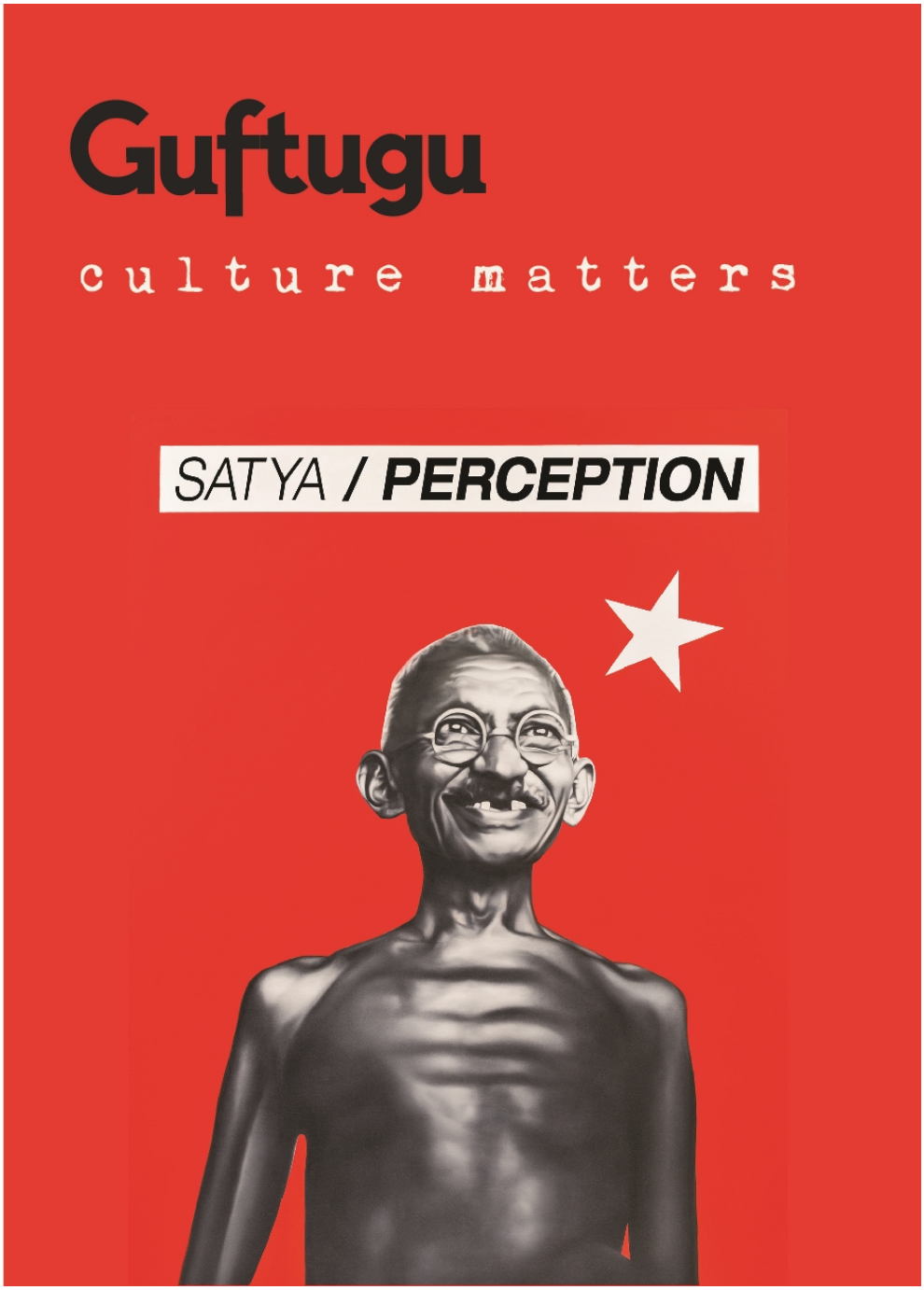
Issue 10



Riyas Komu, 'On International Workers' Day, Gandhi from Kochi', oil on canvas, 183 cms x 137 cms, 2015

About Us

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

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

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

To sum up our vision:

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

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From the Editors

The Politics of Literary Festivals

Apparently India now boasts of more than 200 literary festivals. There may well be more; each mofussil town now hosts one, or even more than one literary festival. Some of these are sponsored by huge corporates, some by newspapers and publishing houses, some by smaller companies, and some directly by governments. The advantages of these festivals are evident: readers get a rare chance to hear, and at times talk to some of the authors they have read or intend to read (or may never read). Authors get a chance to directly address local or regional literary communities, and understand the way they approach literature and ideas. And all this happens in a festive atmosphere, something creative writers at least, given their essentially solitary pursuit, are not used to.

Will the audience return to the books spoken of at the festival? Will the celebration promote reading or increase sales? Or is there a danger of their promoting celebrity culture or mediocrity? No one is sure; there seem to be arguments on both sides. But whether a festival makes a difference seems to depend on the kind of literary culture people take away from the festival. This point could be sharpened with the question of the politics of literary festivals, politics that can be hard to separate from their economics.

What happens, for example, when a company with defined and vested economic-political interests, acts as the chief sponsor of a literary festival? The argument is not that such events should necessarily promote an oppositional culture. But they do need to provide a liberal atmosphere for free discussion and debate, with enough space for non-hegemonic views, and peripheral visions of the society at large. Can a festival sponsored by a corporate — motivated more by profit and interested in pleasing the ruling dispensation for favours given, and to be given — provide an open platform for counter-cultural perspectives that often revolt against 'common sense'? Common sense, as Antonio Gramsci defined it, is nothing but the distilled essence of the hegemonic view of society, politics and morality.

This question becomes important because literary festivals can provide space for dissent and diversity of views and opinions, especially in our times of shrinking cultural spaces. The Kerala Literature Festival held recently at Kozhikode in Kerala organised by D. C. Kizhakkemuri Foundation was a good example. Its theme was 'No Democracy without Dissent' and it had sessions on freedom of expression, the state of the media, science and myth, distortions of history, the plight of human rights in India etc. The speakers included several dissenting intellectuals, scholars, media people and writers of the left or liberal persuasion, including Romila Thapar, Ashis Nandy, Shabnam Hashmi, Shashi Kumar, Jairam Ramesh, Isaac Thomas, Kancha Ilaiah, Kanhaiya Kumar, Sagarika Ghosh, B. R. P. Bhaskar, Rajdeeep Sardesai , E. P. Unni, E. V. Ramakrishnan, Upinder Singh, Sunny M. Kapikadu, Sara Joseph, Shahina Sanal, Kumar Sasidharan, Prakash Raj, K. P. Ramanunni, Perumal Murugan, Kavita Lankesh, Cheran

Rudramurthy, Ganesh Devy, Bama, Bina Paul and M. A. Baby. The editors of *Guftugu* took part in the deliberations. The focus was clear, even in the sessions with writers from abroad who interrogated the conventional concepts of 'European' or 'English' literatures. Faced with the qualitative decadence of liberal institutions; the calculated ideological take-over and occupation of conventional cultural spaces by the dominant right-wing ideologues and propagandists; and the threateningly systematic presence of paid cyber-terrorists on the new social media, we need to say 'yes' to literary festivals, but to a particular sort of festival. Let literary festivals flourish; but let democracy, diversity and dissent too flourish with them.

K. Satchidanandan

February 2018

Six Visions of Politics

Riyas Komu

I. On International Workers' Day, Gandhi from Kochi

Series of five paintings

'…this painting is based on a photograph taken in 1931, when Gandhi was 62 years old. He was travelling from India to England on a ship to take part in the Second Round Table Conference, which he attended as the sole official Congress representative.

Gandhi didn't die of fever, he was murdered. At a time when history is being reinterpreted for political mobilisations and power gains and when the perception of politics is manipulated through well-designed commercial campaigns, it's very important to fight back with icons like Gandhi for counterargument by juxtaposing our time with his principles and the ideologies that he stood for. Here Gandhi is painted, but a Marxian presence is celebrated.

I'd like to paraphrase Anita Thampi, one of the leading poets of Kerala, that the Gandhi figure is a marvellously simple one that submits itself easily both to the doodling child and to the master artist; so minimal that a dot or a line cannot simplify it further—an inner and outer simplicity and a stark directness of this figure can readily lure anyone to make it their logo. This figure can easily mislead anyone into thinking that it can be used any which way.

But the historical gravity and political vitality the symbol wields are not that simple; nor is its intellectual and spiritual depth so light. In Gandhi's case, the tactic of blacking out something that refuses to succumb by appropriating it is not going to work. Because, Gandhi is a rhizomatic image that is too sharp for such manipulations.

And Gandhi appears in our lives as a constant reminder of non-violence and tolerance. So it is in this site that Gandhi is positioned as an icon of resistance and fearlessness, which is the most important political weapon we should carry. It's my attempt to reclaim fearlessness.'

Riyas Komu*, Frontline*


SATYA / PERCEPTION

Oil on canvas; 183 cms x 137 cms (each); 2015

II. Elysian I and II

''Political art' is not a category, it is a wide-ranging argument. It defies easy categorisation because many of the artists, while not being explicitly political, are, in fact, responding to the times in their own way. So I don't think political art needs to have the obviousness of protest or activism…'

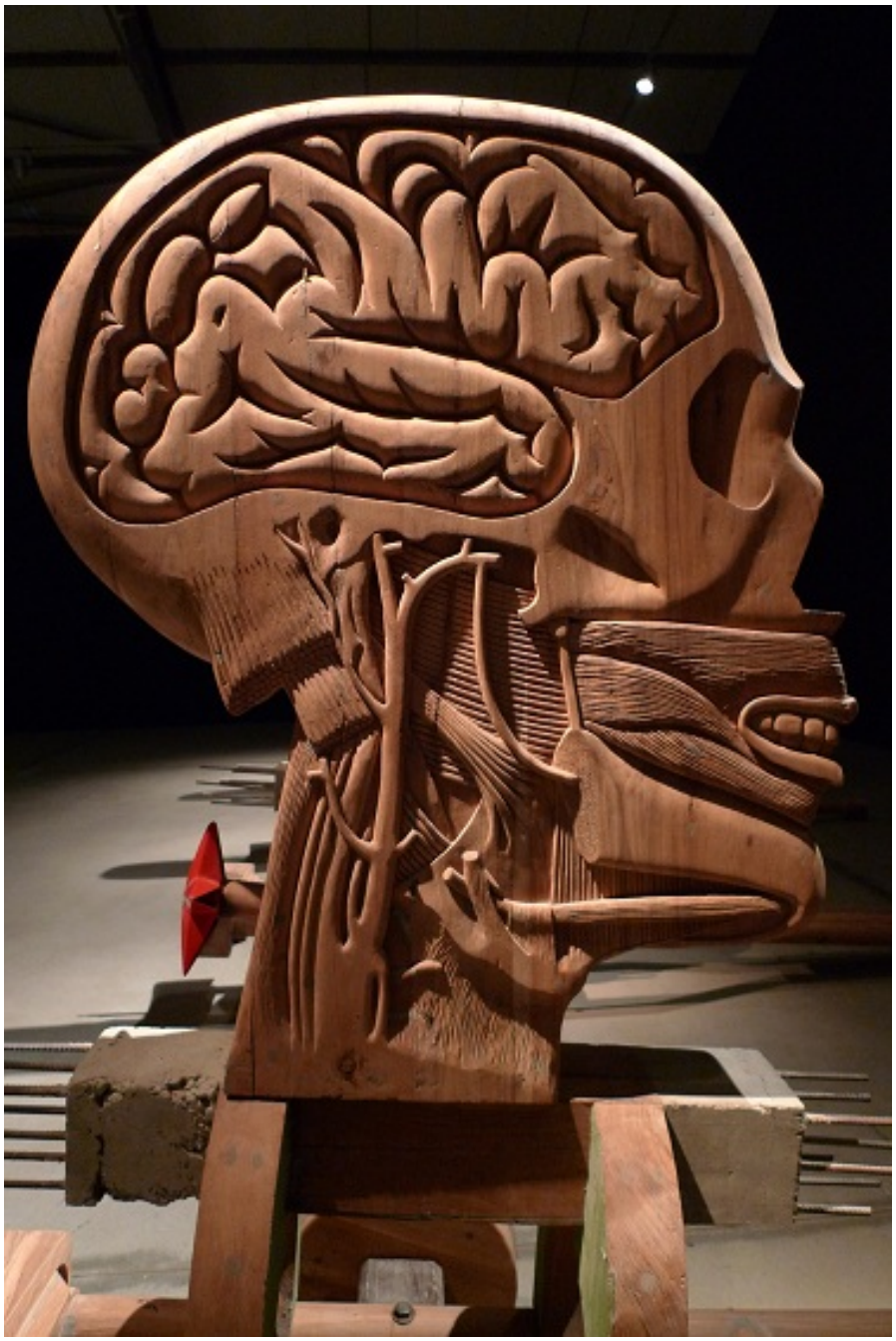
Riyas Komu, *Indian Express*

Charred wood, metal and automotive paint; 74 cms x 82 cms x 74 cms; 2002

Charred wood, metal and automotive paint; 74 cms x 82 cms x 74 cms; 2002

III. Watching the Other-world Spirits from the Gardens of Babylon

'… It can be subdued and be indirect. And many people's politics is not with the State, it's with their community, with issues of discrimination or with issues that are generally not discussed…'



Wood, concrete, metal, and automotive paint; 175 cms x 312 cms x 99 cms; 2007

Wood, concrete, metal, and automotive paint; 175 cms x 312 cms x 99 cms; 2007

Wood, concrete, metal, and automotive paint; 175 cms x 312 cms x 99 cms; 2007

IV. Undertakers

'…sometimes it's with art itself. Wouldn't that also be political art? I am unsure as how to define or identify political art in a time like this…'

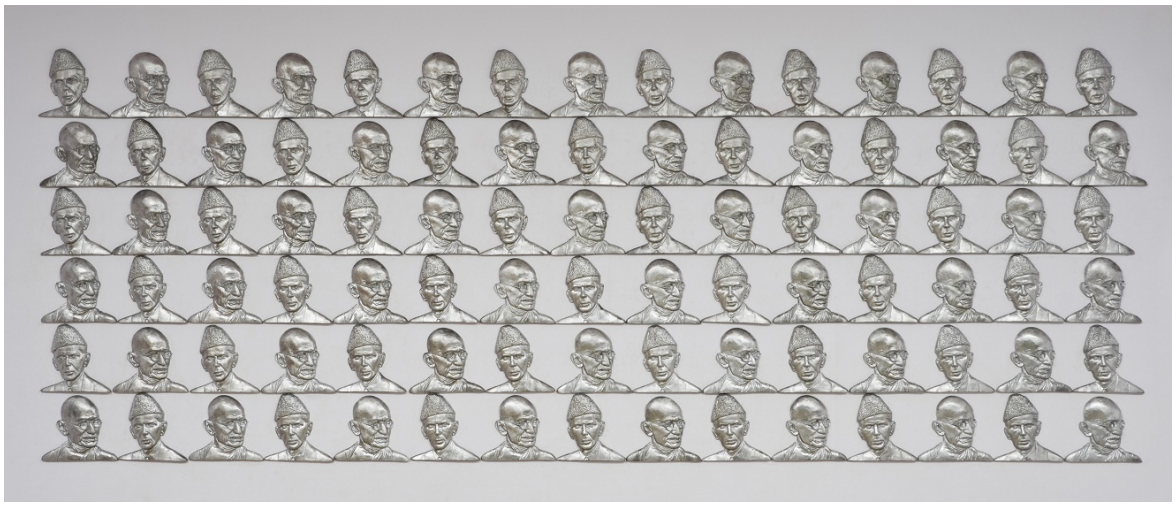
Wood, iron and automotive paint; 120 cms x 105 cms x 61 cms, total length is 1829 cms; 2008

Wood, iron and automotive paint; 120 cms x 105 cms x 61 cms, total length is 1829 cms; 2008

Wood, iron and automotive paint; 120 cms x 105 cms x 61 cms, total length is 1829 cms; 2008

V. Two Fathers from Gujarat

'I don't think we should overstate what art can do in a society, whether political or not…'

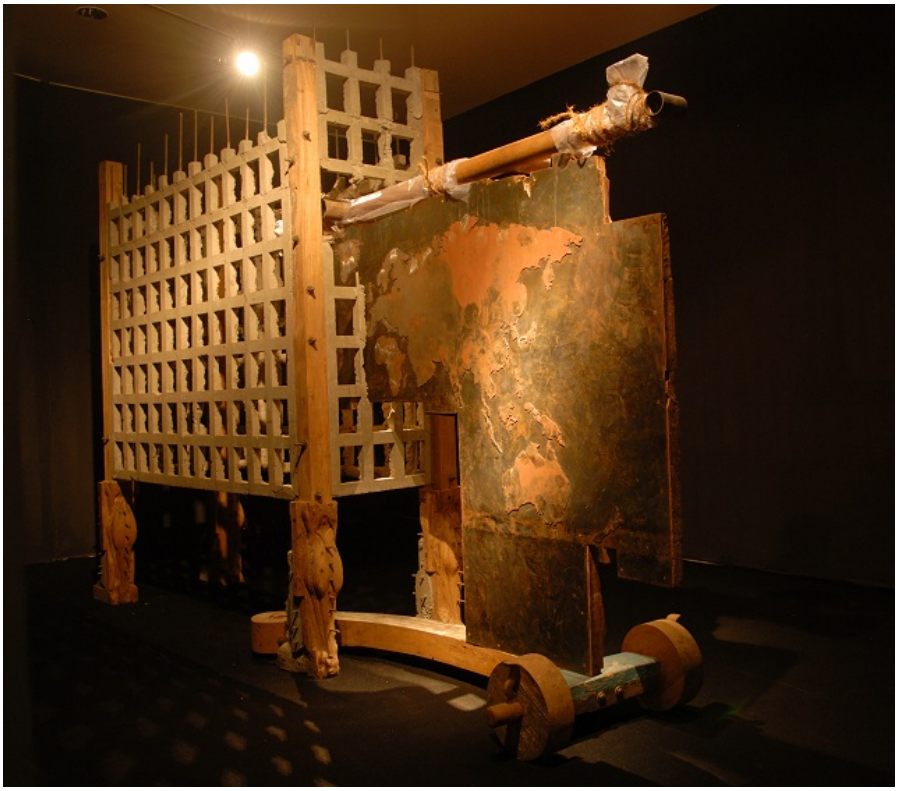


Aluminium; 17.5 cms x 24 cms x 3 cms; 2011

VI. Oils Well, Let's Play

'…But since only art can do what it can do, we must also protect it.'

Recycled wood, metal, cement; 266.7 x 383.5 x 89 cms; 2011



Recycled wood, metal, cement; 266.7 x 383.5 x 89 cms; 2011

The Republic of Reasons

Alok Rai

David Alfaro Siqueiros, 'Group of figures walking to the right, from the folio '13 Grabados", woodcut on orange paper, 11.5 cm × 15 cm, 1930/ Image courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

*

The intellectual and moral foundations of our republic seem insecure from time to time – for reasons both trivial and, alas, grave. The trivial threat is exemplified, for me – by the advertisers' fascination with the princeling culture of yesteryear. The bewhiskered twits who figure in the ads that wish to signal gracious, old-world aristocracy – and look for all the world like the grand *durbaans* in five-star hotels – are an anomaly in a democratic republic. But there are unfortunately more serious reasons to make one wonder about the depth of our republican culture.

At its simplest, a republic is a freely constituted community of equals. This is distinguished from communities that make archaic and often fanciful claims for their existence, involving both hierarchy and even, God help us, God. But a republic is a voluntary, freely-constituted community of equals – and the necessary foundation of this freely-constituted community is, naturally, the Constitution – which has even been endorsed as our 'only sacred book' by the Hon'ble Prime Minister Modi. This coming together is not a 'natural' or easy process – as will be evident from the laborious wranglings in our own Constituent Assembly. The Constitution is a

heroic achievement, and it is only appropriate that the people who are associated with its making – notably, Dr Ambedkar – are honoured by a grateful nation. By the same token, the repeatedly signalled desire of certain political elements to open up the Constitution to fundamental reconsideration is – and should be recognised to be – an attempt to tamper with the very foundations of our republic. Mercifully, good sense has prevailed – so far. But my primary concern here is with another threat that, while it is not quite foundational, is still extremely serious.

This is the threat from the sudden and alarming salience of 'hurt sentiments' in our public life. Indeed, a recent book has characterised our state as a 'state of hurt' — *Sentiment, Politics, Censorship: The State of Hurt*, eds. Ramdev, Nambiar, Bhattacharya, New Delhi: Sage, 2016. In the words of one of the contributors to this volume: 'when sentiment is used as a means to dominate the speech of others by way of force, then this mobilization of sentiment symbolizes tyranny, not democracy. It is also the enforcement of public deceit, because what is being stated is not that such-and-such persons are offended … but that they propose to be violent and destructive unless their demands are accepted. The so-called hurt sentiment has now become the cutting edge of a campaign to replace democracy with mob rule.' (*The State of Hurt*, pp. 34-35) It is against this 'state of hurt' that I wish to counter-pose the 'republic of reasons'. I realise that my 'republic of reasons' — in effect, a sort of perpetual seminar – is something of a utopian idea. (And perhaps even something of a nightmare! I am reminded of Oscar Wilde who said that the trouble with socialism was that it took up too many evenings!) And my academics' delight in the contestation of argument and evidence may well lack mass appeal – but before I turn to the difficulty but also, to my mind, the inescapability of the idea of reasons in our public space, I would like to spend a little more time with the state of 'hurt sentiments'.

There are, alas, many serious and even tragic examples of the manifestation of 'hurt sentiments' in our social life – the murdered Akhlaq of Dadri village has become iconic, but he is not by any means the only one. But perhaps it would be better if we approach this subject via a somewhat ludicrous instance of 'hurt sentiments'. I refer to the 'Bovine Divine' incident from the art festival in Jaipur in November 2015. In the words of one of the organisers of the festival: '…Bovine Divine consisted of a styrofoam cow tied to an air balloon with a string, elevated to a height of about 50 metres.' The local constabulary came to intervene with their usual delicacy, claiming that they were 'responding to a complaint by a 'common person' whose sentiments had been hurt at seeing a cow hanging mid-air.' The artist, wished to express his – 'sentiments', perhaps? — regarding the way in which neglected cows roam our streets, and may be seen consuming plastic waste and often suffering gastric blockage etc., as a consequence. This is an entirely legitimate response, and it is certainly not open to anyone to decree whether or not this is a suitable subject for 'art'? However, the artist's plastic cow, floating in the festival sky – hurt the sentiments of some pious and passing Hindu. Again, entirely legitimate – there is no accounting for flying mothers! But it is what followed that is both ludicrous and heart-breaking. This is best described in the words of the artist… so, a few snapshots of our farcical descent into fascism – So, the cop-turned-art-critic advise: '… remove the installation and instead make a painting and write whatever message you want on the painting.' A little later, after the

bewildered organisers had been 'pushed and dragged' to the police station, another cop asks: 'So you hung a cow upside down?' We remained silent. He repeated. 'So, was it a dead cow or a living cow?' We said it was a plastic sculpture of cow. Unsatisfied, the head constable persisted: 'That's ok, but was the cow sculpture dead or alive?' We tried to explain to him that it was beyond dead or alive because it was plastic. Meanwhile, while this fascinating aesthetic dialogue was going on, some 'dozen Hindutva activists… had already taken over the sculpture, performed a puja, and garlanded it.' (*Indian Express*, 27 November 2015)

There are two concepts that are frequently invoked in the context of such grotesque acts of violence – which must cover both the murder of Akhlaq and the policeman-as-art-critic at Jaipur. These are the concepts of 'provocation' and 'spontaneity'. Thus, the floating cow was deemed to be, in clear misunderstanding of the artist's intention, a provocation. Of course, one cannot have provocation without intention – and even provocative intention must be entitled to some free speech defence. However, it is what happens next that really determines the outcomes of such incidents. Because what happens next is 'spontaneous' – a mob of 'provoked' persons wreaks violence – breaks into homes, institutions – but what they do is removed from the domain of reason by the fact that it is 'spontaneous' – merely 'hurt sentiment', now free to inflict hurt on others. (And, be it stated with no ambiguity, the hurt that they cause goes well beyond 'sentiment'.)

The law that covers this – that entitles the inflictors of private, i.e., non-state violence, to spontaneous immunity, and enables the police, in connivance with such people, to throttle free speech — has rightly been subjected to criticism. (In fact, I suggest that in line with contemporary practice, this kind of violence may well be designated as PPP violence – violence that is the sinister product of Public-Private-Partnership.) It is possible that the law regarding the business of hurt sentiments – Art. 295? — was introduced by the colonial authorities who wished to avoid the inconvenience of civil conflict without being overly concerned about its impact on public discourse. However, even a minimal acquaintance with the emergent culture of our public spaces shows that the law regarding hurt sentiments is increasingly being used to silence public discourse – primarily but not only under Hindu-majoritarian pressure. Interestingly, it appears that the law was introduced to protect Muslims from Hindu provocations – the famous *Rangeela Rasool* incident, insults to the prophet, etc. The publication of *Rangeela Rasool* was, so it was claimed, a response by the Arya Samaj to an attack on Dayanand Saraswati, not quite a god, but certainly holier than many. The original intention seemed to have been to remove one of the axes of Hindu-Muslim conflict. However, it will immediately be apparent that the social function of this law has undergone a significant change. Thus, Hindus may freely say offensive — intentionally offensive – things about Christians and Muslims, without getting a response. When Christians and Muslims do get offended – *and they do* – it is generally – BUT NOT ONLY — by *co-religionists* who are alleged to be attacking their fundamental pieties. But with some 640 million gods and goddesses to go around, there is plenty of possibility of the Hindu being offended, yet the Hindu is primarily offended by – by what? Plastic cows? Thirty-year-old paintings? Whatever. And once the Hindu is offended, the law proceeds to do the rest. Even if there are very few convictions under the law, the very process of the law – the tender ministrations of the police, the widely-dispersed cases – is quite

enough punishment to act as a serious deterrent. But my point here is *not* about adjudicating between the rights and wrongs of particular religious communities, about asserting that Hindus are better or worse than Muslims or Christians – banning Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin under Muslim pressure is just as unforgivable as hounding Husain into exile under Hindu pressure. Rather, it is about the chilling effect that this climate of hair-trigger offence has on public discourse – a strange minimalistic neutering of public discourse, where only trivial and inoffensive things might be said – because to say anything that is even mildly thought-provoking is likely to offend someone, particularly those who are easily provoked, and uncomfortable with thinking anyway. And if those least capable of thought are going to have a veto on public discourse – by definition, since they react with 'hurt sentiments' — the consequences can be imagined easily enough. If I might cite one of my patron saints, George Orwell – If the freedom of speech is to mean anything at all, it must mean the right to say something that someone may not want to hear, that someone may disapprove of and even find offensive – perhaps even 'anti-national'. After all, a right to 'freedom of inoffensive expression' sounds rather tame.

And where the state is unable to find even a small legal foothold, it outsources the enforcement of the 'inoffensive only' doctrine to lumpens within, and without, uniforms. These lumpens are quick to take offence. And take the offensive. This pattern of outsourced violence has been seen before – in Mussolini's Italy, in Hitler's Germany. The parallels are alarming.

It is entirely natural that there will be differences of opinion in any large collective – indeed, often it will be seen that even a family is a large enough collective for significant differences! And, therefore, it is the case that collectives evolve methods for dealing with differences. One of the 'solutions' that is often advanced in such cases, particularly when the differences arise in the context of religions, is that of some kind of essentialised religion, some triple-distilled essence which advertises itself on the grounds that it contains the core substance of all religions which is, miraculously, the same! There are honest – and less honest – versions of this quintessential religion – examples abound. One could argue against the unlikely workability of this 'solution' on materialist grounds – i.e., that what manifests itself as religious difference is really founded in concrete, material interests, and that those material conflicts – most often, land, but also businesses, competition etc., — are not amenable to being dissolved in any religious quintessence. However, I wish to suggest further that religion, by definition, identifies a domain of faith, of belief, of bedrock commitment – and is therefore, not amenable to protocols of knowledge, not susceptible to evidence and argument. That is to say, in the context of 'differences' that derive their supposed conflicting legitimacies from religion, the hope of resolving the differences by resorting to some super-religion is futile. *The solution is the problem*. (This super-religion is sometimes presented in the name of the Religion of Man. However, to me this is a misleading, and perhaps even malign, form of humanism. The sense in which humanism can be useful and relevant for us today would be one that takes the imperfect humanness of human beings as given, foundational – i.e., goodness of course, but along with our propensities to evil, and violence – but, minimally, to difference.)

Another false 'solution' to the inescapable fact of differences that emerges, particularly in the context of democracies, is the majoritarian shortcut. This has to do with a simplistic understanding of democracy – with the counting of numbers. Majority prevails, more is more

than less. Thus, it is asserted that any opinion that has the backing of larger numbers will, and should, prevail. This is nonsense, both pragmatically – tyrannical, non-reasoned suppression of alternative opinions doesn't work, even in families – and philosophically. *The necessary ground on which the counting of numbers makes sense is, if what is being counted is, axiomatically, equal.* Thus, the democratic formula of one person, one vote, and more is more than less, only makes sense if all the persons that are being counted are, equally, *full persons – with all the rights and freedoms that they are entitled to under the constitution* – and these include the right and the freedom to be different. Any majoritarian shortcut that seeks to curb or limit these rights is, both philosophically and pragmatically, undermining our democracy. (The example of the Sri Lankan Tamils: the myopic denial of Tamil rights by the Sinhala majority produced, right at our doorstep, a generation and more of heart-breaking, irredeemable tragedy. It is an example we cannot afford to ignore.)

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Beyond these crude nostrums – essentialised religion and majoritarianism – there is a rather more sophisticated difficulty that has emerged in the last few decades. This is the difficulty that is indexed by the pluralisation of 'reasons' in my title. There was a time – probably mythical in more ways than one – when our intellectual lives were ruled by a Universal Reason – with a capital R. And those of us who could not enter that favoured realm were forced to resort to myths and fairy tales as vehicles for our sense of the world – and declared irrational and removed from the pangat of the Rational. This is again not the place to go into the processes whereby this simple, and convenient, state of affairs was disturbed – whether it was primarily philosophical, or historical, is fascinating but here, irrelevant – but it is certainly the case that former Universal Reason, stripped of its defences, has been revealed to be primarily white, male and western, and in appropriate contexts, capitalist as well. (And, as always and everywhere in India, caste – savarna, Brahminical – is a necessary part of the story.) This is intellectual history as caricature, but it must, for the moment, suffice. One consequence of this is that 'difference' — as embodied in alternative histories, multiple perspectives – has now acquired a kind of intellectual legitimacy which was previously, under the regime of the much missed-Universal, unthinkable.

Amid the rubble of the former Universal Reason, one sees the emergence of all kinds of 'identities', including religious 'identities' which are often associated with groups that feel excluded from – or otherwise are disempowered by – the exercise of the would-be Universal public reason. And, excluded, they turn away therefrom into sulking and worse, into violence. But it is important to assert, precisely in this context, that one cannot afford to reject the exercise of public reason, but must seek rather to extend its scope, and to find ways of including groups that feel excluded, while, and it is important to say this in today's world, including in India, coming down hard against non-rational, non-reasoned, unlawful and violent means of negotiating difference. Further, it is important to recognise that even state violence is also and only a worse form of violence until it comes as a last resort after sincere effort at the exercise of public reason – as, for instance, on the matter of tribals' rights, or the larger question of the alternative paths of development.

The discipline of history has emerged as a major site where this intellectual struggle has been playing out. Henry Ford's famously illiterate dictum about history – history is bunk – is repeated gratefully by every schoolboy. How can it matter what happened several years or centuries or even millennia ago – and yet, people are willing to die, and kill, over their version of events, historical, or even mythical. The 'sack' of Somnath is sufficient cause for contemporary violence. (It is hardly surprising that the historical implication of communal violence is a potent factor shaping the discipline of history itself. Conscientious historians have to negotiate a delicate passage between the twin alternatives of either airbrushing the past or, as in the mode favoured by the right, of seeking, somewhat farcically, to avenge it.

However, the fascinating historians' debate is not to our present purpose. It is sufficient for us to note that in place of the splendidly solid histories of the past, resting on firm foundations of 'fact', we now have 'versions', perspectivally-inflected histories – your version, my version… The pluralisation of histories – and the antecedent and consequent pluralisation of the 'reasons' that are adduced in defence of a singular, shared but differently experienced present – is an irreversible process – there is no going back to some earlier harmony, before the current cacophony burst upon us. But when we see the frequent and violent contestations over alternative histories in our public space, we may notice a simultaneous and paradoxical hankering for an authoritative and unplural status for one's *own* version of that common, and plural, history.

History, our common understanding of our common world, has been ejected from its positivist fortress – and forced to take up habitation in the shifting tents of narrative, an academic refugee. To put it in slightly different words, history has fractured, irretrievably, into stories – history, *her* story… And, as we have seen so clearly in our public life over the last few decades, disputes about competing narratives cannot be resolved by a resort to 'facts'. Of course, and this is still worth saying in the current climate of postmodern laissez-faire – in the words of that famous historian Ella Fitzgerald, 'anything goes' – that despite the inescapable pluralisation of truth, falsity is still falsity, untruth is still untruth, lies are still lies. Indeed, it is a little puzzling that even though 'truth' has become notoriously difficult to pin down, lies can still be identified easily.

The fracturing of the foundational certainties – whether metaphysical, or historical, the 'death' of God, or Clio's suicide – has had a profound impact on the nature of our social arrangements. Irrespective of whether the origins of our present intellectual crisis are philosophical or historical, the fact is that we are in a mess – and if we hear the words of the poet in late-19th century Britain, we have been here a long time —

…we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

And, I fear, by day too.

Of course, the crisis that Arnold was writing about is mere childish stuff compared with where we find ourselves today – our intellectual fractures are deeper, our armies are better armed, and the guerrillas of the apocalypse carry Kalashnikovs. The crucial question before us today is – can we devise/ evolve/ dream up strategies for living together on our darkling plain?

(Actually, and this was pointed out to me by a young friend, a careful observer of contemporary trends – the guerrillas of the coming apocalypse carry something far more dangerous than Kalashnikovs – they carry smartphones. The ubiquity of this satanic invention, and the dependent evolution of the ecosystems of instant misinformation and lies, has meant that the conditions of engagement, of discourse, have changed radically. It is possible for people to be seduced, at least temporarily, mid-argument, into parallel universes founded on instantly generated lies, morphed images, troll-generated 'realities'.)

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The impulse to resolve and reconcile differences – for the always-provisional present in which we are constrained to live – can derive from some prior commitment to a sense of connectedness, of unity. Every trivial, and even non-trivial, squabble over a family dinner-table, does not end up in a divorce court or a partition. But what is so easily accessible in the context of a family becomes rather more problematic when we think of the play of differences in our public spaces, in the context of the nation. The problem may be described, in academic shorthand, as the problem of creating solidarities in 'post-metaphysical' polities – polities and, indeed, nations like ours — voluntary, freely-constituted polities which do not harbour the illusion of divine, transcendental descent, and therefore must *invent a necessary solidarity between individuals and collectives which have significant differences* — must rest, willy-nilly, on that prime exemplar of consensus, a Constitution.

Addressing a similar but not identical problem – establishing a foundation for the idea of justice in societies in which there are different communities of belief and practice, the philosopher John Rawls advanced the deeply influential idea of the 'overlapping consensus'. This is an area of vigorous philosophical debate, and I invoke the concept with some trepidation. Broadly speaking, the idea of the 'overlapping consensus' suggests that one may identify paths from a prior diversity that converge and produce the famous 'overlapping consensus'. Predictably, this has been criticised for being parochially Western, and so shackled to a relatively tame, domesticated diversity, and ultimately reliant on some watered-down version of the late-lamented 'universal'. That is not a debate that I am either competent, or required, to enter into here.

As the repeated recourse to essentialised religion shows, there is a longing for a radical solution to the problem of living with differences – eliminating differences by resolving them – or, more accurately, by *dissolving* them in some powerfully solvent religious quintessence, way more potent than mere alcohol. (I have suggested that this cannot work – that the social work that religions do is to mark difference – the "other" is essential – and also that religions are, by definition, not amenable to reason, and can always retreat into the fortress of "belief".) My own, relatively modest quest is for a strategy of negotiating differences, of living with difference.

It is here that the idea – or perhaps only the phrase – of the 'overlapping consensus' presents itself – a minimal (and legal) consensus on addressing differences by argument and persuasion, by giving reasons to each other, and so evolving, over time, a culture of reasons. However, there are several difficulties with this – so, how do you reason with a rampaging mob, or an assassin with a gun or, nearer our everyday reality, a lynch-mob that identifies anyone who thinks differently from it as being 'anti-national'? The answer is – you don't. That is why we pay for an enormously expensive apparatus of legal enforcement, and if the Basis that man it frequently appears to have forgotten their *raison d'etre*, a minimally civilised society must find ways to remind them of it.

But there are other difficulties even prior to the rampaging mob, irrespective of whether they are real louts with real weapons, or anonymous anti-socials on the so-called social media. This has to do not with the pluralisation of a singular Reason into reasons – a theme to which I shall return – but rather with the dwindling of reasons into 'opinions' and often, into 'mere opinions'. This is a puzzling development, because whereas the pluralisation of reasons is a democratic, inclusive development, and implies a *shared* commitment to the activity of reasoning, the dwindling of reasons into opinions is profoundly conservative. It implies no shared commitment to anything, and its characteristic gesture is the shrug with which people say – 'That's your opinion' – which, for me, carries the disturbing implication that one could, so to speak, harbour someone else's opinion! (In response to one such remark, the philosopher Ronald Dworkin replied tartly – 'Of course it is my opinion. Why would I be asserting it otherwise?') But for all its apparent tolerance – and it is still infinitely preferable to the behaviour we have seen over the last one year – it is, basically, a refusal to engage. But in so far as one's 'opinions' have a bearing on the ineluctably shared public space, these opinions must either present themselves as reasons, or they must remain private.

I referred above, breezily, to the 'refusal' to engage in reasoned argument. But there is a related problem that must, at least, be noticed in this context. This has to do with the failure of the education system – high and low, urban and rural, public and private, elite and not – to inculcate a culture of reasoning, of analysis. The emergence of the cult of information translates naturally into the narrowing of education into mere rote learning – and this is cemented into place by the further trivialization of education into 'skilling'. Again, having 'skills' — relevant skills – is very important, but it is not the same as education. We seem to have forgotten that. But the apparent 'refusal' to engage in argument – the resort to slogans, and shouting – might well signal an *inability* to engage in argument.

Finally, to return to the problem of building solidarities in post-metaphysical societies: even shared myths are dangerous – as in the case of the 'Aryan' myth in Nazi Germany. But when shared myths aren't available – it is here, in the context of the problem of building solidarities in post-metaphysical societies that the activity of reasoning presents itself, yet again, as the ground of a possible solution. We did blunder along with the myth of the 'national struggle' until all kinds of people began to complicate it – and then this history too got pluralised, and so became problematic. Even though, it should be said in the context of some of the most vociferous 'nationalists' that we see around us – lies are still lies. (No matter how tall the statue of Sardar Patel, or how high the flagpole, the role of the Hindu Right under its various names, in

the anti-colonial struggle, does not bear examination.) There is a sense in which Rawls' overlapping consensus suggests a prior consensus on the rules of engagement – that we will manage our differences through reason, and not by hitting each other over the head. There is also, lurking somewhere in there, though not necessarily in Rawls, the idea – which can appear either as a utopia in which harmony rules, or a dystopia, in which all difference has been transcended – of a final consensus, a sort of horizon. However, in between these, there is also the intermedial 'consensus' that emerges merely through reaching out to the other, as one must when one reasons with another to persuade, with arguments which appeal to the other, and are motivated by the pragmatic desire to persuade the other, and are not merely an "expression" of oneself or, alas, only too frequently, merely an attempt to "hurt" the other. This intermedial consensus then presents itself as the possible ground of a viable solidarity. And, appropriately in this context, our common humanity presents itself in a dual guise, as both the ground of our citizenship in the republic of reasons, but also as the goal thereof.

After my somewhat reckless foray into quasi-philosophical discourse, I wish to return to a territory in which I feel relatively more comfortable – that of language. There is a sense in which philosophers – and mathematicians – are embarrassed by the intrinsic slipperiness of language. Mathematicians escape into their world of rigorous and disciplined symbols – but philosophers, condemned to language, seek to tame its flickering, evasive, living quality. But no matter how difficult it is for lay people to take the fact on board, it is a fact that language is a living thing. (In fact, it is not even a thing, is merely living – it is also, for people like me, *a* living!) Reared on dictionaries, and indeed, things, we seek to scale language down to our own limitations. However, there is something to be said for thinking with language, with the grain of language, rather than against it – for submitting to the genius of language itself. This is a large subject – and I can hardly expect to initiate it now – but, for instance, there is a distinction to be made between 'having reasons' and 'giving reasons'. Thus, one may 'have' a reason for doing something – but it may well not be a 'reason' that one can be expected to 'give'. My conception of 'the republic of reasons' rests upon reasons that one may 'give' rather than upon 'reasons' that one 'has' but which, by their very nature, demand that they be kept hidden, secret or, as we have seen, masked as sentiment. But ambiguity and inexactitude are part of the intrinsic nature of language, and so, inevitably, our acts of communication are necessarily, inescapably and ineluctably, a complex and shifting compound of understanding and misunderstanding – the only prior requirement is a desire or, failing even that, a *recognition* of the need to communicate. Language is needed *because* we have differences – thus, ideally, lovers need no language. But the rest of us do.

And irrespective of whether our acts of communication succeed, or fail – or succeed on the basis of some happily diplomatic misunderstanding – *jaane kya toone kahi, jaane kya maine suni / baat kuchh ban hi gayi* — or fail because of some extra-lingual understanding of each other's intentions, the mere attempt to communicate with reasons creates and affirms those filiations – the roots that clutch, the branches that grow – and produce, even in the rubble of post-metaphysical polities, human connection. Discourse within a constitutional framework – and the search for a possible and *future* consensus therefrom, rather than an *anterior* consensus, except on the need to evolve one without violence – alone can be the

foundation for a possible solidarity in societies which are vibrant with real diversities and differences. 'The process of discourse itself draws us out of ourselves and brings us into a process of justification before others in order to explain ourselves, our positions, our reasons and our rationality.' (Rodriguez, 219) With like-minded people, it is sufficient to voice opinions – and lovers don't need even that – but with others, *different* others, one must needs have, *and give*, reasons. (Having a flag is good – but it is neither necessary, nor sufficient.)

A Linguistic and Literary Analysis

Prashant Bagad

Translated by *Kaushika Draavid*

Filippo Balbi, 'Testa Anatomica', 1854/ Image courtesy Viintage

I will tell you a story. The story, of course, has a *hero*. This hero in the story is a *doctor*.

'I will tell you a story…' This very first sentence prepares your mood. A story has a hero, or at least ordinarily it does. ('Good stories do have a hero,' some would say.) As you know and are aware of this, I purposely put in the second sentence: 'The story, of course, has a hero.' The aim is to *tune* you and me onto the same wavelength. (I realise that there are many English words

here. But I reiterate: the aim is to tune you and me onto the same wavelength.) The sentence, 'This hero in the story is a doctor,' evokes a whole atmosphere. A doctor, who is an MBBS or a BAMS, his apron, his stethoscope, medicine, clinic, nurses, the medicinal air at the clinic, the doctor within his chamber and the patients on the benches without, a large hospital, an organisation of doctors, blood pressures, cancer, some smiling doctors, the renowned love affairs of some doctors—all this. The story expects that you are familiar with all this; the third sentence rightly guesses it all and is successful. When this doctor-hero was eighteen, he had a dream. That dream was to become his undoing. He was possessed by a longing to rise above his conventional self and become a poet. He began to frequent the municipal library, where he would read poets' biographies. This was to be his constant practice for two years. Later, he became a doctor. He got married. Then, at the age of twenty-nine, despairing at his failure to pen any exceptional poetry, he committed suicide. The story does not end there.

After the initial sentences, I was suddenly reminded of this story I had heard of a different doctor, so I narrated it. It is not a creation of mine, this one, though it appears so, and it is not false. Such stories are never false. Like the story of Ashvatthama, it is created, cultivated and expanded by tradition. It is not our place to comment on it. I did, however, notice something: my touch has introduced, for better or worse, some different types of sentences into the recollected story. For instance, 'That dream was to become his undoing.' We know the phrase 'to become somebody's undoing'. We use it wherever we see fit. What I have done may be no different. Now, with just another observation, I will come back to the real story. The observation is: why does the doctor in this recollected story study the lives of poets rather than their poetry?

Let us now turn to the real story. But some kings of logic demand to know how this possessed fellow managed to become a doctor at all. That is inconsistent, they say. To become a doctor, one must toil away at study, an impossible prospect for a possessed man. The story is not logical. My response to this is, you sleep at night and wake in the morning to leave for the office—is that logical? Or, you put on clothes and watch movies—what logic binds the two things together? Be that as it may. Now let us turn to the real story.

This doctor—the second, different one—is a decent man. 'Decent' puts you in mind of a non-cheating, gentle, good doctor. Perhaps, once in a while, he treats the poor for free. But that is not what I intend to say. What I want to say is that in his boyhood, this doctor was a bright student. However, when he was in his tenth class, he only managed eighty percent of marks. He had wished to be on the merit list; that could not be. But in the eleventh and the twelfth, he burnt the midnight oil and got excellent marks. He was selected for an MBBS. Where he failed during the first year. But, finding his footing, he got back on track. ('To find one's footing and get back on track.') Then in the third year, he fell in love with a Buddhist girl. She rejected him. Once again, recovering self-possession, he stood steady in the world. To cheer himself up, he joined a violin class. Later, he leafed through some books on Buddhism. He learnt that craving is the root of all suffering. Mark that I do not say 'Buddhism holds craving to be the root of all suffering' is what he learnt. I am saying that our doctor learnt: craving is the root of all suffering. His worldview changed entirely. (Worldview: view of the world. Would it suffice to convey the same sense if I simply said 'view'? Is not any view a view of the world?)

This doctor likes to rain-gaze. He keeps a diary of his thoughts. He enjoys using aromatic soaps of various kinds. Possibly, these three things—rain, diary, soaps—are adequate to draw an accurate character-sketch or word-portrait of this doctor. But in actual fact, all that went before the rain is a part of his wider life-picture. It appears to me that this doctor, experimental and intellectual though he may not be, is of a solemn demeanour. Of course, it may seem somewhat funny that he takes to Buddhism after being rejected by a Buddhist girl. But we must accept the facts of a situation as they are. If I said that this doctor is given to abusing tobacco, that would ring completely untrue. But it may indeed be the case that there is first a turning down and later a turning towards Buddhism. I will tell the story according to my observations and my calibre.

Think over it for a moment. There is a doctor in the story passed down to us and there is a doctor in my story too. Is there any likeness between the two of them?—apart from the fact that they both are doctors?

The first doctor was possessed. And in that state, under the spell of a certain longing, he committed suicide. On the face of it, this is sheer self-destructiveness. But look deeper and you will find an untainted character. What is strange, apparently, is that this doctor reads biographies of poets. But the truth does not seem as strange. Possibly, he wanted to mould his own life in the manner of the great poets. Someone among you might say that biographies are not meant to be used in that way. To this we could say, that is a personal call to be made by each one of us. That this man holds a desire to write good poetry after moulding his life in the light of certain other lives is, for me, not only a logical thing, but something that has a certain moral and philosophical depth to it. I concede: I am concocting this. But the truth is also that I have a particular fascination for the subject of suicide. Many say this. Some writers deliberately say it. But they do not go on to actually commit suicide.

But we were considering the resemblance between the two doctors. What does the second doctor seem like? A diary-writer may perhaps strike one as being a narcissistic dandy. But what exactly does ‘narcissistic dandy’ signify? We say ‘bogus’, which is an English word: b-o-g-u-s—but what is the explanation for ‘narcissistic dandy’? Hark!—Dnyaneshvar would tell his audience. What should I say?—pay attention? Weave together the various threads. Exert your imagination to see the threads and their intermeshings. (‘To exert one’s imagination’—‘You sit on the fence, buddy, and send me in to fight’—is that how we exert our imagination? Sending it into the fray and watching as a spectator from the sidelines?)

There is a strong possibility, it appears, that ‘decent man’ would prove to be an erroneous characterisation. But some strands of the story show that this doctor grows with each incident and event that passes. He learns. And he remains standing. This too could be a meaning of decency. Perhaps the most important meaning of all. Though it is true that his study of Buddhism is not motivated by pure curiosity, his progressiveness cannot be overlooked.

But the fundamental question seems to have been side lined. What is similar in these two doctors? Nothing, it would seem. But there are: enduring failures, achieving successes, picking

oneself up each time and forging ahead, cheering oneself up, thinking about things. What then is the difference? Nothing but that they are two different individuals. Two. Different.

What is of essence is the story, not this matter of similarity and difference. What if I were to say at this juncture that this second story too is just as untrue? That it too is a fictitious tale, or a piece of lore? What would your reaction be? Or have you mixed up the two stories? That would be quite natural. It is hard to keep two stories apart when the key elements are alike. Just saying, we are not swans. But even a swan, scientists have demonstrated, cannot segregate milk from water. Anyway, it is not very appropriate to compare a story-reader to a swan. Nor are there any easy answers to the question of when a comparison is appropriate. And we have no reason to embroil ourselves in this dispute.

Dhrutarashtra was without sight; some construe this to be a blindness brought on by his undiscerning love for his sons. But is there such a thing really as 'blind love'? Love, whenever and wherever it is, is with sight always. 'Sighted love' has been the subject of numerous poems till date. (It is a pitiable prejudice that society has tenaciously held on to since time immemorial that a human lacking vision is also, for that reason, deficient in understanding. It becomes an inevitable task for the mainstream—of storytelling—to examine all such subtexts, strong and sickly as they are.) So there are no rules for interpreting stories. Nor should we allow a particular interpretation to colour our vision and our intellect. I say this in the flow of my articulation, but it cannot be taken as the moral of the story. They are another sort, the stories that have morals.

There was a swan. It wished to be a painter. Off it went to the riverside. (I assume that you are attentive to the sentence construction.) There was a bird in the river. The swan said to it, 'Swim, and I will paint a picture of you.' So the water bird began to swim. When the painting was done, the swan went into the dream of a bird. It said to the dream bird, 'Wake up, and I will paint a picture of you.' The bird woke. The swan disappeared. The goddess of the art of painting touched its disappearance, and the swan regained consciousness, memory, and intellect.

Such was the swan and such is its story. A story without morals. How can a story with a moral still be without morals? The swan is not a symbol of either of the two doctors. Once regarded as a symbol, an import can be drawn out of it. I have decided: I shall tell a clean story, one without any symbols.

This second doctor—'decent man', Buddhist, violin—turning real, met me about town. He said, 'All those things that you say—how experientially grounded are they?' I floundered. The doctor met me in the childhood village of fiction. He asked, 'How many prizes did you win at the prize distribution today?'

'Five,' I answered.

'I got six,' he said. Had the joy I had experienced on winning my prizes been real?

When I inhabited a dark room in town for six months, the doctor resided in a rented flat, and his wife was carrying a child. I would visit the stores that sold greeting cards and look at the

pictures and the girls. He would tell me, ‘The days, they belong to you.’ I held out a foolish dagger. The doctor in later days gave up medicine and gained renown as a composer and performer of songs; I never went to any of his performances. How bright was the beam of light that shone on the seemingly disconnected musical life of this doctor, or was it that I was watching a scattering of motes alongside a pristine river? Do such stories have a meaning?—I said this, with all my being, and behind the taste of the tender coconut stood an ocean.

A municipal corporation, no, a municipality. A very small village. Not one from the stories. The villages in the stories are populated by heavenly folks who are stern on the surface and all love inside. In our village, there was almost no love. Or was it that I seldom used the word ‘love’? It is hard to recall now. The doctor and I on parallel benches. Pals sometimes, sometimes darlings, sometimes at daggers drawn. In the gooseflesh-inducing quietude of the late afternoon, when the sky of life reflects in the water below, there cannot be a forgetting of our shared consciousness, his and mine. At what point, with what kind of precision, and to which mode of consciousness are the strings of one’s passion to be tuned? What are these exigencies that make me forget my storytelling? There are metres in a poem, there are meanderings and precise portrayals, and things come full circle. A story is dry in comparison. But call a story a tale and one feels nostalgic. One feels as though one is caught up in a reverie of remembrance.

This is a brief history of how I lost the threads of my story: I sat about thinking some random thoughts. At an old table in a solitary corner on the fifth floor. It was a dark afternoon. Sounds were near to none. I was telling myself the story of nearly the hundredth doctor. (Telling oneself a story: casting about for the story to tell the world, composing, imagining, playing around.) The hundred Kauravs came to mind. Dhritarashtra had one wife but a hundred sons. Pandu had two wives but only five sons, three plus two. Wicked Kauravs, and virtuous but dice-addicted Pandavs. Dronacharya, learned, but in league with the evil side, helpless. And all these men from the lineage of the creator of the Mahabharat himself. How interesting. But so many people, so many substories, so many women, weapons, years, lives. The table I am sitting at is old, true, but the Mahabharat is ancient. I mean, a man wedding two women, or a couple having one, two, five, a hundred or however many children, or the third-gender Shikhandi becoming a pivotal part of the war at a point, or the immortal Ashvatthama hankering after milk as a child—while his father was in penury—Bhim finding love with a demoness, demons living life rapaciously like humans, gods participating in human affairs, a body being impregnable due to a divine endowment, the loss of virginity—through an imagined fancy—and pregnancy, and that being socially unacceptable… What is all this?

What is all this?

As I sit pondering these matters, it comes to my attention that when I think, I notice several possibilities. Marriage. A male human and a female human. But suppose there are two men and a woman. Or two women and a man. But suppose this too—a man, a woman and no marriage, or a man, two women and no marriage, or ‘marriage’ not deemed the word for a situation, or people without marriage in their thoughts. Noticing all this, I wondered, How many stories like the Mahabharat can we tell? A thing could be put to use in one way and also in another. But not in yet another way. A bridge. Vehicles running up and down. A suicide. But a time there was when there were no bridges around. Imagine a time when there were no stories.

There was a doctor. He worked with dedication. But it never occurred to him to examine the foundations of allopathy. That was beyond his capacity perhaps. How shall I tell his story? Say, he lived for seventy-one years. In the seventy-first year, he died. Survived by his wife, a son, a daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. It is believed that newspapers do not tell stories, but only facts. Pay close attention now. Take any news and try to link it with the three stories of our three doctors. Sometimes, I feel (*Kabhi-kabhi mere dil me*…—everything is an imitation) that I should write the one-sided love story of that second doctor and his one-sided beloved, the self-absorbed Buddhist girl. That I should look for the state where one loses oneself in someone's eyes. But the search for possibilities has nearly been exhausted by the folks of the Mahabharat. One may then explore the possibilities of the sentence. And one may create a thing such as:
But the search for possibilities

Has nearly been

Exhausted

By the folks of the Mahabharat

One may then explore

The possibilities of

The sentence

Now we play. (Play = recreation = creation of the world, re-creation = divine play, dalliance.)

A doctor-hero

Eighteen years of age

A dream

The dream's letting him down

His picking himself up

His longing

For the life of poets

His yearning

For exceptional poetry

Twenty-nine years

Suicide

The story completed

Hark, esteemed listeners! Dnyanadev is here. Having abandoned his aspirations for samadhi. For us. The one of Dnyaneshvari. The one of Amrutanubhav. Put questions to him. Have a candid conversation.

Imagine that a listener gets up to ask a question, a question that everyone has on their mind. Narrating the story of the two, three, doctors, he asks Dnyanadev, 'Tell us, oh Dnyanadev, what is the meaning of it? That the story affects us deeply, what is the meaning of that? What is the remedy for it?' Dnyanadev is quiet. Unable to contain herself, another one asks, 'Oh Dnyanadev, why did you not write your biography? Why did you not demonstrate your human-ness? Why did you not write of your travails? You may yet pen a biography, Oh Dnyanadev.'

'These are possibilities,' says Dnyanadev, 'but history has closed them off to me. I am incarcerated in the rock of samadhi. If I have emerged from that rock, it is for this antique table in the shape of a violin.' And Dnyanadev relapses into quietude, a gentle smile irradiating his face. Whisper-dominated voices emerge from the audience that now pays him almost no attention.

We need an autobiography—

This is not true—

I need a story—

There can be no match for spirituality—

Such irradiance—

Life—

The twenty-first century the twentieth—

I—who converse with you while telling you the principal story—can easily create so many things out of myself.

Countless years were washed away in a rain of colourless sounds; countless writers met up with sadhus on the banks of the Ganga. But the sadhus journeyed on. Some writer then collected sand. Stored in it was history. Another one looked up to the Ganga as mother. In the spring of his writerly being, he remembered her. Writers exiled to foreign shores found flowers of snow. They were teased by girls of Chinese appearance dabbing their faces with embroidered handkerchiefs. They made the acquaintance of desi doctors who came running to their aid. They found ancient specimens among those. They grew versatile. They looked for gems among the answers that spread amid the questions. The shaping of the storyteller went on. Where are you? How far along have you come? I have something to say to you (too).

You may call me a scoundrel who plays with language, or you may call me a thief. Because you have secret afflictions. In secret places, imperative to be kept secret, better kept secret, possible to be wrapped in secrecy—such are your secret ailments. Such is your way of listening

to stories, such are your icons, such your history, your sadhus, your gods, your irrefutable evidence, your newspapers, your loves, your stories.

Read the original Marathi story here.

This is a translation of the original Marathi short story titled “Bhashik aani Sahityik Vishleshan” from *Vivade Vishade Pramade Pravase* (Shabda Publication, Mumbai, 2010, pp. 13-20).

The italicised English words are frequently used in spoken and written Marathi, but the narrator highlights their Englishness, hence the italicisation.

Who Owns Meera Bai?

Kumkum Sangari in Conversation with *Souradeep Roy*

The Rajasthan Sahitya Akademi has cancelled the 2017-18 Ragheya Raghav award that was to be awarded to Hardan Harsh for his book *Meera*. According to media reports, the award was revoked after "some local groups objected to the derogatory references to Meera Bai".

This week in *Guftugu*, we publish an excerpt from an interview with the academic Kumkum Sangari, who has worked extensively on oral traditions, especially the songs of Meera Bai. In the course of the conversation, Sangari explained the various interpretations of oral traditions. "To think of an oral tradition that produces a singular narrative is misplaced," she says.

Recently, North India was rife with tension over the depiction of Padmavati in a movie. A common thread that runs across all such opposition to retellings is the sentiment of hurt. What does it hurt? Honour. Female figures such as Padmavati and Meera Bai are often made repositories of an entire community's honour. "As a society, we do not have the courage to face the truth and we link our honour to our past," Harsh has said, in one of his statements to the media.

But do Meera Bai's songs carry this burden of honour? As Sangari says, the reception of these figures and the retellings are always determined by the social characteristics of class and caste of communities which retell them. For instance, Meera Bai's honour would be important for upper caste groups. "But," says Sangari, "Meera Bai songs are completely different when the lower castes sing them."

Barq

Sophia Naz

Kanchan Chander, 'Queer Moods', acrylic on canvas, 43 inches x 27 inches, 2017

In your teenage a niggling

detail kept on tugging

at the reins Buraq was

an anagram of burqa, winging

desire of a prophet on

his night journey painted

in lurid art of transport

half veiled on rickshaw truck and bus

drivers changing gears always

brushed up against your shalwar

leg jammed too tight to squirm

you would dream of the kick

as an anonymous horse-

woman would gut

his teeth in a flash

lightning bringing

a lost smile

back to your lips.

Barq is the Urdu word for lightning.

Shifting Status of a Region: Perspectives of Art History from Kerala

Kavitha Balakrishnan

As a theory of resistance to hegemonic standardisation that diminishes local differentiation, 'regional modernism' has been a relevant framework to historicise disparate artistic activities submerged in regional paradigms of cultures, languages and trans-migrating population of folk contemporary artists, etc., in India. We need to also consider that regional modernist arguments have also gained some negative dimensions in the forms of parochial attitudes like anti-urbanism, local exceptionalism, claims against cosmopolitanism, etc. Such dimensions seem to push any such scholarship to yet another, second-order standardising structure. Do the regional-modernist enquiries stem from merely academic premises and end at the same disciplinarian limits? How and where can we locate the political moments that push such enquiries about an art practice of a region? This essay is my attempt to locate certain landmark points of departure in the shifting status of a region called Kerala, as a possible location for regional modernist arguments. The artistic scenario of twentieth century Kerala is not yet well addressed by any sustainable methodology, unlike the case of Madras art movement that is often analysed as a site of the 'regional modern' [1]. A national discourse of art history synoptically represented regions as signifiers of all that is traditional and exotic, sometimes even a politically disturbing kind of exile and a longing in the work of migrant people from there. Politicising oneself was the alternative for the regionalised consciousness. The Malayalis started it with their art-student activism in the 1980s. The 'regional modernity' of Kerala demands a re-oriented, political rigour in a new context of internationalism in the age of large-scale exhibitions and cultural festivals.

Today, the young generation of art enthusiasts in Kerala has an easy access to a new mixed crowd of Biennial viewers. This has challenged the way art is understood in this region. We also need to look at the way the region is used as a token in new practices. We need to look at the way the regional artists and art institutions cannot easily participate in this process of change. In a surge of internationalist, artistic propaganda, there is an impression that the whole of twentieth century art history from a regional perspective is meager and no longer valid. My point is that an art history articulating the power-plays among the multiple registers of acknowledgements is necessary instead of a mere story of a (marginalised) region.

The Frameworks of 'Indian Art'

First of all, let me very briefly mention the methods we have often used to make sense of a Modern Indian art history. Many attempts were made to historically locate modern Indian art in the twentieth century. These include a chunk of materials like newspaper articles, informed academic articles, curated exhibitions, catalogues, artist-group manifestos, artist monographs, institutional biographies of major academic centers like Baroda and Cholamandal, a few anthologies of Indian Art like the 'Fifty years of Indian art', the conference proceedings of the Mohile Parikh Center, Mumbai 1997. And to suggest a few significant collections of critical perspectives, there are anthologies like 'Towards a New Art History' and 'Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism' [2].

Institutions are powerful in creating artistic tastes. Survey of the traditional past to historicise disparate sources of art in modern times; formation of pedagogic devices; and the generating of individual artist icons are the three major methods undertaken by institutions to make sense of Indian Art in the twentieth century. Surveys of the past often focus on the historical and on the aestheticised object. Right in 1948, such objects of Indian Art had emerged as a field of choice for the self-representation of the nation [3]. Art schools in Shantiniketan, Baroda and Madras have devised their own frameworks that organically evolved from specific historical moments, and they continue to play a major role in creating a sense of Modern Indian Art History. Interestingly, all these institutional cases inculcated a profound sense of a 'national experience' in the students by drawing their attention to the life of local people, small-town and village activities and the enduring traditions of craft surrounding these institutions. So, a closer observation and study, even the copying of forms and figures of both the traditional resources; and the direct, lived moment formed the ideational epicenters of modern Indian institutions of art vis-à-vis their locations. These were the mainstream methods that infused the indirect linguistic signification of 'roots' with the semiotics of a wider national culture [4].

Perhaps because of these varied institutional pressures, *Indianness* was also a strong point of reference for the making of an artist in India, whether he is an aesthetic idealist, narrative muralist or an artist who has turned into an icon. But throughout twentieth century, this artist-individual has had to inevitably respond to critique or legitimise his subjectivity vis-à-vis some western points of reference [5]. The twentieth century Indian artists generally looked like political idealists, deliberating on their national roots and uniqueness. The Indianness devised by the Bombay Progressives, for example, reflected their need for an individual's modern maneuvers to cater to the modern art market, initiated here by western auctioneers, which often fetishised these so-called modern objects of art. But artists like M. F. Hussain, F. N. Souza and Tyeb Mehta also emerged as the 'rebellious contenders'. Later, Hussain even happened to linger over the Indian public domain as a ghost of all that was secular and modern in the idea of this unified nation, raising questions about the diversity of religions and cultural expressions of the minorities.

In 2001, the 'Century Art' exhibition curated by Gita Kapur at the Tate Modern London loudly declared the connections between the metropolis and the creation of art. The role of Mumbai was also getting stamped in this as a powerful metropolitan location of 'Indian Art' by that show. While most of the exhibits relating to the major western cities were familiar, majority of the works from Rio, Lagos and Mumbai were being seen in the west for the first time [6].

I am going to take up this point of departure in this essay. The twentieth century Indian artist's national significance vis-à-vis the Euro-American world also marks her or his transgressions of regional life vis-à-vis the institutional imagination of a national art history. This imagination was, in effect, a problematic and synoptic view that could be criticised for not acknowledging its own impossibility of creating a unified national signification for modern art practices. It would be better to create a national, modern art that would also be a converging space of many methodologies that can deal with the socio-political conditions of life and art in their own terms in any location. Thinking of this possibility will also amount to a critique of the artificial category of a nation-state that politicises its own under-represented geographies and minorities.

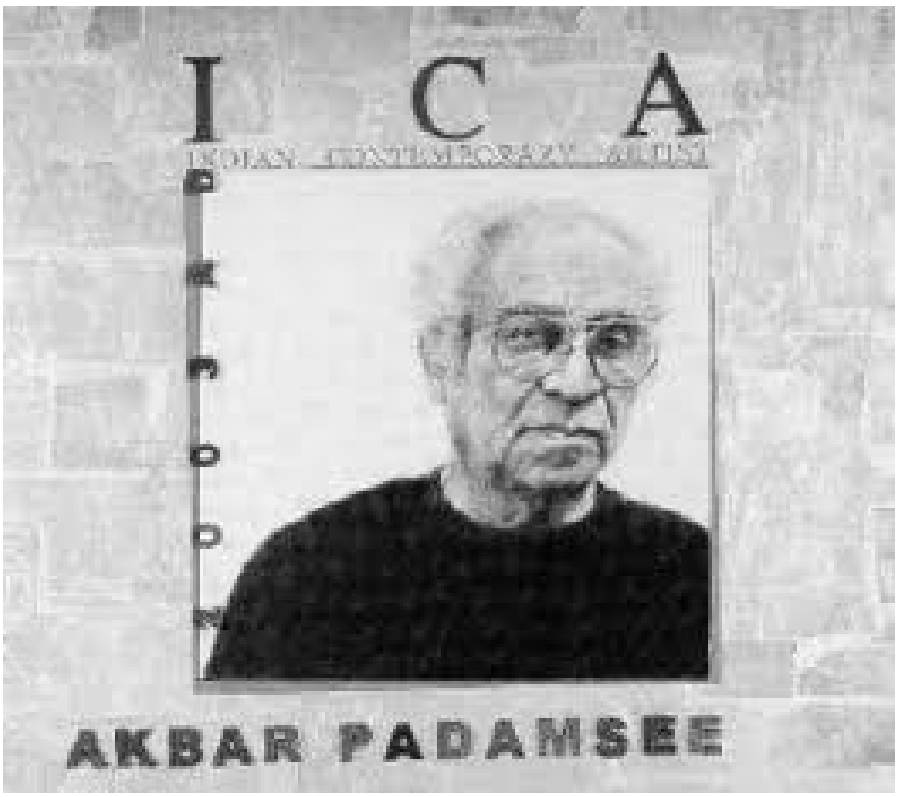
Contrary to general prejudice, the world of Modern Indian Art was not tamed by urbanism. Artists and institutions that could claim their agency beyond doubt could also gain a locational and geographical importance in a Euro-American art map, in spite of being smaller cities like Baroda or pastoral villages that contextualise Shantiniketan or a metropolitan city like Mumbai. But the emergence of the city of Mumbai as a melting pot of much that is Indian in Art also involved a new form of exclusive urbanism induced by neo-liberal conditions in India after 1990. Interestingly, the same contenders for representing the historical idea of national art were also understood as the ideological force behind this 'century city'; there was a co-existence of contradicting elements like the traditional and the modern, the colonial and the local culture, high art and folk art, etc. [7]

In the globalising decade of the 90s, the existential angst of the Indian artist was no longer a mere signifier in his art work but it became a force that bolstered her or his ambition to exist as an artist.

Bose Krishnamachari, 'Exist'/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

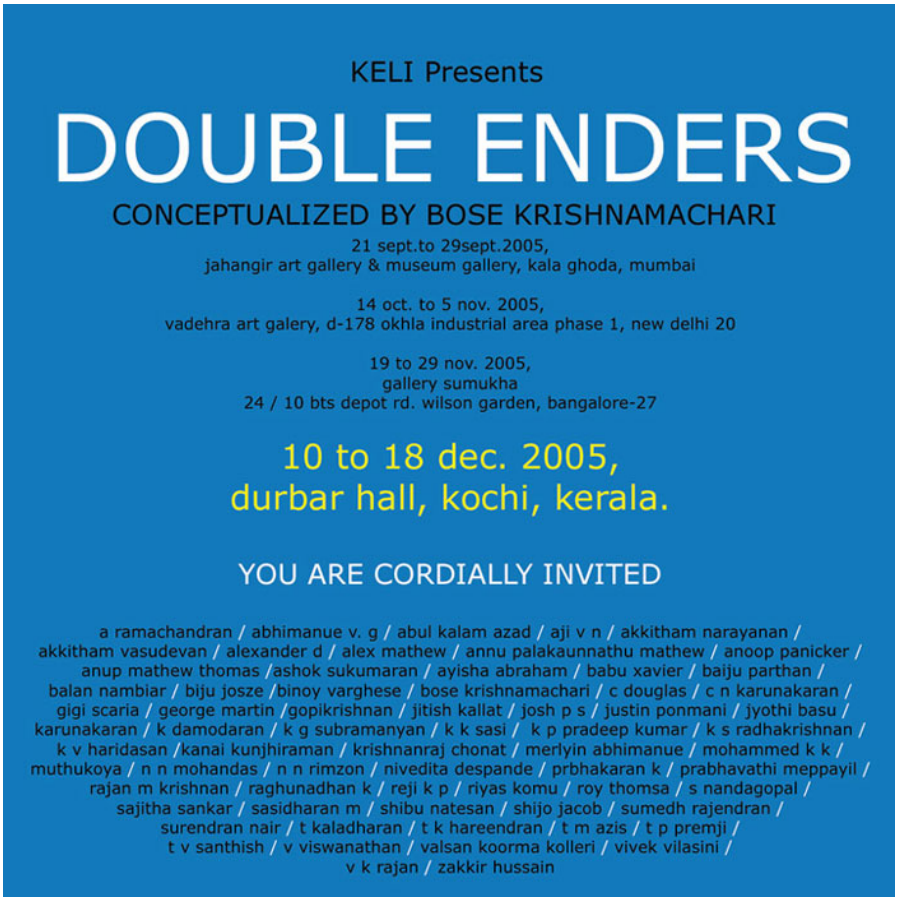
As Girish Shahane has observed, most of the Indian artists selected for 'Century City' either focussed on the sectarian violence which wracked the city in 1993, or responded to the imagery of popular culture, particularly commercial cinema, or critiqued some or the other aspect of globalised economy. There was no room for artists who had the courage to admit to his lack of convictions. This observation appears in the catalogue of another show called 'De-Curatiing Indian Contemporary Artists' that travelled to many different locations in India including Kochi in 2003. This show was an indirect response by Bose Krishnamachari , an artist from Kerala who migrated to Bombay to study art at the J. J. School of Art, to the curatorial premises of the 'Century City'. In spite of being a chronicler of Bombay, Bose's hesitance to take a

straightforward, and moral stand in the then globalised scenario, found him no place in the intellectual milieu of 'Century City'. Hailed as 'a handmade tribute to the memory of the whole-time worker, the artist', 'De-Curation' reflected his personal journey as a student of art and art history.



One of the customised portraits of the Indian Contemporary Artist 'De-Curating' by Bose Krishnamachari in 2003/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

Bose in 'De-Curation' proposed a neutral treatment by fashioning Indian contemporary artists he chose to paint as photographs. As Shahane observes, this itself was a kind of statement, resonating in its particular context, the need for an artist to exist in spite of his doubts about the moral stand in an Indian context vis-à-vis the globalised world. Bose was apparently not taking an outright regional stand then, but in the next two years he organised a show of artists with Malayali origins called 'Double Enders' at the Kerala Lalithkala Academy's Durbar Hall. Perhaps like any artist who cannot (or is not entitled to) take a stand in the national intellectual debate, the regions were also considered insignificant and hence marginalised due to their ambivalence about the idea of the nation. Regions often live in distinct 'other language spaces' that a national idea could only dub into traditions and tensions. The regions also had ambivalence because they needed to somehow exist within a larger idea.



The Show Invite, Durbar Hall Kochi, 2005/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

This existential angst had already surfaced in the mid-eighties through the activism of radical groups that comprised students of art, of Malayali painters and sculptors. They were in conflict with the mainstream intellectual sphere. Many untold stories of migrations from various corners of India had strong underpinnings of that brief period of radical activism and reached the institutional spaces of Indian Art even though it could not acquire a strong institutional base.

The Political Voices from the Regions

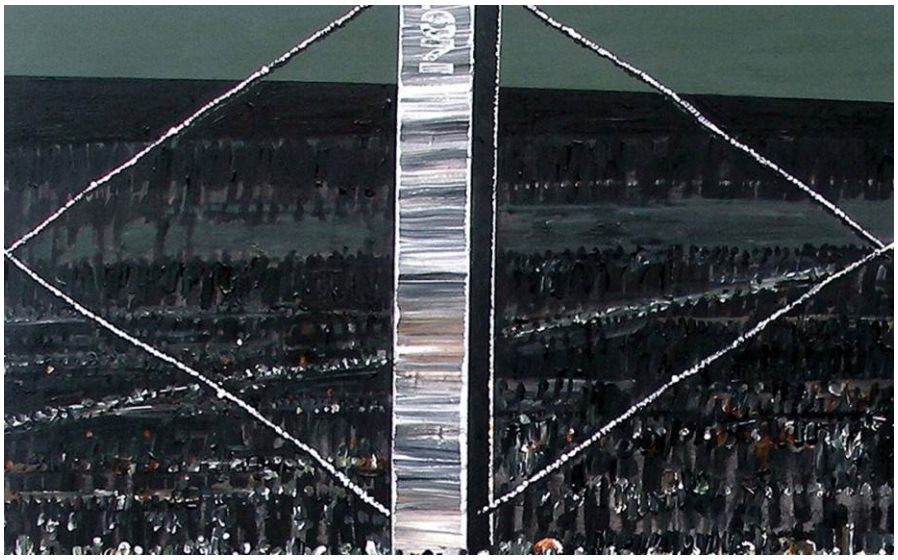
It is in such a context that regional modernism turns up as an argument with respect to the positioning of artistic practices, art works, artists and their lineages that are more or less marginalised during the making of a national history of 'Indian Art'. The regional resources were largely ignored despite their significance for a national art history [8].

Migrations of young people from the regions to the Indian city centres and academic art centres in search of the life of an artist happened because they found their region inadequate for achieving the life of an artist. They are enthused by what's out there.

Let me quote the contemporary artist late Rajan Krishnan from a catalogue note written for his final year exhibition at the Government College of Fine Arts, Thrissur, Specimen'37 in 2008.

I wished standing in front of a Cezanne painting that we too needed a painter like him. We needed a lot of artists who could inspire us, sometimes lead us. A Rembrandt, a Bruguel, a Vermeer, a Van Gogh, a Beckman, a Goya, an El Greco, a Picasso, a Dali, a Magritte, a Matisse, a Giacometti, a Pollock, a Kiefer, a Bacon, a Ritcher and there are many hundreds of them, but all in the west.

When such a feeling of lack is part of one's historical consciousness, it can be due to the absence of links, homes, a childhood; and even the inability to capture the present moment by favouring an imaginary future and an ahistoric past. One feels this lack when one leaves something but captures it in a way as though it was 'found' from another point. Such a self-reflexive experience involves an 'other-ing' in and out of one's location — a state of migration in essence. It could also produce an itinerant being [9].



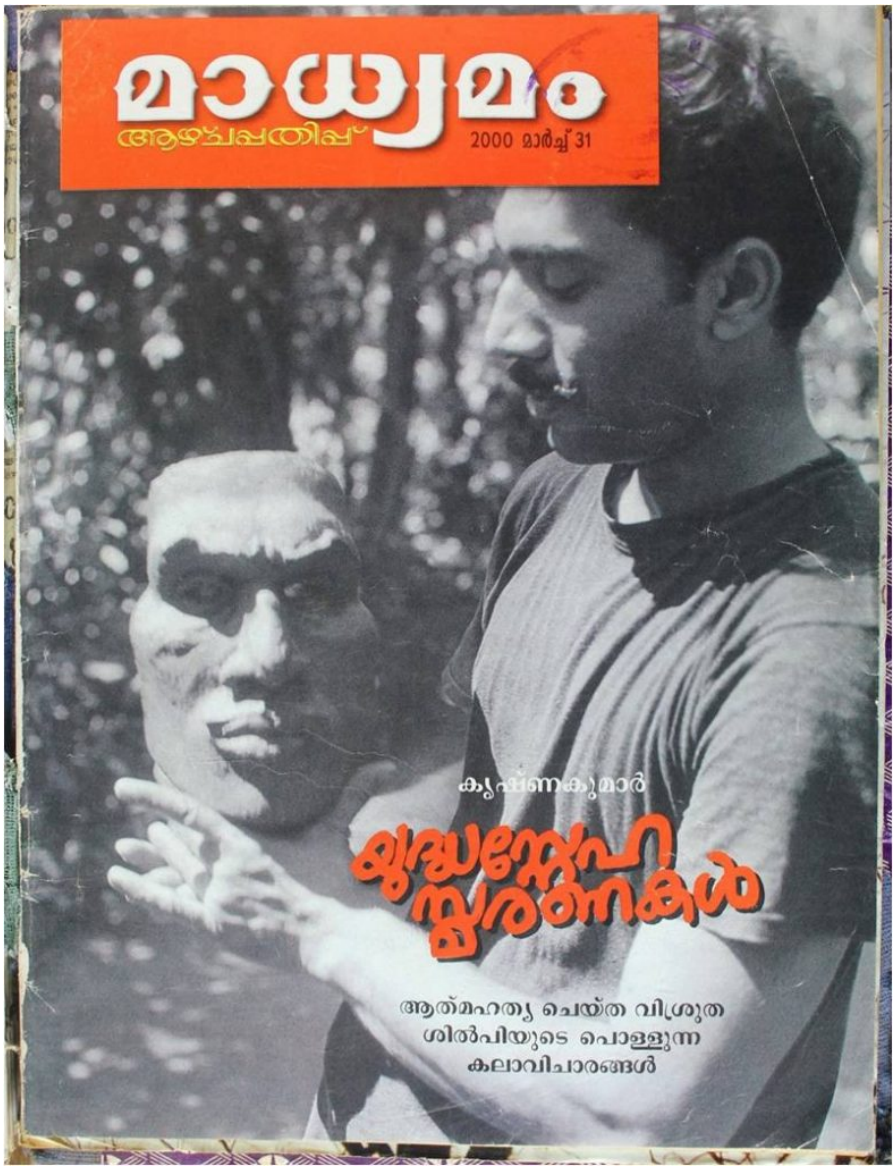
Rajan Krishnan, from the 'Wing' series/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

During the 1980s, the generation of art aspirants from Kerala who were accessing art education during the transitional phase of a regional institution (The Government College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum, Kerala) started shattering the illusion of what is 'out there' in the world of modern art by gaining exposure to the international scenario through books and journals. Fatal bureaucratic obstacles in a regional art college only increased their desire further for accessing art that veered in a different direction, evident in the art-student activism that led to hunger strikes, street campaigns, and poster-making to raise the local public conscience for art. During the 60s, the reason behind abandoning one's lesser territory (one's place of birth, where one grew up, spent one's childhood and teenage years) was mostly vocational. During the 80s, it was a result of an intellectual imagination that came from their social standing and class consciousness. They wanted to escape from the archaic distortions of the rhetoric of Indianess that they received in the Madras school brand of modernism. During this transitional phase, there were teachers in Trivandrum with the Madras school orientation. Moreover, they wanted to leave in order to resort to the imagination of a fraternity of artists to find an accessible social space vis-a-vis the institutional spaces that alienated them.

Alex Mathew, 'Portrait of Krishnakumar', cement, 1980/ Image courtesy: Alex Mathew

These young artists could only communicate with, and were inspired by, the Malayali intelligentsia driven by Marxist ideologies. This radial group's critique of the institutionalising of art and history was short-lived; and they also lacked resources and sustainable energy.

Sculptor Krishnakumar was the main mobilising force behind the radical group. Or, one may speculate that his suicide projected the intensity of a layered ideology gathered from a regional source like the Malayalam literary, political and intellectual circles that were not an active part of any national imagination of art at that time. The group was pulsating with personal, as well as political feelings of lack. The group's activities were perhaps attempts at romancing (because it emerged out of a sense of lack) with the other histories of art, as well as with one's own regional working class, finding the only space where the group communicated authentically.



Picture of the cover story on sculptor Krishnakumar in *Madhyamam Weekly* in 2003 to revisit the historic moment of the radical group/ Image Courtesy: Saju Kunjan

A post-globalisation world at the dawn of the twenty first century gives a picture that renders the very idea of a 'national history of art' unstable. This is exactly where Bose enters with his

strategic ambivalence and an absolutism of artist as 'a whole time worker', not somebody who is remembered for committing suicide but wins a space for himself by 'producing work'. The art market driven by the late capitalist economy deployed smarter strategies for adaptation and was more inclusive than any rhetoric of national art. The art market had already picked up from many 'exotic' stuff and random locations whether the source is mainstream or regionalised. This defies the logic of the center and the periphery that sustained the need for a regional modernism for long. In the changing scenario of the global art world of the late 1990s, local was also global, overlooking the very category of the national. This also hints at a need to re-locate the political importance of the 'region' towards an internationalist turn. It doesn't happen in many Indian regions, but when it does, it proposes a new problematic for the regional modern arguments.

For example, let me cite the discovery of Gopikrishna from Thiruvananthapuram as a contemporary artist:

Indian art circles discovered him around 2000. Once discovered, in several shows throughout the last decade it was proven that he is a repository of experience who had been undermined and ignored until then due to our attempts at modenising through colonial, and later secular modern, and post-independent patchworks. Gopikrishna re-captures the style of the post-Ravi Varma school of regional painters in Trivandrum, undocumented in any art history yet. Gopi's father and friends in that generation were among them — dedicated artists who painted royal curtains called *rangapadam*. Though their technique was foreign, art for them was a matter of devotion and commitment to a royal patronage that disintegrated in front of them, leaving them behind for a mere existence as orphaned artists in an alien system. Overlooking the very category of the national imagination in Gopikrishna's oeuvre, the idea and bodies of the locale that were once ethnographic docu-materials in a colonial context, now get the life of another idiom coming to us from a forgotten location, just like myths which were produced and carried through moral convictions. But the whole thing could be looked at differently by an urbanised Indian art viewer. I remember visiting the show 'Exile and Longing', a group of Malayali artists showing up at the gallery Lakeeren, Mumbai in 2000 when the noted curator Arshya Lokhandwala so excitedly mentioned how 'exotic' Gopikrishna's works looked. And 'exotic' was exactly the word used at that moment to refer to an artist who, it seemed, came from a dark and surreal continent of anthropomorphic beings.

Let me also briefly touch upon another artist whose work also marked a break in the modern national context. Contemporary artist Surendran Nair's iconic specters bring forth a peculiar regional citizenry, a hybrid folk. They catch the 'cosmic man' syndrome. It is also a difficult 'trickster act' that breaks in, just as the unconscious does, to trip up the rational (precisely not singularly national) situation. This is more relevant because these Indian folk elements were for long abbreviated as strange expressive motifs just signifying the ideal of a secular Indian nation. They are now so complexly mixed up with the homogenising religious majoritarianism in India's public domain.

Surendran Nair, 'Doctrine of the forest — an actor at play', 2007/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

Again, these are artists who symptomatically represent their historical moment as incoherent beings in an era of internationalism that controls their existence as regional and national citizens.

The 'Double' People

Here one can get back to the trajectory of an artist like Bose Krishnamachari who was instrumental in organising a Malayali art work force. His shows like 'De-Curating Indian Contemporary Art' (2003), 'Bombay Boys' (2003) and 'Double Enders' (2005) were landmarks in establishing the lingua franca of contemporary art especially for an art community based in or geared towards Kochi. An interesting fact he deployed in 'Double enders' is that simply by the creation of the region as a center, as a pivot, need not always be a parochial issue if it also simultaneously makes its basics right for an institutional practice.

In the current decade, we see the careers and works of many noted artists of Malayali origin who have mobilised with Bose. Some of them have been divided between two locations and two experiences in their lives while some were more comfortable 'Bombay Boys', typical expatriates from the regional state who found that Bombay made them alert and dexterous which in turn made one a 'problem solver' while the regions were dark mysterious spaces full of history and grandiose associations. This is a 'Malayali work force of art' one may say because they were shedding all rhetoric for patronage of the art market. They merged into the sphere of a comfortable high-profile life of a daily art practitioner who produces art objects demonstrating skills that can be capitalized on for a powerful system. This strategy of neutrality ended up in a political alignment with the late capitalist logic.

Crisis in the System and Search for New Relevance

The global economic crisis altered the tune of this alignment by 2010. From mere existential anxiety, art practice needed a different and stronger reason to sustain itself. Crisis of the system pushed people to address the deep-rooted question: what exactly is the reason behind our rigid institutionalism and as a fall out effect of that, the marginalisation of the other? Modern Indian Art still needed to find its social relevance[10]. We find that the symptomatic connections for each institutional location and the artist-individual's iconic languages with the larger idea of the Indian state in the twentieth century were virtually the effect of their relevance in a limited architectonic space of a city or small town.

Initiated by Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale was branding a second tier Indian city Kochi in terms of its abstractedly conceived cosmopolitan history in an extended Musiriz location which is an ancient trade route. It also took the challenge to arouse the Indian public's desire for large scale exhibitions. An unrealized effort at the Delhi Triennial was a point of reference. Kerala government was brought into its own and took the responsibility to help develop an artistic context in the region. But the whole project was thrown into the region from some unknown corner. No prior public dialogues with the existing regional institutions for culture and art was initiated. Their agency in this radical shift was totally denied. This really politicised the region's artistic public who alleged scandals on one hand and put defenses on the other hand. But I believe, this was the most poignant situation created in India's history of art because it was also generating some significant questions from a regional context, generated primarily from its regionalised condition.

The three editions of the biennales have, so far, created great shock through art and culture in

this region, demanding the need for both 'culture consumers' and an informed viewership for art. This has raised the need for various tones of art writing in both Malayalam and English. It has also exposed a huge gap in communicating art to an audience which has different orientations. Any discussion of the latter part is beyond the scope of this essay. So, as a regional insider, let me confine myself to certain reflections about this new scenario which can further shed light on the political undercurrents of these changes in the regional experience.

Let me touch upon a few connecting threads of 'regional modern conditions', in other words, the marginalising forces still actively working in the Biennale times.

Which art world does one belong to?

Five years back, in a review of our degree shows, written in *Art and Deal*, I had expressed a few concerns: What are the art worlds and art histories that matter to the art students in front of me? This was what I had in mind as an art history teaching faculty at Government College of Fine Arts, Thrissur, an institution that has a century-long 'silent past' in art instruction activities. Art history lessons already give them both 'Euro-centric' and 'nationalist' legacies of art, and an image of an ambiguous art world is generally conveyed. That does not necessarily impart the right to experience in one's own vicinities the 'edgy new'. Unless the art institution is directly situated in a place with developed gallery practices and overcomes bureaucratic obstacles to critically connect with mainstream discourses, an experience of transforming one into the life of an 'artist' when one clearly asserts ones agency and authorship, is staved off. When one is left to wait, one is either regionalising oneself or is being regionalised by others.

Atul Dodia, Bose Krishnamachari and Jyothibasu with the students of the Government College of Fine Arts, Thrissur, May 2010/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

Let me connect this with another instance of the experience of meeting two visiting faculties: In

the first instance, Bose Krishnamachari exhorted the students to make a list of world's ten leading artists, museums and collectors. The students generally showed a resistance and boredom in this googl-ing exercise given as assignment. They seemed to have had in mind the question: 'Where do I or we picture in this art world?' The other visiting faculty was a local wood carver Mr. Shankaran, who did not test the students' artificial belongingness to any strange 'art world', but he turned himself into a silent specimen of a carver with tools. More than an artist, Mr. Shankaran was a specimen who might represent an under-represented archaic artist figure possibly found in the mythology of Gopikrishna's paintings.

Wood carver Shankaran as visiting faculty at the Fine Arts College, Thrissur, with students and teachers/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

While the pedagogic practices should clearly articulate such multiple layers of contradicting art practice specimens, what is initiated by the growing biennale institution is a survey-type methodology and a tokenistic attitude. Let me list some instances. The first one is the student biennale. In the second edition, the display of art works curated by a select set of young curators assigned to various Indian regions showed a very irresponsible alignment, without really generating any specific insight into the scenario of Indian art institutions. The second student biennale was an improved and smarter display, but it lacks any art-historical articulation. This exercise only makes the biennale institution an 'inclusive desirable and representative machinery' for the young minds.

Student's Biennale display, 2016/ Image courtesy: Kavitha Balakrishnan

Another instance pertains to my own personal differences in perspective related to the intentions of a trend of archival exhibitions in contemporary art. For the first edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012, my research and documentation of periodical print-picture practices in Malayalam was further selectively displayed through a collaboration called 'varavazhi' initiated by Riyas Komu. An archival show, 'Re-visiting the print-pictures' was executed.

Re-curating periodical print pictures by Varavazhi

It looked like a curious archive floating in the gallery, reflecting the missing cultural threads of communication just suggesting that there are some such undercurrents of a discreet visual field of a region like this in contemporary life. The critic's register was unclear in that show. I was not simply a participant in these regional materials, but by choosing to investigate, write and curate it, I also wanted to expose a male-dominated and thoroughly regionalised field of Indian culture of the twentieth century literate reader-viewer. This was only tested later in a rural art project I had initiated at a place called Mathilakam.

Propaganda of art can create passive spectators as is evident by the increasing number of visitors to Kochi biennale. But, actively informed critical viewership for art is also a result of this. That evokes the need for alternative practices and that alone will directly address the social life of art and artists.

Let me mention one such instance. In the rural art project at Mathilakam, Thrissur district that I initiated as an independent segment in the Chilappathikaram Festival as part of the second edition of Kochi biennale, Abul Kalam Azad, a contemporary photographer based in the temple village of Thiruvannamalai, did a photography project titled 'Black Mother — Contemporary Heroines'. He documented the contemporary women in Mathilakam village. The language he employed was that of an anthropological gaze towards 'native women' that we are quite familiar with. But the process involved a stranger man's access to the females at their households, breaking a dialogue with them regarding Kannagi, the heroine of *Cilappathikaram*. The dialogue proved that the contemporary women at this village are, by and large, unaware of this heroine, even though the festival organised by biennale was celebrating the spirit of Kannagi uncritically, as an element of propaganda of a new rhetoric of empowered women. Azad celebrated the heroines of his photographs by displaying them on bill boards in the locality. The families of some 'contemporary heroines' were irritated. Though they cooperated with the photographer's request to be his fancy models for the art project, it was embarrassing for some women to see themselves blown up as real life images. The vinyl displays were soon dismantled to avoid unrest in the village.

Images in the 'Black Mother' project/ Image courtesy: ETP, Thiruvannamalai

The argument of this essay is that the history of art from the perspective of Kerala (or any regionalised location in the twentieth century for that matter) is gaining more importance as a layer among many layers that can make a region in a post-globalisation world, a container of a very complex network of artistic attitudes. We recognise this perhaps not through artistic significations alone, but more through an analysis of the art-public that is created today, especially in such 'biennale regions'. A new mixed breed of spectators, informed, ill-informed, half-informed and even challengers, are created for the singular establishment and the growth of exhibition institutions like the Biennale. They also grow outside the more exclusive gallery spaces and their stalls in art fairs. This, in effect, touches upon the question, 'what is the social capital of contemporary art?' The regional biography of art in Kerala will not be necessarily the same as the art history of a city called Kochi as a biennale location. Like the paradigm of 'Indian Art' in the twentieth century, Kochi is a city within and without its region. But the Malayali public experiences belongingness to and alienation from both. There is a pervading sense that any public beyond the borders of nationality can randomly take shape in the name of art. This is a new mode of artistic urbanity possible in a region, and that is under construction. And the question that would arise there would perhaps be, 'what happens when the archives of the 'unclaimed modern' in Modern Indian Art meet the politics of display of the Biennales, cultural festivals and such large scale expositions?'.

1. Ashrafi Bhagat, *Framing the Regional Modern: K C S Panikker and the Madras Movement*, Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2011. Bhagat also curated the show titled 'Regional Modernity: The Madras Art Movement 1960s-1980s' for NGMA, Bangalore, March 2017.

2. Shivaji Panikkar, Parul Dave Mukherji, Deeptha Achar (ed.), *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art: Essays Presented in Honour of Prof. Ratan Parimoo, DK Printworld*, 2003; *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism*, Deeptha Achar, Shivaji Panikkar, Tulika Books, 2012.

3. Tapati Guha Thakurta, 'Instituting the nation in Art: Fifty Years of Indian Art' NCPA, 1997, on an exhibition of the masterpieces of Indian Art at the Government House, New Delhi, in 1948.

4. For instance, an influential teacher like N.S. Bendre in Baroda proposed 'Indianness' as that which reflected the ideas that had developed in Mumbai and his short stay at Shantiniketan: the two dimensionality or restriction of space, the accent on line etc. But above all, Bendre asked the students to observe local activities, bazaars, railway stations and melas to derive types from these first-hand experiences of Indian life. (As remembered by Ratan Parimoo in a survey of the supporting critical writing on art. Publications, magazines, journals, polemics. Ibid, p-56.

5. If revivalism as an attitude and an ideology is distinguished from Bengal school style, then it will be possible to realise its abiding consequences, which have served as a propulsive phalanx in the twentieth century. For the first time, the Indian painter felt a sense of confidence in his capacity to create art that is of great significance to the world, because in the past we had been able to do so, (hence the relevance of glorification of past achievements). He did not have to trail behind the West nor was he an inferior counterpart of the European artist (which was what the followers of the realistic style had considered themselves) — *The Three Tagores*, the doctoral thesis of Ratan Parimoo as quoted by the author , Ibid, p-57.

6. Ayyub Malik, review of the exhibition 'Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis'.

7. Ibid.

8. I have instances from my personal research to prove the difficulty of finding an already existing 'national' significance for a local visual culture — The popular periodical and media industry and the literary illustrations nurtured by regional language literature as influential cultural contenders in Malayalam periodical magazines. It produced wonderful illustrators and significant artistic agencies. But it was not easy to historicise it in any available discussion of national art history. Moreover, the region has no consistent discourse of art writing or art history. But an extensive archival methodology I employed has now devised something like an art history of a 'reader-viewer' who definitely has a pan-indian existence. The political role of literacy and the rise of literate subjectivities like readers, viewers and editors in creating discreet environments of visual cultures within the language regions in India remain relevant materials for locating complex sites of modern Indian art histories.

9. See, 'Real Fantasy Masters: Musings on Some Artists *in or from* Kerala' article by the author, ART etc magazine, Vol.1, No.3, 2010.

10. 'Social relevance of art as a primary prerogative is determined by the elite class but it is the same that young artists from the regions claimed their share for. 'Art movements' in India are merely instances of coming together of artists as groups for practical purposes. Further, these movements are inconsequential as far as the nascent aspiration for social space for art is concerned.' – Shivaji Panikkar on art movements and social space.

After Mahabharata

To Karthika Nair

Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee translates 'महाभारत के बाद' by *Uday Prakash*

S. H. Raza, Untitled, oil on board, 37 x 25 cm, 1964

The dhobi's son is a little mischievous

And he lacks civility altogether

He wants to watch *Mahabharata* on TV and brings

Even his filthy sister along

There will be a day this serial would end

Then Dhritarashtra

Will wander all over Delhi, asking for a dhobi's address

And the noise from horns will repeatedly strike his ears

After *Mahabharata* ends, says the wheel of time,

Only horns blare,

And even on searching, a dhobi is found nowhere in Indraprastha.

After *Mahabharata*,

On everyone's clothes you find stains of blood.

धोबी का लड़का कुछ शैतान है
और सभ्यता की उसमें निहायत कमी है
वह महाभारत देखना चाहता है टीवी में और अपने साथ
अपनी मैली-सी बहन को भी ले आता है

एक दिन ऐसा होगा कि यह सीरियल खत्म हो चुका होगा

फिर तो धृतराष्ट्र
पूरी दिल्ली में पूछता फिरेगा किसी धोबी का पता
और उसके कान से टकराएँगी लगातार हार्न की आवाजें

महाभारत के खत्म होने के बाद कालचक्र कहता है कि
सिर्फ हार्न बजते हैं
और खोजने पर भी इंद्रप्रस्थ में कहीं कोई धोबी नहीं मिलता।

महाभारत के बाद
हर किसी के कपड़ों पर दिखाई देते हैं खून के दाग।

In Conversation with Vocalist Askari Naqvi

To mourn is to heal. But at a time when mourning is confined to our social media pages, performed through the endless sharing of images and posts whose impact lasts only as long as it takes the sharer to create and circulate them, let us pause to reflect on other ways of mourning, and what is perhaps more crucial for our times, collective mourning. In this conversation with *Guftugu*, well-known vocalist and performer Askari Naqvi helps us understand the history and form of the *Soz-khwani;* and its reincarnation as a mainstream ritual of mourning outside of its religious context.

I Want to Live

Surjit Akre

Violence against women – it's everywhere in India today; on the streets, in the campus, in the fields, in the police station, at home. By day or night; in language; and in action that reduces the woman to an object, and a man to a beast.

Untitled, 21×15', oil on canvas, 2013

In a collection of fifty recent paintings, Surjit Akre raises her voice, as woman and artist, against this incessant, all-pervading violence that dehumanises both the victim and the perpetrator.

Untitled, 21×15', oil on canvas, 2013

"I was very disturbed after I heard about the [December 2012] rape. I started painting my anger on canvas. That is how the collection *I Want to Live* evolved…" *Surjit Akre*

Untitled 18.5×11.7', oil on canvas, 2013

Untitled, 21×15', oil on canvas, 2013

Untitled, 18.5×11.7', oil on canvas, 2013

Ravana's Fortress

Ambai

Translated by *Aniruddhan Vasudevan*

Emily Carr, 'Big Raven', oil on canvas, 1931/ Image courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery

When she entered that suburb of Paris where a lot of Tamils lived, the first thing that met her eye were the crows. Her mother used to say that crows were the forms our ancestors took. Had her ancestors now crossed the oceans and arrived in Paris? These were not the crows that cawed. These sat in silent penance on electric wires. Perhaps they were displaced crows. Whatever they were, they calmed her anxious heart.

The cause of her anxiety was the fact that she had agreed to give a talk at the Tamil association in the neighbourhood. It was only after she had already accepted the invitation that her Sri Lankan friend explained the complexities involved.

Her name was Tiripurasundari. It was perhaps the fact that she was a doctor that made them excited about listening to her. They might expect her to draw from her experience as a physician and provide some spiritual insight that could redeem them from their lives of displacement. What is more, the title of her talk had the word 'culture' in it. That word might have unleashed in their minds the images of iconic Tamil women: the one who looked at the sky and commanded it, 'Rain!'; the one who made the rope in a well stand suspended in mid-air; the woman who asked, "Did you think I was a crane, Konganavaa?" and challenged the spiritual

powers of a holy mendicant with the power of her chastity, reminding him of the time he had cursed and burned to death a crane that had shat on him by mistake; the woman whose womb is said to have resembled a lion's den; and the valiant mother who said, "If I find a wound on my warrior son's back, I will cut asunder my breasts that gave him suckle." Her Sri Lankan friend had pointed out these possibilities.

The friend had also told her that if she had assumed that she could use 'culture' as a bait and pretty little fish would come leaping towards it, she was hugely mistaken. What she ended up catching might be large whales that she could not reel in. If she had given a safe title to her talk, such as "Womanhood in Bharati's Vision" or "The Tamil Women Depicted in the Thirukkural," there wouldn't have been any hassle.

The friend said she would stay with her through the talk, like a security squad offering protection. The crows stared at her accusingly.

The people who came to receive her had moved to Paris thirty years ago. They looked like they took delight at the mere sweetness of spoken Tamil. First there was breakfast at the residence of the secretary of the association. Idlis soft as jasmine flowers, sambar, and chutney powder mixed with sesame oil. And Mysorepak too. They served her with love. Those who wrote travelogues in the sixties might have been flattered by such a reception. They might have been overcome with emotion and might have wondered aloud if it was some past-life connection that brought them to these people who made and served Tamil food oceans away. But she was taken aback when idlis were laid on her plate accompanied by a comment about how someone who was to talk on tradition must be served traditional food. She had planned a completely different approach to the idea of tradition in her talk.

She was born in a family of practitioners of medicine who were famous in the field of obstetrics. She had apprenticed with her father, mixing medicines, looking for medicinal roots, gathering herbs, crushing them, and extracting their juices. But despite her able assistance, her father was sad that he did not have a son to carry on the family's traditional profession. Those who came to her for treatment often asked her if there was a way for them to conceive a male child. The midwives she met in several villages spoke to her about how the little specks of paddy they had fed into the nostrils of female infants had come to haunt them in times of exhaustion, choking their throats while they were eating. Her widowed aunt had to leave her marital home and seek refuge with Tiripurasundari, because the aunt wanted to send her girl child to school. There were many such experiences she could draw from.

Tiripurasundari looked at her friend in distress, but she only shrugged, suggesting it was too late to do anything. She'd already placed her head on the grinding stone.

Women in saris and salwar kameez were standing outside the hall where the talk was to happen. They hugged and greeted each other French style. None of the youngsters could speak Tamil; they spoke to one another in French. They stood aside and looked at her as if she were a strange creature. Older people came closer and asked her how many children she had and what her husband did for a living.

Before the talk, the secretary of the Tamil association spoke to her in great detail about the association's activities – Pongal celebrations, Bharati poetry contests, kolam contests, dramas, lectures, Tamil classes, debates (topics: 'Who is greater in chastity – Kannagi or Madhavi?', 'Who really runs the family – husband or wife?', 'Which is better – love marriage or arranged marriage?' etc.)

Once she finished her talk, some people stood up in outrage. "Do you mean to say men should wear the taali around their necks?" asked a man in great anger, taking a perspective that had nothing to do with her talk. Some people clapped for him. Another man said, "I came here hoping you would talk about the greatness of the Tamil clan that was born before there was stone and sand on this planet," and he kept his hand on his waist and paused dramatically. People raised noises of support. He told her that he had driven over a hundred miles to listen to the talk and that he was disappointed. Hearing that her name was Tiripurasundari, another man said he had come thinking he was going to listen to a writer who lived in Africa for many years and wrote under the pen name 'Lakshmi'. When someone informed him that it was several years since 'Lakshmi' died, he looked sad. Someone else was offended by her remark that a very strong rodent poison was needed to kill all those pompous culture bandicoots who made their noises sitting safely in their holes and burrows in the murky terrain of culture. He said it was an incendiary speech that could lead the younger generation astray. No one really heard her friend's thoughts on the subject.

The women in the audience stayed silent. When the crowd started dispersing slowly, the younger people approached her hesitantly and started speaking to her in English. Questions and opinions started to emerge.

"Aunty, do girls our age in Chennai feel free to talk to men?"

"My mother says I should not speak to a boy in my class. She says it is not our culture to do so."

"My mother eavesdrops whenever I am on the phone."

"Do you draw kolams in the morning and pray to god?"

"Was Kannagi a real person?"

"Do you cover your TV, DVD player, VCD deck and all that with cloth covers? Why do you do that?"

"In India, do young girls always wear davani, half-saris?"

"Do they only marry the men their parents find for them?"

Those youngsters didn't ask her what caste was. They had no doubts or objections about it. They said that was how things worked. They were very sure of that fact that it was an age-old thing, that it would not change, and that it shouldn't either.

On her journey back from the event, she didn't see the crows. Perhaps they had flown back to their nests. Midwife Angamma hated crows. Whenever she saw crows, she would say, "So pitch

black, it reminds me of the eyes of that child, Sundarimma. When I placed the grains of paddy in its nostrils, the infant opened its eyes like a crow and looked at me. The crow which sat on the kitchen window sill the next morning, crowed till the afternoon." And her grandmother would sit on the front veranda, shooing away crows, and saying, "This is not a crow. This is the crow demon." She wondered if the crows here would remind her of Hitchcock or of Bharatiyar's Nandalala, the god Krishna, whose vision he glimpsed in the black of a crow's wings.

The people with whom she was going to stay had given her the name of the metro station where she should get down. Only when she and her friend got off from the train did they realise there were many exits to the station. When they chose one of them and stepped out, Paris had changed.

The vegetable shops she had seen in the morning were not there anymore. The streets were dimly lit, and the houses looked like owls. If they walked past a certain street, they would get to another one. Then they would turn into yet another street. If they walked all the way down that street, they would reach a dead end. If that happened, they would retrace their steps, then they would find a cross street. It felt like they kept walking in circles.

The experiences at the event and the fatigue from all this walking had made her friend irritable. Suddenly, a large French bandicoot ran across the street. Hearing her scream, her friend said sarcastically, "Why do you scream? This too is a culture bandicoot!"

They had to continue walking through the crisscrossing streets. That's when she was reminded of that game.

The game of finding one's way through a maze. You think you have found the exit and you find yourself hitting dead-ends. After a lot of twists and turns, you are once again at the entrance. It was said that the wax palace that the Kauravas built for the Pandavas had many such maze pathways. They said that even the forts in the old days were built this way. Sometimes a winding passage from inside a fort would take you right inside the sanctum of the main temple. With a pencil, she had traced these pathways drawn in the puzzles printed in magazines. Once during her travels, she had even played in a maze in a garden somewhere. Even in labs, it was in such mazes that they made rats run through winding, crisscrossing, dead-ending pathways, didn't they?

She recalled that in some places they called such structures Ravana's Fortress, and she shared this information with her friend. And by then they realised that their destination was right in front of them. Now they had to press the numbers on the gate outside. But in the surrounding darkness, they couldn't see the numbers. Her friend hadn't brought her glasses with her, and hers were in the room. While they were wondering if they were indeed at the right house and if they had pressed the correct number, the gate opened noisily.

"Ravana's fortress has opened its gates," she said to her friend.

"Get inside quickly before it closes again," her friend replied.

Once they parted for the night and she lay on her bed and closed her eyes, she saw visions of

winding streets. Streets with no beginning or end. Sudden turns and crooked pathways. Bandicoots were running here and there. And overhead, crows flew with their dark wings outstretched, as if they were floating. One of the bandicoots banged itself against a dead-end, lay there, and looked at her. Suddenly she heard the bandicoot speak in Solomon Pappaiah's voice explicating the Tirukkural. It also spoke in Sivaji Ganesan's voice from the film *Manohara*, and asked, "Are you going to be patient even now?" And in Kannamba's voice, it replied, "Especially now." Then it broke into a lullaby: "On a silver tablet, with a diamond-tipped stylus, for you to learn sweet Tamil alphabets, your uncle will come and take you to school; he will hold you in a tight embrace." That was followed by a love duet: "Oh brand new book, I am the poet who shall turn your pages," to which the heroine sang in reply, "I am the beloved of this poet who sings songs from my pages."

The crows started flying low. One of them flew particularly low and caressed her cheek with its wing before flying away.

Read the original Tamil story here.

The English translation of the story was published in the collection *A Night with a Black Spider*, Speaking Tiger, 2017.

The Tamil original was published as "Ravanan Koattai" in the collection *Oru kaRuppu Cilanthiyudan oor iravu*, Kalachuvadu Publication, 2013.

The Plain of Aspiration

Paula Sengupta

A photograph of the installation

The Plain of Aspiration is part of the larger project *INTO EXILE*.

Following the 14th Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet into exile in India in 1959, over 120,000 Tibetan refugees have fled their homeland in an effort to practice and conserve the Tibetan way of life. Severely threatened by the increasing Sinicization of the Tibet plateau, the immensely rich religion, language, culture, heritage, and unique habitat of this peace-loving people today faces extinction.

INTO EXILE is an artist project that reflects upon this deeply problematic situation, especially the eradication and sacrifice of habitats, lifestyles and cultures to inevitable transformations in systems of government and leveling of social structures that became a phenomenon of the modern world. Largely developed from stories of exiled Tibetans, this project dwells on memory as a repository and re-creation of a culture, and the struggle to hold on to a cultural

identity that is today severely threatened by two generations of Tibetans in exile who have never been inside Tibet.

Rumtek Monastries, Sikkim, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

Tabo Monastery, Spiti, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

The work in *INTO EXILE* draws heavily on the indigenous craft and textile traditions of Tibet, as also the religious symbolism, rituals, and practices of Tibetan Buddhism — all of which constitute the cultural pivot around which their society revolves. The Tibet plateau lies contiguous with the high altitude plateaus of the Indian and Nepal Himalayas, which are the last unthreatened bastions of the Tibetan way of life.

Bodhgaya, Bihar, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

Nalanda, Bihar, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

Ghar Gompha, Nepal, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

Boudhanath Stupa, Kathmandu, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

For over a decade now, I have traveled to these and other locations on the “Buddha trail” — in the Indian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia. While some of these are historical monuments today, others are living heritage sites. Yet others are not heritage sites or monuments at all, but seats of living Buddhism. These journeys of inhabiting place trace the land; physical geographies that are intrinsically connected with the Buddha across the subcontinent and beyond.

Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

Sarnath Stupa, Uttar Pradesh, 42” x 30”, wooden pankha-holder, woven grass & and cotton cloth pankha, and embroidery & applique on silk

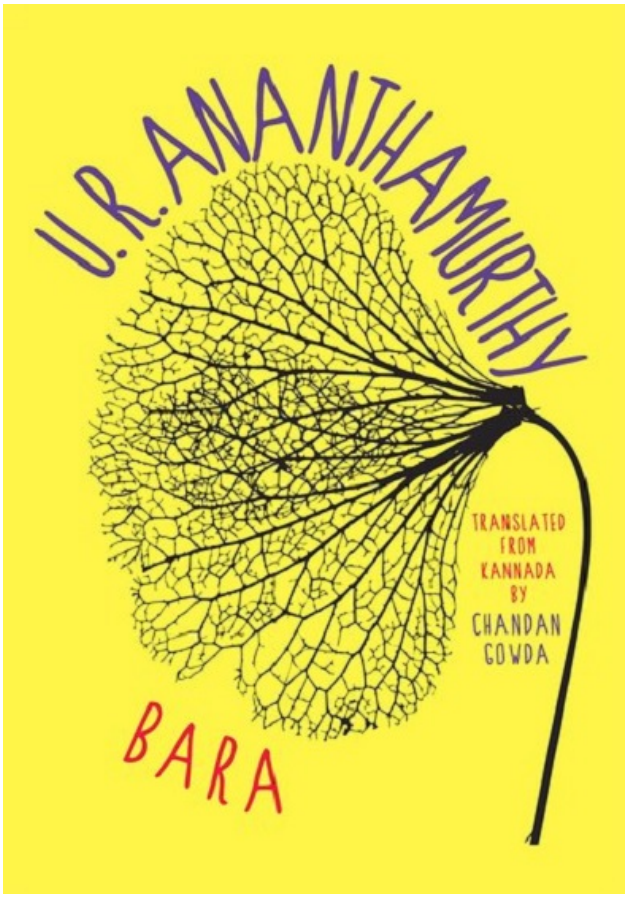
The Plain of Aspiration is thus a mapping of movement and territory that positions a deeply personal travelling narrative of contested sacred geographies, traversing eight contested Buddhist sites that I have travelled to.

It is an interactive installation, where the work takes the shape of a traditional hand-pulled pankha — a familiar object in tropical countries up until the Colonial era. Its aesthetic manifestation here is intended to reference the functional, the performative, and the participatory. The fans are functional and viewers can pull them like the *punkhawallahs* of yore. Thereby, the work activates itself, and the viewer is invited to metaphorically ‘travel’ the map.

A Less Violent Act

Translating the Inner World in U R Ananthamurthy's *Bara*

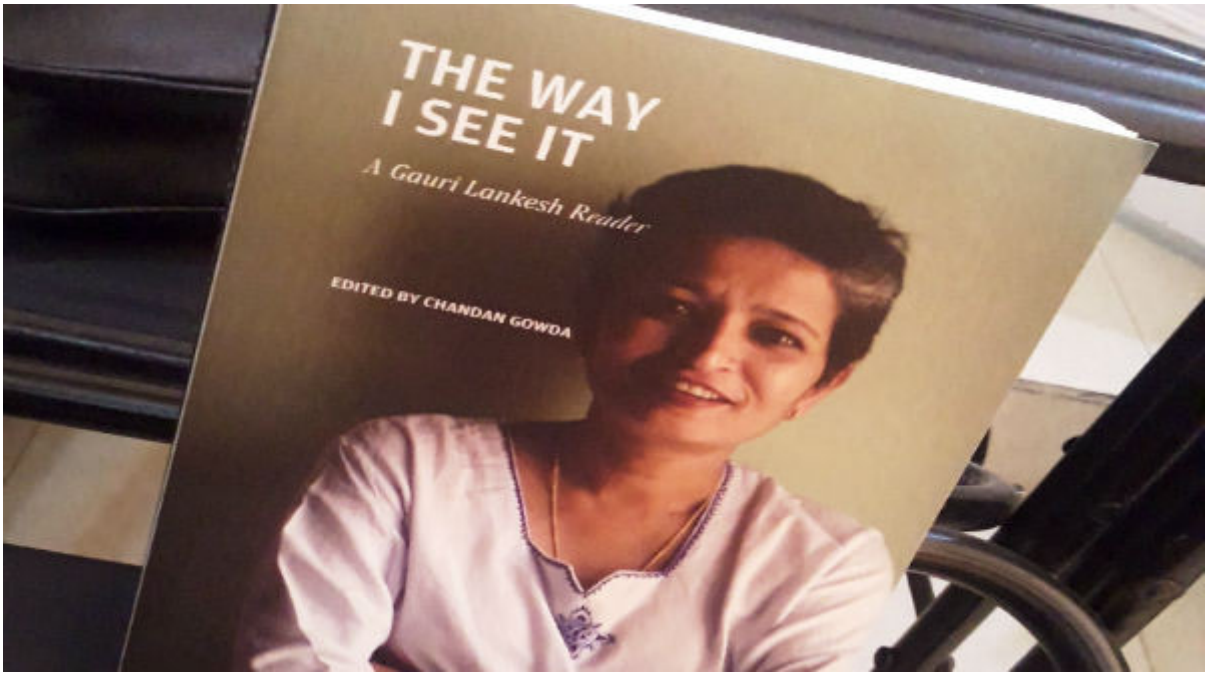
Souradeep Roy



Cover of the book | Image courtesy Oxford University Press

Chandan Gowda is a tall, tall man. He is so soft-spoken that his manner of speaking is almost antithetical to his imposing frame. For those who meet him for the first time, it is quite a balance.

He was in Delhi for a discussion on his edited book *The Gauri Lankesh Reader*. He is also the editor and translator of Ananthamurthy's novella *Bara*, which first appeared in 1976, and was later included in a collection of short stories, *Akaasha mattu Bekku* (The Sky and the Cat) in 1983. Ananthamurthy, however, had wanted *Bara* to be published as a book. 'I had visualised it as a story that can stand on its own', he writes in the Author's Note to the book. The story found such a life in Gowda's translation.



Photograph of *The Way I See It* / Image courtesy *Newsclick*

'Can we go someplace quieter?' Gowda asked. We were sitting in the cafe at Goethe Institute, which was then hosting the City Scripts Festival, organised by the Indian Institute of Human Settlements. We moved to a quiet room.

'How was the process of working alongside Ananthamurthy? I presume he was looking at the drafts quite closely?' I asked.

'Oh, not just drafts of the translation. If you were working on anything and needed his help, he responded with remarkable attentiveness.'

'But was the translation of *Bara* the result of an interest in including this story in the body of already established English translations of Ananthamurthy's novels? I ask this because he was usually sceptical about the narration of an Indian experience in English.'

'I share the scepticism', was Gowda's prompt response. He continued, 'My translation is not prompted by a commitment to Indian writing in English.' He paused, as if wondering if he should say this. 'You see, I wanted to be a writer, and, at some point, I realised this was impossible if I wrote in English. Writing fiction seemed like a hard thing to pull off aesthetically. The sensibility would just not carry. Maybe you could carry it over if you had great imagination. Non-fiction seemed something that I could work with, while poetry was something that I thought was simply impossible.'

In the novella, Gowda italicises interior monologues of the protagonist. I wondered if this was prompted by this sense of impossibility. The dramatisation of this interiority is more difficult than a simple narration of events. The interior movement of the story itself is one of the most

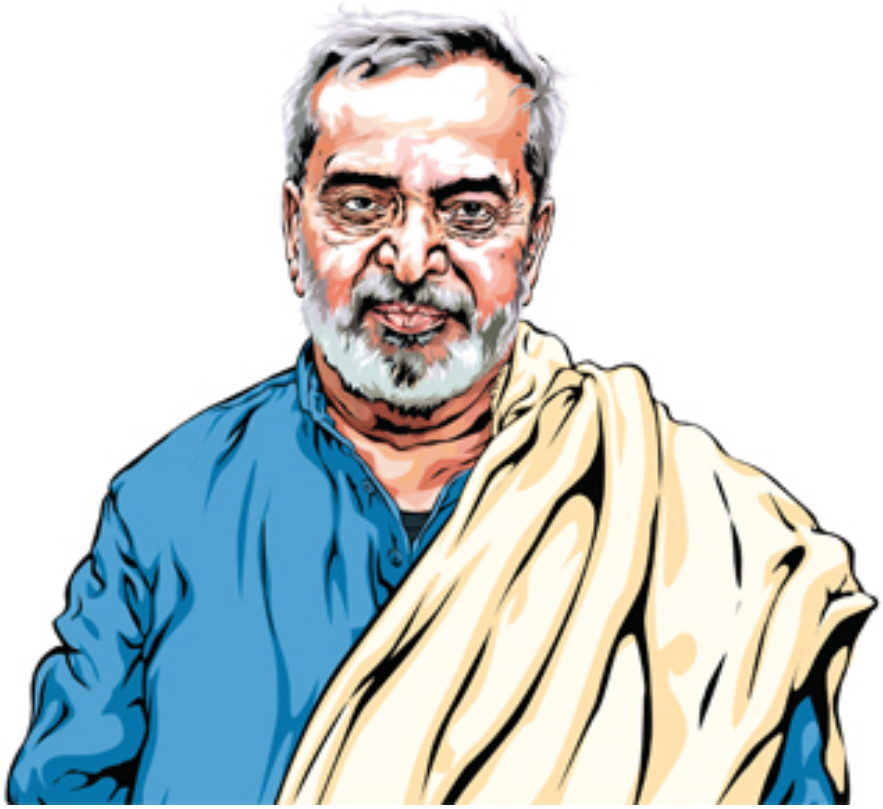
significant aspects of the book, especially because this was Ananthamurthy's response to an overtly political event — the state of Emergency in India declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) had supported the Emergency. Ananthamurthy was, at the time, staying with an idealistic Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who had graduated from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He believed that the CPI was right to work with the Congress, which Ananthamurthy calls 'a national bourgeois party'. The officer wanted to declare the district he was looking after drought-affected, but the Chief Minister of the state postponed this. 'The officer was caught in a dilemma,' writes Ananthamurthy, 'I thought there was great material here for a very realistic story which could take on a metaphorical character.'

II

When Chandan Gowda's translation came out in 2016, the reviewers were divided on their opinion of the book. Some called it obsolete; others, a relevant book. Reviewers compared the Emergency which triggered the story and the contemporary political climate (which, many commentators argue, is an undeclared Emergency). Both these judgements are, in my opinion, ill-founded because they compare social situations that lie outside the novella. The novella, I argue, is indeed responding to a particular political situation, but its significance or relevance cannot be judged by referents in real life, or by actual political situations, whether it is the Emergency or the National Democratic Alliance government that came to power in 2014. Several reviews, for instance, have referred to a scene between Govindappa, part of a cow protection campaign, and Satisha. It is tempting to think of Govindappa as a modern day *gau rakshak*, but such comparisons rule out any nuance, and mistake fiction for reality. In his interview with Gowda, published in *Bara*, Ananthamurthy says that he is 'sympathetic' to Govindappa. 'In my story, he looks funny to Satisha, but he has a point of view', says Ananthamurthy. These comments seem confusing if Govindappa is mistaken for a real life character. But Ananthamurthy is referring to his importance within the scheme of the novel. The Emergency, too, might have been the immediate political situation that provoked Ananthamurthy to write, but the contradictions between the classes explored in the novel are universal. No wonder he told Gowda, 'Nothing is out of date for a writer.'

The novella is like a traditional realist novel, with a third person narrator. But the realist details of the characters are not narrated for the sake of those details, as it normally is in a naturalist novel. My reading of a specific moment in *Bara* will highlight that it employs 'socialist realism' because it emphasises 'hidden or underlying forces or movements, which simple naturalistic observation could not pick up but which is the whole purpose of realism to discover and express' (Raymond Williams, 'Realism' in *Keywords*, 201). To quote Ananthamurthy's own words in his Author's Note, 'Reality can be grasped only when we go beyond reality in metaphorical ways of exploration.'



U R Ananthamurthy, illustration Mayangalambam Dinesh / Image courtesy *Tehelka*

Take, for instance, the way in which Ananthamurthy describes Satisha and his father in *Bara*: 'Satisha's father had been pleased to see how they lived. His own lifestyle had cut him loose from his roots; only modernity stuck to him like a parasite. But he was content that his son had a stake in the process of a traditional society becoming modern.'

Even though the narrator here seems to be congratulating Satisha, it is actually a parody of the elite classes and castes. Preceding the section quoted above is an important detail: Satisha and his wife, Rekha, send their son, Rahul, to a common government school. In a letter to Satisha's parents in Delhi, the couple writes that Rahul has picked up 'crude language' and has 'caught lice' in his school. 'This enchanted Satisha and Rekha's stature in influential social circles in Delhi.' It is not too hard for readers to understand that Satisha's praise for his son is actually Ananthamurthy's bitter criticism for these 'influential social circles in Delhi'. Rahul's body has to bear the burden of the anxieties of not just his own parents but an entire social circle. He has to pick up crude language and have lice in his hair to validate the anxieties of an influential class. The novella also ends with Rahul caught in the middle of a communal flare up when he is returning from the 'common government school'. The novella shows that at the end of the day,

the person who has to undergo the violence of unlearning privilege in a privileged structure, is always the most underprivileged within that structure. In the structure of the families of an elite social class in Delhi, this is Rahul. In another structure, Rahul is the privileged being. His story is, at least, narrated because he is born into a privileged class and caste. In spite of his parent's constant anxiety about making their son a part of the 'commons,' he stands out because he is born into a higher social class. His classmates in the 'common government school' are not even worthy of narration. This is how graded inequalities are marked in the novella.

III

A poster of the film / Image courtesy M S Sathyu's Facebook page

The plot of the novella moves through a crisis, and much of the interest in the story is kept alive

through a dramatic turn of events. It is not a surprise that the novella has been adapted into two films – both by M S Sathyu, as *Bara* (1980) in Kannada and as *Sookha* (1983) in Hindi.

The swift movement in the world outside is supplanted and slowed down by an equally significant movement inward to reveal the psyche of the protagonist Satisha, and his slowly deteriorating relationship with his wife. Here, Ananthamurthy uses interior monologue, which Gowda italicises in the English translation. This section describes a moment Satisha shares with his wife when he is planning to quit the administrative services.

Rekha sidled up to Satisha like a cat and stood with her back to him. Unbuttoning her blouse mechanically, he glanced at his dust-laden artwork from over twenty years ago. The forms he had once viewed as novel now seemed mediocre. *No, I was never free from convention and fully alert to everything I saw when I wandered the plains*. Rekha pressed Satisha's hands which rested on her shoulders and turned. She caressed her cheek with her eyes half-closed. 'Sathi, I love you.'

Wondering if this was a skill learnt at Miranda House to soothe a weary husband, Satisha looked into her dramatically half-closed eyes. They were brimming with tears.

Both the usual markers for thinking interiority are present here: the domestic room and a conjugal relationship. Formally, Ananthamurthy slips into an interior monologue to depict Satisha's psyche. But, the more revealing moments of Satisha's interiority occur when Ananthamurthy uses Satisha's point of view to describe the world outside. The next paragraph communicates the intensity of the tragedy:

'I'll be back.' Satisha went to the balcony. A mournfully silent plain lay in the moonlight: a parched earth, dry trees, a barren rocky land turning into dust, children and women sleeping on hungry stomachs inside their huts, dejected farmers pawning their ploughs. Satisha felt disgusted when he saw how trivial his disappointment was in comparison. *I must tear up the application. It is only decent that I do my duty within constraints like everyone else. I'm being fussy only because my pride and self-respect are hurt*. He wished something would rise up from the plain and slap him hard.

Satisha's active gaze takes us to the world outside. The 'parched earth, dry trees' and the other things he notices in the moonlight create a mood. What Satisha sees reflects his inner turmoil better than the interior monologues or the scenes of his domestic life.

When I asked Gowda how he knew if the translation was working, he referred to the beginning of the same section quoted above:

There is a scene in *Bara* where the protagonist Satisha goes to his room, and he is feeling an inner desolation. He is dwelling on one object after another. Something of that slow, deliberate movement had to be conveyed; a sense of that desolation had to be conveyed in English. So I couldn't speed up the language. He is looking at the plains outside in the dark and he is wondering why people are looking like that. Why would they ever choose to settle down at a place which is drought-prone. There's no water, not much food; but people have been there for

centuries. He can't understand their choice of settlement. And that is not a means of chastising the people, but chastising himself for being unable to imagine forms of living and dwelling. There is a certain dryness of feeling – that had to be conveyed, somehow. I don't know if I have succeeded or not.

Gowda certainly succeeds, for the most part, because the mood of the original is carried over in the translation. Ananthamurthy was obsessed with the inner world, which he often called the spiritual world, and, at the same time, he was equally concerned with the world outside. When Satisha stares at the plains, the large chasm between both these worlds makes for the tragic situation in the novella. Ananthamurthy says in his interview with Gowda, 'My hero is an idealistic Marxist person who is trying to find a space for a spiritual element also (sic). This is what interests me in the young people who are Marxist, but who have a spiritual craving also (sic).'

The drought in the village enters Satisha's inner being, but could this mood be carried into the translation? Gowda answers, 'It's really difficult. At some level, I won't say it is a way of self-deception. I think there is a certain optimal level you want to keep up, and once you have passed the test of proximity, you know your task is complete. Semantically, you can avoid the usual choice of words: syntax, certain slangs, neologisms…' 'Which will wrench it away from the original?' I interrupted. Gowda's answer takes me by surprise. 'The whole thing has been wrenched away, really. But within that practice you are trying to make it a less violent act, make less violent choices.'

Chandan Gowda / Image courtesy Jaipur Literature Festival

Gowda's answers made me think that he, too, might have felt as much conflict as Satisha, feeling that parts of the translation were barren. In an interview with the Malayali poet and translator Koyamparabath Satchidanandan, Gowda says, 'Although set in North Karnataka, *Bara* does not bring in the very distinct Kannada found in that region. The translation, I felt, had to sound like the original. I would read aloud the translated sentences and check if they sounded like the original in their semantic proximity and syntactical effects. I had read out the translation to URA over an afternoon.'

In the Translator's Note, he writes of his time spent with Ananthamurthy: 'I interviewed him when he was not feeling well. In fact, he [would] check the interview transcript between dialysis sessions at the hospital. The entire experience [was] moving.'

Gowda's task may have well been like Satisha's. But unlike him, Gowda has brought some rain to the drought stricken land.

In the Sanctuary of a Poem

Poems by *Salil Chaturvedi, K M Sherrif, Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri*

Shoili Kanungo, 'Ghost'

Salil Chaturvedi

the ants on my floor

If only we could live

like the ants on my floor

toiling as they do

without an audible cry

kissing each other

as we pass by.

the grave of two friends

It’s an awfully

large tombstone

for a tree so small

and the little bird’s call

so big

this mall.

In a dream I had about half

a year ago

I was licking myself

all over like a cat. There were

crocodiles sunning themselves

on the banks of a river. It was clear

that they were all poets

out hunting for images

to drag them into the deep

of language. I told them all to

bugger off. I told them to stop

writing poems

and to start growing flowers

and while I had their ear

I quickly slipped in that

we are all equal

in our sleep and that all

the joy in the world

pours forth from forests

in the cool of the night.

All three poems by Salil Chaturvedi are from *in the sanctuary of a poem*, 2017.

Shoili Kanungo, 'Circus'

K M Sherrif

Jacques Derrida, I Presume

Wonder why it took

So long for you to figure it out

After the heady Tel Quel days ,

After all the scuffles with gendarmes

And the occupation of universities and factories

(Occupation, yes, no quibbling, one has to give you that)

We knew it all along,

All those good old things

Were a big fart:

A war to end all wars,

Making the world safe for democracy,

Freedom of expression,

Prisoners of conscience,

Imperialist aggression,

Cultural offensive,

Peaceful Co-existence,

Détente.

And you, Michel and others farted a lot more:

Logocentrism,

Structurality

Identity politics,

Panopticon,

Hybridity,

Macaulay's godhead,

And the rest of the gobbledygook.

But you were luckier than

The UN chemical weapons inspectors:

Your trace was more visible

Than what they were looking for.

Of course, we continue to search for

The differance between

An American president

And an African-American president.

But your spectres really take the cake.

Imagine old man Karl at the stroke of midnight

Coming up from the netherworld like Hamlet senior

To strew the world with bloody corpses!

To call it wishful thinking

Would be the understatement of the century.

Nothing happened to the world.

But you fucked-up the lives of

Hordes of college teachers across the world.

Few of them are fond of alternate epistemologies;

But biting off more than what they could chew

They are frantically searching for

Alternate systems of medicine

To plug their leaking bottoms.

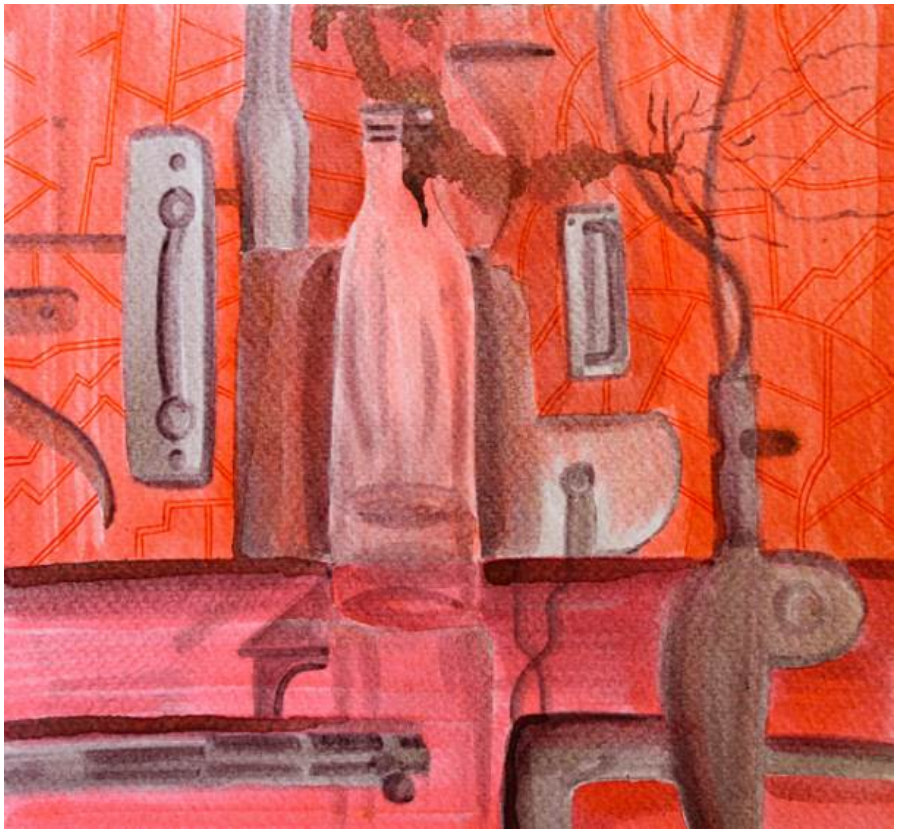
Ha! That will make another of your gags:

What they didn't know hurt them.

But they are luckier than you might have thought:

Nothing can beat

Good old cynicism and scepticism!



Shoili Kanungo, ‘Objects’

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri

Things

What do things matter?

You asked me.

Let me count the ways.

The study table I designed

With my grandfather –That

travelled three homes

Growing-up; Growing old

With me –

That I varnished into a deep mahogany

Ruining my hands to eke out

That inner sheen–

The table that I left behind

Along with memories that

Were mine.

The fabric of the couch

Where we sat endlessly

fought, argued, loved

Not knowing the auguries of time–

The fabric that I chose with such attention

To detail –

colour, pattern, texture

Seeking harmony

With the surroundings.

The chest of drawers –That I

rescued from salvage

restored, redesigned

Loving its ball and claw feet–

Retained something and refused others

Hunted for that milky white

Marble top that tied it

Into the picture

That I was attempting to paint.

The circular dinner table

That you had taken pains

To make –

That single-footed table

that gained another foot

To fit a bigger home

While slowly that edifice Itself

Disintegrated.

The lamp in the corner –

Resplendent still, but

Look closely–

And

You will discover the many

Cracks that I camouflaged In

my denial

Of realities.

Always, trying to hold together –

Things.

Always, hanging on by the skin of my teeth.

Always, the damage control.

Always, in phantasmagoric mode.

Always, among other things.

So, yes – these were things. And

things have memories Wrapped

tightly around them–

Snaking in where you least expect–

Throwing up histories–

Disembowelling the past.

So yes, maybe you were right –

Things don't matter,

The memories scatter,

And you are free

At last.

Matchbox Homes

I can see the woman

Stirring her pot Hair

in disarray

As the muggy air

Condenses and

mingles with her sweat.

The TV blares on

I imagine, in another room

The usual pyrotechnics

Of newsmen turned ideologues

Doing their stuff.

The AC whirs.

In yet another

The blood is warmed

And numbed

Lethe-like with Imbibed

amnesia– Forgetting is a blessing.

The children do

Their homework

Under duress. There is

too much to do,

Keep them occupied!

– or they'll get into trouble.

She is on the phone

In what I presume is

The bathroom –That

lone sanctuary Away

From prying eyes.

The old man and woman

Sit around the sanctum

The incense burns –

And combines with the

Smell of spices

On the stove.

The interloper watches

Scene after scene

Unfold. Some are real.

Some, imagined.

The missing pieces easily concocted.

The mind is a fertile space.

Puny people in

Matchbox homes, Seen

from a distance –

As the traffic moves you

Inexorably into this forward motion

Where all is fiction, all false.

Contributors

1. **Alok Rai** is born and bred in Allahabad, Alok Rai taught English literature at Allahabad University and at Delhi University and was also the Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Delhi. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on George Orwell at the University College London, and has translated Premchand's Nirmala, published by Oxford University Press. He has also authored a book on the politics of Hindi titled Hindi Nationalism published by Orient Blackswan and a book based on his doctoral dissertation titled Orwell and the Politics of Despair: A Critical Study of the Writings of George Orwell published by Cambridge University Press. He is the grandson of the legendary Hindi writer Premchand.

2. **Ambai** is the pseudonym of C.S. Lakshmi, one of the foremost writers of Tamil fiction. Her stories have been translated in three volumes entitled A Purple Sea, In a Forest, a Deer and Fish in a Dwindling Lake. Her work has won numerous awards, including the Kalaignyar Mu. Karunanidhi Porkizi award for fiction by the Booksellers and Publishers' Association of South India and the award for excellence in literature from the University of Madras. In addition to her writing, C.S. Lakshmi has been an independent researcher in Women's Studies for the last thirty-five years. She is currently the Director of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women).

3. **Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri** is Professor of English, Gauhati University. She specializes in Drama and Theatre Studies. Her publications include Mahesh Duttani, and Ideas of the Stage: Selections from Drama Theory. On a Fulbright Fellowship in 2015-16, she worked on a research cum lecture project called Theaters, Spectacles, Audiences: Indian and American Cultures of Viewership at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York.

4. **Askari Naqvi** is a trained vocalist and performer. Having received his training in music from Pandit Amit Mukherjee of the Indore gharana, he inherited the Soz-khwani from his family and took to performing at a very young age. Along with the Soz, Naqvi performs the Dastangoi, a traditional form of storytelling in Urdu. Naqvi is also a practising human rights lawyer based out of Lucknow.

5. **K M Sherrif** writes in Malayalam and English and translates among Malayalam, English, Hindi, Tamil and Gujarati. His work includes Ekalavyas with Thumbs, the first selection of Gujarati Dalit writing in English, and Kunjupathumma's Tryst with Destiny -a study of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's fiction. Sherrif teaches English at Calicut University.

6. **Kaushika Draavid** is a researcher, translator and photographer. She lives and works in

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7. **Kavitha Balakrishnan** is an artist, poet and art educator based in Kerala, India. She has an MFA in Art History from MS University Baroda (1998). Her PhD work is on the illustrated print-picture culture in Malayalam periodicals (2009). Since 2000, she has been engaging with the changing scenario of practice, writing and teaching art and art-history in Kerala. Her articles are widely published in journals like Marg, Art & Deal, TAKE on art, peer reviewed Journal of Illustration, Research Intellect, London etc. She also intensely engages with artistic languages at the crossroads of art, history and poetry. She has three collections of Malayalam poetry to her credit and has also done experimental displays at various poetry festivals in Kerala.

8. **Kumkum Sangari** is currently the Vilas Professor of English and the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

9. **Manash Bhattacharjee's** poems have appeared in *The London Magazine*, the *New Welsh Review*, *The Fortnightly Review*, the *Elohi Gadugi Journal*, *Mudlark*, *Metamorphoses*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *The Postcolonialist*, and *The Indian Quarterly*. His first collection of poetry, *Ghalib's Tomb and Other Poems* (2013) was published by The London Magazine. He teaches at the School of Culture and Creative Expressions in the Ambedkar University, New Delhi.

10. **Paula Sengupta** is an artist, academic, curator, and art writer. She is currently Associate Professor & Head of the Department of Graphics-Printmaking at the Faculty of Visual Arts, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. Her recent projects focus on enforced migration and resultant physical and psychological displacement in the Subcontinent and its immediate environs. She is author of *The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking* published by the Delhi Art Gallery, New Delhi in 2012 and *Foreign & Indigenous Influences in Indian Printmaking* published by LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbrucken, Germany in 2013.

11. **Prashant Bagad** is a writer and critic. He has received the Baburav Bagul Shabda Award and the P. N. Pandit Award for his short story collection, Vivade Vishade Pramade Pravase. He teaches philosophy at Indian Institute of Technology (Kanpur).

12. **Riyas Komu** was born in 1971 in Kerala, and moved to Mumbai in 1992 to study literature. Dropping out during his final year, Komu eventually obtained his Bachelor's and Master's

degrees in Fine Art from the Sir J. J. School of Art in 1997 and 1999 respectively. The artist's oeuvre, spanning several different media and genres, is particularly noticed for its strong political overtones. His paintings, to put it in his own words, carry a protest symbol one way or the other.

13. **Salil Chaturvedi** writes short fiction and poetry in English and Hindi. He lives in Chorao, an island in Goa, with his wife, a cat, and a dog.

14. **Shoili Kanungo** is a graphic designer, illustrator and visual artist. She has worked on a range of communication design projects in Sydney and New Delhi. She is currently visiting faculty at the School of Planning and Architecture. For more on her work, see shoilikaungo.com. **Sophia Naz** Pushcart Prize nominee (2016), Sophia Naz is a poet, writer, translator and an editor published in numerous literary journals including Poetry International Rotterdam, The Adirondack Review, Scroll, Chicago Quarterly Review, The Daily O, Dawn, BlazeVOX, The Stonecoast Review, Cactus Heart, Askew Poetry, Bank Heavy Press, Spilled Ink, Lantern Journal, Convergence, Antiphon Poetry UK, AAJ, The Sunflower Collective, AntiSerious, Zubaan Journal, Pseudomag, The Ghazal Page, Life & Legends among others. Her poetry collections are Peripheries, Pointillism and Date Palms. Naz is Poetry Editor at The Sunflower Collective and City, a Quarterly of South Asian literature. She is the founder of Rekhti, a site on avant-garde Urdu poetry. Her website is www.trancelucence.net.

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16. **Surjit Akre**, born in Taran Tarn, Punjab, has been painting for more than 40 years. She received a postgraduate degree in easel painting from the Academy of Fine Arts, Repin Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in Russia, and was decorated with the Order of the Red Banner of Labour in St. Petersburg. Akre has held over 70 solo painting exhibitions in India, Russia, the US and Canada, and has participated in numerous national and international exhibitions and artist camps. She makes use of oil, acrylic, water colour, pastel, ink and pencil in her work. Her works feature in several public and private collections in India and elsewhere.

17. **Uday Prakash** is a Hindi poet, scholar, journalist, translator and short story writer from India. He has worked as administrator, editor, researcher, and TV director. He writes for major dailies and periodicals as a freelancer. His poetry collections include Suno Kārīgara (1980), Abootar Kabootar (1984), Raat Mein Harmonium (1998), Ek Bhasha Hua Karati Hai (2009). Peelee Chhatri Wali Ladki (2001) is Prakash's best known, and longest continuous story. Often called a 'novella' Prakash calls it 'a long short story'. His 2006 novella Mohan Das has been translated into English, seven Indian languages, and adapted by the author for the 'Mohandas' screenplay (2009).

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