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IIAS REVIEW

Theme

Modernity and Marginality

Interview and Responses

Interview with Gyanendra Pandey

Aditya Pratap Deo

Dalit Studies and the Figure of the "Subaltern" in Kerala

Sanal Mohan

Googling Caste in Hindi Cinema

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Writing a Rohingya History

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History of Burdens: Kashmiri Migrant Labour in Shimla

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Reason(s), Culture and Civilization

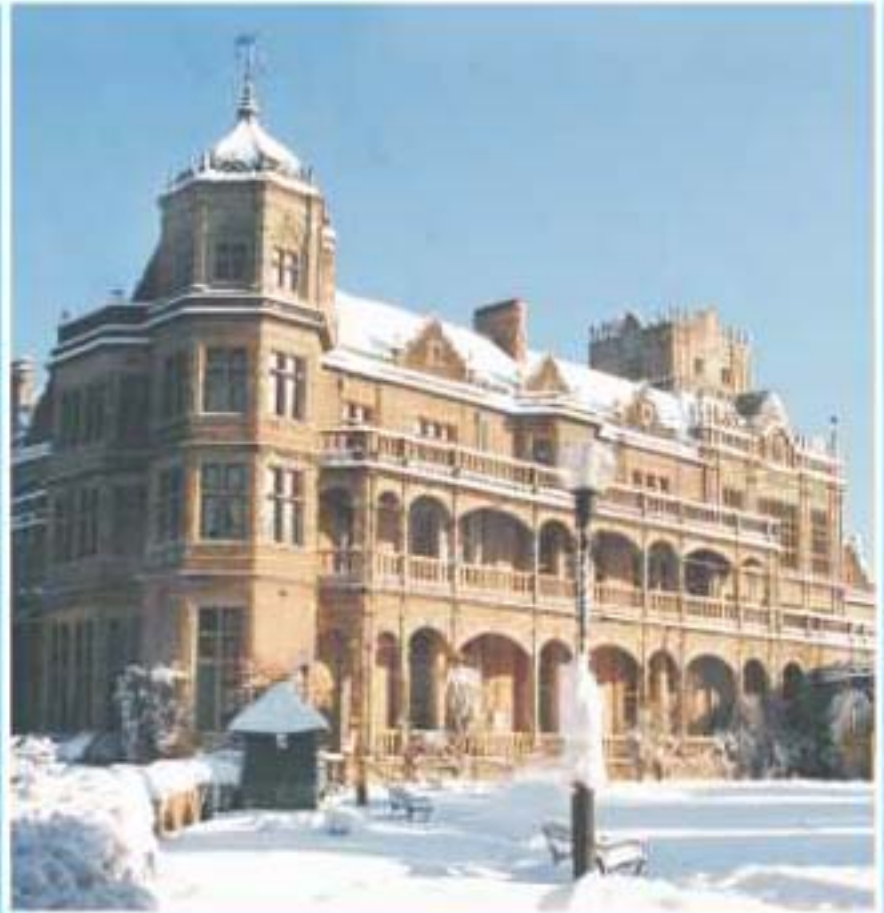
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Tribes and States

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Urban Aesthetics and Power

Matthew Varghese



Vol. XXII, No. 2 (Winter 2016)

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Summerhill

IIAS Review
Vol. XXII, No. 2 (Winter 2016)
ISSN: 0972-1452

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Subscription	
Single Issue	Rs. 50.00
Annual (Two Issues)	Rs. 100.00
Three Years (Six Issues)	Rs. 250.00

All correspondence regarding
manuscripts, subscription, etc.
may be addressed to:

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Note from the Editor

Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.

—Charles Baudelaire

The theme of this issue is *Modernity and Marginality*. The first of these terms ‘modernity’ is protean, as versatile as it is common. Along with its affiliates – multiple modernity, counter-modernity, post-modernity, etc. – it comprises a conspectus of ideas that represent arguably one of the most fundamental struggles concerning the visions for our world. Its dominant understanding, as a condition of time and an aspiration of life, constitutes a view of the world which has spawned myriad marginalities. And hence our second term, ‘marginality’, which, though definitionally less fraught, is nevertheless quite open-ended and capacious, requiring us to constantly attend to the experiences of alienation that emerge at the ever-fragmenting edges of our societies.

A word from Late Middle English, the root ‘modern’ is derived, through Late Latin ‘modernus’, from Latin ‘modo’ or *just now* (OED). From this, I believe that modernity is most originally and inclusively available as an idea that describes the here and now of our world, and the almost endlessly diverse and contingent ways in which we envision and live our lives. Opposed to this conception are ranged historically powerful forces that take an exclusivist view of our shared destinies, and use the idea of modernity to marginalize subjectivities and aspirations that are not in sync with their position.

In this volume, we are interested in the ways in which the experiences of marginality within hegemonic discourses of modernity in history and other imbricated epistemic practices, and the realities that they represent and inform, are produced, negotiated and contested. The disciplinary practice of history, where the dominant idea of modernity as a temporality is centrally inherent and thus constitutive of its many alterities, serves as an entry point for our discussions but does not limit them. The interview, essays and reviews cover a wide spectrum

of necessarily inter-disciplinary possibilities around the question at hand.

The volume opens with an interview with eminent historian and anthropologist Gyanendra Pandey, currently Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor at Emory University. A founder member of the Subaltern Studies collective, whose intervention marked a critical point in the Humanities and Social Sciences scholarship on South Asia, and if I may add, to some extent the Global South, Pandey’s large and significant body of writings has at one level been fundamentally concerned with the relationship between modernity and marginality. Several of Pandey’s works, including *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1990), *Remembering Partition* (2001), *Routine Violence* (2006) and *A History of Prejudice* (2013), have problematized and challenged our understanding of history, representation, politics, democracy and citizenship within the framework posited here. Immensely topical and always thought-provoking, uncovering deep connections in seemingly disparate phenomena, and relentlessly opening new doors for the critique of power and for dialogue across cultures, Pandey’s writing has always forced us to rethink our assumptions about ourselves and the human condition in general. Here, Pandey answers a range of questions concerning, among other things, the Subaltern Studies project, the state of South Asian historiography, the craft of the historian, the movement and direction of his work and the present conjunctures in the world. He identifies the ‘qualifications for and pre-conditions of modernity’ as the key question still insistently engaging historians of South Asia, and by extension that of the Global South.

In his response to Pandey, but more correctly to Subaltern Studies, Sanal Mohan looks at the ways in which, in the context of the reception or otherwise of Subaltern Studies in Kerala, academic influences travel, connect, get creatively read and re-read, and are woven into the web of scholarship we are all a part of.

In this process, theoretical adaptations have unintended consequences and produce surprising twists in the tale, as it were. In another response, Ravikant remembers his experience of the entry of Subaltern Studies in University curricula and discussions; and in his innovative mining of film archives from the internet in the context of the caste question, shows us the exciting journeys scholars undertake.

The essays that follow these responses are all in one way or another concerned with the manner in which dominant modernities of knowledge, identity and personhood are engaged by their consequent marginalities. Located in the interstices of recognized disciplines, even if contextualized with strong historical backgrounds, the essays are as much an interrogation of accepted epistemic boundaries and lethargies as the subjects they concern themselves with are seized of their dilemmas and predicaments.

In her essay 'The Intersecting Triad: the Man, the Snake and the State', K. P. Girija looks at three moments in the colonial and recent history of the medicinal knowledge-practice of *vishavaidyam* or toxicology in Kerala where 'modern' attitudes, knowledge frameworks and regulatory systems have sought to control a variegated, flexible, nuanced and open set of practices concerning the treatment of poison to its near-extinction. Collecting vignettes from colonial writings, vernacular literature and related readings of geography, Tathagata Dutta attempts a 'pre-history' of the Rohingyas, peeling away the layers of colonial and post-colonial (re)constructions of a beleaguered people's otherness. In her thick and complex analysis of two paintings of a pilgrim artist at the Gond shrines and fairs of central India, Mayuri Patankar examines the interwoven world of Gond iconography and popular literature to study a marginalized community's self-fashioning and assertion around the idea of a homeland. Abhinaya Harigovind's ethnography of the life and travails of Kashmiri labourers in present-day Shimla delves into the history of colonial labour, the later regimes of marking and invisibilising a subaltern group and its occupation, and contemporary prejudices about belonging, to bring focus to lives in the underground. In all these essays we get anxious intimations of lives made marginal to the imperious certainties of normative modernity.

The book reviews attempt to comment on writings that

deal with the questions of modernity and marginality as well, although the canvas of both the analyst and the writer is broader here. In his review of Madhu Ramnath's *Woodsmoke and Leafcups: Autobiographical Footnotes to the Anthropology of the Durwa* (2015), Budhaditya Das marks the manner in which Ramnath reverses the gaze to look at how the Durwas of Bastar make their world. In another piece, Alok Prasad points out how Badri Narayan's *Fractured Tales* (2015) has examined the fissures within Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh to show up resulting new marginalities. In her review of Mini Chandran's work on censored writers, *The Writer, The Reader and the State* (2017), Devika Sethi exposes the question of marginality to a complex reading. Martin Kämpchen draws our attention to K. L. Tuteja and Kaustav Chakraborty edited *Tagore and Nationalism* (2017), one of the few recent books on Tagore that provides a focused and topical discussion of Tagore's meditations on nationalism. In his reading of Hulas Singh's *Rise of Reason* (2016), Mayank Kumar foregrounds, like the author, the need to both challenge the Enlightenment's monopoly of reason and point out the pitfalls of taking an essentialist view of other kinds of reason, in the process joining in interrogating one of modernity's abiding fetishes. Ratnakar Tripathy's review of Bhangya Bhukya's *The Roots of the Periphery* (2017) calls attention to the book's exploration of the rich political experience of the Gonds in central India, and its attempt at demolishing the commonsense that tribal people are 'pre-political', and their struggles for political autonomy illegitimate and unreasonable. In his *Rule by Aesthetics* (2015), according to Mathew Varghese, Asher Ghertner investigates the fashioning of neo-liberal urban aesthetics and the consequent discounting of subaltern materialities and aspirations.

In the contributions to this volume, modernity emerges as a site of struggles to describe and shape our world. The vital point is that we in the academia should continue to pursue, as Pandey stresses, new archives and histories, in order that we continue to show up the irreducible hybridity of our shared time, the powerful forces that seek its reduction into the singular and universal, and the subaltern refusal to submit. Even as we do this, we need to be wary of the ways in which we could easily fall prey to new shibboleths of the eternal and the immovable that are always lurking around the corner.

ADITYA PRATAP DEO

Interview with Gyanendra Pandey

Aditya Pratap Deo, IAS

What are the main debates and issues in Indian/South Asian historiography today and to what developments in recent years are they connected?

It will help to take this question in relation to a larger one: what have been the main issues and concerns driving South Asian/Indian historiography from its early days in the 19th and 20th centuries? The answer, categorical in the colonial period and more implicit afterwards, has to do with the qualifications for and preconditions of modernity, and the need to challenge and overturn the colonialist view of India's backwardness and unpreparedness for self-government. That question survives, if in modified form: so some of the most important historiographical debates and controversies of recent decades have had to do with the potentialities of capitalist development (was there an Indian feudalism, for example), the existence of a historical consciousness and tradition of history writing, the possibility of national unity and secularism in a multi-lingual, multi-religious and caste-ridden society, and the political agency and potential of poor, and largely illiterate, peasants and workers.

I think the main debates in South Asian historiography still follow these tracks – except that they have been greatly extended, and now include long neglected and marginalized sections of the population. So today we have a great deal of research and publication on the Dalit (and more broadly, non-Brahmin) past, on women's struggles, and tribal peasant life, art and politics, to mention a few broad themes. In addition, the question of the environment has now emerged as a major focus for investigation, since this has seriously complicated the already knotty problem of 'development'.

Your question on the main debates and issues in today's historiography, then, may have a short answer: whose development, whose nation, whose history – and how is this being pursued?

How would you assess the Subaltern Studies interventions (given that from the beginning it was less

one project and more a collection of diverse questions critical of the state of historiography then) from a 21st Century perspective? What do you think are the legacies for our times of the various questions raised in the Subaltern Studies?

The answer to this question is linked to the previous one. As various commentators in Subaltern Studies and other critical writings have noted, Indian historiography has been animated by an anguished relationship to the question of modernity: what kind of modernity (nationalism, democracy, secularism, liberalism) is appropriate to a vast country like India, with its great diversity, persistent hierarchies, inequality, poverty, and the need to set these right in a changed dispensation? We have, rightly, been dissatisfied with ideas of 'modernity' that have been handed down to us, or preached by other countries; and many groups and individuals have engaged in serious and ongoing debate on the question of the social, economic and political conditions necessary to establish 'real' democracy – and opportunities for all.

The Subaltern Studies intervention was clearly part of that endeavor. It came in the wake of Naxalbari (and the peasants struggle in Vietnam and China, protests against the Vietnam War, Black struggle, women's struggle, and the student movement in Western Europe and North America). We were concerned with the question of social transformation in a predominantly peasant society, which was also shot through with caste and religious sensibilities; and the critique of statist, bourgeois and even traditional Marxist historiography followed from that.

Those questions remain, although as I've said, they have acquired dimensions and depths that the early iterations of Subaltern Studies were hardly aware of: we had a very limited understanding of gender and caste, and some relatively uncomplicated notions of recovering subaltern consciousness and agency. Much of that changed over time, as Gramsci and Foucault, and postcolonial theory and feminist writings and minority

histories, emerged as powerful interlocutors. And, at the same time, urgent questions were posed by lower caste and women's movements in India, and by struggles over minority rights, encroachment on forest people's lands, state oppression of border peoples, and so on.

Which of the criticisms directed at it do you think were significant and which missed the point completely?

The 'off the point' criticisms shouldn't detain us: that this or that contribution wasn't really History, or that it wasn't really Leftist; the point was precisely to investigate what an Indian Leftism, an Indian struggle for social, economic and cultural transformation, might consist of. The pervasiveness of 'feudality' in Indian society, incredible tolerance of hierarchy and debasement, the widespread incidence of rape and corruption, are issues we still need to confront.

I've already indicated the many areas in which the early Subaltern Studies' arguments were inadequate, and even naïve. Fortunately, contributors to the volumes were critical of themselves, and willing to take on new problems and new perspectives. Indian society and politics was showing the way to researchers and scholars, and I hope we've learned a little as our projects, and our research and writing, have matured!

How would you look back at *Construction of Communalism* from the conjunctures today?

It is interesting that you should pick on the 'Communalism' book, rather than 'Ascendancy' or 'Remembering Partition' or my later work. But that probably reflects the context of the question. The problem of what was called 'communalism' continues to bedevil us, and seems to have got worse in many ways – with communalist parties and groups coming to hold power in so many of our institutions, at so many levels.

I think one of the more useful points made in the *Construction of Communalism* was that communalism – that of Jinnah's Muslim League, or the Hindu Mahasabha, or today's BJP – was best seen as a kind of nationalism: that is where it drew much of its energy and strength. I want to make it clear that nationalism comes in many stripes: the Hindu, and Muslim, and Sikh, and (in Sri Lanka) the Buddhist version was, and is, a rather warped and exclusivist kind of nationalism, not so much looking to build a new community of interests and opportunity and hope, but rather seeking to preserve what these nationalisms call our tradition, heritage, religion, languages, 'culture', ways of life, even as they forge and insist upon ever narrower, reductionist and flattened versions of all these. That is the fundamental problem

with the identity politics – including a national identity politics – that has been a defining feature of the 20th century, and that continues to reign in the 21st. Hence, all these damaging calls for British exit from Europe (Britain for Britons – as if we know who those are), America for Americans first (not Native Americans), India for the Hindus (who's included in that category? and when?), and so on and so forth.

In my view, the critique of nationalism remains imperative: perhaps it is even more important today than it was when the *Construction of Communalism* first appeared. We need to challenge the underlying credo of nationalism: that our identities are somehow eternal, given from birth, fixed and immutable. Until we acknowledge that all communities are *constructed* (and contested), and that the struggle to form 'community' is a fundamental and ongoing part of the human endeavor, we will continue to encourage a narrow and intolerant view of visitors, strangers, immigrants and even neighbours who are not exactly like us (without bothering to ask, what is 'exactly like us', and who is 'us'?). Until we change this unhistorical but pervasive 'common sense', we are not going to be able to celebrate the richness and diversity of beliefs, practices and ways of being, that is to say, of human life.

In which directions has your own work moved in the last two decades?

You can probably answer that better than I can. As I see it, my work has always been concerned with questions of citizenship and marginalized populations, and how these have been constructed and perpetuated – often through violence of one kind or another. Over time, these investigations have led me into a more forthright consideration of the categories and concepts we work with: less well-understood concepts such as subalternity and difference, as well as apparently well-understood ones like history and the archive.

In my earlier books, I looked at peasant involvement in the national movement, at the category and consequences of communalism, and the meaning and fallout of Partition. I was working on various aspects of the history of Dalit struggle when I moved to the United States in 1998. With that move, I extended my investigation of marginality and citizenship, and history-writing and its assumed archive, to the history of the US along with that of India. It seemed important to me to engage seriously with the history and politics of the society and people I now lived among, and not focus exclusively on the history and politics (and the making of a revolution) 8000 miles away. That is what led to my *History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and Difference in India and the United States*. And I at least have learned a

great deal from juxtaposing these very different histories, which of course crisscross, interconnect and share many common challenges in this age of 'globalization' and 'human rights'.

What has been your experience in your effort to dialogue, from a South Asian History vantage, with historians and histories engaged with questions concerning the marginalized in the US?

Well, the first thing we learn is what we have long known – that people in the more advanced capitalist societies of the West, the erstwhile First World, know much less about the rest of the world than the rest of the world knows about them. But we also learn, as I said in response to your last question, that our own knowledge of the West tends to be fairly un-nuanced, and often superficial: for example, we don't allow for the many Americas, and the people in many different conditions, and the many different kinds of struggle even within America, that go into the making of an 'America' that is, fortunately, still acknowledged to be changing and open to debate.

Among the first questions I heard from historians of the US when they engaged with Subaltern Studies and other South Asian scholarship was the following: 'Why should we use the word 'subaltern'? What would we gain from it?' My answer was that there was no call upon anyone, in India or the US or anywhere else, to use the word at all, but that the query itself gave rise to a more interesting question. Why had South Asian scholars felt the need for an umbrella category like 'subaltern' (or, earlier, the revolutionary working class and peasantry), while historians of the US felt satisfied doing the same kind of work on marginalized and subordinated populations under discrete labels such as labour history, Black history, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and so on? That divergence, it seems to me, has something to do with inherited social and political conditions, including the strength of 'local' democracy in the USA, and inherited traditions of organizing and writing history in the two countries. And, perhaps most importantly, it says something about the greater and lesser comfort that critics and scholars in the two lands have with the 'modernity' and 'democracy' they have inherited.

In any event, the juxtaposition of very different kinds of historical experiences and political struggles, even as they respond to similar national and global, 'religious' and rationalist, challenges and demands, seems to open up many new questions about our own histories and struggles (and our own blind spots).

You recently organized a conference on the state of democracy. What were the key issues you focused on

and what was the general drift of discussions there?

The context for the conference is clear: the ascendancy of right-wing chauvinist and authoritarian tendencies in many countries throughout the world, the trust that large numbers of people (in India, the USA, Russia, Turkey...) seem willing to place in 'strongmen' who promise to deliver – or recover – 'greatness', and the reduction of 'democracy' in so many places to nothing but the holding of a 'relatively free and fair election' – whatever the bribery and corruption and money involved in swinging the results. The discussions had to do with the emergence and shameless acceptance of the growing divide between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent, the chauvinism and fear-mongering and religious rhetoric that is used to back it up, and the problems of organizing resistance to these tendencies. An underlying aspect of the discussion was the issue of how populations are increasingly distributed and classified in cities and countries across the world – what I have called 'segregation versus democracy' in a recent essay – and whether our frames and terms of analysis are adequate to these newly emerging conditions.

How may one revisit the figure of the historian and the craft of history in the context of present-day challenges?

It seems to me that critical historians have already been doing this for a long time now – thinking through the terms of analysis, chronological divisions, received ideas and beliefs about the pattern of world history (of which Europe was the unchallenged model), and received notions of the archive. They continue to challenge the inherited common sense of what was called History through close investigation of multiple and varied histories, with multiple and varied and not always obvious 'archives' – histories that were long denied the status of history, and archives denied the status of archive.

The new challenge today, or the much increased challenge, comes from the greatly expanded hold of the market and of anti-intellectualism. Fewer and fewer publishers want any history that isn't written in a straightforward narrative style, written in English, and written for the lowest common denominator – the people who travel through airport lounges, fancy malls and (though this seems less important now) railway stations. And fewer and fewer people believe that there is any need to read books, especially serious, 'academic' books. That is a considerable challenge: but critical histories have always been minority histories: that 'minority' may take on additional dimensions today, but minority histories will continue to be written – and they may yet contribute, in small ways, to changing the world.

Response: Dalit Studies and the Figure of the 'Subaltern' in Kerala

Sanal Mohan, *Mahatma Gandhi University (Kerala)*

Critical history writing, as Gyanendra Pandey says in his interview, as 'minority history' writing, will continue to be there, contributing to, as he observes further, 'in small ways changing the world'. I consider this optimism of a historian/social scientist very important in our times.

Having lived for the most part of my life in Kerala, teaching in a state university, I have observed the ways in which concepts and categories of critical history-writing travelled across the academia from the metropolis down to the small towns and provincial universities where a certain kind of translation of concepts and categories took place. There must also have been a travelling back of vernacular concepts and categories, though I am not in a position to provide the routes of such an intellectual traffic. Therefore, I wish to restrict my part here to an engagement with the central issues raised by Pandey.

Unlike prominent academic institutions in many parts of India, where radical historians and social scientists worked through the categories opened up by Subaltern Studies, the academic institutions in Kerala did not see a comparable intellectual response. As I have argued elsewhere, in the early 1990s small groups of Dalit activists including college teachers formed collectives that referred to themselves as Subaltern Studies groups and had discussions and seminars oriented mostly towards problematizing Dalit history and political-economic questions that had a bearing on Dalit life. Interestingly, this engagement with Dalit history happened much before Subaltern Studies historians themselves started moving towards problematizing caste questions or Dalit history, as Pandey mentions.

The period I am referring to here is 1993-95, when a small NGO, Dalit Women's Society, in the village of Kurichy near Kottayam in Kerala, began conducting discussion on Subaltern Studies. The person who led the study group was T. M. Yesudasan, a much respected scholar of English Literature (teaching at C. M. S. College, Kottayam), who knew very well the nuances of the Subaltern

Studies project as it had evolved in South Asian history writing, and seemed to have accepted the term 'subaltern' as a generic term describing the condition of Dalits. In the Malayalam vernacular context, the term 'subaltern' is translated as *Keezhalar*, which is not a term that would be used by any other social group or class, including the working class, as a self-referential term. However, it was acceptable to Dalits as a self-referential term.

Although I am not arguing that there was a misrecognition of the term 'subaltern' in the vernacular context of Malayalam, the identification of 'subaltern' with *Keezhalar* was the direct result of the above-mentioned Dalit intellectual group's seizure and productive use of the critical category of 'subaltern', perhaps much to the amazement of the original Subaltern Studies collective. I reiterate this particular example to show the significance of the vernacular translation of the concept of 'subaltern', which was in fact very powerful in providing a new imagination to the Dalit activists although it was a small group. The simultaneity of the social time inhabited by the Subaltern Studies scholarship and the Dalit intellectual endeavors in Kerala was never recognized properly in the wider academic world as most of the articulations were in Malayalam. This is an instance of a metropolitan idea, reworked by local groups, not quite traveling back to the metropole.

In Kerala, for most of the 1980s and 1990s, Subaltern Studies remained a historians' forte, on a few occasions traversed by an occasional economist. Even here, the concern came from an engagement with the tribal question as raised by M. Kunhaman, who published some of his books as Subaltern Studies publication. Of course, the tribal questions were part of the original project of the Subaltern Studies collective. It was only in the late 2000s that a collection of essays from Subaltern Studies was translated and published in Malayalam, edited by Susie Tharu and S. Sanjeev, and was supported by many feminist and progressive academics in Kerala.

In many ways then, I think the vernacular translation of the term 'subaltern' in Kerala was the handiwork of the natural ally of the wider intent of Subaltern Studies – Dalits. I am not sure at the moment how far that intellectual project was carried forward. I think certain elements of it can be seen in the critical booklet by T. M. Yesudasan titled in Malayalam *A Prologue to Dalit Studies*, published in 1993 by Dalit Women's Society, which was translated into English by the author himself and included in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India, Dossier 1* (edited by Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana, 2011). I have given this example here to show the manner in which, outside the formal academic context, the idea of the 'subaltern' had a very interesting circulation and acceptance in Kerala. We find a certain kind of intellectual engagement here, although in a very small way, towards what Pandey refers to as 'changing our world' through history and critical social sciences.

In history writing today, following the debates unleashed by the ascendancy of Subaltern Studies, we come across distinct genres of history and social science writings that may be referred to as Dalit histories or Dalit Studies. Though this corpus is not as organized as Subaltern Studies, it happens in multiple locations, and different people and institutions are involved in it both in India and abroad. In the last few years, there have been a number of books published by international publishers and reputed university presses under titles varying from 'Dalit Literatures of India' to 'Dalit Studies', among others. What I want to suggest is that these genres of history or critical social sciences and humanities try to carry forward the academic agendas that were not central to Subaltern Studies originally but intimated therein.

Here, I am not trying to build a connection between the various projects of Dalit Studies and Subaltern Studies. However, my aim is to show that within these kinds of academic endeavors, there are real efforts to foster radical inquiries that problematize the official ideologies of the Indian state or its nationalism, with a distinct optic all of its own. This would refer to the fact that through the exploration of the 'Pariah problem', slavery, new modes of literary expressions and the critique of aesthetic canons, and the imbrications of caste and gender, our understanding of the old problem of dominance and subordination becomes much more profound and nuanced. The analysis of modernity becomes much more complex, as in the current situation, where scholarship is trying to understand the problem of dominance/subordination in multiple locations, and explore the manner in which communities and peoples are trying to appropriate and transform elements of colonial modernity (as in the case of Dalits in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). This I think is very different from the manner

in which Dalits have been thought of and written about in different historiographies including Subaltern Studies.

For example, there is a curious way in which the problems of race and caste being talked about generally get problematized in the struggles of Dalits in various parts of Kerala. In fact, this has a long history. It begins with the Anglican missionaries in the early 20th century instructing the Pulayyas with the translation of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* as a text for self-improvement. The connecting link here is slavery in the US and caste slavery in Kerala. We find throughout the mid-19th century, through the early decades of the twentieth century, anti-slavery journals carrying writings on slavery in Kerala; and after abolition, we read about the conditions of the emancipated slaves. Most of such writings compared the condition of slaves in Kerala with that of the slaves in the US. In the twentieth century, in whatever little has survived as printed materials produced by Dalit movements in Kerala, we come across articles on the problems of African Americans. The spirit of the American Civil Rights Movement had reached the Dalit communities in Kerala, who on many occasions named the venues of their meetings in small towns and villages in Kerala after Martin Luther King Jr. I still remember hearing the slogans shouted by Dalit Christians in Kerala that coupled the names of King Jr. and Ambedkar.

A much more serious and sophisticated engagement with the radical currents in the US is seen in the 1980s initiatives in translating the theological text *The God of Oppressed* by James Cone into Malayalam. This was the period of the struggle of Dalit Christians in Kottayam within the Central Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India. James Cone was invited to Kottayam to address the people. One may also record here the influence of Black theology and Liberation theology on Dalit Christian activists in Kerala.

I write of these instances to show that there was an interesting identification of Dalit problems in Kerala and the problems of the African Americans in the US as understood by Dalits, however imperfect their understanding might have been. This is not to say that such efforts were the precursors to the Subaltern historians' engagement with the questions of race and marginality in the US. What I am arguing is that for a variety of reasons specific to Kerala, we notice here a very interesting identification with radical thinking among the African Americans.

Today, when we think about history writing, it is possible to think about a variety of experiences that were not problematized in the genre of Subaltern historiography. However, in Indian history or critical social sciences and humanities, Subaltern Studies offered a radical alternative and that I believe has been path breaking.

Response: Googling Caste in Hindi Cinema: Preliminary Comments

Ravikant, *Centre for the Study of Developing Societies*

Those questions remain, although as I have said, they have acquired dimensions and depths that the early iterations of Subaltern Studies were hardly aware of: we had a very limited understanding of gender and caste...Much of that changed over time, as Gramsci and Foucault, and postcolonial theory and feminist writings and minority histories, emerged as powerful interlocutors – and, at the same time, urgent questions were posed by lower caste and women’s movements in India, and by struggles over minority rights, encroachment on forest people’s lands, state oppression of border peoples, and so on.

Gyanendra Pandey (See Interview)

Shailendra is the most popular Harijan poet after Sant Ravidas.

Jagjivan Ram

Preface

Reading and later teaching graduate and post-graduate courses on global and Indian history, designed mostly in the Marxist-nationalist vein, in the late 1980s and early 90s in Delhi University (DU), was a formidable experience. Some of our naturally committed college teachers and an excellent peer group helped us negotiate what seemed like an endless forest of classic texts covering the entire chronology of human history from the origins of life to the emergence of modernity, touching upon all the major historiographical debates about ancient civilisations, modes of production, socio-economic transitions, cultural-intellectual currents and modern political revolutions. A generous diet of Western history was counterbalanced by a couple of yearlong courses on Asian history and a sumptuous palette on Indian history. Within this curriculum, Modern Indian history stood out as the most happening area, since the Subaltern Studies project had already arrived with a bang, shaking the very foundations of the received modes of history writing.

The History Department in DU had three proponents of this new, non-elitist mode of history writing: Sumit Sarkar, Shahid Amin and Gyan Pandey were already

looked upon by students as inspiring stars, so much so that we did not feel the need to look beyond, not even towards the highly reputed Centre for Historical Studies in JNU. In our enchanted classrooms, we felt privileged to meet in flesh and blood the haloed authors of *Modern India*, *Ascendancy of Congress in UP*, ‘Gandhi as Mahatma’, and such other essays in SS volumes that kept appearing at regular intervals. There were plenty of detractors of the Subaltern Studies in the university and beyond to be sure, but their active distractions were no match to our intellectual enthusiasm, fired equally by post-modernist and feminist readings, coupled with discussions about the brilliant works by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakravarty, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, David Arnold and David Hardiman, in the classes and over multiple cups of tea in the Arts Faculty or Teen Murti Library. Those were also the ‘Mandal-kamandal’ days, and the choice of our research topics was very much shaped by the urge to get a handle on the genealogies of some of the urgent questions around caste and religion. Gyan had taught us a theoretically comprehensive course on nationalism, while Sumit introduced us to such exciting texts on the cultural and intellectual history of Early Modern Europe as *The Cheese and the Worms* and *The Name of the Rose* in M. A. Previous, so that opting for Modern Indian history in the Final appeared natural. Some of us went for Gyan’s newly minted course on Communalism where we were absolutely exhilarated to learn that what he taught in *our* class was going to come out as a book, an utterly topical treatise that was to become an instant hit.

It would perhaps be wrong to say that he ‘taught’ us, for neither the teacher nor the taught ever got this sense. Almost invariably, it was more of a collective discussion that he staged by eliciting and paraphrasing our raw outpourings in such elegant and profound terms that we were thrilled with disbelief at ‘our own thoughts’! Unencumbered by fashionable jargons and frozen wisdom in the readings, his class was above all a breezy,

informal, even irreverent, rhizomatic deconstruction that encouraged critical reflexivity and self-worth among early researchers. Together with the excitement generated in the M. A. and M. Phil. classes (Sunil Kumar was a find for 'Modernists' like us), and the fact that Rahi Masoom Raza's *Adha Gaon* was a part of the suggested readings, I decided to write my dissertation on the defining event of the partition on the basis of some of the best Hindi-Urdu fiction on the subject, including this classic novel. This literary encounter with history was as traumatically rich an experience as it was a pleasure to finally present one's findings to Gyan, a non-intrusive supervisor, who was then on his way to the US from where he published his *Remembering Partition*. However, the decisive impact on my early work was created by his SS essay 'Prose of Otherness'. I too left DU to join Sarai-CSDS to pursue an altogether different trajectory linked to Indic language computing. Gyan went on to bring in caste, race and gender into his research agenda, but I must confess I have not been able to keep up beyond what he published in the mid-90s.

Introduction

This essay is a preliminary result – not comprehensive at all, which we normally associate with 'google search' – of a social historian's search for 'caste' in the YouTube film archive of popular Hindi cinema. It must be obvious to any film buff that YouTube has opened veritable floodgates of film content hitherto unknown, unseen and uncared for. Using this burgeoning wealth, the essay questions the oft-repeated observation that Hindi cinema bypassed the question of caste and argues instead that a particular tendency towards canon-formation based on a limited number of 'classic' films by certain auteurs has prevented us from looking at the richness of filmic engagement with caste. Also, I think the commentators discussing caste names or indeed their absence in the names of lead characters miss a lot of other such socially significant signifiers as profession, dress, *tilak* (a coloured mark worn on the forehead), posture, conversation and so on, where caste is visually inscribed on the body, work and location of individual characters. A number of surprises await the historian in this popular archive and we will pick out some obscure films and songs to underline the depth of this engagement. The narrative presented here is not a linear one, and I feel *Didi* (1959, Dir. K. Narayan Kale) offers a wonderful point of departure, not the least because it takes the nationalist pedagogy of the 1950s into a school classroom and examines the fragments and fissures in it. I also wish to suggest that these 'Hindu Socials' which may now be legitimately treated as 'social-historical' do not only belong to the times they were produced and

watched in for the first time, but are very much part of the living archive of YouTube, where contemporary caste and other identity battles are still being sorted out in the 'comments' arena.

Didi: Caste in the School

That *Didi* is a self-conscious project aligned with the agenda of the nation at its extended 'moment of arrival' is obvious from its dedication. It says: 'This picture is humbly dedicated to all those who have striven and are striving for the creation of a New and Prosperous India'.¹ Gopal (Sunil Dutt), a dynamic scion of a reasonably wealthy household, double M. A., Ph. D., chooses to be a teacher in a school to train the collective 'future of the country', a clichéd euphemism for children. He extols the virtues of science after showing a contemporary American newsreel showcasing the launch of the US spacecraft, Pioneer I, in 1958. When his students ask for holiday homework, he asks them to write whatever they want to about the film they have seen. He stakes all of his and his widowed mother's wealth for the engineering experiment his friend (Feroze Khan) has begun for manufacturing steel. The husband of his very dear elder sister, an engineer, is quite skeptical of Gopal's idealism, and brands him 'a crack'. On the engineer's inspection tour of an industrial unit owned by an illiterate person, Lala Daulat Ram (Om Prakash), very much invested in steel production as a profitable enterprise, we are introduced to the industrialist's daughter, Radha (Shubha Khote), who teaches in a girls' school. Everybody thinks that Gopal would be happy to marry a fellow-traveler like her, which he does eventually after several separation songs and a few inevitable melodramatic twists.

It is clear that the film is a social narrative on the challenges of implementing the Gandhian-Nehruvian vision on the ground. The film embraces many significant parts of that vision which was aimed at achieving national prosperity and scientific progress, but also equally at tackling social issues such as dowry (Gopal refuses to be 'bought' by Daulat Ram), women's education and empowerment (as a role-reversed punishment for mischief, Gopal ordains that boys cook for girls, and girls play football for two hours in the blazing afternoon sun), and of course caste inequalities. Contributing to but also standing apart from the main narrative, Sahir Ludhianvi's two progressive songs in the film sought to address a number of these problems. The *mise-en-scène* of the first one is as follows: a famous image of Gandhi and Nehru in consultation presides over proceedings in a class room, and a map of India hangs in the front corner. The pupils have a series of tough questions for their teacher, who is

also their favourite, and expect him to answer in verse. So this is how it goes²:

Children (in relayed voices):

हमने सुना था एक है भारत, सब मुल्को से नेक है भारत
लेकिन जब नज़दीक से देखा, सोच समझ कर ठीक से देखा
हमने नक्शे और ही पाए, बदले हुए सब तौर ही पाए
एक से एक की बात जुदा है, धर्म जुदा है, जात जुदा है
आपने जो कुछ हमको पढ़ाया वो तो कहीं भी नज़र न आया !

*(We were told India is one and the noblest of all nations
On closer scrutiny however, we see an utterly disquieting
picture*

*Each is on its own, whether as caste or community
Whatever you taught us, teacher, is far from the ground reality)*

The children feel that the idealized portrait of a gentle and united India painted by their teacher was out of sync with the naked reality of disunity and disaffection in the name of religion and caste. The real India was neither 'ek' (one) nor 'nek' (good)! The teacher defends his past lessons by nuancing both 'unity' and 'difference' and makes a case for linguistic, caste and religious diversity in the nation.

Gopal:

जो कुछ मैंने तुमको पढ़ाया, उसमें कुछ भी झूठ नहीं
भाषा से भाषा न मिले तो इसका मतलब फूट नहीं
इक डाली पर रह कर जैसे फूल जुदा है पात जुदा
बुरा नहीं गर यूँ ही वतन में धर्म जुदा हो जात जुदा
अपने वतन में . . .

*(Nothing untrue in what I taught you
Linguistic differences do not amount to disunity
A leaf and a flower on the same tree are not the same
So there is nothing wrong if a country has different religions
and castes)*

But the children remain unconvinced, and they underline the ubiquity of discordant hullabaloo and even bloodbath in the name of religion, even though the founding holy texts like the Vedas and the Quran are propounding practically the same principles:

Children:

वही है जब कुर'आन का कहना, जो है वेद पुराण का कहना
फिर ये शोर-शराबा क्यों है, इतना खून-खराबा क्यों है?
अपने वतन में . . .

*(If the Quran and Veda/Puranas say the same thing
Why is there so much din, so much bloodshed?)*

The teacher takes recourse to a familiar excuse: the policy of 'divide and rule' as the gift of colonial masters to gullible Indians.

Gopal:

सदियों तक इस देश में बच्चों रही हुकूमत गैरों की
अभी तलक हम सब के मुँह पर धूल है उनके पैरों की
लड़वाओ और राज करो ये उन लोगों की हिकमत थी
उन लोगों की चाल में आना हम लोगों की जिल्लत थी
ये जो बैर है एक-दूजे से ये जो फूट और रंजिश है
उन्हीं विदेशी आकाओं की सोची-समझी बख्शिश है
अपने वतन में . . .

*(Foreigners ruled over this country for centuries
And our face is still covered with the dust of their feet
Divide and rule was their time-tested device
And falling into their trap proved our undoing
The mutual distrust and discord that you see around
Is but a parting gift of the foreigner masters)*

We are aware that this was an oft-deployed nationalist trope for explaining away communalism, but Sahir's children shift gears to point to inequalities stemming from birth, pointing to the glaring social hierarchy between the Brahmins and the Harijans, asking why humans are born in one caste or the other, and indeed, why do they get frozen in them.

Children:

कुछ इंसान बरहमन क्यों हैं?
कुछ इंसान हरिजन क्यों हैं?
एक की इतनी इज्जत क्यों है?
एक की इतनी जिल्लत क्यों है?

*(Why are some people Brahmin?
And others Harijan?
Why is one so venerated?
While the other is humiliated?)*

In response, Sahir's teacher delves into the indigenous discursive traditions:

Gopal:

धन और ज्ञान को ताक़त वालों ने अपनी जागीर कहा
मेहनत और गुलामी को कमज़ोरों की तक़दीर कहा
इंसानों का ये बटवारा वहशत और जहालत है
जो नफ़रत की शिक्षा दे वो धर्म नहीं है लानत है
जनम से कोई नीच नहीं है जनम से कोई महान नहीं
करम से बढ़कर किसी मनुष्य की, कोई भी पहचान नहीं

(The powerful have always claimed monopoly over riches and knowledge

While hard manual work and slavery were designated as the fate of the weak

This division of humanity is nothing short of barbarism and foolishness

And the religion that preaches hatred is nothing but a curse

Nobody is low or high by birth

None should have an identity other than their deeds)

Gopal now draws attention to the historical constructions, and hegemonic monopoly, of the rich over power and knowledge, a mythical-ideological device that indexed drudgery and 'slavery' as the eternal fate of the poor. Further, according to him, any religion that preaches hatred is a bane. He then questions the divisive identities ascribed and frozen by birth, and valorises human work and its dignity instead.

Children:

अब तो देश में आजादी है, अब क्यों जनता फरियादी है? ?

कब जाएगा दौर पुराना, कब आएगा नया ज़माना?

(Why do people continue to beg for their rights even after we have become free?

When shall we see the dawn of the much-promised New Age)

The question now shifts to basic economics, to the lack of progress made in the post-independence period:

Gopal:

सदियों की भूख और बेकारी क्या इक दिन में जाएगी?

इस उजड़े गुलशन पर रंगत आते-आते आएगी

(The hunger and unemployment embedded in centuries will not disappear overnight

This wrecked and ravaged garden will take time to get back its natural colours)

Gopal pleads for some patience and is optimistic about the eventual fulfillment of these aspirations. The musical debate is disrupted at this point by an intrusive missive from the governing board of the school. Gopal is called in to be told by a Madan Mohan Malaviya look-alike Brahmin figure to stop his unconventional methods of teaching, in response to which he resigns, and the children witness the proceedings in dismay and return to their desks, crestfallen. Gopal continues with his optimistic sermon about the (Five Year) Plans and other foundational initiatives undertaken by the new government, and throws the ball back into the children's court. The historical injustices, starvation and

unemployment rooted in and perpetuated for centuries cannot be undone overnight, he says rhetorically, and exhorts the children to become the harbingers of the New Age. He argues that it is their duty to fill bright colours in the dull contours drawn up so far:

Gopal:

*ये जो नये मंसूबे हैं, और ये जो नई तामीरें हैं
आने वाले दौर की कुछ धुँधली-धुँधली तस्वीरें हैं
तुम ही रंग भरोगे इनमें, तुम ही इन्हें चमकाओगे
नवयुग आप नहीं आएगा, नवयुग को तुम लाओगे*

*(The new plans and foundations that you see
Are but vague imaginaries of the new dawn
You are the ones to fill colours in these
You will bring the New Age.)*

Bidding his students an emotional farewell, Gopal wishes to leave, but the students won't let him, so he promises to hold informal after-school classes for them in the Shiva temple of the village. True to his promise, he ends up tutoring them in Fine Arts, as a result of which the students win prizes at a prestigious art show. The school management, pleasantly surprised, realizes its mistake in disallowing Gopal's innovative mode of teaching, and restores him to his job at school, thus resolving an existential as well as pedagogic problem in a happy manner. Gopal's engineer friend too finally finds his chemical formula for making steel, and is able to get back the house Gopal had pawned to finance his experiments. Their sacrifices bear fruit and the lead couple finally gets reunited.

We also need to take note of the second progressive song Sahir penned for the film. It is placed just before a clumsy twist in the story wherein Gopal is bitten by a snake and is hospitalized in an unconscious state, swinging between life and death. Just before the snakebite, the two groups of students, one of boys and the other of girls, led by their teachers, converge at a picnic spot by sheer coincidence. The ball kicked by the boys falls into the flour the girls were to make *rotis* (bread) from. When the boys come looking for the ball, the angry girls throw them into a water-filled pit. That is when Gopal, one of the teachers accompanying the students, pronounces the gender-reversed punishment referred to above. The hero and the heroine (a teacher with the girls) rediscover their love for each other, and they sing a song for the children which may be read as an extension of the one analysed above in detail. Here are some excerpts from the lyrics, copied from the [giitaayan®](#) transcription, which follows a particular scheme:

Gopal:

बच्चों तुम तकदीर हो कल के हिन्दुस्तान की
बापू के वरदान की नेहरू के अरमान की
बच्चों तुम तकदीर . . .

(Children, you are the fortune of tomorrow's India
Of Bapu's blessings and Nehru's aspirations)

आज के टूटे खँडहरों पर तुम कल का देश बसाओगे
जो हम लोगों से न हुआ वो तुम कर के दिखलाओगे
(तुम नन्हीं बुनियादें हो) –2 दुनिया के नए विधान की
बच्चों तुम तकदीर . . .

(You will create tomorrow's country on today's ruins
You will do what we could not possibly do
You are the little foundations of a whole new constitution of the
world)

Radha :

नारी को इस देश ने देवी कह कर दासी जाना है
जिसको कुछ अधिकार न हो वो घर की रानी माना है

(This country has called the woman a Devi, but treated her as
a slave
A queen of the house, she is left without any rights).

Both:

तुम ऐसा आदर मत लेना –2 आड़ हो जो अपमान की
बच्चों तुम तकदीर . . .

(Don't take this kind of respect, which is insult in guise)

रह न सके अब इस दुनिया में युग सरमायादारी का
तुमको झंडा लहराना है मेहनत की सरदारी का
तुम चाहो तो –2 बदल के रख दो किस्मत हर इन्सान की
बच्चों तुम तकदीर . . .

(Let the age of Capital wither away from the world
You have to unfurl the flag of the dictatorship of the proletariat
Changing every human's fate is but a mere wish away
Children, you are the fortune of tomorrow's India)

The children are once again appealed to take control of India's fate and future, but the instructive template is as onerous as it is interesting. As inheritors of Bapu's blessings and Nehru's aspirations, they must guard against the fissiparous tendencies, and set up a world free of capitalist oppression under the leadership of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Quite clearly, Sahir here got an opportunity to insert his communist political vision, echoes of which may be found in several films of the time. The most noteworthy layer in the song however,

is the penultimate stanza initiated by Asha Bhosle for Shubha Khote and joined in by Rafi for Sunil Dutt, and Sahir once again surpasses all other lyricists in his radical stance on gender: 'While deifying the woman as goddess, the country has treated her as a slave, as the queen of the household but with no rights whatsoever'. As if responding to the oft-quoted *Manusmriti* dictum *यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवता* (Gods inhabit the place where women are worshipped), Radha asks her students 'to reject such humiliation camouflaged as honour'.

To the Origins: Raja Harishchandra and the Travails of Truthfulness

Didi is not an isolated instance. Popular Hindi cinema has worn its pedagogic responsibility on its sleeves and deployed a range of arguments to attack social evils, traditional and modern. To underscore the point that the anti-caste reformist impulse was present right at the birth of Indian cinema, we only need to recall that Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), an adaptation of the Puranic tale of an upright, gift-giving king, which presented the hero as an accursed slave of a 'lowly' Chandal, placed at the bottom rung of the caste ladder as he presides over the death rituals of his own son at the cremation ghats of Varanasi.⁴ While only a few fragments of the Phalke film are available, film-makers kept returning to the tale in practically every decade of the last century, sometimes twice or even thrice. A search for *Raja Harishchandra* on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) yields more than 25 results, an honour not even the much-remade *Devdas* can lay claim to. It is beyond the scope of the essay to capture the changing contours of this accretionary tale in its long filmic itinerary, but Kshatriya king Harishchandra's tragic downfall to untouchable status does get elaborated and commented upon from a caste perspective. In the 1952 version, for example, we have this conversation between the Chandal's kind-hearted wife and the newly auctioned and acquired Harishchandra:

Lady:

तुम्हारी जाति क्या है?
(What is your caste?)

Slave:

जाति कैसी माँ, जैसा समय, वैसी जाति।
(What caste mother? It changes with time.)

Lady:

तुम्हारा नाम क्या है?
(What's your name?)

Slave:

हरिया।

(Hariya)

Lady:

ये तो भगवान का नाम है, मैं तुम्हें हरि कहूँगी।

(This is God's own name. I will call you Hari)

The element of pathos at the precipitous decline in the status of the high-caste royal family of Harsihchandra is retained in the 1952 film as well, and a recurrent theme song dwells on the mood. But the above conversation, in which the original name is suitably abbreviated to hide the true identity of the hero, is remarkable for the opportunity of detachment, and therefore mobility, that it creates. Like one's name, 'caste could change with time', was a relatively open-ended take by the hero. Both the linguistic continuum and simultaneous shift in the name of one person is rife with socio-historical meanings. The kind-hearted Brahmin mistress of Harishchandra subverts Harishchandra's realistic self-description, so much like what Gandhi did in 'Harijan', and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) too, when they invented *Vanvasi* for *Adivasi*. In real diegetic life, Hariya is made to draw numerous pitchers of water from the well; and his suspicious master banishes him from the house and reassigns him a job at the funeral ground, where Hariya remains steadfast to his duty of fee-collection, unmoved by the wailing of an inconsolable and resource-less Tara, who has to perform the last rites of their son, Rohitashva.

In a grueling contest to prove the relative power of *tapa* (meditative *bhakti*) represented by the Brahmin sage Vishvamitra, over that of demonstrable truth enshrined in the alms-giving acts of the Kshatriya king of Ayodhya, we see the former ultimately bowing down to the steely endurance demonstrated by the latter. The excessive, Manichean narrative presents Vishvamitra as arrogant and cruel. His relentless actions in piling up one misery after another on the king's family stands justified only by presenting the proceedings in the garb of a worn-out mythical motif of divinely designed public test, which becomes so unbearable that even goddess Lakshmi is compelled to intercede on behalf of Tara, Harishchandra's wife. Vishnu sends his *chakra* (spinning disc-like weapon) to keep the stone wheat grinder running when Tara collapses from exhaustion, and then the goddess herself miraculously appears, fully armed, to prevent Tara's Brahmin master (Gope) from raping her. True to his ambivalent character, the sage Narada on one hand tells Lakshmi to take pity on Tara, and simultaneously asks Vishvamitra to take the ultimate test by getting his son mortally bitten by the serpent king Vasuki. Vishvamitra

periodically asks Harishchandra to concede defeat and break his vow, but by staying true to his words, the latter denies the former moral victory and ends up a winner.

The arduous virtuosity of *tapa* is a recurrent motif in ancient Sanskrit texts, and we know from the hair-raising debate over the putative responsibility for the death of a Brahmin boy in the *Ramrajya* (literally 'the rule of Rama, meaning an ideal regime) of Valmiki's *Ramayana* that *tapa* to begin with was the monopoly of the Brahmins. We learn that the route to greatness and salvation through *tapa* was only grudgingly opened up for Kshatriyas and Vaishyas and was still not accessible to the rest of the *varnas* (social orders). Heterodox sects such as Jainism-Buddhism in early India, Bhakti-Sufi movements in medieval times and the social-reform movements in the modern period challenged the Brahmin monopoly over Shastra-sanctified knowledge and power. A gradual shift towards this-worldliness led to the erosion of the Brahmin's once unassailable authority; and the Brahmin figure that we get to see in modern cinematic narratives is hardly an enviable icon of reverence. As in fiction and Parsi theatre before, mythologies were reinterpreted for the screen to insert new sensibilities and make room for pre-Gandhian, Gandhian and even Ambedkarite critiques of the caste system. We will return to the themes of exclusion/inclusion, conflicting claims on the means of livelihood and forest resources, and conditions of service by the low-born for the high-born in our discussion of the fictional biopic of *Ramayana's* author, Valmiki, a figure who came to be deified, and identified with, by castes responsible for cleaning up the fecal mess created by all castes, day after day, for centuries. The abiding popularity of the Harishchandra story with the filmmakers is as much a tribute to the ideal of truthfulness as it underlines a vision of social transcendence beyond immutable caste boundaries.

In another Phalke film, *Shri Krishna Janma* (1918), the available fragments of which have been brilliantly analysed by Ravi Vasudevan, we see five family units as representatives of the four *varnas* trooping to Lord Vishnu to pay their respects and offerings, one after another, separated by inter-titles, and the Lord blesses them indiscriminately. In the end, as they all come back as a crowd, Vishnu exhorts each one 'to abandon their diverse faiths and come under His protective umbrella': सर्व धर्मान् परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं ब्रज. Another inter-title appears soon after: बहवो ज्ञानतपसपूता मत्भावमागता (O various sons of knowledge and *tapa*, come and become (like) me). In Ravi Vasudevan's delicate reading of the sequence, the broom held high by the Shudra male 'sways in the frame, as if involuntarily disclosing the tension within this composition'.⁵ Elaborating further, Vasudevan writes:

Above all, we need to hold on to the particular imaginary virtuosity, and indeed virtuality, of cinematic fiction: the way an immaterial world of light and shadow can figure forth an image condensing the social world, while holding onto all the iconographies of difference and hierarchy within that frame. The frame of Hindu society is filled to the edges, ready to burst, and the broom that swirls suggests a tangential, centrifugal impetus, underlining the apparently impossible perceptual logistics of maintaining a centripetal orientation for the spectator.⁶

The 'caste problem' continued to destabilise the virtual cinematic frame, both popular and experimental. The steady rise of the social film from the mid-1930s displaced the mythological genre to some extent, mediated as it was by several biopics of Bhakti poets belonging to medieval India, poets whose non-Brahmanical birth, non-sectarian life and egalitarian work embodied a critique of the caste system. In the modern socials as exemplars of genre-mixing, we once again see the *bhajans* (devotional songs) emerging as the space for complaint to gods by offering pathos-laden critiques of adversities caused by the upper caste rich and powerful. Temples as the material space for Hindu prayers remained relatively closed even after pro-untouchable legislation in Independent India, but popular cinema fantasied the end of such discrimination quite early on. Much is still made of eating together as a political gesture of outreach to the Dalits, but such issues were dealt without much ado on the screen. Taking its cue from the long-term literary memory and performance practices, Hindi cinema continued its campaign against the inhumanity of the caste system. In the remaining part of the essay, my analysis will zoom in on some of the obscure social films produced between 1930s and 1940s.

Maharshi⁷ Valmiki: Another Biography of the Pioneer Poet

Given that only a few films can be discussed in detail here, let us begin with *Maharshi Valmiki* (1946)⁸, a wonderful instance of a devotional genre in which the received biography of Sanskrit's *adikavi*, first poet, was re-fashioned as a socio-economic conflict over ways of living and control of natural resources between the civilised Aryas and the forest-dwelling tribals (I use the term *adivasi* here). It is not so much of an intellectual journey, but a closer look at Ratna's (later to be Valmiki) life, torn between Aryan rituals and his non-Aryan community habitat. His own community hates the incursion and infringement that the Aryan ashram, and its non-violent *yagya* (oblation ritual) have caused. The violent conflict in the middle is preceded by a discussion of important moral issues about divergent food habits and primary ownership of nature's bounty. Ratna is brought to the correct path of *tapa*, the successful completion of which enables him to write the *Ramayana*. The denouement is

familiar, but a striking biographical twist is provided by the fact that Ratna is not presented as a ruthless fugitive from the inception: he becomes one under circumstances that he believes are created by the Aryas. Directed by Bhal G. Pendharkar, the film remarkably credits 'all the workers of Prabhakar Pictures' as producers, and has Shanta Apte (Bijli), Prithiviraj Kapoor (Ratna) in the lead, and Raj Kapoor in a brief role of Narada, whose sermon accomplishes the task of conversion of Ratna into Valmiki.

The film begins with a panoramic shot of the snow-clad Himalayas, from where the camera descends on an ashram in a forest where its Kulpati (head, played by Baburao Pendharkar) leads his disciples to the morning class amidst recitation of Vedic mantras. He tells them to impart the principles of the great Aryan dharma to the non-Aryas in the neighbourhood. We also get a glimpse of his grown up daughter, Sandhya, feeding the deer and a few birds. The king's messenger arrives with a request to perform a *shanti yagya* (oblation for peace), to which Kulpati agrees, with the condition that no killings be allowed till the *yagya* lasts.

The next sequence has *adivasi* Bijli standing on a tree singing a song with her mates. It is a song in praise of their natural habitat, community solidarity, peace and aspirations, and it also establishes her as the voice/leader of the community. The *adivasis* are all wearing minimalistic attires made from animal skin. In comes Ratna, a member of the community but also a devotee of the Aryan dharma, who lends his manual services to the ashram people, for which he becomes the target of scorn for his community. It seems that Ratna is a lonely figure, almost an outcast, for his unconditional, almost slavish, allegiance to the Aryas. The king's messenger comes to the *adivasis* with the order of observing non-violence during the *yagya*, but Bijli is defiant: 'What shall we eat, if we do not kill?' The messenger threatens them with dire consequences. She lets them know that the Aryas are unwanted outsiders imposing their diktats on a land that belongs to her community. Bijli goes to the ashram and tells Kulpati that they will not obey his unfair orders, and one of them kills a deer seen earlier in the ashram. When asked about who had killed the ashram deer, Bijli takes responsibility, reminding that the deer in fact belongs to the forest. The king's general orders that the *dera* (dwellings of the tribals) be burnt down if they did not evacuate the area by evening. Bijli is forced to shift her community to some other location.

Meanwhile, Ratna is asked to carry the invitation for the *yagya* to several kingdoms, and he asks Kulpati to take care of his sick mother in his absence, but the arrogant guru does not even go to give his *darshan* (visitation) to her, which is the minimal last wish she was craving for. There is an early scene in which Ratna's mother is shown

asking him if he has performed his duties for the ashram. Ratna is back and furious to find his mother's dead body lying unattended, in decay, being eaten by worms. He goes to Kulpati and articulates his fury at the insensitivity shown to his mother. The Kulpati advises him to perform the last rites, but Ratna's anger does not subside. It is the first turning point in his life. Alienated, he joins the king's forces, and tries to implement the royal rules for protecting the forest. Bijli is shown fishing in a pond, where Ratna captures and presents her at the court. As acerbic as ever, she calls Ratna a dog of the Aryas, and herself a free lioness. She is ordered to be whipped by the king, who is incensed at her outspoken demeanour. Ratna protests at such a harsh punishment, but is called a *dasyu* (bandit) by the king.

This introduces a second turning point in the sea-saw narrative of the film. Ratna vows revenge. Converting his community into a trained army, he inflicts large scale arson and killing on the Aryan cities. Bijli, who always derided him in public, now falls in love with him and starts dreaming of a life together. For her marriage, she decides to fetch Kulpati from the ashram. When he refuses to come, she burns the ashram down and Kulpati loses his eyesight.

The king comes to the ashram and says that he will capture Ratna, the robber. Sandhya tries to save him, arguing that he was the only link that could unite the Aryas and the non-Aryas. But the king's men take him away. Sandhya carries the message of Ratna's capture to Bijli and asks her to save him, which she does. Ratna is liberated after a fierce battle in which the king is killed. Shanta and Ratna marry with much fanfare and give birth to a son. In an effort at reconciliation, and for Ratna's salvation, the missionary Kulpati goes to the *adivasi dera* to preach to his former ward. Though Ratna is already assailed by doubts about the attachment demonstrated by his kinsmen, especially Bijli, to their newfound material wealth (for which they hated the Aryas in the first place), Kulpati's sermons sound hollow to Ratna. He orders Kulpati to go away, but the latter keeps laughing back in a patronising manner as he can see Ratna's future turn to asceticism. Egged on by his kinsmen, an enraged Ratna throws several stones at Kulpati, killing him in the process. Enter a voice, singing:

जाग मूढ़ पापी हत्यारे, मौत नगाड़ा बाजे
कौन सहायक अब है तेरा, काल पीठ पर गाजे
भरा पाप घट अब छलकेगा, रोम-रोम अग्नि प्रगटेगा
जिनके तूने प्राण लिए हैं, ये है उनका श्राप . . .

(Wake up, you idiotic killer, hear the Drum of Death,
Who will come for your rescue now, when Time rides your back!

*Your pot of sins is filled to the brink, and fire will ooze out from your every pore
All those you killed, this is their curse, this is their curse...*)

In an abusive language, Ratna challenges the voice to present itself as a body. It is then that the sage Narada materialises, introducing himself as an Arya, which angers Ratna, and he calls all Aryas *adham* (ignoble), *neech* (lowly) and *dushta* (evil). Narada retorts by saying that Kulpati and his daughter Sandhya sacrificed their lives to show him the right path, that he has been ungrateful, and that he erroneously holds all Aryas responsible for the evil acts of an individual king and his men. Ratna says he wanted to take revenge for his mother's death and to break social hierarchies. Narada calls him a fool for having been daydreaming about the destruction of the Arya *jati*, which is powerful beyond his imagination: *तेरा प्रत्येक शब्द, तेरा हरेक विचार आर्यों के ग्यान का जूटन है* (your every word, every thought, is the leftover of Aryan knowledge). Narada then talks about how the body is just a means for collecting virtues and sins during a human lifetime, a sum total that ultimately determines the next birth of the soul. He shows him some really dark and scary visions of the torture awaiting a sinner after death, as described in the scripture *Garuda Purana*. Narada also taunts Ratna about whether his family and friends would take responsibility for his sins, and partake in the torture and repentance apportioned to him. Confronted by such a fearsome spectre, all the kinsmen leave. When he goes to ask Bijli, she is telling her injured son that she can't share the pain he is going through: *जो करेगा, वही भरेगा* (Whosoever sows will reap).

Having received his answer, Ratna comes back dejected. Narada tells him that his aim of fighting oppression was laudable, but his means quite deplorable: he should have shown another path, that of godliness, to his enslaved community: *क्रान्ति तो चाहिए, पर शांति से, सदभावना से, पवित्रता से* (we do need revolution, but it must be achieved with peace, harmony and purity). Ratna asks Narada about the path of his own salvation. *आत्मोद्धार का एक ही साधन है: पश्चात्ताप, शुद्धता और तप* (salvation can only be attained by performing repentance, purity and devotional meditation), says Narada, and instructs him to say *mara...mara* (dying... dying), if he can't, in his inhibition for things good, say *Rama...Rama*, so that by default, by uttering the name of Rama in reverse and quick succession, he would get it right. Ratna eventually takes his advice and goes into a long meditative hibernation, a successful *tapasya*, at the end of which the gods descend from the clouds above to bless him. After that we see the sage Valmiki writing the epic, condensed in futuristic terms as an audio-visual song. Interestingly, this abridged version ends on a happy

note with Rama's coronation, leaving out the tragic episode in which a pregnant Sita is exiled to Valmiki's ashram. Like she was in Bhavbhuti's *Uttararamcharitam* and Vijay Bhatt's *Ram Rajya* (1943), and unlike Tulasidas' *Ramcharitamanas*.

Maharshi Valmiki: Critique by Filmindia

A review in Baburao Patel's *Filmindia* found the second half of the film, the part in which all the brisk action takes place, entertaining. Appreciative of Shanta Apte and Raj Kapoor's performances, it castigated the element of theatricality in Prithviraj Kapoor's role and attributed it to Bhal G. Pendharkar's past experience with Parsi theatre. More importantly, the reviewer found ideological debate in the film confusing, and the challenge thrown up by the *adivasis* in bad taste⁹: 'Perhaps because it was a story of an undated past, the writer has given flight to his imagination and tried to create a plausible theme for the story. In doing so however, he has vomited a lot of bile against the Aryan missionaries of civilization and the bile becomes too bitter at times and spoils the taste of the entire dish'.¹⁰

In retrospect, we can say that in retaining only the skeletal plot, including Valmiki's conversion to the Aryan way, *Maharshi Valmiki* was a major narrative innovation, very much in the diverse creative tradition of 'so many *Ramayanas*'.¹¹ That the battle over the ownership, deification and appropriation of the figure of Valmiki continues in contemporary India becomes obvious from the comments of viewers who have chosen to write in after watching the film online in recent times. Comparing the film with many other animation flicks uploaded to educate the new generation of children,¹² one viewer found it closer to what he believed to be the 'true' story of Valmiki, who is venerated as a god, especially by the Valmiki community.¹³ Released on 18 January 1947, the film must have been inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's stay for a few months in what was then known as 'Bhangi'/Harijan Basti', and later Valmiki Colony, in Delhi, a critical account of which has been provided by Vijay Prashad.¹⁴

A certain history of upper caste hegemony, lower caste assertion and periodic adjustments between caste groups in between, may be written on the basis of naming. It has been rightly pointed out that most of the lead characters in Hindi films have either remained unmarked or bear upper caste second names. In this context, *Filmindia's* omission of *Maharshi* from the full name of the film is as significant as its impatience with what it called 'bile against Aryan missionaries of civilisation' in the film. In fact, the magazine continued to demonstrate a lack of patience and insensitivity with films dealing with caste.

Since we often encounter under-researched journalistic generalisations about silence on caste in older films, Patel's remarks below, excerpted from another film review, are worth quoting at length for the simple reason that he enumerates several caste-centric efforts in the 1930s and 40s. The film under review is *Oonch Neech*, a late production from the once famous New Theatres. The review has a tell-tale title: 'Another Achhoot (Untouchability-related) Story':

The theme and subject matter of 'Oonch Neech' would have impressed us definitely – ten years ago! Then, of course, the very selection of such a subject would have been rightly regarded as a progressive and daring step, worthy of commendation. But umpteen different pictures on this theme have appeared since then – Bombay Talkies' Achhoot Kanya, Ranjit's Achhoot, New Theatres' own Doctor, Navyug's Paroo – to mention only a few names. There is no longer anything original or unusual in a theme based on an 'Achhoot' story. It is only by interpreting the theme in an original and striking manner or by giving it a contemporary context that the 'old wine' could have been made acceptable and palatable in 'new bottles'. Not having done that, the New Theatres depended on their trade name to pass off old stuff – and consequently suffered.

'Oonch Neech' is the simple – over simple – story of an untouchable girl brought up as the daughter of a high caste family, the discovery of her real identity and the consequent suicide...(It) remains a goody-goody insipid story in the old Bombay Talkies tradition reminiscent of Jeevan Naiya and Janmbhoomi, and nothing much happens except the suicide right at the end. What is most deplorable is that the theme of untouchability that has been taken up is nowhere supported by dramatic action. We see neither the plight of the untouchables nor the emotional conflict between the two sisters. Everybody seems to be good and kind and the 'problem' is supposed to be presented through processions and a well-meaning but really a re-recorded theme song, karwatein badal raha zamana (time kept changing its colour).¹⁵

There is no copy of *Oonch Neech* (1948) available on YouTube, so we will have to concede that the film might have been aesthetically poor and lacked 'dramatic action' and emotional conflict. However, 'umpteen' in the passage above is definitely a striking exaggeration, so we are tempted to ask how many is too much, since the review mentions only seven. Reviewing *Paroo*, which it labelled as 'untouchable trash on untouchability' a few months later, *Filmindia* went on to argue that we need not continue to dwell upon the theme of untouchability, since the theme is not relevant, progressive or fashionable anymore.

It would have been progressive enough to advocate such a marriage between the extreme ends of society on screen fifteen years ago when untouchability was rampant but now with Harijans backed by state legislation it is hardly fashionable even to flirt with the idea or attach any new discoveries to it.¹⁶

Once again, the film's print is not available, so we have

no means to quarrel with *Filmindia's* aesthetic judgment on the film. But notice how, within a span of eight months, the magazine reviewer's temporal perspective takes a leap of five years! That the issue was not merely aesthetic is proven by the magazine's take on *Vidya* (Girish Trivedi, 1949) in the same issue. As if to draw legitimacy for its own disparaging caption, "'Vidya': A Boring and Amateurish Effort!", the reviewer, probably Baburao Patel himself, begins by describing how a polite person like Premier B. G. Kher, who came to see the film with his wife, had to leave the hall during interval. Patel then presents a rather violent summary of the plot and declares it a dud even though 'the main design behind it is purposeful'.¹⁷ The only saving grace he could find in the film had to do with Dev Anand's improvement as an actor, though that too is marred by the fact that 'Suraiya Fails Miserably'. Watching *Vidya* on YouTube was quite an engaging experience for me, for it weaves several strands of the times in its well-paced narrative, with a modernist twist in the end. It is a courageous narrative of a young Chamar man, once a school dropout and then again humiliated by some of his upper caste, stiff English-medium schoolmates, beaten up by his teacher, but eventually ending up marrying the only daughter of a wasted upper caste zamindar, after she gets her reformer uncle to support his education. The film opens up with a cobbler (Bhola) doing his job on the pavement, as his son lends him a helping hand. A rich customer arrives in the form of a school girl to get her sandals repaired. The conversation, in translation here, is interesting:

Bhola:
Which class are you in?

Vidya:
1st English, and you?

Bhola:
I gave up after 4th Hindi.

Vidya:
Why?

Bhola:
With everything else, the cost of education has also gone up.

The girl insists on giving him four paise instead of one, by way of her contribution towards the boy's education, telling his father that he must send him to school. At school, Bhola is marked out for his caste: some children scoff at him and his would-be desk-mate leaves as soon as he goes to sit next to him. Harish (who grows up to be the US-returned villain) the third, unwanted angle in the love

story that blossoms between the lead pair, does not like young Vidya eating with Bhola during recess. He says, *तुम तो उस चमार के साथ खाओगी, क्यों?* (you will of course eat with that Chamar, won't you?), to which she says, *हाँ, खाऊँगी, तुमसे मतलब!* (yes, I will, and it is none of your business!) This angers Harish and he picks a fight with Bhola. But the latter gives him a good thrashing, for which he receives his own share from the teacher, in spite of Vidya's protestations. Both Bhola and Vidya decide not to go to the English-medium school. Her reformist uncle sets up a Hindi-medium school with the help of Bhola (whom he always calls Bholaram), where the two get educated, and start teaching as well, when they grow up.

We have tell-tale visual signs of the film being ideologically aligned with the mainstream nationalist ideals: Gandhi adorns the walls of Vidya Bhavan, of Vidya's own house, Bhola reads Nehru's *Discovery of India*, and their reformed co-worker redecorates the walls of her houses with paintings of several other leaders as well. Apart from the main thrust of Dalit education, there is a clear emphasis in the film on *swadeshi*, imparting education in Hindi, and finally bringing Vidya's father, lost to drinking and prostitution, back to reformed ways. An enterprising Vidya achieves this by 'supplying' herself to her father, after his suppliers' attempt to abduct a girl from Vidya Niketan for his insatiable appetite for 'new' pleasures is thwarted by Bhola and other volunteers. The encounter sends her father into a shock, and having broken a few bones, he repents and recovers to finally accept Bhola as his son-in-law, providing the realist story with an idealist, happy ending.

A similar theme of Dalit education, a tale of an elder Chamar brother's financial struggles to educate his younger one, was picked up in *Tel Maalish Boot Paalish* (1961), which starts with the following Nagri preface read out loud:

The story goes back by several years: Santa's father, though raised as a respectable man, fell from grace because he embraced the Harijan movement and decided to break caste ties by marrying an untouchable girl. This bond of humanity became a social eyesore and the gods of the time pushed him downhill into a life of dishonour, closing all doors of opportunity on him. He was cast so far away from the changing tide of time that he could not even provide the light of education to his son. On his deathbed he told his son that his life was but a template of defeats: but you must enable your brother in such a way that he wins the game that you and I lost. Since then Santa has been racing against time by working as a masseur and shoe-shine man in order to educate his brother. The world calls him disdainfully a mochi (cobbler), and a masseur, but he does not care.

The elder brother, played by Sheikh Mukhtar, works overtime to demolish the villain's assertion that *मोची का बेटा तो मोची ही बनेगा* (a cobbler's son will be a cobbler). The title song *एक आना बूट पालिश, दो आना तेल मालिश / गाढ़े पसीने*

की ये अपनी कमाई है (6 paise for boot polish, and 12 for oil massage/this is what our sweat and toil amounts to), sung in chorus with fellow shoe-shine youngsters, is an argument for dignity of low-paying labour, like the educated brother's decision to take to the same job after facing serial rejections at white-collar offices. Since his brother is upset at the choice, he takes up another job at a garage, which is owned by a wealthy Brahmin. The man's daughter falls in love with the younger brother and they manage to marry eventually, battling stiff opposition. Unexpected help creates a melodramatic twist when the Brahmin patriarch is down with plague and he finds that the elder brother is the only one prepared to risk his life in looking after him. It is the same elder brother whose touch had once been considered polluting.

Similar narratives were woven into the films produced throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and beyond. In *Apna Hath Jagannath* (1960), Kishore Kumar, about to commit suicide for the humiliation of educated joblessness, falls flat on the village washerman's feet, calls him his guru for teaching him the dignity of labour. Even more interestingly, he goes on to open a dry cleaning shop in the city! Bimal Roy wove the story of untouchability in his wonderful film on electoral corruption and booth-capturing – *Parakh* (1960). Khwaja Ahmed Abbas presented us with the possibility of several inter-caste and inter-religious love marriages in *Char Dil Char Rahein* (1959), with Meena Kumari, Raj Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor and others in the lead. Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Satyakam* (1969) is as much about an honest engineer's (Dharmendra) fatal struggle against institutional corruption as it is about his ultimate victory over an orthodoxy that would not allow marriage with a sexually violated woman (Sharmila Tagore) whose antecedents are unknown.¹⁸ In another Hrishikesh Mukherjee film, *Aashrivad* (1968), we see the noble-hearted zamindar practicing music with an outcaste, with whom he also goes out for dance performances. Or, let's take the instance of a lot of the dacoit films, going beyond *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), which have already been listed by a number of web essayists.¹⁹ These commentators have rightly pointed out that in the recent spate of films starting with *Eklavya* (2007), and more recently *Fandry* (2013) and *Kaala* (2018), lower caste assertion is more upfront, and that tells us about the changing perspective on caste representation and caste politics in India.²⁰

Interestingly, this would echo what Gyan Pandey has called 'historian's history' as well.²¹ However, the cases of uproar over using caste names in a film like *Billoo Barber* (2009) and *Aaja Nachle* (2007) may complicate our assumption about why Hindi films have refrained from naming lower castes, and that social censorship was an

issue as well. However, it must have become clear from the above that there was a time when it was considered neither improper nor offensive to give the lower caste character his/her caste name, and sometimes it was invoked by *savarna* (upper caste) characters as a label of humiliation. It is a reflection of changing times indeed that all of us have become curious about the caste status of somebody like Shailendra who, as a left, progressive poet, might have believed in a 'casteless utopia' quite like the films of the Nehruvian age he wrote for.²² That those in the business of 'Dalit politics' always knew this is corroborated from a birthday message Shri Jagjivan Ram sent to him on 30 August, 1966: 'Shailendra is the most popular Harijan poet after Sant Ravidas'.²³ Ravidas' *nirguna*²⁴ poetry, as we know, presented a scathing critique of caste inequality and Brahmanical orthodoxy, very much like Kabir's. But not many people know that there was a feature film – *Sant Ravidas ki Amar Kahani* (1983) – made on his life as well. As noted earlier in the context of *Chandidas* (1934), biographies of medieval Bhakti poets were adapted into films in large numbers, and a critique of the caste system is part of practically every story retold. We also find that caste is very much an issue even in the film genre known as 'Muslim Social', and that is way before academics began talking about 'pasmanda' or oppressed Muslims. I would like to close the essay with an invitation to the readers to watch two such films: *Saudagar* (1973) and *Neend Hamari Khwab Tumhare* (1966).

Conclusion

On the basis of the evidence presented above, it may be argued that those in the film business have not been as averse to portrayals of caste issues as some contemporary critics making quick-fire judgments about the entire history of Hindi cinema would have us believe. Our limited search for films not yet indexed as 'caste films', and even a more limited discussion of past journalistic reviews show that there are interesting surprises in the YouTube film archive. If we search deeper and beyond the existing canon, I am sure we will discover many more popular-commercial films dealing with caste as shastric discourse and living practice, the resistance against caste atrocities and myriad manifestations of the vision for a casteless utopia, films that we can then critically analyse using new perspectives and insights. The familiar in Hindi cinema might have served fantasy flicks as high-class/high caste/casteless-upper-caste life-styles, but there is considerable anti-caste criticism there too, to demand a review of certain presentist assertions.

Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4rFyHHvPgs>.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jraa61w8GXw>. Neither song figures in the song collections available in print.
3. <http://giitaayan.com/viewisbsong.asp?id=11273>. Giitaayan is a public domain song repository, attached to a discussion list focused on Hindi film music: <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/rec.music.indian.misc>.
4. For a finely researched Freudian reading of the issue of untouchability in Hinduism see Alan Dundes, *Two Tales of Crow and Sparrows: A Freudian Folkloristic Essay on Caste and Untouchability* (Oxford: Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997). Since the dead body is considered a source of defilement, all agents who are related to rituals connected with the dead are placed at a ladder lower than other castes in the same broad category. It is significant therefore that Kabir, who is celebrated so much in secular discourses, in matters spiritual is embraced only by non-upper castes, and his *nirguna* poetry is invoked to provide solace only at the time of death in upper caste households.
5. Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 139.
6. *Ibid.*, 141.
7. *Maharshi* meaning 'Great Sage'.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Baburao Patel wrote most of the pages of *Filmindia*, including the reviews. Amrit Mathur informs that this most powerful man of Indian film industry originally belonged to a Vanjara community, classified later as OBC. Siddharth Bhatia, *The Patels of Filmindia: Pioneers of Indian Film Journalism* (Mumbai: Indus Source Books, 2013), Chapter I.
10. 'Our Review: Second Half Of "Valmiki" Entertains! Brilliant Performance by Shanta Apte', *Filmindia*, 1 March 1947, 57 and 59.
11. A. K. Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in Paula Richman, ed. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 22-49. Also, Paula Richman ed. *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 2008).
12. See for example the first page of results for 'maharshi valmiki': https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=maharishi+valmiki. There are several stories in which the story is presented as 'from robber to rishi'. Several viewers have found one such upload of 'Maharishi' fake and offensive, and wanted it to be removed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDke2Uayae8>.
13. For example, a user Vikrant Tank Crime Reporter said: *sach ke bahut karib hai* movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vba5EjHoxxA&t=181s>.
14. Vijay Prashad, *The Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), especially Ch. 5: Harijans.
15. 'Our Review: Another Achhoot Story', *Filmindia*, 1 July 1948, 51-52.
16. 'Our Review', *Filmindia*, 1 March 1949, 55.
17. 'Our Review', *Filmindia*, 1 March 1949, 56.
18. For a book length study of Mukherjee's oeuvre, see Jai Arjun Singh, *The World of Hrishikesh Mukherjee: The Film-Maker Everyone Loves* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2015).
19. 'What are some good movies about the evils of caste system in Indian cinema?': <https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-good-movies-about-the-evils-of-caste-system-in-Indian-cinema>.
20. Amit Upadhyay, 'How Bimal Roy's Sujata and Pa Ranjith's Kaala show changing Dalit politics in 60 years': <https://theprint.in/opinion/how-bimal-roys-sujata-and-pa-ranjiths-kaala-show-changing-dalit-politics-in-60-years/71333/>.
21. A glance at a recent two-volume collection of essays, *Caste in Modern India*, eds. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014), will reveal that most of these histories were written in the post-1980s.
22. For a Forward Press list of Dalit-Bahujan performers go to: <https://www.forwardpress.in/2015/10/how-inclusive-is-indian-cinema/>
23. Shankar Shailendra, *Andar ki Aag*, ed. Dinesh Shankar Shailendra and Rama Bharati (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2013), Flap. It is very interesting that no other Shailendra biography mentioned his caste. For example, see Prahlad Agrawal, *Kavi Shailendra: Zindagi ki Jeet mein Yakeen* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2005).
24. Commonly, one of the two types of *bhakti*. Literally 'attribute-less'.

The Intersecting Triad: the Man, the Snake and the State

K. P. Girija

Introduction

Identifying certain significant moments in the history of *vishavaidyam* (toxicology) in Kerala is important for locating the transformations, negotiations and strategies of the practice in its inter-action with the State and with similar/other practices. One such vantage point is a debate around the introduction of the Vishavaidya Board in the 1970s to conduct examinations and thereby regulate the traditionally trained *vishavaidyas* (toxicology practitioners). The attempt was met with fierce protests from the formally educated ayurveda students and the State was forced to postpone the announcement of the results of the examination. Another point of debate was whether a *vishavaidyasala* (pharmacy for treating cases of toxicity) should be eligible for grant-in-aid if it also provided treatment for general diseases. A third debate, which is different from the governing process described in this paper, is one on *vishavaidyam* in the 1970s between Adiyodi, a scientist, and Kuttykrishna Menon, a *vishavaidyam* (toxicology practitioner). A further moment of critical review of *vishavaidyam*, much down the years, published by Dr. Manoj Komath, a scientist, in 2011, is also referred to in this paper. These discourses bring out the fissures in the narratives within which the debates are framed in understanding the dynamics and internal logic of native medical practices. This essay uses archival materials along with other secondary sources and interviews with indigenous health practitioners for substantiating its analysis and arguments.

History of *Vishavaidyam*

In order to look into the rationality of a practice, it is important to know the relational co-existence of diverse elements within the common space and the strategies that were developed and transformed in the course of time to maintain this co-existence. For instance, one has to see the emergence and existence of *vishavaidyam* within

the relationship of co-existence between human beings and snakes. From the late nineteenth century onwards, large numbers of snakes were massacred by the people on orders given by the Colonial State. The State gave monetary benefits to people for killing snakes and orders were issued for 'cutting down and clearing away of jungle in the vicinity of village'.¹ The provocation for snake killing was the high rate of death of people and cattle due to snake bite.² Curiously, in Joseph Fayrer's report *On Serpent Worship and the Venomous Snakes of India*, there is little reference to the popular, native, medical practices of *vishavaidyam*. In other colonial documents, one can see descriptive details of serpent worship classified under the category of religion.³ By then the concept of identifying and recognizing certain kinds of knowledge as systems of medicine and certain others as religious practice had set in. Thus, *vishavaidyam* was relegated to the realm of religious practice rather than recognized as knowledge or a form of healing. It was located in the realm of faith and rituals. By the late eighteenth century itself, the dominance of anthropomorphism had altered the perceptions of the relationship between human beings and nature in particular ways that certain animals and reptiles were identified as useless or even harmful to the existence of human beings. Similarly, the anthropomorphic idea of civilization, which was anchored in settled land and agriculture, had reconstituted the notion of habitable (and hence 'useful') land or space where some animals were positioned as domestic animals and some others were termed 'harmful' to human existence.

The changes in the relationship between land, nature and human beings that were consolidated under Colonialism during this period however, often contrasted with the natives' diverse kinds of relationship with nature. The debates among colonial officials over the massive killing of snakes show out their level of ignorance of native cultures. For instance, Beatson, one of the doctors in the Medical Board, opposed the State for offering rewards for snake killing on the ground that this

would induce the natives 'to breed' snakes for obtaining rewards.⁴ Fayrer could counter this view by pointing out that breeding and nurturing snakes was a costly business and hence the natives could not afford it.⁵ Such debates over the killing of snakes have been unaware of the cultures and practices of communities such as the Pulluvar, Vettuvar, etc., of catching snakes and letting them free in the forests or in the sacred groves⁶ where snakes are worshipped. Communities like the Pulluvar, Kakkalars and Kuravars (all classified by the State as Scheduled Castes)⁷ were known for their different kinds of relations with snakes. Pulluvar was the community that had historically had privileges to do *pooja* (worship) and *pattu* (recital) for snakes. Even in the early twenty-first century in Kerala, they could be seen performing the ritual of *pulluvanpattu*, partially as a means of livelihood and partially as a privileged ritual to which they were entitled. Kakkalars were the traditional snake charmers who also performed *vishavaidyam* treatment. But as the community's social status was low, their practice of *vishavaidyam* was regarded as black magic. *Kuravars* used

to catch and sell snakes as a means of livelihood. Each community's relation with snakes, and income generation in terms of this, differed in relation to their social status. Mannarassala and Pampumekattu mana in Kerala are famous ritual centres where snakes are worshipped. They are income generating sources for the Nampoothiris (caste of Brahmins) who manage these spaces and the privileges associated with them.

Vishavaidyam evolved as a medical practice based on the distinct relationship that existed between the various peoples of Kerala and snakes. In the practice of *vishavaidyam*, there was no attempt 'to control, subject or destroy snakes'.⁸ This regional medical practice was integrated to the social order wherein different species were allowed to co-exist and pursue their own ways of life. This social order was against a total subjection of one to the other. S. Raju points out, the 'tussle between the human beings and the snake is resolved through ritualistic rules and games'.⁹ There were a number of practices in Kerala such as *naga pooja* (serpent worship) and *sarpamthullal* (serpent dance)¹⁰ that managed the tensions within the co-existence of snakes and human beings. There had also been several oral narratives like *pulluvanpattu* and folk tales through which these practices were produced, reproduced and their message spread across generations. Through these multiple discourses and practices, a non-hostile relation between serpents and human beings was established as well as maintained. Raju observes that the meanings of these narratives constitute a collective social bond 'defining the contours of social attitude and behaviour'.¹¹ He writes:

*The economy between the serpents and men constitutes a local sphere wherein a corpus of rights, duties, obligations, codes and norms, form an ensemble which makes possible deployment of power. Rarely are these codes of conducts repudiated. Force was not required for the ceaseless maintenance of rules and regulations to modulate individual conduct in the exercise of power and subjection. For power produces reality and truth before proceeding to violence. The acts prohibited and permitted are part of this reality. They get unconditional sanction as every individual's duty and obligation. Their disregard was seen as a lack of responsibility to oneself; to one's own conscience. This strategy produced power as well as subjection.*¹²

Serpents were not merely seen as poisonous reptiles to be avoided or killed, but seen and categorized as good or bad. Cobra, one of the most poisonous snakes, was seen as *nalla pampu* (good serpent which needs to be revered).¹³ In eighteenth century Kerala, many Hindu households had a space in the homestead garden that was emptied and arranged for the dwelling of snakes as a serpent/sacred grove.¹⁴ The significance of *vishavaidyam* is that it evolved and existed in a less-violent and non-coercive form, interrelated to the society's beliefs, strategies and rationale. In extreme circumstances, *vishavaidyam* also



Painting by Joseph M. Verghese

advocated killing of snakes. But this was done through ritualistic methods of *mantram* and *thantrum* (explained in the following paragraph). It is believed that the act of killing of a snake would bring harm to the family of the *vishavaidya*. The act of killing had to be atoned through *pooja*.¹⁵ Here, the emphasis was on the strategies developed for managing fear within reverence for nature.

Vishavaidyam has overlapped with ayurvedic practice, yet has been different from it in many aspects. It includes *marunnu* (medicine), *mantram* (incantation, magical spells) and *thantrum* (a loose translation of the word would be strategy/magic).¹⁶ *Vishavaidyam* has two parts: *visha-vaidyam* (detoxication medicines) and *visha-vidya* (detoxication art or magical spells).¹⁷ Some ayurveda doctors have distinguished *visha-vaidyam* as rational toxicology and *visha-vidya* as psychologic toxicology.¹⁸ However, these rational and psychological attributes have been questioned by some practitioners who argue that these are the conceptual categories used in modern medicine and have entirely different meaning.¹⁹

Ambiguous Boundaries

In the early twentieth century, the princely states, especially the Travancore State,²⁰ supported many *vaidyasalas* (ayurvedic pharmacies) and *vishavaidyasalas* (treatment centres for toxicity) with a monthly grant ranging from Rs. 15 to Rs. 30, and those that obtained this grant were known as grant-in-aid *vaidyasalas*.²¹ *Vishachikitsa* (toxicology) was only one of the eight specialized streams in ayurveda.²² Apart from these eight specialized streams, there were other unique treatments and medicines in *nattuvaidyam* (indigenous medicine/ayurveda).²³ They were *Marmavaidyam* (vital spot massaging and curing), *Netravaidyam* (treatment for eye diseases), *Ottamooli vaidyam* (single remedy for a particular disease) and *Vishavaidyam*. All the four shared their basic tenets with ayurveda, yet included a number of unique medicines, medicinal oils and methods of treatment of their own.²⁴ Though *vishavaidyam* was one amongst the eight specialized streams in ayurveda, it worked as a unique practice in Kerala, with its own medicines and methods of treatment. The fact that there were many grant-in-aid *vaidyasalas* shows that the practice was prevalent across different regions of Kerala.

In the mid-twentieth century, with the institution-alization and modernization of ayurveda, a Vishavaidya Board was constituted for monitoring traditional *vishavaidyam* practitioners, conducting examinations for them in *vishachikitsa*, etc., and thus to regularize a widely accepted popular practice that dealt with critical cases of poison, especially in snake poison. The examination

conducted was mainly to differentiate and legalize qualified and unqualified traditional practitioners through a 'Vishavaidya Visarada Certificate' (VVC). Until the introduction of this examination, those who knew *vishavaidyam* texts such as *Jyotsnika*, *Narayaneeyam* and *Ashtanga Hridayam-Uttarasthanam*, apart from having knowledge of ayurveda, were permitted to practice *vishavaidyam*.²⁵ In 1929, prior to the establishment of the Board, a one-year specialization in *vishavaidyam* had been introduced in the Travancore Ayurveda College (TAC). The students who specialized in this stream were awarded a VVC. In 1946, the Travancore State decided to withdraw this specialized course meant for the formal students of ayurveda. But the State continued to monitor traditional *vishavaidyas* through the setting up of the Vishavaidya Board and its certification process. The government did not make any attempt to legalize or monitor the other seven streams in ayurveda or the other three unique fields, and no other special boards were constituted to regulate *marma*, *netra* and *ottamooli vaidyam*. It was significant that the State showed concern in monitoring only *vishavaidyam*, one amongst the four fields of *nattuvaidyam* and one amongst the eight streams of ayurveda, for a span of 50 years.

With this new initiative, tensions surfaced between the traditional practitioners and the formal ayurveda students from the modern educational institutions. The attempt of the State was to bring parity among the formal/modern and informal/traditional specialized practitioners in *vishavaidyam* through the introduction of an examination and certification. The students of TAC opposed this and sabotaged the examination conducted in 1970 in Trivandrum²⁶ by snatching the question papers and tearing them up.²⁷ The very idea of parity opposes the idea of differentiation that operates between modern ayurveda practitioners and traditional *nattuvaidyas* (indigenous health practitioners). The contradiction here is that while many ayurveda students were willing to enrich their knowledge by informally getting trained under traditional *vaidyas* (indigenous health practitioners),²⁸ they were very particular about maintaining their separate status. In other words, students who studied at the modern ayurveda colleges saw themselves as superior to those who studied through traditional methods.

In 1972, the *vishavaidyam* competency examination was again conducted by the Board, now in Thrissur district, to award VVC to the qualified traditional *vaidyas*. The change of examination centre from Trivandrum to Thrissur was in order to avoid the recurring tensions between traditional practitioners and the ayurveda students of the TAC during the examination. The

examination included oral questions and written papers and was conducted over two days.²⁹ The students of the TAC initiated a protest against the introduction of a competency certificate for the traditional practitioners of *vishavaidyam*, and the government decided to withhold the results of the examination conducted.³⁰ The protesters were not only concerned about the opportunities they would lose because of this certification process, but also about the uniformity of status and degree this would introduce between them and the traditional practitioners. The *vishavaidyas* who had written the test immediately formed a Traditional Vishavaidya Association and presented a memorandum to the government asking for the publication of the results.³¹ The state did not take any action in spite of repeated pleas from the practitioners. Finally, the Association filed a petition in the High Court, which then ordered the Vishavaidya Board to publish the results immediately. The Board published the result in 1974, two years after the examination, in which only ten candidates passed, out of the 800 practitioners who had appeared for the examination.³² The examination was only for *vishachikitsa* practitioners who strictly followed the ayurvedic practice and the certificate given was an 'A' class certificate. Those who relied on other methods, such as using hens or stones³³ for the treatment of poison, did not even get a chance to write the examination. After 1972, no such examination was conducted to test the traditional practitioners of *vishavaidyam*. The Vishavaidya Board set up for this purpose became dysfunctional. By then the separation of traditional and modern *vishavaidyas* was solidified through formalization of institutional education in ayurveda. The number of students who specialized in *vishavaidyam* was also minimal, as by 1970s anti-venom was widely available in modern medical institutions for the treatment of snake poison.

Regularization of a practice is equivalent to legalizing and normativizing a practice. Regularization draws lines of control while setting standards for the normalization of the practice. It decides who should practice, what should be practised, what should not be practised or what should be eliminated in a practice. Regularization also sets the criteria to determine the qualifications of a practitioner. Since it also sets norms to perform a practice in particular ways, regularization does not count the experience and efficacy of a practitioner accumulated through his/her everyday performance and improvisation. Since the practitioners deal with life and death in the case of poison treatment, and there is no legal protection for ayurveda doctors, now both the formal and informal *vishavaidyam* practitioners are generally reluctant to treat acute poison cases. The specialized and unique practice of *vishavaidyam* is at the verge of extinction.

Ayurveda or Vishavaidyam

The second case described below also displays the dilemmas and ambiguities of the State in classifying a practice within the watertight compartment of a specialized stream, *vishavaidyam*, by denying the practitioner a chance to practise *vaidyam* or ayurveda in general. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the confusions of practitioners in negotiating with the governmental process and their struggle to fit in strictly within the boundaries of a particular stream of practice. One could see the bewilderment of the practitioners and the administrators as a dilemma in differentiating *vidya* (art, ability, skill, strategy, knowledge) from *vidyabhyasam*. While the practitioners uphold the idea of *vidya*, which encompasses a whole lot of codes of practices that often overlap with each other, the State asserts the notion of *vidyabhyasam* that divides and classifies practices into strictly bounded areas. Till early twentieth century, the indigenous medical practice did not face such issues of differentiation and classification, even when the *vaidyas* were specialized in one or two streams of ayurveda vis-à-vis *nattuvidyam*. Rather than being officially recognized as *vishavaidyas*, *balachikitsakas*, *netravaidyas* or *marmavaidyas* through certification, they were popular in a region depending upon their efficacy in their specialization. This popularity did not disqualify them from practising general *vaidyam* or giving treatment for other kinds of ailments. It was the discretion of the patients to choose the *vaidyas* for the treatment of their general ailments. A different kind of informal certification had existed at the level of popular acceptance and this did not fix strict boundaries for the practice. Though there was an idea of specialization here too, at the level of practice, it was not a strictly bounded one.

Kunjukrishna Pillay was a *vaidyan* who had specialized in poison treatment and he had a grant-in-aid *vishavaidyasala* in Pathanamthitta district. From 6th April 1929 onwards, it was aided by a monthly grant from the government. In 1951, he requested the government to consider his *vaidyasala* as a combined one for the treatment of both poison cases and general diseases.³⁴ In his application, the *vaidyan* stated that he hailed from a renowned *vaidya* family and had enough experience to treat general diseases, even though he was 'qualified' only in *vishavaidyam* with an 'A' class VVC. For strengthening his request for a combined *vaidyasala*, he stated that during the inspection of his *vaidyasala* on 16.6.1931, inspector Nilacanta Pillay had expressed satisfaction with the efficacy of the *vaidya*, and had instructed him to send monthly statements to the government including details of treatments for poison as well as general diseases

conducted by him. This is notable because, as per the rules of the grant given to the *vaidyasala*, the *vaidya* had to send only statements of cases of poison treatment to the government as he was meant to treat only cases of poisoning. In another inspection, perhaps in the next year (year or date is not mentioned in his application to the government), the Director of Ayurveda, Narayanan Mooses, observed that such combined statements were not required to be sent to the government. Only cases of treatment for poison were required as it was a grant-in-aid *vishavaidyasala* and not a *vaidyasala* meant for general illness. When Mooses was informed of the existing practice permitted by the inspector and the qualifications of the *vaidya*, he also permitted the continuance of sending combined statements.³⁵

However, Kunjukrishna Pillay's request was scrutinized by the Director of Ayurveda and the latter, in his letter dated 28.11.51, recommended to the Secretary to the Government to consider the *vaidyasala* as a combined one.³⁶ Even in the wake of this recommendation, the government issued an order on 17.12.51, allowing the *vaidya* to practice only *vishachikitsa*. The Secretary to the Government decided so by explaining that the petitioner had qualification only in *vishachikitsa* with a VVC. This certificate was an 'A' class certificate.³⁷ Pillay surrendered this certificate for obtaining a 'B' class registration in ayurveda. According to the rule, the petitioner was not eligible to conduct a grant-in-aid *vaidyasala* for general treatment as he did not possess 'A' class registration in ayurveda. The report went on to say that considering his qualification in *vishachikitsa* and his long service from 1929 onwards, the government could allow him to continue as a grant-in-aid *vaidyan* only in *vishachikitsa*.³⁸

A series of ambiguities and uncertainties are revealed in the certification process and in fixing qualifications for differentiating indigenous medical practitioners as general practitioners or specialized *vishavaidyam* practitioners. The VVC introduced by the government for *vishachikitsa* was an 'A' class certificate. According to the Travancore Medical Practitioners Act 1944,³⁹ registered allopathic practitioners were given an 'A' class certificate. Practitioners qualified through modern ayurveda educational institutions were also given an 'A' class certificate. The registered practitioners who had learned ayurveda in the traditional way got only a 'B' class certificate.⁴⁰ However, *vishavaidyam* was monitored through another examination and certification within this general registration process. One could say *vishavaidyam* was doubly monitored. The 'A' class certificate awarded to *vishachikitsa* practitioners did not give them an equal standing with either the registered modern medical practitioners or the ayurveda practitioners. That is to say, this 'A' class VVC was neither equivalent to an 'A'

class certificate in allopathic medicine, nor to an 'A' class certificate in institutionalized ayurveda. It was also not equivalent to the 'B' class certificate of traditional ayurveda practitioners. VVC was a certificate given to a specialization within ayurveda. But the Secretary to the government considered the 'B' class certificate in ayurveda as inferior to the 'A' class certificate in *vishachikitsa* and issued an order accordingly. Though the inspectors who visited the grant-in-aid *vaidyasala* and the Director of Ayurveda were aware about the nature and limits of the certification process and suggested favourable orders to Kunjukrishna Pillay, the Secretary, who was not an ayurvedic practitioner, could not see the limitations in reducing an expert ayurveda practitioner to only a *vishavaidya*. Ganesan discusses a similar story from the Madras Presidency, where the graduates of the Madras Ayurvedic College, a private institution, were pitted against the graduates of the government run Indian Medical School. The opposition was over the issue of registration as 'A' class or 'B' class practitioner: "'B' class was unacceptable since it put them on a par with hereditary practitioners of Indian medicine who had no institutional training'.⁴¹ Differentiation is the hallmark in situating the status, superiority and qualification of a practitioner rather than the actual expertise of the practitioner.⁴²

By 1970, the actual control and rationalization of *vishavaidyam* happened at a formal and institutional level. *Vishavaidyam* was taught as a special subject of ayurvedic practice only in the ayurveda colleges. Students gave least preference to specialization in *vishavaidyam*. The risk of death is higher in the case of poison. Also, students get fewer chances to deal with poisoned bodies in the institute as the cases which come to the institutionalized ayurvedic spaces are less in number when compared to those attended by individual *vishavaidya* practitioners.⁴³ Apart from these official interventions to regulate *vishavaidyam*, there were public debates too to irrationalize and delegitimize the practice.

Public Debates

Two instances of public debates on *vishavaidyam* are discussed in this section to take forward the argument being developed through the study of the above mentioned processes of governmental regulations. One was the discussion initiated by a scientist Adiyodi⁴⁴ in the 1960s through the *Mathrubhumi* weekly, a prominent magazine in Malayalam. Kutty Krishna Menon took part in this discussion as a practitioner to defend *vishavaidyam* and to assert that the practice had an entirely different logic because when a practice was assessed within the logic of science it was completely delegitimized as irrational.

The second instance of public discussion was after fifty years, through a book published by Manoj Komath in 2011.⁴⁵ In between Adiyodi's and Komath's critiques, in 1974, Dr. A. V. Joseph also wrote a book on snake-bite (*Sarppadamsanam*), but he did not directly address or critique *vishachikitsa*. Instead, he wrote a section on the superstitions about snakes in which he listed the different beliefs in relation to poisonous snakes.⁴⁶ For instance, he pointed out that rural people had a belief that the broken hood of cobra could fly and bite. He explained instead that the hood or the head portion of the cobra would not fly but it could bite and inject poison for a while even after separation from the body of the snake.⁴⁷ He also reproduced the tables of categories and pictures of snakes from Adiyodi's book.⁴⁸

The main points discussed in the debate between Adiyodi and Menon will be elaborated shortly. When Adiyodi started a series called *The Poisonous Snakes of Kerala* in the 1960s, he was receptive to critiques towards his arguments. After a span of fifty years, when Komath published a book on *Snake Bite and Toxicology*, he did not leave any space for a discussion from the other side of the practice. Komath outrightly rejected *vishavaidyam* as a superstitious and irrelevant practice. By that time, the approach of science in assessing 'traditional' practices had also changed from an authoritative to an autocratic and monolithic activity. While Adiyodi was more accommodating in his critiques of *vishavaidyam*, Komath seemed to be expressing contempt towards a slowly eroding practice by projecting a unilateral argument about scientificity.

Adiyodi had initiated a discussion about the non-rationality of *vishavaidyam* in the *Mathrubhumi* weekly.⁴⁹ K. Menon, a well-known *vishavaidyam* practitioner who wrote *Kriyakaumudi*, a *vishavaidyam* text, responded to Adiyodi in the following issues of the same magazine.⁵⁰ Though Adiyodi criticized many of the 'belief' aspects in *vishavaidyam* practice, he did not completely refute the efficacy of the practice. In that sense, the essays did initiate a discussion among the practitioners, unlike the book of Komath in which he did not leave any space for discussion. Komath refuted the practice completely as irrational and superstitious. The author demanded an explanation for each and every aspect of the practice from the logic of modern medicine/science. The book did not evoke a debate and none of the existing scattered *vishavaidyam* practitioners have responded to the critique till date.

While Adiyodi uses the regionally available names to describe the snakes of Kerala, Komath uses mainly English names and only the standardized Malayalam names. Adiyodi uses the local names of the snakes shared by the *vishavaidyas* which reflect the nature of

snakes and their venom and the time taken in the spread of the venom in a body. For instance, Adiyodi uses the regionally available names for king cobra – *karinadan*, *krishnasarppam*, *karimjati*, *malanjati*, etc. – instead of the standardized Malayalam name, *rajavembala*.⁵¹ Komath uses only king cobra and *rajavembala* to describe this snake.⁵² Even while asserting his scientific explanation, Adiyodi incorporated all these regionally or locally available usages, thus partially acknowledging not only the local usages but also the local knowledge enmeshed in the language. While Adiyodi critiques the *mantram* (magical spell, incantation) in *vishavaidyam* and keeps silent about the medicine treatment, Komath refutes the practice altogether as unscientific and illogical.

Adiyodi had raised a point about the non-objectivity and inaccuracy of the description of snakes in *vishavaidyam*.⁵³ Menon replied to Adiyodi arguing that *vishavaidyam* was not *sarppasastram* (science about/of snakes) at all. He said that it was a practice that prescribed hundreds of cures for poisons. Knowing *sarppasastram* was good for a practitioner but it was not essential for treating the cases of poisoning.⁵⁴ According to the practitioners, the conditions to learn and practice *vaidyam* did not emphasize acquiring a set of *a priori* knowledge about the external cause of poison, nature of snakes or other creatures, their habits and habitats, etc. All these could be deduced through the symptoms articulated on the living body of a human being.

Later, Vaidya Bhooshanam Raghavan Thirumulpad, a well-known ayurveda practitioner, in his introduction to Menon's book *Kriyakaumudi* republished, observed that the description of snakes was not a concern of *vishavaidyam* and it was an endeavour of the biological sciences:

*Learning about the categories of the snakes does not contribute to the ability in treating poisons. For that, even knowledge about the poison does not contribute much. The changes occurring in a body when affected by poison, the appropriate medicines required at that time and the suitable practice at that time are the subjects of a vishavaidyam. The objective knowledge about snakes and poison may perhaps be an additional knowledge in that situation...The research on those treatments should be done on each experience.*⁵⁵

Thirumulpad further states that snake bites occurring in different weeks of the month required separate treatment and this has been described in *Kriyakaumudi*.⁵⁶ He says that there is a chapter in *Ashtanga Samgraham*, *Uttarasthanam* (Chapter 47, *Vishopayogeeyam*), which describes the way poisons can be used as medicine for treating different diseases.⁵⁷ Thirumulpad makes it clear through the following statement that the logic of *vishavaidyam* is different from the logic of modern medicine:

Vishachikitsa was never meant merely treatment for snake poison. There is nothing in the world that cannot be turned into poison when not properly used or misused...At times even mother's milk becomes a poison. And it can be cured by knowing the symptoms. Instead of curing the poison, if one suppresses the symptoms with medicine, immediate relief may be gained, but the poison causes many side effects (dhooshivisham) expressed as different ailments...The modern opinion is that these are allergic responses and not side effects of poisons. But (our) experiences prove that allergies could be cured through the treatments for dhooshivisham and insect poison⁵⁸... In vishavaidyam treatment, the medicines that are used in the treatment of poison destroy the environment that promote the existence and actions of poison in the body, and convert the non-digestive poison into digestive form⁵⁹ ... When the poison is converted into digestive form, it loses the strength to affect the dhatus.⁶⁰ All this means that agadam or medicines used in poison treatment will act properly only in living bodies. So, the lack of objective and accurate knowledge about the size and species of poisonous creatures did not affect the diagnosis and treatment in vishavaidyam.⁶¹

Notions of classification

In *vaidyam*, the fundamental basis of all actions (*karmam*) is a living human body. When a matter (*dravyam*) is termed as hot (*ushnam*), it is not an indication of the basic nature of that *dravyam*. When that *dravyam* is consumed by a person, and if it creates heat in the human body, then its nature is *ushnam*.⁶² The central point of *ushna-sheetham* (hot-cool) is the normal temperature of a human body.⁶³ Poison or medicine or food affects a living body in such a way that its nature changes as per the predominant humourous constitution of the body and the digestive process. It works differently in each living body based on the dominant nature of *vata*, *pitta* or *kapha prakriti* or the humourous constitution.⁶⁴ Though the equilibrium of bodily humours is the necessary condition for health, in every person one or two of the humours become predominant. For instance, a person with *vata prakriti* or *vata/air* as the dominant humour cannot withstand cold weather and is prone to diseases such as rheumatism and pain.⁶⁵ A person with *pitta/fire prakriti* will be short tempered, and her body will be hot in nature. A person with *kapha/water prakriti* is prone to infections easily.⁶⁶

Like the nature of the body, the genus of the snake, scorpion, rat, spider, poisonous plant, etc., is also determined through the symptoms articulated within the body of a bitten/affected person. Snakes were not previously classified and named in order to initiate a treatment for their poison. The work of classification is only a second-order activity, and is less important than the signs manifested on the surface of a functional body. There is no attempt to ascribe meanings *a priori*, from a fixed frame of classification and naming. For instance, snakes are described as four types based on the symptoms

that manifest on the body of a snake-bitten person. They are cobras (*moorkhan*), vipers (*mandali*), kraits (*rajilam*) and *vendiran* (no specific snake, explained a little later). The bite of cobra aggravates *vata* humour and affects the nervous system. The bite of viper aggravates *pitta* and affects kidney, and the bite of krait aggravates the *kapha* nature of the body. But the bite of *vendiran* aggravates a combination of these humours. As per the symptoms manifesting on the body of the bitten person, the bite of *vendiran* shows the characteristics of a hybrid poison.⁶⁷ The hybrid nature of a snake or *vendiran* is a disputed category in modern medicine. Practitioners of modern medicine do not believe in the existence of such a hybrid category of snakes.⁶⁸ But in *vishavaidyam*, the category of snake is not important. Rather the symptoms produced in the body of a snake-bitten person shows the characteristics of a hybrid poison which leads to the naming of the snake. The symptom articulated within the living body is more important than the name or the classification of the snake.⁶⁹ All these aspects noted above show that the internal logic of *vishavaidyam* is different; and that attempts to decipher the practice by applying the logic of modern science end up in producing confusions and contradictions amongst the newly educated practitioners, scientists, doctors as well as the administrators.

Notes

1. Sir Joseph Fayerer, *On Serpent Worship and the Venomous Snakes of India* (London: The Victoria Institute, 1892), 105. Fayerer was the President of the Medical Board at the India Office.
2. *Ibid.*, 104. In 1889, it was reported that 22,480 human beings and 3,793 cattle were killed by snake bite all over India, and the State spent Rs. 23,556 to kill 578,415 snakes. In the next year, 21,412 human beings and 3,948 cattle were killed by snake bite and 510,659 snakes were killed in retaliation at a cost of Rs. 19,004.
3. *The Census Reports of Madras Presidency, Cochin and Travancore*, 1871 to 1891.
4. Fayerer, *On Serpent Worship*, 109.
5. *Ibid.*, 109.
6. See S. Raju, 'Narratives, Sign and Social Order: Nagam and the People of Kerala', *Studies in History*, 1991/2010, 7-37; and K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, ed., T. K. Krishna Menon, Vol.4. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1924/1986), 457-98. Sacred groves or serpent groves (*sarpakavus*) were believed to be the dwelling place of snakes and gods. Felling of trees was not permitted there. The *kavu* was usually located in the south-west corner of a homestead garden. Selling or buying of land that housed a *kavu* required the performance of many rituals and hence could be done only as a last resort. Though serpents and *kavus* were outside the legality of land transfer deeds, they were inside the ritualistic and religious space that

- often overlapped with the legal space. Raju surmises that this restriction would have checked the frequency of land transaction in the early nineteenth century.
7. Fayrer, *On Serpent Worship*, 97. Fayrer did mention in his report that the people who caught and 'destroyed' the snakes are lower castes.
 8. Raju, 'Narratives', 7-37.
 9. Ibid.
 10. *Sarpamthullal* is a most elaborate and expensive ritual, and only performed in special cases.
 11. Raju, 'Narratives', 7-37.
 12. Ibid., 7.
 13. Fayrer, *On Serpent Worship*, 97. He noticed this as 'the cobra is an object of superstitious awe to the hindus'.
 14. Menon, *History of Kerala*, 475.
 15. Interviews with *vishavaidya* practitioners Appooty, Kondotty; Vimala and Brahmadathan, Thrissur, November 2010.
 16. Menon, *History of Kerala*, 465.
 17. *Vidya* is not always magic, it could be translated as art, ability, skill, strategy (*thantrum*), knowledge etc.
 18. Krishnakumar, 'Practice of Agada', P. Unnikrishnan, et al., eds., *Toxicology: Ayurvedic Perspective* (Kottakkal, Kottakkal Ayurveda College, 2002), 201-202.
 19. Interview with Brahmadathan Namboothiri, Ayurveda/*vishavaidya* practitioner, Thrissur, November 2010. He strongly opposed this attribution of psychologic toxicology to *visha-vidya*. He said that attributing either psychology or spirituality to *visha-vidya* is a wrong understanding of it.
 20. Before the formation of a united Kerala in 1956, the state was divided into Travancore and Cochin, two princely states, and British Malabar, the northern part of Kerala, which was under the Madras Presidency.
 21. *Administration Report of Ayurveda College* (Travancore, 1937-38), 167-184. Even in 1973, out of the 289 grant-in-aid *vaidyasalas* that functioned in the united Kerala, 154 were *vishavaidyasalas* and 2,49,735 patients were treated in them. Also see *Administration Report of the Kerala State*, (Trivandrum: 1973-74), 122-138.
 22. *Kayachikitsa* (general medicine), *Shalya thantra* (surgery), *Salakya thantra* (ENT treatment), *Balachikitsa* (paediatrics), *Agada thantra* (toxicology), *Bhutavidya* (psychiatry), *Rasayana thantra* (geriatrics) and *Vajikarana thantra* (aphrodisiacs) are the eight specializations in ayurveda. They are not equivalent to the specialization process in modern medicine. Usually a *vaidya* family specializes in one of the streams apart from its knowledge of the general treatment of diseases. So, the students who studied under these gurus had a chance to learn more about one or two of the streams.
 23. Till early twentieth century, the term *nattuvaidyam* was widely used in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar to denote ayurveda. All *vaidyas* were known and called as *nattuvaidyas*, but they become demarcated into *nattuvaidyas* and ayurveda doctors by the late nineteenth century. In 1915, the Ayurveda Patasala of Travancore was under the supervision of *Nattuvaidyasala* Superintendent,
- as mentioned in P. K. Mohanlal, *Keralathile Ayurveda Vidyabhyasam (Ayurveda Education in Kerala)* (Trivandrum: State Institute of Language, 2014). The department that dealt with ayurveda was named as *Nattuvaidyasala* Department in Travancore and Cochin and Department of Indian System of Medicine (ISM) in Madras Presidency, as mentioned in Mohanlal, *Keralathile*; and *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous System of Medicine* (Madras: The Usman Committee Report, 1923). By the second decade of the twentieth century, a Department of Ayurveda was constituted, and all files pertaining to *nattuvaidyam* began to be dealt with by this department. Inspection Reports of the Superintendent of *Nattuvaidyasalas* (indigenous pharmacies) in the 1920s and different government documents show this shift.
24. N.V. Krishnankutty Varier, ed., *Ayurveda Charitram* (History of Ayurveda) (Kottakkal: Kottakkal Aryavaidya Sala, 1980/2002); and E. Unnikrishnan, *Keralathile Nattuvaidyam* (Indigenous Medicine of Kerala) (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 2011).
 25. Mohanlal, *Keralathile*, 16.
 26. Travancore was named as Trivandrum in 1956.
 27. Interview with Dr. Raghavan Vettath, a veteran *vishavaidyam* practitioner, Guruvayur, January 2015. Raghavan Vettath was one amongst the traditional *vishavaidya* who had appeared for the examination. Also, interview with Dr. Mohanlal, the first Director of Ayurveda Education, Trivandrum, June 2015.
 28. Many *visha* and *marma vaidyas* whom I interviewed were giving training to ayurveda students who had degrees from the ayurveda educational institutions. Brahmadathan Nampoothiri of Thrissur, Basheer *vaideyan* of Kozhikode and Manmadhan *vaideyan* of Nilambur were informally teaching some ayurveda graduate students in their *vishavaidyasalas* or residences.
 29. Interview with Raghavan Vettath.
 30. Ibid.
 31. Ibid. Raghavan Vettath, now 82 years old, was one of the organizers of the association which initiated the filing of the petition in the court.
 32. Raghavan Vettath was one among the candidates who passed in the examination. He has proudly exhibited the framed certificate on the wall of his consultation room.
 33. There were other methods of treating poison cases, especially snake bite, by using hens (*kozhi chikitsa*) and stones made of medicines and herbs (*kallu chikitsa*).
 34. *Bundle No.627, Health, Labour and Education (Travancore) File No. 10024/1951, Sub: Recognition as a combined vaidyasala for treatment of general as well as vishachikitsa* (Trivandrum: Kerala State Archives, 1952).
 35. Ibid.
 36. Ibid.
 37. Ibid.
 38. Ibid.
 39. The Travancore-Cochin Medical Practitioners Act 1953 was implemented only after 1954.

40. P. Vinayachandran, *Kerala Chikilsa Charitram* (History of Medical Treatment Practices in Kerala) (Kottayam: Current Books, 2001), 206.
41. Uma Ganesan, 'Medicine and Modernity: The Ayurvedic Revival Movement in India, 1885-1947', *Studies on Asia* 1 (1) (2010): 108-31.
42. *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous System of Medicine (Part I)* (Madras, 1923), found that actual prohibition of unregistered practitioners as found in many states of the U. S. A. was not suitable for India, '...what may now be attempted is only to secure certain rights and privileges to the Registered as in the United Kingdom'. The report further stated that before insisting on medical registration, it was essential to establish an adequate number of medical schools and colleges to produce efficient practitioners, 26-27.
43. Interview with Sankaran Nampoothiri, Jaunary 2012. Nampoothiri learned ayurveda from an ayurveda college. He learned *vishavaidyam* from his father, Avanaparambu Nampoothiri, a traditional and well-known *vishavaidyam*. But Nampoothiri does not practise *vishavaidyam*.
44. Adiyodi obtained his M. A. in Zoology from Madras University and Ph. D. in Reproductive Physiology from Kerala University. He served as the Dean of Science in Calicut University (1988-1991), Vice Chancellor of Cochin University of Science and Technology (1994-1996) and member of the Union Public Service Commission (1996-2001). He was also the founder member of Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, the largest organization for the promotion and popularization of science.
45. Manoj Komath is a scientist at Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology.
46. A. V. Joseph, *Sarpadamsanam* (Snakebite) (Trivandrum: State Institute of Languages, 1974), 82-87.
47. *Ibid.*, 83.
48. *Ibid.*, vii.
49. K. G. Adiyodi, 'Nammude Vishavaidya Granthangalum Vishachikitsa Sampradayangalum' (Our Toxicology Texts and Toxicology Schools), *Mathrubhumi* weekly, January 6, 1963, 40:43, 25-29; Adiyodi, 'Keraleeya Vishachikitsa' (Toxicology of Kerala). *Mathrubhumi* weekly, April 21, 1963, 41; 5, 26-29.
50. K. Menon, 'Keraleeya Vishavaidyam' (Toxicology of Kerala), *Mathrubhumi* weekly, December 9, 1962, 40:39, 19-20, 27; 'Vishavaidyathepatti Veendum' (Again on Toxicology), *Mathrubhumi* weekly, February 17, 1963, 40:40, 19-27; K. Menon, 'Vishavaidyathepatti Kurachukoodi' (A bit more on Toxicology), *Mathrubhumi* weekly, June 30, 1963, 41:15, 14-17.
51. K. G. Adiyodi, *Keralathile Vishappambukal* (Poisonous Snakes in Kerala) (Calicut: Mathrubhumi Books, 1965/2005), 56.
52. Manoj Komath, *Pambukatiyum Vishachikitsayum* (Snakebite and Toxicology) (Trivandrum: State Institute of Languages, 2011/2014).
53. Adiyodi, *Keralathile Vishappambukal*, 17-18.
54. K. Menon, *Kriyakaumudi* (*Bhashavishavaidyam*) (Toxicology) (Kottayam: National Book Stall, 1986), 883-884.
55. *Ibid.*, xi-xxv. All translations from Malayalam are mine unless otherwise mentioned.
56. *Ibid.*, xvii.
57. *Ibid.*, xvii.
58. *Ibid.*, xi.
59. *Ibid.*, xxii.
60. *Dhatu*s in ayurveda are seven elements of the body, skin, blood, flesh, fat, bone marrow and semen.
61. Menon, *Kriyakaumudi*, xxiii.
62. Raghavan Thirumulpad, *Ayurvedathiloode* (Through Ayurveda) (Trivandrum: Desabhimani Book House, 2007/2010), 52.
63. *Ibid.*; Interview with Dr. Prasad, January, 2013, Thrissur.
64. There are three humours in the body, *vata*, *pitta*, *kapha* (which are often wrongly translated as wind, bile and phlegm. Dr. Valiathan translated these three humours as wind, fire and water). See this in M. S. Valiathan, *The Legacy of Caraka* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003/2007). They are aligned with opposite qualities such as hot-cold, wet-dry etc., and the equilibrium of these humours maintains health. Wind, fire and water do not indicate the very nature of these phenomena. Wind helps all kinds of internal and external movements, fire helps digestion and water nourishes the body and activates the mobility of wind. See G. Srinivasa Murti, *The Science and the Art of Indian Medicine* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1948), 88-91. The basic tenets of *nattuvaidyam* are more or less based on the same concepts of humours which rely on the fundamental macro and microcosmic connections between human beings and the cosmos in which they live.
65. Thirumulpad, *Ayurvedathiloode*.
66. *Ibid.*
67. Menon, *Kriyakaumudi*; Raghavan, *Ayurvedathiloode*.
68. Adiyodi, *Keralathile Vishappambukal*; Komath, *Pambukatiyum Vishachikitsayum*.
69. Kochunni Thampuram, *Prayogasamuchayam*, *Bhasha Vishavaidyam* (Confluence of Practices, Toxicology) (Thrissur: Bharatha Vilasam Press, 1956); Menon, *Kriyakaumudi*.

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Writing a Rohingya History: Colonial Discourse, Vernacular Literature and Geography

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*By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin' eastward to the sea,
There's a Burma girl a-settin', and I know she thinks o' me;
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say:
'Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!'*¹

Introduction

In 1889, Rudyard Kipling, on his long voyage back to England from Calcutta, made a stop at Rangoon, the then capital of the newly acquired province of Burma. Burma was conquered by the British Empire in three Anglo-Burmese wars in 1824-26, 1852-53, and 1885.² Kipling, by his own confession, was in 'love [with] the Burman with the blind favouritism born of first impression'.³ Kipling's love for the Burman and especially the 'almond coloured Burmese girls'⁴ found the ultimate utterance when he composed his love poem 'Mandalay', awestruck with the 'beauties' on the footsteps of the Moulmein pagoda. Kipling's 'Mandalay', published in 1892 as part of *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses*, would singularly come to define Burma as the 'Oriental other', with an unchanging landscape and peace-loving, simple Burmese people.

Thus, the widely translated poem and its later musical adaptations helped reduce Burma to a 'homogenised exotic other'. It is perhaps ironic that the 'beauties' on the steps of the Moulmein pagoda who inspired Kipling in all probability were not 'Burma' girls but 'Mon' girls from Moulmein (present day Mawlamyine, located deep in the heart of the Mon state). The Mon, along with the Karen, Shan, Kachin, Chin, Kayin, Kayah and the Rakhine, are recognised by the post-colonial state of Myanmar as major minority ethnicities of Burma. These ethnicities are not only distinct socio-culturally but also occupy distinct geographic regions. A vast majority of these peoples and their regions were independent and at best vassals to powerful agrarian dynasties of upper-central Burma in the pre-colonial period.⁵ The colonial imagining of Burma re-invented sovereignty in new ways. The period of British rule marked the advent of a rigid 'territorialised state', which accentuated ethnic tensions. The British

colonial state used the Karen, Kachin and Chin minorities as recruits for the colonial army and deployed them to crush majority Burman rebellions like the 1930-31 Saya San rebellion.⁶ The post-colonial state of Myanmar not only continued to follow the colonial framework but also actively promoted a majoritarian policy of Buddhist Burman superiority. This precipitated an acute ethnic conflict and frontier state rebellions particularly by the Shan, Karen and Kachin in the immediate aftermath of independence in 1948.⁷

The task of writing any history of the Rohingyas is complex not only because of their geographical situation in a borderland, Arakan, but also because of the paucity of sources. The most significant contributions in recent years to the historiography of Arakan have been that of Michael Charney and Jacques Leider.⁸ The virtual absence of a pre-existing historiography leaves the historian a lot of advantage of manoeuvrability but often leads to the production of a tentative overview. The other difficulty regarding the construction of Arakanese history, and in general Southeast Asian history, has been the elite framework within which the process of history writing operates. This has been the case because of the over-reliance on colonial sources. However, what is perhaps more worrisome is that the historiography often has a pronounced 'state orientation'. In the case of Malaya, this has been prominently identified by what A. C. Milner calls the framework of 'British Malayan' studies.⁹ The secondary literature is often critical of this state orientation yet fails to escape a narrative where the agency is primarily with the state. In the case of the Rohingyas, the situation is far worse as even the impetus of history-writing remains in the hands of the post-colonial state of Myanmar. The disenfranchisement of the Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar has resulted in the marginalisation of Rohingya voices not only in the national discourse of Myanmar but also internationally. The Rohingyas are today in essence 'state-less' people. Burmese scholars like Maung Tha Hla¹⁰ have argued that the Rohingyas are 'immigrants' from the Indian subcontinent and should

be seen as 'Chittagonians'. This not only negates the independent identity of Arakan in a pre-Burmese early modern period, but also raises serious implications for the political and human rights of a people who are at present perhaps one of the most persecuted in the world.

In this essay, it will therefore be my attempt to historically locate Arakan and the term 'Rohingya' through the haze of colonial discourses and the aid of vernacular ones (in conversation with questions of geography) in order to resurrect both Arakan and the Rohingyas in a pre-Burmese and pre-colonial world. Furthermore, I will attempt to deconstruct the geographic entanglement within the early modern Arakanese state. This entanglement led to the formation of a unique socio-cultural and economic milieu, the product of which are the Rohingyas. Michael Charney has demonstrated that the Arakanese and the Bengalis shared an environmental heritage which he calls the 'Banga-Arakanese environmental continuum'.¹¹ It will be my endeavour to develop this argument further and to show that this shared environmental continuum had two poles which led to a cosmopolitan social milieu in the Arakan court prior to 1784, when it was incorporated within the Burman empire. The poles of this shared environmental milieu are represented by the *entrepôt* of Chittagong and the Arakanese capital of Mrauk-U located in the hinterland. It is after the conquest of Arakan in 1784 by the Burmese empire that gradually there were concerted efforts for the '*Irrawaddy-ization*' or '*Burmanization*' of Arakan.¹² The subsequent British colonisation of Arakan and eventually the whole of Burma led, through the imposition of modern state boundaries, to the permanent rupture of the entanglement across the shared environmental continuum.

Background

The Arakan region in the west of Burma is geographically separated from the Irrawaddy valley by a rugged coastal mountain terrain.¹³ The nineteenth-century British historian H. H. Wilson has suggested that until the tenth century AD, Arakan was part of the Indian world and not the Burmese world.¹⁴ Jonathan Saha has argued that Burma itself should be envisaged as part of South Asia. Despite being governed as an integral part of the Indian Empire for over fifty years, it is commonplace for historians to consider Myanmar/Burma as a distinct entity beyond what is usually taken to be South Asia. This is a heuristic separation indulged in by both scholars of colonial India and colonial Burma and is in part a legacy of the territorial assumptions of Area Studies. Recently, new geographic frameworks – particularly the Indian Ocean and Zomia – have begun to undermine the basis of this artificial division.¹⁵ The earliest of Arakan settlers

were thus of Indo-Aryan stock. The region remained multi-cultural, with Hinduism and Islam being practiced pre-dominantly till 1000 AD. From 1000 AD onwards, the Buddhist Rakhine began to move into Arakan as the Burman kingdom of Pagan expanded and incorporated the neighbouring Mon kingdom in 1100 AD.¹⁶ Arakan regained its independence after the fragmentation of the Pagan Kingdom. Arakan then became the site of the Mrauk-U Kingdom from 1430 to 1785. This polity was intimately connected with the Bengal sultanate. The founder of Mrohaung (capital of Mrauk-U), Buddhist King Naramaikhla, re-conquered Arakan from the Burmese in 1430, with the help of Muslim levies of Ahmed Shah, the Sultan of Gaur.¹⁷ Most of these Muslim levies settled down in northern Arakan near the capital.¹⁸ The Sultanate of Bengal remained closely linked with Arakan (which included Chittagong from 1529 to 1666),¹⁹ in a tributary relationship from 1430 to 1531, as well as through trade. Arakanese slave raids into Bengal, later in association with Portuguese, which continued into the eighteenth century, also maintained contact with Bengal and increased the Muslim population through their forced resettlement near Mrohaung.

The geographical position of Arakan, separated from mainland Burma by the Arakan Mountains, ensured its separate historical trajectory. Isolation from, and peripheral location with respect to, the Burman mainland and regional politics led to the formation of a multi-religious society.²⁰ This topography of Arakan strengthened political, religious and cultural connections in the borderlands with Bengal, especially for the Muslim community, as the two areas were connected by plains and rivers. The Muslim Arakanese were linguistically similar to neighbouring Bengal and were seen as enemies by 'the Buddhists who retained links with the Buddhist Burmans'.²¹

Arakan became a part of the Kingdom of Ava in 1784, but this directly led to a clash with the expanding British Empire in India. Arakan became the first region to be separated from the larger Burman area once again when it was annexed to the British Indian Empire after the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1826. Although the rest of Burma would be annexed by the 1880s, in the Burmese national imagination, 1826 forms a cut-off year, the year before which 'pristine Burmese cultural' was unpolluted from British Indian influences. The colonial policy of promoting migration from the Indian sub-continent also led to the notion of a foreign influx in Burma even though most Indian settlers left Burma by the 1960s.²² The colonisation of Burma between 1824 and 1886 was followed by a differential colonial policy of supporting minorities like the Chin, Kachin and Karen in Burma. The colonial state encouraged large scale migration from

India and in fact administered Burma as a part of the Indian Empire till 1937.

After 1937, the British administered the frontier regions including Arakan as a direct 'Scheduled Excluded' region outside 'Ministerial Burma'.²³ The region of 'Ministerial Burma' was pre-dominantly Buddhist Burman in population. In fact, the bedrock of Burmese nationalism can be traced back to this region. On the other hand, the 'Scheduled Excluded Areas' were in the periphery and inhabited by ethnically and religiously different minorities such as the Chin, Karen, Kachin and the Arakanese. This distinction was so acute that even during the Japanese occupation of Burma, the Burma Independent Army (BIA), which was dominated by ethnic Buddhist Burmans, actively co-operated with the Japanese whereas the ethnic minorities supported the British.²⁴ The pseudo-independent Burma established by the Japanese in 1943 effectively destroyed the dual government (separate modes of governance for the Burman and the minorities) of the British administration.²⁵ This led to a government in the post-colonial period which treated the minority regions as units attached to the larger Burman heartland. In the immediate aftermath of independence, all the minority regions rebelled and had to be put down with military force. While the Panglong Conference in 1947, led by Aung Sang, is credited with the creation of the Union of Burma and partially halting the ethnic rebellions, it did not include the Arakanese people while most other ethnic communities were represented.

Therefore, the question which is of prime importance is whether the present day Rohingyas are an immigrant community as imagined in Burman Buddhist national philosophy or were they present in Arakan even before the advent of British rule. It is quite clear from various

colonial sources that Muslims and even the Rohingyas were integral to Arakan.

Locating the 'Rohingyas' in Colonial Discourse and Beyond

As early as 1799, Francis Buchanan published 'A Comparative Vocabulary of Some the Languages Spoken in Burma Empire' in the fifth volume of the *Asiatic Researches*, where he mentioned the Rohingyas. Buchanan wrote:

*The proper natives of Arakan call themselves Yakin, which is also commonly given to them by the Burmas...by the Bengal Hindus, at least by such of them as have been settled in Arakan, the country is called Rossaum...or the kingdom of the Mugs, as we often call it... The Mahommedans settled at Arakan, call the country Rovingaw; the Persians call it Rekan.*²⁶

Buchanan clearly mentions the term *Rooinga* and identify them as natives of Arakan. He wrote:

*I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the Burma Empire, but evidently derived from the language of the Hindu nation. The first is that spoken by the Mohammedans, who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan. The second dialect is that spoken by the Hindus of Arakan. I procured it from a Brahmen and his attendants, who had been brought to Amarapura by the king's eldest son, on his return from the conquest of Arakan. They call themselves Rossawn, and, for what reason I do not know, wanted to persuade me that theirs was the common language of Arakan. Both these tribes, by the real natives of Arakan, are called Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Arakan.*²⁷

The *Classical Journal* for September 1811, in its seventh volume, in turn recognised 'Rooinga' as a language spoken in the 'Burmah Empire' in its compilation of 'Numbers

The Numeral Three in Various Languages of the Burmah Empire²⁸

<i>Rooinga</i>	<i>Rossawn</i>	<i>Banga</i>	<i>Myammau or Burmah</i>	<i>A few Christians in Siam or Tainay</i>	<i>Taiyay</i>	<i>Tailong</i>
1 awg	Aik	Ak	Teet	Noong	Noo	aning
2 doo	Doo	De	hueet	So	Sang	soung
3 teen	Teen	Teen	thonm	Sam	Sam	Sam
4 tehair	Tsar	Sa-ree	Lay	See	Shee	Shee
5 pan-so-ce	Paus	Pas	Ngaw	Haw	Haaw	Haw
6 saw	Tso	Tsoe	kiaouk	Hoe	Houk	Hook
7 sat	Sat	Hat	kuhneet	Kyaet	Sayt	Seet
8 aw-toa	As-to	Awt	sheet	Payt	Payt	Paet
9 no-naw	No	No	Ko	Ka-wo	Kaw	Kan
10 dus-so-a	Dos	Dos	Tazay	Sect	Sheet	Ship

in 200 Tongues'. The above table is a reproduction of the original in the *Classical Journal*, Vol. VII.

Thus, it is quite evident that in the early nineteenth-century, even before the British conquest of Arakan, a distinct group called the 'Rooinga' (Rohingyas) separate from the 'Rossawn' (Rakhine) existed in the region. The present argument posed by Burmese scholars like Maung Tha Hla²⁹ that the Rohingyas are 'immigrants' and 'Chittagonians' needs to be seriously questioned.

The present day ethnic conflict resulting in the genocide of the Rohingyas needs to be understood as part of modern state formation. The British colonial state aided in this process of state formation through the production of colonial discourse which fixed often fluid ethnic categories. These tools were deployed early on. As early as 1824, the British were able to raise a levy among the Arakanese Muslims in their fight against the Burma Kingdom.³⁰ This is because the Burmese conquest of Arakan in 1784 was deeply resented. After the British conquest of Arakan in 1824, it was separately administered under the direct supervision of the Governor-General of India. Arakan however, was soon transferred to the Government of Bengal, and in 1828, the Superintendent of Arakan was made subordinate to the Commissioner of Chittagong.³¹ Close affinity with Bengal was once again re-enforced.

It is however important to understand that the colonial state differentiated the native Muslim population of Arakan from the influx that may have happened from Chittagong. This distinction was so acutely played out that the British administration even as late as 1921 made a clear distinction between 'normal civil population' and 'adventitious population'. In the census report of 1921, '4985' males and '3775' females were marked as 'normal civil Mahomedan' population of the Arakan division.³² On the other hand, '8613' males and only '14' females were registered as 'adventitious Mahomedan' population in the Arakan division.³³ The skewed sex ratio of the adventitious Mahomedan population is supportive of the fact that these men were immigrants from Bengal, as historically migration under various forms of indenture was a largely male affair.

A closer examination of the colonial sources will reveal a plethora of evidence of 'native Muslim population' in Arakan, sometimes distinctively identifiable as 'Rohingyas'. The creation of 'ethnicities' through the census making process is a well-studied phenomenon. The classic work of Charles Hirschman on ethnicity formation in Malaysia gives a sound theoretical framework for the same. Charles Hirschman, in his valuable works on the mentalities of colonial census-makers in the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and their successor state of Malaysia, has demonstrated

how identity-categories in the censuses from the late nineteenth-century till after the Second World War reflected a change in colonial perception about 'native' identity over time. Hirschman primarily concludes that gradually race becomes the important criterion over religion. In the aftermath of Indian independence, the disparate race-categories for the natives of the Indian sub-continent were retained in essence but re-classified as 'Indian' or 'Pakistani'.³⁴ In the case of the Rohingyas, it is an amalgamation of prioritising 'religion' and 'language' over a common cultural milieu, which they might have shared with the Buddhist Arakanese or the Rakhines.

At the heart of the present day ethnic conflict is the historical trajectory of the development of religion and politics in this region separate from the rest of Burma. There is even evidence to suggest that the Muslim Arakanese, under the leadership of U Hla Tun Pru, organised rallies in Rangoon in order to demand 'Arakanistan' on 16th May, 1947, just before the impending declaration of independence in 1948.³⁵ In May 1946, Muslim Arakanese asked for Jinnah's assistance in the annexing of the region to Pakistan. Two months later, the North Arakan Muslim League was founded in Akyab (renamed Sittwe) and it too demanded annexation to Pakistan.³⁶ Even after independence, at the end of 1954, the '*mujahid*' problem of Arakan remained acute. The situation abated only with the arrest of the *mujahid* leader Cassim, a fisherman in Chittagong, by the then East Pakistani authorities.³⁷ The Arakanese aspiration for a separate state often found expression in the form of what was dismissed by the colonial state as 'acts of dacoits'. In a secret telegram sent on 7th October, 1946, by the Governor of Burma to the Secretary of State for Burma, the Governor expressed the 'serious situation' in Akyab created by the Sein Da gang. The Governor noted that the town of Pyapon in Arakan was 'attacked second night by one hundred dacoits in uniform who posted pickets and engaged Battalion HQ, making it impossible for troops to protect the town as planned'.³⁸ It is amply clear that in this situation, these were no ordinary dacoits but in fact armed rebels. In a similar telegram on 11th October, 1946, Sir Hubert Rance, the Governor of Burma, informed Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the Secretary of State for Burma, that the 'situation at Saw in Arakan was deteriorating'. He went on to describe the town to be 'in a state of siege'.³⁹ It is thus evident that *mujahid* groups like Force 136, Force U, Force V and SeinDa's gang were waging armed rebellions even before independence.

The antecedent of the Rohingya identity therefore must be located in the pre-colonial era, where the dynamics of a shared environmental continuum across Bengal and Arakan led to the formation of a people, today trapped by the divide of modern nation-state boundaries.

Chittagong and Mrauk-U: The *entrepôt* and hinterland entanglement

*Chittagong was now in the domain of Arakan, Gobindamanikya (King of Tripura) in his exile was welcomed by the king of Arakan when he arrived in Chittagong. The king of Arakan expressed his desire to help him recover his throne...Near the village of Rajakul, Gobindamanikya began to reside in the fort of the Mags with the permission of the Arakanese king...Selfishness, anger, greed, jealousy were the common traits among the Mag children. In spite of staying with their parents these Mag children do not receive a good education. That is why in the fort of the Mags prevails the anarchy of the Mags.*⁴⁰

Rajarshi, one of Tagore's most popular novels (first published in 1939), captures the interconnectedness of the Bengali and Arakanese milieu. In *Rajarshi*, as presented in the above section, the fluidity of space in the confluence of Arakan, Chittagong and Tripura is evident. It is also evident that for Tagore, the Bengali language functions as an enlightening cultural influence. Therefore it is natural that the protagonist of *Rajarshi*, the scholarly exiled king of Tripura Gobindamanikya, takes it upon himself to educate the children of the Mags. The implicit message therefore is that though the Mags are rulers of Chittagong, they are still inferior to the Bengalis. Not only in Tagore but socio-culturally too the Mags in Bengal are seen to be marauders without cultural sophistication. Hence the phrase '*magermuluk*', meaning total lawlessness, is prevalent even today in Bengal. Tagore, drawing from the *Rajmala*, the chronicles of the Manikya dynasty of Tripura, composed not one but three works on Arakan. Tagore's short story *Dalia* is based on the exile of Shah Shuja, the defeated brother of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.⁴¹ Shah Shuja, after his defeat in the hands of Aurangzeb, lost the *subedari* (governorship) of Bengal and fled to Arakan. However, there remains ambiguity about the fate of Shah Shuja. According to some versions, he was betrayed and murdered by the Arakanese king, Candasudhammaraja (1652-1684), while in other accounts it is said that he fled to Manipur. It is nonetheless clear that the Mughal-Arakan relationship was far more cordial.⁴²

Tagore, on the other hand, tried to weave the possibility of love between Dalai, the Arakanese prince, and Jhulikha, Shah Shuja's daughter. Tagore perhaps foresaw a shadow of communal disharmony in the legend about Shah Shuja and therefore probably felt the necessity to create an alternative.⁴³ Tagore in his other short story *Mukut* (first published in 1908),⁴⁴ portrays the regional patriotism of Arakan, whereby the Arakanese king refuses to submit to the prince of Tripura.

The appearance of Arakan in the Bengali cultural milieu does not however start with Tagore. In fact, it has a long history going back to the seventeenth century. The Arakanese Muslims and the Bengali language come to

play an important role in the early modern state formation in the Arakan littoral. The support and proximity of the Bengal Sultanate was a significant but not sufficient reason for the heightened role of Islamic idioms and the use of the Bengali language in the Arakanese court, the rulers of which were Buddhists.

Mrauk-U, in its geopolitical situation, was basically only the Dhanawati plain intersected by the Mayu, Kaladan and Lemro river systems. The functioning of Mrauk-U as an *entrepôt* was however not autonomous in spite of being on the coast. It depended on the political situation beyond the Arakan Yoma (Arakan Range). The long distance ruby trade for instance shifted into Arakan only when a state of war existed between the Central and Lower Burmese polities.⁴⁵ This rendered the region as a hinterland suitable for the cultivation of rice and cotton. It is in this context that Chittagong began to play an important role. The period between the late sixteenth and middle of the seventeenth century saw the incorporation of Chittagong as the premier *entrepôt* of the Arakanese kingdom. In recent years, the *entrepôt* nature of Chittagong has been well articulated by scholars like David Ludden, who has suggested that Chittagong not only serviced Bengal and Arakan but also linked all the way up to Sylhet.⁴⁶ This is perhaps not the first case in the past where an expanding agrarian kingdom based in the hinterland incorporates a coastal *entrepôt*. The dynamism of a coastal *entrepôt* does not limit itself to the city itself but also transforms the interior. In the period 1595-1659, the revenue demand in the region around Chittagong increased to 117 per cent and the revenue system in the region continued to follow the Arakanese standards even into the nineteenth century. Therefore, the influence of the Arakanese agrarian system in Chittagong is beyond doubt.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the growing importance of Chittagong as an *entrepôt* forced the Arakanese rulers to adopt and provide patronage to the urban elites of Chittagong, who were primarily Bengali Muslims. This entanglement of Chittagong and Mrauk-U led to a unique court culture in Arakan.

The kingdom of Arakan patronised Muslim Bengali poets from the eastern parts of Bengal. Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti) traces the presence of Maradan Donagazi and Alaol in the Arakan court.⁴⁸ Alaol composed his version of the *Padmavat* in the Arakan court, which he identifies as the Rosung court. The Arakan kingdom remained a vassal of the Sultanate of Bengal till 1531. However, even after that, the Buddhist Mrauk-U dynasty fashioned themselves as Sultans and maintained Islamic idioms in governance.⁴⁹ The adoption of Islamic idioms in governance was by no means unique in Arakan. Phillip B. Wagoner has done a similar study to show the adoption of Islamic idioms in the kingdom

of Vijayanagar in south India.⁵⁰ Harvey notes that even as early as 1430, when Naramaikhla re-conquered Arakan, his 'Mahomedan followers built the Sandihkan mosque at Mrohaung (Mrauk-U), and it was under him that a court bard, Adumnyo, wrote the historic song *Yahkaingminthami-egyin*'.⁵¹ Harvey further notes that:

*Thereafter it is common for the kings [Arakanese], though Buddhists, to use Mahomedan designations in addition to their own names, and even to issue medallions bearing the kalmia, the Mahomedan confession of faith, in Persian script; doubtless at first, about this time, the kings had these medallions struck for them in Bengal, but later they struck their own.*⁵²

The control of Chittagong also enabled the Arakanese to be a 'race of competent seamen'.⁵³ Thus the Arakanese acquired the much feared reputation as Mags in Bengal. The term Mag finds reference not only in the Bengali phrase '*magermuluk*', meaning 'land of lawlessness', but also in various kinds of Bengali literature. Tagore identifies the Mags as Buddhists in the novel *Rajarshi* when Raghupati, the Hindu priest, draws a distinction between the Hindus and the Mags in the context of animal sacrifice. Kunal Chakrabarti and Shubhra Chakrabarti in their *Historical Dictionary of the Bengalis* describe the Mags as:

*Seafaring men from Arakan (roughly corresponding to the present Rakhine State of Myanmar, located to the southeast of Chittagong, Bangladesh) and usually associated with piracy. The Mags were excellent sailors, and in the 17th century, they, along with the Portuguese pirates, were employed by the king of Arakan to raid the rich neighbouring states of Bengal which they looted and ravaged. Shaista Khan, the Mughal governor of Bengal, and Pratapaditya, one of the BaroBhuiyans, temporarily subjugated these pirates. But it is only after 1784, when Myanmar defeated Arakan, that the Mags were brought under control. Later, they migrated in large numbers to Chittagong and to the island of Sandwip in Bangladesh. The Mags are Buddhist by religion. The expression magermulluk in Bengali, denotes complete lawlessness, and is derived from the memory of the terror they unleashed on the coastal areas of southeast Bengal in the 17th and 18th centuries.*⁵⁴

The reference to Mags can also be traced to colonial surveys. Francis Hamilton, in 'An Account of the Frontier Between Ava and the Part of Bengal Adjacent to the Karnaphuli River', makes references to the Muggs. This article by Hamilton, also known as Francis Buchanan (!), first appeared in the *The Edinburgh Journal of Science*, Vol. 3, 1825. Despite its relatively late dating, Hamilton's understanding of the area and the people was not substantially different from those found in his earlier diaries during his travels in the area in 1798.⁵⁵ Hamilton described the Mags as follows:

East from Korilliyapahar, is a fine valley called Rumagniya, which extends north and south from Kamaphuli...it contains some small hills, it is well cultivated by the Bengalese peasants; and some parts

*still belongs, as the whole did formerly, to the hereditary chief of the tribe called Muggs at Calcutta, where they are much employed by the Christians as cooks, their habits fitting them for preparing our impure diet, which neither Hindu nor Muhammedan can approach without disgust...The people called Muggs, at Calcutta, are scarcely known by that name in their native country. By the Bengalese, they are commonly called Chakma or Sagma, or, in ridicule, Dubades (two tongued), because they have in general forgotten their original language, which is the same with that of Arakan or Roang, as they call it, and have attained a very imperfect knowledge of the Bengalese... The national religion of the Muggs is the same with that of Arakan (Rakhain), that is to say, they follow the sect of Maha Muni among the Bouddhists. The chief priest assumes the same title, Paun-do-giri, with the spiritual guide of the king of Ava...the books which I saw such using, were in the Bengalese character, and except a few words, they understood no other language.*⁵⁶

Thus it is quite clear that the Mags were Buddhists and not Muslims. It is however also evident from the above and also from the discussion in the earlier section on the Bengali cultural milieu of Arakan, that Bengali was a trans-community language and a language of prestige in the region, used by Mags (Rakhine Buddhists), Muslims and Hindus alike. It is also interesting that Arakan is referred to as Rosung or Roang by Alaol and is the Bengali term for the region. This shows that there was a considerable flow of people and ideas between the *entrepôt* and the hinterland. If Bengali Muslim urban elites moved to the hinterland in search of state patronage, the Arakanese Buddhists moved closer to the *entrepôt* for piracy and marauding. Thus, the environmental continuum, as suggested by Charney, also facilitated a dialogue across the Banga-Arakan divide. It is in this entanglement that perhaps the search for a Rohingya history can be made.

Conclusion

The history of the Rohingyas therefore is not one that starts with colonial migration, though traces of their existence are evident in the colonial discourse. The colonial obsession with 'census making' and 'categories' clearly disrupted the fluidity of their identity. The imposition of modern state boundaries undermined the geographic continuum at the edge of the Bay of Bengal. The entanglement of *entrepôt* and hinterland within the Arakanese polity meant that it not only fundamentally affected forms of 'governmentality'⁵⁷ through the adoption of Bengali, Persian and Islamic idioms but also affected the socio-economic structure of the polity. In this case, marauding and piracy became legitimate forms of state revenue. The environmental Banga-Arakanese continuum provided the space for the entanglement of *entrepôt* and hinterland to play out and create a heterodox socio-cultural milieu. This milieu was however disrupted

with the loss of the 'entanglement' when Chittagong was lost by the Arakanese in 1666. A further disruption occurred when Arakan itself was incorporated within a bigger agrarian Burmese empire in 1784 and the deliberate 'Irrawady-ization' policies of the Burmese state. In the colonial era post-1825, there was a renewal of the entanglement when Arakan and subsequently Burma were incorporated within British India. However, developments post-1937, with the separation of colonial Burma from British India, and again in the post-colonial period, led to the imposition of cartographic boundaries without consideration to the environmental continuum. This resulted in the separation and displacement of communities. The ugliest manifestation of which can be seen in the form of the Rohingya crisis at present. There is however no doubt that even the odious apparatus of a modern state cannot impose completely opaque and non-porous boundaries. The entanglement, though weakened, continues to exist even today. The only viable solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in the revival of the entanglement across the Banga-Arakan environmental continuum.

Notes

1. Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', *The Collected Verse of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1907), 285.
2. M. W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.
3. Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea and Other Sketches, Vol. 1* (Sussex: Macmillan & Co., 1938), 208.
4. *Ibid.*, 208.
5. See W. J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819: Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Konbaung Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).
6. J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 111.
7. See H. Tinker, *The Union of Burma* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 34-63.
8. See M. W. Charney, 'Rise of a Mainland Trading State: Rakhaing under the early Mrauk-U Kings, c.1430-1630', *Journal of Burma Studies*, Vol. 3 (1998): 1-33. Also see by the same author, 'Crisis and Reformation in a Maritime Kingdom of Southeast Asia: Forces of Instability and Political Disintegration in Western Burma (Arakan), 1603-1701', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 41(2), (1998): 185-219; and 'Where Jambudipa and Islamdom Converged: Religious Change and the Emergence of Buddhist Communalism in Early Modern Arakan (15th -19th centuries)' (PhD disst., University of Michigan, 1999). In addition, see J. Leider and J. Gommans, eds., *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring Political, Cultural and Commercial Interactions in the Indian Ocean World, 1200-1800* (Leiden: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2002).
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10. See Maung Tha Hla, *The Rohingya Hoax* (New York: Buddhist Rakhaing Cultural Association, 2009).
11. Charney, 'Jambudipa and Islamdom'.
12. M. W. Charney, 'Beyond State-centred Histories in Western Burma: Missionizing Monks and Intra-regional Migrants in the Arakan Littoral, c. 1784-1860', in *The Maritime Frontier*, eds. Leider and Gommans, 215.
13. A. Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (London: Hurst & Co., 2016), 18.
14. *Ibid.*, 20.
15. See J. Saha, 'Is it in India? Colonial Burma as a 'Problem' in South Asian History', *South Asian History and Culture*, Vol. 7 (1) (2016): 23-29.
16. See P. Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001).
17. G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, The Beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925), 139.
18. M. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972), 18.
19. *Ibid.*, 35.
20. Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 88.
21. J. McKinnon, 'The Political Future of Burma Revisited: A Historical Geography and Review of the Current Situation', *Interdisciplinary Peace Research*, Vol. 5 (2):3-36, 13.
22. See N. R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: OUP, 1971).
23. Alan Smith, 'Burma/Myanmar: The Struggle for Democracy and Ethnic Rights', in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, eds. W. Kymlicka and B. He (Oxford, New York: University of Oxford Press Inc., 2005), 264.
24. See Kazi Fahmida Farzana, 'Boundaries in Shaping the Rohingya Identity and the Shifting Context of Borderland Politics', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2015): 292-314.
25. Smith, 'Burma/Myanmar'.
26. F. Buchanan, 'A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in Burma Empire', reprinted in *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, Vol.1 (1) (2003):40-57, 45.
27. *Ibid.*, 55.
28. A. J. Valpy, ed. 'A chart of Ten Numerals in Two Hundred Languages', *The Classical Journal*, Vol. VII, (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Ormt, and Browne; Lunn; Richardson; Dulau; Law; and Sharpe and Halles, 1811), 105-119, 107, accessed March 2018, <http://archive.org>.
29. See Tha Hla, *The Rohingya Hoax*.
30. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 24.
31. *Ibid.*, 29.
32. S. G. Grantham, *Census of India (Burma), Vol. 10 (1921)*, accessed March 2018, <http://archive.org>, 20.
33. *Ibid.*, 21.

34. See C. Hirschman, 'The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 46 (3) (1987): 555-582; and by the same author, 'The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology', *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 1 (2) (1986):330-362.
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36. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*, 96.
37. Tinker, H., *The Union of Burma*, 56.
38. 'Secret Telegram', 77.
39. *Ibid.*, 80.
40. Translated by me from Rabindranath Tagore, 'Rajarshi', Part 42, *Rabindra Racanabali*, Vol. 2 (Shantiniketan: Viswabharati Publication, 1346), 484.
41. See Rabindranath Tagore, 'Dalia', *Rabindra Racanabali* (Shantiniketan: Viswabharati Publication, 1988).
42. Edward James Rap, Sir Wolseley Haig and Sir Richard Burn, *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 481.
43. Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), 'Myth and History of Bengali Identity in Arakan,' in *The Maritime Frontier*, eds. Leider and Gommans, 202.
44. See Rabindranath Tagore, 'Mukut', *Rabindra Racanabali* (Shantiniketan: Viswabharati Publication, 1984).
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46. David Ludden, 'Cowrie Shells in Global Asia: Trade and Territory around Sylhet' (paper presented in seminar at Tufts University, Medford, February 14, 2018).
47. See C. G. H. Allen, *Final Report of the Survey and Settlement of the District of Chittagong, 1888-1898* (Calcutta, 1900).
48. Bhattacharya, 'Myth and History', 204.
49. M. Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, Western Burma/Myanmar* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 23-4.
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52. *Ibid.*, 140.
53. *Ibid.*, 140.
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56. *Ibid.*
57. A. Fontana and M. Bertani, 'Situating the Lectures' in M. Foucault, *Society must be defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), 284.

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'Gondwana'/'Gondwanaland'¹ as a Homeland of the Gonds: Storytelling in the Paintings of Gond Pilgrims²

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टेथिससमुंदमध्यलहराये. दोव्दीपमंभेदकराय.
अंगाराजनआर्यकहाये. गोंडवानाजनगोंडकहाये.
चारभागपुनिभयेअंगारा, गोंडवानापंचखंडदोबारा
पंचसमूहगण्डकहलाया, गण्डअंकगोंडवानापाया³

*I weave a story of this land, always at your feet is Onkar.
First I bow to Mother Earth, whose greatness our ancestors
sang of.
That same tale I sing again and again. This land blesses me, so
I sing.
The land is shaped as a sphere. Under the land is Pangea.
Three-fourth of the land is water. It is called Penthalsa.
Over time, there were many upheavals. The land broke into
different pieces.
In the north is the land called Angara, the entire land in the
south is Gondwana.
Tethys Sea is thrown in between. It divides both the lands.
Inhabitants of Angara are called Arya, those of the Gondwana
are Gonds.
Angara got divided into four parts and Gondwana again into
five.
A group of five is called 'गण्ड' (Gand), and from it derives the
name 'Gondwana'.*

Introduction

How does the idea of a Gond homeland find representation in the visual register? Or conversely, how does Gond iconography produce the idea of a homeland? This issue is very tangled in the case of the

visual representations amongst the *adivasi* community of Gonds in the Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra border regions in relation to the idea of 'Gondwana'/'Gondwanaland'. Discourses from natural sciences, colonial anthropology, Hindu nationalism, the concept of indigeneity and *adivasi* life-worlds complexly inform these representations. Although Eduard Suess' 'Gondwanaland' finds a privileged position in this imaginary as the homeland of the Gonds, these assertions also claim to retrieve pre-Vedic antiquity and equate the Harappan script with the Gond script. At the same time, even though the revivalist surge of ethnic consciousness centered on the idea of a distinct Gond religion or *Punem* celebrated through festivals and fairs provides the framework for understanding the homeland, clearly external influences fundamentally over-determine its conception.

This paper will look at the meanings embodied in the idea and visuality of the concept of the Gond homeland 'Gondwana' by using a Gond painter Komal Singh Marai's paintings in the context of considerable local writing related to the *Punem*. I will use this exploration to investigate various kinds of historical pressures that inform these articulations and the ways in which seemingly disparate influences get braided into the conception of a homeland. I will use the writings of Gond pilgrims who visit the festivals and fairs of the *Punem*, most of which are written in the Hindi and Marathi languages, to read the images. By studying the deployment of popular images of 'Gondwana' in the public sphere, this exposition underlines the ways in which ideas of 'Gondwana' are mobilized into existence through place-making discourses in oral, literary and visual media.

The Discourse of 'Gondwana' in Gondi *Punem* and its Literature

Since the 1980s, Eduard Suess' 'Gondwanaland' has appeared endearingly in the material culture, folkloric

narratives, and vernacular literature of the Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra border region inhabited by the Gonds. This invocation of 'Gondwana'/'Gondwanaland' is closely linked with the surge of a revivalist movement in this community that seeks to establish a consolidated *adivasi* religion called Gondi *Punem*/Gondi *Dharma*.⁴ With its origin in cities like Nagpur, Raipur and Bhopal, Gondi *Punem* manifests in a nexus of beliefs and practices: Gond deities are restored, new shrines and pilgrimage centres emerge while older ones are re-invested with signs and symbols from Gond cosmology, language and ritualistic practices shift, and a robust cultural production centred on the issues of *adivasi* language, ethnicity, and sovereignty challenges the mainstream representations of the community. Through community celebrations, festivals, rituals, and pilgrimages these beliefs and practices are consolidated. *Adivasi* deities like Pari Kubar Lingo, Mata Kali Kankali, Mata Jungo Raitad and Ravana are restored in local shrines, both metaphorically and physically. While new centres of worship and pilgrim-ages emerge, the older ones are saturated with new meanings and values. For example, one particular shrine, which is centered on Mahakali, in the city of Chandrapur, is (re)situated in an entangled web of stories. In the contemporary context, the popular religious publications by the Gond community highlight religious associations of the Gond community with the shrine. Similarly, the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra has witnessed a rise in the number of shrines of Ravana and of Ravana *Mahotsavs* (festivals of Ravana) since the year 1992. A shrine of Mata Kali Kankali, located in the Kachargarh caves (of Gondia district in Maharashtra), also known as *utapattisthal* (place of origin) of the Gonds, emerges as one of the most important shrines for *Punem* pilgrimage.⁵ In the 1980s, the cultural leaders of the Gond community, namely K. B. Marskole, Motiravan Kangale, Sheetal Markam, Bharatlal Koram and Sunher Singh Taramji, visited the caves and decided to initiate a pilgrimage there. Soon, the annual gathering turned into a means of educating the *adivasis* about their culture and rights.⁶

The literary sphere too engaged actively with the religious changes in the community. Various community groups, cultural leaders and literary activists contributed to the deeper study of the folklore and culture of the region and the publication of the resulting studies. Vyankatesh Atram's 1984 text – *Gondi Sanskrutiche Sandarbh* (A Reference to Gondi Culture) – is one of the first texts focused on the revival. The vision of a contiguous 'Gondwana' state that is in agreement with Gond beliefs and practices is at the core of the revival's agenda. In November 1979, a conference on *adivasi* literature was held in Bhadravati in Maharashtra.⁷ Most of the Gond

pilgrims hail it as the first conference to be organized chiefly for *adivasi* writers of the Marathi language.

The writers among the Gond pilgrims function at different locations and undertake a variety of projects. Writers like Bhujang Meshram, Vinayak Tumram and Govind Gare work from the location of university spaces in cities (of Maharashtra) and attempt to dissociate *adivasi* literature from the Marathi literary sphere. Their works, especially those of Meshram, are heavily influenced by native American and *adivasi* assertions. Then there are revivalist writers like Sunher Singh Taram, Usha Kiran Atram, Motiravan Kangale and Prakash Sallame, etc., whose writings are at the heart of the revival and aimed specifically towards the readers within the community. 'Little magazines', monographs on deities and shrines, and booklets on mythology are the primary modes of communication. All these publications, in some way, are either financially supported or ideologically influenced by community groups like *Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad* (All-Gondwana Gond Literary Academy). They persistently labour to lend historicity to cultural assertions while heavily drawing on colonial anthropology, both in terms of content and method. In doing so, mythical places are rendered tangible and mapped onto regional geographies. In fact, in an interview, Sunher Singh Taram delightfully narrates how Bishop Eyre Chatterton's text, *Story of Gondwana* (1916), was instrumental in the revival of the Kachargarh fair. Kachi Kubar Lohgad (The Hill Rich in Iron Ore) in Chatterton's text is identified as Kachargarh by the revivalists.⁸ This place serves as a site for the revival of an annual pilgrimage, as pointed out earlier. Over the years, Kachargarh has transformed into a significant site for the dissemination of Gondi *Punem* ideas and customs. Most importantly, the revivalists claim to have found pieces of their lost history in Chatterton's 'Gondwana'. Its textual and visual content finds its way into popular posters and folksongs.

The third cluster of writers is the one associated with local presses in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The primary literary output from this group includes language primers, posters, and booklets of devotional and folk songs in Gondi, Chhattisgarhi and Hindi. This ultra-minor literature is a highly local retelling of revivalist writing. Here colonial anthropology merges with folk memory to open up intimate and transformative spaces. In these writings, pilgrimage centers, deities, the homeland of 'Gondwana', cultural leaders and even the discoverers of the Gondwana – the 'scientists' Eduard Suess and Alfred Wegner – are eulogized with utmost devotion. A couplet on the scientists, which appears in one of the creation myths in which the imagined homeland is placed between the formation of Narmada river and the Amarkantak hills, reads as follows:

वैज्ञानिकवैगनरहुआ, अमेरिकाअल्फ्रेड/महाद्वीपविस्थापन,
दियावास्तविकलेख

A scientist named Wegner and Alfred from America/wrote scientific essays on the creation of the island.⁹

The folk songs are meant to accompany various rituals and often get adapted in local albums and movies. The ever-floating, shifting tectonic landmass of 'Gondwanaland', which is now fragmented into different continents and scattered around the globe, is reanimated as the ancestral homeland of the Gonds. One of the pilgrims, Barkhade, notes:

दक्षिणखंडधरागोंडवाना. कहुँजिसेइतिहासबखाना. सुन-मुनसोनचिरैयाभोरी.
दानुरवीरधरा, कुयमोरी.

That southern part of the Earth, which is called 'Gondwana' in history/It is, in fact, Sunmun dwip (island), a golden bird, land of Dainur warriors, and called Koyamuri dwip (island).¹⁰

'Gondwana' thus emerges as the mythological, historical and political centre of the world. Human life, civilization, language and music begin here. It is also a place where justice and glory prevails. In the recollection of another pilgrim: 'The rights of forests, trees and birds are never seized from them, *nakshatra* (constellation) never attacks anyone/such is the life in Gondwana'.¹¹

The prospect of establishing a contiguous land of 'Gondwana' for the people described as Gond, who may or may not speak the Gondi language, and which is in agreement with Gond beliefs, governs these revivalist writings and other associated articulations. The revivalists claim that the Gonds have a distinct cultural identity and that they are the original inhabitants or *moolnivasi* of 'Gondwana', a belief which makes them the rightful owners of Gondwana and the custodians of its lands, forests, culture and heritage. The concomitant construction of the 'native' versus 'foreigner'/'invader' distinction is central to this imaginary. 'Hindu' religious communities are positioned as 'invaders' and 'outsiders' by the deployment of the 'Aryan invasion theory'.

The 'Aryans' are held responsible for the marginalization of the *moolnivasi*, more specifically the Gonds. The Gond past is buttressed by the evidence of various archaeological excavations, sculptures and places of historical significance in India. Mohenjo Daro is claimed as the seat of Gond civilization, its script as the ancient Gond script, and the Gondi language as an ancient language. Present-day non-tribals are viewed as descendants of the cruel 'Aryans' who invaded 'Gondwana', destroyed *adivasi* places of worship, and forcibly converted the natives to 'Hinduism'. The narrative goes as follows: 'The pre-Aryan *adivasi* culture

was an urban and prosperous civilization. The Aryans arrived from outside and indiscriminately killed the non-Aryan. The cities were looted. They were reduced to penury and compelled to migrate out of their lands'.¹² The entry of 'Aryans' is thus a 'dramatic reference point' in this consciousness. Forced assimilation and deception by the 'Aryans' represents a monumental intervention in *adivasi* history. This event recurs several times in the literature of revival and is linked with the Gonds' experience of marginalization. The experience of being driven into forests is written into Gond subjectivity through such narratives. Forest places then get constructed as sacred places. The themes of marginalization and religious intrusion appear to recall experiences of social inequality and subordination.

There is a peculiar emphasis on the outside origins of the 'Aryans'. The motif of settler colonization is deployed to characterize the 'Aryans'. In Vyankatesh Atram's account, the 'Aryans', after having invaded India forcefully, annihilated the native Gond culture and civilization, thereby compelling them to migrate to the forested regions. The religion of the 'Aryans' remains alien to the natives as 'the ones who tried to emulate/follow the 'Aryan religion' were punished... the yagnya dharma of the Aryans (hence) was limited to the Aryans and Kshatriya sons'.¹³ The repeated attempts of the 'Aryans' to annihilate Gond culture is met with resistance. 'Aryans' remain outsiders in the ancient as well the modern Indian nation.

Language emerges as another significant element in these place-making narratives. Atram asserts that the 'Gondi language is the mother of Marathi',¹⁴ and Kangale reads the Harappan script as Gondi script, as mentioned earlier. Atram further writes: 'The term 'Gondi' symbolizes demographic rather than caste associations. The people living in the region named "Gondwana" and the ones who can speak and understand Gondi language are Gonds'. Kangale's assertion serves two purposes: first, it lends a deep past to Gond culture; second, it establishes the presence of a culture before the Aryan invasion. Kangale's evaluation of the Harappan hieroglyphics is an intense engagement in place-making that laboriously constructs a pre-Vedic antiquity. In the introduction to *Decipherment of Indus Script in Gondi*, Kangale compares various ancient cultures based on their rich hieroglyphic traditions. While doing so, the cultures of 'Harappa, Ancient Sumer, Eastern Islamite Egypt and Southeast Europe'¹⁵ emerge as significant ancient cultures. Like Atram, he goes on to suggest that Gondi is a proto-Dravidian language. By placing the collective history of the community in the ancient time, a more acceptable future for the language and script is envisaged.

These writings claim to be addressing the marginalization and repression of *adivasi* voices. For example, Vyankatesh Atram prefaces his work with a brief note on the 'reference-less language'¹⁶ of his book. This language alone, he feels, can express the 'intimacies of the dialects of the Gonds, Korkus and Kollams who reside in the remote insularity of the forests, details of (their) lives, and mysteries of their distinct identity. It is an answer to (their) silences'.¹⁷ Thus, a consciousness of having been 'repressed', 'silenced' and 'marginalized' guides the poetic tributes to the homeland. This homeland is at first 'discovered' and then flung into existence by an emergent ethnic consciousness. Sallame writes wistfully: 'That which is lost will be found/and the one that is found/I do not want to lose'.¹⁸

'Gondwana' in Paintings by Komal Singh Marai

From the literary writings and in the popular culture of the *Punem*, three forms of visual representations of 'Gondwana' emerge: i) paintings¹⁹ ii) posters and iii) monochromatic maps. All these three forms create different kinds of places, which are allegorical, political, and cartographical respectively. Here I draw from Anishinaabeg Studies, a body of writings invested in the cultural history of indigenous peoples of Canada and North America. Much is to be gained from the recent trends in Anishinaabeg Studies, especially in terms of method, as these writings have argued that 'stories are not only things but *do things*, like provoke action, embody sovereignty, or structure social and political institutions'.²⁰ Borrowing from Anishinaabeg Studies in which stories 'serve as the foundation and framework for the field...providing both a methodological and theoretical approach to our scholarship',²¹ this essay brings together 'storied contexts' rather than just invoking the stories depicted in the two paintings of the Gond painter Komal Singh Marai. In doing so, the way in which these paintings converse with colonial anthropology and the folklore of the region, where they contribute to the aesthetic project of establishing a distinct *adivasi* consciousness, is brought to the fore.

Komal Singh Marai's book *Gondwana Bhukhandki Prasangik Kathavastu* (The Relevant Folklore of Gondwana) published in the year 2002, presents five paintings to accompany his poetic narration of the evolution of 'Gondwana'. I have selected two paintings for discussion from it. The two selected images in particular bring multiple genealogies together: geological artefacts, British colonial and concomitant pedagogical practices, Hindu reform movements to which the Gonds were earlier subjected, questions of political sovereignty, recent discourses on indigeneity as it arrives in India

from global bodies like the UNESCO, and contemporary cultural assertions related to religious and ethnic identities of the Gonds. Suess' discovery is an object of utmost appreciation and devotion here. Collected together in a tight frame, various symbols and icons interact and clash with each other in a complex way. Though both the paintings I focus on borrow heavily from the posters in circulation in the community and the *Punem*, Marai's deployment of oil, acrylic and 'storied landscape' lends them a character all of their own. The following paragraphs attempt to understand the contexts of various stories invoked in this painting as they open up creative spaces for negotiation.

Figure 1 is a painting, one of the five that use mythological stories as their ground of articulation, on a book cover with a slight gloss. Two inventive globes are firmly placed at the diagonally opposite corners of the frame as if they are dictatorially hovering around and en-framing other elements in the painting, forcefully echoing their significance in the visual. A yellow band divides the cover into two sections. While the upper section contains icons in circulation in the posters, the elements in the lower sections are more imaginative. The name of the homeland, 'Gondwana', written elegantly across the page in bold, white letters, in Devanagari script, guides the viewers' perspective in 'seeing' the image.

The main elements, the two globes, guide the discussion. Between them are firmly etched a Gondwana *sapatrangi dhvajha* or the Gond *Punem dhvajha* (seven-coloured Gondwana flag) and the *sodum*, a tiger mounted on an elephant, which was once the state symbol of the Gond kingdom of Chandrapur. Below the subtitle are a reverse swastika, a dove with an olive branch in its beak and a trident emerging from the logo of the *Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad*, the literary body that funded the publication of this book. Towards the centre of the painting is an open book attached to which is a small reading lamp.

At first, the fundamental referents in the image appear very simple. The globes at the border of the paintings refer to 'Gondwanaland', a geological entity that finds mention in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century geologist Eduard Suess' four volume treatise *Das Antilitx der Erde (1883-1909)*. Suess' propositions on the evolution of the Earth²² gained currency in the late 20th century and hold a dominant place in school curricula in India. By rendering the images of 'Gondwanaland' in oil and placing them along the political and mythological symbols from Gond religion, Marai lends an imaginative aspect to the 'scientific' representation of the landmass called 'Gondwanaland'. The Gondwana flag is representative of the belief and kinship structure of the Gond community. 750 is the number of the ancestral gods

and the seven colours refer to their patterns of grouping. One of the pilgrims notes that 'this flag is representative of the *gandjeevs* (the inhabitants of 'Gondwana') and Gond *Punem* values'.²³

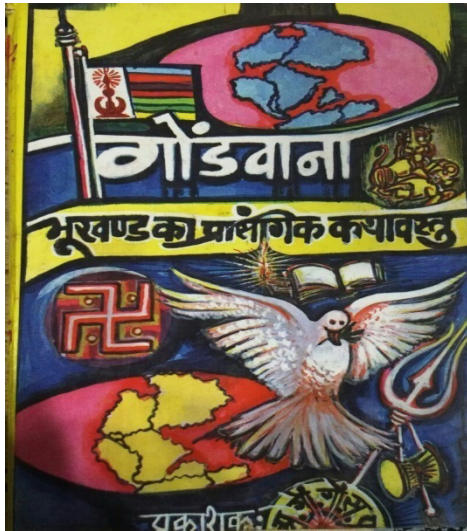


Figure 1: *Untitled*. Painting by Komal Singh Marai²⁴

Another icon, a tiger mounted on an elephant, locally called *sodum*, is painted with a tinge of gold and was the official crest or *raj-chinha* of the erstwhile Gond kingdom of Chanda. The trident in the left is representative of the deity Budha Dev and sometimes signifies the *Trishul Marga*, an emphasis on 'mind, body, and knowledge'²⁵ in the *Punem*. However, the trident is a dense symbol which invokes multiple subtexts. It also represents the deity Shiva, who is locally referred to as 'Shambhu' or 'Mahadeva'. In the writings of Kangale, the Pashupati seal from Harappa – which is sometimes read as a pre-Vedic representation of Shiva, is presented as an older depiction of the Gond deity Lingo.

On closer reading, deeper meanings can be found embedded. Once a symbol of conquest, the object called the terrestrial globe has 'always served as a pedagogic proxy for our planet, placing the unfathomable in our grasp'.²⁶ However, this colonial import also served as a 'means for producing "enlightened but colonized" natives who learned to recognize themselves as inhabitants of not just Mother Earth but also as subjects of the vast empire since the late eighteenth century'.²⁷ Gond pilgrim Komal Singh Marai, who introduces himself in his book as 'illiterate, but born artist, painter, and sculptor', works into this colonizing object of the globe intimate histories that resist and defy the conquest. It is a worlding from the perspective of a Gond artist from the twenty-first century whose life-world remains affected by the devastating legacies of colonialism and its epistemic practices that have far outlived their progenitors.

In India, the colonial disciplines of Anthropology and Geology developed coevally. Pratik Chakrabarti, through his detailed analysis of the persistence of the trope of 'Gondwana' in geology, history and ethnography in nineteenth century India, highlights the simultaneous processes of archaeological excavations and ethnological studies that led to the creation of a primitive, pre-Vedic 'Gondwana' in the imperial consciousness.²⁸ The landscape of central India is worked into the creation of the colonial category of 'aborigines' that was reiterated in the anthropological studies of the time. The persistent investment of colonial knowledge in the creation of the trope of 'Gondwana', Chakrabarti asserts, was dictated by the search for an aboriginal populace. The concept of primitivism, which was essential to the sustenance of the category of the 'aborigines', a majority of which population happened to be the Gonds in the case of central India, found affirmation in the geological theories of Gondwanaland. The ancient 'Gondwanaland' in geology, the historical kingdom of 'Gondwana' and the people called Gonds were linked together by colonial disciplines. In the contemporary context, some of the pilgrims' assertions through popular visuals in the public sphere represent conversations with a diverse set of concepts like 'primitivism', 'tradition', and 'tribe'. These visuals show how the knowledge systems created during the colonial times have deeply seeped into the cultural memory of the Gond community. This knowledge however, after interaction with folk memory, creates ideas and agency for the community to articulate claims of indigeneity, ethnicity and a consolidated religious identity. 'Gondwana', thus mythologized in resplendence by Gond pilgrims, amidst their deities and histories, speaks scathingly to the conceit of the British Empire, particularly as it was represented in an early twentieth century ethnological text, Chatterton's *Story of Gondwana*, published in the year 1916:

*Not that Gondwana made history in the brilliant fashion which Rajasthan, and many other regions of India, did. Its earlier history is more that of the child races of the world. The fact, however, that it has got its own stories of romance and pathos, and that for well-nigh four centuries it had its four kingdoms, ruled over by its own Gond rulers, makes all that we possess of its history worthy of being more widely known than it is at present.*²⁹

Chatterton constructs his 'story' based on the writings of Sir James Malcolm, Colonel Todd and Captain Forsyth's 'old-world book *The Highlands of Central India*, and detached pieces of history to be found in Government District Gazetteers'.³⁰ A review of the book, dated September 30, 1916, in *Illustrated London News*, lauds Chatterton for confirming through his work that the 'country (India) has given splendid proof that its hopes

and fortunes are bound up with those of the Empire'.³¹

Drawing on Gond cosmology, Marai locates the origins of Gondwana's culture in its water bodies. In a highly charged, dramatic and onomatopoeic passage, waterfalls, rivers and canals swiftly emerge out of the peaks of Amarkantak with tremendous intensity as they rush to merge into the oceans of humanity. This he terms 'the culture of Gondwana'³² An imagery of a seascape, which appears in the myths surrounding the beginnings of life on Singar *dwip* and Koyamuri *dwip*, are drawn into the painting. In Kangale's version of the Singar *dwip* story, life on Earth begins from a flood myth. In this myth, water emerges as an ancestor of humankind. First there was a deluge because of which Singar *dwip* was drowned in water. 'Only a peak from the Amarkantak Mountain remained above water'.³³ A human couple, Salla-Gangra, along with a turtle and crow, survived the flood. Over the years, the couple gave birth to two children, a boy named Andiraven Periyar and a girl called Sukma Peri. It was the turtle and crow who found land but were unable to take the children to it. The anguished children then prayed to the sea to take them to land. On hearing the children pray, there was an intense movement in the womb of the Earth and gradually, the mountain of Amarkantak emerged out of water. The water that surrounded it then flowed away from its peak. Due to this movement of water away from the peak, rivers were formed. The parents who were lost during the creation of these rivers were perceived to be present in the form of rivers. Water is an ancestor. It provides life to its devotees. Despite the logical inconsistencies in the story, the imagery of water in this myth connotes the beginning, creation and continuity of life. The objects representative of the glory of 'Gondwana' float in the waterscape on the page. The water-bodies represent birth and fluidity in which Gondi Koyamuri *dwip*/Singar *dwip* are juxtaposed with the objects of cultural significance, and figures like Lingo, heavily documented in colonial archives.

In Figure 2, multiple histories collide as an epitome of Western sciences, the globe, is pierced by the belief-worlds of the *adivasis*. Figuratively, an object of 'scientific' knowledge and means of 'discovery', the globe, appears as one of the elements in the waterscape, thereby getting diminished in the order of things. The sea is not a part of the globe anymore, but vice-versa! Liberated out of its context, the globe is invested with the poetics of veneration. The globe here is threatened by the sea as it merges with the cosmological beliefs of the Gonds. In these mythologies, homeland speaks to the legacies of colonization. With the globe placed precariously on it, the trident from the previous image recurs here. In the god posters, Lingo is often portrayed as a human wearing white dhoti and a piece of yellow cloth around

his chest. Marai's portrayal of Lingo, however, forges iconic relationships with the Pashupati seal as the former borrows its colours and contours from the latter. This mosaic ushers the viewer into the poetic offerings to the homeland. Placed alongside the emblems of religious revivalism and erstwhile kingdoms of 'Gondwana', the figure of the homeland draws attention to itself.



Figure 2: *Untitled*. Painting by Komal Singh Marai³⁴

About Figure 2, Marai writes:

*In the archaeological depictions of unbroken Gondwana giant, vibrant and pictorially rich glimpses emerge distinctly. In these, we view scattered fragments of the philosophic, literary and artistic grandeur of its native groups of peoples.*³⁵

Against this is the optimism implied by the images of Lingo, and Persapen, a clan deity amongst the Gonds. A complex religious symbol is used to represent the deity. The representation is called *Salla-Gangra*, and even Persapen sometimes, and is perceived to be an amalgamation of the feminine and masculine forces of nature, the sun and the moon. The visual is a reflection on the deities that survive and continue to flourish despite being subjected to imperial domination in the past. In the context of the Gondi *Punem*, the Persapen image is referred to as *Gondi Dharma Chinha* (Symbol of Gond Religion), and it appears on political and religious posters, and household shrines, and is also constructed in public spaces in cement. In one of the multilingual language primers,³⁶ the Persapen image comes to symbolize *gyan* (knowledge), a philosophical concept. Through the image of Persapen, a distinct cultural archive is inserted into pedagogic materials that flourish independent of state patronage.



Figure 3: From *Gondi Bhasha Pahada*³⁷

These various elements of the painting, each of which is located in a body of knowledge, are collected together by Marai within a narrativized landscape. In fact, in Figure 2, icons and symbols emerge out of water. The *Kaldubgatha*, that narrativizes the beginning of life on Singar *dwip* and Koyamuri *dwip*, runs as a subtext in this image. Traditional deities and objects from Gond cosmology, rising out of water, are brought into focus, while the globes are pushed to the margins of the frame. The objects, each with its own mythological relevance, retrieved carefully from their watery abode, sit proudly on the landmass of 'Gondwana'. While Image 1 draws from 'transcultural' genealogies that have flown in to create a vision of 'Gondwana' for posterity, Figure 2 in contrast illustrates local history as it emerges out of water.

Figure 2 in particular enriches the archaeological 'Gondwana' by deploying elements from its sacred sphere. A distinct visual language of waterscapes, which is borrowed from Gond mythology, produces the claim of cultural sovereignty. As opposed to Figure 1, which serves as the meeting point of various global and local histories across time, Figure 2 explicitly situates itself in the beginning of mythical time. In the worldview of Gond pilgrims, the globe is localized as a homeland, which might at first seem as an aberration. The vibrant colours and themes used suggest that we are looking at a mythical rendition or a dreamscape. It is crowded with elements from Gond life-worlds and material culture – a white bison (horns of which serve ritualistic purposes), tridents which are representative of the deity Budha Dev and also the *Trishul Marga* in the *Punem*, Persapen, and the supreme Lingo who liberates 33 Gond ancestors from their confinement in the Kachargarh caves. In the lower left corner is a man wearing the traditional bison-horn head-dress, staring out of the picture. A slender paint brush cuts across the shoulder of this man and beside it is a name signed in Devanagari script. The topographic archive from the repository of myths is pulled into the painting. The act of seeing this image implicates the viewer in the process of story-telling. Forms of verbal expressions are conjured up. They demand an immersive experience

of viewing. When juxtaposed with the myths from the *Punem*, new imaginative spaces open. By highlighting the legacies of imperial histories in this highly local genre of artistic communication, multiple conversations are initiated.

Then there is *sodum* (a lion mounted on an elephant), in Figure 1, which was the crest of the Gond kingdom of Chanda. All the four historical Gond kingdoms had different crests. Among the Gond pilgrims, *sodum* has the strongest currency. One of the pilgrims explains its meaning as follows: 'The elephant represents Gondwanaland and tiger is a king'.³⁸ The conquest of the elephant by a lion/tiger represents the control of the Gond kings over Gondwana's lands. Further on, the narrative invokes a dream that a mythical king named Jodh Singh once had. In this dream: 'Jodhsingh, the son of Yaduraay, went for a hunt during which he saw a tiger sitting on an elephant. That night, Budha Dev appeared in the king's dream and revealed the significance of what he saw – "This is not a mere revelation, but a blessing! It is an omen asking you to be made the king"'.³⁹ The deity then advised the king: 'Pay attention to the *rajchinha*. You have to think what its presence suggests and base your decisions on these observations'.⁴⁰

In the context of Gond revivalism, only the crest of the Gond kingdom of Chanda gets worked into popular visual and folkloric representations. There could be two possible explanations for this selective revisiting of Gond history. Firstly, the revivalist assertions have been the strongest in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, of which Chanda kingdom was a part. Literary events about *adivasi* literature, and religious and community festivals related to the *Punem*, were initiated first in this region. The kingdom of Chanda remained in power till the early nineteenth century. The position of Chandrapur at the border regions of states, its tangible culture, historical and religious associations, fuel a sense of marginalization of intimate history that is essential for the invocation of a sense of loss. One of the Gond pilgrims, Prakash Sallame, gives expression in his poems to the metaphorical journey in which he discovered his roots. He begins by paying obeisance at the Mahakali shrine of Chandrapur that is located inside the fort of Chanda and has strong Hindu and Dalit associations in the region. At first, Sallame is surprised at the discovery of the Gond origins of Mahakali: 'First I visited Kali Kankali's court and tried to find out her history, she turned out to be the mother of *Koyavanshis*' (i.e. the one born of the womb).⁴¹ Following an intimate conversation with *Mata* (Mother) Kali Kankali, Sallame further stumbles upon the remnants of the historical 'Chandagarh district (in) Gondwana Pradesh', whose relative obscurity in contemporary times moves him to tears. Sallame, then determined to reinstate the

glory of the deity and the kingdom, embarks on a journey through which he would repay the debts of Kali Kankali.

Secondly, the motif of 'lions and elephants in combat' has been widely represented in the architecture and sculpture of South Asia for more than a millennium.⁴² The presence of this motif across the Indian Subcontinent allows Gond pilgrims to claim all these areas as a part of the kingdoms of the Gond kings. For example, in Sallame's *Gondi Kot Darshan* (A Description of Gond Forts) and Kangale's *Gondwanaka Sanskrutik Itihaas* (The Cultural History of Gondwana), a historical Gondwana is created using the lion-elephant motif. A line drawing of the motif appears in Chatterton's *Gondwana*, through which it finds a way into Kangale's texts. Based on the origins and dissemination of the *sodum* motif in the Indian Subcontinent and beyond, in the Gond pilgrims' imaginary, Chandrapur emerges as the centre of their political power. The invocation of *sodum* thus engenders new perspectives on the historical past of the Gond people.

The juxtapositions and compositions of the objects in the paintings create new narratives and infuse them with markers from the repository of cosmological stories of origin. In the depiction of 'Gondwana' as a homeland for the Gonds, its embedding in mythologies and its sustenance by an intense poetics of loss, the paintings enact the experience of marginalization in everyday life. In this exchange of personal and communal histories, new grounds for negotiations open up.

The writings of Gond revivalists are about a place that once was a huge landmass constitutive of five present day continents. Gondwana is now fragmented and scattered across the globe, reduced in size and further marginalized in the post-colonial nation. It is a place whose existence is evidenced by the sciences of modernity. Some of these very sciences flourished due to the creation of the category of 'aboriginals', of which the Gonds made up a significant population. It is a place that was once glorious, but is now dominated by destructive, alien forces. A recovered place, nonetheless, which is within the grasp of its native peoples.

For the Gond pilgrims, finding a homeland on the spherical globe conjures up simultaneous possibilities of at once shifting the origin of the world to central India while forging solidarity with the 'tribal' peoples around the world. By claiming Eduard Suess' 'Gondwanaland' as a homeland, the Gond subjects attempt to liberate themselves of the map of post-colonial India and deploy affective associations at a global level. An intense sense of cultural belonging exists in the name of 'Gondwana' even though the 'Gondwana' of central India was never a territorially bound, one, contiguous state either in pre-colonial or post-colonial India. What purpose would

this recovered, once expansive, homeland serve in the modern world in which physical distances and time are constantly shrinking?

This quest for homeland is a quest for origins, a sense of belonging and nostalgia for a lost history. It allows humans to imagine for themselves a past – a prehistoric one, in this case – in which their languages and cultures flourished, and peace and justice prevailed. As utopias in the past, homelands offer multiple possibilities in the present that could have manifested but have not. To be at home is to be at ease with the surroundings. The invocation of homeland also brings into existence spaces in which hopes and aspirations take shape and drive movement into futures. Homelands thus serve as exemplars of the potentials that its peoples hold in the present.

Notes

1. The terms used to describe the Gond homeland and can be used interchangeably. 'Gondwana' as a discourse emerges at different moments in the past variously as a supercontinent from the deep past, a territorially bound state in independent India, a mythological space of the Gonds which is ruled by *Shambhu Gaura*, circumvented by the mythical Lingo and revered by its pilgrims, and also as a geographically bounded homeland that is forever lost to the Gonds, firstly due to the breaking of the continents into five parts, and secondly due to the 'Aryan invasion'.
2. I use this term to refer to the people who participate in the revivalist religious festivals and fairs of *Punem*. The *Gondi Punem*, also known as *Gondi Dharma*, brings to the fore Gond articulations of their experiences and worldview. 'Gondi' means 'of the Gonds'.
3. S. R. Barkhade and Onkar Singh Marai, *Gondian Gaurav Gatha: Gondwana Sanskruti Ke Riti-Riwaaj* (Jabalpur: Jai Seva Prakashan, 2013), 13-14.
4. Akash K. Prasad, 'Gondwana Movement in Post-Colonial India: Exploring Paradigms of Assertion, Self-Determination and Statehood', *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India*, 4th ser., 3, No. 1 (September 21, 2017): 37-45.
5. Aparna Pallavi, 'Gonds Nourish Aspirations at Annual Fair', *India Together*. 28 Feb. 2006, n. p. Web 12. Jan. 2016.
6. *Sahapedia online*, 'Sunher Singh Taram on Kachchergadh Jatra and "Gondwana Darshan"', Interview, YouTube. April 09, 2018. Accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooR1izkZWvA&t=948s>.
7. Eknath Sarve, 'Adivasi Sahitya Ani Samkalin Vastavya', in *Adivasi Marathi Sahitya: Swaroop Ani Samasya*, ed. Pramod Mungthate (Pune: Pratima Prakashan, 2007), 91-96.
8. *Sahapedia online*, 'Sunher Singh Taram'.
9. Barkhade and Marai. *Gondian Gaurav Gatha*, 10.
10. *Ibid.*, 15.
11. Sunher Singh Taram, 'Sampadakiya', *Gondwana Darshan*, 1989.

12. Vyankatesh Atram, *Gondi Sanskrutiche Sandarbha* (Wardha: Sudhir Prakashan, 1989), 219.
13. *Ibid.*, 219.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Motiravan Kangale, *Saundhawi Lipika Gondi Mein Udwachan* (Nagpur: Tirumaay Chandralekha Kangali Publication, 2002), 206.
16. Atram, *Gondi Sanskrutiche Sandarbha*, ix.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Prakash Sallam, 'Harivile, Sapdale', in *Koyaphool: Kavita Sangrah* (Nagpur: Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad, 2001), 23.
19. This classification excludes assessment of Pradhan Gond Paintings, popularly known as the primary Gond paintings, since they are closely linked with state patronage and embedded in a market economy governed by state institutions. Although it is worth mentioning that a retelling of the Kali Kankali myth, an important part of the *Punem*, finds mention in the Venkat Raman Shyam Singh's 'Finding my Way'.
20. Heid E. Erdrich, 'Name: Literary Ancestry as Presence', in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories*, eds. Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair and Heidi Kiiwetinpinesik Stark (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 20.
21. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Edna Manitowabi, 'Theorizing Resurgence from within Nishnaabeg Thought', in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, 280.
22. Eduard Suess, tr. Hertha B. Sollas, *The Face of the Earth: Vol. 1-4*, translated by (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1906).
23. Motiravan Kangale, 'Gondi Punem Dhvaj Darshan', in *Pari Kupa Lingo: Gondi Punem Darshan* (Nagpur: Tirumaay Chandralekha Kangali Publication, 2011), 260.
24. Bookcover in Komal Singh Marai, ed. Ushakiran Atram, *Gondwana Bhukhandka Prasangik Kathavastu* (Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh: Akhil Gondwana Gondi Sahitya Parishad, 2002). These images have been reproduced here with the permission of the artist.
25. Motiravan Kangale, 'Pari Kupa Lingo ka Gondi Punem Darshan', in *Pari Kupa Lingo*, 132.
26. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Terrestrial Lessons the Conquest of the World as Globe* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2018), 13.
27. *Ibid.*, 34.
28. Pratik Chakrabarti, 'Gondwana and the Politics of Deep Past' (Unpublished).
29. Eyre Chatterton, *India through a Bishop's Diary: Or, Memories of an Indian Diocese by Its First Bishop*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Northumberland Avenue, WC 2, 1935), vii.
30. Eyre Chatterton, *The Story of Gondwana*, ed. Richard Temple, (London: Sir I. Pitman & Sons, 1916), 4
31. *Author unknown*, 'Story of Gondwana', review of *The Story*, by Chatterton, *Illustrated London News*, September 30, 1916, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001578/19160930/076/0018>.
32. Marai, *Gondwana Bhukhandka Prasangik Kathavastu*, 14
33. Kangale, *Pari Kupa Lingo*, 63.
34. Marai, *Gondwana Bhukhandka Prasangik Kathavastu*, 145.
35. *Ibid.*, 14.
36. Chandrabhan Singh Bhagdiya, *Gondi Bhasha Pahada*, (Ghansour, in Madhya Pradesh: Rani Durgavati Offset Prints, 2017).
37. *Ibid.*, 10
38. Barelal Barkhade, 'Gondwana Rajya Chinha', in *Gondian Punem Satya Saar*, (Jabalpur: Gondi Dharm Sahitya Prakashan, 2016), 45-46.
39. Barkhade, 'Gondwana Rajya Chinha', 45.
40. Barkhade, 'Gondwana Rajya Chinha', 46.
41. Prakash Sallam, 'Mutki Marg', in *Koyaphool*, 9. In local parlance, the term *koyavanshi* refers to various *adivasi* groups of India, mostly to the Gond.
42. Pushkar Sohoni, 'Old Fights, New Meanings: Lions and Elephants in Combat', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 67-68 (2017): 225-34. doi:10.1086/691602.

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History of Burdens: Kashmiri Migrant Labour in Shimla, Present and Past

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Muhammad Ramzan is carrying an old television from the owner's textile store to an electrical goods outlet in the Lower Bazaar. The television is effectively strapped to his back using a rope, and he is hunched over his worn out shoes, panting as he lays it down gingerly at its destination. Ramzan is from the Anantnag district in Kashmir. For the last 30 years,¹ he has been spending six months each year in Shimla, carrying heavy loads from point to point in the Lower Bazaar area. Shimla has christened Ramzan and the numerous other porters from Kashmir with the overarching epithet of 'Khan'.

The dearth of historical studies on the seasonal migration of porters from Kashmir to Shimla is surprising, considering the ubiquity and virtual indispensability of their labour. Writer Raaja Bhasin, who has worked extensively on the history of Shimla and the surrounding regions, confirms that over the course of his work, he has not encountered any substantial writing on the seasonal migration of Kashmiri labourers to Shimla. The possible absence of any written records maintained by the workers themselves necessitates tapping into oral accounts of their histories and contemporaneity as a step towards assembling the scattered pieces of a haphazard jigsaw. Here, colonial, governmental and journalistic records that supplement oral accounts are read against the grain in order to be able to tune into the faint whispers and silences of those who are relegated to the societal fringes. The jigsaw however, remains unfinished – the pieces that have been lost to centuries of apathy and silencing continue to elude the eye.

Prior to the existence of a wide network of asphalted roads, the topography of hill towns like Shimla was such that heavy goods and supplies could not be transported using pack animals along narrow pathways, generating a demand for people who would cart the burden.² Shimla mushroomed from a village into a town perched precariously on the tree-shorn mountainsides under the wilful gaze of the British, who sought respite from the heat of the plains and adopted it as their 'summer capital' from 1864 onwards. Much of what constitutes Shimla

today was built on the backs of labourers who came from places like Kashmir and the Punjab. They hauled construction material, pulled rickshaws, and lugged the baggage of the Englishmen who travelled to Shimla from Calcutta (and later, Delhi) for the summer. Lord Lansdowne noted that there were hill people of all sorts who were great carriers of burdens, 'which an English navy would not think of picking up'.³

Colonial accounts of the life in Shimla are peppered with references to porters and 'coolies'. Raaja Bhasin writes about one such description by an Englishman, Sir Frederick Treves, who witnessed hill men carrying long planks of wood for construction purposes to Shimla along the Hindustan-Tibet Road in 1904. He refers to the labourers as 'creeping wretches in an inhuman procession', crushed by the weight and stumbling down the narrow paths in single file.

In a section titled 'Hints to travellers in the Shimla Hills', Sir Edward John Buck offers advice to the British travelling to Shimla: 'All loads should be of such shape that they can be carried on the back; the Shimla coolies will carry them on their head in preference, but once in the interior, they are carried the other way. The 'Bigarri' brings with him his own rope which he fastens around the load in such a manner as to leave two projecting loops through which he puts his arms up to the shoulder; in some districts they only hitch the loop over the shoulders'.⁴

Buck's use of the term 'Bigarri' is an apparent reference to the *begar* system that was prevalent in the hill states, as elsewhere. According to H. H. Wilson's *Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, 'begar' refers to forced labour, and to such a labourer – one pressed to carry burdens for individuals or the public, without receiving any remuneration for it.⁵ Besides the transport of goods, the *begar* system also included other forms of unpaid labour such as work in the fields of the ruler where forced labour was considered a part of the land revenue that the individual owed to the ruler, particularly in areas where the economy was underdeveloped and the use of money was limited.⁶

While the origin of the *begar* system which was known in the pre-colonial period is debatable, it was rampant in India in the 19th century. When the British defeated the Gorkhas in Himachal Pradesh in 1815 and granted *sanads* (deeds) to the rulers of the hill states, confirming their position as rulers of the states in return for their allegiance to the British government, the *sanads* required the native rulers to provide their peasants as *begar* to British officials who passed through their states.

As Shimla grew under British control, the need for labour increased phenomenally, consequently increasing the ruthless exploitation of those who provided it. The government would pay the labour overseers but the money never reached the hands of the labourers. Lord Dalhousie, who was the Governor General between 1848 and 1856, supposedly initiated the construction of the Hindustan-Tibet road in an effort to abolish the *begar* system, applying the logic that a system of roads would allow goods to be carried by pack animals and carts rather than by labourers.⁷ Establishing trade relations with Tibet was allegedly Dalhousie's underlying motive for initiating the construction of this particular road. The economic interests of the British Empire were couched in the rhetoric of munificence against the oppressive *begar* system.

Satyanand Stokes, an American who settled in Shimla and introduced commercial apple cultivation in the area, campaigned vigorously against the *begar* system. He considered it a violation of the rights of the local people that reduced them to 'beasts of burden'. Stokes consistently petitioned the government to reduce the number of permits that allow the use of *begari* and increase the pay given to the labourers. As a result of his efforts, their wages were increased from 4 to 8 annas per day in 1919.⁸ By the beginning of the 20th century, rebellions broke out in hill states like Theog and Dhamsi against *begari*.⁹ The system was officially abolished in 1948.

The Dogra kings who ruled Kashmir from 1846 till the time of independence were also notorious for imposing the *begar* system on their Muslim subjects. Though the system had existed in Kashmir prior to the rule of the Dogras, it took a particularly ugly turn during their reign. A portion of the land revenue was paid in kind, with the state taking half of the yield, while the officials who collected the revenue often took another quarter. The rulers also decided on the number of peasants in each village who would undertake forced labour.¹⁰ Sir Walter Roper Lawrence, a member of the British Council, writes that the people of Srinagar were exempted from *begar* and the demand was placed entirely on the villages and the Muslim peasantry as Pandits, Sikhs, Pirsadas and Gujjars were also free from *begar* obligations.¹¹ The economy was exploitative, leaving many in the villages impoverished.

While it is difficult to place a finger accurately on the date of origin of these migrations of labourers from Kashmir to Shimla, Raaja Bhasin confirms via email that the migrations have been underway since the 19th century. This period coincides both with the rule of the Dogras in Kashmir and their exploitative *begar* system, and the rise in demand for labour in a rapidly expanding Shimla under the British government. The extent to which either or both factors may have contributed to the seasonal migration is up for speculation and cannot be ascertained definitely.

Mohammad Ramzan who works in the Lower Bazaar says that his father and grandfather worked as porters in Shimla before him. Similarly, fifty year old Ramzan, who works at the Lakkar Bazaar bus stand, mentions that his father used to work at the railway station in the 1940s and 50s. Though the migrations may have increased in the recent past due to the political volatility of Kashmir, they had begun even when Kashmir witnessed more peaceful days. In the Lower Bazaar, Mohammad Ramzan says that it is becoming increasingly difficult for him to find work every day since there are more people now who are willing to take it up.

Both of them lament the breaking up of joint families in Kashmir. 'The concept of sharing land and resources has vanished. Now everybody thinks about themselves', says Ramzan at the Lakkar Bazaar.¹² The property and farmland is now divided among a larger number of people and consequently, each person only gets a small share that is often insufficient to support their children. Besides, the political volatility in Kashmir has also greatly disturbed agriculture. Further, excess produce needs to be brought down to Jammu or Delhi to make a profit. This adds to the cost of production and increases the risk of the perishable supplies not reaching the market on time due to curfews or violence en route.

Abdul Rashid, who works at the District Collector's office, says that most Kashmiris continue to migrate to Shimla owing to the weather conditions and a snowy winter. Ramzan shrugs his shoulders when asked why he chooses to come to Shimla. He says he is fated to lift heavy loads here, much like the 'Biharis' are fated to provide construction labour in Kashmir (and Shimla). 'In addition, not much work is available in Kashmir, so we either carry vegetables, supply gas cylinders or work at the bus stand and railway station here', he adds. Much like the word 'Khan', 'Bihari' is a colloquial term for all migrant labourers in Kashmir, whether they are from UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Punjab or Orissa.¹³ According to the 2011 Census, there are about 5-6 lakh non-local labourers in Kashmir.¹⁴

How much does Ramzan roughly earn for the load he carries? He is in a hurry to return to his work and Rajeev

Kumar, the owner of the electrical goods store to which Ramzan was carrying the old TV, steps in to respond. It depends on the load and the distance. They could charge anything between Rs. 200 and Rs. 300 for a trip up Jakhoo Hill, which is about 6 km uphill from the Mall area and it could take about two hours to complete the trip. Besides, they are likely to charge a smaller amount from a person they know well or somebody who uses their services frequently. Kumar has known Ramzan for three years now and has paid close attention to the Khans in the area. 'As construction workers, they are likely to earn only Rs. 500 per day for 8 hours of work. If they are willing to carry the weight, porters can earn up to Rs. 300 in a single trip', he lists this as one of their motivations to continue with physically strenuous labour. They are usually on their feet from 7 am to 9 pm – waking up and sleeping with the rhythm of the bazaar. 'They are also very hard-working and will carry anything you ask them to. They will not refuse any request', he says.

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The narrow alleys of the Lower Bazaar in Shimla are crammed with people and wholesale vendors of everything from fruits to books. The sanitized Mall that is thronged by tourists breathes down the neck of the Lower Bazaar, but is a world apart from it. Shimla cradles some of its colonial legacies – while the Englishman strategically perched the Lower Bazaar below the Mall to distinguish his haunts and minimize contact with the natives, the bazaar firmly holds on to a flavour that is its own long after the last groups of Englishmen drifted down to the plains.

In 2007, the Shimla Road Users and Pedestrians Act banned the plying of vehicles in the Mall area. This was done to ensure pedestrian safety and protect the fragile area that appears to be sinking into the mountainside. Since vehicles could not supply the numerous shops that line Mall Road and the bazaars below it, the Khans carry large cartons up and down the slopes, supplying the stores with their wares. The proprietor at the Embassy Cafe a little distance down Mall Road says that all stores in the Mall area are supplied by the Khans. Trucks with vegetables and other provisions are often unloaded on Cart Road, below the Mall, and carried up to the bazaar by them. 'They usually have contracts with the wholesalers in the Lower Bazaar who send the supplies up to the stores', he says.

Ramzan lives in the Ganj Bazaar – one of the numerous alleyways that branch off from the Lower Bazaar – in a crammed space that is shared by 15 other labourers from Kashmir. The rent is roughly Rs. 3000 per month and is divided among the people sharing the space. One from

among the group is assigned the task of cooking and there is meat one day of the week. If there is some money to spare, butter or dry fruits for the kahwa and hookah are indulgences. If they moved to Shimla along with their families, they would not be able to make do with a cranny in a hall that houses several other people. Ramzan has left his wife, two daughters and a son in Anantnag.

What does Ramzan think of the political situation in Kashmir? He is a little peeved at the question. 'I am illiterate and have nothing to do with politics', he says, 'I hope to hear about the well-being of my family in Kashmir and that is enough'. But how is it possible to turn a blind eye to the violence? 'It is the poor people who die because the government's money does not filter down to them', he says simply.

Muhammad Ramzan, who mans the cloak room and loads buses at the Lakkar Bazaar bus stand laments the loss of young life in the Kashmir. 'They are still children! That is not the age to die', he says. He believes that more Kashmiris began to migrate from Kashmir to Shimla after the partition. 'The partition did not happen properly. That is where the problem has started. I have heard stories of how people would walk from Kashmir to Jammu and then take buses out of the state, soon after the partition of the country', he remembers.

All workers coming into Shimla from other states are required to register themselves with the local police station with details of when they have arrived and where they stay. 'With the militancy worsening in Kashmir, the police may sometimes create issues for us around 15th August and 26th January in the name of security. They round us up unnecessarily. When the Prime Minister came to Shimla in 2017 during the election campaigning, the police rounded up a lot of Kashmiris and locked them up. There has been no violence here though', says Ramzan.

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The *musafirkhana* (traveller's inn) at the Jama Masjid in the Middle Bazaar has rolls of bedding and blankets neatly arranged on the floor. *Phirans* (Kashmiri overcoats/parkas), jackets and ropes that function as straps hang from nails on the walls of the hall that houses around 50 people at any point of time. Most of them are Kashmiri porters who work in Shimla.

Abdul Rashid, who works at the District Collector's office, is sitting outside the *musafirkhana*, puffing on a hookah with his friends. They are all over fifty years old and from Anantnag in Kashmir. Rashid is on his lunch break from the office. Though he can have his meals at the canteen in the District Collector's office, he chooses to eat at the two restaurants inside the masjid complex that

serve Kashmiri food. His family is in Anantnag and he has a comfortable room allotted to him at the DC's office. He likes spending the free time he has at the masjid, where he has friends and the sense of belonging to a larger community. He has been in Shimla for thirty years now and has no relatives here. He gestures to a couple of rooms in the corridors above the courtyard of the masjid and points out that some people move to the town with their families and live here. The masjid complex, including the *musafirkhana*, houses around 150 people. Rashid's wife looks after their walnut and apple orchards in Anantnag and his children are still in school. He makes the two and a half day journey home by bus whenever he is allowed leave at the office.

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Migrant labourers in Shimla are required to register themselves with the local police station when they begin working in the town. The register entry keeps a record of the current address of the workers in Shimla, their address in Kashmir and their photograph and phone numbers. Once registered, they receive an ID card that is a source of credibility and trust for those who employ them. There are records of workers who migrate to Shimla from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab as well, but the numbers are considerably smaller than that of workers coming from Kashmir, although this might be changing now as large numbers of migrant labourers from Jharkhand are coming in to work in the construction boom that is happening at the moment.

Policeman Roshan at the Sadar Police Station in the Lower Bazaar has recorded 389 new entries in the register from Jammu and Kashmir in 2017. This is against 183 new entries from Kashmir in 2016. 'As the situation worsens in Kashmir, the number of migrants is only increasing', says Roshan. 'But there is a change in terms of the fact that most of the recent migrants are not willing to lift heavy loads anymore. They are more educated and come here to work as tourist guides or take up other jobs', he adds. He clarifies that these numbers are only for the area that falls under the Sadar police station's jurisdiction. Other workers could register with police stations in other localities in Shimla.

However, considering the higher probability of finding work in the bazaar and the railway station nearby, and the possibility of staying at the *musafirkhana* in the mosques in the Lower and Middle Bazaar, the Sadar police station is likely to record a higher number of migrant workers, as opposed to those in other parts of Shimla. A number of Kashmiris also stay in the Ganj Bazaar and Krishnanagar areas that are close to the police station.

The officers at the police station say that the earliest

registers in their office are from 2003-04. However, they suspect that this system of registering migrant workers had been going on for some time before that as well, though they are not aware of when it may have originated.

The registration process could be a possible result of the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 which seeks to protect migrant workers from exploitation by contractors. Under this Act, migrant workers are entitled to (among other benefits) home journey allowances, accommodation and medical facilities, while the contractors are required to maintain registers with details of the migrant workers on their payroll.

However, considering the unorganised nature of their work and the fact that they are not necessarily employed by contractors, more specific regulations will have to be implemented with regard to the Khans. 'The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act does not apply to those moving to another state individually. It applies only to those workers who are employed by a contractor', contends J. John, Secretary at the Centre for Education and Communication, whose areas of specialisation are unorganised labour and small producers. The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act of 2008 provides for the creation of a National Social Security Board at the central level which must recommend social security schemes for unorganised workers. John says, 'This category of porters will definitely fall under the provisions of the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, as they do fall under the category of unorganised labour. But problems arise with the implementation of this Act and identifying the migrant labour population can be difficult'.

Since a record of migrant workers is being maintained at the local police stations, identification may not be the problem with regard to implementation. 'If the police are already maintaining a record, the question that comes up is what are the migrant workers entitled to? It is the responsibility of the state government to constitute a body which will lay down what this population is entitled to under the Act. Till the state government constitutes this body, the recommendations of the National Social Security Board will remain schemes. These workers will be entitled to a minimum wage as specified by the state government, but will not receive any other benefits unless this state level body is constituted', says John.

Pratap Singh Verma, Labour Officer, Shimla District, confirms that Himachal Pradesh has a welfare board for Building and Construction Workers, and no other board has been constituted for unorganised workers. 'The Khans will not fall under this board. There must be another board specifically for unorganised workers', affirms John. According to the Press Information Bureau's list, which was last updated in April 2013, 11 states have

constituted the requisite board for the implementation of the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act. Himachal Pradesh is not on the list, in spite of 83 per cent of workers in the state being employed in the informal sector.

Santosh Poonia, who heads legal aid and worker education work at Aajeevika Bureau, an organisation that offers training and aid to migrant workers, says that it can be very difficult to implement laws in cases like this where the labour is very casual and the porters are attached to a specific store or employer only for a few hours. 'It depends on the state government to implement measures', he says. He refers to the Mathadi Welfare Boards that have been set up in Maharashtra under the Maharashtra Mathadi Hamal and other Manual Workers' Act, 1969. 'Mathadi' refers to workers who carry heavy loads, and this Act ensures benefits like social security (gratuity, medical benefits, bonus, leave wages) for this category of workers.¹⁵

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At the Lakkar Bazaar bus stand, a bus to Rohru arrives at 9 am and Muhammad Ramzan, along with Abdul Rashid and Muhammad Yusuf, rushes to load it with luggage and vegetables that are to be taken up to the town which is about a 100 kilometres higher up in the mountains. By dint of the fact that he is the only one who is literate among them, Ramzan is in charge of reading the slips that accompany the parcels – they detail the contents of the parcel and where it is headed – and handing it over to the bus drivers. Ramzan has studied till the 9th standard in Kulgam, Kashmir.

When the bus leaves, he returns to the cloak room adjacent to the bus stand and gets a cup of tea. There are rolls of bedding piled up inside the cloak room that doubles as the living quarters for Ramzan, Yusuf and Rashid. All three of them hail from Kulgam, where their families reside while they work in Shimla as porters for roughly six months of the year between October and May. The small cloak room has corrugated tin sheets for walls and a roof, and is shared by four people. Another tin sheet separates a little room on the inside that serves as the kitchen from the sleeping area.

Muhammad Ramzan has been working in Shimla for six months of the year since 1981. His father was in the hill town before him, working as porter at the railway station – a job that he gave up as he grew older and returned to Sopor, leaving Ramzan, his oldest son, to earn some extra money for his three brothers and himself. One of Ramzan's brothers is in the BSF, another is a teacher in a government school and the third works in a hospital. 'I was the only one who came to Shimla and never left', he says wistfully. Ramzan has three children who are all

in school in Kulgam. 'Children these days want to do better than the next person. One of my daughters wants to become a doctor and has been asking for tuitions to do better in school. I must earn for them', he says.

Ramzan owns a piece of land, some cattle and a house in Kulgam. He works his own land during the summer months in Kashmir. He's going home in June this year. 'In a few years, when I cannot lift heavy weight anymore, I will anyway have to go back and look after my land. I would like to earn some money here while I have health on my side', he says.

As I wonder aloud about the word 'Khan' with reference to workers from Kashmir in Shimla, Ramzan tells me he is just as perplexed about the word. 'Workers who come here from Punjab are called Chaudhuri, those who come from Sirmaur are called Sirmauri. By that logic, we should be called Kashmiri. At home, nobody calls us Khan', he says. Like most other aspects of Shimla, the use of the word 'Khan' can also be traced back to the British and the fact that they may not have known any better.

It is a busy morning at the bus stand and Ramzan's phone is constantly buzzing with calls from wholesalers about which buses have been loaded and which ones are yet to come in. He takes a break to tell me a parable that he uses to summarize his life in Shimla.

'A king, distraught by his defeat in a recent battle, sat down with his back against a tree. He observed an ant climbing up the tree with a grain of rice. The ant would fall down twenty times and begin his ascent again, trying ceaselessly to carry the grain of rice up the tree. The king recognised his lesson – as long as he has his faculties and army intact, the battle is never lost.'

Notes

1. The people quoted are aware of the use of my interviews with them as a part of this article.
2. Jaideep Negi, 'The Begar System in the Shimla Hill States during the British period', *Proceedings of the India History Congress*, Vol. 55 (1994), 693-697.
3. Raaja Bhasin, *Simla: The Summer Capital of British India* (Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2011).
4. Edward J. Buck, *Simla: Past and Present* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1904).
5. H. H. Wilson, *Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms* (London: WH Allen & Co, 1855).
6. Negi, 'The Begar System', 693-697.
7. Bhasin, *Simla: The Summer Capital*.
8. Asha Sharma, *An American in Gandhi's India: The Biography of Satyanand Stokes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
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10. Mohamad Ashraf Khaja, 'A European Account of the Socio-Economic and Educational Condition of Kashmiris under

- the Dogra Rule: A critical appraisal', *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 6, Issue 11, 2016.
11. Sir Walter Roper Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 1895).
 12. These conversations were in Hindi.
 13. *Life of Migrant Labourers in Kashmir*, Video Volunteers, accessed on 3 February, 2018: <https://www.videovolunteers.org/life-of-migrant-labourers-in-kashmir/>
 14. *Kashmiri Workforce Shrinks Each Year*, Kashmir Reader, published on June 20, 2017: <https://kashmirreader.com/2017/06/20/kashmiri-work-force-shrinks-year/>
 15. 'Mathadi Boards', Department of Labour, Government of Maharashtra, accessed February 4, 2018: <https://mahakamgar.maharashtra.gov.in/lc-mathadi-boards.htm>
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Reversing the Gaze

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Madhu Ramnath, *Woodsmoke and Leafcups: Autobiographical Footnotes to the Anthropology of the Durwa*. NCR: Litmus Harper Collins Publishers, 2015. Paperback Price: INR 399.

Bastar, the forested hilly region in south Chhattisgarh, was recently in national news for a newly-created paramilitary battalion – the ‘Bastariya’ battalion – which is the government’s latest innovation in its war against ‘Left Wing Extremism’. In a policy eerily similar to the infamous Salwa Judum, the battalion will deploy *adivasis* from the region to fight Maoist guerrillas, with their knowledge of the forest, local language and culture as the secret ingredient of counterinsurgency. The Indian state has treated Bastar as its inner frontier for at least two decades, trying to establish its writ and sovereignty by force, encouraging resource extraction from its mineral and forest-rich lands and treating its residents either as backward citizens who have to be ‘developed’ or as lawless rebels. Generations to come will know and remember Bastar as this theatre of war, where poverty, violence and political ideologies have been interlocked in a deadly combat.

Madhu Ramnath’s book, *Woodsmoke and Leafcups*, is a song that rises above the din of war and introduces the reader to a Bastar that existed before the war began. This is a unique book, an anthropological text written by a person who spent thirty years with one of the *adivasi* communities of the region and ‘became a student of Durwa life’. The result is not an impersonal, scholarly exposition of *adivasi* culture; it is an intimate window into the worldviews of a sovereign people and their acknowledgment and endurance of the hardships of life with dignity and humour. Madhu Ramnath throws into sharp relief the differences between the values and philosophy of Durwa life and the modernist aspirations of postcolonial India. In the process, he subtly questions the uncritical celebration of the market economy and the commodification of labour, without exoticizing the *adivasi* or sermonising his readers.

Durwa Life-Worlds

The 300-page book is divided into seventeen short chapters, which are more attuned to the temporal and seasonal rhythms of Durwa life than to chronology or linear time. There is a rich description of quotidian life in the village and in the forest, of events and activities that resist neat classifications of livelihood, religion or culture. We learn about hunting expeditions that are as much guided by dreams, shamans and the desire to wander as the quest for wild meat. We discover the many kinds of containers that can be fashioned out of leaves, the signs that are used to predict rain and the perennial war of wits between humans and panthers.

The book provides fascinating details of forest ecology in Bastar, borne out of the author’s work of documenting *adivasi* botany, the Durwa way of identifying and classifying flora. Madhu Ramnath lives the community life – taking part in communal hunts, slash-and-burn cultivation on the hill slopes and celebrating the seasons with rituals and intoxications. As a result, he is able to describe a biocultural heritage that is deeply rooted in the Sal forests of Bastar. There is an extraordinary range of organic life that is gathered, collected, harvested from nature and is used as food, fuel or to fashion items of daily use. For instance, the meat of birds, crabs, fishes, monitor lizards, snakes, rats, civets, jungle cats, porcupines, flying squirrels, monkeys, pigs and deer are consumed, as are red ants, insect larvae, mushrooms, and the fruits, roots, stems, tubers and leaves of numerous trees and plants. The Durwa community is Latourian in its refusal of the nature/culture binary and the divide that modernity posits between nature and society.

At the same time, the book is not a parable of unchanging Edenic bliss: unlike many scholars of indigeneity, the author does not represent the Durwa as ‘living relics from the past’, as a community untouched by frames of progress and commerce. In perhaps a revealing description of *adivasi modernity*, he recounts the time when wall-clocks became a popular wedding gift and

more than one could be found hanging on a single wall at the homes of newly married couples. As we approach the present, he puts forth questions of sustainability: 'wants have no end, the forest does' (p. 103). There are concerns of equity as well in the use of land and forest resources between the Durwa and other *adivasi* groups (Koitoor and Dandami Maria). The scarcity of resources at the local level is exacerbated by restrictions imposed with the formation of Kanger Valley National Park. The unchecked commercial extraction of Sal resin, the bark of *ahl* (*Morinda pubescens*) (for a dye) and the bark of *menda* (*Litsea glabarata*) (for incense sticks) impoverishes the forest. As Ramnath puts it, 'scientific knowledge and common sense are no match for short-term commercial sense' (p. 256). The Durwa encounters with markets, non-*adivasi* traders and officials are marked with humour and irony, even though they often have less than desirable outcomes. What is important and distinctive about this work is that it reverses the anthropological gaze from the *adivasi* to the non-*adivasi*. The 'outsider' – the government doctor, inspector, constable, clerk or the revenue official – appears ignorant, ill-at-ease and lacking *civility* in the forests of Bastar.

Of Metal Wire Rolls and Forest Protection Committees

The absence or malevolent presence of the government in the life of the *adivasi* has been widely commented upon in sociological and anthropological literature. Scholarly endeavours like Subaltern Studies have represented the *adivasi* as the quintessential rebel, avoiding, repelling and fighting the state. In Ramnath's narration too, the state has an unwelcome-if-intermittent presence in Durwa life, at least until the advent of Maoist guerrillas and paramilitary forces in Bastar. However, unlike most other accounts of state-*adivasi* relations, the leviathan does not come across simply as an all-powerful, exploitative, bribe-taking, chicken-and-alcohol-stealing entity. Rather, government officials appear as bumbling, callous, unsure and undignified characters when they try to regulate and profit from the lives of villagers. The Durwa has more disdain than fear for the state: as the author explains, 'a society's self-reliance is usually in inverse proportion to its reverence for the state' (p. xx).

For the longest time, the state's reach was incomplete and impermanent in Bastar. Government officials and welfare schemes remained restricted only to villages that lay along the sparse network of roads in the 39,000 square kilometre region. Ramnath clearly distinguishes between the villages far away from roads and those that were more accessible to the state. 'The impoverishment of Adivasi society is noticeable in roadside villages, near the towns and district headquarters, where *sarkari dal* [state-

subsidised lentils] and potato have come to dominate the menu' (p. 211). Culturally too, the state is ill-suited to serve the needs of the people, whether it is curing illnesses or adjudicating disputes.

Over time, the forests of Bastar have suffered the depredations of state policy, property and commerce, not unlike the region's indigenous residents. Ramnath describes the misadventures of the forest department as it sets about counting tigers, regulating the growth of bamboo, preventing cultivation on forest land (known as 'encroachments' in official parlance) and implementing the Wildlife Protection Act. State officials are not the only ones to be blamed: Ramnath criticises the Left parties for encouraging *adivasis* to occupy and cultivate forest land. The clear-felling peasant *adivasi* is compared unfavourably to the Durwa who 'clear long narrow strips (in forest tracts) that allow for rapid regeneration of fallows' (p. 244). He describes his own unsuccessful efforts at organising the village residents to agree upon rules of sustainable use, acting to control forest fires and desisting from felling trees. In the end, there are no satisfactory answers to the vexed question of forest governance: who is best positioned to sustainably manage the forests – state, civil society, market or local communities?

State schemes in Bastar exhibit what the anthropologist Tania Li has called the 'will to improve' (Li, 2007). Some are aimed at improving the material and moral conditions of the *adivasi*, while others aim to preserve the rich forests. That these schemes of improvement are ill-conceived, do not fulfil their goals and have unintended consequences will not come as a surprise to scholars, development practitioners and those familiar with *adivasi* regions. Above all, policy and actions of the state are marked by the ideology of 'primitivism' (Chandra, 2013), the idea that *adivasis* needed to be 'improved' and 'protected' under the paternalistic hand of government. Ramnath succinctly captures much of what is wrong with the discourse of 'tribal development': 'The Adivasi is not viewed as a 'person' with individual attributes and character, with specific roles and importance within his community, but lumped into a convenient category like Scheduled or Primitive Tribes' (p. 128).

To conclude, scholars will revel in the empathetic and textured descriptions of the life-worlds of Durwa people. For non-academic readers, the book is an opportunity to taste *landa* and *mel*, listen to the sound of caterpillars munching Sal leaves in the monsoonal forest, and to learn how the drum and flute were invented when two Durwa men went into the forest looking for yams. Everyone who is interested in the many pasts, presents and futures of *adivasi* communities will enjoy and learn from this lyrical part-memoir, part-anthropological work set in one of the most troubled regions of our country.

Dalit Politics at Crossroads

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Badri Narayan, *Fractured Tales: Invisibles in Indian Democracy*, New Delhi: OUP, 2016, pp.xii-186, Rs. 650.

Fractured Tales is a collection of articles written by Badri Narayan on the lives and worldviews of the most marginalized castes among the Dalits of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The declared intention of its author is to record the desires and aspirations of these castes in order to make an assessment of Dalit identity politics and its limits in the context of Indian democracy.

Badri Narayan is one of the foremost scholars working on Dalit Studies and *Fractured Tales* represents much of his most recent, considered and even self-critical views on the subject. Underpinned by a self-corrective tone, *Fractured Tales* makes a case for giving primacy to the study of Dalit lives over the study of Dalit Politics for a broader and long-term view of the progress and performance of Indian democracy. One may even say that he argues for a primacy to identity politics over redistributive justice. The central problematic raised by Narayan is that Dalit identity construction and Dalit political assertion in Uttar Pradesh since 1990s, as epitomized by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) movement, is coterminous with the reinforcement of marginalization of numerically small and scattered Dalits castes, and the emergence of Brahmanical forms of domination by more visible and politically conscious castes over voiceless and marginalized castes within the Dalits. His concern is the 'growing silent zone' in democracy in the age of Dalit political assertion. Thus, he shifts the scholarly gaze from more visible Dalit castes like Chamars to invisible and voiceless Dalit castes like Musahar, Sapera, Dharikar, Jogi and fifty-odd other castes. In other words, it has been quite rightly argued that the 'Dalit subject is irretrievably heterogeneous and there exist multiple marginalities among them that are constantly being produced and reproduced'. Undoubtedly, for this bold and path-breaking approach alone, *Fractured Tales* marks a signal shift in the study of Dalit identity and politics.

An important section of the book is devoted to the

exploration of the 'cultural citizenship' of the *marginalized* Dalit communities. It underscores the fact that the Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCC) have ignored the art and culture of the *marginalized* Dalit castes of UP, thus defeating their very purpose, which was to provide space to all communities of the country and promote 'peoples' culture'. Thus, exclusion of these castes is not only social and political but also cultural: indeed, so pervasive is their marginalization that they are neither 'political societies' nor even 'subaltern citizens'. Unlike advanced/dominant Dalit castes, they are still very far away from attaining the language and competence of citizenship and welfare.

Badri Narayan claims to have been eclectic in his use of sources in writing this book. These sources range from interview notes and recordings of long-term participant observation of a large number of Dalit communities to folk proverbs and administrative accounts. However, it is plain from the references given by Narayan in various chapters that a greater reliance has been placed on participant observation and texts of the Dalit public sphere. This is not surprising given the main concern of Narayan. Indeed, throughout this book, he calls us to represent the marginalized Dalit communities' voices before the academia, civil society and the state till such time as these communities develop the capacity to aspire and assert their voices or Dalit organic intellectuals come forward to play their natural, historical role. Thus, *Fractured Tales'* overriding concern is to prepare a basis for activism and state action and for this reason it shuns the main concerns of conventional approaches of research, that is, knowledge-building.

At various places in the book, Narayan presents the narrative as well as an analysis of the differentiated and uneven nature of progress of various Dalit castes of UP. Much of his approach and analysis draws heavily on his previous works on the emergence and empowerment of what he now calls as the *dominant* Dalit castes, the Chamars and Pasis. He argues, following Partha Chatterjee, that since Indian democracy, unlike European democracies, is a state-led democracy (which

has degenerated into 'gift democracy'), excluded social groups assess and experience their successes and failures in terms of shares in the status and material rewards or 'gifts' bestowed by the state. As far as the Dalits are concerned, it is largely the Chamars and Pasis who have been able to experience relative success with the rise of BSP to power. This capture of state power by these Dalit castes was preceded by occupational diversification, abandoning of traditionally degrading occupations, educational attainment, rise of organic intellectuals, and construction of history and identity based on dignity and self-respect in overt opposition to that constructed by the Brahmanical caste order. Other castes among the Dalits have not been able to do this and consequently failed to have a voice and visibility in democracy. For example, the Valmikis have tended mostly to stay with their traditional occupation of scavenging and also have not been able to develop democratic assertion and independence. The same applies to the Bansphors (bamboo workers), Bahelias (bird hunters), Jogis (beggars), Musahars (*pattal* makers) etc.

While one would certainly agree with Narayan's main argument about the uneven nature of social inclusion of Dalit castes and the historical factors behind it, his argument that the dominant Dalit castes are deliberately seeking to monopolize the 'gifts' of state-led democracy at the cost of *marginal* Dalit castes may be controversial. He has cited a few instances in the BSP government policies, especially those of political and public recruitment, as well as the perception shared by some individuals belonging to *marginalized* Dalit castes, to drive home his point. By mechanically juxtaposing certain post-modernist concepts (like logo-centrism) with social theory (like

cultural capital), he seeks to bolster the view that identity construction by and representational politics of the 'dominant' Dalit castes has created meta-narratives which suppress excluded and voiceless Dalit castes. But so far as this argument is concerned, *Fractured Tales* is arguably both theoretically and empirically weak. For example, many of those who were interviewed by him believe that it is the upper castes and backward castes that oppress them most and it is the lack of educated people in their community which accounts for their failure to become economically independent and politically assertive. This is not to deny the failures of the BSP government and Dalit organic intellectuals vis-à-vis the empowerment of *marginalized* Dalit castes; however, to impute a deliberate intention to them from Narayan's field studies seems too far-fetched a conclusion.

Fractured Tales makes for lucid reading. At various places the main arguments are repeated but this is because the author seeks to constantly remind the reader about his central arguments on Indian democracy. The book will expose the social science researchers to hitherto unexplored perception of the *marginalized* Dalit castes about Indian nation, citizenship and their displacement in it. Indeed, no one would disagree with the author's basic conclusion that India's democracy would deepen further only if it can be meaningful for this important segment of the population. Perhaps with the decline of BSP in UP in recent years, we are at a crucial historical juncture to better understand and analyze the successes and failures of Dalit political assertion in the deepening of democracy in North India. At the least, *Fractured Tales* inspires us to undertake such a task.

In the Light, and In the Shadows: Censored Writers in Independent India

Devika Sethi, *IIT (Mandi)*

Mini Chandran, *The Writer, The Reader and the State: Literary Censorship in India*, New Delhi: Sage, 2017, pp. xxxv + 190, Rs.695.

Are writers a cohesive community? And even if they are, can they be conceptualized as a marginalized community under any circumstances? Censorship – whether of the regulative (state, market, or mob imposed) or the constitutive (self-imposed) variety – is an act of attempted exclusion and/or excision that complicates our understanding of marginality itself. Writers who are global celebrities – Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen, to mention two writers discussed extensively in the volume under review – are, by the act of censorship, relegated to the margins even as they occupy centre-stage in trans-national political dramas. Censorship enjoys a paradoxical relationship with modernity too: even as modernity bolsters state power by providing enhanced technologies of surveillance, yet other technologies facilitate subversion of censorship as proscribed material is circulated through new channels.

Academic research on censorship in India has so far been conducted primarily by historians (Gerald N. Barrier, Robert Darnton) and members of the legal profession (G. D. Khosla, Rajeev Dhavan, Gautam Bhatia). Mini Chandran's book, written from the perspective of literary studies is, therefore, a welcome addition to the field. Of the six chapters of the book, half are based mainly on a synthesis of, and the author's commentary on, studies by other scholars ('The Writer and the State: The Indian Literary Tradition', 'Banned in India: Books Denied to Indian Readers', and 'Of Shame and Silence: The Emergency, 1975-77'), whereas the other half are primary source research based ('Censorship Laws and Colonial Roots', 'The Bhasha Fights: Censorship in Regional Languages', and 'The "Democratization" of Censorship: Books and the Indian Public'). These sources include legal judgments, personal interviews and translations (by the author) of press reports in Malayalam newspapers.

The strength of the book lies in its focus on both English

language and regional languages. The chapter titled 'The Bhasha Fights' contains case studies of litigation featuring books in Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam ranging in time from 1962 till 2016. The author includes a wide variety of perspectives on artistic freedom: from Plato and Milton, to the Arthashastra and the Natyashastra, to Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault and back again. Inclusion of research by G. D. Khosla (Pornography and Censorship), Nivedita Menon (the First Amendment) and Neeti Nair (The Rangeela Rasool case) would have further enriched this book.

The author begins her study in ancient India, with a survey of the 'Kautilyan' and 'Bharatan' traditions with regard to the normative principles governing the relationship between artists (not writers alone) and the state. She defines the 'Kautilyan' attitude as one of haughty indifference to the arts, and the 'Bharatan' one as a sympathetic one. She compares and contrasts this with the position of artists vis-à-vis the state in ancient Greece. While the attempt to delve deep into Indian history to locate examples of censorship is commendable, it is questionable whether present day censors (very often judges asked to pronounce on the validity of bans) see themselves as links in the chain of historical continuity with the ancient Indian past. The discussion of censorship in medieval India only spans a couple of pages, itself a pointer to the paucity of concrete examples of state regulation of literature in the pre-modern, pre-colonial, period. Chandran's contention that the 'baffling lack of overt regulation of literature in pre-modern India' (p. xxix) was on account of internalization of norms governing aesthetic representation is a hypothesis that is interesting, but unproven, and, perhaps, un-provable. This does not really tell us much about the state of the arts (and the state-and-the-arts) in the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history. Since Chandran herself refers to 'an admittedly nebulous continuity in the literary practices of India from antiquity to medieval to contemporary times' (p. xxix), it is unclear why she chooses to devote a chapter to this discussion. This is not

to say that the discussion itself is not of value (it is, in fact, of interest and meticulously detailed and well-written) but merely to indicate that perhaps it did not belong to this particular book.

Chandran's book reveals the many forms in which 'marginality' has affected Indian writers since Independence and some of the forms are rather unexpected. For instance, she provides ample evidence of several prominent writers' and artists' active support of the Emergency (Amrita Pritam, Harivansh Rai Bachchan and M. F. Husain among others) as well as the deafening silence of most prominent writers of Kerala, for instance, precisely at a time when they were expected to protest the loudest. This is not, therefore, a book that peddles lazy stereotypes about heroic resistance by a community en masse. As Chandran puts it (referring to contemporary times), 'Writers have abjured their responsibility and are more like the court poets of yore who did not speak disturbing truths to power. This could also explain why there have been relatively few cases of governmental control on creative writing and writers in India recently; the government has only bowed to public demands for more control or censorship of writing'. (p. 31).

Another form of marginality Chandran identifies is the indifference of the state to literary creations unless they are deemed 'seditious' or 'blasphemous'; in the latter scenario, she posits, pressure groups and mobs have taken on the onus of banning-by-intimidation. Marginality is thus interpreted in this book in various ways: marginality-as-silencing (the conventional understanding of censorship), marginality-as-silence (of writers), and perhaps the cruelest of them all: marginality-as-indifference (of the state, towards writers). This leaves the field open for what she quite rightly terms the "democratization" of censorship'; as Chandran puts it (referring to mob censorship): 'In that sense, India seems to be functioning like a true democracy at least in the matter of literary censorship where the will of the people is being executed for the people *by* the elected representatives of the people' (p. 150; italics in the original).

Although the title of the book promises inclusion of the reader in the discussion (in whose name, after all, most

books are banned), the creature makes no appearance in this book apart from a brief discussion of theories of reception, and the paternalistic attitude of the Indian state towards that shadowy (if not mythical) abstraction: the 'average reader'. The focus is firmly on writers and on the state. Censorship studies pose a dilemma for its practitioner: should one merely describe and analyse? Should one take clear personal positions on contemporary controversies? Or should one prescribe solutions to free speech vs. hate speech conundrums? This book is on strongest ground when it attempts the first two, but on weak ground when it attempts the last. The author's contention (following A. K. Ramanujan) that India is a context-sensitive society and that censorship therefore ought to be context specific is something that is easy to agree with, and impossible to enforce in an exercise as subjective as censorship.

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Nationalism in the Writings of Tagore

Martin Kämpchen, *IIAS*

K. L. Tuteja & Kaustav Chakraborty (eds.), *Tagore and Nationalism*, New Delhi & IIAS: Springer, 2017.

There is no end to Tagore! This sentence has two connotations: There is no end to the discoveries we can make reading Rabindranath's poems and prose. And there is no end to Tagore scholarship trying to unearth ever new shades of meaning and contemporary relevance. Since the three anniversaries surrounding the poet – his 150th birth-anniversary, the centenary of his award of the Nobel Prize, and the centenary of his award-winning book *Gitanjali* – there has been a stream of books on Tagore flowing not only from India, but from Europe, and North-America as well. Many of these volumes are originally the result of seminars held all over the world. It appears that every institution, government or non-government, with an interest in India, every University and Academy with a department related to India or Asia felt obliged to contribute to this glut of scholarship showered on this one person. I myself have been part of this. At least a dozen editors asked me to send a scholarly essay for their book or for the special Tagore number of their journal. How can an academician produce a dozen new essays within a span of three years? It is impossible. So whoever yielded to the pressure of expectant editors held recourse to repetition, to reworking older essays long published and often also to a journalistic approach to the subject. The anniversaries are over since three years, and the glut has reduced to a trickle, but we know that there are a few more books still in the pipeline.

Is there anything new we can project about Tagore? Or has Tagore scholarship become boringly repetitive, churning out the same ideas and cultural notions about Tagore that the Bengali middle-class has fondly grown up with and continues to live by? Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe have preoccupied scholars throughout the ages, who have been providing fresh insights into the work of these writers appropriate for every era. Is Tagore of such a caliber that his work would reach beyond his own time

and continue to supply fresh answers to changed cultural circumstances?

Looking at the variety of new volumes we can confirm one observation: Tagore scholarship has decidedly become more internationalized with fresh viewpoints, authors' personal experiences and new theories injected into a scholarship that has been 'traditional' for way too long. Not only have there been creditable contributions by non-Indian scholars about Tagore's influence outside India, Indian scholars have also increasingly related to Tagore in a more holistic way. One outcome is that it is no longer considered a scholarly prerequisite to be conversant with Tagore's work in Bengali to be credited with an informed assessment of the historical circumstances within which he wrote and influenced society in India as well as abroad.

One drawback of the volumes which have flooded the book-market is that their thematic focus is often very wide. Many are a result of seminars and conferences without a distinct frame. Books have been produced which collect papers on all and sundry topics struggling to delineate (and often not finding) a common thread running through them. The book under review is a notable exception.

'Tagore and Nationalism' has a sharp focus. Its contributions are grouped around Rabindranath Tagore's three lectures 'Nationalism in the West', 'Nationalism in Japan' and 'Nationalism in India', together first published as a book in 1917 from New York under the title 'Nationalism'. They were originally held as lectures in Japan and in the USA in 1916. Rabindranath's denunciation of nationalism provoked strong negative reactions in Japan and in the USA and not the least at home in India. Rabindranath's novel 'Ghare Baire' (Home and the World), discussing nationalism from various angles, was published around the same time.

As co-editor of 'Rabindranath Tagore: One Hundred Years of Global Reception' (2014), I am aware how significant 'Nationalism' has been for shaping Tagore's fame in many countries which, between the two World Wars, were struggling with resurgent nationalisms.

In several countries it was not 'Gitanjali', the book of prose poems that earned Tagore the Nobel Prize, which received the highest acclaim. Rather, it was 'Nationalism' which received both critique and praise. In the present Indian scenario, as the Preface points out, a debate on nationalism could not be more timely and urgent.

Our book does not so much look abroad to fathom the relevance of 'Nationalism', but it mainly looks inwards on the Indian situation. The reader is thankful for the introductory essay by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya who combines the skills of a historian and of a Tagore scholar to bring a strict historical perspective to this volume. His main contention is that Tagore's ideas on nationalism in India and elsewhere did not begin with his lectures in Japan and in the USA. Instead, they evolved in several stages and culminated during the First World War, but they by no means ended in 1916/1917. Apart from lectures, letters, essays, Rabindranath reflected on nationalism in, as mentioned, his novel 'Ghare Baire', in 'Chaturanga' and his satirical play 'Tasher Desh'.

Many authors have equated Tagore's rejection of nationalism with his promotion of internationalism. However, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has rightly warned against a reductionist reading of Tagore's work with this juxtaposition in mind. Tagore was not against all forms of nationalism and certainly not in favour of all shades of internationalism. Although the focus of the book is intentionally narrow, the richness of material that is being discussed under the banner of Tagore's ideas of nationalism is stupendous. The twenty-four papers collected in this volume discuss the topic in Tagore's fiction, in his short stories, his travel writings, from the angle of colonial politics, from the binary of modernism

and Indian tradition, comparisons with Gandhi, Ambedkar and Premchand, and even with the Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh. All these perspectives may have been chosen by other authors before. But there are some truly astonishing new areas which the book opens to this discourse. A look at Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher, contrasted with Tagore, is enlightening (although it is annoying that the author repeatedly calls him a 'German'). The comparison with the Spanish universalist writer Miguel de Unamuno is unusual as well. We must also be grateful for R. Siva Kumar's fresh insight into Tagore's attempt in Santiniketan to create a 'new community through artistic creativity'.

A final section of the 400-page-volume deals with the arts. It is less revealing that films on Tagore's themes, say, by Riwik Ghatak and Rituparna Ghosh, have a debate on nationalism. But to rope music and dance into this focus of nationalism is quite a feat and needs to be admired because Saurav Dasthakar and Aishika Chakraborty do it so imaginatively. Tagore's Rabindra Sangeet is here seen as a major resource to achieve 'leisure' in a modernity which first appears as alien and threatening. Aishika Chakraborty's essay has the title 'Dancing Against the Nation? Revisiting: Tagore's Politics of Performance' and opens a perspective on nationalism hitherto scarcely dealt with.

A certain overlap cannot be avoided when the focus of a book is narrow. Authors normally are quite irritated when editors tinker with their texts, trying to cut away repetitions. I do have less tolerance, however, for the many slips in spelling and the lack of uniformity. Has the book seen a copy editor? Anyway, these mistakes are more cosmetic and do not mar the content.

Reason(s), Culture and Civilization

Mayank Kumar, *Satyawati College*

Hulas Singh, *Rise of Reason: Intellectual History of 19th-Century Maharashtra*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, New Delhi, London, New York, 2016.

Indian rationality, on the other hand, could not emerge since ancient times as a self-contained system of thought, as an independent epistemology. It remained deeply embedded in the overall holistic world-view of life and cosmology. Reason in India had more of a practical rather than purely epistemological orientation. Holism and monism dominated the intellectual world view in pre-British times with spiritual salvation as the practical aim of human wish and efforts. In this world view, afterlife was prized more than this life, at least at the ideational level. (p. 26)

By arguing along the above mentioned logic, Hulas Singh has successfully questioned few well established notions of Indian History as well as proposed a fresh line of investigation to understand the intellectual history of India, especially for modern times. His definition of intellect and intellectual is particularly important for a student of history in general and Indian History in particular, as it avoids their reduction merely to questions of science and technology. Although the author himself makes no such clear cut delineation in the monograph yet one can discern in his writing the argument that it is a misplaced notion that intellect and reason cannot be imagined without developments in science and technology. Locating the history of intellect and reason in the sole domain of science and technology distorts the very basis of historical investigations.

It is equally important to appreciate the manner in which the author has characterized intellect. 'Intellection is essentially a process of cognition through the prism of reason'. The author does not stop here, rather, he qualifies this statement by emphasizing the intention of intellect. He suggests: 'Intellectuals by the very character of their calling are primarily concerned with the present state of affairs which they try to improve. Change, the core of intellectual concern, has to be brought about in the present, and not in the past' (p. 6). This qualified formulation distinguishes him from those who are eager to

locate every development in the 'glorious past' of 'ancient India'. To counter such a perspective, the author forcefully suggests that 'conceptually, "intellectuality" militates against any kind of primordiality or restrictiveness, be it class or group; its openness and open-endedness are its strength, not weaknesses' (p. 6). In an era when the highest political dispensation itself is justifying attempts to seek the roots of every 'development' in the 'glorious past' of 'ancient India', such attempts attain greater significance. Monographs like this can be very useful in offering a more appropriate and nuanced perspective on the intellectual traditions discernible in the Indian past.

While addressing another well-established notion of history that 'the manifestation of reason as a powerful intellectual advocacy in Europe, particularly during the days of Enlightenment, has led many a scholar to believe in its European ancestry', the author proposed two lines of investigations. Firstly, he examines the supposed 'automatic antagonism or hiatus between scientific developments and religion or the church'. His analysis of the 'antagonism or hiatus' leads him to a second line of investigation which suggests that there are multiple paths through which modernity emerges, the Enlightenment not being the sole one. The author states: 'The excessive idealization of the Enlightenment further obfuscates the fact that its rationalistic seeds were actually sown within the Christian tradition itself. ... Thus it would be difficult to defend that the development of reason as a critical tool was the outcome of the Enlightenment and that the Enlightenment ethos is inherently irreverent to religion' (p. 20). This line of investigation offers him the space to locate 'indigenous' or 'local' roots of 'reason' and 'rationality' in non-European societies, one of the significant contributions of this well researched monograph.

In his attempt to critically revisit the 'Eurocentric' origin of reason and rationality, the author begins with an exploration of the long established traditions of social questioning in nineteenth century India. To further trace the local roots of reason and rationality, he deliberately and quite necessarily shifts his investigations from the

Indian National Congress to the proceedings of the Indian National Social Conference, an often neglected but very important source to understand social movements. Singh points out that Rammohan Roy, the pioneer of 'Indian Renaissance', in his first extant work *Tuhafat-ul-Muwahhidin*, suggests that 'the worth of a religion is to be evaluated in terms of 'reason' and 'social good' that it intends to hold and uphold' which are 'predominantly Islamic; the imprints of Western ideas is at best negligible, if not totally non-existent' (p. 89). The work thus emphasizes the pre-British origins of 'reason'.

The spirit of rational questioning in the Indian past gave rise both to the Bhakti traditions and later the 'Indian Renaissance'. These have been traditionally attributed to the influence of the British education system and culture. The examination of this question offers an opportunity to Singh to make a very important departure from existing historiography. On the one hand he revisits Bengal-centric explanations of the 'rise of reasoning' during the British period and on the other, he critically evaluates 'solutions' envisioned by intellectual during the long 19th century. Hulas Singh makes an important distinction between the influence/imitation of 'British culture' and 'British civilization'. The author argues that the 'nationalistic orientation of the nineteenth century rationalist thought in Maharashtra was also palpable in their approach to the West. They made a conscious choice in favour of adoption and adaptation of modern Western civilization as against Western culture. The demarcation between culture and civilization was sharper and more conspicuous in Maharashtra than in Bengal' (p. 228). The same has been suggested by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi when he highlights the fact that the translation of the term 'independence' in India is 'Swadheenta', i.e., control of self or self-governance as a guiding principle for governance, reminiscent of a long historical tradition.

To elaborate the point further, the author argues: 'As it was, the intellectuals in nineteenth-century Maharashtra as elsewhere were confronted with the claims of Western civilization as well as those of Western culture, both more or less being poured into the country as part of the process of colonial hegemonisation. Reformers in Maharashtra opted for the former and rejected the latter which practically meant rejection of Anglicisation as a way of cultural colonization. The material aspects of modern Western society, that is its advancement in science and technology, education and industrialization, were preferred to the Western way of living, their religion, theology, mode of social interaction, etc., that largely denote an existential cultural complex' (p. 231).

Hulas Singh suggests a couple of plausible reasons for this distinction: Primarily, the middle class in Maharashtra had a long history and it was able to

survive even in the post-1818 phase because they were 'able to grab the new opportunities which the new administration and the introduction of English education presented, and they entered into large-scale employment in British government' (p. 235). Secondly, he suggests that 'Maharashtra did not bear the brunt of colonialism for as prolonged a period as Bengal did (and) as a result colonialism was not able to sap the self-confidence of its people, particularly the middle class, to the extent it could do in Eastern India' (p. 235).

Singh has pointed out that along with several marked features, insistence on moral values was the hallmark of this phase. 'Morality constituted the cornerstone of the endogenous normative order, and the Maharashtra intellectuals came very strong on this question. They did not dream of a society based on some sort of a value-neutral rationality but insisted that social order must have a moral foundation to be viable' (p. 251-52). Thus, he once again stresses the argument that in the Indian context, questions of spirituality and morality cannot be segregated from their vision of nation and nationalism. 'The intellectual link with the past in the nineteenth century was a matter more of the head than of the heart. It was based more on erudition than on emotion' (p. 264).

Last but not the least, the author very forcefully points out that the revivalist tendencies in nineteenth century Maharashtra cannot be termed as blind reverence for the past but rather rationality driven. He concludes: 'Revival as no option was not within the ken of nineteenth-century thought in Maharashtra. The intellectuals' bent towards the Vedas was not blind; they were highly selective in their choice. The past had no sanctity if it was bereft of its utility to the needs of the present conditions. They had no hesitation to repudiate that part of the past which was unsuited to the demands of modern times' (p. 269).

Such analysis makes this monograph highly polemical as it transcends barrier of ideological positions and makes earnest efforts to revisit several well established narratives for nineteenth century India in general and Maharashtra in particular. A major strength of the work lies in the quotations from primary sources, so that there is an effort to reduce subjectivity and allow the reader to draw his/her own conclusions. Uncomfortable positions taken by the intellectuals have not been set aside but rather presented before the reader to flag the complex issues at hand, including that of the complexities of social and individual experiences and responses. I am afraid that the greatest strength of the monograph will limit its acceptance across ideological positions. For that reason, it is a must read for anybody who is keen to understand the complexities of cultural-intellectual interactions in the evolution of long term civilisational processes.

Tribes and States

Ratnakar Tripathy, *IIAS*

Bhangya Bhukya, *The Roots of the Periphery: A History of the Gonds of Deccan India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 209, Rs. 750.

This book on the Gonds of the Deccan region in India navigates at two levels – the conceptual one where the category of ‘tribe’ is critiqued in its various avatars made familiar to us over time; and the second, where the author devotes due energy to his empirical material to build a coherent tale spanning the early Gond rulers from the thirteenth century and our own times, with the largest chunk being devoted to the colonial era. The chief conceptual problem with the category of ‘tribe’ is of course the linear and unidirectional view of history with its sequential stages, presuming the *adivasis* to be less advanced than the caste-class societies and requiring them to be civilized by embracing the dense structural features of the class society. In its utter objectification of the hill communities, the word ‘tribe’ also offers the license to regard these communities as innocent children to be reared afresh and educated but on occasions also a nuisance for their supposedly wild and unruly behaviour. This is not an ambivalence easy to dispel and the idea of the tribe in modern times invariably comes loaded with it. The author instead proposes the category of ‘periphery’, emphasizing the political-geographical aspect but also the vast natural resources often obtained in the hilly tracts of India inhabited by the *adivasis*. In many ways, the book presents an account of the increasing peripheralization of the *adivasis*, a phenomenon that first pushed them into the relatively secluded hilly areas and then continued to push them further through the migration of the plains people into their remote havens.

Through a sweeping view of the empirical material gathered, the author tries to demonstrate that during the pre-British era, the Gonds often had a working relationship with the larger feudal entities by means of treaties, tributes, taxes and their sub-feudatory status. He brings out the fact that around the mid-thirteenth century, Gond rajas ruled four kingdoms in the area

known as Gondwana. This continued for almost five hundred years and the Gonds were well used to the idea of sovereignty, an idea they have retained in their communal memories to this day. Even as feudatories, the chain of feudal ties at different levels allowed the Gonds some autonomy and looseness of political structure which was eroded speedily during the colonial period and the process continues into our own post-colonial times. The colonial regime and the dispensation that followed were not content with the loose allegiances and wanted firm and unquestioned control over natural resources and the *adivasis* as citizens, claiming the forests and rivers as the property of the state. The independence of India saw a further intensification of the process instead of relief. The British practice of declaring ‘tribal areas’ as protected left much ambiguity over who was to be protected from whom as vast tracts in Gondwana, as well as Jharkhand to take another example, were taken over by the plainsmen who used both wile and violence to take over the *adivasi* lands, dispossessing them rapidly and continuously since the mid-nineteenth century. This process has seen little reversal since and the changed demographics that favour the plainsmen hailing from caste societies bear it out rather dramatically. The author attributes the ‘Naxal’ problem entirely to the gradual cornering of a self-respecting people accustomed to a high level of political, cultural and religious autonomy.

Bhukya combines documentary evidence with ethnography, archeology, folk lore, elements of oral culture and symbology to construct a convincing portrait of a reign shrouded in mystery. The keyword here is ‘autonomy’ as a negotiable system of co-existence clearly contrasting with the modern state’s urge to tightly control its populace as well as the natural resources within its frontiers through a clear-cut legal order. How the land settlements of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries affected the peasantry all over India is a story told more often and with greater consensus. As for the *adivasis*, who were often driven from the lower reaches of the forest tracts to more remote ones, the modern Indian state,

despite its democratic system, continues with unabated zeal in claiming much of their forest wealth through mining and other modes of extraction. The *adivasis*, for understandable reasons, see this as loot and vandalism or at least a lack of sharing and a reassured sense of co-ownership. The state-industry nexus continues to tighten its noose around their mineral and forest wealth, leaving the *adivasis* uncompensated in all senses of the term. There is thus a great divergence in the historical narrative voiced by the state and that of the *adivasi* with an enormous moral gulf that places the *adivasi* at the periphery of the nation as well as the democratic system.

Bhukya claims on the basis of empirical material that the difference between the impact of the British and that of the earlier indigenous regimes was of a relative kind even though the colonial insistence on fuller control of the resources should be seen as a watershed. Way back, the Kakatiyas, known for their massive irrigation network of tanks for example, appointed Nayaks as the village chiefs, the main purpose being to colonize forest lands and expand the reach of agriculture. Similarly, Gonds and other *adivasi* chiefs also acted as the intermediaries for the Mughals and the author provides a few accounts of active interaction between the mainland and the periphery. The periphery, according to the author, has to be seen as a political-social system on its own rather than the dark unknown inhabited by the 'tribals' as distinct from plainsmen. Even though the earlier rulers did see the *adivasi* as a different entity, the contrast became sharper and nearly absolute during the colonial era. Here, it may be important to note that the 'mainland' and the 'periphery' have been posited by the author as two domains neither completely isolated nor oppositional as was assumed by several colonial anthropologists and administrators. The formation of the periphery is also a historical process that goes back to the Neolithic era and the first settlements in the subcontinent. The process of state formation under different regimes over time and the state's hunger for more substantial revenues from land, forests and mines is the one historical arrow that seems to move in a straight line through the narrative here. The problem, however, is about how the peripheral also becomes the marginal in our times in the downright sense of democratic citizenship.

After a pithy introductory chapter that sets the context for this historical-ethnographic work, the author presents an account of the earliest Gond kings – for example Babji Ballal Shah (after whose offspring the railway station near Chandrapur, Maharashtra, is named), who is mentioned in *Ain-i-Akbari* and who ruled the kingdom of Chanda around 1442 and paid no taxes to the Mughals. It was only in 1667 that the Gond ruler of Chanda paid a tribute to Aurangzeb and accepted Mughal suzerainty though

only as long as it was unavoidable. Again, after the death of Aurangzeb, the Gond rulers enjoyed considerable freedom right until the Maratha invasions. Throughout their reign in central India, since the thirteenth century, the Gond rulers alternated between full suzerainty and subordinate raja status and built their own forts and had their own armies. A scarcely known fact – the Gond villages also practiced settled agriculture and were reduced to slash and burn farming as an opportune livelihood strategy much later and only after being pushed into the hills by the migrating plainsmen.

The following four chapters deal with the more recent history of the Gond rajas and their punitive taming by the British. As the colonial state takes root in the subcontinent, one gets a sense of both – a tireless push to take over the resources and an equally indefatigable attempt to deprive the *adivasi* of his custom and convention-based ownership rights. The details may be different but it is the same old enclosure principle the British applied to their own land in Europe, which they now employed for land settlement in its different versions in India, eliminating every kind of ambiguity in property relations that make an economy and society robustly organic. 'Taming' is the metaphor used by the author who also mentions the British horror of wildly growing forests and the fauna that inhabited it – they were all expected to follow the routinized drill of modern science and statecraft. Or simply get killed and wiped off till they conformed to a neater version of the modernist order! We may thus see the colonizer as a victim of his own flawed vision and our populations as victims of each other in an array of dominos shoving each other to what seems like an inexorable abyss at this point in history. We may also look at the entire saga as a spatial dynamic where the state pushes, corners and crushes any alternate social-political arrangement.

Of course, the spatial metaphor should not be extended too far – the state also insists on 'taming' the minds of the *adivasi* citizens through its own vision of development that may not square with the *adivasi* interests or temperament at all. In an epilogue, the author tries to reflect on the desperate urge of the *adivasis* to retain something of the autonomy they earlier enjoyed. Much of such *adivasi* defiance is directed at a caste society that props and arms itself with the might of the modern rational state. There are germs of a new line of political thinking here for those concerned with the overwhelming power of the modern state that is fundamentally at odds with the spirit of democracy. The historian in Bhukya however lets matters rest with all such questions instead of trying to answer them. There is much material and occasion in this Gond history to reflect and theorize on the modern state and its inescapable stranglehold.

Urban Aesthetics and Power

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Asher Ghertner, *Rule By Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2015, 272 pp. ISBN: 9780199385577

In Asher Ghertner's *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*, the question of aesthetics as a problematic category in contemporary city-making, and thereby the pertinent transformations in state processes, is explored step by step as evident in the chapterisation. The themes are: an outline of world-class city-making, the process of state gentrification and new methods of governance, the transformations in the idea and practice of nuisance, the ways in which aesthetics creates criminalized subjectivities, the effect of world-classing in the creation of belongingness, aesthetics as the normalisation and legitimation of the propertied as against the property-less (and thus the abject), and a comprehensive conclusion.

Ghertner's ethnographic study, besides being an incisive work on slum demolitions and their rationales, as this happens in India (urban Delhi), is probably the first anthropological analysis of this scope of the inextricable link between aesthetics and power. Further, it is not a mere description or examination of the role of law in all this, but rather a contextual ethnography of jurisprudence in the matter of urban aesthetics. Problematising the inert binaries of the oppressor and the oppressed, the work looks into how oppressions in effect operate as rule by consent. The propagation and discourse of urban aesthetics is clearly one of the best methods to interrogate the hegemony of mutually encompassing visions. Control, even when it produces gains for a few, does not operate through clear-cut binaries and oppositions but becomes a complex, embodied process, as eloquently argued in this work on Delhi.

The methodology of tapping a range of sites, from the vignettes of the Delhi Development Authority's initial exercises in the southern ridge to close encounters in Shiv Camp, from the unpacking of statistics, legal discourse, nuisance-talk and world class-ness, to the politics of

property, provides a gripping way of getting not just the expert but also the lay reader into the core issues without watering down the analysis.

Some of the motifs in Ghertner's work would have otherwise appeared as disparate entities with abstract, emotive or descriptive evaluations. Thus, statistics like the one produced by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), nuisance talks and the affairs of the Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) are now connected and grounded in the larger assemblage of aesthetics and the everyday production of world class-ness. According to French Philosopher Roland Barthes, myths are depoliticized statements that are taken for granted. Ghertner says that statistical facts (facticity- the condition of being fact), like growth oriented numbers (and directives) generated by management consultancy firm McKinsey, work precisely like the Barthian, standalone self-justifying myths. He uses both his own analysis and that worked on by scholars like Utsa Patnaik in order to unpack the conjury of objectivity in facts and figures. By bringing up the performativity of nuisance talk through authorizations in institutions with symbolic capital, he makes nuisance less emotive (even though it does invoke powerful emotions) and more of a contextual, legal and political deployment. The RWAs are no more inert descriptions of groupings that just come into being. Rather, the whole Bhagidari process, with the networking of market agents, higher level bureaucrats and RWAs, takes things away from citizens. The process, he says, is Neil Brenner's 'New State Space' making, whereby governance, through urban interventions, are taken away from political societies on the ground.

Ghertner argues that world-class city logic and rule by aesthetics work through the bricolage of changing forms of governance, legal frames of reference, everyday talks/visions as well as the phenomenological experience of the whole habitus.

Earlier, the calculative apparatus of codes, official papers and maps had got tweaked by the political

societies of the post-colonial state to make space for the least privileged, like the *jhuggi*-dwellers. So the appropriation of identity cards or survey statistics, as well as documents gathered during a certain political climate (during the time of the V. P. Singh government, December 1989–November 1990) built up a rights' regime of documents. The change of this document-based regime to the contemporary governance regime based on certain forms of gaze is meticulously traced.

The change in the legal frames of reference is carefully followed by Ghertner: the 80s reference to constitutional provisions to prevent evictions by the Bombay Municipality, the 1980 Ratlam Municipality Council vs. Vardichan case that emphasised the responsibility of the system to provide clean and safe environments to all residents including the *jhuggi*-dweller, the early 2000s indirect targeting of slum dwellers (referring more to the 'waste' they generate, B. L. Wadhwa vs. Union of India), the direct reference to slums themselves as the problem by the latter half of 2000s, and the defining of the 'right to life' provisions in the constitution exclusively for private property owners.

We see the gaze of power gaining hegemony through everyday talks and entrenchment of visions. Jacques Ranciere's 'community of sense' becomes effective when, within urban world-class aesthetics, the popular commentary '*sarkar aa gayi*' (the government has come), referring to police and officials who come for slum demolition, becomes normalised for the select and the abject. It is within these normalities generated in the everyday that visual depictions of nuisance become technologies of jurisprudence. Ghertner makes adequately clear that law is in every respect a phenomenology of perception. The spontaneous recognition of a legal provision like nuisance happens only in the 'scheme of perception', à la Bourdieu. It is only in this scheme that dominant aesthetics is appropriated by *jhuggi*-dwellers.

Neo-liberalism is an extremely flexible technology that can get instituted and embedded in the most efficient of ways. Post-nineties, urban policies have reframed and reconfigured the state in total accordance with neo-liberal capital. In the post-eleventh Five Year Plan period, there has been an increased emphasis on the transition from central and state sector investments to the creation of environment and ambience that is attractive to investors. Ghertner's theorization of rule by aesthetics shows that neo-liberal order does not happen in abstract or linearly. The flexibility of the neo-liberal order can be gauged in the way earlier forms of claim-making get foreclosed. There is an efficient insertion of the vernacular materialities (land) into global circuits through gentrification. Ghertner brings out ethnographically specific instances where

highly localized abjections become political priorities. There is also the specific problematic of placing narrators who recognise personal injustices but at the same time incorporate a common aesthetics.

Finally, the work also offers the reader who might plan further investigations into similar terrains very interesting theoretical engagements, informed detours and diversions. From Foucauldian frames for the impact of governmental programmes to James Scott's (1998) contemplations on the preoccupations of power with the legibility of subjects, Ghertner asks what happens when records once made are no more relevant. What happens when what belonged and what did not, happened more by way of certain codes? He brings in the 'community of sense'-idea of Ranciere and analyses how sense of unbelongingness gets generated by the rule of aesthetics. Thus slums, with forms of records generated within preceding forms of developmental state, become irrelevant, and malls that violate 'plans' become legitimate forms of vision. The work shows how political societies theorised by Partha Chatterjee (2004) become defunct in urban Delhi's everyday. When elaborating on the vernacularised forms of building power through aversions and entrenched casteist attitudes (of purity and pollution), Dipesh Chakrabarty's (1992) idea of the process of abjection is brought in. The theorization of urban abjection in the contexts of world-class cities in the making is original. Bourdieu's 'scheme of perception' as well as its associated 'urgencies' become important coordinates to situate the global circulation and local imbrications of world-class-ness. Mariana Ververde (2012) becomes significant in the valuations of property (as propriety). There is a discussion of the works of Phil Hubbard (1998), Tim Hall (1998) and Choon Piew Paw (2009) on city 'imagineering' in different regional contexts. Asher Ghertner also brings in Terry Eagleton during the final discussion on aesthetic hegemony and the disembodied expressions of common good.

In *Rule by Aesthetics*, world-classness becomes a regime of order and contestation. The work moves from abstract categories to specific legal provisions but importantly, according to the author, neither the abstractions nor the specifics by themselves generate reasons for the regimes in the making. Rather, Ghertner takes the reader through the genealogies of nuisance laws, property based rights and aesthetics of world-classness to make an ethnographically pressing point about the contemporary Indian urban process as exemplified in the case of Delhi. The point he makes is that it is not enough to put the pen down on consumerist logic, middle class inclinations, global aesthetics and materialisations. What becomes significant is the process

whereby the protocols of the preceding developmental order get reconfigured and new codes of order – as law, bureaucracy, strategies of state – give formal hegemony to elite aspirations and globally networked aesthetics. The enquiry is lucid about the ways in which new aspirations and desires emerge and often inform visions in their dialectical relationship with legalities, orders and codes.

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