



INFOCHANGE

agenda

ISSUE 16 2009



Open Spaces

The need for intercultural dialogue and cultural initiatives to build it

FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

RECENT BACK ISSUES



Occupational safety and health



Reporting conflict



Social exclusion



Migration and displacement

© Infchange News & Features, Centre for Communication and Development Studies, 2009

Infchange Agenda is a quarterly journal published by the Centre for Communication and Development Studies, a social change resource centre focusing on the research and communication of information for change

To order copies, write to:

Centre for Communication and Development Studies

301, Kanchanjunga Building, Kanchan Lane, Off Law College Road, Pune 411 004

Suggested contribution: Rs 60 (1 issue); Rs 240 (4 issues); Rs 480 (8 issues)

DDs/cheques to be made out to 'Centre for Communication and Development Studies'

Infchange Agenda content may be cited, reproduced and reprinted for purposes of education and public dissemination with due credit to the authors, the journal and the publishers

Introduction: Open spaces	2
Manufactured multiculturalism <i>by Oishik Sircar</i>	4
Once upon a citizen... <i>by Lawrence Liang</i>	7
The cultural challenges of globalisation <i>by Aseem Shrivastava</i>	10
Expanding the middle ground <i>by Anmol Vellani</i>	12
Ram-Rahim Nagar: Oasis of peace <i>by Anosh Malekar</i>	14
The Shivajinagar problem <i>by Achal Prabhala</i>	16
'Art has always been surrounded by strife': Ratan Thiyam	17
Poetics, politics, praxis <i>by Githa Hariharan</i>	19
Songs of a shared past: Interview with Shabnam Virmani <i>by Prayas Abhinav</i>	22
The sensex of alienation <i>by John Samuel</i>	27
Development without culture <i>by Anmol Vellani</i>	30
Kushti bhaichara <i>by Anosh Malekar</i>	34
The shared space of Bollywood <i>by Jerry Pinto</i>	39
Budhan bolta hai <i>by Anosh Malekar</i>	44
Community beyond boundaries <i>by Gail Omvedt</i>	48
Musings on the popularity of Mein Kampf <i>by Satya Sivaraman</i>	51
Peer to peer world <i>by V Sasi Kumar</i>	53
Opening open spaces <i>by Jai Sen</i>	57

Cover photograph: Graphic on a hoarding at the Wagah border between India and Pakistan. Photograph: dinodia.com

Editors: Hutokshi Doctor, John Samuel
 Production and layout: Gita Vasudevan, Sameer Karmarkar
 Infochange team: Anosh Malekar, K C Dwarkanath,
 Philip Varghese, Rakesh Ganguli, Renu Iyer, Vijay Narvekar, Vishnu Walje

Open spaces

THIS IS THE 16th ISSUE of *Infochange Agenda*. A little late in the day perhaps to be drawing our readers' attention to the masthead. But in case you hadn't noticed, the open-quotes so prominent on our masthead are intended to signify that each issue of this journal opens a space for dialogue on a particular topic.

The masthead might never be more appropriate to a subject than the one dealt with in this volume of *Agenda*, which explores the difficult questions raised by multiculturalism: Why are spaces for dialogue shrinking and primary identities — of race, religion, language, nation — hardening in a globalising world? What is it that is fuelling fundamentalism, making it so easy for fundamentalists to polarise opinion into either/or, us/them? Is intercultural dialogue the way to realise the power of multiculturalism? And how can we forge open spaces for intercultural dialogue?

The problem with multiculturalism could be, as Amartya Sen points out, that the age-old exhortation to "Love thy neighbour" was all very well when neighbours led more or less the same kind of lives. It's quite different now, when loving your neighbour means loving the Indian family that lives next door to you in Montana, USA, and insists on drying fish and *papads* outside your front door. Or if, like Nicolas Sarkozy, you think that the burkha worn by the

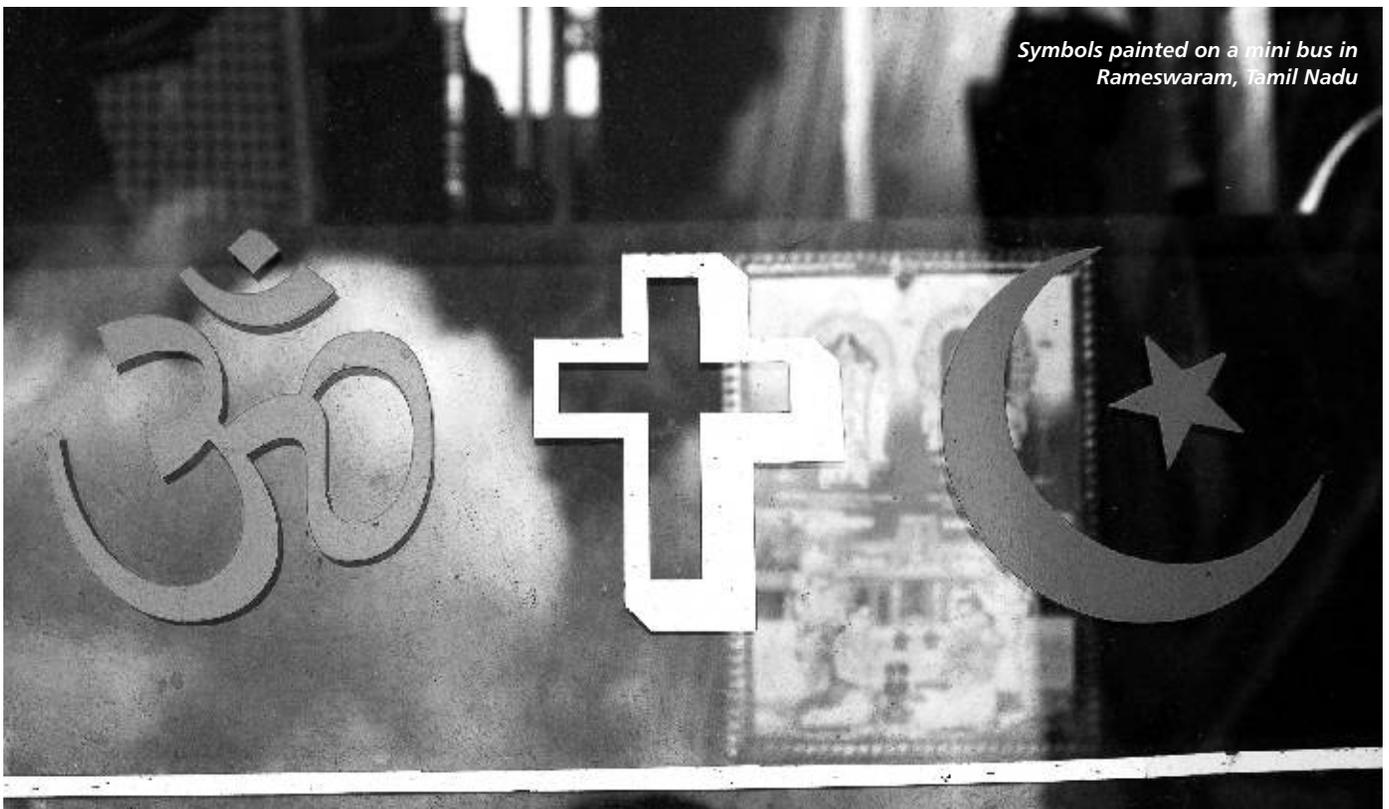
woman next door to you in Paris is "a sign of subjugation... of debasement" and worse, "not welcome on French territory".

Difference — or diversity — has become a dominating feature of modern life. Wave after wave of immigrants have altered the ethnic and social composition of cities and whole countries. They were encouraged at first, then viewed with indifference, and now with downright hostility, as Lawrence Liang, an Indian of Chinese origin, wryly notes in these pages.

Cultural diversity has certainly piggybacked on globalisation. Globalisation was supposed to break down the restrictive barriers of nation-states and establish a democracy of cultures. Instead, Aseem Shrivastava argues, globalisation has led to the dominance of some — mostly western — cultures and the gradual erosion of others. This erosion can be dangerous, he says, for a spurned past persists and lives a furtive life, tormenting people with unnamed anxieties. These anxieties are what John Samuel terms "the sense of alienation".

Globalisation has a tendency to include those who have buying capacity, and exclude others who don't, as Githa Hariharan says in her essay in this issue. The excluded have

Symbols painted on a mini bus in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu



dinodia.com

Hanging together

Strategies for social cohesion

What the State can do:

- Guarantee equality before the law and a strong human rights framework, including anti-discrimination measures. This benefits everyone. Human rights abuses must not be excused as “cultural”.
- Get serious about tackling poverty: people facing cultural disadvantage are often poorer.
- Fund interaction and mixed initiatives instead of particular religions and communities. Intercultural exchanges recognise that cultures are living, malleable and constantly changing.
- Open up spaces for cultural literacy. No culture is perfect, and it's unrealistic to ignore difference and hanker after perfect harmony. By encouraging critical dialogue and learning about the 'Other', boundaries can be crossed and new accommodations created.
- Promote artistic endeavour widely. Artistic expression creates new cultural pathways.

What the individual can do:

- Culture and society aren't static. Grow with change rather than sticking to a cherished version of the past.
- Prejudice is easy but it denies its objects a voice. A more open society needs individuals willing to listen and argue.
- Recognise the multiple axes of identity — personal preferences and beliefs, race, class, gender, sexuality. Engage with the individual rather than groupthink.
- Culture is what you make of it; don't let fundamentalists dictate otherwise. It's up to you to decide how 'traditional' you want to be, create new hybrids, or profess no culture at all.
- Bridges are built, they don't just appear.

— From *New Internationalist*, May 2009

not an inevitable by-product of cultural differences. Sure, difference can erupt into conflict. But more often, difference is manipulated into conflict. It is this manufactured form of conflict that intercultural dialogue can defuse or deconstruct, as the residents of Ram-Rahim Nagar, an island of peace in turbulent Ahmedabad, and profiled in this issue, have proved.

Intercultural dialogue cannot change a fundamentalist's mindset, says Anmol Vellani. The fundamentalist has a polarised view — if you are not *for* them, you are *against* them — and dialogue is only possible for people who are not so polarised. The fundamentalist will do everything possible to polarise opinion further, “so that the middle ground, where dialogue is possible, collapses”.

“If intercultural dialogue cannot change the fundamentalist's mindset... what can it aim to do? It can try to ameliorate the impact of what fundamentalists do. One of its purposes, therefore, must be to strengthen the hand or augment the influence of the moderating voices in different societies, to help prevent the middle ground from shrinking further.”

This is an important part of what the Centre for Communication and Development Studies seeks to do — through the virtual space for dialogue created on www.infochangeindia.org, the print journal *Infochange Agenda*, and Open Space, the civil society outreach programme that facilitates dialogue on identity, pluralism, diversity, rights and social justice in six Indian cities. As Jai Sen observes in the closing article in this edition, the creation, existence, nurturing, and protection of open spaces needs to be seen as the recovering and/or uncovering of our freedoms, our power-to, and our humanity. Open space is a symbol of what is possible, especially in these times of closing spaces. It is up to us to create them.

nothing but ethnic, linguistic and religious identities to prop themselves up with. That's the main reason why globalisation accentuates cultural nationalism.

It is important to understand, however, that difference and cultural diversity are not by themselves problems. Wherever you look, people with radically different worldviews co-exist, renegotiating their relationships all the time, as Achal Prabhala points out in his article on one multicultural neighbourhood in Bangalore. The State and civil society look upon this neighbourhood as a communal tinderbox, a problem to be solved. In fact, says Prabhala, the Hindu fundamentalists and Muslim fundamentalists, the secularists and the anti-secularists are the problem. Because conflict is

Manufactured multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is the official policy that countries adopt to legally protect racial, ethnic and cultural diversity. But multiculturalism is going awry in a world that encourages the free movement of capital across borders while guarding against the free movement of people who threaten our 'manufactured' multiculturalism. Intercultural dialogue is a small but effective means to realise the power of multiculturalism

OISHIK SIRCAR

Exclusive inclusion

What do Belgin Dogru, Esmā-Nur Kervanci, Sarika Singh and Mohammed Salim have in common? Well, to start with they are school students: Salim studies at the Nirmala Convent Higher Secondary School in Madhya Pradesh, India; Sarika at the Aberdare Girls Comprehensive School in Wales, UK; and Belgin and Esmā-Nur at the State Secondary School in Flers, France. Across continents separated by several miles these school students, coincidentally, have shared the same predicament.

In 1999, Belgin Dogru and Esmā-Nur Kervanci were excluded from school as a result of their refusal to remove their headscarves during physical education and sports classes. The school's discipline committee decided to expel the students from school for breaching the duty of assiduity by failing to participate actively in physical education and sports classes. The students moved the European Court of Human Rights, but their plea was rejected and the court observed that the purpose of the restriction on the applicants' right to manifest their religious convictions was to adhere to the requirements of secularism in state schools.

In November 2007, Sarika was barred from attending her school for refusing to take off her *kada*. A note from her school stated: "We have a strict code of conduct that has been in place for years. A copy of this is given to all the girls before they are even pupils, and also at the start of every new term. We use the code to ensure equality between all pupils." Sarika moved the British High Court and managed to have the ban lifted in August 2008; she returned to school wearing the *kada*.

In March 2009, the Supreme Court of India rejected a plea from Salim who petitioned for quashing a school regulation requiring students to be clean-shaven. The Madhya Pradesh High Court rejected his plea, after which he appealed to the Supreme Court. It is interesting to note what Justice Katju of the Supreme Court said in rejecting Salim's plea: "We don't want to have Taliban in the country. Tomorrow a girl student may come and say that she wants to wear a burkha; can we allow it? I'm a secularist. We should strike a balance between rights and personal beliefs. We cannot overstretch secularism."

In all the above cases, restrictions were imposed on the use

of visible symbols of religious significance, but belonging only to minority/immigrant communities. Interestingly, the restrictions have also been imposed in countries that are declaredly liberal, democratic, secular and multicultural.

Justice Katju's remark comes against the background of India's Constitution categorically guaranteeing the fundamental right to freely profess, practise and propagate religion without adversely affecting public order, morality and health. This guarantee forms the core of the idea of secularism in the Indian Constitution. Justice Katju, however, cautioned that allowing Salim to sport a beard would amount to overstretching secularism. What is also interesting about the judge's remark is the connection he makes between keeping a beard and the militant ideology of the Taliban. In effect meaning that overstretching secularism by allowing Muslims to grow a beard would turn them into 'terrorists'. Surprisingly, allowing Hindu brahmins to wear the holy thread, or Sikhs to wear a turban did not strike Justice Katju as other instances of overstretching secularism.

Secularism then gets overstretched when an identified and already disenfranchised minority demands rights beyond what they are benignly granted. Responding favourably to that demand would be called 'appeasement' by detractors. In India we have seen the same argument used during the debates on the uniform civil code where it was said that secularism would be compromised if Muslims were allowed to follow their personal law. Similarly, the headscarf and *kada* debates have been looked at as crossing the limits of multiculturalism.

Thus, the values that the ideas of secularism, pluralism, diversity and multiculturalism embody are premised on qualifications. The inclusion of a cultural minority as same and equal citizens of a body politic will depend on how well the minority population is able to assimilate into and culturally behave like the 'authentic' citizens of the country where they are claiming their rights. What this understanding of pluralism misses out on is the fact that there is never a sanctified 'authentic culture'. The very origins of civilisations are founded on hybrid cultures.

Our mongrel selves

Born to a black immigrant Kenyan father and white

immigrant European mother, had an Indonesian stepfather, schooled in Southeast Asia, was born a Muslim, raised a Christian, and now American President. If there's anyone who presently singularly personifies the meaning of multiculturalism, it is Barack Hussein Obama. Although he is referred to as the first black president of the USA, reducing his identity to the colour of his skin erases the journey of his parents and his growing up to become what he is today.

Obama's story tells us that the world is what it is today because of a very dense history of the intermingling of people from different civilisations and cultures, crossing man-made borders, redrawing them, and creating a hybridity so complex that searching for its origins might be a futile effort. The histories of all countries in this world are multicultural in some way or another. The racial and ethnic similarities between people across continents speak of the great journeys that our ancestors undertook, sometimes for conquests, better prospects, and sometimes as slaves or indentured labourers. It is a history of the triumph of the human spirit that always wants to discover newer lands, and also a history of grave tribulations where entire communities were displaced and evicted from their place of origin either in the name of slavery, or for maintaining racial purity.

India is a plural and diverse country, but can we imagine that there are Indians with distinct Negroid features? These are the Siddis whose ancestors are from sub-Saharan Africa. While most were sold as slaves and taken to the US, many were brought to India as well. They live in parts of Gujarat and Karnataka. Similarly, in Mizoram and Manipur there are Christians with Mongoloid features called the Bnei Menashe tribe, who are originally Jews from Israel; many of them have returned to Israel. More interestingly, a US court in a 1923 decision said that Indian Asians were of Caucasian origin (as Europeans are), except that they were not white. While the racial origins of peoples are contestable claims, these illustrations throw some light on the extent to which civilisations have mixed with each other through what has been referred to as 'miscegenation' leading to the creation of mongrel identities that never have singular origins.

The realisation that the world is not homogeneous, and the fact that we can find more similarities than differences among disparately located cultures has become more apparent since we've called our world a 'global village': interconnected not just through technology but also through history. Multiculturalism is the practice of keeping intact this history of exchanges across cultures and civilisations. It is premised on the principle of pluralism that supports cultural, ethnic and racial diversity and works towards a rainbow society.

While there has always been recognition of this hybridity of cultures, the term 'multiculturalism' is of recent origin. Western countries like the UK, France, Canada, USA and Australia have been the primary proponents of the practice of multiculturalism as official government policy. The concept was strategically deployed to achieve two

objectives. First, they wanted to symbolically declare that these countries belong to the aboriginal or natives as much as they do to the conquerors, and that the settling communities need to undo the violence and disadvantage that aboriginals have been forced to face through history. Second, when these countries required skilled and cheap labour from Third World countries, one way of attracting potential immigrants was to project themselves as places that are tolerant of other cultures. The practice of multiculturalism was also emblematic of support for human rights of all people, especially cultural rights. In countries like USA, Canada and Australia, which have a big population of 'native', 'aboriginal' or 'first nations' communities, multiculturalism was an attempt at compensating for the historical wrongs committed against them by European settlers.

There is, however, a distinction between diversity and multiculturalism, although they are generally used synonymously. While diversity means the existence of pluralism, multiculturalism is the official policy that countries undertake to legally protect that diversity. For instance, the constitutional declaration that India is a secular country is the practice of multiculturalism. Countries attain multicultural status in two ways: they either become 'mosaic' cultures, or a 'melting pot' of cultures. This is best understood by looking at the UK and USA as multicultural countries. The UK is a place where people from all over the world immigrate to form a multicultural 'mosaic', where each community carries on with practices traditional to their culture, while they become British citizens. In the USA, on the other hand, immigrants from other cultures are expected to embrace the American way of life — where cultural differences get mixed into the American 'melting pot'. The British mosaic was wonderfully depicted in the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* or the recent bestseller *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali; and the American 'melting pot' was beautifully captured in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* or the wacky *Harold and Kumar* films.

The predicament of pluralism

While multiculturalism sounds like a great idea, incidents like the ones discussed at the beginning of the essay have revealed its not-so-rosy side. What began as a progressive practice of plural governance has, on several occasions, been turned into a practice of coercive assimilation. This is evident from the ongoing controversies around the wearing of religious symbols by minority/immigrant populations in Europe, the conflict between the French and immigrant black Algerians in France, and the need to prove 'American-ness' to save yourself from arbitrary arrest if you are a brown person in the USA. Anyone bearded and turbaned was labelled Arab and brutally beaten up in the USA, post-9/11. The connection: Arab means Muslim, Muslim means enemy of the USA. Not so different from the logic used by Justice Katju.

Similarly, in India, the ongoing debate about having a

uniform civil code, separate educational institutes for Muslims, and the violence faced by 'outsiders' in Mumbai are incidents that rough out the smooth edges of the neat package of multiculturalism. The indiscriminate violence that Biharis and other north Indians have been facing at the hands of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena in Mumbai where 'place of birth' was the ground on which 'outsiders' were being denied access to employment opportunities, despite the fact that India guarantees the right to carry on a profession of one's choice anywhere in India, is reflective of what happens when we place limits on the understanding of multiculturalism in India's most diverse city.

All of these indicate that multiculturalism today means: as long as you behave like 'us', you will be guaranteed your rights. For the brown/black people from the Third World, entry into the 'western' world as immigrants is determined on the basis of how well they can 'assimilate', and how ready they are to denounce their own culture. This operates meticulously at a time when it is the 'West' that is strongly advocating the free movement of capital across State borders and at the same time obsessively guarding its borders to stop the entry of those it feels will threaten its 'manufactured' multiculturalism.

A hilarious illustration of the assimilationist tendencies of multiculturalism is evident in a white paper that was released by the Tony Blair government in February 2002, called 'Secure Border, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain' which was paradoxically aimed at strengthening border control to protect Britain's multicultural ethos from outside contamination in the wake of September 11. Among other things discussed in the white paper, it raised great concern about what it called 'bogus marriages' among the Indian immigrant population. It treated the practice of arranged marriages as a sham, alleging that it is an 'Indian' practice and is increasingly being used to secure easy immigration. In response, it suggested that the 'western' standard of 'love' marriage be put in place to counter the threat of arranged marriages, where couples will be expected to prove their love within a period of two years, after which immigration proceedings for the spouse may begin!

Communication is the key

Clearly, multiculturalism's plot seems to have gone awry only to revive a 'clash of civilisations' kind of idea — where diversity and tolerance have become mere lip-service towards cultural minorities. Given the immense potential of multiculturalism to play a powerful role in establishing tolerant and peaceful communities of diverse peoples, another tool for reconciliation has been added to multiculturalism's strategies. This is called 'intercultural dialogue' and is being widely promoted by international communities like the European Union to work towards creating a diverse, tolerant Europe.

While there is no internationally accepted definition of intercultural dialogue, the European Institute for

Comparative Cultural Research provides a useful one which has transnational significance: "Intercultural dialogue is a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or worldviews. Among its aims are: to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality; and to enhance creative processes."

Intercultural dialogue processes or encounters thus go beyond passive tolerance towards other cultures and are aimed at active dialogue about cross-cultural issues through creative means. Intercultural dialogue involves creative engagement that converts challenges and insights into innovative processes and into new forms of cultural expression.

But where does one engage in intercultural dialogue? The idea is to think of both conventional spaces like schools, universities, and other formal forums, but also unconventional spaces which need not even be physical, they can be virtual. A challenge to creating spaces for intercultural dialogue is to make sure that such spaces are open, accessible, without prejudice, non-judgmental, non-adversary and safe for whoever wishes to be a part of such a space. Civil society organisations play an extremely important role in fostering spaces for intercultural dialogue. Youth engagement is pivotal to making these spaces diverse, vibrant and sustainable. Several peace initiatives by organisations like the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy, which has conducted student exchange programmes between the two countries, have helped young people look beyond the diplomatic hostility. Use of the arts, films, music and creative writing has been hugely successful in finding out that peace means the same to everyone and is the most missed experience in the lives of people on both sides of the border.

Intercultural dialogue is a small but effective means to realise the power of multiculturalism. And unlike government policies that can take years to be implemented, and are often likely to get politicised, intercultural dialogue can be initiated by anyone who believes in the spirit of multiculturalism, and anywhere. All you need is to start a dialogue on diversity with anyone, and get more people to join in with time. The medium of dialogue can move from just talking to singing to dancing — as long as it is about celebrating diversity and learning about our similarities and differences and respecting them. How colourful our rainbow is depends on how we want to paint it.

Oishik Sircar is a human rights lawyer and independent researcher

Once upon a citizen...

Even as globalisation erases the spatial and temporal constraints imposed by national boundaries, it chooses to do so only in the convenient spaces of call centres, malls and stock exchanges. The constraints remain vibrant and rejuvenated at the good old desk of the immigration counter, as this writer discovers

LAWRENCE LIANG

THE OFFICER RAISES his eyebrows, peers suspiciously at me and says: "Indian?"

The nightmare always remains the same. Even after years of travelling, every time I am in a foreign country there is a moment when I break into a cold sweat and find myself nervously looking for the one thing that will prove my identity: my passport. In my mind, by then, I would have already enacted various Kafkaesque scenarios, most of which involve me trying to explain to a faceless authority how this Chinese-looking person has lost his Indian passport.

Most people hate airports and the long process of waiting, going through security checks and then immigration control. I have gradually learnt to develop an ethnographic romance with this ubiquitous process of nation-states which filters citizens from non-citizens and the authorised from the unauthorised. The immigration check represents, for me, the liminal space in which all kinds of global anxieties converge, the control desk lying somewhere between the desire of finding a better opportunity in a foreign land and the desperate attempts to prevent unwelcome guests from coming in.

The first time I left the country was to do my Masters and, as any average Indian will tell you, the two greatest fears that we have growing up in India is that we will die without going abroad, and that we will die virgins. Often, the two fears were also crucially linked to each other. So, I was returning with as much pride for the loss of my passport's virginity as for mine. But instead of a dramatic welcome home to *desh*, I found myself being detained for questioning by the immigration authorities. It turned out that some Nepali men had been arrested for trying to get to Europe on fake Indian passports which had been supplied by an agent promising them jobs in the UK. Here I was, with my indeterminate oriental looks, claiming that I was an Indian citizen. After a series of endless and repetitive questions and a rapid test of my Hindi vocabulary, I said in exasperation: "*Arrey bhaisaab, rehna tha to London mein rehta, vaapas kyun aata?*" ("My dear sir, if I had wanted to stay I would have stayed in London! Why would I have come back?") To which the officer replied: "*Haan, woh bhi sahi hai!*" ("Yes, that's true too!") and let me leave, a free citizen.

It is no irony that the production of the passport is that which ultimately guarantees the production of the citizen,

and that the passport is also the last stop for the citizen. From the 19th century onwards, there has been a consolidation of the passport as a document that establishes personal identity, but it is really in the post-World War II era that the passport also begins to get consolidated as a document proving nationality and citizenship. Dieter Hoffmann says that the paradigmatic scene of the modern era is that of the immigration officer examining a passport.

I have, in the course of the years, learnt the various skills required for a successful performance of citizenship. It is, of course, helpful that I live in Bangalore, the outsourcing hub of the world where, every night, thousands of young men and women discard their brown skins for white voices. The conversion of Rajesh to James and of workers learning to say 'buddle of waader' is indicative of the massive shifts that

Even after years of travelling, every time I am in a foreign country there is a moment when I break into a cold sweat and find myself nervously looking for the one thing that will prove my identity: my passport. In my mind, by then, I would have already enacted various Kafkaesque scenarios, most of which involve me trying to explain to a faceless authority how this Chinese-looking person has lost his Indian passport

have taken place in the global division of material and immaterial labour. My neighbour, Wasim, who works in a call centre, is now seriously considering adopting the nickname Osama because of the frequency with which people call him that when they discover that he is speaking from Bangalore. After the city's recent links to the attack in Glasgow, Wasim is also seriously considering the possibility of changing his name permanently to James: that will make his life in the call centre and in Bangalore slightly easier.

The 19th century was marked by the simultaneous tensions of fixity and mobility, and the passport found itself floating, Sybil-like, between the demands of national identity and the freedom of movement. Our contemporary era is marked by similar tensions between the need for mobility of capital and labour and the intensification of border controls. Thus, even as globalisation erases the spatial and temporal constraints imposed by national boundaries, it chooses to do so only in the convenient spaces of call centres, malls and stock exchanges. They remain vibrant and rejuvenated at the good old desk of the immigration counter. And yet, one of the conditions that marks the contemporary is the hundreds of thousands of people who cross borders every day, not necessarily at immigration counters, but travelling in secret compartments, hiding under heaps of fruit, or often piled in a small little boat. For most of these migrants, the passport plays little or no role in their travel.

The passport also needs to be understood as a conduit for much more paraphernalia that has to be carried and performed for the citizen to be produced. This is particularly true if you consider the gap that exists between the aspirations of modern citizenship (where people are erased of their markers of difference) and the material world of immigration and border controls where markers of difference alert the nervous system of the State.

The Raqs media collective have argued that the passport and other ID documents can also be seen as a script, and the border as an audition, a screen test, an identification parade, or a drill that you practise and never quite get right. They state:

"The tension, however, between the image and its shadowy referent, between the identikit photo and the missing person remains. This tension between citizens and denizens, subjects and aliens, is historically resolved through the approximation of a person's visage to an administrable image of the citizen. The passport, the identification card, the police record, the census datum and the portraits that these instruments build of personhood, are key to this. The frontal portrait makes a claim to be the distillate of truth. This reduction is all that is necessary for him or her to be known as a person with a valid claim to be in a place; all else is superfluous."

Just as the passport serves as the script that writes out the role of the citizen, citizenship itself can be seen as a particular performance. In the Indian context, the history of

the citizen is clearly tied to the project of the nation, "the largest imagined space which claimed the nomenclature of the new, or at least with the Utopian projection of the ideal community, freed from colonial domination, and free to create a world untainted by inequalities of caste-class, community or gender. It was a community, however, only of those who were eligible to be citizens, and the question of how citizenship was conferred is, in many ways, the same question as how the nation was imaged.

Nationalism was a marker of the readiness to enter the 'modern' age, and the modern person produced as 'Indian' was also the free, agentive, romantic subject of liberal humanism," (Niranjana, 1993).

We can also think of citizenship as the surplus value of nationalism. It is certainly not enough that you produce your identikit, because the production of citizenship also demands your participation in the ritual production of nationalism. Whether it is the American fetish for rallying under the Stars and Stripes, or the proxy wars that are fought on cricket fields, the secret history of your citizenship is written by your success at these rituals.

I learnt rather early to be wary of any form of nationalism. In the sixth standard, I would be asked by my class teacher: "If India and China played a cricket match, who would you support?" It was a particularly stupid question, given that China did not play cricket, but what irked me more was the even more stupidly happy smile that flashed on her face when I answered: "Of course I would support India, Miss!" It's a smile that I find resurrected in the faces of immigration officials around the world, the satisfied look of having been given the right answer when the details of your passport and the evidence written on your body seem not to match.

Whereas for me the production of my passport is the greatest guarantor of my identity, for a large number of people the passport is the greatest threat. Immigrants will often tell you that the first thing you do if you want to have a shot at surviving as an illegal alien is to get rid of your passport. In the late-'80s and early-'90s, a large number of Indian Chinese left India for Canada, Taiwan and countries in Europe looking for better job opportunities. A very bright cousin of mine landed in Canada and worked in restaurants and factories, putting in extra hours at underpaid jobs. The law finally caught up with her, but, luckily, her lawyer advised her to pretend to be a Vietnamese boat woman who did not speak a word of English. So, she merely nodded whenever the prosecutor or the judge asked her anything. Years later, when she came to visit India as a Canadian citizen, she told us that the toughest part of her act was keeping a straight face when being questioned. She had replaced one identikit for another.

Another friend was less lucky. After managing to work underground in Taiwan for eight years, he was finally arrested when he pulled over on the highway for a nap, exhausted after driving for 12 hours at a stretch. The



performative demands of citizenship rarely allow rest and must be continuously worked.

In order to ease the task of the overburdened official citizen-establishing apparatus, there are now a number of proposals for modernising the machinery to include biometric data in people's passports. The challenge after all is not just to weed out the citizen from the alien but, more importantly, to weed out the terrorist from the citizen. As the recent Hindi film *Fanaa* informs us: "The present-day terrorist is a man who thinks. He is a planner. No one knows his name or his past. When and where does he come from? No one knows. He could be anyone or no one. He could be the one sitting beside you in a theatre or a local train, or a bank teller or a cigarette vendor. He is intelligent and dangerous. He has to be found."

The onerous task of performing one's citizenship is already difficult enough, and soon, remaining silent to the demands of your identity may become equally so. The only way to inhabit this increasingly terrifying world where passports trespass into our dreams and convert them to nightmares is to flee momentarily into the world of fiction. I end with the magical circle that the young protagonist in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* discovers.

"When I turned back to my first circle I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people of good intention, had

thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines; I had to remind myself that they were not to be blamed for believing that there was something admirable in moving violence to the borders and dealing with it through science and factories, for that was the pattern of the world. They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony — the irony that killed Tridib: the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the 4,000-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines — so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free — our looking-glass border."

Lawrence Liang is a researcher at the Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore

The cultural challenges of globalisation

Outside the illusions of multiculturalism, there can be no authentic communication between people from different cultures unless and until each is allowed and willing to belong, once more, to the soil in which they grew up

ASEEM
SHRIVASTAVA

How it could all be

A globalised world, facilitated by growing commerce and rapid developments in technologies of transport and communication, presents historic opportunities for the mutual enrichment of human cultures. But is this actually happening? Before one attempts an answer to this question, it is worth reflecting on the conditions under which such opportunities might be harnessed.

For international cultural contact to bear succulent fruit, several conditions ought to prevail in the sphere of human relationships. There has to be an atmosphere of mutual respect, cultural equality and, importantly, curiosity. Without such a “democracy of cultures” it is likely that people belonging to one culture will harbour notions of superiority (and/or people belonging to the culture they interact with bear feelings of inferiority). The truth is that we really have no reliable or even consensual criteria for comparing cultures. In sublime realms, for instance, how is one to make authentic comparisons between the musical compositions of an Amir Khusrao and a Beethoven?

This is not to make an apology for cultural relativism. There are obvious moral standards cutting across cultures which make murder, rape or child abuse crimes under the laws of nations otherwise markedly different from each other. Because the ethical challenges of human life are ultimately universal in nature, and every society has to confront them sooner or later, cultures are remarkably more self-sufficient for most purposes than is usually recognised.

There is an additional prerequisite for mutual cultural enrichment in a globalised world. Each side in the exchange has to know their own culture to an adequate depth (in the absence of such knowledge, there is little to offer the other). This cannot happen without an abiding (yet self-critical) respect for and appreciation of one's own culture. When this is not present, it is more than likely that the hegemonic culture (abetted by accumulated power and wealth) will, over time, take the place of the historically weaker one. Instead of enriching and learning from the latter, it will knowingly or inadvertently contribute to its gradual erosion and ultimate demise. The history of lost cultures since the early days of imperialism and colonialism attests to this truth.

There is another reason why some cultures face erosion and possible extinction. In a world in which people from some

places are inclined to reject their own cultures (because of the colonial legacy of shame towards one's own past), it is very often the case that their knowledge of what they are rejecting wears thin.

Cultural interaction in such a world is likely to boil down to a transaction in surfaces, since people on one side (or both sides — since hegemonic cultures are also in decline, having ceded ground to commerce) are unacquainted with the depths of their own lore and traditions. This does not mean that the psychological depths somehow vanish. Human nature is such that the spurned past persists there and lives a furtive life in unsuspected regions of consciousness, tormenting people with unnamed anxieties.

How the world actually is

The above may be taken as a starting point for judging the cultural dangers and possibilities of globalisation in the contemporary world. But before doing that one thing still needs to be cleared up.

Everyone is led to take for granted that globalisation has actually happened. But is it true?

What has become globalised is the movement of capital. Short of there being a single global currency, money in all its myriad multiplying forms is travelling freely across the world, occupying, say, an American pocket in the morning, a Chinese bank account in the afternoon and an Iranian one by nightfall, perhaps changing hands many times between these (temporary) locations. Production and supply chains are also global now, making it impossible to trace a typical product — like a mobile phone — to any single country of origin.

But the story with regard to labour — ordinary working people — is strikingly different. Human mobility is a function of class. While millionaires and their political patrons jet around the world, buying and selling companies or islands, their less fortunate fellow citizens are not as free to move or transact. The movement of working people and their families across national boundaries is nightmarishly difficult in the global economy, especially from poorer to affluent regions of the world. Immigration laws in Japan, Europe and the US have become much more draconian with the passage of time. And countries like India, mimicking the policies of their rich counterparts in the West, take an increasingly stern view of immigration from poor neighbours like Bangladesh. A

hundred years ago, when even passports and visas were not required in many cases, the movement of people was significantly freer than it is today.

So it appears that it is not globalisation in the fullest cultural and political sense of the word that has occurred. If the world was truly globalised, we would see quite a different view when we open our windows. As there are growing restrictions on human movement and liberties (typically in the name of security in the age of war and terror), it becomes clear that what is happening is not so much globalisation as the internationalisation and concentration of capital. One is forced to infer that the growth and proliferation of capitalist imperialism (under the military dominance of the US) is no more globalisation than power is freedom.

As regards the cultural consequences of a global labour market, westerners sometimes pin the blame for the dilution and decline of their own cultures on immigrants from Third World countries. But the immigrants would not be there if economic conditions in their own vulnerable lands had not been worsened by adverse trade and finance regimes imposed on them by imperial institutions like the IMF, or if global arms profiteers had not furthered their militarisation and involvement in wars both civil and uncivil. Nor would they be there if employers in wealthy host nations did not want them to do the jobs that no one else was willing to do (especially for those wages).

More to the point, from our perspective no culture can be diluted because of the mere presence of relatively poor and powerless outsiders. The more plausible explanation for the decline of the cultures of the western world is the fact that so-called modern societies have been primed by the corporations and their media for economic growth and by the State for warfare. The overwhelming devotion to commerce (and wars for resources, if they are deemed necessary) has been an obvious fact of social life in the western world for decades now. Could commerce and aggression be the twin assassins of culture?

Consider some of the other conditions under which globalisation is happening. We continue to live in the long shadows of conquest. The US has been the dominant world power for over half a century. Since the exit of the Soviet Union from the frontlines of the Cold War in 1990, it has been the lone superpower. The present phase of globalisation was launched in the 1990s by the US in the interests of its own transnational corporations. If the global cultural dominance of the US has no historical precedent, it is because its government and corporations have capitalised on the power vacuum left behind by the erstwhile Soviet Union to flex military, political, economic and cultural muscle across the world to a degree unknown in world history. Imperialism does not any more have to involve outright conquest as in the days of European colonialism. The market and the marines guarantee success for the powerful. Most of the military and economic lessons Washington wishes lesser powers to learn are delivered by the periodic demonstration of the seriousness of its intention of achieving global "full

spectrum dominance". Imperialism, far from dying a long-awaited death, is coming into its own.

Time was when America was the name of a country. Today it is the name of the world's way of life, a condition of being and a state of mind. It is a sobering reality that cultures as far apart as Saudi Arabia and Thailand, Iran and South Africa (not to mention India and China) have all set their sights on building national economic might. Cultural matters are usually important to people nowadays only insofar as they promote the interests of big business and add feathers to nationalist caps. Unsurprisingly, not only is the external hardware of every society beginning to get homogenised after the American pattern, the mental software that people carry — the accents and intonations of language, tastes in film and music to name only a few features of the phenomenon — are also getting rapidly Americanised.

Countries like India, which have barely woken up from the long, troubling and still largely unexamined legacy of European colonialism, now offer a vast culture of uninhibited imitation of the West, sponsored by our culturally impoverished elites. It is in such a context — dominated by American cultural hegemony — that we, perforce, have to weigh the prospects of communication between the peoples of the world. There are Indians who remember their culture only when its bright end has to be showcased before curious and eager foreigners. They feel and live closer to New York than to Nagpur. On the other hand, there are westerners who still flock to India looking for spiritual enlightenment having all but forgotten their own Eckharts and Teresas.

In an era of so much cultivated ignorance, how are the cultural possibilities of globalisation to be explored? Outside the illusions of multiculturalism, there is no authentic communication between people from different cultures unless and until each is allowed and willing to belong, once more, to the soil in which they grew up.

If one comes from a culture that has been subject to conquest, one might wish, for a start, to arrest the ongoing rejection of one's own culture in the name of such chimeras as 'progress' or 'development'. Without this prior decolonisation of the inner life it is difficult to see how any movement in the direction of authentic communication can come about. And for those who come from cultures which haven't yet surrendered their lust for power and conquest, there is a perhaps longer road to be covered if the habits of power which conspire against culture and meaningful human communication are to be unlearned.

Without these twin forms of unlearning, any dream of mutual cultural enrichment is doomed to turn into a nightmare and flounder in the pitfalls of bad faith, leaving the world more xenophobic and stupid than ever before.

Aseem Shrivastava wrote his doctoral thesis on Environmental Economics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has taught economics at university and college level in India and the US. He now works as an independent writer, focusing on issues emanating from globalisation

Expanding the middle ground

The fundamentalist strategy is to polarise opinion, so that the middle ground, where dialogue is possible, collapses. Intercultural dialogue cannot change the fundamentalist's mindset, but it can strengthen the hand or augment the influence of the moderating voices in different societies, to help prevent the middle ground from shrinking further

ANMOL VELLANI

I WILL DEVELOP MY THOUGHTS on intercultural dialogue around a specific image and then a particular fact.

The image I have in mind is rather pedestrian: *Every person is an island*. For the angst-ridden from the middle of the last century, this image referred to the profound isolation of every human being, trapped in his or her own private world.

How can you know how ice cream tastes to me or how the sun feels on my skin? You may be able to *appreciate* my pain, my anxieties and my fears, but you cannot *feel* them as I do. These were the kind of questions that tormented some philosophers who were witness to the ravages of the Second World War.

After such anguish, one might ask, what hope is there for *intercultural* dialogue and understanding?

Perhaps only cyborgs, connected to each other's nervous systems, can overcome this existential anxiety. But two connected nervous systems become one, which destroys rather than bridges difference, removing the very need for dialogue. Even assuming that by connecting nervous systems, we do not obliterate individuality and distinct

consciousness, why would two people who can read each other's thoughts and feel each other's feeling, want to have a dialogue with each other?

Difference, surely, provides the reason for dialogue. You can only be interested in dialogue with someone who is different from you. If we entered into dialogue with the aim of getting rid of the need for dialogue, it would suggest that we were attached to a vision of a world of human clones.

But can differences be so great that dialogue is precluded? How far can islands drift from each other before it is impossible to build a bridge across them?

I believe, and I ask you to believe, that difference *per se*, however wide or radical, never excludes the possibility of dialogue. It is only what's in the mind that can exclude it. It is how you imagine or construct yourself and how you imagine or construct others — your self-conception and your conception of others — that can rule out dialogue. You might consider yourself too superior to a particular person to be prepared to have a dialogue with him or her. Nor is it dialogue that you will seek with someone you consider to be a slave or a victim.

Equally, fundamentalists of all hues define themselves in a way that excludes an interest in dialogue. Those who strive to be thought-controllers, emotion-manipulators, who wish to establish an exclusivist identity, are not ideologically inclined to see any value in dialogue.

The Orientalist process of 'othering' affirms that "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet". This defining of the other in order to define oneself establishes boundaries that do not intersect, have no meeting points. Here, both the self and the other have been conceived to underscore the impossibility of dialogue between them.

If I construct a people as alien, it is because I believe, and want others to believe, that they can only be repulsed; they cannot be assimilated, or even be accommodated or negotiated.

What this means is that fundamentalists cannot be party to an intercultural dialogue because, in their minds, if you are not for them, you are against them. Only those people for whom such polarities do not exist are prepared for dialogue. The fundamentalist strategy is to polarise opinion, so that

Sudharak Olwe



the middle ground, where dialogue is possible, collapses, or at least is so enfeebled as to cease to matter as a political force.

If intercultural dialogue cannot change the fundamentalist's mindset, who is not interested in dialogue, what can it aim to do? It can try to ameliorate the impact of what fundamentalists do. One of its purposes, therefore, must be to strengthen the hand or augment the influence of the moderating voices in different societies, to help prevent the middle ground from shrinking further. The implication for the work of artists and arts groups is plain. It is important that in their work, whether in their own societies or other societies, they seek to give voice not only to the weakest in society, but help to amplify those political voices which, if strengthened, can make a difference in the battle against fundamentalism.

You may ask: how can artists work in totalitarian, fundamentalist societies, particularly those that have never experienced democracy? Haven't the ruling intolerants already eliminated the middle ground, assuming that these societies ever had one?

Let me assure you that the fundamentalist's project of homogenisation or polarisation can never succeed in today's world. Totalitarian societies can still suppress dissenting voices, but they cannot eliminate them. Perspectives opposed to their hegemony will survive underground. Think of what came out from under the Taliban's cover of darkness, once it was lifted (the music, the dancing, the beauty parlours, the video films, the women's groups). A key reason why they cannot eliminate voices in different registers in their societies is that today there are information highways to other ideas and perspectives. The road to a world other than the one to which they would like to chain their people does not need to be paved in asphalt.

The fact

The fact to which I want to draw your attention is simply this: that I sit here before you, speaking. And that I am an Indian, from a distant land. And that the audience I face has its roots in the European continent.

Clearly I would not have accepted this speaking engagement if I did not believe that I could make myself understood to you. And you would not have invited me here if you did not think likewise.

But how is it possible that you and I can speak to each other? It is possible, I suggest, because we share a discourse. It is possible because our worlds, yours and mine, while they are not identical, overlap. It is possible because we may be at ease in more than one culture, or possibly because we feel that we belong to none at all. It is possible because, as someone said, "We are privileged to belong to several worlds in a single life".

And for these very reasons there is much more that I can talk to you about than I can say to a farmer in India, who will probably have a lot more to say to a farmer in Switzerland.

And that is because the two farmers share more of a language and experience with each other than with anyone in this room.

Dialogue is easier to imagine among people who lead lives like ours. Only a minority of people in any society, however, lead culturally double or deracinated lives. But if you agree that the Indian and the Swiss farmer will get along famously (with some help from translators), it expands the range of dialogues we can imagine between societies. There are individuals and groups in different societies that have analogous experiences, lead similarly bracketed lives, which can be connected and crisscrossed in various ways. It is here that the best opportunities for dialogue exist, whether through the arts or in other ways.

In other words, dialogue can be fruitfully initiated among groups that closely mirror each other in different societies. Can we think, for example, of projects where artists mediate between the working classes in two societies, or between women who are victims of violence, or between the homeless or the displaced, and especially between people who shun extremism in all its forms, thus expanding each group's sense of what they share in common?

What will such dialogues achieve? Firstly, if people recognise having a deep connection with someone from the other side of the mountain, it alters their sense of identity towards greater inclusiveness. Secondly, such dialogues keep the potential for dialogue within any society alive. In doing so, they help to subvert the fundamentalist's vision of an ideal society — which is one that does not dialogue with itself, and so cannot dialogue with other societies.

But, as I implied earlier, dialogue should be possible between people however wide the gulf is between them. What I am saying here is only that we should start with contexts and conditions of life in different societies that have common reference points before moving on to talk about apparently untranslatable areas of experience. Talking about what might be shared eases the way for talking about what is different.

(From notes for a talk delivered at the General Assembly of the Forum of European Cultural Networks, Odense, Denmark, November 9, 2002)

Anmol Vellani is Executive Director, India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore

Ram-Rahim Nagar: Oasis of peace

After four major Hindu-Muslim riots, Ahmedabad is a divided city. There is a 'Muslim Ahmedabad' and a 'Hindu Ahmedabad'. Except for Ram-Rahim Nagar, a slum where Hindus and Muslims have lived together and worked together to ensure that the riots leave them untouched. What is the secret of their success?

ANOSH MALEKAR

A HISTORY OF COMMUNAL RIOTS has altered the geography of Ahmedabad. There is a 'Hindu Ahmedabad' and a 'Muslim Ahmedabad'. There are no visible barriers like the erstwhile Berlin Wall. But Muslims feel safer in traditional ghettos like Juhapura and Shah Alam, while Hindus prefer the modern suburbs on the western banks of the Sabarmati.

Standing mute witness to this artificial divide is the magnificent dargah of Shah Alam, a 15th century mystic whose soul may draw some solace from the fact that though most Hindus and Muslims in the city are now sworn enemies, no one entering his shrine forgets to light a lamp in memory of his friend, the Hindu saint Narsinh Bhagat. Residents of the historic city believe that Narsinh Bhagat once wondered how their friendship could be made an example of communal harmony, and Shah Alam said every person visiting his dargah would have to light a lamp in his Hindu friend's memory.

This syncretic shrine continues to be a symbol of Hindu-Muslim amity despite its location in a 'sensitive' area of Ahmedabad. Scholars like Asghar Ali Engineer uphold its symbolic value, while others like Yoginder Sikand are sceptical about its social utility, especially after the destruction of several dargahs and mazars during the 2002 riots in Gujarat, and the subsequent marginalisation of the Muslim community, socially and economically.

Divisions in Ahmedabad are now so sharp and all-pervading

— taking hold of the whole of Ahmedabad including the walled city, the outer industrial areas and the new middle class and elite localities — that the friendship between Shah Alam and Narsinh Bhagat now appears nothing more than a myth from the past.

Unless, of course, you also visit a Hanuman temple and a dargah of a nameless pir standing next to each other at Ram-Rahim Nagar, a slum pocket in the eastern part of Ahmedabad called Dani Limda. This is a living example of communal harmony in the torn city.

Ram-Rahim Nagar has a population of over 20,000, of which 60% are Muslims and the rest Hindus — a delicate demographic composition that has remained undisturbed for the past four decades despite major riots in 1969, 1985, 1992 and 2002. The slum stretches roughly half a kilometre in the densely populated textile suburb, and was originally known as Gulab Bhai no Tekro, or Maharaj na Tekra. It was inhabited mostly by migrant workers from Banaskantha in north Gujarat, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

After the 1969 riots, the slum-dwellers decided to keep away anti-social elements and came together to form a welfare society called Ram-Rahim Nagar. The year was 1974, and the men behind this initiative were the late Ghazi Bhai and the late Kashi Maharaj. "They were security guards at a textile mill. They finalised the name — Ram-Rahim — as a tribute to the fact that a Hanuman temple and a dargah stood cheek-by-jowl at our slum. Nurturing mutual respect and communal harmony ever since has helped us withstand every communal riot that hit Ahmedabad," says Kanhaiyalal Parmar, a resident.

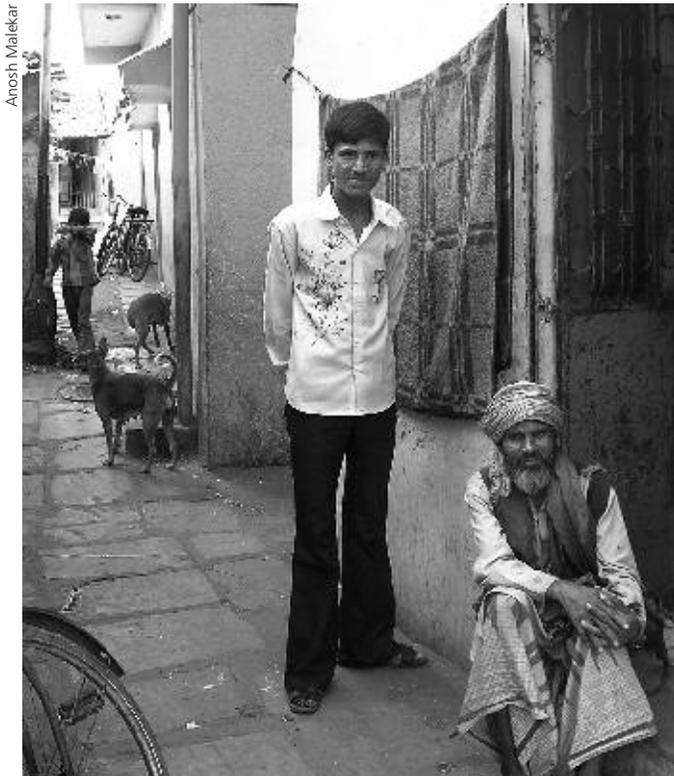
Ahmedabad's residential areas have always been divided along caste lines. Within the old walled city, different communities lived in separate enclosures called 'pols'. As Ahmedabad expanded, Hindus moved out of the walled city and the communal divide became sharper in the suburbs. Muslims and dalits were denied housing because they ate non-vegetarian food.

This mutual exclusion and poverty brought the Muslims and dalits together. "People here are not concerned with mandir-masjid because they know they will be the ultimate sufferers in the event of communal disturbances," says Parmar.

Ram-Rahim Nagar has not experienced riots ever since the



After the 1969 riots, the slum-dwellers decided to keep away anti-social elements and came together to form the Ram-Rahim Nagar Welfare Committee



Anosh Malekar

The residents say they keep a 24-hour vigil during disturbances in Ahmedabad or elsewhere in Gujarat, to prevent any mischief by 'outsiders'

Ram-Rahim Welfare Committee came into existence. The committee comprises 21 members headed by a chairman, a post that rotates between a Hindu and a Muslim every year. If the chairman is a Hindu, his deputy is a Muslim, and vice-versa. Members are drawn equally from the two communities.

The Muslims comprise Sheikhs, Ghanchis and Sunni Bohras, while the Hindus are predominantly dalits. Many of them have been jobless since the mills closed and eke out a living as street vendors and casual labourers. Every family has a young man without a job.

There are two madrassas, two masjids and five temples in the locality, and none has ever been vandalised, boasts Gulab Khan, a dealer in waste material who shifted here from another locality in Dani Limda after 2002. "There is so much trust between the communities that even babies are left in the custody of neighbours, irrespective of their religion. We help each other in moments of crisis without bothering about religious affiliations," he adds.

The residents say they keep a 24-hour vigil during disturbances in Ahmedabad or elsewhere in Gujarat, to prevent any mischief by 'outsiders'. "Many of us have lived here since 1968 and know each other well. We want our area to be riot-free and ensure that the 30-odd lanes and bylanes are blocked to outsiders in troubled times," says Khan.

One fortunate part, says Valjibhai Parmar, an elder, is that

politicians visit the slum only during elections and not when riots take place. But he is proud that many scholars and other important people have visited them to study their success.

Social scientist Ashutosh Varshney, in his book *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, notes: "If organisations serving the economic, cultural and social needs of the two communities exist, the support for communal peace not only tends to be strong, it can also be more solidly expressed."

Industrialist Lakshmi Mittal, who visited Ram-Rahim Nagar in 2005, wrote to the local committee: "When Gujarat burned, there was unshakeable peace at Ram-Rahim Nagar... I wish a bright future for all of you and hope that your example of togetherness will help in bridging differences in this country."

Sociologists may describe the communal harmony in Ram-Rahim Nagar as a case of strong economic inter-dependency, but mutual victimhood could also have played a role. Dalits in Gujarat were at the receiving end during the anti-reservation riots in Gujarat in 1981 and 1985. But then, many dalits have also joined the saffron organisations since.

"Our biggest challenge is to keep our youth in check even as we stand guard to keep out troublemakers," says elder Natwarbhai Rawat, adding that their skills were sorely tested during the post-Godhra riots: "Immediately after the Godhra incident we called together all the youth, especially the dalits, and asked them not to fall prey to outside propaganda."

It has not been easy. Residents say groups of saffron activists have been targeting the slum ever since. "They taunt the Hindu men by throwing bangles at them," says Parmar. But the 20,000-odd residents who barely manage to eke out a living put up a united defence every time Hindu-Muslim riots break out in the city. At the first sign of trouble, committee members abandon everything else to maintain peace.

Ram-Rahim Nagar's reputation as an oasis of peace has resulted in the slum's population growing manifold over the decades. From a little over 700 dwellings in 1969, the slum now has about 5,000 dwellings. While Muslims like Gulab Khan are moving here for security reasons, a large number of poor Hindu families too are coming on similar grounds. Residents say the composition of the once-Muslim-dominated slum has changed to equal members from both communities.

The most pressing problem for the residents here is large-scale unemployment arising out of a combination of the closure of old industry and illiteracy which renders them useless for new industry. "The fear is that if fundamentalist groups begin to sponsor jobs and offer money to the boys here, then all our efforts will be in vain," says Rawat.

Ram-Rahim Nagar feels that if there is anything they should fear, it is the media attention and visits by NGOs. "They keep coming and going like tourists. They are well-meaning people all right. But will all the focus help us survive?"

Anosh Malekar is a senior researcher with www.infochangeindia.org and Infochange Agenda

The Shivajinagar problem

Interventionists will not see the thousands of people who live together and jostle for air in a multicultural neighbourhood such as Shivajinagar in Bangalore as an intercultural success. They will see it as a tinderbox waiting to explode. For them, intercultural dialogue is a roundtable at which prominent secularists from different religions sit; in comparison, the everyday interaction of people in Shivajinagar is mere babble

ACHAL PRABHALA

THE WAYS OF THE BENEVOLENT world intrigue me. Messengers give lip service to the notion that we are all in this together, but only the hopelessly naïve actually believe that. The message has become a spiteful version of a self-help book; if it had a title, it would be called *I'm OK; You're Not*.

Messengers, of course, need welcoming receptacles, ordinary people who can only do things that are either wrong or categorically unimportant. That The People are always in need of us people to whip them into shape is such an old criticism, I am almost ashamed to bring it up, but there it is. As a credit-card-carrying member of the middle class, I have the authority to decide who I will allow to influence me and whose authority I accept. Not so for the hapless rural woman, who will, apparently, gratefully swallow every morose manual that's thrown her way.

A person I know works in the IT industry and uses open source software to create packages for NGOs. He's an integral part of the movement on technology for development, whose growing ranks pride themselves on catchy acronyms like ICT4D. At a recent conference in his office, women from all over South Asia — many from rural parts and at least some of whom must also have been oppressed — listened to talks on information for development. Each woman was given a computer to work on for the course of the conference. The sessions seemed to go well. When he was cleaning up afterwards, he looked through the history files of the Internet browsers they had used and found that many of the women had been surfing hardcore pornography while pretending to be tutored. He conveyed this to a common friend with a mixture of astonishment and delight — for never mind that several well-meaning people had been lecturing the attendees on the need for information; these women had found their own ways to satisfy their information needs.

It's quaint, this temporary blindness to the daily life of The People. Consider Shivajinagar, an area bordering my neighbourhood in Bangalore. Shivajinagar is the epicentre of Bangalore Cantonment: within lies a dense congregation of mosques, churches, temples, hostels, shops and people. It's a place where the rich, the poor and the alien are equally welcome, where glistening heirlooms compete with nuts

and bolts, and where whole streets are given over to reinventing some precise component of urban waste. Like other places — like other Shivajinagars, in other cities — its multiple geographies intersect, interact and collide.

One afternoon, a few months ago, shopkeepers in Shivajinagar were hurriedly downing their shutters. I asked what the matter was. Mehmood, a young shopkeeper, told me that 'they' (the State) was trying to build on land owned by 'us' (a Muslim charitable trust), when the excavators stumbled upon two graves. This happened in the early hours of the morning. By afternoon, the rumours had spread like wildfire: the gravesite emitted a strange glow, the builders who first dug up the bodies were now paralysed with godly wrath; the dead bodies must have been those of holy men.

By evening, Mehmood claimed, reverent wonder in his eyes, 500,000 people had turned up to watch (the papers reported the next day that this number was more like a couple of thousand). The riot squad was despatched immediately to shut down the place and Shivajinagar went into curfew mode.

There was a reason the police were so eager to respond. Shivajinagar has long been considered a flashpoint for communal tension. It makes people nervous. On an earlier occasion, I was driving from Cooke Town to Ulsoor, to visit my parents, unaware that riots had just broken out. I passed eerily desolate streets and a silently burning bus. Shattered glass littered the roads, and the charred skeleton of an autorickshaw lay ahead. This particular round of criminality, it turned out, had been sparked by a local politico's brainwave to publicly protest the execution of Saddam Hussein. The Congress-organised, mainly-Muslim mob

Development likes Resolution: the problem is that human beings tend to be pretty hard to resolve. Development does complexity badly; it leaves that to the dreamers

caused a few 'incidents'. Promptly, the RSS organised its own rally, for no pretext whatsoever except that they were feeling left out. Their mainly-Hindu mob also caused some 'incidents', thus setting in place the banal basis of urban Indian violence. This time too, Shivajinagar was locked down. There is no evidence that dense, multi-religious neighbourhoods are unstable, certainly not in Bangalore; yet the reigning wisdom is that anomalies will get what they deserve.

Now I think of Shivajinagar as a flashpoint for communal harmony. It is possible that I'm not far off the mark, and it's also possible that the fantasy acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. When a friend of mine — a human rights activist born into a Hindu family — converted to Islam, the first thing he did was find himself a mosque in Shivajinagar. And because he did things properly, his preferred place of worship was the Lal Masjid — a modest place with shades of red (or so he said), run by a band of Muslim youth who were homeless, devout and progressive to boot. It sounded like a parody of some secular fantasy, and yet I was eager to believe that such a place might exist.

Faced with the fantasies of secularists and anti-secularists both, one thinks that Shivajinagar would succumb, but in fact, it is an extraordinarily resilient place. The very day after the godly graves had been violated, I was back in Shivajinagar and it was like nothing had ever happened. Ordinary life had spontaneously materialised — again.

I don't think that the people of Shivajinagar are overflowing with intercultural love. I do think though, that under normal circumstances, they would not kill each other. And I do know that their state of being — devoid as it is of both obvious love and outright hate — confuses the hell out of us.

Development likes Resolution: the problem is that human beings tend to be pretty hard to resolve. Development does complexity badly; it leaves that to the dreamers. Interventionists, therefore, will not see the thousands of people who live together and jostle for air as an intercultural success — and they're probably correct. To call Shivajinagar that would be a category mistake: it would presume love in the place of something that is simultaneously greater, lesser, and more complicated (and occasionally mistaken for tolerance). Intercultural dialogue is a roundtable at which prominent secularists from different religions sit; in comparison, the everyday interaction of people in Shivajinagar is mere babble.

The State and civil society are convinced that Shivajinagar is a tinderbox waiting to explode, and consequently treat the exceedingly functional neighbourhood as a problem to be solved. That this approach might annoy some 1 million people who get by happily almost all of the time is another matter altogether. Appropriately enough, it doesn't matter what the residents think, for Shivajinagar is not their problem — it is ours.

'Art has always been surrounded by strife'

Art has to represent the times that we live in, says Ratan Thiyam, renowned theatre exponent from Manipur, a state torn by strife. But art is not about pamphlets and judgments, he says, it is about questioning why conflict is happening

Located in the remote region of Imphal, the capital of Manipur in northeast India, Ratan Thiyam and the Chorus Repertory Theatre have used theatre as a tool for the exchange of ideas and discourse for over 30 years. Known for his exceptional stage design, use of music, movement and the telling of grand epic narratives, Thiyam's imposing canvases continue to enthral audiences across the world with their magic.

Probably the only Indian theatre director who can count among his admirers legends like Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski, Thiyam's work draws from the rich folklore and performing arts traditions of his native Manipur. Working within the boundaries of 'Proscenium Theatre' as we know it, Thiyam manages to contemporise his characters and situations. One of the best-known exponents of 'theatre of roots', Thiyam's work has increasingly reflected the troubled times that we live in: the difficulties of creating art in a state torn with strife, of marginalisation within one's own country, and of how an artist's work will reflect his/her concerns. He has come to believe that the only means of protest available to him today is his art.

*The following first-person narrative is based on Thiyam's conversation with **Nirmala Ravindran and Sujay Saple**.*

Chakravyuha, a play I did over 25 years ago, is as relevant today as it was all those years ago. Take war for instance; when I wake up in the morning and drink my tea, I open the newspaper and all I can see is violence, war, terrorism... and somehow, my tea tastes bitter. If anything comes out of war, then it is more physically challenged people, more prostitution, more orphans, more destitute people, more widows, and more malnutrition. The next generation is ruined. The poorest section of society is always the worst affected.

These impacts may not be physically visible all the time. When World War II happened, we all thought this was the end and that nothing could be worse... but even today we see more and more of the same misery. What do we, as a race, aim to give the next generation besides a dark and gloomy future?

Our memory from then until now is where time juxtaposes itself. And so, Abhimanyu's question, as the protagonist of

Achal Prabhala is a researcher and writer based in Bangalore



Chakravyuha, as he ascends to heaven: “Am I a martyr, or am I a scapegoat?”, becomes a question that probably every soldier in the US or Iraq or Afghanistan or anywhere asks himself, and that of every young separatist who is fighting for a cause that is not his.

Art has to represent the times that we live in; this does not mean that we have to become activists. In fact, art has always been surrounded by strife — one cannot escape from that. Human beings cannot break away from conflict. So, this conflict will automatically manifest itself on stage. The feeling that somewhere something has gone wrong is one that I constantly experience as an artist, and I try to express that through my work. This feeling may come from religion or politics, or from my own aspirations maybe, or from my subconscious... but there is always a volcanic eruption taking place inside of me — and that can translate into art on stage.

This does not necessarily make me a political person. I am sometimes asked if my work is political, and I always say that it is important to realise that art is not a court of law that delivers judgments. Conflict will always persist... sometimes it becomes unbearable — there is just too much of it. I can put it all in a pamphlet and get people to read it, but that is not art and that is not my journey. At the end of the day, everything has to be artistic, and aesthetics must be involved. Art has to go deeper and question why something is happening. And I have to find a way out for my own journey.

It was at a time like this that I decided to do *Ritusamharam*, based on Kalidasa’s work. I wanted to stop thinking of the blood, the violence and the devastation. I could only take comfort in nature. I wanted to go back to the blooming flowers and the open sky and moon that I had overlooked for so long.

The pursuit of art has always been a struggle, but we took a decision 30 years ago that we wanted to work as a professional theatre company, and I’m proud to say that we have achieved it. We might not be rich, and like I keep saying there might be no jam and butter but we have managed to provide the bread. Today Chorus is a well-known theatre company, students and practitioners from across the world come to work with us, and there are several others who have joined the company now. I always stress that growth has to be organic. It is difficult for a newcomer to understand what Chorus has gone through in the last 25 years, how we have had to rebuild our entire working space thrice, because of floods. We lost all our livestock and crops. All these difficulties have shaped our life and work. The way to keep the company together is to ensure that human relationships are not polluted, otherwise people come and go and companies are treated like stop-gap arrangements. Most of my actors have been with me from the beginning; we have grown together. At Chorus they are not just actors, everyone does everything. They make the props themselves, they play music, and they do carpentry work, farming, gardening — in short everything. There is a sense of being rooted in your work, and a sense of belonging, besides a bond that is created between an actor and the properties he uses on stage.

Times are changing and we must change with the times; art is not what it used to be earlier. An artist as a human being has certain limitations. Today, if an artist is known everywhere, people expect more out of him — everyone wants to see something new. They’re not just looking for art and aesthetics. So, all these larger problems must now come into my expression as an artist. The more problems there are, the more you think, and the more you react. What happens to us in Manipur is something I experience every day, all the time. It has become a part of my life. To be treated like a second-class citizen in your own home is something that has become commonplace for us in Manipur today. My actors have been stopped and arrested, my own car has been stopped, I’ve had a gun pointed at me, and these are all things that someone living in Mumbai or Bangalore cannot understand because it is not their reality. And yet, we are all living in the same country.

Modern man has to constantly balance himself between tradition and modernity. And tradition is not a museum piece to be preserved, it is lived. And it is even more relevant today because of its wisdom, roots and moral qualities. Everyone has to find their own path. And to want a better society is everyone’s wish — mine too. So how does that make my plays political? I’m not a politician. I’m not a minister. I’m an artist. I’m just a small fry.

Poetics, politics, praxis

Between the homogenisation wrought by globalisation on the one hand and cultural nationalism on the other, we are witnessing more violent religious and ethnic conflict, more conservatism, more censorship. In short, shrinking spaces in which to think, read, write, and express ourselves artistically. In times of such siege, all significant art becomes offensive, striking against, opposing, revealing, resisting

GITHA
HARIHARAN

THIS WORLD THAT REFUSES TO GO AWAY even if you are locked up in a well-heated or air-conditioned room reading, analysing, fantasising, understanding, writing. This world is the only background we have against which to examine our terms for the day: poetics, politics, praxis. I suspect the specific background we have will give us some terms and realities we have to deal with if we are to talk of poetics, politics and praxis in any meaningful way. And the specific background we have: a background in which the faultlines of religious/ethnic violence are opening up in many countries. Where the concept of belonging to a community, and the concept of citizenship, are subject to distortions driven by ignorance, chauvinism and bigotry. Perhaps our situation is, fundamentally, not unlike what many others in many places in the past have faced. But still, this is *our* world, *our* times, and the contemporary faces of violence, hatred and exclusion are, unfortunately, unique to our times. There are wars against terrorism, there is *jihad*, there is *Hindutva*. There are all the modern and pseudo-modern versions of a medieval battle of good against evil. And there are terms and phenomena we cannot ignore, as students and as chroniclers, in some form or the other, of our times: globalisation, nationalism, terrorism, jingoism, obscurantism and communalism.

We spend a great deal of time commenting on the *context* of the texts we create and read and write about. We spend a lot of energy working out, consciously or otherwise, the diverse (I use the word diverse in preference to the local) and *universal* frameworks of a text. The complex co-existence of the particular and diverse and the universals, not only allows our texts to travel and endure, they also give rise to a range of criteria that help us judge the value of a text. So I would like to talk a little first about the so-called universals, then come down to the specifics of our particular and diverse experiences as readers and writers.

The first question seems to be: this globalisation we hear of *ad nauseam*, the globalisation that is already upon us in the heart of our commercial existence, can it infuse common global values? On the face of it, globalisation, for us word-*wallas*, should mean the *free flow of people and ideas*, allowing advances taking place *anywhere* — anywhere at all — to be shared by others. Even we non-historians know about different times in history when ideas, numerals, technological innovations, and stories and story-forms, have transmitted and disseminated themselves in different parts of the world,

undergoing multiple mutations in the course of their movement. Some years ago, when I began writing my novel *When Dreams Travel*, I wanted to refresh my memory of the framework story of Shahrzad in *Thousand and One Nights*. As I read different translations and different annotated editions, I also came across the same story in all kinds of places quite far away from *Thousand and One Nights*. They were variations: Greek, Chinese, you name it, all of these places had variations of the same story as part of their story-bank. By the time I began writing the novel, I was left in very little doubt that there is such a thing as universal motifs. A universal framework for looking at power struggles, with a diversity at the heart of the universal motif — and the values this motif seeks to establish and examine.

So innovations — and strategies to understand reality — have travelled and continue to travel in multiple directions. We are not just talking about the obvious fact that there is no one-way transaction; or that the transaction has had its source in parts of the world that have, it seems, very little that is original or new to offer. (Of course I say this with a qualifier — there is no real difference between those who now believe some of our parts of the world were never the source of any of these advances, and those who believe most of these advances only came from us simply because we have been around longer.) What is really important is that all of us have given; and all of us have received. That all art and ideas and knowledge itself has been the sum total of not just two-way transactions, but *multiple* transactions, so that it would not be too far-fetched to say that many of these ideas and breakthroughs, if looked at internationally, are the result of teamwork.

To get back to our own globalisation though: it should mean a free flow of advances and breakthroughs; all of us get to draw interest on this huge interest-earning deposit. If globalisation is to encourage healthy competition, competition should mean more choices for the consumer and free trade should make it easier for producers to get a better deal. But the reality makes a mockery of these hopeful definitions: globalisation today is founded on an economic system to which the key is held by internationally mobile finance capital. We have global markets, global stages constructed by the new and rapidly transmitted information technologies; a kind of illusory global law and order, a global sense of values that seeks international human rights,

international justice and so on. But if we look closer at this part of the scene before us, we perceive that all these fair-sounding motives are only so much background. The scene itself is driven by the market; the primacy of the market means that above all values and truths is the worship of the market. ‘Global’ then becomes a word that has to be understood as *merger*: we have numerous examples, and in just the media and publishing spheres we have instances of multimedia giants carving up the global cultural area among them and turning cultural transactions into a fully commercial enterprise.

This obviously unattractive view of globalisation has to be balanced by the attractive guise of the mission it most often espouses: many proponents of globalisation equate it with modernisation. It is touted as the process of breaking down the restrictive barriers of the nation-state and establishing cosmopolitan, progressive values. Close up, this modernity is a rather frail and deceitful creature. It is highly exclusive and restrictive; its principal targets are those who have buying capacity or the capacity to join the speculating exercise. The same anxiety is uppermost in the cultural programmes generated by this system: *something has to be sold*.

This merger-loving finance capital generally originates in the West; and of course the same finance capital also exerts tremendous control over cultural channels. With the result that globalisation also affects the area we are particularly interested in, the free flow of ideas. This free flow has come up against a much harsher regime. There is more than enough evidence that what we write, publish and read is indeed vulnerable to the dictates of globalisation. What does globalisation do to texts once they are published? Indeed, how does it affect what is published, or even what is written?

First, and most important, the ‘universal’ now, in the post-globalisation sense, is increasingly identified with “western civilisation”. There is the need to confront the perception, for those of us who have learnt, for historical reasons, to straddle two cultures, two pasts, that there is an assault by forces of backwardness on a civilised ‘West’. We need to confront another fact: that even those supposedly against this western civilisation are only inverting its categories, not challenging them by posing a more inclusive or universal globalisation.

Globalisation, rather than infusing ‘global frameworks’ — what I prefer to call *universal frameworks* — is actually interested in merging, homogenising, creating a monolithic framework — so that it is as if a Bush can tell us what our human values are, and, by extension, what our artistic frameworks are. In short, the global we are looking at in our world is simply not the ‘universals’ that do exist, and that we want to aspire towards. I have been using ‘universals’ in the plural in the same spirit as that which makes us anxious to clarify that we do not have an Indian literature but Indian *literatures*. The abuse of the word *universal* by the powerful who have been defining the universal for many of us — just as they have been defining our classics for us — has to be

dealt with not by giving up the word or the reality it stands for, but by searching for and engaging in debate about universal frameworks from our own varied and particular experience. Just as those of us educated to believe that our classics consist exclusively of the European canon have to work to reconstruct a list of classics, so we have to reconstruct a more inclusive and fairly represented set of universal frameworks, values, and qualifiers and nuances that hold them in place.

But lest we paint globalisation as a villain all by itself, side by side with the merging kind of globalisation we have been looking at there is another scene it has all too often been accompanied by: more violent religious and ethnic conflicts, more conservatism, more censorship. In short, shrinking spaces. At the heart of this shrinkage, of course, is shrinking economic spaces, especially for those parts of the world where cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious identities are all that is left to prop nationalism on, having ceded economic space to neo-colonial regimes. Quite naturally, the spaces in which we think, read, write, and express ourselves artistically are reducing all the time too.

Let’s look at these two scenes again; two apparently contrasting scenes that we see side by side in our own country. As globalisation brings in radical changes in the cultural scenario and promotes a ‘free market’ ethos, we also witness the growing power of the concept of cultural nationalism. Here, in India, it is in the sense of the predominance of Hindu culture, used by the majority fundamentalists, even while they allow the market a free hand. The globalised model of ‘modernity’ can apparently coexist with the worst kind of parochial and obscurantist views.

The cultural nationalists seem quite agreeable to ceding their beloved country’s economic independence. But is there really no opposition to globalisation from them? There is, and it is the obvious, predictable variety: “our culture is endangered by western influence”; as if culture is something static and should remain so. With the cultural nationalists in the ascendant, all other opposition, anything that may want to go beyond mere inversion of the categories of the present globalisation, and affirm more positive universals, is reduced to a state of invisibility. In fact, just as the *global-wallas* impose their merging universal on us, the cultural nationalists growing in strength impose on us their monolithic, homogenised version of what is Indian.

There are two simultaneous — and apparently not very differently driven — forces then, acting on the new reader/writer’s spaces. Dissent is discouraged; opposition is censored; and above all, alternative perspectives are rendered completely invisible and mute. The result is pretty obvious: shrinking spaces for the reader and writer to go about their business; spaces that are not only shrinking all the time, but spaces that are besieged.

Obviously, writers and readers have a vocation in times of siege. Siege makes writers (and readers) more, not less

Five conjectures on art and politics

Ramu Ramanathan, playwright and creator of Cotton 56 Polyester 84, on the displaced mill workers of Mumbai, explores the relationship between politics and art and describes how the arts can create awareness and provoke meaningful dialogue across economic and political boundaries

Conjecture 1: To be an apolitical artist in the world is to be either a fool or a stooge. There are a lot of apolitical artists out there. Is it the same with scientists, engineers, tradesmen?

Conjecture 2: Of course we first must define what is meant by "political". One has heard the following cliché so many times I truly think it's lost any meaning. To wit: "Art, by its very nature, is political." I never know what that means. I personally would prefer to think that art, by its very nature, is beautiful, which, in my universe, is much more important than any political relevance it may hold. Of course, beauty, you can argue, is a political determination.

Conjecture 3: Of course art is beautiful — well, good art is beautiful — but the artist and his/her art do not live in a vacuum. Artists, like everyone else, live within society. They have social responsibilities, moral obligations, personal commitments. To deny this (and I don't think you would) is to live in an Ayn Randean world of hyper-individualism. This does not mean that their art must be political, but it does mean that they must create art while aware of political realities. An extreme example would be an artist asked to paint a mural upon the wall of a fascist dictatorship's building; to do so while only thinking of beauty is to be ignoring his/her responsibility to humanity. Shakespeare himself did not just tell pretty stories: he delved into the nature of the human soul, and part of that nature is political.

Conjecture 4: When one hears of politics in conjunction with art, one sees rallies, political agendas, solutions to social problems which art can never achieve. All right, you can't make a work of art in a vacuum. You're drawing material from the world that surrounds you, people, places, ideas. However, when politics enters the picture, you have immediately indicated that you're willing to take sides on an issue, which is the death of art. Or rather, the agenda is the death of art. Because if an artist makes a play or novel or song for the purpose of improving the condition of coal miners or office workers, then someone else can come along and just as easily make a play or novel or song in defence of the status quo of that coal miner, office worker, whatever. Art with a social purpose: where does it get us? The artist who paints a mural for a fascist dictator is finally no better or worse than an agit-prop play. Why? Because no matter what political agenda you pursue you will always be oppressing someone, running over somebody's idea of rights.

Conjecture 5: Let's get down to basics. Artists are human. Humans are social animals. Society functions through politics. (If you think pure anarchy can work, I wash my hands of you.) Even in the olden days, when Krishna and Balarama were discussing what to do with the Kansas and Sisupalas they killed, there was politics. We have a moral obligation to help our fellow humans. The artist does not live outside this moral order. To say that "the artist who paints a mural for a fascist dictator is finally no better or worse than an agit-prop play" because all political agendas oppress someone is silly (to be kind). Nazi camp guards, police squads armed with POTA, TADA, and freedom fighters in Manipur and Kashmir are pursuing an agenda which oppressed people; the International Red Cross, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King were not. Political differences are usually not so stark, but they exist, and they are not all the same.

necessary. A few qualifiers: there is a wide difference between what a work is and what it does or what can be done with it or to it. We all know that literature has been used and abused in many ways by authors and readers alike. Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*, exposing one brand of fundamentalism, can, and has been used by another brand of fundamentalists in the games played by competing fundamentalisms. In the same vein, Rushdie suddenly received the offer of a visa to visit India some years back, mainly, we suspect, because the minority fundamentalists are supportive of the *fatwa* against him. Books have been used to flatter tyrants or to contribute to their fall. And, too, authors' intentions can be irrelevant — they can be erratic, unpredictable and, on the whole, most unreliable.

But persuasive passion, commitment, can make the writing more compelling, so that 'anger' can enlarge the scope of the work. In times of siege, a writer becomes an offender. Andre Brink puts it eloquently: all significant art, he says, is offensive; offensive in the sense of striking against; opposing; revealing; resisting. Not just resisting the siege, but also breaking down the resistance in the reader. The writer's opposition exists in a peculiarly agonising form in times of siege: awareness of the intolerable condition of his world. John Berger says: "Our torture is the existence of others as unequals." And with our information technology, no one, and certainly not a writer, can claim s/he has not seen the intolerable condition of his world. The besieged writer has no option but to continue making maps of the world; not duplicating the world itself, but creating one map after the other of what she sees must be exposed, understood and/or changed.

What is at stake, Brink says, is not just the individual writer's grasp of reality, or his/her freedom to write, but by implication an entire community's access to reality and truth. This is the major argument of Julio Cortazar in 'Something More Than Words':

"It is true that we writers always find a way of writing and even publishing; but on the other side of the wall there are readers who cannot read without taking risks; on the other side are people whose only source of information is the official one; on the other side there is a generation of children and adolescents who... are 'educated' to become perfect fascists, automatic defenders of the big words that disguise reality: fatherland, national security, discipline, God..."

The curators of these lying profundities are those in power. A power that works hard to perpetuate itself and to get closer and closer to a state of utter homogeneity. To do this, everything that seems foreign and deviant must be cast out; everything, till all the parts become interchangeable and reflect perfectly the whole.

(From the keynote address delivered at the IACLALS Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, January 23, 2003)

Githa Hariharan is an award-winning novelist and short story writer

Songs of a shared past

At a time of growing polarisations in society on the basis of language, identity and borders, filmmaker Shabnam Virmani discovered Kabir, the 15th century saint-poet who seemed to combine perfectly the spiritual and the socio-political. She spent six years making four films and several recordings on Kabir, each one trying to find the space between the dualities of Hindu-Muslim, sacred-secular, classical and traditional, and East and West

PRAYAS ABHINAV

Shabnam Virmani has just completed four documentary films. All four films have one common thread: the search for Kabir, a 15th century poet-saint.

The Kabir quartet is part of Virmani's Kabir Project, a six-year journey which documents and celebrates the poetry and philosophy of Kabir. The project includes the production of several audio CD recordings of folk musicians and qawwals who sing Kabir's verses, and also books compiling his works.

Why would a contemporary filmmaker seek out a 15th century poet's philosophy? After the Gujarat riots of 2002, Virmani experienced what she calls a "loss of meaning".



Shabnam Virmani

The only voice that seemed to be secularly sound and at the same time healing was that of Kabir.

Virmani's discovery of Kabir was to some extent akin to that of the renowned Hindustani classical vocalist Kumar Gandharva. The film Koi Sunta Hai is about how Kumar Gandharva, ailing with tuberculosis, his voice silenced by the disease, spent a few years recuperating in a Madhya Pradesh town. In those painfully silent years the singer found solace and a new meaning in the songs of Kabir sung by sadhus and wandering minstrels who passed his door. The simplicity and the perennial freshness of Kabir's words have not been forgotten. They are kept alive by the oral tradition, the forgotten faces of generations of seekers and Kabir bhaktas (devotees). Virmani's film follows villagers, vegetable and fruit-sellers on the streets, and contemporary vocalists all over India who sing and live Kabir's couplets.

In another film in the quartet, Had-Anhad, Virmani seeks out the guru bandhus (those who love Kabir) across the Indian border, in Pakistan. This film is important from the point of view of intercultural dialogue. It reminds us of our shared past, and of bonds that are deeper than blood.

There is something in Kabir's philosophy that very easily transcends religious differences. His poetry deals with 'nirgun' (the unmanifest aspect of reality) and 'sagun' (the manifest universe) with ease. Virmani's films dance between these two, and draw us into Kabir's fascinating world.

Virmani herself is into Kabir like an iron bucket in a well. In this interview she discusses her journey to discover Kabir in 21st century India, and her personal transformation in the course of this journey.

What is the relevance of Kabir today?

Kabir is relevant because he urges us to rise above identity politics. We're seeing growing polarisations in our society on the basis of language and identity and borders. Here is a man who's urging us to let go of the brand, the packaging, and seek an essence. Actually seeking the *nirgun* formless essence is not a dry, colourless relinquishing of all our identity markers, all our cultural reference points. Rather, appreciating the *nirgun* perhaps frees us to enjoy and celebrate the multiplicity of the *sagun*, manifestations of

the essence that have taken shape all around us. Not just Kabir, but all the Sufi voices have similar ideas... Bulle Shah said famously: "*Bulla ki jaana mein kaun?*" At a time when society all around us is erupting with confident, self-righteous and acrimonious proclamations of identity, a Sufi is saying he doesn't even know who he is! This is a profound message of ambiguity. This is a healthy kind of uncertainty. It's a wisdom that can come only from a profound recognition of not-knowing.

I wouldn't at all want to argue that Kabir is a unique, very special or the only voice that points us to the truth. If I did that then you could call me a Kabir fundamentalist!

How and why did you decide to embark on this project now?

Well, the Gujarat riots of 2002 propelled me towards a deep desire for making peace. But as I went along this road, Kabir began to signal to me that my desire to make peace between two factions in the outside world — whether two religious factions, or two nations, or two genders — was intimately linked with my making peace with myself. A feminist slogan had said this clearly a while ago — the personal is political. This maxim inspired me over a decade of working with women's groups in the country. I think this slogan got shot through with a new kind of resonance when I discovered Kabir. I think he pushes you to understand the divides and borders you construct within yourself, the ego and insecurities that make all of us violent in some sense. He pushes you to see the connections between those violent impulses in our individual ego and how they multiply into the collective egos of mobs, castes, nations that become capable of unleashing horrific violence. So the problem is not just around me; in some measure it *starts* with me.

So, working in the world has to go with working within. In Kabir no retreat is possible into a spiritual, personal space of salvation. He stands resolutely in the marketplace, he engages with the world. But while being there, he relentlessly pushes you to delve within. It's not either or. His inward gaze is as fierce as his outward gaze. He has a beautiful couplet which says: '*Sumiran ki sudh yun karo, jyon gagar panihaar. Hale dole surat mein, kahein Kabir vichaar.*' So do your meditation like the woman who goes to fill water at the well, says Kabir. She walks and chats and does her village business, but her awareness is always fixed on the pot.

I think perhaps that's why my attempt in each film has been to resolve a conflict or opposition of some kind. Each film tries to weave a narrative between two poles of a duality. *Had-Anhad* explores the Hindu-Muslim or the Indo-Pak divide, *Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein* skirts with the tension between theist and atheist, between sacred and secular appropriations of Kabir. *Koi Sunta Hai* weaves between urban, classical domains of knowledge and the rural, folk, oral traditions of Kabir. *Chalo Hamara Des* takes you between two cultures, East and West, India and America, *desi* and *pardesi*.

Kabir inhabits all these seemingly opposing worlds, in an edgy sort of way. That is the place to which he takes us — that thin, slippery, dividing line that we draw between 'self' and 'other'. I think if we receive with open hearts and minds these many Kabirs, a lot of our self-righteous worldviews tend to dissolve.

The theme of your films seems to be that there are many ways of loving Kabir, as there is no one Kabir.

I don't think I invented that perspective. I take that from Kabir himself. I think he might have said there are many ways of loving God... I think if you listen to Kabir carefully, he's showing you how arbitrary and frail most of our identities and ideologies are. He pushes you to question what makes you so self-righteous about your isms and your practices. In many ways, these journeys for me have been a journey from self-righteousness towards ambiguity. Not a passive, paralysing kind of ambiguity, but an empowering one infused with wonder at the nature of our human existence, how extremely perishable we are...

Can you describe a Kabir *bhakt*?

Perhaps one who wouldn't hesitate to question Kabir if he met him one day.

Although Kabir talks of *nirgun* a lot (which might be considered a *gyan marg*), your films seem to lean on the devotional aspect of spirituality more. Is there a contradiction here?

Do the films lean more on the devotional aspect? That wasn't my conscious intent, but perhaps the subconscious has a way of overriding the intellect. I don't know. This is a difficult question to answer, and whatever responses I will attempt here don't come from the authority of scholarship or a wide/deep understanding of Kabir traditions, but my own personal responses to the Kabir I found in Malwa, Rajasthan and Pakistan.

There are many starkly *nirgun* songs of Kabir. But there are also many love songs of Kabir. Is that a contradiction? These songs are addressed to a beloved he finds within himself, a lover he invites into his eyes. His beloved's bed is perched on the tip of a thorn. You come to resonate with a Kabir who's calling out for a union with an elusive part of your own self. And that's a deeply emotional call. It's not a dry, cerebral space. The discovery of that space of *shoonya* and being disconnected from it, and pining to re-connect with it as a deeply *heartfelt* state.

And you also find many songs of Kabir... those that stress the *nirgun*, those that make you penetrate and strip away all your pretensions and outward symbols and signs, towards an arrival into the living, present moment where you could perhaps experience yourself as a primordial form of energy, at once yourself and yet pulsating in a profound connectedness with all things and beings around you. But to me it feels like a journey in which both *gyana* and *bhakti* walk with you... There is an unflinching intellectual rigour he demands of you that stems from interrogating the self



दुनियादारी औगगादी
जाने भेद मत दीजे रे
इन काया मे अष्ट कमल हें

जादि निगे दाखीजे रे
सत्य बाण पर बर
सुहाण सीधी जादि रे
बुरा जे खोजन मे गयी

बुरा न मिल्या कोय
उर खोज आपणा तो मुझसे बुरा न
तम मे प्रीति मन मे प्रकरी स्व दाखीजे रे

खोज आपणा
मे गरीबी
दाखीजे रे

Rajasthani musician
Mukhtiyar Ali with Shabnam Virmani

and its pretensions and cravings and dishonesties. But along the way, the signs and markers and *sagun* forms, including language itself, start dropping away, and what you begin to feel is an experience of connectedness, you could call it love, born of a simplicity that eludes the intellectual mind. So to me, Kabir does not let you rest. He makes you walk constantly between two poles of form and formlessness, heart and mind, emotion and intellect, sublime and mundane, the spiritual and the socio-political. It seems to me the problems arise when one stops walking, stops making that journey between these dualities and settles for one side of the truth.

You have dealt with the issues of caste with respect to the Kabir singers in a subtle/non-sensationalising manner.

I could add to that and say that I think the gender question too comes in subtle but positively affirming ways in the films. Possibly because I think the identity of woman or dalit too beyond a point shouldn't be hardened or consolidated in our consciousness to such an extent that we don't or can't step out of it. To do that I feel would be untrue to Kabir... and in a sense, to myself and my own evolution at this moment in time, as a person who has worked for two decades now, with video and radio, with women's groups and human rights groups in the country.

Something in the films seems to have evolved as you made them. Can you elaborate on the process of learning new things whilst filming?

These journeys with Kabir have spanned six years. Though there were rough phases — one could call them the 'research', 'shoot' and 'edit' phases — in truth these three overlapped. I was editing while continuing to shoot new footage. My own discoveries, insights and awareness about this poetry and its meanings and implications continue to this day, and so I see new meanings in my own footage on a day-to-day basis! Which is why my energy and enthusiasm for the 'subject' never flagged despite my impatience with the production process of the films.

Most of us do not understand the words in these *bhajans*: this vocabulary itself is dying out in modern India. Is Kabir only a rural phenomenon because of this?

Not at all. Kabir thrives in the hearts and minds of thousands of urban Indians. I don't think English has taken over the souls of urban India at all. I think there is a smaller category of people like you and me, who have been convent-educated and brought up in homes where English perhaps overrode our mothertongues (Hindi and Punjabi in my case).

Personally speaking, I found myself discovering a latent non-English language universe inside myself which I didn't know existed. I started out quite similarly finding the languages/dialects in which I was encountering Kabir (Hindi, Malwi, Marwari, Urdu) to be alien and difficult to grasp. And then slowly I began to get under the skin of the words and the *ras* of the language began to seep into me. That's when I

began to groove, to *ramo*, to experience the joy in the play of words in this poetry. So my allegiance is to both language worlds. I see my work (by which I mean not only the films but also the CDs and books of poetry in translation) reaching out to urban Indians such as yourself. Hopefully this work will give you a contemporary and more accessible *interpretation* of the difficult-Hindi-Kabir. But equally I hope this work will relate with those more connected with their language roots, people who vibe to Kabir in small town and village India.

At the end of the film *Chalo Hamara Des* we see the filmmaker holding a tanpura and singing away. Was this a metamorphosis, and how did it happen? How did the tanpura replace the camera?

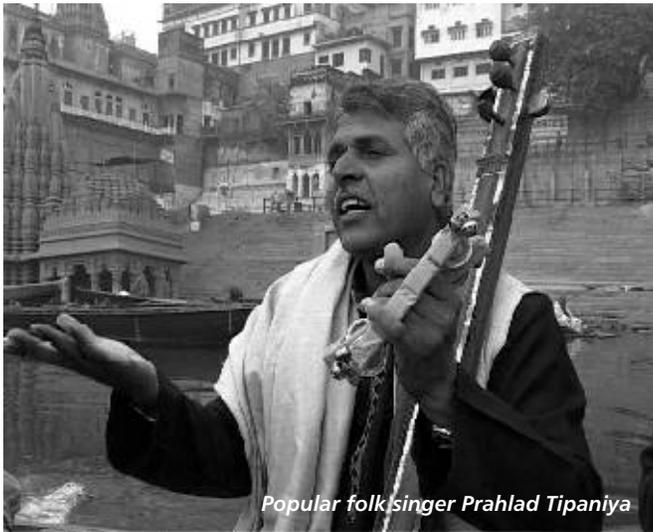
That happened when I began to *ramo* in Kabir. What I was describing earlier. A feeling comes when the poetry kind of enters your body and you no longer want to 'document' it and 'capture' it with good light and sound; you just want to groove to it. In my case, I began to sing. Of course I also grooved to the poetry as a filmmaker, through the delight of capturing it in a frame and cutting it into a narrative... But singing is a more immediate, less cumbersome and accessible way to groove to it!

I was also powerfully attracted to the democratic, inclusive and enabling power of the 'folk' aesthetic. It draws you in, because we're not maestros with a lifetime of training, we're ordinary folk. While I don't want to discount at all the immense finesse and skill that goes into singing good folk music, I'm saying it's more accessible. Raw energy, honesty, tunefulness and an earthy joy in the poetry and song are major ingredients in the magic of folk, and these qualifications are within reach for a lot of us.

Also I should say three people have played deeply empowering roles in my ability to let go of my inhibitions and sing. Prahlad Tipaniya, who gave me his tambura, taught me how to play it, whose singing itself inspires me deeply, who kept throwing me into the deep end by calling me onto the stage to sing, generally with no forewarning, and always to audiences of 5,000 listeners! Those were literally moments when I put away my camera and picked up the tambura. Tara Kini, my friend and colleague who travelled and researched with me with a passionate intensity in the early years. Tara is a fine classical singer herself, but she is also a teacher and educator in the best sense of the word, one who enables others, awakening their latent capacity to sing. The third is a very old influence, my dear pal Dipta Bhog who has absolutely no formal training in music, but sings with a joy for singing, simply. We've sung a lot together as friends, and now also sing together on stage occasionally.

The conversations in the film are very intimate, and natural. They seem to be born of long associations. How did you manage to make your subjects so free of camera consciousness?

Actually, much as it might surprise you, Prahlad Tipaniya,



Popular folk singer Prahlad Tipaniya

Linda Hess, Farid Ayaz, Kaluram Bamanya, Mukhtiyar Ali — these are all people who were spontaneous in front of the camera from the word go. I might speculate here and say that if you're truly infused with the spirit of Kabir you become fearless, or at the very least honest about your fears. Pretensions and superfluity seem to disappear of their own accord.

Also, I'm not a very 'formal' kind of filmmaker. I make the camera a part of the space, rather than organising the space around my camera and its needs. I don't signal starts and ends to interviews. I shoot seamlessly (and with the ethics of when to shoot and when not to). I also don't restrain my own participation in the action. I engage, talk and respond much as a friend might in that space if the camera were off. All this perhaps set the tone from the start for a kind of *sahaj-ta*, a spontaneity and simplicity to the act of filmmaking. Initially, I was nervous about my decision to *not* take a trained and accomplished cameraperson along, but eventually I feel my instinct to do my own camera work led to this kind of intimacy in the frame which I would not trade for any other value-addition a professional cameraman may have brought to the table.

But what did distinctly grow in the course of my shooting, and over the years, is the friendship and intimacy with my subjects.

The characters in the films seem to have a real presence which tends to be very multi-dimensional and layered.

Actually, I'm not interested in 'arrived souls'. Because, in a sense, we tend to put them on a pedestal and remove them from our own lives and behaviour. It's so much more inspiring, I feel, to meet frail, ordinary human beings, struggling with some sincerity and honesty with the pitfalls of being human and trying to walk the talk of Kabir in their own lives. I feel I can connect to that, draw on it, and relate it to my own life choices and practices. Meeting with a saint might actually be quite boring!

There is a rich diversity of visual styles that you employ in the different films. Any comments on that?

Well, I think the styles grew out of the contexts and available resources with some serendipity. For instance, the challenge of a non-presence led to the visual style of the film on Kumar Gandharva. With no access to the man himself, and with so little access to archival material related to his life, the visual style of *Koi Sunta Hai* drew inspiration from the grainy black spaces in the photographs of Kumar Gandharva. Delving into the black, negative space rather than the foregrounded white picture seemed sort of *nirgun*-esque. *Had-Anhad* is a visually more consciously constructed film, with all the graphic animation sequences, etc... I could talk more about this if I had the time to reflect more deeply, but suffice it to say I did want the four films to look and feel different from each other. And yet, connected together too. I wanted the films to reflect the diversity of Kabirs we were encountering... they are indeed very different worlds.

Is there a site that translates Kabir *bhajans*? If you are making one, what is the address?

At the moment www.kabirproject.org is under construction as a space where you will find information about the project and all the films, books and CDs produced by us; also a way to order them online. It will grow soon into an archive which will list songs with translations, with audio and video clips relating to the ideas, imagery and issues clustering around that poem.

In your films you mention things like piracy in a light-hearted way. Is there something like the post-modern "free content" movement in the Kabir tradition?

The oral tradition is very much like the present understanding of open source. I've seen artists with varied responses. Prahladji is very relaxed about it. Restricting the sharing of the music which has come from a shared folk culture seems ironic. The Kabir tradition really doesn't have a fixed source. There is a lot of re-mixing and interpretation.

Is one of the things your films are saying that singing is enough? That singing is meditation?

Satsang has always been seen as meditation, as a kind of communion. A time for reflection and being in touch with yourself.

Future plans with Kabir?

A lot of creative outreach... through festivals, workshops... in college campuses and other spaces in society. Because there are so many entry points to Kabir and almost everybody can have an interest in Kabir... through philosophy, spirituality, secularism and the communal question, peace and conflict resolution, folklore, poetry, art...

Prayas Abhinav is an artist and poet. He is presently the Open Space Fellow in Bangalore

The sensex of alienation

Why are young people today falling prey to primary identity — religion, language or race — and picking up a bomb or a gun? Do people kill and die for a dream because they cannot sing their dreams? Can the increasing mistrust, alienation and anger only be addressed through long-term political, economic and cultural processes?

JOHN SAMUEL

“DYING IS AN ART, I DO IT EXCEPTIONALLY WELL,” wrote Sylvia Plath. How do people discover a new aesthetic of the self by erasing the self? Why do young people with gushing blood and bright eyes literally blow themselves up in fire and fury? There must be something deeply intimate about these acts of violence to oneself and others. There must be some unspeakable sense of agony and anger — beyond conventional modes of communication or language. When some young people feel that life has failed to make any statements, or life itself becomes an unbearable burden, do they choose death as a communicative act? Does death become their medium of communication, not life or language? Is it an act of protest or an act of self-realisation, of self-denial, or sheer helplessness? Or is it a mix of all these?

Is dying an 'art' or is it a deeply political statement; is it an act of courage or cowardice? Why is it that some young people choose the gun or bomb, instead of writing a poem or falling in love? When people express deeply personal grief, hurt, alienation or anger in terms of dying and killing for a cause, what do you call them — revolutionaries, martyrs or terrorists? Do people kill and die for a dream because they cannot sing their dreams?

These questions stare us in the face; they challenge us about our validity as human beings. These are questions without straight and simple answers — stark reminders of the tragedy of our times. Every day, in the inside pages of newspapers, we read about one suicide bomber or another in the killing fields of Iraq or somewhere else. The easiest thing to do is to dismiss them, label them 'terrorists' and legislate them out of our lives and concerns. Easier still is to paint them as dangerous people to be captured, tortured and eliminated at any cost. The more difficult thing is to look for the deep psychology, sociology, economics and politics that manufacture alienation and blazing anger. A metal detector can recognise neither anger nor alienation. Prisons cannot contain discontent. Armies cannot lock up an idea or a cause. Missiles or submarines cannot fight a war within the self, a war deep inside our minds, a war of identities, personal histories and collective memories of discontent and discrimination. How have we reached this predicament in spite of unprecedented economic growth in many parts of the world and in spite of the breathtaking progress of science and technology?

Every suicide bomber signifies the new *sensex of alienation*. 'Sensex' is not only the barometer of finance capital markets; it has become the barometer of war and peace, politics and protest, prosperity and survival, in the ever-growing marketplace. This ongoing economic and technological growth is accompanied by a sense of inequality, a perceived sense of discrimination and injustice, and resultant alienation. If the *sensex of growth* is the thesis, then the *sensex of alienation* is the counter-thesis. Two of the suspects from a terror attack at Glasgow airport were from Bangalore — symbol of the sensex of growth.



What makes human beings distinct is our ability to create and communicate. When a deeper sense of cultural, social, economic and political alienation happens, our ability to communicate, convince and create is affected. When we cannot be creative, the unbridled energy of anger that comes from deep alienation is transformed into the power of destruction. All of human history can be seen as a constant tension between these two eternal 'power plays' within our mind — the power to create and the power to destroy

Last year, Mohammed Mansoor Asghar Peerbhoy (31), a computer engineer who worked for an MNC in Pune, at an annual salary of Rs 19 lakh, was arrested for complicity in organising a series of bomb blasts across India. It seems the world is flat for both kinds of sensex — they're both about virtual realities, imagined communities, and constructed causes.

While Thomas Friedman discovered the *flat world* in a globalised Infosys in Bangalore, Kafeel Ahmed, who could have been a leading technocrat in the flat world, chose to give an entirely different meaning to the flat world — by recklessly driving to destruction in another corner of the world. The suicide attack on Glasgow airport and the charges against a few highly educated professionals are a new landmark in the sensex of alienation. It is no longer the uneducated or half-literate, the different-looking 'other' in the wastelands of war-torn Afghanistan or Iraq who is willing to send a message out with his death.

Unless we address the causes and consequences of growing discontent and alienation, we will not be able to address the growing tendency of people to kill themselves and others for a perceived cause, dream, or promised life after death. There is a deeper problem — in the way we learn history, in the way we use language and symbols, and in the way the notion of the 'other' is constructed as a suspect or an enemy.

What makes human beings distinct is our ability to create and communicate. When a deeper sense of cultural, social, economic and political alienation happens, our ability to communicate, convince and create is affected. When we cannot be creative, the unbridled energy of anger that comes from deep alienation is transformed into the power of destruction. All of human history can be seen as a constant tension between these two eternal 'power plays' within our mind — the power to create and the power to destroy. The history of human civilisation can be seen as the power to communicate the creative or destructive urges of people, communities and countries. Our major predicament is that we and our children largely learn history through war and heroic acts of destruction, not through the poetic action of creation. So we know more about the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb — the man of war — and less about Dara Shikoh who bridged people and civilisations through poetry and translation. Most monuments of great civilisations are built on the destruction of the 'other' or victory over the 'other'. It is the Alexanders, Genghis Khans, Napoleons and other war heroes who stand out in our history books — where the power to destroy and power through war were legitimate enterprises of history and civilisation. The heroes or heroines in our history books are not poets, visionaries or creators. We learn less about those who unite human beings through their creative urges.

This 'heroism' of destruction is in many ways at the core of the notion of 'martyrdom' — the urge to die for a cause (or a perceived cause) larger than life itself; the struggle to derive a sense of worth by using the power to destroy oneself and others. Such deaths require the sanctity of a meta-narrative. They become stepping stones to immortality and sainthood in a political group or religious institution. Both Catholicism and Communism thrived on it. The idea of the Crusades was built on this aspect of heroism for a larger cause — for another world. Each religion came into being as a grand universal narrative for liberation and freedom, and ended up as a 'civilisation' of symbols, rituals and dogmas based on destruction, control and counter-narratives. In many ways what Marx said about religion — religion is the opium of the people — is true of all meta-narratives promising freedom and joy. Meta-narratives are often a mental escape from the agonies and predicaments of the present, and the perceived oppressions of the past and present. The bigger the meta-narrative, and the bigger the promise of a heaven of freedom, the more we are likely to mortgage our ability to dream and imagine. That escapism from our imagination, dreams, creative

sensibilities and poetic urges is what makes religion (as the mother of meta-narratives) the opium of the people.

Dissolution or disillusionment with meta-narratives is a postmodern predicament. In the absence of a meta-narrative, a grand theory or big dreams about change, dispersed and disintegrated ideologies are expressed in the form of fragmented political processes. We no longer have big dreams beyond the urges to gratify desires that have been constructed by the marketplace. The sensex has become the barometer of our own security and of the stability of nations. If the sensex of growth is on track, we tend to think we are secure. It is in this ultimate illusion of the sensex of growth that we tend to forget the counter-sensex — the sensex of alienation. In the absence of meta-narratives or grand promises of heaven, and in the presence of a growing sense of inequality, injustice, doubletalk and discrimination, young people no longer have a dream to dream, a cause to live for, a purpose larger than themselves, a sense of mission that captures the gush of blood from within.

When you do not have enough ideas around you, and when you feel you are pushed to the wall, what do you do? You fall into the trap of primary identity (religion, language or race) — the easiest escape route. Through that primary identity you can construct a meta-narrative for another world — a world after death, a heaven waiting — and thus find the perfect political opium to escape. *Jihad* and the universal pan-Islamic ideology is emerging as a powerful meta-narrative for young Muslims who are alienated and angry. It is important to note that the pan-Islamic ideology is, on the one hand, a critique of new imperialism and on the other, an assertion of a reactionary politics based on exclusion. Such a meta-narrative uses the left critique of advanced capitalism to rationalise an entirely fundamentalist and patriarchal agenda based on a religious identity. The power of such a meta-narrative gives a sense of purpose to people who are at the receiving end of alienation. When people fail to see a purpose in living, they discover the purpose in dying — in search of another world, a world of peace, joy and reward.

When people lose trust in their own creativity, and when people lose trust in others, a sense of terror is born in the mind of the alienated. The terror within is often more torturous than the terror outside. In many ways, killing themselves and others is an escape from alienation, an act of exorcising the demon of the defeated self and the bitterness and anger that accompanies that defeat. So, suicide becomes an act of redeeming self-worth by destroying the self itself. When they fail to use the power of creativity, people end up using the power of destruction. When individuals do this, having no weapons other than their anger, we call it suicide. When countries do it, we call it war — a 'legitimate' enterprise of history, civilisation and State!

When we cease to trust each other as human beings, a tragedy unfolds somewhere deep within. When we cease to

trust, we lose a part of ourselves. When trust disappears from our lives and times, insecurity creeps into the innermost part of our being. Insecurity breeds fear and fear breeds insecurity. Fear and insecurity together create the ground for alienation. Alienation erodes trust. Alienation erodes hope. Alienation, like a cancer, kills creativity.

Thus begins the cycle of human tragedy in the 21st century. One of the biggest human tragedies of the 21st century is the emergence of identity as a marker of alienation, fear, insecurity and mistrust.

This can happen to individuals, communities and societies. At every point of transit such as airports, we confront suspicious eyes, probing questions, sniffing dogs. This challenges our sense of dignity and identity. At every airport, we carry our name, colour, language and appearance like heavy baggage to be scanned to ensure the veracity of our being; we are reminded that our own identities are heavy baggage under constant scrutiny of hidden cameras, security agents, the media, and other peeping toms.

We tend to get so alienated that we need Harry Potters and new fantasies in the marketplace to escape the growing insecurity within and around us. This explains the unprecedented sales of Harry Potter books and the revival of new spiritual and religious movements across the world. The more we feel secure economically, the more insecure we become from within.

In the good old days, the more you travelled the more tolerant and liberal you were supposed to become. But now the situation is being reversed: the more you travel, the more you are reminded of your identity and how alien you are in a new place. It seems the more we get connected, the less we trust each other because our identities and sensibilities are increasingly shaped by the globalisation of stereotypes and images.

The present predicament of increasing mistrust, alienation and anger can only be addressed through long-term political, economic and cultural processes. How can we ensure that the young people of tomorrow choose to write poems, fall in love, discover new things, and celebrate their creative urges, instead of falling victim to the destructive urge? We need a whole new understanding to counter stereotypes based on identity, religion and race. We may have to invest in a new generation to get out of this cycle of terror, counter-terror, violence and counter-violence across the world. We need to build new bridges and pull down the walls created around monolithic notions of culture and civilisation. Culture should give us a sense of belonging to humanity — a means of redeeming our sense of trust, creativity and human community. We need to create a new history of creativity, a new aesthetic of being to counter alienation, discontent and discrimination.

John Samuel is Editor of www.infochangeindia.org and Agenda, and International Director, ActionAid

Development without culture

Culture finds a place on the developmental agenda only as a medium of communication or as a way to build sustainable livelihoods. There is a nagging discomfort about focusing on culture in societies struggling with poverty and inequality. But it is only through the arts and culture that a community views its past, speaks about what matters to it in the present, and envisions its future

ANMOL VELLANI

Prologue

Not long after joining an international grant-making foundation, I was invited to a meeting at its headquarters in New York. I had been told that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss aspects of the foundation's culture programme, but I had no idea how I was expected to contribute to the discussion.

Desperately wanting to clarify my role, I approached the Chair of the meeting (1), ten minutes before it was scheduled to begin.

“Is there anything in particular that you would like me to talk about?” I asked him.

“Just tell us why culture is valuable,” was his breezy reply.

I was stunned. This was the last question that I had expected to be asked. Here was a foundation that had supported cultural institutions and initiatives in South Asia for a decade. It had an even longer history of grant-making in the arts in the USA. Would any foundation, after years of working in community development, ask itself why community development is valuable?

My astonishment quickly gave way to confusion as I began to consider why culture is valuable. The more I thought about the question, the more it seemed to resist any but the most paradoxical answer.

Soon it was my turn to speak. I saw curiosity and expectation on the many faces that turned to look in my direction. I was forced to inject a long pause into the proceedings — not for dramatic effect, but only to buy time for an idea, *any* idea, to stir in my mind. Then, all of a sudden, I understood why the question had so baffled me.

“Culture cannot be ascribed a value,” I began. “On the contrary, it is the limiting point of our ascription of value and meaning...”

Development's view of culture

Today I am better able to appreciate why a foundation — one that primarily supports developmental work — might ask itself about the value of culture, even when it has been active in the field for many years. Behind the question lurks the foundation's persistent uneasiness about being involved in the field of culture. How does it justify supporting cultural

work in societies struggling with grinding poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, inequality and injustice? The apparent lack of integration between its culture programme and other areas of grant-making becomes another source of anxiety. And how would the foundation defend itself against the charge that culture and development are not just unrelated but incompatible areas of work? Is culture not a barrier to development?

Beyond the presumed incompatibility of developmental and cultural activity is a deeper problem, unarticulated and little understood. It is that the *concept* of culture is incompatible with development discourse, or at least with the terms in which it has been conducted until very recently. Understanding the nature of this tension might help to throw light on a number of questions, including why foundations are reluctant to enter the culture field; why such culture programmes as do exist within foundations form a parallel stream of activity, isolated from other grant-making; and why culture appears on the developmental agenda in an instrumental role instead of becoming an integral part of development thinking.

Development thinking has focused on the external world — the social, political, economic, cultural and natural environment — and how it impinges on human wellbeing. Its primary preoccupation has been with the outer changes that need to be effected (rather than the possible link between inner change and outer change) to improve the quality of human life. Naturally it has also been concerned to weigh initiatives that would alter conditions of life for the better against the costs of bringing about desirable changes, such as whether those changes would weaken the social fabric, result in environmental degradation, or narrow the prospects for future generations in some other way.

Within the limits of this discourse, one is confined to thinking about culture as a feature of the world that human beings inhabit. Conceiving of culture as an *object*, it becomes legitimate to look upon it as a good, like health or education, or as an evil, like corruption or child labour. It also seems apt to appraise culture, as one might the state of the economy, and ask whether it can be 'improved' to facilitate development. One could then consider strategies to suppress or strengthen aspects of the cultural environment, depending on whether they hinder or promote development goals.

This discourse, in other words, does not assume culture to have its own inner dynamic that might have a bearing on development thinking or strategy. Rather, culture is viewed from the outside, as a relatively fixed domain to be confronted, evaluated and acted upon from within a developmental frame of reference. Culture can be admitted into this frame of reference only as a feature of the environment that one might want either to overcome or utilise to ensure the success of development programmes.

Because it is seen as part of an inhibiting or facilitating environment, culture plays no role in determining the nature of development strategies or initiatives. As an object, however, culture finds a place on the developmental agenda in two ways. Firstly, it is acknowledged to have instrumental value. Cultural expression is used by development agencies to spread literacy, for example, or to communicate health or environment programmes. As a medium of communication, it is accepted as having a role in contributing to social change, building constituencies, raising consciousness, and even helping to overcome cultural resistance to development ideas. Secondly, development agencies might be involved with cultural expression as an offshoot of their interest in sustainable livelihoods. Under this rubric, support mostly goes out for projects that enhance the income-generating potential of crafted or performed forms of cultural expression in rural and tribal communities. The main thrust of such projects is to give these forms access to wider markets.

These 'development' programmes side-step vital issues of culture. The first sees no harm in altering the content of traditional cultural forms to reflect development messages, the second none in treating these merely as products to be bought and sold. Both ignore the fact that rural and tribal communities attach specific meanings to their forms of expression — meanings that derive from the local context in which, and purpose for which they are presented or produced. In the case of the crafts, for instance, it is not just the materials, colours or motifs that are used, even the very process of creation might have ritual or symbolic significance. As prevailing but ever-fickle market tastes and preferences increasingly dictate the nature of the craft product as well as the mode of its production, cultural agents are being reduced to contract labourers. They are being alienated from their act of creation and its result, which are emptied of cultural meaning to serve a milieu entirely unrelated to their own. It is not surprising that such projects — rooted in the development concern with sustaining or altering external conditions for the sake of human wellbeing — should disregard this intimate relationship between culture and meaning.

Culture's critique of development

Within development discourse, I have suggested, there is nothing obviously wrong or illogical about asking if culture has value. Nor, therefore, would it seem unreasonable to ask whether culture has more or less value than, say, education or health. How often has one heard the lack of philanthropic

The arts occupy a special place within a community, the place from which social critique can emanate, and received wisdom and values be interrogated. If the cultural superstructure of a people is under peril, they can no longer feel certain about their identity and place in the world. They are then profoundly disempowered, rendered incapable of taking control of their lives

or developmental attention to culture defended on the ground that it falls low on any scale of priorities? But culture, as I argue below, belongs in a different category, and cannot be placed on the same scale as education or health for the purpose of comparison.

To begin with, there is something exceedingly odd about regarding culture as an object or state of affairs. One can speak sensibly about good or bad health or education, but not about good or bad culture. It is not culture itself but the expressions of culture that can be assessed in different ways — as good or bad, meaningful or trite, influential or insignificant, and so on. Indeed the assumption that culture and development are opposed rests on equating culture with cultural expression. After all, it is only cultural *habits* of perceiving, thinking and acting that could possibly overturn the best-laid development plans.

But to equate culture with cultural expression is to lose sight of the fact that the locus of culture is not the external world, but the transaction between the self and the world. Culture — unlike food, shelter, education or health — cannot be given a value because it sets the limits to our ascription and production of meaning and value in the world, and to the changes in our world that we are able to tolerate. We do not pursue culture as we pursue happiness; rather culture determines the boundaries of what we might regard as a life worth pursuing.

At the same time, culture should not be seen as a framework or foundation that determines or fixes human habits of perception, action or response. This would make it difficult

to account for cultural change. One should instead think of culture as a bubble, which has the elasticity to accommodate a certain range of ways of seeing and doing, differences in tastes and preferences, and even rival conceptions of the meaningful or worthwhile. It can allow considerable room for negotiation and manoeuvre with respect to competing interests and contested positions. It also has the elasticity to absorb and be transformed by alien influences without losing its identity. But like a bubble, culture also has a bursting point, beyond which lies all that it is unable to contemplate, tolerate or digest (2).

Culture, therefore, is the limiting point of what we might countenance as worthwhile, meaningful or acceptable. It limits our ascription and production of meaning in the world. It limits, for example, whether we are able to ascribe meaning or value to a historical artefact, whether we discover or understand it to have some significance to our lives. It limits as well the *range* of possible meanings we are able to assign to that artefact. Culture also limits the array of meanings that we could assign to a ritual practice in which we participate. Within those limits, the meaning we assign to that practice may change, without implying that our culture has changed. On the other hand, a change in the significance of a ritual practice may well be a sign that the limiting point of our culture has expanded or contracted.

Culture also sets limits to the acceptance of fresh meanings that might be produced by the invention of a new cultural form, or by the introduction of new elements in an existing one. The new intervention might be rejected, but if it is tolerated or accepted, it would be because either (a) it is compatible with the given universe of significance in our culture, or (b) it has altered the cultural limits of meaning ascription and production. At one level, a community witnesses cultural change when new meanings are introduced and accepted. At a deeper level, it changes when the limits of meaning ascription and production have been redrawn (3).

It would be fair to argue that development discourse, as I have characterised it, is associated with an older model of development. Top-down, remote-controlled development has been out of fashion for some time. The idea that workable solutions to the problems of poverty and underdevelopment can be thrashed out in the boardrooms or by the staff of development agencies has few if any takers today. Nor does anyone believe that following the route to development taken by the advanced, industrialised countries is feasible or sustainable. And it is only very rarely that development breakthroughs and insights from one disadvantaged context have been transplanted to another with any degree of success.

The weakening hold of prescriptive notions of development promises to bring culture to the forefront of developmental thinking. For some time now, development programmes have been concerned with empowering groups that suffer social or economic privation. Development-as-empowerment

appears to shift the discourse from initiating change in the best interest of the disadvantaged to enabling the disadvantaged to play a growing role in determining what change is in their best interest and how best to achieve it.

Two reasons can be adduced in favour of handing over greater control to weaker groups to address their own problems and situation of disadvantage. Firstly, people who experience a problem, and best understand the local conditions in which it obtains, are the most reliable source of ideas and strategies to address it. Secondly, one empowers people or communities to enable them to decide what matters to *them*, what priorities or goals to set, indeed even to decide what *counts* as a problem.

If empowerment is about enabling people to take greater control over their lives and their future, culture must occupy a central place in development thinking and strategy. Culture is expressed in many ways — in the food people eat, the rituals in which they participate, the stories they tell, the myths to which they adhere, for example. Cultural expression reflects and reinforces deeply held values and beliefs, providing people with a secure basis for taking decisions about the future of their communities and social and economic lives, but it does more than that. Referring specifically to the arts, Joan Erdman has written:

(T)he arts embody culture in a distinctive manner incorporating myth and history... It is in the arts, in cultural performance, that a civilisation reconsiders its values, teaches them to its young, restores them to immediacy, and accepts changes in their significance or importance (4).

It is in and through the arts, one might add, that a community views its past, speaks about what matters to it in the present, and envisions its future. The arts occupy a special place within a community, the place from which social critique can emanate, and received wisdom and values be interrogated. If the cultural superstructure of a people is under peril, they can no longer feel certain about their identity and place in the world. They are then profoundly disempowered, rendered incapable of taking control of their lives.

This has the obvious implication that projects to empower a particular group must go hand-in-hand with efforts to sustain if not strengthen cultural expression's role in grounding that group's self-understanding, sense of purpose, and capacity for self-examination. But does it not also have the dismaying implication that decisions regarding the future of that community would be circumscribed by the range of possible values, norms, perceptions and beliefs that might be prevalent in the culture? Not really. A culture, as I have suggested, has the elasticity to accommodate new ideas, perceptions and knowledge within certain limits. It also has the ability to redefine those limits. Only a self-assured culture, however, can retain this elasticity, producing new meanings and remaining open to external influences. This, again, underscores why it makes little sense to divorce programmes that aim to strengthen people's participation in

the development process, or legitimise local knowledge and decision-making, from parallel work that addresses issues of cultural dynamism and vitality.

Why have donor agencies and NGOs overlooked this close connection between culture and empowerment? Part of the answer lies in the concept of empowerment that dominates development thinking. Echoing the emphasis given to external changes in development's older discourse, empowerment has been understood to mean 'democratising the ownership of productive assets, capacities and opportunities' (5) and sharing decision-making powers with the dispossessed or marginalised in matters that directly impinge on their lives. Perhaps it is assumed that empowerment in this sense (which gives the disadvantaged a greater say in matters affecting their lives) would lead to empowerment in the sense in which I defined it above (which *enables* people to take control of their lives). But would a change in power relations necessarily be enabling, in the sense implied, for weaker groups? And does it not remain an open question whether the shared power would be exercised responsibly to promote the common interest (6), or the acquired power used to achieve the purpose for which it is intended?

This exteriorised concept of empowerment, apart from banishing culture from the development fold, runs up against familiar reservations about the exercise of power at the grassroots: that it easily falls prey to indefensible caste-based, feudal or patriarchal values and prejudices. Unfortunately, though, the development sector is likely to welcome this observation as supportive of its perspective on culture as a hindrance to progress, rather than read it as criticism damaging to its perspective on empowerment.

Properly understood, however, cultural expression is an ally of development rather than a means to it or, worse, an obstacle to it. The arts make it possible to stimulate development from within cultural contexts, and integrate processes of development with processes of cultural change. The arts, I have said, provide communities with a handle to examine and critique established values, beliefs and perceptions. It is the place from which authority and its prescribed meanings are often contested, and the limit point of a culture tested, stretched and reworked.

The residue of earlier thinking has prevented the development world from embracing empowerment in its fullest sense, and from acknowledging its intimate relationship to culture. To be empowered is to be able to take decisions based on an awareness of the link between material change and cultural change. But it is more than that. Taking decisions about your material future, very often requires taking decisions about your cultural future. A fully empowered community, therefore, is one that is able to ask itself questions like: To what extent do we want our cultural values to determine what we might be willing to countenance as desirable material change? What cultural changes are we willing to tolerate to improve

our material circumstances?

People are empowered not when they can take decisions about their future based on their own cultural values and priorities, but when their culture, and their relationship to it, has become for them a subject about which they can take decisions. People are not empowered unless they can appreciate *how their culture works through them*. To be a victim of one's culture is to be as disempowered as to be alienated from it.

Epilogue

I began this paper by recounting an incident that took place early in my tenure with an international foundation. I had then been confronted with a provocative question: Why is culture valuable? Later in my term with the same foundation, a colleague told me a story that provided the answer, although I failed to connect the dots at the time. This is what she said:

"I've been making a lot of field trips lately and met many people who want to know what our foundation does in India. So I tell them about our work in reproductive health, women's empowerment, human rights and social justice and so on. But it's frustrating because mostly I find them listening to me with polite inattention. Sometimes, though, I remember to mention — and I must confess it's usually an afterthought — that the vitality of cultural expression, especially the arts, is also an important concern for the foundation. And I've been struck by the reaction this produces. Suddenly I find them all ears. They lean forward or sit up and they say, almost with amazement: 'You mean you're interested in us? You mean it matters to you who we *are*?'"

Endnotes

1 The meeting was chaired by the late Dr John Gerhart, to whose memory I dedicate this paper

2 I am indebted to George Jose for the bubble analogy, which he had heard Professor Dipankar Gupta use in a lecture to critique theories of cultural determinism

3 For contrasting views, see Milton Singer's survey of anthropological interpretations of culture in *The Concept of Culture*, International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences 3 (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968) p 527-43. For a more recent account, see John Monaghan and Peter Just's *Social & Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000) Chapter 2. Culture has been defined, for example, as the domain of the most elevated human values (Matthew Arnold); a complex whole of shared patterns of learned belief, knowledge and behaviour (Edward Tylor); rules of conduct (Claude Levi-Strauss); standards for perceiving, responding and acting (Ward H Goodenough); and the organising principle of human experience (Renato Rosaldo). More recent views of culture have denied that it is an integrated whole or refers to an underlying pattern

4 *Arts Patronage in India: Methods, Motives and Markets*, edited by Joan L Erdman (Manohar, 1992) p 13

5 As articulated by Michael Edwards and Gita Sen in NGOs, *Social Change and the Transformation of Human Relationships: A 21st Century Civic Agenda* (*Third World Quarterly*, Vol 21, No 4, 2000) p 609

6 *Ibid.* p 609

Kushti bhaichara

Royal patronage for the tradition of wrestling in Kolhapur bred a brotherhood between the north Indians who came to learn the sport at the local *talims* and the local Maharashtrians. This *bhaichara*, nurtured in the wrestling pits, could be one reason why the MNS's anti-north Indian campaign left the city untouched. But with *kushti* in decline, will the brotherhood survive?

ANOSH MALEKAR

I BEGAN THE TELEPHONIC CONVERSATION in Hindi, introduced myself and the publication I work for, then briefly described the purpose of my intended visit and requested a convenient date and time for an interview from the man at the other end. “*Ya ki kadibi, vaat bagto ki tumchi,*” (Come anytime, I'll be waiting for you), the response came in 'assal Kolhapuri' Marathi.

For the uninitiated, a sentence in 'assal Kolhapuri' begins with an obscenity and ends with the same, enough to turn anyone used to 'cultured Puneri' Marathi tomato-red. This I knew about Kolhapur and Kolhapuri, though I have never lived in this city of nearly half-a-million nestled in a lush corner of India's sugar belt, approximately 425 km southeast of Mumbai in Maharashtra.

The man at the other end of the telephone was Dinanath Singh, one of India's and Kolhapur's legendary wrestlers. “*Bhaiyya cha porga, jo Maharashtra Kesari jhala, aani Maharashtracha pachwa Hind Kesari jhala,*” (A *bhaiyya*'s son who became Maharashtra Kesari, and later the fifth Hind Kesari from Maharashtra), is how he described himself when we met a few days later at Gangaves *talim*, a well-known traditional wrestling gymnasium in Kolhapur.

We were meeting at a peculiar time, early-November 2008. The Marathi-Bhaiyya divide in Mumbai had taken a violent turn on the streets of Maharashtra's cities and towns, leaving many across the nation shocked. Can we ever hope to co-exist, asked a national television anchor as the linguistic battles raged, the aftershocks being felt in Patna and New Delhi.

I was going to pose a similar question to Dinanath Singh. But, I cautioned myself, I would have to use words carefully.

Standing in front of me was a nearly six-foot-tall, burly man with a swarthy, blunt-featured face. At 62, his broad shoulders, barrel chest, strong arms and pillar-like legs made me wonder what he must have looked like in his prime. In 1966, Dinanath became the state's top wrestler by winning the Maharashtra Kesari and following it up with the national top honour — the Hind Kesari — in 1971. To achieve this, Dinanath Singh had wrestled with the best in the country, defeating the likes of Chamba Mutnal and Meher Din.

“I train even today,” he said with pride. But I was not as much interested in his achievements in the *kushti akhada* as I

was in his post-retirement life in Kolhapur as an “outsider”. He was quick to realise this: “For the record, I was born in 1945 in Varanasi, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, into a family that used to sell milk on the streets of Mumbai. We owned a shed of cows and buffaloes, so typical of those days.”

Dinanath Singh could easily have ended up as yet another *bhaiyya* (north Indian) eking out a living on Mumbai's crowded streets. But a chance meeting with former Maharashtra Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil in 1964 proved the turning point in his life. “Patil was impressed by my physique and asked if I would accompany him to his hometown Sangli to train as a wrestler. My family readily agreed. They felt that if I became a wrestler it would help in recovering dues from customers in Mumbai.”

The young Dinanath spent the initial couple of years in Sangli before shifting to neighbouring Kolhapur, which was famous for its old, indigenous institution called '*talim*' dating back to the early-19th century tradition of nurturing the physical culture. “It is here that my tryst with the red clay mud began,” he recalled with nostalgia.

In those days it was not uncommon for young boys from all over India to join the *talims* of Kolhapur, where they would train, eat and sleep together in austere conditions. It is said that Kolhapur had more young aspiring wrestlers than Mumbai had budding cricketers until a few decades ago.

The 70-odd *talims* — Gangaves, Motibaug, Shahupuri, Kala Imam and Math being the oldest — continue to attract wannabe wrestlers from outside to the city to this day. It is easy to spot the wrestlers in nooks and corners of the city, during breaks in their early morning and evening training sessions. Typically, all the wrestlers have cauliflower ears, a result of being repeatedly clouted and grabbed roughly!

Every *talim* has a *haud* (wrestling pit) where matches are arranged between various gymnasiums in the city. The Dasera festival is a big event for the wrestling community because of the annual 'challenge bouts' held across villages and towns where the winners are honoured with a handsome prize — a turban, a silver bracelet or mace, and cash awards.

For Dinanath Singh, the wrestling pit remains a place of worship. “Whatever I am today is because of this blessed mud. We have a tradition of adding lemon juice, turmeric

Young boys from all over India come to the talims in Kolhapur, where they train, eat and sleep together in austere conditions

Arosh Malekar



powder, peanut oil, yoghurt and milk to the mud. This forms hard mud pellets, which are then broken by the wrestler's body and sweat, caking the body in the process. It is believed that this has cleansing and curative properties, besides a calming effect on the aggressive wrestler,” Dinanath Singh explained.

But did he ever consider moving to his native soil after his wrestling days were over?

“Never! I had decided before I retired that this is where I would spend the rest of my life. After winning the Hind Kesari, I visited Varanasi. While travelling in a bus, I was accosted by a group of rowdy young men who wanted me to vacate the seat for them. They ridiculed my girth and the amount of space I occupied. I did not react, but decided there and then that the place of my birth was just not meant for me,” he said. His mother used to curse him saying: “Why do you want to die in an unknown place far away from the land of your birth?”

Life is peaceful in this city, Dinanath Singh said. He has seen Kolhapur grow from a trading post into a small city in the past few decades. “There is no Marathi versus Uttar Bharatiya situation here,” he wanted me to believe.

Dinanath Singh was the guest of honour when the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) formally launched its unit in Kolhapur a couple of years ago. And, more recently, when its leader Raj Thackeray's public statements triggered violence against north Indians in Mumbai and other prominent cities, this city remained largely calm.

MNS district unit chief Uday Powar said the senior champion wrestler had graced many party functions as a guest of the MNS because it regarded him as “a true son of the soil who had brought laurels to his adopted home”. There were several north Indians like him who had made the city their home and adopted the local way of life. “There are no social tensions in the city on the scale witnessed in Mumbai, Pune and Nashik. We had even planned to hold joint celebrations for Chhat Puja this year, but considering the tense situation across the state the district administration and police officials dissuaded us from our grand plans,” Powar said.

The city of Kolhapur itself has approximately 25,000 north Indians, the migrations having begun soon after the formation of the state of Maharashtra in 1960. Prior to that too, nearly a century ago, Kolhapur was known across north India as a princely state left independent under the British and ruled by a king, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, who was very fond of wrestling. Royal patronage to the indigenous sport ensured that many north Indian wrestlers came here and became familiar faces in a society consisting of royalty and landed gentry at the top, and a vast bottom of ancillary classes like traders and sharecroppers.

The second wave of migrations that started in the early-'60s consisted of skilled technicians and workers, said Lal Singh, a civil engineer from Varanasi, who followed his elder brother

Ram Singh here in 1968. “The state's first chief minister Yashwantrao Chavan and senior minister Balasaheb Desai persuaded us to set up shop as government contractors. We were actively involved in the process of setting up the cooperatives network across western Maharashtra,” he claimed.

Lal Singh, who heads the local association of north Indians, said they have been working closely with the MNS to keep the peace in the city. It is not as if everything was hunky-dory in Kolhapur when anti-north Indian sentiments were blowing across cities and towns in Maharashtra. The MNS had issues with recent recruitments in private companies — 13 big, 850 medium and 217 small units — at Shirol, Gokul Shirgaon, Kagal and Ichalkaranji clusters that form the industrial backbone of the district. Some 40,000 unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in local industries have gone to north Indians during the last decade or so, Powar alleges.

The younger generation of peasant Marathas, who have always known a working class life of cultivating sugarcane and making jaggery, or labouring in sugar factories and small industrial units, are now desperate for their share of the spoils of globalisation. “Is there really anything for locals in the private industries coming up on our land? The jobs are being grabbed by outsiders,” complained Suraj More, a 17-year-old preparing for the higher secondary school examination.

Kolhapur is also known for its artisan community, some of whom have made a name as expert craftsmen. Kolhapuri *saaz*, a traditional gold necklace with delicate craftsmanship, is popular in Maharashtra and northern Karnataka, and Kolhapuri *chappals* (slippers) with their sturdy rustic look are renowned internationally. Local craftsmen are now feeling the heat with cheap outside labour providing even cheaper alternatives for their products. The tastes of the globalised customer are changing and newer brands are invading the markets to satisfy them, as anywhere else.

But Powar alleges: “The recent wave of migrants is a highly politicised lot, primarily from the northern states and some illegal Bangladeshis. They do not respect the local culture.” Dinanath Singh and Lal Singh agree with Powar, but feel these are minor creases that can be ironed out by their respective organisations working together for the city's social and economic development.

The small city has been yielding to a metropolitan dream in recent times, and the old regime dominated by elderly sugar barons and their cronies has ceded to a more fluid order. Today, Kolhapur's influential figures include younger politicians, executives, retailers, and property developers. The older regime began crumbling as the younger generation of farmers and salaried middle class began to diversify, each in their own way.

Member of the legislative assembly and a young member of the royal family, Chhatrapati Maloji Raje, explained: “While one section of our younger generation has diversified into



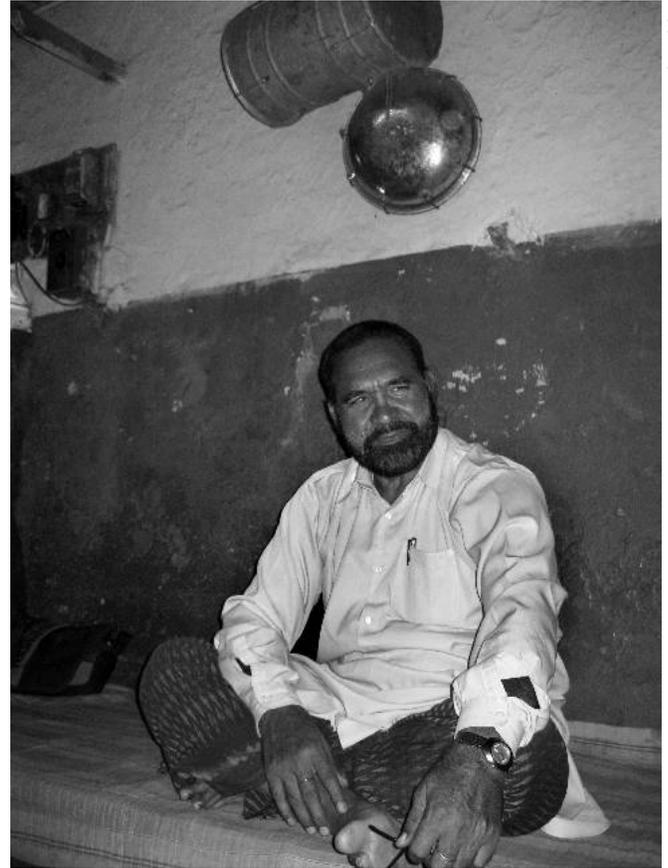
Kolhapur is known across north India as the princely state of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj who was very fond of wrestling

agriculture processing and horticulture, the other is building factories making car parts, oil engines and textiles. Once a 12-hour drive from Mumbai on a hazardous single-lane road, Kolhapur is now linked to the country's financial capital by a four-lane national highway and a daily airline flight." This new growth is bound to attract migrants, and some conflict of interest is likely to be there between locals and outsiders. But Maloji Raje is confident that Kolhapur's progressive culture of inclusiveness will withstand the challenge.

The earliest affirmative action programmes in the country were initiated in Kolhapur in the year 1902. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj is credited with introducing reforms in education and employment, making subsidised education available to all sections of society. He opened several hostels in Kolhapur for students from disadvantaged communities and also ensured suitable employment for them.

Pune-based journalist Radheshyam Jadhav, who is from Kolhapur, says: "Kolhapur has always had a strong connection with social reformer Mahatma Phule's Satyashodhak movement. The Rayat Shikshan Sanstha started by Bhaurao Jadhav from Kolhapur pioneered the education movement in Maharashtra and Chhatrapati Shahu's hostels for the disadvantaged castes were a unique experiment. Even today, progressive thinker-activists like Govindrao Pansare work for the unorganised workers, including migrants."

The modern-day residents of Kolhapur acknowledge that it is largely due to the efforts of the visionary ruler that the city became home to the arts including music, painting and cinema in the later decades. To this day, Kolhapur remains one of the very few districts in the country to enjoy water availability throughout the year, thanks to the Radhanagari dam constructed by Shahu Maharaj nearly a century ago. Warna, the first wired village in India, is another distinctive feature of this district's development graph.



Dinanath Singh, one of India's champion and Kolhapur's legendary wrestlers, calls himself a bhaiyya's son who became Maharashtra Kesari and later the fifth Hind Kesari from Maharashtra

The Kolhapuri Marathas are a proud lot, and equally gracious hosts. Descendants of rustic warriors who loved hunting and eating quail and wild boar, they are hearty meat-eaters. Employing the same recipes as their ancestors, they cook some of the finest, spiciest and most ebullient curries of meat and chicken that are watery thin, but delicious and blistering hot.

Relishing the typical non-vegetarian fare with local journalist friends at the Padma Guest House in the heart of the city one late afternoon, I pondered whether the outward symbols of status like Nokias and Mercedes, even vanity numbers for mobile phones and car licence plates, on display everywhere meant that cosmopolitan values had truly arrived in this rustic city. Or were these modern symbols mere bubbles of small-city aspirations? Would they liberate the young, or destroy the social system?

The peasants' cooperatives that dominated the district's economy are crumbling one after another like elsewhere in Maharashtra due to mismanagement and large-scale corruption. Cultural institutions like the once-famous film studios and prominent artists have long shifted base to

bigger locations like Pune and Mumbai. 'The cradle of Marathi cinema and the fine arts' remains just a sobriquet now.

To try and find an answer to my questions I returned to the wrestling arena. The *kushti akhada* was, after all, the city's strongest cultural and sporting link to the outside world for the past two centuries. It was here that legends were made, once upon a time. And here that the foundations of a unique *bhaichara* (brotherhood) between the rustics of this southern city and the northern states were laid by an erstwhile royal, all united by their craze for wrestling.

“The future of wrestling in Kolhapur is right here,” said Dinanath Singh pointing to the younger lot of wrestlers at the Gangaves *talim* preparing for the upcoming Maharashtra Kesari bouts. Where are the legends like Shripati Khanchnale, Ganpat Andalkar, Maruti Mane, Harishchandra Birajdar and Yuvraj Patil? These wrestlers from Kolhapur were known to crush their opponents into submission with their sheer strength. The younger lot does not have it in them. They are happy if they win district and state competitions, Dinanath said.

Wrestlers from the north continue to perform a token pilgrimage to Kolhapur, most of them flying in and out of the city to participate in national competitions. Rarely does a wrestler from Delhi or Haryana stay back to train in Kolhapur. Old *talims* like Gangaves and Motibaug are barely surviving; the visible neglect and paucity of funds have reduced them to junkyards of a lost era. The facilities back home are better.

The royals of Kolhapur lost their titles and privy purses soon after Independence, and the city's wrestling lost its patronage. The new rulers of Maharashtra did not pay as much attention to the sport as did their counterparts in Haryana and Punjab which are now producing Olympic winners.

The neglect is criminal in a land that once produced Khashaba Jadhav, a long-forgotten wrestler who won Independent India its first Olympic individual medal competing in the bantam weight category at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. Jadhav's tale of neglect mirrors the rot in the system. Nothing came his way, not even a promotion in the state police force which he served till a road accident claimed him in 1984.

“When we meet our counterparts from Delhi, Punjab and Haryana we are ashamed. They are flown in airplanes by their governments, which also employ them in high positions. Asian Games gold medallist Kartar Singh is an IPS officer, while Satpal Singh is a sports official who trains Olympians,” said Dinanath Singh.

The champion wrestlers from Maharashtra are left to subsist on paltry pensions — Rs 2,000 for a Hind Kesari, Rs 1,000 for a Maharashtra Kesari, and Rs 800 for other notables. Their demand for photo identity cards that would entitle them to free travel in state transport buses is still pending with

the state government.

The younger lot of wrestlers is also disheartened. Vishal Mane, a 19-year-old aspiring wrestler at Gangaves *talim*, said: “How do you expect us to compete at the highest level? We cannot even afford a daily diet.” The wrestlers are expected to follow a strict regimen of rigorous exercise and a rich diet. All food has to be cooked in pure ghee; no oil for a professional wrestler. The daily diet may consist of around a dozen boiled eggs, a kilogram or two of chicken and mutton, pulses, green and leafy vegetables, and four to five glasses of *thandai*, a special drink made from buffalo milk mixed with *badam*, *dhania*, *elaichi*, and *kaju*.

“*Shahu Maharajachi kushti Panchganga ghatavar meli, khalash jhali*,” (Shahu Maharaj's wrestling died on the banks of the Panchganga river; it's over) said Dinanath Singh in a moment of utter frustration. His sons, Abhay Singh, 22, and Nirbhay Singh, 20, opted to play kabaddi after seeing the plight of former wrestlers like him. And the younger generation in Kolhapur has new sporting heroes — international swimmer Veerdhaval Khade and ace shooter Tejaswini Sawant — to cheer.

“We have physical power, but we lack ideas. That's where the world scores over us,” said Dinanath Singh. “We understand this traditional physical culture needs to be preserved in the midst of the virtual onslaught of commercial sports culture. But no politician is interested. Perhaps they have better things to do. What more can a wrestler like me say on this subject?”

I asked MLA Maloji Raje about the future of wrestling in Kolhapur, and his response was typical: “The traditional wrestling gymnasiums are a cultural treasure that need to be preserved. I have got the state government to sanction Rs 1.50 crore to modernise facilities at around 20 *talims* in the city.”

MNS's Powar added: “We are planning to revive traditional wrestling in Kolhapur. But there are limitations when you are not in power.” The budding party claiming to represent the interests of locals felt it needed to address the larger issue of unemployment among the youth before getting into specifics like the future of wrestling.

Naturally, Maloji Raje and Powar have their own strong reasons for being more focused on developments at the newly set up five-star industrial estate at Kagal, 20 km from Kolhapur, that boasts an investment of Rs 5,500 crore, besides the IT Park, textile SEZ and a foundry cluster coming up in the vicinity.

Incidentally, Kagal is the birthplace of Chhatrapati Shahu who was so fond of wrestling. It is likely that the five-star industrial estate may be named after this visionary ruler of Kolhapur who died in 1922. Sadly, his real legacy has been left to grapple with its own future in the erstwhile kingdom.

The shared space of Bollywood

Popular culture reaches out to us at some level beneath the conscious, and defines who we are. Hindi cinema has been defining India for a long time. Intercultural dialogue as portrayed in Hindi cinema was often crude — a character called John Jaani Janardhan, the blood of Hindu, Muslim and Christian flowing into one vein — but it was valuable in a way that we did not notice until it went away

JERRY PINTO

AT THE BEGINNING of *A Wednesday*, a young actor Ajay Khanna (played by V J Gaurav Kapur) comes to the police with a complaint. Someone has been making threatening calls on his cell phone. He says it must be because he is from the minority community.

Commissioner of Police Prakash Rathod (Anupam Kher) is slightly perplexed. How can a man with a name like Ajay Khanna be from the minority community? In turn, Ajay Khanna is surprised by such naiveté. All the big stars in Bollywood are Muslims, he points out. That leaves Amitabh, Abhishek (Bachchans both), Akshay (Kumar) and he. That makes them a minority, doesn't it? Neeraj Pandey, the director and writer of the film, underlines the fallaciousness of this reasoning by making the troublesome call part of a series of pranks.

Bollywood, its denizens love to say, is one of the places where there is no communal taint. They also deny the existence of the casting couch and, until the public shooting of Gulshan Kumar, the presence of underworld financing. But they also claim that they are a force in maintaining sectarian equilibrium. For instance, Amitabh Bachchan has often stated

that Bollywood has had a role in maintaining communal harmony. In a recent interview (<http://community.bollywood.com/profiles/blogs/oscars-not-ultimate>), the 66-year-old film actor noted: "Bihar records the maximum crime but has less movie halls. Andhra Pradesh has the maximum movie theatres. It is the movies that keep communal harmony as people of all communities and religion sit together in the hall to watch a movie... where they laugh together, weep together..."

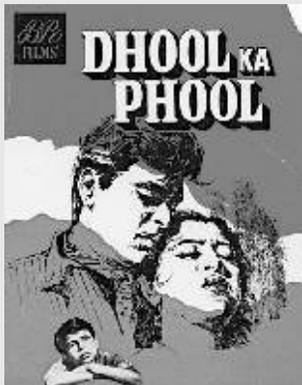
While one is not sure whether one can make such an easy equation between the number of cinema halls and violent crime, Bachchan has pointed to the fact that Bollywood is a shared space. While no language-based cinema can ever claim to be India's national pop culture, Hindi films made in Mumbai seem to have achieved as much of that status as is possible in a nation with 22 national languages and uncounted dialects. Turn to a Malayalam channel playing *Antakshari* and no one bats an eyelid, not the host, not the other contestants, not the audience, when a young woman begins singing the anthemic song from *Yaadon ki Baaraat* — 'Chura liya hai tumne jo dil ko...'



Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* features a diverse cricket team including a dalit boy who's called 'Kachra'

'Tu Hindu banega na Mussalmaan banega'

One of the most famous songs ever written for a Hindi film celebrating pluralism is this one by Sahir Ludhianvi, from *Dhool ka Phool*:



*Tu Hindu banega na
Mussalmaan banega
Insaan ki aulad hai insaan
banega*

*Achcha hai abhi tak tera
kuchh naam nahin hai
Tujhko kisi mazhab se koi
kaam nahin hai
Jis ilm ne insaan ko taqseem
kiya hai
Us ilm ke tujh par koi ilzaam
nahin hai
Tu badle huey waqt ki
pehchaan banega*

Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega

*Malik ne har insaan ko insaan banaaya
Humne use Hindu ya Mussalmaan banaaya
Kudrat ne to bakshi thi hamein ek hi dharti
Hum ne kahin Bharat kahin Iran banaaya
Jo tod de har bandh woh toofan banega
Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega*

*Nafrat jo sikhaaye woh dharam tera nahin hai
Insaan ko jo raunde woh kadam tera nahin hai
Koran na ho jis mein woh mandir nahin tera
Geeta na ho jis mein woh dharam tera nahin hai
Tu aman aur sulaha ka armaan banega
Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega*

*Yeh deen ke taajar, yeh watan bechnewaale
Insaanon ki laashon ke kafan bechnewaale
Yeh mahalon mein baithe huey qaatil ye lootere
Kaanton ke wajrooh-e chaman bechnewaale
Tu inke liye maut ka elaan banega
Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega*

*Tu Hindu banega na Mussalmaan banega
Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega*

The tendency to preach is much more marked in *'Mere desh premiyon, aapas mein prem karo'* from *Desh Premee*, Manmohan Desai's 1982 flop. It is interesting to note that the women respond first to this cry for national unity, although its major rationale is that the enemy from beyond the borders will take over if we are not united.

*Nafrat ki laathi todo
Laalach ka khanjar phenko
Zid ke peechhe mat daudo
Tum prem ke panchhi ho desh premiyon
Aapas mein prem karo, desh premiyon...*

*Meethe paani mein ye zeher na tum gholo
Jab bhi, kuch bolo, ye sochke tum bolo*

Part of this is the magic of music. Part of it is the size of the monolith, the way in which Bollywood's faces are recognisable by virtue of the power of repetition, its music the white noise of the nation. Part of it is the way in which popular culture reaches out to us at some level beneath the conscious, and defines who we are. Hindi cinema has been defining India for a long time. For instance, one of the most popular songs about the nation-state of India, *'Mere desh ki dharti sona ugle, ugle heere moti'* considers the nation as a whole and valorises its farmers. The jingoism of the song from Manoj Kumar's *Upkar* is reinforced by the presence of various Hindu metaphors including an anonymous man playing a flute, a temple with an Om sign painted on it, and the beginnings of the deification of Jawaharlal Nehru.

This should not really surprise us. Popular culture is almost always patriarchal, mainstream, jingoistic, and paints in broad strokes with pre-approved colours. Since it is also almost always rich, it is conservative and has much invested in the status quo. But there have been many ways in which this has been challenged, and many ways in which Bollywood has challenged popular stereotypes in one way or another.

This was probably because the early filmmakers often saw themselves as part of the Nehruvian project of nation-building. They sought his blessings and approval when they made films that had social significance. Gandhiji did not think much of cinema, so they couldn't invoke him, although he has always been a significant and powerful icon, peering down from the walls of thousands of courtrooms and invoked in many debates, including the iconic clash between the *thakur* (Sanjeev Kumar) who wants to fight the dacoit's fire with some mercenaries, and the villagers in *Sholay*.

The patriarchs of the studio age, and even those of the 1950s, were sure of their position in the world. The masses were illiterate and in need of uplift; cinema was the medium that reached where no other could go, and it was therefore their duty to use celluloid to educate and to build one nation out of India's disparate religious communities and castes.

But that was the 1950s, when it did not surprise anyone that a Muslim, Kaifi Azmi, should write lines like these for *Haqueeqat*:

*'Tod do haath agar haath uthne lage
Chhoone paaye na Sita ka daaman koi
Raam bhi tum tumhin Lakshman, saathiyon
Ab tumhaare hawaale watan saathiyon.'*

It is possible to track how much this spirit changed by looking at two songs, separated by a decade. In 1957, Sahir Ludhianvi wrote *'Yeh desh hai veer jawaanon ka'* for *Naya Daur*, the predecessor of *Upkar*'s *'Mere desh ki dharti'* by Gulshan Bawra. In the *Naya Daur* song, the camera stays with the villagers and the party of bhanga dancers. There are no overt references to any political figures, no religious references, not even in the shots. But then *Naya Daur* was not concerned with patriotism so much as it was concerned with the processes of modernity and how this might impact



a village. It was a more inclusive world in which a horse-cart owner might defeat the horsepower of a bus. In its own way, it was mythopoetic but it seems now to be a gentler myth that was being constructed.

Many of the Golden Age filmmakers were well-read men. Some like Mehboob Khan were illiterate, but that did not stop them from being cosmopolitan and well-informed. The presence of the progressive writers, the *tarakkipasand* Urdu poets and the Hindi modern novelists, often mediated their own baser and more commercial instincts.

For instance, the combination of Raj Kapoor and Khwaja Ahmed Abbas produced some outstanding cinema through the 1950s and 1960s. When the Hindu Kapoor and the Muslim Abbas worked together, their films glued the punters to their seats while talking about issues like homelessness, poverty, child labour, and socialism. When they went their separate ways, Abbas became a demagogue and Kapoor began to turn out cinema that relied on wet women rather than burning issues.

These men would have known that the young nation's primary challenge was extinguishing the flames of Partition and starting the process of living together again. To this end, therefore, the Muslim figures in Hindi cinema were always presented in a kindly light. Rahim Chacha was the good guy in the *basti* in innumerable films. It is Abdul Rashid (Manmohan Krishna) who adopts the orphan and swears to bring it up as a human being (see box) in *Dhool ka Phool*. In *Sholay*, the *imam* (A K Hangal) does not regret the loss of his son (Sachin); instead he says it is time for his prayers and that he will now go and ask Allah why he was not given more sons to lose for the village.

And while some of this may be imputed to a genuine desire to be inclusive, it was not always an honest impulse. Some part of it was pure commerce. The native Urdu speaker, the Muslim, was a natural part of the Hindi film audience and he could not be alienated. The native English speaker, on the other hand, could be mocked. Christians therefore turned up as morally degenerate figures; their women smoked and drank and were called 'Lily' and 'Rosy'; the men gambled and were small-time hoods called 'Robert' and 'Rocky'. Parsis too were fair game since, like the Christians, they largely

*Bhar jaata hai gehra ghaav, jo banta hai goli se
Par woh ghaav nahi bharta, jo bana ho kadvi boli se
To meethe bol kaho, mere desh premiyon...*

*Dekho, yeh dharti, hum sab ki maata hai
Socho, aapas mein, kya apna naata hai
Hum aapas mein ladh baithe to desh ko kaun sambhaalega
Koi baaharwaala apne ghar se hamein nikaalega
Deewanon hosh karo, mere desh premiyon...*

*Todo, deewaarein, yeh chaar dishaaron ki
Roko mat, raahen, in mast havaaon ki
Poorab pachchim uttar dakshin vaalon mera matalab hai
Is maati se poochho kya bhaashha kya isaka mazhab hai
Phir mujhse baat karo, mere desh premiyon...*

'Yeh kiska lahu hai kaun mara?'

*Dharti ki sulagti chhaati ke bechain sharaare poochhte hain...
Yeh kiska lahuo hai, kaun maraa
Ai rahabar mulq-o-qaum bataa
Yeh kiskaa lahuo hai, kaun maraa*

*Yeh jalte huey ghar kiske hain
Yeh kat-te huey tan kiske hain
Taqseem ke andhe toofaan mein
Lut-te huey gulshan kiske hain
Badbaqt kizaayein kiski hain
Barbaad nasheman kiske hain
Kuchh hum bhi sunein humko bhi suna
Ai rahabar mulq-o-qaum bataa
Yeh kiska lahuo hai, kaun maraa*

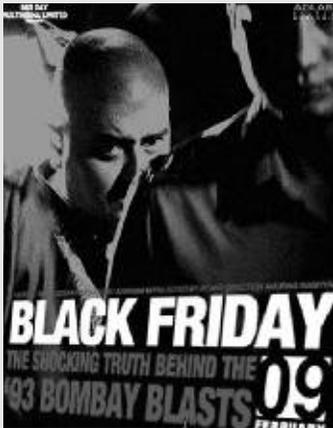
*Kis kaam ke hain ye deen-dharam
Jo sharm ka daaman chaak karein
Kis tarah ke hain ye desh bhakt
Jo baste gharon ko khaak karein
Yeh roohein kaisi roohein hain
Jo dharti ko naapaak karein
Aankhen to uthaa nazarein to milaa
Ai rahabar mulq-o-qaum bataa
Yeh kiska lahuo hai, kaun maraa*

*Jis Raam ke naam pe khoon bahe
Us Raam ki izzat kya hogi
Jis deen ke haathon laaj lutey
Us deen ki qeemat kya hogi
Insaan ki is zillat se pare
Shaitaan ki zillat kya hogi
Yeh ved hataa quraan uthaa
Ai rahabar mulq-o-qaum bataa
Yeh kiska lahuo hai, kaun maraa*

'Arre ruk jaa re bandhe'

The Indian Ocean song, which was used to great effect in *Black Friday* has a similar message:

*Arre ruk jaa re bande
Arre tham ja re bande
Ki kudrat hans padegi
Arre mandir yeh chup hai
Arre masjid yeh gumsum*



Ibaadat thak padegi ho...

*Samay ki laal aandhi
Kabristaan ke raste
Arre lathpath chalegi*

*Kisse kaafir kahega
Kisse kaayar kahega
Teri kab tak chalegi ho...*

*Arre ruk ja re bande
Arre tham ja re bande
Ki kudrat hans padegi ho...*

*Arre mandir yeh chup hai
Arre masjid yeh gumsum
Ibaadat thak padegi ho...*

*Samay ki laal aandhi
Kabristaan ke raste
Arre latpat chalegi ho...*

*Arre ruk ja re bande
Arre tham ja re bande
Ki kudrat hans padegi ho...*

*Arre neendein hai jakhami
Arre sapne hai bhooke
Ki karvat phat padegi ho...*

'Yeh tara, woh tara, har tara'

The song from *Swades* makes the oldest argument in the book, and one that probably still works for most people: in unity is strength. It may also be the first time that a rainbow coalition has been suggested in Bollywood.

*Yeh tara woh tara har tara
Dekho jise bhi lage pyaara
Yeh tara woh tara har tara
Yeh sab saath mein, jo hain raat mein
To jagmagaae aasmaan saara
Jagmag taare, do taare, nau taare, sau taare, jagmag saare
Har taara hai sharaaraa*

*Tumne dekhi hai dhanak to
Bolo rang kitane hain
Saat rang kehene ko
Phir bhi sang kitne hain
Samjho sabse pehle to
Rang hote akele to
Indradhanush banta hi nahin
Ek na hum ho paaye to
Anyay se ladne ko
Hogi koi jantaa hi nahin
Phir na kehna nirbal hai, kyon hara
Hmm taaraa taaara*

*Yeh tara woh tara har tara
Dekho jise bhi lage pyaara
Yeh sab saath mein, jo hain raat mein
To jagmagaae aasmaan saara
Jagmag taare, do taare, nau taare, sau taare, jagmag saare*

preferred western cinema. Thus the prototype Parsi woman was the sex-starved and inquisitive Mrs Pestonji (Piloo Wadia) in *Bobby*; the prototype Parsi man was the effeminate and hysterical man into whose car Feroze Khan bumps in *Qurbani*.

Tribal India? Basing oneself on Bollywood, one might assume that all of them are cannibals who worship totems, shout "hurrr-hurrr" and want to cook the heroine in a stew pot.

Dalit India? Four films come to mind: Franz Osten's *Achhut Kanya*, Bimal Roy's *Sujata* in which Nutan plays a low-caste girl; Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* in which one of the players has the name 'Kachra'. The third one, *Souten*, is the only film in which one of the characters has an actual hatred of the low caste. Rukmini (Tina Munim) has an almost visceral revulsion for the dalits played by Shriram Lagoo and Padmini Kolhapure. All these roles demand sympathy for the dalit characters, but that only four films come to mind in a cinema that has been around for more than a hundred years is indicative.

In terms of the making of the nation, it was emphasised that unity was strength and this unity had to stretch beyond the religious. The symbolism was often crude. In *Five Rifles*, I S Johar's bizarre film, a king of some Clouduckooostan has three images in glittering rhinestones that must be kept safe to ensure that the country is safe. One is Krishna playing his flute, the other is a cross, and the third is the name of Allah in Arabic. One might argue that *Five Rifles* was a C-grade film, but the crudeness extended across genres. *Naseeb*, for instance, had a multi-star cast led by Amitabh Bachchan, Hema Malini, Reena Roy, Rishi Kapoor and Shatrughan Sinha (in alphabetical order, as the posters said). For some reason, Amitabh goes by the name 'John Jaani Janardhan'. In the middle of a song celebrating the golden jubilee of *Dharam Veer*, another Desai superhit, Bachchan sings a song to entertain the stars. In the course of it, someone asks him how he has three names:

Extra: *Ek aadmi ke teen naam kaise?*

JJJ (sings): *Yeh teenon naam hai mere...*

He goes to a window and points.

JJJ: *Allah...*

Outside it, a mosque lights up.

JJJ: *...Jesus...*

Outside the next window, a church lights up.

JJJ: *...Ram hai mere...*

Outside the third window, a temple lights up.

This may explain what Shah Rukh Khan means when he says: "I have Allah and Om in my room. Karan (Johar) says it's like a Hindi film," (in *Colas, Cars & Communal Harmony; A Doff to Bollywood's Secular Colours* by Bharathi S Pradhan).



Gadar: Ek Prem Katha
was probably the apotheosis
of the anti-Muslim film

But even if it was crude, it was valuable in a way that we did not notice. Not until it suddenly went away. In the 1990s, Bollywood went Hindu. The Hindu wedding became the focus of several films. The film title, always rendered in three languages (Roman, Devnagri and Urdu), was suddenly down to two scripts and no prizes for guessing which one was dropped. *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* was released and went on to be a mega success, perhaps even the apotheosis of the anti-Muslim film.

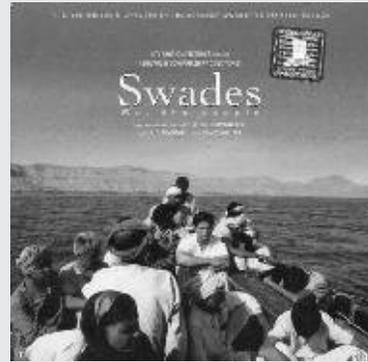
Because, a few years after that, the Muslim figure came back. This seemed a little surprising but then, once again, commercial arithmetic may have had something to do with it. The UK market is now a significant factor in the success or failure of a Hindi film. At a median price of eight pounds sterling for a new release, each Briton of Pakistani origin or of Indian Muslim origin who hears that a film has unflattering representations of his community is a valuable commodity.

In some senses, this does not matter.

In the world of the imagination, there are many things that play out differently from the way things happen in the streets. This means that the man who weeps at 'Arre ruk jaa re bandhe' may still go out with a mob, a *mashaal* in his hand. But the only way to defend the inclusive, the only way to support the notion of a plural State, is to repeat it again and again. To say that there is no other way. To say that we have to learn to live together. To say that when the blood flows, you cannot tell by its colour where it came from. That the earth has no religion. That man is born into humanity and not into a religion. That the rainbow is made of many more colours than we can imagine.

When this becomes part of the popular imagination, when we are ashamed of how we 'other' each other on the basis of what we eat and what we worship, when we can segregate the fanatic and the sectarian, one is fairly sure that social scientists of every stripe will be forced to look at the role popular culture had to play in how this consensus developed.

Jerry Pinto is a writer and freelance journalist based in Mumbai



*Har taara hai sharaaraa
Boond-boond milne se
banta ek dariya hai
Boond-boond saagar hai
varna ye saagar kya hai
Samjho is paheli ko,
boond ho akeli to
Ek boond jaise kuchh bhi
nahin
Hum auron ko chhodein
to, moonh sabse hi
modein to
Tanhaa reh na jaayein*

*dekho ham kahin
Kyon na milke banein hum dhaaraa
Hmm taaraa taaraa*

*Yeh tara woh tara har tara
Dekho jise bhi lage pyaara
Yeh tara woh tara har tara
Yeh sab saath mein, jo hain raat mein
To jagmagaae aasmaan saara
Jagmag taare, do taare, nau taare, sau taare, jagmag saare
Har taaraa hai sharaaraa*

*Jo kisaan hal sambhaale
Dharti sona hi ugaaye
Jo gawala gaiyaan paale
Doodh ki nadi bahaaye
Jo lohar loha dhaale
Har auzaar dhal jaaye
Mitthi jo kumhaar uthaa le
Mitthi pyala ban jaaye
Sab ye roop hain mehnat ke
Kuchh karne ki chaahat ke*

*Kisi ka kisise koi bair nahin
Sab ke ek hi sapne hain
Socho to sab apne hain
Koi bhi kisi se yahaan gair nahin
Seedhi baat hai samjho yaaraa
Hmm taaraa taaraa*

Budhan bolta hai

The dialogue must go on, says Dakxin Bajrange, the moving spirit behind Gujarat's Budhan Theatre, a decade-old theatre group comprised of Chharas, a tribe dubbed criminals by the British raj and still stigmatised even after the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act. Budhan Theatre is their effort to communicate that no one is a born criminal, and they believe that their theatre has transformed their lives and their identities

ANOSH MALEKAR

“HOW DO YOU CONVINCING a world that suspects you are a 'born thief? You act like a thief!” Theatre person Dakxin Bajrange was matter-of-fact as he explained the circumstances that led to the birth of a unique street theatre at a pre-Independence-era resettlement site on the outskirts of Gujarat's commercial heart, Ahmedabad, where a people called Chharas were subjected to forced labour and constant surveillance by the British.

Budhan Theatre was founded on August 31, 1998, to commemorate the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1911, on August 31, 1952. “The withdrawal of the British law was supposed to lift the stigma of criminality attached to our people. But the stigma remains to this day. Budhan Theatre is an effort to communicate that no one is a born criminal. In fact, we call ourselves born actors,” he said.

Bajrange had an interesting point to make: “Even if for a moment we consider that we are born thieves, it still does not falsify our claim to be born actors. A bad actor cannot be a thief. My father was a thief. I realised while doing theatre that theft is also an art form. It follows a fixed method and requires a fair amount of creativity. It is like theatre — there is a director, an actor and a stage. Your audience should not know how they were distracted and picked. There is a lot of drama in all this. We have tried to revive the art form, of course in a positive way.”

Bajrange is a Chhara and has been the moving spirit behind the theatre movement since its inception. He writes, directs and acts in plays that revolve around real-life experiences of his community with law-enforcing agencies, often involving illegal detentions and custodial deaths. “Our goal is to tell the world that Chharas and other similarly stigmatised people — some 60 million across India now referred to as denotified tribes (DNTs) — are human beings with real emotions, capacities and aspirations.”

The plays performed by Budhan Theatre are neither conventional nor experimental as you would know them. They have unique themes that are based on the personal experiences of the actors and have unfailingly touched a chord with audiences. “In the last 10 years that we have been performing, theatre has changed our identity; it has also provided dignity. Established artists in Gujarati cinema and theatre have started looking up to us as one of them. Earlier, our children could not get into college for higher

education, but now they do because they are considered good actors. And often, even if their grades are not up to the mark, they are admitted because their acting skills are seen as an asset,” Kalpana Gagdekar, founding member of Budhan Theatre and now an established Gujarati film and television actor, claimed.

Gagdekar reminisced on the journey that began in 1998 when writer-activists Mahasweta Devi and Ganesh Devy came to meet the Chharas at their homes. They were warned by the police against entering the 'criminal ghetto', but they insisted and pushed their way through. “Mahasweta Devi came and asked us what it was that we needed most. We told her that we desperately wanted to read. She spent money from her own pocket and bought us books. I think it was the first time in Chhara history that someone from outside had made such a gesture,” Gagdekar added.

The young boys and girls in Chharanagar found in her a pillar of support. They started calling her 'Amma' and in gratitude composed a play on the life and death of Budhan Sabar, a denotified tribal from Purulia district in West Bengal killed in police custody. The first performance took place before her, at the first national convention of DNTs held in Chharanagar in August 1998.

Mahasweta, who was portrayed as a character pleading for the dignity and rights of DNTs, cried as she watched those branded criminals speak about their plight. The Chharas were only too familiar with police atrocities, and it showed, though none of the actors were professionals. They went on to perform some 500 shows of the play at schools and colleges across India.

The media started writing about the library Mahasweta Devi helped set up and the unique theatre experiment launched with her intervention in Chharanagar. It provided the first ray of hope for a community living on the margins of society and often banished to the crime section of mainstream media.

Entering Chharanagar always felt like crossing an invisible border into another world. Located beyond the Naroda railway crossing on the eastern periphery of Ahmedabad, the streets are narrower and dirtier, sandwiched between a warren of houses and small shops set out like weekly market stalls. The area is crowded and noisy — roughly three square



miles teeming with 20,000 human souls. The only open spaces are pools of stagnant water overrun by pigs feeding on the abundant refuse. The sharp stink of illicit liquor emanates from the muddle of dilapidated, dark dwellings whose occupants eye strangers with suspicion and fear. No auto or taxi operator would drive here.

It was no different in November 2008, nearly 10 years after I first visited the place. The taxi driver failed to turn up at the last minute; maybe he developed cold feet. Luckily I met up with an old journalist friend who volunteered to drop me at Chharanagar proper on his motorcycle. Even now journalists are among the few who dare venture into the area.

The Chharas trace their origins to nomads from the Punjab engaged by traders in transporting commodities like salt and honey between the coasts and the inland forests, before the arrival of the East India Company. The English too relied on the tribe's knowledge of the vast country to guide their armies through unknown territories and establish trading relationships. But these networks were rendered redundant as railways and telegraphs were built in the 1850s. The colonial authorities grew nervous of the nomads who moved around freely, carrying intelligence they could not directly control.

In the aftermath of the revolt of 1857 these former allies began to be seen as potential enemies. The colonisers dubbed as 'thugs' some of them who supposedly strangled, beheaded and robbed travellers in the name of the goddess Kali. The colonial masters responded with equally brutal repression. In 1871, an Act was passed for "the notification of criminal tribes". Overnight, hundreds of tribes became criminals. When they could not be forcibly settled, they were shot at sight. Those who were settled were kept in confined areas, subjected to a pass system to control their movements, and rehabilitated through rigorous labour.

The first such settlement came up in the northeast, then in the south and in the Bombay Presidency. There were around 10-15 such settlements across the country, the biggest one in Solapur, in Maharashtra. Millions were detained in such settlements. Newborns were separated from their parents at birth. The British feared that young children would also become 'criminals' if they stayed with their parents.

But did the criminal tribes really exist, or did the British invent them as an excuse to seize tighter control of India? Independent researchers confirm the existence of different groups of 'thugs' over the centuries, but the monsters the British made of them had much more to do with colonial imaginings of India than with reality.

The tribes were formally denotified in 1952 after India's independence. But they were reclassified as "habitual offenders" in 1959. Many laws and regulations in various states prohibit certain communities of people from travelling; others must register at police stations in the districts they pass through. The percentage of such tribes in custody and under investigation remains highly



Janak Patel

disproportionate to their population.

The Chharas believe they were notified and settled by the colonial masters at Chharanagar in the 1930s. They were engaged in industrial and agricultural labour. After Independence, they were released from the settlement but many chose to stay back, having no resources or other means of livelihood, and no useful skills.

The elderly Chharas do not deny outright the tag of criminality, explaining it as a social and economic compulsion after being discriminated against as young children in schools and denied opportunities of higher education. But they are proud of their 20 youngsters and some 40 children involved with theatre. The parents of most of these children are petty thieves or brew illicit liquor. Around 50% of the people in the area are still involved in illegal activities. But these men and women want their children to become actors. When the kids come back from school they are sent to the library and encouraged to do theatre.

Roxy Gagdekar, founder member and a crime reporter with a leading national English newspaper, said: "We never really knew why we chose theatre in the first place. Perhaps the Chharas, like several other DNTs, were well-versed culturally, but due to difficult living conditions lacked the opportunity to develop their talent properly."

Dakshin Bajrange recalls the performance of Badal Sircar's *Spartacus* way back in 1979-80: "Ahmedabad-based theatre personality Prem Prakash was hunting for actors to play slaves in his production of the play. The Chharas fit the bill, and Prakash was happy with their performance. He kept coming to us and we owe our primary training in contemporary theatre to him."

He vouches for the innate and extraordinary acting talent among Chharas. "If you ask anyone from this ghetto to sing, dance or act, they will do so unabashedly. Their quality of facial expression, speech and gesture is unmatched. Because

acting is inborn, a tradition dating back several centuries. They are still performing with what little they have — their bodies, their voices and their creative talent — in the hope of changing society so that they may have a future within it.”

It was never easy to do theatre in Chharanagar. The one open space available for rehearsals is right opposite the police station. “We have no option, you see,” laughs Roxy Gagdekar. “We have always performed the theatre of our lived experiences, never mind who the audiences are. While *Budhan Bolta Hai*, based on a custodial death in West Bengal, was performed at several police gatherings, *Bulldozer*, which portrays the evacuation of the poor in Ahmedabad for the beautification of the city, was performed outside the house of the city’s municipal commissioner.”

The theatre group believes that if you have a cause then you must have a voice. It has unemployed youth, young college girls and schoolchildren venting their anger or simply speaking their mind. Budhan’s repertoire includes some 25 plays performed across India from streets to the stage: *Budhan* (1998), *Pinya Hari Kale Ki Maut* (1999), *Encounter* (2001), *Majhab Hamein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna* (2002), *Ulgulan* (2006), *Mujhe Mat Maro... Saab* (2006), *Bhukh* (2007), *Bhagawa Barrack* (Saffron Barrack) (2007), *Bhoma* (2004), *Khoj* (2005), *Ek Chhoti Si Ladai* (2005), *Choli Ke Picche Kya Hai?* (2007), *Ek Aur Balcony* (2008), *Ek Chhoti Si Asha*, *Sangharsh Aur Siddhi*, *Hamari Zindagi Hamare Gaun*, *Swaraj*, *Budhan Bolta Hai...* and so on. They have performed in Ahmedabad, Baroda, Delhi, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune and Mumbai.

The group also started making films in 2004 as a livelihood option for the unemployed Chhara youth. The documentary *Fight For Survival*, based on the conflict between a tribe of snake-charmers and animal rights activists won the Jeevika Award in 2005. Other films like *The Lost Water* (2007), *Bulldozer* (2006), *Thought For Development* (2005), *Bhasha@ten* (2006), *Actors Are Born Here* (2006), *Bhavai Nu Pedhinamu* (2007), *It Is The Music* (2008), *Acting Like A Thief* (a film on Budhan Theatre by Shashwati Takukdar and Kerim Friedman, USA) have been screened abroad at international film events.

Budhan Theatre counts among its supporters Keshav Kumar, a senior Indian Police Service (IPS) officer in Gujarat, and danseuse Mallika Sarabhai who runs Darpana Academy of Performing Arts in Ahmedabad. Vivek Ghamande is the first Chhara to graduate from the National School of Drama in Delhi. Roxy’s brother, Alok Gagdekar, followed him. Both are now struggling for a foothold in Bollywood. That is, of course, the rosy side of the picture.

On May 11, 2003, Dakxin Bajrange was arrested for physical assault on a person in Chharanagar. He was not present in the area at the time the police claimed the incident occurred. He was put behind bars for 15 days, and told: “*Bahut natak kar rahe ho police ke khilaaf?*” (You are performing theatre against the police?). Alok Gagdekar’s father was once caught by the police simply because his

sons were doing theatre. They were not ready to accept that a boy from this ghetto could get admission to a reputed institution in Delhi and tortured the father to reveal the ‘real story’.

But the Chhara spirit keeps them going. Last year, actor Sandeep was arrested by the police on a false charge. Two months later, he was let out on parole to appear for a university examination. His parole was till February 28, and the group was performing a play on February 26. Sandeep went to Dakxin Bajrange and said he would like to perform, and gave an energetic and spontaneous performance.

“Spontaneity in performance is our life. At Budhan Theatre, we first perform and then write a play. This way our actors get involved with the issues. We try to take our plays as close as possible to real life,” Bajrange said, adding that this poses a different challenge in his state: “Doing theatre in present-day Gujarat is not easy. People do not want to talk or see real issues. It is okay if you are doing soft comedies or plays based on family and religious values. Political plays are the need of the hour, but in Gujarat they will not be staged.”

The undeclared censorship did not deter Budhan Theatre from staging *Ek Aur Balcony*, a hard-hitting take on the communal situation in Gujarat, on its 10th anniversary. This was a loose adaptation of *Le Balcon* by French playwright Jean Genet, incidentally himself a vagabond and petty criminal in his early life who later became a political activist and playwright.

The Chharas, after centuries of stigma and a little over a decade of theatre, seem to have perfected the art of purposeful deceit. And they have an open invitation for all those voices that go unheard, to join them. “If you do not find a place to perform in Gujarat then come straight to our ghetto. You will certainly find space here!” Devy, who has been witness to the theatre’s growth from nowhere, jokes: “This ghetto is the only place left in Ahmedabad now for meaningful cultural exchanges.”

As twilight sets in, young members of Budhan Theatre gather at Dakxin Bajrange’s house to practise their most recent and unusual production: *Non-instrumental Music*. “It is music produced from the implements traditionally used for brewing liquor. You will find it on Youtube,” explains one of the child performers. Bajrange chips in: “The dialogue must go on. It is another way of saying: Look we are not born criminals; we are born actors. Any doubts?”

Any doubts were drowned in the music...

Community beyond boundaries

The Indian subcontinent has been characterised by a duality and a contest between two traditions, one that was by and large a tradition of equality, love and social justice, and the other which was primarily that of hierarchy and caste domination

GAIL OMVEDT

*'He knows no 'we', he knows no 'other'
No practice of following caste and clan'*

This verse, attributed to the bhakti poet Namdev in the 13th century, is a proclamation of universalism that is sadly lacking in the India of today (1). It differs radically from the false universalism proclaimed by the brahmanic Vedantic tradition of *atma = brahman*, which could easily be consistent with the actual fragmented hierarchy of caste (2). It is, instead, representative of another tradition in India, not a counter-tradition or a 'heterodoxy' as scholars have called it, but a major tradition of the subcontinent which we know of first from early Buddhism and similar *shramana* sects, but which may well date back to the Indus civilisation. This, India's great tradition, was challenged by the tradition springing back to the Vedas (dating from at most the 15th century BCE) and clearly formulated in the brahmanic teachings which come to us in clear form about the time of the rise of Buddhism, around the middle of the first millennium BCE.

The Indian subcontinent has been characterised by a duality and a contest between two traditions, one that was by and large a tradition of equality, love and social justice, and the other which was primarily that of hierarchy and caste domination. In the most ancient times, this contest was embodied in the *brahmana-shramana* conflict (though Christianity and Judaism also made their entries into India very early and both contributed in ways unknown and still debated to the overall 'Indic' culture). The *shramanas* included those following the teachings of what are now known as Buddhism and Jainism as well as early Indian materialism and many other ways of seeking liberation. The *brahmanas* was a social category that was in the process of defining itself as birth-based and thus exclusive.

The equalitarian and love-based teachings of Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism (3) entered the country very early — what effect they had on further developments is still unknown and is coming to be hotly debated — and following the triumph of brahmanism around the 5th-6th centuries, the Islamic stream also made its presence felt with great power, interacting with these other streams and even merging into the Indic culture in complex ways. Then, in the 'medieval' or 'early modern' period, the primary conflict was seen between what we now call 'bhakti' and brahmanism,

while from the colonial period it was seen in the conflict between a 'non-brahmanic' tradition including Phule, Iyothee Thass, Ambedkar and Periyar, among others, as well as women intellectuals and activists such as Pandita Ramabai. I have touched on major points in this long period in my recent book *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals* (4). Here, I will simply briefly discuss the aspect of universality in this tradition, in the Bhakti movement, and then turn to what *appears* as the most important issue today, 'religion'.

Buddhism not only proclaimed universality but practised it in the Buddhist Sangha, in which all were equal. Within the society outside the Sangha, though full equality could not be practised, what was projected was a society of equal opportunity, that is to say something like a 'modern' class society as contrasted with the feudal/slave society of *varnashrama dharma*. In this, it was the major force contesting brahmanism and can be called hegemonic for nearly a millennium. However, by the middle of the first millennium of the common era, the brahmanic tradition had triumphed and gained the support of most kings in enforcing *varnashrama dharma* and the superiority of Brahmins. Following this, most of the earlier traditions of equality were lost to historical memory until British colonial rule (5).

But we do have enough historical material on the Bhakti movement, at least from the 12th century onwards, to know the kind of equality and universalism that was practised.

The earliest we have clear information on was the Veerasaiva (Lingayat) movement in the 12th century Karnataka kingdom of Kalyana which was famous for refusing caste distinctions and seeking to create a community beyond boundaries. A verse from one of its major early leaders, Allama, simply describes the "six errors" as *varnashramajati, kula, gotra, nama, simeyamba*, or "caste, age, colour, clan, family, name and region" (6). That this was meant very concretely is shown in the early history of Veerasaivism: not only had Basava himself rejected the sacred thread, not only were women admitted on equality with men in all 'religious' affairs, but, in addition, a marriage was arranged between the son of a dalit member and the daughter of a Brahmin. Due to this major 'sin', the two parents were brutally executed, in spite of Basava being a minister in the kingdom, and the Veerasaivas were suppressed and driven

out of the kingdom. It is clear from this that where brahmanism held power, the sin of *varnasamkara* (intercaste marriage, especially in its 'worst' form, the *pratiloma* marriage) was punishable by death.

Following Namdev, we can trace a line of great equalitarian, anti-caste *sants*, including Kabir, Ravidas, Mira, Dadu and others. Of these, Kabir may be most famous for his denial of the reality of 'Hindu' and 'Turk', and for his severe castigation of the way such identities led to murderous warfare:

*Hindu kahe mohi raam piyaara, turk kahe rahimaan,
Aapas me dou lari lari muye, maram na kaahu jaana*

The Hindu says Ram's the beloved, the Turk says Rahiman —
They die fighting one another, no one knows the truth

*Jete aurat mard upaane so sab rup tumhaaraa
Ham pongaraa allah raam kaa, so guru pir hamaaraa*

Every man and woman born are forms of you, so says Kabir,
I'm Ram and Allah's foolish baby, he's my guru and my pir

Finally, let us look at Tuka, in the 17th century, at a very beautiful song which begins:

I have neither home nor habit,
I wander naturally;
I have power over none
and no stability.

My eyes and feet are called my own
I've also set them free —
now I'm blind and lame, but none's
a foreigner to me. (#424)

"None's a foreigner to me" was a proclamation of the universalism which characterised the Bhakti movement throughout.

Tuka, Namdev and others were also very explicit in defining their community of *bhaktas* to include men and women, people of all castes and religions, even people of 'polluted' professions. What we might call an early declaration of 'human rights' from Tuka is worth quoting in full:

O listen now to me,
the sign that makes you free:
keep the lord of Pandhari
in your heart always.
*Then how can we be bound
when we speak and sing Narayan?
who understands the world
will reach this shore (refrain).*
He'll end darkness and slavery,
Illusion's bonds will broken be;
Everyone will be
powerful and prosperous.
Brahman, Ksatriya, Vaishya, Shudra,
and Chandals also have rights;
little children, male and female,
and even prostitutes.
Says Tuka, through experience

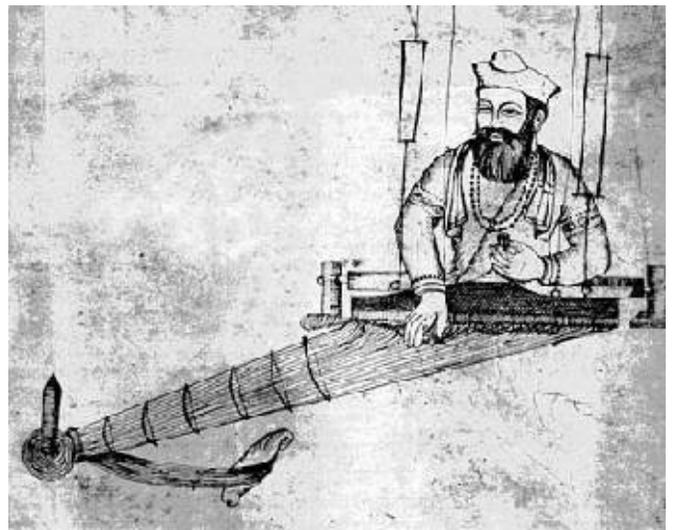
we have torn down every fence.
Many divine joys immense
are taken by the devotees. (#1142)

This very explicitly includes all the *varnas*, the *avarnas*, children, women, and 'despised' professions (the reference is to Kanhoptra, the famous sex worker who was a *varkari*).

The universality the Bhakti movement proclaimed was beyond practically any division we can think of today. Most of the time the universality proclaimed was in terms of caste divisions, as the major exploitative divisions that the *bhaktas* experienced. Gender divisions, however, also came in, as is clear in the song above and in the Veerasaivas' readiness to allow women's equality with men in what would have been equivalent to 'priests'. And, as 'religious' divisions became known these were also consistently opposed. Guru Nanak claimed that he was "neither Hindu nor Muslim", as did the Sufi saint Bulle Shah, as did Kabir (though here it is unclear from the existing texts exactly when the texts describing the murderous conflicts of 'Hindu' and 'Turk' are from) (7). In fact, while all the *bhaktas* are described today as 'Hindus' and the 'Bhakti movement' is contrasted with the 'Sufi' tradition when describing India's plural traditions, the radical (8) *bhaktas* refused a 'religious' identification. However, only two of the movements of the long centuries, Sikhism and Veerasaivism, could in the end constitute themselves with an identity other than 'Hindu' (9).

'Religion', finally, is itself a complex social reality. To go back to

'Every man and woman born are
forms of you, so says Kabir,
I'm Ram and Allah's foolish baby,
he's my guru and my pir'



ancient times, in India as in most of the world thousands of years ago, there were many deities and many ways of recognising and following what was considered the divine. The process by which these streams began to define themselves as 'religion' and get posed against one another in terms of 'we' and 'they' was in every case a complicated one. In India, while the major distinction in the ancient period was *shramana/brahmana*, neither term was strictly speaking 'religious' as we would define it today. The words now translated as 'religion' had a different meaning — *dhamma* as 'teaching', *dharma* as 'sacred duty'; while the two traditions represented very different ways of looking at the world, neither was what we might call a 'religion' today. Buddhism in particular had no rituals or rites to identify 'lay' followers of Buddha; there was only a differentiated group of world-renouncers that collectively became known as the Sangha.

When brahmanism became hegemonic and kings everywhere on the subcontinent began enforcing its social order of *varnashrama dharma*, it was still not known as a 'religion'. Some scholars have argued that 'Saivism' and 'Vaisnavism' could be characterised as separate religions, yet there were also radically different forms of these. Caste was the major way of differentiating 'we' and 'others'. Some sense of 'religious' distinctions apparently emerged with the coming of Islam, partly because it was backed by powerful rulers (though spread through Sufis who themselves did not recognise distinctions), partly because its orthodox observances were clearly visible and prescribed for all members of the world Muslim community. What happened in the colonial period was not the 'creation' of any of the religious-cultural traditions, but their establishment as 'religions', or distinct social categories. Members of the brahman and other 'twice-born' elites began to define 'Hinduism' as a 'religion' that included belief in the Vedas, *bhakti*, and numerous popular deities, in a word all that was not clearly 'Muslim' or 'Christian' or in some ways originating in a 'foreign' country. Today we see even more extremely an insistence that Rama is the primary symbol of 'Hinduism'.

The resistance to this process of solidifying 'religions' has nothing to do with the difference that is often argued between 'Semitic' or 'western' and 'eastern' religious-cultural traditions, and continues today. This is why the entire concept of 'conversion' is erroneous. Many of the early 'converts' to 'Christianity' refused to identify it as a distinct religion or themselves as somehow 'foreign' or 'non-Indian', or even 'non-Hindu'. Pandita Ramabai is one famous example: she fought all her life with the Church authorities (10) and refused to recognise separate denominations within Christianity or draw a clear line between herself and 'non-Christian' Indians. Again, Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism continues to be characterised by so many as *dharma* or 'conversion', what it meant to him and his followers; as for the earlier 'Sakya Buddhism' of the Tamil dalit Iyothee Thass was rather entering into a faith, or returning to a faith that had originally been theirs. Again, so many of those called 'Christians' even today do not identify

themselves as members of a separate religion, but simply as 'followers of Christ'. In fact, the boundaries between all the different 'religions' have been porous and remain porous even today.

Faith or spirituality in the millennial traditions of India is not to be identified with caste, country or community. Those who seek to define it so, especially those who define it in terms of 'nation', as Hindutva politics/ideology does now, are perhaps the most 'un-Indian' of all political or 'religious' groups in the country today, and draw their inspiration not from what most people think of as 'Hinduism' but from the inequalitarian hegemonic, narrow teachings of brahmanism.

Gail Omvedt is a scholar, sociologist and human rights activist who has been involved in dalit and anti-caste movements. She is the author of several books including Dalits and the Democratic Revolution and Dalit Visions: The Anticaste Movement and Indian Cultural Identity. She is currently a Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla

Endnotes

- 1 In fact, it is given to us as an accusation of brahmins. See the collection of songs and poems attributed to Nama and his cohort; see Namdev, 1999, *Sant Namdevance Abhangagaatha* (the abhangs and songs of Sant Namdev), Satara: Rashtriya Samiti, my translation
- 2 See for instance the teachings of the sage Yajnyavalkya to his wife Maitreyi, given in the Bhradaranyaka Upanishad (4.5.6), where the constant theme that "x is loved not for itself but for the Self in it" (the translation I use is from the Penguin edition and is by Valerie Roebuck)
- 3 This, perhaps the oldest monotheistic religion, began in direct conflict with something like the Vedic tradition, with Zoroastrian *daevas* = *devas*, and *ahura* = *asura*; it is clear that the demon of one was the divine being of the other
- 4 Published by Navayana, 2008; see their website www.navayana.org to order it
- 5 No Buddhist manuscript has been recovered from India itself; all we have available today are from Tibet, Sri Lanka, China, Korea, etc
- 6 See Schouten, J P, 1995, *Revolution of the Mystics: On the Social Aspects of Virasaivism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, p 54
- 7 There have been many scholarly interpretations of the difficulties of assigning dates to *bhakti* texts; for a discussion see *Seeking Begumpura* and Vinay Dharwadkar's introduction to his translations in *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*, New Delhi: Penguin
- 8 I define "radical" in *Seeking Begumpura*, chapter 2
- 9 Though the VHP claims them as Hindu, members of these paths to the divine deny this
- 10 An excellent study of the differences between "Church Christianity", "Biblical Christianity" and "Mystical Christianity" is found in Linda Woodhead's *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2004

Musings on the popularity of *Mein Kampf*

What sells on Indian railway platforms is a good indicator of what the average Indian wants in life. When Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is a bestseller at railway bookstalls, you could infer that India is full of citizens burning with anger at corruption, pseudo-secularism and 'polluting' religious minorities, and looking for a disciplined dictator. Despite this, luckily, there are some important factors that preserve Indian diversity

SATYA
SIVARAMAN



BROWSING through a bookshop on the Bhopal railway platform recently, amidst the slick 'How to be successful' manuals and beaming Bollywood glossies, I came across a book in Hindi that got both my eyebrows raised high. It was a full, translated version of Hitler's autobiography *Mein Kampf*, a copy of which I promptly procured as a souvenir.

What sells on Indian railway platforms is, I believe, a good indicator of what the average,

train-travelling middle classes want in life. The bookshop owner indicated that *Mein Kampf* was indeed popular enough for him to stock the Nazi bible regularly.

With my train about to depart, I had no time to interview him on the profile of the typical customer he encountered but I can very well imagine the fellow — a *desi* version of Wilhelm Reich's 'little man'. Clean-shaven, law-abiding, middle class and mild-natured, but burning with righteous anger at the corrupt, unjust world around him.

The fellow would typically put all the blame on 'wayward' girls, hippy youth, 'pseudo-secular' intellectuals and people of a certain religious group 'polluting' Mother India — that Brahmin-looking woman masquerading as the Motherland! And the solution to India's various problems would be, in his view, to establish a strong dictatorship, shoot the entire lot of 'traitors' and ensure 'discipline' among the people.

The popularity in India of *Mein Kampf*, that bible of social and political intolerance, is not a new phenomenon. From the time Hitler rose to power in Germany in the 1930s there have been strong currents in the Indian mainstream that admired the Führer for all he stood for and indeed even sought transplantation of his perverted philosophy to

Indian soil.

That such forces never really succeeded in their evil mission is testimony to the simple and beautiful fact that Indian 'soil' has far greater amounts of life-giving and life-regenerating powers than all the poison anyone can pour into it. Historically, there are many factors behind this strength that enables Indian society to live together without breaking apart.

One important factor is India's much-talked-about diversity of population, the numerous religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups it is made up with, new categories of identification emerging and adding to the hugely confusing but enjoyable mix. The beauty of all this is, of course, the fact that none of these groups are strong enough on their own to dominate national politics in blanket fashion, thus preventing the kind of fascist takeover that was possible in Germany in the 1930s.

Whether one should call this quality 'tolerance' or not I am not sure because what seems to be happening at different levels of Indian social life is actually a balancing of various forces. Very often this 'balance' is unjust and achieved at the cost of the dignity and wellbeing of marginalised groups such as the dalits, indigenous peoples, women and minorities of different kinds.

However, such oppression operates mainly in the local context and is often subdued at the national level by the various competing forms of intolerance all jockeying for attention and cutting their rivals to size when needed. As a friend once remarked, there can be no Indian Hitler because the moment any fellow attempts to be one, the first question that will pop up is '*Iska jaat kya hai?*' Another way of putting this is to say there are so many Hitlers in India that there can be no one HITLER to lord it over all of them!

Adding to the human mosaic that India is made up of is, interestingly enough, the diversity of its landscape and ecology — from the majestic high mountains of the Himalayas to the forests of Bastar, and from the cool, rolling hills of Meghalaya to the balmy shores of Kerala. The different climatic zones, crop patterns, fauna and flora that come along all naturally militate against homogeneity.

A less discussed but very important factor in keeping levels

of social acceptance of differences quite high in the Indian context is also the predominantly agricultural and rural population in the country. According to the 2001 Census of India, over 72% of the people still live in villages, though the ratio is quickly changing in favour of greater urbanisation as the economy expands.

As has been well noted in studies of sectarian or communal violence, rural folk — with a few exceptions — tend to be relatively immune to such passions as compared with their urban counterparts. The 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat saw considerable violence in rural areas also, but then the average village in the state, which is the most urbanised province in India, would be classified as 'urban' in many other parts of the country!

The key ingredient promoting tolerance in rural areas is simply the availability of space — geographical, cultural, social — which allows people to be who they are without stepping on the toes of their neighbours. Even the horrific Indian caste system operates within clearly marked spaces that are easier to maintain in the rural setting, and violence occurs only when such boundaries are violated in some way.

In the urban areas, while the more socially tolerant people of poorer localities lack only geographical space, the middle class, despite their bigger homes, lack the social and cultural generosity to accommodate those who are not 'one of us'. Here violations of space, both real and perceived, are more common and the retaliation swift and nasty.

As urbanisation spreads, industrialisation displaces rural populations to the cities, and spaces of all kinds shrink, intolerance increases. Together there is a hardening of once-diffuse caste, religious or linguistic identities as different groups seek to protect their territory from encroachment by 'outsiders'.

All this is multiplied manifold in our times by the mass media, particularly 24x7 television with its hysterical reporting style and dumbed-down categories which ignore nuances of every kind that make up complex realities.

In the early- and mid-1980s, for example, at the height of Bhindranwale's Khalistan movement in Punjab, though mass television was still in its infancy, skewed media reportage played a big role in the identification of every Sikh with 'terrorism'. While separatist hardliners committed enough heinous crimes of their own, the pogrom against Sikhs that happened in 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi was a result of such stereotyping. Suddenly, anyone with a turban and a beard was a 'terrorist', to be feared intensely and killed or driven away at first opportunity.

The '90s, with the opening up of the Indian economy, fast-paced urbanisation and booming mass media took this logic of 'branding' people, communities and religious groups further (the limits of which we are still exploring in

the late-2000s). Another good example from this period, of the role played by the media in consolidating nascent identities, was the *Ramayana* soap opera which played over national television repeatedly and helped the Hindutva politicians build a pan-Indian constituency from almost nowhere.

The rise of mass consumption and an advertisement-driven consumerist culture around the country has also had its impact on de-sensitising the Indian middle classes. While in an earlier era many would have tried to explore the historical reasons behind militancy and tried to think of long-term solutions, the attitude now is 'why are these strange-looking blokes disturbing my orgasm?'. The call for tougher anti-terror laws that strike at the heart of the Indian Constitution and democracy finds massive support among the consuming classes precisely because they want all real, potential and imagined 'disruptors' out of the way — forever!

Ironically enough, all this may be about to change because of the global financial crisis that will see its full impact on India in 2009. With the various deities of Mammon toppling like dominoes all around there is bound to be a forced introspection of what the callous, money-first policies starting from the '80s till now were really all about. Speculation will hopefully become confined to astrologers and not remain the mass phenomenon it has now become, with everyone from journalists and economists to housewives and shopkeepers indulging in it.

The failure of US policies in Iraq and Afghanistan under George Bush Jr will also have a sobering effect on the perception of issues such as terrorism and the politics of hatred, and there may be a call for a change of approach. The elevation of Barack Obama to the US Presidency, an unprecedented signal of hope, is an indication already of the mood transformation underway in the world (whether he delivers or not is yet to be seen).

Issues such as global warming that are gaining popular currency will also call into question the blind and destructive industrialisation promoted by financial 'wizards'— who pull fake rabbits out of their hats while making real resources disappear everywhere. As harsh economic conditions begin to bite, people will probably try to be more careful with how they spend and consume.

What I have said in the lines above is, of course, a best-case scenario. If my predicted self-reflection fails to happen book vendors around the country will make merry selling more copies of *Mein Kampf!*

Satya Sivaraman is a journalist and videomaker based in New Delhi

Peer to peer world

Michel Bauwens, founder of the Peer to Peer Foundation, is one of those who believe in open spaces and creation without incentive. In this interview he talks about the Free Software and Wikipedia movements as pointers to a genuine change in the way we think, create and distribute goods. He believes that we have never before had such real-time possibilities for human cooperation and collective intelligence on a global scale

V SASI KUMAR



The economic collapse of 2008 is leading many people to question the suitability of the capitalist economic system. At the same time, many people are unsure about the system that can replace capitalism. The most common solution is, of course, socialism. But there are those who wonder whether there could be alternatives, though no serious discussion seems to have taken place on this subject. No one today sincerely expects an armed revolution. On the one hand, there appears to be a serious revival of interest in Marxism in Europe and even in the United States, while on the other hand there are people who are being inspired by the success of movements like Free Software and Wikipedia which point to aspects of creativity and production that we have ignored for too long or misinterpreted deliberately or otherwise.

We now know that creativity can and does happen without

any incentive, especially financial incentive. And sometimes even without recognition. Brief reflection should convince anyone that creativity happens naturally, not because of financial incentives. In fact, it is clear that financial incentives cannot be the reason for creativity — an idea that directly contradicts the concepts behind copyright and patents.

Free Software exists because there are people who enjoy creating software and who are willing to share it with others. Contributors are recognised by the community. On the other hand, the thousands of people who contributed to the more than 2.5 million articles in English, and smaller numbers in more than 250 other languages in Wikipedia, do not even get credit for their contributions. They remain anonymous forever. Yet, millions of articles have been written. Similarly, millions of people voluntarily contribute their computer time to computation-intensive projects like SETI@Home.

These are examples of a modern phenomenon that defies explanation within the existing paradigm — a true revolution, in the Kuhnian sense, waiting for a paradigm shift. Many modern thinkers recognise that it forces us to reconsider our notions about production and distribution of goods. "Without a broadly accepted analytic model to explain these phenomena, we tend to treat them as curiosities, perhaps transient fads..." says Yochai Benkler in his The Wealth of Networks. But these do not appear to be curiosities or fads but symptoms of a genuine change in the way we think, create and distribute goods.

And this is prompting people to enquire into the possibilities of emulating that model in the production of 'real' goods (as opposed to 'virtual' goods like software and knowledge). They also believe they can avoid the alienation of worker from work that Karl Marx warned about, just as in the case of Free Software and Wikipedia.

Michel Bauwens is one of those who believe in open spaces and creation without incentive. Like Richard Stallman who left his prestigious job at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and started the Free Software Foundation, Michel also left a remunerative corporate job to start the Peer to Peer Foundation that tries to study the evolving peer to peer production and distribution systems exemplified by Free Software and Wikipedia.

Michel Bauwens was in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, in

December 2008, to participate in the Free Software Free Society conference and talked about the work of the Foundation. In this interview, done through email after his return to Thailand, Michel speaks about how he decided to leave his job and start the P2P Foundation, what principles the Foundation is based on, what its work is, and how the work has been progressing.

You were an information scientist and magazine editor before you started the P2P Foundation. Can you tell us about this evolution? How did it happen?

My first job (but without any formal library and information science training, as I studied political science) was nine years as reference librarian and information analyst for a centre in Brussels. In 1990, I started working as strategic business information manager at the headquarters of the agribusiness wing of British Petroleum. At that time, I reformulated the role of librarian into that of ‘cybrarian’, ie managing “just in time, just for you” information streams to senior management who were not in any real sense using the physical library resources anymore.

As the animal feed businesses were divested by 1993, I moved on to creating a Flemish magazine that was a mix of *Mondo 2000* and *Wired*, and then became one of the Internet evangelists in my home country, leading to work as a serial Internet entrepreneur.

From my very first encounter with the Internet, ie collective mailing lists combining experts from around the world, I knew this was a technology that would change the very fabric of our world. Never before had there been such real-time possibilities for human cooperation and collective intelligence on a global scale. From now on, the privileged communication infrastructures that were only in the hands of multinationals and the State, would be distributed and democratised, a shift at least as important as the effect of the printing press.

At the same time, I became increasingly dissatisfied with the corporate world, seeing how the neoliberal system not only created increased social inequality, exacted a terrible psychic cost from even its privileged managerial layers, while also creating havoc in our natural world. I started seeing the system as a giant Ponzi scheme (a scheme in which the profit of those who invest earlier comes from those who invest later), so what surprised me was not the meltdown of 2008, but why it took so long to actually manifest itself!

At the same time, there was a revival of social resistance starting in 1995, and I was noticing, as a professional trend-watcher, that there was a common template in the new forms of social organisation, the one I now call the ‘peer to peer’ dynamic, or ‘voluntary permissionless self-aggregation around the production of common value’.

Key for me was the observation of the Internet bust in April 2000, which I witnessed from a privileged position as I was working in the same sector. As the stock market imploded, pundits were predicting the end of the Internet because no

more capital was available for innovation and development. In fact the opposite happened — rather than diminishing, innovation increased, entirely driven by the social field of aggregating geeks, giving birth to the Web 2.0, the first social model based on an interrelationship between new forms of capitalism and user-generated production of value. I knew then that I would study this phenomenon more deeply, and in particular since I consider peer aggregation to be a non-alienating form of work, how it could be leveraged as a force for social change.

So in October 2002, I decided to quit my corporate engagement, take a sabbatical to think things through, and moved to Thailand to create a global cyber-collective to research and promote P2P dynamics.

Is there a basic set of hypotheses from which the Foundation starts?

Yes, I formulated the following principles when I started the Foundation:

- That peer to peer-based technology reflects a change of consciousness towards participation, and, in turn, strengthens it.
- That the ‘distributed network’ format, expressed in the specific manner of peer to peer relations, is a new form of political organising and subjectivity, and an alternative for the current political/economic order, ie I believe that peer to peer allows for ‘permissionless’ self-organisation to create common value, in a way that is more productive than both the State and private for-profit alternatives. People can now engage in peer production that creates very complex ‘products’ that can achieve higher quality standards than pure corporate competitors.

I also believe that it creates a new public domain, an information commons, which should be protected and extended, especially in the domain of common knowledge-creation; and that this domain, where the cost of reproducing knowledge is near-zero, requires fundamental changes in the intellectual property regime, as reflected by new forms such as the Free Software movement; that universal common property regimes, ie modes of peer property such as the general public licence and the creative commons licences should be promoted and extended.

These principles developed by the Free Software movement, in particular the general public licence, and the general principles behind the open source and open access movements, provide for models that could be used in other areas of social and productive life.

If we can connect this new mode of production, pioneered by knowledge workers, with the older traditions of sharing and solidarity of workers and farmers movements, then we can build a very strong contemporary social movement that can transcend the failures of socialism.

I think it also offers youth a vision of renewal and hope, to create a world that is more in tune with their values.

I call the new peer to peer mode a 'total social fact', because it integratively combines subjectivity (new values), inter-subjectivity (new relations), objectivity (an enabling technology) and inter-objectivity (new forms of organisation) that mutually strengthen each other in a positive feedback loop, and it is clearly on the offensive and growing, but lacking 'political self-consciousness'. It is this form of awareness that the P2P Foundation wants to promote.

Was this mostly your work, or were others involved in formulating these principles?

I formulated the principles on my own, but also after at least two years of reading, and of being attuned with the *zeitgeist* (*zeitgeist* describes the intellectual, cultural, ethical and political climate, ambience and morals of an era). Others were formulating similar ideas, though in different ways. So as usual we should not claim too much personal merit; we are standing on the shoulders of the giants of the past, and are simply lucky to accompany a deep shift in human consciousness that would be taking place without us just as well. At the most, we can try to put some extra grease in the machine.

What exactly does the Foundation do?

We want to be an interconnecting platform for people involved in realising the new open and free, participatory and commons-oriented paradigms in every social field. So, we are monitoring and describing real-world initiatives, theoretical efforts, creating a library of primary and secondary material, and trying to make sense of that aggregation by developing a coherent set of concepts and principles. We do this with a wiki, with nearly 8,000 pages of information, which have been viewed over 5 million times; through a blog reaching about 35,000 unique users last year, a Ning community with a few hundred members, and a number of mailing lists. The most active is the peer to peer research list, where academics and non-academics can collaboratively reach understandings. We also had two annual physical meet-ups in Belgium and the UK, and have some national groups such as in the Netherlands and Greece. There's a lot of hidden activity acting as connectors between various initiatives, which, despite the global Internet, often don't know they are working on very similar projects that could reinforce each other.

Peer to peer happens without us, but we want to add a little interconnecting grease to the system. My ultimate aim is to create a powerful social movement that can support the necessary reforms for social justice, sustainability of the natural world, and opening up science and culture to open and free sharing and collaboration, so that the whole weight of the collective intelligence of humanity can be brought to bear on the grave challenges we are facing.

Do you see a P2P society as the state into which a society should evolve naturally? Something like how capitalist society evolved from feudal society?

If we look at the transition from slavery to feudalism, and

from feudalism to capitalism, I think we discover a similar pattern. An old system in crisis and decline, the birth of more productive methods of creating value, and both sections of the ruling class and of the 'producing' class morphing to adapt to the new possibilities. Before feudalism and capitalism became disruptive to the old orders that they replaced they actually were used to strengthen the old order, and stave off their decline, because they were better ways of organising production and social relationships. So, today, hyper-productive peer to peer dynamics are being born in a mutually dependent relationship with capitalism, but ultimately slated to replace it. But first it needs to grow from seed form to parity form — think of the situation in Rome between the 5th and 10th century, or 18th century European capitalism existing within the still-dominant remnants of the late feudal order of the ancient regime. Today, we see knowledge and other workers increasingly adopting modes of peer production, and netarchical capitalists such as Google and YouTube enabling and empowering sharing platforms, while extracting value from the value engendered through that social cooperation. All these processes take time, but that does not mean that they are necessarily smooth. The more established interests try to stop more productive alternatives, the more tension they create in the social system, the more this will express itself in crisis form. Both the birth of feudalism and capitalism were rather harsh transitions. This time we may hope that the global crisis of the biosphere, and the speed of innovation through global networks will speed up the process of change significantly.

I sometimes use the concept of 'conditional inevitability' to name this state of affairs in which a form of change is both necessary and likely, but can still be derailed because it depends on human agency and social struggle and creativity.

The alienation of work from the worker is one of the important aspects that Karl Marx has written about. The peer to peer system that you are trying to develop theoretically appears to tackle this issue. Have discussions at the P2P Foundation taken this aspect into consideration specifically?

Peer to peer is a form of what Alan Page Fiske calls 'communal shareholding' in which each freely contributes to a common that is universally available to those who may need it. Because it is based on a passion-based free engagement and allows the producers to be autonomous and in charge of their own production process, it is in fact already a non-alienated form of work. It allows for the free self-unfolding of the individual, for autonomy-in-interdependence! It corresponds to what Marx called communism, the final stage of his future history, which was to be preceded by socialism, where each would get according to his contribution. The irony is that this mode of commonism is already being born within capitalism itself, creating a post-monetary seed within it. The important question is whether this seed form, now combined with capitalism, could also be combined with some form of

socialism in the world of physical material production. My answer is yes, it is possible, but I prefer to leave this question open and to combine peer to peer as the core process for immaterial production and social innovation, with a pluralist economy for dealing with physical production, where individuals can choose whether they want to follow market-based exchange forms, or any other. The issue for me is not the market, but only capitalism as an infinite growth form and therefore a cancer for the biosphere and humanity. Capitalism will pass (if not, it will destroy us, and I don't believe humanity will allow this to happen), but we may want to keep the market.

The important thing is to be non-coercive about it. As Eben Moglen said: 'Free software' (and thus peer production) is the wet dream of both capitalists and communists. What he means I think is that we can marry the strivings for freedom of liberalism with the strivings for equality of the left in a way in which both are not just mutually compatible but dependent on each other.

Have you thought about the system of governance that could be suitable for a P2P society? Would it be more akin to that in a capitalist society or to that in a socialist society — you know, multi-party versus single party with a kind of democratic centrism?

I think we have to recognise different levels. The reality of peer governance is already well-known from the experience of Free Software communities, and we must insist that it is non-representational and avoids conflicts over the allocation of resources through coordinated self-allocation. But this can only fully work in the immaterial world. In society as a whole, therefore, and though that part may shrink as we design and engineer more abundance, we still need democracy, though perhaps in a much more diversified way than today. So imagine a level of pure peer governance in the open production communities, representative democracy, and hybrid formats in between. In any case, in our complexifying society, we have to expect a significant increase of participatory processes. This democracy should be as far removed from capitalist pressure as it is from totalitarian centralised planning, but I imagine that we'll have much more global coordination of resource flows, and not just market mechanisms.

How do you see the present global meltdown? Is it one of the crises that capitalist society faces once in a while? Or do you think it could possibly be the beginning of the decline of capitalism?

I tend to trust the analysis in terms of Kondratieff cycles as expressed by Carlota Perez in her work on technological revolutions (<http://www.carlotaperez.org/>). The last one started with World War II and was ascendant into the early-'70s, after which the declining phase of neoliberalism took over choosing the speculative route that now collapsed. We'll need seven or 10 years to go through a severe cleaning out, but after a period of reform, such as perhaps that carried out by Obama in the next few years, we can expect a

new up-cycle based on green capitalism, and extensive usage of participatory processes. This will allow P2P processes to move from the margins to the parity level. There is no chance of achieving sustainability without changing individual lifestyles and participatory design.

After this, we'll reach the national crisis stage of the next Kondratieff cycle, and I believe this is the moment when the peer to peer logic can become dominant. In the end, the infinite growth mechanism of capitalism is incompatible with our finite natural environment, and necessarily needs to be replaced.

Do you believe that capitalism has to grow and mature before a society can change to P2P or something similar?

I think that capitalism is already beyond maturity and has reached senility, but there's still life in the old man! So I see the green capitalist global compact as the last attempt at integration, and though it will have some success, it is clear that a system based on infinite growth is doomed. What we have to do imperatively is separate the idea of markets and trading from the idea of infinite growth. Some people are talking about natural capitalism (David Korten, Paul Hawken, Hazel Henderson) or capitalism 3.0 (Peter Barnes) to indicate the hybrid nature of the potential new system, which will combine markets with participation and peer to peer-based social innovation. But the concept is misleading, as the system cannot possibly be based on capital accumulation. I think Umair Haque is also a good guide as to the logic of the new post-capitalist system.

What is your personal opinion?

As indicated in the germ form theory of Oekonux, with which I broadly agree, first we have an emerging germ form — the situation today. Then, it may evolve to a parity level, in which peer to peer and the market will co-exist. But at some point, the meta-system of infinite growth that is capitalism will and must break down if we want humanity and our planet to survive, and at that moment the old meta-system of capitalism will become a sub-system, a market form for certain specific rival goods within the broader meta-system of peer to peer. But humanity always first tries the familiar solutions, so before thinking of a more radical overhaul, a green capitalist phase is unavoidable but also necessary in order to allow participation to reach a parity level. To answer specifically concerning 'natural capitalism': to the degree that we succeed in forcing the market to integrate the external cost of natural destruction, and to fund its dependence on social innovation, to that degree the infinite growth mechanism will be broken and what we'll have will be a market form but no longer a 'capitalist' one.

V Sasi Kumar is a scientist, writer and Free Software activist based in Thiruvananthapuram

Opening open spaces

The concept of 'open space' has come to be used in many fields, from urban planning, education and multipolar media such as the Internet, to social and political practice. Given the religious, economic and imperialist fundamentalisms that have intensified over the last two decades, we need to understand the struggle to open spaces as a struggle against enclosure by either State or market corporatism and/or by fundamentalist forces within societies

JAI SEN

If you remember that one small action, it symbolised the decline of the British Empire. We should safeguard the smallest of actions, the most open of spaces, and try and make as many open spaces as possible. We have to stand guard. We have to keep the space open because all the guards have proved to be useless.

— Ashok Vajpeyi, referring to Gandhi's Salt March

What is open space?

An open, uncluttered expanse of space, in theory available to all? Or is it a culture, a way of doing things, a cultural practice? (But in this case, is it a noun — a thing —, a concept, or a practice, an action? Or are noun, idea, and verb interrelated?) Social practice. Political practice. Networking. Horizontality. Structurelessness. Democracy. Anarchy. A way of relating. Uncertainty. Transparency. Openness. Closedness; closure. Enclosure. Public space. The commons. Property. Intellectual property. Copyright. Copyleft. Common property. FOSS — Free & Open Source Software. Safe space. Autonomy. Equality. Freedom. Fair trade. Free trade? Freedom. Liberty. Tolerance. Discrimination. Inclusion and Exclusion. Boundaries? Policies? Rules? Democracy? Hierarchy? Open access. Open Source. Open plan. Open door policy. Open systems. Open society. Chaos. Clocks and clouds. Determinacy and indeterminacy. Randomness. Open-endedness. Movement. Not object but subject: Opening space?

The concept of open space arises in many fields. For those in these professions (such as myself, by background), it belongs to urban planning, architecture and landscape architecture, but it is equally used in the disciplines of office and workspace planning, education and knowledge systems, social management, conflict resolution and transformation initiatives, and now also social and political practice.

It has come into increasingly intensive use in social and political practice in recent years, along with related concepts such as horizontality and networking, and has gained special currency by virtue of its use since 2001 in connection with the phenomenon called the World Social Forum (WSF). In some cases, there are also crossover applications, such as in the case of the WSF, which declares itself as an open space and where to help people understand this concept, one of its founders refers to it as a 'square' in a city, or *praça*, in the



original Portuguese. The WSF has also adopted the slogan 'Another World Is Possible!', which itself signals, and symbolises, an openness to the future.

Perhaps especially on account of and through the extraordinary proliferation of the WSF that has taken place over these years, this idea — and its related concepts — seems to have widely caught the imagination of people and organisations across the world. On the surface, this has happened as a result of both the polemical challenge that this sustained and successful proliferation itself has represented to neoliberalism and its mantra of TINA — There Is No Alternative. Initially, this was symbolised by the World Social Forum always being held to coincide with the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland (and where, at a mediabyte level, the WSF was even given this name to highlight the fact that the social was more important than the economic). But in time, as is evident from so many testimonies that are now on record, the WSF has caught the imagination of people across the world as a function of the very special quality of celebration and freedom that it embodies — and in particular because of its embodiment of the idea of open space.

On openness

In order to enter this discussion, I want to suggest that it is

vital to reflect on the possibility that of all living beings — indeed, of everything that we today know in the universe, animate and inanimate — only 'man' is capable of seeing 'the open'; and that the open is a key part of humankind's relationship to its environment. Citing the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's discussion of the relation of animal and man to their environment, Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben explains this uniquely human capacity:

Only man, indeed only the gaze of authentic thought, can see the open which names the unconcealedness of beings. The animal, on the contrary, never sees this open (1).

He explains:

The guiding thread of Heidegger's exposition is constituted by the triple thesis: "the stone is worldless (weltlos); the animal is poor in world (weltarm); man is world-forming (weltbildend)." Since the stone (the non-living being) — insofar as it lacks any possible access to what surrounds it — gets quickly set aside, Heidegger can begin his inquiry with the middle thesis, immediately taking on the problem of what it means to say "poor in world".

In these terms, a crucial further difference that Agamben draws between the animal and the human is that whereas for animals, their environment is open but not openable, humankind has the capacity to *open up* the world; we can actually *disconceal* it.

A short history of open space

The concept and the practice of 'open space' in social and political movement — and especially in autonomist movement — are not new. There have been similar practices in movements since the 1960s, though not called this then. For instance, in many ways the feminist movement in North America, and elsewhere, practised something very close to this idea back in the late-1960s onwards: a free, unstructured, and non-hierarchical movement. This attempt to create and practise such a movement then however became the subject of intense critical reflection within the movement in terms of what one participant, Jo Freeman, famously called "the tyranny of structurelessness". Reflection is an integral characteristic of the practice of open space, and Freeman similarly wrote this essay in response to the frustrations of trying to organise non-hierarchically and as a critique of masculinist forms of organisation.

There have been equivalents and expressions of this idea in many parts of the world and in many fields. Another vital expression was its exploration in education, best known through the work of Paulo Freire and his theory of conscientisation and a pedagogy of the oppressed, starting in Brazil but having impacts in much of the world. And of central relevance to the WSF was the parallel articulation of liberation theology in the 1960s and '70s, which had profound influence on the evolution of social and political movements in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere, and through this history, also on the ideology of the WSF.

This experimentation continued right through the 1980s and

'90s, when there were waves of struggle within these and other movements. In each of these instances the concept of openness was rigorously practised, debated, and critiqued. And as I see it, the emergence during the 1990s of PGA and of Direct Action in the US, and of the organisational culture underlying the direct actions at Seattle 1999 and then in the series of 'global actions' that took place during the early-2000s, and the WSF — all of which were manifestations of a new politics founded on ideas of horizontality and open-endedness — were a natural outcome of these stirrings, experiments, and movements.

In other words, I am suggesting that the idea and practice of open space in social and political activity is actually a generalised, widespread, and non-centralised political-cultural phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century, and one that is only continuing to widen and deepen in our own times, the early-21st century.

As Rodrigo Nunes argues, and as others have argued before him in terms of related phenomena such as transnational advocacy networking, the recent intensification in social networking and in networked politics as a common social practice is (and must be understood as) a function of the major changes that have taken place in recent decades in the material means of information exchange and communication and also of international travel. Nunes' argument is that the "...large-scale massification of these media, and (the emergence of) a multipolar medium like the Internet in particular, is... the chief material cause behind the 'renaissance' of openness and horizontality".

It is not as if the concept and practice of open space is not being intensely contested and challenged in specific contexts, including within the WSF, but taking a step back it is perhaps fair to say that networking, the horizontality of social relations that goes with this, and the openness that is required as a characteristic of networking, have now become, in many parts of the world, the 'natural' and normal way for ordinary people — including but not only activists — to behave and to organise things, and to build social relations. It has come to be widely accepted, even if the term itself is not used to describe the practice. And in organisational terms, these new practices have opened new doors, new ways of thinking and acting.

Social movement activists have perhaps made among the most active and imaginative use of these new possibilities, but this is a generalised situation and not restricted to social movement and politics. Many fields, including the military, industry, entertainment, and other big business, have also found strategic value in using this approach, and where it today also fundamentally informs contemporary debate on science, knowledge systems, and intellectual property; and, of course, this is the basis of the phenomenal expansion of everyday social networking in our times. And in turn, the WSF's slogan and philosophy, 'Another World Is Possible!', with its emphasis on what is

capable of happening rather than that which works on the basis of an inexorable and linear logic, is fundamentally consistent with this emerging social practice and with the philosophy and concepts that underlie it.

New horizons of the open

It is also important for us today, in the early stages of the 21st century, to recognise three realities: That the conventional visualisation and conceptualisation of 'space' fundamentally changed during this past (20th) century in several major ways; that this has especially happened only in the very recent past, in terms of human history and evolution; and that this visualisation and conceptualisation is continuing to rapidly evolve and change in our times, and at an accelerating pace.

At one level, this has been simply a function of 'space', and of new dimensions of space and of 'openness' becoming a more everyday experience, and in a way, it has come about because of the popularisation of space and of understandings of space in many spheres of life — art, music, science, and even everyday consumption.

The first major steps were taken in the first half of the 20th century. In the visual arts and then the plastic arts, the emergence, articulation, and then exploration of cubism fundamentally challenged all previous and more fixed conceptions of both space and time in western art. Completely new representations and explorations of space and time, took shape. Similarly, in music, the emergence and articulation of jazz from the early-20th century onwards, with its traditions of improvisation and, in John Brown Childs' words, of "...organised ambiguity and ambiguous organisation" — opened up new dimensions of time and space:

In the words of the great African American artist Romare Bearden, and focusing on his comments about the role of the horizontal in his work, and where he was influenced in part by jazz and also by Chinese art, Indian art, Renaissance European art, ancient Greek art, Mexican muralists, African art, and African American culture:

"When an artist decides on a space, we get a certain kind of space. When I say space, I am not talking about, let's say, distance; I'm talking about relationships... When you get that, it doesn't matter what you're working on..."

It seems to be that verticality detests surprises, but, assuming a communally shared framework, horizontality surprises and enlivens... It is a question of collage... The thing is that the artist confronts chaos. The whole thing of art is — how do you organise chaos?"

These ideas then continued to be developed and explored in literature and art from about the 1940s onwards, and perhaps particularly in the course of the school of magic realism during the 1960s onwards — the exploration of a sort of heightened reality where magical elements, elements of the miraculous, or seemingly illogical scenarios appear in

The fundamental nature of the concept of open space, in all the fields that it is used, is not only that of something that exists, or can exist, but also that of a symbol of possibilities; a metaphor. Its existence, and the possibilities of its existence, is as important as actually practising or experiencing it

an otherwise realistic or even 'normal' setting, and where through the playing with (or 'distortion' of) both time and space, new understandings emerge.

These developments in art and literature paralleled — and sometimes preceded — developments in science, especially through Einstein's discovery of relativity in the early-20th century where time and space were revealed as one, and the subsequent explorations and development of these ideas right through the 20th century; including in terms of theories of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and chaos.

But arguably, and where the relevance of all this lies for this essay, it has perhaps been only in the second half of the 20th century that we have seen the decisively more generalised socialisation of these perceptions, to a significant degree led by developments in science and technology; and that it is during this same period that the practice of open space in social and political movement emerged.

The first development has been through the exploration of extra-terrestrial space. The idea of humankind actually reaching out into and travelling, and existing, in what has come in English to be called 'space' — the apparently infinite openness that exists beyond the confines of our planet — has been around since at least the 19th century, but in material terms, this vision came to be realised by humankind as a whole only from 1957 onwards, with the launching of the first space satellites. This had two impacts: one, while specialists and professionals have imagined and conceptually understood — and mapped — the globe for several centuries, it was only in 1961, with the first manned

satellites, and in 1970 with the moon landing, and given the by-then fairly widespread availability of simultaneous transmission through television, that it became possible for ordinary human beings, with our own eyes, to — for the very first time in our history as a species — directly view and comprehend planet earth not only as a whole but — crucially — also as an object within a much larger universe; aside from also seeing and having a direct virtual experience of other worlds such as the moon; and since then, also of other planets in our solar system.

And two, from this point on the meaning for ordinary people of 'space' — the vast and apparently infinitely and utterly open, so-called 'outer space' — also changed fundamentally. From the remote and mysterious it suddenly became familiar, a part of everyday life; entering and visiting it became part of direct human experience; and as space science and astronomy have come to be popularised, people all over the planet have progressively become aware on an everyday basis of the vastness of space and of our place in the universe, not only in a physical sense but also cosmologically and existentially; and indeed, even as consumers.

Again, while some of this perception was available before this to specialists — adventurers and explorers, astronomers and other scientists, religious thinkers, philosophers, artists, writers, and poets — it now became a phenomenon, perception, and virtual experience available to the species, and as a result of rapidly changing information and communication technologies, to human beings and cultures all over the world, to be variously comprehended, internalised, imagined, re-invented, and domesticated in terms of humankind's widely varying cultural contexts.

The second development has been in terms of the realisation and articulation of the interconnectedness of everything. As a function of the progressively widening recognition during this period of the earth as one whole and as a 'spaceship', we have also begun to become aware of the Gaian nature of the planet as one — as a system and as a living organism; where everything on this planet (every thing, every action, every process) is connected to everything else. In popular consciousness, this is a consequence of the growing awareness not only of the multiple environmental crises that the planet is facing but of the systemic ecological crisis we are today facing, as a species, where life systems themselves are breaking down.

One crucial aspect of the articulation of this radically new Gaian perception has been the recognition of the function in earth's ecosystem of open spaces on the planet — such as the oceans, the Siberian tundra, and the Amazonian basin — as organs that are essential for the life of the planet. (This organic, *systemic* conceptualisation, incidentally, is radically distinct from the colonialist tendency to define the Amazon especially as part of 'humankind's patrimony', thus also laying claim to it.) Open space, locally and globally, has thus become more than something one can

create/enter/use/inhabit; it has now come to be popularly understood as having an organic, ecological, and systemic function, fundamentally interconnected with its surroundings.

Third, our visualisation and conceptualisation of open space has of course also been dramatically expanded by the invention of the worldwide web, with all its apparent open-endedness. Again very suddenly — in historical terms — yet another (and fundamentally new) dimension of 'open', seemingly unbounded space has been added to our cognitive vocabulary. And beyond the openness, it is now common to see references to the Internet as the model on which social movement organisation is increasingly based, and "...common to point to the practice of Free and Open Source Software communities as the 'vanguard' of this democracy-to-come".

Another related new and crucial understanding of openness has also come about in recent decades, in terms of the fundamental role that systems, networks, and emergence play in all physical, natural, and social processes, and where openness and open-endedness are essential and intrinsic qualities and characteristics of these concepts. This new comprehension is today beginning to inform and influence all sciences, and through this is likely over time to influence and shape our thinking in all areas of life. Given its newness, it is perhaps premature to include this as having already contributed to our new consciousness of open space — but its influence is growing even as you read this essay.

Finally in this sketch, we need also to locate the concept of open space, and the new visualisations, in a longer political history of cyberspace — of so-called 'virtual space'. As Shuddhabrata Sengupta has argued, the invention of the printing press, and with this the invention of the idea of artificial media by which human beings could exchange ideas with each other at a mass level (and also create more permanent archival records, ie memory) marked the first radical opening of virtual space in human history. At one level, each successive step in this process — the appearance and distribution of leaflets, books, journals, and newspapers, and then radio and television, and most recently the web — can be considered to have been steps towards opening space and opening new spaces. And significantly, and just as with physical open space, each of these steps was taken first by individuals, working 'locally', autonomously, and 'randomly', and in each case the steps have been subject to challenge and (en)closure by either State or market corporatism and/or by fundamentalist forces within societies, such as religious, caste, ethnic, and/or nationalist powers.

All these developments have also intertwined, and they have, individually and collectively, and in many ways perhaps especially as a consequence of processes of popularisation that are now so commonplace, profoundly

shaped — and continue to shape — our thinking and perceptions. Equally however, attempts at planning, control, and enclosure are today as true of these new dimensions of space and openness as in the old and more familiar; think of the 'conquest' of space, the growing attempts by corporations and the military to control the web, and the juggernaut of genetic modification and the control of natural life processes.

We are in the midst of a major process of reculturalisation. We are moving from a belief in linear, programmed, clockwork movement and politics (and life) to a far more open-ended culture, with a far higher degree of reliance on autonomy, self-organisation, and responsibility. We need therefore to reflect on our programmed tendencies to believe in linear programmes and organisations, and (for instance) our tendency to see only ordered spaces as beautiful; and to consider a willingness to open ourselves to critically embrace the outcomes of openness and of open-endedness — of clouds; of the beauty of clouds of society, of history, and of life itself

The nature of open space

There is an open space in language and literature that exists despite the most adverse circumstances. As I say this, I am reminded of Boris Pasternak's famous poem: "The night is dark and it is bitterly cold, but we must at least keep a candle lit." — Ashok Vajpeyi

As a consequence of the history sketched out above, and as is evident from the cluster of terms given at the beginning of this essay, open space is today a term that belongs to an extensive community and vocabulary of related contemporary concepts, ideas, and practices, and where some of the terms are also used interchangeably.

But beyond this, there is also the question of context. At a quite fundamental level, what does open space, and the open, mean to fisherfolk and to sailors; to the Inuit or to people living in deserts? Or to nomadic peoples, for whom motion — through space — is constant? What does open space mean to people living in deep valleys? To a sculptor in front of a rock? To someone composing a piece of music? To a dancer on a stage? To the physically or visually challenged? And to people dying of a terminal disease, or to someone on death row? To a choreographer? To a physicist?

Are each of these different meanings? Or is there, and can there be, a common meaning across different subjectivities?

Unlike openness, which we can perceive, open space exists only when we construct it — and whatever we construct will necessarily be a function of the conditions that prevail where we construct it. As Wangui Mbatia expressively put it, our construction of — and struggle for — open space may, at one level, be compared with a spider's spinning of her web. Necessarily, the web she will create is a function of the space and opportunity she is working within.

Partly therefore, as a consequence of being a member of a community of like terms and practices with much overlap, partly because of quite different interpretations and uses of these terms in different fields and contexts, and partly because of very different social and material conditions that prevail in different contexts, there is perhaps no one definition of open space. As Nunes points out in terms of horizontalities, there are many open spaces — and many meanings of open space.

This plurality, and the ambiguity that goes with it, is in the very nature of open space, which is essentially a social and cultural construct — in all the fields it is used in, and in all its meanings. It is therefore important to root and/or understand the use of the term in particular contexts and conditions.

The fundamental nature of the concept of open space, in all the fields that it is used, is not only that of something that exists, or can exist, but also that of a symbol of possibilities; a metaphor. Its existence, and the possibilities

of its existence, is as important as actually practising or experiencing it. As de Sousa Santos has argued in terms of the WSF and its slogan, 'Another World Is Possible!', which — by its flagging of the possible and therefore of the 'not yet' — points not to an existing reality or definite singular future but to its immanent potential.

It is also crucial to recognise and read the contemporary political-ideological meaning and potential of open space. Especially in the conditions of closure that have so deeply afflicted the world over the past two decades, as a function of the synergistic interaction of religious fundamentalisms, economic fundamentalisms, and an imperialist power with its so-called 'war on terror' post 9/11 and all its outfalls, every practice of open space and horizontality must also be recognised as being a significant polemical challenge to empire and to hegemonic politics, whether in social movement, art, or everyday social relations. In many ways and at many levels, the idea and concept of open space is deeply interrelated with human rights, democratic freedoms, civil liberties, and cultural expression. It is as relevant to science, education, literature, and art, and to faith, and to the conditions of everyday life, as it is to politics and social movement.

The politics and meta-politics of open space

In the field of urban planning the term 'open space' carries a physical and apparently apolitical connotation, of being a relatively large, relatively open, unbuilt/'undeveloped' space, usually but not always made available either for recreational or (in some particular contexts) agricultural purposes.

This however, is radically different from the tradition of a commons, or common property, that still prevails in many rural and agrarian communities in the world. The commons is not residual space but an integral part of the local and wider social ecology and economy, where such property and the rights of access to it is a function of traditional communitarian decision (though also subject to local social segmentation). As Massimo DeAngelis argues, for every commons, there is a community.

This is very different from planned open space. On the one hand, planned space does not have a single, defined community, but rather is — in theory — a public space, open to everyone; and on the other, the commons was not and is still not today referred to as being 'open', by locals. Indeed, the commons was and is not in fact open but rather available primarily to locals and then too, only within locally determined rules of custom and of customary law. The kind of open space that is created through planned intervention is therefore not a commons, and should not be confused with this.

Beyond this, in the contemporary world planned open space not only does not have a defined community that owns and manages it but, to the contrary, is by definition centrally planned, managed, and owned.

Even though, therefore, the creation of planned open space in urban areas is often seen (and populistically portrayed) as a normative commitment to 'the social', and even to anti-privatisation, a more critical look reveals such space being only a part of larger regimes of centralised control, property, and the State.

Second, looking at these conditions historically, the 'open spaces' that our planners construct in fact refer to contexts where under conditions of both capitalism and state socialism, agrarian or forest land — both private and common — has been 'enclosed' and taken over for urban or industrial uses and its previous occupants or users displaced and scattered; and where the 'open spaces' that we now know have been specially kept aside as part of social planning for the new occupants of the general space within which the open spaces are located — and not for their original inhabitants, who are in effect usually excluded. Planned urban 'open space' therefore, though appearing to provide amenity to city inhabitants, in reality involves appropriation, expulsion, enclosure, exclusion, and control, usually centralised.

All this holds lessons for us as we attempt to explore and understand the politics of open space. Similar to but radically different from the tradition of the commons, open spaces are thus not open by themselves, and it is not their apparent physical reality that matters; they *become open* — or tend to become open, and/or are made open — only when those who use them take part in decisions regarding their creation, planning, design, maintenance, and use. As John Holloway has argued, we need to understand 'open space' not as a passive concept but as an active concept and construct; and secondly, not as a positive concept but as a negative concept, *as a struggle against enclosure*. And in this sense then, open space and the commons become, under existing conditions, complementary concepts and strategies.

One key further point: Under contemporary conditions this process of appropriation of what was historically the commons — land — within processes of urbanisation is being dramatically widened. It is today being extended from a control only of land (including forests) to include water, air, and cyberspace, and also — in yet another dimension — genetic knowledge; and under current conditions of neoliberalism, this is also no longer a question of expropriation by the State for socially planned use but a process of privatisation and enclosure, for hand-over to private commercial interests.

Open space as opening space

The notion of open space undergoes a fundamental change if one shifts from viewing it as something one simply gains 'access' to and uses to something one creates or expands, and crucially, that is created as one acts and that gains its life from our acting. When, drawing on the work of Buckminster Fuller, open space moves from being a noun to being a verb. At another level, the shift also reflects moving

away from seeing open space as being provided by others, to something one gives shape to oneself through one's actions. Nothing is open by itself; it is open because we make it so, and also because of how we make it so — what the social relations of the space are.

Indeed, it could be said that open space does not exist by itself; it only exists, and has meaning (and openness), because we create it.

Towards a definition? Outlines of some organising principles of open space

In this final section before concluding, I offer — drawing on the discussion so far — certain formulations as suggestions towards developing a vocabulary and grammar for the practice of open space. I will not even begin to attempt a singular definition of the concept or practice, or put forward a suggestion of a common meaning. In the belief that it is more useful for each one of us to define our own frameworks for critical thought and action rather than depending on singular, universal prescriptions, and moreover that while definitions have their value, for complex and syncretic concepts such as this, frameworks that allow for multiple interpretations are more powerful — and appropriate.

As Nunes points out, while all of the arguments cited and developed in this essay may be true and relevant, the problem is the tendency to make these positions — for or against the concept — absolute and to fetishise the qualities of open space and of related practices such as horizontalism. It becomes a question of all or nothing (and all too often, of them and us), and when the ideal is not achieved, it tends to lead to paralysis and alienation. To the opposite, we must recognise that open space is inherently ambiguous, as are networks:

...on the one hand, they are what we perceive as the conditions of possibility of horizontality, the means by which it can be achieved; on the other, they are only partial actualisations of the idea they make possible.

The first principle would thus seem to be accepting, and respecting, both partial achievement and also the need for sustained struggle in order to attempt complete achievement.

The fundamental problem here is of conceiving of open space as an object and as a fixed state of being. To the contrary, open space needs to be understood both as a tendency (as in openness, open-endedness) and also as an activity (such as dialogue), and not as a fixed state. This seems to have the makings of a second primary principle of open space.

Beyond this, we must accept that open space is not inherently open, neutral, or equal, let alone progressive; it can only be so if we struggle for it to be so. The idea that an open space — in the sense of a space declared open by someone — is inherently or necessarily open, or is

permanently open, is, even if alluring, illusory. Indeed, an uncritical and closed approach to open space is liable to lead to disappointment and disillusionment. Equally, we tend to perceive (and are often led to perceive) open space as being neutral (in the sense of a 'level playing field'), and equal. It is not. It is subject to all the same forces as exist in life in the society within which it is created or practised, of segmentation, marginalisation, and exclusion, and of resource concentration, power play, and privilege. Again, it can only be open and equal if we constitute it to be open and struggle for equality within it and in relation to it, and take affirmative actions in support.

As a consequence of the above, another basic characteristic of open space — of space that is made open and is to be kept open — is reflexivity on the part of participants. Precisely because of the inherent presence of the intense contradictions and paradoxes that we have discussed, and because of the organically dialectic nature of the phenomenon, open space can only be open when we actually practise openness in a critical and reflexive manner and when it is a conscious, sustained critical practice. Open space must be conceived, perceived, and practised as struggle; as critical action.

In turn, opening space — the creation, existence, nurturing, and protection of open space — needs to be seen as an intensely human act, of recovering and/or uncovering our freedoms, our power-to, and our humanity. It is, as above, and as life itself is, full of contradictions and paradoxes, and — as above — we can only begin to achieve its potential if we struggle for it; but the struggle for openness is by definition life-creating. It is a struggle for life itself.

But it is not the absoluteness or completeness of an open space alone that is important; it is also its very existence and the energy that it radiates, and the influence it has on that which is around it — such as stimulating replications, reactions, or refractions — that are as important as what takes place inside. As much as anything else, open space is a symbol of what is possible, and especially in contexts of relative or absolute closure or of closing spaces, such as the times in which we today live.

A further principle is that even while recognising the above, we need always to be aware that openness and closure are two dimensions of the same movement; twin, related, and inseparable aspects. To act is to open and also to close, and to define both openness and closure, simultaneously.

Equally, we need also to perceive that open space, and openness, has a skin, and is alive, and that it exists — like all live things — in dialectical tension with its environment; and we need to be consciously aware of and work with this reality. The skin is alive and permeable; but more, the skin is the point at which the inside not only meets and contaminates that which is 'outside' but also becomes the outside, and vice-versa. Open space is fundamentally emergent and autopoietic.

Moving on, open space perhaps 'works best' when there is a multiplicity of spaces and possibilities available within or in relation to the space, allowing participants maximum freedom of opportunity; and when it is large enough, and complex enough, to allow participants to be anonymous and therefore autonomous and free. Conversely, the smaller and more particular or singular the space, the less likely it is to be open and the more it becomes necessary to consciously aim to overcome this and to act in terms of all the other organising principles of open space.

The WSF is again a good example: Whereas the larger world meetings have tended to be the most open (and uncontrollable), particular 'national' and local fora have usually been somewhat more mono-ideological and monocultural, being more controlled and 'run' by particular ideological groupings; where anonymity and autonomy tend to become reduced.

Open space, and openness — as tendencies — also need to be perceived not as ends but, like networks, as the means by which horizontal politics can be practised and relations established. I would argue that it is only in open space that we can begin to achieve what John Brown Childs has urged — moving from a politics of conversion to an ethics of respect. Indeed, creating an open space is one of the first steps in such a shift and in the practise of this ethic.

Further, although to speak of open space as structure and organisation might seem contradictory — because these terms are associated with hierarchy — this is precisely what open space does: It challenges and subverts the idea that structure and organisation are necessarily vertical or programmed. It offers an alternative; a horizontal structure, a web. It contaminates and subverts conventional structure — and conventional conceptualisation. It gives us a new, more organic vocabulary for structure and form.

The concept and practice of open space challenges conventional organisational thinking in the civil world, at local, national, regional, and global levels, and conventional ideas and practices of organisation and association. This is not to assert that it is superior; only that it challenges other practices. It frees — and challenges — us to think and act freely. By virtue of its nature, it is, moreover, not just an organisational form. As I have earlier written in terms of the WSF, it

...places a demand on us that we keep the space free of control and resist temptations to try to control it. This poses a challenge not only to mainstream, orthodox, and conservative thinking and practice but also — and perhaps even more so — to all those organisations and initiatives that consider themselves to be 'progressive' or claim to be

working in terms of 'alternatives' but that are doing so through forms and relations that remain conventionally bounded and territorial. It therefore represents a radical challenge to most existing organisations and movements at a very basic level.

The fundamental participant in open space would seem to be, ultimately, the individual; as an individual and not in terms of communal identity or in representation. Open space, indeed, when open, tends to subvert communal and organisational identity — though equally, communal and organisational identity tend to subvert open space.

On the other hand, if open space only becomes open space if we make it so, and if we progressively define principles and practices for helping to keep it open, this indicates and requires a community that becomes defined and constituted through the very act of opening space and of defining the relation of open space. Both individual and community are therefore fundamental to open space, and the emancipatory potential of open space moves from the individual to also embracing the collective.

We need also to recognise that as a consequence of the material conditions and general culture within which we today live, at least in many parts of the world, we are in the midst of a major process of reculturalisation. We are moving from a belief in linear, programmed, clockwork movement and politics (and life) to a far more open-ended culture, with a far higher degree of reliance on autonomy, self-organisation, and responsibility. We need therefore to reflect on our programmed tendencies to believe in linear programmes and organisations, and (for instance) our tendency to see only ordered spaces as beautiful, and to consider a willingness to open ourselves to critically embrace the outcomes of openness and of open-endedness — of clouds; of the beauty of clouds of society, of history, and of life itself.

Finally, while there may be no one definition of open space being dependent as it is on particular contexts, it seems possible that it can achieve a common meaning across different cultures the more that different communities, from different contexts, enter and share the same spaces. Perhaps this too is the magic of the World Social Forum and what it is doing and offering to the world today.

(This is an edited excerpt from Jai Sen's paper entitled 'On Open Space: Explorations Towards a Vocabulary of a More Open Politics', and drawing also from an earlier version of this paper, 'Opening Open Space: Notes on the Grammar and Vocabulary of the Concept of Open Space'. The complete version of the current paper, with notes and references, is available at www.cacim.net)

Jai Sen is an architect and researcher based in New Delhi. He is a Director of ACIM (India Institute for Critical Action — Centre in Movement)

This dossier is supported in part by a grant from the Government of India pursuant to an MoU between ICICI Bank and the United States Agency for International Development's TDC programme. The views and information contained herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Government of India, ICICI Bank, USAID, or any other grant-making organisation, which assume no liability for the contents of this publication by virtue of the support given



dinodia.com

Electric fencing on the Indo-Pakistan border at Wagah

www.infochangeindia.org

Daily updates on human rights, social justice and sustainable development in South Asia

ccds



301, Kanchanjunga Building, Kanchan Lane
Off Law College Road, Pune 411 004

Tel: 91-20-26852845/25457371

Email: infochangeindia@dishnetdsl.net

Websites: www.infochangeindia.org/www.ccds.in