

South **Asia**  
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*South Asia Journal for Culture* is an annual refereed journal published jointly by the Colombo Institute for the Advanced Study of Society and Culture and the Theertha International Artists' Collective.

The journal is open to scholarship and exchange of ideas across the region and beyond, on issues that are of central importance to the region with regard to the broad areas covered by the key term 'culture'. The fact that the journal is based in South Asia does not mean that its focus is restricted on the basis of this regional or geographic identity. The idea is to enhance access of South Asian writers to a journal that is regionally published, regionally edited and managed and is responsive to intellectual needs, interests and concerns in the areas covered by the thematic focus of 'culture.'

While striving for a certain degree of specialization, the term 'culture' is deliberately meant to be broad. That is to ensure that the complexity and the varied manifestations of culture can be accommodated within the intellectual forum of the journal. In terms of conventional disciplinary parameters, the journal would accommodate contributions from the fields of sociology, social anthropology, history, archeology, art history, cultural studies and other related fields of study. More precisely, within and beyond these areas, its interest would be in culture and its extensions that would focus on cultural theory, art history and different domains of the 'arts' such as theatre, visual arts, architecture, film, music, dance, literature and the politics of these domains.

In the general context outlined above, the journal welcomes papers, reviews, photo-essays and opinions for publication. There is no page limit for submissions. However, standard academic practices in the social sciences and humanities with regards to stylistic conventions and issues such as references and footnotes should be adhered to. More specifically, all references should be inserted in the main text within parentheses (eg., last name of author, date of publication: page numbers) and the complete reference details of all texts should be presented at the end of the paper as a separate bibliography. All essays should opt for endnotes where necessary but should not use footnotes. For additional details on general stylistic matters, potential writers can write to the Colombo Institute ([colomboinst@gmail.com](mailto:colomboinst@gmail.com)) or refer to the Chicago Manual of Style (15th Revised Edition, 2003)

# South<sup>Asia</sup>

Journal for Culture

Volume 1, 2007.

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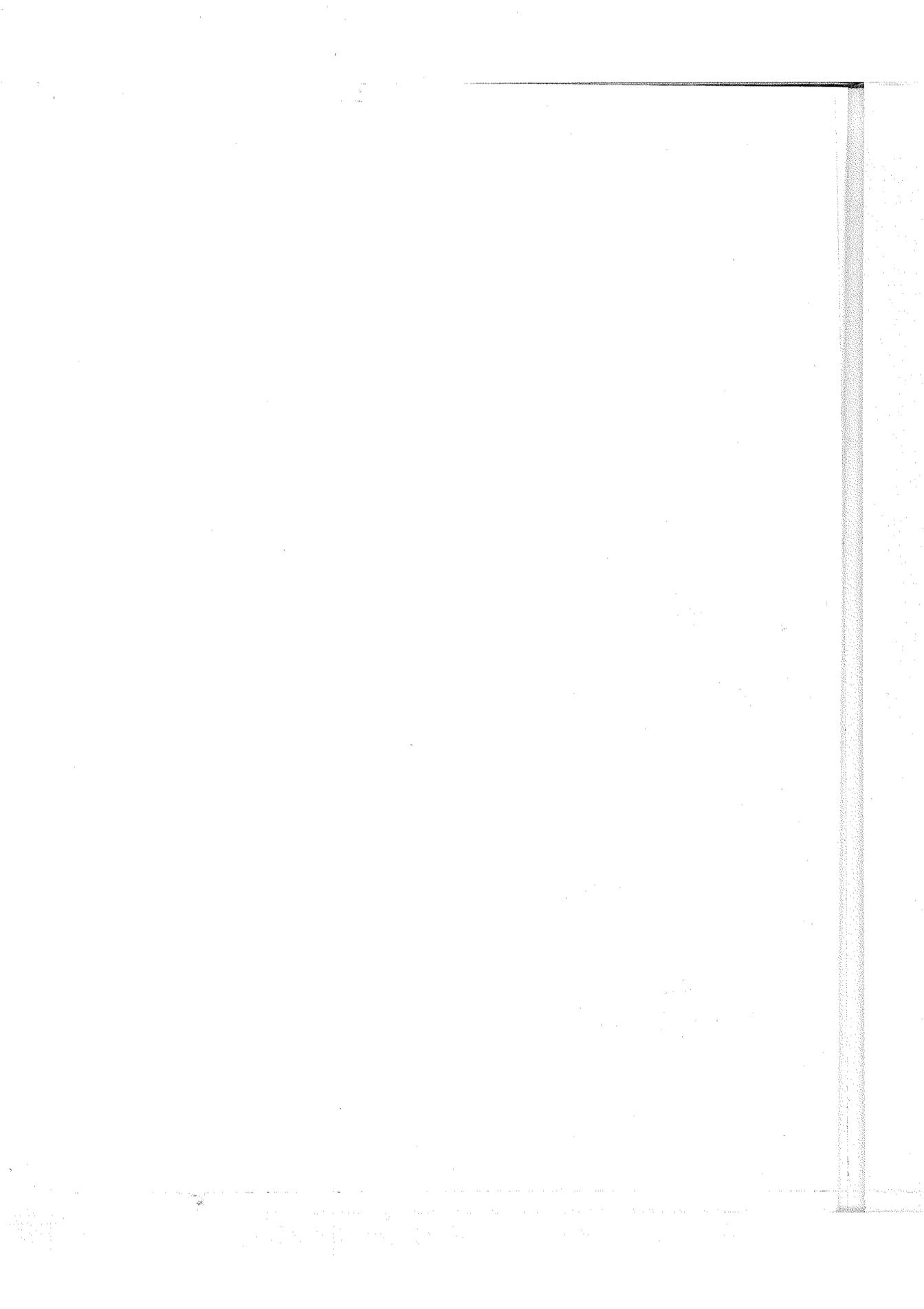


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## Preface

Despite the emergence of an abstract and not yet fully realized South Asian political identity through an entity such as SAARC with all its failings, commonalities, strengths and potentials, a strong South Asian intellectual and cultural identity that is politically articulated at the global level has not emerged to date. One reason for this is the absence of dynamic regional intellectual forums such as regularly published regionally accessible journals, or a regular series of conferences that take place within the region. India-based journals and newspapers such as the *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Contributions to Indian Sociology* have created a sense of scholarship open to the region, but have not tapped their full potential, mostly due to relative difficulties in access to them outside India. In this context, *Himal South Asia* from Nepal is an exception given its pronounced South Asian focus. However, being a general interest magazine, its format cannot be replicated for a journal with more specific interests. Our intention in launching the *South Asia Journal for Culture* as a specialized publication which combines crucial features of a journal and a magazine, is to allow regionally based scholars avenues to publish scholarship and carry out an exchange of ideas across the region and beyond. The content focusses on issues that are of central importance to the region with regard to the broad areas covered by the key term 'culture.'

However, the fact that the journal is based in South Asia does not mean that its focus is restricted to and parochialized on the basis of a regional or geographical identity. On the contrary, the idea is to enhance access of South Asian writers to a journal that is regionally edited, published and managed, and is responsive to intellectual needs, interests and concerns in the areas covered by the journal's thematic focus. In this context, we hope that scholars and cultural practitioners situated outside the region who are interested in the thematic areas covered by the journal, and in South Asia, would contribute to it as well.

While striving for a certain degree of specialization, the journal's thematic focus remains deliberately broad. Thereby, it allows for an accommodation of the complex and varied manifestations of culture to be brought within its intellectual forum. In terms of conventional disciplinary parameters, the journal accommodates contributions from the fields of sociology, social anthropology, history, archeology, art history, cultural studies and other related fields of study. Within and beyond these areas, its interest is in culture and its extensions that focus on cultural theory and the porous categories of the 'arts' such as theatre, visual arts, architecture, film, music, dance, literature and the politics of these domains. The journal is not a mere site for cultural description, but a critical site for debate and engagement with contemporary social theory.

The idea for the journal was born at the Colombo Institute for the Advanced Study of Society and Culture. The Colombo Institute, based in Sri Lanka, already successfully publishes two similar journals in Sinhala and Tamil for local consumption. The idea for the journal is supported by the Theertha International Artists' Collective in Colombo that also publishes

its own journal called *ArtLab* in both Sinhala and Tamil. Institutional responsibility for the journal is vested in the Colombo Institute even though it will be co-published annually with Theertha International.

While it was not the intention of the publishers and the editorial board to make the first issue a Sri Lanka specific volume, it has resulted so due to the thematic focus of most of the essays received. We hope this will not be the case for subsequent volumes except when a decision is made to publish special issues that focus on the society and culture of specific countries.

Colombo Institute, Theertha International and the Editorial Board would like to thank Hivos (Netherlands) and Ford Foundation for their generous support to make this initiative a reality, Anoli Perera for coordinating fund-raising activities and designing the journal and Samudrika Sylva for her invaluable help in editing.

## Bawa and Beyond: Reading Sri Lanka's Tropical Modern Architecture

Tariq Jazeel

### Introduction

This paper is about buildings and people, specifically a particular type of built space in Sri Lanka known as tropical modernist, or just tropical architecture. The architect perhaps most associated with this style is the late Geoffrey Bawa, who is one of Sri Lanka's best known architects internationally, modern or otherwise. His work will be familiar to many readers, but in order to set the scene for what follows I start this paper with a passage published two years ago in the English broad-sheet newspaper *The Observer*, in which Bawa's Kandalama hotel [Figure 1] featured in their 'Magnificent seven' of modern hotel design icons around the world. The passage not only offers a sense of the sorts of architectural style and aesthetics that I engage with, but written by an obviously enthused, (probably) English travel journalist, it also points to an onlooker's perspective on some of the characteristics that are peculiar to, and are common across, this uniquely Sri Lankan architectural genre:

From the moment you arrive at the Kandalama hotel after a lurching drive through the jungle of central Sri Lanka, you know you are in an extraordinary place. The entrance is the mouth to a huge cavern set into the mountainside. The huge building is spread along the side of the rockface and covered by rich vegetation that continues to serve as the home for an astonishing variety of wildlife. The hotel was built in the early 1990s by the late Geoffrey Bawa, one of Asia's foremost architects. His effort to blend the massive hotel into its environment, to use the contours, materials and vegetation of the stunning surroundings, succeeds triumphantly.

The passages linking the 160 plus rooms to the cavernous communal areas are open to the jungle, and at night guests share the space with bats, lizards, mongooses, huge moths, and fireflies.

The cool simple bedrooms feel as if they are part of the forest and troops of monkeys shriek and chatter in the trees that brush up against the windows.

One of the hotel's pools is cut into the polished rock of the mountainside; another infinity pool creates the illusion that it merges with a huge man-made lake below, where elephants are led to bathe and fish eagles dive for their food.

From the surrounding area it is unobtrusive; from the inside it feels airy and capacious, with glorious views across some of the most stunning scenery on the island. It is a masterpiece built by one of the great architects of his era. (*The Observer*, April 9 2006).



Figure 1. The Kandalama Hotel  
(Source: Bawa Trust Website, <http://www.geoffreybawa.com/sw.php>)

Although Bawa was not the first in Sri Lanka to design and build such spaces, he is regarded as a pioneer and central figure within this significant architectural movement. Today, architects influenced by Bawa's style and philosophy build not only hotels, but also social and public spaces, government buildings and a host of commissioned houses for the country's style conscious middle and upper-middle class. Of course, each of these architects has their own design signature, but there are certain sensibilities and aesthetics that characterize the movement, all of which one can recognize from the description of the Kandalama Hotel quoted above. These are notably, the attention to working with site and context such that

buildings become less important than the spatial experience the architect can create; the necessity to work with and through a 'tropical', super-abundant nature that is always on the move; and perhaps most significantly the concretization of spaces that conflate inside with outside, 'nature' with 'culture'. The other important factor that draws together the breadth and diversity of Sri Lanka's tropical modernist architectural praxis is that their structures seem to have become emblematic of a certain, and powerful, type of Sri Lankan-ness. Guests at Sri Lanka's proliferation of tropical modern hotels, for example, are encouraged to consider the spatial experiences that their hotels afford them as an integral, indeed 'authentic', part of their Sri Lankan experience.

In this paper I pose some questions of Sri Lanka's tropical modern architectural form and style by offering a reading of these often breathtaking and captivating spaces and spatial experiences. Particularly, I speculate on the connections and relationships between these built spaces and society, suggesting what they do in and through society is more than just provide shells that people live in, but function as places that also produce particular types of South Asian natures, and perhaps even particular types of Sri Lankan people. Positioned at the intersection of cultural studies and human geography, the analysis firstly outlines a few thoughts on the postcolonial and cultural geographies of architecture, and on the geographies of nature. The main body of the paper then proceeds to speak to four overlapping themes that tease out some common characteristics running through this architectural genre, whilst speculating on their social and political effects in a central and southern Sri Lankan society where 'nature' is lived, experienced and produced in particular types of ways. Those themes are: *opening out the colonial house; building with (tropical) nature; producing 'Sri Lankan' nature; and representation, built space and the evolution of a genre*. Most of the work in this paper is based on secondary and archival material, interview material with six practicing Sri Lankan architects who remain anonymous throughout, and a week long period spent shadowing two architectural interns.

### **Cultural geographies of architecture and 'nature'**

Recent geographical engagements with architecture have tended to focus on the semiotics of buildings, particularly modernist, rational architectural forms like the skyscraper and the high-rise, and their translation as they re-materialize in diffuse global contexts (see Jacobs 2006; Lees 2001; McNeill 2005). This paper shares such scholarship's postcolonially inflected concern to decenter Europe and North America in the history of modernity, in the story of the skyscraper and the high-rise, to stress, as Anthony King argues in his book *Spaces of Global Culture*, how each repetition of the architectural sign of modernity, how each skyscraper, high-rise or modernist house is different; how each is specific to its cultural and historical conditions of enunciation (2004; also, see King 1984). However, also following King, this paper moves beyond a concern with the merely symbolic to think about the connections between a built environment and the mutual construction of subject and society. Further in the context of my own ongoing interest in spatializing Sri Lanka's cultural politics (for example, see Jazeel 2005a, 2005b), I begin to pose questions around how the spatial discourses and practices embedded not just in this architectural praxis but also in the subsequent life of these buildings, help to shape particular forms of South Asian – that is Sri Lankan – subjectivity, and thus society.

In other words, the paper explores how the concretization of these spaces and movement through them actually produces people in certain ways that, I think, are peculiar to central and southern Sri Lanka, and thus how at some level the relationships between built space and people are irreducibly political.

Central to this task is an engagement with the concept 'nature', moreover with the ways Sri Lanka's tropical modern architects work with or through 'nature'. Recent cultural geographical scholarship has sought to think critically about the concept, specifically the separations that we humans often arbitrarily make between 'nature' and its apparent opposite, super-organic notions of 'culture' (for examples, see Braun and Castree 1998; Castree and Braun 2001; Whatmore 2002). In particular, poststructurally inflected human geographical work (Braun 2002), environmental history (Cronon 1995), and Indian environmental history (Guha and Arnold 1997) have facilitated an understanding of how the meanings we ascribe to Nature, to a 'real world out there', have been partially constituted by text, representation, discourse and their associated practices. Thus, for example, in a city like New York, Central Park's almost taken-for-granted meaning as a space of urban nature in which New Yorkers might escape the spoils of urbanity or things similarly super-organically cultural might be read through particular discourses of 'nature' whose representational history can be traced through the wilderness writings of the likes of John Muir and William Thoreau; wilderness writings and philosophies that the park's architect – Frederick Law Olmstead – himself was inevitably heavily influenced by (see Gandy 2002). In fact, poststructuralist theorists of 'nature' point to the very existence of the word as a linguistic demarcation of a taken-for-granted world that-is-not-cultural, because epistemologically North American and European 'natures' can only be rendered in relation to their opposite, 'culture'. Therefore my interest here in 'nature' as a concept in and through Sri Lankan society emerges partly from approaches across the social sciences and humanities that have variously attempted to undo the seams of settled understandings and workings of the concept itself, but partly also from being intrigued by the way that Sri Lanka's natures cannot so easily be understood dualistically, that is as merely the opposite of culture. More of this below.

These are not just abstract philosophical concerns about the social construction of 'nature', because much of the work that seeks to understand the differences between 'nature' and 'culture', or the human and non-human in everyday life, actually poses important questions around *how* the human is defined, how the human is composed and what must be *excluded* to make the human properly (Braun 2004: 269). Here, Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist writings on the figure of the animal have been particularly useful. Derrida gives us the word *animot* as a characteristically clever piece of wordplay that phonetically singularizes the French plural for animal (*animaux*) and combines it with the French word for 'word' (*mot*), thereby drawing our attention to the habit of rolling all animal species into one and using this undifferentiated class of non-human being to define the human (Derrida 2002, 2003; Braun 2004: 270). In other words, Derrida's *animot* reminds us that the very use of the word 'animal' does more than innocently signify; specifically, it demarcates boundaries between us and a whole array of non-human life in ways that actually serve to define the human. This type of scholarship has enabled us to scratch the surface of what it means to be human; to place under scrutiny the ethical implications of all those unseen taken-for-granted that effectively draw the lines

between humans and non-humans, 'nature' and 'culture'. Part of the theoretical purchase of this work is that it has also allowed explorations of how the human and society are composed *through* everyday practices: it has allowed us to suppose a world as we know it that is always *in the making*; a world in which bodies and entities are continually composed, dissolved and recomposed through the practices of everyday life.

For example, let us return briefly to New York. For those walks in Central Park, those leisurely excursions in this small piece of material and discursive 'wilderness-in-the-city' do not just perform the function of leisure. Both architecturally and in the way the space is used and imagined, Central Park also serves to demarcate and reinforce quite settled understandings about the dualistic relationships between a 'nature' that inheres *in* the park and everything that the 'culture' of the city outside is not. Think also, for example, of the ways that domestic space is used in a country like England. Most of the year, most people in England do all they can to keep the outside world out; double glazing, draught excluders, central heating, insect repellent and air fresheners, all to keep the non-human world from pervading the home. As well as protecting from the cold (and those who have tried to live in England for any longer than a short, halcyon summer will understand why this is so necessary!) these techniques of habitation also serve to demarcate and reify quite taken-for-granted distinctions that we hold in much of western Europe that there is a natural world 'out there' whereas 'in-here' there is a cultural world over which we have more control.

But this paper is about neither New York nor England although the examples are useful, because much as I find Derrida's formulations extremely useful and provocative, being a South-Asianist I worry that the types of Euro-American humans at the centre of these enquiries actually restrict the potential of the analysis. The majority of poststructuralist scholarship on 'nature' works the concepts 'nature' and 'culture', the non-human and the human, through predominantly European and North American registers that seek, for the most part, to grapple with a human body that still centers on a Cartesian subject in which there is a quite Eurocentric mind/body dualism. At the heart of Derrida et al's analyses is Descartes' mind/body dualism that we must un-think: the rational human subject that thinks, observes, measures and experiences a natural world 'out there' somewhere is the (mostly western) humanity that this scholarship grapples with. But what if the humans at the centre of these enquiries believe differently about nature and human relationships to the natural world? What if we place a different type of humanity under such scrutiny? Effectively, these are the questions that this paper picks up on as it explores the geographies of architecture and nature through a central and southern Sri Lankan society pervaded not only by the sorts of secular discourses of 'nature' and 'culture' familiar to European and North American scholars, but also by non-western, often sacred philosophies. In central and southern Sri Lanka these are mostly Buddhist philosophies that posit naturalistic notions of the inseparability of the human subject from a sacred and universal reality. By teasing out conceptions and experiences of a particular type of South Asian nature through Sri Lankan tropical modernist architecture, this work begins to ask questions of a non-secular Sri Lankan world *in the making*, of how particular types of non-western, South Asian – that is (a particular type of) Sri Lankan – bodies and entities are composed, dissolved and recomposed through the practice and experience of built space.

Following some of the rich manoeuvres made by the Subaltern Studies movement and Dipesh Chakrabarty in particular (2000), this work not only attempts to get under the skin of particular South Asian realities where gods, spirits and the supernatural have real agency in the world, it also 'speaks to' (see Spivak 1988) those realities by posing important politically inflected questions in the Sri Lankan context about what type of (sacred) bodies and (racialized) entities are composed through experiences of this built space; about how the appropriation, if not design (and that distinction is important) of this built space might at some level be irreducibly political. Although this paper stops short of engaging such questions head-on, it does evoke the prospects of the politics of built tropical modernist space.

### **Reading Sri Lanka's tropical modern architecture**

#### *Opening up the colonial house*

Geoffrey Bawa qualified as an architect from London's *Architectural Association* (AA) in 1957, and returned to Sri Lanka soon after to begin his professional practice. Among his professional influences was Minnette de Silva who also qualified from the AA some years earlier. In Sri Lanka both began to produce buildings that drew on their British professional training and the influences of International Modernism and Brutalism that they had been exposed to in Europe, but simultaneously both were committed to building in ways that provided appropriate cultural responses in a formerly colonial society. This meant engaging with the colonial architectures and building practices that had dominated metropolitan Ceylon and its plantation hinterlands for a good few centuries. But unlike much of the cruder overtly nationalist, post-independent architecture that employed Sinhala and Kandyan symbolism to simply reject colonialism, like for example Wynne-Jones' monument in Colombo's Independence Square built in 1951, Bawa and De Silva were much more attuned to an adaptive approach born from the complexities of living through the transition to independence, and seeing the temporal movement as one of continuity and adaptation rather than rupture. The social and political freedom to imagine, build and play with space was channeled through a desire to design appropriate rather than alternative buildings; buildings that began to open out the colonial house by drawing upon a pastiche of elements of 'good', indigenous design and materials that articulated what architects like De Silva and Bawa perceived as a uniquely Sri Lankan response to the inappropriate elements of colonial and modernist design. Importantly, appropriate design did not have to come from Ceylon's dominant Sinhala historical tradition; on paper at least good design was inherently plural. It was about the opportunities that buildings afforded for appropriate living. As Bawa himself would claim:

I prefer to consider all past good architecture in Ceylon as just that – as good Ceylon architecture, for that is what it is, not Dutch or Portuguese or Indian, or early Sinhalese or Kandyan or British colonial, for all examples of these periods have taken Ceylon into first account (Bawa quoted in Robson 2002: 41).

The adaptation of the colonial house involved a number of quite simple manoeuvres to make the buildings more climatically and culturally suitable, like clearing away asbestos roofing and bare bulb lighting, rethinking flat roofing and paying attention to the slimy black mould that grew on walls without drip ledges. This was all accompanied by a realization that the colonial style bungalow, traditionally set apart in generous grounds with clear distinctions between the intimate and private recesses of inside space and public gardens and reception areas on display outside, was no longer suitable for a different style of metropolitan living in fast-growing Colombo where space and privacy were at a premium. Bawa and De Silva therefore reintroduced 'traditional' Ceylonese design elements borrowed variously from traditional Sinhala medieval architecture, Dutch courtyard housing and Muslim row housing; things like generously sloped roofing, overhanging eaves, the incorporation of verandas and internal courtyards, all in order to open the colonial and modernist house, to turn it inside out in order to achieve new styles of urban living with high levels of openness, ventilation and transparency, yet also to preserve privacy.



Figure 2. House designed for Osmund and Ena De Silva, Colombo (Source: Bawa Trust Website, [http://www.geoffreybawa.com/preview.php?temp\\_id=55](http://www.geoffreybawa.com/preview.php?temp_id=55))

The house Bawa designed for Osmund and Ena De Silva in 1962 in the heart of Colombo is for many a turning point in his career; the point at which Bawa's work began to exhibit a sensitivity to many of these issues, and accordingly, it offers a good example of some of these features at work [Figure 2]. The house was designed around an internal courtyard – itself a reinterpretation of vernacular Sinhalese domestic space – that afforded a great deal of openness and transparency through the main living areas. The pitched roofs were designed with large overhanging eaves that extend way beyond the structure's walls creating a veranda space that leads one into the internal courtyard, another effect of which is that space flows seamlessly from inside to out. This illusion of infinite spatiality and connection to the outside is accentuated by the alignment of doors and windows such that long through-vistas are created throughout the property.

Importantly however, this was not just stylistic innovation. This new appropriate mode of architectural praxis was also born from the proto-national social and economic

context. Sri Lanka's participation in the non-aligned movement through the 1960s had a lasting impact on the development of this architectural genre, as the likes of Bawa and Minnette De Silva built through times of severe shortage and import restriction. Glass and steel were expensive and almost impossible to get hold of, thus for the Ena De Silva house Geoffrey Bawa had to improvise, and he relied heavily on locally produced materials and locally trained craftspeople; something that remains integral to the sense of vernacularism that one reads in the modernist movement today. The De Silva house assumed a vernacular palette through the use of features like the omnipresent roof triple clad with local tiles, the rough stone floor, and the presence of local mill stones and water urns used for ornamentation. It was this type of considered improvisation and adaptation within a particular South Asian political and economic context that became integral to the development and evolution of a style. As one architect stressed:

...it became Sri Lankan because of the materials used, because back then in the 1960s of course we couldn't import materials. We had to be self-reliant and that political context that we had to go through made sure we had to deal with things our own way (Interview with Anonymous Architect 16.02.05).

Also importantly though, this context did not just influence materials and ornamentation. The De Silvas were adamant that they could not afford imported and unreliable air conditioning systems, as a result the architect had to design a structure that was well-ventilated and cool due to economic necessity. Hence there was also an economic functionality to opening the colonial house out, of bringing the outside in and keeping living spaces as ventilated as possible.

*Building with (tropical) nature: landscape, envelope, site*

If, in Europe, modernist houses had to negotiate the relatively stable characteristics of temperate nature, anything that Geoffrey Bawa and Minnette De Silva designed in Sri Lanka had to cope with the lively, super-fertile materiality of a tropical nature that positively crashes into and engulfs buildings. Bawa's first architectural partner, Ulrik Plesner, had grown up with Scandinavian modernism in the early 1950s, which valued the clean lines of abstract functionalism. However, after a few early experiments (for example, Bishop's College, Colombo 1960), Bawa and Plesner soon became aware that the sharp-edged prismatic forms of abstract modernism were not at all suited to Sri Lanka's environmental extremes of humidity, monsoons and aridity. Consequently, tropical modernism was driven by a process of adaptation and translation. Bawa realized that, instead of trying to achieve crisp whiteness, the architect working in a hot and humid climate should accept the inevitability of decay and exploit the patinas that were unavoidable results when building with tropical nature.

For example, when he was commissioned to build the Institute for Integral Education at Piliyandala near Colombo, he tackled the inevitable problem of keeping the large lecture

theatre cool all year by simply opening it on three sides, setting the rows of seats back from the walls and using detachable woven tats to provide barriers against the south-west monsoons [Figure 3]. Some years previously at the Polontalawa Estate bungalow, he went even further by reducing the structure to a simple roof spanning two existing boulders [Figure 4]. This type of architectural philosophy is perhaps nowhere more apparent than at the Kandalama hotel [Figure 1], which of course is literally carved into the rock face: a hotel designed to merge with the jungle, for the vegetation to engulf the structure such that site and context merge.

What one finds then, not just in Bawa's architecture but also in more contemporary developments of the tropical modernist genre, is that buildings are designed to settle into their surroundings. Sri Lanka's tropical modern architects attempt not to keep nature out or tame it, but to build with tropical nature, and to build such that five or ten years down the line the inevitable relentless onslaught of engulfing palms and wild grass, and the extremes of heat, rain and aridity do not pose a problem to a building designed to become properly woven into its environmental context. In her work on artistic tropical modernism in Brazil, Nancy Leys Stepan emphasizes that this mid-twentieth century movement consciously attempted to control tropical nature and space to create art and artifacts (Stepan 2001: 210). This is also true of Sri Lanka's tropical modernists whose effort to weave their structures into the surrounding environment must also be seen as a form of control and regulation of space, however, it is worth emphasizing that the desired effect is always something quite different. The desire is to create the illusion that there is little control of nature and space, of structures that exist in harmony with site; timeless structures that seem to emerge from the over-abundant surrounding tropical nature. As one architect put it, "...they're commonplace buildings from commonplace materials... So that they become buildings that ... when you look at those buildings in the landscape they look like they've always been part of that landscape – commonplace" (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).



Figure 3. Lecture Theatre, Institute for Integral Education, Piliyandala  
(Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

What is particularly revealing here is the tension in the use of the word 'landscape'. For landscape is a painterly term which holds within it implications of distancing, visibility and the scenic (see Cosgrove & Daniels 1988; Cosgrove 1984). Here, however, the term is used quite unproblematically to convey a sense that the desire is to collapse site and structure into one another, to create and produce their inseparability through ways of dealing with tropical nature that actually provides a challenge to the over-riding visibility of European landscape aesthetics (Stepan 2001: 208). Although the word 'landscape' is used by the above quoted architect to reflect on this built space, s/he was also at pains to point out that one of the fundamental precepts of this architecture is its ability to collapse the distance between subject and the surrounding environment: "Because he [Bawa] firmly believed that buildings were not meant to be seen, but they were meant to be background to people's lives... So if you're in the building you hardly sort of notice they're around" (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).



Figure 4. Polontalawa Estate Bungalow, Polontalawa  
 (Source: Archnet digital library  
[http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image-large.tcl?location\\_id=9012&image\\_id=50571](http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image-large.tcl?location_id=9012&image_id=50571))

It should be no surprise then that one of the guiding philosophies of Sri Lanka's tropical modernist architectural praxis that has emerged from this necessity to build *with* tropical nature, is the attention to producing *spatial experience* rather than visually prominent and symbolic structures. This architecture is about building experiences through space foremost; and the fluid connections between inside space and outside space become integral to this

process such that the very terms 'inside' and 'outside' begin to come unmoored from their accepted meanings. Many of the design techniques already identified, like for example overhanging eaves, open walled structures and unenclosed rooms, indoor courtyards, and extended through vistas, have all evolved gradually since the late 1960s to become more than just functionalist responses to the need to build with tropical nature. Specifically, they have become central to the attempt to build certain types of spatial experience, as the same architect stressed:

...the envelope [structure] is not as important as the space you build in. So when you say Geoffrey's contribution, that is ... that your concern with the envelope should not be as much as your concern with the places you live in, what you walk through, what you inhabit (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).

This is clearly identified as a design legacy that pervades this architect's own work:

...a lot of this philosophy comes out in [our] smaller work. Most of our houses look like nothing on earth, it's just a roof and columns, but what it is, it is about moving through the walls, moving past the columns, about the columns, and then engaging the outside, engaging the left space next to the columns and so on. So that is part of the way we work... There is a whole generation of architects in Sri Lanka, our generation and after, who have had to make [buildings this way] (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).

#### *Producing 'Sri Lankan nature'*

What we have then is an architectural style that not only negotiates tropical nature in a particular way out of necessity, but a genre that also *produces* nature in a quite specific way; or in other words an architectural genre that produces experiences of being in a particular kind of 'nature' that is not easily separated from culture. Sri Lanka's tropical modernist architecture produces ways of living and inhabiting, ways of moving through and engaging fluid spaces, that are at one and the same time human and non-human. In this section then, I offer a few brief examples of these kinds of architectural productions of human connections with the natural world, and highlight some implications of these types of fluid spatiality. As these examples show, this architecture and movement through this built space actually conjure particular types of *bodies and natures in the making*. Those being bodies that do not easily distinguish 'nature' from 'culture', and do so in ways that have over the years become emblematically Sri Lankan.



Figure 5. The porch area attached main house at Lunuganga  
(Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

Firstly, I want to highlight a very small detail again in one of Geoffrey Bawa's buildings, this time at Lunuganga, the architect's own private estate and gardens on Sri Lanka's southern coast. Figure 5 shows the porch area attached to the main house, which opens out to spectacular views on two sides, and on another backs on to a planted well. Just behind the concrete seats that are built into the walls separating the porch area from the planted well there is a seemingly inconspicuous detail that highlights the meticulous architectural attention and effort that has gone into creating an enclosed space in which subjects are supposed to experience some kind of bodily connection with the space outside the porch area. It is the very simple method of not enclosing the bottom frames with glass panes, which the architectural interns told me was a deliberate manoeuvre to allow air to circulate around one's upper back, neck and head when one sits in these seats; it allows the body to breathe.

There are countless other examples of features like this in Sri Lanka's contemporary tropical modernist structures where sensorially, physically, one seems prompted by building design to physically merge with the environment beyond the property. Take the infinity pool, for example, where overflowing water levels spill excess water into a trough from where it is pumped back into the pool, crucially of course creating views from within the pool that extend seamlessly to the lake, sea or reservoir beyond. Although by no means unique to Sri Lanka, the infinity pool has become the swimming pool of choice amongst the country's tropical modernist architects precisely because of the powerful illusion it creates, and the ways that the illusion in turn prompts contemplative moments when the outside comes in, when the subject merges with the natural environment beyond.

These types of features offer examples of tactics used by architects to connect inside and outside through experience, to create fluid spatialities, or as one architect put it: "...it's all about that somehow there is no difference between what's out there from yourself, you are part of that and that is as much part of you" (Interview with an anonymous architect 16.02.05). But more pertinently, these experiences actually produce particular types of worlds, bodies and entities, particular types of non-Cartesian, South Asian natures and bodies; bodies that do not objectify an external 'nature out there' in their engagements with the world, but rather live, and are instantiated, through the experiential accumulation of fluid connections between self and world. For many, those connections with an outside in the experiential moment such that self and world merge, where intuition takes over from the five other bodily senses in the experience of everyday life, hold particular salience within Buddhist philosophy. These types of fluid spatial experience where "you are part of that and that is as much part of you" can be, and as I show below are, often philosophically woven through Buddhist truths about the composition of a cosmic universal reality that cannot be known through reason, logic and objectivity alone, but must be intuitively experienced by the mindful subject who seeks to purge him/herself from cravings and desire (as the enlightenment subject may experience reality).

One of the implications of this then, is that despite Bawa's architectural secularism, and that of probably most contemporary tropical modern architects, Sri Lanka's tropical modern built spaces conjure spatial experiences that are often interpreted through a very subtly inflected Buddhist (and by extension Sinhala) religio-philosophical framework. This is an important point that raises the specter of a cultural/spatial politics that works and inscribes itself in the national consciousness merely through the experience of space; another example of how Buddhism pervades everyday life and never dwells far from social reality in these parts of the nation-state.



Figure 6. The view south across Cinnamon Hill, Lunuganga, from the main house (Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

Two further examples perhaps more clearly demonstrate how a Sri Lankan, Buddhist nature sits squarely within a tropical modern architectural praxis, and also how subsequently we can suggest that Buddhist bodies are produced through the fluid experiential moments in these types of space that tropical modern architects seek to create. Both examples take us back to Lunuganga, and the first revolves around a view from the back of the main house [Figure 6] south across Cinnamon Hill.

In the far distance (invisible in figure 6 because of the photograph's overexposure) there is a gleaming white temple in the adjacent hill that seems to gaze over the estate. Figure 7, taken in the middle distance, where the architect has placed a large jar under a tree on the hill, plainly shows the temple nestled into the verdant vegetation that engulfs the hills beyond the estate. Importantly, the temple is clearly visible with the naked eye even from the main house. In a book on the estate, Bawa's words offer a clue as to the natural philosophies woven into the aesthetics that he has consciously composed through this choreography of space:

Over the years moving through the garden as it grew, one saw the potential of various areas which had inherently different atmospheres. For instance, the long view to the south ended with the temple, but in the middle distance was a ridge with a splendid ancient *moonamal* tree and when I placed a large Chinese jar under it, the hand of man was established in this middle distance (Bawa in Bawa, Bon & Sansoni 1990: 13).



Figure 7. The view south across Cinnamon Hill, Lunuganga, from the middle distance (Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

Unsurprisingly, there is no easy distinction to be made here between 'nature' and 'culture'; the "hand of man" seems at home in these naturalized vistas (and there is also a feminist critique to be made of Bawa's masculinizing landscape gaze, but that is not the task of this paper). More explicitly though, the kind of environment that composes this view seems irreducibly Buddhist according to Bawa's testimony: the temple, the stupa, being the integral focal point of a surrounding environment that creates the special atmosphere "inherent" to the place. The stupa in fact comes to signify the naturalistic and harmonious reality in which the estate is set, so if the "hand of man" is established in the middle distance, then the stupa is positively woven into the environment beyond. This is a view, moreover a sensorial slice, of Buddhist nature.

The last example again comes from my own ethnographic research at Lunuganga. I and the two interns I was shadowing were staying in the Cinnamon Hill house designed by Bawa situated in the estate's grounds a short walk from the main house. Characteristically, the house opens out to the surrounding field and encroaching jungle.



Figure 8. The house at Cinnamon Hill, Lunuganga  
(Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

We spent an evening in the porch area chatting about the estate, our conversations set against a backdrop of flickering candlelight and the sound of cicadas, crickets and other nocturnal jungle rhythms that felt just meters away. Curious, I asked one of my companions how he felt being in a place like this. He was silent for a while, before he turned and asked his friend a question in Sinhala. "Infinity", she replied immediately. He thought a little longer before responding, "I feel like my mind keeps making these connections, one after another and another, to infinity. It's difficult to explain, words can't really explain it. Actually in Buddhism

there's a good explanation for this." He then proceeded to tell me a story about the Lord Buddha, the Arahata Ananda and their conversations about the search for the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, after which he added that he felt like his mind is growing and forging connections with something beyond himself. Finally, he added that he thought that this type of thing could happen only in this type of place.

In this brief encounter, it is evident that being in these fluid spaces, being neither inside nor outside, in 'nature' nor 'culture', does more than just provide a backdrop for non-secular, non-Cartesian modes of corporeality. It seems that the Buddhist body is effectively *produced* in and through this mode of spatiality, through the sorts of experiential moments that the built space conjures; space becomes an active agent in producing a certain type of non-secular, non-Cartesian subjectivity. Far from romanticizing this type of experience, however, I would emphasize the very normality of this type of being-in-the-world. In fact, this is an everyday type of engagement with place that tropical modern built space (amongst other modes of spatiality) in Sri Lanka strongly evokes, in ways that are irreducibly and qualitatively different from spatial experiences in European and North American modernist architectural spaces and natures where senses of inside and outside seem much more clearly defined. What emerges then are questions about what types of bodies and subjectivities are produced in and through what is deemed quintessentially Sri Lankan space, and politically, what role do these spaces play in shaping identities, and in articulating particular forms of racialized, and class specific hegemony through the practice of everyday life?

#### *Representation, built space and the evolution of a genre*

Non-dualistic conceptions of the natural world, as well as bodily experiences of transcendence, infinity or intimate immensity are by no means specific to Buddhist philosophy and experience. Furthermore, it is fair to say that on the whole, tropical modernist architecture in Sri Lanka has avoided explicit religious symbolism, Buddhist or otherwise. However, these riders do not negate the role that Buddhist discourse plays in this architectural praxis, particularly at the point when pieces of *architecture* enter into the broader parameters of society as *buildings*, subject to habitations, manifold public consumptions, negotiations and processes that make meaning from material form. Here in this last section then, it is important to outline the significant role that representation, discursive frameworks and historical narrative continue to play in the evolution and meaning of Sri Lanka's tropical modernist genre, and by extension the role that representation plays in the inflection of spatial experience. More often than not it is clients that demand *how* architects variously story their buildings, and so the instantiation of Buddhist natures and bodies through the sorts of spatial arrangements and experiences discussed in the last section cannot be understood in isolation from the representational frameworks in which these buildings come to be located.

Steadily since the 1960s, Sri Lankan tropical modernist architecture has become more or less emblematic of Sri Lanka. For example, in some of Geoffrey Bawa's best hotels the more expensive suites come fully equipped with a copy of the glossy, coffee table book entitled *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works*, by David Robson (2002). Lunuganga itself is now open as a 'boutique' hotel on the south-coast, its popularity in no insignificant way due to its association with Geoffrey Bawa and the architectural movement that he signifies. Both these observations indicate that these hotels and the spatial experiences they afford their visitors have come to be perceived as an integral part of one's 'authentic' Sri Lankan experience.

Notwithstanding the types of Buddhist sovereignty that are positioned and articulated as 'host' in these modes of hospitality architecture, it is a truism to say that there is now something stylistically quite 'Sri Lankan' about these specific modes of tropical modernist architecture and the spatial experiences they create. Accordingly, many of the country's better known tropical modern architects are increasingly in demand within the rest of Asia. Crucially then, a desire that spatial experiences stand for Sri Lanka – and a particular type of Sri Lankan-ness – has become client driven. One architect who collaborated with Bawa on the Kandalama hotel spoke about the constant battles they fought with their client, Aitken Spence, to author the space. Whilst he stressed how as architects they wanted to keep the place free from any kind of historical reference, Aitken Spence were fairly insistent that given this hotel was to be located in the heart of the Cultural Triangle,<sup>1</sup> the space should have some kind of historical referent to the region's Sinhala history; the sort of narratives popular with tourists, but as many scholars have shown, variously exclude in their foundational fictions and narrations of the nation (see Bhabha 1990; Perera 1999; Gunawardana 1995). It certainly seems worth asking then whether the types of spatial experiences that this paper has outlined, also get locked into a chain of association and meaning that mobilizes a certain type of Sinhala-Buddhist Sri Lankan-ness through those client driven pressures to reproduce an emblematically Sri Lankan spatial experience.

Another architect spoke of a hotel project for another hotel corporation at Koggala Lake. The brief was to come up with something that utilized the lake and was, in his client's words, "very Sri Lankan". The ambitious and captivating design that the architect presented involved tree houses, decking and pavilions floating on the lake; the inspiration and template of which was one of Martin Wickremasinghe's early works, *Apē Gama* ('our village'). The architect stressed that the narrativization of the design, its connection to all that Wickremasinghe and his work signify, was a major factor in convincing his client of the viability of this ambitious design. Again, for tourists (foreign or domestic) who use this hospitality architecture, tropical modern spatial experiences become locked into a chain of meaning and association that evokes a certain type of Sri Lankan-ness, and this generation of meaning and association is driven primarily by corporate clients.

But this client driven pressure also presents a major challenge to the development of the architectural genre, with some architects who are closely associated with the classical modes of Sri Lankan tropical modernism that emerged with Bawa and Minette de Silva stressing that when they try to innovate, to develop new concepts, clients will tell them in no uncertain terms that their plans are too modern, or not Sri Lankan enough. One architect, for example, testified that "... [clients have] an idyllic idea of Sri Lanka that has been processed through South-East Asia which is now coming back to us because that's what we do, which is a waste for me, it feels like I'm going back in time to something that we've done, meanwhile we need to get on with it" (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).

On the other hand, some contemporary architects known for building more modern and abstract structures and using more contemporary building materials than the vernacular stones, clays and woods preferred by other tropical modernists, employ the sorts of Sri Lankanist, tropical modern discourses that this paper has outlined to story their buildings. Even though their structures may evoke more Brutalist design aesthetics and appear stylistically very different to the architectural tropical modernism sketched in this paper, the factors that architects themselves use to draw these disparate buildings into a common genre are the

common discourses about the fluid spatial experiences these structures afford the client. It is a certain type of spatial experience wherein 'nature' and 'culture' merge, and inside space flows seamlessly to outside that is deemed 'typically Sri Lankan', thereby is used to knit stylistically diverse buildings into a common *genre*. One architect who I spoke with stressed that although he favors the straight line over the curve and contour, steel over stone, conceptually he perceives little discrepancy between his building philosophy and that of other tropical modernists within Sri Lanka because of the attention he pays to opening the house, to getting the garden on the inside, and to having that fluid link between the inside and the outside. For him, this is what makes his structures "very tropical and very Sri Lankan" (Interview with anonymous architect 21.02.05). Conceptually then, the important point to take from these notes around representation and meaning, are that the ways space is storied, either historically or aesthetically, play a major role in producing the nexus of meaning in which Sri Lanka's tropical modernist built space and subsequent spatial experiences become located.

### Conclusion

If, as social scientists and other scholars, we open ourselves up to the idea that 'reading' architecture can involve more than just an engagement with the semiotics and symbolic meanings of built structures, then we can begin to see and more cautiously speculate on what buildings actually do in the world as we move through them. In this paper, I have teased out the notion that Sri Lanka's tropical modernist buildings actually produce people and society in certain ways that are irreducibly *different* to ways that modernist structures in Europe or North America might do. Reading contemporary Sri Lankan architecture then becomes a task of engaging not just with architectural intention and authorship, but also with the ways that buildings are used, negotiated with and lived in; what they do in and through society once they become part of the worlds we inhabit.

This analysis has pointed to the ways that philosophically a very different type of 'nature' is materially lived with and engaged in Sri Lanka than in Europe or North America. Here, as will be evident by now, I do not just mean a tropical as opposed to temperate 'nature'. I mean a Buddhist 'nature' that is irreducible to philosophical investments in the exclusivity of an objective bio-physical world 'out there', with super-organic 'culture' rendered as this 'nature's' opposite. What the practices around this built space effectively produce are Buddhist 'natures' from which the human subject is inseparable, connected to, part of, woven into. Reading the complex connections between Sri Lanka's tropical modern architecture and Sri Lankan society allows us to see the ways that those and similar philosophical discourses are made material, produced, in the practice and experience of everyday life in ways that also inevitably shape people. One final and important word though. In the interests of fostering progressive forms of plurality within the contemporary nation-state, and because of a belief in the open generosity, plurality and ceaseless creativity in the current community of contemporary tropical modernists, it is disingenuous and of dubious political logic to cede what have been ostensibly secular modes of architectural praxis to the hubris of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and that is not the intention of this paper. However, this paper does trail clouds of political connotations, and I hope it does raise political questions of the practices that surround Sri Lanka's tropical modern built space. At the very least this paper suggests we take more seriously the constitutive relationships between built space and society.

## End Notes

1. Cultural Triangle constitutes an area defined by the Sri Lanka government linking three historic sites within which many archeological ruins are located.

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## Orality, Inscription and the Creation of a New Lore

Roma Chatterji

...[the] peculiar temporality of folklore as a disciplinary subject, whether coded in the terminology of survival, archaism, antiquity, and tradition, or in the definition of folkloristics as a historical science, has contributed to the discipline's inability to imagine a truly contemporary, as opposed to a contemporaneous, subject... Folklore is by many (though not all) definitions out of step with the time and the context in which it is found (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Folklore's Crisis* 1998: 283).

In an essay that critically reviews folklore's disciplinary position vis-à-vis history and culture, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) says that temporal dislocation between the site of origin and the present location of particular cultural forms signals the presence of folklore. Culture is conceptualized as heterogeneous, layered and composed of multiple strands that are interconnected in rather haphazard and contingent ways. This sense of contingency comes about through the juxtaposition of different time-scales such that the idea of 'locality' or 'location' becomes the conceptual frame within which the heterogeneous and circulating strands that we call culture come to cohere, if only for the moment. However as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, even before location comes to be viewed as a spatial category it is a temporal one; and by constituting the present as a series of disjunctive moments, folklore creates a gap between the 'contemporaneous' and the 'contemporary'.

In a different though related manner students of Indian society have made a distinction between 'Great' and 'Little Traditions' (Redfield 1955; Sinha 1957); or between *desha* (regional, provincial) and *marga* (Sanskritic global). Folk rituals, belief systems and the cultural institutions of rural India are thought to reveal an interaction between the forces of globalization and parochialization or *margi* and *deshi* aspects (Marriot 1955; Sinha 1957; Trautman 1997). For most scholars this interaction is a long-term and largely unconscious process. However, the historian Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal (2004) holds a somewhat different view. In his study of a small principality in one of the border regions of West Bengal, he shows how the semi-tribal Mulla court in what is now Bardhaman district, produced political institutions that self-consciously integrated aspects of what was then thought of as 'high culture' – i.e. the culture of the Mughal court in North India – with indigenous elements taken from local tribal and peasant communities. Many such peripheral principalities were declared to be

tributary states owing formal allegiance to the great though distant Mughal Empire. The geographical distance between the central authority and these border states gave the latter some amount of autonomy. Thus they were able to selectively adopt elements of Mughal culture while retaining much of what was traditionally available. The Mughal presence was thought to be alien but distant enough to be non-threatening, and could therefore become a site for experimenting with novelty. Traces of this self-conscious adoption of high culture aspects are, according to Sanyal, still visible in the peasant societies of these border regions; for instance, in the cultivation of particular genres of 'folk' songs that can engage with forms of novelty. Sanyal states that many genres of folk song in Bengal have cultivated and popular forms that require different kinds of performative contexts. He suggests that folk culture is constituted at three different levels, viz. *jana* (local), *desha* (regional) and *marga* (global or pan-Indian), and adds that the *deshi* or regional level acts as a site of mediation between the local and global levels.

Unfortunately, Sanyal does not develop on this theme. However, several scholars have tried to show that the conception of a 'cultural region' is important in the study of folklore's engagement with forms of modernity (Morinis 1982; Blackburn 2003; Chatterji 2005). It is precisely at this level that self-conscious reflection on context, style and the process of transmission actually occurs. This is the place at which the local is conceived of as such, and thus also the point at which "metadiscursive practices for creating, representing and interpreting" folk discourses are developed (Briggs 1993). In this essay I examine some contemporary attempts at producing new kinds of 'folk' discourses in a deliberate attempt to empower certain marginal groups in West Bengal. These attempts, as I will show, are part of a larger movement for the articulation of a distinctive regional identity in which 'folk culture' plays a central role.

The idea of region is not necessarily restricted to a geographical unit but refers rather to a social field formed "by a network of governmental processes, cultural flows and forms of popular transmission shaped by oral, print and visual media" (Chatterji 2005: 1). In this sense my field is carved out of a set of overlapping political regions – the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and also the erstwhile province of undivided Bengal of the colonial era – parts of which are now independent states in India and one part is the independent nation-state of Bangladesh.

### **Folklore and the literary canon**

Even though 'the folk' have played an important part in articulating ideas about Bengali culture and tradition, there have been no significant grass-root reformist movements of the kind taking place in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.<sup>1</sup> West Bengal, governed as it is by a combination of communist and socialist parties for the last three decades, is typically identified with a kind of middle class radicalism. Most reforms have been top-down including those that were initiated by an 'enlightened' elite in the colonial period (Basu 1992). Instead 'the folk' are perceived as an abstract category – an aid to the process of 'traditionalization' – a term coined by Shuman and Briggs to identify "aspects of the past as significant to the present" (1993: 109). Folklore comes to represent the 'authentic' voice of the folk, a living museum from which Bengal's history is to be excavated.

In a previous paper I have shown how the discourse of folklore reinforced by state policy comes to constitute parts of Bengal as a folklore region (Chatterji 2005). Once constituted, this region becomes the location for creative experimentation with the oral literature found here. Traditional 'folk' themes begin to circulate among new publics in popular urban spaces. I examine two Bangla novels that re-interpret folk myths as part of the ongoing project of the Bengali intelligentsia to find contemporary significance in traditional lore.

In an important paper on the Grimms' anthology of fairy tales, Charles Briggs (1993) says that folklore discourses use 'entextualizing' strategies to produce authentic folk voices. These texts are created with a political agenda in mind and it is the task of the folklorist to deconstruct these texts for the power effects that they produce. Unlike the texts that folklorists generally analyze, the texts that I present here are explicit in laying out their political agenda. Both novels draw upon the mother goddess complex to frame their stories. The fact that mother goddess worship (*shaktivism*) is an important religious tradition in Bengal may have influenced the choice of subject to some extent, but more importantly, it is the significance of the mother goddess as a mediator between the Great and Little traditions of Hinduism, or between local religion and textual or *shastric* religion that gives this theme its symbolic charge (Beane 2001; Humes 1998). Coburn (1988) states that even though the origin of the mother goddess complex lies in India's non-Aryan pre-history, there has been a continuous interplay between various religious streams – local/tribal, Buddhist and Hindu – to produce the mother goddess complex as we know it today. A point of significance for my argument is that the mediating position occupied by the mother goddess tradition allowed Bengali nationalists to claim a distinctive place for Bengal's culture within the civilizational mainstream (Chatterji 2003).

Mahashweta Devi's *Vyad Kaand* (the Book of the Hunter) and Nilakanth Ghoshyal's *Bhumi Kanya* (Earth Maiden), both fall within the Bengali nationalist tradition of historiography that assumed that Bengal's folk traditions had a seminal role in shaping her culture (Dutt 1990; Sen 1985). In keeping with a modern political perspective, they use folk tradition as a site for articulating contemporary concerns. However, in the forms in which they have become available for literary interpretation, these folk traditions have already been mediated through inscription. The role of folklorists in bringing oral traditions to print in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been extensively studied in India (Blackburn 2003; Sen 1960). But the relationship between writing and oral literature has a much older history. *Mangala Kavyas*, long narrative poems about specific gods and goddesses, written from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in Bangla, were circulated in oral form long before they were written down. According to Clark (1955) these poems have two distinct levels – the popular and the learned – and he believes that there is a chronological relationship between the two levels. The oral lore was re-inscribed in an orthodox Brahminic literary canon, but the fact that the medium was Bangla rather than Sanskrit allowed for its mass circulation, a fact that holds true as much today as it did in the medieval period.<sup>2</sup>

*Bhumi Kanya* by Nilkanth Ghoshyal was serialized in a Bangla literary magazine called *Desh* in 2004-05. It is a creative re-telling of some of the myths associated with Bhadu, a local goddess cult still prevalent in the border regions of West Bengal. The influence of recent folkloric interpretations of the Bhadu story and their role in the process of entextualizing the rituals and songs associated with her worship is evident in the novel. My intention in selecting these two works has been determined by the fact that the subjects they deal with

represent two important moments of literary inscription: one set in the sixteenth century and the other in the present.

### Chandi Mangala of Mukundaram and Mahashweta Devi

In the preface to her novel, Mahashweta Devi says that the *Chandi Mangala Kavya* of Kavikankan<sup>3</sup> Mukundaram is the inspiration for this work. This epic poem is composed of several different stories that bear little connection to each other; there is an autobiographical account of the composer's journey to a new settlement in a different part of Bengal that reveals, according to critics, a detailed knowledge of the current socio-political state of the society as well (Bhattacharyya 1976; Devi 2002); the *Vyad Kaand*, the story of the hunter Kalketu and his wife Phullara; and the adventures of the merchant Dhanapati, his two wives Khulana and Lalona, and his son. According to scholars like T.W. Clark (1955) and Ashutosh Bhattacharyya (1976) these stories show evidence of the evolution of the cult of Goddess Chandi from that of a benign protector of forest life to a more malevolent deity who deliberately brings misfortune to coerce humans into giving her worship.<sup>4</sup>

Further according to the preface of *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahashweta Devi was inspired by the *Vyad Kaand* of Kavikankan Mukundaram's epic poem, where he describes the lives of nomadic, forest dwelling tribes like the Shabars. She describes the clash between contrasting forms of life through the experiences of two couples, the migrant Brahmin priest Mukundaram and his wife, and Kalya and Phuli, a young Shabar couple. She explores the culture of the Shabars and how they cope with the erosion of their way of life as new settlements encroach on forestland. In the novel the Brahmin Mukundaram is seen using his experiences with the forest dwelling couple to depict the characters of Kalketu and Phullara, both re-incarnations of demi-gods who were cursed to suffer mortal birth. He invokes the Goddess of the Great Forest (Abhaya or Reassurance) through the voice of the hunter Kalketu (Devi 2002: vii).

Mahashweta Devi says that Mukundaram's personal experience with hunters and gatherers in medieval Bengal inspired her to write a novel that would help in the re-historicization of the Shabar tribe. Apart from being a renowned novelist, Mahashweta Devi is also a well-known activist who has worked among former 'criminal tribes' like the Lodhar and Kheria Shabars of Central India.<sup>5</sup> She thinks of this novel as an attempt to re-create the lost oral lore of the Shabars and thereby restore their self-respect. The novel is based on her experiences with the Shabars, the stories that they have published about themselves and their lore in her journal *Bartika*.

The novel is interesting not only in that it seeks to re-inscribe a medieval literary text in the form of an experimental Bangla work using contemporary stylistic devices, but also because of the way that the author seeks validation both from the Shabar community as well as from Mukundaram's life experiences. She states that she was inspired by Mukundaram's own endeavor which was based on a mixture of direct experience and acquired knowledge of the socio-political events of sixteenth century Bengal.<sup>6</sup> She weaves in fragments of the *mangala kavya* story of Kalketu and Phullara into her own narrative, in a way that both subverts as well as gives authenticity to her own narrative. Thus, whilst in the *mangala kavya* the goddess gives Kalketu a boon that makes him the founder and chieftain of the city of 'Gujarat', it is not given on the basis of his devotion to her or to forest creatures, but rather,

to put a break on his wanton destruction of forest dwelling animals.<sup>7</sup> Instead in the novel, Kalketu becomes the first priest of a new goddess cult and, according to Devi, an ancestor of one of the priestly clans of the Shabar. In the novel an old rogue elephant, a representative of the forest goddess, kills Kalya as he inadvertently ventures into the sacred grove where hunting is forbidden. This act of transgression and untimely death leads to his transfiguration into a clan ancestor and demi-god. The character of Mukundaram in the novel who is responsible for this transfiguration is opposed to the deceitful Brahmin priest in a Shabar origin myth who betrays the hospitality of his tribal hosts by trying to steal an aniconic symbol of the forest goddess. The Brahmin is killed by the goddess, and the Shabar people condemned to destitution. Their lot will change only when a Shabar hunter will be able to find and trap the golden iguana, the *vahana* (vehicle) of the goddess, as Kalketu once did.

Devi draws on the authority of the myths published by Shabar activists in her journal, *Bartika*, to validate her version of the Kalketu story, not on stories that are orally narrated. In fact, she stresses the fact that the stigma of the label 'criminal tribe' imposed on the Shabar in colonial times gave them a form of cultural amnesia so that they forgot their oral lore.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the attempt to 're-historicize' the Shabar is interesting though somewhat paradoxical. The 'Shabar voice' must first be entextualized before it can be re-inscribed in Devi's novel. Similarly, when she refers to Kavikankan Mukundaram's first-hand knowledge of the Shabar and the forest, it is at the moment when the forest and the Shabar's distinctive way of life are about to be destroyed. Thus she refers to the names of trees mentioned in the *Chandi Mangala* that are felled when Kalketu clears the forest to make his settlement.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) quotes Ong as saying that writing did not reduce orality when it was first introduced; rather, it enhanced it. She also says that 'inscription' creates a gap between words and speakers, a space that allows for creative innovation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 309). In the example discussed above we see how an act of inscription by a Brahmin in the sixteenth century – the compilation of oral narratives about the goddess Chandi into a written text – led to a proliferation of similar texts. Thus not only are there several other versions of the *Chandi Mangala* compiled by other authors in the medieval period; but there are also more recent oral and painted narratives in Bengal's folk tradition that are based on the *Chandi Mangala Kavya*.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Mahashweta Devi's novel has inspired popular plays on the same theme and even became the theme of a *Durga puja panda*<sup>10</sup> in Calcutta last year (Ghosh 2000).<sup>11</sup>

Mahashweta Devi's novel allows us to read popular culture as a postmodernist text that makes self-conscious use of citation as a device to politicize its location both within tradition as well as in the modern. Peter Shand (2002), in a paper on the cultural appropriation of Maori art, discusses Julia Kristeva's view of language as being constitutive of texts that form "mosaics of citations; every text is an absorption and transformation of other texts" such that it is able to straddle disjunctive registers.<sup>12</sup> He says that the fusion of high and low art creates opportunities for cultural critique made possible through dislocation from their conventional contexts (Shand 2002: 54). In the examples discussed here we see that it holds true for medieval times as much as it does now. Kavikankan Mukundaram's text draws upon earlier versions of the epic found both in the oral as well as the written traditions. Similarly, other composers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as folk painters, folk story tellers, modern-day novelists, play-writes, and contemporary producers of popular culture all become part of a culture of citation and circulation.

In the next example, the discussion is on folklore writing giving impetus to the process of entextualization. As I will show in the next section, the production of certain folkloric themes has given rise to new literary subjects that are in circulation in the Bangla public sphere.

### **Bhumi Kanya: The transformation of a goddess myth**

Let me begin with a summary of the novel by Neelkantha Ghoshyal: Folklorist Papiya is researching Bhadu *puja* in Purulia when she comes across Herambh Bauri (a low caste man) who tells her the secret story of Bhadu's life. Bhadu was an orphan found by the chief (*mukhya*) of Lada village. Raja Nilmoni Singh Deo of Kashipur in whose kingdom Lada is located has just introduced a new strain of paddy – *Bhaduyi* – for cultivation in Kashipur. He tours the kingdom, disguised as an alien traveler, to see if his subjects are in favor of the new crop. He is accompanied by his minister Dhruvachand. In the course of his travels he hears that the chief of Lada village has a daughter who is the living embodiment of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. He decides to see her in person and visits Lada disguised as a Sanskrit *pundit* (scholar). He is wonderstruck by her beauty and grace and decides to adopt her as his daughter. However, since her father, the village chief, will not let her go away, he decides to let Bhadu stay in the village but to be educated in a manner befitting a royal princess. Dhruvachand stays behind to oversee her education. Bhadu's new identity - as a royal princess - is kept secret. Bhadu is very popular among the village people as she works actively for their betterment. In this way she meets Anjan, the son of the doctor (*kaviraj*) of a neighbouring village. They fall in love much to the dismay of Dhruvachand. In the meantime the king is imprisoned by the British because of his active involvement in the popular uprising of 1857.<sup>13</sup> He is however released later, and on hearing of Bhadu's involvement with Anjan, orders the latter's capture and secret imprisonment. Bhadu is heartbroken and together with two of her companions, travels across the kingdom singing songs at the gates of various forts in which Anjan may be imprisoned, hoping that he will recognize her voice and respond. The king relents and Anjan is released, but by then Bhadu has disappeared. Her companions report that one morning she seemed to fade away, merging with the sky. Village women continue to sing the songs that Bhadu first sang in the fruitless search for her lover.<sup>14</sup>

The positioning of Papiya, the researcher, as the main interlocutor, signals the novel's self-conscious location within the larger discourse of folklore. The folk goddess Bhadu has been at the center of folklore research for the last four decades. More recently, her story has been dramatized and is now on the way to becoming a popular theme in urban performative and literary genres. The point I want to make here is that accounts of the Bhadu *puja* produced by folklorists have been used as source material for the transformation of a ritual complex into a literary subject. This is seen through the way in which certain motifs from the folklore discourse are woven into the literary text. Before I discuss the motifs in detail, a brief account of the Bhadu complex is in order. My account is based on versions of her origin myth that circulate in the border districts of West Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand (Chakravarti 2001) and on songs sung during her festival.

Bhadu, a local goddess who was born human, in answer to his prayers as a daughter of the Maharaja of Kashipur, a former principality in Purulia, was given the status of a goddess after her early death. The enigma of her virginity and untimely death has led to many stories

that purport to explain it. One set of stories view Bhadu as an incarnation of the goddess Durga who was born to the Maharaja. Being a goddess, she could stay with him only for a short period of time and died a virgin because no human man dared to marry her. After her death the king instituted this *puja* in her memory. It is performed in the rainy season of August-September at the time when the paddy seeds are being transplanted and the worshippers are exclusively women.<sup>15</sup> An important feature of the ritual is the songs that are sung about the goddess.

Most of the songs depict Bhadu as a young married woman who is visiting her parents' home for the festival season. In this depiction Bhadu songs follow the pattern of the *agomoni* songs sung to welcome the goddess Durga at the time of the Durga *puja* in October-November. However some Bhadu songs refer to 'historical' details in the goddess's biography, such as the name of her father, Raja Nilmoni Singh Deo. Raja Nilmoni Singh Deo is an important historical figure in Purulia. He participated in the uprising in 1857 and was imprisoned by the British for instigating his Santal subjects to raid the royal treasury.<sup>16</sup> However, Nilmoni Singh Deo had no daughters, and this fact is a folklore conundrum that has generated much speculation.

Interestingly, many Bengali folklorists attempt to re-construct Bhadu's history using the songs and origin myth as archeological objects that may help to reveal Bengal's pre-history. Ashutosh Bhattacharyya (1965), one of the first folklorists to write on Bhadu, views this *puja* as a tribal agricultural ritual that has been transformed by 'Hindu iconicity' (*Hindu poutolikta*) and by the colonizing influence of the Maharajas of Kashipur. Later folklorists do not necessarily follow Bhattacharyya in making a strict separation between tribal and Hindu aspects of the ritual. However, they do follow his methodology in that they separate the songs from the ritual and foreground the former as the primary object of analysis. The discussion that follows is based largely on one text by Shubrata Chakravarti (2001) since this is one of the most comprehensive and most recent studies on Bhadu and summarizes all preceding interpretations of the Bhadu complex.

As I have stated, most folklorists have tried to re-construct Bhadu's life-story from the songs sung during her festival. Two significant events of her life stand out: her birth as Raja Nilmoni Singh Deo's daughter and her untimely death as a virgin. Given that it can be demonstrated that she was not his daughter, some folklorists assume that this festival was started by the king to deflect the force of a rebellion among his poor subjects, led perhaps by a woman. He was able, according to another account, to appropriate Bhadu's voice by giving her a royal lineage. Her untimely death has generated another set of explanations. Thus, Bhadu was indeed a member of the royal family even if not the direct descendent of the king. She eloped with a low caste man and was killed by her kinsmen in an attempt to avert dishonor to the family name. The royal house of Kashipur then instituted a festival in her name in order to deflect popular anger as Bhadu was loved by the king's low caste subjects. A point worth noting in these accounts is that the songs and myths are treated as being potential documents. There is no attempt to analyze them as semiotic texts. No folklorist as far as I know has actually examined the genealogy of the royal family to discover whether a princess called Bhadu actually existed. I spoke to one of the senior members of the royal family in her home in Purulia town in 1983, and she told me that Bhadrashwari (Bhadu) was the daughter of Maharaja Bikhambar Narayan Singh Deo. She was to be married but her bridegroom died on the eve of the wedding.<sup>17</sup>

In Chakravarti's text, the Bhadu myth is an ideological construct, a successful piece of propaganda to discipline and pacify a potentially rebellious population. The establishment

of her worship can be interpreted as an attempt to incorporate the source of rebellion into the structure of power. However, Bhadu does retain her exemplary status in this text – if not as a goddess, then as a figure that represents all womankind and by extension all subalterns. The emphasis on the songs, especially on the lyrics, has helped to crystallize a particular disciplinary perspective which assumes that folklore is necessarily concerned with the search for the authentic voice of the people and that the feminine voice is the privileged site of this authenticity.

Scholars such as Chatterjee (1993) and Sarkar (2001) discuss that the 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist historiography of Bengal posited a domestic space that was insulated from the modernizing influences of the colonial state. The internal space came to be represented as the site for national resurgence. The association between domestic space and women's activities that become the symbolic markers of this space is folklore's contribution to this historiography. This point will be elaborated in the next section. However, before this I must first examine folklore's contribution to the new social imaginary that is being formed in contemporary Bengal.

In order to conceptualize folklore's role in cultural production, Gerald Warshaver (1991) proposes a triadic schema in which folklore of the first level is the lore produced by the folk; when this lore becomes the object of knowledge of a discipline it becomes second level folklore. Third level or postmodern folklore consists of "abstract reconceptualization and denotative reconstitution of second level constructs of first level folklore so that it appears bearing traits which... can be identified as postmodern..." (Warshaver 1991: 220). One could think of the two novels discussed here as exercises in postmodern folklore. The "representational practices" of folklorists constitute the raw material that the novelists work with (Warshaver 1991: 224). Thus *Bhumi Kanya* uses motifs from folkloric representations of the Bhadu story rather than from the oral tradition.

In an earlier work I have argued that Bengali folklorists have focused on the songs to the exclusion of the ritual to conceptualize *Bhadu puja* as a secular festival (Chatterji 2005b). Bhadu songs, now available in print form, are supposed to represent the authentic voice of rural women, expressing their daily concerns. Secularism is associated with the folk voice in many parts of the world (Asad 2002). In Bengal today, it is used by left-oriented intellectuals to counter the cultural nationalism propagated by right-wing political parties. In this context women become suitable representatives of the folk. They can be used to represent the category of the subaltern, cutting across such conflicting divisions such as class, caste, religion and locality.<sup>18</sup>

### History, realism and folklore

Bengali folkloristics have traditionally engaged with the ideology of secularism and the political form that it takes in the discourse of art criticism, i.e., realism. Since the first quarter of the twentieth century Bengali intellectuals have tried to harness folk forms to express popular political and social concerns.<sup>19</sup> In 1943 the left oriented Indian peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed to try and introduce the register of 'socialist realism' into folklore and folk art so that the latter would reflect the real life concerns of the common people.<sup>20</sup> Folk art had to be transformed into a 'peoples' art' that would help in the growth of peoples' power (Oberoi 1998). However as Sudhi Pradhan (1979) says, IPTA's theatre activities in Bengal were

largely confined to urban areas. Their impact on rural areas was limited and they were less interested in folk culture per se, creating instead, hybrid forms of music and dance out of the three broad traditions that were thought to make up modern Bengal's popular musical tradition – i.e., folk, classical and "western" (Oberoi 1998).

The Left Front<sup>21</sup> government that has been in power in West Bengal for three decades has been more successful in this regard. The first attempt at establishing government institutions for the preservation and study of folk culture began in the late seventies. An advisory committee called the *Loksanskriti Parishad* (Folk Cultural Committee) was set up to explore possibilities of district level interaction. Members of this committee organized workshops in the different districts of West Bengal to facilitate interaction between folk artists, local scholars and government agencies. The government also set up a series of awards for folk artists and has instituted scholarships and pension schemes for folk performers. *The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre* was set up in the early eighties for the promotion and publication of research on the folk culture of West Bengal.<sup>22</sup> *Lokshruti*, the biannual journal brought out by the Centre, has become an important forum for intellectual debate and discussion on the folk culture of West Bengal.

The significance of such forms of government intervention lies in the fact that it creates sites through which a new form of local self-knowledge can emerge. Most of the scholars who contribute to *Lokshruti* have a moral and political stake in the constitution of folk culture. For them, folk culture embodies the symbolic imaginary through which they can critique certain trends in *bhadralok* (cultured) society. Folklore then represents the site which is both of Bengali society and yet not fully in it. The folk become a virtual community used to delineate the spiritual qualities not just of the region, but also through the mediation of state agencies, of the nation itself (Dutt 1954).

Government intervention in folk culture has allowed the latter to be transposed on to a different register such that it can be co-opted by new forms of institutionalization. The print media is one such form. Since Anderson's (1983) seminal work, its role in the articulation of new political entities has been extensively studied. In India, forms of folk culture have been re-articulated by print media in the service of new political formations (Ashley 1993). These forms also acquire a new kind of aesthetic autonomy in this process, such that they can absorb new contexts of performance.

Oral and literary traditions have co-existed for a very long time in India. Some scholars see this in a positive light as two intellectual streams that mutually enhance each other (Sen 1986; Bhattacharyya 1976). Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, nationalist intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore who set up Vishva-Bharati University at Shantiniketan, actively supported institutions for the propagation of folk culture. Of course this meant that only certain images that were selected for circulation in the literary media were considered archetypal folk forms such as Baul songs, made popular by poets like Tagore and Nazrul Islam; and Santal<sup>23</sup> dances represented in paintings of the Shantiniketan artist Nandalal Bose. Some activists like Pashupati Mahato (2000) consider this to be a process of internal colonization that has led to a form of 'cultural memocide' and to a loss of voice among the tribal people of Central India. Mahato is responding to the writings of an earlier generation of folklorists like Ashutosh Bhattacharyya who felt that there was a mutual exchange of cultures between Bengali Hindus and tribal groups and not a form of forced imposition (Mahato, 2000). To illustrate this point, he shows how particular forms of devotional song

evolve from tribal (i.e. Santali) songs. Other scholars have pointed out factual anomalies in Bhattacharyya's data (Chakravarti 2001).<sup>24</sup> Bhattacharyya seems to have used the Santals as a reference point because they are important in the literary imagination of modern Bengal. In a similar vein, recent theatre productions on the Bhadu theme call Bhadu a Santal goddess, in spite of the fact that folkloric treatises on Bhadu and on the songs associated with her worship are commonly available and widely read all over Bengal.<sup>25</sup> All folkloric treatises on Bhadu refer to her as an agricultural goddess worshipped by low-caste Hindus in the border regions of Bengal. Some scholars like Bhattacharyya admit that her worship may have roots in some archaic tribal ritual, but much the same can be said for any form of goddess worship in India. The Santals have come to represent the voice of subalterneity in Bengal today and there are departments for the study of Santali language and literature in universities such as Vishva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan (Azad 2004). The attempt to incorporate the Bhadu cult into Santali cosmology is somewhat paradoxical, given the fact that the low caste groups who worship Bhadu were absorbed into the caste system only in the medieval period, at the time of the composition of the *mangala kavyas*, when popular folk cults became Hinduized. Bhadu has no *mangala kavya* – perhaps the absorption of her cult into Brahmanical Hinduism never did take place. These groups can lay claim to autochthonous status as much as the more autonomous indigenous groups that are called tribes since the colonial period (Sarkar 2005). Mahashweta Devi goes precisely to a text that was used to proselytize – to bring groups into the Hindu fold – to re-constitute the lore of the Shabar tribe. The point that I am trying to make is that the tradition that is being re-constituted here is thought to be hybrid, disrupted by historical events, and not unbroken or continuous. It is this view of tradition that allows for selective re-appropriation to create a regional culture that can find its place within a pan-Indian civilization.

In this essay I have juxtaposed two moments in Bengal's history when the written and the oral inflect each other. The *Chandi Mangala Kavya* belongs to the written tradition that is also part of secondary orality. Bhadu belongs to the oral tradition and has only recently begun to be appropriated by the written tradition. If we read the contemporary history of the vernacular public sphere with the events of the medieval period, not only are recent attempts at entextualization and recontextualization given historical depth; but the past is made contemporary. Much of contemporary Bengal's oral lore has been re-contextualized from popular medieval texts like the *Mangala Kavyas* that are still enacted in villages. New forms of oral composition are modeled on the poetic language that was formed through these texts (Chatterji 1985).<sup>26</sup> Folklorists need to turn their gaze to the past, not to re-configure 'survivals,' but to make the discipline truly contemporary.

## End Notes

1. The Dalit (former 'untouchable' castes) movement in Maharashtra and the Anti-Brahman movement in Tamil Nadu have re-shaped local societies in both states (Basu 1992).

2. The Bangla of Kavikankan Mukundaram's epic has numerous Arabic-Persian words in it. After the Turkish conquest of Bengal in the thirteenth century, Persian became the court language and Arabic was also studied. The composers of the *mangala kavyas* all pay homage to their patrons who were largely Muslims ([http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/P\\_0336.HTM](http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/P_0336.HTM), downloaded on 18 April 2006).

3. This is a title that he was given after he wrote this much acclaimed epic.

4. Bhattacharyya says that the poetic text was written at a time when distinctions between different groups of goddess worshippers were becoming blurred. However, he bases his hypothesis on the text itself and not on other historical sources. Apart from the version composed by Kavikankan Mukundaram, there are several other *Chandi Mangalas* as well, some of which precede Mukundaram's version. Manik Datta composed the first one. Another composer, Dvija Madhava was probably Mukundaram's contemporary. Dvija Ramdev, from the border region of Chittagong, now in Bangladesh, composed the *Abhaya Mangala* and Bharatchandra, the *Ananda Mangala*, all variants of the goddess narrative ([http://banglapedia.org/HTM\\_0123.HTM](http://banglapedia.org/HTM_0123.HTM), downloaded on 18, April 2006).

5. The 'Criminal Tribes Act' was passed in 1871 by the British Indian government. It was believed that certain groups within the caste system were 'criminals' by hereditary occupation. Meena Radhakrishna (2001) says that this act was based on assumptions about 'vagrancy' and impoverishment that was associated with forms of life that were considered nomadic. Such groups were forced to adopt a sedentary way of life. After independence, such groups were re-designated as 'de-notified tribes'. I use the word 'tribe' rather than 'indigenous peoples' or its Indian equivalent 'adivasi' as it is still commonly used in India, even by activists like Mahashweta Devi.

6. Mahashweta Devi considers Kavikankan Mukundaram to be a forerunner to a more modern literary sensibility as he includes his own experience of migration in the epic text. The modern Bangla novel that deals with the subjective aspects of its characters is supposed to have been inspired by the English novel in the nineteenth century (Chatterjee 1993).

7. This is a form of negative devotion that is well known in medieval Bengal. As important Sanskrit texts are translated and re-inscribed in folk culture, a transformation of the major characters also occurs. Demons come to acquire spiritual grace through the power of their hatred for the gods. Single-minded hatred is sometimes even more effective than single-minded devotion in achieving a sighting of God. The mystical movement called *Bhakti* (devotion) that spread throughout India in the medieval period shaped popular religion, lore and literature. The reverberations of this movement are still being felt today (Sen 1987).

8. She makes a distinction between groups like the Shabar who have forgotten their oral lore and those like the Santal, Munda and Oraon, neighbouring tribal groups who have rich oral traditions.

9. Bengal and Bihar have popular story telling traditions that involve depictions of sacred stories in the form of scroll paintings. Excerpts from the *mangala kavyas* or even variants of the stories told in them are sung while the *patua* (finder of the scroll) displays the scroll register by register before an audience. The *pata* tradition is probably very old, but the first collections of such scrolls and writings on them date to the end of the eighteenth century (Singh 1995).

10. *Puja* here refers to an annual public celebration and worship. However the word may also be used to denote worship organized within the household. A *pandal* is the temporary structure constructed to house the icon (*murti*). Unlike permanent icons made of metal or stone, the icon worshipped at annual Durga *puja* in Bengal is made from straw and clay. The icon is immersed in a river or pond at the end of the 5-day *puja*. Even though *pandals* are temporary structures they are often very elaborate and designed around particular themes that reflect contemporary political and social issues.

11. The Calcutta edition of the *Telegraph* posts a list (with description of the themes) of Durga *puja pandals* of Calcutta and its suburbs every year. Last year's list includes a reference to the "Nalin Sarkar

Street Sarbojanin Durgostab" on Aurobindo Sarani, which had *pata* paintings of Phullara, and Kalketu on the walls of the *pandal*. The goddess Durga was depicted as a village woman with the god Ganesa in her lap (<http://www.telegraphindia.com/1031002/asp/others/print.html>, downloaded on 18 April 2006).

Even though the selection of the theme was inspired by the popularity of Mahashweta Devi's novel among the urban elite of Bengal, the portrayal of the characters from the *Chandi Mangala* was inspired by the *pata* painting tradition of Bengal as was the juxtaposition of figures from different stories in the text. The scroll paintings that depict the *Chandi Mangala* always concentrate on the second story, i.e. the one about the merchant Dhanapati and his vision of a beautiful maiden – 'Mangala Chandi' who kept swallowing and regurgitating an elephant. In the scroll paintings there is only a fleeting reference to the story of the hunter Kalketu. He is depicted as carrying seven pots of gold, given to him by the goddess Abhaya or Chandi. He is seen accidentally by Khulana, a character from the next story. The rest of the scroll makes no reference to the first story. In the epic the two stories are kept completely separate. Interestingly, in the *pandal* depiction of the epic we find a confluence of two traditions – a contemporary activist one that gives prominence to the 'tribal' presence in Bengali culture via the works of Devi; and the older popular tradition of *pata* narratives. Thus, the goddess is not depicted as 'Abhaya' for which there is no iconic model but rather as the village 'Managala Chandi' with her elephant headed son in her lap. Recent *pata* paintings show the goddess seated on a lotus flower with Ganesa on her lap instead of showing her swallowing an elephant; and the song says that Dhanapati misread the vision of the goddess kissing her elephant headed son, Ganesa and thought she was swallowing him instead (Singh 1995).

According to Anjan Ghosh (2000), public festivities associated with Durga *puja* emerged in the eighteenth century with the emergent comprador elite in Calcutta. The British colonial elite also patronized these festivities.

A Calcutta-based theatre group performed *Phullaketur Pala*, based on the *Chandi Mangala*, but clearly inspired by Mahashweta Devi's novel in that it emphasizes the story of Kalketu and Phullara. In the play as in the novel, Kalketu is depicted as a tribal leader who leads the journey of his tribe from a nomadic way of life to settled agriculture. The handbill of the play reprinted in the *Telegraph* says that it depicts the conditions of that time and tries to historicize the modern psyche (<http://www.telegraphindia.com/1031030/asp/others/print..html>, downloaded on 18, April 2006).

12. Julia Kristeva. *Semeiotike: recherches pour une semanalyse* (1969: 146; quoted in Shand 2002: 56).

13. Variously known as the 'Indian Mutiny' and 'The first war of Independence' depending on the perspective of the writer.

14. Ghoshyal's novel *Bhumi Kanya* was serialized in the Bangla magazine *Desh* from November 2004 to April 2005. Many new literary works first appear in this magazine before being published commercially.

15. It will be obvious that I am referring to wet rice cultivation. In border districts like Purulia paddy is sown in May-June and the crop is harvested in November and December. Dry rice cultivation is rare and until recently many areas in the border of Bengal cultivated only one crop a year (Chatterji 1985).

16. The Santal are the largest tribal group in Bengal. The timing of the 1857 uprising dovetails with several other localized uprisings that were taking place in different parts of India at that time. One of these was the Santal rebellion of 1855-57. Many nationalist historians interpret this rebellion as a first stirring for a nationalist cause by tribal groups in India and view Nilmoni Singh Deo as a nationalist.

17. Clearly, the relationship between Nilmoni Singh Deo and Bhadu is a metonymic one, established in the oral tradition. Nilmoni Singh Deo is the subject of folk narrative as is Bhadu and since both figures are associated with Kashipur they are often linked. Unlike the folklorists discussed above, my respondent was quite comfortable with a semiotic explanation for the Bhadu *puja*. She told me that the women of the royal family once performed a goddess *puja* at the time of great misfortune. Kashipur was being attacked and Bhadu, on hearing of an impending defeat, chose to kill herself rather than face dishonor. However, the rumors of defeat were false and the goddess *puja* was institutionalized in Bhadu's memory. There is an implied reference to alien conquerors (i.e. Muslims) in this story. The story seems to have been influenced by Rajasthani tales of valour and virtue, in which Rajput women prefer to commit ritual suicide rather than face dishonour at the hands of the enemy. *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* by James Todd, a colonial administrator and folklorist, was widely read all over India and influenced many creative writers in Bengal as well, one of the most famous being Rabindranath Tagore (Mukherjee 2004).

18. Bhadu songs that address the goddess as an ordinary village woman are privileged in folkloric discourse rather than those that describe her as a goddess. Thus:

Don't cry, don't cry Bhadu  
Your father, o Blighted one  
Where will he get more *kajal* (collorium)  
(Chatterji 2005:199).

Contrast this song with the following:

The drums beating in the bamboo grove  
My treasure Bhadu is coming  
Look, look Vraja maiden, how far is Vrindavan  
You are a friend of Vrindavan, you live there  
Who are your parents, whom do you look to for support  
Whose house did you go to, who took care of you  
Mother's hands are stained with red sandalwood paste, she wears a garland of red hibiscus flowers  
around her neck  
I went to Kashipur and saw a tiger sitting on a golden plate  
The tiger doesn't eat people, he has come to show himself  
(Bhattacharyya 1965: 77).

References to the Great Goddess, as Durga, as Kali and even as Radha occur repeatedly in this song. Bhattacharyya professes to be puzzled by the imagery, probably because he views the Bhadu complex from the perspective of a so-called aboriginal, agricultural ritual.

19. The *Swadeshi* (self-rule) movement (1905-1907) was the first attempt to use folklore for political mobilization. This nationalist upsurge was sparked off by the plan to partition the province of Bengal. The rationale for partition was purportedly administrative. However there were also political reasons such as the threat of a burgeoning Bengali nationalism in the nineteenth century.

20. The Bengal famine of 1943, the worst famine in living memory according to the oral tradition in Bengal, coincided with the establishment of the IPTA. This famine was artificially induced in the sense that it was the result of the diversion of grain for the war effort by the colonial government rather than because of crop failure. Several of the IPTA's most famous theatre productions as well as films by some of Bengal's most illustrious film directors are on the theme of the Bengal famine. Folk songs on this theme are still sung all over Bengal (Chatterji 1985).

21. 'The Left Front' refers to a coalition of political parties in Bengal with communist and socialist orientations.
22. Much of this information was given to me by Professor Mihir Bhattacharya of Jadavpur University, Calcutta. I interviewed Professor Bhattacharya in October 2004.
23. The Santals are a numerically dominant tribal group in West Bengal. They are a significant presence in Bolpur, the place where Tagore established his famous institution, Shantiniketan.
24. As Chakravarti (2001) points out, the forms of song attributed to the Santals by Bhattacharya are more popular among other though less famous tribal groups.
25. I quote: "*Bhadreshwari Galpo* is the tale of a popular and benign princess's transformation into a cult figure. A popular folk icon, Bhadreshwari or Bhadu is worshiped by the Santals of the Bankura-Purulia-Birbhum-Burdwan districts of Bengal and a large part of Jharkhand state" (*Telegraph*, Calcutta, June 17, 2003).
26. While doing fieldwork in Purulia, a district in West Bengal, I realized that much of the oral lore, especially that which is concerned traditional agricultural practices, was not based exclusively on local tradition but was imperfectly remembered from medieval texts like the *Sivayan* and *Khanar Bachan* that circulated orally.

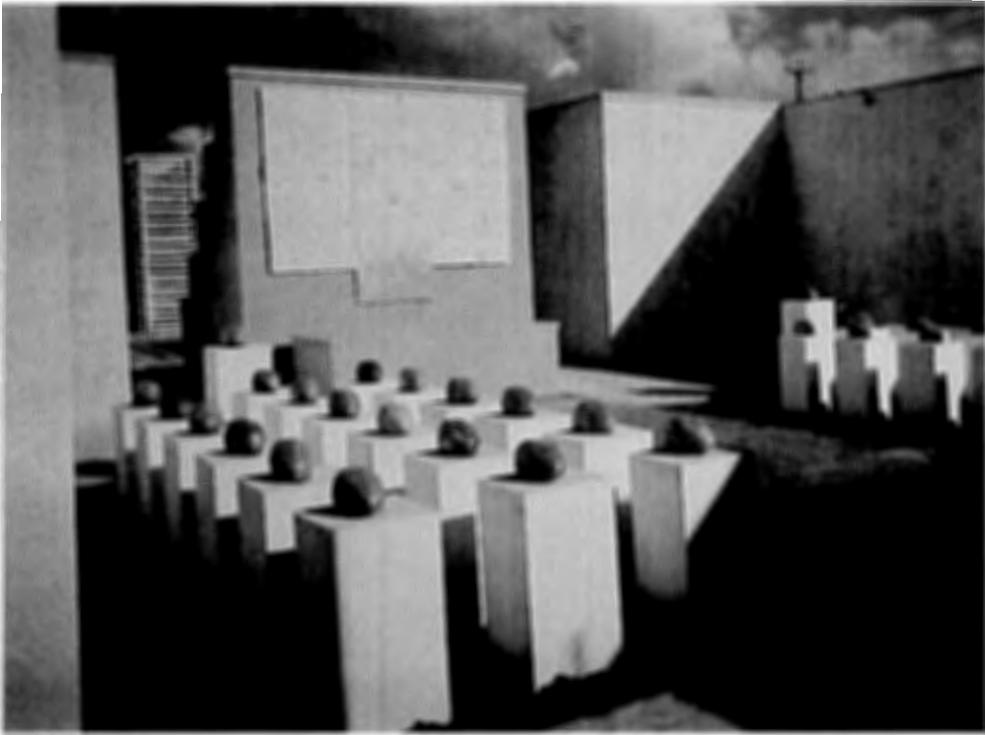
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Shrine the Innocents. Interior View  
(Source: Jagath Weerasinghe).

## Public Space and Monuments: Politics of Sanctioned and Contested Memory

Sasanka Perera

### Introduction

Monuments erected in public spaces are a common sight in all societies despite the variations in the reasons for their construction and actual physical differences. Throughout its recorded history, monuments have also been a relatively common structure in Sri Lanka. In its post colonial history, monuments in Sri Lanka have often been associated with politicians, from the somewhat sedate Bandaranaike Memorial in Horagolla to the rather scary Premadasa Memorial in Jampettha Street in Colombo. The civil war and the recent political violence in the south of the country has also ushered in a new phase of memorial construction identifiable at different levels, in terms of scale, sources of funding, agenda of initiators, utility and so on.

What exactly is meant by a monument, which is also often used interchangeably with the word memorial? At the outset, I must point out that in this essay I maintain no conceptual difference between the words monument and memorial, and will be using these words interchangeably with the same meaning. Hans-Ernst Mittag has observed that a monument or memorial "is an independent artwork located in a public space, which reminds us of persons or events, and derives out of this commemoration a demand of learning (quoted in Grosser 2000). It seems to me that Mittag has captured most of the essential attributes of a monument, which are also reflected in the Sri Lankan and other comparative examples I would be commenting on. However, in the Sri Lankan context, one would also see a genre of public and popular monuments that are also utilitarian and are not seen as artwork. These are the bus stands that have been converted into monuments in numerous villages and towns by the kin and friends of fallen soldiers. But all other attributes of monuments that Mittag has identified are also to be seen in the monuments in Sri Lanka.

Writing about monumental architecture, Bruce Trigger has suggested that "its principle defining feature is that its scale and elaboration exceed the requirements of any practical functions that a building is intended to perform" (Trigger 1990: 119). Although talking about the large scale monuments of the ancient world, Trigger nevertheless places in context certain fundamental aspects of monuments in most places. That is, in general, monuments are public, non-domestic, non-prosaic structures separate from the everyday. As Moore elaborates, "monuments are structures designed to be recognized, expressed by their scale or elaboration, even though their meanings may not be understood by all members of a society" (Moore 1996: 92).

But certain explanations in the definition provided by Trigger as well as the elaboration of Moore do not necessarily explain the dynamics of monuments everywhere. For instance, monuments are not always massive in scale. This is certainly the case with the small bus stand monuments and other village monuments erected in many parts of southern Sri Lanka in memory of fallen soldiers. They are not large scale for the simple reason that they have often been erected by people with merge resources. Massive scale and elaboration in monuments are generally associated with state sponsored monuments or other monuments that attract large resources such as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington or the memorial for fallen soldiers in World war 2 in Colombo. Nevertheless, despite the variation in scale for whatever reason, monuments are designed to be recognized. If they are not, their primary purpose in making a statement would be lost. So even the subaltern monuments such as bus stand memorials in Sri Lanka are recognizable from other bus stands which are not memorials.

On the other hand, in contemporary society (unlike perhaps in the ancient world) most well known monuments do not contain cryptic meanings: they are generally obvious. Again, if meanings of monuments are unclear, their purpose in attempting to symbolize a specific message in memory of a person or event would be lost. While large scale monuments may generally be separated from the everyday, they are not always so. As such, the small scale bus stand memorials are very much a part of the everyday life of the place where they are located. That is where people wait for public transport, talk about personal things as well as the war and other topics of national importance. Similarly, while the World War 2 Memorial in Colombo was designed to be separate from the everyday, the passage of time has changed some of these intentions. So today, except on days the military and ex-service persons remember those who fell in World War 2, on every other day it is a place for lovers to meet, hide from the rest of society and talk about things that lovers generally do. And quite possibly, whatever they talk about has nothing to do with war or heroic sacrifices. What I want to stress here is that despite the ability of general definitions to identify certain key features of monuments, some of those features may change and manifest with altered meanings in different locations, under different circumstances and times.

Monuments may be a site of pride and veneration for some while for others, the same monument may usher in emotions of pain and revulsion. But the fundamental premise upon which monuments are conceived and constructed has to do with memory. In other words, the essential dynamics and politics of monuments are to a large extent, contextualized within the notion of memory. That is, monuments directly address the question of "what is to be remembered" and "how to remember." It is on the basis of addressing these twin issues that the mythic structures and narratives associated with monuments as well as their physical shape and structure emerge. By the same token, but for different reasons, monuments are also sites for forgetting. The Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC remembers the American service personnel killed or missing in action in Vietnam. But it does not remember the even larger number of Vietnamese killed in the same war as well as numerous other disruptions that war created in Vietnam. One could argue that often, monuments or memorials have to be understood in a binary context: memory and amnesia.

In this essay, I would attempt to address a number of interrelated issues. What are the purposes of monuments established in public spaces by state agencies, by individuals or by collectives with defined identities and agendas? These monuments may be shrines in the more religious sense or strictly secular edifices or secular monuments that have acquired

certain religious features in terms of the ritual dynamics that may have sprung up and evolved around them. What is it that these monuments want to remember and what do they want to forget? What kinds of memories are sanctioned and by whom, and what kinds of memories are contested and for what reasons? In order to answer some of these questions and place these questions in a useful theoretical context, I would like to briefly look at one recent monument in Sri Lanka, the *Shrine of the Innocents*, while drawing from other monuments in different parts of the world for comparative exploration and analysis.

### **The politics and the building dynamics of the Shrine of the Innocents**

As a public monument, the *Shrine of the Innocents* was opened to the public on 10th December 1999 amidst much publicity and political participation. As outlined by the designer of the monument, its visual aspects and character were conceptualized and designed upon the story of the 38 school children in the southern town of Embilipitiya who disappeared in military custody at the height of political violence in southern Sri Lanka in the late 1980s (Weerasinghe 1999). He outlines the monument's larger goals in the following words:

But, its aim is to question the conscience of the Sri Lankan society by way of the Embilipitiya incident. It does not, in any way try to curse any person or political party. It only intends to say that we, as a nation are responsible for the culture of violence in Sri Lanka (Weerasinghe 1999).

Its socio-political objectives are furthermore elaborately explained in the propaganda leaflet that was distributed at the opening of the monument:

You are now stepping into a monument to the memory of the victims of the most frightening process and machinery of organized political crimes seen since our country regained its freedom from colonial rule. Yet, this is not only a monument to the tragedies of the recent past. It is also an effort to instill in the hearts and minds of us all who enter these precincts that every citizen of this country, bears responsibility in some manner, for every victim of this gruesome culture of political violence, by letting it nurture in our midst, bloody the soil of our land and the minds of our people. It is a burden of guilt we shall always carry with us (Bandara, no date).

The project cost over six million Sri Lankan Rupees and was sponsored and coordinated by the government with the active involvement of state agencies such as the State Engineering Corporation and the Urban Development Authority. In addition, it was coordinated by the Sudu Nelum Movement (Weerasinghe 1999) which was a highly politicized agency specifically set up by the then regime of Chandrika Kumaratunga to realize some of its own political goals. The monument is located within a kilometer of the parliament on the main road from Colombo to the Parliament. The location is not accidental. In principle, the Parliament, despite the steady dismantling of democratic traditions, practices and institutions in Sri Lanka, symbolizes the apex of state power. As such, the location of the monument so close to the Parliament, in prime road side property is wrought with political and social

significance. It is clear that without serious political patronage, emanating from the topmost strata of hierarchy in the state power structure, the monument and its specific location would not have been possible. In his opening speech on the day the monument was opened to the public, the designer of the monument clearly recognized the political associations and extensions of the project beyond the mere act of remembering:

Any project of this nature, with a budget of over four million, and which was funded by the government couldn't have happened if it did not carry a political investment in it. It is the job of any political party in power to do things that carry political investments for them (Weerasinghe 1999).

The nature of this political patronage is further described in the propaganda leaflet that was handed out on the day of the opening. In it, it is observed that parents from many villages and townships throughout the country who lost their children in the violence of the late 1980s made a request from President Chandrika Kumaratunga "for a memorial to the innocent children they lost in the grinding process of political violence" (Bandara, no date). It is further noted: "But for her unstinted patronage this monument would never be a reality in our midst" (Bandara, no date).

But the politics of the project go much further. Initially, the parents of Embilipitiya, when they made a request for a monument in memory of their lost children, also came up with a possible model for the monument. That was conceived on the basis of the pain they felt at their collective loss as well as the hatred they felt towards the perpetrators of that violence. Their idea was to have a simple statue of a child on a pedestal with a demonic figure (a *raksha*) hovering behind the child trying to devour it, and they wanted the monument to be located in Embilipitiya. Clearly, this idea was not only the wish of the people concerned, but its symbolism was beyond confusion and further interpretation while it was also very consciously rooted in their collective cultural experience. What they wanted to say was very clear. On the basis of expecting the materialization of this monument, these parents and their allies in Embilipitiya also politically supported the parliamentary election campaign of the People's Alliance in 1994. That election victory made it possible for President Kumaratunga to win the presidential election later. It must be noted here that what the parents wanted and what they got, and where they wanted it, and where it was finally established got decided not on the basis of some subaltern currents coming from the people, but on the basis of multiple political decisions and agendas over which these individuals had no control.

On the other hand, the date of the opening is also politically very significant. The 10th of December 1999 on which the opening ceremony of the monument was held amidst much fanfare was exactly 11 days prior to the presidential election at which President Kumaratunga was contesting for re-election. Throughout the campaign, the politics of terror by the United National Party and the Janata Vimukti Peramuna in the late 1980s was a major election issue. One of the main platforms of the ruling party was its claim that it brought an end to that period of terror. Clearly, the rather hurried opening of the *Shrine of the Innocents* so close to the elections, and obviously prior to the total completion of the structure and more importantly, without a clear agenda for its future in terms of maintenance, publicity and improvements, was indicative of its political value to the government at the time of the election. That issue had nothing to do with the grand objectives of the monument or the wishes of the survivors

in whose disappeared children's memory the monument was conceived and initiated in the first place. By the time it opened, the monument had become part of the political agenda of the ruling coalition, far beyond the scope of the mere act of remembrance.

### **The aesthetics, the poetics and the polemics in the architecture of the Shrine of the Innocents**

In order to contextualize the *Shrine of the Innocents* and critique some aspects of it in relation to achieving its declared aims, it is necessary at this stage to describe briefly its architectural design and the symbolism of its sculptures and installations. The designer himself has noted that the "memorial is composed of a series of symbols that carry various meanings; mother goddesses, trilogy concept, an archaeological mound, paths for contemplation, pyre of wood and bones and heads...." (Weerasinghe 1999). Part of the overall design is also based on the lay-out of the 12th century Thivanka Temple in Polonnaruwa.

After coming from the street, one needs to enter the premises of the monument through a low gateway and then walk up a black paved pathway leading up to the main entrance of the monument itself. There, you are confronted by two terra-cotta-like cement images of mother goddesses on either side of the entrance. The dominant colors of these images are black and shades of brick red. The index fingers of these images are pointing towards the earth "as it is the earth that bears witness to the unbearable crimes that took place" (Bandara, no date). In a sense, the images of mother goddesses are unusual as guard-stones in the context of traditional Buddhist temples where guard-stones were usually found. They were mostly male figures. In this context, the figures being female makes a great deal of symbolic sense, as mothers and women in general were among the majority of people who had to live with the consequences of political violence: they were the people who lost their husbands and sons. They were also the ones who had to live with the consequences of torture their male kin had undergone.

Outside the monument, to the right, and in front of the two guard-stone figures there is something that simply looks like a sculpted rock. However, the propaganda leaflet suggests that this is a figure representing the protector of the law and the people, buried "hidden up to his nose in the ground" (Bandara, no date). With reference to this image, the leaflet further observes, "as he looks searchingly at the world, while all but buried in it, he brandishes a shield in his right hand" (Bandara, no date). The symbolic message of this image apparently is the inability of the law and order and secular systems of justice to protect the people when their world was crumbling around them. But if not for the help of the leaflet, which is no longer available at the site, this profound symbolism can easily be lost to those who visit the monument.

Still outside, to the left is the solitary sculpture of a young man looking towards the land that is being reclaimed. The propaganda leaflet describes this sculpture as the "image of a youth with a sense of humanity that is not destroyed, but still undergoing a deep sense of suffering and pain" (Bandara, no date). At the rear end of the monument is a sculpture that resembles a traditional funeral pyre. Both of these sculptures perhaps can let out their symbolic messages without much room for confusion. In addition, there is a paved walkway that goes around the funeral pyre-like sculpture in the shape of an eye, and then around whole the monument. This walkway has been established for meditative purposes.

The main chamber of the monument is a large space open to the sky above and dominated by bright yellow, orange and ochre on the wall surfaces. In the middle, upon 38 white pedestals are 38 brown clay objects resembling human heads. These are supposed to symbolize the 38 students who disappeared from Embilipitiya, and the symbolism in this instance is fairly apparent. The pedestals themselves are placed on a bed of hand-molded baked pieces of clay molded by the hands of the disappeared children's parents as well as human rights activists and artists (Bandara, no date). The walls adjacent to the guard stones are embedded with baked clay tablets containing words in prose and poetry written by the parents from Embilipitiya, perhaps the most personal and touching element within the monument.

Directly opposite the entrance, near the rear exit of the monument but within the chamber, is a structure that has been described as a "bas-relief triptych" (Bandara, no date). The text in the propaganda leaflet interprets the bas-relief triptych as "having in essence the design concepts that bring together a symbolic trine of the philosophies of Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity (Bandara, no date). But of course, without the guidance of the propaganda leaflet or a similar tool, this symbolic meaning would escape most visitors. In front of this is a flower altar or a *mal asna* found in Buddhist temple for offering flowers. In this particular rendition of the flower altar, there is provision for offering flowers as well as oil lamps.

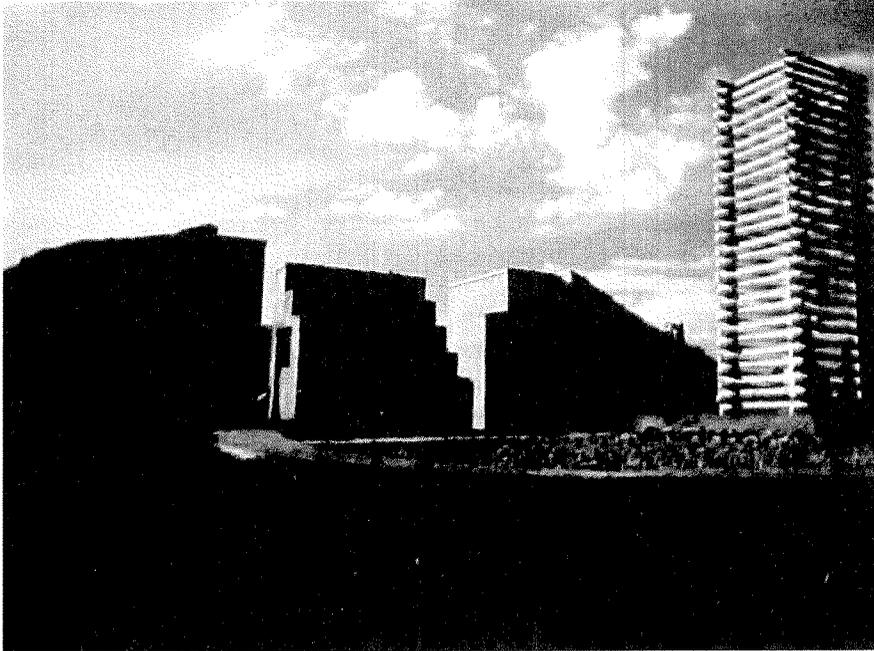
The layout of the interior has been conceived on the basis of a clear ordering of three inter-related elements in life and politics in recent times: The tablets with the thoughts of parents represent the narratives of violence in the recent past. At the opposite end, the flower altar as well as the coloring of the entire inner chamber is symbolic of the religious domain, where many people looked for solace when secular systems of justice and law and order failed. The clay objects on white pedestals representing human heads are indicative of violent death. In other words, this ordering enmeshes violent death in between the religious domain and the narratives of violence. This interior chamber open to the sky, with very bare sculptural interpretations within it, maintains a certain minimalist aura while simultaneously creating a somber and meditative atmosphere which creates the kind of environment in which to remember those who were lost and to ponder about the wider consequences of that period of political violence. In this sense, it seems to me that compared to the exterior, the interior of the design is successful in terms of communicating the declared objectives of the monument.

However, there are other profound aspects linked to the process of building this monument which are not represented in symbolic form within it, or in the few textual interpretations of it that has emerged thus far. One of the complaints of the parents in Embilipitiya had been the claim that their pain was never recognized and that they were unable to give their lost children formal burials. Of course, this is a situation that can be seen in all societies of terror, when the absence of a body creates serious problems of natural mourning while denying people opportunities for essential ritual obligations associated with death. In the process of hand-molding the clay objects strewn on the floor of the central chamber referred to above, the parents as a collective did get a chance for a process that can be called 'public mourning.' Moreover, through television, this act was seen as far as Embilipitiya where the actual collective mourning took place. On the other hand, the designer of the monument

feels that the burning of the clay also offered the parents a kind of symbolic cremation of their children, a ritual that had been thus far denied to them due to the lack of bodies.

**Reading the Shrine of the Innocents: The problem of dislocation and the absence of a popular organic relationship with the monument**

If we contextualize the *Shrine of the Innocents* in terms of the brief discussion above, it is clear that the monument has to be located and understood in the context of the extreme political violence of the late 1980s in southern Sri Lanka. At the same time, the politics of the period immediately after that period of terror is equally an important context to situate the monument and its establishment. In other words, ideally, the monument is not an autonomous text that stands on its own. It is an extension of the narratives of violence and the discourses of terror of the late 1980s as well as a creation of the politics of the post violence period.



Shrine of the Innocents. View from outside.  
(Source: Jagath Weerasinghe).

On the other hand, monuments are not only about remembering specific acts or persons. A specific memorial and its own history and dynamics of conception and construction can also provide information about the time, the socio-political circumstances of its construction as well as the forces behind its construction rather than merely the events or the persons that are to be commemorated. To a certain extent, I would take this approach in my reading of the *Shrine for the Innocents* as its is clearly not simply an edifice for remembering a terrible incident or a tragic period of the immediate past. It has also much to do with power politics of the present as well as the public sense of amnesia and indifference towards the incidents that the monument is trying to remember.

The question one has to pose is not what the *Shrine of the Innocents* is attempting to commemorate, but does the process of remembering or commemorating that is supposed to be the aim of the monument being realized? If so, how is it realized? If not, how does this non realization manifest itself?

One of the fundamental problems with the *Shrine of the Innocents* has to do with its location, or more precisely, its dislocation. That is, despite (or perhaps more accurately, because of it) the political significance of the location of the monument in terms of national politics, it is physically far removed from the site of the atrocities committed against the group of young students in whose memory (and by extension in the memory of other innocent victims of political violence) the monument was conceived and established in the first place. We have to remember here that the parents who initially requested a monument wanted it to be located in their own town. Compared to this, the rather graphic monument dedicated to a woman killed by the military during the 1971 JVP insurrection in southern Sri Lanka is located in Katharagama where members of the armed forces tortured, publicly humiliated and finally killed a local woman who in local lore was considered a beauty queen. That monument details in very graphic terms—without any room for confusion or re-interpretation — the last moments in the life of the victim. It is also situated in the midst of a community which consists of the victim's kin and friends. This was also the town where she lived prior to her death. In that sense, this particular monument is not dislocated from the site of this specific incident of violence. As such, other people who were intimately touched by the pain of that violence are still around to visit the site, clean it and offer flowers of remembrance to it, if they want to. In effect, it is part of the community itself; it is part of its everyday. It is physically and emotionally integrated into the community's routine life, and taken for granted but not necessarily forgotten.

At this moment, for purposes of further comparative analysis, let me focus attention on yet another recent monument, the dynamics of which are very different to the *Shrine of the Innocents*. I have in mind the popular shrine or monument built in memory of Baruch Goldstein in Israel, which was dismantled by the government of Israel in late 1999. To understand the emotions and the politics associated with the Baruch Goldstein monument, one needs to pay some attention to its genesis. Goldstein was an immigrant from New York City who worked as a doctor at the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba, located just outside Hebron. He was also a member of the outlawed anti Arab Kach movement. In February 1994, he killed 29 Palestinian Muslims as they prayed at Hebron's main mosque. He had gained access to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, considered to be the burial site of Abraham, and is sacred to both Muslims and Jews, and opened fire on the Muslim worshippers. Goldstein himself was beaten to death by those who survived the massacre.

After his death and burial, despite the contradiction between his profession (which was to save lives) and his final act (of mass murder) ultra nationalist Jewish settlers erected a shrine as a public monument in memory of Goldstein around his grave. Clearly, the circumstances of the emergence of this monument are much different from the immediate circumstances that enabled the emergence of the *Shrine of the Innocents*. His act of mass murder was interpreted completely differently by his kin and friends as opposed to most other people. Radical Israelis venerate Goldstein because they believe that he stopped a planned massacre of Jews by Muslims. It was in the context of this belief that his grave became a site for pilgrimage and veneration soon after his death. An inscription on the tomb itself claims

that Goldstein is a "martyr murdered in sanctifying God's name" and "The holy Dr. Baruch Goldstein ...gave his soul for the people of Israel. It further calls him "honest and pure of heart" (CNN Website 29 December 1999).

The point I want to clarify here is simply the following: The shrine that was built around Goldstein's grave and the pilgrimages that followed happened as a result of a spontaneous process ensuring that there was an organic link of the community to the monument. Moreover, the people who made it possible also had adequate political power to make it happen. More importantly, the shrine for Goldstein was located in the area where he and his family lived. It was not dislocated from that locality to another due to political or other reasons. All this meant that the monument had a strong local socio-political and emotional foundation for its emergence as well as for its possible future survival. None of the conditions outlined above associated with the Goldstein memorial was visible in the context of the *Shrine for the Innocents* in Sri Lanka. It was dislocated from the site of atrocity and from the areas where the disappeared students lived. Moreover, the surviving kin hardly had any comparable political power unlike the situation in the Israeli case. On the other hand, there was almost no spontaneity in the construction of the *Shrine of the Innocents* despite the pain of the survivors, and all potential organic links to the monument was severed by its (dis)location. By the time it was materialized, the Shrine of the Innocents had merely become a political project of the political coalition in power and not a spontaneous local project over which the local community had any voice or control.

Among other well known and less controversial location-specific monuments are some of the Nazi concentration camps such as Dachau and Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. In these places, former Nazi concentration and death camps themselves became memorials to the Holocaust as a process as well as to individuals who perished in these camps. Auschwitz alone attracted 500,000 visitors each year. But even then, these monuments also ran the risk of actually disappearing due to disrepair and lack of funds to maintain them (Weissberg 1999: 49). Nevertheless, despite these setbacks places such as Auschwitz and Dachau, as monuments, managed to generate a dynamic of their own which linked them to the world outside. They became part of European and world history and not merely a painful aspect of recent Jewish history. Moreover, they were not simply relics of the past, but also part of the conscience of the present as a consequence of regular formal visits, teaching of history in schools, publicized on-site remembrances and so on.

In terms of the discussion above, I do not intend to argue that monuments by definition have to be located in or in the immediate vicinity of a locality where a particular event that needs to be commemorated took place. After all, many well-known Holocaust memorials themselves are located in sites far away from where the atrocities actually took place. In a sense, one could place Berlin's Holocaust memorial in such a context. The problem here however is not simply that these memorials are not in places where actual mass killings of the Nazi terror took place, but because they are easy to forget and not notice as explained by Weissberg:

Berlin's Holocaust memorial is located on a traffic island. Unlike any traffic sign however, it is not placed in direct view of any driver, or in a pedestrian's path. Placed on a lawn, it stands sideways in front of the Wittenbergplatz subway station. Modest and nonintrusive, it does not beg for attention; it keeps its proper distance from a station which, like many others, served

to transport Jews to various collection places --- The Holocaust memorial in Wittenbergplatz appears itself forgotten and forlorn, a mark in thin air (Weissberg 1999: 45-46).

It seems to me that as a result of the *Shrine of the Innocents* being dislocated from its specific locality and also due to aspects of its design, in practical terms, it has the same attributes of non-intrusiveness as the Berlin memorial referred to above. While the *Shrine of the Innocents* is architecturally and visually quite unique from within, from the outside, from the street, much of that is obscured by the grassy mound that is one of its primary exterior identification markers. That is, it blends too well and comfortably into the surrounding natural landscape consisting of a small stream and an expanse of wetlands that has by now become a golf and recreation area for the affluent. In contrast, the small public park immediately adjacent to the monument is much more striking due to the rather obtrusive Coca Cola signs around it as well as due to the visibility of the white sculpture of mermaids that have been established near the stream. In contrast to these, people who travel along the main road towards the parliament can easily miss the monument and yet notice the park with its aesthetically questionable Coca Cola signs and bathing mermaids.

In this sense, it seems to me that one of the immediate aims of this important monument is lost. That is, it fails to register in the minds of the people the reality of extreme political violence in the country's immediate past, simply by not being noticed due to its rather too subtle architectural exterior. For such a message to get through and for an individual to be interested, he would necessarily have to know about the monument and make the attempt to go inside. The necessary invitation to pause, and make the attempt to visit the monument is strikingly absent at the moment. It seems to me that this lapse has come about as a result of the designer's well established background in archaeology as well as a professional artist. In this context, he has looked at the monument merely from an artistic and archaeological perspective and forgotten its essential monumental aspects. As such, this monument may be better described as an archaeologically informed work of art, rather than a monument in the strictest sense transmitting a particular message. A recent essay on the *Shrine for the Innocents* has observed that the monument is not simply reflective of the designer's background in art and archaeology, but that explanations of the monument are difficult without him, and the designer "is the key informant, not the victims represented in the monument nor their parents (Bulankulame 2000: 6-7). It is in this extended context, marked by a pronounced lack of knowledge on the discourse of monuments and dynamics of monuments that is so profound, that the project has not taken adequate notice of the necessity of visibility and curiosity.

#### **Further readings of the Shrine of the Innocents**

I have already suggested that the lack of an organic link to the outside world is the central problem of this monument. Its dislocation from the site of the tragedy is only one reason for this outcome. Even in the present location, the design of the monument makes no attempts to ensure its visibility or link it to other aspects of life in the locality. For example, in about ten ad hoc visits to the monument over a period of one month at different times of the day in September 2000, I met no one within the premises. I also met no one outside the premises

who was interested in the monument. But on most of these occasions, particularly in the evenings, there were many people in the adjacent small park as well as many others in the nearby reclaimed land playing cricket. In addition to the problem of the grassy mound that blends the monument into the landscape and makes it relatively invisible, the design is straddled with a number of other problems as well. The entrance to the monument is not from the main road. To gain entry into it one has to gain access to the adjoining vacant and dusty land and go through a small gate. The monument premises itself is enclosed by a rather uninviting fence of barbed wire, making it a rather uninviting place. Even if people notice it, they are never sure whether it is permissible to go in or not.

It seems to me that to create an organic link with the monument that was in any case located out of context, it was necessary to make extra efforts. For instance, the existence of the monument should have ideally entered what can only be called the discourse on traffic. These are the recently installed large green luminous sign boards which appear above roads in Colombo and some suburbs. They point motorists in different directions – to specific towns, streets or other locations. Those signs could have easily incorporated directions to the *Shrine of the Innocents* in the same way existing signs guide motorists in the direction of the Parliament. The monument in any case does not have any sign that is visible from the street proclaiming what it is. Its existence also has to enter into other discourses such as travel books and school texts.

More importantly, a monument of this nature, with the important message and memories it proclaims to be carrying, should have been designed as part of a larger constellation of activities and things, taking into account the manner in which the people in the city and suburbs spend their leisure. This is particularly important given its already established dislocation. By this I mean that the monument could have been designed as part of a park for which there is ample room in the vicinity and even greater need. If that was the case, people who visited the park (which many people do anyway) may also have visited the monument. In such a context, over time, a kind of organic link with the monument and the public that it currently lacks may have evolved. This is particularly important given the lack of visibility of the monument from the main road.

In his speech, on the day the monument was opened to the public, its designer made the following wish: "I hope that the parents of the disappeared and murdered children will develop a kind of ritualistic relationship with the memorial" (Weerasinghe 1999). By this he meant that such people would make the site an object of pilgrimage and remembrance. That is why there are provisions for offering flowers and embedded clay lamps that can be filled with oil and lit, quite similar to rituals in Buddhist temples. But so far the flower altar and the lamps have been empty and dry. It does not appear that anyone has yet made it a site of pilgrimage. While talking about Euro-American national memory, Noyes and Abrahams have noted that the most successful formulations of formalized national memory are those that have incorporated pre-existing local performances (1999: 77). It is in this context that they situate the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial "designed to provide a centralizing site for vernacular practices of grave visiting and decoration" (Noyes & Abrahams 1999: 78).

It seems to me that the concept of the *Shrine of the Innocents* has misinterpreted the meaning of ritual and pilgrimage in the local context. Particularly in the Sinhala Buddhist context, pilgrimages were always religious. In other words, they had something to do with the Buddha. Main pilgrim centers were either places where the Buddha was supposed to have

visited, where his relics were enshrined or locations important to local Buddhism for other historic or mythic reasons. On the other hand, in the Sri Lankan Buddhist context there was hardly any grave visiting in the secular sense. Comparatively few people built graves as there were other culturally acceptable ways of remembering the dead through rituals. Cemeteries as sites associated with death were not considered auspicious places for the living to spend time in. In such a context, it is very unlikely that the kind of ritual linkage that the designer of the monument anticipated would naturally manifest. Such a manifestation would have to depend on a serious epistemic break in the way pilgrimages and acts of remembering the dead are defined and practiced within the ritual and popular discourse among the Sinhalese in particular and Sri Lankans in general. Such an epistemic break is unlikely to take place without a major intervention, at a large scale and national level. Such an intervention cannot be accidental; it will have to be by design.

It is then in this context that I would like to briefly explore the concept of 'calendar custom' and its applicability in reading the future, if not the present of the *Shrine of the Innocents*. Talking of calendar customs in the European context, Noyes and Abrahams notes that:

This body of observances repeated from year to year on a given date in a given place constitutes a specific form of European collective memory: memory of the collective. Calendar customs are powerful sensory experiences undergone in common, consensual in both the usual sense and the etymological one; felt together (1999: 79)

If one takes the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington DC, its rather dynamic and organic link to the society outside is not only a consequence of the political power of the initiators of the monument and the spontaneous support it received from many sections of American society, but also because the memorial is incorporated within the idea of calendar custom. Clearly, thousands of people who had nothing to do with the Vietnam war visit the memorial as tourists because it is incorporated within the travel discourse as well as the city's traffic discourse. Others, who lost kin and friends in that war also visit the memorial on the days these individuals lost their lives, on their birth days or simply on days when the living are free to visit. At the same

time, many more visit the monument on specified days such as the Veterans' Day which the American state has recognized in its official calendar. That gives the monument recognition, validity and visibility at the level of national politics of that country, while it also allows for people from different parts of the country who have been part of the Vietnam experience to congregate at the site on that particular day to remember those they have lost and to meet others who survived. In this process of calendar custom, the individual memories and experiences of many individuals have been transformed into the more elaborated and invented traditions of the nation or the state. In the words of Noyes and Abrahams, "the calendar custom creates the collectivity as an objective entity that can be remembered" (1999: 80).

It seems to me that one of the realistic ways in which to incorporate the *Shrine of the Innocents* within the lives of the people in its locality and others who visit the area as well as those who live in far away places who have been intimately touched by the pain of

political violence, would be to incorporate it within the notion of calendar custom. In other words, the *Shrine of the Innocents* needs a highly publicized purpose and a set of invented rituals at the national level. For instance, if there is a state declared day for the innocents, within which the dynamics of the monument could be reorganized, over time, the initial hope of the designer of the monument may yet be realized. At such a moment, perhaps the parents and others who have felt the pain of political violence may feel an obligation to visit the monument and feel its meaning and purpose as a collective.

### Concluding Comments

In concluding my reading of the *Shrine of the Innocents* I would like to focus on one key point in addition to the issues I have already placed in context. This has to do with the transformation of the monument from the emotional wish of a group of aggrieved parents to a political project designed to cater to the specific political agenda of a series of power players. It is in the context of this transformation that the monument has ceased to be a monument with public recognition and emotional attachment, and has become the residue of a political agenda that itself is forgotten by now. It was also in this context that the wish for a simple monument in the aggrieved people's own locality was transformed into an elaborate and highly symbolic interpretative work of art located near the national parliament.

It was in this extended context that the project was financed with only a government grant where there was no other attempts to establish a fund with contributions from the private sector or concerned citizens that would have ensured wider public participation, ownership and emotional linkage to the monument. It seems to me that the premature opening of the monument just prior to the presidential election in 1999 is also indicative of the cynicism with which power players had transformed the idea of the monument into a political project.

As it is, in practical terms, the monument is more a shrine to the realities of power play in contemporary Sri Lankan politics than a memorial for victims of political violence. This is particularly the case in a situation, where its future physical survival, ideological direction and popular ownership have not yet been decided. Currently, the monument is neglected without anybody or any institution taking regular care to clean the premises or water the grass. In legal terms, though supposedly completed, it is still an incomplete work site of the State Engineering Corporation. By 2007, the reclaimed land around the monument which many believed would be converted into a park and football field had become massive privately owned golf course and hotel and restaurant complex through a shady land deal initiated by the same government that also sponsored the monument. This means that the potential for public access to the wider area in which the monument is located has been effectively blocked.

The future and objectives of the monument, in the sense articulated by its designer in late 1999 can only be realized if the monument would be incorporated within the daily activities of the people in the vicinity as well as in terms of the rituals of a calendar custom at the national level. To achieve these ends, it would also need a committed agency to look into its routine activities and needs, which will be able to look beyond short term political goals of power players. For the moment, rather than a monument for the disappeared, it the *Shrine of the Innocents* has become a monument that has effectively disappeared from public memory and consciousness.

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# RE-THINKING PUNJAB

The Construction of Seraiki Identity



Cover page of 'Rethinking Punjab.'

## Judging a Book by its Cover?

Nukhbah T. Langah

The focus of this analysis is the cover of a book on Siraiki identity politics, *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity* (Khan, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Written by the political scientist Hussain Ahmad Khan, the book is a commentary on two contesting identities in Punjab: Siraiki and Punjabi. Reproduced on its cover is a painting by Pakistani artist Ahmad Ali Maganhar. I use this cover, comprised of image and title, to present certain paradoxes concerning Siraiki identity in postcolonial Pakistan. This discussion will also indicate the importance of an understanding of Siraiki identity that reaches beyond textual boundaries towards forms of non-textual representation such as the visual (Atkins 1993).

This bridge between text and visual art is indicated through the interplay of meaning between the book's title and the image it reproduces. The image symbolizes the artist's desire to create an imaginative space which emerges through a departure from "the printed word" (Howells 2003: 1). At the same time, its co-existence with the book's title indicates certain political pressures that pull Siraiki identity towards a desired merger with Punjabi, the dominant identity of the region. Khan's title and Maganhar's image can be seen as instances of languages other than Siraiki being used to express the postcolonial Siraiki condition – a foreign language such as English, or the language of visual art.<sup>2</sup> This expressive choice can be read as an attempt to grapple with paradoxes that arise from the conflict between Siraiki and competing identities that center in, and are expressed through, languages other than Siraiki.

The cover of Khan's book immediately gives rise to two questions: firstly, why is the title of the book *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity*? Secondly, why does the cover page constitute a rather ambiguous painting, and how can we interpret the latter? The following analysis attempts to answer these questions.

Khan's title *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity* appears to bestow a theme to both book and painting (Khan 2004). It reflects two contesting identities through the words 'Punjab' and 'Siraiki', which can be seen as represented in the two figures depicted in the painting. However, one wonders why, if he is concerned with Siraiki identity, Khan privileges the word 'Punjab' in his title. Could the title not have been *The Construction of Siraiki Identity: Re-thinking Punjab*? It appears that the author deliberately highlights the *Rethinking* in the case of *Punjab* in the title, and leaves *The Construction of Siraiki Identity*

for the subtitle. This choice could reflect the need to legitimize the publishing of this book by The National College of Arts, Lahore, as a reputed, state-run institution in Punjab. However, I would argue that the significance given to the word 'Punjab' transforms it from a geographic marker into a power symbol.

If Khan had used the word 'Punjabi' rather than 'Punjab', this would have indicated the 'Punjabi speaking minority' merely as a linguistic group residing in the province of Punjab in Pakistan. The word 'Punjabi' would also have narrowed down the book's concerns to Punjabi identity, which, demographically, is a minority group when compared to the number of Siraikis living in Punjab. However, the word 'Punjab' bears the force of geographical, social and political credibility of the entire ruling elite, including the Urdu-speaking minority immigrants from India: the Punjabi-Muhajir alliance. This realization also helps clarify why the author makes the interrogation of 'Siraiki' identity more important than discussing the proposal for the province of 'Siraikistan'. The postcolonial binaries in the title of the book thus revolve between an identity, 'Siraiki', and a region, 'Punjab', rather than the more obvious pairings of two identities, 'Siraiki' and 'Punjabi' or even two regions, 'Siraikistan' and Punjab'.

The Punjabi-Muhajir regional control over the province of Punjab is also symbolized by the word 'Punjab', which literally means 'the land of five rivers', as well as implies the area where Punjabi language is spoken. However, these two explanations of the name of this province fail to fulfill their literal meaning as, following the Partition of 1947, the five rivers of Pakistan do not actually pass through this region. Furthermore, as my analysis will demonstrate, the language that is called 'Punjabi' is neither the sole nor the majority language spoken in the province of Punjab.<sup>3</sup> The political hegemony of the minority linguistic group of 'Punjabis' is thus symbolized through the very name: 'Punjab' which has sought to merge within its ambit the entire linguistic population of the province. This name symbolizes a language of a people who in fact largely migrated from India at the time of Partition, and in the postcolonial period, have managed to dominate the country (Talbot & Thandi 2004). It also symbolizes the domination of Punjabi culture which is further reflected in Punjab's emphasis on its regional supremacy throughout the nation, through coinages such as 'Punjab University', 'Punjabi Adbi Board' (Punjabi Literary Board), and 'Punjabi Film Industry'.

Hussain Ahmad Khan's title seems to replicate Punjabi supremacy by privileging the word 'Punjab'. Yet he does bring together two contesting linguistic identities through this title and subtitle. Khan therefore seems aware at least subconsciously of the fact that a 're-thinking' is required in Punjab in relation to the 'Siraiki' identity. In other words, the 'construction' of 'Siraiki' identity indicates the 'deconstruction' of 'Punjabi' identity, even though Khan's careful choice of words attempts to conceal this potentially subversive view. Thus the title alerts us to the mutual relationship as well as competition between the constructions of 'Siraiki' and 'Punjabi' identities. It seems that regional control is represented through the word 'Punjab', while Siraiki remains merely an 'identity' issue which is not mentioned as a language, group, geography and culture. However, the force of the word 'Siraiki' points to an overall identity, culture and geography that attempts to override it. Its presence alone can signal the presence of Siraiki *sunjaan* (meaning, 'identity' or 'consciousness') and *wukhrup* (meaning 'uniqueness' or 'distinction').

Ultimately, the 're-thinking' of 'Punjab' in the title of this book is as ambiguous as the painting that elegantly dresses the cover, because it fails to indicate exactly which identity will be discussed in this book. Khan discusses the 'construction' of an Urdu speaking *Muhajir*

immigrant identity, because the *Muhajirs* have mostly settled in Punjab. In fact, Khan's book argues that the identity of the *Muhajir* population ambiguously hangs between the two contesting identities, Siraiki and Punjabi. Despite being intimately related to the Siraiki/ Punjabi binary, the Punjabi-*Muhajir* alliance is ironically excluded from the title of the book. However, it lingers in the background of its subject matter. The 'construction' of Siraiki and hence 'deconstruction' of Punjabi that Khan mentions in the title of his book is in fact transformed into an analysis of the role of Urdu speaking *Muhajir* immigrants who settled in Vehari, which is part of the Siraiki region.<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is relevant that Khan himself is a member of the *Muhajir* community. Khan's role as a representative of this community residing largely in the Siraiki areas of Punjab, necessitates his need to build their case of not being accepted as 'natives' by Siraikis despite their authoritative alliance with the Punjabi rulers.

This pressure of *Muhajir* identity, which is intangibly felt in the title of the book and in its subject matter, continues in Khan's calculated domination over the artist's painting which lends a larger theme to the cover of his book. The artist, Ahmad Ali Maganhar, remains shadowy, because Khan chooses simply to give the following details on the book's jacket: "Cover: Detail from Painting by Ahmad Ali Maganhar".<sup>5</sup> Through this one short sentence, which further indicates that the cover image constitutes but one section of a larger painting, the readers are introduced to the artist and his creation. This information also excludes date, place and the medium of this artwork which further transforms it into a 'mystery painting' or, in the present analysis, a 'mystery text' (Howell 2003: 13). In this context, Khan represents this image through "ideological mystification" and "deceptive appearance of naturalness" (Mitchell 1986: 8).

It is important to discuss the significance of the title of Khan's book along with the cover painting because they correlate at various levels. One approach to understanding this correlation is to observe the title as labeling the painting or giving it a theme, and vice versa. This correlation also reflects in the psychological projection of both the artist who created it and the author who selects to present a section of it on the cover of his published work. The binary of the title reflects through the two words 'Punjab' and 'Siraiki', symbolizing the 'construction' or 'deconstruction' of these identities, replicated in the two figures in the painting. These two figures also represent further binaries of 'self' and the 'other' which may symbolize Siraiki/ Punjabi, Siraiki/ Punjabi *Muhajir* or body and text and text versus image (Bann & Allen 1991: 12; Mitchel 1986: 47-52, 110). The coalition of title and the painting therefore represents a postcolonial image communicating several contrasts and conflicts, as well as an understanding of the text as gaining articulation through visual art. This interpretation suggests that in the context of postcolonial Pakistan, the intricacy of such identities must be considered from various angles and through various mediums of representation for enhanced understanding.

However, the title and the painting whilst correlating with each other can also embody two views about the subject matter of this book. One is the artist's view, which is scarcely expressed through this section of his painting because Khan only includes his name at the back of the book. The other is the author's dominating view, which is reflected through the title, *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity*. Despite the fact that Khan revises Maganhar's view by superimposing his own ideology, he cannot erase Maganhar's point of view completely from the image on the cover. The section of the painting displayed on Khan's cover therefore seems to partially convey the artist's emotions. In this context, both the artist and the

author use their individual skills to project their emotions. The author's emotions are projected through the words printed in black ink on a clear background, while the artist does the same through the contrasts between shadowy images and strong colors. Even though the seeming directness of the words in the title dominates the ambiguous abstractness of the painting, the emotions of the artist and author converge on to the book's theme of dual identities. This duality gives birth to the postcolonial binaries of self/ other, lucidity/ ambiguity, clarity/ abstractness, language/ metaphor, Punjabi/ Siraiki, and construction/ deconstruction.

These paradoxes and binaries that define the Punjabi-Siraiki relationship continue to be reflected through the entire image, which presents two figures standing out against a warm reddish orange background, symbolizing the heat of a desert or rural setting. The dress of these two figures is kept rather ambiguous because it appears neither Siraiki nor Punjabi. In fact, the two figures stand so close to each other that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. This closeness also associates with the closeness between Khan's title and Manganhar's image, which indicates certain political pressures that pull Siraiki identity towards a desired merger with Punjabi, the dominant identity of the region. On the one hand, two turbans suggest that these figures are two separate male bodies. On the other, a single pair of Multani style *khusas* makes them appear as being one figure.<sup>6</sup> I read this image and its ambiguities as Ahmad Ali Manganhar's comment on the relationship between Punjabi and Siraiki. While their physical proximity may symbolize the presumed closeness of Siraiki/ Punjabi culture, one figure is made to look taller than the other, which indicates his dominating position, strength or maturity, which I argue in this case, is that of Punjab. However, the face of this taller figure appears smudged, as if he is losing his identity in the course of being made to 're-think Punjab'. It also appears that the facelessness of these figures is a distinct characteristic that their creator has given them to conceal their identity, just as he conceals their attire. However, there is also a sense of dialogue or communication between the two characters because the taller figure seems to be turned towards the shorter character. This gesture may symbolize the need for dialogue between Siraiki and Punjabi, even though one commands the other.

A horse's head appearing at the middle right end of the cover indicates that these two figures may be nomadic travelers passing through the desert setting suggested by the colors of the painting. This setting clashes with the green patches of land in the background and small green hills that stand at a distance. The greenish patches in the background may also indicate their journey from a green belt towards a desert. The strange contrasts of yellow and orange, white and green add to the ambiguity of the setting and make its interpretation more complicated. However, the heated political situation of the Punjab may be understood through the heat of these colors and against this background, the two figures symbolize, I contend, the two competing identities in Punjab: Siraiki and Punjabi. In this context, they may symbolize binary oppositions mentioned earlier within the discussion of the book's title; but they seem also to symbolize the conflict between Siraiki/ Punjabi ideologies, cultures and most crucially languages that my forthcoming thesis aims to explore in the light of postcolonial Siraiki literature and art.

Finally, the most distinct feature of this painting is a black shadow in front of the two figures which suggests a building or a house they are about to enter. The entrance of this building appears in the form of a fence in the left corner of the book cover.<sup>7</sup> The fence also indicates that there are boundaries that the two figures might not be able to cross or perhaps

an area which they are forbidden from entering. It may also be the entrance through which the reader of the book, or the observer of the painting, is allowed imaginatively to enter the painting and join the journey of the two travelers. Suggestions of time and space open up through the silhouette that follows the two figures and the fence that creates boundaries for them. The overall abstractness of the painting reflects the confusion of ideologies in this 're-thinking' or 're-construction' -- a confusion which is also the journey of these two travelers who seem to seek their identities in the desert landscape.

To sum up: the painting's setting can be considered Siraiki due to the colors which are suggestive of the rural or desert area of the Siraiki region which has always been underdeveloped as compared to the capital cities of Punjab such as Lahore. The turbans and *khusas* that the two characters wear give a traditional Siraiki characteristic to Siraiki culture, which remains 'exotic' for Punjab through these symbols. The two figures in the picture wear similar dresses also to create a mirroring image of them which reflects the author's emphasis on the closeness of Siraiki and the Punjabi cultures. The severe heat becomes a cultural representation of Siraiki identity and ruralness that is despised as well as romanticized by the artist as well as Punjab. The painting in general offers an ideal representation of Siraiki/ Punjabi binaries and may be used as an ornamental object along with Hussain's book in Punjab. However, the word 'Siraiki' in the title is a constant threat and a reminder of Punjab's potential division of power. The ambiguity of the two characters and the abstractness of the entire painting thus reflect the masking of this threat.

The objective of this analysis is to demonstrate that the binary oppositions and ambiguities of postcolonial Pakistani identities such as Siraiki and Punjabi are incomprehensible simply through the medium of the written text. This may be the reason why Khan feels the necessity for an artistic image on the cover of his book in order to convey the message of his title. The postcolonial situation in Punjab has forced the artist as well as author to represent binaries and paradoxes in their work. Yet the interdependence of the artwork and text also contains potential for conflict resolution or dialogue. The skills of artist and author both reveal and conceal their views and potentially resist the political pressures under which they both find themselves in some way. It is also this pressure which makes them create an imaginative space through art or text. In their imaginations, Khan and Maganhar cross textual and artistic boundaries by being imaginatively interdependent on each other. In their imaginations, Maganhar's boundary is the fence which allows the observer to imaginatively enter the painting. Khan creates a title to symbolize both this boundary and a possible 're-thinking' and reconsideration of the conflict between Siraiki/ Punjabi identities.

### End Notes

1. In my forthcoming doctoral thesis titled, 'Expressing Resistance through Siraiki Culture in Postcolonial Pakistan,' for the University of Leeds (UK), 'Siraiki' is identified as a postcolonial and ethno-linguistic identity that first emerged in Pakistan during the 1950s as a challenge to the political and economic supremacy of the Punjabi and Urdu speakers residing within the province of Punjab.

2. In Chapter 2 of my thesis I compare the implications of Khan's use of Maganhar's painting and its meanings, with the poetry and plays of a Siraiki poet Aslam Ansari. Ansari's work, written in English, is collected in a book entitled *Lotus and the Sandwaves* (Ansari, 1998).

3. See Shackle, C. 1976. *From Wuch to Southern Lahnda*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.

4. I refer to my meeting with Hussain Ahmad Khan, Research and Publication Centre (RCP), National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan, September 8, 2004.

5. My efforts to email Hussain Ahmad Khan and Research and Publication Board, National College of Arts, Lahore to get more information about this painting have so far been futile.

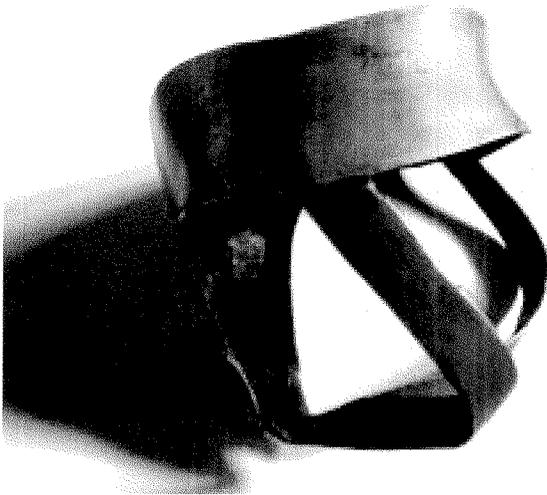
6. See the cover image of Khan's book.

7. Unfortunately this detail has not been reproduced in the version of the image that I have provided for this analysis.

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Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Fibre

## The Celestial Underwear and the Challenges of Postcolonial Art

Prabha Manuratne

Cultures, which were once seen to be meaningful because they were presumed to be discrete, stable, coherent, and unique, are now increasingly seen as interconnected, dynamic, fragmented, and amorphous (Papastergiadis 2004: 330).

As both proponents and opponents of globalization are never tired of repeating, we live in a global culture in which everything is in a state of flux. As global capitalism continues to expand, new models of thinking about the global, the local, and the relationship between the two become necessary. This essay examines the Sri Lankan artist Jagath Weerasinghe's response to the dichotomy between the local and global. In a complex commentary about masculinity, Buddhism, and tradition, Weerasinghe shows us that an interstitial moment between global epistemologies and the concrete local cultural moment is possible, and indeed necessary. In this essay, I will argue that Weerasinghe's exhibition *Celestial Underwear* can be seen as an ironic commentary on the relationship between masculinity and Buddhism, while simultaneously presenting a parody of the problematic 'authenticity' of Sri Lankan art. I see this work not as a unique moment in the Sri Lankan art scene, but as a continuation of themes and motifs discernible in the work of many contemporary artists in Sri Lanka.

Given the constant globalization and commodification of cultural forms prevalent today, postcolonial artists are faced with the dual challenge of keeping up with the global art scene/market, and remaining a part of their 'local' landscape that often continues to be the subject of their work. While the global/local dichotomy has been convincingly contested, especially by Lee Weng Choy, it is a necessary categorization to bring out the process of signification operative in Weerasinghe's work. Choy argues:

My problem with the term [global-local] is that, for the most part, the global-local tensions it refers to are already subsumed by the logic of globalization and late capitalism. It signifies the further penetration of global capitalism into the 'local,' then presents this 'local' as authentic... These terms suggest an increasing conflation of arts and cultural discourse with the idiom of national – even 'transnational' – tourism boards. . . The phenomena these

terms refer to are arguably less local vis-à-vis the global, or the contemporary renaissance of tradition, than, to coin another term, the 'authenti-kitsch' (Choy 2004: 12).

While Choy is indeed right about seeing the global-local dichotomy as one created by the process of capitalist globalization itself, artists are not merely passively subject to these rules of the market. Even as their work is subjected to the gate-keeping processes of the art market, they are also constantly commenting on and contesting these processes. Their work becomes the site where the 'meaning' of the very authenticity that the art market seeks becomes negotiated. Unlike in the postmodern pastiche that completely uproots images and meanings from their contexts and removes them from the 'original' that they parody, in what Choy calls 'authenti-kitsch,' the kitsch 'authenticity' of the work parodies the demand for authenticity itself. It is as if the artist is saying, 'if you want my work to be 'authentically' local, I will give you a parody of the object of that very desire.' While I do not see Weerasinghe's work as 'kitsch' per se, I would like to see this process of parodying 'authenticity' taking place in his work.

*The Celestial Being:* The central image in the painting *The Celestial Being* is a figure of a god, resembling a traditional *deva rupa* of the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, complete with wings and the headdress. The well-built and muscular body of this god signifies masculinity and strength, often associated with gods in Sri Lanka. The reddish pink that dominates the painting is reminiscent of the maroon-pink of traditional pictures of gods. He sits on a white cloud in mid air and does not seem out of the ordinary, except of course for the fact that he is masturbating. The wings are rather unusual for a Sri Lankan deity. Covering his protruding private part with a handkerchief, this god is in deep contemplation -- as befits a god -- although his thoughts are left blank. Surrounding him are images of archaeological artifacts randomly dispersed across the canvass.

*The Persistent Presence of Absence:* The series *The Persistent Presence of Absence* was the centerpiece of the exhibition. It contains a series of male underwear, with stickers of parrots pasted onto them. The underwear here is not purely a garment, but the mould/matrix of the male body, with the material body being absent. Almost a textbook example of Lacan's definition of the signifier, this installation brings out the radical emptiness of masculinity. Two of them are yellow with a washed out effect. This may either be read as references to soiled, dirty underwear, or, as we shall soon see, a reference to religion. The pasted parrot is clearly a cheap sticker. In popular mythology, the parrot is the symbol of the arts in the hands of the goddess Saraswathi. However, parrots are also the sign of incessant and meaningless chatter.

*The Celestial Underwear:* This painting is the more complex articulation of the two earlier motifs of the masturbating god and the male underwear. It has two versions. The first is still embedded in the pinkish hue of the first painting, but the second has a more ominous yellow and black, signifying violence and anxiety, and drawing from *The Celestial Being II*. The male underwear dispersed across the canvass are juxtaposed with distorted gods still masturbating. However, they have become proportionately smaller in this last image. There are also several phallic images across the canvass taking almost the form of guns. The final black and yellow version can also be seen in relation to the war, with the yellow representing Buddhism and black, the violence of war.

The works discussed above carry masculinity as their central theme. In all three texts, the aura of superiority associated with masculinity is subsumed by its juxtaposition with its sexual and banal dimension: dirty underwear, masturbation, and anxiety. To fully appreciate the socio-cultural significance of this work let us turn to the work of Gananath Obeyesekere. His book, *The Work of Culture* (1990) discusses the family complex of the local Oedipus. Obeyesekere provides a useful model to think about the way structures of desire can be variously inscribed in cultural myths. He shows that while the nineteenth century European Oedipus may not be universal, it is still possible to look at different societies and distinguish family complexes and different desire patterns that operate within those particular societies. He argues that the Indian Hindu-oriented culture provides the basic matrix of filicide rather than patricide to instate the desire structure within the family. In the Sinhala Buddhist culture, it is patricide that provides the basic matrix of desire (Obeyesekere 1990). Obeyesekere shows how the Sinhala matrix of desire becomes embedded in a larger power structure the moment this myth of patricide is contextualized by the ethics of Buddhism (Obeyesekere 1990). Buddhist ethics fill the patricidal son with guilt and remorse, which is then assuaged by religious intervention. Patricidal sons become powerful patrons of Buddhism, thus both allaying their guilt and regaining their position in the symbolic structure sanctioned by the Buddhist clergy. Those who refuse this religious channel of redirecting their guilt and remorse are best remembered as ungrateful horrendous patricidal sons condemned to hell. This reciprocal power system between the powerful patriarchal religious institution of Buddhism and the patrilineal monarchical system become the defining forces of the phallic desire structure in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. Obeyesekere also points out that this phallic function mediated through Buddhist ethics was never monolithically present in Sri Lanka. In contrast, there exists a whole gamut of folk cultural or non-Buddhist myths that spell out what he calls the 'debate' between different cultural forces, different desire patterns, and family structures (Obeyesekere 1990). Thus, while a desire model similar to that of the patricidal oedipal model was already present in pre-colonial Sri Lanka, this model was also powerfully mediated by the phallic role of Buddhism as an ethical system.

If, as Obeyesekere argues, Sri Lankan masculinity is embedded within the reciprocal power structures of patriarchy and religion, what impact does the colonial moment have on this power system? Chandra Talpade Mohanty sees three aspects of colonial rule related to the reconfiguration of gender relations in India:

- (1) the ideological construction and consolidation of white masculinity as normative and the corresponding racialization and sexualization of colonized people;
- (2) the effects of colonial institutions and policies in transforming indigenous patriarchies and consolidating hegemonic middle-class cultures and colonized areas; and
- (3) the rise of feminist politics and consciousness within and against the framework of national liberation movements (Mohanty 2003 :58).

Of these, the second is directly relevant to this discussion. Weerasinghe's commentary on masculinity cannot be understood ahistorically. To begin with, the underwear that is one of the central motifs of two of the paintings under discussion is specifically symbolic of a class influenced by western cultural practice. It is clearly different from traditional sartorial symbols. It is a historically situated, culturally contextualized symbol of masculinity where indigenous

patriarchy has been transformed, as Mohanty (2003) says, and is of a “consolidated hegemonic middle-class culture.” Unlike a Hindu lingam that can be associated with the male organ with no ambiguity, Weerasinghe’s myth of the underwear is less a symbol of male power than the male body that is a culturally contextualized and controlled body, and is, consequently, ‘absent’ rather than ‘present.’ The power lies not so much in the body, but in the hegemonic symbolic form of language (recall Obeyesekere’s reference to the ‘debate’ between the official religious forms and folk cultural myths that focus on the body and desire in a much more earthy manner). However, this absence is persistent in its presence as body. This absence is what erupts when the body comes to the fore, especially in violence.

The painting *The Celestial Being* is in many ways the antithesis to this conceptualization, where the powerful symbol of the god is undermined by the very presence of his body. He is no ordinary god, but one whose body is ‘present’ rather than ‘absent.’ These two contrasting images of the ‘absence’ and ‘presence’ of the male body create a narrative about masculinity that is different from the traditional representations of masculinity.

This narrativization of masculinity must also be situated within the cultural and political context within which it is created. Returning to Obeyesekere’s theorization that the role of the Sri Lankan patricidal son is deeply related to the institution of the Buddhist clergy, it is not theoretically extravagant to read these symbols of masculinity in the context of religion. Especially the painting *The Celestial Being* lends itself to such a reading. The motif of the god, surrounded by archeological artifacts, must be seen within the context of religion. Gods and their temples suggested in this painting are the spaces of masculinity; spaces often taboo to the ‘impurities’ of women. However, the artist portrays the sexual being who inhabits the heart of this ‘celestial’ world of religion, tradition, and masculine power. In what can easily be seen as an expression of homoerotic desire, we are presented, over and over again, the excesses of masculinity; its sexuality, and its radical emptiness. If one were to read the traditional symbols in this painting as indeed a reference to religion, then one can also see the artist’s angst at seeing religion as the oppressive force that sustains this masculinity.

To make the transition from Buddhism as religious philosophy, to Buddhism as part of the Sinhala ethnic identity, it is possible to turn to two other works by Weerasinghe that are particularly pertinent here: *The Public Rally* and *The Boots of Religious Militants*. Although these works are not from the same exhibition, they belong to the same period, and bring out the narrative discussed above in a more poignant form. In the triptych *The Public Rally* we see the relationship between religion as oppressive ethnic ideology and masculinity expressed very clearly. At the center of the triptych we see what can be understood as a distorted image of a Buddhist priest. From his penis arises a massive snake which continues into the canvass on the left where it is making a public speech before yellow microphones. The dominant figures of snakes with stretched tongues are ominous. On the right we see a clearer image of a Buddhist priest making a speech. This triptych is a commentary on the recent trend in Sri Lankan Buddhism where Buddhist priests have formed a political party. This party’s salient characteristic is its emphasis on the idea that the ethnic conflict can only have a military solution. Again, the colors black and yellow form a sinister mosaic in which the artist is clearly expressing his anxiety at this new tendency in a religion that is traditionally non-violent and non-discriminatory. *Boots of Religious Militants* uses the same dominant yellow color to signify the militant nature that Buddhism has acquired. Like the male underwear, the boot is the matrix of the body that becomes a part of oppression. Here, the absence that is ‘persistently

present' is that of the soldier, forced to fight a war on behalf of the religious militant. The encounter between this drive towards ethnic and religious dominance and the body must be understood not solely within local history and politics, but within the larger context of globalization, where nation-states are losing their hegemony over the meaning of the state. As Arjun Appadurai expresses in the following words:

As states lose their monopoly over the idea of nation, it is understandable that all sorts of groups will tend to use the logic of the nation to capture some or all of the state, or some or all of their entitlements from the state. This logic finds its maximum power to mobilize where the body meets the state, that is, in those projects that we call ethnic and often misrecognize as atavistic (Appadurai 1996: 157).

This instance where the body meets the state can be discerned clearly in Weerasinghe's portrayal of both masculinity and religious militarism. He shows that masculine power is 'absent' in its patriarchal form, except as a formal symbolic law contextualized by religion. On the other hand, he shows that this 'absent' masculinity is in fact present in the repressed sexuality of traditional 'gods.' This absent body becomes the violent force that erupts out of the more 'officially' non-violent discourse of Buddhism in the form of militant religious and ethnic politics. Globalization, which is particularly pertinent to the rise of such violent politics, looms in the distance, creating vicious serpents out of traditional patriarchies and religions.

This very serious reading requires a little humor on our part. If one were to identify with the forces represented in these works, including masculinity, militant religion, and traditionalism we would miss the whole point of Weerasinghe's paintings. There IS something funny about a masturbating god, covering his bulging sexual organ with a yellow/pink handkerchief. It is not simply a ridiculing of tradition and religion. It is the ironic and self-conscious laugh of a man who sees the small impurity and everyday banality hidden behind this celestial being. The male underwear, worked out with great care, giving it the perfect shape of the male body, suddenly renders visible the very emptiness of the power that that body is supposed to hold. The artist pastes a cheeky parrot, the mark of incessant talking, to turn this ironic encounter with emptiness into manageable humor. We laugh to think of all the fuss about 'being a man.' Even the more serious commentaries such as *The Public Rally* demands that we see it in its properly ironic context: the snake of violence rising from the repressed sexuality of a supposedly non-violent Buddhist priest. As Geeta Kapur puts it:

What is to be remembered ... is that contradictions are rife and you have to put up all the fights at once. If the primary fight is against the imperialism of the first world, you have equally to fight anti-democratic forces of local dynasties and dictators ... indeed against the anti-modern forces that use tradition, which served a useful function in the national struggle, as a ruse to regress into communal and religious fundamentalisms (Kapur 2002: 21).

The dual fight that Kapur recognizes must be sought in Weerasinghe's work by returning to our earlier discussion on authenticity. By presenting religion, tradition, and

culture from this rather irreverent and definitely ironic perspective, Weerasinghe is also responding to an art market that demands the 'authenticity' of the local.

Local myths of masculinity, tradition, and religion are re-situated in Weerasinghe's work, not only to comment on their immediate presence in local culture and politics, but also to parody the demand for an 'authentic' representation of culture. Weerasinghe's work is clearly influenced by postmodern theoretical insights. He deconstructs masculinity, emphasizing its 'absence' as a presence. He uses archaeological artifacts as 'myths' in the Barthesian sense, where they take on a secondary meaning signifying 'tradition,' 'religion,' and 'ethnic identity.' Thirdly, his deliberately distorted images and tropes of gods, masculinity, and religion create an ironic distance usually characteristic of postmodern texts. These complex maneuvers make it impossible for us to read these as a simplistically 'local' narrative. This narrative, and this reading, is already contextualized by our knowledge of global phenomena, shared global moods, and theoretical and philosophical approaches of the west. However, despite this global outlook, there is a certain nostalgia for tradition and traditional meanings when the artist expresses anxiety about both masculinity and religion. His words about other Sri Lankan artists of the 1990s are true about his own work: "one can often see underneath, a yearning for tradition, for an ideal lost, for roots in the past" (Weerasinghe 2005d: 192). There is 'authenticity' at the deepest personal level of his own work as well. However, it is not the 'exotic' authenticity that the art market demands from artists, thereby making the work a parody of itself.

Weerasinghe's work discussed here is not an isolated or unique instance. It is a continuation of the work of a series of Sri Lankan artists: Anoli Perera's *Goddesses Descending*, Chandraguptha Thenuwara's *Barrellism*, Sarath Kumarasiri's *No Glory*, Pala Pothupitiya's *Ancestral Dress*, and the work of many other contemporary artists in the Sri Lankan art scene can be cited as further examples. Together, this generation of artists has questioned, uprooted, re-situated, and revitalized tradition and local myths, challenging a global art market with their almost vengeful vigor. All of these artists present a complex reading of the local from a decidedly global perspective, without losing touch with the concrete reality from which they engage in their creative process. To this end, we see that contemporary Sri Lankan artists, including Jagath Weerasinghe, have found a delicate but self-assured interstitial moment from which they can be vigorous critics of both the global and the local. These artists demand from us, as their viewers, that we see the full complexity that emerges in their work as a result of their position as postcolonial artists engaged in artistic creation in a world of globalization and cultural flux.

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Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Mixed Media on Canvas.



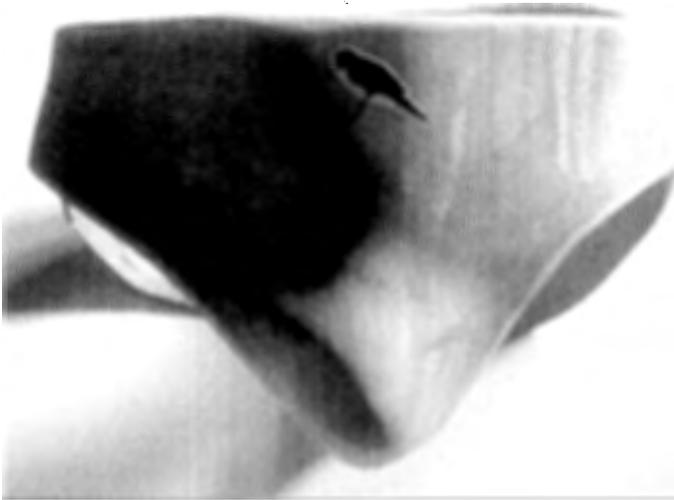
Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Mixed Media on Canvas.



Jagath weefasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Mixed Media on Canvas.



Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Mixed Media on Canvas.



Jagath weerasinghe, Celestial Underware Series, 2005, Fibre



Jagath weerasinghe, Boots of Religious Militants, 2006, Mixed Media



## Asian Art Today: Exploiting the Code A Critique from the Margins

Jagath Weerasinghe

Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it (Fanon1991).

This is an attempt at a critical reading of Asian modernist art of the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of this century. I refer particularly to art that has been canonized as 'good' or 'new' art by art curators from the 'developed world' by way of numerous biennales, triennials, and art writings on contemporary Asian art. Through these events and writings, curators have been able to project, privilege and promote specific types of art and artists, thus identifying and declaring for Asia their 'major' artists to be celebrated. My reading is made in relation to these artists and some of their work that have been highly acclaimed by the enterprise of international art.

The title of this essay indicates that my focus of study includes the whole of Asia. I have considered extensively examples from both China and India in formulating my observations and arguments. However, I need to confess that the most familiar terrain for me is South Asia. Having said that, as demonstrated through the examples from China, the observations I present here are not peculiar and limited to the South Asian terrain.

The idea of looking critically at the global dynamics at play during the last two decades within the Asian art scene that triggered various issues and anxieties, and how Asian art has manifested in recent years had been a nagging desire for me for a long time. However, every time I felt the urge to comment on it, my precarious situation as an art practitioner who has participated in a number of major biennials and triennials in the Asia Pacific region, and the fact that I am personally known to the artists who would be the object of study to develop my critique on contemporary Asian art has made me capricious and at the same time anxious. As such, I would declare this exercise more as an attempt to define what we are doing as Asian artists or what we can do as artists in a world that is controlled and manipulated by globalized corporate capital.

### The rise and subversion of a new era in Asian art

It is now a widely accepted fact that Asian art embarked upon a new era in the 1980s and in the early 1990s. The ideas and trends in art that gathered momentum during this period can be identified as the emergence of a historical avant-garde in visual arts in Asia for several reasons.<sup>1</sup> By the last decade of the twentieth century, modernist art in Asia was in a position to claim a history close to a century on its own terms. It was also during this very period that Asian artists began to show signs of an 'anti-institutionalism' positioned within the history of art that challenged the institutionalized autonomy of the discipline at varying degrees and scales. There have been several curatorial and scholarly attempts to record and define this important development in Asian art.<sup>2</sup> Survey exhibitions such as 'New Art from South Asia 1992' organized by the Japan Foundation, the 'Asian Art Shows' of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and scholarly book projects such as *Tradition and Change* edited by Caroline Turner, published in 1994 coinciding with the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art of Queensland Galleries, are some examples of such attempts.

The new work that came into prominence in these years established new ideologies that fuelled a different narrative urge which propounded a counter-tradition to the accepted norms of modernism, and the universalizing wishes of modernist art. These works interrogated and explored the social and cultural codes as well as the political affiliations of those very codes that constituted the ideologies of control, domination and exploitation. Always containing a certain cultural specificity in terms of the problematic, the thematic and the textuality, these works with their post-modernist critical edge had a local 'aura' around them. In other words, the Asian anxieties stemming from histories of colonial domination, independence struggles, contemporary dilemmas of ethnic issues, violence, political chaos and cultural confrontations in the face of global intrusions tended to inform the thematic core of most of these works. The Asian artists conspicuously predicated upon the narrative textualities of the contexts which they then examined, explored or reflected upon in the art works.

While it was the artists from Asian countries who brought in the new era, it was not they who defined and managed the new era into the future. In the absence of a serious critical discourse in contemporary art that would have consolidated the new movement, the directional guidance for contemporary Asian art was set by the art curators from the developed world, funded by wealthy museums and galleries. It is important to note that the Asian art world had no intra- or inter-regional institutional connections of any significance until the 1990s. Sri Lankan artists were totally oblivious to the changes that were occurring in India or China, while Pakistani women artists did not exist for them until as late as early 2000. It was via international curators, exhibitions and art activities curated by them that Asian artists from different regions met each other and artists' networks were established. Through a process of acknowledgement, recognition and presenting with opportunities to show Asian art in international exhibitions, international art curators played a pivotal role in consolidating the radical developments in art in Asia during the 1980s and 1990s.

In retrospect, this seems inevitable as the dawning of a new era in Asian art coincided with the dawning of another era. The 1990s marked the beginning of an era of curators. The art curators of contemporary art who emerged in the 1990s were guided by several perceived duties. If earlier curators were 'behind the scene aesthetic arbiters,' the new curators became the cultural mediators between the transnational and local. They saw themselves as

mediators between artists, art audiences and art funders. Moreover, they took it as their prerogative to present this art within and beyond the region. This phenomenon worked well for the rapid internationalization of Asian art by way of biennales, triennials, art camps and traveling exhibitions. However, there was an unavoidable drawback in this endeavor of internationalizing Asian art by curators: it took place for the benefit of art audiences in developed countries where the curators performed their work, and to support the glorification of wealthy art museums in those countries. To quote Michel Brenson, "what needs to be stated is that the increasing institutional awareness of the importance of audiences has made curator more visible as mediator between art and its public" (Brenson 1998: 16-27).

What this meant in practice was that the curators had to ensure impressive numbers of visitors to museum events so that corporate money spent on museums was justified and assured. To make sure that art audiences came to museums, the curators were forced to look for art that had potential to speak to, or amuse art audiences of the developed world. Accordingly it became apparent, although never articulated as such, that the art works finding their way into the hallowed exhibition spaces of contemporary art museums in the developed world could not be too culturally specific, and had a comfortable distance from its viewers. Asian art should enthrall the viewer but not perturb them with too much of overloaded details. The unpublicized attribute inherently possessed by these chosen Asian artworks acknowledged by the museums was the high potential of readability with an edge towards 'strangeness'.

If one were to take a critical look at the artists and the artworks that have acquired major accolades as great Asian artists and innovative Asian art, what one sees is a situation exceedingly dominated by the hegemonic cultural values and wishes of the so called 'west', the colonial and the developed (in most cases these are one and the same). The critical edge in Asian art that questioned and explored cultural codes of domination and power in their widest sense in the 1980s and early 1990s, has by now given way to passive and reified representations or narratives of Asian anxieties and histories. Asian anxieties are well packaged in digital manipulations, in exotic and craft techniques, in everyday objects and in the biographies of now non-threatening Asian *villains* such as Mahathma Gandhi and Mao Setung. What is seen now are the products (art) thus packaged, totally relying for their meaning and value upon their packaging; strikingly similar to the packaging of junk food. Here, the art audiences of the developed world are assured of enrichment of their lives through the consumption of some Asian 'cultural nutrients' while the museums and shows of contemporary Asian art are designated as places for this cultural enrichment.

If one were to take a broad look at contemporary Asian art shown at international exhibitions and reproduced in art journals and other international publications, one would see that they can be divided into two main trends:

1. The first trend represents art works that present narratives of Asian anxieties, traditions and histories of violence and suffering in a way that is highly mitigated, sanitized and made palatable to an international audience and corporate culture. Most of these artworks deliberately conceal the social and political affiliations of the cultural codes and specificities that inform their work and can be labeled as exploiting the cultural codes. My major critique of the works within this trend is that they continue to succumb to the hegemonic myth of 'modernist' art and its

extensions, and are totally the prerogative of the so called 'west'. By doing this, such works automatically endorse the precondition of a 'good' work of art to be the 'easy accessibility and translatability' to the 'western' audiences. Like golden beaches of Sri Lanka or India that are kept 'sanitized' for the enjoyment of Euro-American tourists, our art should be cleansed of any direct links with the culturally specific signs that are inherent to the anxieties examined and explored, so that such information wouldn't bother the audiences of the developed world.

2. The second trend contains artworks that became objects of 'great' art by the mere transportation of traditional or early twentieth century materials, objects and situations which constitute narratives that conform to the notions of the 'Orient,' to the clinically spotless gallery environment of wealthy museums. Such exportations of Asian situations shamelessly cater to an age old western hunger for 'anthropologizing' the Asian world and experience. The main problem of this trend is that it gives no reckoning to the agency of Asian artists in representation.

In both trends, one sees that Asian artists work more as 'cultural contractors' for art audiences of the developed world than as artists who 'interject a subjectivity that is existentially pitched' (Kapur 2000: 314). As such, these works contain no moving or critical interiors; interiors which demand an understanding of the cultural specificities of art making. Instead, they only remain within an exterior constructed by exploiting the cultural codes that comprise Asian anxieties, which by implication resemble fantasies fabricated with Asian 'narratives' for a global audience necessarily from the 'western' and developed world. In this sense, these art works are very much like the global literature formulated by Asian novelists that excel by making 'cartoonish' realities of Asian anxieties and histories (Mishra 2007: 16).

Looking at Asian mega art stars and the high profile art events of the Asia-Pacific region from a vantage point that has been only marginally associated with the major circuits of such events, we seem to be in an advantageous position to be more critical of the art today. Our predicament of not being lured by the glamour of the art world was not due to any special virtue on our part, but a privilege of being in the margins. We find that it is imperative for Asian artists to re-evaluate the politics and workings of Asian art at present, and to be aware of its shortcomings. In many ways these shortcomings deprive us of our agency and capacity to be discursive, with the resulting danger of distancing us from our own societies. Alternatively, are we to conclude that the great revolt in the visual arts in the last two decades of the twentieth century in Asia have now been tamed and remodeled in the way the 'superior other' wants us to present us to him? In the introduction to her edited volume, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (an essential text in understanding Asian art), Caroline Turner states that "what Said calls the authority of the compelling image of empire overtaking so many procedures of intellectual mastery has been left behind in the new societies of the Asia-Pacific region" (Turner 2005). Sadly, this may not hold true any more as such liberating processes, or the reflections of an independent art force in relation to Asia has become another utopian myth. If such an effort were made, it was for a very brief time in the early 1990s; it now remains an unrealized dream uprooted by the Asian artists themselves within the dynamics of internationalism.

### Artists as cultural contractors

Having stated my anxieties and critical thoughts forthrightly and somewhat unmercifully, I would now like to question my own hesitation with the idea of artists in the role of 'cultural contractors'. What are the implications for artists in thinking and working in such a role? Without formulating a direct answer to this, I would like to approach the problem from a different perspective that leaves the question unanswered to a certain extent.

Art historians and their writings have repeatedly emphasized that the primary function of the pre-modern era art was to service aesthetic desires and social needs of the wealthy and the powerful. Therefore, for the purpose of my argument, I hold that even artists under feudal conditions of the pre-modern era played the role of 'cultural contractors' in actuality. However, the difference of the pre-modern era was that the artists were not required to have, nor were obsessed with, the notion of unique and original style. At the same time, pre-modern artists were not required to be self consciously interventionist and critical. Even then, when such traits in their artistic personalities and their works existed, those were hidden under several layers of meaning-making. Since I imply that contemporary artists have again assumed the role of 'cultural contractors,' are we to conclude that modernist art has exhausted itself and come full circle? Is it making one of the basic tenants of modernist art -- artist as a self-reflective and questioning individual -- untenable and irrelevant?

Perhaps this is the hidden agenda of corporate capital of the transnational era. The re-phrasing of artists as 'cultural contractors' is not only an Asian phenomena that occurred under the tutelage of international art curators. It has its European counterparts as well, even though its manifestation is not as blatant. The Young British Artist (YBA) phenomenon of the 1990s in the UK is perhaps the best European example of such a manifestation. Some works and artists of this movement can easily be placed under the label of 'cultural contractors'.

At this moment, it is useful to reflect and understand fully the attributes of a 'cultural contractor'. A 'cultural contractor', I would suggest, self-consciously thinks in terms of power and wealth of the class owning the means of production of values /assets. Therefore, the possibilities of thinking and conceptualizing a certain narrative in terms of visual art may essentially be predetermined by the power and wealth of the class that owns the means of production of values /assets. Certain works by Damien Hirst and Marc Quinn can be taken to illustrate this aspect of the psychology of 'artist turned cultural contractors'. Hirst's work with dead animals in formaldehyde not only insists on confronting us with the brute fact of mortality at every turn, but the power of corporate capitalism confronts us with perhaps a greater force. Quinn's self portrait cast in blood also subscribes to this quite comfortably. If not for the patronage of corporate capital, conceiving of an artwork such as Quinn's, that needs an endless amount of financial support for its sustenance and function as an artwork, would not be possible. One obvious aspect of such artworks is that they radiate with a kind of snobbish arrogance by foregrounding the fact that they need a 'lot of cash' for their existence.

Similar to rituals of feudal societies, these artworks need the direct support of the owners of wealth to be conceived, produced and presented. An extreme example of such an artwork that best illustrates the mindset of an 'artist turned cultural worker' is Hirst's recent work of a jewel studded human skull. Costing a staggering fifteen million pounds as reported by CNN, the work was exhibited to a few at a time for only several minutes under heavy security. The whole scenario surrounding this work is interesting because of its similarity to the atmosphere and aura of visiting a sacred chamber. Has Hirst given rise to a very sacred

object? The steps that a viewer were required to go through to see the art work, such as staying in line, being security checked, walking through several doors, seeing the object only for a few minutes, resembles nothing but entering the sanctum sanctorum of a temple or a shrine. This opens to us a series of very interesting questions. Whose 'temple' are we stepping into? Whom are we worshipping? Who is blessed by this temple? One last question looms large: how has Hirst claimed the privilege to imagine making an artwork that would cost him fifteen million pounds? If one were to look at all the answers closely, one cannot avoid the larger than life figure of corporate capital. The high temples of corporate capital play the role of blessing artists such as Hirst to boost their power to 'imagine big.' What Hirst in reality has ended up producing is a 'disneyfied'<sup>3</sup> ritual object and a corresponding series of ritual practices (similar to the feudal rituals of pre-modern times), to sanctify the accumulation of wealth on the one hand, and to camouflage the processes of exploitation that makes it possible to amass such excessive wealth through pseudo sanctification.

Reformulating artists as 'cultural contractors' seems to be a necessary requirement of transnational corporate capital. If Asian artists and art curators have succumbed to this by 'sanitizing' and 'disneyfying' Asian anxieties, histories, sufferings and materials, the European artists have collaborated with it by 'ritualizing' and 'disneyfying' corporate wealth. The difference between Asian and European art, or to be more specific, between the art of the developed world and the developing, is that the former sanitizes its narrative while the latter ritualizes. The main problem however, in casting artists as 'cultural contractors' is that it robs art of one of its hard won post-traditionalist truths- the possibility to be an 'artist'.

I began this essay with a quotation from Frantz Fanon as I believe that a great revolution in visual art occurred in Asia in the 1980s and 1990s which was forgotten, betrayed or not considered seriously by mid 2000 by current Asian mega art personalities and art writers. The ruptures made by artists like K. G. Subramaniam, and Gulammohamed Sheik for India that were further consolidated by artists like Bhupan Khaker, Nalini Malani, Nilma Sheik, Arpita Singh, Vivan Sundaram, Madhvi Parekh and a few others are now betrayed by many of the current superstars of Indian art by having taken a path of 'exploiting the code' rather than exploring and examining the code.<sup>4</sup> The same can be said of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal to a certain degree. A critical retake on the current status of Asian art seems imperative if we are to write our history on our own terms.

## End Notes

1. A discerning reader may notice that my ideas on historical avant-garde stem from Peter Burger's book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984).

2. Surprisingly, for an eminent Indian art writer like Geetha Kapur even as late as 2005 there were no artists or art worthy of her attention outside of Delhi-Bombay-Baroda circuit in South Asia. What exists for her between this Indian circuit of 'excellence' and East Asia is a culturally barren landscape. For her, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal or Sri Lanka does not exist as active participants of an Asian art scene, but India alone on one side and East Asia on the other! For more details, see Geeta Kapur, 'Dismantled Norms: Apropos other Avant-gardes' (In, Caroline Turner, Ed., *Art and Social Change*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005: 46-100). What is ironical in this essay concerning other avant-gardes

is that Kapur, while riding on Hal Foster's position that argues for successive avant-gardes -- claims that "avant-garde is historically conditioned phenomenon which emerges only in a moment of real political disjuncture, (and) it will appear in various forms in different parts of the world at different times" (2005: 57), and fails or avoids looking around South Asia for similar movements. However, she seems quite versatile on Thai, Philippine, Indonesian and Chinese art and artists. Kapur's complete disregard for art movements in South Asia other than the Delhi-Bombay-Baroda circuit destabilizes the politics of her arguments that intend to confront the hegemony of the Euro-American art and art history writing practices. This complete disregard for, and silence on, the art movements in South Asia implies a hegemonic position for India in relation to South Asia, and she as a 'producer of knowledge' casts herself a colonialist of a kind.

3. 'Disneyfication' is a word coined to infer situations that resembles the fabricated fantasies of Disneyland.

4. For more information, see Geeta Kapur's essay, 'When was Modernism in Indian Art?' (In, *When was Modernism*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000). This essay by Geeta Kapur can be considered an important piece of writing though written in the convoluted language of the subaltern studies specialists. It contains a whole range of extremely penetrating insights on modernism/ postmodernism in art in South Asia. Perhaps it may be due to this extremely arrogant, dis-communicative and elitist use of language of the white master that most Indian artists and art curators have not been able to internalize the very crucial and pertinent issues that she has raised in this essay.

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## Glocal-Cola: Visual Communications of Coca Cola in India as a Site of Mediation between Global and Local Factors

Meena Kadri

No one drinks 'globally'. Local people get thirsty, go to their local retailer and buy a locally made Coke (Daft 2000).

These images are the result of an explorative case study, including ethnographic considerations, of the visual marketing of Coca Cola in India. They touch on the theme of 'glocalisation' which explores both the effective expansion of transnational companies into new markets and the ability of cultures to exert their own identity in their interplay with the global scenario.

In 1977, Coke was forced out from operations in India by a socialist government as part of a drive for national self-sufficiency. After a 16 year absence, neo-liberal policies in India allowed for its return in 1993 but to a very different cultural and economic landscape. Countering an initial downturn due to lack of local insight, Coca Cola attempted to position itself as a provider of new traditions or as a participant in existing traditions.

In line with the decentralising thrust of Coke internationally, local managers and advertising teams were recruited and regional teams were established in a multi-local network system. Adaptation to distribution in diverse conditions included the use of branded rickshaw vans, tricycles and *lahris* (pushcarts) that could cope with congested Indian urban roads, and an extensive network and hub system devised for rural delivery. Sign-writing of Coca Cola advertising in India tempers the brand standardization and consistency evident in more affluent countries, while firmly anchoring it in the vernacular styles of the Indian streetscapes. Coca Cola contracts sign-writing firms and supplies them with color templates and paint specifications for its annual campaigns. Increasingly, Coke is using more modern technology such as flex and vinyl prints alongside its sign-written communications. Through these images I attempt to highlight the visual branding of Coca Cola as a 'site of negotiation' between the duality of foreign company and local consumer. Rather than portraying globalization as an essentially homogenizing force, we can view it here through the lens of localization and appreciate the resulting absorption and transformation that exemplifies contemporary India.

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