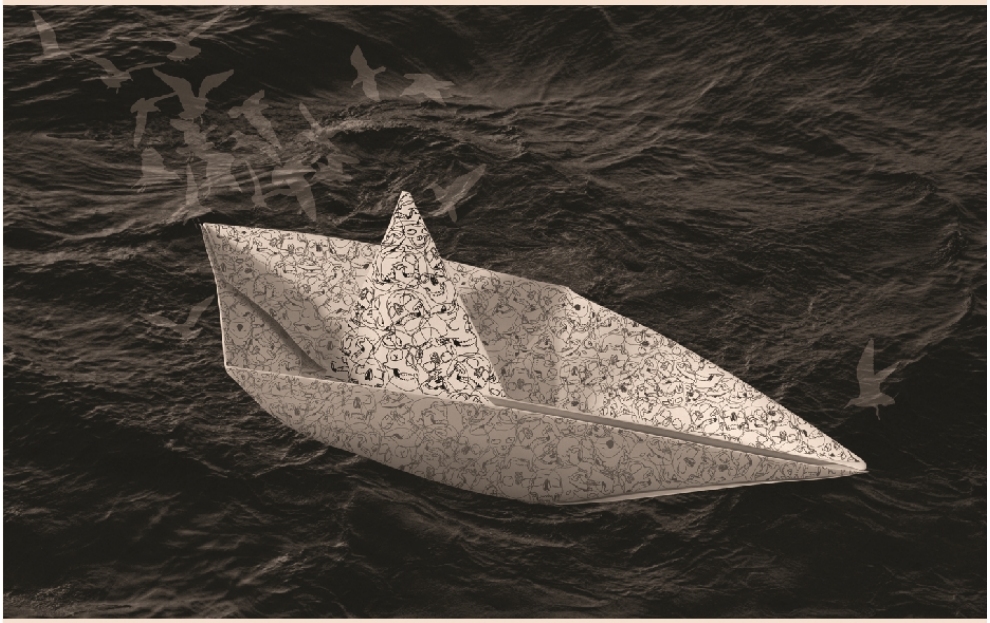
Issue 11

Guftugu

culture matters



Rajib Chowdhury, 'Exile', inkjet print on archival paper, 25 in x 40 in, 2018

About Us

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

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

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

To sum up our vision:

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

Guftugu acknowledges the Tata Trusts for a grant towards its production in 2018.

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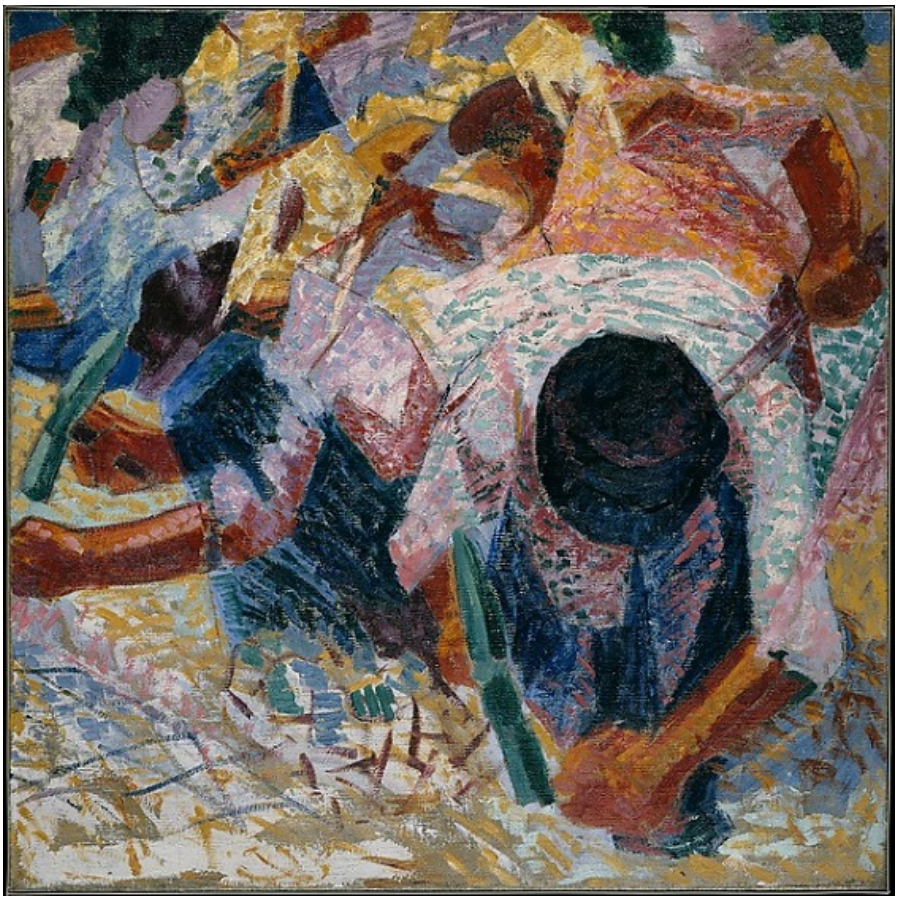
Contents:

From the Editor

Marx after Marx



Umberto Boccioni, 'The Street Pavers', Oil on canvas/ Image courtesy *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

Karl Marx has turned 200 years old; *The Communist Manifesto* 170; and *Das Kapital*, 150. This joint celebration — and the specific context of the times — has given rise to some passionate discussion of Karl Marx's contribution to diverse realms of knowledge. Intellectuals and activists of diverse persuasions across the world lead the celebratory discussion. But even apologists of the bourgeoisie as well as thinkers of liberal persuasion have admitted that the history of human thought would have been different in the absence of the huge and varied corpus of Marx's writings. Altogether, the consensus seems to be an inescapable division of thought before Marx and after Marx.

The present historical juncture — when a large part of the globe, from the United States and the United Kingdom to Hungary, Turkey, Israel and India, has been hegemonised by ruthless right-wing politics — lends special significance to these discussions around the distinct

incarnations of global capital, and its alliance with conservative world views, divisive political practices and orthodox cultural perspectives. Even the opponents of Marxist theory and practice admit today that they are persuaded to go to Marx to understand the working of capital, its global spread and its recurring crises. It is true they are all not going back to the same Marx. Some try to retrieve the spirit of the early Marx of The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, On the Jewish Question and The Holy Family. Some travel to the profound and comprehensive discussions of historical materialism in his mature works such as *The German Ideology*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Capital*. Yet others refer to his notes, *Grundrisse*, published posthumously, and some of the later essays written in *The New York Tribune* in which Marx begins to enlarge his idea of class to include, beyond the proletariat, the traded slaves from Africa and other marginalised, subaltern sections of the society whose revolutionary potential he begins to recognise, thus extricating himself from the alleged 'Euro-centrism' of his earlier writings.

While many theorists would like to divide Marx into an early, middle and late Marx, one cannot but see the continuity of his enquiry, and his basic commitment to the values of freedom, equality and justice that had propelled it throughout. He resisted closure and left his theories open to criticism, revision and rereading in changing historical contexts. That is why it has grown and branched out in new directions. There is hardly any discipline, from philosophy, economics, political science and historiography to sociology, psychoanalysis, epistemology, culture studies and aesthetics, not influenced in some way by Marx's thought. Consider a part of this long growth list. Antonio Gramsci initiated new discussions about the 'nation-popular' and on popular culture. Rosa Luxemburg interrogated Lenin on his idea of the (totalitarian) state and upheld the freedom of the press and opposition in post-revolutionary USSR. Nicos Poulantzas redefined economic class as social class. Goran Therborn analysed what ruling class does when it rules. Louis Althusser fought the reductionist idea of the superstructure as a mechanical reflection of the economic base and emphasised the role of ideas in social change. Eric Hobsbawm tried to imagine a Marxism for the twenty-first century. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt developed a thorough critique of the 'Empire' and put forward a theory of bio-political resistance. The list of thinkers who tried to extend, revise and reread Marx's thought include Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Fischer, Thomas Kuhn, George Lukacs, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Zizek, Piero Sraffa, Maurice Dobb, David Harvey, John Berger, Thomas Piketty, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Ranciere. The list also includes innumerable painters, sculptors, poets, playwrights and film-makers across the globe inspired by Marx's vision of the future: from Maxim Gorky, Eisenstein, Pablo Picasso and Fernand Leger to Pablo Neruda, Bertolt Brecht and Jean Luc Godard.

The Indian Left has a daunting task on its shoulders — to develop theory and praxis that help understand, and respond creatively and radically, to contemporary Indian conditions. It

will have to address its silences, fill the gaps; re-read Ambedkar and Gandhi in the light of the new context of the vulgar and paradoxical alliance of crony capitalism and divisive communalism; fight reductionism of every kind, redefine class in the context of globalised economy running on new technologies; learn to be more inclusive of subaltern sections including religious, ethnic and sexual minorities; take up the questions of gender, caste, race and history; fight for federalism lost in the actual over-centralising practices of the ruling class; develop a people's alternative to the present form of democracy; liberate the people from false consciousness of every kind masked as 'common sense', and stick to its initial vision of egalitarian democracy characterised by the entry of the nameless into history.

K. Satchidanandan

June 2018

India and the World as Viewed from a Pillar of Ashoka Maurya

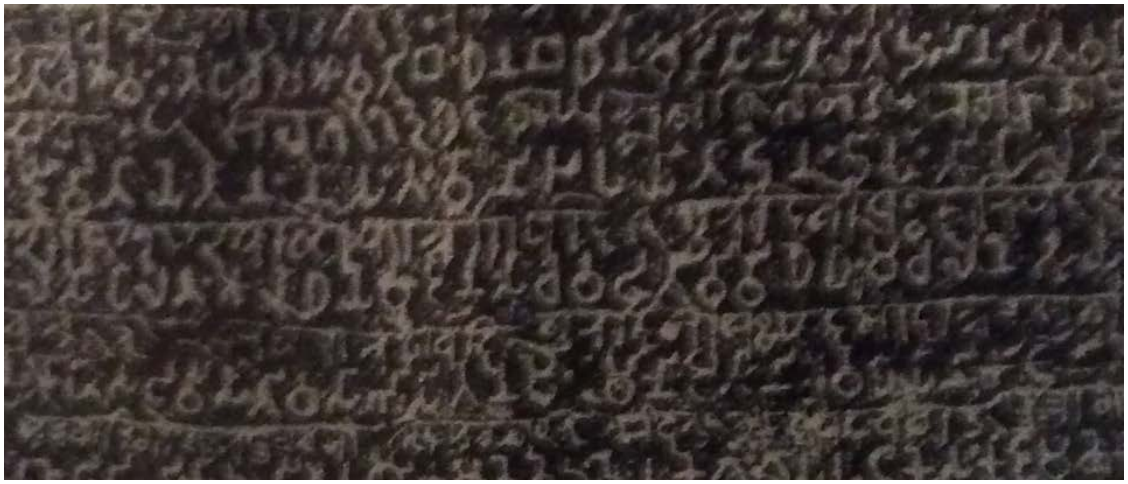
Romila Thapar

There are many objects from the past that have survived into the present. These not only tell us about the past but often contribute to how we shape the present. Of each, we ask the usual questions and construct a narrative of who made it, where, and for whom. Many find their way into a museum where they are minimally described, and their narrative more or less left to the imagination of the viewer.

I would like to consider a rather different kind of object from many centuries ago that was periodically chanced upon and puzzled over. It occasionally carried a statement by a royal figure, but for many centuries in between, it was disregarded or forgotten. It is now one of our prized sources of history. I am referring to the pillar of Ashoka Maurya that currently stands in the Allahabad Fort.

The pillar of Ashoka at Allahabad Fort/ All images courtesy the author unless mentioned otherwise

It was probably originally cut, sculpted and polished at Chunar (near Varanasi), from where a number of pillars were quarried. The sculpting and the polishing were done on site and, possibly, even the engraving. It was engraved on the orders of Ashoka Maurya and first erected at Kaushambi, a city of political importance in the neighbourhood of what is now Allahabad. Some centuries later, it was shifted to its present location in the Allahabad fort. Its surmounting capital was, possibly, a seated lion, now lost.



The pillar of Ashoka at Allahabad Fort

The pillar carries six of the seven Pillar Edicts of the emperor inscribed in the 27th year of his reign, c. 240 BC. The Edicts are carefully engraved around its circumference and form a substantial document. They are some of his musings on propagating the *dhamma* as a system of social ethics which was, to him, central. The language is the widely spoken Prakrit and written in the Brahmi script used at the time. Below these edicts are engraved a couple of more inscriptions: the Queen's Edict, an order that the donations of the Queen be recorded; and what has come to be called the Schism Edict. The latter states that those monks and nuns who cause dissension in the Sangha are to be expelled. Had this been all, the pillar would have been a major historical source. But there is much more.

In about the fourth century AD, some six centuries after the initial edicts were engraved, a long inscription recorded the achievements of the Gupta king, Samudragupta, on the pillar. The statement was composed by the poet Harishena whose family served in various senior capacities as officials at the Gupta court. The text was composed in Sanskrit and not in Prakrit; and engraved in the Brahmi script but of the Gupta period, no longer identical with Ashokan Brahmi. Whether or not the earlier Ashokan Brahmi could still be read has been a matter of controversy. Scripts, like languages, do change. The engraving of this inscription

cuts a little into the earlier one, suggesting either that the earlier one could not be read, or was disregarded.

By the time of the third inscription of historical significance, we are told categorically that the earlier two could not be read, so no one knew what was intended by the pillar. This was the Mughal emperor Jahangir's statement giving his genealogy, going back to his Central Asian forbears, composed in Persian and written in a fine *nastaliq* script. Scattered across the pillar is the graffiti of lesser people who recorded their presence with their names, rather like the scribbles of contemporary tourists on monuments. These consist of the names of local rajas and visitors, including a one-liner of Akbar's minister Raja Birbal.

So we have a historical object that has survived for three millennia from the first millennium BC to the start of the third AD. Its uniqueness comes from the documents it carries written in three distinct languages and scripts, and what they tell us. Each set of inscriptions concerns a king, who is entirely different from the other two. Yet the second and the third must have been convinced that the object had some intrinsic historical power, which prompted their inscriptions despite their not knowing the authorship of the previous ones. The message of each king was entirely different, with a different function and intention. The pillar went into a kind of oblivion for many centuries, till the script of the two earlier inscriptions was deciphered a couple of centuries ago and their authors eventually identified. The realisation grew that the pillar was indeed a historical palimpsest, and that the later contributors may have seen it as encapsulating a form of historical consciousness. My concern is not with this aspect of its function. I would like to present the pillar through the inscriptions as a pointer to how some Indian rulers saw the then-known world, and at specific times.

Let's begin with the edicts of Ashoka. The opening statement reads: *devanampiye piyadassi laja hevam aha/* the beloved of the gods, Piyadassi, the king, speaks thus. It then mentions the date when the edict was issued as twenty-six expired regnal years. One recognises a hint of similarity with the opening of the Achaemenid king, Darius's inscriptions: 'thus says the king Darius.' But sometimes this makes for a more grandiose formulation, as when he says: 'I am Darius the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing all kinds of men, king of this earth far and wide…' There is less grandiloquence in the opening lines of the Mauryan king. Many royal inscriptions tend to be self-congratulatory but in the case of Ashoka, such sentiments are low key. He sees his achievement as the propagating of *dhamma* far and wide.

It was once thought that the Achaemenid rock inscriptions of Iran, such as those at Naqksh-i-Rustam and Behistun, inspired Ashoka. The pillar as an architectural form surmounted with a capital, was noticeable at Persepolis in Iran. But inscriptions and pillars were not rare in the ancient world. Other similarities with Iranian forms were more pertinent, such as certain decorative features. Mention has been made of the abacus with its decoration of a scroll of

lotus and honeysuckle, not to mention acanthus leaves. Whether this was an influence is debatable, but the designs were familiar.

Given that Gandhara in north-west India and the Indus region down to Sind were for a while part of the Achaemenid domain, and subsequently there was proximity between the two empires, the Seleucid and the Mauryan, it is rather surprising that the Mauryan settlement adjoining Taxila (Bhir Mound) shows little presence of Achaemenid features. However, these features are present further afield in the use of Aramaic in some Ashokan inscriptions. Later sources mention Tushasp as the governor of Saurashtra and this is a distinctly Iranian name. Historically these borderlands, from the Hindu Kush Mountains to the coast of Makran, are characterised, as are many frontier regions of the ancient world, by the alternating domination of the powers on either side. The proximity of western India to Iran, in more than a literal way, is a historical factor that we often tend to overlook.

But to return to the edicts, the Mauryans had had a close relationship with the dynasty that ruled in Iran subsequent to Alexander. This was the Seleucid dynasty. Whether the young Chandragupta Maurya met Alexander, as asserted in some Greek sources, does not make much difference. More important, the Mauryans had a distinct interest in the politics of west Asia and the eastern Mediterranean.

When Seleucus Nicator campaigned against Chandragupta Maurya, the advantage seems to have been with the Maurya. Seleucus ceded, according to the treaty, territories in eastern Afghanistan in return for 500 war elephants. Elephants had clearly made a deep impression on Greek generals since even Hannibal, took them up to the Alps, where unfortunately the tropical animals could not survive the cold. The intriguing clause in the treaty was the *epigamia* — some say it referred to a specific marriage alliance between the dynasties, and others maintain that it was the legal sanction for Greeks and Indians to intermarry. Did new communities emerge from inter-marriage? There were communities of Greek speakers in Afghanistan since some of Ashoka's edicts were rendered into Greek. Incidentally, this concern with accessibility was extended to the Persian Aramaic speakers as well.

The Pillar Edicts were largely devoted to explaining *dhamma* and its propagation. It was a social ethic conducive to encouraging a harmonious way of life. The *dhamma-mahamattas* were the officials concerned with its propagation. Apart from the Mauryan domain, they also had to go to the kingdoms of the neighbouring areas to continue the propagation. This must have encouraged an active interest in what was happening in neighbouring countries. Ashoka wanted the understanding of *dhamma* to spread throughout the world, but the world as he lists it did not go far beyond the Mediterranean. Mention is made of these activities as early as in the Rock Edicts a dozen or so years prior to the Pillar Edicts. The references in the Pillar Edicts are therefore a continuation of the earlier activities.

Hellenistic sources mention visits to India by ambassadors from these kingdoms. The best known among them was Megasthenes who, as a friend of Seleucus Nicator, is said to have visited the court of Chandragupta. Some of his compatriots, however, thought that he collected his data from interviews and hearsay and not from a personal investigation of the Mauryan capital.

An ambassador, Deimachos, is said to have come later as ambassador from Antiochus I, to the court of Chandragupta's son known to the Greeks as Amitrochates, otherwise Bindusara. The Mauryan king asked Antiochus to send some sweet wine, dried figs and a sophist. He was informed that the first two could be sent but not the third for the obvious reason that the sophists were free men, not slaves. It is interesting, if true, that Ashoka's father — said to be a patron of the Ajivikas — should have asked for a Greek sophist, an intellectually provocative demand. One wonders what he had heard about the sophists. Greek sources also mention a request for aphrodisiacs. The nature of the gifts suggests a cosy friendship!

Although Ashoka does not refer in detail to the kings of west Asia in his Pillar Edicts, he does so in the Rock Edict XIII. These were the five *Yona-rajas* or Greek kings. *Yona* or *Yavana*, derived from the Iranian *Yauna*, is a possible reference originally to the Ionian Greeks. Later the label *Yavana* was applied to those that came from the western direction. A distinction is made between Amtiyoko or Antiochus of Syria who is said to be close by, and the other four who are his further neighbours — Turamayo or Ptolemy (Philadelphus II) of Egypt, Amtekine or Antigonus, Maka or Magas of Cyrene, and Alikashudala or Alexander of Corinth. This stretch of West Asia and the eastern Mediterranean was not unfamiliar to Mauryan India.

Whether Ashoka had individual connections with each, or those farther away were known through kinship links, is hard to establish, but these kings were close kinsmen to one another. Ashoka's closest connection was with Antiochus I, the son of Seleucus Nicator, and therefore the neighbour next door in Iran. The other four are mentioned as neighbours of Antiochus or those who live beyond. The officers propagating *dhamma* appear to have been sent to each of these kings.

The kinship links among the five *Yona rajas* was close. The Seleucid king Antiochus I had a stepsister who was married to Antigonus of Macedonia, the Amtekine of the inscriptions. His daughter-in-law was the daughter of Ptolemy II of Egypt. So the Seleucids, Antigonus and the Ptolemies were what from the Indian perspective would be various categories of 'sambandhis' — families related by marriage. Antiochus also had a sister-in-law from Cyrene and a brother-in-law from Corinth, both kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean. His widowed daughter-in-law had remarried, and her husband was Alexander of Corinth, who was the nephew of Antigonus of Macedonia. Ptolemy II, contemporary with Ashoka, had a son who was married to the daughter of Magas of Cyrene. In the next generation, a princess

from the Ptolemaic royal family was married to the Seleucid king, Antiochus II. Did Ashoka have diplomatic relations with each of these kingdoms or only with the major ones, namely the Seleucids and the Ptolemies? The others may have been appended to the inscription, since they were closely connected, especially to the Seleucids.

Ashoka refers to his officers working among the people of the *aparanta*, the lands to the west along the Indus. He claims that as a result the *dhamma* is familiar to people who are located even six hundred *yojanas* – possibly fifteen hundred miles, or a substantial distance — beyond the frontier. Interestingly the imperial territories are more often identified by the people living there, rather than by geographical names. This was a familiar usage in ancient times.

Almost as a contrast, those listed from south India are not kings. They are the Cola, Pandiyas, Satiyaputto and Keralaputto, inhabiting the area as far as the frontier of Tambapanni, probably Sri Lanka. They are mentioned in the plural, and two carry the suffix *putto* — literally, sons — suggesting a reference to clans. They occupy the areas that adjoin the region of Karnataka where many Ashokan inscriptions have been found, and others inhabit what was left of the south outside the imperial domain.

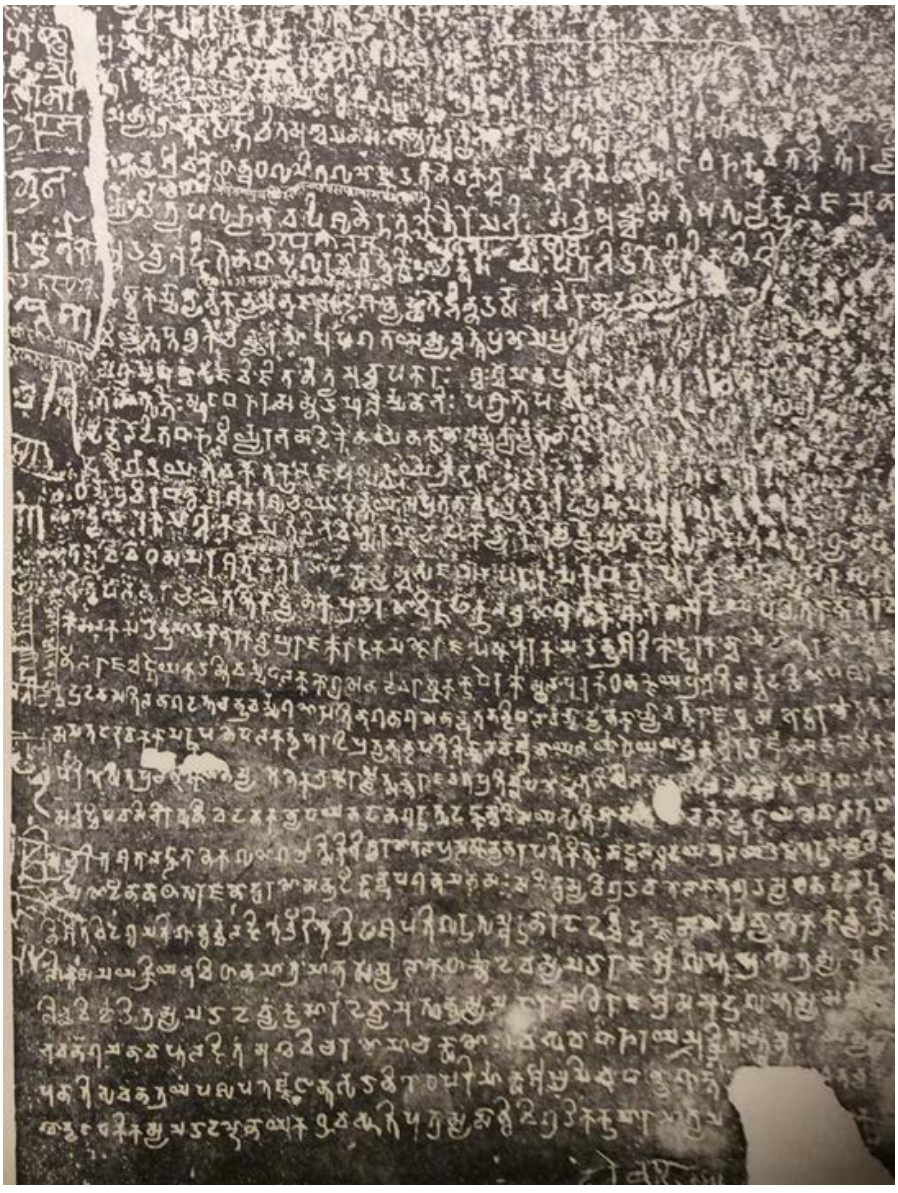
Two important historical developments coincide with this. Sophisticated megalithic cultures are increasingly found in this area. These are different in form and organisation from the cultures of the Ganges plain and north-west India. They are also different from the Greek and Iranian cultures. These were, more likely, clan-based societies and not kingdoms. If so, it may have been thought unnecessary to conquer them and bring them under direct Mauryan administration. Was this perhaps a reason for not campaigning in the far south? Their political and economic potential may not have been compelling.

The second change was that the Brahmi script was being adapted to the Tamil language. This was the reverse of what had happened in the north-west where the same Prakrit language was being written in the localised Kharoshthi script. Large numbers of what have been called Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions have been found in south India and at ports along the Red Sea. Many are short votive inscriptions carrying Tamil names. A few Prakrit names in the Brahmi script also turn up as graffiti on potsherds at megalithic sites. Was the adaptation of Brahmi to Tamil suggested by the proximity of the Mauryan Prakrit inscriptions in parts of Karnataka?

The far south was as yet unfamiliar. The scene in north-western India was entirely different, hosting as it did both hostile armies and amicable merchants in territory and cultures that were by now familiar to all. The north-western borderlands had become like the back-yard of the Hellenistic, Iranian and Indian rulers.

The Seleucids succumbed to attacks from the Parthians from Central Asia who ruled briefly until the early centuries AD, when they too succumbed to the Sasanians rising as a power in Iran. The Sasanians were overturned in the late first millennium, partly by the Huns, called Hunas in Sanskrit sources, also from Central Asia. This was the hub of considerable activity that left its mark on Indian and Iranian history.

This brings me to the second major inscription on the pillar — the *prashasti*/ eulogy on the Gupta king Samudragupta, composed and engraved posthumously.



The Gupta inscription

The Ashokan edicts were more like conversational pieces addressed mainly to his officers and subjects, and largely concerned with how *dhamma* was to be propagated as a social ethic. The Samudragupta *prashasti* was entirely different, being a record of the king's conquests and diplomacy. It was composed by a court poet, Harishena, and is dated to the mid-fourth century AD. So it was engraved on Ashoka's pillar some six centuries after the Edicts.

Why did the Guptas choose this pillar? It was an artefact from the past that had no ostensible religious or social value. Whether the Guptas could read the Ashokan inscriptions remains uncertain. Probably not, else surely there would have been some comment on material so different from the Gupta record. The Gupta inscription endorses all that was contrary to what was said in the Edicts, as it glorifies conquest through violence. Dharma for the Guptas was the Brahmanical Dharma. They had no idea who the author of the earlier inscriptions was, but presumably the pillar appeared an impressive object. A lion capital would have given it an added royal significance. Was it an attempt by the Guptas, who were of a non-kshatriya caste, to claim the legitimacy to rule by inscribing their deeds on the pillar? In their other inscriptions, much was made of their marital alliance with the high status Licchavis.

This inscription begins with a passing reference to the pillar, described as being like the arm of the earth, and it goes on to proclaim the fame of the conquests of Samudragupta, who is no longer alive. The eulogy to the king follows. Nothing further is said about the pillar. The absence of comment on why it was chosen is puzzling. After all, it was no mere piece of polished sandstone but was deemed appropriate for the most important record of Samudragupta's activities.

After the usual compliments to the king, the inscription lists his conquests and the frontier peoples whom he saw as important. In the initial list, a number of places (and their kings) in south India are mentioned, such as Kerala, Erandapalla, Kanchi, Vengi, and other kings of *dakshinapatha* or south India. They are no longer clan-based societies but kingdoms. This list points to Samudragupta campaigning via eastern India into the south and then across to Kerala. The conquests are said to be part of his violent extermination of the rajas of *aryavarta* and of the forests — *atavika rajas*. This distinction between *aryavarta* and *daksinapatha* is interesting, coinciding as it does with other texts that also make the distinction, such as the Manu *Dharmashastra*. Here *aryavarta* lies between the Himalaya and the Vindhya and between the two seas. Was this merely a convenient geographical definition or was the south seen as somehow distinct, although obviously less so than in Mauryan times? But since the Guptas never held the south, this march of triumph may have been, at best, a passing event.

We then come to the kings at the frontiers — *pratiyanta nripati* — and these begin not with the north-west but with the eastern and northern regions, such as Samatata, Davaka,

Kamarupa, Nepala and Kartipura. The eastern frontier is now distinctly more in focus than in earlier times. On the western side, the frontier seems to be marked by the clan-based societies at the western end of the Ganges plain, such as the Malavas, Arjunayanas, Yaudheyas and Abhiras. This list of frontier regions would suggest a somewhat smaller kingdom than is generally presumed when mention is made of the Gupta Empire.

However, people further afield on the west and the south are mentioned.

There is a sense perhaps of a more alien world beyond what are described as the frontier regions. Nevertheless, it is said that Samudragupta, through vigorous self-assertion, bound together the whole world. He is assumed to be superior since the people of these faraway places brought him gifts and tribute, and some made marriage alliances. These included the Daivaputras, Shahs, Shahanushahis, Shakas and Murundas of the north-west. Then there is a geographical leap to the people of Simhala in the south and of all the islands. The geographical locations are not precise, since they are, largely, titles of rulers and ethnic names. A differentiation is being made between the frontier regions that he actually annexed, and those beyond that were perhaps merely part of diplomatic conversations.

The peoples of the north-west frontier, although not proximate, were not too far beyond. Here there is a degree of continuity from the earlier Mauryan period. In the intervening centuries there had been much activity on this frontier. But the activity was in relation to conquests and migrations from the Oxus plain and Central Asia. Among those who made their presence felt were the Bactrian Greeks, the Kushanas and the Shakas. They are referred to, some directly and some indirectly, in the inscription. A Kushana title gave rise to the term Daivaputra, and the Kushanas had earlier reached as far as central India. Shahi and Shahanushahi were titles taken by the Sasanian royal family when appointed as governors of Bactria north of Iran. Shaka groups ruled in parts of the north-west and in Punjab. The term Murunda was sometimes a title taken by Kushana and Shaka satraps. These were the groups that were attacked by the Hunas. This geographical shift points to Gupta diplomacy having to be aware of the threat from the Hunas, a threat that turned into violent confrontations with Samudragupta's successors.

There is a small counter-part to this inscription that I shall mention just in passing. Samudragupta did issue a gold commemorative coin called the *ashvamedha* coin. This refers to the ancient horse sacrifice of Vedic times, when a horse was let loose and the raja who was the patron of the ritual claimed all the land across which the horse wandered. The attendants of the horse doubtless kept it to the straight and narrow. Those rajas who claimed to be conquerors indulged in this ritual [*siddham/ ashvamedha-parakramah/ rajadhiraja-prithvimave]*. The performance of an *ashvamedha* sacrifice in post-Vedic times was a claim to conquest and status and indirectly a challenge to those that might have wanted to question it.

Gupta dinar, Samudragupta, Gold, About AD 335-80, Central India, Diameter 2.2 cm, Allahabad Museum

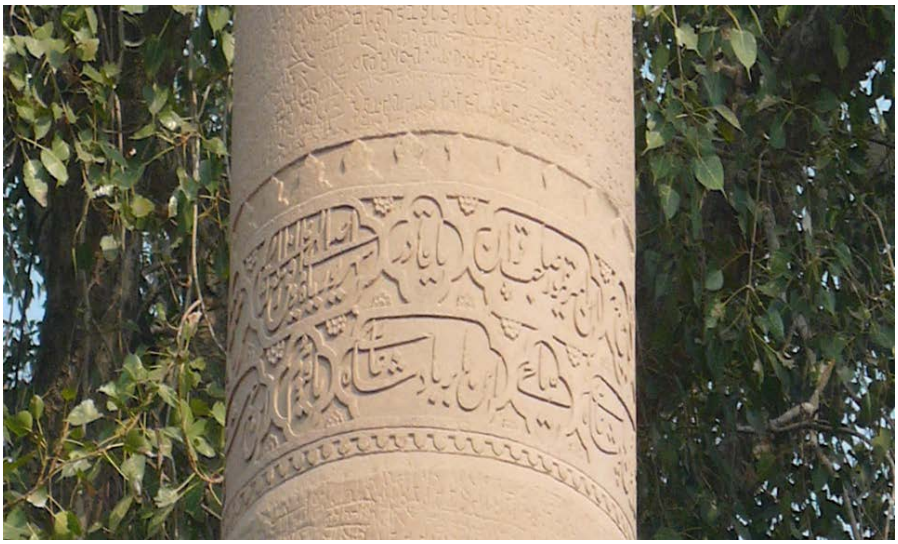
The statements in the inscription introduce new views of the world and new relationships. Of the various frontiers, the south now hosts familiar kingships close to the royal domain. Samtata, located in south-east Bengal, may have been a recent conquest and, by the time of the later Guptas, it is no longer on the frontier but an integral part of the Gupta domain. Its importance in this period points to the growth of trade between eastern India and south-east Asia.

This implied a turn to a new direction. In Mauryan times, attention had been riveted on places to the west of the sub-continent. Gupta campaigns seem to suggest an ambition to control the eastward-moving trade across the Bay of Bengal. The reference to Simhala/ Sri Lanka, and the islands beyond, is intriguing. The names are not mentioned; but could it point to initial eastward movements to the islands of South-East Asia? Interestingly, this is where the Indian presence gets well-established in the post-Gupta period.

There was, therefore, a shift from contact with west Asia alone as in the Mauryan period, to far greater attention to Central Asia, and an initial interest in south-east Asia. The smaller polities and forest rulers of *aryavarta* are said to have been violently exterminated. Was this because they offered no resistance to the threat of the Hunas, or because they did not conform to kingship as the acceptable political pattern. It was also a response to another diplomatic tangle: the Sasanians in Iran, extending their power to the west, were coming into conflict with the Romans in the eastern Mediterranean and, later, in the north-east with the Kushanas and the Hunas from Central Asia. The Guptas were aware of the implicit aggression in this triangular situation. Hence the reference to their bringing tribute to

Samudragupta, and his binding the world together through his prowess. The eulogy to him is a subtle play on Gupta diplomacy.

Let me turn now to the last of the major inscriptions, that of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. It is not as long as the earlier two, is composed in Persian and written in a fine *nastaliq* script by the emperor's favourite calligrapher, Abdullah Mushkin Qalam.



Remarkably, all three inscriptions are engraved with great expertise by excellent calligraphers. The inscription records the ancestry of Jahangir. It is almost as if the pillar by now was recognised as bestowing legitimacy on rulers. It was thought fitting to have it inscribed yet again, although, like the eulogy on Samudragupta, the inscription arrogantly cuts into the Ashokan one, making it clear that the earlier ones could no longer be read.

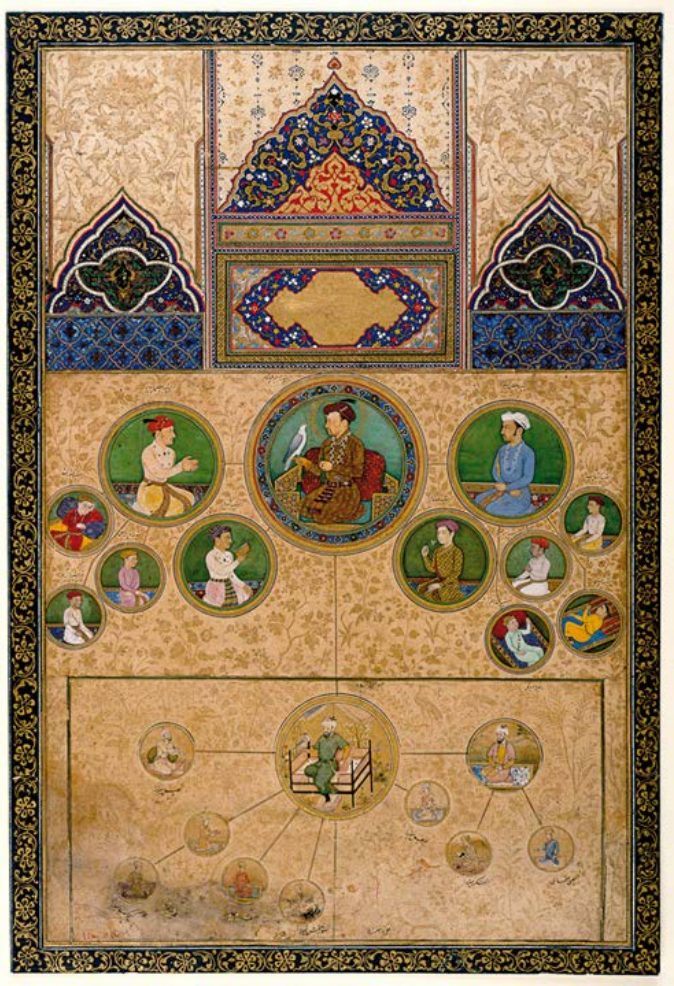
We should not forget that in the fourteenth century the one remarkable conserver of the Ashokan pillars was Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq of Delhi, who shifted some of the pillars from obscure places to secure sites. This underlined their significance, even if the inscriptions remained unread. Jahangir had enough sensitivity to recognize that it was no ordinary pillar and carried a well-recognised aura of authority.

As a ruler, Jahangir was aware of the many directions in which his diplomacy was required. Perhaps more than any other Mughal emperor, he took his imperial name seriously, and wished to project himself as a world conqueror, a claim made by his ancestor Timur. A similar title had wafted over the Samudragupta inscription. The ancestry of Jahangir stretched from Central Asia to Rajput India. What then made him decide to have his genealogy engraved on the Ashokan pillar? Did he see it as a palimpsest, encapsulating historical consciousness? Did Jahangir recognise it as betokening his past as well, and more

so given his Rajput kinship connections? Was the gesture intended to reinforce the Mughal claim to the Indian throne? Engraving his presence on the pillar was a way of stating, almost sub-consciously, that he, like the others before him, was a part of this historical tradition.

Jahangir's gaze on the world around him took him to the borderlands with Persia and Central Asia. The hub of the overland Asian trade was Afghanistan that many wished to annex. Some of the miniature paintings that he commissioned capture his gaze. I shall refer to three by way of example. The persons that symbolise the distant world are different in each painting. In two, Jahangir is depicted standing on the globe in a fantasy of wish fulfilment.

The counterpart to the inscription on the pillar is a painting consisting of portraits of his ancestors, painted as medallions. Jahangir remains the central figure with his male kinsmen surrounding him.



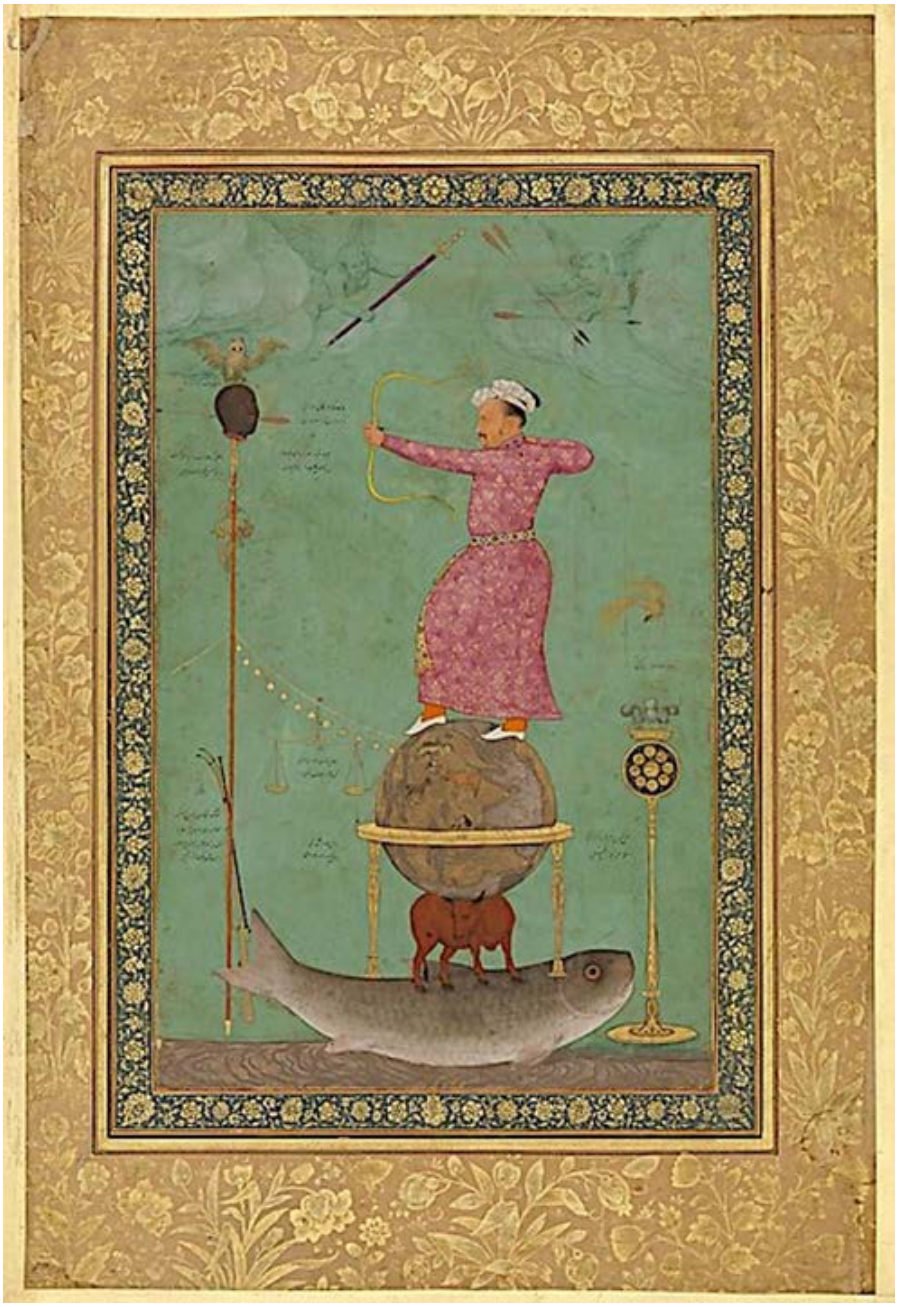
Jahangir — Pictorial Genealogy

The Mongol ancestry was on the male side and therefore important, while his Rajput connections were on the maternal side. Timur was certainly better known in the world of his times than any of Jahangir's Rajput forebears. The obsession with his ancestry may also have been a nurturing of Central Asian ambitions.

Jahangir's territorial ambitions within India were somewhat thwarted by the irritating opposition of Malik Ambar.

A portrait of an African Nobleman (possibly of Malik Ambar), Gouache and gold on paper, About AD 1605-10, Ahmadnagar, Deccan, India, Height 20.5 cm, Width 10 cm, National Museum, Delhi (50.14/8)

A painting shows Jahangir facing to his right, and shooting an arrow at the head of Malik Ambar, impaled on a spear.



‘Jahangir shoots Malik Ambar’, Folio from the Minto Album, Painting by Abu’l Hasan, ca. 1616, Ink, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, H. 10 3/16 (25.8 cm) W. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm)

Such an incident never took place; but Malik Ambar was a serious enemy who had prevented the Mughal annexation of the Deccan. Malik Ambar has no turban and instead has an owl on his head — a bird of ill omen according to some. Jahangir stands on a globe placed on the back of a bovine animal that stands on an extraordinarily large fish. Was this a reference to Puranic cosmology where the fish was the Matsya incarnation of Vishnu that saved the world from the deluge? And was the bovine, the bull Dharma, who dropped a leg in each *yuga* to indicate the decline in Dharma? Two cherubs in the air above the king hold weapons.

Malik Ambar was born Ethiopian and sold into slavery a few times. When he finally arrived in western India, he was employed in the kingdom of Ahmednagar, where he worked his way up as an administrator until he was all-powerful. His administration was much admired. He organised guerrilla warfare against the Mughal armies, a strategy later used by the Marathas. Jahangir did not kill Malik Ambar, although he may have wished to, and the painting was apocryphal.

Apart from obstructing his southern conquest, Jahangir doubtless saw in him the presence of the East African South-Arabian migrants settling along the west coast of India becoming rich on the trade across the Arabian Sea. The two seas flanking the Indian peninsula had already become hubs in the commerce of the Indian Ocean. The arc of the Arabian Sea from the eastern coast of Africa to the southern coast of India hosted major maritime activities. It was being linked to Europe via the Cape, with the Portuguese initiating the link, but there was little awareness of the consequences. The Mughals were unconcerned with South-East Asia, now a separate segment of the Indian Ocean trade, monopolised by Arab and Chinese traders. The Mughals were looking beyond Iran and further west, a gaze that is hinted at in another painting.

This painting, touching on Jahangir's view of the world, was of the same period, c. 1618, and was equally apocryphal. It depicts Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas, the Safavid emperor. That the two ever met is doubted.

‘Jahangir Embracing Shah Abbas’, From the St. Petersberg album signed by Abu’l Hasan (act.1600-30), India, Mughal dynasty, ca. 1618, Margins by Muhammad Sadiq, Iran, dated AH 1170/ 1756-57 CE, Opaque watercolour, ink, silver, and gold on paper, Freer Gallery of Art, F 1945.9

Shah Abbas is shown as somewhat smaller in size, which is not surprising. He has almost a supplicant’s expression on his face, which doubtless was the way Jahangir wanted it. Jahangir was again depicted as standing on a globe of the world that shows a European seventeenth century map of the hinterlands of the Arabian Sea. Is this example of European cartography a pointer to the European world positioned on the threshold of Asia? Although Jahangir is depicted standing on the junction of three Asian empires, the fantasy proved to be short-lived. The nimbus that captures both rulers is so large that it forms the background

to both their torsos. Significantly, Jahangir has a lion at his feet whereas Shah Abbas has a lamb, symptomatic, no doubt, of how the Mughal saw his relations with the Safavid king. Was this a form of diplomacy?

What I have tried to show is that this Ashokan pillar, together with its inscriptions, is a remarkable historical object, encapsulating history in many ways not immediately apparent. There are many pillars in India that carry the occasional inscription. But the Allahabad Pillar of Ashoka is remarkable for the particular inscriptions it carries, and the altogether different statements that the inscriptions capture, with their wide-ranging implications. These are a reflection of diverse periods of Indian history, extending across three millennia, with each later inscription registering change. The pillar remains an object that informs us of how India looked at the world at various times. Perhaps if one were to delve deeper, it may be seen to reflect, albeit indirectly, the world's view of India. It does not tell us why it came to be the site for a few of the most meaningful statements of Indian history. Yet it continues to be an object that has the power to generate history and demonstrate that history never actually comes to closure. The perpetual search for its meaning keeps us continually writing history.

This is an edited version of a lecture of the same title given at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (earlier known as the Prince of Wales Museum), Mumbai, 16 February 2018. The lecture was linked to the exhibition at the Museum on 'India and the World', hence its subject-matter.

Waiting for Spring

Rajib Chowdhury

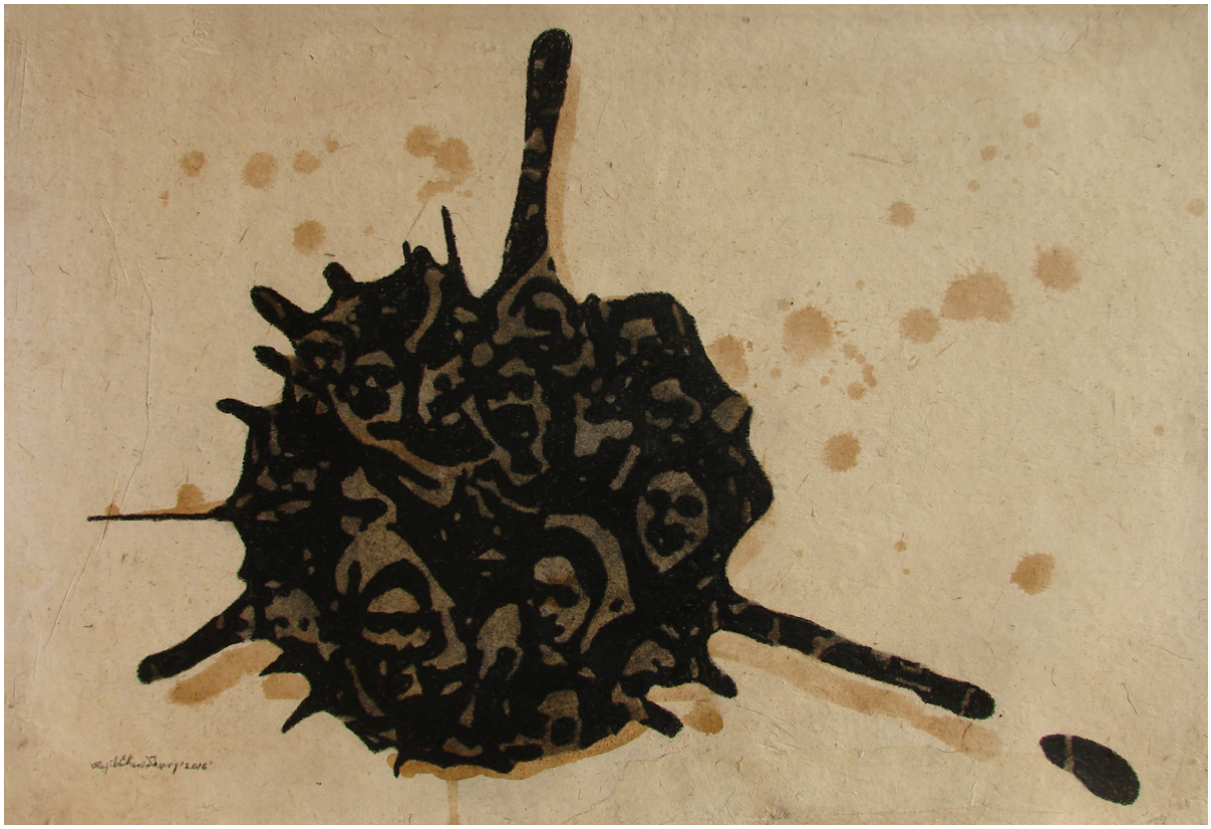
'The common man's plea, socio-political chaos and terror in various forms canopying our lives presently have greatly influenced the visuals of my works.'

In the land of roses, apple trees, and corpses

1.

'In the land of roses, apple trees and corpses', acrylic on rice paper pasted on mount board, 9.5 in X 19.5 in, 2016

2.



‘In the land of roses, apple trees and corpses’, dry pastel and tea stain on rice paper pasted on mount board, 19.5 in X 29.5 in, 2016

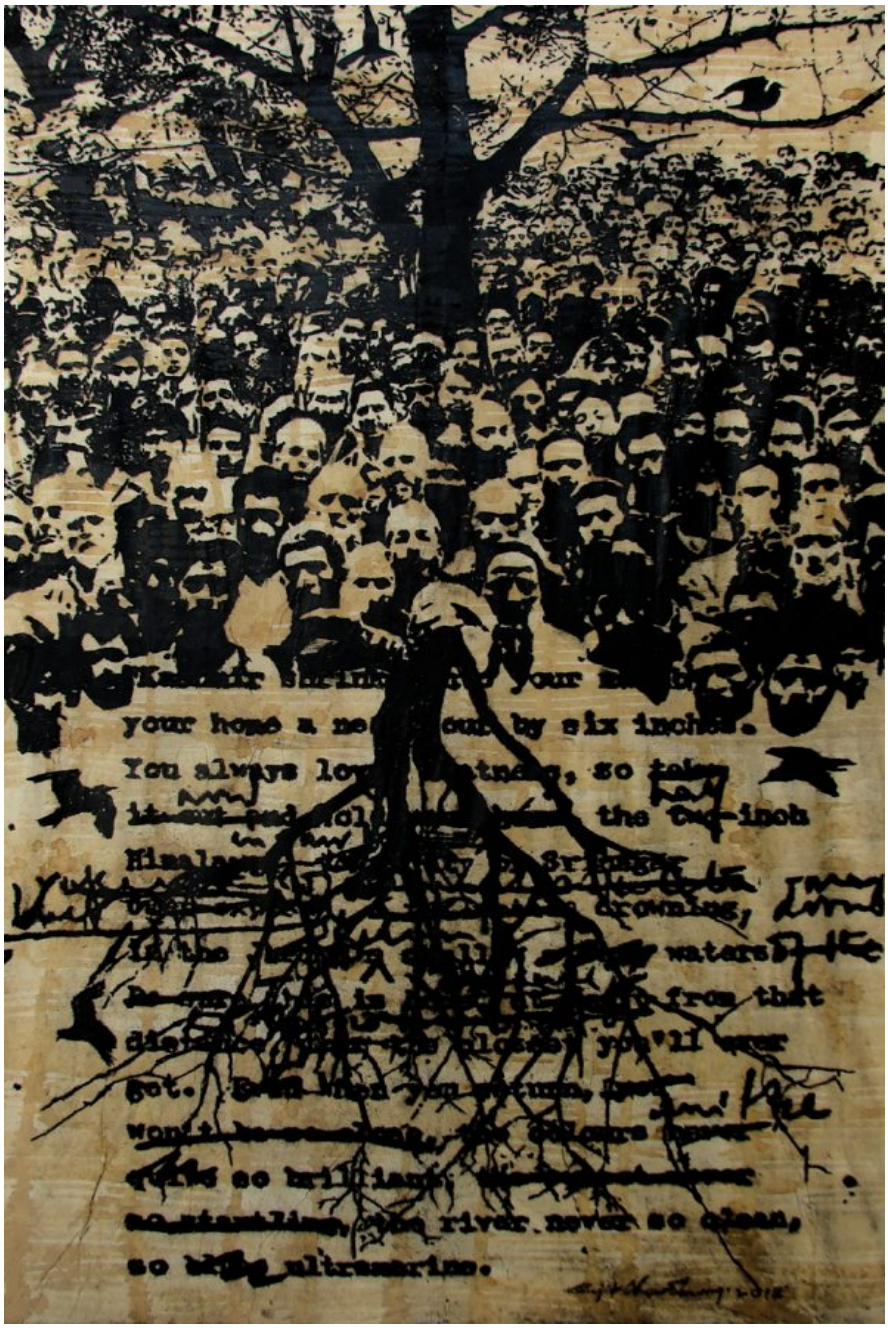
‘My canvases are stained with drops of the fresh blood of innocent people whose lives have got endangered or lost in various degrees of violent acts. Curfew, stone pelting, pallet gun shots, splatters and stains of wailing woman and screaming people, play hide and seek in my works. Enshrouded in an invisible veil, through layers of text and images, I weave tapestries of violence and terror that history has witnessed and that has become the focal point of our activities today. Skeletal forms of birds, animals and humans depict the monstrous form; the human act is taking these days, only to show us the doomsday in future. Through the device of false promises, we are making lines and boundaries according to our convenience, both political and geographical strangling, our will of liberation and self-knowledge. Our lives these days oscillate between the peace-maker and peace-breaker.

My works are just the outcome of such things. In this way I can some up my work as the depiction of what is going on around us; war, resistance, casualties, restlessness, self-defense and security measures. Previously as an artist I used to create what I liked and

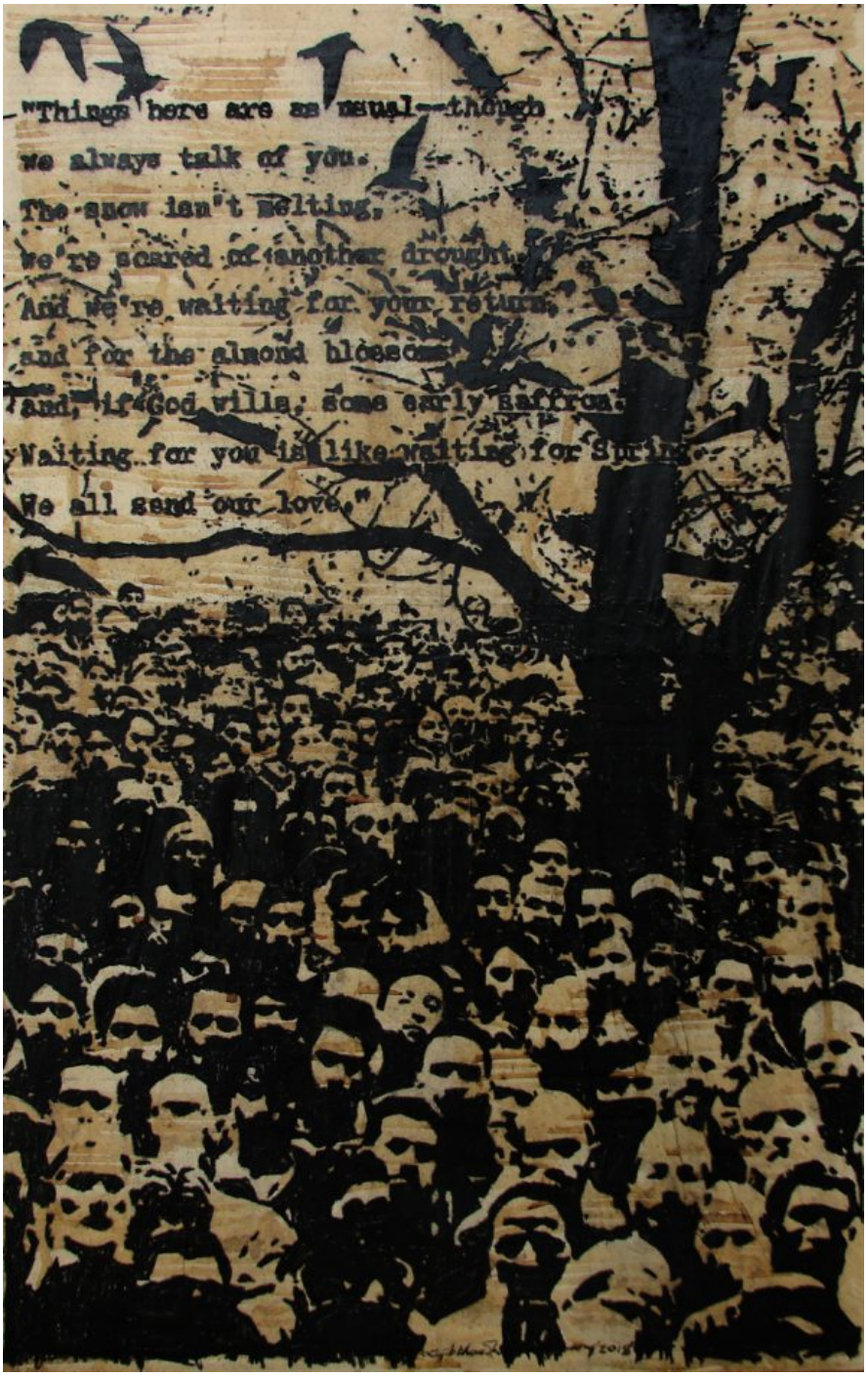
admired. However, the present scenario has somehow forced me to create what I do not like as I want people to have a glimpse of what we have made our world to be.'

Waiting for you is like waiting for spring

3.



'Waiting for you is like waiting for spring – I', charcoal and liqueur coffee on rice paper pasted on markin cloth, 36 inches X 60 inches, 2018



'Waiting for you is like waiting for spring – I', Charcoal and liqueur coffee on rice paper pasted on markin cloth, 36 inches X 60 inches, 2018

my name is Ocean

Ranjit Hoskote

Three Poems and a Conversation

'Jonah and the Whale', from a Jami-al Tavarikh or 'Compendium of Chronicles' (Iran, c. 1400). Coll/ Image courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The Heart Fixes on Nothing

Zafar

The heart fixes on nothing in this wasted province.

Whoever made anything of a kingdom of shadows?

Go find another home, my smothered hopes.

This stained heart has no roof to offer you.

I prayed for long life and got four days:

two were spent in desire, two in waiting.

Gardener, don't rip these thorns from the garden:

they were raised with the roses by a gentle spring.
The nightingale doesn't blame the gardener or the hunter:
Fate had decided spring would be its cage.
Fate's real dupe: that would be you, Zafar, your body denied
two yards of spaded earth in the Loved One's country.

And Sometimes Rivers

And sometimes rivers
that run in your veins
change course.
Silt marks the spot
from where you set sail
to circumnavigate the globe
and where someone wearing your sunburned face
stopped thrashing about in mangroves that wouldn't let go
and stood still, bleached hair ruffled by the wind,
as if, after a voyage charted across fevers and hurricanes,
riding at anchor.

The Oracle Tree

The woman walked up to the oracle tree
and bled its bark for answers.
It's no use trying, said the tree.
They've tied me up with holy threads.
Roots burn through my shoes,
leaves cloud my eyes.

I'm not me. I'm

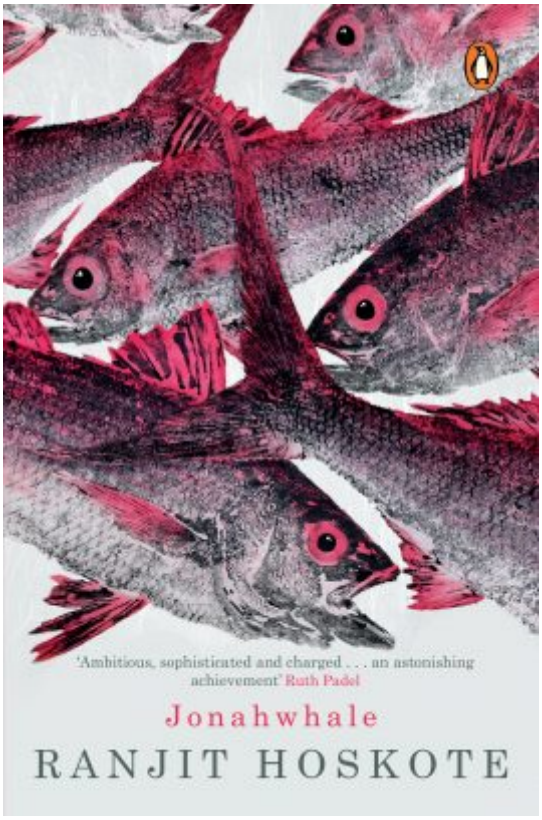
that man jogging along the promenade,

arms outspread,

scattering fistfuls of feathers

to the winds.

Ranjit Hoskote speaks to Souradeep Roy about *Jonahwhale*



Cover image of *Jonahwhale* / Image courtesy Penguin

Souradeep Roy (SR): You have had a fascination with water and not land, and the specific kinds of movements that water allows. Thematically, I could link your book with Jussawalla's first book of poems, *Land's End*. But you seem to stretch the metaphor further and begin from the sea itself. How much has the sea affected your life, and since when have you thought of it as material for writing?

Ranjit Hoskote (RH): I have long been fascinated by geographical and cultural mobility across land as well as water — the manner in which people over the centuries have created webs

of interrelatedness across natural boundaries and in defiance of territorial borders. As a poet, as well as a student of cultural history, I warm to the way in which pilgrims and merchants, scholars and artisans, soldiers and monks, storytellers and sailors have met in shifting contact zones and created new continents of affinity, rather than remaining programmed by the limitations of local circumstances.

Of course, you're right about how water allows for particularly dramatic transcultural journeys — epic migrations, long arcs of travel that carry people, goods, ideas, beliefs, narratives, and art forms from one place to another in the most unexpected ways. I think of how India's maritime adventures drew countries as far away as Indonesia and Cambodia into what Sheldon Pollock has memorably called the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis', so that a grammarian in Taxila, a dramatist in Ujjain, and a theologian in Borobudur would understand one another readily. I think of the Islamic ecumene, which created a global circulation that brought Javanese, Uzbeks, Maghrebis, Sudanese, and Albanians together into a community that balanced off doctrinal conformity with imaginative diversity.

In the process, to name but one example, the *Shuka-saptati*, the 'Seventy Tales of the Parrot', travels into Persian and becomes the *Tuti Nama* and into Javanese to reappear as the *Hikayat Bayan Budiman*. Between the 17th and the 19th centuries, the shipping routes of the world's colonial empires threw diverse crews together — Konkani, Bihari, Tamil, Malay — and from their interactions emerged new languages, such as Lashkari.

Jonahwhale operates as an interplay between solitary maritime heroes whose presence is stated or implied — Jonah, Sinbad, Ahab, Nemo, Odysseus — and the collective, literally motley crews who are largely anonymous, yet without whom the so-called Age of Exploration could not have taken place.

'Three Lascars on the Viceroy of India' (Marine Photo Service, 1929). Coll. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

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I was born and grew up by the sea — in Bombay and Goa. The sea has always made its insistent presence felt in my life, consciousness, and writing. Standing on the shore fills me with a tremendous sense of being at the edge of a seemingly infinite expanse, a reminder of how modest and ephemeral our species is, in the context and against the scale of the planet we're busy destroying with our insatiable desire to exploit, control, consume, and eventually self-destruct.

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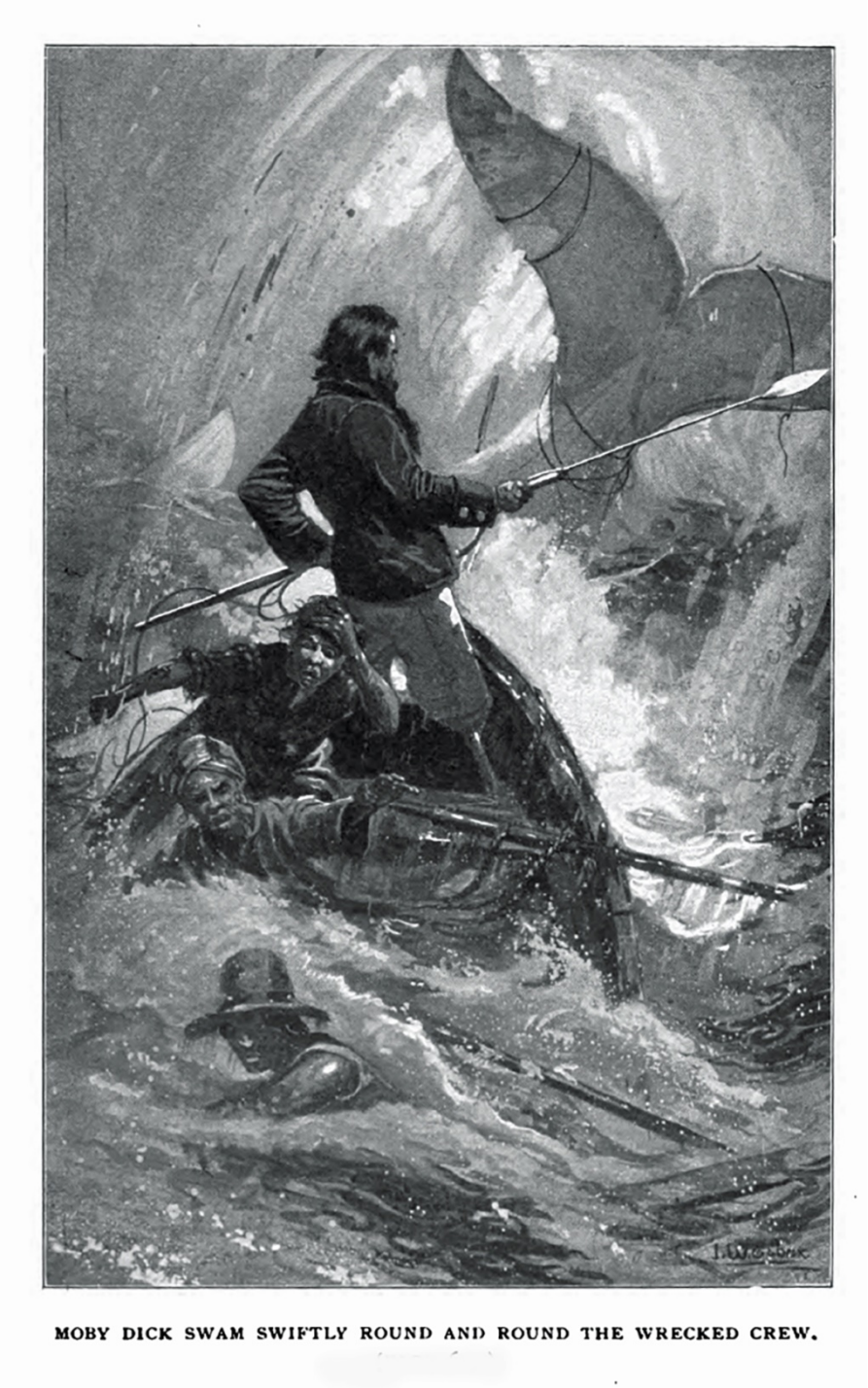
It's very kind of you to suggest Adil Jussawalla's pathbreaking *Land's End* as a point of reference, but I should clarify that Anglophone poetry in India is not the only framework by

which I navigate. My practice, as a reader and a writer, is varied, and not confined to a single literary tradition or a single language — to adapt a turn of phrase from Hindustani classical music, I am a post-*gharana* poet!

My starting points for *Jonahwhale* are quite diverse, and come from the pluriverse that I inhabit as a writer and reader across languages, cultures, and periods – they embody my long-term engagement with several writers, books, and their atmospheres. Among these are Melville's *Moby-Dick*, of course, and — equally crucially — the French poet-diplomat St John Perse's book-length poem, *Anabase*, translated by T S Eliot in 1930 as *Anabasis*; as well as the Martiniquais philosopher Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*; and the French poet René Char's *La parole en archipel*.



'The Final Chase of Moby-Dick', illustration by Isaiah West Taber, from Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902)

Other points of departure for *Jonahwhale* include sources and exemplars from outside the domain of poetry — I have been nourished, while working on this book, by pre- and non-Columbian atlases and charts, such as those of al-Idrissi, Piri Reis, and Zheng He, cartographers and navigators in whose work I have long been immersed.

Piri Reis, ‘Map of the Nile Estuary, with the Cities of Rashid and Burullus on Each Side’, from the Kitab-i Bahriye (1521-25). Coll. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD

SR: ‘my name is Ocean’ — the dramatic monologue of the ocean begins with this line. Does the personal pronoun ‘my’ also stand for your own self?

RH: That line announced itself to me, one day in February 2014, as I was crossing the Sea Link — the curved bridge that takes you out of Bombay and over the bay for seven minutes, if you’re lucky with the traffic, and back — and looking down at the tide. Only after the poem had come together did I register why that opening line resonated so strongly for me. It carries, in fact, a Biblical ring — from the episode in the Synoptic Gospels when Jesus exorcises a man in the city of Gadara, driving the demons that have possessed him into a herd of swine, which then hurl themselves over a cliff. When Jesus asks the demons their name, a standard move in exorcism, they answer: ‘My name is Legion, for we are many.’ (Mark 5:9)

On a visit to Jordan in January 2009, I stopped at the city of Umm Qais — the Gadara of Roman times. With its Caesarean ruins and panoramic vistas of the Sea of Galilee, Umm Qais formed a dramatic, plausible setting for the story. We looked down the slope where the Gadarene swine are believed to have leaped into the void.

The suggestion of the transgressive manyness of Ocean, who is the main speaker in the poem, soon fulfills itself: the location of the voice shifts several times, and without warning, from Ocean to the chroniclers who follow in the wake of tidal catastrophe. In turn, the chroniclers reference languages that are endangered, near-extinct, or threatened by aggressive neighbouring languages: they invoke the speakers of these languages, about to be silenced. Capitalisation and punctuation break down, as though swept away by the waves; indents and other spaces open up. The poem ends with Ocean reciting every narrative he knows, from his depths — he is, after all, the *katha-sarita-sagara* of Somadeva, the ‘ocean of the rivers of stories’.

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Is the ‘my’ in the opening line of ‘Ocean’ a reference to my personal self? It is very difficult to stabilise and confine the personal pronoun ‘my’ to a single, sovereign self today. Consider our predicament — we are defined by our interdependence on others. What is it to be or have ‘one’s own self’ today, when our selfhood is distributed across diverse physical locations and affective investments, delegated to our electronic prostheses and digital avatars, and intertwined with the selfhood of others? Crises link our fates to those of people we have never met, but with whom we share cartographies of schism, tremor, and dislocation across the planet. In these circumstances, I gear myself — my self — to the condition of *dividuality* rather than a classical, irreducible individuality, the recognition that ‘we are many’, that our subjectivity is a kaleidoscope of rival, contending, coincident selves.

And where do we draw the taxonomic lines separating one species from another, even as we acknowledge that *homo sapiens* — named in a spirit of optimism rather than accuracy — is the only species that systematically destroys its habitat? The *Jonahwhale* of my title, apart from carrying mythic resonances from the Old Testament narrative of Jonah, is also a reminder that whales are mammals, not fish — that they once inhabited dry land. In his brilliant study of India’s deep ecological history, *Indica*, Pranay Lal speaks of the whale cemeteries that stretch from Jammu to Kutch — the fossil remains of as many as 18 species of ancestral whales are found in this region, which was once the Tethys Sea. What seems like land was once ocean; what is ocean today could once again be land. Our destinies are bound up with those of seemingly distant species, who turn out to be closer to us than we realised.

SR: I am interested in the range of styles you use in this collection, from a one-line poem (‘Planetarium’) to long poems that steer towards an epic narration. Do you too consider yourself to be a poly-stylist?

RH: Since I often approach questions of poetry from a musical or architectural perspective, I focus less on style, and more on formal, even artisanal, choices. I am not interested in producing a single kind of poem — rather, I am invested in crafting poems of several kinds, each kind addressing specific questions of poetics, of voicing, of tonality, and which stretch the language in different ways.

Yes, as you suggest, the book is structured along a play of scale, from the intimate to the epic — from the monostich or single-line poem to long poems that riff on the choric and the polyphonic. A poem like ‘Cargo and Ballast’ is written like a libretto for opera, with a variety of voices, some singular, others an ensemble, with a continuous variation from aria to recitative. ‘Cargo and Ballast’, ‘Redburn’, and ‘Baldachin’ are intended to act as musical scores, to be interpreted by various voices, set to varied tempi.

Jonahwhale attests to my lifelong devotion to music — here, particularly, that great 20th century tradition of avant-garde experimental music, sometimes misleadingly described as ‘minimalist’, which includes distinctive exponents like Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and Brian Eno. Reich’s percussive, still-amazing 1965 work, ‘It’s Gonna Rain’, informs ‘Baldachin’.

Steve Reich, 'It's Gonna Rain' (magnetic tape with phase shift, 17 min 50 sec, 1965). Screen grab from Youtube

'A Constantly Unfinished Instrument' is dedicated to Eno. The spirit of Riley's music appears in various poems. And 'Cargo and Ballast', of course, is punctuated with the *bandish* lines from some of our loveliest *thumris*, *chaitis*, and *kajris*, resonant with the voices of Siddheshwari Devi, Begum Akhtar, and Girija Devi. And yet, those musical compositions, composed by women, encode political and juridical violence, the memory of loved ones dragooned into the army, forced to migrate to the city for work, or taken away to serve as indentured labour in the South Pacific or the Caribbean. *Sainya ko le gaye thanedar*, goes one. *Ab ke saavan ghar aa ja*, goes another.

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Some of the key poems in *Jonahwhale* unfold as projects in mapping an *ars poetica* — 'Baldachin', which I seem to be talking about extensively, wrestles with the project of shaping a Romantic approach that can take on the urgencies of the early 21st century, its toughness tempered with sensuous regard, its love of gorgeousness veined with sense, its taste for catastrophe held in counterpoint by a feeling for splendour. This is, as is evident, a wager on the Sublime — with all its capacity for terror and bewilderment.

'The Poet's Life', the poem that closes the volume, delineates an *ars poetica* too — it spells out a pattern of quixotic observation and eccentric commitments, oblique entries and exits, an embrace of collegiality and collaboration alternating with solitary retreat, and the refinement of two aesthetics, one pagan, festive and life-affirming ('He painted their grey nets in grainy gold on the beach.'), the other premised on shibui, an awareness of the evanescence and ephemerality of all things ('He collected the rust and shadows that gather on ageing metal surfaces.')

Building on the archipelagic thought of Glissant and Char, the third section or movement, 'Archipelago', sets up a chain or garland of discrete experiences and moments, which build into an assemblage, defined as much by its interrelationships and cross-references as by the individuality of its components.

SR: I am interested in your use of Notes at the end of the book, mostly because it is not quite common among Indian English poetry collections (I am not considering translations here). A collection that uses so many allusions is also rare. I tend to think that the use of several voices in one poem or collection has few precedents, like, maybe, Adil Jussawalla's *Missing Person*, which was a text that confused several readers. Did these anxieties ever come to you in your choice of using the Notes? What prompted you to incorporate such a section?

RH: Pleasure, not anxiety, is the ground from which the Notes in *Jonahwhale* arose. I am no stranger to allusions — my books have always been replete with them. Had I been anxious about this, every one of my books would have come accompanied by a section of Notes!

In *Jonahwhale*, which marks the breaking-down of so many previously self-enforced divisions — between my love of the classical impulse in poetry and of disruptive avant-garde strategies in the visual arts; between an Anglophone register and the presence of other languages, such as Awadhi, Brajbhasha, Konkani — I thought I would also dissolve the line separating my too-often held-apart lives as poet and as scholar. Adding another dimension to the hybridity of the book's form, I did away with the distinction between a volume of poems and a scholarly work. To me, it's about the rustle of different registers of language!

As it happens, I enjoy annotation for its own sake, for the pleasures of reverie and rambling, the opening up of half-glimpsed connections, the establishing of genealogies of events, and calibrating historical horizons. I've practised this already in two previous books: *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*, my translation of the 14th century Kashmiri saint-poet's work, which is accompanied by detailed notes to the poems, and *Dom Moraes: Selected Poems*, my annotated edition of Dom's work, which treats the notes to the poems as an extended meditation on his sources, contexts, choices, dilemmas, and his evolving trajectory. As far as the art of annotation is concerned, I have been inspired by two great, marvellous, sometimes delightfully whimsical practitioners: Richard Burton and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy.

SR: This is, no doubt, a major, grand book that you have written. There is an ambition here that is rare in contemporary writing, especially in the Indian English tradition. Do you consider this to be your magnum opus, as far as your previous collections are concerned?

RH: Thank you so much: this is very kind of you. Of course, it is not for me to say whether this is my magnum opus. It is my friend and colleague, James Byrne, who has very kindly described *Jonahwhale* as such.
My project in *Jonahwhale* is, bluntly put, to break open the lyric. I have no patience with the reflective, sometimes confessional lyric premised on the narrowly personal 'I', its complaints and afflictions and role-playing. This gets especially irksome when, under the banner of 'the personal is the political', the stringently political gets reduced to the self-indulgently personal. My concern in *Jonahwhale* is to operate with a larger 'I' that is sometimes 'we',

sometimes ‘them’, sometimes ‘us/ them’ — which accommodates, welcomes, yet is also perturbed by multitudes; which is schismatic, *farouche*, numinous, and palpable. The formerly invisible subaltern figures of the global maritime history of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries come to view, and to audibility. The refugee and the survivor are invoked. They do not remain outside the ‘I’, objectified or exoticised. To me, these strategies pertain as much to poetics as to politics.

In the Introduction to her recent book of essays, *The Ocean, The Bird, and the Scholar: Essays on Poets and Poetry* (2015: 3), the critic Helen Vendler writes of the ‘fundamentally different structures of literature — linear in narrative, dialectic in drama, and concentric in lyric.’ While the magisterial Vendler’s point is a useful one, I remain unconvinced, as a writer, that one must forever retain these silo-like distinctions. In *Jonahwhale*, I wanted to experiment with mixing these modes, to merge and over-dub them.

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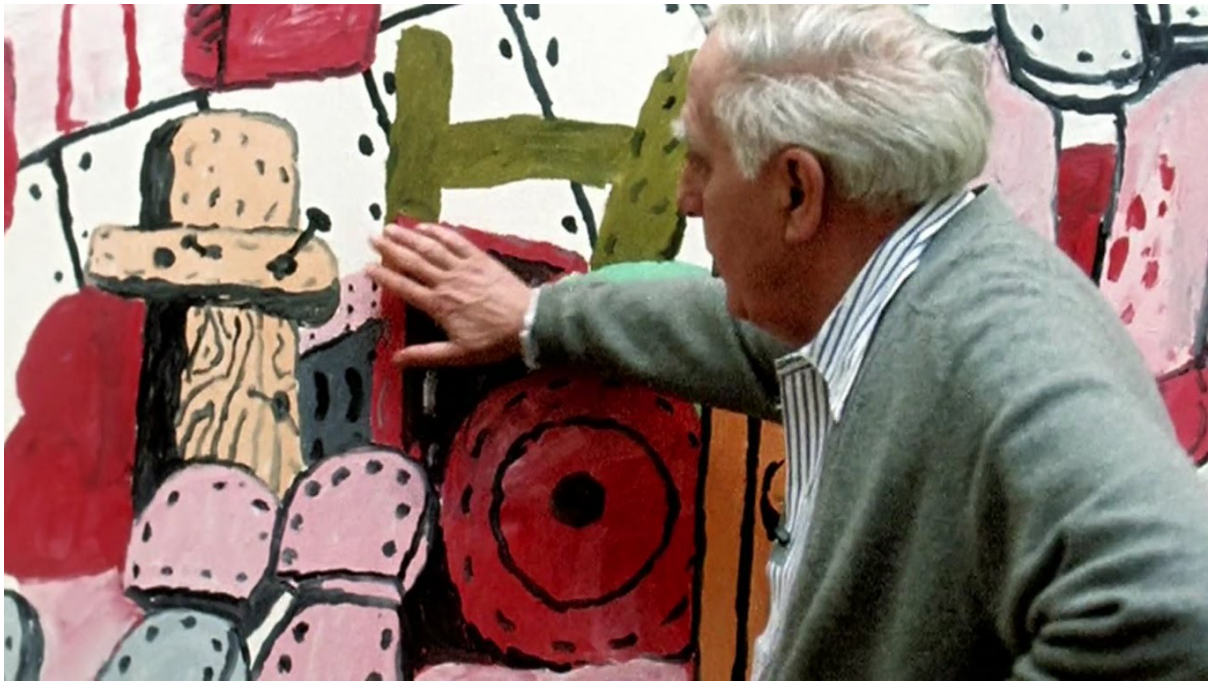
In the Introduction to *I, Lalla*, I reflect on the passage of texts from orality to scribal culture to print modernity, and how each phase possesses its strengths and its disadvantages. Orality allows for the freedom of simultaneous versions being in play; print modernity imposes the dogmas of authenticity, originality, and a single authorised version. As a poet who works within print modernity, how might I retrieve and re-appropriate some of the latitude of oral culture? How might I unknot, dismantle, shake up the printed text? *Mise-en-page* is a vital aspect of the *Jonahwhale* project — it helps push the written and printed text in the direction of the mutable, mercurial, tricky voice.

In many of the *Jonahwhale* poems, the body of the poem is stretched, exploded to the edges of the page; the poem appears as a scatter pattern or diagram on the page. Sentences assume the form of temporary continua sometimes; and sometimes, all punctuation disappears, and a voice carries — or several voices carry — the text forward on the strength of cadence. The page opens up to indicate and accommodate layered utterances, silences and erasures, the word visible yet cancelled, voiced yet unvoiced, perhaps to be rendered *sotto voce*. Sometimes, as I say in the poem, ‘As It Emptieth Its Selfe’, with its use of entries from Macaulay’s diaries and from colonial-era hydrographic maps, we must own up to our speech as ‘stutterance’.

In this spirit, the poem ‘Redburn’ is a palimpsest. First of all, it takes an extract from Melville’s novel, *Redburn*, and subjects it to overwriting, erasure, editing, spatial transformation. It then invites readerly ingenuity as a text to be read – how do you speak a word, phrase, or line that has been crossed out on the page, yet retained under the cancellation? Likewise, ‘Philip Guston, in (Pretty Much) His Own Words’ is, pretty much, that — a meditative selection of phrases and passages from the great American artist’s talks, lectures and writings. I’ve collaged, edited and added interpolations to this purposively found material, to create a three-part constellation evoking three major venues of art-making, dialogue and criticism, especially in the expanded School of New York folklore: the lecture, the studio visit, and the loft.



Philip Guston (1913-1980)

And so, an avant-garde poetics is activated throughout *Jonahwhale*: the collage, the montage, the *objet trouvé*, the cut-up, looping, antiphony, all come into play as formative and integral devices in the making of poems. I'm preoccupied, in many of these poems, with questions of temporality: duration, simultaneity, counterpoint. I've turned back, during the writing of this book, to the maverick William S. Burroughs, who pioneered the cut-up and fold-in techniques, together with Brion Gysin, at an early moment in the history of the dialogue between poetics and emerging technology.

As Burroughs says to his interviewer, Daniel Odier, in *The Job* (1969: 29), it was 'Brion Gysin who pointed out that the cut-up method could be carried much further on tape recorders. Of course you can do all sorts of things on tape recorders which can't be done anywhere else — effects of simultaneity, echoes, speed-ups, slow-downs, playing three tracks at once, and so forth. There are all sorts of things you can do on a tape recorder that cannot possibly be indicated on a printed page.' In *Jonahwhale*, I'm trying, modestly, to indicate just such effects.

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Another point of departure for me, in *Jonahwhale* and in an ongoing project that I have, at the cusp of poetry and the visual arts ('Letters to al-Mu'tasim'), is the *muraqqa* or album, prized by the Safavid, Mughal, Ottoman, and Adilshahi visual cultures. It was part portfolio, part scrapbook, part journal, containing original paintings, copies, prints, calligraphic annotation, and text, all bound together.

In 'Cargo and Ballast', different voices, extracts from judicial documents, maritime records, the phantom of a Turner painting, and pop-cultural references, all come together into a *muraqqa* that mourns the victims of the slave trade. *Jonahwhale*, too, is a *muraqqa* – it

enfolds, within itself, my translation of a ghazal by Bahadur Shah Zafar in his Burmese exile ('The Heart Fixes on Nothing') as well as my super-compressed version of the Ramayana with the emphasis on Sita's perspective ('After the Story').

J M W Turner, 'Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon (sic) Coming On' (1840). Coll. Tate Britain, London

SR: The section 'Poona Traffic Shots' seemed to resemble a kind of writing that is familiar to someone who might have been following Indian English poetry, especially in the use of narrative in terms of form; and the description of place, in terms of content (images like 'the rainfall per square inch of skin'). You have written this from July 1991-July 2014. How did you revise, rework some of your earlier poems? Why did you wait for this book to publish these poems?

RH: 'Poona Traffic Shots' is actually one long poem in ten sections – but readers are welcome to read it as a section comprising ten poems. That works fine, too!

The dates are somewhat misleading. The poem was written, pretty much in its entirety, during a highly intense period of a week or so, during the monsoon of 1991. And then it sat in typescript, in a folder, for decades. Every few years, I would take it out, look at it, alter some punctuation, re-jig a phrase here or there. A strophe was added to one of its sections, at some point. When I finally decided it should go into a book, as a central axis to

Jonahwhale — a pulling-back to land before putting out to sea again – I revised the closing section. This happens to me quite often. A poem may remain in one of my notebooks or folders for years before it goes into a published volume. It has to find its appropriate location and circumstances, its *kairos*!

'Poona Traffic Shots' is not, strictly speaking, a narrative. While the myth of the journey gives it a sense of linear progression, it's actually an epic assemblage involving syncopations, disruptions, changes of scale and tempo. In 1991, when I wrote it, I was 22 and discovering the penumbra and incandescence of cinema — Tarkovsky, Parajanov, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. I was enchanted by the possibility of treating each section in the sequence as a shot, moving fluidly from tracking the protagonists, panning across vistas, taking a crane or a tilt shot in some situations, capturing camera shake. Several sections of the poem were written looking out of a bus window in the rain, going from Bombay to Poona and back.

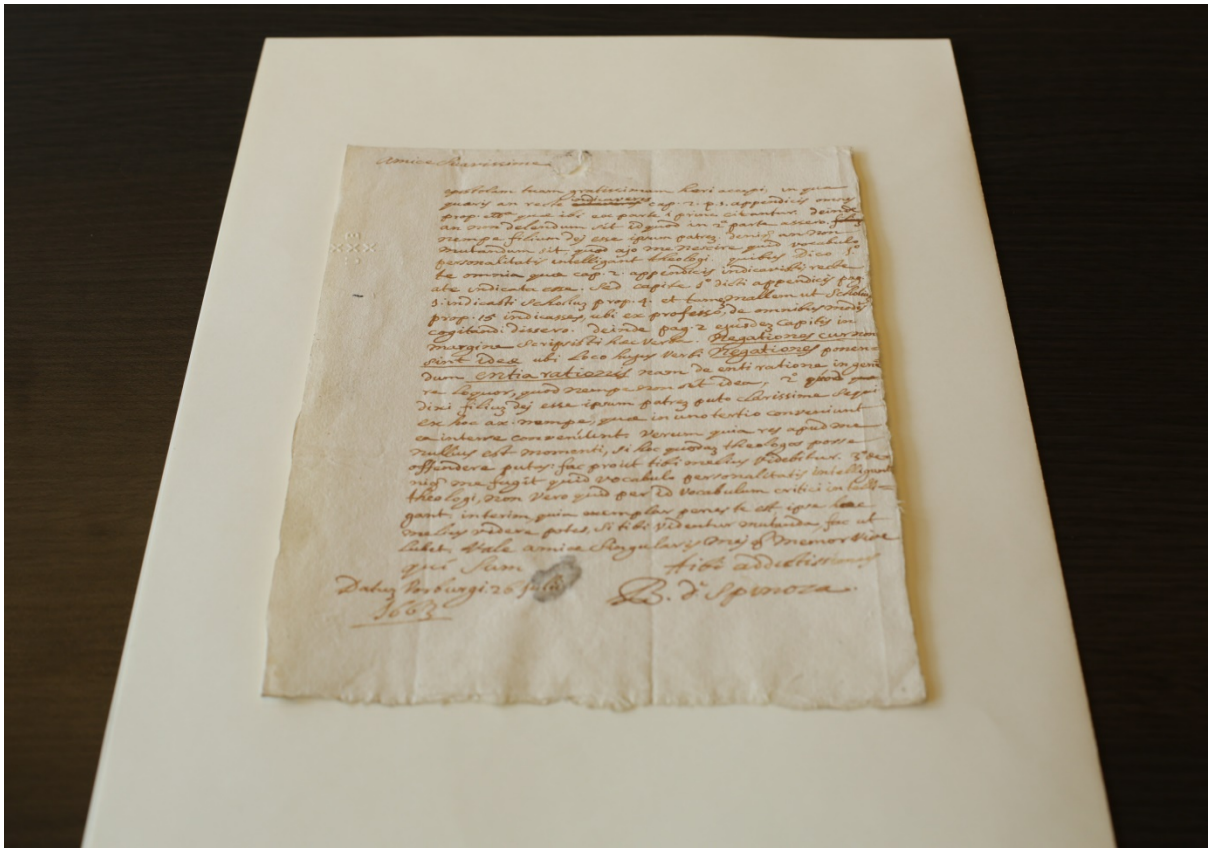
A central theme of *Jonahwhale* is anamnesia — a refusal to yield to forgetting, a going over the contested terrain of memory. Re-reading 'Poona Traffic Shots', I note its references to the ascendancy of the military-industrial-academic-technocratic complex, the first Gulf War, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the ballot-stuffing during local elections — I look back, and I look around me, and think of how certain historical continuities still ripple among us. 'Poona Traffic Shots' looks forward to the more compressed 'Highway Prayer', written in September 2016 on a bus ride from Ithaca to New York City, as a testament to our familiar yet estranging tropical politics of saviours and shysters, streetfighters and tele-buffoons, panic and apocalypse.

The Last Word

Shubigi Rao

Inside pages from Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book: Vol. I. Published 2016, RockPaperFire Singapore.
Photo Maria Clare Khoo

Tyranny (in any form) is always temporary. Its weakness lies in its legitimacy being derived from the enforcement of a single doctrine, dogma and book. All it takes is a dissident or alternative idea to take root; paper will always trump rock. The singular will always breed acts of resistance in print, and often they take a quieter, more resilient form. Under the USSR, the Soviet bloc and Warsaw Pact nations suffered the longest modern period of state censorship and oppression. Yet novel and eventually successful forms of counteraction also marked this period. The underground printers who flourished in Amsterdam, printing the banned works of Spinoza and his contemporaries, are part of just one historical moment in the legacy of print as disaffection, resistance, solidarity, action, and self-determinism. I am struck, as always, by acts of quiet, almost passive, resistance to some of the most violent forces or despotic regimes throughout history.

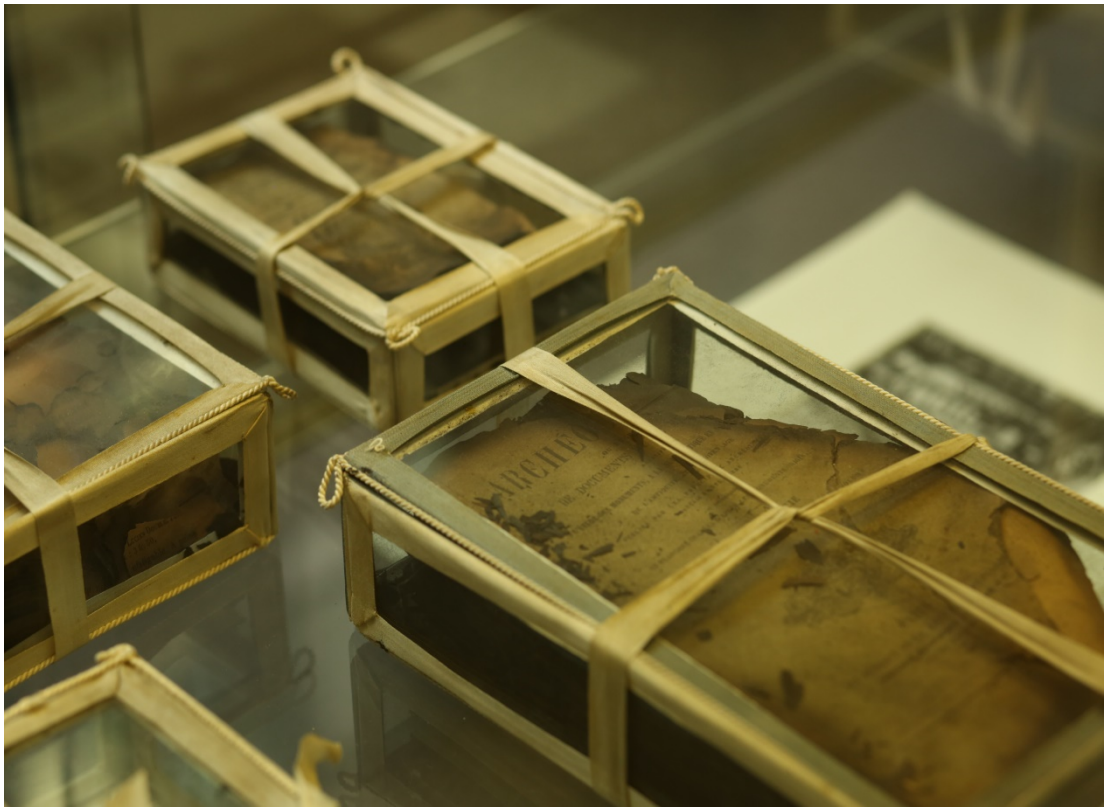


A letter from Spinoza to his editor, property of Special Collections, University of Amsterdam Library. Film still from *Pulp: A short biography of the banished book*, 2014-2024

Erstwhile Czechoslovakia has suffered more than most. In the last century alone, it was first under Nazi occupation and then a Soviet one, and so the brutal destruction of culture under the jackboot would give way to another brutal Communist repression. Prague's writers and dissidents would resist both invaders and regimes. Notably, when under the Soviet heel, they would enact a form of 'as if', taking the illogic of communist diktats at face value, following them to their absurd conclusions. As ironic acts of non-violent civil action, it would constantly infuriate the police, party officials, and bureaucrats in their implementation of repressive laws. The Czechs also kept up an almost-constant supply of underground clandestine printed matter, whether tracts written by local writers and dissidents, or translations of proscribed books, both Czech and international.[1] *Samizdat* texts were a feature across the Soviet bloc and occupied nations behind the Iron Curtain for the duration of the Cold War, despite the ever-present danger of apprehension, detention, harsh punishment in gulags, or defenestration (the latter being a Czech speciality). Sometimes hand copied or typed on illegal typewriters with carbon paper, these texts were even printed at night on party-controlled photocopiers and presses.[2] These remarkable, blurry, poorly printed, nondescriptly bound texts of incendiary ideas about freedom and self-determination would become a counter-form of literary output. Early texts in the Soviet Union were not as political, serving as they initially did a more literary and intellectual audience. But with the state crackdown on writers and intellectuals, notably with the charging and convicting of Joseph Brodsky[3] in 1963 for the crime of 'social parasitism' (for being nothing more socially useful than a poet, and 'in velveteen trousers', no less), *samizdat* became increasingly dissident and political. Soon, the roughness of

the *samizdat* came to be a symbol of anti-state slickly produced colourful propaganda. When the writing, printing, possession and reading of these texts were so harshly proscribed, it was natural that the unassuming, often tattered (from having passed through so many hands) *samizdat* would be seen as a powerful antidote to state-sponsored dogma.

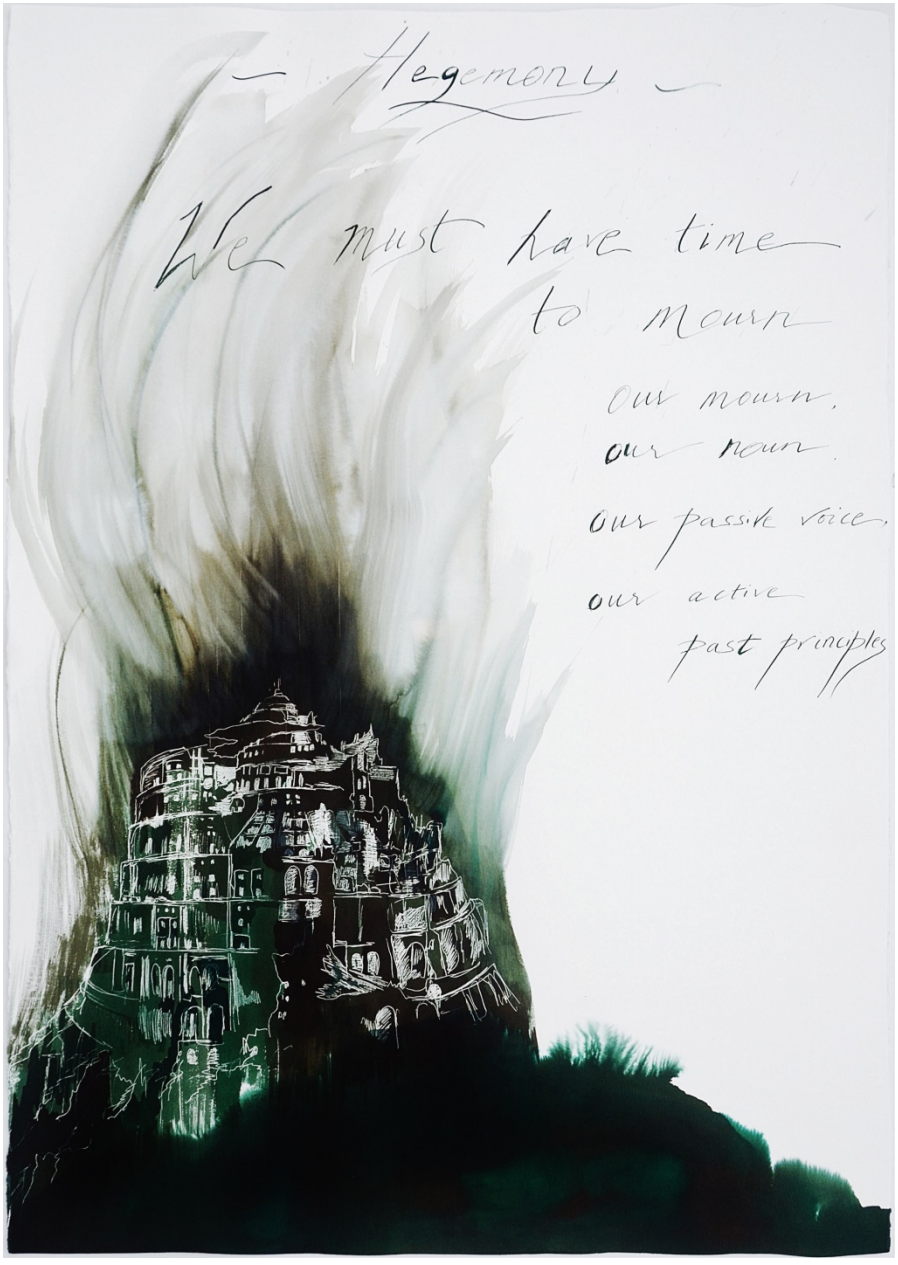
What the *samizdat* proves is the necessity of the human yearning for expression, and as an outlet, it serves a non-political purpose as well. Writers need to have their work read, intellectuals need debate and discourse, and when speech is dangerous because anyone could be an informer, the anonymous tract, pamphlet and text will do. Vladimir Bukovsky, Soviet dissident, writer and activist described the necessity and self-determinism at the heart of the *samizdat* as, 'I myself create it, edit it, censor it, publish it, distribute it, and get imprisoned for it'.



100-year old survivors of the Leuven University burning. Film still from Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book, 2014-2024

This is why the final word on resistance must be given to the form that has consistently proven to be a very effective long-term counter to violence and brutality. Pacifism is a lofty, perhaps naïve, ideal, but it is a state to which our species urgently and collectively needs to evolve. Pacifism, still regarded by many to be analogous to cowardice. While there are still forces of repression, tyranny and violence to counter, we are told that there is no time for pacifism. But this is why the freedom to write, to read, to create and communicate is essential – because we will never make time for pacifism, but we will always know how to make culture. And while this is where we will make our mistakes, it is also where we learn

from them, reread and debate them, and pass on the accretion of knowledge, principles, and empathy. It is in our books and music, our art and our inventions that we have denied mortality and oblivion, forgetting and entropy, most effectively. In reclaiming pacifism as an act of courage, it needs to be acknowledged that it is in the making of culture that we also make our stand.



Hegemony, Mixed media on Tiepolo paper, 70×100 cm

Shubigi Rao in conversation with Souradeep Roy

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1 MARGINALIA: It is noteworthy that the first democratically elected (after 41 years of occupation) President of Czechoslovakia, and later the Czech Republic, would be an author and playwright, the dissident and humanitarian activist, Václav Havel. Famed for his work in absurdist theatre, his passing in 2011 would be overshadowed by the death of the terrifyingly clownish figure of the North Korean despot and architect of his people's misery, Kim Jong-Il. In a fantastic piece of absurdist theatre, the tyrant's death was mourned with state-mandated forms of public grieving (insufficient tears earned harsh punishment).

2 MARGINALIA: Especially dangerous because all machines had identifying marks, and so clandestine employees could be easily caught if a copy of the text fell into KGB or police hands.

3 MARGINALIA: Later, the then youngest winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987, Brodsky would read Auden's poems during his isolation in a Russian gulag, as they gave him the strength to survive the extreme conditions and the brutality of his jailors. See Joseph Brodsky, 'To Please a Shadow', *In Less than One: Selected Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.

The text has been excerpted from *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book, Vol I.* published RockPaperFire Singapore, 2016.

Sunflower

Sharankumar Limbale

Translated by *Priya Adarkar*

Sayed Haider Raza, 'L'oasis', oil on canvas, 41 x 34 cm, 1961

Trimukh was tiring like an ebbing flood. Each step he took in front of him freed itself and fell, like a comet freeing itself from the force of gravity. His gaze was being uprooted from him and falling, like a collapsing tree. His stomach felt as desolate as a ruined sanctuary.

Trimukh was a boy of about fifteen years. He had set out for Banaras. Walking silently. Carrying his mother's bones. His village had receded far behind him. He did not even know how much further Banaras was from him. He had no money with him, nor food and clothing. What did he have at all besides these? It was only the filial duty of throwing his mother's

cremated remains into the river Ganga at Banaras that had made him set out. Crossing village after village. He was told that he would reach the railway station in two days. He had not yet ridden in a railway train. He had never even seen one. The railway, Banaras, his mother's bones: all these things were choking his heart like a dam about to burst.

Today Trimukh was tired out by the incessant walking. His hunger and thirst were making him desperate. He could hardly eat his mother's bones. He was exhausted. The tattered clothes he was wearing, the dishevelled, overgrown hair on his head, the dirt accumulated on his body, his concave stomach,his sunken eyes, combined with the bundle of bones he was carrying, made his appearance disgusting.

Trimukh was the son of the Mang called Sambha. His stomach was hollow with fear of his low status. His caste followed him about like a demon. He couldn't forget his inferiority complex. His caste had hollowed him out. His humanity had died a long time ago. The only thing that remained in him was his disgusting caste. There was pressure of his caste on his mind. He couldn't cross his limits.

'I am a Mang' was all he knew. He had often remained hungry, but had not stepped above his station in life. He had not wished to commit the sin of acting against the religion that had been handed down to him. He was diffident. He was fearful. His caste had made him helpless. While walking in the streets or travelling around villages, he acted as if he was balancing the weight of his caste on a high wire.

Someone had thrown some spoiled rice at the side of the road. Dogs were eating that rice. With a leap Trimukh sat down by that heap of rice. The dogs ran away. He started eating that spoiled rice. Just as fire laid siege to skyscrapers twenty-five stories high, hunger had laid siege to him. Each cell of Trimukh's body had become a ravening hunger. Trimukh's hunger had become as monstrous as a bursting dam.

Before the mansion in front of him, Trimukh saw a new bride doing a puja to the sacred tulsi plant. His thirst reached the tulsi plant like the hand of a thief. The roots of his thirst were becoming madly clasped to the roots of that tulsi plant. He slid towards the door of the mansion like a lizard.

The dogs were barking at Trimukh. That house, too, seemed to be rejecting him in the guise of a dog. The animal in that dog had died a long time before. All that remained was a domesticated human. After completing the tulsi puja with complete devotion, that new bride had gone inside. Along with her newly washed hair, the straying end of her saree, her rounded hips, Trimukh's view of her vanished into the house.

In a little while, a household servant came out. He yelled at Trimukh.

The tulsi was a tame pigeon.

The dog was a domesticated man.

The household servant was a trained animal.

Even in that bright sunlight, who knows how Trimukh's shadow disappeared into the shadow of the mansion. Trimukh was becoming distracted in the scorching heat. He had

lingered in the shade of that mansion. He was reminded of the mansion owned by his master.

The thing that stood out most in his village was the mansion of Shivaji Patil. Trimukh's father was Shivaji Patil's Mang. Shivaji Patil had looked after Sambha Mang. Sambha Mang had grown up with food and shelter from Shivaji Patil. Shivaji Patil had given a loan and arranged a marriage for Sambha. The loan had not yet been paid off. Sambha's wife had passed away, and Sambha had been rotting in jail for the past five years. Shivaji Patil had an immense bearlike strength in the region, but in the village elections Sarjerao had defeated the Patil's party. In the elections, the Maharwada had voted against the Patil. Sarjerao's party had been elected, and the Patil was unhappy.

In order to avenge his defeat, the Patil collected about fifty goons and launched an attack on the Maharwada. They had burnt a few huts. They had killed Dagdu Mahar. The Maharwada had been destroyed. The backlash for this atrocity had registered itself everywhere. Many cases had been filed, and the post of Patil had been lost.

That post had gone to Dagdu Mahar's son. Shivaji Patil was enraged at the insult. The worth of his status and his ancestry had been reduced to mud. The ignominy had bound their muzzles into silence. The Patil was blazing with vengeance. That the Patil's post should go to a Mahar's family was in any circumstance an inflammable matter for him. 'A Mahar has become the Patil': that was a pain he could not endure. He was being killed by it, though alive.

Shivaji Patil gave Sambha Mang a contract to kill. Sambha had to honour his instruction. Shivaji Patil's favours to him were such that they could not be repaid. For Sambha, to disrespect the word of the Patil was a sin. He was ready to give his life for his master. His creed was that his master was the road to moksha for him. 'Sambha, I don't care if I lose all my fields, I'll pay your bail and get you out. I'll look after your wife and children very well. Don't worry about it. Just remove this thorn from my way.'

Sambha murdered the son of Dagdu Mahar in broad daylight. He cut off his head, bound it in his upper garment and flaunted it in the Patil's honour. A tremendous wave of fear shocked the village before departing.

The Patil was looking after Sambha's wife and children. Saraja used to work herself to death in the Patil's fields, and the Patil would feed her. Trimukh looked after the animals. The Patil raised him, considering it his fate. Day after day came and went like the breeze. She was like the animals in the Patil's barn. She lived night and day, in daylight and dark, by the Patil's hands and feet. The Patil's words, his spit, his gaze, his wishes, had become the unbreachable boundaries of her life. After Sambha, she was totally in the Patil's custody. She would do whatever the Patil told her and eat whatever he gave her.

Saraja became pregnant by the Patil. The whole village was up against the Patil. This had been so for thirteen months. Saraja's belly was growing larger day by day. Her calves were swelling like the corn in the crop. The Patil's sleep had become a torment to him. Sambha's murderous hands stalked him day and night.

Saraja died of snakebite; the Patil performed her last rites.

Trimukh slowly began to slither like a snail towards the bathing pond. He set down the bundle of bones and took some water into his cupped hands. He raised his hands to his lips. The water smelled like soap.

Just then, some small children came running there. They began to harass Trimukh and started to throw pebbles at him. After some stones landed on his forehead, Trimukh shook his head. His head felt lighter just as a stove grows lighter after it has run out of kerosene. He staunched the welling blood and screamed. The children began to laugh out loud. They found his strange screams amusing.

Trimukh came to the outskirts of the village. The sun was blisteringly hot. Trimukh cried out like a strange bird. He leapt about a few times. He threw the dust around and began to run. Just as dried leaves fall from trees and fly away with the wind. Memories of his mother were settling on his heart like a flock of birds. The Patil's words were ringing in his ears: 'Take your mother's bones to Banaras and throw them there. Her dead soul will find peace. You are her son, aren't you?'

A desolate moorland dancing with mirages. A route that, like a serpent, did not come within reach. A time that choked the throat of a dove. A totally hushed environment. A hot sun that fell harshly on the head. And a completely harassed Trimukh. He was trampling his way, sunstruck and thirsty.

Trimukh lay motionless under a tamarind tree along the way. He began to eat the tamarind leaves that had fallen to the ground. He began to swallow the sour juice from them. His stomach was not responding at all. The sour taste was causing his tongue to shiver. His mouth was trembling. Trimukh vomited a couple of times. A thousand black waves of unconsciousness were galloping over his body like mounted horsemen. Taking his mother's bones as a pillow, Trimukh lay down and closed his eyes. Languor took possession of him.
Trimukh got up. The day was declining towards sunset. Now he must reach close to the next village. He began to walk with a new strength. He could hear the festive sound of the shehnai. His hopes had begun to rise. In the next village there must be a public feast at the home of some Patil or sarpanch. He would at least get some food there. He was walking with that hope, and his stomach had long since gone into the village and was roaming around it from house to house.

Outside the village, in Bhimnagar, a celebration of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's anniversary was in progress. All the Buddhists had gathered enthusiastically. A Dalit activist was passionately giving a speech. Trimukh had become an inseparable part of that intensity. He got a meal there. At night, he slept in that very same enclosure.

The next morning, he set forth again on his journey. That day he would reach the railway station in the nearby town. He would see the railway station. He would sit in the train without a ticket. He went forward step by step.

Trimukh left Bhimnagar. Outside the village he found the thighbone of some animal. He went on walking like a man with a contagious disease. Then he found an animal's rib. Trimukh began to collect animal bones. Animal bones and his mother's bones had accumulated with him. He went further ahead. Outside the village there was a hut. An old crone sat coughing in the hut. Buying bones was her business. She was very tired. On

account of her age she could not see too well. Her only son had set out that morning on his bicycle to buy bones in rural areas.

Trimukh gave that old woman the animal bones. The old woman evaluated the bones. To Trimukh's eyes, the old woman's hands stood before him like those of the goddess of justice, holding the scales. The weight of the animal bones was proving insufficient. The Banaras in Trimukh's mind went up and down like the weighing scales. Trimukh put his mother's bones into one of the scales, and Trimukh was given one rupee. He would have reached the railway station by that evening. He turned around and looked back. Bhimnagar could be seen at the distance of a shout. Trimukh set out in the direction of Bhimnagar. Like a sunflower at the pace of a thousand storms.

Trimukh wanted to donate the rupee he got from selling the bones to the fund collected to set up Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's statue.

Read the original Marathi story here.

The English translation of the story was published in the collection *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories*, Orient Blackswan, 2017.

The Marathi original was published as 'Suryaphool' in the short story collection *Dalit Brahman,* Dilipraj Prakashan, Pune, 1996.

Two Poems

Shanta Acharya

Thornton Dial , 'The End of November: The Birds That Didn't Learn How to Fly', quilt, wire, fabric, and enamel on canvas on wood, 72 × 72 in./ Image courtesy Gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2014, via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A Time Comes

When you don't want to be afraid any more –

dance as if everyone, no one is looking, not before

an audience in front of a tanker

with the world watching while you prance

playfully along a grand highway of illusions,
knowing you cannot find your way home.
For those who have no freedom,
dying is the closest to going home.
Everyone expects you to sacrifice,
survive at the outliers of the human curve.
The price is always your most precious possession –
your life, your dreams, your future
drowned on a beach, face half-buried in sand,
a daughter, brutally violated, dead in your arms.
How long can one hold on to whatever hope
that lies on the furthest reach of stars?
Time is my country, silence my language.
This body and soul, my map and compass.
I've spent a lifetime waiting to be home,
the songs I came to sing remain unsung.

In a Time of Seige

(Paris: 13 November 2015)
Moving to music in the concert hall
we shrugged off gunshots,
thinking they were fireworks.
In an instant we got a grip on reality
as masked men sprayed bullets and blood.
Bodies bursting with life moments ago
lay inert on the floor, wearing death masks

like actors in a theatre of the absurd –

except this was real, you sprawled on me,

protecting me with your last breath.

I could not stop shivering

even with your still-warm body steadying me.

In the dark night of the soul I hear

screaming, wake up in a sweat, howling.

My days are locked in, incoherent with fear –

loneliness has usurped my peace, grief my cheer.

How does one learn to love in a time of siege?

The world may be more than we know –

it is also what we make of it.

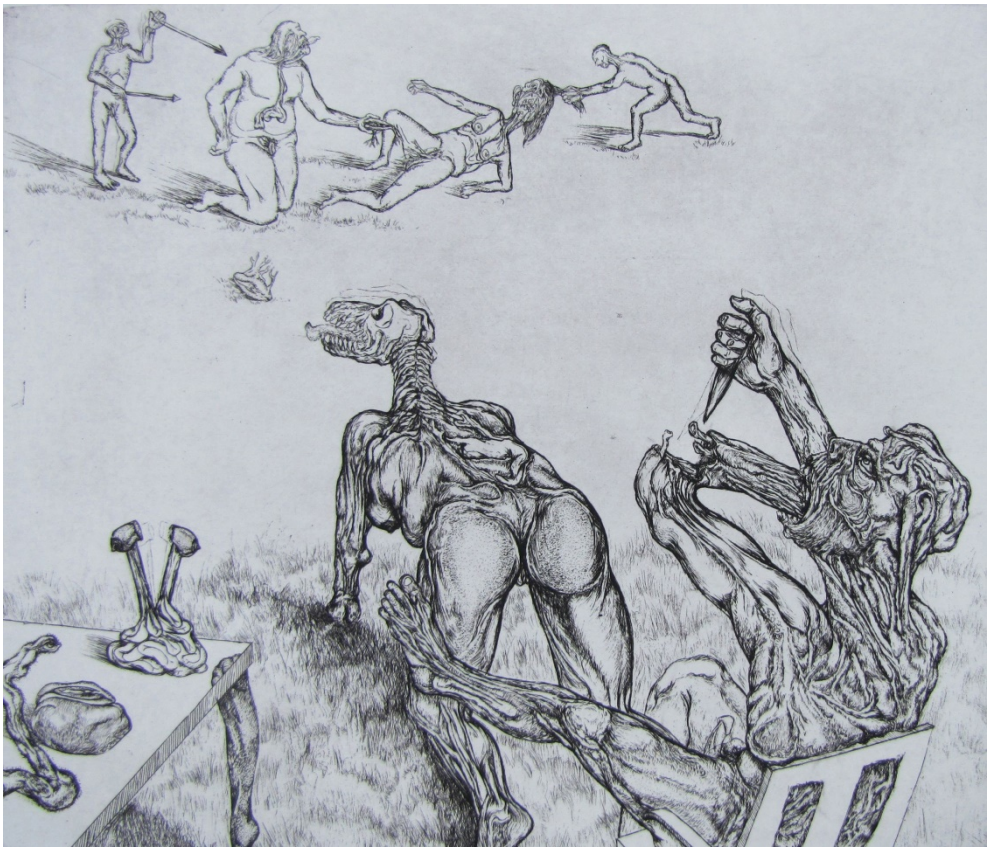
This universe lives and grows inside us,

the world outside is forever diminishing to nothing.

Three Etchings on Paper

Kedar Namdas

'Reclining Reality', etching on paper, 8 x 10 inches



‘Situation’, etching on paper, 7.5 x 9 inches

‘Sentence’, etching on paper, 9 x 6 inches

Finding Common Ground

In Conversation with Kumkum Sangari

Edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, and published in 1989, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, used gender as an analytical tool and reworked notions of social reform during the colonial period.

Kumkum Sangari speaks to Souradeep Roy about this landmark anthology from the Indian women's movement; and the challenges, then and now, of finding common ground among women and among movements.

The Verdict

Bama

Translated by *Malini Seshadri*

Rogers Fund, 'Relief on an Acacia Tree Shading Water Jars with Drinking Cups', limestone and paint, 83×88.5cms, 1926/ Image courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The students of classes three, four, and five were overjoyed. The next day they would be going to the cinema theatre in the next village to see a movie. They were so happy at the thought of the treat ahead that they could barely focus on their lessons. They could hardly wait for the following day to arrive. Each child was to bring five rupees and show up in school uniform. Those who had slippers had to wear them, and those with water bottles were to bring them along. All these instructions and more were given by the headmaster.

Excitement ran high. And why not? It was almost as good as being taken on a trip to the big city!

Though the Kattur Primary School had been in existence for more than fifty years, there had been no improvement at all in the conditions in the village — no bus service, no drinking water facility, no hospital. There was neither a tea stall nor a grocery store … not even a bunk shop where a thirsty person could get a soda. For everything, one had to travel three kilometres to Oothukottai. It was a somewhat bigger village where one could get anything one needed. It had a couple of cinema theatres too. It was in one of these that the children were going to see a children's movie the next day. Never mind which movie, the outing to Oothukottai itself was excitement enough for them.

The next morning, contrary to the usual timing, all the children gathered at the school by seven. Once the assembly was over, they were made to stand in line. The headmaster sent the children off on their way with the teachers, while he got onto his two-wheeler and went on ahead. In their bubbling enthusiasm and excitement, the children walked very fast. The distance was three kilometres. Half-running and half-walking, they arrived at their destination. The children from another school were already at the theatre. The Kattur school children were counted and admitted one by one. What a frightful commotion and noise there was in that theatre! Almost enough to make one deaf! It was past ten o'clock by the time all the children had been settled in, and the movie could start. Everyone fell silent. Though it was an English movie called Baby's Day Out, all the children were totally fascinated and absorbed. They identified themselves with the baby in the movie. In the interval, they kept buying things to eat, whatever they set eyes on and whatever took their fancy, till they ran out of money.

After the movie ended, they formed a line again, stepped out into the blazing sunlight and started back, their steps dragging. The moment they crossed the main road, the orderly line broke up. Many of the children were not wearing slippers; the midday sun scorched the soles of their feet. And then there was the overpowering, parching thirst…. Somehow, they managed to keep going. The water bottles had long been emptied in the cinema theatre itself. Sweating and exhausted, everyone hurried to get back to school as quickly as possible.

On the way back, about a kilometre from the school was a village called Pallathur. When they entered the village, the children went to the wayside water pump, and started pumping water to drink, because they were so thirsty. A big boy from the fifth class was pumping water for everyone. All the children were pushing and jostling for water. It was quite a task to get them organized in a queue. Mahalakshmi from class three held out her water bottle to be filled, and was about to drink from it eagerly. But her sister Vijayalakshmi, who was in the fifth class, stopped her. She grabbed the bottle, gave Mahalakshmi a smack on the back, and shouted at her angrily.

'You're going to drink water from the tap in this village street? I'll report you to Appa, and see what a beating you'll get!' As she spoke, she emptied the bottle onto the street.

'Akka, I'm so thirsty. Please don't tell Appa. I'll drink just a little water,' pleaded Mahalakshmi.

Vijayalakshmi would not let her drink. Mahalakshmi started crying loudly as she walked along. 'What's the matter, Mahalakshmi?' asked her teacher Mary. 'Why are you crying? Not able to walk? It's just a very short distance more to go. See, there's the school. Look there, you can actually see your classroom already.'

Shanthi, who was walking alongside, said, 'It's not that, Teacher. Mahalakshmi is crying because she is thirsty.'

'But everyone drank water at the village tap just now. How could you be thirsty again so soon? It's all right, come along. You can drink water in the school.'

'No, Teacher. Maha didn't drink water at the tap. Her sister said she shouldn't, and she brought her away from there.'

'Why wouldn't she allow her to drink?'

'Because it's the tap on that street, Teacher … that cheri street. Their father will beat them if they drink water from the tap there.'

'Who said that?'

'Mahalakshmi's sister said so, Teacher.'

Mary was stunned. Even at this young age they were practising discrimination…. She was very angry and upset. In the classroom the children get along well together … they do things together. Everyone drinks water from the common tap in the school. Then where did this ugly idea of discrimination come from? If their father would actually beat them for this, then they must have learnt it at home. With all these thoughts crowding her mind, Mary walked along in silence. Later, she called Vijayalakshmi and asked her, 'Vijayalakshmi, what will happen if you drink water from that cheri street in the village? Isn't that also good water? Why did you stop your sister?'

'Teacher, that's what we've been told at home. "Don't mix with the children who live in those streets. Don't accept anything to eat from them. Don't even go anywhere near there." That's what we've been told.'

'But that's wrong, isn't it?' asked the teacher. Vijayalakshmi did not reply, nor did Mary press her any further. The other children were rushing into the school, hungry and tired from the midday heat. The teacher also went in, almost dizzy with fatigue.

Mary continued to feel troubled about the things she had heard on the way back.

There is no such thing as caste. It is a sin to talk of high-born and low-born people. We've been teaching these things here for years, and it's all been a waste of time. I taught this same Vijayalakshmi last year in class four. In the Tamil lesson there was that Bharathiyar song … that drum song. I remember how I explained over and over again that all human beings are equal. I talked myself hoarse about it — all a waste. No use at all. It's not what is taught in school but what is taught at home that seems to be learnt quicker by these children. When the headmaster returns, I must ask him to call the child and question her.

Having come to a decision, she hurriedly gulped down her lunch and stood waiting for the headmaster.

The headmaster had gone home for lunch and was back around two o'clock. The teacher broached the topic gently.

'Sir, on the way back the children had a hard time. So hot, and on top of that, the thirst…. Fortunately, when they got to Pallathur they drank water at the street tap, and after that they felt somewhat better, Sir. But even with that terrible thirst some of the children refused to drink water from that tap, Sir.'

'Why? What happened?'

Mary gave him all the details of what had happened and suggested that he should call Vijayalakshmi and talk to her.

A child was sent to fetch both the sisters. When they came, the headmaster spoke casually.

'What's wrong with drinking water from cheri taps? Only in cheri homes you shouldn't drink water. You've been told by your parents that you mustn't drink water even from cheri taps, is it? All right, no problem, go back to your classrooms.'

Having stressed *only in cheri homes*, Headmaster Varadarajulu walked off to his classroom.

Read the Tamil original here.

This story was originally published as 'Theerpu', in *Oru Thathavum Erumayum* (Coimbatore: Vidiyal Pathippagam, 2003).

The English translation of the story was published in the collection *Just One Word: Short Stories by Bama*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

Three Poems

K. Srilata

Image courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

Learn From Me How to Make Pickles

And since he is a Bombay man with an avakkai heart,

mother-in-law stands on creaking knees and says,

the hope still alive in her eyes,

‘Do you want me to teach you how to make them?

Mango pickles of various sorts: Avakkai, maagai …

Let me show you how to pluck the mangoes

before they fall in summer,

the shapes and sizes in which to slice them,

and just how to subdue them –

in what spicy, salty, oil-pools.

It isn't hard.

Woman, you who sit at your desk all day long

and read and write. I have caught you often

staring out the window.

Learn from me how to make pickles,

and sashay, without a stumble, into my son's heart.

Wrap your fingers around kitchen-knives, not pens.

Books aren't bad, I know, and there's nothing the matter with pretty views, but they are nowhere close to pickles when it comes to certain things. I should know.

I have lived on this earth longer than you

and have three grown children all raised on pickles.

But first things first: the chili should always be a bright Guntur red.'

Because I Never Learned the Names of Trees in Tamil

(After Rod Jellema's 'Because I never learned the names of flowers')

You pour it into my ear,

the warm oil of tree names in Tamil,

and not one of them in soft, cool italics.

You are looking, I know, to oust that convent-English insect,

frantically alive, trapped there since grade one.

Manjanathi, you say, and murungai,

aalamaram, roots you can swing on, girl,

airy wings of thathapoochi

that will tangle

with your hair.

I cite, in my support, the carefree impunity

of lovers who carve their names

on trees they don't know the names of.

Palaamaram, you say, not giving up.

Poovarasamaram, vepamaram, magizhamaram.

The insect stops beating its wings,

learns to luxuriate in this unfamiliar oil,

acquires a certain sparkle.

It is something else entirely

that flies out my ear.

What the Tamil Poet Says About Herself in Her Bio note

That her childhood was marked by her migration

from kurinji to marudham,

that, as a young woman,

a strange and sudden sorrow

clouded her mind,

that she keeps a parrot for a pet,

that poem-birds sleepfly

into her room

in the dead of night,

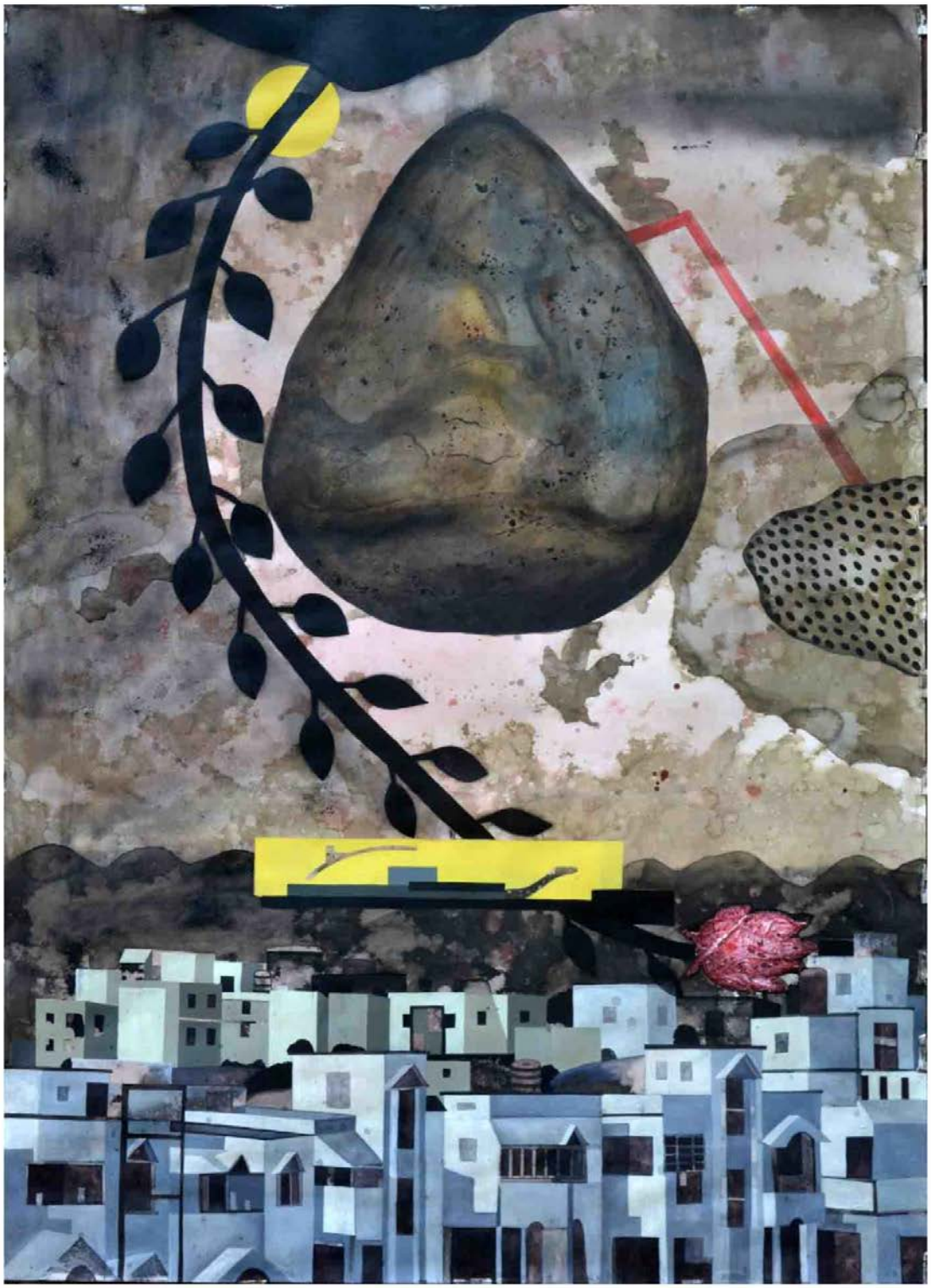
holding lines in their beaks,

that some of them find their way

into the notebook under her pillow.

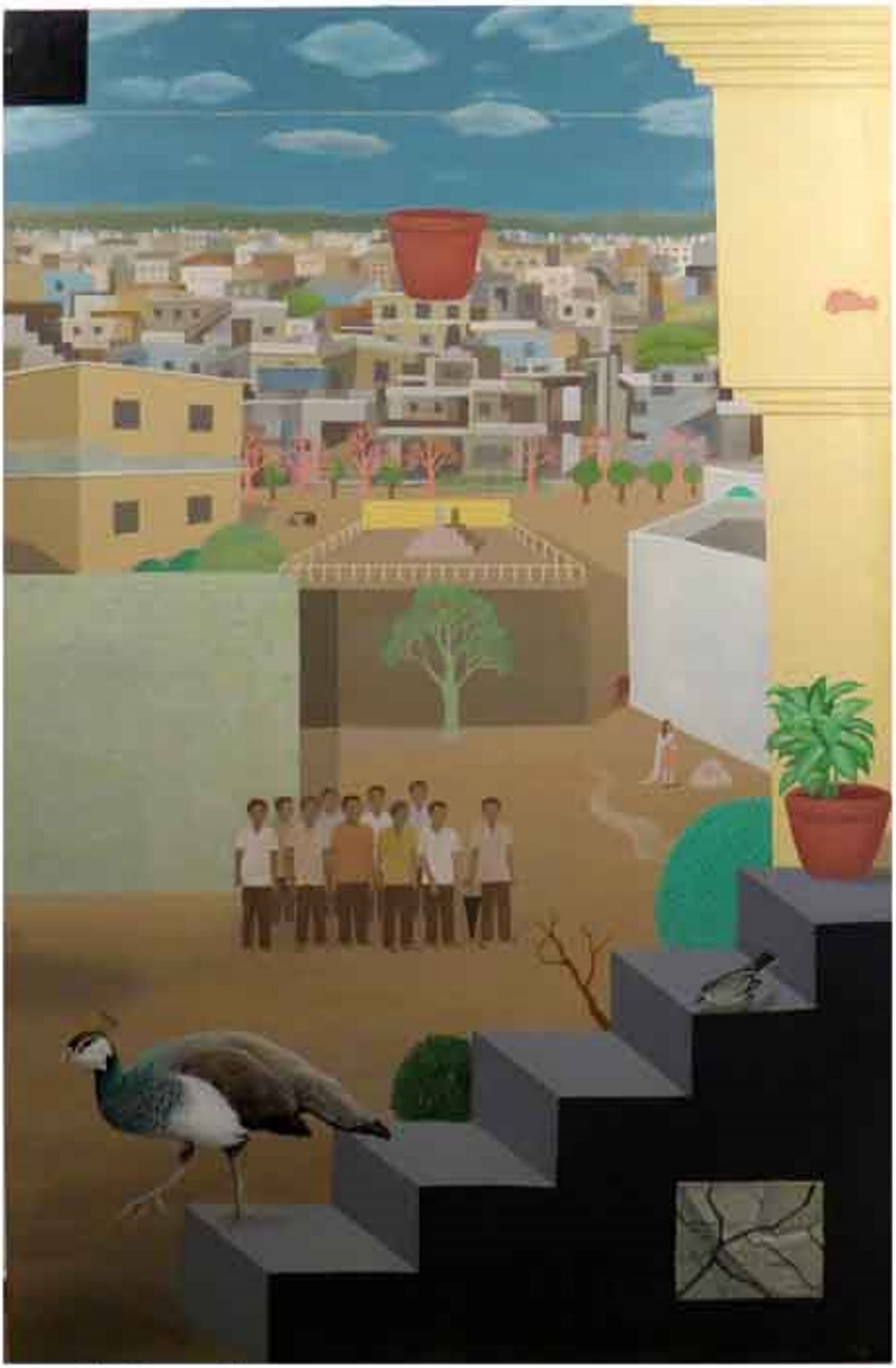
Untitled

Haraprasad Tripathy



RAIN DROP ,MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER ,42 X 60" ,2016

UNTITLED I ,MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER,42 X 60 '' 2016



Untitled, Acrylic on canvas ,60" x 84 '' 2016

''untitled'' medium-ink, water colour,charcoal on rice paper 3.5ft x5ft 2011

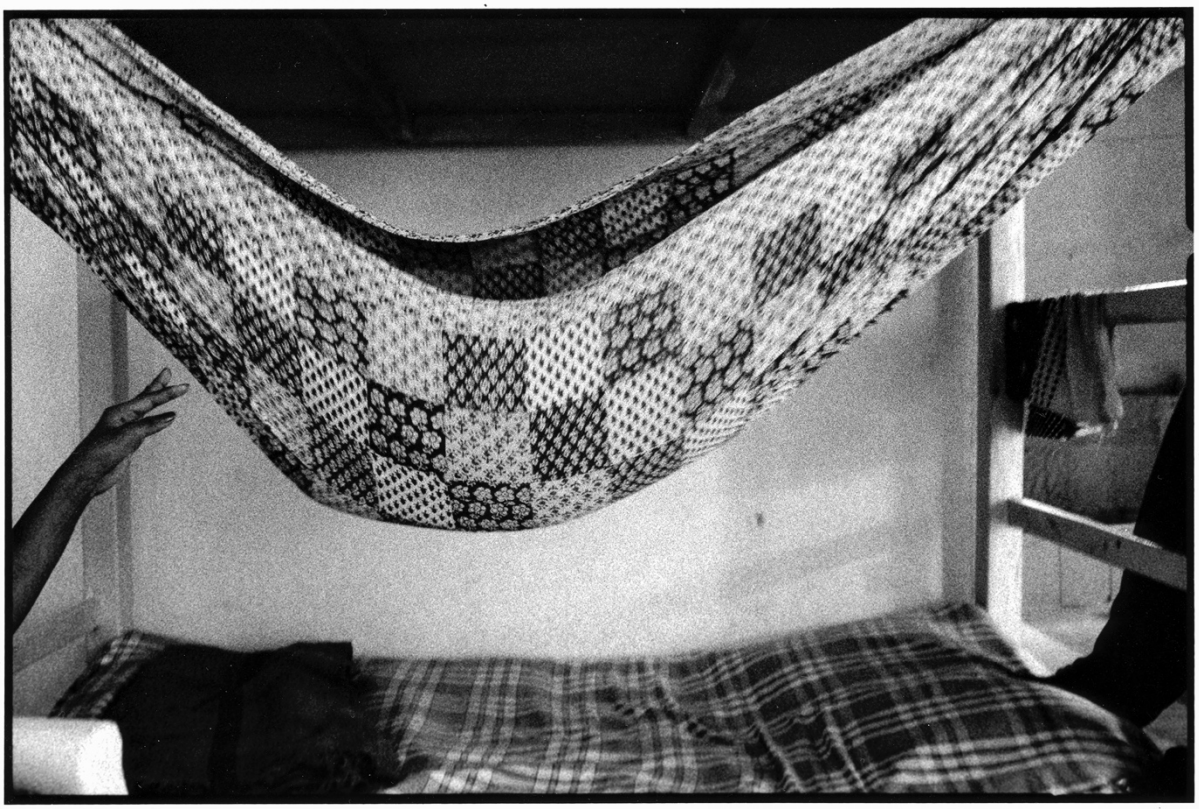
Under the Shadow

Srinivas Kuruganti

A four letter cipher
drawing meanings to itself
draws life out of me, slowly
drew me out of society

A diseased life is not easy as it is, and when the disease is as stigmatised as HIV/AIDS, fear and frustration accompanies pain. It's not just a battle between life and death; it is a battle of the possible ways of living under a shadow and finding courage to step into the light.

Over a period of 4-5 years since 2001, Srinivas Kuruganti began photographing patients and staff at Freedom Foundation HIV/AIDS clinics in Bangalore and Hyderabad, one of the few free private run facilities where HIV+ people can seek treatment. He has documented through photographs, how the virus spreads through the inter-connected communities, including a series on high risk groups such as truck drivers, eunuchs and male sex workers.



Contributors

1. **Bama** (born 1958) rose to fame with her autobiography Karukku (1992), which chronicles the day-to-day lives of Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu in general, and the paraiyar community in particular. She subsequently wrote two novels, Sangati (1994) and Vanmam (2002), and two collections of short stories: Kusumbukkaran (1996) and Oru Tattavum Erumaiyum (2003).

2. **Haraprasad Tripathy** is a Delhi-based contemporary Indian artist. He had a solo exhibition in 2017 titled 'Shifting Terrains: A Psychological Landscape' at the Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi and has been part of many group shows like 'Tentacles' (2011) and 'Titilation and Gratification' (2012). His current body of work deals with the issue of urbanisation and concerns of an individual in contemporary society, seen from his personal perspective and real life experiences.

3. **Kedar Namdas** is a visual artist based in Pune. He has completed BFA (Painting) from Sir J. J. School of Arts, Mumbai and MVA (Printmaking) from M.S. University, Baroda. His works were selected for Tokyo International Mini-Print Triennial and China Print Biennale last year.

4. **Kumkum Sangari** is currently the Vilas Professor of English and the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Souradeep Roy is part of the editorial team of Guftugu.

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6. **Malini Seshadri** is a freelance writer, editor, and translator based in Chennai.

7. **Priya Adarkar** is a writer and translator who has translated the works of iconic Marathi writers and playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar, Satish Alekar and Vishnubhat Godse.

8. **Rajib Chowdhury** is a visual artist based in Baroda. He studied Painting in Govt. College of Art & Craft, Kolkata and Printmaking in Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S. University, Baroda. He has been showing his works nationally and internationally through several group shows and solo shows since 2000. He is the recipient of National Scholarship from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, AIFACS Award, and Gujarat State Lalit Kala Academy Award.

9. **Ranjit Hoskote** is the author of five major books of poems, including, most recently, *Central Time, Vanishing Acts* and eighteen works of cultural criticism. He is the editor of *Dom Moraes: Selected Poems*. His translations include *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*.

10. **Romila Thapar** is Emeritus Professor of History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is the author of numerous books including the popular volume, *A History of India*. She was elected General President of the Indian History Congress, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. In 2008, she was awarded the prestigious Kluge Prize of the US Library of Congress, which honours lifetime achievements in studies such as History that are not covered by the Nobel Prize.

11. **Sayed Haider Raza** (1922–2016) was one of modern India's greatest painters and abstractionists. He was born in Babaria, Madhya Pradesh and spent most of his life in Paris, before returning to Delhi in 2010.

12. **Shanta Acharya** is a poet and novelist. She worked in the asset management industry and has written extensively on the subject. She is the author of eleven books. Her publications range from poetry, literary criticism and fiction to finance. Her latest collection, *Imagine: New and Selected Poems*, is published by HarperCollins (India). More on her work can be read here.

13. **Sharankumar Limbale** is one of Maharashtra's foremost writer-activists, and the author of more than forty works, including novels, poetry, short stories, and essays.

14. **Shubigi Rao** is an artist and writer, currently working on 'Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book', a decade-long film, book, and art project about the history of book destruction. Her publications include Written in the Margins; Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book, Vol. I of V; History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul. Read more on her work here.

15. **Souradeep Roy** is a poet and translator.

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