo board on the floor. My sister and he argued about who would be the first to roll the dice. Grandmother had retired early for the night. The men were spending the night with the dragon, a gesture of moral support. The women had congregated on the porch. I went downstairs and sneaked into the front room. My aunt was whispering what seemed to be an entertaining anecdote. I slouched behind Grandfather's massive easy chair.

They were talking about the dragon. "Ever since the fever, I heard from the others, he refused to get close to his wife." Before I could move, my aunt's voice went on. "This is how it must have happened. After the first bout of filariasis, his scrotum, elephantine! His gait turned crooked as he shifted this way and that. Maybe Ammini cried at night because her husband turned away, refused to touch. In the morning, he gave her a box of kadalai urundai. That would keep her happy for a while."

I remembered Ammini and the dragon laughing and conspiring like children, fussing over a tiny squirrel. Wild laughter ensued from the front porch. I'll never forgive the women in my family for that. By the time I stumbled upstairs, my sister was doing her victory dance. I cried with Fat Goat. What did it mean to win or lose? It was but a moment. Etched forever in my mind was the memory of Ammini, child to woman, struggling all the time.

Pratheesh

Earth and Water



Digital prints of poetry installations, mixed media, 2015

Digital prints of poetry installations, mixed media, 2015

Digital prints of poetry installations, mixed media, 2015

Digital prints of poetry installations, mixed media, 2015

T.M. Krishna and the Jogappas

Coming Together to Sing an Equal Music

Image courtesy Feminism in India

On February 21, 2016, a landmark concert in Bangalore brought together acclaimed Carnatic musician T.M. Krishna with five Jogappas, members of a traditional community of transwomen musicians. The event, called Aikya, or Coming Together, was organized by the Bangalore-based Solidarity Foundation which supports the rights of transgenders.

The Jogappas, a transgender subculture in North Karnataka, parts of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, make a living by Joga (begging), singing and dancing. Dedicated to the goddess Yellamma (Renuka), they are…'caught', possessed, by the goddess Yellamma: as such, they are regarded as holy women, and their gender identity and expression reflects this. Jogappas occupy a respected, priestly position within society: people seek their blessings, and appease Yellamma through them. They are a direct link between society and the divine. However, owing to their identity and gender expression, they also transgress the binary norms of gender and

sexuality held sacrosanct by societies everywhere in India. They face the paradox of being seen as 'powerful and holy' as well as 'strange and deviant'.[1]

The Jogappas often clarify that they are not hijras since their transgender identity is strongly rooted in their devotion to Yellamma Devi. They usually perform at the main temple of Yellamma Devi in Saundatti, or in villages where they go from house to house singing bhajans. Jogappas use three instruments to accompany their music: the choudki, a rhythmic instrument played using a small piece of wood on the inner side (frame) of an open wooden drum; the sutti, an instrument like the ektara, used to maintain pitch; and the tiny cymbals called taal.
Five Jogappas were selected to perform at the concert with T.M. Krishna. Singers Rakhi and Sagar Bhaskar Walke (the latter a Mahar), were accompanied by their teacher, Laxman Nivrutti Bhosale, also known as Laxman Guru. All three are Marathi speakers from Nipani. The other two, Siddappa G. Algonda and Davalsaab, are Kannada speakers from Vijayapura.

Performing with a Carnatic musician, and that too for an invited audience in an auditorium in a large city, was a new experience for these Jogappas. Equally new was the experience for T.M. Krishna, who is not only a respected musician, but also the author of the award-winning *A Southern Music: The Karnatic Story*. But Krishna found, when the event was in the planning stage, that "What they sing is very similar to the bhajan/namasankirtana tradition. They have one melodic line, and there is repetition of that melodic line and that's the chorus. If you take any music, such as qawwali or gospel music, there is this idea that a similar tune must be repeated, mainly because they want the congregation to follow it. When I heard the Jogappas, I realized it was very much doable. Certain melodies of the Jogappas' music are also similar to the Carnatic tradition. Each has its own aesthetic form and intent but there were melodic and rhythmic possibilities."[2]

The result was a very new kind of musical conversation. Coming together on a common platform led to many levels of "aikya". The songs included original compositions by the Jogappas of Nipani and Vijayapura in praise of Yellamma, interspersed with Carnatic music. Genres came closer together as Carnatic music and folk melodies sat side by side; Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Hindi and English came together in song and speech like a miniature portrait of multi-lingual India. Most of all, the conversation raised the powerful question of equality in music practice.

From the concert

Gārbāri

Click here to listen to the song: https://youtu.be/ysNc8tHq1Og

This song, composed in Marathi by Laxman Nivrutti Bhosale, and filled with devotion for Renuka Devi at Saundatti, is performed by Laxman Guru of Nipani with a vocal mélange by T.M. Krishna.

Enagu Aané Krishna

Click here to listen to the song: https://youtu.be/OhfGT5JgJH0

T.M. Krishna and Siddappa G. Algonda come together to recreate this Purandaradasa classic with a rich new Bijapur flavour. Siddappa G. Algonda of Vijayapura plays the choudki, and Davalsaab, also from Vijayapura, plays the sutti.

Allāh Térō Nām

Click here to listen to the song: https://youtu.be/6ce2coq7ZMo

The concert came to an end with T.M. Krishna's rendition of "Allāh Térō Nām", written by Sahir Ludhianvi and composed by Jaidev for the film *Hum Dono* (1961). The song was originally sung by Lata Mangeshkar.

Artists:
T.M. Krishna
Rakhi
Sagar Bhaskar Walke
Laxman Nivrutti Bhosale (Laxman Guru)
Siddappa G. Algonda
Davalsaab
The concert, called Aikya, was organized by the Solidarity Foundation, Bangalore.

Notes:
[1.] Jogappa: Gender, Identity and the Politics of Exclusion, Aneka, Bangalore, 2015. See https://in.boell.org/sites/default/files/jogappa_gender_identity_and_the_politics_of_exclusion.pdf
[2.] http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tm-krishna-to-lead-a-concert-for-equality-in-bengaluru/article8245966.ece

Alok Bhalla

Tea for Today Café

A New Jataka

Shoili Kanungo, "Give us a Break"

For Asif Farrukhi and other friends of Sabeen Mahmud, assassinated on April 25, 2015.

(Told sometime in the late twenty-first century)

Bodhisattva: In one of my incarnations, I was born as a simple, ordinary woman in the city K across the border.

Disciples: (amazed and amused) The Bodhisattva has never been a woman so far.

Bodhisattva: (with an enigmatic smile) Let me assure you that the next one to achieve Buddhahood will be a woman.

Disciples: (still puzzled by the radical nature of the proposition) The women who have only recently been admitted into our schools, and students and teachers will be pleased to hear that.

Bodhisattva: In daily life, ordinary women have often achieved the state of a Bodhisattva. But our social conditioning and cultural prejudices have prevented us from recognizing them.

Disciples: Did you say you were born as a woman, and that too in a home across the border?

Bodhisattva: Yes. Her parents left when the country of their birth was torn apart by religious and sectarian strife. But K, where they lived, was a strange city. Everyone there seemed to pray in such a way that everyone else knew about it. Yet no one had faith. Brutal gangs and sectarian priests had their own zones of influence and were more violent than our nightmares.
Disciples: (sadly) We too are exiles. We had to leave our homes in another country, but didn't find a home in the new one. Even today, under this tree and in this ashram, our dreams are torn apart by gunfire. The life of all migrants was difficult. Some spoke the wrong language, some came from the wrong region, some followed the wrong prophet. It was as if each one of us was the mistake of some god or the other.

Bodhisattva: (sadly) The madness we see imitates the madness of the past.
Disciples: Life became worse than what we could have imagined. We were afraid of going to the market, playing in the park with friends, walking to the tap at the other end of the street to fetch water. So immediately after the civil war, we moved again and came here.

Bodhisattva: (sadly) The days of darkness always seem to return. That's why someone assumes the role of Bodhisattva in each generation. To give hope. To encourage people to carry on. To resist.

Disciples: No one knew when a bullet would tear apart your body, or a fanatic crazed by visions of some surreal paradise would abduct a woman, or sell children into one of the countless slave markets.
Those days in K were particularly heartless. Urged on by pathological preachers and cultural lunatics of all sorts, many tried to erase every sign of hope and peace. Some chopped down mango groves, others blasted Buddha statues carved in mountain faces, yet others whipped and mutilated people as they did cattle or goats… But you know the Bodhisattva can even be an amaltas tree that suddenly blossoms into a profusion of yellow flowers when the land is barren and the sun burns. Or the Bodhisattva can be as unnoticed as the morning sunlight which seeps down to the forest floor after a long, dark and moonless night. It makes one wonder why there is no permanent peace, doesn't it?
Disciples: Didn't the city of K have a retreat like this one where people could talk, share their hopes?

Bodhisattva: There always is such a place. One has to look for it to find it. Or rather one has to be ready to look for it in order to find it.

Disciples: Did no one help?

Bodhisattva: Like the amaltas tree, the most unexpected person acquires the spirit of a Bodhisattva in times of turbulence.

Disciples: You said that you were once born as a young woman in K. Did someone recognize you as the Bodhisattva? Were you heroic? With all the violence in K, did you pick up a gun?

Bodhisattva: Sometimes, and very very rarely, it may be necessary to be a revolutionary leader, but only if there is no other option. That can be dangerous. Violence always leaves the heart in cinders and, as we all know, even the most peaceful form of civil strife can be co-opted by hooligans. And, of course, every time the Bodhisattva is born, Devadutta appears like his shadow. But some day we must talk about women like Simone Weil, Akhmatova and Dorothy Day who thought hard about what it means to be a Bodhisattva in extremely violent times.

Disciples: In cruel cities there are no banyan trees left. Maybe it is time for the Bodhisattva to be incarnated as a banyan tree before they become extinct. In which case, the Bodhisattva will also have to be born as a koel to negotiate peace between the parrot and the mynah – as the kissas tell us (everyone laughs).

Bodhisattva: Let me tell you the story of the time I was born as a woman. At that time women were subjected to atrocities in the name of religion and culture. I decided that since the people of K love to talk over cups of tea, I'd open a small café with the little money my mother had given me. I named it "Tea for Today Café".

Disciples: That was an odd choice. Why a café? And why tea?

Bodhisattva: K has an old tea-house culture. Writers go there to discuss their work, students go to talk, young lovers to dream, and many to voice their discontent. The café was so popular that its regular visitors called it "TFT". Oh, I should add that in those days women neither frequented tea-houses nor participated freely in literary and cultural gatherings.

Disciples: That couldn't have pleased the gangsters and their priests! In violent cities there is no place for writers, lovers, and debates of any sort.

Bodhisattva: Those in power want subservience. And people are willing to bow before guns, hoping they will be left in peace. They never are. The gangsters collect protection money, the politicians appoint policemen, and the priests promise gifts in paradise.

Disciples: How long did the Tea for Today Café last?

Bodhisattva: (sadly) Oh, it's still open. At first my mother looked after it, now it's looked after by a group of concerned citizens. You can go there to discuss the Buddhacharita or the epic by Shantideva which is a favourite of the present Dalai Lama. One summer, when the violence was really brutal, I gave the space in TFT for a meeting of those who wanted to discuss terms of peace in a poor region where land was being grabbed by the usual groups – politicians, well-heeled smugglers, drug dealers and their armed guardians. The gun-runners and the preachers were unhappy with the idea of a negotiated peace. Well, they always are.

Disciples: Did you know how it would end?

Bodhisattva: A few weeks before that meeting, a well-known writer gave a talk at TFT about the Jataka tales. He said that in most of the Jatakas, the Bodhisattva dies, or is killed trying to help those in distress. The Bodhisattva's death is, of course, not a sacrifice – that is now a contaminated word and is uttered with contemptuous ease. The Bodhisattva merely comes in the way of deliberate evil to ensure the survival of those who are powerless but good. I did not know how or when the end would come.

Disciples: But the end did come? Tell us.

Bodhisattva: When the peace meeting was on, I first heard the strange restlessness of birds in the trees before I caught the faint rumble of motorcycles in the distance. Intuitively, I knew what was going to happen; or maybe I had learnt to read the language of birds. I told my mother. Agitated, she warned the organisers, who began to leave by the back door. But the gangsters were already on the steps and I was afraid of a massacre. So my mother and I went out, locked the café doors and walked down the steps. We stood at the entrance, determined not to let the gangsters go upstairs immediately.

Disciples: Surely the gangsters must have hesitated to hit two unarmed women?

Bodhisattva: (laughs) In days of violence, no one has delicate manners. The gangsters wore helmets with visors, wide pyjamas two inches above their ankles, black headbands and loose black kurtas. They had beards which had been carefully dyed red with henna. I thought I was in one of the folktales I used to hear when I was a child. But in those folktales, the unarmed and helpless usually recall some mantra which saves them and defeats the monster.

Disciples: Did you manage to save the people upstairs?

Bodhisattva: Yes. My mother and I stood before the gangsters. They hesitated. Asked us to move aside. But then they recognised me and opened fire. My mother was badly injured. Their bullets killed me instantly. But TFT is still open. More and more people now go there to read their stories or poems, to voice their dissent, to hold hands, to dream…

K. K. Muhamed

Desire Machines

Acrylic on rice paper

© K. K. Muhamed

P. K. Parakkadavu

Translated from Malayalam by Yaseen Ashraf

The Nest

After the wedding he took her to his beautiful home.
“Step in on your right foot,” he told her at the threshold.
She stepped in.
The house was well equipped:
Washing machine,
Refrigerator,
TV.
She wondered at the big parrot cage dangling in the drawing room.
Pointing at the empty cage she asked, “Why?”
He replied,
“Get in and spread your wings.”
Then he locked her in the cage.

The Sale

After selling out all the rivers, the Ministers wondered – what could be next?
Why not rain?
How about leasing out next year’s rain to the United States?
Soon a white man came to look at clouds and took a year’s rain on lease.
And the Minister told the public: “Watch more TV soap operas in the evening with your

families. Shed as many tears as possible. Then collect them in pots. That's enough water for washing and drinking."

Donation

She asked me for a flower,
I gave her a wreath.
She asked me for a dress,
I gave her a shroud.
She asked me for a flint of fire,
I prepared a pyre.

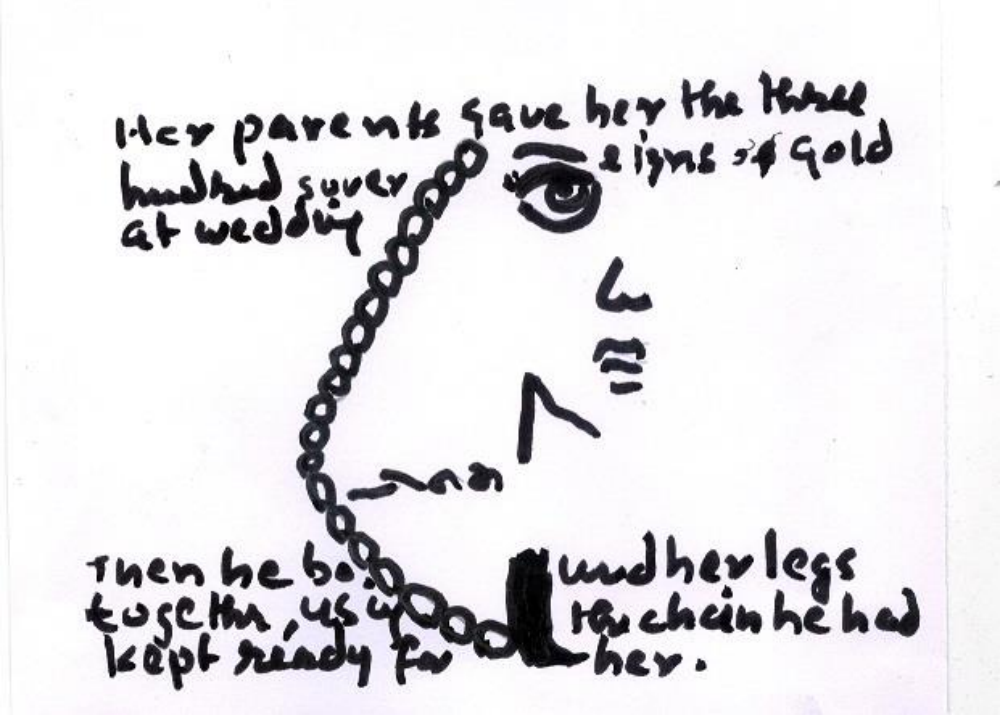
Freedom Bows its Head

They were celebrating the 40th Independence Day.
The leader was speaking at the town hall.
His followers sat listening to his speech.
All of a sudden, an old man appeared.
He didn't have his toothless smile.
The half-naked man rushed to the stage with his walking stick.
Holding up the speech for a while, the leader came down from the stage.
The leader and his followers stopped the old man.
"Stay there," they shouted at the old man. Somebody snatched away the old man's walking stick, while another grabbed his spectacles.
A few bore him away while somebody cupped a hand on his mouth.
A smile spread on the mustachioed face of the leader. Leader and followers walked away.
At the park, the crowd shouted "Jai" to the leader and Bharatmatha.
They enshrined the old man at a specially prepared corner of the park.
Maybe it was the weight of the garland the leader hung around his neck, or the weight of his freedom.
But the head of the statue bowed.

The Anklets

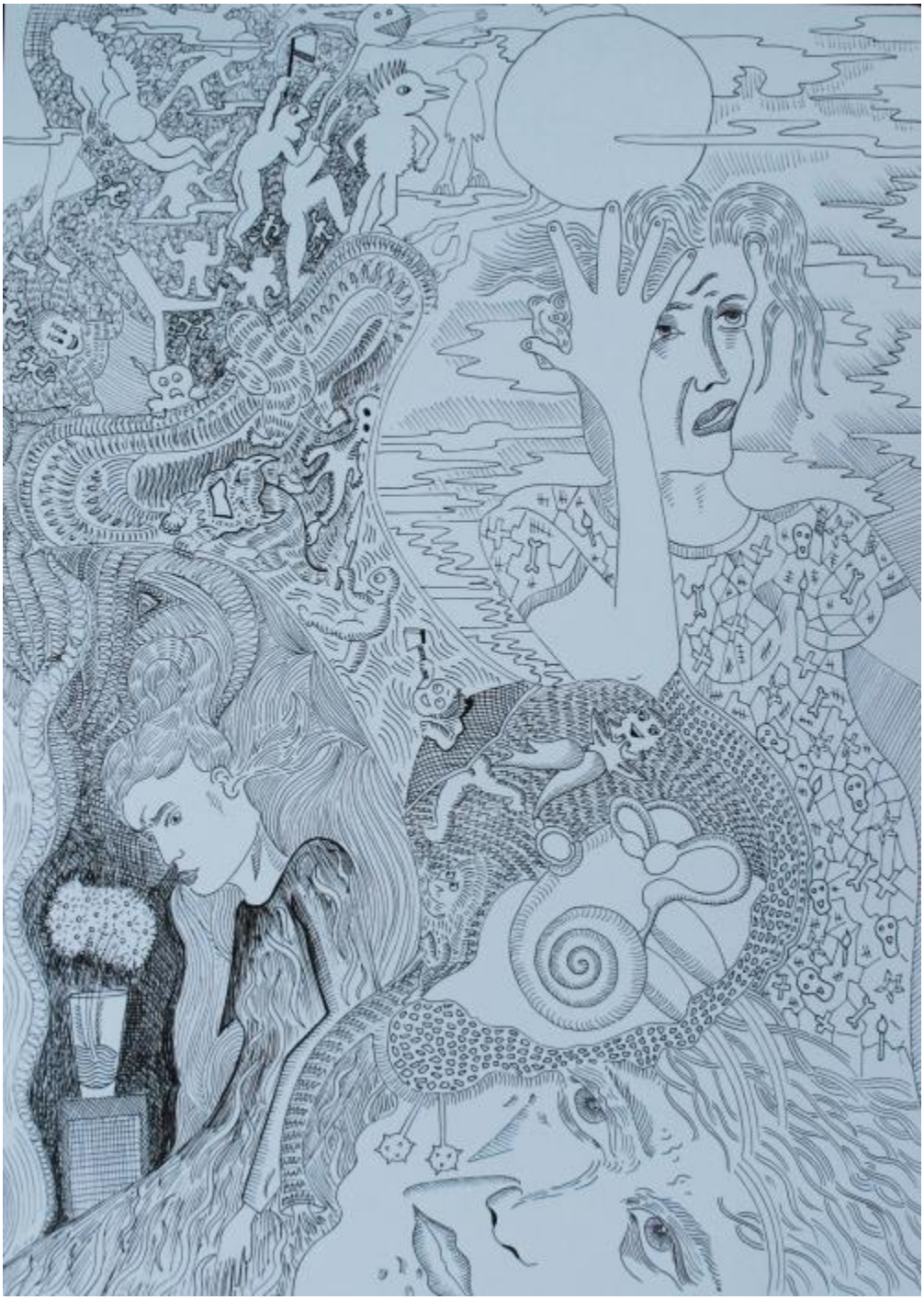
Her parents gave her the three hundred sovereigns of gold at the wedding.
Her hands and neck were covered with ornaments.
But they forgot to give her one thing.
Anklets.
Looking at her naked ankles he asked:
"Didn't they give you anything to wear on your ankles?"

Shyly she said “No.”
“Don’t worry,” he told her.
Then he bound her legs together, using the chain he had kept ready for her.



These micro stories were also published in the collection Through the Mini Looking Glass, translated by V.K. Sreelesh, Lead Books, Kozhikode, 2013.

Divya Rajan



Shoili Kanungo, “They Break Free”

L as in Labelling

There are freedoms only a crumpled brown paper bag
That once cradled a Manhattan sashimi in its folds,
Now stuck in the middle of I 294, would know.
Freedom to glide and scrape by cars, without fear
Of being an upturned fable. That's what she came to enjoy the most
As the newest inhabitant of this pristine space.
Vijayan, a vague synesthete, a writer of sorts, arrived here
Prior to her, his feet dripping with all the salty liquid
Of redemption, of used substance. Who better to work on translating
Khasakkinte Ithihasam, he winced piously.
He wasn't being an idle provocateur. Seriously?
That sounded a bit con-mannish even to me.
Who the fuck still lived in the old world? She nodded
As if it was old news to her. Being agreeable was a virtue
She'd carried forth. Her brothers, she met them here too.
They'd shed their loitering leanings and settled for
Elitist discernments towards à la carte movies
That played non-stop in the background as they
Chomped noisily on political science, other urgent topics
Somewhat like what she did on social media
When she was alive, her grey cells indistinguishable
From moss. They made coffee for her in the mornings
In a rustic coal set kettle while the mahogany chair on the porch
Creaked, crushing leaves. Bird droppings shared names
With siblings, unlike in the other world. Plethargic
Wasn't their last name. I explained to her, that wasn't the case.
That she was morbid and whole in this green planet, with me.
She didn't hear or bother to listen, spread suntan lotion
On her tooth brush, scrubbed her teeth till they were brown.
And I said, "Do you realize what you just did? Look at your brown teeth."
She smiled, "Silly, that's an overdose of iron supplements.
I ain't no nutmeg." Another time, she smeared baba ghanoush
Over her hair and left a post-it for me with instructions to clean the pillowcase
In a mouthful of chicken broth. The psychotherapist listened to her patiently.
Only a lousy caregiver would leave assorted cans unlabelled.

Honouring Last Words via Kollwitz Sketches

"Truth is whatever darkness we choose to ignore."
— J. D. McClatchy, "Descartes' Dream"

I try my best to honour last words as a matter of upper-lipped propriety.
So "Keep it simple" would remain as meticulous as simple.
While scooping out eyeballs that once mocked my shapeless boobs,

Bimbo fluff head and elephantine ears that “stuck out like cross-hatched herrings,”
I made amply sure that the prior designate cranium,
Now rivaling inordinately moldy mayonnaise, didn’t rock
Out of place, into an insufferable lava. Mopping
Floors in the middle of work wasn’t my style anyways.
Sliding globs in its entirety, iris intact, staring (almost thinking)
At lack luster cognac, prism glass effect notwithstanding.
A Kollwitz sketch at the very best, an illusion at worst, the glimmer
Of browner iris floating, a sea grass before it’s engulfed by kelps.
Thirsty, gorgeous.
Her last word was harder to honour.
The permutations just didn’t add up. With “Biaatch,”
Monochromatic as “genuine originality”, the matrix
But a plethora of puzzles. And I don’t want to make a single mistake.
So her shriveled pith lies in frigidarium, iris incorrigibly cold.
Still mocking.

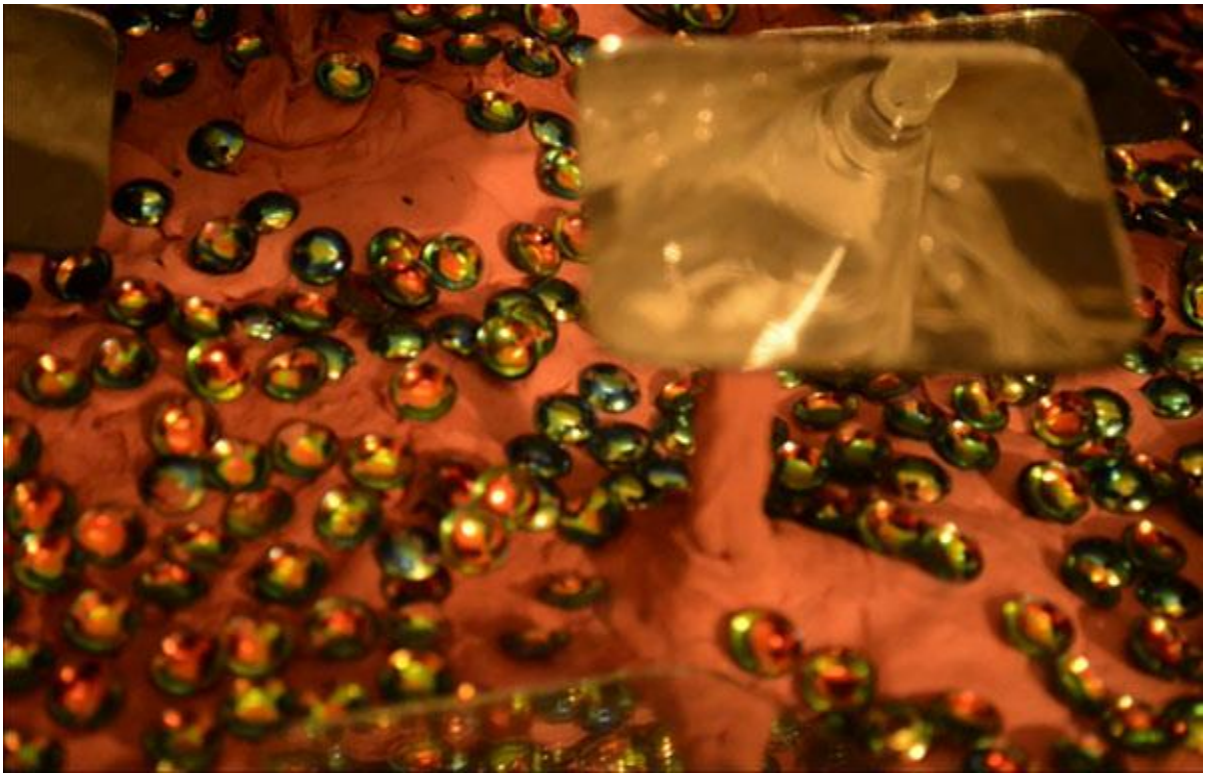
Orijit Sen

Sotto Voce

Perhaps the light did not go out of our lives. Maybe it just refracted into its constituent colours! Laal Gandhi, Green Gandhi, Kaala Gandhi, Bhagwan Gandhi, Grey Zone Gandhi… Take your pick.

Anjana Kothamachu

The Phantasmagoric Menagerie



Still from the Phantasmagoric Menagerie II.

See http://guftugu.in/2016/02/anjana-kothamachu/ for Phantasmagoric Menagerie I & II.

Phantasmagoria can be described as a set of illusions, or a sequence of illusions. The term has been used in various contexts. Psychologist Melanie Klein envisioned phantasy as the hub of the of the mind-body nexus. Phantasy is the psychic representation of instinct. The term "menagerie" refers to exotic objects or animals put up on display.

I constructed a video of mobile/ animated mirrors in the sterile made-up environment of water, and strange, moving circular shapes and tubes. Each mirror opens up a different landscape or setting. There is an overall kaleidoscopic effect of multiple phantasmic images overlaying each other while existing as separate images.

This is what I thought as I made the work: the universe we traverse is a story of our own creation. The self is an assemblage of numerous subjective experiences and universal events. They form the yarn for spinning my artistic tale. The experiment and task is to weave together

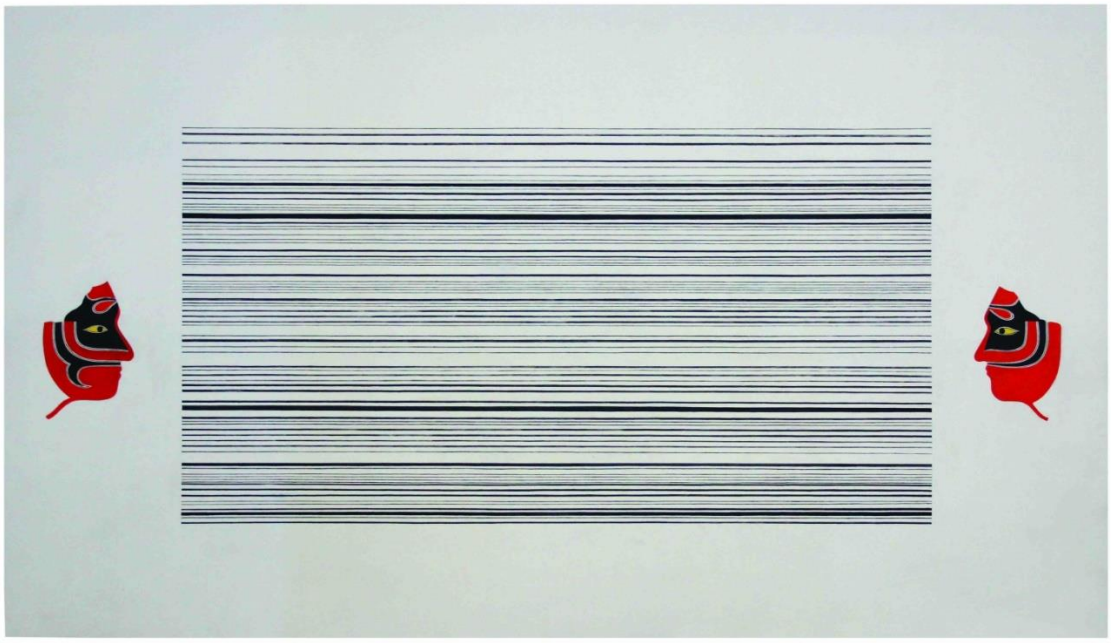
multiple inner and outer realms of existence to reveal nuances, facilitates aesthetic experiences, and individualistic readings.

Balagopalan

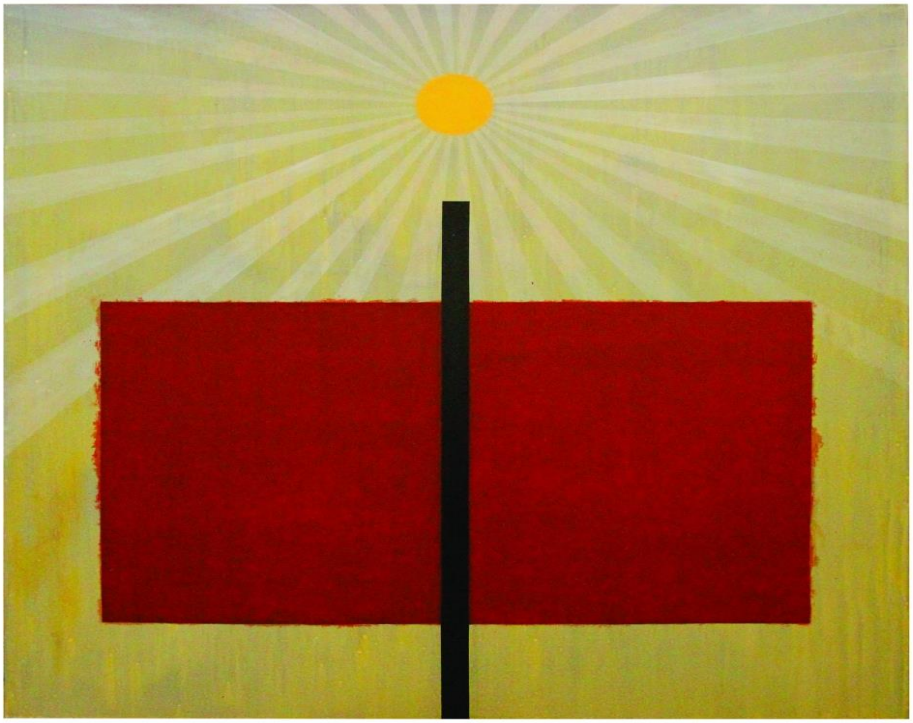
Untitled

Oil on canvas, 96x60 Inches

Oil on Canvas
60"X72"



Oil on Canvas
96"X60"



Acrylic on Canvas
72"X72"

Contributors

Akhil Katyal is a writer and translator based in Delhi. His first book of poems, *Night Charge Extra*, was published by Writers Workshop in 2015. He finished his PhD at SOAS and currently teaches literature at Shiv Nadar University (SNU) in Uttar Pradesh.

Anjana Kothamachu is a visual artist based in Bangalore. She has a degree in Fine Arts and has also studied animation. She has participated in several residency programs including Khoj and ISCP (NYC) in 2015, and Prohelvetia (Zurich) in 2016. Her work has been part of exhibitions and screening in India and elsewhere, including the Creative India Public Art Intensive and the Changwon Sculpture Biennale, Korea.

Ashok Vajpeyi is a popular Hindi poet, essayist and critic. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1994 for his poetry collection *Kahin Nahin Wahin* which he returned in 2015 as a gesture of protest against increasing intolerance in the country.

Balagopalan is a sculptor-painter based in Delhi. He also collaborates with theatre productions and curators. His work, he says, "engages with metaphysical and philosophical ideas combined with traditional and contemporary poetic tradition."

Civic Chandran is a poet and playwright, especially well-known for his powerful street-plays. He was a school teacher in Wayanad. He edits a journal of resistance, *Patabhedam* that raises significant social, political, human-rights and environmental issues.

Divya Rajan's works have appeared, or are forthcoming in, *Berfrois*, *After Hours*, *Missing Slate*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *Silk and Spice — Chicago anthology*, and several others. She has previously served as a co-editor at *The Furnace Review*.

Gorakh Pandey (1945-89) was a popular Hindi poet from Uttar Pradesh. He is known his collections *Bhojpuri ken au geet* (1978), *Jagte raho sone walon* (1983) and *Swarg se bidai* (1989).

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.

Latha Viswanathan is the author of a collection of short stories, *Lingering Tide*, which received honorable mention in the Southern California Book Festival and the New York Book Festival. The story "Brittle" appeared in this collection. Her stories have won several awards including the Goodheart Prize for fiction and two Pushcart nominations.

M.M. Somashekharan is a theoretician of Marxist politics as well as a cultural theorist. He was a student at Government College, Madappally, when he was arrested in connection with the Naxalite attack on Kayanna police station. He was then jailed in the Central Prison, Kannoor.
The late Muhammad Ali was a voracious reader, poet and activist.

Nilima Sheikh studied history at Delhi University, and painting at MS University, where she later taught between 1977 and 1981. She began exhibiting her work in 1969 and has had 12 solo exhibitions. She has participated in several artists' camps and residencies, both in India and elsewhere. Her interest in theatre has led her to design theatre sets for several productions; she has also illustrated books for children, and written essays for journals and art books.

Orijit Sen is a graphic artist, cartoonist, muralist and designer. He 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.

P.K. Parakkadavu has published story collections, children's literature, essays, memoirs, and translations. He received the S.K. Pottekkad Award for *Maunathinte Nilavili* (*The Wail of Silence*); the Abu Dhabi "Arangu" Sahitya Award for *P K Parakkadavinte Kathakal*; the Vaikom Muhammad Basheer Award of the Kerala Language Institute for the collection *Aval Peyyunnu* (*She Rains*); and the Kuttamath Award for the poem "Sneham Kaaykkunna Maram" ("The Love-bearing Tree").

The late P. Udayabhanu was was a regular contributor of poems to periodicals and also published a book of collected poems. He also wrote the Introduction to the first edition of *Thadavarakkavitakal*. He also worked with All India Radio. Udayabhanu was arrested when he was a student of history at the Government College, Madappally, and spent more than 500 days in the Central Prison, Kannoor.

Om Prakash Valmiki (1950-2013) is one of the most important literary voice in Hindi literature. He was a Dalit writer and poet from Uttar Pradesh. His autobiography *Joothan* (1997) is considered a major milestone in Hindi and Dalit writing.

Pratheesh is a poet and artist. He has published three poetry collections in Malayalam. He Lives and works in Kerala.

Rahul Rai is a poet and a playwright. He has worked with theatre groups such as The Players in Delhi, and Motley in Mumbai. He is the co-founder of the theatre company, T for Theatre. He is an editor and contributor to *Kachhikavita*, an online journal of poetry in Hindi. His plays include *Kaali Ghadi*, *ShoonyBattaSannata*, *Daalmot* and *Virah*. His most recent play is *Outer Dilli*.

Rajesh Joshi is a Hindi poet, playwright and a journalist. He was the recipient of the 2002 Sahitya Akademi Award in Hindi for his collection of poems *Do Panktiyon Ke Beech* (*Between*

Two Lines); he returned this award in 2015 in protest against growing intolerance. He currently lives in Bhopal.

Shriranga was the pen name of Adya Rangacharya, (1904-1984), one of India's most eminent dramatists. He wrote 40 full-length and 67 one-act plays, as well as books and articles on the theatre. He also wrote on the Gita and translated Bharata's Natyashastra into Kannada and English. He received the Central Sahitya Akademi and the Sangeet Natak Akademi awards, and the Padma Bhushan. He was the first Director of the Kalidasa Academy in Ujjain.

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 *Strangers to Ourselves*.

K.K. Muhamed did his M.A. in Visual Arts from Kala Bhavan, Viswabarati University, Shantiniketan. He has had eight solo exhibitions in in India and more than more than 45 group shows in India and abroad. He has received several awards, including the Kerala Lalitha Kala Academy Award in 1990; the India International Arts Centre Kolkata Award; the Working Artists Association Award from Orissa; and the Bombay Arts Society Award.

Laxman Guru of Nipani is a jogappa (transwoman) who sings devotional songs in Marathi.

Siddappa G. Algonda is a jogappa (transwoman) who sings devotional songs in Kannada.

Sukanya Ramgopal is India's first woman ghatam player. Disciple of ghatam legend Sri Vikku Vinayakram, she is one of the foremost exponents of Carnatic percussion in India. She has performed extensively at home and abroad. The Ghata Tharang, where she plays melody on multiple ghatams, is her brainchild. She leads an all women's instrumental ensemble called Sthree Thaal Tharang. Recipient of numerous awards and titles, she received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2014.

Sumana Chandrashekar is a Carnatic vocalist and a ghatam player. A student of Vidushi Rupa Sridhar for vocal music and Vidushi Sukanya Ramgopal for the ghatam, she has worked on music education projects and conducted music/ sound workshops for school teachers. She was the project coordinator for a ghatam- making training project supported by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. In 2015, she received a grant from the Sandbox Collective – Goethe Institut to create an experimental performance work titled *Rendu Ghatam*. She currently works as a Programme Executive, responsible for the Arts Practice programme at the India Foundation for the Arts.

Uday Prakash is a contemporary Hindi poet, scholar, journalist, translator and short-story writer. He was a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of short stories *Mohan Das*; he returned the award protest in 2015 in response to the murder of scholar M.M. Kalburgi.

V.K. Prabhakaran is a poet and playwright. He was a student at Government College, Madappally, when arrested in connection with the Naxalite attack on Kayanna police station and spent time in the Central Prison, Kannoor.

Yaseen Ashraf is the Associate Editor of *Madhyamam*, and the Managing Director of Madhyamam Broadcasting Limited. Earlier, he was Associate Professor and Head of the Department of English at Farook College, Calicut. He has authored several books in English and Malayalam, including two original books, six translations, reviews and articles. He has won the Muttathu Varkey Award, the Calicut Press Club Award and the Pandalam Rama Varma Award for the best editorial in Malayalam.

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