

POVERTY REDUCTION AND THE RHETORIC OF PARTICIPATION

IMF/World Bank sanctimony exposed

Palash Kamruzzaman

The World Bank and IMF have proposed the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) framework for all poor countries as a condition of receiving unconditional debt relief under the HIPC Initiative. The PRSPs will also be the key vehicle for the World Bank and IMF and other donors for various assistance packages, including loans. Like its predecessors, the PRSP framework promotes the ideas of 'participation' and 'ownership'. The ownership of such a grand framework cannot possibly rest with the poor countries or their people if the whole idea is the product of World Bank and IMF think-tanks. In discussing the development of Bangladesh's PRSP neither participation nor ownership was the target in preparing a national poverty-reduction strategy: they were merely necessary components of a document required for the continuation of debt and lending relationships with the World Bank and IMF.

Introduction

Recent thoughts on poverty and poverty reduction seem 'big' in terms of ideas,

units of analysis, global measurement of poverty, and the scale of planned policy intervention. This 'grand approach' has taken large communities and groups of people—entire countries with populations of millions—as the common units of analysis to assess and understand poverty. A similar approach has been adopted in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) framework proposed by the World Bank and the IMF in 1999. Rather than an epic and philanthropic discovery, the PRSP framework should be understood as the latest approach in the poverty-reduction strategies of international financial institutions (IFIs) for their client countries. It is associated with a previous series of approaches, such as the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, Country Assistance Strategy (CAS), Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA), Poverty Action Plan (PAP), and Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF).

There is a constant attempt to characterise PRSPs as a country-owned and government-led process. Widespread agreement about the PRSP framework can be found among the IFI boards on key issues to ensure local

ownership. First, a growing sense of ownership has been suggested as a guiding principle for the preparation of a PRSP. Government authorities should draft the PRSP, which will ensure and reinforce country ownership. The IFI boards also agree on a more open dialogue between governments and at least some part of the civil society. Such agreements show that it is the World Bank and IMF that are not only suggesting the PRSP framework but also prescribing how PRSPs should be prepared and how ownership can be ensured. However, it also appears (especially in the added emphasis) that, as a criterion, participation does not necessarily have to come from the widest possible sectors of society—rather, it is a means for claiming local ownership of the PRSPs.

The expectation is that participation by civil society in developing and implementing PRSPs will provide a sense of broad-based ownership, not only by the government, but also by civil and political society. Translating these expectations into operational recommendations, the PRSP framework can advocate participation by poor people

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REFRACTIONS:
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EDITORIALLY SPEAKING

HUMAN RIGHTS ACT
UNDER THREAT

With the General Election looming on the horizon here in the UK, threats to the Human Rights Act from many a source seem likely. Time to keep our guard up. We know that it is the Human Rights Act that ensures fairplay and equal treatment for everyone - not just for a chosen few deemed worthy of protection

Although the right to be free is centuries old in English law, it is only as recent as the year 2000 that a clearly set out legally enforceable 'right to liberty' came into force. The guarantee and security of the person is protected by Article 5 of the Human Rights Act. In other words one cannot be deprived of his or her freedom unless this is in accordance with a given procedure prescribed by law.

Article 5 protects one from the actions of the state - so it is not incumbent on the state to intervene to protect one from the actions of others. It seems therefore that it is the politicians, not the people who need to be convinced. In recent years our attention has focussed on the vindication of rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act of 1998. Both have faced threats from those who find it more convenient to attack them than to try to understand what they really mean. One major party wishes to repeal it, while another wishes to revise it. It is sometimes suggested that the Human Rights Act is undemocratic. This is hard to understand. In 1951 the government of the day ratified the Convention. In 1998, Parliament, in the Human Rights Act, required public bodies and officials to observe everyone's Convention Rights. But now it is being said that the Act enables the courts to infringe the sovereignty of Parliament and usurp supreme legislative authority. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Act is so drafted to ensure that the sovereignty of Parliament is preserved and supreme legislative authority is reserved to it. It is significant that those who wish to disparage the Convention and the Act find it convenient to misrepresent its effect, to stir up unfounded fears.

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CONFLUENCE AWARDS DAY

Confluence held an Awards Day for those who completed a nine week course in creative writing organised by the magazine in the London Borough of Croydon in the UK where it is based. Croydon Council's Director of Education Dave Hills was Guest of Honour and gave away the awards. The course was conducted by novelist, writer and award winning broadcaster Jameela Siddiqi following on a Grassroots Grant from Croydon Voluntary Action. Eleven participants received their awards with Anita Patel securing the prize for Most Promising Writer. Pictured here is the Awards Day in progress, with Dave Hill at centre and Jameela Siddiqi on his right.

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INTERNATIONAL POETRY AWARD
TO MANOJ KUMAR SHRIVASTAVA

The International Vatan Poetry on South Bank Award was presented to the prolific writer, Manoj Kumar Shrivastava, Secretary (Culture), Commissioner, Public Relations and Trustee Secretary of the Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, by the well known literary personality, Saeed Jaffrey OBE on the occasion of a programme organised jointly with the UK Hindi Samiti on September 2nd. Shrivastava's publications include *Meri Diary Se*, *Yadon Ke Sandarbh*, *Pashupati Swarankit*, *Kuraan Kavitaen* (Poetry) and *Pahadi Korwa: Vyatit, Vartmaan Aur Vibhav*, *Shiksha Mein Sandarbh Aur Mulya*, *Panchtantra*, *Yathakaal*, *Vandematram*, *Shakti-Prasang*, and *Sundarkand-Ek Punarpath* (Volumes 1-3). Moderated by Dr Padmesh Gupta, President of the UK Hindi Samiti and Editor of *Purvayi & Pravasi Today*, the programme was chaired by Satyendra Shrivastava, former Senior Lecturer in the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge. Manoj Kumar Shrivastav, who is an expert on the ancient epic, *Ramayan*, also delivered a lecture on the occasion on *Ramcharitmanas: The Modern Context* and took questions from the floor.



With Saeef Jaffrey (seated centre) and Manoj next to him are Divya Mathur, Jennifer Jaffrey, Anand Kumar, Seema and Varisha Kumar

Continued from page 1 Poverty reduction and the IMF/World Bank

in poverty analysis, prioritisation of public actions to be addressed in the strategy, and the monitoring of governments' delivery of poverty-reduction commitments. The World Bank has made approval of PRSPs conditional in principle, on acceptable participatory processes. However, the Bank has not specified what constitutes an acceptable participatory process, which raises questions about its intentions regarding the real ownership of these documents.

The PRSP framework itself is problematic, because it purports to promote local 'participation' to ensure 'ownership', while the whole idea and need for a PRSP has obviously been generated by the IFI think-tanks, not by the client countries or the poor people concerned. However, 'ownership' of the PRSPs cannot possibly rest with the client countries, because ultimately it is the IFI boards that have the power to reject or endorse any PRSP, and hence have ownership of the document. Furthermore, the idea of 'country ownership' is confusing (and illusory) while the World Bank and IMF have in various publications outlined the tentative contents, good practices, and expected nature of participation.

In considering participation in the PRSP framework in relation to previous poverty reduction strategies promoted by the World Bank and the IMF, the framework contains nothing new, and the agenda for its application to all indebted poor countries is questionable.

In discussing the participation process in the development of Bangladesh's PRSP, one sees that little attention was paid to ensuring genuine participation by the poor and by civil society to create ownership of the document. Rather, the claims of participation in the Bangladesh PRSP appear to be more concerned with fulfilling donor criteria than about representing the actual situation of poverty and people's perception of the poverty-reduction policy.

Similar patterns have been observed in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia. One cannot therefore but conclude that while the idea of participation has been invoked in the name of ensuring ownership of local poverty-reduction strategies, neither participation nor ownership was the primary objective of the PRSP framework. Rather the framework serves to continue the hegemonic relationship between the World Bank, IMF, and poor countries, whereby the latter have no better choice than to prepare one more policy paper.

Why (participatory) PRSPs?

The impact of the World Bank's new prescription for reducing poverty has been massive. By March 2006, 52 countries had completed their final PRSPs and 11 more had prepared Interim PRSPs (IPRSPs). In other words, these poor countries have conformed to the idea of developing a national poverty-reduction strategy in order to continue to receive loans and other assistance from the World Bank and IMF. These countries had never thought of such frameworks before they were proposed by the Bank and Fund. Rosemary McGee (2002) examined participation in the PRSP process in sub-Saharan Africa and found that it relied on poorly conceived, rushed, exclusive, and badly organised consultation procedures. The minimal engagement in the PRS process by political actors such as members of the national assembly or members of parliament is also true across much of Asia. Despite hopes that participation in the PRS would lead to better policy making and greater accountability, there is little evidence to date of the impact of participatory processes on the timetable or content of Asian PRSPs. The PRSP process in Bolivia has given rise to serious misgivings about optimistic assertions that externally imposed participation by civil society will trigger better political performance and more accountability, more ownership, and increased effectiveness. But the donors' 'one size fits all' approach gave the Bolivian government the freedom to organise the process in a way that

diluted the impact of civil-society involvement and diverted attention from the fundamental problems that hamper the performance of the political system. In Uganda and Vietnam, governments have selected the parties with whom they consult, and thus prevented the process from becoming a source of contestation about government policies and state authority. In Georgia, the lack of institutionalised politics and the politicisation of key aspects of civil society meant that there was relatively little space for meaningful contributions from non-government actors during the PRSP process. The Nicaraguan PRSP was drawn up by technocrats in accordance with donor directives; even within the government, ownership was limited. The strategy was approved in Washington despite strong evidence that it was only a piece of paper, and that the government did not take poverty reduction seriously (Dijkstra 2005). Dijkstra further argues that the consultation process in Honduras was seen as an improvement over earlier governance practices which restricted the agenda and left civil-society organisations (CSOs) feeling that their concerns were not sufficiently reflected in the strategy. Nevertheless, the first principle of the PRS approach is that it be country-driven and country-owned, on the basis of broad-based participatory processes. Yet these concepts are not always clearly defined. The World Bank and IMF staff lack precise criteria by which to judge success in this area and mainly want to be satisfied that the government has made a genuine effort to involve civil society. In many cases, different stakeholders have very different expectations regarding the participatory process.

“THE POVERTY REDUCTION
STRATEGY SERVES TO
CONTINUE THE HEGEMONIC
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE
WORLD BANK, IMF AND
POOR COUNTRIES...”

This points to the importance of communicating the goals of the process from the outset, in order to avoid its credibility and legitimacy being undermined by expectations that may prove impossible to fulfil. For example, participation does not imply final consensus or guarantee that views garnered through participatory processes will necessarily be reflected in the final programmes.

Local participation not free and spontaneous

McGee (2002) found that essential information was often not provided to participants, inadequate time was allowed for them to analyse drafts before commenting on them, and there was a lack of transparency in selecting participants in the first place. In most cases, participation in the PRSP process has been led by governments, who seemed to be concerned about how much they should 'listen' to the poor and to what extent, and how the views of the poor should be incorporated and interpreted in the PRSPs, while also following the guidelines, principles, and good practices suggested by the IFIs. Although the Bank and Fund suggested broad-based participation by all relevant stakeholders to ensure local ownership of these documents, their own reviews did not find this in reality. The Joint Staff Assessment (JSA) found that the role of Parliaments in the preparation, approval, and monitoring of country strategies has generally been limited. Various concerns have been expressed about the lack of involvement of specific groups in the participatory process. While the patterns differ across countries, CSOs that were out of favour with the government, local government officials, private sector representatives, trade unions, women's groups, and direct representatives of the poor are among the groups that have

not always been fully involved in the PRSP process.

It was also expected that the development of PRSPs would improve the partnerships and coordination among countries and donors. Until mid-2001 a number of donors were frustrated by their own lack of involvement in the process, many of them feeling that it was dominated by the World Bank and IMF. These donors pointed out that they were unable to engage jointly in the dialogue with government during Bank and Fund missions, as they felt that Joint Staff Assessments (JSAs) drew the government's attention away from alternative views. Such findings by the initiators of the PRSP framework underline that local participation was not free and spontaneous, but dominated and directed by the Bank and Fund.

This leads us to ask why ideas such as 'participation' and 'ownership' have been pushed so repeatedly. What is the rationale for proposing a new framework and preparing a PRSP? Why have some poor countries completed their PRSPs, while other Papers are still in the pipeline?

The obvious answers to these questions lie with the intentions of the World Bank and IMF in introducing the PRSP framework, which starts with the premise 'that there is a strong link between debt relief and poverty reduction and debt relief is an integral part of broader efforts to implement outcome oriented poverty reduction strategies. By completion of PRSPs, countries should get unconditional debt relief under HIPC Initiative'. There is no fundamental difference between the PRSP approach and previous IFI poverty reduction frameworks, as the following discussion shows.

Country Assistance Strategies (CAS) were national strategies that were expected to be developed through broad-based consultation and participation. CAS aimed to ensure clear and strong connections between lending and non-lending activities and the poverty-reduction strategy and impact. They were aligned with a framework that required brief reports on the main characteristics of poverty and its determinants; trends over time; links between growth and poverty reduction; the impact of macro-economic policies and of government programmes on the poor; access to services and programmes; and the main dimensions of vulnerability.

In 1991, the World Bank indicated that it would be carrying out Poverty Assessments as a key component of analytical work in all borrower countries, to strengthen the link between the Bank's assistance strategy and the countries' own efforts to reduce poverty. The purpose of a participatory poverty assessment (PPA) was to create space for the voice of the poor in providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics of poverty and regional contextual characteristics, the coping mechanisms adopted by the poor, and local perceptions of problems and priority interventions.

The PPA also aimed to promote participation in poverty assessments (PAs) beyond the level of the primary stakeholders (the intended beneficiaries) to include the secondary, or institutional stakeholders in civil society and government. In seeking to introduce a participatory element into the more conventional poverty analysis, the PPA was not a discrete research process, but was designed to produce results 'that can help to complement, inform or validate conclusions drawn from other kinds of more traditional Bank analysis'

(To be continued in the next issue)

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REFRACTIONS

chitra sundaram

HOT PINK DIVAS AND HOT-UNDER-LABELS DEVIS AND DEVAS: THE CACOPHONY OF ‘CULTURE’

Ok. So I was told by my editor that my report on the South Asian dance organisation Akademi’s recent Bollywood Dance conference ‘Frame by Frame’ [see *Confluence* July-August: visit www.confluence.org.uk] was just that: ‘toothless’ and “reported what everyone had said”.

Well, dear reader, if Mr. Editor had let word count be damned, I would have had for you, just perhaps, a piece far more sexy, biting and as intellectually and imaginatively stimulating, as Bollywood, err, Indian Cinema deserves. Really?! Well, no, not in a column’s space. Anyway, here’s a taste of the opening (and ‘subversive’ title) that I had originally prepared to offer my editor for the ‘report’. Go, salivate!

Framed: Akademi hosts Symposium on Bollywood Dance!

The house lights go down... a drum roll...

“*Lay-dees and Gen-tel-men! ...the In-imitable ...the Ir-repressible ... the In-dispensable... the Most Fantas-ti-cal... the Most Magi-cal... The One... And the Only... Here’ssssssss... Ms. Bollywood!!!”*

Applause! Applause! Applause! Focus, and you will see-hear all, I tell myself.

To the heartbeat rhythm of anticipation, this apparition, this glorious goddess of no particular faith—except in her fans—emerges, arising, morphing, constantly, interactively...even as we lustily adjust our gaze upon her. Then the music comes upon us: aesthetic-making, mind-bending and pelvic-pumping-shoulder-shaking and foot-tapping is so-oh yesterday!

And as we vibrate, in the stunning aura of incredible technology, arching and moving with sinuous precision, she beckons like a siren, seductively, unerringly, suspended in gossamer threads from various lands of earth and time and mind and money, secure in a big and bold cat’s cradle of neo-Indian ‘heritage’ and ‘culture’. And then you think, wow, she is actually here, at the Royal Opera House, no less!!! (BTW: ROH, Indian dance, post-colonial incursion: that was so-oh day-before yesterday; FYI: it was ‘Diversity-day’ a.k.a Overtime Sunday at the ROH.)

But at least you no longer have to go to her shrine in India anymore...this Devi-Diva is everywhere...she actually comes to you...she has few encumbrances, err, clothes or protective armour i.e. no borders, anything goes, especially venture capital money without Dubai Dada-s. She is all yours, to make, take, watch and worship.

Big, bold, brassy, and beautiful, with a strong and worked out body feminine but no big boobs, and she likes her men like that too—Thanks ye fashion

gods!! Yes, you could light a *beedi* or a cheroot from the heat of her ‘*jigar*’ (heart) for she can now be both pure and sullied: Art and Actor. She is ageless like a wish, immaculately re-conceiving Life and its meanings and its avatars. *Who is Madonna?*! This one floats over longing diaspora *desi* hearts and aspirations; she has gone all global and urban; she has gone where the money and fun are: what did you expect, eh, Benegal? Pity, yes, but she’s a showgirl, after all—this is, is Bollywood’s

“JUST BECAUSE BOLLYWOOD DANCE COMES FROM ‘SOUTH ASIA’, IT DOESN’T QUITE BECOME ‘SOUTH ASIAN DANCE’ DOES IT? NOR IS IT INDIAN CULTURE, IS IT? DO THE ‘INCREDIBLE INDIA’ TOURISM ADS FEATURE BOLLYWOOD OR BHARATANATYAM? NOW YOU HAVE GONE AND JUST MADE IT EASIER FOR ‘HERITAGE’ FUNDERS HAVEN’T YOU? AND PLAYED INTO THEIR NUMBERS’ GAMES..?”

Bhumika for now. (And, hey, even the village bumpkin wants to be a ‘Kaminey’ in urban badlands, not a Manoj Kumar’s son-of-the-soil.)

My sweet, she’s there for all: India and diaspora alike. Like it or not i.e. ‘leaving it’ is not an offered option. Health/wealth warning: She is a Daring Diva but a Deadly Devi! She is an addiction!

In fact, “You cannot escape!” as **Nina Nannar**, the ITN journalist and show host joyously exclaimed as she opened Akademi’s ‘Frame by Frame—A Symposium on the Dance of the Indian Cinema & its Transition into Bollywood Dancing’ on July 13 at the Royal Opera House, London.

Well, actually, there was no drum roll; nor fanfare: *Bollywood is stuff of serious culture and heritage for many desi communities in Britain*, as we repeatedly heard that day: conscientious about its ‘cultural’ burden, Akademi’s symposium began with a film-and-live song-and-dance ‘invocation’ to the unnamed *Sangeet ki Devi*, the Muse-goddess of Music.

In fact the ‘show’ had actually begun even before the lights went down in the auditorium: en route the path to the Linbury studio (i.e. down the stairs into the

basement of the Royal Opera House—but no phantom there, ah, alas!), Akademi, with its tried-and-trusted ‘site-flexible’ formula i.e. mounting essentially the same piece of clever capsules of lego-block choreographic ideas with changes of music or costumes or order, had a handful of strategically placed dancers—‘live installations’—on staircase landings and lobby bars, performing, evoking the Hindi Cinema eras. One had to use one’s imagination: Hindi films were always too vast for any theatre, except the 70mm screen and surround sound Dolby, and so no little opera house proscenium studio theatre, however ‘royal’ in name, nor the talent assembled and the time given them of half a day could possibly dream of doing justice to the event’s marketing promise “of dance in the Indian film through the ages’. But they tried and it was a tribute—to the industry that the whole world is after (to buy into), and to Akademi who put it on.

I was transported by the film clips and entertained by the lovely live dancing—Ash Mukherjee in semi-drag in particular. They broke up the talking heads sections delivered by a substantial cast of speakers. [See Report in *Confluence* July-August—visit www.confluence.org.uk]

But ooooh, pre- and post-event-which most ‘classical’ dancers did not attend—Akademi Director, **Mira Kaushik** got flak: Just why should Akademi, a taxpayer funded ‘South Asian Dance’ organisation host an event on Bollywood/film dance?

To parse: Just because Bollywood dance comes from ‘South Asia’, it doesn’t quite become ‘South Asian Dance’ does it? Nor is it Indian Culture, is it? Do the ‘Incredible India’ tourism ads feature Bollywood or Bharatanatyam? Now you have gone and just made it easier for ‘heritage’ funders haven’t you? And played into their numbers’ games? And fallen for their dance-for-all democratic ideas that don’t respect our great and ancient Indian dance forms? And when Bollywood does well enough commercially at “home” and here, why put taxpayer pounds to support it? And so they go on.

To arbitrate: Perhaps they don’t hear Akademi say it is a British not Indian organisation; that they have come of age here not India, and with generations here that need to be reached not lost in languages and histories of which they have not even blood-memory; that Bhavan does the propagation of ‘Indian Culture’, and well enough; Perhaps, they didn’t get a serious artist like Gurindher Chadha saying Bharatanatyam or Kathak did not relate to her idea of even an emotional homeland; Or, perhaps we need to understand that ‘India’ is not just a geography or nation anymore but actually a construct, and a global one i.e. open to all, truly democratic. Or that ‘Art’ and ‘Culture’ are Politics in disguise—everywhere. How could you possibly recognise it all—except for the colour of money?

Creating the Story of Everywhere: Connecting Cultures, Understanding Other

Confluence 7th anniversary keynote address

(continued from previous issue)

Sanjukta Das Gupta

Now turn to the immeasurable strategic importance of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in Postcolonial Times

As we are aware, the most politically charged literary prize in the world is of course the Commonwealth Writers Prize. I began my association with the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize as a co-judge and then acted as a Chairperson of the then *Eurasia Region*, recently renamed as *Europe and South Asia Region*. Of the four regions, Africa, Europe and South Asia, The Caribbean and Canada and South East Asia and South Pacific the region I was linked to as judge, *Europe and South Asia*, I feel is the most challenging in terms of competition as writers from the mother country vie with writers from the erstwhile colonies, in a competitive sport of creative word play.

The most obvious and recurrent impression I derived from the close perusal of about 300 books in three years, is the marked split between the themes and variations of writing from the erstwhile colonies and the mother country. While individualism as a cult was a cultural construct endlessly scrutinized in the texts written by the white residents of the United Kingdom, skin colour, racial identity, memory, nostalgia, loss, displacement and excitement of relocation seemed to predominate in varying combinations the subject matter of writing from the colonies. This tug of war between one’s place of origins and one’s space of re-location, in most of the novels and some short stories written by descendants and immigrants from the erstwhile colonies is a recurrent theme and reiteration generally is about scripting of a new experience, sometimes represented with superb writing skill though sometimes clichéd and essentialist.

During my tenure as judge, the Commonwealth Writers Prize Best Book winners were the internationally known writers, Andrea Levy and Caryl Phillips, both of Caribbean origin. Their respective texts with titles like signposts which act as symbol and metaphor for their fictive themes, *Small Island* and *A Distant Shore* primarily address the issues of race relations and racial discrimination, intolerance and acculturation, psychic and physical violence as lived experience, a sense of loss, memory, nostalgia, the challenges of relocation and finding a home away from home. All these aspects are deeply implicated in the experiences of the material subject. Needless to add, only fiction written in English can compete for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize.

This often becomes a political issue in the colonies, as it is interpreted as an imperialistic ploy that deliberately de-recognizes the ethnic languages. There have been many proposals for initiating a Commonwealth Writers Prize for fiction translated into English. Though the proposals are under consideration, as far as I know, no resolution has been taken on the matter.

The recent themes and variations of British and American literature validate the fact that the

literature that is being produced from these cultures celebrates a sense of heterogeneity by prioritizing cultural differences. This is definitely the most significant and unprecedented contribution of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Prior to the 1970’s American and British literature commonly would stand for first world white heterosexual male writing. Mainstream and “malestream” literature were inextricably intertwined and there was no question of destabilizing these stereotypes. However, in the last three or maybe four decades the subaltern communities and cultures of the world have found their own voices and are able to express themselves with confidence and candour. Therefore literary representations are no longer just Anglo-centric and andro-centric, replete with



essentialisms, as they were in the past. Anti-essentialist discourse in the writings of Asian Americans, African Americans, British-Asians and other writers “of colour” not only reconfigure the readings of cultures but have de-centered the subject to such an extent, that re-reading the context and re-focussing on the text has very successfully opened windows and doors of perception, as never before. The erstwhile rather arrogant dismissive binary of the West and the Rest has been eagerly re-constituted and re-scripted, thereby ensuring that it is quite possible to dream of a world where clash of cultures will be rejected in favour of identifying contact zones, encouraging dialogue and negotiations that will lead to building bridges of mutual understanding.

So in the Commonwealth writers Prize Best Book category (2004) the shortlist of six included Githa Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* that dealt with the topical issue of communalism and the persecution of a college lecturer. Pakistani writer Uzma Aslam Khan’s *Trespassing* also addressed the troubled times in the sub-continent but used a variety of cultural spaces and voices that extended like a silken yarn exploring strands of cultural history. Susan Elderkin’s *The Voices* was a vivid and magical rendering of the people of Western Australia—at once lyrical, experimental and wholly original. a virtuoso revelation of a brilliant but blinkered analytic mind.

Caryl Phillips’ *A Distant Shore* was awarded the overall Best Book category Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2004. Here is an abstract of this powerful novel-

From its opening words, “England has changed”, Caryl Phillips’ *A Distant Shore* explores vast themes—cultural dislocation, the anxiety of belonging, migration and social change—through the prism of individual lives. Set in a village in the north of England, the novel describes a faltering encounter between two solitary and seemingly very different individuals: Dorothy, a primly repressed retired schoolteacher in her fifties, and Solomon, the mysterious African caretaker in his thirties who drives her on hospital visits. But as we gradually learn their stories, it seems both feel alienated and are seeking a kind of asylum, Dorothy from a broken marriage and guilt at abandoning a needy sister; Solomon, an ex-soldier, from civil war and the slaughter of his family. Their trauma and mental

disintegration are skillfully narrated through a fractured narrative, memory lapses and partial recollection. The ordeal of Solomon’s clandestine journey to England is masterly and atmospheric. His cold welcome in an immigration detention cell and his violent scapegoating in England ironically echo the tribalism he fled in Africa. Restrained but deeply compassionate, lucid and modest in its prose, the novel links one of Europe’s major political and moral challenges, the presence of vilified asylum seekers, to Phillips’ larger vision of a society transformed by migration but confused and riven as to its identity.

In the Best First Book category (2004) Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* narrated with passion

and sensitivity the life of two sisters—one transported from rural Bangladesh to Bangla town in London and the other struggling for survival in rural Bangladesh. M.J. Hyland’s *How The Light Gets In* is a superb portrait of a gifted Australian teenage girl on a placement with an American family, whose talent and intelligence alienate her from her underprivileged milieu and she becomes a victim of alcoholism but for her nevertheless, the USA represents a land of opportunity. This particular narrative can be regarded as a counter-discourse.

Interestingly, previous Eurasia Region winners of the Commonwealth Writers Prize comprise Vikram Seth, Sarah Hall, Michael Frayn, Githa Hariharan, Vikram Chandra, Salman Rushdie, Manju Kapoor and Rupa Bajwa.

Cultural Pluralism

At the 2005 World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy spoke about the function of literature for our times: “Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it...With our art, our music, our literature...—and our ability to tell our own stories.” In an article, “The Arduous Conversation Will Continue,” published in *The Guardian* on July 19, 2005, Hanif Kureishi voiced a similar opinion: “...the only patriotism possible is one that refuses the banality of taking either side, and continues the arduous

Continued from page 5 The Story of Everywhere

conversation. That is why we have literature, the theatre, newspapers—a culture, in other words.” The linguistic skills of accommodation of the English language and its democratic egalitarian spirit may be an ideal to follow in order to bridge cultures and develop social engineering between diverse racial groups.

Along with the astounding success of the English language, the other recognizable icons that have successfully pushed against cultural boundaries and borders and have thereby created a de-territorialized transnational space of equity and social equality are, of course, the game of cricket, Indian cuisine, Bollywood films and Fabindia garments. Incidentally, the British Bridal sari recently being marketed in London is designed by Bridging Arts, an organization run by an Englishwoman Susan Roberts. The newspaper report tells us that it will cost less to buy this designer sari in London than at Shoppers Stop in Calcutta. (*Telegraph* October 19, 2008)

In conclusion, I will refer to two newspaper reports that underscore the global two way flow and validate cultural freedom and freedom of movement and location, re-location and re- re-location to the space of one’s choice. Therefore Amitav Ghosh’s choice of re-locating back to his mother country is the mapping of a reverse journey. Ghosh chooses to return to India after living for decades in the USA, and is accompanied by his white American wife and two children. The *Times of India* (*TOI*) carried an interesting caption, “A Brooklyn Bengali Comes Home” referring to his return and also reported that Ghosh had been selected for the India Government award—PADMASHRI on Republic Day, January 26, 2007. In the *TOI* interview Ghosh stated, “As an Indian writing in English, I’ve often felt, as we say in Hindi, *Dhobi ka kutta, naa ghar kaa naa ghat kaa* (a washerman’s dog, not at home in the hearth nor in the water). As I’m an Indian citizen, I’m ineligible for many things in the US and elsewhere...I’ve never thought of myself as having left India—I’ve always spent a lot of time here, and it has always been home. But now, yes I’m in the process of re-locating to India. My family home is in Kolkata but I’ve bought a house in Goa, where there are many writers and artists. I’m looking forward to dividing my time between the two places...” (*TOI*, February 11, 2007)

Ghosh speaks confidently about his singular affiliation—never thought of myself as having left India—to the accommodative spirit of those who have permanently made the re-located space their home is significant. As a sort of counter discourse almost, *Times of India* also reported that the British writer of Indian origin, Meera Syal’s texts would be taught to British schoolkids between 11-14 years. Syal is best known for her screenplay *Bhaji On The Beach*, but she has two novels with grammatically challenged and colloquially inflected titles—*Anita And Me* and *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*. The authors who have been dropped from the British school curriculum according to that newspaper report are Milton, Byron, Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Anthony Trollope, Christopher Marlow, E.M. Forster, Harold Pinter and Evelyn Waugh. Instead Anita Desai, Maya Angelou and Benjamin Zephaniah have been introduced in the must-read list. (*TOI* February 8, 2007) The *TOI* editorial comment must be cited briefly here— “The UK school curriculum is all set to be multicultural, modern and trendy, it seems. Out go Milton, Joyce and Conrad—those old English bores—and in comes Meera Syal, with

her bhaji, tandoor nights, Bombay dreams and Ha Ha Hee Hee. This is an attempt to keep pace with a rapidly changing world.” (*TOI*, February 9, 2007)

As an anti-racist, feminist academic resident in the Global South, however, I feel we need to engage in constructing a more critically informed world literature and cultural studies syllabus that can provide a more holistic understanding of our varied political affiliations. We are aware of the French sociologist Pierre Bordieau’s arguments about the deep intermeshing of economic and cultural capital. Following Aijaz Ahmed who interrogates the exclusionary dynamics of Frederic Jameson’s contentions about Third World literature as non-canonical, I would like to argue in favour of an inclusiveness that is not just about my South Asian locational identity but about the spirit of inclusiveness that ideally should be the essential frame of a globalized world. Ahmed had stated, “Jameson’s is not a First World text; mine is not a Third World text. We are not each other’s civilizational Others.” (Ahmad 122)

Though aware of recent proclamations about cultural globalization, global and local reciprocal flows of cultural production and the deeply implicated politics of semantic jugglery, at the risk of seeming an antiquarian I excavate, re-claim, and reiterate a somewhat forgotten or elided forecast that is more than a hundred and fifty years old. The views of Marx and Engels that the perusal of world literature instead of local or national literature would aid in re-defining cultural boundaries and borders can well be taken as a viable argument and option for re-envisioning and restructuring our understanding of the links between economic, social and cultural capital but also how such engagements will nurture minds and generate ideas of inclusiveness, stimulating social interaction between diverse cultures that would lead to a spirit of accommodation and empathy in a globalized environment—

“The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.” (Marx K.and Engels. Webpage. Italics mine)

But a cultural two-way flow will be ideally possible when texts privileging diasporic experiences scripted in non-English languages become an integral part of diasporic discourse, instead of a monolithic,

monolingualistic understanding that the cultural critic Harish Trivedi has described as a reductionist representation. Also, the diaspora can review their roles as their performance is critiqued in literature written in the non-english languages about the diaspora from the place of origin. This can be regarded as an ideal strategy to set the local and global role-playing in perspective as the diasporans of diverse cultures fashion their identities and negotiate their new home spaces. Such social and cultural sensitization and cross-fertilization can span a very wide trajectory of the local and the global, that may even go much beyond the very laudable efforts of the Liberal Democrats of Britain who have recently launched a Diversity Engagement Group. However, semantic jugglery such as re-naming Christmas as “Winter Light festival” an initiative of the Oxford City Council (*Times of India*, Nov 4, 08) may not achieve any significant goal of engineering social connectivity between diverse races. In India, and especially in the city of Calcutta, Christmas is a social event celebrated with no less gusto by the Hindus as the Christians in the city. After all, it is a matter of social attitude and not about innovations imposed by the administration.

In her recent book *Other Asias* Spivak stated quite categorically “We are Anglo-clone and yet Asian” and as Amitav Ghosh asserted in *The Glass Palace* that fifty years old. The views of Marx and Engels that the perusal of world literature instead of local or national literature would aid in re-defining cultural boundaries and borders can well be taken as a viable argument and option for re-envisioning and restructuring our understanding of the links between economic, social and cultural capital but also how such engagements will nurture minds and generate ideas of inclusiveness, stimulating social interaction between diverse cultures that would lead to a spirit of accommodation and empathy in a globalized environment—

“We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (Spivak 215)

It is this indestructible connection beyond all territories that we can infuse with greater understanding of ourselves and understanding of those who are not quite us.

As a native informant, permanent resident in the place of origin I am reaching out to that dynamic spirit and substance of metropolitan multiculturalism as did Rammohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru among many others in a different time but in a similar spirit of cosmopolitanism, both global and local. Therefore, moving beyond the rigid boundaries of racial pride and prejudice it is expected that the two way flow of culture specific productions from texts to textiles, printed texts and visual texts, cultural exchange promoting social connectivity and social networks will become more positive, progressive and extensive in the present century, which is just in its ninth year.

Concluded

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Indians can surely show a way out of the dire economic predicament in which we find ourselves—Lord Dholakia

The recent meeting held between the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the Indo-British All-Party Parliamentary Group at the House of Lords, revealed the extent of the opportunities and the enthusiasm on the part of Indian businesses to interact and forge relationships with UK business. That has been achieved to some extent with big business and large corporations. However, it was revealed that the UK’s reception of Indian business teams is the weakest in Europe. France, for example, hosted bilateral trade talks with Indian and French businesses, with over 200 French corporations represented. The UK is also under-utilising its small and medium enterprises in its trade relations with India.

FICCI noted specifically that it has a dynamic and growing corporate sector, which is interested in working with UK SMEs. Unfortunately, all requests to the UK Government and business organisations have received little or no response, other than some of the initiatives taken by the noble Lord Bilimoria, and others.

While UK regional development authorities, such as the UK India Business Council and the CBI, work on SME-related issues, they are all disjointed and work on piecemeal projects. As a result, no one knows what is happening on a regional or even a countrywide basis. The main deficiency is the absence of a single co-ordinating body that is able to mobilise a quality, robust SME group that could engage in large-scale business-to-business meetings. FICCI, for example, has been doing this with all other European communities, such as France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. Why not the United Kingdom?

This is a longstanding problem. There is an urgent need to have a co-ordinated effort from the UK to get Indian SMEs and their UK counterparts to engage in an exchange of bilateral trade. We are looking for the Government to take some kind of leadership role and harness the UK’s SMEs. The advantages of this approach are two-fold. It will generate enormous growth in entrepreneurial activity, which is one of the most important forms of economic growth in the recession. With ordinary avenues of employment shut down, many highly skilled individuals are unemployed. Their skills need to be harnessed and the self-starters encouraged in engaging in creative, innovative work. Secondly, it is highly advantageous for the long-term eradication of poverty in countries such as India, where entrepreneurship is often the only way out of poverty.

However, it is also important that people who become wealthy, who are able to generate large sums of money, do not take a top-down approach. The development of the country as a whole needs to be linked to the increase in high-net worth individuals so that the generation of wealth does not create a country of rich and poor but rather a healthy economy which helps to alleviate the dire poverty which affects all of them. According to the World Bank, small and medium enterprises are essential for dynamic economic growth and job creation. The sector in India has been hit hard by the current downturn with credit growth slowing and demand falling in both domestic and export markets. Improving access to finance for this sector is the key to long-term development. This cannot be

achieved without robust attention to the role of women in the formal and informal sectors. Hard work alone is not enough to promote economic mobility. Organized dialogue in all sectors and also across urban and rural areas between India and the UK is the key to achieving millennium development goal number one: the eradication of poverty.

India is often criticised for its government, particularly in relation to its bureaucracy. It is said that Britain invented bureaucracy and that India perfected it in triplicate. However, let us remember that there are more than one million self-help groups, many supported by NGOs, which are creating a grassroots revolution. The magnitude of this invisible groundswell is much larger than that created by Grameen Bank. The positive side of

difficulties of obtaining a visa. We are not talking about immigration, but we should make sure that business visitors and senior providers are facilitated to travel to the UK to explore business opportunities and business contracts. Will the Minister not accept that timelines are short in the business world? We need clarity, uniformity and transparency in visa and work permit procedures. An example is the IT industry. It is particularly impacted by issues such as delivery of service, which is dependent on movement of professionals at short notice.

Medical tourism requires examination. There are difficulties with insurance portability and the three-hour flying rule that preclude UK patients getting treatment in India. Should we not look at regulatory changes here? Then there is the classification of Indian products. A

CURRY DEBATE HOTS UP

Lord Dholakia questions Government in relation to skill shortage in curry industry



Following the speech given last month by the Chief Executive of Immigration Advisory Service, Keith Best which highlighted the difficulties facing the curry industry (85% of curry restaurants are Bangladeshi) Lord Dholakia, Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, asked the Government for their intentions regarding a review of immigration rules in order to deal with skill shortages facing the industry.

“The people of the UK will not easily forgive the politicians if they destroy the curry industry however inadvertently: the Government needs to understand how the industry works and to be culturally sensitive to the demands. It is not only a problem for the Bangladeshis but for Britain as a whole.” said Lord Dholakia

In his reply, the Minister, Lord West stated:

The Independent Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) advises Government on shortage occupations. Skilled chefs, including those in the curry industry, are currently on the shortage occupation list for Tier two of the Points-Based System.

The Government has asked the MAC to review this entry by September 2009 and recommend whether it is sensible to continue to fill shortages of skilled chefs through migration. The Government will consider the MAC’s recommendations carefully in due course.

the Indian economy is its strong financial institutions. There is a great challenge ahead: the demographic dividend can be prevented from becoming a demographic deficit. We salute the major conglomerates like Tata and others, which have shown what can be done in their contribution to India’s economy. They may not feature in a list of the world’s richest millionaires, but their contribution to alleviating poverty and promoting educational programmes is second to none.

Why is there not an exemption from social security contributions for Indian professionals on short-duration visits from India? They pay social security contributions despite no social security benefits being available to them. If Belgium, France and Germany can do this, why can the United Kingdom not do it? Bilateral trade is also impacted by our visa regime. I do not criticise the points system, but repeated attention is drawn to the

case in point is the Indian whisky made not of malt but of molasses. It cannot be sold as whisky here, so now the British Government term it rum. Something must be fundamentally wrong. I do not wish to undermine the quality of Scotch, but India consumes a substantial amount of Black Label, yet it cannot reciprocate by selling its own product in the United Kingdom.

Finally, in the 17th century, Britain entered into trade with India in the name of the British East India Company. That was 250 years ago and provided us with 250 years of British rule. I promise one thing: Indians are not here to establish Indian rule or an Indian Raj, but they can surely show a way out of the dire economic predicament in which we find ourselves.

Abridged from a recent speech by Lord Dholakia in the House of Lords

SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSLETTER
‘WORDS ON WATER’ PROGRAMME BRINGS INDIA-SA IN DIALOGUE



India has come to our shores after a long and dry cultural boycott imposed by the Indian government against the apartheid regime. For over 50 years the local Indian community has been starved of its vernacular culture of indigenous music, drama and literature. In its absence they created within the context of Africa a hybrid culture different and unique from the motherland. Now as the long denied relationship between India and South Africa is being rapidly reinstated through the sterling efforts of the Indian Consulate the opportunity to make up for lost time offers itself. Since 2007 the emergence of the Shared History Festival began in SA to consolidate a relationship between the two countries and its people. This festival which runs for an entire month throughout all the main provinces of SA is a remarkable accomplishment of a public-private enterprise. Without leaving the shores of their country SA will experience the best of Indian art, crafts, dance music, literature, films and cuisine. The ‘Words on Water’ programme which brings India and SA in dialogue promises to be a most exciting experience for both participants and panellists and for South Africans and Indian nationals.

Viewing each other through the prism of history, politics, nationality and culture will present an interesting opportunity for introspection. Among a grand list of great writers and intellectual thinkers I will be conversing with the formidable Ms. Shobhaa De who is one of India’s best selling authors better known for her writings on sexual inhibitions and popular culture. She has often

been described as the Barbara Cartland of India and her work features extensively in comparative literature courses at universities abroad and within India. Somehow fundamental issues that challenge civilizations never die. Death, Life, Sex will always engage our intellect for as long as there is life. Sex never fails to draw the attention of even the most indifferent and it is little wonder that her books sell like hot cakes in India. While Indian culture has traditionally viewed sex as a pleasurable experience raising it to an art form, the modern day Indian has many hang ups about sex and the open demonstration of affection in public places. She says, *“India shocks easily despite the bravado and big talk. Periodic surveys show the same old prejudices and hang-ups, never mind that our movies pretend otherwise. Women may be wearing less and less, drinking and smoking much more, sleeping around with abandon, and generally feeling “liberated”. But despite all that stylish buffing and puffing, society continues to frown at the “westernisation” of our youth, and bridegrooms still prefer virgins.”*

Unlike their counterparts in India, South Africa Indian

“THIS IS PRECISELY WHY SHOBHAA DE’S WRITINGS ARE SO PROVOCATIVE. AS AN IMPORTANT SOCIAL COMMENTATOR SHE ACTS AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE, SERVES THE FUNCTION OF QUESTIONING HER COUNTRYMEN AND WOMEN ABOUT THE TRUE NATURE OF MORALITY...”

youth, though strictly controlled by their parents, have a tendency towards exhibitionistic behaviour. They are to be found necking openly in public places and on campuses of most institutions to the great embarrassment of onlookers. With the high incidence of HIV/AIDS, South Africans are rightly concerned about responsible sexual practices amongst our youth.

On our home front, Lydia Johnson, an ANC member of the provincial legislature and chairperson of the health portfolio committee urged students at a special prayer meeting to abstain from sex because it was not a basic need. Her advice was given in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that was destroying the working population in our country and eroding our base of intellectuals. “We need to change our attitude towards sex to save our lives,” she advised. In a way, perhaps, we have approached the era where idealistic morality and religion celebrate their happy resurrection. The struggle for youth today is to balance the forces between pleasure and reality. This is made ever so difficult by the contradictory messages that continually bombard youth today. At the height of their sexuality, they are being fed with explicit sex, in the electronic and printed media. Sexual symbolism is present *ad nauseum* in food, clothing, cars, perfume bottles

and deodorant canisters and phallic dirt bins. Like a Jezebel, society teases youth. Against this backdrop our contradictory message wails...Abstain!

In India Traditionalists’ regards sex as a procreational activity reserved for marriage. Accordingly individual freedom and personal rights are closely guarded by a moral police force. In a classic case of a global time warp, when a popular film star Shilpa Shetty was hugged and kissed by Richard Gere she was publicly rebuked and had to apologise for her disgraceful behaviour. In another incident the Indian film superstar Sonali Bendre was formally charged in a Mumbai court for appearing in public in a skimpy dress, the locals said that she had insulted Hinduism. But there is enough evidence among the pantheon of Hindu gods for nudity. The goddess Kali is always portrayed in the nude. The famous temples of Khajuraho in the state of Madhya Pradesh are embellished with the finest erotic sculptures believed to have been built between the 9th and 12th century. Artists, historians and intellectuals argue that Hinduism



was never against nudity. In fact body parts such as Shiva’s phallus, the lingam have its place in every temple as a symbol of procreation. I recall a lecture given by an Austrian anthropologist of note who at the age of 13 was well versed in Sanskrit and was asked to welcome Nehru to Vienna. As an ‘adoptee’ of the Hindu faith, Swami Aganandha Bharathi chastised the modern Indian for becoming so westernized and parochial and for having forgotten the greatness of the Tantric tradition. This was the period in Indian thinking when prudish morality as it is known today in modern India was non-existent. Cultures are always in a state of flux. Can one stop this change when global influences knock on our doors? India today is changing rapidly. Industrialization and urbanization are growing exponentially. In the light of this the attacks on Shilpa Shetty and Sonali Bendre make a mockery of real modernism which represents universalistic norms respecting individuals as citizens. And this is precisely why Shobhaa De’s writings are so provocative. As an important social commentator she acts as a catalyst for change, serves the function of questioning her countrymen and women about the true nature of morality. In our current over-sexualized culture, sex has become a commodity, immaturity is often idealized, and sexual conquests have been valorised as sport. But individual liberty is the hallmark of a true democracy. So finding a balance between Eros and Civilization should make for an interesting discussion.

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- * Aviation law: Commercial aviation, asset acquisition and leasing finance for aviation, aviation litigation and dispute resolution,
- * Infrastructure: Handling Insurance claims and advising on Insurance law
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WEDDING ALBUM: INSIGHTS INTO THE PSYCHE OF THE NEW INDIA

Sunayana Panda

There were many attractions that would have drawn Indian theatre-lovers to the play *Wedding Album* staged at Watermans from 15th to 20th September. Firstly, the play was written by Girish Karnad, secondly, it was directed by Lillete Dubey, and thirdly, the cast was made up of seasoned and well-known actors. The combination of all three elements made the performance thoroughly enjoyable.

Presenting this play in the UK made sense because its purpose was to show a slice of life in contemporary India, a view most people here may not have seen in its unvarnished version. It gave a glimpse of all the complexities of modern Indian society as it adjusts to the tech-savvy lifestyle of the young. It did not however answer the many questions that arose in the viewer's mind as one by one the scenes unfolded. Can the system of arranged marriages survive in a changed world? Can the Indian family continue to be as close-knit as it used to be if each one has a parallel life that he doesn't share with the rest? How long would it take before the Indian family too gets fractured as in the West? True to its title, it was a collection of pictures that were not necessarily connected to each other in a straightforward narrative structure.

The play is set in Dharwad in Karnataka, and is about the Nadkarni family which is made up of the parents and their three grown up children: two daughters and a son. The family is preparing for the wedding of Vidula, the younger daughter, an occasion which has had the older daughter come down from Australia where she had settled after marriage. The fate of the brother is also being decided, as during the same period the Sirurs are trying their best to put pressure on him to marry their daughter while he is in a relationship with another girl. Before the play ends we know that eventually he does succumb to the temptations they are holding out. The first part of the play portrays the external relationships of an average family and it is in the second half that the dark secrets come tumbling out. And as is the case with most middle-class families, the maid is a part of the household and partakes of their joys and sorrows.

The new face of India may come as a surprise to some. In contrast to the way marriages used to be arranged when a man and a woman did not see each other until the wedding ceremony had begun, the prospective bride and groom today have the opportunity not only to introduce themselves to each other but also to have a private conversation in a place



Utkarsh Mazumdar & Lillete Dubey (Photo: Natasha Hemrajani)



Raaghav Chanana & Ira Dubey (Photo: Oliver King)



after the show, that he asked a friend who had lived for a while in the States to read out his lines several times until he himself could repeat it with the exact twang.

This is Girish Karnad's only play set in contemporary India—all the others take

outside their homes where their family members are not present. The brother's relationship with a Christian girl seems to be an open secret. That he talks to her in the presence of his family members on his mobile phone shows he is not particularly interested in hiding it. Such liaisons would have been frowned upon by an earlier generation. Vidula, like all young girls, has a life in cyberspace even though she lives in a place which is not a major metropolitan city of India. Another revelation is how Indian women are ready to make sacrifices in their personal life to get ahead professionally and find themselves often at the head of organisations, as in the case of the television producer who is the brother's employer. It is nothing new now for a man to work for a woman boss and to play up to her. India lives with one foot in the past and the other in the future. In fact, the values of the different generations exist side by side.

Much of the credit for the success of this play must go to Lillete Dubey who has not only directed the play but also played the role of the mother of the bride. Her flawless performance did not at any point betray the anxiety she must have had as the director on the opening night in London. Surely there must have been moments when, just as she was getting under the skin of her character, she must have simultaneously worried about technical details, timings and costume changes in a location where they were performing the play for the first time. Making intelligent use of the intimate stage space at Watermans to define the different areas where the scenes take place, she created the illusion of endless movement in a play which is basically set in the living-room of a middle class family or in other places where the characters do little more than sit and talk.

As if under a spell, the audience was transported for a couple of hours to modern India, and it was largely due to the acting skills of the entire cast who could lend that touch of authenticity to the characters they were playing. Special mention must be made of Raaghav Chanana who played the prospective groom from the United States. Even though he had never set foot in America he managed to get the accent just right. He said with a smile,

Continued on page 13

GLOBAL BOLLYWOOD DANCE BEATS

Sangita Shresthova

A young woman strides confidently down the street. She holds herself with pride and purpose. Her headphones on, she snaps her fingers to an apparently catchy beat. She catches herself before executing a shimmy and turn. She is a Bollywood dancer somewhere in the world.

Hardly a day goes by without a new article about the global popularity of Bollywood dance popping up somewhere in a newspaper, magazine, or on the Internet. Titled tellingly with catchphrases like “Bollywood Dance Mania” and “Bollywood Dance Classes are Hot,” these articles invariably point to the growing presence of Bollywood dance on a local level. The burgeoning business of the Bollywood dance instructional video market distributed in DVD and online formats also clearly point to a growing demand for Bollywood dance.

Today, it seems that Bollywood dances are taught in virtually every major urban center in the world. In India, specialized schools and fitness centers offer film-inspired dance classes to members of the emergent middle class. Outside India, in cities like London, Berlin, Chicago, and Melbourne, instructors, often only marginally connected to the film industry, set up classes to meet the demand of South Asian and other audiences to learn and perform movements they have seen (and been enthralled by) in films. Driven by local demands, Bollywood dance classes even exist in cities, like Prague or Geneva, where South Asian populations are rather small. Bollywood dance is fast becoming a diverse and popular global movement phenomenon. Yes, Bollywood dance does indeed appear to have taken the world by “storm.”

Though dances, as choreographed movements set to musical accompaniment, appeared in films soon after the introduction of film technology to India in 1896, the use of Bollywood dance as a term to describe dances choreographed to Hindi film songs is much more recent. First references to Bollywood Dance as a movement category date back to the early 1990s and describe the hybrid, yet Indian dance based, movements used in Hindi films. The past few years have continued to bring new innovations to the world of Bollywood dance as choreographers trained in Indian classical and contemporary dance styles enrich and combine movements and meanings to create new and unexpected work. Sometimes spiritual, sometimes hip-hop-like, contemporary Bollywood dance is an eclectic, catchy, yet culturally rooted dance form.

In effect, the rise of Bollywood dance coincides with pro-market economic reforms in India, the simultaneous coming of age of the Indian diaspora and technological innovations that increased the global circulation of Hindi films to previously unimaginable levels. Today many Indian film song-and-dance sequences, from the early days of *Chandralekha* to the latest as-yet-unreleased Bollywood blockbuster, are easily accessed through YouTube's treasure chest.

But, as we enthusiastically shimmy, thrust, and jiggle to the latest catchy Bollywood beat, isn't it about time that we begin to peel back the glossy appealing veneer of Bollywood dance? This may be the moment when we stop to think more about what drives the global trend, and perhaps even more importantly, how its popularity affects those who make it an important part of their lives. In fact, it is the juxtaposition between the apparent global mobility of dance content in Hindi films and the apparent local rooted-ness dancers who partake in the study and live performance of Bollywood dance may move us closer to an understanding of this worldwide popular phenomenon.



Whether it is on the production or consumption sides, Bollywood dance is, at the end of the day, about the people whose lives are touched by its global circulation.

That said, I now present three stories compiled, created and defined by the global circulation of Bollywood dance. These stories grew out of my in-depth and ongoing research on this popular phenomenon. It is my pleasure to introduce to you: Tatiana, Manjita and Suruchi.

Tatiana in Bombay

“This film is going to be a big hit. It has all the right ingredients.” Bosco, of the Bosco and Caesar film choreography duo, raises his voice to carry above the grinding rhythms of an on-set rehearsal of *The Race* in Mumbai. Bosco sits in the director's chair and scrutinizes the monitor as his assistants work through four counts of choreography with Bipasha Basu and Katrina Kaif, two fashionable Bollywood starlets. Intermittently, he mutters camera angle instructions into his microphone. His voice echoes through the set—a tunnel with a smoke machine and fan—but is drowned out. After several unsuccessful attempts to make himself heard above the commotion, Bosco sighs and walks over to the cinematographer standing next to the camera. The directors continue to sip their tea and watch all activity through the monitor. They do not interfere with any of the activities on set.

“Bollywood dance has changed.” Bosco returns. “You see the songs are more fast cut, more racy.” Scantly-clad chorus line dancers begin to file in along the peripheries of the set. Indian men and foreign, overwhelmingly blonde, women arrive together. The Indian female dancers arrive last and stand off towards a corner and chat as they adjust each other's costumes. The chorus line dancers take their positions on the set. Blonde dancers are assigned to the front rows behind the stars. Indian dancers fill up the background. “Do you think we have a post-colonial hang-up?” Bosco's manager comments, “You should write about that.” The stars take their positions and “quiet on set” resounds through the tunnel.

The last few years have witnessed the arrival of foreign—mostly white, blonde and female—dancers in Hindi film chorus lines. The first waves of these dancers came from countries of the former Soviet Union. Many foreign dancers rotated in and out of India every six months to avoid visa complications as agents coordinated their local contracts and visas. Recently, dancers from other countries like the UK, Spain, Iceland and South Africa arrived to meet the demand for foreign dancers in Hindi films. The initial demand for foreign dancers in Bombay was driven by logistics. Choreographer Feroz Khan explains, “it was cheaper to bring the dancers here than to take the whole crew there...” when shooting a dance sequence set abroad. But the appeal of foreign dancers in Hindi films now goes beyond these early logistical considerations as foreign dancers meet a demand fueled by Bollywood's globally savvy veneer.

Today, several of these dancers, who initially arrived on short-term contracts, have actually settled more permanently in Mumbai. “I came here first a few years,” as Tatiana, a Russian dancer, explains to me as we chat in the dressing room in between takes. She leans forward, studies her make-up in the mirror, and continues to speak as she adjusts her costume. She grew up in St. Petersburg and started her dance training at a very early age. “I studied

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CONFLUENCE 11

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ballet,” she remarks coolly. She struggled to make a living in Russia until she met an agent who made arrangements for dancers to work on Hindi film sets. Tatiana’s initial dance stint in Mumbai allowed her to make friends who told her that she could “make good money” as a Russian dancer in Mumbai. Since then, Tatiana danced in over a hundred Hindi films but says that she “is not learning much in terms of dance.”

Today, Tatiana feels at home in India. She shares a flat in Andheri, a Mumbai suburb, with two other Russian dancers. It is here that she gets to enjoy a lifestyle that would not have been possible for her in Russia. “I have a maid and live a good life,” she explains. She spends most of her days on sets and also finds professional engagements in the city’s vibrant night life—as a dancer at private parties, fashion shows and nightclubs. “There is so much work,” she laughs.

Manjita in Kathmandu

Manjita, a young Nepali woman, walks purposefully down a street in Kathmandu, Nepal. The neon blinking red light of the XXX Dance Bar advertises to a nearly abandoned street. The bar is dimly lit, with a mirrored stage on the far end. A noisy, scratchy Hindi film song blares through the speakers. Manjita runs between the tables straight to the stage. She turns her back towards the audience, runs her fingers over her legs, upwards past her waist, until her fingers intertwine in her hair. Her hips begin to sway. She performs for an overwhelmingly male audience.

In the dressing room of the XXX Dance Bar, Pooja, another dancer at the bar, hurriedly applies powder under a harsh neon light. “Bollywood songs are what we dance the most. Different dancers specialize in different moves.” She adjusts her miniskirt and checks the tension in her bra straps. “We practice our dance moves at home, in front of the TV, and then come here and perform.” The bar manager pokes his head into the dressing room to tell us that they are about to start. Pooja nods and takes one last look towards the mirror. As she heads towards the door, she pauses, “...and *dididi* [older sister], we know all about AIDS, how it’s transmitted and all. We are not like that.” She laughs as the door swings shut behind her. But her comment makes clear that bar dancers in Kathmandu bear the brunt of the sexual stigma associated with dance in Nepal, a stigma exacerbated by the looming AIDS epidemic in the country.

Dance bars have rapidly become a key element of Nepal’s nightlife and compete for clients among the *dobori* bars featuring Nepali folk songs and dances and cabin restaurants where guests have the option of dining in private cabins. For non-governmental organizations (NGOs) monitoring the situation, the sectioned-off cabin restaurants are the most ‘dangerous’ for female employees and are subject to frequent police raids. Select waitresses from cabin restaurants ‘graduate’ to dance bars where they may be pressured into providing additional sexual services to their customers. Bar dancers occupy the highest position in the adult entertainment sector of Kathmandu’s nightlife economy.

On her break, Manjita walks out into the audience and mingles with the audience. She arrived in Kathmandu several years ago, driven to migration through Nepal’s decade-long violent internal conflict. Initially supported by relatives, she made her way through the city and found temporary work in Kathmandu’s urbanizing industries. She even had a temporary stint painting *Thankas*

(Buddhist religious paintings) for sale to tourists. Actually, it was there that Manjita made a friend who told her that she could make a lot more money—even ten times the amount she made with her current work—by becoming a waitress in the dance bar. This was how Manjita entered the dance bar world.

After waitressing for a few months, Manjita ventured on to the blinking and mirrored dance floor. “At first, I was very shy,” she explains, “But then I got used to it. Now, I get on the stage. I dance and all my problems go away.” Manjita explains that her world now revolves around the dance bar. This is where her friends are, and this is where she spends most of her free time. “Usually, I go over in the afternoon and hang out until it’s time to perform.” Manjita is intentionally ambiguous about her personal life. “I don’t want to marry. Ever,” she insists vehemently. Eventually, she confides that her heart was actually broken by a man, who she thought would marry her. He had promised her that she would not have to work. The relationship ended abruptly when her fiancé disappeared. “I don’t know what he heard about me,” her voice breaks.

Three months later, I return to Kathmandu and set out to find Manjita. The doors of the XXX Bar are boarded

“BOLLYWOOD DANCE IS NOW A GLOBAL DANCE MOVEMENT. YET, IT IS THE DANCERS INFLUENCED BY THIS PHENOMENON THAT REALLY BREATHE LIFE INTO ITS COMPLEX, INTERCONNECTED MEANINGS...”

up. A watchman from a neighboring building approaches me as I hover by the entrance uncertainly. “Did the bar close?” I ask him. He nods and explains that the bar closed a few months ago as a result of a police raid. I ask him if he knows anything about the employees. He shakes his head and points me towards a nearby cold store. The shopkeeper, a young man in his twenties, tries to be helpful. The owner of the bar is now in England. “What about the dancers?” I ask. They are around. He gestures to the winding alleys of Thamel, Kathmandu’s tourist hub. “Do you know if Manjita is around?” I pry and learn that Manjita told everyone she was going to Mumbai.

Suruchi in Los Angeles

In January 2009, NBC rolled out a new dance reality show tellingly called *Superstars of Dance*. Hosted by Riverdance star Michael Flatley and created by executive producers Nigel Lithgoe and Simon Fuller, the show comprised of a dance competition between professional dance teams chosen to represent Argentina, Australia, South Africa, United States, Ireland, Russia, China, and significantly India.

After its much publicized premiere, the show ran into some controversy as questions surfaced regarding the background of dancers. “Does a team have to come from India to be Indian?” some audience members asked as they learned that many of the dancers were actually drawn from diasporic communities based in Los Angeles.

Still, India’s participation in the *Superstars of Dance* competition was a much-touted event in the Indian community in the United States. The fact that the whole team, with the notable exception of the soloists,

comprised of dancers from Nakul Dev Mahajan’s (NDM) Bollywood dance troupe became a topic of much discussion, as dances drawn from Hindi films assumed their place next to Kathak and Bharat Natyam, the pillars of Indian classical dance. “Who could think it was right to put Bollywood dance next to classical dance like that?” a stalwart classical dance supporter lamented to me as the show aired. In the end, the fairly early elimination of the Bollywood dance troupe stood out against two classical dance soloists (Mythili Prakash in Bharat Natyam and Amrapali Ambegaokar) who held on until the final round. Regardless of the final outcome, the presence of Bollywood dance at this competition, and it’s somewhat problematic self-promotion as an *international* dance event, stands out as a significant milestone for Hindi-film-inspired dance in the United States.

Suruchi, a young American woman of Indian origin, was a proud member of the *Superstars of Dance* Bollywood team. Born and raised in Orange County, Suruchi began her dance training when she was four years old. Her initial dance training was in Kathak, a dance form she continues practice with reverence. “I wanted to get away from the classical thing. I wanted to try something new,” she laughs when I ask why she decided to transition to film dance. Though her decision to audition for NDM’s Bollywood dance troupe initially conflicted with her classical dance training, she now sees her previous training as an asset that provided continuity to her entry into film dance. “You don’t need to have Indian dance training prior to Bollywood, but I think it definitely helps,” Suruchi explains. She speaks with pride about her Bollywood dance. She sees her practice as a way to represent the Indian side of her heritage. “I think it’s wonderful that you can see our culture on prime time TV in the US,” she asserts.

When she is not training for the next show or TV appearance through NDM, Suruchi is a full time college student working towards a Marketing degree. She dabbles in modelling, acting, and advertisements and dreams of a full-time dance related career. “The great thing is that I don’t have to go to India to do Bollywood anymore. I can just stay right here and dance in Los Angeles.”

From Mumbai to Los Angeles, Bollywood dance is now a global dance movement. Yet, it is the dancers influenced by this phenomenon that really breathe life into its complex and interconnected meanings. The global scope of the industry brought Tatiana to India where her blonde-and-blue eyes and ballet training are in demand by dance directors and producers. Sexualized Bollywood remixes integrate Manjita into Kathmandu’s night entertainment economy. In Los Angeles, the global circulation of Bollywood dance brings opportunities to second generation Indian-Americans, eager to perform their hyphenated identities on national television. Local meanings, persistent inequalities, and global circulation intersect to create the world of Bollywood dance.

Dr. Sangita Shresthova is a Czech/Nepali scholar, filmmaker, dancer and media specialist. She is the programming director of the annual Prague Bollywood Festival and founder of Bolllynatyam



THE GANESH CHATHURTHY FESTIVAL— ITS MORAL AND SIGNIFICANCE

Suresh Menon

“Ganapathy bappa moreya”

The observance of Lord Ganesh’s Birthday “Ganesh Chathurthy” was begun as a public celebration in India during British Rule. The festival was started as a result of a ban on public meetings of any kind by the British colonial government to curb the growing freedom movement of the time. Inspired by the great freedom fighter Sri Lokmanya Tilak from Maharashtra, the platform of the religious festival was used to keep the general public informed about the growth and progress of the freedom movement.

Ever since those days the tradition of Ganesh Chathurthy has continued and has become one of the most popular festivals in Maharashtra attracting national and international crowds alike to view the spectacle of the ever so popular immersion ceremony in Chowpatty beach in Mumbai. Ganesh idols of varying sizes, some as high as two to three storey buildings are worshipped, set on massive stages in public squares over a period of nine days .On the ninth day the idols from all over Mumbai and Thane are loaded into trucks with great pomp and vigour. Around late noon the road leading to Chowpatty conveys one massive procession stretching for miles with trucks decorated with garlands carrying hundreds of Ganesh idols heading towards the sea to be immersed. It is a truly magnificent sight and a spiritual experience of a lifetime.

Every devout Hindu household knows and follows an unwritten rule on Ganesh Chathurthy day, when the young ones are cautioned by their elders: “never look at the moon today, it is forbidden”.

The mythological story goes:

Lord Shiva and his wife Parvati set their sons Ganesh and Kartik the task of



traversing the universe with the one to complete the task being awarded a Modaka (divine sweet) The brothers began the mission with Kartika mounted on his pet animal the peacock, while Ganesh said to himself, “my universe is at my parent’s feet” and mounted his pet animal the rat and circled around the hill where Shiv and Parvati were sitting,

Ganesh the pot bellied and obese child that he was, appeared quite comical, seated on a rat as he was. The moon seeing this could not help breaking into laughter, much to the annoyance of little Ganesh .In a fit of temper he cursed the moon and said “on my birthday no one would ever look at you forever and ever”. Following this curse, no one dares to look at the moon on Ganesh’s birthday, even to this day.

As a growing child I found this a very fascinating story but as I grew older and wiser began to look for answers to life’s questions and lean towards spiritual pursuits. I wondered why we really avoided looking at the moon on this particular day.

Lord Ganesh is worshipped as the God of intellect and wisdom. Avoiding looking at the ever changing moon on Ganesha’s birthday carries the spiritual significance and symbolic message to mankind: “be firm and rooted within you and don’t keep changing like the moon to play up to others.” In other

words, be yourself and have the world accept you the way you are. *Ganapathy bappa moreya!* Ganesh Chathurthy was on 23rd August and the festival was celebrated during the nine to eleven days following this day throughout Maharashtra India.

Suresh Menon, B.Sc., who has completed a post graduate diploma in complementary Health Sciences Ayurveda from Middlesex University is an ayurvedic practitioner.



BOX SEAT

Continued from page 10

This is Girish Karnad’s only play set in contemporary India—all the others take place in the mythological or historic past. But Karnad is very much a part of the contemporary cinema scene and so this is really not unfamiliar territory to him. His familiarity with the milieu gives him insights into the way the minds of the characters work. We see this in the portrayal of the maid’s relationship with her mistress, the sense of alienation of the father, and the bitterness of the elder sister who feels she was not given her fair share of affection.

He also brings out the various nuances in the character of Vidula’s brother, who while being one of the younger members of the family is also the man of the house, attending to all duties.

If the high points of the work came from the writer, perhaps the weak spots also came from him. The way the play moves back and forth in time left some in the audience quite confused. Also, the scene in the internet café was too brief compared to the entire length of the

play to make the point that Vidula was indeed leading a distinctly double life. There was a feeling that among the many issues raised some were not touched deeply enough and this gave the impression that the play was moving in many directions at the same time.

The length of the play seemed not to weigh too much thanks to good humour in plenty, coming mainly from the true to life portrayals; yes, people could recognise their own families in the one they were seeing on the stage. But there were also many worrying questions that emerged that clearly keeps this play outside the pale of comedy. The end, although somewhat abrupt, had a clever touch when the maid asked the age-old Indian question: “Can you keep a grown-up daughter forever at home?” while in the background we hear a TV presenter referring to the modern reality of a woman who had gone to the USA as a wife but returned disillusioned, possibly abused and ill-treated.

As the lights go off on that ominous note we are left with a question. Will Vidula find happiness? Her two

siblings have already told her that if things turn out badly she should not hesitate to come back. The voice of the father warning everyone that marriage is a gamble keeps echoing in one’s mind even after the play is over. And perhaps he is the one who has the last word.

That Girish Karnad chose to write a new play, and so many actors connected with films and television gave their time and energy to it, shows that theatre is alive and kicking in India. English language theatre particularly has had a hard time surviving the stiff competition from popular entertainment in the electronic media. The more it succeeds at home the more likely it is that London will be included in international tours and circuits. That can only come as good news to spectators in the UK. Language not being a barrier, Indian plays performed in English can be understood and enjoyed by everyone. Sunayana Panda, an MA in English and American Literature from Annamalai University, India, is a freelance journalist, theatre actress and director.

FIVE POEMS BY
SASENARINE PERSAUD

From the Persaud album, *Lantana Strangling Ixora*

AMERICANS RE-INTERPRETING HISTORY

Glancing away from a riveting female historian
turned Sanskrit expert, rowers put out
in the Charles: bathtub vessels flying triangular sails

Like Kuru and Pandava pennants on either side
of the *Mahabharata*. She asserts: *The Charioteer's
driver, Krishna, is like—think of a Humvee owner*

*Taking his friends on a Friday night spin
in Bangalore saying, "I am God."* Parsing
an ancient text, and quipping, *I should know*

*Having spent several summer breaks
in India, in households where only women
teach the Gita to children; I will translate*

In these women's syntax. Our uplifted hands
Krishna's benedictions. Are there no agendas?
How can there be? I'm scholar, objective outsider.

In a winter evening, nothing moves on the river.
Stars converse in Morse, in the wounding silence
of ancient Indian theory on making music

In the puncturing of Euro-American myths
on myths, Indian navy divers in the Gujarat Sea
are photographing an underwater city

Surfacing Dowarka utensils for carbon-dating.
In the controlled pause for questions
no one questions Mahabharathology's new science.

THE PAUSE

Pausing in the heat to pour water
around new planted shrubs:
Formosa azaleas still turgid
from last night's watering.
We misplaced the wheel's rhythm.
It was not possible.
We could resume at will.
Periwinkles snuggle up to marigolds
over-ripe carrots bloom
because we failed to harvest them
last fall. Lantanas wait on winter.
You whispered goodbye and turned
your face to a land and time we loved
and could only recall in a mirror of tears.

WHEN

And when that time arrives
—as it must—when we part
may there be no taste of neem
on our tongues—what might have been
is in dreams and our next mornings
the smooth transitioning motorcycles
gears trolling our dull neighborhoods.

SKETCHING A WINDCHIME

Blue plumbago waving frantically
in high wind the brass chimes
echoing an emperor's garden
after he has withdrawn his hands
from a courtesan's shaved legs
the kingdom's burdens and labors
are shifted in the official painter's
brushes water pink and lime bamboo
cured to engineered floors fitting
without nails or paste
interlocking Channels clicking flush
like bodies in a spoon and birds
coming out as tentative as deer
the wind subsiding and retreating
leaving you with a pen
manufactured in Guangdong Province

CIRCUMAMBULATING THE
PARKING GARAGE

Once you're in lefty
it is right and right and right
and you can stalk cars
forever—Olds gone, GM going
Chrysler's way. The history of automobiles.

Ford's blue egg hatching
another fusion. The freight train's horn
awakening a new year's slumber
dissolved in the Carolina wrens' chirps.

Once you're in lefty
it is left and left and left
until your tenancy's over. Who slept
in what room, how you redecorate
bush immaterial except to the woman

whose ancestors served in factories
plucked cotton on plantations
bore the brunt of a one-eyed recording-
you are viewed by your car:
a lowly Ford, Bavarian Motor Works
or Japanese Kaizen sipping gasoline

so the myth goes once you're in you're in
and it is left and left and left
and when you're exiting right
into those very books you once condemned.



SACF ANNUAL FILM EVENTS (2009)
6TH SACF FILM FEST—
SACF HONOURS
GIRISH KASARAVALLI &
CHANDRAPRAKASH DWIVEDI

South Asian Cinema Foundation (SACF) will honour India's
internationally renowned filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli
(whose latest film *Gulabi Talkies* (2008) has bagged several
awards), with an "Excellence in Cinema Award" on October
9th 2009 at the Nehru Centre.

Another filmmaker to be present at the SACF 2009 events
in London (9-13 October) is Chandraprakash Dwivedi from
Bollywood who has given South Asian audiences an epic TV
serial like *Chanakya* and the acclaimed Partition film *Pinjar*
(2003). Dwivedi will receive SACF's Cultural Catalyst Award
for creating films that have explored India's cultural legacy and
historical upheavals.

"SACF is the only film organization in UK which is
committed to building film culture and promoting meaningful
cinema from South Asia and it is this commitment that has led
us to organize the first ever retrospective of Girish Kasaravalli's
cinema in London." says SACF Director, Lalit Mohan Joshi.

Girish Kasaravalli is one of the contemporary masters of Indian
cinema whose work stands at par with Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen
and Adoor Gopalakrishnan. His latest film to win international
acclaim is *Gulabi Talkies* (2008). It traces the impact of the new
media on a fishing community in Coastal Karnataka, against
the backdrop of globalized business practices and growing
communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims at the turn
of the century. Premiered in the Indian competition section of
the 10th Oasian's-Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema,
New Delhi (2008), *Gulabi Talkies* has won the Best Film prize.
Umashree, the leading actor who played Gulabi in the film, got
the Best Actress award as well.

A Gold Medalist from the Film & Television Institute of
India (FTII, Pune), Girish has made just 12 films in a career
spanning more than 30 years. Inspired by the world masters—
Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Ozu, Fellini and Antonioni,
Kasaravalli's cinema is rooted in the traditions of neo-realism.
His debut film *Ghatashraddha* (*The Ritual of Excommunication*,
1977) won him the President of India's Golden Lotus. Along
with Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, Kasaravalli has the honour of
winning the coveted Golden Lotus four times.

"As a filmmaker, my journey, from my first film *Ghatashraddha*
to my latest, *Gulabi Talkies*, has been a continuum. I believe
that a film should reflect some facet of life", says Kasaravalli.

SACF will screen five timeless films by Kasaravalli at the
Watermans from 10-13 October). These are: *Gulabi Talkies*
(2008), *Ghatashraddha* (1977), *Dweepa* (2003), *Nayi Neralu*
(2006) and *Hasina* (2005).

After receiving the award Kasaravalli will speak to film
historian/Editor *South Asian Cinema* journal, Lalit Mohan
Joshi about his life and works. Lalit has authored *A Door to
Adoor and Bollywood—Popular Indian Cinema* and made a well
received documentary *Beyond Partition*.

Another highlight of the festival is the Literature in Cinema
Conference at the Fevie Hall, University of Westminster where
keynote lecture on Literature in Cinema will be delivered by the
Indian filmmaker Chandraprakash Dwivedi and a Master Class
with filmmakers Kasaravalli and Dwivedi and screen writer
Farrukh Dhondy. SACF's Annual Phalke Memorial Lecture will
be delivered by Hindi writer and poet Dr Gautam Sachdev.

On 12 October, SACF's Director Lalit Mohan Joshi will
have an In Conversation with Chandraprakash Dwivedi at the
Nehru Centre. The Festival will close on 13th October with a
free screening of Dwivedi's film *Pinjar* at the Nehru Centre.

The Vernacularisation of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in India

Reviewed by Reginald Massey FRSA

This important document based on rigorous research
and foot-slogging field work sheds light on the entire
Indian democratic process. The subtitle says it all. After
over sixty years of hard striving by well meaning middle
class English speaking liberals, India still suffers from the
sins of the past. If Jawaharlal Nehru were buried in a grave
he'd surely be tossing and turning in it. Politics, caste
and religion are even today inextricably bound together.
Regional parties are largely caste based with narrow
sectarian objectives. It is a cultural curse inherited from
centuries of exploitation by those who dictated ethics
and social values to the masses, the underdogs. The caste
system and the institution of untouchability are powerful
poisons that even still infect Indian society. Let us not
delude ourselves with heady notions of secularism, social
justice and the rule of law. Ambedkar's lofty constitution
has been eroded by corrupt politicians in Delhi who have
been aided and abetted by criminals turned politicians
who operate their fiefdoms in the various
states. Caste and religion are blatantly
used as instruments of political power. 'A
number of democratic ideas and practices
described in this book,' confesses the author,
'do not evidently correspond to the ideals of
liberal democracy which shaped the Indian
Constitution.' Hence when glib labels such
as 'the world's largest democracy' are bandied
about one finds it difficult not to squirm.

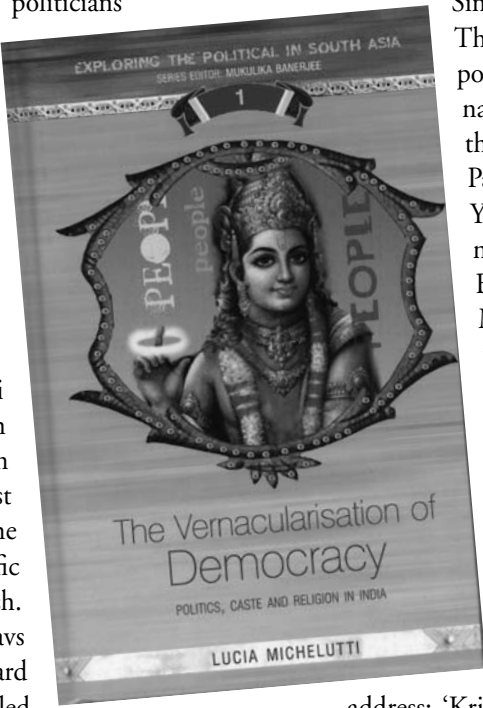
The ground reality that Lucia Michelutti
explores in this doctoral thesis, now rewritten
for a wider readership, has thankfully been shorn
of the jargon that is the stock in trade of most
political scientists and social anthropologists. She
examines a particular caste, the Yadavs, in a specific
district of the town of Mathura in Uttar Pradesh.
Why the Yadavs and why Mathura? The Yadavs
are officially listed as OBCs (Other Backward
Classes) as opposed to SCs and STs (Scheduled
Castes and Scheduled Tribes). Though high caste Hindus
consider Yadavs as Shudras (in the fourth tier of the caste
hierarchy) they, the Yadavs, claim that they are descended
from Yadu who was the ancestor of none other than the
god Krishna himself. Such a gambit is not unusual. Low
castes often fabricate spurious or mythological ancestry in
order to climb up the caste ladder. They can always bribe
a Brahmin pundit to authenticate and legitimize their
claims. It is amazing, nevertheless, how the low castes cling
tenaciously to the caste system. Caste provides a kind of
identity card. India's official policy of reserved jobs in the
civil service and reserved places in educational institutions
for members of the lower castes has resulted in an interesting
new phenomenon. There have now emerged discernible
upper and lower layers among even the lowest castes.

The Yadavs claim Kshatriya status on account of their
'connection' with Krishna. That puts them in the warrior
category and second only to the Brahmins, the priestly caste.
Only Brahmin and Kshatriya men reserve the right to wear
the *janêu*, the sacred thread. The Yadavs and the Ahirs,
who belong to the same caste cluster, were traditionally
cowherders and milk sellers and, they solemnly inform
sceptics, Krishna too herded cows. Krishna's exploits and
amours in the Braj area by the banks of the Yamuna river
form the subject matter of a vast corpus of remarkably
beautiful music, dance and painting. Mathura in Braj is

closely associated with the god and it was therefore wholly
appropriate that the Yadavs living there be closely studied.

Michelutti lived amongst them, and meticulously
recorded their macho attitudes, lifestyles, dress codes,

THE VERNACULARISATION OF
DEMOCRACY: POLITICS, CASTE
AND RELIGION IN INDIA
by LUCIA MICHELUTTI
Routledge Taylor & Francis Group,
London, New York, New Delhi
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familial patterns, marriage codes and practices and, above
all, how they have mastered the art of manipulating the
'democratic process' in order to further their own caste
interests. Their leaders, such as Laloo Prasad and Mulayam
Singh, are well known in India. They wield immense
power. Although Hindu
nationalist propaganda and
the ideologues of the Sangh
Parivar have revived the
Yadav identity, the Yadavs are
not great supporters of the
Bharatiya Janata Party. The
Mathura Yadavs in common
with other Yadavs support
the Samajwadi Party which
opposes the BJP.

The 1999 convention
of the All India Yadav
Mahasabha (AIYM)
held at New Delhi was
noteworthy. This is
what Harmohan Singh
said in his presidential

address: 'Krishna always fought for the
upliftment of the poor, he played with them, he lived
with them... He always associated himself with his poor
friends, the farmers, the shelterless...He passed his life with
these people, he struggled for them and left this world
while struggling for those people...The Mahabharata
period which was the period of the Yadavs is known for
its republican and democratic government.' The next day,
on December 26, Laloo Prasad, best known for his jokey
manner and the 'Fodder Scam', exhorted his listeners: 'I
believe that whenever the name of Krishna appears, it
does not make any sense to avoid politics. Lord Krishna
challenged the evils. The history of communalism has been
explored by many historians. But whatever the Vedas said,
they began with the word Yadav...this is our history...I tell
you the Mahabharata is a true epic...Lord Krishna is being
defamed on the pretext that he was a womaniser...whereas
Lord Krishna respected and recognised women's power.'
On the same day Mulayam Singh, once a wrestler, said:
'Krishna is considered a multifaceted personality...Various
people have various myths about him but sometimes
when it comes to his 16,000 queens it reflects a kind of
illiteracy.'

Well, well. I begin to wonder whether any of these
three gentlemen has ever read the Bhagavad Gita, the
most sacred book of the Hindus which is accepted as the
'Hindu Bible'. In it Krishna declares unequivocally: 'The

duties of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, as well as
Shudras, are divided according to the qualities born of
their respective natures...All varnas have been created by
me...One should not abandon one's duty which attaches
to him from his very birth, even though defective.' The
'Untouchables' (whom Gandhi called Harijans but who
now call themselves Dalits) were not featured in the four
varnas for they were considered 'outcastes' or pariahs. These
include the *bhangis*, scavengers and latrine cleaners, and
the *chamars*, skimmers and leather workers. By no stretch
of the imagination can Krishna's words be construed as a
rousing manifesto proclaiming democratic and republican
principles.

Brahminic taboos have been taken up enthusiastically
by many Yadavs. No Dalit or Muslim is allowed to enter
a Yadav *rasoi*, kitchen. Muslims, who make up a fifth
of Mathura's population are treated with distrust and
suspicion. There is always the danger of Hindu- Muslim
riots breaking out which necessitates a strong presence of
security forces within the town. Dalits are still not allowed
into the Mathura temples since it is believed that they
would pollute the sanctity of those holy places. Michelutti
records that she witnessed the caretakers of the Mahadev
Ghat temple chasing away *chamars* who had strayed too
close to the temple precincts. 'Untouchables', she says,
may not sit in the presence of Yadavs as that would be
considered highly disrespectful. The pollution barrier
between the 'clean' caste communities and the 'unclean'
castes is a reality of everyday life.

In spite of all this objectionable and brutal behaviour
the AIYM is extremely conscious of the 'deprivation' and
'discrimination' suffered by the Yadavs. When the BJP
was in power Prime Minister Vajpayee was 'requested to
nominate at his earliest convenience' at least two Yadavs as
cabinet ministers. Furthermore, they 'resolved to request
the President of India to appoint Yadavs as Governors'.
It was also resolved to 'request the Government of India
to undo the grave injustice to the community by not
appointing any Yadav as member of the Union Public
Service Commission, or Judges in the High Court and
Supreme Court'.

All this may sound funny; but it is not. The upwardly
mobile castes and classes of India are deadly serious. I
equally seriously suggest that the Yadavs and others of
similar persuasion be dropped from the OBC list and
put into a new category. It could be called the UMCCH
(Upwardly Mobile Castes and Classes in a Hurry) list.

'The Vernacularisation of Democracy' is an unfortunate
title since it is almost tautological. At the risk of sounding
like a stern Victorian schoolmaster I must point out the
following: 'Vernacularisation' (from the Latin root) has
connotations of slavery and 'Democracy' (from the Greek
root) is connected with 'common people' who are 'vulgar';
hence the word 'demotic'). However, having read the
book with extreme interest I can't help feeling that India is
experiencing a tragic and painful degradation of democracy.
This is the first of a projected series, *Exploring the Political
in South Asia*, under the editorship of Mukulika Banerjee.
I await the next book in the series.

Reginald Massey's *India: Definitions and
Clarifications* is his latest book. Last year he
was Writer-in-Residence at the UBS think tank
at Chateau Wolfsberg, Switzerland.

ENCHANTED DREAMS & LOST HOPES: AMARJIT’S WHISKY GOES AWRY

by Kirpal Singh

“You know, the best thing about Ava Gardner, my gawd, you should see her inner thigh—simply creamy, just inviting, waiting for your caress—”

“How would you know? You talk as if you had her—”

“But I did yaar, I did.”

“Yiah—I am sure—in your dreams.”

“Yes.”

It is now more than seven years since that dialogue took place. We were all a little pissed, on 5th Avenue New York, hearing the wails of sirens and the catcalls of those who thought we were truly aliens. There were 4 of us—Amarjit, a newly graduated engineer from Purdue university come to the east to seek a better fortune, Sarjit, the lawyer whose job was mainly to frame everything for his colleagues in Smith & Smith but not appear in court himself, Harvinder, Amarjit’s brother who had come from Malaysia to entice his brother to return home because their parents were getting old and missing their firstborn, and me, yes me—I had newly arrived in New York from Singapore to be interviewed for a possible appointment at Columbia—one of the great universities of the world where I was hoping to become an agent of real change so the university could truly usher in the new millennium with flourish. And, oh yes, I must not forget Jenny—Jenny was Sarjit’s white American girlfriend. Jenny was a painter, an artist whose own parents had written her off.

Poor Amarjit. He really loved the USA. His parents had spent tens of thousands to get him educated at what everyone considered one of the best engineering schools in the world. And he had done very well, scoring top grades in every examination. Upon graduation he got a job immediately, in a small firm in Indiana. But he was unhappy because, as he told us, there really had been no future in the small firm. And he had been advised to come east (or go east) for better prospects. And so, now in New York, Amarjit was drinking his life away, effusing to return home to Malaysia and refusing to acknowledge, like Sarjit, that life for aliens like him was going to be tough. The blacks—or Afro-Americans as they were increasingly being labelled—didn’t welcome the likes of Amarjit for reasons which still remain unfathomable in spite of numerous theories of competition being put forward by various sociologists, the Hispanics who were a growing number, just didn’t want anyone whose command of English was better—and almost everyone’s was!—and the whites, aaahh yes, the whites, they always said the best of things but did little to actually help Amarjit get a good job! Jenny’s explanation for this was, “We whites have a super love-hate thing for you guys—we actually admire you for your hard work, commitment and dedication, but are not sure if you are going to make us brown by marrying our girls.” And then she would laugh, ironically, sardonically, sadly. I new that her relationship with Sarjit was a real contributing factor to her parents’ indifference to what she was so desperately trying to achieve as an artist.

“You know what though,” said Amarjit, more thoughtfully, “she was simply adorable in *On The Beach*. Any of you saw that beautiful film? Based on the novel by Nevil Shute? Hey, you (pointing to me), surely you must have seen it, after all, aren’t you into books and all that?”

Yes. I was into books except that for my immediate purpose I was not into the kind of books which Columbia for all its talk of openness was really keen on. But yes, I had read Shute’s novel and seen the film. It was science fiction to me. And very Australian. And yes, I remembered Ava Gardner’s role—stunning, not quite vampish but highly sexual. But we were in America. And Ava Gardner had died a sad, lingering death and never, I thought, found lasting joy in any of her marriages or relationships. For me it was *The Night Of The*

Iguana which was her best film. I remembered watching that as quite a young boy but never forgot the tied iguana. Later as I grew up I realized that the iguana was such an apt symbol for so many of us—yearning to be free but trapped in our own prisons. Even here, in New York, I could see how apt the symbolism was. Amarjit was in a prison.

“Yes, of course Amarjit, but I still prefer the novel—I think Ava Gardner should have suicided like the character in Shute’s novel which she portrays. Would have made it a much better film.”

“Maybe,” said Amarjit, “but you know Ava Gardner—she was not made for death my dhost, she was made for life. For giving life vitality, especially the vitality of sex which keeps us all alive.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Sarjit.

“Is there nothing you guys talk about but sex?” intervened Jenny. “You know we white girls may be attracted to you guys but we are not dumb. And we are not your sex slaves.”

“Of course not honey,” said a meek Sarjit.

I felt for Jenny. I almost knew by instinct she was finding the four of us Sikhs a little tiresome; our sense of humour was not exactly hers, though because of her love for Sarjit (Amarjit though was convinced it was not love but pity) she tolerated our ranting and raving and carrying on. 5th Avenue New York was enchanting—I had heard so much about it that being there now, physically, was for me almost out-of-this-world. I saw drunks lying around, I saw couples hugging and kissing, I saw executives hurrying and scurrying. I saw old people being told to get out of the way by indifferent young people. I saw wonderful stores selling expensive, branded clothing and goods, I saw some superlative cars making their presences felt as the traffic crawled, I saw people with aimlessness in their eyes just strolling, staring, stopping, window-shopping. Was this, seriously, the place I wanted to be if Columbia did offer me a job? My reverie was interrupted—or rather, I was supposed to be part of Amarjit’s rave.

“You see, even you have come here from your blighted Singapore to seek greener pastures. This is what America is all about. Living your dream. This is the land of the brave and free, people, brave and free. Hey, you again, you man of books, what is that book, that book about the American dream, etc? You know the one I mean by Fitzgerald...”

“I think you mean *The Great Gatsby*...”

“That’s the one. Correct. Ava Gardner would have made a brilliant Daisy—the woman whose allure is simply irresistible. The woman all men fall for. Oh man, if only I could have one Ava Gardner in my life. You Sarjit are a bloody lucky bugger man—you have Jenny.”

This was a little too close to the bone. Among Sikh men it was not proper to refer to a friend’s partner, even in jest. In fact, especially in jest.

“Are you flattering me?” asked Jenny, whose eyes lit up as he queried Amarjit?

“No my dear, I am telling Sarjit what a lucky bastard he is having got you. He should forget about what they call him and just marry you. After all a towel-head who wins the hands of a beautiful white girl can’t be that bad!”

Amarjit had crossed the line. He has spoken the unspeakable. Racism was not a subject any of us were comfortable about. I had been warned about discrimination by my colleagues but my answer to them had been it exists everywhere. The difference was in degree.

Sarjit was not going to let this go. Amarjit’s remarks were not only hurtful but an affront. Sarjit had been suffering snobbery ever since he made up his mind to live in New York and work at Smith & Smith. Jenny was his consolation. In her and in her paintings he found the much-needed

transcendence he, as a lawyer, did not always find in the law books. But Amarjit’s utterance had made the inner truth the outer stigma come alive.

I remember Sarjit hitting Amarjit hard on the head and Amarjit stumbling. Jenny was shocked and clasped Harvinder tight. For his part Harvinder was speechless for he was not succeeding in persuading Amarjit to return. I, well I, the man of books, I pushed Sarjit to one side of the pavement and held him there. It was obvious to me that 5th Avenue New York was not going to sympathize with our sorry state except to savour the fact that we aliens were yet another source for their merriment for with the corner of my eye I saw a group of boys laughing at what they had just witnessed.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” said Amarjit. “It’s the fucking beer you fed me just now.”

“Teri mah dhi,” said Sarjit.

“What did Sarjit just say?” asked Jenny

“Nothing. Don’t worry”.

Throughout the shenanigans I tried to maintain my cool. I was an obvious outsider, except, perhaps, for Harvinder who clearly was even more determined that the time had truly come for his brother to return to Malaysia and be with the family.

We walked on after the incident. Surely the night was not going to end this way, with a fight and the ensuing sullenness. I decided to speak up.

“Hey Amarjit, you know all that you said about Ava Gardner? Well I think we have our very own Ava Gardners. Many of them vying for the same titles, trying their luck in the same film yards, craving for the same glories. But ours dare not take the risks. And for me the real Ava Gardner is that near-tragic woman who took risks, with everything. Like Jenny here who has risked a lot to pursue her passion for art. Maybe this is where we should all stop and reconsider our lives. Do we want to stay safe or take risks?”

There was a faint smile playing on their lips. There was a look of expectancy in Jenny’s eyes as she still held close to Harvinder who was beginning to feel a little uneasy. Sarjit managed to put his embarrassment behind him and say, “America is not for the weak—and also not for those who just think scoring high grades in exams is the answer to making millions. America is for those who are in for the long haul. America is for those of us who believe in a dream and are prepared to suffer for it.”

We all seem to have sobered up. Now there was this other dialogue starting. About America. About the great US of A., about us who were brought up on Hollywood movies. Jenny, Sarjit, Harvinder and I looked at Amarjit who had been silent.

“Alright Harvinder. I think mah and pah are right. You are right. America is not for me. I should return to Malaysia. The bunga raya still smells good. My days of whisky and rye are over. The beer here is cheap. But dreams are expensive. Let us go.”

Well what could we say or do after these odd remarks from Amarjit but slowly move away from each other after wishing good-nights. Jenny held Sarjit’s hand but I knew the clasp had been weakened. Harvinder put his arms around Amarjit as he slowly steered towards a taxi. And I, well, I thought about my Columbia interview and slowly trudged towards my hotel thinking “If Columbia offers me a job, that will be my risk.”

All this took place seven years ago. How time truly passes.



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ACCURSED..!

Tejinder Sharma

It was the usual London morning. Foggy and grey!

Rajnikant had got up at a quarter past six; finished his morning routine and picked up the cold left-over chapattis of the previous night. Not that he did not have the option of a hot breakfast; he just did not want to bother. Nisha and Harry, in their bedroom, were still enjoying their sleep under their electric blanket.

This, exactly, was the norm everyday. Rajnikant would always be the first to rise; breakfast over; wake up Nisha and off to work. Nisha would just sleepwalk into the routine. To get Harry started was always a tough task. A bit of turning and twisting, coupled with some pouting, a few tears shed, crowned with an abrupt jump out of bed, had the scenario captured faithfully and a half-hour gone by. Fair, lovely and Chubby Harry was christened as Harshad. Nisha and Rajnikant’s son were a treat to look at. While driving to work Nisha would always drop Harry at school and Rajnikant would bus it to the warehouse.

This day was no different to the robotic routine. Rajnikant had boarded the bus at Harrow Weald; changed at Harrow-on-the-Hill and finally reached his warehouse. He would shift huge loads all day and worked over-time till about nine in the night; came back home and had his shower.

Initially Rajnikant used to mock the English way of life where everybody would favour a bath in the late evening. But it gradually dawned on him that walking out in the cold morning with wet hair was an open invitation to the wrath of unpredictable elements. Thus, the evening bath and the *pooja* rituals had become an integral part of his routine now.

That exactly is what he had done today before opening a chilled can of lager. Usually two cans would do the trick and he would be ready for his food. Not today! He had been under a constant pressure these last few days. Relentlessly gnawing, it left him sleepless in spite of Nisha’s presence by his side in the still of the night.

The advent of ‘Zee’ television on the network had been a good diversion for Rajnikant. He was a regular with the channel. Today as well a Hindi film was being screened. When Rajnikant switched the channel on, the film had already started. In a while he had to make out which movie it was by its music and cast. But he did not bother too long. After all, most of the Indian films look more or less the same, without much of a variation—much like his own life.

Rajnikant had a lingering look at the empty lager can before binning it. He tried to forget his misery in the melancholy of the music being played on the television. He jolted himself out of the reverie and selected a bottle of Glenfidich. He poured himself a good measure of the single malt on some ice cubes. After settling in London, Glenfidich on the rocks had become his favourite drink.

In his village just to think of whisky would be considered a crime. He had been brought up in a totally different lifestyle by his parents, where buttermilk and tea prevailed. But, the change of scenario changed not

only the names but also the people!

All around the cold and the chill ruled supreme. The cracking of the ice in the glass in his hand; the soft landings of the virgin wool-like snowflakes and the chill of his relationship with Nisha! All around layers and layers of chill, a volcanic, dreadful silence, ready to erupt. Would this glass of scotch help bring some warmth to his body, mind and way of thinking? Hardly! On the other hand, the combination of beer and scotch sent his mind into turmoil.

One simple straight forward question—What am I doing in this country? Why am I living here, away from near and dear ones—far so far away! One little question mark and so many subtle intriguing tributaries!

These thoughts had gnawed at his mind for the past



seven years. Now these unanswered questions had become a part of his thought process. The absence of these little pin-pricks left a disturbing daunting vacuum that he could not cope with. Inevitably, the salvation lay down memory lane.

Back home, Rajnikant’s father was a labourer in Anand. He worked his life away to give his son an even chance in life. His persistent efforts resulted in Rajni graduating with History and Political Science as his subjects. His Bachelor of Arts degree, in Gujarati medium, did not get him any job. And his father could not dream of his son doing manual labour, while holding an university degree.

Unable to resolve this dilemma in his hometown, Rajnikant starting toying with the idea of moving far away. Far away where nobody would know him. No taunts to live with if he earned his livelihood doing an honest day’s manual work. And then, what appeared to be a Godsend, his cousin came to visit them. She was settled in London. His father did not miss the opportunity. He talked of his concerns to Rajni’s cousin, “Look Meena, day in and day out, I am worried about Rajni. His education has caused more problems

than it has solved. And I cannot see a way out.”

“I have the miracle solution for you uncle!” The response was immediate and tempting. “Send him to London with us and leave the rest to me. We will get him married there. He would not have to worry for anything.”

Rajni’s father was perplexed. The choice wasn’t an easy one—to lose his son to far-off lands across the seas or let him wander around aimlessly, without a job. And Nisha’s predicament added another dimension to the cauldron. Sneha was dreaming of a future with Rajnikant—her mother was waiting for the day when she would approach his parents with her daughter’s marriage proposal. But this was unthinkable with Rajni unemployed! On the other hand, Rajnikant employed in London—would there be a place in his life for Sneha while he would himself be struggling in an unknown environment? Will time provide a satisfactory answer? Passport and visa formalities needed Rajnikant to be away in Mumbai. Does this have to be the beginning of the end for his love for Sneha? If he has to marry someone else, should he even be involved with her now? Is marriage the natural next step to love? Must love culminate into physical relationship and lust? Rajnikant had never thought on these lines. He never touched Sneha goaded on by physical urges. Her very presence and an exchange of sweet-nothings had sufficed so far. Even today he planned to meet her—slim, petite, and lovely looking Sneha. An only child, studying at college, an expert in the household chores, that was his Sneha. Will this enchanting image melt away under the pull of mundane compulsions like the passport, the visa and employment in London?

Nisha brought him back to the present with the surprised query, “What are you up to? What’s going on? You haven’t started your dinner yet?”

“I haven’t even heated the food yet.”

“You are taking a long time over your drink today...”

“I just started watching this film.”

“Not to worry; I will just heat up and serve the food to you.”

“You don’t have to bother. I will manage; you go to bed.”

“Now that is a new one. You know I can’t go to sleep without you on my side. I will get you food in a moment.”

Rajnikant and Nisha share a strange relationship. They may not exchange a single word during the day, but at night before sleep, Nisha must get what was her due. Sex! It was almost her addiction. She had the weight of logic on her side. To her way of thinking, love ought to culminate in sex. End of story! Sex and logic! Rajnikant lost his appetite.

Clad in a white see-through nighty, Nisha served Rajnikant’s dinner. He had the unusual habit of having milk with his food, as he used to do in India. Nisha’s flimsy nightie could not provide cover to her contours, or the stretch marks after Harry’s birth. Oblivious to all round him, Rajnikant went through the motions of eating.

He was neither able to ignore Sneha's face emerging out of the glass of milk, nor Nisha's presence, whose furtive glances wanted the food ritual over quickly so she could feel the strength of Rajni's arms around her. But Rajnikant was too preoccupied to be amused either about food or Nisha, although deep down he was aware that he had to perform his marital obligations or face Nisha's wrath for the next couple of days. To Nisha, the sex-routine was an essential like breakfast, lunch, dinner and sleep. Above all, she had the satisfaction of having the moral high pedestal on her side. After all, she sought her bliss and fulfilment from her legally married husband. She was not whoring around. Ah, what an icing on the cake, she thought, tomorrow is a Sunday and Rajnikant can have an extra hour or two in the bed. She would indulge him in the luxury of a fresh and hot breakfast.

The day's pressures had seeped through into Rajnikant's dream-world. He could sense and feel all that was happening back home. His younger sister Shalini was going through tragic times. Not only had she lost her husband, she was now burdened with the responsibility of bringing up two young daughters. She only had her mother to fall back upon, emotionally and materially. The harsh realities of life were hitting her hard in the face. A letter from his mother that morning had apprised him of all the details. He felt inevitably compelled to help financially. The leaking roof of the house and school uniforms for his nieces were too genuine to be ignored. He could almost hear word for word his mother asking his sister, "Shalini, have you seen the postman go past?"

"Yes mother, he was early on his round today. He went past at 5 o'clock."

"Don't you worry, I have written to Rajnikant for the immediate need for new school uniforms for the girls. I have also mentioned the leaking roof."

"Ma, you shouldn't bother him with our needs. Life can't be easy for him in a huge city like London."

"I can easily appreciate his priorities. But, my dear daughter, we don't have a choice. He is our only hope in these difficult times. After all these years, he must be settled by now!"

"Ma, I went to the Milk Society yesterday. There are good chances; I might get a job there."

"Well I hope you do get it. All that I wish for my son is his peace of mind."

But Rajnikant was turning and twisting in his bed. He found himself helpless without a ray of hope. In contrast, Nisha, like the proverbial cat that got the cream, was in deep slumber. Now if Rajnikat had got up from the bed and slipped out to the other room, she would have hardly noticed.

Rajnikant found himself unable to comprehend all this turmoil. His friends Mahesh, Nayan, Praful and Mahendra all lived similar lives. They had all accepted their plight and were immune to any pressures. Why must he alone continue to torture himself? Were his friends happy because their wives were different? But no, that was not the case.

Logically speaking, compared to Deepak he shouldn't have a care in the world. For Deepak's wife this was her third marriage. He should at least be happy in the knowledge that he was Nisha's first husband. And once Deepak himself had moaned to him, "My dear friend Rajni, you wouldn't understand my predicament. I am carrying on with soiled goods worse than second-hand.

I am the third husband to my wife. Only if it weren't the lure of living in London and getting the permission to live permanently in this country, I would have run away. At times the very thought is so repulsive. Beyond comprehension and compromise!"

How very naïve of Deepak, not to realize that the hurt from a free fall from either the fifth or the seventh floor, is equally shattering. What a whale of a paradox, we the condemned are confronted with! To suffer and carry on in silence! The isolation is as hurtful as the show of sublime indifference. The sensitive soul camouflaged with shallow callous bravado must cringe under the minutiae weight of everyday living.

Mahesh seems to have come out with the most readily acceptable line of thought, "Look man! No one has forced

"WHY COMPLAIN? WAY BACK HOME EVEN AFTER GRADUATION WE COULD NOT EARN A DECENT LIVING. HERE EVEN WHILE DOING UNSKILLED WORK AND A LOT OF OVER-TIME, WE CAN BRING HOME A FAIRLY GOOD PAY PACKET. EVEN UP TO TWO THOUSAND POUNDS A MONTH. CONVERT IT INTO INDIAN CURRENCY – MORE THAN A HUNDRED AND THIRTY THOUSAND RUPEES – AND YOU START WALKING TALL..."

us to accept this accursed life-style. Why complain? Way back home even after graduation we could not earn a decent living. Here even while doing unskilled work and a lot of over-time, we can bring home a fairly good pay packet. Even up to two thousand pounds a month. Convert it into Indian currency—more than a hundred and thirty thousand rupees—and you start walking tall. After all it is more than a year's wages in many cases! When reduced to simple straight forward economic logic, the compromise must be accepted gracefully. Speaking from a high moral ground and self-pity hardly helps.

Delving deep down memory lane, Rajnikant could see the crystal clear images of the last few years. Shalini, his cousin, and her husband had received him at Terminal Three of Heathrow Airport in London. Wow! The glamour and the size of the airport were breathtaking. The Bombay Airport in contrast was miniscule. The day-dreaming had started the moment he found himself sitting in their huge car— "In no time, I shall have a big car of my own!" The journey to his brother-in-law's house in Wembley was a curious one. Looking wide-eyed at London roads, the lookalike houses and ogling at the white females, it was an intriguing experience. The abundance of Indians and Africans on the Wembley roads was a shocker. "Is this London?" was his bewildered outburst!

His welcome was short-lived. After a couple of days, his brother-in-law showed him his corner shop. He was surprised to find a wide of range of products selling

under one roof—cigarettes, biscuits, chocolates, cards, newspapers, juice, eggs, bread and a lot more. Even a corner was devoted to fresh vegetables. This was in sharp contrast to the way vegetables were sold back home—in the open air on the roads all bedecked in baskets or the vendors doing their rounds on small hand-pulled carts. Vegetables being sold in a lock-up shop, this was new and strange.

Rajnikant had heard of bonded labour only in the tales told by elders. If the renowned novelist Premchand were alive, Rajnikant's experiences would have provided him intriguing material for a new 'Godaan'. Only four months had elapsed. But the drudging monotony and the bestialities of real life, made it seem like four years. All this time not a moment did he live the way he wanted to, Rajnikant, a degree holder, living in a far flung country across the seven seas, had been reduced to an unpaid helper in his remotely related cousin's household! Household helper! Some achievement!

There was yet another cause for concern. His visa was to expire after two months. If he did not get married before that, he would have to go back to India. All that money spent on the air ticket would go to waste. Never mind his brother-in-law, even his sister never mentioned marriage. He hadn't been paid for his work so far. Only some pocket money! In any case, he didn't have any time of his own to go shopping. On top of it, Sneha's memories constantly fanned his guilt complex. The unshed tears in Sneha's eyes followed him everywhere.

Under the circumstances, it was a welcome relief that Nisha's parents appeared on the scene. He had accompanied his sister and brother-in-law to a marriage reception. It didn't take them long to approve of Rajnikant as a prospective son-in-law, notwithstanding Nisha's opinion of Rajnikant being a village simpleton. His obsessive desire to improve his parents' lot coupled with the obligatory compulsion of making a living in London made him willingly accept Nisha despite the fact that she was three years his senior in age. The pressure of circumstances swept aside all exceptions and Rajnikant found himself at the marriage registrar's office within a week, signing on the dotted line. All expenses obviously were borne by Nisha's father. His sister and brother-in-law were mere spectators. None of his family members from India could attend the ceremonies.

Shortly afterwards Rajnikant's father passed away suddenly. His inability to attend the funeral cast a deep dark shadow on his mind. In all honesty he could not have blamed anyone for his failure to do the proper thing. What else, but the circumstances! Was it becoming too convenient to explain away all his shortcomings as difficult circumstances? Had he ever made any robust, manly efforts to force a change? Nearer to the truth probably was the fact that he was just a weak, middleclass man.

Nisha in any case was never interested in this marriage. In no uncertain terms had she confessed this to her parents. But her parents were more realistic. At thirty Nisha was no spring chicken. Her chances of getting a good match within the community were receding fast. And then there was always the chance of her doing the unthinkable. Hasu Bhai's daughter had eloped with a white boy and got divorced within a year. Keshav Bhai's daughter had run away from home and landed herself in Pakistan. To Nisha's parents marriage to Rajnikat was the obvious solution. To make it all doubly sure, they advised their daughter to go for an independent house immediately after marriage. Rajnikant would have to

wait for the obligatory five years before applying for the British passport—time enough for him to get used to slavishly catering to Nisha's whims and fancies.

And that exactly is what Rajnikat was unable to do. But the slavish lifestyle could not crush his self-respect. His conscience pricked him all the time. The inner voice lashed out mercilessly at his inability to help out his mother back home in the village. His inability to control the direction his life left him incapable of forging a constructive relationship with his son Harsh. Nisha even refused to call him by this name. She thought the name Harry was much more trendy. To Rajnikant, it sounded more like the name of a dog.

"If you don't like your son to be called Harry, go complain to your mother."

"To my mother?" Rajni lost his wits.

"Oh yes, complain to your mother. I told her there and then a name like Harshad was not suited to life in London. Opt for a modern name. But then to you, your mother's whim is like a command from the Queen Elizabeth herself. Now you have to live with it."

All arrangements resulted in his son not responding to the name Harshad. Nisha has drilled into his mind that he is Harry. He didn't stand a chance against Nisha's powers of conviction. Time and again she had even stunned Rajni into silence.

"Look Rajni, don't try the emotional blackmail on me all the time. There has to be a reason for everything. Either convince me or concede that I am right. This dilly dallying won't do."

Rajnikant was never able to make his wife understand that all life cannot be lived by just dry intellect. A successful marriage had to be nurtured by many compromises. And these compromises can never be one-sided. Both partners had to make positive contributions and adjustments for a smooth successful relationship. In the absence of the essential ingredients of compromise and positive contribution, the institution of marriage would come crumbling down. Rajnikant could not find fault with Nisha's robust defence of her parents either. She had the weight of logical arguments on her side. Rajnikant, as ever, fails to find favour with Nisha when he wants to help out his sister and mother in their predicament. He is unable to handle this delicate and potentially volatile situation. He cannot take the risk of sending financial help to his mother without Nisha's knowledge. His wages go directly to the joint account. Any withdrawals from that account and Nisha learning of it later would lead to a very hostile reaction, followed by days and days of tension in the home. Under the circumstances, it was better not to broach the subject particularly as it was Harshad's birthday on the morrow. Rajnikant was unable to comprehend his lack of excitement on his son's birthday. Why does he feel that Harry belongs to the opposite party? What harm had this little soul done him?

Ever since his immigration to the UK, Rajnikant had been condemned to a life struggling to meet one instalment or the other. It was a long list—the instalments on the mortgaged house, television, fridge, car, healthcare, credit cards—on and on goes the list. His very existence was a story of instalments—living a life in segments without the thread of continuity binding it into a whole.

His friends seemed to have a similar lifestyle. Then why does his pendulum of satisfaction swing in opposite direction? His friends were happy all the time while Rajnikant remained full of tensions and anxieties. He

was fully aware that his wife, right from the morning, would get into the hustle and bustle of the birthday party. To avoid heated argument, he chose to ignore what was uppermost in his mind—sending money to his mother.

"Why are you sulking so early in the morning? You should be happy today, it is Harry's birthday today! What is bothering you?"

"No, nothing that important."

"Well then let us hear the ordinary."

"Leave it, it is nothing."

"You know Rajni, I have ordered Harry's birthday cake to be made in the shape of a cricket bat. When he grows



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up, I am sure he will play for the England cricket team."

"I have never heard of the shape of a cake influencing a lad to become a player."

"Oh show some interest in life man! In the prime of your youth, you seem to have gone senile."

"I have received a letter from mum."

"Oh! So this is what has been casting a shadow on your face all morning! What are her demands this time?"

"Behave yourself Nisha." was Rajnikant's intuitive reprimand.

"Do you expect me to be happy at the mention of names that are a source of tension on my son's birthday? I don't have decent words for indecent people."

"Nisha, ever since my younger sister lost her husband, my mother's responsibilities and tensions have multiplied. We have to share her responsibilities."

"Well, let us see through the birthday party arrangements now. We shall talk over this matter tomorrow."

Rajnikant was aware that on the next day all would be lost under the weight of her multifold arguments. All his pleas would be washed away by her logic. Whenever he plays his trump card—his love for Nisha, she comes up with a prompt reply, full of mischief, "I respond to your love passionately enough!"

Rajni's helplessness weighs heavily on his breathing. His restlessness compels him to leave the room. He was tempted to take the easy way out, reaching out for the bottle. Exert a lot of willpower he did away with the idea.

Nisha had been carrying a few grudges in her mind. To his embarrassment, Rajni had been unable to ease her pain. Her refusal to accept his mother as a part of the family was the root-cause of the conflicts. She taunts him to this day that his mother had not given her the *shagun* (the auspicious monetary token gift) at their marriage. Her barbed comments regarding a similar lapse at Harry's '*mundani*' ceremony (head shaving) were not easy to ignore. To Nisha, they were only a three-member family. Rajnikant complains of her lack of constructive effort to forge an understanding between himself and Harry. She comes out with the inevitable lashing, "Responsibilities can never be designated. You have to stand up for yourself and take the initiative."

Sneha's image arises in his mind. No solace there either. He is haunted by those penetrating eyes. He hasn't heard of her lately. How is she and where is she?

Rajni's perplexed mind provokes a new resolution. "I will divorce Nisha. How can Nisha harm me? After all, I now hold a British passport. Why carry on under all these pressures?" But his resolve is short-lived. Rajnikant is well aware of the narrow confines of his middle-class thinking. He knows he will never be able to take such a bold step. He succumbed to his circumstances and compromised over and over again.

Once again the powerful subconscious takes over, the overwhelming scents and smells of the village soil; the green fields; the enticing inviting yellow mustard flowers. "How can he resist?" Rajnikant mumbles to himself. "I will not stay here a moment longer. I must go back. I don't want the cricket-bat shaped cake...I will be happy with the *bajra chapattis* (chapattis made of millet flour) and spinach *saag*. Strange are the ways of this part of the world, strange are the people here...I must go back to my village...my village is crying out for me."

Once he stopped mumbling to himself and looked up, he saw his own image in the mirror, telling him, "Rajnikant, you will not do anything. You will neither leave your wife, nor this country. You and your friends are condemned to this lifestyle. You have grown used to living with your wives. In spite of your best efforts, you cannot ignore the comforts you have got used to. You are the kind of person who lets their winged fancy fly after a shot or two of whisky every evening and dream away the nights in your native land. Come the morning, after gobbling a few cold chapattis, you reach the warehouse. Your village, your country will live on in your thoughts only. You will never be able to go back now. You are doomed to live here and one day die here as well.

Rajnikant was oblivious to the lashings. He was under life sentence!

Tejinder Sharma, an established storyteller in Hindi, is the General Secretary of Katha UK and organises the only international award for Hindi literature—International Indu Sharma Katha Samman at the House of Lords, London every year.



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