

# SACH

## South Asian Composite Heritage

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### Women in South Asia : Justice and Empowerment

South Asian nations carry a range of religious faiths, legal systems, economic and political forces. Diverse socio-cultural practices here are often characterised by strong patriarchal biases which impact upon the lives of women. In recent decades the patriarchal interpretations of religious beliefs, cultural attitudes and political manipulations have come to define the social and cultural contexts of women and their status in societies. State regulated laws, policies and violence are among the tools used to reinforce patriarchy against the rights and interests of women. Women's struggle in the region has not only been for an equal representation in public spaces but also an ideological battle against the deep rooted patriarchal norms and customs that view women in a place of subordination.

Notable cases like denying entry to women in Ayyappa temple in Sabarimala region of Indian state of Kerala, conviction of Pakistani Christian woman Aasiya Noreen commonly known as Asia Bibi in a case of blasphemy by a Pakistani court with death sentence and struggle of women survivors of a decade long armed conflict in Nepal seeking justice show that the struggle has been an ongoing one. Sabarimala controversy in Kerala, India is a long standing fight against the patriarchal dogma of the religious order which does not allow the entry of women into the temple and denies them the right to practice religion. This age-old discriminatory religious practice was overturned by the Supreme Court of India by observing that the ban on the right to practice religion is in violation of women's fundamental right to religion and worship as enshrined under Article 25 of the Constitution. The judgment noted that while faith and religion do not countenance discrimination, religious practices are sometimes seen as perpetuating patriarchy, thereby negating the basic tenets of faith, gender equality and rights. Similarly, Pakistan's Supreme Court overturned the conviction of Christian woman Asia Bibi facing execution for blasphemy, a landmark verdict that sparked protests in the Islamic nation. Asia Bibi was convicted in 2010 after being accused of insulting Islam. Her case has been deeply divisive in Pakistan where there is strong support for the controversial blasphemy laws. Nepal was enmeshed in a prolonged bloody civil war for a decade. The conflict led to immense suffering with innumerable deaths and injuries. Women were victims of torture, abuse and sexual violence. Gender based violence continues to remain invisible even years after the end of conflict as women and girl victims and survivors continue to suffer with the faint hope to rebuild their lives again. However the struggle and fights for survival, rights, and empowerment always goes on.

Women's indomitable resistance against the patriarchal order in South Asia offers a ray of hope. Women's battle for empowerment and equality is most visible in all the cases. Despite all odds women in Nepal continue to fight for justice for victims of gender crimes. In Pakistan Asia Bibi was finally released after her case galvanized international support. In India despite threats and protests women are entering the Sabarimala temple to reclaim gender equality. These recent examples in South Asian countries show a failure on the part of its societies and nations in eradicating the deep-rooted patriarchy. In a healthy democracy, both individual and group rights need to be considered and the State must bridge the gap between constitutional ideals and social reality.

SUNIL KUKSAL

# Noorjahan

Poem by KHONDAKAR ASHRAF HOSSAIN, BANGLADESH

*(Noorjahaan, a young girl from Sylhet, Bangladesh, was stoned to death by religious fanatics in the nineteen-eighties. They buried half her body in a pit before casting their stones)*

Water is Boiling on the stove.  
What's there inside the water?

Stones, only stones.

Should we gorge on the stones, O God!  
Should we bathe in the hot-water spring,  
O God!  
We'll Burn with the stove, well melt  
into dewdrops in your anger.  
Should we be fire like bowed grief  
or stones of fire, or little pebbles  
on the foundation bed, or zamzam well?

Water is boiling on the stove.  
What's there inside the water ?

A women's heart her sari

What do you do with sari?  
Who weaves the weaver?  
The thatcher has no rood over his head;  
the quack shivers in daily fever.

What do you do with sari?

It makes a good burial cloth, you know  
One who has nothing, a sari is her world,  
her afterworld.

Wrap her body in four yard long sari  
- that'll be her best, her nights rest,  
her winter's warmth.

Water is boiling on the stove.  
What's there inside the water?  
Only men men's tongues.

Let us all sing the praise of the tongue.  
It tastes a bit salty, acrid but savoury:  
it rules over the wold, over other men,  
and prattleson in infinite zeal.

Water is boiling on the stove.  
What's there inside the water?

A whip inside. And an ocean.

Where does the girl go everyday?  
What does she brings home with various fruits  
from around the village-  
that flower of grief, that dame of sadness?

She collects stones, only stones.  
She'd build a stone sculpture  
of Neolithic Age.

The east wind whispers into her eras:  
she'd write an eternal poem with pebbles ,  
a page like Apollinaire's where  
three thousand well-rounded, black and  
devout stones shower down incessantly

And Noorjahan gets petrified forever  
in the cement of grief:  
with the touch of Time the stone has turned  
into a piece of lamentation  
a white bird on immaculate purity.

That girl will one day be an *ababeel* <sup>1</sup>  
And the stone to death the king's hordes.

*Translated from Bangla original by the poet  
Courtesy : Writing Across Borders*

<sup>1</sup> A lock of little birds name "ababeel" threw stones on the army of the Abyssinian ruler, Abraha Ashram, who had attacked Mecca, killing all his elephants. The event is referred to in Sura Fil of the Quran.

# The Last Song

*The Naga people of the troubled northeastern region of India have endured more than a century of bloodshed in their struggle for an independent Nagaland and national identity. Yet they managed to cope with violence, negotiate power, and seek safe havens amid terror. They whisper songs which we can't hear from our naked ears.*

By TEMSULA AO, INDIA

IT seemed the little girl was born to sing. Her mother often recalled that when she was a baby, she would carry her piggyback to community singing events on festival days. As soon as the singers took up a tune and gradually when their collective voices began to swell in volume and harmony, her daughter would twist herself this way and that and start singing her own version of the song, mostly consisting of loud shrieks and screams. Though amusing at first, her daughter's antics irritated the spectators and the singers as well, and often, she had to withdraw from the gatherings in embarrassment. What the mother considered unreasonable behaviour in a child barely a year old, was actually the first indication of the singing genius that she had given birth to.

When Apenyo, as the little girl was called, could walk and talk a little, her mother would take her to church on Sundays because



she could not be left alone at home. On other days, she was left in the care of her grandmother when the mother went to the fields; but on this day there was no one to take care of her as everyone went to church. When the congregation sang together Apenyo would also join, though her little screams were not quite audible because of the group singing. But whenever there was a special number, trouble would begin; Apenyo would try to sing along, much to the embarrassment of the

mother. After two or three such mortifying Sunday outings, the mother stopped going to church altogether until Apenyo became older and learnt how to behave.

At home too, Apenyo never kept quiet; she hummed or made up silly songs to sing by herself, which annoyed her mother at times but most often made her become pensive. She was by now convinced that her daughter had inherited her love of singing from her father

whi had died unexpectedly away from home. The father, whose name was Zhamben, was a gifted singer both of traditional folk songs as well as Christian hymns at church. Naga traditional songs consist of polyphonic notes and harmonising is the dominant feature of such community singing. Perhaps because of his experience and expertise in folk songs, Zhamben picked up the new tunes of hymns quite easily and soon became the lead male voice in the church choir. He was a schoolteacher in the village and the time of his death was undergoing a teacher-training course in a town in Assam. He was suddenly taken ill and by the time the news reached the village, he was already dead. While his relatives were preparing to go and visit him, his friends from the training school brought his dead body home. Apenyo was only nine months old then. From that time on, it was a lonely struggle for the mother, trying to cultivate a field and bringing up a small child on her own. With occasional help from her in-laws and her own relatives, the widow called Libeni, was slowly building a future for her daughter and herself. Many of the relatives told her to get married so that she and little Apenyo would have a man to protect and look after them. But Libeni would not listen and when they repeatedly told her to think about it seriously, she asked them never to bring up the subject again. So mother and daughter lived alone and survived mainly on what was grown in the field.

At the village school Apenyo did well and became the star pupil. When she was old enough to help her mother in spreading the thread on the loom, she would sit nearby and watch her weave the colourful shawls, which would be sold to bring in additional income. Libeni had the reputation of being one of the best weavers in the village and her shawls were in great demand. By and by Apenyo too learned the art from her mother and became an excellent weaver like her. In the meantime, her love for singing too was growing. People soon realized that not only did she love to

sing but also that Apenyo had an exquisite singing voice. She was inducted into the church choir where she soon became the lead soprano. Every time the choir sang it was her voice that made even the commonest song sound heavenly. Along with her singing voice, her beauty also blossomed as Apenyo approached her eighteenth birthday. Her natural beauty seemed to be enhanced by her enchanting voice, which earned her the nickname 'singing beauty' in the village. Libeni's joy knew no bounds. She was happy that all those years of loneliness and hardship were well rewarded by the God through her beautiful and talented daughter.

One particular year, the villagers were in an especially expectant mood because there was a big event coming up in the village church in about six months time: the dedication of the new church building. Every member of the church had contributed towards the building fund by donating in cash and kind and it had taken them nearly three years to complete the new structure of tin roof and wooden frames to replace the old one of bamboo and thatch. In every household the womenfolk were planning new clothes for the family, brand new shawls for the men and new skirts or 'lungis' for women. The whole village was being spruced up for the occasion as some eminent pastors from neighbouring villages were being invited for the dedication service. Pigs earmarked for the feast were given special food to fatten them up. The service was planned for the first week of December, which would ensure that the harvesting of the fields would be over and the special celebration would not interfere with the normal Christmas celebrations of the church. The villagers began the preparations with great enthusiasm, often joking among themselves that this year they would have a double Christmas!

These were, however, troubled times for the Nagas. The Independence movement was gaining momentum by the day and even the remotest villages were getting involved, if not

directly in terms of their members joining the underground army, then certainly by paying 'taxes' to the underground 'government'. This particular village was no different. They had been compelled to pay their dues every year, the amount calculated on the number of households in the village. Curiously enough, the collections would be made just before the Christmas holidays, perhaps because travel for the collectors was easier through the winter forests or perhaps they too wanted to celebrate Christmas! In any case, the villagers were prepared for the annual visit from their brethren of the forests and the transaction was carried out without a hitch.

But this year, it was not as simple as in previous years. A recent raid of an underground hideout yielded records of all such collections of the area and the government forces were determined to 'teach' all those villages the consequences of 'supporting' the rebel cause by paying the 'taxes'. Unknown to them, a sinister plan was being hatched by the forces to demonstrate to the entire Naga people what happens when you 'betray' your own government. It was decided that the army would go this particular village on the day when they were dedicating the new church building and arrest all the leaders for their 'crime' of paying taxes to the underground forces.

In the meanwhile, the villagers caught up in the hectic activities prior to the appointment day, a Sunday, were happily busy in tidying up their own households, especially the ones where the guests would be lodged. The dedication Sunday dawned bright and cool, it was December after all, and every villager, attired in his or her best, assembled in front of the new church, which was on the same site as the old one. The villagers were undecided about what to do with the old one still standing near the new one. They had postponed decision until after the dedication. That morning the choir was standing together in the front porch of the new church to lead the congregation in the

singing before the formal inauguration, after which they would enter the new building. Apenyo, the lead singer, was standing in the middle of the front row, looking resplendent in her new lungi and shawl. She was going to perform solo on the occasion after the group song of the choir. As the pastor led the congregation in the invocatory prayer, a hush fell on the crowd as though in great expectation: the choir would sing first number after the prayer. As the song the crowd was waiting to hear began, there was the sound of gunfire in the distance; it was an ominous sound which meant that the army would certainly disrupt the festivities. But the choir sang on unfazed, though uneasy shuffles could be heard from among the crowd. The pastor too began to look worried; he turned to a deacon and seemed to be consulting with about something. Just as the singing subsided, another sound reverberated throughout the length and breadth of the village: a frightened Dobashi, with fear and trembling in his voice was telling the people to stay where they were and not to attempt to run away or fight. There was a stunned silence and congregation froze in their places unable to believe that their dedication Sunday was going to be desecrated by the arrogant Indian army.

Very soon the approaching soldiers surrounded the crowd, and the pastor was commanded to come forward and identify himself along with the *gaonburas*. But before they could do anything, Apenyo burst into her solo number, and not to be outdone by the bravery or foolishness of this young girl, and not wishing to leave her thus exposed, the entire choir burst into song. The soldiers were incensed; it was an act of open defiance and proper retaliation had to be made. They pushed and shoved the pastor and the *gaonburas*, prodding them with the butts of their guns towards the waiting jeeps below the steps of the church. Some of the villagers tried to argue with the soldiers and they too were kicked and assaulted. There was a feeble attempt by the accompanying Dobashi to



restore some semblance of order but no one was listening to him and the crowd, by now overcome by the fear and anger, began to disperse in every direction. Some members of the choir left their singing and were seen trying to run away to safety. Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her. Her mother, standing with the congregation, saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to the God in heaven. She called out to her to stop but Apenyo did not seem to hear or see anything. In desperation, Libeni rushed forward to pull her daughter away but the leader of the army was quicker. He grabbed Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd towards the old church building. All this while, the girl was heard singing the chorus of her song over and over again.

There was chaos everywhere. Villagers trying to flee the scene were either shot at or kicked and clubbed by the soldiers who seemed to be everywhere. The pastors and the *gaonburas* were tied up securely for transportation to army headquarters and whatever fate awaited them there. More people were seen running away desperately, some seeking security in the old church and some even entered a new one hoping that at least the house of God would offer them safety from the soldiers. Libeni was now frantic. Calling out her daughter's name loudly, she began to search for her in the direction where she was last seen being dragged away by the leader. When she came upon the scene at last, what she saw turned her stomach: the young captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn. The mother, crazed by what she was witnessing, rushed forward with an animal-like growl as if to haul the man off her daughter's body but a soldier grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground. He too began to unzip his trousers and when Libeni realised what would follow next, she spat on

the soldier's face and tried to twist herself free of his grasp. But this only further aroused him; he bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body, using the woman's new lungi afterwards, which he had flung aside, to wipe himself. The small band of soldiers then took their turn, even though by the time the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead. Apenyo, though terribly bruised and dazed by what was happening to her was still alive, though barely so. Some of the villagers who had entered the old church saw what happened to mother and daughter and after the soldier were seen going towards the village square, came up to help them. As they were trying to lift the limp bodies, the Captain happened to look back and seeing that there were witnesses to their despicable act, turned to his soldier and ordered them to open fire on the people who were now lifting up the bodies of the two women. Amid screams and yells the bodies were dropped as the helpless villagers once again tried to seek shelter inside the church.

Returning towards the scene of their recent orgy, the Captain saw the grotesque figures of the two women, both dead. He shouted an order to his men to dump them on the porch of the old church. He then ordered them to take position around the church and at his signal they emptied their guns into the building. The cries of the wounded and the dying inside the church proved that even the house of the God could not provide them security and save them from bullets of the crazed soldiers. In the distance too, similar atrocities were taking place. But the savagery was not over yet. Seeing that it would be waste of time and bullets to kill off all the witness inside the church, the order was given to set it on fire. Yelling at the top of his voice, the Captain now appeared to have gone mad. He snatched the box of matches from his Adjutant and set to work. But his hands were shaking; he thought that he could still hear the tune the young girl was humming as he was ramming himself into her virgin body, while all

throughout, the girl's unseeing eyes were fixed on his face. He slumped down on the ground and the soldiers made as if to move away, but with renewed anger he once again gave the order and the old church burst into flames reducing the dead and the dying into an unrecognizable black mass. The new church too, standing not so far from the old one caught the blaze and was badly damaged. Elsewhere in the village, the granaries were the first to go up in flames. The wind carried burning chunks from these structures and scattered them amidst the clusters of houses, which too burnt to the ground.

By the time the marauding soldiers left the village with their prisoners, it was dark and to compound the misery it rained the whole night. It was impossible to ascertain how many men and women were missing apart from the pastor and the four *gaonburas*. Mercifully, the visiting pastors were left alone when it became known that they did not belong to this village. But they were ordered to leave immediately and threatened in no uncertain terms that if they carried the news of what had happened here, their own villages would suffer the same fate. The search for the still missing persons began only the next morning. They found out that among the missing persons were Apenyo and her mother. When a general tally was taken, it was discovered that many villagers sustained bullet wounds as well as injuries from the beatings. Also, six members of the choir were not accounted for. An old woman whose house was quite close to the church site told the search party that she saw some people running towards the old church.

When the villagers arrived at the burnt-out site of the old church building, their worst suspicions were confirmed. Among the rain-drenched ashes of the old church they found masses of human bones washed clean by the night's rain. And on what was once the porch of the old church, they found separate mass and through a twist of fate a piece of Apenyo's new shawl was found, still intact beneath the pile of charred bones. Mother and daughter

lay together in that pile. The villagers gathered all the bones of the choir members in a coffin but those of the mother and daughter; they put in a separate one. After a sombre and song-less funeral service, the question arose as to where to bury them. Though the whole village had embraced Christianity long ago, some of the old superstitions and traditions had not been totally abandoned. The deaths of these unfortunate people were considered to be from unnatural causes and according to tradition they cannot be they could not be buried in the village graveyard, Christianity or no Christianity. Some younger ones protested, 'How can you say that? They were members of our church and sang in the choir'. The old ones countered this by saying, 'So what, we are still Nagas aren't we? And for us some things never change'. The debate went on for some time until a sort of compromise was reached: they would be buried just outside the boundary of the graveyard to show that their fellow villagers had not abandoned their remains to a remote forest site. But there was a stipulation: no headstones would be erected for any of them.

Today these gravesites are two tiny grassy knolls on the perimeter of the village graveyard and if one is familiar with the history of the village, particularly about what happened on that dreadful Sunday thirty odd years ago, one can easily miss these two mounds trying to stay above ground level. The earth may one day swallow them up or rip them open to reveal the charred bones. No one knows what will happen to these graves without headstone or even to those with elaborately decorated concrete structures inside the hallowed ground of the proper graveyard, housing masses of bones of those who died 'natural' deaths. But the story of what happened to the ones beneath the grassy knolls without the headstones, especially of the young girl whose last song died with her last breath, lived on in the souls of those who survived the darkest day of the village.

And what about the Captain and his band of rapist who thought they had burnt

all the evidence of their crime? No one knows for sure. But the underground network, which seems able to ferret out the deadliest of secrets, especially about perpetrators of exceptional cruelty on innocent villagers, managed not only to piece together the events of that black Sunday, but also to ascertain the identity of the Captain. After several years of often frustrating intelligence gathering, he was traced to a military hospital in a big city where he was being kept in a maximum-security cell of an insane asylum.

P.S. It is a cold night in December and in a remote village, an old storyteller is sitting by the hearth-fire with a group of students who have come home for the winter holidays. They love visiting her to listen to her stories, but tonight granny is not her usual chirpy self; she looks much older and seems to be agitated over something. One of the boys asks her whether she is not felling well and tells her that if so, they can come back another night. But instead of answering the question, the old woman starts talking and tells them that on certain nights a peculiar wind blows through the village, which seems to start from the region of the graveyard and which sounds like a hymn. She also tells them that tonight is that kind of a night. At first the youngsters were skeptical and tell her that they cannot hear anything and that such things are not possible, but the old woman rebukes them by saying that they are not paying attention to what is happening around them. She tells them that the youngsters of today have forgotten to listen to the voice of the earth and the wind. They feel chastised and make a show of staining their ears to listen more attentively and to their utter surprise; they hear the beginning of a low hum in the distance. They listen for some time and tell her, almost in triumph, that they can hear only an eerie sound. 'No', the storyteller almost shouts, 'Listen carefully. Tonight is the anniversary of that dreadful Sunday'. There is a death-like silence in the room and some of them begin to look uneasy because they too had heard vague rumours

of army atrocities that took place in the village on a Sunday long before they were born. Storyteller and audience strain to listen more attentively and suddenly a strange thing happen: as the winds whirls past the house, it increases in volume and for the briefest of moments seems to hover above the house. Then it resumes its whirling as though hurrying away to other regions beyond human habitation. The young people are stunned because they hear the new element in the volume and a certain uncanny lilt lingers on in the wake of its departure. The old woman jumps up from her seat and looking at each one in turn asks, 'You heard it, didn't you? Didn't I tell you? It was Apenyo's last song' and she hums a tune softly, almost to herself. The youngsters cannot deny that they heard the note but are puzzled because they do not know what she is talking about. As the old woman stands apart humming the tune, they look at her with wonder. There is a peculiar glow on her face and she seems to have changed into a new self, more alive and animated than earlier. After a while a young girl timidly approaches her and asks, 'Grandmother, what are you talking about? Whose last song?'

The old storyteller whips around and surveys the group as though seeing them for the first time. She then heaves a deep sigh and with infinite sadness in her voice spreads her arms wide and whispers, 'You have not heard that song? You do not know about Apenyo? Then come and listen carefully...'

Thus on a cold December night in a remote village, an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and squats on the bare earth among them to pass on the story of that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children.

*Courtesy : "These Hills Called Home :  
Stories from a War Zone"*



# The Refining of a Domestic Art : Surayia Rahman

By NIAZ ZAMAN and CATHY STEVULAK

**THE** kantha or, as it is increasingly referred to now, the *nakshi kantha*, is an important women's domestic art of Bengal. It is made all over Bangladesh except in the south-eastern Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Layers of old garments such as saris, lungis and dhotis are put

together and reconstituted into objects of functional, ritual, or ceremonial use. Borders and motifs are embroidered in variations of the running stitch with coloured thread, traditionally drawn from the borders of old saris. The empty spaces are stitched with white yarn to create an effect of ripples. In most Bengali families, small kanthas made of soft, old cloth, are used to wrap babies. Husbands or sons who leave home to work on land or water almost always carry with them a kantha made by their mothers or wives. The kantha symbolizes the affection of the maker for the recipient and, being made of rags, is also believed to grant protection from the evil eye. Kanthas form part of the dowry of brides in certain parts of Bangladesh.

However, this traditional craft was not in the public eye until the mid-1980s. Though a chance remark had interested me in the kantha and I had gone on to study it in



museums and in areas associated with the craft, it was more or less a necessary domestic skill to make objects of personal use. The Liberation War in 1971 had left many women destitute. After the independence of Bangladesh, there were attempts to provide work for

such women by drawing upon their traditional needlework skills. This encouraged the revival of the kantha. Karika, a newly set-up handicrafts cooperative, offered some kantha items for sale: "carpet" kanthas, pieces worked with cross stitches on red material, and a few dress items embellished by *anarasi*, a spaced running stitch resembling the Holbein stitch. Aarong, run at that time by the Mennonite Central Committee, also had a few pieces with light kantha embroidery. But that was all. Jasim Uddin's poem had become better known than the article itself, so that when the average Bengali spoke of the *nakshi* kantha or heard the term, it was the poem that was referred to or understood, not the quilt so lovingly and painstakingly put together by the women of Bengal. This article Presents that how a private, domestic craft turned into a representative Bangladeshi art form and the role of a few women in making this change.

In “Organising Women’s Employment through Kantha Production,” Hameeda Hossain describes how kantha making was set up soon after Bangladesh became independent. Attempts to rehabilitate women in 1972 led, particularly in districts with a strong kantha tradition such as Jessore, Kushtia, Faridpur, and Rajshahi, to setting up cottage industries and attempting to market kanthas as commercial products. This attempt to revive kanthas was, however, not immediately successful. Hameeda Hossain, Perveen Ahmad, Ruby Ghuznavi, Lila Amirul Islam, who were closely associated with Karika in its initial stages, pulled out the kantha, so to speak, from the closed trunks in which it had so long lain and displayed it at the outlet. Karika was followed by Aarong – the outlet for the Mennonite Church Council and then for Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) – and Kumudini.

However, the catalyst for the kantha revival was the setting up of the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel. In “Kantha and Jamdani Revival in Bangladesh,” Martha Alter Chen, who worked with BRAC from 1975 to 1980, describes in detail the role of BRAC in helping to revive the kantha at Jamalpur. She notes how BRAC attempted to develop the women’s traditional skill and how most of the women did not stitch anything more than “the most rudimentary quilts”. However, further discussion led to the women bringing out quilts that their mothers had made. Chen goes on to note how once they “knew the women possessed the skill and shared the tradition, although the link with the more designed kanthas had been broken”, they started work on reviving the kantha. They realized that at Jamalpur a certain type of kantha was being made which differed from the more heavily worked kanthas in museums. As Chen points out, “This Jamalpur variety, presumably a more recent Muslim expression, is lightly worked in narrow borders of patterned – or threaded – running stitches derived from and named after agricultural products (paddy stalk, date branch), insects or animals (ant,

scorpion, fish), or nature (waves)”.

In a discussion with Cathy, Chen described the role of Surayia Rahman in the kantha revival. One of the pieces on display at the five-star hotel was designed by Surayia. Chen describes how she knew Surayia Rahman as an artist and how she showed Surayia some photographs of kanthas from the Kramrisch collection. Together, they chose elements to include in a nakshi kantha wall hanging for Sonargaon. Surayia produced a sketch based on these elements. The sketch was stencilled and enlarged. The women at Jamalpur then embroidered a sample (approximately 2 feet by 4 feet). The hotel approached BRAC to commission it to produce a large decorative nakshi kantha, based on the sample. However, the work was finally done by Kumudini.

At Kumudini, Sister Mike helped needlewomen and their traditional needlework skills. The true kantha *phor* or stitch is not a darning stitch. The stitches, which have to penetrate all the layers of the cloth, have to fall slightly ahead or behind the previous rows. It is only thus that the characteristic ripples of the kantha can be produced. The women were also taught to use the weave running stitch to create border patterns replicating the *par* patterns of sari borders. But, apart from acquiring traditional kantha skills, it appears that Sister Mike also taught them a filling stitch to fill in large expanses of colour.

While workers at Kumudini when I talked to them when I was revising my kantha book spoke of this stitch as the Kashmiri stitch or *bhorat* – which simply means filling – I learned later that it is what is known as the Romanian stitch. In traditional kanthas, large expanses of colour are filled in by typical kantha stitches: the kantha stitch, darning stitches, either minute pin-dot stitches or an interwoven darning stitch, *kaitya* – the bent stitch – or *chatai* or *pati phor* – the mat stitch. Workers also learned a fourth stitch: the stem or *dal*, to outline motifs. In older kanthas either the back stitch – used to stitch garments by hand – or a double row of close running

stitches is worked. The result of Sister Mike's intervention helped make possible the large Sonargaon pieces but also reduced the endless variety of stitches used in kanthas to these four – five, if we include the Jamalpur *par* or border patterns. Surayia Rahman's piece was embroidered using the *bhorat*. Instead of using the kantha stitch for the background, the background was embroidered in the darning stitch that eliminates the ripple effect of traditional kanthas.

As a matter of fact, there are three types of kanthas – the Jamalpur variety, Surayia Rahman's *nakshi* tapestry, and Razia Quadir's rural designs – that dominate the kantha scene today in Bangladesh. While Jamalpur work, as Chen has pointed out, is lightly worked, Surayia Rahman's *nakshi* tapestry makes use of very close embroidery alternating with lightly worked areas. The piece designed by Razia was planned with the idea that it would make use of a variety of stitches found in kanthas. Things, however, did not turn out exactly as Razia had planned. Sister Mike also intervened in Razia Quadir's design. Razia Quadir had briefly taken up fine arts at Santiniketan and then practiced for another six months at the Fine Arts Academy run by Lady Ranu Mukherjee in Kolkata. However, for personal reasons Razia was unable to continue. Moving with her family to Dhaka, she joined Aarong as a designer. At this time, Aarong was still being run by the Mennonite Central Committee, but would soon be transferred to BRAC. Among other things, Razia designed small kantha pieces for Aarong. She was also commissioned to work on two designs for Sonargaon : a triptych using lotus motifs and a piece with a rural scene, both of which are displayed in the Sonargaon lobby.

Kanthas are traditionally associated with marriages and for this piece Razia planned a central wedding motif with a palanquin, a bride and groom seated side by side as well as the happy couple holding hands, along with other rural motifs. On both sides of the piece she also designed two

mosques, with the Bangladeshi Islamic culture in as mind. Mosques are also a very common sight all over Bangladesh. When she designed the piece, Razia also planned that it would be worked in traditional kantha stitches, and designed feathery and light stitches to suggest the type of stitch to be used. This piece, as well as motifs drawn from other kanthas that she did for Aarong, is included in Sayyada R.Ghuznavi's *Naksha*. Razia signed her drawing "Ritu," the name she used for her creative work. However, Sister Mike had the mosques drawn by the American nun and also had some of the other motifs changed. She also suggested perhaps the use of the *pati phor* for embroidering the piece. The piece as embroidered thus lacks the delicate look of the design Razia had originally designed. In 1981, Aarong was taken over by BRAC. During the changeover, earlier employees had to retake their interviews. A disagreement over salary led to Razia Quadir's leaving Aarong. However, her designs continue to be replicated – but with the use of the *pati phor* that was employed exclusively for the piece.

Surayia's role in refining domestic kantha embroidery came to public light with the kantha that she designed for Pan Pacific Sonargaon. Prior to this textile art piece in the hotel, Surayia had imagined kantha as an art form for the wall as one can see in her paintings of kantha that pre-date her work with threads.

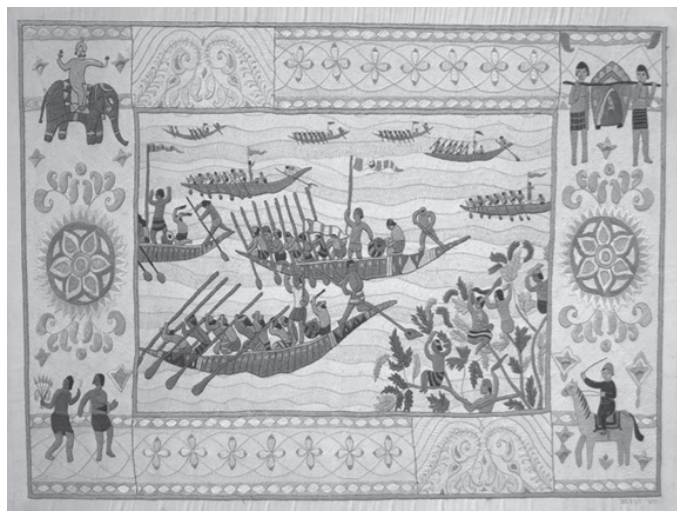
What had inspired Surayia to think of kantha in a new direction – as fine art to look up at rather than for household use?

As a child in Calcutta, Surayia's mother taught her embroidery, but not kantha stitching. Surayia had little formal schooling because of the tuberculosis epidemic, and she taught herself to draw and paint in every spare moment. Statues of figures that adorned the parks and roads inspired her, and she drew the life of the people who she observed on her travels with her father and her meanderings about Calcutta with her bearer. A professor noticed Surayia's artistic talent and invited her to enroll in Calcutta School of

Art, but Surayia could not attend due to communal riots. Surayia's parents married her at 17 years of age and she moved with her husband to Dhaka, then in East Pakistan, in 1950

To support her growing family and for 18 years, Surayia sold various forms of her art at the Women's Voluntary Association shop in Dhaka: dolls, stationery, and scrolls with folk designs. Following the War of Independence and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, Surayia continued with her art, focusing on oil painting. She also experimented by painting *alponas* with mud on cloth, and rural scenes that simulated the running stitch of kantha with paint and brush strokes. She wondered what her folk designs and stories would look like on cloth, and why kantha could not be considered in the public's mind as an art form. In her mind, if kantha could go on the wall and be seen like a painting, perhaps it would be given more value. She envisioned kantha as some of the finest tapestries in the world, stories on cloth to look like a painting. Her style became known as "kantha tapestry."

Surayia's chance to design kantha for stitches to be displayed on a wall came when Martha Chen of BRAC invited Surayia to design an artwork for Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel in 1979. Martha brought photographs of old kanthas from the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Surayia designed a sample for the wall of the hotel. One can see the similarity of the images between the two works, yet Surayia's brought her own artistic ideas to the piece as well. When Niaz asked Surayia why one of the gentlemen in the piece was rising from his chair, Surayia replied, "He is



rising from his chair in ecstasy of the dancers." For 35 years, the final work, embroidered by women working with Kumudini, has been in its original location on the mezzanine of the hotel, across from the elevators where countless people move quickly past it every day. This

artwork's significance in the history of kantha revival is little known, as is Surayia and others' role in its creation.

Following the Sonargaon commission, Surayia and a Canadian expatriate living in Dhaka, Maureen Berlin, discussed possibilities for creating "kantha tapestry" to provide livelihoods for impoverished women. Many women were losing jobs in the jute industry as exports were declining. Maureen worked at Corr - The Jute Works organization and had become friends with Surayia through her art. She invited Surayia to teach two young women to embroider a design at her office. Surayia used one of the figures on the design she had made for BRAC and embroidered it herself to show the women. She then trained the women to stitch the complete piece. There was great interest in this piece from potential buyers, and this market potential seeded the idea for to start a project that could offer young women a possibility for a sustainable livelihood. The concept was to produce high quality wall hangings and charge a market price significantly higher than the price for traditional kantha, and where the sale of the works would provide enough income for self-sufficiency of the women – mostly single mothers – and their children.

In March 1982, Surayia and Maureen started the Skill Development for Underprivileged Women (SDUW) project on



a limited scale, initially with four women. The Canadian High Commission (Mission Administered Funds) provided a grant of CAD 15,000 for a pilot project for 6 months to expand the project for 50 women. Maureen was the donor's representative and Project Director; Surayia was the Project Designer.

Surayia provided the designs, selected color combinations, and supervised embroidery and quality control. She developed a process for transferring her designs to cloth, and washing and stretching the embroidered pieces for final sale. Oversight by an artist for the entire process of a "team" artwork had not been done before. In her earliest pieces, Surayia used cotton cloth as a background but soon moved to the use of silk background to reinforce the image of kantha as art. She used local materials: several layers of cloth, the upper layer being silk woven in Rajshahi, and thread made from bamboo, processed and spun at the Karnaphuli Rayon and Chemicals Ltd. factory at Chandragona, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The running stitch and filling stitch (introduced by Sister Mike) were prevalent in her pieces.

Surayia had a taste of kantha embroidery from her BRAC commission for Pan Pacific Sonargaon. With the help of the embroiderers of SDUW, she now had the possibility to expand her repertoire of art to "kantha tapestry." Her paintings of kantha were now evolving to the next level – this time drawings on cloth to be "painted" in stitches. Just as Surayia's early work for Women's Voluntary Association focused on folk motifs, so did Bengali traditions and village life form the basis for her first textile creations. The Boat Race, one of her earliest works, brings together Surayia's observations of this popular water sport with folk motifs and vignettes of peoples' lives.

The frames of Surayia's works appear similar to the wide frames of some of the older kanthas that Surayia may have seen in museums. However, frames had a particularly significance to Surayia as, before she had seen kantha, she had been exposed to framed

calligraphy in her older sister's home. As a young girl, she had often elaborated frames around her drawings. Upon her arrival in Dhaka, Surayia met Jasim Uddin, the Bengali poet who had written *Nakshi Kanthar Math*, or "Field of the Embroidered Quilt." Jasim Uddin became a family friend, and his poetry. Surayia also brought her fascination with regional history into the stories of her kantha artworks. A German expatriate living in Dhaka in the 1980s, Andreas Falk, showed Surayia old photographs of scenes of the British Raj and encouraged her to draw stories of her memories as one of the last witnesses of British rule in Bengal. Her pre-colonial designs are influenced by the stories that her parents told her of their Moghul ancestry. Surayia's designs and the fine embroidery of the woman of SDUW quickly became very popular. The Government of Bangladesh presented the works as State gifts, in Bangladesh and abroad. The project received many visitors, mainly foreigners, and thus the work started to spread around the world. Surayia's "kantha tapestry" style became available in many local shops as well.

For reasons that are yet unclear, Surayia was terminated from the SDUW project four years after its founding. A publication produced shortly after Surayia's termination and featuring primarily her designs makes no mention of Surayia or her role in the founding of the organization. Surayia's designs were retained by SDUW; the project applied to the Copyright Board to have designs registered by the SDUW project. Surayia's appeal to the Board was decided in favor of SDUW, and she then appealed to the High Court. The decision of the High Court was to register copyright in favor of Surayia for only one of her designs and in favor of SDUW for nineteen designs.

Surayia's designs evolved again in the post-SDUW period. Surayia formed her own small enterprise, Arshi, at the request of some of the artisans of the SDUW project who wanted to continue working with her. She used some designs that she still had at home and made new designs. With the advice of a



lawyer to change her designs slightly, she added elements to some original designs, and changed the typically horizontal, later in Arshi days it is vertical. Surayia's eldest daughter, Annie, had helped with Arshi until she died in a tragic accident in 1994. She was a vital advocate for Surayia with regard to the copyright case. During the Arshi period, the artisans embroidered in their homes rather than in a central workshop, as had been the case in the SDUW project. From within Dhaka and from villages at long distance such as Khulna, the women traveled to and from Surayia's home for guidance, to receive artwork and supplies, and to bring their finished pieces for sale.

Much of the marketing of the finished pieces was with the assistance of volunteers, primarily expatriates of the United States and Canada living in Bangladesh. These volunteers acted as focal points for orders and held sales in their homes. Mrs. Ses Purvis established this system in the late 1980s, and this sales outreach carried on from volunteer to volunteer until Surayia retired from her work. Surayia also received special commissions for unique pieces, such as for the opening of the US Embassy in Dhaka in 1989. The US Embassy piece portrays President H. M. Ershad of Bangladesh and Ambassador Willard Ames De Pree of the United States flanking Teresita C. Schaffer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia cutting the ribbon. Above them, is a picture of the embassy and below this, on the right and left, are pictures of a village fair (Poush Mela) in Bangladesh, where Muslims and Hindus enjoy a day together. On the upper right-hand corner is a picture of Ahsan Manzil, the palace of the Dhaka nawabs. At the very top are flags of the US and Bangladesh signifying the friendship of the two nations, and in the centre an insignia of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In keeping with other pieces designed by Surayia, there is an attractive floral border all around. In the lower left and right hand corners are *kadamba*

flowers – common to traditional kanthas and associated with Krishna, the god of love. In addition, there are other floral motifs – reminiscent of the central lotus motif in traditional kanthas.

In 2007, over 25 years since the Sonargaon commission and replicating over 100 of her designs on thousands of wall hangings, Surayia found it painful to hold a pencil and draw. She transferred her goodwill and designs to the Salesian Sisters of Bangladesh, who continue to oversee the work and sales for the artisans of Arshi-Salesian. Over the years, Surayia had also trained women in other projects to embroider her designs, and the SDUW project also continues to make and market some of her designs. Rather than continuing to repeat her designs, Surayia now wants other artists to step forward and work with kantha, creating their own stories and stitches on cloth and bringing kantha to yet another level. Surayia did not have an artist protégé working with her, and many artisans have left for jobs in industries including garments, banking and shrimp farming. The sustainability of “kantha tapestry” is at a crossroads, despite its current ubiquity.

In conclusion, the refining of the domestic art of kantha took place as a result of various influences: the resurgence of national pride and a quest to revive traditional crafts, the support of governments, corporations and non-governmental organizations for preservation of culture and women's work, and the intervention of Bangladeshi and foreign individuals who saw opportunity to bring a chance for a brighter economic future for underprivileged women and their communities. This refinement of kantha was also made possible because women from the highest to the lowest economic strata of society joined hands to create beauty and an artist who, despite obstacles, dared to keep experimenting with art and to share her creative gifts with others.

Courtesy : <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/886>

# Militants' War on Education in Afghanistan

By RUCHI KUMAR, INDIA

"**EDUCATION** is increasingly a casualty in Afghanistan," a briefing note by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) recently observed. The note was in reaction to a larger, comprehensive report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), titled 'Education Under Attack', which studies the impact of conflict on education in 28 countries. According to the report, Afghanistan, along with Nigeria, suffered the most number of attacks against students and educators. Indeed, as conflict in the country surges, educational facilities find themselves threatened or caught in the crossfire. In the latest such attack, a suicide bombing inside a classroom in Kabul on Wednesday killed 48 people, many of them students preparing for the national university entrance exams. Claimed by the Islamic State (IS), the attack targeted the minority Shia Hazara community. In June, some schools for girls were forced to shut following threats from the IS. Separately, over a 100 schools in Logar province were briefly closed, allegedly by local Taliban groups. Last month, the Malikyar Hotak High School in Khogyani district of the eastern province of Nangarhar came under attack, resulting in the beheading of three staff members. "Threats — and actual violence and destruction — to schools and staff in Nangarhar Province are paralysing the educational sector and quickly reversing development gains," William Carter, head of the Afghanistan programme at the NRC, told this writer, adding that the situation has had "a profoundly distressing effect on children's

sense of safety". Aid organisations working with local educational groups have also confirmed that not only are school and educational facilities at risk of attacks but also that the overall environment has discouraged student attendance. The NRC observed that schools in the region were "increasingly at risk on military, ideological, and political fault lines, with attacks increasing in eastern Afghanistan".

## NOT SAFE AT SCHOOL

In its own research, the NRC found that a majority of the surveyed children did not feel safe at school. It discovered that at least 12% had experienced attacks on their schools and 15% had experienced shooting very near their school buildings. Another 36% were frightened about risks of kidnapping or attack en route to schools and many of them had missed lectures and exams because of threats from armed groups. "This also undermines parents' attitudes to the value of education," Mr. Carter elaborated. Meanwhile, as the much-delayed parliamentary elections approach, school facilities used as voting registration and election centers are increasingly at risk from insurgent attacks. An assault on a school that was being used as a National ID registration centre in Kabul resulted in 60 deaths in April. Currently, according to the UN, over 60% of the 7,000 voter registration and polling centers are schools, with activities taking place during classroom hours.

The deteriorating situation has also

*Continued on page 17*

# Blasphemy, Pakistan's New Religion

By **MOHAMMED HANIF**, PAKISTAN

**AFTER** spending eight years on death row, Asia Bibi, a Christian, was acquitted by Pakistan's Supreme Court this week. For many here it seemed like a good day. The country's highest court had finally delivered justice and released a woman whose life has already been destroyed by years in solitary confinement. The court decision quoted Islamic scriptures, bits of letters by the Prophet Muhammad and a smattering of Shakespeare. A great wrong was righted.

And that's why Pakistan's new religious right, which has rebranded itself as the protector of the Prophet's honor, has threatened to bring the country to a halt.

Posters were put up with fatwas against the judges who had issued the Bibi decision. The judges' guards and cooks were urged to kill them before evening; anyone who did would earn great rewards in the afterlife. Pakistani conservatives, emboldened by gains in the general election this summer, goaded the generals into rebelling against the army chief, whom they accused of being an Ahmadi, a persecuted religious minority. They called Prime Minister Imran Khan a "Jew child."

Khan, in an impromptu address to the nation, seemed appalled at the language and the implication: He said his government had already done more than any other for Islam and warned protesters not to take on the state. But the mobs will settle for nothing short of Bibi's public hanging.

Bibi probably didn't even know what blasphemy was when she was accused of committing it. There are many versions of what led to the charges against her, but all revolve around a verbal altercation with Muslim

neighbors in Punjab, an eastern province, about drinking water from the same vessel. Some Muslims won't share utensils with non-Muslims, a belief that has more to do with (Hindu) casteism than (Islamic) scripture. We can never know what she may or may not have said because repeating blasphemy is also blasphemy, and writing it down may be even greater blasphemy. So let's not go there.

We do know what happened next. Bibi was convicted of blasphemy in 2010 and, after what her lawyers called a forced confession, was sentenced to death by one court. Another court later confirmed the sentence. The governor of Punjab Province, Salman Taseer, visited her in prison and promised to lobby for a presidential pardon. He was assassinated by one of his police bodyguards who believed the governor had committed blasphemy by questioning the country's blasphemy laws. The Pakistani media was understanding. Of the bodyguard's feelings.

A federal minister who happened to be Christian and spoke up for Bibi also was assassinated. Although nobody has actually been hanged by the state for blasphemy so far, the mere accusation can be an open invitation to kill the accused. Last year, the university student Mashal Khan was lynched by classmates after he was accused of putting some blasphemous posts on social media. They were nothing more than a campus rebel's personal thoughts, some revolutionary poetry and musings about the meaning of life.

Also last year, five bloggers were picked up by intelligence agencies in what seemed like coordinated raids. They had all written against the army or its security policies. Some

had written in prose, some in poetry; others in Facebook rants. As their disappearance lasted, some people on social media and TV anchors close to the army started accusing them of having committed blasphemy. They were eventually released by their abductors, but so much poison had been spread about them that they had to leave the country.

Ahead of the last election the same people who are now demanding the army chief's head laid siege to the capital. They were protesting against the government for changing one word in the oath that you are required to take as a member of parliament. This blasphemy brigade was egged on by the media and opposition political parties. Khan, who was the opposition leader at the time, said that his followers were rearing to join the protest. Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, the army's top commander, said publicly that it couldn't be expected to use force against its own people, an honorable sentiment with little precedent in Pakistan's history.

After a botched police operation, the army triumphantly negotiated with the protesters, and an agreement was signed conceding many of their demands. The law minister was fired. The word change in the law was changed back. A general was seen distributing 1,000-rupee notes to demonstrators and patting them on the back: Are we not with you? Aren't we all part of the same brotherhood?

Now those brothers have returned to bite our military and civilian establishment. An arm around the shoulder and some petty cash

may be a good law-and-order strategy in some potentially explosive situations. But not when you play politics with the Prophet's honor.

It's almost certain that Bibi will not be able to live in the country after her acquittal. And a lot of people like her are still languishing in cells waiting to be tried. There's a literature professor, Junaid Hafeez, who has been in jail for the last five years facing bogus blasphemy charges. After he was arrested, his lawyer was shot dead for defending him. His current lawyer can't be named.

Hafeez has to be kept in solitary confinement to protect him from other prisoners who might take it upon themselves himself to avenge the Prophet's good name.

Now that the prime minister himself is in the righteous's sight — protecting a blasphemer may be even graver blasphemy — and a man even more powerful than him, Bajwa, has been declared *kafir*, an infidel, one can only hope their respective institutions won't use the blasphemy card against their perceived enemies. There were about a dozen reported cases of blasphemy between 1927 and 1986, but there have been more than 4,000 since then, when the laws were reinforced. Pakistani liberals are asking the government and the army to go and crush the mullahs and take the country back. It might be more useful to go after these blasphemy laws that seem to be turning all of us into blasphemers.

Courtesy : <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/02/opinion/pakistan-bibi-blasphemy-death-sentence.html>

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## Militants' War on Education in Afghanistan

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affected the delivery of educational aid. "This level of insecurity has made it very difficult for us to assure the safety of both our beneficiaries and our own staff," Mr. Carter said, adding that they are evaluating different approaches to ensure that children are protected and that their learning can be continued in the wake of deepening insecurity.

"However, we are making adjustments intended to reduce the likelihood and limit the impact of such incidents on children and staff," he said.

Courtesy : <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/militants-war-on-education-in-afghanistan/article24726454.ece>



# A Long March of the Dispossessed to Delhi

By P. SAINATH, INDIA



INDIA's agrarian crisis has gone beyond the agrarian. It's a crisis of society. Maybe even a civilizational crisis, with perhaps the largest body of small farmers and labourers on earth fighting to save their livelihoods. The agrarian crisis is no longer just a measure of loss of land. Nor only a measure of loss of human life, jobs or productivity. It is a measure of our own loss of humanity. Of the shrinking boundaries of our humaneness. That we have sat by and watched the deepening misery of the dispossessed, including the death by suicide of well over 300,000 farmers these past 20 years. While some – 'leading economists' – have mocked the enormous suffering around us, even denying the existence of a crisis. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has

not published data on farmers' suicides for two years now. For some years before that, fraudulent data logged in by major states severely distorted the agency's estimates. For instance, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal and many others claimed 'zero suicides' by farmers in their states. In 2014, 12 states and 6 Union Territories claimed 'zero suicides' among their farmers. The 2014 and 2015 NCRB reports saw huge, shameless addles in the methodology – aimed at bringing down the numbers.

And yet they keep rising.

Meanwhile, protests by farmers and labourers are on the rise. Farmers have been shot dead – as in Madhya Pradesh. Derided or cheated in agreements, as in Maharashtra. And devastated by demonetisation, as in just about



everywhere. Anger and pain are mounting in the countryside. And not just among farmers but amongst labourers who and the MNREGA being dismantled by design. Amongst fisherfolk, forest communities, artisans, exploited *anganwadi* workers. Amongst those who send their children to government schools, only to and the state itself killing its own schools. Also, small government employees and transport and public sector workers whose jobs are on the anvil.

And the crisis of the rural is no longer concerned to the rural. Studies suggest an absolute decline in employment in the country between 2013-14 and 2015-16.

The 2011 Census signaled perhaps the greatest distress driven migrations we've seen in independent India. And millions of poor feeling the collapse of their livelihoods have moved out to other villages, rural towns, urban agglomerations, big cities – in search of jobs that are not there. Census 2011 logs nearly 15 million fewer farmers ('main cultivators') than there were in 1991. And now and many once-proud food-producers working as domestic servants. The poor are now up for exploitation by both urban and rural elites.

The government tries its best *not to listen*. It's the same with the news media.

When the media do skim over the issues, they mostly reduce them to demands for a 'loan waiver.' In recent days, they've recognised the minimum support price (MSP) demand of farmers – the Cost of Production (CoP2) + 50 per cent. But the media don't challenge the government's claims of already having implemented this demand. Nor do they mention that the National Commission on Farmers (NCF; popularly known as the Swaminathan Commission) flagged a bunch of other, equally serious issues. Some of the NCF's reports have remained in Parliament 12 years without discussion. Also the media, while denouncing loan waiver appeals, won't mention that corporate and businessmen account for the bulk of the non-performing assets drowning the banks.

Perhaps the time has come for a very

large, democratic protest, alongside a demand for Parliament to hold a three week or 21-day special session dedicated entirely to the crisis and related issues. A joint session of both houses. On what principles would that session be based? The Indian Constitution. Specifically, the most important of its Directive Principles of State Policy. That chapter speaks of a need to "minimise the inequalities in income" and "endeavour to eliminate inequalities in status, facilities, opportunities...." The principles call for "a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life."

The right to work, to education, to social security. The raising of the level of nutrition and of public health. The right to a better standard of living. Equal pay for equal work for men and women. Just and humane conditions of work. These are amongst the main principles. The Supreme Court has more than once said the Directive Principles are as important as our Fundamental Rights.

An agenda for the special session? Some suggestions that others concerned by the situation can amend or add to:

**3 Days : Discussion of the Swaminathan Commission report—12 years overdue.** It submitted five reports between December 2004 and October 2006 that cover a multitude of vital issues and not just MSP. Those include, to name a few: productivity, profitability, sustainability; technology and technology fatigue; dryland farming, price shocks and stabilisation – and much more. We also need to halt the privatisation of agricultural research and technology. And deal with impending ecological disaster.

**3 Days : People's testimonies.** Let victims of the crisis speak from the floor of Parliament's central hall and tell the nation what the crisis is about, what it has done to them and countless millions of others. And it's not just about farming.

But how surging privatisation of health and education has devastated the rural poor, indeed all the poor. Health expenditure is either the fastest or second fastest growing component of rural family debt. 3 days: Credit

crisis. The unrelenting rise of indebtedness. This has been a huge driving factor in the suicide deaths of countless thousands of farmers, apart from devastating millions of others. Often it has meant loss of much or all of their land. Policies on institutional credit paved the way for the return of the moneylender.

**3 Days : The country's mega water crisis.** It's much greater than a drought. This government seems determined to push through privatisation of water in the name of 'rational pricing'. We need the right to drinking water established as a fundamental human right – and the banning of privatization of this life-giving resource in any sector. Ensuring social control and equal access, particularly to the landless.

**3 Days : The rights of women farmers.** The agrarian crisis cannot be resolved without engaging with the rights –including those of ownership – and problems of those who do the most work in the fields and farms. While in the Rajya Sabha, Prof. Swaminathan introduced the Women Farmers' Entitlements Bill, 2011 (lapsed in 2013) that could still provide a starting point for this debate.

**3 Days: The rights of landless labourers,** both women and men. With mounting distress migrations in many directions, this crisis is no longer just rural. Where it is, any public investment made in agriculture has to factor in their needs, their rights, their perspective.

**3 Days : Debate on agriculture.** What kind of farming do we want 20 years from now? One driven by corporate profit? Or

by communities and families for whom it is the basis of their existence? There are also other forms of ownership and control in agriculture we need to press for – like the vigorous *sangha krishi* (group farming) efforts of Kerala's Kudumbashree movement. And we have to revive the unfinished agenda of land reform. For all of the above debates to be truly meaningful – and this is very important – every one of them must focus, too, on the rights of Adivasi and Dalit farmers and labourers.

While no political party would openly oppose such a session, who will ensure it actually happens? The dispossessed themselves.

In March this year, 40,000 peasants and labourers marched for a week from Nashik to Mumbai making some of these very demands. An arrogant government in Mumbai dismissed the marchers as 'urban Maoists' with whom it would not talk. But caved in within hours of the multitude reaching Mumbai to encircle the state legislative assembly. That was the rural poor sorting out their government.

The highly disciplined marchers struck a rare chord in Mumbai. Not just the urban working class, but also the middle classes, even some from the upper middle classes, stepped out in sympathy.

We need to do this at the national level – scaled up 25 times over. A Long March of the Dispossessed – not just of farmers and labourers, but also others devastated by the crisis. And importantly, those not affected by it – but moved by the misery of fellow human beings. Those standing for justice and democracy. A march starting from everywhere in the country, converging on the capital. No Red Fort rallies, nor skulls at Jantar Mantar. That march should encircle Parliament – compel it to hear, listen and act. Yes, they would Occupy Delhi.

It might take many months to get off the ground, a gargantuan logistical challenge. One that has to be met by the largest and widest coalition possible of farm, labour and other organisations. It will face great hostility from the rulers – and their media – who would seek to undermine it at every stage.

It can be done. Do not underestimate the poor – it is they, not the chattering classes, who keep democracy alive. It would be one of the highest forms of democratic protest – a million human beings or more showing up to ensure their representatives perform. As a Bhagat Singh, if alive, might have said of them: they could make the deaf hear, the blind see and the dumb speak.

Courtesy : <https://thewire.in/agriculture/>

# The Psyche and Phantasy

By **CHRISTOPHER CAUDWELL**

*...Continued from previous issue*



**WE** see, then, that psychoanalysts are idealist in their approach to the practical problems of living, and in no way take up an attitude different from that of the great class-religions. For if man's subjective feelings of misery, unease and unhappiness, are not due to outer material causes but to Sin (as the religions put it) or Complexes (as the analyst puts it), then man's misery, unhappiness and unease can be cured by casting out sin, by self-control, by salvation, by abreaction – whatever name one gives to a pure exercise of will unaccompanied by organised effective action. Indeed, many of the class-religions have gone further in that they have developed organisations for clearing up certain sectors of misery by material action – societies to care for the sick, for example.

If the root causes of broad areas of human misery are due to the surroundings in which the Psyche develops, and the obstacles, possibilities, adaptations and attractions offered by the social relations of that environment, then they can only be eliminated by a material change, which will make possible a change of heart. This view is opposed both to that of religion and of psycho-analysis.

Aside altogether from the question of revolution, if the strife between man's instincts and environment can be cured by "education," by a mental self-change, why has man troubled to evolve factories, clothes, houses,

cooking, language, art, religion, science and political organisations? These are all products of the struggle between the instincts and environment and are all unnecessary if Freud and the religious teachers are right, since man's conflict could be resolved merely by his becoming conscious of its causes.

Of course, faced with such an obvious instance as the hunger instinct, Freud could not maintain that its conflict with reality could be pacified by any means other than the material therapy of food. But the logical basis of his theory is certainly idealist or "yogi," and it is this which makes Freudians treat art, one of the instruments of men's freedom, as something childish and escapist in tendency. They do not see that the human conflict between man and Nature (of which the neurotic conflict is only a special form) drives men to free association, and that art is a necessity of this association, the means whereby it remains free, and because it is free reaches heights and depths inaccessible to a coerced association.

The whole of psycho-analytical writing flounders in the marsh of bourgeois epistemology, where subject and object appear as mutually exclusive opposites under a hundred will-o-the-wisp disguises and where the problems of mind are insoluble precisely because in the society which generates this discussion "mind" has moved away from "matter" – subject and object have ceased to interpenetrate actively and so establish in practice their theoretical identity of opposites.

What is consciousness? Unconsciousness? Instinct? Reality? Mind? Illusion? Understanding of these concepts is

evidently vital for a psychology – and it is not surprising that Freudism, with its naive Rousseauistic idealism, cannot achieve a satisfactory psychology.

The individual is born with certain instincts, evidenced in action (response to stimulus) and changed in that action (conditioned response). That conditioning includes consciousness: memory, images, thoughts, percepts and recognitions are the conditioning of instincts.

But not all conditioning of instincts is consciousness. It is important to understand that there is nothing mysterious in unconscious mentation. The repetition which is subtly different, the circling rhythm which is a spiral, the reaction which is changed because of what has gone before, is not peculiar to mind or life, but is a general characteristic of the process of reality. The like, Space, is generated by the ingression of the unlike, Time. Only when this process evidences itself in the sphere of life do we call it psychic; but then we have no reason to call it conscious, any more than the purposeful activities of the autonomous nervous system are conscious. The thing to be explained and accounted for as an intruder is not unconsciousness but consciousness. Only our immediate experience of it can give us grounds for accepting it.

As soon as a mentation becomes conscious, it makes a qualitative leap and enters the sphere of free will. Conscious mentations are different in quality from unconscious precisely because they are conscious. Consciousness is a real material quality and not an epiphenomenon; it is the quality of freedom in mentation.

The behaviourists argue that we have no right to deduce consciousness in others, and that their actions can all be explained deterministically by the sufficient stimulus. Their argument as to the non-existence of mind is sound as long as it remains in the sphere of theory, just as is the subjective idealist's argument as to the non-existence of matter. It is disproved in practice. Aware ourselves of a qualitative difference in actions

when they are associated with conscious thoughts, we find, in our active intercourse with others, that their actions show similar differences. In so far as we depend on their consciousness in our transactions with them, and these transactions are successful, we prove the reality of their consciousness.

This in itself gives us the clue to what consciousness is. Consciousness is the product of association: not of herd association which is mediated by instincts, but of association for economic production which is mediated precisely by consciousness – by specific adaptations of the psychic instincts. We can never prove consciousness in terms of the theory of the common perceptual world because it is entirely that world. In the same way we can never prove not-consciousness (matter) because it is entirely not that world.

Objects detach themselves as objects from the flux of perception in so far as they become objects for social men. The sun, a mere unrecognised source of phototropism for animals, becomes a socially recognised object for man, ripener of harvest, measure of the working day, clock and compass of the hunter. The field of perception is organised into figure and ground only in so far as figures have significance for the conjoint action of men. Instinctual appetite is the basis of his organisation, but it is lifted to a higher plane, it becomes conscious, as soon as it is an organisation for society.

This is equally true of our affective world. This flowing penumbra of instinctive music only acquires a pattern, only becomes *conscious*, to the extent that social life itself organises feelings, sentiments, passions, enduring trends, aims and aspirations which draw their stability from the relations of associated men.

In the fashioning of consciousness the great instrument is language. It is language which makes us consciously see the sun, the stars, the rain and the sea – objects which merely elicit *responses* from animals. It is this which makes us capable of appreciating truth and beauty: for truth is a relation between a

perception of reality and the common perceptual world, and beauty is a relation between a feeling-tone of reality and the common ego.

Thus we see that what makes the difference between the unconscious brute that a man would be if reared like Mowgli by a wolfish foster-mother, and the conscious human he in fact becomes in society, is the active relation between his personal experience of reality and the common perceptual world and common affective ego. Science and art expand and develop this world and this ego. They are not contained in them; they are secreted in the whole complex of a working society. Science and art may for various reasons in some respect oppose or deny the perceptual reality and affective attitude given in concrete social experience. In such a case science or art seems to conflict with a man's consciousness.

The common world and the common ego are generated by the active struggle of associated men with Nature, as a living historical development; and the consciousness of an individual is formed in organic connection with this struggle. Once again we repeat that the common perceptual world and the common ego do not stamp a standardised pattern on the genotype: like the society of which they are products and reflections they are the means whereby the genotype realises its individual differences in the psychic sphere.

It is for this reason that consciousness and conscience have so close a connection: for the conscience – the imprinted summary of the ethical laws of society – is a special integration of the individual consciousness, just as truth, beauty and reality are other integrations, playing similar social roles.

This is not to say that there cannot be a conflict of conscience, divided aims and the like. On the one hand man's struggle with Nature is never absolutely victorious, and just as "accidents," like an earthquake or an attack of malaria, may reveal the relativity of any victory, so in the psychological sphere madness, murder, neuroses or melancholy

reveal that man's adaptations do not extend to the full conquest either of himself or Nature. Man is not yet completely free. The consciousness is not completely integrated – different layers may have different trends.

In addition man's struggle with Nature is complicated by contradictions generated in the very instrument of his freedom, society. This gives rise to local stresses and strains, giant upheavals, revolutions, or the ruin and decline of whole societies. This is necessarily reflected in man's consciousness – moral problems; feelings of sin, worthlessness and despair; widespread death thoughts; vast spiritual needs; loss of faith – these emotional pangs are part of the travail of society.

In a primitive society where man is as yet undifferentiated, conscience and consciousness are similarly simple, direct and homogeneous, and for this very reason lacking in depth and vividness. Primitive communities seem to have "collective representations" and a *participation mystique*. When this consciousness is attacked, there is no complexity or balancing of forces to soften the blow; the collapse is complete. The primitive who is once convinced that he has sinned or is bewitched will promptly die – a fact well-attested by field anthropologists. The shallowness of his consciousness is revealed in the simplicity of his dissociation, the ease with which his psyche can be precipitated into hysteria, his high degree of suggestibility and the "all-or-none" nature of his emotional reactions – all symptoms pointing to a mentation more unconscious and instinctive than that of "civilised" differentiated man.

We are born not merely primitives but *brutes*. Our instincts are not adapted genetically but by the social environment. We have already pointed out that this is the whole meaning of consciousness. Because our instinctive adaptations are acquired, our mentation presents different levels of unconsciousness and is more or less instinctive. It has an outer layer of civilisation, below it a more primitive layer, and still lower a merely animal core. This has long been



generally known; but it was the achievement of psycho-analysts, while in general misunderstanding the social basis of consciousness, to understand the importance of unconscious mentation and to devise a technique for probing it.

Because the interpenetration of subject and object is complete, because life and experience is always the struggle of the instincts with the environment, all mentation necessarily has in it a component of outer reality and an instinctual component. This is not peculiar consciousness but is a feature of all living responses. The fact that even the autonomous nervous system responds to and may be conditioned by environmental influences reveals that it too has a "reality" component in its mentation. Hence the whole field of neural activity is interpenetrated both with environmental or acquired effects and innate or instinctive effects. Previous psychology was chiefly concerned with acquired effects – the "real things" in the conscious field: even the sentiments, feelings and instincts of earlier psychology were regarded objectively and figured as real things. Psycho-analysis therefore found a whole new field to conquer – the exploration of the instinctive or innate elements in mentation considered not objectively but in action, i.e. *in their own terms*. Unfortunately they went to the other extreme and rejected all the objective components, with the result that life reduced itself to a blind dynamic libido. This libido seemed something preformed which wandered into the world like a Christian soul incarnate, instead of arising from a process in reality itself.

When we divide man into instinct and environment, we must remember that man's instinct itself is the product of environmental adaptation (natural selection) but that this is inborn biological adaptation, whereas man's conscious adaptation is to the social environment and is therefore acquired cultural adaptation. Conflicts may arise between these two layers of adaptations – the biological or instinctive, the cultural or conscious. In normal life each has its own sphere. Purely biological adaptations attend to man's digestion, purely cultural adaptations to man's design of a house; but in so far as they overlap a mutual distortion may arise. Man's digestion may be upset by an ugly house; his design of a house may be done for money – i.e. to feed himself. Cooking becomes an art. Art a bread-and-butter activity. It is this distortion and overlapping which psycho-analysis has studied. Since the biological instincts are closely connected with the generation of emotion and the feeling-tone in consciousness (the exact connection has not yet been satisfactorily established), the study by psychoanalysis of the distortion of the consciousness (including the volition) by the instincts has been largely a study of the influence of emotional associations and complexes on men's thoughts and actions. And since we have already discussed the organisation of the affective elements of consciousness into a common ego by art, it is plain that the discoveries of psycho-analysis must be an important aid in the understanding of art.

*to be continued...*

*Courtesy—Illusion and Reality*

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