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Contents

Fuzzy Boundaries of Folk Healing: Interpretations of a Muslim Ethnic Group in Bangladesh

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This paper explores the fluidities in health and illness beliefs in the folk medical system of a small community in Bangladesh, that of the Pangal[1]. The Pangal are a minority ethnic group which coexist with mainstream Bengalis but receive little in the way of government resources and infrastructure. They are socioeconomically marginal, yet increasingly drawn into a market economy where they are disadvantaged compared to more mainstream Bengalis. By examining qualitative data and narrative accounts collected during ethnographic research in the community and situating these within a broader socioeconomic context, this paper examines how medical beliefs and cosmologies and ethnomedical practices are both shaped by political economy (Singer 1996; Singer and Baer 1995) or what Leatherman (1996) and Baer (1996) refer to as political ecology.

I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork among the Pangal, a small Muslim group that belongs to the broader Manipuri ethnicity. Almost ninety per cent of Bangladeshis are adherents of Islamic religious beliefs, making Islam the dominant religion in the country (BBS 2004). The religious similarity may have facilitated the cohesion and co-operation that obtained between the two communities. However, it may also have downplayed the distinct ethnic identity of the Pangal and facilitated the assimilation of various cultural attributes from the mainstream Bengalis into Pangal lives. The Manipuri people in Bangladesh, who originated in Manipur state, India, divide themselves into three categories: the Bishnupriya, the Meitei, and the Pangal. The Pangal follow Islamic religious practice whereas the Bishnupriya and the Meitei follow the Hindu religious tradition. Current and reliable data on the number of Manipuris in Bangladesh is severely inadequate. According to a government census compiled in 1991, the number of Manipuris in Bangladesh at the time was 24,882; in 1995, an NGO estimated the figure at 45,000 (Ahmed and Chowdhury 2003). Recent literature does not provide estimates of the number of Pangal people within this group although, according to Ali (1979), the number of Pangal who historically migrated and were living in Bangladesh in 1979 was 30,000. These figures are in themselves contradictory. The literature suggests that the numbers of Pangal in Bangladesh are smaller than those of the other two groups. Like many small ethnic groups in Bangladesh, the Pangal live in ostensibly poor urban facilities and have limited access to state sponsored services. For example, the presence of state-sponsored modern medical services is severely inadequate in the area where the Pangal live. My fieldwork reveals that their health

management is strongly dependent upon their local healing practices. Interviews with the villagers directed my understanding regarding their health towards the extant community ideas of god and devil, good and evil, and other supernatural powers and their roles in health. The roles of magico-religious practices in health management have been explored over time, from the classical (Rivers 1924) to more recent studies (Bhasin 2008). While religion plays an important role in the intersections between self-care and non-professional medical care (Kroeger 1983), authors have found both negative and positive consequences of religious rituals on health (Rippentrop et al. 2005). 'Unhealthy rituals', such as ritual suicides, have had a negative impact on people's lives (Jarvis and Northcott 1987). In contrast, many other studies have also stressed the positive impact of religion on health management; Crawford *et al.* (1989), who studied mental health sufferers in the United States from a vast range of geographical and socio-demographic characteristics, found that the highly religious participants showed considerably less distress than their non-religious counterparts. In this way, the multifaceted roles of magico-religious beliefs on illness management are well documented. To what extent those medical beliefs in any community can be changed or reshaped due to interaction with other communities are still scantily discussed.

Understanding these changing patterns in illness beliefs should be more pivotal when it comes to a small ethnic community living next to a larger politically and culturally powerful community. The uneven nature of the interaction may drive the small community facing assimilation of several of their own cultural attributes into the more powerful ones from the larger community. To explicate the overlapping and contradictory illness beliefs in health management among the Pangal, I suggest that we must examine these in light of their asymmetrical relationships with the Bengalis, the mainstream population of the country, and the ideologies of cosmopolitan medicine[2] brought to them by the later. The wide expansion of modern medicine with its state-sponsorship, ideological superiority and high prestige, may be responsible for rendering the boundaries of other medical systems weak. In other words, not only individuals' perceptions of health and health management but the overall traditional folk healing system of the Pangal may have been influenced by the expansion of modern medicine. This change, as Appadurai (1990) observes, has occurred due to increased global cultural interactions.

The Pangal participate in a state-sponsored education system; thus the adoption of various Bengali cultural attributes, including the mainstream populations' acceptance of modern medicine, was likely to occur. The epistemological differences between modern medicine and folk medicine may also influence the overlap and create multidimensional tensions amongst practitioners and beneficiaries in the community. Although various similarities and dissimilarities between folk medical systems and modern medicine have been observed (Finkler 1994), the scale of changes in health management and tension that occur due to the interaction with other medical system still need more exploration. This paper attempts not only to explicate these tensions but also to explore the fluid boundaries of folk healing in Pangal interpretations of cosmology and philosophy from a political ecological perspective (Baer 1996).

The political ecologies of folk healing

An ecological perspective has been adopted by several scholars in their attempts to explain health and illness (Wood 1979; Moore *et al.* 1980; McElroy and Townsend 1979). As seen from an ecological perspective, health and health problems are 'reflections of ecological

relationships within a population, between neighbouring populations, and among the life forms and physical components of a habitat. Medical ecology considers health to be a measure of how well a population has adapted to its environment' (McElroy and Townsend 1979: 2). The concept of adaptation remains a central theme in this approach, which has been critically evaluated by scholars (See, for example, Singer 1989). In addition, this approach, as Baer (1996) states, considers health problems as 'environmental insults to which humans must adjust'. By upholding the political economic factors behind health issues, the notion of adaptation has been rejected and 'a synthetic biological approach' is suggested (Leatherman 1996). The relationship between political economy and ecology has been discussed by several theorists, who have variously referred to it as 'political economy of ecology' (O'Connor 1989), 'eco-Marxism' (Grundman 1991), and 'political ecology' (Baer 1996).

Folk healing systems, with their historically derived association with the environment and nature, lend themselves to interpretation from a medical ecological perspective, which explains how historical interaction between human beings and the environment has facilitated the resolving of health problems. Folk healers frequently find explanations for spiritual illnesses in nature: they often use locally grown herbs to treat certain physical ailments. Urbanization and the expansion of a market economy have the potential to increase inter-community interaction markedly. However, such interaction may lead to the diminishing of the previous subsistence nature of small communities, thus increasing rather than reducing their dependency on each other. Interaction has also made possible the 'mixing' of the different healthcare systems, and, while this mixing of several medical practices is not uni-directional, any medical practice possessing considerable political and economic power may ultimately influence others. In this paper, I explain the complexities and ambiguities in the Pangal folk healing system in terms of its practitioners' interaction with the politically and economically powerful modern medicine introduced to them by the Bengalis.

The place and the people

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken in three phases in Kandigaon, a village in the Maulvi Bazar district of Sylhet, a north-eastern region of Bangladesh.[3] The three phases were 2003 (one month), 2004 (eight months) and finally, during a more recent visit for one month in 2008. The very nature of an ethnographic study requires an understanding of people's perceptions: situating their experiences in the context of their lives is important for realising the meaning of the phenomenon being studied. A full understanding goes beyond what informants describe or say; rather, the purpose of ethnographic research is to elicit an understanding of what those studied actually mean. For this reason, I stayed with the community in order to embed myself within its everyday life. I rented a small house in the Bazar, which is situated next to the village and is where the community's social gatherings occur.

In the initial stages of my fieldwork, I encountered a language barrier. Many of the Pangals' speaking skills are limited to their mother tongue. I tried to find villagers who could speak Bengali, the national language of Bangladesh which I speak fluently. I soon found a group of young people who spoke Bengali language in addition to their mother tongue. I developed a good relationship with one young boy named Sumon, who later would act as my key informant and interpreter during many of the interviews. My first few interactions with Sumon revealed that he had a very good understanding of the

community of healers (one of whom is his uncle). Sumon often sees people coming to their house seeking treatment. I decided to recruit him as a key intermediary. He could interact with the community and interview members who could not speak Bengali.

Sumon introduced me to two healers and to some community members, who had earlier been ill and were cured after healing. With Sumon's help, I used purposive sampling to locate people who had suffered from various illnesses and consulted folk healers. I obtained extensive data by observing the social situations of the healers, the sufferers, and the lay villagers. I planned to conduct (a) two forms of individual interviews: random unstructured; and semi-structured, and (b) focus group discussions. While sitting in tea stalls (small restaurants in the bazar), I initiated several unstructured focus group discussions and unstructured interviews which Burgess (1984: 102) calls 'conversations with a purpose'. Out of the 144 households in the village, I selected twenty people that included ten males and ten females, for the semi-structured interviews. Selection was based on gender and illness status. Based upon the data assembled following observation and the five informal interviews already conducted, I prepared a list of questions to guide me during the semi-structured interviews. Over a period of 12 weeks, I conducted interviews with healers, sufferers and their family members, and lay villagers. In reviewing the interviews, I identified key recurring themes which were widely considered to be explanatory sources or correlates for religion in the community. For example, ghost possession that followed the commission of a sin was considered by many informants to be a reason for spiritual illness. I considered it a primary reason for a particular illness in the community.

Out of the selected twenty participants, one informant had reached undergraduate studies level but did not finish; fourteen informants did not complete their tenth grade education. This information is critical when exploring gender disparity. Eight out of the ten female informants had not completed their primary education (fifth grade). This limitation and gender disparity impacts upon their daily income category: half of the informants earn less than two US dollars per day. Most of the male informants were employed as share-croppers, vendors and daily labourers. No females were employed outside of their homes. Their work was totally restricted to the household. Although out of necessity, the informants have to engage in a market economy for their everyday livelihoods, their economic capacity is clearly limited. While most of the informants were members of nuclear families, the observational data suggest that the size of the households may constrain members' living standards. This seemed especially so for approximately half of the informants who came from joint families but where the household relied upon one wage earner.

The data and analysis pertaining to this study must neither be generalised nor treated as representative. I was unable to learn the participants' language due to the short time frame for research and the absence of any institution in the country that offers Pangal language training. The ability to speak the native language is essential for critical and in-depth ethnographic research. However, I was able to overcome this barrier to a certain degree due to the increasing engagement between the Pangal and Bengali peoples. Several Pangal people speak both languages. This study helps to understand the cosmologies of the Pangal folk healing system while at the same time shedding light on the fluidities in the boundaries of folk healing. However, the complexities and ambiguities presented here should be further examined in more long-term ethnographic studies.

Constellation of Forces

When listening to the experiences of the above informants, it became evident that their conceptualisations of illness are closely embedded with their Islamic belief system, a system that provides conceptions of good and bad, and associated rewards and punishments imposed by a supreme power. For example, an individual will be punished with illness if he or she disobeys certain religious rules. However, during my fieldwork, this conception of the community seemed to me much more complex. On the one hand, God is seen as an independent entity, who operates through the 'law of nature' which in turn is created and regulated by God himself. On the other hand, God's commands, which are based on the principal of 'good brings reward' and 'bad invites punishment', may be altered by external intervention. This alteration can happen in two ways: it can be triggered by individual intervention or by bad supernatural forces. Individuals who are devoted to God may request this alteration, which will be approved by God if the person's devotion is deemed strong enough. In the second type of alteration, bad supernatural forces, which are not necessarily always Satan and/or his minions, alter the law of God to demonstrate their own power. This complex feature of the villagers' religious beliefs provides the platform for their folk healing system, a belief system that provides conceptual orientation and categorisation of illnesses in the healing system.

In the main, the illnesses treated by folk healers fall into a dyadic classification which I will call 'spiritual' and 'somatic', given that each embraces a totality in terms of explaining the causation, the experience and the management of the condition. The first category, i.e., spiritual, upholds the existence of a 'spirit', 'ghost', or 'fairy' that may possess an individual and cause suffering. For example, they are often said to cause the person to engage in involuntary behaviour. As my informants suggested, these entities tend to operate through the law of nature when punishing villagers for their sins. These entities may also be called upon by one individual to possess another. But the boundaries of the two types of roles of these entities are not always strongly demarcated. This may be because the intervention of human beings is accepted.In any event, the existence and influence of these entities are real in the lives of the sufferers. The categories that usually cover illnesses include the following: *jinnedhora* (possessed by a jinn), *kiatutka* (possessed by a spirit), *poridhora* (possessed by a fairy), *shami-shtri omil* (a spirit that causes problems between husbands and wives), *nazar* (influenced by Satan's eye), *banmara* (control over a person with the help of a spirit), and *firti-banmara* (releasing someone from another's control). Regarding the intra-classification of spiritual illnesses, (1) it can be person-person (for example, *banmara* and f*irti-banmara*) where an individual intentionally causes another individual's suffering, or (2) it can be impersonal (for example, *jinnedhora* and *kiatutka*) where the supernatural entity, driven by itself, possesses an individual. The expression of these illnesses may also be connected with the larger experiences and world views of sufferers (Obeyesekere 1970). The second category, which I term 'somatic', involves ranges of physical ailments, especially those which are long-term or chronic in nature. The diagnosing and healing of these illnesses differ from procedures employed to treat spiritual illnesses. The involvement of supernatural forces is not considered in somatic illnesses. Rather, the experiences of the sufferers are dealt with by healers using various measures, which includes the preparation of special medications for individuals' specific illnesses. This category embraces illnesses including *jhantis* (jaundice), *komorbedna* (abdominal pain), *bat* (rheumatism), *tan* (asthma), *chudonunu* (small size penis), and *dasto* (purging).

Manipulation and intervention

It is the illness experience, not the biomedical definition of a disease, which drives an individual to discuss his/her ailment with and seek assistance from others (Ram 2010). People's experiences of illness vary from one society to another. Their decisions to seek healing are shaped by 'flows of temporality, habituation and pre-familiarity' (Ram 2010: 203). Among the Pangal, when a community member feels ill, he or she already has pre-conceived ideas about where to go for treatment. Being part of the community and the extant community conceptions of illness, they are socialised to know which healer to consult for their particular form of illness. The decision-making mechanism is embedded with the conceptual base of illness: the principal of the conceptualisation holds the key to healing. The meaning of and explanations for illness are inter-twined with supernatural forces. But, human beings with special attributes possess a quality to alter this connection. In their roles of mediators between the force and the sufferer, healers negotiate and are capable of healing.

Unlike the modern, medical doctor-patient dyadic relationship, the Pangal healers and their practices are closely connected with the everyday interactions of the community members. The roles of the healers extend beyond those of treating illness to participating in and celebrating various religious and cultural rituals with community members. The comprehensive roles of the healers in the community facilitate the holistic nature of healing. By interacting with the villagers on a broad scale, healers become familiar with the patients and their societal and familial backgrounds. The healers, some of whom are women, prescribe various methods of healing depending on the nature of illness and the background of the sufferer. One popularly used method is *tabiz*, an amulet containing holy words that are believed to protect the wearer from evil. The *tabiz* is primarily used for spiritual illnesses. Each *tabiz* comes with several stringent rituals to follow and provisions to maintain. For example, in most cases, individuals have to become cleansed by *ozu*, a practice Muslims employ to cleanse themselves before prayer.

According to informants, entities such as spirits, ghosts, and fairies are always on the roam, seeking to possess humans. These entities attempt to possess those who fail to follow the obligatory religious rules or disobey God. In order to identify spiritual illnesses, one of the healers named Abdul Latif looks for symptoms such as closed eyes, fainting or sudden muteness. If these symptoms are detected in a person, the healer, with his vast range of experience and special attributes, identifies the type of entity responsible. According to my informants, each healer has his/her own unique way of identifying and curing the illness. A healer named Pir Muhammad Badruzzaman stated that he brings in another spirit when curing. He is also capable of reversing the suffering by conferring it on another individual. He said that he sometimes looks for enemies of the sufferers. If no enemies are found who may have caused the suffering, he determines that the illness is attributable to one of the entities roaming around. This healer kindly gave me a *tabiz*, which he provides to his clients to guard them from spirit possession. The *tabiz* has one open end, which the healer seals with a burning candle when delivering it to his client. In the *tabiz* that I was given, because the end was not closed, I was able to see (with his permission) the holy words written on a tightly folded piece of paper. Although he permitted me to see inside the *tabiz*, he did not explain the text to me. Nevertheless, I was able to obtain the literary meaning of the text from Muhammad Lutfor Rahman, Principal, Shahjalal Jamea Islamia Madrasa, Pathantula, Sylhet, Bangladesh. Each of the four corners of the folded piece of paper bears the name of Muhammad, the last

prophet of Islam (Fig. 1). The *tabiz* also carries the names of the four archangels: Azrail, Zibrail, Israil and Mitail, and the four companions of Muhammad: Bokkor, Omar, Osman and Ali.

Figure 1. Holy verse from an amulet prescribed for release from spirit possession

Needless to say, the literary meaning of the text enclosed in the *tabiz* is a very minute part of the cosmologies implicit in Pangal philosophy. Placing emphasis on the literary meaning of the *tabiz* text may detract from the recipients' perceptions of folk healing, distracting the focus from the conceptual base of illness perception. So, it is important that this meaning is read and situated in the broader conceptualisation of their religious beliefs because an in-depth understanding of these aspects is crucial to understanding the attitudes and beliefs of the community (Ingham 1970).

The diagnosis and treatment of somatic illness requires intervention in the body through, for example, medication. Most of the sufferers insisted that certain somatic illnesses can only be treated by folk healers, as opposed to biomedical doctors. It is worth noting that most illnesses classified as such, according to the experiences of my informants, are chronic in nature, as for example, *tan* (asthma). The healer, Pir Muhammad Badruzzaman, insisted that he does not cure ailments; rather, God cures and the healer plays the role of *usila* (medium). Finally, he provided me with a list of ingredients that he uses when preparing medications (Table 1).

When treating, the healers prepare special medications. Healers who were interviewed by me were very reluctant to provide the names of the secret ingredients they use when preparing the medications for somatic illnesses. One healer, who I questioned

about the ingredients, replied in a somewhat cold tone: '...It's very complex, you will not understand.' Following this exchange, the interview threatened to become uncomfortable, so I stopped enquiring into the secrecy of the healer's medications. While this experience underlines the limitations associated with employing an ethnographic approach, it also appeared to me as an effort by healers to uphold the distinct identity of their healing system in the face of modern medical expansion in their lives. Despite all conscious efforts, the boundaries of Pangal folk medicine and their health beliefs seemed somewhat fluid.

Table 1: Ingredients used to prepare medications for somatic illness

Local Term	English term	Scientific
Soibatinkhan	Mimosa	*Mimosa pudica*
Nimorpata	Neem	*Azadirachta indica*
Koypholor siokor	Pawpaw	*Carica papaya*
Tunimunir pata	Gotu Kola	*Centella asiatica*
Kathalorpata	Jackfruit	*Artocarpus heterophyllus*
Tulsi	Holy basil	*Ocimum sanctum*
Soishartel	Mustard oil	*Brassica juncea*
Biholomgach	*	*
Dutra	Datura	*Datura metel*
Narkolortol	Coconut oil	*Cococ mucifera*
Amorpata	Mango leaf	*Mangifera indica*

* Not found

Fluidities in health seeking

The concept of illness and the 'theory of causation' behind the illness seem clear, especially in the categorisation of the illness and the choice of form of treatment. As informants stated, some illnesses, spirit possession, for example, cannot be treated effectively by modern medical doctors. In one interview, I was informed that '…modern doctor[s] never come to the village, they do not know what is real, and they are not ready to believe what they do not know.' Other informants were just as sceptical of folk healers; for example, one young male adult said: 'We never go to the folk healers, nowadays no one trusts them.' It is worth noting here that some of these young adults, who have visited a folk healer at least once, sometimes revealed that the visit was concurrent with their taking of modern medicine. Among the Pangal, if this difference is to be treated as a generational difference due to education and modernisation, it will be criticised for overlooking the differences in the perceptions of the adult community members. The adult members of the community do not necessarily demonstrate homogeneity in categorising illnesses and seeking treatment.

Informants who participated in the semi-structured interviews revealed that they had consulted other therapeutic systems while they were receiving treatment from folk healers. For example, one male informant, who accepted a *tabiz* for *jinnedhora*, which causes him involuntary behaviour, was also taking medication recommended by a modern

doctor. This raises the question of how this concurrent healthcare seeking is intertwined with dominant factors such as belief in the role of super-natural forces in causing illness. In addition to concurrent use of different therapeutic systems, it was observed during focus group discussions, that some informants taking folk medicine were somewhat hesitant to admit the fact. Informants also argued the inability of modern doctors to treat some illnesses; others, who were able to meet the medical expenses, willingly consulted them. However, these contradictory perceptions of folk medicine and biomedicine reflect the contradictions that obtain between the ideologies of modernisation, represented by biomedicine and local medicine labelled as 'backward'. These complexities and fluid demarcations can be observed in other South Asian counties. Take, for example, the co-existence of folk and biomedicine in a rural Nepali household where biomedicine, as a symbol of modernity, can create difficulties for people who want to access other medical systems (Pigg 1995). However, this juxtaposition with people's concurrent access to different medical systems, while fraught with complexities regarding the perceptions of cure, is not uncommon cross-culturally (Kidder 2004 p.33-34).

These fluidities can be explained as a result of increased cultural interaction (Appadurai 1990), which may facilitates changes in various cultural attributes including perception of health management. The point of departure here may well be the close communication and interaction that persists between the Pangal and the Bengalis. Despite the distinct language of the Pangal, they have been participating in Bengali-operated educational institutions for many years. Geographical locality may also have facilitated this interaction. The Pangal and Bengalis inhabit the plains, whereas a number of other ethnic communities live in the more hilly parts of the northern and southern areas of the country. The former's habitation of the plains, and their domestic interaction, are probably the most important reasons underpinning the Pangal's participation in the market economy and other state-sponsored services like healthcare and education. Although the nearest modern healthcare centre is almost a half day's journey by bus to the sub-district city centre, several Bengali-operated pharmacies in the Pangal village bazar represent frequent use of modern medicines in the village. When asked, the pharmacists[4] said that many villagers come voluntarily, seeking medication for illnesses such as headache, dysentery and fever: they rarely come with prescriptions. Needless to say, the pharmacists, symbolizing modern medicine in the area, perform an important role in shaping perceptions of healthcare among the Pangal. The expansion of modern medicine appears to have wrought changes in their cultural values in terms of health beliefs, creating a mixed or 'hybrid' folk medical system. This has established a medical practice which is neither fully traditional folk nor modern medicine. This hybridity among the Pangal derives from the extant fusion and assimilation that happens as a result of the interactions between Pangal folk healing and modern medical ideologies brought by the Bengalis. However, folk healers' efforts to uphold their distinctiveness through concealing the healing procedures present the hybridity as a real disjuncture indicating the uniqueness of their healing system (Young 1995; Bhabha 1994).

Altruistic yet materialistic

Both community members and healers see the latter as 'mediators', who are able to send a message to God about an illness, and to ask for resolution of the suffering. Introducing himself as an *Usila*, healer Muhammad Abdul Latif sees himself as a metaphoric person,

who is able to play the role of mediator between God and the illness. Perceptions of this role have divine connotations. The divinity associated with healers is based on the perception that God provides them with certain special attributes that allow them to help community members. Thus, the services provided by the healers are considered to be altruistic. In line with this perception, healers in the community in general attain very high prestige, superior social status and honour. The community members are expected to visit the healer's house if they need help. The complexity here lies in the fact that the healers will visit sufferers' houses but only, as informants argued, if the sufferer is politically and economically powerful.

Abdul Kadir, an economically well-off informant, showed his influence when he stated that he never goes to a healer's house; rather, the healer visits Kadir's house and provides the treatment. Once, when his mother was ill, he sent his servant to healer Abdul Latif's house. The healer came immediately, provided the treatment, and received a cash payment for his services. Some elderly informants, highlighting the changing scenario of the healer-going-to-the-sufferer's house, said that Abdul Latif's parents were also renowned healers. But, his own parents had never visited any community member's house to provide treatment. The issue of material incentives becomes even more complex. In another example, the healer was a woman from a comparatively rich family; her son was a Union Parishad (the smallest unit of local government) member. This healer never visits sufferers' homes; rather they must come to her house if they need treatment. A few issues are worth emphasising in light of these complexities. In one case, a rich woman healer receives social honour; she enjoys staying at home because of the extant community gender perceptions (which value women's ability to avoid the public gaze) and her economic and political status. So in some cases, the economic and political power of the individual overrides the divine status of another individual. Abdul Latif, enjoying male status as opposed to the female's status, always visits rich sufferers' houses. Both healers are afforded social honour by the community, especially Abdul Latif for his 'nice behaviour' (as one informant stated).

Table 2: Monetary transactions associated with healing

Illness	Amount (BDT)
Jhantis	350
Komorbedna	40-50
Bat	40-50
Tan	50-100
Chudonunu	500-1000
Dasto	300
Jinnedhora	500
Kiatutka	500
Poridhora	500
Shami-shtrir omil	100-200
Banmara	400-500
Firti-banmara	400-500

The healers themselves are also engaged in various forms of conflict and competition. For example, healer Badru Pir does not like his counterpart Abdul Latif and Abdul Latif considers the former healer a 'fraud' and 'greedy'. This conflict between healers is sometimes implicitly interpreted by community members. Some informants prefer to see a specific healer; others may regard the same healer as the least preferred option. Informants strongly argued that decisions regarding the choice of healer are dependent upon the fame of the healer and the efficacy of his/her treatment. The fame of the healer is often contingent upon whether or not the profession is hereditary. If a parent of the healer was also a renowned folk healer, the latter attracts special preference from community members. Opinions regarding the efficacy of medications are spread by the people who receive treatment. In one case, the healer, Abdul Molla, inherited the profession from his father-in-law, Samir Mia, and not from his parents. Samir Mia was a famous healer in the community, who had earned enormous prestige and honour. Fame and efficacy may also influence the monetary system in healing. Although healing is considered altruistic, it in fact involves a range of payments which vary from one healer to another and from one illness to another. A general feature of the payment system is that the expenses surrounding spiritual illnesses are in excess of those surrounding somatic illnesses.

Theorizing the healing system

In this paper, I have described the folk healing system of a Muslim Manipuri group known as the Pangal, and their interpretations of the aetiologies and management of illness. I have attempted to show the close association between the religious practices and illnesses and healing perceptions of the Pangal, and have referred to the dyadic categories of illnesses, i.e., the spiritual and the somatic. I have described the complexities surrounding traditional treatments and their juxtaposition with the modern medical system, which contributes to the fluid boundaries of Pangal's local illness beliefs that has resulted in the hybridization of the community's healing system.

This conceptualisation of illnesses and the folk healing system of the Pangal initiates a discussion regarding the relationship between humans and nature. Historically, this community, which originally came from Manipur state in India, settled in various locations, mainly in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh. Elderly informants shared their experiences of information handed down from their grandfathers. One informant stated that the primary habitation of this village by the Pangal started approximately two hundred years ago[5]. Around that time, the area was covered with deep forest. The lives of the earlier settlers were very hard due to the dense forest and the presence of many ferocious animals. The community members had to clear the jungles before they could settle. During an in-depth interview, another informant related the earlier habitation to the existing oral folk literature. The current oral folk stories, which talk about fighting with tigers and lions, are actually representations of the period of time when their forefathers, in their attempts to settle, had to fight the various animals roaming the dense forest. Some stories depict their fighting with animals as symbolic of the pride and bravery of the community members; other stories tell of repeated failures due to the evil eye.

Keeping these oral histories in mind, if one looks at the magico-religious nature of illnesses and their healings (Winkelman 1990), they can be explained from the perspective of adaptation of the community (McElroy and Townsend 1979). Their accounts of super-natural powers underpin notions of how the early settlers perceived nature and how they developed explanations for it, which, in turn, may have facilitated their adaptation to the environment.

Additionally, the treatment of somatic illness in the Pangal, which largely depends upon various plants, also points to a close association between the community and nature (Sikdar and Dutta 2008). However, this framework provides limited explanation about the fluidity of illness beliefs and complexities when the ill concurrently access different therapeutic systems.

Despite their coexistence with the Bengali mainstream people, the Pangal received limited utilities and services from the government. As suggested earlier vis-à-vis their marginalised socio-economic status, limited state incentives regarding their health, education and economy have made the capacities of the Pangal structurally limited. Living with these limitations in a non-egalitarian society, their everyday lives are increasingly shaped by the regular market economy where their participation is unequal and unfair compared to that of the Bengalis. Even in cases when a Pangal villager is able to afford the high cost of modern health treatment, he/she has to travel for almost half a day to access this kind of treatment. Community members, who opt to seek modern medical services, especially for chronic illnesses, are generally incapable of doing so, thus prolonging their suffering. As a result, their explanations for their suffering find a way of becoming associated with the cosmologies surrounding their lives. Finally, in analysing Pangal healing behaviour, positing their relationship within the environment in a political economic context (Singer 1996; Singer and Baer 1995) seems a sensible way of explaining the fuzzy boundaries of their folk healing system from a political ecological perspective (Leatherman 1996; Baer 1996). This paper has suggested that the changing patterns of the Pangal cosmologies, their increased participation in the dominant market economy together with their structurally marginalised and limited capabilities, demand that the analysis be political.

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End Notes

1. This name is written in several ways in various literatures: 'Meitei-Pangal', 'Meitei-Pangon', 'Pangon', 'Pangan', 'Meetei-Pangal' (Khalique 2005; Seram 1996, 2005). In this paper, I use Pangal, as the informants of this study refer to themselves using this term.

2. Following Charles Leslie (1976), the term cosmopolitan medicine, as it appears in this paper, is synonymous with modern medicine, biomedicine, and Western medicine, which is the state supported, dominant medical system in Bangladesh, as in many other countries.

3. Bangladesh consists of seven administrative areas, called divisions. Each division is divided into several districts. Maulvi Bazar is one of the four districts in the Sylhet division.

4. The term 'pharmacist' here should be read carefully. The pharmacists I spoke to did not have the required formal professional certifications; nevertheless, they were managing the drug stores.

5. This time frame should be considered as part of their oral history, as opposed to a written and definitive historical timeframe.

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Figure 1: Jesuit Chapel; Source: Valentine Gunasekara

The Engineer and the Bricoleur: Revisiting a Familiar Opposition in Sri Lankan Architecture:

Anoma Pieris

Approach

The late twentieth century saw numerous experiments with modernism in Southeast Asia, which opened up multiple discursive strains centred on urban experiences. Projections of an intelligent tropical city and designs for environmental skyscrapers brought green architecture to the fore while skyscrapers built by numerous Western and East Asian architects in Southeast Asia initiated a debate on Asia-centred globalization (Marshall 2003, Yeang 1994). Central to these debates was the numerous innovative technologies introduced to Southeast Asia via East Asia, and the orientation towards a Pacific Century based on investment and engagement with China. At the heart of these arguments was the decision to elevate Asian populations through homeownership into stake-holder middle class polities. Both Singapore and Malaysia embarked on such projects.

While architectural proposals remained idealistic and oriented towards an urban and global future, they were supported and critiqued by alternative representations of culture. The dystopian experience of the post-modern city was reflected in the cinema and in the culture of manga and animée (e.g. Eric Khoo, 12 Storeys, Singapore; Osamu Tezuka, Metropolis 1949). Moreover, despite its rapid urbanization Southeast Asia did not neglect its rural imaginary. Tourism-led development infused a heritage industry focused on urban environments while resort developments revived the language of the regional vernacular (Tan 2007). In short, a rich and diverse range of architectural debate and production, supported by a growing publishing culture was evident.

Compared to Southeast Asia, South Asian architecture, particularly that of Sri Lanka, turned its back on global trends. Most architects focused on the revival of vernacular architecture, its craft based traditions and labour-intensive processes. Anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiment coalesced to inform a regionalist tradition bent on reinserting pre-colonial forms into contemporary discourse. A parallel critique of globalization arising from the Middle East, following the 1973 OPEC oil crisis reinforced this orientation (Akkach 1997). Although lauded in their objectives of augmenting indigenous identities, these positions were narrow in many respects. They replicated familiar tropes using colonial technologies, and craft-based rural traditions turning their backs on the innovations of an earlier age. Very little work was

done in the areas of sustainability, labour-saving technologies or socially-oriented solutions. In Sri Lanka, archaic forms of a feudal past were reproduced as the appropriate expression for a modern polity, resulting in the neglect of modern institutional and commercial programmes necessary for urban development. The vernacular was aesthetically familiar but limited in its scope. Sri Lanka's reluctance to experiment with modernism divided the profession into elite designers focused on the vernacular and corporate architects building in the International Style (a style that emerged from modernism and was adapted all over the world during the early twentieth century).

Using the competition for the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects (SLIA) as an example, this paper examines approaches to architectural design in Sri Lanka during the late twentieth century. It asks why modernism was demonized and why the vernacular emerged as the only valid architectural expression in the country. It takes as its theoretical basis a familiar opposition of the engineer and the bricoleur and applies it to an analysis of an architect, Valentine Gunasekara, who consistently went against the grain. This paper argues that the choice made for the SLIA Headquarters by the jurors, Justin Samarasekere and Geoffrey Bawa, articulates a division in the profession that still persists. The arguments put forward in this paper build on material first advanced in the book *Imagining Modernity: The Architecture of Valentine Gunasekara* (Pieris 2007).

The competition for the SLIA headquarters

In 1984, the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects announced an open competition for their headquarters to be built in a site in Kotte, and the winner was Lakshman Alwis of Design Consortium Ltd (Sri Lanka Institute of Architects 2011). But the site was abandoned after soil-testing for a new location at 120/7 Vidya Mawatha in the heart of Colombo. This new site, previously owned by the Chess Federation was transferred for a grant of Rs. 700, 000, and in return the SLIA was to provide approximately 4,300 square feet on the ground floor for their exclusive use (Alwis 1988: 19-24). Work commenced on the 14th of July 1988, and in September that year the proposed design was published in the SLIA journal Vol.100. No.4.

The drawings that are published in the SLIA journal were adapted for a contained urban site. The architect, who had initially responded with a site-appropriate architecture derived spatially from the vernacular tradition, had to rework his design for an urban brief. The resultant four-storey building with a steeply pitched roof canopy had a formal resemblance to buildings of the late colonial period typically executed by the Department of Public Works. Stylistically it was eclectic. Its classical proportions and exaggerated scale gave it a northern European sensibility, and an almost Tudor presence. When built, it would lose the dominating roof and take on a modern interpretation of a stripped neo-classical façade. Its relationship to colonial patterns was most evident in its plan and elevation.

The brief for the Institute's headquarters called for a secretariat and a council chamber, a secretariat for the courses and studio/lecture rooms; a multi purpose hall, divisible into two lecture halls; and other general facilities including a lunch room, display areas and the library (Alwis1988: 19). The consolidation of the Institute's school and its administrative unit, which had been previously dispersed in buildings at different locations, were significant achievements for the SLIA, and a cause for celebration. It also signalled the dismantling of the exclusive practice of providing architectural education through the highly competitive

and very limited number of places offered by the Moratuwa University's only Faculty of Architecture. In this regard it stood for the democratization of the profession by making it accessible to a wider range of fee-paying applicants with a general education and varied skill levels. The Institute's school would break the monopoly held by an institutionalized tertiary education system, validated through the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), which had, for years, marginalized the system of apprenticeship, and would consequently strengthen the vocational profile of the design industry.

The Palladian character of the Institute's building was most pronounced in its floor plan, which demonstrated the strong geometry and symmetrical organization of the late colonial period. The introversion of the building mass and the articulation of the façade supported this approach. Yet the element that connected several floors of the building carrying visitors between teaching spaces, general offices and council chamber was an anonymous circulation core with no connection to its external context. Access to the building was equally deceptive, with attention divided between the entrance for the Chess Federation and the SLIA competing on an otherwise banal façade.

The SLIA headquarters building was symptomatic of a brand of corporate architecture that had been introduced to Colombo over the last two decades of the twentieth century: an architecture, which was not reconciled with its role in history. Its moderately articulated façade suggested the contradictory desire to be both modern and appeal to history at the same time. Yet, what historical model would suit its modern programme? Postmodernisms return to history captured so successfully through the regionalist revival did not translate as easily into a modern multi-storey building. Examples of office buildings that enlarged the vernacular such as the National Institute of Management Studies located further down the same street appeared top heavy and disproportionate.

In the process of reconciling these two positions in the built embodiment of the design profession, some of its designer's preferences reveal themselves. Lakshman Alwis, a graduate of the University of Melbourne, would in 1992 compile a book on *British Period Architecture in Sri Lanka*, the only record of its kind (Alwis, Aluwihare and Navaratne 1992). In it, the late colonial legacy would be painstakingly documented, with detailed descriptions of a range of building types throughout the island. The institutional buildings featured there would include the Supreme Court, the General Post Office, and the Old Parliament and Secretariat, which display a comparable monolithic presence. The SLIA headquarters would similarly suggest the bureaucratic hardening of the profession as corporate membership increased and its impact on the built environment became considerable. The expansion of the institution reflected the shift from small domestic practices to large corporate architectural firms from 1977 onwards when Sri Lanka opened up its economy under a capitalist government. Whereas previously, architectural projects of a significant scale had been the preserve of government institutions, architects were being given opportunities for a range of projects.

Yet another important change would be signified in the building's easy reference to colonial institutions. It would suggest that colonial period history had ceased to be the target of political manipulation and had entered everyday culture. Having passed the critical two generations since the gaining of independence from the British, the style was available for appropriation at will. In fact, it had been neutralized into a mere aesthetic, signifying authority, longevity and *pucca* structures. Infused by new-found interest in the colonial

period vernacular, colonial expressions had become palatable, even celebrated through the restoration of feudal *walavvas* (manorial residences) and their attraction for tourism-led development.

A far more serious analysis of Alwis's approach is necessary in order to understand why this particular building seemed appropriate for expressing the ideals of the profession during the late nineteen eighties in which the education of architects locally and dismantling of colonial class barriers within the profession played a significant part. The numbers of qualified architects and the range of buildings produced had exploded suggesting a far more dynamic environment for practitioners. Alwis was a prominent educator and corporate architect. Yet, while confident in dealing with diverse urban briefs and eager to corporatise the profession, few practitioners dared to innovative beyond the existing paradigms. Perhaps the most important factor contributing to this inertia was the magnification of the vernacular through the character of Geoffrey Bawa. Inherently conservative in his palette of design technologies, Bawa would not experiment with overtly modernist expressions until the very end of his career.[1]

Alwis's second design is not reminiscent of Bawa's work. Attempts to blow up a small-scale structure, built with appropriately dimensioned building elements, to the size of a contemporary urban building had proved notoriously difficult, as evident in Bawa's own design for the National Institute of Management Studies. In doing so, the vernacular would not only lose its familiar aesthetic composition that gave it its picturesque aspect but would wander far from the moral economy, which defined it. Alwis, wisely, avoided this approach when confronted with a tight urban site in Colombo. Yet his parallel and alternative solution remained unresolved, a truthful representation of the profession at that juncture.

Engineer and bricoleur

The compromise expressed in Alwis's solution was endemic to the Sri Lankan architecture profession, which was torn between two equally entrenched and opposing approaches to architecture.The anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, in his analysis of the 'savage mind', identifies these separate approaches to techne using the familiar tropes of engineer and bricoleur. He writes:

> The bricoleur is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials, which is always finite…(Levi-Straus 1966: 17).

The bricoleur, popularized by post-modernism creates openings for symbolic content that was denied by rationalist forms of modernism. The approach is reminiscent of the work of Geoffrey Bawa whose application of an available palette of materials and technologies defines his aesthetic as one drawn from the vernacular architecture of Sri Lanka's past. It is heightened by the insertion of building elements recycled from historic buildings in a process, which has been described as cannibalizing the past (Menon 1998: 25). Bawa's

additive approach to design where much of the composition is resolved on site is also typical of the collage approach.

Although more recently, since his death, biographers have taken great pains to establish the historic buildings of Sri Lanka as Bawa's primary inspiration,[2] his sources too are a postmodern collage of historic architectures from both Asia and Europe. Bawa himself admits to drawing from "Italian hill towns…English country houses…Greek, Roman, Mexican and Buddhist ruins, the Alhambra in Granada, the chapel in Ronchamp, the Mogul forts in Rajasthan and the marvellous palace of Padmanadapurum" (Lewcock, Ozkan and Robson 1992). In fact, it is exactly this elusive sensibility that separated him from an overtly Sinhala-Buddhist nationalistic cause and maintained his cosmopolitan distance from state rhetoric. It is unlikely that Bawa would support any efforts at essentializing his work through nationalism, chauvinism or religious identities.

Bawa's biographers cannot be faulted for desiring to use his work in order to construct a larger geographical connection to the island of his nativity. It is in keeping with the discursive focus on regionalism, initiated by Tzonis and Lefaivre and elaborated by Kenneth Frampton during the 1980s (Tzonis, Lefaivre, and Stagno 2001: 1-14; Frampton 1983: 16-30). Bawa's approach had, since its conception, been the only viable political alternative to state projects of exclusive identity construction first through the Buddhist style architecture of the Colonial Public Works Department such as the University of Peradeniya and Independence Hall and later by the State Engineering Corporation. In this respect Bawa's confinement within the colonial and indigenous vernacular, irrespective of race or creed, is praiseworthy and politically correct. Yet his architecture also demonstrates a particular colonial affinity for picturesque composition, which privileges the aesthetic and ignores the social agenda in architecture, symptomatic of a colonial generation of practitioners. It is encapsulated best in the quotation from Pope's Epistle to Lord Burlington, which is used by David Robson in his introduction to his book on Bawa:

> Consult the Genius of the Place in all; That tells the Waters or to rise, or fall (quoted n Robson 2002: 12).

Ranjith Dayaratne, in a lecture at the University of Melbourne titled, 'Geoffrey Bawa: The Sri Lankan Genius of the Place, likewise declares:

> He has resurrected the inherently place-sensitive Sri Lankan architecture that had almost been abandoned after centuries of colonization and has shown how fascination and passion for place can create splendour of architecture even in the absence of material wealth (Dayaratne 2005).

On the one hand, such place-based ideologies reveal the picturesque and therefore Western origins of his approach and on the other hand, they attempt to fix the fluid and eclectic personality of Bawa in his national context. Accurate in their interpretations is the recognition of Bawa's knowledge and appreciation of the tropical landscape, learned through long years spent designing his garden at Lunuganga. It is in this respect that Bawa can be regarded as place-sensitive although once again the postmodernity of his approach to garden-planning with strong Italian, Egyptian and 'oriental' characteristics to it, suggest a far broader imaginary,

typical of the picturesque tradition.

If the objective of post-independent architecture was to decolonize a particular asymmetrical relationship inscribed into a class-ridden social system, then Bawa, a product of the colonial system, was unlikely to achieve it, or to explore its inherent tensions. His architecture did not move beyond its aesthetic and empirical frame and generational distance, which rooted it in a lifestyle that has feudal, colonial and overtly orientalist underpinnings. In this respect his approach differed from that of the original designed vernacular proposed and developed by Minnette de Silva, Bawa's predecessor and the first South Asian woman to be trained at the Architectural Association School in London. In the context of this reading, it would be interesting to compare the role and place of Minnette de Silva within the discourse and practice of Sri Lankan architecture in comparison to Bawa. Although, like Bawa, her work demonstrates a shift from modernism to the vernacular she resisted reproducing the colonial picturesque and resorted to a home-grown aesthetic. This deliberate choice was evident in her focus on craftsmanship over composition with implications for the reception of her architecture. Her interpretation of the vernacular was consequently different to that of Bawa.

De Silva whose early writings established the vernacular as an important source of inspiration was the first South Asian woman architect to be trained at the AA but was less well known due to her location in Kandy, outside long-established colonial circuits of knowledge and capital. She had a limited practice and spent many years teaching outside the island. However, she was primarily responsible for the new orientation towards architecture that attracted the Danish Architect Ulrik Plesner to Sri Lanka where in collaboration with Geoffrey Bawa he developed new attitudes towards the vernacular. According to Christopher de Saram, the architect who worked closely with Gunasekara on many buildings and was also familiar with the work of de Silva: "Minnette actually took the vernacular apart and tried to put it together again. She had been initiated into it through her political up-bringing and social life. Work in Mahila Samiti's etc. She never played the *Walavve Hamuduruvo* (lady of the manor) –She could relate at all social levels because she came from a line of Ayurvedic practitioners. She was not just a 'woman architect;' she was a trail-blazer."[3]

De Silva's approach focused on the sociological experiences of rural life, still extant in Kandyan areas, which had limited exposure to colonization. Her work was published posthumously in one of a two volume series that focused on her life edited by the architect Ashley de Vos (1998). Her writings clearly outlined her position, her design for Buddhist ceremonies in the home and her interest in the peasant tradition. They also clearly articulated her abhorrence for the Buddhist revival architecture designed by the Public Works Department. She was the quintessential bricoleur. Her projects can be seen as an experiment in collage between modernist structure and technique, spatial sensibility and vernacular habits and articulation. There was no attempt in her work of smoothening out the rough edges of the different approaches into a coherent aesthetic; in fact, thought-provoking irregularities are its most salient feature. In de Silva's work we see the problem of postcoloniality revealed as an unstable position between cultures.

Bawa's projects, in comparison, although derived from the vernacular of various locales were elaborated and composed to suit the tastes of an elite clientele who used it to invoke and indulge in their nostalgia for a colonial or feudal past. This same sensibility is reinforced by the tourist industry, which markets a particular orientalist ambience to

Western tourists through the work of Geoffrey Bawa. Hotels such as Triton Hotel, Ahungalla or Batujimbar Villas, Bali, produced their own culture of tourism which soon proliferated. The basis of Bawa's architecture was his composition of scenographic views, converting the surrounding landscape into an object of consumption, a feature peculiar to the picturesque.

Roofism

The identification of the roof as a prominent feature of the vernacular of the tropical zone has been documented by many authors, whose anthropological interest in such elements extend to their cultural symbolism (Waterson 1990). In architecture, interest in the vernacular was revived through a critique of modernism and study of "architecture without architects" (Rudofsky 1972). The reinsertion of the vernacular in contemporary practice occurred through the seminal study of the Las Vegas strip, *Learning from Las Vegas* by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour (1972), a project that deliberately challenged the romanticism of the picturesque. In short, in their design of a vernacular in a picturesque tradition, Bawa and others ignored emergent critiques within architectural discourse. The formal elements of a rural type were freely appropriated for urban solutions across space and class divisions. Bawa, under the influence of Ulrik Plesner was more focused on the visual harmony of the vernacular and its climatic and tectonic attributes, which, in their view were idealized in roof construction. A conversation between them, where the significance of the roof dawns on Plesner, like an epiphany, is noteworthy. Plesner recalls:

> I remember the exact moment when the essence of the matter dawned on us. We were driving down Galle Road on our way to Bentota, passing through the villages with all their little tiled roofs and big over-hangings and little wooden railings and I said to Geoffrey "You know what? It's the roof that is the secret of the architecture of Ceylon", or something like that, maybe less pompously. And then there was a long silence for several miles and Geoffrey said, "Yes you are right" (quoted in Mohotty 1982: 43).

Although the predominance of the roof is common to all vernacular architectures within the tropical belt, and have, in almost every case, been aggrandized in what is colloquially referred to as roofism, there is no doubt that both Bawa and Plesner were convinced that this was the unique attribute of Sri Lankan architecture.

Contextualized in this manner it is hardly surprising that Geoffrey Bawa, when judging the competition entries, would reject a building that had an overtly modernist expression. The author of this alternative project and runner up to the coveted commission was Valentine Gunasekara.

The engineer

Bawa and Gunasekara are equal and opposite protagonists in the field of Sri Lankan architecture in many respects, although the latter was increasingly marginalised. Both these individuals trained at the AA during the 1960s with Bawa only a year junior to Gunsekara. In 1957, after six years of study, Gunasekara returned to Ceylon to re-join Edwards Reid and Begg, a former

colonial practice in which he had previously done an apprentice-ship. Geoffrey Bawa joined the same firm a few months later. At this time, both Bawa and Gunasekara rejected the type of architecture undertaken by the practice in general which embraced Buddhist revivalist and neo-classical styles of buildings described as the Kelaniya Style (the style used for the new image house at Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara), and sought to change its design direction. Both faced a climate of social upheaval fired by ethnocentric agendas and each proposed an architecture that might counter racial and religious fanaticism. Yet despite their common schooling at the AA, the two young architects responded with very different architectural solutions. Bawa, whose Westernized and wealthy background had distanced him from the rural vernacular, sought it out as the source of a new imaginary borrowing from indigenous manorial residences and the colonial picturesque as well as the Mediterraneanism that had evolved out of the Modern Movement in architecture (Colquhoun 1997: 14). Gunasekara, who came from a far humbler middle-class social background, had no connections with these former elite traditions and so maintained his fierce alliance to European Modernism. It would force him to leave the firm and set up his own architectural practice in 1967.

Gunasekara also lived and practiced adjacent to Bawa for much of his professional life at No: 4 Alfred House Road next to the ER&B office. Yet his architecture took a very different direction. An early partnership with Jayati Weerakoon, a talented young engineer who would work with him on the majority of his projects would allow Gunasekara to favour the engineering approach over bricolage. A later partnership with Christopher de Saram, also a graduate of the AA, would sharpen his design methodology and conceptual skills resulting in the remarkable tenacity of their combined work. All three members of this design team had strong social convictions, which were realized through a modernist self-expression. They contrasted sharply from Geoffrey Bawa in their eager exploration of innovative engineering and new materials and technologies in modular methods of construction. Social change, labour-saving processes and systemic design marked their approach as different from colonial precedents and current practice.

The work of Valentine Gunasekara

Valentine Gunasekara's architecture has been consistently misinterpreted within the profession and amongst students as overtly modernist and unsuited to Sri Lanka, and even alien to it. This is partly due to his exposure to the architecture of the United States during a Rockefeller Foundation Travel Grant awarded to him in 1965. During the grant-year, Gunasekara travelled around the USA visiting prominent architects like Louis Kahn, Kevin Roche, Philip Johnson, Craig Elwood, Richard Neutra and Charles and Ray Eames, among others. He was particularly impressed with the expressive manipulation of structure in Eero Saarinen's work. But it was California regionalism, developed by Richard Neutra in his house at Silver Lake (1932/ rebuilt1960), that was particularly appealing to Gunasekara, because it was anti-colonial, modular, built with modern and available technologies and reciprocated the soft lines of the undulating landscape of the Los Angeles hills. Both Kahn and Charles and Ray Eames had been working in South Asia; Kahn on the Dhaka capitol (parliament of Bangladesh) and the Eameses designing a programme for the Indian Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. Gunasekara found them curious, open, and not at all patronizing regarding their cultural encounters. It was a formative experience, which drove him to abandon what

he described as the pomposity of colonial norms for a purely spatial and formal definition of the geographic landscape and modern programmes. He recalls:

> I was influenced by the search for totally new spaces than those that human beings had ever encountered, and that was what Eero was producing. The formation of the mind that created the catenary curve and the Jefferson Memorial Arch was to me stunning. How did this man who was surrounded by colonialism and all these formal monuments come up with this wonderful freedom of thinking of a memorial as a form and how did he get to the enormous scale of that bravery? It was to me a wonderful thing to see this huge catenary curve. We went up the observation tower and I kept thinking…how was it that the circumstances were right for society and the jury to accept it and to give him the commission? (It was a similar experience with the TWA terminal, which) set me rethinking all forms (realizing) that we don't need to hold any longer to breaking the box. (I realized) that we could now explore shapes and experiences that had not occurred before.[4]

Gunasekara's approach was also coloured by his years at the Programme in Tropical Architecture, at the AA, under Maxwell Fry, where he was among the first batch of students taught to design specifically for climate. The combination of these two approaches, one climatic and the other spatial and systemic, coupled with his strong social agenda would make it impossible for Gunasekara to indulge in the nostalgia for the past and the picturesque composition that would eventually define 'Sri Lankan' architecture. Gunasekara observes:

> One of the things that we lost in going back to the vernacular is that the deliberate way of designing using modules or a conscious understanding of the way form is arranged or can evolve is no longer there in a lot of architecture. We lost the pursuit of that pattern, which you create and vigorously act out in the project. And we kind of collapsed into spatial organization …into space planning actually, with a known vernacular…The plan is nothing but a space-plan, because you have no idea what the volumes are doing. You have absolutely no concept.[5]

At the end of his tour, Gunasekara worked in Eero Saarinen's office for six months (under Kevin Roche) learning the process of working through models and the close attention to construction details symptomatic of this method. It marked his architectural approach as different to that of his Ceylonese contemporaries who privileged a paper architecture learned through drafting, measured drawing and aesthetic composition. The tendency to romanticize the built object through a particular style of rendering seemed deceptive, in his view. It seemed like an effort to escape into Arcadian representations of built form, which undermined their more critical tectonic details. Above all, the exposure to America had introduced Gunasekara to systemic design and the prefabricated kit of parts that was part of the American industrial inheritance. On his return from America, Gunasekara rejected the vernacular revival that was taking root in Sri Lanka and doggedly adapted the modernist vocabulary to social habits and climatic conditions.

Equally important to his approach was Gunasekara's client base, young men and women who were from among the first generation to be educated at the new University of Peradeniya,[6] home grown intellectuals who embraced modernity in the post-independence years. Their vernacular sensibilities, anti-colonial sentiments and cosmopolitan aspirations combined to enable new social agendas and architectural experimentation. Clearly however, they were a minority. They emerged as a specific segment of the middle class by rejecting two positions: the urban identities of the former colonial elite and the increasingly nationalist rural majority. More importantly, they rejected the colonial legacy of the Victorian picturesque through which the vernacular would be romanticized. As Gunasekara recalls:

> They were ready for change, looking for change, change was a big word. Most of them were professionals; middle-aged and very few of them were landowners or gentlemen and ladies at large. So it was a very different clientele and clientele demands…it was the final rejection of the crinoline, the formality of British family life.[7]

Gunasekara's clients, who were becoming increasingly aware of international architectural trends and modern ideas of society and lifestyle, turned away from British examples towards transatlantic forms of modernism. The cosmopolitanism that defined them was a complex hybrid of conservative values and worldly desires that had a greater affinity with post-war American culture. Gunasekara, eager for symbolic and expressive forms that might capture this post-independent spirit, turned from steel and glass architecture (which was environmentally inappropriate) to concrete technologies. The environmental systems learned in the Tropical Approach are replicated in his projects, and there was a reluctance to use materials like clay tile and timber that cause extensive deforestation. Fair-faced concrete, avoiding lime plaster and standardized reusable shuttering from inexpensive rubber-wood was peculiar to his approach.

Gunasekara's work had a strong symbolic content that set it apart from the modernist avant-garde. He wanted it to express the emotions, beliefs and cultural practices of the Sri Lankan landscape and its people and to portray them as modern and dynamic rather than as a static backward culture. Abandoning the neutrality of the modernist box, he chose expressive forms for his most cherished projects such as small chapel buildings for impoverished and marginal Catholic communities set in Sri Lanka's rural landscape (Figure 1). He felt that architecture could be secular in its design but should not be neutral in its expression. Each project was explored conceptually and programmatically with structural and technological innovations mirroring design innovations that enhanced the social programme. Apart from residences, other structures he designed included schools, chapels, commercial buildings, a crematorium, and several modular low cost experiments. The building that he is, perhaps, best known for is the Tangalle Bay Hotel (Figure 2), an ingenious concrete structure, which in its refusal to romanticize or commodify its context or confine it within boundary walls, stands out amidst a chain of gated coastal developments. Underlying his approach is a brand of humanism where architecture was regarded as an expression of the human spirit, in terms of both inspiration and aspiration.

The self-conscious method and conceptual strength of Gunasekara places him among the engineers in the architectural field: architects like Eero Saarinen, Pierre Luigi Nervi, Robert Maillart, Santiago Calatrava or Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer who reshaped

design history with every exploration. Although celebrated for their visionary architecture, these are architects who have also been accused of social determinism and of controlling social behaviour through built form. Yet Gunasekara, unlike the engineers who inspired him, always worked on small-scale structures at an intimate level, deriving his multiple spatial and formal solutions from thoughtful programmatic innovations.[8] The houses designed by him were individually shaped for the needs of the occupants and activities of the family. It is this priority that has carried his approach through engineering to bricolage towards the end of his career. His desire for symbolic expression opened up a rich field of exploration usually denied by the modernist box, which allowed Gunasekara to pursue what proved to be a very personal journey through modernism to deconstruction. The ultimate resolution of the two positions, of engineer and bricoleur is evident in his entry for the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects.

Figure 2: Tangalle Bay Hotel; Source: Valentine Gunasekara

Gunasekara's competition entry[9]

The competition for the SLIA headquarters is regarded by many as the project that caused Gunasekara to leave Sri Lanka, its rejection by Geoffrey Bawa signalling a larger rejection by the profession and a more personal rejection by his former colleague. Gunasekara interpreted the Institute as having an overarching structure based on the RIBA regulations inherited from Britain yet developing its own inherent flexibility within it. He also felt that the design should accommodate change by providing multiple tertiary structures within a primary frame.

Since the brief had not required the articulation of Sri Lankan culture, Gunasekara felt he was free to experiment, to design a form as yet un-investigated in the Sri Lankan context. Jayati Weerakoon worked alongside him on the structure. Since it was a low building Gunasekara did not want to have anything more than "an extremely visually invigorating composition and an obviously dynamic sloping form". He devised the structure as a single sloping roof plane suspended from the primary and secondary beams floating above it. It was carried on RC columns on a 15'0" grid spaced at 30'0" centres. The traffic moving around it exaggerates the slope of the roof and the diagonal created a corner entrance. For Gunasekara, who had over the years shrugged off the roof-down planning and enclosing canopy of the contemporary vernacular, this was a daring step to explore the potential of roof-based design. He recalls:

> The roof plane had never been used as a dramatic statement of its own. The roof was simply used to cap the space… showing landscaping and beautiful Mara trees. I wanted to work with the roof, puncturing it with pyramidical skylights; all the structure went on top of the roof…. The water would cascade down to the west-end of the roof at the lowest end of the slope….

The deployment of the roof as the dominant feature, a characteristic of the vernacular (as identified by Bawa and Plesner) is manipulated by Gunasekara in a daring and innmovative move. Gunasekara oriented the entrance to face the morning sun, respecting traditional Sri Lankan practices, "so the morning sun is at the entrance, facing east making sharp contrasts". An independent cantilever roof acting as a porte-cochère framed the entrance. At the entry was a cube on-end to be used as a reception.

By locating the structure above the roof, Gunasekara intended to free the ceiling surface so that the sweep of the internal space would become visible. His objective was to produce a "dramatic, powerful, hard structure, penetrated by the circular elements inside and the beautiful unsheathed softness of the ceiling membrane with a grid of metallic materials of different textures like a rich carpet on the ceiling". The roof membrane was to be made of flat rolled aluminium or corrugated aluminium with a flat plywood and Styrofoam sub structure for acoustic insulation. Fibre-glass insulation would be used on top. It was designed for low maintenance.

The project was designed using a modular system with every joint standardized, ensuring its build-ability. Gunasekara's intention was to test it first in a full-scale prototype and reproduce it for the entirety of the building. The interior spaces in contrast comprised of multiple independent forms: a bricolage of geometric shapes in bright colours of orange mauve and green organized on either side of a diagonal access through the site. A cylindrical conversation pit and a pool were located off this central axis while a slit of light across the top mirrored the path through the building. The SLIA board, committee rooms and council chamber would occupy large geometric shapes with smaller cubic cubicles for offices. The meeting rooms looked outward. Un-modulated dynamic forms contained services. All of the modules of the geometric form were to be of plywood.

In Gunasekara's design, the council chamber and auditorium were the only interior forms that went up to the roof structure. The symmetrical geometry of the auditorium was contrasted by a sloped ceiling for acoustic purposes. Two stairways proposed in the plan suggest the possibility of a mezzanine floor. The finishes for the building were all contemporary– metallic finishes and glazing, with the envelope filled in with areas of stucco, and reinforced 4 ½" walls. The envelope was glazed at the corners with the arrowhead-shaped window connected with an epoxy glue joint (Figures 3-10). According to Gunasekara:

> The idea (was) of a light lacy interior (with) the skylight puncturing it over the pool giving it a jewel like quality…The whole thing was meant to be like a jewel with the form strong enough not to be timely or trivial.

Gunasekara has very clear memories of working on the competition in his office in Alfred House Road. It was a project that absorbed his energies and helped him to break through his

own limitations. The comment of Geoffrey Bawa was that the scheme was a bold response fraught with technical problems. Gunasekara recalls "coming back after the announcement meeting and it was mentally twisting – a series of near misses, and the feeling that it was a bad omen."

Gunasekara left for the USA in 1986. It was the last of many attempts at migrating, prompted by the worsening political situation and Sri Lanka and the difficulties he encountered in educating his eight children. His journey would replicate those of many middle-class professionals who would be forced to migrate for similar reasons. His work has not, until very recently, been discussed in Sri Lanka. The development of modern programmes and innovative technologies to support them, which would have been his design legacy, is buried under twenty years of regionalist rhetoric.

Conclusion

Valentine Gunasekara's search for appropriate architectural expressions at various stages of his career illustrates a very personal journey that is difficult to understand. There is no doubt that his passion is his own as is his deep faith and that they give direction to a form of self-discovery that isolates the artist. We can attribute his marginalization to this characteristic in his work. Yet the journey, in itself, is, quite remarkably, an unravelling of a modernist ideal that parallels the self-conscious production of modernity through architecture. The trajectory of Gunasekara's work as it abandons the rigid forms of the European avant-garde for the curvaceous lines of their American competitors convincingly documents an architect's struggle with modernism. The location of this architect outside the West and the modification of the modernist vocabulary through climatic, social and religious values expose both the strengths and weaknesses of the art form.

Critiques of Gunasekara arise from proponents of the vernacular who prefer the direct appropriation and replication of cultural forms to their abstraction and reinterpretation. Their desire to produce an authentic Sri Lankan identity based on what they perceive to be an uninterrupted tradition is an approach common throughout Asia (Askew 2003). They take many forms, in the magnification of Geoffrey Bawa through successive publications, in the regionalist critiques of modernism and in a conservatism fed by nationalist sentimentalists, which marginalise alternative approaches. The comparisons of Gunasekara and Bawa recur in these debates pitting the two approaches against one another (for example, see, the Wikipedia entry on Gunasekara http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentine_Gunasekara). Indeed they have exacerbated following Bawa's death (in 2003) with the emergence of several books on Bawa, validating a generation of young practitioners by association (see Robson 2007). The single monograph on Gunasekara's contribution (Pieris 2007), titled *Imagining Modernity*, a social history of an emerging middle class sensibility studied through the work of an architect, has invited much comment. The facile appropriation of Pieris's detailed empirical research for the reintroduction of Gunasekara into a discussion of modernism alongside Bawa and de Silva (David Robson, Masters of Concrete, DOCOMOMO lecture 2009) and a belated award of honorary membership to Gunasekara by the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects in 2010 suggest the discursive revival of Gunasekara in architectural circles.

When compared with Gunasekara, Geoffrey Bawa was a product of his time, of his colonial values and a particularly Westernized distance from local culture that allowed its

objectification into an aesthetic. This distance is not available to successive generations of Sri Lankan architects, who must negotiate the political and economic realities and remain responsive to cultural norms and changing aspirations. Interpretations of the colonial picturesque by subsequent generations would undoubtedly appear pretentious in relation to the contemporary context of their everyday lives. Alwis's reluctance to reproduce the vernacular can be read in this light as can the profession's general ambivalence regarding the locus of Bawa over the years. Bawa is an architect whose approach has greater resonance with his foreign, particularly British, biographers who do not question the imperial and orientalist underpinnings of his aesthetic. Such tendencies were clearly evident in the Mimar monograph on Geoffrey Bawa, published in 1986, which featured his Rolls Royce juxtaposed to a Batik wall hanging, on its cover.

More recently, Bawa's international reputation as the most published[10] local architect, with the largest quantum of work and strong political and elite connections has won him the support of the profession who regard his approach as the ideology that defines Sri Lankan architecture. There is no doubting the fact that Bawa put Sri Lanka on the map and projected a form of aesthetic decolonization. Unfortunately, architecture following Geoffrey Bawa has taken after the least successful of his experiments, the gated and exclusive environments of elite residents and Western tourists and the public buildings that were used to represent an official form of nationalism. No doubt, in the 21st century, Bawa will be reconstituted as a nationalist, who used historic Buddhist structures as his inspiration. The cosmopolitan character and eclectic sources that make Bawa into a truly postmodern architect will be reduced to suit a particular logo-centric interpretation of regionalism and a mono-cultural Sri Lankan identity. The architect that was left out of the Sri Lankan narrative, yet pioneered a strong design approach, maybe forgotten.

Seduced by the romantic visions of the picturesque that provided an escape from the dirty realism of a besieged urban life, during the long years of ethnic conflict, Sri Lankan architects and their clientéle have been educated into a specific aesthetic as the only proper measure of good architecture. They consequently have few tools by which to evaluate the objectives and prerogatives of an alternative approach. Programmes that are critical to the postmodern nation such as hospitals, industrial buildings, offices or supermarkets do not head the list of innovative designs. The modernistic aesthetic applied to these buildings is seen as incapable of producing good design, or design rooted in place. Technological and structural innovation has somehow been projected as alien, Western, anti-nationalist attributes of globalization just because it does not originate in the local vernacular. In recent years these prejudices have inhibited South Asian designers, considerably, retarding their participation in a range of regional design experiments. In fact, many who set out to test modernist paradigms have reverted to a hybrid vernacular. Not only has this adversely affected the reception of innovative projects that test modernist tenets, it has also retarded the up-liftment of labour. Due to the lack of a healthy debate on how to engage with modernism, many solutions to modern programmes have proved to be anachronistic or seriously wanting.

Endnotes

1. Perhaps the only noteworthy example of a modernist vocabulary is the State Mortgage Bank building designed in 1976-8 with Anura Ratnavibushana. Offices for Cargo Boat Despatch, the State Insurance Corporation and other multi-storey office complexes by Bawa, were

unremarkable. His most overtly modernist buildings, the Chloe de Soysa House and the Kandalama hotel are shrouded in greenery so as to disguise their form.

2. For example, see David Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works*, Thames and Hudson, 2002, ch 2. 'Serendib: An Island Architecture'; Ranjith Dayaratne, 'Geoffrey Bawa: The Sri Lankan Genius of the Place,' Deans Lecture Series, University of Melbourne, Australia, 10 May, 2005; and address to the Ceylon History Society, Melborne, 6 Nov 2005.

3. Interview with Christopher de Saram, January 2004.

4. Interview of Valentine Gunasekara by author, Bedford Massachusetts, (May 28 – June1, 2003), Tape 2: Side A, 28/05/03: 2.

5. Interview of Valentine Gunasekara by author, Bedford Massachusetts, (May 28 – June1, 2003), Tape 4: Side A, 29/05/03: 22-23.

6. Built under British colonial patronage, the University of Peradeniya (1940-1952) was designed in the Buddhist revival style by the Public Works Department. Its location near Kandy the last indigenous capital marked it as an important center for post-colonial nationalism. More importantly the capacity of the university and free education system created tremendous opportunities for tertiary education within the country.

7. Interview of Valentine Gunasekara by author, Bedford Massachusetts, (May 28 – June1, 2003), Tape 3: Side A, 29/05/03: 13-14.

8. For example, his largest building the Tangalle Bay Hotel at 70 rooms is less than half the size of the 150 room Kandalama Hotel designed by Bawa in Dambulla (1991-94).

9. This section is based on an interview of Valentine Gunasekara by author, Bedford Massachusetts, 14 February, 2005.

10. Publications on Geoffrey Bawa include the following: Brian Brace Taylor, *Geoffrey Bawa*, Concept Media, 1986; Geoffrey Bawa, Christoph Bon and Dominic Sansoni, *Lunuganga: The Story of a Garden*, Singapore: Times Edition, 1990; David Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works*, Thames and Hudson, 2002.

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Images

Figures 3-10. The SLIA Competition drawings; source: Valentine Gunasekara.

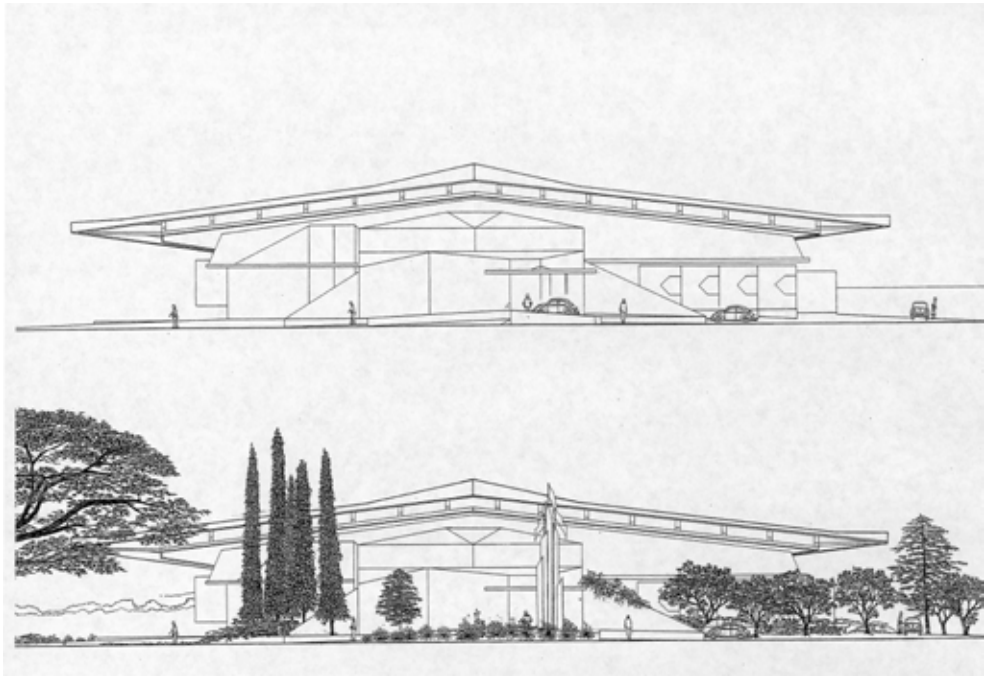
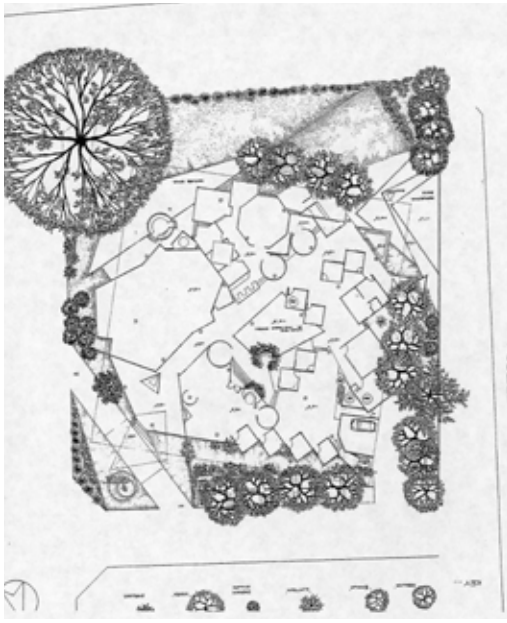


Figure 3



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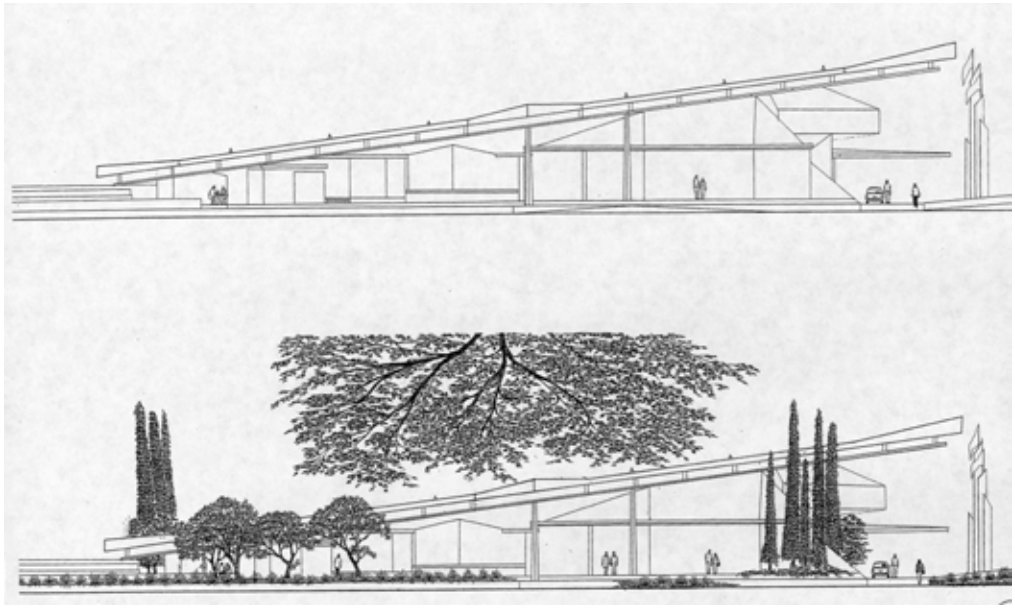

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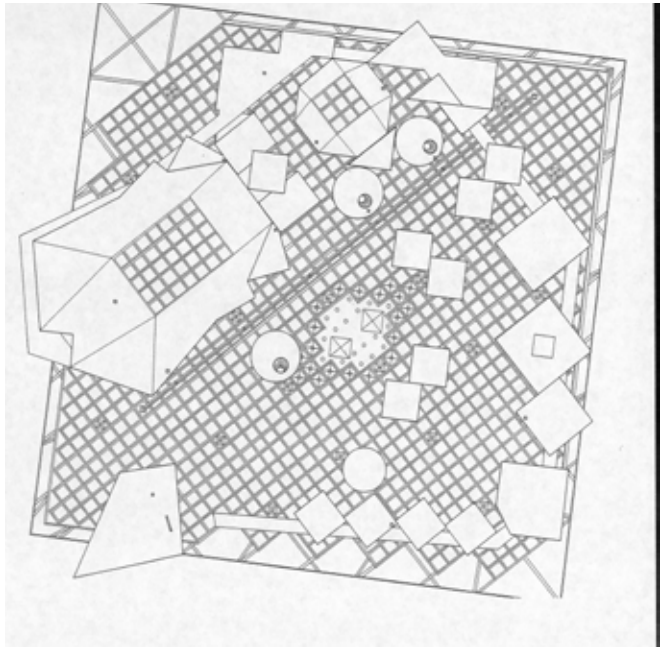

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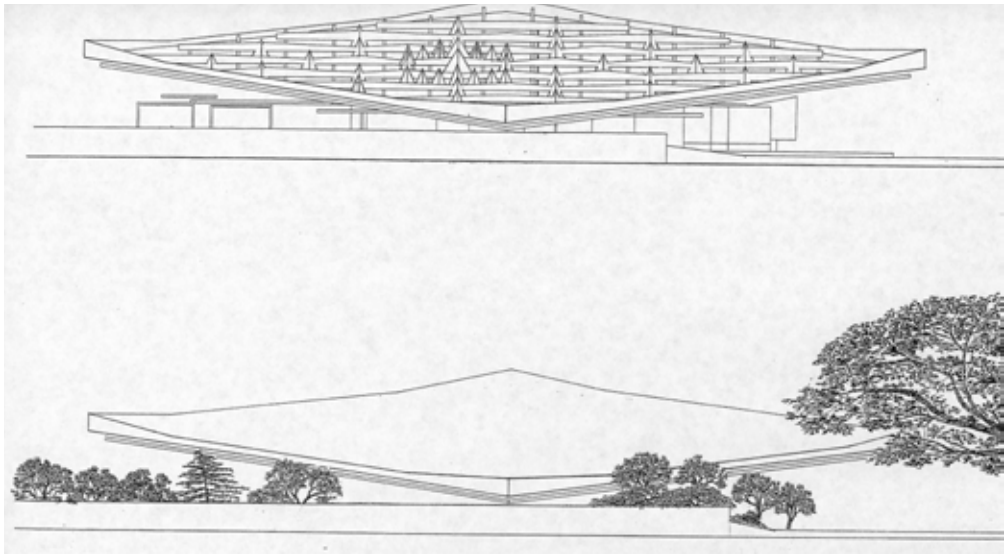

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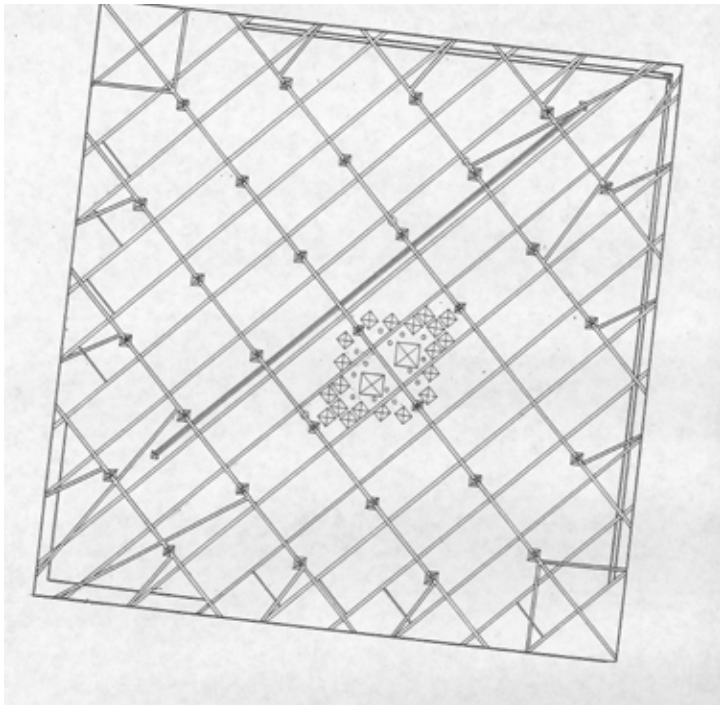

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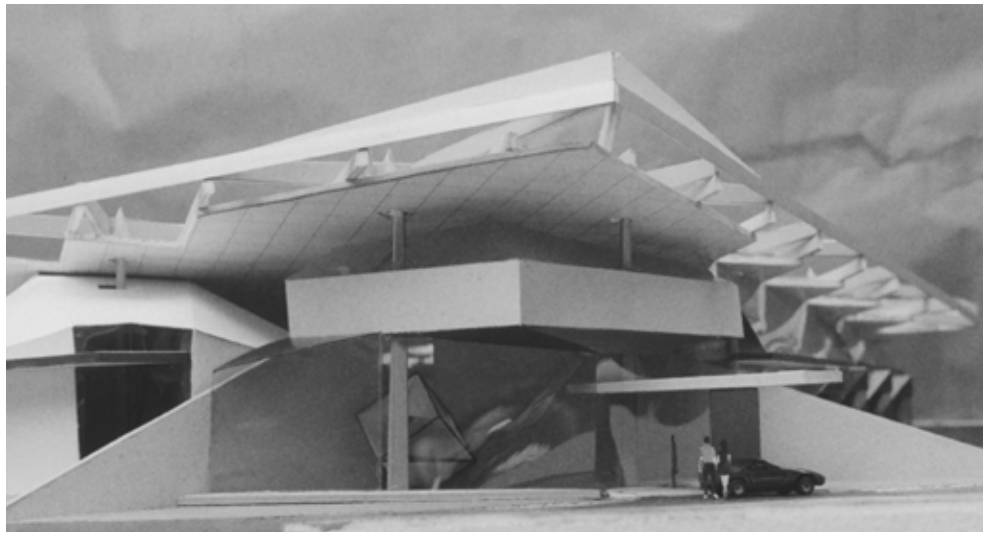

Figure 9

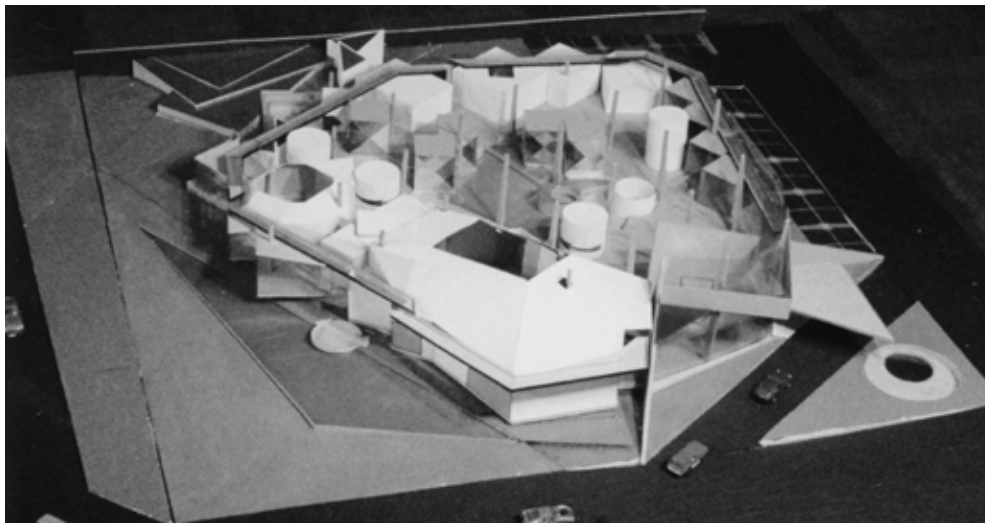

Figure 10

Competitive Humanitarianism: Relief and the Sri Lankan Tsunami

Roderick L. Stirrat

Introduction

This brief essay is concerned with a common issue in disaster relief: high levels of competition between the agencies involved coupled with a lot of talk about the need for 'coordination'. The particular setting for the discussion is the relief that poured into Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami of 26th December 2004 and it is based on my role as an advisor (on a voluntary basis) to one of the major British-based agencies which became involved in the relief and rehabilitation process.

Lack of coordination between agencies and high levels of competition between them is frequently mentioned as characterising disaster relief. The post-tsunami efforts in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand and India were no exception to this. This is one of the themes which the recent evaluation of the DEC (Disasters Emergency Committee) response to the Tsunami alludes to on a number of occasions and which it sees as a problem which has to be overcome by better coordination.[1] In this essay, I shall be suggesting that 'better coordination' is unlikely to lead to less competition. Rather, I shall argue that competition of various forms is inherent in the structure of humanitarian relief, particularly amongst NGOs, and that this is the result of a basic contradiction at the heart of philanthropic approaches to relief and rehabilitation (and, one might suggest, to development interventions in general, especially those mounted by NGOs). For various reasons which I will examine in this essay, agencies which are based on disinterested principles are forced into situations where organisational and individual interests become increasingly important and which undermine the principles upon which philanthropic interventions are based.

The discussion is based on my experience of relief activities in the southwest of Sri Lanka, the coast between Colombo in the north and Hambantota in the south. The situation in the east was in many ways much more complex because of the continuing civil war between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.

The nature of the tsunami in Sri Lanka

By way of an introduction, it's worth saying a little about the nature of the disaster in Sri Lanka, for in some ways the peculiarities of the tsunami had an effect on how relief agencies reacted to the situation.

Put rather simplistically, most disasters – earthquakes, floods, cyclones and hurricanes - cover a more or less concentrated area. There is some sort of centre where devastation is at its greatest and a shading out of destruction as one moves away from the centre. But the tsunami affected Sri Lanka in a very different way – 'ribbon destruction' rather than 'centralised destruction'. Thus something around 75% of the Sri Lankan coastline was affected by the tsunami, yet at the most the destruction caused by the tsunami only penetrated a kilometre or so inland. More or less 'normal' life was never very far from devastation. At the same time, the impact of the tsunami was decidedly spotty. So whilst in some places the waters destroyed anything for a kilometre or so inland, in others there was almost no impact even immediately adjacent to the beach. The result was a mosaic of total destruction and no impact. One house would be destroyed; its immediate neighbour untouched.

This situation presnted the relief agencies with rather different problems from those which they are more used to. So for instance, it was difficult in Sri Lanka to use large scale water purification equipment because the tsunami-affected population was spread along the coast rather than focused on one central point. Basic amenities such as food and water were never very far away from the area of destruction. Another difference, which I will return to later, is that it made it relatively easy for different agencies to make claims to different segments along the ribbon of destruction.

Estimates of how many people were killed or injured still vary. Probably the total is around 40,000, mostly from the coastal belt itself. However, the tsunami hit on a full moon *poya* day, a holiday in Buddhist Sri Lanka, and thus many people were on the move. Some were on their way from Colombo to tourist resorts along the southwest coast whilst others had come from inland towns and villages to attend markets in coastal towns such as Galle and Matara. Thus from the beginning, it was difficult for the agencies to identify precise areas of impacts and there was a tendency to concentrate on coastal areas where destruction was most visible even though the human impact of the tsunami was much more widely distributed.

In comparison with other types of disaster, the tsunami injured relatively few people, and there was not as great a need for specialised medical assistance (although it nevertheless arrived) as in many disasters. But as in many other natural disasters, the tsunami had a differential impact in terms of gender and age. Although there are no precise figures, anecdotal evidence indicates that the tsunami killed women rather than men, and children rather than adults. It appears that men were more able to run away or climb coconut trees and less involved in trying to save children and infants than were women. No matter why men rather than women should have been able to survive the tsunami, the result was that the agencies were often faced with male rather than female single parents, a situation which they appeared unprepared for. There were also relatively few orphans.

To return to the timing of the tsunami, *poya* day being a holiday meant that the majority of the inshore fishermen were not at sea. The result was that most small fishing craft were laid up on the beach and received the full impact of the tsunami. In contrast, craft which were at sea, even only a few hundred meters from the beach, successfully rode the tsunami waves. On another day the damage to fishing craft and gear would have been much less.

Thus the overall result of the tsunami was a narrow strip of devastation stretching down the coast from just south of Colombo, along the south and up the east coast almost

as far as the Jaffna peninsula. Within this narrow strip there was widespread devastation. Fishing communities in particular were badly hit. As well as houses and equipment being destroyed the major lines of communication by road and rail were badly affected. Given that in the southwest of Sri Lanka most major urban centres are on the coast, the tsunami also had a major impact on public infrastructure: hospitals, schools, administrative centres, shopping and commercial centres. Yet at the same time, a little inland the tsunami had no physical impact whatsoever.

The immediate response to the disaster was very much Sri Lankan-led. Even though road and rail connections were very badly hit by the tsunami, individuals and groups of individuals from Colombo and inland almost immediately became involved in taking food, shelter and medical equipment to those directly affected. It seems that much of the immediate response was provided by what one might call, 'civil society': government appears to have been relatively uninvolved and made relatively little effort to coordinate or manage a response to the disaster. That the President was out of the country at the time of the tsunami may have been significant. Various foreign organisations became involved in the relief effort very quickly. Some of these such as OXFAM, SCF and CARE were already active in Sri Lanka whilst other organisations, not just NGOs but also the military from various nations, arrived within a few days. Very rapidly these foreign organisations became increasingly important and influential in the relief effort. Sri Lankans became less active; local organisations including NGOs became junior partners dependent on foreign organisations. But before looking at this process in more detail, something has to be said about the nature and scale of the response to the tsunami outside the affected area.

The scale and nature of the response

One of the aspects of the tsunami which remains somewhat obscure are the factors which gave rise to the massive response to calls for relief assistance. Throughout Europe, North America and East Asia, vast sums were raised to support the relief and rehabilitation effort. Thus the British-based DEC raised around £350 million before the appeal was closed in March.[2] Organisations which are members of the DEC also received funds from other sources. The British Red Cross raised a total of £85.9 million of which £59.3 million came from the DEC, £26 million from direct donations and a further £3.5 million from DFID. Much of this money came from private individuals or groups of individuals but in addition the corporate sector was also involved. For instance, Marks and Spencer gave £260,000 to CARE for work in southern Sri Lanka.[3]

In part, the response to the tsunami has to be seen as the result of the media coverage of the disaster. Shots of the wave first receding and then thundering into the beach destroying all in its path were certainly dramatic. Furthermore, Sri Lanka and Thailand are tourist destinations for Europeans and this may also have had some effect, especially as European tourists were amongst the victims. And of course it was also Christmas. Finally, countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand are easily accessible to the media. That this was truly a 'natural' disaster, not the result of human activities such as war or civil unrest must also have played a part.

But no matter what the factors behind this response, the result was that almost every household in countries such as Britain, Scandinavia and Germany were to a greater or

lesser extent involved in tsunami relief. This could just involve donating money but it also involved organising fund raising events, coordinating fund raising activities and acting as collectors. Not only was money collected but also goods – clothes, medical and educational supplies and food. And of course in some cases people themselves went to Sri Lanka and elsewhere to assist in the relief effort.

The result was that, to use developmental terms, the agencies involved in relief activities found themselves not only the recipients of vast amounts of money and other resources but also faced with a vast number of 'stakeholders' who to a greater or lesser extent felt a sense of 'ownership' in the relief effort. From the beginning the pressure was on the agencies not only to be effective but to be seen to be effective as well. They had to try to justify the vast investment that millions of stakeholders had made in the relief effort. And they had to intervene in ways which these 'stakeholders' would recognise as being 'relief'. So from the beginning there was a certain bias in the sorts of interventions favoured by the relief agencies: highly visible, photogenic, and focusing on the poor, women and children. Furthermore, given the climate of opinion, even vaguely appropriate agencies had to get involved in tsunami relief. Not to do so was in effect to deny either their humanitarian commitment or their competence.

NGOs in competition

Within a week of the tsunami a vast range of relief organisations were active in Sri Lanka. Some of these were the military. Thus the Americans, the British, the Belgians, the Indians and the Pakistanis all had a presence. The Americans for instance were active in clearing rubble whilst the Indians and Pakistanis concentrated on medical assistance. But much more visible were the vast numbers of NGOs which arrived in Sri Lanka intent on spending money. [4] Hotels in Colombo and those that had survived along the coast all went through a short term boom as did the demand for drivers and interpreters. Such was the flow of foreign currency into the country that the Sri Lankan rupee rose rapidly in value.

The problem for most NGOs was to find ways of spending their money.[5] Part of my job for instance was to try to spend £5 million pounds as fast as possible. Given the number of NGOs and the amount of money they had at their disposal, this was not surprising: after all, there were only a limited number of 'beneficiaries' and only a certain area of land which had been affected by the tsunami. The result was that first comers tended to carve out their territories both spatially and in terms of activities. Thus in the Matara region, repair of fishing craft was taken over by an Irish NGO called GOAL whilst the International Organisation for Migration dominated temporary housing. Any piece of land which could be used sported an IOM signboard, an effective statement that other organisations should keep out. NGO representatives talked of 'carving out territories' along the coastal strip.

At the same time there was also pressure on the incoming NGOs to find 'local partners' with whom and through whom they could work. Many of the larger NGOs recognised that they did not have the capabilities or capacities to launch activities in Sri Lanka and recognised the need to work with local organisations which had the necessary skills and experience. Yet these were scarce and often already in some sort of relationship with foreign NGO donors. By the end of the third week after the tsunami it was generally accepted that there were few available 'partners' although there was a certain amount of 'poaching' as latecom-

ers offered higher inducements in terms of facilities or management fees to potential Sri Lankan partners.

Part of the problem was not just that international or foreign based NGOs were under pressure to spend money but that they were under pressure to spend it in particular ways. NGO representatives were only too aware of the presence of TV teams and reporters, and many organisations had their own film crews to record their activities. The result was to privilege certain sorts of activities such as distributing new fishing craft or constructing housing rather than less visible or more indirect forms of disaster relief, for instance rehabilitation of government offices destroyed by the tsunami. Competition was not just a matter of getting rid of money but getting rid of it in the 'right' way which would fit with western donors' visions of what relief should be.

Competition also occurred within organisations. Whilst the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies ostensibly acts as a united organisation in such situations, in practice competition between different national branches led to different strategies being followed in different places. Thus the Maltese and the Turkish national organisations followed their own paths, much to the annoyance of other national organisations which toed the Federation line.

Dinosaurs and small furry animals

So far, the organisations I have been concerned with are mainly the large international NGOs with a long track record in relief or development or both. These include the members of the DEC as well as other international NGOs, and they all in general follow a strict set of guidelines laid down in the Red Cross/NGO code of conduct.[6] In addition, such organisations tend to follow international guidelines in the contexts of sanitation, water supply, temporary housing and so on. Finally, these organisations generally attempt to create good relationships with government, work alongside government departments, and have to a greater or lesser extent a political understanding of the context in which they are working.

The result of all this was that in the Sri Lankan case at least, these agencies tended to be rather slow and ponderous in their response to particular situations. This was exacerbated by the extremely hierarchical and bureaucratised way in which many of these organisations are structured. In one of them the team in Colombo charged with finding ways of spending money was unable to take any decisions without consulting by telephone at least once a day with management in London. The justification for this was the need for 'accountability', how proposed activities fitted the mandate of the organisation, and to consider how proposed forms of intervention or partnership might play in the context of British based stakeholders.

This situation encouraged the activities of what might be called 'small furry animals' in a world of slow moving dinosaurs. One of the striking features of the relief effort was the presence of a horde of small, often newly formed, foreign organisations with little if any experience in disaster relief but motivated by a strong humanitarian impulse that 'something had to be done'. Throughout the tsunami-affected areas small groups and individuals from a wide range of countries were active in all sorts of activities. For instance, a Slovakian organisation was engaged in boat building whilst an Austrian NGO assisted in constructing houses. Neither had any previous experience in South Asia or disaster relief. Similarly indi-

viduals from Europe, North America and Asia whose only prior knowledge of Sri Lanka came from news bulletins, arrived in the country and proceeded to do whatever they thought useful. From the point of view of the larger NGOs, such as the members of the DEC the visibility of these small projects was a problem which only got worse as fewer and fewer visible means of activity were left untouched. It looked as if they were doing nothing.

The lack of experience of many of these small groups led to a degree of vulnerability. This was particularly true in some areas of the country where politically well connected individuals and groupings attempted to control the relief effort with the result that aid was perhaps misdirected.[7] But this lack of experience was also apparent in other ways. So for instance, competition between the Indian and Pakistani armies led to the establishment of two 'field hospitals' a few miles apart. Both did brisk business, partly because they were free and partly as novel suppliers of medical commodities. This was interpreted (wrongly) by some inexperienced NGOs as indicative of failings in the Sri Lankan health service and led to further interventions in a sector which needed little assistance. In other cases the boats and fishing equipment supplied to fishermen were technically flawed or simply unsuitable for Sri Lankan waters.[8] There was also little control as to who received assistance. In some cases fishermen received no assistance; in others, individuals were given two (and in at least one case three) brand new boats. But, and this was what was perhaps most important, what was being done was highly photogenic and appeared to be dealing in an immediate and relevant fashion with the results of the tsunami.

Attempts at coordination

The overall picture of relief in the period immediately after the tsunami is one of chaos. A large number of agencies, mostly NGOs of various sorts from diffrent countries, competed with one another seeking for ways to spend money in ways which fitted into a relatively narrow conceptualisation of what relief is and which would be easily accepted by the donors back home. Well meaning amateurs could outflank the relatively slow dinosaurs of the relief world by undercutting standards – but in such a way as to appear more 'effective' than the larger more well established NGOs.

Of course, those who were working for the NGOs were only too aware of the problems involved and saw this competitive world as counter-productive in terms of the humanitarian objectives of the relief effort. And there was a whole series of attempts at coordinating relief activities at various levels.

As I mentioned earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the government of Sri Lanka took very little role in actively managing the relief effort. In contrast to, for instance India and Indonesia, foreign NGOs were given free access for personnel and resources to enter the country and very little effort was made to control who came in with what.[9] Over time, this situation was to change in various ways with the government attempting to take increasing control over the activities of relief agencies. Thus in early February customs duties on imports for humanitarian use were reintroduced. This led to massive accumulations in Colombo harbour of aid items sent by well meaning groups and individuals abroad and also led to complaints from NGOs that their work was being hampered.[10]

Internally, various efforts were made to coordinate relief activities on a sectoral basis. This frequently involved the local offices of UN agencies working with government

agencies. Thus agriculture and, more importantly, fishing, were charged to the FAO working with the Department of Fisheries. Shelter was a matter for the UNHCR. Yet it was almost impossible for them to find out what was happening in their sectors because of the plethora of agencies involved in the relief effort and the need for each individual agency to maximise its visible impact. In the case of the fishing sector matters were made worse by the attempt of the FAO to use the tsunami as an opportunity for restructuring the fisheries sector which was seen as employing too many fishermen who were over-fishing the inshore waters. This policy was widely rejected by the relief agencies- to such an extent that by the end of March there were probably more fishing craft active off the southwest coast of Sri Lanka than there were before the tsunami.

At a local level there were also attempts at coordinating relief activities. In some places such as Galle this involved the UNDP; in others local government agencies were more important. But again, attempts at co-ordination were generally unsuccessful. Agencies were unwilling to share information where it might threaten their own efforts. There were unsavoury disputes between agencies as to which one should intervene or take the lead in specific areas. In one case representatives of two agencies almost came to blows as to which one had the 'right' to assist elderly female coir workers affected by the tsunami.

Over time, and as the immediacy of the relief effort passed, forms of coordination did develop. Areas of activity were demarcated both geographically and thematically. But this was not the result of some effective coordination policy. Rather, it was the result of a competitive process which, in a parody of the perfect market, produced a series of unstable equilibria.

Discussion

All the organisations, agencies and individuals I came into contact with were driven by a strong sense of moral commitment to the relief effort and they deprecated what they recognised as the corrosive nature of inter-agency competition. All talked of the desirability of effective coordination although there were strong differences as to what form that coordination might entail. Thus there were complaints of over centralising attempts by central government to manage the relief effort, although in practice this effort seems to have had little effect. Most saw more local or district-level forms of management as preferable. Yet the question remains as to whether there is at base a very real contradiction between the philanthropic and humanitarian objectives of relief agencies which implies cooperation and coordination, and structural forces which force relief agencies to compete with each other.

In a very important paper, Cooley and Ron have argued that competition between agencies is inherent in the structure of the international aid industry.[11] They take issue with authors who have argued that the increase in the numbers of international NGOs is an element in the emergence of a global civil society based upon shared liberal values. Instead, they argue that the world of NGOs is a world of extreme competition for resources and that organisational continuity depends upon success in this competitive world. This in turn leads to major disfunctions and contradictions in terms of the effectiveness of aid and disaster relief.

The situation in Sri Lanka certainly fits into the broad picture painted by Cooley and Ron. Relief agencies were quite conscious of existing in a very competitive world and in the

long term saw themselves as competitors for resources. Organisations such as the Red Cross or Merlin or whoever continually faced challenges from other organisations which claim to be doing the same things more effectively.[12] Continued funding depends upon not just being effective but being seen as effective. Thus disasters become media opportunities for these agencies to stake a claim to continue or to inject a new sense of effectiveness.

But what makes the Sri Lankan case significantly different from those described by Cooley and Ron, for instance the horrifying picture of life in the Goma refugee camp in the 1990s, was that in the short run, the competition between agencies was not to get resources but to spend them. In Sri Lanka there was simply so much resources that the competition focused around control of beneficiaries rather than control over donors. Furthermore, rather than being answerable to a small number of major donors, relief agencies working in Sri Lanka were answerable to millions of small donors who could all watch the progress of the relief work through the international media. Competition was thus greatest in aspects of relief which play directly to this public – for instance housing and shelter, distribution of food and medical aid or new fishing tackle. Where there was no competition was in areas which did not have this immediate and visual quality. Thus it might be argued that in the fishing sector, restoration of the capacities of the Fisheries Department was a priority – yet as far as I know very little was done in this area during the first few months and even later there were few inputs.

These competitive pressures were exacerbated by more individual ambitions. Many of the people involved in post-tsunami relief in Sri Lanka were to a greater or lesser extent 'disaster professionals'. In Colombo the major social centre patronised by these people was a bar known as, 'The Cricketers'. On one level this became a clearing house for information and, it has to be said, a scene for informal forms of coordination being worked out and deals over territory being made. But it was also the scene for reunions between people who had worked together in previous post-disaster situations and were now recreating the social networks through which future jobs could be ensured. Career paths and development become a matter of gaining a reputation and 'doing well' in the disaster business, and this involves successfully shifting relief materials both physical and financial. Again, we are in a competitive milieu which whilst extolling the virtues of coordination and collaboration is at the same time based on individual self-interest.

Thus whilst philanthropy might be the antithesis of self-interest, the means of delivering philanthropic relief undermines this high moral tone. People who gave so generously in Europe, Asia and the Americas in response to tsunami appeals were doubtlessly motivated by a humanitarian sense of moral and ethical obligation. The organisations involved in delivering this relief are also premised on these high moral standards as is the vast majority of the people who work for these agencies. Few people if any get rich through working in disaster relief. Yet the structural nature of the relief business inevitably generates competition both between and, perhaps to a lesser extent, within relief agencies. For the ethically motivated donor, the issue is always on how their donation can have its maximum effect and this inevitably generates competition between the donors to prove that they and not other organisations have the greatest impact in alleviating suffering and achieving humanitarian objectives. Philanthropy and competition are inextricably linked.

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End Notes

1. Tony Vaux *et al* 2005, *Independent Evaluation of the DEC Tsunami Crisis Response*. Report to the DEC Board. Available at, http://www.dec.org.uk/uploads/documents/dectsunaACFF.pdf See also A. Bhattacharjee *et al* 2005, *Multi-Agency Evaluation of Tsunami Response: India and Sri Lanka*. Available at, http://www.alnap.org/tec/pdf/IWG_IN_LK_Evaluation_20050901.pdf

2. The members of the Disasters Emergency Committee include World Vision, Help the Aged, Islamic Relief, Oxfam, Care, Concern, Save the Children and the British Red Cross amongst others.

3. See the M&S press release at http://www2.marksandspencer.com/thecompany/mediacentre/pressreleases/2005/csr2005-06-16-00.shtml

4. It is impossible to list all the NGOs that appeared in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami. Perhaps my favourite was 'Noah's Wish', an American NGO which assists animals in disasters. See, http://www.noahswish.org/

5. DEC-supported spending in Sri Lanka is estimated to be £41 million in 2005. This was broadly in line with its overall spending objectives, but overall the DEC in 2005m only managed to spend £128 million on tsunami relief compared with its target of £151 million. Most of the shortfall was in Indonesia–based spending.

6. For the text of this code of conduct, see http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/

7. So for instance, some East Asian organisations became involved in the then Prime Minister's scheme to resite the town of Hambantota.

8. An example of technical deficiencies are the so-called 'papadam boats' which used two layers of glass fibre rather than five. See O.Cossee, R. Hermes and S. Mezhood 2006, *Real Time Evaluation of the FAO Emergency and Rehabilitation Operations in Response to the Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami.* Report of the Second Mission. Available at, http://www.alnap.org/tec/pdf/RTE_FAO_Second%20Mission%20Report%20-%20Final%20Version.pdf

9. This in part led to suspicions later on that various Christian evangelical groups had used the tsunami as an opportunity for proselytisation.

10. The government claimed that these restrictions had to be reintroduced because unscrupulous groups were using humanitarian imports as as a means of supplying the LTTE. Oxfam vigorously complained about duty being charged on the import of four-wheel drive vehicles which it claimed were being imported for humanitarian purposes.

11. A. Cooley and J. Ron 2002, 'The NGO Scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Econo-

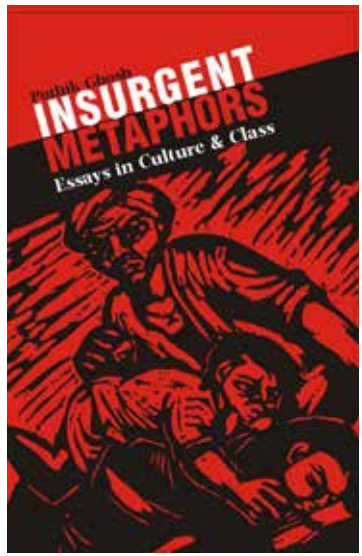
my of Transnational Action'. *International Security,* 27: 5-39.

12. Thus there is little love amongst many Red Cross personnel for MSF which is seen as flashy and too intent on maximising the media coverage it receives.

Pothik Ghosh
Insurgent Metaphors: Essays in Culture and Class
Aakar Books, Delhi, 2010
Pp. 216, ISBN: 978-93-5002-092-0. INR 225.00

Paresh Chandra

Introducing a question: identities and class



The significance of *Insurgent Metaphors* derives, like that of many good books, from the fact that it comes at a conjuncture at which many of the questions it raises are out of fashion, even as the need to raise them continues. In this case, these questions are cultural insofar as they are political, and they are political because they are cultural. Culture, as Ghosh puts it in his introduction, is "nothing less than the totality of human life itself. Culture is how society – human beings in their social existence – manifests itself. To that extent, culture is the attitude and conception that denizens of a social order have towards that social order, their existence within and as part of it and thus towards the social relations that constitute the social formation in question" (2010: 15).

The first and possibly the most fundamental question is: What is "class"? If it is, as it seems to many, one among various identities, what is its relation to other identities? Is it, as some would claim, more important, more essential than other identities? This is a question that we have been trying to deal with since the sixties. Many answers have been offered; some of them were very good, and most of these seem to have been forgotten. In any case, a particular way of looking at this issue is in vogue in the academia, popularized especially by post-colonial criticism and the cult of subalternity. In essence, this approach does not acknowledge the existence of any "closed universality," and argues the case for an "open universality" formed by the aggregation of many (concrete) particulars. This standpoint is, for instance, implicit in Sudipta Kaviraj's attack on Indian Marxism in his recent essay 'Marxism in Translation' (Kaviraj: 2009). The only other approach visible, in the Indian academia

and politics at least, is that of the supposed "orthodox Marxists", who accept no destabilization of the grand-narrative of class, and call the claims of all other identities fraudulent. The significance of the text that the current essay engages with comes partly from the novelty of the way in which it intervenes in the situation laid out above. *Insurgent Metaphors* is a critical engagement with two sterile sects: on the one hand, the "communistologists" with their "reified sociologies of class", and on the other the academia – that unhealthy broth of Adornoesque melancholia and celebration of subalternity (2010: 14, 24).

Negative dialectics and class as a process

Communist Party (CP)-formations (especially in India, but also in Europe, China etc.) have reduced the critical science of Marxism, and the project of socialism, to be created through the organized intensification of class struggle, to fixed epistemologies and institutions. Working class, to them, is a sociological entity, which is furthermore, unfortunately, still identified solely as the industrial proletariat. The crises began in the 1960s when CP-formations found themselves unable to account for the assertion of a multiplicity of identities. It continues now, and class continues to be posited as one among many identities contending for hegemony. The dialectical, relational essence of the concept of class is wholly lost, and with it is lost almost everything that should define a truly Marxian understanding of society. Locating the "working class" as a particular identifiable group, Communist Parties become cults that lose contact with what the author of the present book calls "proletariat cultures," (2010: 16) that emerge as radically antagonistic moments from within the horizon of capital. These cults fetishize older forms in which the transformative politics of the working class had asserted itself. Their project should be fashioned around a logic culled out from the history of struggles, a logic that gets refounded in newer conjunctures and is redefined by them. Sidestepping the basic theoretical exercise that is needed for this, forgetting to generalize the basic critical impulse of an assertion that seeks to undermine the essence of capitalist production, they reify the forms of some such assertions, forms that need to be put in their limits.

Like all self-respecting Indian Marxists, Ghosh too is unable to evade the task of taking a few perfunctory jabs at the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Although he is decidedly a more sophisticated pugilist than most – his charge is that the CPI (Marxist)-led Left Front failed because it "abandoned the tortuous dirt-path of working-class struggle for the comfortable highway of social democracy" (2010: 205-206). Keeping in mind the larger project this book inaugurates, what is more significant is the critique Ghosh offers of the Indian Maoists in the two final essays, 'Lalgarh Beyond Maoism: Maoism Beyond Lalgarh,' and 'Three Fragmentary Theses'. He counters two popular ways of looking at the Maoist Movement in India: the first is to be seen in the political-organizational vision of the Maoists themselves, which repeatedly falls back upon an obsession with territorial expansion that has "spelt no real political-ideological breakthrough for the larger working class movement" (2010: 205), and which "stems from the Maoists' insistence on envisaging the party as an a-priori state-form, which seeks to subordinate the singularity of various experiences of disaffection and registers of struggle to its doctrinaire conception of politics, which is no more than the overgeneralization of one particular experience of social oppression and resistanc" (2010: 205). The second is the "workerist" mistake of certain communist critics of

the Maoists who discount completely the radical potential of such non-urban struggles. Both of these lines, according to Ghosh, fail to take cognizance of the fundamental constellational unity that binds various "socio-occupational subjects enacting the singular logic called the working-class multiple" (2010: 212).

It is one thing to say that the logic of the Maoist movement will unfold into other locations, through a heightening of struggles within those locations, and quite another to talk of the "spread" of Maoist influence. Such spread of 'Maoism' entails the overgeneralization of a locally valid and localized experience (of tribal-agrarian socio-occupational zones). "Such a proposal implies, tendentially, the authoritarian and coercive imposition of the party and its 'revolution' as state-forms on a heterogeneity of working-class experiences" (2010: 215-216). Now, if we leave the historico-empirical specificities that these essays also engage with, and try to arrive at their theoretical essence, we discover a different way of looking at the working class and its historical role.

The question of the relationship between class and identities gets reformulated, because class is no longer seen as one among other identities; according to Ghosh, it is a process or a relation to be grasped through continuous abstraction from a history created by the struggles of identities (2010: 33-34); the relationship is dialectical. An identity is valid at a particular socio-occupational site, and immanent within it is the logic of truly transformative politics. But if it is to escape co-option, an identity needs to, well, self-destruct. The objectively ever-present unity of various socio-occupational forms, to be discovered in the logic that constitutes them, needs to be subjectively recognized by such forms in their respective determinate moments. At the same time, if one does not recognize the specificity of forms (identities), one recognizes nothing, since history is constituted by these forms. The class-for-itself is always in the process of being constructed, but is never out there; it is not present a-priori, to be recognized as somehow different from and superior to the multitude of identities.

When a particular form of struggle gets institutionalized, what is lost is the impulse to negate, because a particular form of negation, invalid beyond certain locations has come to stand as the only truly critical form. Obviously a form, which is locally valid, is unable to deal with other localities. Not only does it try to impose itself upon other forms, it is also unequal to the task of a radical questioning of the status quo in spaces external to its experience. Revolutionary generalization can take place only within a constellational framework, which embodies the negative impulse of various forms trying to move beyond their congealed positivity.

A philosophy for the 'Event'

The importance of the antithetical moment of politics cannot be stressed enough, the book screams almost at each page. But a warning that follows close behind concerns the academic institutionalization of Adornoesque negativity, which is, in the final analysis, quietist and reactionary (2010: 83). Ghosh opens his critique of the ostensibly Leftist academia in an essay titled 'Academics, Politics and Class Struggle' where he calls for "an academics beyond the academia" (2010: 81, 85), pointing out the problems of reifying negativity as an end in itself. The academic subjectivity seeks to present a critique of hegemony from its location, but is unwilling to make a synthetic generalization of the logic of critique. This exercise is like a hit

and run game; the academic takes a shot at the state, but is unwilling to think of a complete destruction of the state, out of the fear that the vacuum will then be filled by another, more authoritarian state. The unwillingness to generalize implies that critique is ungrounded in any, even if provisional, alternative horizon. Since capitalism functions through competition, and in its latest neoliberal *avatar* shows a special ability to co-opt all local assertions within this competitive framework, such a critique serves no purpose at best, and at worst becomes a way of consolidating the state that it ostensibly seeks to negate. The Adornoesque-melancholic subjectivity, although it often does not acknowledge this, has much in common with the Foucauldian/Laclauian suspicion of meta-narratives. It too cannot imagine transformation as anything more than an aggregative addition of negative moments. Any attempt at transcendental synthesis, at systemic transformation, is always already held in abeyance. The shots taken by different people at the state, on different occasions, manage to make small dents in the state structure, and that is thought good enough. What is not understood is that capitalism, like a bucket of water, is unaffected by such isolated blows on the surface. The entire vessel needs to be overturned.

In critiquing this reification of negativity, Ghosh makes a distinction between a "philosophy of the Event" and a "philosophy for the Event" (2010: 28). The Adornoesque melancholic is a philosopher of the Event. He does not think that a rupture can be created, and says that any attempt to create an Event will invariably end in totalitarianism. Ghosh argues against the melancholic, and claims that when negativity gets institutionalized and tries to not make any positive claim, it ends up finding ontological moorings within the horizon of capital. Figuratively speaking, negativity needs a different positive: a third pole. The antithetical assertion of a moment remains, in the final analysis, only an antinomian one, gets institutionalized, its assertion a part of the competitive paradigm that capitalism makes available, unless it is grounded within – and this does not have "a regulative, truth-producing, ontological status" (2010: 28) – a philosophy for the Event. In other words, the passive philosophy of the Event, a pseudo-Bakunian quietism negates the very possibility of an event by being unprepared for it. Waiting cannot be passive, it needs be active.

What is this philosophy for the Event? Glimpses of Ghosh's answer are already visible in what has been said so far, but before explicitly spelling it out, another issue needs to be addressed. In the writings of a number of theorists belonging to the "Subaltern School", and in the anxieties of post-colonial theory at large, one repeatedly comes across a suspicion of meta-narratives (see, for instance Homi Bhabha's essay 'How newness enters the world: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation,' in The Location of Culture (1994)); the essence of this suspicion is the conviction that no one narrative can do justice to a hoard of particularities. A philosophy for the Event is unimaginable in such a situation, because an Event is a systemic break. If what is at stake is the very question, whether 'system' at all exists, then the only form of action that we can conceive of, will comprise of a series of negotiations at various locations; not systemic transformation. If a break in reality has to take place, it will take place on its own. In an essay called the 'The Siren-Song of New Traditionalism,' Ghosh extends his questioning of the academia by taking on this conviction. Without going into its specificities, I will attempt to draw out what I think is one of the main arguments that the essay makes.

What are these particularities that we speak of? Identities, incompletely constituted, always a process, never really ossified forms, but identities nonetheless. What is an iden-

tity? A fundamental observation that Marx made was that the first consciousness is practical consciousness. Humanity expresses itself, even gains its 'humanity' through labour, or creativity. Each identity establishes itself in the realm of difference, pure difference, through its particular style of self-expression. In the final instant, what is this style but the concrete labour that each, particular identity performs? Before the advent of capitalism, before the need for the externalization of value arose, and before commodity production, there was no 'abstract labour.' So long as forms of concrete labour do not have to be expressed in terms of a 'universal equivalent, each form has value unto itself. The moment we begin to privilege exchange over use, we also implicitly begin to privilege the abstract over the concrete. This abstract is nothing but abstract human labour which capitalism accumulates; in fact, capital is nothing but accumulated abstract labour. This abstractness of all concrete forms of labour, which is given to us by capitalism, is already a universal. This is not incomplete in anyway, but always already there in all forms of expression, undermining difference as such, reducing it to difference in relation to. The foreclosure that creates a universal that is always present and complete, is always already made by capitalism (2010: 97). Our struggle is to destroy this universal and establish a time of pure difference. Our ground of functioning is however not determined by us; this all pervasive universality is given to us by capitalism, and we work with it, always facing the possibility of co-option, but work nevertheless.

A philosophy for the Event is possible, and a systemic rupture is imaginable because of this (by definition ever-present) bad universality. This struggle for a meta-narrative (a philosophy for the Event), significantly, is waged not only against these academic detractors of genuine political praxes, but also against many who, at least in word if not deed, accept notions like revolution, class, capitalism etc. The liberal virus, that has, at this point, virtually taken over Leftist practice, both pragmatic and theoretical, brings with it precisely this problem – the evident absence of any meta-narrative of collective action. Because of this void, one is unable to differentiate between what is truly opposed to the logic of capital, and what is another agency of capital, at most a red herring. Not knowing what factors are capable of leading to an authentic questioning of capitalism and what are not, we are prone to say things like, "at least we do something". The form of our activity becomes unimportant to us, because we no longer struggle, as Mao would say, on "two fronts". Radical content calls for a radical form. Critique cannot truly be critique until it is grounded within the logic of the only class that can make a claim to autonomy in this system, the only class that is "in excess" of the system, the only class which suffers from absolute poverty. The critical philosophy of this class is the philosophy for the Event (2010: 88-89).

One of the most important contribution of Ghosh's text is its foregrounding of the Benjamin of the 'author as producer' essay (2010: 49), in privileging not what a form says, but the condition under which it says what it says; in this context, one can also think of the Jamesonian dictum, "always historicize!" (Jameson 1983: ix). Like the ego born by the disavowal of its own condition of possibility, each form/identity forgets the moment of its birth. It is this ahistoricity of subjectivity that this text seeks to confront; one has to make each form rememorize what it has forgotten. Foregrounded repeatedly, is the one mechanism that is central to the constitution of all conjunctures in this phase of history, and which prepares the ground on which assertions, even antithetical ones, take place: the labor-capital contradiction. Since, this is only a review essay, not by any means a summary of this project, I put forth a tenet that is concretized and buttressed in Insurgent Metaphors: the centrality of

class. Class, not as an a-priori principle that exists in addition to localized identities, but one that is constituted and reconstituted through the struggle of identities, and at the same time structures them, whether they acknowledge this or not. Historicizing implies the exploration of the founding moment of a process, exploring the interplay of necessity and external determinations, and the not so insignificant part played by contingency.

Aesthetics and politics

In an essay titled 'Fascism and the Marxist Praxis of Art,' one of four essays on art/literature in the volume, Ghosh begins with a sort of compressed history of art. His main reference point to explain certain evident paradigm shifts in the history of symbolic forms, like the move away from frontality and coordination with regard to perspective, fore-shortening, and subordination, is the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the beginning of the myth of the individual. Borrowing from Benjamin (2010: 49-50), Ghosh highlights the need to locate an artist as a producer within the techniques with which s/he produces so as to determine what the logic that constitutes this production is. Following this method, he associates 'modern art' (which for him is all art that has been and is being produced in a system where the dominant mode of production is capitalism) with the split between the producer and the consumer and the one between the subject and her/his reality. However, not falling into a soft primitivist trap, Ghosh is quick to point out the problems of any attempts to reach back into pre-capitalist reality for a different model of artistic production. He says, "This [pre-capitalist] discourse of all pervasive reality, which did not alienate the human subject from its object, was nevertheless a stratified discourse of reality that played a crucial role in preserving and perpetuating feudalism" (2010: 58).

"Only a step in the direction of creating a socialist mode of universal production", says Ghosh, "where every act of consumption is an immediate and simultaneous gesture of production can de-ideologize and de-commodify art, making it a zone of critique and class struggle" (2010: 65). By this idea of a 'universal production' (2010: 73-74), where the consumer is simultaneously a producer, one is reminded of Benjamin's enthusiasm for cinema in his essay on mechanical reproduction. Ghosh does not promote propogandist art nor does he fall for a "Lukacsian" committed art. As we can see, even in the aspect of modern art that he picks up for scrutiny, Ghosh is very mindful of the question of form, and of the manner in which forms demand and create particular sorts of recipients. When in certain examples of zero-degree writing, in Brechtian epic theatre (2010: 73), and in Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' (2010: 73), Ghosh sees an attempt to transcend the problems of modern art, he is looking primarily at the formal questions these experiments raise, and the demands these forms make off their 'consumers'. The call for transformation that Ghosh offers, is directed more at readers than writers: "…Active reading or making of reality transforms art. It is no longer an ideology to be passively consumed, but a technology to change and produce reality, facilitating universal and complete control over the production rocess" (2010: 73-74). Art is seen as an 'incomplete form'" (in the sense of being always incompletely formed), which is complete till the author is killed, and is then completed again in its relation to the reader/viewer. A different way of reading would mean a different art; conversely, a different art would call for a different reader.

"Modern man is cursed with too much of seeing" (2010: 174), goes the first line of the essay, 'The Blind Art of the Concrete'. If there is one thing that characterizes what Ghosh calls 'modern art', it is the preponderance of the 'eye'. Alberti's disembodied eye is

a tool of abstraction that stands for man's dominance over all he sees. The eye draws out of objects all that is significant, all that fits within the framework of utility and discards the shell. The subject-object divide is represented best by this disembodied agent of perception. In the art of the blind Bengali artist Benodebehari Mukherjee, Ghosh discovers an attempt to transcend the demands of 'optical verisimilitude' (2010: 174). Mukherjee, Ghosh says, even before he became blind had been interested not so much in objects, but in the relationships between them. Once blind, he was freed from the eye, that "compulsive ejaculator of meaning" and "repository of preconceived notions and ideas" (2010: 175); his art acquired a tactile quality almost unimaginable otherwise. In this 'blind art of the concrete' Ghosh finds an intimation of how human beings could one day become more alive and free. Significantly, Ghosh makes no claims concerning the 'radicalizing' potential of this art. He merely points out this art's ability to transcend, which is simultaneously its inability to fulfill the demands of reality.

Deconstructing stereotypes; breaking binaries

The last set of essays that I explore here brings us back to the question of identities. "In Defense of Hamas", tackles one of the most controversial issues of our times, and it does so by shifting the terms of debate – from questions like "Should there be international intervention?" or, "Is Hamas fundamentalist?" – and digging beneath the images that are flashed in the media. This digging is not a Chomskian fact-finding, but an effort to find the only deep structure that Chomsky doggedly avoids – social relations, and the struggles that give birth to an identity. Ghosh's argument concerning Hamas is well represented by the distinction he draws between Hamas and Al Qaeda. After examining the specificities of Israel-Palestine high politics, as well as the concrete political economic situation (2010: 181-182), Ghosh is able to explain the disillusionment of poor Palestinians with the institutionalized PLO (2010: 181). He observes that the proletarianized Palestinians who inhabit Gaza have come to be the centre of Hamas' uncompromising anti-Israel resistance. It is after laying out this foundation that Ghosh asserts that despite the common Islamic religious idiom used by Al Qaeda and Hamas, it would be grossly inaccurate to equate them. "Hamas's radical Islam is, clearly, an organic language of protest, resistance and autonomy against socio-economic domination by a foreign state and an institutionalized, secular local elite. Al Qaeda on the other hand, posits its Islam as an anti-dialogic institution that needs to be imposed on the entire world in the form of an international caliphate" (2010: 185).

Making use of a similar exercise in political historiography, in '"Sri Lanka: Genocide and Other Majoritarian Falsehoods'", Ghosh breaks the LTTE-Sinhala Nationalism binary that seems to be the only truth of recent Sri Lankan history. He blames the Communist Party of Ceylon, among others for their co-option into the right-wing nationalism of the Sinhala elite, and claims that because of the failures of such organizations the "fundamentally secular and social transformative politics of the Tamil indentured labor community" (2010: 192) got extinguished. This was a politics that "could have emerged as a more progressive and ecumenical alternative to both the LTTE's brand of authoritarian nationalism and the Majoritarian chauvinism of the Sinhala ruling class" (2010: 192). In the Indian state's extension of help to the Sinhala attack on the organization of the rising Tamil elite, Ghosh sees not only the larger political project of Indian imperialism, but also an attempt to destroy the less visible radical

voices among the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. As in his analysis of Hamas, Ghosh is able to demonstrate that the binaries that are thrown at us by the media hide the more fundamental struggles of the underclass against their rulers; by foregrounding the intra-class struggles between the internally segmented elite.

Conclusion

From a different route then, the previous section returned us to the question we started the essay with: the question of the relationship between diverse localities and the universality of class. Not only are concrete particularities absent, we realize that it is not the claims of the universality of class that are totalitarian, but the ones that see only differences and localized truths. Localities in claiming self-sufficiency hide the way in which they too are split in the middle, along lines that are omnipresent within the rule of capital. This omnipresence cannot be evaded, and defenders of 'difference' cannot uphold difference by trying to sidestep it. From the determinate moments of identities claiming internal homogeneity ('Tamil', or 'Muslim'), we need to rescue the insurgent immanence of the working class subjectivity. To repeat what can never be said too often, the universality that demolishes difference is already given to us; our task is to destroy it even as we work through it. While the assertion of difference does at a moment disrupt the functioning of the system, the system also co-opts it, and will be able to do so as long as the bad universality that is imposed upon us is not challenged in its entirety. This bad universality needs to be used as the ground for the construction of a good universality, which is paradoxically contra-universality. Each moment of disruption is already implicitly a challenge to the hegemony of abstract labour; how to change rupture into transformation, or as Marx would say a barrier into a break, is the important question. Redefining the notion of the 'working class,' as not the male, industrial proletariat, but as all people upon whom work is imposed to produce and reproduce capital, or as all from whom surplus value is extracted, or as all who are alienated from their creativity, from their concrete labour, so that abstract labour can be accumulated, one could say that this bad universality is that of the givenness of the 'working class in-itself,' and the reconfigured good immanence is the 'working class for-itself.'

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Nalin Swaris
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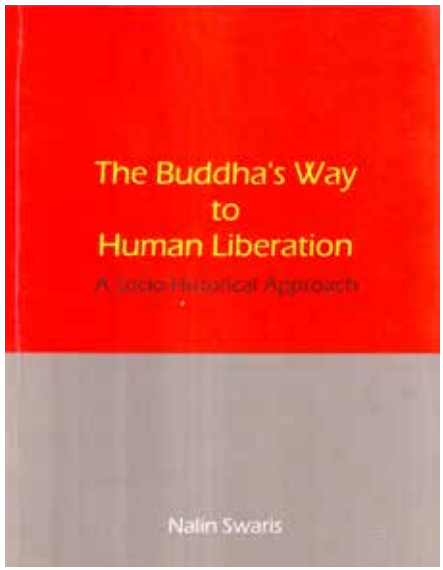
Sasanka Perera



Nalin Swaris' book, *The Buddha's Way to Human Liberation: A Socio-Historical Approach* is an abbreviated version of his earlier book with the same title that was originally published in 1999. Without a doubt, it is one of the most significant scholarly contributions to the understanding of early Buddhism in a global situation where unseemly transformations have taken place in both the practice and interpretation of Buddhism. This state of affairs is typified in contemporary Sri Lanka by the increased participation of monks in divisive and often virulent politics on the one hand and the relatively recent emergence of tele-monks whose emphasis seem to be more on 'performance' rather than on the erudite and socially relevant presentation of the *Dhamma*. In this kind of situation where Buddhism is both misunderstood and misused, Swaris' masterly scholarship is an invitation to explore the thinking of a truly great mind and the contexts in which the Buddha's ideas emerged, expanded and took root. The attempt of this review is to make some comments on three interrelated areas: the contents and structure of the book, the methodology adopted by the writer and the contribution of the book to contemporary Sri Lankan society and our knowledge on Buddhism. My emphasis however would be on the method adopted in the book.

In addition to the 'Introduction' which deals with method, the book consists of 16 interrelated chapters that give coherence to the book as a whole. Nevertheless each chapter can also be read as stand-alone discussions on specific issues crucial in understanding Buddhism. It would be useful to briefly note the themes of these chapters as it would give an idea of the parameters of the book: 1) The Buddha Dhamma: A This Worldly Vision, 2) The Majjhimadesa: Matrix of a New Society, 3) The Monarchical States, 4) Tribes and Tribal Federations, 5) Brahmin Theory and Practice, 6) Private Salvation-Seeking (I):

The Mystical and Metaphysical Way, 7) Private Salvation-Seeking (II): The Way of Self Torture, 8) Wandering Mendicant Teachers – A New Social Movement, 9) The Great Awakening- Conditioned Co-arising, 10) Anatta- Ending the Craving for Immortality, 11) Kamma: The Creative Life-Force of Human Beings, 12) The Sociogenesis of Identity Consciousness, 13) The Morphology of Suffering and its Source, 14) Nibbana: Realized Freedom and Bliss, 15) Magga: The Buddha's Way to Human Liberation, 16) A Movement for the Moral Transformation of Society. As would be self-evident from this chapter breakdown, Swaris' attempt is not a mere linear narration of Buddhist social and political history and a simple description of key positions of Buddhism. It seeks to locate the key ideas of Buddhism in the social and political contexts in which they first emerged and gained currency and to engage with these concepts in order to offer a palatable interpretation of what they mean. Swaris' attempt as a specific discourse then is not a domain of innocence but an arena of contextualization, exploration, engagement and explanation that might also offer grounds for many disagreements among scholars of Buddhism. But then, that itself is a state of reality that the Buddha himself endorsed most clearly in the articulations in Kalama Sutta.

At the very outset, as part of his overall narrative, Swaris questions the validity of the widely held notion that Buddhism is a way for private salvation of separate individuals. While the Buddha emphasized much on the role of individual effort Swaris contends that "---The Buddha's Way was not given as a means to private salvation from cosmic existence, …but from socially and psychologically engendered suffering. Buddhism began as a collective movement for the moral transformation of society. Its ethics are intrinsically communitarian in character (2008: 3-4). Swaris' contention is that for the Buddha, the individual is a fiction of human craving and his decision to establish a community of compassion and sharing was the ultimate expression of the conviction that individualism is the principle obstacle to human happiness (2008: 5).

This brings us to the question of method. A comprehensive understanding of early Buddhism and its contexts of evolution cannot be a religious enterprise. It must be a scholarly and intellectual project that necessarily has to bring in the expertise of multiple disciplines such as history, sociology, linguistics and so on if the project concerned is to be wide-ranging and relevant. This is precisely what Swaris attempts with his multidisciplinary focus, which he calls a 'socio-historical approach.' For him, "the socio-historical approach to understanding the origins and the core doctrines of early Buddhism is consistent with the basic assumptions and the methodology of the Dhamma itself" (2008: 7). He notes quite correctly that "after six years of single-minded inquiry, investigation and experimentation, the Buddha came to the conclusion that if anything can be considered 'absolute,' it is impermanence" (2008: 7). Consistent with this premise that all is impermanent and in flux, the historical approach shifts the method of inquiry from substance thinking to process thinking. The focus on the social context is also consistent with the Buddha's key principle of explanation - conditioned co-arising; everything arises and ceases under specific conditions. Therefore no phenomenon can be understood in isolation and independent of the conditions of its ever becoming existence (2008: 8-9).

This also brings up another related matter. That is, given the fact that Swaris' effort is a thoroughly contemporary one though his main domain of investigation is the ancient past, his method has to be consistent not only with the *Dhamma* but more so with current practices in social sciences which in this case it clearly is. If one were to simplify what is es-

sentially meant by the socio-historical method, it necessarily has to bring into the process of 'reading' tools of analysis and interpretation used in disciplines like history and other social sciences such as sociology and social anthropology. Swaris himself notes that socio-historical method "requires at least a working knowledge of the findings of social scientists and historians" (Swaris 2008: 23).

One can see these requirements manifesting in Swaris' approach from zooming on and fine-tuning the core concepts used in his text (2008: 7-11) to a careful reading of ancient texts not only in the context of what the texts themselves say but also from the point of view of contemporary inter-textual readings ranging from history to philosophy. On the other hand, unlike most writers who deal with 'religious' texts Swaris has clearly identified the limitations of reading such texts: "Textual interpretation is not a simple and innocent exercise of reproducing meanings frozen forever in a sacrosanct language. Textual interpretation is a social practice. It is an intervention in texts in order to construct meanings to be communicated to others" (2008: 17). He notes that this process often camouflages the ethno-political choices that writers might make as well as the interpretations that might seep into texts on the basis of writers' gender, class and ethnic identities as well as their positions in society and the scholarly traditions they may represent (2008: 17). As noted by Swaris, "the canonization of texts, especially texts which are believed to contain revealed truths, involve scholars who adopt a devotional attitudes to them in a kind of 'hermeneutical circularity'" in a situation where "they set out to find what they assume are incontrovertible, 'sacred' or 'salvific' truths" (2008: 17). As a result, "where the text embraces or scandalizes, the explanations tend to be apologetic" (2008: 17). Quoting the Christian theologian Normal Gottwald, Swaris points out that when reading 'sacred' texts, a devout scholar has no option but to adopt the 'literalist method' of textual interpretation since it is assumed that the meanings conveyed exist independent of time and place (2008: 17). By foregrounding these limitations at the outset, Swaris attempt to avoid the pitfalls of textual analysis.

These assumptions however need not constrain critical students of the Buddhist canonical texts, because the Buddha's insights were not divinely inspired. They were the result of personal investigation and could be empirically verified by others. Nevertheless, Swaris notes, despite "the Buddha's insistence on the Conditioned Co-Arising of all realities, Buddhist piety has vested its canonical works with a sacred character akin to the sacralisation of 'The Book' in theistic religions. If the canon attributes certain statements to the Buddha, the attitude of devout Buddhists generally has been to assume that they are indeed Buddha vacana" [words of the Buddha] (2008: 17). Swaris cautions against such blind acceptance of canonical texts and proposes a more critical, reflective and contextual approach. This is clearly what he has employed in his own study. There is no doubt that what Swaris has adopted is the ideal approach for a study of this nature. He has therefore brought into his analysis interpretive insights from a number of contemporary theoretical positions. But he has been cautious enough not to become a prisoner of these positions.

As Swaris notes, "Ideas become a social force when they capture the imagination of the masses" (2008: 4) as the Dhamma did as indicated by its rapid expansion in India and beyond in the time of the Buddha and after. How and why early Buddhism captured the imagination of the masses, is explained at great length in the final chapter of the book, 'A Movement for the Moral Transformation of Society.' Swaris points out that the Buddha was not the founder of a religion but that he was one of the world's great social reformers who

launched a non violent movement for the moral transformation of society in order to liberate human beings from the psychologically and socially engendered conditions of suffering. The Buddha realized that human beings suffer because of their delusions which fuel hatred and lust. Applying his key insight, 'conditioned co-arising', he taught that the way to end the clinging to delusions is to eradicate the conditions which make such delusions necessary. According to the Buddha, all suffering arises under specific conditions, and these conditions can be eradicated. The first Buddhists raised the banner of revolt against humanly inflicted suffering. Their position was that 'nothing is permanent; everything is subject to change and can therefore be changed.' They openly denounced the 'inhuman' teachings of the Brahmins, especially the caste system. They very vocally condemned the tyranny of kings and social inequality. The socially oppressed and the downtrodden, the low castes, women and slaves looked upon the Buddha as a great liberator. The Sangha he founded was a truly inclusive and universal community of caring and sharing in which, in the Buddha's own words all former social distinctions of gender, caste and ethnicity disappear leaving only one flavor, the flavor of freedom – vimutti rasa.

The immense popularity of the early teachings and practices of Buddhism among the masses attracted the attention of the socially privileged who began to lavish their patronage on the Sangha and within two centuries of the Buddha's death, the movement for social transformation became a status religion which came to terms with the social status quo. The Sangha ceased to be a critical presence in society. If the early Buddhist renouncers took pride in the fact that they went "against the current" of society – patisotagmin - the dominant practice of the 'new' Sangha began to "go along with" the current' of society – anusotagamin. Buddhism soon became little different to what it originally opposed under the personal guidance of the Buddha himself. The surest proof of the brahminastion of the Buddha Sangha, Swaris argues is the introduction of the dehumanizing caste system into Buddhism so much so that in Sri Lanka, the original undifferentiated sangha is divided into caste based sects or nikayas. With the passage of time the egalitarian Sangha dedicated to attain the Goal of the Noble Eightfold Way has been severely truncated. The bhikkhuni sangha has effectively ceased to exist. The laity has been relegated to a subordinated order whose role is to maintain the order of monks by the offering of alms and donations in order to gain merit for a propitious rebirth. In this context, for an individual such as myself with a childhood background in Buddhist socialization and a lifetime of work and living in Sri Lanka where I have seen within the span of my own memory the dismantling of key Buddhist teachings often by people who claim to be champions of the religion itself, the Swaris' book offers a path to rediscover what we once had and have now mostly lost.

For Swaris, this inquiry into the historical origins and the perennial relevance of the Buddha's Teaching has been, as he notes, "an intellectual and personal odyssey". But that odyssey can also be a collective road map for our society toward socio-political goals if we have the wisdom and the will to be guided by the revolutionary teachings promulgated by the Buddha. Like the ideas of all great minds of human civilization, the ideas of the Buddha are not the sole property of Buddhists. They are for the benefit of all humanity if we have the wisdom to grasp their relevance. It remains to be seen if we are morally sensitive enough to embark on the Buddha's Way to make our life-conditions more humane or continue to turn our backs on a set of ideas which once nourished wisdom of thought and compassion towards all without discrimination.

The Distance of a Whisper: Notes from the Field

Aaron Burton

Ape ammage gama (my mother's village)

Image courtsey of Aaron Burton.

Between 1976 and 1978, my mother conducted anthropological field research in Kanewala, a Sinhala Buddhist village roughly 35 kilometers southeast of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Her thesis is titled 'Women and Wage Labour: The Impact of Capitalism in Southwest Sri Lanka' (1986). Coinciding with her research she produced a series of three films, *The Sri Lanka Serie*s (1980). Funded by the University of Sydney and the Australian Film Commission, these films were shot by a small crew, including my father, who was the cinematographer and co-director. Four women, a community of fishermen, and a dance instructor were their 'subjects' and friends. In the village my mother was affectionately known as 'sudu-nona' (the white lady), and in response to her persistent curiosity, the villagers would often remark she must have been born Sri Lankan in a previous life.

I was born a few years after the films were completed and am now roughly the same age as my mother when she conducted her fieldwork. I completed an undergraduate degree in documentary photography, and am now conducting research through a media arts PhD program. Like my mother, Sharon Bell, I am in the pursuit of knowledge through an academic institution. Like my father, Geoff Burton, I am engaged in the art of visual storytelling. Taking cue from my heredity, I have the privileged opportunity to re-visit the villages where my mother lived, and focus my lens on the next generation of cultivators, fishermen,

dancers, and family friends. I want to see if they, like me, are following in their parents' footsteps. By way of producing my own film, *Ape Ammage Gama* (My Mother's Village), I also aim to explore how issues of intercultural representation and documentary filmmaking have evolved over the last three decades.

Academic locale

In recent years in my creative practice, I have attempted to integrate the distinctly intimate gaze of documentary photography with increasingly accessible video production technology, into personal short films. This methodology seemed an uncomfortable fit within conventional forms of documentary media, and I found the distinctly personal perspective and experiences more akin to the tradition of visual ethnography and particular works of avant-garde documentary.

One of the most revealing aspects of my research has been to compare and contrast the academic contexts of my mother's PhD and ethnographic filmmaking in the 70s and 80s with the demands of my own program. Entrenched in an Australian 'sandstone'[1] anthropology department, having just returned from the field, Sharon Bell pleaded for life histories and personal narratives to be incorporated as a significant part of her analysis, her concern being that the process of communicating data and written analysis would inevitably lead to abstraction at the expense of more 'honest' and 'accurate' details of relationships and experiences. She has since offered the following account:

> The response was disastrous. Not only did my colleagues not appreciate my paper, many were angry, some were furious. Did I not understand, they interjected, the nature of scholarly research, nor my role as a doctoral student to place one small building block of knowledge on the wall that is the established canon? Obviously I did not" (Bell 1998: 330-331).

I, on the other hand, can be found stumbling through art college, producing a film and exegesis to fulfill my doctoral demands. Whereas Bell was fighting to liberate academic parameters, my current stress cycles are symptomatic of having to construe methodologies and conceptual frameworks, under the convenient banner of 'inter-disciplinarity', to legitimize my practice-led research, a relatively infant and experimental form of research within academia.

The creative space: Interface of social documentary and visual ethnography

Having located my practice somewhere between social documentary and visual ethnography, I have found that while the two disciplines share many similarities in form and methodology, it is their epistemology that has traditionally kept them apart. Both place an emphasis on extensive observation and immersion, both attempt to portray the reality of their subject; however, perhaps in the interest of captivating wider audiences, social documentary places greater emphasis on creativity, whereas in the interest of building blocks, ethnography has been at pains to minimize meddling in representation.

Over the last few decades, however, the discourses and practices between these

disciplines have collided at compelling social, epistemological, and technological junctions, perhaps no more apparent than in the rise of experimental documentary in contemporary art. *Documenta 11* in 2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor, is perhaps the most pronounced example with an anecdotal estimate of 600 hours of largely documentary-based works displayed (see Heartney 2002). While curatorial themes of globalization and post-colonialism might lend themselves to documentary form, I would suggest it is rare for any contemporary large scale survey exhibition such as a biennale not to include a selection of documentary-based projects. For instance, it was at an exhibition of video art from the Centre Pompidou collection at the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art in 2006 that I stumbled across Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), an experience that continues to deeply inspire me, and a film that has since been reconsidered as a significant example of experimental ethnography (Russell 1999).

Through both form and concept *Sans Soleil* establishes a poly-vocality that epitomizes postmodern documentary. A female narrator relays letters written to her from the elusive travelling filmmaker, occasionally adding her own perspective, which is further complicated by frequently dissociated imagery and a multiple-layered soundtrack. Themes of time and space, or more specifically memory and travel, are interrogated through the protagonist's impossible leaping between such locations as a futuristic Tokyo and a primitive Cape Verde islands, with the added imposition of television inspired nightmares or the traveler's misplaced reality within Hitchcock's Vertigo. As Catherine Russell (1999) observes, the identity of the filmmaker and his subjects become fragmented and pluralistic, consequently destabilizing notions of authority and ethnicity, and ultimately highlighting the narrative potential of subjective, or perhaps collaborative, histories.

Reconceptualising avant-garde documentary as ethnography is in many ways revealing; but that process neglects the looming ethical consideration of how to actually conduct responsible and creative fieldwork and approach the documentary event.

Fieldwork as intellectual experiment

In 2004, at a professorial lecture series at Griffith University, my mother presented critical reflections of her time in the field, and one of the issues she raised concerned the 'impurities' of fieldwork experience being hidden beneath the ethnographic facade. Sharon Bell's overwhelming personal challenges, daily tribulations, and intimate friendships, were relegated to field diaries, letters home, or simply filed away as elusive memories. For example, her first letter from the field to her supervisor began:

> I've now been in sunny Sri Lanka for two weeks. I've been bitten by bed bugs; eaten alive by mosquitoes; suffered from diarrhoea; chewed betel; enjoyed a marvelous meal of baked crab at Rodrigo's home; attended a Sinhalese wedding (the marriage of the daughter of a Supreme Court judge - held at the Colombo Holiday Inn!); eaten curry and rice at the Pagoda; been swimming at the Otter Aquatic Club (the Sinhalese equivalent of the Colombo Club?); endured countless rides of unbelievably crowded buses and trains; become fond of hoppers and string hoppers... I thought these might be some useful indices on which to base judgement of my progress (Bell 2004: 11).

While Bell does occasionally appear within the frame of her films, and presents a frank auto-ethnographic account of her relationships with participants, the hidden 'impurities' of the field experience, she argues, are not only culturally significant events in themselves but are more importantly "stories of incorporation, of the ethnographer as 'one of them' (in this case mentally, psychologically and politically) rather than just the 'other'" (2004: 11).

Bell's sentiments are echoed in Michael Taussig's pronouncement that "ethnography is based on fieldwork and fieldwork is personal. By imprisoning the personal in the ghetto of a private diary, the core of the experience is hidden" (2009: 85). Taussig offers the humorous potential of a new form of ethnography via personal notations of prominent 20th century anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski:

> Returning to the island to start his second field trip in November 1917, after thirty months away in Melbourne, Australia, Malinowski constructed a chart. Entitled "Life in Melbourne in Retrospect," it was composed of six columns which, reading from left to right, were headed SCIENTIFIC WORK / EXTERNAL EVENTS / HEALTH / N.S. / M.W. / E.R.M., the last three being the initials of three young women with whom he was in varying and conflicting degrees in love. Bizarre and unromantic, even shocking, as this chart is, does it not also present the possibility of a bold new form of ethnography? (2009: 85)

Jazeel and MacFarlane (2009) also recently argued for 'more uncertain and participatory practices' to overcome forms of distancing often inherent in the representation and communication of intercultural research. They contend that it is the distancing of abstraction that so often objectifies the subject, leading to the fallacy that theory is disconnected from 'the field' (2009: 112). Jazeel and MacFarlane stress the ethical responsibility and creative opportunity for researchers working across the North-South divide to be engaged with their own constituency in the field and be critically aware of their interestedness (2009: 114). In their words, "anyone who produces knowledge of a thing (people/place/community) can never be outside that thing" (2009: 115). Therefore, rather than perpetuate geographical otherness through prescribed methodologies, responsible fieldwork should always be an intellectual experiment through all stages of knowledge production, from early stages of writing proposals, to developing appropriate collaborations and methodologies, through to disseminating the research within 'the field' itself in addition to disciplinary communities (2009: 113).

Provenance as interrogative tool

While visual ethnography and social documentary have since embraced many of the more experimental methodologies such as reflexivity and auto-ethnography integral to ethnographic research (see Prosser 1998, MacDougall 1998, Ellis & Bochner 2000), for those of us searching for guidelines and direction in our various practice-led or inter-disciplinary programs, encouraged by the ethical imperative for experimentation and participation, the question remains of where to actually start.

I have designated the role of my exegesis to conceptualise the paradigm of prov-

enance as a framework in constant dialogue with my filmmaking, providing a critical account of the project's development and a source for creative retaliation. When I first started to research the concept of provenance I was surprised at how little the term had been utilized in contemporary criticism. While it is traditionally associated with tracing the ownership and authenticity of a fine art object, a more nuanced consideration of provenance unloads a host of acute insights into the meaning of an artwork. Particularly pertinent to contemporary visual arts is what lies beyond the frame. A cursory consideration of what provenance denotes highlights this significance, for example: materials utilized, signature styles or techniques of the artist, their motivations and inspiration, their training and community of practitioners, their oeuvre, their socio-political context, governing ideologies, geographical location, the market valuation of the artwork, the history of its ownership and public display, in addition to audiences and critics responses, and perhaps the 'aura' of the artwork. Moreover, applied to documentary, provenance potentially encompasses the multitude of shifting factors peculiar to the form, such as: notions of reality and authenticity, artist's relationship with participants, the profilmic event, audience expectations and conventions, methodology and treatment, in addition to technical properties of capture and distribution like film stock, digital imaging, internet streaming, or cinema screening.

Integrative concept: sensual topography

> Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience - Walter Benjamin, from The Storyteller (1936).

Rather than suggest a structural necessity for producing personal documentary, I aim to draw on provenance to account for relevant personal histories implicated in wider social formations and historical processes acting upon the artwork. The framework is not intended to uncover definitive understandings; on the contrary, I hope it offers a sensual topography which might illuminate potentially significant directions for the research to pursue. In order to further illustrate this concept, I present a few potential extracts from my exegesis.

Artist

Admittedly, as I was growing up, my parents' research and films were of little interest to me. I did however find our family's lasting relationship with Sri Lanka curious. I guess it is difficult for a child, or anyone for that matter, to understand what is actually involved in an anthropological study. To me, what my mother did was study the culture of an appropriately far-away and 'exotic' place. I had the impression that she knew Sri Lanka. When we visited the island, mum would constantly demonstrate her expertise; (unintentionally) shocking the locals with her fluent language, while my brother and I would giggle at ensuing head wobbles. But perhaps the most revealing demonstration was the enthusiastic respect displayed in the embraces and laughing recollections of the past among the wide range of Sri Lankans my brother and I were forced to socialize with. And a wide-range they were; artists, eccentric

filmmakers, political activists, and families that resembled our own; these people I would learn later were the 'significant others'.

Any holiday to Colombo at some point required my brother and I to be dragged away from our Gameboys and hotel pool for an excursion to 'the village' to visit 'the Sri Lankan family', who constituted the focus of my mother's initial fieldwork. The feeling was akin to visiting biological aunties, uncles, and cousins, somewhat ambivalent and awkward but ultimately pleasant and enriching. During these encounters my brother and I would smile, nod, and attempt to eat or drink whatever was presented to us. Wide eyed, we would gaze at mum joyfully volleying exchanges across the room, occasionally pointing in our direction between rising and dropping inflections.

After six months of living in Sri Lanka since early 2011, I often find myself grasping for these melancholy moments, when climbing into a tuk-tuk was the beginning of a magic carpet ride and colonial hotels were majestic receptacles from another world. I urge myself to become excited again, and somehow frame my perspective through that lens. I find Michael Ondaatje manages to do so through incredibly evocative and lyrical sequences in *Running in the Family* (1982):

> Driven through rainstorms that flood the streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate, where sweat falls in the path of this ballpoint, where the jak fruit rolls across your feet in the back of the jeep, where there are eighteen ways of describing the smell of durian, where bullocks hold up traffic and steam after the rains (1982: 69).

These nuanced passages appear as photographs in my mind, cutting from one to another like a slideshow, with similarly diverse sound bytes fading in and out. Memory, it seems, will always remain a melancholy slideshow.

Documentary event

Following a few initial screenings of *The Sri Lankan Series* to previous participants and friends, I became aware of a strong sense of nostalgia towards 'those days'. This was particularly so for the generation born in the 60s and 70s, for whom childhood is remembered amongst the trees and dirt paths of the village. Even from younger generations, I got the impression that they admired the apparent simplicity of village life in contrast to the haste and urgency of contemporary urban environments. As Sasanka Perera explains, for the rapidly growing urban population in Sri Lanka, the 'village' remains a romanticized symbol of national pride; he writes:

> It is a site of purity as opposed to the city, which is perceived as a site of decadence, corruption, commercialization and westernization. This simplicity and purity is supposed to be based on the villagers' strict adherence to Buddhist values and ethics. The repository of the country's undiluted traditions and customs is believed to be the village. In this scheme of things, rather than a dynamic living entity, the village is understood more as an unchanging cultural icon stuck in the mythic past (2005: 117).

Correspondingly, the images of Kanewala in Sharon Bell's and Geoff Burton's film, *Four Women* are lush and romantic; uniformed rubber trees drip latex at dawn, bare feet stroll down narrow dirt tracks, giggling harvesters eat lunch out of banana leaves, and a mother and daughter bathe in the setting sun from a fresh water well. The imagery in *The Fishermen of Duwa* is even more utopic; endless stretches of golden sand, pristine waves gently slap the rhythmic boats, and hard bodies of singing fishermen glisten salt and sweat. Despite the imagery, in both instances the participants discuss in a very honest manner how difficult and seemingly unsustainable their livelihoods are. Sharon Bell has expressed the difficulty of translating the reality of her experience in the village onto film:

> In fact, one of the most significant challenges posed by the documentary film footage of this village in which close to half the population were struggling to subsist from day to day, was that the beauty of the natural environment translated on celluloid to a lush, tropical paradise, masking the economic poverty. The images of the physical environment fail to convey the discomfort, just as the warmth and humour of the women camouflage the desperation and frustration of their circumstances (2004: 10).

Technical definitions aside, these villages are now more akin to suburbs, sprawling from nearby urban centers. In fact, a large percentage of the 'villagers' commute daily to Colombo, or to garment factories littered around the island, and another significant portion are working abroad as laborers or domestic workers. In one scene from *Four Women*, we see the stunningly beautiful young mother, Chandrawathie, rising at four in the morning to make string hoppers (rice noodles) which her children would later drop off at the local shop on their way to school. More recently, Chandrawathie's daughter, Priyanthi, having already pursued professional careers in Colombo but finding herself constrained to the village with two small daughters of her own, opened an Internet Cafe on the same stretch of shops where she used to deliver the string hoppers every morning.

Artwork & ownership

I met the son of one of the fishermen of Duwa after he finished work for beer and hoppers at The Summer Garden restaurant in Colombo. I was keen to spend a bit more time socially in order to get to know one another and discuss what we could do with the filming. He must have had the same idea, tactfully bringing a stocky business minded friend along to interrogate my intentions; who was I making the film for? Where will it be screened? And most importantly, how much money will I make from it?

I was in a prime position to be frank; my film is being produced for university research, I am an independent filmmaker with little money and little interest in perpetuating the template narratives of television broadcasters, and while I did hope the completed picture would tour the world and collect a fortune of awards and launch a successful career, the reality I predict will be much humbler. This was hardly the occasion to unleash a Participant Consent Form, but it is worth noting as a requirement of my academic program the human ethics application comprehensively accounts potential exploitation.[2] Lion Lager, however, has a much more fluid way of dealing with such matters, and by the end of the evening, our

collaboration promised to be equitable and enjoyable.

I have been very fortunate in the friendships my parents forged with the participants of their films. Even with the next generation who barely remember those days, as in the case just mentioned, developing trust has demanded little more than sharing a drink. But it is usually after watching the old films that their eagerness to participate in a contemporary sequel really begins.

With provenance in mind, I have also been extremely fortunate to witness and influence the historical passage and materiality of *The Sri Lanka Series*.[3] Because the films were originally shot on 16mm, while my parents did arrange a few public projections at the time, it meant that many members of these communities and some of the participants had not seen the films since they were produced or had not seen them at all.

In Kanewala, intermittent contact with Chandrawathie's family resulted in a VHS copy at one point reaching their living room, so the re-screening on DVD held little surprise for them. But at a community screening we organised at the village temple, the crowd of two hundred or more in attendance filled the hall with laughter and tears at the sight of departed family, forgotten landscapes, and infant faces now with children of their own.

Juse, the main protagonist of *Dancers Were Only Allowed to Dance*, passed away from old age just four years ago. Two of his sons continue to instruct dancing in the village and their families form a troupe that regularly perform at festivals and peraheras.[4] They had never seen the film in which their father starred. The village remains markedly poorer than neighboring areas,[5] even though we were able to enjoy the DVD on their 40-inch LG flatscreen television. At first I did not recognize the sniffling noises coming through the headphones but as the crying became obvious, I remembered the lapel microphone hooked onto Juse's youngest son. I panned to reveal the solemn face of a grown man watching his recently deceased father as a proud performer over thirty years ago. Heartfelt thankyous through shaky voices and gentle handshakes followed.

I can’t help but question whether I made a mistake with the community of fishermen in Duwa.[6] At the early stages of discussing my intentions with the local priest I gave him a copy of the original film on DVD. A couple of months later when I was trying to organise a community screening of *The Fishermen of Duwa*, I was rebuffed by the response, "why would we want do that when we all have copies on DVD?" The disc I gave the priest had been duplicated and circulated throughout the entire village. Why indeed would they want a community screening, besides to perform their emotions for my camera. What's more, I recently discovered excerpts of the film uploaded onto YouTube and posted on the wall of the ‘Duwa Passion Play’ Facebook page.[7] The idea of community screening seems to have diversified.

This final example highlights the increasingly unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of provenance in digital media, raising important questions concerning the varying demands of field and disciplinary communities. On the other hand, digital media has opened up new opportunities, for instance, while I plan on fulfilling my ethics application and seeking approval of the final edit from each participant, I suspect my 'creative treatment' of the footage might not be as unaltered as they would ideally prefer for their own purposes as family keepsakes and memories. Hence, whenever I record an event such as a festival, ritual, or special occasion, I try to provide the participants and community with an extensive video clip from the footage. Evidently, provenance calls attention to the current necessity of experimentation in intercultural documentary and ethnographic research, and offers a

malleable framework for responsible engagement with such creative opportunities and new forms of knowledge.

End Notes

1. 'Sandstone' universities are an informally-defined group comprising Australia's oldest tertiary education institutions. The term connotes prestige and tradition with an emphasis on theory rather than practice.

2. I am required to seek individual approval from participants before screening the finished film, and at any point during their involvement they have the ability to withdraw consent and erase our recorded material.

3. Film theorist Laura Marks (2000) also emphasizes the way film signifies through its materiality, through a contact between the perceiver and the object represented. She argues that intercultural films build up audience impressions like a palimpsest to be transferred to other audiences, in her words, "like a series of skin contacts that leave mutual traces" (2000: xii).

4 'Perahera' translates literally as 'procession' and refers to a Buddhist festival or ritual dating back to the original kingdoms in medieval Sri Lanka and usually consist of traditional dancing and decorations being paraded through a town or village.

5 Pelpitigoda is a small village near Horana, approximately 35 kilometers southeast of Colombo.

6 Duwa is a coastal village located approximately 25 kilometers north of Colombo.

7 'Duwa Passion Play' Facebook page - http://www.facebook.com/pages/Duwa-Passion-Play/133211450037789

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Dussehra in Jejuri: A Narrative of Color, Vibrancy and Myth

Anshika Varma

scratch a rock
and a legend springs…
Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri*

It will tease you, tempt you with sights and sounds; it will give you glimpses into its history, make you curious; it will invite you to share a cup of chai (Indian tea) with those who live there. And you will have no choice but to fall in love. This is a pictorial narrative: colors and life in Jejuri, a town in the Pune District of Maharashtra State in India. The people of Jejuri have chosen one of the best-known Indian poets to express their soul to the world. My relationship with Jejuri was pre-destined, or so I like to believe.

During a trip to Mumbai, I came across Arun Kolatkar's book of poems on Jejuri, and lost myself in the minute details of the town and its people. The daily life and character of the place that he described intrigued me and made me curious. As fate may have it, the next day I met a photographer friend who was planning to make a trip to Jejuri for the Somvati Amavasya Jatra (the day of the moonless night, traditionally falling on a Monday according to the Hindu Calendar) during the Dussehra celebrations (a Hindu festival that celebrates the victory of Lord Ram over Ravana). I felt something pulling me closer to the place, and asked if I could go along with him.

For the local Dhangars the main idol for worship is Khandoba, a manifestation of Lord Shiva, consecrating a temple at the top of a hill. The Dhangars is a caste that is historically linked to sheep rearing, blanket weaving, buffalo rearing as well as the meat-selling Khataki Dhangars. Today, many of them have moved away from animal husbandry to agriculture, and are now even seen in the industrial sector. Some, like the cricketer Rahul Dravid, have managed to create an iconic niche for themselves in more contemporary fields of popular culture as well. But by and large, although located so close to a big city such as Mumbai, they have managed to keep some of their 'traditional' ways of life alive at least in times of festivals. What unravels in color, sound and vibrancy during Dussehra is one such manifestation where their present is linked to the past and to mythic times; and in that context, the contradictions and ruptures of modernity are made at least momentarily invisible. The images presented here capture the colors and movement of Dussehra in Jejuri (2009).


श्री खंडोबादेवाच्या
दक्षणा पेटी

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Aaron Burton is a documentary filmmaker, photographer, and emerging visual artist. Over the last few years he has been specializing in combining digital photographs and video into personal documentary narratives. His work intends to traverse the boundaries of documentary, visual ethnography, and video art. In 2009, he was awarded the inaugural Jeremy Hynes Award by the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, for his body of video-based documentaries. He is currently a candidate of the Media Arts PhD program at the College of Fine Art, University of New South Wales.

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