December 2019

Atul Dodiya, 'The Route to Dandi', Watercolour, marble dust and charcoal pencil on paper, 70 x 45 inches, 1998

About Us

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

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

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

To sum up our vision:

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

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Contents

From the Editors

From Kashmir, To Kashmir

'Blood in every season', says the poet writing of Kashmir. There's fire in the chinar tree. The poet can see it.

'But there's no sun here. There is no sun here.'

Even as it rains, the poet calls his heart, and our hearts, to be brave:

We will hear words even if the letters do not reach us, even if there is no post office.
We will stand with our sisters and brothers in Kashmir simply because we are human.
We will stand with them like the brave chinar tree, fiery in its suffering.

Rollie Mukherjee, 'Drifting', mixed media on paper, 43 x 29.5", 2015

The Country Without a Post Office

Agha Shahid Ali

1

Again I've returned to this country
where a minaret has been entombed.
Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps
in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His fingerprints cancel bank stamps
in that archive for letters with doomed
addresses, each house buried or empty.
Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,
and became refugees there, in the plains,
where they must now will a final dewfall
to turn the mountains to glass. They'll see
us through them—see us frantically bury
houses to save them from fire that, like a wall
caves in. The soldiers light it, hone the flames,
burn our world to sudden papier-mâché
inlaid with gold, then ash. When the muezzin
died, the city was robbed of every Call.
The houses were swept about like leaves
for burning. Now every night we bury
our houses—theirs, the ones left empty.
We are faithful. On their doors we hang wreaths.
More faithful each night fire again is a wall
and we look for the dark as it caves in.

2

"We're inside the fire, looking for the dark,"
one card lying on the street says, "I want
to be he who pours blood. To soak your hands.
Or I'll leave mine in the cold till the rain
is ink, and my fingers, at the edge of pain,
are seals all night to cancel the stamps."
The mad guide! The lost speak like this. They haunt

a country when it is ash. Phantom heart,
pray he's alive. I have returned in rain
to find him, to learn why he never wrote.
I've brought cash, a currency of paisleys
to buy the new stamps, rare already, blank,
no nation named on them. Without a lamp
I look for him in houses buried, empty—
He may be alive, opening doors of smoke,
breathing in the dark his ash-refrain:
"Everything is finished, nothing remains."
I must force silence to be a mirror
to see his voice again for directions.
Fire runs in waves. Should I cross that river?
Each post office is boarded up. Who will deliver
parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?
Only silence can now trace my letters
to him. Or in a dead office the dark panes.

3

"The entire map of the lost will be candled.
I'm keeper of the minaret since the muezzin died.
Come soon, I'm alive. There's almost a paisley
against the light, sometimes white, then black.
The glutinous wash is wet on its back
as it blossoms into autumn's final country—
Buy it, I issue it only once, at night.
Come before I'm killed, my voice canceled."
In this dark rain, be faithful, Phantom heart,
this is your pain. Feel it. You must feel it.
"Nothing will remain, everything's finished,"
I see his voice again: "This is a shrine
of words. You'll find your letters to me. And mine
to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished
envelopes." And reach the minaret:
I'm inside the fire. I have found the dark.
This is your pain. You must feel it. Feel it,
Heart, be faithful to his mad refrain—
For he soaked the wicks of clay lamps,

lit them each night as he climbed these steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His hands were seals to cancel the stamps.
This is an archive. I've found the remains
of his voice, that map of longings with no limit.

4

I read them, letters of lovers, the mad ones,
and mine to him from whom no answers came.
I light lamps, send my answers, Calls to Prayer
to deaf worlds across continents. And my lament
is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
to this world whose end was near, always near.
My words go out in huge packages of rain,
go there, to addresses, across the oceans.
It's raining as I write this. I have no prayer.
It's just a shout, held in, It's Us! It's Us!
whose letters are cries that break like bodies
in prisons. Now each night in the minaret
I guide myself up the steps. Mad silhouette,
I throw paisleys to clouds. The lost are like this:
They bribe the air for dawn, this their dark purpose.
But there's no sun here. There is no sun here.
Then be pitiless you whom I could not save—
Send your cries to me, if only in this way:
I've found a prisoner's letters to a lover—
One begins: 'These words may never reach you.'
Another ends: 'The skin dissolves in dew
without your touch.' And I want to answer:
I want to live forever. What else can I say?
It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave.

Rollie Mukherjee, 'Inscribed', mixed media on paper, 28.5 x 21", 2013

The Tale of a Chinar Tree

K. Satchidanandan

Jis khak ke sammeer mein hai
Aatish-e-chinar
Mumkin naheen ki sard ho
Voh khak-e- arjumand
-Muhammad Iqbal
(In the conscience of which particle of dust there is the fire of Chinar, that heavenly dust can never feel cold.)

I was born in this dust
with fire that can never cool.
A holy man's hands planted me here
six hundred years ago.
I blossomed even in droughts

provided shade to people in summer
and warmth in winter
herb for hurts,
a place for children's play,
a rendezvous for lovers.

My core has memories
just as my hollows shelter birds.
I learnt my many postures from Patanjali,
Panini taught my branches
wind's grammar.
The semiotics of my stem
comes from Abhinavagupta.
The murmur of my leaves
echo Sharangadev's *hindol*.
My roots are hairs standing on end
listening to the verses of
Lal Ded, Habba Khatoon and Arnimal,
my whirlwinds turned
the freedom-songs of Rahman Rahi
into flames kissing the sky.
Shaivites and Sufis alike
meditated under my green umbrella.

I talk ceaselessly to
the dead and the living.
Talking, I change colour:
yellow, mauve, red.

There are only Kashmiris here,
those who hug one another
during Id and Baishakhi,
breaking every stone-wall and thorny hedge,
those who grow lotuses
in their hearts for the birthdays
of Patmasambhav and Guru Nanak
and paint the lake with *shikaras,*
those who eat from the same plate,

drink the same water and
speak the same language of kindness.
Their religion was liberty
and their flag, love.

They studied their alphabets like this:
Anantnag Arnia
Badgam Baramulla Bishna
Chenani Devsar Gunderbar Hiranagar
Kishtwar Kulgam Kupwara
Kathvua Kargil
Lakhanpur Leh Manda
Pahalgam Pulwama Poonch
Shopian Sopore Srinagar
Talpara Uri Udhampur
Yarippora Vijaypur…

But now only blood spots remain,
the blood of a land being
mutilated and partitioned,
the red blood of fleeing youth
entangled in thorns,
the brown blood of the nail-marks
of the disgraced bodies of women,
the purple blood flowing
from tender hearts torn by bullets:
That is what reddens my leaves now.
The spreading endless variations of red
from the eyes of children, once bluish,
now pierced by pellets:
Blood,
in every season.

*Translated by the poet. Read the original **here**.*

September 2019

Arrival

Atul Dodiya

'Arrival', Exterior: Enamel Paint on metal roller Shutters with iron hooks, 108 x 72 inches, Interior: Acrylic with marble dust and oil bar on canvas, 84 x 62 inches, 2011

The Presence of the Other: Religion and Society in Early North India

Romila Thapar

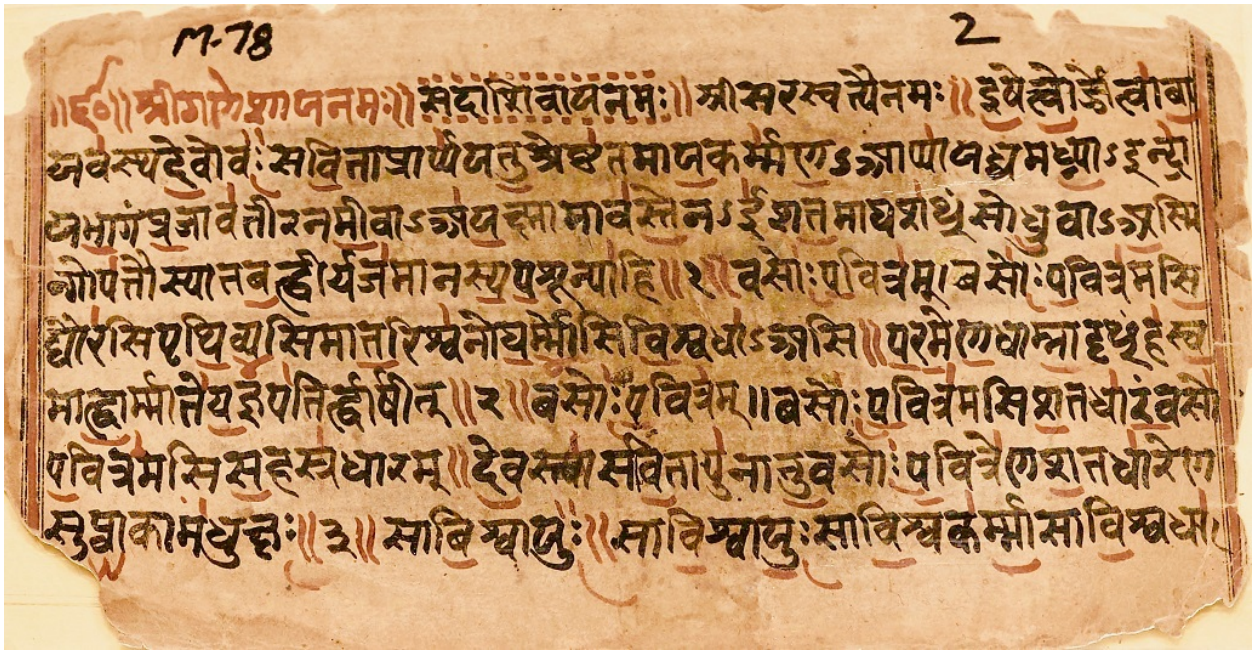


Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

I shall be taking up two intertwined themes: one is the recognition of what we have begun to call the Other, with a capital 'O'. The second is the interface of this Other with established society and religion, which I shall be calling the Self, with a capital 'S'. The interface naturally covers an unending range of activities. I shall take up only a few examples, focusing on connections between religion and society, and the diverse relationships between the Self and the Other.

What we refer to as the Other needs explaining. Put simply it is a person or a group of people who declare themselves to be, or are recognised, as different. The Other or Others differ from the Self — whoever the Self or Selves may be — and the degree of dissimilarity varies. It can be just a passing recognition of difference or it can be expressed in acceptance or rejection.

But however different, the Other demands recognition in every society. This also helps to define the identity of what is called the Self. And like the Self, the Other too has multiple aspects. So in a contradictory way the Other can become, to some degree, a part of the Self. Those whom we see as essentially different, often help us to define ourselves, both individually and socially.

Identifying people by Otherness — or alterity, as it has also been called — can be used to marginalise a section of society, to ghettoise it or even to exile it. Multiple groups all over the

world are turned into refugees with the denial of citizenship or by their banishment. This is an old historical habit. Alternatively the Other can be incorporated into one's society as was also done repeatedly in the past to create what we call civilisations. These have been projected as unitary and monolithic but in fact they were porous, and were textured from multiple divergent strands.

The relationship of the Self with the Other can change over time and move from being distanced to being proximate, or the reverse. The identity of each can also change but the presence of each is an important component of social relations. Every society marks the Self from the Other in diverse ways.

The recognition of Otherness was worked into a theory in the last two centuries. Colonial thinking had sharpened the definition. The concept of race underlay many colonial attitudes towards the colonised. These were coloured by the binary in European thought between the civilised and the primitive. The historical context is therefore crucial to understanding the idea of both the Self and Otherness.

Who determines Otherness? Those in authority generally see themselves as the established Self. They set up the identity of the Self vis-à-vis the Other. This helps to crystallise status and power, and distances those without either. These are not permanent identities nor are they unchanging. Even the criteria by which they are known can change.

The identity of Otherness was not restricted to people that came from different geographies and cultures. It could arise, and sometimes to a startling degree, within the same society. Since societies are stratified, socially and culturally, divergence ranges in aspect. Among these are environment and location, economy and technology, systems of kinship and inheritance, and concepts of belief and worship: in short, the constituents of what we call culture, the pattern of living.

Because of these differences, the existence of the Other was, and is, inevitable. But what is historically valuable is to observe how these differences shaped both the Self as well as the Other. The relationship was not inherently hostile, although in practice it sometimes could be; alternatively it could be mutually acceptable. Where there is competition, there, inevitably, the stronger treats the weaker differentiated one as the Other.

The presence of the Other was noticed millennia ago, almost wherever the processes of thinking are recorded. It was often conceded in subtle ways. One way was through argument, something we all love to do, familiar to every philosophical tradition, and often linked to the exercise of logic. It hints at something akin to the dialectical method. The view of the opponent is presented and then countered by that of the proponent, followed perhaps by a solution. It is more familiar to us as the procedure of *purvapaksha, pratipaksha* and *siddhanta*. It revolves around the views of the Self and the Other. Knowledge however is not fixed as there is always the possibility of new evidence and fresh methods of enquiry. Therefore constant questioning was a necessity.

The presence of the Other, whether in person or in the form of contradictory thought, has to be recognised as normal to both the living and the thinking of any society. A society has to accommodate the Other, if need be through argument and discussion, and if no resolution is

forthcoming then by agreeing to coexist. Our current impatience with the Other looms over us in so many ways. It is most vocal these days in the connect between religion and society. I would therefore like to take up three examples from our pre-modern history and comment on both past and present perceptions of the Other in the three examples.

But before I do that let me clarify briefly how some of us as historians analyse the interface between society and religion. This is important since neither the kinds of societies in which we live, nor the kinds of religions we practice, are accidental inventions. They are consciously thought-out choices and we have to understand them as such. I for one, see religion as expressed in two forms, informal and formal. Informal religion is that of the individual whose choice of whom to worship and why, is a free and personal decision. More often, however, the decision is made for us through the link between religion and social identity, especially among the elite.

Formal religion is when a belief and practice accumulates followers who identify with it, and it imposes codes of belief and social practices specific to the identity. It establishes institutions in society that give it authority and increase its supporters. The more obvious institutions train priests and monks, administer regular places of worship, organise donations, search for a guaranteed patronage, maintain formal rituals and texts, and encourage a crystallisation of orthodoxy. This latter becomes the font of the religion and is acknowledged as such by society.

New religions often begin informally. With increasing social support they take on formal aspects and establish institutions to propagate their ideas. When they succeed, their visibility takes the form of monumental structures such as *viharas*, temples, mosques, churches, *ashramas, mathas, madrassas*, convents, *khanqahs, gurdwaras*, and suchlike. When this happens it is a sign that the function of that religion is not limited to personalised belief and informal worship, but that it is now in the public domain as a powerful agency involved in social and political policies. At this point the interface between religion and society turns complex.

Socially and politically powerful religions root their codes in a claim to orthodoxy. This is when the Other takes form as a social entity either singly or as more than one. The Other dissents from the orthodoxy and has its own formal belief and organisation evolving from the dissent. Orthodoxy has a choice: dissent can be excluded as contrary or placed in juxtaposition to other sects, or even at some later date, assimilated. Historical change however can alter these relationships. Religions as practiced in India tended not to be monolithic or uniform across the region. In pre-colonial times, social concerns of a religious nature and religious identities were expressed more frequently through sects. These spoke to the larger number of people and less to the limited elite. It is crucial therefore to locate the section of society to which a sect speaks and whatever change both sect and public undergo.

Cultures, we must remember, never remain homogenous and unchanging. There is no pristine, unalloyed culture that continues as such throughout history. Every culture mutates or moults, either through its own historical evolution or in proximity to new elements. That it has multiple roots and multiple branchings-off ensures its immortality.

That said, let me turn now to my examples.

I would like to begin by discussing an example of the Other, from back in the second millennium BC and through to Vedic times. The dominant religion was that of the *Vedas* as practiced and taught by *brahmanas*, and thought to be unique to them. The texts however, refer to the presence of others as well. Yet, the popular view seldom concedes this presence since it argues for the existence of just the one dominant culture. The story from the side of the Other remains largely uninvestigated.

The *Rigveda* refers frequently to two distinct categories of people, the *arya varna* and the *dasa varna*. The *arya*, from which Max Mueller invented the word 'Aryan', were those that were respected as persons of status, who spoke Sanskrit correctly, and followed the Vedic religion. Language was the key to identity and it incorporated status. The identification of Aryan became axiomatic in the nineteenth century when race was a primary factor in the colonial understanding of the colonised. The idea of an Aryan race arose from equating the cultural idiom of language — the Aryan speech — with the altogether different factor of biological birth. The identity of race determining a culture anywhere in the world was discarded half a century ago.

We know about the culture of the *arya* from detailed descriptions in the texts of the Vedic corpus. But who then was the *dasa*? Evidently the Other of the *arya,* since the term is often used in that sense. Not unexpectedly, the first distinction is that of language. Those that cannot speak the Vedic language correctly or at all, are dismissed as *mridhra–vac*, of hostile or incorrect speech. In later texts those who speak incorrectly are the *mleccha*. Much fun is made of those who invariably replace the 'r' sound by the 'l' sound. These *mleccha* were the inhabitants of the Ganges plain because this sound replacement occurs in this region for many centuries. In the inscriptions of the Mauryan king Ashoka for example, those that were inscribed in this area use the sound replacement, so what is elsewhere written as *raja* is here written as *laja*. If everyone was in origin an Aryan speaker, such mistakes would have been unlikely.

Language is an immediate identity. What were the other unambiguous differences? Since the *dasas* practice a different religion, they are called *adeva*, without gods. They do not perform the required *yajnas* / ritual sacrifices, not even the *soma* rituals, so it is said that they are lacking in rituals. Worse still they are disapproved of for being phallic worshipers. They indulge in magic, as did the *yatudhana* and the *rakshasa,* so they are disliked and possibly a little envied. They are generally viewed as unfriendly, greedy and socially unacceptable.

But there are complications. Some are also wealthy, especially in herds of cattle and therefore are subjected to cattle-raids. Cattle rustling was a known activity. The *dasas* lived in settlements with stockades. These we are told were attacked by the *aryas* with the help of the gods Indra and Agni. The *dasas* are divided into clans / *vish*, each headed by a chief. The occasional chief is even said to be a patron of the Vedic ritual sacrifices. After all, fees from wealthy patrons are always welcome.

This relationship between the *arya* and the *dasa* that is so intriguing has its own history. It begins with the *dasas* as initially an alien category. But gradually one can infer social divisions within the *dasa* society, and these vary in their relationship with the *aryas*. Not all *dasas* are

wealthy. Those that were appear to have been inducted into *arya* society, whereas the impoverished ones remained in servile occupations.

As usual the women are the more impoverished. *Dasi* women are treated as chattels and gifted to others by the chief. The *dasi* remains a commodity in the community. Many work as servants in *arya* households. This would also be true of the majority of *dasas* who would remain the Other, reduced to servitude and distanced socially. Curiously, some of the sons of these *dasis* are given *brahmana* status and are referred to literally as *dasyah-putra* or *dasi-putra brahmana*.

What are we told about these *brahmanas*? Those that are respected are mentioned by name. The *rishi* Dirghatamas is consistently known by his metronymic, Mamateya, suggesting perhaps a different kinship system from the usual patriarchy. He was clearly special because he anointed the great raja, Bharata. He married a *dasi*, Ushija, and their son was the revered *rishi* Kakshivant whose hymns are included in the *Rigveda,* and who also took his mother's name and was called Aushija. Was having a *dasi* mother just a matter of low status, or a mark of being from a different culture?

The equally renowned sage Kavasha Ailusha was also the son of a *dasi*. It is said of him that he was driven away from a *soma* sacrifice by the regular *brahmanas* because he was a *dasi–putra*. As he wandered away he recited some verses and the river Sarasvati began to follow him. Seeing this, the regular *brahmanas* immediately recognised that he was special to the gods, so they welcomed him back, gave him *brahmana* status, and more, they declared him to be the best among *brahmanas*. What was his special power that despite being a *dasi-putra* he was honoured by the *brahmanas*?

The *Upanishads* carry the story of Satyakama Jabala who came to the *rishi* Gautama requesting that he be accepted as a Vedic student. The *rishi* asked if he was a *brahmana*. He replied that his mother worked as a *dasi* in a household where many men came and went, and she could not recall who his father may have been. The *rishi* replied, that who but a *brahmana* would have told the truth as Satyakama had done, and he was accepted as a student. The issue is not of the *varna* identity but the ethical qualification.

Despite having *dasi* mothers these *rishis* knew the language of the *aryas* to perfection since some of the Rigvedic hymns are attributed to them. They were not described as *mridhra–vac* or *mleccha*, nor was it said of them, as was said of the great ancestral figure of the Puru lineage, that they came of an *asura rakshasa* origin. Those *dasi–putras* that acquired *brahmana* status were born to the lowest status mothers but were recruited into the highest caste. Is there a hint here of a subtle and new socio-religious interface of a more complex kind that needs further investigation?

One sees in this gradual merging of some aspects of both groups, a modifying of their identities. The *dasa* has learnt the language of the *arya*. Does this amount to his having been Aryanised? On demonstrating his superior power, his superiority is acknowledged and appropriated by the *arya*. Did some of the *dasa* culture rub off even marginally on the *arya*? Or was there a more nuanced mutation in both? These sons of *dasis* are not described as *nastika* / non-believers, since there seems to be some eagerness to acquire their knowledge. Did this duality,

expressed in the conversation between the *dasi-putra brahmana* and the high status *arya*, create an elite culture that drew from both sources? The antecedents of these cultures remain intriguing questions.

Let me now turn to my second and very different example: an existing culture gives rise to an alternative Other from within itself. The Other here is not alien but is in disagreement with the prevailing belief and practice. I am taking you now to the late first millennium BC and beyond, into the early ADs. I am referring to the emergence of groups that were jointly called the Shramanas — the Jainas, Buddhists, Ajivikas — and some included the Charvakas / Lokayatas as well.

The Shramanas were opposed in varying degrees to Vedic Brahmanism. They questioned the belief in deities, in the Vedas being divinely revealed, in the existence of the individual soul or *atman*, and in the efficacy of the *yajna* / ritual of sacrifice. Brahmanical literature refers to them categorically as *nastika*, the non-believers. These ideologies of opposition underwent many changes as they meandered their way through history. However, for the orthodox and for the formal religions that were to evolve around Shaivism and Vaishnavism, the Shramanas were invariably the Others.

Apart from their differences of belief, both were competitors for royal patronage. But the Shramanas included among their patrons wealthy merchants, mercantile guilds and craftsmen. This ensured their popularity with wider levels of society. Doubtless it added to their ideological differences. The grammarian Patanjali compares the antagonism between the two — the *brahmana* and the *shramana* — to that between the snake and the mongoose. The emperor Ashoka makes repeated pleas for harmony between the various sects. But the point is that there were by now a variety of sects with dissenting views and no religion was uniformly observed and monolithic in its teaching.

In the period from the Mauryas to the Guptas there is a striking presence of impressive Buddhist *stupas*, and an equally striking absence of temples, a situation that was slowly reversed in the subsequent period. These are indicators of patronage and popularity. It was a time of intense social change with clan societies giving way to caste societies.

It was subsequent to this that the Buddhists and Jainas, projected as dissidents in the early *Puranas*, experienced persecution. Jainism survived by consolidating itself in particular areas. Buddhism did not, but became predominant in many other parts of Asia. Interestingly every religion in India had by now acquired multiple sects, each seeking its own patrons and recognition. No formal religion was a monolith. The feasibility of differences and their coexistence was recognised, although some among them faced animosity and conflict. But in either case the relationship between sects, whether friendly or hostile was confined to smaller, more localised groups.

The Shramanas established a new personality on the social landscape, namely that of the renouncer in the form of a monk, the *bhikkhu*. The emergence of these renouncers took on the characteristics of what may be called a counter-culture, at least initially. It was a new kind of Other. The renouncer was distinct from the ascetic. The ascetic went into isolation searching for ways to liberate his soul from rebirth. The renouncer joined a monastic order — a community

that lived in parallel to society, observing its own rituals, and identified by a differentiated formal religion. It broke the rules of caste in being celibate, in taking cooked food from anyone as alms, and (in theory at least) in not segregating the avarna, those outside caste. However, the distance from society was not absolute as it accepted patronage from different levels of society, and worked towards a large following of people convinced by their teaching. The teaching was not intended to convert people to a new religion but rather to give them a new ethic to direct their lives.

The monks therefore had a concern with the welfare of society so they remained partially connected to it. Unlike the *ashramas* — the forest hermitages of earlier times — these monasteries of the Shramanas were organised institutions and their intervention in social life made an impact. Receiving donations of wealth and large grants of land created monastic landlordism, as Max Weber calls it. Their effective interventions in society led to other religious sects establishing counterpart institutions, such as *brahmana mathas*, and Sufi *khanqahs* and *dargahs*. A range of religious sects adopted this institutional form as they do to this day. Some were devoted to scholarship and the study of religious and philosophical ideas, some were involved in meditation, and some with political and social concerns, expanding their degree of Otherness. The Shramanas eventually created their own orthodoxies, but initially they demonstrated the potential of the Other.

The individual renouncer moved across the historical landscape in diverse forms, such as the *sadhu, faqir, jogi,* in the name of the Other. In a somewhat contradictory way the renouncer opting out of society acquired moral authority within society. One wonders whether this was the reason why Kautilya discourages the state from allowing renouncers to enter newly settled lands. Where the state had a tight control over society, as advocated in the Arthashastra, it exercised the power to disallow dissenting views.

Renouncers voluntarily chose to join the alternative society that gave them a different identity. But a major category of Otherness that we have frequently ignored is of course, that of an imposed Otherness. I am referring to the category of the *avarna* — the lowest castes, those outside caste, and the untouchable. This was the creation of the upper castes. It ensured a permanent supply of bonded labour, as well as a category of people who could be forced to do the work that the rest of society refused to do. The imposition was so oppressive that it disallowed opposition and ensured an unchanging continuity. This is yet one more process of creating the Other, and we have to ask who is creating it, for what purpose, and who is being forced to conform to it. Those that have Otherness imposed on them have to question the legitimacy of the imposition.

My third example is a rather complicated one. I shall now speak about the Other in the context of the many Others, and the many Selves. I am again jumping another millennium and referring to the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries AD, a remarkable period of the Indian past especially from the perspective of the history of religion. There was by now an even greater social mixture than ever before. This is reflected in the teachings, the poems and the life of the time. The emperor Akbar was not a flash in the pan, creating new religious trends. I shall be speaking of those less exalted but whose activities as the Other went further.

My example is one facet of the Bhakti movement, a movement that arose in every part of the sub-continent under diverse *sants.* Initially these were the Other in the context of existing religions. Together with these were the Sufi schools that came from Central Asia and settled in India, forming yet more Others, crucial to breakaway sects. Given this interface of cultures, a spectacular efflorescence of religious teaching and expression followed, affecting many levels of society. This shaped the practice and belief of those whom we have now brought together under the single, uniform label of Hindu; it also shaped the belief of those who were at that time called Yavanas, Shakas and Turushkas, and for whom we today use the single, uniform label of Muslim. I shall try and speak of them as they were spoken of in their own time.

Neither the Bhakti *sants* nor the Sufi *pirs* were founding new religions. They were trying to liberate religion from orthodoxies and jaded conventions enforced by those who had authority over formal religion. Significantly the teaching of these many Others was open to any person or group. The nature of their Otherness varied according to whom they were addressing as the Self.

The previous religious identities of their followers were therefore irrelevant, nor did they endorse caste conventions. The deity worshipped could be an abstract idea or an icon. The teaching was informal as were the scant rituals. Among the *sants* were Kabir, Ravidas and Dadu who, as coming from the lower castes were searching for their utopias. Ravidas had a vision of a future city where there was to be no social inequality, so no sorrow, and therefore called Be-gam-pura. They saw themselves not as a single, but as diverse Others although connected in aspects of their teachings. The diversity is evident not only in the teaching of these *sants* but also in that of Lal Ded and Nanak. Unlike the first three that I have mentioned, Lal Ded was a Shiva *bhakt*, yet this did not stop her inspiring the Sufi poet Sheikh Nuruddin, popularly known as Nand *rishi.* Nanak's verses drew from the Sufi teachings of Baba Farid and others. All this deeply enriched the thought of the times.

Then came the cloud-burst that completely immersed so many. This was the immense popularity of Krishna *bhakti* projected through devotion to Krishna and the worship of Krishna and Radha. As one of the idioms of the sixteenth century it needs further analyses. The *Bhagavata Purana* and Jayadeva's *Gita-Govinda* point to its importance among Vaishnava sects. However, a new impulse came with Krishna bhakti becoming the focus of another set of poets, speaking from distant places and cultures, also referred to as Bhakti *sants.* These were Chaitanya, Surdas, and Mira among others.

Together with these and equally important were their fellow worshippers and poets from another variety of religious and social backgrounds. Among them were Ras Khan from a wealthy *zamindar* family, and Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan who held high offices in the Mughal administration. Disciples from various religions clustered around the *sants*. Haridas was the name taken by an important *yavana* disciple of Chaitanya. Sufi poets such as Bulleh Shah, Malik Muhammad Jayasi, and Sayyad Mubarak Ali Bilgrami, to mention just a few, wrote exquisite poems of adoration to express their Krishna Bhakti. Fortunately these are still sung as part of classical music and dance, and on other occasions. Inevitably it was said of them that these Yavanas were attaining *moksha* through this *bhakti.*

What I am saying is nothing new. It is all well known. But it seldom enters our discussion when illustrating some forms of Bhakti as the Other. The question that has not been answered adequately is why there was such an upsurge of Krishna *bhakti* at this particular time, drawing in such a variety of people from a range of religious traditions. What were the floating ideas and changing social forms that encouraged this?

Another obvious question is, why did so many Muslims, and not inconsequential ones at that, turn their creativity towards Krishna *bhakti*. Modern historians have called them Muslim Vaishnavas, but they did not call themselves that. They preferred to call themselves Krishna *bhaktas*. The difference is very significant. In present times, we overlook the fact that non-Muslims in those days only occasionally used the label of Muslim, a label that we use uniformly today. In those days they were more often referred to as Yavanas, or Shakas or Turushkas. These labels are ethnic and not religious. They also link up interestingly with earlier history. Yavana was used for the Greeks and those who came from the West, as also did the Arabs. The Shakas were the Scythians from Central Asia. Turushka was among the names for the Kushans, also from Central Asia. Shaka and Turushka were historically authentic names therefore, for the Turks, Afghans and Mughals, who came from this region. The Indian of a millennium ago saw them linked to the earlier people who had come from the same region.

However, they are occasionally referred to as *mlecchas*, used sometimes in a derogatory sense or as just a passing reference to difference. For example, in one inscription from the Deccan, the Delhi Sultan, Muhammad bin Tughlaq after a successful campaign in the area, is described by the local defeated side as a dreadful man who killed *brahmanas*, destroyed temples, looted farmers, confiscated the land granted to *brahmanas*, drank wine and ate beef. This was now to become the stereotype description of a Muslim when a negative projection was required.

But there are also Sanskrit inscriptions from elsewhere that make a different assessment. One from Delhi issued by a merchant, also during the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, is full of praise for the Tughlaq rulers, describing them as the historical successors to the Tomar and Chauhan Rajputs, with a passing reference to one of them as *mleccha*. Obviously in this case the term refers to someone who is different, as no one would dare to refer to the ruler in derogatory terms.

Yavanas, Shakas and Turushkas, who were previously Muslims, were included in the ranks of the Other in some texts and by some authors, conforming to earlier historical precedents. What complicates this particular Otherness is not only its own origins but also that it has many Selves. For instance: was every Muslim viewed as a *mleccha* by upper-caste Hindus? Yet there were politically significant marriage alliances among the highest royalty. The Kachavaha Rajputs, claiming high caste *Suryavamsha kshatriya* status, gave their daughters to the Mughal royal family. Some of the most important positions in the Sultanate and Mughal administration were held by the upper-castes — Rajputs, *brahmanas* and *kayasthas*, and the Jainas. The social distance would presumably have also depended on caste. It is likely that those lower down the social scale would have mixed more easily on all sides. But the distancing of the *avarnas* by upper-caste Muslims did not change even when they converted to Islam.

The Krishna *bhaktas* that I have been speaking of were viewed as the Other, by two categories of Selves. Those that were born Muslim and became Krishna *bhaktas* were strongly

disapproved of by the *qazis* and *mullahs* of orthodox Islam, and equally so by orthodox *brahmanas*. This was so until such time as it became helpful to the formal religions to incorporate some of the teachings of these *bhakts*. This indicates that both the Other and the Self have to be carefully defined each time either is referred to. This might be a necessary exercise in clarifying identities, and especially where they overlap. Not all Muslims were identical as indeed nor were all Hindus.

An interesting comment on this situation comes from a sixteenth century Sanskrit text, the *Prasthana-bheda* of Madhu-sudana Sarasvati. He states that the teachings of the Turushkas, have to be aligned with those of the Charvakas, Jainas and Buddhists. And why? Because they were all *nastika* /non-believers. For the latter three – Charvakas, Jainas, Buddhists – this is a repetition of what was said of them by *brahmana* authors in the much earlier past. To these three Madhusudana Sarasvati adds the fourth, the Turushkas. The three did not believe in any deity, therefore were rightly called non-believers. But the Turushkas did believe in a god, because they believed in Allah. But since Allah was not of the Vedic or Puranic pantheon, he was unacceptable, so they too were *nastika*. Interestingly, the author also refers to all four of them together as *mleccha*.

Let me try and make a few final points. I have taken only three historical examples, each separated by a millennium. These were groups that were initially projected as Others. From the simple duality that we began with, we arrived finally at layers of Otherness and its multiple manifestations. The changing historical context also required them to change. Some were opposed, some were subsumed into the dominant society, and some were accommodated as yet another juxtaposed sect. We need to know what social relationships emerged from their presence. How were they viewed? And equally, how did they view these social relationships? Can we think of projecting history from the perspective of the Others?

This would be a necessary corrective. We currently view our past cultures only through the lens of the established Self in each period, be the Self Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina, Muslim or Sikh. Or else, we inflict our present-day stereotypes on the past without examining their viability. We give weightage to the texts of those in authority, be it royalty or sections of the elite, ignoring other, multiple differentiating views. In defining our traditions and our cultural inheritance, this multiplicity has a significant presence, both in what was accommodated and in what was contested, and why.

Understanding the interface between religion and society requires us to recognise that both the formal religions, and the more informal evolving sects, were being transformed by it. New thinking arises either to conform or to dissent. The one cannot be understood without the other. All formal religions and settled societies have Others, especially when identities are strongly demarcated. Such demarcations seem to receive more emphasis when religions are used to define political identities and social gradations. This we have to be aware of.

Religion is only one marker of identity and is conjugated with other markers — occupation, caste regulations, language, and so on. This makes it essential to relate each religion to its larger social constituency together with whatever change it undergoes. Why do some religious sects as the Other became powerful new castes, whereas some lose out — as for example, the

Lingayat in the first case and the Kabirpanthi in the second. Since societies change so do religions linked to these societies.

Religious identities are not formed in isolation. More often than not, some are viewed as heritage and some as a reaction to the Other, be it from within society or from outside. The process is a kind of cultural symbiosis that gives an imprint to Indian religious and social articulation, and the imprint differs from other historical societies. This we have yet to explore.

It is not enough to point out that there has always been an Other or Others, as there have been many Selves. The reason for each has to be analysed in the context of its mutating identity. The Other can be a voice of dissent or of animosity, characterising differences that are altered by historical change. The acknowledgement of dissent is essential because the nature of dissent also reflects our own self-perception. Many sects, either juxtaposed or distant, represent complex and divergent thoughts that have in the past sculpted the Self and the Other. This allowed a free play of belief, emotion and enquiry, such that they invalidate our present-day monolithic, binary identities. It is to this that we owe many moments of spectacular thinking that are evident in the dialogues between the Self and the Other in our past.

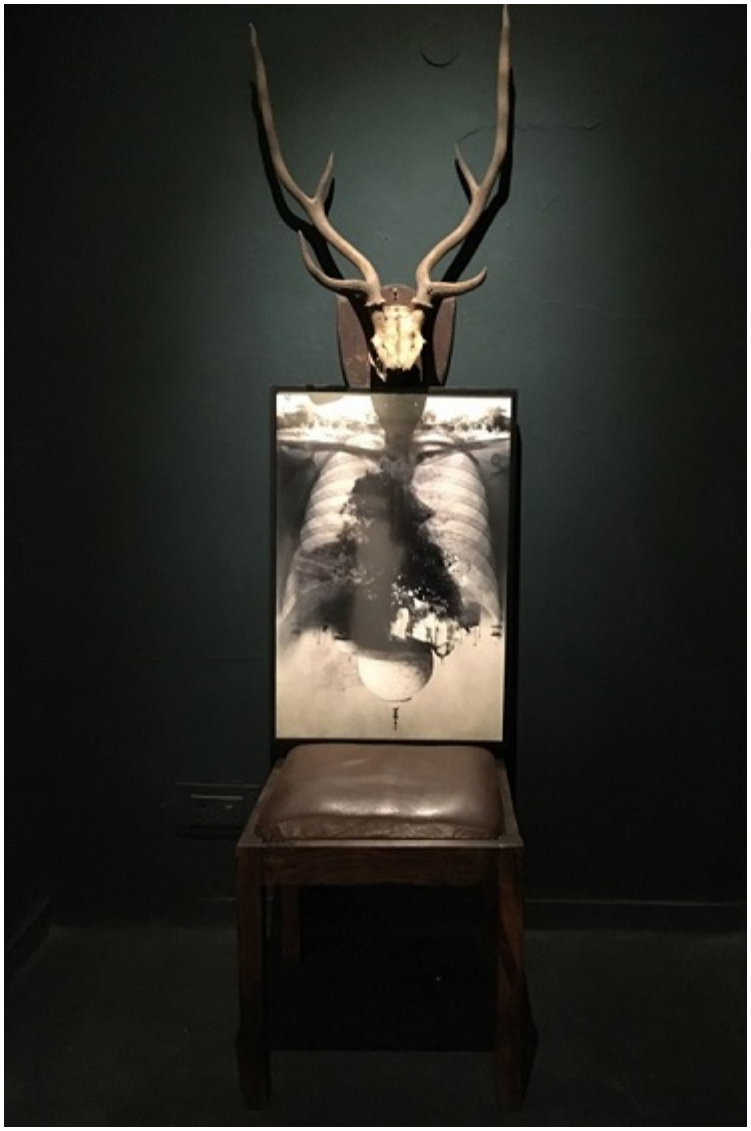
The text is a lightly edited version of the Nemi Chand Jain Memorial Lecture delivered by Prof Thapar at Delhi, on August 16, 2019.

Vanishing Point

Sukanya Ghosh

Set in the idea of the photograph as a repository of recollection and memory, 'Vanishing Point' plays with time and memory to build imagined histories and geographies. Many of the photos I have found are images of travel and leisure, some annotated, some unknown. I approach this disjunctured past by skewing perspectives, inverting vistas and fragmenting spatial geographies. The 'ghosting' of spaces and people in the images of the past, the considerations of time ruptured and forgotten, leads one to deliberate on the elasticity of the spectral image.

I accompany intrepid travellers and deconstruct their destinations, their identity through these devices. I create figures, transplanted, posing among created landscapes; portraits with x-rays, creatures out of time – alienated by their surroundings; objects transplanted into a modern day world of reflections that are all slightly askew. I play with the sense of familiarity and distance that uses photographs to construct an obverse and oblique reality; to create a membrane of memory which acts as a filter for nostalgia and remembrance and stretches taut the constructed singular instance.



‘Kortababu: Seated’, Digital photo collage, 20×30”, Framed archival print, antique animal horn, chair, 2018.

‘Detail from Wood for the Trees’, Lightbox with digital photo collage, 20×30”, 2018.

‘Where Do You Go’, Archival print, digital collage with ink and acrylic, Diptych, 28×18”, 2018.

'A Chair Walks into a Landscape', Single channel animation, archival photographs and animation, 2017.

From the series: Vanishing point

Artists commission for the exhibition: 'Mutations' at 24 Jor Bagh, New Delhi, curated by Rahaab Allana and François Cheval.

Kashmir Album

Gita Jayaraj

Nilima Sheikh, 'Carrying Home', tempera on paper laid on canvas, 48.2 x 149.9 cm, 2001 | Image courtesy Cafe Dissensus

Pherans and Arched Doorways

Parvez sat quietly, listening to Falaq talk about her mother being killed by a stray bullet when she was eleven. She narrated her memory of it gently, without a trace of anger or blame. Her mother had gone to buy milk that evening. The next thing the family heard was the sound of gunshots and everything went silent after a little while. When she didn't return even after the usual interval of time between gunfire sounds and the resumption of the kind of normalcy people were used to, they went looking for her and found her slumped near the gate of a neighbor. Parvez noticed Falak's chin tremble ever so slightly when she recalled that while growing up, the shapes of doorway arches always reminded her of the warmth of her mother's sturdy woolen pherans. As a little girl, Falaq loved to hide in and run in and out of her mother's pheran. She remembered it as a safe place; a place to run to hide, peer out of and watch, stay warm. She obsesses over Islamic doorways in her art course because it reminded her of pherans, she confessed, smiling weakly. Falaq is a wonderful speaker, Parvez thought. Her voice is even, poised, and confident. She rarely falters while speaking English and tilts her head attentively when listening to others. He sees that those who are listening to her are deeply

moved. Parvez wished he could talk like Falaq, be like Falaq, she who could invite you into her vulnerability without seeking to be comforted. Even those who were listening could sense that about her. There was an invisible arched doorway behind which she stayed, politely, stoically, telling her story.

A Bloodied Satchel

Parvez cleared his throat and began to speak in accented English. “I want to talk about a school bag,” he began. “It belonged to my uncle.”

His uncle, Javed, had been thirteen then. On his way back from school, one spring evening, Javed and two of his friends had decided to take Mehnaz poph’s shikara and row it across the Dal lake. She wouldn’t mind. Mehnaz was very fond of her nephew, Javed. He was her brother’s son. Her husband, whose shikara it was, had disappeared five years ago and she spent four years variously looking for him at police stations and army detention centres. She tried to trace him through other networks too, but if he was part of them she was sure he would have sent word somehow. She always went to all the APDP events and meetings. Mehnaz believed that one day her husband would return and they would start a family together. In the meantime, she waited for his return and sold dry fruits and handicrafts to tourists. Mehnaz always had a supply of walnuts or dried apricots in her pheran pockets and fished out fistfuls for Javed, tweaking his nose fondly.

It was a quiet evening and there was nobody outside. Javed and his friends had barely rowed a few hundred meters when the sound of gunfire startled them. It took them a few seconds to realise that they were the targets. “Jump! Jump!”, yelled his friends ducking and diving. Javed sat clutching his new satchel to his chest when the bullets found him. A bloody rose bloomed on the dull canvas satchel. Both his friends had jumped into the lake and the zinging bullets grazed the water before they sank tiredly. Javed slumped sideways on the bobbing shikara, bloody petals enveloping the satchel.

Parvez was thirteen when he discovered the satchel in his grandmother’s room. It was wrapped in a plastic bag. He did not remember what he was looking for when he found it. He asked his grandmother about it. She looked at him for a long moment, seeing and yet not seeing him. It was as if she was seeing other images and his face was merely a screen. Slowly, she pulled him close and sighed deeply. She told him that the satchel belonged to his uncle. Until then, Parvez did not know much about his uncle Javed who had died young.

All that Parvez knew was that Javed had died young from gunshot wounds. Holding Parvez close, running her fingers through his hair, she reminisced about Javed; about how mischievous he was but also very kind; about how she wished he had not gone rowing that fateful evening. What struck Parvez was her resignation as she spoke of her son. There were no tears, no rage,

not even sorrow. Parvez's grandmother died when he was eighteen. When they were sorting through her things, Parvez asked to keep Javed's satchel. His mother shot him a curious look and nodded. She didn't ask him why. Some questions were best left unasked.

In September, the rains came. The rivers and streets flooded and water entered their homes. They had to leave everything and flee. Parvez, along with his friends, stood shoulder to shoulder with the army and the NDRF personnel in their rescue operation as they waited for the waters to recede in the neighborhood of their own homes. At the first opportunity, Parvez went back and found the house completely trashed by the waters. He had no hope of finding the satchel but miraculously the plastic wrap had kept it afloat and he saw it lying on top of the stove in the kitchen. Grabbing it, he left the place that was once home. It would take a long time to forget the fury of the waters and even longer to fathom the destruction of what was once home.

Cassette Tape

Parvez turned to Altaf. Parvez remembers that on their first meeting, he thought that Altaf had the blankest pair of eyes he had ever seen. It was as if the artist who painted him had forgotten to add the little white dot of paint at the outer edge of his pupil to animate him. It seemed that all light was absorbed into the dark void of his eyes. Because of this peculiarity, no one knew what went on in Altaf's mind.

Parvez, like most young men his age, had seen eyes that had been bullied and tortured into shifty submission. They belonged mostly to the generation of his parents and grandparents. Their eyes struggled to meet and hold an outsider's gaze for more than a few seconds. His own generation's eyes were filled with a silent seething rage that was carefully masked. They did not look but they did not look away either. But Altaf's were different. You couldn't look into his eyes. They did not reflect you back either.

Parvez watched Altaf begin falteringly.He made a wry joke about Voldemort, "he who must not be named". The smile didn't quite reach his eyes, nothing did. Those who were listening smiled cautiously, unsure. "In my house too, there was one name no one was ever allowed to mention." He told his story in a flat monotone.

Altaf had wanted to borrow the cassette tape for a memory art project in art school. He had heard that his grandmother guarded it with a ferocity of a tigress guarding her cubs. Altaf sidled up to her after dinner as she sat staring into space. "Nainn…", he began, waiting for her to acknowledge his presence. She patted the bed next to her and he sat down. Nervously he asked for the cassette. Altaf realised that everyone around him had gone silent and waited anxiously to see how his grandmother would react. After what seemed like a long moment, she took a deep ragged breath.

“No!”, she said, her voice steely and cold. “Don’t ever mention it. Ever again!”

Altaf had never seen this side of his grandmother. The familiar noises of the post dinner conversations around him resumed; they sounded forced and awkward.

Two days later, as he stood vacantly staring into the distance, his mother came up to him. The tape was delivered to his grandmother a day after her youngest son disappeared, she told Altaf. Initially everyone thought that he had been picked up by the forces. It had happened a few times before. But the cassette tape was delivered even before anyone went looking for him. Apprehensively, the family gathered around the old tape recorder to listen. Their youngest was a beautiful young boy, long limbed, and delicately built. His voice on the tape told them about how he had been picked up more than once and had unspeakable things done to him; of how he could never bring himself to talk about it; of the pain and the guilt and the helplessness. He wondered if his family knew, if his mother suspected it. He knew that as long as he lived, the horror of it would haunt him. To stay alive, he needed a reason to live. Joining the armed resistance was that reason for him; perhaps he could stop it from happening to another young man or woman. The family sat silently, listening to the tape. As the tape ended and turned silently on the spool, Altaf’s grandmother’s body had become taut; slowly and visibly, the light went out from her eyes. It was like watching a candle being snuffed out. Ejecting the cassette with determined fingers, she said flatly, “No one will ever talk about him again.” A few days later, the family noticed a bulge close to her ribs. It took them some time to recognise the angular corners of the cassette under her clothes. Since that day, 27 years ago, she has kept that cassette tape taped to her chest every single day of her life, never uttered his name, or shed a tear. No one understood if this was a coping mechanism, a mourning ritual, or a way of keeping him protected and safe close to her. Altaf turned his blank eyes to his mother and nodded.

Parvez closed the album gently: so many pictures, and equally, so many blank spaces; memories, disappearances, and erasures.

Gita Jayaraj has dedicated this story to the young artists.

Firing at the Heart of Truth and other poems

Huchangi Prasad

Translated from Kannada by Ali Ahsan and Aniruddha Nagaraj

Jackson Pollock, 'Untitled', Colored pencils and graphite on paper, 38.1 x 25.4cm, ca. 1938–41 | Image courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

Seeds of the Black Soil

The seeds of the black soil
sprout
and spread their roots
within me.

I still have cruel memories

of red nights
set afire.

But as the roots
grow stronger,
the sun and the stars
become my companions.

Even if it is bare-bodied,
Revolution can quell darkness.
It can rewrite history
In the light of tomorrow.

Firing at the Heart of Truth

You cowards —
firing at us who wield pens.
You murderers —
celebrating the cold-hearted killing of innocents.

Let the sparrows
build nests
at your gunpoints.

Your guns may have wounded us.
But we are not just bodies,
Mute bodies.

We are children of the earth,
our mother gives us life with every letter,
strength with every word.

Look, this is not blood we shed
but ink, fresh and indelible,
writing the history of truth.

Every drop of blood now reborn

into a thousand truths.

Listen — I know, you Great Devotees!
I know the sword that chopped Shambuka's head.
I know who demanded Eklavya's thumb.
I know the truth: I know that sword.
I know you who became a gun
to kill me.

Listen — lies are not termites
eating away at truth.
Guns cannot destroy it either.
But these pens, these countless pens,
How they grow, tall, strong,
like a gigantic tree of many truths.

Yes, I have become a whore

Drooling in the dark,
you dogs—
Will you become husbands
to my mother?
Or fathers to my children?

In Yallavva's name,
You throw jasmine, secretly,
on a pile of shit.
Those flowers you give to me.
I haven't forgotten yet.

I was still a little girl
when Avva fed me, in dull lamplight,
dishes of pain.
Curries of lust and the rice of hunger
she mixed with her tears.

My mother didn't laugh

Like the stars.
But still, how she made us laugh!

I know.
I still remember.

The temple priest mutters *madi-madi*
every step of his way,
then his anxious knock comes to the door at midnight.
My pulse rages,
I hear a thunderclap in my heart.
I simmer with anger.

Those people who mouth the words
whore and bitch
in the light of day—
See how their lechery in darkness turns
whore and bitch into
Sita and Savitri.

Let me say this:
You sons of bitches
who have made whores
of my sisters—
Why haven't any of your wives
become prostitutes?
Why aren't your sisters
promiscuous women?

Look:
the religion that made me a slave
I spit on it.
You, the god who made me a prostitute
I slap you with the slipper on my left foot!

I pluck pearls out of the corpses of
religion and god
so I can become human.

Suit-boot Basava

I am alone, lonely, afraid
as I walk the street
lost in the thoughts haunting me.

A ball of fire keeps me company,
the memory of centuries:
my ancestors lashed by the whips of the rich and powerful.

I could kill
when I see the scorching sun scald my mother's back
as she plucks cotton in the field,
or as she begs, or sells her body
to feed her newborn child.
But why be a mother
if it only makes her food for hungry hounds?

I wait,
silently,
deep down in a tomb
for the Buddha.

Will he come again?
Will he come, my Suit-Boot Basava
roaring,
speaking in English?

Boti curry and Biryani

Next-door Saantavva
went to *saabru* Samaadanna's meat shop,
left with boti[1] in the basket on her head.
She walked past upper caste households,
dirty sweat rolling down her face.

Come, help me put down the basket of boti.

Look how rich the meat is
and we can afford it if we share,
Laksmavva, Kenchasanavva
Hanumadadavva, Santavva–
Enough! The number four is perfect.

And here they are, so many unwashed boys
gathering around the bamboo basket,
eager to watch the boti getting ready
to be shared among four.

Matangi scrubs the goat intestine with a stick,
then washes it with water. How well she does it!
Now she can cut it into
four perfect pieces.

Boti, the most inexpensive meat
for the likes of us.
But when everyone began eating our meat
the prices began to soar.

Buy two kg meat,
calculates Keri Kenchavva,
that's enough for just two households.
But boti –
will make curry for four households.

Besides that aroma
as boti curry is cooked—
it's irresistible, as it wafts past
upparatti[2] and kurubara keri[3]
to reach ainora keri[4]

The taste matches the aroma.
People queue up with plates
In front of the houses
Where the boti curry has been made.

When young,
we would go to Muslim weddings
with basins
which would be filled to the brim with biryani.

Ramzan and Bakrid are like
the Mari festival for Madaratti
You get biryani, payasa and serva if you cry ‘Amma’
Coins if you cry ‘Anna’.

But at an upper caste wedding,
we would be pushed away.
Come later, they would say,
You can have the leftovers.

How much we have begged for food,
quarreled over it.
Even a snarling dog or its bite
would not keep us from looking for food.

Biryani from Muslims,
Boti curry from Madru[5] households
The thought of it
Makes me drool all over again.

Read the Kannada original here.

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1. Intestine of a sheep/cow/buffalo.
2. The area where the Uppar community live.
3. The area where the Kuruba community live.
4. The upper caste area.
5. A Madiga, one of the dalit communities.

Portraits of Unspeakable Anguish

Geeta Patel

How can one draw grief? How does one draw out grief? People say that grief carries along with it, as close as its shadow, the possibility that it can be left behind or abandoned to float away, released into water as ash. When loss or death no longer feels so familiar that it thickens every moment, thins every pore, one feels as though the anguish of grieving has muted into a tide that washes over one but also abates. This is the grief proper to a loss that has a recognizable place in lifetimes, a place that must be visited or else a life is not really complete. Then there is another kind of suffering over loss, for which the word grief seems almost too slender. This is a sort of suffering forced through something so unbearably dense that what is left of a person is scattered in pieces that never come together again. The task of representing this feeling is almost insurmountable, beyond comprehension, it always falls short. This feeling, if one can call it a feeling, has no resolution.

This unreconciled suffering is what S.L. Parasher has portrayed with such brutal and eloquent tenderness in his refugee camp drawings and sculptures. Parasher sketched the figures that inhabit his camp drawings while he was the commandant of a large refugee camp near the railway station in Ambala right after 1947. Sculpted in the aftermath of the obscene violence of the partition riots and the vast influx of refugees that flooded over the border of India and

Pakistan, his drawings and terracotta pieces wrest the immediacy of moments. Each piece catches/grasps figures, faces, bodies, clusters of sitting women, rendering through their stillness, unspeakable anguish. There is something both quick and slow in the pieces; the materials were those at hand, paper, lead/pencil, earth: lines rendered in rapid strokes on large sheets of blank paper carried in a bag, pencils pulled out to draw as Parasher walked the lines of refugee tents and settled into a quiet discernment, mud culled from the ground, Ambala earth that clung to form. As Parasher captured the slow dread of his subjects in the act of sitting, of looking out sightlessly, bodies rounded, faces taut, hands falling by the wayside of bodies, hands holding open an odhni, arms nestling heads too heavy to bear their own weight, hands clinging to each other in loose despair, what comes through clearly is his extraordinary compassion, the completeness of his remarkable visionary seeing.

Viewed from across a room Parasher's work summons people to come and share in the hopelessness that brings the figures into life. One series of drawings is of women, hunched into roundedness; each portrait takes almost the entire sheet of paper; the globular fullness of their bodies so weighed down with bleak despondency that offering a hand to them to hold for a moment becomes an invasion that would seize from them the despair that stitches their lives together. One of the most poignant of these portrayals is a side view of a single woman. Penciled in slightly off center on a white page, she is an almost perfect oval; just a foot stretches out from under her pyjamas to break the surface of her shape. We see one hand, its fingers closed in and hidden, its wrist dropping down onto an elbow, her face huddled in the circle of her arms. Her back is a perfect arc, her legs are drawn up, pyjamas gathered at the cusp of her hips, her chunni falls slowly, gliding down her side. Against alt this roundness is the taut stretch of her the blouse outlining the top of a breast where it meets her arms.

All the tension in the portrayal lies here and is mirrored in the dropped wrist. The contrast offered by their tightness accentuates the vulnerable flow of body, bringing all of the hollow fullness of grief held in the figure to the surface. Without what the lines engender or give her body, she might have just been sleeping in a curl, floating in air or water, at peace.Another figure, whose face is exposed to light and air, sits in a grouping. She is shown in three quarter view; the oval of her body open slightly, revealing her covered face and head, which balance on the worn roundness of legs pulled up against her torso. Her body is hunkered down in a wrapping that shelters it from the deep coldness which appears to inhabit her. Her lower legs shrouded in a salwar, escape from the angled curve of blanket or shawl, feet settled against the ground. Her back is stooped, her hands lost, and her shoulders droop slightly as though she had given up, as if she could no longer hold herself upright as she once did. Hair falls forward unheeded along one side Of her face bared to view, her mouth is tucked away and the white between the edges of her eyebrow and eye slanting sideways is shadowed with the lustre of pain. Something in her seems to remember how she once stood proudly but now that is almost gone, everything that measures an ordinary life fallen by the wayside, only the ruins of that memory haunt the lines of her face and clothing.

In another, titled ‘Cry’, a man’s grief, so acute that its voice can never stop, whether shattered open or closed out, calls from a mouth pulled through its contours. His forehead is pushed back from the force of the arm that strikes across it, hitting, holding, bracing or resting it is impossible to say; the hand drawn so roughly it releases a blur of movement. Heavy lines, some smudged wide, some falling thickly upon one another, etch eyebrows flat, press eyes flat from weeping, the swelling underneath palpable. Lines radiate down cheeks. The arch of hair pulled upwards into a knot reflgures the tense steep curve of underarm and muscled chest; the force of the sinewed shoulder flesh tugs (vyabhichara) against the hugeness of this grieving, sends the grief so deeply home no other place remains for it.

The portraits bear witness in the lines, in the ways in which they take up space on the page or recede into gray. Lines are dense in some places, layered to adjudicate the shape of a body, lingering sometimes into a single thread. In try a simple pencil stroke from elbow along an upper arm pulls/pushes the darkness laid more thickly on a face towards the light of the blank page. The efficacy of that contrast coagulates anguish through, into and around the person; there is no escape.

What does it mean to witness? The portraits bear allegiance to many forms of witnessing. On one hand they gesture towards forms of representation that have become endemic, mimetic portrayals of suffering bodied in single instances that call into being what has been wrought on entire groups of people. The universal in the singular. The universal secured through the historical. Parasher’s lines seem guileless, the sketches hasty, quick, powerful, the rapidity of the strokes on the page attesting to having been drawn while Parasher was there, present at the very moment, living in the very place to which he could bear witness. Simulating the roughness of cinema verity, Parasher’s style is a record of realism’s iconography. It produces the illusion of a reality effect, of verisimilitude. All of these, though, are merely the semantics on which Parasher relies; they are the familiars of his contemporaneity as well as the

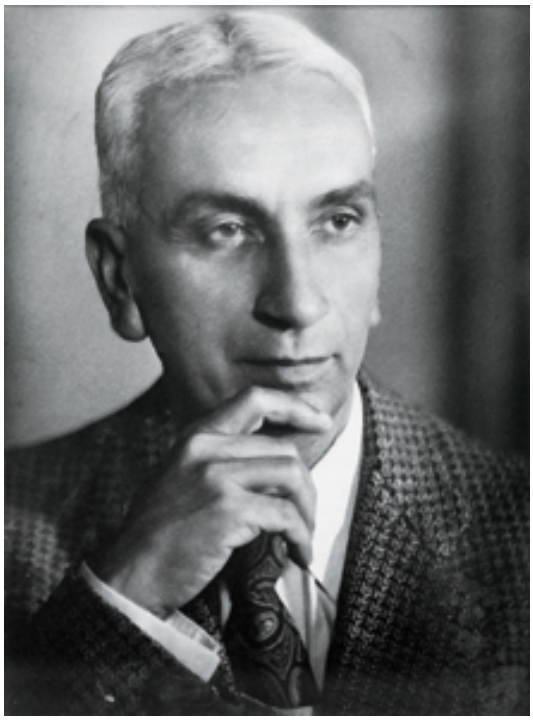
archaeology of his own habit of outlining a face; a hand, a moving body, a tum of phrase, a stray philosophical rumination on scraps, on envelopes, on found material.

The efficacy of his work, however, lies somewhere else, both literally and figuratively. What Parasher shows through his seeing, his drstii, is another vision, an anokhaa darshan, his vision goes to the heart of the impenetrable shades that wrap themselves into every figure which he offers a viewer of this series.

How can you even begin to see the stories of dead habitation, marana nivaasa, pravaasa or avastha, arms and legs torn away, flesh dismembered, children so empty; the artifact of statistical description fails in the face of what is ensconced in these figures humanness for whom humanity has no place, for whom insaniyat has gone missing, compounded by betrayal. Parasher's visual compassionate viewers to each scene, to each manzir, so that one must wear the flesh that has been stripped bare from the figures in the portrayals. This is the purest relationship between politics and aesthetics: it gifts something of the marriage between witness and representation through drawings where one feels the immediacy of a moment treated as though it were not deliberately crafted to produce that effect. For Parasher the sharing of anguish is more than just a portrayal. Instead it situates the person drawn in the ambit of the person gazing so that an observer can no longer hold onto a god's eye view, can no longer accede to the pretense that she is outside the frame; perspectival distance is denuded of all its worth.

This is the aesthetic mode through which rasa and bhaava, rasa dhvani theory infiltrates contemporary mores of art practice, and this is perhaps what **Theodor Adorno** tries to speak of when, in grappling with "incomprehensible horror," he brings the universal together with the particular, weds the sublime to the social in Aesthetic Theory. Perhaps because he was not schooled formally in the conventions of the art of his day, perhaps because he was trying, as his writing attests, to reach for art making that did not shrink back into seductions mired in formal interrogations, whatever the reasons one finds to justify Parasher's turns, there is no question that his art is imbued with rasa. When I say this I am not just alluding to the formal conventions, the notes or svara, although it is precisely these conventions that give a raaga the resonances that make it so right for a season, a slice of a day, a space, a series of layered emotions, loss as vipralambha. What I am alluding to is the astounding subtle depths of feeling that Parasher's work reaches towards in such a way that those very feelings grab hold of viewers and then transform them so that anyone standing before his work is absorbed into the people, animals, trees and houses, light, shapes and movement that bring the work to life. Parasher's work is living breathing form, and it is this form which takes one to a place beyond the form, not outside the form but through the form to somewhere so uncanny, so pure and so completely overwhelming that when someone looking gives themselves over to it they are no longer themselves. The clock comes to a slow stop, the increments of time through which we have learned to parse the ordinariness of our day slips away almost without notice and in sharing the time of a drawing, a painting or sculpture, we are led simultaneously to another time and to a full emptiness of time beyond even that sense of the specificity of the historical moment which might have inspired a line or a phrase of colour.

Each viewer, as a witness, has laid out before them a visual vocabulary through which they can taste, through the concise economy of line the savage quietude of the rasa of grief, a sthayiibhaava beyond resolution. The lines are vibhaava, in the sequences of their slightness, slack or terse, through the wilderness of their profusion, compact or stringent; they invite anyone who wishes their visitations. A rasika willing themselves to see through them marshals the alphabet of anubhaava, and bodies are scrubbed naked so that they can be filled again through 'consuming labor of contemplation'. This practice carries Parasher through the later drawings and water colors from Simla, where figures drawn in similar ways exude such ordinary joy, such a quotidian repose as they break for a short conversation, pause during a day's tasks that their distance from the scenes of 1947 is remarkable. The people from Simla, the single corkscrew trees scripted across long paper, the zigzag of houses condensed along a hill, engender entirely different feelings.



S. L. Parasher

It is the language of bhaava and rasa, splayed across a page, colouring in the hues of feeling without sentimentality and without nostalgia that detaches Parasher's pictorial sensibility from that of someone who is a recorder of a type of person, from someone whose allegiance to genres of anthropological drawing is completely cogent. The concise acuteness of Parasher's language renders each object, each person and each thing and carries them to the places to which they properly belong. Parasher's language becomes his custom, and in later paintings, the mathematics of rhythm disinterred from the conventions of realism reaches towards rasa and bhaava in their purest form.

In an earlier piece which I had written on Parasher's painting, I had gestured towards Walter Benjamin and the vexed questions critics have about his work, questions endemic to a time when something beyond the quotidian encounters the parsimoniousness of modernity: What is the play of mysticism in a world where histories lie in shards? How does one read the apocryphal metaphors Benjamin offers in 'Theses in History?'. The usual resolutions for south Asian art critics seem to remain entangled within the tight-listed/pinched/parched binaries of modernity and indignity. For me the answers lie with the voluptuous plenitude of Parasher's clear-sighted explorations. They begin in the grief beyond redemption of the refugee camp drawings and sculpture from Ambala and close with the magical, uncanny music of the mandala paintings from Delhi.

This essay was first published on The Beacon.

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Both books on Parashar. Talks by Rimli Bhattacharya, Timothy Hyman, Geeta Kapur, Conference on Binode Behari Mukherjee, National Museum of Modern Art, New Delhi, India, February 9, 2007.

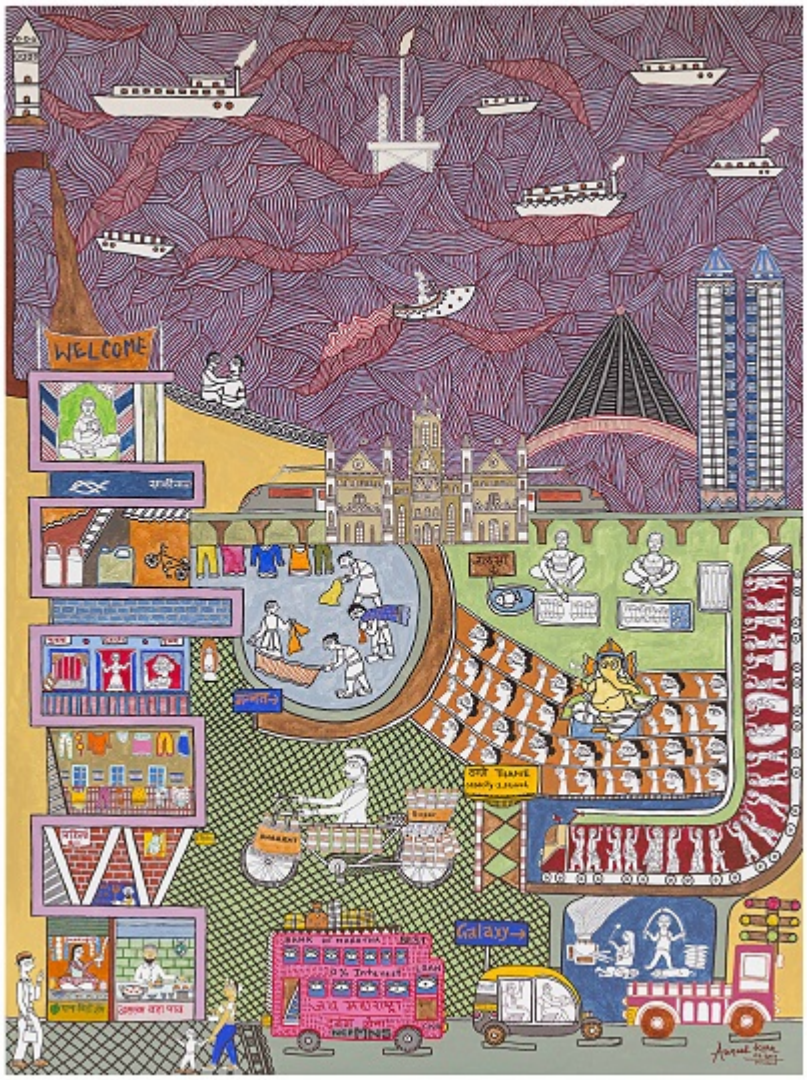
Beauty Lies in the Eyes of the Beholder

Five paintings by Avinash Karn

'Beauty Lies in the Eyes of the Beholder', Acrylic on paper, 22×30 inches, 2018

'Good Morning Banaras', Acrylic on canson paper, 18×18 inches, 2019

‘Kolkata: The City of Joy 2’, Acrylic on canson paper, 18×18 inches, 2019



‘An Ode to Mumbai’, Acrylic on canvas, 24×30 inches, 2016

‘Nataraja: The Cosmic Ecstatic Dancer’, Acrylic on clay coated jute, 43×32 inches, 2017

Madhavi

Shashi Deshpande

Y G Srimati, 'Woman with Lotus', Watercolor on paper, 57.2 × 38.7 cm, 1951 | Image courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Some stories live forever, some die in time and a few change so much over the years that they ultimately become very different from what they were when they were born. And there are

also stories that never come to life. I know one such story. It haunts me, especially since I am the only person who knows it and only I can give it life. But I am no storyteller. I don't have the skill, unlike the *sutas*, who learn the skill when they are still in their mother's wombs. There is this too, that I was part of the story, and that I played a not very honourable role in it. So why do I desire to tell it? Perhaps because I don't want to carry the burden of this untold story any longer. I am a sick man, I know I am not very far from my end. I have to speak, I need to speak.

Let me begin. Oh, I forget. I have to first say who I am. I am Galava, a poor Brahmin student. I was, at one time, a student of the great Vishwamitra. This is my only distinction. Vishwamitra is known for his temper and his curses. Which is why people, even kings and princes, were afraid of him. In my story, however, it was not a curse, but a boon, that created havoc. I suddenly realise I don't know whose boon it was; I have not thought of this until now. I was told there was a boon and I accepted it. Now I wonder – whose boon was it? But I am getting far ahead of myself, I should start at the beginning.

The beginning? Where is it? Did it begin with Vishwamitra and me? No, I think it goes way beyond *us*. It began with three people: King Yayati, Sharmishta, daughter of the King of Asuras, and Devayani, daughter of Shukracharya, the Guru of the Asuras. I must not forget that there was a fourth person in the story as well. Shukracharya himself. A learned and wise man, but with one fault. He loved his daughter immoderately and never denied her anything; she never knew what it was to not have what she wanted. Kacha was her first defeat, Kacha, who came to her father as a student, Kacha whom she began to love and desired as her husband. But that is another story, it has no place here. I can only say that having lost Kacha, Devayani made sure that she would not lose her next victim. Victim? Is that the right word? I think so. Yayati did finally become a victim. Or did he?

Let me get back to my story. To how Devayani met King Yayati. He was out hunting when he heard cries for help coming from a well. It was a female voice. If Yayati had known what was waiting for him in the well, he would have walked away. But how could he have known that? And as a Kshatriya King, he could not abandon someone, specially a female, who seemed to be in distress. He did what he had to. He went to the well and helped the girl out. This was Devayani.

Devayani had seen his dress, the entourage that stood respectfully at a distance from him and knew he was a King. She immediately grasped at her opportunity. 'You held my hand,' she said, 'Now you have to marry me.'

Anyone can imagine what this did to Yayati! He had done his duty as a Kshatriya, that was all. And now suddenly this proposal.

'But … but you don't even know who I am!'

'You are a King.'

'Yes, King Yayati,' he blurted out.

'You held my hand. A man has to marry the girl whose hand he holds.'

Was there such a rule? The King was too confused. He now tried another defence. ‘But I don’t know who *you* are.’

‘I am Devayani, daughter of Shukracharya, guru of the Asuras.’

Everyone knew Shukracharya’s love for his daughter, his anger if she was crossed. Yayati, like so many, feared the deadly curse of the rishis.

‘You are a Brahmin girl … I am not sure your father … ’

‘My father will never say no to any man I choose. But if you refuse me …’

A veiled threat. No, a not-so-veiled threat. Yayati knew he was trapped.

And so he married Devayani. But it was not enough for Devayani to be Queen. She had to punish Sharmishta. Did I forget to say that it was Sharmishta who had pushed Devayani into the well in a fit of pique? It was the result of a childish spat between Devayani and Sharmishta, one of those ‘my father is greater’, ‘no, my father is greater’ kind of arguments, neither of the girls willing to give up. Devayani did not forget this. She now made her father tell the King that Sharmishta had to go with her, Devayani, no, Queen Devayani, as her maid. The King was angry, but he needed Shukracharya. Sharmishta however made things easy for her father by saying she would go with Devayani. She realised she was being punished for her childish act of spite, for her arrogance. She had learnt her lesson – unlike Devayani who never learnt anything. She missed no opportunity to insult and humiliate Sharmishta, to show her power. She should have been careful, for Sharmishta was a beautiful girl and her helplessness and gentleness added to her charm. The inevitable happened. Yayati, who always had an eye for women, found his sympathy for Sharmishta soon changing into love. They got married, a secret marriage.

How long could it remain a secret? The news spread through the palace, through the kingdom. When Devayani came to know of it, she sobbed, she raged, she threatened she would tell her father; but finally she had to accept the marriage. Her jealousy, however, never abated, it never ceased. She could not tolerate the fact that the King spent more time with Sharmishta than with her, she was full of anger that Sharmishta had three sons while she had only two. That she had one daughter, Madhavi, while Sharmishta had none, was something she took no note of. Daughters didn’t matter, daughters didn’t count. And so there they were, a man and two women. This is where I entered the story.

What have I a poor Brahmin to do with this story of Kings and Queens and Princesses? Let me explain. I have said it, have I not, that I was Vishwamitra’s pupil? Well, at this time, my studies had come to an end and I had to go away and take on my worldly duties. Before leaving I had to give Vishwamitra his gurudakshina. I had agonised over it – what could I give a man to whom Kings and Princes came with rich gifts? What did I have which was worthy of him? I could think of nothing. There *was* nothing. I went to my guru, prostrated myself before him and said it was time for me to leave the ashram.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘time for you to go back into the world.’

‘But I have to give you my gurudakshina.’

‘What are you giving me?’ he asked. Then, ‘what *can* you give me?’

‘You know I am a poor man.’

‘So why speak of gurudakshina? You can go. After all, I have not been able to teach you much.’

After insulting me, contemptuously asking me what I could give him, was he ridiculing me, saying that I had learnt nothing? I admit I was a little slow, but I got there in the end. And what I learnt I never forgot. Maybe he was criticising himself, that he had not been a good teacher. No, he would never do that. His words *I have not been able to teach you much* were meant for me. It hurt me, it angered me. I had worked hard, I had memorised so many shlokas …

‘But I have worked hard. I have never shirked my duties.’

‘That’s right. I agree you have worked hard.’ It seemed to me that he was speaking of my manual duties in the ashram. ‘And you have nothing to give me. So go.’

It made me more determined to prove I was not as unworthy as he was making me out to be. That I was like all his pupils.

‘How can I go without giving you your gurudakshina?’

‘What can you give me?’ he asked again.

‘Whatever you ask me.’

He closed his eyes for a minute. He did this when he was irritated, or when he was trying to control himself. I was frightened. What had I done? What was he going to ask me?

‘All right then. You will bring me as gurudakshina eight hundred horses, horses white as milk, except for one ear which should be black as the night.’

My mouth must have fallen open. Eight hundred horses? White as milk, with one ear as dark as the night? What was he saying? Where could I, a poor Brahmin, get them from?

‘You can’t do it?’

He’ll curse me if I say I can’t. These rishis and their curses!

‘No, no, I’ll get you the horses.’

‘Go, then. And don’t come to me until you have what I have asked for.’

Eight hundred horses. Milk white horses. And with one ear black as night. Where could I get them from? Were there such horses in the world at all?

‘You’re stupid,’ my friend said to me when I went to him in despair. ‘When he said he didn’t want anything, you should have given him some flowers, fruits, honey, touched his feet and come away.’

‘But I didn’t do that, did I? No point speaking of what I should have done. I need your help. We’ve been friends since childhood. You got me out of trouble many times when we were boys. You can’t deny me now.’

He didn’t. ‘I know,’ he said, after we, or rather he, had searched for some way of fulfilling my guru’s wishes. ‘I know what you can do, the only thing you can do. Go to a king. Only kings have horses – though they may not have the kind you want. Go and ask. What do you lose?’

‘Why would they give them to me?

‘You’re really stupid. Because you are a Brahmin. You know how these kings are. They can’t say no to a Brahmin. It’s one of the things they are taught in their cradles. Go,’ he said, ‘Go to our King Yayati first.’

While I waited for Yayati in his public hall, I looked around me and I saw no signs of a rich king. He must have emptied his treasury for his pleasures, he won’t be able to help me, I thought. When he came, I saw that he looked dissolute, coarse. Not the handsome young king his people had admired. This was a man who had spent not only his riches, but himself as well.

Nevertheless, he listened to me patiently and when I had done, he said, ‘I don’t have eight hundred horses, let alone the kind you want.’

‘White, with one black ear,’ I muttered.

‘I would have helped you if I could. You are Vishwamitra’s student, I have to help you. But I don’t have what you want.’

‘But it is for my gurudakshina,’ I said, bringing in Vishwamitra once again.

‘I understand. Let me think.’ After a small pause he said, ‘Come back tomorrow. I will see what I can do.’

The next day when I met him, he was smiling which told me he had something for me.

‘I have found a way to help you,’ he said. And before I could express my gratitude, he told me how he was going to help me.

I could not understand him at all. His daughter Princess Madhavi – what had she to do with my predicament? What was he saying? Take her with you? How would that help me?

‘Don’t you know? She has been given a boon.’

A boon that she would bear only male children. And that her sons would become Emperors. ‘And,’ he said ‘she will become a virgin each time after she has a child.’

He saw my bewilderment, he realised this made no sense to me. How would this help me? A little impatiently, irritably, he said, 'Take her with you. Go to kings who have the kind of horses you want.'

'Milk white with one black ear.' I chanted the words like a mantra, as if they would give me what I wanted.

'Offer them Madhavi in exchange for the horses. Tell them about the boon. Nobody will refuse you.'

I felt as if I was in the middle of a story I could not understand. A father giving his daughter away? It was only in a marriage that … Was he telling me I should give her in marriage to a king who could give me my horses? But what right had I to give away a girl – and I a Brahmachari as yet?

He saw my hesitation. 'I had promised you I would help you. I have to keep my word.'

And I had to keep my word to Vishwamitra. But to use a girl? Even while I was in a state of shock, the Princess came out. He must have asked her to come.

'Here she is,' he said. And while I remained rooted to the spot, he said, 'You better leave right away.'

I scarcely looked at her. I was still in a daze at what the King had said. In any case, he almost hustled us out. The Princess came with me. What had he told her? The question hammered in my mind. What had he told her that she came so willingly with me? I was afraid to ask her. What if he had not told her the truth? What if I let it out and she walked away? What about my gurudakshina then? But to give a girl, a Princess, to a man? Perhaps he meant in marriage, he must have meant marriage. I cheered myself with the thought. Surely no father would be so vile as to hand over his daughter to just anyone!

In spite of all these doubts, I took Madhavi to the Ikshvaku king, who, I had heard, had the kind of horses I wanted. He received us with courtesy. After all, I was Vishwamitra's pupil and I had come from King Yayati.

'What can I do for you?' he asked politely

I told him about my need for horses. Milk white with one ear as black as night. They would be my gurudakshina for Vishwamitra.

'Yes, I do have such horses. But it is a big thing you are asking. These horses are rare and valuable. What will I get out of it?'

I found it hard to answer him, I could not find the words to say that I was giving him Princess Madhavi in exchange. But I had to tell him about it. And so, a little desperately, I told him about Madhavi. I saw the shock on his face. I went on in a rush, afraid that if I did not say it now, I never would. I told him about the boons. His face changed. He listened to me in silence. When I had done, he asked, 'And you say Yayati himself gave her to you?'

‘Yes.’

‘To exchange for the horses you want?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is she?’

‘She went to the women’s rooms.’

He clapped his hands, called a serving man and asked him to get Madhavi from the women’s room. The moment she came in, the atmosphere in the room changed. The King turned away from me, as if I no longer mattered. ‘Welcome, Princess,’ he said, ‘welcome to my palace and my home.’

I could see he was pleased with her. And she…? Yes, she too seemed pleased. This king was a young man, well, not very young, but not old, either. And he had a pleasing face, he seemed gentle.

‘Go in and rest,’ he said. ‘The women will look after you.’

And then came the worst of it. ‘The horses?’ I asked.

‘The horses? Oh yes, the horses. I will have them brought to you. But there is one problem. I have only two hundred horses of the kind you want. Not eight hundred.’

‘What? But I need eight hundred. I can’t leave Princess Madhavi here unless I have eight hundred horses.’

What was I doing? Bargaining with a woman’s body, no, a girl’s body. But I had no choice, I could not give Madhavi away for only two hundred horses. I had given Viswamitra my word. I needed eight hundred horses.

Finally we struck a deal. He would give me his two hundred horses and I would leave Madhavi with him – but only for a year.

I left in a hurry. I did not want to see Madhavi or talk to her. True, there was little chance of her coming out to meet me, but I was not going to take even the smallest chance. All the way home, I thought, what had I done? What had I done? But it was not me, it was her father. Which was neither comfort nor consolation. Thoughts were galloping in my mind like horses. *Horses white as milk with one ear black as night. What have I done, what have I done?*

I went back after a year. The King received me at once. I could see he was very pleased with himself.

‘She has given me a son,’ he said right away. ‘A beautiful son.’

Had he forgotten I had come to take her away? ‘You remember our agreement?’ I asked.

‘I remember. But can’t you leave her …?’

‘ No. You gave me your word.’

‘All right. But I keep my son.’

Keep the baby? I had not thought about that.

‘You didn’t say anything about the child. He is my son, I keep him.’

I gave in. The King went away and Madhavi came out to me in a short while.

She looked around. ‘They told me the King wanted to see me?’

‘Not the King. It was I.’

‘Oh! What is it?’

‘We have to go.’

‘Go where?’

This was going to be hard. I cursed the King for running away and leaving me to explain it to this girl.

‘Just come with me. The King says I can take you away.’

‘But I thought …? He called me his Queen.’

I had to tell her the entire story now. Her father obviously had told her nothing. Or had told her a lie. I cursed him too and tried my best to tell it to her in a way that would hurt her the least.

She listened quietly. When I had done, she asked, ‘So you gave your guru your word to get him eight hundred horses?’

‘Yes.’

‘And my father gave you his word he would help you?’

‘Yes.’

‘And so he gave me to you. To be exchanged for horses.’

I said nothing.

‘And now we go – where?’

‘Another King The King of Kashi. I have heard he has such horses.’

‘And you will give me to him in exchange for his horses?’

I was silent yet again.

Suddenly her composure broke, a sob burst out of her and she said, ‘My baby? What about my baby? They took him away from me. I want my baby. I can’t, I won’t go without him.’

‘He belongs to the King. He is the King’s son.’

‘I gave birth to him. He is my baby.’ Her hands went to her breasts, heavy and oozing with milk as the damp spots showed. ‘I want my baby.’

She swiftly turned around as if to go back inside. In an equally swift movement, two of the guards barred her. She looked at me as if for help. I stood there, helpless, angry, miserable. And as she looked, from the men barring her way to me, still as a statue, it was like she understood something, something which might have taken her a lifetime to know otherwise. If at all. My eyes fell before hers and her hands fell from her breasts to her side. She looked smaller as if something had seeped out of her. Then the moment was over and she said, ‘All right. If we have to go, let’s go. Right away.’

We went to the King of Kashi. Once again it was the same story. The King had only two hundred horses. Once again I bargained with him. He finally agreed that Madhavi would stay with him only for a year.

‘And if she has a son? He will be mine?’

This was a King without sons. He would never let go of the child.

‘Yes,’ I said.

When I went back after a year the King was jubilant. He had a son, he gloated over the fact as if it was entirely his doing.

‘Why don’t you leave her with me for another year?’ he asked. ‘I need one more son. Just one son is not enough for a king. It is safer to have more than one.’

‘I will leave her with you if you give me two hundred more horses.’

‘I don’t have them.’

‘Then I take Madhavi away. We had agreed to this. You must keep your word.’

I had become more skilled at bargaining. I was hard and businesslike. How quickly one learns!

Madhavi came out. Inside I could hear a child screaming.

‘Let’s go,’ she said. ‘Quickly.’ As if she could not bear to hear the cries.

What am I doing? I asked myself once again. What am I doing? And yet, I went with her to the King of Bhoj. I didn’t have to explain anything to him. He had heard about her, about her boons,

and the sons she had borne the two kings. He welcomed her with joy, he gave me his two hundred horses without hesitation.

When the year was over and I went to take her away, she was waiting. Someone had told her I had come. ‘Let’s go,’ she said quietly.

When we were on the road, she asked me, ‘Where now?’ As I hesitated, not knowing what to say, she burst out. ‘I will not go anywhere. I will not go to any King. I can’t do it. I can’t do it. Not any more.’

She sounded desperate. What had she experienced?

‘There are no more Kings with horses.’

Relief flooded her face. She immediately said, ‘Then let me go.’

‘Not the kind of horses I want,’ I added. ‘And I have only six hundred horses. I promised Vishwamitra eight hundred horses.’

‘And you have to keep your word.’

I said nothing. ‘So where are you taking me? Haven’t you decided?’

‘What did your father tell you when you came with me?’ I asked her suddenly

‘Nothing. Only to go with you. And to do whatever you asked me to do.’

‘And you came? You didn’t know me.’

‘I know my father.’

What did she mean by that?

‘And your mother? She said nothing?’

She was silent for a moment, as if thinking. Then she spoke in a kind of monotone, no expression in her voice or on her face.

‘My mother is an angry woman. She was angry that my father spent more time with … with my second mother than with us. To me she said, do what your father says. That’s all she’s always said to me. She is so frightened of displeasing him.’

‘And your boon?’

‘What boon?’

‘That you will bear only male children, that your sons will become Emperors?’

‘I never heard of such a boon.’

How could she not have? Was it a lie, then? I have had much time to think since then and I have begun to wonder whether what Yayati did to Madhavi was his act of revenge against Devayani for ruining his life. By making a prostitute of his daughter. Could a man be so vile? I have not lived much among men, so I don't know. But I have begun to think that yes, Yayati had invented the boon so as to make her a woman every man would want. A woman who would have only sons, sons who would become Emperors. Who could resist such a woman? But what father would give his daughter to a man and say 'make use of her'? I thought of my father with his daughters, my sisters. How protective he was of them, how he loved them. He always tried to give them whatever they wanted. And this man Yayati was a King. And what about the boon that she would become a virgin after a child was born to her? Had Yayati invented that too? I had not spoken to Madhavi of it. How could I speak to her of such a thing? But I could see with my own eyes that it was not true. I had seen her body become rounder, fuller, after her first son was born. More womanly. She was a woman now, not a girl. How could anyone believe that virginity could be restored to a woman after she had a child? Even if the body mimicked virginity, what about the woman's mind, her emotions? What of the memories she had of sleeping with a man? What of her motherhood? I thought of her holding her breasts and crying out, 'My baby, my baby.' I was then, still am, a Brahmachari. What do I know of women? Or of mothers? My own mother died when I was only a boy. But I saw what it was to be a woman, a mother, I saw it on Madhavi's face, I heard it in her cry.

'I can't do it,' she said again. 'Let me go.'

'Where will you go?'

'To my …' she faltered. There was a long pause. I waited for her reply. 'Anywhere. I will find some place,' she said.

'How can I tell Vishwamitra I have only six hundred horses?'

She shrugged.

'All right. I will talk to my guru. If he agrees, I will take you wherever you say.'

When we reached the ashram, I left her again among the women and went to my Guru. I prostrated myself at his feet.

'Get up, get up,' he said testily. 'Have you brought my gurudakshina?'

Old man, you pretended you wanted nothing. Now you talk of your gurudakshina without even asking me how I am.

'No.'

'Why?' I could see an outburst of anger coming. He's going to curse me, I thought.

'There are no more horses.'

'How many do you have?

‘Six hundred. If you could forgive me and take these …’

‘I said I wanted eight hundred horses and you promised me eight hundred. You should keep your word.’

‘But … but … there are no more horses.’

‘So?’

I told him then, I told him the entire story, from the time I went to Yayati till this moment.

He was silent for a few moments after I had done. Then he said, ‘If there are no more horses, there is the girl.’

‘Girl?’

‘Yayati’s daughter. You can give her to me for a year like you did with the kings. I will then forget about the two hundred horses.’

I could not believe it. A man considered so wise, so learned. His verses for the Rig Veda were famous, we students were proud of his achievement. Now he wanted a woman. No, a girl. He had three wives already, but he wanted Madhavi. I wished for the first time that I was a Kshatriya with a weapon in my hands, not a Brahmin spouting words that mean little.

But perhaps he didn’t mean it. No, he did, he was serious. I wanted to stop my ears, I wanted to curse him. But I was no Vishwamitra. I wanted to tell him I was going to send her back to her father. He could do what he wanted to me after that. But I said nothing. Old habits die hard. I could not so easily forget my years of obedience to this man.

I went to her and told her about Vishwamitra’s solution. She listened to me in silence. She was silent even after I had done. ‘He’s an old man,’ I said, trying to console her. ‘He won’t be …’ I could not find the right word, ‘… as bad … not like a young man.’

‘It makes no difference,’ she said wearily. ‘The King of Bhoj was an old man. He was no different. All men are the same in their urgency when they want a woman’s body. Kings, scholars, saints, ordinary men – what they want they will take. If they want a woman’s body, nothing else matters.’

I felt a pang of guilt, of shame, thinking of that innocent young girl I had taken away from her father’s home. This girl, this woman who spoke with such knowledge, such weary wisdom of men and their desires – how far she had come from that girl! And I thought, how can they even imagine she is a virgin, this woman who knows all about men, about their desires, about their bodies! A woman who has no expectations, no illusions about men. What boon can restore her virginity? I knew then that this whole world of curses and boons that we lived with was a falsehood.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ she said, as if she had read my thoughts. ‘I have learnt to separate my mind from my body. I can do the same with this old man. Your Guru.’

For a moment I thought – I will take her away from here. I don't care about the horses and the gurudakshina, about curses and boons. Let's go away, I wanted to say to her.

But what would that make of me? I would be just one more man like the others. A man who would use her as they had done. But I didn't want sons, I only wanted …

'Go away,' I said to her suddenly. 'Go away from here.'

'Go where?'

'Go to your…' Like her, I faltered. I could not say 'to your father.'

'No. I have decided I will help you to complete your mission. It will be something I will have done. There's nothing else,' she said, spreading out her arms as if to show me the emptiness of her life. The thought of her children, the sons she had left behind, flashed through my mind. 'And maybe I will do something wrong and he will curse me. I would like to be cursed that I will have no more children.'

'No,' I said. 'You will not go to Vishwamitra. Tell me where you would like to go, I will take you there.'

Sharmishta, I thought, her other mother. She is said to be a kind woman. Why not take her to Sharmishta?

'What about you? Your gurudakshina? And Vishwamitra's anger?'

'I don't care about those things anymore.'

'No, I will complete my job. So that you will have kept your word to your guru. After that …' She said no more.

I could not move her. I left her there and went away. I never saw her again. I learnt that Vishwamitra had a son by her. He was ecstatic. A son at his age! I remembered the King of Bhoj who had also been triumphant at getting a son. My son, they said, all the men. *My* son. I also heard that her father Yayati took her home after her year with Vishwamitra. And, what amazed me, he had a swayamvara for her. A mother of four sons. But she would bear only sons. And she was a virgin, wasn't she? Fools, I thought in contempt. Fools. I also heard, much later, that men flocked to the swayamvara. Every man wanted this amazing woman who bore only male children and became a virgin immediately after the baby's birth.

My friend told me the rest. That she came into the hall, a garland meant for the lucky chosen man in her hands and standing in the centre of the hall, she looked at all the men who were there. Slowly, taking them in with a probing direct look. And then she threw the garland down, like a challenge to all the men, and walked out, trampling over the garland as she left. She walked away from her father's kingdom, nobody knew where she went.

I don’t know what happened to her after that. Whether she went into the forest and lived in an ashram, or whether she went away from all human habitation and lived alone. I don’t know. I don’t want to know either. Does any man like to see the body of a person he has killed?

Enigma of the Day and other poems

Riyaz Latif

John Singer Sargent, 'Venetian Canal', watercolor and graphite on off-white wove paper, 40×53.3 cm, 1913 | Image courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Enigma of the Day*

on the slopes of dreams
all circles vertical,
vigils of silence,
dusk's flowing faces,
intonation within intonation, unknown…
in fossilized perspectives
each new dimension netherworld
mute piazzas

drained of body and soul…
they are being distorted
the murmurs of lands and seas,
the airiness of breath,
in the soundless ranks
of mystery's colonnades,
in sleeping waterfalls,
whose frenetic silhouettes
have shimmered thus?

the core of the dream
rearrange it a bit now;
emerge out now from
the floors of the eye's ocean;
melt now
in the caress of evanescent colors!

*The poem borrows the title of a painting by the renowned Greek-Italian painter, Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1975). The overall deportment of Chirico's art has acted as a muse for this poem, and I have tried to align the imagery of this poem with the forlorn, enigma-laden atmosphere of his canvases, replete with distorted perspectives and emptied brooding squares.

Apprehension

banished we shall be
from the house from the town
from the body
from the world
from the derelict manor of air
from the resplendent palm of stars
we, in the interminable wilds of naissance,
gathering up sands of Time in our hearts
have set forth into the burrows of disavowal
we, gathering up our trees, our caverns
have raged from civilization's blood;
have skidded from zones of soaring…
beyond hearing, perception, imagination
beyond darkness
beyond radiance
beyond extinction
beyond permanence…
banished we shall be one of these days

onto the eyeless lands of denuded possibilities
where exodus shall bear a strange demeanor;
in the roving air of liberty too
the firmament of vastness
shall be incredibly narrow

Apotheosis

I live
in the fluid enigma
of lands…
from there
rising from
unborn tongues of
death-forging waves
now drop by drop
I drink the skies

The Ant

stretched shrunk
oblique askew
walking rushing my existence
a string of fervent frenetic bodies…
moment to moment, like moments here
there's arriving passing attaining and vanishing;
there's to cease an instant, and to be an instant…
striding roving, this is my musing:
towing this atom-worth body,
what more entanglement with
this world a grain of sugar?
towing this atom-worth body,
within the dominions of my own arms,
who knows what all I have lost?
who knows what I seek
in speck within speck wilds;
in the ears of a frenzied elephant!
striding roving, I ruminate:
brewing up a straw-light tempest,
in the stormy eyes of a droplet

I will have to plunge
On the watery shores of a teardrop
I will have to perish!

Venice

fastening shackles of aquatic flora
waters still clasp me
my breath water
my spirit water
in ripple within ripple folds of my image
a heritage of portals and windows
has unfurled fluid rudders…
glittering shimmering
in the effervescence of my net-cast veins
I set afloat lanterns of ornate-bodied boats
Holding sky's mirror above the head,
spiraling down from the
million perplexed crimson eyes of fluttering pigeons,
the moss-tainted vaults and domes of
churches, palaces and *funduqs* — water
Marked on fluid vistas of my bosom,
piazza to piazza dove-wings,
countenances of civilizations,
column within column all voyager-forms of winds…
In the streets of water
have melded agelessly
gold-crusted circuits of merchant vessels!
Contained in all adornments but
occult laps of mirage-waves
have, each moment,
replenished my worn face…
so now recounting the sagas of
my own misty dreamy shadows,
incessantly perched on shoulders of flow,
what if I brewed up a storm of transformation?
what if I submerged in your eyes?

Read the Urdu original here.

Marathahalli Walker's Club

K. Satchidanandan

Translated from Malayalam by Prasad Pannian

Noted poet, bilingual writer, translator and editor K. Satchidanandan received the Poet Laureate award on November 14th at The Tata Literature Live festival, 2019. On this prestigious occasion, Guftugu *presents his short story, 'Marathahalli Walker's Club'.*

Photograph by Alan Schaller | Image courtesy Instagram

Walking was the one and only pastime and physical exercise for Suveeran. Sometimes, he felt that the paths he trod were the skies and that he was a slow, meandering breeze blowing across the galaxies. In moments of agonised pride, he felt he would have already strode up to Kapilavasthu, Calvary, Medina or Dandi in his previous births. Sometimes he felt he was walking in places that his feet had never touched: Bombay, Delhi, Kathmandu, Damascus, Tehran, Istanbul, Cairo, Athens, London, Berlin, Paris… places that he would like to see, but would

imagine he had already walked around. Through novels and travelogues, he had acquainted himself with the streets, gardens, temples, mosques and memorials that dotted those places.

Suveeran's walks were never eventless; nor were they always solitary. It was true that humans found it impossible to keep pace with him and walk the long distances he covered. Nonetheless, sometimes either an enthusiastic dog would run with him or a crow fly in the same direction above his head. Although many trees wanted to walk with him, their deep roots didn't allow them to do so and tightly held them down in their assigned spots. Hence they only waved their branches and wished him well to satisfy themselves.

A few humans and cats always stared at this briskly walking thirty-year-old. Some even dared to ask: 'In a hurry?'

He would then routinely respond in negatives: 'Not to buy pills for breathlessness', 'Not to call the priest for someone's last rites', 'My sister has not yet felt labour pain', 'No, I am not late for the job interview', 'My beloved is not waiting in the restaurant', 'Not to inaugurate any protest march', 'No, my house is not on fire', 'No tsunami is pursuing me', 'There is still time for the wine shop to close' and so on. Whoever was curious about his motive once would never again dare face such insolence.

Very rarely did Suveeran return along the same path he had taken. He would never think if the path he took was the sinners' or the saints'. And so once in a while he has been in the suspects' list of the moral police. But would one who has fixed his eyes on the horizon ever have the time to quench the longings of the mortal body? Would one who was wedded to the path he traveled ever have any mundane goals? Could the omnipresent one have any sinful sojourn?

By this time, he was familiar with all the streets, lanes and the labyrinthine bylanes of his city. He knew which route each bus or vehicle would take and when they would go by. He knew where they would stop and who would routinely board those vehicles. He also knew who all were plying those private cars and which office or college or house they would go to, and he was sure which cow would cross the road at what time.

In a certain sense, one could say, he was a cartographer of the city, a repository of its many mysteries! Some even doubted whether he was a Sherlock Holmes. However, they didn't take him to be one, as there was no Watson with him! Nobody could predict when and how Suveeran would traverse his path. After all, he was not the Equatorial line, was he? Though a good observer, he was never a good planner. In other words, it could be that he hid his road maps from his own feet.

He never thought of buying even a scooter; leave alone a car, even though he was rich enough to do so getting good returns working a couple of hours daily on his laptop. He was staying in one of the suburban lodges of the city- if at all one could say, he was 'staying' there! To be more specific, he stayed in a lodge on the outskirts of Bangalore city, in Marathahalli. He worked for a big company in a distant land that he had never visited in his life. If he had been ready to work full-time, it wouldn't have been difficult for him to get a job either in White Field or in the Electronic City. There were two reasons why he didn't try to have a full-time job: one,

he led a modest life and wanted only to make both ends meet: he was afraid of riches; two, then where would he find time to go for his long walks? Coming back tired from the office and then going for a long walk would have been really demanding.
Initially, he used to walk from Marathahalli to Cubbon Park and return. Then he changed his route. From Marathahalli, he would walk through Koaramangala, Jayanagar, Tipu's Fort, Golf Course, Jalahalli via Kalakari and Indiranagar and then back to Marathahalli. Wasn't there a weave of bylanes in Jayanagar and Indiranagar to walk along! Gradually, his walks grew longer. He covered places such as Jeegani, Hosur, Shoolagiri and Kuppam. He also went upto Tumkur, Doddaballapur, Kurboor and Kolar; and then to Kunigal, Yediyur, Magadi and Ramnagar, and then again via Chithradurga upto Davanagere and crossing over Kemkeri, Bidadi, Ramanagaram, Chennappattanam, Madur, Mandya, Sreerangapattanam upto Mysore, then via Sivasamudram, Chamaraj Nagar, Sathyamangalam, Pollachi and Munnar upto Kodaikkanal, across Gonikkoppa to Madikkeri; what is more, from Madikkeri via Sulthanbathery upto Ooty and then crossing over Kolar, Chittoor and Thiruvalloor upto Chennai. He would know Channasandra, Guttahalli, Bommanahalli and Yeswanthpur like the lines on his own palm. Sometimes, he felt he was walking on the stretchmark of a mother's belly; at other times, that he was a cartographer!

Gradually he got fed up with his solitary walks. Wouldn't there be others who are also interested to walk like me? That is how Suveeran found out fourteen other walkaholics; rather, twenty-eight legs including those of two women! Women were fewer in numbers not because they didn't like walking. After their day's job and routine homecare, they didn't get much time to walk. Out of these two women, one was a dalit Kannada researcher doing a comparative study on the different ideas of India in works such as UR Ananthamurthy's *Samskara,* SL Bhyrappa's *Aavarana* and Siddhalingaiah's *Ooru keri*. And the other woman was an environmental activist. The men were mostly jobless youth; yes, the three retired officers too.

That was how 'Marathahalli Walkers' Club' was founded. Suveerans' room functioned as its office. Although he would have preferred mobile offices, he couldn't find moving houses or buildings! Or else, he would have to rent out a van or so but he didn't have enough money. As it was not mandatory that everyone should walk on the same routes, Suveeran was mostly independent in his choice of routes; sometimes, with his permission some other members accompanied him. That everyone should keep individual journals recording the experiences of their daily walks was the irrefutable code of conduct. They were also supposed to present those experiences at their Sunday meetings. If one put all those reports together, it would make a huge novel! It would be a novel where humans, animals, birds, trees, stars and dust would have equal importance. Let us leave the task to some genius – dead, alive, or yet to be born.

Maybe one could give a romantic twist to this story here: like this female researcher often keeping Suveeran's company, getting intimate with him and gradually marrying him and so on. But, it is imperative that these propitious romantic situations of music and dance have to be done away with — in other words the story never progressed that smoothly! The researcher Pratibha found time only to pursue those three writers and their worlds. Thus at a young age, she understood the difference between the three Indias. Sometimes she witnessed how these three countries fought against one another in the bar, streets, or in the countryside. In each of these places, the Brahmin India continued to win with their infinite cunning. One day, during

one of her walks, Pratibha had to witness her favourite journalist soaked in blood lying still on the ground surrounded by a few onlookers. There was nothing wrong in her concluding that the dead journalist was the real India! Those walks changed Pratibha's worldview completely. She began walking with the rhythms of a route-march. She started secretly looking for criminals who committed such murders in the labyrinthine routes and cyber corridors. She helped the police track down several such crimes, though it is yet another story if all those crimes were followed up seriously afterwards.

I never imagined that this story would turn out to be documenting reality. I hate realism. But our times are such that whatever impossible story you imagine, it would finally turn real and would inevitably lead to many diverse ideas of the nation. Leave it at that. All the diary scribblings of our club members were full of such events; land encroachments, secret murders, narratives of corruption, looting of forest-resources, hunting of wild animals, murders of dalits, the secret night unions of the daytime foes, the mob-lynching in the name of cows and Ram. Yet, sometimes they also had some positive entries — like that of a secret love-affair crossing the borders of religion, a girl carrying a wounded puppy for its treatment, some organisations distributing ragi and sugar, of small protest meetings raising slogans of justice, so seldom seen these days , some bold writers and artists speaking up, or of some youth organising the adivasis—rare consolations, these. But they were only like occasional fireflies in the depth of the dark woods.

One member of the club was a Tamil Crime Branch officer. The weekly diary scribbling of the members turned out to be useful to him, although he didn't very much relish the ones that talked about police officers' criminal activities and their helping some rich criminals. It was Suveeran himself who often presented such reports in the meetings.

Thus the club went on functioning well for five years. But then one day, Suveeran didn't comeback after his routine walks. As he never used to reveal to his friends the directions or routes his walks took, all searches for him proved vain. Members of the club and police searched for him in every nook and corner, including the forests, streams and mountains. As Pratibha too was not to be found, they kept imagining tales around their disappearance. Who could imagine that the two of them would fall in love and elope! There was no such sign in their gestures or moves. By this time, Prathibha had been awaiting her *viva voce* after submitting her thesis. She was studying the political murders in the state and around and would present her findings in some of these meetings. Moreover, under her leadership, the Club had recently started publishing a bulletin based on the Sunday reports with Suveeran as the editor.

Gradually, the number of members of the club started dwindling as they left one by one for various reasons. Some passed away. Others became very busy with their career. Switching jobs or retiring; some relocated to other cities. The signboard 'Marathahalli Walker's Club' which Suveeran himself had designed on his laptop remained there still. And the neighbours could hear from that solitary room the footsteps of someone loitering there on Sundays and reading out notes from a diary about his walks and sojourns, in a subdued voice. It is rumoured that sometimes, a young man in his mid-thirties bleeding from the deep wound on his chest would suddenly appear in Theerthahalli, Old Airport Road, or Shivasamudra, or on the elephant

corridors of Madikkeri before the pedestrians and vanish abruptly. Some also claim to have seen in those phantom moments, accompanying the young man, a red chudidar-clad young woman, her face and legs turned blue!

Read the Malayalam original here.

A Night of Kathakali and Yakshagana

Giridhar Khasnis

GALLERY
GUFTUGU

Re-figuring 'Indira Bai' in a New English Translation

Vanamala Viswanatha and Shivarama Padikkal in conversation with Githa Hariharan

Indira Bai: The Triumph of Truth and Virtue is the English translation of the first social novel in Kannada by Gulvadi Venkata Rao. The translation, by Professor Vanamala Viswanatha and Professor Shivarama Padikkal, was recently published by the Oxford University Press, India. A woman-centric text, *Indira Bai* stages all the major debates of 19th century colonial India such as child marriage, widow remarriage, and women's education. The text and translation make use of multiple languages as in real life. Vanamala Viswanatha and Shivarama Padikkal speak to writer Githa Hariharan about this complex translation process as well as the richness of social comment offered by the novel.

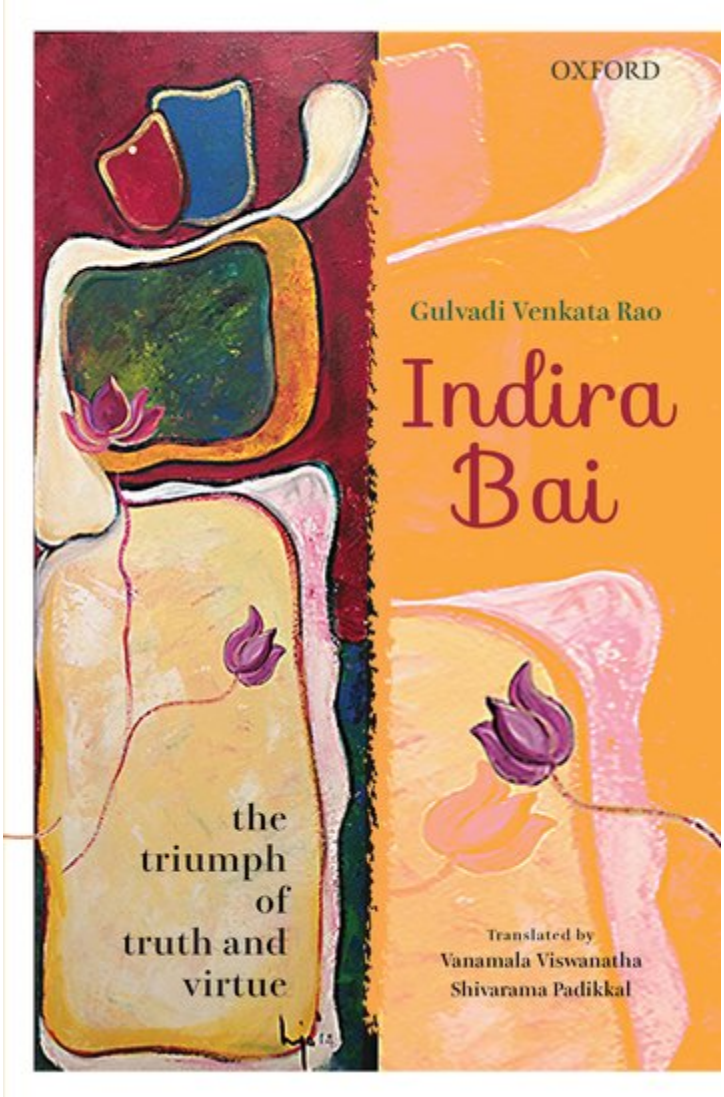


Image courtesy Oxford University Press

Githa Hariharan (GH): This is an extraordinary effort for various reasons. One is the way in which the novel, and the translation, take on multiple languages: as in life, so in text. What are the strategies you decided to employ as translators to deal with so many languages — Kannada, Tulu, Konkani, Sanskrit and different 'versions' of English?

Vanamala Viswanatha and Shivarama Padikkal (VV and SP): Thank you, Githa. Yes, multilingualism is the bedrock of the cultural ecology of India. It is not only a feature of the present but a defining aspect of the very civilisation of India. The coastal region of Dakshina Kannada provides a superb example of this phenomenon as it is marked by an intricate pattern of multilingualism in which several linguistic and religious communities jostle together within a hundred-kilometre radius. It is not merely a multiplicity of languages; these languages live, thrive, and fight in a complex web of social hierarchy.

In order to capture this socio-linguistic uniqueness, we, the team of translator(s), editor, and copyeditor, decided to evolve a new style while printing the text. Kannada, spoken by the Saraswat brahmin characters (the paradox is that Saraswat brahmins typically speak Konkani as their first language, and not Kannada), is the dominant language of the text. Where we have retained the *Kannada* words untranslated, they are indicated in single quotation marks as in 'avva' along with a gloss – 'A colloquial way of addressing a woman/girl affectionately.' *Tulu*, the language largely spoken by characters from the 'lower' castes, is marked by a single asterisk. *Konkani*, more specifically 'Christian Konkani', spoken by the two policemen, is established by the use of double asterisks. *Sanskrit*, the language of religious/cultural pursuits, is set apart by the use of italics. Finally, the use of *English* in the original Kannada text, is indicated by the use of small caps in the translation. This code-gliding between Kannada and English is particularly significant as it serves both the satirical intent of the novel in ridiculing the ultra-modern, phony ways of city youth as well as the representational needs of the narrative when it refers to the onset of colonial modernity in a local community.

GH: Still on languages, the multilingualism is not just rich in the sense of diversity, but also in terms of power structures — divisions of caste and class. Could you talk about this aspect of hierarchical use of language in both the text and in real life in the region?

VV and SP: Right through the text, Gulvadi uses Konkani, Tulu, and English to mark the social difference among the characters. Those lower down in the caste/community hierarchy, holding lower order occupations, speak in Konkani or Tulu. The English-educated youth speak a code-mixed Kannada sprinkled with English words. Some critics have attributed this mimesis to the compulsions of the social realist thrust of the novel. But such a reading ignores the text's basic intent to construct in and through language(s) the imagination of a new community.

In fact, all the main characters hail from the Saraswat community which, in real life, speaks Konkani as its 'mother tongue'. But, in the novel, they speak in Kannada, and not in Konkani. Among the languages of the Kannada region (the present state of Karnataka was formed only in 1956), historically, Kannada was the privileged language of cultural production. Thus, the Saraswat brahmin characters who are the protagonists of the text get to speak the language of power. The 'lower' caste/community characters speak among themselves either in Tulu or Konkani. Often these characters from the lower rung of society speak reverently about the protagonists Indira and Bhaskara as ideal characters; their gossip about the important characters takes the form of public commentary either endorsing the secular ethos of the emerging, English-educated, Saraswat brahmin group or disapproving the actions of mindless traditionalists like Bhima Rao and Amba Bai, or the immorality of the head of the Santamandali, or the actions of the shallow reformists. The choric voice of the ordinary people, used by the author to clearly mobilise public opinion for his tirade against degraded religious practices, offers a powerful critique of his society at that point in history. In the text, he brings alive this critique by translating lower caste speech in Tulu and Konkani into Kannada. As Padikkal (*Early Novels in India*, ed. M Mukherjee, Sahitya Akademi, 2002) has argued, the multilingual code deployed here writes in a new hierarchy of Kannada society in which the modern yet nationalist identity of the Saraswat community is constructed and valorised.

GH: There is also variety in terms of using genres such as prose, poetry, proverbs and so on. Would you link this with the social practices in coastal Karnataka at the time? Also, is this a challenge with many of our Indian texts as far as the translator is concerned?

VV and SP: Drawing from diverse centres of culture, Gulvadi's text creates a space in which a variety of cultural forms and texts clash and blend. Various episodes from the art form *Yakshagana Talamaddale*, which belongs to the 'little' tradition, are deployed not only to represent the villain's emotions, but also to provide an ironic effect. In the wake of his acquittal in a criminal case for murdering Sundara Raya, Bhima Raya presents the episode of '*Vali vadha*' (The Slaying of Vali, in which Rama kills Vali through deceit, in order to win over his brother Sugriva), playing the lead role of Bhagavata, the chief narrator. While singing the song depicting Rama's cowardly act of killing Sugriva slyly, Bhima Raya sweats profusely, stutters, and falls in a faint. The use of this art form is as much a critique of the character as a self-reflexive comment. The modern perspective projected in the novel perceives this traditional mode of entertainment to be crass and fit only for villains to pursue, whereas the *shobhane* wedding songs, part of the 'Great' tradition, sung by women at Indira's wedding to Bhaskara, are celebrated in the novel as they glorify the ideal relationship of the couple.

Thus *Indira Bai* stages its cultural politics through its unique textuality. This can be a challenge for translators as well as readers in equal measure, since reading or translating such a text

demands more attention and diligence. Given that the novel as a new genre was shaping up just then, *Indira Bai* had to simultaneously establish the form, the telling, the characters, and their speech. The text also bears witness to a literary culture in transition from the oral to the written, from the performative to the literary, perhaps a feature common to other Indian literary cultures. While the dominant mode of narrative is befitting the novel, the text also deploys drama and poetry, (evident in the use of dialogues, songs and chants) genres that marked the Kannada literary production in earlier centuries.

Translating this kind of a polycentric text can be quite a task for the translator. In particular, proverbs, the hallmark of oral tradition, do not easily move out of their natural habitat. It doesn't work to replace them with possible equivalent proverbs in English. So we have translated them as literally as possible, signalling their presence with quotation marks. These proverbs are a crucial aspect of the social anthropology of the community portrayed by the novel. The text has sentences and paragraphs that run to two pages. Where we felt the narrative was getting cluttered, we have broken the text into separate paragraphs for greater ease of reading. Translation is, after all, a process where, as a translator, you walk the tight-rope between a commitment to the integrity of the text and its communicability to a contemporary readership.

GH: Coming to the text itself: a layperson's knowledge of the reform movement of the time is obviously incomplete. I was struck by the influence of the Brahmo Samaj in the South. How did this happen? I also recall reading, in the Tamil context, public discussion in journals and papers about the need to educate women, but perhaps more important for us, exactly what this education can do. (Help educate children, be an intelligent partner to the husband etc — in short, reform with clear parameters from our point of view). Would you set the reform and reformist debate background for us in the case of *Indira Bai*?

VV and SP: The establishment of the Basel Mission schools in 1836 in the region was a major catalyst in radicalising the youth of the Saraswat community. Along with translating Christian tracts, the Mission also published books on science, geography, history and biology, thus opening the doors of western knowledge to the local populace. The modern sensibility imbibed through English education transformed young men such as Ullal Raghunathiah and Bharadwaj Shiva Rao to question the value of traditional institutions such as the religious mutts. But as Dr. Viveka Rai points out, these educational activities went along with the mission of conversion to Christianity. As a reaction to missionary conversions and to prevailing colonial tendencies in the public sphere to desecrate the ethos of Hinduism, a branch of the Brahmo Samaj, which had upheld the spiritual superiority of India, was started in Mangalore in 1870. Several thinkers, lawyers, and writers, chiefly from the Saraswat community, led this movement for social reform.

Interestingly, K Veereshalingam Pantulu, who wrote *Rajashekhar Charitamu* (1880), the first social reformist novel in Telugu, and had visited the region around this time, seems to have been a strong influence on the budding writers of Mangalore. Drawn to the tenets of the Brahmo Samaj, Pantulu had worked for social causes such as widow remarriage, women's education, and anti-dowry campaigns. Gulvadi's work needs to be seen against this background. On the one hand, the English-educated Gulvadi worked as a police officer in the colonial administration; on the other, he was profoundly influenced by the philosophy of the Brahmo Samaj. It is clear that Gulvadi's work was an amalgam of both these streams that defined the very notion of Reform at that time.

As most of the reformists hailed from the upper castes, the upper caste Indian woman became the site on which the agenda of Reform was launched. Whether it was child marriage, widow remarriage, or women's education, all these issues got articulated from an upper caste, male perspective. Women's education was desirable if it could help women become modern and intelligent partners to their husbands, to run the household more efficiently and tastefully. Indira, who can read Sanskrit and English equally fluently (much like Chandu Menon's eponymous heroine Indulekha in the Malayalam novel) becomes the quintessential New Woman in the modern nation of India at the turn of the century. While most of the social reform novels in Indian languages discuss the issue of widow remarriage, *Indira Bai* is the first Indian novel in which a widow remarriage becomes an actuality, delineated in vivid detail, with a stamp of total endorsement by the narrative.

GH: Since language as a social marker is so strong in the book, inevitably I have to ask about English as a vehicle for mobility and even emancipation. It brings along the whole baggage of going abroad, hence the fight against losing caste by crossing the waters; civil services; Indira getting new ideas by reading even basic 'padri' books; Christianity; and of course, for us in retrospect, the complex of reform/ progress while in some ways becoming 'comprador'. At another level, it also brought to mind one strand of the more recent caste movements' view, that English is a more liberating choice for dalits with other Indian languages — or 'mother tongues' — carrying so much casteist baggage.

VV and SP: The text showcases two, somewhat ambivalent, facets of English: the face that superficially mimics the language and the ways of the English as deplorable and hence such phony behaviour comes in for sharp ridicule; the other face that has imbibed the liberalism of the west after carefully weighing the pros and cons, and integrating it with what is defined as dharmic in the Hindu fold — as exemplified by Indira and Bhaskara — is glorified in the narrative.

There is a charming scene in the novel where Indira is reading books and her mother asks:

“What kind of books do you read?”

“Until yesterday, I was reading *Stree Dharma Neeti*. Right now, I’m reading *Aesop’s Fables*.”

“Aren’t those books printed by Christian padres?”

“I don’t know.”

“Those books are printed to defile our caste practices.”

“There was nothing that even vaguely looked caste polluting in any of the books I read. Also, can one lose one’s caste by merely reading a book?”

“There are things in those books which are against our religion.”

“Not in the ones that I read. They give useful ideas on how women should conduct themselves in the house of their birth as well as in the husband’s house.”

The polyphonous sign called ‘English’ is thus deployed astutely to recast a new social imaginary which is best represented through a reconstituted image of the modern woman who can read, who is made modern and rendered anew through English education, while she is firmly grounded in a reformed and enlightened Hinduism.

Indira Bai is a text that argues for a ‘wisdom/sense of discrimination appropriate to our times.’ When the winds of western knowledge and liberal thought blew powerfully over our land, one had to respond to it by exhibiting a sense of discrimination that keeps the best from the native land as well as the foreign power. The colonial critique of India, which justified their ‘civilising mission’, condemned the treatment of women in the name of the scriptural tradition. The nationalist response was to reform tradition through a process of modernisation. This compulsion created the image of the new, upper caste, English-educated woman who was superior to all women in other castes/classes/communities. As Partha Chatterjee has demonstrated, the new patriarchy invested the upper caste woman with the ‘honour’ (read, ‘burden’) of representing a distinctly modern yet deeply nationalist culture.

But has ‘Project English’ been liberatory for women in India? Has it empowered all women equally? These questions have been robustly tackled by subsequent feminist debates in India.

GH: Finally, the history of the book since it was written, in particular, the journey of its translations. The first translation was by an Englishman, a colonial, am I right? Would you trace the translators’ readings since then in broad strokes?

VV and SP: As well-known Kannada literary historian Havanur (1989) notes, within a few months of its publication, *Indira Bai* had sold over 800 copies, which was a record for its time.

This 'impressive' figure has been attributed to the fact that the police personnel, since the novel deals with a police case, were given a discount of 25% on the total price of Re.1 (one). This, coupled with the readers' responses published in the local newspapers in English, and the fact that M E Couchman, a local administrator, translated it into English within the next four years, leads one to conclude that *Indira Bai* was a fairly popular novel. While *The West Coast Spectator* described it as 'a novel with a purpose', *The Madras Standard, The Indian Social Reformer*, and *The Madras Mail* (See Appendix of the book) commented on the social reformist thrust of the novel.

However, in the absence of an extensive network for distribution, the reach and influence of the text was limited to the region of South Canara. Hence until its second edition was brought out in 1962, the rest of Karnataka was not quite aware of this novel. This novel had not found mention even in E P Rice's *A History of Kannada Literature*, published in 1921. Noted writer Shivarama Karantha has commented on this fact of scholarly neglect in his foreword to the second edition. But since then, scholars and critics have celebrated the work for its stellar qualities of social realism, incisive satire, rich detail, and progressive thrust. The Government of Karnataka reprinted the novel, selling it at very affordable prices (Rs 8.50) in 1985, which further popularised the novel in the Kannada world.

Given that the novel as a genre was just beginning to take shape in Indian languages in the 19th century, *Indira Bai* illustrates with incredible vividness the baby steps taken by modern Kannada culture and its writing practices in exploring a new literary form. The text dramatises, through its use of language and choice of textual strategies, the Saraswat community's journey of transformation from being a world of unshaken faith in customs, rituals and beliefs, to a modernising world gradually encroached by western education, values, medicine, law, and police. Therefore, the use of linguistic and literary devices in the text is not merely a flourish; they have a defining role in constructing the meaning of the text.

Hence, the translation reflects the changing face of this narrative closely. The text in English does not have the unbroken flow of a modern novel, but it is marked with shifting discourse types. Like a *Harikatha* discourse, the novel draws into its fold, various art forms from the performance traditions of the Dakshina Kannada region — *yakshagana, taala maddale*, folk song, and traditional song which signal the stronghold of tradition. Quotes from medieval Kannada poetry and chants from Sanskrit, two languages with greater cultural capital in the linguistic mosaic of the region, are used to represent the eternal relevance of the scriptures. As our purpose is to present the history and culture of the times, the critical anthropology of the Saraswat social community, and the emerging poetics of the Kannada novel, we have tried to retain a high level of literality in the translation.

As mentioned before, an earlier English version translated in 1903 by A E Couchman, an Assistant Collector in the colonial administration and a superior of Gulvadi, is already available. We have provided his preface and a few responses to the translated novel in order to give a sense of the time and clime of the first version. Like Couchman, the first translator of the novel, we would also like to say, '… the translation follows the original as closely as possible, even at the risk of occasional stiffness….', but with a difference. Where he sounds apologetic, we hope, we do not. For, we wish to affirm the use of literality as a potent technique of resisting the homogenising power of English that tends to erase cultural difference.

Every age chooses and translates the texts it needs for its own purposes. We have embarked on this project as *Indira Bai* is a significant milestone in the history of Kannada. Equally important, the novel in its English translation will add to the burgeoning wealth of the emerging field of Modern Indian Literature. It is instructive to recall Aijaz Ahmad's argument (*In Theory,* 1990) that the category of 'Indian Literature' becomes possible today only through translations into English; however, the Honourable Home Minister might rule differently on the issue. Our hope is that this translation of Indira Bai, a small step in opening up the Kannada world of 19th century to a pan-Indian readership, will lead to strengthening the field of Modern Indian Literature (in contrast to *Indian Writing in English,* an allied field constituting a different thematic and problematique) and provoking debate and dissent on issues that mark our post-coloniality — region and nation, tradition and modernity, gender, caste, and community, along with the complex, intersectional thrust of our self-fashioning in a globalised world.

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