

The Idea of Development as Governance: India in the first decade of independence

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“Emblems for the Souls Consent”: India in the first decade of independence

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An age becomes an age, all else beside

When sensuous poets in their pride invent

Emblems for the souls consent

(Archibald MacLeish, *The Metaphor*)

As India embarked on its post-colonial journey in the 1950s, development and modernisation were the watchwords of the political class. Public rhetoric was characterised by an obsession with questions of political economy that inevitably came to provide the frame for the the project of governance - the mission of “achieving our country”, to borrow a phrase from the American philosopher Richard Rorty (Rorty, 1999). There was not much of a public debate on the form and substance of post colonial governance. While the political transition may have been marred by the violence of Partition, the institutional transition was presumed to have been smooth, with India getting the cream of the Civil Services. The question remained unasked as to how independent India would be governed by its elected representatives within the inherited colonial apparatus of law, bureaucracy and policing? Independence was seen as the prerequisite for the belated transition to modernity; a leap into an industrial society that required an acceleration of historical stages of development.

This paper argues that the staging of an idea of the modern was central to the post colonial enterprise. The deployment of art, film and the theatre sat alongside the state’s rhetoric of development, that anthropomorphised dams, scientific establishments and nuclear reactors into the heroes of the post colonial nation. The *telos* was unambiguous and envisaged a happy ending; a modern, developed and democratic nation. Each of these categories were presented both as cause and effect; both as existing and yet to be achieved. The actors in this national drama were heroic: Nehru; a cast of thousands of politicians

who had come through the fire of colonial repression through the collective discipline of *satyagraha*; and the scientific and other “experts” who would be the makers of modernity India (See Mitchell, 2002). The audience, a grateful nation of Indians, united in their diversity would watch the show being staged for them by the chosen.

Some hissing and booing was allowed from the sidelines. The *Shankar's Weekly*, founded in 1949 and published from Delhi, satirized the Congress government, Nehru and the national leadership through its distinctive cartoons and broad humour, continuing a tradition honed under colonial rule. O.V.Vijayan, novelist, political satirist and cartoonist, wrote later of Shankar's cartoons that, pictorially, they shunned the British notion of refinement; they were crowded with figures, many of them idle bystanders – the atmosphere was that of a fair (Vijayan, 2002). However, this was old-fashioned proscenium theatre, not agit-prop; the audience was not allowed to take over the stage. It was about spectating not participating. The people of India who were perceived either as unmodern or yet-to-be-modern, were scripted in only as a sentimental metaphor (“the people of India”) or as spectre (“the anti-national”). Governance was not for the people, by the people, or of the people; it was about ruling the people.

The 1950s increasingly appear as a decade of closure – in questions of politics as much as aesthetics. Further, it is these two themes, the visualizing of modernity as state led development and a closure of the idea of popular participation in governance that this essay deals with, albeit in a provisional and tentative formulation. This closure was reflected in three arenas. First, in the process of state led development that came to be determined by the parameters of a passive revolution which involved among other things, the short-circuiting of radical land reform (Herring, 1983). Second, in a notion of modernity that envisaged a landscape of a techno-future studded with dams, nuclear establishments and steel mills to which the citizen would be a mere witness, if at all. It would be the political elite and the expert that would oversee this transition and the people of India were to be the beneficiaries of this oversight; an oversight that precluded their actual participation. Third, the very idea of the “people” was rendered as a romantic abstraction, with their way of life frozen in an idea of a timeless romantic popular culture that evacuated any historical process. No better expression of this can be found than in the Gandhian phrase - “India lives in its villages”- that acquired a new life amidst the bustle of change and progress. As

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TO THE RESCUE

July 17, 1949

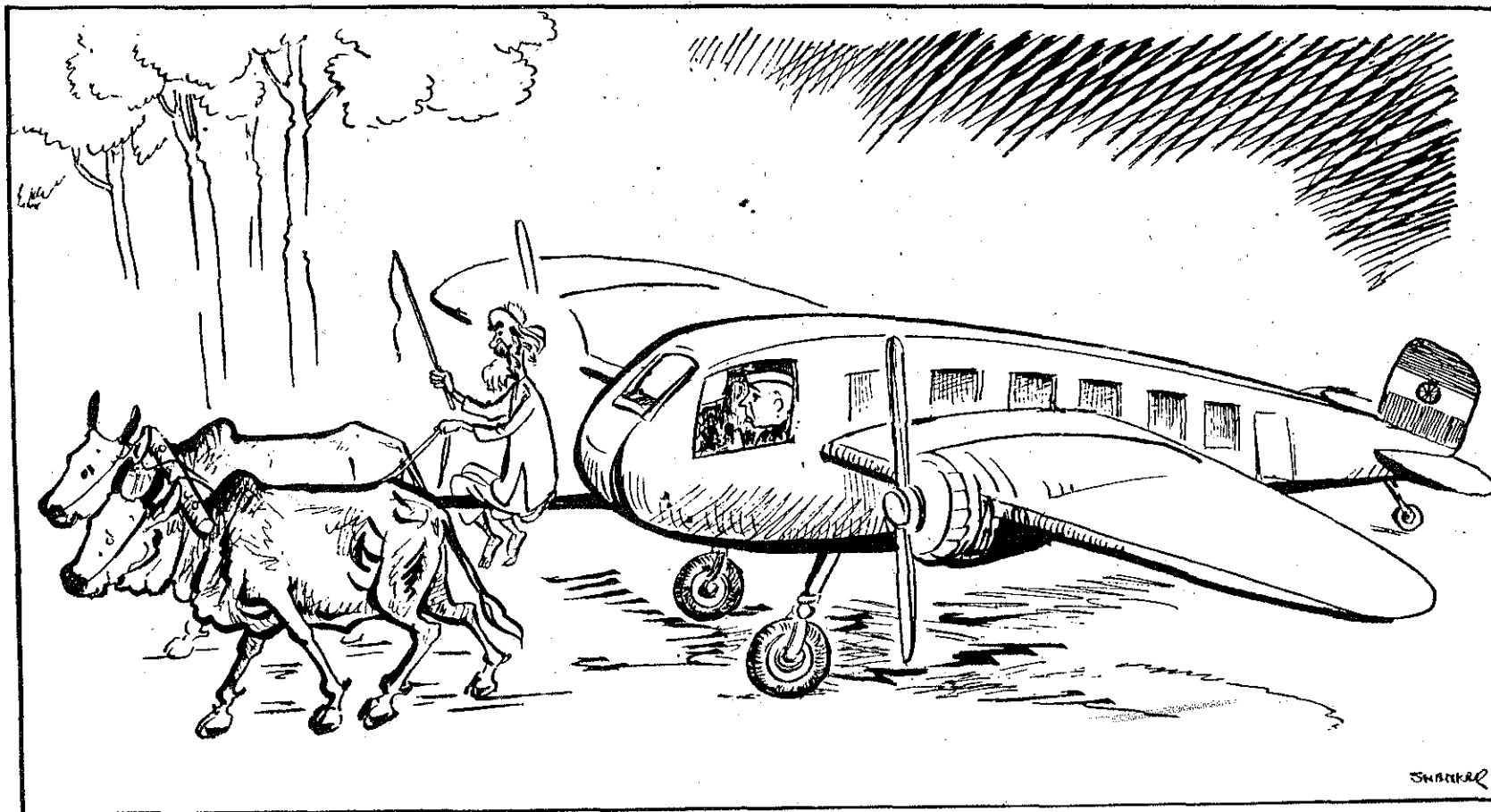


Nehru and Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel rush to rescue the Congress Party from the clutches of nepotism, corruption and other evils.

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HASTEN SLOWLY

July 15, 1951



"To move slowly is dangerous to move too fast might lead to conflicts," said Nehru in his report to AICC

Driving the bullocks is Congress President Purushottam Das Tandon and piloting the plane is Nehru.

May 17, 1964



Shankar's last but one cartoon of Nehru, who died on May 27, 1964. A prophetic cartoon. Behind him: Lal Bahadur Shastri, Gulzari Lal Nanda, Indira Gandhi, Krishna Menon and Morarji Desai.

India forged ahead, paradoxically, there was to be a space within which an authentic India survived, where civilization would always trump the idea of modernity.

In the political arena, intimations of an emphasis on disciplining the people over mobilizing them in were evident reflecting a continuity with Gandhian nationalist practice. The reaction of the nationalist leadership, particularly Nehru, to the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946 had already shown the Congress as a government in waiting, impatient of popular unruliness (Pandey, 1988; Guha, 1998). The horrors of Partition in 1947-8 were followed by a war of diplomacy between the independent nations of India and Pakistan over the repatriation of women abducted during the Partition riots where the body of women was proxy to territory (Das, 1997; Butalia, 2000). The Constituent Assembly, and subsequently the first Parliament became theatres of masculinity as Indian men debated the future of Indian womanhood. The long shadow of this debate about rights and masculinity that haunted the formation of the nation became evident when the Constitution was finally adopted in 1950, and the distinguished artist Nandalal Bose and his students from Santiniketan were asked to provide illustrations for each chapter. Significantly, the chapter on Fundamental Rights was headed by an illustration showing Rama returning triumphant from Lanka with his wife Sita, having defeated Ravana and redeemed both *dharma* and his masculinity.

The Poetics of Passive revolution

It is important to remember that when thinking about questions of aesthetic representation that they cannot be separated from the discourse on the reconstruction of independent India along the axes of modernity, development and equity. Both aesthetics and development had to reckon with the persistence of "tradition" and a "people" for whom modernity was to be staged since the nationalist movement had never envisaged a revolution of the Indian masses. Two framing arguments could be borne in mind: the Gramscian idea of 'passive revolution' and the other an emerging national consensus across ideologies (Gramsci, 1973). Gramsci glosses passive revolution as a historical situation in which the old feudal classes are demoted from their dominant position to a 'governing' one, but are not eliminated. No attempt is made by the emergent state to

liquidate them as an organic whole; instead of a class they become a 'caste' with specific cultural and psychological characteristics, but no longer with predominant economic functions. On the question of development, Sukhamoy Chakravarti has observed that the central problem was one of reconciling accumulation with legitimation. This necessitated the evolution of ways of avoiding the unnecessary rigours of an industrial transition as well as attempting to resolve conflict through change - but not radical change (Chakravarty, 1987). Thus far and no further. The post-colonial project of the Indian state concerned itself with the means by which the condition of modernity could be brought about. Paradoxically, at the same time, it was visualised as an already existing, indigenized, and naturalized state of being. Development was seen through the metaphor of sculpting out a figure that was embedded in a notion of a national economy that had been covered over by the detritus of colonial policies of economic retardation. This is of a piece with Nehru's epiphanic "discovery of India" as something already existing since the dawn of time, which obscured the construction of this very entity in the throes of the nationalist movement.

Nationalist political activity had largely left pre-capitalist sites, structures and classes intact, even in the process of mass mobilization (the Gandhian notion of trusteeship as much as colonial traditions of political compromise with landed elites was responsible for this). Moreover, as in most ex-colonies, passive revolution became the characteristic mode of transition. The establishment of a nation state was the priority and a process of reform from above would follow this. The institutional structures of 'rational' authorities set up by colonial rule - of law or of administration- were neither broken up nor were they transformed. Partha Chatterjee has argued that the new framework of rule was not a representative mechanism operated by individual agents, rather, it incorporated entire structures of pre-capitalist community. In the political field this was manifest in the idea of vote banks. In the economic field, the notion of community development presumed already existing and harmonious communities (Chatterjee, 1998). This timorousness on the part of the state towards a fundamental alteration of the hierarchies of community, led to a certain degree of suspicion in popular perceptions towards its rhetoric. While the post-colonial state claimed to lead from the front, it seemed clear, at times, who was pushing it.

There was also a broad consensus emerging on issues relating to industrialization and the village. Nehru, the Left and Gandhi are conventionally seen as exemplifying

distinct positions on a scale running from outright and rampant industrialization at one end to a valorization of the village on the other. By the 1950s, arguably, the vocabularies had become quite indistinguishable and the differences were more rhetorical than substantive. Nehru's *Discovery of India* concluded with a critique of modern industrial society that could have been penned by Gandhi. He wrote of 'excessive individualism', the prevalence of 'competitive and acquisitive characteristics' and the avid enthronement of wealth above everything else (Nehru, 1946). Gandhi plumped for an ethical socialism premised on the immoral character of capitalist economic institutions. He denounced both private property and production for profit as fundamental causes of exploitation. When he writes in *India of My Dreams* (1947) that "land and all property is his who will work for it" or in *Towards non-violent socialism* (1951) that the capitalist was committing theft when appropriating 'surplus value' as profit, he sounds no different from the Kerala communist theoretician, K.Damodaran writing his 10 popular Malayalam primers on Marxism in the 1950s. Marxism and Socialism in India were heavily influenced as much by the experience of Gandhism as participation in the Nehruvian dream of modernity and development. To rephrase the American philosopher, Richard Rorty, perhaps for us Indians it is important not to let Marxism influence too much the story we tell about our own Left. We need to reflect seriously on what this consensus and confluence of ideas mean: the consequences of running Gandhi, Nehru and the Left together as it were.

Writing the history of the modern

The political orientation of the Indian intelligentsia was significantly affected by the Gandhian refashioning, even reinvention, of the past and tradition so that it exemplified both the evidence of 'ancient moral glory' and a certain romanticization of the idea of the people. This was reflected too in reconstructions within the historical profession of Ancient India- the Golden Age of India's history- which could be mined for seemingly prescient traditions of republican government, rational bureaucracies and *realpolitik* (Altekar, 1955; Sastri, 1955; Mookerji, 1957). There was no contemporary elaboration of an uncompromisingly radical modernity that spoke of freeing incipient citizens from the shackles of the past. In addition, towards the idea of the contemporary there was only a

profound ambivalence. An active engagement with the idea of a past was treated with suspicion; the past had ostensibly been superseded by the very act of gaining freedom. The conception of the people as a historical force for change, an idea that may be seen as central to any notion of good governance, came to be recast by seeing them as the repositories of a timeless wisdom. In art this ambivalence towards tradition expressed itself in more complex ways.

Gita Kapur in a series of insightful essays argues that the idea of modernism has no firm canonical position in India. Being progressive (or modern) is sometimes staged as a deployment of tradition, and at other times as a subversion of it. The modern therefore acquires an emblematic, or as she puts it, a “heraldic” value; newness comes into the world in the name of the modern. However, Modernism arising as it does out of the chronological tryst between nationhood and modernity is embroiled in the demand for the revealing of an authentic national self. Modernization becomes both desired and abhorred as the self oscillates between what Kapur calls the modern and the authentic. This conflation of modernization (the process), modernity (the desired state of being), and modernism (the aesthetic form of the modern) is a characteristic of developing post-colonial societies adding a further dimension to the “heraldic” modern. As Kapur astutely puts it, it is an euphemistic modernism that finally emerged which kept in tow notions of a people’s culture, or folk/tribal art as a legitimating genealogy (Kapur 1990, 1991, 1996, 2000) . What indeed were the consequences for cultural practice or politics of this sentimentalizing of the people as a sign of authenticity? We shall return to this question again when looking at both film and political theatre.

The invocation of the idea of the modern necessarily involves imagining a national culture that shall break free of the distortions of a colonial modernity. It requires a sense of history, as well as a sense of past, present and future imagined along a continuum, each in dialogue with and bearing an organic relation to the other. However, the compromise of the passive revolution rendered both the past as well as the future, ambivalent, even suspect, categories. To imagine too radical a future raised the spectre of social upheaval on a large scale. The Oxford educated dean of Indian sociology, M.N.Srinivas’s idea of Sanskritisation, that has dominated thinking on India (perhaps even the sub continent) since the 1960s and remains the doxa of most Indian sociological speculation, addressed

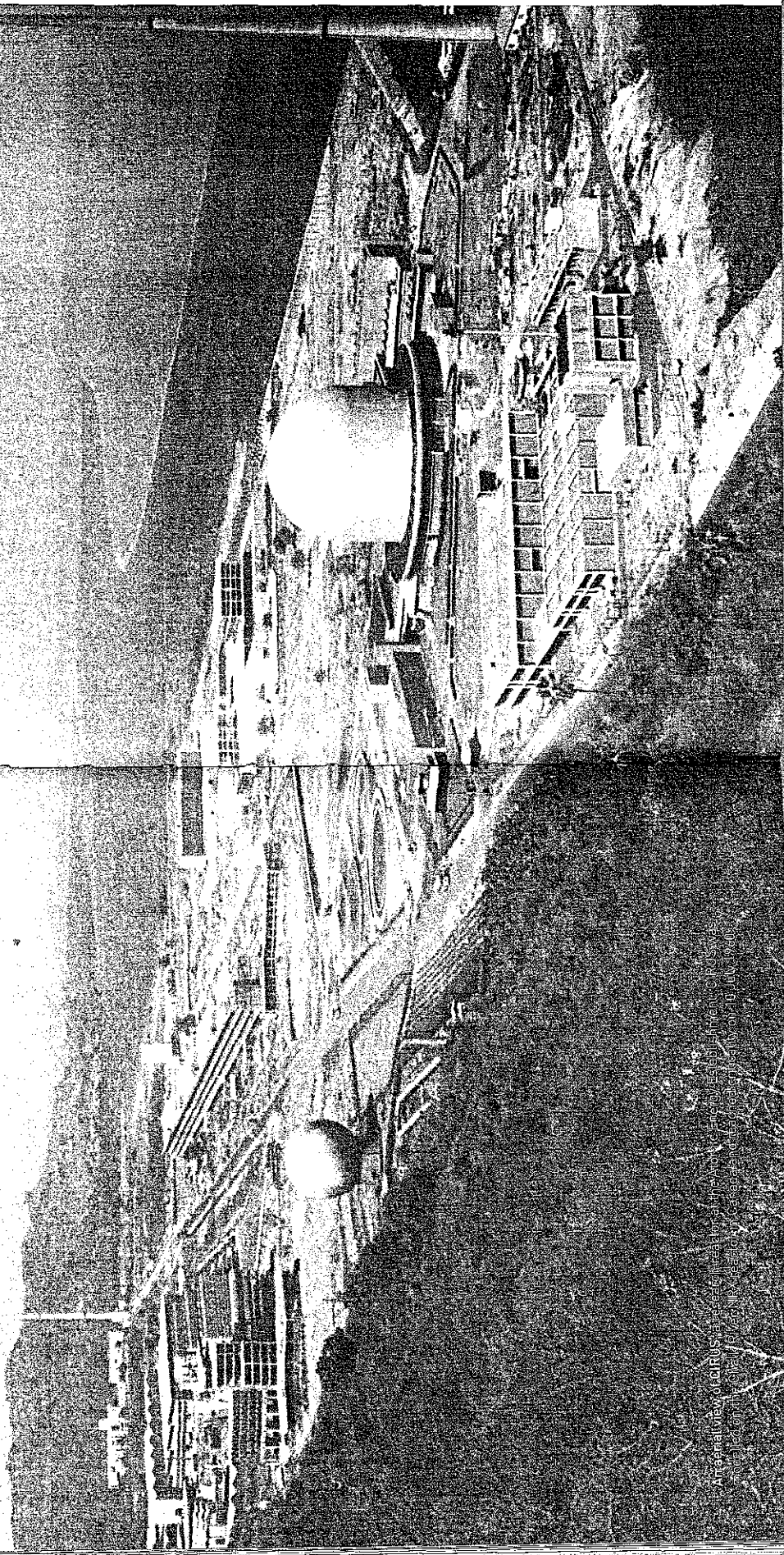
itself specifically to this idea of harmonious social transformation and the task of nation-building (Srinivas, 1952). The concept addressed centrally the question of authenticity: would India's unique civilizational values be undermined by too rapid a change, the kind of change implicit in the modernisation theories that were regnant then and which emanated from the West? The answer that Srinivas provided was that social change would happen through emulation as lower castes would adopt the customs and manners of higher castes in an incremental fashion: there would be positional change without structural dislocation.

For the progressive intellectual of the 1950s whose thinking was shaped by that peculiar mixture of nationalism and socialism, the past lay too close at hand, coiled around the present. The deadweight of the past was manifested in structures and attitudes as well as in the all-embracing metaphor of feudalism that was the counterpoint to the modernity that the Indian state and political processes sought to establish. Visualizations of modernity – the imagining of national culture – reflected this central tension. The present was rendered as the contemporary, and it worked with an idea of the past that was imbued with the aura of ancientness. On the other hand, the past was also a spectre that needed to be, and could be, exorcised through the incantation of the modern. The future became a mere proleptic gesture disconnected from the immediate social and historical space. The contemporary, thus, lay between an under-theorized past rendered as embodying Civilization and a hyper-modern, beyond-history future. The idea of development helped to suture the rupture; it broke away from the past and represented both the work of as well as work towards realising the future.

The fetish of science and national institutions

The dominant visualization of the developed future was determined by the fetish of science and technology. While Nehru's famous 'scientific temper' was harder to inculcate in a country oscillating between reverence for the past and genuflection to the idea of a future, what came easier was the representation of science through artifacts. Itty Abraham calls it a socialist realist style of monumentality – represented through the photographs and publicity material of the Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity and the Films Division documentaries. Dams such as the Bhakra Nangal; the Durgapur Steel Mills (built with

1955 | INDU-ORBITISH NUCLEAR ENERGY COOPERATION AGREEMENT IS SIGNED | KHURUSHCHEV AND BUTGANIN VISIT INDIA
| FIRST TRUE FUSION DEVICE TEST BY SOVIET UNION DEVELOPED BY ANDREI SAKHAROV 1956 | FIRST INDIAN REACTOR APSARA BECOMES OPERATIONAL





British collaboration); the hyper-modern city of Chandigarh where grids ordered human irrationality; and, above all, the gleaming domes of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, indicated an oxymoronic already present yet distant future (Abraham, 1998; Kalia, 1990, 2004; Scott, 1999). These visual representations were accompanied by the fetishised litany of numbers - of tons of steel, miles of road - and invocations to the ineffable power of the atom. The very size and awesomeness of these monuments seemed to locate them in a disconnected future inhabited not by the ordinary Indian, but by categories like the engineer and expert. It was a landscape *sans* the human, a hyper-modern geography of catwalks, girders and gleaming shapes. The 18th century colonial picturesque of the Daniells had created a sense of the sublime and awe through a depiction of India's landscape and ancient monuments dwarfing the loincloth-clad native. This was a high modern picturesque in which the factory and reactor loomed over the Indian people. Mitter Bedi's photographs (albeit from the decade of the 60s) - classic black and white projections of a future - are a case in point. They feature the smokestacks of the Dhuwaran power station, the coolant towers of the NOCIL plant - a landscape of the future without people (Hoskote, 2000). By the time of his death in 1985, Bedi had photographed more than 2,000 installations spanning a wide range of industries, from steel, fertilisers and textiles to paper, sugar and pharmaceuticals. One can put alongside this the classic documentary *The Story of Steel* directed by Harisadhan Dasgupta in 1956, with music by Ravi Shankar and scripted by Satyajit Ray. Here again it was the product (the emblem of India's striving to be a modern industrial nation) rather than labour that is visually glorified.

Let us get back to ideas of art and culture and the grid of development discourse within which they functioned. The process of institution-building of the 1950s - the National Museum (established in 1948), and the National Gallery of Modern Art (1954), both in New Delhi, and the Film and Television Institute, Pune (1959) - was possibly an attempt to modernize through a centralized mandate. It has been suggested that centralized action by the nation-state was a way of disentangling the modern from earlier nationalist polemic (which had to speak in the name of tradition). There are several consequences that follow, the least being the idea of a state that stands outside and above while shaping what is within. Kapur observes that Indian modernism, developed without an

avant-garde (Kapur, 1991). State patronage for the arts absolved progressive elements of adopting confrontational initiatives.

To return to our argument about the disconnectedness of past, present and future in India's visualization of modernity, let us look at the museum and the idea of the past. Nehru was convinced of the power of the museum's ability to visually represent the past for the people of an illiterate country. Citizens would discover their India through sight alone even as Nehru had done through reading and reflection in the uncertain comfort of colonial jails. In 1948, an exhibition of sculpture and miniature paintings that was held in the halls of the Government House, Delhi presaged the formation of the National Museum. What was clearly excluded was any reference to the modern; even though modern Indian painting had been included when the exhibition had travelled to England earlier. As an aside here, it is significant that when the National Gallery of Modern Art opened in Delhi, the core representative collection comprised of the paintings of Amrita Sher Gil - the part Hungarian painter who had honed her images in Paris. The National Museum, Guha-Thakurta has argued, objectified and memorialized the past in sharp dissociation from the present - the 'masterpieces' of Indian art were very clearly associated with achievements in early Indian sculpture (Guha-Thakurta, 1998, 2004). Moreover, the collection embodied Nehru's delightfully vague characterization of what was central to Indian civilization - 'that worthwhile something', as he put it. The pastness of Indian art came to be expressed in that reified, static opposition between western realism and Indian idealism-the spiritual, transcendental, civilizational spirit. If E.B. Havell and A.K. Coomaraswamy had looked back to early Buddhist art to escape from the anxiety of Greek influence, now an all-embracing notion of what was Hindu was jerry-built as the master tradition of Indian art, engulfing Buddhist genres in the idea of a great Indian synthesis (Guha Thakurta, 1998).

The past came to be rendered as distinct from the present, and indeed excised from it. It was also given a religious, civilizational colour. There was another problem - one of silencing. If the hyper-modern future lay under the sign of the factory and reactor, with the people absent or at an awed distance, the reified past was similarly rendered as an object of wonder. Its organic connection with the people was severed. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ironic story of the 'museumisation' of the Didarganj Yakshi from

eastern India (Guha Thakurta, 2004). The Yakshi, was the object of intermittent popular worship, and dispensed her aura under a makeshift shrine. Once identified as an object of art, and an icon of India's civilizational depth, she was plucked away and planted in Patna museum, the first station of the cross in a journey that was to end in the National Museum, Delhi. Over the next few decades' icons were to be recovered from 'inappropriate' uses and locations and 'rescued' from popular village worship. The past was excised from the present as also from the people, who were characterised as the inappropriate guardians of value. Moreover, in the spectacle that was to be India's art heritage, the 'modern' was to be conspicuously absent. This reluctance, even refusal to incorporate the idea of the people as a historical entity changing towards an idea of the modern was to be the failure in the imagining of a national culture. Modernity was to be enacted for a static body of the people: they were to be the audience rather than actors in the drama of the post-colonial nation.

The idea and rhetoric of development under the stewardship of the state came to stand in for the deeper and more democratic project of envisaging governance. The whole project of nationalist mobilization had been premised on the disciplined figure of the satyagrahi, who stood in a disciplinary relation to the masses and had not thought through the idea of a collective political enterprise. The transition from subjecthood to citizenship that the post colonial constitution envisaged (with the detailed enumeration of rights and liberties) should have entailed the involvement of the people in governance. The post colonial state with its predilection for the commanding heights and its fear of mass involvement was loath to experiment with the participation of the citizen in defining the project of the state and administration. This would have to wait till the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1993 which finally took the idea of panchayati raj or devolution of power to the villages seriously.

The romanticisation of the people

In Gandhi's, *The India of my Dreams*, the romanticization of the people and rendering them as abstractions received its classic enunciation.

‘the moment you talk to (the Indian peasants) and they begin to speak.... wisdom drops from their lips ... Take away the encrustations, remove his chronic poverty and his illiteracy and you have the finest specimen of what a cultured, cultivated free citizen should be’ (Gandhi, 1947)

The association of popular forms only with the “common people” was a stark expression of elite dissociation from a culture in which they had earlier participated.

The search for the authentic in the visualization of national culture was an attempt also to straddle the debate on tradition vs. modernity. In the case of Satyajit Ray representation in the realist genre became a way out of the dilemma (Kapur, 2000). A painstaking attention to the lucent, representation of the grain of peasant life is only one end of Ray’s conviction regarding the inexorable autonomy that modernity grants to the individual. When the American critic Stanley Kauffmann, speaking of Ray, drew a parallel with Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus forging in the “smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race”, he was not far wrong. Ray’s *Pather Panchali* trilogy was in a significant sense the “Portrait of the Artist” as a young nation that linked modernization with individual autonomy. The anecdote goes that when Ray ran out of money while shooting *Pather Panchali* he approached Dr.B.C.Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal. Some money was allotted out of the road building programme of the Public Works Department, both because of the English title ‘The Song of the Road’ as well as its realist documentary appearance. The twinning of the ideas of modernization and modernity are also evident in the fact that the train sequence in *Pather Panchali* was the first to be shot though it appears late in the film. Apu and Durga running across a field, encounter a train for the first time in one of the most poignant moments in the film. This encounter with the modern is a watershed followed by a series of deaths, including that of Apu’s beloved sister Durga, that inexorably propel his departure from the village towards a sovereign identity. The final shot of *Apur Sansar* (1959) with his son perched on Apu’s shoulder looks beyond to an unsentimental modernity. Ray was different, indeed unique, in his commitment to modernity, stemming both from his cosmopolitan Brahmo background as well as his location within an international film aesthetic. Reconstruction of folk tradition, middle class urban life and intellectual existential angst could be kept separate and distinct: the rural fairy-tale world of *Gupi Gyne Bagha Byne* (The adventures Gupi and Bagha, 1969) of and

the urban alienation of *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1971) set in the time of post colonial disillusionment with the ability of the state to deliver development, let alone employment, have little in common.

The Hindi film industry was another entity, what Salman Rushdie called a love song to India's mongrel self. While there were attempts at an authentic neo-realism as in films like *Do Beegha Zamin* and *Dharti Ke Lal* (the latter with its authentic footage incorporating peasant union marches) we must be clear as to the nature of this realism. The call for realism arose from the need to project images of India as she should be rather than as she was (hence the controversy over the starkness of *Pather Panchali*). Ideas of realism came to be conflated both with a social conscience and with a desire for modernity which would retain the special, idealistic nature of an Indian essence. The same issues that characterized the debate on development, as of heritage, surface here. Material affluence and the very idea of money came to be tainted, as was the idea of excessive accumulation: the irascible hero was always pitted against industrialists, moneylenders and the feudal rich or the smuggler. Poverty was to be embraced but in a sentimental formulation: it was the act of becoming poor not the state of being poor that attracted the filmic imagination. Whether in Raj Kapoor's *Shri 420* (1955), *Jagte Raho* (1956) or Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* (1957), poverty came to be detached from the poor and was conflated with the civilizational idea of renunciation (the taking up of a life of poverty as it were). This was a closure of any further debate on the question of the conjoined fates of poverty and modernity (Chakravarty, 1993).

Even in the overtly 'social film' of the 1950s the people are abstractions (Vasudevan, 1993, 1995, 2010). Urban streets, shot as metaphors of India's diversity, teem with newspaper vendors, hawkers, construction workers, pimps and layabouts, but the people are only the backdrops against which the moral vicissitudes of the hero are played out. For instance, in a famous precursor to the social films of the 50s, *Neecha Nagar* (1946) directed by Chetan Anand, went on to win the Grand Prix at Cannes. It is the story, allegorical in conception, of a town where the industrialist and the rich occupy Ooncha Nagar while Neecha Nagar holds honest, working folk. The conflict is staged as the hindrances in the love between Balraj from Neecha Nagar and the daughter of the industrialist. There is an epidemic caused by leakage of dirty water. Balraj leads the protest;

the industrialist dies, the lovers are united and presumably the hero will now run the industry with a social conscience (Chakravarty, 1993). The representation of the people is romantic – the happy, singing poor who provide an honest diversion from the protagonists' travails. The rendering of social hierarchies and the possibility of transformation in the form of love required stemmed from the passive revolution that India had undergone. It was an affective solution rather than a political one that was offered, akin to the Gandhian formula of change of heart, whether of the upper caste or the capitalist.

Recent film criticism has suggested that the Hindi film is best apprehended as melodrama with its stereotypical, morally bipolar characters and the narration itself being driven through the awareness of a single character (Prasad, 1994; Vasudevan, 2010), . Within the genre of melodrama the class structure remains resolutely feudal: the distinction between the hero and the other characters are as between King and peasants. The film critic Madhava Prasad has argued that within a narodnik rhetoric of 'the people', what ensues is an aristocratic self-legitimation – where the hero/noble is in an organic relationship with his subjects. He becomes their metaphor and subsumes them. In a typically modern maneuver, it is an egalitarian feudalism, all are presumably equal, but the hero is nearly always well born. Love opens up the possibility of crossing over, of opening up a space, but within a peculiarly modern rendering in which the only difference can be one of class. Inter-caste, inter-religious or even taboo love such as that of desiring widows is inconceivable. In a modernity premised on a passive revolution and driven by it, the pre-modern lurks beneath the rhetoric of the modern, as that which dare not speak its name. After all the very idea of development as I have argued had little to do with social change or transformation; becoming modern was to be achieved through a modernisation that would be stage-managed by the state from its commanding heights.

There are two other issues to be considered here. Films such as Raj Kapoor's *Aawara* (1951), Chetan Anand's *Taxi Driver* (1954) and Guru Dutt's *Aar Paar* (1954) present the street – the space of the people – as the space also of a possibility of the dissolution of the hero's social identity. Within that however the hope of social renewal or redemption is never closed off, but only for the hero (Vasudevan, 1993). Becoming one of the people, and one among them, remains a liminal activity. Moreover, the narratives of films remained rooted in the present and reflect a troubled engagement with the past –

either literally a personal secret or trauma or figurative peasant selves of the modern hero. The future remains outside the space of the narrative and is deferred to a non-existent space outside the film. This may not be surprising, and indeed to be expected within a mainstream cinema concerned with representation rather than Utopias.

Radical theatre and its compromises in Southern India

In the final part of this essay, we turn to the southern state of Kerala and the visualization of a modern, radical culture in the plays of Thoppil Bhasi (1924-1992) who became synonymous with the cultural productions of the KPAC (Kerala People's Arts Club), the cultural wing of the Communist Party in Kerala. Bhasi's plays were avowedly about social transformation and reflected an attempt to create a new radical cultural practice founded on the lives and actions of the "people". Bhasi's turn to the theatre also reflected his faith in an immediacy, which he felt, could not be translated onto the screen. The KPAC was founded in 1950 in Ernakulam by a group of committed student activists at the Law College. In 1951, they staged a play *Ente makannu sheri* (My son is right) that caused only a minor ripple. It was with Bhasi's *Ningal enne Kammyunistu aaki* (You made me a Communist) of 1952 that KPAC became a force to reckon with both regionally as well as nationally through its association with the IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Association) based in Bengal. The decade of the 1950s saw six major productions starting with *Ningal enne*, *Surveykallu* (Survey Stone) 1954; *Visakunna Karinkali* (The Hungry Scab) 1955; *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son) 1956; *Muladhanam* (Capital) 1958; and *Puthiya maanam puthiya bhumi* (New sky, New earth) 1959 followed in quick succession. Bhasi who himself had been accused in a conspiracy case and had spent four years between 1948 and 1952 both in jail and in hiding wove his own experiences into the plays. The plays appeared with dedication to heroes and heroines among the common people who had provided him refuge.

Before we look at the plays themselves, a brief excursus into the history of communist politics in Kerala becomes necessary. In northern Kerala (Malabar), the formation of peasant unions from the 1930s had led to a whole scale questioning of feudal

modes of landholding as much as that of imposed caste behaviour. A live culture of reading rooms, processions and performances of plays, particularly K. Damodaran's *Rent Arrears* (1938) and *Draught of Blood* (1939) had led to the crystallization of an incipient, alternative proletarian aesthetic. In southern Kerala, comprising the princely states of Cochin and Travancore, the struggle had been directed more against the intransigent monarchy than against the colonial state. The communist movement here had to contend primarily with the politics of caste and community associations more than the feudal landholding system as in Malabar. With the People's War Line of 1942, the Communist Party of India aligned itself with the British war effort; the attack on the Soviet Union by Germany had transformed the war into an anti fascist campaign. While this put the brakes on radicalism and precipitated the moves towards an agrarian consensus, the post independence period saw the outbreak of radical activity yet again. Alongside the *tebhaga* agitation in Bengal and the insurrection in Telangana, the Malayali region witnessed the first working class revolt in India in 1946 at Punnappra Vayalar and militant agrarian radicalism in Malabar. The calling off of the Calcutta thesis of 1948 which envisaged rural revolution was brought about as much by state repression as revolutionary fatigue (Menon, 1994)

The decade of the 1950s was to be different. If the earlier decade had been one of militant popular activity, the people as agents, the discourse on the people now assumed different overtones. The 50s began with the acceptance by the Communist Party of the peoples' participation in the electoral process; the move towards 'parliamentary cretinism' as K. Damodaran put it in Marxist argot (Damodaran, 1984). Debates had begun and were reaching a head around the issue of the linguistic reorganization of states. On 1st November 1956, the Malayalam speaking areas of the southwest coast were brought together as the state of Kerala. And in 1957, the first communist ministry to be elected to power anywhere in the world assumed office in Kerala. These three conjunctures of parliamentary communism, linguistic statehood and the communist ministry were also to transform communist cultural expression towards a more conservative practice, centred on the state rather than the people.

One of the most important expressions of a growing closure had been E.M.S. Nambudiripad's book of 1948 *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* (Kerala, the

motherland of the Malayalis). This was primarily concerned with the linguistic and cultural region of Keralam and sought to find the unities underlying differences and inequalities. One of EMS's fundamental concerns was to posit an intellectual challenge to the Dravidian position that the Brahmins, who were foreign to the Dravida space, had historically wrought inequality in South India. The issue of caste hierarchy had come up within the party in 1944 when the senior lower caste Tiyya labour organizer C.H. Kanaran had been removed from the district committee. There had been accusations of casteism and a lot of soul searching in the party, almost precipitating the resignation of Krishna Pillai, one of the founders of the movement itself. EMS in his text looked forward to linguistic statehood and put forward two simple and telling propositions: first, that caste had been a rational form of economic organization in its day, allowing for the creation of a class responsible for cultural production i.e. the Nambudiri Brahmins and second, that it was Brahmin cultural production i.e. a high culture which could form the organic basis of the new state. This moment of maneuver was not unique. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian movement put the lid on the caste question and the challenge from untouchable groups by an exaltation of the glorious Tamil culture and the personification of the Tamil language as mother. Linguistic statehood, I would argue, represented the closure of the caste question and lower caste radicalism much more than Gandhi's intervention in the 1930s. Menon, 1998; Ramaswamy, 1997)

When Bhasi put pen to paper these transformations were already in place. One way of exploring the context of his writing is to compare his plays with the plays put up by IPTA in the early 1940s, particularly Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (1944) dealing with the Bengal famine. They were largely performed by peasant and working class squads much as K. Damodaran's plays of the 1930s had been. It was a localized people's art merging folk traditions with the exigencies of a contemporary politics (Bharucha, 1983). The concern was less with an aesthetic form of the play and more with the political present and its transformation. While Bhasi's plays too are concerned with the transformation of the present – the evolution of the protagonists is always towards a political ideal and an association with everyman (within limits which we shall discuss later) – there is an anxiety regarding form. *Ningal enne Kaumyunistu aaki* [You made me a communist] appeared with a preface by the theoretician of the CPI, C. Ummiraja remarking on how Bhasi had

freed Malayalam drama from the song and dance tradition of Tamil theatre. His second play, *Sarveykallu*, carried a glowing introduction by Joseph Mundassery, a powerful Marxist literary critic of his time, signifying that Bhasi had enlivened a moribund tradition.

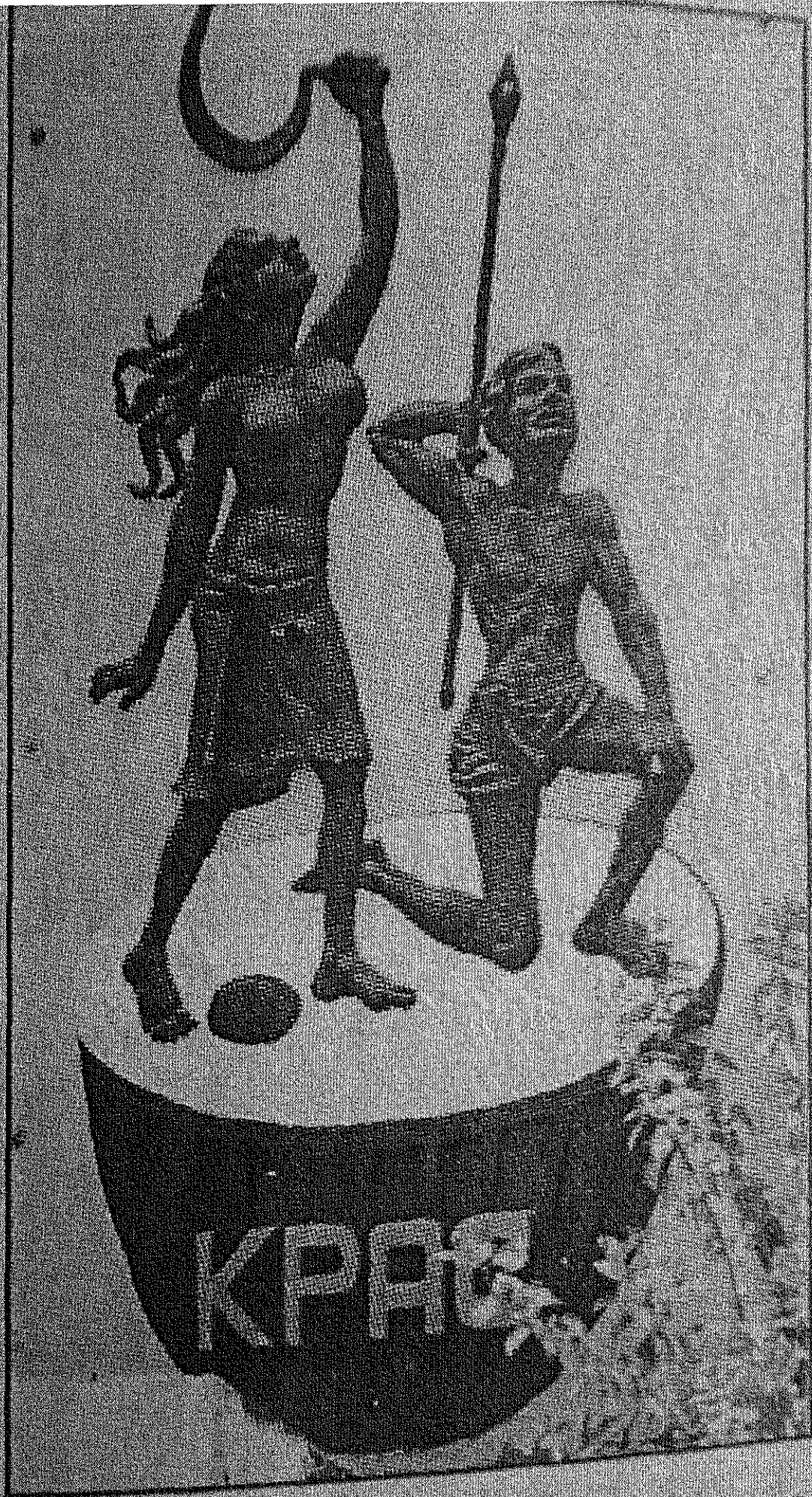
Alongside these were brief notes recording Bhasi's own indebtedness to the lives and words of ordinary people made heroic by circumstances. These opening pages reflect the contrary pulls on Bhasi's own aesthetic – were the plays to be well wrought and conforming to the canon or were they a form of political practice?

New horizons and a new Earth?

I have argued that the decade of the 50s represented a moment of closure after the opening up and culmination of the national movement in the tryst with destiny. If during the national movement the masses had been held in thrall by the disciplined *satyagrahi*, the post-colonial discourse of development offered the engineer and scientist as the objects of devotion. If earlier the people were to be disciplined and mobilised, now they were to be the mute witnesses to the drama of development being staged for them. I shall take up three themes within Bhasi's plays to show how even a radical regional cultural practice came to share in the discourse of modernization envisaged by the post-colonial state.

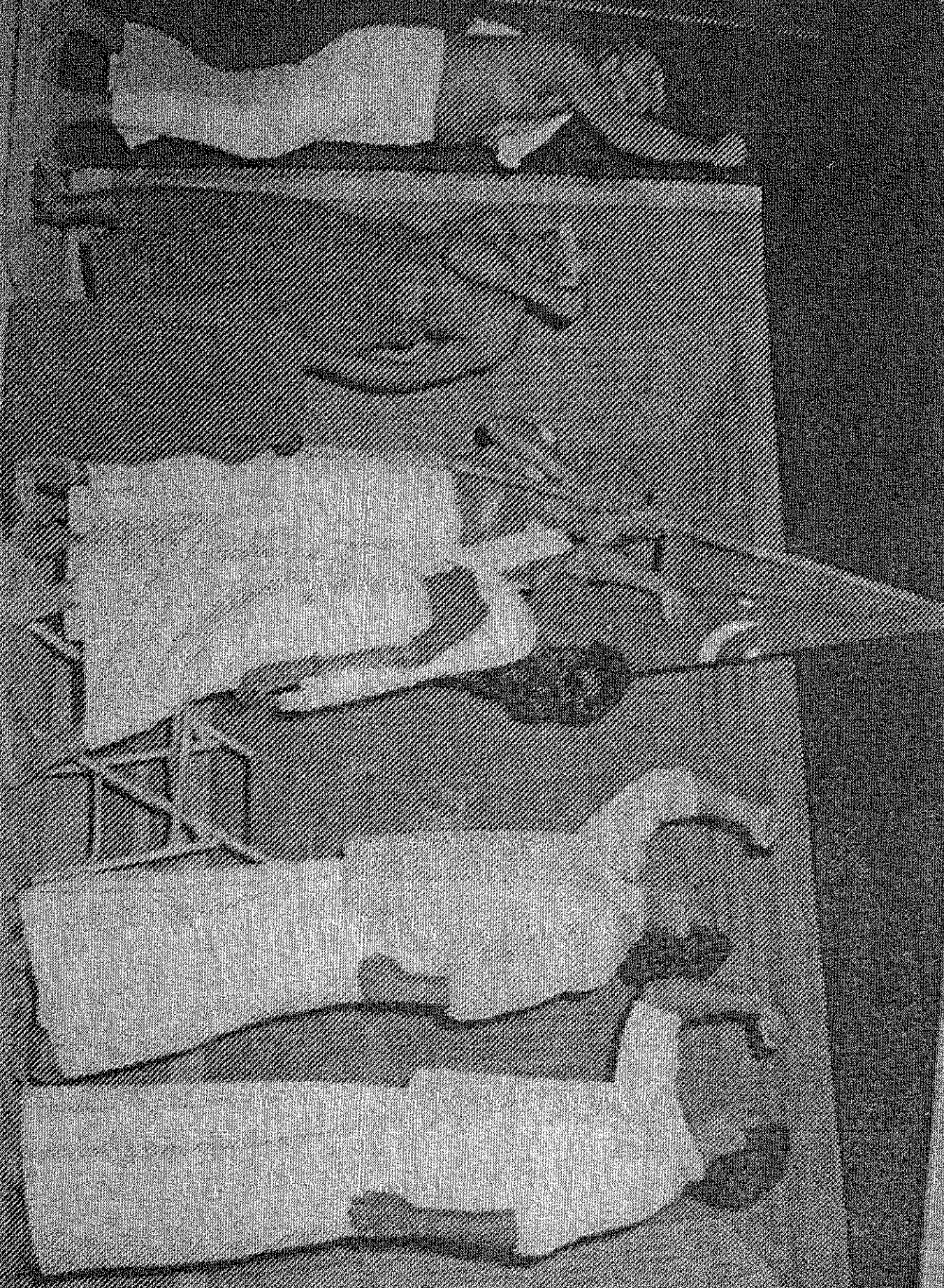
The first theme is Bhasi's construction of the idea of the people, particularly the untouchable Cherumas and Pulayas. In *You made me a Communist*, Karamban, the Cheruman is shown as part of the moral community of the Nair household. He is characteristically obedient and hesitant about involving himself in political activity. The one moment in the play when he shakes off his trepidation and timidity is when Gopalan, the upper caste Nair peasant union organizer, and Karamban's patron, is beaten up. Karamban and the other Cherumans impulsively reach for their implements and sticks and wish to seek revenge for their master. They have to be disciplined and reminded of political norms. Karamban's character – obedient, impulsive and emotional – undergoes little transformation during the play. He remains someone who will witness the political activity of the upper caste protagonists who lead him into controlled political participation. In the *Prodigal Son*, Chathan, the Pulayan is a stereotype, largely ineffectual, impulsive, emotional and given to belief in black magic. His one desire is to get his daughter

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 ചികാപ്പി
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തന്നെ ക
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ՀԱՅԿԱՅԻՆ ԳԼԽԱՎՈՐ ԴՐՈՒՄՆԵՐԻ ՄԱՍԻՆ



Chellamma married to a lecherous politician, the ex member of the Legislative Assembly, Sastri. Chathan constantly reiterates dependence as a matter of honour; that Pulayas work for the master's house rather than a wage. Again in the *Hungry Scab*, Kittu is a tubercular opium addict given to long winded anecdotes and a constant harking back to a dismal past when he lost his wife and child. These are static, ethnographic sketches of an idea of the people – the vestiges of a past in the present, which the central characters have to leave behind. There is no redemption, progress or transformation for them.

At the same time we have to look at another dramatic device. One of the reasons for the phenomenon called the KPAC were the songs written by ONV Kurup and Vayalar Rama Varma. While a number of them were exhortatory political songs speaking of a redemptive future, the majority were based on folk tunes and rhythms and represented a veritable invention of a tradition of *naadan pattu* or folk songs. Here again we see a romantic recovery of the folk with female characters like Chellamma the Pulayi and Thankamma the coir factory worker of *Hungry Scab*, who break into song as a matter of habit expressing a range of moods. While upper caste women like Sumam in *You made me a Communist*, Vasanthi in *Survey Stone* and Radha in *The Prodigal Son* sing because they have been trained in music, the lower class/caste women sing in the spirit of the indomitably happy poor. The plays are suffused by nostalgia for a rural idyll of the happy peasant. The problem here is of carrying the peasant into modernity while retaining the structures of deference as well as a culture structured around the lost routines of work in the fields. There is a sentimental rendition of labour as the site for production of folk culture rather than as demeaning or back breaking.

While these are in a sense political plays, they are structured around love fulfilled, thwarted or betrayed. Why is the question of politics rendered as one of affect? Social stasis, decay and inequality are captured and represented in the impossibility of love within a space as yet to become modern. In *You made me a Communist*, the love of Mala, the untouchable Cherumi, for Gopalan, the Nair political organizer is thwarted by the barriers of caste. In one scene Gopalan contemplates marrying Mala by giving up Sumam, the woman who loves him. At the end of the play, we are left with the assumption that he will indeed marry Sumam though Gopalan has said nothing to revise his altered position. In *Survey Stone*, Kesavan and Vasanthi's love is destroyed by the incessant feudal litigation

over land between their families. In *Hungry Scab*, Thankamma refuses to countenance Sankaran's love for her after he becomes a blackleg to feed his family. His refusal to aspire towards class-consciousness away from an attachment to family marks him as less than modern. In *Capital*, Ravi's family is scattered and his wife commits suicide, presumably, because of the functioning of capital itself. The refrain is that when our *Sarkar*, the government of the people, is established there shall be no incomplete families or indeed, unfulfilled loves. The structuring of the idea of political transformation around the idea of the possibility of love is a distinctly melodramatic mode that brings Bhasi's plays in line with popular cinema. This may indeed explain why former members of the KPAC then found their way into mainstream Malayalam cinema draining the KPAC of its talent and force. Where the plays fall in line with the closure effected in popular cinema is evident in the loves that are not countenanced. In *Prodigal Son*, the protagonist, Rajan Nair loves Chellamma the Pulaya woman but his own martyrdom at the end prevents the consummation of a love that dare not speak its name. We have the figures of Sankaran the Hindu and Thankamma, the Christian in *Hungry Scab* and Gopalan and Mala in *You made me a Communist* who do not realise their love..

The world of the upper caste Nairs is what Bhasi is most comfortable with and there are brilliant portrayals of crumbling households, litigious families, shady land deals and a critique of Nair nostalgia. Paramu Pillai, the small land lord of *You made me a Communist*, and one of Bhasi's most memorable characters, moves from being mired in the past to holding up the red flag in the last scene. The Nairs as anchors of the plays, undergo transformation towards a universal consciousness while the others remain trapped within their stereotypical renditions. The future remains vague and located in a space outside the text the metaphor of the red flag has to serve. The plays, in keeping with the national imagination, work with the notion of a hypostatized past, a present in flux witnessed by a passive 'people' and a future indeterminate and unimagined. Whether it is Paramu Pillai finding redemption from his feudal past through holding the red flag, or Sankaran the scab, finding expiation in a planting of the red flag, it has become merely a politics of gesture.

Bhasi's plays reflect at the regional level the contradictions within the cultural practice of the 1950s. His plays are remarkable in terms of the trajectory that they chart

away from a radical politics of peasant mobilization (albeit controlled) to a participation in the national rhetoric of development to which the people shall be witness. If his first play dealt with the progressive radicalization of a small landlord towards an acceptance of “communism”, the play with which he ended the 50s *New sky, new earth* is a paean to the development project and the peasant organizer has been displaced by the engineer as hero. Ironically, the play itself is dedicated to the first “martyr” (*raktasakshi*) in the cause of progress: the British engineer Alexander Minchin who contracted malaria while building the Pechipara dam. Sukumaran the engineer protagonist of the play who is in charge of building a dam constantly refers not only to the litany of numbers characteristic of development (kilowatts of power, acres to be irrigated and so on) but also to his sense of duty towards the nation and its people. Bhasi in this play moves beyond regional concerns to participate in the task of building the nation. The people of the village for whom the dam is being built are represented as unquestioning, obedient, docile and emotional and Sukumaran’s relation to them is one of patient patronage (or of ineffable condescension!). In a revealing moment Sukumaran tells Ponnamma the village girl

My relation to all of you has got entangled in my emotions. My relation to my job too has become emotional. Was the relation of your father to his ox only that of a man towards an animal on which he had spent sixty or seventy rupees?

Even as the father learnt to love his ox, the engineer learnt to love the people for whom he constructed.

The closure of a radical political and social imagination went hand in hand with the process of nation building. Peasants who had been rallied around the red flag to reject hierarchy and build a new world, had now to be trained in citizenship which meant that they had to hand over volition to the state and its experts. In the radical theatre of the KPAC we can see this rehearsal for citizenship going on, as the communists, initially the opponents of what they called a ‘false independence’ came to share in the project of development and modernity. Along with the dam, the reactor, the museum and the Hindi film, radical theatre too, helped create a audience for state engineered modernity and development through the production of emblems for the soul’s consent. There were some dissenting strains in the 1950s to this hegemonic subsumption of the imagination; the most significant being the great Dalit leader, and Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, B.R.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism along with more than 100,000 members of the *mahar* caste in 1956. The architect of the Constitution with its unremitting and intransigent insistence on equality had lost faith in the politics of deferral that characterized the post-colonial state engagement with issues of social equality.

The decade of the sixties was to see more insistent and urgent demands on the state by a resurgent popular politics, particularly the growth of the Maoist movement and its insistence on agrarian revolution. The fifties, in that sense, were a decade of hope as much as a lost decade; the waiting room of mutinies to emerge. The fundamental question of how the people were to be brought back in as citizens, participating in the building of a new society through incorporation in governance remains an unresolved issue. In the struggle over land rights led by the Maoists; in the popular movements against the handing over of land to mining cartels in eastern India; the protests against big dams and the demands for resettlement we see the problems raised by the delinking of the question of development and governance in post colonial India. Development for the people has to be replaced by the idea of development by the people where governance is seen as a participatory exercise not an exercise in management by the state and its experts.

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