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Note from the Editor

Aditya Pratap Deo

This issue of *Summerhill* has been delayed much beyond its scheduled publication date; and has passed through the desks of several editors before coming to mine. It is thus a somewhat incongruous collection of essays derived from the different phases of its making. But though it lacks a unity of theme, hopefully, it makes up for it with the diversity and vitality of its contributions.

The theme around which its original set of contributions was based was literary criticism: now this section, with some addition, is christened *From the World of Literature*. The first piece – *Do You Understand me?: The Culture of Translation in India* – is by the noted poet and scholar K. Satchidanandan, who offers a brief meditation on the history and state of translation in the Indian subcontinent. First pointing out the unique qualities of the traditions of translation in pre-colonial times, including that of creative re-readings as well as 'vertical translation', he moves on to track the changes in translation practices in the colonial and post-colonial periods, and ends with an analysis of the challenges facing this critical art today, especially when translation, as conversation between cultures, is the need of our times.

In *Mystical, Magical, Maverick Mira: The Poetics of Dissent,* Paritosh Chandra Dugar attempts to resurrect a 'poetics of dissent' through an exploration of the 'metaphysics, aesthetics and ethics' of the extraordinary medieval poet and *bhakta* Mira, with a careful and perceptive reading of her poetry. Dugar takes us on a fascinating journey into Mira's world, where she boldly reinterprets – in her devotion to Krishna and in transgression of the patriarchal strictures of matrimonial duty – the idea of love. In an imaginative use of the analytic of *rasa* in understanding her poetry, Dugar argues that Mira's love for her deity, sensual and emotional as it was, helped her invert the normative 'impure' into the liberating 'pure'. At the end, this essay foregrounds Mira's very life, lived with freedom of conscience, as resistance to power.

Albeena Shakil's *Locating the 'Northeast': Global, National, Regional and Local Novels of Siddhartha Deb, Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan,* as the title suggests, introduces us to the less known but significant English language fiction from the Northeast. Through a study of three novelists, Siddhartha Deb, Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan, Shakil looks at the themes of identity and belonging, local and global, region and nation, personal and collective, that shape their complex, fragmented and crisis-ridden imaginaries. In our intensely here yet intensely nowhere world, the marginal location of the Northeast, and the multiple alienations that it is suffused with, provide its Anglophone writers with a peculiar if also poignant vantage from which to engage with issues that mark the human condition in general today.

In *'Frames of Return': Sādhanā of Vārtā,* Aditya Chaturvedi attempts an *emic* reading of a Vaishnava text from the *Puṣṭimārga bhakti* tradition which began with Vallabhacharya in the 16th century and has continued in our times. The writer argues that modernist ways of reading texts that were composed in the pre-modern period and are part of living (often oral), non-Western literary traditions, limit our understanding of the true sense contained within. Chaturvedi then creatively uses Aurobindo's idea of spiritual discipline and practice to decode the 'secret' meanings infusing the text in question. We learn that the other-worldly, that which is before and beyond language, is often critical for the practice of language and literature.

In the next section, titled *For Our Times,* in a stand-alone piece *Teacher as Mandala: Faith, Beauty and Knowing in Times of N/Rationalism,* Rizio Yohannan Raj offers us a deeply thought-provoking vision of a world beyond the stultifying order of n/rationalizing regimes, and in the embrace of trans-local, organic 'unorder', where 'true reason'/ 'faith' leads us to the knowledge of the beautiful complex/complex beauty of life and nature, plural and unfettered. In Raj's view, the critical, creative, libertarian and enlightened leader is the figure who negotiates this passage from death to resurrection.

In *Satire,* we move to Martin Kämpchen's *Who is in*

charge of Rashtrapati Niwas?: Three Stories, where the writer follows the mice that scamper about in the old Vice-regal Lodge (rechristened Rashtrapati Niwas, now housing the IIAS), tracks the monkeys that trapeze all over its roofs and gardens, and marvels at the flagpole that stands erect at the top, asking who really rules the roost in this grand, venerable but somewhat crumbling monolith. Through satirical observations of the dynamics of the Lodge and its denizens, animals and humans alike, Kämpchen weaves together tales that will at once regale, with wit, those who have lived, worked and visited here, and make them think seriously about the meaning of things beyond the visible and given.

The last section comprises reviews of three books, one strictly academic and the other two straddling the popular and the scholarly. Monika Saxena reads *Looking Within Looking Without* (edited by Kumkum Roy) to explore a work that brings together, in a welcome if tad belated move, essays on the neglected histories of the household in the Indian subcontinent. Tarinee Awasthi reviews Andrea Jain's *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture,* a book that traces the journey of Yoga in the West, in the process raising questions about the nature of religion/culture, cultural consumption, and the phenomena of tradition and its transformation. In his comment on Pallavi Aiyer's *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China,* Aditya Pratap Deo recommends a book that seeks to understand Indian approaches to and anxieties about the Chinese miracle; and provides a humane ethnographic account of the momentous economic, socio-cultural and political transformations that constitute this miracle.

My own time as a Fellow at IIAS came six months after the scheduled, original date for this volume. As a Fellow, I observed that notwithstanding delays of this kind, caused by the somewhat erratic ebb and flow of life at IIAS, its basic rhythms remain undisturbed. I am grateful to Prof. K. Satchidanandan (National Fellow), Prof. Chetan Singh (Director, 2013-16), Prof. A.K. Chaturvedi (Director, 2017-18), Shri Prem Chand (Librarian), and Sangeetaji and Ravi Ranjanji at the Publication Section, for their help and support. I hope that the IIAS continues to support sound scholarship and critical publications.

Do You Understand Me?: The Culture of Translation in India

K. Satchidanandan
National Fellow

India's cultures of translation date back to pre-colonial times that had witnessed several kinds of literary translation, though our ancients may not claim that they were doing translations. This is perhaps natural to multilingual cultures where poets (Kabir, Mira, Nanak, Vidyapati) easily moved from one language to another without even being aware of it; and translators did not fear being executed for deviations as in the West (remember the fate of Etienne Dolet, the 16th century French translator of Plato?). We do not even have a proper word for translation in the Indian languages, so we have, at different times, borrowed *anuvad* ("speaking after") from Sanskrit and *tarjuma* (explication or paraphrase) from Arabic or created words like *rupantar* (Bengali), *bhashantar* (Hindi) *mozhi paharppu* (Tamil) or *paribhasha* (interpretation), *vivartanam* (one specific appearance of a phenomenon) and *mozhimattam* (changing the tongue) (all Malayalam).

Our predecessors used texts as take-off points and freely retold and resituated them, as was done in the case of the many *Ramayanas*, *Mahabharatas* and *Bhagavatas* in different languages. A reassuring example from early pre-colonial days, probably 6th or 5th Centuries BCE, pointed out by Sujit Mukherjee in *Translation as Recovery,* are the Jataka stories, first collected in Pali, forming the tenth book of *Khuddanikaya* and later developed in Sanskrit, mixing prose and verse, as full-fledged narratives. A later example is that of Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* (4-5th Centuries, CE), a voluminous cycle of stories originally composed in a Prakrit speech, almost dismissively named Paishachi. Even when the original text was lost, the stories were preserved in three Sanskrit texts, two Prakrit abridgements and one Tamil fragment. Both the examples do not satisfy the modern criteria of translation, but embody the choice as well as the compulsion behind the rebirth of texts in another language, which apply to translation in general. These were all in a sense acts of appropriation which were academic acts as they required competence in another language and also free enterprise as the translator left the mark of his/her imagination and creativity on the product.

This tendency to transform texts from older languages like Prakrit, Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil or Persian continued almost to the end of pre-colonial period. I will not deny here the chances of many of these stories themselves originating in smaller tribal languages and dialects, a possibility that demands clearer proof. Texts from more recent – "modern" –Indian languages were an exception during the period, the well-known examples being *Padmabati*, a 17th century Bangla work adapted from *Padumavat*, a 16th century Hindi work by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, by the poet-soldier Alaol. Another example is a minor work narrating the tragic tale of Madhavanala, a musician, and Kamakandala, a dancer, that has several versions in Sanskrit and Hindi besides in Marathi and Gujarati. Alam, a court-poet of Aurangazeb, based his Hindi version on a Sanskrit version by Jodh, a poet in Akbar's court. Alam admits how he has composed parts and has also borrowed from other Hindi versions as well as Sanskrit. "*Kachhu apni, kachhu prakrit choro/ Yathashakti kari akshar jodo*" (Some mine, some stolen from Prakrit, putting letters together as well as I can) he says, laughing at four strong Western individualist ideas: absolute originality, faithful translation, the author's moral right and the publisher's copyright.

Most of the pre-colonial translations however, were what Gianfranco Folena would call "vertical translations" where "the source language has prestige and value which transcends that of the target language". The translator here often feels humbled by the superior power of the original, forcing, for example, Jnaneswar who translated *Bhagavat Geeta* into Marathi, to compare himself to a tiny "*titibha*" bird trying to sound the ocean's depth. "Horizontal translation" on the other hand is what happens "between languages of a similar structure and strong cultural affinity" (Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Power and the Case of Horizontal Translation", *Translating Power*). Apparently, there is no hierarchy here: the languages are considered

equal. This is what happens between modern Indian languages, though even here translation into a less-known or recognized language, like Bhili or Santhali, Garo or Gammit, may involve a power-relationship. Sisirkumar Das (*History of Indian Literature: Western Impact, Indian Response*) observes that there were only a handful of translations from one Indian language into another at the beginning of the nineteenth century, produced mainly to meet the demands of pedagogy. There were plenty of translations from Bengali into many other Indian languages. Tulsi Das' *Ramcharit Manas* found an Urdu translation and the first Marathi novel, *Yamunaparyatan,* got translated into Kannada. Sisirkumar Das also notes that geographically contiguous literatures got translated into one another more often, like Kannada into Marathi or Marathi into Gujarati; he also says that South Indian languages got translated more into one another than into the languages of the North. But this is not always true, as for example, Malayalam has more works translated from Bengali and Hindi than from Kannada, Tamil and Telugu.

The translation scene in India underwent a major transformation with English joining India's linguistic landscape. Three areas of translation prospered during the colonial times: translation of Indian literary texts into English; translation of English language texts as also the European language texts available in English versions into Indian languages; and translation from one Indian language into another. Tejaswini Niranjana, in *Siting Translation,* has studied the working of the colonial ideology in the translations done during the period. Translations of texts like *Bhagavat Gita, Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra* were mainly meant to help the rulers understand the Hindu ethos and practices while old literary texts like *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, besides being excellent literature, also satisfied their orientalist mindset with its concept of the wild, exotic East and its coy, vulnerable and beautiful women (see Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, where she contrasts Kalidasa's frail heroine with the brave and independent Sakuntala of *Mahabharata*) in the West. If first the translations were made by Western scholars like William Jones, by the late nineteenth century, Indian scholars like Romesh Chandra Dutt (*Lays of Ancient India* -1894, *Mahabharata*-1899, *Ramayana* -1902) also joined the effort, sometimes with the noble intention of correcting Western perceptions of Indian texts. This is a living tradition, as we realize from the practices of P. Lal, A. K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, Velcheru Narayana Rao, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Arshia Sattar, H. S. Shivaprakash, Ranjit Hoskote, Vijay Nambisan, Bibek Debroy and several other poets and scholars. The translation between Indian languages during the period of the freedom struggle was no more just a literary exercise, it helped in the building of a nation. These translations during the late colonial period and the early years of independence were not profit-oriented; dedicated translators came up in many languages making a Tagore, a Sarat Chandra Chatterjee or a Premchand household names across the country.

Translation came to be institutionalized in independent India as a consequence of the State's perception that emotional integration of India is possible only through arts, and literature had a major role to play here. The idea of translation thus got linked all the more to the idea of the Nation. If nation, as Benedict Anderson says, is an "imagined community", literature plays a role in creating and sustaining that community. India's linguistic economy underwent a change after 1947 and mother-tongues were perceived to be the chief markers of identity and carriers of tradition. Inter-language translation continues to be one of the chief activities of the Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust, two public institutions created in the times of Jawaharlal Nehru's liberal and forward-looking regime. Now we also have other national projects like the National Translation Mission, meant to translate knowledge-texts from English into Indian languages (and hopefully vice-versa), and Indian Literature Abroad, meant to make significant Indian literary texts available in foreign languages.

Inter-language translations have played a major role in creating movements across linguistic territories. Horizontal translations of patriotic as well as social-reformist works during the Independence Movement played a role in shaping our national consciousness. The same is also true of Progressive literature, where translations of the likes of Premchand, Manto, Krishan Chander, Amrita Pritam, Jayakantan and Thakazhi played a pivotal role, encouraging an egalitarian ethos. It happened again during the Modernist movement – I remember how the works of Mardhekar, Muktibodh, Gopalakrishna Adiga, Nakulan, Dilip Chitre, Anantamurthy, Nirmal Verma and others got translated into Malayalam during the nineteen-sixties. It is happening again now, contributing to Dalit and Feminist literary movements in many languages. The translations of Marathi Dalit writings have been crucial in the creation of a similar body of literature in other languages like Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi or Gujarati, though later many of these languages discovered the existence of earlier works. Translations have also played a role in the creation of genres in languages where they had not originally existed.

Let me conclude, pointing to certain challenges faced by inter-language translation in India:

One: Globalisation and the cultural amnesia it imposes on countries like ours are leading to the marginalization of this important activity. We are becoming more and more monolingual at least in terms of linguistic competence

whereas inter-language translation requires competence in at least two Indian languages including some knowledge of the regional cultures and literary traditions that inform the texts. Two: Despite the level playing field supposed to be available for inter-language translators, the field in reality is not always that. For example, Meenakshi Mukherjee, speaking of her experience of translating Alka Saraogi's Hindi novels into Bangla, points out how Bangla resists translations from other Indian languages, including Hindi, even while translations from Bangla are plentifully available in Hindi and other Indian languages. Three: Literary translation is mostly confined to certain genres like the novel. This choice is dictated more by commercial interest than social or aesthetic concern as in some languages poetry, drama, discursive prose or short story may be doing better than novel as a genre. This creates gaps and unevenness in our understanding of other literatures. Four: Truly contemporary works rarely get translated as it takes time for a new work written in an Indian language, unlike one written in English, to gain national notice. Only works produced by certain movements sometimes get translated as they often appear in academic curricula or are politically relevant. Five: There is a dearth of competent translators in each language from many other languages. To take the case of Malayalam, direct translations into Malayalam happen only from Hindi, Bangla, Marathi, Tamil and Kannada. Even here, except in the case of Hindi, it is often one or two translators who do the job and they are often without followers. Our universities are doing next to nothing to create or upgrade skills in languages other than the mother tongues. This means we keep falling back on mediated, indirect translations, mostly using English versions (at times Hindi versions) which may be far removed from the original and may well erase cultural markers. Six: There are very few journals in languages which promote inter-language translations, and publishers in many languages too are indifferent to them, not to speak of the lack of quality editing. Seven: Whatever little translation happens here is also accidental, hardly schematic. The result again is unevenness of impressions. There are few impact/reception studies on the original works to ensure their reception in another language.

We need to understand translation as an attempt to retrieve our peoples' histories, often lost or distorted because of colonial interventions; to resituate their pasts and reassess their presents; and to grasp their modes of imagination and creativity. And this, no doubt, is best done in the peoples' own languages.

The Mystical, Magical, Maverick Mira: The Poetics of Dissent

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I

One needn't delve into any historical and hagiographical accounts pertaining to Medieval India to learn how Mira, a sixteenth-century princess-turned-poet-saint of Rajasthan, chose Lord Krishna as her true lover/husband and sacrificed her "body, mind, wealth and all" (Alston, 2008: 37) for the love of the Lord; how she mingled freely, setting aside all distinctions of class and caste, with those who sang the glories of God; how she remained indifferent to her worldly husband; how her conduct was considered as a transgression of the cherished values of aristocratic Rajput community; how her in-laws attempted to persecute, even kill, her for her defiant demeanour. In fact, all her devotional songs, put together, seem to serve as a concise autobiography wherein all these facts are presented poetically. This observation about Mira's songs may allow us to use an exclusively text-based approach in our attempt to understand her poetics of mystic devotion and dissent by analysing her metaphysics, aesthetics and ethics as revealed through her songs. The English translations of Mira's poems are taken from A. J. Alston's book, *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*.

It is noteworthy that in almost every song, Mira openly proclaims her bridal love for a personal Deity, Lord Krishna. Implicit in her proclamations is her desire to attain a direct union with the Divine which invariably characterises her relationship with the Deity as bridal mysticism. Though in her yearning for a direct union with the Eternal she seems akin to many mystics of the world, she differs from them in terms of her adorations of a personal Deity and her conception of the Deity as an equal partner in the spiritual love-game. Mira's love for the Lord is not the love that exists between conventionally married Hindu wife and husband – a relationship in which the wife traditionally occupies a subsidiary or subordinate position. Rather, it is the love that prospers between two equal lovers sharing the joys of the love-game, a kind of spiritual "dating," expected to culminate in marriage and union. This kind of love can be described as bridal mysticism. In choosing the path of bridal mysticism, Mira seems to depart from all other traditional paths of devotion. And in pursuing her own devotional path, Mira also came to dissent from all those traditions, customs and conventions of society which came in her way as obstacles.

That Mira did have, metaphysically, a Vedantic belief in the unity of the soul and God is evident from her repeated assertions like: "I am dyed deep in the love of Shyam" (Alston, 2008: 40), "Krishna belongs to me/And I belong to Him" (Alston, 2008: 61), and "Thou and I are one/Like the sun and its heat" (Alston, 2008: 80). Yet the duality in her devotion to Lord Krishna (a human incarnation of God) is equally evident from expressions like: "Thou art my companion of many births" (Alston, 2008: 77) and "The link between me and Shyam/Cannot be broken" (Alston, 2008: 63). Mira's relationship with the Deity seems rather paradoxical. For her, God is at once transcendent and immanent. He is at once within and without her. In her spiritual love, she stands in a paradoxical relationship with the Divine. One may ask here: Was Mira, in her love for Lord Krishna, striving to elevate herself to the level of the Supreme Being or was she endeavouring to bring the Divinity down to an earthly status or was she doing both? Mira's devotion is no doubt marked by love – the love that exists between two equal partners in the love-game. It was perhaps through this particular type of love that Mira sought to raise herself or her *self* to the level of the Universal Self. It could be a *saguna*[1] way of transcending the bounds of Time and Space and be one with the Infinite. But here it may also be asked: Did not Mira seek to bring God down from His transcendental heights to an earthly level – a level that God himself had chosen in bygone days? Paradoxically, Mira did both. She did both in order to adjust the levels and create a common ground where she could easily be united with the Divine, not as a differentiated one but as an identical or nearly identical one. This is perhaps one

of the reasons for Mira's perennial popularity among the masses – that she made God so tangible and approachable to human beings.

While discussing the varieties of Hindu mysticism in his book, S. N. Dasgupta says: "Love is a great leveller; the best way of realizing God is by making Him an equal partner in life by force of intense love" (Dasgupta, 1959: 142). Here, the following argument of the same author may help us resolve the paradox of Mira's relationship with God. Dasgupta argues that in devotional mysticism there is:

> . . . an alternation of feeling which sometimes expresses itself as an experience of communion or contemplative unity with God and then by its own inner movement passes for its own realization into the various other modes of relationships through which ordinary human love can express itself. It is a circular movement. At one stage within it, man becomes God, but, at the other, God slowly becomes man and participates with him in diverse human relationships of love and its joys. (Dasgupta, 1959: 129)

A similar argument is extended by David G. Murray in his essay *The Need for a Metaphysical Model in the Comparative Study of Mystical Experience*:

> In this (mystical) experience, however, a certain tension emerges which is of vital interest to our discussion. Though a unitary absolute being may be affirmed metaphysically and a unipersonal divinity may be upheld theologically, *in reality what we might term "the presence of relation in the absolute" is experientially intuited*. (Murray: 2)

The kind of relationship Mira established with her Lord implies her extreme sense of freedom and courage. And it was this sense of freedom and courage that made it possible for her to redefine or reinterpret several long-held social and philosophical notions/concepts which have hitherto been the foundations of patriarchy, most of them being male-minted. To define everything in or of society, including notions and norms related to women, has been the self-proclaimed privilege of men. Counter to this, Mira redefined several crucial concepts like *pativrata* or the duties of a wife, true devotion, man's relationship with the Divine, and the world, in her own way.

For example, the plainness and openness with which Mira defines true devotion in the following song reminds us of Kabir.[2] She says:

> You cannot call this true devotion,
> To bathe one's forehead and apply the tilak
> Without cleansing the impurities of the heart.
> That cruel cur desire
> Has bound me with the cord of greed.
> The butcher of anger remains within me,
> How can I hope to meet Gopal?
> The greedy senses are like a cat,
> And I keep on giving them food.
> Weakened by my hunger for sense-objects
> I do not take the Name of God.
> I worship not God but myself,
> And glow with ecstasy.
> Now that I have built up
> This towering rock of pride,
> Where can the water of true wisdom collect?
> You cannot deceive Him who knows
> The inmost recesses of your soul.
> The Name of Hari does not enter my heart,
> Though I tell with my lips
> The beads of my bejeweled rosary.
> Learn to love the compassionate Lord,
> Give up faith in the world.
> Mira is the slave of courtly Giridhara,
> She has adopted the path of simple detachment.
>
> (Alston, 2008: 99)

Likewise, Mira redefines the term *pativrata*. Traditionally, to be obedient and loyal to her husband in all respects has been a social and religious duty and virtue of a wife in a Hindu community. The loyalty must not be less than treating the husband as God. A wife having this loyalty is called *pativrata*. Mira went counter to this. She ignored her worldly husband, refused to become a *sati*,[3] and treated God as husband rather than husband as God. From an orthodox point of view, Mira could be called an adulteress. But from Mira's own point of view, which appeared startlingly radical to her relatives and community, she was a perfect *pativrata* to the husband of her choice, Lord Krishna. To the women who criticised her conduct she showed that she was far ahead of them in her wifely duties and devotion, in being *pativrata*!

Mira's refusal to become *sati* also suggests her belief that by being a wife of the Indestructible she cannot be widowed. It also suggests her acceptance of the value and meaning of human birth and the corporeal world while being aware of its falsity. A true *bhakta* (devotee, but much more), she seems to believe, utilises her human life for her devotional purpose. Devotion is possible so long as one lives. In other words, the *bhakta* uses the very means of the phenomenal or material world to transcend it. This is exactly what Mira did. Refusing to be an ascetic, she used the very human, erotic emotions, so characteristic of the corporeal world, to achieve a mystic union with God. But, at the same time, Mira rejected any attachment to this world. Being fully aware of its falsity, she says: "False are rubies and pearls/False all glamour and glimmer/False is all external finery" (Alston, 2008: 44). In another song, she speaks: "False is the ocean of transmigration/False is the bondage to this world/False are family ties" (Alston, 2008: 77). In yet another song, she declares plainly: "Worldly comfort is an illusion/As soon as you get it, it goes" (Alston, 2008: 116). That Mira

accepted the value of the phenomenal world is evident from her choice of bridal path – one of the most mundane forms of human experience. But this path in its sublime form, as K. C. Varadachari observes, becomes:

> The culmination of a seeking for union in an integral or total way which includes the essence of all other realizations. It is the culmination indeed of the *jnana, karma and bhakti* paths. It is therefore called *Sringar* path. And it is the most dynamic creativity that is the fruit of infinite love for God. Mysticism reaches the peak of existence-consciousness in this alone. God's Infinite Beauty as Krsna is the eternal enchantment of the mystic's urge for union. For verily the finite belongs to the Infinite and the Infinite longs for the finite. (Varadachari)

Mira repudiates everything as false that impedes her path to the realisation of her unity with the Indestructible, the Supreme Being. She seems to believe that all material comforts, glimmer and glamour, riches and reputation make one worship not God but the self. Thus, she regards them all as false and futile. In one of her songs, quoted earlier, she remarks ironically:

> Weakened by my hunger for sense-objects
> I do not take the Name of God
> I worship not God but myself,
> And glow with ecstasy. (Alston, 2008: 99)

Mira's rejection of the phenomenal world is emphatically suggested by her choice of the immortal Shyam as bridegroom and not of the one "Who will die at each rebirth" (Alston, 2008: 119). As she takes the world as false and meaningless, she remains indifferent to her inimical in-laws. She harbours no ill will against them. She does not even speak spitefully or revengefully of them.

II

Mira's songs are spontaneous expressions of her purely subjective experience – an experience which has its own beauty. Shanta Subba Rao observes: "The pangs of separation, *viraha*, the torture of estrangement and inconsolable grief find a framework in the most spontaneous and natural flow of the (Mira's) *padas* (verses)" (Rao, 1998: 115). It is in fact both Mira's perception of the celestial beauty of the object of her worship and her poetic expression of her mystic experience that provide a magical charm to her songs. Her aesthetics consists in, or is produced by, the sensual and emotional way in which she establishes her love-relationship with Lord Krishna and the symbolic expression of her desire to be united with Him. The mystic experience involves a creative and sublime use of erotic emotions that all human beings, irrespective of caste, creed, clime, age and religion, share. The exuberance of such emotions, which may otherwise be harmful to human mind and body, paradoxically purges her, exalts her, and makes her eligible for a direct encounter with the Divine.

Dasgupta observes:

> For a true bhakta, it is not necessary, therefore, that his sense inclinations should be destroyed. What is necessary is merely that these should be turned towards God and not towards himself, i.e., that he use his senses not for his own worldly satisfaction but to find enjoyment and satisfaction in the great love-drama of God by identifying himself with one of the spiritual partners of God in his love play. (Dasgupta, 1959: 143)

Mira's aesthetics operates at the level of both experience and expression. Here, "experience" refers to what the poet herself experiences as beauty and "expression" means how the poetic articulation of the poet's experience makes the *sahrdaya* (the sensible reader) experience beauty. To analyse the latter, Bharata Muni's concept of *rasa* is used here. An analysis of some representative songs of Mira in terms of this concept can provide richer insights into the dynamics of the *bhakta's* consciousness.

Mira's own experience of beauty is unique in itself. It is defined primarily by her perception of Lord Krishna's person, postures, and embellishments. It is characterised by the *adbudha rasa* (the wondrous) that Mira enjoys while looking at the Lord's idol. Here, as I have elsewhere elaborated: "She (Mira) feels bewitched as she looks at His eyes; enthralled as she sees His fingers on the flute; captivated as she glances at His *tribhangi* dancing posture; wonder-struck as she sees the *mor-mukut*[4] on His head and the *vaijayantimal* around his neck" (Duggar, 2010: 83). In the context of Mira's understanding of the Lord as the creator and sustainer of the universe, her experience of His beauty may be interpreted metaphysically as something beyond a matter of mere sensuous perception. Then, Shyam's *mor-mukut* might be symbolic of all fauna; His *vaijayantimal*[5] – of all flora; His *pitambar*[6] – of all grain; His flute – of universal harmony; His body's hue – of the sky and the ocean; His eyes – of the light; and His *tribhangi*[7] posture – of the three worlds[8] (*lokas*).

An analysis of Mira's aesthetics of expression in terms of the *rasa* concept may help us understand more clearly her poetics of bridal mysticism and dissent from the orthodox and conventional paths of devotion. The analysis is based on Bharata Muni's dictum "*Vibhavanubhava-vyabhichari samyogad rasa-nispatti*"[9] (quoted in Kapoor, 1998: 105) and his exposition of the *sringar rasa* (the Erotic Sentiment). According to Bharata Muni, the *sthayi bhava* (the Dominant Emotion) in the *sringar rasa* (the Erotic Sentiment) is *rati* (love). The *sringar rasa* has two bases: (1) *sambhoga* (union) and (2) *vipralambha* (separation).[10] Keeping this classification in view, two songs of Mira

dealing with separation and one with union are chosen here for analysis.

The first song representing separation opens with an apostrophe to Lord Krishna as "*Jogi*"[11] or yogi/ascetic (Alston, 2008: 52). Mira expresses her disappointment over having missed the opportunity "to entrap and hold" the *jogi* when he happened to be around her. Now, Mira is in a frantic search for the *jogi* who is her Divine Beloved, Lord Krishna. But as a woman, she has her own limitations: she lacks the stamina to carry on her search endlessly. She therefore passionately petitions the Lord to come on His own and "quench the veritable fire" of love that is "raging in her body." Yet her inability to see the Beloved causes apprehensions in her mind about the fate or intentions of the *jogi*. She feels "abandoned and perplexed." Her bewilderment and desperation are revealed through her agitated self-questioning: "What can I do? Where shall I go?" Her frantic search for the Lord disguised as *jogi* acting as the *alambana vibhava* (substantial excitant), her petitioning Him to come to her, her apprehensions about His motives, and her feeling of abandonment bring into focus *rati* as the dominant emotion and her separation from the Beloved as the *uddipana vibhava* (Determinants). Her anxiety, agitation, apprehensiveness and distractedness act as the *vyabhichari bhava* (Concomitants). Her panting and sighing emerge as the *sattavika bhava* (Consequents). In their total effect, all these *bhavas* come together to produce the *sringar rasa* (the Erotic Sentiment) in the *sahrdaya* who for a moment experiences empathically the intensity and depth of Mira's bridal love for the lord.

In the second song of separation, we find Mira making an open declaration about her passionate love and suffering for Lord Krishna:

Without Krishna I cannot sleep.
Tortured by longing, I cannot sleep,
And the fire of love
Drives me to wander hither and thither. (Alston, 2008: 64)

Such a declaration immediately drives us to recognize *rati* or love as the dominant emotion in the song and separation from the Beloved as the *uddipana vibhava*, with Lord Krishna and herself being the *alambana vibhava* to each other – all three acting as Determinants. The "fire of love," as Mira admits, keeps her sleepless, restless and agitated, gives her a feeling of sickness, and even causes her to become wayward. The experience of sickness, insomnia, and agitation of the mind and heart acts as the *vyabhichari bhava* (Concomitants) and is clearly revealed in such expressions as:

And I pass the nights awake.
When will my Beloved return home?
The frogs are croaking, the peacock's cry
And the cuckoo's song is heard.
Low black clouds are gathering,
Lightning flashes, stirring fear in the heart.
My eyes fill with tears.
What shall I do? Where shall I go?
Who can quench my pain?
My body has been bitten
By the snake of "absence,"
And my life is ebbing away
With every beat of the heart. (Alston, 2008: 64)

Here, the croaking of frogs, the peacock's cry, the cuckoo's song and the presence of low black clouds foreboding heavy rains can be understood as the *uddipana vibhava* which, by contrast, only accentuate her pangs of separation and anguish of longing. The psychosomatic effect or the *sattavika bhava* of all this appears in the form of her tears or *asru*. She utters sadly: "My eyes fill with tears." The harmonious amalgamation of Determinants, Concomitants and Consequents leads to the creation of the *sringar rasa* in the *sahrdaya* who immediately recognises through empathy the poignancy and intensity of the poet's suffering as a love-sick woman.

The third song under consideration deals with union. It opens with Mira's spirited invocation of the cloud. She invites the cloud to come with fullness of water. This metaphorically conveys her own sense of fullness of joy. She is in an extremely joyful and exultant mood, the occasion being the prospective visit of her Beloved, Lord Krishna, who is the *alambana vibhava* to her. She is enjoying the rains, the *koel*'s[12] cry, the sweet breeze and the sight of thick clouds in the sky. This joyous atmosphere acts as the *uddipana vibhava*. Mira's contentment, joy and even anxiety about having the Lord by her side function as the *vyabhichari bhava* or Concomitants and are conveyed through her invitation to the cloud, her sensuous enjoyment of nature and readiness to welcome the Divine Beloved. She sings exultantly:

Just listen to the koil's cry.
A sweet breeze is playing
To the music of thunder,
And the sky is overcast with clouds.
Today the Beloved will come to my house.
I have prepared a bed for Him,
And you, O my companions,
Will sing Him songs of welcome. (Alston, 2008: 95)

Her exclamatory declamation at the end marks the *sattavika bhava* (Consequents) of *romancha* (thrill). She speaks: "Fortunate indeed are those who attain Thy side" (Alston, 2008: 95). The synthesis of Determinants, Concomitants and Consequents converts the *sthayi bhava* or the dominant emotion into the *sringar rasa* or the Erotic

Sentiment which is immediately experienced by the *sahrdaya* as *alaukika* (transcendental) experience.

It can be seen from the foregoing analysis that the source of Mira's aesthetics is her bridal mysticism – her whole-hearted and unalloyed love for the Deity. And it is her bridal mysticism that becomes the very source of her ethics too.

III

In many of her songs, Mira refers to her persecution at the hands of her in-laws and their bitter criticism of her conduct as a devotee. Why did Mira's in-laws try to oppress and persecute her? Why did her brother-in-law, king of Chittor, make attempts to kill her by sending a cup of poison and a deadly venomous snake? These questions can be answered by asking: How could they, the upholders of the oppressive patriarchal laws and cultural hegemony in the form of class and caste distinctions, gender distinction, suppression of women's freedom and right to choose or oppose, allow the princess Mira to transgress cherished family customs, abandon the traditional role and duties of a wife, choose her own Deity, her own path of devotion and mix with mendicants sharing the joys of devotion?

Mira has often been described as a challenger of the status quo, an iconoclast or a rebel against gender distinction. These descriptions may be accepted as true but with a qualification. Mira did not make any deliberate and conscious attempt to be a challenger, an iconoclast or a social rebel. She was fundamentally a *bhakta*, an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna. But the path of *bhakti* (devotion, but again, much more) that she chose was at variance with the social code of conduct prescribed for married women. It was also at variance with the orthodox forms of worship enjoined by institutionalized religion. To successfully pursue her path, Mira developed a great sense of freedom and courage which in turn made her a great maverick, enabled her to suffer, survive and thrive despite all odds; and allowed her to proclaim her choices openly and dissent fearlessly from all those repressive and oppressive cultural practices that were impediments to her spiritual pursuits and the individuality of women. She chose the "vice" of becoming independent and maverick in a society where dependence on or subservience to orthodox feudal laws and authority was considered a virtue for women. In her words and deeds, she seems to have followed the dictates of her own conscience and not of those in power. She expresses her maverick attitude frequently in her songs, sometimes plainly and openly, at other times, metaphorically. Her maverick attitude manifests itself in the unhesitant declarations of her choice of Lord Krishna as her bridegroom, her unconcern for the criticism of society and her attempts to redefine/reinterpret orthodox social and religious notions. A large number of her songs either open or end with a loud proclamation of her love and devotion for Lord Krishna whom she variously addresses as "Hari," "Bihari," "Shyam," "Murari," "Giridhara," "Gopal," "Govind," "Mohan," "Manmohan," or "Avinashi" (the Indestructible), these being among the many names of Krishna. She says: "Mira's Lord is Gopal" (Alston, 2008: 34), "Mira's Lord is Hari, the Indestructible" (Alston, 2008: 35), "I sacrifice to Giridhara/Body, mind, wealth and all" (Alston, 2008: 37), "I am dyed deep in the love of Shyam" (Alston, 2008: 43), "My love is reserved for Giridhara Gopal/And for no one else" (Alston, 2008: 40), "Let me go to the house of Giridhara/Giridhara is my true lover" (Alston, 2008: 41). That Mira resolved to tread her spiritual path independently, firmly and fearlessly ignoring all criticism is evident from her words like: "Worldly shame and family custom/I have cast to the winds" (Alston, 2008: 39), "I do not observe the rules of worldly decorum/Fearlessly Sister, will I beat the drum" (Alston, 2008: 48). She makes it clear to the king of Chittor that she will happily endure any suffering, any censure or any loss for following her own path:

O my King,
I relish this loss of good name greatly.
Some will revile me, some will praise me,
But I shall follow my unfathomable path. (Alston, 2008: 47)

And she is so confident of the truth and glory of her path that she tenaciously declares: "I will not descend/From the back of an elephant/To ride upon an ass" (Alston, 2008: 43). What she is trying to suggest through the metaphorical contrast between elephant and ass is that nothing can tempt or force her to give up the blissful path of devotion for vain material pleasures and comforts. In the following song, she metaphorically expresses her unshakeable desire to achieve a direct communion with God without any intermediaries, rituals or priests; and without following any particular sect or school of religion:

I have turned my back on this palace
Once and for all
And the bolt is drawn.
My good deeds in former births
Have come to fruition.
I have no use even for great lakes,
Who would linger for small ponds and reservoirs?
I care neither for Ganges nor Jamna,
I am making my way to the sea.
I do not need worldly associationships,
I have access to the true masters.
I will not trouble with the officials,
I will go direct to the court.

I, who beat iron with a sledge-hammer,
Am not concerned with pewter and glass.
I trade in diamonds
And do not care for gold and silver.
To my very great good fortune
A mine of precious stones is at hand.
Who would forsake a cup of nectar
To drink brackish water?
My Lord,
Now I have made my acquaintance with Thy devotees
And shun the world from afar.
Mira's Lord is the courtly Giridhara:
He has fulfilled her desires. (Alston, 2008: 42-43)

One can see here how Mira shuns great lakes, small ponds, reservoirs, Ganges, Jamna, officials –the metaphorical representations of intermediaries and orthodox paths of devotion – to approach the sea/court (metaphorically, God) directly.

Mira is claimed to have developed an egalitarian attitude in the course of her devotional life. True. But this attitude developed spontaneously rather as a product of her mystical devotion to God. In his discussion of Hindu mysticism, Dasgupta has tried to explain how mystical devotion to God may transform the *bhakta* ethically:

All distinctions of caste, creed or social status vanish from those who are filled with this true and sincere devotion to God. It is a great leveller. To the eye of a true bhakta all beings are but manifestations of God's power, and they are all equal. Impelled by this idea of universal equality and by the idea of God being in all things and all things in God, he is filled with such a sweetness of temper that howsoever he may be tyrannized over by any one he cannot think of inflicting any injury in return. Nor can he remain unaffected when he sees the sufferings of his fellow beings, however lowly or depraved they may be. (Dasgupta, 1959: 128-129)

Mira's urge for unification with the Supreme Being makes her indifferent to everything that produces distinctions in society. Eventually, the righteousness implied by virtues mentioned in the *Bhagavadgita* becomes a function of her mystic devotion. She may be rightly claimed to have been born to "Divine Estate" as she possesses:

Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in devotion to knowledge, liberality, self-restraint, sacrifice, sacred study, austerity, uprightness, harmlessness, truth, even-temper, abandonment, quietude, an unmalicious tongue, tenderness towards beings, a soul unruffled by desire, gentleness, modesty, constancy, ardour, long-suffering, fortitude, cleanness, freedom from hatred and arrogance. (quoted in Kumarappa, 1979: 75)

Mira's choice of the path of bridal mysticism in her devotion to God; her attempts to define/redefine the role and duties of a wife, true devotion and the world; her open proclamations of love for Lord Krishna; her disregard for the conventions of family honour, decorum, family gods; her indifference to the censure and banter of her relatives, symbolise her dissent from oppressively binding patriarchal norms for women and from the hegemonic distinctions of class, caste and gender. As a poet, devotee and dissenter she can truly be called mystical, magical, maverick Mira.

In Mira's songs, her use of definitional and declamatory style suggesting her attempt to redefine social laws; her use of metaphors to convey her own understanding of the world and God, her own mental and emotional state as a devotee, and her love-relationship with God; her use of paradoxical expressions to unfold her experience as a bridal mystic; her candid declarations (in the form of refrain) about her love for the Lord; and her use of nature and wildlife imagery to convey the exuberance of her emotions and varying moods as a lovelorn woman – all together constitute her poetics of mystic devotion and dissent.

Mira's dissent from some of the most deeply established cultural constructs of her time may be assumed to be a potential for resistance and revolt against the status quo and oppressive patriarchal laws. Her poetry and poetics, her life and language, and her experience and expression offer people "multiple points of identification" (Martin, 2010: 12) and inspiration for developing a counter-culture.

IV

To conclude, Mira's perception of life and God as a mystic and her sufferings as a devotee and as a dissenter can be understood more clearly if they are seen in comparison to those of some other prominent Hindu women mystics like Akka Mahadevi, Andal and Lal Ded. They belong to different periods of Indian history and to different geographical locations of the Indian subcontinent. Though the characteristics of mysticism are common to almost all the mystics of the world, yet "the order and degree of these spiritual states may not always be the same in all of them" (Guttal, 2002: 134).

Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth-century poet-saint of Karnataka, appears, in her devotion to Chennamalikarjuna (Lord Shiva), to be a Virashaivite[13] counterpart of Mira. Like Mira, she betrothed herself to the Divine and pined for a direct union with Him. Like Mira, she turned her back upon her worldly husband and relatives and endured sufferings for the Love of the Lord. Yet her sufferings could not be as great as that of the lonely Mira. Mira's independent devotional ways alienated her completely from her immediate social milieu. She had "no true relative or friend" (Alston, 2008: 89) or a guru to consistently provide her moral support and guidance.

Her single-minded mystic devotion to Lord Krishna was in spite of all her persecution at the hands of the king of Chittor, who tormented her ceaselessly and even made attempts to kill her. Miraculously, she was saved every time. Akka Mahadevi, on the other hand, was accepted into the fold of Virashaivite monks at Kalyan after being tested by Allama Prabhu, President of *Anubhava Mantapa*.[14] She got trained in the Virashaivite sect of Hindu religion. Later, she moved to Srisalem and is believed to have been united with the Divine there. Akka seems to be less modest than Mira in expressing her rejection of the world. In one of her *vacanas* (lyrics), she speaks rather harshly of worldly husbands: "Take these husbands who die, decay, and feed them/ o your kitchen fires!" (Ramanujan, 1993: 116).

Andal's bridal mysticism seems quite similar to that of Mira. Yet there are some subtle differences between this Tamil poet-saint of the eighth century and Mira in terms of their perception of the Deity. Andal or Kotai-Andal, identified as the only female Alvar among the twelve Alvar saints of South India, was trained in the Srivaishnavite[xv] tradition of Hindu religion, while Mira cannot be fully identified with any particular sect or school of Hinduism. She developed an independent approach to and understanding of the Divine which may be found matching only in parts with several religious traditions. While Andal, as her poems *Tiruppavai* and *Nachiar Tirumoli* reveal, looks for her Beloved in the mythical realm of Vrindavan and in the mythical forms and feats of Narayana (Lord Vishnu), Mira claims Lord Krishna for herself not for His superhuman powers and childhood pranks but His physical form, the beauty of this form. While Andal yearns to meet her Beloved as a *gopi* (female friend of Krishna in Vrindavan), Mira seeks Him as Mira. Besides, Andal was not so alienated and lonely as Mira was. If Mira had hostile relatives to impede her path of devotion at every step, Andal was supported by her near ones, especially her father/teacher Vishnuchitta (Periyalvar). Unlike Mira, she could easily ask her relatives to take her to the "lands of her lord":

The woman of long curly hair
Kotai of Vishnucittan
king of Puduvai,
city of glittering mansions
entreated her relatives, boldly demanded
to be taken everywhere
from Mathura to Dvaraka
the lands of her lord
Those who master her sweet words
will reach Vaikuntha where he abides. (Venkatesan, 2016: 129)

Lal Ded or Lalleshwari or Lalla, a fourteenth-century mystic of the Kashmiri Shaivite[16] sect, reveals more of a philosophical than emotional element in her devotion to Lord Shiva. Mira's devotion was primarily emotional, and she followed *bhakti marga* (the path of *bhakti)* to attain union with God. As Ranjit Hoskote points out: Lalla's perspective … is premised far more substantially on *jnana-marga* (the path of knowledge) than on *bhakti-marga*. (Hoskote, 2011: xxviii). In one of her *vakhs* (poems) she sings:

I've bridled my mind-horse, reined him in,
struggled to tie my ten breath-streams together.
That's how the moon melted and rained nectar on me
and a void mingled with the Void! (Hoskote, 2011: 78).

Lalla repudiates "the conventional physical elements of worship in favour of meditative path." She was trained in the Shaivite sect and her guru was Sed Boyu or Siddha Srikantha. Mira, on the contrary, was not systematically groomed in any particular religious sect nor did she become a thorough disciple of any particular guru. She proved a thorough maverick and followed a self-carved path of mystic devotion.

It can be seen from the foregoing brief comparison between Mira and the other important women mystics of the Hindu traditions that Mira as a mystic occupies a unique position in terms of her independent approach to God, her path of bridal devotion, pursued unflinchingly despite all the persecution, and the magnitude of the suffering she endured as a devotee and as a dissenter.

NOTES

1. In Hinduism, *saguna bhakti* is worship of God with form.
2. Kabir was a fifteenth-century Indian mystic poet-saint. He rejected the hypocrisy and meaningless rituals in both Islam and Hinduism.
3. *Sati* is an outdated Hindu custom where a widow committed self-immolation on her dead husband's funeral pyre.
4. A peacock feather worn as a crown.
5. A necklace consisting of five types of gems: pearl, ruby, emerald, sapphire and diamond.
6. A yellow garment.
7. It refers to angular posture, standing with legs crossed, body slightly bent from the waist, and arms lifted and curved to play the flute.
8. According to a Hindu belief, there are three planes of existence or worlds: (1) the earth, (2) the space between the earth and the "roof" of the sky, and (3) the illuminated but hidden world beyond the roof of the sky.
9. In his *Natyasastra*, the earliest work on Indian aesthetics, Bharata Muni explains how the combination (*samyogada*) of the *vibhava* (objective conditions causing an emotion or Determinants), the *anubhava* (psychosomatic effect which a specific emotion produces on the reader/spectator or Consequents), and the *vyabhichari bhava* (transitory

emotions or Concomitants) produces *rasa* or aesthetic experience of supreme delight. See Bharata, *Natyasastra* 6.32.

10. See Sethuraman 23-24.
11. A wandering ascetic.
12. Cuckoo bird.
13. Derived from Virashaivism, which is a distinct form of Shaivism. It advocates the wearing of *linga*, the symbol of Shiva, upon the body so that the body becomes a temple for God (Shiva) to reside in.
14. An academic centre for saints, philosophers and *sharanas* of the Lingayat tradition in 12th century.
15. Derived from Sri Vaishnavism which is a branch of Vaishnavism in Hinduism. Its name is derived from Sri (goddess Lakshmi) and god Vishnu. It believes in the inseparability of Lakshmi and Vishnu.
16. Kashmiri Shaivism or Kashmiri Shaivite sect as a householder religion was based on a monistic interpretation of the Bhairava-Tantra. God Shiva is sometimes depicted as God Bhairava.

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Locating the "Northeast": Global, National, Regional and Local Novels of Siddhartha Deb, Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan

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Well into the 1950s and 60s, literary critic K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar was still wondering whether "Indo-Anglian" literature, as it was called then, should be evaluated as "a minor tributary of English literature"[1] or as another tributary of Indian literature. By the 1970s, Meenakshi Mukherjee, another emerging stalwart, made a compelling case for evaluating "Indo-Anglian" novels not as part of the wider tradition of the English novel but independently as a "branch of Indian fiction"[2]. Despite her proposition, by the 1990s, the gap between the Indian-English novel and the rest of *bhasha* literatures could not have been wider, with fierce debates over the "authenticity" of writing in English.

The Indian-English novel has come a long way since then, making forays into the domain of mass, popular or commercially successful literature, catering to the nascent literary appetites of the bourgeoning new middle classes of India who aspire to be globalized but are often also not. The sustained courtship of the English language by Dalit scholars has also produced *The Gypsy Goddess* in 2014, the first major original novel in English by a Dalit author, Meena Kandasamy. During the same period, several English novelists from the Northeast have made significant impact, gaining readerships across India as well as abroad.

By now, writings from the Northeast have evolved as a distinct body of work. It must be clarified here that one employs the term Northeast with caution which, much like South Asia, also perhaps exists more elsewhere than within the region. However, this overall literary development begs several questions: whether English novelists from the Northeast are to be viewed as a tributary of Indian-English fiction or as part of Northeast fiction across its multiple languages and literary traditions; as part of the global body of Anglophone literatures or whether they stand independent and apart. And should a distinction be made between writings "from" the Northeast and "of/about" the Northeast? One does not have straight answers to these questions but we all have the benefit of hindsight in related debates over the Indian-English novel.

The limited point that one seeks to make here is that Indian-English novels in contemporary India inhabit a considerably stratified terrain of the contemporary Indian middle classes' imaginaries, extending from those who are at the cutting-edge of global capitalism in terms of lifestyle, culture, livelihood and theory, to first generation entrants. Emerging in this context, Indian-English novelists from the Northeast are very interesting as they are seeking to negotiate this entire range in their writings, wherein one end of the spectrum exists in acute awareness of the other, with the additional aspect of "Northeast" specificities.

Three novelists from the Northeast will be examined here, namely Mamang Dai, based in Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh; Anjum Hasan, from Shillong but based in Bangalore; and Siddhartha Deb, also from Shillong but based abroad in New York. Since it is virtually impossible to make any representative selection of novelists from the Northeast given the internal diversity of the region, the selection is based on the simple fact of the diversity of the current location of the chosen writers and the fact that they have written more than one novel in English.

Hailing from the Adi tribe, Mamang Dai has written three novels – *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and *The Black Hill* (2015). Anjum Hasan is a case of double migration, of her parents from Uttar Pradesh to Meghalaya, and then her own from Shillong to Bangalore. She also has three novels to her credit – *Lunatic in my Head* (2007), *Neti, Neti* (2009) and *The Cosmopolitans* (2015). Of Bengali origin, Siddhartha Deb too negotiates multiple migrations and alienation in his writings, of his parents in 1947 from the then East Bengal to what was still Assam, and his own from Shillong to Calcutta to Delhi to New

York. He has written two novels – *The Point of Return* (2003) and *An Outline of the Republic* also published as *Surface* (2007).

His first novel, *The Point of Return*, is about the futility of ever being able to have a homeland. Rejected by and rejecting his hometown, the nation, the Nehruvian state as well as his father, the novel is about the slow evolution of the dramatized young narrator, Babu, who is ultimately poised to become part of the global creed of exiles – people with histories but no homelands. Divided into four parts – arrival, departure, terminal and travelogue – his "local" novel maps the growing distance between Babu and his father, Dr Dam, a relic of the Nehruvian state, a dedicated government "servant", a retired veterinary doctor, a 1947 Bengali refugee from East Pakistan who is still a "refuge"' or "Dkhar" even in 1987 in the fictional town of Rilbong closely resembling Shillong. In this non-chronological historical novel with scant presence of the mother or the motherland, the young dramatized narrator asks – "One cannot be an exile in one's own country, can one?"[3] The answer lies embedded within the question. The post-national ideology of the author is evident:

> It was not a question of roots or origin, you understand. That was not possible, not now, not fifty years after the notional ancestral village had ceded its place to the modern nation state. If we were all to do so, we whose lives are flung around in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, if we were to let loose our songliness, our routes of memory, our pilgrimage paths, we would find them faltering against the documents and borders and guns. Perhaps rightfully so; maybe this is the way it should be. One can cling too much to such things, like the followers of Godse, the man who killed Gandhi, who swear upon his ashes every year that the Indus and its tributaries must flow once again within the boundaries of India, that the crack of 1947 will be layered over again someday, but on their terms.[4]

Deb powerfully articulates the predicament of the region – "Each group has its own truth, but there is no way of putting them together to form a complete picture"[5]. Despite this observation, in his next novel, *An Outline of the Republic*, Deb did in fact try, more ambitiously, to map the whole of the northeast through a Bengali Sikh journalist's journey by road from Kolkata into fictionalised Assam, Manipur and beyond into Burma in search of the truth behind a haunting photograph of a woman awaiting punishment by a Manipur based insurgent group, MORLS. The underwhelming novel, often compared to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is notable for its attempt to unmask the quagmire of connivance and antagonisms between the army, intelligence agencies, state, politicians, insurgent groups, civil society, the press and the people. Without offering even a light at the end of the tunnel, this "regional" novel of Deb, going beyond the ethnic particularity of its author, was lost in too many details, and gained much less appreciation compared to his earlier "local" novel. Based in and published from New York, Deb, despite acclaim, has been encountering trouble in carving out a *niche* within the literary world. His interview in 2010 was indicative:

> In my second novel, published as An Outline of the Republic, I tried to go further with the foolishness of capturing the Northeast of India, this time by sending my protagonist on a journey that finally pushes him off the map and into a border town of Burma.
>
> In both the first and the second novel I was very passionate about capturing a specific part of India. In some ways, that was a problem because I think it makes me an unclassifiable writer in the West, an un-Indian Indian writer because I don't work with the accepted frames of India.
>
> The next book which I have just finished, doesn't have that problem. It's a narrative nonfiction book, and it's about a contemporary India that gets a lot of press, meaning this rapidly rising free market superpower, and this wonderful democracy that much of the West uses to contrast with the authoritarianism of China. It's about the new shopping malls, the consumerist middle class, and the new rich.[6]

After his 2011 non-fiction work, *The Beautiful and the Damned: Life in the New India*, Deb has announced plans to write his next novel on New York. One knows that *Fury*, the New York novel of Salman Rushdie, is his worst reviewed till date and he has had to repeatedly return to back-stories from India, the subcontinent and Islam for his fiction. We also know that Jhumpa Lahiri, neither born nor resident of India, accosted with the hyphenated tag, Indian-American, has written two novels with the aid of history, memory, archive and travel about the India that she is supposed to belong to, but has now shifted base as well as language to write in Italian. It remains to be seen how Deb, writing locally, then regionally and then nationally, will fare with his next project.

Mamang Dai makes no claims to represent any category of people. And the subject of her writings is restricted mainly to the Adi tribe of Siang valley in Arunachal Pradesh. As the dramatized narrator of her first novel *The Legends of Pensam* observes: "It was important to record our stories. The old rhapsodies were a dying breed, and when they were gone, who would remember? What happens to people and the places we forget? Where do they go?"[7] Dai has remained dedicated to preserving and transferring oral myths, stories, folklore in Adi into her writings. Her novel is about four generations of Adi men and women, their experiences, beliefs, superstitions, stories and histories in the village of its female narrator. The novel traverses the origin cave

of Keyum or nothingness to the Stillwell Road, extending into routes taken by Marco Polo and Ghenghis Khan, to the Lake of No Return, the arrival of the French priests, British surveyors and soldiers, rebellions, soldiers of the new rulers of India, the catastrophic earthquake of 1950, terrorist and insurgent camps, migration, cities, politics, gods and godmen, and the private histories of love, heartbreak, betrayal, death, illness, birth and old age.

It is interesting that the novel starts with the young Hoxo, the boy who fell from the sky to become the respected village chief, and ends with the grand old man enjoying time with his granddaughter. The narrative is also framed by the opening episode of the narrator escorting her friend Mona, of Arab-Greek extraction, editor of an international magazine – *Diary of the World* – that covers unusual true life stories, into her village by a helicopter, and ends with a pair of binoculars providing a vision out of the village into the forest, river, city and the globalized beyond. Despite the ravages of change, Dai's novel is not about loss. As Hoxo says – "We need courage and faith in the face of change. That is all we can do"[8]. Or, Rakut, another old man who believes that "if a person forgets, he loses his soul"[9], and also says – "Why should we be afraid of change? …Change is a wonderful thing"[10]. The perspective that drives all of Dai's novels is encapsulated in these words – "In this circle of hills, as in every corner of the world, all history is a history of connections"[11].

Her third novel, *The Black Hill*, is about a 19th century French Jesuit priest on a mission to trace an alternate route into Tibet, at a time when China was completely closed under the Manchu dynasty, crossing path with star-crossed lovers, Kajinsha, a warrior from the Mishmi tribe, and Gimur, from the Abor tribe. Respective individual characters in the novel are not yet aware of the historical import of their actions, but the novel is pregnant with meaning for the readers who have the benefit of hindsight. Dai received some criticism for her ambivalence towards colonialism in her novel, but her guiding philosophy remained that of tracing connections even in the face of violent encounters. Notable also was Dai's extreme caution while venturing from stories of one tribe to another, i.e. from Adi characters to Mishmi characters, or even while venturing from one village into another village.

Unlike Siddhartha Deb, who tried to frame the entire Northeast in his second novel within the region, Dai is more thoughtful in tracing this category elsewhere to Delhi. In her second novel, *Stupid Cupid,* her first person narrator, Adna, observes – "…for most of our history the different tribes had never even interacted with each other properly, even if they lived in the next valley. It was now that young people like Yoyo and Rita were meeting in schools and colleges"[12]. Remarking on this new feeling for "…fellow North-Easterners", she elaborates – "There were so many of us in the city now, from Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, from Arunachal, Assam, Manipur and Sikkim, and we mingled with others from every small town and settlement of the country"[13]. Subtle political commentary on the ramifications of changing stereotypes about the Northeast after AASU's 1980s talks in Delhi is accompanied by a critique of those stereotypes and perceptive discrimination. Treading a thin line in an almost risqué novel, Dai offers a critique also of what passes off as tradition and fate in the lives of women in her native village. Her three novels offer a double irony of vision, an inside-out as well as outside-in view, with central narrative figures who value the local but do not necessarily privilege it over the regional, national or global, ironically aware of the limitations of eulogising any.

Published in the same year as *Stupid Cupid*, Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti*, the negation of negation, offers a leaf out of the same book, albeit situated in Bangalore. It too is about a young migrant woman from the Northeast and her struggle with desire, romance, friendship and livelihood leading to shock and return followed by starting over in the city. Hasan's world is layered with diverse and fleshed-out characters with respective back stories, be it Naomi from America, Maya who seeks life abroad, Muku the distraught but tougher younger sister of Sophie, Swami, Sophie's lover who is completely unlike R.K. Narayan's Swami, Ringo Saar who, contrary to expectations, ends up committing murder, Chinnappa, the debt ridden vegetarian landlord, Shiva, the former classmate, god-man Baba Sampige, Uncle Rock of the Shillong Blues band, Ribor, the former Khasi love of Sophie, Shantha, the hardworking co-worker, rickshaw pullers, construction workers, millionaires, and so on. Unlike Dai however, Hasan's novel is not about seeking enduring connections beyond apparent differences, but about deep disconnections, unbridgeable gaps, and learning to adjust and endure.

The protagonist of *Neti, Neti*, Sophie Das, is one of the three main characters continuing from Hasan's first novel, *Lunatic in my Head*, where, as an eight year old, the child thought that "the nicest thing by far, even better than being adopted, would be if she could somehow turn into one of them, somehow become Khasi"[14]. Firdaus Ansari, the young English teacher in a Shillong college, Aman Moondy, an IAS aspirant more interested in music, and Sophie Das, are all considered "Dkhars" and completely at a loss to face the situation. Aman, for instance, "found it particularly hard to defend himself against racist attacks because he was never sure who he was defending – an encroacher, a permanent guest of the hills-people, or

someone who belonged here because he had never lived anywhere else? Which one of these? He didn't know"[15].

Their directionless-ness however, amidst the simmering stagnation of Shillong town, is not very different from the experience of the Khasi boys. For instance:

Ribor knew of boys like him who had gone away only to sheepishly return, weakened by having to bear the weight of their strangeness and deal with everyone else's. He knew of others who had stuck it out, who had become doctors, engineers, preachers and actors. There were those who when they first reached Bombay, had shouted and wept at the sight of the sea. There were those who had married other women, who spoke their own language only on rare visits home, who lived as far away as Helsinki or Bern. But there were also those who would never leave, who, having read Shakespeare and trigonometry, and proudly worn a missionary school blazer, would go on to run a dusty wine shop that didn't sell wine, marry early, have too many children and die of drink.

This was the universe of choices open to Ribor. What was he going to do? Nobody knew for sure, least of all Ribor himself.[16]

Unlike Siddhartha Deb's more direct engagement with politics and insurgency, Hasan takes a more indirect approach. In the novel, the three characters finally make their respective peace with failures, frustrations and living in their hometown, but by the next novel, young Sophie breaks free only to discover the limitations and constraints of her newfound freedom in Bangalore.

It is in her third novel, *The Cosmopolitans*, that Hasan, as a more deliberate and accomplished writer, positions her protagonist, Qayenaat, a fifty-something single woman and art lover, into negotiating the challenging terrain of mainstream contemporary India. The first half of the novel involves the unremarkable Bangalore resident having to confront the arrival of the globally acclaimed sensation, artist Baban, an old friend. "Till three or four years ago, the artist was unheard of here; today, his moneyed fame ensured he was embraced as a native."[17] The adjudication of his art installation, *Nostalgia*, and the surrounding paraphernalia, leads to catastrophe; and in the second half of the novel she escapes, to seek refuge ostensibly in pursuit of an elusive tribal dance form, to a fictional town named Simhal, located somewhere in the red corridor. Her confrontation with the "primitive" is no less unsettling. As the character of the King says to Qayenaat towards the end of their relationship – "It's hard work, being a modern Indian"[18].

In this novel, Hasan evades the Northeast altogether, and lays claim to a more national urban middle class narrative. It is full of angst and deeply unsettling, not because of ethnic turmoil within the Northeast, but because of the sheer turmoil of negotiating and reconciling globalized cosmopolitanism with its intersections with the "primitive" hinterlands. The killing of Nur Jahan, the harmless painter, for her "offensive" paintings, brings the danger closer home. In an interview about her book, Hasan explained:

Qayenaat, my heroine, is something of a Rip Van Winkle. She withdrew from the world late in the previous millennium and went to sleep in the house her father, a Nehruvian civil engineer, had built. When she wakes up she is in an unrecognisable, new, money-obsessed country, and this is what drives the action of the novel, her attempt to make sense of this feeling of estrangement.[19]

At the core of all of Hasan's novels are protagonists who lack any firm anchor in life in either identity, location, profession, relationship or ideology. Her restless and out-of-place characters just about manage to survive and sustain, but they are always on the verge of disaster, in a tenuous truce with threats looming just round the corner.

The three writers taken together are negotiating the intersectionalities of identity, globality, nation, region, migration and locality in very different ways in their novels. Mamang Dai is writing "from" the Northeast but mainly from the particularity of the Adi tribe. The Northeast exists for her only in her Delhi novel. Deb unsuccessfully sought the Northeast within the region in his second novel, but since being based abroad has had to confront the "nation" instead of the "region". And, starting from writing about Shillong, Anjum Hasan has moved on to writing the Bangalore novel and then a novel that evades the Northeast to go into another disturbed area of a tribal village in the red corridor to confront the unsettling realities for the thinking/intellectual middle class individual sandwiched between globalization and the hinterlands today. Writing "of", "from" and "by" the Northeast, the three novelists taken together pose challenges for conceptualizing the category of Northeast fiction in English from diverse perspectives.

NOTES

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3. Siddhartha Deb, *The Point of Return*, New York: Picador, 2002, p. 295.
4. Ibid., p. 248.
5. Ibid., p. 255.
6. Jeffrey Errington, "The Siddhartha Deb Interview", *The Quarterly Conversation*, December 6, 2010. DOI: http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-siddhartha-deb-interview.
7. Mamang Dai, *The Legends of Pensam*, Penguin Books India, 2006. pp. 176-77.
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10. Ibid., p. 190.
11. Ibid, p. 61.
12. Mamang Dai, *Stupid Cupid*, Penguin Books India, 2009, p. 88.
13. Ibid, p. 13.
14. Anjum Hasan, *Neti, Neti*, New Delhi: Indian Ink, 2009, p. 99.
15. Anjum Hasan, *Lunatic in my Head*, Penguin India, 2007, p. 37.
16. Ibid, p. 76.
17. Anjum Hasan, *The Cosmopolitans*, Penguin Books India, Hamish Hamilton, 2015, p. 5.
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19. https://kitaab.org/2016/05/02/the-lounge-chair-interview-10-questions-with-anjum-hasan/

'Frames of Return': *Sādhanā of Vārtā*

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Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā (The Narrative of Eighty Four Vaishnavas, *vārtā* being 'narrative', Vaishnavas being the followers of the path of devotion to Lord Vishnu), henceforth *CVV*, along with *Do Sau bāvan Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā* (The Narrative of Two Hundred and Fifty Two Vaishnavas) and some other text of the *Puṣṭimārga bhakti* (or the Tradition/Path of Grace, *puṣṭi* meaning 'grace', *mārga* meaning 'tradition/path', and *bhakti*, 'devotion'), remarks *Ācārya* (teacher/guru/master) Ramchandra Shukla in his magnum opus *Hindi Sahitya Ka Itihasa*, 'was one of the first compositions in prose in the Braja Bhasha'.[1] *CVV* is a compilation of narratives (*vārtā*) of the deeds of eighty four devout *sevakas* (devotees)[2] of the spiritual master Vallabhacharya Ji[3](in some popular editions 92), who established his own particular version of the *bhakti mārga* – the aforementioned *Puṣṭimārga* – in North India during the first third of the sixteenth century.[4] Each *vārtā* recounts selected events of spiritual importance in the life of one of the eighty-four chief *sevakas* of Vallabhacharya Ji. These *vārtās* are not considered to be mere legends but are held by the *Puṣṭimārgīya*s (followers of *Puṣṭimārga*) to be real accounts of actual people and episodes that played definite roles in the propagation of Vallabhacharya Ji's revelations about the *mārga*.[5]

In the first part of this paper, I approach a *vārtā* from *CVV, Purūṣottamdāskṣatrī Banāras mein rehte tinkī Vārtā* (The Narrative of Purushottam Das Kshatri of Benaras), from two of the three planes of philology suggested by Sheldon Pollock in his essay *Philology and Freedom*. The three dimensions or planes, as Pollock calls them, are different and are separated from each other by their distances in space and time.[6] The first plane is that of the genesis of the text, and while approaching a text from this plane, the author, the intended audience and the first audience should be studied. The second plane involves approaching works of the readers 'before me'; and the third plane is that of reading it as me 'here and now'. However inclusive this practice of philology might seem, the problem with this approach lies in the fact that it prioritizes a specific type of temporality and spatiality. The time, to be considered in its application, is the linear, secular and universal historical; and the idea of the space, it seems, has to be in terms of geopolitical positions on the 'subject' of the activities of the three planes.

In the second part of the essay, while functioning from Pollock's third plane, I shall use Quentin Skinner's method of reading *texts* as 'speech acts'.[7] I shall show the limits of this method by using Richard Bauman's method of understanding oral traditions as 'performances'.

In the third section of my essay I shall show the merits and constraints of these and other approaches presented by Enlightenment disciplinary practices and paradigms by drawing from Sri Aurobindo's *The Interpretation of Scripture.* In this work, while accepting the value of intellect, and modern disciplines like History, Philosophy and Philology, Sri Aurobindo draws one's attention to the limits these disciplines impose on an interpreter. He discusses three standards that exist in the exercise of interpretation – the knower, the knowledge and the known – and emphasizes *sādhanā* or 'spiritual practice' as the mode of understanding texts like the one in question. I also use the *Bhāva Prakāśa* (The Light on the *Bhāva*, *bhāva* translating as 'spiritual mood') commentary on *CVV,* to understand the traditional interpretation of the text in question. Along with this, I use information provided by my interlocutors from Benaras. Benaras, also called Kashi, the ancient Indian city, also (re)emerged as an early modern cosmopolitan center of learning in the North India and hence I use a *vārtā* set in that city to study interaction of various religious communities in this cosmopolis.

Each *vārtā* in *CVV* is made up of a series of vignettes, called *prasaṅga,* each one a separate little story independent and distinct from the others.[8] Some *vārtās* also have *padas* (meter of popular verse with *bhakti* poetry) set to a *rāga* (a set of musical notes meant for expansion to produce music and carry a specific mood with it) suitable for their rendition before the listeners to whom the *vārtā* is told,

and some others have Sanskrit *ślokas* (verses) in between. These elements, along with the use of very colloquial Braja Bhasha in which the *vārtās* have been composed, are reflective of the roots they had in the oral traditions of early modern South Asia. The *praṇetā* (initiator/ inspirer) of the *CVV*, Gokulanath Ji, was known for his skills in giving sermons; and one knows from other *vārtās* like the *Nija Vārtā, Gharū Vārtā* and *Caurāsi Baiṭhakan ke Carita* that he was invited by devotees to lecture on the *Puṣṭimārgīya* principles and *vārtās*.

However, the task of producing in scriptural form the texts he composed was performed by his disciples, either during his lifetime or after. It was from his time that the tradition of appointing *likhiyā*s or scribes began in the Vallabhite temples and *havelī*s (also a category of Vallabhite temples). Krishna Bhatta and Kalyana Bhatta, two of his disciples, produced his sermons in a scripted form under the title *Vacanāmṛta,* and Hariraya Ji edited some of the texts authored by him. Though it would be difficult to give the texts an exact date, on the basis of the style of the language and reference to the famous Mughal emperor Akbar, it can be said with some certainty that it was produced in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. The oldest available manuscript of the *vārtās* dates back to 1640 CE, while its oldest printed edition was published by Surdas Thakurdas from Bombay in 1890 CE.[9] Each *vārtā* gives an insight into the everyday lives of the Vaishnava community it has been composed about. Gokulanath Ji (1551-1647 CE), to whom the credit of telling the eighty-four *vārtās* is given, was the grandson of the founder and was himself an important *ācārya* of *Śuddhādvaita* (pure non-dualism). The compilation of the present-day popularly accepted form of the *vārtās* is attributed to Hariraya Ji (1591-1716 CE), who was one of the foremost interpreters of the Vallabhacharya Ji's doctrines. Hariraya Ji's *Bhāva Prakāsa* on the *vārtās* presents a *laukika* (worldly) as well as an *ālaukika* (other-worldly) interpretation of each *vārtā*. Before analyzing *Puruṣottamdāskṣatrī's Vārtā*, I throw some light on the doctrines of Vallabhacharya Ji and the literature of the tradition in that context.

Vallabhacharya Ji was an *āstika ācārya* (theistic preceptor) and his *Śuddhādvaita* is classed within the *Védānta* schools of the *Ṣaḍdarśana* (Six Philosophies) scheme. In the *Védānta* schools there are many different traditions, one of which is the Vaishnava tradition according to which the *Parabrahmāṇ* (often understood as the godheads Rama, Krishna or Vishnu in these traditions, *Brahmāṇ* being the ultimate reality that underlies all phenomena)) is personal and has divine qualities and attributes.[10] The Vaishnava traditions assert a reliance on the *bhaktimārga* as the surest way to the spiritual freedom of the human soul.[11] Vallabhacharya Ji, like several other *ācāryas,* accepts the doctrine of *karma* (action). *Karma* refers to the force by which every action, no matter how insignificant, breeds results, and these results, in turn, cause further actions; it is believed of *kārmic* requirement that living beings must undergo an unending series of births. Vallabhacharya Ji also accepts the existence of the *jīva* or soul.[12] It is the *jīva* that passes through the aforementioned infinite series of births. In most Indian spiritual traditions, including Vallabhacharya Ji's, the *jīva* is pure but seems to have become impure through *avidyā* or ignorance. Finally, he and most other Indian spiritual *ācāryas* see an escape from this *karma*-produced cycle of birth. This escape is *mokṣa* (liberation): in a/the state of *mokṣa*, the *jīva* is free from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Brahmāṇ (Krishna = *Brahmāṇ*) for Vallabha (short for Vallabhacharya Ji) is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and *saccidānanda* (itself, or the experience of *Brahmāṇ*). However, *Brahmāṇ,* which by definition cannot be limited (*akṣara*), conceals part of itself, which Vallabha calls *tirobhāva*. The *māyāśaktī* (or power of illusion) of *Brahmāṇ,* like a magician's mirror, makes a part of *Brahmāṇ* apparent (*abhīrbhūta*) while the rest is concealed (*tirobhūta*): this *māyāśaktī* is under the control of the will (*icchā*) of *Brahmāṇ*. It is through this *śaktī* (power) called *māyā* (illusion) that *Brahmāṇ* manifests itself as *jagat* (manifest world). This proposition makes *jagat* real (*satya*) as against the *māyāvādin* (or of *māyā*) understanding of the same, which regards the world to be unreal (*mithyā*). *Jīva*s for Vallabha are parts or fragments of *Brahmāṇ,* like sparks of fire. Due to *avidyā,* the *jīvas* forget their real nature and get trapped in the *saṁsāra* (world as the cycle of reincarnation), governed by the cycle of birth and rebirth. The remedy to get out of this cycle according to Vallabha is *sevābhakti* (devotional service) through *ātmanivedana* (self-surrender). The *jīvas* are varied; *puṣṭi jīvas* – the *jīvas* complete and nourished with *anugrah* (grace) of Krishna; *maryādā jīvas* – those within the limits of actions forbidden and allowed by the Vedas; and *pravāha jīvas* – those in stream of continuous action. Corresponding to the three different kinds of *jīvas*, according to Vallabha, there are three ways of life – *Puṣṭimārga* (the path of grace revealed by Vallabha*), Maryādāmārga* and *Pravāhamāga.* While the followers of the first two paths are *daiva* or divine and are capable of *uddhāra (*the process of lifting up of a *jīva* from *saṁsāra*), the *pravāha jīvas* are *āsura* and have no scope for *mokṣa*.[13]

In his lifetime, Vallabhacharya Ji composed many texts to establish his version of *Védānta* and the *bhaktimārga.* The most important of these are his *tīkās* or commentaries on the *Brahmasūtra*s, some *skandas* (books) of the *Śrīmadbhāgvata Mahāpurāṇa (Śrīsubodhinī)* and the *Gīta*, and a compilation of sixteen short texts called the *Ṣoḍasagrantha.*[14] Since these texts were in Sanskrit, given

the exclusive nature of the language, they must have had a very small readership. In this scenario, the role of the *vārtās* and other texts composed in Braja Bhasha becomes important.[15] In the *Puṣṭimārga* tradition, one sees a shift from Sanskrit to Braja Bhasha as the language of discourse within the tradition. This shift was part of a larger process, as argued by Pollock[16] and Bucsh[17] in the context of the rise of new regional centers of power in the early medieval and early modern South Asia respectively, in which vernaculars became a medium of asserting one's own identity different from that of the other, and hence an instrument for the peripheries to establish themselves as new centers. Following the same line of argument, for the *Puṣṭimārgīya ācāryas,* the use of Braja Bhasha as the language of both rituals and discourse must have helped them earn a distinct identity for themselves. This, as Shandip Shaha suggests, helped them gain a popular support base and following.[18]

Given its limited appeal to the *Puṣṭimārgīya* community or the community of the 'Path of Grace'[19] only, the form and the text of the *vārtās* is not as popular as the other texts produced by this and other *bhakti* traditions. The form in which the text has been composed remained unique to the tradition, and Richard Barz has pointed out the reminiscence in the style of the *vārtās* and *Prémsāgara* (the Ocean of Love) by Lallulāla (1763-1835), the pioneer of the Khadiboli literature. Barz has also pointed out the influence of the *Puṣṭimārgīya Sampradāya* (society/sect) on Bharatendu Harishchandra's (1830-1885) notions of *bhakti*.

I

To begin with the first plane of Pollock's method, that of the text's genesis, not much can be said from the text's self-portrayal and the author. As mentioned earlier as well, the text is attributed to Gokulnath Ji, but he is at the same time called the inspirer or initiator of the text, but not the 'author'. The term 'author', here, is being used in an Enlightenment sense and therefore it connotes an individual who writes or composes a text in the form in which it is found. However, as per traditional accounts, the text was compiled by the *sevakas* of Gokulnath Ji, on the basis of his *Vacanāmṛta* (The Nectar of Speech). Gokulnath Ji being the successor of Vallabhacharya, would have himself heard these narratives in his family and thus would have told the Vaishnavas in turn. The text was part of an oral tradition and therefore has many authors. This complicates the question of the text's 'genesis', and thus, given the lack of sources, not much can be argued from this plane.

This forces me to then shift to study the second plane, that of the 'readers before me'. Owing to its unique prose form, the text and its genre in general attracted the attention of scholars writing about Hindi Literature in Hindi and other languages. Scholars working on *bhakti* in particular and Hinduism in general have read the text by applying various methods and theories of textual analysis. The earliest references to the *vārtās*, in English language documents, can be found in F. S. Growse's *Mathura: The Memoir of the City*, H. H. Wilson's *A Sketch of Hindu Sects,* and in Karshandas Mulji's *The History of the Maharajas of Vallabhacharyas of Western India.* These three 'readers' of the text have discussed the *vārtās* in general as accounts of the Vaishnavas, and *'Kṛṣṇdāsa Sambhalvāre Kannauj mein rehte tinki Vārtā'* in particular, and have commented on the 'morality' of the Vaishnavas. Richard Barz, in a monograph published in 1964 – *The Sect of Vallabhacharya* – discussed the principles, practices and philosophy of Vallabhacharya, the genre of *vārtās*, and presents translations of four *vārtās* of the four *Aṣṭacāpa*[20] poets with the *Bhāva Prakāśa.* In this monograph, Barz treats the *vārtās* as 'biographies', and in an essay published in 1994, as 'hagiographies'.

Scholars like Vasudha Dalmia and Shandip Shaha have also treated the text like a compilation of 'hagiographies'. While this treatment of the text as a compilation of hagiographies or biographies is very useful, when viewed in the light of postmodern scholarship and the idea of 'individuality' and 'individual', it might seem a little problematic. If one treats the *vārtās* as accounts of Vaishnava life, or 'biography' and 'hagiography', a close reading of the text suggests that the *prasaṅgas* in each *vārtā* deal with only those parts of a Vaishnava's life which are concerned with *Mahāprabhu* (great lord)[21]. Therefore, if one is to consider *vārtā* as hagiography or biography of an individual then whose biography is it? A Vaishnava's or that of the *Mahāprabhu?*

This question gets even more complicated when one looks at the initiation rites and the status of *Guru* in the tradition. The initiation rite is called the *Brahmasambandha* (establishing relation with the *Brahmāṇ*), and the *Guru* who officiates this rite is treated as the manifestation of the *Brahmāṇ* in human body. After the initiation, the *Guru* is said to have embodied (*aṅgikāra kare*) the initiate. Thus, the Vaishnavas in the *vārtās* are embodied in the *Mahāprabhu* and therefore it can be said that through the *vārtās,* one gets to know about him. In the light of a Sanskrit text like *Śrī Vallabhadigvijaya* [22], which deals with Vallabhacharya Ji's pilgrimage and the establishment of his own version of the *Védānta*, it can be said that texts like the *vārtās* fill the gaps created by it. There is mention of most of the Vaishnavas of the *vārtās* in question and other text of the same genre including the *Nija Vārtā* and *Gharu Vārtā,* and therefore it can be argued that the *vārtās* would have acted as auxiliaries to this text, or

would have been told to those who lacked knowledge of Sanskrit. It should also be noted that each *vārtā* ends with a sentence: 'so, s/he was a devotee of *Mahāprabhu* Sri Vallabhacarya, and therefore was of God and hence is unparalleled; hence there is no end to what can be written'. This statement gives a sense of incompleteness. This incompleteness, I argue, is intentional, for it necessitates help from somebody who already knows what is missing. Incompleteness also renders a sense of secrecy. The secrecy of such a knowledge hidden by the *vārtā* here, should not be taken to mean something that is forbidden but as something that can only be accessed by the deserving seeker. Therefore, I propose that instead of putting the *vārtās* in categories known to the modern world, one must try to approach them in their own right as a genre unique to this period and such traditions.

II

Having discussed the arguments from the second plane, I move on to Pollock's third plane, that of 'me reading the text here and now'. To begin with, I proceed to read the text with an approach that Quentin Skinner suggests, of interpreting texts as 'speech acts' with their corresponding illocutionary and perlocutionary power to make meaning.[23] To do this I refer to the first *prasaṅga*, to make meaning of what has been written in the text. The translation of the same is being presented here:

And the Séṭh (wealthy businessman, in this case Purushottamdas) would never go for the ritual seeing (darśan) of the Lord of Benaras, God of World Shiva (Kāśī Mukhya Viśveśvara Mahādéva), who is the raja of Kashi (Benaras). So one day, Shiva, in a dream, said to the Séṭh –'You don't keep up the relation of the village/of your people, at least keep up the relation of Vaishnava (that of deity-devotee, here Shiva presents himself as a devotee of Vishnu, and therefore as Purushottamdas' co-devotee), sometimes give me the consecrated offering (mahāprasāda)'.[24] The next morning, having performed his daily services, the Séṭh Purushottamdas took a basket of offerings, and left for the temple of Shiva. Then everybody in the village was amused: The Séṭh never came before? Why has he come today? So, many people walked with the Séṭh. The Séṭh, having placed his offerings (to Vishnu) and taking the name of/remembering/praying to Krishna (Śrī Kṛṣṇa smaraṇa), left the place. There were many brahmins devoted to Shiva (Śaiva brāhmaṇa) there, who said to Séṭh Purushottamdas – 'You didn't prostrate yourself in prayer (daṇḍvat namaskāra) to Shiva? Merely saying 'Glory be to Krishna' (Jai Śrī Kṛṣṇa), you are leaving, this is not appropriate. Then, Séṭh Purushottamdas said – 'Mine and his (deity) are relations of deity remembrance (Bhagvāna's smaraṇa) only. You ask. You shall be told by Shiva.

So, amongst those brahmins was one who was a devotee and had received grace of the Shiva (kṛpāpātra of Mahādéva jī). So, to him said Shiva: I had asked for offerings from the Séṭh. Mine and his are only relations of remembrance (as Vishanavas). Therefore, don't say anything to him. After this, many took offerings for Shiva. Once Shiva started taking the offerings, many people started going to the temple. They said, if the likes of Séṭh can go, then who are we? Shiva is a great bhagvadīya (devotee of Vishnu)). But do understand this – ājñā (order) happened to the Séṭh and therefore he went, but Rukmini Gopaldas never went, so how can we go? But not everyone is to be given the best reward/result/gratification (phala). Therefore, only Séṭh Purushottamdas went.

In Skinner's approach, understanding the author's intention is very necessary, and as has been discussed earlier as well, since the question of authorship is complicated, confusing and unanswered for this text, one might have to overlook it. To understand the text in the light of other texts of the tradition might be useful in using this approach. For this I use *Vallabhadigvijaya,* and from this text derive information on Purushottamdas' first meeting with Vallabhacharya Ji, [25] and the resistance the latter faced from various *sampradāyas* (religious sects) in establishing his own version of *Védānta*. Other texts like the *farmāns* (declarations of order) from the Mughal Emperors and Rajput Princes to the *Tilakāyatas* or the chiefs of the tradition, draw one's attention to one of the pragmatic issues of land and monetary grants that all the *sampradāyas* were concerned with. In the light of these tensions, and given the fact that Benaras was an important center of knowledge production and pilgrimage, when one reads *Viśveśvara Mahādéva Jī*/ the raja of Kashi's self-portrayal as a Vaishnava, and looks at his request of offerings from Purushottamdas, this can be read as an 'act' of making space for the *Puṣṭimārgīya* in Benaras. This speculation results out of my field work in Benaras. Vallabhadas Ji, an initiate in the *Puṣṭimārga* tradition, said that *Mahāprabhu* (the deity), by setting his lotus feet in Benaras, transformed it into *Kéśavapurī* (City of Krishna). It is interesting to note that Chowkhamba, where the *Puṣṭimārgīya* shrines, including Purushottamdas' house, are located, is close to the Vishwanath temple and is inhabited mostly by *Puṣṭimārgīya* Vaishnavas. This transformation might have been the power of the 'speech act' Skinner hints at, but in the absence of sufficient material, nothing can be stated with absolute certainty.

Apart from the shortcomings of this approach, there is another major limitation in Skinner's reliance on *texts*. In the case of the *vārtās*, as these have remained in oral form for a long time, this reliance might again yield only limited results.

Since mass-level spread and popularization of the *vārtās* as *texts* happened only after the introduction of the printing press in South Asia, they largely remained and remain in transmission through oral performances and practices. The alternative to Skinner's approach comes from Richard Bauman's idea of 'performance'. Bauman defines performance 'as a mode of language

use, a way of speaking', and 'a species of situated human communication'. Bauman first points to the increasingly all-encompassing use of the term performance to convey a dual sense of artistic *action* – the doing of folklore *and* artistic event – in a performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience and setting. He emphasizes the need to identify the features that distinguish performance from other 'interpretive frames' of communication; and then offers a 'very preliminary attempt' to specify the interpretive guidelines set up by the 'performance frame'. For Bauman, Skinners approach is also one of the many 'frames' of textual analysis.[26] To read the *vārtās* in this manner, I use some ethnographical approaches of studying a living text like this and in doing so, draw heavily from Philip Lutgendorf's work on *Śrīrāmacaritamānas*.[27]

Vārtā, despite being in print, is *done* or performed by the *Tilakāyatas* or *ācāryas* or Vaishnavas of *Puṣṭimārga,* in *satasaṇga* (community gathering for devotional purpose) settings in the courtyard of temples, Vaishnava houses or in temporary pavilion in huge grounds; and are attended by Vaishnavas visiting temples, pilgrims or anybody who wishes to become part of it. Such performances involve narrations of *vārtās* and then some contemplation on them by the performer. Depending on the performer, the *vārtās* may be read from the text or just spoken on the basis of one's memory.

Bauman's analysis suggests two criteria for identifying an 'act' of expression as performance. The first relates to the performer's 'assumption of responsibility' and so might be termed a 'formal' criterion: it accords well with one of the dictionary definitions of 'performance' as 'execution in a set or formal manner or with technical or artistic skill'. The skills of performance, for Bauman, are acquired by mastering the art of public speaking, singing, etc. The second criterion relates to the potential effect of a performance on the participants – its ability to enhance or intensify experience – and so might be termed 'affective'. Performance events then, are demarcated by both the formal and the affective registers from ordinary events and communications. They, suggests Bauman, 'break through' into 'the mundane context, signaling their presence by formal clues but justifying their existence by their ability to transform and enhance life, often by reference to impersonal values and experience'. But if rendering the *vārtās* is to be seen as performance, the 'skills' required by the performer do not come by the exercises that Bauman suggests but through the *practice* of certain spiritualities. Similarly, to understand the 'effect' of the performance of the *vārtās,* the *practices* associated with them are to be understood. To understand this approach. I use Sri Aurobindo's idea of 'interpreting scriptures' and discuss it in the part that follows.

III

Sri Aurobindo, writing on the scriptures[28], in discussing the three standards of interpretation, states three categories, as mentioned in the introduction as well: the known, the knower and the knowledge. The 'known' is that which one intends to interpret: the text itself; the 'knower' is its *drashṭā,* with whom one ought to be in spiritual contact, and 'knowledge' is the eternal truth, part of which the *drashṭā* expresses to the one engaging with the text. If *drashṭā* is to be regarded as the author of the text, then Sri Aurobindo's approach provides for a possibility of blurring the difference between Pollock's first and third planes. By stating that the *drashṭā's* contribution in the interpretation of the 'truth' is only in part, Sri Aurobindo seems to be emphasizing the mere indicative nature of the language,[29] which fails to render the 'truth' somebody like him is looking for.[30]

In the context of the text in question, this idea can be understood with help of the Hariraya Ji's *Bhāva Prakāśa* and an enquiry into the 'skills' of the performer and the effect of the performance, if one approaches the *vārtās* from the 'frame' of 'performance'. Ideally, approaching the text through Pollock's three-dimensional reading, one should have discussed these in the second plane, but using Sri Aurobindo's approach, I shall show how the 'distance' in space and time is collapsed and transcended by Hariraya Ji and subsequently the practitioners[31] of the *vārtās.*

Hariraya Ji was Gokulnath Ji's nephew and could have been part of the first audience of the *Vacanāmṛta* and other discourses given by his uncle, thus placing him in the first plane by Pollock's way of analysis. *Bhāva Prakāśa* and the *prasaṅgas* of the *vārtās* were so closely knit that in most of the manuscripts they were found together. As mentioned in the beginning, the commentary deals with both material and spiritual aspects of the *prasaṅgas* of the Vaishnava. The *Bhāva Prakāśa* is indicative of the importance of the *bhāva* a practitioner should have while practicing the *vārtās* and performing their *sevās* (service to the deity).

To explain this, I shall first discuss Hariraya Ji's *bhāvātmaka lékha* (an exposition on the real sentiment/ meaning of the *vārtā*) on the entire *Vārtā* and then engage with the *Bhāva Prakāśa* on some *prasaṅgas* of Purushottamdas' *Vārtā*. My translations of the relevant parts, with explanations, are being presented below:

(Translation)

Obeisance to Sri Krishna! Obeisance to the Lord/darling of Gopis (Śrī Gopījanavallabha). Thus is written the bhāva[32] *of the Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā done by Sri Gokulnath Ji, said by Sri Hariraya Ji.*

This statement establishes the orality of the text and tradition and the importance of the *bhāva* in approaching these texts.

Hariraya Ji's emotional write up (*bhāvātmaka lékha):*

(Translation)

The reason behind eighty-four Vaishnavas is that the divine soul (daivī jīvas) have fallen in eighty-four forms of life (yonīs)…Those souls are of eighty-four-kinds. They fall in rājasī, tāmasī, sāttvikī and nirguṇa categories, the four types/attributes/qualities (guṇas) of being. Within them live those with qualities/attributes (guṇmaya) rājasī, tāmasī and sāttvikī. Gosainji (Vittalanath, son of Vallabhacharya Ji) will redeem them.[33] *Since Śrī Govardhandhara (God) is in the Master (Śrī Ācārya jī/Vallabhachaya), and the Master is in the Vaishnavas, God appeared in embodied attribute-less (nirguṇa) Vaishnavas. So, the eighty-four Vaishnavas shall redeem one lac forms each…Eighty-four Vaishnavas, embodied in the divine, are without attributes in the divine-play (rāsalīlā). Therefore, as per the treatises on experience/state of being (rasa) they are beyond worldly experience (alaukik). And since the Master's limbs/parts of the body (aṅgas) are twelve, the Vaishnavas are all these parts of him. In each part there are seven qualities (dharmas): aiṣvarya, vīrya, yaśa, śrī, jñāna, vairāgya, these six, and the last dharmī. When these seven are multiplied by the twelve parts, the eighty-four Vaishnavas (are produced), and being embodied in the Master, are omnipotent and beyond worldly experience…Therefore each soul is embodied…With this emotion, the eighty-four Vaishnavas of the Master, drowned in the experience… Time passed and it was midnight. Then, a Vaishnava requested Sri Gokulnath Ji, that 'O King of kings (Mahārājādhirāja), when will you tell the story (kathā). It is (already) midnight'. Then from his divine mouth (Śrīmukha) uttered Sri Gokulnath Ji: 'Today I have told you the reward (phala) of the story. Know the entire reward in Vaishnavas' vārtā. There is nothing beyond Vaishnavas. This is Puṣṭī bhakti mārga and therefore would only yield results or fruits through Vaishnavas. The Master also said: 'Damala (Dāmodardās Harsānī, first disciple of Vallabhacharya Ji), for you I have revealed this path. Therefore, regard the vārtā of the Vaishnavas to be supreme. In this manner eighty-four Vaishnavas should be known as the heads of the Master's attribute less aspect.*

From the *bhāvātmaka lékha,* one can deduce that the choice of eighty-four Vaishnavas is not random but fits into larger theosophical discussion of the tradition. The *lékha* also substantiates my argument about the Vaishnavas being embodied by the *ācārya,* and by further deduction, by the *Brahmāṇ* itself. One sees Gokulnath Ji 'practicing' or 'performing' the *vārtā* with other Vaishnavas, and the 'responsibility' and 'effect', if argued from the 'frame of performance', lies in their doing it with *bhāva*. The element of practice becomes apparent when one is told that they get immersed in the *rasa*, and lose '*sudhi*' or awareness of doing the *kathā.* The later discourse on the *phala*, importance of the *vārtās* and their treatment equal to or even greater than the *kathā* from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, reflect on their nature as something important for practice in *bhakti*. The *līlā* or the divine play, discussed in the note, though *nitya* (constant, not bound by time), happens 'in time' as well. Monika Horstmann, in her essay *Theology and Statecraft* discusses the similarities between the *līlās* of the *Dvāpar* (the epoch of Krishna's *pūrṇa* or full avatar) and their re-enactment in the *Kali* (the epoch of his *mukhāvatāra* (existence as a body/voice, Vallabhacharya Ji). However, the *nitya līlā* being constant can be accessed through a text like this if practiced at any moment in 'time'. This notion of the knowledge contained in the text being *nitya* then creates a tension between the traditional and modern, Enlightenment approach towards it. This can be substantiated by looking at the *Bhāva Prakāśa* on *Purushottamdas' vārtā.*

Purushottamdas would do a *rāja sevā* (special/royal service) of Sri Madanmohan ji (Krishna). He would offer fifty-two *bīdās* (rolled beetle leaves) every day. Therefore, Purushottamdas kept fifty-two *bīdās*, twenty with the *bhāva* for *Thākur Jī* (Krishna), and thirty-two for Krishna's consort. This is because *Thākur Jī* likes faith: hence twenty *bīdās* to express firm faith in him. The consort likes *sṛṇgār* (ornamentation or love), therefore the *sṛṇgār* of the two would be (sixteen multiplied by two equals) thirty-two. In this manner, Purushottamdas would please the consort as well. The reason behind mentioning this is to emphasize that whatever *sevā* Purushottamdas would do, he would do it with *bhāva.* Even for things, clothes and ornaments.

Thus, as is clear from the title of the commentary and the *lékha* on it, the central idea or approach to *vārtā* remains that of understanding the *bhāva* and then realizing it for oneself through practice. In Purushottamdas' case, the notion of time is played out by placing him in two tenses simultaneously, in past and present, in his *laukik* and *ādibhautika* (other worldly) forms respectively. The description of *līlā* is always done in the present tense, again a sign of making it always accessible to the practitioners who do it with '*bhāva'.* My interlocutors from the community in Benaras explained *bhāva* as an eternal state, to be entered *(praveśa)* by following instructions of one's *Guru* and performing *sevā* of his *sevya* (the form of the deity given by the Master for service) with devotion. *Bhāva,* by this understanding, also denotes a spatiality which is transcendental and is accessible anywhere. *Bhāva* and *rasa* are important notions in Indian aesthetics and Vaishnava and Shaiva devotional practices. Being in *bhāva*, both in aesthetic practices of theatre, dance, and music, and that of devotion, requires discipline or *sādhanā.*

Another *prasaṅga,* from the *Vārtā prasaṅga* 4, that clearly challenges the quotidian notion of time, is being discussed here, in translation:

One day Séṭh Purushottamdas was sitting in the temple stitching dresses (for the deity). Then, seeing from a distance, Gopaldas (his son) thought to himself that since Seṭh Ji has grown old, he should take on the service (of the deity). Then he bathed and came (to the temple). Then, knowing his thoughts, Séṭh called him, 'Son, come closer'. Then Gopaldas went closer and saw that Séṭh (was) of 20-25 years. Then he told Gopaldas, 'People of God are always young. But in accordance with their (bodily) stage, they should be treated with respect. Therefore, never bring such thoughts to your mind'.

By presenting himself as a youth, old Purushottamdas, presents himself to his son in two states: first as a *bhagvadīya* and hence beyond aging or ever in one age, and second, as affected by aging. While the first form is that in *līlā* the latter is in *saṃsāra* and interestingly, they seem to happen simultaneously in one moment.

To conclude, as per Sri Aurobindo's proposition, if the inculcation of the *bhāva* is understood as a practice or *sādhan*ā, the 'knowledge' in the text can only be 'known' by inculcating the *bhāva* that 'knowers' like Gokulnath Ji or Hariraya Ji had while accessing or conceiving and then rendering the text in *language*. What Gokulnath Ji or Hariraya Ji rendered, according to this approach, should be considered to be only part of the 'knowledge' that the text contains. This approach thus, while recognizing the importance of and need for the social, political, cultural or linguistic analyses of a text, presents their limitations as well. Therefore, I propose that to have a broader understanding of texts like this, which are living or are in transmission in traditions, the paradigms and epistemological systems emic to them, in which they are 'read' and 'practiced', be taken seriously.

NOTES

1. Shukla, Acharya Ramachandra, *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas*, (Varanasi: Kashi Nagari Pracharni Sabha, 1951), pp. 332-335.
2. Literally servants, the term means devotee when used to express one's relation with the deity or the *ācārya* in spiritual traditions. *Sevak bhāva* is one of the most important modes of *navavadhā* (nine-fold) *bhakti* in Vaishnava traditions.
3. Ji, a suffix of respect.
4. Hariraya Ji, who wrote the *Bhāva Prakāśa* on *CVV* added eight *vārtās* of the family members of Purushottamdas, thus making it 92 instead of 84.
5. Barz, Richard; *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1992), p. 3.
6. Pollock, Sheldon, 'Philology and Freedom', *Philological Encounters* 1, Brill NV (Leiden, 2016), pp. 4-20.
7. Skinner uses the term 'texts' in italicized form to connote the meaning of texts as written or printed documents as against 'texts' when used in regular form to mean everything including verbal, written, visual, and performed that can be read in the category. I, drawing from him, shall use this style to make this distinction in my essay as well.
8. Ibid., p. 5.
9. Tripathi, Kamala Shankar (*ed.*), *Chaurasi Vaishnavan Ki Varta* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Hindi Samsthan, 2008), pp. *v* and *vi.*
10. Dasgupta, Surendranath, *A History of Indian Philosophy (5 Vols.;* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1961*).* Vol. I, p. 68.
11. Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaishnavism, Shaivaism and Minor Religious Systems* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1965), p. 50.
12. The term is used to connote the soul. The relationship between the soul and the *Brahmāṇ* is like that of a spark to the fire, explained later in the essay.
13. Śrīmad*Vallabhacharyaviracitaṃpuṣṭipravāhamaryādābheda:* This text details the difference between the three jīvas and basic qualities and conduct of the *Puṣṭi Jīvas.*
14. Ibid., pp. 30-45.
15. Shaha, Shandip, 'A Community of Grace: The Social and Theological World of the Puṣṭi Mārga vārtā Literature', Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol. 69, No. 2 (2006), pp. 225-242.
16. Pollock, Sheldon, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India,* in Introduction *(*London: University of California Press 2006*)*, pp. 3-8.
17. Bronner, Yigal, Whitney Cox and Lawrence McCrea (*eds.*), *South Asian Texts in History*: *Critical Engagements with Sheldon Pollock,* in chapter 9, 'Hindi Literary Beginnings' by Allison Busch (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2011), pp. 203 – 225.
18. Shaha, Shandip, 'The Movement of Bhakti along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Pushtimarga between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. International Journal of Hindu Studies', Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2007), pp. 299-318.
19. Translated as the "Path of 'Grace' " instead of 'Nourishment', because of Vallabhacharya Ji's doctrine of '*Poṣaṇaṃtadanugrahaṁ*'
20. Literally, 'Eight Stamps'. *Cāpa* refers to the signature line in a pada of a poet (see J. S Hawley's *Three Bhakti Voices* for details). *Aṣṭacāpa* refers to the group of eight Kīrtaniyas (poets and singers who compose and sing in glory of the Divine) organized by Sri Gosain Vitthalanath Ji. The group included Paramanandas, Surdas, Chaturbhujadas, Krishnadas, Kumbhandas, Govind Das, Chitaswami, Nanadadas. They are also called *Aṣṭasakhā* of the Divine, who are always with Krishna during the *Nitya Līlā.*
21. Used to address Vallabhacharya Ji.
22. The text was composed by Shri Yadunath Ji in the Samvat year 1658 (CE 1601). He was Gokulnath Ji's brother.
23. Skinner, Quentin, *Visions of Politics: Volume I, Regarding Method*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 103-127.

24. The Vaishnavas (devotees of Vishnu) and the Shaivas (devotees of Shiva) are often rival sects.
25. *tata ācāryāḥ kāśīyātrāṁ mamāpya maṇikarṇikāyāmekadā sthitā।tadāśreṣṭhīkṛṣṇadāsasutaḥ puruṣottamadāsa samāgataḥ। sa ca praṇamyāha।suciraṁ mayā tapyataśrīmaddarśanārtham।tata ācāryaiḥ snānam kārayitvā tasmai manudvayaṁ mālā ca dattā tatastadgṛhe gatvā madanamohanmurtiḥ sanskṛtya sevārtha dattā।mārgamaryādā śikṣitā,* from *Śrī Yadunātha Jī Praṇīta Śrī Vallabhadivijayam* (Delhi: Shri Vallabha Prakashan*,* 1985*)*, p. 42.
26. Bauman, Richard, 'Verbal art as Performance', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. VII, 1997, pp. 290-311.
27. See, Lutgendorf, Phillip, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritamānas of Tulsidas* (Oxford: University of California Press,1991), p. 20.
28. Sri Aurobindo's usage of the term refers to both the Vedas as texts and Knowledge, thus making it a broader category to include all that is to be known within it.
29. This idea can be understood if one engages with the concept of the four levels of '*Vāc*': the *vaikharī, madhyamā, paśyanti* and *parā, vaikharī* being this language in which one interacts at the lowest level of consciousness, each level being indicative of the level above it, and *parā* being the highest form.
30. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo – Vol. XII: Essays Divine and Human, Writings from Manuscripts 1910-1950* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1997), pp. 36-37.
31. I use this term to replace it with the idea of the performance, because to me and as I shall argue later in the paper, the *vārtās* are not only 'performed' but '*practiced*' by the practitioners of the tradition.
32. I interpret *bhāva* from √*bhū* – to be as state of being in *sādhanā* or spiritual practice.
33. This is explained as the reason for doing *Do Sau Bāvan Vaiṣṇavan Kī Vārtā.*

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Teacher as Mandala: Faith, Beauty and Knowing in Times of N/Rationalism

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The *key enigma* of the new millennium is the *multifarious capacity* of its nations to simplify the act of living. At its best as zeitgeist, this inscrutable faculty can transform our institutions into an intuitive cartoonist whose freeze-frame initiative may present to us in one shot, the nuanced movements of our many-splendoured world. The marvel of the cartoonist's simple line is its synchronized apprehension of nature and culture, idea and practice, aesthetics and politics, involution and evolution. The charged play of this graphic draws the told and untold stories of humanity into a single moment; the aesthetics of its two-dimensional display miraculously brings into the limited range of the witnessing eye the trans-local connections of multiple geographies. But how, and how often, does simplification create these wondrous effects? That question brings us to the *primary challenge* of our Age: the quantum task of aesthetically preparing the simplified line to represent life's coalescing acts.

New Millennium Caesars and Druid Getafix's Swaraj Potion

When consummate, simplification is a double-edged sword. Small yet invincible on the one hand, it works like Goscinny and Underzo's Gauls, keen to have a good laugh at the expense of Caesar's exasperated centurions. A timeless illumination on the other, its Shakespearean genius inspires complex annotations and ever-renewing delight, rendering the clock of Caesar anachronistic. Through such transnational associations, simplification becomes enlightenment, a revelation of light*ness* – a weightless particle and a luminous wave at once. However, when unsuccessful, like the silly Roman legion on its delicate 50 BCE mission of patrolling the free-spirited western Armorica, simplification falls flat and becomes a mere line, quite forgettable usually, but at times worse – a ludicrous picture!

The aesthetics of Goscinny and Underzo's comic imaginary and Shakespeare's anachronistic clock should warn us against the ghosts of Caesar in our times. That should also help us see why the enterprise to make and master complex devices of simplification has been the most thrilling adventure as well the gravest misadventure to which contemporary establishments of governance and nationalistic enterprises have subjected themselves.

The present modernity has been led into this false-Janus-faced project by a curious faith-knowledge dialectic, which gives no aesthetic room for a connecting imaginary. Even as it is consumed by the belief that human beings have today inherited a certain genius to apprehend the complexity of the Universe, it takes pride in its own hugely simplified re-presentations of that complexity and vainly positions these convenient constructions on an equal plane with the subtle natural phenomena. Ironically, concomitant with the avowed reliance of contemporary culture on its own knowledge and operative rationality is its inadvertent leap toward a blind faith in the scale of civilizational progress that it has inherited. The mammoth indulgence in its 'originality' does not help the current wave of humanity attain independence as it were, for, by its own unwitting admission, it is not its self-governance, but a multi-centric artistic, scientific and technological historicity that has spawned its modernity.

If a nation's exclusive confidence in its *reason* could be considered a *plane of experience*, by its own logical training, it would presuppose/bear/inherit/encounter its *faith* as an unverifiable term, a *plane of non-experience*. The *line* of human thought resulting from the *intersection* of the seemingly contradictory *planes* of experience and non-experience becomes a *linear mandala* ever-extending on either side. It is a perennial trap for all the conceited nations of the world, for, in one direction it heads towards a non-organic faith in the past that it defies in multiple ways, and in the other, it becomes an unfaithful quest for knowing with the aid of limited reason. In both cases, the beauty of inclusive living becomes the casualty.

The above mathematical description of the

experientially multi-dynamic tension between human *faith* and *knowing* as a linear mandala is an example of how our rationalistic – not rational – training diminishes phenomena by depicting them in adversative terms, delinked from the interconnecting faculty of *beauty*. But, if understood in the right spirit, these polar terms can offer a line of inquiry that serves as a/an vantage/entry point for one to witness/participate in the interrelated movements of human culture in our space-time.

The above dialectics of re-presentation draws our attention to a twin-feature of simplification: its associative methodology and its reductive composition. Again, the apparently polar processes of *association* – extension of an idea – and *reduction* – contraction of a vision – simultaneously embedded in simplification make it doubly enigmatic. Simplification, thus, becomes the last temptation of our era, as the Gaulish village is for Julius Caesar. It is a zero threshold that opens itself at once and equally on the sides of both glory and damnation. How to make a choice of survival on that uncertain line is the greatest test of our times. And, that is exactly why the aesthetic figure of the Gaulish Druid, the wise teacher, must draw our urgent attention and sustained interest, as we encounter newer Caesarian nations.

Druid Getafix's magic potion is not a broth of superstition. Its secret recipe is passed down the line of druids, by word of mouth. It is brewed with great care from specific herbs and other raw material found around the village and the forests surrounding it. And, the villagers are never greedy for the power it brings – their Druid brews it only when there is a need. More than a mere stimulant, the potion is the essence of their organic governance practice, which upholds the balance of connections between nature and human culture, faith and knowing, aesthetics and politics. The local ecosystem and the land's orality play a major role in the life of this village, the amazing resistance of which frustrates Caesar's great empire. Their magic potion is the aesthetic symbol of a free country's assertion of its self-reliance as different from a Caesarian nation's political insistence on universalizing its ideology. It is a secret recipe that connects human faith and knowing in an organic mandala, a rare occurrence, indeed. The beautiful story of the active defence of the Gauls, under the guidance of their Druid and the influence of the magic potion, offers an inspiring lesson in Swaraj for anyone trying to uphold the independence of the local and the rights of the individual against the universalizing nationalism of new millennium Caesars. But, where do we find a druid who can hold an age-old secret against all odds and temptations, and still share its quantum benefits with a people in times of need?

Un-order of Things in Times of N/Rationalism and the Irony of Socrates

Mainstream training in most contemporary fields is designed to universalise the idea of 'nation'. Its lessons stem from the historical documentation of the insecurities of the peoples of the world or the followers of different disciplines, and not their inherent strengths. Thus, every modern training programme tends to be a nationalistic project founded on a rationalistic anticipation of war, and contains constant reminders of being on guard. For the same reason, a n/rationalistic trainer does not allow her students to harbour any confidence or hope in beautiful trans-rational/anti-national phenomena like individual insights, people's heroes, beards of druids, spiritual calling, powers of brews, children, long-nosed stars, or enlightened stones. Insisting that the only way to win wars is by feeding the greatest limits of humanity such as envy, fear and hatred, the n/rationalistic trainer devises war strategies for every practical aspect of life, all of which ultimately contribute to reducing the world into neat polar taxonomies of 'self' and 'other' – bright and dark hemispheres, white and black races, male and female genders.

Foucault famously begins the preface to *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* by citing a passage from Borges that allegedly borrows from a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' that collapses 'our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other':

> This passage quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.

It is interesting to look at the deconstructive continuity of a set of exchanges concerning this allegedly Chinese (un)taxonomy. These engagements too, like its object, follow no linear pattern of correspondence. The non-linear matrix of these responses to a playful attempt to collapse the dominant order of things has been collectively and ceaselessly formed by different thinkers, and hence could serve our thoughts about 'un-order' here.

To begin this discussion on non-linearity, let me try and draw into a single sentence, one level of circularity

emerging from a web of interactions concerning the above:

Foucault's preface to his 1966 French text, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, which evokes Borges' brief Spanish essay 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', also quotes and directly comments on the so-called Chinese encyclopaedia, Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge, which, according to Borges, German translator Franz Kuhn had discovered, though Borges himself questions the veracity of the Chinese quote elsewhere in his 1942 essay by referring to 'the unknown (or false) Chinese encyclopaedia writer' in response to the Universal language proposed by the 17th Century Anglican clergyman and a founder of the Royal Society, John Wilkins, in his 'An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language', the inspiration for which seems to have been partly from somewhat mistaken contemporary European accounts of the Chinese writing system.

The above one-sentence para re-presents the web of a set of thoughts related to the question of taxonomy, which takes us back and forth among various time zones, languages and perceptions, a few threads of which may be unraveled as below, as a first level demonstration of the complexity contained by/hidden within/opposed by categories as well as the linear structures of their descriptions:

a. Foucault's intimate understanding of the ironical purpose of the Chinese (un)taxonomy and his twice-or-more-removed presentation of it in French.
b. Borges' use (and fabrication?) of the Chinese (un) taxonomy in his brief Spanish essay to topple the complex polarizing processes of simplification and universalization that marked the 17th century (Enlightenment-afflicted?) European scholarship, which have continued to affect the mainstream Western thought as well as its worldwide circles of influence since then.
c. Borges' near-credible attribution of the discovery of the Chinese (un)taxonomy to the German translator Franz Kuhn, which he himself simultaneously upsets by making an uncertain reference about the original Chinese writer.
d. John Wilkins' endeavor to universalize language apparently for the benefit of diplomats, travellers, merchants and others who supposedly have expansive horizons, despite its best intentions, becomes problematic when one considers the effect of such universalization, made for and perpetuated by a certain class of people, on the diversity of local cultures and languages in the world.
e. A string of possibilities ranging from the possible influence of a 17th century European (mis)reading, possibly due to the rationalist – not determinedly rationalistic – perspective of Enlightenment, of the creative Chinese writing system on John Wilkins in his attempt to create a universal language, and how that possibility brings us further to the possible distorting effect of perspectives, possibly a still-prevailing impact of European Enlightenment.

Foucault and Borges consider the Chinese (un) taxonomy useful for their purpose of dismantling the simplified Western categories and representations of knowledge and faith. Their positioning of it takes us beyond our limited field of vision and gives us the keen insight that nothing really re-presents/represents anything. On removing the limited black and white perspective from the mediating role in these interactions, we get a *multicentric circular mandala* which seamlessly connects the timeless faith and intense knowing of the red, brown and yellow human beings with everything on earth, as evidenced in/by the moving speech of Chief Seattle in another context:

And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land.

In such a circularity of the subject/object of engagement, beauties ranging from the allegedly Chinese (un) taxonomy to the speech attributed to Chief Seattle become their own pure representations. Their circular mandalas do not present any new system; they represent themselves in a profoundly aesthetic manner, beyond limited facts and figure, by pointing to the fallacy and futility of any attempt to categorize the world into exclusive areas of faith and knowing.

In our n/rationalistic times infested with technological pride and constructed beauty, *Faith*, an uncountable noun otherwise representing a cumulative emotion, undergoes a shift in usage. Built on a host of insecurities, modern nations – political coalitions, ideological corps, military bases and religious establishments – find it shameful to admit faith as a valid emotion unlike the indigenous people on earth who celebrate it. Our nations find tools and projection techniques to re-present and disseminate faith as knowledge. Thus disguised, 'faith' helps them universalise many generations of native

human experiences and extract from their plurality, homogenous light-and-sound projections to promote particular versions of nationhood. Logically, such a self-defying show anchored in a local past and projected into a global future can be nothing but a make-believe enterprise – it is at once false faith and false knowledge. As a virtual practice of competitive nation builders, it transfigures contemporary human existence into an incessantly shifting sensorial animation, wherein amplified sounds and larger-than-life holograms serve the rapidly changing searches of rationalistic cultures for thrilling and still more thrilling purposes. Entering this newfangled imaginary of faith, one finds a shift in the conventional function of signs, too. It is no longer humble representation – a reminder of the presence of an absent subject and not its substitute – but holography, which lets us forget the absence of the subject altogether, thereby arrogantly rendering its presence quite redundant. Simply put, *faith* has become a decadent game without or irrespective of subjects or objects, at once self-defying and self-indulgent. Faith in these times of n/rationalism is a term of falsity—its substance and representation have come to be the antithesis of beauty.

Knowing, a transitive verb otherwise progressing towards an object in good faith, represents a subjective pursuit. But in times of hollow faith promoting a particular mode of n/rationalism, its internal processes are modified by the vehicular devices offered by a fabricated contemporaneity, and not vice versa. Thus, in an ironical twist of objectives, instead of expanding and thus transforming the subject's horizon of understanding, *knowing* now limits the human enterprise into specialized fields of experience, wherein constructed functionalities overpower the aesthetics of spontaneous movement. On first appearance, this absence of beauty passes as 'focus'. For instance, in a linear, function-oriented world, tasteless nutrient tablets can quickly replace foods, for, the aesthetics of scent or taste or appearance or texture has no direct, assigned purpose in this order of things. At that level, there is a great deal of aggressive marketing of independent skills and distinctive powers in each field. But on a closer look, one finds that what is encouraged is not the universally beneficial intuitive genius, but a spectacular individualism in an extremely competitive context. In the latter mode, which is an endeavor to reach the target objects faster than the competitors, we increase the skill, speed and scale of specific functions and vehicles within particular occupational boundaries. And in order to be effective on this fast track, we shed all subtle aesthetic ceremonies and come out loud and clear. *Knowing* in our times thus becomes a function that uses time, and not a process played out in time. It thus concerns itself with the vertical dimension, a quarantined task indifferent to the horizontal interconnections its object may share with the rest of the world. At a point where walled sites of knowing miss their association with other human functions, this vertical axis reveals itself to be a directional antithesis as well as a thematic accomplice of the contemporary holographic faith that has lost touch with the idea of 'community' and the experience of 'beauty'.

Hence have our n/rationalisms been paradoxically marked by a virtual scheme of faith distending rapidly into a noisy spectacle as well as a reductive logic of knowing gradually diminishing into flavourless/senseless functions. The magnification of the fields of sight and sound coincident with the diminution of the fields of smell and taste has led us to witness the emergence of a co-agency of fatality, causing the loss of the subject's faith in seeking the true meaning of any object, and consequently the *beauty of the act of living*.

Now, what drastic consequence does the loss of this interface of *faith*, *meaning* and *beauty* hold for humankind that our n/rationalistic Age should even register its cost? Remarkably, it is the most pervasive of our senses, touch, which serves as the last bastion of this interconnection. Touch, with its unique faculty to be universal and local at once, makes us *feel* the retreat of faith, meaning and beauty from our lives. It alerts us of the barrenness of our relationships as well as the loneliness of our demonstrations, intimating us of the alienation of our existence from both the bounty of *love* and the intensity of *war*, for, love and war are the true testing grounds of faith, meaning, and beauty. If and when we let the intimation pass, that is a sure sign of our passing into perpetual numbness as a species, after which no n/rationalism holds any ground or water. That is exactly why our space-time needs a fearless teacher who, without caring about sounding naïve before its techo-intensive denizens or being killed by its n/rationalistic activists, can touch us with mere voice: 'Beware of the barrenness of a busy life'.

That is what Socrates did, and he was killed for doing so. The order of things in a *busy life* demands acting fast as per the system's diktats, while Socrates insisted that 'an unexamined life is not worth living'. He perpetuated un-order and upset the categories of the Athens of his times by telling his students: 'To find yourself, think for yourself'. And his students promptly thought for themselves, and a couple of them twice managed to overpower the supposedly democratic regime of Athens.

The irony of Socrates here is two-fold. First, he uses his individual reason to upset a certain n/rationalism, and yet is executed by the same nation that he topples. He shows the world that all nationalistic acts are not reasonable,

and helps his students see the huge distinction between living in a 'rational' way, and adopting the state of being 'rationalistic'. Rationalism is indeed the greatest threat to true reason. Being rational is a fundamental human faculty; while being 'rationalistic' is a mode of nation-building. The former is an individual capacity, and cannot be 'ism'ised. In the latter case, *reason* is falsely constructed as an 'ism' as per the instructions of a nation, which then employs its now-unthinking citizens in the busy task of perpetuating what it *thinks* is best for its unsurpassed reign over the rest of the world. It was this undemocratic order of thinking that Socrates' true reason questions and upsets, thus leading to a great un-order of things in Athens' celebrated democracy.

The nations of the world have never tolerated reasonable teachers; we have grown up on a number of crime stories involving the killing of teachers ranging from Jesus Christ to Mohandas Gandhi. Our nationalistic regimes, irrespective of their *faith*, are founded on insecurities and still continue to kill the learned and the wise who daringly invite them to open conversations. In India, the n/rationalistic enterprise recently killed a few teachers of reason: Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pandharinath Pansare, Malleshappa Madivalappa Kalburgi. In Bangaldesh, in the name of another faith, a few free-voices have been silenced: Avijit Roy, Oyasiqur Rahman Babu, Anant Bijoy Das, Niloy Chatterjee Neel. And many more, we know of and do not know of, across the world, these days…

The second aspect of the irony of Socrates is that his killing has enabled him to live forever, and that is true of all the great teachers who have been killed, too. On the verge of annihilation, the leader of a wise people refers to their oppressor: 'Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for, the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds'. This chief is the epitome of Socratic irony – he is right while sounding absurd – it is all the unassuming teachers who have survived their own death that have truly changed the world because they work through the un-order of surprising matrices, which the linear calculations of their n/rationalistic hunters shall never figure out.

Continuum of the Masters and the Matrix of Organic Play

That is how the masters survive – through and beyond death. Their mastery in the game of continuity makes them trans-local, and accessible to seekers from across time and space. On a zero threshold of uncertainty, when someone in another time and space seeks an un-ordered, un-ordering lesson of life, the masters transcend the n/rationalistic chambers of their oppressors and allow themselves to be discovered in and for another Age. And, that is the line of convergence of the apparently opposite categories/planes of love and war, too, to which Sun Tzu, the great Chinese master who divulged the secret art of war to the King of Wu, gives voice: *The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.*

How would our busy, barren world settle down and fertilize itself for such a play of un-ordered free thinking? How would it prepare itself for a shuffle of its current categories and their n/rationalistic re-presentations? Is there a spontaneous way for our world to enter an aesthetic space-time that reclaims for it the interconnections of faith and meaning that it has lost? Can the human race reclaim its original urbanity for which it had left the unsettling jungle, come to the banks of the world's primal rivers, and contemplated the interconnections of diverse beings in the universe? In our non-urbane cities of barren busyness, how do we invoke the line of masters who can offer us an organic clue to re-urbanising ourselves?

The history of humanity has shown us over and over how a spiral of order reaches its decadence even as another spiral begins its un-ordered course. Our space-time, marked by its blind faith in the machines and systems it has created, and by the overwhelming flow of information that passes as knowledge, seems to have reached a depraved order of things. The signs of this corruption of faith and knowing are seen across the world in the form of separatist, n/rationalistic acts devoid of beauty—violence generated by fundamentalism, terrorism, communalism, racism, and many other isms perpetuated by various nations.

By being merely present in these times, we are unwittingly witnessing an emerging spiral of un-order, too, that will soon evolve into a model of the *organic urbane*. As it will be its own presentation as well as representation, the only way for one to participate in that movement is to begin by shifting one's own 'human' centre from the ecosystem of beings on earth. Now the 'human' is replaced with 'land' – the earth with its matrix of diverse languages and multiple environments of different beings.

The possibilities of education, livelihood, evolution and recreation that emerge from this web of interaction actively challenge the rigid order of things constructed by the n/rationalistic establishments, and are all replete with the un-order of free becoming – creativity, multi-centricity, continuity, transformativity. It defies the self-proclaimed supremacy of the present-day forms of technology and market over those of all other ages and peoples. Surpassing the bragging and violence of the contemporary n/rationalistic industries and competitive

TERRA-SUTRA

MODEL OF ORGANIC URBANISATION

anandena jatani jivanti
happiness sustains life
UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY
CREATIVITY
MULTICENTRICITY
SKILLS
RESOURCING
PSYCHOLOGY
PRODUCING
HISTORY
SERVING
PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSALISING
PHYSICAL
BODY
ECOLOGICAL
NATURE
EMOTIONAL
MIND
SOCIAL
LABOUR
INTELLECTUAL
INTELLECT
CULTURAL
LINKAGE
SPIRITUAL
CONSCIOUSNESS
VIRTUAL
ABSTRACTION
EDUCATION
LIVELIHOOD
LANGUAGE
LAND
ENVIRONMENT
RECREATION
EVOLUTION
COSMIC
UNIVERSE
IDEOLOGICAL
WORLD
RITUALISTIC
COMMUNITY
SOCIETAL
NATION
RELATIONAL
KIN
OCCUPATIONAL
INSTITUTION
PERSONAL
SELF
DOMESTIC
HOME
LIBERATION
PARTICIPATION
ENLIGHTENMENT
RECOGNITION
REJUVENATION
SECURITY
RELAXATION
COMFORT
TRANSFORMATIVITY
CONTINUITY
EQUITABLE MARKET EXPERIENCE
happiness sustains life
anandena jatani jivanti

THE LUMINOUS IDEA OF LIFE APPRECIATION

businesses, it reveals *technology* and *market* as universals that have at all times been accessible to humanity at large, as also other forms of life on earth, in adequate measures, across species, faiths, genders, classes, and all such limited categories.

The diagram given visualizes how such a circular mandala of engagement will lead to a radical re-structuring of the current order of things. I first drew up this chakra for LILA, an organization as well as a veritable 'play' inspired by the Luminous Idea of Life Appreciation.* It presents and represents a trans-local vision of organic governance for any people's movement seeking original urbanity in any space-time. The Terra-Sutra Model of Organic Urbanization is a simple-lined wheel that inspires the nuanced ways in which LILA continuously moves itself.

I present the terra-sutra model here merely to initiate a discussion on *teaching* as a crucial civilizational act, and *teacher* as a mandala of interactivity concerning creativity, multi-centricity, continuity, and transformativity. Teacher as mandala is the totality of the radically transformative un-order that may be revealed to an individual, through phases, events and people that mark various transitions. But to partake in that ceaselessly evolving, uncategorical knowing, we must first lend ourselves to the practical philosophers who can prepare us to enter the circle of the teacher. For instance, on learning the art of containing war from Sun Tzu, the significance of vigil from Chanakya, the power of patience from Marcus Aurelius, the way of prayer from St. Francis of Assissi, we may begin to appreciate that the linear road offered by our limited perspective is indeed a part of the circle that the guru mandala offers to reveal – that every small human step defying its self-made order is indeed a cosmic movement reflected in an individual's microsphere. It is the teacher as mandala that fulfills the quantum task of aesthetically preparing the simplified line of the human to represent the universe's coalescing acts.

Teacher as Critical Thinker Questioning the Decadence of Order

The gravest danger embedded in *order* is its propensity to inertia. The visionary teacher is the first to notice lethargy creeping into the body politic. To prevent a people from paralyzing in order, the teacher as critical thinker primarily engages her wards in rigorous physicality through activities ranging from martial arts through mediation to meditation. It may sound odd to say that a critical thinker begins her lessons with the body, but this master understands the continuity of the body, mind, intellect and consciousness. Her critical faculty points out the visible marks of self-indulgence in the body politic, and shakes it up to find a way to a renewed consciousness.

The lives of some of the teachers who walked different parts of the earth between the 5th Century BCE and 10th Century CE – Confucius, Socrates, Jesus of Nazareth, Muhammad, Shankara – would reveal a common feature. All of them tried to create an alternative to the decadent order of things in which they found themselves. Their methodologies gained immense following beyond their own time, while hardly any of them had a smooth passage through life – Confucius had to go on exile, Socrates was poisoned, Jesus was crucified, Muhammad had to face mockery and war, and though not much is known of Shankara's life, his death at the age of 33 points to an intensely lived life. For all of them, education meant a certain un-order of the status quo, a preparation for a radical alternative. After their time, across time and space, schools were established to spread their teachings. The corruption that has come over these spaces through time confirms that without the critically thinking teacher to un-order, the n/rationalistic order of things will overwhelm the world, and render it immobile. Perhaps, after the teacher as critical thinker has offered her decadent space-time an alternate aesthetics of faith and knowing, she too has to necessarily encounter the circularity of order wherein her own thoughts would be frozen into establishments, until the next teacher in her line arrives as critical thinker.

Teacher as Creative Artist Playing the Phoenix

The teacher as creative artist is born from the great ashes of the critical thinkers, twice-dead – first at the hands of many a n/rationalistic regime, and then trapped within the schools set up in their names by their own followers. It is after the world had long been overwhelmed by its own misrepresentation of the counsel and intervention of the critical thinkers, slipped into the tunnel of ignorance, and consumed by the dark ages, that the teacher arrives again, playing the creative artist. For, it requires godlike imagination to restart creation. Thus do we encounter some outstanding gurus of creativity – Basava, Kabir, Mira, Nanak, Cervantes, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Da Vinci, Hieronymus Bosch, Mihšihkinaahkwa the Little Turtle, Elias Boudinot – blossoming as in a spring of ardour across the globe, approximately from the beginning of the second millennium CE till the eve of the industrial revolution. As weaver, painter, scientist, military leader, dramatist, journalist, they together manifest the multicentricity of creativity, and the human genius for association and adaptation.

* For a detailed discussion on this, see Vision Manifesto on www.lilafoundation.in

Thus does the Bhakti movement map the entire Indic space with a fervent song sung in multiple tones from the Tamil country to the Himalayas, from the western sea through the desert sands till the jewelled land in the north east. We hear the radically prayerful voice of the teacher as artist playing itself out, provoking, inspiring, arousing the peoples of this variegated land, and connecting her times with those gone past and those yet to come. Its artistic enterprise through centuries interlinks the divergent aesthetic courses of the many resident and invading cultures to create an astonishingly tolerant way of pluralistic living and co-habitation for all times.

Elsewhere, Aeneas Silvius rightfully laments that with the fall of Constantinople 'Homer and Plato have died a second death'. But as we have seen, creativity has to necessarily rise from the ash mountain and adapt to new circumstances – the refugees from Constantinople to Italy bring with them the ancient texts that then happen to inspire the expansive humanist investigation of ancient philosophy, and spark off a number of masterpieces in various fields.

In the Old West, following the 'Trail of Tears', a long, deadly march that killed over a third of the Cherokee, Elias Boudinot, the Native American writer and founder of *Cherokee Phoenix*, was labeled a traitor, and killed by factions of his own people who resisted relocation to the 'Indian Territory'. It had angered his rivals that Boudinot's 'Address to the Whites' had advocated acculturation of all Cherokee:

> We have seen everywhere the poor aborigines melt away before the white population. I merely state the fact, without at all referring to the cause. We have seen, I say, one family after another, one tribe after another, nation after nation, pass away; until only a few solitary creatures are left to tell the sad story of extinction. Shall this precedent be followed? I ask you, shall red men live, or shall they be swept from the earth? With you and this public at large, the decision chiefly rests. Must they perish? Must they all, like the unfortunate Creeks, go down in sorrow to their grave? They hang upon your mercy as to a garment. Will you push them from you, or will you save them? Let humanity answer.

It is sad, and unfair to demand that a people change their habits and their habitat for reasons external to their own pursuit – but, isn't it indeed from the ashes of Boudinot's poignant words that the red people today wing out alive and share their story with the world at large? This insider-outsider was perhaps that rare phoenix which combined in himself the un-orders of both the twice-dead critical thinker as well as the creative artist rising from the former's ashes.

Teacher as Freedom Fighter in the Wake of Industrial Bondage

Following the flowering of creativity during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment project had already prepared the world for the last ceremonies of the teacher as creative artist with a trusting, coalescing abandon – with Descartes insisting early enough that 'If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things'. So, the n/rationalistic industries that began to enslave human time from the beginning of the 20th Century were sure to arrive via Europe. The world was beginning to be seized by a great ideological warfare, and the political as well as socio-economic polarization of the capitalist and the labourer, the scientist and the artist, was complete in the wake of the industrial revolution. The questions of domestic comfort, occupational security, societal recognition and participation in global affairs had gained prominence over simple singing and dancing and lovemaking. And then, some wise teachers all along had to see the danger of where it was all going, and relentlessly warn the people and even remind them of the fine principles of the nearly lost art of living. And hence we have, through the last two centuries, a host of teachers arriving in our midst as freedom fighters – Abraham Lincoln, Chief Seattle, Sree Narayana Guru, Albert Einstein, Isadora Duncan, Anne Frank, Helen Keller, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela – emancipating people, disciplines and faculties from the oppressive sway of n/rationalisms. Like the critical thinkers, many of them, especially those who directly dealt in politics, were killed. But in the loneliest and most depressing of our times, we still remember their fervent speeches, long marches, philosophical expositions, diaries, campaigns, poetry and song, dance that emerge right from the solar plexus…Their continuity helps us evolve from mere humans into greater beings capable of sharing themselves with the universe at large.

Teacher as Enlightened Leader Winning the Game of Mirrors

Twenty-first century, at a zero degree threshold of choices, seems to have formed an endlessly linear mandala at the intersection of the planes of false faith and unfaithful knowing, dividing humanity into fields of the 'self' and that of the 'other'. As seen, this polarized logic feeds on the insecurities of nations and caters to competitiveness, and the taxonomy it creates places major hazards on understanding love and war in their mutual connectedness. That is when, from beyond the lines of freedom fighters, creative artists and critical thinkers, the Buddha emerges as the primordial teacher, an enlightened leader, and pronounces: 'Holding on

to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned'. And, one instantly comes to see that there is no external agency that stands between one and one's victory – it is one's own mirror image that one is fighting; it can be destroyed only by harming oneself, and it can be won, only by winning oneself. That shifts the perspective: the line of uncertainty, in a *kshana* or moment, curves itself into a circular mandala of faith, meaning and beauty.

The secret to win the game of mirrors is to end the battle with oneself and relax. On the transformative road of re-creation, one might find kinship rejuvenating one's spirit rather than disturbing one's privacy, rituals enlightening one about one's integral role in the community. Then, liberation might come to the human subject as a *rasanubhava*, an aesthetic experience, of knowing and believing at once, the difference between *soonyam* and *poornam*, here and now.

Of all the geometrical visions of space-time that has ever occurred to human consciousness, the figure of the circle seems the most challenging. It is its own representation and allows all other geometrical ideas and forms to be contained within it, as in the Sri Chakra. Hence has the circular mandala been always mystified, as it extracts of and reveals to the human its own rarest as well as the most latent gift: *the ability to risk the comfort of familiar forms and formats*. For, partaking in the circle's promise of fullness presupposes a churning, a re-formation of the limited line of perspective to become any form as it were. The circle demands the surrender of the exclusionary linearity of one's affliction of comfort. It is at that point of turning that the illumined figure of the teacher emerges from *round the corner* of one's own curving perspective. And, now *vidya* and *avidya* do not appear as opposites, but two points of knowing in the circular journey of the tree that has to evolve into a seed, again. Perhaps, the circle that represents its own nothingness as well as fullness is the clue to the guru mandala that our holographic age must wait for.

Who is in charge of the Rashtrapati Niwas?: Three Stories

Martin Kämpchen
Independent Scholar

The author has been a Tagore Fellow of the *Indian Institute of Advanced Study* in Shimla. The Institute is lodged in the Rashtrapati Niwas, the former Viceroy Lodge on Summerhill, from where the British reigned the country during the summer months. This venerable old building with its long corridors and many spiraled staircases, with its dark furniture and its many rooms that become more and more decrepit, caught Martin Kämpchen's fancy. He has asked himself the question: Who is *really* in charge of the building? – the mice which roam freely, the monkeys which pester inhabitants and guests in the woods all around, or the proud pole which carries the flag on top of the tower – or do the memories of regal times overwhelm the inhabitants and their habitat? Here are three answers: Dear reader, take your pick!

A Short Speech by the Last British Mouse

Good evening everybody, may I introduce myself? – I am the Last British Mouse at Viceroy's Lodge/Rashtrapati Niwas in Shimla. I am proud of a direct lineage to the Mouse that nibbled at the last Viceroy Sir's naked big toe. During his long, long hours of ruling the country every day, he sometimes used to unburden himself, I mean, he took off his leather boots and his socks to air his feet underneath his big, big writing-desk. Oh, they had a lovely smell, his feet! So I was told by my father who knows it from his father and so on. My dear great-great-great-great-grandfather possessed his personal little mouse-hole in the Centre of Power of the British Raj. In the huge office, he used to skip from one chair-leg to another chair-leg and then settle down below the big, big writing-desk of Viceroy Sir. Well protected, he nibbled on the calluses of Sir's feet and, so I was told, found them very aromatic and really tasty.

At first Sir did not feel anything. He stretched his lovely feet long and broad under his writing-desk and my respected forefather danced around his feet, jumped elegantly across from one side to the other and teased Sir by tickling his feet with his long, wavy tail. Sir sometimes stirred a bit, probably thinking that a gnat had strayed under his desk, but no! it was me ... err, sorry! it was my great-great-great-great-grandfather who busied himself in the privileged smelly air of the British Viceroy.

Once, I was told, my respected forefather bit off a tiny, tiny piece of the Viceroy Sir's big toe. All agree that it was a tiny, tiny mistake to do this, but a mistake after all, and it became a historic event! There was a debate raging among us of the Viceroy/Rashtrapati Mouse lineage whether it was the right big toe or the left big toe which he gently bit into with his wonderfully strong front teeth. My father and my grandfather and even my great-grandfather whom I knew told me *personally* that it was the *left* big toe.

But it remains unclear to this day what "left" really means. When you sat under the writing-desk looking into the direction of the toes, the left big toe was on your left. However, if you sat *facing* the toes, the same big toe was the right big toe! After a debate which continued generation after generation, I – as the Last Mouse of the British Raj – personally came to the following conclusion: Does it really matter whether it was the big toe to your left or the big toe to your right? The Viceroy's smelly feet were as lovely "on your left" as "on your right". This, however, does not indicate any political leaning. Any right-wing party-member may freely opt for the left-big-toe-version, and vice-versa.

What did *happen* after my great-great-great-great-grandfather heartily bit into the toe of the respected Viceroy Sir? This is the relevant question, and for the sake of history, I here give you all the facts that have come down to me. Viceroy Sir jumped up, of course, then he stooped down to look under his writing-desk, he even got on his knees and crawled there until he bumped his

head and stood up dazed, and when he saw the blood oozing from his toe, he clasped his hands to his head, and screamed loudly "O my God!" So he got blood on his hands as well from the bump. That rattled Viceroy Sir totally, and he stormed out of his room as he was, with naked feet and blood above and below.

People intercepted him and cried "What happened, Sir? What happened?", but Sir stormed through the Corridors of Power shouting "A rat! A snake! A monkey! A ghost! A fire!" ... He just could not decide whom or what to blame. Then Sir peered down on himself and must have, despite his panic, noticed how funny he looked with his naked feet and the bloody toe. And he said, "Oh, it's nothing! The august responsibilities of governance got me in a tizzy. It's nothing!"

He limped back to the Centre of Power of the British Raj and slumped into the largest armchair available in his office. By then the peons and the *chowkidars* and *chaprasis* and who-not had arrived in the room, a group of *memsahibs* had gathered in the doorway, some giggling, some uttering cries of panic. The fire-engine arrived, with bells ringing, in front of the Viceroy's Lodge. The firemen unrolled the hoses and seized the buckets with water and the buckets with sand, ready to pour the water and the sand over the Viceroy Sir's head. They could not quite decide what to pour over him first, the sand or the water. That saved the poor man.

He yelled, "I'm *not* on fire, you bloody idiots, my bloody toe is ... bloody! The doctor! The doctor, where is the bloody ... ?" ... Then he gave up and resigned himself to the vicissitudes of life. Oh, the confusion was heavenly, I was told on the authority of my forefathers – just heavenly!

But why delve into the hoary past of the British Empire? Let me talk about the present time. Compared to the past, I have a rather unexciting life. Where have the booted people gone? Where are the State Dinners with their rich leftovers? Oh, the cheeses which we could feast on, and the creamy pastries ...! Oh, I am again in the past, sorry for that. Now, all we get are *somosas* when these Fellows in the upper floors at long last decide to have a seminar or some other intellectual small talk. They shut the door of their Seminar-Hall and won't let us in. I am told that all they do is either speak or listen. One speaks, while the others listen – how absolutely boring! Is *that* exercising one's intellect?! I want some action, ladies and gentlemen! Some shouts, some laughter, some knocking on tables and stomping on floors. Alas, the former Corridors of Power have become places of feeble powwows. No more fun! No dances, no races! What can I do to bring back the old rollicking love of life?

Oh, we loved those races when we were young and when I had many brothers and sisters of imperial lineage. Who will reach the lower Dining Hall first and sit there for lunch? – This was a grand competition, and I am proud to say that I won it one thousand and one hundred and twenty-one times. After that I lost count. Or, who would first reach the flagpole on the top of the tower? That was a more demanding competition and I wasn't that good at it. Besides, what is there to eat on the top? Nothing except a rotten bat here or there.

Only in the Library we still enjoy some action. From time to time we migrate to this vast dump of paper to get some dry food after all those oily *somosas*. We, too, have to think of our waistline. The library has lots of old books which smell of the Empire. To gnaw on these brittle pages is like living in the glorious past. – ugh! again I mention the *past*. Sorry, all p-words remind me of the past, first it was *pastries*, now it's *pages*. But these young men in the library, and not to speak of the ladies, are super alert. If we make the slightest sound, just the rustling of a page while we have our snack, they start running behind us. Books seem to have two purposes. They are food for us, but in the hands of the library staff they are murder weapons. They throw them at us, squeeze us, crush us. We have to be *so* careful!

Coming to an end let me clearly say: We startle you when we squeak while eating our dry food diet in the library, or we tickle you with our wavy tail, or we dance across the bodies of the *chowkidars* when they fall asleep at night. We do all this from a sense of duty. I would say, it is social service! We make sure that everybody remains alert and looks after his or her duties. *Somebody* must take charge of this place and be in control!

I remained single, never did I marry. What will happen, I wonder, to Rashtrapati Niwas after me? I believe, my demise will be the end, the final and absolute end of the British Raj. This lovely old building with its many crevices and small, small holes and big, big cracks which are so convenient for us mice to travel from one wing of the building to another, will probably collapse. I see it coming. The bonhomie, the old-world-charm, it will all go. The dance-parties and the races will not even be remembered. But, as the Last British Mouse of the Rashtrapati Niwas, I solemnly promise you that, as long as I'm around, I'll *keep you on your toes!*

The Head of the Monkey Union Speaks Up

A very good morning everybody, I am the head-monkey of the Workers Union of Swingers and Jumpers, Summerhill Chapter. Only few of you know of our Union and what we do. Therefore, I thought I call a meeting which brings us monkeys and the general public of humans together. We have founded this Union to look after the welfare of the Summerhill woods and of all living beings who inhabit

this area, and that includes, let me emphasize, the welfare of you humans. But we have serious complaints against you. Look! All we get from you are shouts, stones pelted at us and sticks shaken in our direction to intimidate us. You make us feel like some thugs, like robbers, like I-know-not-what. *Phew!*

And what do we do? – Nothing really, really nothing! We innocently sit in trees along the pathways crisscrossing the Summerhill woods. We lovingly carry our babies who cling to our breasts. None of you humans has such a caring attitude, have you? Obligingly we slink away and let you proudly walk on your paths by yourselves. Ladies and gentlemen, dear fellow workers, more than that, we play circus for you! Every day we put on a grand trapeze show swinging from branch to branch, bouncing from tree to tree. High jump, long jump, trampoline jumping and pole vault – it is all there for you to enjoy in full measure. Okay, there is no music, there are no drum rolls, but you must agree we conjure up a wonderful family show. And have you ever seen anyone of us fall down from our branch and land on the ground with a broken arm or a bruised foot? – Never, I swear, will you see such accidents. We are more flexible, more agile, can jump higher and swing wider than anyone of you – oh we are *so* truly wonderful!

Well yes, you look at us and enjoy our elegance and artistry – but always from a safe distance! You pay no entry fee for our performances and give us no salary, not even an old-age-pension after a life of indefatigable artistry. And when we approach you humbly with our arms outstretched, what do we get? You scream and throw around your arms wildly, start wailing and pick up stones to pelt us. But do we ever attack you? We just want to *talk* to you. Is it our fault that our speech sounds a little screechy? Your speech sounds peculiar to us as well – like ... like, hmm, like you're biting into a rotten apple. Exercise some tolerance and pluralism! The Indian Constitution is all in favour of it. Be a true citizen, and above all, do not think we do it all for free! Why should we? Are *you* doing *any*thing for free? Shame on you for being so selfish!

Sorry for heckling you a bit longer, my dear human beings. Now I have you right in front of me. Now I can say what I wanted to say for a long time. I feel you do not enjoy life as we monkeys do. When you drink from your bottles and when you eat the bodies of our fellow creatures, then you say: "Ah-ha! How good life is! How juicy the meat! How sweet the drink! How tasty!" But why get out of one's senses to feel the joy of life? Do you have to draw out your knives and dig into the carcasses of our chicken brothers and sisters to tickle your taste buds? Take our example, ladies and gentlemen! We monkeys love juicy leaves, we munch on flowers and berries. Look how civilized we are! And for the joy of life we play with each other, we play with our children, we hop and slide, we hang and swing, we climb up and climb down. We become light like feathers when we play – no gravity! We are loved by the air and the wind, by the sun-rays and the blue of the sky. That is joy, dear human folks!

We need no bottles ... you object? – okay, okay, sometimes we do throw them at you, that is true! But you never understood that we want to play "Catch!" with you. But what do you do? When we throw an – empty – bottle, you yell and throw tantrums as if we were about to kill you. Why not simply catch the bottle and toss it back? Bottles aside, look at how much you need for your enjoyment. Those gaudy clothes, those stupid goggles, you make prisoners of your feet wearing those shoes. You cradle those smartphones – ha! like babies. It was a teddy-bear when you were infants, now as adults you still need a toy, that glittery, squeaky smartphone. Do you humans never grow up?!

We have founded our Union so that law and order may prevail in our woods. You feel great roaming around in this old building called Rashtrapati Niwas which witnessed so many decisions of great import, and saw people whose photos are hanging on the walls of big government offices even today. You humans are allowed to enter those beautiful salons with their dark and curvy furniture. You walk through them in hushed voices. Oh, how much we would love to sit on those chairs with their huge backrests. Being monkeys we would squat on top of those backrests giving them a dignity unknown to them so far! Alas! We are shooed away whenever we sneak close to these hallowed halls of history.

But we have our compensations! We climb and leap to places *you* can never get to. Well, even those British sahibs in their fine silken clothes and waxed moustaches haven't put a foot on the roofs on which we walk with ease and grace. And those funny sounds that we create when we pound on those tiles – can you humans produce them!? We crack and break the tiles when they are weak and fragile, so you can replace them with new ones. How else would you *know* which tiles have become fragile? This is our social service.

But we also look into your rooms through windows and doors to see whether propriety is being maintained. We know from our ancestors that during the time of the Empire such policing was even more needed. I could tell you a few juicy stories about these so-called gentle-ladies and gentlemen ... how they lolled in those armchairs with their mighty backrests, and what they said to each other and ... sorry! what they *did* to each other! I could tell you, but I won't because there are children in the audience.

Unperturbed and unwaveringly we continue to perform such duties even today. Today those Fellows

come from all over the world to have a moderately good time looking on a glitzy surface they call computer and talking to their little teddy-bear-substitutes they call smartphones. But we have a lot of fun together. We snatch their oranges, we eat their biscuits, we stomp on their roofs with *hey-holla!* and sometimes give them the fright of their life by baring our teeth and producing some snarling noises. You should see how they leap to their feet and holler! We merely have to show our faces to make theirs turn pale.

Coming to the end, I on behalf of the Workers Union of Swingers and Jumpers propose a grand peace meeting of all monkeys and humans of Summerhill. I want to wipe out the misunderstandings between us once and for all. I shall shake hands with each one of you. Don't be afraid of our claws. If they hurt, they'll hurt only a bit. I shall embrace each one of you. Don't be afraid, if we squeeze you, it will be over quickly. Our condition is that you come unarmed. No sticks and no stones! *We* are always unarmed! Please send me the Speaker of your Fellows Parliament so that we can plan it. I suggest the two of us meet on the roof of the main building. It will be my privilege to personally pull him up all the way to the top. The best spot is the round, steep roof above the Director's office next to the weathercock because the view is grand from there. We shall sit together and set a date for the peace meeting. Of course, you realize that peace does not mean we shall surrender the responsibilities which we monkeys feel for you since generations. We shall continue to guide and control you and *keep you on your toes!*

The Flagpole Greets His Subordinates

Good morning all of you down there! I must address you from the top, because here is where I stand without moving day and night, always erect, always tall and unbending. That is my nature, and you are welcome to take me as an example of unrelenting rectitude. Do not think that it is easy to stand here in winter and in summer, exposed to the chilly winds and the scorching sun, to the lashing rains and the dark, dark nights. No shade, no shelter, no lights – just the sky above me. Oh, how lonely my life is!

Twice a day I get some company. At dawn a man comes climbing up to me and draws up the flag, and at dusk a man comes up again to lower the flag and fold it carefully. Sometimes this man comes, sometimes another, and they look at me as I stand erect, tall and unbending, only to ascertain whether the flag can fly high and free, but never do they have a kind thought for *me*. But consider, what would the flag do without me who holds it up and makes it visible to everybody from below.

My fate is that all of you consider me as nothing by myself, nothing but a naked pole sticking out from this venerable old building. Nobody thinks of the services I render to the Rashtrapati Niwas and to the flag and to the nation. Nobody knows of my hardships. It is an injustice, but I bear it with humility because I am aware, if nobody else, that the flag would not flutter so joyfully on the top of the tower if it were not for me.

My stoic perseverance gets a jolt only when those monkeys try to climb up on me. Then I begin to tremble and quiver. But, imagine! They like it when I get the jitters and they won't be shaken off. Then all I can do is to bear the ignominy, and to command the winds to blow ever stronger so the flag will flutter high above, beyond the reach of those monkeys' claws.

Yes, you heard correctly, I do sometimes command the winds to blow stronger, or to change their direction, or just to give me a respite and abate. After a century – or how long have I been up here anyway? – one does develop a certain fellow feeling with the elements. With the rain in particular. Those drops that run down on me make me shiver with delight. They touch me, they embrace me with pure laughter and childlike mirth. Thank you, dear raindrops for visiting me now and then. I wish my body was taller, still taller so you could run down longer.

There are other compensations for my melancholy loneliness. I get the best view of you all from here. Come up to the top of the tower – still you won't see what I can see from the tip of the pole. Yes, on clear days I can see all the way to China in the north and to Sri Lanka in the South. And to Pakistan, to Bhutan and Bangladesh in the West and in the East. What? You don't believe me? – Well, disprove me! Show me that I'm wrong! – You see, you can't, because I am the tallest, I am the greatest! I admit, sometimes the crows and buzzards land on me to give me some company, and they claim to know more about the world than I do. They feel they are superior to me because they fly higher up and further afield into all directions. Horrible chatterboxes they are, especially the crows with their eternal craw-craw-craw. I don't believe a word of what these gossips say.

I survey what no mouse and no monkey can see. Yes-yes, sometimes the mice do come up. The mice used to race up to me, five or six of them, and the first one to arrive pronounced him, or herself, the winner. Then they bite each other crying: "I was first! – No, it was me! – Stupid, did you not see me running before you!" – Ha-ha, these smart little liars! I hear it all, but I do not interfere. Don't I have my dignity? Hah-ha, they can't climb up on me though. They slip as often as they try and tumble down, becoming one squealing, irate heap. A few times, they tried to be extra smart and, leaning against me, climbed on top of each other. They managed three or four mice,

then the lower cried, "I want to be on the top, let me climb on the top!" The next moment all of them slumped to the ground. These mice just have no team-spirit!

But are you humans behaving any better? As I stand up here on the top – unrivalled! – I make fun of you down there. Oh, it's so easy to see the funny side of these men and women when they walk in front of the Rashtrapati Niwas and goggle at this old, venerable building. They must be feeling so small as they stand there and stare, with their mouth wide open like fish. Then they click all these photos with their smartphones – click! one selfie done, click! click! click! a dozen selfies! Do they look at these photos ever again? Do they never get sick of looking at their own faces? And at the faces of their boyfriends or girlfriends who dance around them all day? Still, they make a hundred snaps of them! Each one looks the same, yet they make click! click! click! waltzing in front of this venerable building. Phew! Am I lucky to stand up here, erect and unbending, unable to dance and prance and make a fool of myself. I, after all, have my dignity!

Only once have I bent down, and that was on a very special occasion. That was a few decades ago, I was young and flexible then, just cut off from one of those super-elegant pine-trees of the Summerhill woods and selected for this special national duty. There I stood, proud like a prince! A bit lonely, true, feeling home-sick for all my brothers and sisters in the woods. But I began to discover China and Sri Lanka when the view was clear and knew that nobody could see what I was seeing.

The British had their parties down underneath me, and I heard their shouts and their songs, their dances and the clanging of wine-glasses. I did not approve of these clamorous celebrations. True, I am a bit old-fashioned. I prefer law and order and "due process". So once there was an especially grand party, perhaps the last one before these gentlemen and gentle-ladies retreated to the plains for the winter. I heard a music band, I gathered that dances were in progress, couples swirling around in the hall. People were clapping applause. Suddenly, I heard a commotion. One lady cried out angrily, chairs overturned and several humans rushed up the flight of stairs, some others behind them, and people rushed up and up, the small stairs first, then the narrow ladder ... until an utterly exhausted young lady, panting like mad, arrived alone on the tower and hastily bolted the heavy wooden door behind her. Oh, a damsel in distress! I thought and I bent down with compassion to the crying young lady in a long white robe. She felt comforted by my careful, but solid embrace. She stayed with me for several hours until she tiptoed back to the ground where everything had become quiet.

This incident gave me the idea that I have some responsibility up here, because I see and hear more than anybody else in and around Rashtrapati Niwas from my vantage position. I have the longest experience, longer than the oldest monkey and even longer than that mouse who calls herself the Last Mouse of the British Raj. What insolence! What chutzpah, if that is the word I want! I am up here for decades if not ... well, all I can say is that I have served this Rashtrapati Niwas, this country longer than all of you, and this gives me the responsibility to *keep you on your toes!*

Book Review

The Household as History

Kumkum Roy (ed.) *Looking Within Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through Time (Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai)* (Delhi: Primus, 2015), Hardcover, Rs.1595

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The book under review raises many questions and queries about how much we know, and do not know, about the history of households as a social phenomenon in the subcontinent. Histories of households are indeed an unexplored terrain. The essays in this volume – covering a range of experiences from the ancient to the early modern period – are located within different intersecting disciplinary and sub-disciplinary spaces. The focus is on issues and concerns of relevance to readers interested in understanding the 'household' as an analytical category for history in particular, and questions of the marginalized in general.

Divided into six sections, the work covers a wide variety of themes woven around the historical experience of the household. In the first section, *Household Matters*, the archaeological excavations carried out jointly by Supriya Verma and Jaya Menon in the village of Indor Khera have provided evidence to explore the household as a site of economic production. Their article '*Mapping Histories and Practices of Potters': Households in Ancient Indor Khera (200 BC-500 CE)'* discusses this theme explicitly. A similar perspective, through economic history, is available in the essay by Rajat Dutta, though the essay figures later in the book. Dutta's article, titled '*Towards an Economic History of Rural Households in Early Modern India: Some Evidence from Bengal in the Eighteenth Century'*, is able to show how rural households and markets were deeply connected.

In the second section, *The Meanings of Motherhood*, Martha Selby, Sally Goldman and Monica Juneja have employed textual strategies to read historical representations of motherhood. Drawing on early Ayurvedic literature, Martha Selby highlights the position of '*Women as Patients and Practitioners in Early Sanskrit Medical Literature*'. Selby has worked on two medical texts composed in Sanskrit (dated c. 1st-2nd CE). Through a close reading of the texts, Selby deals in great detail with the realms of gynecology, maladies, gestational processes, anatomical difference, edema and abscess. She asserts that women played an active role in the production of medical knowledge in matters that were of special and direct concern to them. Sally Goldman on the other hand, has grappled with issues of conception, pregnancy and childbirth by looking at the last section of the *Ramayana*, the *Uttarakanda*. Throughout the epic, Sita is located within a patriarchal framework, her pregnancy erased from view. Several episodes clearly show that though she is pregnant, she can still be suspected of sexual infidelity. Goldman, in her essay '*Blessed Events: The Uttarakanda's Construction of Sita's Pregnancy*', argues that Sita's journey of exclusion from Ayodhya to the liminal space of Valmiki's *ashrama* tells us about the inner tensions and silences that a woman has to go through. She is constantly reminded that a woman abandoned by her husband has no voice and identity.

The contributions made by Jaya Tyagi, Uma Chakravarti and R. Mahalakshmi in the third section, *Regulations and Representations*, bring out the dynamics of the household from varied references to it in texts like the *Manavadharmashastra, Matsya Mahapurana*, *Mahabharata* and *Tirukkural*. Tyagi, in her essay *'The Dynamics of the Early Indian Household: Domesticity, Patronage and Propriety in Textual Traditions'*, discusses the patterns of continuity and change in the experience of women as depicted in the *Manavadharmashastra* and *Matsya Mahapurana*. She contends that while the *Manusmriti* forbade women from undertaking any religious activity, the *Puranas* gave them an inclusive space, as reflected in the *vrata-katha* tradition. In this way, women were able to negotiate spaces for themselves and were able to come out of the confines of the household. Though the *Puranas* upheld traditional hierarchy and divisions in the social structure like the *Manusmriti*, they simultaneously allowed women to undertake ritual observances and extended

their agency. Tyagi goes on to show that *Grhyasutras, Puranas* and *Buddhist* texts espouse the *pativrata* ideology. They reiterate the idea that in elite households, women competed with each other, and not men, for conjugal rights, share in household resources and progenies.

Mahalakshmi's essay, titled *'Woman and Home in the Tirukkal: The Normative Construction of the Family in the Tamil Region in the Middle of First Millenium CE'* (the Tamil *Veda*), posits that the issue of women's sexuality is a theme common to all classical texts, be it the *Manusmriti* or popular prescriptive literature. Such ideas, she argues, are depicted within a universalist frame.

Uma Chakravarti's article, *'A Sutaputra in a Royal Household: The Kshatriya World of Power and its Margins'*, explores the story of a *sutaputra* (Karna) in the *Mahabharata*, through themes of genealogy, lineage building and patrilineal descent. This story should leave an abiding mark on the minds of the readers. The very fact that Kunti conceals the real identity of Karna as a Kshatriya leaves Karna condemned as a *sutaputra* and has far-reaching consequences for him in the public realm.

The essays related to religion deal with the inner and outer spaces of the household within medieval devotional traditions. Section four – *The Sacred and the Profane* – opens up different genres of sources. In *'Households Profane and Divine: Perceptions of Saintly Wives'*, Vijaya Ramaswamy incisively argues that the idea of bridal mysticism cuts across gender and religion. She gives us vivid descriptions of Lal Ded, Meera and Akka Mahadevi, who crossed the threshold of the profane in their households. In marked contrast to these women renouncers, Ramaswamy talks about Bahina Bai, who continued to live in a patriarchal household but found freedom in its spiritual spaces.

This idea aligns well with the views presented by Pius Malekandathil in his article *'Women, Church and the Syrian Christian Households in Pre-Modern Kerala'* on how spaces for Syrian Christian women were created in pre-modern Kerala. Pius contends that the Church gave considerable latitude to Syrian Christian women to carve a niche for themselves by participating in the multiple activities it organized. Though these women were given the right to assert their freedom, it was acceptable only within the parameters set by men. The spaces of men, Pius says, were about brightness, laughter and visibility, but that for women were designed in such a way that they were dark, dull and grim. The churches of Ramapuram, Kolencherry and Karakunnam were not merely religious institutions but institutional mechanisms to assert the position and pride of the family which ultimately led to the submission of women.

Kumkum Roy's essay *'Worlds Within and Worlds Without: Representations of the Sangha in 'Popular' Tradition'* is a welcome reminder that the *sangha* represented a distinctive framework vis-à-vis the domestic world. Roy also explores how the *sangha's* residential space would have had similarities with the worldly household. Like Roy's essay, Ranjeeta Dutta's work *'Consensus and Control: The Mathas, Household and Religious Devotion in Medieval South India'*, in a section of the book titled *Cross Currents*, and through a study of Tamil texts, focuses on the institution of the *matha* within the Shrivaishnava tradition in the second millennium CE. While the *matha* functions within the institution of the household, she demonstrates how the *matha* used the household as a space to regulate kinship and caste relations. Rosalind O'Hanlon highlights a different set of issues in the context of the household in 18th century Maharashtra. Focusing on western India, where society was shaped by the state of the Maratha Peshwas, this essay (*'Discipling the Brahman Household; The Moral Mission of Empire in the Eighteenth-Century')* gives details of the disciplining of the Brahmin household by the Brahmin rulers of the Maratha state themselves. The attempt to enforce these norms, says O'Hanlon, offers us a series of insights into the state's agenda to carry out a cultural and social mission within an expanding imperial framework.

In her essay *'Crossing the Golden Gate? Sunars, Social Mobility and Discipling the Household in Early Modern Rajasthan'*, in the section *Wider Webs*, Nandita Sahai acknowledges that the growth of the *Sunar* community over the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a pan-Indian phenomenon. Although the status of the *Sunars* was very fluid, she maps out the way in which this community used the court and other public arenas for advertising their customs and traditions. The most intriguing dimension of the essay is when Sahai shows us how realignment in household practices was contested yet harmonized during these phases.

In terms of methodology, the book exhibits an array of approaches. This enables us to explore different dimensions of the household, embedded as it has historically been in wider social, political and economic networks. However, the essays in the book operate at so many levels and around such disparate themes that it often becomes difficult for the reader to get a comprehensive perspective on the household. The contributors have engaged with concerns about caste, the intersections between kingship and household, archaeology and public architecture. Some of the essays raise concerns about religious beliefs and practices, and the reading of colonial records, but the challenge to integrate these varied themes remains. The book will however intertest students of History, Sociology, Gender and Women.

Chronologically, the book spans a period from the mid-first millennium BCE to the eighteenth-century CE. The regions explored include the Gangetic valley, Tamil

country, Kerala, Maharashtra, Bengal, and Rajasthan. Yet the conjunction of time and terrain is episodic, so that the diverse specificity of time-space cases impedes the exercise of tracing change and continuity.

It is to be noted that the volume has looked through varied sources like archaeology, visual representations, the epics, varieties of texts in regional languages, technical medical treatises, inscriptions and official documents like court records. The book reconstructs, and deconstructs, the dynamics of the household in a very perceptive way. However, a comparison of the various sources, located within different genres and chronologies, makes the themes, ideas and conclusions rather dispersed. Also, the myriad approaches adopted by the authors, with their different perspectives, specificities and debates, undermine the possibility of making any profound philosophical point about the household as a historical and social phenomenon.

Book Review

Modern Yoga, Consumer Culture and Religion

Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 240 pp. $ 20.95

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Andrea Jain's book is located within the corpus of scholarly work that has emerged over the last two decades around the phenomenon of 'modern Yoga'. The central problematic this literature seeks to address is the emergence of Yoga as it now exists in such contexts as Yoga studios across the world. There are two aspects to this work: one is to demonstrate the break between premodern and modern forms of Yoga, and the other is to examine the global processes whereby the latter has come to function the way it does. In doing this, various analytic possibilities have been brought to bear on the question of 'modern Yoga', and the book also reflects on the ways in which we might define religion, and the extent to which modern forms of Yoga can be called religion.

Jain's work, coming after various authors have already set out the broader narrative of what is termed modern or 'postural' Yoga, is able to explore one significant aspect of the history of Yoga in detail: its journey from being an 'elite' 'counterculture' activity for the first several decades of its existence in the West to becoming a popular and easily accessible experience today. In doing this, Jain utilizes the idea of 'continuity with consumer culture'. *Selling Yoga* is remarkable for its ability to bring conceptual clarity not only with the study of 'primary' material, but also in the analysis of and response to secondary literature.

The first chapter of Jain's book surveys 'premodern yoga systems' in an attempt to demonstrate how premodern Yogis of any persuasion were 'hardly the images we tend to envision when we think of modern practitioners of Yoga' (p 19). More significantly, this chapter puts forth one of the central theses of Jain's argument – that premodern Yoga was different from contemporary versions because it grew in a different context, which is to say, what has been common to Yoga across centuries has been the fact that it has understandably always been determined by changing sociocultural circumstances.

Modern Yoga, Jain explains in the second chapter, grew out of 'encounters' between Yoga reformers from India and Westerners engaged in 'metaphysics to fitness' (p 21), and modern social phenomena. Much of this section looks at early engagements with Yoga in the West and the reception of Yoga there, discussing some tendencies that the encounter with Yoga brings out about Western sociocultural history. Until the middle of the twentieth century, modern Yoga was 'countercultural, elite, or scandalous' (p 41), writes Jain. It is possibly also an important aspect of the history of 'religion' in nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, as it served as a counterpoint to religious doctrines which had a somewhat broader yet mundane and conservative appeal at the time.

The factors which determined the success of late twentieth century modern/postural Yoga are summarized by Jain in terms of issues relating to government policy (opening up of immigration restrictions), prevailing attitudes towards existing religions, consequently the relative ease with which gurus 'enter(ed) the market', and the way consumer culture functioned. Also then, religious identity is conceivable as 'bricolage' in a modern context. The shift which takes place in this period is that Yoga is no longer counterculture, but pop culture.

Jain contrasts modern/postural Yoga with modern 'soteriological Yoga' to explain why the former became popular in the late twentieth century. The examples she uses of the former to illustrate her point include the Siddha Yoga of Swami Muktananda and Preksha Dhyana of Mahaprajna. Jain holds that the reason modern/postural yoga became more successful in the market was because it does not require a lifelong commitment or any radical shift in worldview, and allows direct access. Weaving theoretical analysis deftly into her narrative, she also reads this in terms of continuity with consumer

culture. In 'Branding Yoga', she narrates the example of John Friend's Anusara Yoga, which she calls a 'second-generation Yoga brand' (whereas Siddha Yoga or Iyengar Yoga are first generation). She discusses the relationship between consumption and Yoga, and brand and meaning.

Jain's fifth chapter takes a cue from something she says in the preceding one, where she observes that surrender to a guru is not easily distinguishable 'qualitatively or quantitatively' from surrender to a brand (p 93). The chapter is focused on explaining how modern/postural Yoga may be thought of as a 'body of religious practice'. She develops her argument mostly as a critique of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's *Selling Spirituality.* In response to their position (and that of many other academics and non-academics) that certain forms of modern/postural Yoga are 'mere commodity', she argues that this position ignores the emic perspective on modern/postural Yoga. She then goes on to address Carrette and King directly, demonstrating that their position on postural Yoga is based on an essentialist, reified understanding of religion. According to Jain, Carrette and King mistakenly take the view that religion is clearly distinct from and opposed to the profane, is 'good' and also sui generis (p 102).

Jain's critical response to Carrette and King depends on Mircea Eliade's idea of hierophany, meaning 'manifestation of the sacred', and her example is the 'body' in Iyengar Yoga. The increasing lack of distinction between the sacred and the material, she points out, is the 'dominant ontology of consumer culture', as Hugh Urban demonstrates (p 104). Postural Yoga, rather than lacking religious and philosophical content, then reflects the 'dominant religio-philosophical mode of consumer culture'. In response to the possible argument that postural Yoga concerns itself only with personal salvation, she brings up the religious problem of human pain and suffering. Her discussion of the question presents an interesting engagement with Preksha Dhyana in North America. On a second point, she draws attention to the fact that the 'religious' need not be ethical: indeed, according to Eliade, Yoga may, on the contrary, be 'antisocial' and 'antihuman' (p 120). Further, she points out that it might be a problem to project back a modern conception of social justice onto ancient systems. Finally, she argues that religion is, in fact, *not* sui generis.

In the sixth chapter, she looks at Orientalist presumptions regarding Yoga which inform both those who think of it as 'theirs' because it is 'Hindu', as well as Christian groups who oppose it on religious grounds precisely for being Hindu. She argues that both the positions emerge from consumer culture, a space which they share in common with postural Yoga itself. Critiquing the idea of an unchanging essence, she posits that protests espouse a 'distorted history' which 'serves a fierce will to power' (p 156). Finally, she brings together the various threads running through her work to emphasize the ideas of context-sensitivity, diversity and the absence of an essence or centre.

While Jain's account is internally consistent, and she certainly accomplishes what she sets out to do quite effectively, her work inspires at least two questions. One is her discussion of etic versus emic views. In her preface, Jain speaks of her experience with the Jain community (pp xiv-xv). When, to the community, she claims that she is 'Jain, but not Jain', distinguishing her last name from religious identity, the community's response is usually one of dismissal. Jain reads this, perceptively, as stemming from their *karma* centred ontology, which leads them to deny that her sociocultural context and experiences shape her. Two processes of translation can be observed here: the Jain community's translation of Jain's claim into a system that is comprehensible to them, and Jain's translation of their dismissal into an analytic which is comprehensible to her and her audience. In a sense, her reading of postural Yoga through ideas of consumer culture is also an act of translation. While one of her criticisms of Carrette and King is that they are dismissive of emic views in their critique of some versions of Yoga, it is not certain to what extent Yoga practitioners would agree with the way she populates the category of 'religion' as she applies it to them. Similarly, her reading of twentieth century Yoga organizations as less or more successful due to their continuity or otherwise with consumer culture presents an ontology which would find itself at variance with that of practitioners of many soteriological Yoga traditions. This is an interesting problem with which she does not engage as sensitively as it might be expected.

The other, related point is that while it is true that Carrette and King appear to reify the category of religion, she appears to miss the point of *Selling Spirituality*, which is in fact a *critique* of consumer culture. The book, if not a call for action itself, certainly judges traditions in terms of the extent to which they may be critically effective.

That said, Jain's work is a persuasive analysis of modern Yoga in terms of consumer culture and emphasizes the context-specificity of yoga, raising some critical points but also providing an analytical structure for further study of an important phenomenon of modern cultural experience.

The Chinese Puzzle

Pallavi Aiyar, *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China* (New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2008), pp. 273, Paperback, Rs.450

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Written in 2008, Pallavi Aiyar's *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China* remains as relevant today as then, even though the pace of change in China has been unusually rapid. Written like an extended diary, reflections on her 5-year stint in China from 2002 onward (working as an English language instructor first, and then journalist), Aiyar's book is at a deeper level a document about the human condition in one of humankind's greatest revolutions – the transformation of China in our time. But the book is also as much about India as it is about China, two peoples joined by geography, history and culture, but also, from the Indian side, anxiety about its resurgent neighbor. Aiyar writes for an India unable to fully grasp what is happening in China, sometimes comparing the two, at other times, more directly if also a little simplistically asking: what could India learn from China? (p. 239). For someone who has just returned from a trip to China, many years after Aiyar lived there, I believe that in many ways the questions are still the same except that the lag on the Indian side has become more comprehensive, acute and exasperating. Here, I will not dwell on Indian anxieties about China. We live it all the time. My focus, as a historian, will be to read *Smoke and Mirrors* as a document of history, a kind of ethnographic history of the everyday in fast-changing China, where the author, in her perceptive, sensitive and evocative prose, weaves a picture of a society in transition. Her wit and humor add an aspect of irony to her prose that is remarkable.

The first chapter (pp. 10-27) – *Better Fat than Anapple* – deals with Aiyar's introduction to China, primarily through her interaction with her students at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute, where she first comes face to face with the puzzle that is China. Writes Aiyar: 'The China I lived in was a communist country in name but a strange hybrid in practice…students sat through compulsory classes in Marxism and Maoist thought, bored blind, fantasizing of little but money' (pp.15-16). Her struggle with the language, amusement at finding that young people learning English invariable take funny English names, realization of how deep they had been socialized into being apolitical, and (almost) horror at discovering the women students' bizarre fixation with large eyes, among other things, give us a sense of how strange and mixed-up a place China appears at first glance.

From her work place, Aiyar eases us out into the streets of Beijing, the city which was to be her home in China, a city in the grip of a huge make-over for the Olympics in 2008, a prestige event that the Chinese government, already in the midst of supervising the massive transformation of its cities, was bent upon making a success at all costs. This chapter – *Olympian Makeover* (pp. 28-50) – tracks the demolition of a very large part of historic Beijing, 25 million square meters, and the creation of a swanky new city with a Central Business District, 'the capitalist core of the communist capital' (p. 28). According to Aiyar, 'the pace of the current transformation was unbeatable as was its reach, as it pushed into every nook and corner, bulldozing its way into even Mongol-period enclaves that had so far miraculously remained intact' (p. 37). In this city in the throes of an 'identity crisis' (p. 36), the Chinese people, observes Aiyar, used to the 'ceaseless impermanence' and 'flux (p. 39)' of their recent past, showed a certain 'equanimity' that 'would have made the Buddha proud' (Ibid.).

In the next chapter, titled *Coronavirus* (pp. 51-70), the writer comes to grips with the Chinese government's obstinate refusal, shored up through censorship and socialization, to first recognize the SARS epidemic, then its volte-face in the face of aggravated circumstances, and the subsequent scramble for damage control. Stunned, Aiyar

notes 'the manner in which students violently oscillated from complete trust in the authorities to hysterical suspicion' (p.60), and the fact that 'the whole country was like a pressure cooker, calm on the top but boiling inside' (ibid.). Though horrified at the state's response, Aiyar also recognizes, in the state's belated acknowledgement of the crisis, that its power eventually lay in fostering an 'uninterrupted illusion that the CCP's continuing rule was essential and beneficial for all sections of Chinese society' (ibid.). Alongside this meditation on the Chinese state, Aiyar brings alive in these pages the panic that gripped the city, with vignettes about the odd and pathetic acts of both the state and the people to safeguard themselves from the disease, like rubbing vinegar on the walls of buildings, playing badminton feverishly, and killing pets and dogs suspected of carrying the virus.

In *Hindi-Chini Buy Buy* (pp. 69-96), Aiyar busts the myth of the China-India comparison, pointing to not just the huge, almost unbridgeable distance between the two countries, but also the surprisingly small economic relationship between the neighbors in relation to the hype. But yes, she finds out, there is indeed a growing exploration by Indians of the opportunities in China, whether it be high level diplomatic and business visits from the subcontinent or the modest adventures of Indian yogis, students and mofussil jobseekers in China's bustling cities.

With the following two chapters – *Mr. Wu and Family* (pp. 94-114) and *Hutong Days* (pp. 115-125) – Aiyar opens an absolutely riveting window into the life of Beijingers in the *hutong* neighborhoods and their *siheyuan* homes in the Chinese capital. *Hutongs* are 'essentially willow-lined villages hidden away from the surrounding urban sprawl' (p. 95), comprising a network of small alleys and courtyard homes that were once the residences of the imperial elite. Although large sections of the *hutongs* have been demolished to make way for the new, glitzy Olympic City, a few have been preserved as souvenirs of Beijing's 'historic district'. The *Hutong*-scape of Beijing bears the scars and spirit of China's turbulent history, having witnessed the eviction of the old elite, resettlement as a proletarian complex with public toilets, and the recent make-over as a tourist curio even as its oldest inhabitants await another dislocation. Through the idiosyncratic behavior of her landlord Wu, perpetually repairing the house, the laid-back domestic rhythms of *hutong* residents, and the lively community entertainment and gossip sessions of the area, Aiyar evokes a China at once in the throes of change and as placid as ever. She writes: 'I loved the communality that infused the *hutongs…* Overfull quarters forced people out to the streets and through the changing seasons residents bundled together outdoors, exchanging gossip, playing mahjong, quaffing beers on steamy hot summer nights or just watching the world go by' (p. 5). During my recent visit to Beijing, I too stayed for a few days in a *siheyuan* now converted into a hotel, and much has – miraculously and thankfully – remained the same.

Passing over the comedies that beset Indian businessmen as they struggle with Chinese food in the chapter *Chicken Feet and Jain Diets* (pp. 126-136), Aiyar delves deeper into the economic miracle that is China in *Factory of the World* (pp. 137-168) and the recent freedoms in religious life in *Opiate of the Masses* (pp. 169-200). On the former, Aiyar observes that Chinese entrepreneurship has often led rather than followed economic liberalization. Given the tumultuous history of the last century, unsure of whether anything will ever last, the 'people', Aiyar quotes a local, 'don't think they get another chance in life… if (they) get an opportunity (they) grab it, tightly, it may be the only one (they) get' (p. 165). On the question of religion, Aiyar believes that faced with 'yawning inequalities, vanishing provisions for education and healthcare, unpaid wages and pensions and rampant official corruption, and disenchantment across large sections of Chinese society… the party (CCP) was thus coming to realize that (religion) may be an opiate, but opiates soothe tensions and calm frayed nerves' (p. 176). Popular religiosity has thus been allowed to grow. During my visit to China's largest mosque in Xian and a Buddhist temple in Shanghai, I too was struck by public notices that spoke of how the government was providing funds for the upkeep of these shrines in keeping with the *(re)correct(ed)* policies of protecting cultural minorities.

In *Shangrila* (pp. 201-2013), Aiyar visits Zhongdian, indeed billed by tourism publicity as 'Shangrila', a largely Tibetan area bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region; and in the *Roof of the World* (pp. 2013-234), she finds herself on board the first train into Lhasa. It is here that she confronts the Chinese puzzle at its most frustrating point, something that leads her, but for the epilogue, to her final substantial chapter *Squaring the Circle and Coming Full Circle* (pp. 235-262), where, in the light of her experience of disaffection among the Tibetans, she ponders over the heart of the matter. Having lifted millions out of poverty in perhaps one of the biggest transformations of our age, created a society where education, health, dignity of labor, women's rights and civic behavior were the norm, provided local social and political freedoms, was the CCP's asking for too much in its demand for total loyalty from all its peoples? Conversely, was India's democracy worthless in the light of the Indian state and peoples' failures in giving themselves a decent life? Given that the promises of political freedom and social equality in India have repeatedly been belied, more so in the present day, I can understand why even in 2007, Aiyar was unable to decide.