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# DIS/CONNECTEDNESS – papers by past Charles Wallace Fellows, Queen's University, Belfast

**Guest Editors**:

**Rukshana Zaman** – Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi, India

**Tom Marshall** – Queen's University, Belfast, UK

**Ashwin Tripathi** – Flame University, Pune, India

Queen's University, Belfast. Photo by Tom Marshall, 2025.

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## EDITORIAL NOTE

## DIS/CONNECTEDNESS: GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Rukshana Zaman, Tom Marshall, Ashwin Tripathi

Queen's University Belfast (QUB) welcomed the first Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow in 1995-1996. From then on, barring 1999-2000 and 2020-2021, QUB has seen a steady flow of fellows from India. There was almost no connection between the visiting Fellows thereafter, either with the institute or with other Fellowship holders, after their tenure at QUB ended. This disconnectedness was felt during a conversation between Dr. Rukshana Zaman and Prof Maruška Svašek in 2018-19 during the former's fellowship tenure. Though the need for communication, networking and academic exchange among the fellows was strongly felt, the question of funds to bring together all the Fellows was a major concern and, in a way, the idea was dropped. The COVID-19 pandemic left a deep mark on everyone's life; however, in one way, it provided an opportunity for the Charles Wallace Fellows, as Prof Maruška reached out to Dr. Rukshana with a conference idea. Thus, the long-pending meeting of the Charles Wallace Fellows became a reality through an online mode. On November 26th, 2021, yes, that long ago, a virtual conference was convened for current and past Charles Wallace India Trust Fellows at Queen's University, Belfast. The conference was dedicated to the memory of Professor Sameera Maiti (1972-2016), the Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow between 2004 and 2005. Eleven Fellows participated, presenting papers on the conference theme of Dis/Connectedness. Along with the organiser, Professor Maruška Svašek, Shreela Ghosh, Charles Wallace Trust secretary, Richard Alford, former secretary, Dr Keith Breen, QUB's History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics (HAPP) Director of Research and Dr Rukshana Zaman welcomed the delegates to the online gathering. After a few years, we are now proud to see this Special Issue of the Irish Journal of Anthropology, which is dedicated solely to the Indian academics who decided to rewrite their conference presentations for publication as papers. Moreover, we saw a common thread begin to take shape: the fellowship had not only offered time and space for individual scholarly work but also created a unique transnational environment for engaging with questions of field, method, and collaboration.

## ABOUT THE SPECIAL ISSUE

As highlighted by the Fellows, the enriching experience of the conference laid the foundation for this Special Issue that emerged from a shared desire to reflect critically on the intellectual,

methodological, and affective dimensions of research undertaken through this fellowship. The conference and subsequent email exchanges with the authors prompted us to reflect on what it truly means to conduct socially engaged, context-sensitive research across borders, institutions, and positionalities. To bring together these discussions, this Special Issue presents both the Fellows' substantive research topics and their research journeys. This includes reflecting on the evolving concerns, creative methodologies, and critical insights of Indian social scientists. Therefore, in the subsequent sections, we present not only the finalised research enquiries (as provided by the Fellows) but also their processes of inquiry. That is, how ideas take shape through personal experiences of moving across cultural, institutional and disciplinary contexts. In the spirit of true anthropological engagement, many of the papers adopt a narrative style to share these experiences.

## THEMES COVERED IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

We, as guest editors, have been committed to rethinking what it means to engage ethically and imaginatively with fieldsites, while also emphasising the vantage point of scholars navigating both local and global interactions. As a result, we see numerous themes emerging in this Special Issue, revealing the textured ways in which research unfolds across borders as well as sub-disciplines of social sciences. An important lens for us was to question how transnational research allows scholars to position themselves in a dialogical, cross-cultural context(s). Therefore, the papers have experiences of India and Belfast. We see throughout the contributions the use of participatory and engaged methodologies where the Fellows have been critical and reflexive of their own positions, but at the same time, tried to build reciprocal relationships with the communities in question and co-produced knowledge. This has also led to decolonial and intercultural perspectives emphasising positionality, reflexivity and accountability. All in all, we aimed to bring together how the Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship enables intellectual risk-taking, creative experimentation and collaborative learning while also exposing the structural inequalities in global academia. We have divided the Special Issue into two parts: Part I references Fellows' time in Belfast. Part II focuses on the authors' experiences and research, which does not necessarily refer to their time in QUB, Belfast.

## SUMMARY OF PAPERS

### SURINDER S. JODHKA

Surinder S. Jodhka's work 'Ethnicity' After Belfast: Identities in the 'West' and the 'East' draws on his lived experiences in the city of Belfast as a Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow in the year 1996. Being the first recipient of the Fellowship, his work is quintessential, as no parallel can be drawn to his experience. Surinder writes of his critical engagement with Western-style higher education through this scholarship, which then was seen as an opportunity "to enable the 'native' emerging scholars to connect with the metropolitan academy and develop networks beyond their national contexts" (Jodhka, in this issue). He further explores his own understanding of the ongoing Troubles, a violent sectarian conflict in Belfast city during his stay and how he was able to relate to a similar conflict in Punjab in India, his home, that happened in the 1980s.

### SUBHADRA MITRA CHANNA

Subhadra Mitra Channa writes a narrative essay reflecting on the transformative experience of her visit to QUB, Belfast, as a Charles Wallace Fellow. This marked her first journey outside India, resulting in a profound shift in perspectives – from exploring the Indo-Tibet frontier to personal experiences of crossing borders, resulting in her questioning mobility, identity and borderlands. This was further complemented through newer modes of inquiry and rigorous dialogue and resulted in the reframing of research questions through deepened awareness. Overall, Channa's paper elaborates on how her experiences made her a more cosmopolitan thinker, equipping her to transcend disciplinary and geographic boundaries and continue global engagements across institutions.

### SANGHAMITRA CHOUDHURY

Sanghamitra Choudhury, in her essay Writing on the Walls: From Belfast to Darjeeling, takes us on a virtual tour of the Belfast Peace Walls, Derry, Armagh and other conflict-ridden pockets within Antrim to understand the impact of the murals, illustrating the artistic representations of the effects of the Troubles. The years of political turmoil and violence that marred Northern Ireland and Great Britain come to life in her photo essay. She further relates her work on the impact of murals to discuss the Gorkhaland Movement in West Bengal, India. The struggle for a separate identity echoed as the root cause of the conflict in both cases. Sanghamitra was a Fellow in the year 2011, and even

though the Troubles began in the 1960s, the impact was still visible during her stay in Belfast, and this she skilfully captured in her photo essay to draw a parallel to the Gorkhaland movement.

**RUKSHANA ZAMAN**

Rukshana Zaman presents an autoethnographic exploration of embodied religious and cultural experiences within the Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association (NIMFA) in Belfast. This is set against the backdrop of Belfast's deeply etched territorial divisions arising from the period known as the Troubles. Zaman's paper foregrounds the lens of space to explore NIMFA catering to the diverse Muslim community of Belfast. Her paper includes asylum seekers and refugees who were provided with a relatively unmarked (unlike the Peace walls, flags and murals) and inclusive space in the NIMFA. The community also provides diasporic belonging through congregational prayers, Ramadan rituals and Eid celebrations for Muslim immigrants in Belfast. The ease of access to such spaces has led authors to reimagine faith, identity and community in a transnational temporality. Thus, Zaman's paper contributes towards the broader theme of dis/connectedness through ritual participation and gendered religious spaces, which comprises of complex understanding of belongingness through the alternative sites of inclusion for NIMFA.

**SUSAN VISWANATHAN**

In Susan Viswanathan's work, we are brought into the world of Iris Murdoch. The thread that runs through Susan's work is connections – apt for the Charles Wallace conference theme. Susan explores and explains her keen admiration for Murdoch's work through her openness during personal illness and heartbreak. She explains how homesickness while in Belfast as the Charles Wallace Scholar manifested as 'heightened and awry' emotions (Visvanathan, this issue). Her homesickness, Susan writes, was 'perhaps the reason that I took to reading' Iris Murdoch's The Philosopher's Pupil (1981, ibid). Susan does not shy away from how her personal circumstances shape and shapes her current predicaments. Murdoch's novel provides a literary connection between the reader and Susan's life. Susan explores the complex relationships within The Philosopher's Pupil, setting out its protagonists' entanglements. Her paper is alive with vivid phrasing and adjectives, which mirrors one of the journal's objectives of cross-disciplinary creativity. Susan connects Murdoch's work and her own life with the spirited observation, 'Chaos reigns' (ibid). Her writing is informative, intriguing and reflective. The 'fluctuating nature of reality' (ibid), as Susan

writes, lets us into her worlds as it does to Murdoch's. The result of reading Susan's paper, surely, is an encouragement to read The Philosopher's Pupil yourself.

**ANWESA MAHANTA**

Anwesa Mahanta evocatively brings us into the lockdown lives of artists during the COVID-19 pandemic. She reflects on how traditional Indian performance extended the performative body to experience the presence of the absences created by the pandemic, in the constrained confines of home spaces. She weaves her and other dancers' lives through virtual performances as modes of expression of the pandemic during lockdown, and as a way to continue their creative crafts. Anwesa's performances are based on traditional Indian dance. Her and her collaborators' creativity was an antidote to the spatial constraints that many of us experienced in early 2020 and onwards. Anwesa's paper discusses lockdown creativity in India as she reflects on her own contrasting emotions, the 'dual tones of life' (Mahanta, this issue) of angst for humanity, which was an impetus to act. In doing so, Anwesa introduces us to various traditional dance forms which can be viewed online (see Anwesa's references). She therefore explains her lockdown self and collaborations through text and visual performances. In her own words, there was a 'translat[ion]…of emotion to a motion of "life" and its energy' (Mahanta, this issue). Thus, Anwesa describes the expression of emotions through ancient art forms as a contrast to the modern COVID pandemic.

**PRASHANT KHATTRI**

Prashant Khattri's paper takes an economic and historical perspective to uncover how ecological disasters reveal socio-political inequalities. He unpacks hazards and disasters, critiquing the all too often default to name the latter as 'natural'. Prashant focuses on the Indian context of how social positioning and particular groups' vulnerabilities are revealed by ecological precariousness, which has a historical basis in the present, impacting more severely on some people and groups and less so on others. He considers the human impact of disasters based on 'caste, class, race, gender, religion and ethnic discrimination' (Khattri, this issue) as a result of economic priorities over local needs and beliefs. Prashant, therefore, calls us to rethink not only how ecological disasters are caused but also who they unequally affect. He effectively argues how disasters are temporal, experienced unequally in the present by particular people and socio-economic groups, arguing convincingly that '[h]uman social and political histories produce vulnerabilities' (ibid). Whether you

are attuned to ecological anthropology or not, I encourage you to read Prashant's paper as it upsets the paradigm of what is 'natural' about 'natural disasters'.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

### SURINDER S. JODHKA, CHARLES WALLACE SCHOLAR 1995-1996

Surinder S. Jodhka is a Professor of Sociology at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He researches different dimensions of social inequalities, contemporary caste dynamics, agrarian/rural India, and political sociology of community identities. His recent publications include *Global Handbook of Inequality*, Springer 2024 (co-edited with Boike Rehbein), *The Indian Village: Rural Lives in the 21st Centur*y, Aleph 2023; *The Oxford Handbook of Caste*, (Oxford University Press (OUP) 2023, co-edited with Jules Naudet); *India's Villages in the 21st Century: Revisits and Revisions,* (OUP 2019, co-edited with Edward Simpson)*; Caste in Contemporary India,* )Routledge 2015); *Caste: Oxford India Short Introductions*, (OUP 2012). He is the editor of the Routledge India book series on 'Religion and Citizenship'. He has been a recipient of the ICSSR-Amartya Sen Award for Distinguished Social Scientists (2012) and the Malcolm Adiseshiah Award for Distinguished Contributions to Development Studies (2024).

### SUSAN VISVANATHAN, CHARLES WALLACE SCHOLAR 1996-1997

Susan Visvanathan is a Former Professor of the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She is the author of *The Christians of Kerala* (OUP 1993). Her most recent books are *The Wisdom of Community and Work* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and *Word and the World*, (Bloomsbury, 2022). Susan has been a Visiting Professor at MSH, Paris (2004) and a Visiting Professor at Université Paris 13 (2011). She was a Professional Excellence Award Fellow at Central European University, Budapest (2018). Susan is a well-known writer of fiction.

### SUBHADRA MITRA CHANNA, CHARLES WALLACE FELLOW 1999-2000

Subhadra Channa is a retired professor of anthropology from Delhi University. Her areas of research interest are gender, cosmology, inequality and marginalisation, identity and urban studies. Her publications include *Gender in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press), *The Inner and Outer Selves* (Oxford University Press), *Life as a Dalit* (ed. Sage), *Religious Pluralism in India* (ed. Routledge), *Colonial Anthropology: Technologies and Discourses of Dominance* (ed. Routledge) and *The Dhobis*

*of Delhi: An Ethnography from the Margins* (Oxford University Press). She has twelve books and more than eighty papers to her credit. She was the Senior Vice President of the IUAES and is at present the Co-Editor of Reviews in Anthropology. Her awards include two Fulbright teaching fellowships, Charles Wallace and several visiting professorships, as well as the Distinguished Teacher Award from Delhi University.

**SANGHAMITRA CHOUDHURY, CHARLES WALLACE FELLOW 2010-2011**

Sanghamitra teaches political science at Bodoland University, Assam, India. She presently holds the position of Dean of Social Sciences at Bodoland University. Sanghamitra held the position of Agatha Harrison Post Doctoral Fellow in Asian Studies at the University of Oxford, served as a Charles Wallace India Fellow at Queen's University, Belfast, and was a UN International Law Fellow at the Hague Academy of International Law in the Netherlands. Sanghamitra has several highly indexed research papers to her credit.

**ANWESA MAHANTA, CHARLES WALLACE SCHOLAR 2015-2016**

Anwesa is a national award-winning dancer–scholar, specialising in the field of Sattriya Dance with premium solo concerts across several nations and various prestigious forums in India. She received accolades for her unique interpretations of the Sattriya Dance, keeping intact the core philosophy of the form and its ritualistic practice. Anwesa is a recipient of the CWIT Fellowship, British Council; her multiple scholarly publications embrace various aspects of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Assam with coveted fellowships from Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Her interdisciplinary research dwells on explorations of sociological perspectives of culture inherent in the movement practices and performance narratives of the North Eastern region of India. Anwesa is a prominent disciple of the great master, Bayanachrya Ghanakanta Bora, Padmashri. She is an empanelled artist of the ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India) and a winner of several prestigious awards like the Aditya Vikram Birla Kalakiran Award, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Yuva Samman, YFLOFICCI Women Achiever's Award, to name a few. Anwesa is the Artistic Director of Kalpa and has contributed to the promotion of international understanding and social harmony through the promotion of arts and culture exchange. She also worked on collaborative research and archival recordings with the University of Otago and INTACH, documenting work in the area of performance

ethnography and community performances. The New York Times, India West, The Hindu, and other national and international media commented on her work as “impressive”, “thrilling”, and “superb”, to mention a few.

**RUKSHANA ZAMAN, CHARLES WALLACE FELLOW 2018-2019**

Rukshana Zaman teaches anthropology at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, India. Within the ambit of Social Anthropology, her research interests are ethnicity, identity, ethnic conflicts, anthropology of performance mainly dance, visual anthropology, gender studies and social institutions. Rukshana has 44 publications to her credit, including journals, book chapters and IGNOU course material.

During her tenure as a Charles Wallace resident Fellow in the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics (HAPP), Queen’s University, Belfast, United Kingdom, Rukshana presented the India Public Lecture on Constructing the Odissi Dance: Reflections on the creation of the Odia identity and the representation of dancers. She organised the virtual conference DIS/CONNECTEDNESS in the year 2021 for past and present Charles Wallace Fellows in collaboration with Charles Wallace India Trust (CWIT) and Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), Northern Ireland, UK.

Presently, she is a member of the School Board of the School of Social Sciences (SOSS) and the School of Agriculture (SOA), IGNOU. She was a member of the Academic Council, IGNOU (2012-2014). As convener of the IGNOU Researchers Forum, Rukshana organised lectures and seminars for the PhD scholars. Rukshana is also a member of the Centre for Creative Ethnography, HAPP. She is also working on an edited book on Rethinking Visual Anthropology as a co-editor. Presently, she is the associate editor of the journal Indian Journal of Anthropological Research (IJAR). While pursuing her doctoral work, she received a short-term Doctoral Fellowship from the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR). She was conferred with the President’s Award for her service as a Girl Guide. She also has a bachelor’s degree in Odissi Dance.

**PRASHANT KHATTRI, CHARLES WALLACE SCHOLAR 2022-2023 (POSTPONED FROM 2019-2020 BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC)**

Prashant Khattri is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, UP, India. He obtained his master's and Ph.D. from the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. He researches the social impacts of disasters, livelihood issues in disaster context, and people's movements in environmental crisis. Broadly, Prashant's research interests fall within the domains of environmental anthropology and medical anthropology. He has more than 10 years of teaching experience and has published research works in reputed journals. More recently, Prashant is working on Gandhian Ideas related to Environment and Health as a theoretical paradigm to understand ethnographic realities.

Prashant has served as Deputy Director of UGC-Human Resource Development Centre at the University of Allahabad for 2 years. He has also worked as a research fellow and then as a research associate in a European Union-funded MICRODIS project on 'Health, Social and Economic Impacts of Extreme Events: Evidence, Methods and Tools'. He has been a recipient of the D.N. Majumdar Memorial Gold Medal at the University of Lucknow. Prashant also worked as a Research Officer at the Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University in Maharashtra for a year before joining the University of Allahabad. He was a Charles Wallace India Fellow in Social Anthropology from April to June 2023 at Queen's University Belfast, UK. Prashant is presently engaged in research on understanding Dalit issues in the context of recurrent flooding in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, India.

## THE CHARLES WALLACE FELLOWSHIP AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, BELFAST

Maruška Svašek

I am delighted to write a few introductory words in this Special Issue. The collection of articles published in this issue resulted from the online conference DIS/CONNECTEDNESS, which was organised in 2021 by Rukshana Zaman and myself in the midst of the pandemic. The major aim of the conference was to come together at a time of anxiety and isolation to celebrate the Charles Wallace Fellowship (CWF), a three-month residency funded by the Charles Wallace India Trust and Queen's University. CWF has enabled dozens of mid-career anthropology scholars from all over India to spend time at Queen's University Belfast to pursue independent research while engaging with the university's academic community.

The fellowship provides Indian nationals interested in areas such as ethnic conflict, international borders, environmental anthropology, anthropology of performance and art, human rights, emotions, and medical anthropology to engage, network and collaborate. As part of their journey, they pursue their own research, participate in seminars, deliver lectures, and network with other UK universities. One of the highlights of the stay is the Annual India Lecture, a prestigious event attended by academics, students and members of the wider public. Importantly, the length of the residency allows for informal chats with colleagues and students over coffees and pints, when shared interests are further explored and friendships develop.

The scheme started in 1995-1996 when Professor Hastings Donnan began to run the programme. Apart from myself, other academics involved in the coordination over the years include Professor Fiona Magowan and Dr Evi Chatzipanagiotidou.

The first Fellow to secure the grant was Professor Surinder S. Jodhka, who arrived in a pre-Friday Agreement Northern Ireland that still looked rather grim. He had travelled from New Delhi, where he had the position of Chair at the School of Social Sciences at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Over the next 28 years, as the effects of the Peace process began to take visible effect, the following scholars were awarded the fellowship: Professor Susan Visvanathan (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), Dr Deepak Mehta (University of Delhi), Professor Subadra Channa (University of Delhi), Professor Rowena Robinson (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay), Dr Sameera Maiti (Sikkim

University, Gangtok), Dr S. Sumathi (University of Madras, Chennai), Dr Kala Shreen (MOP Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai), Professor Chandan Kumar Sharma (Tezpur University, Assam), Professor Munmun Jha (Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur), Dr Debbidata Aurobinda Mahapatra (Central University of Punjab and University of Massachussetts, Boston), Dr Sanghamitra Choudhury (Sikkim Central University, Gangtok), Dr Subir Rana (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), Dr Surya Prakash Upadhyay (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad), Dr Birendra Suna (Indian Council of Social Science Research, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi), Dr Dev Pathak (South Asian University, New Delhi), Dr Anwesa Mahanta (Indian Institute of Technology, Guahati), Dr Sarbeswar Sahoo (Indian Institute of Techology, Delhi), Dr Renny Thomas (University of Delhi), Dr Rukshana Zaman (Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi), Dr Chakraverti Mahajan (University of Delhi), Dr Prashant Khattri (University of Allahabad, Prayagraj), Dr Panchali Ray (Krea University, Sri City), and Dr Sweta Tiwari (Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari).

The Charles Wallace Fellowship at Queen's University Belfast has resulted in various research collaborations and joint teaching projects. Some of the larger projects I have been involved in include the establishment of the Cultural Dynamics and Emotions Network (2006-2015, with Dr Kala Shreen), the online conference Un/Predictable Environments: Politics, Ecology, Agency (2021, with Dr Prashant Khattri, also involving Dr Tracey Heatherington from the University of British Columbia, Canada), extensive postgraduate teaching projects (2023 and 2025, with Dr Chakraverti Mahajan and Dr Prashant Khattri), and joint involvement in publications (Dr Sameera Maiti, Dr Kala Shreen, Dr Rukshana Zaman). The sustainability of the programme is also evidenced by other ongoing professional exchanges between former Fellows and individuals they met during their residency.

In the name of all my colleagues at the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at QUB, I would like to thank all (former) Fellows for their energy, enthusiasm, and willingness to exchange scholarly insights. I deeply cherish the memorable moments that we share.

Maruška Svašek
Charles Wallace Fellowship coordinator
Queen's University Belfast

**PART I**

# 'ETHNICITY' AFTER BELFAST: IDENTITIES IN THE 'WEST' AND THE 'EAST'

**BY SURINDER S. JODHKA**

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**ABSTRACT:** Drawing from memories of a three-month stay in Belfast as a Charles Wallace India Trust Fellow in 1996, I try to locate my visit in the larger context and landscape of Western-style higher education in India. The visit also provided me with an opportunity to critically engage with the West-centric conceptions of social and political change that tend to project Western societies as 'secular' and, modernised and those of the Global South as being marked by 'backwardness'. Such framings have also come to shape the middle-class notions of good urban life. A stay in Belfast at a time when the city was marred with violent sectarian conflict helped me compare it with a 'similar' conflict that the Indian Punjab experienced during the 1980s that I had lived through as a student. Such an experience turned out to be extremely useful and helped me revise my conceptions of ethnic conflict and social change, which had mostly been drawn from the textbooks of social sciences.

**KEYWORDS**: Ethnicity, Ethnic conflict, Belfast, Punjab, Khalistan, Modernisation

The single most important fact about the present-day system of higher education in India is its origin during the British colonial period. Though much has changed in Indian higher education after Independence in 1947, its English and Western moorings continue to significantly influence, if not shape, its ideals and objectives. The Indian higher education system has indeed grown in many ways over the past three-quarters of a century. The growth has not merely been quantitative, in terms of the number of colleges and universities or the proportions of eligible Indians attending such institutions, the enrolment ratios, but also in terms of quality. Indian higher education has become far more diverse in terms of the range and the nature of skills imparted. Besides the growth of specialised institutions with a focus on technology and high-end skill training, India today also has universities that are exclusively dedicated to the research and teaching of "native" languages. The social background of its students and faculty members has also undergone a sea change. For example,

women now make up a large proportion of students, often more than 50 per cent, in most colleges and universities across the country. Similarly, a good proportion of students come from rural hinterlands and socially marginalised communities, such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the Other Backwards Classes (OBC) [1] . The state-funded institutes often have a mandate to reserve a specific proportion of seats for marginalised students.

However, despite these "radical" changes, English continues to rule the roost. With the exception of the teaching of Indian languages, almost all the top institutes of higher education impart their classroom lectures in English. Nearly all high-quality science and social science research is published in English-language journals and books. The Indian universities and other institutes of higher learning, such as the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) are designed on a variety of Western models, though not all of them British. Many of those who teach in these "model" institutes of higher learning in India are partly trained in Western universities, almost universally in the English language. We also actively collaborate with Western researchers and try as much to be part of the Western academy as our own, in India (see Raina and Habib, 2004).

In other words, one of the requirements for being a successful higher education professional in India is one's contact with the West. This is certainly not merely because of the legacy of British colonial rule. Perhaps the more important reason for this is the evolution of global science and social science during the post-Second World War period. India, having been an ex-colony, in a sense, provides us with some degree of advantage when compared with some of the other major countries of the Global South.

[1]The SCs, STs and OBCs are classificatory categories used by the Indian state for affirmative action in form of allocating quotas (Reservations) for them in state funded educational institutions and jobs in government offices and state-run institutions. These categories have their origin in the colonial policies of listing 'depressed classes' for targeted state support to socially uplift them. The post-Independence Indian state has continued with policies of targeted affirmative action, and has over the years further expanded it (see Kumar and Suthar 2024)

However, even as the influence of Western academia persists, India too has developed its own system of higher education with many distinctive features of its own. Its challenges and advantages are largely home-grown, emerging from local cultures, elite processes and national priorities. It also reflects the social, cultural and regional diversity of the subcontinent, as also its economic disparities. With the exception of a few with social and economic privilege, most Indians who manage to pursue higher education complete their studies within the country. This holds true for PhDs as well. However, for those who choose to pursue academic careers, going abroad and seeking certification of their academic worth from a Western academy remains an important facet of life, nearly an essential requirement for building a successful academic career. This is particularly so for those in the sciences and social sciences. Underlying such an imperative is obviously the persistence of an unequal global world order. The economies, cultures and academies of the Western world continue to reign. The prevailing currency regimes make sure that even if scholars from the Global South have the ability and competence to pursue comparative work, they are unlikely to be able to do it unless supported by colleagues from a Western university.

One of the implicit objectives of philanthropic organizations like the Charles Wallace Trust is precisely this, to enable the "native" emerging scholars to connect with the metropolitan academy and develop networks beyond their national contexts[2]. However, the actual experience and outcomes of such academic travels could be different, depending upon the identity, orientation and contexts of the individual scholar. In this brief paper, I hope to focus on the 'contexts' – institutional, political and historical – of my short visit to Belfast in 1996, which helped immensely in shaping my notion of the structure of the global academy, its preoccupations, and my place within it.

[2] For an empirically grounded discussion on Commonwealth Scholarships, see Perraton 2015. For a detailed study of India, see Jodhka and Raina, 2009 and 2022.

## The Personal Context

After completing my formal education in sociology from Pune and Chandigarh, I took up my first teaching job at the University of Hyderabad in the south of India in 1991. I published my first research paper in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) (Jodhka, 1994), a journal I regarded as the most valued across social science disciplines in my context. Nothing could have been better than a 'special article' in EPW for a scholar like me, as I saw the social science academy at that time. In fact, at that time, and perhaps even now, no other social science research journal in/on South Asia could give the kind of visibility that a paper published in EPW could. Besides it being a popular platform for scholars across social science disciplines, it was a must-read for the other audiences of social sciences as well, the activists and policymakers.

The paper published in EPW was drawn from a chapter of my PhD dissertation and provided my take on the changing nature of debt dependencies and unfree labour in post-Green Revolution Haryana agriculture. Fortunately for me, it managed to generate a rather heated debate with the then editor of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (JPS), Tom Brass (1995), who too had worked on the same subject but had arrived at different conclusions. A debate with a high-profile academic for someone who was just starting his career was not a bad thing. Krishna Raj, editor of the EPW, quickly published my responses. In the coming year, EPW published two more papers of mine (see Jodhka, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c,1996).

The academic debate perhaps also gave confidence to my Head of the Department, Professor Ratna Naidu, to suggest my name when someone asked her to recommend an early-stage scholar for the newly launched Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship in Social Anthropology at Queen's University, Belfast. I was obviously very delighted to receive the award letter from the Trust. I was given enough time to secure a leave of absence from my university and get my passport ready. The Chennai office of the British Council arranged for my visa and the air ticket, and I flew out to London via Mumbai by British Airways. After spending a couple of days with my aunt and uncle in London, I reached Belfast in the first week of April 1996. It was around noon when I reached the campus and found my way to

the office of the Chair of the Department of Anthropology and Ethnomusicology[3]. She took me out for lunch and helped me find my way to my room in a students' hall of residence, close to the department, where I stayed for the next three months.

Living with students was a great experience for me. We often cooked together and occasionally also shared our food. I could make only a few dishes, but they all seemed to like my *pulav* (a popular north Indian dish made with rice, vegetables and Indian spices). They often insisted on taking me to the pub after dinner, and I was introduced to the Irish stout, Guinness. How could I be in Northern Ireland and not have Guinness? I did not particularly like its thick taste, but I saw it as a socially useful way of identifying with the group. I drank it several times and perhaps eventually also began to enjoy it.

Over the coming days, I also met the three South Asia experts at the Department at that time, Hastings Donnan, Joyce Pettigrew and Declan Quigley. Declan was the youngest of the three, and we both got along very easily. I also read his new book on theories of caste (Quigley 1993)[4], though I started researching on caste only in 1999. Joyce Pettigrew had been a scholar of Indian Punjab and the Sikh militant movement of the 1980s, also known as the movement for Khalistan. She had just published her book on the Sikh militancy (Pettigrew 1995) and gave me a copy of her book. I read it with keen interest and also included it in my review article on 'Punjab Studies', most of which I completed during my stay in Belfast. The review article was also published by EPW (Jodhka 1997). I also wrote one of my responses to Tom Brass's unrelenting criticism of my first EPW paper during my stay in Belfast (see Jodhka 1996). In his second and third comments on my work, he appeared to have been deeply offended by my disagreement with his position, even though most of my arguments were directly drawn from my empirical work.

[3] Anthropology and Ethnomusicology are now part of the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queen's University, Belfast.

[4] Caste had been a popular subject with the Indian sociologists and social anthropologists while I was student. Most of the earlier research was either embedded in its orientalist framings or the functionalist anthropology, which did not appeal to me. However, his book was an interesting introduction to some of the less-known debates on the nature of caste that had taken place among the colonial administrators and the Western anthropologists. The book stayed with me and I used it extensively when I began to work on it a few years later.

**LEARNING ETHNICITY**

Besides using my time to meet scholars in the Department at Queen's and elsewhere in the UK, particularly in Glasgow and Oxford, staying in Belfast was also a great learning experience. When I look back at my academic life of over a quarter of a decade, I can clearly see the imprint of my first exposure to the Western world. Though I had not gone there to do fieldwork, my stay in Belfast now appears to me more like an ethnographic visit than anything else.

Even though I was selected for the Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship housed in a department of anthropology, my training had been in the discipline of sociology. The sociology that I was taught during the 1980s was still largely shaped by American functionalism, with the modernisation theory being the most influential paradigm for the framing of societies of the Global South. We also had a radical alternative in the Marxist theory, which too was quite popular with social scientists, especially economists, until the 1990s, though it had a lesser influence in Sociology and Social Anthropology. However, on the question of ethnicity and other non-class communitarian identities, it shared nearly everything with the functionalists.

For the Marxists too, non-class communitarian identities, including questions of caste and gender, were essentially political distractions that were either strategically mobilised by enemies of the revolution or were simply a hangover of the pre-capitalist feudal social order. The only way out of their "real" concerns lay in changing the social relations of production. The Marxist academics and the leaders of left-wing political parties believed that the non-class identities were all presumably "super-structural" phenomena. Well-developed capitalism would, on its own, dissolve such identities, they argued (see Karat 2011). The advanced capitalist societies were all divided on class lines. They had "open" systems of social stratification, a civic culture, where individuals came together depending on the identities they acquired through their work or a commonality of economic interests.

Developing countries of the Global South were expected to follow a similar mode of 'social evolution'. As it had presumably happened in Western Europe, collective mobilisations around communitarian identities were to recede. Religion, ethnicity or caste were to become matters of one's private life (see Gupta, 2000).

I completed my college and university education during the 1980s, during which I spent five years in Chandigarh, the capital of the northwestern states of Punjab and Haryana, where I studied for my M.Phil. and PhD degrees. The decade of the 1980s was perhaps the most troubling years in the history of independent India, a turning point in the political life of the new nation (see Jodhka 2000a). It was during this decade that the Hindu right wing began to visibly consolidate itself in northern India. The decade also saw the emergence of "new" social movements, of Dalits, tribals, women, farmers and ethnicities in the peripheral regions of India, the Northeast, Punjab and Kashmir. These movements also challenged the Nehruvian consensus of developmental planning and economic growth being the panacea for everything, its vision of "catching up" with the developed nations of the West.

Given my location and the identity of being a Sikh, I was most troubled by the happenings in Punjab. Sometime in the latter half of the 1970s, sections of Sikhs began to feel restless with their peripheral position in the Indian nation-state. A violent militant movement, though popular only with a small proportion of the Sikh community, arose in the northwest regions demanding secession from the Indian Union and the formation of a separate Sikh state of Khalistan. The political establishment in New Delhi completely misread the situation, resulting in an unprecedented use of force, including sending the Indian army to storm the holiest of the Sikh shrines, Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar, where some Sikh militants were located. Instead of resolving the issue, the state violence further strengthened the Sikh militants. Violence continued unabated over the next seven to eight years, lasting for almost all the time that I spent in Chandigarh.

The social science writings on the issue continued to invoke the idea of modernisation and explained the "crisis" in Punjab as a typical problem that societies in transition tended to go through. It was thought that once India gained maturity as a nation-state, these problems would go away. The Marxists too, suggested the same, but through a different language. For them, it was an outcome of emerging class imbalances where the rising middle classes among the upwardly mobile Sikhs were falsely invoking the idea of a Sikh identity crisis to gain an upper hand over the already established Hindu trading classes. The problems of Punjab were akin to communalism, the division that was created by the British colonial rulers between Hindus and Muslims, which eventually resulted in the Partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. A large majority of Indian academics and

journalists writing in the national newspapers seemed convinced that the ethnic crisis was the handiwork of the elite or foreign powers who were able to manipulate the gullible masses (for a summary, see Jodhka, 2001b).

These explanations and the framework of looking at ethnicity were deeply dissatisfying. More importantly, they all tended to condone state excesses and their open violation of individual human rights. Everything and anything was sought to be justified in the name of a "foreign hand" trying to weaken India.

### Belfast as a Mirror

During the Troubles, Northern Ireland was not known as a peaceful place. One occasionally heard or read about Sinn Féin and its advocacy for autonomy from the United Kingdom. The problem of Northern Ireland, as I learnt, was not that the British state did not want to give them autonomy. It was in fact, an ethnic problem between the loyalist Protestants and the nationalist Catholic minority.

As I learnt about the ongoing political conflict, I also learnt that it had managed to fracture the civic life of the city. As I saw it, 'development' was not the issue. Belfast did not seem any less developed than any other city in Western Europe. This was very obvious from the moment that I landed at the Belfast airport. The city was obviously a part of the United Kingdom, a leading country of the Western World at that time, which had also been a great colonial power. For someone travelling from India in the mid-1990s, the city was no less modern than London, or perhaps any other city in the Western world. As I explored the neighbouring streets and its city centre, just a short walk from my accommodation, I was absolutely impressed with its modernity and architecture. Even more importantly, I did not see much racial or ethnic diversity in the city. Almost everyone in the student house where I lived was racially White, as was much of the population of Belfast itself. However, the White population, I was repeatedly told, was sharply divided on religious lines. These divisions also led to everyday violence.

Over the three months that I spent on the university campus in Belfast, I learnt about its ethnic diversity and religious conflict from a range of people, mostly research fellows with whom I chatted at ease in the tea/coffee room of the Department. I also began to gather such stories from the local

radio news and talk shows, which I listened to with much interest whenever I was in my room. I remember having a long conversation with a post-doctoral scholar (PDS) in the breakroom of the Department on one of the afternoons about the persistent ethnic tensions in the city. I started with a question, and our conversation, as I recall, went as follows:

*Me: How can you figure out that the other person is from a different religion without asking him/her in an urban context?*

*PDS: Well, the Catholics and Protestants live apart, in different streets.*

*Me: How does that lead to violence and conflict in everyday life?*

*PDS: If a Catholic happens to be roaming around in Protestant Street, s/he is surely likely to be physically thrashed.*

*Me: You must be joking? They are racially similar; they all speak English.*

*PDS: Well, their accents make all the difference. You can figure it out the moment they open their mouths. They also tend to have different kinds of names.*

This conversation was very easy for me to understand, having grown up in India. Westerners often find it hard to make sense of caste divisions because all Indians look alike to them. Caste, after all, was not like race! But to most Indians, this is hardly a question to be asked. You can infer caste identities, even today, at an up-market shopping mall in cities like Chennai, Hyderabad or Gurgaon!

Another thing that surprised me about Belfast was the incessant sound of the helicopter, hovering almost permanently over the campus area. What was it for? Most of my fellow residents in the students' residence either did not know or did not explain it very clearly to me. The mystery was finally solved when I met Gagan Sehgal, a locally employed Indian engineer with whom I became friends. Gagan told me that this was a surveillance helicopter stationed specifically to keep an eye on the physical movements of the public. I was also told that there were surveillance cameras installed

almost everywhere in the town. In 1996, this was not yet a common feature of urban life in most parts of the world. Yet, coming from conflict-torn Punjab, the tendency of the political class to reach for 'security solutions' to complex problems was not entirely unfamiliar to me.

My own racial identity, although starkly obvious, was not much of a problem for me in most social contexts. However, one never quite escapes it. Among the random incidents that I can still clearly remember is that of a group of young men yelling at me from a distance. The only word that I was able to comprehend was 'pak' or 'paki'. I imagined they must be curious, seeing a turbaned man and were simply trying to say hello, as if saying 'welcome to Belfast'. I smiled and waved at them and continued walking. Later in the evening, when I shared this with Gagan, he laughed out loud.

> *Don't be so pleased with yourself. They must have called you a "Paki-bastard". I am very familiar with such "greetings"...*

So, this was racism! Not very different from what I used to occasionally encounter in communally charged situations in Haryana during the 1980s. However, this was the only "unpleasant" experience I personally had during my stay in Belfast.

## After Belfast

One of the courses I taught during the eight years I spent at the University of Hyderabad was on the Sociology of Development. What I found most interesting in the course, which I taught with some amount of passion, was the Latin American critiques of the idea of modernisation, the dependency theory. I particularly liked the writings of Andre Gunder Frank (1967; 1975). Unlike the modernisation theorists, he wrote critically about underdevelopment and explained the prevailing poverty in countries of the Global South by locating it in their history of colonial plunder.

The course also discussed a range of Marxist critiques and articulation theory. However, none of these theories questioned the framings of culture and identity. They were either silent on the subject, deeming it of little significance in the broader history of capital, or conceded to the modernisation thesis on the inevitability of individualisation of identities in urban, industrial societies. Ascription and ethnicity were clearly viewed by nearly everyone either as features of a pre-modern/pre-capitalist

world or as identities that were conspiratorially carved and brought to the public sphere by the ruling elite as a mode of popular distraction.

The world has seen many changes since 1996. India has come to be counted among the happening places of the globe. Pockets of Indian cities have begun to resemble the wealthy parts of the West with shopping malls and condominiums as fancy as any found elsewhere in the world. The size of its middle classes has also grown. However, ethnic and other ascription-based identities have only become stronger and more pronounced over the years.

The Western cities too, have changed. They seem to have been borrowing more and more of their labour market practices from countries like India. One sees a growing use of informal labour regimes, with increasing instances of contractual labour and hourly work. For example, grocery shops in European cities, which used to be shut by 5 pm on most days of the week in 1996, now remain open until late in the evening. Their middle classes too, seem far more anxious today than they used to be 30 years back. Most importantly, perhaps, no one in the Western cities would deny the presence of ethnic divisions. Their social diversity has only been growing over the years.

Social science thinking and theorisations, too, have undergone a sea change over the past quarter of a century. Questions of culture and identity have come to acquire centrality, theoretically as well as politically. These changes have opened up spaces for a large number of questions that until the 1980s were seen as epiphenomenal. Ethnicity and ascription-based identities were also a part of this. However, the social science academy, as well as the emerging world, continues to be divided and unequal. The euphemism of 'global village' fails to convey the persistence of false binaries of the East and the West. The shift from 'development' to 'governance' has only changed the language, while the narrative of "deficit" as a characteristic feature of the countries of the Global South still persists.

I had expected Belfast, as a part of the West, to be very different, different from the average cities and towns of India, where, apart from class, identities of caste, ethnicity and religion shaped the urban space. However, it turned out that Belfast was not very different from any communally divided pocket of India, except, of course, for the material prosperity and urban architecture of 'developed' Belfast over the 'developing' towns and cities of India. Living in Belfast, even for the short period of

three months, was, in a sense, a liberating experience. Intellectually, it was very clear to me that we indeed lived in One World. Perhaps, we always have. Divisions of class, ethnicity, gender and other ascription-based identities persist everywhere. Even in the 1980s, the ethnic crisis in Punjab had many similarities (and some obvious differences) with what was happening in Northern Ireland. However, Punjab was never compared and contrasted with Ireland. The prevailing wisdom of social science paradigms did not allow such questions to be raised.

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# CROSSING BORDERS: ACADEMICALLY AND GEOGRAPHICALLY

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**ABSTRACT:** I made an application to Queen's University for a Charles Wallace Fellowship while I was still researching the Himalayan borders, exploring, both conceptually and experientially, a pastoral nomadic community on the Indo-Tibet frontier. When I was successful in my application to go to Queen's University, it was another kind of border crossing, bridging the gap between my own and another country, an experience that for me was a first, being my maiden academic journey abroad. In Belfast, I was exposed to the working of an institution other than the one in which I had been nurtured, providing a great opportunity for both personal and academic growth. The richness of the academic environment stimulated me to frame my research questions and redefine my goals, towards an understanding of identity and its multiplicities. The presence of many known and renowned anthropologists at the centre was an intellectual stimulus that I carried forward even after my return and as part of my further journey to other destinations and other academic positions, across the world. But this visit laid the foundation for my emergence as a cosmopolitan thinker and gave me the impetus to transcend boundaries and converse with global anthropologists.

**KEYWORDS**: Borders, Boundaries, Identity, Academic Growth, Cosmopolitanism

## INTRODUCTION

In the year 1999, I received the information that I was the recipient of the Charles Wallace Fellowship to Queen's University, Belfast, for the year 2000. It was quite a serendipitous occasion, as I had made the application with no particular aim or anticipation of success. I had chanced upon the advertisement and had thrown in the dice, especially since I was working on the Himalayan borders, and a desired qualification for the application was that the candidate could be working in the area of border studies. It was my first academic award for going abroad, and to be honest, I was a little apprehensive as I had never lived away from my family. My entire education, before and after marriage, was from my home. In 1999, I lost my mother, who was staying with me, and I had to leave behind two young daughters, who had also never lived without their mother. It was, therefore, a

period of loss and also of gain, while losing someone very close to my being, I was also looking forward to gaining new experiences. I was educated in India, in a British missionary established school. My father was a professor of English literature, so Britain was not a foreign country in my imagination. I had grown up reading English fairy tales, sang English rhymes in school, been taught by English teachers and devoured English literature from Dickens to Agatha Christie. My mother, herself, educated by British missionaries in colonial India, had taught me the alphabet at age two and a half. However, brought up in post-colonial India, I had not learnt to speak in the chaste British accent with which she spoke. I was therefore not expecting too much of a culture shock, and I did not, at least not in terms of language and general social interactions.

There were, however, significant differences in academic culture, some of which I enjoyed thoroughly, like the visit to the pub after the weekly seminars. In India, it was the coffee house, a practice that became discontinued with more conservative academics entering into university management. At the same time, I realised that the easy camaraderie that I had shared with my colleagues was missing in the British institution. People did not walk in and out of each other's offices and did not meet except by prior appointment. Although the pub culture was missing in India, the tea culture was very alive and meeting over cups of tea at any time of the day was a standard practice in the university departments. One could just knock and enter a room, and no one sent in prior messages for such casual meetings that normally took place several times a day. I realised that merely knowing the language and being vicariously familiar with a society was not enough. The boundaries between insiders and outsiders were drawn around more elaborate and subtle criteria, and also, while these boundaries were porous and often transcended, there was always an invisible barrier that could never be crossed. I also realised with a kind of sinking feeling that a creeping, insidious racism worked, silently, never spoken out but having its subtle presence felt. I was surprised to realise that there were internal barriers, again hardly perceptible but felt, between colleagues from different regions of the world. A few felt somewhat marginalised, and some expressed suppressed ridicule for others' feelings of self-importance, belonging to apparently more dominant cultures. I could not, however, feel the political divisiveness that was overtly present in the city of Belfast, in the academic environment, but perhaps that was also because I was there for a relatively short period of three months. There were some areas of experience that were grey and some of cheer. In the next sections, I will describe both.

**COSMOPOLITANISM**

The initial rationale for having a fellowship like Charles Wallace, specifically aimed at bringing in scholars from an erstwhile colony to the metropole, was probably rooted in some altruistic motive of exposing the 'less advantaged' to a more cosmopolitan and 'higher' culture. When I arrived at the beginning of the century, and as the first after a gap, the feeling was transitional. Some may have welcomed me as an equal, but others were secretly condescending, although never overtly. At the present time, with changed views within academics, it is no doubt directed towards a healthy exchange of ideas and interactions on a more equal footing. The scholars coming in from India, most of them being exposed for the first time to a Western culture, however, come with some sense of anxiety at being at the receiving end of learning. The appreciation and honour extended to the scholar, in terms of delivering a public lecture (an essential part of the fellowship) is a way in which the scholar is made to feel at ease and also feel important. But having been on that platform, I have never been sure about the actual reception. They may have been acting according to what Bailey (1996) has referred to as the 'civility of indifference', where, according to him, in a multi-ethnic situation, people show indifference to the cultural variances of others, limiting themselves to the utilitarian goals that are immediate. In an academic forum, such overt civility can often hide incipient criticism or ridicule, respecting the prevalent ethics of equality that ideally pervades an academic platform. In that sense, such cold etiquette of politeness may override genuine dialogues of critical appraisal, like in a blind peer review, for example.

Cosmopolitanism was, in terms of its ancient and Western philosophical origins, a term that equated it with the ability to reason, to the ability for global citizenship (Waghmore 2019), but at a time when the 'globe' had a far more restricted meaning than now. With colonisation and the spread of Western education, it has come to mean an elitist familiarity of those belonging to non-Western countries with Western culture as a result of greater resources for education, travel and interaction. In contemporary times, as the world is getting more interconnected and the power distribution globally is no longer weighted in favour of the West, it often refers to the globe trotter, the frequent traveller, to the person's ability to speak several languages (including Chinese and Korean) and the ability to be comfortable in any or most cultures. It refers to a person's ability not only to eat with a knife and fork, but with chopsticks and fingers as well.

In other words, cosmopolitanism means that one has the actual cognitive as well as practical sense of 'belonging' that is more extensive and spread out beyond one's immediate environment. Intellectually, the transition from the immediately contextualised scholarship to the more global and widely communicative scholarship is a major step towards becoming cosmopolitan as a scholar and consequently more influential. When I received the fellowship, it was this version of cosmopolitanism that was foremost in my mind. I had met and interacted with many international scholars, but only on my own home turf, when these scholars visited India. At that time, I, as well as other scholars, mostly acted as local assistants to them. Most fellowships and scholarships that enable scholars to meet and interact with scholars away from their home base, in order to facilitate their absorption within the global scholarly community, are directed towards producing a more cosmopolitan scholar, in terms of his or her ability to communicate to a larger and varied audience. To be able to read out one's work in front of a global audience, even if represented by a handful of people, provides a scholar with a sense of achievement, as no doubt such an experience is meant to bring about such a result. There is also the presumed healthy exchange of ideas with mutual benefits. However, the actual impact is hardly ever recorded or known.

Hannarez (1990) has mentioned the elite travellers, the advantages of any country, who, through their ability to travel, set themselves apart and above those who are localised and claim a kind of cosmopolitanism of consumerism; the ability to move around among the chosen few who have 'seen the world'. A fellowship for three months, of course, does not qualify anyone for that kind of elitism, especially as the recipients are scholars with limited incomes and resources. Yet it does pave the way for an academic upliftment, fulfilling to some extent at least the main purpose of the award. Individuals, I am sure, have differed in the advantages that this award gave them. For many like me, it could have been a first-time exposure to the global academia. The duration of three months also leaves open the possibility of attending events outside of Belfast and expanding one's horizons. In my case, I was able to attend a major event at SOAS in London and interact with many scholars whom I had only read about in texts. I was also fortunate to have the paper I had published in an international publication (Channa, 2004).

The exposure and the contact with another culture is also tempered by one's own life situation. In my case, it could be regarded or understood as rooted in a colonial past, in a culture and family

background highly influenced by the English language, in which both my parents were proficient, being directly tutored by the British in the early part of the last century. Students of my father had told me that he could bring Shakespeare alive in the classroom. He also closely monitored my education, making me go through a wide range of English literature. My mother taught me British culture in ways that made some of my interactions with my colleagues smooth. Here, my kind of cosmopolitanism can be described as 'one in which a person's situated positioning creates a domain of commonality, however partial, fleeting or contradictory-across categorical identities' (Glick-Schiller and Irving 2017: 5). Here, the identity is rooted in a fake but yet real association with a colonizing culture and language. The advantages that some Indians have, with English as their core language that also happens to be the dominant global language (never mind the reason), have also been commented on by Hannarez (2010: 114). As rightly pointed out, with increasing information networks, the world has become flat, not for all but certainly for many. However, language is not the key to success alone, but also the ability to communicate in what is a 'white cultural space' or 'white cultural practices' (Hartigan, 1997: 496).

I remember dining with my colleague who had just lost her beloved pet cat, and following my mother's advice, keeping quiet about it. At the end of the dinner, when I mentioned to her that I thought it prudent not to talk about her loss and the cat, she thanked me for being so thoughtful. I also remember that when I was out in a restaurant, going for the first time with a British colleague, she inadvertently watched me use my knife and fork and appeared to heave an internal sigh of relief. All this set me thinking as to how being colonised had affected my ability to be seen as 'cosmopolitan'. I am using this term, because someone had actually mentioned to me that she thought I was 'cosmopolitan'. In fact, later in my extended and frequent visits to other Western countries, someone or the other would comment similarly. I can compare my 'post-colonial' situation with a young Chinese scholar who was occupying the same residence as me, and we would meet at dinner time. We had great empathy with each other, as both were being exposed to a different world for the first time. One day, he asked me in a perplexed way, 'What are all those strange buildings here, where no one seems to be living but people go in and come out?' A little more description made me understand that he was referring to the many churches in Belfast. When I told him that they were churches, he was much even more confused and I could not explain to him, brought up in a Communist regime,

what religion was, what role it played in the lives of people and why there should be so many, according to him, 'useless' buildings.

The vicarious exposure to another culture, especially one that has gone into creating a 'past', is a situation probably faced only by the colonised. People from countries other than those where the entire educational system has evolved from a non-indigenous source are quite differently situated. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the merits and demerits of each of these situations. I am sure my Chinese friend went away happy with whatever he had come to do in Belfast. He probably told his folks back home about the strange ways of the people of Belfast.

But all was not well, and although I had expected to have a comparatively smooth transition to another but 'known' culture, I was not prepared for some of the negative experiences, especially those that had their roots in the insidious prevalence of racism. One cold night, I was walking home with a friend who had come, like me, on a short assignment to Queen's University from America. Although blond, she had her head wrapped in a dark scarf to fend off the cold. We had to walk past a pub where a number of somewhat drunken men were standing. Looking at us they remarked in a rather threatening way, 'look two Paki women'. One even touched my sleeve aggressively but then pulled away. As we hurried away in panic, my friend remarked on the mistaken identity, but I was cold inside. That night, I had bad dreams about being sexually assaulted. That experience also made me think about 'acceptance' and 'othering'. How easy it was to stigmatise someone both sexually and racially. Where did it leave my 'cosmopolitan' identity? Was it even possible for a woman of colour to be accepted in a White man's world? Later experiences have taught me that the last is rather impossible. Therefore, I have also referred to my cosmopolitanism as being 'fake' as not real, for one can never actually belong to another culture, cutting across the boundaries of race and ethnicity. Therefore, one has to agree with Spencer (2017: 38) that cosmopolitanism is 'an aspiration, not a reality'.

But, this does not reflect on my experience with my colleagues who treated me with easy equality, and I often had discussions with them on various topics of mutual interest. They accepted me with warmth and generosity, and I will be ever grateful to the extent each of them went out of their way to make me feel at home.

I had a minor accident and fractured my foot. This incident brought out the most empathetic qualities of my colleagues, one of whom took me to stay with her in her own home. She took care of me like I was her own sister and only allowed me to go back to my room when my plaster was off. Another colleague let me use her apartment when she was away, leaving me with the use of her entire living space. I was taken to see movies, to do shopping and sightseeing by them all. There was internal diversity among the faculty too, as several of them had come from other countries and regions and had almost a similar experience to mine, in terms of settling down. In this way, my quality of interaction was also internally divided according to the varied backgrounds of my colleagues. My most animated interaction was with the local Irish woman who came every day to clean my room. She and I chatted like old friends, and she had tearfully given me a small gift when I left, asking me to remember her. She still occupies a special place in my memories.

The events of the not-so-far-back, political unrest in Belfast, were still in everyone's minds, and each and every person kept referring back to the Troubles, and I often narrated personal experiences of horror and being terrified. One colleague had described how she had to escape out of a window when her house was bombed and carried her pet cat inside her nightdress as she could not bear to leave it behind. The traumatised cat had scratched her, and she still carried the scars. These stories brought me emotional closeness with the others as I realised how humans react with the same emotions when faced with the same kind of trauma. I was often asked about my knowledge of Irish history, and although I had some awareness, it was not really adequate. The political atmosphere had not touched me too much, first because I was an outsider and secondly because I was not deeply concerned with it.

In the next section, I will talk about my intellectual gain and the contribution that my fellowship made to my onward journey as a scholar.

### Intellectual Gains

I had been granted the fellowship based on my interest in border studies, and I could interact with the scholar who had been one of the pioneers of border studies, Hastings Donnan. Undoubtedly, I gained tremendously and was able to clarify my theoretical insights, not only through my

conversations, but also by the encouragement that I received. The weekly seminars that brought in a variety of scholars exposed me to a fresh range of ideas and theoretical possibilities. In the year that I came to Belfast, although the computer and internet were available to us in Delhi University, we had not become as adept in their use as we are now, or as my younger colleagues belonging to the present generation. Today, the present generation is able to carry on their engagement even after the duration of the fellowship, through the virtual platform, as evidenced by the recently organised online conference of which this paper was a part. In 2000, and earlier, we did not have those opportunities, but I was able to carry away with me the exposure to new ideas and also an increased ability for critical thinking. At that time, and as far as I know, the department was not just specialising in border studies and ethnomusicology, but also was pioneering the anthropology of emotions, anthropology of memories and also environmental anthropology. I have not used all of them in my further studies, but they have been inspirational in making me realise the multiple ways one can approach the subject.

When I came to Queen's with my work done in the Himalayan borders, I already had some key questions in my mind, one of which was regarding the epistemology of understanding and translating phenomena that are not understandable or explainable by one's given standards or modes of understanding. While in the mountain village, I was constantly confronted by 'facts' that the villagers attributed to a process of 'knowing' that was not comprehensible to me. For example, they often claimed to have 'seen' certain things that to me were not visible to the senses as we know it, like forest spirits or the soul of a person. One narrative that I had shared with my colleagues was the ability of the lama (Tibetan holy person) to 'see' the exit of the soul of a dying man. As the villagers told me, the lama could predict the next birth of a dead person by 'seeing' from where the soul came out of the body at the time of death. This process of 'seeing' had intrigued me as well as their narrations about seeing spirits and other beings that, to me, were not available to human senses. Moore and Sanders (2014:10) have problematized this reliance on language and sensory factuality to explain something. Taking Lambek (1998) as their source, they write, '[t]he human body knows the world through its practical engagement with the world, and with others in that world' (ibid:11), meaning that it is not possible for the anthropologist to put in words the experience that they get in the field as there may not be verbal expressions available in language for what is experiential in another context. In other words, what the informants in the field verbalised as 'seeing' may not be

'seeing' as we understand it. The experience on which the shaman makes his predictions may be of a nature that is impossible to verbalise in our language or any other language. Over a period of time, I realised that when the people in the Himalayan village were describing something as 'seeing', they were not referring to the sensory perception of sight but to a more holistic experience that involved bodily involvement beyond the eyes. With more thinking on these lines, I moved towards a more situated and phenomenological mode of explanation from the attempted positivism with which I had begun my analysis.

If not directly, my initial interactions with my colleagues had helped to push me towards a mode of understanding and analysis that finally helped me to write my book (Channa, 2013) in a manner that may not have been possible if I had not been exposed to a variety of theoretical possibilities and epistemological innovations, that began, but did not end with my experience at Queens.

What I had achieved was an 'opening of my mind'; a realisation that there were several epistemological possibilities and much more exploration was required before I came to the stage of actually writing down my experiences in the field. This is not to say that I immediately achieved a directionality to analyse and write, but I was able to take the first step towards it.

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# WRITING ON THE WALLS: FROM BELFAST TO DARJEELING

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**ABSTRACT:** As a Charles Wallace (CW) India Fellow, I had the opportunity to work on peace and conflict studies across Northern Ireland. I was fortunate to have many friends all over Northern Ireland, making it possible for me to travel to Derry, Armagh and other conflict-ridden pockets within Antrim. During my study, I was often drawn towards the murals spread all over Northern Ireland depicting the Troubles (Bryan and Jarman, 1997; Jarman and Bryan, 1996).

Many years later, after my tenure as a CW Fellow at Queen's University, Belfast, in West Bengal, adjacent to the diminutive Himalayan state where I reside, another active identity conflict was slowly coming into prominence. I could visually perceive kindred murals depicting the movement for creating a Gorkhaland Movement[1] (Bagchi, 2012/2020; Roy, 2012/2013). My experience as a CW Fellow has taught me to understand this conflict through visuals (writing on walls and murals) as a form of protest.

My paper explores the relevance of the murals to understand these conflicts from two different corners of the world. This work is shaped by what I experienced in Belfast. Here, I have described a few of the iconic images, like the "Smash the H Blocks" that tell us about Ciaran Nugent and the "blanket protest" of 1976 from the Peace Walls of Belfast. Similarly, I have explored the image of "The man wearing a *Dhakai* headgear" or "Pro Gorkhaland" mural found all over Kalimpong/Darjeeling and its role in the campaign to create a separate state out of India. I have tried to showcase these murals and reflect on the various facets of conflict in these two separate regions.

**KEYWORDS:** Conflict, Darjeeling, Gorkhaland, Images, Northern Ireland, Trouble, Peace.

## INTRODUCTION

Murals, which are frequently seen in religious structures, are an important component of any country's cultural legacy. The history, iconography, and aesthetic significance of murals have all been extensively studied by academics. Wall paintings or murals serve as areas for collective thought (Ceceil, 1989). Through what they portray, they can start a conversation about a topic or local issues. Through their works, artists frequently examine the traits that shape our social and personal identities. They help define who we are as people, as a culture, or as a nation (Arjun, 1996).

As a Charles Wallace India Fellow (2011) at Queen's University, Belfast, with my background in political science, I conducted research on peace and conflict studies, specifically focusing on women in conflict situations. This work involved extensive field visits to conflict-affected areas in Northern Ireland, including Belfast, Derry and Antrim, where I analysed murals depicting the Troubles[2]. The research methods used—visual analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, community interviews and historical contextualisation—helped me to understand the role of murals in conflict zones. My engagement with murals began as a means of understanding conflict and identity politics in Northern Ireland. The murals functioned as tools of collective memory, resistance, and political expression, offering insights into both Loyalist[3] and Republican[4] narratives (Donnan and McFarlane, 1989). My participation in conflict resolution workshops at Ulster University deepened my understanding of how murals contribute to peacebuilding.

Belfast is home to the majority of murals in Northern Ireland. At least 700 murals can be found in the city, with about a third being in outstanding condition. Derry, Bangor, Carrickfergus, Portadown, Newry and Ballymena are additional spaces with murals (Jarman and Bryan, 1996).

Political wall art in Northern Ireland first appeared in the early 20th century, when Loyalists occasionally used it. The popularity of murals as a means of political expression surged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some murals were made by professionals hired by political or paramilitary organisations, while others were made by amateurs who were unknown to history (Akenson, 1991). A group from County Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, known as The Bogside Artists, is well known for their mural creations. The Bogside Artists have created numerous murals representing incidents from the Troubles since they first began in 1993.

However, the Bogside Artists who created the murals for The People's Gallery insist that they should not be interpreted as "political propaganda, declarations of identity, or territorial markers" (The Irish News, 2023). The goal of the Bogside Artists' murals is to "enable and facilitate a cross-community conversation around shared experiences seen in different perspectives and contexts," as well as to have viewers "think about the past and process painful memories". They anticipate that it will pave the way for better communication, friendship, and, ultimately, peace. In addition to their murals, the Bogside Artists also worked to foster interfaith understanding by hosting numerous art workshops with local Catholic and Protestant children over the course of many years.

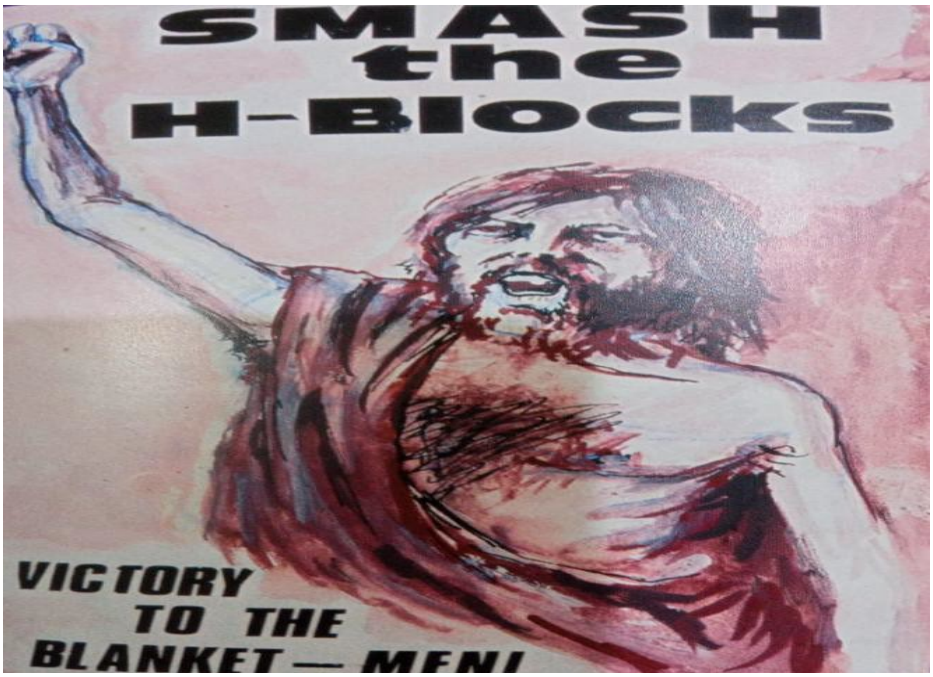
### Visualisation of Thoughts

Murals in Northern Ireland feature a wide range of subjects, styles, and locations. It is not rare to find murals with Nationalist themes in Catholic neighbourhoods. They honour iconic figures from Irish history, like the legendary Bobby Sands and other innocent victims of the Troubles, by referencing them by name (Lederach, 2005). Bobby Sands (1954–1981) was a member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and a key figure in the Northern Ireland conflict known as the Troubles (1968–1998). He gained international attention when he led the 1981 hunger strike in the Maze Prison, protesting against the British government's refusal to recognise IRA prisoners as political prisoners. However, his death after 66 days of fasting intensified nationalist sentiments, sparking protests and riots (Samanta, 1996/2000). Sands was elected as a Member of Parliament during his hunger strike, symbolising the broader struggle for Irish republicanism against British rule.

Murals painted by Loyalists often feature Union Jacks or other British symbols, the colours red, blue, and white, references to the past, or tributes to paramilitary soldiers and groups. The ‘guardian characters’ depicted in some murals often appear militarised and threatening to onlookers since they are dressed in camouflage, wear balaclavas and carry guns.

Some murals avoid all references to politics or religion. Peaceful messages are painted on these walls, and figures like Nelson Mandela, C. S. Lewis and George Best appear.

In the upcoming section, I will discuss a few murals that I have seen in and around Northern Ireland and later explore the murals from Darjeeling for a discussion on protest through murals.




**Mural 1**: Blanket Protest. This image represents Ciaran Nugent, who refused to wear the mandatory prison dress. Photo credit: The author.

This piece of art by Republicans celebrates the widespread protests in the '70s (mural 1). The prison system in Northern Ireland underwent reforms in the 1970s at the behest of the British government. For instance, many people at the time did not embrace the idea that anyone incarcerated for a crime related to the Troubles would be treated the same as any other prisoner after March 1976.

The IRA had a member named Ciaran Nugent locked up in the Maze prison, not far from Lisburn, in September 1976. He refused to wear the mandatory prison garb upon entering the H Blocks (so named because they resembled the letter 'H'). The reason for this was that he considered himself a political prisoner rather than a criminal. He covered himself behind the blanket to prove that he was not a common inmate. This act of protest became known as the "blanket protest" because it was replicated by other republican inmates.


**Mural 2**: Ulster Volunteers with guns. Photo credit: The author

Through such murals, particular emphasis is placed on the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Red Hand Commandos (mural 2). Many of these murals depict pictures of volunteers whom they regard as their local heroes. Most of these paintings are done by untrained young people who are nevertheless trying to put forward their side of the story.

Similarly, a pro-paramilitary painting honouring the East Belfast Battalion of the Ulster Defence Force can be found along Lower Newtownards Road in the neighbourhood's East End. The mural depicts two masked men with automatic guns and reads, "The right if you are attacked to defend yourself". The East Belfast Battalion's victims are immortalised in an artistic mural.


**Mural 3**: Leaders who fought for world peace. Photo credit: The author

**Mural 4**: The photo features the researcher, accompanied by her Irish friend, Dr Fionnuala Williams, 2011. Photo credit: A passerby.

The peace wall of Belfast not only reflects on the Loyalist and Republican thoughts but also brings in images of leaders who had played an influential role in bringing about change. This image of the

world leaders (mural 3) serves as a vehicle for spreading the message of peace and motivating the next generation.

It is not just the Troubles, but Belfast is also known for its love of music. This is one of the most well-known murals in Belfast, and is of Belfast-born rock legend Van Morrison is shown here with a large supporting cast (mural 4). His nickname, "the Belfast Lion," is well-known in the area. From his early days as the leader of the Irish band “Them” to his everlasting solo career, the spirit of the legendary singer-songwriter and his music are beautifully captured in this brilliant and vivid piece.

Morrison largely follows the forms established by soul and early rhythm and blues in his compositions. Long, meditative musical excursions, like those found on the album Astral Week, that draw inspiration from Celtic tradition, jazz and stream-of-consciousness narrative, make up an equal portion of his career.

Years later, I learned of a similar mural depicting the Gorkhaland Conflict in West Bengal, the state bordering the tiny Himalayan state where I used to live. As a result of my fellowship at CW, I have a deeper appreciation for this genre's ability to shed light on this conflict.

The projected territory of Gorkhaland is shown below on a map, and it is shown to border the small Himalayan state of Sikkim. The map includes other Indian states in the country's Northeast region.

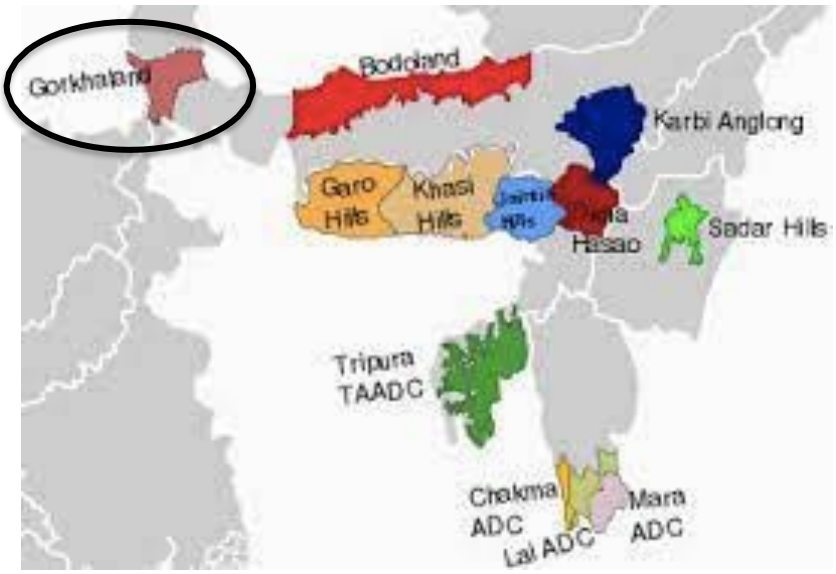



**Figure 1**: Source:https://images.search.yahoo.com/search/images?q=map+of+gorkhaland

**BACKGROUND OF GORKHALAND**

The Gorkhaland movement is an initiative to establish a new Nepali-speaking state in the Gorkhaland region of West Bengal. Darjeeling, Kalimpong and the Dooars (Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and a portion of Cooch Behar) are all part of the proposed state's hilly interior.

The goal of the Gorkhaland movement is to create a separate state in West Bengal's Gorkhaland region that speaks Nepali. The hilly heartland of the proposed state includes Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and the Dooars (Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and part of Cooch Behar). Way back in 1909, the Darjeeling Hillmen's Association sent a statement to the Minto-Morley Reforms requesting that Darjeeling be considered an independent administrative region.

After India gained independence in 1947, the socio-political system of the state underwent a transformation. India transitioned from a parliamentary monarchy to a parliamentary democracy. However, during this transition, the Gorkha people began to experience a lack of representation in parliament. In 1952, they submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, requesting a separate state. This request was made under the leadership of the All-India Gorkha League, also known as the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League, which was established in 1943. In 1955, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel established a State Reformation Committee for them after a prolonged fight, even though the state had not yet been founded. Their ongoing battle persisted. Following the failure of the United Front Government in West Bengal, two notable Gorkha individuals, Subhas Ghising and Chhatra Subba, were enlisted in the Indian Army and stationed in Nagaland. They were influenced by the separatist movement led by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), which went on till December 1, 1963, when Statehood was declared. They began implementing the same approach used by the NSCN for the Gorkha community.

Concurrently, they departed from the army, which was rather evident. In 1980, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) was established, with Subhas Ghising leading the organised democratic protest and Chhatra Subba directing the organised armed fight. There was a violent uprising at that time, resulting in the death of about 1200 individuals. Their period of unity persisted for a duration of 8 years, and in 1988, they began to diverge in their political ideology. Subhas Ghising advocated for the establishment of an autonomous Gorkha Hill Council, while Chhatra Subba supported the idea

of a separate Gorkhaland state and continued to lead the military resistance. Following the conclusion of the Naxalbari Uprising in Bengal, Chhatra Subba gained increased popularity for his involvement in armed struggle. His guerrilla war received support from the Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists, which was founded by Padam Lama and based in Darjeeling. However, this posed a problem for Subhas Ghising. There have been ongoing rumours that Subhas Ghising, with the assistance of the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, orchestrated the arrest, imprisonment and even death of Chhatra Subba. In his absence, C. K. Pradhan assumed responsibility for the GNLF and led the Kalimpong rebellion for a single term. Madan Tamang, who was leading the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League at that time, consistently advocated for the creation of a separate state. In 1988, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was established by a tripartite agreement among Subhas Ghising, Jyoti Basu (the Chief Minister of Bengal at the time) and Rajiv Gandhi (the Prime Minister of India at the time). Subhas Ghising ventured into the realm of electoral politics and assumed the position of chairperson at the recently established Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council.

In 2002, the leader of the GNLF was unexpectedly assassinated in Kalimpong, resulting in a decline in the democratic support for the GNLF. Over time, Bimal Gurung formed a new political party in the region with the intention of spearheading the Gorkhaland Movement. Once more, a state of unrest began to rapidly propagate throughout the Darjeeling hills, extending even to the slopes, such as Siliguri. In 2010, Madan Tamang, the former head of ABGL (Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League), was assassinated, demonstrating a tragic recurrence of events. Bimal Gurung transitioned from armed conflict to participating in electoral politics. He reached an agreement to sign a tripartite treaty with Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal and Dr Manmohan Singh, the then Prime Minister of India. This treaty led to the establishment of the Gorkhaland Territorial Council.

The creation of the Telangana state in Southern India in 2014 once again incited unrest among the Gorkhas in the Darjeeling hill region. In 2015, Subhas Ghising passed away in a hospital in Delhi. In 2017, the Mamata Banerjee Government made it mandatory for schools in the Darjeeling hills to include the Bengali language as a compulsory subject. In the absence of older mentors, Bimal Gurung became fierce and resumed his involvement in armed conflict. A strike lasting 104 days occurred. The Mamata Banerjee regime issued an arrest warrant against Bimal Gurung (The Economic Times, September 06, 2017). The political party Gorkha Janamukti Morcha leaders reached an agreement to

reestablish the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. They won all 45 seats and have since maintained a political monopoly in the Darjeeling hills. The sentiment of Gorkhaland is being exploited solely for electoral purposes, particularly before elections.

Greater in size than the Indian states of Goa and Sikkim, the proposed Gorkhaland would span over 7,500 square kilometres (Wikipedia, 2025). Its four million residents are comparable to those of Manipur and Tripura combined (ibid). However, there is no majority Gorkha population in the proposed state (ibid). Approximately 35% of the population in the proposed state is of Gorkha descent, Nepali, the language of the Gorkhas is spoken by 40% and 51% in the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, respectively (ibid). Somewhere between 15 and 20% of people in the Dooars and Terai regions identify as having Nepali as their first language (ibid). Darjeeling's failed attempt at achieving political autonomy and the transition of power from the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) to the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) is another worrying point for many.

## Representation of Gorkhaland through Murals


**Mural 5**: Leaving a message on the wall. Photo credit: The author

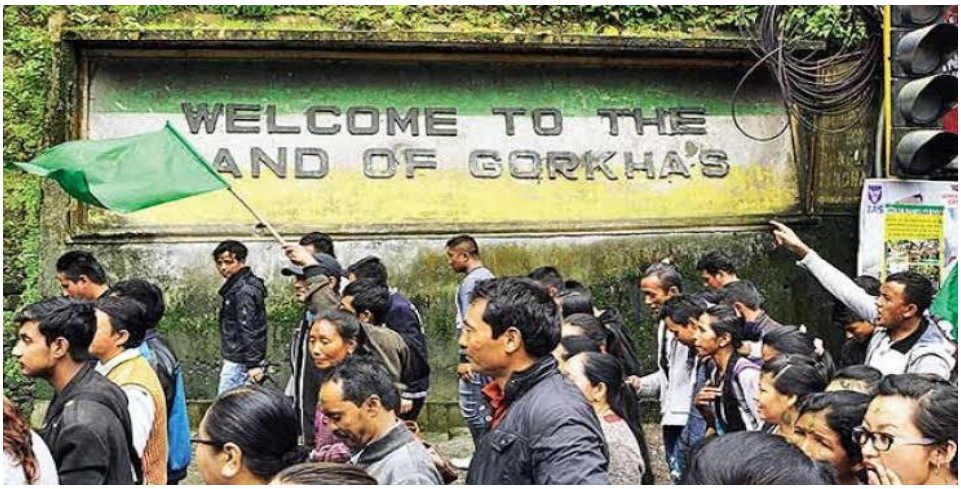
This mural (mural 5) depicts the *Khukuri*, bottom left, (a type of dagger) that is sacred to the Gorkha people. The landscape of the region (with mountains and bright sun) represents the hope that one day, all Gorkhas will be able to claim their homeland, Gorkhaland.


**Mural 6**: A map showing the proposed Gorkhaland. Photo credit: The author

This mural (mural 6) shows the proposed area of Gorkhaland, stating that “Gorkhaland is the birthright of all Gorkha people”.


**Mural 7**: A message left on the walls by Gorkha Janamukti Morcha. Photo credit: The author

The mural stating “We want Gorkhaland” by Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJMM, (mural 7)), an unrecognised political party, shares its support for the Gorkhaland movement.




**Mural 8**: A signboard welcoming visitors to the land of the Gorkhas. Photo credit: The author

The mural "Welcome to the Land of the Gorkhas" (mural 8) is poignant as we see civilians attending a Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) protest march in favour of the creation of the Gorkhaland state.

In the Darjeeling region, one may find a lot of artworks like the one above, which depict themes of identity conflict. The murals in the Darjeeling area, however, in contrast to those in Belfast, are not protected and urgently require preservation.

## Discussion

In the history of both Northern Ireland and the proposed Gorkhaland territory, murals played an important role as they showcased their contentions. As a researcher, I've personally seen how the murals played a crucial part in both regions, providing insight into the conflict and aiding in the transition by representing the unthinkable in both images and words (Bagchi, 2012/2020; Roy, 2012/2013). Reconciliation can be fostered through the use of shared religious and cultural symbols, beliefs, myths, and imagery. The conflict transformation techniques for every perilous region should be shared understanding and dialogue (Lederach, 2005).

J. Paul Lederach, in his work, "Defining Conflict Transformation", writes that it

> is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.

According to this theory, sustaining peace requires establishing the institutional and social mechanisms, as well as the sources of legitimacy, that will ensure their continued operation.

In conclusion, the murals of Northern Ireland and Darjeeling stand as visual testaments to their respective conflicts, capturing both the struggles and aspirations of the communities they represent. The murals in Belfast, particularly those by The Bogside Artists, have received state recognition and protection, serving not only as historical reminders but also as instruments of reconciliation. These murals are well-maintained, often forming part of guided tours that educate locals and visitors about the region's turbulent past and ongoing peace-building efforts.

In contrast, the murals in Darjeeling, though equally significant in depicting the Gorkhaland movement, do not receive the same level of preservation or public engagement. Many are left to decay, subject to defacement or neglect, reflecting the unresolved nature of the conflict and the absence of institutional efforts to recognise them as part of the region's cultural heritage. Unlike in Northern Ireland, where murals have become part of a broader discourse on memory and reconciliation, in Darjeeling, they remain largely informal, transient and vulnerable to political shifts.

Despite these differences, both sets of murals serve as powerful symbols of resistance and identity, shaping the collective consciousness of their communities. Their presence—whether officially sanctioned or informally maintained—reveals how art functions as a medium of historical narrative, political expression, and social mobilisation in contested spaces. The challenge remains in ensuring that these murals are preserved not only as artistic expressions but also as crucial markers of history that continue to inform contemporary struggles.

My experiences in Northern Ireland made me recognise the potential of visual narratives to both escalate and mitigate conflicts. When I later explored the Gorkhaland conflict in West Bengal, I observed murals depicting the Gorkhas' identity and separatist struggles. The murals in Darjeeling, much like those in Belfast, serve as symbols of historical grievances, community identity and resistance against the state. Unlike Belfast, where murals have been preserved and politically recognised, the Darjeeling murals lack state protection and are more vulnerable to erasure and state

suppression. While both mural traditions depict historical narratives of struggle, Belfast murals engage with reconciliation, whereas Darjeeling murals remain tied to an unresolved political aspiration. Both Belfast and Darjeeling murals illustrate contested political histories and identity struggles, showing how art can be used for mobilisation, remembrance and resistance. The political status of these conflicts is vastly different—Northern Ireland has seen peace agreements, while the Gorkhaland struggle remains unresolved, making Darjeeling murals more of a continuing protest rather than a post-conflict memory tool. My Belfast experience allows you to understand how murals evolve with conflict resolution, which could inform how Darjeeling's murals might transition from resistance to reconciliation in the future. The painting on walls and buildings throughout Belfast was the first thing I noticed when I arrived in Northern Ireland. The fact that one may access a place's prior history or identity issues through murals was undoubtedly extremely fresh to me and truly opened up my perspective. I also gained an understanding of the role art had in reconciling the conflict.

**END NOTES**

1. Gorkhaland Movement: The Gorkhaland movement is a campaign to create a separate state of India in the Gorkhaland region of West Bengal for the Nepali-speaking Gorkha people. The proposed state includes the hill regions of the Darjeeling district, Kalimpong district and Dooars regions, including Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and parts of Cooch Behar districts.
2. The Troubles were a prolonged ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland that spanned from the late 1960s to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The conflict primarily involved Unionists/Loyalists (mostly Protestant), who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, and Nationalists/Republicans (mostly Catholic), who sought unification with the Republic of Ireland. The conflict saw paramilitary violence, bombings, and state suppression. The Belfast murals reflect the deep divisions, memorialising events, leaders, and struggles from both sides. The Troubles (1968–1998) was a sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland involving nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist factions. It was rooted in historical tensions between Catholics and Protestants, alongside the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.
3. In the context of Northern Ireland, "Republicans" typically refer to those who advocate for the unification of Ireland and the end of British rule in Northern Ireland. They are primarily

from the Catholic nationalist community and oppose the Unionist and Loyalist groups who wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. They sought Northern Ireland's reunification with the Republic of Ireland. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) played a key role in armed resistance. Republican groups, including the IRA, played a central role in the conflict known as the Troubles. Their murals often commemorate historical figures like Bobby Sands and depict resistance against British rule.

4. Predominantly Protestant, wanted to remain part of the UK. Groups like the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) opposed Irish unification.
5. The walls built in Belfast and Derry to physically separate Catholic and Protestant communities, symbolising division and reinforcing sectarian barriers. The walls with the various murals on them came to be known as Peace Walls. Despite the Good Friday Agreement (1998), they still exist today (The Irish News, 2023).

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# EXPLORING EMBODIED EXPERIENCE IN A MOSQUE IN BELFAST

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**ABSTRACT:** When one visits Belfast, various spaces marked with symbols are witnessed across the city that ascribes to the Troubles, a period of civil unrest that started in 1969, which led to the demarcation of territories. The demarcation led to the creation of spaces marked with symbols like the Belfast Peace Wall, the Flags of Nationalists and Unionists and commemoration grounds. Among all the spaces I came across, there was this one space at 7 Rugby Road, near to the McClay library at Queen's University Belfast, that was not demarcated - *the Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association* (NIMFA), nor did it have an association with the Troubles. This space is a community centre for Muslim families comprising of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. It houses a Mosque for offering *Namaz* (prayers). As in many Asian countries, including India, women are not allowed in this sacred space-Mosque. With my Asian background - born in a Muslim family in Assam, India, I have never visited a Mosque for prayers. While in Belfast, praying in a Mosque in a *Jammat* (congregation), offering *Jumma Namaz* (Friday prayer) and *Taraweeh* (special prayers offered during Ramadan), breaking the Ramadan fast and celebrating *Eid ul fitr* in the Mosque was an embodied experience for me.

The paper seeks to present an autoethnographic account of embodied cultural experiences and ritual processes of everyday life in the Mosque at *the Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association* (NIMFA) in Belfast. Introspecting on personal encounters this paper is a humble attempt on the part of the researcher to comprehend the essence of belongingness or of dis/connectedness associated with the embodied experiences during the stay in Belfast as a Charles Wallace Fellow, exploring the identity of the 'self' as a Muslim woman born in Assam, India, and trying to evaluate this experience in the light of belonging to the community (Mosque in Belfast) for a short span of time.

**KEYWORDS:** Gendered Spaces, Women and Mosque, Place Making, Autoethnography, Islam

## INTRODUCTION

In this autoethnography[1], I would rightfully start with an introduction of the 'Self' and relate it to my experience of visiting a Mosque in Belfast. When I arrived at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) as a Charles Wallace Fellow in 2019, I experienced a sense of thrill as a field worker. Every space presented a case for conducting fieldwork. The Troubles[2] is a hotcake among researchers, while the Belfast Peace Walls[3], and the Black Cab Tours[4] are very interesting cases from a visual anthropological perspective. The shipyard where the Titanic was built, or the old breweries and the Mills which had been much prosperous at one point in time, presented ample avenues to conduct fieldwork. It was like the whole city was screaming to be taken into consideration for a deeper study. My thirst for fieldwork was enhanced. As an educator in an open distance learning mode[5], our learners are spread across the length and breadth of India. We thus miss out on the opportunity to take our learners to the field or conduct our own fieldwork. Belfast was thus a dream come true, with so many opportunities to conduct my own fieldwork as I tried to figure out the best option. During one of our conversations, I shared with Maruška, my fellowship coordinator at Queen's University Belfast, the exciting spaces such as the Belfast Peace Walls and the Black Cab Tours, where I could conduct fieldwork while in Belfast (though it was not part of my original Charles Wallace proposal). Maruška, nevertheless, drew my attention to the Mosque, housed within the NIMFA [6] at 7 Rugby Road, near to QUB's McClay Library. The NIMFA basically looks after Muslim migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, who find solace in a familiar space far away from home. Maruška pointed out that it was a lesser-researched area and needed good scholarships so as to understand migration and place-making making.

Initially, I was not keen on this fieldwork that involved visiting a Mosque. Among the followers of Islam in most Asian countries, congregational prayers are meant only for men, while women are encouraged to pray at home. Thus, it has been "claimed that Mosque based Islam is hegemonic, male-dominated and patriarchal" (Majumdar and Majumdar 2002:166). Like in the case of many Asian countries, including India, women are not allowed inside the Mosque. Mosque, from my personal experience, represented a classic example of a gendered space where women have no entity. Thus, I assumed that as a woman breaking into the Mosque environment, building a rapport would need more than three months. However, just to take stock of the situation, I visited the

Mosque and was presently surprised (which is actually an understatement). As I entered the Mosque, I was guided to a door on the right-hand side, adjacent to the staircase that was earmarked for women. Thus, began a journey of exploring the self in an environment - a space that was entirely new for me.

### OFFERING MY FIRST *NAMAZ* IN A *JAMAAT* (CONGREGATION) IN A MOSQUE

The mosque was a space that was a stark example of a reality that I had never been a part of. The first day I went for the *Jumma namaz* (Friday prayers), I felt extremely emotional, timid and nervous. It was the first time I was to offer prayers in a *jamaat* and was, therefore, not aware of the norms and rituals. The feeling that I was going to make mistakes was galore. I entered the room and found that the *janamaz* (prayer mats also known as rugs in Persian) were already laid and some of the female *namazis* (devotees offering *namaz*) were standing on the prayer mats in *takbir* (standing straight with hands on the sides) and waiting for the *Azaan* (call for prayers) to offer *namaz*. Three rows were already there; as I was feeling a little uneasy, I left the space in the third row and stood right next to the door. I was hesitant and not too comfortable standing near an unknown lady. The unfamiliar faces and the space were a bit daunting for me, leading to a sense of disconnectedness.

As we were about to begin the *Namaz*, I felt a tug on my sleeve from the lady (later during interactions she introduced herself as Maryama) in front of me, she pulled me and made me stand next to her. While offering *namaz,* verbal communication is not allowed, so I could understand the tug instead of words. That tug for me was an affirmation that someone had noticed my presence in the room, and a sense of belongingness swept over me, and I felt one among them, without realising the religious connotation behind that tug. Clifford Geertz's thick description came to mind of how he became "one among them" (Geertz, 1973) as people ran amok when there was a raid by police in the market space for illegal gambling while he was in Bali during his fieldwork. He and his wife were pulled to safety by one of the locals. This embodied experience of belonging to a group, and being accepted as one of them, moved me emotionally in terms of exploring a new space. Initially, my comprehension was that as I was standing right next to the door, the lady pulled me to avoid getting hit if anyone opened the door. But somehow, the feeling that there is more to it kept gnawing. Something was not fitting in, and so later I called up my cousin to enquire about the rule for praying in a *jamaat* and the ritual connotation behind the tug. He explained that I was pulled to the row so as to complete the *saf* (one

straight line). While offering *namaz* in a *jamaat* it is obligatory for the devotees to make their rows straight and stand close to one another without leaving gaps - by standing shoulder-to-shoulder and foot-to-foot. The *saf* is religiously followed as it is believed if the space between two *namazi* (devotees offering namaz) is too wide, the *Shaytaan* (the devil) would join in and disturb the conduct of *namaz* [7]. The ritual practice of *saf* presents a norm that marks a space as to who can be a part of the *namaz* and for whom it is out of bounds. In this case, *saf* protects the space between two *namazis*.

## PLACE-MAKING IN A MOSQUE

Pierre Bourdieu (1970, 1977) in his work, argued that space acquires its meaning through the performance of social practices and the reiteration of cultural norms, and thus, space is always gendered. Marshall, in his work, had described a Mosque in Waterloo, Canada, wherein he had stated that the room allocated to the women is "perhaps 15 percent of the size of the mosque room where men pray…. and is used as a multipurpose room where eating is allowed" (1994: 64-65). To explore the aspect of gendered space, I draw from the Mosque where I spent three months offering almost all the five *waqt* (times) *namaz*. The Mosque at Rugby Road allowed women to pray within the same complex, the room allocated for the women devotees was separated from the space where men prayed and indeed was much smaller in size. It is true that at any point in time, the number of men who come to offer prayers is relatively higher, more so for *Jumma* (Friday prayers), when they spread out into the kitchen area too. Yet, even when there are just a handful of men and women, offering *namaz* together was still not permissible. As in the Islamic context, '*Purdah*'[8] between men and women plays a key role. However, during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month in the Islamic calendar is observed as the holy month of fasting) when we used to offer the *Tahajjud*[9] *namaz* after midnight, the number would dwindle, so at times we prayed in the same room (as loudspeakers were not allowed after midnight) but with a curtain and chairs drawn up to separate and maintain distance between men and women. The curtain separating the male and female rows was a symbolic gesture in itself. We used to occupy the space at the end of the main prayer hall, leaving much space between the male and female rows. The same was the case during the Eid *namaz* when the prayers were held in the Queen's University Belfast Sports complex. There were proper curtains drawn to separate the rows between the male and the female *namazis*.

Karen Olwig and Kristen Hastrup's work (1997) argues that a space acquires its meaning not just by the fixed, obvious, and primal qualities but by the activities that are performed in it. Exploring this aspect in terms of place-making in the Mosque, it was observed that the space allocated for the women devotees was fixed - the room near the staircase (as explained in the previous section). This room, besides being used for the performance of *namaz,* turned out to be a multifunctional space that also housed a crèche. Many of the migrant working mothers would leave their children here, as it was used as a daycare centre. Thus, the space allocated to women turned into a multi-purpose room. During the Ramadan period, many migrant families would gather for *iftar* (breaking of the fast after sunset). They would bring cooked food from home, just like a potluck. After eating, they would clean up, vacuum the space and lay out the *janamaz*, thus transforming the space and making it ready for the *magrib namaz* (prayer performed after sunset). In one such event, I observed that there were only migrant families from the Middle East for *iftar* on that particular day. It seemed more like a close family get-together. The other regular migrant *namazis* came just before the call for *magrib namaz*. Owing to language issues, I could have missed the message on the noticeboard or the WhatsApp group communications (as I was not a member of that group), as the other migrant ladies did not turn up that day. Thus, I did feel a sense of disconnectedness. Even though the space was meant for all, the subtle hint of ethnic bonding, where people belonging to only a particular community or family were using it for family gatherings, evoked emotions and memories in terms of place-making.

Drawing similarity with Marshall's (1994) work, in the case of this Mosque at Rugby Road, it was observed that the room allocated for the women was indeed much smaller in size. However, some of the activities were common for the spaces used by men and women, like commensality, was observed in the section earmarked for men too during Ramadan. When the number of *namazis* exceeded the capacity that could fit in the main prayer hall, the kitchen transformed into a space for offering *namaz*. The main hall of the prayer room in the men's section was used for *Hikma* (Sunday school) as a study area for teaching the verses of the *Quran* to the young children (including girls who have not yet attained menarche). Whereas the space earmarked as a prayer room for the women was also used as a crèche.

**IS MOSQUE A GENDERED SPACE?**

Drawing on Milton's work, Svašek and Komarova argue that to be engaged in this world is a continuous learning process whereby "emotional reactions, feelings and expressions arise and develop out of a complex interaction between an individual human being and their environment" (Milton, cited in Svašek and Komarova, 2018:17) seems apt to begin this section on my reflections and reorientation on my understanding of the Mosque as a gendered space - only for men. I humbly present here two lived experiences during the Ramadan period in the Mosque, that made me rethink the question of the Mosque as a gendered space. One night, around midnight, as we had finished our *Taraweeh* prayers in the Mosque and were waiting for the *Tahajjud namaz*, there was a knock on the door. A young Irish girl who looked very distraught barged into the room and frantically asked for a mobile phone to call her parents. Without asking any questions, Maryama handed over her phone to the girl. While another lady rushed to make a cup of coffee for the young girl. In between tears, the girl explained that she was studying in the McClay Library, and her sister was supposed to pick her up around 11.30 pm. After waiting for about thirty minutes outside the library, she came to the Mosque seeking help, as she was not carrying a mobile phone. This incident left a mark on me, as it symbolised the Mosque as a 'safe' space. In the present circumstances of global turmoil, where Muslims are under the radar, for an Irish girl to visit the Mosque in the middle of the night was a symbolic moment in itself. Herein, I am not elaborating on or discussing the Islamic issue, as for that we would need a separate paper.

From my personal lived experience during Ramadan, I narrate one incident that is quite relatable. After the first *Tahajjud namaz,* which ended around three in the morning, I had an eerie feeling as I walked down to my Fitzwilliam Street apartment alone. Though I could see a few *namazis* walking ahead of me, I could not muster the courage to join them, though I started walking a bit faster to keep pace with them. The *namazis* realising the situation waited for me to catch up with them. After that, most of the time, many of the *namazis* walking in the same direction would ask me to join them. They would also wait till I entered my apartment block. Thus, I felt safe and protected. These two incidents from the Mosque made me rethink the question as to how gendered the space is. Most often, the Mosque is looked at from a patriarchal viewpoint where women are not allowed, a space meant only for men. Yet, the sense of security that was felt both by me and the Irish girl as we sought

help from the *namazis* of the Mosque changed the objective image that I had in terms of gendered place-making.

### WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MOSQUE

Herein, I reflect on two aspects where women have been involved in the Mosque. Some of the women (like Maryama, Zainab[10], and Farah) had narrated during the conversations that they used to help out in the kitchen during Ramadan. In previous years, they had taken turns to cook *Iftar*. During the Ramadan of 2019, Mr. Malik, a migrant from the Middle East who worked as a helper in an Italian restaurant in Belfast, volunteered to prepare the *iftar*. Throughout the month of Ramadan, I was in and out of the NIMFA kitchen and helped Mr. Malik to lay out the food on the plates ready for serving. I did not participate in the actual cooking process as I was not confident about handling large-scale cooking. Most times I would stand near the kitchen door and chat with Mr. Malik as he cooked. He shared stories of the times of cooking *iftar* with the female *namazis*, which was also shared by Maryama and others. This was a unique experience as back home we cooked the food for *iftar* and sent a portion to the local Mosque. To witness and be a part of the preparations for the *iftar* inside a Mosque was an intimate sensorial experience for me. Even though the migrant women did not help out in the kitchen, at times they did come for *iftar*. They cited that they found it difficult to manage preparing *iftar* at home and also cooking in the Mosque while managing their part-time jobs. The time for *iftar* is very short; the *magrib namaz* starts immediately after *iftar*, followed by *tarabi*. So, they preferred to finish work, go home, have *iftar* with family and later assemble for the *namaz*. Most times, after the *iftar* was ready, I too would go back to my apartment and come back later for the *magrib* and the *tarabi namaz*.

The other arena of participation by women that I witnessed was during the *Eid ul fitr namaz*. As soon as the *Eid ul fitr namaz* ended, the ladies took out small goody bags and started distributing sweets. I felt a little hesitant to accept the sweets as I was carrying none - a ritual sharing that I was not aware of. Fundraising was also done by the women soon after the *Eid ul fitr namaz* concluded. Two women carried a cloth and moved in between the rows, asking for funds, to lend a hand in building and refurbishing the new Belfast Islamic Centre at Aldersgate House on University Road. As they moved between the rows, they kept uttering, "open your purses, donate generously sisters, we need the funds". Offering my first *Eid ul fitr namaz* in a *jamaat*, was an embodied experience for me that led

to a web of emotions and was also a learning process as I engaged in the rituals and symbolic gestures involved in celebrating *Eid* in a mosque.

The aspect of fundraising I could relate to, is that my maternal grandmother had once started a fundraising campaign to build a Mosque for women in her hometown. It was during my school days that I saw my grandmother visiting our relatives with members from her *Mahila Sangha* (Women's Club) for fundraising. It took them almost seven years to get a plot of land and build the Mosque. I remember once going there while the Mosque was being built. They had hired a *Maulvi* (a male clergy), as there were no women clergy. There arose the question of how the ladies would say their prayers with the male *Maulvi* leading the *namaz,* as the norm of *purdah* had to be looked into. It thus dawned on me of the uselessness of the situation where the women had to pray behind the curtains in their own Mosque. To make matters worse, with time, the attendance of women who came for the prayers went down. For some, who did not live in the vicinity of the Mosque, the distance and travelling five times a day to-and-fro became an issue. While others realised that along with household chores, it was not possible to visit the Mosque five times a day. Thus, the building of a Mosque exclusively for women that started off as a crusade ended up with the Mosque being handed over to their male counterparts. Though there was support, the Mosque for women could not adequately meet their other commitments.

## CONCLUSION: DIS/CONNECTEDNESS

As an autoethnographic account, I have explored my experience in a Mosque that was quite an unfamiliar space for me. I felt disconnected from my everyday life as the Mosque was an unexpected variant that had happened. Borrowing from Victor Turner's work, I can state that it was a phase of liminality for me where there was a separate entity in my life. It turned out to be an emotional experience to understand place-making among the female migrants who frequent this Mosque. I could connect with the migrant Muslim women in the Mosque as we offered *namaz*, a symbolic construction of identity as we prayed together. This sense of belongingness brings to mind Anderson and Jones' (2009) work on performance theory, wherein they had argued that place-making practices as integral to people's lived experience of identity.

Though there was a sense of connectedness during the performance of *namaz,* yet in other aspects there was disconnectedness. For the Muslim migrant women *namazis,* they felt the disconnectedness when they learned that it was my first experience of praying in a *jamaat*, that in India we do not visit the Mosque to offer *namaz*. For many of the migrant women, offering *namaz* in the Mosque was a part of their everyday life; they could not imagine a space without a Mosque. They at times narrated their stories of how they missed visiting their own Mosque back home after coming to Belfast. Many visited the Mosque as they found solace in this one familiar space and could relate to their everyday routine from back home. Svašek (2018:217) stated in her work that "larger migrant organisations in Northern Ireland have bought or rented particular buildings in Belfast that serve as a spatial focus for group activities". In terms of place-making, the Mosque for many of the migrant Muslims was a space that connected them to their hometown, a familiar space. The language we spoke was different, though some could converse in English. All the migrant Muslim women be they from African countries or the Middle East, wore the *Burkha*, or *abaya* or a *hijab*, while I would just tie a *duppata* (scarf) to cover my head (for more on *hijab* see Zaman 2015, 2016). The Mosque was an embodied experience of a space that led to an emotionally intimate sensorial journey for me, one that would be etched in my memories for years to come.

**NOTES**

1. Autoethnography embroils the researcher to systematically analyse (*graphy*) through a description of personal experiences of the Self (*auto*), and the understanding of cultural experiences (*ethno*) (Ellis, 2004; Jones, 2005).

2. The Troubles started with heavy gunfire on August 15, 1969, a civil unrest that subsequently led to the mobilisation of troops to Northern Ireland to restore order (Dunn 1995), until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Muldoon 2004). It relates to the history of civil unrest (since 1969) that arose out of disagreement on the question of identity and affiliation among the population of Northern Ireland, which divided it into two distinct groups (Zaman 2022). One of the groups was the Nationalist/Catholics, who preferred to seek unity with the Republic of Ireland and a separation from the United Kingdom. While the other group, referred to as the Unionist/Protestant/Loyalist community, supported the unification with the rest of the United Kingdom along with the Scottish, Welsh and English (Hargie, Dickson and Nelson, 2003:11).

3. Belfast Peace Walls are part of the history of the Troubles that began in 1969 in Belfast that divided the city into two halves. The walls and the gates demarcate the city, which has now become a tourist attraction as the graffiti on the walls describes the Troubles, the Peace Process and the desire of the local population to live in harmony.

4. Black Cab Tours of Belfast is an hour-long taxi tour around the city. The tour reflects on the history of the conflicts that have marred this part of Northern Ireland since 1969 that is etched in the 'Peace Walls' to this date and has divided the city into two halves.

5. Indira Gandhi National Open University, established by an Act of Parliament in 1985 in Delhi, India, following the norms of open distance learning (ODL) is engaged in providing education to a large segment of the society, continuously striving to build a knowledge society through inclusive education. Opportunities for learning are created, and knowledge is disseminated by diverse means, including information communication technology like Gyandarshan (Tele-conferencing), Gyanvani (Interactive Radio Counselling sessions), SWAYAM (An Indian government portal for free open online courses), YouTube channels, social media platforms, etc., along with printed course material allowing students to avail the benefits sitting at home. Except for PhD scholars, face-to-face classes are not held for graduate and undergraduate students in the University. Face-to-face counselling sessions are organised by the 67 regional centres with the help of more than 2,000 Learner Support Centres (IGNOU, 2024) spread across the length and breadth of the country, which enables learners to access knowledge at their doorsteps.

6. Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association provides services for the Muslim community living in Northern Ireland which houses a Mosque. It also acts as a community centre that provides Islamic and Arabic schooling for 4 years to GCSE (NI Muslim Family Association (NIMFA) | Community NI). The community has members from 47 countries across the globe.

7. It was narrated from 'Abd-Allaah ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of *Allaah* (peace and blessings of *Allaah* be upon him) said: "Make your rows straight, stand shoulder to shoulder and close the gaps, and do not resist your brothers' hands. Do not leave any gaps for the *Shaytaan*. Whoever completes a row, *Allaah* will reward him, and whoever breaks a row, *Allaah* will forsake him" (Arranging the rows during prayer - Islam Question and Answer (islamqa.info)).

8. *Purdah* implies a barrier or a distance which man and woman have to maintain. It also got translated into the dress code of wearing a *Burkha*/*Abaya* (usually a black flowing dress that covers the body from head to toe), or '*Hijab'* (a scarf that covers the head and parts of the face). A Muslim

woman is also not allowed to be in the company of other males, except for her father, brothers or husband, as she has to maintain *Purdah* (Zaman, 2016:175)

9. *Tahajjud* is also known as Qiyam-u-lail; the *Tahajjud* prayer falls into the fourth category of prayers, i.e. *Nafl*, implying that it is optional and missing it is not counted as a sin. The *Tahajjud* prayer is usually performed after *Isha* (which is the compulsory nightly prayer) and before performing *Fajr* (the mandatory morning prayer). *Tahajjud* means to give up sleep, which is why this prayer is preferably performed during the last third of the night (Tahajjud Prayer: Importance, Benefits, How to Perform, Hadiths (zamzam.com).

Zainab, Farah and Mr. Malik's names are pseudonyms.

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## PART II

### IRIS MURDOCH'S *THE PHILOSOPHER'S PUPIL*

**BY SUSAN VISVANATHAN**

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#### INTRODUCTION

My visit to Belfast in February and March 1997 as a Charles Wallace Fellow to Queen's University, Belfast, was marked by the presence of many friends in the research scholar community. We were much the same age, as many there were "mature" students, who came to academia after having earned money to pay for higher education. I heard among them, many debates about free love, collegiality and sexual exploitation in academia, polyamorous states, strong and instinctive interdictions against or on the other hand, supportive of conjugal infidelity, third gender or platonic friendship among homosexuals and heterosexuals, transvestism and the crossing of borders in bisexuality. In Belfast, Northern Irish staunchness to family values and the institution of marriage prevailed, where serial monogamy occasionally surfaced. I thought Iris Murdoch captured the range of a self-confirmed venality with startling placidity and great humour. It was for this reason that I chose to analyse one novel by Iris Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1984). The heightened and awry emotional state I was in, far from home, was perhaps the reason that I turned to a reading of this novel. I retired in March 2022 and found that reading novels was one way of coming to terms with the alienation one feels from the duties that kept one constantly at attention. Being invited to the conference for past and present Charles Wallace Fellows on the theme of Dis/Connectedness and asked to write a paper was certainly very productive in terms of having to return to isolation, solitude and the self-censorship of emotions running riot.

As a young woman, forty years ago, in the summer of 1983, I was struck down by a severe attack of multiple sclerosis, which went undiagnosed for the next 25 years. Curious though it may seem today, in India at that time, there was neither the diagnostic machinery to analyse my illness, nor was there any feminist literature available in 1983 to diagnose my existential crises, which was exacerbated by the death of my father that February. The two events were followed by the miscarriage of our first child in March 1983, and an unexpected pregnancy in September 1983, followed by hospitalisations

because of a threatened natural abortion. Since we had no family support in the city, my emotional and mental stamina was very much depleted. My husband, Shiv Visvanathan, helped me recover by buying me many books of Iris Murdoch and Virginia Woolf, and that icon of feminism and mutual understanding, Ivan Illich (author of the book *Gender*, 1982), that he could find in the bookshops in Delhi. Consistently reading Virginia Woolf for a decade, and about a dozen of Iris Murdoch's novels, I healed myself of my neurological deficits and was able to carry on my teaching and nurturing duties. My visit to Belfast as the Charles Wallace Scholar was made possible by Shiv's ability to take care of our three daughters, then aged 15 years, seven years and five years, with the help of my mother, who was 80 years old in 1997, who arrived at our home with her maid.

I have always maintained that feminism has prospered with the support of men, and coincidentally, that has been the British socialist feminist theoretical position, as represented in the History Workshop Journal, founded in 1976 by Raphael Samuel. The Internet had just been made available in 1997 in Indian universities and research institutions. But relations of production and forces of production being somewhat dissolute, with the hacker omnipresent, postcards and letters were the conventional ways of communication between India and Northern Ireland before the Peace Process, which began in the Spring of 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Belfast was fun, and my days were filled with music and visits to the Botanical Garden. To be invited to write for this Special Issue is a great honour, and I thank the team at Queen's University for bringing the Charles Wallace Fellows together for the conference where I first presented this work.

In this paper, I attempt to sift through Murdoch's fictional characters and their interrelationships to understand the shifting sands of passionate encounters where emotional honesty is enjoined. Chaos reigns. My illness continues to make life precious and helps me to understand affliction as it rears its head in multiple ways, for we are most vulnerable when we co-exist with the omnivorously healthy.

*The Philosopher's Pupil*, as the name suggests, is about George McCaffrey and his tumultuous relationship with his teacher, John Robert Rozanov. This relationship is so vivid, it is like a scar that runs as blood through the text, a murderous intent that rears up at every opportunity. George fantasises about murdering his wife and his former teacher, John Robert, at every opportunity. He has a mistress whom he is emotionally dependent on, a tawdry space of love and longing, of great

abnegation and servitude where the lovers constantly communicate the possibility of their continued liaison, but it is ridden with lust, guilt and fear.

Murdoch's novel, with its many detours, looks at the way in which being an outsider in British society, like servants to the rich, which the three gypsies in her story are, of whom George's mistress, Diane, is one. The gypsies are women who enthral us with their dark and stereotypically powerful presence. They are useful, dangerous, and in the end, they 'master' the rich (2008). In my final paragraphs, I attempt to interlock the possibilities of coincidence and parallel narratives between the gypsies, heterosexuals and homosexuals, the young and the aged, the impoverished and the powerful, colonizers and victims. When we work with biography, autobiography and narrative construction, we see that the accidents of history are sometimes beyond us. They appear as signalling systems, neon lights that show us that there is more work yet to be done. The many scandals in academia globally, of elderly male Professors, seducing or being seduced by their young students is finally a tattoo on the brain, searing each victim/predator with what he/she/ had done, and cannot speak about, unless "found out about" (institutional surveillance) or disclosed in animosity. Iris Murdoch uses fiction to splay the varieties of dis-ease in situations of mutual mistrust between men and women.

#### MYRIAD CHARACTER TROPES AND OSCILLATING PERSONAS

Solitude, the writer's final refuge, allows Iris Murdoch to put to good use her skills in weaving the story of *The Philosopher's Pupil* as each character takes centre stage to display the nuances of his/her/their identity. Everyone is evil, and yet, at the same time, astoundingly capable of immense goodness. What is this goodness, and how do minor characters become great? Love becomes a kind of currency so that its evil is transmuted into something else, sometimes with frightening consequences for all the characters in the novel. What is evil is of course defined only in the consequences it has for those around, sucked in by the plethora of ways that humans use to consciously hurt one another.

Everyone in the novel is alone, though Murdoch ties them together with a spool of narrative that runs for 576 pages. It is as if she, Ariadne, the spinner of webs, the companion to the maze wanderer, exists in a multitude of characters. In giving the various characters, a fictional stance from which they can project ideas and emotions, the biography of a fictionalised tourist town, Ennistone, is mapped.

The town overtakes the characters. We begin to know it not just from the cryptography of the sulfurous baths, where the locals as much as tourists, take pleasure in the everydayness of having recourse to the therapeutic waters, but also in the hinterland of Ennistone's fields, fallow lands and alleyways that all resonate with the footsteps of the characters. Ennistone becomes a personality, not just a geographical location (Murdoch, 1984:16-29).

Readers are entranced by the co-existence of contraries, the dialectical consummation of desire and death in the same breath. By the skeins of this fluctuating nature of reality, we do not know who wins, and who loses; the novelist then manipulates our emotions. We take sides with the characters, and the venom that then spews out is so dastardly, that we jump back at the new revelations about the human spirit that it brings to us. This is probably why Tom, who is the key protagonist, an essentially likeable man, is inadvertently locked in the baths. We do not know in that particular chapter whether Tom lives or dies, yet we can well understand the depth of emotion and suspense that Iris Murdoch herself experienced when her ally and friend, Frank Thompson (brother of the writer and historian, E. P. Thompson), died in the Second World War, in the hands of Bulgarian fascists (Conradi, 2000:200). In the conclusion of this essay, I have used biographical anecdotes to describe the actual death of Frank Thompson as we live in a time when death preys on people for having different ideologies (Edward Thompson, their father was the author The Other Side of the Coin and a friend of Gandhi's).

It is this momentum of curiosity, intellectual and emotional self-flagellation, which makes the lives of those who are pedagogic socialists so different from those warriors who plunge into the sacrificial moment. Durkheim, in his book *On Suicide* ([1897]2006), described soldiers' unusual bravery and heroism in war as altruistic suicide (Dorit, 2013). It is certainly how Iris Murdoch, through the narrative simulation of the terror of being on the lowest rung of the ladder in the hot steam of Ennistone's sulfur Baths, communicates to us readers how death must have seemed when the hatchet bangs shut. Murdoch's novel attempts to state, if not resolve, the crises that writers continually feel, in their seemingly placid world, in their ivory towers (Murdoch, 1984:518-525). Iris Murdoch seems to be saying that the allegory of death has to be understood and transcended across the decades, and never goes away. In the next section, I shall discuss the shifting sands of intimate

relations as represented in her novel, where oddities are domesticated into near hits and misses of intense emotions.

### The Dynamo of Everyday Domestic Relationships

The McCaffreys, who are at the centre of *The Philosopher's Pupil*, are wrapped around their fates, and their cross-cutting strands of biological and social entrapments keep them occupied. They spend their time staying out of each other's way and are yet thrust unwittingly into one another's path. How they hate one another! Yet, love and loyalty are like genetic codes (you cannot choose your relatives or hide your desires), which is the grammar that Murdoch uses convincingly. She revelled in a companionate marriage and exulted in the secure nesting of her parents' adoration of her (Bayly, 1999). Yet, she is persuasive as a novelist in describing the condition of those who run solo, even if they are opulently described to be in conjugal satiety.

For Iris Murdoch, her non-judgmental attitude to homosexuality and adultery are probably the key themes of recreating images of life in Britain, although earlier, the Bloomsbury group suffered tremendous humiliation at the hands of society and the state. In her long career as a novelist, Murdoch fearlessly took on these issues. She is ultimately a Belfast girl, in spite of the cat's cradle of her representative iconic status as a novelist and philosopher in England. Peter Conradi writes that Iris went to meet her cousins in Belfast in 1939, and she and a friend of her cousin climbed the tower of Queen's University and tied a friend's pyjamas to the flag post (2000:80). She was always fearless and ready for adventure. In the next section, I shall summarise the novel for the benefit of the reader.

### The Philosopher's Pupil at a Glance

In the novel, John Robert Rozanov, the great philosopher, returns to Ennistone, where the Romans have left traces of their presence in the mnemonics of stone and in the baths. He is eminent and well-known in America, a great tyrannical presence to the inhabitants of the Ennistone Spa. His granddaughter Hattie, who floated from place to place (having received an education sponsored by her grandfather, John Robert Rozanov), hopes to further her education in England (Murdoch, 1984:232). Alex McCaffrey, George's mother, owns the house with a garden and outhouse, where Hattie is sent as a tenant by Rozanov. He is able to rent the house in the garden by manipulating an earlier love, Alex, who, according to her son, George, had shown no manifest interest in John Robert

when he was a young man and so, out of spite, he married Linda Brent, Hattie's grandmother, instead (ibid:222). George is Rozanov's former student and has an Oedipal desire to murder him. Receiving the news that her excitement at John Robert's return to Ennistone Spa was misplaced, Alex feels again that sudden piercing obsessive jealous remorse when she heard that Linda Brent was going to marry John Robert Rozanov. Love she could give no one expanded painfully in her heart' (ibid: 209).

Rozanov wants Hattie Meynell to marry Tom, Alex's stepson, but this means reordering emotions. Tom had no idea it would mean the displacement of his primary affection for Emmanuel (Emma) Scarlet-Taylor, his musician friend. Emma (Emmanuel) is Tom's closest friend, a musician who was formally trained by a man, Hanway. The latter suppressed his sexual desire in Emma's company, but always trained them alone, without fellow students, sometimes staring with great intensity into Emma's eyes with some involuntary signal of emotional need…In any case, music made a holy world within which Emma and Mr Hanway could lead safe, intelligible lives, making sense of each other through the bond of transcendent necessity (ibid: 215).

In contrast to this collegial nicety, there was what Tom and Emma felt for each other as students on a brief holiday in Ennistone. Tom is a house sitter for a couple who have gone on holiday. The temporary house becomes the site of a bond which is much more incestuously fraternal and intense. Emma is both a sibling, friend and lover to Tom. When Tom and Hattie marry, they continue to live in his mother's garden house, though Emma and Pearl (Hattie's *au pair*) during this later phase have become sexual partners themselves. Clearly, the memory of that primary friendship is still in force, if not in practice:

Tom said, 'Emma – oh- Emma.'

Emma said nothing, but he drew the bedclothes aside. Tom, still in the swift impetus of his wafting, came to his friend, and for a moment they lay breast to breast, holding each other in a fierce, bruising clasp, their hearts beating with a terrible violence, and so they lay still for a long time (ibid: 218).

It is this resurgence of bisexuality (Tom's attraction to Hattie, and his lingering instinctive love for Emmanuel or Emma, as he is continually called) that Iris Murdoch is dealing with throughout the

entire text of the novel. The intensity of love and repugnance, of unrequited love, of betrayal or instinctual passions, and the manner in which social conventions provide brutal ordering mechanisms are her ever-present themes in Murdoch's novel.

By foisting Tom on Hattie, John Robert Rozanov hopes to elide over his incestuous love for the young girl, who is only just out of boarding school in Colorado, America, and wishes to study further in Britain. By sequestering her in the cottage in Alex's Garden, he presumes that she will have safety and privacy in the company of her *au pair*/ hired companion, who, however, is seen kissing Emma in the garden (ibid: 444). There is here a very striated set of social relations between Diane, George's mistress who is a prostitute (ibid: 64), Pearl, who is Hattie's guardian and *au pair*, employed by Rozanov (ibid: 448) and Ruby, Alex's housekeeper (ibid: 58).

These three serving women, Pearl, Diane, and Ruby, are shadow persons who speak when spoken to and yet are vivid representations of how people who are considered to be of lower social standing are treated. Those considered to be of lower social class can experience the secure life of their patrons through their access to material goods of which they are placed in charge of. Yet, in the women's self-abnegation, there was an undercurrent of subversion. Alex, in her old age, an abandoned wife who gets to keep all the property felt in charge, and her children were affectionate but unruly in their emotions. Alex saw her housekeeper, Ruby, as someone who had power over her and feared her. Ruby had a huge persona, which conveyed the intensity of her servility and ardour. Yet, as gypsies, the three women in service, all clearly demonstrated how intimacy did not stand in place of equality. Equality and freedom lie elsewhere. How then does Murdoch understand the place of humans in a vocabulary of interdependence, where their personal emotions are always interlaced in a poisonous web of contraindications? How do you govern emotions? Where is freedom if emotions are bludgeoned by convention? The servants themselves felt that their power over those in their care, Alex, George and Hattie are ingrained in their own nature, and that love is a connivance towards at least temporary security. In Hattie's case, it translates itself into something bolder, friendship. For Ruby and Diana, exile must follow naturally because there has been a mutual predatory quality between them and their patrons. For Murdoch, writing is her 'home', from which she cannot be exiled, except by the organic misdemeanour of Alzheimer's disease. She brings to the text a characteristic uniqueness of emotions, making the characters active principles, actors in the

drama of life. We see in Murdoch's text how subtle crisscrossing makes us revel in the unspoken emotions of repressed individuals. When splayed out in the narrative, we understand the silent unravelling of that which must be kept hidden. That Hattie and her salaried companion are intimate does not seem contrary, and yet, each must know her place. 'Hattie and Pearl love each other with the deep love of childhood friends, tempered by the love of those who have been shipwrecked together' (ibid: 576). How could Harriet Meynell forget John Roberts' words to her?

'You mean you love me?' said Hattie.
'Yes,'
'You love me - like grandfather - or like – like being in love?'
'The latter,' said John Roberts in a low voice (ibid: 463)

In the dreadful pages that follow, Iris Murdoch unerringly leads us to the blinding spaces in which John Robert Rozanov flounders to explain that his travels have led him away from what is the centre of his world, Hattie Meynell.

'Oh, Hattie, if you only knew', Robert remarked.
'Knew what?' Hattie responded.
'How I've yearned over you and wanted you. You think I don't care about you, but that isn't true, it's the opposite of true' Robert replied.

Hattie stared at the flat head [of Robert], the lined bumpy fleshy brow, and the very short electric frizzy hair, the big birdlike nose framed by furrows in which grey stubble grew, the pouting prehensile mouth with its red lips and the froth of bubbly saliva at the corners, the fiercely shining rectangular light brown eyes which seemed to be trying so hard to send her a signal. The soft, plump wrinkles of the brow, pitted with porous spots, so close to her across the table, gave her especially the sense of something so sad, so old. She felt frightened and full of pity. She said, just in order to say something soothing, 'Oh don't worry, don't worry, please (ibid: 469).

Yet, at the heart of an old man who loves a child, and a young woman who feels the intensity of his suffering, lies the tale. It's about confession, emotional anarchy and the sublime. It is Robert

Rozanov's jealousy of the love that Hattie and Pearl, her servant, share together, that makes him wish to sack Pearl, and corner Hattie in a verbal obsessiveness and vulnerability that creates mutual panic.

Murdoch's own glamorous youth was spent in the resurrection of vagabond emotions which in the 1930s, and after the 2nd World War, were not historically out of place. Shiela Rowbotham (2000) has consistently shown that freedom at work for women, entry into hallowed university spaces as Virginia Woolf had hoped for, and the questions of masculine patronage which ignited and dominated academic relations, were hierarchically placed and symbolically annotated, as women were as welcome as dogs in the chapel. Memory, as fractured and narratively joined in Murdoch's novels, is a similar type of vocabulary for these complex and concurrent emotions, which coexist with patriarchy, offering both consensus and rebellion. Iris Murdoch would turn up suddenly, pursuing her teacher, the Philosopher Donald MacKinnon. He would be embarrassed by her devotion. His wife, he said, found it humiliating that his students took over their personal domestic spaces (Conradi 2000:256-258). Again, we know from the work of Helen Waddel that the love between teacher and student was taboo and could lead to castration in the medieval ages (Waddell 1965:203; see also Mitchell 1975:380). It is this retrospective vengeance that Murdoch brings to the text, a collective horror at the crossing of borders between generations. It is this with which Iris Murdoch is preoccupied, for she makes it her central theme in the novel, as the dangers of obsession and covetousness. It is in the character of George, Rozanov's former student, that Murdoch plays out the dilemmas of frustration and failure which can boomerang so powerfully in the psychotic flow of memory.

Does George, with his hollowed persona and his crafty ingenuity, stand for such a parasitical adoration? Iris Murdoch was so engaged in writing continuously, in the free play of the unconscious, that she could well absorb multiple and coexistent presents, along with contradictory emotions in her narratives. She could show that intimacy brought love and hate to shuddering proximity. She constantly affirmed that people could say things that they did not apologise for, then or later. Inscription then brought the fleeting nature of language into an archetype of echoing similarities. Readers could recognise situations in which they themselves had been thrust.

The plague of adoration which offends, which is unrequited love, remains at the core of *The Philosopher's Pupil*: the desire to 'murder the father'. In this case, his teacher Rozanov, whom George suffers from, is wrenched away from him in a novelistic sleight of hand. Rozanov's suicide is simulated theatrically as 'murder' by Murdoch's prose, but (factually) it is not. Rozanov is already dead by overdose, the reason being his magnum opus cannot be completed, complicated by his love for his granddaughter Hattie. The old man feels a misplaced and grandiose love for Hattie, as strangers might for one another, where age is no barrier. This becomes unbearable for the old philosopher. All these confusing emotions are somewhat counterfeit. People feel what they do, but they assert themselves in socially defined ways. George thinks he has murdered his teacher, but the image of the old and dissolute intellectual baron sleeping and snoring is in itself prophetically the death of the Father God. George had wanted so much to kill his erudite wife, so that he could elope with his mistress, Diane. He thinks he murdered his wife, but everyone says he did not, including his wife and the local priest.

In an alcoholic fog, George roams through the pages of the novel. Attempting to understand himself and relinquishing himself of all moral responsibility *because* Rozanov had snubbed him when he was a student. Mitchell writes that the castration complex and the murder of the dead father bind the protagonist to the law (Mitchell, 1975:395). A sense of emasculation, created by the castration complex, is the threat of a lost male identity and being continually snubbed by Rozanov, as George believes that the latter is the cause of all his problems and would like to kill him. However, Rozanov cheats him of this as he commits suicide from the frustration of not finishing his book, and his inchoate love for a very young girl, his granddaughter Hattie.

John Roberts had moved to rooms in Ennistone Spa, after leaving his granddaughter, where he wrote a suicide note to an old friend, after which he swallowed some poison, which had an irrevocable effect. Father Bernard, an interesting character in the book, standing for those principles of ecumenism popular in England at that time, comes to meet Rozanov and finds him dead in the bath, his manuscript floating in the water. The priest does not know that the unconscious Rozanov toppled from his bed into the bath and floated like a hippopotamus totally unaware of the second order of death imposed by the obsessive George. George "murders" a man who is already dead from self-poisoning, as Rozanov has already died by suicide. It is this fearsome imagery of a poison which has

no anodyne, and the drowning of the near corpse by George, which carries the fetid nature of suppressed and coagulated hatred (Murdoch 1984:551).

How then does George free himself from the panic of his own guilt, his foreboding that as a 'murderer', he never pays his price, as the verdict always is that he was 'not responsible'. It is from his wife, Stella, that he derives his healing rapprochement. George knows that his actions were expressions of his sense of continual revenge (ibid: 558). He is a product of the ways in which intellectualism forces itself as a form of narcissism, through the lives of others. There is something so dreadful about selfish motives, lusts which cannot be controlled, and forced conversion to values which the protagonists themselves find heavy-handed. Is there a moral position that the reader is expected to take? That would take away from the volatility of life itself and the choices humans make about the good life. Iris Murdoch's novel is not just about ethics or morality, it is about variations in human behaviour, which is what makes life so delicious, that agency is constrained by normative behaviour, and the culpability of individuals in the face of fate.

> What would the law have judged George to be guilty of? And what indeed, as things stand, is he guilty of? All these unanswered questions are likely to continue to disturb the minds of both George and Father Bernard (ibid: 560).

The omnipresent narrator thus brings the frenzy of a number of interlocked lives to the plateau of a stable narrative present. The novelist, like the philosopher, becomes a sociologist or is a sociologist, studying the fleeting nature of social relations in rapidly changing societies (Addelson, 1991: 117). Stella, George's wife with her patience, her love, and her great virtue closes the story of his 'blindness' (he actually loses his sight and blames it on a UFO!) but we can imagine how her patience annoys, because George's febrile spirit is always irritated by her magnitude of goodness. What Murdoch provides, in this jumble of displacements and refractions, is an existential equilibrium to the challenges and struggles of those left behind, as the story seemingly never ends. Each character is capable of more actions and more deviations. It is the magnetic continuity into any number of kaleidoscopic possibilities that allows Iris Murdoch to represent the unravelling of her own unique existence, beyond the tale. The amnesiacal finitude through Alzheimer's is the epitaph to Iris Murdoch's long and productive career. As Barthes would call it, the 'death of the author' promotes

the transcendent continuity of the work. As Barthes believes, the magnitude of the work is such that it is greater than the text itself. The text must be able to withstand time and criticism and become instilled in history as having lasting value (Barthes 1977:145). I will close with an exploration of the way texts travel across time and history. I hope to show that the life of Frank Thomas, who was lost in the First World War shows itself up in the vignettes about the abyss in which Murdoch's protagonist, Tom, is locked. Death stalks us at every turn; we are deaf to the cries of those lost in encampments of war, but Iris Murdoch created a palimpsest of events which read as reminders of its ever-present possibility in contemporary situations.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

The Indian communist leader, Vidya Munsi, reminds us of the coincidental nature of friendships and war time memoirs. She writes of E. P Thompson's brother Frank Thompson. Their father was Edward Thompson, a friend of Tagore (the eminent Nobel prize-winning poet) and Mahatma Gandhi.

> Among much useless junk dating back to my student days in England during World War 11, I came upon a few typed sheets of poems and letters by a young Englishman named Frank Thompson *(*Munsi 2006*:* 31).

She goes on to describe in detail Frank Thompson's death. News of it had been brought to England as eyewitness information in 1945 by Madame Sharova, a Bulgarian teacher who attended the World Trade Conference that year and met Frank's mother a year after his assassination. The Gestapo had rounded up the freedom fighters in the mountains North of Sofia.

At Litavako, the Gestapo had to stage a mock trial in the village hall…Mme. Sharova was there with her young daughter. The trial was so brutal and such a travesty of justice that the daughter, weeping, left the hall. But Mme. Sharova had to stay. She tried to memorise every word of the questioning so that she could report it later to her underground trade union leaders. Frank was sitting against a pillar, calm and stern, smoking his English briar pipe, filled no doubt with Bulgarian tobacco. He answered his questioners in fluent Bulgarian (Munsi, 2006: 32).

He died giving the salute, the clenched fist. It was in June 1944 when the Germans were driven out of Bulgaria. 'A crowd of 50,000 had gathered from all over the country to line the route as the coffins were borne there. The people had collected money for a memorial' (ibid: 33). Vidya Munsi writes that the garden, which absorbed Frank's bones and those of other resistance warriors and patriots, is still tended, and small children continue to lay flowers (ibid).

In our shared worlds, we cross over many times, and our memories become the way we reflect on the circumstances of our common humanity. Iris Murdoch used fiction to elaborate on philosophical questions of continuing moral significance. It is interesting that third-gender debates continue to be problematized theoretically and legally. Pleasure, the garden of belonging and eviction from it, the maze of loss and sometimes *no* recovery, of incessant speech as transcribed, was possible only in the circumstances of silence and solitude, the writer/artist needs to practice his/her/their craft. For Murdoch, that act of institutional and conjugal protection gave her a 'room of one's own' which in the end was her mind. As Roger Poole (1976) consummately showed us many decades ago, analysing writers' lives involves the engagement with concepts that undercut the illusions of fiction, where the analyst must take a stand, and all the risks that go with interpretation.

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# ECOLOGICAL RUPTURES AND HUMAN VULNERABILITIES: COLONIALISM AND THE IDEA OF 'NATURAL' DISASTERS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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**ABSTRACT:** The present paper is an attempt towards questioning the dichotomous understanding of disasters, where all kinds of disasters are broadly classified into natural and human-made. It has been argued that within the hegemonic power structures of colonialism, the idea of 'natural' disasters come into question. Colonial capitalism in India was driven by profit motives that altered the ecologies to extract more revenue from the land. Large technological solutions were implemented in the name of flood control that led to ecological ruptures and made the populations vulnerable to more severe flooding and disasters. The indigenous precautionary approach to environmental management was replaced by an imported technical and engineering approach in the name of flood control. The technical approach dissociated disasters from the realm of morals and politics and associated them with natural. Such an approach locates disasters outside the realm of social. It is here that the idea of natural disasters gets established at the cost of structural vulnerabilities that pre-exist or are created and manufactured in the name of environmental management. Ecological ruptures thus create human vulnerabilities.

**KEYWORDS:** Political Ecology, Vulnerability, Colonial Capitalism, Natural Disaster, India

## INTRODUCTION

Lewis (1999) has argued that until the 1970s, disasters were regarded as physical occurrences, both by administrators and academics, in time and space that required technological solutions to help resolve their impacts. However, it was slowly recognized by scholars like Gillespie and Perry (1974), Dombrowsky (1981), Drabek (1986), and Kreps (1989) that doing research on disasters in the field of social sciences considers more than their physical aspects because disasters reveal inequalities that are embedded in social structures (Oliver-Smith, 1996). Lewis tried to understand disasters as a result of human actions that can be labelled as the "actualization of human vulnerabilities" (1999:8). The idea of vulnerability tries to dislocate disasters from the physical and technological realm and locate

them in the socio-cultural and political realms. Within this approach, a distinction is made between hazards and disasters. While hazards are regarded as natural, disasters are not. This is due to the realisation that natural hazards like floods, drought, cyclones, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions, when they impact vulnerable populations, are deemed a disaster. Disasters occur when hazards affect vulnerable human groups. Thus, vulnerabilities become essential in precipitating a hazard into a disaster. The consequence of a disaster reveals and explains the differential impacts of them on different social groups. People belonging to different classes, castes, races, ethnic, ages and gender groups are impacted by disasters in entirely different ways and in different degrees. For example, during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the most vulnerable group in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, India, were women. Most of the casualties were women when the Tsunami struck because they were unable to swim effectively due to their sarees that were wrapped around their bodies. Societal codes and cultural norms in this case made these women more vulnerable. Similarly, during seasonal floods in Eastern Uttar Pradesh in India, people belonging to the lower caste groups suffer more in terms of damage to their houses as they reside on the banks of the river. In comparison, people of upper caste groups commonly have houses that are made of bricks and not mud, often located far away from the banks of the river. Social inequalities are reproduced in a disaster context and make some groups more vulnerable than others. Caste groups and the religious affiliations of people can play an important role in deciding who will receive the relief aid when it is distributed (Guha-Sapir et al. 2006). Vulnerability in this context becomes a function of power that operates in society. Looking at disasters from this perspective requires a researcher to observe various ways in which human systems place people and some groups at particular risk in relation to one another and to their environment (Oliver-Smith, 1996,2004).

Human social and political histories produce vulnerabilities. Thus, one can say that vulnerability is the product of the past. Political powers and their relationship with people and the environment make the techno-economic and social systems vulnerable to disasters. Inequalities based on caste and gender have deep historical roots and are therefore embedded in the social fabric. Vulnerabilities, therefore, have a historical context (Barrios, 2017). Thus, disasters become a historical event, and the aftermath becomes a process of coming to terms with history. Asking the question about why disasters happen becomes a political question as it involves answering a historical process that led to vulnerable conditions based on caste, class, race, gender, religion and ethnic discrimination.

Therefore, understanding disasters involves understanding local communities and histories. Political histories and their impact on local environmental transformations and groups of people become a tool in understanding disasters. Sweeping generalisations about the vulnerabilities of groups of people in a disaster context should not be attempted nor applied to varied situations and societies. The historical and social microcosms need to be studied in detail in order to understand the relations and processes within which vulnerabilities are embedded (Cannon, 2000). This means that ethnographic studies need to be conducted in order to understand how social categories of caste, class, gender and religion make certain groups vulnerable in comparison to others.

Vulnerabilities need to be studied in the context of deconstruction ecology. Within this paradigm, it is argued that the environment does not have an essence, but it has a history (Fritsch et al., 2018; Simpson, 2013; Clark, 2008; D'Souza, 2006). This means that the histories of oppressed people and their environments have considerable bearing on the ways in which ecologies are transformed and produce vulnerabilities. Disasters in this context become a function of the histories of transformation of the environment and the production of vulnerabilities. Specifically in the case of India, the colonial rule and profit motive of the East India Company and the British Raj led to altering the environment in a way that it generated more profit for the colonisers. Profit accumulation happened at the cost of rendering people vulnerable, altering the environment to an extent that transformed the earlier flood-dependent ecologies into flood-vulnerable landscapes. It is in this context that the paper argues that the idea of 'natural' disasters is not actually 'natural' as it is constructed over a period of time within a history of oppression in a local context, thereby producing vulnerable ecologies and people. The perspective of political economy to understand disasters suggests that disasters do not occur in a vacuum as they always take place within a political environment. This line of thinking suggests that governance is a key factor in managing disasters and reducing vulnerabilities of the affected population. Alternatively, a political-economic perspective also suggests that bad governance can create vulnerable people, and this plays an important role in precipitating disasters (Cohen and Werker, 2008). Within this backdrop, when we try to locate the British governance in India then an understanding develops that the British administration worked for the profit of the company and the crown and has impacted people and their environments in ways that made them vulnerable. The idea of 'natural', on the contrary, is used to manage and deal with situations of disaster. This absolves the government and people in positions of power from their responsibilities of dealing with the

histories of oppression and the resulting vulnerabilities of people. Moreover, the idea of 'natural' is a hindrance in the making of a political public. When it is assumed or made to assume that disasters are natural and are not linked directly or indirectly to the issues of governance, then people stop asking for their rightful dues from the government in the form of reducing their vulnerabilities and rightful compensation in the event of a disaster. Case studies from the Indian context suggest that large areas in Eastern Uttar Pradesh in the foothills of the Himalayas are inundated by floods every year (Kapur,2010 and Khattri, 2017). People lose their land and livelihoods due to flooding and the associated soil erosion. Even after suffering year after year since time immemorial, these areas have yet to see people's movements in the form of protests asking for better governance and a reduction in their vulnerabilities in the wake of recurrent flooding (Khattri, 2017). The idea of 'natural' also presents a much 'sanitised' version of disasters as needing only technological solutions for their management (Lewis, 1999; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 1999).

As my paper will discuss, studies in social sciences have extensively talked about the idea that the so-called natural disasters are not actually natural in nature. The underlying theoretical assumption in such studies subscribes to the vulnerability paradigm suggests that when environmental hazards in the form of floods or any other extreme environmental events interact with a vulnerable population, then disasters occur. Cutter et al. (2003) have argued that vulnerabilities that are socially produced within a society are largely ignored because they are considered to be hard to quantify. They have also argued that social inequalities in society also include place inequalities that make certain people and groups more vulnerable than others. This has been labelled as the hazards-of-place model of vulnerability (Cutter et al. 2003). Such vulnerable populations are produced through an internal process within a society. For example, people belonging to a particular caste group, class, gender or ethnicity may be more vulnerable during an extreme environmental event like a flood, drought or cyclone. Such vulnerable groups are produced due to endogenous factors in a society. On the contrary, there are certain factors that are not initially present in the population but are introduced and induced from external sources. Colonial influence is one such factor. This may be labelled as an exogenous factor that contributes towards the making of vulnerable populations. Not only do populations become vulnerable due to induced policies of governance based on a profit motive for an external agency, but the ecology is also altered to increase profit, as happened in the case of colonial rule in India. This may be understood as ecological ruptures induced to fulfil certain colonial

aims. This paper largely talks about vulnerability as an exogenous, imported and induced factor that alters the ecology and hence makes landscapes and people vulnerable. The paper further argues that colonialism generates a certain form of knowledge that categorises such extreme events like floods within the category of 'natural' disasters that are otherwise not.

### Transforming Nature through Colonial Capitalism and Creating Ecological Ruptures

The colonial flood control in India can be taken as an example to understand how ecologies are transformed to create vulnerabilities and, in turn, disasters. D'Souza (2006) has argued that flood control in India needs to be seen not as a benevolent act of the British to save the population and their resources from floods, but as a political project of maximum utilisation of resources and in turn oppression of the masses. Flood control fitted well with the colonial agenda of administration and control of the population. By the construction of embankments and canal systems in the name of flood control and better irrigation, the British actually altered the course and behaviour of the rivers that led to increased flooding that needed much more control and administration. D'Souza (2006) has argued that the idea and practice of flood control must be evaluated at the level of ideology and a construct that is very much a part of the larger colonial project that is influenced by colonial capitalism and political economy. D'Souza (2006) goes a step further and says that flood control in India was very much integral to the 'strategies of empire.'

Ecological control in the form of controlling river systems was actually a strategy for disciplining the colonial subject. This disciplining was done by the colonial administration in the name of extracting more taxes from agricultural income, as it was believed that taming the river systems would have a positive impact on the crop yield. However, it was completely overlooked that flood control in fact transformed once flood-dependent ecosystems into flood-vulnerable ecologies. Studies on British canal systems and irrigation technologies have suggested that the focus of the so-called colonial science or imperial science was on increasing agricultural productivity by substantially altering the ecology (D'Souza, 2006). In doing so, however, such imperial science, in association with the larger aims of governance and control, overlooked the negative impacts that it would have on the lives and livelihoods of people in the long run. Here, the traditional and indigenous water technologies were at loggerheads with British hydraulic engineering. The political power of the British empire and the hegemonic nature of the imperial science deemed fit to blame the indigenous technologies for less

agricultural productivity and projected that the solution to this problem was with colonial hydraulic engineering, even if that was at the cost of altering the ecology and making it vulnerable forever (D'Souza, 2006). D'Souza (2006) argues that the Mahanadi Delta in Eastern India was transformed from a flood-dependent agricultural landscape to a flood-vulnerable area. Flooding of the Mahanadi River was controlled by building multi-purpose reservoirs at the river head. Prior to this, flooding was controlled by simply building or repairing small embankments. Large public works projects in the form of reservoirs were capitalist interventions to alter nature itself to generate greater revenues to support the military.

Similarly, in the context of the Indus Valley, Benjamin Weil (2006) has argued that colonial flood control was based on technical and engineering solutions, which were in sharp conflict with the indigenous systems of flood warning and control. During the colonial rule, there were repeated attempts to save the towns from the Indus River flooding. These attempts came to be dominated by technological solutions at the cost of neglecting the more local and indigenous solutions. Weil further argues that during the colonial rule in the region, the "engineering mentality" became dominant at the cost of "local knowledge" (ibid: 3, 5). This happened even when there were many practical shortcomings of the former. The colonial engineering technology mentality replaced the "precautionary approach to environmental management" (ibid: 3). Such an approach developed in the local context as the local agriculture was more flood-dependent. In contrast to this, the colonial approach was based on looking at the river more from the perspective of navigation, and the changing nature of the river was detrimental to this. In order to fix river navigation, bigger technological solutions were required, thus local needs and wants took a backseat.

Nirmal Sengupta (1980) has exemplified this in the case of colonial South Bihar in Northeast India. According to him, the indigenous tank and channel irrigation system during the colonial regime in South Bihar was altered. In this traditional form of irrigation system, also known as the tank irrigation system, a small dam is built on the river using burnt clay, and water is allowed to collect behind this earthen embankment. Once collected, the water is then released into small channels or canals through sluice doors for irrigating the fields. This irrigation system was not a permanent one and could not withstand the heavy flow of water during floods. The tank irrigation system also did not alter the course of the river. Tank technology is considered to be environmentally sustainable and

better suited for water management than big dams. Being small in size, tanks are more decentralised mechanisms of water storage (Shah, 2008). The change towards an irrigation system based on modern hydraulic technology was a by-product of the changes that were brought about by the British in the revenue regimens of the area. The new tax policies of the colonial administration were aimed at increasing their revenue, factoring land only as a resource. They completely overlooked the land- water system that was integral to the ecology and therefore economy of the region. In order to reclaim more land, the British completely altered the indigenous tank and channel irrigation system and moved towards a more permanent reservoir system that was not sensitive towards the flood-dependent ecology of the area.

Rule and profit were the two guiding principles of the colonial capitalist and administrative regimen. This fact came out explicitly in one of the reports titled Dying Wisdom, released by the Centre for Science and Environment, a Delhi-based non-governmental organisation (Agrawal and Narain, 1997). The report suggested that during the colonial regimen in India, the indigenous water-harvesting systems declined and degraded as a result of colonial policies aimed at maximising profit and governance. The colonial tax regimen made land an important commodity from which revenues had to be extracted. Community control and ownership of the land were a large barrier to realising this aim. This was due to the fact that community ownership of land made it difficult to extract revenue. When lands are held in individual names and titles, it becomes easier to collect revenue for a piece of land. This is because individuals can be coerced into giving revenue by powerful administrators. Assigning land to individuals led to the institutionalisation of land as private property that facilitated further revenue extraction. Land as private property of an individual also ensured that it would be available to the colonial administration whenever they needed it for building large dams. Destroying the indigenous water-harvesting systems was an integral part of the colonial agenda. Colonial hydraulic engineering made a strong case in favour of dams and embankments to tame the river systems that ensured perennial irrigation for settled agriculture. This was possible, as it had the necessary administrative backing, at the cost of destroying the indigenous systems.

Perennial irrigation canal systems aimed at increasing productivity and crop yield around the year came with their own consequences. Studying the consequences of the British canal system in Panjab, Agnihotri (1996) says that it disrupted an entire alternative form of economy based on pastoralism.

Flood-based irrigation canal systems developed indigenously by the people of the Panjab made agriculture a seasonal activity and thus gave ample scope to pursue other alternatives in the form of pastoralism. The new canal system, however, eroded the vibrant pastoral economy. Groups that were earlier engaged in pastoralism who took agriculture related activities only occasionally had to invest more of their entire time and energy in the agriculture sector.

### Colonial Capitalism and its Roots in the Western Nature-Culture Dichotomy

The colonial interaction with nature and its transformative effect needs to be analysed within a broader framework of the colonial perception of themselves as being superior to the 'other'. Here, the 'other' stands for groups of people and communities who were part of the colonial empire and the environment that were considered inferior to the colonisers. Within the Judo-Christian myth, nature has always played foul with humans and therefore needs to be tamed.

> [T]he Christian church was elaborating theological doctrine that set humans, like God, in transcendence over nature as early as the third century……Christian abolition of pagan animism altered human environment relations from mutuality between sentient beings to a more utilitarian perspective towards the natural world that eventually became dominant in the 17th and 18th centuries (Redmond, 1999:21, cited in Oliver-Smith, 2004: 12 and 13).

It is interesting to see how social groups, specifically tribal groups, with their belief systems, interact with nature. It is quite evident from the fact that pre-literate, pre-capitalist and pre-industrial aboriginal and indigenous societies had a very different relationship with nature when compared with capitalist, modern, industrial societies. Ethnographic literature on the Aboriginal groups suggests that these groups have been living in harmony with their environment from time immemorial. In the Indian context, L.P. Vidyarthi (1963) in his study among the Malers of the Bihar district has shown that there existed a nature-man-spirit complex among these tribes that was based on their close association with the natural world and the world of spirits. Such a perception of and interaction with the natural world is very different from the utilitarian interaction of Western colonisers. At an ontological level, the aboriginal interaction with their natural world subscribes to the relational ontology as opposed to the occupying mindset of the colonialists. Another example from among the Nayakas of South India is worth mentioning here. Nayaka's perception and relation

to their environment can be located within the frame of the parent-child relationship. The Nayakas consider the environment as their parent and perceive themselves as their children. They treat the forests as their parents.

> For Nayaka….major ritual involves getting together with the forest and other supernatural spirits. These spirits visit them in their hamlets, and they all share cooked food (normally done within the domestic unit), converse, sing and dance (the Nayaka even share cigarettes with the visiting spirits). For Nayaka, at least, this is an occasion where people and supernatural spirits voice their expectations and complaints - the Nayaka demand to be looked after and fed, and the spirits request them to follow in the ways of their parents (Bird-David, 1993:119).

In the backdrop of Social Darwinism, a sense of cultural and civilising superiority developed among the colonialists. This led to the Othering of everything that was non-white and non-European in a way that was inferior to them. Considering themselves as the epitome of human civilisation, it became a white-man's burden to civilise the 'Other.' Transforming nature as it was a given 'Other' was within this agenda of bringing about a social and economic transformation (Harvey, 1996).

Within the Western philosophical discourse, there always existed a nature-culture dichotomy. The human identity was constructed as being cultural against the backdrop of nature. Nature was always seen as given by divine powers, which it is the duty of humans to work and use for their own benefit and for the benefit of humanity as a whole. Within this nature-culture dichotomy, culture is seen and projected as superior to nature. The idiom of nature has been used to conceptualise certain human groups that were supposed to be living in 'natural' conditions. They are the ones that needed to be controlled by people who were 'cultured'. Nature thus encompassed the entire ecosystems of the colonies. Nature was objectified and commoditised for the benefit of the colonial powers. Domination of the colonial power and subordination of the subjects was thus naturalised (see Plumwood, 2006; Descola and Palsson, 1996; Ingold, 1992; Hewitt, 1983; Horigan, 1988).

The inferiority of nature to culture came to be associated with the idea that human activity on nature will not only benefit humanity but it will also be beneficial for nature. Nature was seen as having an essence that comprised of rawness, crudeness, violence and aggression. It was firmly believed that

this aggression could only be tamed by human interventions. Such interventions were supposed to bring order in chaos, which is represented by nature. Human reason was seen as a tool for the emancipation of nature. This gave way to ecological imperialism as envisioned by Alfred Crosby (1986). He was of the view that such an interventionist approach led to large-scale transformation of the ecology in the context of the Europeans gaining entry into the New World. Crosby saw it as a sort of biological imperialism where the Europeans brought with them a whole new range of diseases, not only to humans but also to the flora and fauna of the region (Crosby, 1986; Murphy, 1994). The European expansion led to a massive ecological transformation of the New World. The indigenous populations and their ways of life in the New World were seen as inferior to European knowledge. This gave them the necessary moral imperative to bring about massive changes in the ways people used to lead their lives (Murphy, 1994).

Colonial expansionism led to a large-scale ecological rupture that adversely affected the human-nature interaction. As detailed above, certain landscapes were transformed into flood-vulnerable areas due to such imperialist interventions. Disasters from this perspective seem more like a product of ideologies and specific social and political forms rather than being 'natural.'

### 'NATURAL' DISASTERS: ARE THEY PART OF THE SOCIAL REALM OR EMANATE FROM OUTSIDE THE SOCIETY?

The emergence of the concept of 'natural' disasters is as recent as the turn of the 18th century. The era of enlightenment, the age of reason, has its bearing on locating the cause of natural disasters within the observable and explainable phenomenon of nature. This was in complete contrast to a more traditional way of explaining nature's wrath in India, which was found in the immoral deeds of human beings. Human action and thought in initiating disasters occupy the centre stage in the Indian traditional paradigm. The doctrine of Karma within Hindu philosophy holds that every action has a reaction. Good Karma leads to good consequences, and evil Karma leads to destruction. The pain and sufferings of people, due to disasters in this traditional view, are a result of Karma. Past deeds result in present disasters and related sufferings (Kapur, 2010). Thus, disasters within this paradigm were seen more as a form of punishment due to one's evil Karma rather than having a cause located in nature itself. This locates disasters within the realm of social and collective duty. Society and what was going on within it in terms of the deeds of people, had a direct bearing on the cause of disasters. Nature's wrath was also seen as a form of social control wherein the mere thought of getting

punished by nature in case one committed immoral deeds acted as a deterrent and helped in bringing about social order. Human actions were connected not only to human good but also to the betterment of nature at large (Kapur, 2010). By dissociating disasters from the realm of the social on one hand and associating them with the realm of the natural, the colonial forces tried to introduce technological solutions in the form of large dams to control floods. Engineering solutions for controlling the environment actually and eventually controlled the population. In the name of technological solutions, that form of knowledge was upheld to be superior to local knowledge. Flood control, therefore, also became a tool for social control.

Technological solutions, however, changed with colonialism and its forms of knowledge, making inroads into colonies like India and elsewhere in the world. Such forms of knowledge disconnected nature from the moral laws. Physical processes having scientific explanations took centre stage in explaining the cause of 'natural' disasters. Anu Kapur (2010) is of the opinion that the concept of 'natural disaster' originated during the 18$^{th}$ century. One of the important shifts that the concept of natural disasters brought about was that they were now seen as events emerging from outside the society rather than events embedded within the social and collective realm. The human-nature dichotomy is the hallmark of such an explanation. Nature and, therefore, natural processes were not only seen as different from humans but also seen as an agent that is external to human beings. The human-nature linkage was completely snapped within this paradigm.

When looking at India, one of the countries in the world that has a long history of colonial rule, the idea of natural disasters gained much popularity. Colonial rule and imperial science had much to do with grounding the idea of natural disasters in Indian policy documents and the overall psyche of the people. It has been argued by Kapur (2010) that with the coming of the British in India, a very specific mode of thinking was established based on Cartesian dualism that separates nature from the divine and also from the human. Western science and theories explaining disasters precipitated by earthquakes, floods and droughts, for example, started gaining currency and became very much an integral part of the British Empire. Theories that were developed in the West were couriered to the British Empire in India. Such theories and scientific advancements always helped the empire to establish hegemony over its subjects in India by rendering only Western forms of knowledge and knowing as the legitimate form and all other indigenous forms as redundant. These theories

explained that disasters were happening not because of any divine will but due to specific processes that could be deciphered and shown to have occurred. This led to prefixing 'natural' to the word disaster, which became a very common composite linguistic term (Kapur, 2010). More importantly, when disasters were viewed as natural, they were either beyond the control of human beings or could only be controlled using scientific technologies like building large dams. In all these, the idea of human vulnerabilities, inbuilt in the social system, took a backseat, and human societies absolved themselves from the responsibility of reducing human vulnerabilities.

The paradigm became so popular in the Indian context that disasters were seen as events caused by natural forces. The first-ever High-Powered Committee appointed by the Government of India in 1999 was given the task of laying down a systematic approach towards disasters and disaster management in India. The committee on disaster management was set up under the chairmanship of Mr. J. C. Pant, then a high-ranking civil servant secretary in the Government of India. The committee also had members from different ministries, non-profit organisations and experts from relevant fields. The committee, when its report came out, reiterated that disasters are events having natural or human-made causes. It further mentioned, and I quote from Kapurthat, that "disruption in India is ascribed to frequent natural disasters like earthquakes, landslides, droughts, floods and cyclones and occasional human-made tragedies like the Bhopal gas leak" (2010:122). From this, one can infer that the high-powered committee considered natural disasters with natural causes as the most frequent disaster type and that human-made disasters were rare. This further led to completely segregating natural from human-made disasters, and they were classified and categorised based on this distinction.

The idea of natural disasters got so ingrained with the political and policy think tanks that major documents focused solely on the idea of 'natural'. If one looks at another high-powered committee report on disaster management released in the year 2002, then we find that it talks about thirty-one types of disasters that are grouped under five categories. Out of these five categories, four belong to the realm of the natural. Putting the blame squarely on nature for disastrous events, absolving the state and the central government of their responsibilities and they are therefore transformed into agencies that simply provide relief in the face of disasters. In 2019, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India, released the third and latest edition of "The Vulnerability Atlas of India".

This atlas is dedicated purely to the idea of natural disasters as it focuses solely on natural hazards like earthquakes, windstorms, floods, landslides, and thunderstorms. Vulnerability maps pertaining to these disasters and damage risk to housing in different parts of India were the subject matter of this atlas. The atlas also contains various messages from ministers and secretaries of the ministry at the beginning of the report. These messages project India as a country prone to natural calamities and hazards.

## CONCLUSION

The idea of natural, therefore, seems all pervasive. Socio-cultural, structural and historical vulnerabilities have taken a back seat. Ecological ruptures and vulnerabilities created due to such ruptures are not part of the discourse at the highest level of policy-making. Reducing historical vulnerabilities is something that needs to be done first if we are serious about reducing the disaster induced losses to the lives and livelihoods of people. Focusing majorly on the 'natural' disasters that may not be considered 'natural' in the context of the ecological ruptures brought about by specific forms of social, political and economic structures, actually amounts to overlooking disasters completely. We need to understand that the environment does not have an essence, but it has a history. Different political-economic forces and forms of society have their specific impacts on nature, and that needs to be acknowledged before jumping into the task of managing disasters. If we do not take this into account, then we most probably will be dealing with just the symptoms and not the cause of the phenomenon under consideration.

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# HOME, LENS AND REFLECTION: A SPECTRUM OF MOVEMENT AND MOMENTS

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**ABSTRACT:** 2020 brought in waves of social-distancing where everyone except essential workers was bound to avoid normal physical communication, interactions and travel. Amidst this physical disconnectedness and negativism, rays of hope healed many creative practitioners who re-envisioned their domain of practice with sensitivity and responsiveness to their surroundings. The set up at homes transformed into performance spaces; various series of online sessions in the form of digital concerts were held, interview sessions and Zoom classes became quite regular. As a support to each other in the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, there arose a flow of solidarity and digital connectedness through the medium of creative arts. The digital platform for performances, which otherwise were not so frequent, was used in a vibrant way creating multiple interactions which changed the dynamics of performance orientation and its reception. The present paper shares a few reflections as I observed some of the series of digital performances and online activities done during the period of Covid pandemic. Both as an observer and participant, I engaged with interactions of the moment and movement of the performance dynamics and their performative liveness.

**KEYWORDS:** dance; Sattriya dance; liveness; digital performance; dancing body; pandemic dance films.

## INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin the paper with a quote from one of the famous national dailies, *The Hindustan Times.* It reads:

> In times like these where people are forced to insulate themselves, dance and music are slowly becoming a common way to bring people together and cheer them on. The internet is full of free concerts, and celebrated dancers and artists are beaming out art from their living rooms, making the experience so much more real and personal. Just what the doctor

> ordered—to spread hope and reassurance. A lot of performances are also being shared on the internet as a way of keeping people engaged and positive (Lobo, 2020).

The isolation during the pandemic filled with an atmosphere of gloominess reached out into the minds of multitudes creating a global space within one's own body where creative professionals carved out expressions of solidarity and communion. The pandemic, amidst distress and despair, also created an alternative global connectedness, somewhat erasing borders and extending virtually the reach of space, home and relationality. Dance being a manifestation of a 'living attribute' inspired many bodies to communicate despite this global sense of disconnectedness, distance and isolation during the pandemic through a medium suggesting a sense of solidarity amidst human tragedy. The upsurge of creative and artistic flows during the pandemic through dance narratives, films, writings, virtual meetings, and tributes, re-enforced a spatial connection beyond its physical space. This spatial connection for me is like a reflective space. A reflection beckoning a ray of hope that we could often connect online, amidst darkness and despair which moved beyond its physicality in its role of revealing virtual presence and vitalizing significant performative action. The stories and reports coming through social media posts, newspapers, TV and radio intensified the emotional dynamics that created a new refractive spatial paradigm of connectedness. The virtual connectedness, phenomenologically, became more real with its sense of connecting, transmitting the potential for 'aliveness' (Auslander, 2012: 3)[1]. One must note here that, while dance films, webinars, sessions of work from home, online class were not new, the acceptance of the digital presentations as the only source of global connectedness during the pandemic made its impactful presence greater.

## Moments and Movements: A Subjective Note on Liveness of Performance

Moments are subjective and involve a series of occurrences with an interplay of emotions. These inner movements create a space that unfolds one's reflective journey. The sojourn of reflection, a personal narrative, is manifested in many creative forms. The streaming of my reflections and refractions of thoughts and the performance of digital movements inspired this article. I sought a connection amidst the disconnected spaces which surfaced predominantly during the various lockdown phases in India. As creative practitioners, a group of dancers under my curation thought of expressing our multiple strands of connecting thoughts through a short video "Which Fork We Take" (PIDF, 2020). Located in various parts of the globe, the process strung us together through the

expressive medium of the camera with the elucidation of text written by noted cultural activist, of India Dr. Arshiya Sethi. While the video output was widely acclaimed by the viewers, the process of making videos during the pandemic situation left a deep emotional impact. The sense of connectedness in sharing a message of empathy and compassion was overwhelming for each of the collaborators. One must also remember that for many of us, imagining a performance in front of the camera was very challenging. To quote Arendrall here, '[d]ance and film share an uneasy relationship when it comes to the primacy of the performance space' (Arendell, 2016:1). The traditional physical performance context, especially in Indian dance traditions, is held with utmost primacy and significance. While documentation of live performances on various physical stages has taken place, dance for the camera in traditional Indian performance contexts, although not new, gained a new impetus during the pandemic. For many artists, the camera or the digital space gradually became the only creative platform to express their views and thoughts during the pandemic. The analysis of the recording process, which initiates the liveness of performance, makes for an interesting reimagining of performance. To consider it critically with the ideas of Leeker et al, the liveness of performance is seen at various phases and is addressed for its performativity / performative turn with a constant interaction of human and machine agency (Leeker et al., 2017:9).

The video "Which Fork We Take" (PIDF, 2020) was aimed at expressing communion and solidarity through a screenplay that brought together a range of performers, their physical movements and emotional moments (Figure 1). As a curator, associated with the video process, it brought to me a cycle of actions and its performative liveness. Various moments of responsive involvement were transmuted into movements that evoked intense emotional states.

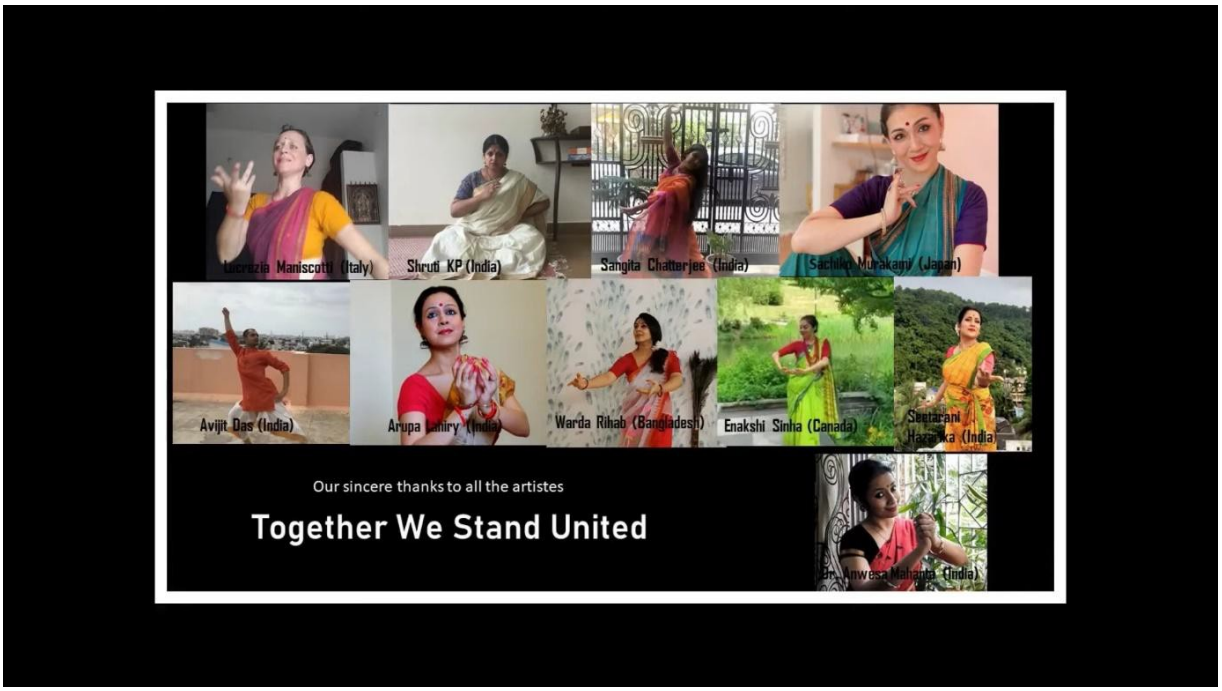


**Figure 1**: Artists from various spaces respond to the call in the video "Which Fork We Take" (PIDF, 2020).

The video can be reviewed under the following fractionated process to analyse the spectrum of moments and movements:

1. A writer (Dr Arshiya Sethi) pens down her thoughts on the pandemic.

2. A team of dancers located at different geographical locations - Lucrezia Maniscoti (Italy), Shruti K. P. (India), Sangita Chatterjee (India), Sachiko Murakami (Japan), Avijit Das (India), Arupa Lahiry (India), Wada Rihab (Bangladesh), Enakshi Sinha (Canada), Seetarani Hazarika (India) and Anwesa Mahanta (India) - responded to the poem through their interpretations and gestures, embodying the moment through movement.

3. The curator conceptualised the movement frames and sequenced them in synchronisation with the music.

4. The dancers were framed, keeping in view their respective locations, to capture the moments and movements of their thoughts.

5. The editor and choreographer picked up each performance and, in line with the progress of the performance, linked them to the narratives.

6. When streamed, the audience as an onlooker from their respective locations with their interpretations became a participant in this moment of connection - an emotional movement.

The poem rendered by Dr Sethi was given to the respective collaborators with the freedom to interpret the text as to what it meant to each of them. A different cycle of liveness evolved in virtual performance, in contrast to the regular live presentations of traditional Indian performances, which is practised as an experiential and embodied process of ideas in a spectrum of moments and movements In citing a few more references of video performances during the pandemic in a later part of the essay, I highlight insights into the interactive play of body, space, and camera – and the sequences of the 'intra-actions' of moments and movements referred to by Leeker et al in quoting Barad (2017: 9)[2]. In due process it speculates over the process of capturing images choreographed and framed for the lens and the gradual spatial connection with the virtual view through the camera, which became a popular home for performance during the pandemic.

### Insight into Motion and Stillness: A Body-Mind Interaction

Sondra Fraleigh, while discussing dancing bodies, wrote: "Dance, in its essence, is an embodied art; the body is the lived (experiential) ground of the dance aesthetic" (Fraleigh, 1987: xiii). Traditional Indian Dance practice is often observed as a heritage reservoir of embodied knowledge systems of intangible cultural heritage by its practitioners. Weaving multiple streams of individual interpretations of performance, it is a legacy that is passed on as ancestral knowledge. A dance aesthete or traditional practitioner curves pathways through contemporary realities to embrace movement and moment in their liveness. And here, the multiple dynamics of the imaginative mind of the practitioner, the structured grammar of a dance form, and a liberating dancing body interact to create a collaborative performance in its essence of movement and moment. An interactive play of both movement and moments is seen in the performance that establishes a liveness. Liveness here can be seen as a celebration of the moment with bodies interacting with time and space in all its reverberance. Every enactment of body and gestural interpretation is realised as a movement, with a 'liveness' [3] of bodies in presence (Davis, 2012: 501). A body's experiential approach to the movement through a pathway of emotional dynamics transforms a movement into a moment that channels emotion into a motion. It is a celebration of the presence of the bodies in the performing space that brings in a reverberating liveness. And every motion of the dance becomes defined by an emotional connection. A two-way cathartic release can be seen here - a dance aesthete expressing her/ his narrative and the audience moving to the thoughts of the imaginations of the dancer.

Many in the dance community would say that dance is an expression from the heart; otherwise, it is just sterile body motion (Laws, 2002:5)[4]. Here, a story of personal narration often reaches the minds of many performers and observers. A narrative of a dancing body expresses a story through a personalised interpretation that connects many bodies and minds through the channelling of emotion in motion (Mahanta, 2021a). In Indian dance tradition, where the grammar of the traditional form follows a very structured and rigorous discipline, and emphasis is placed on expressive content in multiple ways through the modes of *angika* (body), *vacika* (voice), *aharya* (costume), and *satvika* (enactment of an emotive mood from within). Ascribed in the *Natyasastra,* one of the ancient treatises of Indian performance aesthetics, modes of expression are illustrated through body, voice, costume and emotions, which are distinctive features of each performance tradition. While the modes of expression hold their own individual significance, an emotion gets into motion through an interconnected stream of thought connecting mind, body and voice that shapes a moment in the performance. That moment connects the onlookers to the dance narrative. The generation of emotions moves the mind towards the performance and plays a dynamic interaction of motion and stillness, thereby transforming dance—a journey of connection. It is a journey that traverses into the 'realm of senses' (McRobbie, 1997: 216) or towards 'an arena of self-expression,' which holds the power to stir the minds of the viewers away from the routine puzzles of life. The process of cognition towards this possible connection of dance includes an embodied progression, as an 'integrated self' (Mahanta, 2021b: 33), where the dancing body, in response to time and space, undergoes sequential moments of stillness and movements involving a cyclic response of *angika* and *satvika* in addition to *vacika*and *aharya.* Dana Mills interprets the embodied process of cognition in dance and its narrative as a 'multi-dimensional self' where the body undergoes a series of 'contraction' and 'release'(Mills, 2017: 11) . In the video of "Which Fork We Take" (PIDF, 2020) the dancers within the limited space embraced the moment of the cause and moved their bodies to 'release' their thoughts in their respective spaces. The spine of their bodies embraced every element of the space with a command and expansion of bodies, nevertheless in 'contraction' of the respective dance forms and their structural parameters[5].

**CAMERA AND BODY – A SPATIAL HOME**

Saint poet and philosopher, Srimanta Sankaradeva, [6] who was the fountainhead of the Bhakti Movement in Assam, in one of his philosophical treatises, *Anadi Patana,* mentioned, 'Manara Kalpana Ito Samaste Jagata...Ase Mana Samasta Pranira Hridayata' – *Anadi Pata* (1998, 297)[7], (my translation: The world is an imagination of the mind and all creatures possess a mind in their hearts). His statement leads us to the uncharted paradigm of space existing within our bodies, making a co-web of interrelation and coexistence. The lived experience of disconnectedness during the pandemic created a body of artistic works that constantly reminded us of the performing body that connected stories of multiple bodies. The social realities of suffering anxiety, pain and separation – 'BOXED' in moments found a cathartic release in movements (see Ratnam, 2020). Alienation due to the pandemic embodied a translocation of a spatial home for the body through digital spaces. And few, as expressed from their creative work, made choices of finding pathways for extension and growth that translocated a global home within the dancing bodies. Various digital films invoked the responses of the 'body' and were displayed in their expressive note of distance, migration, quest and myriads of emotions. Special mention should be given to a series of curations during the lockdowns when dance professionals weaponised their creativity to fight against the morbid situation of the pandemic (see DanzLenz, 2022). *Narthaki,* a renowned digital portal for dance in India, led by the eminent choreographer and presenter, Dr Anita Ratnam, commissioned short dance films as reflections of the dancing body. To quote her from one of the interviews with A. Bhuyan for *Mint Lounge,* in which Dr Ratnam says:

> It started as choreography homework—not something that would get you a gig or that you could enter for an award. But this is a dancer's response to here and now, to the pandemic and to what it means to be boxed in…For instance, the most important thing to a dancer is breath and this pandemic is attacking that (Ratnam, cited in Bhuyan, 2020).

In due process, the project by *Narthaki* evolved, as the dancers stepped beyond their set notions of the physical stage to rethink movements for the camera in view of filmmaking and editing (Bhuyan, 2020). These commissioned films are an autoethnographic account through their choreographic presentations. On another account, the acclaimed film series "The Pandemic Dances" by Richard Daniels, expresses his autobiographical account of the pandemic. The directorial note reads:

> The Pandemic Dances is a product of the times and limitations through which we are living. This series is made with at-hand elements: smart phones, portable lighting, computers, green screen, and shot entirely within the confines of my apartment. The series aims to capture elements of the experience of this time through close-up footage of body movements and gesture work, and is a natural outgrowth of my previous Dances for an [sic] iPhone films. Yet this will be a first effort in capturing autobiographical work on film (Daniels, 2021).

On a subjective note, the phases of lockdown with people's sufferings, loss, physical distancing, movement restrictions, recoveries, a victory of life, newer births, and economic setbacks to mention a few, have generated a stormy wave of oscillating thoughts which encouraged me to probe within myself the questions of existence and sustenance. At one moment, I felt a deep pain for my fellow human beings, but the period also brought me closer to nature than ever before. The moments of life and the co-existing dualities - pain and joy, life and death, futility and hope, ignorance and knowledge seeped in an experiential, somatic and embodied view, where my body related these dual tones of life and the phenomena of sustenance, preservation and destruction searching for an equilibrium or a basic balance. Interestingly, Sattriya Dance,[8] (Figure 2), which is one of the distinctive dance traditions of Assam, trains a body with this primal lesson of equilibrium or the basic stance which centres the performer's motions. As a practitioner of this ancient dance tradition, the basic stance termed as *'Ora'* emerged metaphorically as a sense of balance. On a similar note, Steve Paxton wrote how "dance refocuses our focusing mind on very basic existence, and time, space, gravity open to creativity. This seems to me a reminder of nature, of our natures" (Paxton, cited in Kourlas, 2020:2). The unmoving point of balance in *Ora* became a window for the dancing body to recognize the process of movement translating every emotion to a motion of 'life' and its energy. Thus, the equilibrium position *Ora* signals an important equilibrium point of our mind that becomes a nerve centre for emotional absorption and at the same time the foundation for steering emotion in motion.

**Figure 2**: A Dancer in the Sattriya Practice of Ora. Source: Personal Archives (Anwesa Mahanta)

### CAMERA – A NEW SPATIAL CONNECTION

The camera has always been a powerful potential performing space which in the field of dance is realised in the form of, for example, screen dance, dance films, dance sequences in films and documentaries. However, for art forms that are not usually presented through virtual platforms, the digital platform had to be embraced forcibly or organically during the time of the pandemic, especially by the traditional arts sector and more specifically the community of performing arts in Assam. There was a point when the digital interface became the only platform for communication and sharing performances. Zooming into the motion dynamics of a dance form which was usually embodied on the periphery of the lens, the body tuning to the camera space demanded attention. For example, taking online classes and, more so in the virtual concerts, the challenge was to reorient the pedagogy of dance to suit the virtual interface. Presenting or teaching in the absence of performing bodies, yet exploring and filling the spaces with motion and emotion demanded a reconceptualisation of choreography.

In a discussion on video cameras and expressional movement kinetics, Candra et al. (2018), analysed experimental video camera work:

> The camera frames the world of dance, so it can produce mood and create an atmosphere because it can convey emotions, stories, present perspectives, and parts of the action. Through the use of shooting and different shooting angles, the camera is able to take the viewer's point of view to put a viewpoint that they do not usually get. The lens can enter the dancer's kinesphere which is a personal area around dancers moving with it as a dancer so focus on motion detail and allow an intimacy or closeness that cannot be reached within the context of live performances (ibid: 219)[9].

The reflective physical space as captured within the lens of the camera in a refracted mode became the new space for connection, be it the facial muscles, elaborate eye movements, expressions and physical movements. The captured dimension of the body through the camera lens became the new visible form of dance through suggestive choreography. Hence, the traditional performances, which are otherwise being trained with different kinesthetics, achieve a new body visualisation for the lens. The content of the choreography framed for the lens takes the foreground in such cases. However, during the pandemic, the presentations took place in the new and unusual performance spaces of the living room, terrace, balcony or study room, while the domestic lights and sarees became decorative backdrops. The whole process outlined a new definition of performance space beyond the structured dimension of customary studios and theatres. The dancing bodies were reaffirmed as potential transformative tools that embraced space, physical and beyond, re-imaging and re-framing its existential structure. While in the live presentations, the dancing body is perceived holistically with the music, motion, choreography and lighting, the camera in the screen dance is framed more as a 'partner' (Arendell, 2016:2). Every scene in the video dance is a framed angle with suggestive choreography embracing the body in the lens of the camera. Thus, a single hand captured in the lens can have a powerful presence in the camera lens, which otherwise in the live presentation would be seen in a holistic perspective of the body in the space with lights, costume and position.

**Figure 3**: A Dancer in an Unusual Performance Space in the video "Which Fork We Take" (PIDF, 2020).

### ABSENT AND PRESENT BODIES – DIGITAL LIVENESS

A body in preparation for a performance undergoes a multilayered interaction and engagement, which is the process of performance itself. Whether it is the internalisation of the content of the performance or the choreography, a graphic visualisation of the context of the actual presentation from an onlooker's perspective is also imagined by the performer. While such a process of an on-stage performance is empowered by the presence of other physical bodies like fellow performers, musicians, directors, technical team and spectators, many a time the dancer/performer also undertakes several sessions of rehearsals with the imagined presence of these bodies to internalise the context of performance. The phenomenon is also observed from the audience's point of view when the imprints of the live performance resonate deeply in one's mind even after many years. My memories of being overwhelmed by the emotions of the movements and the lyricality of some of the concerts are still fresh in my mind, with this duality of presence yet the physical absence of bodies in performance. In the digital space, too, this process further gets expanded with the presence and absence of performing bodies at multiple levels. While the audience sees the final output of the video on the screen with the dance and the dancer, the bodies in presence behind the camera (camera operator, editor, director, lighting organiser and sound recordist, for example) are not seen. To speculate further from the opposite end, the imagined presence of the onlooker and their reception

do play an unvoiced role while executing every frame of the camera and the captured image of the performer's actions. This interaction of 'presence' and 'absence' of bodies in a performance is a continuous whole and is interlinked with each other at various points.

Furthermore, to elaborate on the nature of bodies in performance, in the light of Indian Aesthetics, performing bodies are seen as a *patra* (Ghosh, 1950:616). I consider *patra* as an earthen pot holding the immense potential to absorb what gradually transforms into a large reservoir of knowledge. The embodying process of a dance form through the meditative thoughts of a dancer responds to their surroundings and expresses the reflections of their mind through every nerve, muscle, limb, and part of the body – ascribed as *anga, pratyanga* and *upanga*[10]. Rising to the challenge of the pandemic, the artistic forms in multiple ways reflected a "body-of-ideas" (Foster, 1997:235) through respective performing bodies in applying newer techniques of performances, in the unusual set of performance spaces, adopting the mode of live streaming or telecast of their work on social media platforms and other digital spaces. Vitalising the source of inspiration and energy from the surrounding lives, the body in practice, found its expressive forums through lenses that ranged from high-definition cameras to mini phone or laptop cameras. Richard Daniels writes about five performances:

> [i]t's lockdown - we cried, we laughed, we stressed, we cooked. A pandemic narrative is suggested in five short dance films: A Dance for A; Zooming; Nature Morte; Turbulence; and Test Kitchen. Employing at-hand technology - computers, iPhones, portable lighting, green screen - all films are shot in a single apartment (2021).

The video "Which Fork We Take" (PIDF, 2020) too, emphasised the similar use of the tools by Daniels during lockdown. In contrast to the usual film production, with high definition cameras, specialised equipment of lighting and sets and a large technical team, Daniels' pandemic dance films also had a powerful commentary about the application of these very basic technological tools like phone cameras, webcams, table lights and computers. One must note that, while the emotive content found its potential platform, the narrative content of the performing body found a different dimension through the lens. The 'liveness of an experience' (Auslander, 2012:5) in a regular dance presentation took a turn during the pandemic using technology. While the pre-pandemic phase saw many

experimental works with digital technology, the digital frames during the pandemic period became the only choice for expressive sharing by the dancers.

Moreover, performance is a collaborative effort with the presence of the performer and audience in a digital environment, which transpired as digitally enlivened moments through Facebook Live, YouTube Live, or other means to live stream performances. These processes brought in a social co-presence with "online liveness" and "group liveness" (Auslander, 1999: 110) where people could comment and watch a performance together or with the option of watching later at one's convenience. This 'digital liveness', in the form of live streaming a presentation or seeing the recording of a live concert, brought in a range of performing bodies in action through its presence and absence.

### THE LENS AND THE EXTENDED BODY

Performing bodies, in their reference to narrating a subject, apply tools that allow an expansion of the body in space. Props, lighting tools, and even digital screenings, to name a few, have every possibility of being considered as an extended performing body with its course of interaction in the performance narrative. In fact, depending on the thematic content of a performance, narrative is seen to use cultural artefacts, and motifs (like masks and so forth) as part of the choreography. Such props not only add to the choreographic design but become an organic part of the performer's action thus forming an extended performing body (Mahanta, 2023:40). The camera lens in the dance films, in reference to the pandemic period, also became an extended dancing body, where the motion became textured through an interactive pattern between lens and dance, cameraperson and dancer, editor and choreographer. With the recording facility, experiencing the liveness of the performance met with a representative domain where the interactive pattern of performance happened at a refracted zone of 'liveness' with digital tools of Zoom, over-the-shoulder shots, and further advanced editing skills. Here, the whole notion of the expression of the body involved a presence of bodies and their distinctive roles through the camera lens and the editing board. From its vantage point of angles to the digital advancement of editing, the notion of body and its performativity defined a different paradigm of liveness, making motion and emotion visible through the involvement of 'bodies' captured by the performative aspect of the lens. This involved an entirely new embodied cognition (Shapiro and Spaulding, 2024) with the extended performing body of the lens in contrast to the

performing bodies on a live physical stage. The performative interactions of the bodies in general, always vary in each performance context depending on space, time, light, sound and mode of presentation (live or recorded). Thus, every subject captured within the frame of the lens in a digital space became the visible performing body of the choreography, dancing to the tune of the emotional content of a narrative (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**: Lens capturing the essence of the subjective content as part of the choreography Source: From the video, "Sakhi He: An Emovere" (Mahanta, 2021a).

## CONCLUSION

Within the disoriented conundrums and challenges that the pandemic placed us in, movements orient moments through an embodied cognition of arts that homes a space (Patraka, 2003:82) of its own within our system of knowledge, where we reflect and recover our identity. This idea of home and a sheltered space develops with the liveness of performing bodies through embodied knowledge (Tanaka, 2013:48). The emotional dynamics, as we situated ourselves within the social realities of the pandemic, connected to ways of virtual realities, which eld a multi-dimensional self of absent bodies, yet present, connected yet disconnected. The pulse of 'liveness' within digital performances and online premieres created a performative aspect in its social interaction, yet absent in its reality, finds a new acceptability of performance. The spatial paradigm of virtual performances and performing bodies with the digital lens as a translocated site for performance, with the camera/lens presenting

an extended dancing body, created a refracted zone of liveness of body and space – forming a new performance spectrum and identities.

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[1] The term here is used in reference to Philip Auslander's significant discussion on liveness in the digital culture. He mentions that: "My premise in Liveness is that liveness is not an ontologically defined condition but a historically variable effect of mediatization. It was the development of recording technologies that made it both possible and necessary to perceive existing representations as "live". Prior to the advent of these technologies (e.g., sound recording and motion pictures), there was no need for a category of "live" performance, for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility (Auslander, P. Digital Liveness A Historico-Philosophical Perspective *PAJ 102*, 2012, pp. 3–11).

[2] Leeker et al (2017) in illustrating the study of performativity in its multiple dimensions refers to 'intra actions' (Barad 2003, cited in ibid.) involving techo-social processes in the digital cultures. Barad referred to the term as a post humanist performativity study (ibid.).

[3] S. Davis discusses in details about the definition of liveness with an analysis on Auslander's observations on liveness and mediated performance.

[4] In one of his famous essays "The Dance of Shiva", A. Coomaraswamy (1957) says: "This is His dance. Its deepest significance is felt when it is realized that it takes place within the heart and the self….
"The dancing foot, the sound of the tinkling bells,
The songs that are sung and the varying steps,
The form assumed by our Dancing Gurupara—
Find out these within yourself, then shall your fetters fall away".

[5] The dance forms seen in the video represents various styles of Indian dance tradition like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Sattriya, Mohiniyattam, Manipuri, Kathak. Each of these traditional dance styles of India, have a specialised grammar and a structured methodology of expressions and movements which become a distinctive feature of the dance form itself.

[6] Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) was a Vaisnavite saint and philosopher who initiated the Bhakti Movement in Assam with an unparalleled creative resurgence of arts fusing philosophy, poetry, music, painting, crafts, textile, that left an unprecedented impact in the entire socio-cultural history of Assam. The first expressive form introduced as part of the Bhakti Movement was *Ankiya Bhaona* where dance, music and theatre were combined to make it a lyrico-dramatic spectacle. The saint-poet also conceived the ideas of Sattras, Vaisnavite institutions that could work as nodal centres for preserving and practicing these expressive forms as a functional unit of society. These sattras even today serve as important religious and cultural centres in Assamese society where the expressive forms are practiced as rituals. Further reading. P. J Mahanta.

[7] One of the important philosophical treatises written by Sankaradeva, the work is accompanied by illustrated paintings of Sattriya tradition. Also, these compositions are recited as part of the ritualistic service in the Vaisnavite monasteries called as *Sattras.* Chutia, D (ed*). Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardevar Bakyamrit*. Guwahati. Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha. 1998. Print.

[8] Sattriya Dance one of the distinctive dance traditions of Assam emerged in the wake of the Bhakti Movement in the Brahmaputra valley introduced by Srimanta Sankaradeva, his principal apostle, Sri Sri Madhavadeva, and their apostolate. The Sattra institution where dance came to be pursued as a part of the Bhakti faith, played a very important role in preserving and developing the form as a distinct tradition that came to be known as Sattriya Dance in later years.

[9] Video for capturing dance has developed multiple genres keeping in view its contextual uses and sites. Further reading see Candra et al, 2018.

[10] The *Natyasastra* understands the human body in its divisions of *Anga, Pratyanga* and *Upanga.* The *Anga* includes the six major parts like heads, hands, feet, chest, hips, sides, while the *pratyanga* includes shoulders, arms, stomach, thighs, shanks, back are the six *Pratyangas.* The *Upangas* include eyes, eyebrows, eyeballs, cheeks, nose, jaws, lips, tongue, chin, face, eyelids, teeth. Further reading see Rangacharya, 2010.