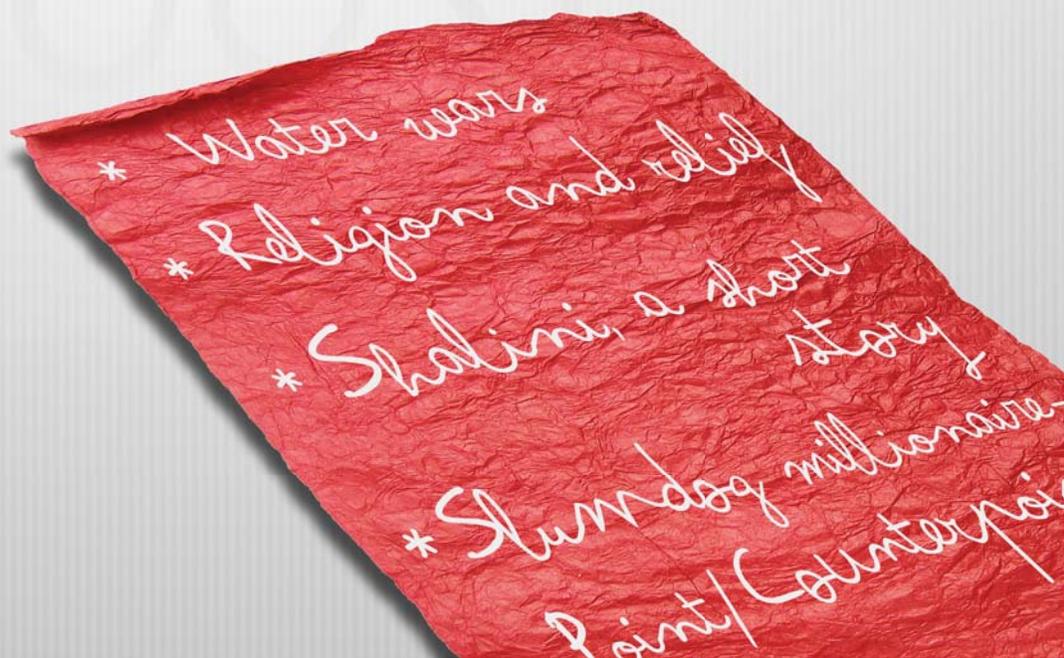


voice of south asia

# Awaaz!



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# INDIA'S WATER WARS

## Prospects and Prevention

Mark Hay

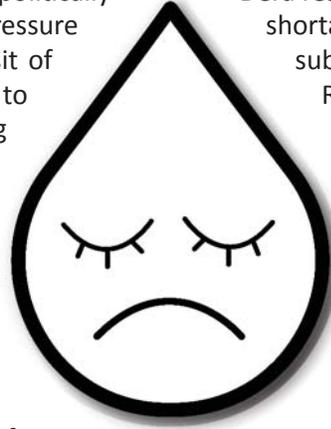
The ease with which we in the western world may turn on a tap and receive a gush of clean water is anesthetizing. Safe water's ubiquity for us undermines our ability to conceive of it as a finite resource, or to imagine that parts of the world could be on the verge of crisis due to thirst (a word that has lost the potency of its brother, starvation), dysentery, and other water-related problems. Yet a 2006 UNESCO report claims that from 1948 to 1999 there were 507 conflicts recorded in relation to water. By 1995 the growing intensity and frequency of such stories led World Bank Vice President Ismail Serageldin to predict that "the wars of the next century [would] be about water." These water wars involve violent confrontation not for the use of ports or control of aquatic borders, but for the use of water as a vital resource as the sole cause of conflict. Now well into the

century, India may be on the way to pioneering the water war. Although India faces external and internal threats of conflict, the causes of and solutions to the country's current predicament are predominately internal and structural.

Recently, stories have bubbled up over the intents of China to divert the flow of the Brahmaputra River, which originates just across the border from India and runs into Assam and Bangladesh. Already, odd shifts in the Ganges River's water flow to Bangladesh have led Bangladeshis to migrate by the millions into Assam, triggering ethnic violence where water and employment run short – the worst of nationalism and desperation.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the prospect of up to 50% of the water flow to Assam and Bangladesh leading to 100 million or more Bangladeshis migrating into Assam has led some to outright fear and outrage.<sup>2</sup>

Although these actions could potentially trigger a crisis, China has been considering this step for decades as part of their “South-North Water Diversion” project. French journalist and India specialist Claude Arpi has aptly noted that, “If Beijing goes ahead with the [Brahmaputra] project it would practically mean a declaration of war against South Asia.” The Chinese have already started to flex their political muscles; first, by demanding payment for hydrological data on the river that was previously given freely and secondly, by boxing in Prime Minister Singh on his recent visit to Beijing. However, the Chinese are ultimately politically pragmatic. Though willing to pressure India with threats, the 2006 visit of Hu Jintao to New Delhi relating to such issues shows an underlying current of compromise – granted a compromise not necessarily as equal as India would like it, but probably one that will not lead to Arpi’s prophetic declaration of war. And although the international ramifications of the prospective diversion of the Brahmaputra grabs headlines, actions made by - not against or with - India are equally a part of the problem.

Changes in India’s economic structure has had unanticipated consequences, extending far beyond the business interests of the private sector. Following the economic reforms of 1991, privatization and liberalization have attracted foreign investors and an explosion of economic activity. However, the growth of India’s GDP has come at the price of environmental sustainability. Coca-cola’s Indian plants provide an excellent study for the nature of privatized water abuse in India as a media blitz in 2006 pressured investigations leading to the disclosure of usually shady details of industrial water management. Among the most shocking of details, the India Resource Centre discovered that Coca-cola was allowed to extract unlimited water paying a cess of only approximately 30 paise per thousand liters, and that at times this cess was calculated on the amount of water waste, not total usage.<sup>3</sup> These plants often improperly disposed of



their water waste or sold it to local farmers as a fertilizer.<sup>4</sup> The sludge, containing two to five times the Central Pollution Control Board’s acceptable levels of certain hard metals, then leaked into local groundwater wells, contaminating the sole water supply of the region. The revelations from 2004 to 2006 of such a gross mismanagement of Coca-cola’s water usage led to the closing of the Plachimada plant and of the case in the popular mind. However, though cleaning up their act on waste water somewhat, Coca-cola still managed to misuse their water resources – a sad truth that surfaced in 2007 when Kala Dera residents began to experience water shortages and blamed Coca-cola. A subsequent test by the Energy and Resources Institute revealed that in just four years of functioning, the plant in Kala Dera, and in six other plants, had lowered the groundwater levels by ten meters.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as early as 1998 the Central Ground Water Board of India had declared Kala Dera and other sites of water intensive Coca-cola plants as overexploited in their groundwater capacities. Knowing this, the Indian government still allowed the production of toxic facilities in low-water regions and sanctioned the extraction of this water for a pittance with no input from locals and almost no adequate means of protest.

The effect of the depletion and poisoning<sup>6</sup> of Indian water supplies is far deeper than the inconvenience of small communities. Environmentalist Rohit Prajapati and economist Trupti Shah have illustrated that privatized industrial uses of Gujarati water have lost of upwards of five million local jobs<sup>7</sup> by contamination of groundwater wells. With no other water resources available, the land becomes fallow and the jobs irreplaceable. And still, government actions to treat the cause, rather than the symptoms, of such displacement and economic strife have been minimal at best.

Inefficient government infrastructures, though, are equally if not more to blame for loss of livelihood by waste water mismanagement. Only 13% of the nation’s waste receives

treatment<sup>8</sup> resulting in approximately 80% of the nation's urban waste ending up in rivers, which are the main sources of drinking water to large urban centers.<sup>9,10</sup> - The Ganges may be able to support 60,000 daily bathers by its remarkable self-cleansing properties, but no river, no matter how miraculous, can handle the massive influx of raw sewage dumped in rivers flowing through urban centers in India – the Ganges alone takes in three billion liters of sewage daily.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the fecal coliform at certain locations along the Ganges is over 3000 times the levels considered safe for bathing, much less drinking, thus contributing to the deaths of 1000 Indian children from diarrheal sickness every day.<sup>12</sup> As the Hindustan Times made clear starting with its coverage on dumping in the Yamuna in 1994<sup>13</sup>, most Indian rivers are comparably polluted in urban areas – the area from which vast amounts of water for city consumption are gathered. Both citizens groups and the municipal governments should take more responsibility in providing for waste burial or diversion to prevent such mass pollution of water sources.

The municipal governments must bear the greater blame though, as the failure of the municipal governments to ensure even an adequate distribution of water to cities sheds significant doubt not just on the size or funding, but the very competence of the institutions running the water resources in major urban centers. One glaring example of the ineptitude of the local governments in managing urban water distribution is the murky world of New Delhi's water supply. The Delhi Jal Board oversees the distribution of approximately 670 million gallons<sup>14</sup> of water to the city. However, at worst only some 100 million reaches the public through public outlets and at best only 335 million gallons. The locals and even minor officials<sup>15</sup> say this is the work of the heavily armed Water Mafia of Delhi, a force that taps into pipes and siphons city water into large tankers in broad daylight to resell it at hike prices as bottled water. The DJB denies the existence of such

*The Delhi Jal Board oversees the distribution of approximately 670 million gallons<sup>14</sup> of water to the city. However, at worst only some 100 million reaches the public through public outlets and at best only 335 million gallons.*

a removal, claiming that at a maximum, 10% of the city's water is being siphoned in a random manner. The DJB accepts money to fix pipes, but once the problem persists, they pass the blame and responsibility to another agency. And so on and so on, like a twisted game of hot potato. The current organization of Delhi's water oversight means that no one can be fully aware of how much water the city has at any moment or where the water is going and so the blame game never ends.<sup>16</sup> However one chooses to view the situation, though – as one of government scandal, disorganization, or just plain apathy – the fact remains that the current administration of water distribution in urban areas is woefully inadequate to monitor and protect the right of its citizens to water.

As for the rest of the rivers, beyond the cities large canal systems divert the flow of the vast majority of India's rivers to provide water for farms. Indeed, 56% of the agricultural<sup>17</sup> output of India depends on the major irrigation projects (major and medium projects account for approximately 60% of irrigation projects in India)<sup>18</sup>. However, a recent report by The Australian with the Wall Street Journal<sup>19</sup> concluded that up to half of the water diverted

for irrigation in India is wasted due to decrepit irrigation systems and technologies. This, then, means that India's finite agricultural lands are adequately irrigated by water diverted from the rivers that also provide water to cities. This diversion may leave enough water for consumption, but it diminishes the river's ability to dilute the pollution at urban centers. And moreover this ample watering is extremely wasteful due to deferred maintenance on existing irrigation projects and insufficient infrastructural monitoring by the Indian government.<sup>20</sup> As our ability to genetically increase crop yields reaches its limits and the population continues to grow, the demand for irrigation waters will rise to fill the remaining cultivatable lands of India, and more water will be drawn off from the major rivers. These rivers in turn will then

decrease in their ability to supply and dilute the supplies of the urban centers of India.<sup>21</sup> One cannot help but wonder what could be done with these stagnating irrigation waters if the system were repaired, both for urban provisioning and agricultural growth and sustainability.

On top of current overexploitation, contamination, mismanagement, theft, and agricultural inefficiency, one must consider the increase of consumption in the future. Such factors include the rising middle-class with their water-intensive electronics and appliances, the increase in agricultural dependence on irrigation as groundwater agriculture dries up<sup>22</sup> and the continual expansion of water exploiting industries. Altogether these add up to an estimated 40% increase in water consumption over the next eleven years.<sup>23</sup> And yet there's more. The famous case of the Gangotri glacier exemplifies the subtlest, yet direst, threat to Indian water resources. Like all other glaciers, Gangotri has been shrinking through the ages, but recent satellite evidence has shown Gangotri to be decreasing in size at increasing rates on a near yearly basis (due mainly to increased greenhouse emissions by China and India)<sup>24</sup>, a condition similar to most of the Himalayan glaciers. The devastating part of this situation is that Gangotri supplies water to the Ganges, and if the Ganges begins to trickle in water flow as Gangotri disappears, this then leaves 407 million people high and dry, to say nothing of the other dependents on Himalayan rivers. These same environmental changes are also tampering with the monsoon rains that are vital to agriculture in states like Orissa and Maharashtra where 2008 saw drought and scarcity, while other such dependant states saw reduced agricultural production.<sup>25</sup> Such scarcity has renewed inter-state battles over the rights to irrigation of shared rivers, especially between Himachal Pradesh and Punjab<sup>26</sup>, and between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. But the impact of water scarcity is not limited to interstate crises like Orissa and Maharashtra, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu<sup>27</sup> and Karnataka.

The result of a collision of all the aforementioned factors may already be taking

a toll on India's national and international security. In 2007 India stopped exports of rice to Bangladesh and started importing the product from Australia<sup>28</sup>, which some, including UK environmental journalist Fred Pearce, see as the result of shrinking water resources for groundwater and/or irrigation farming. This suggests that in the future, food-exporting India could turn into a major food importer triggering an international food scarcity crisis.<sup>29</sup> Attempts to avert this crisis by an only-too-aware India could result in the exacerbation of the conflicts between states and within cities<sup>30</sup>, weakening national cohesion when it would be most needed.

The partitions of the South Asian states upon secession of Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively left India with control of the source of Pakistan's Indus river and the Ganges and Brahmaputra, which provide upwards of 60% of the fresh water and almost all of the alluvial deposits of Bangladesh.<sup>31</sup> In the past, "India's control over the Ganges causes both floods and droughts in downstream Bangladesh"<sup>32</sup> and dried up the Indus (especially in Kashmir) to the point that it no longer reaches the ocean.<sup>33</sup> Often, the threat of loss of agriculture has led to tension with India by both nations.<sup>34</sup> Faced now with the prospect of losing its own agricultural basing and sparking intercontinental crises over food distribution (and possibly the realization of Malthus' worst fears of the planet's carrying capacity), India may choose to divert water from the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers for its own drinking and agricultural purposes. On the one side, the diversion of water from Bangladesh will lead to the depositing of more arsenic in the soils,<sup>35,36</sup> - meanwhile the melting of glacier will cause periodic flooding in the nation and the continuation of climate change will cause all of the Bangladeshi coast lying five meters of lower above sea level to sink below it,<sup>37</sup> leading (along with arsenic) to massive migrations to Assam regardless of the Brahmaputra diversion project and most likely sparking ethnic conflicts, which could result in national conflicts, in the border areas.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the diversion of water from Pakistan, directly allowed by treaty from six rivers in Kashmir<sup>39</sup> will prevent the construction of the Chenab

and Jhelum dams, which the Pakistani government is counting on to prevent a 20 million acre water shortage by 2020.<sup>40</sup> The already-water-strapped Pakistan has made it clear since 2002 that such a deprivation of water on a prolonged basis would compel outright and nuclear warfare with India<sup>41</sup> according to the testimony of the director of the Mumbai-based International Center for Peace Initiatives, Sundeep Waslekar. Even the Maldives faces a specter of submersion similar to that of Bangladesh.<sup>42</sup> The agitation between states and by agricultural sectors in India may ultimately push an unwilling India towards policies that would spark conflict, if not outright water wars, on one or more borders. The clarity of this threat of water wars has prompted several suggestions of alternative solutions to the India water crisis to avert war and maintain agricultural output.

In search of solutions, some regions in India have resorted to chemical degradation of their waters to avoid drought, such as the use of chemicals and polymers in reservoirs to prevent evaporation in Maharashtra.<sup>43</sup> However, this largely ignores possible negative side effects of the chemicals and the effects of decreased evaporation on the monsoon patterns. Likewise, the digging of deeper wells as has been suggested by the UN and advocated by international volunteer organizations, simply invites the use of contaminated waters found at deep levels (as in Gujarat or Bangladesh) and accelerates the depletion of the groundwater tables.<sup>44</sup> The government has also introduced plans for a \$200 billion, 10,000-kilometer canal project to unite multiple rivers using thirty large and medium canals while creating thirty-two dams.<sup>45</sup> The project aims to decrease the dependence on monsoon agriculture, seen to be less effective than irrigation agriculture, by dispersing the monsoon cycle and evening out water distribution to increase farmed lands. However, tampering with monsoon seasons is a dangerous business, especially when the current irrigation systems are so highly ineffective that the possible gains could be halved in only a few years' disrepair. Likewise, further dispersing the waters of major rivers would most likely affect Bangladesh and Pakistan adversely, leading to the threat of water wars. Beyond even that, the diversion

of waters could deplete the dissolving and cleansing powers of major rivers in urban centers and increase the concentrations of toxins, degrading the potability of the water for major urban centers. Overall, the project is a crapshoot at sustainable water by the spending of massive amounts of money during an economic recession when other solutions exist, less detrimental to the environment and to foreign relations, less expensive, and equally able to produce recession-style infrastructure jobs.

Two key policies would offer high-gains improvements. Restoring access to the 50% wasted canal waters would decrease agricultural pressure and better monitoring and filtering groundwaters (and stream waters) would avoid overexploitation and avoid and treat contamination. Most compelling are the arguments of S. Selvarajan of the National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research New Delhi, which boil down to the following: irrigation systems must be restored by government initiatives to a level of satisfaction defined by *users, not donors*. Meanwhile, management of the canals must be turned over more to local farmer organizations, and accounting should be streamlined to maximize the effectiveness of dollars spent and dollars available to irrigation repair and revision projects.<sup>46</sup> These organizations should then be empowered, along with irrigation departments, to collect equally and especially from bulk users an approved cess on water. Likewise, the monitoring of groundwater should be returned to those organizations most vested in their maintenance. This would allow locals to make final decisions on the exploitation of groundwater resources as well as ensure government funding for cleaning or expansion projects. The repair jobs would supplant employment lost to water shortages and recession economics and thus reduce the likelihood of conflicts over agricultural shortages (a keen concern in Orissa and Maharashtra). Likewise, monitoring stations would create more full-time jobs on a local level and increase connections between the central and local governments on ecological issues. True, India currently employs many monitoring stations along major rivers and large groundwater sources, but these stations

do not provide accurate information for the majority rural populations and often check mainly for fecal bacteria and other waste matter. Local monitoring would increase accuracy in records and allow the testing for chemicals, wastes and other toxins suspected to be present by the local population, yielding more reliable, accessible and reliable results that would in turn lead to more informed and sustainable choices for the development of water-intensive industries and agriculture. Finally, greater government regulation and centralization should be imposed on local municipal organizations to combat issue of the water mafia and inaccurate water zonings, such as in New Delhi and to better discourage the state from allowing rampant privatization and multi-national access in areas already under water stress.

There are those who would disparage such plans, claiming that granting teeth to government organizations and making the exploitation of water more bureaucratic and locally minded would hinder the GDP growth of 9% per year. In turn, one must recall the claims of Dr. Shreekanth Gupta, a professor at the Delhi School of Economics specializing in the environment, who notes that factoring in loss of life and jobs to the current economic-ecological policies of the government actually shaves off 4-4.5% of the GDP growth to create an actual net growth of merely 4.5-5%.<sup>47</sup> This figure is encouraging as

an incentive to increase regulation and local controls on government action – it is vital to ensure growth of the Indian economy, but in actuality the current economic policies fail to do so. The creation of a more technologically advanced monitoring system and the investment in the research of groundwater cleaning and replenishing technologies and tactics, as well as in better irrigation, sanitation and recycling technologies, would not only provide jobs to Indians, but would give India a niche in the international market, thrusting it forward possibly to an actual 9% growth rate in GDP while curbing the damage to water resources. This may not tackle issues of climate change and current overexploitation of groundwater, but as the Third World Center for Water Management's Prof. Asit K. Biswas says, such factors will not lead to water wars, at least not within the next century – only bad management would spark a conflict. Better management, though, is not only possible, but profitable and the money, technological advances, and time these steps would afford could aid in the struggle to stymie or even reverse overexploited waters and climate change. There is hope for the future, but this hope depends on the ability of ecologists in conjunction with economists to present an inclusive and convincing case to the Indian government to proceed with such plans and to do so quickly – to treat the wounds of the nation from within before they spread without.



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<sup>4</sup>According to reports by the India Resource Center and Corporate Accountability International.

<sup>5</sup>And all the worse, that far down the water begins to become contaminated by hard metals.

<sup>6</sup>Poisonings similar to the Coca-cola case continue as in the Patancheru debacle in which a pharmaceutical company directly dumped twenty-one drugs related to the treatment of hypertension, heart disease, chronic liver ailments, depression, gonorrhoea, ulcers and other ailments directly into the local stream (the major water source). Half of the drugs detected are present in their highest concentrations ever recorded in the environment. The story, released by Margie Mason, an Associated Press Medical Writer on January 25, 2009, is still unfolding as of this writing. The adverse effects of direct consumption of the water remains to be seen.

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# NEW FRONTS IN ANTI-SIKH HATE WARS

Abhijit Nagaraj

The escalation of hate crimes against Sikhs after the September 11 attacks merely opened up a new front in an animosity that had already become a fixture in modern Indian history, though usually for different reasons. After mass anti-Sikh rioting following Indira Gandhi's assassination, Rajiv Gandhi is notorious for saying, "Some riots took place in the country following the murder of Indiraji. We know the people were very angry and for a few days it seemed that India had been shaken. But, when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it does shake a little."<sup>1</sup> Before the mighty tree fell in the United States on 9/11, hate crimes against Sikhs were not necessarily uncommon, though they were far milder in degree. In 1993 three gunmen broke into a Sikh temple in Los Angeles and destroyed a security system, phone lines, and a

television set; the incident was not classified as a hate crime,<sup>2</sup> though it's hard to imagine the Sikh community ignoring the possibility of such a motive. In Toronto meanwhile, police reported a rising number of hate crimes; three Sikh students were beaten up after a high school dance, including one who had his turban ripped off.<sup>3</sup> In Surrey, a Vancouver suburb, four Canadian white supremacists were charged with second degree murder after beating Nirmal Singh to death outside a Sikh temple.<sup>4</sup> Such incidences at least indicate the transforming landscape and new targets of hate crimes in the West, and India in the 80s and 90s offered a model for what could happen in the West if a militant group's actions are taken to represent the attitudes of an entire people. In fact, the theme defines the post-9/11 anti-Sikh attitudes in the States.

The second September 11 attacks

(the first being a militant Sikh car bomb attack in India) came in this context, with Sikhs already defending themselves against association with militant terrorists in South Asia, and hardly free from hate crimes elsewhere. Within days of the attacks, more than three dozen attacks against Indians, mostly Sikhs, had been reported. The New York Sikh community launched a “\$100,000 campaign in the mainstream media to dispel the impression that they are bin Laden sympathisers.”<sup>5</sup> Two Sikhs were attacked near the Richmond Culture Center; two students were also attacked in Queensboro College. A Sikh temple in West Sacramento was targeted. In Arizona, an Indian immigrant, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was shot to death at his gas station<sup>6</sup>—the murder elicited a nation-wide response, and Sodhi would become a sensational symbol of hate crimes against Sikhs. The fact that nothing was stolen was evidence for a hate crime—that the owner was targeted for the way he looks, and specifically because of his turban. India meanwhile sought refuge for innocent Sikhs in the United States<sup>7</sup>, though India itself had neglected to do so in 1984. The U.S. response to the attacks was much stronger, and by September 17th it had set up a hotline to respond to verbal and physical assaults against Islam, Arab Americans and other minorities—just call 800-552-6843.<sup>8</sup> The next day George W. Bush issued a statement denouncing the hate crimes, a small but important move, though the FBI by this time was already being criticized for ethnic profiling.<sup>9</sup> The violence did not stop, even as the U.S. created a task force to protect Muslims and other minorities.<sup>10</sup> On September 19th a Sikh taxi cab driver was assaulted and called a “butcher terrorist”.<sup>11</sup> Indian Visa applications fell<sup>12</sup>; international students began to leave.<sup>13</sup> In California alone, 70 hate crimes were committed in the largest cities. “Many of the victims have been neither Muslim nor Arab, but Sikh—who have been targeted because of the way they dress.”<sup>14</sup>

Sikhs do not cut their hair, and wear their turbans partly to cover it. The turban, combined

*“The fact that nothing was stolen was evidence for a hate crime—that the owner was targeted for the way he looks, and specifically because of his turban.”*

with the beard and possibly an unfamiliar language with at least some lexical overlap with Arabic, seems to have prompted the attacks. In fact, Sikhism is no closer to Islam than is Christianity or Judaism, but to Sikhs after September 11 it seemed equally problematic to distance themselves from Muslims, as it would send the message that it is somehow wrong to be Muslim.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Sikhs mounted a powerful, web-based campaign against hate, including suggesting that Sikhs carry placards that read, “I am a Sikh—not a Muslim.”<sup>16</sup> Despite their efforts, by the beginning of October, more than 200 Sikh Americans had suffered violent harassment since 9/11, according to an association of Sikhs in San Francisco. On October 4, a 51-year old Sikh woman was stabbed twice in the head and nearly died.<sup>17</sup> On October 18, two Sikhs were chased with a baseball bat in Orange County.<sup>18</sup> And the next day,

Kali Singh was struck with a wood and metal cane at the SeaTac motel.<sup>19</sup> In response the Senate passed a resolution condemning violence against Sikhs, but the violence continued in the U.S. as well as internationally. Melbourne’s 20,000 Sikhs, for example, complained of the same prejudices and hate crimes as Sikhs in the United States.<sup>20</sup> In Britain, Blair’s lampooning against hate crimes mixed with legitimate anti-terrorist measures against some Sikh groups, including the International Sikh Youth Federation.<sup>21</sup> Sikh temples were set on fire by teenagers<sup>22</sup>, storeowners were beaten by thugs and called Osama bin Ladens,<sup>23</sup> and an American woman was jailed for shouting racial slurs at Sikhs and trying to pull a turban off.<sup>24</sup> She believed she had found Osama bin Laden and was sent to undergo mental health treatment.

In all fairness, the Bush administration responded within days to the hate crime emergency and were clear in their position; don’t harass people, help them. But as recently as December 2008, a Sikh family accused deputies of harassing them in their own home, asking if they had heard about the terrorist attacks in Bombay. One of them said he had

been to Kuwait and “knew about Muslims.”<sup>25</sup>

Sikhs have faced at least two fronts of hate war in the last thirty years, and a number of measures are necessary to prevent a new flood of hate crimes caused by a future terrorist attack, as well as to continue to prevent hate crimes due to the 1984 assassination, or 9/11, or even the recent Mumbai attacks, the ethnic repercussions of which are yet to pan out. Further legislation and policing is probably useless, as are leaflets, placards, books, and most print media, including this article, though discourse must begin somewhere. Sikhs wishing to expedite a culture of tolerance should focus efforts on maximum visual exposure—whether by movies, television, internet, or incorporation into school curricula, the latter possibly an objective for national and state governments. Sikhs must seize and

revise the definitions, paradigms, and stereotypes thrust upon them by a news media that has for years projected images of the typical “terrorist.” Americans need a strong, charismatic, Hollywood-ready model of the trustworthy Sikh-American. Movies like *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Monsoon Wedding* have taken powerful steps in depicting Sikh Americans as individuals who can embrace Western culture and enjoy familiar familial relationships and dilemmas, and are probably the right tools to tackle the problem most efficiently. While the notion that hate crimes can be abstracted as a moral wrong and addressed all at once seems too optimistic, a successful anti-bigotry campaign fueled by government dollars, like the one that opened opportunities for the current President and other racial minorities might work in ten or twenty years.



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# LTTE'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE SUBCONTINENT'S POLITICS

Rahul Doshi

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 changed the way the world viewed terrorism. The United States of America began to operate on a hair trigger and people all over became more wary of it in any form. "Terrorism" metamorphosized from a set of independent clashes and conflicts concentrated within regions into a global problem. These changes have transformed the nature of existing struggles against terrorism by involving and connecting far more people, parties and political agendas than ever before. More attention is being paid to terrorist clashes that were not given as much global attention before, such as the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, which hitherto took a backseat to the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir in the hierarchy of global press coverage. Increasingly, the politics of seemingly apolitical figures, such as popstars,

have become issues of great debate and discussion. While some would prefer to distance themselves from political controversy that could be detrimental to their careers, British-born Sri Lankan singer MIA has chosen to embrace her affiliation with the Lashkar Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE), a Sri Lankan militant terrorist organization. She makes her politics an integral part of her music and lyrics - so much so that MTV refused to run her music video 'Sunshowers', which featured lyrics suggestive of suicide bombings and a video showing guerilla tactics and the LTTE's bold tiger emblem. She even claims that the Sri Lankan Civil War is a genocide against Tamilians in the country, and in one interview went on to say, "You can't separate the world into two parts like that, good and evil. Terrorism is a method, but America has successfully tied all these pockets of independence struggles, revolutions, and extremists into one big notion of

terrorism.” Her opinions do not sit well with most people, who automatically assume she supports the actions of the LTTE, although others might argue that she is only promoting awareness and her opinion of the “real” situation of human-rights abuse in a less-known country like Sri-Lanka. Her father plays a major role in the LTTE, and although she referred to him ‘insane’ in one interview, his nickname, ‘Arular’, was chosen as the name of one of her albums.

The LTTE, or Lashkar Tamil Tigers Eelam was formed in 1976, and is a military organization that operates from the Northern part of Sri Lanka. It was formed with the purpose of fighting for a separate Tamil state within Sri Lanka, and initially operated along with other groups in the region that had similar demands. The Tamils are an ethnic group native to the South Asian island state of Sri Lanka who predominantly speak Tamil, a Dravidian language with its origin in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu.<sup>1</sup>

The LTTE began as a small militant outfit which carried out a series of small attacks in Sri Lanka, and attracted many of the younger Tamilians in Sri Lanka. This led to the creation of the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF), which is the main players were the LTTE and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO). However, the LTTE took a more violent and aggressive stance towards obtaining its demands, and this led to a separation of power within the ENLF. Also, the TELO was interested in working in accordance with Indian foreign policy interests and was accused of being overly sympathetic to Indian demands. This led to a split in the ENLF and ultimately the LTTE became a majority power, controlling most of the Jaffna Peninsula, while the other groups quickly ceded their power and territories to the LTTE.

The LTTE, bolstered by this internal victory, began to heighten the impact of its attacks on Sri Lanka. They began targeting civilian areas, high-profile members of the government and began to employ well-honed and gruesome tactics of guerilla warfare. They were the first to introduce suicide bombings, and to date remain the only terrorist outfit with access to aircraft. After a series of attacks by

these Tamilians against the Sinhalese people, riots broke out between the two factions. It eventually escalated to a civil war, and the Sri Lankan government, desperate to restore peace to the region, called on the aid of the Indian Government.

At first, the Indian government was reluctant to help, since it found itself in a very tricky situation. On one hand, it had to protect the Tamil people in Sri Lanka to avoid public outcry from the majority Tamil populace in the South of India, but at the same time, it had to ensure that its involvement did not incur the wrath of the LTTE upon India. Eventually, the Indian government offered a meeting point to Sri Lanka, in the hope that the government could come to terms with the LTTE through talks and negotiation. At this time, Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister of India, and she was known as a rather shrewd lady. Hence, although she succeeded in bringing the two parties to a negotiation table, the Sri Lankan government was still suspicious and wary of India’s standpoint, claiming that they were worried about an Indian invasion. They even went on to state that they did not want India to play any role in settling the dispute, although it was they who had initially approached India for help. Even the Sri Lankan media bashed the Indian government, though no effort was made by the Sri Lankan government to refuse any help given to them. They simply stated that if they felt threatened by India, they would approach the USA or Great Britain for military aid.

All along, the politics in Tamil Nadu, India were putting pressure on Mrs. Gandhi’s government to sympathize with the LTTE and the racism against the Tamils by the majority ethnic group - the Sinhalese - in Sri Lanka. They tried to force the government into shedding its nonpartisan role in the conflict, which was only kept in check by the fact that India at the time was opposed to any foreign involvement in the crisis which would result in ethnic fallout. India strongly considered its own security, in this case especially that of the Southern parts of Tamil Nadu, which would be the first to come under threat if the situation worsened.

This is why India became more concerned

with the actions of the Sri Lankan government when negotiations and peace talks failed. The Sri Lankans refused to grant the LTTE its Tamil state on the basis that it would set a dangerous precedent for other communities to revolt, and the LTTE refused to settle for anything less than its original demand. After a series of these talks, all of which failed, Sri Lanka began to seek military aid from external countries. India condemned these actions, greatly discouraging foreign nations from supplying the ill-equipped Sri Lankan army with any aid. It was here that Pakistan, gave its full support to Sri Lanka, with a steady stream of arms, equipment and training. This only resulted in more of a polarization in the Indian subcontinent itself, something that Mrs. Gandhi had feared from the very beginning.

As India's worst fears came to be realized, Mrs.

Gandhi was assassinated and her son, Rajiv Gandhi took over the government. Preferring a more diplomatic approach, he quickly negotiated with the two parties of the conflict to end the war and revisit the notion of agreeing peacefully to a bilateral settlement. A ceasefire was called and once again, the two parties became engaged in peace

*They were the first to employ suicide bombings as a means of spreading terror on a large and vicious scale, something that the Hamas later adopted.*

talks. This time the Sri Lankan government took a less hard-lined approach to the situation, the terms of which involved India and Sri Lanka entering into a peace agreement. They understood that the nature of the conflict was between the Tamil and Sinhalese people, and agreed to give the Tamilian revolutionaries leadership of the area's council, provided they lay down their weapons. Most of the Tamil Revolutionary Groups accepted this offer, but the LTTE, not being bound by the peace accord, did not on the grounds that the representative for minister to the region was one they believed to be working against their core interests.

As a direct result of this failure, and the subsequent assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE in India, the Indian intervened military for the first time in the conflict. It began with

the air dropping of relief supplies in LTTE-controlled areas in order to support the innocent Tamilians trapped in those areas. This was also, to some degree, aimed at appeasing the Tamils in South India at a time when India was targeting the LTTE Tamilians. At the same time, the Indian Military launched an all-out offensive in the Jaffna Peninsula to take back the region and then hand it over to Sri Lankan government. This attack made the Indian Army and government even more unpopular in the eyes of the Tamils, both in Sri Lanka and in India.

This caused another spate of attacks on Sri Lankans by the LTTE, which were even more ruthless in nature, and the situation began to plunge further out of control. With the civil strife continuing unabated, and the LTTE also being battered by both the might of the Indian Army and the Sri Lankan one, the parties,

in a final desperate bid to end the war, again came back to the negotiation table. Not surprisingly, once again, the talks led nowhere. The conflict continued until finally, the Sri Lankans began engaged in a battle towards the end and finally ended the reign of the LTTE in the last few months of 2008.

The LTTE engaged in brutal methods to spread their message of violence. They were the first to employ suicide bombings as a means of spreading terror on a large and vicious scale, something that the Hamas later adopted. They also remain the only terrorist outfit to date with access to planes and possess the ability to strike out water targets using well-equipped boats. In fact, they even had the means to infiltrate Sri Lankan army installations and siphon off equipment, something that became very apparent when they nearly succeeded in hijacking Sri Lankan fighter aircraft from one of their outlying air bases. This in itself made them more dangerous than any other major terror organization or network that currently exists, had they chosen to broaden their objectives.

It's clear that they could have caused a mas-

sive pocket of instability in the southern region of the Indian peninsula by creating a very volatile situation between India and Sri Lanka. It would not have taken much, just a few attacks on Indian soil launched from their base of operation in the Jaffna peninsula, using their jerry-rigged bombers from old and unused or stolen cargo and passenger airplanes. Already they were targeting Indian fishing boats, and the government was under pressure from these harassed fishermen to act decisively. Anything as direct an attack of a nature as described above would have been the last straw, and the Indian army would be forced to go into Sri Lanka, with or without consent from the Sri Lankan government. While this may have been heralded by most as the end of the LTTE, who would then collectively breathe a sigh of relief; it would have set up a dangerous precedent, and may have even been construed as an act of war, which would not be a happy situation for Sri Lanka because they would be forced to react, knowing full well that they'd be slaughtered and over-run by the sheer number of the Indian army. It would have condemned India on the geopolitical front, and India would no longer be seen as a protector of peace and the reason for stability in the subcontinent.

In retrospect therefore, the Sri Lankan gov-

ernment's insistence on approaching the world community for help in dealing with the problem prevented the conflict from escalating to such catastrophic heights. Instead of allowing Sri Lanka to procure outside help, India tried to monopolize the job of protecting the peninsula by doing everything it could to dissuade the international community from providing aid. This only served to prolong the conflict and strengthen the LTTE, and led to tragic consequences, such as the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the very same LTTE that the Indian government refused to help or allow other to help eradicate.. However, the tragedy proved to be a turning point in the conflict, as it led to the India's military intervention and supplementation of the weak and rather inexperienced Sri Lankan Army. It catalysed the launch of a major offensive by the army and eventually led to the weakening of the LTTE. India's self-appointed position as "Security Manager of South Asia" can and has proved problematic, and it is up to the current and future governments to learn from past mistakes and carry the subcontinent into a new era of multilateral and global cooperation. Terrorism is no longer localized and confined in its scope – it is a global struggle, which requires multilateral and international solutions.



#### Note:

<sup>1</sup>Anthropological evidence suggests that the Sri Lankan Tamils have lived on the island since the 2nd century BCE. Most modern Sri Lankan Tamils descend from the Jaffna Kingdom, a former kingdom in the north of the island and Vannimai chieftaincies from the east. They constitute a majority in the Northern Province, live in significant numbers in the Eastern Province, and are in the minority throughout the rest of the country.

Sri Lankan Tamils are culturally and linguistically distinct from the other two Tamil-speaking minorities in Sri Lanka, the Indian Tamils and the Moors. Genetic studies indicate that they are closely related to the majority Sinhalese people. Since Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948, relations between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil communities have been strained. Rising ethnic and political tensions, along with ethnic riots and pogroms in 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983, led to the formation and strengthening of militant groups advocating independence for Tamils.

# RELIGION AND RELIEF

Embry Owen

**T**he Indian city of Thane, Maharashtra is often overshadowed by its neighbor Mumbai. The “New York of India,” Mumbai is home to twenty million individuals from a wide array of socioeconomic classes, all of whom are confronting the challenges of a society at the crossroads of East and West. To say that its neighbor Thane is unimportant, however, would be a grave error. It is facing many of the same problems as Mumbai and India as a whole: abject poverty, HIV/AIDS and a lack of social justice. In an effort to confront the growing effects of HIV/AIDS, two extraordinarily different humanitarian organizations have begun work in Thane: “Apne Aap”, which works with women and children in brothels to combat HIV and other issues surrounding prostitution, and Jeevan Sahara Kendra, which provides medical assistance and psychological counseling to In-

dians diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. On face value, it is difficult to see the difference between these two organizations. The critical separation is that Apne Aap is a secular NGO, while Jeevan Sahara Kendra is a proselytizing Christian organization. In Thane’s destitute communities, a secular humanitarian organization is more effective in combating poverty-related issues than a Christian, proselytizing organization.

While different non-governmental organizations are set-up to meet separate needs, basic comparative criteria to evaluate and measure success can be expressed. For one, an organization and its members must work with an open mind. Every NGO has specific values and priorities, but success can only occur when the priorities of the NGO match the needs of the community. Moreover, aid work must focus on the needs of an entire person or community, not just one element.

Organizations need to work for all-around wellness of their constituents, which includes physical, mental, psychological and emotional health. Finally, NGOs must be able to present tangible results. If there are no personal cases of freedom from poverty, improved health and better quality of life, then the organization is clearly struggling for success.

The situation in Thane must also be evaluated before aid work can be deemed “effective.” The community, as mentioned before, is growing in population. As Mumbai has expanded and economically developed, many Indians have decided to relocate outside the city for affordable housing and better living conditions. As a result of these changes, Thane is facing severe social issues. Prostitution has become an increasingly prominent issue. Though it is technically illegal in India, many women are forced to resort to selling their bodies in order to survive. Large-scale brothels are present in Thane, where women live and work long shifts with their children underfoot. HIV is also a pressing issue throughout Maharashtra and India as a whole. Maharashtra, with around 747,000 reported cases of HIV/AIDS, is second only to the state of Tamil Nadu in the number of HIV infections in India. However, this figure is undoubtedly a low estimate. In a nation where the stigma associated with HIV is extreme, many Indians may be uncomfortable reporting their positive status and many more have not been tested for the disease.

Apne Aap is working to combat some of these issues. Indian reporter Ruchira Gupta was first exposed to the issue of human trafficking when she visited Nepal on an assignment in 1994. She suddenly came to find that the absence of young women in impoverished communities was due to the fact that they had been sold into the sex trade and shipped to Mumbai. Upon this realization, Gupta worked for forty days in brothels in Mumbai and the surrounding area, interviewing women caught in prostitution for the creation of a documentary on the subject. Though she had encountered many compelling stories before, this was the issue that caused Gupta to put aside her work and create Apne Aap with the prostitutes. “I just couldn’t move on,” the reporter recounts. “I had never seen this kind

of exploitation—this level of human degradation.”

“Apne Aap” literally means “on our own” or “self-help” in Hindi, illustrating the spirit of the organization. Its work is multifaceted, and the group operates in five Indian cities. In Thane, Gupta established the Bhiwandi Community Center, which reaches more than sixty prostitutes and nearly fifty children. The center takes a holistic approach to attacking poverty and prostitution. It offers a safe, neutral place for these women and children, allowing them to share their experiences and support one another. All of the women and children are considered members of the center, giving them a sense of ownership, pride and responsibility. “This goes a long way toward just restoring dignity in their lives,” Gupta says. Apne Aap also utilizes music and art therapy to help women and children cope with the trauma of prostitution.

The organization offers a wide variety of vocational and literacy classes for women in order to empower them through education and offer them work outside the brothel. Bhiwandi Center volunteers also teach classes to the children of prostitutes, who would otherwise never receive an education. Moreover, each Bhiwandi member receives access to basic medical assistance, including free weekly checkups. Finally, Apne Aap lobbies the government to impose stricter standards of conduct, such as mandatory condom use, on male customers.

“We are a group of God’s workers,” reads Jeevan Sahara Kendra’s webpage. The organization, affiliated with the conservative Christian charity Samaritan’s Purse, was started in 2002 by Dr. Steven Alfred, an Indian who spent considerable time living and working in the West. Upon returning to India to start Lok Hospital, another project in Thane working to help Indians faced with medical crises, Alfred was “shocked by the overwhelming scope of the HIV/AIDS problem”. Thus, he started Jeevan Sahara Kendra, an HIV/AIDS care project in Thane. The organization offers medical assistance to forty Indians who are HIV positive. Social workers focus on counseling and practical medical care. Therapy is offered to individuals who are known to be HIV positive,

or thought to be so. Medical treatment in the home occurs by a single social worker, though a network of church volunteers is being created to help. Prescriptive medicines are administered to mitigate illnesses caused by the HIV virus. In addition, there are some outpatient services, as well as training for family caregivers. However, the focus is clearly on Christ; one former patient says: "I thank God that I have HIV/AIDS. If it weren't for coming here and being told about the Gospel, I wouldn't have known Jesus Christ."

The issue of proselytizing in aid work is one that is being debated and addressed around the world. Christian aid organizations evangelize to varying degrees in their work overseas. The main problem with this kind of aid work is when accepting Christian doctrine becomes a precondition to receiving aid. This was an issue in the devastating South Asian tsunami in December 2004. Christianity Today commented on the situation, writing, "We all know there is a time to speak and a time to be silent. Amid such a profound calamity, sometimes the best witness is a shoulder to cry on and not a sermon." Christian aid workers walk the fine line between keeping their faith quiet and going overboard, focusing on religion more than relief.

Neither Apne Aap nor Jeevan Sahara Kendra is wholly superior. Both lack funds, which makes success difficult to achieve. Apne Aap has taken on such multifaceted work in Thane that one must speculate if any organization can succeed in these circumstances. That being said, Apne Aap is truly innovative because it partners with prostitutes and their children instead of handing them aid. It seeks to mitigate the current manifestations of poverty by providing health care and counseling, while stopping the cycle of destitution through education and activism. Jeevan Sahara Kendra, on the other hand, clearly has a conflict of interest because it is a Christian organization in a predominantly Hindu nation. Their work in combating HIV is minimal in terms of the number of people they reach

and what they accomplish. The organization would have a larger impact if it performed more widespread work. Also, the group does not offer HIV/AIDS or sex education to local teens and adults, which may be because of its conservative nature. Such education is vital to preventing the pandemic from affecting future generations. However, Jeevan Sahara Kendra's aid is important when considering the fact that India is one of the three next "frontiers" for fighting HIV. The nation needs as much humanitarian aid as possible to prevent HIV from spreading, especially because India now has the highest number of infections in the world.

Apne Aap also has a significant advantage over Jeevan Sahara Kendra because it is a partnership with poor individuals. As stated before,

*"I thank God that I have HIV/AIDS. If it weren't for coming here and being told about the Gospel, I wouldn't have known Jesus Christ."*

Ruchira Gupta founded the organization with the prostitutes, instead of coming in with ideas of "saving" them or eradicating their poverty single-handedly. As she puts it, "[Apne Aap was founded] because some of the women that I worked with while making the film pushed me into starting it. They said, 'You will come

make the film, and go away. How will our lives change?' I told them, 'Your lives will only change if you want to, I can't do anything.' So they said, 'But we can't do it right, we don't know anybody.' So I said, 'Well, I can be a facilitator, but you have to organize.'" Aid work is not successful unless it is focused on local individuals helping each other. In addition, this model is successful because it focuses on the needs of the slum residents in question, instead of Western ideals. Jeevan Sahara Kendra, while founded by an Indian, was created with American, "fix-it" goals in mind, not to mention a heavy emphasis on preaching the Gospel. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for impoverished Indians to be heavily involved in their own relief if the organization in question is focused solely on Western ideals.

Bringing religion into a humanitarian aid situation can jeopardize true relief work. Theoretically, a "slippery slope" effect could occur,

in which the organization starts as one that performs poverty relief with an evangelical mission, and eventually deteriorates into one that solely proselytizes, concerned only for the number of souls that are “saved.” The impoverished of the third world need shelter, food and justice. The message of Christ cannot fill bellies or extend civil rights. Some may consider the Gospel important, but it does no good if poor individuals still have physical and emotional needs. It is easy for Christian NGOs to get “hung up” on the message of Christ, instead of that of relief. States Dr. Steven Alfred, “The church is the only institution fully equipped to deal with the crisis [of HIV].” This skewed, one-sided perspective runs rampant in evangelical organizations. With this outlook, the issue of poverty can never be solved. The priority must be physical and emotional relief, not the number of converts won.

Ultimately, a holistic approach is best for combating poverty, whether it is in the red-light district of Thane or in the third world at

large. By no means is every secular organization better than every Christian, evangelizing organization. However, many nonreligious NGOs are less biased because they have no proselytizing agenda, allowing them to focus solely on poverty relief and not on winning converts. They are often able to enter situations and immerse themselves into communities from which many Christian NGOs would shy away from. While secular humanitarian organizations have strong standards, they do not have the moral responsibility of living up to the Bible, allowing them to take more risks and use innovative techniques without being criticized by donors or the media. The high religious standards that evangelical organizations have can hinder their work. Clearly, the organization that has succeeded more is Apne Aap, and the results are tangible. Ruchira Gupta simply states, “The warmth I get from the girls is so overwhelming [and] so inspiring.”



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# LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Mathangi Subramanian

**O**n February 15, 2009, my friend and colleague Pooja Makhijani and I organized an event called Love and Marriage at Bluestockings bookstore on the Lower East Side. It was a reading featuring five New York authors who are vocal supporters of gay marriage. The proceeds from the reading went to the National Council for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), which is one of the lead counsels on the case to challenge Proposition 8 in the California Supreme Court. We had timed the event to coincide with Valentine's Day, but it turned out to be opportune for another reason: NCLR began arguing the case on March 5, a few weeks after our event.

It was the first time that I had ever organized a fundraiser, and I was nervous. I weathered the expected anxiety associated with choosing an organization to donate to, finding a venue, cold-calling authors, and arranging for publicity, all of which

seemed to magically fall into place with the help of friends and complete strangers who supported the cause. For me, though, the most difficult part of organizing a fundraiser for gay marriage was finding my place as a straight, South Asian American woman in a fight that, in my understanding, was mostly queer, and mostly White.

Truthfully, until recently, I did not feel invested in the struggle for gay marriage. Like many of my fellow single, Indian American women in their late 20s, I have spent much of the last decade of my life convincing the more traditional members of my family that I have a right not to marry. For me, marriage has always been something to escape, rather than pursue. Although I respected the movement for gay marriage, I respected it from afar: I wished gay marriage activists well, but the battle was theirs, not mine.

In fact, when I began planning the event, I did so mostly out of guilt,

rather than conviction or feelings of solidarity. The idea for the fundraiser came to me when I was sitting in my office the day after the presidential election, studying the map on the friend page that had the states color-coded according to their electoral outcome. I felt a personal triumph for two of the blue states in particular: Pennsylvania, where I had knocked on doors and tried to persuade undecided voters to go democrat, and Florida, where I had sent post cards written in the Harlem Obama election office telling voters about former students of mine I had lost in Iraq and urging them to vote for the candidate who had promised to end the war. Obama's triumph felt like my triumph, and, for the first time in my adult life, I felt euphoric about the outcome of a presidential election.

Tucked into the corner of the front page, though, was another article. Clicking on the headline, I discovered the Proposition 8 had passed in California. I was overcome with guilt. I had so been so busy working for Obama that I had completely forgotten about perhaps the most important civil rights moment in my personal history: the campaign against Proposition 8. This law, which would affect many of my dear friends, would technically not affect me. Because I did not feel it was a part of my life, I had forgotten about it. The consequences of this omission stared me in the face that morning, ruining my transient feeling of victory.

To compound this guilt, I was in the middle of revising the literature review in my dissertation, which is about South Asian Americans in the diaspora. Just the night before, I had dashed off a few angry paragraphs about the South Asian American community's – my community's – dismal history in the gay rights movement. I had been writing about the history of the India Day Parade in New York, and how for almost a decade, the organizations that ran the parade had banned SALGA, the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Alliance, from marching: they have only been allowed to join for the past few years. As of this writing, the Pakistan Day parade still does not allow the organization in the parade. According to the literature I was reading, these decisions are rooted in the South Asian American commu-

nity's desire to preserve its image as a model minority. Having queers in our community, this vein of argument goes, is a problem, and something to cover up rather than celebrate. Knowing this, and seeing the outcome of the election in California, I felt that I had to do something to compensate for what I saw as my community's absence from the national debate. (I should add that it is possible that there are South Asian Americans who are visible in the struggle for gay rights, but that I not only do not know about them, but also feel that the homophobic views of powerful South Asian American politicians like Bobby Jindal unfortunately overshadow whatever vocal South Asian American minority does openly support gay rights.)

Guilt, however, is no reason to join a movement. Although I threw myself into preparing for the event, I still felt disconnected from the struggle, as though I were an awkward outsider trying not to say or do the wrong thing. I treaded carefully and constantly asked for the opinions of my queer friends, afraid that I would inadvertently become the condescending liberal swooping in to save the helpless, marginalized minority. After years of fielding questions from well meaning philanthropists who, at dinner parties and professional events, shook their heads sadly about the plight of "the poor, starving brown children in India", becoming the straight version of these charitable, but irritating, people was my worst nightmare. If I wanted to do this right, I reasoned, I needed a hook. I needed a reason why this event was relevant to me, and my life, other than the fact that I had a few friends whose wedding I could someday be able to attend.

Then, as I continued to write my literature review for my dissertation, I found it. Authors tend to begin the history of activism in the South Asian American community, my community, with a description of the Supreme Court case *United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind*. In 1923, Thind was suing the Supreme Court to label him as White. Thind's was one of what became known as the "racial prerequisite cases" in which "experts" were brought to court to testify about who counted as "White".

There were many reasons why Thind may have sought a change in his racial status. He may have wanted the right to own the land that he had farmed for years. He may have wanted the right to vote and otherwise participate in government. He may have wanted the right to send for his brothers in India, who were not allowed to immigrate because of the color of their skin. Thind, however, presented an entirely different reason for his case: Thind was suing for the right to marry a White woman. Essentially, the South Asian American civil rights struggle began with a man who wanted the right to love who wanted to love, and to do so publicly and freely in his new nation. Although the Supreme Court ruled against Thind that day, decades later, I am allowed to marry whomever I want, or to choose not marry anyone. The point is that now I have a choice. My struggle, and my community's struggle, began with the same struggle that the queer community is engaged in today.

Reading about my own history, and engaging in activism in my own community, I began to see the commonalities between groups that I used to see as entirely separate. This became

particularly clear when I began volunteering for the Obama campaign: my fellow volunteers represented a variety of marginalized groups, all working towards the election of a man who, they felt, would somehow advance their cause. During the Obama campaign, we came together to be part of the same struggle. Perhaps this election is what it took to make us realize that we have always been a part of the same struggle, that our causes are all different versions of the same cause, that we are all fighting for the right to be ourselves, to love who we choose, and to take care of our families the best that we can.

Whether we identify as straight or queer, single or married, male or female, black or white or brown, the fact is that we all want the same things: to live, and love, with dignity and freedom. In 2008, we tasted the victory of remembering this, and the defeat of forgetting. Now, the key is to maintain the momentum and the solidarity, to learn from our mistakes, and to remember that our desires, our bodies, our lives, and our histories are linked, and that all of us are responsible for each other, no matter where we came from, or where we are going.





# BOLLYWOOD AND THE VILLAGE

The Purpose and Perils of Idealizing the Indian Village

Parinitha Sastry

**T**he word “Bollywood” conjures images of beautiful fields, natural splendor, richly decorated bungalows, eccentric costumes, and stunningly beautiful women. Bollywood is the informal term used for India’s Hindi film industry. “Barso Re,” a song in the Bollywood movie *Guru*, features past Miss World winner Aishwarya Rai as a simple peasant girl; in her plain, red sari, Aishwarya dances through the village, passing goat-herders, jumping in rice paddy fields, and spinning in circles outside a temple. Even the lush green plants and clear blue waterfalls that fill the landscape seem to reflect the perfection and simplicity of the village world.

While many Bollywood music videos portray a similar image, usually the theme is reflected by either the plot of the video, or the lyrics. How-

ever, the directors of “Barso Re” create this idealized village world on many levels by manipulating the lyrics, the song, and the video’s aesthetics. For example, Aishwarya sings of the farmer sowing wheat, the bells chiming around the oxen’s neck, and the fields being watered. The water motif, created by the rainy setting and the repeated allusions to rain and water in the song, emphasizes the village’s purity. The repetition of the water motif in “Barso Re” reflects how film can be used to shape the viewer’s perception of the village. Film does more than display an unbiased view of a scene, but rather re-packages scenes into an experience for the senses. There is someone behind the camera, manipulating what the viewer sees and doesn’t see.

“Barso Re” draws the viewer’s attention to certain ideas while deliberately omitting others. Even a superficial analysis of “Barso Re”

reveals the discrepancy between the image portrayed by this aesthetically pleasing music video and the reality of village life. This video blissfully omits any form of caste repression, lack of healthcare, lack of education, unfair land distribution, intricate tenancy systems, and gender inequality, among many other social issues. The viewer is tempted to forget all the vices, limitations, and problems of the village because they are infatuated by the natural splendor before them. In fact, when I watched the video, I could not help but become jealous of Aishwarya Rai: her character seemed to have no responsibilities or pressures, and she had ample time to rejoice in her child-like activity, running, spinning, dancing, swinging, and singing.

In reality, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru described "the village" as stagnant, unchanging, and fundamentally backwards, adjectives that are inconsistent with the image portrayed by "Barso Re" (Bose and Jalal 115). With only this music video to go by, many would be thoroughly misled about what life in the Indian village is really like. Many lack direct contact with the village and are only exposed to village life through Bollywood. This lack of knowledge about the village stems from the huge demographic differences within India, and the various religious, ethnic, language and cultural barriers. Moreover, no one category can be separated from another; these categories all overlap in complex and intricate ways. For instance, Indian anthropologists Sunita Bose, Bandana Purkayastha, and Manisha Desai mention in their essay "The Study of Gender in India" how women cannot be analyzed independently of "the interaction of class, gender, caste, religious, and regional specificities" (Purkayastha 505). Talking about "women" as a whole category becomes virtually meaningless, since a woman in South India may lead a different life from a North Indian woman. Very rarely do the experiences of various groups overlap. The hugeness of the sub-continent and the heterogeneity of the population lead to an element of intra-Indian ignorance. People become unaware and

*"Civilization is such a disease, and we have to be very wary"*

*- M K Gandhi*

ignorant of the plights and obstacles of other groups since they rarely make direct contact with these other groups.

Thus, the average city dweller may believe what "Barso Re" tells them about the village, since he has very minimal information. Psychologists Brewer and Steenbergen conducted a psychological study which explores how the average American forms his/her views on foreign policy. They found that "in the face of incomplete information and constrained cognitive resources, people must often rely on their generalized level of trust when processing information and making inferences" (Brewer and Steenbergen 42). In the context of their specific study, this means that American citizens tended to supplement their lack of knowledge about foreign affairs with their views on human nature. In broader terms, their conclusions explain how people feel the need to fill in gaps in information with whatever they can, including preconceived notions and generalizations.

Scholar Jack G. Shaheen in his essay "Media Coverage of the Middle East: Perception and Foreign Policy" makes a similar statement about the entertainment industry. He extends the Brewer and Steenbergen findings to show how the entertainment industry becomes one of these gap-filling mechanisms that people employ. He argues that the lack of direct contact between Americans and Arabs forces Americans to base their opinions on easily accessible information, which ends up being images portrayed by the entertainment industry. Sontag too notes a comparable phenomenon, writing, "the understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images" (Sontag 87). These observations suggest that Bollywood movies transform from being mere works of fiction to documentary sources that allow viewers to "fill-in gaps" in their information about fellow Indians.

Just as "Barso Re" gives non-villagers a glimpse into an idealized village world, "Crazy



*Bollywood is a 2.3 billion dollar industry affecting daily life of ordinary Indians - seen here is the artwork of Superstar Amitabh Bhachchan on the mudflap of an auto rickshaw in Ahmedabad, India*

Kiya Re,” a music video in Bollywood movie *Dhoom 2*, represents a vantage point to view the West. The song’s scene is set in a western-style club, with green lights and hi-tech machines everywhere. About 7 seconds into the song, we see a giant motorcycle in the center of the room. Everyone in the video is wearing Western clothing, and a large part of the song is in English. In fact, many of the dancers are wearing black leather, a fabric that is shunned by Hinduism because it requires the slaughter of cows. The dance movements too are highly robotic, and the video features a wide variety of races (as opposed to the usual homogeneously Indian back-up dancers). These clues allow us to infer that “Crazy Kiya Re”, indeed, refers to the West.

The images in “Barso Re” stand in stark contrast to those in “Crazy Kiya Re.” “Crazy Kiya Re” lacks any of the natural beauty that was portrayed in “Barso Re.” The combination of the techno nature of the song, the setting, and the hi-tech machines present in the video abstractly represent the West’s technology and industrialization. Furthermore, both videos feature the same actress, Aishwarya Rai, in radically different roles. In “Crazy Kiya Re” she becomes a sex symbol, wearing a

short jean skirt and a skimpy crop-top, far different from the “Barso Re” Aishwarya who wore a fully covering sari and a bindi. While Aishwarya manipulated her hands in “Barso Re” in a way that was reminiscent of the Indian classical dance tradition of Bharatnatyam, we see no such emulations in “Crazy Kiya Re.” Rather, we see Aishwarya slapping her thighs and shimmying rather crudely. The opening lines of the songs are “she’s sexy,” and “sexy lady on the floor”; also, in the middle of the song, we hear a random “feel the rhythm of the night,” all in English. Filled with various allusions to lust and infatuation, “Crazy Kiya Re” highlights how the West is associated with moral degeneration and sexual promiscuity, in addition to technological advancement and industrialization.

The simplicity and purity of “Barso Re” is meant to contradict the industrial, technological, and “morally degenerate” images in “Crazy Kiya Re.” This highlights the idea that India’s national identity is contingent upon opposing Western influence. Before discussing this point, I need to contextualize the notion of what it means to be “Indian.” Before British imperialism, the concept of “Indian” did not exist because India was not a unified nation, but a land divided into different regions ruled by different kings. While there were many conquerors in India, and the borders between kingdoms were constantly contested, the entire subcontinent never fell under the rule of one leader (Bose and Jalal 9). Consequently, in pre-imperialism times, people did not define themselves as “Indian.” Even after the British united various regions under their leadership, the governed people did not necessarily feel a natural alliance with one another. Leader Mahatma Gandhi knew that Indian Independence could only be achieved by uniting the diverse Indian population, and it was during this time that the notion of a “national identity” emerged.

Leading the nationalist movement, Gandhi employed strategic rhetoric concerning the relationship between India and the West to define what it meant to be “Indian.” For example, he wrote in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi’s controversial book that discusses his life and philosophy, “civilization is such a disease, and we have to be very wary” (*Hind Swaraj* 47).

Gandhi uses the word “civilization” to refer to the civilization produced by the industrial revolution that characterizes the West (Hind Swaraj 35). Meanwhile, the word “we” refers to the various groups in India who would call themselves “Indian.” He suggests that the sanctity of “we” relies on resisting “civilization.” In other words, Gandhi believes that Indians, in order to remain “Indian,” must resist the influence of industrialization and the West. Gandhi repeats this idea by contrasting India’s cottage industry with Western industrialization. He describes how already, the Indian “cottage industry, so vital for India’s existence, has been ruined by incredibly heartless and inhuman processes” of the West (Young India, 167). Gandhi postulated that Indians must do all they can to preserve the Indian cottage industry, a mechanism which he believes is fundamentally Indian, from the infiltration of Western industrialization. What we end up seeing is that Gandhi places the burden of upholding an Indian identity on the idealized “Indian Village.” For Gandhi, the village came to symbolize all that was not British or Western, an idea that was uniquely Indian, an ideal that various groups in India could embrace.

Gandhi’s rhetoric for saving the “village” did not stop here. To create more animosity against the British, he also scorned factories, hospitals, and railroads; factories destroy India’s cottage industry, and hospitals destroy traditional Indian ayurvedic medicine. As for railroads, Gandhi writes, “it is beyond dispute that they propagate evil” (Hind Swaraj 48). Railroads represent the epitome of Western power and industrialization; he later goes on to justify that claim by citing how railroads cause famine, divide up the country, and destroy tradition. “Barso Re” reflects Gandhi’s opinions about the corrupting, British railroads. At the end of “Barso Re”, we see a frightened and confused Aishwarya Rai sitting on a bench at a train station at night, while a massive train roars toward her. Her facial expression has completely changed from when she was dancing in the village, no longer simple delight but fright and confusion. The sun that shined over the village has now set, with the night air making the train station even gloomier and eerier. In effect, “Barso Re” reinforces the Gandhian contrast of defining

“Indian” as essentially all that is not “Western.” If Indians really resisted all that is “Western,” then how could the same Indian industry produce both “Barso Re” and “Crazy Kiya Re”? One possible answer is that “Barso Re” highlights India’s desire to preserve what they consider traditionally Indian, whereas “Crazy Kiya Re” represents India’s view of the morally degenerate West. While “Barso Re” allows Indians to assert some sort of moral purity, “Crazy Kiya Re” shows that India can match the West’s economic development while simultaneously criticizing the West. By producing movies like “Barso Re” and “Crazy Kiya Re,” Bollywood asserts that India can have the best of both worlds.

Whether or not this is true, such glorified misrepresentations present extremely biased views of the villagers and the West. More specifically, the moral degenerateness of the West is based on Western stereotypes, and the idealization of the village omits extremely crucial aspects of reality. Although each photograph is an interpretation of the scene it depicts, and thus all photography is biased and unobjective, there is a relevant question of magnitude. Staging a family picture where I ask everyone to smile, even if not everyone is extremely happy at that very moment, is not nearly as biased as overlooking enormous amounts of suffering to portray a perfect and pure village. While both bias the viewer into believing an interpretation that is not necessarily true, videos like “Barso Re” are outright lies: false impressions made with a deliberate intent to deceive, intentional untruths. One technique I already mentioned was how “Barso Re” created this perfect world by omitting certain harsh realities. “Barso Re” actually promotes untruths in more direct ways. For one, a village girl often gets married once she hits puberty (at around twelve), whereas Aishwarya Rai seems to be single and unwed in her mid-twenties (Sarkar 192). Furthermore, the rice paddy fields in the video are lush, green, and fertile; in reality, India’s rural farmers suffer from enormous poverty, drought, and infertile land. In fact, more than twenty-five thousand farmers have committed suicide under these harsh circumstances since 1997 (“Seeds of Suicide”).

That Indians believe “the village” is the pin-

nacle of “Indianness” is a huge problem—when one reads autobiographies which show the cruelties that women had to suffer, the rising problem of India’s agrarian sector, the extraordinary exploitation of low-caste workers, and the prevalence of child marriage, Bollywood’s exaggerated images change from mere idealization to extraordinarily perverse untruths. Here, many (including myself) would try to assert that Bollywood should become more truthful than it is to give a more accurate impression of what life in the village is really like. We would logically assume that Bollywood movies should promote more realism to combat ignorance, since they become documentary sources for those who have never been to the village. Truthful portrayals could expose the horrors of village life to people who are largely ignorant and could result in a movement for progressive change that enhances rights and justice for those in the village. Just as the “Vietnam War was mobilized by images,” according to Sontag, maybe progressive reform can be mobilized by Bollywood (Sontag 97).

Ascribing a “social consciousness” to Bollywood, compelling as it may be, is not necessarily fruitful. Doing so only considers those who are ignorant of the social injustices in the village, and completely ignores those villagers who also watch Bollywood movies. My discussion thus far only considers the spectators, those who are not the villagers themselves, the ignorant. Rather than being spectators, villagers experience first-hand the harshness of reality. Would people in villages want to be reminded of the injustices they face in a movie that is meant to entertain? If “Barso Re” were to include Aishwarya Rai dancing around beggars in the street, women doing back-breaking labor in the field, and a woman going to market, pleading for a sale of her two-rupees vegetables so her children can have food that night, the music video would become emotionally stunning and, to a certain extent, patronizing to the village world. Blindly advocating more realism ignores the role of Bollywood for these very villagers. I doubt that a woman who does back-breaking labor in the field watches a Bollywood movie to be reminded of her toils. If she were to see that in Bollywood movies (which are known to lack any form of realism), how would she

feel?

Maybe by glorifying in such ways, Bollywood caters to the interest of those who are familiar with the ills of the village. As Film critic Lalit Mohan Joshi describes in his essay, “India’s Art House Cinema” it is no secret that Bollywood directors deliberately and elaborately avoid portraying negative aspects of life. He writes -

*“Films of the popular or commercial genre [Bollywood] were peopled by fantastic characters who were either ugly, cruel and despicable knaves or beautiful, virtuous and pure-hearted heroes and heroines. Commercial filmmakers steered clear of picking themes that might remind viewers of their daily lives by concentrating on wealth, glamour, beauty, romance, dance and song” (Lalit Mohan Joshi).*

The fantastical imagery and characters in Bollywood provide a way to avoid seeing the horrors of reality for those who crave that escape. Bollywood is put in a very delicate position, having to carefully straddle two competing interests: combating ignorance, and being considerate of the villagers’ desires.

In the process of questioning the perfect and simple village portrayed in “Barso Re” we have come to a point of discontinuity: while Bollywood’s exaggerations are audacious, realism in these films could isolate those who are not mere spectators, the villagers themselves. The natural splendor and waterfalls both misinform those who are ignorant, and distract those who are all too aware of the horrors of village life. This discontinuity stresses Bollywood’s dual role as an entertainment as well as a documentary source. By omitting any negative aspects of reality, does Bollywood deny their existence? To probe this question, I must change the very nature of my discussion. Thus far, I have focused on how these film videos portray biased images, thereby completely ignoring the viewer’s responsibility to interpret these videos. In switching the focus from those behind the camera to those in front of the TV screen, we can see the viewer’s role in influencing his or her own perceptions. Through the power of interpretation, Bollywood’s blatant lies can function as a form of unintentional irony. While on the surface “Barso Re” seems to reinforce the idealization of the village, upon further thought

the video does seem too good to be true, too perfect, too... artificial. Bollywood shows the absurdity of what the "village" would have to be to fit the Gandhian mold. In effect, videos like "Barso Re" come to represent what the village is not.

So, while all forms of photography and film are biasing, we can end on a point about the power of the viewer's ability to question these biases. While directors employ extraordinary techniques to control the image they portray, they are only one part of the process of forming judgments; viewers play an equally important role in perceiving and interpret-

ing what they are shown. Bollywood's elaborate adaptations of cultural idealizations carry with them huge implications for their diverse viewers; Bollywood's portraits of the people and the settings prevent a realistic view of the village. Yet, on the other side, we see people's tendency to readily accept what they are told, -a tendency to not combat ignorance with more knowledge, but rather with false images shown by the media. Ultimately, the question of progressive reform and social justice for the village depends on both the Bollywood directors, as well as the nature of those viewers who watch.



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*“The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice.”*

- Mary Ann Evans, commonly known by her male pseudonym George Eliot.

**M**umbai moviegoers in the Cinemax Theater on December 2nd 1998 had come to enjoy an art film, but they were unwittingly plunged into a violent culture war. Midway through *Fire*, the first film of director Deepa Mehta’s elemental trilogy, members of the Shiv Sena, a far-right political party, invaded the theater—smashing glass, harassing the audience

plectic because the film centered on a lesbian relationship, the first overt portrayal of lesbianism in Indian cinema. The hyper-nationalistic rightists opined that *Fire* portrayed Hindu culture in a negative light, debasing its traditions. The catcalls rained down from as high as Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray, notorious for inciting ethnic violence and extolling Hitler. The opposition also asserted that the Sapphic scenes would threaten the very existence

# THE ELEMENTAL TRILO

and setting posters ablaze. The theater, along with others playing *Fire* that were subsequently attacked, discontinued showings of the film. The local government, ruled by a coalition containing Shiv Sena, did little to protect cinemas. At *Fire*’s Indian premiere a few weeks prior, the climate was just as virulent. One enraged viewer screamed, “I’m going to shoot you, madam!” at Mehta, who was present at the screening, and the police had to be called.

The extreme Indian right was apo-

of Indian society, instigating women to forgo heterosexuality and, at another extreme, all reproduction. In reaction, Mehta jested, “I never thought my film would help solve India’s population problem”.

Similar censure would surround *Earth and Water*, the trilogy’s other films. Before filming began on *Water* in Varanasi, a holy city in North India, mobs galvanized by right-wing political parties destroyed all the sets, burned effigies of Mehta and issued death threats. The second time Mehta attempted shoot-

ing, anti-riots squads and nearly 200 policemen protected her. After two short takes, government officials shut down filming, claiming safety could no longer be ensured. The shutdown was instigated in part by a protester who had taken poison and jumped in the Ganges River. It would later be revealed that the man was a professional suicide tempter that often tried to kill himself for political causes. All this occurred in 2000. The film would not be released until 2005 after a peaceful filming in Sri Lanka.

Mehta's films motivated vitriol because they question the core tenets of Indian society, probing its foundations, or—to use a more apropos word—its elements. Though the three films are far from masterpieces, the reactions to the trilogy convey an important message about the changes needed to create a more open-minded India, and the timeliness of Mehta's arguments. A case-by-case examination of each of the movies is useful to identify the provoking and important questions about religion and its place in Indian history, society

following his swami who proclaims that “desire is the root of all evil.” Sita's husband is Jatin, a Westernized hedonist who clandestinely sells pornography and openly ditches his wife for his East Asian mistress Julie.

The namesakes for Sita and Radha are both prominent Hindu deities. Sita is an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu. In the canonical epic *The Ramayana*, Sita proves her martial purity by walking through fire. In Hinduism, Sita is a paradigm for virtuous femininity. The goddess Radha is a model of eternal devotion. She is everlastingly dutiful to Krishna, another incarnation of Vishnu, supporting him in his laborious quest to slay a demon.

The names contributed to the furor over the film, and, at the behest of Indian censors, Sita's name was changed to Nita. These charged religious references attack the core assumptions of what Mehta sees as extreme, dogmatic Hinduism. For the traditionalists, the female apotheosis, manifested in these two goddesses, is submissive, burdened and

# GY OF DEEPA MEHTA

David Berke

and culture that Mehta raises. Her portrayal of civil and political conflict helps a relatively young nation to reexamine the development of a national character, predicated on a long history and tradition of difference and diversity.

## *Fire*

Sita and Radha, the lovers of *Fire*, are sisters-in-law, living and working together as cooks for the family takeout restaurant/video rental store. The household is bustling with their husbands, Biji (Radha's paralyzed and mute mother-in-law) and Mundu, the bumbling servant. Radha is wedded to Ashok, who, after discovering his bride was barren, became a Tapasvin, an Indian ascetic. The celibate Ashok views his wife as a sinful temptation,

blindly devoted—not an independent being but a servant to the husband. By appropriating the names, Mehta is recasting the ideal “woman” as a strong individual, equal to men. The religious references possess a depth beyond straightforward feminist critique. These characters, whose namesakes were married to two faces of the same god, are married to brothers. That connection opens questions about connections between the seemingly disparate Jatin and Ashok. Are their hedonism and asceticism two species of the same sexist impulse?

Before the forbidden passion between Radha and Sita is consecrated, that questioning feminism and redefinition of the ideal are far from evident. Radha never resists her auxiliary status relative to her husband who, when-

ever he feels pangs of desire, orders her to lie next to him. She lies there while Ashok transcends his lust. These rituals have damning implications about Radha's self-worth. In this practice, she is a dirty object, sin incarnate.

The climate is just as oppressive across the hall in Sita's bedroom. Jatin is enamored of his mistress and has no scruples about lauding her in front of his wife. "Julie is so smart, so special, so pretty—you should meet her!" He says. When the couple does have sex, Jatin is loveless and aloof. After losing her virginity with Jatin, Sita is pinned to the bed by pain, fear and confusion. Still naïve to adulthood, she is terrified like a child. "If you...bleed, don't worry. It happens the first time," Jatin

*Mehta describes her trilogy of "elemental" films as being about choices.*

tells her gruffly before turning over to sleep. Sita is left to scrub the bloody bed sheets, cleaning quietly so as not to disturb her snoozing husband.

Once Radha and Sita discover their love for each other, the tide changes. Alight with desire, the housewives buck subjugation. While their husbands are out, they play games and dance to Bollywood music. Ashok discusses the personal benefits of his celibacy and Radha responds, "How does it help me?" When Ashok orders Radha to feed his senile mother, Radha retorts, "Why don't you feed Biji tonight?" Sita stops accepting Jatin's halfhearted sexual advances and calls him a "pompous fool." Jatin slaps her for the insult, and she slaps him right back.

Jatin is not fazed by Sita's rebellion, and this uncaring attitude makes him the film's chief antagonist. He character embodies Mehta's critique of India's modernizing men. Though domineering, Ashok is at least striving for morality, trying to find meaning without a child. Ashok should see the oppressiveness of his traditional beliefs, but, in his own twisted way, he's attempting to do right. Jatin has no such sense of morality and is completely self-absorbed. In his antagonism, Jatin manifests an unsettling trajectory for Hindu culture, a hypocritical blending of East and West, the worst of both hemispheres. Jatin oppresses

his wife in the traditional manner while embracing hollow Western lust.

Jatin's wickedness is subtler than that of the servant Mundu, and, for that reason, it is easy to see Mundu, the servant, as the chief villain. Though cruel, Mundu suffers the same oppression as Radha and Sita. When charged with tending to Biji, Mundu masturbates in front of her to pornography from Jatin's secret stash. The mute Biji, a stroke victim, is completely helpless. Before one session, he mockingly questions her about what video they should watch, proposing one called The Joy Suck Club. His behavior is vile, but Mundu is forced into a life of endless work and subservience, not privy to the liberty of Ashok and Jatin or the community of Radha and Sita. His sadistic perversion is inexcusable but not without motivation.

Mundu serves more as a foil to other characters than a villain, allowing Mehta to pose dark questions about similarities between other characters and him. The porn title is a play on The Joy Luck Club by Chinese-American writer Amy Tan, so the East Asian pornography is a parallel Jatin's Chinese mistress. Radha also feels that her affair with Sita is akin to Mundu's masturbation. Both Mundu and she are buckling under the weight of societal oppression, engaging in taboo sexuality. The lesbian relationship, of course, is not traumatizing an innocent bystander, but it does involve deceiving, however justifiably, Ashok and Jatin. Mundu is the dark reflection of the household's sins.

The mirror of Mundu, along with Sita and Radha's violent departure, taints the victory of Sita and Radha when they escape the household. At the end of *Fire*, the patriarchal foundations of the Indian family have crumbled, but no new path is certain. Mehta's fundamental critique is unforgiving, but she does not pretend that there are easy answers to her criticisms.

### **Earth**

The sequel to *Fire* occurs fifty years prior in 1947 Lahore. Whereas *Fire* picked apart the core tenets of the family, *Earth* is an unblinking look at the basis of India itself. The British partitioning of India is Mehta's focus, and she

is unabashed in her abhorrence at the event, which her narrator says “would scar the subcontinent forever.” Mehta is calling the very genesis of modern India into question.

Mehta heaps plenty of blame for the one million deaths resulting from the Raj India’s splintering, but she chiefly criticizes the British. That position is made allegorically clear early on. A Parsee family—an ethnic group who cooperated with the colonial British and gained prominent roles in colonial society—hosts a pre-independence dinner party with Sikhs and a Brit. The Parsee father muses that the British first brought syphilis to India. If the British never came, there would be no syphilis. To Mehta, it is the same with the violent ethnic partition. Before the British, the diverse ethnic groups coexisted. After the British, acrimony is everywhere.

At the same dinner party, Mehta explains how native Indians are partially culpable for the coming violence. A Sikh, infuriated by the British guest who tells him that Sikhs are “a bloody bunch of murdering fanatics,” tries to strangle the colonial. In response to being called a murderer, he tries to murder. It is the same for all ethnic groups, who morph into killers in reaction to each other’s insults and acts of violence.

The central action of *Earth* is a love triangle between the nanny for the Parsee family Shanta, Hassan, a masseur, and Dil, a candy vendor. Hassan and Dil are Muslim while Shanta is Hindu. From the outset, Shanta loves Hassan and simply likes Dil, whose brooding, deep-set eyes foreshadow his character’s malice.

As their romance progresses, fear, pervades the Indian milieu. In one painful scene, Lenny, the Parsee daughter that Shanta watches, goes to the marriage ceremony of a servant girl who, like Lenny, is still a young child. For a wedding present, Lenny brings the bride-to-be a toy doll. Upon giving the childish gift, Lenny discovers that the groom is an elderly dwarf, accepted as a husband only because, as a Christian, he can protect the young servant. “Fear is making people do crazy things these days,” Shanta notes.

According to Mehta, this fear, as with its con-

sequent violence, is itself elemental. It derives from the darkest, most basic recesses of humanity. Pleading for Shanta to marry him, Dil remarks that there is an “animal” inside him, and only through marriage can he cage this inner-beast. In an interview, Mehta said that *Earth* is about “basic instinct,” and Dil’s primal impulses are that instinct. *Earth* strives to connect this personal “instinct” to the societal-wide direction of history. The scarring of India is the result of everyone’s inner-animal, the artificial borders drawn in blood.

### **Water**

For her final film, Mehta takes another step back in time to the late 1930s. Her trilogy has a reverse chronology that works in concert with her theme. Making a film about the elemental, the proper course is to regress farther back in time, following the roots of society deeper into the soil.

The central focus of *Water* is Chuyia, a married child whose elderly husband dies during the opening credits. Chuyia’s parents send her to an ashram, a widow house. According to Hindu scripture, she is condemned to spend her life in the ashram, suffering deprivation to honor her husband’s spirit.

Chuyia shatters the languid atmosphere of the ashram, bringing in a playful energy. The young girl sneaks a sweet to one dying widow, who had spent her time reminiscing about the candies at her wedding. Chuyia also acts as a go-between for the ethereal widow Kalyani and Narayan, an acolyte of Gandhi who loves Kalyai despite the taboo against remarriage widows.

Chuyia’s liveliness does not just bring joy; she also engenders deep doubt. Sitting at a prayer session with the widow Shakuntala, Chuyia, surveying all the women around her, asks, “is there a house for male widows?” The women erupt with scorn, but the naïve observation unsettles Shakuntala, who begins to question her faith in the scriptures that sentence her to a life of austerity. Chuyia is a vector for elemental questioning about the ashram. Her heartfelt questions, along with her tragic turn as a forced prostitute later in the film, attack the principle that widows are subhuman.

The film does more than denounce objectionable ashrams; it also examines India's social establishment in relation to this injustice. Shakuntala's spiritual guide, a Hindu religious leader who runs services for the women, is unable to quell Shakuntala's doubts about ashram living. The religious sage is played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda, the same actor who played Ashok in *Fire* (He is one of many actors to reappear in the trilogy. Though there is not room for it here, these recurrences have implications for the interpretation of the films). Kharbanda's character, as he did in *Fire*, underscores the inefficacy of the traditional religious teaching in solving oppression. *Water* is not just a movie about subjugation, but also how society's ethical structures are incapable of confronting it.

At the end of the film, Shakuntala puts Chuyia on a train carrying Gandhi and his supporters. Shakuntala, a woman who professes deep faith, now finds a future in the ashram untenable, so she puts Chuyia on the train toward India's liberation. Chuyia is, in a sense, the seed of progress that will grow into the loving rebellion of Sita and Radha.

As Shakuntala emulates, the core theme of *Water* is societal choice. Shakuntala realizes that Indians are not required to have ashrams, but can elect to give women equal rights. The degradation is not a given. This basic understanding—that choice can bring freedom—is

important to the entire trilogy. A choice to fight primitive instinct to could have saved millions in Earth. A choice to eschew the oppressive familial establishment frees Sita and Radha.

Discussing *Fire* with the *New York Times*, Mehta describes her trilogy of "elemental" films as being about choices. Creating the societal space for these choices is difficult, and films are not necessarily strong enough to meet the task. All three are plagued by some clichéd melodrama, and aspects of the first two films, from sound editing to flimsy dialogue, are subpar. Even so, as extremist suppression of art in India becomes more acute, Mehta's defiant voice is an important one, and is one that matures through the course of these three films. Over the decade or so it took her to make these films, she has visibly grown as a director.

It is heartening that she will direct the film version of *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie's postcolonial masterpiece. She has an unflagging commitment to moral honesty, whatever the consequences. Importantly, in questioning and challenging society itself, Mehta does not scorn Indian or Hindu identity. She considers herself a member of both categories, and so her goal is to help improve the cultures and not execrate them. India is ripe for deep, questioning cinema, and, as is evidenced by her elemental films, Mehta is ready to provide it.



# SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

“Poverty Porn” or “Incredible India”

## POINT

Meera Sahni

**D**anny Boyle’s latest film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, has angered many people, including and especially South Asians. Some claim that the movie was made by a voyeuristic foreigner who ignores India’s recent prosperity. They appear oblivious to the fact that Danny Boyle is not making a documentary - and never claims to be doing so. These critics are the ones that stumble out of the theater concerned about how tourists will only see India as a country that is morally corrupt and bankrupt. The truth is, their shock is selfish. This literally foreign approach of portraying India is what makes this film unconventional – it is India through an outsider’s lens, at a time when the country is attracting a lot of outside attention because of its stupendous economic growth.

*Slumdog Millionaire* is different in

that it trades exoticized portrayals of customs such as henna for footage of the slums outside of Mumbai. This step away from what people are used to shows a different side of India. The truth is the lack of low cost living options for one million Indians has forced them to live in these slums. At the other end of the spectrum, a thriving economy has brought to birth a new middle and upper middle class, which demands a life of comfort and luxury. There’s something to be said about feeling like you are on the New Jersey Turnpike while driving through National Highway-24 in New Delhi-India. The almost instantaneous rise of urbanization in India is directly proportional to the rise of urban poverty. Not everyone has seen the darker side of Mumbai, India and this reason alone shows why the setting of *Slumdog Millionaire* serves as a rude awakening to Indians, Indian Americans and non-Indians alike. Those who criticize



the slum setting are often those who would rather watch escapist Bollywood movies shot in exotic locales. Then, there are those protesters who are actual slum dwellers, many of whom take offence at the word “slumdog”. However, this vulgarity has, in turn, made the impact of the portrayal of their condition all the more forceful, and the international impetus against poverty and child rights abuse all the more urgent. It is the exposure to what many call the ugly side of India - and to real, pressing issues - that gives me a strange, counter-intuitive sense of pride in the movie because I am just simply tired of the superficiality and vapidness of much Bollywood’s portrayal of “Indian culture”.

The Indian film industry, Bollywood, is epic in its scope and international popularity, but I wonder sometimes at the quality of most of its productions. One might argue that the traditional and formulaic love story is necessary to draw audiences in, but then along comes a movie like *Slumdog*, which was immensely successful despite the love story being but one of many plot elements. Of course, *Slumdog* was not a Bollywood movie – it was made by and for a Western audience – but its success amongst the global South Asian diaspora is proof that the Indian film audience has come of age.

Critics point out several factual flaws in the film, one of which is the protagonists’ overnight proficiency of English. However, it must be kept in mind that the movie was clearly never geared to a predominantly Indian audience, and therefore, for the sake of art and accessibility, certain compromises were necessary on Boyle’s part. I understand the natural tendency for Indians to question the validity of a non-Indian’s portrayal of India, but those pointing fingers should bear in mind that Bollywood is not any more realistic. The Indian directors of Bollywood, with exceptions who are few and far between, can continue to produce mega hits that feed India’s popular culture; however, they should take the phenomenal success of *Slumdog* as a wake up call. Who knows when the next Danny Boyle will come along to produce a chilling, *Slumdog*-esque movie? Without a doubt, Bollywood needs to raise its bar, and diversify the subject matter of its movies.

When Anil Kapoor’s eyes start to tear up as he stands on the stage of the 2009 Golden Globes helping to accept the Best Screenplay Award, you can’t help but to feel proud of India. Kapoor’s presence transforms into a mark of India’s achievement. So, maybe having a Westerner produce the film helped it achieve this status, and at the same time maybe some people may see Danny Boyle as a traitor who capitalized on “the dark side” of India, but what people should recognize is that the passionate and mystic sense of fate and destiny that reverberates throughout this movie can only come to life in the country that is India. Irrespective of who produced this movie, the content of Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire* stays true to the human spirit, vibrant color and spicy drama that are characteristic of India. As always, the choice is yours whether to be unenthused or proud of the incredible soft power and global acclaim that the movie has generated.

Prapti Chatterjee  
Sumati Rajput

## C O U N T E R P O I N T

**A**fter watching *Slumdog* (as it’s affectionately been nicknamed) Christmas Day in Peoria, IL I remember how my family and I left the theater soaring on the high-octave notes of Jai Ho! We were proud of the film’s uplifting score and its portrayal of India’s scenic beauty. When I returned to school, it was amazing to see just how many people had watched the movie, and how it was the one of the first things that they thought of when they saw me. Clearly, it was one of those movies that had found its way into meal time conversations, where anyone who had not watched it, was recommended with utmost enthusiasm by many who had, to make it a “weekend to-do priority”. Indians across the world cheered for *Slumdog* at the Oscars, and basked in India’s most publicized and globally talked-about foray onto the international stage.

One was less proud, however, of the representation of the Indian slum in the movie,



which many took to be unadulterated truth. The slum was a mix of every possible kind of destitution; nothing was left untainted but Jamal's human heart. When Boyle's camera was not highlighting the griminess of outdoor plumbing, or impoverished Hindu-Muslim relations, it was immersed in the false glitter of childhood prostitution and poverty. As Shyama Sengupta, film professor of Mumbai's Whistling Woods International institute accurately remarks, "It's a white man's imagined India. It's not quite snake charmers, but it's close. It's a poverty tour."<sup>1</sup> Those who have visited India understand that there's more to the country than just slums and poverty and the Taj Mahal, but those whose visions are not as complete assume the film's depiction is accurate. "The spoon," my friend says, "The spoon and the eye. That kind of stuff really happens where you're from?" My visceral reaction is rejection of the statement, the association. The problem is that though beggars exist, and those who attempt to control them also exist, they alone do not make up India's character.

The images of *Slumdog Millionaire* stir pity as much as fascination, which is received uncomfortably by Indian audiences, for whom the supposedly "feel-good" movie turns into an indirect lecture. The fact that the children cheat foreigners for monetary help, which they give willingly, while an Indian man won't even spare a roti, is more telling than any of the film's other commentary. "As shown in *Slumdog Millionaire* the Indian way of life is one of poverty and callous disregard for basic human rights. I have no idea if that's the real India, but that's the one portrayed in this movie." That harsh comment is not even from an Indian citizen, but Josh Tyler of CinemaBlend, who is, as he should be, unwilling to believe *Slumdog* is all India has to offer. No one doubts *Slumdog* is a well-made movie.<sup>2</sup> And surely the tale of India's extreme economic gap has been told before from a Western point of view (think *City of Joy*) but never before has such a narrow focus been placed on the state of im-

*The fact that Danny Boyle, a British director decided to make it a movie to spread around this message says something about the world community wanting to make a difference to these ill conditions.*

poverishment. Especially in a time of such growth, when people are hoping the situation will gradually get better, *Slumdog Millionaire* seems to be a brutal reminder that the pace isn't quite quick enough. India is a young democratic country, and many of its political kinks have yet to be worked out—but that doesn't mean there isn't hope. And that certainly doesn't mean individuals should depend on luck instead of hard work and dedication.<sup>3</sup>

The extraordinary circumstances of *Slumdog Millionaire* are unlikely to be recreated in reality. In fact, the film contains numerous flaws and gaps in its plot, which contribute to the implausibility of its story. One such flaw relates to the use of the English language. The movie started with the actors speaking in Hindi, which is the official language of India. All of a sudden, Jamal Malik, his brother, and everyone else they had contact with begin to speak English fluently. I know that the movie is catering to an audience which speaks English, but the fact that it begin with them speaking in Hindi, and then shifts to them speaking in English without any formal education is quite an unrealistic phenomenon. Granted that a large population of India speaks in English, children living in conditions that are depicted in the movie can-

not pick up English like that, unless of course someone takes the time to teach them, or if they attended school. That being said, without the use of English, a lot of things in the movie become inconsequential. For instance, the tours they give to foreigners at the Taj Mahal would require speaking English. Also, Jamal works as a "chai wala" at a call center. That can be plausible given his skill set; however, he also fills in for people at the call center when they need to take a break and when he does, he easily uses the computer and in fact even attends to a customer in America. The only time that Jamal is shown to attend school is before his mother passed away, and, resourceful as he is shown to be, it is still unlikely that with such limited education he

would be able to use a computer or speak in a British accent with quite as much skill.

The story behind the question of Benjamin Franklin was undoubtedly one of the most questionable ones. First of all, the Indian currency is rupee, and not dollar. Agreed that Jamal got the \$100 bill from a tourist, but since dollar bills are never used in India for daily transactions, it's highly unlikely that a blind beggar would be able to identify a \$100 by the smell and feel of it. Secondly, the beggar too, spoke perfectly fluent English, so much so that he knew who Benjamin Franklin was, and having grown up in India, I find it absurd to believe that someone in his situation would have that kind of knowledge and information. To add to this, Jamal did not know that Mahatma Gandhi was on a 1000 rupee note. Maybe he had never seen a 1000 rupee note, but he definitely had seen other notes of smaller denominations, and all rupee notes have Mahatma Gandhi's picture on it. So given that he was a chai wala at a call center, could use a computer and converse in English, knew who Amitabh Bacchan and Benjamin Franklin were, but had only ever heard of Mahatma Gandhi is almost inconceivable.

Another big glitch in the movie is that such

game shows are never live. They're always telecasted after they've been shot, and so the fact that Latika sees him on TV, and then rushes to find him at the event, picks up his "phone a friend" phone call, makes absolutely no sense.

On a positive note, the movie has definitely attracted a lot of attention to the condition of the slums, at least to a large part of the world which lives in relatively better conditions. Even though this movie is based in the slums of Bombay in India, it gives a general idea of what slums are like in other third world nations. The book that inspired the movie is written by Vikas Swarup. However, the fact that Danny Boyle, a British director decided to make it a movie to spread around this message says something about the world community wanting to make a difference to these ill conditions, even though they are far removed from it.

What we can hope is that *Slumdog Millionaire* inspires moviegoers to visit India and see the truth for themselves. They may not find a land in perfect condition, but they will find a country that demands the suspension of their preconceptions, and that is just as bright and colorful and ineffable as they could hope to imagine.



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# A FRIDAY NIGHT DINNER

Prapti Chatterjee

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I could've taken a few more minutes to wrap that last gift  
the tape was a messy job,  
and stuck to my finger last minute,  
making the paper rip.

instead I'm a go-between  
for the rice and the paneer  
the salt, the defrosted chicken  
I'm not really impatient,  
or hungry  
but dinner's one of those things  
you have to swallow down like meds  
prescribed - fully.

meanwhile my ma's on the phone—  
we think she's talking to a telemarketer, and letting him down easy  
(they don't have an easy job,  
being put down all day)  
she's probably the only person you'll meet  
who says 'no thank you,' to a telemarketer.  
and my dad's trying to teach my brother  
about parabolas and quadratics, all in one night  
he's so young  
still picky, but loading up on carbs for the soccer match  
that's probably not happening --  
you see,  
it's raining on saturday.

– take some more chicken, my ma mouths, still on the phone  
I pass, and tap my foot on the laminated wood.  
it's fake, but you can't really tell.  
I have some reading to do, I remember,  
a letter to write to my grandmother  
who's grown old so many Indian summers  
without me.  
funny how many things happen without you.

my dad's smiling now: he's finally remembered 4ac,  
and though I should have reminded him,  
I was too busy admiring the clock  
that keeps moving, in that slow, admirably  
consistent way.

– ready? my dad asks. he puts away the books.  
my brother smiles at me  
and my mother hangs up the phone.  
we don't say grace  
nor do we clink our mismatched glasses  
but it's always at this table  
that we begin.



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# SHALINI

 | a short story by

Monica Verman

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**H**er eyes remain downcast as she rattles off the by-now rehearsed list of ailments - illness has become the new small talk, a way of filling gaps of time and silence, a bond forged of shared pain. Life has come full circle for them, as it always must. As children they compared bruises; now, with age, they bond over the scars life has dealt them.

He jokes about his new daily ritual - scouring the obituaries for faces familiar are too often featured. They compare notes sourced from the grapevine - of a friend's illness, death and the occasional wedding or birth of a grandchild. Emotion is now delivered in extremes, an inevitability that has become universally acknowledged. For the quiet desperation of middle age has given way to an even quieter acceptance as time marched on; an

acceptance of a new reality - one which includes reading obituaries and choosing gravesites. The rebellion of youth has given way to smaller deviations from life's linearity - she names a dog Kitty, a white cat Blackie. The power to do so is a reminder that all individuality need not be lost, sacrificed to the relentless march of time.

It is a curious company - in youth they were scattered all over the world, too busy with life and love to be more than names on a Christmas list; now in the fragility of age they are each other's greatest support. They have promised to meet once a month - to share each others joy, sadness and the pain of age. Those amongst them who have retained their joie de vivre remind the others of a youth that can be remembered, recaptured, if only in small doses. One talks of his adventures in making chocolate from cocoa beans that grow in

his garden, of his secret dreams of starting a chocolate business. They all chuckle, mentally dismissing it as futile daydreaming. Another enthuses about her newfound discovery - SuDoKu. Keeps you young, they all nod approvingly. Yet another speaks with barely disguised pride of the money she is making online in the stock market. The only thread running through the eclectic group is a sense of mutual understanding – of the loneliness of a spouse lost, of growing old in a foreign land, of roots that never struck firmly enough.

Shalini Joshi realizes she has come to live for these evenings, these brief but regular moments of companionship. In old age her needs have become extremely simple, happiness easily found and even more easily lost. She still enjoys the simple joys of life - a cup of steaming tea on a rainy day (no sugar please, she is diabetic after all), window shopping (provided her knees don't start to hurt), visiting her son (she keeps her visits short; doesn't want to be a burden). She thought retirement would be a chance to catch up on the books she'd always meant to read, the movies she'd meant to watch - she'd even bought a La-Z-Boy to commemorate the occasion. But it was now gathering dust, the books were left on hold. She didn't know what it was exactly she was waiting for - some sort of confirmation, perhaps, that she had come as far as there was for her to go and that this was all that was left - her couch and her books. The thoughts of others, passed down to her for knowledge she may never have use of and yet delights in.

When they leave she retreats to the study again. And then, in the deafening silence of the room, she realized why she could not sit there. It had been Aamir's space, his sacred refuge in their sprawling bungalow. His pride and joy - the rows of leather bound volumes lining the walls, the practical and tasteful furniture, the crackling

fireplace. Even now, it belonged to him and him alone. It was cold to her, as if she was not welcome there now that he was gone. It was only after these monthly reunions, or visits from her son that she realized how lonely, how empty the house was. And how terribly she missed him.

Aamir had not been the love of her life. In fact, she wasn't sure she'd ever been 'in love' with him. No, that could be an exaggeration. But it was like a song she loved but couldn't quite

*Aamir had not been the love of her life. In fact, she wasn't sure she'd ever been 'in love' with him.*

place - For twenty-five years I've lived with him/ Fought him, starved with him/ Twenty-five years my bed is his/ If that's not love, what is? She knew had he cared for, had appreciated her efforts towards building their life together. That in his own quiet way, he had loved her more than she could ever love him back. But he had never said that he loved her, never vocalized the words she'd most craved to hear in all their years of marriage.

She had met Aamir at her parents' house soon after graduating college. He was introduced as a 'family friend', an umbrella term that tended to include a staggering number of acquaintances old and new her parents had made in order to preserve their 'roots' when they moved to New York. She had stayed behind to complete college in Delhi – her parents wanted to 'protect' her from what they believed would be a culture shock. She moved into their apartment on the Upper West Side soon after gradu-

ating, thinking it would be a short sabbatical – she was waiting for responses from the graduate schools she had applied to. She spent most of the summer walking the streets of New York, learning where Broadway snaked in unexpectedly in Midtown, hunting down the best coffee in different neighborhoods and deciphering the subway map. She spent a lot of her time observing and introspecting – it was a perfect change of pace, an opportunity to reexamine what she wanted from her life. And then she met Aamir.

It was immediately clear that her parents had intended for him to be a 'prospective suitor' but Shalini was completely oblivious of their watchful eyes as she introduced herself and asked about his practice. He was a young doctor practicing at St Luke's Hospital and struck her as quiet and endearing. They made small talk; he seemed interested in her passion for creative writing and her ambition to write a novel. She was surprised she'd told him about the novel – it was a secret dream she had been harboring, something she had not confessed to anyone and here she was, telling a perfect stranger about it. Perhaps it was the fact that he was a stranger – she felt secure in the knowledge that she would never see him again, that he would have no motive or interest in divulging her secret to anyone - that had made her tell him. She thought nothing more of it and they went their separate ways, circling around the sea of unfamiliar faces, all making the same pointless small talk she despised.

Her parents brought up the subject at dinner that night. For all the years she had lived at home, they had eaten dinner together, as a family, at exactly half past eight. But tonight she could tell that her parents were uneasy and nervous. Initially, the sudden burst of conversation at the dinner table took her by surprise – there had always

been a rule not to talk at dinner time for as long as she remembered.

“Beta,” her father said, gently, using the Indian term of endearment she loved to hear. “We saw you talking to Mr. Modi’s son earlier – Aamir. What did you think of him?”

*“It was so difficult for me growing up. I was confused about who I was, desperate to fit in anywhere. I don’t want our child to ever feel the way I did”*

“Aamir Modi? Isn’t that a strange name?” Shalini said, alluding to the fact that Aamir was a Muslim name, not one usually paired with Modi, a Parsi surname. Parsis are known for their custom of marrying strictly within the community and are often ostracized if they fail to do so.

“Yes beta, Aamir’s parents met at medical school. They eloped and came here to start afresh. But he is a very good boy – he is a doctor and he has even adopted Hinduism. Now don’t change the subject- answer the question,” Shalini’s mother said.

The parameters her mother used to ascertain that Aamir was ‘a good boy’ didn’t escape Shalini’s attention. “Well, I don’t understand what you mean – he was nice enough,” Shalini said, nervously. She had a vague idea of where this was going.

“The Modis were wondering if you two would consider, well..” - her father glanced at her mother for support- “an alliance.”

An alliance, how terribly romantic, Shalini thought. She felt ambushed and very, very alone. “You mean marriage? I only just graduated!” Shalini yelled. “I want to do my Master’s, write a book, see the world!”

“Why can’t you do that once you get married? No one will stop you!”

“But it isn’t the same! I want some more years of freedom!”

“But he is such a good boy!”

“That’s not the point!”

And so it had gone on. Now, after all these years, Shalini wasn’t sure what had changed her mind. It strikes her as faintly ironic and sad that she cannot remember why she had taken the decision that had affected her life the most. She supposes it had something to do with the fact that she had told him about the novel – something in her had told her it was a sign, that if she had been comfortable enough to share that secret with him in a single meeting it must mean something.

So they had been married, and in her youthful enthusiasm, Shalini had thrown herself into married life with full passion. It was her way – to do everything with great intensity and almost intimidating focus. She quickly saw that Aamir lacked her spontaneity, her spirited joie de vivre, but believed it to be a perfect match – opposites attract, after all. It surprised her, actually, that he was so conservative and passive. She had found his parents’ story terribly romantic and imagined he would have inherited the passion, the rebellious streak she imagined they’d had. Instead, he insisted on observing neither of the religions he was born into and was a strict Hindu almost to the point of fanaticism, refused to eat anything but Indian food

and almost never wore any color but blue and white. She’d even asked him on occasion why he was so attached to tradition and conformity when his own name betrayed his uniqueness. It was what had drawn her to him, after all (though she did not tell him so).

Now that they would soon be raising a child together she had to voice her concerns – while she appreciated that he observed the religion she did, the one she wanted to raise their child in, she wanted their little boy or girl to be allowed to choose his or her own religion when the time came. He had told her once that he had not even considered following Islam or Zoroastrianism, he had decided on Hinduism because he felt it would help him relate his country, his roots. Most of the Indian children he’d met growing up in Edison had been Hindu, and in an effort to fit in, he had adopted their religion. She tried to explain that Islam and Zoroastrianism were as integral to the ‘Indian’ identity as Hinduism, but he was adamant.

“You don’t understand Shalu,” he’d said. “It was so difficult for me grow-

*“Shalini, my son must have a strong Indian identity- I don’t want him growing up like one of these ABCDs. You don’t understand – you grew up in India, you’ve never had to question your identity,”*

ing up. I was confused about who I was, desperate to fit in anywhere. I don’t want our child to ever feel the way I did.” She hated it when he called her Shalu. She had never mentioned this to him – she always feared their relationship was too fragile for blunt-

<sup>1</sup> ABCD- American Born Confused Desi. A term used for people of Indian origin born in America who are confused about their racial identities.

ness.

When her little boy came into the world they decided to call him Asim – a name Shalini chose. Privately, she had chosen the name because it was an acceptable first name in Muslim, Hindu and Parsi communities, and so regardless of her son’s chosen religion, he would never feel the way Aamir did about his name.

Aamir insisted that Asim’s first language be Hindi – Shalini argued relentlessly that this would make things difficult when he started school, that he would feel out of place among the children who played in Riverside every evening.

“Shalini, my son must have a strong Indian identity- I don’t want him growing up like one of these ABCDs<sup>1</sup>. You don’t understand – you grew up in India, you’ve never had to question your identity,” Aamir said, adamant.

“But Aamir, even in India, in the metropolises many families choose to speak English rather than Hindi amongst themselves,” Shalini cried, frustrated. To you India is an abstract concept built up from books and two vacations, she thought. “Trust me, our child will be no less ‘Indian’ if we teach him English as well from the beginning!”

Finally, she resorted to speaking him in English while Aamir was at work, reverting to Hindi when he returned in the evenings. It was only then that she had the chance to take the subway up to 116th Street and Broadway, to the gates of Columbia University where she took a late evening class in Creative Writing, working towards her lifelong dream, her novel (which Aamir had never once asked about after their first meeting).

Sitting on the steps of Low with a cup of coffee, she watched the students walk by, animatedly discussing politics, philosophy and pub-hopping. Their energy and idealism reminded her of herself not so long ago. She did not recognize who she had become since meeting Aamir – the woman who had never started her novel, the woman whose own passion for life had become obsolete since marriage (and even more so since Asim’s birth), the woman who had thrown away her acceptance letter for the full time MFA program at Columbia during the wedding preparations. Even then, she had decided one day as she walked past the campus gates, there was always opportunity to move forward, if even in a different direction from the one she had imagined for herself. So she had walked in and enquired about the classes she could take through the School of General Studies. The first three weeks had been wonderful – her time away from home, if only a few blocks away, allowed her to revert to who she had once been, to dream that she could make more of her life than she had. But then, the minute she entered the door of the house, an overwhelming feeling of guilt would hit her as she saw Asim hungry and Aamir’s ever waning patience with their son.

He was a good father, most of the time. She had little to complain about – it was never things he did that upset her, it was the things he didn’t do. He was dutiful and attentive – he always asked about her day, never complained if there was too much salt in the food, came along on every doctor’s visit. And she was sure he would never, ever lie to her. It was not his way. But he never debated politics and philosophy with her the way he did with the men at their parties, never saw her quiet desperation. She would agonize over their relationship,

over ways to broach the subject of trying marital therapy to repair what she saw as a disintegrating relationship. But she knew he didn’t see it that way, that he assumed this was their normalcy, their equilibrium. He took her new passiveness as a sign that she had settled well into her life and was content, if not happy in the intense, passionate way she was when they were married. Besides, she didn’t know what she would tell a therapist; it was difficult to pinpoint why their conversations were never anything but superficial, how they could live in such proximity and never achieve true intimacy, where their relationship had failed.

Three weeks later, Aamir announced that they would move to Edison. He said the opportunities for practice in his specialization were better there – Shalini knew the considerable Indian population in Jersey had been no mean factor in his decision. He had already left his practice in Manhattan by the time he told her. Shalini was miserable about his decision, but completely ambushed. She remembered how her father had described her marriage to Aamir– he had used the word ‘alliance’. Then too, she had felt ambushed – the militaristic connotations were not lost on her. Still, she

*Asim had rushed back from school to light the funeral pyre, as his father had wanted him to. After the funeral, he told his mother he had converted to Buddhism and had met the girl he was going to marry.*

<sup>2</sup>Kitty party – A term commonly used in Asian countries to describe a get together of a group of women, usually for brunch or lunch. Generally carries negative connotations and conjures images of vapid, rich, unemployed middle aged women debating make up brands

left Columbia, and slowly dedicated her life to Asim. Her entire day began to revolve around him – his meals, his homework, her aspirations for him. She wanted him to explore his talents and encouraged his love of art and design, but Aamir pushed him towards math and science, blind to her efforts. He wanted his son to be a doctor or engineer and would not hear of anything else.

The years flew by as Shalini tried desperately to fit the mould her husband seemed to want her to – she was active in the Indian Women’s Association and attended every ‘kitty party’ it hosted, joined yoga classes, threw parties for their neighbors and ensured Asim focused on his school work. Every so often, she would sit at her husband’s desk, pen in hand, trying to write her novel. But she never knew where to begin.

One night, at one of their endless parties, where the usual collection of people would meet to make the usual small talk, she overheard Aamir say –

“Yeah, she keeps herself busy writing stories. Not real ones or anything – just little things. She fancies herself Jhumpa Lahiri or something.”

After that night, hearing him dismiss her efforts like that, she rarely went back to her pen. In retrospect, she blames herself for how easily she was defeated, how easily she sacrificed her spirit for the man she married and did not love. She glances over at the desk in the study – even now it seems to mock her, as Aamir had, so many years ago.

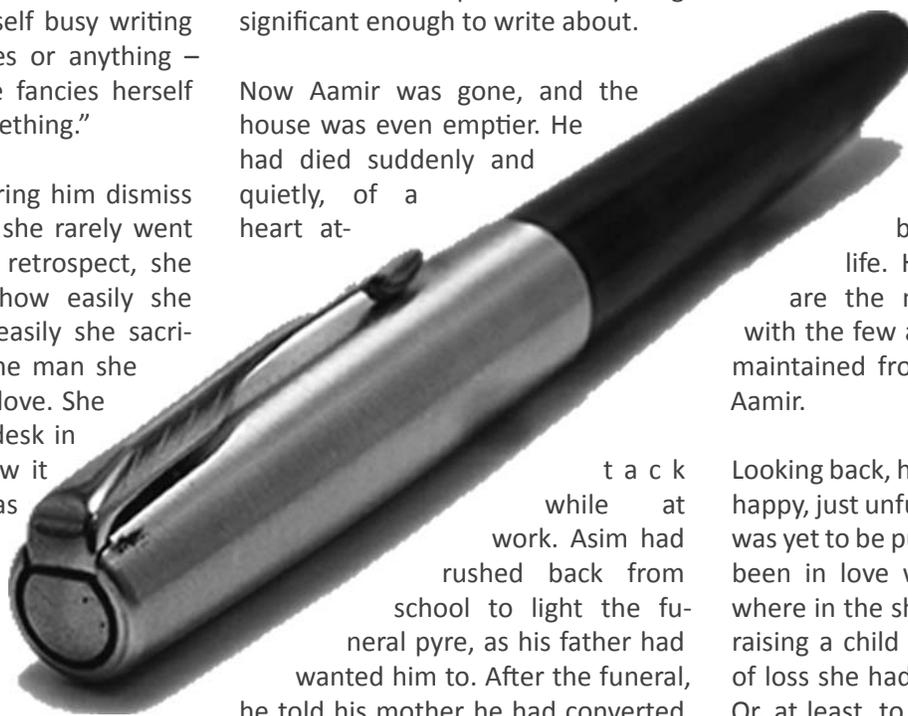
When Asim chose to go to college on the West Coast, she was heartbroken. But she never showed it – no, she had always encouraged him to follow his

dreams and carve out his own path. To keep herself busy she started working at the library at the Main Library in South Edison. It was an opportunity to surround herself with rows of mag-

*despite all her years in America, she is not used to their life, their lifestyle. She cannot relate to Sara’s insistence that they employ a nanny when their daughter is born, does not enjoy the food they eat.*

nificent books, to just stand and stare. She still secretly hoped to be somewhere there, filed under Joshi (she would write under her maiden name, of course), somewhere between Johnson and Joyce. But she had still not found her inspiration, she still felt she had not seen or experienced anything significant enough to write about.

Now Aamir was gone, and the house was even emptier. He had died suddenly and quietly, of a heart at-



t a c k while at work. Asim had rushed back from school to light the funeral pyre, as his father had wanted him to. After the funeral, he told his mother he had converted to Buddhism and had met the girl he was going to marry. Her name was Sara and she was from Boston. She

was not Indian. The wedding was simple and understated, not at all like the lavish and extravagant Indian celebrations they had attended all their lives.

She does not visit Asim and Sara very often – despite all her years in America, she is not used to their life, their lifestyle. She cannot relate to Sara’s insistence that they employ a nanny when their daughter is born, does not enjoy the food they eat. When they suggest she accompany them to Sara’s family estate in Martha’s Vineyard she refuses, politely. Instead, she enrolls in a distance Master’s program in Comparative Literature. Her eyes well up when she sees Asim in the crowd at her graduation, cheering her on as she had done at his. She never tells him how lonely she is but she suspects he knows, that he feels guilty for being so far away in San Francisco. She feels like she did that summer after college – like she is drifting, without purpose. She doesn’t have the energy to move back to Manhattan, but occasionally she takes a train into the city and begins her walks again, enjoying the anonymity in a crowd

that she had even then. Once again, it was a time of introspection and reflection, a feeling of being in transit between phases of her life. Her only social events are the monthly get-togethers with the few acquaintances she had maintained from her social life with Aamir.

Looking back, her life had not been unhappy, just unfulfilled, like a piece of it was yet to be put in place. She had not been in love with Aamir, but somewhere in the shared meals, the joy of raising a child together and the pain of loss she had come to care for him. Or, at least, to miss the idea of him – having someone in the house to call out to when the phone rang, someone on the side of the bed that was

now permanently made, someone to plan their son's wedding with. Even now, she missed drinking tea by the fireplace in the study with him, even if it was always in silence. He would sit at the desk, reading endlessly, while she would start reading a new book every evening (she never finished them, now she can't remember why). Shalini walked over to the desk and slid open the top drawer (something she'd never done before), searching

for some semblance of Aamir. There, in the otherwise empty drawer, was a photograph that had been taken at their wedding. He had his arms around her and they were smiling into the camera, their eyes bright with hope and joy – it was one of the only photographs from the ceremony that didn't look carefully orchestrated to look perfect. She'd hated the wedding album, hated the way they looked tired and harassed throughout, the

way everyone seemed to be posing and faking smiles. This was one she'd obviously missed. It was perfect.

Shalini sat down and pulled a sheet of paper towards her. Aamir's pen was lying where it always had – in the stand by the window. She picked it up uncertainly, tentatively, and held it to the paper. And then she began to write.



Living there day after day, unable to move, she peered into the world of Cropsey Avenue through a sunlit window. Paralyzed on the left side of her body, my grandmother conquered the succession of each insipid day during her ten years of paralysis with the help of a green rosary. A *tasbi* or a rosary is a ubiquitous object in Pakistani households. It is commonly seen dangling from the hands of elderly men in the bazaar, who fiddle it with it every now and then while taking part in a serious discussion of how steeply the price of chickens just rose. But for my grandmother, her rosary was an indispensable utensil for tallying the number of dua's to get me an A in an AP Chemistry exam or my brother to accept a marriage proposal from her friend's cousin's niece. While unable to physically take part in household chores, my grandmother took each activity of my family, from me getting to school on time to my sister passing her driver's test, to heart and set to work with her rosary. Each success in my family was hence attributed, in part, to her hard work.



## THE MAGICAL ROSARY

Aqsa Shakoor

The day of the SAT's drew near, and my anxiety was exceeded only by that of my grandmother. When I turned to my books, my grandmother turned to her rosary: I recited vocabulary words from Kaplan's SAT Score-Raising Dictionary while she recited prayers from an equally heavy self-composed prayer book. The dreaded Saturday arrived and we both looked equally exhausted

from an exam that neither of us had yet taken. We got dressed, ate a healthy breakfast of omelets, watched some cartoons to help us relax, and finally when I marched out of the house to take the exam, my grandmother feverishly clutched the beads of her rosary in fervent prayer. I came back looking thoroughly relieved but it took a while for my grandmother to lower her skyrocketed blood pressure and sugar levels. At the end, we both did well.

Since my grandmother passed away, the position of the protector of the family has been passed down to my mother, who, having suffered a similar stroke, has tallied its green beads through many festive and troubled times. My grandmother's prayer book has solutions to every problem imaginable: when feeling nauseated read *álhumdu-lillah* 35 times on the rosary; when studying and are tired read *bismillah* 15 times; when thankful recite *subhanallah*, and so on. There are even instructions and prayers for routine activities: the prayer for eating and washing hands before eating, instructions for prayers upon entering and leaving the bathroom, instructions for positions in sleeping, its prayer, and the waking prayer. My grandmother has left a how-to encyclopedia of Islam that all of the imam's in Pakistan could not create. The prayer book and the rosary are the cornerstones of my family's traditions, those that exist and those yet to be made. Though of not much material value and quite ordinary-looking at first, the green rosary is an heirloom that possesses the blessings of my elders. It links different generations of my family such that the stress of obstinate tasks faced by my siblings and me was once shared with my grandmother and now with my parents.

# IT'S ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

Idrisul Somi

**A**nother terrorist attack. This time it is not in America, and the year is 2008, not 2001. It's another time. The setting is now Mumbai, the heart of India—not New York, the city that never sleeps. Already there's a lot of media hype buzzing around the tense air. The attention to this event is definitely justified, but all the comparisons between the two are not. An unsettling feeling is in the air. Grief, loss, despair, sadness all resurface. Another emotion takes a hold of me—fear. The loss of the amount of lives is incredible, even this time around. Similarities do exist, but that should not be the only issue at hand. A thought lingers at the corner of my mind; the events are not the same, but will people think they are? I cannot also help but wonder—will animosity towards Muslims resurface?

Attempting to contextualize these

events is like trying to solve a math problem but proper information has not been given to solve it. Sure, you have an idea about what equation to perhaps use, but there seems to be something missing in the initial conditions. Something is not there. Likewise, this “Muslim problem,” has similar issues. Given the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it is a little obvious that although not “all Muslims are bad,” some people are unfortunately inclined to think so. This is the sad truth, the reality of it all. Being born and raised a New Yorker and a Muslim I fear these generalizations; having personally experienced the September 11 attacks I am trying to understand.

I have tried to find the answers. I do not want to be the victim of something out of my hands. I want to help find a solution. I am not sure if any of us can get the deeply ingrained stereotypes out of our heads, but I want to give context to the

current predicament as that may be one way of understanding the issue at hand. That way I can at least begin to understand. Even if people label the Mumbai attacks as “India’s terrorist attacks,” I do not want to fall into that trap. Thus, I would have to agree with what writer Arudhanti Roy believes would have “forfeited the rights to our own tragedies.” As she says in her article, *Mumbai Was Not India’s 9/11*, comparing and then labeling an event to another causes only more media attention. The wrong kind of attention. Proper issues are not focused on, and most importantly we give away our right to form our own judgment on issues and events. We need to be able to think for ourselves. So I can not label the events as the same, as I’m certain most people will, but am inclined to feel that the consequences of both atrocities will parallel one another. This is the central idea here.

Thus in my search for understanding the background-some of the context-I have to go back to September 11. Living here my entire life, and watching the towers fall from my Brooklyn-based middle school puts me on location during the horrific event. Additionally, as a Muslim, the aftermath of the September 11 attacks has been even more life altering. I can give you a compelling narrative and paint a picture with words depicting my science classroom that overlooked the once-perfect Manhattan skyline. But I don’t want to get caught up in the details that everyone is already familiar with. I would much rather focus on what happened after. At the age of thirteen, the enormity of the event did not sink. I am not honestly sure when it finally did but incidents throughout the past seven years has led me to question motives, justice and vengeance. How was I, by virtue of being Muslim, implicated? Whose side was I on or did I even have to ‘choose’ a side?

I was trying to put things in context, but perhaps at that age could not do so. And I’m still unsure if I can contextualize it all even now. My faith, and trust in Allah, remains as strong as ever. I have however questioned the reasoning suicide attackers have used to justify their actions. I have tried to decipher political bias and acts that may have induced so many to take on this course of action in killing in-

nocent civilians. I have wondered immensely why was the name of my God being slandered to justify violence. On the other side of the coin, I have also contemplated on why suddenly I am in some sort of “allegiance” with the bad guys for simply being a Muslim.

I have searched for answers within my own Muslim community. In keeping with the idea of context, I have tried to find these answers to such open-ended questions. But the Islamic community in itself is quite diverse, differing in lifestyle choices, taking various positions on key issues, and so forth. So how can anyone, including myself come to a conclusion about this? Thomas Friedman’s piece, *No Way, No How, Not Here*, illustrates one view that the Mumbai “Muslim” terrorists, are not qualified “Muslims,” since as M.J. Akbar says, “terrorism has no place in Islamic doctrine.” The death of innocent lives cannot be deemed in any faith to be doing “God’s work.” I think perhaps Friedman forgets that it does become hard, as diverse as Islam is and given that there is no central figure for Muslim authority like a Pope, for a unified forbiddance or a tirade against suicide bombers. But talks, and discussion within the community, the Ummah, must continue. These are essential problems that need to be dealt with. But this again is only part of what I’m looking for. There has to be more, more to take into account.

From this I realize the two sides of the coins, the various dimensions of the issue. I sense that this is not enough context. I know there can be no justification or excuse for terrorism. In the specificity of each situation, in particular, can context be found. Yet, what does this mean for the bigger picture, because since I am a Muslim, I am affected by general perceptions and even stereotypes.

Personal reflection only helped thus far, the problem goes beyond the events of that day. I have to trace farther back and go into the word etymology of common terms we hear today. The first has to be the term ‘jihad.’ This term apparently, is directly connected to terrorism in Islam. Jihad means to “bring light where there is darkness,” to “achieve a positive goal.” Eqbal Ahmad’s *Jihad Against Time*, includes examples of this definition like social service, humanitarian work and spiri-

tual striving. A holistic definition of the word would be “serving Allah through external and internal means.” Again, like the nature of many religious principles, the exact definition of the word is debatable. However, jihad is used by terrorists to justify the religious basis they have for their intolerable actions. Ahmad also gives a greater insight and a very detailed history of the word’s evolution. Some engaged in warfare against non Muslims—the jihad then, as Islam expanded into the Arabian Peninsula during the early Islamic years. Doing jihad was service to Allah. Arguably, it included the some forced conversion of non-believers into Muslims. Jihad now is senseless killing of innocents today. Sadly, however the conclusion that can be made here is that terrorists justify their actions by taking one aspect of the jihad’s definition and manipulating it for their own political means. This misrepresents the religion, and contributes to an overall negative view of Islam.

We must also trace back terrorism itself. This includes the meaning of the word; its evolution and the various contexts the word has been used in, in history. This one word seems to be the final link to the previous term. The context that is necessary to comprehend. Terrorism is defined as bringing fear and terror for political means. In time not so long past, the word terrorism was nearly synonymous with the Soviets, especially during the early 1990s. It would not have been surprising then to watch even a James Bond movie to see the main villain as a Russian communist. He was the terrorist then. As time progresses and history takes its course, the word terrorism has sadly become associated with Islam. The image of a new terrorist forms, usually a middle-eastern descent man, with an Islamic background, between the ages of twenty to late thirties. This is the face of the new terrorist. The history of the word, and terrorism’s evolving nature provides more of a framework to better understand the situation.

Islamic terrorists are not alone in their arguments and in their persuasion for committing

atrocities in the name of a higher being. Roy and Ahmad come into an agreement that political motives and the desire for power are motives behind violence by terrorists and religious leaders from all groups. Ahmad sums it as “neither Muslims nor Jews nor Hindus are unique in this respect...they are concerned with power, not with the soul, with the mobilization of people for political purpose rather than with sharing or alleviating their sufferings and aspirations.” Thus authorities are not concerned with the ideology they use to gather individuals under the religious banner.

In trying to understand this all, one must deal with the politicization of Islam; it is obvious that religion and political aims are intertwined. It seems to be hard for many to separate the two. There are internal issues within Islam that need to be dealt with, but the focus cannot be lost at just that. The politiciza-

*‘Jihad’ - This term apparently, is directly connected to terrorism in Islam. Jihad means to “bring light where there is darkness,” to “achieve a positive goal.”*

tion of Islam has another side to it which is in regards to worldwide conflicts. The bigger picture provides more perspective as it is concerned with those who are innocent but caught in the middle when looking for the “right terrorists.” In the name of ‘fighting against terrorism,’ Russia can fight Chechnya’s Muslim rebels, unjust Indian political figures

can imprison the most unlikely Muslim citizens as terrorist, and Palestinians can continue to die in Gaza. These victims are caught in the middle of something that is beyond their hands. They are the casualties. In these cases, Roy says how “the US war on terror put the wind in their sails.” The casualties just happen to be in the wrong spot, in the wrong time. As a result, the world will continue to bleed. The conclusion drawn from this only makes me wonder if there is any solution at all. It also makes me realize demonizing Islam isn’t helping either, which is what happens when a narrow vision of Islam takes place.

I cannot end terrorism. But I do know violence will not end the terrorist activities. Nor will war, as Roy too mentions. It is as how Jeffrey Sachs has mentioned on numerous occasions, poverty is one of the breeding grounds

for terrorism. Media too plays an important part, with their lack of attention on the poor yet providing this amply to the terrorists. The media is not the only to blame. Overall there is not enough focus on the “elephants in the room,” as Roy says. This includes the Gujarat killings of 2002, the volatile region of Kashmir, and other issues for India. For America, the elephants in the room have also been avoided. Context is merely forgotten.

Going back to 9/11, going back to present day situations, I am stranded. I see myself as one of those who Eqbal Ahmad says “are stranded in the middle of the ford, between the deep waters of tradition and modernity.” I am one of those who are often times confused by the perplexities of life, as I am sure many are. But I remember all the facets of my identities; my faith, my heritage and my beliefs.

I think, and know Islam is not intolerable with modern society. There really is not a “clash of civilizations.” Islam adapts, and will only grow stronger. In order to ensure this, and to

enable the entire world to progress, we need relevant issues to be vocalized internally and externally. We can not continue to form opinions based on stereotypes and generalizations. In the pluralistic world of today, we cannot simply assume. We must take action and deal with situations.

Thus as I walk away from the vigil held on Low Plaza for the victims of Mumbai, with hope in my heart. I have tried to contextualize it all but I see now that it is a never-ending process. Perhaps, terrorism can be a ‘thing of the past.’ My instincts tell me that ‘Islam’ will not become synonymous with the word ‘terrorism.’ This can only happen however if we hear one another, listen to each other’s voice, or “awaaz” as it’s called in Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. This discussion must take place within the Islamic community, as well as between other religious, and cultural groups. This is the only way. The math problem, like this can indeed be solved. The expectation, the answer so to speak, is there. Have I provided enough context here?







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