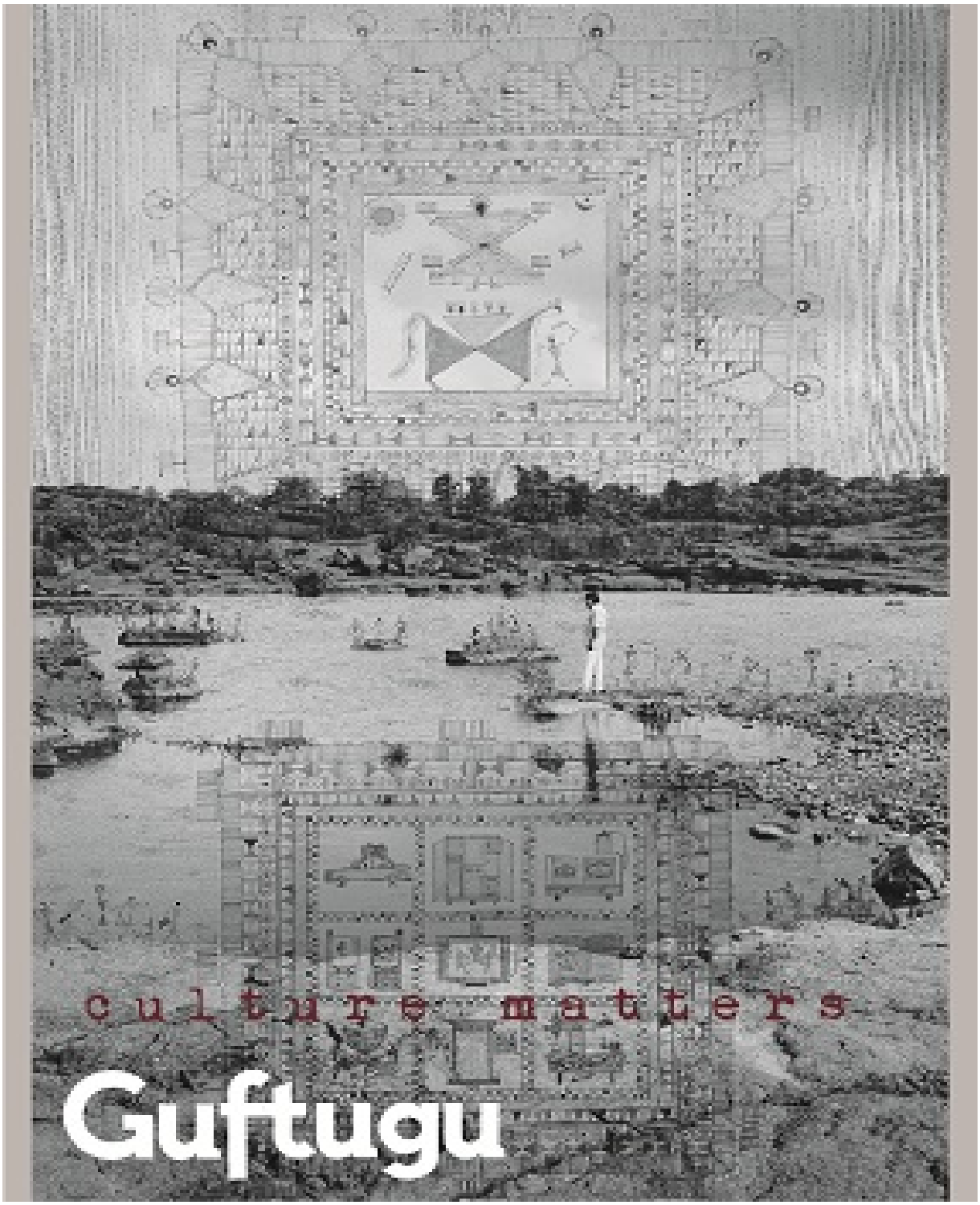
Issue 8



Cover Image: Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad, ‘Sacred Gods, Revered Things’, ink on archival pigment print, 62 x 42”, 2016

From the series Fields of Sight, (2013-)

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.

Guftugu acknowledges the Tata Trusts for a grant towards its production in 2017.

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

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From the Editors

Rebellions on Paper and on the Streets

Consider these words from a Prime Minister: '… whether I am a writer or not, I am an admirer of writers and I think that they perform not only a useful but an essential function at any time…' The writer performs a function that is essential to the country; and the country, we find out from the same Prime Minister's words, include both the citizenry, of which a writer is a part, and the state. This is one central point made by Jawaharlal Nehru in his Inaugural Address at the Fourth P.E.N. All India Writers' Conference in Baroda in 1957. It can be a little hard to believe this today, but we had an India in which the Prime Minister could discuss rationally, in a public gathering, what a writer is, and what the state and writer have to do with each other.

In times of censorship through intimidation, and the tacit or open support of the state and its ideological allies, it's useful to recall what Nehru had to say about the 'important question of the individual freedom of the writer' in his 1957 address. Nehru was clear that this freedom was critical; equally critical was the relationship between the state and the writer. The state must encourage writers, but not act as an arbiter of what is adequate, 'competent', 'good' or 'bad' writing. And writers and literary bodies have to be autonomous; the state has no business to interfere in these bodies. Nor, Nehru may have added, if he could have seen where these cultural institutions are today, should they toe the line of the prevailing ideology of the day.

Jawaharlal Nehru presents the Sahitya Akademi award to Rahul Sankrityayan in 1958. Image Courtesy: Sahitya Akademi

We have not heard any views on writers and their role in society from the present Prime Minister, Mr Modi. But we have, alas, heard from his official and unofficial teams.

In 2015, a large number of writers returned their Akademi awards to protest against a range of developments summed up in the somewhat inadequate word 'intolerance'. The writers were protesting the murder of citizens, from Mohammed Akhlaq to MM Kalburgi; curbs on free speech and dissent; communal violence and the increasing and violent polarisation of the country. The writers questioned the silence of both government and Akademi on what was happening. Culture Minister Mahesh Sharma said of the writers: 'If they say they are unable to write, let them first stop writing. We will then see.' Speaking to The Indian Express, Sharma added: 'This is an award given by writers to writers. It has nothing to do with the government. It is their personal choice to return it… we accept it.'

In other words: writers and the government have nothing to do with each other. Possibly they live on two different planets. Clearly, Mr Sharma and Nehru also come from two different planets.

The writers said that they could not be silent in the face of the vicious assault on India's culture of diversity and debate. In response to these voices, and the voices of other members of the cultural, academic and scientific communities – citizens all – the Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, wrote that this was a 'manufactured paper rebellion' against a 'manufactured crisis'. That a Minister in government should describe attacks on citizens for what they write or eat, or which community or caste they belong to, is shocking. But the accusation of a 'manufactured paper rebellion' is also telling. For the current dispensation, for the India they want to make, writers are manufacturers in the sense of fabricators; fundamentally, they are liars. This, of course, is a complete failure to understand how writers speak of the place they live in through their work. It is also a denial of the fact that writers speak, and should speak, as citizens, on the public stage. Contrast this with Nehru's insight on the fact that the writer is not part of some special 'tribe' separate from other constituencies: 'People sometimes ask… something about a writer's responsibility in a rapidly changing society, as if this tribe of writers is a peculiar kind of group separate from the rest of mankind from that particular perch on which it sits.'

Worst of all is the hatred against criticism, debate, dissent and imagination we see today, the fear of all the traits so valuable to writers, readers and citizens. Nehru's 1957 Inaugural Address is one small signpost to remind us of who we are, and where we come from.

The Writer and the State

PANDIT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

I have hardly any great claim to be.....a writer, although I have been honoured by being made a Vice-President of the P. E. N. organization of India. Because many years ago I wrote some books and some people found some virtues in them, I do not become a writer, and for many years I have had no occasion, opportunity or time to write in that way, and such creativeness as I have possesed has flowed in other directions. But, whether I am a writer or not, I am an admirer of writers and I think that they perform not only a useful but an essential function at any time, more especially now. Now, what a writer is, is more than I can define. I do not think it is very easy to define what a writer is. Now anybody who writes occasionally in newspapers or anywhere is called a writer. People sometimes ask.....something about a writer's responsibility in a rapidly changing society, as if this tribe of writers is a peculiar kind of group separate from the rest of mankind which has to discharge its responsibility to mankind from that particular perch on which it sits. Well, it may have been so to some extent in the distant past where writing or reading itself was limited to a few persons. It has ceased to be that when reading and writing have become so common that almost everybody can indulge in them to some extent. The greatest men in any country in the old days had probably a library of 30 or 40 books, and they wrote solid stuff and the manner of keeping them was an enormous labour. Nobody could write rather casually for a casual reader. Now things have changed and millions of people read and write, and obviously that is a good thing, but also obviously that tends to submerge the good below the bad. It is like the law of bad coins coming in and the bad coins hiding the good ; that is the danger. However, ultimately what is good survives. So, what is a writer is difficult to say now and it will become more and more difficult in India as we hope our people, everybody in India, becomes literate and capable of writing. Now what exactly do you expect the State to do in this matter ? A State cannot produce good writing. It can provide conditions where good writing can be encouraged. It may produce conditions where vast numbers of people get to know how to write fairly competently. The State cannot do it ; it can spread good education and out of the mass of people who are supposed to be educated more and more people will rise higher. Just as, in this era of science and technology, a State should aim at producing vast numbers of engineers of all grades, scientists of all grades, for out of this vast reservoir of scientists there is a much greater chance of scientific progress being made, and sometimes of fine topranking men coming out. And so all that the State can do is to prepare this big reservoir of people out of whom writers can come and give other facilities and encouragement. Then again it is a very important question of the individual freedom of the writer. In our country our Constitution lays down not

only for the writer but for everybody the importance of individual's freedom. If that applies to every individual much more it does, and should, apply to the writer. That is, as soon as writing is put in a strait-jacket, it may become competent but it is bound to lose and to suffer.

On the other hand you may have a great deal of loose writing and all that. Unfortunately you have to face that, more especially when you have this vast spread education, without having been disciplined to it. The disciplined writers and the good writers manage to keep their heads up.

Again, I do not think the State can do very much about creating conditions to encourage the good writers. State favour which encourages those people whom the State approves of, not because of their competence but because of their views, would be unfortunate. Therefore it would be better for bodies, literary and academic, to be autonomous and independent and for no writers to be controlled by the State. Anyhow, there is no doubt about it that an enormous responsibility rests upon every one of us whether we are writers or not. Those of us who are sensitive—and writers presumably are supposed to be sensitive—in these changing times that we live in so many of the old standards have gone and are going and all of us are in search of something old or new. I must stick to the old rules or new rules or a mixture of the two. You have to change your view of life when everything round about you changes. You live today in—whatever you like to call it—an industrial age ; you just cannot go on as people who used to live two thousand years ago in the forest. It is not done. You just cannot do it. You have to live in a modern age, on the threshold of the atomic age. All these are tremendous revolutionary concepts, far more revolutionary than the ordinary jargon of revolution. Now how far can we grasp that and at the same time not allow ourselves to be swept away by the winds of heaven and keep ourselves planted firmly on the soil on which we stand and yet have our head high enough to understand or try to adapt ourselves to them, because unless we do try to adapt ourselves our future becomes vague and that is not good.

So these tremendous problems face us and, all of us have, whatever our job, to think about them. It particularly becomes the writer's responsibility to make us think about these problems directly or perhaps even indirectly for the direct is seldom appreciated. It is the indirect way that usually sinks into the reader's mind.*

*From the Inaugural Address at the Fourth P. E. N. All India Writers' Conference, Baroda 1957.

The India that Nehru, and we, as citizens, assumed, not just as a vision, but as a reality: it is not really gone. It cannot be gone, because we will not let it go. We will make more rebellions, on paper, on image and celluloid. We will read, write, sing and paint them. We will take them to the streets.

Githa Hariharan

K. Satchidanandan

August 2017

Fields of Sight (2013—ongoing)

Gauri Gill and *Rajesh Vangad*

'Once in a while an artistic practice emerges which challenges viewers in new ways that cut through the noise, and offers something both deeply familiar and at the same time utterly new. Collaborative, creative, and experimental, Gill and Vangad, in *Fields of Sight*, provide a new language for art practices that address the politics and aesthetics of environmental destruction. Ecocriticism comes alive through the conjoining of photography and Warli painting, hoping to replace one modern history with another history, one that is contemporary. If the modern is marked by notions of progress, development, and nationalist discourses of decolonisation, the contemporary moment, with its rampant inequalities and environmental destruction, calls for a politics outside of the modernising narratives of the nation-state.'

Inderpal Grewal

'Tree of Monkey Ancestors', 2015, 24 x 16", ink on archival pigment print

‘Building the City’, 2016, 42 x 62”, ink on archival pigment print

‘The Drought, the Flood’, 2016, 42 x 62”, ink on archival pigment print

‘Factory and River II’, 2016, 42 x 62”, ink on archival pigment print

‘The Eye in the Sky’, 2016, 42 x 62”, ink on archival pigment print

Another Way of Seeing

In early 2013 I spent some weeks in Ganjad in Dahanu – an Adivasi village in coastal Maharashtra. I was invited to live in the home of a well-respected artist, Rajesh Chaitya Vangad, and to create work in and for the local primary school.

In the course of my time living in Ganjad and working on the school project, I began to appreciate the landscape; only some hours away from Bombay, it was nonetheless completely distinct. We were living within nature, which, chameleon-like, had so many faces – changing even as one took a turn. There was no electricity for hours and nights altogether, and the Airtel only worked when you climbed a little hill.

Undistracted, one's awareness was sharpened. I wished to extend this awareness through photographing the landscape, but it felt distant, even opaque. Perhaps the beauty was a barrier, or perhaps I had simply not spent enough time there. In conversations with Rajesh, whose family has lived for generations in Vangad Pada, working as artists, we began to discuss his village.

Any place looks entirely different to different eyes. I was made acutely aware, once again, of how a place is assigned meaning only by its viewer, determined perhaps by her relative distance or proximity to it; and of how viewing itself is an essentially solitary act, since what we see might be only a projection of what we know, have already seen or experienced prior. As someone wise once said, to one man's eye the pond is full of beautiful lotuses to admire, to another's it contains mighty fish to eat.

Tentatively, I decided to photograph places significant to Rajesh – often with him present in the frame. He would take me to these special places, and I would decide where and how to construct the image, what to include within it, how to work with or against the light, how best to frame him within the landscape and so on. It was a set of pictures about his place, a map determined by Rajesh, and formally constructed by me – photographer as cartographer.

When I later saw my contact sheets, I realised that so much of the narrative that I had received from Rajesh – the great stories, which had made it come alive for me – was missing. Part of it, I realised, was the limitation – and perhaps, the unique presence – of photography, which restricts what is in the image to 'now'. How could I convey what happened in those months in the 1970s when the violent mobs of a powerful political party raided the village and the locals fled and fell upon each other in terror; or the particular full moon night in October when a great forest on one hill comes alive, and all the people who spend that night in the forest see shining eyes glitter around them, as even the most dangerous animals are benign when everything glows from the aura of the moon; or the stories of great overlords who come calling in secret to

the homes of innocent, hospitable men, bringing gifts and drink and returning with deeds of land; or the mythical stories that encompass everything that has come or is yet to come.

So we decided to collaborate in a more active way. Rajesh would inscribe his drawing over my photograph, meet my text with his own. Or I would construct a photographic scene or set, in which he might stand and speak. Over the course of the last years, through works mailed back and forth between Delhi and Ganjad and subsequent meetings, we have made and selected several photographs and worked on them to reflect the narratives that arise from our conversations. We restricted our work to a monochromatic palette to make the encounter more intense and precise. The final work is created over a period of many months spent together in my studio in Delhi, in different spells.

This commingling work may be seen as an encounter between two artists of about the same age with entirely different languages – one with ancient antecedents, the other more recently originated; and the histories, politics and world views embedded within the expression of those forms. Rajesh's language, constructed with stick and brush, unfolds entirely from an encyclopaedia of forms in the mind, which emerge to reflect the world, memory and myth: wind, disease, apocalypse – anything is summoned forth at will. In my own language, constructed by camera and negative, the world itself is the encyclopaedia, and I recognise and edit existing structures to reflect what is apparent in my mind. The final work contains parallel projections of place; using perspective, negative and positive space, tonal values and relative dimensions, it merges fields of sight, and of perception. If you stand here, you might see it this way, if you move just a little, another world unfolds.

Gauri Gill

I am a creation of my stories, which live in my work. There are at least sixty stories I know. They concern gods, kings, man, the earth, Mahadeva, Parvati and the gods of the hills. This particular story was told to my father's father by his brother. He relayed it to my father, who told it to me. I believe it was prescient, that it foretells the future. It encompasses so much of what we see today: earthquakes, cyclones, tsunamis and all kinds of destruction on earth. Why do we farm, when, and how, in how many days and in what ways must the farmer till his fields, all of this is in the stories. It manifests constantly in my work:

Once, there were four hunters. Each hunter came from a different direction and represented a different portion of the whole – North, South, East and West. Each one went to the forest to hunt. The hunters did not know each other and went there on their own. Hunting, they roamed from forest to forest, until they were in the deep. One day, in a clearing, the first hunter encountered the second and asked him, who are you? The second hunter answered: I am a

hunter, from the South. The first hunter replied: I too am a hunter, from the North. The two decided that since they were both hunters, they would hunt together. They continued their journey.

As they travelled, the two encountered the third. They asked him: who are you and where are you from? He replied: I am a hunter, from the East. They invited him to join them. And so they continued.

Like this days and nights passed. One day, they went to a big jungle to hunt. There they met the fourth hunter. In answer to their question about his antecedents, he replied: I am a hunter, from the West. The four decided to continue together, hunting as they moved deeper and deeper into the forest.

When they finally arrived in the very dense core of the jungle, they could not find anything to hunt for two full days. So they decided to find a place where there was water and a tree's shade to rest in. They spotted a large Bael tree, and a stream flowing nearby. As they went closer, they saw a hut near the tree. As they moved even closer, they saw a sadhu near the hut. They greeted him respectfully, and he asked them how it was they had come to the deepest part of the jungle. One replied: We are hunters of four separate directions, and met while hunting; hunting together, we arrived here. They asked if they could spend the night in the hut. The sadhu answered in the affirmative. All four of them cooked some food, ate and slept.

In the morning, before the sun had risen, the four went off in four different directions to do their morning ablutions. When the first hunter reached the river, before bathing he saw a cow give birth and eat its offspring immediately after. The first hunter was astonished at the sight.

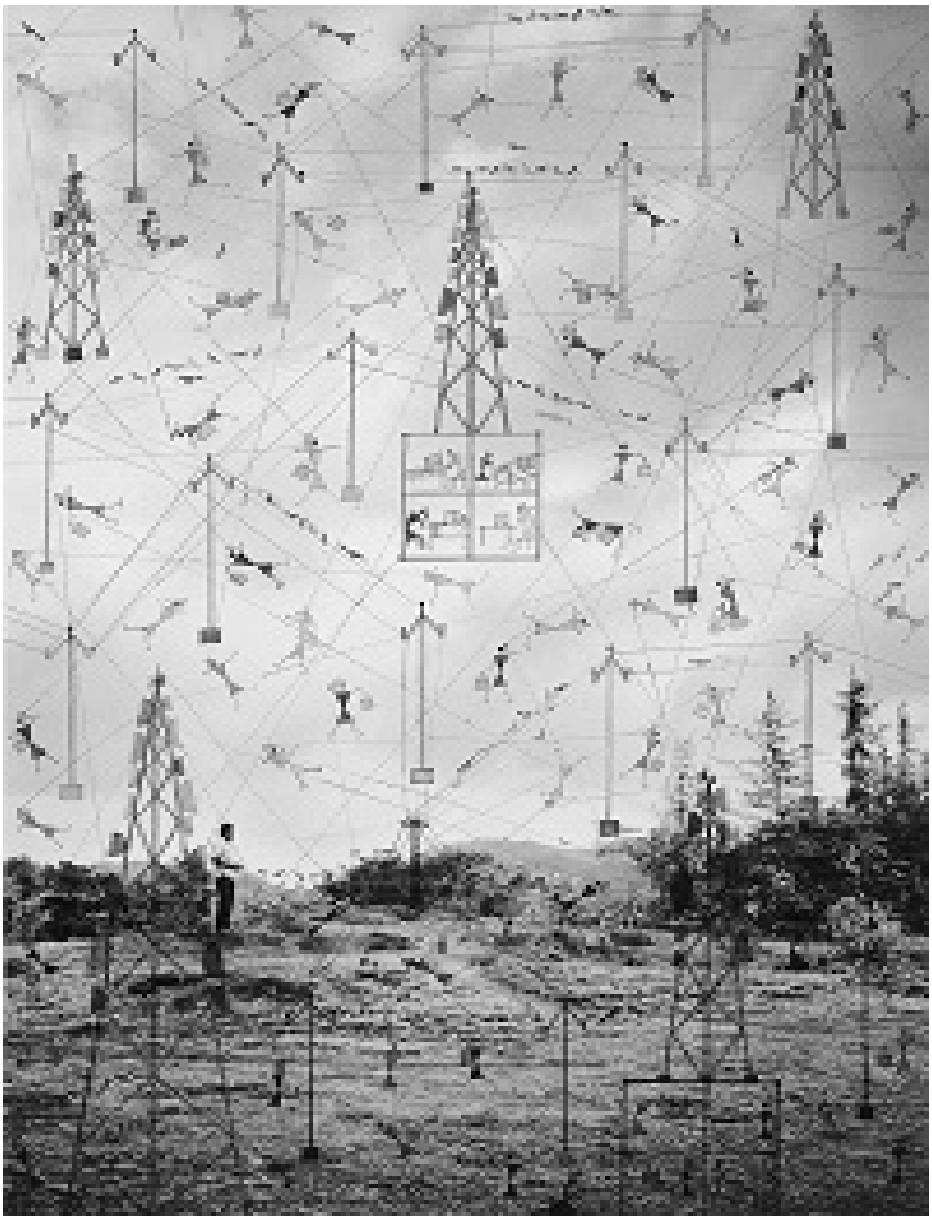
The second hunter went in another direction, where he saw two large trees. In one he saw a beehive. Before he could begin to bathe he saw an elephant eat all the leaves of the tree, only to discover his tail was now stuck fast to the hive. No matter what he did, he could not dislodge it. The second hunter was astonished at the sight.

The third hunter made his way to bathe, but before he could do so, he saw the large mountain before him begin to slowly melt into water. As dawn rose, he saw the immovable mountain, with all the men, animals, trees and plants upon it, become water and flow into the river. The third hunter was astonished at the sight.

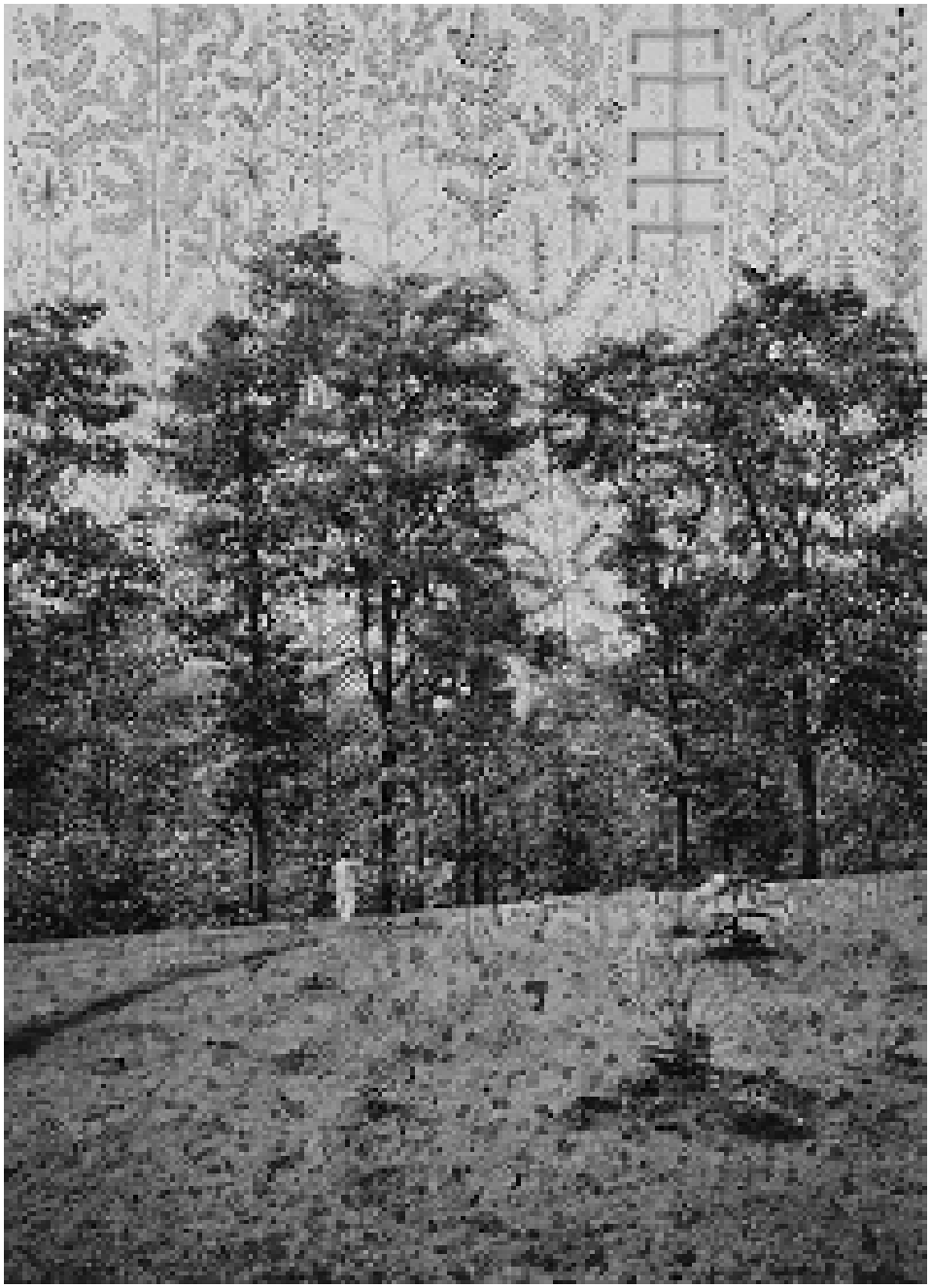
The fourth hunter, before bathing, saw before him a greater mountain, with men and animals, trees and plants, begin to crumble from one side, even as it caught fire. As it was being destroyed various gods tried to stop it, but they were unable to do so. Finally, a god managed to halt the destruction with the point of a needle. The fourth hunter was astonished at the sight.

All four returned to the hut, and told each other what they had seen. When they arrived, the sadhu was praying to Mahadeva. The hunters decided not to hunt that day, and instead told the sadhu the full story when he had finished. When the first hunter relayed his sight, the sadhu replied: Don't trust anyone in these times. When the second hunter relayed his sight, the sadhu replied: Even the strongest man is able to get snared by small things. Therefore, walk carefully. When the third hunter relayed his sight, the sadhu replied: The earth is at risk from wind and water. When the fourth hunter relayed his sight, the sadhu replied: On this earth there is very little truth to be found.

Rajesh Vangad



'Paths through Air', 2015, 42 x 28", ink on archival pigment print



'A Forest of Trees', 2015, 62 x 42", ink on archival pigment print

Inderpal Grewal writes on Fields of Sight

Once in a while an artistic practice emerges which challenges viewers in new ways that cut through the noise, and offers something both deeply familiar and at the same time utterly new. Collaborative, creative, and experimental, Gill and Vangad, in Fields of Sight, provide a new language for art practices that address the politics and aesthetics of environmental destruction. Ecocriticism comes alive through the conjoining of photography and Warli painting, hoping to replace one modern history with another history, one that is contemporary. If the modern is marked by notions of progress, development, and nationalist discourses of decolonisation, the contemporary moment, with its rampant inequalities and environmental destruction, calls for a politics outside of the modernising narratives of the nation-state.

Denuded landscapes, infested and opaque waters filled with sewage and chemical sludge, garbage dumps, abandoned houses and communities have all become the new critical language of environmental photography as political art. The images present us with an aesthetic of the lost landscape, trying to evade the inevitable pleasure of photographic capture or that frisson of pleasure in destruction. Photography's relation to death and time, in Roland Barthes' formulation, became allied to this aesthetic language of ecocriticism. Yet so many of these practices inevitably succumbed to the sublimity of empty landscapes of 'nature', or the aesthetic of the picturesque as histories of nostalgia for landscapes that can be controlled (even to look natural). Breaking from this language, Vangad and Gill mix media, languages, stories, modernities in a collaborative project that defeats the reinscription of the history of landscape art and the valorisation of an empty construction of 'nature' in both painting and photography.

Fields of Sight populates the contemporary photograph with narratives and figures that fill the landscape, reaching up to the sky, visually claiming presence rather than loss. The photographs create landscapes of environmental destruction, and are critical of what is taken as the progress of industrial modernity. But what is lost is not nature or emptiness – as images that claim to participate in ecocriticism often demand the viewer to fill up the emptiness with her own loss. *Fields* leaves us no such space or opportunity. Gill's landscapes in black and white position Vangad at their centre, not simply as collaborating artist/ painter but also as narrator, and he takes over to repopulate the so-called lost landscape. Decentring the perspective of power, Vangad's presence – often with his back turned to the viewer, blocking her ability to see him, replaces that perspective of power with another one, Vangad's own. He paints fully, much as he might paint walls, houses, and other canvases, but this is not a distant space, it is his own village and land. Vangad's painting covers the photograph, populating the landscape with stories of loss, power, ethics, and the politics of land that come from his history, his language, his community.

Vangad's prolific and intense figures make demands on the viewer. Warli iconography and landscape photographs merge in a critical language that remakes each medium. We must not remember the lost landscape in terms of pristine worlds, picturesque lands, 'natural' worlds empty of people not lost through the coming of other people, but rather through the narratives and worlds of those who have been displaced, seen as non-modern, unfit to be part of the modern state. There were other worlds, Vangad and Gill tell us, other people, other lives and stories… They are *there*, not gone, not past. Vangad is in the landscape, not simply of it. The photograph captures him in the place that is his own, but the language of the photograph is not the only one that can speak for him.

His painting constitutes and inscribes the particularity of place, the history and cosmology of his community. He inhabits and reinhabits, covering all the available space of land and sky of the landscape photograph. There is no demarcation between land and sky, all are filled with his stories, nothing is left to profit and production; the only utility possible is that of his stories. He demands we look at him, through him, at images, narratives, stories, lands, worlds – his old school, the land altered, the factories spewing black smoke. But looking through him is not simple: it is demanding, asking us to look closely, decode, decipher, listen, and decolonise. Gill's photographs become both a setting and a match for Vangad's intensities.

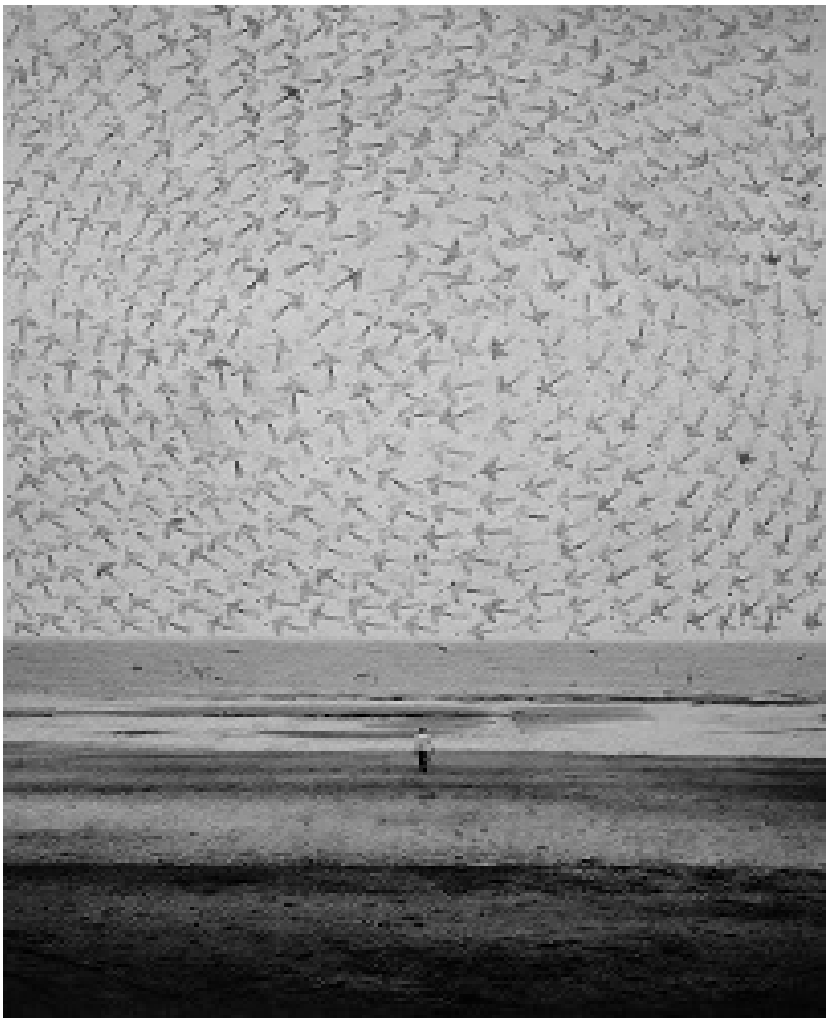
At the same time as Vangad and Gill embed their new form within a historical Indian practice of the painted photograph, they depart from it as well. Refusing to paint over with colour the black-and-white photograph, they paint with the same palette but with different intensities, languages, shades, and figures. There are no brilliant colours here. What draws the eye are the sombre shades of black and white and the combination (not melding) of divergent styles and languages.

Vangad and Gill merge the medium of the black-and-white photograph with the more traditional Warli use of figures and icons in white pigment. The starkness of drawing and painting with shades and textures works not simply to disavow modernity or erase it, but also to remind us of its uses and costs – and not why it must not be an end in itself, but rather, why its limits must be recognised.

We see here a photographer of and from contemporary, urban India (though of a land-centred community herself) and an artist/ painter of the Adivasi community from Maharashtra whose visual narratives work together to tell stories that demand to be heard as equally contemporary, not as relics of a traditional or 'tribal' past, a term the British as well as independent India have called Vangad's communities. He is not a 'lost' figure of what Renato Rosaldo called 'imperial nostalgia', asking us to mourn what we ourselves have destroyed. He is not destroyed; he is there, producing a language and art practice that uses the modern medium

and its technologies – the photograph, the motorcycle – to assert presence rather than to provide the possibility of mechanical replication of that which is lost.

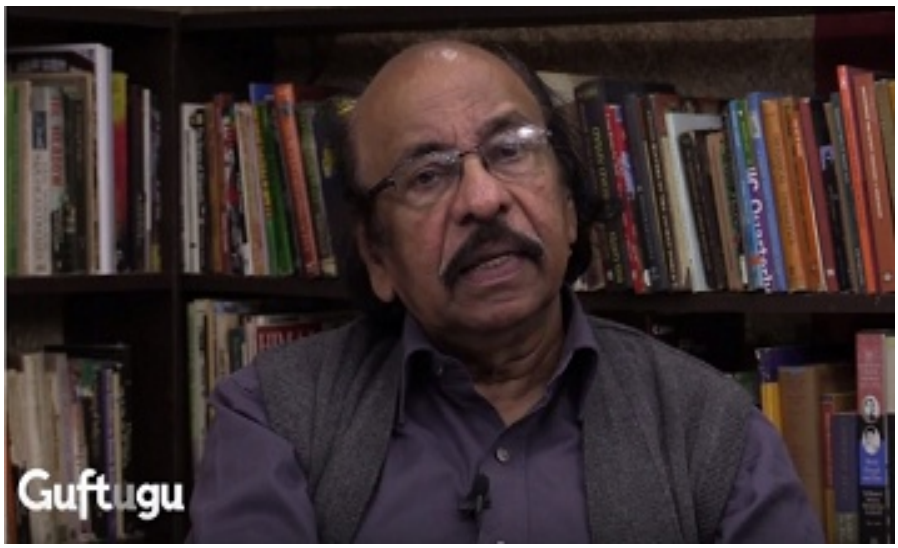
The artistic practice here is one of a demand, a challenge, to recognise rather than to mourn. Vangad and Gill together re-create in a new language the practice of collaboration of the painted photograph. The past is narrative, but narrativising continues, through mixing the historical and generational practices of Warli painting into the language of the photograph. It is a critical language of demand and recognition, the moment of the photograph now embedded in a plethora of voices, languages, and histories, in the ongoing production of attention, of new ways of seeing.



'The Sweet and Salty Sea', 2015, 62 x 42", ink on archival pigment print

Sharing the Rooster: Five Poems

K. Satchidanandan



Stammer

Stammer is no handicap.

It is a mode of speech.

Stammer is the silence that falls

between the word and its meaning,

just as lameness is the

silence that falls between

the word and the deed.

Did stammer precede language

or succeed it?

Is it only a dialect or

a language itself?

These questions make

the linguists stammer.

Each time we stammer,
we offer a sacrifice
to the God of meanings.
When a whole people stammer,
stammer becomes their mother-tongue,
just as it is with us now.
God too must have stammered
when He created man.
That is why all the words of man
carry different meanings.
That is why everything he says,
from his prayers to his commands
stammers
like poetry.
(2002)

Gandhi and Poetry

One day a lean poem
reached Gandhi's ashram
to have a glimpse of the man.
Gandhi, spinning away
his thread towards Ram,
took no notice of the poem
waiting at his door
ashamed as he was no bhajan.
The poem cleared his throat

and Gandhi looked at him sideways
through those glasses
that had seen Hell.
‘Have you ever spun thread?’ he asked,
‘Ever pulled a scavenger’s cart?
Ever stood the smoke
of an early morning kitchen?
Have you ever starved?’
The poem said: ‘I was born
in the woods, in a hunter’s mouth.
A fisherman brought me up in his hamlet.
Yet I know no work, I only sing.
First I sang in the courts,
then I was plump and handsome;
but now I am on the streets,
half-starved.’
‘That’s better,’ Gandhi said
with a sly smile, ‘but you must
give up this habit
of speaking in Sanskrit at times.
Go to the fields, listen to
the speech of peasants.’
The poem turned into a grain
and lay waiting in the fields
for the tiller to come
and upturn the virgin soil

moist with the new rain.

(1993)

The Mad

The mad have no caste
or religion. They transcend
gender, live outside
ideologies. We do not deserve
their innocence.
Their language is not of dreams
but another reality. Their love
is moonlight. It overflows
on full moon day.
Looking up they see
gods we have never heard of. They
shake their wings when
we fancy they
shrug their shoulders. They hold
that even flies have souls,
that the green god of grasshoppers
leaps up on thin legs.
At times they see trees bleed, hear
lions roaring in the streets. At times
they watch Heaven gleaming
in a kitten's eyes, just as
we do. But they alone can hear

ants sing in a chorus.
When patting the air
they are taming a cyclone
over the Mediterranean. With
their heavy tread, they stop
a volcano from erupting.
They have another measure
of time. Our century is
their second. Twenty seconds,
and they reach Christ; six more,
they are with the Buddha.
In a single day, they reach
the big bang at the beginning.
They walk, they walk on, restless,
for their earth is boiling still.
The mad are not
mad like us.
(1996)

Poetry Will Come Back

We need rice, salt,
chili, firewood;
we can do without poetry.
Yet poetry will come back
like rice,
the seed of the earth,

boiled and cleaned of husk and bran,

overflowing every measure,

every granary and godown;

like salt,

the memory of the sea,

watering our mouths,

burning us with pain

to heal our wounds,

to nourish our roots;

like chili,

the lust of the clay,

turning hot our lips, tongues,

breasts, waists, veins and nerves;

like the firewood,

the bones of the forest,

their marrow melting sizzling

burning slow with tiny flames,

chanting, in a single breath,

rice salt chili firewood poetry.

(1997)

Sharing the Rooster

Carry away my rooster, share it among yourselves,

But give back to me that knife-sharp beak.

Carry away my rooster, share it among yourselves,

But give back to me that cockscomb of copper,

Those eyes red and black like kunni seeds…

Carry away my rooster, share it among yourselves,

But give back to me those golden legs,

Those toes like sesame flowers,

Those bright sugar-cane nails…

Carry away my rooster, share it among yourselves,

But give back to me that trunk like a little drum,

That throat that sounds like a conch,

That liver that blows like a pipe,

Those guts that shape a lyre…

Carry away my rooster, share it among yourselves,

But give back to me those wings like banana leaves,

Those feathers like coconut blooms,

That tail like tender pineapple shoots,

That mating that scatters sparks,

That cock-fight with its virgin valour…

Carry away my rooster, share it among yourselves,

O, yes, you can have the rooster's horns,

You can have his teeth,

Have too the rooster's egg

The rooster's breasts as well…

Carry away my rooster, share it among yourselves,

But give back to me, give back to me, just my rooster, just.

(1972)

Sridhar's Father

Aparna Karthikeyan

Kanchan Chander, 'Visage', Etching on Paper, 13 x 14 cm, 1998

'Don't run,' Lakshmi shouted.

'Ok, ok,' Sridhar said. And he ran.

'Don't go near the saw mill,' she shouted, a little louder.

'I know, I know,' he said. And he ran into the saw mill.

'Don't open the saw dust pit,' she said softly, she knew he was too far to hear.

Sridhar had reached the saw dust pit. He stood there, catching his breath, his arms on his waist, his tongue licking his upper lip, nervously. His eyes darted this way and that. There was nobody around. Of course, his mother knew he was here – she had known for days he was coming here

and that he was bringing food. She probably knew there was a dog and puppies too, but she hadn't told anybody. He was sure of that, because if his grandfather had known there were dogs – a girl dog who had birthed pups behind his house, inside his saw mill – he'd have asked Babu to take them away. Who knows, they might have ended up in the river, in the only stretch with water in high summer, where the pups were dunked till there were no bubbles, the mother dog whimpering, later howling, and wandering by the river for days. Just as she did the last time she delivered her litter in the sawdust pit.

But this time, Sridhar was careful. He took only the rice that was kept aside for the maid. She smiled the first time he scraped out the rice, mixing it clumsily on a banana leaf with the watery buttermilk left out for her. Sridhar felt better seeing her smile. 'Can I take some more,' he asked. Her smile faded, but she nodded her head, yanking her pallu a little tighter and wrapping it around her waist. He scratched at the vessel, at the grains of rice with his dirty fingernails, he picked up the rice that fell around the pot, and he ran, spilling the watery food on the ground.

The dog ate hungrily. She was always hungry, he noticed when he sat on his haunches and watched her face. Her whiskers were the only thing luxurious and glossy. Her body was lean – her ribs stuck out – and her hips and legs were thin and bony. Her teats were thin too, and they hung long and low, and shook this way and that while she ate. The little food vanished in a few minutes. The dog looked at him – for a moment, into his eyes – and then jumped into the pit. She always used the chute when he wasn't around, but when he came and opened the trapdoor, she blinked at the light, wagged her tail and jumped out elegantly.

She must have been, Sridhar had long decided, a beautiful dog. Why else would she keep having babies? His own mother, he knew from all that he overheard, did not have many children because she was not beautiful. 'If only she was,' his grandmother would say, and sigh and cool herself with the palmyra fan. Then she'd suddenly bang the fan onto the ground, as if she had remembered something important, and her lips would tremble and she would cry. It happened everyday, mostly when there was no power, Sridhar noticed, and his grandmother could not watch television.

'Fate, fate,' she would say some days. Those days, she'd slap her forehead several times and it would turn red, and the sindoor would smudge and she would look just like the Durga idol at the temple; all that was missing, he thought, was a garland of lemons.

'Evil eye, evil eye, that Gomathi, you should have seen how she looked at all the bangles I had made for my only daughter!' she would say another day. Then she'd bring her hands together, and knot her fingers, making every joint pop, all the while muttering curses, taking Gomathi's name, her children's name, wishing they'd all turn barren and flat-chested, forgetting that Gomathi's daughters and daughters-in-law had borne many bonny children…

‘If only she knew how to keep a man interested,’ she’d say the days her mother sat in the hall, staring outside the bars of the window, into the narrow passageway that was the entrance to grandfather’s saw mill.

Lakshmi would pretend she hadn’t heard. Or maybe, Sridhar thought, she didn’t really hear it. She would continue combing his hair with her fingers, not pausing, not turning her face; never angry at her mother for calling her a woman so artless that her husband didn’t love her…

Sridhar had never seen his father. But he knew what he looked like: there was a photo of him inside his mother’s cupboard. It was a portrait, taken in a studio, and his mother and father had smiled for the camera. His father had a big moustache, he had curly hair, and his eyes were sharp and serious, even while his lips gently smiled. There was nothing in the photo that hinted he was an unkind man. But he did not look the monster he thought he must be. For he must have been a monster – why else did he never come to see him, his only son, not even once in ten long years? Why didn’t he come back for his mother? And she wasn’t plain, Sridhar knew that. Of course, some of the women were prettier – their skin glowed, their plaits moved this way and that when they walked, their sarees hugged their bosom and buttocks, and Babu – he was the one who would point this out to him – wouldn’t stop staring.

Babu told Sridhar all about women the day they fell down from the bicycle. They were going to the cinema – it was a hot summer day, and he had no school, and everybody was irritated because he was running from one end of the house to the other, the searing heat not bothering him as much as the scorching boredom.

Grandfather couldn’t sleep, and grandmother was weeping – it was a curse-Gomathi day – and mother, she was staring at the passageway as always. Right after his coffee, grandfather made Sridhar wear a shirt and comb his hair. Then he shouted until Babu heard him in the saw mill – he never went there anymore, his legs were bent with arthritis and his back with age – and he ordered him to take Sridhar to the cinema. He gave them money for the ticket, and a little extra for snacks. But they ended up spending everything on the bicycle – the front wheel was bent and the rexine seat was torn – and they went to Babu’s house to wash their scratches and drink something.

‘Coconut water?’ Babu’s father asked, flicking his towel and fashioning it into a turban. He quickly went up the tree and threw down a few nuts. Babu sliced off the top and they drank the water, and he told him why he lost his balance and fell.

‘You saw her?’ he asked.

‘Who?’ Sridhar asked, his voice echoing inside the coconut.

‘Valli, that seductress,’ Sridhar said, his voice suddenly husky, as if he had a cold.

‘No, who is she?’ Sridhar asked, curious now, because Babu was smiling in that odd way the cinema heroes did in item songs.

‘A beauty, that’s what she is. Actually “beauty” does not do her justice… she is voluptuous, she is a mango…’ and he laughed as if he had said something very funny.

Sridhar did not understand. He looked at him strangely.

‘Like Hansika?’ he asked.

‘Yes, but more yellow,’ Babu said. ‘And bigger,’ he patted his chest with both hands.

‘Like Thangam teacher?’ Sridhar asked.

‘Haha, yes, clever boy!’ Babu scratched Sridhar’s head affectionately. ‘When I was in school, we used to suck our breath when she walked…’

‘You went to school?’ Sridhar asked.

‘Yes, but only till fifth,’ Babu told him.

‘I’m in fifth now, will I also stop?’ Sridhar asked.

‘No, no, your grandfather has money, you can keep studying, you don’t need to climb coconut trees, do you?’

‘No, and I don’t need to drown rats and puppies either,’ Sridhar said.

Babu stopped scratching his head. He stared at Sridhar for a minute, a full minute, then he said it was getting late, and they had to go back home.

‘I don’t want to go home, Babu. Tell me about Hansika…’

And then Sridhar told him about Hansika, about Valli and Thangam teacher, about women. When Sridhar came back home, he felt fifteen.

‘How was the picture,’ grandfather asked him.

‘Super,’ he said, ‘very super.’

‘Who acted?’ grandmother asked, folding her betel leaf and popping it into her mouth.

‘Hansika,’ he smiled.

‘Really? I did not see posters of her anywhere!’ grandfather said.

‘Since when do you look at cinema posters?’ grandmother asked.

‘When I pee on walls, I look, ok?’ he snapped.

Grandmother laughed and grandfather laughed and Sridhar laughed so hard he got hiccups. His mother stared at the passage that led to the saw mill.

***

‘Don’t run,’ Lakshmi shouted.

‘Ok, ok,’ Sridhar said. And he ran.

‘Don’t go near the whirlpool,’ she shouted, a little louder.

‘I know, I know,’ he said. And he ran faster, all the way to the river.

It was a good year, the rains had not failed and in August, the dam was opened and the water came rushing into the river.

Sridhar went to bathe in it every evening after school. He came back brown and shiny, his face and hair smelling of the sun and water, his feet crusted with tiny golden flecks of sand.

Sridhar would be very hungry after his swim. He would eat his portion, and eye his mother’s. She would quietly hand him the fried appalam and vadai whenever it was made. She would give him an extra poori or two, and sometimes, all the raw banana chips from her plate.

He grew fast that year – as fast as a girl, his grandmother said – and they had to stitch him a new uniform set by November.

He sat straighter in Thangam teacher’s class, he watched her move. When he went back home, he ran to the saw mill and told Babu about her…

The dog was pregnant again in January.

She was fatter this time, because Babu was bringing her leftovers from his house.

‘Don’t tell your grandfather,’ he told him the first time he gave the animal chicken scraps.

‘No, no,’ Sridhar said and licked his lips. ‘What does it taste like?’

‘What? The dog?’ Babu laughed.

‘The chicken, I’ve never even eaten an egg,’ he told him.

‘I know, your family won’t touch animal flesh… No wonder your father had problems with them!’ Babu said.

‘What problems?’ Sridhar asked.

‘Oh something I heard, could be rubbish, lies, who knows,’ Sridhar muttered, looking away.

‘Babu, tell me, what was my father’s problem?’

‘Your grandfather will skin me,’ Babu shuddered. ‘I’m a fool to open my mouth.’

‘Please Babu, tell me… Nobody speaks about him. Amma cries, her parents sigh or scream… should I not know about my father?’

‘Ok, but promise on your mother you won’t repeat it?’

‘Promise!’ Sridhar said, and closed his eyes, invoking his mother’s image, and opened them, when all that swam before his eyes was the wedding portrait.

‘Your father played the mridangam,’ Babu said.

‘Ok, so?’ Sridhar asked.

‘He was a different caste,’ Babu said.

‘Oh,’ Sridhar said. ‘So?’

‘So your grandfather hated him. But your mother ran away right after school – they were classmates – she married him. She got pregnant, your grandmother begged her to come back home and have the baby, and afterwards, your grandfather never let him visit… Everybody thinks he abandoned her… but…’

‘Oh!’ Sridhar said, his mouth forming an ‘O’, his eyebrows meeting in the middle, his eyes widening in confusion, images flashing in front of them, of his grandmother calling his mother plain, artless, cursed…

‘Where is he now?’ Sridhar tugged at Babu’s shorts.

‘Where he always was – fourth stop on the Trichy road. You know that big chariot festival your grandfather never takes you to? That village. He plays in the temple for functions, but I’ve heard he often goes to the city and plays for weddings…’

‘But, Babu,’ he began.

‘Look, I said too much, ok? And who knows what really happened? Never believe what anybody tells you… people will speak, they even say Valli ran away with the headman’s daughter, but who knows the truth? He might have abducted her… Would my Valli go willingly?’

‘No, no,’ Sridhar said, and touched Babu’s wrist.

‘Go home,’ Babu said. ‘It is getting dark.’

Sridhar turned to go. Then he walked back to Babu.

‘Do you think my father loved me?’ he whispered.

‘You’re a fine boy, what’s not to love? Now, my father, he had problems with me. He taught me to climb palm trees; I was no good. He taught me to brew toddy; my batches weren’t half as strong as his. He got me a job at the headman’s house, and I refused to go when they made me eat their son’s leftovers. And now? I work as a coolie for your grandfather…’

‘You’re not a coolie, you’re Babu,’ Sridhar said.

‘Babu is not my name, Sridhar. My parents named me Billa…’

‘Billa?’ Sridhar laughed.

‘Yes, and like you, your grandfather also laughed, he refused to call me Billa… he said I was no Rajini, and here I am, Babu…’ he shrugged.

‘But at least your father loves you, Billa,’ Sridhar said.

Babu laughed. He was still laughing when Sridhar reached the house, and found his mother slumped on the living room floor, his grandfather fanning her with the palmyra hand-fan, his grandmother wiping her brow with her pallu, and his mother sweating, her blouse and saree wet and stuck to her body, even though the electric fan whirred and whirred from its hook on the ceiling.

‘Why did you have to become a widow, why does everything happen to you so quickly, why does your life have to end so soon?’ his grandmother sang her laments, and pressed her saree over her mother’s face and rubbed at her hair parting.

‘Get up slowly, go have a bath, the curse has left us, the Shani,’ his grandfather said, fanning irritably, the handle bending in his hands.

‘Amma,’ Sridhar called. She looked up at him.

‘I want to see him, please, come with me…’ he said.

His mother bit her trembling lip, she bunched her pallu with her fingers, stuffed it into her mouth and cried.

‘I’m going,’ he said.

‘Over my dead body,’ his grandfather shouted.

‘They will spit on you, don’t go that side,’ his grandmother keened.

‘Amma, you come with me, or at least let me go… He is my father, I want to see him…’ Sridhar begged, sitting down next to her, his hands tightening around her shoulders, shaking her, pleading with her.

‘Don’t run,’ she whispered between sobs.

‘Ok, ok,’ Sridhar said. And he ran out of the door.

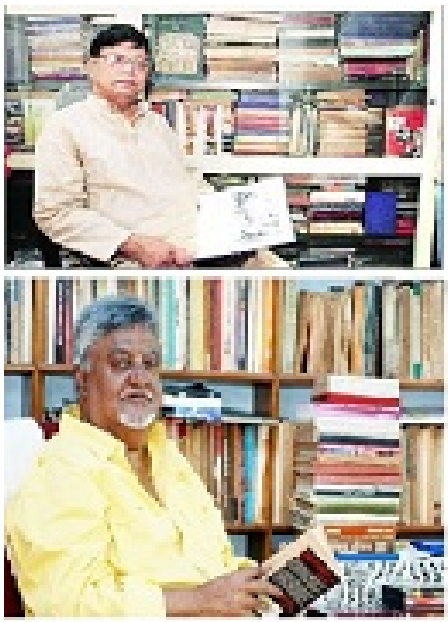
‘Dalit’, Dalits and a Dalit Playwright in the Terrain of Labels

Ashok Gopal

Datta Bhagat/ Image Courtesy: Maharashtra Times

Raja Dhale, one of the founder-leaders of the Dalit Panthers, never liked the movement’s label. His opposition was not to ‘Panthers’. He disliked what many would consider the soul of the movement: ‘Dalit’. Dhale’s objection may be seen as a display of egotism: The ‘Dalit Panthers’ label had been announced by another Panther leader, Namdeo Dhasal, without consulting Dhale; and the two later became arch-rivals. However, we cannot ignore Dhale’s argument for dis-favouring ‘Dalit’: He felt ‘Dalit’, which means broken in Marathi, refers to someone who is socially disabled (Dhale, 14).

Dalit Panthers poster/ Image Courtesy: Raiot



Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal/ Images Courtesy: Mulakhat.com and Prahaar.in

Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that many people who are called Dalits in academic literature, do not use that label, and define themselves in other ways (Marriot, 3751-2). In Maharashtra, many people who are called Dalit, actually resent that label (Paik, 229, 233; Beltz, 218-19).

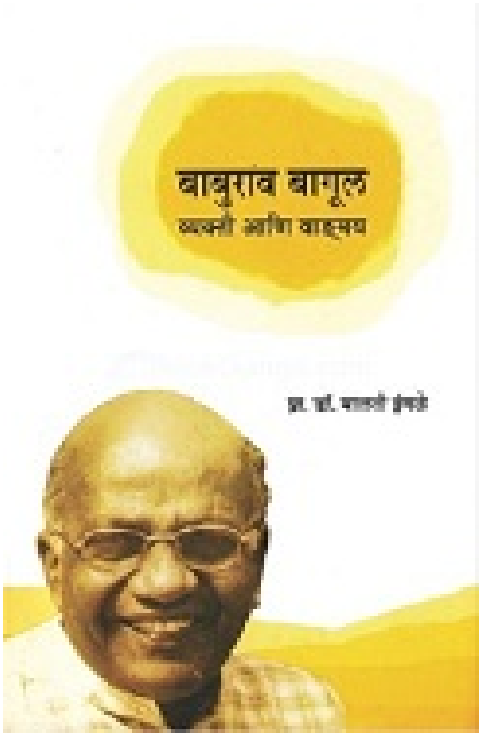


Image Courtesy: Bookganga.com

Generally, social-group labels represent ethnic identifications, and/ or power, or status positions. For the Dalit Marathi writer Baburao Bagul, 'Dalit' was a position against the entire 'establishment' (245):

> 'I am a Dalit' means that the establishment, its class, its religion, its ideology and everything else about it are not acceptable to me.

The above declaration itself suggests why 'Dalit' is not acceptable to many people who are called by that label. For Raja Dhale and his supporters, 'Dalit' had another, more literal meaning, and Bagul's definition did not reflect the positive self-identity that was secured by 'Dalits' who embraced Buddhism. And for people who have risen to status positions—people who have become respected members of the establishment that Bagul rejected—'Dalit', obviously, has no positive meaning. Further, in Maharashtra, 'Dalit' is generally associated only with one Scheduled Caste (SC) jati, Mahar, and therefore, not favoured by people from other SC jatis (Paik, 230).

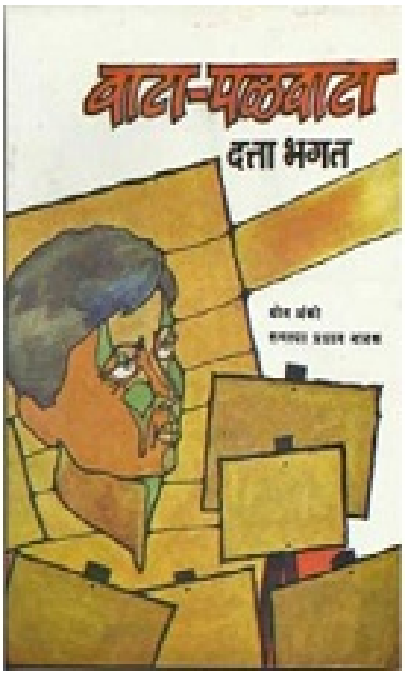


Image Courtesy: Menakabooks.com

While the contentiousness of 'Dalit' could be attributed to its relatively recent origin and fuzzy boundary, older and fixed labels like 'Brahmin'—that denote sharply defined groups—are also not gladly and passively accepted nowadays by all those who are so labelled. Consider an opening, drawing-room exchange in *Wata Palwata* (Routes and Escape Routes), a play written

by the Dalit Marathi writer Datta Bhagat. The speakers are a Maharashtrian Brahmin ('Baman') woman, Hema (H), and her Dalit husband's uncle, Kaka (K), who identifies himself as a Buddhist, or 'Bauddha': 1

K: (*Stops reading a newspaper*) Daughter-in-law!

H: (*Off*) Coming! (*Enters*) What?

K: (*Angry*) Two feet in nose swot!

H: Sheeee!

K: Sseee? What sseeee? 2

How many times do I have to tell you? When I call, you have to say 'Jee', not 'what'! What?

H: (*Helpless*) Jee!

K: (*Happy*) That'sthaway! When my mother used to call me when I was small I too would say 'what'. I'd say 'what' and she would scream, 'Damn you, your two feet in nose swot! Listen to what I say or go screaming away!' (*Laughs loudly*) From that time, the habit has formed. Anyone calls me, I say 'Jee'. Even if it's a small child! (*Stops. Then sternly*) You have to say 'Jee' too. Understood?

H: Jee!

K: That'sthaway!

H: Kaka, it's okay if you speak to me like this when I am alone. But at least in front of other people, please don't speak in this humiliating manner.

K: People have to learn how to speak, how to behave! But what can we teach you? We are plainly Bauddha! And you are from a Baman family. And then again, educated!

H: (*Angry*) Kaka, stop mentioning my jati every now and then.

K: (*Ashamed, but does not show it*) So you say? Okay, I'll stop mentioning it. (*Stops*) But if you don't mention jati, does that mean caste is finished? Babasaheb told us before he went, 'Caste will not die!'

H: But I don't like it at all.

K: What? Caste? Or my speaking about it?

H: Both! We broke jati barriers and got married. Whose opposition did we not suffer? Parents, relatives, everybody, literally everybody, opposed us. You too.

K: Admitted.

H: For days we were jobless and hungry. Who came to help us? Anyone from the jati or the clan? Even you didn't look at us for one and a half years! Because you didn't like the fact that we had got married.

K: One should let bygones be bygones!

H: That's what I am saying. But are you ready to forget? In the last six months that you have been living in this house, there's not a day you haven't missed mentioning my jati.

K: Now the truth breaks out of my mouth. (*Provoked by H's assault*) Who likes caste? Who likes it? I worked with Babasaheb! On this very thing! Struggled for thirty-forty years! But did it go? Did jati go? How many years since you're married? Five! And three or three-and-a-half years since you came to this city for work! But what do the people still say? What do they say? 'Satish Godghate, professor from the Bauddhas! And his wife, a Baman!' Every passing by kid peeps into the house. What do they see?

H: Let people say what they want to. But you are not people. You are his Kaka (uncle).

K: Not any odd Kaka. I am his real, real Kaka.

H: Are you not? Then at least you should stop speaking like this (Bhagat 2002, 1-2).

Caste and jatis will of course not go away by not speaking about them. But, at the same time, Hema's plea cannot be dismissed as fanciful or irrelevant. It reflects the effort of many Indians—admittedly, we don't know how many—to go through life without the jati label that was stamped on them at the time of birth.

On the flip side, we see the vigorous use of caste labels in politics. In this arena, incredibly shifting alliances are formed through the terrain of labels. This is one of the many themes running through Datta Bhagat's first full-length play, *Kheliya* (Impersonator), and this work is worth considering along with his position as a 'Dalit' writer, as these two strands are inter-related, and tell us much about the current play of social-group labels in literature and life. We will first see how these strands emerged in the playwright's life.

Urban Dalit Playwright

Datta Bhagat was born in a Mahar family two years before Independence, in a village close to Nanded, the second largest city in Marathwada, and spent most of his life in that city. 3 His

father was employed as a peon, so the family had a regular source of income, enjoyed fairly decent living conditions, and did not suffer any of the terribly humiliating experiences suffered by families of other Dalit writers. Bhagat got the chance to go to a good Marathi school, which had a large collection of books. He became an avid reader, and before he left school, he had a good grounding in modern Marathi literature. Then, in college, he had a Brahmin teacher whom he adopted as his guru: Narhar Kurundkar, one of post-Independence Maharashtra's progressive public-intellectuals, who used the form of the discursive essay, and plain Marathi, to write about a wide range of issues. Like many other progressive intellectuals, Kurundkar was influenced by Marxist thought.

Datta Bhagat acquired some traits from Kurundkar: interest in a wide range of issues, a penchant for objective analysis of social situations, and a love for teaching. Bhagat became a school teacher, and then a lecturer of Marathi in the very educational institution in Nanded where he had studied. He was the first person from an SC jati to get the job in the college, and it was only then that he got his first experience of being identified as a Mahar. A savarna colleague greeted him in the staff room and Bhagat greeted him back, in a conventional way. The savarna colleague then twitted, 'You should say Jai Bheem!' 'Jai Bheem' is the greeting used by Ambedkarite Mahars ('Bheem' is the short form of Bhimrao Ambedkar's first name). Datta Bhagat told me that the comment was a turning point in his life: he became aware of his caste identity; the bubble of living a 'casteless' existence was broken. However, this recognition did not lead to rebellion; it did not pull him towards the Dalit Panthers movement, which had by then gained significant ground.

An avowed academic, who has always been described publicly as a pradhyapak (professor), Datta Bhagat did not participate in any Dalit Panther event. However, he followed the movement, as he followed the Dalit literature movement, and when the Naamantar (name change) controversy erupted over naming the Marathwada University after Babasaheb Ambedkar, and tensions flared in Nanded district, he toured in the region to deliver public lectures. In his talks, he did not broach the subject of *Naamantar* directly, but spoke on a broader issue: the democratic society envisaged in the Constitution of India, and the need for people of all social groups to align with its values. 'Caste-ridden society will not change overnight,' he told me. 'Change can happen only by raising public awareness.'

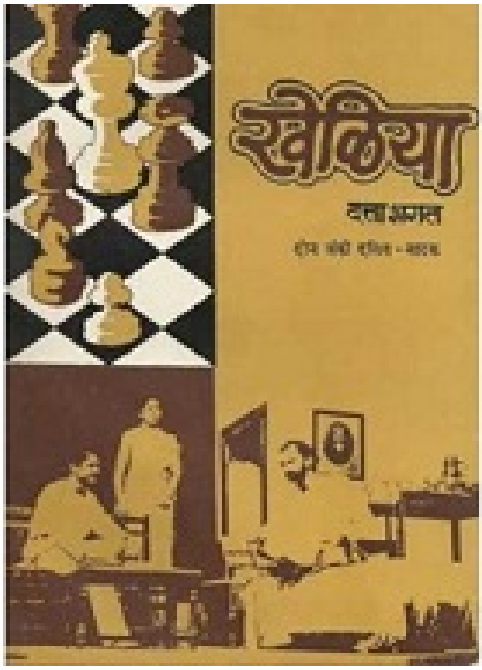
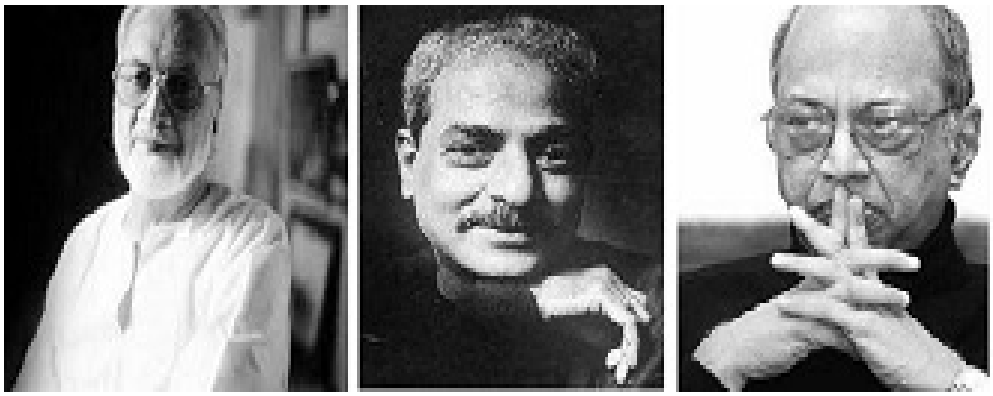


Image Courtesy: Menakabooks.com

During one of his lecture tours, in one village, he came to know about a young, fiery leader of the Panthers, who had been brought up in a Brahmin household. The story he heard was the seed of his first full-length play *Kheliya*, written in 1982.

He had written plays earlier. In the 1960s, when he was working as a school teacher, the headmaster asked him to write short plays with educational messages for students. Later, he began to write one-act plays for adult audiences. However, he started to consider play-writing seriously only after one of his one-act plays, *Aavart* (Vortex), written in 1978 (Bhagat 2011, 59-84), received critical acclaim and a prestigious award. Around this time, he began to read plays by contemporary Marathi playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Eklunchwar and Satish Alekar. Though he could not relate to their plays as much as he could relate to Dalit literature, he felt the plays were of his time. As he was based in Nanded, which had no theatre movement or culture like Mumbai and Pune, he could not see the plays on stage. He had to be content with reading the scripts of the plays. In this way, he got acquainted with the forms and techniques of modern drama. Later, in 1986-87, he benefitted from a play-writing workshop organised by the Theatre Academy, Pune. An output of this workshop was *Wata Palwata*, his most well-known play.4

In his introduction to the play (Bhagat 2002), he acknowledged the support he received from Tendulkar, Eklunchwar and Satish Alekar, who were associated with the workshop.



Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Eklunchwar and Satish Alekar/ Images Courtesy: Bebeautiful.in, The Hindu and qtpthescript.blogspot.in

Notably, in *Aavart*, Datta Bhagat borrowed from traditional folk forms such as *dindi* and *tamasha*, but did not do so later. Rural audiences, he explained to me, could not relate to the use of these forms in a modern stage setting, and urban audiences viewed them as exotica. As for another folk form, *jalsa*, which was extensively used during the non-Brahmin movement, and in the early days of the Ambedkar movement, it had died before he started writing plays. So, to reach out effectively to a large number of people who went to the theatre regularly, he chose to stick to the mainstream mode of modern, realistic drama. Necessarily, he had to also accept that his audience would mainly be urban, middle-class and non-Dalit. However, these limitations did not frustrate him. For, he told me, his primary motivation to write for theatre was to make best use of the available situation to do *samaaj prabodhan*, or social awakening, about caste; and in his view, this prabodhan is required across all sections of society.

This stand marks a remarkable departure from the dominant discourse on Dalit Marathi literature, which foregrounds protest rather than prabodhan. Further, while Datta Bhagat's name figures in any comprehensive discussion of Dalit Marathi literature, he told me his writing can be more meaningfully described as 'caste-conscious literature inspired by Ambedkar's thought'.

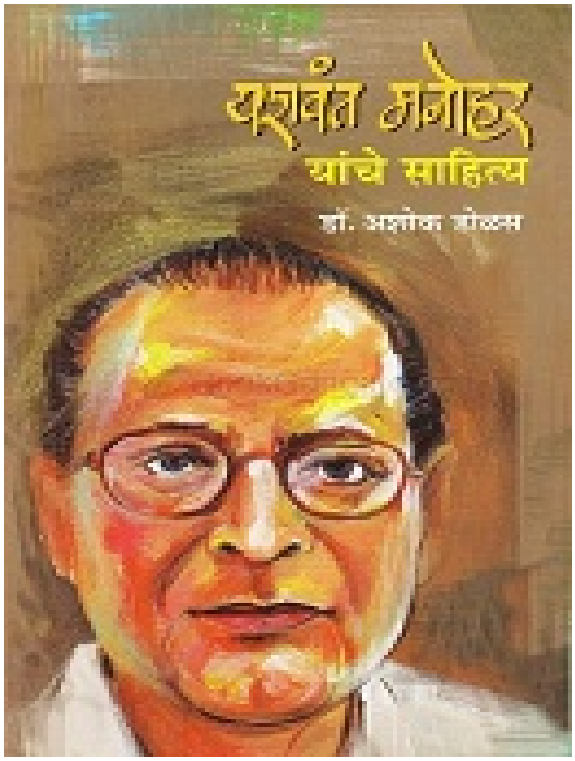


Image Courtesy: Bookganga.com

The choice of an alternative-label is not entirely original. For example, Yashwant Manohar, a well-known and prolific Dalit Marathi poet and writer, has advanced the label 'Ambedkarvaadi sahitya' as an alternative to 'Dalit' or 'Baudh' sahitya, to signify a clear ideological source and direction (Manohar, 322-3). In the same way, when Bhagat speaks about production of 'caste-conscious literature', a term that echoes 'class-conscious literature' used by Marxist litterateurs (who also use terms like 'class-informed' or, 'class-engaged' literature), he means literature that, following Ambedkar, focuses on the role of caste in Indian society, and tries to unpack and unveil that role, towards the goal of annihilation of caste. Theoretically, any person from any jati can produce such literature, and its audience need not, and should not be limited by jati boundaries.

This line of thought is reflected in much of Datta Bhagat's writing; and one result is that none of his plays are exclusively about Dalit lives. Instead, we get a larger picture of Dalit lives intersecting with the lives of people from other social groups. However, the focus lies on Dalit lives. *Kheliya* (Bhagat 1987), a play that we will now consider, follows the story of a rural Dalit youth called Narayan, though the story is set entirely in the house of his Brahmin master, Bhaskar Deshmukh.

Ace Player

Bhaskar Deshmukh belongs to a landed, feudal aristocracy. In medieval Maharashtra, Deshmukhs were hereditary rulers of parts of a kingdom, in charge of administration and revenue-collection. According to the religion, jati, and preference of the king, Deshmukhs were drawn from diverse social groups. However, they were predominantly Marathas or Brahmins. After the establishment of British rule, Deshmukhs lost the political structure that gave them clout; and after Independence, they lost direct control over large tracts of land that they owned. However, they still retained much of their social prestige, and quite a lot of their lands. In villages, they generally continued to be very important people. In all important village affairs, including village politics, they commanded great influence—one of them, Vilasrao Deshmukh, rose from the position of a gram panchayat member to become the chief minister of the state.

Living in an unnamed village in Marathwada, Bhaskar Deshmukh basks in the *de facto* power-position of being a Deshmukh. However, he is acutely aware of the changing times. While he will not let go of any of the prestige and power he commands through indirect but effective ways, he does not remain hidebound by caste. In fact, with regard to traditional caste practices, he is a liberal. Unlike his father Anna, who is highly orthodox, Bhaskar scoffs at untouchability. He has no hesitation in interacting with people from low-ranked Hindu jatis and Muslims, and he does not uphold strong religious beliefs. He is also derisive of some traditional savarna morals; for instance, he has no compunctions about drinking alcohol in front of others. He describes himself as a man moving with the tide of time.

But, Bhaskar Deshmukh has not at all imbibed the democratic values underlying the Constitution of India. He does have a deep, practical knowledge of how political democracy works on the ground in his village. But he uses that knowledge to plot and play political games with a singular motive: he should always come out on top; he should always hold all the cards.

He has a formidable weapon in his hands: he is trained to be a lawyer. He has no interest or need to pursue law as a livelihood—he treats it as an 'intellectual pastime' (ibid, 11). But knowledge of law, and his position as a lawyer, gives him great clout in a village (and country), where people fear the legal machinery more than they fear the law.

He is not alone in the local power game. He has two formidable rivals: Hanumantrao, another influential Brahmin, and Shivanand Patil, a politically connected Maratha who allies with Hanumantrao.

To counter them, Bhaskar has thought of a devilish, long-term plan. Breaking one of the fundamental barriers of caste, he has brought Narayan, a boy from a poor SC household working on the Deshmukh family's lands for generations, to live in his home. By that measure, Bhaskar hoped to kill many birds with one stone. He could somewhat satisfy the maternal

feelings of his childless wife, Nalu. He could get a full-time, residential servant to do all the odd jobs at home. And by giving Narayan some school-education, he could eventually have a fairly educated Dalit youth-leader working under his instructions.

Playing with the Dalit vote in the village has been one of Bhaskar's games: in an election held two years before the start of the play's storyline, Bhaskar had engineered a split in the Dalit vote, to the great disadvantage of Hanumantrao. With the Narayan card in his pocket, Bhaskar hopes to go further. As he tells a frequent visitor to his house, Kasare, a Brahmin schoolteacher, he does not want to merely move with the course of times; he wants to give it a completely new twist.

With that grand design in his mind, he gives two hoots about Anna, or other savarnas in the village cribbing that the 'impure' Narayan is allowed access to all parts of the Deshmukh house, including the place where the family gods are kept.

As a young adult, who has been in the Deshmukh house for around eight years, Narayan does not know anything about Bhaskar's grand plan. For Narayan, Bhaskar is 'Dadasaheb', a person to be venerated.

Narayan is otherwise sharp. He is, for instance, keenly aware of the socialisation thrust on him in the Brahmin household. He tells Bhaskar's wife Nalu, who cares a lot for him:

> … Madam, in the last eight years you have made so many efforts to turn me into a wise person: 'Narayan, change those clothes. They are dirty!' 'Narayan, don't sit like that; sit properly.' 'Narayan, don't speak like that. That's impure language…' (ibid, 2)

At the same time, Narayan is aware that, while he has been brought up in a Brahmin family, he can never be one of them. But this does not perturb him. With his Dadasaheb behind him, he is a picture of self-confidence, and assertion, as we can make out from a conversation between Narayan and Kasare. Kasare is, by his own description, a thick-skinned Brahmin who does not agree with Bhaskar's liberal views on caste practices, and he is always looking for opportunities to show Narayan his 'place' in society. The following conversation, which takes place in the Deshmukh house, starts with Kasare (K) asking Narayan (N) about a book Narayan is reading.

> N: (*Answering K's question*) It is a biography of Shahu Maharaj.
>
> K: Whose book? Dhananjay Keer's?
>
> N: No, our Dadasaheb's.
>
> K: I know that. But who is the author?

N: (*Reading the cover of the book*) Dhananjay Keer [savarna journalist who wrote biographies of Phule, Ambedkar and Shahu, as also Tilak, Gandhi and Savarkar].

K: Didn't I tell you that?

N: Yes.

K: We have it in school.

N: You may well have.

K: What do you mean 'may'? I sent the money order for buying the book for the school. Dhananjay Keer was a very great man! You are reading him?

N: Yes.

K: Read, read. That's good. I haven't yet read the book. But Shahu Maharaj was a very great man.

N: Aa?

K: Bhaskar—your Dadasaheb—has told you to read. Read, read. (*After some time*) But how will this be of use to you?

N: What?

K: This book! Are there going to be questions about it in the SSC exams?

N: No.

K: Then why are you reading it? (Pauses) You want to become an intellectual?

N: (*Confused, irritated*) What?

K: You want to become an intellectual? Like the man who is considered the leader of your community—one cannot even mention all his degrees in one breadth: MA, PhD, BSc, Bar-at-law [reference to Ambedkar, and the string of his educational qualifications often displayed along with his name by Dalits].

N: Yes.

K: But first pass the SSC exams, what?

N: I will pass the SSC exams, won't I, Guruji?

K: You will! You will pass. But what will you do with an SSC certificate? It's no longer like the old times! Now there are graduates in every lane and bylane.

N: That's true.

K: Then why become a matriculate?

N: (*Confusedly*) Dadasaheb says…

K: He may say a hundred things. But don't you have some intelligence of your own? Arre, why do we need this meddling with education? Maartya, your father, hasn't he become old and weak?

N: He can't see well.

K: And your mother?

N: She is very weak.

K: And you are studying for SSC. Who is going to take care of them? What's your age?

N: Must be around eighteen.

K: If you had got married, you would have been the father of two. And you are studying for SSC. Arre, Ambedkar was of your community. He used to carry the burden of the entire Dalit community of the country! And you can't take care of your own parents.

N: (*Sufficiently inflamed with irritation*) Guruji, did my father meet you?

K: When?

N: In the last eight or ten days?

K: No.

N: I thought to myself, did he meet you and ask you to lend some money? Just something that came to my mind, listening to this outburst…

K: Arre, whatever I am saying is for your benefit.

N: Guruji, give me the advice when I come begging to your door (ibid, 5-7).

Narayan's hopes of becoming a highly educated person are, however, thwarted by Bhaskar, as part of a plan to frustrate Shivanand Patil. The latter had been eyeing the land owned by a poor widow. She could get ownership of the land due to the efforts of Bhaskar's father, Anna. To get

back at Anna, Shivanand Patil has his men trouble the widow every day, to prevent her from cultivating the land. In desperation, the widow decides to sell the land to her tormentor, Shivanand Patil. Hearing about this, Bhaskar steps into the picture, and through some smart moves, makes Narayan the buyer of the widow's land. Abandoning his education plans, Narayan starts cultivating the land.

With an asset and a livelihood, Narayan begins to stand on his own feet. He also starts to look into village affairs—such as, the barely functioning village school run by a private body headed by Shivanand, who pockets all the government grants he gets for the purpose; and a ration-shop owner who sells sugar in the black market. Narayan wants to initiate action against these crimes. Bhaskar is not supportive initially—he wants to be sure that Narayan has the backing of the people of his social group. Subsequently, Bhaskar plots victories for Narayan in both cases. Narayan even gets the license to run the ration-shop.

A 'Dalit Leader'

Narayan becomes a 'Dalit leader', but not quite a 'Panther'. The distinction becomes clear when he brings an educated cousin, Jagan, to the Deshmukh house. Jagan is a self-proclaimed 'Dalit Panther'. He is also needy: he is looking for some employment, and hopes that Bhaskar will hire him as a clerk. The following conversation between Narayan and Jagan takes place in the Deshmukh house after Narayan has introduced Jagan to Nalu, and there has been some friction between Narayan and Jagan: Narayan expected Jagan to touch Nalu's feet, and Jagan chose not to do so. Nalu is not present when Narayan (N) and Jagan (J) converse:

> N: Jagan!
>
> J: Yes.
>
> N: You are angry?
>
> J: When Dadasaheb arrives, should I fall on his feet?
>
> N: (*Peering into J's eyes*) Why?
>
> J: (*Avoiding N's gaze*) If you want, I'll prostrate myself before him. Whatever it is, let me know in advance. I shouldn't suffer a backdoor insult.
>
> N: You think doing a namaskar to the lady is an insult?
>
> J: I did a namaskar.
>
> N: But without bending.

J: What do I know?

N: What is there to know about that?

J: Why didn't you tell me beforehand?

N: Beforehand means? (*Dadasaheb enters, but stops abruptly at the door—N and J have not seen him*).

J: Before we came here. And what do you think? That I should act without self-respect because I need a job? That I should fall on the feet of anyone you say? That I should prostrate myself before all? I am a Panther!

N: Jagan! Nalu madam is not one of 'all'. Dadasaheb is no stranger. This is my home. And falling on the feet of elders in the house is not acting without self-respect.

J: The man is a Brahmin! And you say he is one of the elders of our home?

N: Jagan…

J: Don't shout. You are not educated. You won't understand this. This is Brahmin craftiness [The phrase in the source-text, Brahmani kasab, is the title of a book by Jotirao Phule].

N: And if that's what one has to learn in college, it's good that I didn't go there.

J: I'll leave.

N: You won't meet Dadasaheb?

J: Will I get a job if I fall on his feet?

N: If you are definitely going to get a job, will you fall on his feet? (Pauses) Think about it. You are a Panther!

J: Narayan, don't feel bad. But the fact is, these savarna folks behave hypocritically only to ensure that we people keep bending before them.

N: Is this softness driven by an ulterior motive? By the hope of getting a job? (*Calmly*) Jagan, Dadasaheb has no job to offer.

J: Arre, I am asking you to be fearless. And you… ? Learn to be a bit upright!

N: Being rude is being upright?

> J: Then is self-deprecation politeness? I don't want to meet your Dadasaheb. I am a Panther. (*Strides away*) (ibid, 19-20).

Narayan does not meet Jagan's standards, but soon he takes a very Panther-like action: he files a case of untouchability against Sailu, a Muslim tea-shop owner, who uses separate cups to serve SC customers—a common practice in many parts of rural India. Narayan takes this major step, which has no precedent in the village, without taking Bhaskar into confidence. Bhaskar is displeased. He tells Kasare:

Nobody can take any decision that concerns me without asking me. Nobody has that right. Not even my biological father. Narayan should have such courage? He should abuse my goodness in this way? I am surprised! (ibid, 50)

Bhaskar decides to teach Narayan a lesson. He decides to take up Sailu's case, as his defence lawyer. Further, though Narayan's complaint is valid, and Sailu admits guilt, Bhaskar manipulates witnesses and evidence in such a way that Sailu is acquitted. One of the witnesses who testifies in Sailu's favour is Jagan, the self-declared Panther; Bhaskar bought him off for a few hundred rupees.

It's only now that Narayan realises that he is a pawn in Bhaskar's game. Speaking more in the voice of pradhyapak Datta Bhagat, rather than a poorly educated village youth, Narayan tells Bhaskar:

> …I used to look up to you. But it's good that I came to my senses very early. Dadasaheb, you should have realised that this was a first of its kind case in the village. To start with, Dalits don't dare to take such a step. I did. I assumed your support. But do you know how much harm you have done to Dalits by taking up Sailu's case? You broke their backs. Now they will think ten times before filing such a case. They won't have the guts. Dadasaheb, if you had harmed me, it would have been okay. I would have endured it meekly. But you harmed a poor community. You killed an ideology (ibid, 64).

Bhaskar is unfazed. His public stand, which he conveys to Narayan, is that Sailu had hired him as a lawyer, and all that he did was what every lawyer should do: make the best case for his client.

Though embittered and disillusioned, Narayan does not react violently. In fact, he warns a mob of Dalits angered by the court judgement, to stay away from the Deshmukh house.

But defeat in the Sailu case does not deter Narayan. On the other hand, it motivates him to emerge as a player in his own right. He takes the battle-game forward, straight into the Deshmukh household. He organises an agitation of non-Buddhist SC groups to gain entry into a village temple that has been out of bounds to them. He knows well that savarnas like Bhaskar's

father, Anna, will bar the SC agitators' entry into the temple. It is just the reaction he gets. Narayan ensures that a case is filed against all those barring entry of SC persons into the temple, with Anna named as one of the prime accused.

In this situation too, Bhaskar tries to come out on top. He responds to Narayan's move with a stunning counter-move: he announces that he will appear in court on behalf of the SC agitators, and against Anna, his own father.

By now, the battle lines in the village have become complex. As a new and energetic actor in the local politics, and that too from an SC background, Narayan has raised the hackles of Hanumantrao and Shivanand Patil, Anna and other tradition-bound savarnas. Narayan has also angered many people from his own community: they view him as a troublemaker, who is disturbing the well-set social and economic arrangements that give them some livelihood.

One night, at a desolate spot near the village, Narayan is attacked by some unknown persons, and hacked to pieces. The killers remain untraced. *Kheliya* ends on that abrupt and unsettling note.

By some standards, the play is not a good example of Dalit literature, as the Dalit protagonist does not emerge a victor. In his introduction to the play, Datta Bhagat dwelt at some length on this aspect (ibid, viiii-ix). As he put it, he had three plot-choices for ending the play: Narayan could have emerged a victor, or he could have emerged a loser, or he could have been killed. The first option would have provided a 'facile dream' to the Dalit movement; the second would have evoked hypocritical sympathy of the urban middle-class audiences. The third option was the most realistic, he felt. It reflected a basic reality in the villages he was familiar with: there, conflicts are routinely resolved through violence rather than democratic or legal means, which are anyway not favourable to Dalits. That apart, while the first two plot options would leave all sections of the audience secure in the cocoons of their cherished beliefs, the third option could provoke some thought around the question, 'Why did this happen?'

Whether *Kheliya* actually provokes such thought is something that can be determined only by seeing a performance of the play. What we can consider here is the printed text, and how it represents caste.

Complex Characterisations

A striking feature of the text is that it eschews gross categorisations and characterisations. We get to know complex human beings:

Bhaskar is, with respect to traditional caste practices, a liberal, but that is not because he rejects the ideology of caste. His rejection of caste practices is only strategic; he has, in fact,

scant regard for human beings. As he tells Anna, he views Narayan purely as an 'animal called man' in an 'experiment' of his design (ibid, 61). On the other hand, Anna is highly caste-bound, but as Narayan recognises, he has an admirable quality Bhaskar lacks: Anna is true to his word. Openly anti-Dalit, he is less harmful to Dalits than people like Bhaskar, who 'speak for our welfare but kill us by their deeds' (ibid, 65).

Jagan is a Panther, brimming with anger. But he does not have a strong moral core that can make him spurn the offer of giving false evidence in court; he cannot recognise the damage he is causing to the cause he is supposedly fighting for. As for Hanumantrao and Shivanand Patil, even the thick-skinned Kasare thinks they are 'maggots stuck to society' (ibid, 33).

Narayan himself is no model of virtue. After he gets the license to run the ration-shop in the village, he arranges to send a sack of sugar to the Deshpande house as a gift. He explains to Nalu that he did not obtain the sack by short-changing or turning away any of the ration-card beneficiaries; he simply 'managed' to get a higher sugar quota from the supply office. In his estimation, he did no wrong—since he did not cheat any needy person he knew.

The moral centre of the dramatis personae is Nalu. Initially, she is represented as an orthodox Brahmin. In one of her conversations with Kasare, she reveals how uncomfortable she used to feel about the avarna Narayan moving all around the Deshmukh house. But towards the end of the play, she makes a grand declamation, which includes hefty statements put into her mouth, and rises above her caste and gender status. After Narayan is dead, she admonishes her husband and her father-in-law:

> Enough! Shut up, all of you! Both of you are murderers. You used him [Narayan] like a toy. Anna, you wanted Narayan, but a Narayan who would behave like his father. A slave and bonded labourer who will never complain, and follow your orders without protest! And you? (Addressing Bhaskar). You also wanted the same kind of person—a mouse you can play with in the net of your intelligence! Both of you have killed him. If a case has to be lodged, it has to be lodged against you both. What crime did he commit? What flaw did he have in his character? But you'll never consider this in your behaviour towards him. That he is also a man of flesh and blood, that he is a living human being. That he has a mind, an inner self, emotions, and when necessary, the intelligence to take decisions on his own! But you both were basically not willing to accept his fundamental rights. Every time, you threw a net and tried to catch him. Then, you threw another net, and he got caught again. Did you ever understand him? He was so torn internally; he never had any need for your games. He needed compassion. Proper treatment. But how many challenges you put before him! Why? For what purpose? What was the purpose of all this? A boy I took care of as if he was my own. You'll killed him . You both. You all are heartless, evil! Evil! (ibid, 97-98)

Paradox

Another striking feature of the text is its delineation of how caste works within, and subverts a modern political and legal system—that is, in theory and principle, not rooted in caste. The system provided Narayan with an opportunity not had by 'untouchables' since the time they were categorised that way: He could demand justice against the practice of untouchability. But the system did not give him justice.

This paradox shows, in an indirect way, a fundamental limitation in the modern conception of the Indian State imposed on a non-democratic social order. A lawyer and constitutionalist, Ambedkar put his weight behind the creation of such a State, and helped frame its Constitution as a guarantor of rights and justice. As his last address to the Constituent Assembly shows, Ambedkar was acutely aware that the adoption of the system of political democracy would not automatically lead to the formation of a democratic society (Ambedkar 1994, 1214-18), and in the very first years of the working of the system, he saw that it was being subverted to preserve the traditional social order (Keer, 432-4, 456-7). However, he did not bring himself to a call for revolution. Instead, he advocated the path of the Buddha, in a statist way: In the way he interpreted Buddha, not just people, but the State itself would change; it would be an upholder of Dhamma (Ambedkar 1972, 226).

That is a distant ideal, and people like Narayan are left with a State that promises justice. Even though it keeps up to the promise in some cases, it does not uproot the pillars of injustice, and gives spaces for the protection of the unjust. All the characters in *Kheliya* recognise that Bhaskar took up Sailu's case only to show Narayan his 'place' in the socio-political order. They also know that Bhaskar won the case by cheating—by bribing key witnesses to give false testimonies. Yet, all the characters, including Narayan, accept the court verdict. Within the discourse on a modern democratic State, they have to. Those who follow the discourse have to live with reason for hope, as well as despair.

The Dalit Panthers refused to despair, and expressed anger that led to violence. But in *Kheliya*, Datta Bhagat clearly does not endorse the path they took. Through the deus ex machina of Jagan becoming a turncoat—for reasons unexplained—Datta Bhagat influences the reader to reject the Dalit Panther movement, though in the introduction to the play he spoke admiringly about its 'historic work' (Bhagat 1987, xi). While *Kheliya* shows the limitations of the discourse on the Indian democratic State, Bhagat does not position himself out of the discourse, or in opposition to it.

Firmly positioned in that discourse, Datta Bhagat recognises that its interplay with a non-democratic social order limits the scope for political theatre. Theoretically, he explained to me, the State gives him the freedom to write a play on the Naamantar issue. However, he felt that

the non-democratic social order will not be able to embrace the performance of a forthright play on the subject. Years after the issue apparently got resolved, it can arouse passions, and the State apparatus can justifiably step in to prevent a law-and-order problem, by preventing the staging of the play.

Should a writer accept this state of affairs or challenge it? Datta Bhagat's choice is the first option, but with a rider, and an explanation. According to him, if a writer wants to do samaaj prabodhan, Naamantar and many other politically sensitive issues are not good subject-choices for theatre, as these will generate more heat than thought. However, that does not mean the writer should evade the issues. Rather, he should look for strategic alternatives. One option, with reference to Naamantar, is to locate the issues in a historical play—such as a play on the Gandhi-Ambedkar divide, which provides material for more than one play.

A Bigger Platter

In a conversation with me, Datta Bhagat expressed several other opinions that do not fit within the standard discourse on Dalit literature: as the consumer for modern literature is the middle-class, the majority of the audience for Dalit literature will always be non-Dalit…While 'Dalit' refers to a distinctive ideology that needs to be disseminated widely, trying to build a unique, all-India Dalit cultural identity, on the lines of Afro-American identity, is like pursuing a mirage: Unlike America's Blacks, Dalits do not have cultural and historical roots that are far apart from the roots of mainstream society… protest literature is not the only kind of political literature required; political literature is also required for the purpose of education, about conflicts and underlying causes.

Likewise, Bhagat did not speak entirely within the standard discourse on Dalit literature when he was elected president of the Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Natya Sammelan (All India Marathi Theatre Conference) in 2006. Like previous presidents of the sammelan, Bhagat got the post as recognition of his contribution to Marathi theatre and literature, which includes four collections of one-act plays, three full-length plays, three collections of essays on literary-criticism, and editorial direction to a collection of Narhar Kurundkar's writings. There is more to the matter of being made president of a mainstream literary body: Such posts mean a lot in cultural politics. But here we will stick to the text of Bhagat's presidential address.5

At the outset, he acknowledged the honour bestowed upon him, and his belonging to a tradition of Marathi theatre studded with many great personalities, including a well-known savarna dramatist Ram Ganesh Gadkari, who was never made the president of the natya sammelan. Then, Bhagat acknowledged belonging to a tradition of theatre in Marathwada, created by many people whose contributions have not been recognised. Then, he identified himself as a Dalit theatre person; a member of Nanded's theatre community; a beneficiary of a

historical movement for social justice carried out for a century in Maharashtra; and as a contemporary of playwrights Tendulkar, Eklunchwar and Satish Alekar. After dwelling at some length on the need for Dalit theatre writing, and the challenges of writing political drama in India, he moved to other topics: Maharashtra's border dispute with Karnataka, and how litterateurs could work to build constructive inter-state relations; and the need for taking measures to strengthen the theatre movement in Maharashtra, provide financial support to needy and aged theatre professionals, develop a theatre industry in Marathwada, and establish drama and music departments in the Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University at Nanded.

Considering the post he was occupying and the prestige it carries, Bhagat was probably expected to speak on many different issues. However, he was clearly not playing to the gallery. He didn't broach several hot media-topics of the day (farmers' suicides, floods in Mumbai…), and on each issue that he spoke, he expressed a personal viewpoint.

Indirectly, his speech suggested that he could not be defined only by a Dalit social identification: He wanted to claim a bigger platter. The claim reflected his life-position: educated, and employed as a pradhyapak, including a ten-year stint as professor of Marathi at the Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University in Aurangabad, Datta Bhagat was a respected member of the urban middle-class.

At the same time, one can hardly overlook the fact that Bhagat's literature stemmed from his caste position, all the writing that brought him into the limelight is entirely about caste, and his mission as a writer is the production of 'caste-conscious literature inspired by Ambedkar's thought'.

It is to be also noted that, though Bhagat does not prefer the word 'Dalit' to describe his literature, he does not object to the use of the term, and even defends it vigorously, as he did in response to the critical acclaim accorded to Raghavvel, the first of a three-volume, semi-autobiographical novel by a first-time writer from the Mang jati, Namdeo Kamble.

The book, which got the Sahitya Akademi award for Marathi literature in 1995, raised a basic question: Could it be considered an example of Dalit literature merely because it was written by a person from an SC group, and he tells the story of an SC family? The author answered stoutly in the affirmative, and, his publisher went one step further, stating that Kamble's effort had given a new direction to Dalit literature (Kamble, 2-3). But, Datta Bhagat, along with several Dalit litterateurs, refused to accept this view. In a lengthy review of Raghavvel, Bhagat argued that while Kamble's book is moving, it is limited by the fact that neither the protagonist of the novel, nor its author, shows any desire to challenge caste. Raghu's story is the common story of young people of low-ranked jatis, who demonstrate no political consciousness other than some

loosely held political views; and who try to up their living status by all means available to them. As the story of a representative of this category, Raghu's story is valuable. But, Bhagat argued, Raghu lacks consciousness about the mechanism of caste, and the author himself displays it in only a facile manner in the second and third volumes; as such, his work contributes nothing to the cause of annihilation of caste (Bhagat 2010, 66-100).

Bhagat's critique completely ignores the reader, who can bring into a reading of Raghu's story a consciousness that Raghu and his creator apparently lacked. One can also question his argument from other flanks—for example, would Bhagat have raised the same objection if the creator of Raghu's story had been from the Mahar background? However, the moot point here is something else: though Bhagat apparently finds the 'Dalit' label limiting or inadequate, he is also emotionally attached to its meaning and relevance—and he, therefore, launched a defence against its perceived dilution.

This paradoxical action is fundamentally different from the calculated, selfish maneuvering of Bhaskar Deshmukh, but both actions are possible due to a common condition: whereas social-group labels had largely fixed meanings and roles in the past, many group labels today have differing salience and meanings in different contexts. Differing engagements with 'Dalit'—of differing interpretation, intensity, proximity and distance—are part of this process of social flux.

But the process is not uniform. Bhaskar Deshmukh can flit across several labels, but from his caste and class position, Narayan does not enjoy this privilege. *Kheliya* reminds us that the position accruing from the 'Brahmin' label can provide opportunities to exert dominance, but 'Dalit' can get you killed. Those who seek to move away from labels have to recognise this stark asymmetry, as Datta Bhagat did.

Notes

1. All cited text is translated from Marathi by me.

2. Non-standard English is used for Kaka's dialogues, to reflect non-standard ('rural') Marathi in the source text.

3. Details of Bhagat's life and work that follow, and quoted statements, are from two extended conversations I had with him in Pune in January and February 2015.

4. An English translation of the play, available in Mee 2002, is used as study material in many university courses.

5. Published by Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Natyaparishad, Mumbai, in 2006.

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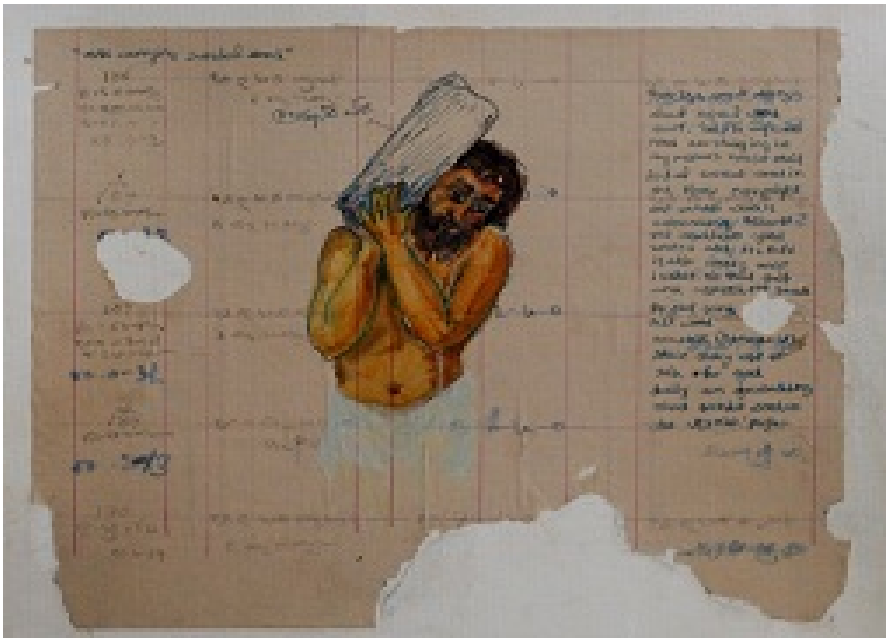
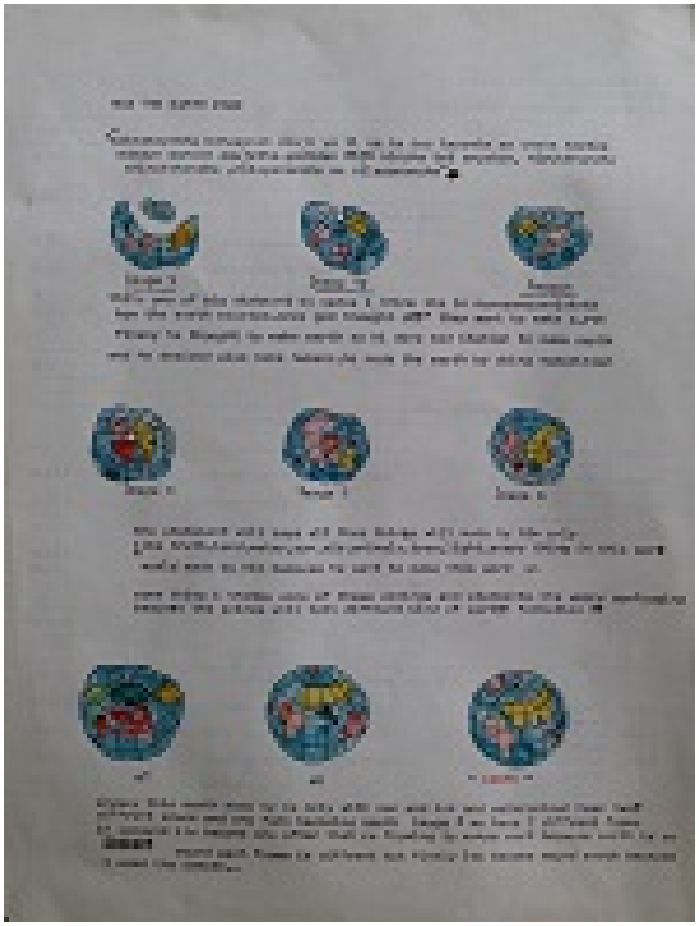
Philosophy Machine

Shailesh B.R.

'I begin with several drawings that serve as illustrations of my everyday thoughts like rituals or blueprints, and document the possibilities of my work.'

Drawings/ Blueprints



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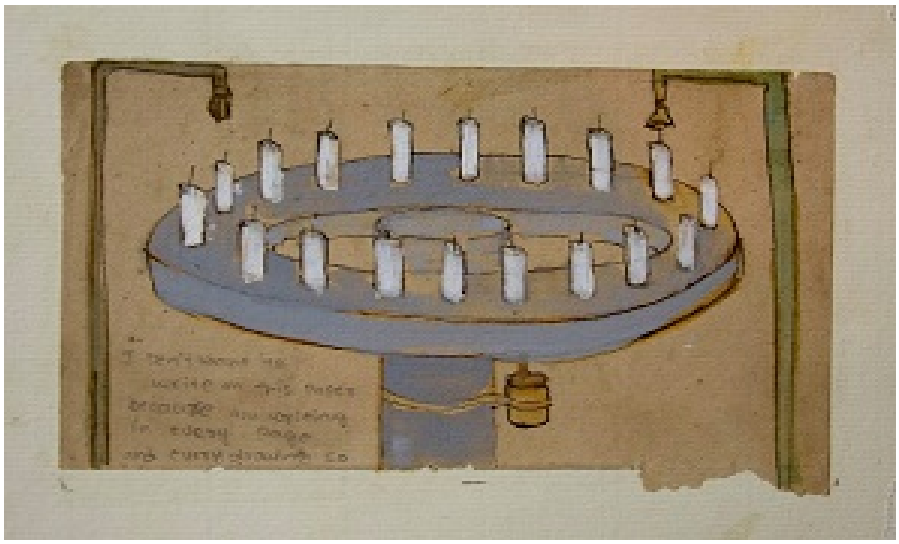
‘My work imagines the construction of a device that may eventually be an object, or exist as a thought. I deal with complex ‘machines’ and simplify them in terms of their physicality and function, to make them more representational of human needs and/ or want…’



‘Raised in a small village in South India, without access to basic electricity during my childhood, my introduction to mechanics during my higher education greatly fascinated me. This fascination within my practice is applied to solve queries, and answer questions of philosophies and existence.’

‘My practice remains a reaction not only to an object/ practice that I see and interact with, but also to its sensibility, meanings, practical, conceptual or metaphorical connotations. I thereby ‘repurpose’ objects to alter their function, and inject them with of satire to criticise their political, social or cultural significance.’

Documentation

Almost an Obituary: Eunice de Souza (1940-2017)

Souradeep Roy and *Sneha Chowdhury*

and *Kanupriya Dhingra's Hindi Translations of Three Poems*

Image Courtesy: The Hindu

> Interviewer: You've also written a couple of novels.
>
> Eunice de Souza: Two. Have you read them?
>
> Interviewer: Yes, *Dangerlok*.
>
> Eunice de Souza: I'm quite fond of the other one (*Dev & Simran*), but nobody reads it. It's got some very good reviews.

Several obituaries written after de Souza passed away a month ago, described her as 'acerbic', 'sarcastic', 'endearing', and 'witty'. The range of writers who wrote an obituary for her – from womens' activists to poets to theatre directors, most of them her students – shows the variety of people she influenced in her lifetime. This is why we are surprised by de Souza's remark in the interview – 'Nobody reads it.' Is it another case of admiration for the person, not her work – one of our national pastimes?

We have never met Eunice de Souza. We have never met Eunice de Souza the person. We have, however, met her quite often in her writing. This article will have no anecdotes on de Souza, the person. It will, however, have a few anecdotes of meeting de Souza the anthologist, editor, novelist and poet.

We like to think of de Souza as an interventionist. Her interventions were critical; her style sharp, often puncturing accepted critical notions on Indian poetry in English. Consider her substantial work as an anthologist – *Nine Indian Women Poets*, published in 1997; it put to test Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's landmark *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, published in 1992. Here is her admiration for Mehrotra's work:

> What is important about this anthology, however, is its crisp introduction, the clear focus on language and craftsmanship, rather than on thematic content. The focus is a welcome relief after, for instance, Vilas Sarang's dated and woolly ideas about 'Indianness' and the 'dangers' inherent in women's writing about the self, in his anthology Indian English Poetry Since 1950 (Orient Longman, 1990).

The two sentences, however, come only after her snide remark on the absence of women poets in Mehrotra's anthology:

> Arvind Krishna Mehrotra who once remarked in a review that 'the rate of mortality among the Indian poets in English must be the highest anywhere', reduces the number of women poets represented in his anthology… to one.

Her anthology introduced us to poets like Mamta Kalia, Melanie Silgardo, Smita Agarwal, Sujata Bhatt, Charmayne D'Souza and Tara Patel, apart from the more visible poets such as Imtiaz Dharker and Kamala Das. We must point out that Mehrotra's exclusion of women was a matter of principle. He had intended to show the 'sharp-edged quality of Indian verse', and pitted his anthology against R Parthasarathy's earlier *Ten Modern Indian Poets*. Eunice de Souza is the only woman poet who, in his opinion, fitted the criterion. This is certainly an apt assessment. Notice the lack of sentimentality when she writes of death:

Forgive me, mother,

That I left you

A life-long widow

old, alone.

It was kill or die

and you got me anyway:

The blood congeals at lover's touch.

The guts dissolve in shit.

I was never young.

Now I'm old, alone.

In dreams

I hack you.

('Forgive Me, Mother')

I hold the child up in delight.

The revolving fan cuts her through.

It's a dream.

I'm you.

I heard your fumblings in the dark.

Woke on wet beds.

Kniving marshes.

I'm you.

You're the cold wind.

The grey mist.

The black dawn. The grinning skull.

I'm you.

('For My Father, Dead Young')

In her own anthology, she fills the pages with women poets, whose styles share the same 'sharp-edged nature' as hers. Here is Melanie Silgardo, de Souza's student and collaborator, writing of her father:

Father, you will be proud to know

you've left something behind.

The year you died

I inherited a mind.

…

Wherever you are, will you

turn your index finger away?

I grant you divine power that it took

to live your kind of life,

both villain and hero of the piece.

Father, perhaps you lived too much.

And now I'm writing with my life.

The price of an inherited crutch.

de Souza's work, however, is not limited to contemporary writers. She had a penchant for writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and championed their work in *Early Indian Poetry in English*. First published in 2005, the anthology challenged the widely held opinion that pre-Independence poetry in English is only mimetic. Here is Mehrotra again: 'Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Sarojini Naidu were courageous and perhaps charming men and women, but not those with whom you could today do business.' He has changed his stance now, with an essay on Dutt's bilingualism in the recently published *A History of Indian Poetry in English* edited by Rosinka Chaudhuri; but de Souza perceived the relevance of these voices, and made a case for their poetry much earlier. 'In any case,' she writes, 'an anthology like this one can only be a part of the story. There are probably many forgotten writers in libraries all over India.' In the same way, Eunice de Souza the anthologist is only a part of the larger story of Eunice de Souza the writer, and editor.

Image Courtesy: Goodreads

Although she is known mostly as a poet and a teacher, reading her novellas feels like a gust of wind on a humid afternoon. Think of the ingenuity of the title, *Dangerlok*. In the novella, the word is used by one of the characters to describe the people of Bombay. It is likely that de Souza picked it up from Bombay's streets. Overhearing conversations and using them as material for their writing is a phenomenon common among Bombay poets, especially Arun Kolatkar.

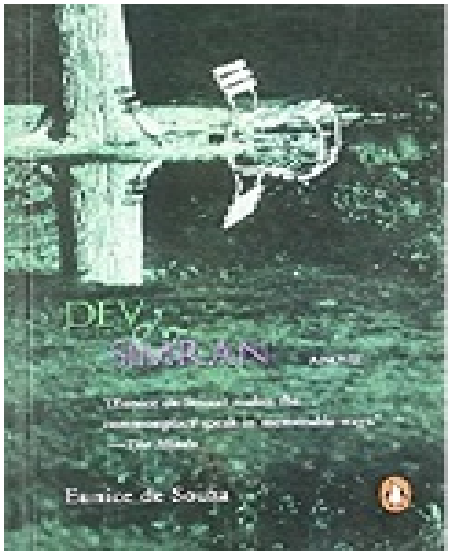


Image Courtesy: Amazon.in

Dev & Simran was published two years later, in 2003, and here, we get a glimpse of a different sensibility. The novella is about a group of friends who help Simran cope with her child and her husband Dev's death. The style is remarkably plain and straightforward; never sentimental. Death is depicted as an unremarkable fact of life and this is reflected in her description of death in the novella: ''did I really once think that death made life more meaningful? … I don't think I was stupid enough to actually say that to anyone. It's a very idiotic idea'.' Through a series of first-person accounts, we learn that they mourn Dev's death together. The novel is imbued with a quaint lightness, lightness that imparts a valuable message about mourning the death of people who are dear to us: one cannot carry the memory of death around as an existential weight; one has to let go. Simran's letters to the recently deceased Dev are her work of mourning, slowly healing her as she comes to terms with his death. 'No one lives life as if death is around the corner', after all.

It is only de Souza who can make you laugh while describing death. Here is one short section from the novella:

> 'Deblina,' I said to my assistant at the Women's Studies Unit, 'if I hear one more person saying 'the Good Die Young' or some such, I shall scream.'
>
> 'They have to say something,' Deblina said.
>
> 'They don't have to say anything. 'Time Heals'. God! The man's barely dead. And Time doesn't heal.'
>
> 'I don't know about that. I've no experience.'
>
> 'Sim and I bought that bar for him. It wasn't really a bar, just a rather lovely, delicate cupboard. And we asked the guy to stick it on an old carved table. It turned out well, didn't it?'
>
> 'How's Sim?'
>
> 'Inundated with relatives.'
>
> 'Sheesh.'

On a more serious note (as if death wasn't serious enough), de Souza is one of the few writers who worked on the shorter forms of writing and polished them to perfection. Her poems are almost always short, and work like short jabs a boxer throws before landing a knockout punch. The novellas, too, are strung together by episodes and snippets of conversations (like the one quoted above) to make a book which seems incomplete, but, at the same time, works precisely because it is incomplete.

There have been far too many obituaries written on de Souza in the last few days, and this is another unwelcome addition. With so many obituaries written on her, we can well imagine her exclaiming 'Sheesh' if she knows there's another one.

Kanupriya Dhingra's translations:

Star Gazing

The light I saw in you

Love

Came from a dead star

I am to blame for this

Star gazing at my age

Is an ambitious art

तारे ताकना

जो रौशनी मैंने तुममें देखी

प्रिय

एक मुर्दा तारे से आई थी

इसके लिए मैं ज़िम्मेदार हूँ

मेरी उम्र में तारे ताकना

एक लालसी कला है

Death

Under the dusky mango tree

ceremonial shaving of heads.

The newly bald make fun of each other.

The newly dead is an unknown quantity

urged on by the tuneless singing of the women,

and men in white standing their ground.

मौत

धूमलि आम के पेड़ तले

सरों का रस्मी मुंडन।

हाल ही में गंजे हुए

एक दूजे की खलि्ली उड़ा रहे हैं।

हाल ही में मरे हुए एक अंजानी तादाद हैं

औरतों के बेसुरे गायन

और सफेदी में अटल खड़े मर्दों

से उकसाए हुए।

It’s time to find a place

It’s time to find a place

to be silent with each other.

I have prattled endlessly

in staff-rooms, corridors, restaurants.

When you’re not around

I carry on conversations in my head.

Even this poem

has forty eight words too many.

अब वक़्त है एक जगह ढूंढ लेने का

अब वक़्त है एक जगह ढूंढ लेने का

एक दूसरे के साथ चुप हो लेने के लिए।

मैंने लगातार बक लयिा है

स्टाफ-रूम, गलयिारों और रेस्तरां में।

जब तुम नहीं होते हो

मैं सरि में बातें लएि होती हूँ।

यहाँ तक कि यह कवति

भी कोई अड़तालीस अधकि शब्द लएि है।

Image Courtesy: Hindustan Times

A Bigger Truth: Maya Ghosh and the Bengali Political Theatre

Rusati Sen

Translation and Introduction by *Souradeep Roy*

Maya Ghosh in 'Chak Bhanga Modhu'/ Photo © Pronob Ghosh

Maya Ghosh (born 1943) is an actor who began her career in Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), Dum Dum Branch, in the play *Saoñtali Bidroho* (Santhal Revolt, 1961) by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay. When Bandyopadhyay left IPTA to form Nandikar, she became one of the founders of the group. Her first performance in Nandikar was in the role of the mother in Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, adapted into Bengali as *Natyokarer Sondhane Chhoti Choritro* by Rudraprasad Sengupta. In 1966, when thirteen members of Nandikar split from the group and formed a new group Theatre Workshop in the same year, she joined the new group, eventually becoming its President. Here, she worked on landmark plays such as *Chak Bhanga Modhu* (written by Manoj Mitra), *Rajrakta* (written by Mohit Chattopadhyay and directed by Bibhash Chakraborty), *Bela Obelar Golpo*, *Vietnam*, and several other plays. Besides these, she has acted in countless office club productions, as well as in other groups.

Maya Ghosh in front of Biswaroopa Theatre before the performance of 'Natyakarer Sondhane Chhoti Choritro'/ Image courtesy Maya Ghosh

Below are excerpts from her performances in two plays – *Saoñtali Bidroho* (1961, written by Ajitesh Bandypadhyay), and *Sitayan* (2008, written by the poet Mallika Sengupta). She performed them at Tepantar in December 2016, as part of the three-day-long Tepantar Theatre Mela in Satkahania village in Bankura, organised by the theatre group Ebong Amra.

Maya Ghosh performs excerpts from *Sitayan* and *Saoñtali Bidroho*

Rusati Sen has compiled a book on Ghosh's work, *Maya Ghosh: Manchoi Jeeban*. The book was compiled through completing extensive interviews with the actress. Here are selected excerpts from the book translated into English.

On Maya Ghosh's Life Now


Maya Ghosh as Sita in Mallika Sengupta's play 'Sitayan'/ Photo © Nemai Ghosh

It's better, really, if I don't talk about the kind of work I do. For one line of dialogue, and for one shot of my expression, I have to sometimes wait for more than six hours. In addition to that, the person who I am addressing the dialogue may not be present in the

> sets when I am shooting. Maybe (s)he's a very famous artist; (s)he's finished her work here and left for somewhere else. I am acting all by myself. A less busy, lesser-known actress like me will have to deliver her dialogues in the absence of the person to whom my dialogues are delivered. Yet I do it. Didn't I say this before? If I say no to TV completely, what will I eat? It takes some time to get the money, but I get it at least! I don't really have an alternative in front of me now; working here, I get a handful sum together; I spend it slowly. I don't know when will I get to work next. If I get four thousand each month I can manage things quite well. I live by myself; I have a place to rest my head. But I am hesitant to spend all the four thousand. Somehow I manage my month with two and a half thousand; don't keep a maid – there's no guarantee to my employment.

The year: 2011. Who is this person who gets four thousand per month but hopes to spend no more than two and a half thousand? A lot of people will easily recognise her if I say this is the woman who gave life to Sumati's character in *Bela Obelar Golpo*, adapted from Arnold Wesker's play *Chicken Soup with Barley* by Ashok Mukhopadhyay for Theatre Workshop… When Maya Ghosh makes no complaints and gives details about her life, like the ones I have quoted above, it is the listener who's hangs her head in shame.

From left: Haradhon Ram Mukhopadhyay and Maya Ghosh in Ashok Mukhopadhyay's *Bela Obelar Golpo*, adapted from Arnold Wesker's play *Chicken Soup with Barley*/ Photo © Nemai Ghosh

On Satyen Mitra's Murder and Theatre Workshop's Play Rajrakta

On 25 January, Theatre Workshop performed *Rajrakta* at Rangana theatre for the first time. Bibhash Chakraborty directed Mohit Chattopadhyay's play *Guinea Pig*, and staged it as *Rajrakta*… Bibhash Chakraborty has written about this play in the commemorative edition of Theatre Workshop's tabloid in memory of Satyen Bose, published on 7 May, 1971:

‘Rajrakta!’

I don’t know how important this word is for others, but, for me, for other members of Theatre Workshop, this word has a significance of its own. ‘Rajrakta’ will remain in our history as the time when we emerged out of a deep hole of hopelessness and overcame our predicament… After 1967, we could not even stage a notable play… There was not a single play that we could have staged as a minor production… Our group was formed in the year of the food revolt (1966). Politically, the movement marched ahead and led to the United Front government in 1969. Within the Left movement, we could see several mistakes, disagreements. On the other hand, our rivals or their armed response, was wondering how these lowly people, who had risen up in power, could be shown their place once again. They tried to destroy our dreams in such a way that it would be impossible to even close our eyes, let alone dream of a new red dawn… There was considerable pressure from various ends on those who were talking about class struggle, or the labouring workers… In the world of theatre, whatever we had built as political theatre was almost over in fear of repression, confusion, and despair…

Maya Ghosh in ‘Lolita’/ Photo © Arun Dasgupta

In such a situation, the members of Theatre Workshop got hold of Mohit Chattopadhyay’s *Guinea Pig*. In Bibhash Chakraborty’s words, ‘The capitalist political system kept us like guinea pigs. It allowed us to exist in the boundaries it had created for us; in the jobs it made, or did not make for us; in the freedom it gave us, and snatched away at will. In effect, it wanted us to exist or wither away for its own existence. But human beings are human beings – not guinea pigs. We had learnt this from our history. Where else could we find such a contemporary picture of our crisis and resistance? The members of Theatre Workshop read the play, and instantly decided that we would stage the play’ (ibid). There was an additional advantage. For a group

like Theatre Workshop, which, at that time, had very few members, this play had only four characters. Among them, there was one woman. Bibhas wrote, ‘Maybe this play was written for us’ (ibid). Yes, Maya Ghosh performed the ‘woman’.

Those who remember watching this play will know how striking Maya’s performance was. She kept all the characteristics of her acting style and yet, created something new with it. I shouldn’t have remembered so much. I was a student in the seventh standard. This was the first time I had seen Maya Ghosh perform. May be, because of my curiosity at such a young age, I had overheard audiences say in hushed tones – really, she has some talent! None of us can make out from her acting. Yes, yes, the new person playing the ‘man’ is Ram Mukhopadhyay – no, no, it’s Maya Ghosh who was talking about power. Satyen Mitra, who has been murdered – he played the ‘man’ before – Maya was supposed to get married to him…

Ram Mukhopadhyay and Maya Ghosh in the play ‘Rajrakta’/ Photo © Nemai Ghosh

Today, she says, ‘Nothing happened of it, isn’t it? Neither of us had the money to sit in a restaurant and order a meal. All we could manage was walk for miles with peanuts wrapped in newspapers. Marriage was far off the charts. My father, younger brother, younger sister – all of them depended on me. How could I think of myself when there was no other way by which they could support themselves? But, had Satyen been alive, my life would have definitely been different.’

From left: Debnath Bandyopadhyay, Maya Ghosh, Sumita Bandyopadhyay and Asit Bandyopadhyay in Buddhadeb Bhattacharya play 'Duhsomoy'/ Photo © Nemai Ghosh

After Satyen Mitra was killed mercilessly on 6 May, 1971, several newspapers reported the incident… There were several protests. Jyoti Basu raised the issued in the Vidhan Sabha. Obituaries were written in newspapers. Samik Bandyopadhyay's write-up came out in the magazine *Enact*. The entire theatre fraternity came together; Mohit Chattopadhyay dedicated *Rajrakta* to Satyen Mitra; Dipen Bandyopadhyay wrote a poem. But how would Theatre Workshop react to this? How would they protest? Their weapon was theatre. They decided to stage *Rajrakta* and register their protest against Satyen Mitra's murder; various other political murders would be invoked in the play. Bibhash Chakraborty had written:

> It was such a fearful task for us; for those who acted alongside Satyen *babu*; for the new person who played his part… In the first scene, when the woman says, 'I've done the right thing by not calling out. Yet, we will hold meetings; visit each other; love each other; we'll do whatever we want to do. Listen, we have to throw such kind of philosophy away – I've had enough of it. You were born against your wish, you will die against your wish! Let's leave such bullshit and, instead, say we are here; we will live for many years; we will try and live in a happy, comfortable way. This is a much bigger truth, do you understand?" While saying this dialogue, Maya has almost broken down, we too have begun to cry; so have those who were watching the rehearsal. Immediately after this, the "man" says, "We want to live happily, but who lets us do it? The woman, "Who's not letting us?" The man, "We both know who isn't letting us live" We have make others who what both these characters know. Who didn't let our Satyen babu live, who isn't letting lakhs and crores of people live? That's why we have to gather all our strength and create this play once again. This was our only resolve.

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Feminism and Poetry

Sneha Chowdhury in conversation with Nandini Dhar

Lyonel Feininger, 'Untitled' [Woman Writing], Ink on paper, 1908/ Image courtesy Harvard Art Museums

Sneha Chowdhury: What does it mean to be a feminist poet? Do you identify as a feminist poet?

Nandini Dhar: As I am reading through this question, Sneha, I am thinking, this very question – *what it means to be a feminist poet* – is pushing me towards a definition. As a worker in the academic theory industry, I put food on my table through my ability to define cultural texts and socio-cultural phenomena. And, that's probably why, I am always a little bit wary of definitions. Every time I am defining something, I also tend to think of the inevitable exclusions from my definition. So, I will resist this effort to define what constitutes a 'feminist poet'. Yet, I do think, definitions do important work.

I will, then, try to come up with a very basic definition of a 'feminist poet'. A 'feminist poet' is a poet who pays attention to how gender constitutes an important category – often times, of unequal distribution of resources – in the social world we inhabit. A poet who pays attention to how such attention will change the very work of poetry-making. I am not saying that only in terms of what we often term as 'content', but also in terms of what constitutes the formal elements of poetry – the line-breaks, punctuation, metaphors. Everything.

Personally, I don't believe in a feminism that does not take into account questions of state and capital. Or, for that matter, a feminism which remains by and large uninterested in the questions of class, caste, or race. I don't believe in a feminism that is not equally committed to

questioning the myriad forms which the neoliberal onslaught assumes in our contemporary historical moment. Which, obviously, also means, an awareness of the politics that often constitutes the multiple poetry communities we inhabit as writers. How are our poetry communities complicit in the dominant cultures of neoliberalism? Can we resolve this complicity through a mere inclusion of gender in our poems? To me, the answer is obviously no. But then, that answer in the negative, I believe, also calls for a more complex sort of feminism. Something, I don't think, in India, as poets, we do very well.

I do identify as a feminist – not in an unproblematic way though. It is often the poet part that makes me a little bit uncomfortable. I write poems. I often process my existence through poems. But, the word 'poet' also suggests a kind of solidity that I cannot always identify with. In other words, the word 'poet', I believe, is also a historical category, which connotes a specific way of seeing and being in the world. A specific relationship to language, to the material and social world. A specific relationship to patronage. I am not sure I want to associate myself with all of that baggage. Instead, I prefer to be a feminist (along with a lot of things), who writes poems. Sometimes. Often times.

Sneha Chowdhury: How has feminism shaped or affected you as a poet?

Nandini Dhar: Part of that shaping came from this very realisation that even when I like the work of a lot of the male poets, their gender ideologies leave me cold, and frankly terrified. (You can possibly think of my essay on the Hungryalists that was published recently in *Cafe Dissensus*.) From that fear, also comes a kind of rage. I have no qualms in saying, rage is pretty much the dominant affect that prompts me to write. But then, as I recognise now, rage, too, is a complex emotion. There is a sense of loss embedded in every form of anger. Rage can also be a powerful form of mourning, I think. And, rage exists very openly in some of my most favourite feminist literary works and political rhetoric. Think of the work of someone like bell hooks. Or, Rokeya Sultana. Would it have been possible to write what they have done, without rage? I personally don't think so.

But then, I think, certain aspects of that kind of work, would also exceed a narrow definition of feminism or feminist art per se. In that, most of the feminists who have inspired me, happen to be attentive to issues of class, capital, caste, race or community. Not always in the same way. Not always in that order. And, not always to all of these categories at the same time. But, for a piece of feminist art to work, I do need an acknowledgment in some way that gender almost always intersects with other categories.

Anyway, to go back to the question of rage, I think, rage is a form of feminist affect. And, an essential form of affect for feminist art. I mean, as a teenager and a young adult, I had been angry about the fact that I didn't see myself or the subjectivities I embody, represented in most kinds of men's writings. An awareness of this absence, then, also made me think of the ways in which I can look for myself in literature and art. If I can't find myself in men's writings, does that mean, I will find myself unproblematically represented within a lineage of women's writings?

Can there ever be a homogenous understanding of *women's writing*? The answer is, obviously *no*.

The truth remains, I cannot find myself in most of the women's writings either. And, again an awareness of that absence has often made me ask, what are the ways in which one can construct a feminine political subjectivity that is not vacillating between the two poles which often guide women's social subjectivities – domesticity and sexuality – while being cognisant of the ways in which these two categories determine women's lives often times. And, often in disproportionate ways.

In other words, what I am looking for is a language which would enable me to think of questions such as, how do women relate (or, don't relate) to state. To categories of capital. To political movements. These questions make the work of the construction of a seamless body of women's writing difficult. So, if I have to answer your question in a sentence, this would be it: If my feminism made it possible for me to be alienated from certain kinds of male cannons, my understandings of Marxism and radical-left sympathies, my academic work as a critical race studies scholar, also made it difficult for me to think of a homogenous notion of feminism or women's writing. But, in this mix, I have learnt to respect conflict. I have learnt to think of conflict as the guiding force of art and literature-making.

Sneha Chowdhury: Could you name some of your favourite feminist poets, and cite examples of poems that you like, lines that are particularly striking to you?

Nandini Dhar: Right now, I am really enjoying the work of the African-American poet Natasha Trethewey. I have been reading and re-reading her poem 'Drapery Factory, Gulfport, Mississippi, 1956'. You can listen to Trethewey reading it here. What I love about this poem, is the way, race, class, gender and factory labour come together. The lines are short, the descriptions are sparse, yet, right on point. But, what it does for me, in this poem, is the final image of the woman – a black factory worker – and her soiled Kotex. For me, it was a lesson on what you can probably call, object history. How in our lives objects come to occupy an ideological space. Quoting the right object in a poem can break it or make it. But, also, this is a moment that exceeds the object. I mean, it's not just the Kotex that does the job here. It's really the *soiled* Kotex that builds up the final moment of the poem. And, I keep thinking, how in this poem, the soiled Kotex of a black factory worker – soaked in menstrual blood – becomes the symbol of a very racialised, gendered and sexualised class conflict.

And, in some ways, given that this is a narrative poem, and often in narrative poems, we do get sucked into the work of building up an immaculate setting, I think, what Trethewey is doing is so vital. Trethewey doesn't fall into that trap here. The poem is not filled with objects per se. Instead, it's crowded with people. And although we know, as factory workers, the women are in the business of manufacturing objects, what they are making – those objects – don't dominate the poem. Precisely because this poem succeeds to progress through this opposition, this duality, that in a space where objects are manufactured for others' consumption, we hardly get any detailed representations of what's being made. Instead, the emphasis is on the ruined

object. A ruined object that's essential to a woman's sense of sexual dignity. And, that ruined object is ultimately made into a weapon in a racialised, sexualised class struggle in Jim Crow America. And, in transforming a ruined object into such a weapon, the poem also creates a realm that pushes against the dominant culture of commodity fetishism. When I think of feminist poems, it is this multi-layered cultural work that I expect from the poem.

Of course, I am also thinking about all the conversations we are having about menstruating bodies in India as I am reading this poem. How can we write about those realities in a way that does justice, not just to gender and femininity, but to inter-relationships among labour, class and caste?

Eunice De Souza's poem 'Women in Dutch Paintings' has always struck to me as brilliant. Although they are not poets, I have found the work of three Bengali novelists – Ashapurna Debi, Sabitri Roy and Sulekha Sanyal – to be extremely crucial in re-thinking a Bengali literary feminist lineage. In the recent past, I have also felt inspired reading and re-reading works of such poets as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.

Sneha Chowdhury: Is it okay to disavow your identification with feminism when you are not writing poems that are overtly feminist or do not overtly refer to a feminist issue?

Nandini Dhar: It depends upon the context. I don't think, we can ever talk about a series of prescriptions when it comes to poetry. Not even feminist ones. Or, any other art, for that matter. But, personally, I think, an awareness of gender as a category can change the very texture of a poem, even when it is not explicitly about a 'feminist issue', as you put it. And, when I say gender, I am thinking not just about femininity, but also about masculinity, and other forms of gender identities that feminisms historically have not done a great job of addressing. So, for example, a lot of the poets have written city poems. In fact, I am seeing a lot of the Indian poets writing about cities these days. And, I do think, cities can be an extremely important site for our artistic explorations. But, what does it mean to write about the city as a woman or a transperson? I mean, anyone who ever had to think of the city streets as sites of sexual violence, is bound to write about the streets in a way that is essentially different from, say, the overwhelmingly male and masculinist Hungryalist writing of the cities. Or, the Beats aesthetics of the cities.

Sneha Chowdhury: Do you think feminism can act as an overarching force that informs every aesthetic decision you take as a writer?

Nandini Dhar: No, not necessarily. I do write from a place that is aware of the complexity of gender as a social and political category. But, quite a few of my poems are also about relations of conflict that bind women with each other – along class, familial or ideological lines. In a way, I don't think that there is anything new about that. Women writers in India and abroad have always written about such conflicts. And, we all can speak of multiple forms of feminisms –

Socialist, Marxist, working-class, black, queer and dalit feminisms, so to say – that have often centered such conflicts in their own writings and actions. Yet, in most mainstream feminisms today, such conflicts still occupy uncomfortable positions.

I mean, can Zohra Bibi and Mrs. Sethi occupy the same feminist space? I don't think so. Yet, in spite of this acknowledgement, most of us, who are engaged in the work of culture-making – including this tricky business of writing poems – are closer to Mrs. Sethi than to Zohra Bibi. It's a reality that often makes us uncomfortable. So, for instance, when we write about contemporary neoliberal domesticities, how do we write about both of these phenomena? The class conflict that occurs between women inside the affluent high-rises, and the sense of claustrophobia the housewives who live in such high-rises feel? The class conflict that occurs between someone like Zohra Bibi and a professional woman like myself? And, if I push the envelope a little bit, the class conflict between the highly educated, urban employer of the Delhi NCRS – who happen to be women – and the men she employs as servants and drivers? But, then, representation of that discomfort, and these realities, are bound to cross the borders of any homogenous notion of feminism, which talks only about women and/ or gender and sexuality, into the realms that deal with class, urban space, migration, labor, capital and neoliberal domesticities.

Sneha Chowdhury: Can you talk about some of your own poems that you'd like to call feminist poems? Tell us what went into the making or writing of these poems.

Nandini Dhar: Instead of poems, I would like to talk about my first full-length poetry collection *Historians of Redundant Moments: A Novel in Poems.*

This book grew out of my love for longer forms. I was writing individual poems, which kept going back to the same characters, same themes and locales. I knew, I will have to think of a different form, a form that's somewhat different from a collection of individual poems. I kept resisting the idea of a novel-in-poems, precisely because, I wasn't so sure of the narrative essence that often comes with the very idea of a 'novel'. Yet, I was telling a story of politicisation of two little girls. I was telling a story of the points of intersection between the domestic spaces and left-radical political movements. I was telling the story through the stories of two sisters, two little girls, who also happen to be twins. You know, little girls are not exactly thought to be political beings. So, in that sense, this project is also a feminist project. But, at the same time, I wasn't terribly interested in the stories of these two girls' sexual coming of age, for instance. There are, of course, ways in which sexuality appears in this book – as something uncanny that the girls observe when they are trying to understand the lives of the adult women around them. But, there was a deliberate effort to keep the story circling around issues of state repression, political violence, resistance, political history and class. Class as it is lived within Bengali Hindu middle-class homes. Class as it was lived by middle-class Bengali Hindu little girls in a pre-liberalisation, post-Left Front, post-Naxalbari era. Not that I am creating a binary between sexuality and politics in that sense. Needless to say, sexuality is in itself political. Yet,

in popular perceptions, sexuality almost always becomes the default realm of women's subjectivities. I was trying to stay out of that – somewhat consciously.

And, as I was writing this book about children – as an adult – I began to think more and more about the rhetoric of infantilisation and its relationship to gender. The rhetoric of infantilisation that pervades our legal language in India right now, especially with the issue of 'love jihad'. I had been thinking, how infantilisation of women marks the rhetoric of Hindu fundamentalist politics. So, here in this book, I have two little girls, who speak in very adult voices. I would like to think, speaking in adult voices about very 'adult' concerns – such as 'history', 'state', 'political violence' — becomes a way to flip the power equations inherent in political language.

Here is a poem from the book:

Artifact Cartography

The skull of a little girl, a miniature dinghy on fire, a ceramic doll's

house with a broken chimney, the wooden frame of a stringless guitar,

an ocean-floor of dead rats. What else can the rigid ribs of the walls

fit inside? A labyrinth of half-notated songs – my mother's. The wreckage

of a novel which never could be written beyond the first three lines – my

uncle's. Alphabets from a forbidden romance, the white space

of curves filled up by notes scribbled in illegible calligraphy – my

aunt's. The overabundance of meanings that can be retrieved from the torn

pages of *Dakshindesh, Deshabrati*. Whatever was left after almost everything

was confiscated. A tap on the wall, on our fingertips the evidence – in

this community, everything and everyone is unformed, fractured,

interrupted. A scratch of our fingernails along the walls – inside

every fissure of a brick, broken bones. Every piece

of peeled paint, shredded owl skin. A push with your head, thwack, bump.

The simultaneous revelation. Face each other, hand in hand,

the first timid articulation: *this is not where we can lean*.

What is left is a mangled promise. A silenced

sun hangs over the neighborhood. Nazia Hassan blares

assurance from the next door uncle's stereo.

I repeat *disco, disco, disco*. Like a scratched record.

My sister always and already alert about words,

whose meanings she does not know, is reciting

nashelee hain raat, nashelee hain raat, nashelee hain raat.

Mother peels off her skin to make a rag – to dust the dining-table.

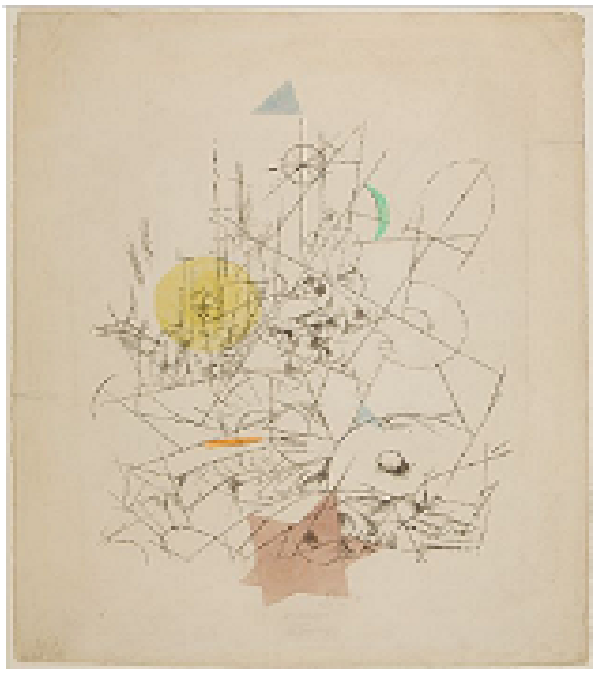
Home, Mother says, is the shadow of an over-active quill.

Home, we sisters suspect, is our mother's bone sculpted into walls.

Truth is Always Persecuted

An Essay on Tragic Thought

Saitya Brata Das



Paul Klee, 'Destruction and Hope', 1916/ Image courtesy harvardartmuseums.org

I

The Decision of Existence

Sometimes, suddenly in our life, we encounter the moment of decision that we can't evade: either we become slavishly complicit with the princes of the world, wash their feet, and get petty morsels of worldly benefits that fall from their table; or, we are ready to give up, if necessary, many worldly benefits, but, retain our absolute fidelity to truth, to one's own conscience, knowing that truth is always persecuted. Where should we go: towards the narrow and straight way; or, towards the wide way where crowds of multitude throng, the road where everything we see is crooked? Every great decision is always either/ or – as Søren Kierkegaard likes to say – and there is no middle path. In fact, the middle path is the great illusion of the petty bourgeoisie. There are only two ways in life, for every third or fourth way is still only the second way; for truth is always the singular and irreducible. It can only be a one-way street.

This is the essence of tragic thought: the thought of the two in their incommensuration; there is no dialectical third to totalise and include this disparate within it. To live tragically, is to live at the extreme limit of thought where decision occurs out of the abyss of freedom. Not deciding,

that is, not assuming freedom too, comes already out of the abyss of an inscrutable freedom. In a certain way, we are already decided, and we have already decided what we are. This essential decision is already the decision of existence itself, out of the abyssal freedom. The only thing is to follow the decision of existence to its limit, and then see what happens there.

What erupts, out of this decision, is nothing less than the radical demand of the unconditional. One may call it truth or justice. This unconditional demand can never be arrived at in a calculable process of conditioned negotiations of practical politics. To talk it out with the other party in a roundtable style approach, where each one plays his/ her card, and to see how much each one is ready to negotiate to arrive at the conditioned solution of mutually negotiable demands: this is the gravest illusion of the secular parliamentary democracies. It does not know anything of the unconditioned demand of life, of justice and truth. It flattens out everything into the conditioned politics of practical negotiations.

Thought tragically, there is, then, a limit of dialogue. For example, what is there to conduct a dialogue with an establishment that has replaced all speech with horror, where every word is a murder, where every sentence is an annihilation of humanity? All talk of 'reformation' – which any of the established regime always evokes – that only maintains the homogeneity and continuum of the evolutionary scale, where only the fittest survives after a struggle of life and death: all such talk is sheer complicity from the perspective of the vanquished, and those who are oppressed by history. Their claim of justice is so absolute that only the unconditioned satisfies them; the rest is only untruth and a betrayal of the truth.

II

The Infinite Contestation

The tragic decision demands an infinite contestation: not the contestation of one hegemonic regime trying to establish another regime to come, but infinite contestation of any and each hegemonic regime in one place, at any point of time. The tragic thought, thus, introduces the thought of death into politics: in operation of any hegemonic regime, phantasm destitutes the regime that it anchors. We must be able to find out, with infinite vigilance, the phantasm that operates, supports and anchors the hegemonic regime; then uproot it from its ground, and exhibit it as what it really is: a mere phantasm and not truth, a mere myth and not history. For all hegemonic regime is mythically founded; in other words, it is based upon a fiction or a phantasm, whether it is the racist Aryan identity for the Nazis, or communism for Stalin, or our very own Aryan nationalism. The tragic thought must pierce through the mythic phantasm of the political regime at place and unravel, interrupt and de-constitute the law of its being. It is poetry, art and philosophy that bear that cry which pierces through the murderous speech of the hegemonic regime. This is why art and philosophy are the highest activities of the human race. This is why every hegemonic regime would either like to appropriate and domesticate the artist and the philosopher and the writer; or, it would like to banish them from the regime. In any case, the poet, the philosopher and the artist, are inhospitable to the constituted order of the political regime; by their mere presence and by their mere insubordination they exhibit the truth that is indigestible and an inhospitable remainder of the world. This is the paradox par

excellence: by their very being at the limit of the world, they salvage the world from the shipwreck of humanity.

Only infinite contestation, already opened by an opening of pure affirmation, can keep our world open to the futurity to arrive. It is poetry, art and philosophy, emerging from the depth of the dark earth that keeps the promise of the new future for humanity alive. When everything is said and done, and at whatever stage of progress or regress humanity finds itself, it is this promise alone that remains fruitful, the promise and the truth are always wounded and persecuted in the world. That is why, each time, we need to rescue it from hegemonic regimes through an infinite contestation.

III

Hic et Nunc

The infinite contestation must be unleashed each time, infinitely, here and now, especially today, and at this precise place more than ever before. When the destruction of the life of the spirit is nearly complete (the destruction of the University life in this country, under the regime at place, is only one example among many), when 'the document of barbarism' (Walter Benjamin) behind the glorious civilisation called India is now revealed to us in the broad day light of history in all its ugliness and horror; it is precisely here and now that we need to unleash the infinite contestation in its purity and infinity.

The space of the University is not one space among many of a national life. It is the very space, the only remaining space in today's world, which conserves and preserves the life of the spirit. It is out of this space alone, in today's world of advance capitalism, of mass consumption, that the spirit can unleash the infinite contestation in the name of purest affirmation. By infinitely interrogating the hegemonic regime which constantly serves the interest of the dominant class/ caste/ gender, the community of teachers and students within and outside the space of the University affirms a form of life freed from the cages of the law; a life liberated from the bondage of any oppression.

This is why the hegemonic regime and its intellectual servants have recently made attempts to depoliticise the space of the University, and purge any elements of the spirit of questioning and thinking. These attempts of the conservative regime to de-politicise education mean nothing other than the following: that we should accept their domination without critique, subversions, deconstructions and resistances. It is not for nothing that the dominant regime – this one at place particularly – always prefers technological education which is supposed to be politically neutral. The truth is that, technology is never politically neutral: not only are the technologists and scientists often, politically and socially, the most regressive ones, but technological domination has always gone hand in hand with political and social domination. Therefore, it is not surprising that our pseudo-mystics who revive some obscurantist elements of Hindu mysticism, often eulogise technological power. By selling us the cheap idea of technological progress, the mystics of political authority want us to also buy their authority and domination in the name of progress. We can find the secret of this nexus here. This nexus constitutes the

mystic foundation of political authority. All legitimacy-seeking authority evokes myth as the very foundation of political domination.

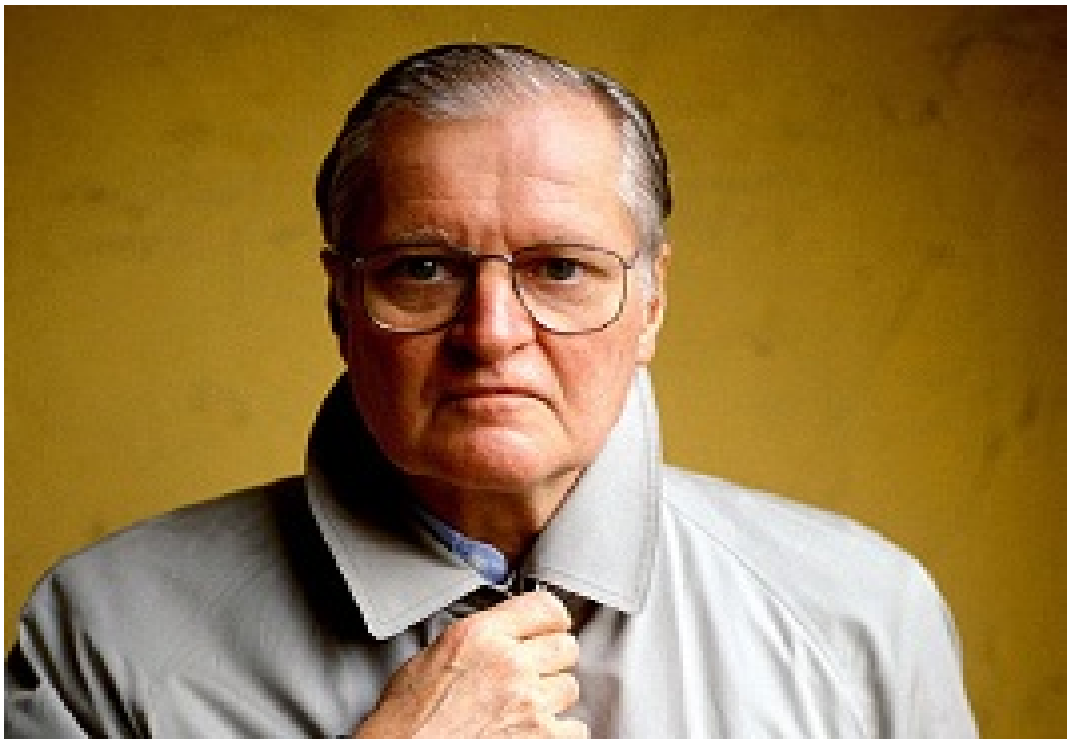
Hic et nunc! Here and now, the decision of existence must be reached on the basis of the immeasurable of either/ or, and it is only from within this space called the University, where such decision may erupt and upsurge: the decision to say 'no' to any oppression and domination, and the refusal to accept injustice, in the name of an absolute justice or truth. Such form of life that we call here the 'spiritual life', cultivated within the space called the University, is not the life of fragile beauty untouched by death and sacrifices, but the tragic life par excellence that never ceases to declare, even at the instance of death, that immortal 'No!'. And here, too, we know how truth is always persecuted. This declarative speech 'No!' is, however, only another way of saying 'Yes' to the absolute justice which is not yet but soon to come, yet coming, just after a little while.

Five poems by John Ashbery

Translated into Bengali by *Aryanil Mukherjee*

(Selected by the translator from his book *Ei Ghar: John Ashbery'r Kobita*, 2010)

And an essay on John Ashbery's influence.



John Ashbery/ Image courtesy The Times Literary Supplement

What Is Written

(Your Name Here)

What is written on the paper

on the table by the bed? Is there something there

or was that from another last night?

Why is that bird ignoring us,

pausing in mid-flight, to take another direction?

Is it feelings of guilt about the spool

it dropped on the bank of a stream,

into which it eventually rolled? Dark spool,

moving oceanward now — what other fate could have

been yours?

You could have lived in a drawer

for many years, imprisoned, a ward of the state.

Now you are free

to call the shots pretty much as they come.

Poor, bald thing.

কি লিখো

বছিানার পাশে টবেলিে ঐ কাগজটায়

কি লখো?নতুন কছিু?

না অন্যকে ান রাতরে খসড়া?

পাখটিা কনে আমাদরে এড়য়িে যাচ্ছ,ে উড়ানরে মাঝপথে থমেে

শরীর ঘুরয়িে নচি্ছে অন্যদকিে

সে কি অপরাধবে াধ?ে

ঐ যে সুতে া ফুরানে া কাটমিটা ভুল করে নদীর পাড়ে ফলেলে া

যে নদীতে কাটমি গড়য়িে গলে অবশষেে

গাঢ় কাটমি, ক্রমশ সমুদ্ররে দকিে সে

এছাড়া আর কি ভবতিব্য ছলি তে ামার?

পড়ে থাকতে টানার কে ানে কে াথাও

বছ্রভ’র, বন্দী, আপন অবস্থার কারারক্ষী হয়ে

এখন বরং মুক্ত হলে

নজিরে লাটাই নজিরে হাতে এলে া

আহা, খালি কাটমি ।

Paradoxes and Oxymorons

(Shadow Train)

This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.

Look at it talking to you. You look out a window

Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.

You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.

The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.

What's a plain level? It is that and other things,

Bringing a system of them into play. Play?

Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,

As in the division of grace these long August days

Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know

It gets lost in the stream and chatter of typewriters.

It has been played once more. I think you exist only

To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there

Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem

Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you.

প্রহসন ও বিরোধাভাস

ভাষা নিয়ে এই কবিতাটির ভাবনাচিন্তা খুবই ওপর ওপর।

দ্যাখো তোমার সঙ্গে কিভাবে সে কথা বলতে চায়।

তুমি জানলার বাইরে তাকালে বা ছটফট করার ভান করলে।

মনে হল কবিতাটা পেয়ে গেছে তুমি, আসলে পাওভ্রন।

তুমি ওকে পলে না, ওও তে ামাকে পলে না। একে অপরকে এড়য়িে গলে।
এটা বষিাদরে কবতিা কনেনা সে তে ামারই হতে চয়েছেলি, পারলে া না।
ওপর ওপর মানে কি? মান,ে এই অর্থ আর অনর্থরে
খলোয় মাতা বস্তুসমূহ। খলো?
হ্যাঁ, তা খলোই, তবে আমার মনে হয় কি
খলোটা একটা বহরিঙ্গরে জনিষি, স্বপ্নে পাওয়া তার নয়িম-নকশা
সে ৌন্দর্য-বভিাজনে দীর্ঘ, অগাস্টরে এই দনিগুলে ার মত;
যদওি প্রমান দতিে পারবে ানা। তার দুদকি খে লা। এবং তুমি বে ঝার আগইে
টাইপরাইটাররে বাষ্প আর বকবকানরি মধ্যে সে হারালে ।।
কউে আরকেবার খলেছে তাকে নয়িে। আমার মনে হয় তুমি আছে ।
শুধু আমার পছেনে লগে,ে আমাকে দয়িে ইটা করাবে বলে
এবং তারপর একসময় তুমওি হাওয়া হয়ে গলে।ে অথবা রুচি বদলে ফলেলে
আর কবতিাটা? আমাকে তার পাশে সন্তর্পনে নাময়িে রখেছেে কখন।
সে তখন তুমি হয়ে গছে।ে

Some Trees

(Some Trees)
These are amazing: each
Joining a neighbor, as though speech
Were a still performance.
Arranging by chance
To meet as far this morning
From the world as agreeing
With it, you and I
Are suddenly what the trees try

To tell us we are:

That their merely being there

Means something; that soon

We may touch, love, explain.

And glad not to have invented

Some comeliness, we are surrounded:

A silence already filled with noises,

A canvas on which emerges

A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.

Place in a puzzling light, and moving,

Our days put on such reticence

These accents seem their own defense.

কচ্ছি গাছ

ওরা আশ্চর্য। প্রত্যকে তার প্রতবিশীর

সঙ্গে জুড়ে রয্ছে, যনে ভাষা

একটা সুস্থরি খলো যনে

ঘটনাচক্রে এভাবে সাজানে ।

এই সকালরে দখো হওয্া

পৃথবীর আজকরে অনুমে াদন মনে নয্ি

তুমি আর আমি

এই মুহূর্তে গাছরো যা চষ্টো করছ

আমরা তাই

ওরা য আজ এখান, এর একটা অর্থ আছ

আমরাও হয্ত নজিদেরে স্পর্শ করব, ভালবাসব ।

নজিদেরে কথা নজিদেরে বে াঝাব।

আর আমরা যে কে ান পবত্রিতার জন্ম দহিনি

এতেই যে আমরা খুশী; আর পরবিষ্টেতি:

এক নস্তিব্ধতায়, যা এরই মধ্যে শব্দময় হয়ে উঠছে

একটা ক্যানভাস যার মধ্যে ফুটে উঠছে

একটা হাসরি কে ারাস, এক শীতরে সকাল।

ধাঁধানে া আলে াক্স্থান যা চলে ফরিে বড়োচ্ছে

যে সারবত্তায় বাঁধানে া আমাদরে দনিকাল

তার উচচারণই তাকে রক্ষা করে।

যদি পরে অশ্রুকে ছদেঁ া ছুঁতে ার মতে া লাগে

আর এই কঠনি ভয়-করা পৃথবিীর আলে া জ্বালাবার

The Sea

(Can You Hear, Bird)

We carry our anxiety about the land with us

when we leave the land to travel overseas.

She shouts: “This is the dimmest

thing you ever did! In all time

was never such lurching, so much rubbing of the chin.”

It’s true: I’d have deserted the land of my forefathers

a dozen times before if I’d thought

I could get away with it.

And a triangular shadow whose apex is my toe

comes to tell me of my rights, warning me

of perjury, in some books the most serious crime of all.

Even the crinkled stars in the meadow

cannot look the other way, forcing me

into my constrained idea of myself.

I must go out with the light, and some day

someone will see through and love me.

I look down at these asters, unsteady,

unsure of what to grab. The tuneless sing to me.

সমুদ্র

আমাদরে যাবতীয় দুশ্চন্তিা এই দশে আমাদরেই পছিু পছিু ঘ াের

এমনকি আমরা যখন দশে ছড়েে যাই সাগরপাড়রে দশে, তখন ।

মহলিা চঁচোয় – ‘এর চয়েে ব াকামি তুমি আর কর ানি’।

সত্যি কন্তিু: হয়ত । বার দশকে পত্রেকি ভটিে ছাড়ার পর

তবইে মন হত – এতইে আমার কাজ চল যায়

আর ঐ তক াে না ছায়া, যার একটা ক াণ আমার পায়রে

বুড় । আঙুল ছুঁয়ছে, বাতল দচ্ছি আমার স্বাধকিার

মথি্য সাক্ষ্য দওেয়া সম্পর্ক হুঁশয়িার করছ

একেটা বইত এর চয়েে বড় অপরাধ আর নইে।

এমনকি খ াোমাঠরে ওপর ঐ ক াঁচকান । তারাগুল াও

অন্যদকিে তাকাত পারনো, আমাক আমারই বন্ধ ধারনাটার

মধ্য আটক রাখ। আসল আল ার সাথ বরেয়িি যাওয়া চাই

একদনি হয়ত ভদে কর দখেব কউে, ভালবাসব আমায়।

নীচ তাকয়িে দখেি ঐ আস্টার ফুলগুল , অস্থরি

কাক ধরব জাননো এখন ।। অসুর আমায় গান শ ানায়।

Vetiver*

(April Galleons)

Ages passed slowly, like a load of hay,

As the flowers recited their lines

And pike stirred at the bottom of the pond.

The pen was cool to the touch.

The staircase swept upward

Through fragmented garlands, keeping the melancholy

Already distilled in letters of the alphabet.

It would be time for winter now, its spun-sugar

Palaces and also lines of care

At the mouth, pink smudges on the forehead and cheeks,

The color once known as “ashes of roses.”

How many snakes and lizards shed their skins

For time to be passing on like this,

Sinking deeper in the sand as it wound toward

The conclusion. It had all been working so well and now,

Well, it just kind of came apart in the hand

As a change is voiced, sharp

As a fishhook in the throat, and decorative tears flowed

Past us into a basin called infinity.

There was no charge for anything, the gates

Had been left open intentionally.

Don’t follow, you can have whatever it is.

And in some room someone examines his youth,

Finds it dry and hollow, porous to the touch.

O keep me with you, unless the outdoors

Embraces both of us, unites us, unless

The birdcatchers put away their twigs,

The fishermen haul in their sleek empty nets

And others become part of the immense crowd

Around this bonfire, a situation

That has come to mean us to us, and the crying

In the leaves is saved, the last silver drops.

ভটেভিার

যুগ চলে যায় ধীরে, খড়রে গাড়রি মতে ।

ফুলরে তাদরে পংক্তি আওড়ায়

আর মে ৌরলা ঘে ারে পুষ্করনিীর নীচে।

কলমটা শীতলস্পর্শ।

সঁড়ি লতয়িে উঠে গয়িছেলি ে ।

সুগন্ধী মালার ভতের দয়িে

অক্ষররে ডে ৌলে

এক স্মৃতগিত বষিণ্নতা ছঁকে রখে।

শীতরে আসার সময় হলে ।, সটো মে াটা চনিরি তরৈি

রাজপ্রাসাদে তার যত্নরখো সহ ধরা পড়ছে

মুখরে কাছে, গে ালাপরিঙরে ছে াপ কপালে, গালে

যে রঙরে একদনি নাম হযছেলি ে । ‘গে ালাপরে ছাই’ ।

কতগুলে । সাপ গে াসাপরে নর্মি াক খসে পড়লে

এতটা সময় এভাবে কটেে যায়

বালরি গভীরতর প্রদশে পাক দয়িে শষে সদ্ধিান্তরে দকি।

এতে াদনি কি ভালে া চলছলি া সব, হঠাত কমেন দখেুন

হঠাতই, হাতে হাতে খুলে এলে া যইে

এক পরবির্তন সাড়া দলি া, তীব্র তীক্ষ্ণ গলায়

যে বঁড়শি আটকায় আর সুসজ্জতি অশ্রু

পাশ দয়িে বয়ে গয়িে যে অববাহকিায় পড়ে

তাকইে বলে জগতরে অসীম।

সমস্তই ছলি া বনিামূল্য। গটে স্বচ্ছোয় খুলে দওেয়া হযছেলি া।

পছিু পছিু ছে াটার কে ানে া প্রয়ে াজন নইে, যা চাও সবই তে ামার। আর

একটা ঘরে কটে তার যে ৌবন পরীক্ষা করে, মনে হয় শুকনে া, ফাঁপা

হাতরে পরশে মনে হয় রন্ধ্রবহুল

আমাকে ছড়েে ানা, সঙ্গে রখেে া, এক যদনিা

বাহরি আমাদরে দুজনকে জড়য়িে ধরে, মলোয়, এক যদনিা

পাখধিরারা তাদরে কলকাঠি সরয়িে রাখে

জলেরো টানে তাদরে মসৃণ ফাঁকা জাল

আর অন্যরা গয়িে মশেে সইে বরিাট জমায়তে

বনফায়ার বা অনান্দাগ্ননরি ধরে, এই পরস্থিতি আমাদরে কাছে

এসে আমাদরেই কথা শে ানায়, আর ওই

পাতায় পাতায় ছাওয়া কান্না আমরা জমালাম –

ঐ অন্তমি রূপে ালি ফে াঁটাগুলে া।

**Vetiver is a fragrant extract or essential oil obtained from the root of an Indian grass, used in perfumery and aromatherapy.*

Shadow of Pleasance

Because life is short

We must remember to keep asking it the same question

Until the repeated question and the same silence become answer

In words broken open and pressed to the mouth

And the last silence reveals the lining

Until at last this thing exists separately

At all levels of the landscape and in the sky

And in the people who timidly inhabit it

The locked name for which is open, to dust and to no thoughts

Even of dying, the fuzzy first thought that gets started in you and then there's no stopping it.

— John Ashbery, 'Three Poems'

I had my first pass at John Ashbery's poetry during the last of my teen years, in National Library, Kolkata where I had chanced upon a copy of *Shadow Train*. I don't remember much of that first exposure except for a faint feeling of ricocheting at the stolid, textual opacity of those poems.

My first serious engagement with Ashbery's poetry happened one and a half decades later as I was beginning to settle down in South-West Ohio in Cincinnati, which I would later call home. In a bid to understand the workings of post-modern American poetry, first symptomatically, and then spiritually, I chose two poets from the New York School to focus on, in the usual genealogical order – John Ashbery and Ted Berrigan.

What immediately came off the Ashberian bat for me was the so-called crafty street-talk some early critics had dismissed as 'inconstruable babble'. Because of his early Dadaist (as in *Leaving the Atocha Station/The Tennis Court Oath*), Surrealist and Abstract Impressionist influences, Ashbery had developed a writing style that was both inviting and impenetrable at the gateway of the poem. Never had I come across a major poet, in the languages I read poetry in, before or after Ashbery, who had drawn so much from the other arts, especially painting. To cut short the long list of such poems, one feels the temptation to mention at least two –'The Painter' (Some Trees), which is based on a de Chirico drawing of an unfinished painting by an unknown painter, and the legendary and much cited long poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' which is sourced on Francesco Parmigianino's 16th century self-portrait. Ashbery, however, had once separated poetry from painting: 'For me, poetry is very much the time that it takes to unroll, the way music does… it's not a static, contemplatable thing like a painting or a piece of sculpture.'

The carefully planted and often deceiving digression of speech, which Ashbery had sculpted into an art form, began to appeal to me. More things offered pure magnetism as I started reading his books in a non-chronological order. The serpentine journey through street-side corollaries before the hazy theorem appeared or never appeared, ending the tunnel with an illuminated haze, became a personal passion.

A constant de-glorification of the position of the poem was also conspicuous. Naughty manipulations and often self-destruction of a saucing lyric (as in 'Vetiver', 'Hotel Lautréamont' and numerous other poems) and the childlike mirth of playing with randomly chosen colours, tunes, and muck brought me the courage I needed to pursue directions my own poetry was leaning towards, but with more vigour, surety and determination now.

John Ashbery, in front of his Chelsea home in NYC, 1998/ Image courtesy John Tranter

Most of Bengali poetry, by tradition, is a curry with barely any meat and vegetables in it except for a few rounded potatoes. Opposed to these poetic traditions — which was aggravated more by my cultural exile in North America — the shape and weight of the poem's content became more important than the quality of textual gravity that mingled language, expression, syntax, rhythm, metaphors — sources of personal flourish many Bengali poets cultivate. I was close to forty by then, had read a plethora of world poetry, published over hundred poems, two books and had been associated for more than a decade with Bengali experimental poetry genres. These were propounded by groups/ magazines like *Kaurab, Kabita Campus* and *Natun Kabita*, where I had worked as an editor or associate editor. With a hunger for knowledge and a passion for multi-epistemology, I was leaning in directions where John Ashbery's poetry had accentuated and catapulted to unreachable heights. The singular 'modernist' content I had long rejected, and was beginning to feel that the poem needs be a crumb-can than a smooth, monolithic loaf.

Ashberian poetics was beginning to open up that maze to me as I began to ask,

How are we to inhabit

This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,

As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staving as we are,

In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet

Unrealized projects, and a strict sense

Of time running out

— 'Pyrography', Houseboat Days (1977)

The decentralised theme and constant revisitations of sub-themes, carefully deceiving manoeuvers of what I would call 'derivative themes' and a widely stretched vocabulary gives John Ashbery's poetry a quality that remains unmatched in the English-speaking world. There were lessons to learn from everywhere, to get into his poetry, gather the beautiful shells of floral print and then depart in a variety of ways. In a way, for a non-academic reader of poetry like me, who is rooted in another poetic and linguistic tradition, the Ashberian poem offered a porosity though which I could stream my fluids with ease and leave with strange scents and flavour. Later on, interestingly, while going through my first book of English language poems transcreated from Bengali, *late night correspondence*, some poets close to John Ashbery felt that there was no apparent influence, while my preface writer, poet and scholar Tyrone Williams felt 'Ashbery's influence is palpable'.

On what had been the thematic mainstay of Ashberian poetics, critics through generations have appeared vexed with early pessimists banishing it as 'nothing' (is what Ashbery writes about) to the illustrious Harold Bloom hailing him as a luminary in 'the American sequence that includes Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens and Hart Crane.' Many critics of the later years thought 'poetry' or 'writing' was what John Ashbery was almost always writing about. The poet's own self-

reflection on the subject has been variegated too, until a point in time came when he confessed, 'as I have gotten older, it seems to me that time is what I have been writing about all these years during which I thought I wasn't writing about anything'.

For a poet, the more abstract and non-poetic influences get, the more incomparable her oeuvre becomes. Ashberian poetry presented me with rich examples of such departures. Art, music and cinema, especially the former, fermented wide domains of his poetry. Ashbery once famously said,

'I have probably been influenced by the modern art that I have looked at. Certainly the simultaneity of cubism is something that has rubbed off on me, as well as the abstract expressionist idea that the work is a sort of record of its own coming into existence. The process of writing poetry becomes the poem. This was radically demonstrated by action painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning'.

The conspicuous presence of the *mise-en-abyme* in Ashberian poetics has often been highlighted. In an intriguing parallel with 'art-about-art-making' much of his poetry was about the conundrum and contradictions of writing poetry. This had become a platitude by the late 1990s. Such tendencies certainly propelled me to incorporate place-holders for brief, critical discussions on the pursued poetics in many of my poems. As several younger poets in my coterie began to imbibe this approach, I became more conscious of it and veered away.

Cinema was another common interest. Movies had been an influence in John Ashbery's poetry since his early years. D.W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* was the loaned title of an Ashbery poem from *A Wave* (1981). In the august years of his life, Ashbery came in touch with several younger filmmakers – American, Canadian and European, who had been influenced by his poetry and were now weaving that into their own cine-work. Abigail Child, Nathaniel Dorsky, Jorgen Leth and most notably Guy Maddin have all confessed to casting Ashbery's halo on their work in one way or another. Interestingly, during a 2007 interview, John Ashbery told me about his loose collaboration with Jorgen Leth and particularly Guy Maddin, whose work had been introduced to him by my friend and acclaimed poet Peter Gizzi.

In fact, it was Gizzi who put me in touch with Ashbery sometime around 2005. Introduced late into his work, I was literally devouring John's work, reading his poetry and critical commentary about his poetics in very oblong and haphazard ways. I remember speaking with John a couple of times over phone about the self-sponsored Bengali translation project I had just begun. David Kermani, Ashbery's partner and literary steward of many years, got in touch and offered enormous help providing, among other things, key resources from *The Flowchart Foundation* in completing my five-year-long project. My Bengali book of translation, essay, interview and bibliography *Ei Ghor: John Ashbery'r Kobita* (This Room: The Poetry of John Ashbery) was published by Patralekha Press, Kolkata in 2010.

It is customary for younger poets to look up to luminaries for unique influences at the beginning of their careers. As we age, however, a waning of such influences ensues and many writers fail to find newer rooting. In the light of this, one thing stands out for me from my 2007 Ashbery interview. At one point, while musing about Frank O'Hara, he said, 'I don't read the

work of my friends anymore (smiles)… specially my own work, which I don't read at all… Basically, of late I like to read the more young contemporary poets, many of them have been influenced by me and who have then gone on to write their own and are now influencing me.'

Three Poems

Sridala Swami

Howard Dearstyne, Untitled, yellow wove paper on blue card, c. 1925/ Image courtesy: harvardartmuseums.org

Dream at 12

He is twelve

and is to be executed by drowning.

He escapes.

Now he is sitting in front of me as if he has just come

out of a shower

but he is shivering.

I have no time to hold him

or release the grief that held me.

I must hide him
from the full house that is
half-emptied of what it holds.
A cardboard wall, hardly enough.
It must suffice. For now.
The people know he is here
but they greet him as if he had never left
and never needed to.
I still do not know what he did.
Like every mother I say, ‘My son is innocent.’
How did they plan his execution?
Were they pirates? Did they make him walk
the plank? Did he walk off the edge
like a fool
with his head in the clouds?
I can believe this last
But I cannot believe in death by execution
execution by drowning.
It is not civilised. It is not how we live
where we live.
There weren’t men lined up, rifles pointed
at the boy who came up for air
and reached right for the clouds.
He flew. This is what occurs to me.
I still dream of flight
as if the bowl of heaven is an illusion

just because I can see right through it.

I gave him wings but he used them to come home.

Twelve is too young to be thinking of nests,

too old for a son and his mother.

The refusal of a gift is also an execution.

He cannot be drowned

though he can no longer fly.

But he can dream of flight

and perhaps that was enough

to bring him out of the water

as if it was an inverted bowl

without substance.

In Words Only

The stinging lip

The ringing ear

The toppled light

This is not hypothetical.

If you could kill with your bare hands

You said *bare hands*

The one you love

And the world became a better place

This is hypothetical.

A better world in words only.

If you acted if you did not act

If you rose if you drowned

If you stayed or left

If you were staid or deft

If you sliced time too thin for pain

If you provided a line and turned it into a rope

If you allowed yourself to hope

If you spidered into a corner

If you drew and quartered

If you cornered truth and flayed it alive

If you were surrounded by light

If your blind spot shone like a torch in the dark

If you loved with your bare hands

If you stung with your lips

If you toppled the light with your blind spot

If you drowned with your wings

If you stopped

If you walked away.

All you dammed life, hypothetical.

AI Winter

In these last and terrible days there's still a kind of perfection in choosing the moment of one's death. Drona hears your name spoken and detaches himself from his body. From this moment on, he is pure intelligence. You call it soul and you sing its ascendance. You feel his death in the gleam of the jewel embedded like fate into your forehead.

It is now a frozen land you traverse. You follow celebration but you can never participate in it. Aim at the sky. That bird that hovers burns everything in its sight, follows or precedes you, you're never sure which. Other people die but you're sure it's you he has in his sights. You are the one thing he has never been able to separate himself from.

He calls destruction intelligence because it is distributed and needs nothing to hold its shape. He has always been sure of his mastery over weapons but now that you occupy different states you know he is wrong every single time. The ones who die are guilty only of living.

You are guilty. This is why your wandering is eternal and your thirst unslakeable. Some nights, when you can only hear him in the skies, the blades of his vahana whipping the air until it calls your name, you freeze as only hunted animals do. You hide in plain sight. You're good at this by now.

You want to tell him you have done your worst, that there are no pre-emptive strikes he can make upon you. Annihilation is another matter. If he could promise you destruction you would take it even it meant a nuclear winter for this land forevermore.

But his intelligence is pure; not limitless. He is only looking for what corresponds to your soul and he because he finds traces of it on the ground, he sends his astras as messengers not knowing that they have poor memories for words and faces and always deliver partial messages to the wrong people. Always the wrong people.

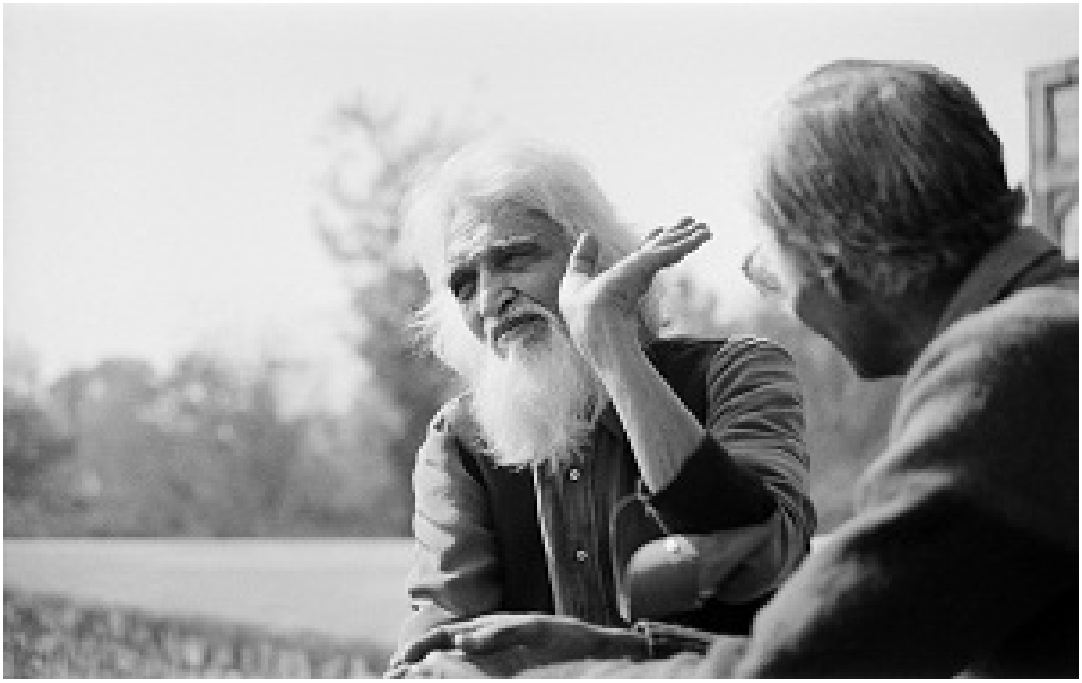
He, who once took from Parasurama the knowledge of all weapons, who was invincible in all things except his love for you, is now master only of these carrion birds that misremember, as they do everything else, in his name.

In these last and terrible days, death cannot be chosen, least of all yours. Your life is tied to all living things in this world. When you cease, everything ceases. Listen: when he calls you by other names, it is still a beautiful song. This is why you hide, Ashwatthama: so that you can hear these agents of death sing even if they sing other people out of existence. As long as they call names that are not yours, this awful beauty that is the winterland of the world continues for one more hour, one more day.

'Dream at 12' and 'In Words Only' were first published in Poetry at Sangam. 'AI Winter' first appeared in Interfictions 3.

In the Twilight of Modernity

Ananya Vajpeyi



Maqbool 'Fida' Husain/ Image courtesy Parthiv Shah

It has been an extraordinarily regressive start to the new academic term for Indian institutions this year. The already beleaguered Jawaharlal Nehru University has seen attempts by the campus administration to single out and intimidate individual faculty members for their political views; suspend or dissolve bodies that are supposed to look into sexual harassment complaints; install militaristic symbols of state power like army tanks on the premises; and, most worrying, drastically cut student admissions to MPhil and PhD programs, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

Najeeb Ahmed, a Muslim student who entered the MSc program in Biotechnology last year, disappeared after an altercation with students from a right-wing Hindu student group, a year ago in October 2016. He has not been found, alive or dead, and the authorities have done nothing about it. The Vice Chancellor and the university administration seem to be continually at war with the academic community in their charge. JNU is consistently rated one of India's top research universities. Why the government is hell-bent on destroying this lively and prestigious institution from within remains a mystery.

The situation at Banaras Hindu University is even more appalling, with the campus authorities there attempting to police and discipline the female student population, fully backed by Chief Minister Yogi Adityananth's state administration. Every cliché of patriarchy, sexism, social

conservatism and majoritarian violence converges upon the hapless women students of BHU. They have fought back with admirable courage, alas to discover that the microcosm of their university is embedded in a larger environment where these backward tendencies are only encouraged and magnified, not resisted.

The assassination of Gauri Lankesh, a brave, outspoken and widely respected journalist, activist and editor of the *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, an independent Kannada newspaper, dealt a deadly blow to the already endangered freedom of the press in Modi's India. But that the target this time – of as yet unidentified killers – was a woman, suggests that the most malign misogynistic and authoritarian tendencies of the Hindu Rashtra are now fully on display. Minorities, dalits, students, people on the left, liberals, artists, intellectuals, journalists, academics, activists and women in public life are equally at risk. If you combine two or more of these categories, then you could well end up disappeared like Najeeb, or murdered like Gauri.

These signs of a continually regressing public sphere are all around us. But recent shows in the capital about art, architecture, urban works and a previous generation of 'the makers of modern India', looking at a period from the 1950s to the 1990s, reminds us that we really are in an age of reaction today. 'Stretched Terrains', a series of exhibitions at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art ongoing since February, and 'Shared Legacies' at Bikaner House, marking seventy years of Partition and Independence in August, are deeply moving for showing us a very different India, one that we remember as though it were yesterday – and it was – but that is fast eroding and buckling under the onslaught of Hindutva. Some of these exhibitions, particularly the photographic work of both Ram Rahman and Parthiv Shah, spell out exactly what India stands to lose: its very modernity.

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We are accustomed to thinking about modernity in India as a mixed blessing at best, and an ecological and moral disaster, at worst. Gandhi and Tagore left us with strong criticisms of capitalism, nationalism and technology that form the pillars of modern life; Nehru and Ambedkar, on the other hand, were focused on the developmental, progressive and emancipatory possibilities of modernity. These two strands of critique and aspiration are intertwined in the very DNA of postcolonial India.

But Hindu Nationalism, while pretending to respect 'tradition' (parampara), lacks the basic egalitarianism of critical traditionalists, and while pretending to champion 'development' (vikaas), shows no awareness of the dangers of unbridled growth in a time of serious planetary crises, both economic and environmental.

Ram Rahman has been collecting and curating the architectural photographs, plans, models and other archival materials of his father, architect Habib Rahman, as well as the group of architects, structural engineers and urban planners who conceived, designed and built much of modern Delhi in Jawaharlal Nehru's time, from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, continuing through Indira Gandhi's time, right into the late 1980s. This extraordinary set of modernists included, besides Rahman's father, are Raj Rewal, Mahendra Raj, Achyut Kanvinde, Kuldip Singh

and J.K. Chowdhury, and the American architect Joseph Stein. (Charles Correa is absent, sadly, as he did not build that much in Delhi).

Rahman often uses photographs by his father, by the legendary Madan Mahatta, as well as his own (contemporary) photographs. Together, these show us the unique vision that gave rise to New Delhi as another layer atop a millennium-long palimpsest that already included a Sultanate city, a Mughal city, a colonial city and Lutyens' Delhi.

These men created almost the entire institutional architecture of the post-colonial state. Many of them were students of, or in conversation with other modern masters like Le Corbusier, Henri Cartier Bresson, Charles Eames and Walter Gropius, many of who flocked to India attracted by the cosmopolitan, intelligent and elegant personality of Nehru. As the first prime minister, he had set out to build new cities like Chandigarh or rebuild old ones like Ahmedabad. Inevitably these became international undertakings, albeit in an Indian setting.

The national academies of the arts and literature, the IITs and IIMs, central banks and financial institutions, auditoriums, educational and training institutes, offices of public sector companies, government housing, art galleries, memorials, stadiums, exhibition halls – all kinds of massive buildings and important public infrastructure came up in the first three to four decades after Independence, especially in Delhi.

Rahman's superb curatorial intervention reveals the unmistakable signature of modernism in a variety of structures and sites. Monumental, minimalist, functional, nationalistic, often decorated with gigantic murals and outdoor sculptures, blending traditional materials and construction techniques with twentieth century design and technological innovations, these buildings suggest an idealism which has permeated the work of the two generations of architects and artists, and whose fountainhead was Nehru himself. They shared an energy that only a new nation can experience, perhaps, even if it is created on the plinth of an old civilisation. The sense of open spaces, blue skies and a genuine freedom to experiment comes across clearly, more so in Mahatta's pictures taken as the projects were first begun or freshly completed.

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Image courtesy Ram Rahman

The recent demolition of the Hall of Nations and the Nehru Pavilion at Pragati Maidan, razing the work of architect Raj Rewal and engineer Mahendra Raj, is nothing less than an act of vandalism by the current administration, rudely interrupting an ongoing dispute on the future of these buildings, currently being heard in the courts. Here we see a willful destruction that is equal parts real-estate manipulation, land-grab and ideological violence against what is undoubtedly a symbol of an older, Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian Delhi.

Nehru's inaugural address to a 'Seminar on Architecture', organised at the Lalit Kala Akademi in March 1959, ought to be compulsory reading for all Indian citizens interested in the foundations of their nationhood. In his usual charmingly rambling, carelessly erudite, affably grandiose style, familiar to us from *The Discovery of India*, Nehru holds forth on past and present, beauty and technology, form and function, history and industry, temples and cathedrals, the Taj Mahal, and most importantly, Chandigarh. He describes Chandigarh as 'a thing of power coming out of a powerful mind', that of Le Corbusier.

Nehru closes with these words, so simple and straightforward yet, so hard to imagine being uttered by the leadership today: 'The main thing today is that a tremendous deal of building is taking place in India and an attempt should be made to give it a right direction and to encourage creative minds to function with a measure of freedom so that new types may come out, new designs, new ideas, and out of that amalgam something new and good will emerge.' Something new and good – isn't that what every worthy leader ought to envisage, for India?

Humayun Kabir, who was interestingly Minister for both Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, said in his welcome address that he hoped that the architects present at the seminar would use the discussions and debates 'to be able to supply the requirements of a new India, a free India, a democratic India which is aiming to be a Welfare State, an India which is aiming at reconciling differences and combining them into a unity.'

Rahman has extensively documented the structures of Pragati Madan, in photographs and videos that are now as breathtaking as they are heart-rending, given that key sections of this iconic campus have been demolished despite a stiff legal challenge put up by city planners,

urban historians and other stake-holders. Like the havoc being wreaked at JNU, the flattening of Pragati Maidan is another instance of the BJP government cutting off its nose to spite its face. The very name of Nehru is like a red rag to a bull; the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library too, stands to be repurposed and possibly renamed at any moment. Jawaharlal Nehru and Humayun Kabir addressing a gathering of architects sixty years ago might as well be speaking a foreign language, from the perspective of Modi's India.

Ostensibly, the trigger for the wrath of the ruling Hindu Right dispensation is the legacy and memory of the Congress party, led more or less without interruption by the Nehru-Gandhis from the 1920s to the present. But if we look deeper, the actual irritant is in fact much more significant – it is modernity itself, as a set of philosophical considerations, reflected in both politics and aesthetics, that gave free India its identity and direction over the past seven decades.

The Hindu Rashtra cannot be modern, plain and simple. It cannot stand the questions that students and youth ask of authority. It cannot stomach the equality and education of women. It cannot accept that western influences inevitably and inescapably colour our cultural life long after decolonisation. It cannot bear the demands of Dalits for dignity; as for Muslims, even their very presence and participation as Indians cannot be tolerated.

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If we allow it, this government will demolish – stealthily, by night, against court orders – the very edifice of our modernity, as it has demolished the Nehru Pavilion at Pragati Maidan. Parthiv Shah's evocative photographs of the celebrated painter, Maqbool 'Fida' Husain (1915-2011), taken in the 1990s in Delhi, capture this endangered spirit of modernity in a very different, but related way. In large format black and white prints, Husain is sensitively photographed wandering about in the alleyways of Nizamuddin Basti, playfully striking poses at the National Gallery of Modern Art, sitting-standing-lying down with his own paintings and art-works, and talking with friends like the progressive artist and abstract painter Ram Kumar at Humayun's Tomb.

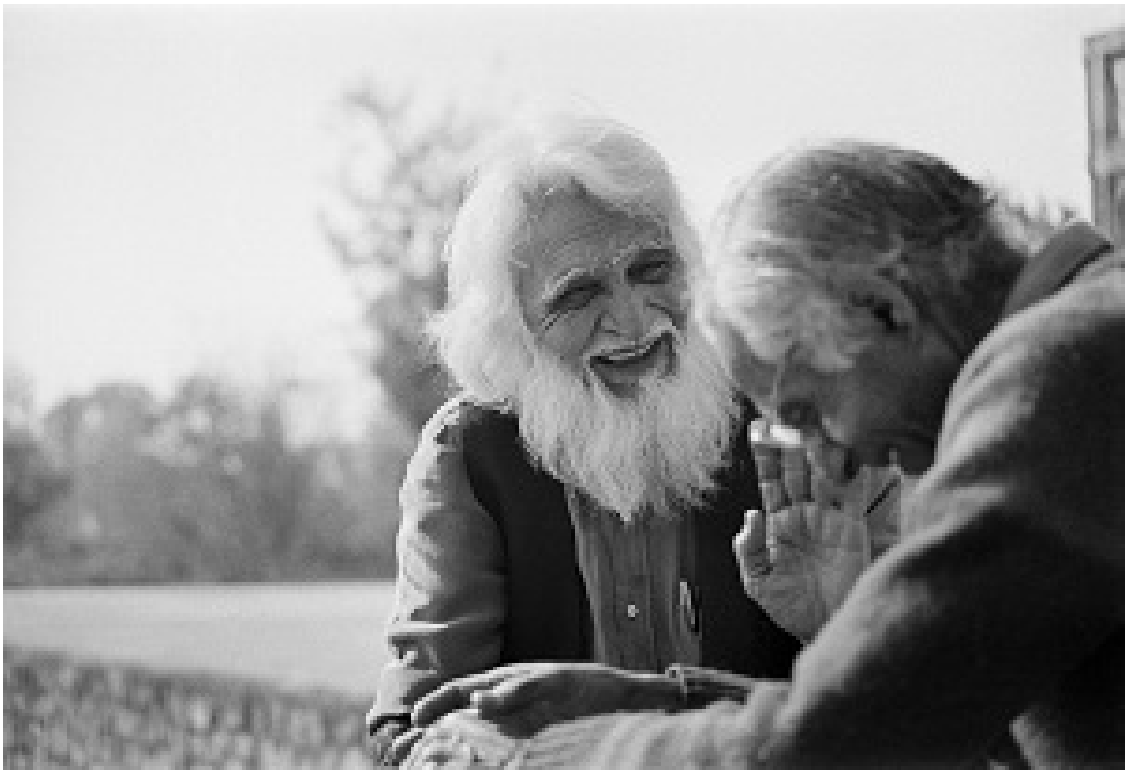


Image courtesy Parthiv Shah

Through Shah's lens, Husain is tall, white-haired, bearded and barefoot, a striking apparition at any time, but in our dark days, an almost impossible vision of artistic whimsy, free-spirited ease, and unselfconscious belonging in a place and a time.

Image courtesy Parthiv Shah

He’s restless but comfortable – in his skin, in his neighbourhood, among his peers, in India. The camera seems not to intrude in any way.

Image courtesy Parthiv Shah

Image courtesy Parthiv Shah

Shah, who was a very young photographer at the time when these pictures were taken, clearly managed to establish an excellent rapport with Husain, who is completely unselfconscious (except when he is deliberately posing!) There seem to be no impediments to his creativity – he is extraordinary, but, at the same time, unpretentious. You can see in his lanky figure, his shambling gait and his bushy brows a manner of relating to his environment where everything that he sees around him, all the matrices of class, religion, caste and history that he traverses, are almost certainly grist to the mill of his art. He's a traveller, for sure, but he's unmistakably at home.

In another part of 'Shared Terrains', titled 'Yatra: The Rooted Nomad', one could see many of Husain's own works, and what really jumped out was the dizzying mélange of styles, his calligraphic ease with many different Indian languages and their scripts, and his ear to the ground of rural landscapes. All of India: complex, multifarious, unresolved, lived in Husain's eye; all of it real, and hard, and soft and wet and dry and clean and dirty under the soles of his bare feet. Full, fearless, joyous contact with India – that was Husain.

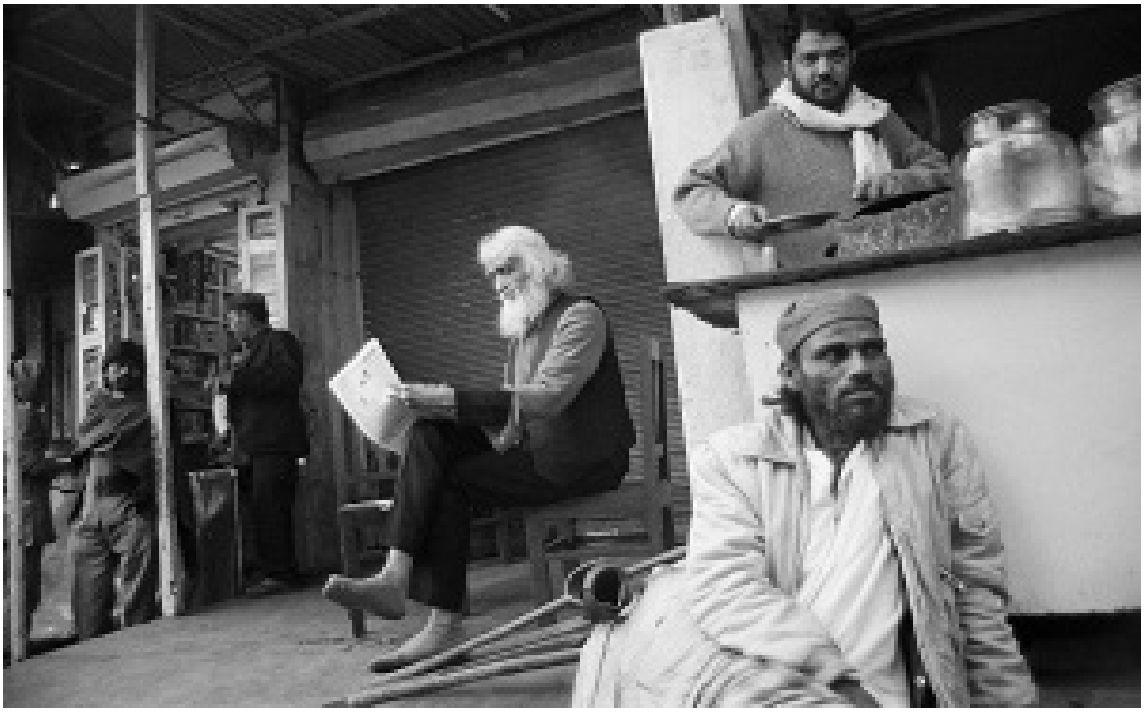


Image courtesy Parthiv Shah

The harsh fact that Husain was vilified and subjected to communal abuse; that he spent his last years in Qatar, far from his beloved homeland; that he felt exiled and threatened after being India's most famous and successful modern painter, all of this only makes Shah's intimate, unobtrusive portraits the more poignant. I live in Nizamuddin – I moved in barely three months after Husain's death. The thought of Husain ambling about in the neighborhood, sitting at the

Dargah, chatting at the Tomb, drinking chai in the Basti, reading a Hindi newspaper in the winter sunshine, makes my hair stand on end even today, makes the hallowed ground of Hazrat Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro and Mirza Ghalib (and Ashis Nandy) even more sacred, to my mind.

Image courtesy Parthiv Shah

Husain died, aged 95, of a heart attack in a British hospital in June 2011, and is buried in a London cemetery.

Kitna hai bad-naseeb Zafar dafn ke liye,

Do gaz zameen bhi na mil saki koo-e-yaar mein!

***

I spent some time talking to Ram Rahman, Parthiv Shah and the art critic S. Kalidas about these images, on modern Delhi, of Husain in Delhi. All three are the offspring of important figures of an earlier generation – Ram is the son of the architect Habib Rahman and the dancer Indrani Bajpai; Parthiv is the son of the artist Haku Shah; Kalidas the son of the painter J. Swaminathan. Seen though their eyes, the period under question is a matter of both public history and personal memory.

These are literally the children of India's aesthetic modernism, thanks to their parents, as well as the heady socio-cultural milieu in which they were raised. For them, returning to an earlier period in the life of modern India is both a journey back to their own childhood and youth, but also a form of resistance to the assaults and indignities of our present politics. Shah and Kalidas had a marvelously engaging public conversation at the KNMA on 31 August, introduced by the curator of 'Stretched Terrains', Roobina Karode, in which they reminisced about the Indian art-world the way it was when they were growing up. Shah shared many more photographs of well-known artists from his personal collection, taken without any plan or intention to document or exhibit, just naturally, in the course of life itself. Rahman similarly led a panel discussion at the KNMA on 2 September with Raj Rewal, Mahendra Raj, Kuldip Singh and Achyut Kanvinde's son Sanjay Kanvinde. Intimate knowledge and personal stakes for all the participants enriched both discussions immeasurably, making the past come alive.

Indian modernism – across fields – in literature, in the arts, in architecture and design, in politics too, is one of the great chapters in the history of global ideas in the twentieth century. Like the filmmaker Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy, so beautifully explicated by scholar Geeta Kapur, the modernism of Habib Rahman and M.F. Husain too, holds up a mirror to the nation. Their works suggest a coming of age, a journey, a hybridity, and an inner conflict, all of which belong as much to India itself as to the creative individual negotiating a passage through the modern world, hauling tradition along like a burden or like riches, depending.

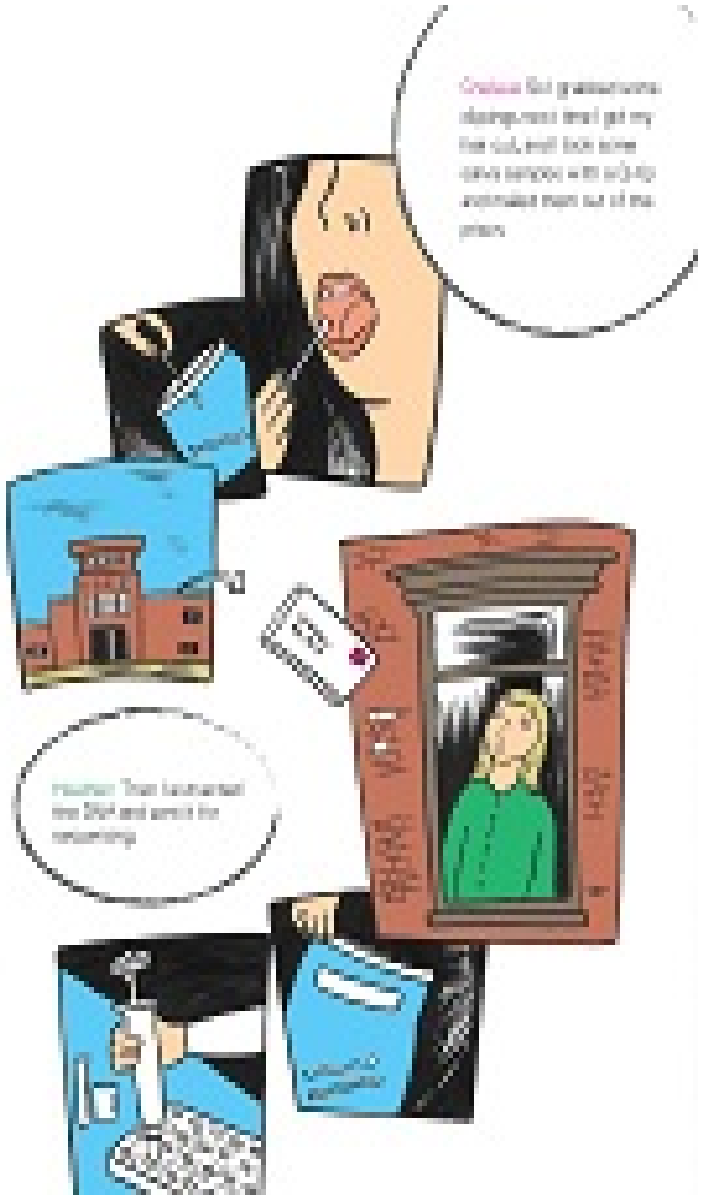
It is this capacity to know what is ancient and make what is unprecedented; to be tentative and confident at the same time; to remain planted while yet mobile, to fashion a selfhood such that we can be with ourselves and yet live with others – this is what is under attack today, from the Hindu Right. Something new and good, that we were making, that we are losing. A wall to hang our greatest art; a piece of earth to bury our dead; buildings that belong in our age and reflect our deepest desire for home, our human need for community, our right to privacy.

We have to remain alert, and we have to fight back.

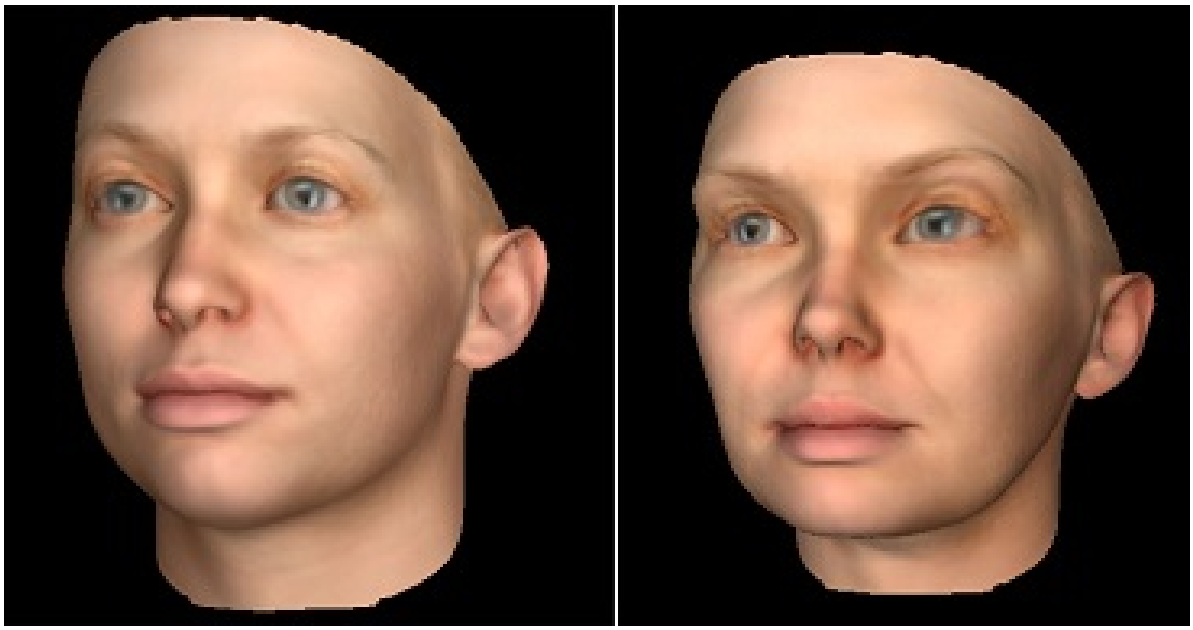
On Chelsea Manning's Portraits

Shoili Kanungo

Sometime last year, I made a collaborative comic about artist Heather Dewey Hagborg's DNA-portraits of US whistle-blower Chelsea Manning, at a time when Manning was still in prison, and nobody was allowed to take her photograph and slip them into mainstream world media. I was curious about how it came to be that prisons believed, with such certainty, that they could make a person disappear by stopping the continued supply of their photographic portraits.



Frame from the comic Suppressed Images/ Image courtesy Heather Dewey Hagborg, Chelsea Manning, Shoili Kanungo and the Thoughtworks Arts Residency



DNA portraits of Chelsea Manning created by Heather Dewey Hagborg/ Image courtesy Heather Dewey Hagborg

Photographs must be simultaneously scary and useful to law enforcers. In the courtrooms, forensic photography is used to extrapolate evidence from photos. In the early 20th century itself, people came to collectively believe that the camera box was a neutral machine that had no temperamental artist sitting within, and hence, it was well equipped to give an unbiased reflection of nature. And this is probably how courtrooms could justify the use of photographs as a source of evidence [1].

And just any photograph will not do. Photographs have to be styled in a technical way in order to be considered appropriate as forensic evidence. But, this forensic styling could conceal inconvenient truths — truths that might be revealed in an art-directed photograph, or a more subjective portrait. For example, the prison profile photographs of Manning were taken in the forensic 'mug-shot' style, as if determined to bleach out Manning's personality: Harsh flat lighting, a plain background, front view, side view.

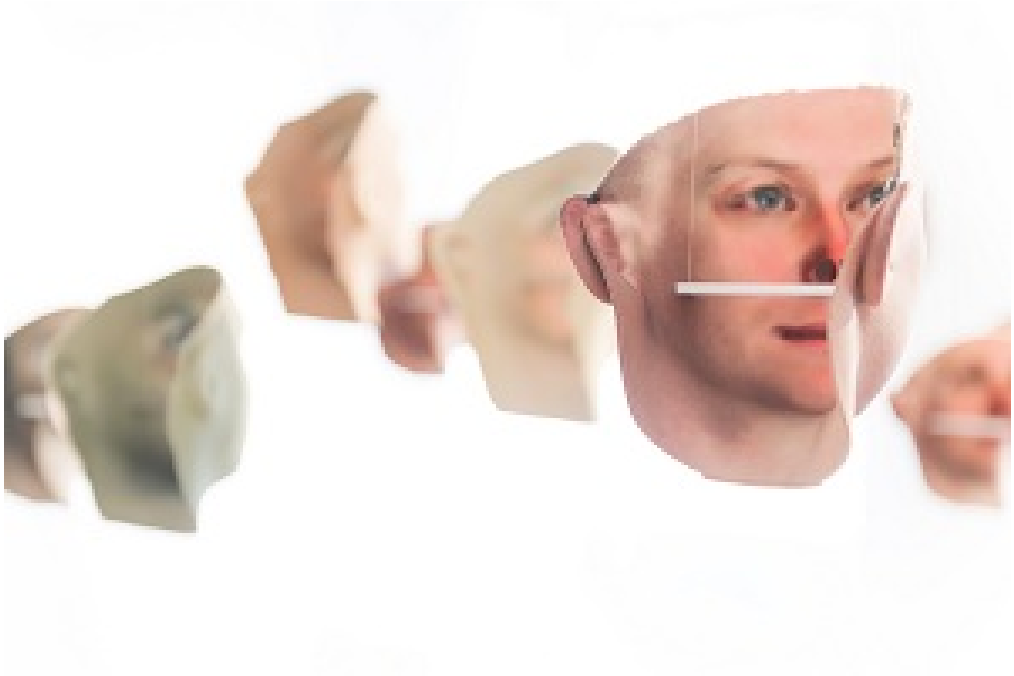
Sometime in May this year, after leaving prison, Manning released photographs of herself to the press. There she was, stunningly beautiful, one of many wonder women. She looked optimistic, energetic, and calm — someone who had weathered the storm and now gave us a slightly bemused half smile. It was the portrait of a hero and a role model. The photograph has been art-directed, and yet it seems to have captured the essence of Manning better than any technical portrait. Maybe, this is why the prisons were afraid to allow more portraits of Manning to emerge — it would mean allowing for the possibility of an interpretation of Manning contrary to what the prisons wanted to project.

Chelsea Manning in May, after her release from prison/ Photo via Instagram

In addition, perhaps, the prisons hoped that people would forget about her if no new photographs were to emerge. In the age of the internet, we assert our identities with continuously updated profile photos. And those who have none, seem to have fallen into oblivion of a kind. This image-lacuna was felt in the case of Manning because artists came up with alternate representations. Heather Dewey Hagborg's DNA-portraits are a powerful solution because they are the result of DNA that Manning had sent to Hagborg from prison, and there is an immediacy to this portrait. Given that we live in times when the DNA sequence is believed to be the axiomatic truth, this too could be viewed as a neutral and objective portrait, closest in power to a photograph. But is it really? This is precisely what Hagborg questions in her work, 'Probably Chelsea', in which she displays thirty possible portraits that can be created out of Chelsea's DNA.

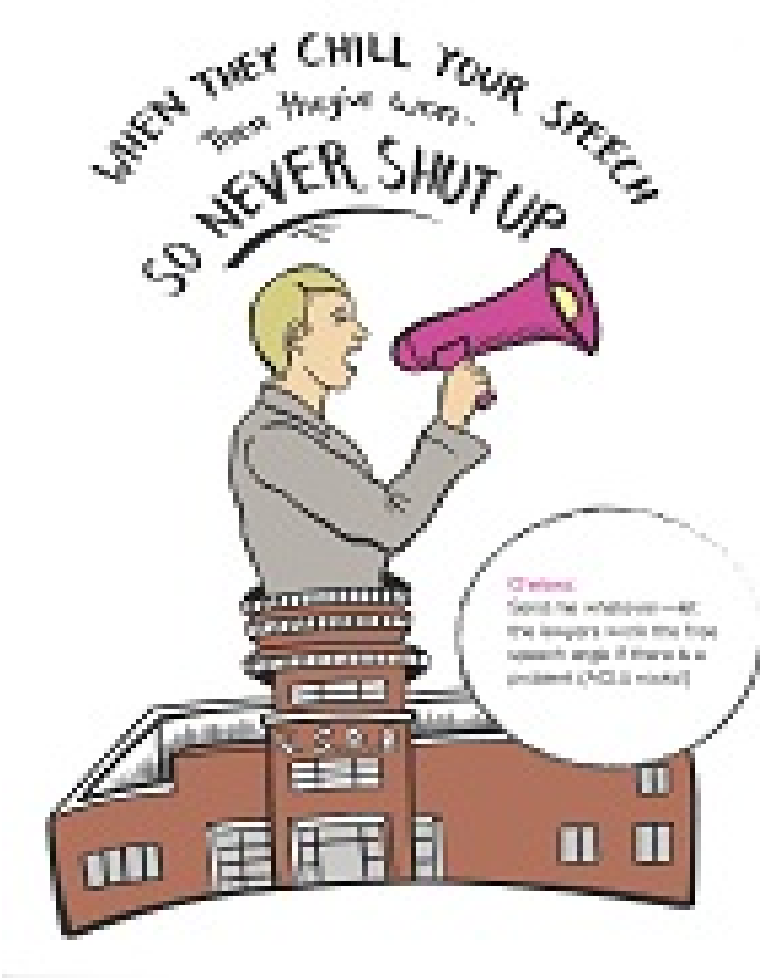
A series of 30 3D printed portraits of possible Chelseas. The installation ‘Probably Chelsea’ illustrates a multitude of ways in which DNA can be interpreted/ Image courtesy Paula Abreu Pita, courtesy of the artists and Fridman Gallery

A series of 30 3D printed portraits of possible Chelseas. The installation ‘Probably Chelsea’ illustrates a multitude of ways in which DNA can be interpreted/ Image courtesy Paula Abreu Pita, courtesy of the artists and Fridman Gallery



A series of 30 3D printed portraits of possible Chelseas. The installation ‘Probably Chelsea’ illustrates a multitude of ways in which DNA can be interpreted/ Image courtesy Paula Abreu Pita, courtesy of the artists and Fridman Gallery

The creation of the comic led to the generation of another kind of portrait. I read some of the letters that Manning had sent to Heather from prison and one of the lines stood out particularly, ‘If they chill your speech, then they’ve won. So never shut up.’ For me, it encapsulated Manning’s unending courage and spunk, and I wanted to create an image to accompany her statement. I thought of Manning, always ready to speak her mind, emerging like a jack in the box from the United States Disciplinary Barracks where she was imprisoned.



Frame from the comic Suppressed Images/ Image courtesy Heather Dewey Hagborg, Chelsea Manning, Shoili Kanungo and the Thoughtworks Arts Residency

So finally, which of the portraits of Chelsea Manning is true, or more true? And what does that even mean? I think that we project upon the images we create, and view, vast worlds of truths that we already believe in. They may or may not be apparent in the image itself but the way we present an image enables that truth to emerge for the viewer to receive.

[1] The use of forensic photography is discussed in the following essays: The Construction of Visual Evidence by Diane Dufour; The Image of Truth: Photographic Evidence and the Power of Analogy by Jennifer L MNookin; courtsey to the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts.

Contributors

1. **Ananya Vajpeyi** is a fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi.

2. **Aparna Karthikeyan** is an independent journalist currently living in Mumbai. She documented a series on vanishing livelihoods of rural Tamil Nadu on a Fellowship from NFI, and volunteers with P. Sainath's People's Archive of Rural India. She now wants to tell stories of everyday people: short fiction, set mostly in Tamil Nadu.

3. **Aryanil Mukherjee** (b. 1964) is a bilingual poet, translator, and editor who grew up in Kolkata, India, and later emigrated to the United States. He has authored ten books of poetry and essays in two languages. Widely published in both Indian (Bengali) and American poetry circles, his work has been featured in many anthologies, including the *HarperCollins Book of Indian Poetry in English* (2011), the Indian Poetry issue of *TLR*, *Indivisible*, an anthology of South Asian American poetry, and *Pared de Agua*, an anthology of contemporary Bengali poetry (Olifante Press, Madrid, Spain). He edits *Kaurab*, a much-celebrated Bangla literary magazine of experimental poetry and literature published since 1970. His poetry has been translated into Hindi and Spanish. A PhD in aerospace engineering, Aryanil works as an engineering mathematician and lives in Cincinnati.

4. **Ashok Gopal** is an independent researcher and writer based in Pune. He has been studying Ambedkar's thought and Dalit Marathi literature for over a decade.

5. **Gauri Gill** is a photographer based in New Delhi. Her work is widely shown and is in the collections of prominent North American and Indian institutions. In 2011 she was awarded the Grange Prize, Canada's foremost award for photography. Gill's book *Balika Mela* was published by Edition Patrick Frey, Zurich, in 2012. For more information about her work, see gaurigill.com.

6. **Inderpal Grewal** is professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University. She is the author of *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel* (Duke University Press, 1996) and *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Duke University Press, 2005).

7. **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*.

8. Born in New Delhi, **Kanchan Chander** received her B.F.A in Painting and Paintmaking from the Delhi College of Art in 1981. Since then, she's received a fellowship and a grant from the Delhi College of Art, and Lalit Kala Academy, Delhi, respectively; and a scholarship from Ecole Des Beaux Arts. Paris, France. She has also lectured at College of Art, Delhi and at the School of Planning and Architecture. To find out more about her work and her upcoming shows, please visit http://kanchansartworks.net/

9. **Kanupriya Dhingra** is an MPhil research scholar at the Department of English, University of Delhi. Her translations have appeared in the *Indian Culture Forum* and *The Sunflower Collective*.

10. Poet and academic **Nandini Dhar** is the author of *Historians of Redundant Moments* (Agape Editions), *Jitakshara* (Aainanagar Prakashani), and a chapbook called *Lullabies Are Barbed Wire Nations* (Two of Cups Press). Her poems are published in *The Los Angeles Review, The Mayo Review, The Four Quarters Magazine*, among other places. She also co-edits co-edit two online journals – *Elsewhere* and *Aainanagar*. Dhar has taught graduate and undergraduate classes on the postcolonial historical novels, food literatures, and cultures of domesticity in postcolonial and US ethnic novels. She teaches at the Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanitites, O P Jindal University. To know more about her work, please visit her website nandinidhar.com.

11. Photographer, film maker and graphic designer, **Parthiv Shah** graduated in 1986 with a diploma in visual communication from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, India. He is the founder and director of the Centre for Media and Alternative Communication (CMAC).

12. **Rajesh Vangad** is a Warli painter from Ganjad, Dahanu, an Adivasi village in coastal Maharashtra. He has exhibited his work at Pune, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Bhopal in India, and London and Barcelona in Europe and through the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited, as well as the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.

13. **Ram Rahman** (b.1955) is a photographer, artist, curator, designer and activist. He initially studied physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later completed a degree in Graphic Design from Yale University's School of Art in 1979.

14. **Rusati Sen** is an Associate Professor of Economics at Basanti Devi College, Kolkata. She is author of the authorised biography of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, which won the Indrani Roy Memorial Award for the best non-fiction book for the years 1997-99. Her major publications include *Prachchhanner Akhyan* (Thema 2002), *Khada Bodi Thod* (Thema 2005), *Paraner Alo Bhubaner Andhar: Mayeder Katha Meyeder Katha* (Patralekha 2012), *Phaltu Lekhay Phaltu Kathay* (Sutradhar 2012), *Bibhutibhushan: Dwander Binyash* (Papyrus 2013), Chhodano *Srinkhal: Jeebaney O Bayaney*, and *Manusher Katha Phanusher Boyan* (Ebong Mushayera), *Kichhu Muhoorto Kichhu Ashroy* (Ebong Mushayera, 2017).

15. **Saitya Brata Das** teaches literature and philosophy at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

16. Based in Vadodara, Gujarat, **Shailesh B.R** received his P.G Diploma in Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S University, Baroda. He participated in the Atelier Mondial Residency/ Pro Helvetia – Swiss Art Council, Switzerland in the year 2016, and exhibited his work recently, from 13 July to 12 August 2017, at the Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi. He was the winner of the FICA Emerging Artist Award in 2015.

17. **Shoili Kanungo** is a graphic artist and designer based in New Delhi. For more on her work visit www.shoilikanungo.com.

18. **Sneha Chowdhury** is a member of the editorial collective of the Indian Writers' Forum. She is an MPhil Research Scholar at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

19. **Souradeep Roy** is a poet, translator, and member of the editorial collective of *Guftugu*.

20. **Sridala Swami** writes poetry and lives in Hyderabad.

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