

Speakers at “State of Nature in India”

Mumbai, 23-25.08.2018

Amar Kanwar



Abstract

Comprehending Violence

Whenever I look long and hard at the landscape of ecological devastation around me I get compelled to look at the landscape of violence inside the human mind. It seems then that a greater understanding of the nature of human violence may lead to a deeper understanding of the disintegrating natural landscape. This may even lead us to imagine and appreciate other ways to resist, protect and nurture. My presentation will be an attempt to present a few propositions and speculations towards comprehending violence, within humans, between humans and between humans and nature.

Bio

Amar Kanwar is an artist and filmmaker. His recent solo exhibitions have been held at the Tate Modern, London and Minneapolis Institute of Art (2017-18), Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Mumbai (2016) and the Assam State Museum in collaboration with KNMA, Delhi and NEN, Guwahati (2015). In 2012 and 2014 at the Art Institute of Chicago, USA; Yorkshire Sculpture Park, U.K.; at TBA21, Vienna and the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland. Kanwar has also participated in Documenta 11, 12, 13 and 14 in Kassel, Germany (2002, 2007, 2012, 2017).

Amar Kanwar is the recipient of the 2017 Prince Claus Award, the 2014 Creative Time Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change, an Honorary Doctorate in Fine Arts, Maine College of Art, USA (2006) and the Edvard Munch Award for Contemporary Art, Norway (2005). His films have also received several awards like the Golden Gate Award, San Francisco International Film Festival, the Golden Conch, Mumbai International Film Festival, and Jury's Award, Film South Asia, Nepal.

Dr. Annapurna Garimella



Abstract

A Tree Grows in Bangalore

There is a movement afoot in Indian cities to create peaceful coexistence with trees as a necessity for a healthy and comfortable urbanity. The proposed felling of trees in South Delhi for redesigning prime urban space for new commercial-residential complexes and the cutting of large African rain trees to expand roads and build Namma Metro in Bangalore indicates that the life-cycle of trees and the urban horticultural philosophy that initiated their planting in the years after post-Independence is not always in alignment with the way urbanisation is changing and ideas of the good life evolve. This paper looks at nature in Bangalore's urban parks and roadsides as part of the large question of struggles over the definition of infrastructure and habitus.

Bio

Dr. Annapurna Garimella is a Delhi-based designer and an art historian. Her research focuses on late medieval Indic architecture and the history and practices of vernacular art forms in India after Independence. She heads Jackfruit Research and Design, an organization with a specialized portfolio of design, research and curation. Jackfruit's recent curatorial projects include Vernacular, in the Contemporary (Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi) and Faith: Manu Parekh in Benaras 1980-2012 (Art Alive, New Delhi) and Drawing 2014 (Gallery Espace, New Delhi), Mutable: Ceramic and Clay Art in India Since 1947 (Piramal Museum of Art, 2017) and Barefoot College of Craft in Goa (Serendipity Arts Festival, 2017). Her most recent book *The Artful Life of R. Vijay* (Serindia, 2016) is about a collaboration between a Rajasthani miniature painter and an expatriate American photographer. In 2017, she was awarded the India Today Emerging Curator of the Year Award. Garimella is also the Founder and Managing Trustee of Art, Resources and Teaching Trust, a not-for-profit organization that runs a public art library, conducts independent research projects and does teaching and advisement for college and university students and the general public.

Aruna Chandrasekhar



Abstract:

Radical Ecologies and Futures

For too long, Northern anthropocentric value systems have persisted in the global South in the form of extremely base debates that pit development versus the environment, with those who value the non-human dismissed as “anti-science” or “anti-national”¹. Meanwhile, proponents of biocentric egalitarianism, or deep ecology have faced critique² from social ecologists and ecofeminists for ascribing the same value to all life forms, in an age of mass extinctions and where patriarchy and exclusion still persist. But whether you’re a development pragmatist or a Gaian idealist, on a global stage, the Paris agreement was a landmark, near-universal³ acceptance of anthropogenic responsibility for the world we’re in and a common basic commitment to keep warming under two degrees. Even as that threshold is being breached, arguments around climate justice⁴ and reparations for historical emissions have reached a fever peak. With the rise of protectionist governments in the global North unwilling to cough up their fair share and developing countries- bearing the brunt of the damage- refusing to do more until historical debts are paid, it seems our collective futures are stuck at a stalemate of finance. With an eye on temperature rise, financial valuations and instruments of every size are attempting to assess varying degrees of common loss and ways to “sequester” it, but evidence of the actual trickle-down is hard to come by.

How nature and the non-human is valued in the developing world now- particularly in India that’s well into its third decade of economic liberalisation- will matter the most. India is now the world’s second largest producer, importer and consumer of coal⁵, and has the largest population at risk from climate impacts. The fallout of massive anthropogenic activity at the cost of the commons- previously driven home in the form corruption-based financial loss- is now impossible to miss even for its shielded middle class. From unseasonal storms that could cost billions in infrastructure damage to an air-pollution crisis that has claimed millions of lives⁶ to water crises that determine political tides⁷- the non-human is increasingly making its presence felt, even to those with anthropocentric blinders on.

Forest-dwelling and agrarian frontline communities with a distinctly different valuation of the non-human are burdened with the dual responsibility of securing the country’s last

¹ <https://scroll.in/article/720045/by-dismissing-activists-as-anti-national-india-is-advancing-interests-of-big-business>

² <http://www.uky.edu/OtherOrgs/AppalFor/Readings/240%20-%20Reading%20-%20Deep%20Ecology.pdf>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/climate/syria-joins-paris-agreement.html>

⁴ <https://thewire.in/197345/stalemate-pre-2020-climate-actions-breaks-draft-agreement-emerges/>

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/aef83108-ce94-11e7-b781-794ce08b24dc>

⁶ <https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/pollution-and-health>

⁷ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/supreme-court-tells-centre-karnataka-elections-not-an-excuse-to-resolv-dgtl-227788>

forests and lowering our collective footprint. As their valuations have been historically dismissed and few contemporary legal gains being rapidly dismantled, communities are forcing change in the face of increasing militarisation and censorship, from self-governance movements⁸ to economic⁹ blockades¹⁰. In a digital age that's bringing cause-and-effect into stark relief, the countryside is now finding allies in the city, with public health, extreme weather and state excesses and apathy acting as binding forces. Will cities- now made to acknowledge ecosystem services- adapt in time or will climate migration from the hinterland put even more pressure on fragile landmasses? Will court decisions that recognise rivers and the animal kingdom as legal, rights-holding entities¹¹ protect against continuous attempts to fragment them? Can dipping renewable energy tariffs and divestment movements the world over accelerate a different valuation of the non-human, beyond narratives of progress and nationalism? This presentation will look at radical ecologies that are revising traditional debates around our relationship with nature, and the future of life on earth.

BIO: Aruna Chandrasekhar is an award-winning independent journalist, researcher and filmmaker working on issues at the intersection of corporate accountability, land, environment, people's movements, energy, health, conflict and climate change for the last seven years. She likes to tell stories from the ground up and as a means to answer collective questions around development, sustainability and the future of communities at risk in a warming world. These are questions that have lead her on a journey from Central India's coalfields and its frontline resistance movements to the UN Conference of Parties on climate change. Aruna was formerly a Senior Researcher with Amnesty International India, where she lead research looking at human rights and environmental violations by India's coal mining industry and policy dilutions that enabled them.

⁸ <https://scroll.in/article/878468/the-constitution-set-in-stone-advocates-in-jharkhand-are-using-an-old-tradition-as-a-novel-protest>

⁹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/will-stop-milkvegetable-supply-to-cities-from-june-7-if-demands-not-met-farmers-body-5201822/>

¹⁰ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/cuttack/women-in-sundargarh-block-roads-over-polluting-iron-plants/articleshow/63377241.cms>

¹¹ <http://www.livelaw.in/uttarakhand-hc-declares-entire-animal-kingdom-as-legal-entity-with-rights-duties-liabilities-of-a-living-person-read-judgment/>

Ashok Sukumaran



Abstract

Nature is not Natural, So what Happens Next

With CAMP and other groups, I have been working for some years on maritime, electrical and internet landscapes, and recently on the road network in South Asia-- looking for aesthetic eruptions and via-media that allow us to experience and recognise worlds that are not directly experience-able or Facebook-fed, to humans. One of our intuitions about these landscapes, or ecosystems, is that while they start off as modernist interventions into and often against the environment, over time and in our time especially, they have become the environment. So deeply part of it, for better or worse, that subsequent interventions have to negotiate them in the same way as a forest or a river. It is not a surprise then, to find that a chir-pine forest in the Himalayan foothills or a river in Mumbai are themselves deeply un-natural beings. Nature is not Natural, because it has history, it changes. And this change includes exclusions, ruins and traumas.

How does this understanding help us? We have heard that "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (Timothy Morton). That nationalism is natural but homosexuality is unnatural (Ramdev Baba). That the non-natural landscape reveals above all, power (Landscape Theory of film). Or that in modern Japanese literature, the landscape, childhood and other themes of that genre are literally constructed by and in that period (Karatani Kojin). So what is "our modern" landscape, our childhood relative to what is to come, our reading of "power", our properly ecological form of culture? How to un-dear what we hold dear (like Nature), and find new dears? I suggest some possibilities based on immersion in the above mentioned "synthetic landscapes", that are all too real today.

Bio:

Ashok Sukumaran is an artist based in Mumbai. He co-founded CAMP and Pad.ma in 2008. His interests include distributed forms and contemporary infrastructures, and art as a risky and expressive engagement with things larger and stranger than "us". His work both as CAMP and individually has been exhibited at Sculpture Project Munster, Documenta 13 and 14, biennials of Sharjah, Shanghai, Gwangju, Kochi, Liverpool, Taipei, and recently at the Tate Modern. Film works have been shown at the Flaherty seminar, Anthology Film Archives, MoMA, Viennale, MAMI, London Film festival, and at CAMP's own rooftop cinema. As part of a hands-on interest in technologies of all kinds, he recently built with others a book-scanning platform, a community library (aarandaar.net), and is working on series of digital probes into Bombay/ Mumbai's archives, a five year project on roads, and an upcoming exhibition at the De Appel curatorial program in Amsterdam.

Himanshu Thakkar



Abstract

ARE RIVERS A LUXURY?

Humans have acknowledged the key role that rivers played in providing place of birth and growth for human civilization. In India, the rivers have important role in scriptures, prayers, festivals, rituals, and in culture in general.

Little of this has place in the way the rivers are governed by the governments at various scales and locations, the place that rivers have in constitution, law and judicial pronouncements. When dams and hydropower projects are built, when rivers are barraged, channelized, diverted or embanked, when rivers are used as dumping grounds for solid and liquid wastes, when floodplains are encroached, when rivers are converted to concrete channels in the name of river front development, when rivers are proposed to be used as waterways and dredged, we see little understanding of the impact all this has on the rivers. It can be nobody's case that rivers cannot be used, but ensuring sustained functioning of rivers is necessary and possible as many has shown.

The irreverence gets magnified when we see the mega program of interlinking of rivers. The program sees rivers as water channels that can be remapped to take water from "surplus" river basins to "deficit" river basins, thus solving the flood problems of former and drought problems of latter.

The livelihood or future of the people who are in charge of ensuring that rivers are not polluted is not dependent on whether the rivers flow clean or not. And millions of people whose livelihood depend on a living river have no role in pollution control or other governance of the rivers.

The need for environment flow is now grudgingly accepted after decades of efforts, but there is little reflection of it on ground as yet. Rejuvenation of rivers has entered the governance lexicon recently, but we have yet to see a rejuvenated river. The religion has not come to the rescue of the rivers, on the contrary, the religious practices continues to add burden to the dying rivers.

"India cannot afford to have the luxury of water in the river when society's demands for water are not satisfied" said an ideologue of Central Water Commission when environmentalists were fighting for environment flows in the rivers. So are rivers luxury for India?

BIO: Himanshu Thakkar, an engineer from IIT (Mumbai), is currently coordinator of South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (SANDRP). He in the past has been associated with the work of the World Commission on Dams, Narmada Bachao Andolan and Centre for Science and Environment. He has been associated with Water Sector related issues in India for over 25 years.

SANDRP is an informal network working on issues related to rivers, communities and large scale water infrastructure like dams: their environmental and social impacts, their performance, options and issues related to governance of rivers and dams. It was set up 20 years ago.

Janaki Lenin



Living with Snakes

Snakes have a checkered history in India. They are deified or demonised. They represent forces of good as godly sidekicks as ornaments, belts, beds, and umbrellas. Or evil – the monster that Krishna kills, or the helpless sacrificial victims in the great Khandava forest blaze. In traditional households, killing snakes is a sin. But that doesn't prevent people from killing them and then asking for forgiveness later.

Over the past two decades, almost every town and city has a new service listed along with the police, fire and ambulance. If you have a snake, you call a snake rescuer who'll catch the snake and release it far away in a forest. It satisfies everyone because the snake has been removed out of harm's way and people have also been saved from it.

But, this "humane" action kills most snakes as they seek to return to their original locations. Homing pigeons have an unerring ability to return to their lofts. Similarly, these disoriented snakes attempt to return to their home burrows. Although distance is against them, they try anyway. They get run over by automobiles or die of starvation.

Yet, 50,000 Indians die of snakebite every year. Shouldn't removing snakes save human lives? Unfortunately, nature works in confounding ways. Where there was one snake, there are bound to be others. Remove one and another is waiting in the wings to move in. So the situation for humans doesn't improve after a snake is removed. Instead, they may believe their surroundings are snake-free and act without caution. Can we make space in our lives to include these rodent predators without killing ourselves and them?

BIO: Janaki Lenin writes about wildlife science and conservation practice in India. She is a full-time freelance journalist, runs a publishing company called Draco Books, and is the author of *My Husband and Other Animals* and *A King Cobra's Summer*. *My Husband and Other Animals 2* released in late-April 2018.

With Professor R. Sukumar, she wrote the Action Plan for the Mitigation of Elephant-Human Conflict in India and contributed to the Guidelines for Human-Leopard Conflict Management. Between 2008 and 2012, she was the Regional Chair for the IUCN/SSC/Crocodile Specialist Group (South Asia and Iran), Executive Secretary of the Gharial Conservation Alliance, and a member of IUCN's Theme on the Social and Environmental Accountability of the Private Sector.

As a film editor, Lenin worked on numerous soaps and commercials. She set up Draco Films, a wildlife film production company, with Rom Whitaker. She gave up filmmaking altogether to focus on writing.

Kanchi Kohli



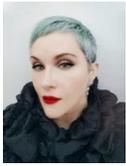
Abstract

The challenge for environment justice in an aspirational economy.

With its commitment towards greater industrial and infrastructure expansion, ensuring ecological and livelihood security have emerged to be important "developmental" challenges for a country like India. Since 1980s, India has seen a range forest and environment regulations put in place for mitigating and offsetting damages. These were to assist governments to strike win-win trade-offs that could balance both environment and development. Over the years, these regulatory frameworks for impact assessments, coastal regulation and forest diversion processes have been criticized for slowing down the growth rates. At the same time serious questions have been raised on the efficacy of environmental laws in ensuring environment protection. Through a set of contemporary case studies, the presentation will attempt to highlight the challenge environment and rights based laws face in an aspirational economy like India. It will also speak to the strategies affected people and rights holders have used to resist, regulate and remedy displacement, degradation and loss of livelihoods.

Bio: Kanchi Kohli is researcher and writer working on environment, forest and biodiversity governance in India. Her work explores the links between law, industrialization and environment justice. She seeks to draw empirical evidence from sites of conflict and locates it within the legal and policy processes. Other than her independent work, Kanchi is presently Legal Research Director at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR)-Namati Environment Justice Program. She has individually and in teams authored several publications, including the recent book *Business Interests and the Environmental Crisis* published by SAGE-India in 2016. Her writings also include several research papers and over 500 popular articles. Kanchi regularly teaches at universities at law schools in India on subjects related to biodiversity, environment and community development.

Maya Kóvskaya



Title to be decided

Many scholars have identified problems with the blanket inclusiveness of the Anthropocene thesis in its allocation of responsibility to all of humankind, for ravaging the planet's physical life support systems on a catastrophic scale of geological magnitude—offering alternative terms such as M/anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chtuluchene, Plantainocene, as conceptual rejoinders. These critiques rightly point to asymmetries of power and responsibilities for the unfolding crises, but while some arguments focus productively, beyond the anthropocentric, on *multispecies entanglements*, none fundamentally re-imagine the basic foundations of the *polity and political membership* in ways that include the more-than-human in the political equation. The Anthropocene and impending ecological catastrophe provides the common ground conditions that necessitate and indeed will force us to live differently with or against “nature,” putting the more-than-human into the game whether we like it or not. One of our greatest and most consequential challenges, then, is to radically re-imagine *how* to live differently in a way that includes the world beyond the human. This is a fundamentally political question. How to think about what might constitute what I call the “multispecies polity” is the main focus of my work. If language, speech, and action are traditionally seen, in Western political theory, as irreducible essentials that make the political possible, how can we include the beyond-human world in our notions of a polity? Drawing on Speech Act and Performativity Theory, as well as Ordinary Language Philosophy and Peircian Semiotics, I suggest that “nature” speaks myriad “languages” through performative speech acts, through indexical signs, and other “forms of enunciation” that have “illocutionary force,” all of which are relevant to the basic questions of political life: Who are “we” and how shall we live together? Under what conditions? Who decides what those conditions for both membership and co-existence shall be? I posit that the natural world is already *de facto* participating in these conversations, but we are not paying attention. By broadening our understanding of language, speech, and action, we can begin to pay better attention to forms of non-human agency operating with great consequence in the natural world beyond the human, and begin to rethink our basic political forms of belonging and shared co-existence with greater attention to the speech going on all around us.

Bio:

Winner of the 2010 *Yishu Award for Critical Art Writing*, Maya Kóvskaya (PhD UC Berkeley, 2009) has authored, co-authored, edited, translated, and contributed to numerous books and articles on contemporary art as it intersects with the political, cultural, and ecological. She taught for eight years at the university level, at University of California, Berkeley, Beijing Capital Normal University, Beijing Polytechnic University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, and has lectured extensively on politics, art, ecology, and curation at universities, museums, and public institutions worldwide. As curator and critic, and/or academic advisor, she has worked on over 35 Asian contemporary art exhibitions and public art interventions across Asia, in Europe, and North America. She is Art Editor for */positions: asia critique/* (Duke University Press), and is working on a book on art and the Anthropocene in India.

Mukul Sharma



Abstract:

Caste and Nature

This presentation traces Dalits' quest for their place in nature, by taking in different voices – songs and narratives of early bonded labourers; writings by leading Dalit ideologues, leaders and writers; myths, memories and metaphors of Dalits around nature; their movements, labour and footsteps – which together highlight Dalits' attempts at defining themselves in casteised nature through heterogeneous means. The presentation deploys the term 'Dalit' in a larger, inclusive, encompassing sense, sometimes including boatmen and fisher folk, as the ecological caste-and-nature paradox creates a larger pattern, which impacts the body, self, presence and position of the oppressed. The intertwining of caste and nature presents a critical challenge to Indian environmentalism, which has hitherto marginalized such linkages. I attempt to fill this lacunae by highlighting what environmentalists have largely missed on the one hand, and on the other, how by studying Dalits' complex relationship with nature, we can bring forth new dimensions on both environment and Dalits.

The presentation hinges on three broad themes, through which it attempts to see Dalit and caste conceptions of environment. The first is the apologist and recuperative Brahminism and a stream of environmentalism in modern India. The second is Dalit environmental thought -- mythological, anecdotal, theoretical and rational. And the third is Dalit activism, with its certain embedded conceptions, such as the new commons. These are interconnected windows through which the thesis looks at different aspects of Dalit environmentalism as a comprehensive terrain of ecological contestation and appropriation, conceptualisation and activism. They represent how Dalit meanings of environment have counter-posed themselves to ideas and practices of neo Brahmanism and to certain mainstreams of environmental thought. They underline that with all its ambiguities and multiplicities, Dalit thought represents an attempt to produce a new conception of environment as spatial equity and build a case of environmentalism, free from burdens of caste. Rather than looking for a single-united Dalit thread and a coherent understanding of ecology, I explore their diverse and rich intellectual resources that give nature a social, political and cultural underpinning.

Bio: Mukul Sharma is presently a Professor in Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi. He was a Special Correspondent in Navbharat Times, Delhi, 1983-1998, and has received 12 national-international awards for his environmental, rural and human rights journalism. Between 1990s-2000s, he was a visiting fellow at the University of Oxford, the London School of Economics and the Mahidol University, Thailand. He has been the Director of Amnesty International and Heinrich Boell Foundation in India and worked with several developmental organizations, networks and forums. He has published 16 books and booklets in English and Hindi, the latest being, *Caste & Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics* (2017), *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics* (2012), *Human Rights in a Globalised World: An Indian Diary* (2010) and *Contested Coastlines: Fisherfolk, Nations and Borders in South Asia* (co-authored, 2008). His forthcoming book is *Dalit aur Prakriti: Jati aur Bhartiya Paryavarn Aandolan* (in Hindi).

Navjot Altaf



Abstract

Patterns which connect

This presentation looks at perception of - the crux of deep ecology, concepts of ecological aesthetics (i.e. aesthetics of integration at one level and probing into the historical roots of the fast growing culture of unsustainability on the other); and the aesthetics of sustainability, based on my research and experience of living and engaging with Adivasi (indigenous) artists, communities and the process of their struggle for justice and resistance (in both the southern and northern central parts of Chhattisgarh state, India) for their existence, their knowledge systems which are transmitted orally across generations, their myths and performances, which are intimately linked to the land, their belief in cyclical processes of nature and the relationships between humans and more-than-humans, which co-produce a world, which they believe is interconnected - a concept of relationship, with all life and its potential to create experiences at several levels of consciousness and in the subconscious mind...

Bio: Navjot Altaf's multi-media practice and site-specific works negotiate various disciplinary boundaries. Navjot works with people from different disciplines and for the past 20 years has been engaged with indigenous artists and communities in Chhattisgarh in Central India. Her methodology ascertains the interactive aspects of collaboration, whereby the work emerges out of extended dialogical processes. Navjot is interested in understanding the significance of transdisciplinary work "whose nature is not merely to cross disciplinary boundaries.

Apart from number of solo exhibitions, some of her participations include, Starting from the Desert : Ecology on the Edge, Second Yinchuan Biennale, China,(2018) Landscape as Evidence : Artist as Witness, collaboration between KHOJ, Zuleikha Chaudhari and Artists, New Delhi, India (2017) 'Stretched Terrains - Interpositions: Replaying the Inventory': Kiran Nadar Museum of Art New Delhi, India (2017) 'Why Not Ask Again': 11th Shanghai Biennale, China (2016) 'Dead Reckoning: Whorled Explorations': second edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi, India (2014)

Navjot has been participating in national and international seminars including Anthropocene Curriculum at the House of World Cultures, Berlin, (2014 and 2016).

Nilanjan Bhattacharya



Abstract

The Inmost Nature

For Adivasi or the indigenous/tribal people the quest for food is an arduous and incessant activity. Their dependence on nature for nourishment and wellbeing has helped them develop a deep understanding of nature, it has also influenced their societal designs and cultural expressions.

With examples drawn from experiences gathered in the course of filming biodiversity practices, food cultures and knowledge traditions of adivasis of India, I will discuss how the adivasis' close ties with nature have shaped their dietary and cultural practices. I will discuss the utilitarian approach to life that is coded in their belief systems and reflected in many of their cultural creations. I will also refer to some of their social/religious ethics and festivities which commend various principles of nature and propagate the codes to manage resources. As traditional adivasi institutions in India are breaking down and their natural resources and knowledge eroding fast I will point to the strength and relevance of adivasi knowledge practices in relation to use and management of natural resources.

Bio: Nilanjan Bhattacharya is an award-winning filmmaker based out of Calcutta. His works have been exhibited in various national and international documentary film festivals as well as art spaces. For many years now, he has been working on India's biodiversity, indigenous food culture and related knowledge practices by the people.

Some of his important works are:

Quiet Flows the Stream

Johar Welcome To Our World

Rain in the Mirror

Since last two years, Nilanjan is pursuing a project on tribal food cultures of Odisha.

Rahul Srivastava



Abstract

India's Circulatory Urbanism

Urbanization in India follows a complex trajectory in which a large section of the urban service sector and the working classes remain part of circular migratory loops.

Rather than a one-way rural-urban flow, we have seen a lubrication of multi-directional movement over the last several decades, thanks to an extensive and affordable railway network. From dual household families to rural-urban community networks, relationships have been forged across vast territories.

What does this aspect of urbanization mean for India's future? How does one understand urban and rural needs, choices and expectations? How do we understand urbanization in India beyond reductive demographic calculations that do not do justice to these dynamics and complexities?

If one frames a thematic around the idea of urbanization and the "poor", we need to factor in such distinctive configurations of habitats and choices that vast sections of Indians make – especially when "they" are represented in terms of statistical aggregates.

These often go against the expected normative of what constitutes contemporary urban life. Typically, issues of housing are abstracted into a realm where livelihood questions become secondary, especially when they are intertwined with habitats that have grown incrementally. Persistent rural connections become hazy even though family members in villages both support, and are supported by their urban extensions.

Against these tendencies, policies get framed by bifurcating urban and rural life, in a manner that subverts agency and ignores the constantly evolving complexities that are inherent in the way people define their lives.

The presentation will explore such concerns, drawing from a study done over the last five years with Matias Echanove at urbz. The study looked at the relationship of families from the Konkan coast who made Mumbai their home without giving up connections with ancestral villages and in the process, shaped their habitats and lives in both places.

Among several other findings, the study helped us develop a more nuanced understanding of the distinct needs of urban accommodation and housing, a deeper appreciation of urban typologies and provided new insights into the networked and transforming nature of rural contexts.

BIO: Rahul Srivastava is a co-founder of urbz.net along with Matias Echanove and Geeta Mehta. urbz is a global action and research collective with offices in Mumbai, Goa, Geneva and beyond. He has studied social anthropology and collaborates with planners, architects and other practitioners to work on urban issues in diverse contexts. Over the last several years he and Matias Echanove have done a detailed research study on "Circulatory Lives", looking at migration and urban contexts on the Konkan coast in India, with the Mobile Lives Forum, Paris. The work of urbz has been shown at various venues around the world including MoMA (New York), Centre for Contemporary Culture (Bordeaux), Chicago Cultural Centre, (Chicago), Maxii (Rome) among others. His writings on urban themes, co-authored

with Matias Echanove, have appeared in various publications and periodicals including the New York Times, Oxford University Press, Wall Street Journal, New Village Press and Strelka.

Ram Ramaswamy



Abstract

"Nature, Matter, Technology"

The book of nature, Galileo said, is written in mathematical language, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures, without which it is impossible to humanly understand a word; without these, one is wandering in a dark labyrinth.

But what is the true nature of the world around us? What is the most appropriate mathematical framework within which a proper description of nature emerges? Questions such as these have long dominated the landscape of the physical sciences, typified by Wigner's famous statement that "The miracle of the appropriateness of the language of mathematics for the formulation of the laws of physics is a wonderful gift which we neither understand nor deserve. We should be grateful for it and hope that it will remain valid in future research and that it will extend, for better or for worse, to our pleasure, even though perhaps also to our bafflement, to wide branches of learning."

Over the past several decades, the systematisation promised implicitly in this view has been challenged. The appropriate mathematics to describe much of nature is likely to be nonlinear, with fundamentally complex solutions that are unpredictable in the long term. The implication of these developments both for the nature of our understanding of matter, and for how this impacts technology will be discussed.

Bio: Ram Ramaswamy is Professor in the School of Physical Sciences at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He was educated at Madras University, IIT Kanpur, and Princeton University from where he received his Ph.D. in Chemistry in 1978. He has been at JNU since 1986, and has also held positions at the TIFR Mumbai and the University of Hyderabad. His research interests are in the areas of Chaos and nonlinear science, disordered systems and statistical physics, computational biology and genomics. He is currently President of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore.

Ranjit Hoskote



Abstract

'Language and Landscape'

As ecologies in India die or mutate under the pressure of changing policy imperatives, altered land use patterns, the inexorable expansion of an urban-centric commerce and industry model of economic advancement, the vocabularies that once described or were associated with their specific features remain marooned in fable, folksong and the dictionary, gradually fossilised without their referents in lived experience, social practice, and landscapes.

Likewise, as local languages become endangered or are rendered extinct under the pressure of aggressively unitary 'regional' or 'national' languages, these nuanced vocabularies – attentive to season, species, the gradation between one set of climatic or edaphic conditions and another – themselves will vanish gradually, leaving behind no memory of the experience of what had once been India's flourishing ecosystem diversity.

At the intersection between these movements towards ecological degradation and linguistic flattening stands such a document as the draft National Forest Policy recently shared online with citizens at large by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change. Premised on a colonial-style understanding of forests as, effectively, plantations regarded from the revenue parameters of an extractive State, this draft policy makes no provisions for zones and micro-environments that do not conform to this typology. Deserts, grasslands, marshes and other 'non-forest' areas will not receive official protection, rendering vulnerable the animal and bird species dependent on them, as well as human livelihoods organically connected to them.

With what forms of anamnesia can we imagine countering these perils? How might we engage with the processes of memory, forgetting, and re-learning in this context? In the course of this presentation, Ranjit Hoskote will dwell on a spectrum of mythological images, literary practices and linguistic occasions that bear upon this crisis, including Ananda Coomaraswamy's reflections on the Yaksha eco-cosmology, the landscape-sensitive classical Tamil poetry of the Sangam period, the monsoon poems of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, and the contributory meteorological and landscape glossaries of the Peepli Project.

Bio: Ranjit Hoskote is a leading Anglophone Indian poet, and has also been acclaimed as a seminal contributor to Indian art criticism. His books include *Vanishing Acts: New & Selected Poems 1985-2005* (Penguin, 2006), *Central Time* (Penguin/ Viking, 2014), and *Jonahwhale* (Penguin/ Hamish Hamilton, 2018). His poetry has appeared in German translation as *Die Ankunft der Vögel* (Carl Hanser Verlag, 2006) and *Feldnotizen des Magiers* (Editions Offenes Feld, 2015). His translation of the 14th-century Kashmiri mystic Lal Ded has been published as *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (Penguin Classics, 2011).

Hoskote was a Fellow of the International Writing Program, University of Iowa, and has been writer-in-residence at Villa Waldberta, Munich; Theater der Welt, Essen-Mülheim; and the Polish Institute, Berlin. He has been researcher-in-residence at BAK/ basis voor actuele

kunst, Utrecht. He has received the Sahitya Akademi Golden Jubilee Award, the Sahitya Akademi Award for Translation, and the S H Raza Award for Literature. Hoskote was juror for international literature for the 2015-2017 fellowship cycle at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart.

Rohini Devasher



Abstract

Strange-ing Spaceship Earth

Seven years ago, I began a project that looked at unravelling the world of amateur astronomers in Delhi. Beginning as a form of collective investigation, stories, conversations and histories came together in a slowly building chronicle of this almost obsessive group of people whose lives have been transformed by the night sky. As an amateur astronomer and an artist, this was also an exercise in self-reflexivity. Where did I position myself within the material, or perhaps where did astronomy position itself within my practice? As part of the research I travelled back and forth across the country with amateur astronomers, each trip focused on a stellar event or site. As this work developed, I became increasingly conscious of the methods of 'field work' and 'expedition' in my practice.

The field is a place or group of physical sites in which evidence of past activity is preserved. As a mode or methodology, it is a space for investigation that allows you to explore something unfamiliar, rather than a moment of necessarily acquiring knowledge. My current practice engages with the field both as a series of physical sites - skies, sea forts, observatories, telescopes 'etc. but also as an opportunity for the exploration and observation of the relationships between the human and non-human.

Increasingly it seems as though the deeply inter-connectedness of our relationship to the planet will be essential to our imagination of our future in both shaping and living within it. We could look at future transformations of this relationship as a vista of 'strange' terrains, constructed by observing, recording, fictionalizing, and imagining objects and spaces that exist at the interface between nature and culture, perception and production. And we might begin to understand and perhaps even anticipate how intersecting patterns between them are made visible.

BIO: Rohini Devasher has trained as a painter and printmaker, and works in a variety of media including video, prints and large site-specific drawings. Her current body of work is a collection of 'strange' terrains, constructed by observing, recording, and re-imagining objects and spaces that exist at the interface between science, nature and culture.

Devasher's work has been shown at the 7th Moscow Biennale, Spencer Museum of Art, USA, MAAT, Lisbon, ZKM (Karsruhe), Dhaka Art Summit 2016, Whitechapel Gallery, London, and the 5th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, among others. She has had solo exhibitions at the Bhau Daji Lad City Museum in Mumbai (2016), Vis-a-Vis Experience Centre New Delhi (2016), Project 88, Mumbai (2013, 2009). Most recently she was an artist in residency on a cargo ship as part of the Owners Cabin Residency Program. Other residencies include the Spencer Museum of Art (2016), The Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin (2012) and the Anthropocene Campus II, HKW Berlin (2016).

Sheba Chhachhi



Abstract

The Goddess Who Lost Her Body: A feminist reading of the feminine mythology of Indian Rivers.

Pre-modern knowledge systems describe modes of relationships between humans and their environment which seem to offer kernels of an enlightened eco-philosophy often garbed in myths, folklore, religious practices and rituals. In both urban and rural communities many of these practices continue, albeit often in commodified and contemporized forms. Several ideas central to current ecological discourse – multispecies co-being, plant and tree sentience, biodiversity, co-dependence, to mention a few, lie embedded here.

Reading the River Yamuna back through history and cultural memory one finds an abundant, active symbology of water articulated within the multiple cultures of the city of Delhi; the conceptualizing of water ranges from the meteorological to the mythopoeic, the religious to the mercantile. From hymns of praise still sung every morning along her banks, to stories of desire and erotic play, to images of her deified form as the Goddess Yamuna, much is extant.

Why then is her body, the river itself, choked with filth? Focusing here on cultural and symbolic regimes, rather than the nexus of capital, a flawed development paradigm and profiteering state interests, several questions arise: Is the contradiction between abandonment and worship only apparent? Does the deification of the mother/lover/river produce dereliction? Is it at all possible to recuperate images and stories, ways of being, knowledge systems that could generate material acts of conservation and regeneration? How would this recuperation be different from or avoid contamination of other populist re-constitutions of the Goddess serving fundamentalist interests? Can we create a feminist ecological imaginary, reunite the Goddesses and their bodies?

BIO: Sheba Chhachhi is an artist, photographer and thinker who investigates questions of gender, eco-philosophy, violence and visual cultures, with emphasis on the recuperation of cultural memory. An activist/photographer in the women's movement in the 1980s, Chhachhi moved on to create intimate, sensorial encounters through large multimedia installations. Her work interweaves the mythic and the social, pre-modern thought and contemporary concerns, bringing the contemplative into the political. She has exhibited widely including the Gwangju, Taipei, Moscow, Singapore and Havana biennales; her works are held in significant public and private collections, including Tate Modern, UK, Kiran Nadar Museum, Delhi, BosePacia, New York, Singapore Art Museum, Devi Art Foundation, Delhi and National Gallery of Modern Art, India. Chhachhi speaks, writes and teaches in both institutional and non-formal contexts. She lives and works in New Delhi.

Shibani Ghosh



Abstract

LAW, RIGHTS AND NATURE

Numerous cases are filed in Indian courts every year claiming violation of 'environmental rights'. These rights may adopt different formulations: right to a pollution-free environment, right to decent or hygienic environment, or right to maintain ecological balance; they may originate from different sources: some are based on constitutional provisions, while others on statutory provisions; they may have an anthropocentric bias (right to the environment – of a human being) or an eco-centric one (right of the environment); they may protect procedural guarantees such as the right to access information or the right to effective grievance redressal, or substantive environmental outcomes; some rights may be claimed by society at large, while others only by those suffering a legal injury. Notwithstanding the broad spectrum across which they are spread, and therefore lacking in strict definitional limits, environmental rights have played a vital role in Indian environmental movements, and contributed to the development of a rich, albeit somewhat muddled, environmental jurisprudence in the country.

However, the language of rights has a curious relationship with nature, one that I would like to explore through this talk. The legal recognition of environmental rights, even by the highest court of the country, has not necessarily resulted in the protection of nature. There are several reasons for this, which I hope to discuss and illustrate through examples: while balancing competing rights and interests, environmental rights and interests are often on the wrong side of the balance, or are not 'weighed' properly; the right is not claimed in time or vociferously enough; the violation of the right is (insufficiently) compensated – monetarily or by some actions; or the right is recognized, but is not interpreted in a manner which protects nature (e.g. the right to access a natural resource could mean anything from guaranteeing necessary sustenance, to endangering particular floral or faunal species, to ensuring commercial viability of a project). And of course, there is the persistent issue of poor enforcement – when the right is recognised, but violated with impunity. The aim of analyzing these reasons is not to undermine the value of rights-based claims, but to understand when and how 'nature' as a non-human entity enters the legal and judicial decision making.

BIO: Shibani Ghosh is a Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), a New Delhi-based think tank, and an Advocate-on-Record, Supreme Court of India. She specialises in environmental law, and appears in cases before the Supreme Court and the National Green Tribunal. At CPR, she researches and writes on issues relating to environmental law, regulation and governance. She has authored several articles, chapters and opinion pieces on environmental issues. She has edited a volume titled 'Indian Environmental Law: Key Concepts and Principles' (Orient Black Swan, forthcoming) which provides in-depth case-law based analysis of Indian environmental jurisprudence.

Shibani has been a Sustainability Science Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School (2014-2015), and a visiting faculty at the TERI University, New Delhi, and the RICS School of Built Environment, NOIDA, where she taught environmental law. She is a Rhodes Scholar and holds graduate degrees in law and in environmental change and management from the University of Oxford.

Sria Chatterjee



Abstract

Art, Science and New Nationalisms in Shifting Political Climates

This paper takes as its starting point a 'satirical picture' titled 'Inanimate Scream' by Gaganendranath Tagore, published as a part of the portfolio 'Reform Screams' by Thacker and Spink in 1921, to provoke questions between art, science and new nationalisms in the early twentieth century. 'Inanimate Scream' is a caricature of the Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858 – 1937), who pioneered the investigation of radio waves and experiments in plant science. Bose is particularly remembered for his experiments that proved that both organic and inorganic matter responded to external stimuli. Bose's ideas drew neo-vitalists, who saw the future of biology in metaphysics, such as the biologist and urban planner Patrick Geddes, and figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, and Sister Nivedita among others. 'Inanimate Scream' opens up an investigation into how art in the Tagore circles and Bose's researches into plant science navigated the complex colonial institutional fabric and a particular kind of Hindu nationalism that emerged at the time. This paper constructs a network of changing ideas around biology, metaphysics and national politics to examine how Nature (with a capital N) and nation were co-produced in this particular instance. Using the caricature and a focus on the relationship of a particular elite Bengali intellectual milieu (that both worked within the framework of colonial knowledge and power and also resisted it) with art, science and national ideology as a mini case-study, the paper addresses the malleability of scientific discourse and the production of nature into ideology and what this might mean for twenty first century environmental crises in a broader global scenario of asymmetrical power relations. Opening up a nuanced discussion about power and ethics in the formation of ideas around nature, it asks what a historically informed approach to the political ecologies of the local and global might contribute to the contemporary discourse around the 'state of nature'.

Bio: Sria Chatterjee is currently Charlotte Elizabeth Procter Fellow at Princeton University and a fellow at the Max-Planck Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. Her academic work focuses on the relationships between art, design, politics and ecology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She has received fellowships and grants from the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, the Rockefeller Archive Center, the Taiteen edistämiskeskus (Arts Promotion Centre Finland) among others. In 2013, she co-curated the exhibition, 'Bauhaus in Kalkutta' at the Bauhaus Stiftung in Dessau and has been a part of Haus der Kulturen der Welt's Anthropocene Curriculum project since 2016. Her poetry, and other artistic collaborations question the primacy of human perception and engage with asymmetrical power relations between biological and technosocial worlds. Her poems have most recently been published in The Capilano Review, the Common, and featured in art installations and catalogues in Berlin/Toulouse (2015) Beijing (2017), Stockholm (2018).

Moderators

Aveek Sen



Aveek Sen is a writer and educator working on the intersections of literature, art, cinema, music and everyday life. He was associate editor (edit pages) of The Telegraph, Calcutta, and lecturer in English at St Hilda's College, Oxford. He studied English literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, and University College, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar. He was awarded the 2009 Infinity Award for writing on photography by the International Center of Photography, New York, and has written with artists like Dayanita Singh, Roni Horn, On Kawara, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Bharti Kher and Subodh Gupta.

Ravi Agarwal



Ravi Agarwal has an inter-disciplinary practice as an artist, photographer, environmental campaigner, writer and curator. His work explores key contemporary questions of ecology, society, and capital. It has been shown widely, including at the Yinchuan Biennial (2018), Kochi Biennial (2016), the Sharjah Biennial (2013), Documenta XI (2002), etc. He co-curated the Yamuna-Elbe project, an Indo German twin city public art and ecology project (2011), and Embrace our Rivers an Indo- European project in Chennai (2018). His work is in several private and public collections, and he has served on many art juries and committees. Ravi is also the founder director of the environmental NGO Toxics Link which has pioneered work in waste and chemicals in India. He serves on policy and regulatory committees and Boards and writes extensively on sustainability issues and has co-edited several books. He was awarded the UN Special Recognition Award for Chemical Safety in 2008 and the Ashoka Fellowship for social entrepreneurship in 1997. His training has been in engineering and management.