THE IDEA OF NATIONALISM
‘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 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

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THE IDEA OF NATIONALISM
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Contents

IRFAN HABIB
Nationalism in India: Past and Present / 1

RAJNI BAKSHI & GULAN KRIPALANI
IN CONVERSATION
Nationalism: Pre and Post-Independent India / 12

DEVI KAR, ANIL SETHI, NILANJANA GUPTA, JOYEETA DEY
PANEL DISCUSSION
Nationalism and the School Curriculum / 30

BANI ABIDI & PRATEEK RAJA
IN CONVERSATION
Nationalism and Identity / 52

MEHER ALI
Dreaming of Revolution:
Student Politics and the Radical Left in 1960s Calcutta / 69

JERRY PINTO
Bollywood as National[ist] Cinema / 80

DEEPA SREENIVAS
Sculpting the Citizen:
History, Pedagogy and the Amar Chitra Katha / 99

YOUSUF SAEED
Popular Art of the ‘Two Nations’ in the Mid-Twentieth Century / 118
NATIONALISM, BORDERS AND CONSTRUCTION
Voices from the Ground

ZAINAB AKHTER
India-Pakistan Partition: ’Balti’ Voices from Ladakh / 138

PARISMITA SINGH
Politics of Representation:
The Idea of North Eastern Writing / 146

ABEER GUPTA, ZAINAB AKHTER, PARISMITA SINGH,
MALIK SAJAD
PANEL DISCUSSION / 163
The arch reactionary Metternich is reputed to have denounced the idea of Italy as a nation by asserting that Italy was merely a ‘geographical expression’. With this gibe he still rendered a service—he reminded his listeners that a geographically well-defined territory, or country, does not necessarily constitute a nation. In this context, the word ‘nation’ means something substantially more than its earlier sense of simply a large group of people. In the seventeenth century, the English East India Company’s factors in India would speak of even the Banya caste as the ‘Banya nation’. It was the French Revolution of 1789 which, by raising the slogan of ‘independence of nations’, inserted a crucial addition to the sense of nation, the sense not only of the people of a country but within them also the wide existence of the aspiration to be, and to remain, independent. Or, as John Stuart Mill later put it, ‘to be governed by persons from amongst themselves’. Metternich was simply denying that the Italians of the time really entertained such aspirations. Given this condition for the emergence of a nation, Benedict Anderson in his Imagined Communities, goes on to make the nation into an ‘imaginary construct’, a product of
the wide dissemination of the printing press rather than any definable material circumstance in people’s lives.¹

What leads Anderson to overlook the real grievances that made for the rise of nations, including the process that took place in Latin America, with which he deals in detail, is the failure to understand the basic difference between foreign conquests of earlier times and the colonial expansion that ensued after Columbus’ discovery of America in 1492 and Vasco da Gama’s voyage round the Cape of Good Hope in 1498.

The earlier foreign conquests used to result, essentially, in the imposition of a foreign ruler; he, his courtiers and officials supplanted native rulers and their coteries. They then settled in the conquered country, so that their plunder, like the extortions of their predecessors, remained within the conquered land. This was the case with the Norman conquest of England in 1066 or the Ghorian conquest of northern India, c.1200, or even the extensive Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century spanning the bulk of Eurasia.

The distinctive feature of colonialism, on the other hand, was the effecting of a continuous huge transfer of wealth and resources from the enslaved countries to the conquering countries, which Karl Marx captured so brilliantly in Capital, Volume I:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the original inhabitants, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for commercial hunting of black skins, signalised the rosy dawn of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.²
Let us remember that, to Marx, primary accumulation meant expropriation of non-capitalist sectors or classes for ultimate conversion into capital—in other words, expropriation of non-capitalist economies. It thus included the exploitation of conquered countries or colonies, a process whose early stage has been so strikingly described above, and was followed by a long subsequent phase of ‘expropriation’ on an ascending scale as the colonial powers turned into industrialized capitalist countries seeking raw materials in tribute from the colonies at the same time as they ‘de-industrialized’ the latter into becoming their markets.

On the surface, the invocation of ‘nation’ by each colonial power to justify its own nation’s superiority over the enslaved nations was a species of nationalism, and Anderson so treats it in his chapter ‘Official Nationalism and Imperialism’. It was then very much like the chauvinistic ‘patriotism’ that Samuel Johnson had dismissed as the ‘last refuge of the scoundrel’. There were also cases in Europe where there were dominant and oppressed nationalities within historically formed states, e.g. Poland within Russia, Slavic nationalities under Austria-Hungary, or Ireland under Britain. When within the Socialist Movement a debate on the issue of national self-determination took place at the time of the Second International, it was more or less concerned with this issue, as may be seen from the perusal of V. I. Lenin’s *Rights of Nations to Self-Determination* (1914) and J. V. Stalin’s *Marxism and the National Question* (1913), both of which only tangentially touched on the issue of national liberation from colonialism.

The fact is that in terms of populations involved, it is precisely the movement against colonial domination among the exploited countries which, by converting oppressed countries into nations, has created the largest category of nations. Of this India offers a single example. Here we have
been favoured with a long essay by Perry Anderson in his *The Indian Ideology*.\(^4\) Perry Anderson goes in respect of India far beyond where Metternich went in the case of Italy—he denies that India was even a geographical expression, a country, before the Europeans saw it as such in recent times. One might retort that in the matter for foreigners, the Chinese have clear precedence over the Europeans, for Xuan Zhuang (Yuan Chwang), in the seventh century, clearly describes the country of ‘Indu’ (name derived from Iranian ‘Hindu’) or India in as much geographical detail as one would wish. As for there being no term for ‘India’ in any Indian language, as Perry Anderson informs us: What about ‘Jambudvipa’ in Ashoka’s inscriptions (3rd century BC) and ‘Bharata’ in Kharabela’s Hathigumpha inscription (1st century BC), both in Prakrit, as sure an Indian language as any? Or the Indian poet Amir Khusrau’s patriotic description of India (‘Hind’) with a listing of all its regional languages, from Tamil to Kashmiri and Bengali to Sindhi, almost exactly 700 years ago? The fact is that India was widely recognized as a country by the knowledgeable among its inhabitants from quite ancient times, when, looking at its social and cultural uniformities, they could easily mark the universal presence of the inequities of caste system, or the prevalence of Sanskrit as the language of the learned (*vide* Amir Khusrau with his high praise for Brahmansand Sanskrit).

Such perceptions of India as a country, however, did not make it a nation. What was needed was a recognisable and widespread urge for its political unity. There is only a faint trace of such a sentiment in Akbar’s minister Abul Fazl’s argument (c.1595) that the policy of religious tolerance was essential for a multi-religious country like India (‘Hindustan’). It is only with the British conquest that the notion grew of common suffering and common resistance within India as a whole. We see its explicit expression in
1858, when the rebels of 1857–58 framed their reply to Queen Victoria’s proclamation of 1858: they began by recalling the British destruction of Tipu Sultan’s Mysore, and their subsequent acts of aggrandizement in India and ended with the annexation of the Punjab and the deposition of Duleep Singh.

The unifying memory of a common grievance in the loss of independent states was, however, only the starting point of India’s conversion from a country into a nation. The burden placed on India’s poor by colonial exploitation, the heavy tribute and de-industrialization through free trade, were analysed by the early ‘economic nationalists’ (Bipan Chandra’s designation of them), such as Dadabhai Naoroji and R. C. Dutt, whose earlier studies were collected or summed up in their major works at the beginning of the twentieth century, so that an increasingly large number began to see in the very existence of English rule the source of India’s impoverishment. It will be unrealistic, however, to think that the nationalists’ exposure of British exploitation alone could unify the Indian people. Ram Mohan Roy, in a letter of 1828, insightfully remarked that Indians could not have patriotic feelings because their primary loyalties lay with their castes. Clearly, India’s social inequities needed to be addressed if its people were to feel a sense of unity. It is perhaps time that we should with greater emphasis recall the bold positions adopted by Keshav Chandra Sen (d.1884), an opponent of the caste system, an advocate of women’s education and social rights, a critic of untouchability, and at the same time a person who, trying to unify the streams of the Brahmo Samaj and Young Bengal, was perhaps the most conscious, among nineteenth-century social reformers, of India’s future destiny as a nation. Caste loyalties and divisions did not disappear—as the Cambridge school of historians have so constantly reminded us—but these tended to meet explicit
and open opposition in the national movement and outside of it which proved crucial for the growth of national consciousness.

It is thus clearly pertinent to consider the role of ideas. In an early article, Marx pointed to Britain’s implantation in India of scientific education, printing press, railways, etc., for its own purposes but which would necessarily bring about a ‘regeneration’ in India, such that would lead to Indians growing ‘strong enough to overthrow the English yoke altogether’. As Gandhi’s autobiography makes clear, his own principal notions, from non-violence to dignity of labour and passive resistance, were founded on readings of modern Western writers, not India’s past literature. There can be no doubt as to the Western sources of Jawaharlal Nehru’s own thought, as his Autobiography (1936) in turn makes so amply clear. Earlier, the methods of analysis that the economic nationalists adopted were also those of modern classical economics.

The idea of ‘nation’ too, as we have seen, has impeccable Western genealogy, with the French Revolution as its fountain-head, and so also the ideas that defined the contours of what the nation should be like when freedom was won. The words Bharat Mata, ‘Mother India’, are not to be found in any Indian text before the nineteenth century, for even the concept of one’s country as ‘motherland’ or ‘fatherland’ is an imported one. This needs to be said here only because our home-grown chauvinists of the Hindutva brand, with the full support of the country’s government that they now control, profess to see the ‘nation’ in the oldest imaginable texts, and weave around it a religiously oriented mythology.

The main fact to be emphasized is not, of course, the ancestry of the concept of Indian ‘nation’, but the struggle which went into creating it. This could only be achieved if
the masses joined it; and here Gandhi’s role has to be recognized as crucial. For the first time, in 1917-18, in the Champaran satyagraha, the Kheda satyagraha and the Ahmedabad textile workers’ strike, peasants and workers were drawn into the movement on the basis of their demands, however modest. But it was not until the perspective of a larger land reform, based on the slogan ‘land to the tiller’, was offered, as urged notably by Jawaharlal Nehru in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, that the national movement also became a peasant movement.

We cannot, of course, be unmindful of the role of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Communists and socialists, and revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, in bringing about this great turn towards the workers and peasants.

Before 1947, the test of loyalty to the nation was a simple one: opposition to British rule. No one who substituted for British rule some other opponent, Muslims or Hindus or caste-Hindus or ‘untouchables’, could be deemed a nationalist, nor can be deemed today to have been a nationalist. The Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS and the Muslim League all fail on this simple criterion. Golwalkar, chief of the RSS wrote in *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) that Muslims who constituted over a quarter of undivided India’s population, would not have any rights as citizens—‘claiming nothing, deserving no privileges . . . not even citizen’s rights’. Savarkar in 1937 gained precedence over the Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League of 1940, in pronouncing a ‘Two-Nation’ theory. The Muslim League on its part forced a partition of the country in 1947 along the same thesis—a religious community being sufficient to form a nation.

In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi had not spoken of secularism. But he had denied that the nation can be linked to any religion and so had held that Hindus, Muslims, Parsis
and Christians ‘will have to live in unity.’ When the time of trial came in 1947, Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and the others stood by their convictions and kept true to their vision of a secular nation, for which we should all be ever thankful to them.

The national project did not end with independence in 1947. Promises had been made to the people about what India would be like after Independence. The resolution on Fundamental Rights approved at the Karachi session of the Congress in March 1931 gave the promise of a welfare state with rights for peasants, workers and women, and state ownership and control of basic industries.

Although 69 years have passed since Independence, most promises are yet to be fulfilled; and since 1991, despite celebrations of a higher rate of growth under the umbrella of ‘neo-liberalism’, we seem to be moving further away from the promises’ fulfillment. The national aspirations were partly given constitutional sanction when the designations ‘secular and socialist’ were added to the Republic by an amendment to the Preamble in 1976, but the ‘socialist’ part has remained on paper, practically forgotten by all who matter. Clearly, nationalism does not mean just crying hoarse about the nation. In its genuine form, it represents an urge to work for the welfare of the people. How the nation benefits from mere shouting, or rioting, or disputable ‘encounters’, or firing with pellets on civilians, is surely debatable; and it is further debatable whether some authorities or special persons have the right to ban citizens from questioning dubious statements emanating from the army and police over the atrocities they might have committed against the nation’s citizens. On the contrary, it is in the interest of the nation that the true facts are established, justice is dispensed and the guilty do not escape. The semi-fascist tendencies of the RSS and BJP based on naked
communalism married to a worship of the corporate world are now becoming daily manifest; and true ‘nationalism’ surely means that the nation should be protected from this onslaught on its basic values by all available means.

I should like to close this note with another important cause that also calls for our loyalty—internationalism. Are our loyalties, commitments and sympathies to be limited just to our native land, our nation? Do neighbours mean nothing to us? And what of the brotherhood of the oppressed? Readers of Nehru’s autobiography might have noted how troubled he was about the very concept of ‘nation’, as one separating us from the rest of humanity. Even in the *Discovery of India* (1946), in which he found virtues in old India that he had missed earlier, he mused over how in the Quit India agitation of 1942 ‘nationalism had triumphed over internationalism’. Even today one is troubled by the fact that the Quit India resolution had to be passed at exactly the moment when Fascist aggression had reached its peak, the Nazis were at Stalingrad in Soviet Russia and the Japanese stood on the Assam frontier. One hopes the time was not chosen by the nation’s leaders just because it was the most critical hour for the Allies. I would wholly defend the Communists in the AICC for their vote against the Quit India resolution, on this ground alone. There is no doubt that after gaining independence, India partly did its duty in aiding the cause of other victims of colonialism. Indeed, we can be proud of some of our record in the very first decade of freedom: we supported the freedom struggle in Indonesia, we stood by Egypt over the Suez Canal and stoutly opposed Apartheid in South Africa. But now, as one sees the government’s statements and the media pundits’ pronouncements, we have no interest left in the world except for whatever serves any direct, immediate self-interest of ours or satisfies some deep-seated grouse that
we entertain. Our self-interest, of course, often means little more than what our corporate oligarchs consider to be profitable or what can yield electoral dividends in India, something we see so much at play in our relations with Pakistan and Nepal.

It is, therefore, surely time to stand up and say that it is hooliganism—not nationalism—to shout down any one who dares to point to misdemeanours committed against the nation’s citizens or, indeed, others. Genuine nationalism calls for an anxiety to remove the nation’s blemishes and rectify misdeeds carried out in its name. We also have to answer to the call of internationalism, which demands, above all, peace with our neighbours. True, Indian nationalists will always revere the memory of the line of Englishmen from Octavian Hume to Ben Bradley, who stood by India against the interests of their own nation. A nation’s own critics, as these Englishmen were, could possibly also turn out to be its real benefactors.


5 *New York Tribune*, 8 August 1853.


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Gulan Kripalani. How do we celebrate diversity in a country that is increasingly getting polarized? One of the ways that we (at Citizens for Peace) have been addressing this issue is by providing a forum—or as we like to call it *spreading a durrie*—to enable people of different views, ideas, points of views and opinions to come together and to listen to each other. This is particularly for people that we do not agree with. To be able to listen to and understand some of the anxieties and aspirations of groups who seem to us to be representing something that we inherently do not agree with is integral to understanding and celebrating diversity.

In order to think about what is giving rise to this polarized conversation, we need to think about why today, in our homes and workplaces, it has become OK to say things about the *Other*. How is it becoming more and more acceptable? How is it becoming almost respectable to say these things, which it was not certainly when I was growing up? How do we live with people who speak differently, dress differently, eat differently, worship different gods? How do we live together and celebrate this?

We think that perhaps listening would enable dialogue. It would pave the way for mutual respect, understanding and help us live in peace, without necessarily
having to agree with everything others say or stand for. That’s in brief what we’ve been trying in different ways at Citizens for Peace. Rajni and I have been co-travellers in this process for a while. Before I hand over to Rajni, I thought it might be interesting to start with distinguishing between patriotism and nationalism. These are two terms that are being used absolutely interchangeably, and in our conversation they have become one. Of course, many people have defined it. I will start off with a quote from none other than George Orwell, who says in his essay ‘Notes on Nationalism’,

Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism. By ‘patriotism’ I mean one’s devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world, but has no wish to force on other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand—is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.¹

I thought Orwell’s definition would be a good starting point for us, and to ask you, Rajni, if you could give us some broad ideas about the meaning of nationalism, perhaps before independence. One of the ideas being talked about was: What does it mean to be a nationalist? What were some of the values that the word incorporated? What were some of the thoughts of Gandhi and Tagore and others at that time? Was it not a much wider, more embracing, inclusive feeling? And where do you feel this absolutely marvellous idea of vasudhaiva kutumbakam—the world is my family—fits in today’s increasingly narrow definition of the term?

**Rajni Bakshi.** I’ll try and take the questions one by one. Patriotism is more like when we say ‘Yeh mera desh hai. This is my home.’ A sense of bonding with that which you have
grown up with—very much like what you feel for the mango tree in your grandfather’s backyard. It’s a sense of belonging that is non-competitive, and completely unrelated to the Otherness of anyone. To me, that is patriotism.

As for nationalism: I think Orwell has done a good job of describing it. I must say that I am also very influenced by Ashis Nandy’s differentiation between these two. Ashis-da says that patriotism is an emotional state of bonding—a non-ideological sense of territorial identity. One may feel it for Calcutta or for Bengal, because that’s the culture one has grown up in.

Swaraj is primarily command over ones own passions. It is finding your ‘swa’, or self. Swa ke upar raj—control over oneself—is Gandhi’s primary goal, and that’s why Hind Swaraj is not freedom from the British as much as it is about finding one self. That self cannot be found as long as we are seeking it in relation to some other body. Then, inevitably, one will be in conflict and competition, one will end up nursing all kinds of real and imagined grievances. For Gandhi, the nation can only be an extension of this rule over the self. When you rule over your own passions, then the nation becomes the basis for expressing your humanism. Many great scholars have said it with a great deal of documentation.

On a connected note, I would strongly urge anybody who has not read it yet to read Godse’s self-defence during his trial. Godse is very aware that he is committing patricide. He says Gandhi must die because his model of the nation will mean that we will be puny and effeminate thanks to all this mumbo jumbo about humanism. According to him, Gandhi will enslave us on the world stage again. The imagination which Godse comes from cannot visualize that one can build a society and a nation grounded in protecting its
rights while also protecting the rights of the larger of body of nations, a society committed to living in a global community but without a sense of competition with the Other. So it is not nationalism, which is the evil for Gandhi—it is the narrowness, the selfishness, the exclusiveness which is the bane of modern times and which Gandhi identifies as evil.

That brings us to _vasudhaiva kutumbakam_. How do we find ways to sift, to pick apart the threads of these toxic elements, to deal with them and deconstruct them? Because all of us now—especially teachers, educators, and those in communication—have to do this on a daily basis. There is no other way for us to fight this specific, complicated issue. It seems that most of the media today is hardwired to generate hysteria unless we are able to pick apart the threads. And I think many people are doing it. It’s not that it’s not being done.

The problem with the term _vasudhaiva kutumbakam_ is that it has been brutalized from many different sides. The first attack takes the form of an allegation—that it’s a fraud, a hypocrisy. Even though that’s the most reductionist way to look at this term, it’s true. How can the society that has untouchability and in which 50 per cent of the population is deemed unfit for social inclusion—how can that society claim _vasudhaiva kutumbakam_? So this is the easiest way of completely dismissing the idea.

But why don’t we look at it as an aspiration? Societies are known as much by what they aspire to as by what they attain. For example, my hunch is that the story of Shravan in the Ramayana is actually indicative that the neglect and the abuse of the elderly must have been an endemic problem. That’s why a hero like Shravan was created, who is such an extreme case of filial devotion. Similarly, the ideal or the aspiration of _vasudhaiva kutumbakam_ is, I feel, worth exploring. This can be done while being fully cognizant of,
and yet not being defeated by, its historical imperfections and failures.

The reason I say this is because I’m coming back to patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism can deal with poetic imagination, which means then that patriotism is comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. It doesn’t need to live in a black and white world. But nationalism cannot do that. This is most manifest in not only the direct use of the term but also in the way the media has now taken shape. Currently, there is very little room in the media for any kind of ambiguities and uncertainties, for the freedom and confidence to say, ‘I don’t know, I’m not sure’. It is those who are actually not confident, and therefore insecure, who need to constantly say that they are sure. They are also the ones who are only comfortable with one right answer.

Just to close the vasudhaiva kutumbakam issue—because I grapple with it all the time: How should we respond to Mr Modi bringing it up on many world platforms? In the UN and in many other speeches delivered abroad, he has said, ‘I come from the land of vasudhaiva kutumbakam.’ As someone who does try to live creatively with ambiguities and uncertainties, my hunch is (even though I’m not sure how to act on it) that we need to say, ‘Great, we are happy to hear this. Now tell us how we are going to work with it.’ We need to be able to say that not out of sarcasm and not out of a sense of ‘Hey, I know you’re a fraud, but I’ll hear you out’, but as an entry point to say, ‘OK, if this is your take on it, let’s see the various ways in which we can make it happen.’ I am hopeful that in the discussions we’ll have over the next two or three days, as historians and as teachers, we can struggle or grapple with some of the nitty-gritty of this challenge, of how to work with this.

In my talks with college students, I have seen that young people are really hungry for open-ended thinking.
They are sick of being told what it is. Or that: We are ‘like that only’. They are really sick of it. This is my conviction. I would love to hear if you agree or disagree on this.

**Gulan Kripalani.** On a connected note, how do you distinguish between the idea of desh and rashtra? If you could just elaborate, it would make it clearer as to how we stand in our values of being interconnected.

**Rajni Bakshi.** Maybe I should share that I come from a family that was affected by Partition along the Punjab side. We are Punjabis. I was lucky that I had clever and insightful ancestors—they left before the worst of the violence began. But in all the memory that I picked up from within the family, the one thing that came through was that they never imagined that they were leaving for ever. It was unthinkable. Why? Because even though Muslims and Hindus were two different groups—it was unthinkable for one to marry into the other—they were not ‘others’ in the way we experience ‘otherness’ today. No marriage in either Hindu or Muslim family was complete without members, neighbours and family friends from the other community playing a crucial role—a ritual role. These are the memories that we were given.

So one clear way that I can distinguish desh from rashtra is that I and the Punjabi Pakistani are supposed to be two different rashtras. If I sit with them and talk about Al Qaida or terrorism, then I will also be coming from a position of: What is the threat to my borders? What are you doing to me in Bombay or any of the other places in India that have been attacked by terrorists? At the same time, we can interact as human beings—we have a commonness of desh which is really astounding.

All the Pakistanis I meet are also born after Independence and Partition. With Punjabi Pakistanis, we have the same jokes, the same poetry/shayaris. Those links are
continuous, and I think maybe that is our sense of desh, which is a cultural affinity. It has to do with so many things—the flavour and texture of food, festive rhythms, the language, its cadence. I have met Pakistanis who hear my Punjabi and are able to tell where my ancestors came from because there are so many nuances from Punjabi. To me that is desh.

Also in a sense, desh is what songs like ‘Ae Mere Pyaare Vatan’ are about. I think it is desh which, in that famous Kabuliwala song, is the centre point of melancholy. Now, I don’t know what Iqbal meant when he wrote ‘Saare Jahan Se Achha’. But as children who grew up singing it, never for a moment did we think that it was to be taken literally. Again, it is the literal mind which will read or sing ‘Saare Jahan Se Achha’ to mean ke baaki saari duniya bekaar—the rest of the world is trash. That was not the intention and emotion that was communicated to us whenever we encountered that song in our childhood. I don’t know if that helps. It’s an idea, a distinction, that we can only work on more and more. It’s not a readymade construct.

**Gulan Kripalani.** You spoke about how it takes confidence to live with ambiguity—that it takes humility to admit ‘I don’t know’, that we’re all trying to figure out what it means to be human and to stand up for the values of equality, justice and fundamental interconnectedness. Yet there have been people who have been able to transcend all that. I’m thinking of Tagore, about aspiring to a life based on these values. There are only a few who can grasp such ideas of a different future, to understand that we can create without Othering. So is it a failure of our imagination that we want certainty here and now?

**Rajni Bakshi.** One way of answering that is to refer to Vinoba Bhave. Vinoba Bhave used to say that humanity is located in a spectrum. At one far end—you can think of it
as the ultraviolet end—you have Buddha, Christ and Gandhi, and other highly evolved souls to whom this comes naturally. And at the other end you may have Hitler and other genocide manufacturers. His argument was that the bulk of humanity lives in the middle. There are some people who are not saints but who are inclined towards those ideals. But the bulk of humanity is swayed by the atmosphere of the times, and I have now lived through successive cycles of what I think of as infected by a kind of ‘psychic virus’.

My first encounter of it was 1984. I was in Delhi, sent to cover the post-assassination politics by a magazine from Bombay. And I ended up covering a massacre. When I left Bombay the night we received news of the assassination, we had no idea what was going to happen. Also, we mustn’t forget Operation Blue Star. That’s very important. We can’t talk about the post-assassination phase without talking about the violence that built up to Blue Star. The kind of dread that one had learnt to live with in Delhi—in 1982–1983, signs began to appear on buses: ‘Look under the seat before you sit in case there’s an unidentified package which has a bomb’. So not all fear is manufactured—I’ve seen how fear is created by circumstances also. The manufacturers are able to tap into and maximize or exploit fear, but there are physical events that have caused that fear. There are physical, political, violent strategies that have created these atmospheres. And then what you get is like a psychic virus which causes perfectly, rational, reasonable otherwise humane people to behave insanely.

In those four days of the massacre of the Sikhs in Delhi, I could not find eight out of ten people who thought that it was absolutely wrong. About five thought that this kind of brutality is very wrong but, surely, I had to understand that people were angry with the Sikhs because two Sikhs had just killed the prime minister. Out of ten, I could only find
about two who were categorically and unconditionally horrified by what was happening. But if you talked to the same set of people six months later, they behaved differently—those who had supported the violence had second thoughts, they felt remorse.

From that to the 1992–93 Bombay violence to 2002 in Gujarat and now Kashmir, much has changed. Harsh Mander’s important insight about Gujarat is that this process of remorse and recovery didn’t happen there. That is why it is even more frightening.

If you go with this premise for a moment, i.e. that these are psychic viruses, then we have to be a little clinical about them and not get swept away by panic and hysteria and think, ‘Oh yaar, all of humanity has become like this. We are all going down the tube.’ No. There are recoveries; because if we had been like this as a species, we wouldn’t be here today, sitting in this very civilized context. This again, is Gandhi’s key insight: if violence, hatred and competitive brutality were parts of our core nature as a species, we would not have made it out of the trees, ever. So how do we find the spaces to work in ways that are not just intuitive but also based on a finely informed understanding of what people are going through? That means asking: What is the real fear behind their anger and their hatred? And then finding it in ourselves to listen for the concern behind the complaint. This is a fundamental lesson that I learnt from you, Gulan, and the work you have done in the noetic sphere. You should say more about that.

Gulan Kripalani. I think it connects with what you said, about our impatience to come to answers quickly, to quickly slot people—whether they are individuals or groups—as ‘this’ or ‘that’, to not listen to the reasons behind what is going on. We are continually responding and reacting to the symptoms of something rather than to what is at the root of
it. We need to change the way we have conversations with people we don’t agree with, rather than saying to them, ‘You are that and, therefore, I have no way of engaging’.

Rajni Bakshi. That headline today in the Telegraph is very accurate. ‘Angremica’? Anger and America—they have combined the two words. It is one thing to say it is more evolved to be liberal, and quite another to say that if you’re not then you’re an ‘idiot’ or some kind of a subspecies of the human race. This attitude is now present everywhere. It has become a kind of fascism. There are even universities in which such political correctness is enforced, almost policed. A friend who teaches at a university in the US said that it’s a rule of the university that if any professor is going to use material containing references or descriptions that may be deemed violent or gender insensitive or racial, she or he has to inform the students so that they may opt out of that class lest their sensibilities be damaged or offended or traumatized.

Now how small a self is this? That in a classroom, that in an intellectual training ground, this small self is not able to look at material without being affronted?

It’s the same kind of people who are willing to kill human beings in order to protect a cow.

Gulan Kripalani. Or beat up people if they don’t stand during the national anthem, beat them up because they are not ‘proud of our country’.

Rajni Bakshi. Yes. Nationalism is, I think, a decoy. What I am more worried about is narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness. Because these evils—if we may use that word—are attaching themselves not only to nationalism but also other kinds of behaviours.

Look at the rise of the neo-Nazis in Germany or across Europe over the last year. Over the last year and a half, I’ve visited Europe as part of a foreign policy thinktank
and met several people from all over that continent. Some were the same age as me, in their late 50s, and they were in tears—because they didn’t know what hit them. We all know that toxic energies never go away. But within a century of their past, they could not imagine somebody calling themself a Nazi and daring to march through the streets. But that is now happening. They are also struggling to try and understand what is driving this.

I asked a young woman why eastern Germany was the hub for a lot of the neo-Nazi mobilization. This woman, who had grown up as a child in East Germany said, ‘Look I’ve done very well for myself. But a lot of people who are in the full stride of their profession, dependent on the communist state structure, were completely displaced. And never found their feet again in unified Germany.’ Her father, for example, had been unemployed since then. Subsequently, she said, for various reasons a whole generation of young men have both been undereducated and underemployed. All kinds of resentments and anxieties and so on have taken root and it is those that are now finding easy outlets in this kind of hate. Because hate is so energizing.

Gulan Kripalani. Rajni, could you talk a little bit about what’s happened after independence in this country in terms of the ideas that you outlined? We’ve seen a kind of exclusivity, not only within regions—caste, of course, has been there for ever—but also language. There is this inability or unwillingness to engage in any real way with anything that is different. In this age of so-called globalization, where technologically we are more connected than ever before, we apparently have more in common with the educated English, or even people in Germany or Japan, than we do with our own people in our own country because of the widely differing education or exposure and so on.

Also now—the day after the American elections—why are we seeing that the most unimaginable things can
be said, and yet people are willing to brush them aside and elect those people to represent them? People who seem to be the opposite of inclusive? What is it about this growing consumerism that, across the world, we no longer see one another as humans? Only as a ‘you’re only as good as what you can buy’ consumer?

**Rajni Bakshi.** I’m glad you asked me this, because right now I’m working on an essay which tries to, at least, look at the very—you may think—ridiculous possibility that simplicity might still be a value going forward in India. What I discovered after talking to people who monitor or study young minds and their behaviours, etc., is that the picture is not so black and white. Or perhaps that is just my optimistic self. I think we are being overwhelmed by the volume acquired by toxic voices. Here, I think, technology has been a big contributor. Earlier, people could scratch a filthy message on the door of a public toilet or they sat down and wrote a letter to the editor. If it was abusive, it never got published. Now anybody and everybody can get on to WhatsApp, Twitter, etc.

**Gulan Kripalani.** And say what they want.

**Rajni Bakshi.** Yes. So one part is technology. And I am wondering if even that is truly representative. I would like to see a great deal of research on that before I’m convinced that all of society has started thinking like that.

Another thing is that something has happened in the education process, and this precedes Twitter and Instagram, etc. From 2005 to 2007, Citizens for Peace ran a essay competition titled ‘Rethinking Secularism’, in collaboration with Indian Express. So for three years in a row we had to sit—Gulan and I—with the ad agency of the *Indian Express* to craft the call for entries. That was like hitting our heads against a brick wall. Naturally, this was a pro bono arrangement, so the agency sent their juniormost people. But that
was good because that was exactly the category we were trying to reach. But those youngsters would say, ‘Yeah, yeah, so you want people to vent right?’ And we’d say, ‘No. No. This is not an invitation to vent. We are asking people to reflect.’ ‘Woh kya hota hai? What is that?’ they would ask.

Something has happened to the educational process, over 20, 30, 40 years. Maybe it’s a byproduct of the crimes of pedagogy that we have followed. I don’t know. It’s a mystery to me. But that and the technological revolution have combined to result in a tremendous distortion.

In the course of live social interactions, people may say some things which are shocking. But if you talk to them for a while, if you don’t run away from that one shocking thing they have said, then most people reveal that they have a more nuanced position.

The problem is that everybody’s living in a kind of ‘vent-moment culture’.

**Gulan Kripalani.** Tell me now. Finish it now. Answer me now.

**Rajni Bakshi.** Yes. So when you invite someone to just vent, they can only talk in curses

**Gulan Kripalani.** How then do we create that *durrie* that we have been talking about? How do we create a *durrie* to listen? How do we create a *durrie* that helps us address the insecurities behind this violence—these ideas of masculinity, this powerful ‘my way or the highway’ rhetoric that we hear across the world now? How do we begin to counter these assertions of manhood being equated with nationalism and with Hindutva and so on? This is particularly relevant because I think because most of our audience comprises teachers reaching young minds. How do we create that space in classrooms, in homes, in workplaces where we can listen and speak without this overriding need for the right answer, right now? How do we give primacy to
reflection, thinking, introspection, self-awareness and values? How do we create a space where we can have a value for values?

**Rajni Bakshi.** One thing that we have done—Gulan and I are both part of that endeavour—is that we have worked to craft a platform we call ‘respectism’. In fact, I hope over the next two and half days, we can show you some of the videos that have come out of that process. We have boiled it down to the bare minimum, which is: We can disagree on everything, but can we agree on respecting life? Can you and I respect each other’s elementary dignity? So, whatever differences we may have—on how to solve a problem or even how to understand what is a problem—can we regard it from a template of respectism? Now, this has been ridiculed by some of our colleagues and friends who say that in this highly toxic atmosphere, this is unreal. But we feel that precisely because the atmosphere is so toxic and polarizing that this offers a window of opportunity. In a sense, respect is the *durrie*—respect is the platform.

I have therefore, over 25 years, made it a point, for example, to be in conversation with people from the RSS. Because they are also a part of this society. Simply demonizing them will not solve the problem. Part of what I say is based on what I have understood of that pathology—and it is in part a pathology. The challenge lies in trying to constantly sift elements of that pathology, so that we are able to find entry points for those values you mentioned. I find that this saying: basic respect—can it not be? In fact, the Afro-American movement has made a slogan of it. It’s kind of a greeting, to just say ‘Respect’. So we are not working from scratch. Rather, we are building on something that already has a global resonance. And of course that’s the crux of what Gandhi’s saying in different ways.

**Gulan Kripalani.** So, like you said, in this toxic atmosphere, people question if this is the time to do this, if
this is the time for be engaging with the Other. But can we afford not to?

Rajni Bakshi. But the Other is us. For ‘them’, we are the Other. We are somebody else’s Other. The Other version of history is also a version. It’s not the last word in any case. So, in that sense, all history is somebody’s angle to the story.

**QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION**

Sneha Ganguly. Good morning. I’m Sneha Ganguly, from the BA Department of Loreto College. Ma’am you have been telling us about respecting all kinds of people and ideas. I feel that those who believe in this are not just a dying breed but also a mocked breed. If a person has a different perspective, they are mocked. If the person says, ‘I do not know the answer to this,’ they are mocked. You’re saying that we need a change in society. But for the change, we need education. Today, education is all about learning by heart. You produce good marks—you get into good colleges. Students do not have the liberty to think. Others’ opinions are shoved down our throats. How do we tell our students to think beyond the texts? How do we encourage them to think, when every aspect of their life says, ‘Do not think, just go with the flow?’ How do we teach our students otherwise?

Rajni Bakshi. That’s a challenge, really. I think that’s the crux of it. How we create narratives about history is a much lower-order challenge compared to what you’ve just said. I really don’t know, except that we have to do it against the current, in spite of everything. All the children that I know are certainly looking for it.
Tina Servaia. I teach the international curriculum but I still have students who are insular thinkers. I teach them to think, but they still think in an insular manner. The US has an educational system that teaches children to think. Yet they end up voting like this [for Trump]. So it’s not just education—it’s something much bigger than that.

Gulan Kripalani. When I was in school, we used to get these exam papers that said ‘answer all questions’. So perhaps teachers could start their papers by saying ‘question all answers’.

Gauri. My name is Gauri. I’m from St Joseph’s Boys’ High School, Bangalore. I’ve been teaching for about 32 years at the same school, so I can say that whatever I speak of is true of my school and background. Before coming, I asked my boys what they felt about this topic. I find that, generally, we talk about ‘toxicity’ and ‘other’ and this and that, and how it affects students. To my boys, three things are the most important things in life: food; football/cricket; and girls. So there’s nothing in their horizon about toxicity. So all this discussion is wonderful as food for the soul for me but I know when I go back to my classroom, it is something completely different. The reality is completely different in school.

Sophia. Good morning, ma’am. I’m a teacher from Sushila Birla Girls’ School. You talked about the difference between patriotism and nationalism. Today we are looking at things such as regionalism. Also, national integrity has lost its relevance because we are always told to think beyond. It’s not the nation any more—it’s the
We occupy a ‘global village’. How would you categorize regionalism and the cases that are coming up with this Gorkhaland issue? Under patriotism or under nationalism, because nationalism is an ideology?

Rajni Bakshi. It’s very complicated. I must tell you that I don’t entirely understand it. I am puzzled by the accelerating rise of identity-based nation states. And because I personally have no sympathy with such states, that is my handicap—I’m not able to be clinical about it. I understand, for example, that the Scots have been very troubled by the English for centuries, but I really don’t understand why and how a Scottish nation would help now. So I’m puzzled. Because the truth of the matter now is that our ecological damage is going to destroy—is already destroying—all of these categories.

Also, if we do not think of the world, our neighbourhood, our state, our region, our country and the subcontinent—if we do not think of it in bio-regional terms—nobody in this room will have a future. I don’t want to be an alarmist, but I have been working on an essay in which I’ve brought together a lot of data on the current damage to the planet. It is staggering. Yet there is no sign of any major paradigm shift in the way the global economy is organized, so it is guaranteed to worsen. This whole discussion about carbon is actually just one part—carbon is just one villain in the picture. There are much bigger issues. I was at two interesting global gatherings recently—the World Social Forum in Montreal and a Degrowth Conference in Budapest. And
even there I didn’t see any great breakthrough. People are genuinely at a loss.

**Catharina Veldhuis-Meester.** Maybe I can mention an element that contributes to understanding. I am Catharina Veldhuis-Meester, a Euroclio ambassador. Euroclio is an organization of history educators that works in Europe. I’m very happy to be here and hear all this. What we see in Europe now is that the more Europe makes us feel that we are first European and then Dutch, French, English, German, the more we feel—where do we belong? So I think it has to do with a sense of belonging, which becomes stronger and stronger.

**Rajni Bakshi.** Because you feel threatened, you become more assertive of a narrow identity.

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1 Published in the first issue of the *British Magazine of Philosophy, Psychology and Aesthetics: Polemic*, October 1945.


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Both Bakshi and Kripalani are Trustees of Citizens for Peace, a Mumbai based non-profit organization.
Devi Kar. Before introducing our terrific line-up of panelists, I would like to address those in the audience who teach history. You are a very powerful section of society. Don’t underestimate your power, because you can capture the minds of the young far more effectively than others. While I was preparing for this discussion, I read that Hitler didn’t think much of his teachers, except one—his history teacher, in whose tales of heroism lay the origins of his German nationalism. Never mind the curriculum, never mind the syllabus—the power is in your hands.

Anil Sethi. Although the nation state and nationalism have earned enormous flak in recent decades—and though we may think that nationalism has lost its emancipatory potential—the term nationalism remains an instrument of tyranny and oppression. Sadanand Menon, in his keynote address, expressed this clearly and analytically. How the othering happens—how we create others only to ridicule them, how nationalism leads to intolerance and the state, of course, with its expectations of people needing to be disciplined in a certain nationalist way. If they disobey, they will be punished. For the state demands unqualified obedience and loyalty.

At the same time we must remember that sovereignty—the right to self-government, the right to
non-interference from external agents in the running of the state—is still very much a part of the political architecture of our world. So who is sovereign? It is India, the US, the UK—these nation states are sovereign. Haryana or West Bengal is not sovereign. Asia is not sovereign. South Asia is not sovereign. So I think the first proposition, really, is that sovereignty, despite all the dark aspects of nationalism, continues to be pegged to the nation state.

Now, the government of a sovereign state will be a key player—not just a significant actor—in decisions that affect our lives, in areas as diverse as military spending, trade, demonetization of currency, health, food security, education. Its interventions in education will keep scripting, disseminating and reproducing nationalism of one kind or another. And this is my second proposition: that curriculum materials in school education are almost always imagined and conceived of through national, even nationalist, frames. So the history, the social science, the language textbooks of the nation state—say, of the NCERT or the SCERTs—will obviously create and inculcate some kind of nationalism.

There are two concerns here. First: What will the precise content of this frame be? Who gets to decide that content? Whose knowledge and which knowledge will enter the curriculum? Second: Can the National Council for Educational Research and Training, then, really subvert nationalism? Can school-level social science, written within a nationalist frame, help to undermine or overthrow nationalism? Can it unseat the nation-state and nationalism from their position as the presiding deities of school textbooks? Will it ever be possible for the NCERT—the apex educational body of the nation-state, and bearing ‘national’ in its name—to discard nationalism as a barbaric force even as historians, political scientists and educationists pronounce it to be fascistic or exclusionary?
And this brings me to my third idea—that there are many different types of nationalism. Something that has been made very clear from all the presentations so far. How do we understand this vexed concept? This vexed idea of nationalism? Given the recent summary dismissal of nationalism—we need to remind ourselves that, broadly speaking, its history has witnessed the development of two types of thought and movement:—the ethnic or religious nationalist on the one side; and the civic nationalist on the other. The latter ideal, aspects of which first emerged in Great Britain, France, and America in the eighteenth century, is based on a civic definition of belonging—on a shared attachment to democracy, to consensual or publicly debated modes of governance, on the rule of law. While all nationalisms may adhere to doctrines of popular sovereignty, civic nationalism vests sovereignty in all the people, regardless of creed, race, colour, gender, language or ethnicity. It seeks to create a community of equal rights and defines nationhood in terms of citizenship.

Obviously, on the other hand, ethnic or religious nationalism privileges certain ethnic or religious groups in the nation’s self-definition. What Irfan Habib, in his paper called ‘not nationalism but hooliganism’. There are various ways of describing these things—the words used may be different but eventually it is the content of these concepts that is significant.

Now, it was to this civic nationalism, inspired by the ideal of working for an unsegregated citizenry, that stalwarts such as Gandhi, Nehru, Namboodiripad, J. B. S. Haldane (the British biologist who became an Indian citizen in 1956 and worked in Calcutta), Jefferson, Ernst Renan, Benjamin Rush subscribed to. And it is about such a nationalism that Prabhat Patnaik, Sugata Bose and Ramachandra Guha have recently written or spoken about, that Michael Ignatieff or Perry Anderson or Paul Virilio have written so much about.
Virilio uses the category ‘republican patriotism’. So what Ignatieff would call civic nationalism, Virilio will call republican patriotism. And what Ignatieff would call ethnic nationalism, Virilio would call nationalism. As I said: the words may be different but they all agree that, broadly speaking, these thousands of nationalisms can be divided into two broad types: ethnic and religious, and civic. Virilio would say ethnic and religious nationalism is nationalism and civic nationalism is republican nationalism. These distinctions are important. And it is in this sense that I might remind you that Benedict Anderson said that he was an Indonesian nationalist. Remember also that Irfan said in his paper that Octavian Hume very nearly thought of himself as an Indian nationalist—and this is why I think the distinction is important.

Now, imagine that the content of the curriculum is based on a considered and just understanding of the welfare of a nation’s people. This is an argument that Prabhat Patnaik came up with last year when so much was being written about nationalism. Then, Prabhat would ask, would we not distinguish between democratic nationalism on the one side which is relatively far more preferable, to, say, ethnic nationalism on the other?

If you look at the History and Political Science books that the NCERT produced after 2005, you will notice that they speak of diversity and discrimination. And that in illustrating discrimination (I will just give you one example), one book speaks of how cart drivers in B. R. Ambedkar’s village refusing rides to Ambedkar and members of the Mahar caste, and then connects it to the Constitution of India banning untouchability and the kind of nation that the Constitution of India wishes to create. Now: Is this not an attempt to help create a modern, civic nation state? Isn’t this constitutional nationalism?
And if the ‘Partition’ chapter that I did for the Class XII History textbook questions hyper-nationalist accounts, refuses to drill an ‘India line’ into the students’ heads, presents multiple perspectives and voices, foregrounds Pakistani experiences of the Partition—and then am I being anti-national? Or am I trying to replace the shrill othering nationalism with the idea of a cosmopolitan citizenship, with a humane, just and democratic nationalism as well as internationalism? Isn’t the inculcation of internationalism in our children very much a part of nation-building? Isn’t it building a better Indian society? As Benedict Anderson put it in his last book *A Life Beyond Boundaries*, serious nationalism is tied to internationalism.

**Devi Kar.** Do you think history and the study of history is meant for the welfare of a nation’s people, that it is so to have a better people in the country? Or do you feel there are other aims?

**Anil Sethi.** The study of history could have a thousand and one aims. And, still, on top of the list of would be: to help develop a perspective about the past and the present and to create arguments about continuity and change over time based on evidence, on a good factual analysis of issues, on attempts to understand the different perspectives from which history can be written, on attempts to include heteroglossia and multivocality into our narratives. This to my mind would be the first aim.

But if we were to bring in many voices, and if we were to bring in the voices of sub-alternate people, then history would also help empower us and, in the long run, empower all kinds of sub-alternate groups. Of course, it cannot do so on its own because, ultimately, empowerment is a matter of contemporary politics. It is a political issue—not a historical issue. But if histories speak about those who are marginalized—those who are excluded—then it would, to my mind, certainly help empower certain groups.
Devi Kar. You mentioned Renan, and he says that nations are based as much on what the people jointly forget. Sometimes if textbooks are written with that aim and purpose, then we are encouraged to forget certain things we are ashamed of. Dr Gupta, I would request you to comment on this.

Nilanjana Gupta. I am not a teacher of History—I teach Literature. But of course we cannot teach Literature without talking about History. Many of the participants here teach both History and English Literature. And this is not a coincidence. There are many connections between teaching Literature and teaching History. All histories are basically narratives—stories. Past events are presented in a particular sequence, just as ‘stories’ are. When we read a novel or watch a movie, we can tell that it’s a story—there are certain events that happen, and there is a certain logic which is given to us to explain why these events happen as they do. And that is precisely what history is. It is a sequence of events that we are told about and that as teachers we then pass on. Of course, there is one significant difference: in history, we like to think that the logic or the connection is based on a causality. This caused that. This led to that. Typically, History is taught in this way. Hence: the seven reasons for the downfall of the Roman Empire, the ten reasons for the rise of this or that. History is presented as a logic-based narrative.

Then why is there so much controversy about the teaching of history—so much discussion? In the group discussions, we were given almost one hour to talk about teaching history. And the organizers had to come around three times to stop us, because everybody was talking so much. So there is a huge problem about teaching history and why we teach history and what we teach as history.

I would like to suggest a few things that might make us more conscious about what happens when we try to talk
about history or teach history, and I would like to begin by suggesting that all stories have meaning because we as readers use a particular social framework to understand them. The social frameworks are many. When I read a story which begins with ‘Once upon a time,’ I know that it is not just a narrative indicator but also a socially determined indicator about the fact that this is a fantasy—there is a particular way in which the story is going to be told and there is a particular way in which the story is meant to be received. So: there are particular social frameworks within which the narratives work. If we look at History, the same thing works there as well: there are social frameworks within which the narratives of history function in particular ways.

When there is a publicly shared articulation of what some critics have called collective memory, it is a publicly shared social framework. Then there are no debates: we all share the same social framework, so we all understand the narratives. We all understand the stories being told, we all understand the history being taught. The problems begin when these social frameworks are no longer consensual but contested. When different groups need different social frameworks to tell their stories. Often, groups that are marginalized want a new, a different, social framework within which their narratives may be included. Gender, caste, different issues, different people, different voices want to come in and the social frameworks become not so publicly shared any more. They become fragmented, and history itself begins to take on different meanings. People look at its stories differently, understand them differently. And so histories are written differently because we no longer share this public collective memory, this public collective experience.

Collective public memories are constructed in certain ways and can be divided into two categories. One is what
some critics have called products—mnemonic products, products that are connected with memory. These would include, for example, statues, buildings, monuments—tangible objects that are present and visible in the public sphere. In Calcutta when we drive past Victoria Memorial, it’s part of our history, part of our collective memory. But a mnemonic product can also be other things. There were many references to Nehru’s speech, for example. It’s not a physical product but it is something that exists and helps create this collective memory for us. So it can be something which is physically present or that is intangible but present through being preserved.

The other thing is practice—the practice of commemorating. For example, 15th August—a day when we celebrate freedom and thus construct a public memory. Or 26th January, we celebrate the republic and thus we construct a memory of why it is important to us.

Another way in which collective memory is constructed is through representation.

One of the television serials most watched by children today is Little Krishna. There are around 20 Krishna serials being aired at the moment. The one on Nickelodeon is a particularly well-made one. And it begins with a text which says: 5,000 years ago, in the village of Vrindavan, a boy was born. And we have a shot of a beautiful village. Then more text, stating that this serial is based on readings of historical texts, that it is factually correct and that ISCKON helped verify the facts. So when the students come to class, this is what their idea of history is. When you say something happened 5,000 years ago, they already know what happened 5,000 years ago. They already know that this history is based on texts—on manuscripts. All the proper tools of history are being referenced in this serial. And there are many more such examples.
So, as history teachers, how do you distinguish between this representation and history which is also a representation? The social frames through which we look at our past are changing, and we should be aware of that. And the best perhaps that we can do as teachers at any level—schools and colleges and universities—is to make our students aware of these social frames, of how they are constructed and enable them to be critically aware of the ways in which they function.

Devi Kar. Is there something called cultural nationalism? Would you comment on that?

Nilanjana Gupta. Nationalism has many different aspects to it, and cultural nationalism is one which many of us are perhaps over-conscious of, because it is a nationalism which tries to take over or define the culture of the nation. And in a country like India which is so pluralistic—so diverse—to have one idea of cultural nationalism is very difficult.

Joyeeta Dey. I’m addressing the concept of ‘nation’ through Mahasweta Devi’s writing in the West Bengal Board’s secondary-education language textbooks.

I must also mention the brilliant work that has come out of Jadavpur University—the West Bengal version of Textbook Regimes put out by Nirantar, looking at the previous set of language textbooks in Bengali. A lot of that analysis holds very true for the new set of textbooks that are now being taught. If any of you are interested in looking up the question of language textbooks of the state boards in West Bengal, I would suggest you take a look at that.

One might ask why I am looking at state textbooks when one of the most virulent debates that happened was around the writing of textbooks and, inevitably, about the writing of NCERT textbooks. We need to be cognizant of the fact that approximately only 10 per cent of our students
go to CBSE and ICSE-board schools. The rest go to state-board schools, and it’s equally important that we look at what’s happening in those spaces.

There is something we must keep in mind with language textbooks: the state board creates the textbook which is then picked up as the language textbook both by CBSE and NCERT. They take stories out of that. So there is a larger group outside the state that these textbooks are speaking to.

I am going to look at Mahasweta Devi’s stories: which ones are taught, which ones are not taught, how they are taught, how the guidebooks tailor the content and guide the reading of the text and how the students receive the stories.

What was my research process? I spoke to two bureaucrats in the State Education department, I held long unstructured interviews with 10 Bengali teachers, I looked at the guidebooks and the questions in the textbooks and I of course looked at some answer sheets written by the students. I didn’t interview the students directly.

Before I discuss my research, I’d like to discuss what the scholarship from Nirantar’s studies say about West Bengal’s language textbooks. Two patterns come through very strongly: one, that the language textbooks in West Bengal have a preferred nationalism—a linguistic nationalism and the desh is ‘bangla-desh’ or undivided Bengal. The literature draws on the topography of the nation—the lush fields of Bengal, the rivers of Bengal. Apart from the Madrasa-education language textbooks which speak of a wider idea of the nation, the language textbooks of Bengal have an idea of the nation based on the nature and the topography of the region. And the imagery they draw and draw upon is very state-specific.

The other—which is a pattern across all Indian nationalist, cultural imagery—is the idea of the nation as a mother.
Mahasweta Devi’s *Harun Salemer Masi* was part of the state-board curriculum until last year. This year it has been dropped for unknown reasons. This story—through the questions at the bottom of the text which eventually appear in the West Bengal board examinations—is pitched as the story of an expansive motherliness that transcends the religious boundaries of a woman. This is a story about Gaurabi who takes Harun as her child even though he is from a different religion. Groups across the state are reading the same text.

My first enquiry centres around its teaching. So I asked the teachers, ‘Do you introduce Mahasweta Devi to the students? Or do you jump straight into the story without going into the writer’s politics and other writing?’ All the teachers I interviewed said: ‘In our B. Ed. class, they’ve told us that *lekhak parichiti* is an important part of the lesson.’ So, then, how does a middle-class private school in Calcutta introduce Mahasweta Devi’s politics? She is a writer and a social worker. In the *lekhak parichiti* as it appears in the textbook, she is portrayed as an elite, awarded, highly decorated social worker. But then, I asked this teacher, have they never heard of her independently? A lot of teachers said yes they had. When she died, it was in the news. And there was a movie by Raja Sen, *Hajar Chaurasir Ma*, that some of them had watched.

**Devi Kar.** Did you find in a particular school that all the teachers were teaching exactly the same way?

**Joyeeta Dey.** I met teachers from similar kinds of schools and they had very different teaching styles.

But the interesting deviation is that, once the Trinamool came to power, the secondary board of education began to prescribe language textbooks, from Class 6 up to Class 12, for all the government schools. Only if you are a private school affiliated to the board do you retain the autonomy to choose your textbooks.
A private-school teacher I spoke to said, ‘Yes, we included a lot of her other work before this, much more ‘radical’ work. So the students have some background.’

At the same time, within the autonomous space which allows schools to include her work, how it emerges is perhaps not living up to its radical potential. Another interesting thing the same teacher mentioned is how different the current West Bengal–board question papers are from the previous ones. The West Bengal board was well known for its demand for really long answers—the longer the answer, the better. While the CBSC/ICSE board has the opposite ethic: short, objective points, and multiple-choice questions. The teacher said that while it is true that length should not be the standard for a ‘good’ answer, it is not perhaps such a good idea to entirely drop interpretive questions. Earlier you would have a question like ‘What do you feel about the expansive motherliness that can draw in somebody from a different community?’ Now you have: ‘When she met Harun, what did she feel?’ Which is, really, one internal monologue in the story. So, in a sense, since our teaching is catered to the examination pattern, the readings of texts grow narrower when those examination patterns demand less imagination and analysis.

The other teacher I spoke to teaches in a government school, which is till Class 10, in the Sunderbans. Adivasi children attend the school. And I thought there was great potential there, for them to be told about the writer and her work even beyond her writing. But the teacher said: ‘I don’t introduce her politics at all. Because the children are struggling with Bangla as a language. At best, we may have a discussion about aspects they feel they identify with. But when they have to write, their vocabulary is so limited, they don’t have a voice of their own. As a result, their experience and how it ties up with what they are reading and how they are understanding this text gets completely left out in the
writing. What they manage to write sounds more or less like a cheap Chhaya Prakashaniguidebook. Even though there is so much integration—cultural integration—between the text and them.’

Another person that I spoke to runs a school in Sonagachi, a red-light area in Calcutta. He said: ‘I make a point of not giving notes to these children because I want them to write in their own words and I want them to develop language skills. So instead of dictating notes in class, I get them to write the answers and I correct them before they appear for the examinations. What happens all the time, and I feel bad about it—is that these children of sex-workers keep putting themselves into the story.’ The children would write things like ‘I understand what this woman went through. She is widowed, and her son is a migrant labourer who went away and she had to do certain things.’ ‘I really understand, because this is exactly my aunt’s story.’ He says he has to constantly remind them to not bring themselves into the answers.

A lot of the children did not understand the communal aspect but they fully understood the deprivation because that was very much part of their lives. They did not understand the communalism because too many of their parents were Muslim mother–Hindu father. There are other issues that are huge social taboos in their lives but not religion. So he had to explain communalism to them. The other thing they didn’t know was the village. Because they live on the streets, and their imagination is very urban.

Then there is the tuition teacher, an integral part of the teaching economy. The tuition teacher gives out ‘notes’ to the student. I ask the tuition teacher, ‘What do you do that the teacher in class does not?’ And the tuition teacher says, ‘They are bored in the classroom because the teacher only reads from the text. The teacher reads—the students stand up in turns to read. So there is intense familiarity with
the text, but I’m the one who does the hard work and prepares them for the exams.’

An interesting contradiction in bringing Mahasweta Devi into the classrooms. The textbook committee has remade the textbooks. Last year *Harun Salemer Masi* was dropped but she remains in the new textbook with a different story, *Jhoro Shadhu*. But, again, this is not in the syllabus. *Jhoro Sadhu* is about an old man who gets onto a train, along with an upper-middle-class Bengali family. When the old man is stigmatized by the ticket collector, he says, ‘Everyone is afraid of me because I start storms.’ And the family says, ‘What do you mean, you start storms? We don’t believe a word of what you are saying.’ And he says, ‘Let me prove it to you.’ And he starts a storm. Then another family travelling alongside, a middle-class family, they say, ‘How did that happen?’ And he says, ‘A holy man taught me this. I could teach it to you.’ But the family rubbishes his claims and warns him not to do it again. This story addresses the middle-class person’s anxiety with stories that don’t fit his narrative. As you see, in this story, on the one hand he is disbelieving and dismissive, and on the other hand really afraid.

Mahasweta Devi writes people’s histories. And writing of people’s history brings with it narratives that our positivist frameworks can’t really reconcile. This story bears out that conflict. It’s unfortunate that this story is not in the syllabus. **Devi Kar.** You’ve told us so many interesting stories. You’ve talked about pedagogy which is neglected. Everything is content-driven. So let’s be upfront and say that it’s all about political partisanship. You did wonder why Mahasweta Devi is not taught any more. But we do know why, we all have our suspicions. Do you remember that *Shohoj Path* was banned once upon a time? You remember that? This happens all the time, particularly with History.
Because the curriculum makers are very selective about what should be taught. Again and again it is what should be taught, not how it should be taught, as you have demonstrated. This is something we need to address. Anil talked about multiple nationalisms and so on, but should nationalism be taught? Is it all right to teach students that your country is the best in the world and superior to others? Or should we teach about nationalism? Here our curriculum is largely about secularism and communalism.

**Question-and-Answer Session**

**Jerry Pinto.** Joyeeta, did the teachers ever talk about what the children see as the nation and whom they see as their ruler? For instance, while talking to students in the border areas, I was told repeatedly that Mahatma Gandhi was the prime minister of India. Very confidently and pleasantly—without any discussion. And without any embarrassment from the teachers who were also present. For me the Northeast is an area that often nobody thinks of as India. And often, therefore, the Northeast reflects this view. So for these marginalized children—of Sonagachi’s sex-workers, for instance, or the children in the Sundarbans who we have erased from our consciousness—does India figure in their consciousness?

**Joyeeta Dey.** These children are made to move through these texts, and the readings are more or less implanted in them. When you say that the Northeast does not feature in mainstream India’s idea of the nation—in West Bengal, nothing outside West Bengal features our idea of the nation. I am generalizing, of course. In fact, there
is much more inclusion of caste, class, etc., with writers like Mahasweta Devi being read in the schools, but the pan-Indian angle is practically absent. It’s much more a regional-linguistic nationalism. Perhaps in their homes, this is not the reading one would find. But because these children are going through the school process, perhaps the first generation in their families to do so, they have learnt a certain rhetoric as it has been taught to them.

Devi Kar. You asked whether the nation knew what the nation-state was. Unfortunately, I read Hobsbawm, and after reading him I realized that I don’t know what it is either. And I am sure if one is asked to define it, it’ll be very difficult. Anil spoke about ethnicity, religion, geographical borders and so on—these are fuzzy notions, because they are shifting all the time. So, it’s very difficult to define the nation-state. Nationalism, too.

Anil Sethi. Jerry’s question was not how children define the nation-state. His question was: How children imagine the nation. Does it feature in their imagination at all? And if it does, how?

Devi Kar. When you think about a nation, what is it? Beyond its immediate territory?

Joyeeta Dey. To them, desh is the village. Even when they are away from it.

Rajni Bakshi. Is this pardes?

Joyeeta Dey. In a sense. I don’t know—it wasn’t said in so many words.

Nilanjana Gupta. But that’s the way it works in Bengali. I am asked where is my desh, and I say
‘Dhaka.’ My father never went to Dhaka, still my desh is Dhaka.

Joyeeta Dey. It’s the language. Language is also symbolic of a certain implicit understanding.

Nilanjana Gupta. It’s an imaginative belonging—not a real belonging. In Sonagachi you find that especially.

Joyeeta Dey. Among children of rural migrants, this concept of desh is very strong.

Nilanjana Gupta. Their imagined homeland.

Joyeeta Dey. It’s a very strong part of their homeland idea, so to speak. Another important factor deciding their notion of the country is, of course, which political party the teacher belongs to.

Anil Sethi. The distinction between desh and rashtra that Rajni made earlier this morning is very valid. Desh is like watan—desh and watan are ‘homeland’. For some people, the whole of India may be desh, but for a lot of others their own rural area or their homeland is the desh. When ice-cream vendors in Delhi go back to their homes in winter, they say ‘Hum desh ja rahe hain.’ So the distinction between desh and rashtra and the distinction between patriotism and nationalism are distinctions we should certainly keep in mind.

Jerry Pinto. I remember in school—in the second standard—studying the pledge: India is my country, all Indians are my brothers and sisters . . . I promise to love and serve my country and honour its vast and eternal heritage, etc. That is a pledge we got up to every morning, and we recited it as a kind of prayer. Does this pledge feature in West Bengal schools?
Joyeeta Dey. No, I don’t think it features generally.

Devi Kar. Is there any CBSE teacher here?

Audience member. All boards have a prayer the students recite.

Devi Kar. But do they recite the pledge every day?

Audience member. The pledge is there, whether it is taught or understood is doubtful, and I think it depends on the individual teachers in the school if they even think back to it.

Devi Kar. I think with the national anthem too, it’s the same story, isn’t it?

Sadanand Menon. I was quite fascinated by the idea of the narrative in the nation and the nature of the narrative, which came up quite brilliantly in Joyeeta’s talk, particularly pertaining to the subaltern. The narrative of the nation is multiple, and for each one of us it is different. Someone in the audience spoke about their own racism or their own religion, but when does the overlay of the narrative of the governing nation come in?—that is the question. When does that slip-page happen, and when does the narrative get imprisoned without any breathing space, without any sort of what you call ‘sanchari bhava’ in it? When does it become one homogenous monolithic narrative—when does that happen? If you could shed some light on that? How do these narratives get completely closed?

Nilanjana Gupta. That is the issue really, why and when they get fractured. Which is what I was trying to talk about, and not about just looking at the frame through which we perceive the narrative or create the narrative. Of course,
there are always multiple narratives of the nation. Some are given official backing from agencies such as the NCERT. When it decides something, that becomes the model which even the state boards then have to follow. Apart from school curricula, there are these wonderful narratives in Bollywood, for example. So when we are teaching History, we are teaching it as only one narrative amid all these available narratives. Of these many narratives, to believe that any one can assume a dominant position in a country like India is perhaps not the right way of looking at it. We have to keep creating alternative narratives, and we have to make sure that our alternative narratives are out there as well. Nowadays, there are a lot of issues. This morning people were talking about social networks, and somebody spoke about the violence on those social networks—violence against women, specially. As you know, our university—Jadavpur University—has also been fighting all kinds of things. And many of the students, in fact, the one student who heads the student union and is very vocal, had to face horrific things and hear statements like ‘You should be tied to a tree and raped,’ etc.

So these are the kinds of narratives that are gaining ground and the alternative narratives are not loud enough any more. **Devi Kar.** Going back to the school curriculum: the dangerous thing is that people are always looking for the right answer. You are talking about different narratives, but that is impossible in the examination situation.
Nilanjana Gupta. I don’t think it is impossible in the examinations at all. I think that in today’s world of media super-saturation, the role of the teacher has to change. When I started teaching, what we would do is go into class and say, ‘Today I am going to teach Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf was born here, she did this, she did that, this is the meaning . . .’ We would concentrate on giving information to the students. Now it’s no longer about information. Most teachers here are from schools where students have access to a lot of information. We get very good students—if I tell them that next week I will be doing Virginia Woolf, they’ll have read the text, they’ll have read the biography, they’ll have seen the film, they’ll know more than I know about Virginia Woolf! I have to constantly think about what my role is as the teacher. And the only way I can justify my role is to say that I am trying to teach them to think, to teach them to make logical interpretations, to analyse.

In examinations, questions are usually only testing the student’s retention of factual information. So questions have to become more critical. They have to be interpretive. That’s why I gave the example of the Krishna serial which is saying that what it is depicting is as historical as a textbook. Students have to be taught to distinguish between different kinds of narratives. That is the only way that History should be taught. As far as I know, that is what happens in International boards—IB and A Levels, etc.

Anil Sethi. That is changing. I don’t think any one narrative remains fixed. Narratives are
always contested. The fact that we are organizing this conference is a contestation for me. As far as pedagogy is concerned, things are gradually changing. If you look at the books we produced after 2005, they are precisely what you want the books to do. They are not books that test facts. Even the quality of questions is gradually changing. In the social and political life textbooks, we have emphasized very strongly that there is no one right answer, that there is a range of right answers, although it does not follow that every answer is right. And validity is a point of discussion in the books that we produced.

As far as Dina Nath Batra goes: between 2004 and 2008, he filed 5 cases against the NCERT, and cases in different parts of the country. We fought those cases and you’ll be happy to learn that we won all 5. So it’s not as if Dina Nath Batra can’t be defeated. The point is: the larger acceptance of a narrative is contingent on who holds power. So if today the BJP in the Hindu right hold more power, then it may seem that their version can never be contested. But, surely, there are all kinds of contestations taking place even today in a subtle way.
Devi Kar is the Director of Modern High School for Girls and the Modern Academy of Continuing Education. Besides being a member of multiple Education Boards and Scholarship panels, she is a writer of history books and driver of vintage cars.

Anil Sethi is professor of history and history education at Azim Premji University, Bangalore, where one of the courses he teaches is ‘Discourses of Nationalism’. He has taught at various universities, including Delhi University and Osaka University of Foreign Studies, and helped develop various history textbooks published by NCERT.

Nilanjana Gupta has been teaching in the Department of English Jadavpur University, since 1991 and served as Director, School of Media Communication & Culture, until 2010 when she was elected Dean, Faculty of Arts, a position she held until 2012. Gupta’s publications include Switching Channels : Ideologies of Television in India (1998, Oxford University Press), the first academic study of television in the country, and Reading with Allah: Madrasas in West Bengal (2009, Routledge), based on extensive field studies and surveys and raising questions about the role of education in a fast-changing society.

Joyeeta Dey is a researcher at Pratichi Institute, focusing on the public education system in West Bengal. She is a contributor to The History Project, a textbook for Indian and Pakistani students on partitioned histories, and a researcher for History for Peace.

These videos look at the role of shared culture and history between Pakistan and India and the struggle to own, but more often sequester, the common histories of food, music and language.

*The News*: A mock news programme is being broadcast on either side of the Indo-Pak border, with the presenters relating separate versions of the same event.

*Anthems*: Addressing the role of music in the creation of patriotic sentiment, through images of two young women dance to popular Indian and Pakistani songs.

*Mangoes*: Two expatriate Pakistani and Indian women sit and eat mangoes together and reminisce about their childhood. But an otherwise touching encounter turns sour when they begin to compare the range of mangoes grown in either country, a comment on the heightened sense of nostalgia and nationalism that exists in the Indian and Pakistani diaspora.
**Bani Abidi.** Educators, teachers of History especially, have a very particular response to my work. In a short, condensed format, there is a satirical approach to issues that are in fact dealt with in great detail.

My background. My parents are from India—my father is from Lucknow and my mother is from Patiala. They came to Karachi as teenagers. So there is this idea of a relationship with North India. My history and my identity have always been across the border. Karachi is where I grew up so Karachi is very much my history. Of course I have grown up hearing a lot of stories and family histories from across the border.

The most stereotypical experience, I think, a lot of Indians and Pakistanis have, is when they are studying in England or in America, and they encounter each other. In that moment of missing home and nostalgia, the people you grow closest to are your Indian and Pakistani contemporaries. There is endless amounts of love. Relationships and friendships happen. It is quite beautiful, because you realize that your ability to switch from English to Hindi and Urdu is a gut-level ability. It’s very satisfying, and you need it as a person. When it is 3 degrees outside and inside you are cooking together, making your biryanis and your daals, there is a different kind of bonding. I am interested in food and language and music, because I think these three work very effectively to debunk the idea of a national border as a space of identity. To this day, I feel these are part of my identity whereas my religion and my nation are not. If you ask me if it is important to be a Muslim or to be Urdu-speaking, then of course to be Urdu-speaking is important. In Bengal too, the language has such a strong sense of identity, even more than religion.

The three videos I am showing here are works that I did 16 years ago.
For me, they are very important because they are about the place where we came together. They are a beautiful and loving look at the tragedy of it all. In all the videos—especially in Mangoes—the theme is the coming together. I used the idea of competing about the amount of mangoes, about one-upmanship, because I was interested in vulnerability. I took a human look at our foibles, at the things that trap us. So even though we are looking at the things that connect us, they are also these traps that lie within.

I find very interesting that moment of transition that most young people encounter on their way to becoming adults, when they loosen their grip on, when they shed, the slogans and jingoistic material that they have read in school. I think in Mangoes and Anthems, one is trying to figure out where ones allegiance lies. In the videos where I am dancing, it’s about that moment of transition. In some ways, what’s really important about these videos is that they allow one to laugh at the absurdity of cross-border tension and competitiveness.

A couple of years ago, a pigeon was caught on the Indian side and then taken to a police station—and that was news! I was getting mails from everyone, saying ‘Have you seen this article?’ It was supposed to be a spy pigeon. Life is far more absurd than anything we can ever conjure up. And our ability to laugh at life brings many issues down to earth in that way.

Prateek Raja. What I think is the most touching part of this trilogy is that they talk about the same thing but from two completely different points of view. It’s very beautifully and simply put. One of the works that has not been shown here—and Bani’s work is always about nationalism, borders and identity—is Ghost of Muhammad Bin Qasim. In the 1990s, there was a series of TV shows about the
invasion of Muhammad Bin Qasim. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Bani Abidi. Jinnah introduced and made mandatory two subjects, Islamiyat and Pakistan Studies. The latter replaced Civics which is what we were studying earlier. So we grew up with a very clear chronological narrative that Pakistan was always meant to be and that Muhammad Bin Qasim was the first citizen of Pakistan. Of course, it was the most boring subject, and we all wanted to bunk those classes, but we had to study it until we got into college.

In 2006, I was really interested in the idea of making a fiction about fiction, and that’s when I was struck by the idea of this completely fictionalized, fabricated, edited history that we had grown up with. The only way to deal with it was to take it a step further, which is what a lot of satire does. So I did a series called *The Ghost of Muhammad Bin Qasim*, which looks at how Pakistan Studies affected the idea and myth of Muhammad Bin Qasim in the 1980s. I created completely fabricated photographs of a man with a horse who believes he is Muhammad Bin Qasim. He is a Christian who has converted to Islam and rides all over the country, a sort of urban eccentric. I made up the whole story—all of it was conjured up, but it was really popular at the time. That was clear—you could not mistake it for fact.

My friend’s mother, a high-school History teacher, came up to me and said ‘*Shukar hai*, finally someone is making fun of it.’

To me it was a very economical and indirect manner of dealing with these issues. That work was then used by an academic in Columbia, Dr Ahmed, who was working on Muhammad Bin Qasim. He used images from it. And it was very nice for me to see how my forays into this kind of critique are being used by academics.
Prateek Raja. Your later work has a lot of these aspects as well. For example, your works on Section Yellow where you are waiting for a visa. There is, in any case, a special relationship you have with India because you came here as a student and even lived here for a while.

Bani Abidi. And Calcutta was my ex-in-laws’ city.

Prateek Raja. How do you deal with the present multiculturalism of state-driven ideologies and state-driven educational systems? Here we have realities that are completely different: we experience being humans first rather than being citizens. That is secondary. You have worked on this idea as well. How do you deal with this dichotomous multiculturalism?

Bani Abidi. I was at the National College of Arts in Lahore, which is similar to the Mayo College and was set up at around the same time. It was a rite of passage that in your third year you travelled to North India. I think now that idea has died down because of visa issues. But at the time I thought it really interesting. At least in the cultural world it was normal to reach out and explore. Although I couldn’t see the reverse happening—not many Indian students would come to Harappa or to Mohenjodaro. Which is sad, because India has over time become a big brother, a self-contained nation beside us but with no desire to have any continuity or connection with this marked-off piece of land.

Eventually, I lived in India. Moving to Delhi was a real eye-opener. I love Delhi, and I really did feel like an informal ambassador for people on both sides of the border. When I went back to Pakistan and heard someone say something too simplistic, I would say they could not make claims till they came and explored. There were many conversations about Pakistan here, where people said things without knowing I was from Pakistan. I would step in here too.
Unfortunately, a lot of what you see—at least on social media and the news—about what younger people feel is not very promising. Our generation has parents and grandparents who have experienced Partition. With the sense we have of the Other, I don’t know how things will go forward. There is a fatigue factor with Partition that people speak of. Yes, there is a fatigue factor, but you go back and realize that there can never be enough said about it because it is so huge. It needs to be revisited, by writers, producers, educators . . . it needs to be revisited. The face of the divide has changed in the 70 years that we have been divided. We are living in a time where the world changed in some ways even yesterday. So it is very difficult to talk about this abstract space for humour and be liberated and free when people are in fact imprisoned by very tight walls.

Prateek Raja. I was looking at the other work that deals with the ideas of the time you spent here in India. The Speech Writer is an important body of work, part of what you showed at Documenta (four years or five years ago, on the theme of Nationalism as well), about the politics of time in building an identity.

Bani Abidi. The self-aggrandisement of political culture.

Prateek Raja. I have often done talks with students when they are made to visit a gallery. The receptivity of alternative thinking in the younger generation is incredible. If you plant a seed of thought beyond the ‘normal’ narrative, their ability to live with that and build on that is great. I think in a lot of your work, you try and provide that window to an alternative narrative. You deal with people who might not be currently in a stable frame of mind. But you deal with those eccentricities in order to better deal with reality. And what may be considered eccentric by individual adults may not be so by a child. What made you start the bodies of work that you did?
**Bani Abidi.** *The Ghost of Muhammad Bin Qasim* was the first idea. A person who has lost his mind in the face of social pressure, or a desire, to conform. How does he manifest his confusion? There are four types of work where I look at eccentricities and madness as the only free space, and mad and eccentric people as truth-tellers in some ways.

*The Speech Writer* isn’t about India, but I was very interested in the lost generation—my parents’ generation, people in their 80s—who belonged to a different world and how they were making sense of what's going on right now. Because for these two countries with their huge sense of idealism and their hope, the future is very different.

*The Speech Writer* has a set of books. You flick through them—it’s like a film in the form of books (I know it’s a bit of a confusing format). There is a gentleman who sits down every day in his study. He pulls out papers and makes speeches into a microphone. Then, you look outside and see the megaphones facing outward and then realize that he is making the speeches to no one. He is an eccentric man who lives in his house and makes speeches to no one. It is about his lost words and ideas that have no place in society now. The actor was a gentleman who recently passed away—Jasbir Malik, my father’s friend from college in Kanpur. So there was a personal reason too for that.

Another work I did was called *Death at 30-degree Angle*. I was very inspired by Mayawati and all the statues she was getting made. I had travelled to the Congo where I had seen the African leaders enshrined as statues, and then to Hungary which has sculpture parks with fallen Communist statues. So I was very interested in the life of statues—the moment from their commissioning to the moment of their collapse. It becomes the thing that people are able to attack, to break. A proxy for the person who is not in power.
I wanted to make a film about a politician who wants to get a statue made of himself but can’t decide how he wants to pose, what he wants to wear. A simple moment—he is just standing there, surrounded by his cronies, posing, changing clothes, looking like an intellectual in one outfit, looking like a warrior in another. During my research, I came across Ram Sudhan. He must have been 87 or more. From Maharashtra, but living in Noida. I went to his studio and found the whole pantheon of Indian political figures in there. It was three storeys high! And for 60 years he has made political statues . . . he has one of Mayawati, even. It is such an inspiring space, and his story is so beautiful. He is a Gandhian and he said, ‘I just want to make a statue of Gandhi-ji holding the hands of two Dalit children and walking, in Bombay. I want it to stand like the Statue of Liberty, but no one wants to make it’. That was so beautiful because he represents the generation that I was talking about—very fixed in a certain way in their idea of India. He said, ‘But no one wants that. One person wants Shivaji, the other person wants somebody else.’ Indian politics is just so fractured that way. ‘And that’s the only money I get. So I will never get to make my statue.’ Anyway: I made a film where I used him and my fiction together.

**QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION**

**Jerry Pinto.** In the mango film, there was a sense of the improvisation there. But was there any in the dance film?

**Bani Abidi.** It came out of a real conversation, the idea of mixing Urdu and Hindi. And the informal delivery was very consciously done. That was my first video (and a technical feat for me) and that I was there twice was one of the
most exciting things. I did a double role for all those videos because that was important, and those are the only videos I have been in. It meant something to me, to be both the Indian and the Pakistani.

Saiful Huq Omi. My name is Omi and I am a photographer from Bangladesh. I loved your work. And my question is really simple: have you ever thought of producing a similar series on the relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh? You perhaps don’t connect with it in the same way as you connect to India in your personal past, but have you ever thought of doing something similar?

Bani Abidi. That is a much more complicated project. I have spoken about doing something with my Bangladeshi artist friends, because we are going to have 50 years of Bangladesh and Pakistan’s separation soon, and I think this has to be built up because there isn’t that much between Pakistan and India—that conversation has not been visited. When I do something about it, it will have to have a lot more gravitas than this. This is almost too silly. No, not yet but I will be visiting it at some point.

Tina Servaia. You are an artist, and artists create in a context. So will the recent change in the political context—the relationship between India and Pakistan, and the hardening of feelings—have any impact on your artistic work?

Bani Abidi. This work of mine is really old and I am kind of done with India and Pakistan. I was able to deal with it while it was easier to deal with. But now we have lived with it for so
long—for the past 20 years we have dealt with it—that every moments of tension pulls us away. I have also been in India during times of serious tension, and I have had my visa issues too. Now I think I have pulled away from all this. Like I said: you can never talk too much about the division. But it will have to be approached in a very different way.

I think that the question is: How do younger artists and writers, people in Pakistan and India—how do they deal with this? How are they thinking about this as they are becoming adults? They are coming of age at a different time than I did, so it is a bigger conundrum to see how they will think of each other. One of the things that is important for me is the ability to travel and to visit each other. I always tell my Indian friends, ‘There are those of you who have never been. And those of you who have.’ Because there is a seminal difference you experience when you do visit. The fact that Calcutta and Karachi are similar, or that the air smells similar in Bombay and in Karachi—all these things shatter lots and lots of notions of difference. I think that is the only thing that is really important—to talk about the first-person experience of Other.

Priyanka Raja. To Tina: as an observer of Bani’s work over the last 15 years, I think the answer to your question is yes. You can see it in her early works like Mangoes, The Anthem and The News. In the work that she did afterwards, Reserved she talked again of the idea of nationalism and the ideas of privilege. Prateek talked about The Script
Writer, which is again about nationalistic ideas. I am sad we couldn’t have an experience of that today—it would have been so meaningful for an audience that is so passionate about history. I think, yes, as you said, context drives the content and therefore the kind of work that artists do over time. For Bani, certainly there is change. And I don’t think it is a conscious strategy but a clear response to her time and space.

Bani Abidi. Also, there is a lightness to these videos you saw that was very much part of being a younger person—a student. There is humour and lightness in how you approach things then. As you age, you look at things very differently. I cared so much about these issues at the time that it informed all the work that came after. Mangoes is, for me, a really important video because it is so short but it says exactly what I proceeded to say in all my films, because it was something that I understood and deeply cared about.

Audience member. Bani, can we hear a little about your later sound project?

Bani Abidi. It’s called The Memorial to Lost Worlds and was made to mark the centenary of the First World War. I happened to read a book by Intezar Abdullah Hussain last year, a Pakistani writer who wrote a book in Urdu called Udaas Naseem and translated it himself sometime in the beginning of the twentieth century. The first quarter of the book is very moving because it has descriptions of all these Punjabi villages from where young Sikh, Muslim and Hindu men were whisked away and sent off to fight in the Belgian front. It is so beautiful to read something
in Urdu and, of course, this gentleman is very Left-leaning and so his point of view is very much that of the worker. There’s displacement, the excitement and fear of those 17-year-old boys who didn’t know who they were fighting. But they were fighting. There is a battle scene where everyone in the trenches has died. There is a cabin where all the arms are stored. One man goes in and finds three Indians sitting and laughing at a silly joke about a stolen buffalo in their village. And he says, ‘But how can you laugh, there is death all around you?’ And they say, ‘Well, we are going to die, so we might as well die laughing about something we love!’

I was so moved at the agency of how you are going to die. I was seeing all the immigrants around me in Berlin: Shias from Pakistan, Syrians. I looked at these men and the sense of loss was so deep. Many months later, I was asked to do a project for the Edinburgh Arts Festival. Edinburgh has about 200 monuments and they are now challenging the idea of monuments. So I got interested in the idea of looking at oral histories as the ultimate memorial. If an oral history survives, that is a testimony to truth and memory. So I started researching, reading letters written by Indian soldiers back home—more than a million Indian soldiers, of who more than 70,000 died. If you go to the Imperial War Museum today, they are not even a footnote. I went to London to check—there is no mention. It’s such a shock. It’s a bit of history that’s completely ignored. None of the colonial soldiers are mentioned.
Anyway: I ended up looking at letters written by soldiers back home. But because they were too critical of the war, the letters were censored and so they never reached home. I found them with the help of a poet in London, Amarjit Chandan, who has an archive of songs sung by women in Punjab. Invariably, they were songs of dissent—very critical of Germany fighting a war and Britain taking away their men. Songs describing in detail how the space of their society was changing.

I got the text together and created a song, ‘The Memorial to Lost Worlds’ with a male voice that sings the letter, and three female voices singing at the back. One of the women asks him to not go, and the man describes where he is. This conversation never really happened in history. So I’m sort of bringing these ghosts alive. It was installed in the Debating Chamber of the Parliament in Scotland, in Edinburgh, a chamber which was never used. So it was also about filling the space of debate with voices of representation, voices of Indians from a hundred years ago.

Indu Nair. My name is Indu and I am a teacher from Bangalore. You mentioned how in the two videos you put two characters together but that a boundary remained. In Anthems, there is a clear boundary while in Mangoes there is an invisible one. I just wanted to know: Was it a conscious decision to create that or did it occur naturally? If it was a conscious decision, how did you manage to do that? When I was watching it, I could tell there were two distinct characters—one Indian and one Pakistani—talking about their
differences with Mangoes but I wasn’t sure about where the invisible boundary was. **Bani Abidi.** It was very consciously done in *Mangoes*. You can’t see it, but of course, the way I have placed myself on both sides of the screen was important. There is a full acknowledgement of the boundaries in all the videos. *Anthems* is interesting, because it was made with the idea of a Pakistani and an Indian being in a third country. Once we are around white people, we suddenly find ourselves competing to be heard and our voices grow shriller and shriller and everyone wants representation. It’s a literal representation of that idea: both trying to shove each other off centre-stage by turning up the volume. The boundary in that is very important because one or the other can exist. In their own pathetic ways, they are both half there. So the boundary was important—it was a TV Screen.

*News,* when it is shown, it is always shown on two TV screens. It’s just designed like that. And it’s very much about the two broadcasts from across the borders. Not about wiping away boundaries. Even the humour in the work is not about erasing boundaries nor about pretending they don’t exist. It’s about how you live with them and with everything else that exists. It’s about bringing it all together.

**Indu Nair.** Especially in *Mangoes*, I was curious about how you create the boundaries, even though there is no physical separation. Because, somehow, there is a sense of a boundary.

**Bani Abidi.** I think it’s only because of the conversation. This punch-line with which the video
ends is like, ‘There is more in your country; there is more in my country.’ It’s a sort of dead end. I am very interested in the dead ends of conversations, in what kills a conversation. And that kind of a competitive conversation was a dead end.

**Anil Sethi.** For me, what the videos capture is also the lives of ordinary people. They capture ordinariness in general. I say this because when I was teaching at Osaka University of Foreign Studies, we had colleagues from India and Pakistan. My neighbour—the chap who had his office next to mine—was a Pakistani. And another Indian. I noticed one afternoon that both were talking about mangoes, and that they talked about mangoes for two hours! Can you imagine! From the way in which the *fauj* exchanges mangoes to ‘*meri bhabhi ne bheja hai mangoes apke liye*’ . . . you know, so many different aspects of mangoes! Sitting in distant Japan they were being nostalgic about South Asia. At the same time there was a sort of a symbolic boundary because the conversation was taking place in Urdu–Hindi. So sometimes they wouldn’t understand each other, one word or so, and the other would go back to explain it.

**Bani Abidi.** It’s amusing, this mangoes obsession, and very real. There are serious conversations that happen about mangoes. To this day, obviously, I will say that Pakistani mangoes are the best even though I have eaten a lot of Indian mangoes. I go to Delhi and I love saying, ‘*Nahi nahi, Karachi mein* this doesn’t compete at all.’ Is the joy of eating a good mango more important than not being able to understand Hindi or
Urdu? Maybe it is, because that connection is extremely profound. I have lived in both Lahore and Karachi, and there is something about the smell and the feel of things that the boundary doesn’t break at all.

Then I came to live in Delhi, and saw all the Punjabi aunties in their salwar-kameezes and their cardigans and shawls in winter which is apparently very ‘North Indian’. But it’s also exactly how things are in Lahore. This was so familiar—I might as well have been in Pakistan. Of course, Delhi is very different and India is very different. But this is the stuff of life—the ordinariness of everyday things.

A very good example of materiality: a sculptor friend of mine moved from Lahore to Bristol recently and she said, ‘I just don’t understand it. In Lahore, there was so much dust. But in Bristol, nothing changes. It is all just sitting there—clean. I never need to dust it.’ So: just the way things smell. How do you explain the smell of rain to someone in Berlin? I don’t know about Calcuttans, but Delhi-wallahs and Pakistanis certainly love the rain. No one in many parts of the world ever understands that. Being able to understand and play with these as the true sense of space and identity . . . it is a pleasure to consume and explore that kind of work and thought.
Bani Abidi is a Pakistani artist who gleans from cultural and political absurdities of quotidian life in South Asia. Her work, which is almost always humorous and extrapolates from small, banal moments, has been exhibited widely in solo and group shows across the world. They may be seen at the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Guggenheim Museum, the British Museum and the Tate Modern. She has also been an artist in residence at DAAD Artists Residency, Berlin in 2011/12.

Prateek Raja is the co-founder of Experimenter—a gallery in Calcutta which goes outside the hyper-commercial imperatives of the Indian art market, highlighting instead experimental and alternative artists from the entire South Asian subcontinent and artists globally who have a South Asian connection to their practice.
I have worked on the early history of the political Left in Pakistan, specifically the short-lived existence of the Communist Party of Pakistan after Independence, and the anti-dictatorship student protests of 1968–69 in Karachi and Lahore. Those projects are what sparked my interest in exploring the histories of other youth movements in the subcontinent. Unlike the histories of the Pakistani Left, a lot has been written on the Naxalite movement in Bengal. It is a moment in the history of the radical Left that has constantly been revisited and often romanticized. It is not my purpose to try and prove, once again, its overall significance or impact. Instead, I want to revisit it as a unique moment in history in which one may find ideas and ways of thinking that have grown unfamiliar to us now. The focus on students, instead of political parties, is purposeful. The youth represent, in a way, the raw idealism of a movement. Through their actions, you can get a closer look at the roots of activism, and try to capture the cultural, emotional, and ideological features of a movement.

A lot of my work is also interview-based, focusing on oral testimony and personal narratives. This allows for a different kind of investigation, one that emphasizes
experiential history and freely explores the subjectivities of individual participants. One that asks not only how or why something happened but also what it felt like to inhabit the event, to be agents or witnesses of a movement that affected so many lives. There is no straightforward relationship between experience and narrative, of course, and one must remember that these oral histories are filtered through the words and recollections of people more than 50 years after the fact. Aside from the politics of memory, the extremely early stage of my work and my relative newness to the subject matter make me hesitate to offer large analytic arguments or judgements. Instead, I would like to hold up some questions which are as relevant today as they were 50 years ago, and that relate to the theme of this session—that of the relationship between the Left, the state and nationalism.

There is no such thing as one Left in South Asia. The term means very different things at different places and times. In Pakistan, it has been vilified as a subversive, anti-state force, which always had very little reach, let alone any kind of real power, at the state level or otherwise. When I studied the history of the Left in Pakistan, it was a history of possibilities, of unrealized dreams, of alternative conceptions and imaginings of the state which existed among only a tiny sub-section of society.

Bengal is different. There was, here, the longest-running democratically elected communist government in history. This complicates the lines between state and the ‘establishment’ on one hand, and the anti-establishment revolutionary dissenters on the other. The period that I have been focusing on—roughly 1966 to 1971—is a very interesting time because that’s when a lot of those splits were born, and the Left was trying to redefine itself. Many of my interviewees would explain this timeline to me from a macro view, describing it as a crossroads. They would refer
to many different incidents, or ‘markers,’ in their timeline but over the course of several interviews a common sequence emerged: that after a surge of radical activity from the Communist Party of India, between 1948 and 1951, marked by extreme rioting and violence, there was a period of ‘quietly rising discontent’ across the country. The nationalist fervour of the independence struggle died down, but the systems and issues of the colonial era persisted. The economic failures of this period—especially continuing poverty and land-lordism in the countryside—disillusioned many with the new ruling system. In West Bengal, the decade ended in an agrarian crisis which led to food riots and a major unemployment crisis. One statistic listed the number of applications from the educated unemployed in the live registers of the employment exchanges in India at 163,000 in 1953, increasing to 917,000 by the end of 1966. All this gives some context to the rising frustration and apathy which was brewing, especially among the educated youth who had grown up on the dream of independent India but had yet to see that dream be delivered in any way. As one of my interviewees put it, ‘People had great expectation of independence. They thought it would bring happiness, prosperity, peace and security. People at that time were not as pessimistic as they are now. No defeatist spirit. They thought we have found independence, but if the Indian state is not good, we will change that state.’

This disaffection also had specific targets. Aside from bleak employment prospects, there was a sense of disgust with the whole education system: corruption, administrative failures, the devaluation of diplomas, and numerous problems at the level of infrastructure, such as hostel accommodation, transportation fees, access to books, and so on. I think it is also worth referencing the extremely rich and deep legacy of student activism in Bengal, which goes
back to the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1828, the first student group of India, the Academic Association, was founded at Hindu College. A British newspaper from 1830 refers to Hindu College as a ‘breeding ground of sedition’. Throughout this era, students participated in nationalist societies like the Bengal British India Society and the Brahmo Samaj. In 1875, the Students Association was formed to propagate ideals of independence. When the Association’s leader was imprisoned, it sparked the first mass student strike in India’s history. The ties between Leftist movements and student politics run deep as well; if not always in explicit partnership, then at least in the political leanings of their leaders. Take, for example, the Bengal Provincial Students League. This group was established at the All Bengal Student Convention in 1935, and was presided over by Hiren Mukhopadhyay, a young Marxist teacher with ties to the Communist movement who went on to become a prominent politician.

It is beyond the scope of this presentation to go into a detailed background of the Left, but I will make a couple of points regarding the Communist movement’s stance on the state. It should be remembered that the CPI was the first organized political party to demand full independence for India, back in 1924, when the National Congress was still saying it would be satisfied with dominion status within the empire. On the issue of Partition, the communists went from being largely aligned with the India National Congress on a platform of Hindu–Muslim unity to supporting the demand for Pakistan in 1942 due to Lenin’s principle of national self-determination. One of the party’s pioneering members, Gangadhar Adhikari, presented a report in 1942 in which he talks about the three phases of national development, the third being when dormant nationalities rise to consciousness and make demands of their own.
This conception of the nation saw it as a historical product of bourgeois evolution rather than a static or fixed entity. In this vein, the CPI even called for the suspension of the Tebhaga peasant movement here in Bengal, which they had earlier actively supported. By the end of 1947, however, they were rethinking their position, and in December that year, a more radical line within the party took hold under the leadership of B. T. Ranadive. Under this anti-reformist stance, the Party went back to calling the demand for Pakistan ‘anti-national’.

In 1951, the Party reigned in this radical line once again, and a new programme was presented which called for the ‘setting up of a people’s democracy created on the basis of a coalition of all democratic anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces in the country’. This move towards a path of peaceful parliamentarianism sparked a long debate between the rightists, who favoured alliances with the Congress, and the leftists, who maintained the need for an anti-Congress front. This divide didn’t come to a head until the early 1960s, when both the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the Sino-Soviet split within the party finally brought about the creation of the CPI-Marxist (CPM), at the Calcutta Congress of 1964.

The Sino-Indian War is a good instance to investigate this claim of being ‘anti-national,’ as that is how those who had any sympathies for China were branded. However, right from the beginning, the CPM—although supposedly representing the more radical faction of the communist movement, the revolutionary rather than the revisionist path—stuck to the system of peaceful parliamentarianism. When, for example, the Andhra Pradesh State Party proposed an amendment demanding the right of self-determination for nationalities, and the adoption of a programme of armed struggle, its proposals were uniformly rejected by the CPM.
So to tie up these two threads, after decades of the nationalist movement which had brought the Indian bourgeoisie and the Leftists together under a common cause, the power of traditional nationalist ideology began to falter under the weight of post-Independence reality. The specific factors are varied and plentiful: the third Five Year Plan was virtually abandoned, rising inflation and unemployment, and so on. In this context, the delegitimization of nationalist feelings makes sense, especially among the hopeful and idealistic youth. I would note here, as well, that in West Bengal, many of the students who were drawn into revolutionary politics were from a lower-middle-class background. Many were from families that had crossed over from East Bengal, and were living in refugee colonies and shanty district towns. For these people in particular, Partition had mattered, and it had been a difficult transition to the post-Independence years.

Now, there are a few different moments I could point to, amid this turbulent atmosphere, to mark the beginning of a real ‘students movement’. One that stands out is the massive student involvement in the Food Movement of 1966, when there were large-scale protests in Calcutta and the surrounding districts. The main active student group was the Bengal Provincial Student Federation, or the BPSE. The food crisis was brought on by food scarcity, high prices due to crop failures, and hoarding which led to a shrinkage of the market for consumer goods and a subsequent industrial recession. Some of my interviewees mentioned the kerosene shortage in particular, for how could students study without lamplight? In the massive strikes, rallies and demonstrations that followed, there were frequent instances of police *lathi* charges and firing on the crowds. Cases of agitations, called instances of ‘student indiscipline’, rose from 271 in 1965 to 607 in 1966.
A subsequent movement took place in 1966 at Presidency College, which, especially then, was one of the city’s elite institutions. Here, in the 1965 college union elections, the Students Federation won an overwhelming victory. The organization worked actively in the Food Movement, and one of their leaders told me that they refused to formally become members of any party. ‘Party means pledging yourself,’ he said, ‘submitting to party discipline. And we didn’t like it. We said we’ll remain as sympathizers, but keep our independence.’ The next year, the accumulating grievances of students living in the college’s Hindu Hostel exploded into protest, and they demanded the resignation of their hostel superintendent. When the authorities cracked down, the students began a hunger strike and, after three days, were fleetingly successful for the college accepted their demands. It was, as one interviewee put it, ‘unprecedented’. But then three of the leading students who had just graduated were refused admission to the post-graduate course for no fair reason, a decision which led to strikes and clashes between the students and police. This demand for the withdrawal of their expulsion orders became such a widespread and disruptive protest that Calcutta University had to be closed sine die from 8 December, 1966, the first time ever in its 110 years of existence. The deadlock continued until January, when, finally, on the eve of elections, a compromise was reached. The expulsion orders were withdrawn, the students were given transfer certificates and classes finally resumed.

On 2 March 1967, a non-Congress, United Front government was sworn in West Bengal, a coalition dominated by the CPI, the CPM and a breakaway group from the Congress called the Bangla Congress. Not long after, on 23 May, there was the first serious clash between peasant activists and the state machinery in the small village of
Naxalbari, Darjeeling District. A policeman was killed in an encounter with armed tribals, led by radical CPM leaders. Two days later, the police retaliated by sending a force and firing upon a crowd of villagers, killing nine, including six women and two children. Several peasants were arrested. Over the next few weeks, the situation escalated. Between 8 and 10 June alone, there were 80 reported cases of ‘lawlessness’. The West Bengal Chief Minister called it a ‘reign of terror’, and by the end of June, the CPM leadership was openly coming out against the rebels.

It was at this time that the CPM dissidents—many of whom were Presidency College student leaders—formed a support committee called the Naxalbari Peasants Struggle Aid Committee. Many members left the Student Federation, seeing this as an opportunity to take the revolutionary steps that the CPM was failing to take. It bifurcated the CPM into what these youth called the *sarkari* communists—the government communists—and the communist revolutionaries. ‘Those who thought that governments will come and go,’ as one of them put it, ‘but the international movement should be kept alive, at any cost.’

I want to share a quote from a pamphlet, distributed by the CU branch of the CPI-ML, which captures the spirit of student involvement: ‘The educational system that the reactionary rulers have established, is basically colonial—after this came the farce of 1947. A nation which attains ‘independence’ through a compromise with the imperialists under the auspices of traitors can never have a really militant, patriotic and anti-colonial education system. For 22 years, this system fed the students and youth with the opium of careerism and taught them to go against class struggles, prevented them from standing side by side with the poor peasants and workers and fight a revolutionary
war. Charu Mazumdar, the Naxalite movement’s primary ideologue, also said: ‘In a man’s life, the age between 18 and 24 is the period when he can work hardest and be most vigorous, most courageous and most loyal to his ideas,’ but students in India were ‘forced to pursue anti-people courses of study and try to pass examinations [. . .] it will give me the greatest pleasure if you plunge yourselves into the revolutionary here and now instead of wasting your energy in passing examinations.’ These students never wanted to be seen as dealing with economic issues, or with essentially student issues. They wanted to change society.

The Naxalite movement wasn’t organized in a traditional way; there wasn’t even a ‘party’ until two years after it began (and it splintered so quickly, one wonders if organization was somehow antithetical to its very spirit). We’re still fascinated about it all these years later precisely because it was so symbolic, and so intensely ideological. It rejected those ideals of bourgeois humanism and self-cultivation which mark youth movements of a different kind; this was anti self-cultivation, it was anti-culture, the slogans were to declassify, to destroy, etc. Many Calcutta students left for the villages, to live among, and as, the peasantry they wanted to organize. In the city, inspired in part by the Cultural Revolution in China, a mini-cultural war took place. Targets included pictures and busts of Gandhi, Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Vivekananda, and other ‘bourgeois’ political leaders and social reformers. The term ‘anti-disciplinary politics’, which has been used to describe other youth-led movements of the 60s era, could be employed here, defined as ‘a language of protest which rejects hierarchy and leadership, strategy and planning, bureaucratic organization and political parties and is distinguished from the traditional left by its ridiculing of political commitment.’ One could also think about the
particularities of Bengal, and how that played a role. There is this idea of a regional trait which includes an inherent disrespect, or at least disregard, for the politics of the centre, and a very Bengali identity. For these radicals, it may have been easier to imagine the ‘nation’ as separate from the state and, rather, as an abstract ideal of the ‘people’: the refugees, the peasantry, the workers, all of those not being taken care of by the state.

So when I talked earlier about how the history of the Left could be a history of possibility, I think the extreme actions and ideas of these radical students, with both their idealism and their deep pessimism, embodied, briefly, a real rejection of the existing idea of the nation, and a hope for something else. There is, naturally, a lot of nostalgia for this moment of possibility. A quote from Talleyrand which I like comes to mind: ‘He who did not live in the years before the revolution cannot know the sweetness of living.’ The idea is of this dialectical relationship between progress and the future on one hand and destruction, pessimism and nostalgia on the other. That a sense of revolt is possible only as long as it is ‘before the revolution’, when the status quo can still be challenged. In a pre-revolutionary moment, it is always possible to have hope for change. This is part of how people talk about the 60s: all these global movements which failed because, by definition, a revolution can never be permanent. It is only a brief moment when a grander vision for change, a liberating spirit, becomes part of the life of a group.

Ranabir Samaddar, himself a student leader at this time, writes in his academic analysis of the movement that the revolutionary encounter can be characterized as a moral critique, rather than an outright rejection, of the nation: ‘The nation’s awareness of its own inadequacy leads to a search for revised forms of rule [. . .] The nation survives
because it is consciously revisionist; it is adequate because of its adaptive nature.” The idea that the ‘nation’ is inherently unfixed and revisionist suggests that the experiences and feelings that remain a powerful legacy of this movement—the dream of change, the pre-revolutionary desire—is actually part of what constitutes the nation itself.

And so in this understanding—to end on a hopeful reflection—the students and youth of the radical Left become the vanguard, the representation of the non-conformist masses. And this non-conformism, the rejection of liberalism of all kinds, the desire for revolutionary change, involved rejecting the structures of the nation, yes, but what it fought for was, in its own way, the nation itself.

Meher Ali is a Fulbright research scholar from Brown University, where she completed her BA with honors in history. Her senior thesis, entitled *The Hidden Left: Communist Activity in Pakistan, 1948-1951*, received the distinguished senior thesis award, as well as the Marjorie Harris Weiss memorial prize and the Samuel Lamport award for promoting international understanding.
I have come to realize that we are all the same, all of us here—our interests, our political stances, our take on the nation—so we are pretty much talking to one another, which is a bit of a problem. But it is not as much of a problem as what I witnessed at the Kumaon Literary Festival where there was an attempt to bring together various viewpoints through a debate on nationalism. So there was Hindol Sengupta who represented a certain version of nationalism; there was Tarun Vijay who is a spokesperson for the Bharatiya Janata Party and therefore must assume certain attitudes; and there was my ex-student Rana Ayyub who has written and self-published *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover-Up*.

The problem is simple: Do we preach to the converted or shout at the unhearing?

In about 10 minutes, the debate had degenerated into a shouting match and it was quite obvious that nobody had anything to say to anybody else. And that no one was listening. This is the real source of terror, the real source of our problem: we have not been able to maintain a space for dialogue, for listening and receiving. We have relied too long on the academy as the space for the formation of history. History is being made right now, today, in newsrooms across
the country. History is being made on television which can be scary, since truth is often the first casualty of TRPs.

But that’s not what’s terrifying. What’s terrifying is that history is being made by the twitterati, in editing studios where soundtracks are overlaid on recorded events. That distorted reality is then widely circulated. And since we are now in a space where we only hear and believe what we want to hear and believe, the correctives are ignored.

The old formula for instant history, over the last 50 years of our society used to be: ‘I read it in the newspapers.’ As journalists, we were aware that we were responsible for the making of history. Then it became ‘I saw it on television’. Large corporations know they could be sued and so they try and be as seemly as possible. But what about the independent troll who puts out a video that goes viral? ‘I saw it on Twitter,’ say his followers and the result is that history is made by those who have a desire to represent not what happened but what they think happened. They know they are biased. In fact, they are proud of these biases. And they are prouder still of introducing these biases into their work.

And then there is the other narrative. We also learn about our history from extramural sources, from what we hear outside the world of academia for the history textbooks are easily forgotten. The world is very clearly divided into people who remember what they studied in school—that’s 1 per cent of the universe—and the rest who forget.

I know you believe that you remember what you studied. But should I ask you what the cosine of an angle is or what (a+b) raised to the power of three is equal to—you would look at me blankly. It is no less shocking that you should not remember a binomial expansion than it is that you should not remember who Tipu Sultan was. As History teachers, you may have a greater investment in
Tipu Sultan—but Mathematics is a modality of engagement with logic—if that slips you by, then logic slips you by. Because up to that time, the only thing allowing you to think about logic is the mathematics that is taught without logic. If you do not remember that Lithium has a valency of 1 or 2 and so you do not know whether Lithium Carbonate is $\text{LiCO}_3$ or $\text{Li}_2\text{CO}_3$ how have you excused yourself? How have you said that they should all remember their History—but it is okay for me to forget my Chemistry? Or to forget my Mathematics? Are we guilty of prioritizing certain forms of knowledge? Perhaps we do it unknowingly but here it is: They should know their History but I can forget my Botany.

Why is it that after so many years of education in school, most Indian schoolchildren are unable to write a simple letter? I have two young neighbours. One went to medical college and became a pathologist—which means she not only did a medical degree but also went on to do her MD. And the other is an engineer and teaches in an engineering college. Recently he had to write a letter to his principal, requesting for a day’s leave to get a visa. But he could not write that letter, so he came to me. If an engineering professor cannot write a leave application, we should acknowledge that our system is a failure.

And if our system is a failure, then let us assume that everything we know comes from sources outside the classroom. That everything we know about our history does not come from our textbooks. Those textbooks have left no impact. But we are humans and we want to know who we are, we want to know the story of our tribe. The most trivial form of this desire for tribal knowledge is gossip; its most noble form is literature and history.

So: something else fills the gaps. And this something else is the visual and the aperceptive and the non-academic.
Anil pointed out that nationalism is shallow. We love shallow. Shallow is easy, shallow makes no great demands on us. And Hindi cinema, Bollywood, being perennially, perpetually, unashamedly shallow, presents us with the ideal formulation for understanding of the nation-state.

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*Mere desh ki dharti sona ugle, ugle heere moti,
mere desh ki dharti*

Lyrics by Indeewar from *Upkar* (1967, Manoj Kumar)

In a bus humming through the British countryside, a group of Chevening scholars were angrily discussing the issue of overheated nationalism. (This was in the late 1990s and, from the standpoint of today, the heat of then seems tepid.) Then a Bengali journalist from *Ananda Bazar Patrika* began singing ‘Mere Desh ki Dharti’ and, within a line or two, the whole bus was singing too. Sixteen Indians singing ‘Meri Desh ki Dharti’ and not talking nationalism any more.

The song then dissolved into *antakshari* without us even thinking about it.

These are the seductions of Bollywood that will take us away from our everyday analysis of who we are. Is this the problem? The problem is not with our circumstances. Our circumstances have always been bad, and every editorial tells you that we are on the verge of the apocalypse. If you read nineteenth-century journalism or eighteenth-century social critique, you see the same narratives again and again: the rich have got richer, the poor have got poorer. The young have never been so shallow, the old have never been so tired.

It’s been nearly a hundred years since that beast was slouching towards Bethlehem in Yeats’ poem. And we have seen some pretty good beasts come down the pike.
Now imagine what role Bollywood has to play in all this. None! There is no room for something so shallow, so lightheaded, so ignorant in a discussion of the making of history. How could there be? History begins with jigyaaasa, the desire to know. Bollywood has rarely, if ever, wanted to know—it is deliberately ignorant, it is often dangerously naive.

But the moral universe of Hindi cinema is the moral universe of our students. When they come to ask if Tipu Sultan is a good guy or a bad guy—they are really asking: ‘Yeh Gabbar hai ya Jai-Veeru hai?’ If all that they are told, over and over again, is that there are bad guys and there are good guys, and the good guys beat the bad guys in the end, then they will apply that to the narrative of history too. They will want to know why Tipu Sultan died the way he did, because it doesn’t fit the narrative they have been given.

So what you are contending with is not just the simplicity of a young person coming to you and asking you for the facts. Because history strives for consensus, history tries to establish the facts. And yet research continues—new archives are discovered and new inscriptions are uncovered, and the facts begin to rearrange themselves. This is the magic of research, and the greatest of historians—like the greatest of scientists—must be willing to acknowledge that facts mutate as our knowledge grows and our technology improves.

We all know that there is no single narrative. Just think about the last time a couple you know got a divorce. Let us assume you are close to each of them, and each tells you the story of their marriage. You might think you have two different stories here. You might be tempted, if you are closer to one, to accept that as the true story. That is bias. That is a crude ahistorical response that we produce out of our loves and our hates. We know we cannot trust this, but how we want to.
So we go back again to those two differing stories. Is one wrong and is one right? Or is neither wrong? Is there room for contending versions? How can there be? We were taught to believe in unitary truths. But what room does that leave for the versions written by the victors versus the versions written by the vanquished? What room does that leave for Adivasi, Dalit, Tribal histories? What room does that leave for women’s versions of history? How do we accommodate the subaltern? And if we can accommodate all these, should we find a way to accommodate the right-wing versions of history that are now finding their way into our textbooks? Can subjectivity find a place in history?

I do not have an answer for you. But I can offer you an analogy. We can consider Heisenberg’s Indeterminacy Principle here. If you have forgotten your physics, let me remind you. We cannot know both the speed and the position of an electron, because as soon as you ‘look’ at an electron, you flood it with so much light that you change its velocity and its position. So you can only know either its velocity or its position.

We know also that the macroworld and the nanoworld operate by different laws but simply to know that by looking you change things is a useful principle. Your position is going to be important. Who you are and what you are, whether you are a Brahmin, a Bengali, a Dalit, an Anglophile, a Communist, a left-leaning liberal—we can be all of them at once, or slip and slide from one to the other—all these identities are going to shape what we want to believe.

So if you don’t start by implicating yourself, the history you understand, the history you teach, will be a history inflected by the old-fashioned and dangerously naive pretence that there can be a grand narrative, the one that Bollywood has aspired to. A narrative with good guys and bad guys. And at whose end, Satyameva Jayate, the truth
shall prevail. Let us take *Sholay*. In the end, Thakur (Sanjeev Kumar), whose family has been destroyed by the bandit Gabbar Singh (Amjad Khan), pulls his foot back from Gabbar’s head and does not crush him.

The original, by the way, is available on YouTube where he does kill him.

And here is the truth of the narrative of fiction. The original had Thakur killing Gabbar. The film was released around the Emergency, when violent films were supposed to be banned. But it didn’t get banned, even though it was about vigilante justice and the failure of the State machinery. There are many reasons posited for this, including the friendship between Rajiv Gandhi and Amitabh Bachchan. One story is that the filmmakers were told to do the Gandhian thing, to have Thakur forgive at the end, for it to get passed.

These are also subaltern narratives.

I had a poignant encounter with an art film-maker who shall go unnamed. We were travelling together. He asked me where I was going. I said there was a conference in London on Bollywood. He sighed and said that, in his time, there were filmmakers who were Saraswati-bhakts or Lakshmi-bhakts. He, and his kind, made his films for Saraswati, for art, and commercial filmmakers made their films for Lakshmi, for money. Saraswati rewarded his kind with critical attention; Lakshmi rewarded the other kind with pots of money. And he was very puzzled at how much critical attention classical Bollywood was getting.

He was not wrong.

Something had changed.

At the first screening of *Amar Akbar Anthony* at an Italian film festival, it was being presented by Rosie Thomas...
and Behroze Gandhi, and the audience gave a slow clap. A slow clap is the Italian way of saying, ‘Go home, this is not what we want to listen to.’

Cut to 2012: we are having conferences on ‘the soft power of Bollywood’. Academic conferences on the soft power of Bollywood! In Abu Dhabi! Business class tickets for everyone! No need for a visa—the embassy men will escort you from the airport to your hotel!

I’ll tell you what changed—globalization and liberalization made India a player. Up to that time, the international narrative about India was one of heart-stopping despair. It was about disease, open defecation, corruption and the failure of the state to provide basic amenities to its people.

In 1992, 1993, suddenly the world discovered that we were a market. I interviewed the President of Lee Jeans when they launched in India and he said: ‘I want babies to be in Lee Jeans diapers.’ And he said it with a straight face. I wondered whether he was serious. He looked serious. He also gave me the headline that I wanted: ‘Lee VP sees Indian babies in denim diapers’. I knew he was feeding it to me. That was part of the deal.

Once India was recognized as a market, we were allowed to take pride in ourselves—because they were proud of us.

Once, ICSE schools were ‘the best’. Now, it’s the International Baccalaureate. So here’s another conundrum: you can do the entire international curriculum, and never study Indian history. Tell me why that is worth one lakh? Tell me why that is not on your agenda today? Tell me why it is not a problem that our best minds are being taken out of state schools and put into schools where they have air-conditioned classrooms, where they have SUVs taking them to and fro, where they have laptops to mandatorily do their
homework on, where they submit their homework via email and are now resisting email because they want to Whatsapp their teachers? How is this not being discussed? That an entire generation of the people who will determine the future of this country—they are not just the chatterati, they are the uber chatterati, the international chatterati. They will be running things and they will not have a clue who Gandhi was.

But I was talking about the failure of our schools, our ordinary everyday state-sponsored schools. Here is the terrible thing we teachers have to face up to: every child is curious and full of questions, before school. Before we kick the curiosity out of them. You take a three-year-old out for a walk in the park and they ask you a question at every corner. Why that? What is that colour? Why this? Who? Here? When? What? You can’t keep up with them. You send them to school and two years later you take them for a walk in the park and there are no questions. They have all been answered.

Let us return to the subject of my talk. In 1943, Kismet, directed by Gyan Mukherjee and starring Ashok Kumar and Bina Rai, was released. The big song in it was ‘Door hato yeh duniya walon, Hindustan humara hai.’ How did the British censor allow it? Because the producer and director argued: ‘We are saying this to Japan. We are saying this to Germany. They will come and attack us. We don’t want them here.’

It is a moment of strategic duplicity and we celebrate it today.

I believe that much of who we are and how we have created our likeness and image has come out of popular culture.

There is the image of Mother India. Mehboob Khan made the film twice, once with Sardar Akhtar in 1940 and once with Nargis in 1957. Both were huge successes.
This forged the image of the sacrificing woman who will kill her son; her greatest possible achievement is to give up her beloved son in the interest of dharma. Bollywood was going through what we call its Golden Age. We call it so because we cherry-pick its offerings and look only at the films made by a handful of people who were invested in the construction of a certain kind of nation. They would invite Gandhi to see their films (rather a hopeless cause; the Mahatma would have nothing to do with cinema); they would organize special screenings for Nehru; and if he wrote them a letter, it would go into their publicity material.

There is a sinusoidal curve that Bollywood follows: good decade and bad decade. In the 1950s, the hero would reject the *taqton, yeh tajon, ye samajon ki duniya yeh...* In the 1960s, the hero didn’t care if the world called him a ‘junglee’ (1961, Subodh Mukherjee). There was a burst of prepubescents, all made of cotton candy and fluff. Biswajit and Rajendra Kapoor arrived with lipstick for men. (I have never seen such glowing lips in my life.)

Then the 1970s, the time of strife, turmoil and terror. The angry young man has been examined as a critique of the nation state. It is interesting, then, to compare the Vijay of *Trishul* (Yash Chopra, 1978) and Devdas (Bimal Roy, 1955). Devdas is crushed by his father and the weight of tradition whereas Vijay defeats his father and crushes him—it’s Oedipus Rex for the first time. Devdas never gets his lady love, nor can he cannot accept the love that is offered until Anurag Kashyap makes *Dev D* (2009) and Devdas (Abhay Deol) can come back to this new Leni/Chanda/Chandramukhi (Kalki Koechlin) to say, ‘Can we try? Can we actually have some faith in love?’

The 1980s were a terrible time, aesthetically. We did have a couple of interesting ones: *Mashaal* (Yash Chopra,
1984) and surprise hits from the art house: *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* (Kundan Shah, 1983), *Saaransh* (Mahesh Bhatt, 1984) and *Ardh Satya* (Govind Nihalani, 1983). But most of the time it was bad music, aerobic-style dancing and formulaic plots repeated ad nauseam.

But each repetition has its value in formulating the state. When young people die for their love, as they did in *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (Mansoor Khan, 1988), what had changed since the producers insisted that *Bobby* (Raj Kapoor, 1977) have a happy end with the lovers reunited?

How is it that this death fest is now part of the way love confronts society? *Ishaqzaade* (Habib Faisal, 2012) had a Hindu–Muslim love story: the boy (Arjun Kapoor) plays Parma Chauhan, a Hindu, of course; the girl (Parineeti Chopra) plays Zoya Qureishi, a Muslim, of course. In all Hindu–Muslim love stories, it is always the male who is a Hindu and the woman who is a Muslim. The womb must move to the right community, even if the children may be named carefully syncretic names.

But in small and subtle ways, we do seem to have changed. I like to think of *Hum Tum* (Kunal Kohli, 2004)—a big hit. The female lead (Rani Kukherjee) has sex with the man she loves (Saif Ali Khan). And when she wakes up the next morning, she hopes that he will say he loves her. But she is not crying. She is not saying: I hope he will marry me. When he offers to marry her, she is appalled. Because he thinks things have gone wrong and need to be put right. Whereas she doesn’t think that their making love was wrong.

That’s nice. She just wants some tenderness.

Have you seen *Ganga Jamuna Saraswati* (Manmohan Desai, 1988)? It has a scene so dreadful it is magnificent. I think it’s supposed to be a dream sequence—the hero (Amitabh Bachchan) and the heroine (Jaya Prada) are
running through snow which suddenly becomes real. She falls through the snow into water and is obviously very cold. Amitabh Bachchan takes her into a room and undresses her. Behind him is the world’s most fake cobweb made out of white cotton. He stands there, thinking, ‘If I do not warm her with my body, she will die. So I must strip her and I must strip myself, and I must warm her body.’ He does that—out of focus, of course, and water begins to collect on the cobweb and the cobweb tears. And we know that she has lost her delicate and precious virginity. So in the morning she is weeping, and he is promising marriage to make it all right again.

*Mard* (Manmohan Desai, 1985). Amitabh Bachchan rides his horse into a club where Amrita Singh is having a massage. She says: throw him out and throw his dog out. So he picks her up and rides through a thorny forest, so that the thorns will cut her body and then he throws her into the salt pans at the edge of the thorny forest. And he rubs salt in her wounds.

Her response to this is to sing ‘Will you marry me?’ To which he says ‘No, no, sorry ji.’

Bollywood has constructed a cinema that reflects the world we see around us. And it is not an innocent reflection. It is a magic mirror that will let you see yourself the way you want to be seen. The image and the reflection are caught in a symbiotic relationship.

What is it you want to see?
What is it you see?

**Question-and-Answer Session**

**Tina Servaiya.** I don’t really watch Bollywood but after the Nirbhaya case what really shocked me was that song in *Phata Poster Nikla Hero,* a
song about sexual harassment on the roads on a daily basis. How is it possible for Bollywood to be so disconnected from what is happening?

Jerry Pinto. Let me ask a question to the Indian men in the audience: Did anyone teach you how to talk to a woman before you attained the desire to talk to a woman? No, na? There are women who are women in a non-constructive way: your sister or your mother.

But then you see a woman you want to have sex with. You want to hug. You want to do things. Weird things. Now: what are your models? Your models are Haseen toh phaseen. Aati kya Khandala? You have to talk like that. And if she smiles, it means she’s accepted your proposition. Suppose she smiles just because she is amused at your stupidity? And that wrong message passes and that becomes a yes?

In every Hindi film, a ‘no’ is a ‘yes’ from a woman. The assumption is that the woman is eternally coy and unable to face her own sexual desires. Therefore it is up to the man to, literally, force the issue. I mean Pink has a hundred flaws but I hope it will begin the conversation about ‘no’ is ‘no’. Before that, what was romance? Romance was Urdu shayari based on the assumption that the beloved is with the rival and tormenting you, and that out of this torment will bloom the great gulistan of your heart and the great sorrows of your love.

Sometimes the beloved is a man, which meant they may or may not have been gay or may not have given a shit and just wanted words to fit the meter. Poets are like that. Urdu shayarī
determines Devdas. He must lose to be a lover; he cannot be a lover who marries and has children and settles down happily.

Then come the 1970s. Do bear in mind that Devdas is upper-caste. That Vijay Dinanath Chauhan is Kayastha or Kshatriya. Those are his markers: warrior, man among men. So the woman now becomes decorative. She will seduce him, she will lure him, be fascinated by his lone-wolf aura. All you have to do is read the Bronte sisters to see where that came from—they established the model.

You can also look at it as the 1971 shift. Because that’s when we win our war (sorry to the Pakistanis present, but the Indo-Pak war, we say we won it. I am sure you all say you won it. That is how we write our textbooks. We don’t actually care about what happened, we write what people want to hear.)

So, after that, we needed a dramatic, definitive, masculinist presence. Look at the shape of the Indian hero. Imagine taking off Raj Kapoor’s shirt and seeing his six pack. Imagine Shammi Kapoor bare-chested. Imagine Dev Anand bare-chested. Consider Shah Rukh Khan. Perfectly nice looking, slightly chubby. But he now has a six pack. Because this is the new masculinity. Anuradha Kapoor has a lovely essay in which she talks about the Ram of the posters in Raja Ravi Verma’s style and the Ram of the first Hindutva posters, with an arrow. \textit{Kasam Ram ki khaate hai, hum mandir wahin banaenge}. That Ram suddenly has the V of Arnold Schwarzenegger. The image has changed.
Economics is never very far from politics and culture.

Rajni Bakshi. The whole *Haqeeqat*—after we lost the China War—from *Haqeeqat* to *Border*—the transition. Please talk about it.

Jerry Pinto: If you look at *Haqeeqat*, even its genesis is interesting. Chetan Anand was directing *Teesri Manzil*, a great film. But he gave it up to do *Haqeeqat*. He just handed it over. And he was given full cooperation from the government. The narrative was his but the government would help shoot the film. Raj Kapoor was a great filmmaker, but it was the Communists who gave him his social consciousness. Then Ahmed Abbas, like a complete idiot, went and made his own films. *One Night in Bombay* and all. You have to see them—they are terrible. And Raj Kapoor drifted away to make *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*. But without each other they were nothing. All the progressives were in Bombay, then. Ismat Chughtai was there. She says in her *A Life in Works*, ‘I could live on my writing for cinema.’ Kaifi Azmi is there. All these people were there and *Haqeeqat* is the product of that symbiotic environment.

But by the time of *Border* and *L.O.C*, the split is total. The progressives, the lefties—they have all moved out. They are all with Shyam Benegal. Working on the art-house movement. Happy as larks. Because now they don’t have to do ‘ek mujra sequence ke liye ek gaana de do yaar’. But that’s a cinema that is drifting away from people too.
Suddenly you want to make films about how powerful and masculine the nation is. It starts with how powerful and masculine the man is: Amitabh Bachchan and his avatars, all the Vijays that he plays. Going right up to *Lakshya*.

How do you become a man? In the old days, you killed an animal and they put blood on your face. Hrithik Roshan becomes a man by picking up a gun. The phallocrisy of patriarchy. That is the trajectory. We lose our conscience. Our conscience abandons us.


**Nilanjana Gupta.** You brought in the importance of Bollywood as the source of information and knowledge. I was wondering whether schoolteachers can actually have discussions about these things because this is what they watch. Many people in India have been talking about teaching media literacy and doing workshops, and this is something that we would like to really develop—to be able to read these things is a skill that we should teach children. In the print culture, we learnt how to write, we learnt how to read, we learnt how to interpret. That was a part of our school curriculum because then print was the medium of communication. Now that it is audiovisual, I think we need to be aware of these narratives too: what is happening, how they are constructed. The
young are spending so much time on these narratives . . . We need to bring these into the schools too.

Jerry. The other thing I would like to flag here is that History is taught mostly by women. Think about history teachers. Most college teachers also. If you ask me, the Ramayana was the basis of all cinema and the Mahabharata the basis of all television. Mahabharata is about two feuding families who fight it out till the bitter end and Ramayana is about one man on a quest who makes friends and then they all go and attack the evil land and its evil king and come back home.

Now if you look at those two texts, we could actually teach the Mahabharata the way the Mahabharata is written—because there are no good guys. All the good guys have terrible flaws. One likes to gamble. One keeps having affairs. There is a lot of greatly human stuff in the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The battle at the end is so terrible that no one wins. Both families are wiped out. Ashwathama then goes and kills everybody in the night. What’s that lesson telling you? It’s telling you, very simply, that there are wars. Our history is a history of conflict, as Janaki suggested. But you have got to learn to deal with it.

But you look at the Mahabharata on television and you see a completely sanitized version, an Amar Chitra Katha. Everyone is like ‘Matashri, aap kya kehe rahi ho?’ And Matashri says ‘Jao putra.’
Like everyone is in some sort of a painting or a sculpture from some old temple.

Look at the Jataka and its constant warnings about making friends across species. Do we read these things in a way that teaches us to look at ourselves? Or do we read them in a way that we are being made to read them by the mainstream. Bibek Debroy has just finished a 10-volume translation of the Mahabharata, based on the Bhandarkar Mahabharata. The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute took all the extant Mahabharatas, worked out which shlokas were common and then put those together as the Mahabharata. Some people say ‘It is not our Mahabharata.’

You can spend the rest of your life reading that text.

The primacy of texts is something that historians have always valued. Television is taking these texts and simplifying them to the point of madness and dangerousness. It is our responsibility then to go back to the multiplicity of the sources and the potential they have, because those are our storytelling fountains in every way. And the more you don’t go back to the primary texts, the more lies can be told about them. Quite simple. Here’s a story from Bollywood. Dadasaheb Phalke was the son of the mahant of the Tryambakeshwar temple, one of the greatest Shiva teerths. In his autobiography, he tells us that his father caught him reading a book and beat him because he said, ‘You are reading an immoral book.’ The book—the Bhagavad Gita. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,
the *Bhagavad Gita* was seen as an immoral book. It was not meant to be read by children. There were very clear prescriptions and proscriptions and popularities. Maybe this is just one priest saying don’t read the book. But it is an illustrative tale that makes us think.

Whenever I ask my students this question, they say ‘Bible’ or ‘Koran’. *Smriti Chitre*, for instance. One of the most lovely narratives of the nineteenth century, written by Lakshmibai Tilak whose husband became a Protestant. She was aghast but throughout the time he was reading the Bible, no one ever says, ‘Don’t read it—it’s immoral.’

All learning does to us is show us who we are.
In this paper I revisit, after a considerable interval, my work on Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) and its role in teaching history. I recall the start of my research in the early 1990s and its rather straightforward intent—looking at ACK and its readership, its impact on Indian children. But something changed during those years—it was the period of anti and pro-Mandal agitations, and my not-so-complicated thesis got steered into choppy waters. Those years, especially within academia, were marked by intense debates around the idea of merit and its presumed neutrality. Suddenly, the ‘universal’, unmarked subject of the liberal humanist and nationalist discourses was open to interrogation, no longer assured of its stable status. As pro-merit (largely upper-caste and middle-class) agitators adopted street-sweeping or shoe-shining to protest the Mandal Commission’s recommendations for enhanced reservations, they inadvertently revealed the hidden class/caste affiliations of the secular self. At that historical moment, especially within university spaces, one was pushed to engage with the overt and covert workings of caste in institutions and disciplines, in textbooks and in classrooms.

Situated in the newly emergent subject of cultural studies in India, my framework was significantly influenced
by Italian Marxist philosopher Gramsci’s profound impact on that discipline. Gramsci regarded culture not as a site of people’s self-affirmation nor of their repression but as a dynamic space where the battle for consent was continuously waged. Through the Gramscian lens, the dominant class appears neither uniformly repressive nor ideologically manipulative. A lot of work goes into maintaining dominance, or, as Gramsci termed it, hegemony. According to him, the dominant class is of an uneven nature and must transcend some of its corporatist interests so as to be able to articulate the interests of subordinate groups by means of continuously waged ideological struggle. For dominant groups to claim moral and political leadership and forge strategic alliances with subordinate groups, they must represent/re-envision their goals and politics by connecting with the beliefs, fears and emotions of the larger people. In this process, they may have to give up some of their interests but without disrupting their ‘core values’. Each hegemonic cultural text makes certain moves and addresses certain problems but retains something as basic, core, authentic and hence, incontestable. However, for Gramsci, the management of subaltern groups is never total because there are opposing pressures and alternative articulations of cultural practices in civil society. So for a cultural text to be powerful, it must continuously respond to and re-articulate contemporary concerns and discontents.

Today, I re-look at Amar Chitra Katha more than 25 years since those troubled times which abruptly and drastically turned upside down an innocuous children’s comic series for me. I do so for this very critical conference to which I have been kindly invited, with a large involvement of teachers of history in schools. But there is another important reason. I teach in the University of Hyderabad. Today, perhaps the name of this university is ineluctably linked with that of Rohith Vemula, owing to the nationwide
student unrest that followed the tragic suicide of the young Dalit research scholar. Many of us, students and faculty, were once again forced to confront the idea of merit and the many contradictions and privileges underpinning it. Here was a young man, articulate, brilliant, aspiring to be a writer of science like Carl Sagan but finally coming to the decision that only through death could he travel from ‘shadows to the stars’. Once again, we are forced to ask questions such as: Who can claim merit? Who is the ideal citizen? Who has the confidence of belonging? What is national and who is anti-national?’

So perhaps this is an apt time to revisit the small history of merit and citizenship that I had traced through my analysis of the ACK phenomenon.

I am going to make two main claims: that ACK’s history is presentist, that is, its history and mythology have a contemporary frame of reference. And that in order to make this past effective within the present, it radically breaks from any singular or purist notion of history.

Amar Chitra Katha, a picture story series started by Anant Pai in the early 1970s, came into existence at a historical conjuncture when the contradictions and inequalities of the post-Independence Nehruvian state became increasingly visible, and culminated in large-scale protests and agitations by socially and economically marginalized groups—women, workers, tribals and peasants. Concurrently, there was a different set of challenges from the right, blaming the Nehruvian ideology of socialism and secularism for the moral collapse of the nation and seeking, instead, a spiritual revolution. Aligned with the position of the right was the emergence of a competitive middle class that favoured crucial partnerships with foreign capital, thus demanding a masculinization of the self in place of ‘special rights’ conferred by the state.
Significantly, through the fashioning of a nationalist, brahminized yet modern masculinity as the ideal for emulation by middle-class children, ACK inserts itself right into this discourse.

Consciously countering the influence of the West on the youth, ACK seeks to revive the ‘authentic’ traditions of India through a re-telling of history and mythology. Colorfully illustrated in a chitra katha (picture story) format, it can claim to have moulded the ideas of nation and citizenship for generations of children growing up in the 1970s and 80s. It has contributed to many of our contemporary articulations of merit, hard work and self-respect, and through its narratives of great men and women, it has provided ideals for middle-class children to aspire to in order to grow up as adequate citizens of the nation.

I would like to first address the role that ACK assumes within the project of constructing the culturally rooted, modern Indian citizen. Its creator Anant Pai’s attempt to refashion history—which he presents as a series of vignettes of the heroism and charisma of great men and (a few) women—into an effective pedagogic tool stands in distinct contrast to radical historiographical initiatives, such as the Subaltern Studies that emerged in the early 80s, as critiques of the the elitist basis of both colonial and nationalist historiography. One may well characterize ACK, with its accent on the moral rejuvenation of the youth by reconnecting them with their traditions, as a powerful initiative of ‘regressive modernisation’, borrowing from Stuart Hall, in his incisive analysis of the Conservative discourse of the Thatcherite era. This discourse, better known as Thatcherism, repeatedly invoked the lost glories of imperialism and the loss of the colonies to legitimize its aspiration for a masculinized, white middle-class identity.
Cultural theorists have drawn attention to the shaping of extraordinary personas/subjectivities in films and literature in the 70s. By way of illustration, let us look at the reappearance of the Hindu widow, valorized in Swadeshi writing, in literary writing. In M. K. Indira’s award-winning novel *Phaniyamma* (1976), the protagonist is an upper-caste widow who observes traditional rituals in their strictest austerity and yet demonstrates the humane face of tradition when she breaks caste taboo by assisting a lower-caste woman in childbirth. A critique of Nehruvian secularism is embedded in such representations, throwing into sharp relief the latter’s disengagement from ‘Indian values’. Notably, Pai imagines ACK as the substitute for the storytelling grandmother who kept children connected to their ‘routes’ but was fast disappearing with the disintegration of joint families.

The reinstallation of a valorized, authentic Indian past in ACK needs to be located within the larger social and political context of the time. The right’s ideological labour in the 70s was directed at a ‘moral regeneration of the society’, thus, shifting the focus from those struggles from the margins that called for a radical socioeconomic reconstruction. However, it would be reductive to completely bracket ACK within the ideology of Hindu nationalism or right-wing politics, for it often ingeniously pulls the idea of the Hindu nation and secularism into a harmonious articulation—and that is perhaps more disturbing. Within its worldview, everyone who shares the core values of the nation is qualified for its membership, irrespective of caste or community. When the Muslim is excluded/Othered from the idea of the nation, it is because he does not share ‘our’ norms and values. The epitome of the recalcitrant Muslim/alien invader in ACK is Ala-ud-din Khilji, a threat to the purity of the nation, a threat which is mapped onto
the body of the upper-caste Hindu woman—the pure and noble Padmini.

ACK draws on several of the foundational premises of Hindutva—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s organicist articulation of the nation as family; or the Jana Sangh’s re-imagining of Hinduization as Indianization, connoting the cultural oneness of India. Balraj Madhok, an ideologue of the Jana Sangh, in his immensely popular *Indianisation* (1970), emphasized the cultural singularity of India which for him was synonymous with Hindu culture, founded on a Vedic philosophy. Madhok had also appealed for changes in school textbooks which, he felt, distorted facts by avoiding references to India’s traditional (and Hindu) heroes and heroines in the name of secularism.

ACK was launched a few years following the founding of the VHP in 1964. Its narratives clearly address the cultural anxieties experienced in the rank and file of the VHP, specifically the need for ‘modern gurus’ to bring back to the folds of Hinduism the Westernized middle class—or, in the words of its ideologue, Swami Chinmayananda, ‘the modern educated illiterates’. The historical and mythological protagonists of ACK are thus shaped as teachers/leaders for the present, signalling a harmony with the vision of the VHP.

I believe it is critical to see ACK not as an isolated phenomenon but linked to and participating in the larger political/ideological struggles to revision the past in order to build a national/bharatiya identity. Pai firmly believed that history was more than ‘dates and facts’, and that classroom history was ineffective precisely because it restricted itself to a dry, empiricist idea of the subject. In a determined move away from this mode, he fashioned ACK’s history narratives in the storytelling format, with illustrations becoming central to the project. Combining the
Western comic style with pre-novelistic visual storytelling traditions of India—the chitrakatha, scroll painting and fresco—it attempted to create figures that were historical yet contemporary, sacred yet secular.

The figure of an ordinary child with extraordinary potential has been a motif in ACK since the publication of its first issue, *Krishna*, in 1969. While the child Krishna displays divine powers, he is also portrayed as an ordinary boy, and the illustrations prove crucial to achieving this effect. When Krishna is dancing on the hood of the deadly snake Kaliya, a crowd of onlookers from the village watches him with their backs to us. But two of them turn to face the rest and one says, ‘What a boy!’ His expression is of indulgent bemusement and his tone is personalized. As art theorist Anuradha Kapur has pointed out:

> What happens when the story is about gods and heroes from epics? The personalized tone of voice and causality of the narrative ‘secularizes’ the event and makes the action plausible in human terms. Thus gods and heroes appear understandable to us, close to us, like us (Kapur 1993: 96–7)

The Krishna of ACK is, on the one hand, an ideal: on the other, he invites identification from the child reader/viewer by producing a sense of familiarity, and the belief that one can be like Krishna through emulation.

In another critical move, ACK blurs the boundary between history and popular culture. Shrewdly assessing the popularity of the Superman and Phantom comics in the Indian market in the late 60s and 70s, Pai understood that he needed to pitch his history in that very domain for it to be read by a large number of children. And that it had to be attractive enough to find a footing in the thriving market.
for comics. Yet we know that the comic, since its inception, especially since the 50s, has been viewed with suspicion by parents and educators the world over. Which leads us to the question: How did Pai adapt this medium as a vehicle for fulfilling the lofty aim of teaching ‘Indian themes and values’ to children? Perhaps his own response is illuminating:

In all fairness, it must be admitted that some comics could do damage to the impressionable minds of children. If there are bad comics, let us oppose them, as we oppose bad books or bad movies, but let us not frown on comics as a medium of education. Should we stop using a tool as useful as a comic, just because it can cause harm? A matchbox is useful—a must for every house. Do we stop using it because it can cause a fire? (Pai 1978)

But ACK is not just a comic—it combines the comic format with the lavish visual traditions of the katha and chitrakatha and scrolls, narrative modes that spoke of the grand conquests and adventures of kings and princes.

One might well ask, ‘How can something so extravagant pass for History—popular or otherwise?’ I have argued elsewhere that, despite its grandeur and mythologized history, ACK remains rooted in contemporary frames of reference. The hero might be Krishna or Shivaji or Jayaprakash Narayan, but he is always emblematic of what an individual can become if only he strives to realize his fullest potential. I hope to relate this recurring trope in ACK to a competitive middle-class ethic through the discussion that follows.

One can detect a continuity between the nationalist historiography and ACK. The nationalist historian used myths and legends alongside ‘facts’ and fashioned history into a dynamic tool of politics that could challenge the
proclaimed superiority of the colonizer. The nineteenth-century nationalist historian borrowed freely from the spectacular and sensational elements of pre-novelistic narrative forms in India, making it difficult to sift history (in its modern, positivist sense) from myth and legend. These pre-novelistic forms, such as *dastan*, *kissa* or +, usually dealt with adventure, chivalry and magic, and revolved around the achievements of a hero of extraordinary valour.

Pai emphasizes the instructive rather than the informative potential of history—a strategy that resonates with the idea of history fashioned by the famed Bengali writer of historical fiction from the nineteenth Century, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Pai sets up the magic, colour and inventiveness of history-as-story against the ‘meaningless jumble of dates and names of persons and places’ (1978). As Sudipta Kaviraj has pointed out, the writing of nationalist history followed two different trajectories: the real and the imaginary. The former was marked by factual research; and the latter by a fictive imagination turning to historical subjects (111). Significantly, at a point when James Mill disqualified ‘oriental fables’ from the domain of rational history, many proponents of rationalism such as Bankim Chandra and Romesh Chandra Dutt decided to write both ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ histories. The indigenous historian inserted Puranic myths, legends and romances into the historical discourse. Following the example of Bankim Chandra (and the prominent trend of nationalist history in the nineteenth century), the boundaries of community in the ‘fictional’ history of ACK are fluid enough to mark an ‘ideal’ national community. Within this frame, an active allegiance to the memory of Padmini’s ‘sacrifice’ or Shivaji’s ‘vanquishment’ of Muslim rulers or the valour of Rana Pratap becomes the touchstone for the patriotism of every Indian, whatever region, caste or community s/he may belong to. A Rajput identity very often emerges as the
pan-Indian identity and the history of Rajasthan stands for the ‘glorious past’ of India. To cite from the introduction to Rana Pratap: ‘In essence Rana Pratap’s name is synonymous to the highest order of the revolutionary patriotic spirit of India.’ (Pai 1986)

II

I would now like to address how ACK locates its stories from the past with a contemporary frame of reference.

Narrating the triumph of the individual over the most trying circumstances, the ACK narratives serve as an elaborate practical guide for modern middle-class children in a competitive, modernizing world. It is difficult to miss the crucial link between ACK and Pai’s prescriptions for the development of ‘personality’—a term resonant with the modern connotations of leadership and communication skills.

Pai had founded the Partha Institute of Personality Development in the 1980s. Personality, in a globalizing, corporate context, connotes attributes such as conduct, appearance, enterprise and the drive to succeed. Pai sets up an interesting traffic between history and personality development. History is envisioned as a pedagogic tool to teach children how to not fail, and how to be confident citizens in a world ruled by the ethic of competitive individualism.

Emerging on the eve of the 70s, ACK has its finger on the pulse of the palpable discontent brewing among the younger generation, increasingly faced with unemployment and failure and disillusioned with nationalist idols. Pai speaks of the time when he witnessed ‘educated youngsters of Bombay resorting to violence’. He writes, ‘I then met and talked to many youngsters and realised that though today’s education imparts a lot of information to young minds, it does not prepare them to face life’ (1992: viii).
Partha Institute of Personality Development was advertised in various issues of ACK, addressing parents in the following manner: ‘The world is becoming increasingly competitive . . . Is your child prepared for the grim battle of survival and success? Just imparting him the three Rs (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic) is not enough. It is vital that he possesses the three Cs (character, confidence, courage) also.’

A bridge is set up between the past and the present, between heroes of the ACK tales and the (globally) successful capitalist entrepreneurs and bureaucrats/academics. Individuals can succeed in the global arena as long as they do not succumb to mind-debilitating weakness.

History tells us of many great men who had very humble beginnings. Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the Mauryan Empire was a person of humble origin. Shalivahana, who established a mighty kingdom, was a potter’s son! Kalidasa was a shepherd boy. Sher Shah Suri, who defeated Humayun and became the Sultan of Delhi, was the son of a horse breeder of Sasaram. Hasan, who later became a popular ruler and was known as Bahman Shah worked on the farm of a Brahmin called Gangu. Shivaji was the son of a petty chieftain (Pai 1993: 11).

In the 80s and 90s, ACK’s practical middle-class ethic becomes increasingly geared towards fashioning a global Hindu identity. Notably, at all times, this discourse remains tied to the discourse of nationalism. Pai draws from a range of sources to make this ethic viable and teachable to young people. An ethic resonant with Bankim Chandra’s formulation of anushilan (‘cultivation of innate human faculties both physical and intellectual’) animates ACK’s
imagination of an India where the culturally empowered Hindu with a global vision replaces the subject of the welfare state. Pai’s stated claim that education should inculcate courage, patience, perseverance and a sense of fellowship in an individual (1978), re-notates (in fact, echoes) the four virtues advocated by Bankim as essential for the Hindu male: enterprise, solidarity, courage and perseverance (Chatterjee 1986: 57).

The ACK narratives also draw on Vivekananda’s reframing of Brahmanism as a norm of excellence rather than as a status related to the ‘accidents’ of birth or caste. In Adi Shankara (Pai 1974), an ‘outcaste’ refuses to move out of Shankara’s path as customary, and asks him, ‘What shall I move? My body of common clay or my soul of all-pervading consciousness?’ Shankara then acknowledges his superiority saying, ‘He has seen the one reality in all. He is indeed my guru, regardless of his low birth’ (Pai 1974: 14).

The pedagogic ingenuity of ACK lies in seamlessly suturing Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda or the Gita to the Western propounders of capitalist and corporate success—Dale Carnegie and Ayn Rand. By doing so, it imbues the capitalist worldview with moral authority, teaching modes of cultural leadership to middle class children who may fit in with ease into a corporatized/globalized world and yet wield the authority that comes with tradition and authenticity.

Each comic, while about the past, also serves as an allegory for the imagined community of the nation. In Padmini, Ratnasen is represented as the good-hearted but naive king who, in a fatal error of judgement, allows the ‘outsider’ Ala-ud-din Khilji into his palace as a guest. The latter, shrewd and treacherous, comes in posing as Padmini’s brother but usurps the kingdom, including the queen, who chooses to commit jauhar (ritual self-
immolation) rather than lose her ‘honour’. A careful reading of this re-presentation of the Padmini myth (many versions of which have circulated in the North India since Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s *Padmavat* in the sixteenth century) will uncover the underlying subtext of Partition, identified as an act of betrayal by Muslims in the hegemonic nationalist imagination. Ratnasen is represented as someone with a good heart but who is ultimately weak and appeasing as a leader; the narrative/visual strategies do not project him as a model for identification by the child reader either. He is insignificant. If we read this perspective in the larger context of right-wing ideology that has consistently accused Nehruvian secularism of minority appeasement, then Ratnasen is an allegory for Nehru.

*Chanakya* (Pai 1971) demonstrates how a ruler might be carefully chosen and trained if he were to lead the nation with requisite power and authority. Chanakya, a celebate sage, trains Chandragupta Maurya to become a mighty ruler. Visually represented as sinewy, muscular and powerful, Chanakya is not someone who meditates in caves, withdrawn from the world. Slighted by Nanda and faced with the invasion of Magadha by Alexander, he chooses Chandragupta—to overthrow the ruler. Chandragupta is anointed to be the new king as he is ‘very brave, very intelligent and very powerful’, with the right amount of respect for Brahminical authority and order. Read against the backdrop of the 70s, *Chanakya* conveys that the loss of authentic tradition is what ails the nation and that the ideal ruler must ally himself with the Brahminical-patriarchal order.

Notably, Babasaheb Ambedkar, the rallying point for Dalit politics, is also represented in an individualist and Hindu patriarchal mode in the comic titled devoted to him (Pai 1979). The heroes of ACK are routinely born at an auspicious hour in the Hindu calendar, signalling their
extraordinary destiny. Here, too, Hindu religious symbols fill the first page as an ascetic prophecies Ambedkar’s birth to his father: ‘I bless you. You shall have a son, who will achieve worldwide fame’ (1).

In the course of the narrative, we tour the gamut of Babasaheb’s experiences—the struggle of his family to educate him, his lone studies at two in the night in the crowded one-room tenement in Bombay, his endless hours of toil at the British Museum library in London. Yet each event is pressed into re-affirming the power of the individual, never allowing caste to emerge as a social and political question. In the manner of all ACK heroes, Ambedkar is a model of excellence. More important, he emerges an icon of merit. If we read this in the larger context of ACK’s valorization of the individual (outside caste or class conflicts), the story hegemonically recasts the historical marginalization of the lower castes as a condition requiring ‘meritorization’ and self-elevation. While Ambedkar’s life and writings are foundational to Dalit politics and movements for reclaiming rights, in ACK, this figure is deftly displaced on to a discourse that is fundamentally opposed to the special rights that the state is constitutionally obligated to provide to historically disadvantaged sections.

Conclusion
Let me end this paper with a very brief reference to my more recent work on stories that deal with marginalized childhoods, written by authors from marginalized groups. These stories were collected for a project ‘Different Tales: Stories from Marginal Cultures and Regional Languages’. While collecting material and speaking to Dalit writers we discovered that these stories often blurred the line between myth and history. However, unlike ACK, which was invested in an upper-caste, individualistic pedagogy, these aimed to teach dignity and survival to children from
marginalized communities. For instance, in a story titled ‘Tataki’, noted Dalit feminist writer Gogu Shyamala resurrects the myth of the demon-woman Tataki in order to write a history of land usurpation and deprivation of Madigas in the Telangana region.

I will briefly discuss one story to demonstrate how it serves as a counterpoint to the ACK mode of retelling history—‘My Friend the Emperor’ by Shefali Jha. It is about 12-year-old Adil, a Maulvi’s son in Changanacherry, well loved by his father and friends, growing up without ever sensing any kind of marginalization. However, his sense of well-being is shaken up one day as his history teacher, Jessy, narrates the legendary battle between Rana Sanga and Babur. During the lesson, Adil encounters a look that changes everything:

But why had she kept looking at him like that? She always looked at everyone while telling stories but this was different. Her look would rest on him, wander off, and then come back to rest on him again. The more exciting the story got, the more the look seemed to rest on him. It had seemed to seek him out, from every corner of the room, until he was forced not to look at Jessy Teacher. . . . Babur had won, with a far smaller army than the Rana’s, but it was clear who the hero of the story was. But that is not what he remembered from the class—he remembered the look. He could not understand it, but it made him want to stay away from class, even from school (Jha 2008: 13).

Adil suddenly feels excluded and burdened with a strange sense of guilt. Jessy Teacher is not the stereotypical boring history teacher; she is a mesmerising performer in
class. Yet something bothers him deeply, ruining the sense of security he had so far. A longer engagement with this story is not within the purview of this paper. But my reference to it is only to illustrate a point about ACK: the immensely popular history of Amar Chitra Katha, despite its colour and fun, might be deeply exclusionary for children from minority or non-middle-class communities. The ACK story, which aimed to substitute the comforting presence of the grandmother for middle-class children, may yet turn an accusing look on the Muslim child or the Dalit child.

‘My Friend the Emperor’ on the other hand deals with the question of how history might address the minority child in a more inclusive manner, stepping out of the restraints of nationalist emotions. A traumatized Adil meets Babur in a fantasy-dream, and asks: ‘Who do you think was braver, Babur or Rana Sanga?’ Babur responds:

Braver! I don’t know—they were both brave! . . . It doesn’t really matter, you know. On the day of battle, anything can happen—who was braver, more intelligent, all this comes after. Rana Sanga was not a great king for nothing and Babur was no stranger to battle either! It was a tough and long battle. Everyone had known it would be. . . . Strategy, experience, bravery, courage—everything goes into fighting a battle. But who can tell what will happen? Or what will matter eventually? No one. No one but Allah. After you have done everything that is possible you have to leave it to Him. There is no shame in that—but after you have done everything. You understand? (18)
The pedagogic potential of history, as ACK has amply demonstrated, can be channelled to shape the politics of the present and the politics of possible. But we need to explore how this potential may become part of our imagination of a more democratic and inclusive future—in the classroom and in children’s literature.
References


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India’s streets, public spaces and homes are filled with colourful, mass-produced images of various kinds, from calendars, religious posters and cinema heroes to large billboards, advertisements and roadside graffiti, all of it reflecting the aesthetics of the masses who revere and celebrate them. While religious iconography, such as that of Hindu gods and goddesses, dominates much of this visual universe, images with Islamic themes are also not far behind. Some scholars studying India’s calendar art have shown how the concept of nationalism, dominated by Hindu revivalist themes, was entrenched among Indian masses through the use of popular art. However, while Hindu images seem to easily adapt to political themes, such as Bhārat Māta (Mother India) being revered both as a religious and nationalistic icon, one finds hardly any political content in Muslim calendar art—it is mostly icons of piety, or at the most, nostalgia for a decaying Muslim aristocracy. At least, that is how they have been represented so far.

But does it mean that Indian Muslim society was devoid of political subjects worth making images of? Or is it truly a biased representation of the community as
apolitical and pious? Some would say that the religiosity of Muslims was not compatible with Indian nationalism, at least visually, except in the case of their being part of the clichéd images of ‘National Integration’. As a matter of fact, since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the loyalty of Muslims in India towards their homeland has always been a subject of debate and even discussed in popular culture such as cinema and mainstream media, if not in calendar art. It would be worthwhile to explore the representation of political themes in Muslim art before and after 1947, especially through what has been produced in the popular visual culture in Pakistan.

The Representation of Nation

The introduction of print technology from Europe triggered the production of literatures in the nineteenth century that were specifically targeted towards Hindus and Muslims, helping them formalize and often institutionalize their distinct identities. As they lost the Mughal Empire, the Muslims suddenly realized that they were in a dār-al harb (a land where Muslim law doesn’t apply) whereas the Hindus discovered the desire to invoke Vedic period as their original utopia. Such polarization started appearing in popular art too and, ironically, with the same publisher often catering to both identities. It is important to look at what kind of themes were being depicted in Muslim calendars (and in what ratio to the other themes) before and after 1947, which to me seems a decisive date for the trajectory to be followed by north India’s popular print culture.

We could begin with an example that illustrates the political leanings in early calendar images. Indian calendar producers in the early twentieth century came out with image catalogues for clients who wished to have calendars featuring their branding or product. These large colourful catalogues from the 1930s to the 1960s—some of which I
surveyed in a private art collection—have a historical value, as they reveal popular trends in the users’ preference of images. Catalogues of then-well-known companies, such as All India Calendar Co., Oriental Calendar Mfg. Co., Ajanta Art Calendar Mfg. Co., Empire Calendar Mfg. Co. (all from Calcutta), and Imperial Calendar Mfg. Co. from Delhi, contain sample images of some of the following themes:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Calendar image themes</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1930-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu deities, mythology</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>National leaders, freedom fighters, patriotic images</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film actress, beautiful women, cute babies</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural scenes</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>British Raj, Queen, Viceroy</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modernity, Industrialization</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim religious themes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian kings, aristocracy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others, miscellaneous</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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The majority of images showing either Hindu themes or patriotic icons (and very often a potent mix of the two) grew in number after 1947, while the images with Muslim themes, which in any case were fewer with regard to the ratio of Muslim users, decreased further after the Partition. Although this survey is limited in many ways—possibly some other publishers were making more calendars for Muslims—it does compel us to ask: Are Islamic images incompatible with Indian nationalism or for that matter any politicization? To explore this further, we need to go beyond this set of images and see what constituted the political content in Hindu images in the larger popular poster domain of that era. There are some obvious features one should avoid associating with a religious identity, such as the widespread use of Urdu in the mainstream print culture before 1950s (even Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement, used Urdu for its propaganda literature!), or slotting images of leaders like Gandhi, Nehru or Maulana Azad according to their religious identity.

Certain connections between Hinduism and Indian nationalism are very obvious in the images and have been explored extensively by scholars such as Christopher Pinney, Lawrence Babb, Sumathi Ramaswamy and others. Hence, rather than repeating them here, I would like to describe a couple of image themes to extend my argument. It is well known that both Hindus and Muslims made equal and often combined efforts in the struggle for India’s freedom. In fact, in some cases, Muslim individuals and institutions initiated independent local efforts to protest against the British Raj. If the popular calendar art of the early twentieth century made heroes out of freedom fighters, it certainly oversimplified the history of this struggle by deifying only a handful of individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad, Sardar Patel, Sarojini Naidu,
Rajendra Prasad and so on, usually in that order of preference, and ignoring many other equally active leaders and their complex stories. Most of the celebrated leaders belonged to the Indian National Congress—in fact, Gandhi and Nehru alone feature on more than half of all such images. Almost all members of Nehru’s family—father Motilal, wife Kamala, daughter Indira, and sister Vijay Lakshmi—feature in the posters.6

Maulana Azad—the prominent Muslim member of Congress who refused to migrate to Pakistan—is shown in a few individual portraits but hardly as part of the Indian map and never along with the Mother India figure, which most other leaders from the above list do. He also appears with Jinnah and Gandhi in a poster showing a meeting with the British Viceroy, Lord Wavell, in Simla. Another calendar showing the larger Simla Conference of 1945, where Wavell tried to discuss in vain the reconstituting of an Executive Council, includes many Muslim leaders such as Khwaja Sir Nizamuddin, Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, Hidayatullah Ghulam Hussain and others.7 But these meeting scenes have more of a factual or news value rather than of creating heroes. While several minor events of the freedom movement have been illustrated through posters and postcards, one finds none illustrating, for instance, the Khilafat Movement, a major campaign started by Muslim leaders to buttress a collapsing Ottoman Empire after World War I—even though Gandhi supported it and benefited from it in his cause of Hindu–Muslim unity. Muslim sentiments about the Khilafat movement were however extensively represented by Urdu publications produced in Calcutta at the same time when the mainstream patriotic images were being made in the town.

Other prominent Muslim freedom fighters or reformers, such as Sir Syed Ahmed, Hakeem Ajmal Khan, Dr M.A. Ansari, Maulana Shaukat Ali and Mohammad Ali
Jauhar, Mohammad Iqbal, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Dr Zakir Hussain, or Saifuddin Kichlew, are all missing as patriotic images. In fact, older Muslim icons like Tipu Sultan (considered by some as India’s first nationalist) or Bahadurshah Zafar who initiated an uprising against the British, don’t come close to the popular legends created for, say, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Rana Pratap, or Chatrapati Shivaji. One exception is Abbas Tayebji, a Bohra Muslim associate of Gandhi from Gujarat, who is shown working on a charkha (spinning wheel) in a postcard or small poster. Captain Shahnawaz is shown once in a 1946 calendar depicting other brave Indian soldiers who fought against the British. A small portrait of Ashfaqullah Khan features once at the bottom of a 1931 poster depicting martyrs Bhagat Singh, Azad, Ramprasad and so on, but never when the latter are shown presenting their decapitated heads to Bhārat Māta in many illustrations.

But these few representations are insignificant compared to those of the mainstream Hindu leaders, typically shown blessing a map of India. In many posters, Bhārat Māta, and sometimes Vishnu, is shown blessing Nehru and Gandhi. Often, clearly Hindu divine images have been recycled by substituting the deity’s face with that of a political leader like Gandhi. The contours of the Indian map itself are such that they can easily adapt to the image of a sari-clad woman which has very frequently been illustrated as Bhārat Māta, a Hindu deity. More interesting and problematic are the images deliberately trying to represent the role of religions other than Hinduism in the making of modern India. A poster titled Message of Love shows Bhārat Māta standing on the map of India flanked on the top by a crucified Jesus Christ, Gandhi and Gautama Buddha (on a lotus), besides other leaders like Bose, Swami Vivekananda and so on. Another image titled Agriculture from a calendar catalogue shows Christ, Gandhi and Buddha blessing the
scene of Indian farmers with a tractor and a plough while Rajendra Prasad, Nehru and Patel look on. It is obvious that, for such a concept, even if the artist wished to represent Islam or Indian Muslims, there was no human icon or religious personality imaginable. But this could also be a convenient excuse to exclude Islam.

The early images also aim at reflecting the supposed all-inclusiveness of Hinduism—all faiths coming under its umbrella, except Islam. An image titled Prajātantra (democracy) from the same catalogue shows the trio of Christ, Gandhi and Buddha looking from above the clouds upon a queue of marching Indians who seem to represent, from their attire, male couples of king and pauper, farmer and a learned man, low-caste and high-caste, and so on. Only towards the diminishing end of the queue one can spot a person dressed probably as a Muslim; women come at an even farther diminishing point of the queue—a sort of patronizing effort to depict egalitarianism, yet the biases are apparent. To explore such attitudes of the 1950s further, it would be interesting to study other forms of popular culture, such as Hindi cinema or its music to see how the different identities have been represented in the portrayal of freedom struggle. A recent author points out how a popular patriotic song ‘Mere desh ki dharti’ (the earth of my land) from the film Pukār (1967) by Manoj Kumar mentioned only a few mainstream leaders and excluded many popular ones (especially non-Brahmins and Muslims!). The lyrics try to associate the key colours of the Indian flag with the names of some freedom fighters but in an oddly selective and biased way.9

Muslims and Islam did get represented in the later political images but only to be equated with other religions in the Nehruvian project of ‘National Integration’—a concept often defined as the adoption of a blend of many
religious identities necessary for peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious land. There is at least one postcard from 1940s that illustrates how the death of one Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi in a Hindu–Muslim riot of Kanpur had a heart-rending affect on the people, thus leading to further unity among them. But post-1950s, most calendar images of this category show cute children wearing the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian headgear, often with the title *Hum sab ek hain* (we are all one). In one poster, Gandhi is shown meditating under a tree while his backdrop has silhouetted icons of a Hindu temple, a mosque, a church and a Sikh gurudwara. Educational charts used in Indian schools sought creative ways to represent the diversity of Indian culture and religions. But even here the artist was challenged in some ways to keep the supposed Muslim sensitivities about images at bay. A chart showing the prophets, deities or originators of all religions uses the image of Delhi’s Jama Masjid for Islam even though it shows Emperor Akbar as the originator of the new creed *Deen-e Ilāhi*.

The national-integration project could not take off in real life beyond poster competitions and exhibitions in some Indian schools. However, themes of communal harmony and Hindu–Muslim unity have been tried more extensively in popular cinema, theatre, music, and literature, some of them becoming quite a hit among the masses. But their effect on popular calendar art has been negligible. In contrast, some adverse propaganda based on religious or ethnic identities has thrived in printed literature. The Hindu revivalist movement in the nineteenth century promoted, for instance, the protection of the cow as the sacred mother of Hindus through images of *chaursi devtaon wali gāi* (the cow containing 84 Hindu deities within). Initially, some printed versions of this image had shown a Muslim butcher
raising a sword at the cow but being stopped by Dharmaraj. The butcher in the later posters was replaced by a carnivorous demon of kalyug after some Muslims were reported to have objected. Some versions also showed a Muslim, a Parsi and a European being given the cow’s milk to drink, with the caption: ‘Drink milk and protect the cow’.

Other recent religious campaigns in the twentieth century, such as that of the Ramjanmabhoomi, translated into posters, literature and videos of hate against Muslims. Some Hindu nationalist organizations have been producing a body of printed images, such as greeting cards for New Year or Diwali, that depict Mother India calling against alien cultural domination, i.e. Westernization, Christianity and Islam. On these cards, Muslims and Christians are often shown as demons destroying Mother India and so on. But these images belong to a different political stream and should not be seen as related to the independence movement. Nevertheless, the above examples indicate that the very seeds of Indian nationalism sown in the popular imagination through printed images were rather biased and not representative of the region’s wide cultural and religious diversity.

The Popular Visual Culture in Pakistan
The politicization of religious images seems to have acquired different dimensions in Pakistan. While the real impact of the Partition on Muslim popular art is yet to be studied in detail, I would like to share some experiences from my limited sojourn in Pakistan in 2005. Most Indians or non-Pakistanis see Pakistan as a land of Muslim fundamentalists and steadfast Wahhābis running an Islamic state that keeps strictly away from anything non-Islamic or non-shari’a. The outsiders take it for granted that since Pakistan was born out of the two-nation theory that assumed Hindus and Muslims of India as two separate entities who could not coexist, present-day Pakistan must
not have any traces of the Hindu or syncretic past. No doubt, the orthodox and reformist institutions and individuals have always remained in a powerful position in Pakistan, continuously trying to redefine or dictate what the cultural identity of Pakistanis should be according to the Islamic tenets. But their efforts of over six decades have neither yielded into a definitive national identity of Pakistan nor have been able to culturally alienate the entire society according to their terms. Although as a result of the process of ‘Islamization’ in the 1980s the religious extremism and its related violence has certainly grown into a monster. But equally prominent has been a thriving culture of popular Islam represented by Sufi shrines, syncretic rituals and a vibrant print culture of devotional art and literature, which in its figurative iconography crosses many limits that even India’s Islamic images have been reluctant about. Even a cursory look at the representations in the poster art of Pakistan can reveal a popular visual imagination that has been running parallel, or sometimes contrary, to the very idea of Pakistan as a nation.

Needless to say, almost all Sufi orders and shrines dotting the landscape of Pakistan are in a continuum with those in India—in fact, the Sufis, coming from central Asia, had to cross the region which is now Pakistan in order to arrive in the region which is India, and many of them settled in places like Multan, Lahore and other towns of Sindh and Punjab, helping in the emergence of a rich Sufi literature and music.14 While Lahore and Punjab are famous for saints like Ali Hujweri (Data Ganj Baksh), Baba Farid Shakar Ganj, Baba Bulleh Shah, Khwaja Ghulam Farid, Baba Shah Jamal, Barri Imam, Pir Mehr Ali, Sakhi Sarwar and others, Sindh and Multan have famous saints such as Abdullah Shah Ghazi, Shahbaz Qalandar, Rukn-e Alam, Shah Abul Latif Bhitai, Bahauddin Zakariya, Sultan Bahu
and many more. Their historical significance as well as contemporary popularity has been extensively studied and documented by scholars such as Annemarie Schimmel, Richard Eaton, Carl Ernst, Wasim Frembgen, and several other Indian and Pakistani scholars.

What may surprise any Indian in Pakistan is the cultic hysteria among the crowds of devotees at many religious sites, especially on certain auspicious days of the week. The Thursday nights or the urs of saints are great occasions of folk rituals, chanting and celebration. In fact, observing the celebration of any festival, especially in a town like Lahore, was quite an eye-opener for an Indian Muslim. I happened to witness in Lahore at least three major festive periods—Basant, Eid-e Miladun Nabi and Independence Day (14th August). Each of these amazed me for its exuberance, colours, sounds, and the spirit of people, comparable to the celebration of Diwali or Holi in India. Even though Basant, the spring festival in Lahore, famous for kite-flying, food and other celebrations, has recently been discouraged; at least the kite-flying has been banned (due to many fatal accidents), by the local government as well as the clergy, who declared the festival non-Islamic. But the festive spirit of Lahore’s ordinary residents does not let it die.

On the Prophet’s birth anniversary, Lahore’s children make hundreds of miniature replicas on pavements outside their homes depicting events from the Prophet’s life, including shrines of Mecca, Medina and the cave of Hira (where the Prophet received revelations from Gabriel), often using common household items and modern toys like Barbie dolls and GI Joes! Even adults make fine and expensive paper models of Medina mosque and the Kā’ba, exhibiting them on Lahore’s streets with pride. There are public gatherings on every street—after stopping all traffic at night—involving recitations of milāds or religious
oratory—comparable again to the Hindu jāgrans (night-long singing and prayers) in India. Cauldrons of food are cooked and distributed. Many of these festive gatherings happen to be in and around takiās or baithakās (shrines) of saints, where qawwals and other musicians perform. In fact, the practice of traditional music with its rich syncretic components, especially the lyrics and the musical modes, (a subject of research for which I actually visited there) has mostly survived in Pakistan, despite many efforts to mute or alter it to suit ‘Islamic’ identity.17

**Saint Posters in Pakistan**

Among examples of visual print culture, the most surprising is the unhindered depiction of Sufi saints in the thriving poster industry in Pakistan. Some saint portraits do exist in India but, as discussed earlier, the Indian publishers have been extremely reluctant in depicting Muslim saints. In fact, many Indian Muslims would probably consider it blasphemous to see portraits of saints like Moinuddin Chishti, Nizāmuddin Aulia or others which are available freely across the border. Pakistani poster artists, however, have not only painted figurative portraits of all South Asian saints but also their miracles and attributes in vivid realism. An Indian had to go to Pakistan to see what Indian saints such as Moinuddin Chishti, Sabir Pak Kaliyari, Shah Mina, or Abdul Qādir Jeelānī looked like! I could even set my eyes on the portraits of Hazrat Ali, Imam Hasan, Hussain, and other personalities revered by the Shi’a, freely available in Lahore, although probably imported from Iran.

A unique aspect of Pakistani saint collages is the inclusion of photos of the shrine’s current khādim or keepers and their male family members (even children) to keep their image alive in the public memory. Some of the current shrine keepers in rural Pakistan are also big
landowners and politically influential, naturally having both spiritual as well as temporal influence on the populace. The new photos continue to be pasted along with cut-outs of tigers and lions to invoke a sense of power among the devotees. At the shrine of Pir Mehr Ali at Golra near Islamabad, I met the present sajjadah nashin whose photo not only appeared in a popular poster but also on equally colourful visiting cards that were being distributed free to all devotees who queued up to shake or kiss the Sufi’s hands for blessings. These cards, being small in size, appear as more personal sacred mementos to keep, and even kiss, compared to a large poster. In fact, I could buy on Lahore’s streets small matchbox-sized images of saints and Shi’a symbols, laminated in plastic, often used to hang in the dashboard of auto-rickshaws or taxis.

Another common art form that connects with religious iconography is Pakistan’s decorative truck art, where the owners spend a fortune getting their transport vehicles painted in a riot of colours and designs, including religious symbols like Kā’ba and Medina’s green dome. Some of these trucks, mostly coming from the northwest Pakistan, are like moving galleries or museums of popular art, often depicting romantic tales of the Pathans. Their art can also be compared with the popular paintings on the cycle rickshaws of Bangladesh, which too depict Muslim religious themes in colourful folk style besides romantic and now modern legends. While the popular art of Pakistani trucks or Bangladeshi rickshaws cannot be termed Islamic—these are more specific to local culture and might have thrived even if there was no partition of India—one can spot some amount of national symbols in them along with religious icons.

Along with the saint portraits and syncretic images on Pakistani streets, equally visible and loud are the text-only banners and posters announcing ceremonies, religious
meetings and moral discourses, very often antithetical to the Sufi culture. The religious images are also not devoid of political content often carrying portraits of Pakistani leaders. Although when I visited the country Gen. Parvez Musharraf was the president and public posters for his popularity were hardly visible or even required. But popular images and hoardings of leaders like M. A. Jinnah, Liaquat Ali, Gen. Ziaul Haq, Zulfiquar Ali Bhutto, and so on, have thrived in the past. In fact, earlier posters published in Lahore have also depicted Islamic heroes like Salahuddin Ayyubi (known in the west as Saladin) or Indian ruler Tipu Sultan, both depicted along with cut-outs of European-looking soldiers being defeated or killed by them. Many older posters show Zia ul Haq as a martyr or a pious Muslim praying before Kā’ba or the Prophet’s mausoleum while Jinnah, Gen Ayyub and others look on. One cut-out pastiche shows Zulfiquar Bhutto in action with a bloodied dagger in hand, and his smiling daughter Benazir in combat dress, holding a rifle. A caption in Urdu says: *Hum Kashmir ke liye hazar sāl tak ladenge* (we’ll fight for Kashmir for a thousand years). But the top half of this poster shows a lion, usually meant to signify Hazrat Ali, tending an injured deer (which probably means Kashmir).

Such printed images also include warplanes, tanks and marching Pakistani soldiers, often women or children, as visual fillers to signify the two wars that Pakistan fought with India.20 Political posters of the later periods, especially from the end of Ziaul Haq’s regime, during Nawaz Sharif’s government, and the rise of Benazir Bhutto, have been explored in a study by Iftikhar Dadi where such leaders acquire a pious image with religious icons.21 An image of a praying Benazir with husband Asif Zardari and her children, under Mecca, Medina and flying doves, signifies an ideal Pakistani family. Observing some old political posters produced in Pakistan, I found a surprise—a reaction to the
1992 demolition of Babri mosque in Ayodhya, India. This vertical poster titled Ālam-e Islam ki ghairat ke liye khula chal-
lenge (An open challenge to the honour of the Muslim world) is a photo-painting collage showing the three domes of Babari mosque below which some supposedly Hindu activists break down a lower structure with sticks and pick-
axes (some wearing saffron), with a couple of Indian policemen watching. A photo at the bottom shows an agitating crowd and a text in Urdu saying ‘Agitate, agitate, agitate, the martyrdom of Babari mosque.’ Another quotation from the Qur’ān on top assures that the mosques belong to Allāh, and ‘do not involve other (deities) while invoking Allāh’.22 Besides Kashmir and Ayodhya the other international political subjects that occasionally crop up in Pakistani posters are the Muslims’ struggles in Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, and so on, usually to go with public agitations on such subjects.

At public spaces in many Pakistani cities, one cannot ignore the street graffiti reflecting the unpleasant conflicts within different sects and factions of Islam, visible more dominantly in Karachi—the hotbed of sectarian violence for many decades. Almost everyone is fighting everyone and expressing their creative angst on the walls. The scathing slogans of religious factions share space on the walls with rivalries of ethnic identities too, such as non-Punjabis cursing the Punjabis, Muhajirs (migrant) berating the Sindhi, and almost everyone denouncing America and Israel. Of course, the bitter violence itself, ensuing out of such ideological differences in recent times, has left Pakistani society gasping for life, and the worst effected are the individuals and institutions of cultural minorities like Sufis, Shi’as and Ahmadiyas.

How does one explain the thriving of folk syncretism in Pakistan’s religious posters? In the region that became West Pakistan, Lahore and Karachi have been major centres
of printing even before 1947. North India’s most prolific poster producer, Brijbasi, had a sprawling business on Karachi’s Bunder Road, with their 1930 colour posters being printed in Germany. But Punjab’s Lahore and Amritsar had an older and more bazaar-based tradition of printmaking and lithographs starting in the nineteenth century, almost comparable to Calcutta’s print culture of the same time. In fact, Lahore had hundreds of talented designers, painters, calligraphists, bookbinders, and later, engravers and printers, even before the arrival of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (d.1839), some of whose art and skills having been transmitted and surviving until today.

There were direct and prolific business relations between places like Lahore and Delhi, or Karachi and Bombay until 1947, including books, calendars and posters being manufactured in one town and distributed in another. A large number of Hindu publishers of Lahore produced Hindu religious literature in Urdu which was distributed in the rest of north India. While a poster with Qura’nic calligraphy produced by Taj Company of Lahore got sold and put up in a house in Meerut (Uttar Pradesh), an Islamic poster from 1940s published by Hemchandar Bhargava of Delhi (printed in Bombay) got distributed all over India by Hafiz Qamrud Din & Sons of Mochi darwaza, Lahore, who appear to be the prominent booksellers and poster makers.

The new popular culture of celebration among Pakistanis (as I noticed even in current festivals) was more of revelry than a true appreciation of cultural syncretism. On Pakistan’s Independence Day (14 August, 2005), I saw packs of young boys on their motorcycles noisily marauding through Lahore’s streets with the national flags in their hands. On many street corners one could see children getting washable tattoos of Pakistani flags on their cheeks. The popular print industry complimented these youngsters with strange concoctions of modern patriotic posters and
banners—one of them bringing together the faces of M.A. Jinnah, the poet Iqbal, and—hold your breath—Mickey Mouse, printed together! Sweetmeat shops sold special green *barfis* (milk fudge) and other items with an edible crescent and star logo to match the Pakistani flag. I am yet to see such flamboyant patriotic spirit on the Independence Day in India, except maybe during major cricket matches. But of course, much of my observations are from the first decade of the twenty-first century. The Indian jingoism today is taking new, and sometimes, violent shapes. Its reflection in popular visual culture, especially on the Internet and social media, would need another deeper study.


3 Literally, *dar al-harb* means a place of war, but it has been used to denote a non-Islamic land.

4 More than 500 images spread over seven catalogues were surveyed for this, though these average percentages do not reveal the actual ratio of images selected by customers.


6 The image of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty continued to be stamped on public memory through calendars/posters of Indira, and her sons Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi, keeping the Congress party alive. Sonia, Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi are the new heroes in twenty-first century popular posters.


12 Christiane Brosius, ‘Celebrating More Than the New Year: The Hindu Nationalist Greeting Cards’ in Richard H. Davis (ed.), *Picturing the Nation: Iconographies of Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007). An abridged but visually richer version of this may be seen at http://www.tasveerghar.net

13 My comments about Pakistan are the mere observations of a casual Indian visitor, and are used here to illustrate some basic points. A serious research into these areas may reveal much more.


16 I saw a news item about the cutting of a giant cake in the shape of a mosque in Islamabad. The event was preceded by prayers by local clerics who were also among those who consumed the cake.


18 Richard Covington, ‘Masterpieces to Go: The Trucks of Pakistan’, *Saudi Aramco World* 56(2) (March–April 2005).

20 I have seen at least one Indian portrait, drawn by H. R. Raja for a calendar, of Indira Gandhi along with the Rani of Jhansi in her typical horse-riding pose. All around Indira, one sees Indian soldiers shooting at warplanes that have Pakistani flags inscribed on them, some of them falling to Indian missiles (Priya Paul Collection).


22 The subject of Babri mosque’s demolition has also been dealt with by Indian Muslims, mostly through the Urdu press, but hardly in any poster. A rare poster I saw in someone’s house in Delhi shows the design of new green mosque that Muslims hope to build at the site of demolition.


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NATIONALISM, BORDERS AND CONSTRUCTION
For many, Ladakh is a mere tourist destination, a remote Himalayan region known for its monasteries and peace-loving people. But this is half the picture. For Ladakh is geostrategically important for India—it shares its borders with China and Pakistan and is home to the mighty Siachen glacier. In the past, Leh/Kargil and Gilgit-Baltistan was a part of Ladakh, linking further to the strategic Central Asian region, and part of Silk Route. Most importantly, not only Kashmir but also Ladakh was affected by the Partition of India in 1947. Media and scholars of history on both sides of the border have mostly looked upon Partition and the problem of divided families through the prism of Kashmir and Punjab. On the other hand, Partition stories from Ladakh/Gilgit-Baltistan still remain untold. There is cross-border connectivity and activity from both Kashmir and Punjab but no voice for the divided families of this Himalayan region. This paper is an attempt to highlight the unheard voices of Partition from the far-flung regions of Ladakh.

Unacknowledged History
Kargil is one of the two districts in the Ladakh region of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Consisting of the Suru,
Wakha, Drass and Zanskar valley, it is located near the Line of Control (LoC) facing the Pakistan-administrated region of Gilgit-Baltistan to the north. Before Partition, Kargil was a part of the greater Baltistan province. The first India-Pakistan War, often referred to as the first Kashmir war in 1947–48, left the region divided into two, with Kargil lying on the Indian side and Baltistan on the other. A large number of people, therefore, suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of India, separated from their family and ancestral land.

The destiny of the people of Ladakh became entwined with the dispute over Kashmir, to which India and Pakistan lay claim even today. However, unlike the separatist movements in Kashmir valley that calls for azadi from India, the people of Ladakh—both Muslims and Buddhists—have remained resolutely pro-India and strive to make their distinct political voice heard in the national mainstream. Yet hidden beneath this overt discourse is the more delicate balancing act between a politics of belonging to India and a longing for a space unfettered by geopolitical barriers erected by the Partition, which is expressed through the circulation of cultural forms sustained by shared linguistic and religious histories.

Partition stories from Ladakh come out very sparsely and are mostly unacknowledged by mainstream media and researchers. Most of the stories, if any, are mainly centered on Leh and Kargil town. There are villages in the far-flung region of Kargil that are equally affected by Partition but nothing has been written about them so far. One such village is Padum, hidden amid the high mountains of the Zanskar valley. It is a 240-kilometre drive from Kargil. The majority of the population in Zanskar is Buddhist, with Sunni Muslims in the minority (40 per cent). The Muslims live in and around Padum and among them are hidden Partition stories which have never been written about.
During the summer of 2016, as a part of *History for Peace* project, I undertook an initial field study and made an attempt to record few of these unheard/unacknowledged stories from Zanskar.

Here are a few of the stories:

Field-Study: Recording Unacknowledged History

**Haji Abdul Hamid, 83, Farmer**

He was only 12 when the Partition happened and his father Habibullah crossed to the other side of the border. He and his three sisters were raised by their mother who died at the age of 63, leaving him to shoulder all responsibility. He worked in the farms in the summers and migrated to other parts of India in the winters in order to earn a living. There was rarely any communication with his father. After his marriage, he received the first letter from Pakistan which informed him that his father was settled in Sermik, Skardu, and had married another woman. It was only through these rare letters that he was able to keep in touch with his father and his family on the other side. In 1992, when he visited Mecca to perform pilgrimage, he received a letter and a photo of his father’s family for the first time, which they sent with a person from Skardu who had also gone on Haj. He kept yearning to meet his father until he received a letter from Pakistan about his death. He is 83 now and his only wish is to visit his father’s grave in Sermik.

**Mohd Amin, 62, Retired mountaineer**

Mohammad Amin was only eighteen months old when his father Mohammad Ali left for Pak-
istan with the rest of the troupe of what was known as ‘Padum Party’. This was after the ceasefire was signed between India and Pakistan and when both representatives from India and Pakistan came to Zanskar to announce the ceasefire and end of India-Pakistan war of 1947. Being an infant, he spent the rest of his life without his father as his mother never remarried. However, his father remarried when he reached Skardu, Pakistan, when he realized there was no way of going back to Padum after the permanent borders were drawn between the two countries. He could never meet his father and could hardly picture him in thoughts and memories from the few letters and pictures he sent from Pakistan. He tried to get a Pakistani visa many times to meet his father. But by the time he got a visa in 2009, his father had died. He visited Pakistan but could not meet his father.

Mohd Shafi, 82, Retired teacher

He has witnessed the impact of Partition very closely, as his two brothers Mohd Jaleel and Mohd Yaseen, and his sister’s husband, Mohd Ali, left for Pakistan. The sister was only 25 when her husband left. She had four sons then but two died very early in life. The two children were brought up by the mother without a father as she never remarried. Mohd Shafi took care of his sister and her children. ‘Since then, 70 years have passed but nothing has changed between India and Pakistan. The only thing that has changed is my sister’s life. She was 25 then but today she is 96 and barely understands things. If she lives two years more, she will be 100 but the
India–Pakistan issue will remain the same,’ he says. Her husband died in Pakistan and she never met him after Partition.

Cultural Connect
Caught in the crossfire of political tensions between India and Pakistan and the strict patrolling of the LoC—especially after the 1999 conflict—it has become impossible for people to obtain Pakistani visa to travel across the border. Despite the impermeability of the border, people in Kargil continue to maintain strong emotional and cultural links with Gilgit-Baltistan. Narrations of these travels in Baltistan and objects carried back by the few people who make it to the other side of the border imaginatively recreate the borderland for those who have never been. These stories acquire a life of their own through renditions by those who have neither experienced the Partition nor travelled to Baltistan and Gilgit. The language spoken in Kargil and Gilgit-Baltistan is the same and is referred to as ‘Balti’ and the community is known as Balti community on both sides of the border. The food habits, physical structure and geographical terrains bear a striking resemblance. People of Kargil and Gilgit-Baltistan bond mostly on the Balti songs which travel across the border. Balti singers from Kargil are famous in Gilgit-Baltistan and vice versa.

My Experience in Pakistan
For my grandfather, whose father was buried in Skardu, visiting Gilgit-Baltistan remains an unfulfilled dream. He was overjoyed when I was granted a visa and commented, ‘It is easier to get permission to perform Haj than to get a visa for Pakistan.’ Before my departure, he asked me to bring a medicinal herb called ‘Bashoo’ that is only available in Skardu. He insisted that I must bring this under any circumstances and our relatives in Islamabad sourced it from Skardu well in advance.
The excitement of crossing borders was palpable but there was an added eagerness to see my cousin from Skardu, Pakistan, who was coming to pick me up from the border. Partition has divided our families too and this was the first time I was meeting him, though of late we have kept in touch through social media. It was my grandfather’s wish to visit Pakistan and meet his relatives but he couldn’t make it due to the stringent visa process. I got this opportunity to realize his dreams and was acting as a bridge between the divided families. Finally, I saw my cousin and it was *deja vu* kind of feeling—as though I have met him before or maybe I have a relative who looks just like him in India.

We spent considerable amount of time trying to unravel the family tree and managed to clarify some of our shared history. I met several Balti students in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad and to me they looked no different from friends and relatives from Kargil. The astonishing similarities makes you wonder about the legacy of loss left by Partition for the people along the LoC, which divided families that have been unable to meet in the last 7 decades. I felt very much at ease during these interactions. They would call me *Brokpa* (a Balti girl), which suggested that they regarded us as part of their community. For them, it’s a source of pride when someone outside their region calls them Balti.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have been famous for their music and they have preserved the core culture and mannerism of the earlier styles of Balti ghazals and songs. I could immediately identify with their songs and their music. The small music industry in Kargil and Gilgit-Baltistan are based on a common set of singers, and CDs made in Kargil and GB have a way of finding their way across the LoC. The blind Balti singer from Skardu, Abbas Anand Sermiki (the title ‘Anand’ is a tribute for his love of the Hindi film industry), remains a favourite on both sides
of the LoC; his songs and videos are very popular in Kargil and he remains my mother’s personal favourite. Music certainly has no boundaries and it cuts across borders and connects people. The Internet has made it easier to upload and download music and helped the spread of Balti music across the Himalayas.

I met a person from Gilgit-Baltistan who lamented that the war of 1971 between India and Pakistan has divided his family; they remain separated after India captured Turtuk in 1971. He sent gifts and letters for his relatives in Tachay, Turtuk. He added that the travel restrictions between the two countries has discouraged them from applying for a visa and in the long run there seemed to be little prospect of easing this process. In the context of such hopelessness, the letter and gift from relatives across the LoC must have been an occasion of pure joy.

Looking Forward

Haji Abdul Hamid is my grandfather and I have grown up hearing Partition stories from him, which finally culminated in me taking up India–Pakistan relations as my field of study for my doctoral thesis. I have visited Pakistan and it has helped me immensely to understand the power of people-to-people diplomacy of which I am a strong proponent. With an urge to see my grandfather’s dream fulfilled, I have been trying to arrange a trip for him to Sermik, in the northern areas of Pakistan where his father is buried. With the help of an invitation letter from my cousin from Pakistan and an official at Pakistan Embassy in India (whom I met during a conference and narrated my grandfather’s story), I have finally submitted an application to the Embassy, requesting them to grant a visa to my grandfather on humanitarian basis. Even though the India–Pakistan relationship at this stage is not so great, we are still
hoping for a positive response from the Government of Pakistan.

Coming back from Pakistan and being able to share stories from the other side of the border was such a fulfilling feeling. The gifts and letters I brought with me to Kargil were a symbol of the strong emotional and cultural connection between the two regions. The only demand which people on both sides of the border have is the opening of the Kargil–Skardu route. This demand is particularly emotional for it will facilitate travel to meet relatives more easily. But this narrative has been given a political colour at the regional and state levels and is used as a vote bank. The underlying question is: If there is a provision for the people of Kashmir to cross borders and meet relatives, then why don’t the people of GB and Kargil-Ladakh have the same opportunity? Given the fact that Ladakh is considered to be more peaceful as compared to the Kashmir valley.
I am going to talk about the idea of North Eastern writing. I will be speaking as a practitioner, as someone whose work inadvertently comes under this label of ‘North Eastern writing’.

To begin with, we could briefly look at the term ‘Northeast’ with respect to experiences I have had with my writing, and in relation to mainstream Indian publishing and the political situation of the Northeast. And I would like to speak of my experiences to illustrate how these various factors influence the process of publishing, writing and reading of books.

Till a couple of years ago, and even now, when you asked someone from the ‘Northeast’ where they came from, no one really answered with ‘The Northeast’. They either mention a community or a state. The term was used initially very much as a construct by others to refer to this region, and it was not how people from this region chose to define themselves. If you look at this region geographically, on a map, it is not to the North-east of anyone. And in relation to India, shouldn’t it be the east?

In the field of publishing and writing, I discovered over the last few years that the ‘Northeast’ is a term favoured
by Delhi-based critics, journalists and publishing houses to categorize writing from a particular region. But without examining with much care or rigour what it is that holds this writing together (or keeps it apart) in terms of style, content and other literary markers. Surely when you use a category to describe a writing or a people, it cannot be simply a function of geography (and inaccurate geography, at that). And if it is so, then it is rather problematic. Because many of these communities are divided by borders, both domestic and international. How are you to be categorized if you belong to the Garo community linked by kinship with Northeast India but living in Bangladesh? Do you then become Northeast of Bangladesh?

There is a danger, then, of two things happening here (not mutually exclusive): either this becomes a marketing device, i.e. you position yourself and market your writing as Northeast writing. Or your work becomes part of the larger national-diversity and integration project, without a deeper engagement with the term. Then there is another scenario, of the term Northeast writing being used consciously by writers and poets and artists from the region to describe their work. This can have interesting consequences—the term is reclaimed by the very people it is used to define/categorise and in the process a new identity emerges through the art and writing of this imagined community. An art that, among other things, also recognizes and plays on the tension between work from this region and work from the larger body of India. Some of our poets have done this very successfully and created some lively debates around this.

I often use the term ‘writing’ to refer to my work though it has to do more with images than texts. Inversing the poet Ted Hughes’ formulation, who once said—and he wrote longhand—that ‘writing by hand is also a form of
drawing that calls upon the memories of the hand’. I think this is a fairly good shorthand to describe the kind of work graphic novelists do! This is then the kind of text–image work I am going to be talking about.

So: my first encounter with the mainland publishing industry was when my graphic novel was published in 2009. I was based in Delhi then. The book enjoyed moderate success. Graphic novels, as I was to discover, are hard to sell but it was reviewed in several national newspapers and garnered some interest. Referencing Ted Hughes again: he speaks eloquently of the shock of being published and reviewed for the first time; he equates it to ‘walking into a wall of hostile fire and being in some fundamental ways changed by it and how it influences the future course of one’s work’.

I am sure this is an experience that many writers share—to see their work suddenly thrown out into the world and greeted by critics, and the estrangement that produces. One aspect that seemed to get a lot of attention was the ‘Northeastern-ness’ of my book’s content. Even though the book did draw on various traditions of folklore and speech patterns and art styles from various places that could be placed in the region, I was wary of having it marketed as a ‘Northeast’ book. There were many reasons for this, one of them being that this was fiction—the geography of this book was not fixed and I fretted that the crisscrossing routes of its hills, valleys, cities and small towns did not exist cartographically. Neither did I want to cater to the exotic, ‘incredible India’ marketing. But the reviews showed me that it would not be so simple to evade clichés and facile categorizations. There were some positive, well-meaning reviews too. For example: ‘With this book, Singh has not only tried to entertain us but also offered us a glimpse into the life, the aspirations and failings of the people in these largely unknown territories.’
Now, who are these territories unknown to?

Another critic wrote: “The characters Kona and Kuja sound Assamese but do not look Assamese.” As if you can still apply the rules of nineteenth-century ethnography which say a nose has to be this long, the eyes a certain way. It reminded me of the time, a few years ago, when at a literary event in Delhi (one of my stories had been shortlisted for an award), the chief guest, a prominent poet I later found out had also served as an IPS officer, referred to me in public as ‘this young girl in a Kimono!’

This kind of comment, I suspect, would not have been applied to books, or authors, from other regions.

Then there is the question of authenticity. If this book is a Northeastern one, is it authentic enough? All this stems from the historical baggage—from a particular way of seeing the peripheries and the Northeast. There is a long history of representation, stretching from the colonial period, that I will not elaborate upon here. But the fact that the politics of representation continues to be played out even today is rather shocking. In some cases, the book was lauded as a profoundly Indian book—as if it was a kind of test.

Then I discovered that this tension with the larger body of Indian writing and critique is not new. There have been debates in the past. Poetry often seems to be in the front line of debates on aesthetics and politics. And so it was here, when a group of Northeastern poets published an anthology in which they formulated a manifesto (for lack of a better word) for Northeastern writing. A reclaiming that brought with it a new sense of possibilities and politics. The manifesto seemed to be in reaction to certain Indian poetry anthologies, so I took a closer look at some mainstream anthologies of Indian poetry. I am going to quote a couple of lines from *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: 56 Indian Poets*, edited by Jeet Thayil. There is a very
intriguing line, by which he is trying to formulate an identity for Indian poetry:

‘Indian poetry wherever its writers are based, should be really seen as one body of work.’

Another quote, which I thought, was interesting:

‘One convenient starting point to look at modern Indian poetry is Independence, when his majesty officially gave India back to the Indians.’

That is my fear with the idea of the great Indian novel, and great Indian poetry—it eventually comes down to the one body of work and the various parameters of the Indian nation-state. And that should be problematic, not just for the peripheries but also, as we are beginning to find out, for the nation-state itself.

I am going to speak briefly about this other book I did and didn’t do, because it further illustrates some of these points. I started to work on The Crab Chronicles after my first graphic novel, The Hotel at the End of the World, was published. It was a time when Northeastern writing was acquiring a certain recognition in mainland India and there was some interest in Northeastern folklore and writing and its history of conflicts. The book had an auspicious beginning: I received a generous fellowship from a non-profit education organization to do a book for young adults. The prospect of doing a book for young readers and being paid to do so is indeed a stroke of luck. I located the book in a forest village in Bodoland, Assam. Folk stories of different communities, ecological concerns, militarization and everyday life and its challenges would be an essential part of the story. I thought that a young adult novel or children’s book exploring the lives shaped by the turbulent events of the last few decades in Assam was a good idea.

Before long, I had another exciting offer for the book: I was approached by an editor of a major Tamil newspaper.
They were redesigning their children’s newspaper and were interested in translating and publishing a serialized version of *The Crab Chronicles*—they would run 10 pages of my book in their weekend edition. The editor was delighted to have a story based on the conflict in the Northeast and I signed a contract. For a writer working primarily in English, to be translated and serialized in a newspaper is something akin to finding the holy grail as it opens up an entirely new readership.

I am going to show a couple of pages from the *Crab Chronicles*, for you to get a sense of the book, so there is a context for what happens next.

Image set 1: I look at two aspects in these chapters (in the extracts I am showing you): one, the ethnic-identity mobilization along lines of community, and how it starts to affect children who attend school together. The two girls in the story come from different communities, at a time of ethnic tensions, and their fight with the boys reflects how these tensions played out in school. The second part shows the girls reaching school only to see that it has been taken over by the army and barricaded with sand bags. This was a common phenomenon in the 1990s, when schools often got taken over by the army or by the administration to settle refugees. Many of these children have nothing to do when school is closed, and, as you can imagine, this is indeed a perfect setting for the beginning of a book. With no school to go to, they set off on all kinds of adventures.

Image set 2: The next image is that of the girl, Jorou at home, chatting with her mother and grandmother. Jorou’s teacher’s husband has been shot during the inter-community riots and she comes home and repeats the story. Except there is a certain glee in the recalling of the violence, as children often feel without comprehending the true import of that violence: ‘Oh! you know they dragged him out and they shot him.’
Did you do all the math homework?
I have two sums left...

Hey! Look who's here?

It's Monday morning, boys!
Are you going to school on a buffalo now?
And no books?
You're going to school? Haven't you heard?

Soon all schools will shut forever!
Yes, And you'll go to America on your buffalo!
Come, we'll be late. We can't stand around talking to this idiot!

He's right. There's no school today.
You want to know why?
Because teacher's husband was killed!
My uncle told me that he was traveling in a bus from pithagaon.

The boys stopped the bus. They pulled him out along with the other outsiders.

And bangbang they shot him!

And he was gone. Dead.

Oh...

And soon they are going to come and get the people from your community too! Watch out Lily Chetri!

Ah!

Ha ha!
Wait a second, mister! Who is going to get Lily? Let me show you!

Aaaaaaaaahhhhh

I told you not to mess with her, now she'll call the crab!

Let go of me!

Say that again!

Run, she's a witch!
Whats the matter now? Why do you sit there with a face like a cow's backside?

I miss school. It has been closed for two weeks now...

You know what happened to teacher? They pulled her husband out of...

Yes yes. We know. Don't start again! People seem to be going mad these days...

Without Miss, I won't pass. The other teacher is no good, and does not come to school anyway...

I'll fail. Then I'll have to stay in the village forever...

Not to worry. We'll find you a smart groom to take you to the town!
You just try!

And the boys are saying that people from some other communities will be chased away from here. Lily’s aunt in ...

Enough! This stupid girl ... Nobody’s chasing anybody anywhere.

You don’t have to spit out everything you hear on the road! Once these things begin, they will never stop. Today Lily’s family are outsiders. Tomorrow, it will be your father...

Ah. What is happening to all of us?

Oh come! Stop this, the both of you...
These things happen sometime. Though why god wills this madness we'll never know... But this too will pass, as so much else has...

You remember when the river rose that year? Everything was gone, but we began again...

With time, the pain will lessen. Your school teacher will come back. Where will she go? She has taught here for twenty years. She is one of us...

Things will come back to normal. We will go on living... Come, it's almost night. Let's go inside.
Her mother is upset by this and the grandmother tries
to calm them down.

‘You should all calm down because these things keep
happening, she will come back to the village . . . Do you
remember the last floods?’

It is as if the grandmother has seen it all, because if
you live in these forest villages, life is a series of trials and
tribulations, with natural disasters and violence and
insurgency.

These images are to try to give you a sense of some
of the themes I was trying to touch upon in the book.

The comic was being serialized in the Tamil newspa-
per, when, suddenly in the third week of its publication, I
got a phone call. Discussions and editorial inputs are
normal, so I didn’t think it amiss when I realized it was the
editor calling. I was taking a lot of care to show no graphic
violence, or anybody getting shot or blood because I
wanted it to be ‘suitable’ for older children without trau-
matizing them. But the editor from Chennai called to say
that the comic was to be discontinued. I asked him why
and his reply was simple: ‘Oh, we really liked it—the edi-
torial board—but the proprietors felt it was too political.’

So that ended my short-lived relationship with Tamil
comics. Then the funders of my grant got back to me saying
that creating a book with ‘radical political statements’ would
be a problem. They also said that the story could have
moved a bit away from the ecological question to a socio-
cultural one or fantasy. Because the politics of insurgency
had no place in a children’s novel!

I would like to go back to some of the queries from
the Amar Chitra Katha presentation yesterday. One of the
questions was, ‘What is it that children want (in books,
entertainment)?’ This is indeed an important question.
But the other equally important question is: What are we
prepared to give children? If we have a problem with them reading or watching Iron Man’s adventures, what are the alternatives that we are offering? If they are playing with video games all the time, it is our responsibility as educators and writers and artists to introduce them to other more compelling narratives. Our attempts to sanitize books and graphic novels is not the best alternative to winning children back to reading! To examine loss and violence, and to give children a chance to read them in the context of their own country and its deficiencies, and not as histories of slavery in America or the suffering of Indian heroes of the Independence movement should not be seen as problematic.

But what finally ended the book, after the funder’s objections and the newspaper’s pulling it out, also goes to illustrate the peculiar predicament of working in areas like the Northeast or other regions with a history of conflict. In 2012, after a few years of relative peace, inter-community violence broke out again in the region in which the stories were based. The stories that I was working on, the narratives of past tribulations and history, suddenly became reality again. This time, I finally shelved the book. The conditions of one’s home, it seems, are as heartbreaking and difficult as the conditions imposed from the outside.

And so where does that leave the writer of the Northeast?

At this moment, I have to go back to the poetry debates of “Northeastern writing” (that I had lightly touched upon), and record with some sadness, that I could not make my home there either.

The poet Nongkynrih has some beautiful reflections on Northeastern writing, where he attempts to forge past the imposed unity of a single body of work:
. . . a rootedness is visible everywhere in the poetry of the North–East poets today. The roots of their beloved land; the roots of their people’s culture; the roots of their times; and most of all, the roots of the past that is ‘lost’ to them, have sunk deep into their poetry. And this is the chief reason why their poetry is found to be so bonding even though it may come from very different regions.\(^3\)

And much as I would like to, I find I cannot ascribe to this rootedness either.

I have no choice but to fall back instead on these lines from Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, with which I will end:

Authors settle into their texts like homedwellers. Just as one creates disorder by lugging papers, books, pencils and documents from one room to another, so too does one comport oneself with thoughts. They become pieces of furniture, on which one sits down, feeling at ease or annoyed. One strokes them tenderly, scuffs them up, jumbles them up, moves them around, trashes them. To those who no longer have a homeland, writing becomes home. And therein one unavoidably generates, just like the family, all manner of household litter and junk. But one no longer has a shed, and it is not at all easy to separate oneself from cast-offs. So one pushes them to and fro, and in the end runs the risk of filling up the page with them. The necessity to harden oneself against pity for oneself includes the technical necessity, to counter the diminution of intellectual tension with the most extreme watchfulness, and to eliminate anything
which forms on the work like a crust or runs on mechanically, which perhaps at an earlier stage produced, like gossip, the warm atmosphere which enabled it to grow, but which now remains fusty and stale. In the end, authors are not even allowed to be home in their writing.⁴

2 Ibid.
4 Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life. Available at: https://goo.gl/N6WSFU; last accessed on 27 December 2017.

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Abeer Gupta, Malik Sajad, Parismita Singh, Zainab Akhter
PANEL DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION
Abeer Gupta

Over the past two days we have discussed various nuances of the idea of nationalism. In this session—a panel discussion on Nationalism, Borders and Construction—we present experiences of story telling through Malik’s, Zainab’s and Parismita’s presentations, addressing narrative construction in oral and visual forms. These shift our perspective slightly towards the margins, the peripheries, and in some way attempt a kind of antithesis to the discussions around the construction of mainstream narratives as we heard during Deepa Sreenivas’ paper on ACK and Jerry Pinto’s talk on Bollywood.

The visual has a language of its own which goes beyond the textual. Cinema, for example, has developed an extremely diverse vocabulary and even rhetoric within its relatively short lifespan in the manner in which it is able to juxtapose sound and music and the visual. So it is important to understand that people who are working with these are working with a different arrangement.

Speaking of narrative constructions, in the context of the historical, let me bring in the idea of civilization—the
The history of the world from pre-modern times has, in recent centuries, been projected in the form of stages, some culminating in civilizations. However, in the light of recent studies of history, civilization as it was earlier defined is becoming rather paradoxical. The concept is a construction that emerged at a particular point in European history in the 18th century. It was a way of comprehending the past. Other theories of explaining the past that are now emerging in historical analyses may lead us to rethink the concept. Historians today try and peel events, viewing them as part of larger, and often diverse contexts [. . . .] A civilization implies a kind of package with specific characteristics. Thus the territory of a civilization has to be demarcated; civilization is identified with a period of high intellectual and aesthetic achievement—what some call ‘high culture’, including an emphasis on humanism and ethics; associated with this is a premium on refined manners exemplified by the elite; civilization is articulated in a particular parent language; it is symbolized in a single religion; it assumes a stratified society, evidence of a state and governance; its elite is distinctive and dominates its surroundings; there is a marked presence of what are described as aspects of culture—art, monuments, literature, music, all of a sophisticated form; and
above all, a civilization records its knowledge of the world and attempts to advance it.

One of the concerns she spoke of is that ‘civilization draws on the identities of its creators and its participants, but the identities of both change in the course of history.’ So there is a sort of definitive recognition of agency—it is not just there, someone is actively constructing it. She further clarified, and I quote ‘German writers differentiated between civilization and kultur/culture. Culture referred to what was thought of as intellectual and artistic in terms of value and ideals, and to morality. Cultures, again, were not compact, enclosed and static. Civilization, however, had a broader spread and included more, as the definition suggests.’

How does the idea of the nation or nationalism sit next to all of this? This is something to think about when we are story telling. Is it a simple matter of tense—is it about the past? What is Prof. Thapar implying when she says that ‘other theories of explaining the past’ have evolved? One of the things she talks about is the archeological–anthropological trajectory. She takes the example of Harappa, the classical situation of the archeological discovery and what it does to the nineteenth-century concept of the oriental basis of the Indian civilization. Further, the archeological evidence makes implications towards the materiality of things alongside the textual. Culture and often heritage—which implies the most valuable part of culture—is more often than not also a construction. We are constantly deciding that this is our heritage—let’s restore this building, let’s document this text, let’s put it out there so that it can be preserved for future generations.

What is the relationship of language with culture? I said, for example, that film has developed a language of its own. But if you look at cinema over the past 100–120
years—the visual language has evolved from silent to talkies to other forms, but what has the Internet done to that? What is happening to the videos being produced for social media, for example? Is there one static language that the audiovisual works with? When we speak of archeology and its material, we are familiar with that. But what kind of material does anthropology deal with? The shirt I am wearing, the shoes I am wearing, the food I am eating, the house I am living in—this is the kind of material that anthropologists engage with. Is there a politics there? Is there a politics of the choices we make in selecting these objects that surround us? Do objects, like visuals, have a language of their own? These are some of the things that I hope will slowly emerge out of this session.

The contents of Zainab’s presentation may not have appeared in our horizon—the partition of Ladakh & Baltistan. Ladakh and Baltistan were partitioned just like Punjab and Bengal on communal lines. The phrase that is used is the Line of Control—there is something to rethink there too. The stories are not new, the pain is not new but what makes it special is the materiality of it. Who are these people, what is their culture, what is this materiality lending to this narrative? That is one aspect. When we come to Malik Sajad—the question to consider is how do we as a nation include narratives that have been conjured in graphic novels such as Munnu. Can we? Parismita discussed the politics of representation—it is one thing for us to want to do something about the Northeast, but do we really have the vocabulary to understand the multilayered contested identities that exist there?

I would like to focus on a couple of themes that might have emerged from Zainab’s, Parismita’s and Malik’s presentations this morning. In the video in Zainab’s presentation, the first person was speaking in Urdu, the second
in Hindi and the third in Purki or a dialect of Ladakhi. That region has several dialects, almost one every 100–150 km. In the video, one of them spoke of opening up trade routes. What is really going on with the politics today? When we speak of Kashmir, of Ladakh, of Kargil, one of the things we always mention is that the richness of each region results from the constant interaction it enjoyed. The city of Leh, the city of Srinagar, these were highly cosmopolitan spaces. In the years that I lived there, I got the overwhelming feeling that besides the political stifling, there is cultural stifling as well because all the borders have been closed off. Now, when one is asked to define one’s identity, one defines it out of something; and in the absence of a cultural practice, they resort to a religious or political discourse.

Take the example of Ladakhi jewellery in the context of material culture—it has gold, turquoise and pearls, none of which are ethnically Ladakhi. The Ladakhi jewellery has large gold pendants with precious stones such as turquoise, strung on pearls. The pearls came from southern coasts, the turquoise from central Asia and the gold from all over. The region used to have gold but that ran out some centuries ago. There are amazing examples of how culture constructs itself through what is made available to it. One of the people interviewed by Zainab says that it is fine that the people of the Tibetan diaspora make a living selling goods made in China, but if they start talking about their Tibetan identity then it becomes a problematic. One of the things I would like to do is to try and urge you to think of identity in these terms.

Another is the idea of space. We are constantly talking about territories, borders, (implying political) geographies. But what about nature, the environment and the historic routes that emerged? When Samir goes to Skardu, he is fantasizing about going to Ladakh, and all of Ladakh wants to
go to K2 and Hunza. Let alone Samir and Malik traveling across the borders—I will not be allowed to go to Hunza. I can only speak to scholars in international conferences. So scholars from Baltistan and Ladakh meet in Germany and exchange papers. A Korean friend of mine trekking in Hunza called and said, ‘What do you want from here?’ I said, ‘Please get me a rug because I can never go there.’ So what is happening to the things that people are producing and to nature? When we speak about opening up borders, in the context of global economies of commodification, we are essentially saying, let’s go back to a time when people could exchange goods and ideas with their neighbours. Parismita was talking about the relevance of the location (as in, place), where we come from. We were having a conversation earlier, that Malik and I would never be paid to do this kind of stuff in mainstream media. Bollywood may be offering to take up his work, but we dread to imagine what will happen to it if Bollywood were to. It is flattering but farcical too, because of the relevance of our own location.

**COMMENTS / QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION**

**Malini.** Abeer’s brief introduction has opened up the world of bitterly divided geographies and anxious histories to the broader domain of material culture, and the materiality of regional borders itself. Parismita’s presentation reminded us that the North East is constructed in certain specific, tangled ways by so-called mainland India. That notion of the mainland is contested—because what is mainland India? Is it just Delhi or is it beyond that? That made me think of one important theme that connects all our concerns here today—that ties in discussions of history, geography and material culture and that
is: the dense entanglement between the human and non-human. Whether it is the valleys, the hills, Parismita’s texts or the water buffalo in your graphic novel, whether it’s the deer—it is all materializing the deeper political nuances in the region. Whether it’s the letter, it’s the gifts that travel between two sections of Kargil or the aeroplane—this entire panel has served to emphasize the close entanglement between the margin and marginality. I think it is important for us to understand that these two go hand in hand. At the same time, I think we also have to understand that the larger flows, the larger commodities and cultural flows that have happened in regions like Kashmir have happened in other regions too. In border Burma and North East India, border Chittagong hill tracks, Kutch, and so on. Trade circuits have always materialized in zones that have been deeply territorial, and this deep territoriality is historical and has had other shapes and contexts than what we see today. The current lines on the map tell us about the tension between the world of humans and the world of non-humans, the world of map-making, the world of territory as the kind of the land and the broader cultural spaces through which things move, people move. The idea of the national, but also, importantly, the idea of the transnational. Zainab’s presentation didn’t just take us to the frontiers of India and Pakistan but also to the Hajj; because each of those objects, those images, the letters and gifts were transacted in a space that was part of a larger transnational pilgrimage space.
Alisha. It has been a very emotional morning. Usually when you hear about the margins you feel deeply troubled and tend to lose hope. Over the course of last three days, from talking about histories from the south, to histories from the borders (perhaps next year it might be histories of the coast), we have been dealing with physical land borders. But the SEZs that have been set up along the coast have affected our ports and populations that have had open relations of trade between different countries. I am starting to feel that the centre is a very hollow and small space that we can all overwhelm at some point, because the larger part of our nation seems to exist outside of it, seems to exist in the space of trade and movement.

I had a question about circulation because Parismita spoke so much about the publishing aspect. When I was looking at both your graphic novels, I thought that in some ways it would be very easy to print these. Is there any option of self-publishing and circulating? I know it would make your life commercially unviable, but I feel these are things that people could relate to so easily. Is there a way in which we can get this material, because I feel like mainstream media—in terms of news as well as publishing—is not a great option when you want to work in these critical spaces. But you can get the material into the schools and homes through other insidious ways. The question is: What are those ways? While I was sitting here, I got a message on Whatsapp from someone in my family, which showed a split photo. One side showed a long
line outside an ATM, and the other had Indian soldiers standing at the border. The caption reads: ‘When you are feeling frustrated standing in a long line, think of those standing in long lines by the border every day.’ These kinds of images are circulated on Whatsapp every day, in different forms.

**Parismita.** About the underground economy of publishing and disseminating comics. That is primarily how comics have survived in many cultures. Yet a lot of American underground comic artists are complaining about how they are not paid. For the comic artist, it has to balance out with paying bills. On the other hand, we have Orijit Sen. He has his shop, he creates a lot of comic books and other things that he puts up on networking sites. I mean, no one is going to publish the kind of things he is doing right now. Also, if someone wants to, it cannot always be the comic artist themselves.

**Malik Sajjad.** I think we should not demonize publishing. Most of the big publishing houses in India can’t publish everything they want—the government won’t let them. They need an ISBN number and that process acts as a censor board. If they can suppress a multinational organization like Penguin, they can easily trash smaller publication houses in the south. It’s a larger problem. There are spaces to negotiate.

When I tried to publish my book, I signed a global contract. In a way, HarperCollins had to follow the order from their head office in Scotland. But in India, it could not publish my book because it could not get ISBN number. It
was banned for six months. I didn’t make that public because that could put five years of my work in jeopardy. I tried to work by using my contacts, tried to negotiate with all these people in a friendly way. Unfortunately, they could not even take one word out of the book, so it is exactly as it is in the UK edition. So you have to push.

I have worked in a publishing house for a long time and seen that happening. You need to know these people, you need to hang out with these people to get your books published. That is a bigger problem than pushing your politics. I think that is the bigger challenge because they have friends. For your book, Parisimita, you got several reviews but I had people, I had people everywhere, in *New Yorker*, in *Wall Street Journal*. That meant if I published a book, I could get 30 reviews in a week if I wanted. But the problem was, again, my politics. That annoyed those people—it’s not just the Indian government that was offended by this work, it was also people from Kashmir. I had friends in Kashmir but they give me the cold shoulder now because I did not really follow their politics at various points in my book. They too were happy that my book did not get published here.

So we have to push. We can always protest against the government—that is easy, it has even become a fashion now. For me, I don’t want to use my contacts to get my art displayed in a gallery—I want my art to be displayed on merit. At this point, there are these people, in Delhi, Mumbai and everywhere, you need contacts. If the government censors a book, it’s as good as
awarding your work a medal. But most of the time the problem lies with the people who can take the books to the market, and don’t.

Some of my friends wanted to publish their books, but there are categories into which they have to fit. Like ‘academic book’ for libraries—which means it will sell. That’s the business model for many publishers. And of course, how do you convince people that a self-published book is to be taken seriously?

**Abeer.** There is a bit of materiality in that too. If your book is going to get published by Harper Collins, it is going to be of a certain quality. The look and feel and print quality—all that matters. I am not saying let’s not self publish. But I am saying that, as artists, we invest a lot in our work. So we want it to have a certain quality when it is reproduced.

**Tikendar.** This might be a little out of context but allow me to share an anecdote from when I was a part of the youth movement. A massacre took place in Satrundi, part of Jammu and Kashmir. When I went there, I met an old woman who had kept the terrorists alive for 30 days. Even though they had killed almost 35 people. When I met her, I asked her, ‘Why did you feed them? Don’t you know they were against India?’

‘What is India?’ she asked me.

This is a hard reality at the margins that we cannot ignore.

**Samir.** My question is to Zainab: Is there a concerted effort being made to build some sort of archive or collection of these Partition stories
from the dark region? I know that, in Pakistan, the Citizens Archive is working extensively with some of the people who have gone through Partition and noting down their stories. In your videos, I noticed that a lot of these people are over the age of 70, 80 and 90. Which means that the maximum window we have is the next 15 to 20 years. So, is there a concerted effort to note down these stories? And how has the narrative changed in Kargil since the Kargil war? I’m sure people had certain sentiments about Pakistan and India before the war, but has the narrative changed since then? At least from the side of the government, a lot of change has taken place. But has there been any change at the grassroot level—the people who used think of the other side before the Kargil war?

Zainab. About archiving the histories from Ladakh—unfortunately, we don’t have a collection of histories from there. This was the first time I went to Padam. I was able to take interviews. As you said, these Partition survivors are older people, and yes, it’s very important to preserve oral histories from these marginalized places. There is no written history available about Kargil, Gilgit and Baltistan—especially from the Ladakh region.

About how things have changed after 1999—the security is tighter, and the locals in Kargil have been deeply affected. Most of the narratives about the war comes from other parts of India, like Delhi. Often, some colonel will write about it, from their perspective. But no one tries to understand the locals’ perspectives—how it has affected them, further marginalized
them, pushed back the question of opening the borders through these areas.

Anjum. A partition museum was set up in Amritsar by TAACHT in October. What they are trying to do is archive the oral histories of people who have been affected by Partition. I have been pushing very hard for Kishwar Desai, one of the trustees, to collect oral histories here, because I happen to know some people who can contribute. Age is a factor, but I think that’s one person who we could get in touch with in terms of collecting oral histories. They have very little money, she says, but at least it’s one place where people are making an attempt to keep some part of this history alive.

Nandini Bhattacharya. I have been teaching for two years in the Central University of Kashmir and Central University of Jammu in the department of English and Comparative Literature, which I have set up from scratch. There is actually a Jammu Oral History Project on right now. The narrative about the army as a homogenous block is a sort of unlayered narrative that is not true. There is a lot of dissidence and politicization within the army. Among the retired people and their children, two of who are doing their PhDs with me. Though I have come back to Calcutta, their PhD’s are continuing. One is on Kargil and the war, and it’s an incredibly nuanced reading. The JOH has taken some sort of form. The question of Ladakh and the question of Partition is tied up with questions of militant Buddhism and the anti-Islam feeling over there. And it’s a complex narrative.
I would ask you to get in touch with the JOH and with some of these young scholars—many of them are children of martyrs—who are on the ground. I use the term ‘martyr of the Kargil war’ so that might be something worth looking at. The communal aspect is not just what the army and the civilians think; Buddhism takes on an altogether different colour. Remember that Aung Sung Su Kyi has banned Islamic groups—they are now being asked to rename themselves.

Abeer. I completely agree with you. There are layers of politics just in Kargil—the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council was set up in 1995, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Kargil in 2003. The relation between the various regions of the state, and in Leh district itself, the factions within the sects, it would make for an interesting conversation. I’m sure you’re familiar with Martin Van Beak’s work. Now you are talking about a periphery within the periphery, so we can talk about it, but trying to get that narrative into the mainstream is the challenge we are trying to grapple with.

Omi. Hi, I am Omi and I would like to share my experience of publishing. Ten years ago, I did a project on the rise of political Islam and violence, and I published my first book titled Heroes Never Die. It was funded by a well-reputed international NGO. The book was published, then it went to the government and they allowed the book to be distributed. But then the NGO called me. The head of the NGO was very sad—
he had been told that the government would stop the NGO from working with the millions of people it was supporting if it continued to distribute the book.

I have the book in office, hundreds and thousands of copies that have never been distributed.

I have been working on the Rohingyas for the last eight years. The publisher I was working with is a very famous publisher. The designer is also extremely popular. The donor is one of the biggest in the world. Yet they wrote to me and said that though my work was very powerful, ‘it’s very expensive to publish books, so we are taking out the money from this’. And the book was stopped.

Other things started. The world tour, the photographs were printed, an exhibition was meant to happen in Tokyo, Geneva, around the world. But just before it was launched, they refused to exhibit my work—because it was too sensitive, too powerful, it would hurt the ongoing conversation between Aung Sung Su Kyi, the Europeans and Americans. Thankfully I won a grant, so I can publish the book. But this will be published by me.

The governments, the NGOs and the donors sometimes have an unholy alliance which may not be that visible or that simple. The government will come with its censorship apparatus and say you can’t publish. My first body of work was forbidden in Bangladesh. Nor were the galleries allowed to show my work.

Deepa. I am going back to something Parismita said. I am assuming that what you were doing...
was meant for children, and that some of these graphic novels or comics are meant for children. I had also worked on a project, collecting stories for children from mainly Dalit communities in Andhra and Telengana. One of the questions we were asked when we went to writers was: What is a story for a child? Is there something called children’s literature? When they wrote, it was not for a category called ‘childhood’ or ‘children’. Why I bring it up is because both a book’s sales and its reception depend on a deepened understanding of the genre. If you think about children’s literature or comics, there is a powerful underlying perception that childhood is a place of innocence. But when we were working on this project, it emerged that for a large majority of children, childhood was an extremely conflicted, traumatic time and yet that is not something that comes into much of children’s literature.

I quoted from one book at the end of my presentation yesterday, about a Muslim child in a classroom who feels that when the teacher is teaching about Babar and Ranasangha, the gaze comes to rest on him. But he is a child—he is not an adult, and it’s a story about childhood.

There is another story by a Telangana Dalit writer, Gogu Shyamala, called ‘Tatakki’, where a child must wake up very early, around 4 a.m. so that she can go to the land—they have a small strip of land—and see to it that when the canal water is let out, the water goes to her track of land before anyone else wakes up. But the landlord of the village takes this as a huge insult, and
she is asked once or twice not to do so. But she persists. Then, at one point, the landlord attempts to rape her.

There was a huge uproar when this book came out, about how can you even attempt to show rape. Even before the publication, the publishers were saying: How can we even publish it? We talked to Shyamala to know if there was any way she could bring this out. She stood her ground, and her comment was: This happens, this happens in my community. And we deal with it in different ways. Through collective memory of the kind of experiences that women in our communities have.’

I thought this was a great critique of what a lot of us understand as childhood. I was just giving this example to go back to Parismita, What is it about a genre that determines a publisher’s understanding of a certain kind of literature? When you are writing the kind of stories that you or Sajad are, it is also really straining against the grain of that understanding. And I believe that some, or a lot, of the resistance comes from that.

A teacher from audience. I would say our perception of the North East is the, say Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal, right? Now 15 years ago I moved to Gurgaon and, of course, everyone asked, ‘Where do you come from?’ When I said I was from Kolkata, the response was, ‘Oh, you’re from the North East!’ That gave me a different perception about the entire issue. And so my question to you is: What do you define as mainland? Because this is the term you
used. I thought I was part of the mainland. But I was perceived as being part of the North East. Not that it bothers me. But when you say mainland, do you also include Kashmir? And is the idea of marginalization only in the heads of the ‘mainland’ people?

Para smita. I use the term ‘mainland’ very deliberately. And I always get queries like this. These words are not carved in stone. And the use of this word is expected to prompt a response exactly like this—that we sit up and ask what the mainland. Because as a geographical term I see it is referred to if there is an island somewhere—like in China, where there is Mainland China and then you have Taiwan.

Often terms like mainland become political terms. These terms have life. For instance, today, Malini was referring to the Garo’s as Adivasis in her presentation. Now the term Adivasi in Bodoland, for instance, is used usually only for migrants like Santhals and others, tea community people. Then the word ‘tribal’ is used for Bodos and other communities. Here these are all political terms. The term Adivasi has been owned by the community and become a political term, but the essential thing about the term Adivasi is that it refers to certain communities and not only tribal communities like the Bodo, etc. This is because they want to make a distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous people in that particular area. So these are political terms and they are free-flowing. Is Kashmir a part of the mainland? Probably not.

Malini. I just wanted to briefly touch upon some of the issues you raised. In the last 20 years
or so, literature, and not just the creative writing, that has come out of Assam has shown the complexity of this region also called North East. On the one hand you have political scientists and theorists like Hongji Borua who time and again remind us of the North East’s very fragile links with the main geography of India—its insularity, its deep militarization and a kind of a New Delhi security-led nomenclature that I think you were also calling attention to, a marking of a deeply disturbed area which is also exoticized. You also have historians who have studied the same region and who constantly call to attention to the larger circuits Abir was talking about. David Ladan, for instance, says that we understand Assam through its river geographies—how it is connected with the Mekong, how it is connected to a global range of commodities like tea, opium, etc., which totally unfixes Assam from its location.

More recently, Joyeeta Sharma has challenged the notion in her Empire’s Garden (about tea and plantation labour) the idea of Assam as a garden.

I think somewhere Parismita is pushing us to think about these very well-established categories. Even questions of indiginity in this entire region that we call North East India. Even in the northern regions of Bangladesh, there is a big debate going on about the terms indigenous and Khurgojanogoshti. There is no intellectual or moral consensus around these terms and that is what I think that reinforces the marginality of a margin.
Anil Sethi. Adding to what Malini said, I think the whole issue of mainland, periphery, margin, etc., also has to be looked at temporally, that is, in specific temporal contexts. So for a minute I will leave out the North East or Kashmir and talk about, say, Tamil Nadu or Punjab. In 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, when the Tamils said that they did not want an expositional Hindi imposed on them and vigorously resisted it, they probably saw themselves as being on the margins of India. Others may have also seen them as being on the margins. But today nobody thinks of Tamil Nadu as marginal. So there is a temporal context to all this.

Similarly with Punjab. While it continues to be a border state, nobody thinks of it as marginal. I am intentionally mentioning places that have traditionally not been thought of as on the margins. So during 1984, 1982 or 1983, if you thought of Punjab, you would think of it as gradually becoming marginal. So it is a temporal thing also, and a historical thing.

The idea of margins, the idea of the mainland, these change over time.

Something you said, Abeer, that was very interesting for me was the kind strong cosmopolitanism in the cultures of Ladakh and Kashmir, and in the culture of all places that have been traditionally been on trade routes of some significance. So if someone were to do a long-term history on these areas, they could show how insularity has been imposed upon them because of the geopolitics of the 10 to 20 years. This insularity didn’t exist earlier.
**Parasmita.** I am not sure if I used the term margins in my presentation, but I get the sense of what you are saying. I will assume that people who live in the so-called margins do think of themselves as living in the margins, that’s at the heart of their lives.

**Abeer:** Two things I would like to connect with, what Malik and what Deepa said earlier. This conversation is around the kind of popular narratives that are being circulated, I mean, your point about temporality is very important but we have to also understand that these terms are being created. And that is what we are trying to discuss over here, these terms and their predominance and their construction. Let’s not forget that this panel is called ‘Nationalism, Borders and Construction’. So we as artists, as storytellers, what are the peripheries and margins and centers that we are constructing? We need to keep evaluating those.

**Nandini.** The word margin has a Latin root and comes from something called marginalia. The margins of scripted text were not its periphery in the sense of its outside, but perhaps where the most important comments were written. So that they would stand out. When you talk about marginality, please remember that marginalia is a very important part of textual practice. And one claims the margin—that’s one’s identity position. The first thing that happened to me when I went to Jammu to get a SIM card was the seller in the shop told me that the SIM card used in Jammu does not work in the rest of India. So the point that Tamil Nadu will not
speak Hindi was a point of Dravidian identity assertion. In reality, when one is in or at the margin, then one is heard and seen. That’s not a position or point of weakness—it is a position of assertion of identity.

Alisha. I wanted to make a point in response to what Anil said in terms of the need to document this shared history. When we are constantly saying ‘Oh, has this been archived?’, ‘Oh, we need oral histories’, we have to be extremely careful about museumizing things and events that are still very active. That is not to say that one should not document. I work on an archival projects myself, but such projects should not be purely for the purpose of remembering. We have to fight against the idea that stories like the ones we saw today—the ones Zainab showed us—are entirely from the past. We have to keep pushing the idea, especially in the mainstream, that these are present-day stores. We have to use the word history very carefully, because we will end up working against ourselves by pushing these issues into the past, by pushing these people into the past. As if, all of a sudden, they had become something else. It’s dangerous territory, even the Partition archive and the museum in Amritsar. They’re necessary but there is a danger with how they have been positioned. More often than not, such projects enable us to simply say, ‘Oh, we have recorded all this information, now let’s move on.’ This narrative of ‘now let’s move on’ is so powerful that we have to use this very material to fight against it. Not just keep it as a resource repository of things to look back upon.
Tina. We are using the word margin in a very political context and I think we need to disassociate with it. Cultural context is far more important right now. We have been talking about the nation state and how they tend to enforce a cultural homogeneity onto the people but the cultural margin can come from anywhere, it can come from Madhya Pradesh, you can still have a cultural marginality and that needs to be preserved. India is so diverse we stand a much greater chance than most modern European countries stood of fighting the cultural nationalism. It is only possible if the margins of culture are alive.

Abeer. Do you believe that culture is not political? There is a very deep politics in each of these cultural repositories.

Tina. Of course, but it doesn’t have to be the politics of the centre.

Abeer. But that is not what we mean by politics. Not party politics.

Tina. Exactly. So if we fight against the politics of the centre, then our culture will not be the culture of the centre. And in that sense we can create an alternative space to keep these ideas alive.

A teacher in the audience. Coming back to the comics. Comics like Marvel’s Iron Man and Captain America have been mentioned earlier and these comics are highly politicized. So how do we overlook that part and allow the children to read those comics?

Abeer. We read Tintin over here, even though we are alienated from the political problems it
represents. Even though we now realize how problematic the representation is, we should not avoid it.

Deepa. Sometimes we think of something as violent but the children don’t see it that way. And sometimes, depending on where we are located, certain things do not appear violent to us even though they might appear extremely violent to other people. Just as what Malik was saying or what Parismita was saying—what appears as violent to certain publishers or groups of readers may not appear so to many other people. In cases like this, one needs to think why it is violent to some whereas it is actually the life of certain groups of children. My innocence when I was reading Amar Chitra Katha—I think was a violent kind of innocence and it was also an innocence that I participated in without knowing that the innocence was so political.

A teacher in the audience. Ma’am talked about the notion of innocence in children. But how are children innocent when they play games like Assassins Creed or GTA in which you have to kill someone to go to the next level? My brother used to play it, and I used to wonder about how it could show racism, sexism . . . everything. How is that not political? Why only these simple books which show the real picture of how we perceive the great nation of India, why are only those political? So political that they are not to be published?

Ineke. Thank you for these presentations—they have moved me more than I thought was possible. You sit here, so that means that there is at
least some space for such discussions. Two of you have done Phds and one of you is a teacher—so you live. You publish with the help of all your contacts and networks. You are a filmmaker—so you live. What I wanted to ask all of you is: What means do you have to make the larger population more active? People or parties or communities or whoever, to get them into a more active role? When I say to you all that ‘you live’, I mean you sit here and you are alive and you have a voice. But how does all this connect with society?

**Malini.** One thread in this panel has been about teaching and another has been about writing. Both these acts are very powerful in this part of the world, even though they often function in invisible ways. The institutions of higher learning or the kind of literary societies that Parismita and Malik are a part of, those have far larger lives than this moment of us sitting here. And that’s what takes the work forward. Of course, I think each of us in this room have very clear constituencies in our own ways that we address through different mediums. And I think it’s writing and teaching that have far richer lives in taking thoughts and lives in these regions.

**Ineke.** Thank you. And I thought of these things too but I wanted to have them articulated by you, hear if they were really true. And you say ‘yes’, so that means there is hope.

**Parasmita.** I wake up every morning and feel that what we are doing or what I am doing is very little, given the kind of privilege we have. So your question really touches a nerve.
Tina. I don’t know who it was yesterday—was it Jerry?—who said that we are all versions of each other. We have sat here for three days and spoken to and agreed with ourselves. What purpose have we served? Which mind have we changed? What impact have we had on the broader picture that we all hope to change? Talking to others like us is not enough.

Malik. That is where writing and teaching, in our own little ways, comes to use.
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Zainab Akhter is a former Research Officer with the Centre for Internal and Regional Security at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. She has worked as a reporter with Hindustan Times and has been awarded the Ladakh Women Writers Award for the year 2008 by Charkha, a Delhi based NGO. She has recently completed her Ph.D. on the ‘Role of Culture in International Relations: A Study of Cultural Diplomacy between India and Pakistan’ from JNU.

Parismita Singh is a writer, graphic novelist and educationist. Her graphic novel The Hotel at the End of the World (2009, Penguin) was shortlisted for the Shakti Bhatt First Book Award (2009–10). She helped conceptualize the Pao Anthology of Comics (2012, Penguin). Her publications include Mara and the Clay Cows (2015, Tulika Books) and Crab Chronicles (2011). Winner of the Katha Prize for best translation, she has been working on an education project in Kokrajhar, Assam, with the NGO Pratham since 2009. She is currently writing on a volume of prose stories.

Malik Sajad is a visual artist and writer, focusing on the human condition and the physiological consequences of political and social uncertainties. Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir, published by HarperCollins, UK, is his first graphic novel which has won the Verve Storyteller of the Year Award and been included in the permanent collection at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. Malik is an Inlaks (2011) and OMI, Francis Greenburger (2013) fellow who studied visual art and storytelling at Kashmir University and Goldsmiths, University of London. He has also written several short stories documenting the human toll of political crises across South Asia.