ashoka UNIVERSITY | Young India Fellowship

FINAL DRAFT

A JOURNAL OF THE YIF CRITICAL WRITING PROGRAMME

Acknowledgements

Contents

"Love words, agonize over sentences.
And pay attention to the world."

— **Susan Sontag**

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.

Designer's Note:

Judge a Book by its Cover—Sometimes.

Final Draft has always been home to the works of enquiring minds—in this issue, the story continues. As the designer for this issue, my attempt was to make the design part of the overall story, in harmony with the flow of ideas in the essays. The cover design expresses the process of thinking, crafting, and writing. The design pieces inside delve into the intricacies of this process—the trial-and-error, the hours of hitting the delete key, the cracking of knuckles…just to start again!

The hands, the strings, the threads, and the picture that all these elements paint are in tandem with the Fellows' writing process as they work to craft something beautiful, which is true to their identity and lived experiences. The designs take inspiration from their creative and critical thoughts as they navigate *Critical Writing* and the Fellowship and seek to celebrate the new visions that emerge as a result.

Sabahat Ali Wani
YIF 2022

Class of 2021

Shaheen Bagh: A Study in Subaltern Dissent

Manvi Aggarwal

About the Author:

Manvi (She/They) is a queer, autistic, and left-wing writer and activist based in Delhi. They have been writing their entire life, and took it up professionally after graduating from the YIF class of 2021. Since they come from a background in business, the YIF was vital for them to navigate their interests in sociology, and find their voice as a writer. They write about politics, gender and sexuality, and culture, and create content in multiple languages. Currently, they live with their two indie rescue dogs, Cheeku and Chamcham.

I miss protests. I miss losing myself in the crowd, one voice spelling out all our anger, the strength and love and risk, the collective power. I would pack my bag and spend the entire day lending my weight to the struggle; my own fatigue, hunger, thirst, lost somewhere in the songs. It isn't lost on me how romanticised this memory is. It isn't lost on me that I went home and slept in a comfortable bed at the end of the day, even while the same women at Shaheen Bagh who I sang with, had *chai* with, had nowhere to go. For me, it was holding their hands while they fought. For them, it was a fight for survival.

On December 12, 2019, the Government of India enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The CAA, amending the existing Citizenship Act, 1995 aims to facilitate Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who are Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian and entered the country before 2014 (Press Information Bureau). This eligibility, however, does not extend to Muslim immigrants from these countries. For the first time under Indian law, religion has been overtly used as a criterion for citizenship (Slater). The National Register of Citizens (NRC), mandated by the 2003 amendment to the citizenship act, is a registry of all legal citizens such that anyone left out of the registry can be recognized as an illegal immigrant, or "foreigner" (Mohan and Chawdhary). Implementation of the NRC in Assam in 2013-2014 declared approximately 19 lakh applicants "foreigners" due to their documents being considered insufficient (Chanakya). A nationwide NRC approach is bound to have similar results, except most people can claim citizenship under the CAA– everyone except Muslim migrants. The CAA and NRC taken together, critics claimed, were bound to systemically deprive the Muslim community in India of their citizenship rights.

Several protests broke out in response to this move. Shaheen Bagh, which became the focal point of the cities' protest, is a neighbourhood in South Delhi. It falls in Jamia Nagar, Okhla, and includes areas such as Batla House, Zakir Nagar, Ghaffar Manzil, and Noor Nagar. Also known as the Abul Fazal Enclave Part II, it is an area with a relatively large Muslim population—with some estimates proclaiming that the Muslim majority is approaching 100% of the population (Farooqi). The *galis,* or bylanes, leading to the main protest site are extremely cramped and narrow. A foot over bridge runs atop the protestors, every inch coloured with resistance art and poetry. If you were to stand at the centre of the bridge and look towards the site, you would see a huge map of India, glowing and impossible to miss, the ideal that everyone there stood for. The map read, in bold letters: No CAA, No NRC, No NPR.

The protests at Shaheen Bagh were led by poor, Muslim women from working class families. The brutal police attack on the Jamia Millia Islamia University campus, where many of their children studied, propelled burqa-clad, hijab-wearing Muslim women homemakers to come out and occupy a 150-metre strip of the main street in Shaheen Bagh, two kms away from the university (Manchanda 609)[1]. Their message was simple: in reciting the preamble, hoisting the tricolour, reading out the Constitution, and singing Faiz and Jalib, these women were making sure that "their physical bodies in protest sites show(ed) dissent" (Bhatia and Gajjala 6297).

The presence of these women at the sit-in was in itself a bold and deeply political move. The Shaheen Bagh in Delhi paved the way for the emergence of other Shaheen Baghs across the nation, bringing women in unison against the violence they witnessed during the protests. This violence was inflicted on bodies which were discriminated against on the basis of gender, class, as well as religion. By crossing these three political barriers at once, the physical insertion of their bodies into their dissent left a long-lasting impact on the psyche of the state, as well as the nation. Their fearless and consistent presence in public spaces, out

where the state could wield its power against them, like the times had shown, blatantly and without repercussions, was a revolution in itself. It showed the majoritarian communalist sentiment that equality and secularism, engendered in our constitution, were being fought for even and especially by the most disempowered: Indian Muslim women.

Delhi Police had cordoned the entire area off, so the main protest tent could only be reached by going up or under the barricades. This practice would have normally been too much for me—the public eyes, the complicated and awkward physical manoeuvres, the vulnerability as a woman in an unfamiliar space. But I did it every day, like clockwork, and after the first few times, barely even registered it. It is ironic that the one time I felt I was unapologetically myself as a woman in the city was when the women around me were at their most vulnerable. I was boiling with rage, sure, but the fact that I was alive and safe in my anger reeked of privilege. In the end, I still had an identity card that read "Manvi Aggarwal", I still had a family back home with enough financial capital and religious/caste privilege for them to help me out even if I did land myself in trouble. The fact that I could go back home at the end of the day, proud of myself for having done what I could as a 'responsible citizen' reeked of privilege.

I didn't always recognise this privilege, especially in the beginning. There was a library in one of the corners—hundreds of books in multiple languages, and a beautifully diverse gathering just sitting together on the *daris* (carpets), and people reading. Two people ran the library. First was a JNU graduate student, who founded it, and subsequently sat there the entire day. He only ever left to eat when one of the visitors would agree to handle the space for an hour or two. The second person, his young aide, was a boy of about 15, who loved asking people their names. He ran between the books, tiptoeing so as not to touch his feet to the books while fetching them from different corners, only to tire himself out

and sleep on top of a stack of *rajai*s (quilts) behind a *parda*, a curtain sectioning off some space at the back. Now that I look back at it, it feels almost like a segregation of space.

Everybody whose life isn't immediately on the line, assemble in the library. Anybody whose sheer privilege makes them draw a blank while talking to the women, sit here and read a book. I only ever went to the library the first couple of times. I'd go inside the main tent, look at the artwork and click pictures, smile at the women who would glance at me, and retire to the library. Finish entire books, just sitting there. Occasionally someone I recognised from Instagram would show up; we'd have a conversation. A little Iqbal would run to me and offer *chai*, and I'd ask him what he learned that day. I'd wave a goodbye to the assembled crowd, offer one last smile at the women, and take the metro home. Feeling free in my skin, in my city.

What a load of crap.

My bubble burst this one time I didn't see Iqbal. I found him with his mother, in the tent, both sobbing. It was a Friday, and the men were off to the *masjid* for *namaaz*. The women sat along the corners, and for the first time, I noticed how tired they all looked. I went and sat with Iqbal. He didn't acknowledge me, neither did his mother, nor did anyone else. Nobody cared. This wasn't about me.

This wasn't about me.

Every visit after that changed. I even forgot to take my anxiety meds some days. I would barge into the kitchenette and make terrible chai, and carry it out 3 cups in one hand. I sat with the *dadis* (the older women were affectionately called *dadis*, or grandmothers) and listened to them when they told me, *"beti, per dabaade"* (child, massage my legs). This wasn't about me. I brought pins and staples from home and did up the posters. I bought *moongfali* (peanuts) for the children; I let them teach me the Urdu alphabet. I translated the English news reporters' coverage for the uncle who spoke Urdu in

a Punjabi accent. I told people the men were gone for *maghreb*. I shut up, and spoke only when spoken to. I told the journalists to talk to the women instead of me. I waved hi to the library crowd, but never went back. I ran out of staples. But this wasn't about me.

In its 101 day run in the biting winter cold, Shaheen Bagh had become a site of pilgrimage for secular India (Manchanda 609). In its execution, it was a unique strategy of dissenting, divorced from the traditional rally-based structure of the protest culture in India. But in its very participants and torchbearers, it can be hailed as a historic moment. Academic Zoya Hasan in *Shaheen Bagh and the Idea of India* emphasised that this time, women were not responding to the call of male leaders–they *were* the leaders. As Manchanda affirms, "we have never seen such a sustained and collective pan-India civil society mobilisation dominated by women, not even during the freedom movement. Nor this scale of mobilisation around non-gender issues and in complete defiance of state and police violence" (611).

Women protestors at Shaheen Bagh had a particularly complex lack of visibility to deal with. They were the bearers of the double-brunt of religious as well as gendered violence; but this susceptibility to the status of being the most vulnerable also made them fearless in their resolve—they, quite literally, had nothing to lose but their chains. It was their children and grandchildren's futures that they sat for, day and night through the cold. "Either sit at the protest today or prepare to sit in detention centres a few years later", said one woman (Manchanda 609).

Even with this ominous objective ever present in their minds, the women of Shaheen Bagh made the space so distinctly joyous and inviting that it was impossible to not feel at home there. The endless flow of music, poetry, *chai* and *samosas*, was almost a punch in the face of authority. The *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh, settled on a wooden platform near the stage, symbolised the steadfastness of the resolve of the protesters to

safeguard the future of their children and grandchildren. Many spoke of having kept quiet for too long despite the mob lynching, the Ayodhya judgement, Triple Talaq law and the NRC process. In the corner there was a little reading area, where someone or the other would sit with dozens of children holding their little slates, and teach them the Hindi alphabet. Or numbers. Or how to pronounce "inquilaab".

The women hosted multi-faith prayers, determined to stay peaceful all the while. In the face of pro-CAA protestors, they showered rose petals. Come Valentine's Day, and they arranged for hundreds of postcards to be sent to Narendra Modi, asking him to come and talk to them. The historic sit-in was as much about initiating a dialogue as it was about resistance (Manchanda 610). Gunshots were fired[2], and still, the crowd only swelled, growing from 70,000 to 1,50,000. Eminent celebrities came and showed solidarity, creating around these women a safety net of their power. Shaheen Bagh was quintessentially a woman's space of protest (Manchanda 610). However, the pinnacle of what I can only call beautiful politics, was the confidence and ease with which these women powerfully asserted their Muslim identities. Exercising their rights not *despite* being Muslim, but *because* of it—they were Muslim citizens of India, and they had every right to exist and take up space in their own country. It was a direct challenge to the "wisdom" of secular liberals who advocate invisibilising their Muslim identity (in the fight for) freedom, justice, and equality (Manchanda 611)[3].

The fearless visibility of Muslim women at the Shaheen Bagh protest site is subversive because it challenges the commonly observed practices of women's participation both in politics and in public (Bhatia and Gajjala 6292). This conscious act of protest helps us reconfigure spaces as inclusive and democratic. It makes public spaces accessible to people from the margins, and declares their unwillingness to stay quiet about their oppression anymore.

The active presence and leadership of Muslim women in the protest space also challenges their representation as victims of patriarchy within their own community. Hindu men are often applauded as the saviours, tasked with the responsibility of rescuing Muslim women by abusing, oppressing, and even violating the Muslim men (Bhatia and Gajjala 6293). This sentiment was resound in the minds of the protestors, as one 68-year-old woman explains:

> [I] did not allow the younger members of the family, especially [my] sons, to visit the site. I am worried about their safety. Everyone in our community knows the police come to your house, arrest the men of your family, and leave (Bhatia and Gajjala 6297)

Many women feared that if the men actively participated in the protests, they would be arrested on false charges. As is evident, these women protestors were using their bodies to shield the men in their families and communities from police brutality and violence (Bhatia and Gajjala 6297). If there is anything in the world that I can truly call a 'woman's instinct', it's standing on the verge of despondency, and still trying to protect others.

The revolution that Shaheen Bagh and its women was, went on for 101 days before it was razed down by a bulldozer citing the pandemic as a reason. Even though the physical space and memorabilia of it has been erased, and even though the CAA still managed to make its way through, the courage and selflessness of these women is something that will forever remain in our collective memory. Every time India rises to fight an oppressive evil, Shaheen Bagh will be writ large on all our faces.

On one of the last few days I managed to spend at the site, when crowds were waning and only the older women were persevering through the protest-fatigue, I heard one of the women tell a reporter,

> We are taking that risk. I am so old, I do not have any savings and if they beat me—even if they lathi charge and I get some injury on my head, I will probably die. Every minute we are here, we fear this violence, but we also know this is very small compared to what will happen if we do not start now.

This isn't about me, and I don't get to have the last word. In what these women managed to achieve, they have been much more than political; they have been revolutionary. I only deem it fit to end with one of the posters I saw at Shaheen Bagh everyday:

> *Tere guroor ko jalaayegi vo aag hu, dekh mujhe, mai Shaheen Bagh hoon!*
>
> *I'm the fire that will burn your arrogance. Look at me, I'm Shaheen Bagh!*

End Notes

[1]On 15th December 2019, hundreds of Delhi Police officers forcefully entered the Jamia Millia Islamia University Campus and assaulted students with batons and tear gas. In the wake of a confrontation with students protesting the CAA-NRC outside campus, the police barged in and detained over a hundred students and ransacked parts of the campus library and washrooms. According to Slater and Masih, about 200 people were injured.

[2]On 1 Feb 2020, a man later recognized as Kapil Gujjar opened fire 500 meters from the protest site of Shaheen Bagh (Aggarwal).

[3]In a social and political context increasingly coloured by Islamophobia, markers of Islam come to be seen as culturally threatening and deviant. This often leads to Muslims in public spaces hiding or being advised to hide expressions of their religion, including but not limited to clothing, language, symbols, etc. Especially in their fight for rights, the concerns are safety as well as being met with fear and aversion by the state. This belief, however, has evidently been turned on its head by the protestors at Shaheen Bagh, who proudly asserted their religion as well as their rights in their own country. Salam and Ausaf capture this symbiosis in the phrase, 'The Constitution in one hand and the Quran within their mobiles'.

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Do I Belong to Bokaro? Tracing Hints of Belongingness in an Indian Steel Town

Iman Bhattacharyya

About the Author:

Iman is an architect turned social-impact consultant who currently works with Sattva Consulting. She deeply believes in the need for equitable habitats for all. Having lived in different cities in the country for studies and work, she discovered her interest in reflecting on her own habitats through socio-economic-historical layers. Her bachelor's degree in architecture from School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi enabled her further to understand cities in the spatial and visual sense. Becoming a Young India Fellow assisted her in broadening her horizon to segue into the development sector where she eventually intends to contribute to making our cities more liveable.

'**L**et's go to Sector 9 one last time, Baba.'

My father started our scooter with a muted smile on his sweaty face. As smoke billowed out of its exhaust, I threw my leg around the back seat to sit astride.

'Packing is almost done. We have to leave too. Watch the clock!' —warned my mother from the balcony.

Settling down with a jerk and throwing a thumbs-up at my mother's direction, a small 'hmm' hummed through my throat unconsciously. Baba, habituated to both my verbal and physical cues for 25 years now, accelerated our LML scooter as it groaned into motion. He was taking me to the first home I had lived in as a child, for one last time. My last scooter ride in Bokaro.

I had grown up in Bokaro Steel City, riding the pillion in Baba's scooter. Born and brought up here, I had roamed every little corner of the city with Baba as my chaperone and accomplice. But when it came to calling it my own city, I doubted if I belonged here. Just like every other person in the city, I too was a migrant—a child of a migrant. And like most children of migrants who formed the larger chunk of the city's youth, I too was amidst building a career in a metropolitan city—a city where I could roam unaccompanied and at my free will. However, then the nationwide coronavirus lockdown of 2020 was imposed and I scurried back to Bokaro despite my doubts of belonging there.

Coming back to my parents' nest in the city during the pandemic was a temporary relief, but our time here was fast ticking away. Baba had retired from service at the Steel Plant—a Public Sector Unit (PSU) under Government of India. It was this service that had us settled in this designed, controlled habitat of the Steel City. With the service term being over, it was time for Baba to pack up his bags and leave for his hometown after 37 years. In these 37 years, a lot had changed and he had formed his own comfortable social life in the city. From being an adventurous 23-year-old boy racing bicycles and hitting the football fields in the city, he had turned into a content husband and a father riding a scooter at the top speed of 40 kmph. Several of Baba's friends had already retired and their families had left the city, creating a void in the little social life of my parents. My own friend circle too was diminishing. With there being barely any college education facilities in the city, my schoolmates too, like me, had either moved out as their parents retired or moved out for higher education and job opportunities after completing schooling. The pandemic brought back a few from the hostels and PGs in metro cities but we found no desire to connect back. My present connections with the city were fast fading and I had barely any connections with the 'hometown' we were moving to. A sense of rootlessness had taken over me. Where did I belong?

As the scooter took a lavish left turn having moved past the uniform rows of ochre-paint peeling, partly dilapidated, three-storied residential buildings of my sector, my eyes registered long uniform belts of tall teak trees lining the road. Cows and buffaloes tied to several of them, were grazing in peace. A patch of broken road and Baba's baritone interrupted my thoughts as he directed my attention to a clump of trees in no way distinguishable from the others, next to a roundabout that housed a 20 feet high Ambedkar statue. For the umpteenth time in my life, I was listening to the story of the teak plantation drive in the year 1995, the year I was born. He had enthusiastically planted several saplings to celebrate my coming. As a kid, the story had bewildered me. How were these trees so tall if they were as old as me? How come all of them looked the same when my schoolmates and I didn't? However, today my thoughts were different. I wanted to read the city in an attempt to locate myself in it.

'Baba, why did they have to plan this city? And how exactly do we fit into this plan?'

He slowed down the scooter and stared at his wristwatch.

'Let's take a quick detour.'

He took the turn to the wide, four-lane, tree-lined MG Road. Crossing the giant Mahatma Gandhi statue at the best-maintained roundabout, we sped to the portal marking the city limits, and took a U-turn. The portal now announced: 'Bokaro Ispat Shahar me apka hardik swagat hai', or 'Heartfelt welcome to Bokaro Steel City', as we re-entered.

Home to India's second largest national steel plant, Bokaro Steel City was built in the period of 1960-90s, with the plant being built through a partnership with the Soviet Union. It was built at the southern rural-end of Bihar (now Jharkhand), on the mineral rich belt of the Chhotanagpur plateau. It is one of the first 300 modern cities that were envisioned by the early leadership of modern India to be built by the end of the twentieth century. Nehru, Ambedkar, Shastri, and a few other makers of modern India find themselves peppered across as 20-30 feet tall statues in the designed roundabouts of this garden industrial city spread across a minuscule area of approximately 50 sq. kms. Out of this, 50% of the area houses just the steel plant, leaving the rest to the habitation by people manning the steel plant. The city was built in the sector model[1], on the lines of the city of Chandigarh—the much-adored City Beautiful[2] of the 1950s designed by Le Corbusier. Bokaro also happens to be the obscure younger kin of the better known Bhilai and Rourkela, which were among the first few steel cities to become operational in 1960-70s under the welfare vision of the government.

Sociologist Jonathan Parry, while studying Bhilai, notes that these industrial cities were an integral part of the aforementioned socialist leadership's dream of a self-sufficient, modern, secular, democratic society and citizenry, running on the highs of an "accelerated industrial revolution" (Parry 7, 135). It was a conscious, internationally-consulted attempt at breaking from the new nation's scarred past of inequalities on the lines of impoverishment, caste and religion (Parry 6).

Entirely designed by state-funding to house the workers of the steel plant and their families, the planning of these cities had barely left any stones unturned in handing adequate facilities to everyone who came to stay, irrespective of caste, religion, ethnicity. The utilitarian needs of the employed were the responsibility of the government. Alongside job security, every individual was provided a house—a government built 'quarter' (the formal nomenclature used in these cities), subsidized electricity, purified water, free medical and school education facilities, sports and cultural facilities, all at no cost at all, alongside numerous other benefits. However, after an employee retires, all their claims to any of the facilities are gone.

Baba's voice was laced with nostalgia as he reflected on all that the city had given him. He was now chanting the story of the beginning of his career. It echoed the thrill of a batch of boys in their twenties, playing and roaring through the smooth metalled streets of Bokaro in the 1980s-90s. Having left behind their family homes in their respective cities across the country, every year, batches of hundreds of young men would come to live and work in the city. People of all ethnicities, religions, and castes from all over India worked together on the shop-floor. Inter-group friendships therefore, were all too easy to find and quick to form. The quarter-allotment system in the city too had no focus on ethno-cultural-religious differences. Till date, the system is strictly dependent on ones' rank in the hierarchy of the steel plant and one has little to no choice in deciding one's neighbours. Essentially, an odd group of young boys—honed to be industrial workers, were picked out of their traditional communities across India and thrown into this new society like a social experiment. As the modern Steel Plant would convert raw iron ore into finished steel, the Steel City was envisioned to turn this rugged, raw bunch of boys into model citizens of the modern state of India, infused with the constitutional ideals of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Despite the rules imposing a denial of caste,

religious and ethno-cultural differences, Baba fondly recalled the way this odd group of employees from different ethnic groups formed their own ethno-cultural communities without staying in localised colonies. He recalled the making of the Bengali Kalibari—a temple of Goddess Kali, and the adjoined cultural centre with a library and music-dance-painting classes, where most of the childhood of second-generation Bengali kids of the city, like myself, had been spent. Ram mandir, Ayyappa temple, Jagannath temple, mosques, churches, and gurudwaras with their own cultural centres too had cropped up. Areas were carved out of the city plan to locate these centres in prominent road intersections. The result was the creation of numerous religio-cultural institutions open to all. Preparations for ethnic festivities became the times for intra-group cultural bonding and merry-making in the pre-liberalisation times, when TVs were rare and prized possessions. I noticed in Baba's remarks the way each ethnic community mostly kept to itself in the evenings after work—screening movies, holding quizzes, holding reading and conversation sessions. But when it came to the celebrations of the festivals, the centres would be frequented by everyone. Durga Puja, Diwali, Eid, Christmas, Rath Yatra therefore didn't remain community specific festivities. The idea of acceptance of ethno-religious diversity was also echoed in the education imparted in the city. I recalled the way every year, primary school children across the city would be taken on a field trip to all the religious centres across the city compulsorily. Stickers carrying messages of communal harmony would be distributed in class. We, as children, would rush to stick the most number of them on our school diaries.

While inter-ethnic friendships at work and school romances became the norm, it was the intra-ethnic merry-making and cultural scenes which stood strong as a hotspot for matchmaking among the youth then. Baba noted the way senior Bengalis in the city would play the role of community elders searching for matches amongst the young bachelor Bengalis, for their daughters in the city or back in their hometowns. He quipped that it was a larger trend not only for the Roys, the Majumdars but also for the Reddys, the Naths, the Ekkas, because the modern Bokaro was their alien workplace with alien values where they tried to rebuild a little bit of their traditional 'hometowns' through familiar customs. Thus, the members of each community coalesced to find one another for familiarity in the absence of strict familial and society norms. This indicated that the city was still a 'salad bowl of different distinctive ethnicities' rather than a 'melting pot where identities fuse in'.

One such match made in the city was that of my Ma and Baba, who started their life together from the house we were about to reach. Baba's scooter entered a narrow street ridden with potholes, having four-storeyed decrepit residential buildings hovering over us on either side. Tall mango, jamun, kathal (jackfruit) trees towered over our heads shading the street, while guava, harsingar and yellow oleander plants peeped out of the little walled gardens under each building. He stopped under one of the faded ochre buildings. We were at our destination. I had spent the first six years of my life here.

We stared up at the curtained windows on the top-floor of the four-storeyed building. Cracks had developed throughout the structure, running from the ground to the top. As we parked the scooter on the side of the road, people peered out of their windows around us suspiciously. An old lady came out and sat on the balcony of the first floor, her eyes fixed on us. I looked around to see if by sheer luck I could find even one familiar face and wasn't surprised to find none. There was a new community—formed out of staying in this neighbourhood. It made its presence felt through their inquisitive exchange of glances happening around us. Once upon a time, I used to be a part of a community here. But that community had been long gone from the city. People come and go every few decades. All that had remained of my childhood were the connections with the people on the street

then, people who were now dispersed all over India and abroad.

The connections were not just inter-ethnic but inter-religious too. When I recall the names of my childhood playmates in my street, I now recognise Sikh, Christian and Muslim names among others, thanks to having subconsciously learnt regional, religious and caste metadata that names carry in India while growing up. As one observes larger trends of religious differences in the country, it also becomes clear that it is the metadata in the names which defines how a person is allowed to occupy space in cities, but not in Bokaro. It is, therefore, not a surprise that those names of my friends had carried no baggage of background information for several of our innocent minds, and sufficed at being just a string of syllables to address a friend.

Parry notes in his observations of Bhilai that the industrial city had largely seen peace during the times of communal violence across the nation. He argues that the cosmopolitan nature of the city makes it difficult for one to sustain the conviction that their own religion or culture is the right way. The fact that the cosmopolitan nature had been enforced at the smallest neighbourhood level in Bokaro, ensured that growing up as Steel City kids most of us didn't realise the relevance of the communal harmony stickers distributed at school. Pair this up with the fact that it is a planned city, the need for ease of law and order enforcement was pretty much kept in mind while planning the city with sub-sector level police stations created alongside hospitals, shopping centres, schools and other civic amenities. Baba recalled the way there would be quick police deployment across Bokaro in case of any news of riots in India. Peace in the city would easily prevail. The maintenance of harmony and resilience was thus completely in the control of Bokaro Steel Limited, the state-run corporation running the city, and the resilience would remain till the state wanted it to remain. The burning proof of this was the 1984 Sikh killings across several spots in the country when Indira Gandhi, the erstwhile Prime Minister and the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, had been murdered by her Sikh bodyguards. Bokaro, a mere township then, made headlines in national news for its death toll and gruesome killings alongside the capital city of Delhi. Such was the intensity and impact of the killings in Bokaro that it made its way into popular culture, inspiring a web-television series in 2021. The Central Bureau of Investigation, the main investigative agency of India, later mentioned its belief that the genocide was orchestrated and supported by the erstwhile central government of India. It was therefore clear that rules of egalitarianism which make people coming from diverse ethnic, cultural, religious backgrounds live and work together, could be put on pause to exacerbate these differences.

However, a tiny silver lining here shines through in the ingenuity of the public that arises when it puts its minds together and figures out the gaps in rules and laws to operate in them and express their will. Therefore, much like the communities of the city figured out in-between spaces in the egalitarian city plan devoid of ethno-cultural centres to build their temples, gurudwaras, mosques and churches, these communities could find power in its new cosmopolitan values to find subversive ways to avoid weaponising their differences. An instance which serves as an example of this regularly features in my father's recollections of the anti-Sikh riots. He remembers the way neighbours stood guard in front of buildings housing Sikhs protecting them from the angry mobs trickling into the streets, the way workers in the steel plant formed human chains around their Sikh co-workers, escorting them to safety. However, he also recollects standing in the balcony of the Sector 9 house and watching neighbours plundering the homes of the Sikhs of the street who had luckily been rescued. The cosmopolitan values thus were perhaps not deep enough yet. I wondered if a citizenry that could plunder the houses of those they saved were yet to be called model citizens.

However, this is where the difference lied between the Steel Plant and the Steel City's produce. Unlike the stringent quality checks of the steel leaving the gates of the steel plant, the examination of the depths of the constitutional values of the Steel City's citizens was left to good faith as it periodically rolled out batches of families conditioned throughout the industrial workers' service period. Just like the steel once produced out of the steel plant does not need to go back to its place of moulding again, these families too are not expected to come back. Once the industrial workers retire, all utilitarian facilities that they and their families enjoyed through the period of service are taken away. The families such as mine are thus left with no reasons to ever come back to the city except perhaps nostalgic memories. For people like me born to a worker of Bokaro Steel Plant, the Steel City—the city of my birth and growth—therefore does not qualify as a hometown that I could ever go back to live in at my retirement age, unlike my father who would soon be taking us back to his. At this point of preparing for departure, I was thus a homeless immigrant in the city I was born in.

My mother's phone call to urge us back home was a welcome distraction. We had to ride out of Sector 9 to go back to Sector 4F—the officers' enclave from where our home was being packed. Baba had toiled hard for years climbing the ladder of hierarchy at the steel plant, and getting the perks of lifestyle improvement as mandated and designed by the establishment. One of the perks was getting allotted bigger houses as one moved up the ladder. We had, so far, moved two houses and now lived in a 1000 sq. ft house attached with a better lifestyle as opposed to the 300 sq. ft one we had just visited in Sector 9, all of which were the only houses that had ever been my homes. But to the city, these were mere quarters to mould the next batch of people. Our family's time in Bokaro was done. Baba's retirement certificate made us eligible to join the fresh batch of human products being rolled out. How could mere products long for a sense of belonging? Does a steel sheet coming out of the steel plant pine

to call the plant its home? The small silver lining however, is that unlike the sheet, I am a live product, which can seek belongingness through rationalising, contemplating and giving in to nostalgia.

We reached Sector 4F and went upstairs to the now-empty house to check if anything remained to be packed. Our truck was all packed up. Bills paid, orders signed. It was time to go. Two of our polite neighbours, wearing masks, came to see us off. There was no hugging. Uncle and Baba shook hands and sanitized immediately. Ma smiled politely at aunty who had teared up. Goodbyes were waved. Our car rolled off. Through a pool of tears in my eyes, I looked back to stare at the sunlit balcony of our Sector 4F house as it faded in the distance and the tall, uniform teak trees started rolling like a continuous film outside the window. My mind went back to my school-mates. Perhaps we were way more similar than I thought. The discipline of the life of an industrial city had indeed taught us to look, talk, think, and behave similarly on many fronts.

'Beta, did you know why they did a teak plantation drive in 1995?'

Baba too was looking outside the window, staring at the trees. I stared at him quizzically through the rear-view mirror. He caught my eye and quipped calmly.

'After they are old enough, they can be cut down for quality timber. I think they're old enough now.'

Even the life of a tree in this city was not its own and was slated to serve a purpose for the establishment.

As we landed on the highway, trucks and trailers of hot-rolled and cold-rolled steel sheets and plates coming from the steel plant lined the sides of the road. For a moment on this road today, the products of the steel plant in trailers and that of the steel city in a car, were side by side before we sped off to an unknown future back to the 'hometown'. The steel sheets and plates, I'm sure, had been well moulded; but had we managed to get moulded into

the model citizenry that the visionaries behind the city intended us to be, was yet to be seen.

On a separate note, public transport in the 'hometown' is great. I was glad I could go around the city on my own terms now. But I was also glad that our scooter had also been mounted atop the luggage truck, and was enroute to our new home with us.

End Notes

[1] The city is divided into separate residential clusters, called sectors. A sector would be a unit for a set number of residential quarters. Each unit would be a neighbourhood complete with its own open spaces of play, neighbourhood commercial centre, school and health centre. The idea was inspired from the neighbourhood unit concept popular in the mid-twentieth century US (Kalia).

[2] A Sobriquet of Chandigarh is in reference to the City Beautiful movement led by American architects in the 1890s-1920s that influenced the design of the Indian city. A key philosophy of the movement was that city design must encourage civic engagement and pride and that it cannot be segregated from social issues (Kalia).

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Singing Songs of Desire Under the Sheets: Hindi Film Songs, Literary Devices, and the Expression of Desire in Socio-Familial Spaces

Mahek Jangda

About the Author:

My writing journey began when, as a child, I would conjure stories out of thin air and put them on paper. As I grew up, the stories grew larger until one of them was published as my debut novel called *Sometimes Ivory, Sometimes Sand* (Hachette India, 2020).

While prior to YIF my writing had been focused on stories and fiction, during YIF, and especially because of the *Critical Writing* programme, I developed a deep fondness for academic writing, especially essays.

I am an MLS'22 and YIF'21 graduate. I'm currently working as a Sr Research Specialist at Gartner during the day and on a second full-length book at night.

Introduction

A heart made of Styrofoam is draped with a low-quality red polyester cloth. Decorated with many tiny green, blue and red lights, it is too bright a backdrop for the emcee standing in front of it to be clearly visible. The stage is high enough for even the uncles and aunts huddled at the *pani-puri* counter towards the back to have a clear view of the performances. In his booming, cheery voice, the emcee announces, "and next, with the dazzle of their *jhumkas* and the potency of their *thumkas*, come the ladies of the house to blow you away. Give a huge round of applause for the aunts of the groom".

It is my cousin brother's wedding, and my mother is one of the aunts being invited onto the stage. She has been rehearsing for this performance, in the time stolen between household duties, for a month now. I watch in anticipation as she walks onto the stage with two of my aunts. The stage lights turn to rose as the music comes on and the three ladies begin to dance. The song they are dancing to is "Piya Tose Naina Lage Re" ("O Beloved, My Eyes Meet Yours") from the movie *Guide*. Cheering loudly for the three performers, I start to sing along, but suddenly stop short. The lyrics of the song say "bhige mori saree, tan badan mora kaapein thar thar" ("my saree gets wet, my body shivers") , and then "raat ko jab chaand chalke jal uthe tan mera, main kahu mat karo chanda iss gali ka phera" ("when the moon comes out at night, my body burns with the flames of passion, and so I tell the moon not to visit my lane") (Mangeshkar). For the first time, it strikes me that the lyrics are talking about a woman's sexual desire and longing for her beloved. I have never heard my mother or any other woman in my family ever discuss anything related to their sexual desires. In fact, they would act rather embarrassed and look away at any mention of sex or even a glimpse of a kissing scene on TV, and here they were dancing to the lyrics that refer to sexual longing and desires, in front of three hundred people. With the movement of their bodies to the song, with their swaying of hips

and twirling of fingers, they were participating in expressing this desire, akin to how an actor conveys certain emotions through playing a character. I am not necessarily suggesting that my mother had these desires, was aware of them and was suppressing them; or even that she was unaware of having these desires. What I am saying is that regardless of whether or not these desires existed in her, the space for expression or engagement for such desires did not exist in the family setting till the moment she started dancing to the song. As soon as the song came on and she and my aunts began dancing to it, a space was created in which she, the other dancers and the viewers were in some way engaging with a desire which they otherwise do not even, at least publicly, acknowledge the existence of. This instance brought back other scenes to my mind: my father singing "Raat Akeli Hai Bujh Gaye Diye" ("The Night Is Lonely, The Lamps Have Been Extinguished") to my mother at a family Diwali party, "raat akeli hai, bujh gaye diye, aake mere paas, kaano me mere, jo bhi chahe kahiye" ("The night is lonely, the lanterns have gone out, come close to me, and in my ears, say whatever you want to"); my cousins and I dancing to "Kajra Re" (Chinoy) from *Bunty Aur Babli* on another cousin's wedding, "meri angdai na toote tu aaja…kajra re kajra re tere kare kare naina" ("I am not able to pandiculate, you come to me…kohl lined, kohl lined, your black eyes"). Richly laden with literary devices such as metaphors, idioms, innuendos, symbolism and allusions, such Hindi film songs dripping with desire have been part of socio-familial settings all my life.

Considering the landscape of desire in the socio-political space in the country, this phenomenon became interesting to me. It is common knowledge that ideas of desire and sex are taboo in the larger socio-cultural space in India. An article by Agence France-Presse (AFP) says about India, "Despite its heritage as the land of the Kama Sutra, open discussions around sexuality and intimacy are often regarded as obscene in the largely conservative country" (AFP). This erasure of desire in India has often been attributed to the need to

establish India as a puritanical culture according to Victorian moral standards in the colonial and post-colonial world.

In her critique of Hindi translators of *Kamasutra*, especially Madhavacharya, called "Pleasure or Moral Purpose", Ruth Vanita posits that these translators warped the narrative of the text and portrayed *Kamasutra* as a warning, pejorative text rather than a playful text about pleasure. In this newly constructed past, any other type of man except for the heterosexual normative man became impure. Women were confined to being virtuous housewives. These virtuous wives were elevated to a goddess status, and were looked at as symbols of purity, without providing them room to desire (Vanita). Madhavi Menon, in her interview with *The Wire*, asserts how post the arrival of the British and till today, there has been "wiping out and criminalisation" of desire (Gambhir). This statement is seen to come to life with bans to films such as *Lipstick Under my Burkha*, which expresses desires of four women. This film was banned because it was 'lady oriented' (TNN).

It becomes even more fascinating then that in something as popular as Hindi film music, taboo forms of desire can find a space to be. The Indian music industry was estimated to be worth INR 1086 crores in 2018 (Economic Impact of the Recorded Music Industry in India), and 80% of the Indian music industry's revenue comes from Hindi film songs (Ucaya). While in niche circles, such as that of Urdu poetry, one is still able to create spaces of desire, I did not expect to find desire lurking in something very public and very popular.

This paradox—of Indians being completely at ease in socio-cultural-familial spaces with Hindi film songs that express sexual and sensual desires, while being extremely uncomfortable, embarrassed (thinking of it as a taboo) at even the mention of sexual desires at most other times—leaves me perplexed and brings to mind questions which I wish to think through with this essay: What allows these songs to become vehicles for expression and experience of desire? In what ways does the space created by these songs allow for the non-normative?

Songs and the space for multiple/fluid interpretations

To delve into the above questions, I want to begin by exploring the fluid set of meanings that Hindi film songs can contain.

Hindi film songs, even though most often are especially composed for the film they are a part of, have a separate life of their own. They become individual units, with an identity that can be different from the identity ascribed to them by the film. Hindi film songs are available by themselves on various streaming platforms, are played on the radio and are downloaded by people. They are circulated as independent and transportable units and can be heard without needing to listen to the entire film album or watching the film, and are readily available on streaming services such as Gaana.com, Spotify and YouTube. Shohini Ghosh, in her essay "Queer Pleasures for Queer People" explains that, "[f]ilm songs acquire an independent life in Indian society because they are released on audiocassettes before the film's release…Long after a film is forgotten, one or more of its songs continue to be very popular, regularly played on radio and TV. Many people know scores of songs by heart and they are sung as entertainment at weddings and other festivities" (Ghosh). This modular quality of the song helps rid it of the strict meaning or intent a film may have ascribed to it, hence moving it away from having a stable set of interpretations. For example, the song "Beedi" ("Tobacco Rolled Cigarette") from the movie *Omkara* is a song sung by a courtesan and is hence presented as a sensual 'item' song performed in front of a 'vulgar' audience of men. But even the creators of the song don't necessarily look at it with this meaning. Gulzar, renowned lyricist and writer of the song "Beedi", in an interview with another popular lyricist Kausar Munir, talks about his thought process behind "Beedi" (Chauhan). He says, "people may see *Beedi jalayi le* as an item song, but it is actually my take on

the zamindaari system… "a*ise kaate ke daant ka nishaan chhod de, ye kataayi toh koyi bhi kisan chhod de*" ("your bites leave such a mark, even farmers will leave the harvesting of the crop") (Correspondent). Thus, even the creation process does not entail looking at the song as a text with a closed and defined meaning. And the audience too is often able to derive its own meaning from the song. "Beedi", even though in the movie is shown to be for an audience or a class who might not, as per the middle class, share their morality, we see it being popularly played to a middle class audience in DJ nights in posh clubs, in wedding ceremonies, etc., where suddenly how the song is viewed is changed due to a completely different setting. It is not an item song anymore, with a courtesan singing it to entice men. In this setting, all genders dance to it, relishing fully in its innuendos and sexy lyrics. Thus, the song does not prescribe a specific set of meanings, neither to the creator, nor to the consumer.

Usage of Literary Devices in Hindi Film Songs

It is not only that the song does not have a stable set of meanings that makes it open to multiple interpretations. What also makes its meaning malleable, is the usage of literary devices. Literary devices provide a meaning that is not literal. They are used to denote something that is not, something that isn't contained in the meanings of the words themselves and often, something that cannot be expressed directly. And in the Indian subcontinent, they have a long history. They have been brought to the Hindi film industry by much older artforms such as poetry and the courtesan culture.

Poetry from the Indian subcontinent has deployed these devices to talk about desire, and in many instances, even non-normative desire, for centuries. For example, the late 17th century poet Bulleh Shah wrote for his Sufi master Shah Inayat "Bullah, let us go and sit at the gate of Shah Inayat, who made me dress in red and green" (Menon 34). Madhavi Menon, in her book *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*, reads this as a "repeated insistence on being the bride of the pir, of dressing in

red and green….all suggest an erotic union" (Menon 34). Here, dressing up in red and green is read as a symbol of eroticism, even though there is no mention of erotic union in the verse itself. While India's Sufism is a mystic tradition, Madhavi Menon says that, "there is no way to tell whether the passionate poetry is heavenly or worldly", and that India's Sufi poetry displayed non-normative "passionate homoeroticism" (29). Hence, on this basis, we are not sure whether desires expressed by Bulleh Shah are devotional or homoerotic. Even as early as the 12th century, we can find desire dwelling in the realm of connotation. For example, Mahadeviyakka in the 12th century writes, "Like a silkworm weaving/ her house with love from her marrow/ and dying in her body's threads winding tight/ round and round/ I burn desiring what the heart desires" (Menon). Along with these poets, there were other artists who wrote poems and sang songs, and these were India's courtesans (Bhasin). As courtesans engaged in erotic arts and their profession was sensual in nature, what they created, including their music, contained a sensual character. For example, *paan* (a betel leaf delicacy) becomes a symbol of desire as the courtesans used *paan* to "set the stage for their erotic arts" (Menon 280). Thus in India, in different traditions of poetry and song, desire found a way to be expressed through the usage of literary devices. When the film industry came into being in early 20th century India, the courtesans, poets and the poetic traditions such as these got incorporated into the Hindi film industry, bringing along with them a host of literary devices and symbols to express desire in film songs. In a story in *The Hindu*, Shivani Bhasin says, the culture that was bred by the courtesans became the "very grammar of Hindi films". She adds that "Composers recreated the music of the kothas. For instance, the song 'Mohe Panghat Pe Nandlal Ched Gayo Re' is taken from the repertoire of UP's tawaifs." Poets such as Sahir Ludhianvi wrote for hindi film songs. Ghazals by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, poems by Bulleh Shah and many others have been converted into Hindi film songs (YRF). Even today, some of the most popular lyricists in the Hindi film industry are acclaimed

poets, such as Gulzar and Javed Akhtar.

Thus, metaphors, innuendoes and other literary devices for desire are enmeshed in the history and lyrics of Hindi film songs, making the meanings of songs sensual yet fluid.

But what does the fluid nature of lyrics in a song do? What does the usage of literary devices for desire in a song enable? Without the lack of a prescribed meaning, the space to ascribe one's own meaning to the song opens up.

Take for example, the sensual song "Namak" ("Salt") to understand how multiple meanings could be derived from it, leading to different experiences. The song "Namak" from *Omkara* (Bhardwaj) is performed by a courtesan character played by Bipasha Basu. Its lyrics say "Tej tha chaunka kya karun, si si karti main maru. Zabaan pe laaga laaga re, namak ishq ka" (Bhardwaj), which literally means "The tempering of spices was too hot, what can I do, my tongue burns from the heat of the spices and I die. My tongue has caught the salt of your love". I had been reading the hotness of the spices as the intensity of the desire, and the salt on the tongue as an extended metaphor of the common idiom "iske ghar ka namak chakh liya" ("Tasted the salt of their house"), which is used to refer to the idea that if one has tasted the salt of someone's house, or eaten food at someone's place, then that person has developed a loyalty for that house. Hence here, I read it as tasting the salt of love and desire and hence being loyal to that love and desire. But, when I read the YouTube comment section of this song, I was surprised to see that the common interpretation of this song was of a blowjob! Rethinking this, tasting the salt of love can metaphorically translate to giving a blowjob in the sense of tasting the salty semen. It's incredible how many different ways a song can be read because of its usage of literary devices and not direct language and hence singing them can be intended for the expression of different kinds of desire for different people. A blowjob might be a sexual act simply impossible to be described in a conservative cultural milieu; yet, a song like

"Namak" still makes it possible for people to read and express their otherwise forbidden fantasies through its lyrics.

Singing Songs of Desire Under the Sheets

But even if meaning is open to one's interpretation, how are these meanings of desire not shunned by the socio-familial space? How are we able to relate to and indulge in the third shared meaning conveyed by the aforementioned song "Beedi" and its lyrics "beedi jalai lay jigar se piya, jigar maa badi aag hai" which translates to "light the tobacco cigarette with my chest as there is a lot of fire in my chest", commonly understood as "I'm burning with desire, come and satisfy my desire"?

The usage of literary devices allows one to understand a shared meaning without having to make the meaning explicit and thus remain safe from societal scathing due to established societal norms, like an under the table deal which everyone knows has gone on but has no mention of on paper. This can be seen to literally manifest in writer Ismat Chugtai's trial for her short story *Lihaaf* (Quilt). The story was under trial for obscenity charges in 1944 in the Lahore High Court. While the witnesses maintained that the story was obscene, when asked to provide textual evidence for the same, they could not. Nowhere in the story were any 'obscene' words such as breasts used, nor were any sexual desires explicitly described. While the audience, the witnesses, the judge and perhaps the lawyers and Chugtai herself may have understood the sexual references in the story, such as "later that night, Begum jaan's quilt was, once again, swinging like an elephant" (Naqvi), but because of the use of literary devices such as allusions, idioms, symbolism, metaphors, and innuendos, with no direct reference to the sexual act, there was no proof that Chugtai had actually mentioned anything sexual in her story (Aftab). Similarly, these devices allow one to sing aloud Hindi film songs, even if the meaning is understood, since it is unspoken and there is no proof that it indeed was the understood meaning. Thus, my mother is able to dance to "Raat

ko jab chaand chalke jal uthe tan mera, main kahu mat karo chanda iss gali ka phera" (Mangeshkar), without reproach from the society.

Creating varied non-normative spaces of desire

This space for multiple meanings also allows many non-normative possibilities to the reading of these songs, thus also making this politically important. Shohini Ghosh looks at the concept of "perverse reading" to describe the way in which "lesbian feminist readers resist 'heterotexts' by privately rewriting and thus appropriating them as lesbian texts" (Ghosh). She further goes on to comment that a queer spectator can choose to "cut a hole through the narrative labyrinth" and follow their own path of deciphering the text. Due to usage of literary devices, many Hindi film songs provide a queer spectator ample room to do so (Ghosh). This means that even beyond a shared meaning, which talks about desire, there can be individual meanings, which make these songs even more useful for creating spaces to express non-normative desire and engage with it. For example, according to Manish Gaekwad, in the movie Mast Kalander (1991), Pinkoo, a homosexual character played by Anupam Kher, to express his desire for Prem Chopra, breaks into a dance sequence lip-syncing the famous song "Ek Do Teen" ("One Two Three") which was originally performed by Madhuri Dixit and which talks about her wait and desire for her love ("Reading Between The Lyrics Of Straight Love Songs"). Other popular songs such as "Lag Ja Gale" ("Tie Me In An Embrace") and "Dil Cheez Kya Hai" ("What is the heart?"), which are often featured at weddings in my family, have become go-to songs for queer expression, and have become queer anthems Gaekwad). This shows that Hindi film songs, which may (and most often do) talk about heterosexual desire are, because they often use literary devices and do not imply a direct meaning, able to provide room for a listener to interpret and use the song in a variety of ways and create multiple meanings.

Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this essay is that even though Indian society on paper considers all other kinds of desire except for heteronormative desire for reproduction, and any expression of desire, taboo, when my mother and aunts dance to "Piya tose naina lage re" (easy choice because of its popularity), it creates a space for desire in an otherwise desire-taboo environment. This happens because the desire here is coated in literary devices, making it a shared, common, even public secret which, by virtue of its masked and secretive nature, does not disrupt the supposed 'sanctity' and 'purity' of the space. Everyone is okay with sexual desire being talked about till no one says the literal words.

At this same wedding, one of my cousins, who recently came out as bisexual (only to me and a few close friends), was also present, and so was the girl she had a crush on. For her, as I look retrospectively, the song and the space created by the song could (and as I spoke to her later and realised, did) hold a completely different meaning. While my aunts and mother danced to the song, she often glanced at her crush and mouthed some of the lyrics, expressing her desire. The ambiguous nature of the song's lyrics because of its usage of literary devices, allowed my cousin to express her non-normative desire. While many songs allow different kinds of sexual desire to be expressed, this is not to say, by any means, that all Hindi film songs provide room for expression of desire or reading of queer desire, but to bring to the fore that even in as popular an industry as the Hindi film industry, exist songs which allow one to do so, and it is fascinating that this disguised yet popular space even exists in a country where desire, as asserted above, is viewed in a non-virtuous light. So, I suppose next time I am asked to dance on "Kajra Re" (Chinoy) for a cousin's wedding, or the next time I find my mother dancing to "Piya Tose Naina Lage Re" (Mangeshkar), I will quietly, sheepishly grin in the knowledge of these masked desires, and perhaps, if I'm feeling adventurous enough, I'll look around and widen my grin when I catch the eye of another cousin who will probably be grinning too.

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Reimagining Authorship Through Music or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Hate Copyright

Aman Shaikh

About the Author:

I came to the YIF as an engineer and data analyst, so I assumed writing was not a skill to be learned, but rather an innate talent that people are blessed with. *Critical Writing* broke that misconception and taught me to approach reading and writing as a process of not just understanding the meaning of words, but also the thought behind those words. Since YIF, these skills have been integral to my work as a development sector professional and enabled me to get published in the biggest social sector publication in India.

For as long as I have written, I have wanted to be a writer. The form has shifted over the years—sometimes it is essayist, sometimes novelist, for a brief while, scriptwriter and, in undulating moments, a poet—but the idea of *authoring* a work fills me with a giddy sense of joy. My love for the craft has led me to consider writing as a profession, contrary to the advice of several professional writers and publishers. In this tumultuous negotiation between passion and profession, I have asked myself this question several times: why do I want to be an author? But in order to truly answer the why, I need to examine the what: what is an author? This paper seeks to explore this basic question of authorship by examining the role of an author within society alongside an understanding of the power structures upholding authorship. The intent of this paper is not merely to present an academic understanding of a longstanding discourse within literature; by rooting this in a personal narrative, my goal is to articulate fundamental questions I have as a creative individual: what is the outcome sought from creativity? Moving away from the prevalent discourse around authorship also means moving away from a traditional definition of the author as being linked to the literary space.

This paper tackles notions of authorship in a rather unconventional paradigm: music. As someone with a deep connection with music in all its aspects—the history, the creativity, the mechanics, the theory, the intangibility—I see mirrors of myself in both writing and music. It carries the same giddy sense of joy every time I learn a new song, or write a new piece, or even listen to something great. In that sense, the approach to this paper is a personal indulgence. The indulgence is reflected in genres of music too; I will attempt to draw an understanding on the broad heads of discussion through three genres I personally enjoy and which carry a rich heritage: qawwali, kirtan and hip-hop.

This paper is divided into six sections. In the first section, I will attempt to understand the social functions of an author as proposed by Michel Foucault. Using Foucault's analysis as a starting point, I will lay out the analytical framework for this paper as being split into three key heads, which will be explained further in subsequent sections. The second section opens our analytical framework by understanding the relationships of power and authorship by taking the example of two different forms of kirtan. More nuance is added to our understanding of this relationship between power and authorship in the third section where we shall see how individual actors negotiate conflicting power structures by taking examples from qawwali. The section concludes by detailing the interface between traditional understandings of ownership under the qawwali paradigm and the models of ownership posed by copyright, which leads us into the fourth section. This section tackles the second key head in our Foucauldian analytical framework: we will examine the power's active interest in protecting authorship by elaborating on the models of authorship pushed by modern jurisprudence under copyright. By using copyright and its ramifications in the world of hip-hop, the intention is to highlight the fact that the models of authorship upheld by legal structures are hindering cultural production not just on the fringes, but also in very mainstream, mass-market media. Having addressed some of the philosophical considerations to authorship within copyright law, we move into our fifth section where we address the third key head of our analysis. This section deals with ascertaining the identity of the author within a piece and seeks to dismantle the notion of the author as a solitary creative agent through an exploration of intertextuality within kirtan, qawwali and hip-hop. The section also talks about the technical inputs required to create a work of art fit for public consumption—inputs which are not considered in the question of authorship. In the final section, I re-examine the argument thus far and synthesise an understanding of the author as an entity exercising choice which moves away from simplistic conceptions of the author either as a solitary creative agent or an identity held by a collective tradition.

What is an Author?

In a lecture titled "What is an Author?" delivered in 1969, Michel Foucault describes the function of the author in a society as characterizing "the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society" (305). In Foucault's definition, texts and their contemporaneous discourse are characterized by the author and, by invoking the author's name, we are not only calling upon the individual contribution, but also the broader discourse around a given set of ideas. Foucault's definition of the author situates the individual in the broader discourse thereby de-individualising and depersonalising the author. The attribution of a single name to multiple texts indicates "relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentification [sic] or of common utilization" (ibid.). Foucault posits that authors are characterised over multiple bodies of work through similarity of ideas or form, linkages of thought, responses and commentaries; attributes that are framed within the discourse contemporaneous with the text. Through citation or attribution, our culture is predisposed to consolidating ideas within a single entity, "the author"; however, the author themselves is situated within the cloud of ideas that shape culture. The individual only marks a point of entry into this amorphous cultural cloud. The individual contribution stands meaningless when devoid of its context. However, the individual creates a mark in cultural memory; we define discourse through the ages by assigning them the names of individuals. The author in this regard serves only as a nameplate on the many doors to the large mansion of cultural discourse.

Foucault expands on his definition of the author by laying out four key characteristics of what he calls "author-function" (306). First, he talks about the legal and institutional apparatus that make texts a "form of property" (305). This property is also a means for ascertaining culpability in works that profane the status quo. Second, he talks about how the historical significance of the author-function changes, from anonymous folktales that did not require authors to relying on the authority of a proper name to dictate the truth as was the case in the Middle Ages. Thus, a statement was only as good and truthful as the authority of the person it is attributed to. Third, he talks about the complex process involved in attributing a text to an author. He draws a comparison between modern critics' methods of gleaning authorial identity from texts to the devices laid out by St. Jerome that determines the veracity of a text by "ascertaining the holiness of the author" (307). Fourth, he characterises the author-function by the "plurality of egos" it inhabits; an author writing in first person is not necessarily writing about themselves: the author is both writing the story and narrating it from two different viewpoints (308). Foucault's analysis of the author through the discipline of literary criticism offers us an important analytical framework to understand broader questions of authorship. His treatment of the author as a social function allows us to better unpack the notion of the author, not merely as a solitary, creative entity, but as a social role in dialogue with society.

But there are issues with taking Foucault's position too far. By relying on models of literary criticism, the question of authorship is examined through a finished product—a book, a poem, a novel—but other key issues such as authorial intent or how the author views themselves within the discourse have not been addressed. In the first author-function characteristic, Foucault emphasises the state and legal apparatus that make texts a "form of property" (305). His primary contention is that the intention behind this legal framework is to penalise authors for profanity. However, there is little consideration to the social and financial capital afforded to authors by virtue of texts being considered property. Legal protections are designed to enforce ownership of texts with the authors and protect their claim to royalties. However, Foucault believes that the financial protection pales in comparison to the assigning of liability, especially

when considering controversial texts. Another instance is in talking about the "plurality of egos" that the author-function inhabits; Foucault fails to highlight how this plurality plays out in texts that do not rely on a first-person narrative (308). It also does not address a more fundamental question: where does the ego of the author lie within a text and within the broader discourse around the text? Establishing these markers of identity, which could be individual or collective, underpins the discussion on authorship.

Establishing authorial identity as a mark of authenticity forms a key assumption in Foucault's argument. His argument concentrates on aspects of attribution and the mutable standards applied. But it is equally important to consider who is applying the standards. The attribution of a text to an author when it comes with its authority, carries with it a source of power. The shifting sources of power within society consequently also shift the society's perception of authorship. This source of power is then also responsible for protecting the authenticity of the text. Thus, for examining conceptions of authorship, we must examine three broad heads: sources of power granting authorship, the interest of power structures in protecting authorship and the issue of identity markers in ascertaining authorship. Building on Foucault's literary analysis, I will attempt to gain some insight into the relationships of power within a different cultural paradigm: music.

Understanding Authority in Kirtans

Growing up in Pune, it is impossible not to live in the vibrant reality of the bhakti movement. The cultural backbone of the city—spiritually, aesthetically and even nominally—is formed by the famous saint-poets of Maharashtra: Tukaram, Namdev and Dnyaneshwar. This experience is distilled in the two days that the Pandharpur wari goes through the city, with pilgrims singing kirtans and abhangs written by these saints. Against this backdrop, I look at the relationships of power in granting authorship in the kirtan space through the work of Christian Novetzke on Sant Namdev. His

exploration of the Maharashtrian kirtan and its kirtankars (performers) lends an interesting alternative perspective to viewing authorship, especially in a largely oral tradition.

Novetzke focuses on two primary forms of kirtan prevalent in Maharashtra: Naradiya and Varkari. In the Naradiya tradition, the formative elements of the performance rely on the "learning and performative virtuosity of the kirtankar" (Novetzke 225). The Naradiya kirtan is characterised by the "erudition" of the performer and the narrative built by the performer by relying on various Sanskrit sources and philosophical texts (ibid.). A Naradiya kirtankar is granted authorship role by "mimesis" of sage Narada, mythologically considered the first kirtankar and served as a celestial messenger (226). In order to fulfil this role, the kirtan must inhabit several characters: part-narrator, part-musician and part-scholar. With Varkari kirtan, the performance is more communal in nature and the topics are narrower in "narrative and polemical scope" (227). The community bestows "temporary authorial status" to the lead kirtankar, which is returned back to the community at the end of the performance (228).

With the two different forms, we also see an invocation of two different powers to define authority. These different sources of power constitute the authority of the performer as the author. In turn, the performer must fulfil an elevated role and not merely parrot the words of the saint-poets; they are entrusted and expected to actively shape the narrative of the performance by bringing in other sources and, therefore, carry as much responsibility of authorship. The intertextuality within the act of performance is a point we will come back to later. But an understanding of the invocation of power presents us with interesting insights. In modern individualistic societies, the source of power is the state and, therefore, authorship is enforced and protected by the state. However, in societies with more communitarian organisation like the varkaris, power rests in the collective and it

is the collective that momentarily deputizes the kirtankar to carry the power to shape the collective's experience through the performance. Tying this back to the Foucauldian analytical model, the example of the two forms of kirtan present us with two different ways of viewing the relationship of power sources and authorship. However, both these examples show one thing clearly: the link of power and authorship is undeniable; therefore, to understand authorship, we must understand the various sources of power operating within a society.

The interface of conflicting paradigms also presents us with interesting insights about the individual actors who negotiate these conflicts. In the next section we will look at examples from the world of qawwali to further our understanding of the relationships of power and performer.

Negotiating Power Structures through Qawwali

To the Sufis, music and the raw power it exercises on humans is integral to faith and practice. In South Asia, Sufism is rarely separated from its musical footprint: the qawwali. While historical studies of Sufism are plenty, the work on its South Asian manifestation in qawwalis is limited. But in his deep ethnographic study, "Qawwals of Ajmer", Patrick Weston focuses on the primary qawwal family at the Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti dargah in Ajmer, Rajasthan; his work forms the backbone of my exploration of the qawwal model of authorship.

But first we must understand what qawwali really is. Bhattacharjee and Alam define it as "rendition of philosophic verses in several languages by a lead male singer, accompanied by a few accompanying singers/chorus, embellished with clapping of hands and some musical instruments" and characterise it as being a particular feature of the Sufi tradition of South Asia (211). Sufi thought is organised into chains of spiritual succession called "silsilahs" through a continuous sequence of "pir" (master) and "mureed" (followers) (212). In a musicological tradition, a similar organisation in the form of gharanas carries

on notions of lineage and authority across generations. The authors credit Amir Khusrau as the "father of modern Hindustani classical and Sufi music", responsible for "creating the qawwali genre" (217). The gharanas and silsilahs form two separate but related sources of power that govern the lives of qawwals and understanding these power structures is important for us to understand the question of authorship among qawwals.

A simplistic, superficial consideration of this organisation would frame the qawwals as constrained within ossified structures of familial heredity and spiritual heredity. But Weston's study reveals something more complex. The qawwals are tied to the reality of everyday life and, so, while social ideas of succession and heredity are afforded their place, they must also pay heed to economic considerations. Weston paints a picture of a profession inhabited by actors who satisfy conditions for neither competition or cooperation, yet coexist in their respective roles within their spiritual and practical realms. The gharana system serves as an institutional framework for the transmission of authority and, in a purely theoretical consideration, would constitute a rigid power structure, upholding culture, identity and skills over generations. But the lived reality of the qawwals of Ajmer tells us otherwise. For a family that traces its power as the "first" qawwals of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti to Emperor Akbar, the individual actors within the family are not constrained to intermingle and experiment (76). The younger generations indulge in cross-pollination of musical ideas, forms and influences in the same space as the formal, more traditional approach to qawwali.

Even the existence of the formal structures is under criticism from within the qawwal community. Shafi Mohammed Faqir, a qawwal from Sindh, Pakistan, is well-known for singing in "a style that is highly classical yet distinctly folk, bringing home the voices of Kabir and several Sufi poets in Sindhi, Punjabi, Urdu, Siraiki and other languages" (The Kabir Project). In an interview included in the

documentary "Had Anhad", he critiques the death of the "soul" in music, a lament familiar to certain fictitious jazz musicians:

> There's a huge gap between a profession and passion (he uses the Urdu word "*ishq*" which is closer to love). Profession says, what will I profit? And love doesn't even think, what will I lose? When raag came to gharanas, to the pandits of raag, each made his own temple, madrassa and house! What we say is right, what people say is wrong. That's why the soul in it got lost. Raag is a great thing. It teaches you surrender, to bow, to erase yourself. If you lose yourself in awareness of the note, then finding Hari is not difficult.

What Faqir is describing is the process of gentrification. By codifying the ideas in the public sphere under a socially recognised authority like the gharana system, a power differential was established within the cultural space. Faqir also comments on the economic motivations for this power differential. Codification into formal schools creates the dichotomy of classical versus folk, with classical being the more renowned form with greater social and economic benefit for the performers and folk performers regarded as marginal actors in the creation of culture. To Faqir, this runs contrary to the very ethos of music in Sufism: as a means to find God. Beyond constraints of money, status, and authority, qawwals are expected to root their performance in the spiritual consciousness.

Weston's work and Faqir's critique reveal a dialogue between two different models of authorship. The power of the gharana to uphold authorial identity comes to a head with legal understandings of authorship and ownership. Economic and social considerations, on the other hand, dilute the ossification of gharanas through cross-pollination of musical and spiritual ideas. (On a radical end, the argument of loss of "soul" within the music presents a third centre of power: the spiritual.) Individual actors are constantly negotiating both these power structures in order to make a legitimate living. Legitimacy means different things based on the differing contexts of power that grant this legitimacy: the heritage of the musician, both musical and spiritual, and the economic considerations to ensure a livelihood.

The conflict of legitimacy and inheritance is perhaps better explained with an example. In 2018, Nida Nusrat, the daughter of the legendary qawwal, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, threatened to sue her cousin, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, over copyright infringement of her father's qawwalis. Rahat, a hugely popular qawwal and playback singer in his own right, simply remarked, "I am the successor and the adopted son of my ustad and uncle Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and I don't need any permission to sing his songs and qawwalis" (The News International, 2018). His blunt dismissal was rooted in the fact that Rahat had trained with his uncle and father since childhood, and carried on the tradition of performing qawwali that had run in their family for 700 years. Rahat understands that he owns the qawwalis he sings just as much as his uncle did because of his musical inheritance. Legal conceptions of copyright and property law are immaterial to him as his claim to authority is rooted in a different power structure where musical heredity supersedes family inheritance.

The interface of copyright and qawwali presents a fundamental lacuna in the conception of authorship propagated by modern legal frameworks. For one, copyright does not seem to recognize collective authorship of communities. Cultural production in societies is seldom a solitary effort as we have seen above, and it stands to reason that the authority over cultural artifacts should not rest within individuals. Rahat Fateh Ali Khan claims his uncle's qawwalis as his own, precisely *because* they belong to his uncle. He does not see himself as a different entity from his uncle, in that they both serve as vanguards of their musical lineage. Conceiving

authorship in this manner presents the ownership and authority of cultural artifacts to communities who view such artifacts as integral parts of their identity.

Having duly considered the relationships between the various sources of power within society and individual actors through different lenses we can understand the following. The fact that authorship is linked to power is unimpeachable. By virtue of the power, either within the collective or as a manifestation of holiness or as a representative of a spiritual lineage, we see the performers being accepted by their society as authors. We also learn that these differing sources of power are in conflict with each other and it is the adeptness of the individual actors that negotiate these conflicts. Thus, in order to reconsider our understanding of an author, we must reconsider the source of power upholding the authorship and its interests. I will explore this further in the next section when I talk about copyright. By exploring copyright, the aim is to first understand the conception of authorship upheld by the modern state and, second, to understand the interests of power in upholding this conception.

Models of Authorship in Copyright

Copyright is the cornerstone in the preservation of cultural artifacts in modern jurisprudence. The state protects the exclusive authority of the copyright holder to create copies of their work and leverage this exclusivity for economic benefits. Modern legal frameworks are designed to protect a specific notion of authorship and it is this notion that I will try to understand in this section. By detailing the interface of hip-hop and copyright law through the issues within sampling, the intention is to show the reader that it is not just in the fringes of culture where our understanding of intellectual property is faulty: it is very much a mainstream issue with far-reaching ramifications.

In "'This is a Sampling Sport': Digital Sampling, Rap Music and the Law in Cultural Production", Thomas Schumacher attempts to critique our understanding of "individual authorship and creativity". He argues that, "Ultimately, copyright law is property law, and its foundation in notions of creativity and originality therefore have to be seen within the complex of *capitalist social relations*." (my emphasis) (443) His indictment of the modern legal apparatus is radical; the legal system sees cultural production as capital and, hence, protects the "cultural raw materials" and the "acceptable end-products" (ibid.). This analysis is particularly relevant when taken in conjunction with Foucault's first author-function that describes the author-function codified in the legal framework.

One particular instance of copyright laws being the death knell for creativity is summarised by Nelson George as follows:

> In 1992, the gentle-voiced '70s balladeer Gilbert O'Sullivan sued Cold Chillin'–Warner Bros. signee Biz Markie for unauthorized use of his 1972 hit "Alone Again (Naturally)." But instead of sticking up Biz and his record companies for a substantial royalty on all records sold—which he was certainly entitled to—O'Sullivan successfully forced Warner Bros. to recall all pressings and stop selling the album until the song was removed. The resulting loss of visibility severely damaged Biz Markie's career as a rapper and sent a chill through the industry that is still felt (440).

Schumacher, in relation to this judgment, makes an interesting observation that defence's line of argumentation reveals a "widespread musical practice" within the community (446). While sampling is covered under fair use, copyright claims are decided on a case-by-case basis, and the prevalent trend is to side with the owner of copyright, i.e., the capital holder. In essence, the intellectual property laws are in furtherance of a cultural market and do not necessarily facilitate the

creation of art.

Schumacher's analysis also focuses on the philosophical model of authorship that underpins the legal framework. Based on the various copyright judgments, the laws reiterate the notion of the individual author and the "aura of authenticity" around a cultural product (448). Copyright, he argues, is based on the notion of "origin", but the intertextuality of rap and hip-hop by pulling through different samples and creating a sonic collage challenges that notion by presenting multiple "origins" (447). The latter concept, borrowed from Walter Benjamin, places the creation of a work at a "singular musical moment", thereby negating the contribution of the technological expertise and processing it takes to affix the sound to records or in general, to make it consumable by an audience (449). It is that one specific moment of individual genius that spawns art and thereby is granted "authenticity" while mechanical reproduction of art denudes this authenticity. However, Schumacher argues, these assumptions are rooted in the "ideological mystification of the production process", i.e., laws don't understand the nebulousness of individual contributions that make modern music (448). The argument behind copyright as one of preserving "authenticity" is evidently as tenuous as the act of ascribing a singular creator entity and it negates the contribution of the various actors that play a role in shaping that artifact.

This singular author mindset of jurisprudence as a means of consolidating ownership of capital evidently hinders the creative process that relies on intertextuality and open discourse. The intellectual property laws clearly reflect an arcane notion of authorship that impedes a society that clearly has the capability of being more open with creating and sharing culture. By detailing the interface of hip-hop and copyright law through the issues within sampling, the intention is to show the reader that it is not just in the fringes of culture where our understanding of intellectual property is faulty: it is very much a mainstream issue. Hip-hop

is mass market media and yet the legal apparatus protecting that market is also the thing inhibiting its very foundational principles. Addressing the question of authorship as it exists in the legal-political space is integral to the interests of not only folk performers, but also rappers, producers, DJs, blues musicians, jazz artists, researchers, software developers, VFX artists, YouTubers, TikTokers—basically every person who has ever wanted to create. In the software space, this has been addressed to some degree through movements like copyleft, which uses existing legal protections to ensure free use of software ("What is Copyleft?"). However, this is merely a stopgap solution and the law requires much rethinking and reflection to facilitate and celebrate creation in society.

So, what have we learnt so far? Drawing on Foucault's analysis, we know that the author is not merely a solitary creative agent; they fulfil a certain role in society. Building on Foucault's theory, we have seen a framework of analysis that presents us with three key questions: what is the relationship of power structures and authorship; what is the interest of the power in upholding authorship; and finally, where is the author in a given work. Using kirtans, we have established a link between power and authorship, while the examples from qawwali present a more nuanced understanding of the conflicting sources of power and how individual actors negotiate these conflicts. We have then explored the prevalent notions of authorship as pushed by modern jurisprudence by understanding copyright and how it impacts hip-hop, a mainstream genre of music. In this exploration, we have understood that copyright serves the interests of cultural capital and does not further the creation of art in society.

Challenging this paradigm of authenticity brings us to the third key question in our analysis: who is the author? In both the kirtan and qawwali paradigm, authorship is temporary and is used as a placeholder, occupied by several individuals either concurrently or at different times. In all the

examples, including hip-hop, I have hinted at the intertextuality that underpins these genres, making the question of a single author almost irrelevant. In the next section I will attempt to unpack some of these ideas in order to draw a clearer understanding of who the author really is.

Who is the Author?

Foucault's criticism of the concept of solitary author and his idea of a "plurality of egos" present within a text presents us with a problem (308): who is the author? Can their presence be determined from any text? Where is the author's ego located within the piece? Foucault's own deconstruction of the literary critic's method of ascribing authorship and its parallels with proscribed manuals of determining saintliness is an indication that the author's identity within the text is a tenuous notion at best.

Going back to the kirtans, we see that in both forms, the performer is expected to shape the narrative by bringing in various other sources. The onus is on the performer to be well-versed in all manners of scriptural and philosophical texts, parables and stories, along with their interpretations in order to deliver a successful performance. The kirtankar creates a narrative through the intertextuality of various sources and is an active component of discourse and not merely a passive medium of expression. This intertextuality also blurs the lines between author and performer. While the invoked poems come from diverse sources, it is the duty of the performer to frame these in a cohesive narrative. Creating this collage is essential to the dissemination of not only ideas attributed to individuals, but also the broader discourse around the subject, both antecedent and precedent.

Similarly, in the case of qawwals, Weston describes in some detail the practice of "knot-tying" or "girah-bandi" which refers to the weaving of different verses, poets, musical styles and languages by the qawwal (25). He posits that through the "act of knot-tying", the qawwal attempts to link these different streams of related thought into a single chain: a "silsila" (ibid.). Thus, the qawwal is in some senses responsible for defining the lineage and also associating the assembly to this spiritual hierarchy.

This intertextuality is still very much a mainstream presence in the 21st century. The origins of hip-hop lie in the break beats in old jazz and funk sounds extended through the use of turntables. When technology caught up, sampling was an essential part of the musical lexicon of hip-hop. Dimitriadis extends the connection of hip-hop with sampling to older traditions of Afro-Western music like blues: "...Afro-American blues, when performed live, is a flexible art form, one which relies on a fluid interchange between floating verses, rhymed couplets and other vocal tools...The absence of a strict narrative thus allows for a spontaneity appropriate to live production and performance." (423) Glossing over the obvious parallels we see in the performance of blues and the performance of kirtans and qawwalis as seen earlier, I want to focus on the material used in these performances. The "floating verses" and "rhymed couplets" constitute part of a pantheon of musical and lyrical ideas that the musicians draw on; this with modern technology and in a different context has been transformed into sampling.

So, what do these diverse examples tell us? In granting authorship to the performer, these genres are abandoning the notion of the individual author, because the inherent expectation in granting authorial power is that the available material—poems, songs, musical ideas, samples—will be recombined into a different narrative. This recombination and improvisation is, in fact, the very basis of these genres. It also presents problems when trying to determine identity. These performances, so intricately crafted, have the potential to obscure, or at least render irrelevant, the point of origin. In this patchwork of identities overlapping and intermixing, it is irrelevant to assign permanent authority of the piece to any one individual, no matter the virtuosity. When viewed through this

lens, the author is no longer a single entity but a collective—the entire tradition takes ownership of the raw materials that the performer utilises to craft their performance and tell a story.

This problem of assigning authorship in music is further compounded when we consider the various technical processes that are responsible for creating a tangible cultural artifact. Going back to the kirtan, Novetzke presents an interesting case study of the form evolving alongside technology in the 20th century, by narrating the anecdote of Gadge Maharaj's last kirtan. Gadge Maharaj was a famous kirtankar of the early 20th century, whose kirtans became famous for their nationalist overtures and anti-European sentiment. His last performance at Bandra Railway Police Station in 1956 combined verses of Tukaram, Jnandev, Kabir and Gandhi, along with his own personal comments to advocate an "ethical, balanced life as a contribution to the nascent Indian nation" (Novetzke 240). The kirtan was recorded by an audience member, subsequently reprinted and transcribed, and now the performance is preserved in posterity by the written canon. Novetzke uses this example to show that the existence of the performance is the contribution of several individuals—Gadge Maharaj himself, but also the 700 years of kirtan tradition, the person recording the performance, the transcriber, all play a role in preserving a cultural artifact.

This is particularly relevant when juxtaposed with the current legal framework of copyright. "Copyright protection for music is divided between the underlying composition and the sounds 'fixed in a tangible medium'" (Schumacher 444). Thus, the recording of the sound is what is protected under copyright. However, the creation of the recording sees technical and non-technical input, besides the creative content, that shape the final product and current models of authorship under copyright do not recognise this input. With hip-hop, sampling is not merely sticking together sounds stolen from records; creating a cohesive soundscape takes technical skills in understanding the equipment and the technologies involved alongside a strong musical sense.

By exploring intertextuality, I have shown that the question of ascribing singular authorship is pretty irrelevant. Further if you consider the technical contributions that are required to create art fit for public consumption, it reinforces the question of whether the author can be a single entity. Do we entirely abandon the notion of singular authorship entirely? This question has implications not only for social identities, but also economic realities, as it is intrinsically linked to copyright and the model of authorship that jurisprudence subscribes to. On a more personal level, I have to ask myself if the pursuit of authorship is ultimately irrelevant. So far all I have managed is to show the author as a de-individualised entity, formed only as an entry point into the space of cultural discourse. If that is the case, then does the title of an author really carry any meaning?

Authorship as Agency

Looking back at this paper, we see that the author is a construct, used to fulfil a certain function for the community and space of cultural discourse; and in the modern legal sense, a construct which needs a significant rethinking. My attempt with this paper was not to propose a radical shift in thinking about intellectual property law; it was to understand what I wanted to be when I said I wanted to be an author. What I have determined thus far is this: the author as an entity is a myth. The author is better envisioned as a nameplate on one of the doors of a massive mansion. The name only marks an entry point into the world of ideas that shape and constitute our culture. To be an author is to dissolve any ego I have about being published, achieving fame or even infamy, making money or even having an author's copy on the bookshelf. I must reconsider my perception of the author not as an entity with a force of creation, but an instinct of reorganisation. Creation is beyond the individual; but with enough individuals we see the space of ideas and cultural discourse take shape.

However, this dissolution of ego is not the dissolution of individuality. The power of the author exists in making choices. The author's ego only manifests itself within the performer in their power of choice: they choose from what they have, to present themselves through their art. Much like the kirtankar and qawwals and DJs, my individuality as an author is reflected even with this paper. The paper is chock-full of personal indulgences that designate my individuality, even as they expand discourse. It is evident in the very thesis: authorship is a deeply personal question for me. The indulgences are also reflected in the fact I chose music to examine what is traditionally a more literary exercise and even in the genres I picked. This is not to say that the pursuit of being an author has ceased; it just means that it is irrelevant. The fact is that I like writing, with all its problems and joys and idiosyncrasies, and whether or not my writing is recognised as being by an *author* is meaningless. I think Bukowski put it best:

> don't be like so many writers,
> don't be like so many thousands of
> people who call themselves writers,
> don't be dull and boring and
> pretentious, don't be consumed with self-
> love.
> the libraries of the world have
> yawned themselves to
> sleep
> over your kind
> don't add to that (3).

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Class of 2022

Humanising the Villain: An Analysis of Soaphead Church's Subjectivity

Saloni Dhadwal

About the Author:

Saloni hails from the hill state of Himachal Pradesh, but spent her formative years moving around the country due to her parents' professions. Throughout her travels, reading remained a constant passion for her. Although she considers herself more of a reader than a writer, her experience at the Young India Fellowship inspired her to take her writing more seriously. In the *Critical Writing* course at the Fellowship, she discovered compelling narratives that opened up new avenues of self-expression and helped her see the world differently. Currently, Saloni works as a research associate at a Delhi-based think tank, where she spends her time writing policy briefs. When she's not writing, you can find her exploring the city's vibrant cultural scene.

In the formidable literary catalogue of Toni Morrison, Elihue Micah Whitcomb—popularly known as 'Soaphead Church'—counts as one of the most diabolical characters that emanated from the wellspring of her imagination. He appears in Morrison's debut novella, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which explores the deleterious effects of internalised racism on black communities. In the novella, Soaphead is depicted as a paedophile, self-proclaimed psychic and misanthrope, characterised by his heinous actions and abhorrent justifications for the same. As a result, he is frequently villainised and rarely regarded through an empathetic lens in the existing literary criticism.

This paper seeks to critically analyse Soaphead Church's subjectivity as a colonial creole subject, by referencing the ideas explored in Donald E. Hall's *Subjectivity* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. The paper argues that Soaphead Church's failure to de-naturalise himself is the cause for his feelings of alienation and immoral sexual predilections. At the outset, it must be made clear that this is an exercise in understanding (and not justifying) his actions. While acknowledging that child sexual abuse is a heinous act, there is merit in trying to grapple with the subjectivity of its perpetrators, not only for the ascription of accountability but also to humanise such individuals by understanding the root cause of their actions.

Hall defines 'subjectivity' in relation to 'identity' by theorising that "we may have numerous discrete identities, of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., and a subjectivity that is comprised of all of those facets, as well as our own imperfect awareness of our selves" (134). Hall also cites another compelling definition which was proffered by Regenia Gagnier:

> First, the subject is a subject to itself... Simultaneously, the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an "Other" to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity...Third, the subject is also a subject of knowledge, most familiarly perhaps of the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being. Fourth, the subject is a body that is separate (except in the case of pregnant women) from other human bodies; and the body, and therefore the subject, is closely dependent upon its physical environment. (qtd. in Hall 3)

This four-part delineation of subjectivity provides a compelling framework, which may be utilised to analyse the character of Soaphead Church. With reference to the first element of the definition, the novella explores Soaphead's self-perception of his subjectivity through a long-winded letter he writes, which is addressed to God (Morrison 174). In the letter, he ruminates on his early life experiences, justifies his deceitful profession and paedophilia, and lambasts God for designing an imperfect universe. His description of his family's obsession with white culture, the experience of facing violence at the hands of his father, and his failed marriage with Velma help the reader understand his warped understanding of the world—making it difficult to judge him for his immoral actions. The letter is indicative of how Soaphead is adept at the art of self-deception and suffers from a God complex that may have arisen from his sense of superiority over his white heritage while harbouring hatred for his black lineage.

With reference to the second element of Gagnier's definition, there are several instances in the novella where Soaphead is described as a subject to others. His name itself is illustrative of this, since it was the townspeople of Lorrain who gave him the moniker 'Soaphead Church'—the former word referred to his tight, curly hair that were pomaded with soap lather; the latter derived from his past stint as a preacher. Other notable instances are of Velma, his wife, who left him "like people leave a hotel room" within two months of their marriage, and his father, who was a schoolmaster known for his "controlled violence" (Morrison 179). It may be

argued that his father's violence and Velma's desertion formed the backdrop for his feelings of alienation, self-hatred and eventual moral decay.

Perhaps the most important element in understanding Soaphead's subjectivity is his position as a subject of knowledge. Here, the term 'knowledge' refers to discourse, i.e., "any means by which human meanings, beliefs, and values are communicated and replicated. Language is the most obvious example of discourse" (Hall 131). Direct evidence for Soaphead's mixed racial identity as a subject of racist knowledge is present in the novella as well, through Soaphead's exposure to De Gobineau's hypothesis that "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it" (Morrison 166). In Soaphead's own family, "hoarding of the white strain" as considered paramount, therefore, his ancestors "married 'up'" to lighten the family complexion (166). As a result, his family passed on their Anglophilia from one generation to another and learnt "to separate in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa" (165).

It is safe to surmise that racist discourses have a profoundly negative impact on the conception of selfhood of creole people. In this context, postcolonial theory allows us to "confront the legacy of imperialism… [B]esides exploring the economic and cultural consequences of colonialism, it also probes the psychological effects of being a member of an ethnic group or race defined and treated as inferior" (Hall 133). Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) was one of the first texts to inquire into the psychological impact of colonialism on colonial subjects. It examines how colonialism negates the identity of colonial subjects and leads them to internalise a sense of inferiority; and how, through the mechanism of racism, the colonised often seek to emulate their colonisers, but end up recreating and perpetuating the racism of their own oppressors—a process encapsulated powerfully in the title of the book.

Fanon argues that the Antilles (the region that Soaphead hails from) is a "neurotic society"—a direct result of colonialism—by postulating that the psychological dynamic of master and slave still lingers, even after slavery has long been abolished (165). He describes how this dynamic subsists:

> We can say that every neurosis, every abnormal manifestation, every affective erethism in an Antillean is the product of his cultural situation… [B]ooks, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio—work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world of the group to which one belongs. In the Antilles that view of the world is white because no black voice exists. (118)

Fanon's argument is connected to the idea of 'interpellation' (as propounded by Althusser) which is "the process by which we acquire our social identities" (Hall 132). In the case of Soaphead Church, he has inherited his family's Anglophilia, which creates in him a hatred of his black heritage. Furthermore, as a creole, he suffers from a lack of familial and communal intimacy, since he is neither 'fully' black nor white. His God complex—which perhaps serves as a defence mechanism against his feelings of alienation and racial self-loathing—becomes a vehicle for re-creation and perpetuation of the racism of the erstwhile colonisers of the Antilles. This is demonstrated through his treatment of Pecola. He finds her request for blue eyes "the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty" (Morrison 174). His acceptance of her wish as 'natural' indicates his obsession with whiteness as a colonised subject, which has led to his racial self-hatred, emotional bankruptcy, and sexual depravity. At the same time, it is interesting to note how he ends up empathising with Pecola's plight. Since he too has the same racial self-loathing, he understands Pecola's desire; he is

so moved by it that for the first time he wishes he had actual power and sits down to write a letter to God. This moment of genuine compassion (one of the very few in the novella) makes it difficult for the reader to hate him absolutely, rather, it makes the reader think about the socio-cultural reasons responsible for Soaphead's nature and personality. While these reasons do not exonerate Soaphead, they definitely serve the purpose of humanising him. In doing so, Morrison's narrative gently directs our hatred away from the perpetrator to the deep-rooted structures, discourses, and norms at the heart of racial and sexual violence.

The fourth element of Soaphead's subjectivity is his position as a subject whose body is closely dependent upon its physical environment. In the novella, he is described as someone who experiences "keen sexual cravings" but "never relished physical contact" since "all the natural excretions and protections the body was capable of—disquieted him" (Morrison 165). His inability to tolerate imperfections of the body translates into a hatred for other humans, as well as his own humanity. It may also be argued that his disgust at human physicality left him isolated, leading him to direct his sexual impulses to those humans whose bodies were least offensive to him—young girls. Furthermore, his desire for racial purity is reflected in his desire for physical 'purity' i.e., the sexual pursuit of young, prepubescent girls. A perverse logic; yet a logic that gives a method to his perversion. It might not exonerate him for his heinous actions since a consideration of subjectivity cannot be separated from adult responsibility; but it definitely compels the reader to look at his perversion in light of his socio-cultural lived experiences.

The question that arises then is: when our conception of selfhood, social identity and actions are shaped by dominant (in this case, racist and sexist) discourse, how do we ascribe responsibility to an individual for their actions? Another related question is: how much agency (if any) do subjects have when faced with forces of interpellation? Hall's response to these questions is that "we are *subject to discourse*, not simply *subjects through discourse* with the ability to… rework our subjectivity at will" (127). We as subjects are caught between our desire for agency and forces of interpellation, but as Hall argues, our agency can be defined and asserted through a counter discourse. While exceeding might not mean escaping, the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound (127). Therefore, we are not merely passive victims of dominant discourse, but we can also engage in actions that challenge and interrogate the dominant discourse. It is on this latter front that characters like Soaphead Church lack; his victimised self turns into a victimiser rather than fighting for preserving its eroded humanity and dignity.

Fanon recommends colonial subjects to make "an effort at disalienation", i.e., an act of continuing analysis "to scrutinize the self . . . to touch and feel the other, to explain the other to myself" (231). Similarly, Hall argues for the need of critical engagement with one's subjectivity or "denaturalising the self", so as to counter the external forces of interpellation and express our agency in socially meaningful ways. Therefore, it may be contended that an individual's subjectivity should not be used to justify their actions, rather, should be used to treat them with empathy and carefully ascribe them with accountability. Soaphead's failure to critically engage with his own subjectivity and to accept and take pride in his black heritage, is what leads him to transgress societal ethics and laws, and while he should be held accountable for the same, he should also be humanised.

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Politics Behind the Translation of Sikh Holy Scriptures: How a Critical Writing Course Took Me Closer to My Religion

Sarandeep Singh Khurana

About the Author:

I have been writing poems for over a decade now and till the Fellowship began, I used to think that writing comes naturally to me and I have no control over it. Thus, I also thought that my written pieces didn't require editing. I was proven wrong in the first *Critical Writing* class. Over the course of the Fellowship, I unlearned a lot of my notions about writing. The most important lesson I learnt was writing in drafts and the importance of editing in each stage.

For the final assignment, our professor suggested we choose a topic that is close to us as we would have to delve deep into it for months. Thus, I chose a topic related to my most intimate relationship, that with God. And, I must say, it was quite a journey.

ੴ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥

"Ik ongkar, satgur prasad."

There is but One creator, and through their[1] grace, everything exists[2].

- A quote from *Guru Granth Sahib*

     I am a Sikh man, twenty-four years of age, belonging to a religious family. Every aspect of my family's lives has revolved around God, of all gender, religion, caste and colour. My earliest childhood memories are associated with our family being in a gurudwara[3] or a Hindu temple. Three generations of our family have lived close to a masjid. Jokingly, my father says that I have listened to the *azaan*[4] more times compared to any average Muslim that you can find. God has been the guiding force that our family turns towards at all times: on the days we win, on the days we lose, on the days we are elated with joy, and also on the days when sorrow gets the best of us. At times of despair, we turn to God for hope, and when we are content, we turn to God with gratitude. I have been brought up on this idea of Sikhism and God. I found no reason to question anything when it came to religion because I was never taught to do that. Moreover, when God is the ultimate truth, the need to launch a probe into the legitimacy of this idea would be nothing less than blasphemy.

Understanding *Sikhi* as a Child

     Sikhism is a fairly young religion, founded around 500 years ago on the tenets of equality, social justice, and service to humanity by the first Sikh *guru*[5], Guru Nanak, and was carried forward by nine subsequent gurus[6]. The tenth *guru*, Guru Gobind Singh compiled the *Gurbani*[7] together and named the final book *Guru Granth Sahib*, which became the eleventh and final *guru* for the Sikhs[8]. As a child, my parents regularly sent me to attend Sikh education summer camps in the local Gurudwaras. When I was sixteen, my parents sent me to an international summer camp at Dehradun, organised by the International Institute of Gurmat Studies (IIGS), an organisation based in California. IIGS was founded by Captain Kanwar Harbhajan Singh. He started organising Sikh youth camps in 1972 and gave lectures on various topics related to Sikhism. Because of his caring and fatherly figure, he was called Papa ji. Papa ji passed away in 2011, two years before I went to the camp. We were shown the videos of his lectures covering different topics like the history of Sikh Gurus, the meaning of Sikh scriptures, the logic behind practices and rituals of Sikhism, etc. I remember one particular lecture that made quite an impression on me and has stayed with me since. In the lecture, he talked about Guru Nanak's idea of doubt and faith, and their importance in religion. Papa ji taught us that Guru Nanak told us not to have blind faith in God because the holy scriptures say so, or he says so. Because such faith is superficial. Instead, he said: doubt God, ask questions through *ardas*[9], and receive answers in God's magical ways through instances in your daily lives. Guru Nanak said such a faith created from scratch becomes imperishable slowly and lasts for eternity. This perspective about God was completely different and fascinating from the perspective that I had, thus it remained with me.

     I remember I was made familiar with the *Gurbani* as a child by my mother. While praying, she used to take me in her arms and slowly read the holy hymns. I was twelve when my mother first gave me a *Nitnem Gutka*[10]. I barely understood the meaning of the text nor was I ever encouraged to understand it. Yet I invested nearly ninety minutes every day to read the hymns. I was taught that *Nitnem* was the magic wand that would solve all my problems, both internal and external. I started reading the hymns as a sense of duty however with time, chanting the hymns started feeling meditative. What is interesting is that even though my parents have regularly been reading the texts and they remember the hymns of the *Nitnem* word by word, they too do not understand or care to understand most parts of it. The reason behind such an attitude could be never having the urge to question what their parents taught them. After all, having the sense that you have a magic wand to cure all your problems is in itself

sufficient to quieten your inner doubts and questions (if you have any).

Growing as a Sikh Man

During the Critical Writing course at the Young India Fellowship, I was taught to critically engage with all the texts that I was reading, and thus, I started deeming the task of reading the same hymns daily without understanding them a banal activity. That is when I began searching for translations and interpretations of the *Gurbani* on the Internet and through books. Since my mother's understanding of the hymns is better in comparison to mine, whenever I found something noteworthy, I discussed it with her over a video call where she gave her insights. With time, I started delving deeper into my pursuit of exploring the translated versions of more and more hymns.

I came across a collection of hymns of the *Guru Granth Sahib* called *Shabad Hazare*[11]. The first few hymns of the collection are written by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth *guru* of Sikhs, and the rest by Guru Nanak Dev. The hymns are written in such a way that Guru Nanak assumes themselves to be the bride of God and they talk about their desires and longing for God. For the same text, I read the translations of Sikh feminist writer and scholar, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh in her book, *Hymns of the Sikh Gurus*. Singh explains that in the hymn, Guru Nanak, in the voice of a female bride, spoke about their divine union with God—the groom. The hymn also mentions their nuptial bed. I was surprised, as it reminded me of a few Sufi poets like Amir Khusrau and Mawlana Rumi that I had read earlier. Usually, male Sufi poets in their poems take a feminine voice while talking about God. I again went back to my religious anchor, my mother, and discussed the same with her.

When I asked my mother if she knew about how Guru Nanak has mentioned their *suhagrat*[12] with the divine, she was quiet at first, then hesitated before trying to change the topic. I kept asking her more and more questions, such as "Is it possible for the *guru* to have a *suhagrat* with God?" to which she replied, "If you talk about your *guru* with such utter disrespect, you will be cursed with a *paap* on your head." I told her I am just having doubts about my religion to nurture my faith as Guru Nanak said, which is not wrong. Listening to this, my mother cut the call on my face. I was shocked for a moment as my mother is one of the calmest people I know. Maybe she was furious because it would have been the first time she was listening about God from a perspective of desire. Thus, I realised that it was taboo for me to talk about 'such' topics with my mother.

I was confused so I did what a critical mind would do—find out the reason behind such discomfort in discussing the topic of desire in relation to religious texts. I wanted to understand what contemporary scholars and *granthis* have to say about desire in Sikhism and compare it with the interpretations of erstwhile scholars and *granthis* whom my mother grew up listening to. The logic behind doing this was simply to understand why my mother and I perceive the topic differently. Since it was my first time reading academic texts, I gained new perspectives about the holy texts and the history associated with them which I have mentioned briefly below.

Feminine Face of God in Sikhism

Another book by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh called *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of Transcendent* helped me understand the basic metaphors used in the scriptures. She points out that the image of the bride has been central in most religions around the world (Singh 92). She further elaborates specifically about Sikhism, in which God is described in various relationships by *gurus* and *bhagats*—relationships such as that of a master and their disciple, a mother and her child, and the husband and his wife. She enumerates multiple instances throughout the *Guru Granth Sahib* on how the different *gurus* and *bhagats* have taken the voice of the feminine to express their intimate feeling for the Divine. In one of the hymns, longing for meeting God, Guru Nanak says "*Haar Ddor Kankan Ghanae*

Kar Thhaakee Seegaar" (I am tired of decorating myself by wearing a necklace, hair ties, and bracelet [for the husband]). Singh points out that these elements are "typical" for "Indian bridal makeup" (94). The perspective about feminine face of God in Sikhism helped me to interpret the holy book anew.

Gender Roles in Sikhism - in text and in practice

Doris Jakobsh's essay, "Gender in Sikh Traditions", stood out to me as it was entirely different from the learnings that I have had from history taught in Sikh summer camps and Gurudwaras. It is widely believed in the Sikh community that Sikhism is an egalitarian religion, as is written in the holy text and history books on Sikhism. In the *Guru Granth Sahib*, myriad hymns are present which speak directly against sexism, patriarchy, and discrimination. The tenth and final human *guru* of Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh wrote in a hymn, *"Manas ki jaat sab ekai pehchanbo"* meaning "Consider the entire human race to be one", which is one of the most famous quotes regularly used by Sikh priests while talking about the religion. Throughout the text, Jakobsh claims that while the scriptures of Sikhs talk about egalitarianism, the practice has not been so. She points out that Guru Gobind Singh, who said, "Consider the entire human race to be one" while creating his army and giving a structure to the Sikh community, changed the names of the Sikhs. He instructed the men of the community to change their last names to 'Singh' meaning a lion, while not prescribing anything along the same lines for the women of the community. It is interesting to know that this story has been re-interpreted by the Sikh leaders, and they claim that while giving the name 'Singh' to the men of the community, Guru Gobind Singh gave the name 'Kaur' to the women of the community. However, Jakobsh points out that the word Kaur for Sikh women was derived from the Rajasthani word *Kunwar*, meaning royal, by Sikh royal families (Jakobsh 733). This narrative lies in obscurity for a large part of the Sikh population. She further explains as the Sikh population increased, different institutions were created, and thus specific gender roles also came into existence (Jakobsh 731).

Feminist Interpretation of Sikh Scriptures

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, in the essay, "A Feminist Interpretation of Sikh Scripture" has made use of a feminist perspective to explain Sikh theology, spirituality, society, history, and personal identity. She talks about how the scriptures have been interpreted and reflects how they should be ideally interpreted, to create a discrimination-free Sikh society. She has shown the masculine and feminine dimensions of God, and how they co-inhabit and exist together (Singh 744). She has written a lot about feelings and desires, which many scholars on Sikhism ignore. She also mentions that while people usually cite the holy book for its rejection of caste and class, yet they forget how boldly the writers of the holy book have rejected sexism (Singh 750). While reading her texts, it should be kept in mind that one of the limitations of her criticism might be that she is a Sikh herself, thus, at times there is a possibility that it might get difficult for her to criticize the practices of her own religion due to biases or blind spots. However, as enough work has not been done by feminist scholars on the Sikh scriptures, her contribution is seminal.

Coming Back to *Shabad Hazare*

Having read about Sikhism through these contemporary writers, I read translations of *Shabad Hazare* done by four different writers. It was interesting to know that the go-to published translations of *Guru Granth Sahib* which are widely available have not been done by academic scholars. The first translation I came across was done by Gopal Singh, who practised medicine and was a doctor. He did the first-ever complete translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which was published in 1960. His book starts with messages from former President Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The second was done by Advocate Manmohan Singh, and published in 1969. This translation was published and distributed widely by Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee[13] (SGPC). The third

translation was done by Sant Singh Khalsa, who also is a medical practitioner and a doctor. He started translating the Guru Granth Sahib in the 1980s and his work is available online. His work is by far the most widely spread translation both by Gurudwaras and YouTube channels. The final translation that I read was by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, from where this project started. She has not yet translated the entire *Guru Granth Sahib* and has translated only a few hymns, one of them being *Shabad Hazare*. The comparison has been done with the knowledge that the translators have not done the translations in a similar timeframe, and that only Singh is an academic scholar among the four translators[14].

While reading the translations I tried to keep in mind the concept of 'fidelity' and 'freedom' proposed by Walter Benjamin in his seminal text "The Task of the Translator" (Rendall 160), where fidelity implied being faithful to the original text and freedom implied to what extent can a translator bring their own interpretations while translating it. I also immersed myself in all the different translations with a pinch of salt, as Sukanta Chaudhuri has suggested in his book, *Translation and Understanding* to consider the viability of translations similar to 'viability' of an 'organ transplant', it may or may not work in entirety (Chaudhuri 24). He opines that it is inherent for all the translations to be imperfect at some point, which I too could observe while reading the different translations (Chaudhuri 66). I have compared and pointed out some major differences that I could observe after close and critical readings of the translations.

A general term for God or any respectable/religious person used in Sikhism is *sahib*. Now, the word *sahib* is usually used for men, and for women the word used is *sahiba*. But in Sikhism, the word has been used so widely (from people to places) that it no longer holds gendered connotations attached to it. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, while translating the term *sahib,* uses the term 'sovereign', which, similar to *sahib,* does not have a gender attached to it and can be used both for

a queen or a king. Sant Singh Khalsa uses the term 'Lord and Master', Gopal Singh uses 'Master', and Manmohan Singh uses 'Lord'—which signify a man. Here we can see how subtly a system of patriarchy manifests itself, and for a non-critical reader, how such societal structures reside in their subconscious that their God is a 'male' entity.

Another interesting translation that I found was of the words *kant* and *suhagan,* which are fairly common Punjabi words meaning husband and wife respectively. While writing the poem for longing and desire, Guru Nanak here calls themselves *suhagan* and calls the divine their *kant*. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh while translating the hymn directly uses the words 'bride' and 'wife' for *suhagan,* and the words 'groom' and 'husband' for *kant*. Here, Manmohan Singh is similar to Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh and he too translates the words as 'groom' and 'wife'. Whereas Sant Singh Khalsa, again differs and uses the words 'soul-bride' and 'husband-lord' instead, for the same words. Gopal Singh uses 'Lord' for *kant*, and 'True Bride' for *suhagan*. We can see again, how patriarchy has come into place, and euphemisms have been used for words that can slightly depict the desire for a romantic relationship between a wife and her husband. In India, the culture of a *pativrata*[15] woman is observed as that of an ideal wife. In such translations we can observe similar connotations, a wife being just a wife and a husband being the lord or master.

Nuanced differences can also be observed in the translations. *Mehervan* is a word, which can have multiple meanings depending on the context. Guru Nanak uses the word *Mehervan* for divine in the hymn. Since the hymn is telling the story between a wife and a husband, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh uses the term 'compassion' for translation which signifies equality, whereas Manmohan Singh uses the term 'beneficent' and Sant Singh Khalsa uses the term 'Merciful Lord', which again is subtly sowing the seeds of patriarchy in the minds of the reader and creating a 'master-disciple' relation between the couple in the mind, instead of a 'husband-wife'

relation. Here, Bhai Gopal Singh just uses the term 'Lord' and skips translating the word *Mehervan*.

Two Punjabi words are used for couples madly in love with each other, *kamli* for women and *kamla* for men. Often, the words are used jokingly or with funny connotations, but they are used in a positive sense. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, while translating the word *Kamli* uses a softer word 'silly', whereas Sant Singh Khalsa and Manmohan Singh use the term 'foolish', which has harsher connotations. Interestingly, Gopal Singh does not use any word at all and skips the word *kamli* in his translation.

While reading Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's text I observed that the concept of 'fidelity' suggested by Chaudhuri was followed more, compared to that of 'freedom', as she has translated words according to the context in which they were written by the *guru*. The patriarchal system and the role of gender can easily be observed in the translations done by the men, using more 'freedom'. As mentioned earlier, she has pointed out that in the Guru Granth Sahib, the relationship between God and the *guru* is present in various forms, such as master-disciple, other-child, and husband-wife. When the male translators are using their freedom while translating the hymns with desire, the question that needs to be asked is why are they trying to change a husband-wife relation to a master-disciple relation. Would the *guru* not have used only the master-disciple relation, if they would have wanted so? What is the need for, or instead, what is the motive behind such a standardisation? While I also understand that Guru Nanak has metaphorically explained their relationship with God as a worldly wife-husband relationship, but the actual relationship is in the realm of spirituality. So possibly to convey that clearly, the male translators might have used a master-disciple metaphor instead. But if my hypothesis is true and there is no hidden motive behind the translations, if Guru Nanak could believe their readers to understand their metaphor, why couldn't the translators believe their readers? Another important question to ask is that when a

Sikh reads such holy translations, is this possibility that they get it ingrained in their minds about the role of a husband being the superior in a relationship (Lord, Master, Merciful) and that of a wife being inferior (foolish)? Because of the paucity of time and these questions being out of the scope of the essay, I could not delve deeper into researching them. However, I believe that there needs to be more research done particularly on the interpretation of the Sikh scriptures through a feminist lens.

Growing up visiting the temples, gurudwaras, and masjids near my home, I have observed that mostly the people with mic in their hands are men. So, it occurred naturally to me that the people with power in religion are men. And thus, the interpretations of the teachings of the *gurus* have been male-centric. Possibly because I came from a position of privilege, I never questioned the gender roles in religion. It is when I came a thousand kilometres away from my home to Ashoka University and I was taught academically to critically question the books I read for the Critical Writing course that I started questioning the magic wand of *nitnem* (and its translations) in my hands as well. I kept asking questions and receiving answers in God's magical ways, through research papers, discussions with professors and friends, and conversations with fellow Sikhs about what *Sikhi* means to them. Today, I am much more clear about my relationship with God and my faith has become stronger. However, I know that I still have to learn many things about Sikhism, to be able to critique the translations of the holy scriptures in a fair way that the renowned scholars and granthis have dedicated their lifetimes to understand. Yet, there are a few things that I can clearly see through my eyes which make me question the teachings that I have received about Sikhism.

I was taught that my religion is egalitarian, yet when I tried to find a translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* by women practitioners, I could not find any. I was taught that my religion is egalitarian, but when I looked at the *granthis* of the major Gurudwaras, who preach the holy text and make

Sikhism easy for a Sikh, all were men. I became anxious when I could see the role of gender in my day-to-day life and my religion, thus I fell back on those who created my identity to find solace. I was taught that my religion is egalitarian, but when I looked at my ten *gurus,* all were men.

This is when I realised that something is wrong and that something needs to be done about it. The first step is to admit that we have a problem, then only together as a community can we seek the solutions. My attempt to write this essay is, I believe, a step towards this awareness and eagerness to incorporate transformations in my religion.

I went back to my home a few weeks ago from the university and got the chance to go on a 150 km drive with my father to his native place. While driving, I slowly started telling him about this essay, and the findings of my research. At first, he tried opposing me and then bombarded me with a lot of questions, which happened throughout the three hours of the journey. He carefully listened to whatever I said and turned silent. As we reached home, we had dinner with our extended family. At some point, my father started talking about my research, and told his brother, "Take my son to the Gurudwara and let him have a debate with the *Granthis*, they will be left speechless in front of him." I felt a bit embarrassed, and then he ordered me to talk about my research. It took me a couple of hours, and a lot of questions and answers, but by the end, everyone was smiling, looking at how I have grown as a critical religious person. My mother called me out when everyone else was asleep and prayed silently, revolving salt and a green chilli around my head to remove all the *nazar*. That's when I realised, my parents have conformed to me being a non-conformist. But this is just the first step.

"*Deh sajan aseesarheiya, jio hove sahib sio mel*."

My friends, give me blessings, so that I can meet my God.

–Guru Nanak

End Notes

[1] Throughout my text I would be referring to God and the Gurus as "them" instead of "him" as I believe they are beyond gender binaries.

[2] *Ik ongkar, satgur prasad* is used prior to each hymn in the *Guru Granth Sahib* by all the Sikh Gurus, reflecting that the written hymns come from God and are not their words. Writing the same verse on top of pages became a culture for Sikhs, denoting their gratitude for God and control of God in their lives.

[3] The Sikh place of worship.

[4] The call for prayer for Muslims usually announced on a loudspeaker five times a day.

[5] Guru means a teacher in English.

[6] All male.

[7] Hymns written by some of the Gurus and a few other poets called Bhagats.

[8] The *Guru Granth Sahib* is not written in a single language. There are more than 22 languages and dialects of the Indian Subcontinent. Today, most of the words in the book have gone out of use.

[9] A form of a prayer of Sikhs, etymologically originating through an Arabic word *Arzi* and Hindi word *Das*, literally meaning 'request of a disciple'.

[10] A small book that contains the hymns that a Sikh is prescribed to read daily.

[11] *Shabad* means word, and *Hazare* originates from the Persian word *Hijr*, meaning separation. Thus, the meaning of *Shabad Hazare* is 'hymns of separation'.

[12] Night of Consummation.

[13]The committee which manages all the major Gurudwaras in Punjab, including Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple).

[14]I wanted to compare hymns translated by Granthis (priests) as well, but their translations are only available in Punjabi, thus, I could not include them due to paucity of time. I could not come across a translation done by any other women scholar or priest apart from Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh. There were a few videos available on YouTube where women explained the particular hymn in Hindi, but they did not mention anywhere that the translation has been done by them, thus, because of lack of credibility, I have not included them either.

[15]A woman loyal to her husband, and whose only dharma is taking care of her husband.

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Making Sense of John Brennan's "Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy"

Manasi Rathore

About the Author:

I was brought up on a diet of books, movies, music, TV, theatre, and travel. Of all these, I found it easiest to connect with books: one can take them anywhere, open them at any time, and they always oblige: patient, willing, and wonderful. While reading was invigorating, writing, on the other hand, was painful and draining. I never could say what I wanted to say quite the way I wanted to say it.

At YIF, my relationship with writing changed. *Critical Writing* proved a blessing because it made me read more – denser material than I ever had – and write more too –both in frequency and in length. I'm currently an MLS student and I plan on applying to graduate schools later this year. I've jumped four different jobs across four different industries, only to realise that what I really wanted to do for a living was read, write, and think. Luckily, *Critical Writing* gave me the confidence to walk this path as well as the toolkit that makes the journey possible.

In his speech, "The Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy" made on April 30, 2012, then-Assistant for Homeland Security, John Brennan, defends the Obama Administration's preservation of American, "biolegitimate" (Rowland 601) lives through the elimination of un-American, "bio-illegitimate" (Rowland 617) lives, whether the individuals in question happen to be American citizens, or otherwise.

The 9/11 attacks were a blow to America's collective psyche, changing the face of security operations well into the future, and in the wake of which the United States consolidated government action in a mission to protect American lives, both at home and overseas. While the Bush Administration was the first responder to the attacks and the instigator of the 'War on Terror', the Obama Administration kicked it up a notch with its increasing use of a very particular kind of weapon: the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) or drone. In explaining President Barack Obama's counterterrorism strategy, John Brennan also defends it, justifying the need for the United States to act in order "to protect the safety and security of the American people".

Defending the use of drone strikes, Brennan claims that: 1) American drone strikes are *legal* because they comply with both the US Congress' Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) as well as international law; 2) they are *ethical* in that they abide by the principles of necessity, distinction, proportionality, and humanity; 3) they are *wise* in that the asymmetric risk of drone strikes favours US troops on the ground and in the air (and accurate vision enables the precision of the strikes); and 4) they are *subject to rules and regulations* in that drones strikes are regulated by governmental checks and balances.

Using the works of Derek Gregory, Andrea Miller, Allison Rowland, and Eyal Weizman, I will critique Brennan's justifications of the Obama Administration's actions by highlighting two main

claims underlying the arguments in his speech, which are:

1) The established hierarchy of the United States' biolegitimate status through the rhetoric that: (i) American lives are biolegitimate and the lives of al-Qa'ida terrorists are not; (ii) the taking of bio-illegitimate lives is analogous to curing a sick body of a "cancerous tumour"; and (iii) the taking of bio-illegitimate lives is morally calculated to be a "lesser evil" (Weizman 6).

2) Further, I will attempt to establish that the implementation of this 'justified' action is made possible through the operational matrix of drones which also enables: (i) "risk-transfer" (Gregory, "Drone Geographies" 7); and (ii) a "special kind of intimacy" (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill" 193) among the actors directly involved (UAV operators and on-ground American troops).

Land of the Free/ Home of the(ir) Graves

Obama Cares, Osama Cares Not

Conceptualised by the anthropologist Didier Fassin, biolegitimacy is a recognition of the "sacredness of life as such" and "a crucial issue in the moral economies of contemporary societies" (Fassin 50). How does biolegitimacy apply in our context? Think about the value of life in the discourse of drone warfare, set in the greater context of the 'War on Terror': who has the 'right' to live and who is denied that 'right'? Who *decides* to give that right to live and what goes into that decision? Moreover, if someone is deemed to deserve to die, who is given the right to make the kill?

When taking lives is justified for the sake of saving lives, the United States can stand behind the noble reason that the kill is performed not with an

intent to *hurt* someone, but with the intent to *save* another (who presumably would be killed by said someone). This is one way of "saniti[zing]" death-by-drone through the discourse of biolegitimacy (Rowland 604). We hear this in Brennan's argument for the United States' status as a biolegitimate nation in that it puts a "premium…on protecting human life, including innocent civilians" (inherent in his argument is the assumption that an 'innocent' life is a level above, or worth more, than a non-innocent life). What is interesting to note is that Brennan consolidates the United States' biolegitimate status by extending that "premium" even to terrorist lives: "It is our *preference*," he says, "to capture suspected terrorists whenever feasible" (emphasis mine). In other words, the United States is seen as "having a 'culture of life'" (Rowland 615, quoting George W. Bush).

While the US posits itself as a biolegitimate nation, it also "divest[s] biolegitimacy from the 'enemy'" (Rowland 611). Brennan demonstrates this in his speech as well: after affirming the United States' status as a biolegitimate nation, he divests al-Qa'ida of the same, calling it the "antithesis" of "...peace, tolerance, and humanity…". But this is not limited to Brennan: another way the western world creates this Othering is by popularising archetypes and stereotypes of the terrorist as "savage, subversive, and evil" (Rowland 615). Compared to the United States, terrorist groups are said to "hav[e] a 'culture of death'" (Rowland 615, quoting George W. Bush). Any strikes then—and particularly drone strikes—are conducted as an act of self-defence (Rowland 617): a shoot-to-kill death-match between a life-loving U[S] and death-loving Them.

Medicine Man with a Plan

Taking the "sanitized" (Rowland 604) rhetoric of Obama's counterterrorism strategy one step further, Rowland argues that "drone strikes are metaphorically equated with the cleanliness, sterility, and precision of surgical operations" (Rowland 611), which adds another layer within which to couch its acts of killing. Sure enough,

Brennan uses this metaphor when he speaks of the surgical "precision" of the US targeted drone strikes in order to "avoid the loss of innocent life". Brennan contrasts the disease-causing nature of the "al-Qa'ida terrorist" and the disease-curing nature of the drone: "It's this surgical precision–the ability, with laser-like focus, to eliminate the cancerous tumor called an al-Qa'ida terrorist while limiting damage to the tissue around it–that makes this counterterrorism tool so essential". This medical metaphor wherein the terrorist is cast in the role of a "cancerous tissue that requires excision" (Rowland 614) allows the United States to cast itself in the role of 'the good doctor', always ready and willing to perform said excision, on standby to cure the world of a "chronically recurring disease" (Rowland 615). The use of metaphors like these, Derek Gregory also says, "work[s] to render military violence intrinsically therapeutic; counterinsurgency becomes chemotherapy" ("From a View to a Kill" 205). While expounding on the motives of his country's counterterrorism strategy, Brennan asks, "Is it going to save lives?". Clearly, it is this conflation of what Rowland calls the "scientific practice that *ends* life itself (contemporary warfare) with the scientific practice that *attends* to life itself (medicine)" (Rowland 613) that encourages the United States' saviour complex on its mission to heal the world.

(Un)Holy Accounting

Another pillar of support that Brennan erects in his defence of the country's use of drones is that it is morally just in that it is a "lesser evil" (Weizman 2) because it adheres to the: 1) "principle of proportionality" and; 2) the logic of pre-emption.

He acknowledges that targeted drone killings do lead to suffering (in the loss of civilian lives), but he puts a caveat that drones do "not inflict *unnecessary* suffering" (emphasis mine). Whatever suffering is caused by drones is justified in that the collateral damage is always calculated to not be "excessive in relation to" what he calls "military advantage" (the loss of terrorist lives). This is the

principle of proportionality. One of the best critiques of this logic is that of Eyal Weizman's: in the first chapter of his book titled, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, Weizman introduces to the reader the Leibnizian concept of "the best of all possible worlds" (2). This means that the world as it exists today, however flawed it may be, exists as the best possible option of all available options. In Leibniz's conception, God manages the world's problems using the "optimum combination of good and evil" so that the world exists, solved for the least possible amount of evil (Weizman 2). Extending the concept of divine calculations to secular human action, "humans…ceaselessly seek to develop and perfect all sorts of technologies and techniques that might allow them to calculate the effects of violence and might harness its consequences" (Weizman 3). In the context of war technologies like the drone, governments use this argument of moral calculability to "justif[y] the pursuit of harmful actions that would be otherwise deemed unacceptable in the hope of averting even greater suffering" (Weizman 6). Here we circle back to Rowland, who says that the White House uses this very discourse of "perform[ing] humanitarianism" via the weaponized use of drones, "to gain public acquiescence" for it (Rowland 603).

In that drone strikes are humanitarian because they are pre-emptive, Brennan doesn't justify collateral damage only in light of existing terrorist threats; he also justifies it in light of potential terrorist threats. According to Andrea Miller, "[p]reemption is a mode of governance whereby the U.S. military and state apparatus act in the present based on a perceived ability to apprehend virtual, future risks" (114). Brennan says that the United States "conduct[s] targeted strikes because they are necessary to mitigate an actual ongoing threat" and also to "prevent future attacks". Miller argues that mitigating *potential* threat figures prominently in the US government's interpretation of the legal standard of "incitement to violence discourse" (Miller 113). In its effort to map potential threats and prosecute incitement to violence, the US

government extends the possibility of violence to potential suspects who have not yet committed an act of terror (Miller 117). Here, "spaces of the accused terrorist's imagination and desire become sites of imperialist preemption and capture" (Miller 113). Brennan claims that, when weighing the decision of whether or not to strike, the US government "consider[s] the costs of inaction", calculating "whether a decision not to carry out a strike could allow a terrorist attack to proceed and potentially kill scores of innocents". His logic is similar to St. Augustine's demonstration of "an economy of lesser and greater evils" (Weizman 7). The scene described by St. Augustine is a hypothetical robbery at a crossroads, in which "it is better to kill the would-be assailant before he kills an innocent traveller" (Weizman 7). Better a would-be-sinner killed than a saint.

Reality Tele-Mission

We may be able to understand how John Brennan asks for the collective public acquiescence of state-sponsored violence, but what about the actors involved in the implementation of these acts? One of the things that facilitates the use of drones is the increased psychological proximity between drone operators and troops on the ground—a proximity that is enabled, not hindered, by the virtual matrix from which drone strikes arise and within which they operate. Brennan calls the use of drones "a wise choice" that has the power to "dramatically reduce the danger to U.S. personnel, even eliminating the danger altogether". Is he alluding only to the physical safety that drone operators enjoy, targeting individuals who are a thousand miles away, or is he also referring to the increased protection of the troops on the ground, a protection that is accorded to them by their drone-operating comrades-in-(virtual) arms? I believe that both work in tandem and, if that is indeed the case, then the question is: how? How does someone sitting so far away from the physical zone of combat develop a closeness with their counterpart who is fighting down in the muck?

Let's talk about risk-transfer. Drone operators tasked with a mission to target a suspected terrorist follow a kill-chain-command, the trigger of which is pulled on US (or militarily allied) soil, but which deals death to individuals across oceans (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill" 196). The US's remote operations, thus, "project power without vulnerability" (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill" 192) whereby "virtually all the risks are transferred to populations overseas" (Gregory, "Drone Geographies" 7). This means that the privilege that drone operators enjoy is not only that they can see their suspect and attack them on command, but also that the suspect cannot see and attack them with an equal reciprocity (Gregory, "Drone Geographies" 9).

Gregory also says that the drone "viscerally immerses physically remote operators in combat and reinforces their sense of communion with troops on the ground" ("From a View to a Kill" 203). There is a closeness that develops between drone-operating personnel and troops on the ground in the direct zone of combat—a closeness that is facilitated by what Gregory calls the drone's "techno-cultural system" ("From a View to a Kill" 200-201). A drone-operating crew needs six to twelve months to situate themselves in the matrix of these remote operations, continuously viewing images of "on-ground realities", day-in and day-out (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill" 200-201). This not only enables remote operations personnel to gain familiarity with the "space of the enemy", but also with the "space of the ally", developing a deep sense of communion and kinship with their colleagues on the ground (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill" 200-201). But this is not all: while acquainting themselves with the space of the enemy, troops over time also "'become emotionally distant'" (Gregory, "Drone Geographies" 10). The live video-feeds on the screens of drone operators are distributed across satellite links, fibre-optic cables, and viewed by a "network [of] senior officers, military lawyers, image analysts and ground commanders" (Gregory, "Drone Geographies" 9) as they assess and determine when and where to strike. With so many stakeholders involved in the decision of who gets to die, the personal act of killing one's 'enemy' "becomes more impersonal" (Gregory, "Drone Geographies" 10). Illustrating a mess of a scene in Oruzgan, Gregory describes a drone strike which ended in 23 casualties and a dozen wounded, all of whom were civilians. While explaining what happened, he says: "It seems equally clear that the Predator crew's [i.e., drone operators'] identification with the Special Forces team [i.e., on-the-ground troops]–the intimacy of the time-space compression from Nevada to Oruzgan–had converted civilians into combatants: in his desire to support the ground forces…the Predator pilot 'had a strong desire to find weapons' which 'colored, both consciously and unconsciously, his reporting'" ("From a View to a Kill 203"). Seeing is believing, but what does it say when that sight is also "techno-culturally mediated" in favour of one of the two parties? (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill 203").

Conclusion

In his speech, John Brennan provides explanations of the Obama Administration's counterterrorism strategies, but he is also asking for public acquiescence of them with his justifications. Weizman warns us about condoning actions of this nature: "less brutal measures" might be "more easily tolerated" and what humanity will be left with is not a "lesser evil", but a "greater evil" that "may be reached cumulatively" (Weizman 10).

So, what are we left with, then? The war on terror: a war to end all wars. If that logic sounds warped, that's because it is. Rowland explains this much better: "...liberal logics wage war for humans, on humans", in the relentless pursuit of "emancipating the species from war" (Rowland 611). She makes us take a step back, reminding us that, regardless of the life-saving logic that the United States government employs, drones deal in the distribution of death: "Before a drone strike can save lives, it must kill" (Rowland 620).

Employing a lesser evil logic of pre-emptive violence that facilitates and is facilitated by the hunter-killer narrative defeats its own purpose: we may be preventing the 'future' taking of lives by taking lives in the present, but we're still taking lives. A kill is still a kill, and it should not be in the hands and minds of certain individuals to make the decision of who 'should' die. We're not gods; we're human beings. Maybe it's time that we started to appeal to the humanity of those we deem fit to die and stopped resorting to the humanitarian logic of our moral machinations.

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Digitally Irrational: How Cognitive Biases are Exacerbated on the Internet

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Having studied behavioral economics from the University of Essex, Harshita built a strong academic foundation before completing the Young India Fellowship. She is currently honing her expertise as a political consultant in Hyderabad through the Nehru Fellowship programme. Passionate about gender politics, Harshita is dedicated to shaping policies that empower women. Outside of her professional pursuits, she enjoys swimming, walking, and refining her coffee brewing techniques to achieve the perfect cup.

This paper is going to blow your mind. No, seriously, you're going to miss out on an amazing time if you skip this. Don't believe me? Wait till you reach the end. Only people who have a knack for the intellectual will be able to reach it.

How many times have you come across sentences like these on Buzzfeed articles on the Internet? Clickbait, as it is called, is an extremely effective tool to hook you onto reading something. Even if you expect a mediocre article (hopefully expectations unmet after you read this paper), you click on it, because you cannot help but see the mystery to its conclusion. You believe yourself to be a person who is above being cheaply tricked like this, yet the trick works. Why? Perhaps we think we are navigating the internet (and even the world) with a certain level of rationality and logic. We have a flawed understanding of rationality, causing us to have biases that are easy to exploit. Over the course of this piece, I want to show how our assumptions can often be false and even detrimental to the outcome we want. Businesses have historically taken advantage of these biases we have, to trigger our impulsivity. On the internet especially, human rationality has taken a big hit because of the *troublesome architecture* under which we engage with each other. To illustrate this further, we will take the example of thrift stores as an intersection of business marketing and the internet, and how they are using our cognitive biases to make themselves more appealing.

Suspicion of human rationality has been intuitively explored for a long time. Emphasis on human rationality as the driver of decisions and actions started with the great philosopher and thinker (and hence exist-er), Immanuel Kant, who postulated a method of obtaining 'truth' solely through reason, logic and deduction with the specific absence of sensory experiences. According to Kant, anything that cannot be recognised by reason is not knowledge. It was a ground-breaking theory—one that future philosophers like Spinoza used to set the stage to postulate that "*reason* is the basis of human morality", and not God or religion ("Benedict De Spinoza: Moral Philosophy"). With this, the Age of Reason[1] began. The human condition was studied not to understand faith, but to critique it. 'Reason' was touted as the better alternative. Parallel to this movement ran the concept of empiricism, which heavily relies on beliefs being predicted by pre-existing knowledge but strengthened by experience. Rationalism counters this by believing that there are some fundamental truths of reality that everyone innately has knowledge of. I believe this is the movement that lays the foundation for the modern economic, social and psychological assumption that a given man is a cold, calculating machine; always looking to gain the maximum benefit.

The modern truth, as it often is, lies somewhere in the middle. We have started believing that 'reality' is a subjective environment shaped by our individual experiences and perceptions. But we have also internalised the idea that there are some assumptions and thinking processes that are ironclad, like the assumption that we make a decision after logically thinking about our choices. This situation arises because of our erroneous belief that our assumptions have passed the test of rationality and logic, and more so that we forget these assumptions don't remain consistent in every environment. Let's take an example to illustrate this. Have you ever procrastinated on a deadline? Maybe you have a big paper due by tomorrow, yet you cannot help but binge the new season of *Atlanta*. Subconsciously, you know that the more you delay it, the more negative impact you will have in the future. You also know that the paper is time sensitive, but completing the show is not. Yet, we keep ending up in this scenario. Why is that? It is because our mind has a hard time letting go of an instant, certain reward of dopamine for a delayed, uncertain reward of accomplishment. You don't know if your paper will turn out good and make you happy later, but you do know that watching the show will make you happy right now. Simultaneously, we

humans detest nothing more than going through a 'negative short-term effect' (doing work for a paper) for a 'positive long-term effect' (getting a good grade and submitting on time). This is a problem we all face in some capacity, whether it be writing a paper, sticking to a diet, saving for retirement, or doing your taxes.

These biases, known as heuristics, are known and recorded throughout human psychology that businesses often use to make you be more irrational and impulsive. For example, 'manufactured scarcity' is a well-known marketing tactic. The best example of this is the lifestyle brand "Supreme" which only releases their products in limited editions and quantities that always fall short of the market demand because they want to create the image that people are clamouring for their products. People buy into this scarcity even if they are aware of the tactic, because they suspect there is always a greater fool[2] who they can benefit from if they regret their decisions. In the field of behavioural sciences, the assumption of humans being "rational" has been shifted to be what Dan Ariely calls "predictable irrationality" (Ariely xix). Humans are rational to some extent, but with barriers such as limited attention span, incorrect or incomplete information (formally called asymmetric information) and cognitive biases, the decision-making process becomes much more flawed. There are many such intuitive examples of heuristics which change our perception of business fronts once we become aware of them. Much like the previously mentioned scarcity tactic, many of these biases are utilised to exploit the subconscious processes we have. When asked to donate to a campaign to save *one* child in Africa as opposed to "10000 children in Africa need your help", you feel more inclined to donate. Even if you donate to the latter cause, your charity is not proportionally increasing as there is a limit to how much you would donate. This concept, known as "Scope insensitivity" is a heuristic that shows that as the scope of altruistic action increases, your willingness to pay does not proportionally increase

(Yudkowsky). When it's one child, you "prototype" the child starving and helpless, and it triggers your emotional response. For a hundred children, your mind cannot visualise the situation as clearly, and the size of the number diffuses the prototype. This is why corporations often reduce the scale of things to make things relatable.

Another popular set of heuristic devices, "anchoring" and "framing" (Kahneman and Tversky 1128) seems much more relevant now than ever with the way disinformation has seeped into our lives. "Framing" is the idea that the way information is presented affects the outcome of a scenario. For example, patients would be more at ease when they are told there is a 90% chance of survival as opposed to a 10% chance of death. Anchoring shows us that we tend to "imprint" on the first bit of information we get on a certain topic and tend to process future information through comparing it with this imprinted information. Pricing is a very interesting concept from a cognitive perspective. Let's say you're walking through Sarojini Nagar's street shops. The price you were told for earrings in the first shop is always what you compare the next shops' prices with. If it's low enough, you buy it. There are many more biases at play because of how central they are to economic activity. The left digit bias makes humans register only the first digit of a price tag and anchor that number as the price. This is why you see so many items priced like, say, $199 instead of just a round $200. We see the "1" in 199 and instinctively put the product in the 100-190 price range rather than in the 200 range.

They say that 'there's no such thing as a free lunch'. But in marketing and businesses, you see plenty of free stuff. Whether it is buy one, get one, free samples, free services with another purchase and a free plus premium business model, individuals today are used to free items much more than before. Especially, with the advent of the internet which is, on surface, free to use with services like Google and Meta keeping their

platforms free-to-use. Why is this the status quo? Why is something free rather than paid? Well, this is also due to a bias we have towards the cost of something being zero. The truth is, when we see the word FREE, something in our monkey brain sets off bells. Even if we initially did not want to own something, the idea of 'free' is so enticing that we pick it up anyway. This is why a coffee packet that comes with a free mug does better than one that doesn't, even if the former one is priced higher. Dan Ariely calls this the "cost of zero" (Ariely 49). Much like the adage hints, however, we are actually paying with something other than money in this scenario. In the coffee scenario, you are paying with your time and word-of-mouth to build the company's reputation and brand. In the case of Google and Meta, you pay by giving them access to your interests, likes and dislikes on their platform so they can sell this data to advertisers. Advertisers will then use this data to strategically place ads that *you* can't resist clicking.

Making an irresistible advertisement might sound fairly innocuous. After all, it's nothing personal, it's just business. But that's just it. With tools like Instagram, Facebook and Google advertising, brands *are* getting personal. Brands have created a "social media persona" to humanise their identity. When we think of the American fast food chain Wendy's, we don't think about their food first, but their sassy and humorous twitter persona. What is the end result of this? People who never even consumed Wendy's food still spread brand awareness by sharing their tweets. Dan Ariely says that human activities are divided into two aspects: social norms and market norms. In market norms, two parties in a contract have different expectations of behaviour and norms as opposed to two personal friends, i.e. 'social norms' (Ariely 68). If you worked overtime in your office, you expect to be compensated for it. This is a "market norm". But if you stayed back late at your friend's party to clean up and they paid you, you would be offended, because this is a "social norm". Social relationships are formed through emotion,

while market relationships are transaction-based. Recently, brands have been keen to mix social and market norms and make you form an emotional bond with them. They use the Internet, which is an inherently community driven platform to do this. Using Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr and other social media, brands make you adhere to social norms when perceiving them and market norms when consuming them. Could this be leading to a new normal where individuals do not find it strange to form a sense of community based on transactions or commercial identities? Consumerism, which is the idea that one's well-being and happiness is directly tied to the number of things they consume, is already considered a huge problem in modern society. Consumerism is a by-product of late-stage capitalism. The internet might just be accelerating this by providing a space for brands to simulate communities based on consuming their products.

Let's talk about that particular word we used. Why did I just call this act of a brand's community, a "simulation"? What's stopping it from being considered the real thing? To understand why this is, we first need to explore the unique and novel relationship between humans and Internet culture, and how they shape each other. It started out with the Internet being a forum where a small set of people talk about their experiences in real life and build a community. But with increasing ease of use and accessibility to devices with the net, people prefer using the internet to making friends in real life. A more efficient process has replaced the less efficient conventional process. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls this concept a "hyper-reality" (Baudrillard 12). The internet was like a simulation of real connections, but over time, the internet stopped being a "map" of real life and formed its own identity. The process of finding community on the internet became a "hyperreality", one that seems better than reality at what it promises to do. People view the Internet to be just as real as the real world, and sometimes even more real.

While having a space for community is a well-meaning human trait, the sheer size of human interaction on the internet forced it to structure itself in a populist way. The only way we all interact with each other is through the creation of *content*. Everything on the internet is fodder for everyone else to consume or react to. That's the only way to propel engagement on the Internet. This kind of infrastructure coupled with people's propensity to prefer the hyperreality of the internet makes it so that people only use the real world as a reference on the internet, where humanity interacts and exists. Bo Burnham, when talking about how the pandemic has made him terrified of the real world and dependent on the internet for shaping his reality, succinctly says, "One should only engage with the outside world as one does with a coal mine. Suit up, gather what is needed, and return to the surface [the digital world]" (Burnham). Even without the influence of the pandemic which pushed us all online, the internet has greatly changed how the world functions. Instead of real life actions affecting the digital space, the digital world is affecting real spaces. This ties in well with the concept of hyperreality that Baudrillard speaks about. We live a "simulated" life on the internet, one that is scarily accurate at showing us what we would already be prone to agree with[3]. The algorithms of the internet are blindly trusted, because we are under the false presumption that we chose to be shown the content we are shown. This is exactly the base on which corporations build their narratives and exploit biases using the efficient tools of the internet. The pre-internet era was defined by powerful parties colonising land or capital, and the current era is defined by corporations colonising our attention.

Brands colonise our attention using their social media personas. They appeal to our emotional sides by pursuing us to buy their items. This is not for utilitarian purposes, but for cultural and moral ones. Termed as "virtue signalling", this phenomenon has led businesses to "green-wash" their products and marketing (Business News Daily). Generation-Z, which defines the post 2000s generation, the first one who were born with complete access to the internet, or "Zoomers" as they like to be addressed, care about the environment, and generally tend to be activists on social media (Pew Research Centre). Corporations use this in their marketing to signal to their target audience that they too, are ethical and environmentally friendly because they know that individuals are more likely to buy from brands that resonate with their beliefs. This might be true, or it might just be a well-crafted marketing campaign. When done poorly, the facade is glaringly obvious—like when brands like Zara and H&M start recycling campaigns while simultaneously employing child labour for producing clothes (The Guardian). But when done right, it leads people to make your brand a part of their identity and moral compass. This is the biggest reason one sees the frequent corporate take-over of cultural movements like Black Lives Matter and Pride Month. As Bo Burnham yet again acutely points out in his comedy special, *Inside* when parodying a self-important social media manager, "The question is no longer 'Do you wanna buy Wheat Thins?' The question is now, 'Will you support Wheat Thins in the fight against Lyme disease?'". This idea goes the other way too. If you buy Nike, you are no longer consuming just a pair of shoes, but you are also supporting child labour. This is what leads Zoomers to desire reassurance about the ethics of consumption.

On the internet, if you feel inclined to buy shoes from a more "ethically sourced" brand, Instagram, knowing that you watch ethical sourcing posts on its app, will recommend them to you. Even if you buy a brand that is unethical, it is frowned upon to not acknowledge the evils of the company. For example, people make videos on fast fashion hauls[4], but you will often see them prefacing these videos with how they generally only buy ethically sourced products and this is an exception or they host a giveaway to avoid 'wasting' the products. If they don't do this, they risk criticism and the

conversation almost always gets directed to environmental waste or ethics. This ties into the broader theme of wanting to be "politically correct" on the internet at all times. It is well known that the internet is getting exceedingly intolerant of a person making a mistake or saying something inappropriate. It's hard to be ignorant or offensive when you say something to a room of 10 people, as opposed to a platform of millions of active users who all have different world views and are unafraid to point out why you are wrong. This is not to say people should be above ostracisation. But once again, a tactic that would be of social and communal benefit in real life actually becomes detrimental to an individual because of the sheer size and vastness of the internet and how it is built. 'Cancel Culture' as it has been labelled, is paralysing, and counterintuitive to learning from your mistakes. Rather, it's an action that is punitive and calls for self-censorship. Questioning certain pre-established norms or beliefs may invite outrage, thus creating a barrier of fear and stress about your words. This leads people to want to stick to certainty and avoid going against the court of the public opinion on the internet lest they face the same court.

A good way to see the intersection between how corporations exploit biases and how the internet is a simulated reality that exacerbates biases is to take the example of thrift stores on Instagram. They are essentially Instagram pages curated by individuals who sell second-hand products like clothes, books, jewellery and shoes on Instagram through scheduled posts (called "drops") on their pages. The followers of the page are potential customers who get these products on their feed, and can choose to buy the product by 'DMing', or directly messaging the seller. Most pages are run and used by Zoomers. A few things that I've noticed commonly being thrown around in marketing reels of thrift pages by content creators and consumers alike are that they are firstly, ethical and secondly, anti-capitalist because of being run by individuals. The friendliness and approachability of these page runners also helps in building a sense of community

for them. Not only do these pages market clothes by using pop culture, but they also use terminology that shows the buyer that this is not solely a business relationship. For example, when you buy an item from a thrift store, there are usually handwritten thank you notes, stickers or small freebies attached which add to the emotional value of the purchase.

Thrift stores are actually neither ethical nor anti-capitalist despite being perceived that way. Most of the clothes are bought in labour and environmentally exploitative places like fast fashion brands and street shops. Much like corporations, they also practice virtue signalling to make their audience feel like they're partaking in a moral decision. Thrift stores, while being small in number, are exceptionally good at exploiting the biases we discussed over this piece. By attaching ample freebies, they make use of the bias we have of not being able to refuse free stuff. Adding personalised notes and building a community around their page also perpetuates the social norms we previously discussed. They use anchoring and framing biases by showcasing the MRP of the product first and then their own 'thrifted' price. An interesting note here is how these prices are usually much higher than brick and mortar thrift stores. What enhances these biases for thrift stores is the narrative that they are not the same as corporations, but are more authentic and genuine because they are 'small businesses', run by one or a small group of individuals. Thrift stores are abusing our moral sensitivity. We think we're being more ethical by not directly buying from Nike and supporting child labour. We're being *good people* by buying second-hand and making a difference in the climate crisis.

Theoretically, buying second hand offsets the production of one new clothing piece. In reality, fast fashion simply does not have cost incentive to cut down on production. They overproduce and discard any unsold items. So why do thrift buyers overwhelmingly feel ethical and morally upright when shopping on thrift pages? This is a consequence of the simulated reality we have

decided to consume on the internet. Thrift stores are creating a "myth" of being ethical and anti-capitalist. As Roland Barthes puts it in his book "Mythologies" when discussing the idea of mythmaking in culture and language, a myth is created with a wilful communicative intention (Barthes 1972). In this case, the thrift stores want you to think you are making a rational and ethical choice. Now this is not very different from any other kind of tall claims made by advertising that make you buy a product. The difference is the effect that the medium of the internet has on these antics. As we previously established, there are more barriers to speech on the internet than in the real world. It is also much easier to create information asymmetry on the internet. Thrift sellers utilize Instagram's interface to mitigate any negative reviews. If you, as a buyer, don't like the thrift page's product and put up a story saying so, it will only reach the eyes of *your* followers, not those of the thrift page. But any positive reviews will be shared by the seller on their social media, and put up in the highlights bar on their page. Instagram makes it such that there is no space for collective or democratic discussions of any negative points of the products. Additionally, the people who do post publicly about their negative experiences get responded to. Posting screenshots of disgruntled customers on their stories, known as "social media shaming" is an accepted norm. Notwithstanding that many of these instances may be people being unruly and rightfully deserving of our scorn, what are the effects of having these issues displayed on a store's public profile? Perhaps, the person's profile might get blacklisted from the bigger pages' network. Sometimes it even leads to brigading the individual by the rest of the thrift page's followers. Actions like these thwart rude and unconstructive criticisms, but also exacerbate the fear of punishment of people who have constructive criticisms. As discussed earlier, Zoomers *want* to form a sense of community through consumption. This causes us to seek validation from these very corporations and brands on the internet. In the example of thrift stores, we want to buy from these

pages because it makes us feel validated. Because brands and thrift stores are assuring you that when you purchase their 'environmentally friendly, vegan, cruelty free and ethically sourced' product, you are being smarter and more conscious than others, and hence are more rational. This validation makes you feel good, and you feel the need to put down others who are being unethical by choice (a.k.a. public shaming which causes the pressure to be politically correct). The ostracisation and fear thereof leads you deeper into the rabbit hole of being unquestioning on the internet. This unquestioning self leads you to further be a gullible consumer on the internet, and the cycle perpetuates itself. We stop being self-aware of our actions, because we think we are being logical and have agency over our minds.

It does not escape me that the picture I have painted of corporations, thrift stores and the internet is grim and manipulative. The truth is, there is no master strategist behind these facets being ill-meaning and vindictive. The status quo happens to be so because we are shaped by our desire to believe in the existence of our absolute rationality, against our better judgement. We often overlook that our rationality is a construct of our perception and take it as objectivity. As said by Elizer Yudhowsky in his Rationality blog series,

> Rationality begins by asking how-the-world-is, but spreads virally to any other thought which depends on how we think the world is. If you believe that there is a goblin in your closet that ties your shoes' laces together, then this is a belief about how-the-world-is. Your shoes are real—you can pick them up. If there's something out there that can reach out and tie your shoelaces together, it must be real too, part of the vast web of causes and effects we call the "universe" (Yudkowsky)

For better or worse, we have come to worship reason. But with the matrix-like world we have

invented for ourselves, where information is measured through its propensity to grab our attention, how reliable is our rationality? While exploring how the chase for a "social philosophy based upon perfecting and applying reason to solve society's problems may transform into fascism", Justin E.H. Smith in his book, *Irrationality* claims that a pure drive for reason always ends in the other extreme, where people lash out in irrationality. The internet is a great medium for what he calls "accelerationism", whereby majorities and minorities get to make the same amount of noise, sometimes the latter even making more through outrage reactions (Smith 47). This often leads internet discourses to become Sophistic in nature, i.e., win the argument, forget the content. But "not even logic, in short, is safe from human unreason", says Smith (95). This can be in the form of anger, distraction, pettiness, insult or revenge. In fact, "logic is particularly prone to be corrupted by human passions and self-interest".

If we follow this rationale, things seem awfully deterministic in nature. Humans would have no agency over their actions. The internet would be a "supernormal stimulus" which has taken over our ability to judge information for ourselves. And agents on the internet are acting in their best interests of profitability by abusing these biases. Can humans debias themselves and be better consumers of the internet? It may seem tempting to assume that we are all rational human beings whose true potential has been blocked by these perceptions and biases. In fact, we are not who we are despite our biases but because of it. We *are* our biases. So would being able to debias and "act rationally" even be possible? One of the most unique aspects of being human is our ability to meta-think. As Yudkowsky puts it, "a human brain is a flawed lens that can understand its own flaws—its systematic errors, its biases—and apply second-order corrections to them. This, *in practice,* makes the lens far more powerful" (Yudkowsky). The secret to being rational is being "*deliberately rational*". Being aware of our biases, and turning inward on why our beliefs are the way they are can be the first step towards reason. Think about which sort of processes will create rules and assumptions of your inner world that mirror reality. Being aware of the difference between your 'inside view' and 'outside view' is what one needs to distinguish reality from simulation. Additionally, just as there is no longer a need for religion as the basis for morality, there is merit in wondering if morality should be the motivation for rationality. Whatever the debate, moving forward it is imperative for us to be cognizant of the power the internet has over us, for corporations most definitely understand the power they can yield through it.

End Notes

[1]The Age of Reason, also known as Enlightenment, was an intellectual and cultural movement in the eighteenth century that emphasised reason over superstition and science over blind faith (Khan Academy).

[2]Greater fool theory in finance suggests that one "fool" might pay for an overpriced asset, hoping that he can sell it to an even "greater fool" and make a profit.

[3]Algorithms are used to understand your behaviour and preferences while engaging with content on social media and the internet. This helps them curate content that would be more up your alley. Best case scenario, this filters out the bad memes on your feed and worst-case scenario, it causes your feed to show you an echo chamber of violent ideologies which you find hard to break out of.

[4]Fashion hauls are a form of video/content where the creator buys many products from a certain brand or website or store at once and opens them all on video camera.

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Barriers Faced by Muslim Women on their Path to Educational Mobility in India

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About the Author:

My journey with writing started very early on when I penned down my first poem, "Rain" at the age of 8. Being a person who prefers silences over verbal conversations, writing was a medium that I could use to express myself freely. For a large part of my life, most of my writings stayed in the pages of my diary. It was only when I was pursuing my undergraduate degree in English that I started to put my work out there for others to read. While this degree helped me develop a critical eye, I still had a lot to learn. I wanted to write about things that I cared deeply about, which is where my *Critical Writing* course 'Education, Literacy and Justice' came in. Through this course, I was able to articulate myself better and deeply engage with issues that mattered the most to me.

I currently work as an Assistant Manager with the Office of PR & Communications at Ashoka University where I am predominantly involved in some form of writing or other.

I have always deeply cared about the cause of equal access to education for all. This is mainly because this has had a personal bearing on the context I come from, where obtaining educational opportunities was a privilege that I had to struggle for.

Due to the inherently entrenched patriarchy within large parts of society, being a girl is never easy and when you are the third one in a largely conservative Muslim family, it becomes increasingly difficult. This is something that I was made to realise very early on. My birth was not a cause for celebration in my family; rather it was a grievous occasion. My grandparents lamented and were visibly disappointed by my unwanted existence in their world. According to them, I would be a burden weighing down on my parents who were already struggling to raise *two girls*. This sentiment was echoed by most of my relatives and acquaintances who were saddened at the unfortunate fate of my parents.

When my birth itself had created so much distress within the family, accessing any kind of opportunities was inevitably not going to be an easy task. When the time to enrol me in a school came, there was vehement opposition from my relatives who did not see a point in girls' education, that too all three of them. Since my grandfather was a *maulana*[1], the right path would have been to attain Islamic education from a *madrasa*[2], as that would have helped us develop 'good' morals and acquire a 'good' character, which would then have helped in procuring 'good' husbands and raising 'good' children with the appropriate kind of *tarbiyat*[3] and *taleem*[4]. Their concern stemmed from the fact that when the eventual goal in a girl's life is to get married, what good would a school education do? Unfortunately, this belief was not novel to our household only. It is a cultural notion that is propagated and promulgated widely across India. The educational decisions of a girl are, more often than not, not hers; the larger familial circle has a crucial role to play in it. This has also been validated by the research conducted by Sahu et al. wherein interference by family members impeded the educational pursuits of the participants who were Muslim women. For instance:

> One Muslim participant from a low socio-economic background explained how her brother and mother are opposed to her obtaining higher education because studying in college will give her freedom of mobility which is likely to spoil the family's name. (Sahu et al. 187)

In addition to the interference by family members, there is also a strong negative perception of English-medium education. It is believed that receiving such type of education would make us too modern and liberated, as we would venture from the safe private spaces of our homes where we had been good girls to the 'public spaces'[5] which had the potential of tainting us, thereby rendering us morally loose, following which no 'good' men in their right minds would make the poor choice of asking for our hands in marriage. This idea emanates from the tradition of honour being linked to women's behaviour, elaborated upon in another section of the paper. Simply put, "A family's good or bad name is closely linked to how a young woman conducts herself in public, so controls over young women are important to maintain the family's dignity" (Sahu et al. 186). Thus, if our educational pursuits could morally corrupt us into being unmarriageable, it would mean we had failed as women.

However, my parents, both of whom are college graduates, knew the need and importance of education in a rapidly growing world. They did not share the familial belief that only boys had the intrinsic merit to receive an education. They wanted us to have access to as many opportunities as possible, something that they perhaps never had the chance to do, due to various socioeconomic reasons. They persistently stood by their resolve of getting their girls educated and pushed against all the backlash they received, so much so, that they

managed to send all three of us to the best institutions they could afford at the time.

During the initial days of my schooling, we used to live in small towns[6] which meant access to good quality education was very limited, as there were only a handful of schools in those areas, out of which, only a few offered education that was on some levels at par with educational institutions in bigger cities. I could go to these premier institutions because my parents could afford them even when they were far off from our places of residence. They also believed in the idea of a good education and taking all necessary steps in that direction, even if that meant going against the dominant views of people around them, according to which it was not okay for a girl to venture out to get an education. My social position[7] allowed me to travel for my education. However, not a lot of Muslim women have the option of choosing if and where they want to study. That choice is made for them. The prevailing notion according to which some people within the community may operate is that travelling outside the boundaries of the home, that too for education, is not an action befitting a 'good' Muslim woman. The perceived idea of goodness is linked with that of family honour. The onus of protecting this honour is put on women's bodies, while men act either as custodians or enforcers of this morality. Since the world beyond the confines of the home is painted as evil, the solution to protecting women from it is to keep them inside the home[8]. As Kabir points out in his paper, "For many Muslim girls, the boundaries of home and community delimit the only "safe space" able to protect them from the risks of physical or sexual abuse and assault on both their cultural and religious identity (GOI, 2006, p. 13)." (22). This limits women's access to any educational opportunities that exist beyond this defined safe space. Since this boundary is defined, it is also important to look at the quality of schools and education that exist within it[9].

Due to various policies, there is no dearth of on-paper government schools; however, the condition of many of these schools is abysmal, to say the least. They are infrastructurally weak[10], with no place to conduct classes some of the time. The student-teacher ratio is also skewed in government schools. According to a survey conducted by The Times of India in 2014, the majority of primary schools have a teacher-student ratio of 50:1[11]. As Sahu et al point out, "writing about government schools, Dyson et al. (2009) and Drèze and Sen (2013) contend that they are ill-equipped to offer quality education because of teacher shortages, teacher absenteeism and teachers' short-tenure contracts" (179). However, these schools have a nominal fee and are in closer proximity to the places of residence of economically disadvantaged Muslim women, so these are the only kind of educational opportunities that exist for them.

Once the immediately available possibilities have been exhausted, women are hardly allowed to venture outside their villages or towns for further studies. This is because of the fear of dishonour that they might bring to the family name on account of being outside of the purview of control of their parents and the larger community. This could happen either because they might engage in something not encouraged by the community or something might be done to them, due to their vulnerable social position. Their parents are apprehensive about sending them to institutions that are located in non-Muslim areas due to fear on the same grounds as has been discussed. In the politically charged climate that exists today, when Muslims are constantly being othered and their lives are constantly at stake, this fear is not unfounded. Muslim girls have the double disadvantage of their gender as well as religion, which puts their existence in jeopardy. This, then, acts as a barrier for Muslim women in availing of good quality education. Thus, it can be said that "the "danger of disrepute" has been a powerful discourse in defining the boundary of education for Muslim girls in rural India" (Jeffery et al. qtd in Kabir 27).

The economic condition of the family also

acts as an impediment to Muslim women's education. I was fortunate enough to have been given the chance to attend the best schools that my parents could afford, even when we were three *girl* children. They did not compromise on our education. However, this is not the larger reality. Firstly, travelling for education to places, not in the immediate vicinity is an option available to women coming from a certain socio-economic class as has been demonstrated by Sahu et al. in their study wherein the participants from a lower economic background attended colleges nearby or at a shorter distance from their places of residence (184) proving that location and not the quality of education is the key factor at play when deciding on what institution to choose.

When the financial situation of the family is not favourable, the argument that usually emerges is that girl children are anyway never going to be the primary breadwinners of the family[12]. So, they should stay at home, thereby granting preferential treatment to the male children, who are allowed to complete their education. In the study conducted by Sahu et. al, a Muslim participant from an economically disadvantaged background is not supported by her mother in her educational endeavours, while her brother has access to "financial, educational, and recreational aids to pursue higher education" (185). This is because the parents think that he would be able to give them a sense of financial security once his education is completed. Along with that, while he has a fixed space where he can study without any disturbances, the girl participant has to study in the kitchen amid all the din, and distractions, where her schedule is also interspersed with housework[13]; making it difficult for her to focus on her course material. This, therefore, brings us to the point that not being able to travel to educational institutions is only one of the problems. There are various other supplementary costs[14] to education too, which are deprioritised[15] for girls, simply because investing in a girl child's education is not going to bear any profitable returns. She will soon be married and will therefore not be allowed to provide for her family. This is the unfortunate reality for myriad girl students, who have to suffer so much more for accessing something that they rightfully deserve, while their male counterparts can easily obtain more opportunities[16] in a comparative sense, as can be seen through the case mentioned above.

Another prevalent reason that acts as a deterrent for women's education in general, which I have heard being voiced out within my house as well, is that if the girls study too much, they will be overqualified and will not find a good husband for marriage. It is considered a norm that a woman has to be less educated than her husband. This notion negatively impacts Muslim women in particular, as Muslim men are less likely to attend college and drop out more as compared to their counterparts from other religions. This is either because Muslim men "get engaged in the income-generating activities at a very early age due to the economic backwardness and do not get the opportunity to acquire higher education" (Amin 946) or "because of scepticism that their qualifications will translate into formal-sector employment because of discrimination" (Sahu et. al 185). This is to say that the educational status of Muslim women is largely contingent on the educational status of the males in their community. It also puts them in a doubly marginalised position, making it difficult for them to have opportunities beyond a certain point. This fact is corroborated by NSSO data[17] used by Amin in their study, "The condition of Muslim females was even worse at higher levels as indicated by the fact that only 1% Muslim females among the age group of 24-29 could continue higher studies, followed by 2% of Hindu Females" (947).

This brings me back to my school experience. Within all the institutions I have attended[18], one thing that has always stood out to me is that the number of Muslim students in a class is always very less. It hardly ever crosses single digits. I believe that all the reasons posited above—the interference of family members, a negative

perception of English-medium education, locational barriers, the abysmal state of existing schools, the economic condition of the family and the apprehension against women being more qualified than men—are some of the causal factors that work in consonance with each other to curtail the chances of Muslims, especially Muslim women to attend schools and colleges. Due to limited representation from students of the same faith, I struggled to find a sense of belonging within the school. While there was no conscious othering through any behavioural practices, all of us struggled to locate ourselves within the larger space of the school, as we were always a minority. Our contexts and practices were hardly ever taken into account. Although our school used to pride itself in its secular nature, where all religions were one, we had to pray with folded hands[19], singing either Christian or Hindu prayers in the school assemblies. There was no relaxation in terms of our schedules[20] during the month of *Ramadan*[21] when most of us were fasting. There was always only a one-day holiday for *Eid* when *Holi* and *Diwali* merited longer holidays.

Moreover, there was a lack of Muslim role models to look up to in these institutions as there were hardly any Muslim teachers. Since we had no primary frame of reference in this regard, it was difficult for us to imagine ourselves in any position of significant power. We had no examples to go by, which on some levels deepened the mistrust of our own capabilities. There was no avenue for us to build a sense of affirmation[22], which is imperative in educational spaces, as has been highlighted in Smith[23]:

> Students of color who see the faculty member may develop a sense of affirmation. This sense of affirmation can offer inspiration and signify future possibilities…The belief is that if students of color see other people of color in positions of authority and status, the students will be motivated to achieve and excel. (2)

Thus, we always found ourselves out of place, engaging in a futile exercise of trying to identify ourselves with people who had contexts entirely different from ours, only to find ourselves disappointed by the end of it.

We need to understand that the reasons behind Muslim women facing barriers on their path to education are not unidimensional. Various factors work in tandem with each other to hamper Muslim women's chances at an education. Society has a huge role to play in the same, because of the dominant views held by the people against the Muslim community. The first rationale that people usually ascribe to, is that the community itself is to be blamed for whatever issues they are facing. For a long time, in India, Muslims have been demonised, merely for existing. "Their identity has been appropriated to enforce a communal and divisive narrative that questions their right to be considered "Indian." The Indian Muslim is the "Other"—an impostor, an impersonator, and an infiltrator." (Salil and Lobo). When it is a community that has been othered for decades and their picture has been painted as being uneducated, primitive, and backwards, it becomes even easier to accuse them of holding back their women from achieving greater heights of educational attainments, as this adds fuel to this fire of vilification of Muslims. This narrative is comfortable to fall back to, as it has been disseminated in various forms historically. However, our understanding cannot be so linear. We must diversify our thought processes into analysing these historical links in a more complex, rigorous way, rather than through reductive, distorting prejudice.

The research done in this field does not help either. A large part of it seems to be fundamentally biased towards the Muslim community as a whole and looks at it as the homogeneous Other which leads them to make sweeping generalisations. It, therefore, becomes a classic case of 'victim-blaming'. Amin in their paper blames the Muslim community saying that one of the major reasons for

low educational levels in Muslim girls is the deeply patriarchal norms that exist within families and there is a need for internal reform "to remove the shackles of the educational backwardness of their women" (950). According to them, all the other socio-economic and geographical factors are secondary. While it is correct to state that patriarchy infringes on women's rights and hinders their progress, it is not right to say that patriarchy is a problem associated with one specific religious community. It is a socio-cultural issue that pervades the entire world, let alone the country. So, to say that Islam is a conservative religion hampering the progress of its women is a very lazily drawn simplistic assumption. Sahu et al. substantiate this through their study which had both Hindu and Muslim participants, where they "found [no] empirical support for this notion: none of the Muslim participants mentioned any barrier posed by Islam per se on their attainment of education…". (189). It is imperative to break away from this kind of dialogue and attempt to uncover the layered complexities of why Muslim women are unable to obtain the education they want. It has a lot to do with societal attitudes towards women's education in general, with tenets of safety and honour predominantly overshadowing this discourse. Along with this, factors such as financial hardships and unfavourable geographical locations additionally obstruct Muslim women from realising their full potential as Muslims primarily constitute one of the most economically disadvantaged groups[24] and have the lowest rate of enrolment in higher education[25] in the country.

Through the scope of this paper, I have tried to establish that there exists a very visible problem when it comes to Muslim women and educational opportunities. However, acknowledging the problem is not enough. We have to work towards asking the right questions and trying to find semblances of the right answers to those questions. The Sachar Committee report of 2006 notes that Muslims are socio-economically the "most backward community in India" and find themselves in particularly vulnerable positions when they

belong to states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, etc. (Mashkoor 551-2). Muslim women find themselves in an even worse position with their literacy rate at 47.04% in rural areas "thereby indicating that more than half of the total females of 7 years and above age were illiterate" (Mashkoor 556). The state in urban areas is also not starkly different. Only "56.44% Muslim females were literate as against 74.96% among Hindu females and 94.27% among Jain females" (Mashkoor 556).

As mentioned earlier, the Muslim community is seen as the Other in the ethos of this country. Governmental interventions are not designed keeping us in mind. We are an afterthought at some times and an electoral gimmick at others. The policies that are formulated are usually exclusionary and fail to take us into account, which leaves us out of "national integration strategies". Muslim women are not seen as a part of the general female population of the country and their future is linked with Muslim personal law and characteristics of Islam, which is the reason why they are neglected when policies are being planned out. This, therefore, means that "Muslim women are often considered as 'separates' or 'different' from Indian society, reinforcing cultural stereotypes and obscuring their contemporary realities" (Parveen 306). On top of this, Muslim women are forcibly and violently brought into the fold of a hegemonic 'reform' narrative, which ironically operates to deny Muslim women ownership over their existence[26]. People (read: men) from other religions (read: Hindus) function from the prerogative of saving Muslim women from their "oppressive" religion[27]. Maybe, just maybe, Muslim women do not need saving. What they need is inclusion. Policymakers need to be made aware of the fact that Muslim women need to be included in their interventions. As Mashkoor rightly points out in his paper:

> For the inclusive socio-economic development of a region, it is necessary that marginalised minorities and backward social

groups have equal access to education so that they can join the mainstream population and contribute to the development process of the country. (552)

Not only that, but it is also important to recognise that they are definitely a separate group but only in the sense that their needs are different from others, not in the sense that they can just be left out of strategies. There is a dire need for the state to design separate interventions, keeping in mind the specific necessities of the community, rather than imposing the Islamophobic agendas of the state.

The first step towards this is to dispel misconceptions about the stance of Islam on education. Islam promotes the seeking of knowledge and truth by its followers, without any cap on any gender. Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W.) said, "Whoever takes a path upon which to obtain knowledge, Allah makes the path to Paradise easy for them" (Jami at-Tirmidhi 2646). It is very important for people to understand this so that the blame can be veered away from the community. Having said that, there is also a need for community-based interventions. Since a large of Muslims remain uneducated due to various socio-economic reasons, some of which have been delineated above, they remain largely unaware of the merits of a good education. Both the governmental (National Commission of Women (NCW), National Minority Commission (NCM), and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)) and non-governmental organisations must join hands in trying to inform the community and direct them towards more educational opportunities. For that, I believe that a novel national database needs to be developed to understand the current situation of Muslim women in specific and Muslims in general, within the larger fabric of the country. There has not been a new report of the same magnitude after the Sachar Committee report of 2006.

The government has made efforts in the field of women's education, but those efforts have not been curated categorically for Muslim women, which is what is required currently. To motivate Muslim women, there have to exist scholarships, especially for them, so that women from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds can obtain an education. In addition to this, more institutions need to implement reservations for Muslim women, to encourage them towards studying. Some percentage of jobs in each sector should also be reserved for them so that they know their education will make an impact and convert into an opportunity for them to uplift their economic status. The schools that exist on paper, need to exist in reality as well, in areas where the Muslim population is concentrated, and there are hardly any good institutions nearby. If schools are near places of residence, the parents would feel safer sending their girl children to study. Since one of the predominant languages used by the Muslim community is Urdu, these schools could be Urdu medium[28]. However, that would also depend on the region where the school is functioning, so instead of English-medium schools, the regional languages spoken by the community could be taken into consideration while designing schools. Lastly, society needs to stop pitting educated and non-educated Muslim women against each other, where the former, more often than not, has to assume a role of being more 'modern' and 'liberated' than their community, which as per societal standards is backward in terms of its views and principles. Educated Muslim women must try, and if they can, create possibilities[29] for their sisters who may not be in a very advantageous position.

We have to find more and more ways wherein we can build more affirmative spaces for Muslim women to motivate and incentivise them to attend schools so that they can explore their potential and build a better future for themselves.

End Notes

[1]Urdu word meaning a Muslim male scholar revered for his religious learning.

[2]Arabic word meaning a higher education institution of Islamic religion and sciences.

[3]Urdu word meaning behaviour and the teaching of that.

[4]Urdu word meaning education.

[5]A public space here can mean simply anything that is outside the confines of home, consisting of people who are not family members. These people, in this context, would be predominantly men from other religions.

[6]These small towns were mainly concentrated in the eastern parts of Uttar Pradesh.

[7]Here, social position refers to both class privilege and the fact that my parents were educated enough to understand the value of sending their daughters to relatively good schools which were located at a distance from our homes. However, it must also be noted that distance from home was also one of the factors my parents considered before deciding on schools for us.

[8]This is not specific to Muslim families but is a larger cultural practice within most communities that function within the rubric of patriarchal control.

[9]Our focus here is to look at government schools in small towns and not the madrasas which may also exist within the boundary and Muslim women may have access to it.

[10]According to a 2014 NDTV survey of 780 Government schools in 13 States of India, 63% had no playgrounds. More than 35% of the schools had unserviceable toilets. Students had to go back to their homes, to use the toilet, where they may or may not have been available. The channel cited it as one of the biggest reasons for high drop-out rate of girl students. Moreover, the majority of these schools have not been renovated. Sometimes students are made to sit on the floor outside the classroom as there are chances of the roof falling down anytime.
Source: Kaur, Ramandeep. "Condition of Govt Schools in India – Quality of Teachers and Teaching." Maps of India, 14 September 2014, https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/education/condition-of-govt-schools-in-india-quality-of-teachers-and-teaching. Accessed 30 March 2022. Web.

[11]For more information on this, refer to:
Kaur, Ramandeep. "Condition of Govt Schools in India – Quality of Teachers and Teaching." Maps of India, 14 September 2014, https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/education/condition-of-govt-schools-in-india-quality-of-teachers-and-teaching. Accessed 30 March 2022. Web.

[12]This again is not specific to the reality of Muslim families but to any patriarchal community despite the religion.

[13]For a detailed understanding on why and how housework impedes a girl child's education, refer to:
"School Has Been a Right for Girls in India Since 2009. So Why Aren't They Going?" Time, 27 June 2019, https://time.com/5614642/india-girls-education/. Accessed 10 March 2023. Web.

[14]Some of these supplementary costs include cost of books, tuitions, Internet connection etc.

[15]In the study conducted by Jeffrey et al. quoted above, the male child in that family has a mobile telephone and also a motorbike for commuting to college and tuition. Moreover, everyone is supposed to maintain silence when he studies. This is in stark contrast to what the girl child in the same family has access to as mentioned above.

[16]If looked at, in a more absolute sense in comparison with males from other religions, these are not much, but are generally more than what Muslim girls get to access.

[17]The source for this information is the 66th round of data collection done by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Employment and Unemployment Situation among Major Religious Groups, June, 2013.

[18]Herein I refer to institutions located in the northern part of India: in Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

[19]Praying with folded hands is a gesture that is part of Hinduism and Christianity. In Islam, we make *dua*, with both our palms facing upwards.

[20]Our school did start hosting an *iftar* party in 2013, but in retrospect, it seems like a tokenistic move.

[21]Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer,

reflection and community.

[22]Such role models being present at educational institutions act as signs for us to affirm our faith in the fact that people, especially women from our (Muslim) community can excel at their chosen field.

[23]Even though the context here is different, the effect of role models in all settings is largely the same, which is why the author has borrowed her understanding from this context.

[24]According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI)'s global multidimensional poverty index (MPI), 2018, every third Muslim (33%) is multi-dimensionally poor. The term multidimensional in the report defines poor not only on the basis of income but on other indicators such as nutrition, health, education, living standards and assets. The report covered 640 districts across the country and compared data over a 10-year period between 2005-06 and 2015-16.
Source: Mishra, Abhishek, and Ruhi Tewari. "Every second ST, every third Dalit & Muslim in India poor, not just financially: UN report." The Print, 12 July 2019, https://theprint.in/india/every-second-st-every-third-dalit-muslim-in-india-poor-not-just-financially-un-report/262270/. Accessed 10 March 2023. Web.

[25]Muslims comprise 14% of India's population but account for 4.4% of students enrolled in higher education, according to the 2014-15 All India Survey on Higher Education.
Source: Bahri, Charu. "Muslims have the lowest rate of enrolment in higher education in India." Scroll.in, 23 July 2016, https://scroll.in/article/812272/muslims-have-the-lowest-rate-of-enrolment-in-higher-education-in-india. Accessed 10 March 2023. Web.

[26]For an understanding of how Muslim women and their actions in the public sphere have been perceived in recent years, refer to:
Naqvi, Farah. "The Idiot Muslim Woman." The Wire, 18 August 2020, https://thewire.in/women/muslim-women-rights-protest. Accessed 10 March 2023. Web.

[27]The criminalisation of triple talaq in 2019 is one example that comes to mind. It not having any legal standing is one thing, but villainising the Muslim man as "oppressive, violent, sexually deviant" (Dhingra) is another thing altogether. The framing of the debate over the 2022 Karnataka hijab ban is another case in point here. Hindu right-wing groups and many educated Indians were of the view that Muslim women had no agency and voice of their own. They had been forced and brainwashed by their oppressive families and by extension their oppressive religion to wear the hijab. Hence "they must be saved from their own families and culture – they must be saved from themselves" (Dhingra).
For more information on this, refer to:
Dhingra, Sanya. "Hijab bans in India: Where communalism and patriarchy intersect." Al-Jazeera, 24 March 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/3/24/on-the-hindutva-urge-to-save-muslim-women-from-muslim-men. Accessed 10 March 2023. Web.

[28]This is a very hopeful suggestion. Given the state the country is in right now, it seems like a far-fetched idea to dream of opening new Urdu-medium schools. It is a valid suggestion, nevertheless.

[29]A brilliant example for this is the LedBy Foundation, started by a Harvard graduate Muslim woman, Dr. Ruha Shadab. It is India's first leadership incubator that focuses on the professional development of Muslim Women. For more information on this, visit: https://www.ledby.org/
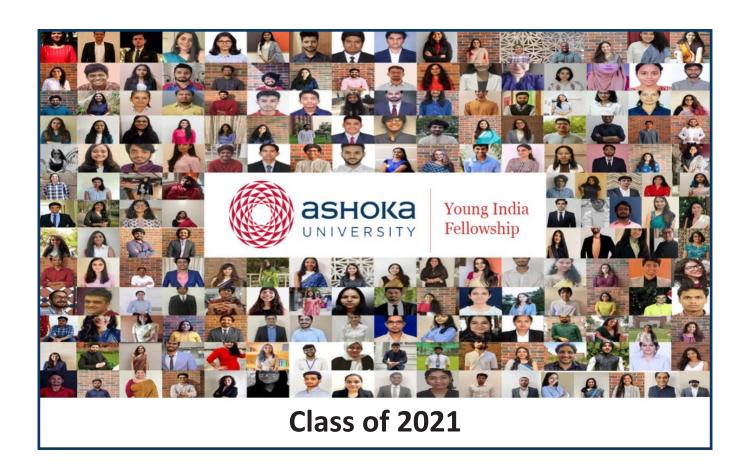

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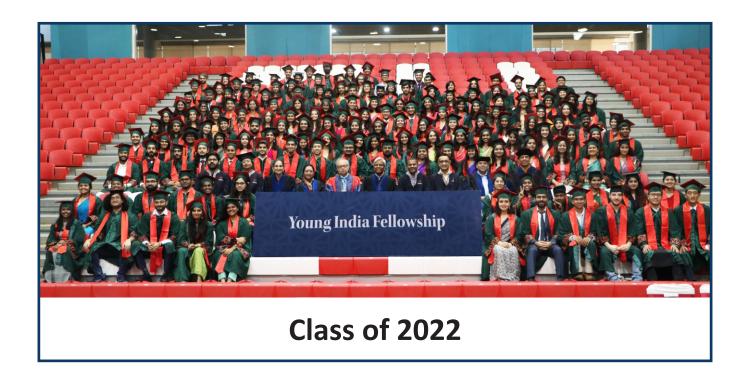
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