

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY

# SUMMERHILL

IIAS REVIEW

**Introduction**

Bindu Menon

**Interview with Professor Robin Jeffrey**

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**The Politics of the Cyborg:  
Some Thoughts on the Posthuman Debates**

T.T. Sreekumar

**Listening to the Sonorous: Digital Archiving as a Political  
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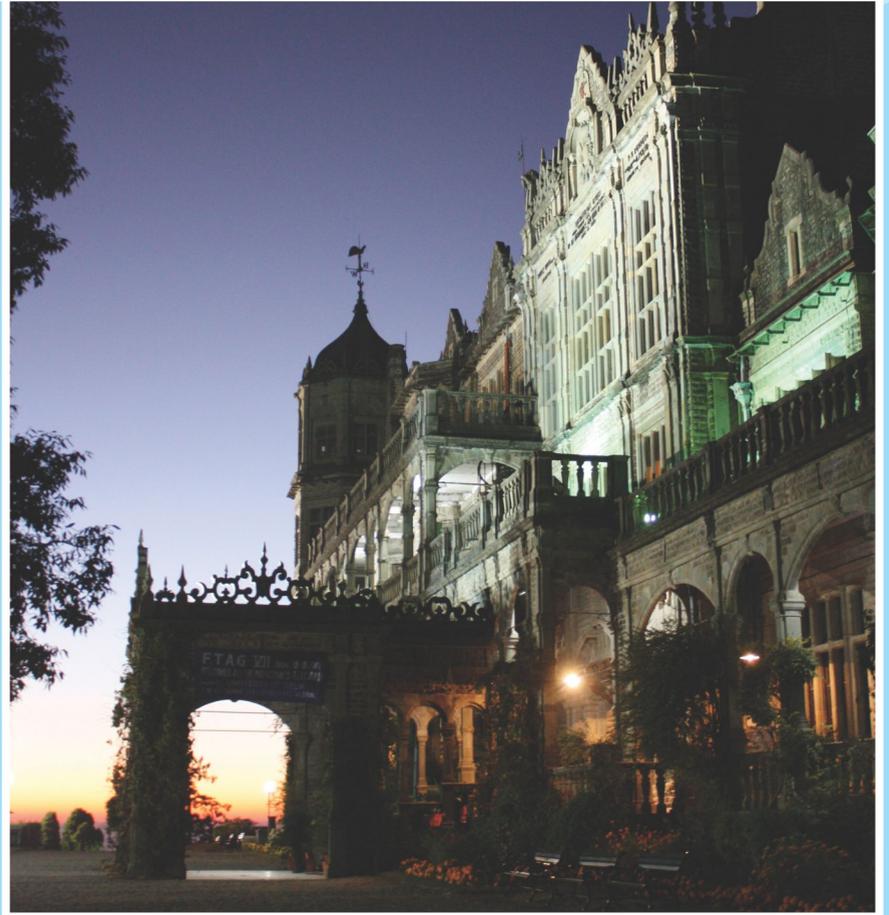
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## Summerhill

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## A Note from the Editor

“Totalitarianism is latent in technology”

—PAUL VIRILIO (1996)

One of Paul Virilio’s enduring contributions has been his trenchant critique of technology. He incisively revealed several of technology’s harmful consequences. Nevertheless, his criticisms most often were grounded on a technophobic approach that tended to entirely neglect the democratizing impulses latent in many technologies and technological assemblages that the digital turn has enabled us to generate. The current Volume of *Summerhill* takes a close look at some of the technological trajectories of digital technologies in order to assess and understand the global communication society and the deep issues of ethicality, politics and culture that underlie its rationality.

In the centerpiece that holds this volume together is a conversation with Prof. Robin Jeffrey who has paid close attention to the relationship between Media, Democracy and Politics in postcolonial India. Through his work, Jeffrey constantly brings into our attention the dynamics of the global and the local, mobility and stagnation, long *durae* and short *durae* and the fragility of the information systems.

T.T. Sreekumar, in his essay on the Politics of Cyborg, gestures to the particularity of cyborg futures, a future that would be mired in deeper inequalities and located in the differential experience of modernity. Through a summation and deeper analysis of debates on art, techno culture and techno politics the essay lays out the prospects of reconstituting the nature of dreams, revolts and futures in the realm of cyborg futures. He invokes the Janus-faced figure of the cyborg that Donna Haraway interpreted as the two different directions that our cyborg future may take—one that intensifies our experience of the masculinity orgy of war and the other exploring the tremendous possibility of emergence of communications-savvy cyborgs who can be agents of social change.

If the emergence of print has initiated dictionaries and encyclopedia to order and assign meaning to a world of voluminous information that it brought about, the

digital explosion has impelled new forms of ordering and storing data. Various attempts like the Partition archives, family histories and memory projects are situated at the intersection of data collection, storage and retrieval redefining the concept of physically located archives and interrogating its organizational logic. Sai Kommaraju and P. Thirumal in their essay, attempt a sensory analysis of the Dalit Digital archives online, in which they argue that the Dalit digital archives shift the sensory nature of the archives from one of making visible to one of making heard; from visual registers to sonic registers, from disembodied and objective archival orders to embodied moorings. In their inquiry, they juxtapose the print with the new harbors of digital archives, a juxtaposition that is generative of debates around memory, archival imagination and marginalities.

What are the practices that have emerged in the digital scape that is relevant to contemporary India? In the context of film and video production that has been enabled by the digital turn, Hemantika Singh tries to rethink the idea of authorship in the digital media. In their analysis, they try to shift the attention from the models of thinking about the film-maker/author as an individual genius to a collective and contingent process of encounter at the site of the filmic text, an encounter they describe as intertextual, contingent and socio-political.

The rather exciting field of cell phone studies has established the meaning making capacity of mobile phone usage and mobility has emerged as a key term, bringing together studies in migration, tourism and urban systems with emphasis on experience and embodiment. Manisha Madapathy asks what exactly constitutes the sensorium of mobile phones. By examining the centrality of mobile phone messages and circulation in recent riots, lynching and violence in India she takes the debates on mobile phones and embodiment further.

In her poetic meditations on the desolate landscape through short digital postcards of poetry, Gowhar Yaqoob creates a visual ekphrasis of the desolate landscape of Kashmir- of ruins, rubble and abjection when she writes

of the soldier at the Line of control who wants his newly wed to know about his assignment to create a moment at a poor landscape, the teenage girls who wonder about the history teacher's silence on the desolate landscape, the wind mill supervisor's lone moments watching the landscape of calm sky.

How has this vast landscape of frictions in history, technology, human-machine relations and art reflected in the humanities in India? Setting up itself against the grain of a global narrative of Digital Humanities and its universalizing tendencies, Puthiya Purayil Sneha's essay maps the many initiatives that records and archives texts and practices and in the process reimagine the very objects of study in fields as diverse as literature, anthropology, film studies and musicology. Many questions related to a neo-liberal takeover of the university system in India, archival imaginations, pedagogical interventions and shape shifting of various disciplines through the digital turn deserve closer attention.

Rightly recognizing the 'global' as ubiquitous, the anthropologist Anna Tsing (2011) suggests that the 'global' comes into life in what she terms as "frictions", a process that exists through the grooves etched by people and things going somewhere as they are helped along by those who move them. These essays enable us to listen to the digital media as they emit and exist through processes of 'friction' in what can be described as the globalscape of digital media.

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BINDU MENON (Issue Editor)

# Interview with Professor Robin Jeffrey

BINDU MENON\*

Professor Robin Jeffrey, historian and political theorist of Modern India has extensively worked on Media and Social change in India. His two books on the transformations in newspaper industry in India are accounts of a rapidly transforming modern media that takes on new forms in conjunction with technology and industrial contexts. His recent work on the life of mobile phones in India maps the wider social, political, business and cultural networks that are vitally re-energised and reworked through new communication technologies. Together, these enquiries explore the specific relationship between mass media, democracy and technological modernity in India. Having served as Professor at various universities in Canada, Australia and Singapore, Prof. Jeffrey is currently Professor Emeritus at University of Melbourne, Australia



Professor Robin Jeffrey

**1. From your work on the post 1990s Newspaper Revolution in a liberalizing India to the latest work on Cell Phone Technologies, you have provided us with a concise account of major developments in Indian media history. Along with changes in economy, you have accorded an important role for new technologies of printing and distribution networks, as key in bringing about these changes. How would you reflect on the digitalization of print in general and newspapers in particular in the 21st century?**

I think the big challenge lies in the survival not of newspapers but news organizations – that is, organizations that have the sense of purpose and the resources to live up to the old maxims about journalism: telling stories that powerful people don't want to be told and comforting

\* The interview is a personal correspondence with Bindu Menon over email.

the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. We shouldn't, of course, get too dewy-eyed about "great newspapers of the past". There has been plenty of prurience and incitement – there's plenty today, as the Murdoch tabloids regularly remind us. Successful papers had to run at a profit, and the profit usually came from advertising. Daily newspapers and magazines covered a wide range of topics to ensure a wide range of readers and advertisers. Today, however, the challenge is to find ways of making money out of reporting "news". Once a story is released, it can be repackaged in minutes and distributed to non-paying consumers through scores of different portals. People don't want a general package of news – they single out particular themes on their smartphones and take feeds only of such material.

If local news organizations die, where does diligently researched information about local events come from? I think a few great global news organizations will survive and find ways of paying their bills – say, the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, the major public broadcasters of the democracies (if governments continue to fund them). But who will cover triumph, disaster and corruption in medium-sized cities and smaller centres? News organizations give experienced reporters time, legal support and security, which no blogger or small group can provide.

**2. In one of your earlier essays you present a schema to understand the relationship between media and democratization. The schema defines and describes Gandhi as a communicator, effectively communicating with a vast non-literate mass through oral and print medium, the emergence of an elite public sphere followed by a subsequent Janus faced mass media and democratization. In a context of ever expanding media in all forms and an ever expanding public, how would you present the schema now?**

I was trying to think about different stages in people's encounters with media – rare, scarce and mass. "Rare" was when reading, writing and books were almost magical things. "Scarce" was a world of newspapers from the late 17th century until the late 19th century and the arrival of railways, telegraph, mechanical typesetting and rotary presses, which enabled "mass" media. Today, we seem to be in a time of individually-produced, mass-distributed media – that is, anyone with a smartphone can broadcast to the world. At one level, that seems very democratic. At another, anyone with an opinion, no matter how vicious, factually wrong or downright wacky can trumpet it to the world. Marshall McLuhan, 60 years ago, wrote about "the global village" that humanity was entering with new media like broadcast television. If we are now living in a global village, the "village idiot" is part of the package and village idiots can go global as well.

**3. The fundamental questions that both "India's Newspaper Revolution", "Making News" and "Cell Phone Nation" pose hinges on the assumption that media technology can be assessed on its ability to function as social equalizer. Without making broad generalizations, you have effectively emphasized the ability to enable political participation and redefine citizenship. What kind of theoretical conversations can be initiated between sociology, political theory and media studies around these questions?**

I think one of the crucial questions for the next twenty years relates to how the internet comes to be governed. It is a wonderful means by which any citizen can talk to the world and learn from the world. At the same time, it gives any citizen the ability to unload viciousness, lunacy and lies. It is difficult to imagine any regime saying, "We're not going to have these mobile devices. No networks. Punishment Death if you are caught with one." That's not going to happen. But – and I suppose here is where practical sociology intervenes – are there ways in which to identify and contain the crazy and the nasty without running the sort of censorship that follows the path of the Chinese Communist Party? A columnist in the *Economist* (28 August 2017) argues that "the best way to guard against pernicious ideas is with well-aimed ridicule and tough counter-argument". That's not very comforting if the wacky stuff, by its very nature, has a lot more advocates with free time and easy internet access? A hundred jack-hammers drown out a sitar and a violin. And where does "counter-argument" go if states, such as China or Iran, shut down portals and providers that carry outlawed content?

**4. "Cell Phone Nation" has tried to bring under analysis the vast geographical spread of cell phone, its**

**imaginative uses in forming community, commercial, social, familial and love relations and brings a formidable span of reference from governance, trade and mobile waste. In the many instances of riots and lynching in the recent past, the centrality of mobile phone images and their circulation, before and after such violence has been noted. How would you analyse these mobile images and the cell phones as generative as such affects?**

Mass media have a history of being used to incite "the masses". The "Ems despatch" – a doctored diplomatic cable released to an eager French and German press – helped kick off the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. The blowing up of the warship *Maine* in Havana in 1898 gave the *New York Journal* and the *New York World* jingoistic copy that whipped up American enthusiasm for the Spanish-American War. And the 20th century overflows with uses of media to serve bloody ends. Bhindranwale's messages spread through Punjab and overseas on audio cassettes, and video cassettes were used to spur on the rioting after Mrs Gandhi's assassination. The difference now is that just about anyone can produce, edit and disseminate inciting audio and video.

**5. Cell Phones are also central to the creative industry, in which games, interactive apps and music play an important part. How do you reflect on this ever-thickening web of technologies whose workings are increasingly wound up with market and often opaque to us?**

Quick research using Professor Google says there are 2.2 million apps in the Apple app-store and 2.8 million available for androids. That's a lot of software being written for every conceivable purpose. 3D printing is already making body-parts for medical purposes, and robots are driving cars. These technologies, however, depend on some fragile links – access to things like electricity, radio frequency spectrum and great internet exchanges. "What were these big Internet exchanges like?" Andrew Blum asks in *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet* (2012). "These big exchanges made me nervous. Wasn't it dangerous for things to be concentrated?" (p. 113). With things we can see, touch and understand – mechanical things – it's possible to do *jugaad* – to tie things together, make on-the-spot repairs. It's harder when what you need to make something work comes from a long way off and over which you have almost no control. You don't have to be a science-fiction writer to imagine a world in which a lot of this comes apart, where the electricity grid collapses, where banks can't find your money and where all your keypad can do is make clicking noises. The digital world may be much more fragile than most of us realize.

# The Politics of the Cyborg: Some Thoughts on the Posthuman Debates

T.T. SREEKUMAR

When postmodern thoughts became formidable intellectual presence in the 1960s and 1970s, undermining some of the sweeping notions about progress and reason, one of the political consequences was that the idea about historical agency also underwent a fundamental transformation (Fitzhugh and Leckie 2001, Ermarth 2001, Shaw 2001). Socialist politics was particularly brought under introspection for its consistent defense of the agency of the worker, and feminist politics for its allegiance with a possible socialist politics that can address the historical questions of gender inequities (Bhavani and Coulson 1986, Kennedy and Tilly 1987, Harris, 1989, Anyon 1994, Kennedy 2008). Soviet and West European socialist experience was understood as 'actually existing socialism', a phrase Habermas described as "coily pleonastic" (Habermas 1990, p. 10), while western Marxism was mostly seen as a continuation of the 19th century utopias that Marxism had engendered (Frank, Rosenzweig, and Vale 1980, Williams, 1980). Most of the Third world, which now goes by the more modish phrase 'Global South' was marked by the growing presence of radical movements that revolted against imperialism, finance capital and their own national bourgeoisie. Parallel to these developments, at the core of the capitalist world order, several scientific advances began to emerge pushing the boundaries of human possibilities (Hanson, 2016). It is at the convergence of these compulsions, and in a deep and contradictory relationship with them, that the idea of the cyborg, that has now become a major social category, began to get increasing attention among anthropologists and philosophers along with scientists, engineers, technologists and technocrats. I have argued elsewhere, in the context of discussing Asian modernities, that the cyborg future is not a universal one, and the march toward a future of transhuman would inevitably create deeper inequalities in a world where modernity is differently experienced (Sreekumar 2015). In fact, Agar (2007, p.14) has noted that "exacerbation of social

inequalities" is a much-discussed possible harm that transhumanism can create. Nevertheless, it is important that the material force of the idea of the cyborg, its possibilities and transformative capabilities should also be explored against its increasing acceptability as a social category (Huges 2004, Bostrom 2005).

Most recently, in the radical imagination, the concept of the cyborg or the scientific advances that lead to its refinement have also been recognized as a major challenge in rethinking emancipatory politics (Zizek, 2016). Zizek, in fact, even edges the issue in terms of the juxtaposition of techno-gnostic dream of achieving immortality (among other things) with the abandonment of the political utopia in the domain of socio-economic relations (Ibid p. 339). As de Vries (2007 pp. 781) noted "the involvement of scholars belonging to STSD and Philosophy of science, in experiments that extend participation in decision-making about science and technology are shown to be based on an un-reflexive use of an off-the-shelf conception of politics. This conception, grafted on the old model of the sovereign, frames political actors as 'mini-kings': as subjects with preferences, interests, aims and plans that they want to be executed" (What is political in sub politics? How Aristotle might help STS). In response to Habermas's important study on the Future of Human Nature (Habermas 2001), Mendieta (2004 p. 723) argues:

In contrast to these posthumanists, Habermas suggests that we should reflect at a lower level of abstraction, one that is more in tune with our reflexive modernity. At this level we can consider the practical impact that genetic intervention, and here Habermas is particularly interested in stem cell research and pre-implantation genetic diagnostics (PGD), would have on the moral self-understanding of future generations who would be at the other end of PGD interventions; more specifically, what are the consequences for political modernity if we are allowed to proceed with the optimization and instrumentalization of the species that all forms of genetic intervention entail.

The political possibilities of the idea of the cyborg

is also being contemplated deeply in the emerging literature on techno-culture as well techno-politics (Gray 2002, Braidotti 2013). The political rupture the concept foregrounds is increasingly drawing scholarly attention. As Smith (2009, p. 70) noted “the figure of the cyborg is both a metaphor and role model for resistance within this evolving paradigm.” The theoretical and political challenge it poses to radical systems of thought was noted by Samir Amin, a prominent Marxist scholar in his significant essay on the Law of Value (Amin 1998). He carefully notes, although he does not directly invoke the notion of the cyborg, that cybernetic automation implied “a challenge to the concept of value and to the law of value, for social supervisory labor does not represent, according to its main characteristics, a direct or indirect contribution to the productive labor process” (Amin 1998, p. 82). He adds that the technological revolution manifested in cybernetic automation has triggered “a metamorphic process for exchange value, opening the possibility of the withering away of its dictatorial sway” (Ibid, p. 89).

Indeed, the idea of the cyborg was closely hinged to the emergence of cybernetics as a new discipline of enquiry. Cybernetics as a principle from physics was first borrowed to human-sciences and cultural studies long back when Norbert Wiener’s work of 1948 on cybernetics revolutionized our understanding of regulatory mechanisms in organisms (Weiner 1985 [1948]). Wiener’s argument was that organisms are self-regulatory mechanisms whose structures are largely cybernetic, i.e. governable systems that work through signals and feedbacks. Wiener calls this “*control by informative feedback*” (Ibid p. 113). This conceptual principle then came to be applied in a variety of sciences and disciplines ranging from electronics to linguistics and psychoanalysis (IEEE 2014). The term cyborg to denote a cybernetic organism came up first in the discipline of Space science in 1960, as used by Clynes and Kline (1960 [1995]) in a paper in *Aeronautics*. The intent of the paper was to propose that it would be better to alter human’s bodily functions technologically than provide earthly environments to survive in space. The paper had radical and direct impact in the field of space technology, artificial intelligence and bioengineering. According to them, a human as a cyborg, would extend the self-regulatory functions of the body to the external machinic components with the help of technical additions to the system. In science, cyborg technology was thus imagined as part of the future human evolution, to think about the prospects of surviving in non-terrestrial environments. Basically, cyborg implied a human who was augmented with any technology and it was possible to reimagine human history with an alternate perception about human in

relation to the material tools, extensions, media, language, speech, script, pen and computers. This possibility gave the concept of cyborg an epistemological opening into human sciences, philosophy and history.

### Haraway and Cyborg Vision

Haraway proposed in her landmark text that the obsolete idea of ‘human’ and ‘man’ could be replaced and a ‘cyborg’ could be the new paradigm of the self (Haraway 1985). By the time Haraway happened to use term in a politically strategic manner, the term had already emerged as a figure in the popular culture and especially in science fiction and “reiterated in a variety of embodied technoscientific forms and venues” (Schneider 2005, p. 61). Hayles (2006, p. 159) notes that the article was written in the closing years of the Cold War, in part as “a provocation to feminists who wanted to position women in alliance with nature and against technology”. Haraway perceives cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 1991, p.149). She observes that by the late 20th century, humans “are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (Ibid, p.150). At a time when machines were not only becoming integral to life, but were being perfected to be more intelligent, imaginative and self-sufficient, Haraway’s proposal had several layers of implications and it also worked to forge the relations between man and machine that was becoming a central problematic for life forms of 21st century. The relations that we bear to machines henceforth would decide the nature of our cultural and political existence. Haraway herself had an ironical vision about this relation when she observed that, a cyborg world is a perspective on one hand “about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women’s bodies in a masculinist orgy of war” and on the other it might be about “lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (Haraway 1990 p.196).

The cybernetic vision and the cyborg dream had come up with many promises. The title of a 1967 poem of Richard Brautigan says it all; “All Watched over by the Machines of Loving Grace” (Madrigal 2011). The poem written while he was a poet-in-residence at the California Institute of Technology, imagines about a “cybernetic meadow” a techno-utopian vision of a world where mammals and computers lived together in a mutually programmed harmony (Brautigan 1967). Donald Fagen’s song I.G.Y.

wrote in 1982 also dreamt of “A just machine to make big decisions/ Programmed by fellows with compassion and vision”. Incidentally, 1982 was also the year *Blade Runner* was released, a neo-noir dystopian science fiction film which projects the machine as the hubris and fatal doom of man. *Blade Runner*, according to Martin (2005 p. 120) raises questions about both the position of the human being under postmodern conditions as well as invites “speculation upon a *posthuman* epoch”. Haraway herself described the character Rachel in *Blade Runner* as rightly representing the fear, love and confusion of the cyborg culture (Martin 2005 p. 107). While science and technology negotiated with and navigated through the cybernetic principles to finally connect the organism and machine into a collective form, popular cinema, art and literature got flooded with both utopian and dystopian visions about machinic future. Recently, an art exhibition, “All Watched Over” at James Cohan Gallery curated by Tina Kukielski (2015), summoned up the utopianism of Brautigan’s poetry, but also takes into account the later cynicism that washed in—as represented by the dramatic irony of Fagen’s song. The pieces by Brenna Murphy, Michael Portnoy, Lee Mullican, Paul Laffoley, and others, do project certain strangeness, but also emphasize the role of capital in framing the futuristic cybernetic visions. I think the way this can be understood is as a metaphorical frame for the argument that capital sullies the cybernetic-meadow dream.

This is precisely why we need to understand the original idea of the cyborg and look at its transformative trajectories. Haraway (1991 p.181) draws on a bizarre dichotomy between cyborg and goddess. The title of her essay published in the journal *Arguments* was ‘Rather cyborg than Goddess’<sup>1</sup>. This reveals that her intention was to take a firm stand against the anti-technological, luddite, essentialist limitations of feminism of that period. The disjuncture between the huge technological changes happening and the conspicuous lack of theoretical and political responses toward it, from both socialist and feminist quarters was perhaps what brought about the ontology of cyborg in the first place. The extreme irony in which Haraway steeps her essay is of course a way of challenging the political and theoretical orthodoxy of socialist-feminism. She contests that her ironic faith on their premises works like how ‘blasphemy’ works over faith. She calls cyborg the ‘bastard’ illegitimate offspring of militarism, patriarchal capitalism and state socialism. It is the very fact that the father is both essential and inessential that make a bastard/cyborg a powerful metaphor for protest and dissent.

Cyborg is both a material artefact as well as a compelling metaphor to explore corporeality and human subject. It is compounded of not the ‘human’ (with all

its political history and ontology) but the ‘organism’ and the machine. Haraway curiously calls them post second-world war hybrid entities. While understanding Cyborg as organic creatures and ergonomically designed apparatuses, communication systems, texts and processing technologies, can the ontology of cyborg fit into the contemporary social context that follows the political chaos of a post-cold war, post-Soviet socialist, post 9/11 and post Arab spring global reality? In the early stages of cyber-discourses, an assumed polarity between what William Gibson called ‘meat space’ as against the ‘cyber space’ was emphasized and human consciousness was thought to be caught between the real space of the body and the disembodied virtual space. The cyborg is, perhaps, the only concept that could swim through the polarity discourses and make itself relevant in contemporary realities of artificial intelligence where anxieties over such polarity no longer makes any sense. The cyber space, that is no longer about virtual, the new cybernetic meadow that floods with capital, also rewired the cyborg and its social and cultural prowess.

It is the historical understanding of Haraway’s cyborg as not just a mere techno product but the result of the extended military-industrial complex and the rising neo-liberalism of the 1980s that makes it more relevant today. Moreover, pertinent to the birth of cyborg was the then prevalent post-Heideggerian critique of technology (Heidegger 1977) that provided a bridge between Marxian political economy and post-structuralism (Gandy 2010). Haraway notes that no confrontation of dominations of race or gender can claim ‘innocence’ from other dominations by citing how Euro-American feminism had to see the non-innocence of the very category called ‘woman’ in its blindness to the experiences of non-white women. She, therefore, holds that cyborg is ‘completely without innocence’, in the sense that its politics is rooted in an ‘informatics of domination’. (Haraway 1990 p. 192) Haraway’s most important contribution must be perhaps that of foreseeing the informatics of domination, a new type and pattern of domination using information and communication machines that she identifies across a realm of fields ranging from genetic engineering to immunization.

The concept of cyborg is not to be identified and studied as just a product of technology, but like ‘human’, it should be understood as an ontological category rooted in history and constituted by contexts that are local, cultural and political. The earliest marked attempt to co-relate man and machine, Alan Turing’s tests to identify the ‘intelligent’ machine, worked on a pre-supposition about a ‘man’ that was evidently carried over from Enlightenment humanism (Copeland 2004, Hayles 1999). The test depends on an interpretative intervention to find

out who is on the other side, a man, a woman or a machine through language-based questions. Every theoretical and practical attempt toward co-relating man and machine henceforth was based on the mind-body duality which was also rooted in Western rationality. Moreover, not surprisingly, the test presupposed 'woman' as an error, as an aberration from the normal, thus borrowing all the cultural inequalities into the domain of the machine (Hayles 1999). From Norbert Weiner's theoretical proposal to telegraph a 'human being', to Han Moravec's fantasy of downloading human consciousness, to Kevin Kelly's futuristic call to scan everything into a brain, to the imagination of the producers of the science flick *Star Trek* that body can be re-materialized in a remote location after being de-materialized on earth, to the *Matrix* series, to the concepts of molecular biology and genetic engineering that rests upon body as a code, to the experimental artist Stelarc's performative prosthetics (Stelarc 1991), much of contemporary technologies as well as confrontations with them are built on this age-old understanding of mind-body duality. Thus, Haraway, in a certain sense, clearly anticipated the more recent arguments in Gray (2001) and Clark (2003).

### Cyborg and Actor Network Theory (ANT)

In the course of the appropriation of the idea of cyborg into the newly emerging areas of knowledge, its original message as a transformative agency replacing the worker of the socialist politics and woman of feminist politics was getting diluted to evanescent. As if the inherent irony of cyborg that Haraway steeped it in would pursue its course, the most practical application of Haraway's cyborg came with Bruno Latour's attempts to extend the material-semiotic analysis that cyborg implied into the actual techno-cultural contexts. Especially in the wake of huge technological advances of the 1980s and 1990s that involved political, technical, legal and scientific objects, cyborg had to be relocated from the metaphorical realms it occupied to that of techno-materiality. In fact, Haraway herself acknowledged this future transformation of the idea when she argued, "Michael Foucault's biopolitics is a flaccid premonition of cyborg politics, a very open field" (Haraway 1990, p. 191). From Latour's ANT and the material engagement that it proposed, the cyborg became a thorough technical component, away from the socially relevant metaphors of feminism and socialism (Latour 2005). As a perceptive writer pointed out:

De-substantivized and detached from the sociotechnical and other determinate topics, ANT becomes an overture to a shape of concepts and an intrinsically spatial treatment of ontological action. Distributedness offers the counterpoint to treatments of assembly through alignment and enrolment that have struck

many anthropologists as overly triumphalist and voluntaristic, but it also, to take an obvious example, pushes anthropological understandings of place, locality and subjectivity away from the sufficiency of structuralist notions of negative or contrastive definition (Oppenheim 2007 p. 486).

Agency in ANT is situated neither in humans nor artifacts but in their coexistence within the network. The controversy regarding the question of agency becomes a topic for dense debate as non-human intentionality implied in this proposition is challenged and closely interrogated. However, the standard response of ANT scholars typically relies on a denial of the assumption of the equivalence of agency and intentionality by their critics (Pyyhtinen and Tamminen 2011; Vicini and Brazal 2015). Non-human 'actants' and humans, in this strict sense, are not seen as equals in the network by ANT. However, the subject-object distinction is deeply contested by Latour in his expositions. In the second International Knowledge and Discourse Conference, held at the University of Hong Kong in June 2002, a debate between Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller teased out the deeper philosophical dimensions of this controversy (Barron, 2003). The question centred around the emphasis on the subject – object distinction is to reflect on the ANT position on human-non-human unity in the network. Latour, arguing that the subject–object distinction is a Kantian legacy that academics should discard, uses the orientalist shield citing Asian examples. He says that it is "very difficult to argue for the subject and object distinction – not because Asiatic thought has overcome the subject–object dichotomy, but simply because it was never there" (Ibid p. 82), while Fuller points to the nature and purpose of social science in general where he sees it as moral project of humanity where human agency has always been crucially significant in a historical sense, making the need for a distinction between the human and the non-human indispensable. However, in Latour's exegesis, the dream of a powerful agency turned into a resigned acceptance of the role of a mere actor of the network. Human subjects are defined by Latour as not any autonomous essence, but with respect to the networks in which they participate. It not only meant that 'human' subjectivity could no longer be separated from the machinic units of which it is part of. More threateningly, it also implied that the control of the machinic component would be an act in the network that the human can only partake. The idea of machine being a tool in the hands of a benevolent or non-benevolent human was no longer valid. On the contrary, machine or the technical component became integral to the being of an 'organism', its existence in the network. This is why Latour's Actor based anthropology concentrated on the non-human's participating in our collective life, as his broad field work reveals, it resides

in laboratories, in rain forests, in councils of states so on and so forth (Pyyhtinen and Tamminen 2011). What had to be understood for Latour was the infinite ways in which humans are enmeshed with what he calls 'non-humans'. He leads this argument to the very end of it by observing that 'humans' cannot be grasped and saved unless the non-human is restored to it. Agency was thus no longer subjective but distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field. (Bennet 2010). Action is defined by Latour in terms of the influence or effects on others in the network. The capacity to act implies no special motivation of the humans. Non-humans—houses, missiles, airplanes, mobiles, food stuff, plagues, tornados so on and so forth—do not just form the background of human action, nor are they passive objects of human action. For Latour humans owe their agentic efficacies and capabilities to the larger assemblage of elements that they are part of. It is Michele Foucault who had earlier looked up at 'human' as a compound of relations, networks, functions and practices, constituted within archives, (written texts, annals, medical and institutional records, literary texts and personal narratives in the case of Foucault). The radical question in Foucault's critique has always been 'have we ever been only human'? What Foucault meant when he said that man is a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea that will soon be wiped off, is certainly that our assumptions and convictions of an entity called Man is soon going to be judged, challenged and reconstituted. When subjectivity was examined by Haraway as a cybernetic compound consisting of a biological body and information networks- both carbon and silicon, her emphasis was on the subjective agent that was free from the restricting episteme 'Man', freed from its socio-political, racial and gender norms and equipped with a new machinic property installed into the body, cybernetics flowing through the cells. But when we reach Latour, this powerful agent is re-configured as an Actor, a component unit of the network, a node in the cybernetic flow. In his response to de Vries (2007), Latour reads de Vries's position as implying clearly that it is time that scholars stop playing the philosophical (Latour 2007). It is not that Latour is discarding the project of politics of science altogether, but he wants it to be defined differently than what is commonly understood by the term. The everyday struggles of domination and hegemony are not, even in their micropolitical manifestation, admitted as politics. Instead, as he says, "politics is something entirely different from what political scientists believe: it is the building of the cosmos in which everyone lives, the progressive composition of the common world" (Latour: 2007: 813). Citing Tresch (2005), he argues that "politics is now defined as the agonizing sorting out of conflicting cosmograms" and it can now be called cosmopolitics, to

mean the politics of the cosmos "and not some expanded form of internationalism" (Ibid). It is within this newly defined understanding of politics where ANT is now staking cyborg's political agency.

### **Some Contemporary Cyborg Utopias and the Informatics of Dissent**

In some lesser vein, cyborg metaphors have also been projected as a solution for all the economic problems where socialism fails to provide an alternative. Everything from internet to artificial intelligence, interactive programs to cybersex emerge as fairy-tale-like endings for the unimaginable problems that 21st century capitalism rooted up (McCracken 1997). Universal access to internet or Bill Clinton's 'slogan a computer in every classroom' (which comes to be reiterated in many campaigns in 3rd world scenario as well), or Al Gore's dream of a global network of fibre optic cables are only few instances where access to technology is projected as the solution for every capitalist enigma.

The truth is that the cyborg metaphor, though it had evolved from the particular milieu of Bay Area of America, especially San Fransisco and Silicon Valley, influenced by its strong lesbian and gay cultures, of body piercing, tattooing, silicone implants, hormone treatments, cosmetic surgery and all those 'specific' implications of being 'posthuman' which coexisted with technological capitalism of Apple and Hewlett Packard (McCracken 1997) (now being carried over by Microsoft, Google and Facebook), it can be handy and undeniably so in the Third World contexts where every universalistic project has to be viewed with suspicion and scrutiny (Agar 2007). Where and when more and more people experience dislocation, isolation and alienation and are placed in a very threateningly volatile terrain of access to technology that acts like double ended swords, an identity notion that do not rely on the old faith on human as an organic whole is very significant.

There is an emerging pattern of what could be called 'informatics of dissent' (Smith 2009) that comes up today. 'Twitter revolutions' and Facebook protests are in fact part of this larger pattern of dissent and resistance that involves organism and machine. The relation between man and the tool is no longer that of the early forms of alienated labor, nor is the machine here a mere blind/passive partner in a march toward material progress. Though the manifestos about cyber utopias were immensely restrained by the limited nature of the liberation that they sought, there has been a constant tussle with the accepted mainstream that information technology has come to symbolize as well as render possible. Smith sees this as the cyborg turn in social networking arguing that "cyborg has come to life

in the young (and not so young!) people who aren't afraid of science and technology but, on the contrary, expect that technology will conform to their needs as users rather than anticipating that it will impose deterministic agendas on them" and also that "they see themselves as potentially powerful agents of social change" (Smith 2009 p. 76). Smith's radical interpretation of Haraway is summed up in her conclusion that informatics of domination has produced communities and networks of communications-savvy cyborgs who are the gravediggers of capitalism (Ibid p. 76). Fisher (2010 p. 241) takes a similar position when he argues that "the construction of the cyborg, the engagement of humans with the world becomes more meaningful and allows greater degrees of freedom. Networks free humans by affirming and augmenting their non-essentialism".<sup>2</sup>

This emerging emphasis on the liberating potential of the cyborg, however, does not take seriously the response of the State to the possibility of such subversive use of technologies. Today an individual with the ability to use unconventional ways of accessing and processing information becomes the most formidable threat to States. A certain 'criminal' way of using the communication tools is identified in acts like breaking into secure devices or websites, mass texting, sharing of content, forming of resistive groups and so on<sup>3</sup>. Techniques of fear, isolation and tracking, public shaming, denial of basic liberties of speech etc., form the backbone of the strategies of the informatics of domination. The techniques of the informatics of domination remain the same whether the dissent is for the right to share music, watch a film, read a content or protest against governments. Larger expanding circles of crimes are thus being identified that mark the cyborg politics, its aspirations and limitations. On the flip side, the strategic informatics of domination is also emerging as a significant element in the post-truth right wing politics worldwide, that depend on manufacturing consent through fake data and fake news.

### **Art and Technology: The Digital Interface**

Arthur C Clarke in his 'Profiles of the Future' had made an extraordinary observation that "any sufficiently advanced technology was indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke [1958] 2007, p. 21). It seems very ironic in a way that what links art and technology is the historical and conceptual roots that they both share with magic. Apart from the eerie ambience of digital-sensors and infra-red and the psychedelic sensations that digital art and magic evokes, art and technology has now created a conjured-up space in which people's movements are detectable, presences archivable, senses projected and bodies located. In this space where art, technology and politics use the

same interfaces of the digital, it has become impossible to differentiate each of these units distinctively. Mobile art, a relatively recent idea that encompass the production of art via smart phones and tablets, represents yet another moment of this ambivalent merger of aesthetic, technological and the political domains of everyday life (Farman 2011; Riser 2011). Luke (1996 p. 2) succinctly notes that Clarke was popularizing the image of cyborg in his Profiles of the Future, arguing that "humanity had nothing to fear from uniting, temporarily or permanently, with spaceships, sub-marines, or TV networks, Clarke ultimately foresaw the human, organic component of cyborg beings becoming disposable".

"Cybernetic Serendipity"—the ground-breaking pioneer computer art show held at Institute of Contemporary art in London in 1968 in which computer graphics predominated as art—was also perhaps the first in which it was impossible to distinguish between a technologist and an artist<sup>4</sup>. Most of the displays by George Nees, Max Bense and others who exhibited their computer graphics as art believed that generating "works of art" or "aesthetic objects" was a very rational activity like programming (Candy and Edmonds 2002). While their exhibits looked to laypeople as nothing more than black straight lines on white paper and geometric shapes, the language of computers had invested into it such metaphors that revealed itself only to an informed scrutinizing eye. But this was not after all any different from the auratic magic that art upheld, the aura that Walter Benjamin famously proclaimed as disintegrated after the mechanical reproduction of art (Benjamin 1969 [1936]). Digital reproduction was also repeatedly claimed to be destroying the 'aura'. However, we may see that the 'aura' had in fact remained intact and has survived in new technological, commercial, corporate and ideological strategies.

Max Bense (the credited founder of the field 'Visual Semiotics') even called the graphics generated by computer programs as 'generative art' or 'artificial art', combining Chomsky's generative grammar and Minsky's artificial intelligence (Candy and Edmonds 2002). But the term also necessarily implied that there was a 'natural' art prior to the digital. This self-consciousness often defines a section of digital artistic endeavours and invariably even in contemporary critical parlance, digital is often regarded as requiring lesser 'original' and human effort, and inconsequential of lesser merit and standards (there is no dearth to such prejudices against digital media from the print-quarters, from writers, artists and publishers in our regional locales too). However, the merging point between programmable devices and fiction had started earlier, perhaps with the memex, the proto-hypertext conceived by Vannevar Bush. Alternatively,

the knowledge of and relation to computer's language had been an undercurrent in literary fiction like Borges' 'Forking Paths'. Migration, interactivity, participation and immersion and almost everything that computer networks implied, were being passionately explored in the postmodern literary landscapes by writers like Borges, Calvino and others in whom we see that the 'engineer's vision and artist's vision' (Murray 2003) collide and integrate. The approach of these writers is marked by an evident, almost paranoid awareness of the organization of human consciousness, as if the opaque intricacies of language became transparent before them. While Vannevar Bush, Ted Nelson, Douglas Engelbart and other many computer scientists were trying to study the artistic dimension of computing technology, writers like Borges and Italo Calvino were testing the computing potential of the language they wrote in. Writers, especially of fiction and poetry were becoming more and more conscious that their task was that of a machine minting words, that presented one or many of the possible combinations of events and the error in the system that made the 'work of art', what Calvino called 'Clinamen' (Calvino 2003. p.187).

It was Marcel Duchamp who described art as a practice like 'breathing' (Cabanne and Duchamp 1971, p. 72). Enigmatic and provocative, Duchamp's statement indicates a key threshold in modern art. It contrasts and counters the conventional notion of art as 'life-work', for breathing does not produce anything stable and is not a lasting activity, but as ephemeral as it can be. It is perhaps from Baudelaire on, in whose definition of modernity in 'The Painter of Modern Life', that art began to prioritize ephemerality over the hitherto accepted expectation of eternity (Baudelaire 2010 [1863]). In the world of 'post internet' art, we may even think of Duchamp's analogy of breathing to extend itself to the meanings that the act of breathing takes up in the digital lives, the sinews of networks that connects to the central nerves of power. Duchamp's statement, Baudelaire's equation, Benjamin's predictions about the fate of artistic aura and the nature that art took up in the digital times, all in a way attaches to Hegel's revolutionary prediction about the end of art: that there will be both art and the end of art (Hegel 1998). That art and its end will co-exist together could have been radical to conceive in Hegel's times, but with the coming of modern media technologies, its praxis and semantics of permanence and impermanence, the coexistence of art and its end has become part of our quotidian.

The influence of digitality on art, is no longer restricted to the production or distribution of art, for digital is now more than a 'medium' but an environment and ecology in which life survives. 'Ecology' here implies that 'massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects,

beings and things, patterns and matter' (Fuller 2005 p. 2) that is characteristic of both digitality and art. Cyberspace is now the ecology in which digital art like Net Art thrives. Unlike web based art, Net Art exists within specific networks on the internet and not necessarily on world wide web. Initiated and popularized by Vuk Cosic, constituted through alternative networks in lists like nettime, these are efforts by artists to use network as a means of production of meaning, as alternate space for creative resistance (Duron 2016). Net Art was a sort of internet anthology started by the digital organization called Rhizome in order to provide permanent home online for the fleeting art works in internet that often vanishes due to clutter or sometimes due to political and censorship reasons.

According to Mark Tribe, the founder of Rhizome, the site was inspired by the book *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) in which the biological term denoting laterally spreading underground stems was used as a metaphor to all types of spreading, especially that of the horizontally distributed, non-hierarchical networks (Rose 2016). The foundation, like Net Art, had come up as part of the radical politics of internet that promised to do away with all sorts of traditional museums and gate-keeping of ideas. But ironically when Net Art itself began to disappear in the altered contexts, Rhizome became a sort of 'post-museum' to preserve the same radical works.

Thus, even when the reproducibility of work of art has increased several fold and avenues of production and distribution extended, the infamous 'aura' that Benjamin credited with work of art could be seen getting restored in the altered contexts and crises of digitality. (Betancourt 2006). With the digital, the aura gets extended into two broad terrains -one is the international art/literary markets that now thrives through the digital and the other is the process of self-distinction and self-aggrandization that the new extended audience of art now necessitated rather than obliterated. For instance, every other industry of art-painting, music or book now insisted on the supremacy of the original and the real in one way or the other to fight the burgeoning market of piracy. Film industry for instance, was forced to resort to many tactics to clamp down file-sharing and piracy by insisting on the 'theatre' experiences, by enhancing the quality of theatre viewing through 3D and high definition, or even by entering into successful trading partnerships with the 'legal' piracy of online distributors like iTunes, Netflix or Amazon. It is hard to talk about the 'aura' of the film here in terms of the old dictum of original and copy that had vexed Benjamin. With the digital, the significance of aura merely shifts from the cult value to commercial value.

Stelarc's performances based on the concept that human body is obsolete, should perhaps be the most

appropriate artistic imagination to have come up from the cyborg ontology (Stelarc 1998). Stelarc's performances involve robotics and other technology integrated to his body<sup>5</sup>. The genre of biotechnological performance practices cannot be rubbished as too futuristic. In one of his performances 'Parasite', Stelarc explores his body by choreographing it through internet data streams, body is experienced and projected as the 'chimera', the combination of meat, metal and code. The idea of Stelarc's art is to explore the extent to which our physical appearances can be projected as extensions outside the actual physical body and performed remotely through machines. It is a theoretical, experimental and artistic confrontation of all the psycho-sexual and archetypal entrapping and obsessions about the mind-body duality which has been the foundation of Western epistemology for so long. For Stelarc information is the prosthesis that props up the obsolete body. The most striking fact about Stelarc's performances is that it is not agency driven. The body of the artist, which has long been the ground for subjective assessments about individual worth, power and expression, is mostly a sight of indifference, extreme susceptibility and objectification. Most often, in the performances that are not scripted, the body is absolutely clueless about the outcome of the act of extending itself electronically. Stelarc reiterates through his performances that speaking about a mind in terms of the old platonic duality or the Cartesian crisis or the Freudian psycho-sexual conclusions is highly problematic. Stelarc pointed out in an interview (Donnarumma 2012) that "[t]he more and more performances I do, the less and less I think I have a mind of my own, or any mind at all in the traditional metaphysical sense...What constructs our identity is no longer our physical presence or location but rather our connectivity (to other bodies)". He also argued that "[t]he significance of cyber may well reside in the act of the body shedding its skins" and that "[c]yber systems spawn, alternate, hybrid and surrogate bodies" (Donnarumma 2012). The insistence on connections that Stelarc emphasizes has been elaborated by Scheer (2002). Performances are also seen as highlighting the potential of the of the body as an adaptable medium capable of dealing with new contexts and prosthesis, focusing on "the relationship between body and technology in terms of connections and not in terms of a logical separation of bodies from the world" (Scheer 2002 pp. 85-86). While Stelarc has been experimenting with the limits of the body since 1960s, his internet performances represent and demonstrate the relation of the body to the global communication system (Poster 2002 p. 28).

## Conclusion

Wolfe (2010 p. xv) pointing to the complexity and ambiguity of the idea of post-humanism attempted to bail it out by arguing that it is analogous to the paradoxical interpretation of postmodernism as given by Jean-Francoise Lyotard that it appears before and after humanism, emphasizing both the technological and biological embodiment and embeddedness of the human species. The idea of the cyborg in its various incarnations served to at least partly reduce this ambiguity. Ostensibly, the politics of the cyborg, as initially envisaged by Haraway has also undergone innumerable transformations. It now stands at the threshold of being appropriated into a rhetoric of scientific progress on the one hand and aesthetics of experimentation with body composition on the other. From the art of the 1960s in which networked computers stood for much hope and a reassertion in humanity, when the machine was posited as a boon to save man, through the dystopias of the machinic violence as in *Terminator* or *Blade Runner*, contemporary popular discourses understand human-machine connectivity in terms of a choicelessness and dramatic irony that reasserts the end of a dream. But there is also a hope in reconstituting the nature of the dream, the nature of the revolts and that of dissent. But it drastically differs from previous experiences of historical forms of organized resistance and struggles for social transformation. Latour (2005), in an imaginary conversation prepared for a volume in honor of Donna Haraway which was eventually rejected by the editor says: "You see. So, you're still dreaming of storming the Winter Palace, aren't you? If it doesn't resemble the confrontations of May '68, or the riot gas filled streets of Seattle, you don't believe it's politics? You still have Delacroix' painting in mind: The Republic with her naked breasts, a Phrygian cap on her head, holding the tricolored flag and marching on — straight into the hail of bullets. You want to die heroically on barricades. Sure to lose." This summarizes, in a sense, the prospects and limitations of the concept of the cyborg as an agency of change.

## Notes

1. Damarin (1994 p. 54) picked up this argument to "elaborate (and to celebrate) the goddess and cyborg mythologies in contexts of teaching" involving a search for "positionalities for teachers who are neither goddess nor cyborg but always already both goddess and cyborg".
2. Citing Downey and Dumit (1998) Scholari (2009 p. 952) argues that "From the anthropological point of view, a new field called cyborg anthropology has appeared which studies the intersections between individuals, digital society and networks".

3. However, subversive use of such techniques has also been celebrated. Wikileaks, Aron Swartz's hacktivism and Edward Snowden's leaking of NSA documents in June 2013, are actions that more recently renewed discussions about electronic surveillance, security, privacy in the context of understanding ethics of the nation state (Fidler 2015; Bauman et al. 2014; Murakami and Wright 2015).
4. "Cybernetic Serendipity was the first large international exhibition of electronic, cybernetic, and computer art. It took place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, UK, from 2 August to 20 October 1968" according to the URL <http://dada.compart-bremen.de/item/exhibition/3>, retrieved on 20 August 2017.
5. Some of the important projects and texts by Stelarc are archived at the URL <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20247>

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# Listening to the Sonorous: Digital Archiving as a Political Practice

P. THIRUMAL AND AMULYA KOMMARAJU

## Introduction

*“Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity,”* says Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian author, in her famous TED talk on “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009). She argues that a singular narrative can have dangerous consequences, and expresses her initial wonderment that people of colour could “exist in literature”. Although the need for libraries and books for African-American children was emphasized, especially at the height of the civil rights movement, because education was “the key to break free of slavery”, (Wheeler, Johnson-Houston, Walker 2004), there was also a recognition of the need to tell stories that did not re-invisibilize children of colour (Bishop 2012), and those that did not reduce or essentialize a group of people, as Adichie so eloquently puts.

Padma Velaskar (2012) notes that even Ambedkar’s ideas on liberation were intrinsically linked to education, as a “key instrument” to not just liberate Dalit from oppression but also in the “reconstruction of a new social order.” Following the Mandal Commission report and the period of liberalization, Dalit mobilization was not just limited to making a space for themselves in educational institutions, setting up of Dalit study centres, and actively producing knowledge, but, an activism that spanned the political, and the cultural, in order to, as Mary E. Hancock’s writes (2008), carve a space in public memory and “an explicitly Dalit social and geographical space” through “erection of Ambedkar statues and busts”. The neo-liberal regime and proliferation of New Media, and the Dalit movement occur at the same time (post 1990s). As Hancock points out, the transregional, transnational, associational networks of Dalits have become more effective in the past decade, due to a variety of strategies. One of the ways in which these associational networks are made possible is through the internet.

Historically, the print (capitalist mainstream) media has not made itself accessible to the Dalit-Bahujan

community. As several studies have confirmed, the conspicuous absence of Dalit-Bahujan in contemporary mainstream media, and the inadequate coverage of their issues has marked the trajectory of Indian print and electronic media (Balasubramaniam 2011; Martand 2016). Though there have been several attempts by Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals in different parts of the country to start newspapers (Omvedt 2006; Aminmattu 2016), these efforts did not consolidate into one overall anti-caste articulation in the country at large. It is against this backdrop that the Dalit-Bahujan presence in the New Media must be empirically studied and theoretically understood.

Dalit camera, Round Table India, Savari are some instances of Dalit activism, online. The material they produce textualizes the world, not to impregnate reified abstract philosophical thought, but to produce compelling tellings of the world, instead of *showing* of the world. The text is not graphic but sonorous. They write to make themselves heard and in doing so, digital archiving becomes one of the strategies used by Dalit Bahujan community, as a part of a larger political project. This archiving is not dormant, but alive, and very much a political practice, to counter the hegemonic texts, by producing what can be referred to as “anti-caste matter”.

The coming together of various strategies to organize activities across spheres (not just limited to politics or cultural production) is what Agamben discusses in his piece “what is an apparatus”:

I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself (Agamben as quoted in Packer 2010).



Anonymous. 02-10-2017. "Manemma." Water painting.

But this 'apparatus' falls short in describing what these revolutionary online spaces can do. Though technology itself can reify caste and re-assert the hegemonic order, it also has the potential to spring a surprise. In his introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, Mark Seem (1983) writes that revolutionary actions, intended to create new social orders, cannot be based on relations of exclusion and segregation, instead, groups must multiply and connect in "ever new ways" to keep the momentum of the movement going. The way in which internet is put to use by the Dalit-Bahujan-Adviasi men and women, and how they operate in order to create relations of solidarity across groups of people, straddling different spheres of activities (politics, educational institutions, cultural production in the form of movement media) can only be described as Oliver Marchart (2011) puts it, 'counter-apparatus'.

Most Dalit literary works are measured against a social-emancipatory project but there are certain expressions

of it that are unhinged, that are not contained by the project. Dalit studies centres, largely, seem to provide a negative description by reading itself against an already given political program, but a positive description should account for the surplus meanings that certain literary and artistic works have produced.

This paper then tries to ask, not what is caste, but what is anti-caste, and in so answering the question, draws from scholarship that looks at body and embodiment, caste, and new media, to look at digital archiving as a political practice, and how technology facilitates this archiving. We argue that the digital media has a way of lending itself to both the sensible and the intelligible, in contrast to print media that privileges the intelligible over the sensible, much less preserve it. The general economy of the intelligible is to produce and preserve the being while the economy of the sensible alerts us to the economy of expenditure and annihilation of being—caste being by writing out<sup>1</sup> the body (not to be confused with writing the body out). The haunting dream of anti-caste project is to listen to the casted body and the fragrance of the casteless body where the dream is not considered as an apposite of waking life. The new media theoretically offers this place to experiment with the excription—of the caste body, and to secure a new set of civilizational apparels. What gets sometimes worked out as anti-caste matter is a nakedness of caste, its body and its mind.

Conventional Social Sciences treat religious-political discourses rather than caste body or matter or sense as contributing to the vitality of caste in contemporary India. It is true, some critical work has demonstrated the two-way traffic between a disembodied, philosophic reading of caste and an embodied understanding of caste. This study while pursuing the latter proposition seeks to highlight the acoustic somatic rather than the 'touch' variable integral to caste dynamics. In a more expansive manner, the paper has argued that the acoustic somatic encompasses touch as well. Reading of Dalit Bahujan Digital archives, therefore, should be read as offering anti-caste material that destabilizes majoritarian religious identity and identities of any kind.

#### *Archiving the Body*

As French historian Jacques Le Goff (quoted in Cook 1997) suggests, archiving and archival politics, typically, has been about those in power and therefore could speak, and those who were/are forced to remain silent not just in public life but also in archival records, thereby creating histories that are only one part of the story. Textual archiving, amongst other things, is based on the male principle, predominantly about preserving the manuscript, where in matter is seen as an inert

container of something, that it lacks what is referred to as *spontaneous morphogenesis*, or to put it simply, there is matter, and form is imposed on this matter. It is made to seem as though Matter does not possess the ability to produce a form on its own, a thought that is inherent in Western philosophy. Since minorities have been looked at as matter, as incapable of speaking for themselves, rather forced to remain voiceless. Archives of minorities is about unlocking this potential of matter, a synthesis of their creative impulse, as literature replete with biographical accounts, their experiences and desires, and a rewriting of histories that has hitherto not been allowed expression or place in archives.

### *Will to Archive*

Colonialism produced Indology and nationalist discourses critically engaged with Indology and sometimes a more nuanced reading of this archive but they still limited themselves to a certain closed reading of the Brahminic texts. In recent times, scholars like Pollock and others have tried to write a longitudinal intellectual history of the Indic civilization. This effort has given rise to a variegated archive and they tend to refer to textual sources that are of a dissenting tradition from the Brahminic kind and they are suggestive of an embodied understanding of the world and the self. It is the force of this embodied understanding and conduct that is being discussed by the Dalit-Bahujans during colonialism and more recently on the social media. The ancient strictures on listening, speaking, touching go on to prove that senses played a crucial role in articulating and violating the natural distribution of senses across the space of the body. The caste body was organized around a particular regime of the senses.

How does one understand the embodiment of caste? Among other things, such a question raises the issues of caste as a form of sensibility that works on the tension between looking at caste as sense and caste as intelligible. The presentation of caste or how caste appears in the form of food, clothing, sexuality, religion, relationships and aesthetics including the orientation of caste subjects towards these objects, people and ideas. Touch has been the most foregrounded sense that scholars have examined but hardly has anybody looked at caste as a form of listening, which is both intelligible and sensible.

In this essay, among other things, we focus on how Dalit-Bahujans bring their sense of body and bodily sense to critically deconstruct the Brahmanic-Savarna form of presentation and orientation of the self towards itself and the world at large (for example, '*Just Savarna things*' a Facebook page that pokes fun at people who claim to be 'casteless'). More specifically, this intervention focuses

on the form of listening that characterizes Dalit-Bahujan towards a sonorous world which has a resonant structure and how this form of listening to the resonant structure enables them to exit the caste world even as they are generally disciplined and contained by the cultural categories of caste. At certain historical junctures, the resonant structure is powerfully articulated through their performative arts. The Dandora or the drum played a crucial role not in playing out the tradition role of alerting the Brahminic ears of the approaching and polluting untouchable but provided a tool for widening the democratizing of the Dalit movement itself.<sup>3</sup>

The impossibility of assigning will or purpose to these performative cultures speaks of their ability to unhinge themselves from historical and cultural contexts. The indeterminacy of sense and the determinacy of reason play upon each other and more often play into each other and produce the experience of caste and occasionally, exit from caste. This indeterminacy of sense is further fueled by the medium where a modern body and mind dualism is not taken as a primary axiom. The combination of the indeterminacy of sense coupled with indeterminacy of the medium is what propels the will to archive of the Dalit-Bahujan English-knowing chattereti who process minutely the Brahmin-Savarna presentation rather the meaning of Brahman-Savarna content today.

### *Affective Disposition and the Will to Archive*

It looks like that the cultural memory is fraught and is not likely to handle a hostile past. It is in that context perhaps that the will to archive among the marginalized goes deeper than creating a storage facility. After all, storing grains vis-à-vis knowledge requires technologies that keeps it safe from hoarders, pests, smugglers, corrupt, and revenue officials, intemperate and impoverished peasants. State is the final arbiter of producing, storing and distributing grains. Market may be considered another name for the state. Dalit-Bahujan women have been traditionally associated with planting, harvesting and storing grains, of building the edifice of traditional and modern state, of producing the conditions for monuments and texts, of building bridges between experience and thought. In modern times, the foundation of nation-building in the form of massive dams, flyovers, railway lines, concrete cities, industrial and physical infrastructure has been laid down by these women. Both the Nehruvian dream of dams and bridges, that Nehru refers to as the temples of modern India, and the neo-liberal dream of gated communities, and concrete jungles that form the phallic, capitalist, Savarna economy is based on these kinds of labour.

The Dalit-Bahujan women's affective disposition

towards procuring, storing and retrieving experience as knowledge may also be addressed as the will to archive. Both the capitalist economy and the micro-physics of work become the disciplining and controlling structures of repressive, representational regimes. Further it denies the Dalit-Bahujan body the power to act and think to transform the past, present and the future. This is the why stories and dances are enacted. We are suggesting that if there are translations of Dalit-Bahujan poets, mystics or literary figures, then such translations must be read in a manner that opens up a temporality that is less alienating. This time produced may be what Bataille (as quoted in Irwin 1993) calls Sovereign, an unattached time that is not tied either to a burdensome Brahminic past or a projected emancipatory future. It speaks of the immediacy of the instant. Is there a moment where there is an intensity for exiting from a casted body and mind and surrendering oneself to the infinite randomness of the world? Needless to say, the distinction between ideas and objects, histories and enactments, techniques and technologies does not pose serious issues.

This processing of matter requires knowledge, skills, and an affective disposition. The will to archive is about the need to capture this imperceptible process, a process that is transient, resonant, and poetic and extremely difficult to capture, because it is the will to archive the Dalit-Bahujan being herself. The will to archive is to listen to the process of materiality, a materiality through which the Dalit-Bahujan self is created and continuously processed. This processed self, reimages casteless horizons even as it inhabits the oppressive, negating, dominant casted horizon and embodied Brahminic structures which regulates horizontal thinking (where vertical thinking is about the communion between man and God or authority, horizontal thinking is about the communication amongst men).

### *The Nature of the Archive*

Archives, by its very nature is the trace of an event, it does not speak of the perceiving senses but of the perceived meaning of the event. It is the presentation rather the content that the senses concentrate on, it is singing rather than the song. The perceived meaning is a hegemonic Savarna construction which also fits the capitalist logic. The perceiving senses are not available for examination through these hegemonic meaning-systems, they work on the model of a sonorous structure where shapes and sizes of sounds are not immediately available through the act of listening. A Savarna-capitalist logic works towards constructing an intelligible world, the Dalit-Bahujan aesthetics works towards the foregrounding of the sensible. The sensible refers to the presentation of a

thing, object, or a people, whereas the intelligible refers to the content of a thing, object or a people. Modernity drives a wedge between presentation and content and the prevailing Savarna logic reinforces the conceptual over the embodied. Scientific rationality acts alongside political rationality, including religious faith to wear down the seeking of an artistic world that is not based on exalted human purposes or action.

Perhaps, the will to archive by the Dalit-Bahujan is to disrupt this heavy emphasis placed on the intelligible over the sensible, of the conceptual over the embodied. Issues like the affirmative policy do not always make economic or rational sense but they do possess a social, ethical and an embodied rationality. The caste system does not allow for some kinds of resonances: listening for, listening to (which the caste system allows, in certain instances) and listening with (which is one of the possibilities but is disallowed by the Savarna regimes of listening). The promise or the hope of this will to archive, situated in the realm of aesthetics and the sensible, is to allow for *listening* and *speaking* with, instead of the dominant disposition of the Savarna to merely hearing to a sound-object, as the Dalit is often thought of, and to *listen* to the other regimes of senses.

Textual archives (that reduced minorities to matter incapable of expression) now available as *digital archives* should be seen as spaces where matter can reveal itself, where matter and form are interlocked and one is not privileged over the other. Archives today cannot simply be read as manifestation of dominant order, but as spaces of the transformation of matter which can be explosive. Differentiating between the online and the offline or 'real' worlds, referred to as the online disembodiment thesis has long been rejected by digital culture scholars. Research on cybercrime, illness forums, rape survivor blogs are often cited as a clear indication that one cannot transcend their bodies in the 'online worlds'. Such literature, although relevant and important, is predominantly framed around crime and violence (we acknowledge that offline hierarchies are often played out in the online as well), and do not consider how crucial *body* and *embodiment* is for the (liberatory) politics of the marginalized, who are 'most commonly associated with bodies' (Dumler 2003). Digital archives provide a platform for people to create and curate spaces for themselves, and need to be thought of in terms that go beyond just representation and content.

### *The Ocular and the Sonorous*

From colonial calendar art to post-colonial modern commercial cinema, public culture in mainland India has been heavily influenced by the ocular centric media. In

both colonial and post-colonial modernity, the cultural expression of elites has largely been visual while that of the masses is aural and oral. For instance, Ananditha Ghosh's (2006) work on the Battala press discusses the valorization of the printed word, its silent reading, and the use of what was deemed *proper and high culture* by *Bhadralok* ("upper caste" people of Bengal) as opposed to the "*basar*" songs that were considered "low culture" and associated with lower castes and Muslims. Similarly, as Farina Mir (2010) points out, it is impossible to miss the "orality" or the "performative" aspect of Punjabi literature, because genres like the "quissa, var, dole, kafi... ..were not meant for silent reading".

Interestingly, in North-East India, musical traditions have been fore-grounded as public culture rather than visually orientated cultural artefacts like cinema, painting or sculpture. Aizawl has emerged as the transnational musical center for production and dissemination of the North-East music to neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. But even the narrative of Indian cinema, as Sheila Nayar (2004) points out, finds itself moored in a "non-writing" mindset that uses motifs and techniques that are specific to oral cultures and storytelling. Ajith Kumar (2013) in an interview discusses how Nadan Pattu (literally means local song and therefore associated with low caste and culture) moved into the "public" and urban spaces, because of the Malayalam cinema industry. Nayar's assertion, then, that it is important to focus on invisible orality because the subaltern may find representation through it must not be forgotten.

This focus on sonority in a public culture that is ocular-centric, the main thrust of this paper, then begs the question if the "privileged" or the "upper caste" can *listen and if they do then what kind of listening is valorized and what is disallowed*. This paper will briefly (by that we mean, it is not an exhaustive study of the portal, its users/readers, or a close scrutiny of its content or moderation of content) look at as an example of digital archive, *Savari*—an online collective started in 2012 by Adivasi, Bahujan and Dalit women to share their stories and many of the translations carried out in *Savari* testify to the aforementioned distinction. The Tamil Dalit colonial newspapers like *Ayothass*, *Oru Nai Paisa* spoke of an experiment with newspaper genres; the ambition of Dalit in colonial India having the potential to produce news and demanding that it be read and heard by others. To shape the senses of the Upper Caste was an audacious claim but the claim was nevertheless made. The Dalit digital archive may profit from including these formal academic research materials (cited in the text). It need not see these materials as antagonistic because they have been produced by caste Hindus.

### *Savari: A Brief Profile*

*Savari* is a space for Adivasi, Bahujan, and Dalit women to share their stories, converse with men in their communities and comment about current issues. To quote:

We are adivasi, bahujan and dalit women. Here we share our thoughts about our lives and the society we live in, including conflicts with the self, family and community. These are perspectives from our history, and our dreams for the future. Here we are in conversations with each other, with the men from our communities, and others. Inspired by our foremothers, the free spirited, knowledge bearing, community healers of the Saura people, this space is named *Savari*. *Savari* group: Authors and Organizers.

As is evident in their "About Us", they describe themselves as 'Authors' of their stories and 'organizers' of the website, archiving and creating alternative web-histories that take into account a multitude of voices including Dalit, Bahujan, Tribal and other marginalized groups. Personal stories that are self-reflexive, film reviews, reflections on current news stories and laws, Dalit literature and poetry translated into English, republishing pieces that originally appeared in *Round Table India* or *countercurrents*, combining materials from *Dalit camera* to supplement what has been written.

Recently, literary historians have touched on some aspects relating to caste and gender questions but they have rarely paid exclusive attention to anti-caste texts. *Savari* is a robust Dalit-Bahujan online portal and it has varied content; large number of committed contributors and user/readers and their great strength lies in the readers' allegiance to source loyalty (anti-caste disposition). Perhaps, for the first-time, technology allows for Dalit-Bahujans to collect, process and store information in the form of digital archives and not much theorizing has been attempted by Indian scholars to look at this interesting development on the cyberspace.

*Savari* is a repository of knowledge, and can be read as a site of (what scholars have referred to as), theoretical '*transformative capacity of embodiment*' (Gorringe & Rafanell 2007) and to extend it further, to include *transformative capacity of caste*, because caste is embodied in specific ways as can be seen in the next section.

### *Bourdieu and Foucault: A Gorringtonian Analysis of Embodiment of Caste*

This section borrows heavily from Hugo Gorringe's works on the embodiment of caste, and the transformative capacity of embodiment. In order to explain how this transformative capacity of embodiment can be extended to caste as well, we go back and forth between two

important texts authored by Gorringe. Gorringe & Rafanell (2007), in their essay titled *'The Embodiment of Caste: Oppression, Protest and Change,'* suggest that Bourdieu's "'caste'" Habitus helps in understanding how caste is internalized, and agency in such a set-up is only a "by-product of this structural internalization." As William H. Sewell, Jr., (1992) notes, lack of agency is inherent to the concept of habitus, except, perhaps in "structural crises" where "reflexive agency" is only a "slip" and not a "permanent state" (Gorringe 2007). But Gorringe & Rafanell find it is useful to understand how caste habitus shapes both the physical and psychological practices of respondents in their empirical research.

In addition, they write that Foucault's *Political Anatomy* balances Bourdieu's caste habitus, and shows that both power and agency emerge "in and through interaction". The stark contrast between the two in terms of how they think of bodies: for Bourdieu, the body is unaware of itself as the site of power struggles and rules of the game; for Foucault, the body is aware of the rules of the game and how it is being manipulated by those who create truth regimes, can explain how caste operates as the structuring force at the macro-level which is one's caste habitus on one hand, and how it is re-reproduced through interaction on the other, and therefore for Gorringe and Rafanell, a combination of the two helps explain how individuals and their micro-level interactions ultimately "sustain the macro-level phenomena" of caste.

While there are multiple instances where Savari women speak about the way in which caste is internalized in the caste habitus, they also write:

It is caste system that disciplines and socializes bodies. Thus, the different stereotypes for bodies for 'upper' and 'lower' caste people. Traditionally these bodies were bound by their assigned jobs which are considered to be their duties. When the boundaries are transgressed, when they are visible in spaces which are otherwise meant to be for 'upper' castes, violence is not always explicitly physical but rather perpetuated through symbols and actions that would assert the authority of 'upper' castes by constantly humiliating the 'lower' castes. This maintains the existing status-quo and power structure of caste. This is done by distinguishing US from THEM; 'upper castes' from 'lower castes' through various symbols, of which body and skin tone is an important one. (Meenu, *Savari*, July 17, 2015).

As Gorringe and Rafanell (2007) note caste is not just "a state of mind" but is constituted and reproduced through interactions. Meenu on *Savari* also directs us to think about how, even while macro-level social institution of caste "disciplines and socializes bodies", one is also aware of the actions that help those in power to re-assert their authority and give sanction to certain kinds of performances over others.

In one sense, sharing would mean 'having' and on another level, it is also being with, and not merely as a possession. One of the important characteristics of the new media is that it provides a dignified address to its participants. Many of the educated Dalits come from rural or ghettoized urban Indian pockets. But on the new media, there is less humiliation and insult that they have to face because of the not so entitled address that they possess. The new media has a potential to create a form of sharing that obscures formal possessions and entitlements and allows for sharing or being with. The Rohith Vemula movement was based on this kind of sharing.

*The Theoretical Transformative Capacity of Body, Embodiment (and Caste?)*

Gorringe's essay, *'The Transformative Capacity of Embodiment'* (2007), also makes visible how bodily practices can lead to "resistant modalities of agency", that bodies have the potential to subvert and transform power structures. Gorringe contends that the biological body does not just disappear in various contexts and that this recognition of the biological body need not necessarily be essentialist. It can lead to an awareness that the biological posits the social just as the social posits the body, co-constituting each other, where the biological and the social cannot be seen as separate, and one is not privileged over the other.

While the social shapes these bodies in specific and marked ways, affecting both the physical and psychological practices, the awareness of how certain disciplining happens can lead to acts of resistance to transform the social, and therefore both bodies and social are always in a state of flux, always in the process of co-constituting each other, thereby offering an opening to transformation (theoretically, at least).

*"Bodies that do not belong"*

Since the mainstream largely ignores alternative histories, and systematically silences voices of the "others", women writing for *Savari* will themselves into being, thereby creating techno-corporeal (inter) subjectivities which are individual, and, due to identification with its committed readers, also intersectional and collective in nature:

These [mainstream] most often end up reinforcing the savarna hegemony by appropriating voices of the underprivileged. It is in this context that the internet and social media gave a scope for breaking away from such narratives and became influential in making heard multiple voices which were otherwise kept away from mainstream discourses. (Meenu, *Savari*, July 17, 2015)

Also, consider:

..the step to share your lived experience with your community through the self-determined platform of Savari. This is such a powerful story that some of us can identify with as we intersectionally navigate caste, class, religion and the politics of identity, culture and economics in the broader frame of caste reservations and Indian social milieu. (Noel Didla comments on Favita Dias's post, *Savari*, November 28, 2015)

It is imperative for the Dalit-Bhajan community to gather themselves in the cyberworld because the political economy of creation and dissemination of information in the virtual world does not present problems of production as in the capitalist print economy. Although, it is critical to note that given the problems of access in a developing economy like India, only educated, university dwelling Dalit (more men than women) have access to the internet and the possibilities it offers, spaces like *Savari*, though a rarity, offer the Dalit-Bahujan- Adivasi women a crucial platform to voice their opinions.

It is evident in their writings that their corporeality, "embodiment of caste", and their voices are not taken into account by the mainstream and that becomes the very reason for their online presence, and therefore as Richardson and Harper (2002) write, "impossible to separate theories of technology from theories of embodiment" despite the insistence of disembodiment theorists that technology offers a closure for the body and an opening into infinite possibilities of the "mind" and 'virtual reality', re-asserting that the mind is separate and privileged than the body.

These archives are important:

Because the explosive pertinence of a remembered detail may challenge repressive or merely complacent systems of prescriptive inventory of history [typical archiving based on male principle is a part of such an endeavor], memory, like the body, may speak a language that reasoned enquiry will not hear. (Davis and Starn 1989)

#### *Anti-Caste Archives*

Anti-caste refers to both being and becoming human (Guru and Sarukkai 2012). It refers to transformation at two levels: at the level of a theoretical understanding of emancipation from caste (provisions in the Indian Constitution) and an embodied awareness and an inner transformation (expressive arts like literature, performative arts and spatial arts). It is true that these are not mutually exclusive spheres but such a distinction makes us aware that anti-caste is not merely a product of the mind but it has deeper embodied moorings (Wakankar & Milind, 2010). Savari, and various other Dalit forums online, offer a space where discussions include all the three overlapping categories, i.e., the constitutional rights and legal provisions provided for the marginalized, their

experiences of marginalization, Dalit literature and art, and an effort to bring to light the scholarly contributions made by Dalit thinkers.

Spaces like Savari transport us into different worlds where past and present intertwine, where there is space for the sensible (encompassing the intelligible) and the performative. The "authors and organizers" bring with them, a historicity of experience, that is at once about the past and yet about the present, and in many instances, timeless, and therefore relevant at all times. For instance, consider Shubadra's poem '*kongu*', translated into English and published on Savari (reproduced here in full):

#### **Kongu isn't a rag that stands guard over my head**

Kongu ties up my hunger,  
tucks my stomach in and keeps watch  
for me like *Katta Maisamma* while sleeping;  
When I turn into a canal of sweat at work  
she mops it up like a cool breeze,  
like the moon clutching together the stars  
she glistens as the sack  
that holds roots, vegetables, grains  
and the *komati's* groceries on my head;  
In the fields and the fallow plots, when I grow tired  
she spreads out a bed to give me rest,  
when my grief streams from my eyes to the skies  
she draws my eye babies towards herself  
like a mother, and hugs them close, my dirt rag;  
When my husband reaches out in love or anger  
like a ball of butter she always gets caught before I,  
to aggression or violence, from those at home or outside,  
my *kongu* rag always succumbs first...  
Kissing my ears and cheeks  
she holds up an umbrella of *senna* flowers  
over the dawn of my face  
the sapphires of my hair;  
From chilly weather and searing looks  
from the blasts of heat waves  
from the sneakiness of rain drops  
she offers cool relief like the shade of a tree,  
becomes a warm fire that covers my shoulders.  
She becomes a pad for cool pots  
that slake your thirst from a mile away,  
burns her fingers  
handling vessels on the stove,  
comforts my crying babies  
hugging them like warm baby clothing.  
Though she works cheerfully by my side all day in the  
dust  
she stems the life streams  
flowing from my body's sluices all night;  
Like a cow nursing a new-born calf

she licks all dirt off my body,  
 like a wicker wall  
 she hides the *modugu* stain spreading through my cloth;  
 Only when she becomes the snake charmer's *been* at my waist  
 do planting, harvesting, weeding and threshing,  
 chores and songs screech into motion.  
 My dirt rag that rolls in my hands, sweat, bed, bones,  
 limbs  
 in pleasure and sorrow,  
 my kongu rag that sticks to me  
 in work and song, in crisis and comfort,  
 like the filth that clings to my feet, the companion  
 of my life path...slaving like the washerman's stone,  
 when does my perspiring kongu find the time for rest?  
 She's not the patchy *pallu* that stands guard over my head  
 nor the hobbling stone... over my breast  
 how can I drag her into the bazaar  
 set fire to her honor and lose myself?

How does one read the immeasurable life of Kongu in the finite perceiving senses of Subhadra? At a time, when the upper castes women were eager to burn their sarees as a feminist gesture, this Dandora poetess unweaves the gift and the illimitable giving of the Kongu to materially and socially and culturally outcast woman. Unlike Brahminic strictures that do not allow all the senses to participate in abandon, the Kongu produces a casteless sensibility that allows the Dalit woman to gather herself, sense of the self and sense of the world together. The Kongu allows the Dalit woman to touch herself in a sensuous and desirably way, to protect and care for her body in times of severity of weather, it delays her hunger and communicates deeply with her flesh which enfolds both the sensible and the intelligible.

The Kongu that wraps the personhood, like a mother, caring for the body and "eye babies", and unwraps to carry a day's ration, is alive. Subhadra's poem is an evocative poem on Kongu where it is in not merely an instrumental object used just representational purposes, but by moving out of a world of subject and object dualism and entering a world where one can hope to get a glimpse of things in their totality, where such a possibility is suggested because it consciously moves away from the cultural embodied arrangement caste makes, and reveals a much more basic, primal arrangement.

The Kongu, described variously as "a tool, companion, a comrade-in-drudgery", suggests that there is an inexhaustibility to the kind of relationship one can experience with "objects" but for that to happen one needs to go beyond looking at them as merely objects. Subhadra's Kongu, an object of ire for (upper caste)

feminists (Zare & Mohammed 2012) because the nationalization of women was irrevocably tied with "covering the female body in layers of discourse through layers of Cloth" as Priya Srinivasan (2011) writes, draws attention to the fact that these mundane objects have a history and relationship with people that moves beyond the objective- representational framework.

Isolation or alienation of the *things and objects* marks the caste arrangement where objects are thought of in terms of their use-value and representation. Both the sacred and sacrosanct and undesirable bodies that "do not belong", are, in a Brahminic tradition not allowed to be experienced in a sensorial way. Curiously, the distance between objects and people is a consequence of it being either sacred or not. But this reading of Kongu effectively disrupts this sort of an arrangement, where a distanceless reading of the Kongu implies that one can touch the life of the object and at the same time, the object can touch your life as well, in doing so, it also redefines the Savarna understanding of use and reflection as well. Distance is produced to keep certain impurities that are connected with the biological functioning of the human being but then it is not limited to the imputes alone, it is a general mode of receiving the experience by the touched (Savarna).

The intimate relationship that Subhadra shares with her Kongu, a life-force that expands and shrinks as needed, but always touches the body, the way it extends itself into worlds of labour, and caring, but always intimately connected with the body, as though, even while the life-hardened Kongu provides shelter and life to the wearer, also derives its energy from the very body it hugs. This to and fro between the sensible and the intelligible (and it is important to note that one can never say which is more important) is to be listened to with the being. To see/read the archive, is to listen with the being, and not merely hearing. 'Speaking with' would require an openness to listen to an immeasurable other. It is not an individual response to Brahmanical supremacy and caste, but an anti-caste thought to do a secular criticism of casteism, not caste as religious or spiritual but caste as deprivation, lack of access and rights, an anti-caste thought to counter caste as a modern category that finds itself institutionalized in modern spaces such as universities and media.

Such a reading of Kongu, then, reveals to us, that, though determined by caste, cannot be contained by caste alone. Just as "untouchability is always in excess of its description" (Guru 2009) so is this reading of objects and things. The realm of the sensible (which is also intelligible but not vice versa) offers us infinite possibilities. It cannot be understood through the intelligible alone, since it is, by its very nature, situated in the realm of sensible

and the performative, and can be experienced in all its rich, sensorous magnificence, disclosing to us that the sonorous precedes and exceeds caste. We are talking about a sense and an experience that not only determines but exceeds caste.

## Conclusion

We begin the essay with the importance of stories, of increasing visibility by being heard, and the digital worlds that make it possible for the Dalit-Bahujan community to throw into sharp relief, their absence in the mainstream media, and the importance to focus on listening to the sonorous, the invisible oralities. This essay does not just speak about the Dalit-Bahujan presence online, but also about the conversation between the poetic and the prosaic. The sense of the new media and the intelligibility of print textuality, the tension between Dalit women's poetic transformatory project against the Brahminic philosophical tradition, a fight that is not just against the dominant intelligible but also a fight to retain the capacity for the sensible, this productive tension between the sensible and intelligible, perhaps, describes best, the anti-caste digital archives.

Should we restrict the meaning of this presence, a poetic presence rather, to modern transformative project or should it be treated as a project in itself? It is against this second and broader social project that we read Kongu. Subhadra's Kongu is simultaneously a project to address both the inscription and excription of the casted body, it transgresses caste not through a deliberate act but in a non-coercive, non-categorical way of addressing and describing the world. It is a form of interpretation that is not confined to producing the meaning of the world.

## Notes

1. Jean Luc Nancy theoretically posits a condition of not only inscription of the body but also the excription of the body in his work *Corpus*
2. [https://www.facebook.com/justsavarnathings/Their 'About me' reads: We, the caste-less people](https://www.facebook.com/justsavarnathings/Their%20'About%20me'%20reads%20We,%20the%20caste-less%20people). They also have a twitter handle, @justsavarna, and often use #justsavarnathings
3. Sundar Sarukkai's interesting phenomenological work on the drum seems to posit a Brahminic ally orientated understanding of the sensible but this is an effort to read Dalit-Bahujan sensibility from the bottom upwards.

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# Understanding Riot in the Age of the Digital

MANISHA MADAPATHI

## ABSTRACT

This paper tries to locate the impact of new media technologies within the phenomenon of mass mobilization, focusing on riots in India. The cases I examine are from the recent past, dating not more than five years ago. These technological innovations have generated new vocabularies in which one can perceive riots in the subcontinent. I try to correlate concepts of digital with traditional social sciences resulting in a hybrid discourse on the current day riots in India.

South Asia, comprising a large arbitrary landmass, is home to a multitude of cultures, races, languages, ethnicities, and religions. This region on the geographic map is celebrated for the diversity it tolerates, which itself also throws challenges at its communities to keep them intact within the milieu of differences and the fear of alienation. The characteristic of coexistence of the various societies in a place, whether peaceful or otherwise, is peculiar to the South Asian region. One that has been the subject of colonization for the powerful Westerners, South Asia has been in conflict with its occupiers and sometimes with its own people.

South Asian societies, India in particular, have been threatened by the lack of cultural homogeneity and the absence of institutional mechanisms for the managing of differences. Therefore, a strong state is understood as a necessity to ensure order in society and to proclaim a new order based upon rational and scientific principles of management. (Das, 1990)

This said, the conditions of unrest between communities has mostly been a sporadic phenomenon, and not a constant threat to the harmony of everyday life. These high tensions, more often than not, translate into collective violence or riots. Case studies from India will be taken as the vantage point from which further theories in the paper will be analysed. With the case of India, one must keep in mind not only the religious conflicts but also the strong communal identities that they proliferate. Collective violence arising out of ethnicity or

non-religious sentiments can be observed repeatedly in Maharashtra, Assam and other parts of the North-East. Ashish Nandy, in his essay 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance', makes a distinction between religion as faith and religion as ideology, which is analogous to the distinction made between syncretic popular religion and communal ideology.

Within this context of uncertainty to life in communities, I would like to introduce another very crucial concept with regard to information systems. Contrary to popular belief, riots are not a spontaneous occurrence, there is a great deal of planning and a systematic dissemination of information that function methodically. Spreading rumours and delivering inflammatory speeches in areas already torn by communal differences have been tools of the old trade. What is of immediate concern though is the coming of newer forms of communication with the changing *mediascapes*<sup>1</sup> and advancing media technologies. By this, I am referring to the omnipresent information systems in the age of the digital. Digital technology has made life as easy in some aspects as it has made it complex in other. The nature of the binary world has its own characteristics, so radically distinct from previously existent media that controlling authorities are at a loss when outbursts caused due to information circulation on new media occur. Such is the pervasive nature of the technology.

To analyse technology in isolation would defeat the purpose to validate my observation of how digital technology is involved in instigating riots. Hence, I want to locate the new media practices within societies. Societies, in other words, could be understood as networks that contain nodes<sup>2</sup> that are interconnected to form a web of networks. The ability of networks to be able to communicate between each other depends upon the shared communication protocols and the access to connection points (switches). (Castells, 2004)

The above jargonized concept basically borrows from Manuel Castells' theory on 'Network Societies'. This seminal work on the digital information circulation,

and the society will help us connect the dots between the advent of new media and the civil unrests along communal lines that have played out recently.

Let's look at what some of the leading media scholars have to say about how media technologies are convoluted with the cultural practices of people. McLuhan's idea of how all media embodies cultural meaning and can be read in his popular phrase, "the medium is the message". Even so, no technology-culture effect can be established because the technologies themselves are also cultural artefacts, and there is no way of breaking into the circle." Technologies have immediate impact on cultural practices, their "effect" can be described only as observable patterns of consequence emergence. As new means develop, individuals as well as institutions may create new cultural forms and meanings. This interchangeable usage of the concepts of technology and culture show the inherent dialecticality of the two, the way each one effects the other in the process of cultural meaning making. (McQuail, 2010)

The above reinstates the idea that the medium of information reception is tied with our ability to make meanings differently with different media. Now let us go back to Castells and establish a deeper understanding of how new age digital media has changed the generation of meaning by virtue of its novelty and singularity.

The pre-electronic communication technology age, has been characterized by historical superiority of vertically hierarchical organisations over networks. The time lag of feedback in communication process made the system a very one-way flow of transmission of information and instruction. Under such conditions, networks were extensions of power concentrated at the top of vertical organisations. But, electrically based communication technology developed around vertical production organisations, like the state, without offering any autonomy to networks. Autonomy here refers to multi-directionality, continuous flow of interactive information processing. Proper technology was not just a sufficient condition but a necessity.

The network society came into being in the 1970s as a result of two independent processes. One being informationalism, which is a new technological paradigm that constitutes the material basis of twenty first century societies. Informationalism is based on the augmentation of the human capacity of information processing and communication made possible by revolutions in microelectronics, software, and genetic engineering. Secondly, a new social structure emerging out of the ashes of feudalism, one where each individual forms the unit of the society, retaining their autonomy. Both these phenomena combined together make the emergence of a network society possible.

Talking about networks, Alexander Galloway says, "Networks oscillate between two related but incompatible formal structures. On one side, the chain of triumph; on the other, the web of ruins." Galloway makes an important statement, which makes us weary of the power of networks, and rightly so. We are familiar with Arab Spring, in which social media networks were used as a tool to change the course of governance in North Africa and Middle East. Individual citizens came together to overthrow dictatorship through a structurally bottom-up framework made available by digital infrastructure, and shared digital literacy. While this may be an optimistic way to look at networks, Galloway is quick to warn us of the double faced nature of it. He calls the web of ruins, a nonlinear mesh, unlike the linear chain of triumph. He says, "it is designed to ensnare and delimit even the most intractable opponent. It is commonly characterized as a swarm or pack of animals, unknowable in quantity, and innumerable in form. Less concerned with connectivity, the web brings with it a flood of insatiable persecution." This paper talks about the web of ruins that networks can be, with reference to violent mob attacks that resulted in deaths and mass destruction.

Digital networks are global. Therefore social structures whose infrastructure is based on digital networks is by definition global. Which in turn means that network societies are global societies. But this does not mean that everybody gets to be a part of the network. Specific societies, defined by current boundaries of nation-states, or cultural boundaries of their historical identities, are deeply fragmented by the double logic of inclusion and exclusion in the global networks. Inclusion in the network also depends upon the ability of the social actor to act on programs and modify them to suit their interests. Networks have dominance over people who are external to it. Which means, the global overwhelms the local. All these shortcomings show the 'imperfect globalization' of the network society, which is a highly significant feature of its social structure.

In the communication realm, network society is characterised by a pattern of networking flexibility, recombination of codes, and ephemeral symbolic communication. Cultural expression are enclosed and shaped by this inter-linked, electronic hypertext, formed by TV, radio, print press, films, video, art, internet communication, in the so called multi-media system. Even though this system is characterised by oligopolistic concentration, it is not a system of one way messages to a mass audience. Media in the network society provide a large variety of channels of communication with increasing interactivity, which is inclusive of a wide range of cultures and social groups. The much required autonomy of audience equipped with internet is growing.

There are two theoretical remarks that Castells makes regarding networks. Firstly, structures (networks) do not live by themselves, they always express the interests, values, and projects of the actors who produce the structure, while being conditioned by it. Secondly, the connection of telecommunication networks does not guarantee the incorporation into dominant networks or counter-dominant networks. This is the binary logic on which networks work, either inclusion or exclusion, there is no partiality that is permitted or can be achieved. This, in another theoretical paradigm, maybe be known as the digital divide. Therefore, power in networks operates by inclusion and exclusion. Those within a network are powerful, and those outside are powerless. Within a network, power plays out in two ways; in global capitalism, the global financial market holds power, and in the state-military power, the apparatus able to harness technological innovation in pursuit of military power, which has the material resources to invest in technology and know-how, holds the power. In this paper, the focus is largely on the latter form of power yielded not only in the digital networks by the state but also in maintaining everyday civil order in society.

It is imperative for us to understand networks to understand crowds, because crowds do not just materialize out of any passive pools of people. They arise out of networks that function on a common dictum. Networks are a precondition for the cultural lives of the digital world. One where understanding a certain vocabulary makes you eligible to be a part of a network. Hence, networks of people and relationships that already exist have to be mobilized in the creation of crowds. Since these networks identify with a certain protocol, it is only within that programme that people can be activated. This is the reason why everybody who is exposed to inflammatory speech, images or voice recording doesn't go ahead to become a part of the rioting mass. Because not everybody subscribes to that interpretation of speech that cajoles them into taking up arms. These networks are not inescapable, if one changes their outlook one may dissociate themselves from it and attach to other networks. People are always a part of one network or the other, nobody can live in isolation away from flows of information.

In his essay, Nandy briefly mentions about how in the 1980s, Indian villages and small towns can take credit for having avoided communal riots. According to him, more than 90 per cent of the riots emerge in urban India, in and around the industrial area. This view of the riot as an urban phenomena, in the contemporary sense does not seem to hold true anymore. If it were so, then how would we justify the riots that took place in the fringes of Uttar

Pradesh in Muzaffarnagar and Saharanpur, which are far from being urban spaces? There is something that is far more pervasive, crossing spatial boundaries of distance and development that is at play here.

One reading of what Nandy is saying could be the distinction he is making of resources for initiation of a riot being available in an urban set up and its absence in rural areas. The reason for such resources to be available in an urban city is the ingression of modernity that is first experienced by the cities, and only much later by the suburban areas, smaller districts and finally the rural. Modernity in terms of development of technological communication has been far more tangible than in areas of civic development, in the rural villages of India. The changes brought about by radio, television, and cinema were felt by the people more strongly than say the introduction of modern transportation like the car. If we are to look at this in terms of digital communication, Nandy could be understood as pointing towards the digital divide that separates the urban from the rural.

But to think that is true would be a skewed idea of understanding digital technology. Of course, the digital is not all encompassing, but even with the caveats, it has managed to transgress social, political, and economic borders. We access digital technology through computers, mobile phones, tablets, etc., in varying degrees. But the phenomenon that has hit the rural with a resounding positive reception is the mobile phone.

A report by IAMAI (Internet And Mobile Association of India)<sup>3</sup> and KPMG in July 2015 has found that "...rural growth story in the coming years is likely to be through 2G mobile technologies. 3G and 4G may continue to be primarily an urban phenomenon for the next few years. Increased internet enabled device penetration, decreasing handset prices and data plans tariffs are helping create a suitable environment for a rapid growth of mobile internet in India, with rural India set to take the lead. As of June 2014, nearly 50% of the Active Internet Users (AIU) in rural areas accessed internet using mobile phones, community service centres (CSC) and cyber cafes. 38% of the AIU use mobile phone as the main access point."

In India, the number of people who own mobile phones is far greater than the number who own personal computers. India has the third largest Internet user base in the world out of which more than 50 per cent are mobile-only internet users. All the above statistics point to a very specific construction of a public that belongs to an abstract idea of an online community that not only consumes information on the internet but is a member that identifies with the functioning protocols of the virtual space.

What should be noted from the report is also that,

“SMS, email, messaging and social networking apps are the most popularly used apps, while video streaming and banking services are the least used apps.”

The objective of bringing the two observations to the table, that of the network society and the mobile phones, that construct and maintain the mobile phone ecology, is to bring context to the numerous examples I am going to cite further in this paper.

The circulation of falsely attributed images, incendiary texts, doctored videos, call to action on mobile applications like SMSs, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter have been platforms through which a number of riots have allegedly began. For example, the exodus of north-east migrants, both student and workers, from the southern cities was due to the dissemination of a threatening SMS among the community to leave the city to save their lives. There was no way for the police to track down the source of the message, by when railway stations were being flooded and in no time people were being siphoned off to their home states.<sup>4</sup> And in July 2014, in Saharanpur, where the inflammatory and hate inciting tweets of BJP national executive member C.T. Ravi where he uploaded a video link that said, “How Congress leaders made 1000s of Muslims attack the Gurudwara and cause the Saharanpur Riots- watch this Sikh speak” come under the usage of social media as a tool for inciting communal violence.<sup>5</sup>

Veena Das in the introduction to her book, *Mirrors of Violence* brings our attention to a very key idea this paper tries to pursue- the form of the riot. She asks, “What is the web of signifiers through which such ideologies such as communalism and ethnicity are organised and communicated? Have these symbols remained constant through history, or, if they have changed, what does this change signify?” (Das, 1990) Das says there are three kinds of implicit categories of symbolic structures that can be analysed when talking about the formality of the riot. They are: the organization of symbolic space, the temporal structure of riots, and finally, the repertoire of symbolic actions that is called upon in the case of ethnic or communal conflict. This machinery is not just employed by the crowd, rioters, or the mob, but also to the state in its stronghold over collective behaviour.

### Spatiality

The control of sacred spaces and their protection has always been a concern not just of the state but to the general mass of people, as history tells us these are symbols around which communal conflicts are bound to happen. To understand what a riot leaves behind, one should examine the space in which it has taken place. There is a peculiar observation Das makes about the works of authors of communal riots. She says that

there is progressive diffusion of violence from ‘spaces of traditional configurations’ to new areas where it may have spread. The difference between the two spatial entities is that in traditional spaces patterns of violence become routinized as they follow expected paths and are somehow less traumatic than new patterns of violence. A rise of novelty is signalled when violence spreads into areas that is not the traditional.

In the Hindu-Muslim riots that occurred in September 2014 in Vadodara, Ahmedabad, *Mirror* reports<sup>6</sup>, “a photoshopped image of Ambe Maa on Kaaba, the cube structure in Mecca, caused much furore and sparked communal tension. Furious, people pelted stones at the house of one Sanjay Raulji, who posted the photograph on social media.” In another incident in June 2014 in Pune, a Pune *Mirror* article<sup>7</sup> blurb reads this: “Defamatory post morphing photos of Chhatrapati Shivaji, Bal Thackeray and others on Facebook sparks violence across the city; special forces deployed to maintain peace; many injured in stone pelting, property damaged in several areas.”

In the examples above, what is striking is the ‘digital’ alteration of religious symbols, deities, political figures – the blasphemous act to which the riot is attributed to. The abstruse space into which the sacred has been projected is the digital. This, one can say constitutes of a ‘new’, non-traditional space which demands an unpredictable reaction. For one to also examine the space of the digital would be of interest. It is one that is not bound by the physical dimensions of our immediate surroundings. It cannot be geographically located, hence the impact of it may also not always be specific to locality. The organisation of the symbolic space that Das talks about is now represented in by an abstract entity – the digital.

Appadurai understands ethnoscape, as the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world. It is the constitution of this and the co-existence of such diverse groups that the harmony of a place depends upon. The modern city is quite different in character from the traditional city. The modern city has a large number of new migrants who live on the margins of the city, whose integration into the economy and polity is of a special kind. Generally, such migrants constitute the floating populations which the natives of the city are constantly apprehensive about.

This also brings about a new narrative on spatiality, which moves along a different tangent. The lynching of the alleged rapist which was done in Dimapur, had more to do with the man being a Bangladeshi immigrant than that he was a rapist. Both of which are allegations.<sup>8</sup> What the natives of the city have towards the outsider is complete abomination. The feeling that they are not what

the city ought to shelter, and provide them with a means of livelihood. A different understanding of space can be extrapolated in the Dimapur incident. The symbolic space here could be that which is according to the natives is 'forcefully' taken by immigrants what is not rightfully theirs.

### Temporality

Now there are two ways of looking at temporality. One is the event structure or the narrative sequence of the riot and the other being the ritual or political calendar. The first classification corresponds to the determination of the sequence of the riot, what triggered it, and what were the events that followed. To fix the 'origin' of riots is not easy. The precise sequence of events within which it is to be placed remains one of the most contested sites in the interpretation of violence. To understand this better we can look at Muzaffarnagar in 2012. Whether the seed for the riot was planted when Shahnawaz was killed by the two Jat brothers, Sachin and Gaurav; or whether it began with the motorcycle collision between Shanawaz and Gaurav; or when the misattributed video of two boys being beaten up by the mob was circulated on social media, cannot be determined by anybody.<sup>9</sup> This is only one of the many such events in which the chronology of events occurred can be almost impossible to trace. If we are to dig up the archive of the early articles on the riot, the inconsistencies are pronounced. This approach to temporality gives us the inconsequent, and incongruent nature of a riot and the discourse around it.

The form of the imaginative institution of narrative sequence is given by two rhetorical devices; metonymy and mimesis, and the use of metaphor and resemblance (Das, 1990). The killing of Shahnawaz by the Jat brothers is understood to be the first in order of the progression of events. Which was followed by the killing of the two brothers by the other community. This violence is in which the bodies of the dead mimetically display the wounds to the whole society, both literal and metaphoric. In making each of the members of the two communities repeat the fate of the dead persons, one can perceive the mimetic nature of violence.

In yet another incident, an innocent Mohsin Sadiq Shaik was bludgeoned to death in Pune because of the obviously religious markings on him. The Pune riot that began because of the morphed images of Shivaji and Thackery took the life of a person not even remotely involved in it, but because he represented or resembled a person of the community that the alleged 'wrongdoers' belonged to. In a Firstpost report<sup>10</sup>, Shaik's friend Riyaz is quoted to have said, "Mohsin was targeted because he was wearing a skull cap and had a beard". In another

report by *The Hindu*<sup>11</sup> the police have said that Shaik was targeted because he "looked Muslim". The metonymic signifiers on a man took his life, for no fault of his. An immediacy in deploying hatred over anything that even closely represented their target faced their outlet of resentment.

The second way to look at temporality is by mapping the occurrences of riots around the religious and political calendar of the place. This simply refers to those riots that occur with a definitive intention of happening at that given point in time. The riot that was contained immediately in Mumbai in January 2015, as a result of the foresight of the Police commissioner Rakesh Maria is one such example. This riot that resulted in torching of multiple motor vehicles in Lalbaug, Parel, and Kalachowkie is believed to have begun with a rift between a group of youth returning from the Eid-e-Milad processions and members of 'another community'.<sup>12</sup> The social set up is ripe for a communal riot during religious festivities, because the very spirit of celebration is built on heightened fervour and reverence. It is in moments of such sensitivity that a blow will have the most savage impact. It has been observed in the past how civic disturbances clash with important dates like August 15, January 26, October 31, January 30, etc. Here, the same can be said when feelings of nationalistic jingoism are thick in the air, and even a slight instigation can be explosive. This is the same reason RAF personnel are deployed on the streets in the capital on these days, to avoid or curb any social unrest.

Another aspect of interest is how many scholars when speaking of collective action, be it protests, riots, religious gatherings, or concerts, almost always cloud the specificity of the individual. Or their discourse identifies the individual at the beginning but tends to move away from that line of thought progressively. Sudhir Kakar, in his essay "Some Unconscious Aspects of Ethnic Violence in India", asks whether one's experience in crowds leads to a lowering of normal defences, so that 'the crowds assault on the sense of individuality, its invitation to transcend one's boundaries and its offer of a freedom from personal doubts and anxieties is well-nigh irresistible'. He goes on to argue that "the need and search for self-transcending experience, to lose oneself in the group, suspend judgement and reality testing, is I believe, the primary motivational factor in both assembly and violent mob, even though the stated purpose is spiritual uplift in one and mayhem and murder in the other. The image of the crowds as emotional, capricious, temperamental and flighty has dominated the literature of mass psychology" (Kakar, 1990).

Here I wish to not necessarily oppose the de-individualisation of the crowd, but offer an alternative outlook. Since our study is situated in context of virtuality,

the identities that people acquire here are different from, say, a public gathering. Behind your screens, although you are transient to your fellow netizens, the individuality of the person is heightened. Because the computer screen is essentially an interactive medium, without the person's navigation there is no change that is assumed at all by the device. Now imagine you are viewing a mob lynching video on a webpage. The keywords here are 'you' and the 'webpage'. 'You' are the decision-making unit of the activity, you may continue to watch it till the end, or may want to close the window because of the grotesque and perverted nature of the video. Here you are playing two roles, one of yourself and the other as the member of resultant mass of people viewing the video. These two identities sometimes are opposing each other and at other times complying. The second identity is made more obvious when looked at from the 'webpage' perspective. You are one amongst the many who is on this webpage with intentions of being there, may match with most other people viewing it. This makes your second identity more pronounced.

I propose to look at this also in another manner, one that runs almost parallel to the traditional view. It is nothing but the emphasis on individual mobility that results in collective mobility, and how collectivity doesn't emerge out of vacuum. A measured importance must be given to the unit that comprises of the large magnitude of people called the crowd.

With the coming of virtuality, the images of the riot become objects of permanence. This preservation can be for an eternity, unless it gets tampered with, but its afterlife post riot is a long one. This indestructible documentation of the riots has been made possible only by the digitization of technology. Long after the event is over, the images of it stay alive. A new character to the riot is brought because of the novel nature of its afterlife. Events would stay alive in people's memories earlier by oral accounts of those who have lived through it. This unverified, non-systematized virtual archive of events also has a very different affective quality as opposed to oral narratives. It is almost a first-hand experience where one relives the event through the archives of texts, in opposition to second hand narratives.

Lastly, let us examine the internet blackouts that are imposed so often now in almost all instances of civic unrest. The very recent one being the week long mobile internet ban in Gujarat due to the Patidar reservation stir. *The Times of India* article<sup>13</sup> about the Vadodara riot noted the police commissioner E. Radhakrishna saying that the decision to block internet (2G and 3G) and messaging (bulk SMS and MMS) services was necessary as there was a lot of rumour mongering on those platforms. "If the

situation remains peaceful, we may allow the services to continue before Tuesday," he said. The police attributed the communal tensions to images and messages being spread on SMS, Whatsapp, and Facebook. *The Indian Express* article<sup>14</sup>, on the incident, said, "On Friday, gory images of persons belonging to a particular community being hacked to death were seen doing the rounds on social networking sites, with mobile phones playing a major role in their spread. This led to another flare-up in communal clashes."

The Azad Maidan riots of Mumbai, fake MMSs did the rounds, many of which were posted on social media, showing pictures that purport to show that Muslims were being slaughtered by the hundred. A Pakistani journalist-blogger – Faraz Ahmed, investigated these pictures and found that many of them were bogus, and possibly morphed by mischief-monger to enrage Muslims everywhere. One SMS<sup>15</sup> was circulated that made every Muslim feel hunted and victimized.

In the NE exodus, the government claimed a bulk of the doctored incendiary videos and horrific clippings of atrocities allegedly committed on Muslims in lower Assam and Myanmar were uploaded on various blogs in Pakistan in a bid to incite the minority community in India.<sup>16</sup> As many as 250 websites were blocked and some other blogs got deactivated as a result.<sup>17</sup>

In most other recent cases of communal violence, the state has held the internet responsible for inciting violence. Be it Akhilesh Yadav during Muzaffarnagar and Saharanpur or the Maharashtra government during the Pune riots. They have been quick to point fingers at social media and the internet.

In an article that arose after the Vadodara internet blackout, Nihkil Pahwa the founder of Medianama, and an important commentator on new media asks the hard hitting questions. He says, "Information and misinformation can spread virally, and people can react and riot", but also believes that the fault isn't with the medium, but those posting and sharing messages inciting violence. The questions he asks is that, should my freedom be curtailed by the state's inability to curb violence and maintain peace? Why isn't the police using the Internet to identify the individuals who might be inciting violence instead of shutting of the medium? Can't the police counter misinformation by using the same medium to share information?<sup>18</sup>

Almost as a counter to Pahwa's questions, in the riots that ensued in Trilokpuri, under police instruction residents of the many blocks were to be in direct touch with them through a Whatsapp group. If residents came across any suspicious or mischievous activity, they could directly post a message to the group which would

instantly alert the police. This model was adopted in order to reduce response time in case of any suspicious activity that may cause tension. The residents were urged to join the groups for their own safety and so that they could directly post their grievances on the group and that it is a platform for them to voice their anger. As reported by *The Indian Express*,<sup>19</sup> an officer is quoted to have said, "By making these groups we have cut down the entire chain of the public first approaching the police station with a written complaint and moving up the police ranks. Now the public just have to type in a message to register their grievance".

The small scale riot that took place in Parel also allegedly emerged out of spreading rumours on Whatsapp. Deputy Commissioner of Police, Dhananjay Kulkarni said that, "As soon as we got to know about the false news being spread, we sent out a message on behalf of the Mumbai police assuring citizens that the city was safe and everything was under control."<sup>20</sup> Mumbai Police Commissioner Rakesh Maria who was commended by the media for the swift action that was taken place to curb the simmering riot said, "We are treating peace on the ground and in cyberspace as equally important."

There is at least some understanding by state apparatuses about how the cyberspace works and how it may be controlled if necessary. The archaic ideas about the new technology must be done away with, by increasing our understanding of the unknown. But what we have is a case of xenophobia. Only when we overcome this, will we be able to face the problems arising out of it head on.

What this paper tries to do is to find the link between collective mobility in violent forms and the new age media that has been a facilitator. This does not mean that before the coming of digital technologies riots did not happen, but the relationship that has evolved between the two is an interesting matter of study. The connection is very much perceptible but is invisible for us to be able to discern its actual impact which is contentious. I hope to have established at least some basic principles that I think can be identified with this new phenomenon.

## Notes

1. Arjun Appadurai, who coined the word mediascape in his essay, "Disjuncture and Difference in Global Cultural Economy", defines it as that which indexes the electronic capabilities of production and dissemination, as well as "the images of the world created by these media".
2. Where curves intersect in the network society theory proposed by Manuel Castells
3. IAMAI is a not-for-profit industry body registered under the Societies Act, 1896. Its mandate is to expand and enhance the online and mobile value added services sectors. It is dedicated to presenting a unified voice of the businesses it represents to the government, investors, consumers and other stakeholders. The association addresses the issues, concerns and challenges of the Internet and Mobile economy and takes a leading role in its development.
4. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Northeast-issue-Exodus-subsides-in-Bangalore-no-let-up-in-Chennai-Pune/articleshow/15546059.cms>
5. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/social-media-used-to-ignite-violence/article6255146.ece>
6. <http://www.ahmedabadmirror.com/ahmedabad/crime/Communal-tension-in-Vadodara-shops-torched/articleshow/43458135.cms>
7. <http://www.punemirror.in/pune/crime/FB-post-shuts-down-Pune/articleshow/35911896.cms>
8. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/dimapur-lynching-on-social-media-first-rape-then-bangladesh-man/99/>
9. <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/the-mystery-of-kawwal-were-muzaffarnagar-riots-based-on-distortion-of-facts-534608>
10. <http://www.firstpost.com/india/pune-muslim-techie-killed-by-rightwing-mob-over-morphed-fb-posts-1555709.html>
11. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/founder-of-hrs-charged-with-pune-techies-murder/article6101990.ece>
12. <http://www.firstpost.com/india/curfew-like-situation-central-mumbai-following-clashes-eid-procession-2029507.html>
13. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/vadodara/Internet-services-blocked-in-Vadodara-after-riots/articleshow/43674499.cms>
14. <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/after-rumours-stoked-communal-embers-uneasy-calm-in-vadodara-2/>
15. SMS read thus: "Burma, Assam, Gujarat, Kashmir ke bad na jane kahan? Burma mein Musalmano ke qatl-e-aam or zulm ke khilaf Azad Maidan me Sunday ko rally hai. America me 5 Sikho ka katal hua to media or sarkar me hadkam hai, or lakhon Musalmanon ki zindagi ki koi keemat nahi. Sab ki ankhen band hai. Is SMS to Sunday se pehle Hindustan ki har Musalman or mantriyo or media tak pohchao..".
16. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Videos-doctored-in-Pakistan-sparked-NE-exodus-Government/articleshow/15550503.cms>
17. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/newdelhi/ne-exodus-govt-blocks-250-websites-for-triggering-panic/article1-916568.aspx>
18. <http://www.medianama.com/2014/09/223-gujarat-government-internet-kill-switch-vadodara/>
19. <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/whatsapp-in-trilokpuri-a-message-group-that-keeps-police-at-fingertips/>
20. <http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-dna-special-gossip-galore-whatsapp-rumours-about-parel-riot-leave-mumbai-cops-irked-2049934>

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# Authorship in Political Film Practice: A Reading in the Times of Digital Proliferation

HEMANTIKA SINGH

This paper is an attempt at interrogating the questions related to auteurism in political cinema in the digital era. Drawing from the theoretical interventions on Third Cinema and its call for social and political transformation, we focus on a new cluster of politically charged shorts, documentary films, alternate news videos, parodies, spoofs and film fragments that are circulated through online portals and offline platforms.<sup>1</sup> The paper will then go on to thoroughly scrutinize how the lens of authorship could be made more fruitful to examine these new tendencies of political film practices in our times.

The idea of authorship in this context must be problematized in several ways. To begin with, one can perhaps start asking whether the concept of “auteur”, an individual genius film practitioner, is an ideal frame to examine the sphere of political filmmaking that has been historically associated with collective and democratizing production and reception practices? Does the political film itself have a critique of the individual genius film maker as its ideology? As far as digital times are concerned, can we truly identify a single author in the times of fragmentation and amalgamation of diverse filmic and non-filmic materials? The paper will try to grapple with these questions and also attempt to investigate whether this current proliferation of diverse cinematic works through multiple digital interfaces encourages newer and alternative perspectives on our imaginings of the author.

## “Political Cinema” in the Digital Era

The contemporary digital moment is witnessing an abundance of diverse film practices outside the spheres of both popular and art cinema.<sup>2</sup> The sphere of filmmaking continues to expand in scope with both original and reworked audio-visual content that circulates through multiple online platforms and diverse physical spaces. Significant changes in film culture through the rise of film clubs, alternative film festivals, online film

discussion forums, etc. have begun a new dialogue on video activism.<sup>3</sup> A newly emerging cluster of politically energized short films, video documents, comic content like spoofs and parodies, etc. are being circulated by an assortment of contributors like university students, media activists, alternate news handles, political groups and human-rights collectives.

In this context, the questions around political cinema require a brief discussion. An important body of political films that have been theorized under the rubric of Third Cinema, emerged in Latin America in the 1960s. Third Cinema rose into prominence with a militant anti-colonial, anti-imperialist call for change and an exploration of newer cinematic languages to map local narratives of struggle and history (Armes, 1987). Third Cinema was inspired by a wave of film manifestos - Glauber Rocha's *Aesthetics of Hunger* (1965), Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *Towards a Third Cinema* (1969) and Julio Garcia Espinosa's *For An Imperfect Cinema* (1969) (Martin, 1997).<sup>4</sup> These manifestos shared a common thread, one that emphasized on the value of a militant alternative cinema in opposition to both commercial mainstream cinema and the auteur cinema of self-expression. The emancipatory function of cinema was viewed as fundamental along with the refusal to recommend a specific aesthetic form (Willemsen, 1994). It is also important to note that the criticality of third cinema lies not only in the radical transformations of the film form but also in significant changes in the mode of production through democratic working practices and reception through fostering of active spectatorship (Wayne, 2001).

The contemporary times are witnessing an upsurge of multiple cinematic forms like video shorts, documentaries, parodies, even fragments of popular film texts that circulate independent of the central narrative of the film. This digital moment doesn't seem to only stand for a diversification of forms but also a burgeoning of alternative modes and spaces for production, distribution

and reception. We see voices from marginal spaces and backgrounds translating their ideas into moving images which circulate often through unexpected territories of informal film festivals, campuses, factory gates, sites of protest demonstrations and different online platforms. Interestingly and perhaps paradoxically<sup>5</sup>, in its tendencies, this breed of content probably furthers the Third Cinema's ideology of cinematic investment in the spirit of political transformation. We would like to examine here the significance of the author, a very important category, to dissect these political filmmaking practices.

### Auteurism and Its Discontents

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, auteurism debates took center stage in film criticism and theory. Auteurism had its roots in French film criticism of the late 1940s as a barometer for aesthetic assessment that drew from the writings of Alexandre Astruc who was at that time rallying behind an analogy between cinema and other arts like painting or writing, ushering in the filmmaker figure to embody the singular creative force, an artist unto himself. Astruc also coined the term "camera – pen", mapping how cinema was turning into a medium of personal expression like all other art forms (Graham, 1968). Astruc's theorization paved way for Francois Truffaut's famous manifesto-essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" published in the *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1954. Truffaut called out on the strategically manicured and stylistically formulaic films based on French classics, dubbing them "cinema de papa" (Daddy's Cinema). For Truffaut and his peers at the *Cahiers* an auteur's film should carry a signature style of the creative individual who made it. A case was specifically made for the distinguished personality of the director, one that needed to be made recognizable through the mise-en-scene, the thematic and stylistic disposition of narrative, a quality that should surface across the oeuvre of the individual genius. The *Cahiers* critics identified Hollywood directors like Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Samuel Fuller et al as auteurs.

The auteur debate was introduced to the film scholarship in the United States by Andrew Sarris in his "Notes on the Auteur Theory" in 1962 where, in his hands, the auteur theory portrayed a film as an exclusive work by the director and also as an instrument for claiming the superiority of American Cinema (Sarris, 1968). Sarris's intervention drew severe criticism from the writing of Pauline Kael, another American film critic (Kael, 1971). The auteur theory, while ascertaining the primacy of the director-author, came under fierce attack several times for ignoring the collaborative aspect of film production.

For instance, Kael, in her thorough reading of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), a text considered as a classic for the study of the auteur model, argues how the film is highly influenced not only by Welles's authorial signature but also by the distinctive talents of writer Herman J. Mankiewicz and cinematographer Gregg Toland.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the interventions around auteurism in cinema further evolved. Film theorist Peter Wollen introduced the idea of "auteur-structuralism" in his book *Signs and Meaning in Cinema* (1969). According to auteur – structuralism, the author is a critical construct or structure rather than one individual genius. There were attempts to read cinematic elements which were beyond the conscious control of the author. At the same time, in the field of literary theory, the notion of the author as the sole creator of the text was being destabilized in the literary theorist Roland Barthes' landmark essay "The Death of the Author" (1968). Barthes thoroughly criticized the idea of explanation of any artistic work as a "voice of a single person" and brought to the fore the replacement of the author by the "destination" of the text, the reader. On the other hand, Michael Foucault (1969) also declared the "birth" of the author, in a specific historical time, thus historicizing the universal concept. He was pointing at the emergence of the idea of the author in the specific historical moment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the era of "individuation". These interventions resulted in the dissolution of the idea of the author as the sole producer of the text to the historically formed ways of reading or viewing.

Auteurism was also criticized, as Robert Stam has pointed out, by the ardent followers of experimental cinema, Third Cinema and through Marxist and Feminist interventions (Stam, 2000). Auteurism's extreme fascination for the commercial cinema completely marginalizes diverse avant-garde filmmaking practices. Third Cinema pioneers Solanas and Getino thoroughly criticized auteur cinema finding it politically compromising and open to appropriation in the dominant commercial practice of filmmaking. Marxists thoroughly denounced the ahistorical celebration of the auteur theory that claimed that individual geniuses would always prevail, whatever the political and economic scenario is. Feminist film historians criticized the boy's club masculinist tendencies of auteurism, by also trying to recognize female auteurs, an effort never made by conventional auteur theorists (Lewis, 1990). But in spite of all these criticisms, the lens of the auteur remains a significant critical tool to understand cinema, in both journalistic and academic discourses.

It is also important to note how the idea of auteur further gets complicated in filmmaking practices in the digital era. At the time of the shift from celluloid to digital,

a number of film scholars and critics had spoken about the death of cinema and the death of the auteur. One of the earliest statements about the demise of cinema came from Susan Sontag's writings (1996). Sontag lamented:

The theatrical release time of movies became shorter and shorter (like the shelf life of books in bookstores); many movies were designed to go directly into video. Movie theaters continued to close--many towns no longer have even one--as movies became, mainly, one of a variety of habit-forming home entertainments. ... In this country, the lowering of expectations for quality and the inflation of expectations for profit have made it virtually impossible for artistically ambitious American directors, like Francis Ford Coppola and Paul Schrader, to work at their best level. Abroad, the result can be seen in the melancholy fate of some of the greatest directors of the last decades.

The anxiety about cinema and its author is palpable in the time of demise of the big screen experience and the alleged degradation of cinematic images into diverse new technologies. On the other hand, several other scholars highlight the democratic potentials offered by digital technologies. Because of the relative affordability of digital equipment and diverse circulation platforms, the film viewer is being seen as often turning into the image-maker and the new author. Hito Steyerl (2009) maps the contemporary creative energies around remix, appropriation and experimentation where the user may also become editor, translator or co-author. The digital has, perhaps, resulted into a discourse about despair reeking off the end of cinema and the cinematic author, but what needs to be considered is how this shift has assisted interventions by offering spaces for new authors, often destabilizing the long-established hierarchy between the maker and the recipients of the filmic image.

Legally, sharing a post or reposting is now as much an offence as the production of "offensive" content in India. Shaheen Dhada was arrested under Section 66A of the IT Act, for writing a post which was allegedly offensive for Shiv Sainiks on the occasion of Bal Thackeray's death (Das, 2016). But, the deeply telling fact for us to note here, while dealing with the author, is that her friend Renu was arrested for "liking" the post. This makes the liker and sharer equally culpable legally as the author. This has serious theoretical implications for the idea of the author.

### New Imaginings of the Auteur

In popular discourses and even in the interventions in Indian film studies, the idea of any kind of oppositional cinema (to the mainstream commercial), has almost always been ascribed with the skill, method, artistry and personality of individual directors. Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and Anand Patwardhan have all been credited the authorial

power to produce critical or politically interventionist films. The extra-textual life of the films directed by these filmmakers, like discussions with audiences at screenings and seminars, commentaries and extra materials on DVDs also reflects the "author's" deep engagement in the creation of the filmic object. What often goes unaddressed though are the perspectives from the scriptwriter, cinematographer, cast, crew, staff and other professionals involved in the entire process of filmmaking.

The current digital moment has cultivated newer formal devices of cinematic production and exhibition spaces that have changed viewing habits and cultures of circulation. Does the authorial figure, in this new cinematic situation, gets problematized, perhaps even stand in for more than one author? *The Factory* (2015), directed by Rahul Roy, is a film that documents one of the most long-drawn industrial unrest in recent history: Maruti Suzuki factory workers' protests against the company administration in Manesar in Haryana that started in 2011. Roy, who has also shot the documentary, started filming on July 18, 2013, a year after the death of the general manager of Human Resources. The company alleged that the general manager died from beatings and suffocation after his floor caught fire, and 147 workers were jailed on murder charges. The workers, who had been demanding from the management their right to form a union for several months, countered that the general manager's death was an excuse to frame them and demonize the union. The documentary brought to public sphere the criminal prosecution of hundreds of workers exposing a widespread system of injustice. Roy has since been invited to various screenings and post-screening discussions as the director of *The Factory*. In an interview Roy remarked:

I filmed at a point when the movement was waning in terms of its public presence and the entire concentration was on the court cases. ... Where you place the camera reveals a lot about the film and filmmaker. I very consciously decided that the camera would always be on one side. It would look at the workers' angle, not in terms of becoming a PR job, but becoming observant to how they are dealing with the issues. (Ramnath, 2015)

It is important to note that Roy has previously directed a film titled *When Four Friends Meet*, which narrates the stories of four young men from Jahangirpuri, a working-class settlement in Delhi. He again picked up the story of the same four protagonists in a subsequent documentary *Till We Meet Again* in 2012. Clearly, much of Roy's works observes and explores working class lives in urban spaces. *The Factory*, while revolving around similar thematic tropes, consolidates Roy's authorial style in lieu of the very public nature of the Maruti movement and

prolonged legal battle. Roy's own association with the Maruti movement came through his filming, screening and circulation of *The Factory*. The idea of auteur of a documentary is here built not just by the filmic content but the specific venues and festivals where the film gets screened, the awards, circulation by words of mouths and critics' reviews.

In March this year, after more than four years of trial, 13 workers were convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Maruti case leading to widespread protests. It is interesting to note how a short video clip titled *A Letter from the Jailed Workers of Maruti Suzuki* (2017) uses, and perhaps subverts, the idea of the auteur. The video opens piecing together the Maruti administration's lawyers announcing the verdict to the press as the camera moves away from the court and the usual post-verdict media furor transitioning to the protest demonstrations in response. Worker's gathering at the factory gates, marching, sloganeering and reading a solidarity note, written by the convicted workers who are the union leaders of the plant to workers across the country who have stood in support of the Maruti workers struggle, is what makes up the content of the document. Three filmmakers, each of them with their own auteur images, Navdeep Sharma, Rahul Roy and Saba Dewan, who were present at both the court verdict and the demonstrations, filmed and edited the short clip while a network of political activists, trade unions, students and academicians helped circulate the film on social media. While Rahul remains one of the contributors of the film, should the tag of authorship not extend to the other two filmmakers? Or would it be appropriate to consider this clip a mere extension of *The Factory*? What about the circulation of the clip through political groups in their specific social media platforms? What does this circulation do to the authorship of the film? Isn't this clip more symbolic of a collective authorial style?

The present-day matrix of social media has also sprung on us the phenomenon of content being accessed through personal gadgets inculcating an audience that scrolls, clicks, likes, shares, copies, pastes and subscribes. Contemporary audio-visual content makers challenge conventional notions of the auteur as the single distinguishable personality of absolute creative value hence furthering this very query. Video Groups and Collectives, often sharing comedy as the common ideological aesthetic, produce and disseminate videos that often go viral online. One such team of innovators in the universe of online satirical viral videos is AIB (*All India Bakchod*) who make political sketches, film parodies, podcasts, web shows etc. for their multiple internet channels.

AIB also make available behind the scenes pictures,

bloopers, gig updates and other tidbits on their Facebook page and YouTube channel that makes known the production process, regularly breaking the fourth wall and interacting with the fans. The group's claim to internet popularity is their often-brazen news parodies, political humor and satire. Through SnapChat controversies and a growing online viewership, AIB has come to represent a network of comedy content producers with a distinct authorial style. Several other such groups have mushroomed across YouTube, in the past few years, that critique the politics of popular representation. Or as AIB explains in a video interview for an online magazine in reference to the misogynist content in the popular mainstream television series called *Comedy Nights with Kapil*, "we try and punch up at the system rather than punch down", a remark made on the misogynistic contents of the TV show. This putting up of a collective front by a motley group of stand-up comics could be read as another contemporary reflection of collaborative authorial stamp. A video produced by AIB titled *Harassment Through the Ages* featuring popular actors Richa Chaddha and Vicky Kaushal takes an 'honest' look (a part of a regular 'honest' look series) at how mainstream Bollywood songs have enabled and encouraged harassment over the decades, is one among the many parody videos that the group produces on the theme.

In terms of their textual nature, fragments of certain films also present an interesting case for collaborative authorship. For instance the 2014 film *Haider*, a modern-day adaptation of William Shakespeare's tragedy *the Hamlet* and an adaptation of Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night*, is set amidst the insurgency-hit Kashmir conflicts and civilian disappearances. The film drew criticism from several film critics for collapsing a long-drawn issue of political conflict into a titular personal narrative (Kamath, 2014). But the *aazadi* sequence from the film, located at the historic Lal Chowk clock tower in Srinagar, has since breathed a life of its own on social media portals, where it continues to be circulated from various accounts as a fragment independent of the feature length of the film. Would it then be sufficient if the authorial voice is accredited to Vishal Bhardwaj, the director of the film? Or does the anonymous editor of the clip, the original post that first ran it on social media, along with the subscribers-circulators, trouble the claim?

### Do We Need an Auteur for Political Cinema?

Noted scholar James Naremore uses Giuliana Bruno's argument to problematize the undoing of the idea of auteur:

it is very important indeed for us to know who is speaking. Readers or viewers always decode messages by positing a

source, even if only an imaginary or unconscious one, and the source has a political meaning. ... a good many previously marginalized groups need some identification with authors to help shape their identities. Thus in a recent book on Italian director Elvira Notari, Giuliana Bruno poses a rhetorical question: "Can or should we consider as dead an author, such as the female author, who is yet to be fully established in the public sphere and theorized?" (Miller and Stam 2004, 22).

This is pertinent in this context because it talks about authorship in relation to marginalized groups, especially in the context of political film practices. The online environment today enables multiple contemporary forms of audio-visual activism like short video documents, mash-ups carrying messages of dissent, alternative reportage, candid cellphone videos recording protests, public address, police brutality and civil unrest. Networks of political organizations, students' collectives, worker's unions etc. run regular updates, protest videos, documentation of public meetings and demonstrations etc. on their YouTube, Twitter and Facebook pages. *Dalit Camera*, a YouTube channel through which a collective of video activists document perspectives on/voices of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and Minorities explains in their 'about us' section,

We capture narratives, public meetings, songs, talks, discussion on Dalits. It is largely run by students and their expenses are mostly met by themselves. At present our people work in Hyderabad, Mumbai and Calcutta. Although we have people in other places we or they don't have cameras to capture. We would be happy if someone comes forward and supports us. We also need volunteers who can translate videos from Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi to English.

There are also instances of independent online publications, run by small groups of journalists, like *The Wire*, *Quint*, *Newslaundry*, etc. which have short videos in reportage style produced by field visit correspondents who travel in motley crews, and present another example of contemporary forms of audio-visual journalism via portals of alternative news handles. The videos, sometimes of high production value, don't respond to a singular auteur but rather to a group of content producers whose strategies may be situated within the market logics of social media and user-generated cultures but whose content and presentation functions as a rebuttal to the dominant mainstream narratives.

The need for these collective voices to stand in as author, as the alternative against mainstream jingoist journalism of today, has critical potency. We urgently need the *Newslaundry* or AIB version of news to counter the world of *Zee TV* – *Republic* – *Times Now*. So that the auteur here can perhaps transcend the idea of a mere individual signature style and become associated to a notion of a collective critical oppositional voice. The concept of the

auteur can also perhaps serve as an assault on convention and even a kind of resistance in some contexts.

Sometimes even the anonymity of the author-figure, or a particular screen persona to which the authorship of the handle is accredited, is another strategic move that could be read as problematizing the idea of the author. A YouTube handle from Haflong, Assam, that goes by the name Mr. India is an example. A video titled *No 1 Gau Rakshak* by this handle uses a collage of *gau raksha* posters from right-wing outfits as a man with half his face covered by hands-shaped glasses, sword raised high in one hand, ridicules the violence that the mushrooming *gau raksha dals* promise the country. The Facebook page, Mr India, describes him as a fictional character and so the signature of the author is transferred to his alias-like screen persona. The entire video carries a hard-hitting message, from the context of the North-East, on how it is mostly the unemployed youth who are brainwashed into joining these gangs and talks of how no one has forgotten Mohd. Akhlaq of Dadri. Things that contextualize political turmoil and the art that takes on the rise of the right-wing in the video are mockery of the Nazi salute, a mention of Patanjali salwar and the visual strategies that borrow from the remix ethos and aesthetics of mash-up videos online.

Personal narratives and accounts of lived experience are now surfacing more often in even the course of the current films reflecting the attempt to break out of conventional positioning of filmic subjects. A 26-minute documentary titled *Where Have You Hidden My New Moon Crescent* by Iffat Fatima, which is the story of Mughal Masi, a Kashmiri woman who died after waiting for 20 years for her son to return, explores narratives of loss and separation in the context of young men who disappeared allegedly due to the atrocities of the Indian army in Kashmir. Fatima's oeuvre, one that has received recent interest from progressive academic spaces, women's organizations etc., posits a contemporary example of a woman auteur, read for her commitment and prolific coverage of both the ruling powers' political failure and societal hierarchy imposed on women's lived experiences.

So, how do we rethink the idea of authorship? Here, I would like to draw from Robert Stam, who places authorship in the intersections of biography, an intertext, an institutional context, and a historical moment (Stam and Miller 2000). Stam's idea of the "intertext" is interesting, because it relates to fragmentations, combinations and recirculation of video shorts, alternative films and other such examples taken up in this paper. The institutional context and time are significant in this regard as they overhaul the idea of the author at a moment where the corporate nexus threatens to dictate almost every film and media imagery. In this spirit, there is perhaps a need

to rethink the traditional conception of the author and move beyond the idea of an individual genius to reading the filmic text as the site of encounter of filmmakers or groups of filmmakers where a process is developed around intertextuality and the specific socio-political context and time.

## Notes

1. The genre of shorts loosely refers to film texts of comparatively shorter duration than the mainstream commercial ventures. Through the history of filmmaking, this genre has always found a place in practice, even if marginal. But in the contemporary digital moment the shorts have resurfaced and caught on as a significant trend because of multiple and flexible exhibition platforms. On the other hand, earlier, a piece torn from the "main text" and circulating need not have been noticed as having a separate identity at all. But, the digital era has also produced the technological possibility of tearing away a fragment or producing a fragment accessible to a large audience. Therefore, its visual circulation which produces the possibility of an independent text emerging in new contexts is much more now. Mechoulan for instance, grapples with the problem of archiving of texts in the digital era (Mechoulan 2011, 92).
2. The term art cinema is generally defined as a film practice in opposition to the commercial mainstream cinema. Film theorists have identified the emergence of art films with particular strands of filmmaking in European Cinema in the post - Second World War era with distinct formal and thematic conventions, specialized exhibition venues and often associated with "high culture". But, in the post - television, post - multiplex and digital times, there was an alleviation of the traditional opposition between culture and entertainment, and also art and commercial cinema. (Betz, 2009, Galt and Schoonover, 2010).
3. For instance, film festivals organized by *Cinema of Resistance*, is one such example of the many recent efforts to create democratic screening spaces away from the exclusivity of festival circuits (Suman, 2011).
4. Michael Martin, in his book *New Latin American Cinema*, Volume I, traces the theories, development and transcontinental articulations of Latin American film practices. In the section on theoretical trajectories, Martin compiled the manifestos penned by Rocha, Solanas and Getino, Espinosa and others Latin American film practitioners.
5. Paradoxical, because the digital moment is also the globalization moment of the capital. French social philosopher Andre Gorz(2010) speaks about the 1990s economic boom and its subsequent collapse in 2008 stemmed from an "immaterial" consumption of symbols and ideas.

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### **Filmography**

*Citizen Kane*, 1941. Dir. Orson Welles

*The Factory*, 2015. Dir. Rahul Roy

*A Letter from the Jailed Workers of Maruti Suzuki*. 23 March, 2017. Dir. Saba Dewan, Rahul Roy, Navdeep Sharma

*Haider*, 2014. Dir. Vishal Bharadwaj

*Where Have You Hidden My New Moon Crescent*, 2013. Dir. Iffat Fatima [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZK\\_J96O6gQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZK_J96O6gQ)

*When Four Friends Meet*, 2011. Dir. Rahul Roy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFHd0qYPPJs>

*Harassment Through The Ages* feat. Richa Chadha, Vicky Kaushal, 2016. Produced by AIB (All India Bakchod) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzRwawgzeTw>

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# New Contexts and Sites of Humanities Practice in the Digital

PUTHIYA PURAYIL SNEHA

The last couple of decades have seen an increasing prevalence of digital technologies and internet in the study and practice of arts and humanities. With the growth of fields like humanities computing, digital humanities (henceforth DH) and cultural analytics, there has been a renewed interest in the increasing role of the 'digital' in interdisciplinary forms of research and knowledge production. DH in particular has become a field of much interest and debate in different parts of the world, including in India. Globally, in the last two decades, there have been several efforts to organize the discourse around this field which seeks to explore various intersections between humanities and digital methods, spaces and tools<sup>1</sup>. But DH also continues to remain a bone of contention, with several perspectives on what exactly constitutes its methodology and scope, and most importantly its epistemological stake. A specific criticism has been the Anglo-American framing of DH, located within a larger neoliberal imagination of the university and the higher education system at large. As a result, the connection of these two threads—a history of DH located in humanities computing and textual studies and its contextualization within the American university—is often represented as the history of DH. This has been met with resistance from several scholars and practitioners across the world calling for more global perspectives on the field. Drawing upon excerpts from a recently completed study on mapping the field of DH and related practices in India, this essay will attempt to outline the diverse contexts of humanities practice emerging with the digital turn, along with a reading of some of the global debates around DH to understand the discourse around the field in the Indian context.

## **Histories of a Digital India**

The discourse around DH as a discipline/field is still developing in the Indian context, and the term has often been reiterated with respect to connections that technology has forged with education in general,

especially in relation to concerns of access, infrastructure and context. Some of these challenges however are much older, as seen in rising criticism about the growth of a seemingly neoliberal model of education that has brought about drastic changes in the functioning of universities<sup>2</sup>. These include debates on the privatization of education, the entry of foreign institutions and increased vocationalisation that have grown over the past decade<sup>3</sup>. Even as institutions have been grappling with several basic issues, often technology is seen as a recourse, in a large part also due to the futuristic imagination of a techno-democracy envisioned within policy. Classrooms have changed with the ubiquitous presence of technology, demanding a rethinking of curricula, and a move towards a digital pedagogy. Access to online spaces of knowledge production such as Wikipedia, and the prevalence of blogs, social media and new publishing platforms such as Academia or Scalar, have offered new opportunities to collaboratively produce and circulate research. Access to these 'smart' classrooms however remains a challenge, with issues of diversity and quality playing a key role. In fact the context of the introduction of the internet and digital technologies in India, like with most countries in the Global South, has been rather chequered, given a persistent digital divide<sup>4</sup>. From the development of Information and Communication technologies for Development (ICT4D) in different sectors to now programmes like Digital India that seek to foster new modes of e-governance, there has been a significant growth in the adoption of digital technologies by the state, and this has informed the discourse around technology more broadly. In the education sector in particular, there have been a slew of policy initiatives aimed at harnessing the potential of digital technologies and internet in developing more advanced learning environments, and addressing problems of access, quality and diversity in education<sup>5</sup>. Most recently, the report of the committee for the evolution of the New Education Policy (2016) outlined several recommendations for the use of ICTs at all levels of the sector, including teaching-learning practices,

remedial education, adult literacy, teacher training, and in governance and information management.<sup>6</sup>

Several memory institutions, such as archives and museums have also been investing in digitizing their collections, largely as a matter of preservation and record, but now with the possibilities offered by the internet they are also contemplating wider public access and outreach. The increased availability of digital technologies, better access through gadgets like the mobile phone and a culture of sharing has contributed to a growing interest to record, store and circulate information, and therefore the creation of large corpora of different kinds of material, both in terms of private collections and public archives. Problems with digitization still persist however, such as preservation of analogue material, curation, copyright, privacy, access to and usage of digital material. The digitalization of content in Indian languages poses a set of unique challenges such as sourcing of material, lack of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) for Indic language fonts, and wider circulation. The growth of a number of independent spaces of research and creative practice in arts and humanities however, often at the margins of academia and supported by the availability of funding from government and private resources, is another development here, that draws greatly from the affordances of new digital tools and platforms. The transition of archival practice to the digital space, and the growth of such alternative or peripheral knowledge spaces would be important factors for consideration in understanding the landscape of digitalization of arts and humanities practices in India.

This brief overview urges the need to locate the present debates around DH and related digital practices in India, within a wider imagination of the 'digital' and what it implies across different contexts, especially countries in the global South. For several reasons, there are various forms of scholarship and practice related to digital technologies that do not find themselves within the ambit of DH yet. This is not only because the field is still considered emergent in many places outside the Anglo-American world, but also because there is a need for a more critical understanding of digital technologies and their implications for the arts and humanities. Following criticism about the invasion of universities by neoliberal agendas, paving the way for more profit-driven forms of functioning, it is important to recognize what such a change has meant for the arts and humanities in particular, and where digital technologies play a role in realizing these mandates. In terms of policy alone, there have been significant gaps in terms of addressing the development of humanities, arts and social sciences, and what role digital technologies may play in them. The NEP Report 2016 offers few recommendations on arts and humanities

education in a detailed manner, in fact the larger policy itself has seen some criticism for being restrained in terms of its scope.<sup>7</sup> To go back a little earlier, a report published by the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore, in 2010, while offering several insights into the landscape of research in arts and humanities in India, remarks on the shifts that have taken place in these disciplines over the last three decades, largely in terms of a "renegotiation of boundaries of traditional disciplines, and emergence of new institutional structures and new interdisciplinary courses, or altogether new themes/fields of research". It identifies these shifts as a result of the way new and traditional institutions have articulated their research and funding interests based on a critique of the definition and constitution of established research practices within the domain of the arts and humanities, and adapted to the need for interdisciplinarity. The report notes that "UGC's existing measures and evaluation systems as well as its funding strategies have not adequately recognized and/or responded to these transformations" (IFA, 2010). Interestingly, the report mentions the importance of new media technologies and archiving practices in furthering innovative forms of research in the humanities. The NEP 2016 also devotes substantial thought to the role of ICTs as mentioned earlier, especially in the light of the Digital India programme opening up several new possibilities, but this is yet to speak to discipline specific issues. Also, the imagination is still in terms of specific tools and platforms as aiding a certain existing form of teaching-learning practice, rather than a focus on what new forms of pedagogy may be developed keeping in mind the digital environment that we now inhabit. Research in arts and humanities in India, and in new fields like DH need to contend with these challenges of a changing digital policy and socio-political landscape.

### **Doing Humanities in the Age of the Digital**

Lata Mani (2015) notes that "critical political discourse in India has largely been shaped by the social sciences. However, the instrumental thinking of this period and its bequest, the transactional nature of communication, compel us to integrate into our practice a fresh reconsideration of language and of forms of representation, concerns core to the arts and the humanities." With reference to her work on video-poetry and a multi-genre collection, she illustrates how the 'exploratory sensibilities' offered by these disciplines may help render lived experiences closer, and positively inflect the terms of critical discourse. This offers several insights on the scope of these disciplines, and interestingly, as seen in the examples—how different forms and genres of representation—may effectively contribute to new ways

of thinking about not only core disciplinary concerns, but also critical discourse at large (ibid). The use of new media technologies, though not addressed explicitly here, is also a relevant point in terms of the role they play in engendering these new modes of representation. The advent of the digital has opened up several possibilities now for research, pedagogy, scholarship and practice in the arts and humanities, with the availability of a large body of cultural artifacts with digitization, as well as emergence of new kinds of digital objects which also require new methods of study. However, there is also a need for contextualizing these changes, especially in countries like India with an acute digital divide—where conditions of access and usage, transition from analogue to the digital, and the notion of ‘digitality’ itself need to be defined better. What questions about the scope, context and methods of such forms of enquiry may a field such as DH offer is an important question, as the field itself seeks to be interdisciplinary, and includes within its ambit even creative practices outside academia.

In India, debates around the term digital humanities have been largely within academic or university spaces so far, with digital archives, game studies, textual studies, design and cultural heritage being some of the key areas of work, spanning both academic and applied practices. Even with increasing interest in the field, there is lack of consensus on what it means in India, with questions around definition, ontology, and method remaining pertinent as well as the need for recognition within policy. The study on mapping DH in India tried to address some of these questions, through an exploration of several digital initiatives in humanities in India. Importantly, while a lot of these efforts may not necessarily identify themselves as ‘DH projects’ what they offer/represent are different kinds of responses to the new contexts and sites of humanities practice in the digital. One of the earliest instances of a project that speaks to some of these questions is a digital variorum of Rabindranath Tagore’s works titled Bichitra, developed at the School of Cultural Texts and Records (SCTR), Jadavpur University. The variorum hosts a comprehensive collection of Tagore’s work across several genres in English and Bengali, and uses a unique collation software, titled Prabhed (‘difference’ in Bengali) that helps to assemble text at three levels (a) chapter in novel, act/scene in drama, canto in poem; (b) paragraph in novel or other prose, speech in drama, stanza in poem; (c) individual words, thus helping trace variations across different editions. As the researchers behind the variorum point out, the most novel aspects of this ‘integrated knowledge site’ are these functions of cross-referencing and integration. The process of digitization itself is fraught with its own challenges, such as sourcing

material, lack of OCR for Bengali fonts, and problems of privacy and access among others.<sup>8</sup>

Two other recent projects that raise similar questions are: a) the Scottish cemetery project at Presidency University, Kolkata<sup>9</sup>, an online archive of narratives which offers a comprehensive collection of images, stories and historical information on the cemetery and Scottish heritage, and tools to enable analysis of this data through flexible and comparative searches, building of timelines and creating map locators, and b) Two Centuries of Indian Print, a pilot project by the British Library and other partner institutions in India<sup>10</sup> which aims to digitize 4,000 early printed Bengali books and explore how digital research methods and tools can be applied to this unique digitized collection, through digital skills workshops and training sessions at Indian institutions to support innovative research within South Asian studies. All the above initiatives illustrate changing methodologies, prompted by new practices of digitization and notions of textuality, reading and writing.. Through the possibility of search and retrieval of data across a large corpus of different kinds of texts, such as maps for instance and using tools such as collation, they offer a new form of enquiry that is unconventional within textual methods and literary studies.

The growth of open-access publishing, although at a very incipient stage right now, is an important part of this evolving landscape. An interesting project here is KSHIP at the IIT Indore<sup>11</sup>, which seeks to promote an open-access publishing model for academic work in Indian languages, by publishing original research monographs in Humanities, Social Sciences, Sciences and Engineering, and hosting peer reviewed journals from academic societies primarily in India. This is an important development that fosters an open access environment for better research accessibility in spaces that have traditionally followed standard subscription based models of publishing. Moving to a similar model of developing innovative platforms for creating and sharing content, Indiancine.ma and Pad.ma are two examples of online archives of film and video, which offer users diverse ways to engage with cultural content not just for storage and retrieval but also to work with them in multiple video and audio formats and themes through annotations and referencing, by adding transcripts, descriptions, events, keywords and maps. This recontextualisation of the film object also creates a new research object that necessitates new methods of study, apart from raising questions of ownership, access and diversity of uses of the archive<sup>12</sup>.

In addition, several universities have already been offering coursework on DH or related areas which open up possibilities for a critical exploration of the

digital within existing disciplinary frameworks of media studies, oral histories, cultural archives, design and informatics for example<sup>13</sup>. Importantly, how do these approaches, within academia and outside then contribute to furthering core disciplinary concerns of the humanities? What kinds of skills and expertise do they demand of researchers/practitioners working in these fields? The interdisciplinary and collaborative manner of research and creative practice that these platforms require also encourage the development of new methodologies, and DH could be a place to develop, explore and critique these possibilities by rethinking forms of digital pedagogy. In fact, these challenges of method and scope can be extended to understanding ways of navigating and studying the internet at large, where forms or visualization, curation, search, retrieval and analysis of information in a meaningful manner have become increasingly complex given the vast amounts of material or data now available, but also being made invisible through forms of customization like filter bubbles and echo chambers. These processes continue to be informed by the availability and access to large databases of cultural material, and the development of infrastructure, expertise and resources that facilitate their creation and use in diverse ways.

### DH and the Humanities Crisis

A much-debated essay published in the Los Angeles Review of Books [LARB] last year located the emergence of DH within a larger phenomenon of a 'neoliberal takeover' of the university, and highlighted a number of criticisms of the field, including its emphasis on 'building and making' (seemingly at the expense of interpretation and critique), the privileging of technical expertise over other forms of knowledge, and an apparent exclusion of perspectives that take into account race, gender and other minority voices in the larger global discourse around the term<sup>14</sup>. The LARB essay joins the extant criticism of the term<sup>15</sup>, but it also raised several niggling concerns about the field itself that continue to remain persistent, becoming an important flashpoint in the global discourse on DH. While this traces the problems of definition on one hand, it is also that of unravelling its ontological basis, in the process also prescribing what it must be and do. Even as efforts at sketching out those boundaries continue, across disciplines and practices, it is also imperative to map how much of an uptake the field had found, whether in research, pedagogy or practice across diverse areas in the humanities. How various disciplines and practices engage with DH, its problems and politics also ties into the question of where they locate it. A large

section of the global literature on DH clearly addresses a more prominent, available history which can be traced to humanities computing<sup>16</sup>. A few scholars, including those in the LARB essay have countered this with a history of DH emerging from textual studies, an important precursor to much work being done today in the field, and where the authors also locate its criticism about being apolitical, or not political enough. The authors suggest that through its focus on archiving materials, and developing tools and building software, DH has often been also seen as reverting to a form of cultural conservatism<sup>17</sup>, lacking in a political or critical stake, pandering instead to a 'corporatist' imagination of the university. The implication is that in its focus on building certain kinds of skills and practices, DH is instrumental in serving the mandate of a neoliberal university.

While this criticism importantly reflects larger changes in the university system, and higher education in general, it is still also a specific Anglo-American framing of DH which traces a history in humanities computing and textual studies. The criticism of a neoliberal takeover of the university has been expressed time and again by scholars, a not so recent example being a lecture by Noam Chomsky (2013), where he laments the impending 'death of American universities' due to the growth of a corporate business model, emphasizing on certain kinds of practices, skills and forms of education, often to the detriment of others. He also talks about the introduction of a condition of precarity into the education system due to these changes. The growth of the adjunct system, resulting in reduced full time employment and poor compensation, no security or benefits, the rise of a class of administrators that changes conditions of academic labour, and a gradual rethinking of the practices and objectives of higher education are some of the factors outlined by Chomsky<sup>18</sup>. These speak clearly to the apprehensions about a 'crisis' in the humanities and liberal arts<sup>19</sup> which has not only been a subject of much debate in academia over the last decade or so, but has also been a prominent aspect of the global discourse on DH<sup>20</sup>. As many scholars also point out, the crisis has led to reflection on traditional forms of enquiry in the humanities, and the need to engage with creative practices and diverse skills outside the academic context. The advent of digital technologies is seen as both adding to the challenges posed by these changes, but paradoxically also helping to address them. In moving away from conventional forms of research and practice, it expands the scope of work that can be done in the humanities, but at the same time there is also a perceived threat to traditional forms of research and practice, as reflected in the criticism around methods such as distant reading<sup>21</sup>, or building, hacking and making.

Closer home, initiatives like Humanities Underground (HUG)<sup>22</sup> have been proactively responding to this idea of a crisis, by contributing to and documenting emerging research, writing and practice in humanities and arts in India. As they note, the increasing pressure to vocationalize and professionalize the humanities is something that has evoked several anxieties, as these are often seen as a detriment to traditional disciplinary concerns, and its functions of political critique. There is also a need to understand in a more nuanced way where the digital is implicated in these changes, and what that means to the humanities, beyond facilitation of certain forms of communication and ideas. Most importantly, the changes in the humanities need to be located within a context of existing issues within higher education institutions – such as lack of autonomy, funding constraints, need for rethinking pedagogy and assessment, concerns about employability, restrictions on access to education by women and marginalized communities, and curbs on freedom of expression among others. The digital has been a space of resistance towards these issues, with innovative forms of writing, activism and research especially around caste, gender and sexuality taking place within the online space, and any exploration of the scope of DH as a field will need to engage with these concerns as well. Through an engagement with humanities work in multilingual and multimodal (including offline) forms, these contexts need to be brought to bear upon a study of the evolving digital landscape in India. DH, therefore, is as much about the humanities in a digital environment as it is about the ‘digital’ or technological, and separation of these threads could lead to concerns of the field becoming apolitical or lacking in cultural criticism. To paraphrase Shah (2015), ‘the challenges of the digital humanities are two-fold in India, where it needs the support of state infrastructure to mitigate issues of access, wider outreach and enrollment of the masses in higher education, but as a result it also becomes aligned with its neoliberal imagination of technology; secondly, it needs to repoliticize the stakes of higher education by rescuing it precisely from the onslaught of these neoliberal mandates of careers, employability, access, etc, which distance it from its core concerns of human and social interest.’

## In Conclusion

The above are examples of digital initiatives and emerging digital forms that in many ways speak to some of the larger, global concerns about DH, and outline the contexts and sites of the field in India. Yet how much of the learnings from these practices have pervaded the discourse around DH in India remains to be explored, for there still is a need to effectively document and understand what is an

Indian practice of DH, within and outside the university context—which accounts for and is influenced by larger questions about the digital landscape in the country. There is a resistance to a perception of American DH as a global narrative of DH, as seen in the work emerging from different parts of the world, especially from countries in the global south, but also in strands that address concerns of gender, race, ethnicity and accessibility within the prevailing discourse<sup>23</sup>. The criticism about DH being a manifestation of the neoliberal policies of the state may not be explicitly visible in India yet, but as a field that is premised on the use of digital technologies, it may soon be asked the same questions. While the attempt here is not to argue against, compare or separate these threads, they do offer a possibility of tracing a history of objects and practices that are specific to India. Some examples of the directions that such an enquiry may take are: How do we understand the digital turn in the creation of cultural repositories, and where do they challenge the norm of colonial archival practice? How do challenges of Indian language content and tools inflect the practice of doing DH in India? What are material practices of reading and writing, and oral histories that we could trace as precursors to notions of digital textuality? These are just a few of the emerging entry points to this enquiry. Importantly, whether such iterations could also help form a different basis of fields such as DH, which is not only aware of the role of neoliberal agendas in the growth of the internet and digital technologies itself, but then may also offer a space to critique the same would be pertinent. These would provide several insights into the not only the growth of fields like DH, or new media and digital cultures more broadly, but also help to map shifting modes of research and practice in the humanities and arts in India.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. For some of the early works on the field see: *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, John Unsworth. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/>. Also see the CUNY Debates in DH series edited by M.K Gold, published by University of Minnesota Press: <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/>

2. Nayak, Dhanwanti. 2014. Understanding the Logic of Neoliberalism in Higher Education. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. XLIX. 13. March 29.
3. Tilak, Jandhyala B.G. Higher Education Policy in India in Transition. *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 31, 2012 vol xlviI no. 13.
4. For more on this see the Centre for Internet and Society's monograph series on 'Histories of Internets in India', 2011. <https://cis-india.org/raw/internet-histories>
5. For a detailed overview see Nishant Shah in "Beyond Infrastructure: Re-humanizing Digital Humanities in India" (2015), where he notes that such policy reform still falls within a rubric of 'infrastructure building' that is geared towards addressing issues of access to education, digital literacy, unemployment and economic development with the motive of India becoming a significant player in global information societies. He further argues that the assimilation of digital humanities within this existing discourse of the state has also led to a flattening of earlier histories of 'science-technology-humanities-society studies' that were initiated by the state. Also see Sneha, P P 'Context' in Mapping Digital Humanities in India, 2016
6. National Policy on Education 2016: Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy. Government of India. April 30, 2016. <http://www.nuepa.org/new/download/NEP2016/ReportNEP.pdf>
7. Gupta, Vikas. Politics of the Guarded Agenda of National Education Policy 2015–16. *Economic and Political Weekly*. October 15, 2016 vol II no 42
8. For a more detailed description see interview with Prof. Sukanta Chaudhuri in Mapping Digital Humanities in India, 2016.
9. <http://readinggamesplayingbooks.com/scots/>
10. <https://www.bl.uk/projects/two-centuries-of-indian-print>
11. <https://iitkship.iiti.ac.in/site/about/>
12. For more on these archives see <https://indiancine.ma/> and <https://pad.ma/>; also interview with Ashish Rajadhyaksha in Mapping Digital Humanities in India, 2016.
13. As an indicative list see courses offered at Jadavpur University (<https://sctrdhci.wordpress.com/about/the-course/>), Presidency University (<http://dhgenedpresi.blogspot.in/>) and Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology (<http://srishti.ac.in/programs/pg-program-main-digital-humanities>)
14. See: Allington, Daniel, Sarah Brouillette and David Columbia. 2016. "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. May 1, 2016.
15. For more on this see Stanley Fish, "Mind Your 'Ps' and 'Bs': The Digital Humanities and Interpretation." *New York Times*, January 23, 2012; Stephen Marche, "Literature is Not Data", *LA Review of Books*, October 28, 2012 and Adam Kirsch, "Technology Is Taking over English Departments", *New York Times*, May 2, 2014.
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21. Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 2013.
22. <http://humanitiesunderground.org/>
23. See Roopika Risam, "Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and the Digital Humanities" *DHQuarterly*, 2015.

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# Ten Testimonies on Postcards

GOWHAR YAQOOB

1. Sarah, mid-forties aged, they call me Saara  
I lost a pigeon and a silver anklet  
forty days ago  
on my way back from  
Diagnostic center –  
Period  
Call back on: xyz...01
  2. Whosoever it Concerns:  
Juaana, age 16, alias joan  
There is a strong resentment  
Between me and my friends  
Concerning our new history teacher  
At the school  
he is good-looking though  
he chooses to be mute about the desolate landscape?
  3. From Response Cell:  
Juaana dear,  
You are too young to ask questions  
However bright enough  
to call our attention to the desolate landscape.  
We shall soon look in...!
  4. To Emergency:  
Reyies, aged 24, male  
There is a cordon in the plains.  
Hills in the North  
are running short of supplies  
Kindly contribute generously!
  5. From Suppliers and Containers:  
Mr. Reyies, there are no orders yet  
Let your calm prevail  
Nonetheless, City is not far away  
Our job is different  
P.S.: do not write to Emergency again!
  6. Naroa, Windmill care-taker, He, 62.  
I am watching calm sky
  7. I am a soldier  
Waiting to disappear  
When the clouds shall roar  
On the line of control  
Let my newlywed bride know  
I was assigned to create a moment  
On the surface  
of this poor landscape
  8. She peon at the primary school  
22,  
I want to learn  
To read and write  
My work keeps me on toes  
Day and night  
I wish I could read  
Horoscopes at least  
And one day I could write  
My resignation  
I am tied to my work  
Without addiction  
Sounds like I am workaholic  
I am not  
I am Zaleeta.
  - 9.
  - 10.
- 2 postcards are scanned, improperly?  
2 testimonies lost?  
9 and 10 are illegible?

# Postcard 2

GOWHAR YAQOOB

I  
A plain cloth curtain  
against which  
an old lady bespectacled  
sits cross-legged  
wearing an eerie smile  
Her face embroidered  
with thin pink wrinkles  
a portrait of grandma.

II  
She posed  
like a young dancing girl  
for a coloured photograph  
on a pretty sunlit afternoon  
colours melt in her eyes  
behind her glasses  
grandmother has turned eighty  
with beautiful calm on  
her wrinkled face  
and bony neck.

III  
When grandpa would go  
to bring grandma back home;  
both returned back on a cycle  
taking longer way  
back home  
grandma always recollects it  
with girlish giggles  
in her voice  
and miraculous joy  
in her eyes.

IV  
A girl with red headgear  
walks  
alone  
on the bridge

holding  
a basket full of cherries  
that match her scarf.

V  
A maiden  
sings to herself  
at a window  
that opens into  
the deserted street  
She combs her long black hair  
as the sun sets  
behind those roof-tops.

VI  
The soil here is red  
moist breeze sublime  
and the landscape non-linear.  
In the backdrop  
the blue sky beholds  
trinkets of clouds,  
laced with the coconut trees  
to sculpt in  
verdean time.

VII  
A path dented in asphalt  
with trees on both sides  
leaving midway stretch  
that looks bare in daytime  
or sensuous on full moon nights.  
The stone building is huge and  
grotesque  
behind exquisite window sills  
and rooms on both sides  
of the corridor  
walks one into a labyrinth  
of human breath

semi-curiously obscuring  
outside:  
what if  
all those who arrive  
are left with no exit.

VIII

The first thing that impinged on me  
was the smell  
smell of a city -  
do all cities smell the same  
all those who walk in  
from lane to lane  
from square to square,  
time cued along the roads  
mute in scorching heat  
and solitude,  
where  
life is cramped in silhouettes.

## Land Rights in India

NIRMAL SENGUPTA

*Land Rights in India: Policies, Movements and Challenges*, edited by Varsha Bhagat-Ganguly, 2016, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New Delhi, London, New York and the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Distributed by Manohar Publishers, xxi, 301 pages, Rs. 995.00.

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ISBN: 978-1-315-66607-5 (ebk)

This book is the first one to appear in a series published on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. The papers included were presented at a national seminar on "Right to Land and Its Potential for Social Transformation" held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in June 2014. The editor is a Professor at the Centre for Rural Studies, Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie. The contributors are academicians, bureaucrats, researchers and social activists. There are seventeen well-written chapters divided in five parts along with a 'foreword' by the Director, IAS, and an 'afterword'. The chapters are based on empirical research and are impressively, free from clichéd narratives.

The collection begins with a rich introduction by the editor, Varsha Bhagat-Ganguly. She avoids repeating the colonial legacy and makes a very comprehensive summary of the current issues. The first part of the book contains six articles that introduce the readers to the diverse nature of dependence of people on land. For example, dependence may be like the loss of human rights as in the case of landless, or on common properties, that

support almost all segments of the population. Another article discusses the dependence on land lease market, a phenomenon of increasing importance.

Part two contains four articles that revisit land reforms from a social justice perspective. The next part reviews existing policies and laws. This part contains three interesting articles on eminent domain, the 2013 Land Acquisition Act, and community rights in Forest Act. Two articles in part five contain four case studies of different kinds of people's movements. The first one contains case studies of struggle against land acquisition for industrial purpose in three different settings. Admirably, one article is an assessment of the *Bhoodan* movement. The last part is rightly titled "issues and challenges of land governance". It begins with an excellent survey of the issues in the country as a whole. The author describes how the post-Independence evolution of land governance has led to the introduction of the National Land Records Modernization Programme. The next article discusses the problems of prospects of land records modernization programmes. A brief 'afterwords' try to characterize the nature of recent developments on land rights, whether they are people-centric and participatory or are only techno-managerial solutions.

Common impression is that the land reforms programmes have ceased to exist. The present volume shows that it exists but in some different forms. There are new issues, and new efforts to deal with those. The book is a very rich introduction to this new and emerging dimension of land rights in India.

## A Sanskrit Dictionary of Law and Statecraft

AMBA KULKARNI

*A Sanskrit Dictionary of Law and Statecraft*, edited by Patrick Olivelle with his students David Brick and Mark McClish, is a dictionary of technical terms from two important domains of Sanskrit texts of ancient and medieval India viz. Dharmaśāstra (texts dealing with law) and Arthaśāstra (texts dealing with statecraft). Domain-specific dictionaries are very important especially when the words in a language are loaded with meanings. Such dictionaries provide the precise meaning appropriate in a given domain.

This dictionary has around 4000 entries. Each entry has a head word printed both in Devanāgarī and IAST followed by one or more meanings in the form of definitions/explanations and a few citations where the term is used. This dictionary has two special features that we normally do not come across in normal dictionaries. I illustrate these features with an entry of “uttara” on page 94. Three meanings of this word have been provided. The second meaning is further supported by an explanatory note since the editors felt the need of further explanation to the definition provided. Such explanations are essential in order to understand the definition further.

Another special feature of this dictionary is the cross references. We are familiar with the cross references or pointers to other entries when there are spelling variations with regards to the head words. But in this dictionary, the cross references are provided to all the terms that are related to the head word. For example, under the first meaning of “uttara”, there is a list of words that are related to this meaning such as *atidośavat*, *atyalpa*, *anuttara*, etc. It is, however, not clear to me what the editors mean by ‘related’. While the ‘related’ words are given for some entries, there are some entries where these ‘related’ words would have been useful, but are missed out. One such entry is on the very next page (the last entry on page 95) for the word “uttarasākṣin”. The word means ‘indirect witness’. Further there is an explanation: “One of the five

kinds of appointed witness (*kṛtasākṣin*).” Naturally there is a curiosity to know what are the other four kind of witnesses. But there is no reference to other four types. Such an information would have been useful. Of course this in no way diminishes the quality of the dictionary.

The editors have avoided providing any etymological information and also the constituent components in case the head word is a compound. The only one exception I noticed is the case of pre-verbs or the verbal prefixes. For example, on page 75, the entry for *ākṣara* has been given as  $\bar{a} \sqrt{kṣara}$  and the entry for *ākṣip* is given as  $\bar{a} \sqrt{kṣip}$ .

The editors refer to several authors and extant works – both primary and secondary. There is an elaborate and informative introduction detailing the inception and progress of this work, followed by the information on the organisation of the entries and the list of important topics for which cross references have been provided. Editors describe the importance of this work as “Having all its technical terms in one place with illustrative references to their usage will give a bird’s eye view of the entire legal and jurisprudential system of classical India” (page xi).

It is not clear why the publisher has chosen a Tamil/ Grantha script manuscript folio as a cover design. If it has any special significance a footnote explaining the importance/relevance of this manuscript would have added value. If it is not really significant, Devanāgarī image of some manuscript of dharmaśāstra or arthaśāstra would have been appropriate.

This dictionary, like other domain specific dictionaries such as *Dictionary of Sanskrit Grammar* by K.V. Abhyankar and J.M. Shukla, the *Dictionary of Vedic Rituals* by C. Sen, *Nyāyakośa* by Jhalakikar, *Dictionary of Technical Terms in Navyanyāya* by V.N. Jha, etc. is an important milestone in the lexical resources for Sanskrit and I’m sure in the times to come this would become an indispensable resource for the researchers working in the law and spacecraft of ancient India.

## Contributors

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