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# India's Reluctant Multilingualism

In a land of 179 languages



Magali Koenig: From the *Voyage en Inde* series, 1991

Alok Rai

With four language groups, 179 languages and 544 dialects, India represents a multilingualism that makes Switzerland's quadrilingualism look quite tame by comparison. Alok Rai, Professor of English at the University of Delhi, discusses the big differences and little similarities between them |



India's multilingualism is famous. The People of India survey, conducted by K.S. Singh under the aegis of the Anthropological Survey of India, while consciously eschewing the question of distinguishing between languages and "dialects", puts the total number at 325 languages. [Singh 1993] Grierson's authoritative work on the *Linguistic Survey of India* took twenty-nine years to complete – 1897-1927. It identified 179 languages and 544 dialects, making a total of 723. Somewhat mysteriously, the Appendix to the *Linguistic Survey* gave a list of 872 classified languages. And while the numbers have fluctuated somewhat, successive censuses have

always reported languages and dialects in the hundreds. Then again, these languages belong to four distinct language groups: the Indo-Aryan (or Indo-European), the Dravidian, the Austric (Munda or Kol), and the Sino-Tibetan. Somewhat consolingly, according to the great linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, these greatly different languages, deriving from fundamentally different families, have interacted over the millennia and produced a not entirely mystical commonality which he describes as "a common Pan-Indian Speech-Culture type". ["Address to the Dravidian linguists" (1972); cited Singh 1993, p.2] Reaching towards a similar formulation,

others have described India as a linguistic and as a cultural “area”.

While the fact of India’s multilingualism – the presence and persistence of hundreds of languages and dialects – is undeniable, the way it plays out in national life is rather different from the relatively tidy multilingualism of Switzerland. On the one hand, language is one of the dimensions along which the cultural diversity that is such a large part of India’s national self-image gets expressed. But there is a manifest and unresolved tension between this celebration of diversity and the centralizing tendency of the Indian state. This tendency itself probably derives from the nature of nationalist mobilization that underlay the struggle for freedom from colonial rule. Thus, there is an unmistakable Herderesque linguistic-cultural aspect to Indian nationalism. In the period before 1947, there was an explicit desire to identify one national language – Hindustani – other than the language of the colonial masters, English. However, it was in the nature of the political mobilization itself that the major languages of the different regions of the country also demanded recognition, and the Eighth Schedule of the language chapter of the *Constitution of India*, promulgated in 1950, listed fourteen major languages, all of which were deemed “national”. This list has seen subsequent additions. And shortly after independence, there was a massive “reorganization” of the states along linguistic lines, with the predictable wrangling about where the lines ought to be drawn in the inevitable and inevitably fuzzy contact zones.

**Interaction or coexistence.** However, this rich and contentious history has one aspect that has a direct bearing on the present consideration of the comparative experience of Indian multilingualism – the creation, through “linguistic reorganization”, of supposedly monolingual states federating awkwardly to produce a multilingual India. Thus, to borrow the terms used in the analysis of the Swiss experience, this arrangement is one that makes for “coexistence” between the major languages rather than “interaction” [cf. Dürmüller 1997] at the national level. And while it is generally understood that education should be available to children in their own language, the mismatch between the fifteen-odd languages of the Eighth Schedule and the hundreds of languages and dialects reported by the censuses means that in practice the dominant “national” language of the region – also called, therefore, the regional language – subsumes the ritually celebrated heterogeneity. And the fact that those hundreds of languages continue to be reported indicates either an unofficial, informal existence in in-group communication or, sadly, an assertion of language loyalty that is increasingly merely nostalgic. (On the other hand, there is the practically insur-

mountable challenge of providing educational materials in hundreds of different languages – but one of these, Shmong, can be exempt: the 1961 census reported only one speaker!) [Singh 1993, p.335] There is a very real threat to the cultural heterogeneity that has developed over the millennia. As the acculturating apparatuses of the modern state increase their reach – and, it is plausibly argued by many, they aren’t doing so fast enough and so primary education lags behind solemnly affirmed targets – the cultural visions embodied in the languages that developed in the narrow valleys of the North-East, in the mountains and forests of Central India, might well not survive. But there is another set of processes that derive from the need for inter-regional communication – the problem (and, given the sheer magnitude of the heterogeneity, the need) of a *lingua franca*.

**The three-language formula.** Before the incursion of modernity – whenever *that was!* – people needed to communicate only with their neighbours. Contigual intelligibility sufficed for the most part, and the somewhat greater needs of merchants and mendicants led to the evolution of some kind of *ur-language* which emerged in the first millennium, combining diverse cultural influences. This history is part of the romance of India, the evolution of a rich, loamy cultural pluralism. This linguistic domain – variously called Hindustani, Hindi and Urdu – which was the peaceable *lingua franca* of pre-modern India, has also been the arena of some of the fiercest political struggles of modern India. [Rai 2000, p.12 and passim]

The crucial difference between Swiss multilingualism and Indian multilingualism is that the Swiss version is both a given phenomenon – the simultaneous presence of many (well, four) languages in the country – and also a policy desideratum. There are four different national languages, and ideally people should know at least some of the other languages in order to communicate with their fellow citizens. In India, multilingualism is an empirical fact, but it is not really a policy goal. A minimal attempt in the direction of promoting intra-national multilingual communication was made in the 1960s under the rubric of the “three language formula”. This sought, substantially, to create a formal equality between Hindi and the other Indian languages by requiring people in the Hindi regions to learn another Indian language, while requiring non-Hindi users, in half-hearted pursuit of the multilingual ideal, to learn Hindi. The third language of the formula was supposed to be “a modern European language” but it was, in practice, almost exclusively English. The hope was that emotional integration and communication between different language groups would be promoted, and the burden of language-learning would be equalized as between non-Hindi speak-

ers and those who spoke free India's would-be *lingua franca*. It would take too long to go into the whole story, but the implementation of the three language formula was, at best, defective.

Meanwhile, however, outside official channels, the spread of Hindi, the success of the medieval *ur-language* mentioned above, driven now to a large extent by that engine of mass culture, the Bombay cinema, continues apace. The People of India survey reports that an increasing number of people are now "bilingual in Hindi". And also that while more and more people are being absorbed within the major languages of the Eighth Schedule, large numbers of minor languages are languishing. Thus, underlying this complex multilingual landscape, particularly under the hothouse conditions of modernity, there are the complex dynamics of power, which are correlated in turn with state control and demographic weight and economic consequence.

**English as the language of the elite.** Much of this works – as it has in the past – to the advantage of Hindi. However, the history of the rise of modern Hindi, and the fact that it is the language of the poorest as also most densely populated part of the country, means that it is unlikely to find acceptance as the *lingua franca* for intra-national communication. The only other candidate for this role is English. Immediately after independence, there was considerable resistance to the idea that English should be used for this purpose, but in the changed global context, this resistance has, to a considerable extent, abated.

However, there are some specific Indian difficulties with allowing English to assume that role. These, again, serve to differentiate the Indian situation from Switzerland, where, too, English is emerging as the *de facto lingua franca*. English is without doubt the language of the pan-Indian

elite – i.e. those who need to communicate across regions, do so in English. However, it is also the language of an infinitesimally small number of people. The census is notoriously inadequate in measuring the spread and penetration of English, but the number of English-knowers is roughly estimated to be around 2%. A *lingua franca* that excludes 98% of the population cannot but be something of an anomaly! Then again, if English were equally foreign to all language groups, it might have found acceptability on that count – unlike, say, Hindi. However, given that English is virtually a first language for the already entrenched Indian elite, the formal adoption of English as the *lingua franca* would be adding insult to injury – and vice versa too.

What we are left with, then, is little other than the ritual celebration of a multilingualism that is, as we used to say delicately, acknowledged more in the breach than in the observance. And in the censuses, of course. ─

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# Celebrating Differences in an Era of Flattening Sameness

## The dance of cultures, the culture of dance

Sadanand Menon

Tradition, modernity and globalization meet head on in India, confronting artists with a critical challenge and sometimes an acid test. Sadanand Menon uses dance to illustrate the dilemma of Indian identity |



Haruko: From the *All India Permit* series, 2005

Cultural production for the contemporary Indian artist is predicated upon the vexed question of “identity”. The time/space juncture converts it into a profound predicament. The artist as producer is confronted with grave new dilemmas as cultural production sheds its specific identity in the increasingly flattening global process of cultural homogenization. Set adrift on the waves of a faceless market, art increasingly aspires to be a glitzy product in the seductive portals of mass entertainment. Even state agencies today seem to articulate official positions in favour of regulation and instrumentalization of “cultural industries” for commoditization and export.

**Clichés and complications.** The old certainties no longer apply. The organic, the authentic, the native, the classical, the indigenous, the rooted, are all facing threat across the board in all disciplines. And if they survive, they survive either as museumized art objects of reactionary nostalgia

or as reinvented emblems of aggressive cultural nationalism. Millennia-old tribal and folk forms and craft objects are rendered banal and stripped of their lustre in the crude emporia of state patronage or plucked out of context and transformed into inaccessible high-value baubles in the boutiques of the urban elite.

Things are further complicated by some infuriatingly stereotyped identity markers for the “East” and the “West”, which translate into glib binaries like “tradition” and “modernity”. In Western descriptions, one encounters again and again the fictionality of what goes by the name of India as a place invested with some deep spiritual and cultural certainty, on the one hand, and resistance to change on the other.

Identity, however, needs to be seen as a constant process of loss and recovery, which simultaneously accommodates erasures of normative differences and boundaries, even while reasserting them.



**Split identity.** One of the illustrative entry points into this sequence of cultural tensions in contemporary Indian art practice can be through, say, a classical South Indian dance form like Bharatanatyam. Thanks to the body-text, which is dance, it is possible to analyze the ways in which social identities are signalled, formed and negotiated through physical movement. In this capacity, movement serves as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class and national identity or even as a flagging of sexual identity, age or illness.

A graphic story which illustrates the tension of the “split identity” of the classical dancer of an older form living in a modern nation state – who is made to wear the stereotypes of both national and aesthetic markers that might directly contradict lived realities – is the one made famous by dancer-choreographer Chandralekha.

Today Chandra (as she is fondly addressed) is some sort of a legend and icon for having successfully intervened in the plastic fixity of a form

like Bharatanatyam to contemporize its content and its energy. But she narrates a story relating to her dance debut, dating back to 1952. It was a charity show in aid of raising funds for the water famine in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. As a student of Guru Kancheepuram Ellappa Pillai (who was also the nattuvanar, or conductor, for the legendary diva Balasaraswati), Chandra had chosen to perform that evening a sensuous composition which describes the mythological story of the pleasure and excitement of the young women of the city of Mathura as they bathe in the River Yamuna awaiting the arrival of Krishna. In Chandra’s words: “I was depicting the river, the water-play of the maidens, the sensuality, luxuriance and abundance of water. Suddenly, I froze with the realization that I was depicting all this profusion of water in the context of a drought. I remembered photographs in the newspapers of cracked earth, of long and winding queues of people waiting for water with little tins in hand. Guru Ellappa was singing ‘Mathura Nagarilo’. Art and life seemed to

be in conflict. *The paradox was stunning. For that split second I was divided, fragmented into two people.*"

**Integrating divergencies.** The lessons she drew from this experience are crucial in terms of understanding the issues concerning "identity" in Indian art today. Chandralekha has written: *"Through the years, this experience has lived with me and I have not been able to resolve this contradiction, which, of course, is also a social contradiction. On the one hand a great love for all that is rich and nourishing in our culture and the identity it gives me, and on the other the need to contribute positive energies towards changing the harsh realities of life. For me, to be able to respond to the realities of life is as crucial as to remain alive and tuned to sensuality and cultural wealth. I have struggled to harmonize, to integrate these diverging directions, in order to remain sensitive and whole."*

Clearly, identity has the power to both enable and disable. National identities are combusted together in a mould, which shapes their contours by leaking out their unacceptable "other". Reductively, one could say this is the distinction built into the binary of the Occident and the Orient. The Orient both repelled the Western colonizer and, simultaneously, seduced him. In a curious way, he managed to contaminate the colonized too with this love-hate sentiment. He left behind a class of people emptied of identity, deeply suspicious of their own past, despising their own bodies and fearful of their own sexuality.

With the result, for example in India after national independence, that the gain of a homeland has also come with a concomitant loss of a homeland of the "imaginary". Which is why "identity struggles" have assumed such a central location in the life of the subcontinent over the past one hundred years. The much feared Oriental eroticism and licentiousness, an encounter with which triggered the "modern moment" in the Occident, has been entirely suppressed and flattened out in the Orient itself as a baser instinct. What has supplanted it is some sort of a fake, counterfeit identity of enacted spirituality, the banality of whose content only matches its cosmetic decorativeness.

**The tension between the "local" and the "global".**

Indian Nobel laureate, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, said a national identity is not merely "mrinmaya" (territorial); it is also "chinmaya" (ideational). At this level of ideas, many nations need to find their vectors and locations on the map. Particularly now, confronted as we are with the reality of an expanded "global identity".

In a curious way, this expansion of "global identity" compels us to reflect upon what it means to be local – to comprehend the nature of the tension between the cosy binary of the local and global, which, ultimately, is a geopolitical geometry that forcibly seeks to convert asymmetry to symmetry.

In a simple way, one could suggest that the "local" is a place with the least amount of conflict with "identity". The "global", on the other hand, is a place where identity conflicts are not only high, but where hanging on to identity is like standing at the seashore during reverse tide and feeling the sand rapidly shift beneath your feet. It is a place where identities are constantly under threat and, often, violently recast.

**Tradition-as-identity.** In the Indian context certainly (and in many other Asian contexts), there is a battle around the notion of "tradition-as-identity" and who speaks for it. As the leading Indian historian Professor Champakalakshmi has explained, *"Colonialism played a critical role in the identification and production of Indian 'tradition', devalued under conditions of colonial modernity."* She further says, *"the extraordinary burden of knowledge and responsibility was arrogated by the colonizer, in order to regulate knowledge, by fixing tradition."* The point is: this was, in turn, gleefully endorsed by an Indian elite.

One of the obvious reasons for this may be that the category tradition represented a power bloc. All those for whom the newly invented concept of tradition came as a boon were part of the nascent westernized, urban elite for whom aligning with tradition was a means of self-inscription into the body politic of an emerging nation state, something they had been marginal and peripheral to in the earlier monarchical system, and against which they had connived on the side of imperial power. Now to proclaim you were traditional meant you could legitimately claim power in the present, due to your endorsement of the past. It represents a phase of aggressive, elitist identity-making.

**Class and cultural domestication.** However, tradition is not some undifferentiated, homogenous, unitary thing. Take the case of the dance form Bharatanatyam, and how it was adapted in the late 1920s/early 1930s from its earlier version as sadirattam, performed by the socially ostracized community of deva-dasis (Les Bayaderes or the Dancing Girls of the Temples). When the dance transited from the "low-caste" dasis to the upper class/caste Brahmin community in cosmopolitan Madras (now Chennai), it also resulted in a bowdlerizing and sanitizing of the form.

In most cases we will find that dance forms originating in subaltern classes or non-dominant communities present a trajectory of upward mobility during specific phases of nation-building, during which these dances are fumigated, de-odorized, gentrified and de-eroticized. Often, during such clinical de-sexualization and domestication of the forms, as they cross class/caste/race boundaries, we also encounter a distinct difference and transformation in body usage as the erotic charge is sublimated within false religiosity.

In the case of Bharatanatyam in particular, the disenfranchisement of deva-dasis from their hereditary artistic capital was swiftly achieved, in the space of a few decades. The instrument for this bloodless transfer was the gratuitous agency of tradition, which, in the hands of the elite, merely justified such plunder by extrapolating on to it some sort of divine sanction, thus effectively distancing itself from all modernizing (and, therefore, critical) tendencies.

**The politics of displacement.** While myth and memory conventionally serve to preserve identity and provoke bonding through evocation of shared cultural heritage, these can also be used as political weapons to impose a hegemonic memorial narrative, which seeks to privilege a narrow vision of specific historical events. The erasure and replacement of the memory around select art forms and physical disciplines like Bharatanatyam contributed significantly to a politics of displacement wherein, by wrenching away the organic intellectual and aesthetic property of a marginal, subaltern community and claiming it as their own, the elite succeeded in establishing its “natural” cultural superiority, thus consolidating its claim as the legitimate inheritor of the state apparatus from a similarly “culturally superior” imperial power. If you called yourself a dancer in the India of the 1940s, you risked being dubbed a prostitute. Thirty years later, this very dance became the flag-bearer of cultural heritage and national pride. Today, another thirty years later, the notion of “dance-as-culture” is being redefined by dancers of the Indian diaspora. If dance can, in fact, speak for the making and unmaking of universes and identities in the twinkle of a toe, we need to discover new affiliations in the specificities of the rich diversity of practice rather than let the specificities be eroded into a

market standardization imposed by a global culture industry. Only this can enable a radical humanization of the content and restore to dance its subversive potential to celebrate “differences” in an era of flattening sameness. ─

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# “You Have the Watches – We Have the Time”

## The Swiss quest for the “inner India”

Bernard Imhasly

Seeing differences – but from what perspective? Swiss artists have long viewed the Indian subcontinent as an object of desire, whether as projection or salutary shock therapy. The photographic view reveals widely different reactions, but also exposes characteristic similarities |

In the summer of 1991 I met two young artists in Delhi, brothers from Switzerland. They aroused my interest because they came from the little town of Thal in the Rhine Valley, very close to the Catholic boarding school where I spent several years of my youth. “Marienburg”, as the castle was called, was situated on a scarp beneath a rocky ridge of Rorschacherberg; the other three sides were surrounded by a high monastery wall. From the balcony of the dormitory you could look down onto the Rhine Valley and Lake Constance. But the vista was limited by the knowledge that through this open plain ran the border between Switzerland and Austria, and that, despite its liberating breadth, the lake in fact formed the border to Germany. Though I could climb the walls below, and we often did, the expanse beyond was a glass barrier.

The view from Thal was even more restricted. The town nestled between the mountains and the foothills of the Hohen Kasten. It was this imagined shared view that connected me to the two artists. I recognized in their artistic approach an expression of this feeling – but also a reaction to it. On their way from Ladakh in the north to the southern tip of India, they had made a stop at Delhi. Travelling on foot, hitchhiking, taking coaches and trains, they understood their journey literally as taking the measure of a huge, expansive space. They triangulated, collected rock samples, coach tickets and menus, recorded sounds, described and drew faces, houses, trees and telephone masts. They jotted down crossings and detours, border fences and other obstacles, waiting periods and resting places, and again and again this meas-

ured immersion in the space around them. The exhibition they mounted in Delhi was a presentation of marks and signs located by two Swiss from constricted Thal in the infinite space of India.

It was not until later that I realized why this documentation of movement had fascinated me so. It was more than the biographical coincidence of a shared youthful outlook. I saw in it a Swiss response to the experience of a country like India – a country with an area eighty times bigger than Switzerland and a population a hundred and fifty times larger – which seems to foreign eyes and feet to be a land without boundaries. Many who travel to India react to its vast landscape by pursuing an inward path, which, rich and well marked, is studied with spiritual signposts, guides and inns in the form of ashrams, monasteries and other “hang-outs”. It is an essentially romantic vision of India: what André Malraux called the view of a country that belongs to “*the ancient Orient of our soul*”.

“**Inner India**”. This “inner India” is often a vision that does not even seek direct contact with Indian reality. The perspective dates back to the German Romantic era and a tradition founded by the Schlegel brothers, Schopenhauer and later Max Müller, who were the most influential Indologists of the nineteenth century. Projecting an idealized past into the present, they always avoided putting their position to the test by taking an actual trip. This mindset assumed almost tragicomic dimensions with Herman Hesse, literary “guru” of the hippie movement. Encouraged by his host Georg Reinhart in Winterthur, he decided to travel to the Indian subcontinent in 1911. He had plan-

ned to land at Tellicherry, where his grandfather had been a missionary for the Basel Mission and his mother had been born. But in Colombo, about to embark for South India, he abandoned the idea for fear of falling ill. He felt at risk of losing himself were he genuinely to walk in the footsteps of Siddhartha.

“You can’t make gurus out of the Swiss,” says journalist Isolde Schaad. The artists from Thal did not travel from Hardwar to Benares, from Pushkar to Goa; their journey began methodically at the northernmost point and would end at the southernmost, followed by an analogous east-west passage at some later date. It was an India experience with feet planted firmly on the ground, or more: at the time I interpreted the gesture of measuring, of the measured step, the documentation of the seen and experienced, as the attempt of narrow-horizoned, pinhole-perspectived Swiss to cope with this infinite space, as furrows in a field that could thereby be made manageable and assimilated.

Was this a “typically Swiss” form of encounter with India? There are contrary examples, like Le Corbusier, whose plans for Chandigarh were less a gesture of finding marks than of creating a modernistic counter-world. Going far beyond a furrow, his was an excavation of local soil on a gigantic scale. Though this approach to India, too, was rooted in the narrowness and constrictions of a Swiss background, it derived its electricity from the egomaniacal creative will of an urbanist who sought in wide-open geographical spaces the freedom he had not been able to find in the country of his birth or even in his adoptive home of France. Hardly anything about the buildings in the capital of Punjab Province would suggest the observation of something foreign or alien. The body of the new India was not just scratched, it was veritably co-opted by the architect’s design fantasies. He could do this because Jawaharlal

Nehru had given him *carte blanche*. Le Corbusier’s vision was the same as that of the Father of India – to transform a rural landscape into a global city.

**The photographic perspective.** It was almost a relief for me to experience a Swiss photographer’s answer to Le Corbusier’s modernist counterpoint. Thomas Flechtner’s Chandigarh series shows the sculptural force and beauty of concrete spaces with their precisely calculated edge cracks and light points. But in this country full of people, these are spaces devoid of people: the leather armchairs are empty, the figures in front of the Coca-Cola counter disappear between massive columns, in the monsoon season the areas between the grey concrete buildings become swampy wastes. A tree without a single leaf looks as smooth and hard as the columns around it. The only sign of life in the picture is a small placard reading “To Let”. It is one of the little incongruities picked up by Flechtner’s camera, subversive signs that a gradual reconquest is under way: a round clay jug leans against a concrete column, supported by broken bricks and stones; the weeds growing out of the cracks in the wall along the monotonous ramp of the Capitol are almost as beautiful as flowers.

I also mention Thomas Flechtner’s Chandigarh pictures here because I regard them as representative of peculiarly Swiss ways of encountering India: meticulous observation, incorruptible, unbiased and unsparing, combined with the formal creative energy of an artist who has learned to discover beauty in detail, proximity and distance as a single entity. Is it a coincidence that – of all the artistic ways of addressing the Swiss-Indian experience – it should be photography that has set the most important accents? In the opinion of Peter Pfrunder, there is “hardly a country in Asia – with the exception perhaps of Japan – that has attracted



Thomas Flechtner: High Court/Capitol Complex, Chandigarh, 1997



so many major Swiss photographers". It started with Walter Bosshard's photo-reportages in the 1920s, then the travel pictures of Annemarie Schwarzenbach and Ella Maillart, the big post-war works by Werner Bischof, the reportages of Emil Scheidegger, Nicolas Bouvier, Martin Hürlimann, René Burri and Bernhard Moosbrugger, and on to the city portraits by Manuel Bauer and Thomas Flechtner, and Daniel Schwartz's delta photos.

However much they may differ stylistically, their approach, their readiness to engage with the "other", is always similar: "Note the hands of a young Indian girl embarrassed by an overly direct compliment," wrote Nicolas Bouvier. Hugo Loetscher views India as a country whose beauty and excesses allow photographers the chance to live the dialectic "between the 'beautiful' and the 'committed picture', between creatively imposed order and the brutal disorder of reality". Certain photographers consciously went out in search of this challenge – Werner Bischof, when he documented the famine in Bihar for *Life*; Manuel Bauer, in his many-year exploration of coexisting chaos and order in a city like Calcutta; or Daniel Schwartz, who sets himself the reportage photographer's ultimate challenge: capturing the fluid, threatened, changeable quality of a river landscape and its people in the here and now of a picture.

**Timekeeping and illusion.** The photographic view has impressed me as a significant Swiss form of attempting to come to terms with India, though surely not the only one. It is natural that, for the photographer, "time" should play a subordinate role. But it is surely a theme in the response a country that has dedicated itself to timekeeping shows to a country that views time as an illusion. Two professions – missionaries and business people – are certainly faced with it repeatedly. Film-maker Markus Imhoof has written about the sense of time pressure felt by his grandmother, wife of a Basel missionary in India, in relation to converting the "heathens": she "compared his [her husband's] mission in the field to that of a doctor who had discovered the vaccine against malaria and was desperately trying to save the population before it was too late." It is hardly a coincidence that the "Basel missionary industry" was the first to try and teach the locals to produce cuckoo clocks, in order, as Imhoof quotes a missionary, "to banish the heathen instincts from the dark human being through meticulousness and diligence". As so often in India, the undertaking ends in resignation: "In the country of inertia, the business of time cannot flourish."

Time plays a role, not only in the economy of the soul but also of the body. In the Sixties, Hans Probst, Swiss representative of the Rieter Company, was in charge of establishing a factory in Coimbatore in South India for the Lakshmi Machine Works in a joint venture. When he experi-

enced delays, his Indian partner consoled him with the words: "You have the watches, we have the time." It was a statement that expressed more perfectly than any other the contradiction, the tension, between two diametrically different cultures – measured time, which lays the foundations for a work economy and equates productivity with production, thereby becoming the mainspring of prosperity; and whose absence is reckoned to be one of the reasons for poverty, because, in this case, time cannot be instrumentalized as a discrete category in the working process. But the irony of the comment undercuts the "developmental differential" between the two countries, affluent Switzerland and poor India: "You have the watches, we have the time" puts both keeping time and having time on the same level, pronouncing them complementary. For what is the point of a time-keeping instrument if it is not constantly on the trail of timelessness and intent on catching it, not unlike a hunter who basically loves the wild animal's freedom – but has to kill his quarry to capture this freedom at the moment of its ultimate loss. Those who measure time in order to "have time" will ultimately have less and less of it: "We live half as long as you do, and have twice as much time."

**An escape from life.** Le Corbusier was not the only one to let his personal sensibilities dominate his eye for the new and alien quality of India. There are also Swiss who sought, not supremacy, but refuge from their own suffering in India. A case in point is the writer-photographer Annemarie Schwarzenbach, who travelled to Afghanistan and India with Ella Maillart in 1939, shortly before the war broke out, to escape her "demons" – family, depression, homosexuality, drugs. She already began taking photographs on the Simplon Pass, the place where "home" becomes "away" – looking, not forward but backward. Her subject is a little girl sitting on a roughly hewn tree trunk, a bunch of wildflowers in her hand. Later Schwarzenbach will write on the back of the photo, in English: "That is our last look on Switzerland. Why do we leave this loveliest country in the world? What urges us to go East on desert roads?"

It is the nostalgic view from elsewhere that gives rise to these words, for the flight motif is later clearly named: "Whoever does not wish to spend thirty years behind lock and key is well advised to cut and run early enough... We were not looking for adventure, just a breather, in countries where the laws of our civilization did not yet apply and where we hoped for the unique experience of finding these laws neither tragic nor inevitable, irreversible or indispensable." But these laws already caught up with Schwarzenbach in Afghanistan, and her diary entries could not conceal her disappointment and disillusion: "Afghanistan, land of freedom? Land of adventure?"

Romantic land of the future? Or simply a mountainous country one and a half times as big as France?" The image of women in chadors continually drives her back into the safety of her European sensibilities: "The chador does not merely mean unfreedom, it means undignified fear of life, ignorance, constraint ... this country sometimes has gestures of silence that choke me." Schwarzenbach felt repelled and yearned, not for India, but to return to Europe: "In our country there is war, a different future is preparing itself."

While Annemarie Schwarzenbach constantly looked into the rear view mirror on her "route des Indes", rejecting and being rejected by the strange and new, for Ella Maillart the road to India was a road to Damascus. Even as her photographs conscientiously continue to document the country, the experience of India begins to alter this globetrotter's philosophy of travel. She finds herself confronted with a saying of the Buddha: "No journey leads to the end of the world. In truth, I tell you, the world is contained within this six-foot body." Having said her final good-bye to Annemarie Schwarzenbach in Mandu in Central India, she goes, not to Bombay, but to Tiruvannamalai, where she meets the mystic Ramana Maharshi: "Vastness must be in us," she later writes. "It can only be in us, otherwise it would be no more than a geographic dimension. Only those who understand vastness and let it mature can ever possess it."

But remaining at core Swiss, Ella Maillart does not let herself be gripped completely. Instead of moving to the ashram, she rents a flat in the city. And the book she writes revolves, not around her encounters with her guru, but around her cat, who is also the title figure: *Ti-Puss, ou la vie avec ma chatte*. In her diary she playfully notes: "If only I desired truth as passionately as I long for Kashgar." And here, too, she remains true to herself in the knowledge that the experience of a strange land is often the condition for a journey to one's own inner world.

Later, from the heights of her chalet-ashram in Chandolin, she recapitulates her India experience with the sentence: "Before my trip to India, I travelled to delight in differences; from then on, to take pleasure in similarities." When, with measured view, she – like the two brothers from Thal with their triangulations – made a furrow in the Indian soil with her pictures, she also opened up the "inner Orient of her soul". ─

Translated from the German by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart

Bernard Imhasly was born in Sierre (Valais) in 1946. A research assistant and instructor of linguistics at the University of Zurich from 1973 to 1978, he earned his doctorate in 1978 with a dissertation entitled *Sprachliche Kreativität als linguistisches Problem*. As a member of the Swiss diplomatic service from 1978 to 1990, his last posting was in Delhi. He has been based in Delhi as South Asia correspondent for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* since 1991. He is married to Rashna Gandhi.

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# Reports from Bangalore – Artists in Residence



*Usha Twilight*: Installation by Haruko at the Chitrakala Parishath national art college, Bangalore 2005, © Suresh Kumar

## Art Is Art, Wherever You Go

Christoph Storz

What do Swiss artists seek in India – and what do they find? Christoph Storz has been living in Bangalore for many years. The Studio for Guest Artists he helped establish there cooperates with the Atelier Krone in Aarau, providing an important site of Indian-Swiss cultural exchange. Pro Helvetia supports the undertaking via artist grants. A report by e-mail I



My “new-to-India” experiences are now eighteen years old. I do remember coming to India with the feeling that no matter where I was, I wasn’t really interested in experiencing something different. Like those business travellers who want their rooms at the Intercontinental always to look the same, whatever town they are in, I wasn’t looking for palm trees and peacocks, but grass and sparrows. But the fact that my first encounter with India took place in a village made it somewhat difficult to maintain that attitude.

**Discoveries and rediscoveries.** In 1988 – three years before the opening of India’s economy, the full cultural impact of which became effective around 1995 – my friends here were rightly reserved about this Eurocentric habit of mine of making facile comparisons. To them, my Western-perspective comments must generally have come across as condescending. In that respect, things are much more relaxed today. For example, it’s now quite acceptable for Amir Khan, in the film *Dil Chata Hai*, to make fun of the way Western opera

singers distort their mouths when singing. But the cultural barriers are as great as ever and prejudice remains an ubiquitous element in critical thought processes.

India tends to be gradually rediscovered every fifty, sixty years or so. Idealistic philosophers started the trend, then came the theosophists, later still the hippies and now the Western world is discovering India through films made in Bollywood. But of all these, the one I find most beautiful and appealing is the apparent discovery of India by Christopher Columbus, in whose footsteps we all follow, in a sense – without noticing that we have long since become Native Americans.

India has survived each successive wave of discovery more or less intact, and, for the first time in its history, the country's new and newly confident middle class can boast discoveries of a similar calibre in the West. The post-colonial era would seem to be over.

Leaving aside the business opportunities presented by new markets, isn't the process of discovery mainly a case of maintaining the status quo and simply finding new pictures to adorn our own four walls? The explorer Vasco da Gama is said to have been greeted in Portuguese by Arab traders the first time he set foot on Indian soil. Even globalization seems to result in a plurality of local provincialisms that are frequently of a purely private nature, rather than in genuine cosmopolitanism. It always boils down to a question of detail.

**Where from?** When I first came to Bangalore, the place was still a complete mystery to most Swiss people. Since I didn't want to be mistaken for a Swede, and knowing that Spielberg's films had been shown in India, I answered the question "Where from?" with "I'm from Jurassic Park", because I felt that this description somehow fitted the area I grew up in at the foot of the Jura mountains. "Where from?" was always the first of three questions to be asked. The second was: "What's your name" and the third: "What's your qualification?"

During a two-day train journey from Bangalore to Calcutta a friendly passenger tried to explain the difference between Islam and Christianity to me, repeating the phrases "You people?" and "We people?" over and over. I've always had a problem with overhasty identification, of oneself or others, even if I am a little envious to hear a new Swiss artist-in-residence in Bangalore describe with confidence how "the Indians" tend to do things and (what "we Swiss" tend not to do) after she has spoken to maybe a hundred citizens of this country. Such generalizations can uncover certain truths, if a fresh perspective is brought to bear, but certainly not about "India" as a whole.

It was love that brought me here originally, and the Indian subcontinent was, in a manner of speak-

ing, the dowry that came with it. At the beginning, I certainly thought that all Indians were going to be as difficult as my wife. But given that, from day one, I spent almost all my time surrounded by her extended family and circle of Indian friends, I have never had the uncushioned shock-experience of the country that many Western tourists tend to have. I may have been the odd one out, but I was always in the thick of things. That is a privilege, but not an easy one to handle. I will never truly master my son's native language. My European ear cannot tell the difference between guttural and dental consonants, even when I pronounce them myself.

**Changes and comparisons.** My experience of the changes in India – or, rather, in Bangalore – are now from an insider perspective: I compare what you can say and do today with what was acceptable in the 1980s; and my attempts to understand and evaluate the situation are probably no different to those of my Indian friends of the same generation.

Art is art, wherever you go. For artists themselves the national context label is – hopefully – not as central an issue as it is for a wider public. Through my wife, the artist Sheela Gowda, I have access to interesting people here. I have also been able, on occasion, to give my support to young artists in the context of our exchange programme. For many older artists, India's opening up to the world was no straightforward matter. Let's wait and see where all the current hype has got us in five years time. But, of course, for many people it means new opportunities and stimulation. Today, being internationally recognized doesn't necessarily mean having to go to Europe or the U.S. As in the case of L.N. Tallur, the road can now also lead via South Korea to China or to Japan.

And it isn't the case that Bangalore's status as a "software city" has led to a network arts scene. When I think of multimedia art here, I come up with only a few Indian names: firstly, the Raqs Collective in Delhi, then Shilpa Gupta in Mumbai. But that could all change very quickly, most likely thanks to expensive private schools such as the Srishti School of Art Design and Technology in Bangalore, which guested at last year's Ars Electronica festival in Linz, rather than through the hidebound state art schools. ▬

Translated from the German by bmp translations ag

Swiss graphic artist, painter and object artist Christoph Storz has lived in Bangalore for many years. He co-founded and oversees the Studio for Guest Artists there, which operates an exchange programme with the Atelier Krone in Aarau, Switzerland.

For more information on the Atelier Krone and Studio for Guest Artists, visit [www.artists-in-residence.ch](http://www.artists-in-residence.ch)

# My Indian Face

Sybille Omlin in conversation  
with Nesa Gschwend

Everyday contradictions that Indian artists consider perfectly natural can present a considerable challenge to artists from Switzerland. With the support of Pro Helvetia, performance artist Nesa Gschwend spent January to March 2006 as artist-in-residence in Bangalore. Here she describes her impressions of three months in a bustling city of eight million |

*Sybille Omlin: How did the idea of your going to India as an artist come about?*

Nesa Gschwend: I had wanted to go back to Asia for quite some time and India was right at the top on my list of destinations. I had spent a whole winter in Indonesia back in the 1980s, in Bali, learning about Indonesian forms of theatre and masked performance, since at that point I was still a member of the performance theatre group PanOptikum.

*And why India this time?*

In the meantime I have left the ensemble to become a solo performer. Through the “Gästeatelier Krone” cultural exchange programme in Aarau, I heard that there was a residency available in Bangalore and so I put in an application.

*What kind of reception did you get in India?*

A very good one. Right at the start of my stay I was asked whether I would like to stage a performance at the opening of the Artists Centre in Bangalore. I had spent most of the initial period locked up in my studio working on *sing a song*, a piece about an egg that I had been developing – on and off – over the past three years, but had not yet performed in public. And so I decided to get the work in shape and ready for presentation at the Artists Centre.

*What were your impressions of India? We here in Europe tend to think of the Indian subcontinent as extremely colourful and teeming with contradictions – a mixture of Bollywood, Silicon City and the caste system?*

You have to learn to take a different look at things. I was in Bangalore, a city in the south of India with a population of eight million. I lived on a housing estate in the old Malleswaram area in a fairly typical apartment. I had electricity, running water, lots of neighbours and any number of small street-side eateries where you could dine really cheaply. I hardly did any cooking myself because the smell of food coming from these outlets was always so tempting. The city as a whole struck me as a place where many different aspects overlap and inter-

weave. Extreme opposites seem to exist side by side without any problem: the holy cows in the middle of the road, the simple mud-floored huts in the city centre nestling alongside modern high-rise buildings and office blocks.

*How much contact did you have with other artists in Bangalore? Was it easy to get to know them?*

Thanks to the exchange programme organized by the “Gästeatelier Krone” in Aarau, the lines of contact with creative artists from India have been well established for a long time. The artists who run the studio in Bangalore and who have already spent time in Switzerland, at the studio in Aarau, were extremely helpful and very keen to exchange experiences. They invited me into their homes, introduced me to their families, showed me round the villages they grew up in, took me to exhibitions, the theatre and films. Christoph Storz, a Swiss artist who has lived in Bangalore for years and who was involved in establishing the studio there, also helped put me in touch with people.

*How did you organize the material for your creative work?*

Since the invitation to perform came right at the start of my residency, I very quickly found myself tackling a number of organizational issues in preparation for the performance. My colleagues helped me get hold of the electronic equipment I needed: a beamer, video, playback equipment. The Artists Centre is located on the edge of town, in an old furniture factory that is no longer fully used. A special bus was hired to bring people to the opening – just over a hundred in all. And we lost our electricity supply shortly before my performance was due to start (laughs). That’s something you come to expect in India.

*Your performance “sing a song” is all about an egg: it starts out hidden in your clothing. You then take it out and start playing with it. Next, you let it fall to the ground and eat it. At the very end you produce yet another egg from your clothing. As already mentioned, you brought this piece with you from Switzerland. Did the*

**Haruko, object artist, about his residency in Bangalore July 05 – January 06**

Spending half a year in the booming business capital of Bangalore in southern India is a challenge for an artist. The wave of new impressions and impulses demands quick mental reflexes. It's an education in flexibility. You can have anything and do anything in India, but you never achieve what you actually want. My stay there illustrated to me how very strongly external conditions influence artistic activity. Detours help you redefine your goals.

I began collecting these impressions with a digital camera, shooting pictures of insignificant objects in a state of decay, but also images that aroused the curiosity of my Western eye. The result, which turned out to be a sort of *Orbis Pictus*, was *All India Permit*, a picture book with 170 photos that break with the widespread Bollywood clichés.

Making an installation and running workshops at the Chitrakala Parishath national college of art, I came into contact with Indian artists, and this soon gave rise to an inspiring exchange. In any case, a volume of photos about Switzerland is to be produced. So don't be surprised if, strolling around the Zürihorn one day, you come across an Indian rapturously taking pictures of the green Robidog dog-poo bin.

Haruko lives and works in Zurich. He has always been interested in worlds that tick differently. His recent works with air-filled objects shift the ironic analysis of existing things into the foreground. Haruko spent 2005 in Bangalore.

*focus of the performance change in any way in India?*

Yes and no. I have been carrying the story of the egg around with me all over the place from Switzerland. I once had an amazing experience with a bird's egg that had fallen out of a nest. The shell had split open and, through the hole, I could already make out the tiny bird's head, its neck and legs and beating heart, while its body was still a jelly-like mass. I recorded three hours worth of video material. I took this with me to India because I wanted to work on it there. Looking back, I can now see that Bangalore and the Artists Centre in particular were the right place and time to premiere this work.

*How did people there respond to your performance?*

I talked a lot about my performance, especially with my fellow artists. They saw it as a philosophical inquiry into life. As one Indian artist told me, it was at once both familiar to them and yet also quite foreign. However, most Indians tend to

take the contradictory for granted and don't even perceive it as such. Another artist recognized a story from his own culture in my performance. After that I visited a lot of different places throughout the city, partly to meet other artists, but mainly to present a slide show of my work at the university and various art schools, where I discussed it with the students afterwards. I found Indian students to be very open and interested in encountering something new.

*Today India is considered to be very much up and coming and a centre of innovation. What form did your work with the students there take?*

I taught performance at the Chitrakala Parishath art college for a week and developed short pieces with my students that we then performed. How we perceive ourselves in personal and cultural terms is the issue at the heart of my fascination with performance, and these workshops offered me great insight into the culture of India, especially into the struggle faced by young women and the role models and gender stereotypes in the different classes of society. The students found it quite alien having to integrate their own person – and above all their own bodies – into a visual work of art. But there was a genuine connection; the students even invited me to join them on a school trip. The art college also has its own exhibition space in which I was able to show some of my works at the end of my residency in March.

*And you came up with a whole new performance piece in India into the bargain. In "The Red" you play around with red, a colour you see a lot of in India. An Indian influence seems to have crept in. Or how do you see it? It's true you do see red all over the place in India. You see this red powder every day almost everywhere you go, not just as a dot on someone's forehead or as a hair dye, but as a decoration on doors and statues of the gods. Kumkuma – as it's known in India – is sold in many places, usually piled up into a great big mountain. But red has always been a central colour in my work.*

I started off by buying a bag each of three different shades of red powder that I then used in my video performance *The Red*. I put on white gloves and poured the red powder back and forth from one hand to the other. The gloves were sewn together, dipped in hot wax and left to dry as a pair of hands making a single gesture. The video performance ended with four hands, an image that is widespread among depictions of Indian gods. When the performance was over, the gestures remained as 3-D objects and are now part of an installation. Other women were involved in creating some of the objects in the exhibition at the art college in Bangalore – they made the gestures and I poured the kumkuma into their hands.

Which is also a gesture of passing something on to others. What have you brought back with you as your happiest memory of India?

The twinkle in people's eyes. I haven't seen so many beautiful faces in such a long time. I find faces interesting to draw; and during my three months in India I also managed to sketch my own face over and over again. It's a piece of conceptual work that I started in Switzerland and will go on developing after my return from Bangalore. In it, the face reflects the interplay between what a person is experiencing on the outside and what that person is feeling on the inside, the crossover point between "self" and "the Other". That's why I called this series *My Indian Face*.

In my experience, India is a land of great variety, one which gave me a lot of inspiration, but which also forced me to strive for clarity. Otherwise it would be easy to become baffled by all the diversity and contradictions. Maybe that's the reason why it became so important to capture my own expression on paper. ┐

Translated from the German by bmp translations ag

Nesa Gschwend is a performance artist and lives in Niederlenz, Aarau.

Sibylle Omlin is a freelance art critic and heads the Department of Visual Art, Media Art, at the University of Art and Design in Basel.

**Marc Lee, media artist, on his participation in the New Delhi Festival of e-Creativity in January 2006**

I spent only ten days as a visitor to India, in New Delhi, at the Festival of e-Creativity in January 2006 (with Beat Brogle and Christoph Storz). We presented our media projects at the festival. My project *onn* (open news network, [www.nun.ch](http://www.nun.ch)) was running in the exhibition, and 56k-Bastard Channel was introduced during the presentations.

The festival wasn't very well attended. But a great many questions were posed in conjunction with the works nonetheless. The interesting thing was that questions took a different tack than they would have here. Instead of addressing the work directly, they were of a general, fundamental nature. The Indians asked: what does this work have to do with our lives? What struck us, and one of the Korean curators too, was that people in India are more deeply rooted in their own tradition than we are. They wear their colourful, costume-like garb; traditional objects, folk art and traditional crafts are far more likely to be integrated into artworks than is the case here. We Swiss responded very positively to this.

Marc Lee is a media artist and lives in Zurich.



Haruko: From the *All India Permit* series, 2005



# Composing One's Home

## Illusions of noise and silence

Sandeep Bhagwati

“My family’s home had been almost an island of quiet amid the general bustle of India, now, wherever we went, we were the noisiest neighbours.” Composer Sandeep Bhagwati, who has worked with Pro Helvetia several times, grew up in India. He lived mainly in Europe from 1968 and has recently moved to Canada. How do the sounds of his childhood influence his music today? |

I grew up in a restless world. In my grandparents’ house in the Bombay of my childhood, silence was a precious commodity. Everything was loud, the streets, with their blaring car horns, rattling diesel engines and melodious peddlers’ cries, invading the rooms through the perpetually open windows. So everyone in the house shouted too, however matter-of-fact the topic: my uncles, aunts and cousins had developed very strong lungs to make their voices heard above the ceaseless din of the town. One was never alone. Hissing, sizzling and chopping sounds emanated from the kitchen, as did the noisy shouting or laughter that marked the culmination of arguments in three languages – Gujarati, Marathi and English – arguments that continued seamlessly into the dining room and Shivaji Park across the road, where every Sunday began with endless loudspeaker tests, trial runs for political mass rallies, their drooling appeals regularly spilling into the courtyard and trees in front of our house. Monkeys, pigeons, mynahs and crows punctuated the ubiquitous noise, but also the quietest minutes – that still, enchanted time shortly before daybreak, when the panting of hundreds of morning gymnasts greeted the day with tennis balls and calls and the clacking of bamboo sticks being struck together in contortions reminiscent of ritual dances. Sometimes in these brief twilight minutes one could actually hear the rushing of the sea, a kind of natural “bordun” or organ-point to the morning prayers that would soon be starting in all the houses round about, and to the more distant calls of the muezzin.

**A skin of noise.** The world was a bubbling cauldron of all sorts of sounds, human, technical, natural – and musical. The singing cries of the beggars; the blaring, quavering jollity of the wedding bands that turned every winter into a month-long festival; the screeching radios; the obsessive musical accompaniment of every undertaking in public spaces, which did not, as it does in this country, serve as a protective sonic screen against the noise of the everyday world, creating instead a dendrite-like network of relationships: in the kitchen Auntie sang along with a song playing in a passing taxi, the taxi driver honked to the rhythm of the music of the procession moving past him, which in turn intoned popular film tunes billowing from one of the shops along the street. Everyone listened to, but also made, music: virtually all the older people close to me in India sang their daily prayers and songs to themselves, with a melodic complexity that amazes me even now. Classical and popular music were not discrete musical categories, but different stages of assimilation: everything you could repeat and carry around with you vocally in daily life was popular – whereas classical music was the unrepeatable, lifting the moment of listening and music-making out of the eternal repetition of the world. The world was an enveloping skin of noise in which one felt protected but that did not leave one in peace. Then I came to Germany, first to the south and then to the north – with its closed windows and those great sound absorbers, rain and snow – where taciturn conversations took place in hushed

tones. My family's home had been almost an island of quiet amid the general bustle of India, now, wherever we went, we were the noisiest neighbours.

**The tumult of the world.** What I brought with me from India was the awareness that no sound ever comes along on its own – but also the yearning for the delicious taste of silence and the power it harbours. It was in Hammah, the Lower Saxon village of my youth, at the edge of the Sterneberger Moor, that, in the rain-swishing stillness of the lonely afternoons, I became a composer who searched for sounds and cast about in his memory. Awkward at first (and actually even now), but undeterred in my quest for the ever-shifting and, for this very reason, intellectually impenetrable interplay of disparate sounds.

And in fact, for all the intellectual pleasure it gave me, I was never really captivated by musical theory: its pseudo-mathematical games and pseudo-histological formulae, be they scales, harmonic analyses, frequency grids, formal models or microtones, all of which confused me for a very long while and prevented me from composing what I was really looking for – today they seem no more than a series of palliatives against the effects of acoustic malnutrition in early childhood. Their unfortunate victims lop off their ears in heroic gestures so as not to have to endure the tumult (and sweetness) of the world. That is not how I wanted to live.

**Acoustic snapshots.** My compositional approach to the various sound worlds I was thrown into, including those I later sought out, was by no means exhausted by a conjunction of theoretical or cultural musical or sound phenomena. That would not do justice to the way I experience the world. My path in this *terrain vague* is very personal, but perhaps that makes it all the more authoritative. It grows out of the acoustic discrepancy, explicable by my biography, between metropolis and countryside, between song and noise, but above all between the rules of living together – and the basic unpredictability of harmony and meaning.

Some of my most recent works, like *Inside A Native Land* or *Mora*, explore above all the last discrepancy: how can one prompt many music-making individuals to listen to each other musically, give them rules that help them enter into contact with one another – and how can one enable this contact to generate meaning, a meaning that I, the composer, do not yet know, but whose effect will transcend the moment of its creation. For the moment, I am still creating monochrome tableaux in which the teeming of sounds is limited to a small number of gestures, acoustic snapshots from my treasure-chest of memory, which only tell stories between the images.

Perhaps, so I sometimes think, meaning always emerges in the in-betweens. Here a child's wail, there a note on the piano, in the background a truck's diesel engine, a drill boring holes in a wall, scraps of Turkish wafting up from the street – that is what I hear in my Berlin study right now: it is a fine metaphor for my kind of intercultural music. And it is how I compose a musical home for myself.

**Silence and clamour.** Again and again I hear in the West that true music must be born of silence, out of the silence of the world. But in India a classical musician spends his life ardently endeavouring to lead the clamour of the world back into metaphysical silence.

Neither experience is alien to me – but I know: I can find happiness as a musician only in the shift of perspectives, the maelstrom of meanings, the simultaneity of strangeness shouting into my ear that the world of sounds is formless, without purpose and shape, an insuppressible flurry of vital signs and sounds. Then I feel comfortable and centred. Then I can calmly sit down at my desk among all these cultures – and, as I compose, listen inside myself and hear the echoes of the intoxicating cacophony of the world that sweeps through me every day of my life. ─

Translated from the German by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart

Sandeep Bhagwati is a composer and media artist. Born in Bombay in 1963 as the son of a German mother and Indian father, he has lived predominantly in Europe since 1968. His boundary-defying works in all musical genres have been honoured with numerous prizes and performed all over the world. He has served as composer-in-residence of distinguished orchestras and institutions and regularly works with eminent ensembles and soloists. He has also curated numerous intercultural projects and written essays in the furtherance of artistic dialogue between Asia and the West. Professor of composition at the Musikuniversität Karlsruhe (Germany) from 2000 to 2003, he has held the Canada Research Chair in Inter-X Art at Concordia University Montreal (Canada) since September 2006.

# Exploring the “Other” in Music

Sandeep Bhagwati in conversation  
with Shubha Mudgal and Aneesh Pradhan

**Shubha Mudgal is a vocalist, classical musician and pop star rolled into one. Aneesh Pradhan is an experimentally minded percussionist. Composer and media artist Sandeep Bhagwati questioned these two wanderers between East and West about the relationship between tradition and innovation in Indian music |**

*Sandeep Bhagwati: Cultural globalization is a buzzword nowadays and it seems to bring with it a new attitude to changes in traditional, classical music cultures. Both of you have participated in many different cross-cultural projects. As musicians coming from a North Indian classical tradition, what do you think of them?*

Shubha Mudgal: A desire to explore always goes against widespread notions of purity and how Indian music becomes diluted or adulterated if it is mixed with anything else. First of all, art can never be just a mixture: these are not two things that you put in a blender and whip together. Musical give-and-take only happens when there is a mutual willingness to explore each other.

Aneesh Pradhan: If there is a creative desire to en-

gage in such an exploration, why not? Who can stop you? Anyhow, so many things happen at a subconscious level – we don't always make a list, after all – and just flow into your system. Why, just within India we have so many streams of music making. If a person is really creative, even if they like to say: I am a *khayal* singer, or: I am a *drupad* singer – if I am sensitive, then I will have a desire to open that window and look out, and perhaps take some of the Other into my music. But if you are not sensitive then, even if you have all the influences around you, it's not going to be of any use.

We tend to think of classical music as something that has always been the same. But classical mu-

sicians have responded to changing times – they have developed their own adaptive strategies: whether it is borrowing influences or tweaking their instrument or changing repertoire. Very often musicians don't want to articulate the changes that they bring about – perhaps they have not even thought of them as changes! And sometimes they are smart enough not to say that they are changes – they say, our forefathers have always taught us these things.

Sometimes we ask our teachers, "This composition, is it yours?" Depending on the space and time, they will say that it is theirs, or they will say that it was handed down. And, you know, at a subconscious level they are right in both ways – because the tradition is so vast. If I compose something today, how can I really state with confidence that I alone have made it – because, in the final analysis, I am standing on the shoulders of a tradition. The complexion of the music will change – it is already changing and that is inevitable.

*Sandeep Bhagwati: The only question is whether the change that happens from now on will be some kind of conscious change or whether it will be the same kind of unconscious change that has happened in the past hundred years.*

Aneesh Pradhan: Both, both. I do not think that all the changes in the past were unconscious!

When the middle class started propagating music education and performance, it was not just for the love of music. Those people were inspired by nationalism, and so they looked at symbols of Indianness – and music was one symbol of Indianness principally because of its antiquity. Thus they could say to the Westerners: "Look, we do have a very old music!"

And then the Westerner says: "But, you don't have any notation!" – "Of course we do," they say, "we can notate everything!" So you notate everything,

then you write textbooks, establish music schools, you establish music at the university level – you imitate everything that the West has done, you want to show that you are on par. These are conscious decisions.

*Sandeep Bhagwati: In the West, classical music is often seen to be losing its former eminence as the world becomes more commercialized. Classical music seems to be out of touch with the youth. Is there a similar trend you could discern in India?*

Shubha Mudgal: I think that the pressure of Bollywood is all-pervasive.

Aneesh Pradhan: Even in Europe: in a German café the young waitress, I thought she was Italian, came up to us and asked us: "Are you from India?" We said we were from Bombay. "So you speak Hindi, then!" We said yes and asked: "Where are you from?" She said: "My father is from Bangladesh, my mother is German – and I just love Bollywood, Sharukh Khan etc." Then she asked: "What are you here for?" and we said, "We are here for a concert." She thought we were some kind of Bollywood group. Classical music did not even cross her mind! She asked: "Can I get in touch with you? I'd love to be a part of Bollywood!" So this is the craze.

Shubha Mudgal: But I think that part of the problem, at least in India, lies in the nomenclature. In the West, for example, we can talk about "contemporary art music", whereas in India we always treat classical music as being part of a very old tradition. Antiquity indeed seems more important than the music itself. But the moment we declare: "It is as contemporary as Bollywood music!" – people's reaction to it will change. What classical musicians do now should really be called "contemporary classical music"!

Aneesh Pradhan: People keep on harping about a 5000-year-old tradition and create a mystique around it. But there are things that have changed



Magali Koenig: From the *Voyage en Inde* series, 1991



in the last fifty years: you can tell if you listen to old recordings.

Shubha Mudgal: And consider the number of young people who flock to every single institution of music today, learning classical music. In fact, hardly any institution teaches any other kind of music. They have so many applicants that they can select their students: people want to learn classical music.

Aneesh Pradhan: Maybe only as a stepping stone to Bollywood singing..

Shubha Mudgal: Then they realize that there is a prestige to it – but also that this prestige rests on the idea of glory and struggle – and poverty. Outside of India, there is a certain straightforwardness about seeing classical music as a business – because you want to make a living by it. In India, money is still considered... almost a dirty word. Young people go to music schools, stand in line, experience quite a few problems: they all want to learn classical music. Then why do they not take it up as a full-time, lifetime occupation? Because it is not making ends meet for them, whereas other kinds of music *do* afford them a chance of survival. Why can't we turn classical music into a viable livelihood? A passion that allows you to live from it?

*Sandeep Bhagwati: Is there no royalty system for classical music in India ?*

Shubha Mudgal: The laws are in place, but there is no will and no organization to enforce them. Even in Bollywood, all the rights of a film score belong to the producer, not to the composers or performers. Whenever I am invited to speak at government hearings, I speak about this, but people do not want to listen. The big money comes from Bollywood, so policy makers want to please the Bollywood producers, not the musicians.

*Sandeep Bhagwati: The way it often happened in the West was that the citizens themselves financed the arts*

*as a collective venture. So most of the museums, concert halls, orchestras that you see in the cities were made possible by many citizens throwing together money, subscribing to funds – and then municipal authorities helped them. Nowadays it is seen to be as important to maintain a concert hall and an orchestra as to maintain streets, or a sewage system, or an army – culture is a legitimate use for an important part of tax money. Do you think something like this would be desirable in India, too?*

Shubha Mudgal: Yes, we need to re-establish the arts as an integral part of society. People will allow their children to learn music in a disciplined fashion only for the first five or ten years of their life. But the moment they have to appear for important examinations, music is considered an irrelevant subject. No longer is it seen as something that will enrich your life. This is a huge problem both in society itself as well as among policy makers. If they really believe the arts can enrich people's lives, then what will they do to foster them? ▣

Shubha Mudgal is a vocalist, classical musician, composer and pop star. She has also established herself as a composer of music for dance, ballet, film and television.

Aneesh Pradhan is a percussionist (tabla) and music sociologist. His love of experiment continually leads him to test and cross the boundaries between East and West.

Sandeep Bhagwati is a composer and media artist. He has also curated numerous intercultural projects and written essays in the furtherance of artistic dialogue between Asia and the West. He currently holds the Canada Research Chair in Inter-X Art at Concordia University Montreal.

# Freedom Over Diversity

Pratap Bhanu Mehta

The true challenge to multicultural societies lies less in the preservation of cultural diversity than in the expansion of individual freedoms. That is the view of political theorist and commentator Pratap Bhanu Mehta. Here he tells us why |

In contemporary debates over multiculturalism in different societies, from Europe to India, a good deal of emphasis is placed on the celebration of cultural diversity as a value. But what exactly is cultural diversity? Why exactly should we worry about it? At the current conjuncture, the appeal to diversity has a great deal of rhetorical value, but the grounds for defending it are not entirely clear. This essay expresses some skepticism about the usefulness of cultural diversity as an analytical concept.

The real challenge for multicultural societies, indeed the planet, is not preserving cultural diversity, it is rather expanding freedoms so that individuals can be whoever they wish to be. The philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, in a meditation on modernity, once wrote:

*“If we look at the life of the thirteenth century, passing from Chartres to Borbodour and from Venice to the Mayas, from Constantinople to Peking and from Kublai Khan to Dante, from the house of Maimonides at Cordoba to Nara, and from Byzantine monks copying Aristotle; compare this extraordinary diversity with the present state of the world, where countries are really not that different in terms of each other in terms of their present – which, as such, is everywhere the same – but only in terms of their past. That is what the developed world is.”<sup>1</sup>*

**The spectre of a homogenized world.** Confronted with the process of modernization we worry about the future of diversity. The imperatives of adjusting to a global competitiveness and the deliberate policies of many states undertaken in the name of development all seem to constitute a threat to human, especially cultural, diversity. They raise the spectre of a monotonously homogenized world, governed by a few practical imperatives but incapable of providing room for the endless inventiveness of the human race. Social forms, languages, practices, sensibilities all seem to be at risk. Such worries about diminishing diversity are not new. Herder, for instance, worried that modernization would put cultural diversity at risk, and much of his defence of cultural nationalism was an attempt to enlist forces that would help preserve diversity.

Even if one is not bothered, if one prefers an alternative image, *“that we may be faced with a world”* in which *“there simply aren’t any more head hunters, matrilinealists, or people who predict the weather from*

*the entrails of a pig,”<sup>2</sup>* the spectre of diminishing diversity haunts us.

**In praise of freedom.** There is something to be said for this anxiety. But the difficulty is figuring out the normative weight diversity should carry in our moral imagination. *Why should we care about diversity?* There many kinds of reasons one can give. Valuing diversity is a way of honouring human dignity, of appreciating human inventiveness, of celebrating human freedom, of increasing the stock of knowledge that humankind can draw upon, of diversifying our portfolio of risks and so forth. But these reasons fall into two categories. One set of reasons takes diversity to be a free-standing value, something that carries intrinsic importance that obliges us to act on its behalf. Another set of reasons does not take diversity to be a free-standing value. It is agnostic on the question of whether or not diversity, by itself, is worth preserving. Rather, these reasons worry about loss of diversity because that loss represents the loss of something else that we take to have normative weight. So it might be the case that we should worry about the loss of diversity because such a loss is a sign that somewhere, some injustice might be taking place, or that some people might be denied their legitimate freedoms. This view does not give diversity independent weight but rather treats it as a *sign* that some other moral value might be at risk.

**Diversity of what?** It makes very little sense to discuss diversity in the first sense as an aspiration that carries independent moral weight. This is so for three reasons. First, invocations of diversity immediately invite the question: diversity of what? This question in turn cannot be answered without invoking some normative criteria about the permissible range of diverse social practices: clearly no one would want to use diversity as an argument to protect sati or slavery, no matter how glorious the societies built around those practices might have been. So the limits of diversity, the moral horizons within which diversity operates, cannot themselves be settled by an invocation of “diversity”.

**The God’s Eye view.** Second, the appeal to diversity is usually an aestheticized appeal. It is as if one were surveying the world from nowhere and con-



Magali Koenig: From the *Voyage en Inde* series, 1991

templating this extraordinary mosaic of human cultural forms and practices. Such a contemplation of the world can give enormous enrichment and satisfaction and we feel that something would be lost, perhaps something of humanity would be diminished, if this diversity were lost. But the trouble is that this view from nowhere, or if you prefer an alternative formulation, the “God’s Eye” view of the world, is a standpoint of theoretical not practical reason. Most of us can conceptually grasp the fact of diversity; we may even try to

recognize each other in an intense and important way, but it is very difficult to live that diversity with any degree of seriousness. From this theoretical point of view cultures and practices form this extraordinary mosaic; from the practical point of view of those living within any of these cultures, these cultures and practices are horizons within which they operate. Even when not oppressive, these horizons might appear to them as constraints. It would be morally obtuse to say to these individuals that they should go on living



their cultures, just because their not doing so might diminish the forms of diversity in the world. Some groups might stop using their own language because it diminishes their access to and choices in relation to a large outside world; some groups might give up their own systems of law because these are incompatible with modern notions of justice. One might worry that in such instances alternative ways of being, as embodied in language and law, are being lost; but in their process of being lost, individuals might actually be gain-

ing more choices. The imperatives of diversity cannot, at least *prima facie*, trump the free choices of individuals.

**Options and compromises.** Third, in some areas the loss of diversity has a precise meaning. But the area of diversity where contests are most fierce, the realm of culture, is much more difficult to compute in these terms. This is in part because human beings continually invent new cultural forms, so that even if some are lost, it is difficult

to argue that diversity has been lost. Sometimes, diversity between cultures might diminish, but diversity within cultures, the range of options within particular horizons and the choices available to individuals might increase.

Fourth, there is often a real tension between the demands of integration into wider society, the imperatives of forming thicker relationships with those outside the ambit of your own society on the one hand, and the measures necessary to preserve a vibrant cultural diversity on the other. What the exact trade-off is depends from case to case. But simply invoking diversity by itself will not help morally illuminate the nature of the decision to be made when faced with such a trade-off.

**Culture and identity.** Finally, in the realm of culture, it is often argued that culture is to be valued because it is constitutive of someone's identity. This alignment of culture with identity can be misleading. The minute we are talking of identity, we are talking of difference rather than diversity. It is possible for individuals or groups who are more alike each other in most respects to have a profound sense of having a different identity, a different sense of who they are. Indeed, as many have argued, we see more and more identity conflicts not because of the objective diversity between people, but because of their increasing likeness. In fact, as Michael Ignatieff has argued, following Freud's insight that conflicts born of the "*narcissism of small differences are most acute*", identity differences do not by themselves signal greater diversity. Rather, invocation of identity may be a sign that diversity is decreasing.

**Defending values.** The point is not to belittle concerns over diversity. It is rather that diversity by itself is not a free-standing value and there might also be trade-offs between diversity and other

values. Indeed, it makes little sense to design instruments, domestic or international, to protect diversity as such. Rather the instruments will have to be tailored towards protecting the values that we think are manifest in the loss of diversity: in short, diversity concerns have to be situated within a framework of justice. Which diversities we think are worth defending are a function of our theory of the rights and obligations we have.

This is not the occasion to engage in a detailed debate over justice, but the real challenge for multicultural societies is not the preservation of cultural diversity. It is rather the expansion of freedom so that individuals become whoever it is that they want to be. From this perspective, multiculturalism is profoundly misleading because it places value on the diversity of cultures, not the freedoms of individuals within them. If the range of freedom expands, all kinds of diversity will flourish anyway. But this will not necessarily be the diversity of well-defined cultures. It will be something that both draws upon culture and subverts it at the same time. The success of a nation will be if it provides the means of moving beyond its own identity. ─

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, quoted in M.V. Moses, *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, "The Uses of Diversity", *Michigan Quarterly*, 25, No.1, 1987.

# Single-Serving Friend

## An encounter in Basle

Eugene Datta

After a long evening at the Cargo, the riverside bar where Nissar Chaudhury had met his colleagues from Herzog & de Meuron for their ritual end-of-the-workweek beers, he was on his way home. It was late; almost one in the morning. And barring the occasional cyclist either cruising down or grinding up Petersgraben, the street was completely deserted. Unlike most of his friends Nissar never brought his bicycle to the bar, and it was largely because of this uphill stretch between the quay and Petersplatz; it was too steep for his leg muscles, especially after they had been soaked for hours in one delicious brew or the other. The walk, although quite long, was less exacting. But tonight, having drunk a few glasses too many, he was exhausted.

He reached the corner of Petersgraben and Spalenvorstadt and made his way somnolently across the number 3 tramline. And then entering Kornhausgasse, he walked laggardly past the windows of Volkshochschule and the Copy Centre, where he went at least once every month, and the Jewish Museum, peering into the window of the little antique art gallery at its entrance. Nissar liked the gallery's unassuming, almost makeshift air, and its quaint, slow-changing display of a handful of old paintings perched on easels, and brittle books sitting open on two ledges behind the glass front. Unless he was in a tearing hurry, he always stopped to inspect those assorted treasures, which lay carelessly scattered around the room, as if forgotten by their owners. Now, in the half-light of an antiquated table lamp, the ghostly shapes stared blindly back at him. And so he walked on, passing the restaurant next door. Kornhaus. Every summer's day, when the weather was good, he'd look longingly at the sign outside its door saying "*Unser Garten ist offen*". But in the three and a half years that he'd spent in the neighbourhood, he hadn't submitted even once to the urge to walk in and sit in that garden in the back of the restaurant, amidst

its mostly middle-aged regulars, and have a drink. Trudging past the giant glass-panelled doors of the fire department, all Nissar could hear was the sound of his own leather-soled shoes and the soft whistle of a cool late-August breeze, with bits of the debate he'd had with his colleagues earlier in the evening bobbing up in his head like a carcass in a river. "Zaha Hadid is dazzlingly impracticable," Irina, who was Czech and had studied in England, had commented at some point, to which he'd countered, "She probably seems so because she operates on a whole different plane. She's way ahead of architects like you and me. Besides, don't tell me you think projects like the Cincinnati Center for Contemporary Art or the BMW plant in Leipzig are impracticable!" He couldn't tolerate criticisms of Hadid, his biggest hero after Gaudí and Le Corbusier.

With these thoughts playing an idle hide-and-seek in his head, he was about to round the corner on Schützengraben when he heard something rather unusual for the time and the place. It was the sound of a single voice chanting rap, unaccompanied by any instrument; the nagging, defiant staccato of hip hop rising to pound the clear, dignified hush of his neighbourhood. Standing by the light pole, waiting for the signal to change, he turned to see where the sound was coming from, and found a small man, beating the air to keep rhythm, walking in his direction. He waved at Nissar, continuing to sing, and Nissar waved back, crossing the street.

"*Sprechen Sie Englisch?*" the man called from the other side, at a pitch far from appropriate for the hour.

Nissar turned around. "Yes," he said, "how can I help you?"

The man took off his headphones and teetered across the street, oblivious to the signal which by then had changed to red. "Hey!" he said with a fuzzy smile, swaying precariously.



Haruko: From the *All India Permit* series, 2005

“Hello.”

“Thank God, man.” He grabbed the light pole to steady himself. “Thank God you speak English.” He was young, barely out of his teens, and drunk to the gills. “I’m Mike,” he said, licking his dehydrated mouth and letting go of the pole to offer his right hand.

“Nissar.”

“I am...I’m from the United States. Charleston, West Virginia. And I’m lost.” He tried hard to keep himself from lurching forward and back. “Please take me home,” he begged, clutching Nissar’s hand. “All right,” Nissar said, thinking, *If only all the world’s men and women had the camaraderie of drunks...!* “What’s the address?”

“What address?” Mike frowned, as if he’d been asked the most inappropriate question imaginable.

“The place where you’re staying.”

“How the hell should I know that?” His chin rose for a few wobbly moments before dropping back down to loll helplessly. “I got here...this morning.”

“Hm,” Nissar said, thinking that the rest of the walk home would not only have to wait, but it could also be indeterminately stretched across the night. But didn’t they say back in Calcutta that a drunk always finds his way home? He was drunk as well, wasn’t he? But, of course, compared to his young inebriated friend he was stone-cold sober. In fact, the comparison between them wouldn’t be unlike one between, say, a loudspeaker soaked in water and one drowned in a pond. But *loudspeakers!* Nissar thought. Why did he think of loudspeakers? Wouldn’t shoes be a more relevant analogy? A pair of shoes soaked in rain and one



drowned in a pond; one perhaps difficult to walk in, but the other forever out of commission, incapable of taking anyone anywhere, let alone home! It had been quite a while – more than four years, he calculated – since he'd last shepherded a drunken man to his destination. Thinking that it was time he did this noble deed again, he asked, "Do you remember any landmark? Or at least if it's this side of the river?"

"Is there...a river here?"

*Of course, there's a river here!* The Rhine. The river that had taught Nissar lessons about the city like nothing else had. The river on the banks of which he'd witnessed the unfolding of the daily drama of a different Basel, the Basel of the asylum seekers, with its subculture of Turkish, Arabic, pidgin English and poor German, its edges blurred by uncer-

tainty, aimlessness, alcohol and hashish. It was the Rhine that had acquainted him with the protagonists of that surly show – Asians and Africans for the most part, lives hanging like unwanted detritus from the fringes of society, like grime along the edges of a rug despite daily vacuum-cleaning, but somehow, inexplicably, allowed to be there, and even thrive in that peculiar, smothered sort of way, out of who knew what obligation on the part of this gentle land.

"Yes, there's a river here," Nissar said, having finally dragged his mind back to the task on his hands. "Gee...I have no idea." Mike reeled, smiling apologetically. "But landmark? Wait a minute." He swayed, poking the air limply with an uncertain forefinger. "It's not far from...um...this tall thing...going way up..."

"Oh, you mean the Trade Fair Tower? I know the place. It's on the other side of the river. And quite a walk from here too."

"Let's get a taxi," Mike said. "I have money. Lots of money. I'll give it to you. Here –"

"Hold it, hold it!" Nissar grabbed Mike's hand to keep it from diving into one of the sack-like pockets of his over-size denims. "You won't have to give me money for the taxi. I have enough. Let's go."

They walked back across the street, with Nissar keeping a watchful eye on the signal which was about to change back to red, and Mike shuffling along behind him saying, "Thank you, man. Thank you for doing this. God bless you! But why do we have to walk? Why can't we get a taxi? I'll give you the money! I'm telling you –"

"We have to go towards Marktplatz to get a taxi. We might get one before we get there, but –"

"Ah, the marketplace!" Mike stopped dead in his tracks, leaning against the wall next to the fire department entrance. "Is that what...it is?" Without waiting for Nissar's response, he continued, "If you take me there, I can...find my way home. I know that place."

"You mean...you can walk home from there?"

"Yup! I can. It's close."

Nissar was puzzled. The Trade Fair Tower was a long way from Marktplatz, and if the house Mike was staying in was, as he'd claimed, near the tall building, then how could it be "close" to Marktplatz? Even by the standards of the vast countries that they came from, that distance could hardly be characterized as short, and especially when one was in the kind of state in which Mike was. Could it be, then, that he'd completely misinterpreted his young friend's description of the landmark?

"What does this tall building look like again?" he asked.

"Dude, I told you!" Mike responded with an impatience laced with despair. "It goes up...like this" He gestured with two hands, the tips of his fingers forming a clumsy spire.

The Spalentor, one of the gates of the old city. Nissar was certain now that that was what Mike had meant, and he had, in fact, been walking in the right direction as well. He couldn't help appreciating the boy's sense of direction. If he could do that in a city where he hadn't yet spent twenty-four hours, he was indeed the classic drunk of the old Bengali adage, someone who would always find his way home.

"OK, I got it," Nissar said. "It's right around the corner. We don't need a taxi."

In the time that it took them to reach the old gate, Mike talked ramblingly about his day's experience, explaining why, despite having spent most of the evening with his cousins, he was alone at that hour. "They left me," he said, "because...they thought I was drinking too much."

"All right, here we are," Nissar said as they came and stood in front of Spalentor. "Does this thing look familiar?" He pointed at the gate.

"This is it, man!" Mike exclaimed. "This is the place. Oh, thank you so much!"

"So which way do we have to go now?"

"That way!" He turned around, hurling both hands in the direction of Missionsstrasse, his bent legs planted wide apart and his body arching back. "But I can find my way, don't worry. I'm good."

"Are you sure?" Nissar asked solicitously.

"I'm sure," Mike said, holding out his hand. "Thank you very much...um...I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Nissar."

"Thank you very much, Nissar," Mike slurred, giving his hand a few deep, urgent shakes before stepping off the footpath to walk across the intersection.

Nissar kept standing there, his eyes on the signals and the streets pouring into the wide traffic circle. When he looked at Mike again, he found the boy waddling back towards him.

"Single-serving...friend,"\* he said in a slightly raised voice as he walked closer. "Do you know that one? You know what...that means, right?"

"I do, Mike." Nissar smiled.

"That's what...you are, my friend. Nissar. My single-serving friend." He stood close to the edge of the footpath, bowing his head with the palms held together in front of his chest. "Thank you. Very much!" And then turning around, he resumed his walk back across the traffic circle.

Nissar kept watching as Mike put his headphones back on and started to sing again, disappearing one staccato step at a time into the gaping, brightly-lit hollow of Missionsstrasse. And the traffic lights blinked on, to the swish of a soft breeze and the fading patter of a disembodied voice. ┘

\*This phrase, meaning a "friend" you meet only once, has gained currency among young people since being used in the 1999 movie *Fight Club*.

Born and raised in India, Eugene Datta has had his writings appear in numerous publications around the world, including the *Richmond Review*, *West Coast Line*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Following his long residency in Basel as a fellow of Stiftung Laurenz-Haus, he moved earlier this year to Munich, which is where he currently lives.

# Sāhitya – the Shared Experience

## Re-Presenting Indian Women

Supriya Chaudhuri

A short tour through the work of five contemporary Indian women authors reveals many voices describing a shared experience. Supriya Chaudhuri, professor of English literature in Kolkata, offers us insight into the sensitivity and forcefulness of Indian women authors as they confront exoticism, Bollywood glamour and the constraints of caste and gender I

How many ages later  
Will my ragged train of anger  
float away,  
Like a thousand sesame  
seeds, on the flooding Ganga?  
– Vijaya Mukhopadhyay,  
“Mahalaya/Ancestor-Worship”

One legacy of the centrality of the “woman question” to pre-independence social reform and nationalism in India is the urgency of involvement with women’s issues in the public domain. For creative writers, social justice – to the extent that the personal is the political – is as important as a more nuanced examination of affective and intellectual life. The major women writers of post-independence India have impacted the public conscience as well as its consciousness. Their work is inseparable from the totality of the cultural space of representation. In India, literature, *sāhitya*, etymologically “togetherness” or “shared experience”, is only one among art-forms such as music, dance, visual arts, film and theatre which reflect the intimate connections between women’s bodies, public spaces, aesthetic form, mental categories, expressive signification and social empowerment. The work of three women writers in English and two in Indian languages may serve to illustrate the range of literary representation.

**Captivity and constraint.** The most distinguished in the first category is Anita Desai (b. 1937), whose sparing, reticent style focuses on human relationships, juxtaposing a passive, almost decadent entrapment in the past with an impoverished present. For her women the physical space of the house is a site of captivity, but men too are exhausted and powerless, as in *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1987), or *In Custody* (1984). In the former novel, as in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), the sharp, subtle edge of Desai’s satire searches for ironic parallels be-

tween East and West. Desai has been criticized for the narrowly upper-class, even Eurocentric bias of her fiction, much of it produced from Western locations. But her treatment of the sensibility of a class of Europeanized Indians, and of the family as an instrument of psychological enslavement, is unerring and profound.

**Complex worlds.** Very different are the two novels of her daughter Kiran Desai (b. 1971), *Hullabaloo* in the *Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006; winner of the Booker Prize), ambitious, densely imagined works set in a rich, bewildering, socially and politically complicated India. The first is influenced by the magical realism dominating the literary climate of its origin; the second is a bleaker work set in the small hill-town of Kalimpong in the eastern Himalayas, against the background of political agitation and doomed personal relationships. In her mordant, often bitter treatment of the detritus of post-colonial migrations, stray encounters and ethnic insurgency, Desai shows herself willing to imagine many ways of life: “never again”, the heroine Sai concludes, “could she think that there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged firmly to herself, that she might create her own mean little happiness and live safely within it.”

**A small town in Kerala.** Indian writers based in the West, like Jhumpa Lahiri (*The Namesake*, 2003), are well known, but women’s concerns are better understood from the work of writers living in In-



Haruko: From the *All India Permit* series, 2005

dia, such as Gita Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy, the activist author of a single extraordinary novel, *The God of Small Things* (Booker Prize, 1997). Roy's semi-autobiographical novel draws upon her childhood memories of Ayemenem, a small town in Kerala. Written in an uneven blend of schoolgirl rhetoric and brilliant, satiric vignettes of persons and places, the novel tells the story of a divorced woman with two children, who returns after the failure of her marriage to a mouldering family es-

tate where she falls into a doomed love-affair with a low-caste "untouchable" carpenter, Velutha. The events are seen through the eyes of one of the children, Rahel, loosely modelled on Roy herself. This choice of narrative perspective makes it a novel of childhood and adolescence, of children's guilty intuition of their elders' secret lives, and their entry into adult knowledge at the end of the novel, when Velutha is beaten to death by the police. Roy looks with a clear, unsparing gaze at contemporary Kerala politics, at police corrup-



tion, middle-class hypocrisy, domestic violence and exploitation, yet without sacrificing the passionate, even lyrical core of her story. The abused and unhappy Ammu is a spirited and independent woman, and despite its tragic ending the novel's final impression is not negative.

**A global market of culture.** In an elegiac passage, Roy speaks of the plight of the Kathakali dancer, forced to peddle his wares in the global market of culture: *"In despair he turns to tourism. He enters the*

*market. He hawks the only thing that he owns. The stories that his body can tell."* The temptation to exoticize is a danger for the writer in English, whose work must guard against the seductions of marketability. Writers in the Indian languages, who can only reach the world through the agency of translation, are less vulnerable to these temptations. Pioneering women's presses in India, such as Kali for Women, as well as the Katha and Sahitya Akademi imprints, feature translation as a major enterprise.

**The politics of caste and gender.** If the crisis in Roy's novel arises from sexual contact across caste barriers, the politics of caste and gender are central to Dalit women's writing in India. The term "Dalit" ("downtrodden") was first used in Maharashtra to describe the most oppressed members of the Hindu caste system, whom Mahatma Gandhi called "Harijans" ("Children of God"). A significant body of Dalit literature, such as Baby Kamble's autobiography, *Jina Amucha* (Our Wretched Lives, 1986), emerged in Maharashtra and the southern states. Perhaps the most remarkable modern Dalit writer is a former Christian nun, (Faustina) Bama, author of a Tamil autobiography, *Karukku* (1992), and two novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanman* (2003). Translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, they are marked by linguistic and generic unconventionality, vivid local detail, Dalit consciousness, and a powerful feminist idiom. Bama left her religious community to return to her native village, where, as part of a group of *paraiya* women, she realized history as a collective struggle. Autobiography, anecdote, reportage and fiction are blended in her work to create a new collectivity of narrative voices. Through these voices, Bama tells us of hard labour, of violence, of sexual and economic vulnerability, but also of the supportiveness of her community and her sense of self-worth. Bama says: "My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them...I wanted to shout out these stories."

**Speaking with many voices.** Equally original is the work of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, whose short stories, novels and plays are passionately committed to the cause of the politically and socially oppressed, which she has espoused

as an activist. Her best stories, such as *Hajar Churashir Ma* (*Mother of 1084*, filmed in Hindi by Govind Nihalani), about the mother of a political worker killed by the police, and *Draupadi*, about a tribal woman insurgent (given powerful theatrical expression by Savitri Meisnam), focus on victims of state violence and the rights of poor tribal communities. Mahasweta Devi's works are written in a deliberately rough, unconventional Bengali using slang and dialect, contrasting with the high literary culture in which she was educated, at Tagore's university in Santiniketan. Most remarkable are her representations of the woman's body as the site of oppression and exploitation, not only in *Draupadi*, but also in *Stanadayini* (Breast-Giver) and *Rudali* (Mourner). That this last work is also a powerful theatrical and cinematic text should contest the glossy, processed images of Indian womanhood projected by the popular "Bollywood" cinema, by advertising and by the media.

Women in India are not a single community: they speak with many voices, all of which demand to be heard. Their work conveys the wrongs and sufferings even of those "missing generations" silenced at birth, at the same time that it expresses, with subtlety and precision, the contours of a modern sensibility. —

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# Connoisseurship and Commitment

## Alice Boner and the Indian arts

Eberhard Fischer

The Alice Boner House in Varanasi has recently undergone gentle renovation. Starting in 2007, it will be available to recipients of grants from the Alice Boner Foundation and artists-in-residence supported by Pro Helvetia. As a place to explore Indian culture. Who was Alice Boner and what led her to settle on the banks of the Holy Ganges? I

By the time Alice Boner (b. 1889) settled in an old house on the banks of the Ganga (Ganges) in Varanasi (Benares) in 1935, she had concluded two chapters in her life: she had trained as a sculptor at several art academies and had quickly gained success, already receiving a one-person exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zurich in 1916. Ten years later she attended a performance by the Indian dancer Uday Shankar at Zurich's Kursaal and was thrilled by what she saw. He and the French partner he had at the time danced to the accompaniment of a piano or gramophone records. But in the following decades he became the most important exponent of modern Indian dance. Boner was impressed by Uday Shankar's "graceful elegance" and "the harmony of his movements, as if statues on temple walls had come to life", and not long afterwards the charismatic dancer visited her in Ticino, where he posed for her so she could photograph, draw and model his Indian dance postures.

**Exploring ancient dance traditions.** Soon Alice Boner invited the young dancer to spend almost a year travelling through India with her. She wanted to find maharajahs ready to fund the dancer in developing a new programme, which she hoped would spark off a revival of the classical dance tradition and, equally, earn worldwide acknowledgement for Indian culture. She also wanted to build up a company, assemble a professional musical ensemble, and purchase good instruments and appropriate costumes, looking to temple sculptures for inspiration for classical dance poses and exploring what dance traditions still existed. Alice Boner and Uday Shankar travelled from Bom-

bay to Bengal by way of Rajasthan, visiting the dancer's family but also the cave temples of Ajanta and Ellora, and ultimately journeying to Kerala, where Alice Boner saw and documented the Kathakali dance theatre. Back in Paris again, Alice Boner and Uday Shankar put together an immediately successful Indian dance programme featuring Uday's brother, the sixteen-year-old Ravi Shankar, on the sitar! So at the beginning of the 1930s Alice Boner was the patron, in effect the co-owner, of the "Uday Shankar Company" founded in Paris, and at the same time a project manager with aesthetic and promotional influence. Her contribution to the revitalization of classical Indian dance in the early 1930s should not be underestimated. Alice Boner subsequently travelled with the troupe, as their manager, on a highly successful tour of Europe, but in 1935 their paths diverged: Uday Shankar and his company were drawn to New York, where they appeared on Broadway – while Alice Boner felt the pull of India, moving to holy Varanasi.

**Settling in Varanasi.** Alice Boner had been reading books about Indian art since her youth, and now she wanted to gain first-hand knowledge of the culture that so fascinated her by living in India for a time. The outbreak of the Second World War three years later prevented her from returning to Europe, and when travelling became viable again, she nonetheless remained faithful to her home in Varanasi, staying there into very advanced age. She had been able to rent an old house directly on the river, along the most important pilgrimage route. A two-storey building built around



Magali Koenig: From the *Voyage en Inde* series, 1991

a little courtyard, it had a balcony and roof terrace. From there she could observe both locals and pilgrims at their daily rituals. She set up a large studio on the roof, later installing her Krishna shrine and her library there. Though there has been some modernization, with the surrounding houses enlarged and developed for tourism, the very special atmosphere of the Alice Boner Institute has been preserved down to the present day. In Varanasi, Alice Boner soon abandoned sculpture for sketching and watercolour. She would later

paint carefully elaborated motifs in oil on canvas. She initially took her subject matter from the world around her – ferrymen, launderers, pilgrims, beggars and priests. But her images were never casual impressions; they were formally rigorous, chromatically homogeneous pictures, as she had by then already recognized that her artistic strength lay “in the constructive aspect, in the form and structure” of her motifs. Admittedly, the fact that she cast “inner rhythm” in geometrical constructs robs her pictures of much of their poten-



tial sparkle. One searches in vain for the spontaneity so extolled today, or for strong colour contrasts or an expressive brushstroke that captures the moment of vision. Everything is carefully considered, the result being sophisticated, balanced chromatic nuances and compositions deliberately thrust into predetermined patterns.

**A cosmic triptych.** In the war years preceding Indian independence (1947), even a Swiss found it difficult to live in freedom in South Asia: Alice

Boner had made no secret of her sympathies for an independent India, but had to desist from any sort of political activity if she did not want her residence permit withdrawn – which is why, equipped with a generous allowance from home, she lived a relatively modest, retiring life in her house on the Ganges. She had a circle of local friends, all of them Indian. The Maharani of Vijayanagar had initiated Alice Boner into the Krishna cult and introduced her to the most important sacred Hindu texts. Alice Boner turned these cos-

mic-philosophical ideas into a monumental triptych about becoming, being and passing away. Today the piece, which must be considered her artistic masterpiece, is on permanent exhibit in the Alice Boner Gallery of the Varanasi art museum (Bharat Kala Bhavan on the university campus). Alice Boner made hundreds of sketches for these paintings into which she wanted to project Indian life present and past. To achieve this, she began collecting Indian miniatures – at first mainly according to motifs rather than art-historical criteria: images of deities, illustrations of myths and songs. But she also acquired fascinating colour combinations, striking compositions and interpretations of the world around her. These miniatures entered the Museum Rietberg in Zurich after her death.

During this period Alice Boner made frequent pilgrimages to the cave temples of Ellora: she wanted to understand the monumental reliefs, many of which represent scenes featuring the god Shiva, wanted to decipher their compositional structures and find valid principles of space and time in the geometrical principles underlying them. In 1962 she published an art-historical study entitled *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture, Cave Temple Period* (E. J. Brill, Leiden).

**Sanskrit studies.** This led to the fourth chapter in Alice Boner's life: in the late 1950s she met Pandit Sadashiva Rath Sharma, the chief temple priest of Puri, the biggest Vishnu temple in North India. He told her about so-called *shilpa shastra* literature – the Sanskrit textbooks dealing with temple construction and the making of religious statues – and placed at her disposal unpublished palm-leaf manuscripts on the subject, with centuries-old pictures and texts consistent with her intuitive discoveries. Now Alice Boner intensified her study of Sanskrit and, together with this agile Brahman, helped pioneer scholarly research into texts highly relevant to the understanding of Indian temple architecture. Three great works resulted, among them one on the construction of the Sun Temple at Konarak. These books brought Alice Boner both an honorary doctorate from the University of Zurich and the Padma Bhushan, the highest distinction awarded to foreigners by the government of India. Thus was her enormous commitment to research into the foundations of Indian art honoured.

**A centre for Swiss-Indian cooperation.** Until very lately, this work was fruitfully carried on by Prof. Bettina Bäumer, her spiritual successor in Varanasi. Alice Boner's collaboration with Uday Shankar has also been the subject of a recent study, by Anjali S. Fischer. Only her contribution to twentieth-century Indian painting has not yet been documented: here Alice Boner independent-mindedly

took up the Indian echoes resonating in her surroundings and in art, granting them a contemporary visual identity and creating unmistakable, complex works unlike anything else to be found in India in the twentieth century.

Since Alice Boner's death, a foundation housed at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich has administered part of her estate, managed the house in Varanasi and promoted both artistic and art-historical research there, particularly in the context of Swiss-Indian cooperation. The Alice Boner House in Varanasi has recently undergone gentle renovation and will, from 2007, be available to recipients of grants from the Alice Boner Foundation and Pro Helvetia, as a place to explore Indian culture. And what better place is there for this than South Asia's most sacred spot: the banks of the River Ganges in Varanasi? ─

Translated from the German by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart

Eberhard Fischer is an art ethnologist. He obtained his doctorate from the University of Basel in 1965, undertook field research in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire and subsequently taught the documentation of village handicrafts at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. From 1968 to 1971 he was representative in India of the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, engaging in field research in Gujarat. Director of the Rietberg Museum in Zurich from 1972 until 1998, since then he has been curator of the museum's India Department. Numerous exhibitions and publications on Indian and West African art. Longtime collaboration with Indian colleagues including Haku Shah, Prof. Jyotinda Jain, Prof. B. N. Goswamy and Dr. Dinanath Pathy. He is president of the Alice Boner Foundation and the Rietberg-gesellschaft in Zurich.

# Surprised by Our Own Feelings

## Why we watch Bollywood films

Alexandra Schneider

Forget the critical sneer and admit it: we all love Bollywood films. Film scholar Alexandra Schneider, initiator of Switzerland's first Bollywood film event, shows us why that love isn't as easy to explain as it looks |

My interest in Bollywood has a lot to do with Switzerland. In the late 1990s people gradually began noticing that Switzerland was a popular location for Indian film crews, above all for so-called "Bollywood" films, in other words, commercial Hindi films made in Bombay. Impressed by an iconography of the Swiss landscape that was distinctly different from the visual repertoire of tourist images and the popular European and Swiss cinema, a few colleagues and I initiated a research project about the relationship between Switzerland and the Hindi cinema that Salman Rushdie has so aptly described as "*epico-mythico-tragico-comico-super-sexy-high masala-art*". In my own case, these movies lent an alien quality to all-too-familiar landscapes and cities, in the productive, aesthetic sense of the Russian Formalists: they allowed me to restore negotiable parameters to a cultural space with seemingly fixed coordinates again, to rediscover it and explore it from a new perspective – as a kind of aesthetic experience of oneself as someone else.

**Bollywood chic.** When we presented our research findings in a publication, an exhibition and an extensive film series in Zurich in 2002, we became part of a real Bollywood wave sweeping Europe and the United States that year. The West seemed to be succumbing to what an English journalist termed "*Bollywood chic*", and we were suddenly part of that trend. The phrase "*Bollywood chic*" carried resonances of Tom Wolfe's "*Radical Chic*", which Wolfe used in a story of the same name to describe the courting of the radical Black Panthers by New York's fashionable circles in the 1970s. But the expression "*Bollywood chic*" is not only apt because of Western audiences clearly at-

tracted by a hint of the exotic. It also conveys the cultural appeal of "Bollywood", which extends far beyond the movies themselves. Many people are familiar with the label and have an idea of what it refers to without ever having seen a single film. The B-word is like a chemical that has spilled over into other contexts outside the cinema, altering established forms of reception and producing new ones. "*First it was the hippies, then the social workers and now it's the students who take an interest in Bollywood,*" explained a media activist from Bombay, talking about the young foreigners who come to her as soon as they arrive in the city. Her statement has a slight ring of annoyance, which is easily understandable if we imagine the reverse situation: how would we react if young Indians suddenly began coming to Zurich in pursuit of their passion for the rural idyll of *Ueli der Pächter*, the plastic glamour of a Monika Kaelin or the *faux* folksiness of a Trio Eugster. It is approximately this kind of irritation that the Western fascination for Bollywood chic has been known to arouse in India, particularly among intellectuals who would categorize the commercial Hindi cinema in about the same way as the Swiss would classify the above-mentioned "artists". Whether Indian intellectuals' disparagement of the Bollywood cinema is justified or simply reproduces the old Western distinction between high and popular culture is another question again. But there is undoubtedly good reason for a closer look at the reasons for the sudden Bollywood boom in the West. A fitting starting point would be the internet discussion forums devoted to the subject of Bollywood.

**Cult following.** It is an incontrovertible fact that Bollywood has long gained a kind of cult following

"I think I have to watch a Bollywood film tonight!!! This weather is so depressing!!!"  
– Quote from an internet forum



Magali Koenig: From the *Voyage en Inde* series, 1991



in this country, in the sense that communities form around these films, seeing them as an expression of shared perceptions. There are countless sites, forums and chat rooms where German-speaking Bollywood fans can exchange the latest gossip from the (putative) centre of the commercial Indian film industry, with subjects ranging from new films, television broadcast dates and DVD sales outlets to Hindi courses and any number of other things. For instance, one popular forum is devoted to resemblances between stars: Indian stars are examined for their resemblance to stars from other countries, above all from Turkey or Hollywood. “Doesn’t Aamir Khan in *Lagaan* look a little like the young Tony Curtis?” is a typical question. One could speak of strategies of integration through association with the familiar. Which is not to say that “the Other” should not remain special, or different. As one young Bollywood-forum manager puts it: “I would like it [Bollywood] to remain something special here in Germany, and not to become something normal.” Like other cult followers, Bollywood fans, too, are held together by the feeling that they are acquiring knowledge of something they perceive as “special”. Then there is the sense of fellowship that comes from belonging to a community of individuals who love something others sneer at. In these fans’ eyes, Bollywood films would be “normal” if they played alongside American blockbusters at multiplex cinemas – which, for a number of reasons, is unlikely ever to be the case. On the other hand, RTL 2, one of the major German entertainment channels, has started regularly broadcasting dubbed Hindi films during prime time, and since then Bollywood has ceased to be quite so “special”. In that respect there is no aura of subculture about the Bollywood cult as might once have been the case, say, for the John Waters cult, where fan cohesion also had an aesthetic and political dimen-

sion. The bond that unites the Bollywood fan community is neither politics nor decidedly bad taste, but emotions: for fans of Shah Rukh Khan et al., feelings, not thoughts, are the main thing. Take the German-Iranian who posed the question in an internet forum: “Do you think love as intense as in Indian films exists in real life?” There were over 250 replies expansively discussing what kind of love is (im)possible in real life and on screen.

**Excessive emotions.** Talking like this about feelings, fictional characters’ and one’s own, has a solid tradition in the modern era. In his study of melodrama, German film scholar Hermann Kappelhoff writes: “What strikes the viewer ... is the sensing of his own sensibilities: his surprising encounter with his own emotionality.” People used to turn to novels and then to Hollywood films to be surprised by this sense of one’s “own sensibilities”; today many people find Bollywood films the place for this encounter. And the excessiveness of the emotional worlds presented by, and experienced through, the Bollywood cinema are in fact precisely what the public loves so much. As the Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar puts it: “Hindi films may be unreal in a rational sense but they are certainly not untrue.” ─

Translated from the German by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart

Alexandra Schneider is a senior research assistant in the Department of Film Studies of the Free University of Berlin. She is currently working on a post-graduate thesis on films and tourism. She is co-editor of a number of books, including: *Bollywood: Das indische Kino und die Schweiz* (Zurich 2002), *Import-Export: Cultural Transfer Between India, Germany, Austria* (Berlin 2005) and *Kinogefühle: Emotionalität und Film* (Marburg 2005).

# Take-Off 2006 A cinematic vision

Kumar Shahani

As the author speculates on the future of cinema, the air pockets that must be endured in the present do not prevent a wonderful vista from opening out I

**Where we began.** Looking back at the generations that wished to take off from a colonial ground into the realm of global freedom, the take-off seems quite remarkable.

Every wondrous move on the way up seems miraculous, considering the aesthetic problems that each culture's awakening brings home.

It is in the context of an overbearing modernity that created both Leni Riefenstahl and Sergei Eisenstein that a gentle, folksy film was born. Embarrassing in its special effects, it was nevertheless the only spontaneous creation of a masterpiece of Indian cinema that could equal the work of a Dovzhenko or a Dreyer.

The name of the film which reaffirmed the human spirit in spite of the colonial-fascist axis of that time is *Sant Tukaram*. Sant Tukaram's poems and his saintly life provided the inspiration that carried it through and past the Indian studio system prevalent in the 1930s. The studio in which the film was made later housed the Film and TV Institute of India. Ritwik Ghatak – who was being exiled from one territory to another within the subcontinent – lit up the universe of cinema for subsequent Indian generations from that locale. “*Tiger, tiger burning bright ...*”, we hailed him as he stalked the long corridors.

Well, the forest of the night is still with us. So is his illumination. I think that he set us on to find that which is invisible and inaudible yet palpable in the cinematographic moment. Or, outside of it, in the spaces in between, as intervals are in music.

It was for that reason perhaps that, when I went out to Europe at the height of the French New Wave, my choice for a mentor in that continent was Robert Bresson.

Bresson's decoupage was like the Western musical scale. Camera positions at fixed distances from the actors developed a certain rhythm line over which the tempered scale of emotions searched for the unexpected sign. While Ritwik found the revelation of the unstruck sound and the sense of the invisible in overtone montage, Bresson placed great importance on the sign that emerged almost by divine intervention within the rhythm line of perspectival shifts. Both these approaches, coming from cultures far apart, went far beyond known realisms.

**Reality and illusion.** Thus, the stylistics could yield content beyond the brute matter of the story.

Note that the pride of Indian cinema – *Pather Panchali* – was often mistaken to be a documentary, years

after it was made! Satyajit Ray's realism made the representation replace the represented. The reality became the manufactured thing itself: poverty. Subsequently, it was fondly believed that one could actually eradicate poverty by the rhetoric of cinema. Mrinal Sen had abandoned his earlier attempts at lyricism in his new avatar of a political film-maker. He was relentlessly attacked by Satyajit Ray, whose favourite political films were *Garam Hawa* and *Ankur*. All these films, however, leaned heavily on the art of producing catharsis rather than thoughtful action.

Ritwik Ghatak, on the other hand, had intensified signification. First, he recognized history both as chance and necessity. He was himself a refugee, constantly being displaced.

Secondly, by admitting experiences of abstraction other than those of identification like those of the metonymy and the musical modes of the East, he forsook all kinds of illusionism. Reality, in his films, is reconstituted as acute personal pain.

For me and my closest colleagues from the cinema and the other arts, the legacy has meant freedom with discipline, an affirmation of individuated voices, in a kind of choral way. Remember Komal Gandhar and Vivan Sundaram's allusion to it? The voices come from across the Padma river, from infinity, but the camera tracks to a dead end.

Some of my colleagues, however, have seen their salvation in regional, cultural specificity: thus not only Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Girish Kasaravalli and Aribam Shyam Sharma but also some younger film-makers of great integrity like Soudhamini.

Ironically, she is a student of Mani Kaul's, who has in the last few years made an extraordinary attempt to free himself from the structures that he mastered. These were modernist paradigms of the Indian nation in a mirror obverse of European form. Saeed Mirza and Ketan Mehta, each in his own way, tried to give the downtrodden identities in the Indian nation a new dignity. Hariharan has tried to win over the popular in Tamil cinema, as have Vinay Shukla and Sudhir Mishra in their brushes with the mainstream Hindi cinema. Today, in remarkably different ways, Sashi Kumar in the South and Khaled Mohammed in Mumbai, both with strong journalistic backgrounds, are working with larger than life canvases.

**Courage and rigour.** Stylistically at the other pole but with a vision which crosses linguistic borders is Vishnu Mathur. Perhaps the most radical film-maker of his generation was John Abraham. Both

he and Aravindan are no more. Others are silent for reasons of lack of support: Rahat Yusufi, Sushant Mishra. I have had an ongoing dialogue with all these film-makers and each one is doing his bit. When I presented my first feature film, *Maya Darpan*, at Locarno in 1973, it received citations for its courage and rigour and for its ecumenical content!

Had I walked in where angels feared to tread? Many years later, when Locarno celebrated its own fiftieth year along with the jubilee of Indian independence, my rendition of Tagore's *Char Adhyay* questioned courage and rigour and compassion, too! Perhaps, it is foolish to love the cinema as much as one does. But it is the same folly that sustains a lot of my younger colleagues in the face of disappearing public funds.

Amongst the last of those film-makers of significance who received support is Fareeda Mehta. She made an extremely reflective work adapted from the stories of Manto, a true pioneer of urban sensibility. Her film, *Kali Salwar*, displays both courage and rigour in confronting the necropolis that the former industrial city might be reduced to. Two of her senior colleagues who appear in her film, Paresh Kamdar and Rajat Kapur, anticipated the form that the multiplex-oriented distribution system brings to the fore. These cinema houses are closely allied with the lifestyle of the shopping mall.

All value is tied up, "democratically", with monetization, collapsed into digits, named in the manner of exotica, accompanied with slogans.

**Riding the crest.** Rajat Kapur has taken a fuller plunge into the new system, earning his bread as an actor. Both he and Paresh have playfully questioned their own premises of masculinity and femininity, of the mask and the being. Both have taken financial risks themselves as had Kundan Shah before them. It appears that Rajat is riding a tide that may take him higher.

Some of Rajat's colleagues a little older or younger than him have successfully sought links with European finance to make films that embed themselves within the Indian tradition. The best-known are Shahji and Murali, who have won awards at major film festivals. Rajan Khosa went to Venice with a film about the Indian tradition of learning. Anup Singh acknowledged the cinematic tradition with a homage to Ritwik Ghatak. Significantly, it was shot by KK Mahajan, a cameraman who will live to be a legend for the sheer range of stylistics that he enabled through his career.

Importantly, Anup Singh's documentary is *enacted*. Such a genre has come into being only because audio-visual thinking has had to face great challenges from technology and the global economy. Additionally, varied modes of subaltern representation from quite disparate cultures have opened up infinite possibilities.

**The step to digital.** Digital technology has made all work almost perfectly accessible and *automatic*. Yet, the need for an individual's intervention to create a magical moment remains.

Both in terms of form and content, the context or the particular person and event, indeed the relationships obtained between all these terms, an encoded levelling has taken over. Its fidelity is to the information gleaned by the electronic device from the chaotic world, not to anyone's subjectivity or particular ethos. The digital event can replace all that by the psychosis of its own self-sufficiency! But it has done such great service to us in other ways. Above all, its contribution will be, I think, to make us revalue the random in our life and thought.

I hope that our documentarists like Anand Patwardhan, Arun Khopkar, Chhandita Mukherji, the wayward Kamal Swaroop and their younger colleagues like M.R.Rajan, Amar Kanwar, Vipin Vijay, Ramaniand and many others, such as Sandeep Chatterji (with his abandoned projects), are allowed to step into the digital world with their individualities intact. When ways of seeing transcend all teleologies, one can see the individual aglow.

I know that, from the work done at the margins of any civilization, our whole human species evolves into a greater enunciation of both knowledge and being. —

Kumar Shahani is one of the most important film-makers working in India today and a key figure of the current Indian avant-garde. He has developed a unique epic idiom that engages with the contemporary. Shahani's films explore cultural memories embedded in classical Indian art forms, texts and objects. His visual explorations of Indian music and dance, the classical Indian epic and contemporary literature mark his practice as unique in the history of Indian cinema. Shahani also engages with European cinematic traditions. His first feature, *Maya Darpan* (1972), is regarded as India's first formalist film. His oeuvre is often considered alongside a number of renowned directors – including Pier Paolo Pasolini, Stanley Kubrick and Jacques Rivette – whose work is similarly entwined with the visual arts. Kumar Shahani has been awarded the Prince Claus Award (1998), the International Film Festival Rotterdam FIPRESCI Award (1990) and multiple Indian Filmfare Awards (1972, 1990, 1991).

# Footprints on the Sands of Time Le Corbusier and India

Surinder Bahga

**“Form follows function” – thus the dictum of Swiss architect Le Corbusier. His is a name that will ever be associated with Chandigarh, the new capital of Punjab built according to his designs in the 1950s. Le Corbusier expert Surinder Bahga tells us about the evolution and legacy of the project |**

The relevance of Le Corbusier today, for India as for the rest of the world, lies in his specific architectural and urban designs, as it does in some of his principles – and more so in his example as an independent thinker of modernity.

The early 1950s saw the beginning of Le Corbusier's association with India. It started when PN Thapar, the Chief Administrator of Chandigarh Project, and PL Varma, the Chief Engineer of Punjab, were sent to Europe to select a team to design a new capital for the state of Punjab after India's independence, which would be named Chandigarh. It was the French Minister of Reconstruction and Urbanization, Eugene Claudius Petit, who first recommended Le Corbusier as well as Corbusier's cousin and long-time associate of the team, Pierre Jeanneret, describing him as a “good detail man”.

Le Corbusier's initial reaction to the Indian proposal was negative. Considering the potential of creating a city and the opportunity of finally implementing his lifelong ideas, Corbusier agreed to reconsider taking up the Indian project at the behest of Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, the British architect couple who were also selected by Thapar and Varma for the Capital Project. Le Corbusier finally decided to accept the assignment on the condition that his cousin Pierre Jeanneret would also be taken on for the project team. Le Corbusier recorded his feelings of that fateful moment in his diary, “It is the hour that I have been waiting for – India, that human and profound civilization – to construct a capital.”<sup>1</sup> In 1951, he wrote to Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew and Pierre Jeanneret that they would together give India a modern archi-

itecture, “...whose fundamentals will be an organic architecture which is neither English nor French nor American but Indian of the second half of the twentieth century and for which we must find the fundamental principles.”<sup>2</sup>

**Arrival in Chandigarh.** Before Le Corbusier came on the scene, a master plan of Chandigarh had been prepared by Albert Mayer (1897–1981) of Mayer, Whittlesey and Glass in New York and Mathew Nowicki (1910–50), a young Polish-born architect. In this project, they were assisted by Varma and Thapar. After Nowicki's death in August 1950, Le Corbusier took his place on the Chandigarh project team. The distinctive features of the master plan prepared by Mayer were retained, with Le Corbusier also adding his own new ideas. Besides preparing the city's master plan, he designed the Capital Complex, the City Centre and the Museum Complex. The residential and educational cores were designed and executed by Pierre Jeanneret, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew.

After being appointed as Architectural Adviser for the Chandigarh Project, Le Corbusier visited India for the first time on 18 February 1951. He arrived in Chandigarh on 26 February, from where he wrote to Yvonne, his wife, “Von, I will tell you that I am going to do the work of my life here, among people, the Indians, who are extraordinarily civilized.”<sup>3</sup> During his first visit to India, Le Corbusier gained a deeper understanding of the country's cultural and industrial traditions.

Many Indian architects were engaged to work on the Chandigarh Capital Project. An entrance examination was conducted on Le Corbusier's re-



Thomas Flechtner: Assembly Hall/Capitol Complex, Chandigarh, 1997



quest. Among the architects to join Corbusier's team were Urmila Eulie Chowdhury, Jeet Malhotra, AR Prabhawalkar, BP Mathur, Roshan Lal Malhotra, Aditya Prakash, Shiv Dutt Sharma, Pilo Mody and MN Sharma, along with others. In Chandigarh, when work on the project started, there arose a problem of communication. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, whose mother tongue was French, were not fluent in English. Consequently, the Indian authorities had difficulty in communicating with them. Ted Bower, an American architect, was appointed as a mediator for one year. That gave Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret sufficient time to gain a working knowledge of English to communicate effectively with their team members as well as the government departments. Eulie Chowdhury, who knew French, also helped smoothen out a lot of the language problems.

**An international style.** During his bi-annual trips to India, Le Corbusier carried with him sketchbooks in which he recorded his thoughts and observations about India. The whole activity of the project centred around him during his stay in India. He would wake up early and paint and would start work in the office at about 11.00 in the morning. He would discuss with each of the architects and planners the detailing of his buildings, designing open spaces and marking the drawings for the architectural controls of certain important areas in the city. He would stamp his signature and the date on every sketch he prepared in Chandigarh. He was always dressed in a khaki outfit with many pockets in which he carried his tools – crayons, pencils, pens, measuring-tape, eraser and sketchbook. During his visit to Chandigarh, he lived like an Indian, having bucket baths and eating Indian food.

*“Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time.”*  
– HW Longfellow.

Le Corbusier's arrival on the architectural scene of the Indian subcontinent played a major role in Indian architectural history. It gave a new impetus to the emergence of an international style in India which till then had kept a low profile due to the bias of most of the architects towards the revivalist movement. It will not be an exaggeration to state that the development of modern architecture in India was accelerated by Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier was a man of firm convictions, which had emerged after almost four decades of contemplation on the concepts of design and architecture. He was sixty-three and at the pinnacle of his professional success when he was invited to

India to design the new capital city for Punjab: his conceptions for a new and modernistic approach to architecture had crystallized and he was prepared to give a bold profile to their expression. In addition to Corbusier's sublime belief in his own ideas, Nehru's patronage of his modernist theories emboldened him to give India an architecture which in Nehru's words was “...totally fresh... free from all shackles and shall be unfettered by the traditions of the past...”<sup>4</sup> Not only did Le Corbusier give India an architecture of modern times but also an inspiration to Indian architects who were struggling for a new identity to evolve a well-delineated style.

**Form follows function.** Modern architecture, which Le Corbusier introduced in India, initially drew criticism from those who favoured the revivalist style with lattice-work (*Jalis*), rooftop kiosks (*Chatris*), domes etc. However, it was assured a lasting place due to its inherent qualities of humanism and rationalism. For the first time, architectural trends were centred on man instead of God, and made him the measure of all things. It was a fresh start which rejected all traditional notions, beliefs and concepts. The new architecture was utilitarian in nature rather than purely symbolic or decorative, and thus a symbol of the development processes of twentieth-century India. The theory behind Chandigarh's architecture was “*form follows function*”. Streamlined horizontal and vertical lines, plasticity of forms, play of voids and masses with glass and concrete were the new aesthetics of architecture.

**A healthy shock.** Le Corbusier really hit the architects on the head to awaken in them a new sense of freedom and enlightenment. Besides, he was instrumental in changing the status of architects and the Indian attitude towards architecture. Le Corbusier's influence on Indian architecture proliferated primarily through those budding architects who had the opportunity to work directly under him either in India or abroad. After their alliance with the master, these architects later became the torch-bearers of modern architecture in the subcontinent. It was indeed a tremendously stimulating and productive experience for them. This enriching exposure enabled them to observe directly the design methodology of these giants of modern architecture and learn for themselves the processes by which an architecture of international value can be produced. The new awakening subsequently changed the entire architectural scenario in the country. Apart from disseminating his knowledge and experience of handling concrete and brick to the younger generation of architects, Le Corbusier enriched them with a new architectural vocabulary – a set of patterns that they could adopt and adapt.

The Sixties and Seventies witnessed the flowering of Indian architecture nourished by Corbusian thoughts. The architectural style which emerged became synonymous with Chandigarh. It became a living library for young architects to refer to and derive inspiration from. Besides architecture, town planning in India was also influenced by Le Corbusier's concepts and his works in India. It will not be an exaggeration to state that the majority of urban development schemes prepared in the post-Corbusian period in India are more or less based on the principles applied in the Chandigarh project. A magnificent example of such an impact is Gandhinagar, the capital city of the state of Gujarat.

The above discussion about Le Corbusier's influence on modern Indian architects and planners is just a microcosm symbolic of the macrocosm. The stylistic influence seems to have become subdued over the years, but its spiritual impact on the psyche of Indian architects still prevails and informs their senses, acting as a constant catalyst. ─

<sup>1</sup> Ravi Kalia, *Chandigarh – The Making of an Indian City*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in PL Varma, "Homage to Master", *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), October 6, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Mogens Krustup, *Porte Email – The Enamel Door*, Copenhagen, Arkitektens Forlag, 1991, pp. 51-52.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Sarbjit Bahga, Surinder Bahga and Yashinder Bahga, *Modern Architecture in India – Post Independence Perspective*, Delhi, Galgotia Publishing Company, 1993, p.18.

Architect Surinder Bahga, founder of the Saakaar Foundation in Chandigarh, has won several architectural competitions and awards. He was given the Sir M. Visveswaraya Award by HUDCO for energy-efficient housing design in 1995 and received the Michael Ventris Award from the Architectural Association, London, for his research on "Architecture of Astronomical Observatories in India". He has co-authored three books: *Modern Architecture in India: Post Independence Perspective*, *New Indian Homes* and *Le Corbusier & Pierre Jeanneret: Footprints on the Sands of Indian Architecture*. He has conceived and researched a travelling exhibition, "A Dream Realized", on the life and works of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret.

# When Dreams Come True

## A trip to the Titlis

Anisha Imhasly

Engelberg, particularly the Titlis, is where Indian dreams come true. With high spirits and excellent organization.

Indian-Swiss Anisha Imhasly, who grew up in Delhi, joined a travel group – and found herself torn between

Swiss realism and Indian elation I

Today is Ganesh Chaturthi, the Hindu holiday celebrating Ganesh, the elephant god. Being the god who removes obstacles from human beings' paths, Ganesh is one of the most popular Indian deities. Mrs. Munagekar always carries her Ganesh around with her, in the form of a silver ring she wears on her finger when she travels, and honours him with a brief morning prayer. She, her husband and forty-one other predominantly middle-aged Indian tourists are on an eighteen-day "Classic Tour of Europe". Today they have arrived in Engelberg, in the canton of Obwalden, one of the highlights in their 7000-kilometre, twenty-two destination coach trip.

Mrs. Munagekar is a retired doctor. She and her husband joined a group, the majority of whom were Gujaratis. Gujaratis are the most enthusiastic travellers targeted by the Indian travel organization SOTC, a subsidiary of the Kuoni Group. "**You** look at the world, **we** look after you," goes their slogan. And the word has got around. Because the predominantly traditional and almost exclusively vegetarian Gujaratis have enjoyed travelling even more since Indian meals have been served for lunch and dinner on their tours. No room here for the old adage "*When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*" In Rome they had vegetable curry and rice. "*Indian food is the chief selling point,*" thinks Sujit Tayade of GourmIndia, a catering firm which is registered in Bütschwil (Canton Thurgau) and organizes the



Haruko: From the *All India Permit* series, 2005

catering for three hundred groups annually. In Engelberg, it has installed itself at the Hotel Terrace and is delivering Indian meals to several local hotels. During the high season, the various travel companies employ some fifty Indian cooks as seasonal workers all over Western Europe, most of them in hotels, but some on the road, in mobile camper vans. The vans drive ahead of the coaches so the cooks can prepare the food and serve meals to the Indian guests at motorway service areas at lunchtime.



The Hotel Terrace has the feeling of an Indian enclave. With its Indian cuisine and serving staff, it is a sort of parallel world within the hotel. For people like Tayade, the hotel has become something like home. This is where holiday reps meet for dinner, have a beer and talk shop.

**In pursuit of punctuality.** Why such a packed itinerary if they don't stop for more than an hour or two at certain places, I ask the guide, Girish Agrawal. "So they can tell relatives and friends in India:

*I was in Venice, I saw the leaning tower of Pisa, I touched real snow on the Titlis. You make your neighbours green with envy before you even leave."* For that, Indian guests don't care how strenuous it is, because most of them will only be able to afford a trip like this once in their lives. Agrawal knows a lot about European history and geography, can tap into his guests' cultural idiosyncrasies and instructs them on how to deal with Europeans. With respect to punctuality, for instance. An Indian guest once told him that his wife and daughter

had never been punctual in their lives, until they met Girish Agrawal – “now they have *The Fear of Girish* in them.”

During dinner Mr. Dalal, a 58-year-old hydraulics engineer from Bombay on his first trip abroad, tells me that he sometimes senses a patronizing attitude on the part of Europeans. Tour guide Agrawal can confirm this. But often the Indians have only themselves to blame, or it is simply a matter of cultural differences. “If you go to the greengrocer’s to buy something in India, you get a perfect example of multitasking: while he’s giving you prices, he’s also serving two or three other customers, counting money and maybe talking to a supplier on the phone – all at the same time. Here, on the other hand, people wait their turn, which Indians don’t always understand. That’s what I’m here for: I constantly have to intervene and mediate.” I have to think of the brusque young woman behind the counter at the kiosk when I arrived at the railway station in Engelberg. She was wearing a T-shirt printed with a threatening fondue fork, and above it, in red, “KILL HEIDI”. Heaven help the tourist who tries to jump her queue.

**Onward and upward.** In the coach next morning, people are in boisterous spirits because they are off to the Titlis. Girish Agrawal surveys his group with amusement, looking at their shoes and joking with his guests about the many layers of clothing they have put on, even if most of the women have not abandoned their saris. They cheerfully recite an Indian mantra as the coach begins moving. On the short drive to the Titlis cableway the guide asks the group how they are feeling – they all agree that the Hotel Terrace is “wonderful” and “excellent”, and that the chai in the morning was “first class!”

Up on the Titlis, at an altitude of 3020m above sea level, snow is falling and a thick fog obscures our view of the mountain panorama. No one shares my disappointment at the weather. The main thing is that we’re here – and if it snows, all the better! Everyone has already decided that Switzerland is the highlight of the trip. Because of the lovely, rich green landscape, the snow-capped mountains and the wonderful air. And what about the Austrian Alps, I ask? Switzerland’s scenery has lost its appeal for Bollywood: today films are more likely to be shot in Tyrol. Vacant looks all round. Austria? The infrastructure here is just fabulous. “Oh, the discipline! Cars stop at a red light even if it’s two in the morning and there are no other cars or people on the road far and wide!” rhapsodizes Mr. Popat from Jamnagar. Of course, they know a little about this from films, but “the real thing” beats anything they ever hoped for. “My life’s dream has come true,” beams an approximately seventy-year-old silk merchant from Benares, and shows me a little notebook in which, with trembling hand, he has jotted down all the places he has visited so far.

**From photo studio to Indian buffet.** Once they arrive at the top, the group’s first stop is the photo studio, where the tourists are advised to have themselves photographed in Swiss costume, in front of a typical mountain landscape. On the wall hang pictures of tour guides from all countries, all dressed in Swiss costume, as if they were on some wanted list. A few storeys up, the snow beckons. The Indian visitors pose briefly for the camera, but few can be persuaded to take a ride on the chairlift. Mr. and Mrs. Dalal from Bombay are among the daring few: now they’re here, they want to try out everything. Their eyes light up, and they will never forget this moment, their legs dangling in the biting cold high above the crevasses. But the majority sit shivering on their moulded chairs, waiting for lunch. In the charmless, faux rustic dining-room, where in wintertime skiers help themselves at the self-service buffet, a plastic Indian garland hangs in the carved wooden doorway and Bollywood songs play from the loudspeakers. The Indian buffet is served.

In the afternoon a visit to Lucerne is on the agenda. During the coach ride Agrawal, like a dedicated teacher taking his young charges on a school excursion, imparts noteworthy details about the watch and chocolate industry and recommends a visit to the local branch of the Bucherer jewellery store. But the majority of the tourists are already fast asleep. *We are in Switzerland. We went to Titlis. We can go home now.* ─

Translated from the German by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart

Anisha Imhasly grew up in Switzerland and India, where most of her family live today. After doing ethnology and media studies in England, she worked for Switzerland’s national exhibition, the Expo.02, for two years. Since then she has been responsible for press relations for various cultural projects and institutions, a job she currently does for the Stadttheater in Berne. She lives in Berne and regularly travels to her second native country.