IN IMPORTANT ROLES IN ESTABLISHING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND CONFIDENCE BETWEEN NATIONS. WORLD

...emoral memory, and turn it into a literature of resistance..."
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.

This volume is a compilation of presentations at the 2017 History for Peace conference in Bangalore.
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Despite popular notions to the contrary, giving up is never easy. Failure is never comfortable to face up to.

Resignation in the face of odds, the ones stacked against you, stepping back, or aside, or sideways, or all of the above, as a feint, a strategy, with survival in mind. But also a fight, one in which you are only biding your time, and not running away from the battlefield out of a sense of despair. Not giving up, that part of it is fine. The world that adores the heroic in you will accept that. As will you.

The trouble begins when you let the numbers arrayed against you overwhelm you, when you accept the inevitable even before it has identified itself, when you arrive at the point of giving up. When you tip over.

It’s not easy. Then again, the opposite is hard too, perhaps more so. Persevere—a word that also comes with heavily stacked odds. The word. Suggests that the prospect of success in situations that demand perseverance is usually low. The romance that the word conjures up dies out swiftly when you’re faced with the obstacle in question, be it emotional, or political, or life threatening, or a point of principle, far from static, nimble-toed, a Birnham Wood on roller-skates. . .

You have to decide quickly.
A mountain is making its way to you, guns blazing. Will you persist?

Heroic and stubborn to the core, dig in your heels, continue, carry on, keep going, squaring your shoulders, hammering away, persistent, quietly determined, stand your ground and blow trumpets of tenacity from hurriedly assembled barricades. Promise to stand fast. Firm. Send signals of going the distance, staying the course, stopping at nothing short of soldiering on. Pledging to leave no stone unturned in your desire to persevere, hang on, plug away, stick to your guns.

Or.

Will you take off the white shirt you wear. Rip it. Wave it in surrender.

Like everything else, ‘goodness’ is an acquired taste. You have to learn the skill. Study its variations. Practice. Hour after hour. For days at a stretch. For a lifetime.

Angry times, these.

A little provocation. A nudge in the wrong direction. Enough to plunge you into an unforgivable moment of anger. The abyss that offers no return. We are taught to believe that being desperately angry is not the solution. Yet how many times a day do we totter on the brink? Like angels struggling before the fall. Wings tied. Feet and legs bound together. Afraid of the unknown. Not the slow descent of the plunger before the detonation. Nor the giant drilling machine that pierces the crust of the earth and burrows to the centre. Layer upon layer of viciousness. There is no rock-bottom sometimes. No sense of having arrived.

The fall over the rim is into limbo.

What does it take to be a good human in these times?
Kozo Yamamura, friend, author, patron of PeaceWorks. A good human. Died on 15th February 2017, of cancer. Professor Yamamura was a world-class scholar, writing or editing more than 20 books on the Japanese economy and its history and on the nature of capitalism. A legendary teacher, Yamamura challenged generations of University of Washington students with courses on postwar Japanese economy and the economic history of Japan. Many benefited from his guidance on issues ranging from senior theses topics to career choices. He was a generous academic, mentor, colleague.

In retirement, he collaborated with his wife Susan Hanley in writing four novels under the pseudonym Michael S. Koyama, three of which were published by Seagull Books. So we first knew him as an author, one who wrote financial thrillers.

One day Kozo found his way to the work that we do under our PeaceWorks programme. Out of the blue, he sent us a generous donation in support of the programme. An unsolicited act of goodness with a courteous letter of quiet praise. This was five years ago. Each year since then he has been donating 30,000 dollars. We never met him, nor did he ever visit Calcutta to see what we were doing with his generous support, but he followed every bit of our work online and showed complete trust and affection, and often told us how important it was in these times to keep doing what we did.

It is with immense pleasure and pride that we dedicate this conference to the memory of our friend Kozo.

Here is what his wife and partner in his fondness for our work wrote a few days ago,

Dear Naveen,

I am mindful that your conference is convening in a few days. If you plan to mention Kozo when you address
the participants, please let them know how much he admired and appreciated what you are doing, and that he was honoured by the tribute you are giving him. I plan to continue the support in his memory.

With all best wishes for a truly successful conference,
Susan.

Thank you Susan, thank you both.

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Naveen Kishore is publisher, Seagull Books and Managing Trustee of The Seagull Foundation for the Arts.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Although we are both guests on the stage, I feel like I’m welcoming my old friend to Kolkata because this is the first time that I’ve seen her here, and Presidency University has had the good sense to give her an honorary doctorate. This is a conversation that began long ago—

Romila Thapar. Many many years—

Spivak. I’m very excited to be sharing a stage with her, as you can see. This is a conversation that began long ago, many, many years ago, sometimes between the two of us, sometimes in front of an audience, sometimes in New York where I acknowledged the incredible role that the humanities imagination plays in many of the things that she has done. But today I’m only the questioner—because it’s about teaching history, and god knows I don’t know anything about teaching history. So what I really want to ask Romila is, how does one teach the idea of India?

Thapar. Let me begin by thanking Seagull for giving me this unique opportunity. Gayatri and I have often chatted in the privacy of, should I say, of our homes, in New York, in Delhi, and had long conversations, teased each
other, joked with each other. This is the first time that we’re performing, as far as I remember, before an audience. So, if we get the giggles or if we start shouting at each other, you must forgive us. This is just out of sheer friendship.

You’ve asked a very tough question to start with. What do we mean by the idea of India? Being a historian, I would turn it a little bit and ask: When did the idea of India come into existence? One can’t date it, of course, because one can seldom date ideas with precision. Ideas have a way of wandering around backwards, and so on—you can’t pinpoint them. Let me begin by saying that it’s a modern idea, a concept which I think emerges in colonial times. We often hear people saying: Oh yes, the idea of India existed in the Vedic period, it existed in the Gupta period, it existed in the Mughal period, and so on. I would beg to differ with that. We don’t really know how people saw themselves with regard to questions of ‘Am I state? Am I nation? Am I country?’ We don’t even know what names each took. We know, for example, that the Sumerians—now I’m going really back, far back—of the third millennium BCE referred to countries to the east, one in particular with whom they had trade relations, and the items they traded were items that came from the Indus plain. So we assume it’s a reference to the Indus civilization, which they called Meluhha, which we think might be a Sumerian version of the Prakrit Melukhkha / Milakkha / Milakkhu which is known and which is referred to.

But in the Vedic period we begin to get textual evidence, references to something called Aryavart(a). Now Aryavart(a) is a very interesting term because it shifts. In the Vedic texts it goes from the Doab to just about
the middle of the Ganges valley. In the Buddhist texts, it moves a little eastwards. In the Jain texts, it moves still further east. By the time you get to Manu and his *Manava-Dharmasastra*, he’s talking about Aryanvar(a) being the land between the Himalayas and the Vindhayas, the land north of the land between the two seas. So, that is not quite the India that we speak of today. Similarly with Jambudvipa, which Ashoka refers to in his inscriptions, we do not know where it was or what its boundaries were, what the territory was—we don’t know. Bharatvarsha. Al-Hind, which comes into use from about the twelfth century AD onwards and refers to all the land across the Indus when looked at from West Asia. Then come the British, and they start referring to this part of the country as India, from the Greek *Indós*, referring to the Indus. (The Vedic texts also mention the Sapta-Sindhu, so the Persians referred to it as the Hapta-Hindu, the ‘S’ and the ‘H’ being interchangeable.)

Now, what did the British mean? They talk about India when they’ve conquered certain parts of Eastern India, then gone on to conquer other parts of the peninsula and then up north. With each conquest, the boundaries change until, finally at the end of the nineteenth century, the entire subcontinent is painted red—that is the India of the British Empire.

Is this when the concept of India, the idea of India, comes into being? Possibly, but it’s a territorial concept. Actually the idea of India is much more than territory of course—it’s culture, language, religion . . . all of that is assumed. When does *that* begin? My guess is—although I’m not a historian of modern India, and I may be completely wrong here—that one of the most interesting decades of our times were the 1920s. What
happened in the 1920s? You had, first of all, the Indian National Congress, with Gandhi trying to convert the movement into a mass movement which he successfully did. I’m not going to quibble with the subaltern studies perspective and others on how far it truly was as a mass movement but, technically, yes, they certainly brought in a very large number of people, and the idea of India began to gel because the end, the purpose of it, was the independence of the nation that was being created.

But the 1920s also saw the development of two other notions of the idea of India. There is the Muslim League that is finally asking for Pakistan, which is a negative idea—it’s not what is India, it is a truncated India of the British Empire. So you’ve already got the difference coming in. Countering this in a way is the establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha, in the 1920s again, which gives way to the RSS wherein the idea of India is very clearly enunciated as the Hindu Rashtra.

Now you’ve already got three ideas—not one but three. And then you also have the Communist Party of India, founded in the 1920s, where the idea of India is eventually a socialist state. So I think the 1920s is really where the discussion should start in terms of not a single idea but of the opening out of possible ways of looking at these ideas—why they happened, and what the consequences were. These we know as the creation of the two nations, and then, later on, Pakistan split into two with the emergence of Bangladesh. Associated with these was the notion of independence, and what is it that was being sought at the time of independence. What was this idea of India as conceived by the anticolonial national movement, the biggest movement at that time? How were those people visualizing
the idea of India, how were they thinking of where independence begins?

Spivak. Well that’s a big one. Now I’m going to respond a little to what you said, which was the question I asked you in your house in November. First of all, of course I am deeply suspicious of ideas. We cannot proceed without ideas—they’re a convenience—but they’re also very dangerous, they’re like a lid you put on a boiling pot under which they begin to—your word is crystalize, right?—take control of that entire seething, boiling mass of all kinds of thoughts. Having spent an entire life trying to learn from the literary, I’m a little bit afraid of ideas. I also feel in some ways, and again I’m really only speaking as an Indian, that ‘I’m not an Indian’. It’s true, you can scream at me, you have screamed at me, remember when you said, ‘Why are you teaching South Asia at all, you produce these students who don’t know anything?’ And I stopped. There’re very few people in the world from whom I would take that kind of suggestion. Another thing you told me was when I said that after Edward’s death I would do a biography. You said, ‘Don’t try to research everything historically. If you think something is true and correct because of the way you’ve lived, put it down,’ and so it’s the second suggestion that I’m taking up now. It seems to me that there was in the sense of India which we got—I was born in 1942, I was a precocious child, so I remember quite a bit of stuff. Of course, mostly famine, mostly riots and so on. Nonetheless, there was something. But what we got later—thinking about it, I felt more and more, with my friend Edward Said, that it was a kind of an orientalist discovery of India, a discovery which allowed what Vladimir Ilyich would call the progressive bourgeoisie to think about India in this way, however
much they wanted to bring the masses in. Which is why it slowly began to fade away. This is just an Indian person’s opinion, an Indian person who knows nothing about India from book learning. This is my sense of things. And this is why I wanted to ask you the question, and I actually wrote it down, the question about what you said in a conversation in your house last November: ‘When we were active in the independence struggle as young people, we did not expect the grave problems that would arise as the post-independence years progressed.’ Or something to that effect. I’m interested in hearing from you a more detailed explanation of this, including whatever you want to say about the first independence and the specific hopes that seem not to have fulfilled themselves. I do want to say that this one hears from other people—I’m thinking now about the Bangladesh War, of which of course I have a good deal of experience. Both my dear friends Zafrullah Chowdhury, and Sandhya Ray who was very involved (she gave up her education, at 15 she joined Zafrullah), say so. ‘We thought that when independence came in—I could go back to school,’ Sandhya says, and then, ‘We didn’t realize that that would mean nothing.’ And finally, behind it all is Frederick Douglass at emancipation saying, ‘Now the problems begin.’ You on your own have obviously been troubled by this. I really wanted you to say something more about it—I think it’s crucial to hear from you what it was that moved you to say it on your own.

**Thapar.** Let me begin by saying that I agree with you. I’m also very suspicious of ideas. Largely because ideas have a habit of slipping around and changing their meaning, which is disturbing because you think they mean something and you locate them in a place, and then
you discover that they mean something quite different, and so on. They’re a tricky business. But yes, the idea. I wonder if I could start with an anecdote from my school days. Just to give you a flavour of what it was that we were doing in our teenage years in the early 1940s, I was at school in Pune. My father was in the army and so frequently transferred, and we went from Peshawar to Rawalpindi to Pune. We arrived in Pune in the 1940s, at a time when Gandhiji was in and out of jail. We were part of the cantonment culture, and the cantonment culture in India was a very special kind of culture, one that I wish some cultural historian would work on because it was quite distinctive. It was different from the city; it was Indians and Brits working together but not really socializing. This was something that struck me even then, that people who dropped in—and dropping in was a great thing in the evenings. You had nothing better to do, and so you dropped in on friends and sat around. It was always Indians who dropped in, very concerned about what was going on because this was the ’40s. We as schoolgoing teenagers would hang around the grown-ups, and very often my father would say to me, ‘You’ve listened to everything we’ve been discussing but please don’t go about repeating it in school. Because obviously what we’re discussing is meant only for us Indians.’ So that consciousness was very, very strong.

But to return to what happened to me in school. Come 1947, my final year in convent school. A convent school because all of us ‘army brats’ had recourse to only those schools that had any kind of uniform teaching, such as the convent schools that were all geared towards what was then called the Senior Cambridge Exam. About a month before 15 August, Sister Superior
sent for me. I went to her, fearful and trembling, thinking, ‘What have I done now?’ And she said, ‘Independence day is coming on the fifteenth of August. You’re one of the prefects, and we thought that it would be nice if you lowered the Union Jack, raised the Indian flag, planted a sapling, and gave a 15-minute speech about what independence means to you.’ And I heard her, absolutely aghast, and said, ‘You mean me?’ and she said, ‘Yes, I mean you.’ So she said, ‘Now don’t disappoint us, think about it, but do it.’

I came out of her room and for nights on end I couldn’t sleep because I kept thinking, ‘What am I going to say? Fifteen minutes—what am I going to say?’ I remember going to my favourite teacher, who happened to be the history and literature teacher, and saying, ‘What shall I talk about?’ and she said, ‘You keep talking about the future with your friends—what do you say? What do you think about the coming of independence? Just stand up and talk about that.’ So what was it that I talked about? I talked about: ‘We’re now going to find an Indian identity.’ Very important to us in those days. What do we mean by saying we’re Indians? We’re Indians in the context of British colonialism, yes, but now we’re going to be Indians without British colonialism—what does that mean?

The second thing we all talked about endlessly was: So once colonialism goes, the rules of ‘You can’t go here, you can’t go there,’ and ‘You can’t do this and you can’t do that,’ all of that will go, and what kind of society will we have? We did not discuss this in any very sophisticated way. We talked about it in a simple way of: obviously, things will change because the colonial power will not be there. So what kind of society will we have? In a sense, that was what stayed with me for
years, even though I didn’t realize it. It’s still with me, I think, especially these days. I’m still trying to find out what we mean by an Indian identity, and, my goodness, these days one is thinking very hard about what kind of society we should have.

And it was about this, after independence, that we started to talk about much more, and continued to talk about in the 1950s.

And what were the issues? First, that we must define our society, and there was a fair amount of socialistic thinking going around in those days, partly inspired by some of Nehru’s speeches, partly inspired by other people who said one couldn’t have a society without rank inequality. So we started thinking in terms of a society that would be reasonably equal, where people had equal status. Now this inevitably led, in the 60s at least, to an absolute obsession with the economy. Everybody was talking about what kind of an economy we were going to have. Economic growth was the subject of the hour, right through the 60s, questions about economic planning, state industrialization, employment, rural development and so on. Any student who had an iota of intelligence wanted to be an economist because that was the subject that mattered. Historians and philosophers were at the bottom of the pile—ancient historians in particular—nobody was interested in all that. And its not just economics but economic growth, statistics, demography, all that went into calculating how to build a society that one could be proud of.

I remember even earlier, in the 50s, for example, before all this started off in Delhi, when I was a student in England, we used to be giving talks all over the place, at meetings of the Workers’ Educational Association, on
this and that and the other. And what were we talking about? The great new society that was emerging in India. And why did we come back to India? Because it was going to give us the great opportunity to build a new society, a new society to which we would be proud to belong. There was that kind of innocent belief that independence was going to bring about all these changes. It was an innocent belief because I guess we hadn’t really worked out all the problems. The focus on the economy, on economic change, was so strong that there was much less attention paid to aspects of caste and religion. And so when caste and religion surfaced, we were almost taken by surprise. Where did those come from?

And, of course, the other great claim was, ‘When freedom comes, we will be free to speak as and how we wish. We will be free to speak the way we want to.’ The first shock I had on this issue was when I was in college in Pune and was the cause of censorship. My brother Romesh Thapar was bringing out a fortnightly called *Crossroads* in Bombay. Very left, very revolutionary and socialist. I would go down to Bombay during my holidays and help with the proofreading. On one occasion, when I was proofreading an article whose headline stated that the chief minister’s action was unacceptable, I added the word ‘criminal’ to his action. And of course, the very next week, the censor hit, and my brother was informed that *Crossroads* had been banned. I was utterly, utterly miserable, because I thought the ban was because of me. That was my first experience that freedom doesn’t bring freedom of speech, and that you have to be somewhat careful about how you negotiate freedom of speech. The issue went to court, and, as it happened, my brother won the case,
and it remains a foundational case. Whenever the freedom of speech comes up, they all refer to Romesh Thapar vs the State of Madras.

So one had all these ideas . . . we’d all studied the French Revolution, we’d all studied the books that went with it, we’d studied the Russian Revolution . . . so we had these ideas about how India was going to be an ideal society. But it didn’t work out that way, and slowly and gradually one began to recognize what the problems were.

Spivak. Of course, what I want you to talk about is precisely what the problems were. But I want to put in my two bits. That, in a sense, the way in which my sense of building an Indian society, etc., came about was a little bit later . . . You did say you wanted to know a little about our experience. Also, Delhi and Calcutta—they’re very, very different. My uncle was Jnan Majumdar, so I was in the middle of a kind of intellectual left which was very Calcutta at that point. At any rate, I left the country because Tarak Nath Sen told me I wouldn’t get a first class in my MA. My father was dead. I was supporting myself, so I had to kind of buzz off. That’s why I left, right?

At that time, we were really the bottom of the pile, Romila—even below the historians were the literary people. I think I would’ve been even worse off had I been reading Bengali. Before leaving, our sense was like Dev Anand’s in that film, Guide, that ‘English is only one of the languages of the world, so that when we speak it . . .’ That was absurd. On the other hand, that’s how it was, ‘When we speak Bengali, we will speak wonderful Bengali, and when we speak English we will speak wonderful English,’ you know? The first adolescent generation, postcolonial, etc.
So, by the time I went, there was an idea of India which did not resemble at all marching in the streets, and so on. Allen Ginsberg, all that stuff . . . I sang on the harmonium with him, and it was a crazy thing, confronting that India, with ganja and the whatchamacallit and Vajrayana Buddhism and Gary Snyder and Zen . . . All that resembled nothing. On the other hand, when in 1962, Malcolm X came to Cornell to speak—he started speaking (he was a very mild-mannered man), I remember it so clearly—and the idea of India in my head made me think, ‘Gee, this is like Calcutta.’ Malcolm X is speaking, I’m 20 years old, sitting in the audience—and that’s what I thought. Because otherwise, all around me, was this other India made up in that way.

Now the diasporics are becoming really important. When you first invited me to teach in India in ‘87—remember, I was not invited by the literature section, because I was not French and yet I was doing French theory. So Professor Thapar invited this non-historian (points to herself) to teach in the history department—and that is something that should be known, that there’s been solidarity between us for a very long time. However, back to ‘87, and to what I began to feel was more and more the difference—I gave a long talk in Bengali, here in Baguiati, on the difference between onabashi and probashi, the expats and the NRIs. Onabashi is a made-up word. At that point in time, it had already become important for us not to acknowledge the diasporic image of India, a minority in the United States. Sometimes even a white-identified, good, affirmative-action minority. Sometimes a minority in that little island off the coast of France. On the other hand, not claiming the kind of 86 per cent majority that was
already showing signs of violence. So, at that point, what happened to me was that I turned more and more to thinking about the rural Indian landless illiterate people whose children I taught who don’t even know the word dalit and yet call themselves SC/STs, and to seeing if there was an idea of India in the largest sector of the electorate. I’m not going to go on about it because I think we want to hear more about your idea of the problems and so on. But I just wanted to get this said.

Because now it is, in fact, on the rise, this business. Because of what’s going wrong abroad, with the new Khilafat which has a history which is not known by anybody. It is known, but it’s not known by the young radicals. And what’s happening in France and the rest of Europe—all the right-wing coming up. And let’s not even talk about the United States. Of course there is a certain kind of unity coming in among the radical diasporics, but it’s an unexamined unity, so that, to an extent, the continents of Africa and Asia are becoming adjunct to these radical diasporics. Which is why we who do not want to discourage this feel that we have an obligation to talk about those old nation-state type ideas, of the national enterprise as my friend Bernard Harcourt calls it. So how do we re-negotiate the idea of India as a safe idea? The present prime minister was just in the United States. Luckily, I wasn’t. There we have a certain kind of solidarity emerging which is extremely frightening. Therefore, I just wanted to get that in, in terms of the problems from outside, which is not only not disappearing but also increasing. And now I want to hear a bit more about what you think of as a list of problems.

Thapar. Yes I think one of the problems which you’ve
touched on in the notion of the idea of India, or the idea of any place for that matter, is of course that the idea changes—it’s not the same all the time. The idea of India that I had in 1947 has changed. Reality begins to impinge on the idea, and the idea takes a different kind of shape. At the time of those years, the 50s and 60s, the diaspora was seen as something relatively marginal to begin with, it was seen as disgruntled people who are not very happy over here, who are pushing off there because they’re getting better jobs and leading a better life, and all the rest of it. Initially, of course—and I know the UK better than the USA—it was a different group of people who went. It was the sailors, and some members of the working class who were especially taken to do specific jobs. Their presence was absolutely marginal. But when it began to change, when professionals started going and the middle-class migrated, then two things happened, as happens even now. One: they did so well that they became, as it were, the role models for the middle class here, and their attitudes therefore became extremely influential. Interestingly, also, they developed a culture which was divorced from the culture of the host country, the culture of the diaspora being a very specific culture—it doesn’t really feed into or draw on the culture of the host country but remains separated, initially at least. My guess is that as long as there isn’t a critical mass of Indians in American politics or British politics, or there isn’t a lot of intermarriage, it will remain a distinctive community. But I may be wrong about this. So, what happens in the diaspora is not something that is to be dismissed, and much of what one might call cultural or religious attitudes of the diaspora tend to have a very direct influence on the middle class here. And, of course, we
know that the middle class today has changed completely from the ideas and ideals it had in the 1960s. I’m always very intrigued by the fact that, on occasions when I switch on the television to see the news, there are advertisements, especially for private universities. Very often they show very lavish laboratories, foreign scholars coming to lecture. Describing the university, they announce loudly, ‘Your destination: Success.’ I always ask myself: surely, the destination of a university is learning, knowledge, thinking. How does it become success? And what is meant by success? Is it making money and having power? And I think that this is a very distinctive difference that has taken place from those earlier times.

But I’m going off a little bit. We were talking about what is it that came in the way, as it were, what was it that caused a lot of change. I mentioned how there was a tremendous obsession with economic growth and economic change—very legitimate but the kind of obsession which tended not to give enough attention to religion and language and to what is generally described as cultural articulation. There was a tendency to assume that religion is not very important in India, that the political message is much more important. That if we can solve the economic problems, we can solve all the others. Language became a problem and it was finally solved in the way in which democracy solves all its problems—that is, the numbers in support of linguistic states were counted and the majority opinion accepted. What linguistic states have done is another issue, is another question, and I think one that impinges very much on the notion of nationalism in the country.

Then, of course, there’s the cultural idiom which always tends to be associated with the coming in of
religion, whether it is or not. And by this I mean that when people define Indian culture, and this relates a little bit to what you were saying, the idea is not to ask, ‘What is the culture of the entire Indian society? What is the culture from top to bottom?’ It’s always only the culture at the top—that becomes the identity, that becomes the Indian identity. And, in fact, many of the problems that we’re facing today are precisely because that identity is not sufficiently broad. The identity has not been discussed and debated sufficiently in order to arrive at a point where one can say that, ‘Yes, this is perhaps not the ideal identity but it does approximate the ideas that most people have of what they mean when they say “I am an Indian.”’

**Spivak.** It seems to me also that the idea of India is quite often metonymic of one’s language group. The Indians who speak about India abroad quite often have no clue about the fact that it is an extremely multi-everything place. Forget about class and caste—just in terms of cultural differentiation . . . And I think that’s a very major problem, I mean, even in scholarship sometimes, no name’s named but one thinks Bengal is India and India is the world—and that’s a book on nationalism.

I don’t even know whether one should think ‘India’—that’s another question. But if one does, then one should think about Indians who do not resemble one at all. Now that’s one of the things that’s disappearing today—it’s disappearing abroad, it’s disappearing at home, and I think it’s a tremendous shame. When we were growing up for example, it’s a very simple thing but if something got lost, I’d say, ‘Ouf-oh! Hajir Pir ke ektu noon jol dite hobe.’ (You have to give some salt water to Hajir Pir if you find the damn thing.) Now it’s all Ganesh. If you find something, it’s all Ganesh. I
mean, we didn’t even think that by giving that salt water to Hajir Pir we were being middle-class syncretic secularists. It was just a natural thing to do, but it’s kind of disappeared, those kinds of things have disappeared, you know.

Sometimes, when I see someone abroad and say ‘Salaam-Alaikum,’ they say, ‘Oh, you’re Muslim?’ I say, ‘No, that’s also an Indian greeting—what’s your problem?’ (Audience laughs) This is the kind of thing that should be practised in our everyday, I think this very, very strongly, so that somehow you begin to think not only of your own identity as the Indian identity.

You said that one of the things you were thinking about when independence came was, ‘We talked of economic growth that would end poverty.’ Garibi Hatao. Now here I can say something, because I’m supposed to be an expert on economic growth and social inclusion for the World Economic Forum—haan bachalog, haat-tali lagao (audience and Spivak burst into laughter). You know, I have this wonderful, wonderful colleague called Xavier Sala-i-Martin who has invented the competitive index. And he says—he’s a delightful man, an economist—he says, ‘Look, I can tell, because I go to meetings of the World Economic Forum, that when the Ministry of Finance of Rwanda and the Ministry of Finance of Canada come and talk to me because I show where there are new areas of economic growth, they are not talking about the same thing. But I can talk to both of them. But social inclusion? That’s in your hands.’ This separation has now gone, totally gone. I’m coming from Ghana. Ghana has just launched its first satellite. There’s the diasporic convention, but I’m not showing my face—I’m only listening to them. And what are they saying? They’re saying, ‘Now, we are
no longer looking for freedom, we are looking for eco-
nomic growth.’ And this is how the Indians talk about
China. So this whole thing of economic growth—of
not including social inclusion, of exacerbating the dif-
ference between the rich and the poor . . .

Thomas Piketty is a very nice guy but his wonder-
ful Eurocentric book does not take into account how
bad the Scandinavian countries became in the 90s.
Because the Somalis and the Rwandans and the Turks
were coming in, the Scandinavians were changing the
rules. So they were no longer Piketty’s ideal, but he
never once writes a sentence about the change. And
he’s also talking about inheritance rather than capital,
etc. Just paying taxes and so on is not going to do it.
But this particular question has become so identified
with the idea of India, this question of economic
growth. The middle-class is going up, there’s electricity
all over the place, there are latrines and so on and so
forth. Economic growth, and social inclusion—I think
that problem has to be questioned in a completely dif-
ferent way. It perhaps needs the revamping of education
from bottom to top, because education is not just learn-
ing and knowledge, it is also questions, it is also ques-
tioning. I mean, the good education that you were
talking about—that is also questioning. That has been
completely throttled, that idea of education with which
we began. We’ve both been in that business for a very
long time and it’s gone from us. I would say that that
the economic-growth you mentioned in your ques-
tioning, and in your discussion with me, as something
you were really looking forward to. That, and that
‘Poverty would disappear.’ I think that’s something we
should focus on a little bit in terms of who has an idea
of India.
Thapar. Let’s also clarify that one isn’t throwing the baby out with the bathwater—it’s not that one is against the idea of economic growth at all, especially economic growth related to poverty. That is absolutely fundamental. All that’s happened, of course, is that we continue with our failures on that score, except that now the talk is about development. The new mantra is development—everybody makes a speech, and says, ‘We’re for development.’ What is meant by this? We’re never told in detail what is meant by it, but we’re for it. What I was trying to emphasize was not that the obsession with economic growth was the fault. But that one had to also give some importance to other factors, and that we failed to do. And one among them was the question of caste.

I remember, in the 60s and 70s, there was little discussion on social inclusion. One was well intentioned and thought, ‘Caste had to be got rid of,’ but there was nothing done, actually, to make it the kind of thing that you can slowly slide out of your system. On the contrary: it’s around that time that the use caste identities in politics starts to be recognized. Nehru’s original idea of universal franchise was that every individual has a vote, and that is what would make the person independent. Because he will vote the way he wishes to vote, and parties will have to woo the voter on that basis. But the reverse has happened—there are now vote banks, and elections are based on vote banks, and the parties are wooing the voters not for the independent vote but the ones that belong to the right vote bank. And I think this is really a negation of democracy. It’s a very worrying situation, but isn’t seen that way. But yes, then, the issue is not faced in terms of: How are you going to convert a hierarchical society into a
less hierarchical society? You can’t remove the hierarchy altogether, but can you make it less so?

And this is where, actually, I think there are two aspects that are fundamental. Again, slightly touched on in the 60s but not very much. One was, as you said, education. We, at that stage, still had an education system that did up to a point teach people how to think. That’s gone completely. Teaching people how to think has gone. Encouraging students to ask questions is frowned upon. And we have politicians who must not say, ‘You ask questions.’ Whereas for some of us, the basis of education is that you teach students how to ask questions. That hasn’t happened. Partly I think because it was also tied up in the issue of which language was the medium of instruction. I may, again, be completely wrong but I think that, possibly, if we’d had a dual-language system—the local, regional language and English—that there might have been much more questioning. Simply because the kinds of books that one reads, critical books, in English, tend to question much more than the books published in the local languages. Now this is not true of every language at all, but there are some which are more advanced, perhaps because they have better translations, perhaps they have people that are more analytical who are writing. But I think that input from a different kind of intellectual tradition is always a very worthwhile input. Otherwise one does get very bogged down in just one intellectual tradition. And if you really go into the question of language, the difference between the intellectual tradition as expressed, for example, in Hindi and as expressed in Malayalam is not the same. There is a difference. I’m not going to comment on which I think is better because that’s not the issue, but there is a difference. And I think that one has to recognize that something
coming in from elsewhere does force people to think beyond what they’re taught in their own tradition. Apart from language, the content of education is central, and here I’d like to bring in the discussion on secularism. During the time of the national movement we did not endorse the Hindu Rashtra idea and say that the Hindu has primacy as a citizen. The second aspect, which is again where I think we didn’t discuss the issue of secularism sufficiently, is the question of not just the coexistence of religions but also of their equal status and the extent to which religious organizations control social institutions. And education is a very important factor there. The content of education depends on who is controlling the content and who is financing education, especially in a so-called secular state. Now of course we’re running into problems because state education is far from being secular any longer. But as long as you had a reasonably secular state, it was possible to have the content of education not coloured by the strength and importance of local religious organizations. That’s a very important factor in the question of secularism. So education is one area where I think we should’ve taken a much stronger stand when these issues came up in the 70s.

The first big debate on textbooks was in the time of the Morarji Desai government, after the Emergency, when those of us who had written the first lot of NCERT textbooks were being attacked from all sides. I think the period after that was a period when we should have insisted much more firmly on removing the textbooks from government control. But not realizing the damage that can be done, we let it be. So, the content of education is absolutely crucial in this issue.

The second aspect that needs much more discussion than what we give it at the moment, and that is
the question of civil law. Do we in fact continue with
civil law according to religious conventions? In a sense,
a step was taken in that direction with the Hindu Code
Bill in 1956, which was of course attacked viciously
when it was first brought up and which we forget. But
that was just an attempt to try and clean up one reli-
gious code relating to civil law. Now we have many—
not only religious codes like the Muslim Personal Law
and the Hindu Code Bill but also have Khap Panchay-
ats in Haryana which are caste laws, caste laws which
result in killings if they are broken. This claims to be
outside civil law, almost, not quite officially, but in fact
one wonders. The point again is: Isn’t it time that we
removed all the individual laws of caste and religion,
and reformulate a civil code that is truly secular? That
acts as a civil code without caste or religion?

So I think these two things, the content of educa-
tion and civil laws, are very important items in the cre-
ation of the idea of India, the identity of the Indian and
the kind of society one looks forward to.

Spivak. I’m going to say this: Who are the we? Since I
spend most of my time away from us secularists, and of
course I’m completely for secular law, I mean, no prob-
lem there at all. I remember Amartya Sen once calling
me from Rome, saying, ‘I’m sorry I said you were
someone who supports fundamentalism because you
work with Subaltern Studies.’ I said, ‘Amartya, at least
you’re calling me because you felt bad, because you
know damn well I’m not.’ I’m not a fundamentalist. But
it is true that there is a possibility of finding the world-
historical by bringing this public discourse of religion
to a crisis, a discourse we can no longer, at all, support.
If we do, we are not being secular. We have to behave
as if religion is like going to the bathroom—completely
private, shut the door. However that’s not reflected in the whole world. And so we may pass the law, but it will be like that Shakespeare thing, right? ‘I can call the spirits from the vasty deep’. I have secular laws. Why, so can I. And so can anyone. But when you do call, do they answer? That’s what Hotspur asks in that play, right? So from that point of view, I think one of the most difficult things is to de-transcendentalize—sorry for that word, but you know that I’m a very obscure person—the religious which can work even at the grassroots level. I hate the word grassroots, but you know what I mean—I say they’re bottom-feeders. Even at that level it can work, because when it’s not mobilized politically, then this happens. Like in Bangladesh: I’m eating kurbaan meat with very, very poor people. They don’t eat meat because they are too poor. Yet I’m eating meat, so they say, ‘Didi. Amra khacchi toh thik ache, apni keno khacchen?’ ‘We’re eating, it’s all right, but why are you eating beef, eh?’ They’re protecting my religion. That is a certain kind of thing which can operate when it’s not mobilized as a difference recognizing violence.

I remember at the two-hundredth anniversary of Presidency, Hindu College I read stuff where the First Bishop of Calcutta in Middleton (it’s published), says, ‘These natives are so stupid that they think there are many ways of approaching the Almighty, whereas we know the right way. As in, we cannot teach them the scriptures, and therefore, they should go to Murray’s grammar, and I approve of Hindu College.’ Now why was this mistaken as access to secular education? Why can’t we not think that a certain kind of class mobility actually puts the lid on the religious cultures? There is so much of it. This is again a story, like your story about lowering the Union Jack.
Now I’ve been living with these people for a very long time, 30 years now. So they have finally come to accept that I behave in this way, maybe because I live in the United States. Fine. But one day I take a slice of tomato from the side of someone’s plate and I eat it, without thinking. And there is this huge silence for about 75 seconds. These are the people I work with, live with, eat with, everything, but a Brahman has eaten from his *jhootha* plate! You see, they believe this damn thing! In order to undo this, we can’t just put secular laws in place—nobody will internalize them.

So I feel that we really ought to think of who the ‘we’ are. Development is insertion into the circuit of capital without any kind of training as to how to manage it. Forget the training to use capital for social ends. All these *swanirbhar* schemes with their bank accounts, etc. Yet nothing is taught about how to manage this. Hence development and the question of language within development.

You know, I teach English in the United States. And I will say that one can’t have confidence in English texts being more impartial and teaching us. Mind you, at the same time, I will agree with you in that it doesn’t mean that local language texts should be celebrated. But I must say that my confidence in English-language texts has really gone somewhere after these 30 years of hanging out with these other people. And I will also say this, that the idea of the Global South, a deeply reverse racist idea which totally ignores class, is now up for sale. Because they do this English thing in a very superficial way, with no knowledge at all. They are proposing these alternative epistemologies, and that is also a very deeply troublesome thing.

So it does seem to me that the entire question of
what to do with languages—again, I will go off the topic, but one of my projects which will never be funded because it’s Central Africa is the unwritten languages, the wealth of unwritten languages, survivor/survival languages, campaigners campaigning in them so that there is ethnic violence right before the elections, etc., which the UN in its wisdom thinks needs “preservation”, ‘They’re going extinct and they should be preserved.’ I have a sense of the ecology of languages which would be too off topic here. So: these languages, how they should be used, for what development has come down to, you know, agriculture and health, etc. To an extent this is a question that goes beyond India, as it were, it’s a global question. The Indian development stuff, development as it is all over the world. I’m completely with you, because what we now have is sustainable underdevelopment, and that is called sustainable development. What is being sustained? Let’s not go there because we are talking about the idea of India, and I’m sorry I spoke at such length. But both the question of secularism, and the question of English scholarship, English-language and European-language scholarships—one has to think about the concept of sanctioned ignorance. That’s where we live. And the idea of what to do with languages that are in an unexamine way being called better than English. This is a fraught field. I just wanted to agree with you, but make it a little less easy to solve by saying it would’ve been better if they had read a little more.

Thapar. Yes it is a very fraught field, and one’s fully aware of that. But the point of course is that you’re in here. I’m not going into the international dimensions, the global dimensions, because that’s huge, and you’re quite right that it’s a problem which seems to be beyond
solving. But with us: Are we moving towards a future where precisely these languages, the hundreds of languages that, maybe don’t have a script, or have a script, are spoken—what is going to happen to them? Are the Munda-speaking people having to convert completely to Hindi in order to survive, or can they be bilingual, and reach out to people far beyond just their one language area? I mean, this is also a problem in demography, because what you’ve got today is a degree of migration in this country that you’ve never had before. Landless labour going all over the place, from Kerala to Punjab, from Punjab to Assam—huge distances. What is going to happen to the languages when people grow up in an area where their own family speaks one language but everybody else speaks another, and you can’t go out because you don’t know the third language and the third language is important. What’s going to happen? Are you going to have people being inward-looking all the time? Are cultures going to become like ingrown toenails?

Spivak. No.

Thapar. No?

Spivak. No. It’s a very gendered question of course, the third language thing also really affects gendering because access to language is highly gendered. (Thapar: Yes, yes.) Now the students here, the people who go to Kerala and so on to break stones, or put coffee in bags, many of them are my students, you know, because there’s no job. You should hear them talk about the Tatas and so on, but I’m not going to enter into that thing.

Thapar. That’s the other side of the story.

Spivak. Let’s not go there, let’s not go there. They’re not happy. Anyway, what happens is not something we can
control. It’s a kind of general realization, and takes a little time, because these ideas, they’re old twentieth-century, nineteenth-century linguistic ideas, of languages in boxes, names, orthography, etc. Since 1986, I’ve been hanging out with these so-called Aboriginals and they are in fact bilingual. I mean, they were speaking Magadh, Prakit, not the Kheriya language as many people in the cities thought, and they were also speaking in Bengali to me, constantly, and saying, ‘Didi, learn our language.’ The Mundas and Oraons in Birbhum, for example. Now they’re also doing a little Oraon stuff on the side, which is wonderful. But what happens is that this dialectal continuity, this multilinguality on the surface, we don’t even know about this. It’s not like there is a general creolization. It’s more like the ecology of forests. So this whole huge thing about, ‘Oho, language extinct, let’s preserve,’—that’s the UN, that’s not what’s happening in real life. What’s happening at the tip top of linguistics now is an acknowledgement that those un-written languages are completely dialectally continuous, very multilingual, etcetera. Those are not like the big lingua francas, you know, esiZulu, and kiSwahili, and so on. They are the survivor/survival languages—pre-scientific digitizing, written on the memory, so they’re not tied down to that old idea of named languages in boxes. These linguists are really at work on this. So it will not be like so many languages, about which we ask: What to do with it? For the purpose of globality, we should keep English and French and Russian and Chinese and so on.

Thapar. No no, I don’t think for a moment that it’s going to be like the twentieth century—it’s bound to be different. But it’s precisely that difference that we have to be aware of. What is the difference—and the difference
is not just language. Bilingualism alone will not solve it, nor the cross-lingual use of languages. It’s tied into your professional work, your marriage relations, how far you migrate and all the rest of it. It’s a very very complex question. What I’m trying to argue is that instead of looking at just the one strand, whether it be economic growth, whether it be caste, whether it be religion, one has to look at the totalities, and the intermeshing of that totality which we have ceased to do now. In the 60s, though I felt there was an obsession with economic growth, there was still some concern, not enough but some concern, with the other aspects. People were very worried about the fact that religion was beginning to enter education and law and professional activity. Religiosity was on the increase. But there were no solutions to that, or people didn’t think about them sharply enough, strongly enough. Now of course you don’t think about them at all—you just let it all ride as it’s riding. And one is looking at the future and saying, ‘But do people realize what this riding is going to lead to?’ And the kind of interlinkages that one had always hoped would be fundamental to the kind of society one’s going to build, those interlinkages don’t exist any more. People don’t think along those lines.

Spivak. In *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* written by the director of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, there’s this sentence, ‘It depends on us.’ And I think that’s what’s changed. I don’t think it’s really up to us to build the society but to acknowledge how interlinkages are happening, the interlinkages we cannot quite imagine through the training we have had. So learning to learn the things that don’t resemble the kinds of plans, if you don’t mind my quoting Marx—am I allowed?
Thapar. I don’t mind.

Spivak. Okay.

Thapar. It’s the audience.

Spivak. I’m talking to you, they’re overhearing. You know, that sentence I always quote: ‘The content of the nineteenth century revolutions will come from the poetry of the future.’ That’s Karl Marx, poetry of the future. So this idea that we may not be able to recognize the inter-linkages—you have been very negative all through, but that’s the one thing I really do want to hang on to. That it’s possible, that interlinkages will happen, not all good, some really, really scary, but we will not be able to plan them away because we are building a society.

Thapar. But the interlinkages are there.

Spivak. That’s what I’m saying.

Thapar. It’s a question of will they happen—they’re there. My point is that we are not giving enough attention to the fact that they’re there. That we’re not looking at them—we’re picking up only one thread, and then just going on and on about that one thread. Whether it’s religion or caste or economy, it doesn’t matter.

Spivak. We are on the same page, but carry on.

Thapar. The interlinkages are very much there, but somehow we are not making those connections. When I say we, I mean, people who are talking. The connections are not being made, that’s all.

Spivak. You know, the very uneducated, who are getting into IT, I don’t mean the tip top . . . they actually lexicalize the nouns! On the other hand: talking about curricular change. I’m just coming from Durban where a brother was talking wonderfully about how you have to have terminology to teach algebra in esiZulu. No,
no, no, I was saying to him, we really are gonna do something together, I said, ‘Look, I went to a good school but it was Bengali-medium up to Class 7. So when we learned algebra, etc., we were learning in Bengali. But we used words like equation, formula, etc., while learning in Bengali, but those nouns were there. And I was saying, ‘Look, now, when I coach the high-school students, because at high schools they teach nothing . . . talk about education now and I want to weep. So the students are coming, and they haven’t learnt—I didn’t even know that algebra was beejgonit. I know now. So the students are coming, and they haven’t learnt anything from these schools. They’ve just been taught to copy. I don’t know the Bengali word for formula, and I don’t know the Bengali word for equation. On the other hand, if my authority is undermined, then the kids will lose confidence. So I’m saying to my supervisor, ‘Ei, pata ulto, pata ulto, turn the pages, see where it’s used for the first time, prothom bar byabo-haar hoyeche, bojha jabe Bangla ta ki. What is the Bengali of formula, and what is the Bengali of equation.’

This way of lexicalizing the superior into the general linguistic medium which is totally creolized—it’s extremely difficult for people like you and me to imagine this, because we don’t do it. It totally doesn’t resemble what we do. Especially if you’re teaching languages, right? I could give more examples but I think I’m becoming a bit absurd—you want to hear Professor Thapar. But this is what I would say: that the general creolity of the world, on a certain level, without our progressive bourgeois ideas of building societies, and so on and so forth, is taking something away . . . just one more story. I used to go to those mud schools near the Laos border where they’d never seen non-Chinese
foreigners. So those schools, one person, one community, one school—they’ve been closed down. Now with some private money the state has opened central schools, they’re like prisons. They wrote a thing in Chinese for me, talking about the fact that in those one-community, one teacher–schools, which are very remote, in the Himalayas near Laos, they were teaching what they call ethics, which is socialism. Nobody talks to these people—there are no non-Chinese foreigners there at all. But the guy is showing me the rubber stuff coming in, right? ‘Look,’ he says, ‘five years ago when I showed you all the trucks bringing rubber, it was the same amount of rubber. Today you will see, some are more, some are less. We have lost our one-room mud schools.’ See, there’s stuff going on. They won’t win in the way we recognize winning, but one hopes that level of stuff will become the poetry of the future. I’m sorry if I talk like a literary person, what can you do, that’s what I am. So let’s go back to history. Tell me more.

**Thapar.** I think that’s about all one can ask for. You can’t ask for the idea of society, but a little move in that direction would be very encouraging. And it’s that little move that one doesn’t see in what’s going on. It’s simply not happening, and however much one may converse, and however much one may go out and talk to people, somehow that is not being understood. And that in a sense is what I find most depressing, that now we are in a situation where we can make the kinds of changes we had thought of making in the 60s. But we are stymied by the fact that we’re not recognising what is happening.

**Spivak.** We are not acknowledging that we may have to shift class focus in order to be able to. You’re older than I am, but I feel very much that I’m too old, you know.
Thapar. My god, I’m not feeling that for a long time.

Spivak. You’re so full of energy, Romila—

Thapar. No no. You know, I wish to goodness the next generation would take over more efficiently.

Spivak. In this way, we can perhaps see a mahan Bharat, eh? Then it would be something different, won’t it?

Yeah. What does that mean?

Thapar. Should we stop on that note?

Spivak. I think so. And you know what they say on Air India these days? They’re obliged to, after every announcement. ‘Jai Hind.’

Thapar. Well.

Spivak. Well.

Thapar. Well, just as well, they don’t say Bharat Mata ki Jai.

Spivak. Well, we have said both of those, in a literary way.

(Thapar: That’s nationalism). It is after all ‘independence’ tomorrow. Within quotes. Thank you.

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Amita Prasad. We meet on the fifteenth of August, and the significance of this date is known to many of us here. Many of us have come here after a flag-hoisting ceremony in school, and I am no exception. When I was watching the children waving their flags and singing patriotic songs, I felt that I couldn’t think of a better way to celebrate India’s Independence Day than indulge in this debate and discourse on ‘the Idea of India’. I was on a high after last evening’s conversation which, as Gayatri-di mentioned, we had the opportunity to ‘eavesdrop’ on.

When we think of the idea of India, one of the first things that come to mind are the challenges that India faces today, and, in the context of those challenges, I wish to open this discussion by asking Professor Thapar: Is it possible to teach history to promote peace?—because that is the fundamental guiding spirit behind our History for Peace initiative.

Romila Thapar. God knows if we have ever needed peace in the world, it is now, because everywhere you look the situation is very grim. One can console oneself by saying, ‘We’re not the only ones,’ but I’m afraid that’s
no consolation. The point is: What will we do with the situation?

Can we teach history to bring about peace?

I think it really depends on what you mean by teaching history. Now that I’m coming to the end of my life, I must say I really don’t know what one means by it. Having taught history for many years, I’m still unaware as to exactly what it is that history means, except to say that, for me, it is really teaching about the world around us. You walk into a garden and you pick up a leaf and say, ‘Oh my, this also has a history. Is it a young leaf? Is it a leaf that’s beginning to dry? Is it a totally dried-up leaf? Where does it come from? What kind of leaf is it?’ And it goes on like that. It does seem to be important, therefore, that the fundamental activity in the teaching of history is to ask questions. This, of course, is an activity that concerns every bit of knowledge—not just history. But to ask questions with a time framework is what distinguishes history.

What do I mean by time framework?

Concede the fact that everything has a beginning, a middle and an end, and the time to understand the linkage between these processes and these conditions. So, if you’re teaching history as I’ve been teaching it—my students, of course, much older, in college or in university—I always say that the first book my students should read is a detective novel. Read Agatha Christie as your basic reading.

Why do I say that?

I say that because the problem with teaching history is the past is over and done with—we dare not return to the past. Alas, however much we may think that we are reconstructing the past, that’s not what historians are doing. What historians are doing is trying
to explain and understand the past. So there’s no ques-
tion of a historian sitting in judgement and saying, ‘This
is correct and that is incorrect.’ No, that’s out—that is
a nineteenth-century idea that we gave up in the last
century. The historian is not talking about the truth.
We don’t know what the truth is, we never know. We
cannot reconstruct the past.

So, what are we about?

We’re about explaining the past, trying to under-
stand what happened. And then the question arises:
Whose past are we explaining? One’s own past
becomes a biography, becomes a bit of a dialogue and
moves from autobiography to biography. I like to think
we are explaining the past of a whole society. But that
has multiple problems. How do you decide which part
of a society constitutes a representation of that society?
Do you pick and choose? Do you mix the cycles of
society you are speaking about? This whole exercise is
much more complicated than it sounds. How do you
explain the complication to a younger age group, per-
haps schoolgoing, some of them of course are very
smart but you don’t start off by giving them Agatha
Christie and saying, ‘What is happening here?’ You have
one clue, and you reconstruct a whole series of actions
from that one clue. This is particularly apposite for
ancient history, because we historians only have that
one clue, whatever it may be—an artefact from archae-
ology, a chapter from a book written two thousand
years ago, a bit of an inscription. That’s all we have. And
we start looking around and finding connections to
things that will link it to a bigger picture.

Modern historians are much more lucky. They
have an absolute expanse of information, and they only
have to pick out what they think is important and
significant. It’s a slightly different process, and I do make a very sharp distinction between ancient history and modern history. In ancient history, you have to use, with caution, a certain amount of imagination in reaching out. But not fantasy. And this is where one comes to the second feature: having decided to ask questions, you have to look for evidence, just like Hercule Poirot starts looking for clues. You look for evidence. And in this process you ask the question: What is the question you’re answering? Please remember that all old historical writing starts with asking a question. You don’t just say, ‘I’m going to write, I’m going to do research on Ashok Maurya.’ You begin by saying, ‘I have a question about this character from the past. What is my question, and how am I going to proceed to answer that question?’

Now, this is where it becomes very important to understand the questions that you’re starting with. How are you going to explain to schoolchildren the significance of asking questions? This is absolutely fundamental. I think you cannot do any worthwhile teaching unless you can explain to them how important it is to start with asking a question. And this is where, in answer to the question that was posed to me, I think it is possible to change. You can’t change the direction of history but you can change the understanding of how particular events came about by asking a different set of questions. And so, if one is concerned with understanding what it means that there be peace—between societies, among people, among human beings—then you begin with the question: ‘What do I mean by peace? What do I mean by bringing in this idea of peace?’

And, as we were saying last night, unfortunately
ideas are not straightforward, solid, touchable, tangible. Ideas float, they swim around. You have to chase after them and catch them as best you can, which is not an easy exercise. So you begin by asking: What do you mean by peace? Do you simply mean that you and I are going to be friends? Even if it’s as limited as that. Your next question then is: What is this friendship based on? What are you and I doing which is going to lead to a friendly, peaceful situation or to an antagonistic situation? So you start analysing this concept that you’re going to convey to the children you’re teaching. By this I don’t mean that you may do a very sophisticated analysis. Nevertheless, this brings you to a third problem: How to convey that analysis to a mind that is not as sophisticated as your own? And this is where I think it’s very necessary, with historical concepts particularly, to be constantly reminding the person you are teaching of the world that they’re surrounded with.

So if you define peace in a particular way, you relate it to the world in which those students are living, you give them examples from the lives that they are leading, from their activities, and explain to them how this concept enters the discussion of what you’re dealing with, which is possible past situations. You’re reconstructing, you’re trying to explain the past, and you’re bringing in this concept as one concept which is important. So you do it in one stroke, quite literally, by saying: ‘All right, if I’m going to teach you Mauryan history, Gupta history, whatever it may be, we will not start with the names of the kings and what they’ve conquered. We will start with: Who were the people that lived in that time? What are the books they wrote? What are the subjects they wrote on? Why did they choose to write on these subjects?’
Let’s take two extreme examples. The Gupta period. Let’s not start with Samudragupta and his great *prashasti* of conquests—that’s not very much of a peaceful exercise. Let’s start by asking: Why in the Gupta period do we get two seemingly contradictory texts? Now, I’m entering a territory which some of you may feel is a little dicey. You have the Kalidas plays—superb examples of Sanskrit literature. You have the *Natyashastra* which tells you how to appreciate these texts from the perspective of that period. It would be quite interesting to explain to the children how *they* appreciated the drama, what *they* wanted from drama and what *we* want from drama today. Where it was presented, how it was presented, what the message was. Then you can take a very difficult, completely contrary text, something like the *Kama Sutra*, very difficult to explain to children but extremely important—children should know that there are certain attitudes to life that existed in those periods, in those times, which we are unhappy and uncomfortable with today. Why are we unhappy and uncomfortable with these attitudes today? Why were they perfectly relaxed with them? This is a very fundamental social difference, and I think it could be a matter of some interest to children to know that these social differences exist.

Now, if you begin at that end, and start off by saying, that, really, what we admire the most of the Gupta period is not necessarily the conquests but, rather, the writings of dramatists, the writings of people on the *Kama Sutra*, the completion of the *Arthashastra*—what does that mean? (It’s rewritten in the Gupta period.) Then you go on to the philosophical schools, you go on to Aryabhatta and the sciences. What did Aryabhatta discover, how did that influence scientific knowledge
in other parts of not just India but also the world? Was there a discourse going on between the scientists of India and the scientists of Alexandria? My favourite discussion is: Was Ujjain in contact with Alexandria? The two centres where astronomy, mathematics and medicine were being advanced, by knowledge being exchanged. Translations of Greek texts into Sanskrit and vice versa . . .

Now if you approach history from that point of view, of who are the people that are making this history, and why do we give so much attention to this kind of history, then I think you’re part of the way there to downplay the glories of bloodshed and campaigning instead to inculcate in the child an interest in other things, other activities, other kinds of human beings rather than just world conquerors.

**Tina Servaia.** Professor Thapar, you’ve given us a wonderful view of how history can be approached. When we look at history as a discipline, one very striking thing is the way it’s taught at the school level, so divorced from the way history is actually practised by historians. Why do you think that is, and how can we bridge the gap in order to give the child more of a flavour of what history is about?

**Thapar.** How should we get good history across? Well, there is one easy answer which you’re going to be talking about later today—textbooks. But that’s a very simple first step. We are by and large completely uninterested in and unconcerned about the kinds of textbooks that we give to children, and this is not just recently. Many of us did try and improve the situation, although not with much effect as you all know. There is in fact a gap between those who are writing the more, shall we say, advanced form of historical knowl-
edge, and what goes into textbooks. And I think the first thing is to make sure, in any subject, that the people writing the books that are going to be used in schools are professionally qualified. There’s a little too much of, ‘Oh I’ve read six books on ancient India, so I can write a textbook.’ Why? Because there’s money in it—royalties. Nothing wrong with royalties, some of us live off royalties. But it’s a question of who you get to do the writing. And that awareness is something that has to come from a social concern. You can’t just have a bunch of historians complaining about bad-quality textbooks if the parents of the children and the school-teachers and if others in society don’t complain.

What is happening today in Rajasthan? One is horrified to learn that not only is the Mughal period being slowly cleaned out of the textbooks, with the exception apparently of three lines about Akbar somewhere—but, wonder of wonders, Rana Pratap is said to have won the Battle of Haldighati. We all laugh at this—my first reaction also was to laugh. But when you consider the reality of that historical action, what happens? Rana Pratap was against the Mughals because the Mughals were not giving him patrimony, all right? It’s a political crisis. So, Rana Pratap gathers his forces, and the most important segment of Rana Pratap’s army consists of a descendant of Sher Shah Suri who is also trying to claim his patrimony from the Mughals. So he joins up with Rana Pratap and says, ‘I’ll fight with you.’ The Mughal army was not led by Akbar, because he sat, wherever it was, in Agra or Fatehpur Sikri. Instead, it was led by the two great Rajput generals, one of them the famous Raja Mansingh. And this battle was fought, and every account under the sun, all the evidence, as would have been gathered by Agatha
Christie—all the evidence says that Rana Pratap was defeated. Now you’re going to get textbooks that say Rana Pratap won. You already had textbooks saying that this was a Hindu–Muslim confrontation which, of course, is absolute baloney. The issue was a straightforward political issue—two people fighting for their patrimony against a system which is denying it to them for whatever reason. It was not a Hindu–Muslim conflict. But now because the Hindus have to be glorious, Rana Pratap has to win this battle. Now, what are we going to do with this kind of situation.

The question you ask is a very complicated question, I’m taking it at its simplest level of simply questioning what we would call historical facts. Now, I suppose if I was a very strong postmodernist, I would say, ‘Well, there are two versions. You take either.’ But no, sorry I’m an old-fashioned positivist historian, and I insist that one version has a greater amount of factuality than the other. So I would argue that that version is the version that should go into history books. This is only the tip of the iceberg. Let me be deeply pessimistic and foretell that in the next ten years we’re going to see much more of this kind of rewriting of history to please a political ideology. We have seen it happen in other countries, in other forms. It is by no means unrecognizable.

But the more complicated question is: How to get good history into schools? When I first wrote my NCERT textbooks, I wrote them rather reluctantly—because I had never written for children, I had never written textbooks, and it is the most difficult thing. I would much rather write a PhD thesis all over again than write another textbook for children. You have got to be on top of the subject and not talk down. That is
very difficult to do if you have been researching, writing and so on.

I think it is terribly essential that those who are researching and writing history, whose books history teachers are reading, should be in contact with history teachers. We need to have many more occasions like this where history teachers and history researchers and writers get together and thrash out the problems they jointly face. Or simply get together and have a discussion on what is being said. You might get together and have a discussion on the Gupta period, for example, on which a lot of new work has been done over the last 30 years. It would be great to have a meeting of schoolteachers and the people who’ve worked on this rewriting and say, ‘Please discuss this, explain, what the rewriting is, what it implies, and how we will teach it.’ I think that contact is extremely essential. We tried to do this when Prasar Bharati was first launched, and Krishna Kumar will remember the occasions when we had discussions about the possibility of an education channel. Now I think an education channel in the hands of any government is a disaster. But if you can get an autonomous education channel, that could be one way in which you could have discussions on the same platform between historians researching history and teachers teaching history. Have a conversation, and get it across. If you cannot have an education channel, can you do a series on YouTube? Every school has a computer. Have a series on YouTube, ask historians with new ideas to explain what their new ideas are, and get teachers to listen and discuss. You can then invite feedback. Using the new technologies of today is very important. Children will also be much more attentive if you say, ‘This is a computer program,’ rather than if
you stand up and say, ‘I’m going to talk to you.’ I would suggest that this contact is something that is absolutely essential.

Alok Mathur. I would like to begin by sharing a personal anecdote. Amita, you mentioned that you’ve just come back from flag-hoisting at the school where you teach. I had an early-morning conversation with my daughter in Canada where she is about to begin her postgraduate education. And she said to me, ‘We are going to the Indian community where someone is going to do flag-hoisting.’ And I thought: Canada is celebrating 150 years of Canada, and they are having many celebrations there to create a certain idea of Canada. But also there, within the diaspora, there is this community which is retaining in some ways the idea of India with that particular flag-hoisting. So I asked her what emotions this evoked in her. She said she has been thinking about all the various flag-hoistings which we did in school. In our school—Rishi Valley—there are only two holidays: one is Independence Day, and the other is Republic Day, when we observe the ceremony of flag-hoisting, followed by some kind of a programme that deals with an assembly on some aspects of India. ‘What I really remember about that is singing the national anthem together, the aesthetics of it, the music of it,’ she said. ‘Everyone dressed in white, and all the thoughts of the different things we’ve studied in history coming back to you, the various films you’ve seen. And the emotions all that aroused in you regarding India.’

I am neither a historian nor a history teacher. I have taught different subjects but I now work with teachers who teach various subjects. I am really concerned with the school curriculum, how teachers teach and how students learn, and I think that history in
some ways is one of the most important subjects in our curriculum. It has a way of shaping you as a person, shaping your attitudes and values, and that’s the question I am most concerned about. Romila-ji, early on in her talk about the teaching of history said, ‘I still don’t know what history is.’ Although then she did mention that history is a way of understanding the world around you. I would like to add that it could also be a way of understanding the world in you, that is, understanding yourself and understanding how you’ve been shaped. That is very vital to me—that in any educational endeavour we include this aim too. What is it that students can take away from the teaching of history is a question I’m deeply interested in.

Going back to my conversation this morning, my daughter also said, ‘I’ve heard about the Rajasthan textbooks—they’re deleting the Mughals.’ She said it’s happening in Maharashtra too, and she’s absolutely horrified that a whole chunk of Indian history is being knocked out. She said, ‘I’ve also been hearing that there are directives from the MHRD as to how each school should celebrate Independence day, and I believe Mamata Banerjee in Kolkata has refused to follow them.’ She also mentioned a news item she’d read—that madrassas have been asked to videograph their celebrations—and there’s a lot of reaction to that too. So we are living in very complex and dangerous times, and I’m glad that my daughter is at least a little aware of it. That awareness I think comes from a certain understanding and knowledge of history that has been imparted to her at school, and the ability to raise questions and not just swallow what the authorities feed to you.

I’ve heard in Romila’s response to questions several
things that I would consider to be values gathered from teaching history. One: a feeling for the truth of what happened, not the ultimate truth which, as was mentioned, we will never know about the past. But a sense of some basic facts that you can get at about the past. There are some things which happened and some things which didn’t happen. The tendency to mythologize history, to overrule facts—that is something that needs to be challenged. Even to be aware that this is happening is very important, and historians will have to play a role in creating that awareness. Perhaps in some way publicize what the Rajasthan government is doing, mount the evidence in popular media—not just in academic journals—to awaken the schoolgoing public of teachers and parents as well as, of course, the children. To say, ‘No, you can’t take all this at face value.’ To insist that what is in the books be evidence-based, and something which considers various points of view so that we can arrive at a reasonable, rational interpretation of events.

The Agatha Christie example was wonderful, because yes, you have to piece things together, you have to use your mind, you have to think—the ability to think, to make connections, to arrive at what is plausible even though not necessarily true, these are important values indeed.

With regard to the question of peace, I think that’s a concept that needs to be pushed much further. At a very simple level, you are right, let’s start with the children’s own lives: How do they see themselves relating to each other? What does friendship mean to them? Further: What is the relationship between communities? To become aware of what comes in the way of relating to each other, and that’s where I think we begin
to look at the human psyche, human tendencies, human psychology, the tendency to pitch one group against another, to have prejudices about the other. We need to be able to question that. To question those attitudes that are fed to us as we’re growing up—that would be another value that the teaching of history needs to impart. This is at a first, basic level.

A very powerful means of influencing minds today are the television serials. We have a version of Rana Pratap and Akbar’s interaction, which is clearly coloured by the serial producers. This is also the case with the other popular serials shaping popular minds. So I would push the question further and ask Romila-ji: What else do you think are the values that could be derived from history? What else could young people take away from the teaching and learning of history? And how can teachers be equipped, first of all, not to transmit their own biases and prejudices nor to be the mere purveyors of the information in the textbook, but to be critical users of the resources? How can they help children develop a more sophisticated, nuanced, rational and inclusive approach to the understanding of the past, and the understanding of themselves?

Thapar. To pick up the thread about the world around us—obviously, the child should be asked: ‘What is it that you find most exciting or interesting in the world around you? So, let’s look at the history of that and see what happens.’ The world around us, as you rightly said, also includes the media, it includes social media, and both the media and social media are in some ways anti-question and anti-intellectual things. The whole idea is: This is what we have to say—this is it, it’s this. The logic of the computer age—this right, this is wrong. There’s nothing in-between. There’s nothing you can play
around with, in explanation. So, yes, I think it could be very important in the circumstances to maybe spend ten minutes of the history lesson not talking about the Battle of Plassey or whatever you’re talking about, but saying: ‘This is being said of such and such a thing on television or on social media. Please remember that there are many ways of looking at this. You can analyse it, please ask questions.’ If you keep rubbing that in, somewhere along the line I think the child will get into the habit of asking questions, and that is half the battle won. Because if someone looks at a television show on Rana Pratap and starts asking questions, then you know that your answers can be answers which are an intelligent analysis of the problem. That asking of questions is absolutely fundamental. You must tell me how you as teachers would begin to ask, to explain to children how to ask questions. I am lost there.

Servaia. When I teach European history, no matter what age group I am teaching, whether it is seven-year-olds or seventeen-year-olds, I have a plethora of sources to choose from, visual and written, and I can pick the right source, tailor it to the age group, present my class with a multiplicity of sources and then they very naturally ask questions. But when I’m teaching Indian history this is difficult to do—because I can’t find the sources. European history sources are everywhere, they have been catalogued, codified almost, and a teacher can just pick and choose. Why has this not been done for Indian history? Is there any attempt to do this, because if we make it easy for the teachers, then they will use sources. We have very little time left over after our lesson planning and logging and all the various administrative jobs. What we really need is an effort to make it easier for the teacher to find sources. Any tips
or suggestions you could give us, to make this a little easier for us, would be so very helpful indeed.

**Thapar.** It’s been a long time since I have looked for sources for teaching but you’re right that there is much more intelligent imagination about European history than there is about Indian history. I think it’s partly because Indian pedagogy—and here I’m framing myself open to attack—is still rooted in the idea that you take what you are told. You don’t say: ‘What is your evidence? Where can I find evidence for this?’

I have found, on the few occasions when I have tried to take a lesson for schoolchildren, that what works is, for example, if somebody asks you, ‘What are the sources of ancient Indian history?’ You say, ‘The most important sources are inscriptions.’ ‘What are inscriptions?’ Then you either take them to the museum where there is an inscription. Or you say, ‘These are generally records of the government or some official body.’ You ask for a copy of the school records, and you read them out and explain the history of the language, the history of the institution. What is it that is being recorded. Similarly, you say that an inscription from an ancient period is recording these same items but from earlier times.

The one thing that I found was the most successful was when I said that coins were a source of information. The students would look at me and say, ‘Coins?’ and I would say, ‘Yes, take up the coin. Now, what is the information that you can get from that coin?’ And then you start relating the theory of numismatics to that particular coin, and then the coin begins to make sense as not just something of monetary value but also as a historical document. Think of the modern, contemporary equivalent that they’re using and paying no
attention to. You pick up a coin, you throw it, you pick up your item, whatever it is, you never look twice at it, and yet there’s a massive amount of information in that one little bit of metal. So that kind of imaginative leap, as it were, between the past and the present might trigger off a certain amount of thinking about the past.

**QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION**

**Audience Member 1.** Taking up that point about the battles. One of the things that come to mind is to look at the difference between democracy and the age of kings where you don’t really need battles. This is something Kosambi makes really clear when he talks about the Mauryan empire—that battles are not needed. You have a different sort of connection with the people, you don’t conquer them but you have representatives from these different localities. This could possibly be used as a contrast between the democratic age and the age of kings. I did when I was a schoolteacher.

Professor Thapar, to what extent would you say that it’s really a failure of the left that the saffronites have been able to come in? The social sciences are very fluid—not like physics where you have certain laws which you cannot question. This space was left vacant because the left was coopted into the system. They are not with the people any more. I would say it is a failure of the left that this has happened. What would you say?

**Thapar.** That’s a very interesting question. First, on the question of teaching peace: yes, there is a need to go into a whole series of differences. Pre-modern times, modern times, the economy comes in as well. One would also have to consider things like caste exclusion, religious groups and their relationships. Was there relative tolerance or is that a myth that we have concocted
in the modern period to somehow glorify the premodern period? All this also involves not only saying, ‘Peace is good, peace is good,’ but explaining why. What do we mean by the centrality of peace in a society? That’s crucial. None of these positive features you want to bring into the teaching of history should come in as slogans—slogans have no meaning. You have got to make the young think about those issues, you have to explain to them what you mean by looking at peaceful relationships in the past. Have they been overlooked, in the writing of history so far? Why? You don’t have any histories where people talk about peaceful relationships. So I think it is a bigger enterprise than we imagine, the definition of what is meant by emphasizing peaceful activities of the past.

On the question of the left—it is a very big question. I must confess that I am puzzled that you had the left in power in Bengal for one generation—the educational system could have been completely overturned in a positive direction. They had the ability to do that, and so one wonders why it wasn’t done. It is a puzzle. It’s not just that they lost touch with the people. I think it was also the pedagogy of: ‘We will tell you what the thing is, and that’s what is education.’ The idea that you teach children to ask questions, to question what you are telling them, that is a non-starter with many—not just the left. Therefore one can’t rely on any political ideology to push through a really good programme of education.

The essential thing is really that the people who are doing the education, the educating, and the people who are producing the knowledge that goes into the process of education have to be sure that what they are doing is autonomous, intelligent and accessible. It is that
accessibility that we lack. We have very fine researchers and we have a public, but the European societies have a middleman who takes the research and reconstructs it, sometimes correctly, sometimes not so correctly, but not blatantly into the opposite of what the researchers are saying. And that middle communication is missing here.

I don’t know whether, as I was arguing last night, it’s a question of language. Really good historical writing today—with some exceptions—is published in English. And if your English isn’t good enough, you’re not going to be able to make anything of the new publications. I have this problem when I go to Kerala or Tamil Nadu or even parts of Bengal, outside Calcutta, and I have to give a lecture. I can only speak in English to such audiences, and I find that the front row of ten people are following what I’m saying but the rest of the audience is just sitting there. I could be talking in Japanese! That’s a very important feature that we forget, that there is a language of communication and we’ve got to sort out what that language is to be if we’re going to talk about conveying the research to the public. That is extremely important.

Audience Member 2. Professor Thapar, you have spoken about the interaction we should have between researchers and schoolteachers, which would be absolutely wonderful. Many of us here are schoolteachers, and we’re going to spend the next three days interacting with scholars like you. I want to bring in another aspect which we as schoolteachers are battling all the time, and that happens to be the examination system—a terrifying reality we live with. I am sure I speak on behalf of many when I say that we would wish to teach history in a particular way, we would wish to make the
children analyse, we would wish them to ask questions. Yet the end of the day we are forcing them to study history the way so that they can answer questions in an examination system and score marks. So, where do you find us in the middle of all this?

**Thapar.** You are absolutely right. I have no answer to that question except that I think there should be an agitation among school teachers to say that there should be a choice of more intelligent questions, that you find these questions impossible. I get endless emails, to the point where I’m holding my head and saying, ‘Oh! another one’: ‘Dear Ma’am, I’m in Class 12, and I’m facing the exam in six months. Could you please tell me how to score marks on the following questions?’ What do you do? I cannot sit and reply to each of those because there are six questions and I am not going to spend my time saying: you must mention this and this, but don’t mention that. Mention this in this way but don’t mention that.’ This is what the examination system is about. It’s how you put these bits and pieces together. And this silly nonsense of objective questions. I mean, in a subject like history, to give you a whole set of marks on objective questions—it’s a travesty. It’s total unintelligence. But what do you do? Nobody objects. You need to unionize!

**Prasad.** I think what many of us have been forced to do is to adopt a two-pronged approach. Up to, let’s say, Class 9, we are away from the purview of the spectre of public examinations. So we take the law into our own hands and teach history the way we believe it should be taught—as indeed you are suggesting. Teaching them to ask questions, arousing their interest in the subject. Then we move on to a situation where, in their last year, when they are facing the examinations, we tell
them: ‘Now you need to be practical.’ It’s destination success not only for the students but also in many cases for the teachers. Their jobs are at stake if they cannot produce enough one-pointer. So, that practical consideration comes in in the last year, when we help to prepare them for the rigours of the final examination. We haven’t seriously considered unionizing or other such radical steps, but I think what we’ve been forced to do is to somehow have a foot in each boat. It’s not easy for the teachers, and I guess it’s not easy for the students either. But, somehow, we blunder along. And I think there are many teachers here who are very proud and satisfied that their students have gone on to study history at the university level, and today are producing original works of research. So, maybe the picture is not as gloomy as we sometimes believe.

**Thapar.** I must say, I’m very impressed with the brilliance of young historians despite the system. It’s almost as if they are working against the system, but they are, many of them, absolutely brilliant.

**Joyeeta (from the audience).** I have grown up believing a couple of things that have already been said, except those beliefs are fraying right now. It’s almost a cliché that you hear in these sort of spaces about how history needs to be taught so that what you read in the history books is connected to your contemporary experience, so that you learn to deal with the knotty problems by relating. And yet I learnt recently that most schools have a tacit understanding that teachers should not bring up anything political for fear of repercussion from the parents. This elephant in the room is never brought up. How then do you work in spite of this obstacle?

The other thing is, earlier I thought it was so cool and youthful to bring YouTube into the classroom and
have eminent speakers directly address the students. At the same time, teachers are getting more and more marginalized as important voices to be listened to. Children are watching YouTube anyway, they are reading other things outside class. So when we say that maybe in India there isn’t a middleman between the intellectual researcher and the students and people, why is the teacher, the schoolteacher, not considered the person to fill that role? It seems to me the obvious answer. Why do we need these ‘content creators’? Why should that person fill this role when there are people who have been dedicating their lives to teaching this particular subject?

**Thapar.** You are quite right that the teacher should be fulfilling that role. Obviously, the teacher is not fulfilling that role sufficiently, otherwise the presence of the teacher would be very strong. On the other hand, you must also see that there are many other agencies explaining history to the public, like the media, the internet and so on. Those agencies will be used. In how many schools do you have a blanket ban on using Wikipedia as a source of information? Very few. The problem with that source is that anybody can write anything they like. I am just waiting for the time when the Wikipedia with Indian items is going to be absolutely flooded with a particular kind of entry. You have to consider that there are other agencies that are also influencing the student, and as a good teacher you have to have an attitude towards those agencies. That is, if television is showing a particular play that you disapprove of, you have to discuss it in class and explain why you think that historically that is incorrect, or if not incorrect then inappropriate. That is important. Sorry, I have forgotten your first question.
Joyeeta. That schools have a tacit agreement about teachers not bringing up anything political.

Thapar: That is a very tricky question. Both in terms of people wanting to impose it, and people wanting to oppose it. Can you actually impose a rule that says politics is taboo? Politics is in everything. Every aspect of our lives have a political edge today. So, how far will you go on saying, ‘No, I won’t talk about this, that’s politics.’ You can’t do it. So you work around it by adopting the usual tactics. If there is one elephant in the room, please bring in six more. If you allow alternatives and say, ‘This is one alternative, there are these others.’ You can emphasize your alternative to a greater degree than the others, but, as long as you mention the others, no one can object.

Mathur. Picking up on Romila-ji’s response: I think teachers do need to in some way interpret the exam, the textbook, what is available in the media, what is available on YouTube, out of their own interest in history. A teacher cannot be seen as only someone transmitting something to the student, a something that has been created by someone else. If you make a choice of something on YouTube, you have to present it.

Regarding the second part of her response: one way of managing the situation is by complexifying it. The tendency today is to simplify everything—a single narrative, a single story. There is great danger in that. As we, I am sure, are all somewhat aware of. So to bring in multiple points of view, even a point of view that you may favour but without thrusting it down their throats. So students see that there are multiple points of view of a situation and that some carry greater weight than others. That is one of the values one takes away from the learning and teaching of history, and teachers need
to play that role. Out of our own interest in understanding what is history. It should be a lifelong question for us.

About the examination system: I completely agree with Amita that whichever subject you teach, there is a dumbing down for the examinations thanks to the marks culture, to over-emphasis on cut-offs for universities and so on. We need to deal with this as intelligently as we can, and show the students that it is a game they have to master in some way, and that they must take it in that spirit rather than thinking that, 'How many marks I get is all that I am.'

Somewhere there is another level that pushes me to work with students, because the system is going to change at its own momentum. Two thousand and five onwards, when Krishna Kumar was the director of NCERT, papers were written on examination reforms, attempts made, but these historical processes take their own course. We have to, as intelligently as possible, negotiate them.

Servaia. The classroom is the teacher’s space, and the exam does not always impinge on the classroom. What we need to do as teachers, first, is own our space. Second, we need to be aware that each of us also has our own bias. We need to examine that bias, claim it and impart it along with all the other biases. As Romila-di said: Bring all six elephants into the room. Once we bring in those multiple perspectives, our students will automatically question which is the correct one. There are still things we can do to negotiate the very narrow space that we have been given by way of our freedom.

There is a question I have here Romila-di: If, let’s say, in an ideal situation, we can choose what we want to teach . . . when it comes to Indian history, the chal-
The challenge is that there is so much to teach. So—and this is a 20-year long conversation that Amita and I have been having—what do we choose to teach? And what do we choose to omit?—because we simply cannot teach it all. How do we choose, and on what basis do we choose?

Prasad. Choice reflects a bias.

Thapar. Oh yes, every choice reflects a bias. So let’s start with that and say that even the existing syllabus reflects a bias. We faced this when we started JNU—working out the process from scratch. I remember the then vice chancellor saying to us, ‘I do not want a repetition of any syllabus that’s taught in any Indian university.’ And we thought, ‘Maare gaye, now what are we going to do? Where are we going to find these new courses?’ We started thinking, and in the end we did manage to come up with totally new courses. So much so that our friends in Delhi University said, ‘You people are mad, you’ll never get any student to come and learn and graduate.’ Of course, we happened to get some of the best students in our times. But the point is, you have to decide, judiciously, as to what you think are the turning points. What are the issues that really made an impact? So instead of going on right through the Mauryan dynasty, and the whole of the Shakas and the Kushans, and the whole of the Guptas and so on, pick out what you think is important and why you think it is important. Try and get that across to the students.

Now, the problem is that we will run into examinations, and there they expect all the unnecessary information to be piled on as well. But at least what will happen is that, in the course of having to pick up that unnecessary information, the student will have some idea of what is important, and the differentiation
between ‘this is important’ and ‘that is less important’ will become a bit clearer. But you have to be a bit choosy in picking—not just in picking what is significant but also in justifying that selection.

**Audience Member 3.** Professor, it’s a huge honour to be in your presence. I teach in a 160-year-old boys’ school in Bangalore, and all the boys want to do is play football! As the other teacher mentioned, we are heavily straitjacketed in the examination system. We teach Class 10 and we follow the ICSE syllabus. It is very hard for us to do anything other than just finish our syllabus and get them ready for the exam. We talked a lot about the peace problem and about asking questions and I was very inspired by what you said. I would, very briefly, like to share what I do despite the straitjacket. When I teach the Partition of India—I have a tenth-standard history textbook from Pakistan too—I read about the same events from both books, and there is a huge storm of questions. I find that a great way of provoking questions. I am running through my syllabus to finish, but they cannot believe their ears when they hear the completely different version from that side. The explanation for, say, the Dandi March or the Quit India Movement is completely different. Right from the book covers—there is no Gandhi on their cover, there is no Jinnah on ours, so it begins there. So, there are a lot of perspectives available that we can use.

In the context of asking questions, this is something I have used very effectively all the 32 years I have been teaching: I begin every class with a reading of the newspaper. I choose *The Hindu* because it is politically stable as far as my views go. One student reads the political headlines, local or international, for about one and a half minutes. Then I might ask questions. This
whole exercise takes about four to five minutes. Let’s say the topic is about the beef ban, and I am teaching Vedic history at that point. I mention how, during the Ashvamedha Yagna, the Brahman would partake of horseflesh. That brings up a lot of questions. Every one of my boys are really up to date with world news, and these few moments every day spent linking and connecting what is happening in the world around them leads them to think and ask questions. Over the last few years, I have seen a huge difference in the mindset of my students because of social media—the way religions are being labelled and so on.

We talked about peace. This week we had a new initiative called ‘Religious Harmony Week’ in my school. We had a little competition where we asked boys to choose a verse from a scripture which is not their own. It was a fun competition—we had the Jain boys singing the Azan, we had the Muslim and Christian ones reciting the Gayatri Mantra. It was wonderful—and I think it broke many barriers. The biggest hit was the Quranic verses. All the Jain, Hindu boys wanted to sing the Bismillah. We are so constricted by the syllabus, but every one of us has to make these small efforts that will somehow take us where we wish to.

**Audience Member 4.** In our constitution, there are two principles of state policy: that one of the purposes is to promote scientific temperament in society. As a history teacher, I think history is one of the most suitable subjects to promote that scientific temperament, if one can use it properly.

Your suggestions for tackling issues like what is happening in Rajasthan is the best way of promoting scientific temperament. We are not historians, but as history teachers who are also political thinkers, should
we do our work of promoting scientific temperament by being apolitical or by standing on a political platform?

Thapar. The big change that took place about 1960s and 70s, in history, in India, was that it moved from being Indology to a social science. The basis of social science was critical thinking—some people might say it is scientific history, but there is a debate about whether history can be called a science, for obvious reasons. You cannot experiment with the past, you cannot demonstrate the past, you cannot prove it right or wrong absolutely. So some of us prefer to say that it is a study based on rational analysis, and logical generalization. In other words, it is a study for which you have to be certain that the evidence that you are using is reliable. You cannot just say: ‘I have some evidence, but I am not going to tell you what it is, and that’s the way it is.’ You have to show your evidence and you have to show that it is reliable. You have to analyse your evidence and you have to analyse it in a rational manner. And your analysis then, when you put it together as a statement, a generalization as we call it in history, has to be logical. B comes out of A and B leads to C, and the explanation is all based on reasoning and logic. That is the definition of good historical writing, whether it is from a left ideology or a right. Generally of course the right ideology fails on this. Nevertheless, the main issue is your process of analysis—that is the crucial thing—and it has to be based on reasoning, on logic, on causal relationships which can be supported by reliable evidence.

And that is why some of us oppose the kinds of stories that come out, say, about the head of Ganesh being plastic surgery—we oppose them because they are not based on reasoning and logic and evidence.
They are based on a fantasy. If your historical analysis is rational and logical, you may not have to make the choice of going either leftwards or rightwards. You may have the choice of saying, ‘This is how I see it, and on this issue this is how I analyse it. That issue I may analyse somewhat differently, given the kind of evidence I have.’

Now here I am talking about somebody who is not totally ideologically committed to either a particular pattern of analysis, or a particular end result which has to be obtained from history. Given these two extremes, I would say that the person who is trying to take not a neutral position but a position uncommitted to an ideological bias—that is the person who can claim that the historical analysis is rational and logical and plausible. Now, coming from Kerala, I can understand your problem. I sympathize with you. I don’t know what advice to give you, except to say: just try and be firm.

Audience Member 5. Before I ask my question, I’m going to quote George Orwell. In *1984*, he says, ‘He who controls the past controls the future, and he who controls the present controls the past.’ Now, keeping this, or Althusser’s ideological state apparatus, in mind, I want to ask all of you here: Why would the state allow the true professional historians and history schoolteachers to interact? Taking that forward: even if we take certain measures in the best schools around us, we have to remember that, in a country like India, most of the schools are government schools, and we don’t know what goes on there. Not just what the state and the central government is doing through education, but how would we as students of history or historians challenge the mindset of those people for whom it is not
books of history but sources like TV serials—like the Sunday-morning *Mahabharat*—that are more accessible? How do we counter or go around these problems? Teaching history as it should be, and access to proper historical education—are these even possible without political power or control?

**Thapar.** Well, it is difficult to answer a question like that because, in a sense, everything is dependent on political power in the country today—the good, the bad and the indifferent. So, do we just say: We have no access to this power and therefore we give up? Or do we say: We cannot change the political power but, within our little circle of activity, we can do what is possible? And I would say that is the way in which many of us have functioned all our lives. We have not attempted to change the political power. Not because we think it is incorrect. If you think you can change it, good luck to you. Whichever direction you want to change it, as today it is changing very strongly in a particular direction. But if you are not in a position to fight the political power, then please use your little energy and activity to make half a dozen young people think. That’s as far as one’s going. Think intelligently about the subject they’re reading—bas, that’s enough.

**Prasad.** You mentioned *Mahabharat*. I’d like to give you an example from another popular film released some years ago. It was a blockbuster and it had Shahrukh Khan’s dialogue on Ashoka. When I went into the classroom, I had hundreds of students who challenged what I had taught them on Ashoka because they believed there was really someone like Kareena Kapoor in his life. They felt very cheated that I had not taught them anything about that. They said, ‘Miss, in the history that you teach us, you leave out all the fun parts.’ I went into my class—
room with my Bible—Professor Thapar’s *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, and I told them, ‘You may not read this book right now, but, believe me, in a few years, you will read it and you will understand that what I have told you is possibly closer to the truth than what is being depicted on screen.’ It took me a great deal of energy to convince them that Ashoka did not take mud baths! At least nowhere in Professor Thapar’s book did I find any evidence that Ashoka did so!

On a serious note: it is difficult to contradict such images, such popular ideas from film and television. So difficult to convince students that Akbar did not look like Hrithik Roshan.

Coming back to the point Joyeeta raised: yes, as teachers in classrooms, we do occasionally use YouTube, film clips, music—a whole range of inputs. But at no point does the teacher take on a passive role. These are just tools to enhance our teaching because it is something that the present generation does appreciate. One of my favourites that I use frequently from YouTube is the one on the rise of Hitler—it just brings that topic alive. However, we pick and choose what we want to show. It is not as if I switch on a film and recede into the background. The onus is on us as teachers to use it to enhance our classroom teaching rather than to become slaves of technology.

**Servaia.** There is one more thing I want to add to that. You may use a YouTube clip but the clip then needs to be interpreted, analysed and thought about. I don’t think schoolkids are ready to do that without the teacher. So these are extra hands for us but they don’t replace us.

**Mathur.** There was another part of your question to which I wanted to respond: that all this is fine in
schools which are well resourced, where the teachers are somewhat more enlightened and so on. But what about schools at large? I think there the state does play a very critical role, and the education secretary, the bureaucrats, the ones who commission things, they matter a great deal. I will give you one example that I know of, from the state of Karnataka. They commissioned a wonderful series of educational films on the teaching of history called *Young Historians*, in Kannada. It has as students a group of young village children who were willing to participate in the history lesson but who were not coached. The teacher led them through a series of lessons to understand the methods of history, starting from their own family histories. It is a wonderful tool for teacher-training, and was used in Karnataka for many years, I don’t know if it still is. The teacher who uses these films in the classroom has to be a facilitator who unpacks what is being done by the teacher in the film. So there is cooperation possible between the state and NGOs, and that could be very valuable because it does need to reach far more people than just a few select students.

Audience 6. People are consuming information visually more than ever, and the idea that children are not already reading heavily into the visual medium before they begin their first day of school is questionable. When we talk about presenting rational, scientific examples, we also, more than ever today, need to teach children how to interpret the visual—whether it is photographs they see in the newspaper, what they see on WhatsApp, on YouTube . . . different ways of interpreting the visual medium—as you would teach them how to interpret a sentence—a subject, object . . . That I think has become more and more important.
My question was about agency. This is my third year at this conference. I am not a history teacher nor am I a historian, but I am interested in how we can bring visuals into classrooms. We are talking about historical figures and events being presented, discussed. A lot of them are inspirational people, people who have committed themselves to long courses that have changed our entire lives. And then we come back and say, ‘You know, we need to unionize.’ But the thing is that nobody objects: the parents are not objecting to what the schools are doing; the students themselves are not taught that they have the right to object to the examination system they are being put through; the teachers also feel they need to learn how to negotiate rather than object, find a way to act within the system. Of course you are teaching the kids to think, but the history classroom is also the space where you are discussing how people have acted in the various situations that they were placed in, situations that were perhaps even more difficult to deal with than what we are handling today. So how do you deal with this question of agency when you are dealing with young students who are imagining what they can be, what they can do at that moment, in the next decade, for their entire lives, and they are encountering figures and moments in which they are seeing how people negotiated the challenges that were in front of them at that moment? How do you inspire that sense that we are at no moment having to just negotiate, that there is action—a thought and then action? How do you deal with that question of agency with your children?

**Thapar.** You know, the process of thinking also involves the process of agency. You can’t think without asking the question: Who is responsible for this and why?
What was the purpose? I mean, that applies even to a source. You pick up a book and the first question you ask is: Who is the author? What is the background? The next question you ask: What is the book about? What was his purpose in writing the book? There is a whole range of things that comes up. And, finally: Who is the audience, who is it intended for? So when one says that you have to teach the child to think, it is not just, ‘Oh yes, now I have to ask a question about this.’ You have to pursue that question further, and make the child realize that the thinking process involves looking at the actions that were carried out and thinking about the actions in turn. You are not just thinking about the person who performed them—you are also thinking about agency. Agency is absolutely fundamental to the questions you are going to be asking. So there is no way in which you stop at simply saying: This happened. You have to go on and ask: Why did it happen? How did it happen? Where did it happen? When did it happen? Had it happened a hundred years later, would it have been different? There are a host of questions all geared to not separating thinking from agency. Agency is very important.

Mathur. Absolutely. The starting point of any agency is the capacity to think, the capacity to look, to listen. As teachers and educators, it is also our responsibility to make children aware—at different stages and in different ways—that a lot of their thinking is coming from elsewhere. That a lot of their thoughts are influenced thoughts. To become conscious about that is a very important thing. There are so many influences that are acting on you—what your grandparents told you, what your parents told you, what the community believes, what you see on the media, and so on. So, first, see what
is shaping you. This leads to agency already getting crystallized in certain directions. That process of becoming conscious of influence requires a kind of inward inquiry, which I spoke about a little earlier. History teaches you to understand the world at the same time as it teaches you to understand yourself and where you are coming from. And many of the things which have been mentioned so far—all of these have an impact on the choices students make as they grow up. They face different situations, they make life choices, decide what they are going to do later. Are they all success-bound? That is also a huge influence in the modern capitalist world—the idea that individual success is what matters, that community obligations can be thrown aside, parents can be forgotten. At the same time, there is the influence of what my parents taught me. In some sense, therefore, agency is also negotiation. You are negotiating all the time, but you are negotiating because you have agency. If you did not have any, then you would just follow the track that you were put on. What teachers do every day in the classroom leaves an impact, even if right now the students cannot do much to change the examination system. As you said, some of them go on to become thinking historians and that is because of the seeds we might have planted. Small seeds that sprout in their own way, in their own time. I am reminded of the poem that was read out by Naveen-ji at the beginning: somewhere we have to keep planting seeds. They will sprout when the conditions are right. The tide will change again. That is also something that history teaches you, that things don’t go one way all the time, there are forces of another kind that may be cutting through what is growing and rising across the country at any one time.
Megha Malhotra. There is one issue we have been discussing internally, over the past two or three months, while we’ve been planning this conference, and I would like to hear Romila-di’s views on that. Seventy years since independence, yet our textbooks don’t go beyond 1947. What are the implications of this? What is the basis of the decision on the time frame included in textbooks?

Servaia. I would like to add: When does the past become history?

Megha. When does the present become history too?

Thapar. Technically, history begins with written sources, that is, everything prior to the point when written sources come in is pre-history, and is largely based on archaeological data. You may, for example, have an in-between period when there are sources that are technically written sources but they are not read, they have not been deciphered yet. That is proto-history, and that, of course, in our case is the Harappan period. That is proto-history. The moment you get the Ashokan inscriptions, technically, that is the point at which history begins. But of course, given the kind of inclinations that existed 100, 150 years ago, and when history first began to be written . . . It was argued that the Vedic texts were the starting point of history. Technically, the Vedic texts were not written down at that period—they were written down much later. Nevertheless, what was composed in a kind of textual form is what qualifies as the beginning of history. So most people say the Vedic period was the beginning of history because you have the composition of texts. Others say: no, if you’re going to be technically right, you have to have evidence of written texts, and that would be the Ashokan inscriptions. So you have a choice as to where you begin.
The interesting thing, of course, is that the beginnings are very important for nationalism. Where do you begin? British colonial writing said that history began with the Vedic period, and people like Mill talked about the two nations—the Hindu and the Muslim, Max Muller came up with the notion that the origin of the Hindu nation is in the Vedic period. So we are stuck with the Vedic period. However, had we argued that history began with the Ashokan inscriptions, we would have had a different kind of origins of Indian history. It is something one can only speculate about.

The end. Partition. I think at that point—soon after Independence—it was too recent to go beyond. History was always treated as a narrative about the past. Sufficiently the remote past, coming up to the recent past. You never treated it as a narrative of contemporary events.

When we introduced a course on contemporary history in JNU, we faced a lot of flak from many historians who said, ‘It is a contradiction in terms—history cannot be contemporary history, it has to be the past.’ But we persisted.

The Partition was very recent, so people said, ‘No, no, that is not history.’ But I think the more important, if slightly subterranean, argument was that 1947 and what followed—the Partition—would have brought to the surface the whole contradictions between the Islamic nationalist interpretation and the Hindu nationalist interpretation. And although, politically, the Indian National Congress was taking a secular position, it is a debatable point as to how many people in the Indian National Congress were not veering towards Hindu nationalism. It is a debatable issue and I would not like to pass any generalisation on that. But I do think that
if we had gotten to the discussion of Partition and what happened after Partition, it would raise emotional problems of all kinds, both in Pakistan and in India. We were not terribly worried about the emotional problems of Pakistan, but we were worried about the emotional problems in India. And somehow, therefore, we got into the habit of stopping at 1947. Now, clearly, one should go on, because it is 70 years down and it is no longer contemporary history—it is very much a history of recent times. Maybe one of the interesting points to take up to would be 1991, when the economy changed completely and we became part of the whole market system. And the consequences that have followed. The obsession with destination success really stems from that kind of change, and I think it would be perfectly legitimate now to take it up to 1991. Though, as I said, we in JNU do teach contemporary history which comes right up to virtually the present.

I think if one is going to take it beyond 1947, it would be very interesting to compare the Pakistani textbooks with the Indian. A very useful exercise which will never be done, and those of us who suggest it will be damned as unpatriotic. We have already been called traitors to the Indian nation, so, in that tradition . . .

When I was at the Library of Congress we had a conference on post-Independence history textbooks in ex-colonies. And, certainly, the couple of people who came and spoke on the Pakistani textbooks were extremely interesting—on why they project it in a certain way, justifying of course the creation of Pakistan, the Islamic nationalism. But I think it would be quite salutary for us if we take our history beyond 1947. I would argue that it would be extremely important to take into consideration not only Pakistani textbooks
but also textbooks from Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. So that this South Asian nexus that has been created through these actions can be seen in juxtaposition and seen more analytically. Otherwise what you will get is a sort of frogs-in-the-well situation—*this* is Indian history, *this* is Indian history, *this* is Indian history. But what are the others? What are our neighbours saying about this history that we are unaware of? I think it is about time we paid some attention to what our neighbours are saying about their history, and our history, and the connection between the two.

**Audience 7.** I have two or three points I’d like to mention here. One: that whatever I’ve heard, I’m getting the idea that through the school system we are trying to get answers to all our questions. I feel that should not perhaps be so, because some questions should be left unanswered. For example, the basic difference between science and the humanities is that the full package of science will end with an answer, whether it’s reasonable or not. But in the humanities, in history or political science, the end result will be whether the students are able to ask better questions than the ones they were asking before. That is the end result I am looking forward to. That is how I see history.

My larger questions to the educators is: Who is teaching history in the classroom? Is it a teacher, a mentor, an educator, an administrator, or a sum total of all of these? Certainly not a historian. So, if the teacher is not a historian, then in what capacity, and with what autonomy, are they to deliver history? And there lies some confusion about how to deliver history.

My second question is: How reasonable is it to use the terminology that Romilaji used, ‘good history’? What may be considered ‘good history’ in a school is
debatable. Seventy years after Independence, I feel that maybe secularism—the word that we have coined—is not a very deep-rooted idea. I may not agree to the idea of secularism, and I will give the antithesis idea—an idea which has been floating around for the last three years and is an anti-thesis to secularism. There was a non-violent approach of India, this is a slightly violent approach of India. Now the onus lies on society to decide how they should go forward. Rather than an outright rejection of a good history or a bad history.

Thapar. I have a short answer: Good history is good history, whether you are teaching it in schools or whether the general public is reading it, or whether the research body of a university is reading it. I don’t make a distinction between good and bad history for a school and good and bad history for a university. My argument is that if good history exists, every school child has a right to be told about it, to be taught it, to have it explained, and that’s as far as I would go.

On the question of the history teacher not being a historian, that is raising the whole issue of who are the people who are educating us. It is not an issue of the historian, nor does it concern at every level a history teacher. Rather, it concerns the educational administration that is appointing non-historians in schools—very often administrators or people who do not know too much about anything. If you do not have a strongly disciplined educational service or system, and if you cannot produce at least graduates of history to teach history in schools, that is not the problem of the historian—that is the problem of educational administration and governance. I think the two should not be confused.

Servaia. I want to add just one thing here: Do you think
that it is also a problem that history as a discipline is not given the respect it deserves?

**Thapar.** No, of course it is not given the respect it deserves because politicians are frightened of history. History is crucial to politics, and if your politics are what they are today, which is a mix of an integration, we hope, of nationalism, secularism and democracy, then history holds a certain fear for those who like to fiddle the story and tell fantasies instead of history. And that is a problem.

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Manish Jain. Dear friends, today is the seventieth anniversary of India’s Independence. I remember as a child I would enthusiastically repeat ‘Jai Hind’ when the principal of my government school ended his speech or after I’d listened to the prime minister’s speech. Recalling those memories is important, even as you read the news of 70 children dying in Gorakhpur, of the continuing impasse at Doklam, of Medha Patkar being arrested, of contestations about food and marriage, of Jignesh Mevani, of the High Court’s judgement to not permit the regularization of 1.73 lakh Shiksha Mitras as schoolteachers in UP. Each of these events signifies contestations of the idea and new reality of India, and of history. The history of India in Indian textbooks stops at 1947, and these daily events and experiences remind us that history is contemporary as well.

If engagement with a specific time, space and context to explain change and continuity marks the status of history as a modern discipline that attempts to access and reconstruct the past through the use of sources and evidences, then this exercise to discuss the idea of India
and history textbooks has to begin with the acknowledgement that each of these categories—India, history and textbooks—and their meanings are historical constructs that are simultaneously invoked, constructed and challenged.

Yesterday, in the course of an engaging conversation between our two eminent public intellectuals, Professor Romila Thapar and Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, we heard about the different elements of the idea of India—the shifts in it—and the silences in those different ideas. It was not so much a discussion about history and its textbooks. Professor Thapar mentioned that the first debate on textbooks happened in the 1970s, when Jan Sangh, an earlier avatar of BJP, as part of Janata Party government, objected to the NCERT history textbooks written by Professor Thapar and Professor Satish Chandra.

May I mention in passing that this perception—that community sentiments about history became important with Hindutva politics in post-Independence India—is not historically correct. My historical research about textbooks shows that, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the emerging public sphere in India began to pay more and more attention to what was being published in the textbooks, and one can see this in the series of objections, submissions, memorandums and debates in newspapers and the archives. In these historical sources, we find sufficient evidence that communities were quite sensitive about how they were being portrayed in the textbooks. Muslims, Hindus and Jains were consciously looking at depictions of their communities. Colonial historians and administrators too were constantly debating about what should go in the textbooks, what should be their
language, how they were to represent India and whether the depiction matched the imagery expected by the people. There were disjunctions and critiques of textbooks in the colonial period. For example, at the turn of the nineteenth century, schoolteachers, and students in the United Provinces were raising a variety of objections to the first textbook for civics by Lee-Warner, *The Citizen of India*, on account of how it represented India, how it talked about a subject, the questions of pedagogy and the difference between the language of the textbook and the level of students. Thus to argue that this concern regarding community sentiments emerged only from the 1970s onwards is misplaced. We need to be historically aware of the past.

At the same time, being a historian, we should also be aware of the shifts, and emphases, which have come in the present times about history and history teaching. Here I would like to quote what Professor Thapar rued yesterday: ‘There was a period when we should have insisted on removing textbooks from the control of the government.’ But why was it not insisted on then? We can find the answer to this question in Professor Thapar’s own 2009 essay in the journal *History Workshop*. Reminiscing on her engagement with the writing of history textbooks in the 1960s and the 70s, she discusses how, in the wake of concerns about national integration and the existence of poor-quality history textbooks that used communal, religious and colonial stereotypes, the writing of a textbook that presented secular and national history was seen as a national duty.

It is worth pointing out how both children and teachers were oblivious to the developments in the field of history and this is a point which also emerged in discussions around history textbooks in the morning.
With this background, we can posit some questions. I am not suggesting that all the panellists respond to these questions—the discussion will take its own forms and directions. But I wish to draw your attention to some of these questions, before we move further.

We often talk about the idea of India in history, but do children and teachers figure in our imaginations about the idea of India? Who are the children and teachers in our imagination of the idea of India and the teaching of history? What are their temporal, social and spatial locations of power and marginality? Who is this ‘we’ who imagines the nation without bearing any marks of religious, caste, occupational, linguistic or gendered identities? Is that erasure of the needs of the community in deference to the needs of the nation not an imposition of the cultural arbitrary of the dominant group of society on the other groups—groups that also restrict the choices of children?

Second: if education is not just knowledge and learning but also questioning, then, in tandem with the idea of India, what are the aims of teaching history to the young? And what kinds of textbooks and pedagogy are needed to work in that direction? If both life and educational practices are not based on a neat divide of the sacred and the secular, the feudal and the capitalist, the rational and the non-rational, but embedded in social relations of power and cultural beliefs and prejudices, then how do history textbooks engage with children and teachers and the repressed histories—a term used by Neeladri Bhattacharyya—that circulate around us?

Third: given the federal character of India, what have been the experiences, challenges and opportunities in the creation and use of such textbooks and pedagogies?
At this juncture, please allow me to historically contextualize the question of the federal character of India and the production of textbooks. It is important to remind ourselves that a significant shift has recently occurred in the understanding of curriculum, teaching history and history textbooks. Most of the schools and teachers present in the audience today are associated with ICSE boards. Thus, it is possible that most of you may not have taken note of the shift I am referring to, relating to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, and the creation of the new history textbooks guided by this framework under the aegis of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

The NCF 2005 conceptualized learning within a constructivist framework and made meaning central to learning. It did not see children as passive recipients and reproducers of textual knowledge but as active and creative and gave primacy to their experiences and voices. In the domain of history, the new textbooks moved from a linear narrative of the nation to multiplicities of histories and narratives of the past. These new textbooks brought the history of everyday life within their ambit to give students a sense that everything around them has a history, whether it is cricket or clothing.

In the context of the federal nature and structuring of education, curriculum and textbooks, it would be worth thinking about the different ways and experiences of engaging with history teaching at the centre and the constituent units of the Indian union of states. A study of various history textbooks, which include textbooks from Bengal, show that the imagination of India and the region are refracted through textbooks of history in different ways in the different Indian states.
So there is not a singular imagination of India—there are also regional identities at work. When we are talking about history and history textbooks, and the idea of India, we need to also bring in the question of regions and the question of languages, which was raised yesterday in the context of the discussion between Professor Thapar and Professor Spivak.

The fourth set of issues—in the wake of the concerns about the power of the state in using textbooks as a medium of sectarian ideological propaganda—relates to suggestions about removing textbooks from the control of the government. But when you begin to think outside the state, and in terms of civil society, then you need to remember that these are forces which have a presence not only within the state but outside the state as well. For example, Vidya Bharati, which has more than 1 lakh schools under its control, is the largest network of education controlled by RSS. So the question of regulation needs to be imagined in relation to professionalism, which Professor Thapar was mentioning earlier. What are the possibilities and alternatives in such a case when you need to imagine this?

Another issue which was briefly picked up in the morning session is: Why has the Indian state and its historians been reluctant to include contemporary history in history of India? What does this tell us about the anxieties of the postcolonial state and its own pedagogic role vis-à-vis the young?

And last, I wish to draw your attention to the news of proposals by the present central government of one examination board and textbooks for all of India. Coming in the wake of one nation, one leader, one ideology, one uniform civil code, one tax—GST, what would such a proposal mean to the idea of India and the
teaching of history? I do not suppose that we will be
able to find answers to all these questions in this session,
but conversations and questions are necessary and
should continue. So let us listen to our eminent panel
of speakers.

Hari Vasudevan. Manish has provided us with a number
of interesting questions, and my greatest regret is that I
was not present either yesterday evening or this morn-
ing, because I have a feeling that this kind of an event
is really an engaged conversation which continues over
a number of sessions, and somewhere or other each of
the sessions are meant to feed off of one another.

I hope I will be able to link up some of the issues
that have been raised both yesterday evening and this
morning, and also take up some of the points that Man-
ish has dealt with.

For the purposes of setting the ball rolling, I’d like
to stress three points and add a fourth. When dealing
with history textbooks or any textbooks and placing
those textbooks within a framework of how India has
evolved since 1947, one has to have a sense of the his-
tory of the textbook in India. This history is in many
ways a partial key to much of the kind of disjuncture
that some of the statements and questions raised by
Manish have dealt with. And I would like to first
address that smaller history of the textbook.

Professor Krishna Kumar has pointed out on many
occasions that the textbook has always been key to edu-
cation in a country in which there has to be some par-
ticular point of reference, either in terms of the
classroom or in terms of the examination thereafter that
the teacher can use. But what does one do where such
a fixed reference is not possible, given the variety of
pedagogic systems, as well as the range of concerns that
school education is meant to address, both in pre-Independence and post-Independence times? Significantly, though, this situation too has had different avatars over the course of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, and is a further complication in what transpired.

In these circumstances, the notion of a textbook with a specific set of references for an Indian nation, where the nation itself is writ large, is part of a discourse which emerged in the 60s and the 70s and I think, from what I’m hearing, Professor Thapar has already paid a good deal of attention to this. But I’d like to stress that that particular agenda, that particular notion of a textbook for India was relatively new.

If we are looking before the 1960s and 70s, the textbook was generated in a series of different contexts. There was an almost decentralized way of looking at what was to be used and how it was to be used. Certainly, when we are looking at the time when such a discourse at the national level was not enjoined at all, that is, in the pre-1947 period when—except in terms of the national movement which engendered such a discourse internal to itself—the examination system as well as the teaching system tended to respond to that nationalist input without having its job cut out for it in terms of what that particular input was to be. Most of our textbooks in that particular period and even after 1947, during the 1950s, were generated by the universities or by those associated with universities in different ways. So much of our examination system, so much of our curriculum, as well as our syllabi were generated by the Calcutta University, the Punjab University, the Madras University, etc. The variations depended on the focus of that particular university and the way in which it wished to conduct its affairs at that particular time—
and I think this was very important in the case of a subject like history.

During the course of the 1950s and early 60s, since education was on a State List, and since the universities were still very much in charge, much of what they recommended tended to be a product which was locally generated rather than nationally generated. A series of government committees—the Committee on secondary education, the financial committee and others, all attempted to set a particular framework of reference for the way in which these ideas would be generated during the course of the late 1940s and the 50s. But little broke the mould of established practice.

It really comes to the setting up of the NCERT in 1961 and the Kothari Commission, when the real national discourse, the notion of a framework of reference on a much larger scale was seriously to evolve. And even as it evolved, attached to this particular agenda was a deep feeling of distrust, a deep sense of worry concerning the way in which the universities and the states had done their job until then. So the Saiyidain committee report during the late 1960s raised major questions concerning the communal nature, as well as the communitarian nature, of the large number of textbooks that had been generated in the states at this time.

History is one of the most sensitive of subjects when it comes to this particular variation. Not so much geography, although geography in terms of economic geography was certainly affected by this. To a certain degree not civics so much either, because civics evolved as a subject primarily associated with the development of a good citizen, what precisely the good citizen was all about and what the constitution of India was all
about. It was fairly straightforward to understand, to have a sense of. So of all the subjects that made up the social sciences at the school and early university and intermediate level, history was probably the one most focused on the variations that we’re talking about, and some of the misuses as well as uses that we’re talking about.

It was against this background that the national discourse itself had a certain rubric within which it evolved. It tended, during the course of the 1960s and 70s, to follow a particular way of understanding history which I do not say was exclusive but which had a specificity about it in terms of approach and categorization.

What is important to remember, though, is that somewhere or other, if we are thinking of India at that time as a whole, the two levels of approach—decentralized and national—continued to exist almost simultaneously. This was the outcome of the entry of the national discourse in the 1960s and 70s, and the persistence of all the variations from the past, through a very simple strategy: the existence of state boards of education, which tended to set their examinations, and follow their own preferences in a particular way. So whether you are dealing with Punjab or with the SSLC in the South, etc., you have a series of variations in terms of objectives, aims, goals, as well as the sheer content of what was being generated. The importance, I think, of what we consider a particular paradigm of variation has always lived, during the latter part of the twentieth century, or at least in the mid-twentieth century, up to 1980s, with this duality. And it is important to remember that the duality is at the base of a large number of problems and issues that we’re dealing with.
When, for instance, a particular state does not think or listen to what has been generated within the framework of the national discourse. There has been an alternative lineage which has continuously run and continuously existed, and history has been one of crucial subjects that have been affected by this.

Primarily because different regions have been very particular about their communities and the different history associations and such that have generated it, the range of complexity has been large. The Kerala History Association, for instance, during the course of the 1970s, had its own particular take on history which is very different from anything that the Indian History Congress had begun to evolve during the course of the 60s and the 70s. If you look carefully, *Keralacharithram* which was done during the course of the mid-70s to late 70s, you will see this major distinction between that and the textbooks that were produced by the NCERT during the mid- to late 70s, and which became so popular during the 1980s, and which today, of course, Orient Blackswan sells and we all recommend.

This duality in the world of the Indian history textbook is something that I would like to stress. That is the first point that I would like to have borne in mind in the course of our discussion.

The second point that I’d like to make is that, quite clearly, this duality existed within a series of larger educational concerns. These were educational concerns which were addressed in the Kothari Committee. These concerns failed, following the generation of the national and/or state discourses during the course of the 1960s and 70s, to find serious solution. During the 80s and 90s, there was this sense that, somewhere, the Indian education system has not performed as effectively as it should have.
As a third point: I think there were three basic issues that came to receive stress at the end of this time-line and all of them affected the world of textbook production. The first was that somewhere or other the quality of education had simply not been up to the mark. The second: that the numbers that were affected were not adequate to the numbers that needed to be affected. And third: that the peculiar combination of the Concurrent List’s interpretation during the course of the 60s and 70s, when education had moved on to the Concurrent List, had simply not generated what was needed.

Finally, a fourth point: that there were a series of other issues concerning the burden of education as well that required attention.

**Shireen Maswood.** Regrettably, the approach of the state government continues to remain flawed in the approach to writing/revising textbooks on Indian history. The basic principles of projecting a holistic approach to the evolution of society, economy and polity are not priorities. A secular, inclusive pluralism needs to be accepted and upheld. India has moved into the twenty-first century, but, as has been lamented, the textbooks of modern India, in some cases, bring the narrative down to the mid-1960s to cover the Nehruvian era. Most textbooks commissioned by state governments, including the series produced by the West Bengal government, also stop at 1947. And by way of lip service to the postcolonial period, a little section on civics takes us to the 1950s. But there is one problem, which I think needs to be shared: the moment the commissioning authority is the state, there is an unstated agenda. And this we realized too late. Not so much in the case of the first two textbooks written and produced for distribution in government and aided
schools, i.e. for Classes 6 and 7, but with regard to the Class 8 textbook.

For the Class 8 textbook on the history of modern India, (and to keep the record straight, all was fine till last year—no questions asked, no pressures), we were suddenly called upon to introduce one particular event. And here we thought we had a trump card, because the book was till 1947. How could we include something that happened in the twenty-first century when the book’s narrative ends with Indian Independence? But you will find that when you work in tandem with the state government, there are some things that just happen.

Most of us here are teachers—some of my students are here. As a facilitator, the most important thing about the textbook is not to make your students read it but to encourage them to ruminate, to question. Question what is written, and to try and come up with answers to the questions, so that we get better students at the graduate and postgraduate levels.

**Krishna Kumar.** I wish to pose the question of teaching history in relation to three pleas. First, how do we think about peace in relation to teaching of history? Second, how is teaching of history organised at the levels of nation and the States? Third, I wish to make a plea for a dialogue between the historian and the child psychologist.

I have analysed history textbooks in India and Pakistan. I met children and teachers in Pakistan besides looking at the textbooks. In 2006, in a meeting with 400 teachers from Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV), a KV teacher asked a question. It was : ‘Why should history be taught from the perspective of peace and not from the perspective of reality?’ By reality, she perhaps meant hostility, potential violence and the experience of war.
There has been a silence between India and Pakistan on the freedom struggle and a potent silence between secular and communal forces. Religious separatism and partition are seen as the outcome of communal or religious voices finding expression in politics. If we continue to maintain these binaries, then there is not much room left for dialogue.

I think we have a lot to think about in terms of, what is the purpose of teaching history? Is it to build citizens who are loyal to an idea of what a nation-state stands for? This may be one idea, or another idea, and may be replaced by yet another idea. In this view, history is essentially concerned with the making of informed citizens committed and loyal to a nation-state. Educational theory has of course a lot to offer by way of reflection on the purpose of teaching history. Perhaps no idea is as charged with inspiration as a question which many scholars use to summarise the work of the great political theorist Rousseau. He also had a lot to do with what we today call child-centred education. Scholars of Rousseau have summarised Rousseau’s formulation of a primary problem that he left for the world to resolve. Rousseau was aware that education is going to spread, and that it is going to spread as an instrument of the state. So, scholarship on Rousseau has crystallised the Rousseau problem, and this problem is: ‘Can history be used for peace?’ It depends on answering the following question: ‘Can we nurture enlightened citizens who are also good human beings?’

Translated slightly more elaborately, it means, can you create people who are loyal to a particular nation state, whose heart also beats for other nation states, or who are also sufficiently good human beings to worry about citizens of other countries? It is definitely a very
difficult question. You can say that people who make syllabi, textbooks, etc, have to resolve it in their own minds first. This question has remained relevant ever since Rousseau formulated it in various ways. We must face it today.

Let me now move to my second problem. In our country, the nation and the province are very submerged categories. In education, we think about the nation in terms of CBSE, and we think about the province in terms of provincial boards, and so we worry about, for example, Rajasthan’s textbooks today. But we don’t ask, how come in Rajasthan there are about four hundred schools which are not going to teach the syllabus of the Rajasthan board. Who attends these schools? They are also in Rajasthan. The only difference is that they are affiliated to the CBSE, and you can guess who attends those schools. These are children of the better off sections of Rajasthani society. The CBSE with its over 18,000 schools in the country constitutes today perhaps some six to seven per cent of the total number of secondary schools, and this is the top disk of India’s system of education, which likes to give its children the best products in terms of curriculums and textbooks. Then for the masses, there are provincial board schools, and there, the provincial system of textbook production prevails. Provincial governments have their say there, and generally provincial elites don’t worry too much about those schools and about those textbooks. Not just because in most States they are in the provincial language, but because their children don’t study those textbooks. Then there is yet another disk. There is the ‘national’ India of CBSE, there is the provincial India of the provincial boards, but then there’s also a private board, namely the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination (CISCE).
Like some other States, Bengal was able to ignore the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 because CISCE is more popular among the private schools of Bengal than the CBSE. And now, there is a fourth disk added to India’s diverse and unequal systems, the IB, International Baccalaureate, and of course, there have been since colonial times schools affiliated to Cambridge board. So, in a way you can say the examination system is kind of a great leveller, it hides our inequalities, which are expressed not only as systems of managing a modicum of equal opportunity, but also systems of managing diverse levels of awareness and very different kinds of knowledge. The knowledge that today Rajasthan Board of Education is creating, much to our annoyance, will never reach the children of the upper sections of Rajasthani society. It is meant for the masses, and in fact if you look at textbooks in Punjab, Gujarat, Haryana, and many other States, you will be worried. Normally we worry about NCERT textbooks. It’s a matter of great interest that NCERT textbooks produced in 2005 and 2006 are still going on, and many of the States which are governed by the BJP today adopted that, like Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and so on.

Within the big umbrella of federalism, it all seems to work out, that we will not worry too much about what becomes mass knowledge. Many among national elites feel that if there is some scope for hysteria among the masses, it is alright. That is exactly how the English looked at the masses and in that sense the legacy of colonial rule continues to prevail.

My third point is about psychology. History as a subject presents a serious problem to the cognitive psychologist. Children end class five without much history, but with the awareness of territories of India. They have
seen the map of India not only on stamps but also textbooks and various other places under geography, which does creep in by grade four/five. There’s no basis to suggest that suddenly you’ll now go into grade six and you will now start with ancient India. This structuring of history as linear knowledge, which takes its starting point in the earliest possible period of known history or documentation, is based on an academic sort of rationalism which is rooted in history as a discipline. But what exactly it has to do with childhood, with the way children learn, with the way children engage with knowledge, is difficult to explain. This question of sixth, seventh, and eighth being ancient, medieval and modern. In class eight; you come to the freedom struggle, and, you know, it ends in 1947, and you don’t go any further. This is the way historians have constructed their knowledge, and the cognitive psychologist who knows a little bit about children is kind of puzzled. How come the historians don’t want to understand childhood, and the way children think? Don’t they treat children as learners? They treat children as an audience. They assume that children that have to be brought up to a certain idea of the past.

Why is this great race to finish history up to 1947 till grade eight? Well, the answer usually given is that class eight is the closing point for compulsory education now. So by then the history of India as a nation should be completed, and every child must know who we are, where we came from, what we have gone through, and so on. This is essentially as history recalling our collective memory as a nation, and this has been therefore a site of great contestation.

NCERT’s new history series is very appropriately called ‘Our Pasts’ rather than ‘The Past’, and the explanation is that we have many pasts, therefore, there
cannot be a single past that we represent. As Professor Vasudevan has explained, there are pasts of regions, pasts of communities, past in terms of gender and classes, and so on. And I think that’s certainly moving a bit towards the ground where history as a subject would become psychologically defensible. But we have a long way to go, because the way history is organised for those who are going to pursue history as a discipline doesn’t provide enough of a rationale for organising it in a similar way for children who are not yet at what cognitively is called the formal stage of their intellectual development.

Philosopher John Dewey was very sceptical about history in elementary classes by which he meant age 14 and 15. He thought perhaps the best we can do is to introduce history as sociology. Dewey was writing long before Jean Piaget’s work was known, but through his own work as a teacher he had understood that history is not history. It’s like teaching something else, teaching something that children will learn, and yes will say, ‘We know it,’ but they won’t know what they know, or why it’s knowledge. And I think that problem remains, particularly because of the very tight compartmentalisation that remains in our education system. Children learn about this map of India, they can see the map from age four, five onwards, and by age seven or eight, they completely absorbed that map. This is India, this is territorial India, and it’s within it that we live. The construction of identity as Indians takes place in geography long before the historian comes to do the job, and tries to expand that geography because ancient Indian history cannot be taught within the boundaries of India that have been conveyed already, under this very rudimentary geography. There is so little flow of ideas between geography, history, and what we now call
in NCERT Social and Political Life. We don’t call it civics anymore though the word has persisted, so well was it used in colonial times to make us civic citizens, we refuse to believe that today citizens need to be political people. And then there is the question of economy and economics. There is so little flow of ideas across these classes in seventh and eighth that it’s not surprising that history comes across as a bizarre subject. Even though it has been greatly humanised now with many curriculum improvements and changes, the fundamental problem remains.

And then, from ninth onwards, we are looking at a completely different scenario, there’s so much more room for experimentation, and I’m very glad it has been done, although many in Bengal are not aware of what exactly has been done, and how it has worked. Why does it work at all as history? But yes the question remains. Is the textbook a central tool? Is the textbook a basis of examination? Is that a good idea? Should our system move beyond that idea and treat many resources as worthwhile resources? What is the territory of the teacher in relation to the territory of the textbook maker? My answer generally would be, and I will end with that, perhaps we haven’t looked at another creature in this exercise, and that person is the syllabus designer.

The syllabus designer of history has a problem because history is a whole. What you leave in it also conveys something about who you are. So the desire is to teach everything, a problem that Professor Yashpal who has passed away a couple of weeks ago posed extremely sharply in his 1993 report ‘Learning without Burden’, that if we teach everything that we know—if we present our disciplines, or our subjects as whole packages that have to be passed on to the next
generation as whole packages, then we are showing great distrust in our children’s curiosity and in their ability to gradually translate their curiosity to a spirit of enquiry. That’s where every discipline meets, to make sure that the child’s natural curiosity is drawn towards our discipline. In this case we are talking about history, and that once it’s drawn, we have the means to engage with the child’s curiosity and gradually train this curiosity to become the capacity to systematically enquire into every matter. And that’s where the joy of history actually lies, and perhaps it is not totally reconcilable with the use of history as a means of nation-building. It is perhaps not totally reconcilable with the use of history as training of the citizen. There are overlaps, and these overlaps are very important when we work within systems of governance and so on and so forth. The debate within history has to be, why should it be taught to children? It’s typical to accept that, yes, it should be taught to all children so that some at least become good students at the post-graduate level. This is just not defensible. If you want to choose potential good students of history you can have a pre-history test, like a pre-medical test. You don’t need to pass on history to every child, there has to be a deeper, more sophisticated defence of history. History as the means that makes us respect the past, that makes us sufficiently mature to stop quarrelling with the past, which is exactly what is happening in the context of Partition which we remember today on its seventieth anniversary. Thank you.
Krishna Kumar is Honorary Professor of Education, Punjab University. For most of his career, he served the Central Institute of Education, Delhi University. Between 2004 and 2010, he was Director of NCERT. His books include Politics of Education in Colonial India, Prejudice and Pride (a study of history textbooks in India and Pakistan), Battle for Peace, A Pedagogue’s Romance, and Education, Conflict and Peace. A Padma Shri awardee, he also has an Honorary DLitt from the Institute of Education, University of London.

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Jana Natya Manch is based in Delhi. Sometimes we travel but essentially we are a Delhi-based group, an amateur group in the strict sense of the term because we don’t earn from the theatre we do. We are all professionals in various fields—I am a publisher, apart from being an actor. There are students, teachers, other professionals, there is a doctor too, government employees, and, of course, as always, there are people who are unemployed, who are looking for jobs.

Since we are based in Delhi, and that’s really the context in which we create our plays, all the plays are in Hindi.

Two of the most complicated issues we have taken up in our plays—both street and proscenium—are caste, and the communal question. In my view, these are the most complicated issues to deal with in a performance. And this is particularly true of street theatre. In street theatre, we don’t go to auditoria and perform. Sometimes we do perform in halls but, in 99 per cent of the cases, those are not places meant for performance. Those are halls where some trade union is having a meeting, stuff like that. The idea, really, behind street theatre is very simple: in Delhi or Calcutta or most other cities of India, a large majority of people don’t have access to theatre, because theatre is restricted to
certain parts of the city. There are cultural, educational, economic barriers to accessing theatre. And distance. In Delhi, for instance, most theatre happens in the Mandi House area or the India Habitat Centre. If you are living in Noida or Dwarka—it’s a long way off. So if people are not going to the theatre for all these reasons, what do we do as theatre people? We take our theatre to the people. The idea is simple: there is an open space (Peter Brook calls it the ‘empty space’) and all you need is human bodies. You need one person, at least, to be performing, and one person, at least, to be watching. If these three conditions are fulfilled—an empty space, a person watching, a person performing—then you have theatre.

But, of course, there are no truly empty spaces.

Now look at this picture of a Janam performance in a basti. The statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar tells you immediately that you are in a dalit basti. All over North India, all dalit bastis have some iconographic representation of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Of course, this is not true only of dalit bastis—it is true of all spaces. There are no spaces that are really empty. All spaces are contested, all spaces are fought for. The lack of access to theatre, it’s not just because of an economic or geographical aspect. There is a cultural aspect too, the feeling that, ‘Oh, will I be welcome? I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what happens in there. There’s a building, but what happens inside?’ For a working-class person, to be able to access theatre or any kind of culture is very hard.

I remember when PVR started in Delhi. There was a government regulation that said that a certain number of seats had to be reserved at a very low price—seven rupees, when a normal ticket was about eighty or a hundred. The first row of every show was reserved at seven rupees. Who were the people who were accessing those seats? Students.
I never saw a working-class person, never saw a rickshaw-wala or a thela-wala access them even though it was economically feasible for them to do so. That is what I mean when I say that there is a cultural barrier too.

If you think of spaces as being contested, as being fought over, as having histories, and segmented histories, then what it enjoins upon you as a street-theatre artist or activist is that your radar has to be active all the time, you have to be aware of what these contestations are. You cannot start doing something in a space that would make no sense to the people in that space, nor use language that would be completely opaque to them. By language, I don’t mean only the spoken word. I mean the gestural language, the genre, etc. You also have to be sensitive about the language you speak among yourselves as actors when you go there. Do you speak in Hindi, do you speak in English? It matters, it makes a difference. The street-theatre performance is not just for the duration of the play—the street-theatre performance is everything that precedes and follows the play. The fact of going there, the fact of selecting the space, the interaction with local organizers, comrades, friends, etc., then doing the play, speaking before the play if you do speak before the play, interacting with the audience (there is always some banter that goes on), being aware, sensing, looking, talking to people, finding out what their lives are like, asking for stories. A lot of the research we end up doing is by osmosis, and a lot of that then feeds back into the plays that one performs.

Jana Natya Manch is a fairly old group. We were set up in 1973. Our first street play was *Machine*, performed in October 1978. Soon after, we did *Hatyare*, based on the communal violence in Aligargh. There is an excellent fact-finding report on the riot, and that formed the basis of the play. The riot was used by organized companies to try and
wipe out the indigenous lock-making cottage industry that thrived in Aligarh. This cottage industry gave employment to vast numbers of artisans, both Hindu and Muslim. A single lock would go through multiple workshops, each specializing in a particular process or component. Economic dependence on one another had led to the creation of a composite and interdependent culture. The communal riots that were engineered were meant to wreck this harmony.

So that is the framing of the play. The idea that the common people of this country know how to live and work together, know how to live as neighbours, how to be part of each other's lives, festivals, sorrows and joys and so on . . . and that it's an outsider who comes and instigates them.

From there, I will jump to 1986, to a play called Aparan Bhaichare Ka which was created at the time of the rise in Punjab of the Sikh separatist forces demanding Khalistan.

So: the owner of the Great American Circus comes to India, looking for a deadly animal. An animal called Samprodaijta. But there is a figure preventing the owner of the Great American Circus from getting to this deadly animal—the figure of Bhaichara (brotherhood). That's a character in the play, and Safdar [Hashmi] used to play that character. In the end, that character is killed by the three communalists who have been instigated by the American to do so.

The argument of the play is in a sense similar to Hatvare, the idea that the people of this land are essentially secular, able to live with each other in peace and harmony. And it is outside forces that perpetrate violence and hatred among them.

This framework remains constant, even though the
details keep changing. In fact, this framework is something we inherited from the Indian People’s Theatre Association plays of the 1940s. The anti-communal plays have always been like this, based on the idea of Hindu–Muslim bhai-bhai (or behen-behen). But this framework becomes increasingly untenable and inadequate by the late 1980s. Recall the events around the Shah Bano case, when a progressive judgment is overturned by a law in Parliament passed to appease the Muslim fundamentalists. Then, when the Hindu Right creates a furore, the locks of the Babri Masjid are opened to appease them. So one after the other, the most retrograde, backward-looking elements are appeased by the same government which, please remember, is the Congress government of Rajiv Gandhi.

Through the late 1980s, we see a massive mobilization on the question of Ramjanmabhoomi. Those were terrifying times, times of dread.

In 1988, we did a proscenium play, based on the story by Munshi Premchand, called *Satyagrah*. It’s a comic story. The Viceroy of India is going to visit Banaras. On the day of his arrival, the Congress declares a general strike. The magistrate is very concerned. So he gets a Hindu and a Muslim notable to confabulate, and they wonder, ‘How do we break the strike?’ They reach out to Pandit Moteram Shastri. This character appears in several Premchand stories. He is a fat Banaras panda. He loves eating. They say to him, ‘You go on a hunger strike and that will sabotage the Congress strike.’ So, there is the magistrate, the Hindu Raja and the Muslim Rai Bahadur, all of them convincing Pandit Moteram Shastri to go on strike. He does so. But, of course, he can’t control his hunger. There is a young Congress worker who goes to him with a bowl of Kalakand and keeps it in front of him. The pandit is severely tempted, and eventually eats the kalakand.

The spin that Safdar gave to this story was the idea that
religion is fine as long as it is in your private space. That it should remain there. All of us have a right to pray to whatever god we want. But the moment religion and politics start to mix—that’s when the problems start. While political parties, especially Right-wing parties, have always used religion for political mobilization, there was a new, aggressive, and ambitious edge to what unfolded in the 80s. Now, one issue—Babri Masjid/Ram Janambhoomi—became, quite literally, the chariot for the BJP’s push to conquer the Indian political landscape. In a light, funny way, Moteram helped focus on that.

The next play I want to talk about is Hinsa Parmo Dharmah, again based on a Premchand story. This is a play that we made in 1989, right after Safdar was killed. The first half of the play was written by Safdar himself when he was working on Moteram, but he had abandoned it. We took up that fragment and turned it into a street play. The style of the play is that of a musical. There is an orphan boy who is found between a temple and a mosque and he doesn’t know what religion he belongs to. He is picked up and given a name, ‘Jamid’, and he becomes the do-gooder of the village. He is an innocent young boy. He works for the temple; he works for the mosque. But his weakness is that he can’t see anybody being oppressed and that is what leads him to quit the village. He goes to the city. He is first adopted by the temple and then by the mosque, but at both places he finds the poor and the weak being oppressed.

And then, on 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished by the Hindutva stormtroopers. We did a play called Sab Mein Sahib Bhaipur Hai Ji, based on the legend of Sant Paltu Das, in an attempt to recover the memory of this lesser-known Sufi/Bhakti poet as a symbol of our syncretic culture. What attracted us to this historical figure is that he lived in Ayodhya, and spoke out equally against Hindu and Muslim clergy.
Soon after, we created *Mat Banto Insaan ko*, in which there’s a character of a tourist guide called, after the film character, Raju Guide. There’s a structure he identifies as a mosque, and the Hindu fundamentalists attack him, saying: ‘That’s not a mosque, it’s a temple.’ So he says ‘OK, it’s a temple.’ But then the Muslim fundamentalists attack him. At the end of the play, Raju Guide is killed by both.

And then, first in 1996 for 13 days, and then in 1998, the BJP is able to install its own prime minister. In the winter of 1998–99, we did a play called *Gadha Puran*. An allegorical play, a rollicking farce. There is no reference to any real-life figure. The central character is a king called Gadhad. He has a guru called Guru Golgangol, a shadowy character who stays in the background and wears an RSS-type cap. The king is always surrounded by five of his ministers. Referring to the coalition that the NDA was. The BJP didn’t have majority.

The king’s problem is simple: his crown is too large for his tiny head. But Guru Golgangol says: ‘It’s not about the size of the head. That doesn’t matter. It’s about what is perceived by the people. That’s what is important. We have to create a perception that you’re a great guy.’ And every time they try that, a poor donkey comes in the way and plays spoilsport. Till, in the end, the donkey is declared ‘anti-national’ and executed. That last sequence, of the hanging, is quite chilling actually, so the farce suddenly turns serious and tragic and hits you in the gut.

It’s quite uncanny. I was reading the play to prepare for this talk, and I was struck by how much of what has come to pass was presaged by the play—the pliant media acting as the handmaiden of the government; the attacks on universities; the crony capitalism; the escalating militancy of the rhetoric, so that every new guy makes the previous one look like a ‘liberal’ (think of the move from Vajpayee to
Advani to Modi to Yogi); the branding of all opposition as ‘anti-national’; and so on.

And then, of course, there was 2002. As the pogrom in Gujarat started unfolding, we did another play. I remember the evening of the Godhra train-burning. We were at rehearsal, and all of us had that terrible, dreadful feeling—something terrifying was going to unfold. And we knew that no matter what happened, we wanted to be on the streets with a play. Remember, this was a decade after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and many of us had vivid memories of the bloodletting that followed. It was clear to us that no longer could one do the older type of play that equated the communalists from the two sides, and made a plea for humanity and sanity. What was unfolding in Gujarat, post-Godhra, was not a riot but a pogrom that targeted only one community. And this targeted violence was aided and abetted by the state, in particular by the police. And what was under attack was not one community per se but the very idea of India as a secular, democratic republic. The destruction of the Babri Masjid, as well as the post-Godhra violence in Gujarat, were to be understood as punctual instances in the transformation of India into a fascist Hindu Rashtra. So the framing of the play had to be not as an anti-communal statement but as an anti-fascist statement. Their Hindu Rashtra has nothing to do with religion. In fact, it’s not even in the interests of the majority of Hindus who are crushed by poverty and oppressed by caste.

So, the play had to say: they want to reconstitute the secular, democratic republic into a fascist state. The question is: How do you communicate this? In particular: How do you communicate this on the street where you cannot regulate the audience? How do you communicate this with strength but with full responsibility? How do you
communicate without inciting further violence in a situation that is already tense?

We decided that the play was going to use four different registers of speech. And by speech, I don’t mean only the spoken word. The play begins with silence. In theatre, as you know, silence is also a statement. Actors come in, stand in a straight line, silent, and look at the audience. And then, from behind their backs, they pull out images. Images of the violence in Gujarat. We were careful about the kind of images we wanted to show—not very graphic but also moving. They go to the audience with these images (not too close, though), then one actor comes forward and recites a poem. In the first two or three weeks of the violence, a lot of poetry was written. I read dozens of poems in Hindi, and I am sure there were more. We used three poems in the play—by Vimal Kumar, Mangalesh Dabral and Vishnu Nagar.

The poem ends, and then we have the entry of three buffoons. The first is Guru Golgangol (whom we met earlier in Gadha Puran). In Gadha Puran, he wore saffron. Here, he comes in RSS dress—the ridiculous half pants, a white shirt and black RSS cap. He is flanked by two lieutenants—Buddhibali and Bahubali, the Brainy One and the Brawny One. This scene is totally over the top, satirical, comic, slapstick, crazy. There’s a gag in this scene which is repeated in the play, and the audience loves it: every time Bahubali says something particularly idiotic, the Guru summons Bahubali who presents his bum. The Guru says ‘Tum gadhe ho!’ (You are an ass!) and kicks his bum. Bahubali accepts the kick gratefully, with a ‘Thank you, Guruji’. But, of course, the joke is on the Guru, because most often all that Bahubali has done is to strip away the spin from reality and said it how it is.

So the play uses four registers of speech: silence; visuals; poetry; slapstick. The play works because it juxtaposes all
these. None of them becomes overpowering. Had we done a satirical play, I believe it wouldn’t have worked—in fact, it might have been counterproductive. Friends have often asked: Haven’t you been attacked for this play? And the answer, happily, is: No. We’ve had many instances where someone in the audience got very angry and called us all kinds of names, but it never descended to violence. (I should add that there is an element of luck here—who knows what might have happened if a RSS shakhapramukh or someone like that had seen the play! Fortunately, this was in the age before smartphones and social media, which also probably saved us.)

And now, of course, the one who helmed Gujarat in 2002 helms the nation. So, as soon as Modi was elected, we made a play called Natak Chappan Chhati Ka. In this play, the actor puts a placard inside his shirt that says 56 in big numbers. So what the audience sees is a big, inflated chest. This character always comes with the media and the corporates backing him. This was in 2014–15.

Our most recent play is called Chor Machaye Shor. This is a play that we started making once the lynchings of muslims and dalits began. Making a play takes a lot of time. By the time you understand what’s happening, you see a trend, you try and investigate that, you try and learn more about it, you do research, etc. One thing that is different between the 80s and early 90s and now, is that in the 80s and 90s, the RSS-led Hindutva forces took up one big issue and used it to whip up hatred. Babri Masjid/Ram Janambhoomi remained an issue for a very long time and many of us from very different fields, historians, journalists, artists, writers, scientists, etc., responded to that one big issue in various ways. Today, what do you find? You have Ghar Wapasi, it stays in the news for a while, then, inexplicably, suddenly it dies down; then you have Love Jihad, then
suddenly that dies down; then there are lynchings; then beef; then language; renaming of a station; renaming of streets, etc.

I think it is a deliberate strategy to keep assaulting people with these short bursts and to not stick to any one issue for long. So the problem for us playmakers is that by the time we respond to an issue and make a play, it is gone from people’s minds. So, how do you respond to this? One of the things we have started working with is making plays out of a series of short scenes. Each scene is about 3 to 5 minutes long—no more. So you don’t get into too much historical detail, not too much complexity. But each scene talks about one particular aspect of what’s unfolding around us. It need not only be a communal issue—it could be something else. A month so or ago, there was a report in the paper about some idiot minister saying that even cows should have an Aadhar card. Now, that’s perfect for us. It’s ready made for theatre. We don’t even have to do anything. We just land up and say this, and people start laughing. You don’t need to make a scene around it—it’s funny by itself.

But lynchings are not funny. When Akhlak is killed, when Junaid is killed, when Pehlu Khan is killed, that’s not funny. You need to respond, you need to do something that expresses how you feel about it. So we are trying to work with a form that is more flexible, in which scenes are interchangeable, i.e. you can take out one scene and insert something else in its place if need be, yet the rest of play is not affected. Our most recent play is in this format. This format has no script because it is constantly being improvised.

I think one of the things that has changed from the 80s is that now you can unleash mobs at any time. We have, of course, been attacked multiple times. Safdar’s killing was the most horrific attack but there have been others over the years. Some of them could have been quite serious. For the
first time now, we are asking: ‘How do we say this? How do we name things?’ This has never been an issue so far. I have not heard of a single instance where somebody watched the play and then physically attacked the actors. They might come to you, they might argue with you, they might shout at you. They might even call you all sorts of names. But people who watch a play typically don’t attack you physically. The ones who do, they don’t actually watch the play.

One reason why street theatre is more relevant than ever is that it trains audiences in democracy. Democracy is not only about casting a vote once in five years. It is about the spirit of debate and enquiry, the capacity to live together despite and with differences, the right to hold minority opinions. In other words, democracy is something we have to forge every day, on the streets, in schools and colleges and workplaces, in the home, and, within the home, in the kitchen and the bedroom as well. Street theatre, in that sense, is a rehearsal for democracy.

**QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION**

**Gulan Kripalani.** When you started talking about the play that you did based on the violence in Aligarh, you said that the focus was that the outsider comes and creates violence and then, of course, it takes on a life of its own. Now you are saying we don’t need a particular person to come, it is almost an organic violence that is happening. So my question to you is: With your experience of working so closely with people, what are the RSS and BJP tapping in to in order to have created this fundamental shift? Earlier we would say, and we still do, that we essentially live together, essentially we are bhai-bhai, and other people come and create the mayhem. Now there is a clear change, now we don’t need other
people to come and do it. It’s become a part of who we are. What do you think the fundamentalists forces tapped in to, to create this almost chemical change in the environment? What have they tapped in to, to have created this?

**Sudhanva.** I can only speak of what I see around me in Delhi. I live near and work in an area called Shadipur. It is a very lower-middle-class, working-class area. One sees all kinds of anxieties and tensions the daily lives of the people. To do with the nature of jobs, the kind of precarious employment, etc. There are caste issues, gender issues, and so on. Now, I don’t want to sound as if the battle is lost, as if the Indian people as a whole have become communal. I don’t want to exaggerate, but I also don’t want to pretend as if nothing has happened. I feel that a lot of the anxiety, the tension, the fear comes from people having to deal with the degradations of their daily lives. The nature of our capitalism, which is particularly predatory and brutish, exaggerates all these insecurities. Cities have also become very unfriendly in many ways. Public spaces inside cities have shrunk. There are great disparities in access to services, etc. There are parts of the city that have grown crazily rich, there are parts that have sunk more and more into squalor. And people see it, they resent it. Then there’s the media—you turn on your television and it is like a class study in consumption. You’re being told consume, consume, consume, even though you don’t have the means to consume. These resentments, these anxieties, are bound to find expression. If you have a strong Left, it goes in the direction of people’s struggles—for example, look at the farmers’ struggles in Maharashtra and Rajasthan. But if you don’t, then fascism fills the vacuum.
Audience Member. Hearing you speak was an honour, seeing you perform also. Suppose we want to show any of your street plays to our students as a resource when we are teaching a particular topic in the class, are they available on YouTube? Because students of the city don’t get to see the street plays. They get to see movie clips, but making them go back to the roots where the poetry is, to reading between the lines, that’s really wonderful! Our students really don’t know any of this. They are so attached to Bollywood. But this is what real world is. I am from Pune. So where can I show them?

Sudhanva. Uploading links to YouTube is a complicated business for two reasons. One, I have never been happy with anything that’s been shot. I just believe that it loses its energy completely. There is another aspect, which is that we live in a Republic of Hurt Sentiments. And we are incorrigible. We make fun of a lot of things. So I am genuinely of the view that some things should not go on YouTube. At least for the sake of the safety of actors!

Audience Member. Have you addressed rural issues?

Sudhanva. Not as much, because we are Delhi-based. Ninety per cent of our work happens in Delhi itself. When we go to villages, our plays sometime fall flat. First, you need to know the language. By language, I don’t mean Hindi, Marathi, Telugu. There’s also the language of the lilt, the cadence, the metaphor, the gesture. There is a language of the form itself. Now, in our plays, we can very easily take off on Bollywood songs or rap, etc. That doesn’t necessarily work in rural areas. And then the duration. Our plays are typically 30 minutes or thereabouts. In villages, they expect much longer shows. So, no, we don’t do much work in rural areas.
Stuti Pachisia. Performances work in terms of audience. In that, there might be one play which you are performing for various kinds of audience. So like, in the moment of performing the play, how do you adapt to what the audience requires of you? How do you negotiate with that kind of disparity in your response?

Sudhanva. You have to have your antennas tuned. You have to know what kind of jokes work with what kinds of audiences. Sometimes you change a word or two, because you know that word will resonate more with that day’s audience. I should also say that this is something that requires training. Actors need to be well trained in order to improvise. It is not easy. And how do we train ourselves? We train ourselves by doing it a million times. And it helps to be a jester, a clown, a maskhara. You can make people laugh, then slip in something serious. You can use innuendo—when you say chhapan chhati, you don’t need to say Modi. A little smile comes on people’s lips and they know. That’s the beauty of performance.

Sudhanva Deshpande joined Jana Natya Manch in 1987, motivated and inspired by Safdar Hashmi. Over the past three decades, he has been involved in the creation and direction of dozens of street, proscenium and other performances. As an actor, he has over 2,000 performances to his credit. He has led workshops all India, Palestine, South Africa and several countries of Europe and North America. He has co-directed two films on Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre, and edited two volumes of essays on theatre and politics. He is involved in the running of Studio Safdar and the May Day Bookstore in New Delhi, and works as editor at LeftWord Books.
My presentation is about four of my art projects based on the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. My argument in the course of this presentation is that the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict is a product of a misinterpretation of history. A renowned Sri Lankan historian recently dedicated his book to the innocents who lost their lives as a direct consequence of this misinterpretation of history. Hence, through this presentation of artworks, I would like to suggest other modes of writing histories—writing histories from ordinary things and writing histories of the subaltern. These works also talk about alternative ways of archiving the past.

Let me start with a political understanding of the Sri Lankan national flag. Foreign friends tell me that it is a beautiful flag. But is it really so? When the British colony Ceylon transformed into an independent country, a flag from an ancient kingdom was adopted as its national flag. A gold lion holds a sword in its right forepaw on a maroon background, with four gold bo leaves in each corner. The lion represents the Sinhalese while the four bo leaves represent Buddhism’s four concepts of Metta, Karuna, Mudita and Upeskha. Later, two vertical stripes of equal size in saffron and green—the saffron stripe closest to the lion—were added to represent the two main minorities: Tamils and Muslims. Interestingly, the lion in the centre of flag the is
raising its sword against the minorities. Further, minorities and faiths are kept outside the borders of a nation clearly marked by Buddhist and Sinhala identity. Hence, the flag re/presents the ideology of the modern Sri Lankan state as well as the innate mechanism of the making of a Sinhalese Buddhist nation by marginalizing its others. History as a discipline played a crucial role in the validation of Sinhalese Buddhist domination. The modern discourse of history, by racializing and singularizing Sri Lanka’s identity and erasing the shared histories of multiple cultures, claimed the entire precolonial heritage as the achievement of the majority community. This provides larger ownership of the country to a particular community.

Racial consciousnesses marked the postcolonial polity that emerged from the conditions of colonialism in Sri Lanka. This overlaps with the manner in which the trope of race was mobilized in the Indian context. Romila Thapar has argued that the ‘theory of the Aryan race not only structured knowledge about the past, but perhaps more directly gave legitimacy to the conflicts of the present’. While the theory was first introduced by the culture of colonialism as a theory of language, at its zenith it transformed into a racial theory, a product of the culture of imperialism. Aryan theory, from its genesis, is a thesis about linguistic origins, and argues that Sinhalese is an Indo-Aryan language. However, Sinhalese became an indicator of a lineage that descended from the Aryan ‘race’ whereby a linguistic theory metamorphosed into a racial theory. This was based on the belief that all speakers of Indo-European languages were related to each other by biological decent. Marisia Angell argues that archaeology, the Aryan theory and political legitimization to rule secured the structure of empire for the British. Therefore, the Aryan theory was used as a tool to increase British political power in Sri Lanka. This allowed the rulers
to project a hereditary link with the majority of their subjects, which in turn allowed them to claim the legitimacy to rule. R. A. L. H. Gunawardene has noted that the Aryan theory in colonial Ceylon was embraced not only by British orientalists but also by large swathes of the Sinhalese community. The theory located a section of the south Asian community in a privileged position: it elevated them to the rank of the kinsmen of their rulers, even though the relationship was a distant and tenuous one. Contrarily, the local Tamil population was portrayed as Dravidians.

In the census conducted in Sri Lanka by the British in 1871 and 1881 ‘race’ appeared as an important category for the first time. The history of Sri Lanka has always been conceived as the history of the Sinhalese people, argues Michael Roberts. ‘It has bequeathed to us, in a powerful fashion, two interrelated concepts: Dhammadipa (Lanka as a home of the Buddhist doctrine in all its pristine purity and glory); and Sihadipa (Lanka as the home of the Sinhalese).’ Sinhalese nationalism, by appropriating the imagination of the Ceylonese nation, displaced all minorities from the nation space and constructed the Tamils as a perpetual threat to the nation. ‘From the 1880s onwards, the preoccupation of the early nationalists with “Aryanness” meant demonizing the “lower races” of other ethnic and religious origins and the valorizing of Sinhalese Buddhism.’ As Roberts says, ‘invidious yet powerful influence of historical traditions, natural physiographic unity attached to an island and newly arrived democratic theories and democratic sanction of a demographic majority made possible this transformation.’ The word ‘Jathiya’ in Sinhala has been used to signify both race and nation. This linguistic fix, in a way, erased the line between these categories in popular usage. Therefore, for the Sinhalese, ‘there could be no nation that was distinct from a race.’
Although many eminent historians are not in favour of considering ancient chronicles like the *Mahavamsa* as a historical text or as historical evidence, unfortunately Sri Lanka’s entire historical narration is deeply rooted in these texts. *Mahavamsa* considers the arrival of Sinhalese ancestors (Vijaya) from Bengal and the arrival of Buddhism to Sri Lanka as the major civilizational project that transformed the island. It also talks about the inhabitants before the arrival of Prince Vijaya. It is important to note here that, in medieval times, there was no India and Sri Lanka. Because of the geographical location Sri Lanka and South India have a shared history and culture, as Indrapala argues that South India and Sri Lanka is one cultural region, that the sea in-between is a unifier and not a boundary. Hence the island of Lanka had, every now and then, come under the direct or indirect rule of south Indian kings. Its art and architectural remains of the past depict its close resemblance with South India. But Sri Lankan history books interpret South Indians as invaders, conquerors and destroyers of Aryan Buddhist culture whereas the North Indians are regarded as insiders. It is also silent about South Indian Buddhism and the Buddhist artifacts produced by the South Indian artisans and South Indian rulers in Sri Lanka.

The transformation of a British colony called Ceylon into a Sinhalese Buddhist nation-state was engineered not only through an appropriation of selected bits of its past as history but also through cycles of riots. If you look at the history of riots in pre-independence Sri Lanka, the first cycle was against the Catholics, the second against the Muslims and the third against the Malayalis. The Malayalis are not a visible community in Sri Lanka now, for either they became Tamils or Sinhalese or they moved out of Sri Lanka. Similarly, there are photographic and other documentary evidence that establish the presence of a good
number of Telugu speakers in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. After independence the Sinhalese nationalist propaganda against the Anglo-Ceylonese or Euro-Asians forced them to leave the country. The history of independent Sri Lanka is marked by cycles of violence against the Tamils. Later, this violence led to the civil war that lasted for 30 years. Now the civil war is over but the violence is targeted towards the local Muslims. Every month there are reports about burning of mosques, attacks on Muslims and their business enterprises. School textbooks describe minorities as outsiders, invaders, colonizers and settlers. The same sentiments are expressed in much of the media.

In 1948 Sri Lanka emerged as an independent state after 400 years of European colonial rule by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Since the majoritarian politics and the emergence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in post-Independence Sri Lanka was not agreeable to any mode of power-sharing, the Tamil minority was forced to claim a separate homeland for the Tamils. That led to the birth of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). During its 30 years of civil war more than 3 lakh innocents have died. Thousands of people have disappeared, their families still searching for their beloved ones. There is not a single family from the north and east part of Sri Lanka—which was the warfront—that has not had an experience of displacement. In 2009 the war came to an end with the government’s most cruel military initiative that killed more than 4,000 innocents and displaced nearly 5 lakh people. After the war was won by the government there were celebrations like the one that happened in India after the Kargil. The Tamils were not allowed to mourn their relatives lost in the war. All commemorations were completely banned—LTTE memorials and cemeteries all over the north and the east were bulldozed, almost vacuum-cleaned at the same time.
as the government and the military were busy building their own memorials and victory monuments in that very part of the country that was soaked in human blood.

The memorialization project in postwar Sri Lanka is linked to the discourse of power. If you look at the flag and read its symbolism, it very clearly delineates the minorities from the majority. After winning the war, then president, Mahinda Rajapaksha said that there were no minorities or majorities in the country—only patriots and traitors. Any person or group questioning or dissenting from the dominant discourse were labelled traitors. Hence that statement implicitly identify minorities as traitors. The power gained from the victory was further invested in the making of new ‘historical sites’ connected to Buddhism. An archeological site belonging to the Megalithic period in Jaffna is declared a Buddhist site. Hundreds of new Buddhist temples have been built in the minority areas where there is no Buddhism. These temples have been validated by local myths and seen as evidence of the Sinhalese Buddhist claim to the entire island. Pilgrimages and war tourism continue turning myth into history.

In this context, I did four works as a response to my immediate surroundings. In 2009 I got an invitation from the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver. They said they were inviting artists who use anthropological tools in their practice to make art. Until then I didn’t realize that I was using anthropological tools to make art. Similarly, when Megha called me regarding the history conference in Calcutta, I realized my approach to art and its method fit well into the project of writing alternative histories. Similarly, before the Asian Art Archive in Hong Kong invited me for a project involving archiving and art-making, I had never thought that there was an archiving element to my work. As an artist, I am reacting to a situation. When I conceived
these works, I conceived them as artworks, although they have elements of memory, history and archive.

In 2004 during the Norwegian-mediated peace talk between the Sri Lankan government and LTTE, the war came to a temporary halt. As a response to a bigger, visual-art exhibition visiting Jaffna, my four students and I did a work in collaboration with the general public. It is called History of Histories. We collected, from randomly selected homes in Jaffna, 500 objects representing the memories or histories of 25 years spent in a war zone. We exhibited the collected objects at the Jaffna Public Library that had been set on fire by the government in 1981. Tamil minorities in the north consider the burning a cultural genocide because it was a treasure house of rare palm-leaf documents and other materials that can never be recovered. It was one of the best libraries in South Asia. The act of burning further fuelled the ethnic rift. That library building underwent a major renovation and reopened to the public in 2004—but with empty bookshelves! We filled those bookshelves with the 500 objects we collected from the local people. The objects varied—a broken limb of a doll, shell pieces, empty bullets, water, barbed wire, death certificates, identity cards, house keys, a shoe belonging to a dead child, passports, sand, particles of ruined buildings, clothes of dead relatives, costume jewellery . . .

In 2009 I was invited to exhibit the same work in Vancouver. At that time, the war had re-escalated. And most of the materials in History of Histories were banned under emergency regulations. So I couldn’t transport them to Vancouver. Certain materials had to go underground and could not be in the public domain. So I did a similar work with the Tamil diaspora in Vancouver, slightly shifting my focus from home to home-making. Interlacing 300 individual memories and stories of home, that installation tried to
unpack the emotional and material boundaries of diaspora homes and how they interact with and transform each other. Many of those Tamil migrants—both legal and illegal—crossed various borders, entry points and checkpoints to reach their final destination. Those unpredictable and dangerous journeys determined the size and nature of the objects they could carry. Thus, the passage of travel became the subtext of these objects. Like the migrants, the objects too underwent the surveillance of state and non-state actors at various points along the journey. Hence, travel handled, translated and altered the memory and meaning of objects and determined their transparency or opacity.

In Vancouver too, we collected 300 objects in a similar manner and explored the element of travel. Because they too had gone through different experiences: some had immigrated illegally, some legally. How do these objects transform memory and represent history? What kind of objects do people take with them, and what do they leave behind? Even though a significant amount of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora live in Vancouver, the anthropology museum has no representation from this community. This art project gave a chance to that diaspora to exhibit its history. It brought untold personal stories to the public in the form of objects, through this aesthetic mediation. It built a collective history of a community that was forced to live with the experience of exile, displacement and trauma.

In 2012, I did another artwork called The Incomplete Thombu. Winslow’s (1862) Tamil dictionary defines thombu as a public land registry. It is a word commonly used by both Tamils and Sinhalese, and is probably derived from the Greek word thome, meaning a section, most likely of papyrus, which gave rise to the Latin word tome or large book. The Portuguese and Dutch, who colonized Sri Lanka in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively, used
this term for the land registers in which they documented land ownership.

The colonial document talks about the ownership of a property in relation to the boundaries shared with others. So the ‘other’ is very important. *The Incomplete Thombu* is about the emotional boundaries of lost property. One of the major challenges I faced was how to present the individual who is not a visual artist, and how to engage my skills in drawing in this collaborative endeavour. I finally chose drawing as tool of remembering or as a method of collecting individual testimonies. I randomly selected individuals from my social network as well as those who were recommended to me by word of mouth. I asked each person to draw the floor plan of the house that was most closely associated with his/her image of home. In the process of drawing, they shared memories of loved ones, objects, incidents, plants, pets, colours and smells associated with that building. Their narrations transformed the hand-drawn plans into a tangible expression of home. I then did a drawing in response to the stories I heard and the emotions they gave rise to. To make these mental house plans more ‘legible’, an architectural rendering of the original floor plan, on transparent paper, was inserted between my drawing and the hand-drawn plan. An extract of each narration was included on the reverse of the plan. The entire work was bound and presented in a form that recalled a *thombu* or land register. The result contains 80 documents of memories of home by Tamil and Muslim civilians displaced from the northern part of the Island and presently living either in Sri Lanka or abroad. Given below are a few testimonies.

1. I was a small child when we were displaced in 1990. We walked nearly 15 km to reach Jaffna. My family members carried household things that were portable. Since I was small, they told me to carry my pet puppy.
I carried him because he was too small to walk that distance. A few days after we reached Jaffna, the puppy died . . .

2. We got notice to leave our village without delay because of the advancement of government troops. My grandfather could not bear it. He died the same day. We left the village immediately after his body was cremated.

3. It is hard to nurture a jasmine creeper in the heavy winter of Toronto. I covered the plant with a blanket and kept it inside the house. Last summer it yielded four flowers. Their fragrance took me back to my Jaffna house.

4. We had to leave our house because of the advancement of troops in 1990. My father carefully locked the doors and brought all the keys with him, with the hope of return. Now, almost 20 years have gone by. My father passed away a few years back, without seeing his house. We still have the keys even though it, and my father, no longer exist.

5. I have my ancestral house in Jaffna. My elder sister’s marriage took place in that house . . . Now it is a military training camp. Once, when my family visited, we received guest treatment in our own house. We sat in our drawing room tasting cool drinks and biscuits. Later, when I attempted to see the house, my request was rejected on the grounds that I did not have the right. Now I watch my sister’s wedding video to see my own house.

6. Now I am living in Toronto with my family but my childhood memories are more closely associated with our house in Jaffna . . . There is no trace of my house
now. I used to look at my empty land from Canada using Google maps . . .

7. My father died when we were little. My mother struggled to feed seven children. I started working in the paddy fields when I was eight years old. My elder brother, who was helping my mother to raise the family, was shot dead by the Indian army. My elder sister is married and living in Switzerland and my younger brother is in France. Now I work as a university lecturer in Jaffna. One of my sisters was an LTTE cadre and was killed in 1995 during a military operation. My other two sisters are married. One of them was badly injured in the last phase of the Vanni war. Both my sisters’ husbands lost their legs in the same war.

8. Since the late 80s, due to heavy shelling from the Palay air base, we had to move out of our house many times and stay in neighbouring villages. During the time of our final expulsion in 1990, we were in the process of building a new house. One of the most disturbing incidents during the expulsion was that we could not take our pregnant Jersey cow with us. We had no option but to abandon her in our cattle shed. We never knew what happened to her.

9. I have resettled in our own house after nearly twenty years. I was displaced to Puttalam. Everything has changed here. My street does not look like it did. Most of those who were displaced have yet to return . . . Even in the refugee camps in Puttalam, we lived with our relatives and friends. Now I am living with strangers. I am a stranger on my own street.

These art projects are a collage of diversified identities, contested memories and disjoined histories of lost homes and the different mechanisms of home-making. These projects
represent the common feeling of loss, and attempts to rebuild the community based on that feeling. They register voices of the common man who carried the burden of history.

In 2016 I did a new work called *Cabinet of Resistance*. It contained 25 resistance/resilience stories of war-affected communities. It was exhibited in the Kochi Bienniale, and the stories are narrated through printed texts and drawings on a series of index cards placed in library index boxes. By inquiring how these individuals appropriated or relativized their day-to-day existence under the conditions of war, such as economic embargos, displacements, lack of communication facilities and travel restrictions, this project aims to register the innovative and alternative inventions that intertwined with the experience of war. The cabinet as a physical form and conceptual imagining, connects to the colonial cabinet of curiosities that led to the development of museums and archives. By employing this particular method of collection and display, this work attempts to play with ideas of archive, memory and indexing in relation to their connection to object and object making.

I will read one or two examples of these stories of resistance of different people.

**Shreen and the Sand Bags**

i. Sand bags were crucial during the war to protect us from aerial bombings and sniper attacks. Fertilizer bags and hessian sacks were commonly used for making sand bags.

ii. But in the last phase of war there was a heavy shortage of these sacks because people did not carry them when they were displaced.

iii. People who were trapped in the final days of the war were displaced many times. With every displacement, the number of things that could be carried grew less and less.
iv. People carried items that were needed for their day-to-day survival and items that had sentimental value.

v. They sold their gold jewelry during different stages of displacement out of the need to purchase food items such as rice, coconut and milk powder for the children.

vi. Most of the married women carried their bridal saris as their most precious property, especially for their sentimental value.

vii. To safeguard themselves and their families from the shelling and air raids, they gave away their expensive silk bridal saris with gold and silver thread to make sand bags.

**Sivaraj and the Radio**

i. The distance between Jaffna and Colombo is 394 km, and it is nearly 7 to 8 hours away by train or bus.

ii. When the LTTE took over the control of the entire northern part of Sri Lanka, the main road that connects it to the capital Colombo was closed. No direct transport was available.

iii. People had to travel to Colombo for many reasons. They took the risk of travelling dangerous routes crossing landmines, jungles, lagoons and ‘no man’ zones. Many of them died when they were caught in the crossfire in the areas between no-man zones and the LTTE- and government-controlled areas.

iv. Travel to Colombo sometimes took 4 days or more.

v. People would inform their families in Jaffna via letter that they had reached Colombo safely. There were no telephone or telegram facilities available at the time. Letters could take more than a month to reach Jaffna depending on the schedule of the ship service.
vi. With great difficulty it was possible to tune into broadcasts from the state-owned radio station. Due to a shortage of batteries and a lack of power supply, people only used the radio for listening to the news at 6.30 a.m., 12.45 p.m., 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. After every news transmission, the radio would broadcast the daily obituary announcements.

vii. Those that reached Colombo safely sent their own obituary notices to the radio station. When their relatives in Jaffna heard their names they celebrated their safe passage to Colombo.

Thiyaku, Thirunelveli Mechanic

i. For more than 10 years the government stopped the supply of petrol. As a result, all petrol engine vehicles were abandoned.

ii. But there was a limited supply of kerosene. So we converted petrol engines into kerosene engines.

iii. By following the function of tractor engine, we fixed three to five gaskets and converted the petrol engine into a kerosene engine. The gasket reduces the compression. I converted many British-made cars, such as Morris Minor, Morris Oxford, A 30, A 40, A 90, Austin Cambridge and Somerset, in this manner.

iv. For a while we had to mix vegetable cooking oil or gingelly oil or bassia oil with engine oil, and in some cases coconut oil with engine oil, to run the engines.

v. During this time there was also a shortage of spare parts for these converted British cars. I used parts of condemned vehicles as spare parts for cars in running condition. Occasionally, we also made our own spare parts by casting them in aluminum or iron.


QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION

Audience Member 1. You mentioned something about Malayalis and Tamilians and the communal hatred against them. Was this politically influenced?

Sanathanan. Yesterday we were talking about how Bangladesh is moving away from a secular state to a Muslim state, how Pakistan was formed and what is happening in India now. A similar project started in Sri Lanka 50 years ago. Through riots, discourse of history and the constitutional arrangements, it has become a ‘pure Sinhalese Buddhist’ state.

Audience Member 1. So no other religion or language?

Sanathanan. Buddhism has a special place in the constitution. After independence, in 1956, Sinhala was made into the official language. Ever since, the Tamils have been fighting for equal status for their language. Although Tamil gained the same status in 1987, in most cases, the state violates the constitution. The sect of Buddhism followed by the Sinhalese is called Theravada. But in South India it was Mahayana. Mahayana sites were found in significant numbers in Sri Lanka, showing the link with South India. But the tragedy is that the history of Buddhist South India remains unwritten.

Audience Member 2. What were the socioeconomic ramifications of all these aggressions?

Sanathanan. If you look at the records from the 1920s and 30s, there were negative sentiments that came with the Buddhist reformists. They were anticolonial, anti-Tamil, anti-Indian and anti-Muslim—because they found that most of the economy was under the control of the minorities. Even now, if you look at the demography of Colombo, 60 per cent is non-Sinhalese. The minorities own the major business establishments. The plantations, which were a big part of the country’s
economy, are supported by the South Indian Tamil labourers brought in by the British in the nineteenth century.

English colonial government established tea plantations in hill country and developed infrastructure facilities to support its rule in the southern part of the island. Schools set up by the missionaries and the Hindu revivalists in the north produced employees for the colonial administrative machinery. Hence many of the government jobs were secured by the Anglo-Ceylonese and Tamil communities. But, after independence, the national government introduced the quota system that made the minorities feel that they were being sidelined by the Sinhala state. That was one of the reasons for the Tamil insurgency.

Audience member 3. What has been your procedure or process for selecting these stories? How many people did you talk to and how did you decide what would eventually be a part of the project?

Sanathanan. The number was decided by the size of the book or the size of the site where we were going to exhibit. Hence the book project contains 80 stories. History of Histories and Imaging Home contain 500 and 300 images, respectively. Cabinet of Resistance has 25 stories. We collected stories through a rhizomic process. I was very concerned about the collection of stories outside my social and ideological locations. I did not pass any judgement—I treated everything equally and rejected nothing. Since I underwent similar experiences, I was able to empathetically identify myself with each story. If I put it differently: it is about telling my experiences in others voices.

Audience Member 4. How have Sri Lankan textbooks interpreted Buddhism?
Sanathanan. After the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhist sites in Afghanistan by the Taliban, a group of Buddhist students in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka, met with a local Buddhist monk in the area and asked if they could do something. It was decided that a gigantic statue of Buddha would be built in Kurunegala to compensate for the great loss. The commission was given to a sculptor from Tamil Nadu. What is interesting is that the same sculptor was employed to build a huge Hanuman sculpture in the hill country few years before the Kurunegala Buddha. This may have been the practice throughout history, because the stylistic aspects of artifacts connect Sri Lanka with South India. But the Aryan myths imaginatively connect it with North India. We look at history from the point of view of the dynasties and kings, but never the craftsmen. We don’t look at history from the point of view of patronage, labour, migration and travel. Myths played a crucial role in the absence of scientific evidence to bridge Sri Lanka with North India, such as Buddha visiting Sri Lanka by flying through the sky. Sri Lankan textbooks hardly distinguish myth from history, religion from history and totally ignore the fact that there was no Sri Lanka as a political entity in the premodern era.

T. Sanathanan is a visual artist living and working in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. His work has been exhibited in Sri Lanka and at the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Museum of Ethnology, Vienna; Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi; Asian Art Archive, Hong Kong; Kochi Art Bienniale; and elsewhere. His artist-book projects include The One-Year Drawing Project, The Incomplete Thombu and A–Z of Conflict (forthcoming). He is currently Senior Lecturer, Art History, Department of Fine Arts, Jaffna University, and co-founder of the Sri Lankan Archive for Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design.
People of the North East often complain about the lack of representation of their history in the curricula of most school boards. One of the reasons for this is that, until recently, besides the colonial ethnographies, there was hardly any written history of the region. I have not been able to study the latest NCERT textbooks and their perceptions of the North East, but I believe that Rani Gaidinliu is often the only figure who finds mention in Indian history textbooks. When the region is represented in other kinds of works, it is usually in the context of the insurgency and the political instability originating from the separatist movements in the region. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that in the future, the region will be receive its due representation, given that there has been much more research and scholarship on the region in the past decade.

The silence of the region and history from the margins are issues that I have time and again iterated in my lectures. History from the margins is usually not given much importance. In order to counter the under-representation of the North East, I decided to follow a visual approach and use photography as a medium to trace the history of the Mizos.
I have worked on this project with Willem van Schendel who has also worked on the visual history of an adjoining area in Bangladesh—the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The University Grants Commission funded our project. Our methodology involved collecting images from the length and breadth of the state and neighbouring Mizo-inhabited areas, from all sections of society and from, as far as possible, all ethnic configurations. The idea was to collect a comprehensive visual account of Mizoram. We visited villages and approached the villagers, asking them to show us photographs from their family albums. Most people were happy to share, and we were thus able to collect more than 16,000 images, including those from archives in the UK. The project was intense and time-consuming and it took us a little more than two years to collect the images. The procedure we followed was to take photographs of photographs. We asked for as much details of the photos as possible—names, places, dates, occasions that the photographs showcased, etc., although there were times when such information was not always available. By the end of the project we were pleasantly surprised to know that these projects are not as expensive as one expects them to be and much can be done with small project grants.

The need for such a project was also because the visual past of the Mizos had never been adequately documented. The period of the insurgency from 1966 to 1986 also brought about the loss of Mizo material culture, as counter-insurgency operations led to the burning of several villages as a result of what was called the ‘grouping of villages’.

To put the photographs in context one needs to know a bit about the history of the Mizos. The Mizos, a conglomeration of several tribes, were part of the many tribes moving into Northeast India from further east since the precolonial period. The actual cause of these migrations is
not clear but they range from the need for new *jhum* lands, push from tribes further east, population explosion, etc. It was during these migrations and the British incursion into these territories either to establish tea gardens or to protect their territories that the Mizos and the British came into conflict. By the 1890s Mizoram had come under the jurisdiction of Lushai Hills district, Assam, thereby becoming a part of British India. The arrival of the colonial officer introduced the camera into Lushai Hills and our earliest images are by them.

Christian missionaries soon followed. Among the many things they introduced was the Lushai/Mizo script based on Roman/Latin characters. This meant formal Western education was also introduced in the hills and through that the Mizos were connected with other regions and parts of the world. Missionaries and educated elites became another source for photographs.

I mentioned why it was important for us to carry out this project. To that I would like to add that a visit to the state museum in Aizawl will make one realize that in these displays the conceptualization of the past is very modern, since the past is portrayed through a contemporary lens. Thus the earliest visual images enable us to locate a certain authenticity about the past rather than these simple projections of what the past may have been. Images of the Mizos in the early colonial or in the precolonial past are rare. Unlike other ethnic groups of the North East, like the Nagas or the people of Arunachal, professional anthropologists had not visited the Mizos.

The result of this project was *The Camera as Witness* published by Cambridge University Press in 2016. We were also able to hold exhibitions, two each in Delhi and in Mizoram, and hope to do others elsewhere. The book was reprinted within the first year of its publication and the
exhibitions extremely well received although the reaction to the photographs differed in Delhi and Mizoram.

We were able to collect three genres of photographs from the colonial administrators, the missionaries and the family albums.

It is essential to mention in this context that photographs are not the first source that historians usually go to, to write their histories. They usually focus on written sources and sometimes even neglect the oral. The advantage of photographs is that the evidence they provide is material. They are often able to show visually what a written source may not take account of. Moreover, a photograph is taken at the time of the event whereas a written source is usually written after the events have occurred. This is of course not to say that photographs are infallible. They therefore have to be treated and understood with care.

Coming back to the reception of the photographs in Delhi and Mizoram: most people from Delhi were amazed by the modernity of the Mizos. Popular perceptions framed through the categories of ‘tribal’ expect perhaps images of primitiveness and savagery. However, many noticed the several engagements Mizos had with modernity and their very early reception of global culture. We may talk about transformation and focus on political transformation, but a photograph can change the trajectory of the narrative by uncovering details that would otherwise have been eclipsed or remained unexplored. In Mizoram, on the other hand, there was a fascination for the early images of the Mizos that included the arrival of colonialism. People often wanted to see images of their forefathers for such images are rare. The photographs from the period of the ‘troubles’ held a lot of fascination too, even though the Mizos are beginning to talk about the violence of the period only now.
The Camera as Witness was divided into four sections and a total of 23 chapters, even as we wanted to capture a hundred-year history of the Mizos. The first was called ‘Becoming Mizo’, the second ‘Mizoram in the New India’, the third ‘Visions of Independence’ and the last ‘Mizo Modernities’. These titles encapsulate, broadly, the kinds of photographs we encountered.

What follows is a sample of some of the images from our collection.

Vanhnuailiana (whom the British called Vonolel) was a powerful chief near Champhai in eastern Mizoram. He had died just before the first British invasion of 1871–72. Here we see British troops posing in front of his elaborate shrine. The ordinary soldiers in this photograph appear to be largely Sikhs from Punjab (to the left) and Gurkhas from Nepal (to the right), which is probably something that most people fail to acknowledge or realize.
A tombstone of a chief surrounded by skeletons of animals and bulls that he killed. Another photo that takes one back to the 1890 expedition when the British warred against the chief. The photo shows the courtyard of the chief.
The Lushai expedition had three starting points: Assam, in the north, Chittagong and Burma. The image of this army camp stationed at Lunglei caught my interest because of the display of cannons. Written sources of the period often talk about the difficulty in transporting military equipment to the hills. Images such as this enable us to speculate about the labour employed as well as the draught animals used in order to be able to carry out the expeditions.
Lushai chiefs posing with guns during their visit to Calcutta, 1872. Collection: Sainghinga

Some of the chiefs in this photograph are Vanhnuia (of Pukzing village, sitting in the left chair), Lalngura (in the middle chair), Rothangpuia (of Belkhai village, on the right chair), another Lalngura (squatting on the left) and Lalchema (of Laisawral village, squatting on the right). These independent chiefs made the trip at the behest of T. H. Lewin, the British officer stationed at the border of their domain.
The provenance of this photograph is unknown. However, the image is of a chief and most probably his family, taken in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The gun undoubtedly was a cherished possession. The group appears to have posed for the photographer who has tried to make the image ‘ethnographic’.

This image is also interesting even as the photo reveals a firearm, a much valued item and whose presence reveals the global connections the region had even before the arrival of the British. The British, when they came, made it a point to control the movement of guns. Which is why unlicensed ones were often smuggled in from Burma and Bengal. Thus, an interesting connection existed between the Northeast and these places as far as trading firearms was concerned.
The Mission School in Aijal [Aizawl], 1903, with missionary D. E. Jones in the background. The first primary school was started in 1894. This is perhaps the earliest example of what would become a standard genre in Mizoram photography: the school or class photograph, complete with sign showing date and place.
The building of the Presbyterian Hospital in Durtlang, 1929. The missionary in shorts is E. L. Mendus. The hospital went on to train nurses and it became an important institution providing healthcare.

Miss Hughes with Durtlang choir, probably from the 1950s. Singing was an important means through which Christianity was imparted. Western choral singing was imbibed with gusto and the tonic sol-fa system was introduced. Katie Hughes (pictured here), also known as Pi Zaii or ‘Madam Songstress,’ was an important figure in the choral singing scene.
The previous 3 photos depict the many ways in which the missionaries intervened in Mizo society—through education, medical facilities as well as the introduction of Western musical scales. Soon, the Mizos were being educated in Shillong and Calcutta and other places in India and abroad. They became well-known for their singing and the Mizo choirs went on tour everywhere. Photography soon became a tool that the Mizos employed for themselves and self-representation became an important idea. Following such interventions and changes, we see the Mizos representing themselves through the medium of photographs. The following 3 photos are examples of such self-representation.

Collection: C. H. Liana

Studio portrait of Mizo students in Silchar, 1921. First row, from left to right: unidentified, Pakunga, T. Luaia, Selluaia. Second row: Lama, Chalmawia, Hnûna.
Kaithuami and Laii, nursing students in Shillong, 1919. The young women in this elaborately decorated portrait stand in a tradition that began in the early 1900s, when nursing opened up as a career for women in Mizoram.
Thangsailova in a gazebo in 1957, reclining in a pose strongly resembling cultural icon James Dean. The cowboy motif connected Mizo teenagers with the worldwide popularity of Hollywood films.
The bazaar area of Aizawl, Mizoram’s capital, after the Indian Air Force destroyed it in March 1966.
Women fighters Lalthansangi and Chalmawii with their guns, 1969.

These women were among the few female combatants in the Mizo National Army. More women worked in supportive capacities, for example in the Medical Corps. The photograph was taken in the headquarters of the Lion Brigade in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, East Pakistan.
The last set of photographs depict the very many ways in which the Mizos engaged with modernity from the 40s through the 70s.

Durtlang Leitan’ [The Durtlang Gap], 1947. This full-length portrait of a young woman exudes suave elegance. She stands against the bare rock-face of the Durtlang Gap—a narrow breach in the mountain ridge that separates the towns of Aizawl from Durtlang—which has been a favourite location for Mizo photographers.
F. Sapbawia, 1950, posing confidently for the camera, smartly dressed in a suit and rakish fedora hat.

Collection: V. Zochami
Saimuana (centre) and his friends in Aizawl in 1970.
Lalbuta, lead singer, and other members of the highly successful band Vulmawi on stage. Around 1980, Mizo bands from the Chin State (Burma) had many fans among the young people in Mizoram. Some of their songs, in the Mizo language, went on to become classics.
Finally, to conclude, while photographs may not be able to tell the entire story, the visualness of the source offers a different kind of narrative. The photographs can be sites from where new questions arise but they are also useful in imagining vividly the past. The different genres of photographs have been influential in revealing a different kind of image of the region that gives us insights into the history that is otherwise not represented in textual sources.

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RYAN LOBO

THE CAMERA AS WITNESS:
HIGH NOON IN LUCKNOW &
A MILLION MUTINIES

HIGH NOON IN LUCKNOW

‘High Noon in Lucknow’ is a series of photographs I made of museums and memorials in Lucknow. I made photographs of monuments across time and periods of power, and of contemporary politicians like Mayawati who built numerous large statues commemorating her self. I made photographs inside what looked like a warehouse within the museum premises of Lucknow Zoo. This asbestos-covered room is a repository for statues of Queen Victoria and English officers once famous for their works but now mostly forgotten. Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ came to mind as soon as I entered the room.

‘Ozymandias’, Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Ozymandias, Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.’

I captioned these photographs with what the personalities had said, with quotes from mythology and from Jung to reflect in some way on power and its transformation through time.

When King George V was on his deathbed, according to ‘official’ accounts his doctor asked him ‘How is the Empire?’ The King’s secretary apparently answered, ‘All is well, sir, with the Empire’ and the king smiled before ‘relapsing into unconsciousness’. His last words appear to be less quotable—his physician Lord Dawson reported later that they were ‘God damn you’, told to his nurse when she administered a sedative. There has been speculation that Dawson prescribed the sedative to ‘hasten the King’s demise’, so that the press could have the story for the morning newspapers and not the less prestigious evening publications.
The state’s former chief minister, Mayawati, herself a dalit, has built many large-scale architectural memorials commemorating social reformers associated with India’s ‘untouchable’ caste throughout Uttar Pradesh, including the Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar Samajik Parivartan Prateek Sthal (Ambedkar Memorial) in Lucknow. In other areas, statues of leaders through various periods of history have been removed and Mayawati’s statue erected in their place. The architecture is usually oversized and assertive. Trees are completely absent from the acres of marble-covered ground, similar in some ways to an imperial or a colonial space. The figures of Mayawati and Kanshi Ram, her mentor, loom over the space.

Kanshi Ram once said to Mayawati ‘I can make you such a big leader one day that not one collector but a whole row of collectors will line up with their files in front of you waiting for orders.’

Although for now Mayawati has lost power, there is speculation that she is focused on becoming the prime minister of India. One wonders what will happen to Lutyens’ Delhi if she manages to do so.
The figure of the Buddha from the Ashoka period does not have a face. People of rival faiths would, with every change of ruler, inflict damage on the faces of ‘other’ idols and render them unworthy of worship. A recent example might be the Taliban’s destruction of the Afghan Bamiyan Buddhas. I captioned the image of this faceless Buddha with his own words: ‘Three things cannot be hidden: the sun, the moon and the truth.’
History seems to have undone the queen in this photograph. This very imperial queen has a missing nose—perhaps accidentally broken or knocked off by vandals.

Destroying idols, knocking off their noses, was common practice in temples of North India, especially when marauding Muslim armies swept into town.

The Queen had once said: ‘The important thing is not what they think of me, but what I think of them.’ History seems to imply otherwise.
Mayawati’s time in power has attracted praise and criticism. Millions view her as an icon but the incredible rise in her personal wealth has been criticized as indicative of widespread corruption. One of my photographs features Mayawati’s famous handbag. I captioned this with her own words when she was accused of corruption: ‘It’s my turn now.’
I photographed the statue of a once-famous man who was responsible for solving issues related to famines in West Bengal. I found a quote from him in a book called *Famine as a Geographical Phenomenon* by B. Currey and G. Hugo: ‘With the lesson taught by the past before us we may indeed hope to interpret the needs of the present but the past alone projects no certain light on a changeful future.’

MacDonnell was saying that history teaches us that we don’t learn from history—that we can only hope to predict the needs of the present with the past.

I found it a humbling thought, that we as humanity are not really in control.
I found it interesting that there were no trees planted in the massive public space of the Ambedkar memorial. The few plants that are, are constrained by steel frames to give them shape and mould them in a certain way, possibly like so many ideologies today where the objective is about power-grabbing and not about the elevation of citizens.

I captioned the photograph with a saying from Jung: ‘A key to transformations is to be aware of who you are.’
I found this tableau in the Buddha museum within the Ambedkar Memorial. The elephant is the party symbol of Mayawati and I captioned the photograph with a line from the Buddha: ‘If you cannot find a wise and prudent friend, then, like a king who leaves a conquered kingdom, or like an elephant in the forest, you should go your way alone.’

A relaxed and serene depiction of Queen Victoria sans crown and globe (usually in her left hand) is captioned with one of her own lines: ‘Great events make me quiet and calm: its only trifles that irritate my nerves.’
Mayawati’s father, Prabhu Das, was a post-office employee at Badalpur, Uttar Pradesh. The sons in the family were sent to private schools while the daughters went to ‘low-performing government schools’. I find it interesting how personal psychology and history affects human history, and this phallic-looking and very trimmed and sculpted tree in the Ambedkar Memorial is captioned with ‘I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection,’ from Civilization and its Discontents (1930) by Sigmund Freud.
Likewise, I captioned this photograph of a tourist hurrying over the super-heated marble flooring under the gaze of many oversized elephants with a line from Mayawati herself, as she described an attempted violence on her person from a rival political party: ‘The first tenure began in the shadow of the guesthouse incident with Mulayam’s men. It disturbed my peace of mind.’

As the cliché goes, power corrupts. But what is seldom realized is that power also reveals. When a person is engaged in the act of attainment, subterfuge is necessary. But as he or she achieves power, the need for concealment diminishes. In time, monuments are built to honour the powerful, the wise and the heroic. In time, older monuments are replaced by what has risen from the ashes of the past.

All empires perish, but not for a lack of power. They lose discipline and are one day replaced by those who have known less, want more and who have yet to consider a need to rise above their own desires and selves.

The rise and fall of empires have been going on since the first ape man usurped his brother’s position. Savagery,
ascendance, decadence. The great rise because of savagery and a need to triumph. They rule in ascendance. They fall because of their decadence. A cascading process, through space and time, the eternal Ourobouros eating its own tail, its darker aspects alive within the heart of man, whose existence we often reject and allow to manifest in so many ways.

We want to believe in universal peace and justice and our own individual ideas of the world. The truth is that our existences are circles of shadow and light, greed and transcendence, peace and war. It will always be so, no matter the utopias we imagine, history being more gigantic, relentless, terrifying and humbling than what we think we know of ourselves.

Occasionally, a sage.

And this too shall pass.
MILLION MUTINIES

The Bir Khalsa is but one narrative among many in India waking to a smaller world and may help us understand how hidden aspects of history are revealed through performance or storytelling.

Our stories and performances reveal our selves in ways that words may not be able to. India is going through what is probably the largest demographic shift in the history of humanity. Millions are moving from villages to cities, carrying within their selves their mythologies, histories and ways of looking. An increase in income and wealth has created a new confidence in peoples once poor, repressed or unsure. Particularities long suppressed due to poverty, foreign rule or suffering have begun to flow again. Identities, religious and cultural, once overwhelmed and displaced, are being freed, and what cannot be written or spoken about is expressed through various forms of storytelling. As the saying goes, ‘History flows in our blood and is not written in our books.’ For many in the once ‘remote’ areas of India, regional talent shows and the Internet have become stages for the sharing of performances and stories. These are photographs of a semi-rural troupe of performers—the Bir Khalsa group—at a ‘talent show’ in a small Indian city.

I captioned the works with quotes from Sikh mythology and the words of the performers themselves.

Throughout India, people are retreating from the global to the local. They are retreating back into the culture and traditions of their communities because they do not feel protected in a globalized world. The hyper-dangerous feats and machismo of the Bir Khalsa performance seemed to reveal more than was intended. It was an in-your-face display of warrior ability, strength and resilience.

This district, the group comes from, suffered terribly in times of ‘terrorism’, the police as well as terrorists killing
up to 20,000 of the men (according to Gurdeep, the group’s leader).

‘The men in Tarn Taran have learnt not to trust anyone in the days of terrorism but to trust their swords,’ says Gurdeep Singh.

The performances of the Bir Khalsa group attract huge crowds and, though riveting, were hard to watch for me, mostly because any errors in judgement could mean serious injuries or worse for the performers as well as the audience. They chew tubelights, play with superheated iron chains, break concrete blocks and suspend themselves from their necks and so on.

During the shoot, I was cut by bits of flying glass, almost had my head walloped by a flaming metal ball attached to a chain and being rotated at high speed by a performer (The ball goes past my lens in Pic No. 2, attached) and was squashed against the stage by an over enthusiastic crowd who pushed forward to get at pieces of coconut from those being smashed with a baseball bat on a teenager’s head.

The pieces of coconut were covered with bits of tube light. Yet they were wiped clean and eaten as if they were ‘prasad’ or a ‘sacred offering’ by an adoring crowd.

According to Gurdeep, the group became famous after being screened on regional talent shows on local networks. Their biggest fillip came when they were shown on a Telugu channel, where the judges were so horrified that one could not watch the show and another seemed deeply disturbed by the end.

But the crowd loved them. The YouTube video of the show went viral, and they acquired numerous fans across the subcontinent and the world. Since then, they have been invited all over the world to perform: Italy, Slovakia, Singapore, Malaysia, Turkey, Iran, Japan and Germany.
In Gurdeep’s own words

When the holy Sikh gurus were alive, they taught us how to fight against Muslim invaders at that time. These invaders caused a lot of suffering in the Punjab as well as in different parts of northern India. so the gurus made it compulsory for young men to learn martial arts, so that they could defend their people and protect their culture.

Our mission in Bir Khalsa is to uphold what the tenth guru said: That it is compulsory to learn martial arts both for the strengthening of the body as well as the mind, so that we can face anything mentally and physically.

We at Bir Khalsa want to promote discipline and mental courage in the face of all modern day problems. We want to teach people to manage themselves at a young age, no matter what challenges or danger comes their way. Though we are carrying out what our tenth guru has said, this is not only about religion but also about discipline and the right way to live. In today’s modern world, people are getting soft. They are exposed to bad influences like drugs and violence and terrorism. Crime is increasing day by day. People don’t challenge their bodies and minds any longer. We want to bring out the special powers within us and to keep god happy also. We wish to fight for the right reasons and for justice.

We want to make sure that all of us keep ourselves pure in mind and that we remain physically fit to face any threat. We are teaching Sikh martial arts and techniques for strengthening both mind and body in many areas near Amritsar now. We conduct classes and training programmes in many villages. We need this now more than ever.
‘The world is a drama staged in a dream’—a caption which draws upon the words of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten Sikh Gurus.
Watch and listen carefully, as great truth is revealed in jest.

The world is a drama, staged in a dream.

My humiliations shall sanctify me, my annihilations shall free me.
My sufferings shall bring me closer, but only with God.

Scars remind us that the past is real and that history is just what someone wrote down.

In the midst of crowds, I hear a song.

Will my sword be truer than my father’s?
So a great honour is to become who you truly are. I cannot recognise you but I see aspects of myself that have fallen upon you.

Both the police and the terrorists would come for our men and in the morning, after the darkness we would find their bodies. So you see, we learned to trust our swords and not men.

Time obliterates the fictions of opinion and confirms the decisions of nature.

He said, ‘Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake’, but which heaven and whose country was he talking about?

What paradise do you search for and does it lie outside yourself?
And so my rage has travelled through the ages, killers to the killed, father to son

Into the dark pools at the bottom of my heart I plunge and I am a salt man swimming in the sea.

To rise glorious from the ashes one must first burn.

History flows in our blood and is not written in your books. Do you understand what I am saying?

@ryanlobo on Instagram

Ryan Lobo is a filmmaker, writer and photographer who has produced and shot more than 80 documentaries on subjects from the Afghan drug trade to Papua New Guinean tribal rites to King Cobras, and various photography and film projects for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and C&A Foundation. His films have aired on National Geographic, Animal Planet, OWN and PBS, among other networks. A TED speaker, Lobo has co-produced the 2011 Sundance Film Festival award-winning film, The Redemption of General Butt Naked. Lobo owns Mad Monitor Productions, a film- and photo-production company based in Bangalore and is author of Mr Iyer Goes to War.
QUESTION-AND-ANSWER-SESSION

Alisha Sett. Hi Joy, I want to know whether you are going to make the family albums that you digitised available as a public resource to help scholars use them in their research?

Joy. We have been careful about the copyrights of the album owners. While permission has been given to me to use them, it would not be appropriate to make them fully public. We would love to put up these photos online but we have our limitations.

Alisha. It is surprising because I archive photos of family albums of the people of Kashmir. I have been researching along similar lines and as you mentioned the lack of a visual representation is a vital issue and with the exception of certain sensitive images, these families are open to the idea and happy to have their work shown to the public because it means their identities too will be viewed as part of the mainstream narrative.

Joy. The onus is on us and we cannot predict the kind of reception coming our way once we exhibit these photos. Since the community whose photos are in question are a close-knit community we have to be a little careful about exposing these photos to the public, not that there are scandalous images. One isn’t sure how the photos might be used. Otherwise, largely speaking, the owners of these photos have no major objections as such.

Alisha. I am emphasising on this question because historians and particularly anthropologists, the scholars researching on visual materials are in a quandary due to lack of access of visual sources. I addressed the problem of the lack of access when I was in Nepal, writing about another digital archive. The historians admitted
that in their years of training they are not taught to read into visual material like photographs, which is more contemporary and gives the same emphasis as textual documents or artefacts. Historians are barred from engaging with visual sources. I am curious to know whether you have truly found in your work that historians are getting comfortable to engage with visual material. Prof. Thapar was not talking about the same kind of contemporary visual material during her session yesterday.

Joy. I know what you mean. As a historian, you can always fall back on the texts, but dealing with photographs is not very expedient as it depends on its availability and the expertise of the historian. However, most of the historians don’t talk about the use of photographs even in methodology classes. I doubt whether they use photographs to teach students. At this moment, it does seem like photographs are used only by a few specialised historians and it is not considered an obvious source.

Audience Member 2. I would just like to intervene because I teach the IB curriculum where we rely on photographs. We teach children from the age of fourteen to study photographs as historical evidence. There is no difference in the way of analysing the text and the photograph as a source. We follow the standard rule of the origin, the purpose, the content, and values and the photographer in relation to the photographs. In other words, the basic ideas that are applied to a text are also applied to a photograph. I was very surprised when you defended the notion that photographs can be used as historical sources. I want to know why there is a gap between texts and photographs in the international curriculum.
Joy. Coming from JNU, we have divided our discipline into ancient, medieval and modern streams, which means that two thirds of the history cannot engage with photographs as part of their research. I was talking from the point of view of the discipline as a whole. On the other hand, you are talking about modern history where you have the option to study photographs as sources unlike medieval Indian history that I have worked on for a long period of time.

Audience Member 3. I have a question for Mr Ryan as well. Sir, I would like to thank you for your presentation. It’s really interesting. I would like to know your opinion on what incites the supporters of dominant groups to precipitate violence against the minorities once they rise to power. Can the act of statue demolition and similar expression of violence be traced to an oppressive caste system that has been rising unchecked for thousands of years? People are using violence to bring about an outburst of art. This is evident in the performances of Bir Khalsa, the martial arts group.

Ryan. One of my professors said that one particular siege left a strong impression in our hearts, which inevitably means that all of us fall back on violence in order to make our lives meaningful. People have labelled the North East as a volatile region. However, I feel that we all are homogenous when it comes to exhibiting violence. This homogeneity stems from an understanding that as a country we should work together rather than against each other. It would be wrong to label any particular community to be more violent or more imperial than others. However, I will not disagree with your assertion that some communities have greater potential of violence. I have spent some time at Manipur and in terms of its natural history, it’s a very beautiful place.
But it is a conflicting place in history as the Nagas warred against their opponents. Head hunting was an intrinsic part of the pre baptism, pre Christian culture. Despite this reality, I find it difficult to label any particular community because I believe we share common traits and have the same potential.

Joy. The creation of identity is the result of people coming in contact with foreign cultures. Though the Khasis were subjected to colonial influence for a long time, Mizoram was under colonial influence for only 55-60 years, which is a very short period of time. The students who came to Calcutta in the 1940s and the fifties to study were westernised.

People now talk about the Koreanisation of the North East and in this context, it is important to mention that Hindi serials are also translated into Mizo, giving the viewers an opportunity to watch Hindi serials. The popularity of such translations grew with serials such as Kasauti zindagii ki (original release 2001, to 2008). The serials used to be aired in the evenings and there were jokes about how many were indecisive about attending the evening church services or to stay at home, watching the serial. This is thus another cultural influence which people don’t talk about.

Ryan. I think it’s really fascinating. You were talking about search for identity and I think the stories of people who are born creating their own identity are so important. I think what you are doing is unbelievable, it gives people something to hold on to. It instils a sense of pride in our community and makes us believe that you have put tremendous effort in your work.

Joy. Both our works have an important place. My work does not deal with the ethics of photography. Their only purpose is to be used as sources of history. Most
of the photos are beautiful, but they are not a professional photographer’s work. Besides, the harsh weather conditions have deteriorated the quality of the photos. Ryan is more concerned about the aesthetic beauty of his photos. His works are very appealing. However, both our works have documented the historical narratives that we are trying to construct.
I always think of a translator as someone who is rowing a boat of salt across the river. Your boat is dissolving even as you take it across, but you still try, because on the other side the need for salt is acute. Why? It differs from book to book, but, in India, the translator is working at joining up the linguistic islands of the nation. She—and it is generally a woman—is building bridges across which meaning can flow. Perhaps I should make the second analogy a little clearer. The islands are low-lying, and the sea between them recedes often to allow some traffic. Thus in any major city, it is possible to negotiate several languages at once. I get up in the morning and speak English to myself; then call an old aunt and speak in a mixture of Konkani, Portuguese and English; then I talk to the cab driver in Hindi; and then to an author I am translating, in Marathi; then a Parsi friend calls up and, in ludic mode, I ask him, ‘Kemchho, majja-maa?’

I know that each time I step out of English I am risking something—speaking to a senior woman in the tone meant for a junior, changing the gender of some inanimate object . . . I transgress in many languages, English included, but my transgressions are forgiven because most of my linguistic
transactions are agenda-based. People want to know what I mean, so they will work at understanding my meaning. I will too when someone says something to me in a language I know a little better than he. This is how language works when it is not politicized. For the story of language in India is the story of a great exchange, a grand migration, unabashed borrowings and reusings on one side; and of equally strenuous attempts at purification and cleansing on the other.

My first translation was a book called *Cobalt Blue* (Hamish Hamilton, 2013) written by Sachin Kundalkar, a Brahman author. I mention this because there is some cause to believe that being Brahman gives you a position of some legitimacy, some centrality. But if you are a gay Brahman boy in Pune, you are going to be an outsider not only in your community but also in many others. Thus we must beware the seductions of easy categorization when dealing with how biography may impact a person’s history. Kundalkar wrote this book when he was young; I have heard it said that he was in his twenties. The narrative is divided into two parts: Tanay tells the story of his love affair with their new Bohemian boarder; in the second half, Anuja, Tanay’s sister, tells her story of her encounter with the same man. These simultaneous affairs are hermetically sealed off from each other by the hypocrisy of the middle-class Maharashtrian family. (This can be read as any middle-class Indian family but the narrative specificities are Maharashtrian, more specifically Punekari, though the city around is an amalgam of Pune and Mumbai.) The young boy is allowed to go upstairs and stay all night in the man’s room but the girl, the sister, is not. So she meets him outside. Since brother and sister never talk to each other about their sexuality, since there is a huge silence around matters of the heart, neither Tanay nor Anuja confide in the other and this silence remains even at the end of the book.
My friend Naresh Fernandes and I put together an anthology called *Bombay, Meri Jaan: Writings on Mumbai* (Penguin India, 2003). We wanted it to be as representative as possible. We had some Narayan Surve in an essay on the mills, some Namdeo Dhasal as well. But then in a wonderful anthology called *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Orient Longman, 1992) edited by Arjun Dangle, I found an essay called ‘Son, Eat Your Fill’ by Daya Pawar, taken from his celebrated autobiography, *Baluta* (Granthali, 1978), certainly the first Marathi dalit autobiography ever written. It is a warm and wonderful portrait of his grandmother, her memories of the city, of the horse-drawn trams, of her working at a vet’s clinic and of her sitting by his side as he ate, encouraging him to eat his fill.

Some years later, I was looking through *Bombay Meri Jaan* and realized that I had not read *Baluta*, which is a classic. I knew that a French translation had come out, because Adil Jussawalla mentions it in his essay on Daya Pawar (in *Maps for a Mortal Moon: Essays and Entertainments*, edited by Jerry Pinto, Speaking Tiger, 2017). I was sure there would be an English translation as well, and, since reading in English is easier, I thought I would get hold of it and read it. So I asked Shanta Gokhale whether it had been translated. She said it hadn’t, and, without even thinking of the consequences, without even having read the book, I asked her if she thought I might make a good translator for it. Bless Shanta’s heart, she said, ‘Yes.’ And I was launched as a translator.

I think there may be a lesson in there for all of us who call ourselves teachers. Often when a student comes and asks ‘Do you think I can I do this?’ we tend to say ‘You?’ in a tone of some disbelief because we tend to remember every mistake s/he has made, every disappointment to which we have been subjected. We are also perhaps trying
to keep them safe from failure. My lesson as a teacher was that the more you trust a student, the more a student can trust herself.

This was a big book, because at the start is this incredible performance where Daya Pawar splits himself in two, and the two halves have a conversation. One half encourages the other to write, the other demurs, wondering who might want to read his book, asking whether he might seem like a walking freak show of horrors. I was wondering why he was doing this and then I suddenly realized: What if you have never seen yourself in a book, what if there is no representation of your kind? What if you have been told repeatedly that your story has no significance? Name me 10 dalits you mention in class. Ambedkar? Phule? Periyar? Jogen Mondal? Four, five, eight, maybe?—but it ends there. There are 200 million people out there and we represent them in our educational system with four or five! How do you think that feels? How do you think Daya Pawar felt when he finished his BA without hearing a word about Chokhamela, one of the greatest of Marathi saints? He is canonical in Marathi saint literature but he is never talked about in Marathi textbooks. Therefore in Baluta’s opening chapter, Pawar must encourage himself because there’s no one else to do so. There’s no lineage, no history, no models and no references. But within 20 pages he’s hit his stride. His story has taken shape and he abandons those two halves. Now there’s just one Daya Pawar who is talking, and he talks right through. He talks and he talks, and he’s brilliant. Suddenly, somewhere in the middle, he comes up with poetry and I thought, ‘Oh, I have to translate poetry now!’ So I did, and it was magnificent, it was heart-wrenching, it was heartbreaking, it was wonderful. I enjoyed Baluta tremendously.
I am a great fan of the Bombay Dock explosion because it was such a weird thing to happen. In 1944, a ship comes into Bombay harbour, carrying cotton, explosives and gold. Now, you have to keep wetting cotton or its internal heat is so great that it can spontaneously burst into flame. But the man who was spraying the cotton with water took a day off. So the cotton caught fire. So, in turn, the explosives were set off. And 4,000 tons of ship flew into the air and fell over another ship, and then gold bricks flew through the air and crashed into a Parsi balcony. This is all history. The great thing about history is that it’s always unbelievable and always weird—because it’s composed of human beings. So, the Parsi gets up in the morning and finds the gold bricks and goes and hands them over to the police.

Now, in Baluta, when this explosion happens, all of Bombay is running away from the docks because the docks are on fire. But all the mahars—Daya Pawar’s people—are running to the docks, because where there will be damage, there will be rubble, and where there is rubble there is something to salvage and sell.

I read Mee Mithaachi Baahuli (Rajhans Prakashan, 2014) by Vandana Mishra, who wrote her autobiography when she was 85. Again, she is Brahman; again, her status is in question. She was two years old when her father died of pneumonia and her mother became the head of the family, training as a midwife because it is a short course and will give her a way to earn a living. Sushila Lotlikar is 12 when someone throws acid on her mother and she is laid up in bed. Now Sushila must go to work, and she becomes an actress. She is a Maharashtrian girl who speaks Konkani at home, but her first job is on the Gujarati stage. She acts on the Gujarati stage for years, and becomes a bit of a star but getting only second leads. So she decides to break out and become a Marwari theatre star. Then, at the
height of her career, her mother tells her that she should get married—so she gets married at 21 and retires from the stage, settles down and has three children. She also has a story about the Bombay Dock Explosion: She’s on stage and the audience hears the explosion. They finish their show and they rush home but the next day, as the city burns and people are fighting the fires, she is back on stage again.

Same event, two prisms.

This is what biography can teach history. Heraklitos taught us that you can never cross the same river twice. But you can have several river crossings—a metaphor which carries much weight in India—in fact, as many river crossings as there are observers.

Take the case of *Mala Uddhvasta Vhaaychay* (1994) by Mallika Amar Sheikh, which I translated into English as *I Want to Destroy Myself* (Speaking Tiger, 2016). Mallika Amar Sheikh had a ringside view of history. Her father was the noted revolutionary poet Amar Sheikh who died young. Her husband was the noted revolutionary poet Namdeo Dhasal who also founded the Dalit Panthers, a movement based on the Black Panthers movement of America. Her story is told with great honesty and a complete lack of guile. She speaks of the tragedy of losing her father, the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband and the breakdown of her marriage. For many readers, this was a new perspective of events. Namdeo Dhasal was the poet who had blown Marathi sensibility out of the water—now he was also the man who had mistreated his wife.

What I want to say about translation is: you must want to do it. That is the only reason to translate. For me, translating *Baluta*, Mallika Amar Sheikh and Vandana Mishra and *Cobalt Blue*—and Eknath Awad, a Mang activist whose explosive autobiography will come out next year—are all about rowing that boat of salt across the river.
Or, to use another metaphor: think of your knowledge of history as a quilt. As a history teacher, you might think of your quilt as particularly fine. But when your quilt is examined from a certain perspective, you might find it a little threadbare. How does your quilt stand up to the question of how many women lives mattered? How does your quilt stand up to the question of how many dalit lives are mentioned? How does your quilt stand up to the question of where the aboriginal, the tribal, the farmer, fits in? Is your quilt rich with kings and princes and emperors and presidents and prime ministers and foreign ministers? How would your quilt stand up if the North Eastern woman went looking for the names of her people in it? Do the names of Henry Kissinger and Bismarck mean more than the names of Birsa Munda and Imliakum Ao? This is where translation has so much work to do that sometimes I feel an almost personal sense of despair at how little good translation we seem to be doing.

To me, history is a story. Etymologically, it is histoire, the story. A folk rendering of it might be his-story, the story of the upper-class privileged male. This story has no place for fiction, we are told. I think that’s not a particularly useful distinction, because fiction often offers the reader clues to the thoughts and feelings and worldviews of its characters. Yes, these tend to be middle-class people because middle-class people also write fiction but we should know by now that we are all required to look more carefully at identity politics.

In fiction, we are looking at ways in which people look at other people. So Cobalt Blue is an answer to many RSS claims that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon, that it didn’t exist in India. Is this of any relevance to you as teachers? Do you mention a gay figure out of history in class and say that he was gay? There might be a student in
your class who is wondering: Am I the only one who feels this way?

There is a horrible silence around many things, around being born in the wrong body, around being gay, around being dalit, around being Muslim. All of these silences we as teachers can break. You can break silence, and you can break the silence ex-cathedra. Your students believe you, they trust you, they may hate you but they still believe and trust you. And they hate themselves because they trust and believe in you and you often let them down. That’s what our relationship with students is—a complex mixture. We may have served one section of the class only to ignore another. We may privilege the ones who are ‘bright’, by which we refer to the brightness that allows them to deal well with abstract ideas. But in the process we may let down the others. Can we try to be more inclusive? Can we talk about these problems?

Allow me a small digression. My novel is called *Em and the Big Hoom* (Aleph Books, 2012). It tells the story of the Mendes family in which the mother has bipolar disorder. She is based on my mother who had bipolar disease. But I couldn’t write it as nonfiction—I wrote it as a novel, because I needed some distance when I was writing. After I finished, I did readings where people would narrate their experiences. When raw emotion is let loose in a room, you have to be trained to control it. I was telling my publisher this and he said, ‘Get them to write.’ And this made me think that maybe this was one way to try and make something out of the pain, to take the pain somewhere. So I started telling people to write, and then one of them actually did and sent the piece to me. And it was so good that I began to look for other people.

Most of the people who wrote for *Book of Light* were carers, people who lived with the person with the affliction.
The last one was Nirupama Dutt who wrote about her daughter, who is a special-needs person and has just become a mother herself. Dutt told me of a young man who wanted to write about his father, Swadesh Deepak, a playwright. I had seen his play, *Court Martial*, set in the Indian Army. Apparently, after he wrote *Court Martial*, Swadesh Deepak had what is called a nervous breakdown. He tried to kill himself—he slashed his wrists, then he set himself on fire, and was burnt so severely that at AIIMS, Chandigarh, they could not decide whether to put him into the burns unit or the psychiatric unit. After seven years of this, he began to recover. When he recovered, his friends said, ‘Write, write about this.’ He wrote a book called *Maine Mandu Nahi Dekha* (I have not seen Mandu).

Now, if you have grown up with a mother who has a mental problem, you become addicted to reading about mental health—you read about it all the time. And you read anything you can lay your hands on. You want to understand. You want to be able to translate what is happening. You want magic, you want a talisman, you want books to become some kind of a guide and guardian in the world. And I who had read so much—I had missed this book!? So I start reading it, and, truly, I’ve read nothing like it. Not only because we do not have many narratives about mental health in India but also because it is a formally stunning book. Deepak calls it a *khandit* collage—a fractured collage. It begins with a long description of dinner at the house of Nirmal Verma and Gagan Gill. I started reading it for mental health and before I knew it I had become a fly on the wall in Nirmal Verma’s house. And then, of course, it begins to darken. As you read, you see that the man who is writing is not well. Deepak is walking on thin ice till the end of the book. And two years after the book came out, he got up one morning, walked out of his house and he vanished for ever. We don’t know where he is.
It was his son Sukant Deepak who wanted to write a piece for me for *Book of Light*. When it was done, I asked him why he didn’t translate his father’s book. He said that it was too personal. And before I knew it, I asked, ‘May I translate it?’

That translation will be available out soon. This sounds like a commercial break but I am only trying to point out the hundreds of constituencies that we need to address to make our quilt a rich and inclusive one.

**Question-And-Answer Session**

**Audience Member 1.** You mentioned how teachers have to break the silence. I am a teacher and I think that sometimes silence is good for a society—because you need to understand the silence and try to break it. This generation is in a hurry to discover history very fast. History will move at its own pace and until it reaches a place where it needs to be told, until then silence is golden. It is also important that you teach your students why that silence is there.

**Jerry.** I completely agree with you when you say that silence is golden. Teachers are responsible for anything that happens in a class. It is a terrible responsibility, actually. So I would say that when I walk into a classroom, I start by telling my postgraduate students: ‘This is going to be no holds barred.’ I say—because a majority of them are women in a media class—‘We will obviously be talking about sexuality. If you feel that at any point you are uncomfortable, you need to be able to openly say, “I don’t want you to be talking about that.”’ For example, we talk about feminine genital mutilation. We talk about many issues that come up in the papers. There are terrible things that happen in the world and that find their way into the media and then into a
media class. Now, over the last 25 years, I have never had a ‘one size fits all’ theory for my class. My class is a living, breathing entity and I must be completely responsive to that entity at every moment, able to make a connection through silence or through speech. Both need to be respected, because we often deny students agency. Students often resent the lack of agency but, equally, are frightened of agency. For the last 15 years of their education process, they have given themselves over to teachers and texts. They have not been asked to think, or they have been rewarded if they thought in a certain way. It is very rare to find a teacher who can look at a student making a contrary argument and respect that student and respect her right to make it. So my understanding of it is that most students see themselves as pots. And as a teacher you are supposed to pour into the pot that which is useful for the exam, and that which will come in handy for a career. So often, in the first month of my class, someone will say, ‘I don’t know what notes to take in your class.’ So, I say, ‘Do you need notes?’ And they say, ‘How will I answer exams?’ And I say, ‘We won’t have an exam of the kind you can prepare for.’ That should liberate them, you would think. It doesn’t. It terrifies them.

So what quality you attribute to speech and what quality you attribute to silence is really dependent on the context. If a woman is raped, and she says nothing about it, is her silence really golden? If we witness some atrocity and are silent, is it golden? Speech can often be powerful, speech can be disruptive too. I think you are teachers with jigyasa. You have chosen to come here. You have chosen to acknowledge that your teaching methods can be improved by something like this. I am going to trust your fundamental teacherliness, I am going to say you are here understanding that being a
teacher requires being a student as well, and you have come here as an acknowledgment of that. When you are breaking the silence or maintaining the silence—perhaps we can all be more responsive to how our students will take what we are saying.

But there are many things that must be said. Silence can fester just as much as speech can explode.

**Audience Member 2.** When one is a teacher in the Indian system where there is a fixed syllabus, especially for the senior classes, a syllabus often entrenched in Brahmanism and other oppressive ideas, how does one practice inclusion?

**Jerry.** It’s very simple—give them notes. I would say to them, ‘There are 24 likely questions in the exam. Here are the 24 likely answers that will give you more than 60 per cent. Take them and go home and study them. Write these answers out, copy them out, 10 times before the exam. Copy them again and again and again, then they will be in your system. You’ll see the question and start to write without thinking. You write your six pages—you’ll get your 12 on 20. You’ll get your First Class.’ This calms most students down. Now you get them in class and make them talk. Talk, discuss, debate, learn how to be civil to opposing points of view—that is what education should be about.

Second, the most effective way of teaching is to shut up! Most teachers do too much talking in class—they do not let students discover things themselves. So, presentations are a very useful way of doing things. I tell my students every year to sing a lavani on Freud. They have to research Freud and then they have to come in front of me and dance and sing. And I always tell the intelligent ones, the ones that are standing stiffly in the corner, to move. Because that’s also language.
Body is language. Communication. One group will be filming it, because it’s a media course, then that group will come up and do a qawwali on Marx. And the lavani group will be shooting them in turn, and the third will go up and do a bhavai on someone like Sister Nivedita . . .

Three things happen. They are forced into performance, and Indian students love performing. They will all dress up, wearing Qawwali caps and so on and actually have a good time. Can we make the classroom a place where a student talks more than the teacher and embarks on a process of discovery? When you are teaching, say, the history of the Indian Independence movement. You ask your students to count the number of women in the textbook. Make a list of the men and a list of the women. That was half the sky. Where is half the sky today? Take the newspaper. Divide it into articles about men and articles about women. Look into the articles about women. Cookery, flower arrangements, how to make nice sandwiches. If the students discover this for themselves by making that list, it is much more effective than telling them ‘Women have been silenced, women’s voices have not been represented.’ Let them discover it. If we are not using the hive mind of the students, we are not teaching.

**Stuti Pachisia.** I wanted to do a module on dalit literature for children. But I haven’t been able to write an introduction, given that I myself am a Savarna woman.

**Jerry.** Go and interview dalits about their childhood and do narrative pieces. One of the greatest tools we have is self-implication. Self-implication requires me to stand up and say ‘Roman Catholic male’ at least three times when I am dealing with dalit writing. I am implicating myself before you say it to me. Now you say ‘Savarna
woman.’ That is all is required. And don’t let your voice take over the introduction. If your voice doesn’t take over but allows other voices to come in, then you will have more than done your duty.

You don’t have to be a dalit. You are not a dalit. You will never be. You can never be, and if you try to be—they will resent it. We’ve got to do this stuff, until such time as 10 years from now, 20 years from now, there will be no Jerry Pintos translating—there will be dalits translating dalits. Till then, let’s do what we have to do and implicate our selves and say, ‘Yes, I am standing here, I did this.’

**Stuti.** I study at a Central University. In my undergraduate course, dalit literature was not regarded as a legitimate paper. I have never had access to it and even the professors approach it in a very restricted way. So, if we don’t see dalit literature or its translation as a legitimate exercise or a legitimate academe, how far can we achieve that dream? If it is a dream that 10 years later a dalit woman or a dalit child will be able to express themselves without a savarna woman having to intervene?

**Jerry.** Every dream has a negotiation element. The presence of the savarna is the negotiation of the now. This is how it will be now. It may not be like that tomorrow. Dream that. But know this: Utopia may be postponed. What may come tomorrow may not be as good as what is today. So every moment of literary history is incomplete, fraught, stained, broken, because it is human. If we expect that tomorrow there will be a beautiful moment where everything will be perfect, that will be just one more Utopian fantasy in a string of Utopian fantasies we have had. So don’t worry too much about it. What you need is archeology and
excavation. There are many stories right now that are being told by dalit women to their children. The Grimm Brothers went from house to house and said, ‘Tell us a story! Tell us a story!’ We are so bad at this fundamental thing: documenting what we say to each other to tell each other who we are.

Teacher. What you are talking about is a vague helpless historicity in our society among Indians—why?

Jerry. I think it is because we have too much. I was in Boston for three months. There, if a poet happened to stay in a house for more than 10 minutes, you have a plaque commemorating that fact. We have eleventh-century monuments falling into decay because there are also tenth-century monuments, ninth-century monuments, eighth-century monuments . . . how many monuments will you look after? So—just let them go. It’s the same thing with stories. The same thing with narratives.

Ten years ago, in Sophia Polytechnic, I asked my students how well they knew their mothers. And I started an exercise: ‘The 5,000-word essay on your mother.’ So: you interview your mother, her family, her friends and you put together a 5,000-word piece on her and you take that piece and give it to your daughter, when and if you have a daughter. You begin to break the silence on women. Don’t worry about other people’s historicity—worry about your own. Do you have a narrative? Do you have a feminine narrative in your family? Who is in charge of this narrative? Who is in charge of the archive? Who has your mother’s letters and diaries? If we each took responsibility for ourselves, our sense of historicity would strengthen and grow. If you can’t use your mother’s papers, then take any woman’s papers. She doesn’t have to be a scientist or a
doctor or a professor—she just has to be a woman. Strengthen historicity yourself. Don’t ask someone else to do it.

**Audience Member 3.** Say, 50 or 60 or 100 years ago, if a person was gay but he was famous for some other work he had done. Being gay is a very small . . . very exclusive and very personal for us, right? I’m sure in those days—

**Jerry.** You think it’s personal? Very personal? No money was put into research when the AIDS epidemic hit the US because it was a ‘gay’ disease that happened to ‘gay’ people and there were no ‘gay’ people at all. Read a book called *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* by Randy Shilts. You’ll see how deeply entwined the personal and the political were at a certain point of time.

Sexuality is a small part of their lives. Of course, it is not necessary for us to imagine that Oscar Wilde has no identity other than being a gay man. Or Isaac Newton has no identity other than being gay. There is no reason for us to box them in this. But we can see very clearly how exclusion—exclusion of the Muslim from public life, of the Mughals from our textbooks—affects our understanding of the plurality and diversity of India. If you feel comfortable and have an understanding of your students, and you feel you can talk about plurality and sexuality and diversity—then please do. But if you don’t feel you can, you don’t have to. If you don’t feel it’s important, you don’t have to. That is the most important thing about teachers—you get to decide what’s important in your class. The way you say it, the way you talk to your students, everything. Whether you realize it or not, they are picking up on your cues. For example, you could say: ‘Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar headed the Constituent Assembly that wrote
the Constitution of India and he was also a dalit.’ You could also say: ‘Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar was a Maharashtrian.’ Or you could say: ‘Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar studied in Columbia University, came back and was put in charge of the Constituent Assembly.’ Or: ‘He took charge.’ Each one is true, each one presents a point of view, each one is a prism. In each case, you have not departed from historic fact—but you have set an agenda. Self-implication requires you as a teacher to ask yourself what your agenda is in your selection of the facts. At the end of the day, ask yourself if you have been fair, if you have done your duty.

Jerry Pinto is a poet, award-winning novelist and translator who lives in Mumbai. His translations include Daya Pawar’s *Baluta*, Mallika Amar Sheikh’s *I Want to Destroy Myself* and Vandana Mishra’s *I, the Salt Doll*. Currently he is at work on translations of Mang activist Eknath Awad’s *Strike a Blow to Change the World* and Swadesh Deepak’s *I Have Not Seen Mandu*. 
Raoul Peck, the Haitian filmmaker, opens his new film—*Der Junge Karl Marx* (2017)—in the forests of Prussia. Peasants gather fallen wood. They look cold and hungry. We hear horses in the distance. The guards and the aristocrats are close. They have come to claim the right to everything in the forest. The peasants run. But they have no energy. They fall. The whips and lances of the aristocrats and the guards strike them. Some of the peasants die. Even fallen wood is not allowed to them.

Young Karl Marx, sitting in Cologne in 1842, is dismayed at the violence against the German peasants. The peasants, he wrote, know the punishment. They are being beaten, even killed. But what they do not know is the crime. For what crime are they being punished?

Peck is clever to open his film with this dilemma, for it is the question that every sensitive person should ask today. What is the crime for which the world’s poor are being punished? Poverty and war produce refugees of hunger and bombardment, but they are denied mobility, denied any exit from their predicament. They know the punishment that they face: starvation, death and indignity. This they know. What they do not know is their crime. What have they done to deserve this?
The Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz visited Raoul Peck’s Haiti after the devastating earthquake of 2010. In a memorable essay titled ‘Apocalypse’, Diaz noted that Haiti warned us of the zombie stage of capitalism, where entire nations are being rendered through economic alchemy into not-quite alive. In the old days, a zombie was a figure whose life and work had been captured by magical means. Old zombies were expected to work around the clock with no relief. The new zombie cannot expect work of any kind—the new zombie just waits around to die.

And the new zombie cannot be allowed to forage for food or to seek shelter or medicine. The new zombie, truly, must just wait to die. This is the punishment. But what is the crime?

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How to begin to speak about India today? Do we begin with the most obvious fact—that, as a McKinsey report recently showed, one in two Indians lives in acute deprivation? This means that half of India’s population—about 700 million people—live with the reality that they do not know where their next meal is coming from. These millions do not eat, cannot know what they will eat. Their future, as it were, is confined to the horizon of their hunger. Those are their aspirations.

Even if we translate that McKinsey report into each of our languages, 300 million Indians will not be able to read it. India has the largest illiterate population in the world. This illiteracy is our reality almost seven decades after independence. Among those who can read, 240 million will not be able to do so in the evening because they do not have access to electricity. But, then, the report’s findings would not be a surprise to them.
Nor would it surprise the million dalits who have to crawl into the sewers across India or carry human refuse on their heads. What does it mean that the brutal indignities of caste hierarchy condemns more than a million people to do something so inhumane that could easily be done by machines? What does it say that brutalities of caste hierarchy remain so central to our world despite the fact that the Indian Constitution was drafted by Dr Ambedkar, the greatest critic of this infirmity? In his final address to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949, Ambedkar said that for Indians to believe they were a great nation was to cherish ‘a great delusion’. ‘How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation?’ Ambedkar asked. Castes are anti-national, he said, because ‘they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste’. What India is there, then, if castes so fundamentally govern social life?

Should we begin our search through the ruins of the present with the barbarities of honour killings, the khap panchayats, the disregard for women’s bodies in public? A few years ago, 370 gender specialists around the world voted India as the worst place in which to be a woman out of all the G20 countries. Saudi Arabia came second. Gulshan Rehman of Save the Children, one of the people who participated in this poll, said, ‘In India, women and girls continue to be sold as chattels, married off as young as 10, burned alive as a result of dowry-related disputes and young girls exploited and abused as domestic slave labour.’ If you think this is an exaggeration, then consider that on the United Nation’s Gender Inequality Index, India merely switches places with Saudi Arabia. This is misery.

Is this not the place to begin if we are to start our journey in the ruins?
What journey? Who is going to walk on this journey? Is there a ‘we’ that is prepared to walk out of the ruins into something hopeful, into a national project that is not corrosive and dangerous?

The freedom movement produced a reservoir of energy—a commitment to some form of social democracy, of care for the masses, of a sense of unity of the nation. It was this ‘unity’ that allowed India to move to universal suffrage for both men and women and for all ‘castes’ without any debate. This sensibility of unity and social democracy was shared by all the components of the freedom movement, from the Gandhians to the Communists. The RSS was never part of this stream, having committed itself early on to not the view of India but of Hindu Rashtra, to not unity but division. Gandhi’s influence on capitalists such as G. D. Birla and Jamnalal Bajaj opened up space for liberalism even among people who had a great deal to lose from social democracy. They helped draft the 1944 Bombay Plan, a pact of national development that promised to raise the living standards of people by wrenching India away from the predatory instincts of imperialism.

This sense of national unity and this care for the people is now vanished. It has exhausted itself, not carrying over through the generations. The Congress Party’s embrace of liberalization was one side of the abandonment of social democracy. The rise of the BJP and the RSS is the other. The political elites speak now of the ‘nation’ but do not mean the millions who are indigent. Ideas of ‘nation’ now are utterly abstract or else emptied out and then refilled with a toxic content.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, like a colossus, straddles India. His triumphant ride from Gujarat to Delhi supersedes the Rath Yatra of Advani—he seized the throne
while all Advani could do was leave blood in his wake. Modi has vanquished India. His acolytes say that whatever happened in 2002 in Gujarat is in the past. The future is in Development.

What is meant by Modi’s Development? There are two ways to gauge this. First, one can look at Gujarat—where Business has thrived, but the livelihood of the ordinary people remains mediocre, where labour conditions are abysmal and environmental protections withdrawn. Second, one can go and find the theory of Modi’s Development. This is easily found in the writings of the former head of the Niti Aayog—Columbia University Professor Arvind Panagariya. The most important suggestions are for what Panagariya calls Track 1 Reforms. Let us look at three points:

1  *Eviscerate labour laws.* ‘Track 1 Reforms require, first and foremost, the reform of India’s labour laws,’ writes Panagariya. ‘Highly rigid labour laws have made entrepreneurs terrified of hiring workers.’ Since the 1990s, the courts have whittled down the right to strike and other protections given to workers. But Modi’s Development requires more. It requires freedom for capital to fire labour as well as freedom for capital to declare bankruptcy and liquidate its labour force. This means workers—Indian citizens—should not be allowed to bargain for a better deal, but should accept as their bad karma their deprivation.

2  *Expand Privatization.* The BJP’s Vajpayee government had set up a Ministry for Disinvestment. It went a long way toward the asset stripping of Indian industry. The Congress-led UPA was too embarrassed to do the job with such brazenness, and chose more refined ways to do the same kind of thing. Panagariya thinks the Congress simply didn’t go fast enough. He wants more. ‘The government must restart efforts to privatize public-sector enterprises, especially those engaged in such
activities as manufacturing fertilizers, chemicals and electronic and engineering goods.’ Little divides the UPA’s Montek Singh Ahluwalia from Panagariya. It is merely that this BJP government is not hamstrung by the wiles of the regional parties or the ideological opposition from the Left. Public Sector Units—such as Hindustan Zinc—are seized if their market capitalization deteriorate; they are being starved of funds, rendered unable to compete with big corporate firms that have close ties to the political elite. On the chopping block for privatization, for profit over people are Air India, Indian Railways, ONGC, Oil India, BHEL, SAIL, Hindustan Flurocarbons . . . The public good, the social wages of a nation, are to be squandered to private profit, to the ruins of the future.

3 Privatize Education. One of the most serious gestures made by this government has been the call for the privatization of higher education. In June 2014, Panagariya wrote that the government ‘should abolish such government bodies as the University Grants Commission, which set and enforce standards for all Indian universities’. There is a need, he wrote, for the government to ‘end its own bureaucratic stranglehold on the university system’. What would replace it? Some modest regulation of a largely fee-for-service educational industry. The attack on higher education in India—from JNU to Presidency College—is a piece of this privatization agenda. You might like to know that, during apartheid, the government in South Africa spent a higher proportion of its GDP on education for the black majority than the Indian government has ever spent on its own population. This is to be further cut back as profit drives the education agenda—and as a narrow understanding of skill development overwhelms the important task of producing citizens and human beings.
In essence, the mechanism to end poverty—which Modi has said is his major goal—is by freeing up the private sector to create jobs. The policies that Modi is trying to install in India are precisely what have created a drought in global employment, according to the International Labour Organisation and the UN Conference on Trade and Development.

Modi has said that it is poverty that he wants to fight, that social suffocation of India’s diversity is not his goal. Nonetheless, Modi’s election has strengthened the forces of suffocation who now give full vent to their ludicrous yet dangerous ideology. There is always a whiff of fascism emanating from the BJP’s allies. From Muzaffarnagar to Muzaffarpur, from the rhetoric of Varun Gandhi to Niranjan Jyoti, the evidence of this intolerance is evident. But these epigones of Modi are not new to the Indian stage. Advani would froth at the mouth during his Ramjanmabhoomi campaign, as would Vajpayee in his Goa speech in 2002 (This is what Vajpayee said: ‘Wherever there are Muslims, they do not want to live with others. Instead of living peacefully, they want to preach and propagate their religion by creating fear and terror in the minds of others.’) The emotional register of the BJP and its Sangh Parivar is viciousness—it cannot speak without bearing its fangs.

The attack on Gandhi is not merely for his position on Partition or on Hindu-Muslim unity, but also for his philosophy of care. The term Gandhi used to describe his form of socialism was sarvodaya—care for all. The legacy of this Gandhian socialism is now inert, with socialist parties—samajwadi parties—now patrons of business and of disbursement of advantages to their supporters. Gandhi is now a token, little read and not taken seriously. Gandhi’s test for nationalism would evoke glassy-eyed nods in our time, in the ruins: ‘The test of orderliness in a country is not the
number of millionaires it has, but the absence of starvation among its masses.’ It is a bewildering formula. You might say, but that is idealistic, utopian—how can starvation be ended? It is that disregard, that cold-calculation of realism that erodes our moral compass and produces political cynicism. Why bother? Why get involved?

* *

To read the ruins, we have to go further back.

Colonialism made us feel backward. It was always Europe that was advanced and enlightened, and it was always the East that was backward and wretched. Rather than honestly say that they had come to plunder, the colonial rulers said that they had come to school the East—it needed to be civilized.

It took an immense effort of political will in the colonies to craft powerful movements against the colonizer. Different cultures of rule and resistance marked the battlefields—some engaged in armed struggle while others built resistance through nonviolent mass action. But what united all these movements was the deep desire for freedom—for a break from the experience of backwardness.

The deep desire for freedom among the masses came in a register that appeared narrow. In his brilliant *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote that the people ‘take their stand from the start on the broad and inclusive positions of bread and the land: How can we obtain the land, and bread to eat?’ The masses make a concrete demand for dignity through their call for land and for food—this, according to Fanon, is their ‘obstinate point of view’.

Such a concrete form of dignity had to be denied to the masses. Such a demand would spell socialism. Any movement that took that position in the 1950s and 60s had
to be cut down. And they were, from Cape Verde to Malaysia—crushed with the full force of colonial violence. Fifty years ago, the fighters from around the Third World gathered in Cuba to inaugurate the Tricontinental, to break the wall built around their aspirations. None of their movements—with the exception of Cuba—would remain intact. Between CIA coups and financial terrorism, their dreams were crushed. What was allowed was ‘flag independence’—freedom from direct colonial rule—but what was not allowed was full independence. Backwardness had to remain intact.

Fanon considers the problem of backwardness as it re-emerges after independence. The masses’ victory does not come with the sensation of a new beginning. They have thrown out the colonizers, but they now find that ‘they have been robbed of all these things’ that modernity had promised them—running water, surely, but also freedom of political action. Two or three years after independence, Fanon writes, the people begin to feel that ‘it wasn’t worthwhile’ to fight the colonizers, and ‘that nothing could really change’. Fanon sees this resentment. It marks his text. ‘The enlightened observer takes note,’ he writes, ‘of the existence of a kind of burnt-down house after the fire has been put out, which still threatens to burst into flames again.’

Independence from colonial rule opened a new continent for the darker nations—but it was not enough. It did not give them freedom to craft their own social and economic agendas. Tentacles of the capital of capitalism strangled their options. Coups and corruption dampened the enthusiasm to create a new world. It was enough to reduce oneself to a subcontractor for the former colonizer. Old colonial terms—such as comprador, which the Portuguese used in China—defined the subordinated bourgeoisie of the new nations. Their degeneration was marked by their subservience.
Fanon spots a problem for the racist. During colonial times, the native was called lazy and slow. But with independence, the masses want change to come quickly. Now they are disparaged for being impatient, for wanting to move history too fast. The racist shrugs off the criticism. The racist still has power over the narrative. The story can change whenever the racist wants it to change. The masses want to walk on the stage of history, to refuse the term ‘native’. But it is this desire that is most wantonly denied.

What are the masses to do? They dream for a while of a Third World Project, but even that is killed before it can get off the ground. Communism is denied. Religion is an outlet, and it is indeed where many take refuge. But even religion is not sufficient. It has its cruelties, its insistence on narrow social agendas and fatalism. But it is something to grasp in the desert of human possibilities. Religion is, as a very young Marx wrote, the ‘soul of soulless conditions’.

‘Religious suffering is, at one and the same time,’ he noted, ‘the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering.’4 When the critique of capitalism from a socialist standpoint is denied them, it is through religion that the masses find their voice against suffering—in this sense, it is an expression of real suffering. But because religion does not offer an alternative to the experience of backwardness, it is also a protest, a scream in the dark, the search for a hallucination of reality. What is Heaven if not the real longing for an alternative?

Groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda and RSS continue to attract people who have been broken by a world order that neither provides for them security nor livelihood, nor the ability to dream of a better future. New economic policies—driven by the disarticulation of production in the West and the creation of a Global Commodity Chain—set in motion from the 70s economic outcomes that impoverished large parts
of the world. The new inequality combined with a sharp attack on social welfare and on agricultural protections threw millions of people to the wolves. New forms of discontentment emerged, but this time not with the temper of communism nor social democracy but with the revived and regenerated masks of ethnicity and religion. The dis-temper of the post–Cold War era came with a glance backward, at what appeared to be primordial identities, rather than a future-oriented humanism. It was through part of this emergence that ‘terrorism’ became the buzzword. These new terrorists are the detritus of the suffocated world order from whom the clothes of a progressive cause had been ripped off and who now dress in religious garb to fight brutally for a future that remains impossible.

The colonial gaze descends upon women in burkhas or burkinis or anything that resembles—as far as the colonizer is concerned—backwardness. Real backwardness—poverty, disease, illiteracy—is set aside. It is the false backwardness—backward religions—that must be condemned. This colonizer sees in the woman a threat to his civilization. He wants to tell her what to do. She cannot make up her own mind. Not long ago, the colonial patriarch told white women not to wear bikinis. Now the colonial patriarch tells women to wear bikinis. It is always the colonial patriarch who must decide. He is the only voice of freedom.

Anger in the banlieues, where the natives live inside France, rises because real backwardness is unaddressed, but also because the false backwardness is disrespected. Dignity is more expensive to win than one imagines. Workers go on strike, and their first demand is often: Treat us with more dignity. But the boss does not know what this means. The boss thinks that this is a cheap demand and nods, yes. But the boss does not realize that dignity is the hardest of all
demands to meet. To meet the demand for dignity requires that the boss change the conditions of real backwardness. This is not possible without the boss being erased from history.

Revolutions have drifted into despair. This does not mean that no revolution is on the horizon for the people of the region. Indeed, revolutions are a great necessity, but not cloaked in religion.

In the slums of Athens (Greece) and in the slums of Ferguson (United States) resentment grows against lives of indignity and suffering. The bosses do not know how to manage the situation. They turn to the gun. It is easier to hire more police than to provide enough jobs to erase human misery. The police stand in for a broken system. They are the dying canaries in the coalmines of capitalism. Repression becomes normal. The masses respond but only here and there. The Black Lives Matter movement represents the inherent hopefulness of the United States, while Spain’s Juventud Sin Futuro, ‘youth with no future’, suggests the fatality in the Old World. Such forces are united beneath these differences of temperament by their refusal to accept the terms of the present.

Last September, 180 million Indian workers went on strike. Twenty-five years of neoliberalism has pushed them into a corner—fewer workers’ rights, a smaller share of the wealth their labour has produced. Every corner of India experienced this strike. It was a demand against backwardness.

Chilean students go out on the streets. A woman with her face painted white like a mime carries a sign that reads—No Nos Callarán (We Will Not Be Silenced). This is the mood. It is a refusal to accept the condition of backwardness.

It is to those of us who believe in a possible future, a future that is progressive and rich, one that strikes against
economic and social inequality and ushers in a cultural outlook that is diverse and embracing. The political projects that are available in the world—neoliberalism, religiosity—are incapable of solving the problems of the present. Another project is needed. Another world is to be imagined. Another dream is to carry us forward to the future.

1. Available at: http://bostonreview.net/junot-diaz-apocalypse-haiti-earthquake


3. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 75.


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Radhika Bordia. News organizations make it mandatory for their journalists to be on social media, most certainly on Twitter. But when what people post on Twitter actually ends up dictating news priorities—that becomes tricky. Because as a journalist you are relying on a lot of what the general public is talking about, on hearsay, almost.

The other thing is that Twitter has a huge following. According to the Centre for Internet and Society, we have less than 40 per cent internet coverage in the country. Yet we are the third-largest users of the internet, after America and China. Such a reach is phenomenal, especially in terms of how journalism operates. For instance, I work for a show called India Matters. It goes on air three times over the weekend. When the episode we do on a particular week is uploaded on the web, suddenly the feedback is far greater. I work for an English news channel, which means the audience is already restricted. But even for those numbers, the feedback and discussion all happens on Twitter. Giving a
recent example: I did a show on discussing the changes that have been implemented in textbooks in Rajasthan. The definition of ‘mammal’ has been changed in Hindi textbooks because the word for mammal in Hindi is sthandaari or sthanbaai. But the Rajasthan government now feels that the word sthan which means mammary gland is inappropriate for students. A few faithful watched that episode on television, but when I put it out on Twitter—what followed was utter madness. The response was unending, including a deluge of hate messages.

I am sure we are all aware that we journalists are called ‘presstitutes’. Occasionally, people even interchange the ‘e’ with an ‘o’. The debates, the issues and the information are all converging onto social media in such a way that it has become absolutely impossible to ignore it. We now need to figure out ways in which some of these debates and these issues can be introduced to students.

Social media is hugely democratic—anyone can use it. Forums that do not have any representation in mainstream media can use it effectively to communicate. Recently, young dalit boys were beaten up. A video of the incident was taken and put on WhatsApp where it went viral. I had gone to report this story for India Matters. I was talking to a young dalit boy named Lalji Chavda, whose family has been involved for generations in the traditional caste profession of removing carcasses. He said, ‘If this had not gone viral, none of you would have come to report the story. Because it is not an isolated incident for us. We are beaten for doing what is our caste’s profession. We are beaten for not doing our caste’s profession. This is pretty much how it has been. It’s just that it never makes it to the news. So, thank god there is WhatsApp and thank god the video went viral.’
The use of the word ‘viral’ has become a part of our everyday vocabulary. This incident in Gujarat became news primarily because it began trending on social media. It had already become news, which is another problematic part of what is happening with journalism. There is a reliance on the fact that something has to become viral before one actually goes to report it. It means that several other issues do not get covered.

The other recent example was of the human shield—when the army tied a citizen to the front of a jeep to prevent stones being pelted at them. Again, this image went viral on social media and led to endless debate. Again, when we go to Kashmir we are told that they are thankful it went viral. Because incidents like these occur every single day and ordinarily go unreported.

Social media is clearly an effective way to bring attention to matters that need to be looked at. But for every positive aspect, there is a negative too. Social media is being used in divisive ways, which brings us to what is currently the main problem: fake news.

We have so many examples of fake news in recent times. At the peak of communal violence in West Bengal, an image with the caption of a Muslim man disrobing a Hindu woman started trending on social media. It went viral within minutes, and communal tension escalated in that area. The image was actually from a Bhojpuri film called *Aurat Khilona Nahi Hai*.

These images are circulated in a very organized way. There is an army on Twitter, with a very clear intention, that will work to ensure that an image is widely circulated. That’s where we come back to the wonderful phrase we now hear all the time: *the idea of India*. The battle for whatever the idea or the soul of
India is—it’s happening on social media. The Hindutva armies on social media are very organized. They are very successful on Twitter, especially, both in terms of numbers and in the way they use cultural identities. Anyone opposing their intent is viciously and violently trolled.

The problem is: where do we go from this? Is there currently any debate or discussion in the classroom on this? It is easier to control television and newspapers, but it is almost impossible to get the source of the data on WhatsApp. On Twitter, it is a little easier to trace back threats, but WhatsApp is where the majority of today’s youth are now consuming their news.

There are modules now in the West that address social media. They have come up with key vocabulary words: misinformation, disinformation, misdirection. They try and define and explore these words in the classroom. The issue here is intent. Misinformation is a mistake; disinformation is a very careful attempt to spread something that is false. It’s not surprising that the Oxford Dictionary made ‘post-truth’ the word of the year in 2016. I think that some of these modules will have to be looked at in our classrooms too. And I think a good starting point would be to take some of these examples and discuss them. To know that not everything you see on Twitter is news, is real.

Gulan Kripalani. Thank you, Radhika, that was a great start. I think it’s time we heard from the youth on how they respond to the world in the context of social media.

Suhasini Das Gooptu [Class 12, Modern High School]. What is my idea of India? Is it just a country I spot on the map during my geography lesson? Or is it the colour of my passport? Or is it the identity I was born
with? To me, India is more than just an idea—it’s the first ever identity I’ve truly embraced. I’m Suhasini, an Indian. This idea was nurtured by my history books, my family, my teachers and my community. Today, I value the idea of a free democratic India that grants me liberty, equality, justice and fraternity, the pillars of our Preamble. I foresee a diverse passionate and highly opinionated India. An India that is involved and always ready for a debate. But today’s social-media language is not argumentative. It manifests this unnecessary sense of aggression and combative spirit that rather than stimulating a free flow of thoughts, encourages regimentation. To be unique is to be mocked in today’s world. For example, if I post something on, say, LGBT issues or criticize Mr Modi in any way, my inbox will be barraged by a slew of nasty comments. They will be graphic, often involving hateful comments, or will pressure me to keep my mouth shut. And god forbid if you are a girl—you will receive everything from sexist insults to rape threats.

I was born into a liberal-minded, intellectual family. My political socialization taught me to take my liberal ideas for granted—I thought everyone was liberal! What else could everyone possibly be? Twitter, despite its faults, granted me for the first time a panoramic perspective of my own world. Social media has transformed social issues into movements. Take the Nirbhaya rape case: it grew into an unprecedented mass movement, held the union government accountable and changed the way in which we perceive brutality against women in our country. This is my idea of India, an India that refuses to accept the status quo and fights back. The ultimate power of social media is to be able to change perceptions. Because, at the end of the day,
mankind is nothing but a product of their created perceptions.

However, in this era of ‘fake news’, it is foolish to believe everything we love. Today media literacy is not a luxury but a necessity. The questioning of the barrage of news that we receive every day is imperative.

I still remember my first media class in school. Our teacher showed us a BBC video about a family that grew noodles on cheese. It had interviews and evidence and, believe it or not, some students completely fell for it. So is it that unrealistic to believe that every section of society will not question all the news they hear throughout the day?

Media literacy, however, must never be confused by blind criticism of anything and everything. It is the practice of discernment and the use of critical thinking to analyse a situation. And accepting it only after it meets the high standards of your verification process. All forms of media, even advertisements, are a hyperbolic mirror of society, reflecting the development we perceive in that society.

I am sure you all remember the advertisement in the 1970s of a girl in a bikini under a waterfall. It outraged public opinion. But if you saw such an advertisement now, I am sure you wouldn’t remember it. Can the faculty necessary for critically analysing media be developed through the introduction of yet another period in our school days? No. It should be a natural part of our formal education, a part of a framework that will allow us to use our historical perspective and apply our academic lessons to question the events of our present day. Its function: to teach us to use the fundamental questions of who, when, what, where and why. I don’t believe everything I read on social media, but I must
know my facts and my history in order to fight against what I think is wrong. India is a chaotic country that believes in liberty but with restrictions. India cannot be analysed in black and white, in linear equations or algorithms. We hate test cricket but we are the No. 1 test team in the world. Our gender diversity rank is 134 but most of the CEOs in banks are women.

So: Has the idea of India failed? It cannot be answered, because it is the wrong question to ask. The right question is: ‘Can the idea of India be allowed to fail?’ India is a bundle of contradictions, an experiment! But an experiment that must succeed. We live in a country that is the product of some of the greatest minds. To let that idea of India fail is not an option. To let it fall into the hands of communalism, mindless intolerance and uniformity, is not a choice. We are the children of a vast and diverse nation. A nation that I believe will accept my flaws and amplify my strengths. A nation that thrives on diversity and, despite of world’s harshest deliberations, continues to survive and thrive. This is the nation challenged every day by social media.

Nikhat Khatoon (Class 12, Future Hope). Earlier, people had the habit of reading newspapers every morning. Now that has begun to fade away. Still, young people like us stay updated with news. But where do we get our news from? From digital media. People across the world communicate with each other with just one click. Just one click and the bond between parents and their children studying abroad grows stronger. We don’t have to go to the stadium to watch a cricket match—we get updates and live videos on Facebook. The players can even contact their fans on Facebook. Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg, is one of the most promising social-media sites. It probably helps many
brands too. When we see advertisements on Facebook, like for a sale on Myntra, we immediately download the app. Social media has made things so much easier for us. We can buy anything we want with just one click.

To be honest, I don’t like watching the news on television. The debates go on, people arguing but not really getting anywhere. I prefer going online and watching the videos and reading the articles or blogs. As soon as school is over, my friends check their social media for news about politics and the rest. All you can hear about is the corruption, the inequality. Being from a poor family, it really distracts me.

We can also use Facebook to share or promote information about organizations like ours. We want the world to know about the good work our NGO is doing for us. I feel things are changing every day, and that social media is becoming a way by which we youth can share things. I read a news article on social media about a man who had saved Jewish children during the Holocaust. He was giving an interview and all the children, who are now grown up, were sitting beside him. He had tears in his eyes. These articles are forgotten by the newspapers, but they are being posted on Facebook. We get to hear the news of the past that has never been printed in the newspapers.

Social media does help us. It has made it so easy to look for information, which might be making us lazy but I think it is also doing a great job for us.

Shrijit Dasgupta (Class 12, Calcutta International School). We can now connect faster than ever before. Social media is a democratic platform—everyone is equal. A person like me, a ‘nobody’, can tweet to the president. Talk to a foreign leader on a daily basis. I have
noticed, however, that on social media, everything is either black or white. On Facebook, there are hundreds of pages that compliment every aspect of the present government and hundreds of pages that criticize the same.

Information on social media is reduced to a couple of bullet points because that’s how you can convey it fastest. The speed of information dissemination is one of the best qualities and also one of the biggest weaknesses of social media. Concise information is amazing when you are preparing for an exam, but horrible for policy-making. Social media is based on shareability, likeability and rateability, and there are very few repurcussions for anyone being irresponsible on social media. Whenever I share a joke or a funny sketch on social media, in the comments section there are always reactions from people who are offended by it. This trend is increasing in India. The arts are coming under greater criticism. People seem to be becoming harsher by the day. Social media also normalizes many of the horrific things that happen.

Why does social media matter for the ‘idea of India’? The primary reason is because most of my generation consumes information via social media. However depressing that may be, we get most of the information from there and, yes, there is fake news. It has its problems, but social media also proves to us that when things can be bad, they can also be incredibly good. Social media shows us the incredible diversity of the people, and how everyone can voice their opinion. How every marginalized group has a voice on social media. It shows us that absolute liberty and absolute equality is possible.

Gulan. We are going to talk now about media literacy
which is something that I hope will help us negotiate the very bewildering space that is social media. We will also talk about what is trending or not trending and what it indicates about our society.

What is the importance of media literacy in classrooms? Why is all this information out there? What is its impact? Is there an agenda behind the information? I would first like to start with a question to all the schoolteachers here: How many of you have media-literacy classes that are part of the curriculum, to work with the students and help them negotiate? How many of you discuss social media, its implications and its importance even if it’s not in the curriculum? So, can we first talk about what is critical and why its so critical?

Radhika. Listening to the three presentations, I think there is already a good degree of media literacy in terms of what social media can or cannot achieve.

I hear all the time that the curriculum is burdened. But as Suhasini said, ‘It’s the way of bringing in this critical theory in classroom discussions on most other subjects.’ I feel that involving another person teaching media literacy is not required. One of the easiest ways of bringing media literacy into a classroom is to introduce some of the sites that look at news and journalism critically and perhaps building a resource space. Alt News, founded by Pratik Sinha, is doing some incredible work, looking through news and identifying what is fake and what is not. Hoax Slayer is another one of these sites. Introduce these sites, pick up what is the news of the day and discuss it. If the use of a human shield is trending on social media, and is also in the newspapers, discuss that. You can use all the imagery that you see. For instance, after India loses a cricket match, the internet will be flooded with Muslims
Panel Discussion

You could begin a classroom discussion on videos like this. How does one know where the video has originated from? What are the primary sources? Whether it is taught as a separate module or as a part of classroom discussion, it is important that media literacy be looked at.

Gulan. Can we hear from some of the teachers? What kind of response have you had in your classrooms?

Audience Member. Media studies has been introduced in my school as an elective course under the CBSE curriculum. This is itself a realization that it is a very important tool for citizens and society and should be taught. We have been teaching the course for three years and have a good number of students enrolled in it. Now as a teacher and a core-team member in our school, I believe that it is important to have a fine balance between the importance of media and the over-use of media. The first thing, on principle, we say is: if you like something on social media, don’t forward it without going through every detail. It does not mean that just because you like it, everyone else will. First discuss its authenticity.

We should also question some of the news that has been created by social media. We had an in-depth discussion about Nirbhaya. We discussed how this was real news—not something that was started on social media.

Suhasini. When I think of how I would like to be taught media literacy I don’t think a separate period or subject is necessary. I should have a broad perspective and be able to make correlations. I think that is how history should be taught—in such a way that we create a broad framework in our mind, so that we can apply what we study every day in class to the present situation.

Audience Member 1. Media literacy is now a necessity.
It is as useful as knowing how to read and write. Deciding what is right and what is wrong is of utmost importance. It is not something that should be taught as a subject—it needs to be taught as a skill. It is like having to swim after being thrown in a river and that river is the internet.

Krishna Kumar. The classroom is a space where one needs to have time to understand things. The whole idea of education is to allow children to make sense of what is going on. Having heard this last hour of presentations on social media, I want to propose that it is perhaps too early in the history of this particular issue for us to suddenly start drawing implications on how we should go about it in the classroom. Some of these presentations prompt me to think that social media is just one more dimension of mass media. And that as teachers and educational planners, we haven’t yet made sense of mass media despite the fact that it’s been around for more than 150 years in different forms. Ultimately, what does mass media do to the profession of teaching? It presents a kind of difficulty. To respond to it is a responsibility. The speed at which communication flows does affect that responsibility. We have to understand and then respond. As one of the speakers said, ‘It’s very difficult to cope with the kind of responses one gets.’

These responses don’t necessarily mean that they carry an understanding of what has been said in this very fast-moving media. Now that presents a very serious case, but it’s not new. Social media may be new as a term but this difficulty has been presented by mass media all the time. Even during days of radio, and even before that, by mass media. I have a microphone in my hand and you are listening to me. If I say something
about somebody which carries a certain edge of either misunderstanding or expansion, then that person will be facing a situation where he or she may not feel comfortable responding after a point has been made.

I am sorry to give this example from my very dear young friend Radhika’s presentation. I was having a discussion with her over tea in which I tried to distinguish the problems of provincial textbooks and national-level textbooks. And she added a line to it in her talk which totally distorted my view. She said that I equated left and right—which I have never done in my career. I know that the left’s distortions were never as bad as the right’s, and I will be the last person to equate left and right. But now I am in a position where I have to defend myself. Because somebody carried away a point. Mass media has always done this. They have done it in the days of the loudspeaker. They have done it with radio and TV, and now they are doing it in this age.

Our young friend here says that social media allows her to communicate with Trump. I try to communicate with my chief minister or my prime minister—and it is exciting for me to send a message. But it is equally depressing for me never to receive a response.

Ursula Franklin, the communication philosopher who passed away last year, made the point that the world reveals what social media lacks and it is a way to negotiate power. Power has got even more concentrated in the age of social media, and that is where the meaning of prophecy has to be revisited and understood. I think this hype about equality is hype only, it has not been achieved. Perfect equality is highly problematic and I have no idea how the teacher is going to convince the young person that this is not equality. Yes, you are free to say what you want but the other person
is not playing the role of listener, because understanding what you are saying takes time. Mass social media covers space, but distorts time. This problem was understood by Prof Yash Pal 30 years ago. The problem is more acute today because the message of that never got across. That syllabi and textbooks are basically ways to package time. And if teachers are professional, they don’t have to accept that package, he said. They first need to create a timeframe in the classroom within which understanding is possible. And as he defined it, he said: education is nothing but a process of creating an addiction for understanding. For not letting anything go just because it’s going fast. For not letting anything go without the right to say, ‘No I have not understood.’

This business of being oppressed by the examination system, the syllabus, the textbook and now social media—which has made it so difficult to say anything critical—is a manifestation of the erosion of the profession of teaching. Negotiating knowledge with understanding takes a certain time. Don’t say it can be done fast.

**Radhika.** I do not see the encouragement of this sort of critical thinking in students. Of course, I could be wrong but things are not very different from when I was studying history. From when you could do really well by just memorizing five tutorials. We are being bombarded continuously with information—a very well-organized strategy of communication—and I think we need to find ways of countering that.

**Suhasini.** Archiving tweets has become very important, but what about the issue of privacy?

**Audience Member 2.** When one reads letters written by personalities from history, that also is an issue of
privacy—but that has an archival gap. The important issue here regarding social media is when someone’s privacy is encroached upon for surveillance. I think if the archival gap is maintained, then privacy will be diluted. So archiving tweets is significantly important for future historians but archiving tweets for surveillance by the state is a completely different issue.

Audience Member 3. There is a temporal separation between the information we consume from the media and the information we consume from history. So one way in which I try and tackle this with my students is that I have an activity that we do every week, an activity that teaches us how to analyse sources and identify bias, perspectives and the purpose of the writer in terms of history-writing. We then tell the students to apply the same skills to what they see on the media today. Social media presents and requires immediate responses, which is a pressure we don’t face when we are studying history. Social media doesn’t give us the time to digest the information presented to us.

So: each student has to present a piece of news they find significant and I present them with some basic questions that encourage historical thinking and critical thinking. I ask them who the author is and what the purpose may be. I also ask them if there is any bias in the segment.

Audience Member 4. Perhaps we are not aware that most of these apps are public. For instance, I can take a screenshot of a private WhatsApp message. People forget that anything one puts on the internet always stays on the internet, and this is something students need to be educated about.

Suhasini. When we download something from the App Store, we actually say that we agree to all the
‘conditions’ but nobody really reads what those conditions are.

**Audience Member 5.** How do you negotiate the dichotomy that the very people who are in desperate need of the potency of this medium, especially in the global south, are the very people who don’t have access to it? How do you negotiate the challenge that the minorities who need to access the digital medium are unable to?

**Radhika.** We make a conscious effort to not be dictated by what is trending and stick to classic journalistic responses. Regarding the point you made about access to the internet: there is a lot of work being done on making the internet more accessible to the wider community. Many marginalized groups, dalit groups and women’s groups, have access to cellphones with internet, but they do not use it to surf for news. In terms of news, I think it is the responsibility of journalists. Sometimes we find that Twitter becomes crucial in putting out stories and putting the pressure for something to be reported on. For example, the incident in Pune was talked about so much on social media that the news organizations found it impossible to ignore. On the other hand, sometimes we get pushed into doing stories that don’t give us the time because they are viral on social media.

There is a concentration of power in every single media outlet and there are biases. Does the internet democratize it? Yes, to a certain extent. You have to be a large corporate media institution if you have to get your views out, so the smaller ones use social media as a platform. Also, there is the issue of organized ideology, like the Hindutva using social media to troll. But we do have to accept the fact that it is now easier for
smaller organizations to be able to put out stories. We are using social media to renegotiate and repeat issues that have been debated for years now.

Gulan. In the hugely complex and complicated space of social media, there is no simple black-and-white answer. There are ethics involved, criticism, fake news as well as amazing sociopolitical movements that have started gaining momentum through social media. How we use this technology is up to us.

A television journalist for more than 20 years, Radhika Bordia is Senior Features Editor, NDTV. She has worked on several docu-style series, such as 24 Hours, Witness and India Matters, each of which has looked at issues through the combined lenses of current affairs and culture.

Suhasini Das Gooptu, Student, Class 12, Modern High School

Nikhat Khatoon, Student, Class 12, Future Hope Foundation

Shrijit Dasgupta, Student, Class 12, Calcutta International School

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Ownership. Every thought. Every memory. Every emotion has a landowner.

Things that ‘happened’. Are meant to belong. To you. Or to me. Like a privilege acquired at birth. A litany made up of ‘this is mine, yours, ours’.

Often it is nations that appropriate entire histories. Lives. Other nations. People. Writing and the re-writing of things that later become our truth. Yours and mine. Living under the heel of collective ownership can be crippling. To say the least.

How does one free the ‘event’ of one’s life from the clutches of a possessive, even dictatorial, memory, and turn it into a literature of resistance?” — Naveen Kishore

History and history teaching play an important role in establishing mutual understanding and confidence between nations. Worldwide and particularly in Europe, in the recent past, there is considerable work done on the modification of history textbooks to bring in multi perspectives for peace and understanding and to eradicate bias and prejudice.

Peace demands educating the imagination.

One major example is the path breaking common history textbook produced by Germany and France spear headed by the governments of the two nations.

The German, French contributions are also assessed in publishing books and material that includes new up-to-date material available to teachers.

This however is not true of some other regions in the world.

In the Indian sub-continent for instance the Partition generation has largely been cast into a mould where the perpetrator has always been the other community, and by implication, the other nation.

As a result, the churning of hatred has been on auto mode for over 60 years simmering hatreds that lead to conflicts at the slightest pretext.

With the Partition generation — the custodian of partition memories — fast fading away, the young today are far removed and unconcerned with the historical event.

Yet, it is quite evident that they are picking up and sporting mantles that hinder their ability to understand, accept and respect difference.

How does one free the ‘event’ of one’s life from the

Ownership. Every thought. Every memory. Every emotion has a landowner.

Nations of a possessive, even dictatorial, memory and turn it into a literature of resistance?”

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Peace demands educating the imagination.