The Idea of India

Bangalore 2017
History remains a continuous narrative of preselected events, where neither the basis for the selection of those particular events is examined, nor their relevance. Students of history therefore are trained to receive a certain body of information which they generally commit to memory and which they then go on repeating ad infinitum when they in turn become teachers of history or when they attempt writing history. Another reason for this highly unsatisfactory research in a particular field of history is rarely incorporated into standard works and textbooks. Thus in most schools and colleges the student of history is still learning the subject, both in content and in technique, as it was taught one generation (if not two) ago.

Romila Thapar

PeaceWorks—an initiative of The Seagull Foundation for the Arts addresses this and many other issues through its History for Peace project by showcasing and engaging with alternative work—in the arts—in education and in civil society—at an annual conference, with the aim of exploring possibilities of bringing these into classrooms.

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Contents

PADMA M. SARANGAPANI / 1
CULTURE AND SCHOOL

ANAM ZAKARIA / 18
COLLECTIVE HISTORY AND IDENTITY

MANOSH CHOWDHURY / 40
HISTORY IN THE SHADOWS OF GIANTS

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN / 48
HISTORY IN THE SHADOWS OF GIANTS

PADMA SARANGAPANI, ANAM ZAKARIA,
MANOSH CHOWDHURY, NAEEM MOHAIEMEN / 54
PANEL DISCUSSION

ARUNDHATI GHOSH / 65
GAPS, ERASURES, SILENCES: How the Arts Provoke History

KOMITA DHANDA / 78
THE CHALLENGES OF STAGING COMMUNALISM IN THESE TIMES:
The Aesthetics of Jana Natya Manch Plays
An Illustrated Talk

ABEER GUPTA / 95
HERITAGE, CONSERVATION AND PEDAGOGY
Thank you for reaching out and inviting me for this conference. I had heard about the Kolkata conference from my teacher Krishna Kumar, and my colleague Manish Jain, both of whom were very enthusiastic about the kinds of issues that had been raised and the kinds of ideas they were able to present and discuss with teachers and educators. I am especially pleased that this is a small group and that this session can be a conversation. I hope we will be able to connect with each other’s ideas.

I will present to you some thoughts that I’ve been preoccupied with for more than a decade, from the time when I was engaged in studying the Baiga tribal community, the most formative, transformative, field experiences that I have ever had and one to which I keep returning as I mull over the idea of an Indian identity. I keep returning to that experience—of living among Indians who are culturally so distinct and different from the rest of us mainstream Indians who are integrated into the all-too-familiar hierarchical caste system. My talk today is based on the need for culture in human formation and what schools need to do about it.

Many years ago, when I was preparing to study learning within the Baiga tribal community, I read the M.Phil
dissertation of my friend Amrita Patwardhan, who was researching the educational experiences of adivasi children displaced by the Sardar Sarovar dam construction in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Amrita noted that, other than in those schools run by the Narmada Bachao Andolan, there was a cultural disconnect as far as tribal children are concerned—most schools seemed to have no reflection of their culture and in fact even seemed to be distanced from it. I think we can all immediately relate to this finding—it is consistent with our common knowledge that tribal culture is not a part of mainstream education. What marks tribals in our mind is the distinctiveness of their culture, from their external appearance and exotic dressing even in contemporary times, to their ways of life, such as the centrality of communal dancing, the simplicity of their lifestyle conducted in close relationship with nature. They seem to merit distinctive treatment, not because they are poor, which most of them are, but because their culture is distinctive and in danger of being lost if they are assimilated into modernity through schooling. Our intuition tells us that the difference is more than material and appearance, that the difference lies in the realm of the symbolic world that they inhabit and which gives rise to their distinctive way of life. It is this symbolic world which is culture, manifesting in material ways such as the lack of possessions, being self-reliant with regard to meeting their daily needs except for cloth and iron. But, more importantly, in giving meaning to life and giving rise to a distinctive way of life.

This culture provides the Baiga with their framework of values such as wanting less, making do with less, valuing independence from an early age, a particular aesthetic taste and a sense of beauty. And even in relationships, such as child-rearing being a community activity, negotiating encounters with new ideas and sources of power through
hybridity and hybridization as a way of assimilation and the ability to bracket out community when they cannot so hybridize. It makes them predisposed to wait for others on occasion, and to accept a wide variation in norms of practice. I remember an occasion when a gathering had to start its proceedings at twelve, which is when the sun is overhead, but the whole community just waited and waited for one particular musician to come, who came when he was ready. And then when the group started playing together I was astounded by the cacophony of sounds, but they had completely different norms of perfection. For me, these are the elements that define their culture and way of life and give it such a distinctive character. And creates the predispositions they have through which they negotiate the world. It also includes ways in which they value themselves and others. It is the basis of motivation and of attaching significance to events.

These are the resources that accrue through culture, and why culture as world-making is so essentially constitutive of human formation. It is not only true of the Baiga but of all human formation—that we need culture in order to be fully human. Because these are the kind of resources that it gives us. Mostly we don’t notice it because we’re like fish in water—we don’t see the water we’re swimming in. But when we have the opportunity to observe another culture, we become much more aware of what it is that makes life possible. Acquiring that is what it means to have and grow in a culture and grow into a culture. All humans have and need culture, but it is the particularities of culture that carry its distinctive constitutive character and that account for specificities of tastes, values and practices. Why, for example, obedience may be valued in one culture but independence in another; why the movements of Bharatnatyam appeal in one culture while in another it is the movements of Yakshagana.
Returning to Amrita’s dissertation on the education of children in the Narmada Valley, what was unexpected was her subsequent reflection that the mainstream government schools seemed to be culturally barren. It was not that they seemed to reflect the culture of the majority group of that area—they seemed to lack culture entirely. The schools educated for literacy, numeracy, official curricular knowledge of science and history, any element of culture that was present was vestigial, incidental, sometimes purely decorative (for an annual performance) or as part of a hidden curriculum followed by particular teachers. As though they were present privately and unofficially, as token attempts at recognizing the value of local cultural practices in order to celebrate cultural diversity as an integral and constitutive part of Indian society. Grounding in culture, that is community culture that grounds and roots people, was not an official aim of education nor a part of official curriculum.

By now, you must be thinking of the counterfactual from your experience that go against this claim that I’ve made—that mainstream schools are culturally barren, that they do not provide grounding culture. I’m sure you know of several schools that propagate Hindu, Islamic or Christian culture as their stated mandate. There are, after all, various forms of nationalism and regionalism that pervade schools that follow the state curriculum. So is that not a grounding that is state-mandated? Aren’t we concerned about the Right’s tendency of wanting to ground all Indians in a state-mandated Hindu culture?

I believe that grounding in culture as a need for human formation has by and large been set aside as an aim of education in India. Recognition of culture, and diversity of culture, has been well documented as an aim in education, even in our National Curriculum Framework. However, by and large, we have followed a model in which being
rooted in one’s community culture is part of the private realm, to be addressed in the home and the community. Grounding in culture is seen as primarily the work of home socialization and acculturation and not as the work of the school. School is expected to keep its focus on epistemic educational aims—literacy, numeracy, learning of science, history and geography, and the development of skills and capabilities, including physical skills—and the formation of a public culture.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005, for example, extensively discusses the need to recognize local and indigenous cultures as repositories of knowledge that can serve as a resource in education. But this is primarily an epistemic focus. In other words, it looks at cultural resources as resources of knowledge formation and not as resources for grounding in culture. In its aim of education, it calls on the need to develop in all students the ability for cultural change, to critically reengage and reinterpret the past. But this is also part of the public-culture formation that it advocates, the ability to look at one’s own culture and reengage with and reinterpret it.

There is the learning of epistemic and public values, such as autonomy, collaboration and learning, respecting equality and difference, listening to other people’s point of view, requiring evidence for truth claims, being able to ask and receive explanations, negotiate differences and achieve consensus. These values underline the practices of modern knowledge and modern democracy, and are associated with living in a pluralistic or multicultural context. The idea of unity in diversity is an important part of the idea of India, and its public culture. So I’m in no way denying the centrality and importance of this. However the curriculum remains silent about the role of the school in forming identity with reference to the specific constitutive culture of
diversity, relegating culture to the realm of the private, even when one is being grounded in this common public culture and its associated national identity. The forms of nationalism and regionalism, the forms of majoritarian Hinduism that pervade the state and school systems are contesting views regarding the formation of the public culture.

Nationalism and regionalism can be understood as attempts to consolidate the state’s power over the individual at the level of the nation or the region. According to majoritarian Hindutva, the so-called culture of the majority is assumed to be the definition of public culture. However the distinctions that I’m proposing between identity constituting culture (which I’m referring to as community culture) and public culture (which is also identity forming, but of a national identity)—these are not distinctions that have official constitutional recognitions except where minorities are concerned. Only minority groups identified at the regional level are explicitly accorded cultural rights. The categories of minority language, minority religion and the culture of tribal people have been accepted as the basis for recognizing constitutive cultural rights and identity. The rest of Indian society seems to have been aggregated into a single whole. And here, culture in its identity constituting sense, seems to cease to matter.

The idea of public culture alone seems to be all that needs to matter, sufficient for the formation of society, and for human formation. Arguably, in order to achieve consensus on the characteristics that will define our public culture, the Indian constitution makers must have deliberately chosen to remain silent. Or as Krishna Kumar puts it, mask many of the identity-forming, humanity-forming aspects of culture which reside in the realm of family and community, including contentious matters such as the status and rights of women and children which very likely are in conflict with constitution’s own liberal framework. All of these
matters on which people were and are deeply invested, and wish to maintain control over or at least a status quo at the level of community. However public culture on its own is quite insufficient for human and social formation. It’s more akin to a set of moral values and principles governing social relationships, interactions and social justice.

Human-forming cultures are specific cultures. And humans become human within specific cultures, belonging to and identifying a particular culture. For example, all of us speak languages. But we speak specific languages, either Bengali or Tulu or Telugu. This is not to say that a common public culture is not important. After all, it characterizes how we relate to each other as individuals or as members of particular cultural groups in the public arena, and it is therefore necessary for society, especially a liberal and multicultural society, to form and function. We need a public culture. The constitutional silence on the matter of non-minority culture, or rather cultures, may have been politically necessary and seems to have been a strategically wise choice to enable the Indian state to form as a pluralistic democracy. To the extent that the constitution is a sociolegal document, arguably it did not need to engage with this matter any more than it did. But as the Indian state has adopted a reformist and modernizing agenda for Indian society, and is not merely overseeing social relationships but actually forging and directing change in the Indian society, it is therefore also forging this change in all these pluralistic constitutive cultures. And therefore its silence on the matter of the non-minority community cultures has problematic effects. At an obvious superficial level, it allows the following view to gain ground: that because it has something to say about protecting minority cultures, the state and the constitution don’t care equally about the majority cultures about which it is not talking. And in fact seems to disregard entirely.
We will be justified in regarding this view as populist motivated political rhetoric that would not hold ground if we examine facts or had a mature understanding of why a liberal democracy with a majority group needs to have special legal protections for minorities. But it is one of the problems. And we find this increasingly in populist rhetoric that the fact that majority cultures are not spoken about means that the state doesn’t care about them or wishes to extinguish them.

However, a more substantive problem arising out of the silence with regard to culture is in the aim and curriculum of compulsory schooling which follows from the Right to Education. The Right to Education in the Indian constitution has been read into the right to life. The right to a life with dignity. This enjoins on education the task of fully forming humans and giving them the enabling capabilities to live life with dignity. A conservative and minimal reading of this right could be that education should not do anything that takes away from a human life its dignity. And to that extent, recognition of and respect of a person’s culture, community culture, constitutive culture, is essential and necessary. A more ambitious reading of the right to education could be that if culture is essential in human formation, then grounding a person in his or her culture is an essential task of education. This need not be read negatively as an uncritical grounding in a person’s community culture, which could include unconstitutional values and practices of illiberal and restrictive identities. But it would require that, even as individuals access the cultural achievements of humanity, and grow into a new national culture, they are enabled to be fully human by being rooted in their own culture. This is no simple task. And it has its own problems. Gandhi, for example, had wanted the village community and its life to provide the core human-forming culture.
Ambedkar on the other hand rejected any proposal that would lead Dalits to be rooted in a hierarchical oppressive culture of village communities while we waited for the oppressors to become enlightened. And what will constitute community? And whose culture would be recognized and accorded this human-forming function? Will it be the caste groups? Will it be occupational groups? Linguistic groups? Geographic communities?

Perhaps it does not matter which of these it is as long as these are authentic communities with traditions and values composed of a range of ages, generations and knowledgeable members, with a distinctive and recognizable form. With an attendant world view and world-forming features, dynamic and evolving as living culture should be, integrated through activities and interdependencies, involved with or affecting intergenerational cultural change. It’s useful to remind ourselves that living cultures are not static. They’re not like some purist broth that you get for some nutrition. They are evolving and dynamic and changing all the time, and they’re responding. And the members of this culture define and reshape the culture. It’s not only that culture forms you, but, equally, you form culture. So it’s that kind of living culture that I’m referring to. This world requires that education be spread and shared between school and such cultural communities. And that the right to education will have to extend beyond compulsory schooling to include grounding in one’s own cultural community as a necessary aim for education.

Going back to the tribal world: including the life world of the tribal in the world of the school is non-trivial. The two are epistemologically different and engender different epistemic cultures—epistemic meaning, knowledge-related cultures. Aboriginal people in Australia, seeking to ground children in their own culture while accessing modern
schools, have tried to solve this problem of incompatibility by creating what they call a two-way school, or a split school, as the only feasible solution. Children spend half the day in the school and half the day in the community. And they continue like two parallel worlds. And that seems to be the only way in which they can give children equal access to both the modernizing cultural experiences of the school and the rooting cultural experiences of community.

If education and grounding culture is to be a part of the curriculum of compulsory education for all Indian children, then the institutional form of the school will need to be revisited and restructured to make it compatible with participation in cultural and community activities on the one hand and participation in school on the other.

Shanta Sinha however has always been suspicious of any suggestion that the school calendar should be revised so that it coincides with the agricultural calendar, so children can have holidays when there is harvesting going on. She says that this carries the danger of propagating child labour. It’s a valid concern. Perhaps community culture itself will have to be revisited and reengaged with and reoriented as suggested in the NCF. It’s not as if community culture is ready to take on this human-forming function either.

Equally, there’s a concern among educationalists about the practices of culture which will maximally be able to support this human-forming function that we are attributing to it. What would such a grounding culture mean for children who attend schools like this one and for children whom we teach? Most of these children are from families who have migrated into the city. So it’s not like they are a part of their own community. Could it be engagement with a mother-tongue learning which produces that kind of grounding? Could it be that the school calendar should be restructured so that they and their families can go back to
those communities from where they have come to reengage with that community life and its way of being? So that instead of having the terms the way we do, maybe one term is for community and children actually go back and reengage with the community. If the argument that I’m making carries some force and some value, and I believe it does, I do think that a lot of the difficulties that we are experiencing as a society are largely related to the fact that we have not been able to recognize our own cultures as a living part of our own tradition. And we are always at loggerheads and tense about those who claim that they’re doing it. We’re unable to figure out how to relate to our own cultures with confidence. And I think if we have to regain that right, then we have to regain our own authentic engagement with our community and allow it to contribute to the way in which we have formed as humans.

So in conclusion, I want to leave you with this proposal, and leave you with the questions that I feel arise especially as we begin to think about what it means to integrate with community culture for social classes of people especially middle class who seem to have migrated and moved away and ahead in accepting modernizing cultures and public cultures as the key source of identity.

QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION

Audience member. You mentioned about the split school. Doesn’t that increase the burden on the child? How do you expect a child to cope with it?

Sarangapani. Any curriculum requires you to prioritize and select. Because there’s only so much time in which we have to do things. So if we decide that we only have four hours to spend in school and four hours will be spent in community, we have to decide what we are going to do in these four hours. Not that we are going
to load everything into the four hours that we were doing in 8 hours of school. It means that we have to return to the drawing board, and select experiences that we regard as important in our compulsory curriculum, which brings us to the school as an institution, and those experiences that we will have as members of the community. So that’s really how we would make it less burdensome.

Audience member. Like you pointed out, most parents have moved away from the local community. I was wondering if there was a need to be grounded. I no longer know what it means to be grounded in the community culture, considering we’re also constantly on the move and the community that you are associated with is not permanent any more. So is there a need for a universal culture or values?

Sarangapani. You are absolutely right. In what we identify as community or culture, there can be various ways in which we draw that circle to say this is culture and this is not culture. That is a difficult problem and I can’t say that any of us have the solution to it. However the idea of a universal culture lacks the authentic character that community culture has. Whatever that community is—and as I was reflecting even on today’s talk I was thinking to myself that, for me, music has had a strong tradition in my family. Would my association and growth into that musical community be a way in which I have become grounded in one of the cultures that I have access to? I think all of us have access to many cultures, and we could probably be grounded in any one of them or even more than one of them. We don’t have to follow a rule—that it has to be the caste group, it has to be the occupational group—but it must have the characteristics that authentic communities have. If
you don’t belong to culture, you forfeit your right to change it. You can’t change it from outside. You can only change it as an active member of the community culture contributing to it and evolving it. That’s how languages grow. All languages have grown and we should strongly reclaim our membership of language groups. That can also be a source of grounding identity. I was wondering whether there needs to be one kind of grounding identity that all Indians should have, and then I began to think maybe that’s not really the important question. But we should be able to have some grounding identity about which we can be more flexible and inclusive.

**Audience member.** I want to know if cultures divide or unite? Especially in a multicultural country like ours, or is there a common ground?

**Sarangapani.** I think cultures do divide, because you can only be a member of this culture and not that. Particularities seem to be divisive because they hinge on difference. I think the public culture is the common ground. Also, I think we don’t have to be members of only one culture—I think we can be members of more than one. Probably we can’t be members of two religious groups but we can be members of a religious group and a linguistic group and an occupational group. We can have multiple identities of that kind, and those are cultural identities. I think one of the problems of using a single matrix to define the culture of belongingness is it breeds exclusivity, it makes us inward-looking and makes members of the other cultures the ‘other’, makes them unrecognizable and different. And that is a problem.

We may say that traditional Indian society had a solution to that by expecting everybody to function within
caste groups. I don’t think the modern India that we have
given ourselves wants us to function like that. I think the
public culture that is encoded in the constitution is a very
important solution. It is a culture as well. It’s just that it’s
not adequate for human formation. But it is a very good
basis of society formation, of enabling people to be able
to live with each other, the democratic values, for exam-
ple, listening to each other, the need to arrive at consen-
sus. But any value which is important to us, we are not
going to change our mind about it easily. So it’s foolish
to think that I’ll make somebody change their values. I
really have to figure out how we are going to prioritize,
if we have to choose. We should be able to speak about
that. It’s not that I need to make you believe in what I
believe in, because that’s going to be impossible. You’re
never going to give up beliefs that you are committed to.
So the ability to converse should not be based on the
commonality of values but on an agreement that we’ll
engage in discussion in order to prioritize. I think then
we can find the means of discussion.

Audience member. I think teaching diversity through
perspective building—something like the subject that
was introduced in IGCSE called ‘Global Perspective’,
in which you teach empathy and sympathy, and looking
at somebody else’s perspective—maybe that could be a
way.

Sarangapani. In a way recognizing that these are inalien-
able rights. You don’t have to like the other person’s
way of life, and so liking cannot be the only base of
acceptance and respect for these rights. That’s really a
problem—if you say everything is good but some
things are not good. I think we have to have the matur-
ity to be able to live together and realize that will not
come out of a homogeneity of values.
Audience member. Do you believe we should have a revival of our own community cultures? Because I think we all believe that they are segmenting our community and society. So do you think we should have a revival of our community cultures again, because I think they’re fading away as globalization is forging ahead.

Sarangapani. In fact, what’s happening because of globalization is that the local community is reasserting itself in very retrogressive ways. And those of us who have said we’re global citizens, we can no longer interact with our community as authentic members of that community. When we try to speak up in our community, to say: ‘Look, there’s another point of view’—people just shut us up saying: ‘Look, you have left us long ago. You don’t belong to us, so we’re not going to listen to you any more.’ So we have forfeited the right to engage in our community by saying we are global citizens. But actually it is a kind of a rootless global citizenship. And in my view we can be much more confident as global citizens if we are rooted. And that doesn’t mean that we have to accept everything that we have in our culture, but that we have to gain the right to reject it by becoming a part of it. As a member of the community I can refuse some things. As a member of the community I can choose not to be jacketed into a particular role given to women in the past, I can debate with others who are forcing that identity on other members in my community. But if I leave the community, I no longer have this role and influence in my community. So I feel that reclaiming that space is very essential for the community to remain alive. Otherwise it goes back to some mythical ‘pure community’ state. Which is kind of a dead thing of the past.
And it doesn’t have the human forming potential that it should.

**Audience member.** You mentioned that the public culture is adequate for societal formation but not for human formation. I think I am still struggling with what you mean by human formation because I am someone who has always run away from community culture. Because every time I try to think critically about it, I can only see mostly the flaws in it and so I try to stay away from it. Someone mentioned here that we are moving towards the world of globalization—it seems like the more appealing perspective to move towards. I can understand that community culture is needed for the community to grow, but I am struggling with understanding why it’s needed for human formation.

**Sarangapani.** The sense of self and who am I is a very core human concern. When you run away from your culture, when you return to it, when you return to yourself—it’s impossible not to see your community of origin in that part of the narrative. It is not like it has stagnated, and, of course, we live in multiple communities. So even if you reject one, it’s not like you are rejecting everything. You will also find that you will search for communities where you will feel you can grow. And the thing about community is that it’s actually social, it’s material and it’s psychological. In a very deep way. It is only when you are a member of the community that you feel motivated to act in the world and do things. It orients you—that’s really what culture does. It’s impossible to realize this as an individual. That’s what it means to say humans are social. It’s not that we’re social in a general sense, but we are social in a particular sense. We cannot become citizens of the world, because the world doesn’t have a culture as such.
We speak particular languages, we like particular forms of art, we speak with particular accents—it’s the particularities that define ultimately who we are. Often we encounter people and feel they are confused. That’s really because they haven’t been figuring out where they belong, or what defines them. Belongingness is not a static thing. It’s not a binding thing—it need not be. Some versions of the theory of belongingness is that it is binding and static, but I’m very much of the view that culture with a small ‘c’ is constitutive and evolving and not static and binding.

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The idea of India holds central importance in Pakistan; in fact, one can say that it is the idea of India that shapes the idea of Pakistan. The two hold a symbiotic relationship and it may be said that the way Pakistan is imagined in India, and the way India is imagined in Pakistan, holds eminence in the construction of national identity on both sides of the border. India argues that it is everything Pakistan is not—secular, democratic and tolerant. The portrayal of Muslims and Pakistanis in popular discourse as ‘barbaric’, ‘savage’ and ‘fundamentalist’ in many ways legitimates the creation of Pakistan, encouraging many Indians to perceive it as a blessing in disguise, one that rid the ‘tolerant India’ of the fanatic elements that crystallized in the shape of Pakistan in 1947. While my research in India has been limited due to logistical constraints, I have interviewed people who said that the nostalgia for the pre-Partition years they once experienced, the longing for unification they once exhibited, had eventually been taken over by a sense that they were better off without Pakistan. ‘Had Pakistan not been created, today India would have been dealing with all the issues that Pakistan is struggling with’—in other words, had the fanatic elements not left, they would have radicalized India. In fact, even as intellectuals worry about the rising
intolerance in India today, comparisons with Pakistan remain at the centre. Comments such as ‘we are becoming like Pakistan’ or ‘at least we are still better than Pakistan’ show a deep-seated need to use Pakistan as a symbol of everything India is not. It polishes the image of shining India, making it brighter, glossier.

In Pakistan, ‘otherizing’ India perhaps serves an even greater existential need. Simply put: without India there would be no Pakistan, not only in terms of geography but also in terms of its ideology. Carved out of the Indian subcontinent with the two-nation theory at its heart, over the past seven decades Pakistan has worked diligently to justify its existence by portraying India as the impure, demonic infidel that it had to separate from. History as a discipline was abolished in the 1970s and replaced with Pakistan Studies, a course which teaches the ideology of Pakistan. The current Pakistan Studies book, endorsed by the Federal Textbook Board, and taught across public and low-cost private schools across Islamabad states in its Preface: ‘The textbook has been written with a view to provide orientation on the Two Nation-Theory.’

According to a study conducted by the National Commission for Justice and Peace, ‘Indophobia and Anti-Hinduism were the driving factors responsible for the rewriting of school textbooks [in the late 1970s] in Pakistan in order to promote a biased and revisionist historiography of the subcontinent.’ The report goes on to state that, ‘In 1979 General Zia-ul-Haq conscripted his National Education Policy with a mission of manufacturing of “Good Muslims, Good Pakistanis” and the drivers were “jihadist Islam” and the “Ideology of Pakistan”. General Zia’s educational policy (1979) stated that the highest priority would be given to the revision of the curricula with a view to reorganizing the entire content around Islamic thought and
giving education an ideological orientation so that Islamic ideology permeates the thinking of the younger generation and helps them with the necessary conviction with ability to refashion society according to Islamic tenants.”

The national education policies that followed also ensured that the ‘teachings of Islam’ held primary importance. In fact, the 1998–2010 National Education Policy emphasizes that, ‘We are not the country founded on its territorial, linguistic, ethnic or racial identity. The only justification for our existence is our total commitment to Islam for our sole identity.’

Even with General Pervez Musharraf came to power, he maintained that ‘it should be the purpose of education to inculcate in the child the Muslim value system.’ In 2007, it was further stated that ‘Islamic ideology must determine the education policy.’

It is perhaps then no wonder that ‘history’ has been moulded and, more often than not, distorted in the name of educating children according to these ‘Muslim values’ and by censoring any material that may challenge this Muslim identity or the Two-Nation theory. The idea of Pakistan is closely linked with Islamic nationalism. Thus, Pakistan was not created in 1947; rather, textbooks teach children that Pakistan was born in 712 when Arab conquerer Muhammad bin Qasim arrived to Islamize the region. Only recently have Punjab textbooks changed Pakistan’s date of birth to 1947 but only time will tell if other provinces will follow suit and if such changes will be sustained.

Over the years, this need to equate Pakistan with Islam has come at a great cost. To be a Pakistani is now perceived as synonymous with being Muslim, and that too a particular type of Muslim. By this definition, anyone who is not Muslim is also often construed as not Pakistani enough. This again can be explained in the context of the Two-Nation
Theory. If Muslims could not coexist with Hindus and a separate country was necessary, then all Muslims should live in Pakistan, a country made in the name of Islam. Those who do not abide by the ‘right’ Islamic tenants, then, do not belong here.

Between 2010 and 2013, I was working for a local non-profit organization, The Citizens Archive of Pakistan or CAP as it is more commonly referred to. CAP is dedicated to the historic and cultural preservation of Pakistan. One of its programs, the Exchange-for-Change Program, sought to connect schoolchildren in India and Pakistan with the hope of facilitating dialogue and fostering better understanding. In my interactions with students in Pakistan, it quickly became evident that the majority of children found it difficult to separate nationalism from religion. Most of them were startled to learn about the number of Muslims still residing in India. A few asked if they were true Muslims at all; weren’t they traitors for staying back? For the others, all Muslims had to be Pakistani. So they told me that Shahrukh Khan was of course Pakistani; how could he be a Muslim and still be Indian?

Religious nationalism is increasingly the only type of patriotism that the children are familiar with, and is deeply embedded in the culture and the consciousness. To be a patriotic Pakistani is to be a good Muslim and vice versa. This not only means that criticism of state policies can be construed as criticism of religion since all state institutions insist that they are based on Islamic principles, it also means that religious minorities in Pakistan find themselves in a precarious situation. For instance, when anti-American sentiments are on the rise, Pakistani Christians come under attack. And when India–Pakistan relations sour, it is the Pakistani Hindus that become increasingly vulnerable. In 1992, in reaction to the demolition of the Babri Masjid,
Hindu temples and members of the community faced severe backlash. According to a New York Times report, more than 30 Hindu temples were attacked across Pakistan on 8 December 1992. In Lahore, thousands of people accompanied a bulldozer in demolishing an abandoned Hindu temple. Crowds set fire to six other temples and stormed the office of Air-India. “Crush India!” marchers shouted. “Death to Hinduism!” Children and adults alike refer to Pakistani Hindus as Indians, and so any anger towards India is directed towards the community perceived as representatives of the Indian state.

I would now like to share some textbook excerpts from the 2013 Punjab textbooks to shed light on how some of these perceptions are created and cemented over time:


‘Hindu thugs started killing Muslims and burned their properties with the patronage of the government.’ Class 8, Political awareness of Muslims of South Asia. Social Studies (2012–13, Punjab Textbooks), p. 80.


And now some from the Cambridge syllabus, followed across British schools that cater to the middle and upper classes:
‘Whilst [the Congress Tyranny] was never an official Congress policy, Muslims feared that a major aim of their Hindu rivals was to erase Muslim culture . . . Muslims were forbidden to eat beef and received harsh punishments if they slaughtered cows. Azaan was forbidden and attacks were carried out on mosques. Noisy processions were arranged near mosques at prayer times and pigs sometimes pushed into the mosques. Muslims felt that if they lodged complaints with the authorities decisions would always be taken against them. Sometimes there were anti-Muslim riots in which Muslims were attacked and their houses and property set on fire.’ Classes 9 and 10, Nigel Kelly, ‘History and Culture of Pakistan’. Pakistan Studies (Peak Publishing UK, 2013), p. 83.

‘The Wardha Scheme: An education scheme based on Gandhi’s views [. . .] Teaching was to be in Hindi [. . .] All students were expected to bow before a picture of Gandhi hung in their schools. Muslims saw these measures as an attempt to subvert a love for Islam amongst their children and convert them to Hinduism.’ Classes 9 and 10, Nigel Kelly, ‘History and Culture of Pakistan’. Pakistan Studies (Peak Publishing UK, 2013) p. 83.

It is well known that Islam, from its origin, has denounced idol worship and the consumption of pork. To shove what is haram or forbidden into a sacred place of worship, would amount to an outrageous offence to any religion. In Islam, the azaan, or call for prayer, forms an essential pillar of the faith. Muslims must pray five times a day, that is their duty. To be obstructed from performing this act or disrespecting the masjid is sacrilegious, to say the least. Similarly, bowing before a picture in Islam would, according
to mainstream Islamic teachings, amount to shirk, one of the biggest sins a Muslim—or a human being, for that matter—can commit.

These instances of disrespect may not be entirely fabricated. However, when such episodic events are promoted as the typical behaviour of ‘them’ without providing a larger context, and when most children are not introduced to other realities—that many times Muslims have instigated attacks; that often people from the ‘other’ communities have even saved the lives of Muslims and vice versa—a rigid and distorted understanding of the ‘other’ takes birth.

The NCJP study that I referred to earlier shows that similar hate content is present in textbooks in Sindh. A few glaring examples include:

‘Since their belief and culture is different from non-Muslims, therefore cooperation with Hindus in any situation is impossible.’ Class 9, Pakistan Ideology. *Urdu* (2012–13), p. 42

‘But as was their habit, Hindus deceived Muslims at every step.’ Class 8, Pakistan Ideology. *Social Studies* (2012–13), p. 101

Frighteningly enough, the report concludes that the hate content in both Punjab and Sindh textbooks is increasing over the years. Conducting a comparison between textbooks used in 2009–2011 and 2012–2013, it notes that while in Punjab there were 45 lines of hate material in the syllabus books for 2009 [. . .] the number increased to 122 in 2012’. Similarly, in Sindh, in 2009, there were 11 chapters consisting of hate material; but this had increased to 22 by 2012.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, too, this trend is being followed. While the provincial government led by the Awami National Party (ANP) had undertaken promising
reforms after 2008, the new leadership spearheaded by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) that came to power in 2013 began reversing that impact. The ANP government had removed some of the verses on jihad from the elementary- and secondary-school syllabus, as they were deemed unsuitable for consumption by young students. But these verses were reinserted while pictures of girls with uncovered heads and dresses and of non-Muslim personalities were deleted (for example, of Raja Dahir, the prominent Hindu ruler of Sindh and parts of Punjab). According to Atif Khan, the provincial education minister: ‘The previous government [. . .] had made some changes in the curriculum and removed sections from syllabus. Those changes didn’t suit our Islamic society.’

Many academics, policy analysts and intellectuals have over the years criticized the textbook curriculum, concerned by the blatant hate sentiments promoted at the school level. According to Tariq Rahman, renowned professor and researcher: ‘Pakistani textbooks cannot mention Hindus without calling them cunning, scheming, deceptive or something equally insulting.’

The question is: How much do these textbooks impact students and shape their perceptions of Hindus and India? In this context I would like to share a few anecdotes from my classroom interactions. Often one of the first questions I ask students is to identify their neighbouring countries and then share the first thing that comes to mind when they think of these countries. Children will often say, ‘Afghanistan has Pathans or beautiful carpets’; sometimes the mention of Taliban and war will also resonate with them. They’ll mention that Iran has oil or that it’s a fellow Muslim country. ‘China makes everything’ they’ll say, or specifically point towards the Pakistan–China friendship. When it comes to India, though, the responses are the most
conflicting. A few children will talk of Indian food or say that they have heard it is a very ‘colourful’ country. Some will mention the Taj Mahal or Bollywood. Others will straightaway speak of Partition. Sometimes there will be silence, at other times there will some snickering, some laughter. A few students will nervously say, ‘War’; others may mutter ‘Infidels.’ I recall one workshop in which a young girl raised her hand and said, ‘India has Shahrukh Khan.’ In response, a boy retorted, ‘He’s a Pakistani, stupid! He’s Muslim. Muslims can’t be Indian.’ Another said, ‘India has nothing! They will all go to hell!’ When I asked them why, they replied that because the Hindus had been responsible for the massacre at Partition, that they were kafirs, traitors, treacherous people.

More recently, a Mumbai-based NGO reached out to initiate Skype sessions with Pakistani students. When I asked my students if they would be inclined to participate, one of them vehemently opposed the idea. She told me she had read in her textbooks that Indians were ‘horrible’ people and she didn’t see any point in talking to ‘them’. Another student whom I took with me to India in 2012 as part of CAP’s Exchange-for-Change program told me that, when he crossed the Wagah Border, he expected Sikhs to be standing there with talwars in their hands. He told me he had read in his Class 5 Urdu textbook that Sikhs slaughter children, cutting them into tiny pieces.

According to a study conducted by Gallup Pakistan, 76 per cent of Pakistanis have never met an Indian citizen. In a country with dwindling numbers of minorities, it is unlikely that most children have even come across a Hindu or Sikh either. However, it must be noted that because Pakistan’s creation is deeply embedded in Partition itself, it is impossible to avoid discussions around 1947 which in turn inevitably result in a discourse around India—and
Hindus and Sikhs—from which Pakistan fought for its separation. Therefore, it may be argued that all Pakistanis find it imperative to think about India; since the majority have never met an Indian, it becomes necessary to imagine them. That imagination is fueled by textbooks and by biased teachers’ attitudes who have also studied from these textbooks. Prejudice, suspicion and mistrust thus mars the majority’s understanding of India and Hindus and Sikhs with which and with whom it sees the state as being synonymous with.

Partition is, then, seen as Pakistan’s biggest triumph. It is used to instill patriotism in Pakistan. It was ‘our’ victory over ‘them’. A ‘pure’ or ‘pak’ land was erected, separating it from the ill practices of Indians. Today, children do not know that August 1947 marks independence from colonial forces. In fact, even when Pakistani textbooks discuss colonization, they portray both the British and Indians as the enemies. For instance, a textbook excerpt from the 2013 Punjab Urdu Grammar and Composition book (Classes 9 and 10) states: ‘Englishmen were the ruler and Hindus were the enemy.’ Another reads: ‘Sub-continent was governed by British. As they had snatched the rule from Muslims. They considered Muslims as their enemy and they did not spare a single opportunity to slander and disgrace them. Traitor Hindus also sided with them.’ Yet another excerpt from the same book states: ‘Due to British Hindu conspiracies, the condition of Muslims had become pathetic.’ Unlike Indian textbooks, the Divide and Rule policy is not delved into, for the notion is that Hindus and Muslims could have never been one to divide in the first place. Thus, every 14th August, it is independence from the ‘Hindu India’ that Pakistanis celebrate. British imperialism has faded away into an almost irrelevant footnote in their minds.
Of course, not all children swallow everything that is taught to them at school. Their family’s experience at Partition, their travel and exposure to Indians abroad or across the border and their access to alternative sources of information can certainly serve to challenge the textbook biases. But it does not help that even media, including social media sites, tends to present a particular version of the truth, often portraying all of Pakistan’s problems as a result of Indian meddling. With rising security threats and terrorist attacks in Pakistan, fingers are first pointed towards India and ‘Indian agents’ working to destabilize Pakistan. Students tell me that ‘India could never truly stomach the creation of Pakistan and has, since 1947, been trying to break the country.’ These sentiments are reinforced when TV anchors and news reports distort information and promote prejudiced news. In 2014, a local court was attacked by terrorists in Islamabad. The school that I teach at was just opposite the court and we were locked inside for a few hours. The next morning, as I tried to debrief the students, I found almost all of them insisting that the attack was orchestrated by India. Their rationale was simple: ‘We heard on TV that the suicide bombers had tattoos. Since tattoos are banned in Islam, they couldn’t have been Muslims. Even our parents said they must have been Indians.’

In my work on Partition, I have found that while personal histories can often serve to challenge state-sanctioned metanarratives, they too are influenced by the grand stories promoted by the state. As mentioned earlier, it is not possible to escape discourse around Partition in Pakistan. However, since the state needs to ensure that it justifies the creation of Pakistan based on the Two Nation theory, only certain Partition narratives can be promoted. These narratives repeatedly reinforce one-sided bloodshed, with Hindus and Sikhs projected as barbaric and Muslims as innocent
victims. Rescue stories, narratives of intercommunal har-
mony, of nostalgia and longing for homes and lives left
behind are conveniently obliterated. Partition survivors,
who experienced the complexities of 1947, are also
encouraged to forget certain memories in favour of more
simplistic narratives. Hence, their testimonies which serve
as evidence that, if anything, Partition can only be studied
on a spectrum where experiences of violence and harmony
often coexisted, have also been hijacked by the grand
narratives of the state. Memory, after all, is not objective; it
gets influenced by external events, it gets diluted over time.

In my work, I found that stories of bloodshed, rape and
murder were on the tip of every tongue, that other narra-
tives had receded to the background. In fact, even people
who did not witness the violence had learnt to personalize
the general stories of trauma. I would like to share my
grandmother’s oral history here. Fortunately, she did not
lose any family members to Partition. In her early 20s, she
was based in Lahore in 1947 and actively volunteered at
Lahore’s largest refugee camp to nurse the refugees back to
health. For years, she would only speak of the blood strewn
trains rolling in, of corpses and grave injuries. However,
when I began to probe deeper, I learnt that there were
many other stories that she remembered, many other
experiences, but those she never shared. For instance, her
Hindu friends Rajeshwari and Umma with who she had
remained in contact with. Her sister being saved by a Sikh
family in Amritsar; another sister being named after her
father’s Sikh friend’s daughter. Many of these narratives had
skipped generations, overtaken by the collective trauma of
Partition and by the narrow one-sided understanding of
events. The horror stories had left deep imprints, pushing
other memories aside.
Even archaeological sites that have a rich Hindu past have been appropriated by the state. These sites are portrayed as Buddhist—seen as a more neutral religion—and their Hindu ancestry conveniently forgotten. A couple of years ago, I visited one of the oldest Hindu universities—that also served as a temple—in the heart of Sharda, a town in Neelum district, Pakistan-administered Kashmir. However, the signboards beside the site told me that it was no longer Hindu—the centre is now only known as an old Buddhist university. This more recent association with Buddhism has salvaged the damage of being associated with the Hindu faith; the monument has become a popular tourist site in Neelum Valley only after shunning its infidel and impure heritage. Today, travellers know only its Buddhist past, which is far more acceptable to the Muslims in the region than its Hindu ancestry. Were it not for the Buddhist history in the region, perhaps this university and temple too would have eroded like countless other temples on this side of the divide.

So while on the one hand Partition cannot be avoided in Pakistan for it brought about the formation of the country, on the other hand a holistic understanding of 1947 has never been encouraged. Students have to scavenge through half-told truths, tainted oral histories, biased media reports and hijacked historical sites. Which results in confusion, in vacuums, in growing suspicion and mistrust of the ‘other’. Whereas the Partition generations that witnessed the bloodshed firsthand also lived with the ‘other’ before they really became the ‘other’, the younger generations have to resort to the imaginary version of the ‘other’, one that is only growing more monstrous and demonic as we move further away from Partition and the Partition survivors who may be the only remaining hope of providing a more nuanced understanding of the past when identities were
not as crystallized and when Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs could coexist.

So far, I have spoken about the state using Partition to instill patriotism and ‘otherizing’ India. It has done so by actively distorting history and accentuating certain truths that fit the national project. However, another tool used by the state that must be analysed is the instrument of silence. When the state finds a historical event or current reality an ‘uncomfortable truth’, it often censors the event altogether, in an attempt to wipe it out from the collective imagination. The two events that I would like to explore deeper in this regard are Kashmir and the creation of Bangladesh.

I have been working in Pakistan-administered Kashmir since 2014 to understand how the conflict has impacted ordinary Kashmiris on this side of the Line of Control. Using the oral-history technique, I have sat with women and children, with refugees who crossed over from Indian-administered Kashmir in the 1990s to receive militant training or to simply escape the crackdowns, with nationalists who want as much independence from Pakistan as from India. It has slowly become evident through these conversations that the Pakistani state has, over the years, tried to undermine indigenous voices from this region to promote its own policies. ‘Azad’ Kashmir as it is referred to here, has been used to instill the idea that this side is the heaven from across the hell. In fact, ‘Azad’ Kashmir is only evoked in politics or in the media when there is firing from the other side or when ‘Azad’ Kashmiris are protesting Indian atrocities. In Pakistan at large, the discussion on ‘Azad’ Kashmir only takes place in the context of Indian-administered Kashmir. It is as if ‘Azad’ Kashmiris do not have their own identity, their own politics. They are only worthy of mention if the Indian state has shelled or fired at them. They are only spoken of to show how bad the enemy is.
On a recent trip to Neelum Valley in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, I stopped by a book depot and scanned through Kashmiri textbooks. I found little focus on the history of Kashmir itself. It was as if Kashmir was already an accepted part of Pakistan. There was no need to teach students local languages and culture nor local history. And I found that where the history of the region was taught, albeit as a cursory lesson, it had many distortions. One passage from a Class 4 textbook on civic studies—written by the AJK textbook board—revealed a chronologically flawed and censored history of Kashmir in Urdu. Here is a translation of the passage:

In 1947 when Pakistan and Bharat gained independence, princely states were ruled by Nawabs and Maharajas. They had the right to choose between Bharat and Pakistan. Muslims were in majority in Kashmir and wanted to join Pakistan. Kashmir had a Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, who ran to Bharat and against the wishes of the people, decided that Kashmir would join Bharat. In 1948, Indian forces entered Kashmir. The locals and refugees fought against these forces bravely. They managed to free a part of Kashmir and today this part is called ‘Azad’ Kashmir.16

This simplistic narrative of a very complicated history fabricates the facts of that time. It presents a black-and-white version of history, with no discussion of the events that may have led to the accession. There is no direct mention of the tribal raid, nor of any local resistance and revolt against Maharaja’s rule prior to accession. It is as if it is not necessary to teach children their own history, for fear that it may provoke critical thinking.

Locals tell me that in schools they learn that Kashmir refers to the part under Indian control; this part (referring
to ‘Azad’ Kashmir) is already Pakistan. The word ‘occupation’, they are told, also only refers to Indian domination. By limiting the definition of occupation to Indian policies and by refusing to teach students Kashmiri history, culture and language, the state can effectively ensure Pakistani patriotism in Kashmiris and render obsolete any criticism of the state. The voices of the locals, their grievances and demands then recede to a marginal space, into a whisper that most Pakistanis never hear. Censorship of literature that may be deemed critical of state policies is also quickly banned. The state ensures that the only information that comes out of this part of Kashmir is what conforms to the ideology that Kashmir and Pakistan are one.

I would like to end this discussion by sharing some recent insights from my research on the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh. In many ways, just as India approaches Partition with a tinge of nostalgia—which is missing from the Pakistani narrative on Partition—and perceives it as a loss for the motherland, the creation of Bangladesh is viewed as a loss in Pakistan. In my review of Indian textbooks, I found many silences on the discourse of Partition. The Pakistan movement was seldom discussed and Partition was largely cast away as a result of the Divide and Rule policy of the British. The uncomfortable truths of the exploitation of Muslims and the reasons why the call for the creation of Pakistan gained so much support are largely avoided. Similarly, there is a silence in Pakistan about 1971. Compared to 1947, it receives little attention. Yet, because the war is so recent and it is necessary to delve into it to some extent, the state has linked it to the Two Nation theory and larger anti-India and anti-Hindu rhetoric prevalent in the country.

When a discussion on 1971 is evoked, while most people will acknowledge that Pakistan’s policies were unfair
and unjust, they will soon claim that the creation of Bangladesh was inevitable because Bengalis were always closer to ‘Hindu culture’. References to women wearing saris and bindis, to Hindu professors and teachers and to the proximity to India will be made to justify the loss. It is as if it has become necessary to believe that East Pakistan had to break away—not because of Pakistan’s policies but because of its association with ‘Hindu culture’.

Chapter 3 of the Grades 9 and 10 Pakistan Studies Textbook, which is endorsed by the Federal Textbook Board, has a section titled, ‘The Fall of East Pakistan’. As it details the reasons for the growing resentment among Bengalis, India’s role in the dismemberment of East Pakistan is allotted the greatest space. It is alleged that:

The Indian leadership in general did not agree with the idea of creating a separate homeland for the Muslims. When Pakistan was created to their entire displeasure, they started working on the agenda of dismembering it without delay. East Pakistan’s soil proved very fertile for them for several reasons. Firstly, that the province had a very big Hindu population, which, unlike West Pakistan Hindus, had deep pro-India sympathies. Secondly, that these Hindus were economically well off and well educated. In many schools, colleges and universities Hindu teachers outnumbered Muslim teachers. These institutions with the passage of time virtually turned into nurseries for breeding anti-Pakistan and secessionist intelligentsia. These intellectuals played a decisive role in dismembering Pakistan. East Pakistani masses, which felt deprived and oppressed by West Pakistan fell an easy prey to the secessionists.17
The authors have found it imperative to highlight that East Pakistan held a ‘very big Hindu population’. As Hindus are perceived as the ‘other’ nation, a wing with a significant Hindu population was thus destined for separation. By presenting it as a given, it prevents children from questioning Pakistan’s own role in 1971 and the years leading up to the separation. The Bengali Hindus are equated with having pro-India sympathies; in order words, they were traitors who held loyalty to Pakistan’s biggest nemesis. First, by accentuating the existence of the Hindu population, with little focus on the number of Muslims in the region, children learn to ‘otherize’ East Pakistan, to treat it as alien, as a part that was never truly Pakistan. And then to project all Bengalis Hindus as pro-India is to swiftly cast away East Pakistanis as treacherous traitors, working behind Pakistan’s back and in the interests of its enemy. It is no wonder that the popular perception in the country is that the break up of East and West Pakistan is because of India. The language movement, the economic disparity, the social discrimination and the grave injustices meted out to the Bengalis, receive little attention. In fact, the language movement, one of the most significant causes of tension and conflict between the two wings, is presented as the last reason for the growing resentment in East Pakistan in the chapter. It is stated, almost as an afterthought, that:

A clash of opinion on the question of national language arose in the very early years after partition. Though the Bengali demand was conceded under the 1956 Constitution and Bengali was then recognized as one of the two national languages of Pakistan, yet the bitter memories of linguistic riots of the early years and of the resulting casualties kept taxing the Bengali mind.
In order words, though the Bengalis were given what they demanded, they remained unsatisfied, greedy for more. There is no discussion of almost a decade-long struggle to have the language recognized, during which people were killed and dozens injured and arrested while demanding a basic right which would not only give them a fair chance to excel in the education system and workplace but was also symbolic of a larger parity between the two wings, denied since the birth of Pakistan.

There is also no mention of Operation Searchlight, launched by the Pakistan army to ‘search’ or ‘hunt’ pro-liberation Bengalis, resulting in mass killings and rape. History focuses on the weeks prior to 25th March, emphasizing the violent and unruly behavior of East Pakistanis, and then fast-forwards to August 1971 when India signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and allegedly received Soviet backing to crush Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. Pakistan is then painted as a victim, forced to ‘fight against two enemies, an enemy from within and an aggressor from without’. It is stated that on 2 March, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman—popularly known as the Founding Father of Bangladesh—launched a disobedience movement. Thereafter:

Banks were looted and the administration came to a halt. Public servants and non-Bengali citizens were maltreated and murdered. Pakistan flag and Quaid’s portraits were set on fire [. . . ] Awami League workers started killing those who did not agree with their Six Points programme. Members of Urdu speaking non-Bengali communities were ruthlessly slaughtered. West Pakistani businessmen operating in the East wing were forced to surrender their belongings or be killed in cold blood, their houses set on fire. Pro-Pakistani political
leaders were maltreated, humiliated, and many of them were even murdered. Armed forces were insulted; authority of the state was openly defied and violated. Awami League virtually had established a parallel government and declared the independence of East Pakistan.¹⁸

Were Operation Searchlight and the resulting deaths discussed in any detail, which they are not, they too would be justified as a reaction to the ‘barbaric’ behaviour on part of the Bengalis. Hence, when India becomes ‘fully equipped for dismembering Pakistan’ after signing the treaty with USSR, the ‘loss’ of East Pakistan seems almost warranted in the collective memory.

These textbook passages, whether on Partition, on Kashmir or on 1971, show that Pakistan continues to view itself in opposition to India. The ‘enemy’-country image is repeatedly evoked to justify its own creation and its own policies. The idea of Pakistan remains fully entrenched in the shadow of the idea of India. Projecting India as the nemesis, as the infidel, as the treacherous, is necessary to portray Pakistan as the pious, the pak and the pure. The result is that ideology rather than history is taught in the country, with students being indoctrinated in hatred and suspicion of the ‘other’.

The only hope for the future is that the linear one-dimensional narratives promoted by the state learn to accommodate the ‘uncomfortable’ truths, so that the post-Partition generations learn a holistic history of their past, in which the ‘other’ is humanized and where the complexities of our shared past are owned rather than discarded and distorted in the name of nationalism. These personal histories, which India, Pakistan, Kashmir and Bangladesh are fortunate to still have access to, are not threats to our national identities. Rather, they will only serve to strengthen our
historical narratives, enable a better understanding of each other and guide us towards a more peaceful present.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 5.
3 Ibid., p. 6.
4 Ibid., p. 6.
7 Ibid., p.16.
8 Ibid., p.17.
9 Ibid., p.18.
10 Ibid., p.20.
11 Ibid., p.21.
12 Ibid., p.12.
13 Ibid., p.19.
14 Jibran Ahmad, ‘Pakistan Province Rewrites Textbooks to Satisfy Islamic Conservatives’, *Reuters*, 30 October 2014. Available at: https://goo.gl/FZiM7m (last accessed on 27 November 2014).
15 NCJP, *Education Vs Fanatic Literacy*, p. 7.
16 AJK Textbook Board, *Civic Studies*, Grade 4, p. 17.
18 Ibid., p.59.
Anam Zakaria is an author, development professional, psychotherapist and educationist with a special interest in oral histories, identity politics and conflict narratives. Her first book, *Footprints of Partition: Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis and Indians*, explores the shifting intergenerational perceptions of the 1947 Partition through 600 oral histories and won the Karachi Literature Festival German Peace Prize, 2017. Her second book investigates the impact of the Kashmir conflict in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and will be released by HarperCollins in 2018. Anam is now working on her third book, focused on the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh. She has an academic background in International Development from McGill University and has previously worked as a director at the Citizens Archive of Pakistan, collecting oral histories from the Partition generation and religious minorities of Pakistan and connecting thousands of school children in India and Pakistan through a cultural-exchange programme.
1971 can be seen as a joint project between India and Pakistan, and Bangladeshi identity is perhaps caught between the two. I have been teaching for the last 23 years at a university. Even last week I had to face the question: ‘Are you from India?’

I believe that this is because of two reasons. One: that my name is Manosh Kumar Chowdhury. And the second: that my parents are among those migrant Hindus who kept on migrating within the legal framework—I mean legal migration—till 1971. Bangladeshi Hindu migrants are still in the process and are now extra-legal migrants. So are my parents extra-legal migrants? This is a tricky situation, given the legal, extra-legal and moral aspect of the whole question of citizenship, loyalty and identity.

I introduce some films by Indian filmmakers to students in my socio-anthropology classrooms. When I showed them Aakrosh (Govind Nihalani, 1980), most of them were shocked. Here was a film that was sensitive towards the plight of the adivasis, a film about their experience of torture and eviction and a manipulative legal system. This was an award-winning film, an intellectual success and one that was allowed to be broadcast by the Indian authority. This is the India that they were not able to connect with. The
India-haters as well as the ones who support India find it difficult. We are talking about the transnational, cross-border identity question beyond the nationalist project which most of the public schools are supposed to be accused of. Perhaps I would love to proceed with some caution. It may sound like empty rhetoric in the Bangladeshi context to say that the non-public schools or the non-government schools are not into the nationalist project. That is something that has been haunting me for these last few hours. I mean, there is an easy line of distinction line we can draw, especially in the Indian context where private schools are really doing well in terms of dealing with Indian missionaries, the nationalist missionaries perhaps. But, at least in Bangladesh, that might not be the case always.

A few minutes ago, Naeem was making some cautious remarks about what not to say because of various state laws. Any statement can be monitored whether or not it is in a private or a public situation. Of course, I am not a great believer in private institutions being the ‘liberating’ ones. We don’t have that kind of experience. Allow me to read a few lines from Naeem.

Perhaps, one thing that is almost a taboo in the secular population that is mentioning our religious identity.

Naeem wrote some years back, in non-fiction:

Every time I am in Kolkata, for work, something very specific happens at dinner. My host takes me aside wanting to tell me about their family home in pre-1947 East Bengal. Often that home is in Chittagong, Comilla, Sylhet or Faridpur district. But it can be many other places as well. They will invariably talk about what was left behind. A well-ordered melancholic life. Sensing both longing and
reproach in these encounters I always hesitate in my response. What should I offer in exchange? My grandfather walking on stage at his school to receive the gold medal in Sanskrit, overhearing one teacher whisper ‘Must be a mistake—he’s a Muslim boy’?

So Naeem’s dilemma is understandable. Naeem is a Muslim, and I’ve told you that it is almost a taboo in this secular set up to utter our religious identities. We can mention our ethnic—or in this specific case, multilingual—identity. In most cases, Bangladeshi public schools are monolingual, yet Bangla is almost a forgotten language. In Bangladesh, even classical Bangla as a school medium is not something you can really rely on. By classical I don’t mean orthodox or old-style Bangla but a syntactically uniform Bangla that is very difficult to continue with and that is the sole medium in the public schools. At the tertiary level, for instance in the university I work at, I find students mostly non-lingual. That should be the right word to describe them. So that is another part of our educational policy—but this should be discussed in an entirely different session.

I think the audience is familiar with Indianness in the Bangladeshi curriculum, but I need to be a bit cautious about that. There were lots of changes in the curriculum from Grade One to Grade Ten, unlike any of your experiences in India or even Pakistan. You do know that India is more persistent, if that’s the right word to use, and Pakistan went through some experiences as Anam mentioned during the Zia ul Haq regime, and then of course Pervez Musharraf . . . perhaps trying to have some kind of a secular public presence—as an educationist, Islamic facet and a public figure, perhaps a secular facet. The point is that you went through some experiences with regard to the curriculum changes but they were unlike what happened with
the Bangladeshi curriculum. I mean, there is a huge turmoil over that period. And that is where the role of India or, rather, the identity of India or the facets of India are always being reconstructed. And Naeem’s speech dealt with the books that were written on 1971. Most of the writers are from India and they had their own versions. Quite interestingly, those versions suited the Pakistani versions.

On 16 December 1971, when the War of Liberation, as it is now termed in Bangladeshi history, was over and the Pakistani army signed a treaty of surrender with General Arora, the Commander in Chief of the United Force, no official from the Bangladeshi army was present. No Bangladeshi official is seen in any of the archived photographs. In the Bangladeshi context—the Mukti Bahini that consisted of many non-military regular peasant folk—gives an emotional, moral identity to the people. No one from the Mukti Bahini, not even General Osmani was present. These photographs have incited many discussions and controversies over the years.

So Naeem continued to review the books on Bangladeshi war history. There are, of course, some other people, either ‘against’ or ‘for’ India, trying to give the Bangladeshi war history a political perspective beyond the popular versions. One of those should be named as Jafar Sobhan who coined a phrase like ‘the third train of Bangladeshi politics’. I have already told you that the curriculum went through changes, especially with the history of political power in Bangladesh, especially after 1975. Officially we call it a military regime. Yet there was some kind of election in 1978–79 which legitimized the military government into the civil scenario. So these are the areas not grey for the scholars but grey for the partisan people.

Most of the historians in Bangladeshi tertiary education are partisan and so are the authorities responsible for the
Grades One to Ten history and social sciences textbooks. They are appointed for these projects only, like it happens in other nations also. The role of India from 1972 to 1974 was acknowledged and properly placed, but you perhaps cannot find any of these books in the archives in a given period. Then, since 1975, all of a sudden, the role of India and Pakistan disappeared (from the school textbooks). The word ‘Pakistan’ disappeared from the text for a long period. In Bangla there is a word—*haanadar*—that means ‘the attackers’; and that was the sole word used to make Pakistani force invisible. This tendency continued for up to roughly 10–12 years—1976 to about 88/89—till the Ershad regime was challenged. From Grade Three to Ten and in ‘public’ broadcasts, Pakistan was called the ‘attacker’—and not ‘Pakistan’. On 16 December, for example, it would be mentioned like this: ‘Today Bangladesh got victory, set itself free from the attacker force.’ These state versions continued for years. So it was perhaps a turmoil between the Awami League, as Anam mentioned, as pro-Indian forces, and BNP, the bearer of the anti-India campaigns. So the modern Bangladeshi textbooks have been through 180-degree changes from both ends over the last 20–25 years.

My presentation starts with the images of those leaders who were assassinated—Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 15 August 1975, and then four other leaders who were already in jail. In Bangla, it’s called *jail hotya* or ‘murder in the cell’. In the Class 5 textbook in the current curriculum, there is a very localized version of the history without much input from the Indian forces.

There is a single mention of the joint forces when the Indian army joined with the Bangladeshi army. The joint force was called *Jontho Bahini* in Bangla. These are all Bengali heroes, but all military personnel. There were no civilians.
We now know of staged photographs representing women soldiers. That does not necessarily mean that women were not in the liberation war, but the point is that the picture perhaps showed the more sanitized middle-class version of the women warriors. With the white saree, for example.

Naeem has repeatedly mentioned the surrender ceremony and its probable meaning. You can see General Niazi and General Arora in the photograph that exists, but there is no significant high-level representative of Bangladesh in that photograph.

On a popular framework, one can expect the pro-independence—and believed to be pro-Indian—Awami League government to bring about some change. But the point is that, perhaps, mentioning India’s role, no matter what the official government versions were, created some kind of tension among the historiographers and the nationalists. I am of the opinion that with the current government, the role or image of India in the textbooks has a different tone than it used to have before 1975. Even in public discourse, the current government is much more cautious about mentioning India’s role no matter what the role was. It has a very tricky policy because of the years’-long criticism of being pro-India. In the last eight years, changes have been made just every three–four years. The role of India is limited in the textbooks.

The sole photograph representing 16 December 1971, the day of Bangladeshi victory over the Pakistani army, is repeatedly used in classrooms. It is everywhere from government documents to archived books to the history books. The same picture is used in the textbooks from Grades 6 to 10. Some 3–4 photographs of the same table exist—the same actors, the same settlement and no Bangladeshi people. This has encouraged a lot of debate among those believed
to be pro-Indian people too—because it is really hard to define this picture—and definitely those believed to be anti-India. The argument is how India conceptualizes their neighbours and how they deal with the supremacy and their decisive agenda. There is a dilemma from the current government or the people who are believed to be secular, pro-India, pro-Awami League forces. They are experiencing a dilemma for the last two decades. The representation and the acquisitions that India has is one aspect. Another is the ever-growing hatred against India. That is the new phenomenon. One cannot really differentiate between the two camps like some of the scholars might like to. Today the definition of where one’s sympathies lie—pro-Awami League and pro-secular can equally be anti-Indian too—is demonstrated at cricket matches and on social media. I do not think these phenomena should be reduced to a simple equation. Perhaps it has its own zone for reinterpretation. The earlier versions of pro-secular, pro-India, pro-culture, pro-independence and then pro-Pakistani are reconfigured. I am for this opinion that the Indian scholarship has long been demonizing Pakistan in the global academia as its legitimate ‘other’. That is something I have been talking about for a long time now, but the point is: that is the image that is shaping Pakistan among the Bangladeshi seculars as well. So my take would be: the new and very recent situation is not that simple. Because there can be a pro-secular, anti-Pakistani person who is also anti-Indian for some other reason. So I will end with a note before asking for my friend Naeem’s intervention.

I am not a history teacher, I do not teach in the schools either. But looking through history’s prism is something we all have to do. I do, when I am teaching socio-anthropology. The prisms of historiography have been set long before we come into action, which in my case is teaching. For
example, what I was trying to say to the history school-teachers in this conference, that the schools are dangerous nationalist projects, no matter if they are government schools or private ones. Perhaps in the private ones, nationalism comes through (social) class lens, (social) class prisms or (social) class perspective. Those are at best a kind of cover.

I think this whole part needs clarification. But, again, do we advocate for a singular nationalism? Nationalism has always been different for the cosmopolitan class, for the metropolitan class, for the peasant class, for the proletarian class. Even in the subcontinental history, nationalism has never been the same for all. I do think that even the private schools can be hubs of nationalist ideologues. That is where, no matter if we do street theatre or teach history, we end up using the prisms of historiography. And those prisms have been set long before we come into the business.

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**Manosh Chowdhury** is a professor of social anthropology at Jahangirnagar University. He has also written works of fiction, edited Bangla academic titles, acted in films by feminist filmmakers and served on the editorial board of *Depart*, the first art quarterly in Bangladesh. His publications include *Practice: A Collection of Writings in Anthropology* (with Zahir Ahmed, 2001), *Discourses on AIDS and Sexuality: Marginality of the AIDS Patients* (with Saydia Gulrukh, 2000) and *Master’s House: A Collection of Feminist Writings* (with Saydia Gulrukh, 2000). His works of fiction include *Moinatodontohin ekti Mrittu* (2010) and *Panshala Kingba Prem Theke Polayon* (2014).
Each of the countries—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh—seems to have suffered from a surplus of history and a deficit of the present, the present being defined as a modernity project that is sufficiently forward-looking. So much of India’s self-definition is about 1947 and all the conflicts after that vis-a-vis Pakistan. And so much of Pakistan’s is the same. For Bangladesh, so much of it is 1952 and 1971, which also requires the erasing of 1947. I talked about the fact that in Bangladeshi historiography, whether in high schools or in colleges, 1947 isn’t really discussed. Because if we talk about 1947 to its full extent, and we strengthen the position of what the lessons of 1947 are, then suddenly 1952 doesn’t make so much sense. And 1952 is only 5 years later. So, in all sorts of ways, contemporary Bangladesh’s self-definition is tied to 1971 in isolation and to the erasing of 1947.

The photograph of the surrender ceremony is actually a good way to enter into the problems of teaching history. You would have noticed that the images that Manosh showed in his presentation, and those in the textbooks, are quite often of inanimate objects. They are either portraits or monuments. They aren’t really what would be considered conventional action images from the war. I think Manosh
showed one image of a dead body—and that’s from before 1971. During the war itself, there sometimes wasn’t ‘sufficient’ imagery of the type that would help the national project—if the national project was primarily about liberation from Pakistan by the Bengalis, a term by the way that obscures all adivasi people. But if the project of ’71 is the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan by the Bengalis, then the imagery of the 1971 war presents a problem. Because so much of the planning of the war, the military command, was all inside India. And when the final, decisive confrontation happens, the part that’s captured by the cameras—both film cameras and still cameras—is an encounter primarily between India and Pakistan in the last days of December. Of course, the Bengali guerrilla army fought, and suffered tremendous losses, but nowhere near the camera—for that’s the nature of a guerrilla war.

Just to give an example, Manosh mentioned General Osmani, officially the chief of the Bangladeshi Mukti Bahini. As has been documented in books—including Srinath Raghavan’s 1971, A Global History, the Indian high command didn’t allow General Osmani into the inner circle. Two days before the surrender ceremony, Osmani was ‘sent away’ to the North, in a way that made it impossible for him to be back in time for 16 December. If you read Raghavan’s book, you’ll see how it was very clear to the Indian army that the Pakistani army was going to surrender. In fact, the last six days—between 10 to 16 December—were given over to negotiations at the United Nations about the terms under which Pakistan was going to accept the surrender. And from Pakistan’s point of view: Who were they going to surrender to? Because, technically, Pakistan does not want to surrender to the Mukti Bahini. Because the Mukti Bahini is not a state. The UN also did not want to ratify the surrender of a state to a non-state.
So for the last six days of the war it was known that Pakistan was going to surrender. They were discussing the terms of the surrender, yet miraculously there were no Bangladeshis present at the surrender ceremony. Except for one person in civilian clothing—A. K. Khandker, Chief of the Air Force, but he wasn’t wearing his uniform. Now from the Indian side this makes complete tactical sense. Because if you have a surrender ceremony between Pakistan and India, then you have a legally binding agreement where India gets to guide what will happen to this new entity after 16 December. In 1971, West Bengal was in the middle of the Naxalite crisis. Which was Indira Gandhi’s other concern even before the war broke out—she was very committed to insulating that from any seepage via East Bengal.

However, to the extent that the Indian state had these kinds of discussions, it’s a problem for Bangladeshi historiography—because it was a war in which part of the final act was played by another nation. I think that’s one of the reasons why our history books have focused so much on talking about a war but not really showing a war. As Manosh pointed out, the iconic images are of women marching (photos from before the war broke out), which became a very important thing in the 1980s for the feminist movement—to show women warriors. And women warriors could be represented in many different ways. For example, a woman who is raped during the war becomes a woman warrior, which is in some ways very bold but also very problematic because the only way she can fight in the war is as a victim of sexual violence. And the other way is, of course, these women marching with guns, before the war starts.

It’s clear what Pakistan and Bangladesh’s relationship should be, because the whole idea is to be not Pakistan. But
what’s the relationship with India? It wasn’t clear at the outset, it especially wasn’t clear at the surrender ceremony. It was an extremely volatile time, from 17 December ’71 till about February/March ’72, and that set the route for how Bangladesh’s historians write about ’71. Manosh mentioned the army presence. One: the guerilla army that was made up of peasants who took up arms. They didn’t become soldiers until the massacre happened on 26 March. The second: the regular army, which got the top leadership positions. The commanders of the eleven sectors of war, except for one, are all from the regular army. But that also meant that, before March 1971, they were Pakistani army and that means, technically, after 26 March, they had deserted the Pakistani army.

We should understand that, during those nine months, every army officer or soldier who was a member of the Pakistani army and then became Mukti Bahini faced the absolute possibility that, if they lost the war, they would be executed. It was an executable offence, with no quarter given, to have deserted the Pakistani army. That wasn’t quite the case for the guerillas, especially a peasant who picked up a gun. They may have faced punishment, but they were also not embedded in any official record-keeping of the pre-1971 Pakistan state. I think this is what actually set the stage for one of the instabilities that bled into Bangladesh from 17 December, in which India played a part even if she didn’t wish to. So as far as the people who were originally Pakistani army and then defected are concerned, they consider themselves as the ones who took the fullest risks, the ones who fought the war and who would have been executed if the war was lost. If you were a Bangladeshi officer, and defected from the Pakistan army, and you saw that surrender photograph, it would give you quite an intense allergy—because you would understand that the dynamic set in motion on 16 December was that a junior Indian soldier
was still more senior than your Chief of Air Force who is standing in civilian clothes.

I think this argument about who really liberated the country cuts through the historiography of Bangladesh. India, as the giant whose shadow I referred to, therefore has to be deleted from the scene in order to produce a sense of stability. India is hardly mentioned in these narratives, including the entire lead up to the 1971 war, even though the photograph has an Indian general and a Pakistani general signing the document.

I think for me, personally, one of the projects I have been interested in is to not see these things in terms of fault or without fault, or sin or not sin. Rather, I am interested in understanding the structures that produce these moments. So I look at India within the 1971 narrative to understand what was it that was incomplete for Bangladesh on 16 December 1971. I think in all sorts of ways it is East Bengal’s third partition. The first was in 1905, which was reversed in 1910. The second was in 1947 at which point Bengal was divided and so was Punjab. And then the third partition was of course 1971, when East Bengal, which became East Pakistan, was partitioned from Pakistan/West Pakistan. Three partitions is a lot of separations to go through for one country. It creates a very unstable sense of nation.

I think unlike Pakistan–India, this dilemma of definition isn’t so easily resolved by conjuring up ‘the enemy’ at commemoration ceremonies. Because the enemy, in this case, is too far away. There’s a massive landmass of India in the middle, so Pakistan doesn’t animate the emotions quite in the same way. So the only way it can be resolved is to put India aside, and to be very uncomfortable about these kinds of photographs. Which is why whenever the photograph is reproduced, it is always cropped with many people
out of the way. And as someone interested in photography and the archives, I’m very interested in what’s left out.

Naeem Mohaiemen combines films, installations and essays in order to research failed left utopias and incomplete decolonizations, framed by third-world internationalism and world socialism. His work has explored a hijacking of a Japanese plane (United Red Army, 2011); the historian mistaken for Marx in Dhaka (Afshan’s Long Day, 2014); a Dutch journalist caught up in the 1975 Sepoy Mutiny (Last Man in Dhaka Central, 2015); and the slippage between Algiers 1973 and Lahore 1974 (Two Meetings and a Funeral, 2017). Editor of System Error: War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (Papesse, 2007) and Between Ashes and Hope: Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism (Drishtipat, 2010), he is also the author of Prisoners of Shothik Itihash (Kunsthalle Basel, 2014).
Naeem Mohaiemen. I went to a public school in Dhaka that was run by Christian missionaries. As a policy of affirmative action—if we can use that term—there were a large number of Hindu and Christian as well as a few adivasi students. What was remarkable was the ‘disappearance’ of that student body by the time I got to 12th grade, and especially after I got into college. I mean, ‘disappearance’ in terms of the track we were on. You get out of this very protected school environment where there is an active policy of diversifying the student body and you then get into a ‘normal’ university—I went to Dhaka University for a year before I went to the USA—and suddenly you look around and you notice that almost everybody is Muslim. That I think was my first awareness of myself, and my ethno-religious community, as a majority population, and how quickly we were able to access things, accomplished through the erasure of everybody else.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts is one of the contradictions of 1971. To raise the Bangladeshi flag on 16 December and to say everybody is Bengali immediately erases the adivasi community. The adivasis were neither Bengali, nor necessarily even Muslim or Hindu. We
don’t talk about the Chittagong Hill Tracts enough, and our adivasi community is one of many unresolved blank spots.

**Manosh Chowdhury.** A person from Assam—and I am not talking about the famous ones—is not considered a ‘proper’ Indian, even at a conference. Even in a Bangladeshi conference, a person from Assam is not considered a ‘proper’ Indian. There must be political reasons for this, because these conferences are not the typical nationalist conferences. So the question is not about the relationship of the Assam or Nagaland government with the central Indian government. But that even in the core of Indianness, in India, the idea of India might exclude the identities of Ahomia or Naga. I found some Bengali friends in Kolkata who define India as a mosaic of four states. So they believe that the India that is being propagated or, rather, being constructed in modern days excludes not only the seven sisters but the whole of India.

**Padma Sarangapani.** I can’t claim to respond to this as a historiographer, because I’m not one. But as an Indian I think there is a great othering of even downright lack of knowledge about the northeast. The people from the northeast are hugely threatened—there’s even been violence against them. So even their own sense of not belonging and speaking of India as ‘the mainland’, or speaking of India as ‘India vs Mizo’ is indicative of the fact that the integration and the idea of India is not something which is very widespread. There is enough evidence that the way in which history is told is a very North Indian version which even excludes histories of the South. I think it’s a surprise for many of us that there was also a partition between Bengal and Bangladesh, just as there was one between Punjab and
West Pakistan. I think the leaving out of many of the regional histories is also why we construct an idea of India which is incomplete.

**Chowdhury.** It’s not only leaving out their stories—sometimes it’s also about concealing the stories. Nobody from Bangladesh or India—in mainstream historiography—would find it of any importance to have a discussion about the Bengali population, considered a single linguistic nation, being divided three times. The feeling in academia is that it is over. But you’re always dealing with complex identities. Whenever I visit India, I am being defined by the feeling that I am going to my own land that had never been mine.

**Anam Zakaria.** I think I was focusing more on religious identities, but, in Pakistan, it is the Punjabi identity. It’s always been so hegemonic that the Pakistani identity and the Punjabi identity have merged into one. So, ironically, Punjab is the only province in which Punjabi is not taught—you’re even fined for speaking Punjabi in schools. Sindhi will be taught in Sindh, Balochi in Balochistan and Pashto in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. But in Punjab you have to speak Urdu. Because Urdu has been associated with the Pakistani identity, and Punjab, in order to maintain its dominance, has undermined all its regional, indigenous identities, cultural and linguistic markers, and this Urdu Pakistani identity comprises unlearning its own Punjabiness in order to be Pakistani enough.

So who is Pakistani enough? For me it equates with being Punjabi, being anti-India and anti-Hindu. Those are the key ingredients. And if you meet the key ingredients, you fulfill the perfect idea of Pakistan, you’ve consumed it and you embody it. It’s very problematic. You can see all kinds problems in Balochistan right now and FATA amongst the ethnic communities,
completely receding into marginal spaces. And religion and blasphemy being used to charge the public sentiment against them. It’s become a very tricky space to be in—if you are critical, if you want to exhibit your own identity, you will be silenced. And the state has found many ways to silence those identities. In no way have we learnt from 1971.

**Sarangapani.** The other thing that I have noticed in India is that we are a stratified hierarchical society. Various groups have traditionally always occupied separate spaces. Schooling as it is emerging today is also catering to a similar kind of stratified homogenized clientele. Ethnic identities are dissolved into the class identities in many middle-class schools. They are like ghettoized spaces, which are partly a produce of privatized education. I think many of us don’t know people or don’t have friends who are not like us. Who belong to other cultures or social classes. So it’s a mix of privatization, operating within a hierarchical stratified society that is allowing this principle of choice to actually segregate the kind of pure-group experiences that you have as students. I don’t know if it is similar in Bangladesh or in Pakistan.

**Chowdhury.** Until very recently, people in India who had good ties with Pakistan have not faced ‘punishment’, the kind that we now see in the entertainment industry. In Bangladesh, we are told that Pakistan does not have flexible policies. Anam, what is your experience of the Pakistani academia, being an educator with a non-biased stance?

**Zakaria.** I think it’s becoming a more and more difficult space. For a year in Pakistan there was a lot of optimism and hope, that we were breaking out of the shackles of extremism and fanaticism, but 2017 changed all that.
The year started off with the disappearances of four bloggers. We continue to see missing person cases and the crackdown on free speech. Blasphemy has become a huge issue, and the state has a problem with anyone who speaks critically and without bias. The institutions that I have been working in have a lot of like-minded people so I am fortunate, but one feels that even in classrooms what one says is monitored. You are being watched, what you say is being watched, how you influence young minds is being watched. And that is a very tricky and scary place to be in, because when religion and nationalism get so enmeshed, then any question on national identity, or any criticism of state policy, very conveniently becomes a case of blasphemy.

In the last few weeks in Pakistan, government policies were being undermined by the rhetoric that they had committed blasphemy followed by mob violence and protests. And these protests and mob violence have become so powerful that they go beyond the law. Who do you watch out for? The state or the non-state violence? Hyper-nationalism is increasing in India and also in Bangladesh from what I witnessed over the summer. I found an interesting discourse while I was in Dhaka, over Bangladeshi nationalism vs Bengali nationalism. People seem to have a very charged, very heightened kind of perception about what those are. I was told that Bangladeshi nationalism is a way to subvert the secular idea of Bangladesh and make it somehow more like Pakistan. Whereas Bengali nationalism is true nationalism. At least, that was one of the narratives that I heard, so please help me understand: What does this Bangladeshi nationalism do? Is it in anyway meant to be inclusive of non-Bengalis or does it have its own ideological agenda?
**Mohaiemen.** Where were these discussions happening? The Gulshan, Banani side of Dhaka or the Dhaka University?

**Zakaria.** The Gulshan, Banani side of Dhaka, absolutely.

**Mohaiemen.** I think within elite circles and intellectual circles, people are still circulating around that discussion because it’s also very easy to understand and, I think, especially very easy to explain to a visitor.

**Chowdhury.** I agree with Naeem about the connotations and the baggage these words can be loaded with. In my opinion, this is about cultural cartography. Another emotional term is ‘cultural capital’. During the mid-1970s, in the hubs of the intellectual-cultural traditions—intangible and tangible—in terms of philosophy and theatre, novels and films—this is how Kolkata was described in public discourse. I am pretty sure that one of the intentions was to demarcate cultural consumption on the basis of ‘yours’ and ‘ours’. So, for example, before 1975, just an imaginary scenario, you could feel a Satyajit Ray’s film or Mrinal Sen’s film was your film as well, from a strictly linguistic definition (identity). But since we occupy a different culture or we coined a different cultural political world now (after 1975), it is easier to identify some new list of cultural products as ‘ours’ and ‘yours’. So it began from a very basic sense of cultural cartography and with some elements of what is believed to be non-secular.

**Sarangapani.** As you spoke about your experience in academia, I was reflecting on the Indian context and that, within our social-science academia, we may still find people who are identified in today’s jargon as ‘pseudo-secularists’ because they are not bound to Hindutva ideology. But, interestingly, within the scientific community of India, you can find a huge Hindutva
discourse gaining ascendancy and people claiming to become historians despite hailing from science backgrounds. In fact, I recently came to know that one of these pseudo-historians has even become a part of the Indian Council of Historical Research. So this kind of migration, and the fact that the scientific community seems to be emerging as intellectual stronghold of the Right while the social-science communities are being choked—funds are being withdrawn, projects are not being offered, positions aren’t being created—is the way in which the intellectual community is breaking up and diversifying and occupying the ideological spaces within the country. When we think of cultural products circulating subcontinentally in the Indian context, there is a marked absence of anything that comes from Nepal, Bangladesh or Pakistan. It’s like we are enough for ourselves and we don’t need to know about people who are a part of our shared history. So there is a deep amnesia—in fact, they don’t even seem to matter as neighbours. As though we can leave them behind and forge ahead and become a shining India and the sole representative of the subcontinent. There is that kind of problem—recognizing and acknowledging and interacting with the wider culture of the subcontinent.

Chowdhury. Naeem, can you recall, during the formation of SAARC, how did scholars reflect upon these points—about knowing others and the neighbouring nations? There must have been some scholars across the border who projected this platform as that kind of an avenue. Can you recall any?

Mohaiemen. I have read more about the Non Alignment Movement than about SAARC. I wanted to bring up the question of memory within generations because, in an earlier essay (for *New York Times*), I had written of
constantly hearing in West Bengal about ‘our village that was over there’. This was also a gesture of hospitality: ‘You should come home, because my pishima is from opaar and should meet you.’ There is a nostalgia, but not for the next generation. There are a lot of things that people will tell you: ‘This was the way it was and then it changed.’ Maybe, but what I have seen is that when I start digging, I don’t find any records of things being this way or that way. I realize that I am also reading textbooks and vernacular material produced by people from Manosh and my generation or slightly younger—i.e. the people who don’t have a living memory of that period. So I think lot of what goes around in the name of history is also a generational struggle with a younger generation now much more in charge of writing the history.

I am not saying people who have memories are more reliable. We know that if you interview someone who is a survivor of 1947, its unlikely their memories are entirely intact anyway—it is very likely that many more things have sedimented on top. But for somebody of Manosh or my generation, it’s a very different kind of memory. From the moment we write the first sentence or when we tell you as a visitor ‘This is the way it was,’ we are repeating a story that isn’t our memory. I think this is something important to think about about the writing of history and as it comes down through the textbooks. I think one of the reasons that the textbooks of Classes 1 to 5 fascinate me is because that’s the generation that doesn’t even have a memory of, say, SAARC—it doesn’t have a memory before 1990. So you’re talking about a 20-year distance from the central event of Bangladesh’s history, i.e. 1971. You are now in
a terrain where you won’t have a living person that can contradict you or add to what you’re saying.

Zakaria. I was working with four generations in India and Pakistan. And, even when I was in Bangladesh, I was keen to locate survivors of 1947 to find out how they understood that partition. I was also working with schoolchildren in Classes 6 and 7, and in them one can definitely see the intergenerational shift. And what happens at least in the context of the ’47 partition is that it gets appropriated, it gets diluted, it gets changed—and recreated in essence as well. How the younger generation understands it today is very different from how it was actually experienced then. When I was in Bangladesh, I was curious to see if all the monuments and genocide centres and studies on genocide was going to create a new history of 1971. Like you mentioned earlier, about how it is so important to wipe out ’47 in that context. Because, again, these become uncomfortable truths and uncomfortable questions, you know . . . How does ’47 happen? And then ’52 and then ’69 and ’71?

When I was working with children, I told them to guess where I was from. Some said India and I asked them what they thought of India. They said that they have learnt from their textbooks that India is their friend and a friend of the liberation war. Then I asked them what they have heard about Pakistan. They started making faces and said that the women were so oppressed, they wore burqas and that they were enemies and so on. When I told them that I was from Pakistan, their jaws dropped. ‘But you speak English and wear jeans,’ they said. This is what happens when you don’t meet each other. I think Bangladesh–Pakistan even more than India–Pakistan don’t have that much
interaction among the younger generations. If they did, it would become easier to craft a new imagination of the other. I don’t know where that is going to go but there definitely is going to be a difference with someone who witnessed ’47 and ’71 and those born post-1990. This you will find on all sides India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Mohaiemen. I think since you mentioned ’47, it is important to note how East Bengal’s experience is very different from that of all the others. Besides the Noakhali riots which were quite deadly, East Bengal did not really experience as many major riots before ’47. Second, it didn’t experience in large numbers the train-to-Pakistan or train-to-India phenomena. They didn’t have hundreds of thousands of refugees coming in—not on the same scale, at least. If you flip the gaze and look at West Bengal, then there was a large migration of refugees, and the working-class population did not migrate with a situation of any comfort. I think that also effects the memories. You are not with the same pool of memory in the two Bengals at all. You have a larger pool of people who left East Bengal and went to West Bengal, and a much smaller number that came into East Bengal. Therefore the reservoir of traumatic memory is less on this side. That’s why the traumatic memories of the ’71 war become more important—because it is also this idea that, without a traumatic memory, the nation can’t have been formed.

Audience member. What I understand is that textbooks play a very big role in shaping young minds. The political agenda is often driven by the leaders of individual countries as well as the societal demands of that country, and the hate narrative is becoming more and more prevalent. As a teacher, what does one tell young minds?
Do they first go back to their cultural roots and then evolve as regional citizens, national citizens, subcontinental and then universal? How do I guide my students to know factual history and not preconceived perceptual history?

Sarangapani. See, I don’t believe that there is some kind of a serial hierarchy through which you form these identities—we need to be carrying multiple identities. It’s not as if the regional or the national identities are any less relevant to who we are in our own community and cultural identities. Placing it in some kind of familiar-to-some-unfamiliar, global-to-local kind of trajectory is inadequate to dealing with identity formation. That’s the first point I wanted to make. The other is that its important for all of us to critically engage with official knowledge. We cannot accept any official narration as truth. It’s untrue to think that Indian textbooks don’t have hate narratives—it is there in all forms, sometimes blatant and sometimes less so. I think all of us as citizens—and the colonial experience was a good training in that—can never take this state for granted, nor can we ever let our own critical reflection down. We need to engage with the state in a critical, proactive manner and not be complacent about any official knowledge. I think the point is that the task of forming the idea of India is never over. Nobody is going to give it to us and say, ‘Now you can start living because your India is formed.’ All of us have the task to form the idea of India that we want to enjoy and we want to continue. I think we would be able to engage as global citizens only if we have been able to evolve an Indian culture that stands for the values we’ve fought for, gained independence for and which forms the common cultural fabric on which all of us can thrive.
INTRODUCTION

When we meet someone, we often ask: ‘Where are you from?’ The answers may vary from names of villages of patrilineal ancestors, countries from where they may have migrated or towns where the immediate family has settled in. The reason we ask such a question is to be able to situate the person in a context, get a sense of who we are meeting, frame their lives for our understanding in howsoever fragmented a manner. Similarly, when we ask the same questions about ourselves as the human species, we refer to ‘history’. History enables us to look at where we come from and the journey that has been so far—the various roads we have travelled as a race, the struggles, the conflicts, the people and ideas we have encountered along the way—the stories of our multiple pasts—or so we would like to believe.

The question of multiple pasts brings us to the question about whose stories does history tell us? And who is narrating those stories? History is complicated. What it is, what it is not, who it is about, who makes it, who writes it, who
decides what to keep and what to eliminate—these are questions that complicate both history, and the way it is written and studied. It becomes even more complex in a country like ours. This is a land that has been witness to the footprints of so many different kinds of people from across the world, over thousands of years. Our civilization is formed by many forces and influences, which make it layered and complex with plurality at its core. These multiple strands of stories are often not linear or chronological. Many things happened simultaneously, and others in loops of time. The causes and effects of these stories are usually not clear and the lines are blurry. Political powers shifted first between kings, then colonial powers and then through independence and partition, shaping and reshaping the contours of the subcontinent. Simultaneously cultural, religious and philosophical movements, class and caste struggles, assertions of gender and sexuality, have written and rewritten our stories. Not a single ‘history’, but a multitude of ‘histories’ have thus shaped the way we live, the way we understand ourselves and our relationship with the world around us.

But like Chinua Achebe said using an African proverb, ‘Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter’. In the constant struggles for power, those who have maintained positions of strength have always pushed the writing of their own singular story. There are some historians too, who have contradicted and challenged these dominant narratives telling stories of the ‘others’. But constantly the structural powers of caste, gender, religion, race and sexualities, among others, have tried to drive away this ‘noise’ of the other historians from the textbooks we read in schools. The hegemonies of certain ways of telling history ensures that the general public, who have not pursued the long and
strenuous journeys of reading histories in universities remain unaware of the works of these historians who challenge power. For the larger public then what is available as history is often singular ones compromised at the hands of such powers. In the process, gaps, erasures and silences necessarily arise within the narratives of the past that we encounter.

This is where the arts come in. The arts in its various forms as plays and poems, songs and films, dances and sculptures live and breathe among the public. They influence, question, mould and shape how we see ourselves and our relationships with the world around us. The arts have always provoked and protested the telling of a single story. Through the arts we are enabled to enquire into our past and ask critical questions about the gaps, erasures and silences that dominant powers of various kinds have created and sustained. The arts seek those stories that have been suppressed, blanked out and made invisible. We are able to seriously, playfully, ironically, and sarcastically engage with them. They have the possibility to disrupt hegemonies of caste, gender, religion, race and sexualities, among others.

I work with India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) where our focus has been to support the journeys of scholars and artists who do just that. As a facilitator, catalyst and provocateur in the field we fund projects that investigate and explore that which is absent from our understanding of our pasts and presents while making ways for our imaginations of collective futures. Here I will share with you some examples of these projects.

INTERROGATING THE PAST: GAPS

Gaps in our understanding of history could arise out of various reasons. There could be lack of evidence, a limited understanding of what is defined as evidence, communities
unable to articulate and narrate their stories because of the imbalance of power or even a dearth of imagination on the part of investigators of the past to be able to find alternative ways of understanding it.

For instance, there has been in-depth scholarship on various aspects of classical music in this country over decades. However, there is very little work that explores the lives of the musicians who play instruments, many of whom come from the lower castes. One such case is that of the players of the Nadaswaram, a wind instrument popular both at religious ceremonies and weddings in south India. In the southern parts of Karnataka these musicians come from the hajama or barber community who call themselves the Savita Samaj. There is no documented history or study on them, though the instrument they have been playing for centuries is an integral part of the Carnatic music repertoire. Ashok Maridas, a film maker, attempted to study this community to make a film that depicts the untold story of the members of Savita Samaj. Using the instrument as a visual metaphor, the film, Casting Music, explores the socio-economic conditions of their lives and the various issues facing their existence. It explores their journey, the many changes that have taken place in their ways of life, and the uncertainties of their futures as well as the future of the Nadaswaram as more and more members of the younger generation move away from music to pursue other occupations. The film strongly critiques the social stigma faced by them and their struggles to find their rightful place in the history of music in southern India.

In another project Umashankar Mantravadi, a sound expert, challenges the singularly visual understanding of archaeological sites such as temples. He argues that the study of ancient sites has been dominated by visual and spatial methods of observation and research. However, since
many of these sites were created for performances, unless they are also studied through their aural qualities and parameters, we will remain ignorant of the history of listening practices in India, and be unable to conserve them without damaging their aural capacities, he postulates. Through his study of Archaeo-acoustics or Ear-chaeology, Umashankar mapped two sites—the Vadakkamnathan temple in Thrissur, Kerala and the Buddhist site of Nagarjunakonda in Anupu, Andhra Pradesh—by recording the sonic properties of their ambience, as a pilot project for a larger exercise of doing the same for five more sites. He aims to create an archive of these sonic properties of the sites on a web platform, enabling users to recreate the listening experience of those sites. Perhaps, his findings will also help the Archaeological Survey of India to develop ways of conserving these sites without impairing their sonic qualities.

These two works, in very diverse ways, illustrate how projects in the arts can enquire into the ways in which we study our past and attempt to bridge some of the gaps in our understanding of history.

INTERROGATING THE PAST: ERASURES

While there have been gaps in history where we have not paid adequate attention to some stories, other narratives have been erased over time due to various socio-political power dynamics that have rendered them invisible.

One such story is those of the women poets of the warkari tradition who composed abhangs, or spiritual poetry dedicated to the Vittala deity of Pandharpur in Maharashtra. Mostly sung in the north Karnataka and Maharashtra regions, these songs are integral to the warkari pilgrimage, a journey of 21 days from Dehu or Alandi to Pandharpur, undertaken in the months of June and July.
The warkari movement began in the late 13th century with the saint-poet Gyaneshwar and continues to this day. While those abhangs composed by male saints like Tukaram, Namdev, Eknath and Gyaneshwar are sung by the community, the ones written by women composers like Aubai, Limbai, Gonabai, Bahinabai and a dozen others have been forgotten. Shruthi Vishwanath, a singer and music composer, has brought some of these abhangs back to life through composing and singing them in the public realm. Like many women’s voices from across the world, the poems of the warkari women speak of the sphere of their immediate domestic lives and inner worlds where chores of the everyday resonate with philosophical realisations about life and living. While at one end the simplicity of these works makes them accessible and endearing, their unabashed outspokenness makes them fiercely feminist. For instance, there is an abhang where Gonabai, mother of Namdev, is remonstrating her son for not taking care of worldly matters and spending his time in search of the lord. Another by Janabai, in tender and sensuous tones, talks of her intimate relationship with Vittala. The compositions speak of desire, longing and physicalities that are bold and audacious. Shruthi’s work has brought not only these abhangs, but also the lives and practices of these remarkable women poets into light, out of the oblivion they were pushed into.

There is another kind of erasure that happens even within dominant narratives—expunging parts of its uncomfortable or conflicting history for the vested interests of powers that be in later times. Enquiring into the relationship of caste, patriarchy and violence and its debates within the history of the Hindu religion is one such story. Abhishek Majumdar, a playwright and theatre director, had been concerned that after the elections of 2014 and the rise of the Hindu right wing, all debates on the hardline
religiosity in India were happening between believers and non-believers. He wondered if such debates ever happened within the frames of Hinduism’s vast intellectual and philosophical expanse. Exploring historical documents and archival materials he wrote *Muktidham*, a play which is set in the fictional context of 8th century India when Hinduism encountered the rise of Buddhism especially among the lower castes. It interrogates the multiple debates within Hinduism during this difficult time, examines the various branches of its philosophy, and traces how one kind of sectarian response that originated through this argumentation, turned increasingly dogmatic and anti-intellectual. This set the course for the Hindu right for the next many centuries.

These two projects delineate the ways in which the arts are able to unearth stories that have over time been extirpated from our sense of history and how their resurgence can create new ways for us to understand our struggling presents.

**INTERROGATING THE PAST: SILENCES**

There are also silences in our histories—stories we are too scared or heartbroken or weak to tell and listen to. Many of these silences arise out of our own complicities or turning a blind eye to systemic violences of power; while others are results of sheer ignorance or arrogance that arise out of our own privileged positions in society.

One such story is that of Kashmir. In the imagination of India, Kashmir is a picture postcard of vivid natural beauty, devoid of human beings. However, over the past few decades the valley has been the site of unprecedented violence and we have still not found a language to speak about it. Sanjay Kak, a writer and film maker, worked with nine remarkable photojournalists from Kashmir to research and
excavate their chronicles of the lives of people over the past twenty-five years. The resultant book *Witness*, comprising 200 images of photographers Meraj Uddin, Javeed Shah, Dar Yasin, Javed Dar, Altaf Qadri, Sumit Dayal, Showkat Nanda, Syed Shahriyar and Azaan Shah represents the public collective memory of the valley seen by insiders from close quarters. The design of the book with its loose spine, bound by a thread, detached image post cards within its pages, haunting layout and the editorial note by Sanjay narrates a story of Kashmir we need to pay heed to. Choosing the visual medium over text, these photographers have been able to dive into quotidian life amidst everyday brutality and the banality of violence attempting to find a new language to speak about a community struggling for agency and self expression.

Another significant area of silence in our histories has been the absence of stories of those who labour. While rulers and the cities and monuments they built, wars and empires and changing hands of power have been at the core of historical narratives, lives of women and men who ‘work, build, and make’ have been absent in our stories. Bhagwati Prasad, a graphic artist, attempted to work on the untold stories of migrant labourers and their tools, as they shape the history of the city of Delhi. These stories provide varying perspectives from those who have come from outside the city to make it their home as it grows in shape and size. *Auzaron ki Chuppi Aur Kolahal* (The Silence and Clamour of Tools) is the graphic book that traces this history through intricate drawings made by Bhagwati as he explores the world of labour, their relationship with tools and the roles they play in shaping our histories yet remaining absent from it. During his many engagements with members of labour groups Bhagwati also painted these images across the walls of the Faridabad Majdoor Library.
where workers meet to bring out a newsletter, the *Faridabad Majdoor Samachar*.

Another way in which silences are created in history is through constructing other people’s identity by representation in the complete absence of their own agency in it. Often this happens because of a complete inequality of power between the represented and those who represent. Zubeni Lotha, a photographer attempted to understand the construction of identity by representation through photographic images—in particular, the photographs of the Konyak Nagas by ethnologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, which are responsible for creating the Naga stereotype. In 1936 ethnologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf came to Nagaland with a camera, and photographed the Konyak people, which became the earliest and most definitive images of them for the western world. His book, *Naked Nagas*, presented to the reader, these ‘noble savages’ uncorrupted by civilisation, framed and informed by Europe’s claim of civilisational supremacy over the ‘primitive Orient’. Zubeni’s project challenged this idea of the Naga identity formed through these images where they had no agency to determine how they wanted to be represented. Travelling through the state and in consultation with people from the community Zubeni built a body of photographic work titled *Looking At the Tree Again*, which is a critique of Haimendorf’s way of ‘seeing’. She photographed people the way they wanted to be seen, thereby also interrogating her own practice of photography on ideas of representation. More importantly, the project raised questions about the nationalistic mission of the modern state machinery that renders communities homogenous and lacking in agency to determine their own identity even today.
REIMAGINING THE FUTURE

While we examine our pasts and provoke history to relook at its gaps, erasures and silences, we need to ask how do we understand who and what is absent in our stories today? How do we ensure that marginalised voices of the ‘here and now’ are speaking their stories? How do we trace the transformations that are happening within traditional power structures disrupting the way they impact society? How do we secure that the future we are imagining is that of a collective that co-exists with differences of perspectives, lifestyles, practices and politics? Unless these multiple and marginalised voices make their place in our artistic work, they will again remain as our present day silences.

One such project attempted to investigate the role and positions of women, women characters and female impersonation by men within the male-dominated practice of the Yakshagana tradition. This was the making of the performance piece Akshayambara by actor and director Sharanya Ramprakash. Trained at the Udupi Yakshagana Kendra under the guidance of Guru Bannaje Sanjeeva Suvarna, Sharanya was among the few women who performed Yakshagana professionally, giving her the opportunity to explore this form with respect to gender roles. Her play delves into the complex debates around women entering this form and the position of men who traditionally have been performing the women characters. Scripted as a play-within-a-play and based on the Draupadi Vāstraharana episode of the Mahabharata, where Dushyasana attempts to disrobe Draupadi in the middle of the royal court in order to humiliate her, in Akshayambara Dushyasana is played by the character of a new woman actor who has joined the Yakshagana and Draupadi by a traditional streevesha or female impersonator. Their conversations and arguments both off and on the stage-within-a-stage format of the play...
investigates into the ideas of masculinity and femininity, morality and its conflicts, power dynamics between genders as well as the urban-rural divide in society. The piece explores the ways in which the Yakshagana form itself is at a point of transformation with the arrival of women performers who are claiming their space in it slowly but steadily.

I would like to end by writing about a project that was not supported by the IFA in its making, but which later received a grant for its public engagement through workshops built around the work. One might ask what happens when an artist challenges normative behaviour? What happens when such a challenge places the audience in the midst of an experience that makes her question her own positions? What happens when such an experience is about the most intimate and private of emotions and actions thrust in full view of the public? What shifts when such a public performance passionately enquires into the archaic and inhuman laws that enter our bedrooms making us unequal citizens of a nation? Such are the interrogations of Queen-Size choreographed by Mandeep Raikhy and performed by Lalit Khatana and Parinay Mehra. Poised as a deeply visceral, simmering, dissenting piece of work, it enables ‘desire’ to be the ultimate resistance. It is centred around sexuality, desire and gender activism raising critical queries about Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code constituted in 1861 that criminalizes homosexuality. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code reads, ‘Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished […]’. The archaic law of 1861 introduced by the British, modelled on the Buggery Act of 1533, is still in force in India. LGBTQIA+ communities and Right to Privacy activists have been fighting the law on judicial and legislative levels over the
last two decades. Mandeep’s work is an act of protest against this law which was triggered by Nishit Saran’s article ‘Why My Bedroom Habits Are Your Business’. The piece, performed on and around a charpai, raises questions about the territories of power—the murmur of bodies at play becoming a form of protest against the authority of the state. Intense transgression here, is where possibilities of equitable lives lie.

Works of art such as Akshayambara and Queen-Size enable us to question the ever dynamic, chaotic present moment where various social, political and economic forces are shaping, moulding and changing our lives. The multiple voices that speak through these shifts and transmutations frame our imaginations of the collective futures we desire.

CONCLUSION

‘Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one’, wrote John Berger, in his novel G in 1972. And then he pledged half the money from the Booker Prize that G was awarded to the Black Panthers, ‘turning the prize against itself’. This refers to the slave trade or profits from the sugar manufacture in the Caribbean which contributed to the wealth of the sponsor. Challenging the singularity of stories, the official versions of history and homogenous documented facts about our past - has been the work of artists. This has enabled the simultaneous telling of many histories, especially belonging to those voices that get drowned by the more dominant ones. Thus, Cesar Cruz—an American gang violence prevention advocate and academic at the Harvard University, and Banksy—a British artist have both been attributed the saying that the arts must disturb the comfortable—the ones who are cushioned in power, determining most times what and whose history must be written. Arts must also comfort the disturbed, they
add—those who struggle with and resist that power, speaking from their own marginalities, creating and chronicling their own histories.

After spending a decade in the corporate sector, Arundhati Ghosh joined India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) as its first fundraiser in 2001 and assumed office as the Executive Director in 2013. In 2010 she received the Global Fundraiser Award from Resource Alliance International, the same year IFA won the ‘India NGO of the Year’ award in the medium category. She is a recipient of a fellowship under Chevening Clore Leadership Awards (UK) in 2015–16 and has worked with the National Theatre (UK) to recommend a strategy for their national reach over the next three–five years. She is also a recipient of the Chevening Gurukul Scholarship for Leadership and Excellence at the London School of Economics in 2005. She often speaks and writes on arts and philanthropy for leading Indian and international non-profit and cultural networks. Arundhati has a degree in economic from Presidency College, Calcutta; a postgraduate degree in management from the Mudra Institute of Communication, Ahmedabad; and a degree in classical dance. She is also a published poet in Bangla.
Jana Natya Manch (Janam) was formed in 1973 in Delhi by some radical theatre amateurs, Safdar Hashmi one among them. For the first five years, Janam did only prosenium plays. Then, in 1978, it went to the streets with its first street play, Machine. Using lyrical language, stylized movements and sound, the play foregrounded the exploitation of industrial workers by the capitalists and the police. Since then, Janam has performed over a hundred street plays on the issues ranging from labour rights to communalism to caste to violence against women.

We perform throughout the year. We perform in slums, in working-class areas where people live and work, in schools, colleges and in middle-class residential colonies. Always taking a partisan position for the people on the periphery, Janam has done performances in and outside Delhi and, on some occasions, outside the country as well. Our group works on the idea of volunteerism. Some of the group members are employed, unemployed, students or retired from service.

One of the major moments in the history of Janam is the murder of the group’s co-founder and then convener,
Safdar Hashmi, in 1989. On 1 January 1989, Janam was attacked by local goons backed by the political party during the performance of our play *Halla Bol* in Jhandapur, Ghaziabad, near Delhi. Safdar was brutally beaten up and died the next day in hospital. We received an overwhelming wave of solidarity and support from political activists, artists and people from all sections of society. On 4 January 1989, we went back to the same site and finished our interrupted performance. That moment inspired several new activist theatre groups to emerge across the country. As a result, on 12 April 1989 (Safdar’s birth anniversary), thousands of street plays were performed by known and unknown theatre groups all over India. Since then, Janam has continued to take its theatre to the people.

Today I’m going to discuss the aesthetics of Jana Natya Manch plays with a special focus on the challenges of staging communalism in these times. The idea is to talk about the performance texts in which we have used different dramatic techniques, devices, language, props, costumes and stories of ordinary people in order to foreground the narratives of the marginalized.

The emphasis of our talk will be on our plays based on the theme of communalism, and how Janam responded to the political changes in the country through the aesthetics of its plays. I will not follow a linear timeline of our repertoire—I will not begin from the beginning.

**YEAR 2002: RESPONDING TO THE VIRULENCE**

The first play I am going to discuss is *Ye Dil Maange More*, *Guruji* which we prepared as a response to the violence in Gujarat in 2002. Like several other artists, poets, writers and intellectuals, we were troubled with the one-sided violence inflicted on the Muslim minorities in Gujarat. We needed to respond to the virulence that we could feel in the sociopolitical atmosphere. The Gujarat riots did not happen
all of a sudden—there had been a build up for several years. The curriculum and the textbooks were one of the few sites where the saffronization of young minds had been taking place much before 2002. History was replaced by the dogma of faith. However, like textbooks and literature, theatre is also a site for memory and a site for multiple histories.

*Ye Dil Maange More, Guruji* attempted to analyse and demolish the idea of the Hindu rashtra pushed by the RSS and the BJP. Structurally, the play has three parts: placards; poetry; and farcical scenes between the rightwing ideologue, Guruji, and his two disciples, Budhibali and Bahubali. The play opens with actors entering in silence, holding placards with statistics related to the loss of property and destruction in the riots. After few moments they break into a poem. (The poems used in the play were written by Hindi poets Vimal Kumar, Manglesh Dabral and Vishnu Nagar while the carnage in Gujarat was still going on.) The three poems present the aftermath of the riots, solicit the memory of the dead and sarcastically pity the efforts of building a Hindu rashtra at the same time as they sharply critique the idea of the Hindutva politics. Here is an excerpt from the first poem:

अपका स्वागत हैं
इस जलते हुए और शीषे की तरह धियालते हुए, इस मरते हुए और मरने से पहले थोड़ा पानी मागिते हुए शहर में
अपका स्वागत हैं।
किस तरह नोचे हैं तितलीयों को पर यहाँ
किस कदर आपको गड़ है धास पाकों में
किस तरह दहाई गई है दीवार
किस तरह लंगाई गई है आग,
लुट गया है क्या तरह सबका विश्वास,
चौंटे हुए पेड़ों और रोली हुए नदियों बाले शहर में आपका स्वागत है...
The second part had a set of images—disturbing photographs of the post-riot situation which were publicized by the media at that time. The images, followed by another poem, a first-hand account of the dead, represent the multitude of violence and the human capability for brutality.

The third part had two farcical scenes based on dialogues between the Guruji and his Bahubali and Budhibali. While Bahubali represented the ‘aggressive’ face of Hindutva politics, Budhibali represented the ‘moderate’ face. In these two scenes, on their mission to create Hindu rashtra, the trio is hatching a plan to demolish the idea of a secular nation. In their dream of Hindu rashtra, there is no place for dissent or any discourse around human rights.

The textual and visual material juxtaposed the idea of ‘India Shining’ with the violence unleashed on the streets of Gujarat.

But how do you create a performance which is responsible and which won’t instigate further violence? These situations often lead to challenging aesthetic questions. Sometimes the answer lies within the structure and form of the play. For instance, in this play, we had three devices—placards, poems, and farcical scenes. Dramatically, the poems appear as bullet points and the imagery in them present the dangers of Hindu-rashtra theory. While the guru and his chelas are planning the future, the poems and the placards foreground the present and the past.

Placards, poems, farce and intermittent silences are some of the devices that are often used in Janam plays. For an activist theatre group like ours, how and where are we going to do a play and what devices we will use are aesthetic and political choices. As historian E. H. Carr says: the historian has to choose. I would say that as theatre activists attempting to tell alternative histories, we also have to choose—the language as well as the side that we take.
1978 TO 1989: THE HUMANIST APPROACH

We often make plays that directly respond to specific incidents and the sociopolitical situations in the country at a given moment. For instance, Machine, Janam’s first street play, was based on an incident that happened in Harig India factory in Sahibabad. That is the kind of material that we often draw upon while making a play.

Janam’s first play on communalism was Hatyare, prepared in December 1978, after the riots in Aligarh. Hatyare talks about Hindu–Muslim brotherhood and about people living in harmony but its approach is different from Yeh Dil Maange More, Guruji. Let me start by reading out an excerpt from Hatyare—the opening monologue by the Sutradhar that establishes the location as well as the idea of the secular in the everyday life.

As the narrative proceeds, the play talks about the industrialists’ strategy of divide and rule by instigating vio-
lence with the help of the police, local goons and political leaders.

Another play, *Apaharan Bhaichare Ka* (1984), was created after the Sikh riots in Delhi. In the play, the concept of bhaichara or brotherhood was brought in as a character who gets kidnapped.

In both these plays, *Hatyare* and *Apaharan Bhaichare Ka*, the characters were not named. They were given generic titles such as Neta and Mantri and so on.

Our play *Hinsa Parmodharm* (1989) was based on a short story by Munshi Premchand. We often pick up stories from literature and adapt them. Stories already have metaphors, well-rounded characters, and, in a Munshi Premchand story, politics as well.

*Mat Baanto Insaan Ko* (1989), another play on communalism, showed how two communities should live together in unity. The play ends with:

मिलके चलेंगे एक रेहेंगे, एकता है अपना धर्म।
ये हैं Hindustan, नहीं ये टुकड़ों में बट पाएगा।
धर्म के नाम पे खून, नहीं सड़कों पे बहाया जायेगा।
हर मुश्किल आसान करेंगे, हर बन्धन को तोड़ेंगे,
एक एक का परवम सब मिलकर दुनिया में लाहराएंगे।

Most of our earlier plays took a humanist approach to representing the problem of Hindu–Muslim religious fundamentalism. We showed that people were not bad, they were not communal but that they get instigated by outside forces such as capitalists, goons and ministers. They were a pragmatic analysis of the problem of communalism that existed in the country at that time. Today, the nature of communal ideas and its proliferation in the society has changed. It is this changed nature of Hindutva propaganda and the role of mainstream media spreading the hatred that
requires a different analysis and a new way of telling history and reading contesting histories.

Marathi playwright and scholar G. P. Deshpande points out in an interview (2002) that it is time for street theatre to handle communalism at the ideological level, and create an understanding about how a given ideology creates the kind of audience that it does in a society. At this juncture, reading and retelling the history of communalism and religious propaganda has to be handled ideologically, as we discussed yesterday in the context of relationship between history and ideology in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. History cannot be separated from the ideology.

1992 TO 2002: TOWARDS THE HINDU RASHTRA

On 6 December 1992, Janam was performing *Mat Baanto Insaan Ko* at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi when the news about demolition of Babri Masjid came in. That incident transformed the shape, colour and texture of the secular fabric in post-Independent India for ever. It was a breaking point. We could see the idea of Hindu rashtra slowly seeping into everyday life. It also changed the way we represented the issues of communalism in our earlier plays.

Janam created a play *Sab Mein Sahib Bharpoor Hai Jee* (1992). It was based on the writings of eighteenth-century saint Sant Kavi Paltu from Ayodhya. The aggressive contestation between two types of collective consciousness was being played out in the country in 1992. Public knowledge about the ownership of the site of the mosque was disputed. How does one make a play without compromising the content in order to prevent more violence being triggered off? *Sab Mein Sahib . . .* was the play in which, for the first time, we foregrounded the idea of Hindu religious fundamentalism. We kept performing *Sab Mein Sahib . . .* till 1998.
Then in 1998, with the BJP forming the government at the centre, the political atmosphere of the country changed again. Now we had a rightwing government backed by the fascist RSS staring in our face. The situation was even more dangerous.

We produced *Gadhaa Puraan* (1998). The script of the play emerged out of improvisations. The play brought forward the idea of one nation and a singular language and culture. The narrative revolves around an undisputed king whose crown is bigger than his head! The protagonist of the play is a donkey (*gadha*). It focuses on a prototype of a king—how a king is and how he should be—showing a slight shift towards a certain kind of expected personality. The play used masks, curtains, photos, images, colourful costumes and music to leave a visual and aural impact. The form of the play lay between a street and proscenium performance.

**2014 AND AFTER**

*Samjho to Jaane* was a play we created before the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and we brought back Guruji in the picture after a very long time. The worst nightmare of a secular country was going to come true—Bahubali was all set to rule the country. And this time he did not come alone—he was backed by mainstream media and top-notch PR agencies. Building a brand image was as important as building the Hindu rashtra. It was completely personality-driven election campaign in which Bahubali was projected as the most suitable candidate. In fact, in *Yeh Dil Mange More, Guruji*, Guruji says to Bahubali that the next time he will be made the ruler. And that’s exactly what happened in 2014. Our play showed the brand-building and emergence of ‘Vikas Purush’. We drew our material from what was shown in the media, public speeches and campaigns during
the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. We shifted our focus from
the larger idea of the communalism to a particular kind of
personality politics that was being played out in the public
sphere. The play showed how the protagonist—Shambhar
(parody on Gabbar)—was being promoted by corporate
money and media. The play opens with:

हम है Promoters. International Promoters. आजकल हम
Shambhar को Promote कर रहें हैं। जिसका नाम है समझो।
Shambhar चाकू, Shambhar bullet, Shambhar दुनाली,
Shambhar riot equipment जो पहले से ही rioters under-
world और religious groups के बीच में बहुत famous हैं। अब
हमें समझो brand को promote करना है, हमे जनता के दूसरे हिस्से
को निशाना बनाना है, other section of people you know.
Other targets. नहीं नहीं, gun चाकू या bullet का target नहीं,
hमारे promotion का target है जो किसी bullet से कम नहीं।
Shambhar के नाम, समझो के बाद हम उनको एक नया getup, एक
नया Makeover करने वाले हैं। ताकी वह जनता को अपना सा लगे।
So bye bye ढीली निविकर, bye bye काली टोपी and here comes
समझो in designer kurta, specially designed for समझो at
your market place.

The media did not appear in our earlier plays. But
today it is unthinkable to do a play on communal politics
without showing mainstream media’s role in it. Unfortu-
nately, what we see is the media aggressively trying to
rewrite the narrative through fake news and blatant lies.
They are explicitly refuting the history of secularism and
multiculturalism in our country. The media performs the
political, therefore in a play on communalism today, the
media can be used as an interesting dramatic device. Samjho
to Jaane urged the audience to make the right choice in
favour of democracy, secularism and constitutional rights.

After the 2014 election results, we prepared Chhappan
Chhati. This was not a term that we coined—it could be
found in speeches and news reports. We elaborated on
the idea of personality-driven politics. The artificially constructed discourse around mandir–masjid has been expanded since then. The cracks have become deeper, ‘normalized’ and ‘legitimatized’. Today the daily life of ordinary citizens and public culture is deeply affected by communal politics and an unashamedly communal media.

Our play *Achche Din* (2016) explores how the socio-economic interests of the populace get choked in the mantle of religious fundamentalism. The play has references to the mob-lynching incidents in northern India and the killing of public intellectuals like Dabholkar and Kalburgi and Pansare. The ideas of dissent, multiculturalism and constitutional rights are shown to be under attack. The aggression by the Hindutva bhakts is unleashed on the streets every day. We are constantly told what do we need to write, read, eat, and wear. *Achche Din* begins with:

हम आर्थ हैं, हम देशमक्त, हम अपने धर्म के रचक हैं। हम झुकने को
तब्यार नहीं। हम हिंदू राष्ट्र बनाएँगे अब झुकने को तैयार नहीं।
एक ही सबकी भाषा होगी, राष्ट्र की परीभाषा होगी, बड़े लोग और ऊँची जाती,
यही राष्ट्र की झूँकी होगी।

As theatre activists, we feel we need to find new entry points to reclaim the history that is being appropriated and distorted by the Hindutva elements in the country.

We have been looking for new forms, something that our group has not explored. We are looking for new materials that can be adapted into a play. In *The Last Letter*, we tried to connect the idea of caste oppression and communalism in India. This short reading performance was created as a response to Rohith Vemula’s suicide (institutional murder) at the University of Hyderabad in January 2016. Rohith’s suicide note forms the core of the performance text. Three actors intersperse the text of his letter with poetry in Hindi, to create a moving experience. The
performance also takes up some other letters, such as those targeting Rohith as ‘anti-national’.

We need to use new devices to bring out complex layers of relationship between the Hindutva, personality politics and the role of mainstream media’s communalization of issues. The political atmosphere is volatile. Incidents of street violence against minorities, Dalits, intellectuals and artists by Hindutva outfits, state coercion, anti-people policies, rigging during elections—these are all part of the everyday. There is an attempt towards normalization of violence.

The new challenge for us is to showcase the novelty of absurdities that we are facing everyday. Every day there is something new, something more absurd, something more grotesque than the previous day’s news. How do we respond to that quickly?

Our most recent play, Chor Machaye Shor, is an effort to respond to the reckless implementation of the Hindutva agenda. We are trying out a structure to respond as swiftly as possible. We are drawing our material from media stories. Every scene in the play has three parts: What is incident/story? What is the role of the government and the media? What is our response? The idea is to decrease the verbose-ness and make a visually active scene. The challenge, however, is how to deliver the subtext within the swiftness of the performance text.

In the current times, language and words are stripped of meaning. Words that have histories of hundreds of years are losing out to the idea of ‘one nation’. Our collective vocabulary for describing diversity, tolerance and human rights has been formed after several years of struggle. The Right is distorting or appropriating these words. For instance, ‘secular’ is now called ‘sickular’. In this atmosphere of the fear of vigilantism, could we think of performing a
play like Ye Dil Maange More, Guruji? How do we negotiate our performance space that is in direct contestation with the Right? Our audiences have always supported us. The performance space comes alive with the presence of actors as well as spectators. We are aware that theatre is not the only force that influences the spectators’ minds. Nonetheless, it does help raise some questions about the very material condition of those who are watching the play. As Safdar once said, ‘The purpose and function of agit-prop theatre is to agitate the people and to mobilise them behind fighting organizations.’ We have started to wonder if, in the given atmosphere, our spectators will remain our allies if we are attacked again during a performance. With all these questions in front of us, we need to reclaim the streets, nukkads, factory gates, to counter the Right’s destructive narratives. The sites of political contestation cannot be left vacant for them. We have to build a discourse around how cohesive communities of rightwing believers have formed through the cultural fusion of texts, myths, symbols, religion and rituals.

Eminent historian Hartoj Oberoi argues that religious identity has to be understood not as a category in itself but also as a historical process. It does not get formed in one day. Cultural activists like us need to find out new ways of foregrounding these ideas in simple and robust entertaining ways. G. P. Deshpande reasons, ‘The new forms of theatre or arts, in the present, will be determined by the new politics around us.’

In the end, I would like to suggest that theatre is a site for recollection, site of memory, site where language is preserved, site where various histories are preserved. And in the process of preserving these, theatre cannot remain a mere site for presentation. It has to become a site of analysis and interpretation. This is what Janam has attempted to do
for the last so many years—making theatre the site for contesting the idea of India.

**QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION**

**Audience member.** The plays that you perform on the street itself—do you take any feedback from the audience? What is their level of comprehension? And do you change the scripts to make them more accessible and understandable by these people?

**Komita Dhanda.** We produce a play and immediately take it to the streets. We perform at factory gates, in slums and residential colonies where workers live and work. Our local hosts like women’s organizations or trade unions watch our plays and comment. Sometimes after the show is over, people come to us and say, ‘Aapne woh nahi dikhaya.’ (‘You did not show that.’) Two days ago, before I came to Bangalore, we were performing in Rangapuri, a basti next to a very posh colony in Delhi. We performed *Chor Machaye Shor.* The play did not talk directly about the debate on EVMs being rigged, but one of the audience members said, ‘Aap ekdum sahi keh rahe ho. Humnein to use kabhi vote hi nahin kiya. Pata nahin mera vote vahan kaise chala gaya.’ (‘You are absolutely right, we never voted for him. I don’t know how my vote went there.’) Audiences make their own meanings. These sorts of reactions help us know whether the play is working or not. Help us understand if the audience is able to comprehend or not. We often call certain people to see the preview before we take it to the streets. They give us feedback. Our plays also keep changing. Sometimes something new happens and we add a word as reference. The process is organic in nature and that helps us connect to the audience.
Audience member: I have two questions. Have you ever contemplated the fact that you can use languages other than just Hindi? Do you think in Bangalore you would really connect with the audience in Hindi even though it’s the national language?

Dhanda: This is a sort of a limitation. Our work is in Hindi because that’s the language we know as a group. But we have performed in India and outside without changing the language. The visual nature of the performance helps us deal with the question of language. We try to break the language barrier through other techniques as well. For instance, when we performed *Ye Dil Maange More*, *Guruji* in Silchar, the placards were in Bangla. In South Africa, we used placards to describe the scene in Xhosa and Zulu. Recently, we did a bilingual play in collaboration with a Palestinian group. The play was created in Hindi and Arabic and performed in 11 cities in India.

Audience member: Is there a particular type of incident you choose to make a play on?

Dhanda: It depends. Not all our plays are based on real-life incidents. In the case of the plays I mentioned, there have been some trigger points. *Hatyare*, for instance, was a response to the Aligarh riots. In another instance, few years ago, two Dalit girls were raped and hanged in a village in Uttar Pradesh. The incident was gruesome. Then we used a form called Playback Theatre—a dramatic representation of voluntarily shared stories and experiences of audience members. We performed for an invited audience to share their experiences on gender violence.

Audience member: Do you ever think of the trajectory that Jana Natya Manch has had over the years? For example, being Marxist and pro-working class in the
late 1980s, and onwards and then shifting towards issues with more liberal values like anti-communalism? Would you agree on that observation?

Dhanda. I would disagree about communalism being an issue with liberal values—it is everyone’s issue. Communalism affects everybody including the worker. Like in Hatyare, the character of the capitalist wants other lock factories to be closed so that he can monopolize the business. Whether it is communalism or any other social issue, we always try to connect it to the lives of the ordinary people and show how these issues impact the working class in particular.

Audience member: Two observations related with communalism and perhaps, portraying, a democratically elected—you know, a very difficult political word to choose, you can’t say fascist any more in the modern, new liberal world. It has a different connotation . . . Some of us find the glorious-past—a harmonious past between Hindus and Muslims—discourse a very difficult, problematic one, perhaps even a false one. So as a cultural activist on stage and on the street, do you think that there can be other narratives or other discourses that cannot connect or need not connect with the glorious past and still put the importance or significance over the harmonious present or the collaborative present?

Dhanda. In our recent plays, we are trying to challenge the notion of humanist approach. This is not to say that there was never a harmonious past. But when we see today the mindless one-sided violence perpetrated by rightwing outfits, it is difficult to talk only about the glorious past. What we showed in our earlier plays was exactly this liberal human approach, i.e. all communities should live in harmony. This would be an inadequate representation and analysis of the situation vis-à-vis the
communal violence in the country at present. Thus, there is a shift in our approach. But we are also hopeful that, eventually, the ordinary citizens will say, ‘Enough is enough—no more violence!’ The ordinary citizen doesn’t want violence. The challenge for us is how to show the brutal reality alongside the possibility of a collaborative present and future.

Manosh Chowdhury. A small note—in the popular art forms, portraying the democratically elected people who are not doing that much democratically is a very difficult choice. We didn’t have this problem in Bangladesh, because we had two military junta who were not democratically elected, so I do know the dilemma with this.

I have been on the street as well for some years, and I find that whenever we make a performance that mocks these rulers, the new generation finds it comical. For it does not understand the power nexus behind these dictators. That is a dilemma I personally face.

Dhanda. I partially agree with that. We try to resolve this dilemma by juxtaposing the caricatures to certain other scenes, with the use of silence, poetry or real-life incidents. We hope that the audience understands the darkness of the humour that these caricatures are painted with. These are again political and aesthetic choices.

Audience member. Some of the topics are really intense and need an audience that will be able to absorb and dwell upon the messages. Can you throw some light on their receptivity among schools?

Dhanda. We have performed almost all our plays—on gender violence or communalism or labour rights—in schools. A few months back, we performed our play on violence against women in schools in Calcutta. Sometimes if the play has scenes that show extreme physical
violence, we request the host schools to send only their senior-school students to watch the performance.

In schools, we often engage in discussions after the performance. As far as the question of receptivity and comprehension goes, we believe that our audience, whether at a factory gate or a school, is very intelligent. Ultimately what we are doing is taking incidents from their life and showing it back to them. I think they understand.

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This morning, Arundhati, Komita and Sanathanan gave us numerous possibilities of how art and theatre engage with the idea of history. I’ll make a slight departure, though a lot of the raw material we are working with are very similar, and explore the idea of heritage, conservation of heritage and how education is becoming an interesting and important part of it. I am a filmmaker and an anthropologist, I’m coming into history from the point of view of cultural construction. Artefacts of culture, whether art or cinema, are very active parts of cultural production. They are created with a particular point of view and are products of certain politics. However, it should not go unnoticed that the patterns of circulation and consumption of these artefacts also have a wide array of implications. Visual anthropology enables us to understand those constructions—the visual and the material—and I look at concepts such as heritage through those lenses.

How many of us believe that heritage is something to do with the past? I don’t. I think heritage is concerned with the future. Heritage is something that we construct. By implication, then, whose prerogative does heritage become? Who is responsible for it, who carries the load of it?
I’d like to share a few anecdotes with you around the idea of materials. In Ladakh, we now realize that one of our biggest concern is concrete. The way it is being used is not sensitive to the local climatic conditions, and is creating a great imbalance with the earthen vernacular architecture. I discovered recently that concrete was introduced by Sir John Marshall (1876 – 1958), the first director general of the Archaeological Survey of India. At the time, the ASI was setting down roots in this country and concrete was the new invention. It was a product of the industrial revolution, and gradually, it became the answer to everything. It was strong, waterproof, modern and seemed to be permanent. And a lot of heritage we have inherited, whether we like it or not, are restorations or reconstructions that took place during the Raj.

This leads me to another point—that heritage also assumes a certain contemporary aesthetic. We are constantly trying to recreate a past with materials available to us in the present. This construction, includes the intent, and the methodology along with the materials. For instance, I do not know the circumstances because of which this school, Vidyashilp Academy decided to have a Gothic entrance. Why not something baroque, something from the early twentieth century, say, something Modernist? So: What is it that we are trying to achieve when we make these illusions? What is this look that is so important for us when we think of history, and what is the kind of social agency that this carries?

Have we ever wondered how, as a group of individuals, we relate to the past? One of the things that has become very popular, in Delhi, in Calcutta, and I’m sure in Bangalore too, are heritage walks. This is an example of an individual, or a group of individuals reclaiming certain narratives. What the presentations before mine demonstrated was a social
way of reclaiming or creating an understanding of a past. When we do that, what is there at the back of our mind? What is it that we are looking for? What is this weight of, and how do we negotiate with this idea of tradition? Whose tradition is it? When Sanathanan was talking about Sri Lanka and when I talk about Ladakh, there is a constant appropriation of tradition. How does it get layered? It is very similar to putting a layer of concrete on a building. How does that change the weight of that building? And, of course, there is the political. We are standing here today on the anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition—I don’t really need to elaborate on that . . . enough has been said. I will take a couple of examples from Ladakh because that is where I have been working—and it is important for me as an anthropologist to be located somewhere—but I will also try and urge you to think of the parallels as I speak.

What is our imagination of Ladakh? In the contemporary context, a large part of how Ladakh is imagined, in India, was constructed by one film. What India’s misinformed development policies could not do, one film has done. On one hand, Ladakh today is imagined as a kind of frontier. Ladakh, in Jammu and Kashmir is made up of 2 districts, Leh and Kargil. They are really large in land mass and very sparsely populated. Leh district has a rare distinction of having 3 international borders with Tibet, China and Pakistan. Almost all the wars that have been fought in the subcontinent have been fought at those borders. But it is also a Buddhist Shangri-La, a homogenous Lamaistic culture where people are drumming huge brass gongs and praying and doing things we don’t quite understand. This imagination that we have of a certain space is also being actively constructed for us. Who is doing it and why are the questions we need to ask.

When one studies Ladakh, it is often referred to as the ‘Crossroads of High Asia’—a book written by Janet Rizvi.
It means that Ladakh is in the middle of western and eastern Asia. This was where Arabs were trading with Tibetans and Central Asian silk route traders were interacting with subcontinental India. Exports from Varanasi and other production centres in India were reaching the Silk Route through Ladakh. Take the example of Ladakhi jewellery. It has corals, turquoise, pearls and gold. None of these materials are ethnically Ladakhi. Effectively, the most traditional object of a particular place is actually being constructed out of things that arrive from the far corners of the continent by trade and that is how Ladakhi culture has been derived. It is very important to remember this because culture is indeed only possible in interaction and exchange, it can almost never exist in isolation.

When we actually engage with the history of a space for academic reasons, we have to look at sources of history. We’ve already spoken about the kind of agency that history writing has, I don’t need to elaborate on that. In Ladakh the primary source of history is the monastic documentation. Monasteries, apart from being a space that houses a certain religious discourse, but not spaces where people simply meet and discuss philosophy. They controlled large tracts of land for the longest period of time; the villagers paid tributes to the monastery, either as tributes in terms of what they produced, or in terms of labour and those relations continue even today. It is very erroneous on our part to look at the monasteries as an isolated museums of Buddhist art. Second, the royal chronicles. Very little needs to be said about that, but there is one incident that I would refer to which rarely gets mentioned. Ladakh has seen several battles. Of these, the largest battle that it has witnessed was back in the seventeenth century at the peak of the Namgyal Dynasty when the army of the 5th Dalai Lama (1617–82) attacked Ladakh. At that point of time, the territory of Ladakh extended way beyond Kailash Mansarover.
Aurangzeb (1618–1707) was, the emperor in Delhi. Kashmir was being administered by Afghan generals. The Namgyal king, sent an emissary to Kashmir for help. The only clause provided in return for military help was that the construction of the Jama Masjid in Leh, which had been stalled for several decades, be completed. Aurangzeb simply asked for a mosque for Muslim traders where they could pray. The Treaty of Tingmosgang was signed and it still defines the eastern border of Ladakh with Tibet. These are the histories we forget. The Mughal chroniclers have also mentioned Ladakh, the main reason being pashmina. The shawls that get made in Kashmir would never have been made, if the raw materials were not arriving there. There exists a history of material culture in the Srinagar–Leh highway. It is not just a road that tourists use or the military uses, it has a cultural ramification.

One might have also have heard of the ‘Great Game’. When the British were ruling a large part of the subcontinent, Jammu and Kashmir was never really under British rule—they were an ally. There was a great fear that the Russians and the French might invade, so the period around the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a range of agents moving about the region and trying to understand its geopolitics, coined the term ‘Little Tibet’. A lot of the documentation that we see, especially in the form of travelogues, which can be broadly categorized as colonial documents of that period, were nothing but reports being made for the imperial government to properly understand the threat of war. Moving on to contemporary historians working on Ladakh, an Irishman, John Bray, has comprehensively worked on documents produced by the Moravian missionaries as they too have been in the region.

It is only in the last couple of decades that a certain recognition and acknowledgement of the presence of
Christians and Muslims in Ladakh, have come into circulation, and researchers are increasingly using oral history to try and reimagine other histories of the region. When I started, a lot of my work in Ladakh was positioned around the history of Islam in the region. And my first challenge was the paucity of textual sources. When I began to write academic papers for European institutions, they were all aghast with my lack of references—because that is the framework that you will have to fit into. But there have been local scholars such as Abdul Ghani Sheikh whose work has been published. This also brings us to a very strange space where the legitimization of this history happens only once it is written in a particular manner.

A lot of historical research pins itself around archaeology. August Hermann Francke, engaged with an archaeological survey of the region, at the turn of the century and since there has been hardly been any consistent archaeological mission. A lot of scientific research has been carried out in recent years, mostly again by foreign scholars, and slowly a certain periodisation is emerging which is important for us while working with material and visual culture and I’d like to share how I have periodised Ladakh around certain concepts of trade, circulation, and of mobilities.

In the mid-twentieth century while Ladakh and its borders were being reconfigured and they were still trading with Tibet and Central Asia, however, by the early ’50s they were gradually clammed down and till the 1970s Ladakh was completely cordoned off. Apart from the Ladakhis, Kashmiris and locals from Jammu, no one was allowed enter. Another myth, I hope I can shed some light on is that what we know as the LOC (Line of Control) and what is referred to as Pakistan Occupied Kashmir is actually Pakistan-administered Ladakh. Baltistan shared several similarities with Ladakh, in terms of language, food, and dress
and in the thirteenth–fourteenth century, that part of Ladakh had adopted Islam, and converted into Shiaism. I don’t wish to trivialise our national history, but there is a version of what happened around 1947, when the Indian Army was sent to Kashmir, when the Treaty of Accession was signed. The Indian army were at the LOC (Line of Control) and were reporting back to Delhi, the status of their military advancement and offered an estimate to complete the acquisition when they were actually asked to stop. So much of the politics of the subcontinent is constructed on the notion of this dispute, though it will never go down in history that it was something that we constructed. We constructed the Line of Control and in 1971 Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Mrs Indira Gandhi signed the treaty in Shimla. It was actually agreed that the Line of Control would be used as a de facto border. To complete the periodisation, till 1947 Ladakh had a role and identity in that region and between 1947 and the early 70s, it was completely kept in isolation. The only people who went there were administrators and teachers of Kashmir. For them it was termed a punishment posting. Teachers and administrators who found themselves out of favour with their seniors were posted there and were forgotten about, there were people who were extremely frustrated, they were people who were certainly not there to enjoy the landscapes and found it quite difficult to live there. For these 20 years Ladakhis were told that they were fools and capable only of becoming porters and taxi walas. Can you imagine what that does to the psyche of a region? I remember I used to go into the Nubra valley for my research around Islam and ask people their notion of 1947. Independance of 1947 (for the rest of India) was not only not liberation but the exact opposite of it because for the next 25 years Ladakhis were in a condition mimicking imprisonment. In 1971 when parts of Nubra valley were recovered by the Indian Army, for 5 years
they were still cordoned off just to make sure that their alliances were clear. The Indian Army needed to protect them, that was the word used, to make sure that their alliances were towards the right party and they were not shifty about where they belonged. I have accounts of people who were in class 10 and class 12, who were 17 or 18 and were going to apply to college, and for 5 years, they were just working as bonded labour for the army. They couldn’t move out, what does it do to your psyche? In the early ’70s, in a very fortuitous way, again under the pressure of the military, Ladakh was opened for civilian traffic. The reason it was done was, it was very difficult for the military personnel to actually travel to their home towns because they would get very short leaves and most of the leaves would get over, getting in and out of there as there were no flights. They would have to go by road to Srinagar and then Jammu and then take a train from Jammu. This prevented them from going home for years on end. Under such pressure from within the military, movement was allowed and they tried to make it possible for their families to visit them. It was in lieu of this that tourism was initiated in Ladakh because they had to open it up for civilians. This was post the 1971 war, what we also tend to forget is the ’71 war, you know the epicentre as the formation of Bangladesh but the war was also being fought at the northern border and this was the time when large parts of territories were being reclaimed by the Indian army.

This was the second phase from the mid ’70s, till the ’90s. The people coming from the west were scholars who wanted to study Tibetan art. Tibet was in a volatile state and thereby, inaccessible; Ladakh was next of kin. This was an important period when all academics, with the right intention, were coming into Ladakh. They were looking at Ladakh within the larger context of Tibet, one can observe yet another construction around the colonial phrase ‘Little
Tibet’. In 2010, when the floods happened in Ladakh, a television journalist from Delhi was in Leh and was interviewing a Ladakhi woman, who was very distraught because she was looking for her family members whom she couldn’t find. The journalist put the mic in front of her and went on to introduce her as a Tibetan. One must realise that Ladakhis and Tibetans are by no means synonymous; there are huge cultural variants between them and they do not identify with each other at all. I bring up this example to see that how within us we have these imaginations.

The contemporary period can be identified as post liberalisation, however the effects have perhaps trickled into Ladakh only now over the last five years. Mobile phones do work sometimes and you have some internet and the Pangong Lake, is a large garbage dump of packets of Maggi and plastic bottles because there are people flying in from across the country and the only thing they want to see is that the lake and have Maggi at the 3 Idiots cafe.

The community, what is the kind of role and imagination they have? One of the ideas that I wanted to bring up is mythology. Ladakh is a rain shadow area of the Himalayas and a trans himalayan region with very sparse vegetation. The notion of the sacred groves is very popular here. If you said that a grove was sacred, what you were doing is in a way you were protecting it from being destroyed.

There was a man called Rinchen Zangpo, referred to as Lotsava, the lotus born. He has been credited for bringing Buddhism back into this region. Vajrayana, a third wheel, which is a confluence of Mahayana and Brahmaminism was brought into Ladakh. Those familiar with Tibetan Buddhism will be able to relate it to an extremely ritualised form which developed a stunning visual and material culture. Back to myths, a very interesting prevalent practice, any temple they cannot remember having built themselves or
in the memory of their three or four forefathers was built by Rinchen Zangpo. There is archaeological proof that the life of Rinchen Zangpo was very finite. Documents locate his existence between the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and attribute the construction of a temple complex of Nyarma (and Tabo in Spiti) to him. He perhaps even offered his blessing to a few more. It is, however, impossible that he lived for 600 years and constructed temples in Ladakh between the eleventh and the seventeenth centuries. It is one thing to go and tell them they are wrong but, the real question is that where is this coming from?. Is this a community’s way of using mythology to protect something because the agency of that single man was important. By eluding to that name, they are actually attaching a certain amount of importance. So heritage is not just being constructed by adding a layer of concrete, it is also being constructed by adding a name and a narrative to the site and saying ‘this is made by Rinchen Zangpo and hence this is very important’ and it is sacrosanct, we cannot touch it. Having said that, a lot of contemporary myths are developing within the tourism narratives based on ill informed history and that is dangerous.

When we speak of community, the word more and more in circulation today is the idea of stakeholders. When we attach the word stakeholders to community, what happens? The government, the funding agencies, people in the tourism industry, along with people like me who are either researchers or part of a certain NGO working there become invested into that space, we also become a kind of stakeholder. And it takes us back to that point I was making earlier about a social agency. At what point do we decide that something from the past needs to be protected? And why? And then we go and do research on it and prove it is rather important.
EDUCATION OUTREACH PROGRAMME, LADAKH 2018:
A CASE STUDY OF AN EDUCATION INTERVENTION

At the Achi Association, our mandate is conservation of the Himalayan heritage, and the question we continually confront is how we define it, materialise it? The association is engaged with heritage—mainly through monuments, and a lot of brick and mortar kind of work, a lot of research and a lot of it depends on the community itself because we’ve learnt it the hard way that, without the participation of people there is almost nothing that one can achieve. Our expertise is around earthen architecture and wall paintings, but these do not exist in isolation, indeed they are wrapped in a very complex web of things. Research helps us explore some of the links between the historical and the sociological, the tangible and the intangible. It’s easier in my mind to restore an existing building but how do you restore and repair connections or the flows that have been disrupted through generations?

How does one address the gap between our imaginations of what Ladakh should be and Ladakh’s imagination of what Ladakh should be? The latter has been very heavily influenced by Delhi, by the kind of policy making, development projects, by the kind of people who have not had the opportunity to engage with the geography, the climate or the history and ushered for the last couple of decades, communities in that direction. There is an acute understanding of the problems with constructing in concrete, and a proper understading of the material has not developed locally, but experientations are in process. But for the last 30 years the state and the leading institutions have adopted concrete and more recently there is a government policy and funding through the Rajiv Gandhi Awas Yojna. This rendered the entire historic Leh old town overnight into a slum. Because it was all kacha, earth architecture.
Under that scheme a huge amount of money was given for the redevelopment of Leh. The government of India financed massive reconstructions after the 2010 floods, where the fragility of constructing with concrete was quite evident. It leaves the people little choice to access this money and in order to access this money we’ll actually have to take our history and say it was a slum whereas the old town in Leh which was built in the sixteenth century is perhaps the most cosmopolitan and multicultural bazaar that existed in this part of the world.

A certain amount of inter-disciplinarity is required when we try and look back at history. In Achi Association, we work with geologists, archaeologists, art historians and anthropologists and even linguists. Because what we often encounter looking back at history and it’s interpretations, are gaps between different knowledge systems. Each of us who go there have to also remember that we are going there with a particular philosophy, or a disciplinary framework, we are coming from a particular school of thought, such as returning to the vernacular. That is one school of thought, we are hoping that by returning to the local materials and processes and adapting them to contemporary scales, we can make it sustainable. It is very important for us to remember that when we are engaging with the past we cannot be absolutist. We have to be constantly open to ideas and adapt ourselves to contemporary needs.

When working with oral history, we are reminded constantly, that memory is fragile, and in our subcontinent fractured, fragmented and subjective, memory has a lot happening within it, it is not simple. It is very important for us to remember that there have been major gaps in flows, such as those created by colonial and national discourses on education both in terms of access to education and continuities in our imagined histories. I have access to
a certain kind of education and hence have the capacity
to bridge certain gaps in my mind and move on in order
for my work to continue. But if those gaps continue in the
field I’m working in then my work will be restricted.

As we approach the core of this talk which is around
education, I would like to share another experience, which
made us question the impact of our work. Very often we’ve
understood that what we imagine as valuable may not be
the same as for the people who are living there, have imag-
ined as valuable, in that way does culture reconcile with
history?

Most of us might have heard of the temple called
Alchi. It is a complex of temples, perhaps the oldest in
Ladakh. A similar complex is Wanla, where the Achi Associ-
ation has worked for over 10 years. We started working there
in 2003–04 and by 2012–13 we had actually finished about
80 per cent of the architectural restoration and conserva-
tion of a significant part of the wall paintings. Around
2014–15 we heard that the Wanla monastery was being
included in list of monuments of national importance to
be protected by the Archeological Survey of India. We met
the villagers, the monks, trying to understand what was
going on? One of the the implications would be that we
would not be able to work there. Our only intention was
to try and see whether we could complete the work there
that we had started. Not a single person in the village came
and told us what was going on. What we discovered was
that the people of the village felt that if Wanla did get listed
under ASI, it would mean a huge amount of resources
would flow into the village. People in the village would
get jobs, and that this was their best bet for quick devel-
opment. Here is the classic situation demonstrating this gap
of understanding. Eventually, the ASI did take it up, there
was a line in the gazette which said that the Wanla temple
complex was among the 3 new buildings that were being included in the list of monuments to be protected but the ASI have still not put up the board . . . Which eventually means that for the last three summers no maintenance work has happened on the temple and on my last visit this year, with the German Ambassador who wanted to go and see the space, as the German embassy had funded the project for about two or three years we realised that two new concrete buildings had been constructed under the twelfth-century fortress in these three years. These are the things we are plagued with and this is why I come into education.

First we created a platform where these kids could come back to Ladakh and work there because what had happened in the meantime was that there was a migration of young people due to the lack of educational resource in Leh, to Delhi, Chandigarh and Jammu. Once they move, they find it difficult to move back as there is more opportunity outside. It was important to create a culture where young people are able to interact within themselves and recreate that confidence about what is it that they want. How is it that they are looking at history? I constantly use this word for myself, are we the new colonizers who are going there and telling them how to think? It is very important to think of that? This building has to be protected but what do they want to do with the building? That is much more important. We also have to demystify heritage and history. We have to break them down into smaller constituents so that people can start interacting with them. When we started designing these projects and workshops, we wanted to start simply by asking kids to draw. Sananthanana was talking about how people drew their homes. It’s very important, from a young age to have an opportunity to explore some medium or some mode of self-expression.
In 2016 we asked our young Ladakhi interns to create a database of all the schools recording the available resources, human resources and physical resources and where is it that we can sneak in. Can they give us a day in a week? Can they give us a week in a month or a year where can we get in and what is it that we can do? And next we had to also identify, what is it that the kids wanted to do?

One thing that we did is that we started developing some teaching aids. We chose 4 areas: rock art, fortifications, vernacular architecture and wall painting and try and create something young people can relate to. Common motifs such as the wheel of life as, it has been represented across periods. But what are the elements? What is the reason to have it? Why is it represented? These are ideas that we want to start talking about with the kids. Another often repeated motif which comes out of the Jataka tales, is Four Friends, the elephant helping the monkey who was helping the bird to get the fruit and so on. We have also tried to recreate the temples, which have a particular grammar, with the protecting deities and a mandala and then there are images of Buddha and bodhisattvas and then invariably some mention of who made the temple, why they made the temples. We felt that rock art is something that our colleagues, Quentin and Tashi Ldawa had done a lot of work in . . . A very interesting transition happened in the nineteenth century when the trade routes in Ladakh did not follow only along the rivers. They would traverse through the mountain passes but with the Dogra invasions in Ladakh, the roads which we have now inherited, came into being and go along the river valleys. When the Dogras came and invaded Ladakh under Zoravar Singh, they found it much simpler to traverse it through the river valleys. That is what people in the plains do. People in the mountains
don’t do that, people in the mountains walk the mountains. They invariably go down to the river, those routes are longer. What is happening now with the mapping of sites of rock art and the sites of fortifications, recreating how Ladakh would’ve been probably traversed within itself just 100 years ago because that history has already disappeared, that work was never done. In this slide what we are trying to achieve is to show how people lived in Ladakh and how it developed. At the very beginning they actually lived on the ridge. Subsequently they again made fortifications right on top of the ridges. This was again the crossroads and they had to protect themselves. And it is only over time that these dwellings came closer and closer down and to the fields, earlier the fields were down below but they lived right on top but as they grew more and more comfortable in being able to protect themselves, they moved closer down to their fields. The final topic that we are dealing with is the idea of vernacular architecture, to kind of recreate the values of the materials and processes that went in and what were the benefits of it, how do we continue to use some of those benefits and adjust them to our contemporary lives and so on.

This summer we did a series of workshops and then again we did a set of workshops in Leh with teachers and again Komita was there with us. Till now we’ve been functioning mostly with voluntary support from our friends. We did a series of workshops where we took these ideas to the teachers. We invited teachers from government and the private schools in Leh. The teachers had a lot of fun. This is the first of the ice-breaking exercises that we did with theatre and getting to know each other. Then each of them created a small teaching module about how they would like to talk about heritage and eventually they made presentations on and it made is easier for us to understand
the things that are important for them. Of course most of them enjoyed this bit where we actually gave them Markalak, a very fine local clay that is available there which is used to plaster the houses to make models with them and to also see what are the kind of stuff that they are making. This one is actually very interesting this one is the butter tea maker, head of an Ibex, the *chodme*, lamps.

And subsequently we did a whole series of workshops with kids, I’ll go straight to day 2 because that is where I can show you images of the brick making work that we did. We start with storytelling, this is the way we can understand by exchanging stories that are important for them, what is it that can learn from them, songs, narratives that we can bring back. We asked them to draw as much as possible as what is their imagination of their home, oh their space, their landscapes, their village. We did an exercise of making a mini museum where we had requested each one of them to get objects from their home, this for their mid-
dle school level and you know they all got stuff. They brought little objects, a teapot, that an earthen teapot that they use, we asked them to draw it and to try and look at it more closely and then try to think of a story around it, why was it used. We found that they are fairly aware but they don’t know what to do with it. The bit that they enjoyed the most was when they made mud bricks and

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Schoolchildren at the roof of skurbuchan khar overlooking the monastery

signed their names. On the last day the kids were taken to a a conservation sight, the Skyurbuchan Khar where they were explained various facets of our work.

The Nomadic Residential School, Puga is a school in Changthang, the nomadic part of Ladakh, where a lot of nomadic children come. Here we started with these exercises of remembering your home, how is it structured, what goes in there but then we also went on to looking at how the nomadic settlements are made, why are they made there and then this exercise, this is where we learnt from them. We had taken these blankets and each one of them made these miniature reebos, the nomadic tents, little ones are the prayer flags and they also made the fencing for how
they keep their cattle and they actually got actual cattle shit. So they actually went and picked it up and put it at the ground and then made clay models of their animals and put them in it . . .

QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION

Audience member. Would you call the term cultural heritage a bit contradictory?

Abeer Gupta. Not really. I started by saying that heritage is something that we are constructing for the future. It might be located in the past but it is getting enacted within contemporary culture for the future. Which is why we are speaking about it today because it is forcing us to engage with history. We cannot speak of culture or heritage without looking back but we have to remember that it is being constructed and that each one of us are active agents in it. I have in the last 1 hour reconstructed a history of Ladakh, which can be very contentious, I’m sure that there are people in this country, if not in this world, who can come and challenge a lot of things I’ve said. I have my sources they have theirs but we also today, in a position to understand that histories can have multiple voices. To answer your question again we need to engage in the past but both culture and heritage is a forward moving, not a retrogressive movement.

Audience member. The army has been there almost 70 years now—what is the cultural impact of that?

Gupta. Huge. A lot of positive impacts, the army in Ladakh cannot function without the locals. They are a colonial enterprise and I am using the word enterprise very carefully. The army is an industry, we have to stop looking at them only as patriots.
Audience member. I asked because my father built the Leh airfield.

Gupta. Yes, in Ladakh perhaps more positive contribution than the negative. They actually share a cordial relation with the army. You know even today. But unfortunately the military will never engage a cultural anthropologist right? The air field at Leh is something else. But at the end of the day when the new Leh airport is being imagined and created, it has to look Ladakhi and that was again a notion that I was trying to challenge. What we are invariably trying to reconstruct is the look. What we’ve forgotten is the functionality to it, that a not a single aesthetic element that you will see in the indigenous is there without a function. Not a single element of culture came into without a clear rationale as to why it was there. Yes, a lot of them became ritualistic and hence severed themselves from that rationality.

Audience member. Do you work with Sonam Wangchuk?

Gupta. I first went to Ladakh in the winter of 2006–2007. I went because a very dear friend of mine was working with Wangchuk. A large part of what I’ve imbibed comes from my interaction with him. In fact a lot of things that I’ve shared here are stories I’ve heard from him. In the mid 1980s, it was Wangchuk, along with a number of international scholars, who initiated a project called Operation New Hope. At that point of time, for the first time, there was a mandate to bring in local expertise and local teachers. Till then they did not have Ladakhis coming back and teaching in Ladakh schools. The 1980s were a major turning point. The entire history is available on Google—of Operation New Hope, and how these people restructured the educational system and created for me the reference point of teaching aids developed for local consumption.
The other most important thing Wangchuk keeps saying is that it is very easy to reject something—so we cannot do that. We cannot say that the government institutions are problematic. If there is a problem, then who else but we must go and fix it. When the SEC-MOL campus was designed, he said it was not designed as a parallel system—it was designed to complement the government structures. So people who were flunking out of the school system, whether in Class 10 or Class 12, would come there, spend a year and then reappear for those exams. Because to fight the system you have to first win it.

So when I went, I went precisely because of that—because they called me. There was a friend who was working there, and they said that in March, when the ISC and the ICSE exams happen, that is the period when they have no volunteers because December, January and February are the coldest months. So they wanted people to go because there were a bunch of kids who needed tutoring in History and English. So that’s the first thing I did. And if you will believe me, I went to Ladakh with no image of Ladakh in my head. So can you imagine my reaction when I landed there.

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