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ASHOKA UNIVERSITY | Young India Fellowship

Final Draft

A JOURNAL OF THE YIF CRITICAL WRITING PROGRAMME

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Editorial Board Members

About the Journal

The YIF Critical Writing Programme has few visible contextual precedents within the Indian higher education system. Acknowledging the importance of writing as central to processes of knowledge acquisition, production, and consumption, the programme has developed a pedagogy geared towards building critical reading, writing and thinking skills to help Fellows engage with the world of ideas and enable them to develop and express their own ideas in a well-reasoned, lucid, and engaging manner. We do this by helping students innovate with genres of writing across different disciplines to develop a metacognitive awareness regarding their own reading and writing practices. These skills act as building blocks for the liberal arts education they receive at Ashoka University and enhance their abilities to navigate academic, professional, and social spheres once they graduate from the Fellowship.

The goal of *Final Draft* is to showcase both the range—in topic and genre—and strength of writing in a student body that is itself highly diverse in terms of its educational, disciplinary, professional, geographic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Through the process of writing multiple drafts, student-authors discover their own unique voice, and recognise writing as an ongoing, open-ended activity as signalled by the title of the journal itself.As the Fellows learn to bring critical thinking tools to the drawing board, readers of *Final Draft* can witness a clear attempt by them to negotiate with texts and social phenomena as they make sense of the world around them.

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“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

- CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, “The Danger of a Single Story”

A Dialogic Journey to the Final Draft

The Writing Process and Pedagogic Choices

Criticality is all about confronting the textuality of one's own self—impossible to realize without the aid of critical reading of certain academic texts. That's why we need courses on critical practices!

But can't our lived experiences beyond the classroom also lead to those realizations? Why does one need to read Foucault and Althusser for that? More importantly, does doing a course in critical reading and writing guarantee a lifetime of ethical and empathetic choices?

But that's a question of theory versus praxis...

In this assignment, the students should get the genre conventions and the linguistic style right. Let me frame it in a way that they know exactly what is expected of them.

Am I being too formalistic? Am I not supposed to enable them to question institutional norms of writing and think critically through multiple frames of thinking? Am I doing enough to provide space for innovative thinking and writing? How can I make my students look at genres as having fluid boundaries?

The classroom atmosphere should encourage meaningful dialogue among students, my role is to moderate-

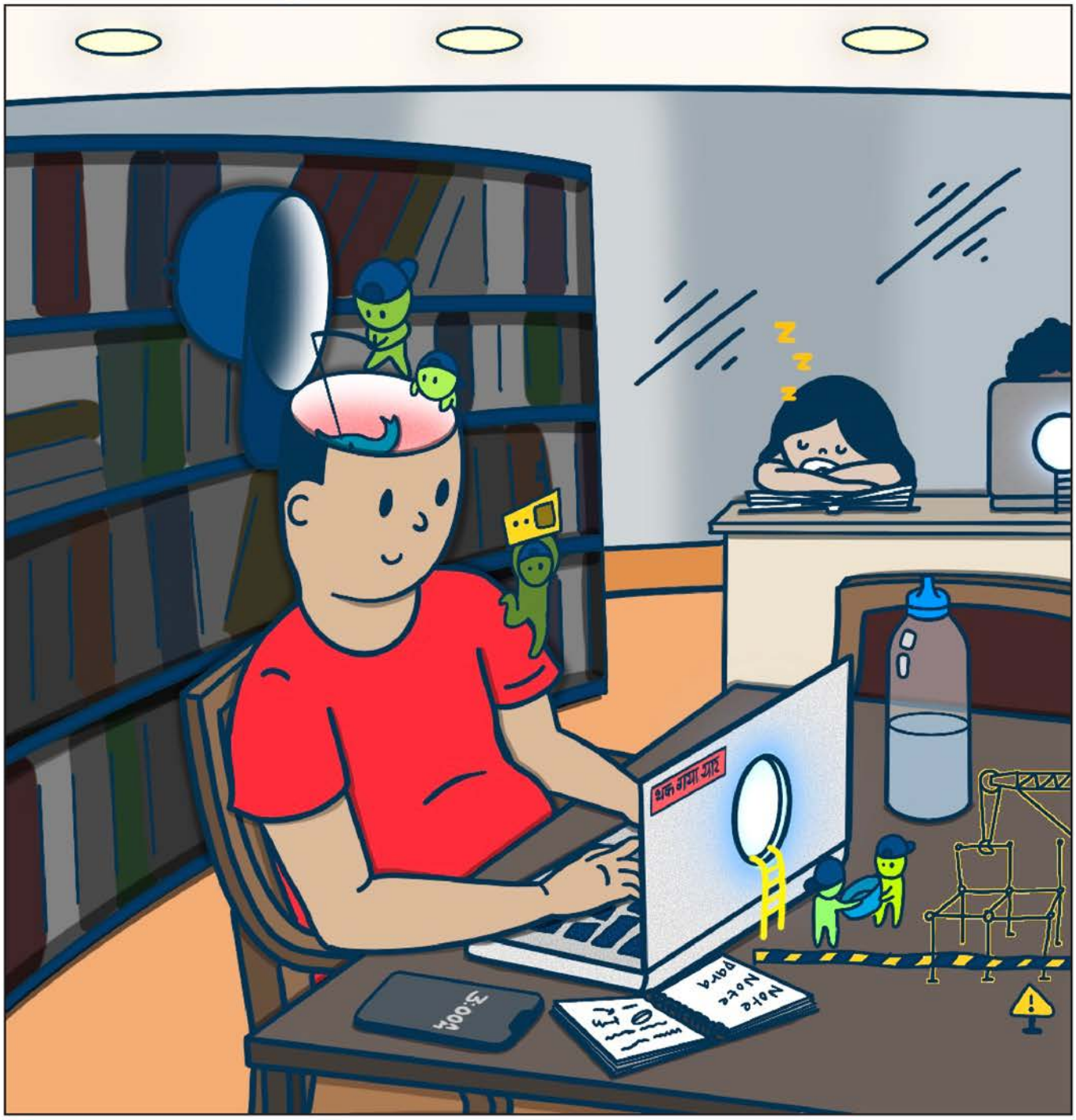
What happens if there are strong disagreements?

Well, oppositions help sharpen arguments. I don't want students to slip into reductive, self-validating positions. They need to be challenged and even inspired by unfamiliar perspectives. They need to discover the limitations and possibilities of each source, each voice.

Yes...and inevitably, each voice is inflected by many more. We begin to assume more complicated positions; we begin to inhabit a layered and fraught criticality...

The true aim of teaching critical writing is to help students discover their voice as writers. And to do so, they need to develop their opinions into arguments informed by existing scholarly voices on the subject.

So a student's personal voice of self-expression has no role to play in the development of their academic voice?

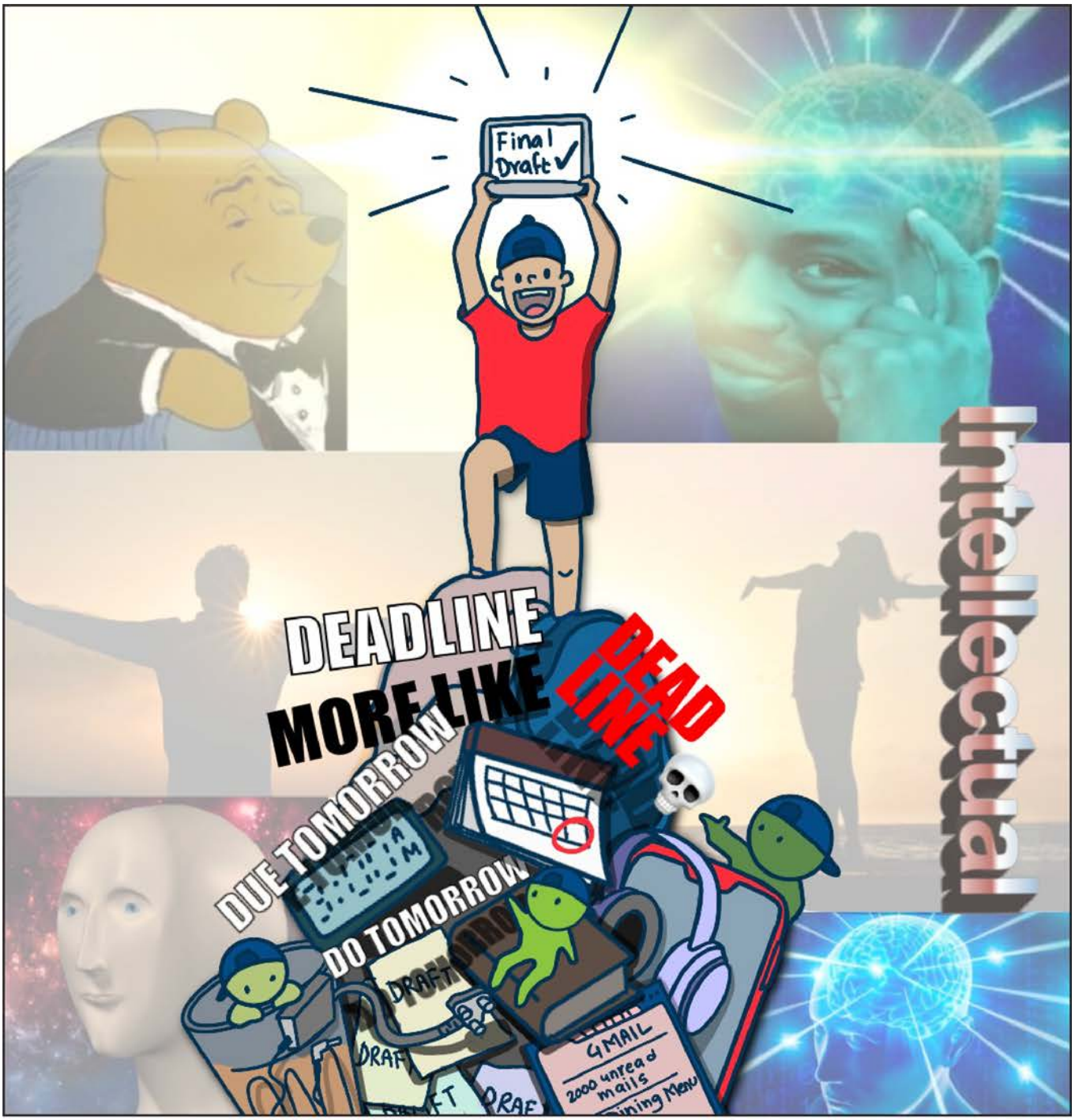


Since criticality is about overcoming one's subjectivity—probably not!

But isn't that subject position of great significance in determining the distinctness of one's academic voice? Originality in thought is impossible without a selective retention of one's subject position...

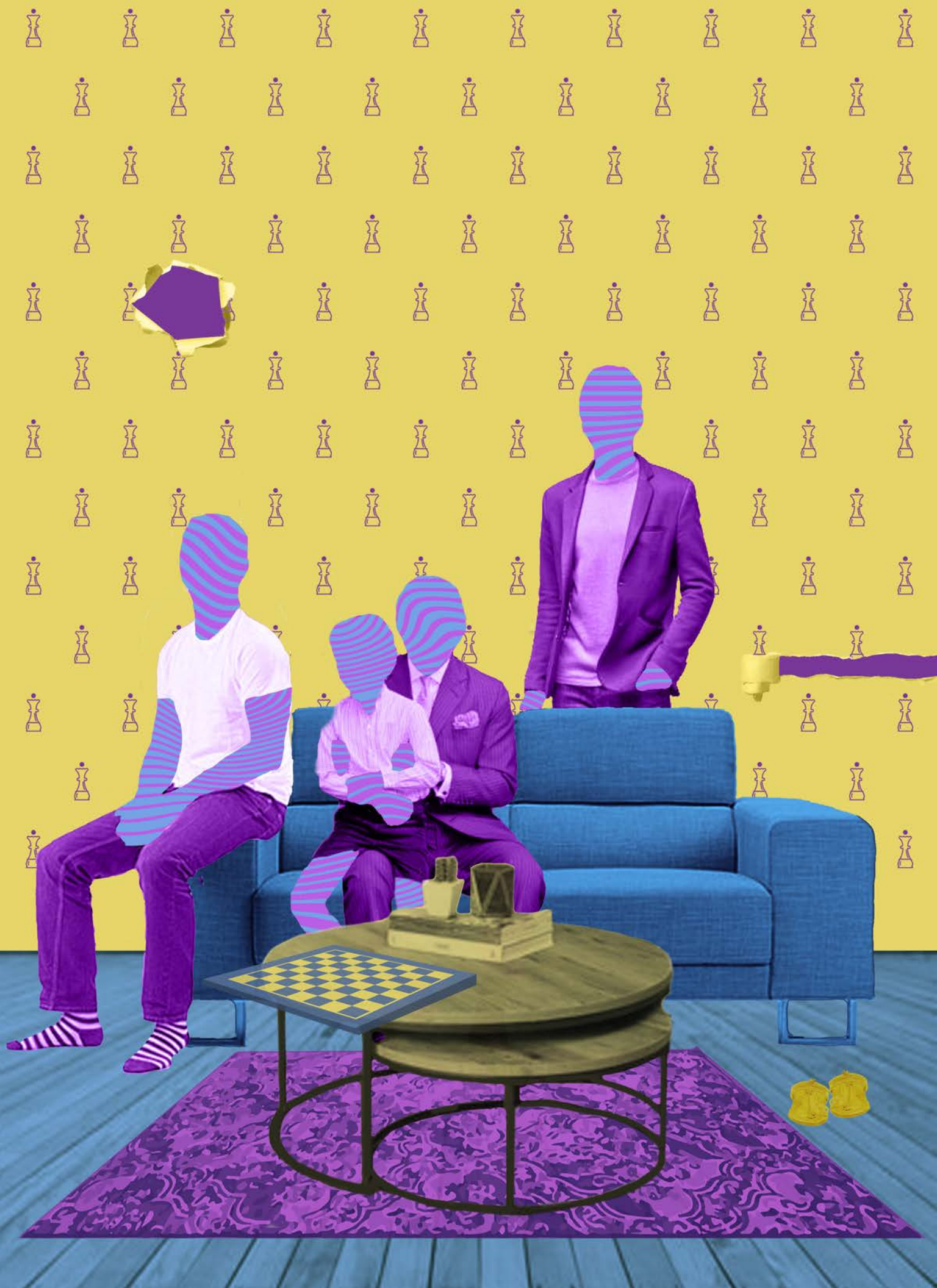
My feedback flits between hesitation and certainty, dialogue and command. I want to invite the student into a conversation about their choices, I do not want to impose. But perhaps the student is expecting clearer directions; perhaps I will inevitably impose.

How do students respond to the play of power, the politics of language, the negotiation of voice? Sometimes feedback can overwhelm students; it can hurt them, alienate them. It is complicated, but I am learning everyday. Feedback is emotional, discursive, social and cultural learning...



As I put a grade on the final drafts, I wonder how do I assess myself? Did I give my students enough space to explore their writing process? Or did I do too much scaffolding and make the process mechanical? But I do see growth and evolution in their writing.

Perhaps, each one is on their individual journeys as writers and thinkers! Hopefully they will be able to negotiate with the complexities and contradictions of the world. Hopefully they will continue to challenge themselves and inhabit new spaces of dialogue and engagement...



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Of New Checks and Old Mates

SANKALP KHANDELWAL

About the Author

Most of my life after school has revolved around editing and writing. As I studied towards an English (Hons) degree at Hans Raj, I wrote more than 500 SEO articles as a freelance writer. Graduation done, I joined a publishing house in Delhi as a copy and commissioning editor, where I helped dozens of authors hone their fiction for three years. The necessity to fatten my paycheck thereafter led me to the corporate parks of Gurgaon, where I edited business reports and proposals for four years. Then I took a break and joined YIF.

At YIF—both in Critical Writing and other courses—my writing oeuvre expanded to include a rich variety of genres, including a manifesto on validation, a critical essay on Kabir's poetry, and the narrative non-fiction piece featured in this journal. I also found a mentor in Professor Janice Pariat, whose feedback and recommendation helped me secure a scholarship to study creative writing at a summer school in Edinburgh—an experience that I fondly remember as a month of writing and reading in the parks, cafes and libraries of the stunning Scottish city.

Since graduating from YIF, I have been working with the communications team at a global management consulting firm.

My mother suggests my father and I play chess, a proposition I do not find unpalatable. I know that even though my mother would not proclaim it, what she really wants is for me to spend some time with my father. Maybe even chat a bit. And, if god is merciful, she hopes that this will set in motion a series of fortunate events—the first game leading to many others in the future, each bringing the two of us, my father and I, closer together, our bond becoming ever stronger as we make move after move against one another.

My father inhales deeply before he gives his assent.

I rescue our chessboard from its years of disuse and start arranging the pieces. As I do so, my mind wanders back to a similar setting on a Sunday afternoon of about fifteen years ago: my father and I sitting across from each other, the chessboard between us, awkwardness permeating the room like an industrial room freshener. At the time, my father's king—all on its own—brought down my feeble fortifications, took half of my pieces, returned to its ranks, and then sent the pawns for the final kill.

Never before that had I suffered such a humiliating defeat. Never since then have I been defeated so humiliatingly. In which universe does the king do all the hard work while the queen sits back and watches the drama unfold?

After arranging the board, I tell my father the 'international' rules that I know he is unacquainted with: the pawns sprint before walking, the rook is more powerful than the knight and the bishop, and see, this is how you castle, in one single move.

I learnt how to play chess when I was in primary school. I started with observing the men in my house—my grandfather, my father, his two brothers, and their sons—play with each other in the afternoon after lunch. Sometimes, one of my aunts joined too. But she was considered an unformidable player and was, therefore, avoided when one wanted a 'good game'.

For months, I remained a curious spectator to the silent battles. I watched but did not comprehend. One day, after I expressed interest in learning the game, I was asked to come prepared the next day. All these years later, I don't remember who took charge of my initiation, but I do recall that the following afternoon, I was so restless to start learning that I made a small ball of the roti my mom served me for lunch and stuffed it in my mouth all in one go.

That day, the rules I was taught were different from the ones I now know. My grandfather—who offered 20 rupees to anyone who could checkmate him—called them the 'Indian rules'. The pawns didn't sprint, the rooks barely mattered, and to castle you moved the king once like the pawn and the second time like the knight.

I took a liking to the game almost immediately. Unlike other games I played in those days—Ludo, cricket, WWE playing cards—there was no element of luck involved in chess. No dice, no tosses. No Rank 1 Hitman losing to a 500-pound Yokozuna. Chess was all focus, strategy, patience, and control. It

did not demand of you to run fast or to hit hard or to cheat when nobody was watching. All that it asked was that you focus longer and harder and be more resilient than
your opponent. And this came naturally to me.

After I finish explaining the new rules to him, my father protests. As the man of the house, he dislikes being at a disadvantage, hates being vulnerable. I tell him that this is how chess is played all over the world, that even though the rooks are holed up in the corner, they have the power to turn around games. Reluctantly, my father acquiesces.

"Where did you learn all of this?" he asks.
"In college," I reply.

Within the first few weeks at my undergraduate college, I joined the campus chess club, which essentially comprised a group of boys—including an international and a national player—who would play a few games in the sports room after classes. They were the ones who taught me the standard 'international' rules and forced me, through a series of defeats, to unlearn the chess knowledge my family had inculcated in me years ago.

In the same way that I discarded the 'Indian' rules for the 'international' ones in the sports room, I unlearnt many domiciliary rules in my English literature classes and instead adopted new and arguably 'international' charters. Lecture by lecture—as our class dissected writings of Dostoevsky, Blake, Flaubert, Woolf, Milton, Tagore, Marx, and their ilk—my vision became unblinkered. My world transformed. Idol worship gave way to atheism, blacks and whites transitioned to infinite shades of grey, boundaries of gender and sexuality expanded and dissolved, and politics saturated all aspects of the personal. Suddenly, anywhere and everywhere I looked, all I saw were spectres of patriarchy, casteism, racism, and heteronormativity. I started questioning everything, from family traditions and festival rituals to why the hell did we worry so much about what people would say?

My parents did not welcome this new-found curiosity.

"Why do Indian women punish themselves by fasting all day on festivals?"
"You think you have become too clever by reading all your books? You can't put a question mark on everything."
"Why go to weddings of people we don't like?"
"You are too young to understand. We need to do these things to live in society. Go get ready."
"All this dowry business is so wrong. Don't you think Uncle should have just rejected the match?"
"That's how it works there. You have to be more practical in life. Can't just rely on bookish knowledge."

Faced with such a famine of logic but too dependent on home to stir up a revolution, I began to emancipate myself. This process, unsurprisingly, fostered disaffection and resentment. Cracks materialised in our relationship and soon turned into deep-seated fault lines. Their traces remain to this day—years after we commenced the intricate work of de-estrangement.

Parenting, I have come to realise, resembles reverse osmosis more than a steady movement downstream. It is not just something that parents do to raise their kids, but also all the conscious and unthinking ways in which children raise their parents. Children initially parent by depending on you for everything and, later, by dragging you through the agonising process of un-depending, which culminates with the complete severance of the umbilical cord. Parents, on the other hand, parent with the same lens throughout their life—of protecting their children from harm.

Years ago, when I started un-depending, I tried to reduce mutual suffering with my parents. I meticulously strategised, instead of acting on impulses. I sacrificed the pawns—visiting insufferable relatives, skipping night outs, attending pujas—to get to the rooks and the queen—taking up jobs that I liked, studying things that I wanted, going on holidays my way. Now, we are past the stage of severance, and have traversed a long distance. We now know that there are some things we can never change, and realise that there is merit in becoming accustomed to the discomfort. From a place where an inter-religious marriage would have been detestable to them, my parents have come to a point where they may just tolerate, even celebrate, a same-sex union. I, meanwhile, show enthusiasm for the Diwali puja, going as far as singing bhajans in chorus with my mother.

As the game advances, I gradually realise that even though my father agreed to the new rules, he does not really believe in them. He frowns when I exchange my knight with his bishop in the first few moves.

"Why are you being destructive?" he asks.
"They are equally valuable. That's how the game is played."
A few moves later, he willingly exchanges his rook with my bishop.
"I told you the rook is more valuable," I say.

My father remains quiet.

His outdated approach doesn't stand a chance against my advanced know-how. Checkmating him is child's play. For neither of us, this was a 'good game'. I sense my father is upset. To be reminded that your long-cherished beliefs are flawed can be painful. As can the reminder that your childhood heroes are imperfect.

I pack up and return the board to its resting place, for what looks like will be another period of hibernation.

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A Mental Problem!

ABHEEPSITA PURKAYASTHA

About the Author

An ardent lover of Jhumpa Lahiri and Khaled Hosseini novels, Abheepsita is inspired by how the works of these authors are suffused with influences of their culture, language and experiences with migration. After leaving her hometown Calcutta for higher studies in 2016, she took to recreational writing as a means to put to words her initial feelings of homesickness, of belonging nowhere and longing for a familiar place. Though her undergraduate experience at the University of Delhi was scattered with trysts with writing, it was only at the Young India Fellowship that she pursued it with seriousness, criticality, and mindfulness. She owes this change in approach to her Critical Writing preceptor Anuj Gupta, who played a monumental role in shaping her writing. From Anuj, she learnt that a good literary piece can be produced only through patience (copious amounts of it!), an awareness of one's position in a complexly stratified world, and the willingness to view the world from the perspective of others.

Currently a postgraduate student in the LLB programme at Jindal Global Law School, Abheepsita fondly reminisces of the days spent writing short stories, introspective prose pieces, and editorial pieces in her Critical Writing classes and yearns to get back to these genres of writing soon.

It was a cold January afternoon and the hands of the clock seemed more sluggish than usual— it had been about ten minutes since the start of the lecture but it felt like an eternity. The dampness of the classroom made it even more unconducive to intellectual activity—yet my professor of research methods tried diligently to keep a firm grip on the class's attention. I was particularly distracted that day—I had debate practice in half an hour but the class was scheduled to go on for another hour. I had requested to be excused from debate practice too many times in the past and could not muster the courage to do this another time. I felt fidgety and kept unlocking my phone to see if my teammates had arrived for practice. The 12th NUJS Parliamentary Debate was in three days and no amount of practice would have been enough for one of Asia's largest parliamentary debate tournaments that would see stalwarts coming from across the continent.

It was 2:48 pm and there was still no news from my second teammate. That day was our last day of practice, and missing it could prove to be detrimental to our performance in the tournament. At 2:53 pm my phone buzzed with a message from my teammate who wrote, "Guys, I'm having a bad mental health day today and don't think I can make it for practice. Just not in the headspace to meet people right now. Can we reschedule this to tomorrow?" This was my second year of college and I hadn't heard of anything like 'bad mental health day' before—in fact, the phrase 'mental health' was relatively new to me. I had frequently heard of phrases like 'mental illness', 'psychological problems', and 'mental disorders' in high school psychology classes but all of those were phenomena that required clinical intervention and those afflicted with them were generally referred to as 'patients'. But the feeling that my friend described did not quite seem like something that required her to visit a doctor or be called a 'patient'—what was it then? What does 'mental health' mean? In retrospect, this may seem ignorant and insensitive, but the 21-year-old me was new to this term. I later found out that most of my friends too had learnt of this phrase very recently. Why had this phrase not entered our vocabulary in 21 years? Could it be a relatively new coinage then?

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According to the World Health Organisation's Expert Committee on Mental Health, "mental health is a condition, subject to fluctuations due to biological and social factors, which enables the individual to achieve a satisfactory synthesis of his own potentially conflicting, instinctive drives; to form and maintain harmonious relations with others, and to participate in constructive changes in his social and physical environment" (Bertolote). Let's break this rather complicated definition down. The mental health of a person is not constant—it changes due to social, temporal, and biological factors, and it is these changes that help an individual to attain a sense of balance among their conflicting feelings and maintain harmonious relations with those around them. It is not unusual to experience contradictory emotions, for different emotions, though distinct from one another in

theory, are in their manifestation, fluid phenomena that cannot be contained in clear and discernible categories. For instance, while happiness and dejection may theoretically seem like opposing emotions that cannot be felt simultaneously by an individual, it isn't hard for us to recall times when we have felt happy and content, but at the same time experienced a nagging sense of dejection and hopelessness. However, often when these contradictory feelings become perpetual, individuals find it difficult to effectively adjust and respond to their social and physical environment.

The reason the phrase 'mental health' had arrived relatively late in my vocabulary was that the phrase entered the English lexicon only in the late 1940s and even then, phrases like 'bad mental health' were used strictly to refer to illnesses of the mind that could be diagnosed, identified, and cured. The term 'mental health' was not used explicitly until 1946 when a *Mental Health Association* was established in London by the World Health Organisation. Before the twentieth century, a widely prevalent concept was that of 'mental hygiene' (Bertolote), which went on to become a movement concerned with enhancing the methods of care for those with mental disorders. This understanding of mental hygiene started as one which was related to the specific domain of psychiatry—mental ill-health could be alleviated and 'cured' by adopting specific preventive measures. The latter half of the 20th century, however, saw a swift shift in the discourse around 'mental health'—individuals and psychiatric associations asserted that conversations around mental health needed to be distanced from hospitals and instead placed in communities; that is, preventive measures could not just be restricted to individuals but extended to the community at large. Instead of merely 'treating' those afflicted with mental disorders, it was imperative to empower the community in a way that aided their healing—policies needed to be created to break down the existing stigma and discrimination faced by those diagnosed with a poor mental state. Despite bouts of activism to normalise it, conversations around mental health remained stigmatised, primarily because the phrase's association with medical set-ups could not be broken. This disassociation was perhaps hard to attain because, by the 1970s, most aspects of human life had become (over)medicalised—most human problems had entered 'the jurisdiction of the medical profession' (Conrad), and this had created the compelling need to define every thing to a T - a person and their behaviour. Peter Conrad in his essay "Medicalization and Social Control" uses Max Weber's concept of 'rationalisation' to argue that this shift to medicalisation was primarily caused by society moving further away from religion, the mysterious, and the unexplained. Interestingly, however, medicalisation of life was a phenomenon restricted mostly to the Western part of the world. Even as late as the mid-twentieth century, medicalisation had made only very minor dents in the common understanding of mental illness in most parts of the world. The majority of people continued to associate mental illnesses with the supernatural—oscillations in emotions were attributed to 'possession by evil or demonic spirits, displeasure of gods, eclipses, planetary

gravitation, curses, and sin' (Farreras). Irrespective of whether mental health was medicalised or linked with the mystical and supernatural, it remained taboo.

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As opposed to the 20th century, the use of terms related to fluctuating mental health conditions were far less stigmatised in the 21st century and therefore used relatively frequently—albeit, often even flippantly. While the uninhibited use of such terms has helped destigmatise conversations around mental ill health, their sudden entry into the popular culture lexicon has led to several contradictory opinions within the mental health discourse. To understand the evolution of the discourse on mental health, we must explore the arguments put forward by those that have contributed to it.

A section of people argue that the phrase 'bad mental health' must be understood as a spectrum ranging from simply 'feeling bad' to having a mental disorder/illness that requires medical intervention. In order for terms associated with mental health to be destigmatised and normalised, it needed to be reclaimed and used even in cases which did not necessarily qualify as an 'illness'. Restricting the usage of this term to only cases that were ratified by a medical practitioner as one which needed curing, could potentially lead to pathologising the state and thereby stigmatising it further.

This section argues that it is all right to use terms such as 'depression' and 'anxiety' in cases of momentary fluctuations in feelings that may lead to temporary imbalance and hinder functioning. That is, it is all right for an individual to say they are feeling 'depressed' when they are experiencing a fleeting moment of sadness. Poor mental well-being does not necessarily have to be diagnosed and labelled by a trained doctor for it to qualify as a valid issue and therefore be termed "bad mental health". In fact, this branch of critique asserts that the very act of defining human beings and their mental illnesses is a show of power at play. Definitions are used to label individuals and segregate them into categories—medical terms are used to give legitimacy to some social norms and behaviour, and deviating from these norms are labelled as "abnormal' and therefore in need of treatment. For instance, medical fraternities in several countries across the world continue to use the language of medicine to justify the view that conditions like homosexuality, transsexuality and hyperactivity are psychological aberrations that need healing. Labelling is therefore used as a potent tool to create the very foundation of institutions such as the asylum, as discussed by Michel Foucault in his seminal work *Madness and Civilization*. Individuals labelled and medically confirmed as being 'mentally ill' internalise their illness, accept that they are social deviants, and succumb to the medical surveillance that is administered to 'rectify' them.

In my opinion, labelling and classifying individuals into categories that describe their mental state also reduces the individual to their mental illness. It denies them the right to view themselves as capable individuals who can live independently, creatively, and with

dignity. The most immediate example of an individual who was doomed to being reduced to her mental illness is Virginia Woolf—throughout her literary career and long after her demise, her works were blemished with the term 'manic-depressive'. Ever since her diagnosis, it was almost as if critics, readers, and well-wishers had banished from their memory the erstwhile image of a Woolf pre-diagnosis. Authors Susan M. Kenney and Edwin J. Kenney, Jr in their essay "Virginia Woolf and the Art of Madness" point out how soon after her diagnosis, the lens with which Woolf's life and literary works were viewed, was one of 'madness'—the dominant image of her that emerges is of a 'frail, pathetic invalid' (Kenney and Kenney 162). The label 'manic-depressive' invisibilised the potential Woolf had to channelise, if not control her depression; though her mental distress occasionally debilitated her, she had the unique power to use it to cultivate her creative genius. As opposed to what was popularly conceived, Woolf was not a perpetual victim of her mental state—she had unique coping mechanisms, and fiction was the most potent of them. While having words that can give meaning to one's feelings may feel empowering to some, there are some others who don't find the language of diagnosis empowering. To the latter, labelling reduces them to powerless entities who constantly need assistance, a cure, and someone to control them.

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Another section of the mental health discourse argues that casually using terms related to poor mental well-being greatly undermines the severity of symptoms experienced by those who live with that condition. This is not to invalidate the realness of the feelings of imbalance that are felt in passing; proponents of this section push for creating a community that is more mindful of the impact words have on people. Frivolously using terms that describe mental illnesses, to refer to minor lapses in mood, does a grave disservice to those dealing with mental health disorders for it seems to them a trivialisation of the crippling feelings they face on a regular basis. As someone who was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and anxiety, I often find myself feeling extremely uncomfortable when people around me unmindfully say things like, "I'm so OCD when it comes to keeping my desk clean," or, "Can you straighten the painting on the wall; it's making my OCD go wild!" It seems to me almost bizarre that the term has gone on to signify a particularness with cleanliness or being a 'neat-freak' as it is popularly called. I have for long time experienced and continue to experience intrusive thoughts which often cause me to obsessively repeat certain actions like washing my hands and feet, counting from one to five, and arranging and rearranging things around me when I feel anxious, etc. For me, the disorder also includes sexually intrusive thoughts, irrational fears, fear of doing harm to others and having harm inflicted upon me. These thoughts often manifest in disturbing dreams which, on waking up, cause further discomfort and compel me to think about it all day and hence come back in my dream the next day again, and the cycle goes on and on and on ...

"If you say kangaroo enough times, it stops being a furry animal with a pouch and becomes a sound" (Ewens), and such has been the case with words related to mental health disorders. They have for so long been used in casual conversation to refer to mild to moderate emotions, that the words have almost become diluted. Ewens, in this context, talks about 'semantic satiation'—the study of repetition or "the psychological phenomenon in which the echoing of a word causes it to lose all meaning" (Ewens). She argues that for far too long words like 'OCD', 'bipolar', 'depressed', etc. have been used in contexts other than those of mental disorders and further added onto disorders being misunderstood and illness normalised. Ewens further argues that this rapidly increasing trend of decontextualising words related to mental illnesses leads to "either a total disconnect between language and meaning or a troubling symptom of self-diagnosis culture". She elucidates this claim in her article, by citing Dr Zsófia Demjén , an expert in applied linguistics who studies the intersections of language, health, and mind, who asks, "How does someone who actually has depression describe his or her illness or how he or she feels? How can people differentiate the much more complex, much more intense thing they have from this thing everyone always claims ownership of?"

The social implications of such usage are several. Many argue that this collective flippancy reflects the pervasive ableist culture that appropriates terms that the mental health community attributes pathos to—words that carry extreme psychological, emotional, and social baggage for individuals struggling with 'bad mental health'. What is interesting, is that terms related to physical illnesses aren't used as throwaways—one wouldn't casually use cancer to describe a feeling of transient laziness or weakness. But the invisibility of mental illness allows people to conflate anything and everything with it. This carefreeness in usage is aggravated by social media and its devouring meme culture that oversimplifies, trivialises, and makes a mockery of even the most serious things. While a positive change in the mental health discourse has been noticed, with individuals with mental illnesses coming out on social media and making jokes at the expense of their illness, it has also facilitated the trend of nonchalantly using terms like 'anxious', 'retarded', 'manic', etc. by those who are say merely tired of studying for an upcoming examination or a snarky boss at work.

We live at a time where fads start and end at a rapid pace and words take no time to enter and leave our vocabulary. Owing to social media and its ability to reach even the farthest corners of the world, language acquires new meanings and words enter our daily parlance with such swiftness that we do not even realise it. Words that once had pejorative connotations to them, can now mean something completely different and maybe even empower some. Therefore, there is nothing inherently wrong with the evolution of words. However, some words come with meanings that one community of relatively disadvantaged people attributes immense power and importance to, and when these words are appropriated by those who are relatively advantaged, the words

become liberating and convenient for one but oppressive and tragic for another. But how do we determine if someone is appropriating these words or using them flippantly? Given that mental health constitutes a wide range of feelings and the validity of a fluctuating feeling is not contingent upon its degree, it is not only harsh but also insensitive to argue that someone's momentary fluctuations are not intense enough for them to use certain words to describe their feelings. What is the solution to this lexical conundrum then? To put it simply, we must exercise mindfulness when using words that may generate anguish in another. Just like the human mind and matters related to it, the discourse around mental health is intensely complex, nuanced, and for some, even personal. In my view, the very act of choosing one side of the discourse and dismissing the other, defeats the very essence of the mental health movement that upholds consciousness, empathy, and sensitivity.

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Othering of Women in the Workplace: A Deep Crack Requiring Repair

AVNIE GARG

About the Author

To Avnie, writing is like going to a faraway therapist – she loathes the hard work she has to put in the journey but looks forward to the therapeutic experience at the end. At the Young India Fellowship, she was pushed out of her comfort zone several times to embark on this journey of writing only to look back today and gleam at her learning curve. Writing, she says, feeds her entrepreneurial and free spirit; she can get imaginative with words and styles and offer the reader her bare thoughts. Having written for newspapers, social media handles, blogs, and websites, she considers her entry to the Final Draft as one of the write-ups she takes pride in.

"Of all the negative influences that can hamper a business from realising its full potential from its employees, 'otherness' is perhaps the most subtle—and, in many ways, the most insidious—of all."
(Hitchiner 2016)

What do you feel about the phrase 'women in the workplace'? Do the words 'women' and 'workplace' seem odd together? Does the phrase make you sad because it brings to your mind a harsh reality? Do these words remind you about a case of harassment in your office? Does the phrase appear to be borrowed from a book on feminism? Irrespective of what your answer is to the above questions, this paper is for you if you are willing to explore 'women' and 'workplace' together.

The phenomenon of 'othering' has a subtle way of playing out at the workplace. A common way in which it manifests itself is through gender. The yearly "Women in the Workplace" reports by McKinsey have consistently produced evidence to indicate that women are barred from getting equal opportunities and fair treatment in the workplace, which is dominated by men, both in number and authority. Many companies do not realise that the under-representation of women is a problem; those that do, do not know how to deal with it. This paper analyses the implicit and explicit problems that women face at the workplace, and how having more women in the workforce is momentous for an organisation. Towards the end, the paper attempts to explain why the existing solutions to promote the participation of women in work are inadequate, and also discusses some of the approaches used to bridge the gender gap and make women feel included. This paper attempts to develop a nuanced understanding of the brunt borne by different categories of women (for example, women of colour, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women). The point of the paper is to corroborate that there is a problem with 'othering' of women in the workplace, and to look at the problem optimistically by suggesting some solutions. Out of all the workplaces, the paper refers to the workplaces that form part of the formal and organised sector, unless stated otherwise.

Two Dimensions of Gender Diversity

This paper analyses the problem with workplace gender diversity through two broad dimensions. The first dimension is the limited opportunities available to women to get hired and promoted. In the corporate hierarchy pipeline, "women are unable to enter, stuck at the middle, or locked out of the top" (Krivkovich et al. 2016). The second dimension deals with everyday discrimination, explicit or subtle, that women encounter at the workplace. While explicit discrimination can include cases of sexual harassment, subtle discrimination can include a feeling of 'otherness'. The feeling of 'otherness' can have serious repercussions on an employee's behaviour and productivity (Hitchiner 2016). In both cases, women get discouraged from entering and continuing in the workplace. Hence, to address the issue of gender diversity at the workplace, it is critical to analyse what leads to some of these problems.

First dimension: Few Women Hired and Promoted

Why are fewer women hired in comparison to men? There are certain 'blind spots' in this regard. Many organisations do not realise, in the first place, that they do not have gender parity. Many employees are of the view that women are well represented in leadership positions, because to them, even a few women seem to be a good representation when compared to no women at all. Employees are 'comfortable with the status quo' and do not feel the need for change (Krivkovich et al. 2017). Secondly, increasing the gender diversity of the organisation may not be an important goal for the top management. A study showed that typically when a human resource head of an organisation is asked about gender diversity as an agenda, the usual answer is that it is among the top three priorities. On the other hand, merely 37 per cent CEOs and about 20 per cent line managers of organisations rank gender diversity in their top three or four priorities (London et al.). When the top leadership of an organisation does not find this agenda salient, it is much more challenging to enhance the participation of women in the workforce. Thirdly, corporate organisations feel that women, who have to deal with periods and pregnancy, are less productive than men. As far as promotions are concerned, it is generally believed that women leave the workforce due to reasons concerning family and children, and hence a meagre percentage of women move up the career ladder. But, in fact, research shows the opposite. The attrition for women is lower than men (London et al.). Thus, unconscious bias comes into play while hiring and promoting women. Even for a country like the USA, it will take more than 100 years to reach gender parity in top-level management, called the C-suite, given the current rate of improvement (London et al.).

Later in the paper, we look at solutions to correct the problem of few women being hired and promoted.

Second Dimension: Everyday Discrimination

In addition to the quantitative exclusion of women at the workplace, the second broad problem is related to the day-to-day realities that create obstacles to women's growth in the organisation. An atmosphere of discomfort for women at the workplace hinders them from reaching their full potential. These include "everyday discrimination, sexual harassment, and the experience of being the only woman in the room" (Krivkovich et al. 2018). Let's explore each of these three issues.

Everyday discrimination is inconspicuous in nature; it includes instances such as making jokes about a woman co-worker's capabilities, judging women if they talk about their personal lives at work, and mistaking a woman at the senior level for being in a junior position. Women have to constantly prove their competence, and their judgements are questioned even in their area of expertise (Krivkovich et al. 2018).

Sexual harassment at work is rampant, and most of it goes unnoticed. Many women have faced sexist jokes and/or have been touched in a sexual way at

some point in their careers (Krivkovich et al. 2018). Most men are silent spectators to it, and most women laugh it off. Women find it 'risky or pointless' to report an incident of sexual harassment (Krivkovich et al. 2018). At this point, one might want to ponder: Does this not indicate how unsafe women feel at the thought of speaking up against sexual harassment?, or does this also signify that women know that they won't be heard? Later, the paper briefly touches upon The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, popularly known as the POSH Act (Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act).

Another problem is that of being the only woman in the room at work. It is not just about the quantitative presence of women in the workplace; it is also about the behaviour that the only woman meets. This woman is at a higher risk of sexual harassment, and she also feels that she is always under scrutiny. The only woman becomes a 'litmus test for what all women are capable of doing'. This experience is in contrast to men's experience as an insignificant proportion of men reported that they are the only male member in the room; whenever they are, they 'feel included' at the workplace (Krivkovich et al. 2018). Thus, the capabilities of the only man at the workplace are not doubted. The only man does not feel discriminated against at the place of work, which is in sharp contrast to the experience of the only woman.

Dealing with Segments of Women at Work

All the problems that women encounter in the workplace and the feeling of otherness are amplified for women of colour working among Whites, and lesbian and bisexual women. For a moment, imagine that you are an Indian woman dreaming to live and work abroad, let's say, in the USA. Talk about women in corporate America: while "1 in 5 C-suite executives is a woman, only 1 in 25 C-suite executives is a woman of color" (Huang et al. 2019). Women of colour have to work extra hard to prove their worth. They have a hard time finding mentors from the C-suite and senior executive levels. They are not provided career-advancing projects. Lesbian and bisexual women have to 'downsize their aspirations' at work. They have to be fine with the fact that they may not get good projects or promotions even if they have high potential (Thorpe-Moscon & Pollack 2014). Around three-fourths of the lesbians have heard demeaning remarks at the workplace (Krivkovich et al. 2018). Given the hardships that they face, will solutions that improve the situation in general for women also improve the situation for all segments of women? Towards the end, the paper reviews the one-size-fits-all approach.

Infrastructural Impediments

An interesting point to note is that even infrastructurally, the workplace is not conducive to women. Take, for example, the temperature set for air conditioning at the workplace. The metabolic rate of women is significantly lower than men. Ignoring this fact, the room temperature

in offices is set to be fit typically for the male body, making the current offices "five degrees too cold for women" on an average (Criado-Perez). Similarly, various gadgets, tools, and equipment required for work are designed as per the average male size. For example, the standard equipment employed at a construction site is designed around the male body, leading to "higher rates of sprains, strains and nerve conditions of the wrist and forearm" in women (Criado-Perez). The size of a standard brick and a hand wrench is too big to be gripped properly by a woman's hand; devices such as keyboards and 5.5-inch mobile phones are designed according to the male hand; women in safety-related work are always at risk because the standard safety harnesses are ill-fitting for women (Criado-Perez). The compromises that women have to make with regard to the personal protective equipment (PPE) can prove to be fatal:

> In 1997, a British female police officer was stabbed and killed while using a hydraulic ram to enter a flat. She had removed her body armour because it was too difficult to use the ram while wearing it. Two years later, a female police officer revealed that she had had to have breast-reduction surgery because of the health effects of wearing her body armour. After this case was reported, another 700 officers in the same force came forward to complain about the standard-issue protective vest.
>
> But although the complaints have been coming regularly over the past 20 years, little seems to have been done. British female police officers report being bruised by their kit belts; a number have had to have physiotherapy because of the way stab vests sit on their body; many complain there is no space for their breasts. This is not only uncomfortable, it also results in stab vests coming up too short, leaving women unprotected (Criado-Perez).

Clearly, increasing the number of women employed will not solve all the problems that deter women's participation in the workplace. It is of utmost importance that the workplace is designed keeping in mind that there are two kinds of people who work, and they have different bodies and bodily processes. So instead of parroting the age-old narrative that women are not made for jobs such as police work or construction, it is time to face the truth that certain jobs are infrastructurally designed ignoring women, or actively keeping them out.

Why Should Companies Consider Gender Diversity?

Evidently, if women join the workplace, there is going to be a need to redesign and restructure the workplace, which demands time and money investment. In that case, why should companies care about equal representation of genders? Even if the cost was not the issue, why should organisations care about gender diversity as a fair principle? Research shows that organisations get better financial returns when more women are added to the workforce. One sociological research shows that gender diversity attracts better investments

because it signals to investors that a firm uses best practices and is 'well-run' (Turban). Another research indicates "a jump in stock prices after firms win an award related to diversity initiatives" (Turban). Further, the research claims that diverse teams bring more innovation, unique ideas, and different perspectives to the team (Turban). Thus, adding more women to the workforce can lead to multiple benefits for an organisation, including attracting top talent, getting better financial returns, and enticing investors. This all happens in a loop: surveys conducted by the job site Glassdoor produced results that suggest a majority of top employees, especially top women employees, look at "workforce diversity when evaluating an offer" (Turban). Therefore, to attract talented women to an organisation, there should already be good representation of women in the organisation.

In fact, better representation of women in the workforce proves to be fruitful not only for the organisation, but also for the socio-economic condition of the entire country, and many agencies of the United Nations (UN) swear by it. Women Empowerment Principles of the UN state that economic participation of women is necessary to "build powerful economies, create stable societies", achieve goals for "sustainability, development and human rights, improve quality of life for families and communities", and "boost the operations and goals of businesses" (Kaur 37). Considering the advantages that gender diversity brings
with it, incurring the cost of making the workplace more gender-inclusive is justified.

Does Diversity Training Work?

Though there is difficulty associated with ensuring gender equality at work, firms have begun to recognise the advantages that gender diversity brings with it. Several companies have their solutions in place to improve gender diversity. Then, why has this goal not been attained at least for these organisations? One of the reasons is that many solutions do not work. Let's look at diversity training or anti-bias training as a solution. Diversity training encourages positive interactions among group members belonging to diverse gender identities and/or social, economic, and cultural groups, and aims at reducing prejudice and discrimination. Anti-bias training makes people aware of their implicit biases and provides tools to eliminate discriminatory behaviour. The problem with such training is that these training methods normalise the message that 'implicit bias is everywhere'. So, an interviewer begins to think that it is 'normal' for him/her to be biased in favour of some candidates. Besides, many trainers report that employees see diversity training as efforts to 'control them' and react with anger and resistance. This led to the finding that forcing anti-bias on someone, in fact, enhances their bias ("Can You Train People to Be Less Prejudiced?" BBC Worklife). Many men perceive that gender diversity efforts are disadvantageous to them (Krivkovich et al. 2017). They feel that hiring and promoting more women means that their share of the jobs is reduced. Hence, they commit to such initiatives less. Therefore, diversity training is definitely

not the best solution for promoting gender diversity at the workplace.

Making Solutions Work

What can be some of the ways to address the problem of gender diversity in the workplace? First of all, recruiters and evaluators need to be made aware, through facts and figures and not simply training, that women are crucial to the development of the organisation. They should also be acquainted with the fact that the family-work-balance narrative against women is false and is not supported by research. This will convey to them that it is not okay to normalise their gender bias, as it will only be a disadvantage to the organisation. Thereafter, specific measures can be taken to target specific problems.

While hiring new candidates and reviewing the performance of the existing candidates, unconscious gender bias creeps in. To check this, the recruiters/reviewers should have clear criteria, such as a rating scale as opposed to an open-ended assessment. For example, a rating scale that allows them to rate candidates from 1 to 5 on the skills required for that job role as well as on the job fit will be more objective than making an open-ended assessment where they write why a candidate is not suitable for a role. In the case of an open-ended assessment, a recruiter might reject a candidate with thoughts such as 'she was too soft', or 'I don't think she will stay in the company for long as she seems to be of a marriageable age'. On the other hand, the rating scale will contain questions about proficiency in a particular skill, and a total score on such questions would help the recruiter exercise objectivity. However, it is important to note that having rating scales only will make the recruitment process quite mechanical, and thus a combination of a rating scale (the first step which can have more weightage and keeps gender bias in check) and an open-ended assessment (the second step which can have lesser weightage and helps make the process more human) will be ideal. Research shows that having a third party in the room can be helpful when evaluators discuss candidates as it makes it possible to "highlight potential bias and encourage objectivity" (Huang et al. 2019). After interviewing a candidate, they should ask themselves consciously what the basis is for accepting or rejecting them. Clearly listing out the factors can reduce the number of female rejections.

Even before interviewing, the first step is to send out a job posting, and how the job profile is described matters. The language of the job description is important; to describe the ideal candidate required, instead of using words such as 'aggressive', 'ninja', 'rock star', which are usually associated with a male, one could use more gender-neutral language (O'Brien). Further, to keep the salaries of male and female employees equal, companies should make the salary structure transparent. This will ensure that female employees are not paid less than their male counterparts. The role of the CEO becomes important if these solutions are to be implemented. First of all, the CEOs should understand the complexity of this form of discrimination and should be aware of their own biases. If the CEO issues 'clearly articulated

mandates' that gender discrimination will not be tolerated, then the managers, officers, and the senior executives will follow suit (Wade 374). Nevertheless, the success of these measures is contingent on making everyone aware of the importance of including women in the workplace. It is only then that the employees will understand the importance of anti-bias training, and such measures can be applied.

Tackling Sexual Harassment

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that without solving for the discrimination that women continue to encounter, merely quantitative inclusion of women in the workplace will not help. Including a greater number of women would only mean an increase in the cases of sexual harassment and a spike in situations where women are paid less for the same work and receive fewer promotions than their male counterparts (Wade 350).

As a basic step in the prevention of sexual harassment, the company leadership should publicly make a clear statement that sexual harassment will not be tolerated. Companies in India are obliged to comply with the POSH Act. However, simply including the POSH Act in the list of contracts that one signs when joining an organisation is not enough. It is essential to curb the feeling that reporting harassment would be risky and/or pointless. Organisations should ensure that human resource managers are properly trained to deal with such cases and the POSH committee checks that investigations are thorough and quick.

Moreover, women themselves need to be intolerant towards everyday discrimination and sexism in the workplace. Instead of laughing off a sexual comment or insult as a joke, it is important to become assertive about such instances by presenting the same statement without its gendered nuance in such a way that the harasser's bias is questioned. For instance, if a male colleague says the following when a female seeks his help in operating MS-Excel, "Why are all women bad at Excel!", she might say, "Well, I don't know Excel because I am from an arts background, and you probably know it because you are an engineer with two years of work experience in Data Analytics." Another method is to simply ask, "Oh, was that a sexist comment?"; it helps in cases when the harasser himself is not aware that his statement had a sexist nuance, and based on his answer, a conversation can be carried forward. One of the reasons that sexism at the workplace operates is the unconscious bias, and making the bias explicit in front of the perpetrator can help.

Concrete Action Points

When introducing women at meetings, the speaker should consciously avoid talking about her appearance (Priestley). The introduction should include achievements and capabilities and not how beautiful a woman is or how well she carries herself.

Another initiative that has been found to work wonderfully is to allow women-to-women networking by specially organising events for this purpose. This means that women across roles and industries attend conferences

to discuss trending topics, share their experiences in the workplace or exchange opinions about topics such as leadership. A study in several states of the USA found that after attending such conferences, "the likelihood of women receiving a promotion doubled" (Achor). Women became more realistic about their present and optimistic about their future, received a pay increase of more than ten per cent, and felt a sense of social connection (Achor). Such initiatives should definitely be taken to the rest of the world.

Moreover, some companies are including the gender equality agenda in their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) programmes which can play a 'dynamic role' in providing equal access to job opportunities and equal treatment of women in the workplace (Kaur 37). Such initiatives not only set an example for other organisations, but also accentuate that the glass ceiling—"a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, however so strong that it stops women from moving up in the management hierarchy"—needs to be broken (Kaur 37). Additionally, CSR strategies will help in correcting gender perceptions at societal and familial levels as well.

Does One Size Fit All Women?

To solve the problem of gender diversity, companies should not take the approach of one size fits all. The problems faced by women from different parts of the world and different gender identifications are varied, and thus different policies should address them. Organisations need to consciously provide lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and queer women with mentors from the senior level. There should be transparency in payrolls, upcoming projects, and vacant senior positions in an organisation so that every employee has equal access. When choosing a suitable employee for a position or project, the evaluators must consciously ask themselves questions such as: "Am I rejecting her just because she is a lesbian?" or, "Have I asked her if she would be able to relocate for this project or am I assuming on my own that she is not open to relocation?" Homogeneous cultures kill creativity, and therefore investment with respect to promoting diverse cultures is worthwhile.

Summing It Up

Economists around the world talk about unpaid household work and the low participation of women in the workforce. But how will these parameters improve if women are continually made to feel like the 'other' at their workplace? In order to improve organisational growth, and ultimately ensure greater development of the economy, there is a dire need to improve the gender ratio by working at each stage of the corporate pipeline. The senior executives should sit together with the head of human resources so that the organisation as a whole can prioritise gender parity and create a feeling of 'belonging' for women. To create gender equality, an equal workplace would not serve the purpose. Men and women are two different genders, and an equitable approach, which takes care of the special needs of women, is required. Women menstruate, and therefore two extra days of working from home for women won't hurt an organisation if the work done is up to the mark. Women have to deal with pregnancy, so flexible

rules for pregnant and lactating women are something to consider. Of course, different organisations need different strategies to bring about the change. But a basic path would involve checking the status of gender diversity in the organisation, realising that there is a need to improve the status, building effective solutions, and implementing them to (quantitatively and qualitatively) include more women. Providing women support and acknowledging their work will unleash exponential growth levels because the potential that organisations are currently able to see in women is just the tip of the iceberg.

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The Symbol of the Wallpaper : Subjectivity and Agency in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

ABHINAYA MURTHY

About the Author

My exploration into creative writing began at age 11. Stories helped me interpret society and my place in it. However, I found academic writing to be the boring, rigid cousin of creative writing. At YIF, my views were challenged. I realized that any piece of writing needs to reflect critical thought. From the beginning, I enjoyed the process of critical reading, thinking, and writing. My preceptor made me realize that first drafts are never meant to be perfect and through peer reviews, my classmates helped me grow too. Today, writing takes center stage as I work in marketing and communications.

In 2008, I had fallen in love with reading and writing, and a decade later, I fell in love again after a year of immersing myself in learning and unlearning, feedback, and assessment at YIF. I suppose one should find themselves lucky if one falls in love twice right?

Introduction

What is a voice? Is there a latent power in muteness, or is silence to be sidelined and ignored? Is voice a marker of one's agency? Is the dialectical subjective mind itself, expressed or unexpressed, a reflection of the conflicted self and its search for agency that inevitably becomes a part of a discussion larger than the self? Donald E. Hall argues that agency remains at the heart of discussions around subjectivity to this day. He states that we are both 'subjects to discourse' and 'subjects through discourse', and that "*Agency*, its possibility and practicality, brings us face-to-face with the political question of how we can motivate ourselves and others to work for social change and economic justice ..." (Hall 124). Agency is the voice of the 'self", and so the 'self" has become a crucial topic for critical analysis that often finds roots in literary texts and traditions. It also transcends them in its ability to interrogate literature and culture (5).

"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is one such short story of transgression from within the nineteenth-century convention of narratives of women's experience of madness that gives voice to The *Madwoman in the Attic*. As succinctly described by Maggie O'Farrell in her introduction, the short story is "an account by a nameless young woman of a summer spent in a large country house ... she is forced to dwell on the only things in front of her: the room; the grim bars on the windows; the bed, screwed to the floor; and the peculiar repetitions of the patterned, yellow wallpaper" (O'Farrell viii-ix). In this semi-autobiographical piece, Gilman writes the story of a woman going through postpartum depression. The narrator is diagnosed with neurasthenia by her husband and brother who are both reputed physicians (Treichler 61). She is forcibly made to rest in a hereditary estate, stripping her away from any and all stimulants; most importantly, she is denied any attempts at writing. During a time when hysteria was regarded as one of the 'conventional women's diseases', Gilman's carefully chosen words are urgent even in the most quiet moments (Treichler 61).

The yellow wallpaper in the short story is a metaphor—a symbol—that has been subject to much critical discourse to answer the question of what *exactly* it represents. Paula A Treichler and Karen Ford have explored this question in their papers "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" and "The Yellow Wallpaper and Women's Discourse" respectively. The former argues that the yellow wallpaper represents women's discourse, while the latter asserts that it is a symbol of patriarchy and that the potential of women's discourse lies in the 'blank spaces' of the wall behind the destroyed, distressing wallpaper. By critically examining both the positions, this paper takes a new position: the yellow wallpaper symbolises the conflicted subjectivity of the narrator which oscillates between her desire for agency geared towards production of women's discourse, and the necessity to conform to patriarchy and its silencing discourse of diagnosis.

The Patriarchal Language of Diagnosis

Treichler associates nineteenth-century psychiatric 'diagnosis' with 'patriarchal sentencing' in her paper. She defines diagnosis as "a 'sentence' that is simultaneously a linguistic entity, a declaration of judgement, and a plan for action in the real world whose clinical consequences may spell dullness, drama, or doom for the diagnosed" (70). Further, she speaks of a language that is patriarchal, particularly in medical discourse, and which constructs women in the image of domestic slavery, reducing them to a social and economic dependence (64). Her position of the wallpaper representing women's discourse comes from her argument of the narrator 'escaping the sentence' through her interactions with the wallpaper in the short story. Treichler introduces the concept of feminist linguistic innovation and extrapolates this with escaping patriarchal sentencing. She does this by vocalising the 'unheard-of contradictions' in the subjectivity of an active, desiring female subject: a woman rising against false diagnoses and unconforming to her submission to a 'superior' gender (Gilman 6). Treichler also discusses the idea of breaking free from a restrictive language constructed by the male order—responsible for the clinical conditioning of female desire, power, and individuality—demystifying what is considered to be pathological behaviour. The wallpaper, at the very beginning of the story, commits 'every artistic sin' according to the unnamed narrator (Gilman 6). It is interesting to note that something unconventional and unappealing to the narrator is connotative with the word, 'sin'. The dominant 'artificial feminine self" of the narrator, at this point, is a sweet, obedient wife who regulates her behaviour during sickness according to the rules imposed by her husband's patriarchal diagnosis and the conservative society at large (Treichler 61). Anything that breaks this order would be sinful. Using the yellow wallpaper as a metaphor, the unheard-of contradictions surface in unconventional patterns that are alien to a mind that has been exposed to, and has even internalised, plain patterns that obey and submit to conventions.

Conditions of Speaking and the Possibility of a 'Forbidden' Women's Discourse

Treichler questions the patriarchal syntactical conventions of language by engaging with the unconventional patterns of the wallpaper and by analysing the wallpaper's symbolism through a feminist lens. In the duality of diagnosis as sentencing which entails semiotic relations on one hand, and the question of representation in language on the other, Treichler states that "diagnosis is a set of representational practices" (65). In exploring the relationship between language and reality, she posits reality is constituted of language; that it is essentially linguistic in nature. "The sentence for a woman is bound inescapably with symbolic order", and thus, the reality of female language is "not concerned merely with speech, but with conditions of speaking" (71). The conditions of speaking is the environment the speaker is in and that in which words are being spoken. This is precisely why

the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" engages in expressing her views which Treichler describes as 'forbidden discourse' because of the narrator's understanding of her own oppressive environment. "I did for a while write in spite of them; but it does exhaust me—having to be so sly about it, or else be met with heavy opposition" (Gilman 4). The subject is also "subject[ed] to discourse, and a subject of knowledge, most familiar with perhaps, of the discourses of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being" (Hall 3).

This forbidden discourse is consistently situated in conflict within the story, from definitions to descriptions to analyses. The narrator defines John as 'practical' and herself as 'sensitive' (Gilman 3–5). While she confides in her journal (to 'dead paper') that John is falsely diagnosing her, she is compelled to listen to a physician of high standing (Gilman 3). Elaine Showalter points to this duality in saying that contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists have "shown how women, in the dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind" (4).

In the short story, John also seems to view the narrator's writing as merely 'fancies' which she should try her best to not give in to as 'her imaginative mind' will hinder her recovery (Gilman 8). The question to ask in this context is, as artists, what are some of the barriers that women face in practising their work professionally? Will it always come second to the duties of motherhood and wife? In her book *But Is it Art?* Cynthia Freeland illustrates how women have been pathologically enforced to restrict, or even give up, artistic expression lest they disrupt their primary gender responsibility and occupation of looking after the household (Freeland 136). Freeland does this by taking examples of potters Maria Martinez and Nampeyo who "made pottery while attending to household chores, child-care and the significant ritual responsibilities of Pueblo ceremonial society" (128). Musician and composer Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, while being a gifted musician, was also restricted from working by her brother who wrote to their mother stating that Fanny is "too much of a woman" to take authorship seriously and should only do so after her "primary occupation" (domestic duty) is accomplished, and that "publishing would only disrupt these duties …" (136). While Freeland does not discuss female writers in this section of her book, her arguments related to restrictions placed on female artists across genres are compelling.

In the short story, John brings the narrator to the mansion as she was unable to care for her child (due to postpartum depression). Consequently, the environment that is created for the narrator does the opposite of aiding her recovery: John's constant patronisation and infantilisation of the narrator alongside the role of John's sister who is described as a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper who hopes for no better profession" creates an oppressive patriarchal setting (Gilman 7–10). Therefore, the narrator is rendered a subject *to* discourse, whose subjectivity initially reflects the

predominance of patriarchal conditions that she is placed in and the strong grasp of forces of interpellation.[1]

However, as the story progresses, and as the association with the wallpaper deepens, the voice of the narrator undergoes a radical transformation. It grows from a "crowing, impertinent language to rude, direct language" (Treichler 73). In the following instance, the narrator speaks but is still restrained by the system:

> I don't know why I should write this:
> I don't want to.
> I don't feel able.
> And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think
> in some way—and it's such a relief! But the effort is to be greater than the relief. (Gilman 12)

This duality in thought represents her oscillating mind. Her conflicted subjectivity oscillates between breaking free (desire for agency/becoming a subject *through* discourse) and caging herself in (forces of interpellation/ subject to discourse). John is still playing the role of the oppressor and she, struggling to break free from it. Treichler does identify that the wallpaper could symbolise the 'narrator's unconscious' but holds her ground on the metaphor of women's discourse emphasised by structures of patriarchy that alienate the narrator from work and intellectual life (62). However, the narrator's unconsciousness is crucial to the construction of potential agency. By the end of the short story, her impertinent voice gains confidence and transforms into something more direct and imposing when she says, "I've got out at last ... you [John] cannot put me back!" (Gilman 23). This defiant voice of the narrator, demanding agency, contains the potential of engendering women's discourse even though it is marred by the 'punishment' of madness.

Symbolism of the Wallpaper: A Parable of Subjectivity and Agency

Karen Ford, on the other hand, aptly observes that the narrator grows more and more silent as she begins to engage further with the wallpaper. Ford unpacks the contradictions in the narrator's language. The narrator is constantly interrupted; her only counter to John's dictum is by literally "refusing to speak, or metaphorically, by revealing the blankness behind the paper" (Ford 311). This silence, according to Karen Ford, signifies patriarchal muting of women's voices and a surgical removal of their agency from their narratives, making the wallpaper an embodiment of male discourse. She further discusses the space occupied by female discourse in the male order by stating that the narrator, if she discovers women's discourse in any sense, "is in the blankness behind the wallpaper" (312). When the narrator finds that other

1 The term 'interpellation' originates in Althusser's writings and alludes to the 'process by which we acquire our social identities': "We are interpellated, or hailed, by ideology in the same way we might be hailed by a police officer on the street. We respond to that hailing automatically, turning around as if acknowledging our guilt, and in doing so assume a certain identity. Interpellation captures the power behind social categories and the ways that we are conscripted into our social identities ..." (Hall 132–33).

women (who she soon identifies with) are trapped behind the paper, she tears the wallpaper down to set them free. “They get through and then the pattern strangles them off” (Gilman 19). Ford draws upon what Gauthier calls “the new space” that points to “aspects of feminine writing which are most difficult to verbalize because it becomes compromised, rationalized, masculinized as it explains itself” (312). Ford thus argues that in getting to the blank spaces, the narrator and other women trapped within male discourse will find an alternative new space which is outside male influence.

But what happens to her agency, when she gets to the blank spaces behind the wall? Ford states, “Is this freedom of expression, and if so, at what cost does she achieve it?” (312). On the other side of the wallpaper, the narrator emerges mad, creeping on the floor and tied to a rope (Gilman 23). In Treichler’s initial paper on escaping the sentence, she argues that this final image serves a sentence that “seeks to escape the sentence passed by medicine and patriarchy” (Treichler 70). She also notes, “to ‘escape the sentencing’ involves both linguistic innovation and change in material conditions: both change in what is said and change in the conditions of speaking” (74). Treichler’s position of the yellow wallpaper symbolising women’s discourse stems from the realisation that the narrator becomes an “involved language user, producing sentences that break established rules … which changes the terms in which women are represented in language and extends the conditions under which women will speak” (74). Both Treichler and Ford’s positions discuss how the subject is situated in conditions put in place by male-ordered sentencing.

In her attempt to exceed the sentence, the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” does not manage to escape it. In her response paper “The Wall Behind the Wallpaper: Response to Carol Neely and Karen Ford”, Treichler argues that the blank spaces may point to linguistic practices evolving “outside the policed territory of specific discourses” but it is pertinent to understand that “women’s discourse is never truly ‘alternative’ but inhabits the same terrain as the ‘patriarchal discourse’ it challenges” (324–25). In light of this, revisiting the final image of the narrator tearing down the wallpaper while tied by a rope and locked in a room, she succeeds in forcing a new diagnosis of being sick, overthrowing her earlier conformity to male-prescribed language. However, she is not free from the severe consequences of being sent to Weir Mitchell for treatment (327). “Woman stands before man not as a subject but an object paradoxically endued with subjectivity; she takes herself simultaneously as the *self* and the *other*, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences” (Beauvoir, qtd in Hall 98–99). The narrator’s conflicting self and other, thus performs the duty of exercising agency while being limited by forces of interpellation

Donald E Hall borrows from Butler to build his discussion of potential agency on the idea that agency is a part of ‘being’, and this ‘being’ is a “potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation” (Butler, qtd in Hall 127):

> [T]he expanded notion of potential agency [is one] that approaches the optimism of Giddens without ignoring the limitations resulting inevitably from the interpellative process and the parameters of discourse itself. If the subject can choose for close contestatory connections, then certainly it has an always limited but still significant ability to allow those contestatory connections, or at least to recognise their possibility. (Hall 128)

This idea of *potential* agency paving ways to recognise the possibility of transgression and identifying contradictions as part of having this subjectivity which is not absolute (as humans err), substantiates my chosen position of the wallpaper symbolising the narrator's subjectivity with limited agency. This conflicted subjectivity allows the narrator to tear the wallpaper in certain moments and be one with it in others. Treichler outlines these moments of tearing as moments of escape. While the diagnosis itself is a "consequence to a death sentence" (Treichler 71), a sentence that entails a life that suppresses desire and individuality, a "stimulus-less environment" (Gilman 15) which constructs a life not worth living at all; the consequence of this is the narrator experiencing unheard-of contradictions. And by freeing the woman inside the wallpaper, which she also identifies as herself, she 'escapes the sentence'. Hall quotes Butler in saying that "exceeding is not escaping. The subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound" (Hall 127).

The Female Malady and Struggle for Agency

The conditions to which she is bound vividly come alive at the end of the story. The narrator's conditions of speaking change as she repeatedly instructs John to find the keys to the room. Treichler argues that while this repetition can be a sign of madness, it is in fact an example of John (the patriarch) being "unable to accept a statement of fact from her, his little goose" (73). A woman resists, loses her sanity, but does not give in. Stories like "The Yellow Wallpaper" make a strong statement that women, both writers and characters, are "proving that language can be both powerful and womanly" (Ford 314). While language is powerful enough to break stereotypes in writing female characters and also in redefining how women are viewed and spoken about at large, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story of transgression because it challenges the narrative of the female malady. In the introduction to her book *The Female Malady,* Elaine Showalter points to the three major images of the madwoman: "the suicidal Ophelia, the sentimental Crazy Jane, and the violent Lucia"––in all three stories in which the heroines' attempts to break free end in them being driven to madness or suicide or both, endorsing madness as a desired form of rebellion (Showalter 5). While the heroines rebelled, they were also unmistakably tied to their affection towards their respective male counterparts. The image of Crazy Jane particularly is "a flattering reminder of female dependence upon male affection" (Showalter 13). In adaptations of these cultural images in opera as

well, depiction of the female malady is bound to male domination:

> But to watch these operas in performance is to realize that even the murderous madwomen do not escape male domination; they escape one specific, intolerable exercise of women's wrongs by assuming an idealized, poetic form of pure femininity as the male culture had construed it: absolutely irrational, absolutely emotional, and, once the single act is accomplished, absolutely passive. (Showalter 17)

Showalter then highlights that the psychiatric interpretation of madness in women, and by extension, in narratives around it, are the product of male culture which silences female discourse. Stories produced out of this culture may dignify or romanticise the death of the heroines or their descent into madness. But Ford makes a poignant statement when she says that while there can be some dignity or victory in these resolutions into madness when compared to a domesticated enslavement of women, they are not ultimately acceptable. "As the holes, blanks, gaps, and borders [that Gauthier proposes as sites of women's language] are no substitute for words on the center of the page; lethargy, depravity, and suicide are not alternatives to a fulfilling life" (Ford 313).

The question to ask is, do we read these narratives as that of resistance and agency or of wasted life? Short stories like "The Yellow Wallpaper" challenge the 'death sentence' delivered by male-dominated medical discourse, and take up space within the dominant patriarchal discourse to give utterance to women's discourse. As we journey with the narrator and her conflicted subjectivity, we also journey through the terrains in which freedom is defined. While the story begins with an image of confinement (the narrator trapped within grand ancestral halls) and ends with the visual of the narrator tied by a rope in a locked room, the narrator 'breaks free' from her initial conditions of speaking and exercises agency (although limited) in her resistance.

Both Karen Ford and Treichler's positions of what the wallpaper symbolises cease to consider the fact that absolute freedom is a myth. Treichler, by saying that the metaphor of the yellow wallpaper is "truly never resolved" places the contradicting thought of enslavement in a struggle for escape within parentheses (75). Ford, on the other hand, strengthens her argument of the wallpaper symbolising patriarchy as it leaves the narrator in a self-tied rope. However, there is a more realistic argument of limited freedom to be made: agency in certain moments while co-option in others. How can one know freedom if one does not know restraint? The rope represents the confines that define freedom. It represents a liberated woman who is still a part of the patriarchal system. It speaks volumes of the fact that liberation cannot occur overnight, or in this case, over the course of three months—during their stay in the mansion. By representing the narrator's subjectivity, giving her voice and agency, women's discourse does not tie itself to attaining absolute freedom but around creating a space for negotiation of freedom by women themselves. It recognises

that the relation between power and agency is always dialectical in nature, shifting scales in various moments in an individual's life. Hall, quoting Butler says, "Agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power … to claim that the subject exceeds is not to claim that it lives in some free zone of its own making" (127). Therefore, the yellow wallpaper, at its centre, has a voice that vocalises unheard-of contradictions in its patterns, gives the narrator her space to act on patriarchal diagnosis and sentencing, and allows for the possibility of creation of women's discourse in the process of recounting the struggles in the narrator's subjectivity. The yellow wallpaper becomes the agent and medium of creation of women's discourse but as a metaphor represents the subjectivity of the narrator—a subjectivity both as flawed and organic as the specks and scratches on the paper.

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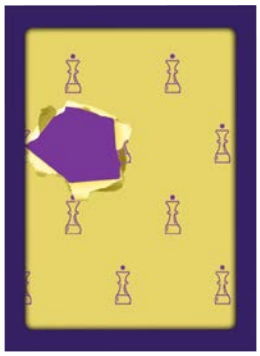

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2

Walking on Water: Stories of the Anthropocene

MEERA C. GOVINDAN

Once Upon a Time: A Life in Stories

SHUBHAM GUPTA

A Dictionary

ANEEQA KHALID

Walking on Water: Stories of the Anthropocene

MEERA C. GOVINDAN

About the Author

Anyone who is a reader inevitably imagines themselves writing. That's how I started writing. During my undergrad and my early career, I was drawn to performance poetry and the counterculture of Bangalore. Thus, when I arrived at YIF, I thought of writing less as a skill and more as an interest. But the Languages and Realities class shifted writing from the arena of hobby to a necessary tool in interpreting reality. Not only did it help develop a structure and process to writing, but also made it less lonelier. My peer group helped make writing communal and the diversity of our identities made me think deeply about the politics of language. As someone involved in community management and marketing, this has made me very sensitive to the way we tell stories and aspire to tell them better, especially given the dystopian nature of our lives.

I.

Fewer things are harder to forget than the terror of childhood nightmares, especially the ones seen so often that they almost become a memory. As a kid, I'd dream of a drowning world. A world where there is the din of the ocean and nothing else. There would be no traces of our existence, no buildings, no trees, no continents; just the ocean. Pralaya—the end of the world as we know it, a deluge. Imagine it unfolding in real life, as if something, somewhere made the worst spectres of my dreams come alive.

The first time I saw it up close, I was 11 years old. It was in October 2007. That week recorded the year's highest rainfall—118.2 mm. My father and I walked 7 kilometres in the monsoon-washed Chennai roads and somehow the water seemed to never end. It felt as though the ocean had made a home in the city; the streets a tattered murky brown Venice. As we walked, the water rose until it reached my thighs. Once the electricity went out, I couldn't help but wonder about the world underneath the water. A world of plastic bags, bent umbrellas, and pothole creatures. The autorickshaws that remained on the street refused rides, worried about getting stuck in the flood. We got home after midnight, wet to our bones and filthy. Perhaps for the first time in my childhood, I understood nature as something to be feared. The ominous dark skies lasted for a week that felt like a lifetime. For days after the rain, I was haunted by some primitive sadness, as if something bigger awaited us all.

When we talk about ancient civilisations like the Indus Valley that seemingly vanished in the blink of an eye, I think we feel a similar ancient sadness. In those instances, despite our firm belief that life is guided by reason, our history is evidence enough that there is more to our existence than meets the eye. Then why is it that we brush these inklings aside when we have set into motion, knowingly and unknowingly, the unravelling of the planet?

The writing is on the wall, we've all heard it hundreds of times—global climate crisis—it is the drama of our times, the spirit of the Anthropocene. Yet, some deny it altogether, some ignore it, and the rest don't quite know what to do with it. Climate change deniers often use the rhetoric that climate change is as old as time—since the dawn of the planet, Earth has indeed seen five mass extinction events as a result of or accompanied by climate change. But it is only since the early twenty-first century that the impact of human actions has become so extensive that we are now at the precipice of rapidly altering the very nature of our planet 20 to 50 times faster than ever recorded in its 4.5-billion-year history (Clark et al. 6, 360–69). In effect, being human is killing the planet. We are presiding over a planetary-scale reassortment of species and substantial losses that many refer to as the Earth's sixth mass extinction event (Oliver). The average abundance of native species in most major land-based habitats has fallen by at least 20 per cent, mostly since 1900. More than 40 per cent of amphibian species, almost 33 per cent of reef-forming corals, and more

than a third of all marine mammals are threatened. At least 680 vertebrate species have been driven to extinction since the sixteenth century, and more than nine per cent of all domesticated breeds of mammals used for food and agriculture had become extinct by 2016 (Bridgewater et al. 2457–61). The ecological genocide is nowhere close to ending with natural resource extraction and mega infrastructure projects being undertaken by many countries as a part of the development standard required to compete globally. Why is it that despite scientific consensus, no real headway has been made with regard to the climate crisis?

Anyone who's spent time on the internet in the age of information is aware of climate change—right? One would assume the rise of turmeric lattes, yoga, and organic food would also mean a rising global consciousness of climate change. However, for all the Greta Thunberg-ian activism, and despite the family WhatsApp group forwards about eco-friendly living, we are confronted with the prospect of an uncertain world in our future and a superficial engagement with it at best (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 355). Knowledge about climate change and biodiversity loss appears to have little effect on mass consumption patterns that have captured human imagination. While for most of history, human identity was rooted in scarcity, mass consumption has now blurred lines between luxury and necessity. After all, how can a human who is subjected to thousands of hours of advertising every day be expected to change what and how he consumes?

I believe the dissonance between availability of information and credible action comes down to imagination and storytelling. We see the world not as it exists but as the stories we have about it (Lotto). Stories from recognisable patterns that create meaning. In a way, nothing human could exist without stories, including science and faith. We argue with stories, internally or out loud. We talk back. We praise. We denounce. Every story is the beginning of a conversation, with ourselves as well as with others. If we were to accept that it is primal human nature to understand the world through stories, we could perhaps even say that the global climate crisis is not just an environmental crisis but a cultural one.

One of the problems with the climate crisis story is that of framing. The impact of climate change is often referred to in the context of near time as opposed to deep time—geological time which is unimaginably greater than the time scale of human lives and human plans. While there is a common perception that the climate crisis is a twenty-first-century problem, the scope of it extends from 20 millennia in the past, that is, from the very origin of human civilisation to the next ten millennia when the effect of anthropogenic climate change will grow and persist (Clark et al. 363). What science shows us is that compared to the last major climate change event some 11,700 years ago, anthropogenic climate change has been very rapid, the impact of which may extend to a duration greater than the entire history of human civilisation. Thus, on one hand, we are dealing with the unpredictability of the forces of nature turning against man, and on the

other hand, we have the abstraction of this effect over a period of time beyond our wildest imagination, very literally. The unprecedented nature of this crisis also means that human civilisation is now collectively involved in creating stories and myths about a phenomenon that it has never encountered before.

It is unsurprising therefore, that this has led to the climate crisis being packaged into a doomsday narrative of catastrophe, disarray, and chaos. Popular TV shows and films revolve around end-of-the-world scenarios which require a hero or a group of heroes with great bravery to come and save the day. Sci-fi has been one of the only genres of modern fiction where issues, both human and those that extend beyond the realm of humans, have been addressed with care and creativity. Sci-fi exemplifies the agency of that which is non-human—artificial intelligence, genetic mutation, superpowers. Thus, perhaps sci-fi is better suited to discuss issues like climate change because it explores the thin line of improbability (Ghosh 20), especially of extreme weather events and so forth. Take the Netflix series *The Umbrella Academy*, for example. Both seasons of the series are based on the concept that there are ten days left till the end of the world during which the heroes have to save it. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is blissfully unaware that doomsday is around the corner. This is reflective of mass sentiment where drive to collective accountability or action is largely absent. It is also reflective of how crises catch the ordinary unawares. It is only when the destruction and chaos begin that we pay attention, and by then it is already too late. Sci-fi, because it adopts narratives of heroism, also requires villains. In *The Umbrella Academy* this comes in the form of the Handler and the Commission, which to any viewer is deeply relatable as the symbol of modern corporatisation. The Commission is a flawed corporate entity which in its attempt to do what it is designed to do, puts an end to the world. Yet, the employees of the Commission are very ordinary and mostly unaware of the part they play. In terms of metaphors, this is probably the best reflection of society as we live in it. The series also reflects an idea that one of my teachers, Prof Dileep Simeon, professor of totalitarian history espouses—the world always feels like it is about to end and men will always be at war with each other, be it the World Wars, space races, nuclear doom or the global climate crisis. Perhaps nobody has paid as much attention to sci-fi as it deserves—as a vehicle of mass sentiments and mass desires.

The doomsday narrative is not exclusive to the sci-fi genre. The scientific community often uses the same vocabulary. The first significant political narrative on climate change, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*[1] was also rendered along the same lines. While it propelled public conversation briefly, soon enough the media realised that bad news without any real solutions besides changing light bulbs and reducing plastic usage did not make facing the apocalypse any

1 An Inconvenient Truth is a 2006 American concert film/documentary film directed by Davis Guggenheim about former United States Vice President Al Gore's campaign to educate people about global warming.

easier (Smith, Tyszczuk, and Butler 11). The complexity of this idea intensifies once we realise that global warming is a consequence of the global carbon economy whose economic success and positive externalities, including higher living standards, have been driven by fossil fuels. Living standards that we collectively enjoy are at stake. The problem with the doomsday narrative is that we think the world will end in a colossal boom. However, the global climate crisis only serves to highlight that our doomsday may look different—a gradual decline in our standard of living, a planet where death and disease is an everyday occurrence, widespread poverty, a march back into scarcity in the face of the apparent opulence of current times. Perhaps the inability to face this reality is what makes ecological politics a blame game. The United States exiting the Paris Climate Accord, a typical example of this phenomenon, driven by the rhetoric of purported gains and losses, also brings up the question of privilege, retribution, and ideas of development. Though these are too vast to be addressed comprehensively by this paper, it is something we need to think about.

There are two issues at hand while trying to make pro-environment behaviour a part of the mass psyche. The lack of positive engagement with the crisis has to do with fear and our dependence on heroes to save the day. The scientific community with its 'win-win technical solutions' such as geoengineering[2] does not take into account the ecological genocide and the effect of biodiversity loss. It attempts to prolong the privileges of human behaviour as is. Meanwhile, environmental activists adopt a 'too little too late' stance that believes in the end of humanity as we know it. The fear appeal as well as the hero appeal end up being counterproductive. The lack of employing everyday emotions and concerns in the context of this macro-environmental issue does not appeal to the daily office-goer or the parent or the teenager (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 361). The conflict between techno-optimism and eco-pessimism ends up with a 'you're either with us or against us' stance. There is no space for new narratives to evolve within the serious narrative spectrum (Smith, Tyszczuk, and Butler 11).

II.

Chennai is one of those cities where monsoon brings with it a cyclone and/or flooding every year, so much so that when it starts getting cloudy, people would sit in front of the local channels hoping for a newsflash proclaiming a city-wide holiday. The cyclone would uproot a couple of trees, make water wastelands out of the roads. As candles ran out and the wind howled, it had the potential to make Shelley write Frankenstein.

2 Geoengineering is a potential last resort for addressing the challenge of climate change. Some of the ideas under exploration include: releasing sulfate particles into the air to mimic the cooling effects of a massive volcanic eruption; placing millions of small mirrors or lenses in space to deflect sunlight; covering portions of the planet with reflective films to bounce sunlight back into space; fertilising the oceans with iron or other nutrients to enable plankton to absorb more carbon; and increasing cloud cover or the reflectivity of clouds that already form. All of which may have unintended consequences, making the solution worse than the original problem (Biello 2007).

It was November–December 2015; 1,049 mm; the one that the CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General of India) would later term a 'man-made disaster'. When the incessant rains and the subsequent flooding was reaching its peak, I was a reporting intern at The Hindu. As I travelled to the office every day, I'd see the Cooum river swell and eat away at the fringes of the Cooum cheri [3] . In the newsroom though, the cyclone was just another story. A small PTI report about the India Meteorological Department predicting more rains appeared in a corner. Scary and foreboding WhatsApp forwards were chalked off to fake news; the meteorological department and Mr Ramanan, the weatherman had always been a joke—well known to predict rain on sunny days and vice versa. Their predictions also lost ground to directly impactful and newsworthy real-world stories. Everyone thought they knew Chennai weather from their past experiences. Floods were nothing unusual, just a little too much rain; it would come and go. Little did we know. This was 1 November. Within a month, for the first time since its founding in 1878, The Hindu would not print their newspaper because of the flood. Close to 250 people died in the flood. Among them was an old couple who lost the keys to their house locked from inside. As the water rose to their neck, they made a final phone call to their daughter living abroad, an apocalyptic goodbye.

Every story has a beginning, middle, and end. Outside the realm of sci-fi, modern literature has been obsessed with plot lines centred on the 'everydayness' of humans—stories begin and end with the human. Telling a story about climate change is then doubly hard. First, because it has to do with subjects far beyond what is just human. Second, because it almost always ends badly for humans. Climate change still seems to be an impersonal and distant issue to many, despite having borne the brunt of it, because they don't realise their behaviour can be directly related to extreme weather events or other climate phenomena. This gap in cognition is what fiction is tasked with filling up. The easiest way to incorporate non-human elements into a narrative is through metaphor. Yet, even metaphorically, elements of nature slip into the background while the human is considered removed from nature to become the protagonist. Just an Instagram search of #nature is enough to fill your feed with evidence of this: nature in the background for a human's social media account. Franco Moretti phrases this phenomenon as "the relocation of the unheard of toward the background. … while the everyday moves into the foreground" (Ghosh 23). Further, the human experience of joy, sorrow, conflict, and resolution is removed from the environment it takes place in. For instance, the often-seen lovers in the rain have little to do with rain and more to do with lovers. With climate change, there is a necessity to foreground the phenomenon.

This need arises from the improbability associated with the climate crisis—it will be the first of its kind to ever occur in recorded human history. The highest rainfall, the largest forest fires, the greatest floods, and so on—

3 Cheri/Seri is a Tamil word that denotes in its current linguistic usage a ghetto or a slum.

extreme weather events are very much a part of our day-to-day lives in the Anthropocene. The sheer magnitude of these phenomena is proof enough that man's conquest over nature has completely and utterly failed. But going back to a period when nature was revered and feared does not help either. Narratives of cultures reflect who we think we are and what we think of ourselves in relation to the world. As cultures appear and disintegrate, so do their narratives. Myths, folklore, and magic realism associated with nature worship predated the western civilisation's sci-fi. However, even they fall into the trap of fearmongering.

If science has proved beyond doubt that fear doesn't propel us to our feet, isn't it time we start thinking about what will?

We now stand at the intersection of clarity and concealment. The stories we create out of this crisis have the same heuristic potential that stories have contained through ages of human history. Therefore, the stories we tell should not be just about the gory and ugly parts of it, but the comedy of it, the tragedy of it, the fear it induces, and the hope it requires to find collective solutions.

Perhaps the narratives of our time are burdened by language. Maybe the priority of dialogue has diminished the value of the metaphor, especially in motion pictures. Take Godfrey Reggio's 1982 masterpiece *Koyaanisqatsi*—an experimental film trilogy that explores the way we live. It looks at the intricate relationship between nature, humans, and technology through moving images slowed down, time-lapsed alongside the chants of the word 'Koyaanisqatsi', a Hopi Indian word that means a life out of balance. While talking about it he says, "It's not for lack of love of the language that these films have no words. It's because, from my point of view, our language is in a state of vast humiliation. It no longer describes the world in which we live."

The visual medley and transcendental music are not about making perfect sense; there is no linearity of a beginning, middle, and end; nor is there a hero who fights a villain and rides into the sunset. In one of the sequences, footage of a Saturn V rocket lifting off is followed by footage of the May 1962 explosion of an Atlas-Centaur rocket. There are montages where one feels as though one is peering down from the clouds onto barren deserts and sunsets reflected on skyscrapers. It has no story in the formal sense, and yet you can't peel your eyes away from the narrative it creates, how it can be interpreted from one viewer to another. Cut to the song "Baby" by Four Tet in 2020 or any of the exotic landscapes that form the crux of Cercle concerts in the past two years.

The task of our time is to embody the diverse facets of the crisis we face—not just as an abstract occurrence that happens to someone. Perhaps this requires an appeal to our senses, not just our minds. One of the most interesting creative expressions that arises out of this juncture is the visual representation of climate change and how it could potentially affect people's perception of the issue. A prime example of this is the internet culture that followed the

screening of Planet Earth in April 2019. While often the images of glaciers melting seem like it's happening on some other planet, hundreds of people broke down sobbing as they watched walruses plummeting to their deaths through their laptop screens. Another projection of the environment exerting its narrative over the human narrative is the phrase winter is coming. This visual and linguistic medley enforces what we already know to be true—life is guided not so much by reason as by the strength of our emotions.

The body of artistic work with regard to climate change has only been expanding and even becoming a part of popular culture. In India this seems to have taken the form of returning to folklore set against a specific geography that also seeps into its culture and polity. Two notable artistic works which have broken boundaries are the films *Jallikattu* and *Karnan*. Both evoke the supernatural through what feels like a Marquezian magic realism abundant with metaphors. Both films also brought to mind ideas I remember from Tamil classes as a twelve-year-old; the Dravidian division of landscape by its attributes and local gods—kurinji, the Western Ghats with its flora and fauna; mullai, the riverbanks, fertile and flourishing; marudham, the hillside where Lord Murugan resides; neidhal, the seashores with salt and fish; and paalai, the barren scrubland in the west. In *Jallikattu*, which was selected as India's official entry for the Oscars, the metaphor is a wild buffalo causing human-animal conflict, an everyday phenomenon now that their habitats are threatened. Set against the politically laden landscape of the Western Ghats of Kerala, the buffalo thwarts its killers over and over again until the protagonists themselves succumb alongside it in its pursuit. In *Karnan*, the metaphors are more intertwined with humans—the spirit of a local goddess, a donkey with its legs tied to stop it from running away, the cats, the dogs, the worms and their birds of prey, and a horse all feed into the caste struggle of the scrublands and forests of Tamil Nadu. Here is a film where instead of conflict, the creatures of the landscape form the shape of its politics alongside the humans. It is notable that most of the criticism of the film is centred on the apparent overuse of animals. When one asks, why so many animals? Doesn't it only prove how disassociated the human experience has become from nature? It is almost as if we have forgotten that this land and everything in it is as much for the cats and the insects as it is for humans. The erasure that accompanies ecocide—the systematic wiping out of ecological systems—can only be combated by the awareness of its existence and our actions against them. The cultural moment is ripe for the rise of a radical ecological democracy tied to art, politics, and the Anthropocene.

The supposed impending doom of the climate crisis would not be the end of the world, not really. It would just be the end of the world as we know it. Not a giant flood that consumes everything living but a world of phenomenally lesser living standards, a world without clean drinking water, a world without the birds and animals we see today. There is evidence enough to suggest that environmental conflicts have often in turn given rise to human conflicts (Diamond 51). A step right back into

the old adage of a dog-eat-dog world. Impending doom, only if we let it be. To reimagine such a future requires not just a great scientific heroism but a reimagination of what it means to be human. In such moments that require paradigm shifts, stories always come to the rescue as record keepers, as a heuristic tool. Fiction comes to be reimagined in such a way that it becomes a form of bearing witness, of testifying, and of charting the career of the conscience (Ghosh 167). To shake a world out of balance back to itself within a small window that is rapidly closing, perhaps what we need now more than ever is the very thing that makes us human—art.

III.

As a kid, I'd dream of a drowning world. Perhaps that is why I've always felt a calling to the ocean. For three summers I walked the beaches of Chennai after the city had fallen asleep, searching for nesting Olive Ridley turtles while the sea crept up on us silently. Every year, the sea would have eaten a little more into the land. I would think of my dream as I walked on the shorelines. I've come to believe that the ocean is as alive as any of us and just as intelligent, perhaps even more so than us. Some days, you could almost taste the intensity of the salt and the thirst. Some days, it would be cold fury and the thundering of waves landing on top of one another. There were days when the ocean was almost crooning lullabies. As a kid when I dreamt of the world drowning, I used to be terrified of the din of the ocean. Now I am learning to listen to her voice. When I dream of the world drowning, it does not end with the drowning. From somewhere high up in the heavens, a kamikaze leaf falls, like a cradle, gently rocking in the air to meet the roaring waters below. And the second they touch, I wake.

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Once Upon a Time: A Life in Stories

SHUBHAM GUPTA

About the Author

Shubham came to YIF with two STEM degrees and left with a job as a writing teacher. The catalyst for this was the critical writing programme. His preceptor, Anuj Gupta, helped him learn, unlearn, and relearn all steps of the writing process. Ashoka University's emphasis on critical thinking has made Shubham stick around–for the past two years, he has been teaching at the Undergraduate Writing Programme and will now be joining the PhD programme in English. In this essay, he reflects on the one thing that started it all: an inexplicable love for stories.

Look up but avoid eye contact. Keep walking, keep walking. Swerve left to give way to the girl in a hurry. A slight nod to the right to acknowledge the warmth of the sunshine on the campus lawns. A lapse of judgement resulting in an exchange of awkward half-smiles with an acquaintance. Walk faster. Stop. Then earphones. Unlock. Scroll, scroll. Press play. A momentary blindness. Then the words flow.

> *When I was seventeen*
> *My mother said to me*
> *"Don't stop imagining. The day that you do is the day that you die."* (Lagoon)

Trevor Powers did not write this song for me. I do not know him or his wise mother. I only know a few things. His music project was called Youth Lagoon.[1] This song is called "17", from an album called *The Year of Hibernation*. He wrote it when he was 20 or 21, suffering from anxiety and an acute fear of death. The nostalgia for a recent past, pregnant with the poetry of his mother's words, gave him a release. The death of imagination is the death of the soul, of the heart, of the human being. We are merely mortal, but stories last. Don't stop imagining. Don't stop imagining. Trevor Powers did not write this song for me, but his voice rings in my head, telling me to look for magic in everyday things.

The final panel of my favourite comic strip goes something like this. Disgruntled by the limits of the world we inhabit[2], Calvin lies down flat on the ground, defeated, and exclaims to Hobbes, "Reality continues to ruin my life" (Waterson). In six words, this existential six-year-old captured the essence of storytelling. Reality is what happens to us. You fail an exam, you lose that girl, you flick through the daily newspaper, you die in a war, you get through yet another day at work, you exist, you exist, you exist. By virtue of its very definition, reality is humdrum. It is objective and straightforward. The human mind, fortunately, likes subjectivity. It likes to think in stories. If reality is what happens to us, stories are how we respond to those happenings.

Why do we cling to stories? There are many reasons. For some, it is a need to disassociate from reality, stemming from a place of dissatisfaction. The mind immediately wanders to *Life Is Beautiful*, the heart-warming, heartbreaking Italian film set in the Nazi concentration camps. How do you forget Guido and the stories he makes up to protect his son from the horror of the reality that surrounds them? It is easy to dismiss it all as a lie, as a fabrication of the truth. It takes far more courage to believe in a little bit of magic. Stories are not detached from what is real; for many of us, they shape our very realities. Some of us seek stories because of curiosity. You walk into a dark movie theatre, settle down on a nice seat with your warm popcorn, and for a little while, you escape. In a moment, you are in the Millennium Falcon with Han Solo and Chewbacca, fighting for intergalactic peace. Or perhaps it is midnight in Paris and you're lost in the vagaries of

1 Powers retired the Youth Lagoon project in 2016, tweeting that there was "nothing left to say through Youth Lagoon". He continues making music under his own name.
2 The limits in question involved his inability to pick up a large snowball and throw it at someone's face.

the high society of the 1920s.[3] Spare a moment and look at the beach. Sam Shakusky and Suzy Bishop are dancing to *Le Temps de l'Amour*.[4] In a moment of self-awareness, you recoil. There is the hint of magic again. You are caught in the world of stories.

Each story-world may seem infinite, but each story begins somewhere. My own obsession with stories too has a genesis, albeit one that is itself scattered across a couple of stories. The first is The Tale of the Two Libraries. It goes like this.

In primary school, we had a library period. Each week, we sat in that cramped library, poring over the likes of *Tinkle, Chandamama, Champak*[5], and other assorted magazines. It was the most fascinating thing in the world for a boy like me. Those 40 minutes went by faster than I would have liked. At the end of it, we were issued a book. The process, however, was unique. The librarian picked up a stack of books and put them on her desk. We students formed an orderly line. As we walked up to the desk, we were assigned whichever book was at the top. In the boundaries of this tiny library in the middle of the chaos of New Delhi, the naïveté of youth excused us from the concept of choice. Funnily enough, I did not mind. Money was not abundant at home, so the idea of getting to read a different book each week was good enough for me. I diligently read whatever I was issued. As proof of us having read what we were issued, we were required to submit a short summary each week. For most of my classmates, reading was an unnecessary infliction on their playtime. Thus, the blurbs present at the back of the book were blindly copied and submitted. Even at the age of ten or 12, this was an absurd idea for me. Instead, I began writing reviews. This impressed the librarian. An honour was bestowed upon me: every week, I could choose my own book. This had an immense impact on me. Soon, I was browsing the shelves, getting my hands on the likes of *Oliver Twist, Huckleberry Finn, Black Beauty, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea, The Famous Five*, and so on. That library became my favourite place in the world. When we moved on to the middle school library in seventh grade, I was heartbroken. Then one Friday, things changed.

As the school bus trundled homewards, I threw a cursory glance outside the window. An old, beat-up van snaked its way into a tiny alley. On its side were plastered the following words—"Delhi Public Library Mobile Van". Upon reaching home, an enquiry was immediately commissioned. Within 30 minutes, I was browsing through the dusty shelves of that mobile library, leafing through tattered copies of the *Hardy Boys* series. A new Friday ritual began. By 3 pm, I was back home from school. By 3:30, I was rushing towards the van. Then a sigh. A hasty browsing. A revelation. Then the run back home, towards the couch. A restriction on movement and chaos until the last page was over. Then the longing for a new book, a new story. Eventually, the

3 *Midnight in Paris*, Woody Allen's fantastic film, is another study of imagination.
4 *Moonrise Kingdom* is a stunning film by Wes Anderson, and this scene in particular demands that the audience get up and strut shamelessly.
5 For many '90s Indian kids, these were the primary magazines. There was no *Batman* in my childhood.

longing got the better of my morality. Lies were told, credentials were forged, and soon, I had two subscriptions to the Delhi Public Library in my name. *The Hardy Boys Mysteries* consists of a total of 190 volumes. A conservative estimate tells me that I have read at least 70 of them, almost all of them from the insides of the tiny van that would roll up every Friday at 3 pm.[6] It also introduced me to the world of Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie and Jeffrey Archer. This boy was dreaming of picnics in the English countryside, of the elegance of elaborate dinner parties, of the dampness and mystery of Baker Street, of the loneliness of prison cells, all from the confines of The Couch That Didn't Move. The two libraries shaped me and my thinking. They taught me the power of imagination. All I had to do was allow myself to believe in their magic. Thus concludes The Tale of the Two Libraries.

The second story involves a strange word. *Sonder. Es oh en dee ee aar.* Sonder. The first interesting thing about this word is that it is made up.[7] The second thing is that its place of origin is a blog on Tumblr. Here is the definition of 'sonder', as proposed by The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows:[8]

> *n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.*(Koenig)

When I was struggling in engineering school, the literary club on campus proved to be a haven. It was one of the few places on campus that respected imagination, which was not surprising in a college where innovation was preached but not practised. It allowed me the space to express myself in whatever way I felt, with elaborate puns and terrible poetry soon becoming my speciality. When I became editor of the annual magazine, 'sonder' came to me when I was scouring for a theme. It seemed apt. I was used to making up stories about strangers. This was a favourite pastime in the Delhi Metro. Perhaps Uncle is tired at 9 am because he was up all night in the newspaper office, where he is the editor. Maybe that girl over there is on her way to take an economics exam. Is she considering dropping out of college? Who knows? Then there were my parents. Being brought up by two doctors meant that dinner-table conversations were often about the patients that they were currently treating. From the details that they threw around, I tried to construct entire narratives. My mother once told me about a lady who, in a fit of madness,

6 A quick check online informs me that the van still rolls up at the same place at the same time.
7 My critical writing instructor's response to this statement was that all words are made up.
8 There is a wonderful little video that accompanies this definition, for those interested. Link follows: https://youtu.be/AkoML0_FiV4. Accessed 11 August 2021.

smothered her infant daughter with a pillow right on the hospital bed. When the initial shock subsided, I tried to imagine the kind of things that would have gone through her head. Making up stories became a way of accessing my own emotions. Sonder taught me empathy. It told me not to forget the complex stories that each person lives every moment. Stories do not exist merely in books. They exist in the throbbing heart of each human being who passes you by.

Sometimes, it is not enough being a background character in other people's stories. Sometimes, it becomes important to remind yourself that, paradoxically, stories grow as they are given away. Stories grow, and they help you grow with them. For stories are not sedentary; they move around and shape us. Neil Gaiman once said, "The reason why story is so important to us is because it's actually this thing that we have been using since the dawn of humanity to become more than just one person" (qtd in Popova). If I were just myself, it would have been a terrible life. Thankfully, there have been others to keep me company. Take, for example, this song called "Blues Run the Game" by the late Jackson C Frank. It was decided on the first listen that it was the saddest song I had ever heard. Now, someone else in some corner of the world might have heard it some day and dismissed it as just some song. Frank would have no further influence on their life. With me, it was different. When Frank lamented that no matter where he went, "the blues are all the same" (Frank), it made me tear up. This story could have ended here. *Young Man Discovers One More Sad Song*. The end. But Frank stayed.

Here was a dead man, but as I read more and more about his life, he began talking to me. He told me how he started playing music. An accident in elementary school had left him with over half of his body burnt. Sympathising with his condition and the inevitable loneliness, his teacher bought him a guitar. A guitar is a fine instrument, but it does not cure depression. His childhood trauma had forever scarred Frank. He recorded only one album, suffered from schizophrenia, accidentally got blinded in his left eye, and died at 56 of pneumonia. With this in mind, every time I listen to "Blues Run the Game", I am in another world, giving the dead man a warm hug, as if trying to piece him back together. Our stories combined in a surreal manner. This tends to happen with much of the art that I consume. When I watch *In The Mood For Love*[9], I am reminded of the cinema professor who gave me the only A I got in college. When I listen to *The First Year* by Tajdar Junaid, I am back in the crowd at The Humming Tree[10] in Bangalore, listening to Junaid tell me how the song is about the relationship between a mother and the child in the first year after birth, inspired by his own private life. When I read *Lolita*, I think of the girl who lent me the book and told me to lap up all the words in its pages, rich and sweet as honey. We remember things in stories. We are storytellers by our very nature. Even before language evolved, cave paintings told stories of

9 Directed by Hong Kong film-maker, Wong Kar-wai, it has often been described as a poetic film.
10 A popular live music venue on 12th Main, Indiranagar, Bangalore, a favourite haunt of the best musicians of the country, with yours truly in the audience every week.

hunts. Now the mediums have changed, but the crux remains the same. Stories give us life, because, as Gabriel García Márquez, says, "Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it" (Márquez).

One of my favourite persons was my eighth-grade English teacher, Ms Raka Mukherjee. Ms Mukherjee was a fierce lady whose favourite hobbies were grammar and discipline, or at least that is what it looked like. Somehow, she took a liking for me. When she retired in 2010, she gifted me *Haroun* and the *Sea of Stories* by Salman Rushdie. Our young hero, Haroun, faces off against Khattam Shud, the sinister tyrant of the land of Chup. Khattam Shud "is the Arch-Enemy of all Stories, even of language itself" (Rushdie), hating them because he cannot control them, as each story-stream in the Sea of Stories has a world of its own, a world that he cannot control. Khattam Shud is strong, but stories are more powerful. We know that they grow, but now we know that they outlive us. When a person dies, they stop existing, but they are not gone. The present is not a zephyr that lingers; it is like sitting in a train and watching the endless line of trees go by, each passing tree the previous moment of your life as it passes, going, going, gone. Everything that we say, then, is a story. It is an ache for the past or a longing for the future. It is the smell of your lover's hair. It is the coldness of your feet in the Delhi winters. It is the stillness of the forest; it is the madness of the government office. It is the sound of a newborn's cry. It is the taste of cherry. It is the yellowness of autumn leaves, the greying of your mother's hair. It is poetry. It is raindrops on the windowpane. It is a gunshot. It is the paws of a dog as he runs on the sand on the beach. It is each grain of sand on that beach, everywhere and nowhere, insignificant, and spectacular, static, and endless. It is you. It is me. It is life and death and everything in between and beyond. It is magic. It is real.

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A Dictionary

ANEEQA KHALID

About the Author

Academically oriented, Aneeqa is interested in combining the fields of psychology and human rights, while actively reimagining and pushing the known contours of both disciplines. She is interested in mapping conflict through a psychosocial lens and looking at how conflict shapes the idea of the self. Her research interests aligned with the scholarly work that her Critical Writing course, Anthropological Unsettlements, was based on and that is when she realized that writing, conversing and articulating could be a recourse that would enable her to formulate her own voice: one not restricted to the conventionally imagined contours of a single discipline.

My relationship with my home town has evolved over time: initially experienced as an embodied reality, it eventually transformed into a more nuanced understanding of conflict. As I recall my own childhood in Kashmir, growing up in the late 1990s and early 2000s, witnessing daily uncertainties and being acquainted with human rights violations from early on, I understand how it shaped my identity differently compared to friends who did not grow up in conflict zones: for those of us who live in conditions of chronic conflict, violence gets normalised. Readings on state violence in my Critical Writing (CW) class spurred me to revisit my history with a critical consciousness. Conversations with my CW instructor led me to push the boundaries of a literary narrative/memoir and experiment with the genres in a way that they unfolded a pedagogy of the self. This called for a moment of self-reflexivity and interrogation which presented the circulatory nature of history: one that is not only inclusive of the localities, but also weaves an intricate web to connect histories on a global scale.

My experiment with a literary narrative/memoir is in the form of a letter dedicated to my home town in which I explore the associations formed through language and their impact on identity construction. This memoir hints at the hierarchy existing in terms of political structures, developing languages, and the play between the two. The piece attempts to highlight the negotiation of conflict on an intellectual and emotional level. It traces the journey from the initial familiarisation of a child to a political vocabulary through a lived reality to an academic pursuit of a young Kashmiri woman understanding conflict on a global scale.

To my home town,

Have I ever written about you before? I don't think so. We were not even allowed to talk about you at home. Why so hush-hush? Is this because you ask for liberation? What does that mean to me? What do you mean to me? I've been asking questions about you since I was a child. You were introduced to me with words like *hartal* and *curfew*, words too complicated for me to understand then—to me, they just meant not going out of the house. These new-fangled words became a part of my vocabulary in no time, probably because people around me used them so often. I didn't know the difference between the two words—both restricted our movement. New 'outlandish' words kept being added to my dictionary as I grew up. As far as memory goes, there have only been murmurs about the state of conflict we lived and embodied each day. Although nobody at home talked about what was happening, we could not escape it. You always found your way into our conversations.

People talk about your beauty: the snow-capped mountains, the lush green meadows, the sparkling rivers, the lakes, the bewitching atmosphere. … But yours was the sort of beauty that would always hurt and haunt my dreams: no one would talk about the old weary Chinar, frozen in time, always crimson and never green; the warm and murky Jhelum, always thirsty for blood; the bodies with flesh hanging from them; the sacks containing decapitated

heads; the dead air of the gunshots; and the boom of the curfew. I wonder why? Why this silence about your pain and anguish?

As a child, I remember going shopping with my mother to Lalchowk one day. Lalchowk is the hub of activity: you can get everything here, from clothes to electronics to food and books. I could see a young man trying to control the crowd of people surrounding his stall; the women sitting beside his stall, who sold fish, were also busy with the customers and so was the young boy who sold second-hand items. Everyone seemed preoccupied. Mouji's sole aim was to get my new school uniform, but I had my eyes fixed on the toy gun that an old man was selling on the street. I was a stubborn child and I kept pulling Mouji's dupatta till she agreed to buy it for me. I had been seeing big men in uniforms holding big guns in their hands, and I wanted one for myself. As Mouji was paying the old man, he said, *"Dapaan Zero Bridge gov crackdown, yeti maa laagan talaeshi Karin. Tuih neeriv. Bharose chuni kenh!"*[1]

On hearing this, Mouji panicked. She started sifting through her bag, looking for something. "*Shukriyah*," she replied, *"mye chuni card ti saeeth kenh. Aes naerav."*[2]

She was interrupted by an announcement made by a police jeep carrying several Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) men and, within seconds, Mouji dragged me to the nearest shop. I was peeking out from the glass window; everyone was running here and there on the streets and I couldn't understand why. I looked at Mouji's distraught face and decided to stay quiet when, all of a sudden, we heard a blast! Someone in the shop shouted, *"Khudaya Reham! Blast haa!"*[3] I buried my head in Mouji's warm chest and felt her heart racing with mine. We stayed in the shop for some time, and when we finally moved out, we saw a large black spot on the road and some men cleaning red marks around it. Mouji decided to take a shikara as it was the safest means to reach home at that time. I had just witnessed something very unusual and I finally asked Mouji about it and these new words that I had just heard: *crackdown* and *blast*.

Mouji tried explaining it to me: *"Crackdown ke waqt checking hoti hai, school card gassi panas saeeth thavun. Ma sann waen yath, pakh TV vichao."*[4] I did not fully understand, but two more words were added to my dictionary of you.

I soon started to relate to these words.. What was the significance of the identity card? Apparently, the identity card was my identity and I have to show it, to prove my identity and carry it at all times; otherwise I could get in trouble. As I grew up, I learnt more

1 "Rumours are that there has been a crackdown at Zero Bridge and they might start checking here as well. You should leave immediately!"
2 "Thank you! I'm not even carrying my identity card. We'll leave …"
3 "Allah have mercy on us! It's a bomb blast!"
4 "They check your ID card during crackdown, always keep it with you. Don't think about this too much, come let's watch TV."

words: *Kaeni jung*[5]*, lathi charge, firing, grenade, shaheed*[6]*, AK-47, gooel*[7], bandook[8]. Some of these became a part of our play. I remember my brother and I playing, one of us pretending to be a protester and the other one, a policeman. We performed the same actions we saw being acted out on the streets, substituting a twig for a gun and paper balls for stones. You found your way into a child's play as well.

And when I think about the kind of violence you and I have endured, I'm transported to a very vivid memory of CRPF men pummelling the doors of our house. They looked really angry and I could not understand what they wanted. My aunt and I were the only ones at home, so she went running to open the door and I went after her. I was hiding behind her shalwar and felt mortified as these men in their uniforms pushed her aside and demanded to inspect the house. I hurt my head as it hit the wall when the men were barging in, but I rushed to see what was happening. They were going into all the rooms and flinging our stuff around aggressively. I was taken aback by this rupture in our everyday routine. Later, I asked my aunt what gave them the right to barge in and dismantle our home like that. She told me that these men in uniforms have been given the authority to check people's homes whenever they want and that it's called CASO (Cordon & Search Operation). Another word was added to my vocabulary of my land.

The addition of new words in my dictionary of you seemed endless. Dear *Mouj Kasheer*[9], your existence is entangled in the convoluted nest of these terms, special articles, acts, laws, and restrictions imposed on you: Article 370, Article 310, AFSPA, Section 144. … Oh wait, Article 370 is no more, burying your supposed autonomy with it. I could never make much sense of this eerie uncertainty. But, as I grew up, I had to read about it and live with it to get to know you better. With time, I also got acquainted with the sounds of your oppressors: the inauspicious announcements, the guns being fired, and the blasts. These sounds—bark, clack, boom!—still resonate in my head. Even now, when I'm not at home, whenever I hear a loud thud, these associations return unbidden. You have had such a deep impact on me! And you would think that I've got used to this, but I'm sorry, it's still difficult to keep up with the uncertainty that engulfs you.

And yet, in this uncertainty, I found the voice of your people: the protesters shouting slogans, *"Hum kya chahte? AZAADI!" "Jis Kashmir ko khoon se seencha, woh Kashmir hamara hai!"*[10] These are my people as well; this is my voice too. In no time I became accustomed to these words and they became a part of me as they are a part of you. I grew up with you, trying to know you and understand you. We have grown together. I started giving meaning to these words in my dictionary

5 Stone-pelting.
6 Martyr.
7 Bullet.
8 Gun.
9 Mother Kashmir.
10 "What do we want? Freedom! The Kashmir that has been drenched in our blood, it belongs to us, the Kashmiris!"

and I now understand who you are to me. I no longer know you only through these words in my dictionary of my home town, but now I actually know you, I feel you. I respect your struggle for liberation, for now I understand it. I've felt your pain and grief. I have caressed your wounds. I've cried with you, for you. I am a product of you:

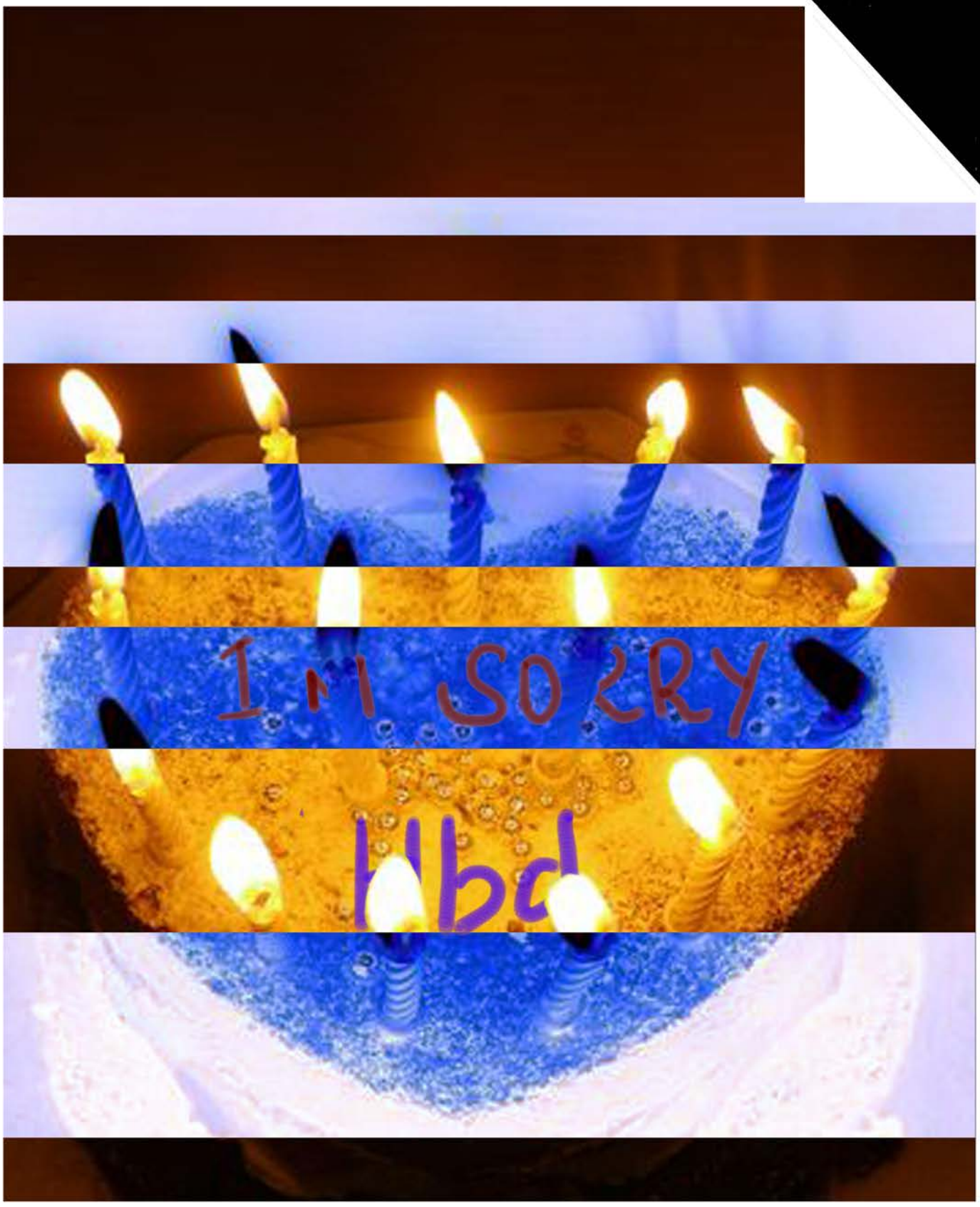
I am a child crying for her mother who has been silenced, a child who does not have the luxury to fall back into her mother's arms as she weeps. I am *your* child. I am a child of conflict, exiled, writing a letter to "The Country Without a Post Office".

To Kashmir, the paradise on earth:

Agar firdaus bar roo-e zameen ast,
Hameen ast-o hameen ast-o
hameen ast.

—Amir-e-Khusru Dehluvi

11 Ali, Agha Shahid. The Country Without a Post Office. 1997.
12 "If there is a paradise on earth/It is this, it is this, it is this."



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3

The Heart of the Mind: The Rationale of Forgiveness

ARNA CHUGANI

About the Author

In her pre-YIF life, Arna's relationship with writing was built on the foundation of a rich experience in drafting emails ('Thanks & Regards' was once her favourite sign-off) and adding bullet points on her PowerPoint slides. For someone who was convinced that the Critical Writing course would be her doomsday device, it surprisingly turned out to be a truly revelatory experience for her at the fellowship. Through the process of writing for the course, and the resolve of her preceptor Anunaya Rajhans, she discovered a channel of communication with texts, authors and ideas, and more significantly, with her own self. Today, she doesn't really consider herself to be a skilled writer, but writing does help her see herself – it helps her observe her thoughts, her patterns and her process of meaning-making

As I walked through a door of hurt,
I stumbled upon a door that c
ould help me heal.
My heart sang a song of relief, while
my mind questioned if it would be
forced to seal.

The conversation enveloping the boundaries between the rational and the beyond rational, between the scientific and the philosophical, between enquiry and faith, between reason and intuition, has been an ongoing debate, and it may well be an eternal one. During my year at the Young India Fellowship (YIF), I often found myself at a crossroads: on one end, an endeavour to develop the tools to think critically, and on the other, a calling to embark on a personal journey of healing and emotional transformation. I drew my boundaries, and two camps of thinking emerged as conflicting flag-bearers: the rational school of thought, and the emotional one. The paper positions itself as a medium of enquiry into the strength and validity of this inner conflict, and contends that there is an inherent osmosis between the rational and the emotional. I question the demarcation through the lens of forgiveness—a concept that I had associated with being spiritual and emotional (and therefore, as an outlier to the rational school of thinking). I attempt to break down my understanding of forgiveness in its philosophical and metaphysical components, and unfold these components to encounter a plausible thread of rationality within them.

At the outset it would be pertinent to acknowledge an important disclaimer that would contribute to the reader's comprehension of this paper. Through history, philosophy, science, and spirituality, authors, scientists, and thinkers have defined the multiple theories of knowledge in a multitude of ways. I have taken the liberty of using a handful of words interchangeably. Reason, rationality, science, and logic have been tied together; and emotional cognisance, philosophy, metaphysics, and spirituality in another bundle. As I consciously follow this rather crude approach to funnel the focus of the enquiry, I acknowledge that each of these words has its own definitions, and I will keep in mind the limitations and the complexity of terminology that I engage with.

The Fortified Borders

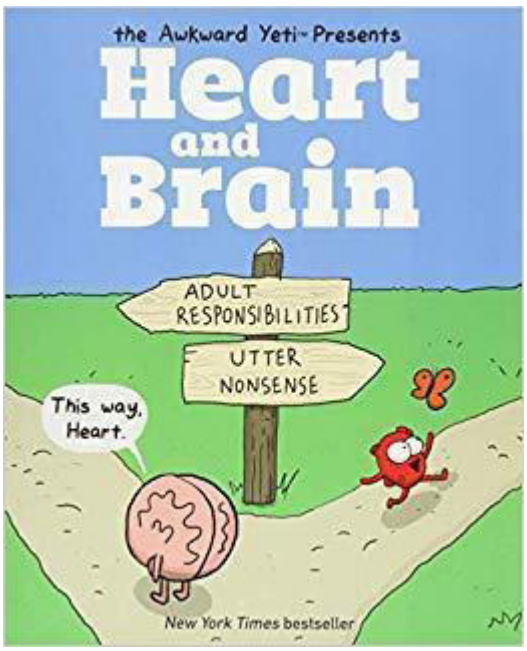

Image credits: Seluk, Nick. Heart and Brain. Kansas City, United States: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015

The game of chess between two schools of thinking has not only been a personal conflict, but has also been a chapter of interest in the world of

academia and philosophical pondering. Demonstrating how the emotional school of thought has been checkmating the rational school of thought, David Best in his paper "Education of Emotions: The Rationality of Feeling" writes, "The root of the trouble is the largely unquestioned assumption that pure emotional feelings are 'direct', in the sense of being 'untainted' by cognition, understanding and rationality" (Best, 240). Best, in his paper, theorises the possibility of 'educating' one's emotions, thus in the process, attaching them with reason, and brings to the reader the proposition of adding such education to mainstream education. The 'trouble' Best talks about is the growing independence of rationality from emotion, a phenomenon he largely attributes to the perceived *purity* and *individuality* that followers of the emotional school of thought assert over their contemporaries. This game of chess is not a one-sided game either. The rational school of thinking has its own moves in this debate. Historian and philosopher Frank Thilly in his paper "Psychology, Natural Science and Philosophy" draws attention to this demarcation between the two repositories of knowledge and writes,

> ...Psychology too cut loose from her old-fashioned sisters (aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics). ... The introduction of laboratory methods into psychology has given it a scientific savor, and the experimentalists are often ashamed of the company they are forced to keep. They have greater respect for the kind of work done by the natural scientists, who are apt to smile at the pretensions of the philosophers ... (Thilly, 131).

Though they do not claim the superiority of one school of thought over the other, both Best and Thilly indicate that the boundaries between the two theories of knowledge appear not just distinct from each other, but also seemingly at loggerheads with each other. It appears that the ardent enthusiasts of the two schools use the innate essence of their school to question the validity of the other in the quest for meaning-making.

The divide is not a closed chapter of the past. One may claim, and rightly so, the visible existence of this debate in contemporary academia even in times as recent as ours. Professor Massimo Pigliucci of the City University of New York comments in his essay "The Demarcation Problem" about the long-lived will-power of this debate,

> The fact that we continue to discuss the issue of demarcation (between science and pseudoscience, or metaphysics) may seem peculiar, though, considering that Laudan (in 1983) allegedly laid rest to the problem ... (Laudan) concluded that ... if we would stand up and be counted on the side of reason, we ought to drop terms like 'pseudoscience' ... from our vocabulary.
> (Pigliucci, 10)

In this paper, Pigliucci challenges Larry Laudan's much referenced paper "The Demise of the Demarcation Problem" (written in 1983 in the book of essays *Physics, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*) which was then

renowned for bringing an end to the demarcation problem between science and pseudoscience. Laudan rendered pseudoscience meaningless and thus conferred the authority of meaning-validity to scientific enquiry and empirical evidence. Pigliucci, by challenging Laudan's claim, brings back to philosophical enquiry the 'demarcation problem' that probably never left the question bank.

The question of this demarcation is not only a philosophical and academic pursuit. Digital cartoonist Nick Seluk encapsulates this very demarcation problem in his cartoon strips under the trademark *The Awkward Yeti*. What started out as a book that became the *New York Times Bestseller* has now found resonance with its 2.3 million followers on Facebook. Two protagonists in Seluk's world, the heart and the brain, have their individual personalities. While *Heart* seems free-spirited, carefree, sometimes 'irrational', and always with her 'heart' on her *sleeve*, *Brain* in these pages appears to be rational, a planner, a believer in action over word, sometimes with traits of a 'classic over-thinker'. The conversations between Heart and Brain form the vessel for Seluk's creative pursuit. Sometimes in deep thought, sometimes in questions of distress, and sometimes simply in routine conversation, the two often appear to be at a crossroads, each one traversing a path different from the other. With visual representation of the age-old demarcation problem, his content reminds us that the tug of war between the heart and the brain is a common, shared experience.

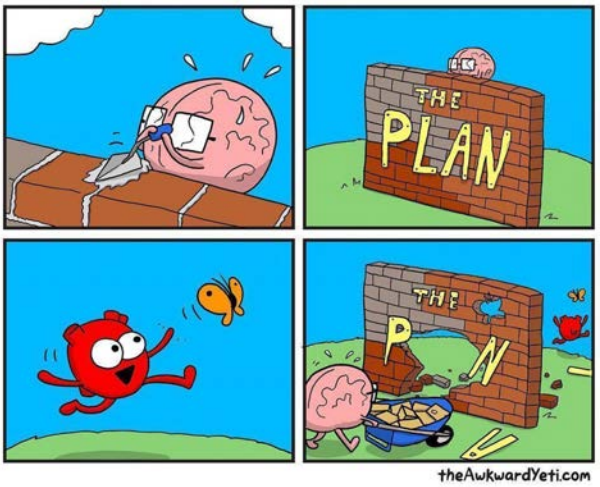

Image credits: The Awkward Yeti, 3 March 2019, https://www.facebook.com/AwkwardYeti/photos/a.323340867741595/2118480981560899/?type=3&theater. Accessed 12 August 2021.

The Blurring Borders

"The misunderstanding of passion and reason, as if the latter were an independent entity ... and as if every passion did not possess its quantum of reason."
Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche, 208)

Through this section, I question the established divide through the lens of forgiveness—a tool that I had often associated solely with an emotional and spiritual significance. The enquiry into the seemingly complex realm of forgiveness begins with an observation of the ambivalence that could be attached to forgiving the *forgivee*. In *The Book of Joy*, Douglas Abrams scripts the unfolding of the five-day conversations between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu as they discuss a question that has been one of spiritual enquiry, the question of finding joy in the midst of 'inevitable suffering'. In one such conversation that steered

towards forgiveness, the Dalai Lama emphatically says,

> There is an important distinction between forgiveness and simply allowing others' wrongdoing. ... Where the wrong action is concerned, it may be necessary to take appropriate counteraction to stop it. Toward the actor, or the person, however, you can choose not to develop anger and hatred. This is where the power of forgiveness lies—not losing sight of the humanity of the person while responding to the wrong with clarity and firmness.
> (Dalai Lama, 234)

The Dalai Lama calls for a distinction between the doer and their actions, and maintains the distinction between 'Chinese hard-liners' and their actions that caused the people of Tibet pain and suffering. Questions of whether the two are distinguishable, and thus whether a person does have agency over her actions arise from this read. However, for the purpose of this paper, I draw your attention to the last statement in the quote. The forgiver, he seems to suggest, is one who does not do nothing about the situation she finds herself suffering in, yet recognises the perpetrator as a fellow human, thus focusing her remedial response on the *wrongdoing* and not on the *wrongdoer*. Attempting to unravel the steps in this process, it appears that the pursuit of the path that the Dalai Lama suggests would begin with taking a step back, detaching the self from the pain, and almost sitting on the fence of neutrality as an observer. *Sitting on the fence* is what comedian Tim Minchin recommends in his "anthem to ambivalence".[1] Talking about worshipping a fellow human without accounting for his flaws, Minchin's song plays, "You can't see which grass is greener. Chances are it's neither, and either way it's easier, to see the difference, when you're sitting on the fence" (Minchin). Minchin challenges the tendency of an absolute binary classification and tells his viewers to hold back from dividing the world "into wrong and into right". It is almost ironic to connect his quote to the quote of the Dalai Lama's since Minchin through his song satirises the glorification of the Dalai Lama as well. However, what Minchin suggests for political awareness, can be drawn to what the Dalai Lama suggests for forgiveness awareness: the very necessity of taking a step back and sitting on the fence, before making a judgement.

Once we find a comfortable abode on the fence, it would be insightful to question whether there would be a return on the investment of time and effort that would go into the process of forgiveness. That is to say, does granting forgiveness add any value for the forgiver? Colin Tipping, life coach and author of *Radical Forgiveness: Making Room for the Miracle*, is likely to answer in the affirmative. He writes, "He (the wrongdoer) provided you with an opportunity to get in touch with your

1 "The Fence" is a song performed by Tim Minchin and the Heritage Orchestra in 2011 as a part of his stand-up set. The performance is a commentary on the ideological boundaries we build, and an account of persuasion to sit on the fence, reflect, and think. The audio version of the song can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2zU3fHg3wI.

original pain and to see how a certain belief about yourself was running your life. In doing so, he gave you the opportunity to understand and change your belief, thus healing your original pain. (This understanding is) what I mean as forgiveness" (Tipping, 26). Asserting that the act of 'radical forgiveness' is fulfilled when the identity of victimhood is replaced by the identity of a student, Tipping suggests that the pain one undergoes as the consequence of an action that requires forgiveness is in fact an *opportunity* to learn about and to heal an earlier stimulus. This opportunity makes the process of forgiveness not only a function focused solely on the absolution of the *forgivee*. A part of the equation also includes an added value for the *forgiver*, potentially implying that forgiveness is not only an altruistic concept in its entirety.

Moving along the forgiveness decision tree, once the added value is identified, it is now the agency of the potential forgiver to forgive or exercise their right to refrain. Testament to exercising this agency is the short-lived life cycle of the Asian Women's Fund (AWF). The fund was set up by the Japanese government in 1995 as an apologetic compensation for the ageing former 'comfort women'—women and girls who were taken (by several historical accounts, forcibly) into wartime sexual slavery and held in 'comfort stations' near the Japanese military base camps during World War II (Brown et al., 217). At the time, an ongoing debatable number of 1,00,000 to 2,00,000 comfort women were taken captive from South Korea, China, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the Netherlands, among other geographies (Yoshimi). The Government of Japan set up a fund comprising $4.8 million raised from private contributions and $6.3 million from the state to fund 'welfare services' for the women who survived the systematic rape and sexual slavery by the then Japanese military. The women who accepted the funding, thus gesturally *forgiving* the state, would each receive $17,000, accompanied by an apology letter signed by Japan's then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (Koizumi). A minuscule fraction of the estimated number of former comfort women accepted the *apology* compensation by the time the fund closed. In 2015, the foreign ministries of Japan and South Korea struck a deal of $8.3 million in return for South Korea absolving Japan for the actions of its former military. This fund, meant for the welfare of the women captured from the then annexed South Korea, was planned to be used for the welfare of the *state* instead (Berenson). An emphatic Facebook video shows the exchange of dialogue between a former comfort woman and the then vice minister of foreign affairs, Lim Sung-nam. The victim is seen repeatedly questioning the minister on the grounds of negotiations between the two states, "Shouldn't you have met the victims first before you do that [agree on the settlement]. ... Are you going to live this life for me? ... How could you do this, when we are alive as witness [sic] and evidence of history?" (Lim). Forgiveness, these women reaffirm, is a process undertaken after an analysis of the act of perpetration versus the authenticity of the apology, and is an agency that rests with the victim of the crime.

Through the above paragraphs, I see three key milestones en route to

forgiveness. One, a focus on objective segregation by taking an almost third-person view from the fence. Two, a pursuit of weighing the value it provides to the forgiver. Three, a restoration of the agency of choice in the hands of the forgiver. This prompts me to reconsider my former compartmentalisation of the concept of forgiveness as a solely mystical process—rather, the decision to forgive comprises within its realm processes that are likely to be identified and understood, if the cloud of demarcation between the rational and the beyond, between reason and spiritual, is open to the possibility of weakening in strength, even if not dissolving completely. Today, my spiritual journey enjoys the presence of reason, analysis, and critique: sometimes playing the devil's advocate, at times solidifying my trust in the process. As a result, I sometimes find myself in the midst of increased chaos, and sometimes approaching greater clarity. What has, however, been relatively more constant is the presence of a deeper internal dialogue.

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Happy Birthday (?)!

SIDAQ BATRA

About the Author

My dalliances with writing are personal, often painful, but always relieving in the end. It is an exploration of my anxieties and confusions. What the Critical Writing class gave me is the wings to explore without certainty and to embrace contradictions. The paper I am being credited for emerged as a result of a question I had often asked myself — why must birthdays be happy? The programme allowed my confusion to take the shape of curiosity and flow into words structured in sentences carefully transitioning from one to the other. While going through the paper I discovered that a detail well chosen is no detail at all. My structure, therefore, is akin to that of a "drunken in a midnight choir" as Cohen would say. This paper is the most fun I have had with my keyboard. I hope you enjoy reading it!

At the stroke of midnight, when the clock strikes 12, somebody will be celebrating their birthday—the fact that they will be turning a year older. I have been celebrating my birthday ever since I was born. Going by the pictures from the day, it seems like my first birthday celebration was apparently the biggest, and also quite happy. All the pictures have one thing in common—me. Cut to 2019. This year, as I turned 22 on the 13th of March, I could not help but question why birthdays must be happy? Why does everyone wish a happy birthday without even thinking twice? In fact, according to the *Guinness World Records, 1998*, the "Happy Birthday to You" song is the most recognised song in the English language. In the age of social media, birthdays are also more public than ever before. The limited scope for them to be personal is out of the question as everyone is aware of our birth date, and we celebrate our birthdays with our social media friends over and above our close family and friends. You must be wondering that if everybody celebrates their birthday, then does it even require our attention? As we shall discover, birthdays are not all that happy—or trivial—as one might think. An art installation by artist Sophie Calle shows what role birthdays can play on the mind of a person. *The Birthday Ceremony* showcases the presents that Sophie received over a period of 14 years when she celebrated her birthday party. She wanted her birthday to be remembered in order to overcome the insecurity that she had felt as a teenager. She would keep these gifts stored as a reminder of the fact that people loved her (Morris).

Psychologists have reaffirmed such phenomena and written about concepts like the birthday blues, birthday stress, and the anxiety associated with a birthday party. Through a lens of history and psychology, this paper aims to bring together a study of birthdays. It looks at the responses to and expectations of a birthday celebration in the virtual and real worlds. In doing so, I will argue that

Pictures of Sophie's birthday gifts as exhibited at the Tate, Britain

the expectation of a *happy* birthday has resulted in increased anxiety, across ages, which has been further aggravated with the advent of social media as people want to appear happy and show their best side.

This paper tries to investigate a primary question—why must birthdays be happy? It first explores the history of birthdays through a religious, historical, and capitalist lens before seeing how birthdays cause dissonance between the subjective age (the age one believes one is at) and the age of civil status (the numerical age calculated from birth). It then talks about a certain performance anxiety and anxiety during performance as one nears a birthday. Lastly, it moves onto social media to see how people react to birthdays and how social media has led to an increased anxiety around birthdays.

Chapter I—Celebrations Must Begin

2nd March 2019
Sitting on my bed logged onto Facebook

Birth days have been around since the birth of humans, but Birthdays with a capital B and the giant celebrations that surround them are fairly new. In this essay, birthdays shall refer to the latter, i.e., birthday celebrations. Two weeks away from my 22nd birthday, all my virtual friends already know that I am turning 22, and they are excited! Facebook indicates to me that it is my birthday month, and my friends—real and virtual—want the world to be excited about my special day which also happens to be special for the other 20.8 million people that share their birth date with me—not so special after all. As my mother walks into the room, posts have started appearing on my Facebook wall—childhood pictures and countdowns. My mother exclaims, "you are turning 22, what are your plans for this big birthday?" At first, I thought to myself that I am turning 22; is that any different from turning 21 or 23 or some other age? But then every year is supposed to be a big year. So why do we indulge in this ordinary, futile, recurring ritual each year? The only thing that it marks is the change of date and a change of age, after all. Closer scrutiny reveals that questions around the celebration of birthdays have bothered our ancestors long before I became anxious about my birthday celebration.

Historically speaking, life expectancy was less than 40 years[1] across Europe until the 18th century. It was lower than it is right now, and it was difficult to survive. Many people died young since medical facilities were fairly un-advanced and it is reasonable to say that it made sense to celebrate the fact that a person had made it through another year. From a religious lens, birthdays were a pretext for a great feast in Latin Antiquity before it came to be recognised as a sin by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church saw this as a wrongful, vain act of celebrating a mortal life and substituted it with the feast in the name of Saint Patronymic. The Protestant Reformation challenged this ideal and restored the power of civil age in the form of birthday parties.

1 This data has been taken from the National Bureau of Economic Research, Massachusetts.

Religion can give an origin for anything—even birthdays—and that came as a surprise to me as well.

However, the market around birthdays is not as old as these explanations. Today, a flourishing market exists around birthday celebrations. Birthdays have become an indispensable part of our lives with shops dedicated to birthday cakes and cards. The rise of the idea of 'individual liberty' in the 1960s around the Capitalist world presented an opportunity to the capitalists by creating conditions conducive to the celebration of individual expression. As a result, birthdays became a big day to commemorate individual life. This was a time when the television screens were broadcasting birthday parties of Hollywood stars and rich businessmen. Consequently, birthday songs and birthday parties became a big thing as people wanted to emulate what they were seeing on television screens. The birthday cake became a marker of class, and everyone aspired to have a birthday party like that of the infamous Marie Antoinette.[2] The market has only become more sophisticated since. Even as I sit in my room, I see the kind of advertisements that go along with birthdays. Birthday facial, birthday party, birthday vacation, and birthday sex are all dreams that have been sold to people in order to make them celebrate the day on which they were born. However, no answer has been provided to the fundamental question: Why must we celebrate this day? History has its reasons but what are my reasons? I have no part to play in my birth and there is nothing that I have done to feel special on this day. One can celebrate the fact that the previous year was good, but celebrating a new year in my life just for the sake of celebrating is something I do not understand. Maybe age can give an explanation for why people celebrate birthdays?

Chapter II—Ageing Backwards
6th March 2019

My aunt's golden jubilee birthday party—Asiad Village

There is a huge celebration today. My aunt is celebrating her 50th birthday—the golden jubilee—and a lot of people have gathered to celebrate her mid-life event. The party is themed in a colourful manner with mostly reds and yellows, and there is whispering in the air—some people are talking about her age of retirement while others are concerned about the marriage of her daughter. I hear people telling my aunt, "You look so young, no one can tell that you have now entered the second stage of your life." This makes me remember Shakespeare's evocative line, "What's in a name?" (*Romeo & Juliet*), and I am thinking to myself—what's in an age? Is age not just a number as we hear so often, or is it more than just a number? The politics around ageing is closely related to the anxiety that surrounds a birthday. While people like to celebrate their birthday, they also fear it since it makes them older, and this paradox of age is at the centre of the conflict between the subjective age and the chronological age. Psychologist

2 Marie Antoinette was a French queen in the late 18th century, and she was infamous for her decadence and lavish lifestyle.

Christian Helson has done some exciting work in this field and he points out that:

> This apparent paradox reveals the tension of the contemporary western individual between his age of civil status he cannot ignore and his subjective age to which he nevertheless identifies. This tension is at the bottom of our ambivalence between, on the one hand, the insistent temporality of the calendar and agendas, in our time of imperative deadlines, of precipitation in urgency, of exigency of simultaneity and immediacy, from an obsession with quantitative measurement to which does not escape that of time; on the other hand, the imperative aspiration to blossom and fulfil oneself, to win back on the shrinking time of the social calendar a kind of 'extended time' necessary to 'become what one is'. (Helson)

This is a loaded statement. It alludes to the difference in our perception of age. Helson points out that the age of civil status, or the chronological age given by the calendar, assigns certain responsibilities to us such as the socially accepted age of schooling, voting, maturity, work, marriage, having children, retirement, etc. All ages correspond to a set of values that society pins on to them. However, our subjective age opposes the age of civil status as it no longer relies on tangibly measurable achievements, rather on one's self-perception of oneself (Kastenbaum, 1970). Age just becomes a feeling and is then no longer a number. This is what could have led to the trend of people feeling as if they are ageing young, people retiring at different ages, changing their jobs, marrying at 50 or not marrying at all or deciding to have a child in the latter half of their lives. All of these are in opposition to what the age of civil status dictates. Birthdays are what bring this subjective age in conflict with our chronological age.

My aunt's birthday party points in this direction too. While she thinks, and so do other people, that she looks younger than her age, the worry of retirement looms over her head. When the personal calendar is confronted with the arithmetic calendar, this paradox of age is what emerges. As my aunt cuts her mammoth cake, she is literally announcing to the world that she is entering the latter half of her life, but the themed party and the music point to the fact that this is a celebration of her subjective age and that she is feeling young. A question that arises is: Why do people always want to remain young? This may have to do with our obsession with youth and our fear of old age, but more than that, it has struck me as a way to tell the world that people are not scared of what is inevitable—ageing. Birthdays also act as operations of memory to remember what the person has done, and this is seen in our fascination for biographies and fear of Alzheimer's that we will not remember, or worse still, we will not be remembered. The age of a person becomes a way to mark their achievements in life. And celebrating with others refreshes the achievements of said person in the minds of the audience. The audience is happy to be a part of great celebrations, and the person celebrating their birthday is

happy to indulge in this vanity. In that way, birthdays provide a necessary ego boost and a narcissistic kick to deal with this paradox of ageing. What is overlooked is that sometimes the person being celebrated might actually be unhealthy, lacking emotional support, needing constant supervision or may not want to live any more. We become so accustomed to birthday celebrations that at some point it matters little if the person being celebrated is interested or not. It may as well at times be more about the celebrations than the person being celebrated. This can be mostly seen in birthday parties of old people organised by their young children. In one such rather bizarre party, the hosts only invited their own friends and forgot (read: ignored) the friends of the person being celebrated. Age does indeed present varied perspectives to the understanding of birthday celebrations. The conflict between the age of civil status and the age of our hearts cannot be resolved very easily. However, this conflict has resulted in more options and avenues for some individuals who are able to pursue what they want at any age, even though it still remains a major cause of anxiety. As my aunt's party ends, I am left wondering if I have done enough for my age. People have jobs at 22 and some have become billionaires, and here I am thinking about birthdays.

Chapter III—The Green Room

12 March 2019
Common room of the hostel

It is almost here. Tomorrow is the big day. At first, I had said that I will be taking it easy—no pressure—but this is far from the reality. Oscar Wilde always seems to have a line or two to describe my mental state. He once said that "there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about" (Wilde, 4), and this is exactly how I feel. I want to be relaxed about my birthday, but I also want people to be excited about it. When asked by my friends as to what my plans were, I played it cool and said that I wasn't doing much; just hanging out with my friends. But people don't just randomly happen to hang out on your birthday. You must set a venue for this get-together and arrange for stuff that would enable people to have a good time. And thus, a string of questions began to drive my mind crazy. Should I send the invite for my birthday eve myself or should I get my best friend to do it? Should I invite everyone or should I just keep it to five or six close friends? What time should I invite them—10:30 pm or midnight? How much booze and food should I arrange, and also, why should I arrange booze for everyone? After all, it's my birthday and I am supposed to have a good time. These questions don't have easy answers. Sending the invite myself would mean that I am planning my party, so I got someone else to do it. Calling only close friends has a downside. There is always somebody you miss out, and my close friends are mostly like me; quiet and introverted, which means that the party will be rather low on energy—so I invited everyone! Calling people at 10:30 means that I will be standing there waiting for people to arrive, and when they come, they will not know what to say to me since my birthday has still not arrived. Calling people at midnight is an even more anxiety-inducing decision since nobody is drunk and your birthday has

arrived—what does one do? I decided to call everyone at 10:30. And this was the beginning of my anxieties. The first of these anxieties was caused by the hype that was created around my birthday. From birthday messages to sale offers to facials to funny posts, there is always an air of excitement around birthdays. And when people feel excited for you, it becomes your responsibility to reciprocate. When something is hyped, then the chances of it disappointing you also increase, and that causes more anxiety.

Psychologist David Phillips conducted a study with three million cases in trying to see a link between birthdays and stress. He concluded, "In men over the age of 50, vascular accidents are more frequent 3 days before their birthday date than any other period of the year and women die more, at any age, in the week following their birth date than any other week of the year" (Phillips, 7). This is a large sample, but I am not sure about its statistical significance. This might just be a correlation as opposed to causation. In any case, it does point to the fact that birthdays are more than just happy and do cause anxiety and stress for many individuals. One has to be happy all the time and anything else is a cause for therapy. Now, there is a difference between performance anxiety and anxiety while performing. When something is hyped up, one is bound to feel anxious. Performance anxiety is related to the build-up as one is anxious to perform and is more visible. While anxiety during performance is invisible to others as only the performer knows and feels it as the performance is going on. The latter kind of anxiety is more impromptu and live as opposed to the former. This is precisely what is happening to me. It is 10 o'clock, I have taken a shower, and I am sitting on my bed doing absolutely nothing but thinking. I have to decide what to wear; again, the right balance has to be maintained between too dressy and too casual. I am also thinking about the time I should enter and how I should behave. These questions were answered soon enough as I went out to find that nobody had arrived on time. I felt even more anxious at this point. Then, a few people arrived and I didn't know what to say to them. I was only thinking about the people who had not yet come. British writer, Olivia Laing captures this sentiment in her article on the virtues of loneliness,

> It seems that the initial sensation triggers what psychologists call hypervigilance for social threat. In this state, which is entered into unknowingly, one tends to experience the world in negative terms, and to both expect and remember negative encounters—instances of rudeness, rejection or abrasion … [which] creates, of course, a vicious circle, in which the lonely person grows increasingly more isolated, suspicious and withdrawn.

Even though I am always late to parties, I started interpreting my environment in a negative manner. As I waited for others, I started building more and more stories in my own head, but thankfully, people started arriving. Now the anxiety during the performance kicked in. I had the pressure of feeling happy since it was my *happy birthday* but also the responsibility of making

sure that everybody else was having a good time. Especially the sober ones. I always find it difficult to understand their feelings at a party where everyone else is drinking. Amidst all this confusion, I decided to put my foot down. I danced and drank until the clock struck 12, when we all sang happy birthday in unison and cut my birthday cake. Two of my friends had come to give me a surprise, and I must admit I was feeling quite happy before I drowned into the night and the night blurred onto me. I don't quite remember what happened after that, but I woke up and I was excited to walk out, almost expecting everyone who sees me to know that it is my birthday and that they must wish me. That obviously did not happen.

Chapter IV—Birthday Withdrawal

14 March 2019
Hostel Room

I had a packed day filled with anxiety, cakes, wishes, and some genuine warmth. My phone is filled with messages, Instagram stories, and wall posts, but yesterday seems like a completely different day from today. I am a normal being again, and nobody is celebrating my existence any more. It is like a dream that I did not want in the first place has ended and now I am "Alone Again—Naturally".3 But I have what everybody has, some 1,000 friends on Facebook, Instagram followers and stories, and some of them had something to say about my birthday. Happiness, as has often been said, is only real when shared, and social media has given it a new twist. On social media, it is only real as long as people know that it happened. People must know that you are happy for you to be happy, and here I am wondering why this must be the case. Facebook walls are like public boards for everyone to share what they feel, but in virtual real life, these walls only act as advertisements of our own personality and what we choose to project. However, many people have raised the question, why do people appear to be happy on social media? How I see it is that social media is an extension of our own lives. Whenever I meet someone new, I project my best side forward because I want to be liked by them. I try to say intelligent things that will make me come across as an interesting person. Now zoom into the world of social media. We advertise ourselves on social media since that is often the place people first visit before they have even met us. People curate their Instagram profiles and try to weave a story around their lives, and social media platforms recognise that people want to project their best sides. It is true that social media has certain distinguishing features that amplify the need for social validation through likes, reactions, and comments. My thinking is that social media is always in the quest to hoard its users' attention. The way it can hoard attention is by creating a need or solving a problem—that does not already exist. In both cases, whether a need is present or is artificially created, the stimulus is human interaction. We might condemn social media filters in reality, but if given a chance, we all want to be the

3 "Alone Again Naturally" is a song by Gilbert O'Sullivan released in 1972.

best-looking versions of ourselves and that is what filters help us do.

This aspect of social media has been corroborated by a study in South India, conducted by researcher Venkatraman for the paper, "Does Social Media Make People Look Happier?" He shows that people always appear happy on Facebook because they do not want to show the world that they are sad. He also points out that the increasing number of people who send good morning and motivational posts to others on WhatsApp may be feeling low in their own lives. This, as he points out, is symptomatic of a larger problem that is this need to always appear happy (Venkatraman, 12). It is symptomatic of a larger culture where we think that others are happy and leading a great life while we are doing nothing. This becomes more widespread as one looks at birthday posts. They always seem to convey that a person had the best day of their lives on their birthday. I am no stranger to this nor am I holier than thou. As I look at the stories and pictures from yesterday, there are more instances of me sitting alone waiting for something to happen, feeling anxious, passed out or doing some uncool things, but I chose not to share them. What I shared were group photos and cake-cutting photos to tell everyone that I was happy and that I had a great day. Parnell points out that this is related to the three syndromes that people face on social media—The Highlight Reel, Social Currency, and FOMO. The Highlight Reel means that people only share the highlights of their lives on social media (Parnell), and it would be a grave mistake to form a judgement on the basis of a highlights package, as any test cricket fan will also tell you since it only shows the standout moments. Social Currency is basically like the money of the internet, which is the likes, comments, and shares that one garners. I equate it with money since it determines one's social standing or power on the social media platform. After all, the success of a birthday party is only measured by the number of likes and comments the pictures get. That is also the reason why people carefully curate their birthday posts in order to distinguish them from the rest. And lastly, FOMO, which stands for the 'fear of missing out', alludes to the point that nobody wants to be left out, and because everybody *appears* to be having a good time on their birthdays, so must I.

Final Chapter

Light at the end of the tunnel?
20th March 2019

Remember the artist Sophie Calle we spoke about? It took her 14 long years to overcome her obsessive insecurity surrounding birthdays (Morris). All people are not like Sophie. Some people are able to overcome this anxiety while others live through it without recognising it. I leave it up to you to decide whether turning old is a matter for celebration or not. However, if you do plan to celebrate, then I must warn you about the anxiety that comes along with it and I wish you good luck! If I look back now, I distinctly remember the anxiety that I felt in school when my parents had given me a packet of Eclairs toffees on my birthday to distribute while some other kid had got Perk chocolates. I felt bad that day because I

thought that people would be happy to get toffees from me, but they were not because they got something better. I assumed that this was supposed to be my day and mine alone. But little did I know about birthday anxiety or that *Perk* is liked more than *Eclairs*. I don't think that birthdays are treacherous. Many people emerge out of them feeling a sense of being loved, as have I over many years. Yet, it is important to belabour the point that one should be allowed to celebrate their birthday how they wish to. We must not pressure ourselves or anyone around us to feel happy or celebrate publicly if they do not want to. The world of social media, driven by the perils of social validation, leaves little scope for silence. And more importantly, silence on social media is assumed to be a synonym for sadness. This culture needs to change. For this, we must think about a question that is outside the scope of this paper but very closely related to the entire hoopla around birthdays. Why is happiness so over-glorified? I think the conversation needs to change from attaining happiness (which is outcome oriented) towards being okay with oneself. It is all right to be sad. As you think about these questions and maybe one of you will write a paper on it some day, I still wonder why birthdays should be happy? To be very honest, I don't know. Maybe because society expects them to be happy. As far as I am concerned, I would be happier in the absence of 'happy birthdays'.

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This is Not a Paper: A Meta-Paper on Metafiction in a Post-Truth World

ABHISHEK VAIDYANATH

About the Author

My writing journey started a while after my journey with cinema did. Like every lover of the movies, I too wanted to make films, write scripts. So, I decided to not pursue engineering any more, and try my hand at something more creative; documentary film was my first choice. Fast-forward to a year later—the interviewer is reading a script I wrote. He then looks at me, smiles, and says, "Welcome to the YIF." Ok, that didn't happen the way I described, but a few months later, I was in the Critical Writing class at the YIF. Here is where I unlearned about "writing" and was introduced to a world of language, rhetoric and culture.

Post the YIF, I am now treading the waters in Ed-Tech. Both "Ed" and "Tech" have seen massive effects due to the pandemic, and I often find myself revisiting the ideas of critical writing and thinking, and applying them to solve new and exciting problems in my field.

Introduction

I was recently watching a show called Aspirants; the show is about the lives of UPSC aspirants preparing for the exam in the hub, Old Rajinder Nagar, Delhi. In one scene, after the protagonist was accused of having a 'confused shakal', he replies, "We are living in a postmodern society, we tend to be confused, *bas main thoda zyada confused hu*" (UPSC 33:40). While a direct causation between postmodern thought and people being confused is an oversimplification, the connection does seem apparent to a lot of us. Another phrase that the protagonist could have used, though not very common, is that "we live in a post-truth world". Now here, it's much easier to make sense of the confusion, as the truth itself is qualified by 'post'; whether it's the lack of truth, or existence of multiple truths, is something that I want to explore in this paper.

Postmodern thought has been around for more than a century (McIntyre, 6), and there is a sea of literature on it. For this paper, I will take the help of one of those postmodern literary ideas that I personally find exciting. It's the idea of the 'meta'. Many of us use this word to describe a wide range of thoughts and situations. I'll use some movies, and this paper itself, to try and emulate the concept of 'meta' and what it has to do with postmodernism and post-truth. Thus, I will use this meta-paper to first elucidate what metafiction looks like, and then argue that while postmodernist tendencies largely cause post-truth, there are some redeemable qualities that can be observed in metafiction that can even help navigate post-truth.

Chapter 1- Post-Truth: not just fake news

Post-truth—The Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year 2016[1], rose to fame during the rise of Trump and his famous and outright denials of facts during his campaigns. Thus, the early understanding of the word was that it describes a world where there are no objective facts and truths; people believe in their own versions of facts, to make up their own versions of truths. The Oxford Dictionary defines post-truth as, "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Lee McIntyre, in his book *Post-Truth* while talking about the origins of this term, says that, "post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not" (13). There is a lot to unpack here, but what stands out is ideology, and appealing to emotions rather than evidence. How are these emotions delivered? Stories, narratives, and fiction. Now, what is also to be noted, is that these narratives aren't devoid of objectivity. At least, at the outset. An ideologue would still state facts, and truth, but woven in a way into the narrative, that furthers their agendas.

The blurring of fact and fiction is a characteristic of post-truth and seems

1 "Word of the Year 2016" - https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/

to happen everywhere in our culture, and not just in public political discourse. Yuval Noah Harari in an excerpt from his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, in the article "Are We Living in a Post-Truth Era? Yes, But That's Because We're a Post-Truth Species" says: "Blurring the line between fiction and reality can be done for many purposes, starting with 'having fun' and going all the way to 'survival.'" He talks about how we 'suspend disbelief' while watching or playing a game, reading a novel or watching movies. We know that it is just fiction, and make-believe, but we still choose to enjoy it, often deeply and *sincerely*. While this is the 'having fun' part of his quote, the 'survival' part comes when we not only believe, but sometimes dedicate our whole lives to fictions like money and the idea of Nation. He says that we have "the remarkable ability to know and not know at the same time" (Harari). We all thus have shared fictions that are such integral parts of our lives that we sometimes forget the fictionality of it. This is one of the glaring symptoms of post-truth, and shades of these are seen in postmodern thought as well.

Day 2- Postmodernism: what did you do?!

It's the third day of writing this paper, and I only have these phenomena and words in my head. Let me go back to McIntyre and find some connections there. I hope these musings in my journal lead to some connection or idea popping up. Aha! There was an entire chapter called "Did Post-Modernism Lead to Post-Truth?" He, while taking us through various understandings of postmodernism, says: "The postmodernist approach is one in which everything is questioned and little is taken at face value. There is no right answer, only narrative" (125). Rings a bell? When everything we read, or watch, is reduced to a narrative, and is questioned, it means that it is up for deconstruction. Friedrich Nietzsche, who came even before we talked about postmodernism, says, "There are no facts, only interpretations."2 For Nietzsche then, the world already looked like one that is devoid of truth; it was only a matter of time that we started seeing it too.

I can say this because I played Nietzsche in a college play. I was given a script, and as it was a satirical play, I thought that the dialogues were made up and changed. But now I was reading about postmodernism, I realised that this was something that Nietzsche actually wrote and believed. I was indeed being true to Nietzsche. But what about the audience? Would those who hadn't read Nietzsche have thought that I was saying something that he actually said? Or will they, like me, think that it's just fiction, and truth doesn't matter, in this context of watching a play for fun? Here, what is actually at play is a manifestation of *irony*. While what I said was true, in some sense, I said it ironically, to garner laughs. This irony had a few layers: first was the fact that I am not Nietzsche; second that the context of the play was satirical and a criticism of those who blindly quote and follow such great thinkers and think of themselves as great thinkers too. This

2 The Portable Nietzsche—Edited and Translated by Walter Kaufmann (Penguin Books, 1977) p. 458.

kind of irony which we see not only in plays, but everywhere these days, invites again, a kind of deconstruction and subjectivity with which the source can be read for intended meaning, and what the audience ultimately would like to interpret. The layers of irony puts the audience at a distance where the truth is subverted as there is a gap between what is said and what is meant.

But this subversion of the truth goes too far when instances of irony and other postmodern literary devices become more commonplace. In the video essay "David Foster Wallace—The Problem with Irony" by Will Schoder, David Foster Wallace says, "The problem is that now a lot of the shticks of postmodernism—irony, cynicism, irreverence—are now part of whatever it is that's enervating in the culture itself." Wallace was talking about American TV in the '90s and how most of the shows had become more 'self-referential', which gave rise to cynicism and irony. Referencing itself, or critiquing itself, meant that we could no longer criticise it, as the show, movie or content has done that for us, and in the process not only rendered itself, but also rendered other content of this kind, meaningless. Wallace believed that this resulted in us not taking anything seriously after a point because there was no element of sincere engagement left as the culture itself was getting too cynical and ironic (Schoder). An increase in this kind of 'irreverence' would devalue truth and the search for truth. Every fact or instance of objectivity will be seen with this culturally acquired lens of cynicism and aggravate the sense of post-truth. Wallace thus believed that "postmodernism has to a large extent run its course" (Schoder).

In the previous chapter, the lens with which we tried to understand some symptoms of post-truth, was fact and fiction. Here, we went further into some manifestations of exactly the kind of fiction that amplifies our perception of reality. This self-referential, ironic, and often cynical content, can be associated most closely with metafictional content.

Scene 3—Enter metafiction: how meta can it get?

Let me take a break from this paper or whatever I am writing, and go back to the time and instance that actually inspired me to write on this idea; I am also hoping that this anecdotal reasoning would add depth to my argument. This is when I had just watched a film called *BUDDHA. mov*, by Kabir Mehta that came out in 2017, knowing it would have something interesting to say as it did some rounds in film festivals and won some accolades. It was a very postmodern film with extreme self-referentiality, which also makes it a metafictional film. What makes it meta is the reference and acknowledgement to itself being a film within the content of the film. I had to tell this to my friend as my brain was making connections from meta-films, to postmodernism, to post-truth. We had a phone conversation that day, and it went like this:

FRIEND: Okay, okay, calm down. And tell me why you think this movie is so meta and postmodern?

I: So dude, on the movie cover page, the genre was mentioned as Documentary. So I was expecting a real-life story of this guy, Buddhadev. But then, just a few minutes into the movie, Buddhadev is with this woman in a hotel room getting intimate and both of them displaying full nudity. This is where things started getting shady. Documentaries, especially biographies, never go to the lengths of showing someone's most private moments happening inside a hotel room. This is when I realised that there has to be some fictionalisation involved. When the cast rolled out at the end, I realised I was right and all the women were in fact actors with their names hidden.

FRIEND: So why isn't it like any other fictional movie?

I: Because in the scene after this, Buddhadev was looking himself up on Google. His page showed up, and this is how they show us that he is a first-class cricketer from Goa. All his bowling statistics were on this page, along with his Wikipedia! I pick up my phone immediately and do the same Google search to find that it is indeed true. The guy was Buddhadev himself, and I was seeing his story on screen. He was himself, but also playing himself. Non-fiction and fiction coming together!

FRIEND: So are you saying that this blurring of lines between fiction and non-fiction makes us question whether what is happening on-screen is the truth and the reality? And how does the meta-ness come in here?

I: Yes, that's right. The film goes into meta territory when Buddhadev is talking to the film-maker, Kabir Mehta himself. We see chats between Buddha and Kabir, where Buddha is giving him ideas on what all he can add to the film. They are basically talking about this film, in the film. In another scene Buddha even acknowledges that Kabir wanted to add fictional elements in the film, after which Buddha starts narrating fake incidents that can be added. They were continuously going meta by talking about the process of making the film. But the next scene is when the post-truth aspect of meta-ness hits. Kabir and Buddha are filming Buddha's gardener. The camera movement is handheld and raw. We hear Kabir telling Buddha: "This is amazing, festivals love this class shit." Now this scene said a lot. It was a commentary on how documentary film-makers, too, come with their own biases, ideologies, perspectives, and subjectivity. They often show what they want to convince the audience of their own beliefs by hiding them under the veil of documenting truth. It was as if Kabir was debunking the claim to truth through non-fictions.

This was a perfect use of irony and postmodernism to do this. In the words of David Foster Wallace, "Exploiting gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are—is the time-honoured way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy" (Schoder). Kabir was thus exposing this hypocrisy of manipulating the truth, while claiming to be true, by doing it to himself, which adds to the credibility as he isn't just passing an opinion about others. It was as if Kabir Mehta was screaming to me that all documentary film-makers are liars!

FRIEND: Wow! This connection is interesting between metafiction and post-truth because of postmodernism. But, are you saying that metafiction is causing post-truth, or is it telling us what post-truth looks like? Why don't you use Marie-Laure Ryan's reading to talk more about this?

I: How do you know that I have read this?! I never told anyone about that.

FRIEND: Ha ha ha! Oh, you sweet innocent child. How can I not know? Did you forget again?

I AM YOU.

Section 4- Metafiction and Post-Truth

After that small meta experience in life, I want to situate where metafiction lies between fiction and non-fiction, and what further implications it has on our perception of truth and reality. When the distinction between fiction and non-fiction seems to dissolve, it makes it difficult for us to discern the truth, by making it harder to weigh the different narratives against each other. Marie-Laure Ryan in her paper "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality", while taking a position for maintaining the distinction between fiction and non-fiction says:

> The distinction between fiction and nonfiction is important as it provides our only protection against the "hyperreality syndrome" (to borrow Baudrillard's concept): the replacement of reality (or the masking of its absence) by the simulacra thrown at us by culture and the media. If all representations produce their referent, they are all equally true, and we are doomed to fall under their spell. Under this regime, different images cannot be compared in terms of their relative truthfulness, since truth is a relation, and comparing this relation pre supposes a common external referent. (180)

Non-fiction by convention is supposed to have a reference in the real world. This reference, by virtue of being the real world, makes it possible for us to verify facts, and also compare the realities that they present with each other and come to an inference on our own. But when the distinction isn't maintained, when everything is seen as fiction, they all have their own referent, that may or may not be the real world. In simple terms, they all have their own context, in which all of them are true. When a 'common external referent' is thus missing in this case, we cannot get to the truth 'since truth is a relation'. This eventually leads to a situation where we end up mistaking reality for whatever reality the popular media and culture sells us. Ryan argues that a distinction between the two will thus save us from this 'hyperreality syndrome', and we will no longer be 'gullible victims' of fabrications, as when there is no fictionalisation, we can see for ourselves and choose for ourselves between the different realities, but with a common reference, i.e., this world (180). To give an example, we can compare and verify what two documentaries or what two different news channels are saying about some event, and choose for ourselves which one is closer to the truth, as both of

them refer to the same world. But imagine a scenario when news channels decide to show a fictionalised depiction of what happened. We would now not be able to compare the two realities as they have their own made-up reference worlds, and remain equally true in their own context.

My above example about the metafictional *BUDDHA.mov* would now seem like it is adding to the post-truth by doing exactly the above—erasing the distinction between the two. But that isn't the case. What metafiction actually does is to carve a different third genre of its own, which helps us navigate the problems that post-truth presents. Ryan, while talking about how metafiction, through 'inversion' of the qualities of both of these, invents its own position, says, "Metafiction tends toward the abdication of both the guarantee of truth and the illusion of a reference world" (182). She says that metafiction works in a way that it does not 'guarantee' its own make-believe truth, and it also does not claim to be true because of its reference to the real world. We have many times seen how fictions can contribute to post-truth, but how non-fiction does it, is more subtle. Verification of facts is not always possible, so the claim to truth of non-fictions becomes automatically problematic and also a proponent of post-truth. In *BUDDHA.mov,* this works in a way that when we start getting into the fictional world of Buddha, he starts talking to the director, self-references to the film, and as a result, pushes us out of this world. Then, when we think that it's the director making a film on Buddha in the real world, they start throwing in fictional elements and remind us that what we are watching is not real. To put it briefly, metafiction is moving away from the post-truth elements of both fiction and non-fiction.

Another way in which metafiction helps in navigating post-truth is by asking us to stay at a critical distance. While explaining what metafictions are, Ryan says: "Excluded from the fictional world through the visibility of the medium, the reader of self-referential fiction contemplates this world from a foreign perspective, through which he remains anchored in his native reality" (169). This foreign perspective keeps us grounded in our own reality, and we remain at a critical distance from the film, which is useful in my opinion to discern and stay in touch with the truth. Thinking critically itself is about not taking anything at face value, close reading, analysing, and then forming an informed opinion or judgement about the same. Like in BUDDHA.mov, metafiction, by keeping us at a critical distance, can help us see how there can be biases and intentions of non-fiction film-makers who would want us to believe what they believe.

But when we consider the experience of watching a film, critical distance doesn't sit well with it. We want to feel engaged in the movie, and want to root for the protagonist. This insincere watching of a movie is what Wallace disliked. He predicted the damage irony would do. I left it at this in the previous chapter, but Wallace did give us a ray of hope, a solution of sorts.

Journal entry 5- Metamodern sincerity for navigating post-truth

I sat there wondering how to end this paper on a hopeful note after all the dark and scary thoughts about post-truth and losing touch with reality. In the same way that the *Communist Manifesto* was born when society was ridden with capitalism, it is the "Metamodernist Manifesto" by Luke Turner, that seems to hold some answers to how we can navigate postmodernism and in turn post-truth as well. The eighth and the last statement of this manifesto is: "Thus, metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!" (Turner). Let's go through this one by one.

What is the *sincerity* in the above definition? In the same video essay, Will Schoder presents the solution to this problem of postmodernism that Wallace proposes—New Sincerity. This new sincerity is a shift in content to move away from postmodern tropes of irony and cynicism, to empathetic human stories. No complexities about storytelling, self-referentiality or moral relativism, just stories of human connectedness, resilience, redemption, and ultimately love. But is it possible for us dwellers of the post-truth era to enjoy something sincerely any more? Most of us are so used to postmodern content in popular culture that we almost always tend to deconstruct things: take memes, for example, and how they mostly use ironic or dark humour. This is where the 'New' part of New Sincerity comes in. It understands these problems. It will be in a state of 'oscillation' or flux between postmodern and modern which enables a more effective delivery of sincerity. This effective delivery comes from the fact that when there is an acknowledgement of postmodern ideas, the audience is engaged and satisfied as this is what they are used to. So when sincerity is delivered after the audience is engaged, it is more effective.

BUDDHA.mov's ending would be an apt example here. After all the meta-ness that was displayed in the movie, it tried to end on a sincere note. Buddhadev was now retiring from cricket and moving away from his old habits of being a playboy. We see him working hard in his new venture as a real estate agent, and at the end he is seen eating an inexpensive meal at a local food joint, whereas before this he was always shown hanging out in plush pubs and hotels. The whole character arc of Buddha is thus created, and at the end we see him getting redeemed, as a take-away for the audience. Other examples would be from the video essay itself, where he says how Bojack Horseman, which was ironic at the beginning, later turned into a sincere depiction of loneliness, depression, and existential crisis. The postmodernist irony and humour was used in the beginning for engagement, and then moved on to telling a more empathetic story sincerely. This is metamodern sincerity.

The oscillation is an important idea in metamodernism. The rest of the statement follows from the oscillation between irony and sincerity to other important ideas in flux that are relevant to fighting and navigating post-truth. Like the oscillation between 'relativism and truth', and 'optimism' and 'doubt' (Turner). Metamodernism is thus characterised by this ever-dynamic back and forth between construction and deconstruction, objectivity and subjectivity, hope and cynicism. So when culture moves towards post-truth-inducing qualities, the redeeming qualities bring it back. This process happens continuously and dynamically in the metamodern age, helping us navigate some of the aspects of post-truth.

In the chapter "Fighting Post-Truth," Lee McIntyre's closing words are: "It is our decision how we will react to a world in which someone is trying to pull the wool over our eyes. Truth still matters, as it always has. Whether we realize this in time is up to us" (172). So when the post-truth world tries to pull the wool of relativism, doubt or irony over our eyes, we must retaliate with truth, optimism, and good old (new) sincerity.

Simply put, postmodernism has been a teacher. We learnt to think about the world critically, albeit with a little cynicism, and irony. Even though it paved the way for post-truth, making it hard for us to discern the truth and reality, we created art, cinema, and literature that helped us remember that in the end, what matters is sincere connection, with both, the content that we consume, and the people in our lives.

Epilogue

This meta-paper was an attempt to not only present my arguments, and write about post-truth and postmodernism, but also for this paper to be an exhibit of this culture itself. While writing the paper, I was often drawn to the immense scope and directions I could take at every turn, like the mediasphere and the social media element of post-truth, or the linguistic and semiotic aspects of postmodernism, and the theoretical understanding of fictional and non-fictional narrative. Delving deeper into these aspects and combining them with behavioural studies and primary research would form a comprehensive future scope for this study, and more meta-writing could be good content for a book; or should we call it a novel? A metafiction novel. But I am not saying that we need more metafictional works in this world, as it would invoke the ghost of postmodernism, and only add to the feeling of post-truth. I am saying that we need just enough, to keep it *metamodern*, so that it keeps us aware of post-truth, tells us that truth matters, and helps us find sincerity in our stories.

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4

Reimagining the Master Plan: Stories from Hyderabad and Other Cities

JABILI SIRINENI

Radio: A Public Ride to the City

JAITUN PATEL

What the Metro Smart Card is Unable to Read: Understanding the Relationship between Delhi Metro, City and the People

SAKSHI BARAK

Reimagining the Master Plan: Stories from Hyderabad and Other Cities

JABILI SIRINENI

About the Author

Jabili Nellutla-Sirineni is a poet and architect (strictly in that order) from Hyderabad. Being surrounded by books from a very young age, she naturally took a deep interest in words. As a socially awkward child, she discovered joy and freedom in writing her thoughts instead of speaking. She loves to observe and draw insects and paint watercolours. Living almost all her life in Hyderabad, she was constantly fascinated by its stories, people, and streets, and its transformation over the period of her life.

As part of the critical writing programme at YIF, she was able to bring together her love of writing and her longing for a constantly evolving city. After ardently scrawling question after question in the nascent drafts of her final paper, Jabili deduced that critical writing is not just about questions, but also answers (well, after a number of comments from her preceptor). This paper was then carefully woven together, with glimpses of the city she loves, snippets from some other cities, and more answers than questions.

"Mera shahar logan soon mammoor kar
Rakhya joon tun dariya mein min ya Sami"
"Fill this city of mine with people as,
You filled the river with fishes O Lord."
Quli Qutb Shah
(qtd in Bhatnagar 14)

Quli Qutb Shah, the founder of the city of Hyderabad, is believed to have said this after he shifted the capital of his Deccan kingdom from the nearby Golconda to a small village called Chichlam that would later evolve into present-day Hyderabad (Bhatnagar 14). From the Qutb Shahi grid plan centred on Charminar to the mutating, multiplying sprawl of the present-day city of Hyderabad, a part of his prayer can be termed prophetic. Migration after migration, his city would be filled with people to an extent that its perimeter would have to keep stretching outward to make space for its inhabitants. However, the river that Quli crossed would become extinct in this process because of the people he so wished would populate his city.

Hyderabad is said to have originated out of a Quranic plan of heaven, on the bank of the River Musi. One can notice, still, the long avenue all the way from Char Kaman passing through the Char Su Ka Roz (symbolic of the origin of four heavenly Quranic rivers), with Charminar at the centre. Behind the shops, some of which are as old as the road itself, are the houses of the residents of Old City. This mixed-neighbourhood planning of the Qutb Shahis has sustained until this day, but the city was to grow manifold in the centuries to come.

What was once a planned city would face challenges that it couldn't tackle without improvising. The sustained influx of people, the Musi flood of 1908, the British residencies and military areas, and the Indian State's annexation of Hyderabad changed the planning mechanisms of the city greatly. However, the biggest change happened during and after the IT boom of the 1990s. With the creation of what is called the HITEC (Hyderabad Information Technology and Engineering Consultancy) City and the creation of many jobs, the number of people who arrived in the city rose exponentially. Between 1991 and 2001, the population density of Hyderabad is said to have grown faster than Mumbai, Kolkata or Chennai. Between 1991 and 2005, the population of Hyderabad surged from 4.3 million to 6.5 million due to in-migration from surrounding villages and other parts of the country to settle in the south and the west of the city—where the international airport and HITEC City are located respectively. These surges impacted the spatial setting of the city greatly. Most importantly, they 'saturated' the core area, which would later cause major economic activities to flow outward (Mishra, Raveendran 42–46).

I have lived in the city of Hyderabad for the entirety of my life barring a brief period of two years from 2003. When I returned to the city with my family in 2005 after this brief interlude, the pace of the city had seemed confusing and chaotic. The traffic was denser and moved faster, new roads had appeared, entire villages around the HITEC City and other developing areas had been converted into residential neighbourhoods. Most of the single

storeys in my neighbourhood had been replaced by tall glass buildings and alien architecture, and most of my neighbours had moved or were moving into high-rise apartments all around the city. From a slow-moving, relaxed city that seemed to follow its own unofficial standard time (which was at least half an hour later than any scheduled time), Hyderabad raced towards its ambition to be located on the global map. This aspiration, however, changed its own map greatly.

It was only years later, as an architecture student poring over large master plans of the city that I realised: what I remembered as a sudden unfamiliarity in my city of 2005 was part of a larger systemic change, and this change was guided by the master plan I was studying. During the course of such urban studies, I observed the inconsistencies between the master plan on paper and the existing condition of city spaces. One of my first observations was the solid division lines through the city drawn to split areas into their prescribed functionalities—Residential, Commercial, Industrial etc. This led me to understand the fundamental problems with the master plan—inflexibility, monotony, and detachment.

This paper is inspired by various such interactions with master plans and ethnographic studies in the city ever since. By taking Hyderabad as its prime case study, it aims to understand certain problems of the master plan and bring to light its failure in ensuring sustainable development and its insensitivity to existing local development models. Taking a cue from such models, the paper also aims to propose, through examples, new methodologies of development that may help in shaping cities better.

The Problems in the Master Plan

Typical master plans are complex and colourful, like cities, but unmoving and unchanging, very unlike cities. Master-planning exercises for cities are pursued with futuristic ideas that sometimes span 20–30 years. During such long periods, certain socio-economic changes take place in a city that are unanticipated by these master plans (Nallathiga 141). These shifts can't be anticipated because cities are studied on a macro level by urban planners. Policies and boundaries are drawn out from this perspective and pose a risk to existing workable models—usually local interventions that emerge from regional problems—which are overlooked in the process. The site of such models is usually where administrative bodies do not aim to reach: from infant informal settlements by the sides of busy roads to notified slums, and from deteriorating heritage structures reclaimed by the public to saturated city centres.

The role of urban planners and planning bodies is to solve the problems of growing cities—planning for socio-economic development, transit systems, sustainable development models, etc. within the city for its effective management. Through the examples of cities like Hyderabad, among others, we can observe that the focus of current master plans made by urban planners in India is on the creation of new commercial districts and residential neighbourhoods—

without necessarily accounting for their future impact, although they claim to 'plan' for that very future—on an already deteriorating body. A close reading of the Hyderabad master plan for the year 2031 discloses the idea of 'development' it proposes for the future: a great emphasis on provision of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to invite investments from different national and international industrial organisations; creation of 'urban zones' for commercial development; increase in city limits that could encroach into villages surrounding the city. The layout summary provides a brief understanding of the motives of this master plan—SEZ development, land pooling schemes, and township development (Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority).

This document demonstrates that master plans are prepared without leaving much space for flexibility. Such policies in a master plan are what can be termed 'inadequate', as they fail to meet the expectations of the citizens as well as the decision makers for several reasons—poorly implemented designs; simplistic understanding of public aspirations; 'restrictive' methods that 'curb' public interventions; inability to predict future trends and plan ahead; ignorance or negligence towards existing problems in the urban landscape (Nallathiga 141). The Hyderabad Master Plan 2031 in that sense is an inadequate one as it doesn't include any problem-solving mechanisms to develop a people-centric model or an environmentally viable approach to city planning.

A G Krishna Menon writes in his paper titled, "Imagining the Indian City" about Indian town planners, "[Their] alienation from ground realities is clearly evident from the seemingly intractable problems which confront Indian cities. The logic of urban development appears to defy [their] will and imagination and it is commonly acknowledged that successive Master Plans are characterised more by violations than by observance" (2932). As Menon argues, Indian town planning has become an 'uninspired mechanical exercise' where planners are 'low-level functionaries in the decision-making hierarchy of the government'. He laments that planners find it easier to adapt to new patterns but not to new ideas that define these patterns. Urban planners are detached from understanding the cultural and social nuances of Indian society, and therefore form only an image of a city that is influenced by Western models, however volatile they may be (2932). These Western models—criticised for having shortcomings themselves—when adopted (and not adapted) by Indian cities become unworkable due to contextual inconsistencies. One of the main aspects of this model that Indian town planning seems to have borrowed is that of creation of typical districts with uniform planning.

Jane Jacobs, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, criticised this very aspect that has been an invariable influence for present-day planning, especially in India. She illustrates, through the example of Eighth Street in Greenwich Village, New York, how a locale can be successful for a period of time owing to its popular monotony but will eventually decay into a 'has-been' space when it reaches a saturation point where only a certain single type of function takes place. Eighth Street

went from being a common nondescript street to a bustling locality with theatres, convenience stores, and nightclubs. Since the street was busy throughout the day and night, restaurants became very popular on Eighth Street owing to the high profit margin in that area. Eventually, the bookstores and galleries that formed the diversity of the street were 'pushed out' by new restaurants, and any other typology of uses stopped entering the street. The popularity of Eighth Street would slowly fade because of the disappearance of the very reason for its reputation. Jacobs further argues that such districts will not be able to grow with the rest of the city or evolve beyond this point. This saturation results in the centre of the city shifting to different places over time. She calls this phenomenon the 'self-destruction of diversity' (241–42).

In the name of 'IT corridors', most fast-growing Indian cities are witnessing this 'self-destruction of diversity'. These are almost dystopic areas where only a singular type of building is constructed—offices for the Information Technology (IT) sector. Cities like Delhi NCR, Bangalore, and Hyderabad all boast the presence of these corridors. Although they are portrayed as market centres that aid in the development of the city, they are usually built upon demolished urban and rural areas and only allow for a single type of construction. The delineation of these districts into areas almost outside the city with a specific function makes them an isolated, faraway part of the whole. There is a possibility that these areas may become derelict in case of redundancy of their function, and the city may not be able to reuse them efficiently. Many IT companies are now working at half their capacity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and some plan to enforce this as the norm in the future. This will result in large spaces remaining unused and most buildings remaining unoccupied. It becomes necessary to ask if these spaces will remain fit to be reused at all in such a scenario.

Homogenous planning as the one in such IT corridors is likely to block the scope of a locality to evolve owing to social, political, economic, and ecological changes, and may thus cause stagnation in the locality. This recent example proves that master plans can't predict future trends. If master plans must be flexible, it is necessary that the ideas behind them be re-oriented.

Re-orientation of this kind must involve studying the city in a unique way and mapping it from a perspective that is indigenous and innovative. This may in turn create complex discourses in urban planning and lead to the discovery of new ideologies. It may also give access to people to develop their own locales in an unhindered way. Such spontaneous and organic development of a city is extremely critical in the present scenario where we are heading towards increasingly monocultural methodologies of planning that are largely top-down approaches and seldom answer the needs of the city.

To re-establish the 'spirit of urban planning' (Nallathiga), the idea of the master plan itself must be re-interpreted. To that end, the paper proposes re-imagining four broad changes. First, taking an approach that is not only top-down but also bottom-

up. Through this approach, local bodies can collaborate with the public to come up with solutions for urban problems. Following this approach may fill the gaps that occur during the execution of urban plans by involving all stakeholders with equal capacity in the process of the 'development' of the city. Second, these approaches must be studied in detail during any master-planning exercise and implemented in areas where they can be remodelled. This may provide modules of 'indigenous' (Menon) solutions to some crucial street-level problems. Third, planners must distance themselves from any preconceived understanding of city planning and look for new approaches and develop new theories. By distancing themselves from previous methodologies, planners may be able to derive novel perspectives on city planning. Fourth, diversity, spontaneity, and flexibility must be given precedence over rigid organisation of city neighbourhoods. This may leave ample space for the city to grow unhindered and progress beyond rigid lines. Illustrated below are examples that provide evidence of successful approaches to problem-solving in some urban spaces that are usually ignored by master plans—slums, heritage, and abandoned spaces—that will emphasise the need for the afore-mentioned solutions.

Self-sufficient Slums

In master plans, most of these areas are denoted as informal 'settlements' and not in the formal 'residential' category. When there is a new area to be 'developed' in the name of housing crisis or commercial development, these are the areas that bear the brunt of eviction. These settlements become expendable in the larger master plan of the city, and their potential for providing unique, organic solutions is extinguished along with their existence.

However, there are some anomalies to this phenomenon. One such settlement is Kothawadi in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, where a small group of people who played cricket together decided to brainstorm over various ways to uplift their neighbourhood. One of the first problems they decided to tackle was hygiene and sanitation. In collaboration with Bombay Municipal Corporation and some local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), they succeeded in providing a clean community toilet for the neighbourhood. The toilet, however, didn't just remain a toilet. The group formally founded an organisational body called the Triratna Prerana Mandal (TPM) and built their office and a computer lab atop the toilet. The centre soon became an educational space for the children and youth of the settlement. To empower women from the locality, a community kitchen was created in a derelict building in the slum which emerged as different women's self-help groups (Shankar 25). TPM became not just a full-fledged NGO, but an inspiration for self-sustaining informal settlements.From a small group of local people, TPM evolved into a community-body organisation and a residents' association. Today it works in a range of localities to provide community-level sustainable solutions in the domains of education, environment, solid waste management, and women and child development.

The efficiency and success of this model is the simplicity of its form—a participatory process of identifying and solving local problems. This example shows the importance of identification of the needs of the people instead of provision of abstract models that don't permeate to the street or neighbourhood level (Shankar 25). It highlights the necessity of looking into such areas to observe the various bottom-up approaches of development that exist. These models, when promoted by future master plans, can cause a paradigm shift in urban planning where simple, fast, cost-effective, and workable solutions can be implemented for the betterment of the city. These approaches will be people-centric as they are emerging from public issues.

While some models for 'development' don't reach the settlements in question at all, some others that do reach are simply inefficient. In such cases of conflict, a fair level of interaction can be seen between the administrative bodies and the people. One such example is from one of my ethnographic studies of the Jubilee Hills slums in Hyderabad, which is one of the biggest notified slums in the city. The slum is located on a steep slope, and most parts of it are accessible only on foot. It is significant to note that its topography and location may be the main reason for its residents not being evicted. Furthermore, the reason for provision of basic amenities in the area is due to the major vote bank constituted by the dense population of this slum.

The people of this slum were provided with three options instead of evictions—lifetime ownership of the land on which their tent/gudisa/jhopdi stands; a half-built house by the JNNURM1 scheme; a fully functional house under another government housing scheme. Contrary to preconceived speculations, most people chose to stay in the settlement in their kutcha dwellings. In fact, very few of them chose the half-built residences and further went on to build them with their own savings. Even fewer chose the government apartment blocks which now lie abandoned. Some of the residents recounted how the government apartments didn't provide sufficient water supply and had faulty drainage and electricity systems. They found it easier to illegally draw water and electricity from the main supply and connect their drainpipes to the nearby lake. Not only do the people choose to auto-construct2 (Caldeira) large parts of their neighbourhoods but they also find solutions to pressing everyday problems like rainwater seepage and garbage collection.

This example illustrates how people in dense settlements negotiate their urban spaces and construct them by themselves. The general solutions that master plans provide—cleanliness drives, housing schemes—don't work in these neighbourhoods since the master plan is itself inadequately aware of the prime aspects of these localities, let alone the nuances. Local solutions and methods are what aid in the settlements' survival, in case they escape demolition.

1Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission was a city 'modernisation' scheme by the Government of India launched in 2005 for a wide range of urban sector reforms, including housing.
2 According to Teresa Caldeira, auto-construction is a phenomenon of building houses, neighbourhoods or cities entirely by the people that inhabit them.

Master plans will have to, therefore, take into account the issues, nuances, and necessities of the people who live in these spaces before providing unworkable schemes. They must also look to the local solutions to see if they may have the potential to serve other similar instances of urban population.

Reclaimed Heritage

"The survival and future of heritage are linked to urban and spatial planning, which takes into account the integrity of space and the cultural heritage in it" (Scitaroci 1).

Even though there is enough emphasis on master plans and other conservation proposals by administrative bodies towards heritage, the vital question to ask becomes: Are the proposals materialising into reality?

There are two such examples in Hyderabad that come to mind: The Osmania General Hospital, which was built by the last Nizam and was threatened with demolition multiple times by the government. Due to pressure from conservation organisations, this proposal was later rescinded; however, such dissent is not taken into consideration by public bodies when master plans are proposed, devoid of any concern for public heritage. The Hyderabad Metro Rail layout was planned to cut across one of the oldest markets of the city, Sultan Bazar. The shopkeepers in the market were compensated for the demolition of their shops, but the cultural and social fabric of Sultan Bazar is now frayed. The erstwhile pedestrian street is now overshadowed by large metro pillars. The 200-year-old heritage precinct is visually obstructed by the track built above the market street. In addition to this is the reduced public accessibility to these shops and the rift caused between the shopkeepers of Sultan Bazar and its neighbouring Badi Chowdi market due to events that are associated with the construction of the metro line.

It is shocking to note that such insensitivity is similar in a city that is world-famous for its heritage–Agra. This example is inspired from a series of design solutions proposed by a Harvard classroom for the conservation of both the ignored heritage structures and the River Yamuna. While it is not necessary to delve deeply into the details of these academic design proposals for the paper, the process of their study reveals a crucial aspect. The students visited different parts of the city and interacted with communities that live in the shadow of the monuments. Their major observations were twofold: larger monuments were preserved and the people who live around them neglected; while smaller monuments were entirely ignored. Following this, the students proposed a range of solutions for different parts of the city. Broadly the solutions were based around delineating a 6-km-long Special Planning Zone for the 45 monuments and the Yamuna, and the creation of a governing body to act as a 'unifying platform and facilitator' between all the stakeholders (Mehrotra 42).

This approach demonstrates that there is indeed a possibility of creating such solutions where participatory models which engage with both the public and

the administration can be formulated for overall urban development. The fact that a delineated urban zone was proposed shows both the inadequacy of the existing master plan and the prospect for a more nuanced approach through subsequent master plans.

Integrated Abandoned Spaces

There are many spaces in cities that eventually become derelict and are abandoned. Underused alleys, dead ends, and old factories are some examples. Once their original function or necessity ceases to exist, they gradually deteriorate and become obscure. This obscurity creates, in some cases, unused and unsafe spaces in cities. There is no social interaction in these spaces and therefore the public space deteriorates. This wasted space breaks the continuity of the urban fabric and creates 'meaningless unstructured landscapes' (Sameeh, Gabr, Aly 181).

Since master plans don't study cities in detail as mentioned earlier in the paper, such places become more and more indistinct and are no longer part of the active city. There are some innovative examples where these spaces have been recovered. Such is the story of Gem Cinema in Kolkata, which was abandoned after a fire many decades ago. Gem Cinema, which had screened films like Sholay in the past, had turned into a 'giant, grotty concrete box with blackened walls' (Das). Recently, this part of a crowded urban neighbourhood was picked for the site of a visual arts exhibition by the CIMA (Centre of International Modern Art) gallery. The decayed look of the space was an apt backdrop for the artworks that were presented. Therefore, the space was repurposed by reworking electricity and basic infrastructure but keeping its derelict look as it was. The chairs were removed to create a large walkable space for the gallery, and the screen was replaced by artworks. One of the artworks that hangs in the gallery is an ode to the loss of the erstwhile theatre in 'public memory' and on the city map (Das). The main aim of this repurposing was to rekindle not only the memory of this once-famous public space, but also the materiality of the public space itself.

Reviving a lost public space by altering its activity and reimagining its potential is the inspiring element of this story. In cities, there are many old public spaces that are abandoned and unused. In a developing city, there is always a crisis for housing, the need for more institutional and public buildings. If such prospects are encouraged by master plans by delineating areas that are inactive and up for re-use, they can be reimagined in such ways and made part of the city's sustainable development.

Conclusion

By studying lapses in the master plan through ethnographic studies and urban research, and by citing examples of three typologies of spaces, this paper has proposed a re-orientation of the master plan across three significant elements of the document. Each of these are inventive forms of development that utilise the existing potential of a city as opposed to looking outward to integrate more land and people into its boundaries. These approaches will therefore help to re-activate the core of

the city without external interventions but through self-sustained measures.

Master plans may not have the capacity to delve deeply into the nuances of spaces. However, it is imperative that planners remain aware of the evolution that happens in streets and neighbourhoods without their intervention. It is necessary that these approaches are considered with sensitivity and integrated into the planning mechanisms of a city in a manner that is not forced or rigidly prescriptive. The most necessary approach to planning is that people and the systemic workings of the city they inhabit are not unfamiliar to each other, as from this unfamiliarity comes monotony and eventual decay.

By employing these new approaches to planning, urban planners may become crucial promoters of an urban change that provides a fresh understanding of the cityscape, people-centric solutions for the social space, and a 'self-referential' framework for the planning and design of future heterogenous cities. This, perhaps will lead us to what Quli's couplet was really about—a prospering, active, moving city.

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Radio: A Public Ride to the City

JAITUN PATEL

About the Author

As a person who is often quiet in the verbal world, finding expression in written words has been both stimulating and empowering. Driven by the curiosity to know the world better, I joined Ashoka, until which—as a computer engineer—I had hardly engaged with writing to voice my thoughts. Critical writing has been the heart of my writing experience at Ashoka, and the reflection writing and sharing in those classes is what I enjoyed and remember the most. It was like visiting a flower shop—where you come across a variety of flowers and are free to choose as well as create your own bouquet. Always intrigued by the possibilities of giving form to my learning and observations, writing this piece has been a similar pursuit—digging into my experience of listening to the radio and dwelling in different cities. I am thankful to my preceptor, Prateek Paul, for his efforts and support, and even more for introducing the theme of Writing the City. As a first-time visitor and a short-term resident, I know Delhi/Dehli/Dilli much more than 'things to do' while there.

I am passionate about design, technology, art culture, and nature, and embarking upon graduate studies for an interdisciplinary career.

Cities can be reflected in the camera; cities come into being on radio.
(Marek, qtd in Birdsall 129)

Squeak! Squawk! Frequency is tuned and voices from the radio begin to seek attention. In the era of television and video streaming, people have been habituated to perceive their surroundings through visual media, and there is a continuous switching between hearing and listening; putting constant pressure on these voices on the air to avoid getting lost in the surrounding activities. These voices desire and are able to pierce through the daily lives of listeners who would otherwise not let strangers penetrate their private boundaries.

Encountering these voices—consciously or unconsciously—in everyday settings, listeners become familiar with the presence of the space embedding them; floating alongside their routine practices. As a passenger boards the train, by turning on the radio button the listener boards on air. Entering the shared space, they embark on a journey to places while engaging with space itself. It also provides a window to the outside world. Just as the sounds of the engine, whistles, vendors, the chatter of the passengers, and the announcements on the railway stations are linked to a train journey, the sounds of radio's physical equipment, tunes, announcements, advertisements, and voices over the medium form the sound sensorium of radio broadcasting. So, listening to the radio is analogous to travelling on a train. This paper first studies the public sphere and categorises radio broadcasting as a public space—shared and open. It also delves into the construction of this public space through the sounding, voicing, and listening aspects of radio. Employing this understanding, the production of the experience of urban space, the city, is traced. The role of this old media form in the construction, portrayal, and experience of the city is thus presented through this study.

Jürgen Habermas has put forth the concept of the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens" (2). According to him, the public is an institution, and not a crowd, that takes form through the participation of the latter. So, when people get involved in unrestricted discussions of general interest, only then they behave as a public body (Habermas 2). Hence, freedom of speech and expression are integral to this space. This understanding is furthered with the concept of a deliberative public sphere: "space where collective and individual, popular and non-popular actors within a community have access to participate and have the possibility to add new issues to the discussion agenda" (Avritzer). As the exchange of ideas and dialogue defines the public space, it need not be physical in nature. Its constitution can be either through face-to-face or mediated spaces that, whether "interconnected or individually, correspond to a community"
(Navarro 4).

Radio waves are everywhere: anyone with a receiver is just a tap away from accessing the space of the radio and, so, it guarantees unrestricted access. The connotations of a community, or public, with the radio are also found

in the usage of slogans for the radio programmes like *Bahujan Hitaya Bahujan Sukhaya* ("For promoting the welfare and happiness of the masses") and *Informasi Dari Anda, Untuk Anda* ("Information from you and for you"). A space modelled for common usage follows norms and modes of behaviour that guarantee public opinion, which include— a) general accessibility b) elimination of all privileges, and c) discovery of general norms and rational legitimations, as characterised by Habermas (3). However, tracing the history of radio in India, radio broadcasting was not part of the public domain nor did the audience engage with it as one. This was mainly because of the presence of stringent government control and political influence on the space that constrained the radio from being relevant to its listeners' interests. It was only after the Supreme Court judgment of 1995, that declared airwaves as public property, that radio broadcasting was employed to serve the general interests of the public (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting vs Cricket Association of Bengal, MIB). Since then, airwaves have been owned by everyone and no one (Sarai 18). But, open gates of a park only fulfil the first norm of Habermas's idea of the public sphere; they are not sufficient for the citizens to publicly engage with the space. Only when radio broadcasting serves the interests of anyone and everyone who can receive its signals, can it be leveraged for the formation of public opinion. Hence, ownership sets the necessary precondition in removing the barriers for access but is not sufficient for the construction of public space.

"For those who go from home to work, and commute long hours to come home again, public space is basically the interminable zone between work, and rest, in order to go back to work again" (Sarai 2). These commuters might not be accompanied by someone but they know that in those interminable zones they are not alone, that they are part of a shared space. The scenario is not very different for radio broadcasting. The radio is very clearly present in these interminable zones, and it is itself one. Tuning in the radio in leisure time, in the bathroom, while cooking, driving home, on the way to the office or in traffic jams, commuters choose to be part of this parallel 'on-air' space that is spread endlessly and penetrates all visible boundaries. With the advent of mobile phones and headsets, this space is ever-expanding and now, accessible even at the office desk, on trains, and on buses. Additionally, listeners can tune in to radio programmes of any region—local, national or international. Thus, the private, public, national, and international are all fused and open on-air. Listeners, although connected to the radio in their own personal spaces, are aware of the presence of a larger audience—that the space is simultaneously occupied by others. It is this common and simultaneous use of the space that shapes the very idea of publicness. Listeners are connected in/through the same medium and yet are distant. Moreover, they are aware of this distance and still carry the sense of togetherness. It is the radio's feature of intimacy-at-a-distance that this paper interprets in the context of the public space.

The space of radio broadcasting is purely a creation of sound and voices that travel through the ether; which is invisible yet physical. For this identity rooted in the sense of sound, radio has various associations of the oral and aural in its construction as a public space. There is usually no face to the voice heard on the radio, and so, on-air interactivity is restricted to speech. This puts the requirement on the space to be listener-friendly. In their friendly tones, the radio hosts should sound ordinary—one amongst the audience—and be or seem to be themselves (Tolson 8). With thousands of ears on them, a naturalness in the tone is vital in order to handle any unexpected situations (especially in live shows), and maintain the illusion of liveliness (for recorded programmes) and spontaneity (in both recorded and live shows). Furthermore, the hosts only have their microphones to talk to; the visual audience is absent. Speaking amid such contrasting shades—of being conscious and being oneself, friendliness and strangeness, natural and scripted, absence and presence—transforms the hosts into actors and their speaking into performances. Jurriëns, in his case study on Indonesian radio programmes, has discussed the diverse roles the hosts play. One of these roles is that of 'counselor-therapist'—lightening the mood of their audience through relaxed and humorous conversations. "By discussion and releasing the tension from controversial issues, the hosts attempt to free people from their frustrations and console them" (Jurriëns 8). Through such oral performances, radio hosts establish a connection with the listeners and enable them to stay tuned in.

"It is raining outside and there's a touch of the cool breeze ... so, your RJ brings you this song. Enjoy listening and stay tuned." Such instances are not uncommon when the hosts make use of the common physical surroundings, 'the present', to associate with the listeners and extend into their space. Radio talk shows as described by Andrew Tolson are the "presentation of self" in everyday life (5). The wide receptivity of radio signals enables the utilisation of radio alongside routine activities, especially while driving, in the kitchen or in the fields where the scope of visual attention is absent. "It blends in with the domestic life that surrounds it, either competing with other activities or accompanying them" (15). Moreover, usage of collective pronouns—we, us, all, everyone—explicitly tells the listeners about the presence of several others. It sets up the notion of a shared space. However, radio broadcasting is more than one-way performances and involves elements of interactivity which, in turn, transforms it into a public space.

The audience on the radio is not always on mute. Interactivity as per Edwin Jurriëns is the 'talk-back' or 'phone-in' feature of radio where the audience can connect to the host on-air, participate, and even contribute to the radio programme through a telephone (2). Listeners can access and engage in the space without requiring a self-declaration; a space of sounds has no faces. So, radio broadcasting is comparable to the public domain that "has historically signified a kind of happy nameless, effaced existence" (Sarai 4). Such anonymity enables the building of a relationship on-air while getting involved with the radio. For

instance, in the case of the community radio *Kalyani* in West Bengal studied by Bonita Aleaz, "The listeners of the programme came to symbolise a person named Kalyani with whom they could communicate on a no-holds-barred basis" (Aleaz 30). The broadcasting centre received thousands of letters addressed to *Kalyani* from men and women of various age groups. Of them, letters from women, particularly Muslim women were considerably larger in number. These letters, rather love letters, were an outlet for emotions and the expression of intimate feelings that were usually constricted for women in social settings. The invisibility of the airwaves removed "the constructed formalisms of interpersonal social communication consciously created and upheld by society" for women (Aleaz 31). Similar was the case with the category of letters from male counterparts who considered *Kalyani* the only hope to live with their increasing age and loneliness. Such emotional outpourings were unusual, as pointed out by Aleaz, among the society of rationally thinking men (31). Radio thus engenders interactions through other mediums and creates avenues for the otherwise restricted subjects to enter the public sphere. The formation of these counterpublics "widen the field of discursive contestation, meaning they bring to the fore issues that might have been overlooked, purposely ignored, or suppressed by dominant publics" (Kampourakis). Radio thus nurtures diverse participation from society and closely resembles the Habermasian model of the public sphere.

Community radio, in particular, is set up with the goal to bring marginalised voices to the centre, "to give voice to the voiceless". In the case of *Kalyani*, the programme format and radio's embedded anonymity empowered its listeners with a buffer for an emotional outlet. On similar lines, Vinod Pavarala mentions three instances where the usually unheard voices used their access to the radio for community building and empowerment: tsunami alerts broadcast by a local woman that saved Vilunthamavadi village in Tamil Nadu from the havoc of the 2004 tsunami; the recording of over a thousand songs in Bundeli through a community radio show called *Bundeli Idol* hosted by the women of Orchha village in Madhya Pradesh; and the Telugu talk show that explores critical social issues through gossip between sisters-in-law. These instances demonstrate community participation, ownership, and management of the broadcasting space. It also highlights the role of radio in "enabling marginalised communities to use the medium to create opportunities for social change, cohesion, and inclusion as well as for creative and cultural expression" (Pavarala). Besides, radio connects the audience to the outside world by eliminating all privileges and preserving their identities.

Similar to the way railways connect distant parts of the country to its city centres, radio links every end receiver to its radiating urban centres—the cities. Historically situated in cities, radio emanated to the periphery of the city; speaking and listening to the margins—often the rural. While its physical presence has expanded with the development of regional and local radio, the urban association

of the radio still remains intact. For example, the knowledge about the location of broadcasting centres in the cities maintains the conception of radio as belonging to the urban. The apparent changes in language usage and content of radio programmes are other factors contributing to the urban influence. "The different languages used interchangeably and without translation, can be heard as a metaphor of the multiculturalism that came with the development of the vast modern city" (Karathanasopoulou and Crisell 8). The production of broadcasts in English and the creation of FM Rainbow by All India Radio (AIR) to serve the 'modern' taste of pop music are a few other examples.

The reach of radio across the boundaries of the nation portrays the picture of the developing world. The opening of the global boundaries and the emergence of the world market are very well heard on the radio. "In other words, a new aesthetic of broadcasting is being created on-air as a metaphor of the new ways in which the world is going to function" (Karathanasopoulou and Crisell 8). Moreover, as this information is routed through the city's radio broadcasting centres, and cities are perceived as links to the global. Radio reaffirms the distinctiveness of the city (from the rural) and lets its listeners understand the urban by transmitting information about the notions of city life; often marked by the effects of industrialisation: fast-paced, concentrated with intense activity, and increased connectivity (both with the rural and the global). The notion of 'internationalisation' due to radio's ability to tune in to far-away sounds, therefore, burnishes its urban image (Birdsall 25). Aerial Congestion—dense terrace spaces with antennae and radio receivers—also confirms the urbanity of the invisible radio waves in the visible landscape of the cities (9). The increased reach of radio has been followed by the intrusion of tech apparatus in homes and the association of new sounds with the apparatus (6). These new—at times unexpected—sounds are of the urban environments, of the development of the new world, a world that is accelerating.

Urban can be both documented and imagined through the radio, through the sound and the aural. Carolyn Birdsall has discussed the use of sonic dimensions for the depiction of the urban. Capturing the sounds of the cityscape—the sounds of harbour, steam engines, railways, cars, and also outdoor broadcasting—facilitates the audience's visualisation of the city (Birdsall). However, only the sounds of the urban landscape cannot convey the unique essence of a city. So, radio announcers play an important role in creating the sonorous portrayal of the visual through speech, music or sound effects (Bodenstedt 45). For example, the change of place from Ahmedabad to Bengaluru is not felt merely upon reaching the Bangalore airport or entering the city. Visual cues of the pleasant weather or the location update in phones are not unavailable, but it is only when the radio in the taxi screams "Namma Bengaluru", and with songs playing in Kannada, that one truly feels the change of city landscape. Similarly, Delhi, being the national capital, is indicative from the usage of Hindi, the official language of the country, on all

its radio channels. "Radio forces people to objectify the senses anew, and in doing so, it opens a space by which the ontological—senses of being-in-the-world—is also objectified, cited, expanded, and reproduced" (Bessire et al.). Thus, locally occasioned speeches, along with the characteristic sounds of the place, deliver a flavour of the city to the listener on the radio.

These speeches and conversations fostered by radio, as a public space, deal with public affairs and should be categorised under public speaking. Public speaking, as presented by Stewart, "offers an important forum for the dissemination of ideas about the city and the urban experience, for the construction of the city's 'imaginative structure'" (49). So, radio is "a site for the discussion of the city itself, a place in which the city could be—and is—constructed through discourse" (Stewart 49). The broadcast of local news, for instance, familiarises the listeners with the city's spatial and cultural elements. Listening to the news occurrences with references to North, South, East, Central, and West Delhi, creates a mental impression of the local happenings and helps to situate oneself in the city. Radio interactions with the people, local bodies, and government officials also build an understanding of the local context of the city. Entertainment programmes, on the other hand, provide the best knowledge of a city's culture, for the dialect and use of language by the hosts are closest to the people of the area. Advertisements, mainly the local commercials, are another source of knowing the city on-air as they are linked with the popular/demanding facets of the city. For example, the frequency of commute options and sale commercials, or event announcements, in Bengaluru depict the traffic problems and weekend tastes of the city dwellers. So, the voices embodying the city take the listeners on a trip to imagine, explore, and experience the city on-air.

However, the experience of the city built by the radio is different for the locals compared to those who are new to the city. Richard Foreman, in his excerpt from a play, has portrayed the role of radio in his exploration of a new city:

> *What I can bring back from my day exploring the city—?*
> *It vanishes.*
> *Therefore, the city might have been endless. On the other hand, it might*
> *have been a disappointment.*
> *That is one of the reasons I so miss having a radio in my room. If there was a radio in my room I might, now, turning it on for myself,*
> *hear—intuition-wise—what I missed, or lost, in my meticulous exploration*
> *turned back toward me.* (Foreman 136)

The sounds and voices of the radio, unlike a tourist itinerary, are not situated only around the monumental cities. They are instead embedded in the routine practices of the city life and so, offer an entry into the city's everyday reality—as the processions of Republic Day at the Red Fort are unique to Delhi but not unknown to outsiders. However, the frequency of Punjabi songs and repeated mentions of the metro do point at its demographics,

and the public's inclination and usage of the Delhi metro. Besides constructing the cityscape, radio is also a window to experience the city. Even if one is familiar with the city, radio creates opportunities for new engagement; for example, a random song on the radio can evoke the experience of the streets of a common route afresh for listeners. Furthermore, the usage of deictic language enables the audience to travel across space and time and enter the realm of an imaginative yet existent space. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who still make their 'live' appearances in 21st century India through their speech broadcasts from Delhi, putting forth a distinct image of the present-day city. So, radio offers a dive into the cityscape that is not unknown, but the way it reveals itself may no longer leave it known either. The liveliness and spontaneity of radio enables the listeners to visualise the city and move across it while "demonstrating that an ongoing commitment to immediate communication lay at the heart of the modern media-dominated city" (Stewart 154). These interactions with the city are constantly shaping the formulated image of the city, adding dimensions from its own inhabitants.

"This city, as it is constantly reimagined and reconstructed through very large-scale conversations in electronic space, and as it shapes and steers that form of public speaking, is a virtual entity that contains the potential to surprise the actual city" (Stewart 179). Radio as a public space facilitates unbridled conversations that connect the social to the domestic, city to the individuals, and vice versa. When individuals tune in to the radio, it constitutes a public sphere, as defined by Habermas, where "private individuals assemble to form a public body" (2). This public body then carries with itself a sense of collective, of community. The sounds and voices that embody the space of radio often become the voice of the community. Public spaces do not exist as standalone spaces. So, the formulated on-air space, also an embodied urban space, constantly interacts with the spaces that contain it—the cities and those contained within—the on-air community. "The city of the future, then, need not be conceived merely as a simulation of a built environment; instead, it can be visualized as a complex network of speech sites, as an entity formed through digital speech" (Stewart 179). Sounds travel through the air and so, to their listeners, radio broadcasting is transformed from a site of communication into that for loitering and engaging in the space it creates and the one it is situated in. Radio can be thus characterised as a public ride to the cities.

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What the Metro Smart Card is Unable to Read: Understanding the Relationship between Delhi Metro, City and the People

SAKSHI BARAK

About the Author

On the first day of her critical writing course, Writing the City, Sakshi discussed that she had not travelled much around the city even though she had lived in Delhi all her life. During the next six months she travelled the city through the writings of William Dalrymple, Khushwant Singh, Rashmi Sadana, Shilpa Phadke, and even scrolling through The Delhi Wala.

Each week in the course, students were asked to submit their reflections on the readings, which she says helped her the most in building her own impression of the city. She is a huge fan of the Delhi Metro as it aided her in exploring different parts of the city. Therefore, she decided to pen down her relationship with the city and the Delhi Metro in her final paper for the course.

She holds a bachelor's degree in commerce along with YIF and has worked with the finance team at WNS.

She loves to bake and create art in her leisure time. Recently she discovered that the writing seed, planted a long time back during the critical writing course, has now sprouted and she is diligently taking care of the little sapling.

You can find her on Instagram: @sakshibarak8@ashokadoodles

"Papa, I had registered for a conference some days back and I have got an invitation for the same. The conference is at NCAER today at 11:00 am. Can I take the Scooty, and can you please tell me which way to go?"

I was an 18-year-old, who had recently secured admission in Jesus and Mary College in the University of Delhi. I had just started going to college on my Scooty and had to ask my father for directions for every single route other than the one between my house and my college, which is in Chanakyapuri and around 13 kilometres away from where I live (the shortest distance between the two was the only route that I was aware of as I had rote-learnt it after two or three trips). I live with my family in our house in Block 2, Mahavir Enclave, sandwiched between Dwarka and Janakpuri. The area is very well connected by the DTC bus route and five minutes of walking leads one to the main road where one can catch public transportation very easily. But at that point of time, the words public transport did not exist in my dictionary. First, it was and still is considered 'unsafe' for women. Second, I could not step out of the house without asking my father for directions, as he always knew some shortcuts to navigate in and around the city, as well as for his permission.

He came to the city with the family when he was very young and has spent most of his life here. He got to travel in and around the city a lot and knew every route whenever we used to go out together. As a child, whenever we went out, I was always amused by the beauty of the endless roads that lay before us. We always navigated and experienced the city through his eyes, and when the time came to finally get a chance to explore the city a little on my own, something had suspiciously entered our life. Savdhan India. It not only resulted in increasing the restrictions at home but also took away many peaceful afternoons which could have been easily spent enjoying a cup of tea.

Growing up, the city looked like a labyrinth in which I was just a dot. It was only later that I realised the city itself is merely a dot on the map of India. An insatiable curiosity had always been there inside me as a child to one day explore the whole city, and find my own way in this labyrinth, unencumbered by any kind of restrictions. But the dream always came tumbling down along with the fear of getting lost as virtually the whole city was uncharted territory for me. Also, it seemed like *'khatron ke khiladi'* for me, riding my Scooty with one hand and searching for directions on Google maps with the other. I found I was always afraid that I would not get a chance to explore the city, but before that, I was even more afraid of never getting permission to do so. *Jiska darr tha, wahi hua.*

"Stay at home."

I rarely got the opportunity to travel around the city on my own. Family trips, too few and far between, were restricted to places like the Airforce Museum, India Gate, Teen Murti Bhavan, and sometimes the Lotus Temple. I remember that these used to be the special days when everyone in the family used to get very excited. We used to get ready in the evening for a

45-minute drive in my father's blue Tata Mobile car, up to Central Delhi to visit India Gate on Children's Day. Our house is in the south-west district of Delhi, and we would always take the Palam Flyover to commute to Central and North Delhi. We would drive through the lavish greenery of Delhi Cantt, and I was the one who was constantly looking out of the window trying to absorb as much as I could of the city, in the limited time span. As I grew older, curiosity took a back seat as different priorities took charge of driving now.

15 May 2019 was the day I had my personal interview for the Young India Fellowship at Ashoka University. I had applied to the programme without my parents' permission or even knowledge. Up until then, every stage of the application process did not require my physical presence on campus and things were running smoothly. For the interview, I was called to the Ashoka University campus. Upon checking on Google Maps, I realised that it was around 50 kilometres away from my home. I decided not to cover this journey on my Scooty because, that way my father would have gotten to know about my application. I was completely unaware of the route as well. I searched for the directions to reach the university and came to know that I would have to reach Jahangirpuri metro station, and after deboarding, make an hour-long journey in the shuttle of the university to reach the final destination. It required me to travel inter-city. I had just started navigating my way through the city with the help of the metro and now I had to travel across the city all by myself. It was somehow scary but I was equally thrilled. I had already taken a day off from NITI Aayog, where I was pursuing my internship. I used to take the metro for my daily commute and used to deboard at Patel Chowk metro station. I was familiar with the transportation system and metro stations that were along my route from Palam to Patel Chowk. That day, I took a leap of faith and decided to undertake the journey, which I had never done, to Sonepat, all by myself. I found myself looking out of the window whenever possible, trying to explore every aspect of the city which became visible to my eyes. As soon as I reached the GTB Nagar metro station, the crowd had already started to evaporate and I could see the inner frame of the metro train more clearly, which is rarely the case on stations like Rajiv Chowk and Vishwavidyalaya. Through the window, I could see gigantic cold storage chains and an impenetrable set of local shopping centres. Cold storage facilities gave me the chills even with just a glimpse. "What would happen if I got stuck in there?" By the time I could analyse this question, the door opened with the announcement, "Jahangirpuri station. Mind the gap."

Throughout my college days, I commuted on my Scooty. All I ever knew about the city was from the 'rear view', not only of the mirror but also of my father. I would take the Palam Flyover, which would take me to the main traffic signal where I had to decide which route to choose—Delhi Cantt or Gurugram. I had an access pass with which one can travel through the restricted areas in the cantonment region. Since my father works in the Military Engineering Services, he had one. As his 'dependent', I would be free to travel along the

route heavily loaded with security, and hence considered to be 'safe'. After crossing the Manekshaw Auditorium, I would make my way to the Dhaula Kuan road, and then navigate farther to reach my college nestled in the highly secured area of the diplomatic enclave. That was the particular route between college and home, beyond which only uncertainties existed.

I look back on my first journey in the Delhi Metro and I realise it indeed required some courage. I was hoping to not leave any of my belongings behind, hoping to take the right line, and was alert like a cheetah whenever any announcements were made. I looked around and saw many people with their headphones on, and wondered how well rehearsed they were with the act of travelling in a metro. I had to get familiar with the system of how tokens and smart cards are used, guide myself through specific terrains to reach desired platforms, and understand the maneuvering skills required to survive the rush hours. As I started my first journey that day, I was exposed to the life of the city through the metro—a place where lakhs of commuters come to a common platform, where heterogeneities collide intimately, and mobility comes with a negotiation of space in-transit. It felt as if the whole city was at my disposal, ready to be explored. Just by listening to the names of the metro stations, when the announcements were made every two to three minutes, I found myself getting closer and closer to the city. Unlike before, there was no specific route carved out for me by my father. I could take twists and turns and could go anywhere I wanted within the city. I was no longer afraid that in the middle of the road, stuck in traffic, I would bump into my father commuting on the same route that day. This continuous anxiety that came along whenever I had thought of changing my route stopped me from doing so. But travelling in the metro felt liberating, first from the scorching heat that I would be broiling in if I had gone on the Scooty, and second, from the continuous brainstorming required in order to come up with a perfect excuse for changing the route. It provided me with a sense of ownership on my journey traversing the city.

With a population of approximately 17 million according to the 2011 Census, Delhi is the fifth most densely populated city in the world, and it could become the world's most populous city by 2028, surpassing Tokyo that is currently home to a population of 37 million people (DESA [Department of Economic and Social Affairs]). Delhi has been seeing a continuous rise in the population growth rate since Independence. The reasons for this rapid spike in the population of the city were arguably greater employment opportunities and an increase in the standard of living. Hence, the decade witnessed a greater degree of migration to the city. With the increasing population in each passing decade, it was becoming crucial to build up a rapid transportation system that could cater to the rising demands of the fast-moving city.

The model of the Delhi Metro was adopted, and Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) was established in 1995. The 'railway project' as claimed by E Shreedharan, its first managing director, started in 1998 with financial help from Japan International

Cooperation Agency (JICA). It progressed over the course of four years and was completed in 2002.. The construction work started in 1998 under Phase I, which gave Delhi its first metro line, i.e., the Red line from Tis Hazari to Shahdara, which opened on 25 December 2002 (DMRC, *Annual Report*). There had always been a requirement for an efficient transportation system in Delhi which would cater to growing population needs. Today, there are 11 colour-coded lines serving 285 stations with a total length of around 350 kilometres (DMRC, *Annual Repor*t), encompassing peripheral areas of Delhi NCR under its network. The areas such as Greater Noida, Gurugram, Sonepat, Ghaziabad, and Faridabad are well connected through the Delhi Metro.

New Delhi is infamous as an unsafe city for women. Delhi is ranked first among 19 metropolitan cities in India in recording the highest number of crimes against women, according to data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). A 2012 survey in Delhi which was supported by UN Women revealed that 95 per cent of women felt unsafe in public spaces ("Safer Cities Free of Violence against Women and Girls"). Public transportation plays a crucial role in the economy by taking the human resources from one place to the other. In this context, women possess the same right to participate and contribute in the economy as men do. In a study with around 4,000 Delhi University students, it was found that women's choice of colleges is influenced by the lack of safe and suitable public transport (Borker 5–8) The metro, however, is widely considered to be safe public transport for women. It employs advanced technological systems for surveillance and has added a special coach for women. Thus, it has helped in improving the mobility of women with its well-connected stations encompassing almost the entire city. According to a survey done by the Delhi Transport Corporation and the Delhi Metro, it was found that today women constitute around 30 to 35 percent of the passengers in both buses and the metro in Delhi (Choudhury). Thus, it has made the city far more accessible for women today.

Melissa Butcher claims that the metro has become symbolic of 'modern' Delhi; it is more than just a rapid transport system which includes unprecedented safety measures and a major focus on cleanliness (Butcher 165). Delhi Metro has become a symbol of modern and progressing India, and more specifically a symbol of cosmopolitan Delhi. If we glance at the cinematic evidence, the metro has played a major role in Bollywood films, giving a glimpse of life in Delhi. I distinctly remember the movie *Delhi-6* where Sonam Kapoor's character takes the metro to explore herself as well as the city. Its widespread reach combined with a comfortable journey to just about all the important destinations in the city has brought people together who belong to different strata of society. This thought became stronger when I saw two monks travelling in the metro one day as I was headed back home. It depicted a beautiful juxtaposition between two major themes—tradition and modernity. Delhi Metro provides a way to transit between the two.

With my journeys on the metro, the curiosity of exploring the city that had died down a long time ago found itself rising again. Melissa Butcher writes that the Delhi Metro has emerged not only as a means of transport but also as a technology to think about and experience the city differently. In the initial journeys, Delhi Metro had provided me with a platform through which I was not just travelling to an unknown area for the first time but also the opportunity to refamiliarise myself with the city. On the day of my personal interview when I commuted across the city, I realised that the ever-present fear of entering unfamiliar regions was fading away and it in fact provided me with a boost of self-confidence in terms of travelling alone. In *Delhi-6*, I could see Sonam's character enjoying the expanding landscape of modernity through the Delhi Metro, and it provided her a channel to experience the city in a different way. In my case it ended up becoming a reality. The vast landscape which encompassed different uncertainties was made available on a single screen through the Delhi Metro app. With every approaching station, I was going to different places, the names of which I had never heard before. I would continue tracking my position with the green dot on the map installed inside the metros. Every three minutes, the doors would open and I would look out to grasp the tiniest of indicators that distinguished one station from the other. Without anyone guiding me on how to navigate the city, I could make my own spatial imagination of the city. I could guess that Chandni Chowk is a place known for shopping, by observing passengers who board at that station with numerous shopping bags. I could not believe that I was in the middle of the city and knew exactly how to go back home in exactly how much time, without having to ask for directions from anyone, not even from my father. I no longer felt like a stranger to the city, nor did the city feel like a stranger to me.

During my initial journeys in the metro, I had found myself quite focused and alert. Listening to the announcements on the metro: "The doors will open on the left. Please mind the gap", at three-minute intervals, made me realise that it is the disclaimer: "Please mind the gap" that we have come to internalise in our day-to-day travel. Today, when I look, I find the majority of the people engrossed in the screens of their smartphones; some watching their favourite episode of *Friends* or some busy surfing the tracks in *Subway Surfer*. Public transport not only facilitates mobility from one point to the other but also provides an ample amount of time for social interactions that can be utilised by the passengers to build healthy relationships with other co-passengers. I recall that day when I ended up discussing books with a complete stranger as he was sitting beside me and reading my favourite book, *The Alchemist*. Jensen argues that rather than just being 'passively shuffled across town' in public transport we are in fact 'linked-in-motion' (qtd in Butcher 149).

•••

Imagine, if Jesse would have been playing Candy Crush on his smartphone that day on the train and Céline too, busy chatting with her friends while taking a seat in the compartment adjacent to his, then we would have never gotten a chance to experience the beautiful journey that follows in *Before Sunrise* after their interaction (Linklater).

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DO NOT INTERACT
WITH THEM

5

Nietzsche, Rawls and Bezos Walk into a Bar: A Review of Pandemic Ethics

SREERUPA BHATTACHARYA

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

URA VERMA

Zoo and the 'People Shows': Meeting Points of Ecological Modernity and Colonialism

ANURAAG KHAUND

Nietzsche, Rawls and Bezos Walk into a Bar : A Review of Pandemic Ethics

SREERUPA BHATTACHARYA

About the Author

Sreerupa is a student of literature and a Young India Fellow, 2020. She is a slow, talkative reader, a scribbler more than a writer, and a struggler in words. At YIF she realised the impossibility of a 'final' draft, the importance of knowing one's audience, and her indebtedness to all those who help her find her voice. She has lived in Calcutta all her life and tries to see it through a stranger's eyes.

What happens when Nietzsche, Rawls, and Bezos walk into a bar? Nothing. Bars have not opened yet. Well, what's new then?

2.6 million! No, that's not the latest financial aid package announced for COVID relief by our Finance Minister. That is the number of views that a TikTok video, made by e-commerce freelancer Humphrey Yang, garnered on Twitter by reimagining Amazon CEO, Jeff Bezos' total wealth in terms of rice grains (Scher 2020). At the time, his $122 billion translated to 58 pounds of rice grain, at the rate of $1,00,000 per grain. The video went viral in late February 2020, long before the Dalgonas were brewing in the kitchen. However, before we could smell the coffee, the alarm rang, and we woke up to a strange new disease. In early March, WHO declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, and our world changed—Bezos got $24 billion richer. Yang's video had already sparked outrage against the skewed concentration of wealth, but the mounting health and economic crisis, along with rising unemployment in the US (Cox 2020), exposed the fault lines of crony capitalism as a gaping, festering wound. "Eat the Rich!"[1] became a common response to Yang's video (Scher 2020), succinctly summing up the general resentment caused by the economic disparity that has become acutely evident since the pandemic.

Closer home, the situation was no different. In the end of March, thousands of migrant workers all over India found themselves deserted, bereft of shelter or livelihood overnight, owing to the sudden announcement of the nationwide lockdown, and the lack of foresight and contingency put in place by the Indian government to manage the imminent emergency (Ninan 2020). Amid all the chaos and confusion surrounding the unprecedented turn of events, there rose a similar uproar. Even as businessmen, actors, and sports personalities such as Gautam Adani, Amitabh Bachchan, and M S Dhoni made their contributions, they were berated for not doing enough (Meghani 2020). News reports and social media appeared to hold them ethically accountable for their financial contributions. This article, however, would make no attempt to add to the many incisive critiques available in this context (Bamzai 2020, Giorgis 2020). Instead, I wish to explore a few questions that remain for most of us, those who walk the middle line, jostling for space somewhere between the ultra-rich and the impoverished, to reckon with: What are our expectations from the Bezos and Bachchans of the world, and why? What does the pandemic teach us about individual responsibilities towards fostering an equitable world? How does the pandemic compel us, ordinary citizens, to reimagine our own role in bridging the gap between the haves and the have-nots? In this context, by appropriating 19th century German

1 The expression has been attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and came to be used in the context of the socio-economic instability during the French Revolution. In recent years, it has emerged as a common slogan on social media to decry the (in)actions of the wealthiest among us that exacerbates the class disparity.
See Talia Lavin, "How 'Eat the Rich' Became the Rallying Cry for the Digital Generation," GQ, 2019.

philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of 'slave and master morality' on one hand, and 20th century political philosopher John Rawls's concept of the 'veil of ignorance' on the other, I shall argue that, even as we condemn the wealthy for not doing their due diligence, the pandemic ought to strip us of any sense of complacency about our own contribution towards mitigating the crisis at hand.

Several reports have built the narrative of the pandemic crisis with a focus on the unfair concentration of wealth, asserting how the wealthy have managed to keep their distance from the grim social realities. Hannah Giorgis, in her article "The Problem with Celebrities Urging Fans to Donate During a Pandemic", for *The Atlantic*, offers a scathing indictment of celebrities urging their fans to donate towards COVID relief efforts. She draws a comparison between the whopping net worth of Hollywood stars and the 'average American', who are being motivated by them towards charity auctions and merch sales, even as they face potential unemployment. The essay, in condemning the celebrities' 'stark disconnect from the realities', draws attention to the egregious behaviour of the powerful almost to the detriment of those most affected by the crisis (Giorgis 2020). Such disparaging instances of celebrities 'offloading responsibilities' might bear traces symptomatic of what Nietzsche, in his 1882 book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, referred to as 'master morality'.

Without going into the intricacies of the moral world in which Nietzsche bases his concept, it might suffice, for the present discussion, to understand the relation between the 'Master' and their other, 'the Slave'. According to Nietzsche, the strong and wealthy Masters are the rulers of the world. They do as they wish, without any consideration or the approval of others. They are those who seem to hold the reins of the world we inhabit. We live as pawns in a world where they are kings. We resent them because they have so much wealth, and yet they continue to amass more, leading to an ever-widening inequality of power. For example, here is a tweet which summarises the situation in the context of the imminent recession caused by the pandemic: "If Jeff Bezos gave all 3.3 million people who've just applied for unemployment $10,000 he would still have 80 billion dollars" (@ Austra).2 In general, Bezos can be in gross violation of labour rights (Kantor and Streitfield 2015) or the Adanis can indiscriminately mine across the Western Ghats (Jamwal 2017), without any qualms, even as others bear the burden of their actions. Those suffering the consequences, according to Nietzsche, would represent the weak and meek 'Slaves' who are oppressed by the Masters and eventually grow indignant. Yet they remain subservient since the Masters, asserting their power, proclaim themselves to be morally good and noble, while renouncing the Slaves to be ignoble owing to their weakness and vulnerability (Solomon and Martin 2009, 409-410). The apathy of the 'Masters' towards the reality of the 'Slaves', even as they recognise their power, echoes in Giorgis's incisive observation that the pandemic has

2 Incidentally, "Eat the rich" also features as one of the responses to this tweet.

stripped celebrities of the excuse of 'being unaware of how their fans live' (Giorgis 2020); and yet they manage to keep themselves distanced from the society at large, sometimes even profiting off of their despair, such as through pay-per-view online concerts during the lockdown. Although the article, noting the 'parasocial', 'one-sided' artist-fan relation, delineates how jarring some celebrities' lack of empathy can be, it does not go as far as to speculate on the effect it might have on the common people. It only suggests that the situation has taken "a financial, medical, and psychological toll on the very people who are viewing celebrities' tweets or Instagram posts seeking donations (and who are taxed at much higher rates than the uber-wealthy, too" (Giorgis 2020).

However, the Master-Slave dynamic is in no way one of unquestioning compliance. Nietzsche suggests that the mounting tension gives way to a slave rebellion—an awakening whereby they reclaim their lives as morally superior and better than the depraved selfishness of their other, because they have chosen to sacrifice their own well-being for the greater good (Solomon and Martin 2009, 409-410). Nietzsche's formulations have perhaps never been so glaringly evident as during the pandemic, when every day we see blatant manifestations of these two kinds of moralities: one 'noble', the other 'contemptible'. For those cooped up in their homes, braving financial loss or solitary despair, it is a voluntary sacrifice they are making in abidance by the law, symptomatic of the slave morality, while for those who derive pleasure by flouting these rules, or simply because they know better than believing how deadly the virus is, are perhaps in some sense exercising their master morality. The blaming and shaming of anti-maskers can thus be seen as an example of the 'slave revolt'. Similarly, when a section of netizens revels in a 'carnivorous id of class struggle' (Lavin 2019) against Bezos or trolls Bachchan asking for receipts for his charitable work, it is the triumph of slave morality, calling out the unchecked structures of oppression. Curiously, the standards which are otherwise aspirational to most—who would not mind being a billionaire, after all, provided there are no adverse consequences to oneself and others—become the object of our contempt, during a crisis such as the present one. We see the power—especially in terms of economic stronghold—of the 1 per cent as dangerous and 'evil'. The trolling and tirades on social media, à la 'Eat the Rich' could be seen as a fitting example of this sentiment. In contrast to this evil, we who do not own as much wealth, and are humble are 'good' (Solomon and Martin 2009, 409-410). But that is not all. Even as we assure ourselves of being righteous in our goodness and limited means and power, we are also always scornful towards those who do not subscribe to our ways. Hence, Slave morality thrives by undermining the Master morality. This relentless conflict between the two moralities, based on reciprocal domination, only serves to widen the social distance between the two factions. But is there a way out?

The average citizen is often justified in hurling tirades against the aura of

economic privilege to confront the wealthy about their actions, or lack thereof. Scorning the value system of the powerful becomes a source of strength and legitimacy for them. The ethical force behind the class struggle is thus a demand for fairness and justice. A month into the lockdown, another social media post was widely shared—an amusing data visualisation of wealth, shown to scale. In the same vein as Yang's TikTok, it illustrated the expenditure of a variety of things—from US veterans' sustenance to the upkeep of an Amazon warehouse—in comparison to the net worth of, no points for guessing, Jeff Bezos. But it made other references as well, the most telling of which was how the 400 richest Americans have more wealth than the bottom 60 per cent of the population combined (Vincent 2020). And then it inferred what all of us have been screaming all along—why can't they just give us some of that money! Or how, as several netizens suggested, a fraction of the income of these 400 individuals can provide free COVID tests for the whole of America for a start. In India, on the other hand, there emerged a different trend. Cricketers, who are otherwise exempted from public scrutiny as such, were put in the line of fire. While both Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly were criticised for having given less than some of their other colleagues, Virat Kohli's undisclosed contribution was met with misgivings. The insinuation was that it was not enough. Otherwise, why would they keep this information a secret? Denouncing such conjectures, others sympathised with the players, claiming that such accusations only "shows the deep anxiety and anger that people have for the successful, and it is as if they need to donate because they have earned money and have the means to do so" (Majumdar 2020).

Such a position, otherwise tenable, becomes tenacious under the present circumstances. Detractors claim that it is only justified that we know to what extent have those with whom the bulk of wealth rests come forward to extend their support towards those less fortunate, especially under such unprecedented circumstances as a deadly pandemic. In essence, we have an objective sense of fairness which, we think, creates moral obligations on every individual to come together to foster a more equitable society, but perhaps with different standards of expectations. This underlying ethical assumption was most thoroughly put forward by political philosopher John Rawls in his 1971 work *A Theory of Justice* as the axiom 'justice as fairness'. A society is fair when its free citizens, entitled to equal basic rights, cooperate within an egalitarian economic system for collective benefit. In his 1985 eponymous essay, he explains that 'justice as fairness' is premised upon the two principles of liberty and equality, whereby the latter entails "the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (Rawls 1985, 227). It is our expectation that those with means abide by this cornerstone of justice. Instead, such demands often resign to apathy and neglect. This is why celebrities asking everyone, without distinction, to "step up (as) we all need to do our part", as Giorgis remarks, comes across as tone-deaf because, "what does stepping up look like when you've lost your job?"

Hence, when we ask the wealthy to be generous, we are trying to restart the wheel under the Rawlsian principles, reminding the mighty and the powerful to contribute towards ensuring that their fellow citizens are not robbed of the same opportunities as them.

But what is it about Rawls' understanding of justice that makes it especially relevant to pandemic ethics? It is his premise of deciding what justice is from behind the 'veil of ignorance'. Rawls proposes a hypothesis: in a situation where everyone starts from the same original position, from behind the 'veil of ignorance', where they are unaware of their own social, economic or political status, there would be unanimous consent to build an unequivocally egalitarian world, since that would ensure that no matter who they turn out to be, they would be treated fairly (Rawls 2001, 86–87). The bliss of being ignorant of one's social identity and reach is that it propels us to always strive for an equitable world. The current crisis, however, has pushed us to be acutely aware of our social capital, or the lack thereof. While an Amit Shah can be treated in intensive care at the first signs of affliction, a pregnant woman with COVID symptoms loses her life as eight hospitals refuse her admission (Salaria 2020). In brief, those with better access to health-care amenities are likely to be safer than those who perhaps cannot afford to even maintain physical distance or work from home, as is the case with the inhabitants of Dharavi or domestic workers put out of jobs (Ashar 2020).

Yet, the virus is fair in its ways that it can infect both a migrant labourer as well as a Tom Hanks. So for many of us, even when we are economically and socially privileged, it is perhaps the first time that we have been so acutely aware of the spectre of uncertainty that looms large: What happens if I get the disease? Will I be able to afford sustained medical care? How long would the lockdown continue? How long would our coffers sustain us? What happens once they have dried up? These anxieties reinforce in us the importance of a just society with a fairly equal distribution of wealth and accessibility. The veil of ignorance is thus no longer a thought experiment. It is an imperative. More importantly, the pandemic has made us confront a reality in which the veil of ignorance may be necessarily indispensable even without the imagined original position. Presently, it is precisely the acute awareness of our own status, as we go through the uncertainties of these unprecedented times, that should lead us to actively invest towards building an equitable society. Potentially, we stand on the brink of a greatly altered world, where we have to build the society anew, brick by brick. The underlying notion is that this is our opportunity to not return to our 'old normal' but reconfigure the mores of our world, where class struggles do not become the site of a conflict between life and death. Most of us are clueless as to what will become of us, socio-economically, on the other side of this. As a result, we are pushed towards envisioning what principles of justice we would choose to ensure that we do not get the short end of the bargain. This realisation, an acknowledgement of our moral duty for its own sake (deontology) as well as a commitment towards achieving the greater good for the greater number of

people (utilitarianism), is perhaps what has moved us to partake in creating new networks of support. Perhaps, it is also this realisation that compels us to implore our public figures and heroes to do better, to give more.

However, despite our best intentions, would we be willing to hold ourselves to the same standards as we do our celebrities? M S Dhoni was heavily trolled on Twitter for having contributed Rs 1 lakh towards a private COVID relief fund, because evidently it is a measly sum coming from one of the richest cricketers in the world. As news outlets amplified the matter, his wife, Sakshi Dhoni, debunked the rumours, lashing out at journalists for propagating fake news (*Hindustan Times* 2020). She was naturally agitated, and for good reason. Would we take kindly to someone who dictates what we do with our personal wealth? Perhaps not. As Boria Majumdar remarks, "None of them has earned money at anyone else's expense. They have done so at their own merit. What they give and when they give is an entirely personal decision and not one that social media police have any say in" (Majumdar 2020). This brings out an axiom fundamental to personal liberty: no one likes to be told where, how or to what extent one shall spend their money. This is why Robert Nozick, Rawls' most prolific intellectual adversary, in his 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* critiques the ideal of equal and just distribution of wealth, as he argues, it cannot coexist with the commitment towards individual freedom.

So while our outrage over celebrities' apparent apathy is not unwarranted, an honest self-reflection might betray our own inadequate responses in coming to the aid of the disadvantaged. We console ourselves about the migrant crisis by donating Rs 1,000, when perhaps the phone which we used to transfer that amount costs at least tenfold more. Thus, the charge of disproportionality in income and donation applies to us too, albeit on a different scale. Peter Singer makes a similar argument in his essay "Famine, Affluence and Morality", where he illustrates that having less wealth than others does not necessarily free one from one's moral obligation to contribute equally, or even more, say, in order to alleviate poverty. In fact, individuals should strive to give more than they are expected to, assuming that not everyone will put forward their own share in the first place (Singer 1972, 233–34) . Yet, we congratulate ourselves on our generosity, think our moral duty is done once we have made a contribution, and continue condemning those above us for not doing more. In other words, we subscribe to the principle of "Thou shall not (be miserly)...but I shall..." This is, on the one hand, an exercise in double standards, and on the other, a recourse to mitigate our guilt of having at some point benefited from the same principles that further the unequal distribution of wealth, against which we now rally and seek to hold others accountable. This is in no way a defence of the Jeff Bezos of the world. Of course they are to be held accountable for not sparing even a fraction of their earnings. The scales are not comparable, as Yang's representation shows. Giorgis's article and several others, as mentioned earlier, have already shed light on the issue. However, what is crucial here is to realise that the criticism against

the thoughtlessness of the Bezos and Adanis should not be used as sanctions for our own charitable lethargy. Even as we hold them accountable for their ethical failures, those of us who are not the worst sufferers, should be cognisant of our role in alleviating the crisis.

Neither Nietzsche nor Rawls could have possibly anticipated a calamity as the present one. Nonetheless, they note certain fundamental conditions about human existence that have proved to be all the more prescient during the pandemic. It appears we are eternally oscillating between a desire for Master morality and the recognition of our reality entrenched in Slave morality. On the one hand, we fantasise about having the power to resolve our sufferings, while on the other, the drudgery of the pandemic has reinforced in us "a pessimistic suspicion … perhaps a condemnation of humankind along with its condition" (Nietzsche 2007, 156). For Nietzsche, the only way out of this dilemma was to stop looking outwards to gratify or undermine ourselves through comparison, and instead introspect, to look inwards to discover our personal values, and act accordingly to excel in our own ways. But this impetus for personal excellence, as the pandemic attests, cannot be one of self-interest but needs to be pursued with an eye on collective well-being. The imperative for us is to assume the veil of ignorance, irrespective of where we stand. We are not Bezos and indeed, should not be expected to share the responsibility equally. But merely denouncing him does not exonerate us either. Instead, it exposes the urgency of defending our own idealism, exhorting our obligations, and educating future generations to do better than us.

So, what happens when Nietzsche, Rawls, and Bezos walk into a bar? Nothing. Bars have not opened yet in India. So they go to the local liquor vendor instead, and get into a brawl with the rest of us waiting in line. In the end, Nietzsche changes his mind about drinking, Rawls buys a bottle for everyone, and Bezos convinces the owner to hand him over the keys to the shop. We still stand at the threshold. The question is, where do we go from here?

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Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

URA VERMA

About the Author

I come from a family of authors, and hence writing was never really alien to me. One would probably assume that I loved it from the beginning, but that's far from the truth. My journey actually started at YIF in 2019 when the critical writing programme was introduced. This programme was defining for me because it paved the way for my career. It made me realise my love for writing, which I thought was non-existent.

In many ways, critical writing saved me from a life that I probably wouldn't have enjoyed. But that doesn't mean writing is not frustrating. The constant research, the drafts, the edits, endless procrastination, and the list goes on. It frustrates me, but I can't see myself doing anything else.

So, after the long tug of war, writing finally won. I do that for a living now, and I couldn't be happier!

The polished reflective surface that we use every day to view our physical selves was first invented around 200 years ago in 1835 by a German chemist called Justus von Liebig; it was the Mirror. Since the creation of mirrors, a commercial activity has commenced; it has changed the way people live their lives. Not only has it transformed the way we walk through society, and look at fashion, beauty, and culture, but it has also given us a perspective that none of our ancestors could have imagined: "a perspective on how we look to the rest of the world" (Heichelbech). This changed perspective has made the meaning of the word Mirror even more relevant. The word is of Latin origin, where *"Mirari"* means to admire ("Mirror", Etymology Dictionary). No wonder that with the advent of the mirror, not only have we become obsessed with admiring ourselves, but we have also become obsessed with the idea of being admired by everyone else. This obsession has reached such a high that with the coming of each generation, humans all around the world will do anything to get this admiration; even if that means distorting our personalities to be accepted in a society where the parameters of acceptance are changing day by day. In this paper, I will not only attempt to understand the mirror as a cultural object, but in addition will also delve into the categories of mirroring as a phenomenon in the realms of social media, and how it affects online personas and identity formation through the exploration of *alternative accounts and Finstas*.[1] Through these explorations, I will show how it is impossible for us to portray our real self online through *Finstas or alternative accounts* because of the constant mirroring that we indulge in on social media.

Part One—Sharp Objects

What we often seem to forget and fail to understand is that once an object becomes a crucial part of everyday life, it is not just an object any more; it becomes a part of our culture. Chopsticks, according to the California Academy of Sciences, were developed in China about 5,000 years ago. The earliest evidence of the use of chopsticks, or chopstick-like structures was probably twigs, and then it further developed into a pair of sticks of equal length. By around 500 AD, the use and idea of chopsticks had spread to various other Asian countries. The usage of chopsticks became so popular that stories and lore were being made about and around it (Bramen). The chopstick that we talk about, is not just a utensil that we use to eat and cook; it has now become a part of a cultural identity. The same thing happened to the mirror. After its introduction, it became such a daily need that it started transforming into a universal culture. This universal cultural identity of the mirror then reflected itself in metaphors in various works of art. Laurie Schneider in her essay "Mirrors in Art" discusses how "art is a mirror"; it reflects the society we belong to, with all its customs, beliefs, norms, beauty, and, most importantly,

1 Alternative accounts and Finstas is a place where a user gets to interact with their audience or following in a more private and controlled environment. It is a phenomenon that started on Instagram (a mobile phone app) where already existing users started owning a second account with only their 'close friends'.

it reflects the artist (Schneider 283). Since the artist is a creation of the culture and society that surrounds them, art is essentially reflecting itself. If we solely stick to the qualities of the mirror, it will almost always reflect what is on the surface; it reflects what exists. However, when one realises that what exists is not what is accepted, the mirror then often starts to reflect a desire, a fantasy, an acceptance, an *ideal self* that we all want to reach. When this idea starts to permeate within the very being of an individual, not only does the culture and society become a mirror for us, but we become a mirror for them. We make ourselves believe that we desire the things they want us to desire and become a reflection of society but without any of our agency.

One of the most alarming repercussions of not having full agency over our identity, physical or otherwise, is the deterioration of self-esteem and how it affects every aspect of our lives. The psychological impact of society on how we are supposed to be, completely changes the way we perceive ourselves. The ideal of perception has shifted from what we are to what we ought to be to feel accepted. I believe that it hits the way we look at our bodies. The obsession this culture has with perfectionist beauty standards is a huge risk factor when it comes to disorders such as body dysmorphia, where individuals end up worrying about the flaws in their appearance, which are often unnoticeable to others. These mental health conditions often lead to eating disorders where individuals take active negative steps to change the appearance of their bodies to align with the beauty standards that their culture and society constantly reflects onto them (Kaur 5). Moreover, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, in its "2017 Top Five Cosmetic Plastic Surgery Procedures" article states that most of the cosmetic surgical procedures include breast augmentation, liposuction, nose reshaping, eyelid surgery, and tummy tuck. Individuals all around the world are compared to bodies and beauty standards that are unrealistic and unachievable naturally in most cases. We are not beautiful if we do not have an hourglass body, six-pack abs, the perfect nose, the perfect height, the desired size of breasts, flawless skin, and the list goes on. We need to realise and see the trends and their direct connection with how societal institutions disempower us to embrace our uniqueness, only to serve a purpose of perfectionism and conformity.

Almost all dominant social structures treat diversity and individuality as a pathogen that needs to be either prevented or cured at every step. This purpose that these structures want to achieve is not only highly prevalent in the constant need to change our physical appearance but is now creeping into the way we portray ourselves to others; our personalities. Just as we try to mould ourselves physically to fit into socially and culturally created beauty standards, we also consciously or unconsciously try to mould our personalities to fit the ideal standards of someone who can be 'liked'. And frankly, who does not want to be liked? We become so involved in pleasing society to fit in that we often end up fighting our own true selves to create accelerated personas. With the advent of social media platforms, these personas have become easy to

make. It has become effortless because now, we do not have to step outside our sheltered homes to access culture. Technology has immensely increased the presence of social media and has bombarded us with an ideal image which is taking us far away from our true unique selves. Personas then become a dominant second nature, a tool to please and feel accepted.

However, an important question is what is a persona? Is it a part of an individual? Is it a character they are playing? Or is it a specific aspect of their personality that overpowers their authentic self? While trying to understand how art is embedded in unreality, Jean-Paul Sartre accidentally stumbles upon what we call a persona. In "The Work of Art", he explains:

> It is well known that certain amateurs proclaim that the actor does not believe in the character he portrays. Others, leaning on many witnesses, claim that the actor becomes identified in some way with the character he is enacting. To us these two views are not exclusive to one another; if by "belief" is meant actually real it is obvious that the actor does not actually consider himself to be Hamlet. But this does not mean that he does not "mobilize" all his powers to make Hamlet real . . . he lives completely in an unreal way ... (Sartre 222)

A persona is nothing but a character, a role that individuals take up to be perceived in a certain way, according to the situation or the experience that they belong to in real time. In the same fashion of Sartre's unreality, personas too are a belief, but that does not mean that the persona is the individual. There still exists a distance between the persona and the individual portraying the persona. Despite this distance, the individual will do anything to make this persona believable for the audience that consumes it. To make that consumption possible and successful, the portrayer will always be mirroring what the audience wants and will constantly be changing or enhancing its personas. Hence, "It is not the character who becomes real in the actor, it is the actor who becomes unreal in his character" (Sartre 223). By using the term 'unreal', Sartre is trying to explain that it is not that the character the actor is playing becomes real, but the actor willingly lets go of their identity and becomes 'unreal' for the sake of the character. Similarly, when we portray a persona, it is not that the persona is real, but the individual portraying the persona compromises on some part of their identity and reality to make the persona acceptable.

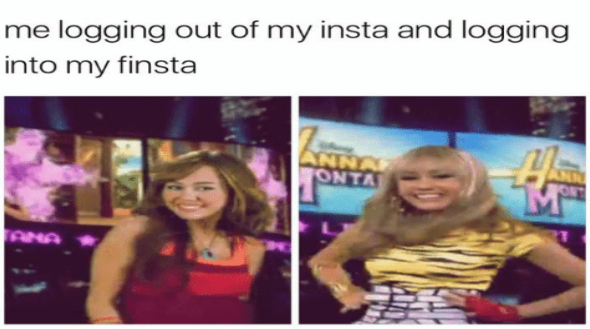

Image 1: "Me logging out of my insta and logging into my Finsta."[2]

2 https://me.me/i/me-logging-out-of-my-insta-and-logging-into-my-13486037

This type of persona formation is vastly seen on social media platforms, where the creation of a persona precisely depends on how good you are at the art of *mirroring*. The concept of mirroring is closely related to the 'ideal persona effect', which talks about how presentation on social media has become so important that individuals are now becoming hyper aware of what they are posting (Halpern et al. 8). Mirroring, then, holds a very important position in the process of creating this ideal persona. As previously mentioned, when one realises that what they are is someone that does not fit the societal norms of one's online culture, they start to mould their personality accordingly. This moulding of one's personality happens through mirroring; where individuals consciously or unconsciously imitate "the gestures, speech pattern, or attitude of another" ("Mirroring", Wikipedia). "The concept often affects other individuals' notions about the individual that is exhibiting mirroring behaviours, which can lead to the individual building rapport with others" ("Mirroring"); this happens in every aspect of our lives, including our presentation on social media. We tend to mirror the culture and personalities that are portrayed to us, to build a rapport with the community we want to belong to; and hence keep indulging in this phenomenon to gain acceptance. The repercussion of mirroring is the creation of an unrealistic persona that also acts like a mirror for society. Not only do we tend to realise the unrealistic standards of social media, we mirror these standards by creating personas that fit the norm and hence validate this "ideal persona effect" (Halpern et al. 8). The constant need and pressure to keep mirroring for the sake of being relevant and accepted leads to a radical duality within an individual. This duality first starts by trying to *fit in* and ends with an urge to *break out*. This urge of a non-conformist that comes from within an individual who is also trying to conform at the same time, is reflected through a phenomenon seen on Instagram called a *Spam Account* or *a Finsta*. Further in the article, we will be discussing in greater detail what *Finstas* and *alternative accounts* are, and how they are nothing more than the result of constant mirroring.

Part Two—Best of Both Worlds?

My journey of discovering this world of social media, spam accounts, and their repercussions began when I was very young. In tenth grade I realised that it was important for me to become someone I am not, to gain acceptance. Yes, that is a fairly young age, and no, it is not very uncommon for people to feel the exact same way. For me, it started with the advent of this question-and-answer site called "*Ask.fm*"; it is exactly what you think it is. People ask you questions anonymously, and well, you answer them. It first started as something you just did in your free time; your friends ask you irrelevant questions and you answer them, just to play around. After a couple of months of its popularity, the site became something it was not. Teenagers from all around the country started gaining a large following through this website, simply by answering questions in ways that would shock the audience; by answering questions that you would normally not give answers to in real life. I gained most of my audience through

being "*Ask Famous*". For a girl who didn't really fit in at school, the online world became my solace, and I would do anything to gain that acceptance. It did not take long before I started getting noticed in places such as school fests and parties. It was something that I had never experienced but it was also something that I had always wanted as a child; to be somebody. It is exactly like winning. Once you start winning, you do not want to lose. Once you start gaining recognition for that win, the very loss of that recognition makes you work harder to win.

I had to shift this online Ask.fm persona that I had created to all my other social media accounts. Why? you ask. Because I thought it was an obligation. I believed that my persona is what people wanted. This lasted for a couple of months where I would noticeably change my appearance, the way I spoke, and even my thoughts to the extent that it became difficult for me to even recall who I actually was. The essay "Online Inspiration and Exploration for Identity Reinvention" explains how "Online self-representation is highly dependent on perceived audience" (Haimson et al.). The spectator for every online persona is always perceived by the persona, and just like the mirror, the online persona will always perceive what is on the outside. There is no actual evidence to back what the spectator actually feels, and hence the persona may also sometimes see what they want to see through this perceived spectator. The act of mirroring then performs a very different role, where it still takes place, but is distorted by our perception of what the individual is behind the reflection.

The first hint of unreality for me, was when people started referring to me not by my name, but by my Instagram username in public. That is when I truly realised that this persona I had created had taken an ugly form of reality. I understood that this was not online any more; people expected me to be a certain way, even when their screens did not separate us. Not only was I constantly giving people what they wanted online, but I started reciprocating offline as well. What I understood is that the world of social media has a mix of 'social categories'; it may include your peers, family, acquaintances, love interests, and even strangers, and these various mixes of compositions drastically affect the kind of risks you may take online (Haimson et al. 3809). What I had forgotten in this high of living an unreality, was that people knew me in real life and not just through an app. Not only was my character unreal to me, but I had to become unreal for the sake of the character everywhere I went.

I played along for as long as I could, but after a point I could feel the compulsion building up in me. If you have watched the Bollywood film *Rockstar* by Imtiaz Ali, you would know how Heer Kaul felt throughout the movie. She had to be the epitome of a perfect Indian woman, polite, shy, and mysterious. Heer belonged to a well-reputed family, and she believed that behaving the way that she did was the only mechanism through which she could be accepted by the people around her. In reality, she was the complete opposite of what she portrayed herself to be. I felt like Heer Kaul from Rockstar. The only difference between us was that she found an

escape where she could be *herself*. For me, this escape came much later in the form of a *Finsta* account, which distorted my reality even more.

According to the Urban Dictionary, a '*Finsta*' is "a spam Instagram account where people post what they are too afraid to post on the real account" ("Finsta"). Usually, when individuals are too afraid to do something because of an unseen force or possibly an untrue perception of reality, they find ways to face this fear by either doing what they want to do in secret with only a few people knowing about it, or they deal with it through outright rebellion and not following the social constraints that were earlier strapping them down in the first place. In the realms of the online social media world, where having a perfect reflection-created persona is important, a *Finsta* now is not only an escape, but is also a clear act of rebellion. Carl E Pickhardt in his article "Rebel with a cause: Rebellion in Adolescence", explains, "Although the young person thinks rebellion is an act of independence, it actually never is. It is really an act of dependency. Rebellion causes the young person to depend on their self-definition and personal conduct on doing the opposite of what other people want." We are so afraid of portraying our real self online because of our need for acceptance, that we think that having this alternative account that exhibits a completely opposite reality to ours will fill the void that we feel within.

This phenomenon of having a *Finsta* and knowing about the contents that lie behind the *Finsta*, became slowly and steadily really popular. The universal connotations that came with having this alternative account meant that the public account that one has is not truly the real self, but this alternative spam, or *Finsta* account is the true self. This is because one can post the things that one is afraid to post on the main account on this alternative account, and this account is also subscribed to by only a few close friends. Therefore, it is plausible to call this phenomenon a mixture of escapism and rebellion. Not only are we opening up our 'real self' online just to a few close friends to escape the pressure of a public account, but we also openly showcase that our *Finsta* does exist, as an act of rebellion. We create this *Finsta* account to break the social norms that we have been following till now, doing the opposite of what we are asked to do, thinking that maybe this distortion that we are facing in real life because of our online identity can be salvaged.[3]

Image 2: The pictures in the collage next page are taken from my own accounts. The left represents a picture and style from my public account and the right is from my *Finsta*. This picture is a classic representation of the difference between the two kinds of accounts.

3 https://www.instagram.com/p/B94GSC7pN9V/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link ... https://www.instagram.com/p/B30QiH0J0JmyujwbanmvPnF_MdWjS6-kCi-Uks0/

Part Three—You Never Existed

Marlon Jovi S Valencia, in her thesis "How Online Social Media Persona Affects Personal Identity and Self ", talks about "Hidden Identity Online" (Valencia 9), where she explains, "Recently there has been a rise in taking on an *alternative account* to post about different things. ...While there are limited eyes on someone's *alternative account*, the account still exists. The presence, while supposed to be hidden, is still real" (10). "The Hidden Identity Online" (9) is a phenomenon that can be viewed through the lens of a *Finsta* account. The idea that we can get away from our created personas on our public accounts through the creation of an alternative account, and somehow press on the belief that "an alternative account is truer to one's identity" (10) is a delusion that a lot of us tend to hide behind. Just as Valencia explains, that even though this alternative account is reachable to only a select number of people that the owner picks, the fact that it is still reachable, makes it embedded in reality. Logically, even though this alternative account is accessible to a select few, it does not imply that it is the closest to one's true identity. The only thing a *Finsta* proves is the reality of another account, where you post things you usually won't post on your main account. And hence it adds to the argument that "an alternative account is also part of the identity of a given person" (10) that we portray online. The general connotations that we give the *Finsta*—of it being our true identity—are something that we have created to break the norms of social media; to rebel and to escape. That is also what a portrayal of an online persona is all about; we provide characteristics of a persona, but that does not mean the persona is us.

Sandra Newman in her article "Possessed by a Mask" gives an interesting analogy between masks used in mysticism and

the masks individuals wear online. She talks about how the earliest appearance of a mask was supposed to be in religious rituals, where, by wearing a mask, the devotees would let the spirit of God enter their body and act in ways that were alien to the individual wearing the mask (Newman). "In short, as soon as people put on masks, they begin to violate social norms" (Newman). The most important aspect of wearing the mask is that their personas would prolong, regardless of who is wearing the mask (Newman). When we upload a persona, essentially it is created through vigorous mirroring of the society we represent. These personas, hence, are not unique to us at all, since everyone around us is mirroring the same culture and society we belong to. The persona, then, does not become a personal entity; it is now in the public sphere, and has been accelerated through technology and culture. So then how can any of our online identities be who we actually are? Are we all really that similar?

When we put something out on social media, we should accept the fact that it is susceptible to mirroring, and in most cases the content that we put out is a result of something that has already been mirrored. This is also one of the reasons why things become popular on social media: the constant act of mirroring. *Finstas* and alternative accounts have also gone through the same course of mirroring, which has led to their popularity. That is why most of these accounts have the same kind of content, the same circle of people involved, and the same kind of personas. If *Finstas* were the reality of one's true identity, then none of the alternative accounts would be so similar.

Valencia argues that an *alternative account* "does not serve as an alternative person; if anything, having an alternative account only aids in one's overall online composition" (10). Having a Finsta is not something groundbreaking that portrays one's real identity. It is as performative and created as any other account, because at the end of the day, it is content that has been mirrored by similar accounts like it. According to a study called "*Finsta*: Creating 'Fake' Spaces for Authentic Performance":

> Humor and authenticity are values within Finsta communities. "Authentic" does not mean un-performed but is its own norm of performance enforced by the Finsta audience. Similarly, humor indicates that even when trying to be less curated, Finsta users are still trying to be something … (Dewar et al. 4)

What is humorous about having a Finsta account is its preaching of being authentic, but at the same time, being similar to all other Finsta accounts. It thrives on having the same kind of authenticity, the same kind of self-deprecating humour, the same kind of ugly pictures, and the same kind of mirroring that its cousin—the main account—has. If there are so many stark similarities between all *Finsta* accounts, then how can it be a depiction of our real identity? Because last I checked, personal identities are supposed to be unique to every individual.

The authenticity that we want to achieve on our *Finsta* accounts, as well as our main accounts, is constantly distorted by the act of mirroring and the achievements it brings us online or offline. Once we realise that something is giving us benefit, we tend to gain an appetite for it, regardless of what we have to give up for the appetite to be fulfilled. Once we notice an act or behaviour gaining popularity or overall social acceptance, we try our best to mimic it to gain the same. *Mirroring* not only is an essential tool for observation of others but is also a tool that can be used to gain the same kind of acceptance and appreciation that the people around us are getting. This process then replicates itself so many times, and the consumption of it becomes so homogenous that authenticity becomes a sham, an act that needs to be fulfilled. This sham of authenticity can be seen on *Finsta* accounts, where to be authentic means to be the same kind of authentic. When the portrayal of authenticity is similar across all *Finsta* accounts, then are we ever really portraying our true self?

While writing this paper, I knew that I was heading into dangerous territories because talking about inefficient portrayals of the true self online in a very generalised way can be scary. It's unsettling because some people may disagree with my argument entirely, and who am I to tell them that they are wrong? Humans are complicated. The way they portray themselves online or offline is complex and personal. Telling them that their online presence is not exactly who they are can cause turmoil, real-life turmoil. And even if we do keep these realities in mind, we still can't shy away from the clear similarities between personalities that we see online. These similarities are apparent because mirroring has always been universal! You can see it in viral videos and online trends, and now it's branching out to online personalities. Even though I believe in mirroring and how it presents itself online, this paper is not about proving a point. It's more about questioning an individual's online presence.

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Zoo and the 'People Shows': Meeting Points of Ecological Modernity and Colonialism

ANURAAG KHAUND

About the Author

Anuraag Khaund is a run-of-the-mill ordinary fellow from the YIF 2019 batch. Inspired by Ruskin Bond and, later, by the extravaganza of Shashi Tharoor's speeches, his earliest writing attempts were flowery, bombastic, and "beyond the reach of ordinary folk", according to his friends. This cost him heavily in his school and undergraduate years. His sojourn with writing took a turn for the better when destiny landed him in the CW course, Political Ecologies. Under the mentorship of his guru-preceptor, Anuraag's writing underwent the travails of an academic odyssey, and he and finally came to terms with writing for all. His writing reflects his interest in history, ecology, and international politics, in addition to recounting the frustrations of MLS and everyday life in the form of sadak-chaap (street-style) poetry.

Introduction

It was a sunny day in February 2018 at the Assam State Zoo-cum-Botanical Garden located in the rising metropolis of Guwahati in North-Eastern India; my classmates and I were there to conduct a study of the flora, fauna, and habitat of the zoo inmates as part of an undergraduate course. While approaching the crocodile enclosure, I was stopped short by a sight which would otherwise seem normal in everyday zoo settings. Despite a board prominently stating "DO NOT FEED AND DISTURB THE ANIMALS", a visitor was throwing potato chips at a crocodile submerged in the lake and shouting at it to rouse it from its slumber. Two observations struck me: first, the impunity of the visitor despite the warning sign; and second, the fact that such a ferocious creature as the crocodile was being treated like a slave being cajoled to perform before a master. On further contemplation, it struck me that such behaviour on the parts of both the visitor (that of impunity) and the crocodile (of submissiveness and lethargy) would not have been possible if the setting had been outside, or if somehow, the bars separating the visitors and animals were to magically disappear. The visitor would probably cower for his life before the jaws of the crocodile. Throughout the entire episode, my focus remained on the bars, railings or enclosures which allowed human visitors to look down with 'fearlessness' upon ferocious beasts which once evoked fear and awe. Within the confines of the zoo, those same beasts appeared like domesticated cattle.

Weren't the zoo enclosures similar to the cages of erstwhile circuses where, in addition to severe restrictions on freedom, inmates were also tortured and beaten to death for the slightest mistake in performance? Above all, the most important question which came to my mind was: Isn't the zoo a space where humans dominate over other creatures?

Exploring this question revealed the often hidden and brushed aside history of zoos: the origin of zoological gardens as manifestations of the ideology of colonialism. The seemingly innocent space where schoolchildren or recreational visitors flock for purposes of education and relaxation are symbolic of a history filled with aspects of power, control, exploitation, and domination.

The link between zoos and colonialism was first highlighted by John Berger, who saw the prominent zoos of the West—such as the London Zoo, the Jardin de Plantes in Paris, and the Berlin Zoo—as bringing prestige to the national capitals of their respective countries which were also the dominant oceanic empires of the time (Berger). Berger does not claim that the human obsession of collecting exotic animals and plants began with the zoo, but instead traces it back to the royal menageries (along with the gilded palaces, orchestras, and acrobats) of prominent ruling houses, where they symbolised the wealth and status of the owner. In a similar manner, zoos symbolised colonial power, where the capture and display of exotic species of animals were a representation of the coloniser's conquest of native habitats (Berger). On a broader level,

the zoological garden was also the manifestation of a new tradition which dominated the modern era: the separation of civilisation (human) and wilderness (animal) that underpinned ecological modernity.

Ecological Modernity and Colonisation Of Nature

According to Ian Jared Miller, who also coined the term, 'ecological modernity' refers to a twin process of intellectual separation (between 'wise', 'rational' humans and 'dumb' animals) and social transformation: the rise of urban industrial cities with nature being confined to the wild outlands or institutions such as the zoological gardens (Miller). The concept of intellectual separation can be traced to the dualism of soul and body proposed by Descartes, whereby the body was subjected to the laws of physics and mechanics, and consequently animals were viewed as being 'soulless' and 'mechanical', lacking the capacity to reason and think (Berger). The civilisational qualities of 'reason' and 'intellectual thinking' enabled humans to construct civilisations and empires, while animals remained trapped in a state of wilderness. The orientation of the zoological garden, as per Miller, was devoted to playing out the separation of 'wild animals' from the 'civilised' urban visitor, whereby the visitor, on glancing upon the caged animals, was reminded of their own 'superiority' and power as compared to the zoo inmates.

The social transformation brought about by zoos can be summed up in the words of Berger who argues that zoos were established at the moment when animals disappeared from daily life (Berger). In other words, with the increasing distance between animals (and nature) and humans brought about by the arrival of industrial modernity, the zoo emerged as a place reminiscent of the erstwhile nature or untouched wilderness where the urban populace could enjoy glimpses of the once-virgin nature. The social transformation here, according to Berger, involved the reduction of animals from awe-evoking and mysterious creatures, which inspired early humans, to mechanical units of industrial power or exotic specimens for human pleasure (Berger).

However, a peculiar social feature of the zoo which also emerged in its early establishment, as in the case of the Ueno Zoological Park (Japan), was its function as a site of greenery and solace where the industrial worker or the urban citizen could connect to nature or humanness. This attitude was summed up by the Japanese liberal critic, Hasegawa Nyozekan, who acknowledged that the separation of humans from animals was "something new for the Japanese" and claimed "the need to reclaim traditional connection to parklands and green spaces" in order to discover "who we really are" (Miller). As per Miller, this constituted one of the ironies of ecological modernity. Although nature was perceived as the antithesis of civilisation, it was also seen as the source of authentic humanness which was getting increasingly alienated in the modern industrial world.

The zoological garden as the site of the separation between civilisation and nature, and also as a space of 'natural' solace for urban populations in

industrialised societies, had to rely on the colonisation of nature and wilderness which happened at various levels. The production of illusions of nature and the acquisition of exotic species from overseas colonies were two processes which were crucial for setting up zoos in European metropolises. As zoological gardens were established in modern Europe, the business of animal catching flourished: a job which was taken up by war veterans, hunters, and professional catchers (Rothfels). In the early years of this animal trade, the European catcher merely played the role of a collector. They depended primarily on the labour of indigenous populations of the colonies to deliver the quarry demanded in the trading posts accessible to the Europeans (Rothfels). Over time, as the task of catching was taken over by European catchers and hunters, native populations were often used as 'coolies' for carrying equipment and captured quarry or were given the more dangerous role of 'beaters', which involved luring the prey out for the hunter to kill. In most cases, accounts of such catching expeditions, while focusing on the European hunter and his exploits or the dangers faced by him, also featured anecdotes of harsh treatment of natives. For instance, Hans Hermann Schomburgk, a professional German ivory hunter and animal catcher for Carl Hagenbeck, while in his search for 'pygmy hippos' in Cameroon, is said to have held the chief of a village at gunpoint in order to secure additional carriers for the cargo (Rothfels). In addition, Schomburgk also mentions having to constantly resort to the whip in order to quell open rebellions by the natives, or to get them to work. Dominik, another German animal catcher and hunter, mentions signing peace treaties with native villages which required the latter to pay tribute in terms of goods and men, with the captured men being used for carrying the cargo or to be sold in the plantations (Rothfels). The chaining and shooting of native workers to get them to work was considered 'appropriate' and 'normal' in the larger context of German colonisation and slavery in Cameroon (Rothfels).

Central to the accounts of hunters and animal catchers were anecdotes that highlighted their bravery and valour in the act of capturing and killing animals. The early accounts of hunters like Dominik and Schomburgk were also filled with explicitly violent and gory details which often accompanied the aftermath of any killing. This unabashed display of violence was often mediated by the fact that, as per Heinrich Leutemann, the catchers were mainly concerned with the capture of living and healthy quarry at any cost, with the means being a trivial issue of little concern (Rothfels). Another norm among animal catchers was to massacre entire herds of adults in order to capture the young and infant members of the population. Hence, stories about Dominik capturing young animals by fencing off herds and shooting the adults one by one, resulting in pools of blood (Rothfels) were seen as the routine collateral of the business. Although it is possible to obtain the desired quarry without having to kill entire herds—a trend which was exemplified by the arrival of professional hunters like Christoph Schulz—in most of the previous cases the massacres or killings happened. In the recollection of his account of the hunt, Dominik mentions having avoided

the killing of female elephants as per the 'laws' of the huntsman (Rothfels). However, in reality, the first members of the herd to fall before the gun were two female elephants (Rothfels). One can draw analogies between such hunts and the massacres and atrocities committed against native populations in colonial empires; in both cases, there is evidence of unnecessary killing targeted at vulnerable members: female specimens and women and children. In addition, both kinds of massacres had an underlying 'logic' of the display of power over natives and nature.

The second level of colonisation of nature took place within the premises of the zoological gardens. This was the process of producing duplication or the illusion of happiness in the display of the inmates of the zoological gardens. During the early part of the 20th century, there appeared to be an increasing awareness among visitors about the bars, wires or other types of partitions which separated the animals from the human onlookers; hence the zoo-going experience came to be increasingly viewed as artificial or unnatural (Rothfels). This led zoo directors and others to find new ways of resetting the relationship between visitors and the animals on exhibition: separate yet appearing close and intimate. These included the usage of glass and painted enclosures in the Ueno Zoological Park (Miller). Glass offered more intimacy than bars, allowing the viewer to enter directly into the realm of the exhibited animal. The combination of coloured rooms which were painted with imitations of the inmates' natural habitats and the glass gave the viewer an illusion of viewing the bird or animal in its natural surroundings. However, the most radical shift happened with the Hagenbeck Revolution of the 20th century, which manifested in the Animal Park (Rothfels). The Hagenbeck Revolution, initiated by Carl Hagenbeck who began his career as an animal collector in Germany, was marked by the replacement of bars by enclosures, open moats, and zoo habitats which seemed to mimic the original habitat of the inmates (Rothfels). The separation between visitors and inmates, and between different inmates, was no longer marked conspicuously by iron bars or cages, but instead by moats and artificially constructed hillocks or stone ridges which gave the illusion of animals living in liberty, while being confined to a space at the same time. Over time, the Animal Park came to be associated with the Biblical Garden of Eden and even with Noah's Ark (Rothfels). The association with Noah's Ark is an interesting one, as according to Nigel Rothfels, the Animal Park increasingly came to be seen as a place where the animals could find safe haven from the realities of their life in the wild. This notion was also increasingly supported by the new methods of exhibition where predators and prey such as lions and gazelles were seen not in separate cages or enclosures, but instead cohabited the same space, although invisibly separated by the artificial ridges or hillocks. In the wild, these species would have been involved in a violent and brutal competition for life and death. Such illusions overturned the functions of zoological gardens from being representatives of nature to *replacing* wild, violent, and brutal nature. Here again, one can draw analogies with the processes of colonialism.

As with the illusions of progress and development which were heaped upon conquered regions and native populations, while in reality benefiting no one except the colonising power, the ideas of 'freedom' and 'intimacy' generated through glass panels and the Animal Park were created to hide the reality of the exploitation of both the inmates—who appeared to be 'at home' in the zoo—as well as the consciousness of the visitor, who was made to feel intimacy and connection not only with the inmate, but also its natural habitat (or exotic landscapes) without having to visit the depicted location in reality. Glimmers of the 'White Man's Burden' of 'modernising' and 'civilising' the 'savage' natives could also be seen in the allusion to Noah's Ark, where animals needed the protection of the zoological garden to be saved from the brutality of nature.

Ecological Modernity, Colonialism, And 'People Shows'

Another important space where the logic of ecological modernity played out was the 'people shows' or 'exhibits' organised in zoological gardens, often as travelling and mobile shows. Initially, these 'people shows' began as a means of attracting more crowds to the already existing exhibitions of caged animals, especially in the case of Carl Hagenbeck who, upon the advice of a friend and in order to save his failing animal business, brought, along with a herd of reindeers, a family of Laplanders or Sami to attract more visitors (Rothfels). However, the people on display in these shows were members of communities deemed 'exotic' and, invariably, 'savage': Sami, Laplanders, Pygmies, Nubians, Bella Coola Indians, Bedouins, Ceylonese, Indians, etc. (Rothfels). Of central interest in these 'people shows', especially to the emerging disciplines of anthropology, ethnology, etc. was the idea of 'a people closer to nature' or of 'a people frozen in time' (Rothfels). The idea was that of a community untouched by civilisation or industrial modernisation, who were representative of the 'primitive' or 'ancient' ways of early humans. The emphasis on 'ancient' or 'primitive' ways of life was because of the rising interest in 'prehistory', supplemented by the ideas of Ernst Haeckel, the German scientist who postulated the 'biogenetic law' whereby every individual contained within themselves the history and past experiences of their ancestors (Rothfels). Laplanders were believed to be the closest 'savage' relatives of present-day Europeans, and by Haeckel's law, their lifestyle mimicked that of the earliest ancestors of Europeans (Rothfels). These factors led to the immense popularity of Hagenbeck's reindeer and Laplander shows where even simple activities such as Laplander adults sharpening and cleaning their tools or women milking the reindeer drew excited cheers from the audience (Rothfels).

In the case of the 'people shows', ecological modernity can be said to have played out in the notions of 'modern', 'civilised' humans (Europeans in general) and the 'people closer to nature' ('savages'). To the idea of ecological modernity, Miller adds the feature of nostalgia for nature which was viewed as the true repository of the human soul in the context of an increasingly alienated urban modern

world (Miller). This feeling of nostalgia found expression in the zoological garden where the caged animals represented lost nature, and the same logic played out in the 'people's shows' where the communities exhibited were seen as relics of the prehistoric past or, in some cases such as the Nubians, the missing link between humans and apes (Rothfels). Along with evoking feelings of wilderness and natural nostalgia on the part of Europeans, the 'people shows' were also an effect of the project of colonialism. Nigel Rothfels argues that these exhibitions also performed the function of allowing colonial administrators to 'learn' about the communities they were about to govern; the 'people shows' also increased in popularity at a time when European nations were building colonial empires in Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world (Rothfels 90). 'People shows' enabled the collection of anthropological data such as the measurement of cranial length, height of ears, length and breadth of faces, separation between eyes, etc. (Rothfels); such data were used to further the ideas of race sciences and environmental determinism (Rothfels): the cranial difference between Negroid and White races or the environment in which the 'savages' lived, and the same environment which determined their cranial and physical features (determinism), did not allow civilisation to develop among such people (Rothfels). This provided the bedrock for the 'White Man's Burden' and justified colonialism.

One must not think that, unlike the bloody and violent acquisition of exotic animals by European collectors, the acquisition of members for 'people shows' did not entail the use of violence. The use of force or the intent of usage of force was equally present here. This is evident from the case of Ota Benga, a member of the Pygmy tribe from the Congo Basin in Africa, whose presence at the Bronx Zoological Gardens in 1904 was to spark debates about human exhibits in the USA. The indications of violence or military force can be gleaned from the letters of his captor, Samuel P Verner, who acted as special agent to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company for purchasing of anthropological material from Africa (Newkirk). Verner mentions stopping by London (en route to Africa) to buy ammunition and other hunting material; even before embarking on the journey, he had requested a navy warship or gunboat (Newkirk). This is followed by a line in the letter which states that tribal cooperation would be secured easily as he had stockpiled his ship with enough arms (Newkirk). The case for the use of violence for acquisition could also be made from the return letter by McGee, then president of the American Anthropological Association, who described Verner as being a *"law unto yourself"*, and expressed confidence *"in the competence of the court"* (Newkirk), thereby implicitly sanctioning the use of force if necessary, in securing 'specimens'. A quick glance at the history of colonialism would reveal numerous instances of Gunboat Diplomacy: the use of force (generally in the form of naval power) for securing agreements or imposing the will of colonial powers upon colonies or militarily weaker nations.

Another feature common to both the acquisition of 'exotic' animals and people and colonialism is the hero-making of the hunter/collector and the coloniser. Earlier, I have discussed the trope of the 'brave hunter in the wild', exemplified by the tales of Schomburgk, Dominik, and Christoph Schulz. In the case of Schomburgk and Dominik, the emphasis on violence and unruly beasts in their letters to their European clients or interviews to newspapers served to highlight the 'bravery' and 'valour' of the hunter: 'heroic' values which were admired by the wider European public. However, in the case of Schulz, the values espoused in his *Catching Big Game for Hagenbeck: Personal Experiences from the African Bush,* were of the professional hunter whose accounts focused less on the violence meted out to animals and more upon the setting up of animal farms in German East Africa where species like zebras and giraffes were corralled and taken care of before being transported to Europe (Rothfels 71–2); along with bravery and valour, one can see the picture of a hunter who also cared for animals. As mentioned by Rothfels, the story of Schulz struck a chord with European readers in the early decades of the 20th century, and even in clients who were becoming increasingly critical of the needless bloodshed being perpetrated to capture animals. With both Schomburgk and Schulz, one can observe the hero-making of the hunters despite the fact that both killed or cared for animals only for commercial purposes, and their acts were symbolic of the human domination over nature. The fame of heroism was also claimed by adventurers or hunters who collected exhibits for 'people shows' or anthropological societies; the image of the heroic adventurer was evident in Verner's account to newspapers back in the USA where he mentions rescuing Ota Benga from cannibals and enemy captors or the 'caring' acquirer who sought Benga's consent before being shipped to New York (Newkirk). Carl Hagenbeck, whom I mentioned earlier, was applauded not only by the general European public, but also by the German Anthropological and Ethnological Societies for various reasons, such as his contribution to the development of the 'sciences', education of the public, and, most importantly, the conservation of 'exotic' species whose existence was under threat. This despite the fact that the Hagenbeck enterprise entailed massacre and oppression of communities and was born purely out of commercial motives rather than for social goodwill. Similar stories of 'heroes' or 'heroic feats' abound in the history of colonialism: explorers, generals, statesmen, etc. who braved the odds to keep the flag of their respective mother countries flying in the colonies despite the brutality of the costs and consequences.

Conclusion

The paper was an attempt to outline the similarities between the processes of colonialism, zoological gardens, and the 'people shows'. All three depended on perceived dualisms: the White Master versus the Native Slave; Civilisation versus Wilderness; the 'primitive, closer to nature savage' versus 'the modern, industrial rational man'. In addition, these processes provided various justifications for their methods of treating animal and human

subjects: colonisation was necessary for bringing 'savages' to civilisation; zoological gardens were essential for preserving the remnants of nature and saving animals from harsh nature; and 'people shows' were seen as being in the service of sciences like anthropology, ethnology, etc. Finally, all three depended on the creation and propagation of illusions: of development and progress, of freedom of animals and intimacy with nature, and the ideas of 'people closer to nature who had links with the earliest ancestors of humans' or, worse, the 'missing link' between apes and humans.

The illusion of intimacy has increased in contemporary zoos which develop the trends set up by the Hagenbeck Revolution, aided by new technology with more illusory power than the earlier moats and artificial rock hills. Zoological gardens have continued to play the role they were originally assigned: to see the animal as an object of exotic curiosity rather than as an individual with the same rights to life and freedom as that of any human individual. Such ideas are manifested in incidents such as the one occurring at the Assam State Zoo described above, where the inmates are expected to be at the beck and call of the 'master'/visitor. As Berger argues, the inmate of the zoo has been made marginal. Bereft of any social interaction with other members of the species, or other species, the animal has been habituated to respond externally only to the movements of the zookeeper who comes around with food (Berger). Their prevailing conditions of isolation and dependence have made them treat the human visitors around them as illusions or marginal events not worthy of capturing the animal's interest. The zoo, as summed up by Berger, "can only disappoint" because the animals no longer stare at humans with the central curiosity of their gaze, but rather greet the inmates with disinterested, lethargic looks reminiscent of a being drained of life (Berger). As an extension of Berger's argument, although the confines have changed from the narrow iron cages to surreal savannahs and Arctic landscapes, and the visitor is greeted by sights of running giraffes or performing seals, the animals still merely go through the motions: the satisfied munching on grass or the acrobatics are not expressions of the animals' joy. At the same time, one shouldn't neglect the role of zoological gardens in conserving and redeeming from near extinction species such as the pygmy hog; yet the question remains whether the pygmy hog will thrive and live, in the fullest sense of the term, in its natural surroundings or in the artificial recreation of its habitat: whether it needs to be saved in nature or saved from nature?

The 'people shows' or exhibits which began as commercial ventures aimed at increasing the income of animal-dealing firms like Hagenbeck's were the product of racial stereotypes and hierarchies which existed prior to the beginning of such exhibitions. Rothfels traces the origin of the European obsession with 'exotic' people to the journeys of Columbus who repeatedly brought back chained Arawaks for the Spanish Crown, or the visits of 'New World' chiefs like Pocahontas to 1619 England (Rothfels 87). The appearance of such 'New World, exotic' peoples in the European mind and fantasies coincided with or

began with the process of colonisation of Africa and American continents, and the European stereotypes to be associated with such communities were shaped by the accounts left behind by colonisers themselves whose views in turn were influenced by the idea of ecological modernity. In turn, it was the same stereotypes which allowed for the flourishing of 'people shows' by Hagenbeck; shows which provided easily available 'specimens' for anthropological and ethnological societies of Europe and furthered the existing notions of 'race sciences' and racial hierarchies, thus legitimising the 'White Man's Burden' and colonialism. Similarly, in the case of the link between zoological gardens and colonialism, as pointed out by Berger, the caged animals, especially 'exotic' species such as lions, tigers, elephants, etc., were symbolic of the extent of the colonial empire: the tiger representing the empire's colonisation of Asia and the lion of Africa. Here, the zoo was seen as serving an important function of educating the European visitor about the colonial achievements of the mother country. In addition, it was also the 'logic' of ecological modernity carried forward by colonialism in different parts of the world which aided in the establishment of zoos. This point is highlighted by Miller who traces the establishment of the Ueno Zoological Park in Meiji-era Japan to the popularity of Western colonial notions of civilisation and development (Miller 2); such institutions came to be seen as Japan's attempts to catch up with the West. In retrospect, the ideas of ecological modernity in Japan, or the separation between the human and animal *(dobutsu),* accompanied by notions of civilisation, were brought to its shores by the arrival of the American fleet of Commodore Matthew Perry who was seen as a colonising power by the Japanese (Miller 1–2); thus, the zoological garden and its underlying ideology were transported to Japan by a Western colonising power. However, it was not only that colonialism aided in the existence of zoos. The reverse happened as well. This can be substantiated again in the case of Japan. The exotic species exhibited in the Ueno Zoological Park such as the wild boar *(inonishi),* the spotted leopard named Hakko, etc., were displayed as trophies from imperial victories in China and Manchuria, and also served to highlight the bravery of Japanese troops: for instance, the wild boar soldier *(inonishi musha)* charging like a boar at the enemy lines, or Hakko who served as a military mascot (Miller 81, 86). These animals, as symbols of Japanese military bravery and achievements, were crucial in rallying popular support for Japanese overseas expansion or colonialism into other parts of Asia. In addition, the idea of 'lost distant green nature' as the true repository of human nature—ideas propagated by the establishment of Japanese zoological gardens as relics of the 'lost nature' (Miller)—also partly justified the process of Japanese expansion. This was made possible by the projection of the colonies as manifestations of the 'distant, lost green paradise' (Miller) represented by the zoological gardens which had to be brought under Japanese occupation.

The above examples serve to highlight the similarities and mutual interdependence of ecological modernity, colonialism, and the institutions of zoological gardens and the 'people shows'. It was

the dualist idea of ecological modernity further propagated by colonialism which enabled the establishment and legitimisation of zoological gardens and 'people shows'. These institutions in turn justified hierarchical race relations and the ideas of exotic nature—ideas which further legitimised colonial rule and also justified and sparked overseas expansion. Returning to the original question of the paper, 'innocent' institutions such as zoological gardens or more questionable people exhibitions did not emerge for 'noble goals' such as a concern for conservation, public education or advancement of scientific knowledge; rather, they were the meeting point of the ideologies of colonialism and ecological modernity.

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DO NOT INTERAC
WITH THEM

6

Legal Literacy: A Key to Socio-Economic Justice

AADIL RAZA

Education for Change: Social Reconstruction through Critical Pedagogy

NIHAALINI KUMAR

Dalit Resistances to 'Indian Political Modernity'

SHANTANU KULSHRESHTHA

Caste in Higher Education: Examining and Redefining Affirmative Action

PRASENJEET PATIL

Legal Literacy: A Key to Socio-Economic Justice

AADIL RAZA

About the Author

Aadil Raza is a Young India Fellow of the 2020 batch and currently working as a talent adviser in a multinational human resource consulting firm. Before joining Ashoka University as a fellow, Aadil received a postgraduate degree specialising in Modern and Contemporary History from Jamia Millia Islamia. He is also an online educator and mentor, guiding a community of more than 2,000 students from across the country. Writing has always been an integral part of Aadil's journey. Mostly, he has written academic papers and essays, but sometimes he likes to write poetry in Urdu. For the love of writing, he worked as freelance content writer for multiple e-learning start-ups during his college days.

At YIF, he was introduced to the multilayered nuances of critical writing. It has given an altogether new direction to his writing style and approach. He recollects the eight-month-long critical writing course was his favourite, where he got the opportunity to learn how to systematically approach a paper. Although he still produces hundreds of drafts before being satisfied with the final one, he feels more confident and writes more often.

On Monday evening, around 5:00 pm, Zayana was walking down the lane towards her home. Suddenly, two guys on a bike snatched her mobile phone by threatening her with a sharp knife. She managed to save herself, but lost her mobile phone. When she returned home, she was afraid to tell anyone about the incident.*

Later that same evening, Zayana's young sister asked for her mobile phone to make a call. She acted as if she had misplaced it and started searching for it. When no one in the family could find it, Zayana said that she must have dropped it somewhere while coming home from the market.

Can you guess why she lied to everyone?

Let me explain! The next morning, she called her friend and narrated the real story. Her friend asked Zayana to file a police complaint. But she refused, saying she hadn't told anyone the real story because she knew they'd tell her to file a complaint. She told her friend that she was afraid of the police, FIRs, and other legal procedures. She didn't want to get the police involved.

Zayana felt that if she reported the incident, the police would unnecessarily harass her. In the past, one of her friends, Shazia, had experienced something similar. Shazia once complained to the police about being eve-teased, but instead of taking her complaint seriously, the police harassed her by saying that she must have had prior relationships with those boys. Experiences like this had shaped Zayana's opinion about the police and the legal systems.*

Zayana is 24 and is a postgraduate from one of India's top universities.

**Not the real names.*

Introduction

It is clear from the above incident that Zayana is afraid of police procedures and legal systems, but she is not alone. In India, a large number of people act like Zayana in similar situations. People are afraid to file even an FIR (First Information Report), even though they can now do this online and don't need to visit a police station. Although this behaviour is understandable with regard to poor and marginalised people who are unaware of legal help and remedies, it becomes more disheartening when well-educated people tend to behave like Zayana. The larger question here is: Why are people reluctant to use the law? Aren't laws made for citizens to use? Do people know their basic legal rights? If they do, what prevents them from exercising these rights?

In this essay, we will explore some of these issues. We will explore what legal literacy means and why it is important. We will assess if there is a need for legal literacy in India, especially among youngsters who are, just like poor and marginalised people, equally reluctant to raise any concerns even if their rights are being violated. We will also try to see what measures have been taken by the Indian government to legally empower citizens. At the end, we will conclude with some remedies to deal with the issues and challenges pertaining to the promotion of legal literacy.

Legal Literacy in India and Constitutional Provisions

The absence of legal literacy contributes significantly to deception, exploitation, and deprivation. Marginalised citizens such as women, Dalits, and tribals are highly prone to falling victim to exploitation and injustice, say legal experts. However, well-educated university students also occupy a marginalised position, if they are not legally literate. As a matter of fact, more than one-third of the Indian population is considered to be living with low levels of basic literacy. Adding to that, more than 70 per cent of the population lives in rural India with little or no access to better education, equal opportunity, and socio-economic justice. Consequently, the lack of awareness, little or no access to legal information or legal help, and the lack of ability to assert one's fundamental rights compels a significant portion of the population to remain distanced from the legal system. Despite a huge transformation in the whole legal system after Independence, the system is still foreign to many people. The judges of the Supreme Court, India's apex judicial authority, have reiterated the need for legal literacy, which they see as a much-needed tool to bring socio-economic equality, envisaged by the Indian Constitution.

Article 39A of the Indian Constitution clearly provides that the state will make arrangements for free legal aid to all citizens. Consequently, arrangements have been made by promulgating the Legal Service Authorities Act 1987 which established a national institution called NALSA (National Legal Service Authority). Based on the same Act, SLSA (State Legal Service Authorities) and DLSA (District Legal Service Authorities) were also established in each state and district. These institutions are mandated to provide free legal aid to poor and other marginalised citizens, and also to spread general legal awareness among the masses.[1] Despite such efforts having been made by the government, ordinary citizens of the country are still reluctant to seek legal help.

In the context of the growing crime rate, especially crimes against women, minorities, and Dalit communities in India, a sense of legal awareness becomes essential. Former Chief Justice of India, Justice Altamas Kabir, has rightly remarked, "Lack of legal awareness and education are the main causes of injustices being meted out to the marginalised populations, especially women."[2] Justice Kabir also stressed the importance of expanding legal services to all people with the help of paralegal volunteers. Adding to that, NGOs and CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) can also play a huge role in spreading the cause of legal literacy. Therefore, legal literacy for the whole country becomes crucial as it can empower any ordinary citizen to seek justice for not only oneself, but others too. A legally conscious citizen

1 "The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987." National Legal Services Authority, Government of India, 8 January 2019, nalsa.gov.in/acts-rules/the-legal-services-authorities-act-1987.
2 Correspondent. "Strengthen Legal Aid for Women, Backward Sections, Says Kabir." The Hindu, 26 March 2013, Agartala, India www.thehindu.com/news/national/strengthen-legal-aid-for-women-backward-sections-says-kabir/article4551795.ece.

can save himself, along with others, from exploitation, inequality, and many injustices. Critical knowledge of legal provisions coupled with the skills to use this knowledge to realise rights and entitlements will empower people to demand justice.[3] Legal empowerment of the whole society along with legal reforms and judicial restructuring can prove to be the most crucial steps to bring about socio-economic equality and justice.

Legal Literacy: A Broader Perspective

Before proceeding, it is important for us to understand what the term 'legal literacy' connotes. According to the American Bar Association, "legal literacy is the ability to make critical judgements about the substance of any law, the legal processes, the available legal resources, and to effectively utilize the legal system by participating in it."[4] In other words, it simply means the ability to gain certain knowledge about basic laws and their procedures. People should know their rights and duties as citizens. Furthermore, they should also know what is expected of them and what is legally permissible or non-permissible.
This basic knowledge, later on, can be used as a tool to evaluate other laws, or to become familiar with the laws pertaining to fundamental rights, and to get those rights enforced by taking action. When citizens take legal action, it brings the whole legal machinery into force. Without legal action, mere awareness of laws and rules would avail nothing.[5] For example, social inequality based on caste still exists in some rural villages of India despite the fact that everyone knows "all are equal before the law". Article 14 of the Indian Constitution made 'equality' a fundamental right of Indian citizens, but it is seldom exercised by poor citizens to break the shackles of inequality.

James Boyd White, an American professor of Law at the University of Michigan, argues that the phrase 'legal literacy' can have a wider range of possible meanings.[6] In his acclaimed work, *The Invisible Discourse of the Law: Reflections on Legal Literacy and General Education,* he talks about two basic perspectives to understand legal literacy.

First, one can easily use the phrase 'legal literacy' to refer to a complete professional legal education. It means 'being literate in law'. According to this understanding, legal literacy would mean the ability to read and write legal arguments, cases, judgments, deeds, wills, drafting laws, and to know how to conduct a trial. It only deals with professional legal education to become a lawyer or judge (James B White, p.

3 "Legal Awareness." Multiple Action Research Group, 2019, www.ngo-marg.org/what-we-do/legal-awareness/. Last visited 16 May 2020.
4 "What Is Legal Literacy ? Examining the Concept and Objectives of Legal Literacy." *Https://Www.athabascau.ca/Syllabi/Lgst/Docs/LGST249_sample.Pdf*, Society of Advance Legal Studies, 21 December 2011.
5 "Legal Awareness ." *Basic Knowledge*, www.basicknowledge101.com/pdf/literacy/Legal awareness.pdf. last visited 15 May 2020.
6 White, James Boyd *The Invisible Discourse of the Law: Reflections on Legal Literacy and General Education."* Michigan Publishing House, 1983, p. 144.

144). Consequently, for our purposes, this is an extremely narrow definition.

Second, the term 'legal literacy' also refers to "the ability to have a certain degree of competence in legal discourse to lead an active civic life in our increasingly legalistic and litigious culture", says White (p. 144). According to this understanding, a citizen who is legally literate in legal discourse would certainly not know how to draft legal documents and cases or how to try someone in court, but he would be competent enough to understand when to seek legal help against any injustice.

Thus, legal literacy, in simple terms, means having certain basic knowledge of laws and rules to be able to fight exploitation and seek justice for oneself or others. However, if a citizen doesn't know anything or deliberately ignores legal action despite having knowledge, he or she might end up in deeper trouble.

> *Remember Zayana ? If she had known to file a basic online police complaint, or an FIR, about her mobile phone, she could have saved herself from further exploitation and trouble. The two guys who snatched her mobile phone rammed their bike into someone's car and ended up killing a person who was sitting inside the car. Both of them escaped from the spot sustaining only minor injuries, but Zayana's phone fell out of one of their pockets. While inspecting, the police found the phone and traced the owner, who in this case, is innocent Zayana. Even though she didn't do anything, she was still held as a primary suspect having possible connections with those boys. Next day, the police team reached Zayana's home for further enquiry.*
>
> *It took a decent amount of time for Zayana and her family to convince the police that they have no connections with those thieves. Things could have been very different if Zayana had confidently filed a complaint as a responsible citizen or at least alerted the police.*

Accordingly, in a broader sense, we must remember that legal literacy is not just having 'awareness of law' (like Zayana), but rather making use of that knowledge or awareness. Modern societies are governed by the 'Rule of Law'. Most countries in the world have written and published laws. In India also, laws are written, published, and notified with clear objectives. However, the anomaly is, when one-third of the citizenry is denied education, it cannot be expected to have any legal knowledge. Living in extreme poverty and with the lack of access to authentic information, citizens cannot be expected to learn and participate in legal discourse. Besides, a larger issue is that those who are literate are also not asserting their legal rights for various reasons. Thus, on the one hand, poor, marginalised citizens don't know and are fearful of the system, while on the other, educated people are simply apathetic towards it.

It is no surprise that there are several reasons for such reluctance and non-participation on the part of citizens. Let us analyse some of those issues and obstacles that people face while dealing with the law and legal systems.

Obstacles in the Course of Legal Literacy

In the Indian context, the reluctance of citizens in claiming and exercising their basic legal and fundamental rights is primarily because of ignorance, fear, monetary-expenses, time and effort. The fundamental roots of ignorance are two: one, some people hardly know any law; and two, those who know the law, hardly make any use of it. They tend to ignore their problems because they don't want to engage with the system and hardly expect any positive outcome from it.

Let us analyse the first issue. Remember, a large number of people in our country are living with little or no access to literacy (the basic ability to read and write), and their only source of a little legal knowledge is word of mouth. They are not only dependent for information, but also for comprehension and interpretation. As a result, if the carriers of legal information to these marginalised sections are misinterpreting any law, missing crucial information, conveying the wrong message, and using difficult language and jargon while explaining anything, then it is bound to create a negative perception. People may get intimidated and, consequently, lose interest.

Regarding the second issue, there are two kinds of people: those who are either illiterate in general or legally illiterate and so, are ignorant of their legal rights and remedies; additionally, there are people who are literate and legally aware, but are apathetic about using the law. Moreover, legal experts opine that educated people escape from the legal system because of the complexities involved. These complexities are multilayered and operate at different levels of language and procedure. No doubt, even the most basic laws are complex enough to surpass the comprehension ability of graduates and postgraduates.

The judiciary works independently of legislation and, as a result, the official language rules of the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution do not apply to the higher judiciary. The legal language in India is English. Particularly in the higher judiciary, the Supreme Court of India and other high courts adhere to English language usage. Only four north Indian state high courts have allowed the use of Hindi so far: Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar. On paper, trial courts at the lower level are allowed to use vernacular and regional languages, but that is limited to conducting trials only. The paperwork is mostly done exclusively in English, be it judgment or any type of order. In fact, laws are written only in English, and this creates a great dependency on the quality of translation and interpretation.

When he launched the National Legal Literacy Mission in 2006, then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh acknowledged that laws are written with complex structuring of sentences and extra-long paragraphs. This is indeed true: if you read any law, you will find an excessive use of conjunctions to connect legal principles. This is partly because most lawyers are not adequately trained by law colleges to write in a clear and more precise manner.

Ordinary citizens of the country who are educated but not legal practitioners feel that legal language is foreign to them because it is complex to decipher without expert help. Non-English speakers suffer the most. A large population of our country speaks vernacular and regional languages and neither English nor Hindi, and, thus, people find themselves disadvantaged and left out. They feel strongly alienated from the legal system and ignore it.

Therefore, legal literacy needs to be promoted in vernacular languages.[7] Non-English speakers will not understand concepts like *"Burden of Proof", "Mens Rea"*, *"Innocent until Proven Guilty"*, etc., unless someone explains these in a language they understand.

A large part of Indian laws and legal procedures is inherited from the British legacy. Little effort has been made by successive governments to change them on priority.

Complexity of laws not only operates at the level of language barriers, but there are procedural hurdles as well. Both groups of citizens, those who are generally illiterate and those who are generally literate but legally illiterate, find it difficult to seek justice because of procedures and technicalities like FIR, Jurisdiction, Zero-FIR, Public Interest Litigation, Writ-Petition, Review Petition, Appeal, Stay Order, Prohibition, and so on. People find it challenging to navigate difficult procedures of filing complaints. Often, it involves giving too many details. Sometimes the format of the complaint, applications to the SHOs (Station House Officers), and necessary documents to be attached with complaints are too much to deal with and this discourages people from getting involved. For example, in a recent incident in 2019, the body of a murder victim was shuttled back and forth by policemen because the crime took place on the border of two states. The family of the victim found it difficult to seek justice because of jurisdictional conflicts during the registration of the FIR.

Secondly, many people seek out-of-court solutions due to the lack of time, knowledge, patience, financial constraints, technical procedures, linguistic know-how, and so on. As a matter of fact, while quasi-judicial bodies provide out-of-court moderation facilities, these might not necessarily play a positive role. In rural areas, this could lead to worse outcomes when people approach local bodies like Khap Panchayats to seek justice. Khap Panchayats are arguably infamous for their regressive judgments, and their decisions have at times been highly controversial as per the established law of the land.

Third, there is a general lack of trust in police, lawyers, and courts among the public. Poor, marginalised citizens of the country perceive them as exploitative and corrupt. This raises a lot of questions about the standard operating procedure of police personnel. Sometimes, people are forced to bribe the police and officials

7 Peruginelli, Ginevra. "Multilingual Legal Information Access: An Overview ." *Eurac Research*, webfolder. eurac.edu/EURAC/LexALP_shared/media/Peruginelli.pdf. Last visited 15 May 2020.

for registering an FIR or complaint. Their innocence and lack of knowledge helps foster such a culture. Police personnel must be trained adequately to provide all sorts of help to anyone in need. If the police win the trust of the people, it will improve a lot of things on the ground.

It is not just a matter of corruption, but political influences also play a larger role: the recent Unnao rape case in Uttar Pradesh and the Asifa rape case in Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir are two notable examples. These negative influences act as a barrier for the victim to seek any justice.

In addition to financial and political pressures, social, personal, and family influences also hinder the delivery of justice in the absence of legal literacy. In India, a significant number of rape cases are under-reported because victims usually seek out-of-court justice to save their family from societal embarrassment. Many times the perpetrator is a family member or someone known to the victim. In many such cases, the victims are minors who are influenced by fear, exploitation or death threats.

Citizens who are innocent and have never dealt with such things before are intimidated by the police and the legal system. They are often advised by the police themselves to seek out-of-court settlements to save their time, money, and effort. Although this unnecessary counselling is acceptable on the part of policemen when they act as moderators in trivial issues, it is highly questionable when moderation expands to cover up rare incidents like sexual violence. For instance, rape victims are often counselled by police not to file a complaint on the grounds that any judgment will take years, and it will harm their family's reputation as well as their own. This is another reason for the growing alienation of people from the legal system.

Fourthly, coming to the procedural aspect, we also need to question the judicial and legal procedures which intimidate the common citizen and thereby demotivates popular participation. Finally, even after facing all initial hurdles, when cases do finally reach the courts, further complications and delays ensue.

> *Do you remember Mr Sunny Deol? "Tareekh pe tareekh, tareekh pe tareekh, tareekh pe tareekh milti gyi my lord, lekin insaaf nahi mila" (Dates, and new dates, and then new dates are the only things I got my Lord, I didn't get any justice from your court*)

Once a case is filed in an Indian court, it usually takes years or even decades to get any solid representation. Unfortunately, these delays are standard operating procedure for the Indian judicial system. Here, one must clearly observe the inadequacies of the system we are part of: lack of judges, lawyers, and arbitrators; redundant judicial appointments; outdated technology used by the police in investigations; lack of infrastructure in courts; and lack of solid evidence, to name a few.

While the number of pending cases is increasing day by day in all law courts, there are hardly any judicial

appointments. Unlike many other countries, there is no unified system of judicial appointments in India, despite having a unified judiciary. Even the Supreme Court has recently been operating with only 30 judges, including the Chief Justice of India, against the sanctioned strength of 34. All high courts across the country are overburdened with the administrative load of managing and supervising lower courts, along with their own business. Consequently, pending cases are piling up and citizens are not getting justice on time. Lack of timely appointments, low judicial strength, and a centralised administrative set-up act as a significant blow to any positive perception of the legal system throughout the country. It creates a vicious cycle which leads to non-participation and ignorance. Citizens belonging to vulnerable and marginalised groups are highly sceptical of seeking justice via the courts, even if free legal aid is available to them through NALSA and SLSA, because they lack time and money.

Conclusion: Remedies

We are all living under an increasingly bureaucratic structure. State surveillance has increased significantly, undermining all privacy laws. Mass legal literacy is, therefore, the need of the hour. It can definitely act as a cornerstone for the smooth functioning of a true democracy. If citizens were aware of laws made for them, they could remain vigilant about the arbitrary powers of state. Legally conscious citizens could put reasonable checks and balances on the authoritarian tendencies of the State.

To meet these ends, the government and NGOs have made efforts to create mass legal awareness via various legal literacy programmes. In the recent past, all sorts of resources have been used to increase legal awareness among the public, including organising camps, workshops, lectures, seminars, street plays, and radio shows; publishing and distributing pamphlets, books, comics; putting billboards at strategic places like railway stations, government offices, courts, and bus stands; and much more. No doubt, these efforts have helped create mass awareness. Gradually, more and more people are becoming aware of their rights.

However, most of these efforts focus only on providing people with information about laws and their rights. As a result, nothing much has changed despite mass campaigns for raising awareness, and a lot is yet to be done. People are still reluctant to take charge and engage with the law. Even if a road accident happens in India, onlookers are afraid to take the injured person to the hospital because they fear the police will torture them, harass them or may even register a case against them. Despite several guidelines of the Supreme Court and assurance of all security, people do not help victims and leave them to die. Thus, legal literacy also envisages a behavioural change.
Of course, ordinary citizens must be made aware of their rights, procedures to be followed to exercise those rights, access to authentic information, free legal aid, and more. This information should be made simple enough for any layperson to comprehend and be provided in regional languages. However, legal literacy is a broader

concept which goes beyond just information. Legal literacy aims to increase the participation of ordinary citizens in legal systems to assert their rights, without any fear or intimidation. Legal literacy aims to achieve the development of a critical mindset. Legal literacy doesn't simply mean knowing a law or a rule and being completely obedient to it. The objective of a true Legal Literacy Mission should be to enhance the ability of citizens to question, evaluate, assess, accept or reject any law or rule made for them. The objective of legal literacy is to create a more robust system in order to develop a community of informed citizens—citizens who are fully aware of their rights and responsibilities. Citizens who can seek legal remedies by taking action, not just for oneself, but for others too. Citizens who can educate others, especially the marginalised sections: women, minorities, Dalits, and tribals. It creates a community of citizens who can participate in the formulation of rules and laws, who can assert their rights, who can evaluate and question the rules, and who can develop a critique of it.

Thus, it is clear that legal literacy aims to achieve legal mobilisation. This mobilisation cannot be achieved by providing mere information. The government should look at training school and college students with practical hands-on learning of the legal system. Compulsory short courses to teach legal applications like filing FIRs, RTIs, petitions, complaints, and the like would enhance participation. Compulsory CASH workshops, gender sensitisation, could be done with the help of Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) in each institution. The best way to enhance citizens' participation and trust in the legal system is to invest in students' learning today. College students could be encouraged to write blogs and make audio-visual content for illiterate masses in rural areas. In a university set-up, diverse peer groups could sit and translate complex laws in vernacular languages to spread awareness via social media.

Legal literacy would automatically improve the justice delivery system in the long run, by making it transparent. If informed citizens would enhance their participation and evaluate the current functioning, it would compel other stakeholders to bring about necessary changes.

> *In India, what an irony it is that illiterate people are competent enough to choose and elect a political representative for them, who in turn goes to the Parliament and makes laws for the whole country along with other legislators. And then, the same illiterate people are not enabled to be competent enough to comprehend those laws to seek any remedy or secure any justice from the system*
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If environmental literacy can be important for sustainable development, and financial literacy can be crucial for economic integration, then why not legal literacy for sociopolitical and economic justice? Legally empowered citizens can knock on the doors of those who are entrusted to deliver them justice.

Education for Change: Social Reconstruction through Critical Pedagogy

NIHAALINI KUMAR

About the Author

Nihaalini's educational experiences—first at Mirambika, an alternative school in Delhi, and then at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education in Puducherry—made her curious, almost in an existential sense, to better understand and question educational practices.

The critical writing course on education, literacy, and justice at the YIF provided her with a critical lens to reflect on the social contexts of learning, curricula, and pedagogy. The theme of the course forms the basis of her paper, which attempts to rethink the role of higher education in Indian society. She is currently working at Terre des Hommes Foundation, an international child rights organisation. In her free time, she can be found making art, admiring trees or listening to funky guitar tunes

From December 2019 onwards, we didn't know how to continue sitting in our classrooms. The entire country had been shaken by protests in dissent against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and in solidarity with some of the premier institutions of our country which had been targets of distressing violence—from libraries tear-gassed, to students assaulted in campuses by cops, to hostels rampaged at night by lathi-wielding goons. The biggest shock was that the agencies of law and order—which came under the Union Home Ministry of the BJP-led government—were far removed from fulfilling their role. Instead, they reacted brutally as protestors were beaten up, minors were detained, leaders were arrested, and attempts were made to curb the peaceful—and thus quite legal—protests through Section 144. The police gave a free pass to the goons who attacked JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) and eventually arrested no one. Furthermore, as if in a culmination of its cruelty and complacency, the state machinery did not interject when, from 24 February 2020, Delhi saw its worst communal riots since 1984 continue for three days. While the protests had already consumed our lives, the riot left us feeling deeply broken. As we sat through our university classes in a state of despair, helplessness, and anger, we experienced a dichotomy in our lives which made us wonder if it made any sense to continue studying, and if so, what the point of our education was.

The countrywide involvement of students in the protests seemed to make it clear that education could not limit students to the four walls of the university campus. The protests, wherein a common sight was a collective reading of the preamble to the Constitution, were putting the government under scrutiny. Owing to the mixed response of the government that was apathetic as well as reactionary, it became evident that universities were being perceived as a threat to the state's growing totalitarian power.

What, then, was the role that a university played—or was supposed to play—in the larger collective struggle to uphold democratic and constitutional principles, such as secularism which the protests against CAA and NRC (the National Register of Citizens) represented? Was higher education solely a means to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to enter the job market, or did it also play a larger role in politics and culture in society? Did we need to find a way to bridge the seeming dichotomy between formal education and civic engagement?

The liberal arts programme that I was enrolled in, for instance, seemed to play a significant role in making the students more informed, concerned, and engaged as citizens. It provided the basic knowledge and intellectual skills that can help an individual develop their critical faculty and assert their social agency, which are necessary to partake in a democratic society. Discussions on democracy and social justice formed the basis of the academic content and university culture.

However, I wondered if every university in the country served as a platform for questioning, dialogue, and reasoning. And even if they did, was it enough for a university to simply provide such

a space, or did these principles need to be included within the curricula and pedagogy as well? On the other hand, if they didn't, then could a system or framework of values be developed within which universities could operate that would systemically encourage and facilitate questioning and dialogue?

The first question that one may ask is what such an educational approach may look like, and second, whether and how it could play a role in contributing to dissent, action, and social transformation in society at large. In the mid-20th century, social reconstructionism emerged as a philosophy that stressed the role of education in 'reconstructing' society to help make the world a more just, equal, and democratic place. This paper aims to highlight the relevance of this philosophy within the context of Indian higher education. It offers a glimpse into some of the current challenges in higher education in India, enquires about the purpose and limitations of the theory of social reconstructionism, and discusses critical pedagogy as an approach to help rethink and redesign how we understand and practise education.

Challenges in Higher Education in India

Many higher education institutions in India have been critiqued as being structurally oppressive or authoritarian spaces. This is despite the fact that there has been a drastic increase in the number of higher education institutions in India, with a fourfold increase in enrolment since 2001, as highlighted by a Brookings 2019 report (11). The report points out some of the structural issues in higher education institutions (HEIs), including low capacity and accountability, lack of autonomy and adequate funding, and minimal focus on research and innovation. Additionally, HEIs continue to see high rates of suicide, caste and gender-based discrimination, and socio-economic inequalities.

While education is believed to 'socially uplift' and 'empower' students and contribute to economic growth, the high rate of unemployment only points to the dismal state of higher education in India, writes Anjali Mody in an article on Firstpost. She says that education on its own does not change a lot, but only "reproduces the inequalities [in society]". It is systematically biased against the socially disadvantaged communities, whether in terms of socio-economic privileges or social status.

Higher education in India, writes Satish Deshpande, is a space largely based on 'exclusive inequalities' of merit, caste, and discrimination. Based on a survey done by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) in 1999–2000, Deshpande highlights that the share of upper-caste Hindus that are highly educated is double their share in the population. Deeper analysis and several other studies uncover many more caste and gender-based inequalities in higher education, including enrolment in different disciplines, interpersonal experiences on campus, attitudes of professors, graduate professions, and so on. For instance, a study conducted at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences highlighted in an article in the *Times of India from* 2014, showed that 78 per cent of students from SC/ST and OBC categories reported that

they faced discrimination, 88 per cent faced social isolation, 76 per cent said that their papers were not examined properly, 85 per cent said that professors gave them less time than students from upper castes, and 76 per cent said that they have been asked about their caste on campus. Satish Deshpande writes that the continuation of these exclusive discriminatory practices is the product of "durable, self-reproducing mechanisms that are systematic (i.e., not accidental or random) and systemic (i.e., relating to system properties rather than to the attributes of individuals)" (Deshpande 2439).

One of the counterarguments against caste discrimination in higher education is that reservation is not based on 'merit' and disadvantages people from upper castes who may 'meritoriously' earn those seats. However, while universities boast of merit-based methods of assessment, the argument for meritocracy ignores resource-based inequalities. It does not acknowledge that performance in examinations, while supposedly based on merit, is also based on resource merits, namely, as Deshpande writes, economic, social, and cultural resources, which are distributed unequally in society (Deshpande 2443).

Add to these deeply entrenched social inequalities, the trends in enrolment, graduation, and placements highlight that access to higher education is still a big challenge, especially at the postgraduate level (Brookings 8). There is a shortage of faculty, poor quality of teachers, and low investment in academic research. The lack of academic research is also something that is often disregarded, which brings up the point that higher education is perhaps not inclined in the right direction, for research is undeniably an essential part of higher education. The inclination towards research is what creates an environment in a university that encourages and helps incubate intellectual discourse, which in turn leads to the task, as Deshpande writes, of creating a space that "may think on behalf of society" (2440).

With social media keeping students increasingly more connected and well informed about what is happening in HEIs across the country, student activism has only been rising. The recent protests by students against caste discrimination, fee hikes, and increased university autonomy, cannot have gone unnoticed. Most of these protests, often spearheaded by students' unions, are against policies that are socially exclusive and increase the inaccessibility of higher education to a vast majority of Indians.

These inequalities are only some of the examples of the various kinds of problems that exist in higher education in India. They strengthen power imbalances and oppressive structures within and outside of HEIs, and are representative of socio-economic inequalities in society at large. Within this context, we may better appreciate the importance of a philosophy of education that contributes to social transformation.

Social Reconstruction through Education

This approach to education that aims to 'reconstruct' society may be traced back to the philosophy of *social reconstructionism*, which was initiated by theorists such as Theodore Brameld and George Counts in the mid-20th century, and later developed through the theory of critical pedagogy, as articulated by Paulo Freire and his contemporaries in the latter half of the century. The social reconstructionists believed that education should focus on engaging students in enquiry and dialogue around social experiences and issues, such as hunger, inequality, social injustice, inflation, terrorism, and so on. The aim of this education is essentially to address issues of social injustice, and to work towards reconstructing a more equal and just society. The critical theorists argued that education must aim to help overcome oppressive human conditions and serve as a means towards building a new social order.

This theory differs from the educational theory of the *experimentalists*, such as the principles of John Dewey's progressive education, as it is based on a more planned method. The experimentalists' approach to education, one of the most notable educational movements of the 20th century, leaves the task of solving social issues to the educated individual, who is supposed to be a rational and intelligent character who may 'experiment' and discover solutions to real-world issues on their own (Sutinen 20). However, social reconstructionists believe that the task of social change cannot be accomplished through experimentalism. According to them, the goal of education should be based on a critical analysis of society and an effort to achieve a specific reconstruction of society. This goal, unlike experimentalism, should be clear and planned. Therefore, every theory of social reconstructionism is built closely in alignment with a specific time and place, and the social context of that society. Ari Sutinen writes that an education based on the social reconstructionist philosophy should aim towards four things: "to produce students who think critically about culture (1), who are capable of reaching the set or reconstructed social situation (2) by means of a social reform or a revolution (3) and to accomplish the new social order (4)" (21).

The social reconstructionist theory began as a critique of capitalism that played out in its cruellest form during the world wars, and which, as Sutinen writes, "has led into the disappearance of true human individual freedom. It has been replaced by an economic system that exploits people both mentally and economically" (23). One of the most prominent thinkers of the social reconstructionist movement was George Counts, who wrote a piece titled "Dare Progressive Education be Progressive", in which he highlighted that while child-centred education remained an important aspect of education, it wasn't enough. Counts describes the cruelty of a capitalist society thus: "In the present form of capitalism it is not only cruel and inhuman: it is also wasteful and inefficient. It has exploited our natural riches without the slightest regard for the future: it has made technology serve the interests of the profit motive: it has chained

the engineer to the vagaries of the price system: it has plunged the great nations of the world into a succession of wars, ever more devastating and catastrophic in character: and only recently, it has brought on a world crisis of such dimensions that millions of men in all of the great industrial countries have been thrown out of work and a general condition of paralysis pervades the entire economic order" (Sutinen 23). Counts offers a reconstructionist approach to building a socialised economy, and places education at the centre of this aim. According to Counts, educators must discuss what 'good' education is and how it can produce 'good' human beings, who in turn, can contribute to building a 'good' society (Sutinen 24).

Indoctrination as a Risk of Social Reconstructionism

While the aim of a social reconstruction through education is a radical aim for society, the means to arrive at it has been proposed by theorists such as Counts through an indoctrinatory method. Their belief is not limited to critical pedagogy and the contribution of 'woke'—in today's language—citizens to the building of a better society, but aims towards a revolution—i.e., against neoliberal capitalism—through an educational indoctrination.

This aspect of the theory has met with much criticism, comprising mainly of three problems: the idea that individual freedom, which is at the core of education, cannot be changed by proposing a sole 'truth'; the disregard of the experiences, viewpoints, and rights of the individual; and the contentious authority of the one who would decide the social reforms, and thus the 'right' curricula. John Dewey and the other progressive educators were not in favour of the idea of implanting ideas in students, as it disregards the student-centred learning approach they advocated. Indoctrination as a concept is fundamentally against the principles of a social democracy, and it is this aspect of social reconstructionism which poses a limitation and needs to be understood in order to arrive at a more liberal conception of the philosophy.

The first question that we may ask is what we mean by indoctrination. In some sense, indoctrination could be said to be contradictory to critical thinking, for it promotes a certain close-minded thinking rather than an open or critical mindset. The individual who is indoctrinated has no sense of individual perspective, critical thinking, or in fact, even a purpose. They become the same cog in a wheel that Counts criticised, and instead of contributing towards the betterment of society, they contribute towards the goals of an individual or institution. Historically, education has been used to drive two prominent agendas—political and religious. While the progressive educators contributed to breaking away from this norm, political indoctrination is often done more subtly to promote an authoritarian education and to instil submission and passivity in thought. Such a form of indoctrination can exist across political and ideological spectrums.

This subtle form of indoctrination, that is not always intended or planned, can be done through the narratives that are taught in classrooms and the pedagogic

approaches that are adopted. This is why the limitation arises of having a theory of social reconstruction that aims to 'rebuild a social order' by *using* the students as tools. Instead, the importance should be placed on *providing* students with the right tools that will allow them to define and build this new social order. The faculties of critical thinking and reasoning, which would allow an individual to better understand the society in which they live—its dynamics and relations of power and authority, its oppressive and unjust structures, and its shortcomings—can only be cultivated, not imposed.

James C Lang, in a paper in which he discusses indoctrination as a legacy of liberalism, suggests four main aspects of indoctrination which may be assessed to analyse a pedagogy: content, method, intention, and outcome (247). The content refers to the curriculum, the method to the pedagogic approach—to which we will return later—the intention to the motive behind the teaching, and the outcome to the success of the intended imposition of knowledge or narratives. Concerning the outcome, Lang writes that mere exposure—to certain ideologies, values, and principles—cannot be called indoctrination, for exposure does not necessitate an acceptance on the part of the student to a particular idea. However, the pedagogy must provide students with enough criticality for it to be at their discretion as to whether they support an idea or not.
Criticality or questioning and dialogue lie at the heart of education, as they do at the heart of a liberal society. It is important to work towards a pedagogy that keeps in mind the limitations of social reconstructionism to avoid turning education into indoctrination. Such a pedagogy must be critical so that it provides a space for analysis, criticism, and dialogue, preserving individual freedom and making it democratic in a true sense.

Critical Pedagogy for Social Reconstruction

Critical pedagogy is an educational philosophy that lies at the heart of a project of social reconstruction and is one of the most crucial elements in liberal arts education. It emerged as a philosophy of education in the 1970s and 1980s through a movement led by several radical educational theorists, including Paulo Freire, Henry A Giroux, Peter McClaren, Michelle Fine, Walter Feinberg, and Philip Wexler, amongst others (Weil 25). Critical pedagogy aims to study the politics of culture and begins by educating students on the relations of power and domination that exist in social groups, in order to increase intercultural understanding and awareness. Shaumber and Mahoney highlight the educational approach proposed by Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationist: "Freire emphasizes that education should liberate students by rejecting oppressive, traditional pedagogical methods and advocates a pedagogy of emancipation that provides students with the knowledge, empathy, and power to develop a value-based understanding of their role in society" (79).

While Freire did not use the term 'critical pedagogy' himself, his theory of education has been one of the most significant contributions to

liberal education in the 20th century. He critiqued the 'banking' system of education, which he says presupposes the teacher to be knowledgeable and the student to be ignorant, so the former 'deposits' and the latter 'receives' (Freire 72). He says that this "attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" (Freire 77). Freire proposes, on the other hand, in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a transformative education that uses knowledge in the larger struggle for social justice to liberate human beings from oppressive structures. He stresses the importance of thinking critically about one's own situation, a process he termed *conscientization*, in order to understand the relation between one's individual experiences in the context of larger social issues. He emphasises the importance of connecting education with the experiences and problems faced by students in their own lives through a dialogic and participatory pedagogy. Ira Shor, another leading theorist of critical pedagogy, writes that this approach indicates that "education is something they [students] do, not something done to them" (343).

Further, Freire emphasises praxis or informed action, so that education deals not only with critique but also takes the next step to make pedagogy political and contribute to resistance and social transformation. Henry Giroux, a prominent educationist and cultural critic who articulated the theory of critical pedagogy, writes:

> The fundamental challenge facing educators within the current age of neoliberalism is to provide the conditions for students to address how knowledge is related to the power of both self-definition and social agency. Central to such a challenge is providing students with the skills, knowledge, and authority they need to inquire and act upon what it means to live in a substantive democracy, to recognize anti-democratic forms of power, and to fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systemic economic, racial, and gendered inequalities. (Giroux 35)

To educate students to be more socially aware and responsible, a key method that can be used is community-based learning. Community-based learning focuses on providing students with the ability to critically analyse social issues. Shaumber and Mahoney conduct a case study in which they compare outcomes of community-based learning students with non-community-based learning students. The factors they take into account include students' understanding, attitudes, and knowledge with regard to political awareness, social justice, and civic action. The study found that community-based learning adds to academic learning by providing students with a real-life context that helps them understand and sympathise with relevant social issues and recognise their stake and responsibility in contributing to policy making.

A closer starting point to help students understand structural power imbalances in the world is the classroom itself. For instance, discrimination in Indian higher education based on

caste, gender, and merit, which was discussed earlier, is a replication of the same socio-economic inequalities and oppressive structures within Indian society. Uday Mehta, in his paper that discusses the causes of oppression in Indian education, emphasises the need for a 'Freirean critical awareness' in Indian society as students are not encouraged to ask questions or engage in interactive discussions. He states that "critical education can contribute to a more democratic society and social transformation and Indian education can gradually lead to true democracy with the need to create more democratic classrooms" (Mehta 41). To make classrooms democratic, educators need to make space for and encourage questioning, participation, and reflection, while also making classrooms more inclusive, open, and non-judgemental.

In a larger sense, the democratization of classrooms can only happen through systemic changes that allow for institutional structures to be changed and provide the freedom to teachers to redesign pedagogy and curricula. A critical pedagogy that is self-reflective and contextual, and focuses on dialogue as well as praxis, is one that would bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world and make education truly transformational.

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Dalit Resistances to ‘Indian Political Modernity’

SHANTANU KULSHRESHTHA

About the Author

I am not a very agreeable person, and that is a part of myself I would not change. From an early age, my tendency to question and argue has often landed me in trouble. With my teenage years, my parents, who took pride in my exercise of criticality, soon realised the calamity they had brought upon themselves. This tendency, however, has also led me to explore avenues, and engage with ideas in a way that has truly shaped my life experiences, and made me the individual I am today. Writing has been an important part of this process, and has allowed me to exercise my criticality outside the confines of my immediate surroundings to a larger (often imagined) public. My time at Ashoka, first during the YIF and now as a master’s student with the political science department, has only furthered this attraction, allowing me to engage with and produce academic discourses, and put my un-agreeableness to good use.

Introduction

Over the last few years, there has been a renewed interest in understanding the 'Idea of India': imagined as a liberal-secular entity built out of the values of the independence movement, with a special emphasis on locating it in binary opposition to Hindu nationalism and communalism. This interest, however, has largely marginalised the Dalit-Bahujan challenges to both the liberal as well as Hindu nationalist conception of India. Drawing from the conceptual framework of Indian Political Modernity, I will trace the Bahujan critique of the larger political modernity in India, and place it within the context of an alternate nation-building exercise.

For the purpose of this paper, I will divide the critique, as well as its on-ground manifestations, in two parts. I will first analyse Bahujan resistances to the nation-making projects undertaken by both the Left and the Right through their creation of a Mulnivasi identity in the sociopolitical domain. Following from this analysis, I will attempt to show how the binaries of Secularism versus Communalism perpetuated the same grand narratives, and provided a limited scope for a discussion on Bahujan identity.

The creation of the modern Indian state has been replete with numerous challenges to its 'modernity'. These challenges do not only originate from a reactionary, conservative Right opposed to change, but also find their roots in a Bahujan rejection of the values and premises inherent within the conceptualisation of an 'Indian modernity'. This rejection—far from overturning the modern process of state formation, citizenship, and nation-building—seeks to redefine the westernised, individual-centric, and Brahmanical contours of the modern Indian state. With the rise of Dalit mobilisations, manifested not only through political or social processes, but also through growing Dalit literature as well as radical identity conceptualisations, there has been a large shift in the modern understanding of caste. This shift, away from an organic, rural, and structural phenomenon (Jodhka) that will automatically 'wither away', has led to a more immediate action-oriented approach linked to its annihilation (see next sections). These reinventions have radically altered the discourse around rights and the nature of the state, both theoretically and practically by moving away from the Gandhian paternalist paradigm of Harijan protection, towards a new understanding of state responsibility and Dalit rights.

Before we move forward with its critique, it is important to understand what I mean by 'Indian Political Modernity'. Modernity in this context does not refer to the project of Rationality and Science, the overwhelming adoption of which is strongly intertwined with Dalit visions of emancipation where the fundamental underpinnings of equality and justice have been a product of western emphasis on these ideas. From Jyotiba Phule, who was heavily inspired by the ideas of Thomas Paine and other British theorists, to Dr B R Ambedkar who sought his own identity away from the oppression of traditions and encouraged people to attain a western education, the Dalit movement

has in various ways co-opted forms of modernity through the years. Instead, it concerns the ways in which the modern Indian state thinks of, conceptualises, and operates within the 'political' frameworks of modernity: the nation, the state, and the other, which, seen through historical processes of post-enlightenment development of nation states, constitute the modern.[1] Thus, as I will show in the paper, the Dalit critique of Indian Political Modernity is not in fact rooted in a Gandhian romanticism of village life and 'Indian traditions', or a Hindu social conservatism manifested through religious fanaticism and the creation of the western 'other', but rather in its appreciation of the structural and institutional limitations of the modern political system in India. This critique can be summarised through two 'grand narratives' in the Indian political discourse—Secularism and Nationalism, and their manifested antithesis of Communalism and Colonialism (Nigam). Instituted by the rise of the Indian nationalist movement—formed of the upper castes and classes—these grand narratives and their antitheses were the by-products of British colonialism and the penetration of western thought and epistemology into the sphere of 'public rationality' (Kaviraj). With Indian independence, and the accession of Congress's vision of a modern Indian nation, conceptualised through political equality and citizenship as well as traditional exceptionalism (Matthew) these ideas became central in the discourse around the idea of India (Khilnani).

For all of their emancipatory appeal, however, these principles of political equality were founded on the recognition of a universalist individuality devoid of any communitarian character. This centrality of an unmarked, neutral individual in the national secular-modern discourse inherently privileged forms of identity that were not bound up in modes of communal domination, and those who controlled the narratives of 'normality', through which the social person could be seen as a political citizen (Banik). In this paper, I will be using the words Bahujan and Dalit interchangeably as the contemporary resurgence of the Dalit movement has been intertwined with the creation of a Bahujan or Mulnivasi identity. This intersectional nature of the Dalit resurgence has taken into account the failure of modernity to recognise and annihilate caste, and argued for an expansive definition of political and social entitlements like reservations, affirmative action, self-respect, amongst others. Even with this interchangeable usage, the focus of this paper will be on a specific group of people who ascribe to the 'Dalit' political identity.[2] Here, I will show how Dalit resistances to religious homogenisation, as well as the creation of alternate non-religious primary unifying identities in the form

1 For a broader discussion on the Indian state's linkages to political modernity, see Sudipto Kaviraj (2000) "Modernity and Politics in India".

2 The Dalit identity is not the same as Bahujan identity, while the former is a radical-personal identity conceptualised and ascribed to by various sub-castes that are bureaucratically characterised as Scheduled Castes/Depressed Classes and involves a process of 'Ambedkarisation' (see Singh), the latter was initially conceptualised as an electoral and political identity and includes OBCs, adivasis, Muslims (some definitions include women and trans people as well [see Darapuri for more]).

of Dalit/Bahujan/Mulnivasi, forms the basis of a Bahujan critique.

Resistance to Nationalism and Challenges to Nationalist Historiography

The development of Indian modernity is closely linked to the rise of Indian nationalism in the movement led by the Indian National Congress (Kaviraj). This is not to say that it was the Congress that conceptualised or designed the ideas of nationhood that were to become prevalent through later years, but that it massified (G Pandey) these ideas beyond their initial roots in early Bengali *bhadralok* subcultures[3] (Mukherjee), and in Maharashtra. The project of nationalism in this context was created in opposition to British colonialism (Nigam) through the initial home-rule and *swarajya* movements, largely led by the upper castes and classes, and limited to urban centres. With the arrival of Gandhi and Gandhian mass movements, these experiments in nationalism were further propagated to a larger number of people. Thus, the project to conceptualise a modern Indian state was premised on the basis of an Indian nationhood—especially after the Partition which fuelled fears of a 'Balkanisation of India'—and led its leaders to pursue the creation of a multicultural 'Indian' identity (Ranjan).

This project was accompanied by the rise of an alternate Indian nationalism—premised on a 'Hindu' identity, where society was to be organised on the basis of 'Hindu culture'. Such a form of nationalism was inspired by the ethnically, and culturally driven nationalist insurrections in Europe which led to the formation of modern nation states (Desai). Communal nationalism was also rooted in the early ideas of an 'Indian' nation, replete with Hindu religious symbolisms and premised on upper-caste insecurities arising out of demographic realities where upper-caste Hindu domination was challenged by colonial representative institutions (Mukherjee; Rao; Rawat). In Bengal, for example, the census revelation that Hindus were a minority, alongside increasing Peasant-Muslim solidarities that led to the formation of the 1937 government led by the Krishak Praja Party and the Muslim League, prompted the foundation of the Hindu Mahasabha by Mookerjee and Savarkar in the state (Mukherjee). Similarly, in Maharashtra, the rising anti-Brahmin movement, along with demographic insecurities arising out of Christian missionary activity, prompted the creation of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an overwhelmingly Nagpur Brahmin association based on the idea of militant Hindu Nationalism (A K Pandey).[4]

From the 1920s onwards, these two stands have been in constant conflict over the definition of the

3 For an interesting analysis of the links between bhadralok culture and cultural nationalism in India, see "Battle for the Bhadralok: The Historical Roots of Hindu Nationalism in West Bengal" by Ishan Mukherjee in the November 2019 edition of Caravan.

4 Pandey in his book also provides an interesting account of the obsession with Peshwa pride that prompted Marathi Brahmins from Tilak to Savarkar to Hedgewar to create dominant grand narratives.

'idea of India' (Khilnani). While the liberal Left5 (Chhibber and Verma) has attempted to create a liberal-secular constitutionalism premised on the opposition to the colonial 'other', the Right has tried to formulate a conservative Hindu nationalist identity premised on the identification of the Muslim as the other through constant invocations of 'Muslim invasion' and the 'Muslim threat'. These two strands, however, are in no way oppositional when it comes to their larger caste-Hindu conceptualisations of the social and political, intersecting at the base of upper-caste hegemony and domination through over-representation of upper-caste Hindus, creation of a dominant larger identity, the invisibilisation of caste, as well as the perpetuation of social conservatism through 'Brahmanisisation' of mainstream culture (Christophe Jaffrelot, India's Silent Revolution: *The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*; Nigam; Banik). There is a significant body of work analysing the upper-caste premises of Hindutva and Hindu Nationalism (Ashraf; Jaffrelot, "Rise of Hindutva Has Enabled a Counter-Revolution against Mandal's Gains"; Badri Narayan; Sen; Shah; C. Jaffrelot). When it comes to analysing the upper-caste Brahmanical premises of the modern Indian state, however, academic works generally tend to focus on the skewed electoral and structural representation of upper castes (Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, Kumar and Jaffrelot, Iyer et al., Rao, amongst others). Amongst the few academics writing on the Indian state's functional and institutional *savarna* (upper-caste) premises, Kancha Ilaiah in his book, *Why I Am Not a Hindu (1996),* shows how upper castes reproduced the social systems of caste within the democratic and state institutions, thus formalising caste power through the state. He argues that the Brahman focus on politico-bureaucratic power, the Baniya focus on the capitalist market, and the neo-Kshatriya control over the agrarian economy in this context facilitated the hold of Brahmanism in this secular-democratic Indian state. The Congress system in this framework of upper-caste control and tokenistic representation of minorities was also reliant on these same levels of control, with urban upper caste office-bearers connected to clientelistic[6] networks of agrarian elites to remain in power (Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India"), and capitalist networks of Baniya industrialists to fund their political project (Ilaiah; Banik). This control, moreover, is not only evident in the political and economic systems but also in the mainstream media, where most editors and journalists were and continue to be upper castes (Newslaundry-Oxfam; Neyazi).

Dalit resistance in this context concerns both the resistances to a larger Brahmanical Indian nationhood—

5 I use the term liberal Left quite broadly to encompass a range of statist, Gandhian, liberal, and leftist ideologies that, as I show in later sections, contributed to state formation and national identity-building towards the end of British colonialism in India, as well as in the post-independence state structure.
6 The exchange of goods and services for political support, often involving an implicit or explicit quid pro quo. Clientelism involves an asymmetric relationship between groups of political actors described as patrons, brokers, and clients. Source: "Clientelism". Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clientelism

wherein albeit the legitimacy is not drawn through scriptural or religious identities, civil engagement or political citizenship, and 'rational discourses' are still dictated through adherence to norms of upper-caste conduct[7], and mediated through upper-caste elite networks—as well as a more immediate Hindu nationhood. At a principled level, the Dalit-Bahujan movement has continuously challenged the Brahmanical legitimacy over Indian nationalism using the Aryan Invasion theory. This theory, used by Phule to advocate for emancipation (O'Hanlon), looks at Brahmins as the invaders and the backward classes as subdued natives. In contemporary Dalit-Bahujan discourse, particularly through the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), and localised literary movements, a Mulnivasi identity premised on this historical discourse of indigenousness has also been created. Fundamental to this identity is its critique of Hinduism, wherein it is directly associated with the religion of oppression, imposed by colonising Aryans to subdue Dalits, OBCs, and adivasis. Here, large-scale conversions to religions like Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity have been recognised as sources of escape from the institutional oppression of Hinduism (BAMCEF). Brahminical legitimacy over the idea of the nation, both 'multicultural' and Hindu nationalist, in this regard is challenged by reversing the Brahmin gaze of self-belonging (Sweet et al.), and characterising them as outsiders.

Beyond a reversal of this gaze through the creation of alternate ideas of belonging, Dalits have challenged the binary of nationalism as oppositional to colonialism by refusing to integrate with the freedom movement and boycott the British, because their emancipation, however limited, was in large parts aided by the British policy of creating integrative educational institutions (Jadhav). This anti-colonial nationalism is also undermined by the Dalit celebration of the victory at Bhima-Koregaon, where a regiment of Dalits, fighting for the British, defeated the upper-caste Peshwa army (Dutta). Thus, by challenging the Brahmanical control over both these nationalist narratives: related to the construction of universally oppressive colonial rule, and the hegemonic pedestalisation of non-British armed forces, the movement has created a third category of nationalist identification—that of oppression and indigenisation. In this way, the movement has called into question upper-caste anti-imperial, and anti-Muslim victimhood as well as refuted an assumption of belonging embedded in their narratives.

Challenges to Secular Modernity

Secularism at its very base refers to the separation of the Church and the State (*Secularism | Definition of Secularism by Merriam-Webster)*. This separation is the product of the recognition that individuals are equal and neutral—devoid of any 'private identity' in the public sphere, which is itself seen as the

7 Within academia, this is evident in the ways that civil society in India has been conceptualised as opposed to 'political society', wherein Partha Chatterjee characterises the latter as authentic zones for discourse generation occupied by 'subalterns', taking a view of subaltern discourse as an antithesis to the 'rational' and 'civil' society (see Chatterjee).

zone of discourse related to the matters of narrowly defined 'public concerns' (Habermas). In the traditions of western political thought, this separation is an essential part of modernity, associated with the formation of a nation state (Butsch; Habermas). The binary of public-private, along with the composition of the public sphere, however, make this very public a site of social reproduction, wherein socially dominant groups can form, influence, and decide public identities and discourses, without engaging with their own social domination in the 'private' sphere (Fraser). Nancy Fraser, in her work on counter-publics, has shown how this public-private binary has meant that normative ideas of 'privileged classes' have seeped into discourses defining the neutral-rational citizen, at the cost of the marginalisation of other diverse and non-dominant identities (Fraser; Graham and Smith). It has also meant that frameworks of oppression and power that operate in the 'private sphere', including that of the household, the family, social relations, and personal beliefs, are kept outside the avenue of 'legitimate discussion', and in this way invisibilised.

In the context of India thus, from the very start, a fundamental idea of equality—associated with public neutrality—has not only been epistemologically restrictive to Dalit-Bahujan politics, but also antithetical to any concentrated means of emancipation. By putting all individuals in the same category of citizens, and expecting similar equitable resources from each one, the notion of equality defined in this way, limited any active reparations to combat disabling socio-religious institutions like caste. The second feature of an equality-driven view has been its conceptualisation of society as an organic entity, capable of gradual change. This idea, propagated by Gandhianism to argue for a socially libertarian state (Riggenbach; Misra), saw social change as motivated by *hriday parivartan* or a 'change of heart' in the oppressor rather than as a product of state policy and intervention (S Kumar; Jodhka). In *Annihilation of Caste* (1935), as well as Gandhi, Jinnah, and Ranade (1943), Dr Ambedkar argues that this view of the role of the state is inherently problematic as it ignores that village society, with its rigid systems of domination and dependence in the economic sphere, and graded inequalities in the social sphere, and has no incentive to reform in the absence of external pressures of the state through the legal, administrative, and economic spheres (B R Ambedkar). A libertarian view of the state in this regard, guided by Gandhian and modern normative (Jodhka; Pandhian and Krishnan; Banik) frameworks of the state's social functions, came to dominate the Indian state's view of social life till the early '90s (Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*; Kothari, "Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste"). An invisiblising statist ideology alongside an upper-caste normative civil society, thus, made even conversations around caste inconvenient within the early contours of the modernist insurrection in India (Nigam).

Such a view of the state not only perpetuated the public-private binary that restricted any statist action to undo the conditions of the oppressed but had its origins in the espoused role

of the state in a Brahmanical society. The state, represented by the king, was to act as a mediator, and the protector of dharma—punishing infractions, and ensuring communitarian responsibility was fulfilled (Brown). Thus, while the state was responsible for communitarian control, individuals were deeply tied to their castes, which were autonomous, and guided by existing social norms, specifically created for specific sub-castes. Any individual who dared to violate caste norms was punished by the autonomous caste group, and any caste group that violated social norms regarding inter-caste interactions was punished by other castes as well as the dharma-bound state. This was all maintained by a system of graded inequalities (B R Ambedkar), where lower castes maintained their power and status by oppressing castes lower than them using the norms of the castes above them. In such a paradigm, Indian modernity was designed to recognise individualism, while social norms were designed to uphold caste status.

The Indian practice of secularism has evolved over the past few decades, with its movement from separation to non-establishment of religion from the state (Das Acevedo). Yet, even this progression is problematic to the Dalit-Bahujan project of social emancipation. With the recognition, and the subsequent grant of entitlements to the 'Scheduled Castes' by the Constitution in 1951, the Indian state recognised the rigidity of Hindu society, and took upon itself the job of reformation—a job entrusted to it not by its secular nature, but by the authorisation of its Hindu majority (Mehta). It is important to know here that this 'authorisation' was not an organic process as it is sometimes made to appear in the Hindutva discourse around the Universal Common Code, but rather faced huge amounts of resistance from caste-Hindu interest groups both inside and outside the Indian National Congress (Kataria). That the Hindu Code Bill, installing legal protections for women and other unprivileged groups, was also most prominently pushed for by Ambedkar instead of Nehru or any other 'architect of Modern India' (Khan) also says a lot about the conveniently privileged nature of Indian Political Modernity led by upper-caste Hindus.

Even after the recognition of the need for social reform by the state, the ascent towards caste emancipation was limited by the de-prioritisation of caste in the modern governmental structure, where caste was seen as an unsavoury and 'feudal' form of understanding society, and class was preferred to conceptualise government schemes and social programmes (Jodhka). Brahmanical control over the political and administrative institutions of such a change like the judiciary, administration, educational institutions, media, and until the late '80s, even political parties, further perpetuated such a view and largely limited caste-based affirmative action. Thus, while reservations were granted to Scheduled Castes by the Constitution, their access to mobility was severely restricted by the 'pedestalisation of "merit"'(Subramanian) which was used to demonise affirmative action by portraying upper castes as some sort of victims, and an upper-caste-dominated bureaucracy which resisted

implementing affirmative action and social justice policies (Pai).

The Dalit resistance to this grand narrative of secularism was put forth in two ways—the first was an early rejection of Hinduism and an aversion to 'Hindu homogenisation' in the context of the colonial census-making exercise (Rao; Pai; Rawat), where Jatav Dalits demanded official recognition as Adi-Hindus in Uttar Pradesh, Ad-dharmis in Punjab, and 'Pariahs' in Tamil Nadu amongst others (Viswanath; Rawat). The second kind came through the creation of a Bahujan-Mulnivasi identity by BAMCEF and other Dalit organisations in the late '80s (Pai; V Kumar). The latter political formation is a contemporary phenomenon that has created multiple political movements prompted by Kanshi Ram's idea of the Bahujan—the many. By creating a collective Bahujan identity as opposed to a religious or patriotic identity, consisting of adivasis, OBCs, Dalits, and minorities, the movement has resisted the increasingly polarising binary between secularism and communalism perpetuated by both the Right and the Left.

This politicisation of the Bahujan identity, as exemplified by the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Vanchit Bahujan Agadi (VBA), is also an important strategy to resist Brahmanical control within the paradigm of secularism. This identity creation has allowed members of the community to enter corridors of power, not just as token representatives, but as ideological torchbearers of the fight against casteism by creating an electorally successful alliance of the oppressed. Political power, arising out of the formula of the Bahujans, has allowed Dalit organisations to take more militant stances in their fight for emancipation, and assert themselves more effectively, as well as partake in institutions responsible for reformation. In the context of Indian democracy, it has created a third form of nationally relevant and electorally appealing identity, based not simply on an upper-caste vision of 'secularism' or Hindutva, but on the moral victimhood of the many (Jaoul, "Politicizing Victimhood"; Jaoul, "The 'Righteous Anger' of the Powerless: Investigating Dalit Outrage over Caste Violence").

Investigating State Control in a Modern Democracy: Contemporary Political Movements as Bahujan Critiques

While the modern Indian state operates within the two grand narratives of Secularism and Nationalism, these grand narratives are operationalised through electoral politics. Electoral democracy in the context of India is the major pillar that sustains and empowers narratives and adjudicates demands for resource allocation (Tawa Lama-Rewal). For a large number of its population, it is the only way to determine their vision of the state (Banerjee), and interact with it in the capacity of citizens and not subjects. Political and social campaigns surrounding elections are also one of the most fundamental motivations for the perpetuation of these binaries and narratives. In this context, it is important to look at how Dalit-Bahujan resistances to both these binaries have been actualised.

On the ground, the Dalit-Bahujan partnership has also been deployed against the resurgent Hindu Right, which has been at constant odds with the radicalism of movement. The electoral power of the Bahujan movement has forced the Hindu right wing's vision of a united Hindu nation to abandon its upholding of the caste system, and facilitate gestures (no matter how tokenistic) like building Ambedkar statues, appointing OBC chief ministers, investing in the legends of local Dalit figures (Badri Narayan) towards 'backward' communities, and including Dalits (Badri Narayan). The Bahujan identity here has also acted as an antithesis to the system of graded inequality through which caste has been upheld (B R Ambedkar). Beyond just its sociopolitical relevance, the transformation of caste as a visible marker of electoral mobility as opposed to its earlier unspoken manifestation, through the directed Bahujan-oriented discourses, has challenged the idea of Indian political modernity as encompassing neutral, unmarked subjects. Furthermore, it has revealed the inherent upper-caste biases of the modern political system by demanding representation according to population, and unmasked the systems of caste clientelism that benefited upper castes who refused to acknowledge the sources of their power (Jaffrelot, India's Silent Revolution: *The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India;* V Kumar; Pai; Ahuja).

In Uttar Pradesh itself, the electoral politics of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), founded by Kanshi Ram to represent the Bahujan ideology, focused on Dalit self-respect and ownership of public spaces, has ensured that the government has focused on building monuments honouring Dalit leaders and symbols (Khound). Such contentious politics of public space, manifested through the installation of statues, have been a key pillar of radical identity assertion and 'visibilisation' of Dalit identity in a Brahmin normative (Pandhian and Krishnan) modern state. This strategy is not only evident in Bahujan government-backed constructions, but has also been replicated at the level of the village, where Ambedkar statues have been installed on common village lands by local people. The appropriation of public lands in this context offers two different kinds of critiques on Indian Political Modernity.

The first critique concerns the nature of occupation of public or common land itself, where Dalits have argued that village common lands are rightfully theirs, given the unfulfilled and unimplemented promises of land distribution made by successive central governments in return for Dalit votes. The second critique is the statue of Ambedkar itself, where Ambedkar is shown wearing a suit and tie, holding the Constitution, and pointing forward. As opposed to statues of other prominent national leaders, Ambedkar's depiction as 'culturally modern' by the emphasis on the western suit and tie over the Indian kurta pyjama or Nehru jacket, associated with his authorship of the Constitution, challenges the postcolonial emphasis on 'Indian culture' and 'Indian clothing' by the political class across the spectrum, from the Hindu nationalists to the communists (Jaoul, *Learning the Use of Symbolic Means: Dalits, Ambedkar Statues and the State in*

Uttar Pradesh).[8] It also claims ownership of the 'Idea of India' by linking it to the Constitution, which is shown as the work of a Dalit. This reclamation of public spaces defies the Brahmanical control of the public, and creates alternate narratives of leadership. To this extent, it has been criticised by the larger Brahmanical narrative as 'inefficient', 'partisan', and aggressive (PTI; Noorani; Jaoul, "Learning the Use of Symbolic Means"), where using the vocabulary of modernity to critique modalities of Dalit assertion has been a constant.

With the decline of the BSP after 2012, and the subsequent return of upper-caste Hindutva politics in Uttar Pradesh (Jaffrelot, "Rise of Hindutva Has Enabled a Counter-Revolution against Mandal's Gains"), the on-ground resistance has been led by the Bhim Army, a militant volunteer-based Dalit organisation led by educated Dalit youths that focuses on identity assertion and has brought attention back to Bahujan politics. In various districts, the Bhim Army has reclaimed caste pride, by asserting their *jaati* as a symbol of power (Tiwary). Using social media, another 'modern tool' generally associated with upper-caste subculture politics (Udupa), the Bhim Army has also created alternate channels of information dissemination in the face of upper-caste control over mainstream media. Beyond just an electoral-power model of Bahujan government, the Bhim Army has proactively used Constitutional discourses of social justice along with avenues of bossism[9] (Michelutti et al.), changing the state's interactions with its most marginalised citizens from that of paternalism and tokenism to one of responsiveness and accountability[10] by putting social and 'muscular' (Michelutti et al.) pressure on the administration.

Conclusion

At both conceptual as well as functional levels, the Dalit movement has offered a critique of important developments within Indian modernity. This critique has allowed an expansion of the contours of both the modernist binaries—nationalism v colonialism; secularism v communalism—within the Indian polity. The creation of Dalit-Bahujan and Mulnivasi identities has also allowed space for the exploration of an Indian identity away from its partisan roots. However, the accommodation and subsequent integration of the movement within the Indian state formation project cannot happen without an expansion of the epistemological definitions of 'modern institutions' and a recognition of their upper-caste origins and biases. While we recognise this critique, it is also important to look at the Dalit-Bahujan appreciation of modernity, especially in the context of caste, where the advent of rationality and equality has provided Dalits with emancipation and respect. Dalit resistances to Indian

8 About the Marxist critique of Ambedkar's western attire Jaoul writes, "The Marxist critique of depictions of Ambedkar in Western dress seems grounded in some deep-rooted Gandhian influence on the Indian Left. Marxists also criticise the 'petty bourgeois' outlook of the Ambedkarite leadership."
9 Bossism is defined as an act of "doing power" in the context of the increasingly criminalised and masculinised political economies of north India. The act of bossism then involves not only exercising power, but creating the images, narratives, threats, and potentials linked to 'bossing' within the economy. See Michelutti et al. for more.
10 Research in my thesis on "Bhim Army and Social Media mobilisation."

political modernity, unlike Gandhian critiques, do not operationalise through an idealisation of the past, premised on Indological subsets of the 'organic' village society, or conservative change based on social harmony, but rather through the conceptualisation of counter-modernities within the framework of democratic identity formation, and structural reforms and compensations like affirmative action policies. Such a form of resistance, thus, rather than engaging with utopian grand-narratives imbued in modernity's political imaginations, challenges the actual operationalisation of ideas of communities, nations, political institutions, and 'the people' by consistently questioning the core assumptions of such hegemonic concepts.

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Caste in Higher Education: Examining and Redefining Affirmative Action

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About the Author

I currently work as an educator at Byju's, building interactive and engaging learning products. My interest in writing developed during my undergraduate days, when I started writing short stories. Apart from writing, I was also passionate about education. With the belief that education can lead to creating a just and equitable society, I joined Teach for India (TFI) as a teaching fellow.

Being a teacher to a bunch of enthusiastic eighth graders, I learnt the importance of the power of a well-reasoned, lucid, and engaging argument, which further cemented my interest in writing.

Following TFI, an interdisciplinary academic engagement at Young India Fellowship helped me connect my on-ground experiences to theory within an academic environment. As a part of the critical writing course, I began to explore the intersection of education and social identity through the dynamics of caste, power, privilege, and oppression in educational spaces—which ultimately contributed to this essay.

I intend to continue learning and writing about education and society while exploring interventions towards making quality education accessible to all students.

Introduction

On 17 January 2016, Rohith Vemula, a young PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, was martyred. In his suicide note, he expressed his desire to be a writer of science. Rohith, unfortunately, could not fulfil this dream of his. He wrote in his suicide note, "My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past." One can only imagine the grief in these lines and the experiences that led him to take this drastic step. He writes further, "I am not hurt at this moment. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this."[1]

Rohith was part of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA). They, under the banner of ASA, organised a protest condemning the hanging of Yakub Menon. The event was met with an intense backlash from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a radical Hindu right-wing student political organisation. The hostility between ABVP and ASA grew, and ABVP enjoyed the support of the administration. It eventually led to a discriminatory and arbitrary expulsion of Rohith, along with four of his colleagues from the hostel. They slept outside the hostel premises as a symbol of continued protest for 15 days.

Further, Rohith had not been receiving his PhD stipend of Rs 25,000 from the university for the past seven months. These events affected Rohith emotionally and mentally, as is evident from his letter to the university's vice chancellor. In the letter, he demanded a rope and sodium azide for all Dalit students. This persistent caste-based systemic discrimination was compounded for Rohith and eventually forced him to take his own life.

Rohith Vemula's suicide opened the Pandora's box of casteism that still exists in higher education. This event raised questions about the extent of inclusive practices and policies by universities and institutions towards students holding marginal identities. The report, submitted by teachers of the Hyderabad Central University (HCU), claimed that a total of nine Dalit students had committed suicide between the years 2001 and 2013.

In 2008, 12 students (11 identifying as Scheduled Castes and one identifying as Scheduled Tribe) were expelled from IIT Delhi with the rationale that they were academically weak. This decision was abysmal because it was made within six months of them joining the institution.

One can agree that affirmative action in the form of reservation in higher education institutions has contributed to a significant increase in the enrolment rate of students identifying as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST). In the long run, reservation has played an influential role in the economic upliftment, increased representation in the workforce, and social prestige

1 "My Birth Is My Fatal Accident: Rohith Vemula's Searing Letter Is an Indictment of Social Prejudices." *The Wire*, thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices.

as an outcome of occupation for the SC and ST population. However, there still exists an institutional breakdown once these students enter higher education institutions. They are often subjected to structural and institutional discrimination.

This essay attempts to describe these issues at length and highlights the long-standing repercussions of this systemic exclusion cascading to experiences beyond higher education. Although reservations for students identifying as Other Backward Classes (OBC) exist, they have been excluded from the scope of this essay. The rationale for this is that SC and ST students are most marginalised and oppressed based on access to social, economic, and cultural resources. Hence, this essay majorly focuses on them. However, the implications of the arguments made in the essay could be extended to OBC communities as well.

This essay consists of three sections. The first section explores the need for reservation in higher education and offers perspectives on its contribution towards positive social change. The second section dwells on the experience of the SC and ST students post their academic exposure through the lens of job readiness and security. Lastly, alternate affirmative actions are discussed that can be adopted at a structural and institutional level to make education accessible and attainable to all.

Status of Higher Education for SC, ST Students

The upper castes account for about a little more than one-third of the total population, yet they constitute more than two-thirds of those with professional and higher education degrees.
According to the National Sample Survey Organisation (2011–12), the under-represented castes—SCs, STs, OBCs, represented 71.5 per cent of the total population and hold poor representation in the educational and professional circuit. Hindu upper castes have roughly double the total number of graduates among all other castes and communities put together (Deshpande 2439). It is improbable that the figures have significantly improved through the years, especially regarding graduates in the technical domain like engineering and medicine.

Reservation policies account for about 15 per cent of reserved seats for SC students, and 7.5 per cent for ST students, while it is 27 per cent for OBC students. The cut-off margin for SC, ST students is less than that of the general category. Moreover, it has been observed that SC, ST students score relatively lower than the established general category cut-off. A study conducted at a medical college in Pune showed that merely one-sixth of SC and ST category students scored enough to be admitted as a general-entry student, while for OBC, it was five-sixths (Weisskopf 4340). We can conclude from this study that these students would probably not have entered these institutions had the reservation policy not existed.

The lower score of students in these entrance examinations could be attributed to multiple factors. One could be the lower quality of educational exposure at higher secondary level and, possibly before that, backtracking to early childhood education. Thus, students competing in these entrance examinations are already at a disadvantage. Second, the weak financial status of students from these identities restricts them from availing facilities like tuitions, which in general are expensive and play a pivotal role in moulding students to perform better in the competitive examinations for prestigious higher institutions.

Higher education has been accessible, attainable, and accomplishable for the SC and ST students because of affirmative action. The number of enrolments has increased over the years. Nevertheless, many seats reserved for SC, ST students at prestigious institutions like IITs, AIIMS and JNU remain unavailable to them. Moreover, the opportunity to access higher education has contributed to improving three spheres—social capital, knowledge and skills, and socio-economic status. The university experience allows them to not only establish a network with peers whom they can reach out to professionally and personally, but also opportunities post higher education have contributed to an improvement in their economic status.

The idea of affirmative action should be welcomed by students belonging to upper-caste groups as a measure to make university spaces more inclusive. As Thomas Weisskopf rightly points out, such integration promotes greater diversity, better political representation, better workforce representation, and upliftment of the under-represented strata of society. Reservation within higher education has provided opportunities to establish social prestige and build financial assets, thus improving economic status (Deshpande 2441). Over the years, the number of students aspiring to attain higher education has increased, thus making these institutions highly 'selective'. These circumstances have created a system of nationwide competitive examinations that determine 'merit' based on the parameter of a mere exam score.

Merit, in a literal sense, refers to the 'quality of being particularly good or worthy'. In the context of higher education, merit determines the competence and aptitude of a candidate through selective examination or what may be appropriately termed as an elimination examination. The number of seats and cut-off is predetermined. The examination, using merit as a basis, serves as a tool to create a dichotomy of being 'accepted and rejected' for students. Further, it legitimises the exclusion of students by saying 'No' based on performance. For merit to be a legitimate basis to select the 'worthy' and 'best' amongst the pool of students, one would have to assume that all the students are equipped equally with respect to economic, social, and cultural resources. However, this is not the situation.

Satish Deshpande rightly points out that examinations are based on the premise that merit contains an

element of 'resource discrimination'. Resource discrimination is born out of the discrimination of inadequate and inequitable resources for access and success in higher education concerning SC and ST students (2441). Resource discrimination further is a function of inequitable backgrounds, cultures, economic facilities, and the cultural differences in spoken language that are ultimately reduced to being 'dialects'. These 'dialects' are systematically excluded from the ambit of the dominant language(s) spoken by privileged populations (Ilaiah 2308).

Marc Galanter argues that three broad kinds of resources are necessary to produce results in a competitive examination—a. Economic resources, b. Social and cultural resources, and c. Intrinsic motivation and hard work (Galanter 10). A common argument made by the upper-caste population is that merit solely holds the reason for their majority representation at higher education institutions. Assuming that the argument is valid, then it would mean that amongst the three resources mentioned by Galanter, only intrinsic motivation is missing amongst people belonging to SCs and STs. While there is no detailed research on the above conclusion, the idea that millions of SCs and STs lack intrinsic motivation comes across as an improbable assumption and hence, could be termed as an unsound argument.

The notion of merit propagates unequal opportunities for students, especially for those identifying as SCs and STs. The idea of merit needs to be re-evaluated thoroughly, and robust policy interventions are needed that could substantially replace the resource discriminatory merit system and connotations associated with it through interventions that are inclusive of marginalised people. Reservation serves a part of this purpose by somewhere ensuring representation of SC, ST at higher education institutions. However, the current framework of merit simultaneously also serves as a tool of discrimination, and subsequent marginalisation and alienation of students belonging to SC, ST communities once they enter the higher educational institutions. A testimony to this lies in the experiences of SC, ST students at higher education institutions.

Experience of SC, ST Students—Institutions and Beyond

Anoop Kumar, an Ambedkarite activist and founder of the Nalanda Academy in Wardha, argues that most SC students opt for traditional courses rather than professional courses because of a lack of guidance. There has been an evident systemic gap in providing support to the students once they enter these institutions. It has been observed that the performance of students belonging to the SC, ST category has been inferior to their peers from the general category.

There are multiple reasons for the above, as rightly pointed out by Anoop Kumar. First, SC, ST students entering these institutions already come from a weak economic background. As an outcome, more often than not, students drop out midway. The state has provided scholarship schemes for students belonging to SC, ST backgrounds, but that has not been

very impactful in retaining students. It could be attributed to multiple factors—insufficiency of scholarship amounts to manage all expenses, inconsistency in the transfer of scholarship amounts to students' bank accounts, and lack of awareness about available scholarship schemes for SC, ST students. Second, the poor state of primary education already leaves them with less proficiency in grade-level learning outcomes.

On top of that, the medium of instruction and evaluation is English, which acts as a significant barrier for students hailing from vernacular-medium schools. There are no adequate linguistic support systems to help students learn the language. These factors result in lower academic outcomes for SC, ST students compared to the general category students. Third, the explicit and implicit discrimination faced by these students at the hands of fellow students from upper-caste communities. A single paramount experience that almost all the SC, ST students have claimed to have had is that of being labelled as non-meritorious based on their academic performance or their lesser linguistic proficiency compared to their general category student fraternity or because they used their reservation to enter the institutions (Kumar, '"Merit' Is Constructed via Coaching Centres").

These experiences leave a profound psychological impact on the SC, ST students: self-doubt. Loss of self-worth. Loss of self-esteem. Cultural alienation. Low confidence. Negative self-image. Negative community image. Inferiority complex. The list is long. Anoop Kumar elaborates further on the mental health of SC and ST category students, claiming that these factors are also contributing to high dropout rates. One cannot ignore the possibility of self-harm that may arise from a chronic feeling of failure.

The negative self and community image may result in them rejecting this identity and conforming to the majoritarian hegemonic culture. Diane de Anda, in her "Bicultural Socialising Factors Affecting the Minority Experience", calls this process 'Bicultural Socialisation'. She explains that an individual belonging to the minority subordinate culture interacts with the majority culture through any of three ways—translators, mediators, and models. The first instinct for a subordinate group while interacting with the majority homogeneous culture is to blend with their culture. The rationale is simple—it paves the way for a path of least resistance for oneself. Diane de Anda argues that this is done by developing the behavioural trait that conforms with the majority homogeneous culture (de Anda 104). An example of the above can be seen in certain students, who, instead of leveraging education to uplift their community further, have become ignorant and even repulsed by their caste identity.

Job readiness and post-education transition have also been a struggle for SC, ST students. They find it challenging to secure a job through campus placements. The factors perpetuating this could be traced to their college education discourse—academic and social. A study was conducted on a sample of students from Milind College of Arts—a college in Aurangabad dedicated to students belonging to

the SC category. It was found that while the students after graduating on an average earned more than their fathers, the students transitioned from a 'traditionally poor background' to what he termed as 'disadvantaged educated class'. None of the graduates managed to secure class I or II (administrative, as opposed to clerical or menial) jobs despite SC reservations for these jobs (Weisskopf 4345).

Another survey conducted amongst 143 IT professionals in Bangalore revealed that of the majority of the participants, 88 per cent were Hindus, 5 per cent were Christian, and 2 per cent identified themselves as Muslims. Brahmins constituted almost 50 per cent of the sample. Amongst 143 participants, only one identified with Scheduled Caste. The class composition was mainly upper class, upper middle class, and middle class. The majority of the professionals hailed from five metro cities or Tier 2 cities like Mysore and Pune. Professionals belonging to rural backgrounds and Tier 3 cities came from financially well-off and middle-class families (Upadhya 1864).

The lack of representation of SC and ST students is evident across domains and hierarchies at the workplace. Although the IT industry cannot be blamed for the under-representation of these students within the industry, one could argue that they can still be blamed for not meaningfully intending to diversify their workforce. Their role is to select candidates who will be an asset to the business. This process of 'selecting candidates' from the pool of applicants happens through multiple screening rounds, reinforcing the systemic exclusion that SC and ST students face. First, the process includes initial shortlisting that demands a minimum score of 70 or 75 per cent, thus discouraging the aspirations of many SC and ST students due to their underperformance at higher education institutions. Second, it requires them to go through a technical round that tests aptitude and comprehension skills. Third, there is an HR interview, wherein the objective is to convey a message to the company that the candidate is an excellent cultural fit and will be an asset to the business. Communication plays a vital role in acing this round, the medium of which happens to be English—proficiency of which is inferior in SC and ST students compared to the general category students.

Affirmative actions have ensured that students enrol in higher educational institutions, with stars in their eyes and the dreams of their parents in their hearts. However, the systemic exclusion at higher education institutions and failure to support them during their educational journey has contributed to turning those stars into dust, and dreams into broken pieces of glass. This systemic and institutional failure calls for a revamp in affirmative action policies, support systems, and structures.

Redesigning Affirmative Actions

There is a need for the affirmative action policy to undergo modification and be deployed effectively, not only on a structural level but an institutional level as well. The first issue that needs to be resolved while defining a measure is whether we should focus on attainment or enrolment (Basant and Sen 63). While

it has been established that reservation has enabled SC and ST students to enrol in higher educational institutions, educational attainment still faces a huge gap that needs to be addressed. Systemic-level interventions would be required to create a space that stands on the pillars of inclusivity and equitable outcomes for students.

The affirmative action of the reservation has catered mainly to the 'creamy layer' of the SC and ST population at a systemic-policy level. Only certain castes in some states have been able to utilise it for their upliftment. For example, the Mahars in Maharashtra and the Chamars in Uttar Pradesh. There needs to be a further elaborate enquiry into the broad spectrum of castes to ensure that those at the lower end of SCs, STs, and OBCs benefit from it. Anand Teltumbde argues that reservation has caused more division amongst the beneficiary castes. He proposes that caste could be segregated into two parts—those who have availed reservation and those who are yet to benefit from the reservation. The castes who have availed the reservation before, would not be able to avail it for a second time. He insists that this would benefit the other sub-castes who usually are unable to benefit from the reservation.

Further, this is not against the Constitutional provision of reservation and right against discrimination enshrined in Article 15, and might promote further equality within castes (Teltumbde 17). However, community upliftment takes generations to occur. While availing reservation once may arguably improve the educational and economic status of a family, the question remains whether the subsequent generation will be equipped with resources and social capital to compete with the privileged castes.

Pradipta Chaudhury, in her essay, "The 'Creamy Layer': Political Economy of Reservations", argues that the politics of caste identity founded on reservations help to push the economic problems facing the poor away from the centre-stage. Moreover, it also prevents the poor belonging to high, middle, and low castes from uniting along class lines (Chaudhury 1990). The system of economic condition as a criterion for providing reservation is ineffective. How would one determine what parameters of economic conditions should be considered to determine reservation? What mechanisms can we leverage to ensure that people are transparent while disclosing their economic conditions to avail reservation?

A few proposals are the focus of this section. First, the unfulfilled seats at prestigious institutions like IITs, AIIMs, and JNU. An article titled "Caste Discrimination in IIT Delhi: A Report" notes that almost half of the SC/ST seats in IITs remain unfulfilled. Twenty-five per cent of the candidates from those seats that have been filled drop out. The figures are alarming and give an image of an immense loss to the community (Kumar, "Caste Discrimination in IIT Delhi: A Report"). Indeed, fewer applicants is not the problem here. Perhaps a lack of support at these institutions and fewer candidates who fit the required criteria stands as a hindrance. Although IITs have introduced systems like 'preparatory year' for SC and ST students to train them for the rigorous

engineering tenure, yet the situation has not significantly improved.

There is a need to establish support systems throughout the engineering tenure. It not only equips them to cope with the rigorous academics but also equips them with better preparedness for future prospects. The remedial classes for English are not conducted effectively and efficiently. Borrowing from Anoop Kumar's experience, faculty take up these classes as an act of formality. One One-hour class per week! It is expected that four to five hours of classes will bring students at par with the students who have received their education in English-medium schools. Further, there is a stigma attached to these classes. These classes are for the SC/ST students. These classes are for the 'weak' students. No one wants to be associated with such remarks, which propagate a sense of humiliation amongst SC and ST students. There is a need to make these remedial classes effective and efficient across government institutions and private-aided and unaided institutions, where many SC/ST students enrol. Perhaps, sensitisation sessions for faculty, social conversations in the institutional space, and robust curriculum design could prove a good start. It would not only normalise the conversation around remedial classes but could also address the stigma attached to them. Moreover, deliberate research focusing on why students do not participate in the deployed targeted structures such as remedial classes is needed. It would enable the design of meaningful and effective interventions.

Second, the SC/ST cell has to be made more effective and efficient in its redressal mechanisms on caste-based discrimination in educational spaces. There needs to be accountability within the institutional administration to ensure the same. Accountability also has to lie with the government to ensure that the cells are rightly placed at institutions and are functioning.

Third, primary and secondary education, especially in low-income, under-resourced schools, needs to be strengthened. A majority of SC and ST students end up enrolling in these schools. This is a complex problem, and at a systemic level, multiple factors contribute to it—poor infrastructure, fewer teachers, inadequate teacher training, low attendance, poor nutrition, and weak early childhood education. This will require deliberate policy-level interventions and effective institutional implementation.

At the micro-level, 'community centres' could be established to provide educational, emotional, and psychological support to SC and ST students. One could imagine it as an environment to foster knowledge and the life skills (vocational training) necessary for various professional spheres. This would equip students with a better understanding and mastery over grade-level knowledge pieces and positive self-image and identity. Further, community centres could also be leveraged to address the need to make students aware of career opportunities, provide them with aligned resources, and connect them with people who would help them navigate their educational journey

successfully. The onus also lies with the SC, ST community professionals. They have availed the benefits of reservation to lend financial, emotional, and psychological support to current university students and enable them to make a successful career. There has to be a collective consciousness amongst SC and ST professionals to actively contribute towards the upliftment and betterment of their contemporaries. We owe this to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Educational institutions are sacred places where dreams are nurtured. Students have a bright future for themselves in mind coupled with high hopes placed by parents. It is a matter of despair that these dreams are crushed and hopes shattered once students enter these institutions due to the burden of holding an oppressed caste identity. What value does education hold if institutions and their people discriminate against the less privileged? How effective is the notion of 'merit' when the opportunities and resources themselves are discriminatory? How many suicides does one have to witness to question the systems and institutions? How many Rohiths do we need to lose to realise as a community that something needs to change? 'Community' does not only refer to the Dalits and Adivasis. It also addresses the people holding a position of power and privilege.

Rohith writes, "The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind as a glorious thing made up of stardust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living." These words, rather reflections, demand that we evaluate our position in the dynamics of power and privilege operating in society. There is a dire need to acknowledge one's privilege, especially in places like educational institutions. There is a need to deploy systems of meaningful interventions and severe repercussions on discrimination against marginalised students by the government to make the educational system inclusive for them.

There is a need for social conversations within the upper castes and lower castes around questions of power and privilege. This would only prove effective if it is supplemented by conscious efforts by upper castes to acknowledge their position of power and privilege and actively work towards dismantling it. Lastly, people from lower castes, who now occupy the position of social privilege and capital, should reach out to their less privileged community. It is necessary to have a sense of community and contribute towards the upliftment and empowerment of their comrades. The struggle persists!

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The YIF Critical Writing Programme has few visible contextual precedents within the Indian higher education system. Acknowledging the importance of writing as central to processes of knowledge acquisition, production,and consumption, the programme has developed a pedagogy geared towards building critical reading, writing and thinking skills to help Fellows engage with the world of ideas and enable them to develop and express their own ideas in a well-reasoned, lucid, and engaging manner. We do this by helping students innovate with genres of writing across different disciplines to develop a metacognitive awareness regarding their own reading and writing practices. These skills act as building blocks for the liberal arts education they receive at Ashoka University and enhance their abilities to navigate academic, professional, and social spheres once they graduate from the Fellowship.

The goal of the *Final Draft* is to showcase both the range-in topic and genre-and strength of writing in a student body that is itself highly diverse in terms of its educational, disciplinary, professional, geographic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Through the process of writing multiple drafts, student-authors discover their own unique voice, and recognise writing as an ongoing, open-ended activity as signalled by the title of the journal itself. As the Fellows learn to bring critical thinking tools to the drawing board, readers of *Final Draft* can witness a clear attempt by them to negotiate with texts and social phenomena as they make sense of the world around them.

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