

The Sand of the Coliseum, the Glare of Television, and the Hope of Emancipation

NANCY ADAJANIA

I.

Milan Kundera once observed that every Utopia secures the purity of its goals by consigning its undesirables to a septic tank. And so, in tyrannies that are able to enforce Utopia, we have the concentration camp, the death camp, the gulag and the holding area. But what of some of the republics we know: those more humane drafts towards Utopia that have come dangerously close to failure, and whose septic tanks are not occasional aberrations, but everyday horror zones to which the marginal are consigned?

In this essay I will reflect on the Indian republic, which was established in 1950 as the outcome of an epic anti-colonial struggle for liberation; and which committed itself to serving the welfare of the greatest number, to securing the good of the oppressed and the dispossessed, the starving and the marginal. In actuality, through the six decades of its existence, it has increasingly become characterised by swollen margins ; it leaves its subjects naked, exposed, leading a *vita nuda*, a bare life , protected neither by divine sanction nor by the rule of law, easy game for any predator.

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has examined the condition of bare life and its embodiment, the *homo sacer*, or sacred man : a paradoxically-named figure in Roman law, who is excluded from all civil rights and may be killed with impunity by anybody.¹ Agamben cites the examples of the Nazi camps and Guantanamo Bay as sites where the *homo sacer* has been incarcerated, suffering torture, grotesque violations of body and mind, and facing certain death. In the context of a Western democratic order that broadly upholds the rule of law, such aberrations tend to be dramatised as flagrant violations. But in the Indian context, the *homo sacer* is not an aberration who is invisible, a tear in the fabric of normality. He is everywhere. He is normality.

The Indian situation is complicated by the fact that this ubiquitous *homo sacer* is made a subject of melodrama and entertainment by a media that has abandoned ethical self-restraint while exploiting its potential as a powerful and responsible mode of representation. This has brought into being a coliseum scenario reminiscent of the gladiatorial reality shows of imperial Rome. Except that these are televisually disseminated rather than organised in a stadium for a physically present audience. But the structural principle is the same: the State and the media collude to compose a spectacle, for a popular audience, from the sordid materials of power asymmetry.

For what is the coliseum ; whether stadia or televisual ; if not the spectacular dramatisation of oppression and injustice, of the complex relationship that binds the tyrannised to the tyrant? The gladiators ; those who were forced to act in the coliseum s reality shows ; were slaves, *de-seised*, taken by force from home and hearth, cut away from family, livelihood and country, and guaranteed only the right to die while providing entertainment for Rome s multitudes. It was Caesar s prerogative to decide whether the dispossessed would live or die.

When the State and the media collude to produce such grand spectacles, their subjects are cast into a juridical wasteland where no laws apply and no rights are guaranteed. In the TV discussion fora (which often blur into reality shows) that top the viewership charts in present-day India, for instance, the subject of the discussion is degraded into a theme for gladiatorial exercise. It is voted upon raucously, the anchor yelling and egging the debaters on to ever more flamboyant expressions of rage and mutual contempt. And if the debate should revolve around a real-life issue involving members of the subaltern classes, the person or persons at the heart of the controversy are given virtually no agency. The *homo sacer* ; and I will soon pass on to the specific cases of a subaltern child and a Muslim woman ; is brought into public view forcibly, virtually kidnapped into the show.

I would interpret this situation through the model of competence and performance proposed by J. L. Austin, the philosopher of language, to account for speech-acts: language in its social context, language as it creates or cannot create a ground of social being. All Indian citizens are in theory guaranteed basic freedoms of suffrage, expression, belief and so on by the Constitution, and therefore are formally invested with a civil competence that equips them to enact their political rights. But in reality, the contextual distortions of hierarchy, illiteracy, corruption, violence and so forth are so immense that this civil competence cannot translate into *performative acts of political participation*.

Reading these symptoms correctly, the televisual media have factored this crisis of alienated citizenship into a system of illusions that already includes a mass communication technology, an aesthetic of theatrical entertainment, and a commercial mandate to maximise popularity ratings. As a result, what they offer is the *political performative through play* at the level of melodramatic spectacle and participatory illusionism. These strategic underpinnings are revealed most dramatically by those TV talk shows on which citizen-viewers, seated in the studio as a representative sample of the People, are symbolically joined by those watching the programme at home. These latter are allowed to feel

empowered when they respond, via phone, SMS or email, to opinion polls announced by the TV anchor.

During the last ten years, the Indian televisual media have begun to assert a para-statal role in offering representative and participatory alternatives, basing this role on a recognition and publicising of the State's inadequacies. This shift from democratic participation to televisual spectacle has had baneful consequences. Television has transformed the shape of participatory experience by playing several simultaneous roles, while appealing to the public imagination. *First*, that of political opposition, through interrogative patterns of reporting and comment; *second*, that of a clearing house of opinion, by inviting all shades of opinion, even extreme; and *third*, that of a court of appeal, in which trials by media are conducted in parallel with, and often improperly appropriating, the roles correctly to be played by investigative agencies and the judiciary.

Since no one has challenged this court of appeal role of television; perhaps for fear of appearing to muzzle the newly emergent Fifth Estate, or of generating a precedent for draconian censorship; this habit of appropriation has become greatly inflated.² In recent years, television has even asserted a mimesis of the deliberative prerogatives of the political process. Consider, for instance, the manner in which various satellite TV channels have strategically named their discussion programmes; which seek to manufacture public opinion; in significant ways that mimic the established structure: We the People (which echoes the opening line of the preamble of the Constitution of India), *Aap ki Adalat* (Your Court of Law) and *Satyameva Jayate* (Truth Alone Shall Triumph, which is the motto of the Republic). These televisual assemblies, as I have described them elsewhere, began as surrogates for mainstream democratic assemblies, and now almost claim to have displaced them.³

The topics chosen for discussion are never rigorously debated from a nuanced perspective of the polity, society, economy and culture. All shades of opinion are welcomed; with an eye to staging as explosive a spectacle as possible; but the responses of citizen-viewers as well as invited experts are edited in such a way that they cancel each other out. And on taboo or sensitive subjects such as national territoriality, sub-national aspirations or the uniform civil code, all TV discussion programmes; however independently they claim to function; maintain the official line of the State.

One of the most shocking instances of this tendency took place in 2004, when a *panchayat* (village or ethnic council of elders) was conducted *live* on the sets of Zee TV. The programme was titled *Kiski Gudiya?* (Whose Gudiya?; also, by a cruel irony, Whose Doll?) and subtitled *Yeh Kaisa Bandhan?* (What Kind of Bond Is This?).⁴ At the centre of the controversy was Gudiya, an underprivileged Muslim woman from a village in northern India who was confronted with a terrifying perplexity. Her first husband, a soldier who was called up for the 1999 Kargil war soon after their marriage, had gone missing. Officially declared a deserter and thought by his community to have died, he reappeared five years later after having served time as a prisoner-of-war in a Pakistani jail.

Meanwhile Gudiya, under pressure from her family, had remarried and was pregnant by her second husband. She clearly did not want to return to her first husband, but he was

adamant and so were some members of the village *panchayat*. The televisual media sensed great potential in this tragic story: a battle over a woman and her unborn child, that too belonging to the Muslim minority, which offered vistas of controversy involving Muslim personal law. The channel Zee News simulated, in its studios, a *panchayat* that included Gudiya, her two husbands, elders from their village, Muslim religious jurists and, as token participants, members of the All India Muslim Women's Forum.

Thus, a young woman in the eighth month of her pregnancy sat captive while she was put under trial in the mediatic coliseum, turned into an object for the bloodlust of prurient viewers. Abetted and urged on by the ringmaster, a wily female anchor, the terms were set in place: all decisions regarding Gudiya would be taken according to the Sharia (Islamic law), because she happened to be Muslim. In one swoop, they had constructed the subject as a Muslim woman rather than as the citizen of a secular republic, with recourse to secular laws.⁵ The anchor kept reminding the audience that the decisions regarding Gudiya would be taken strictly within the framework of the Sharia; a statement suggesting that the studios of Zee TV had temporarily seceded from the Republic of India to become an Islamic state. Gudiya's wide forehead was branded with slave status. She was forced to return to her first husband.

Death was foretold in those eyes, drained of blood. Putting a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy under such intense pressure is criminal under any country's law, but the televisual media had already usurped the role of the State and the judiciary. Gudiya had become a *homo sacer*, stripped of her rights as a citizen without the cover of a legal framework. She could be killed with impunity, even if the weapon was media excess. Gudiya died of multiple organ failure in early 2006, leaving behind a baby boy. She was 26 years old.

Gudiya's volition or desire was definitely of no concern to the TV producers, the religious experts, or the programme audience. Her fate was already sealed by the media corporation, intoxicated by its gluttonous appetite for rising TRPs. No one told her that, under Sharia law, she could opt for a separation from her first husband, or that he could divorce her. Members of the women's forum were not allowed to guide her about her rights and privileges under Islamic law. Reality TV shows, it seems, cannot deal with too much reality. What had started as a mock *panchayat* was menacingly transformed into an oppressive reality, an invidious social injustice: the mock court became a kangaroo court.

Many real *panchayats* behave in an equally, if not more, unconstitutional manner; and are gender- and caste-biased; than their mediatic counterparts. It is not surprising, then, that modern media technology deploys a forum like a village council, with all its regressive values, to make a decision about the fate of a vulnerable woman. With the Gudiya case, TV tribalism was born. The programme may have been set up to look like a televisual assembly, but it was a coliseum nonetheless: a coliseum organised to parody and mock the values and methods of judicial due process. The Gudiya case is an unholy precedent: this was the first time that a legal issue pertaining to a personal matter had been decided in reality-TV style in India. Unfortunately, not even the otherwise vocal leftist women's organisations raised a suitably loud protest against this travesty of justice, this blatant subversion of the rule of law.

It is not coincidental that Gudiya was brought like a slave from the peripheries to entertain middle-class city audiences, when very few homes in her husband's village have electricity, leave alone a TV set.

Another *homo sacer* recently entered this scenario of deafening cheerleaders and scrambling TRP-watchers: Budhia Singh, a four-year-old boy from the eastern Indian state of Orissa, who had been prepared for the kill both by the televisual and the print media.⁶ In May 2006, we watched this frail child in an oversized T-shirt and fairytale red shoes running a marathon sponsored by the Central Police Reserve Force. He found mention in the *Limca Book of Records* for running 65 km in 7.02 hours. His coach, a man possessed by ambition, would have run him to the ground, had he not finally slowed down, gasped in breathlessness and vomited. With his limbs thrashing helplessly, the boy was whisked away into a car.

Budhia soon became a national sensation, with the Chief Minister of Orissa, the state's Governor, and its Sports and Youth Services Minister supporting his feat. The only protest came from the head of the Ministry of Woman and Child Development, who opposed the coach for exploiting the child so cynically. But with such high-profile support for the coach, this voice of sanity was easily drowned.

Most TV channels presented the Budhia story as a debate on whether a child so talented should be allowed to run a marathon or not, at his age. Important issues such as the fact that the coach had *bought* Budhia from a vendor, who in turn had *bought* him for Rs 800 from his impoverished mother who had three other children to feed, were underplayed. That Budhia was a child slave who was too young to be aware of his rights was not even raised as a niggling doubt on any of the channels. That Budhia could die of heart failure or suffer growth retardation if forced to continue to run unbearably long distances was dismissed as a side issue. People, interviewed off the street by various TV channels, expressed the noble sentiment that the boy should run for India, and that his talent should not be snuffed out. That runners below an acceptable age do not qualify for the physically demanding, marathon-length race has escaped these citizens. That the boy is not a free agent, but a freak on show, has similarly escaped them. What makes it worse is that Budhia, who is said to be sprinting towards modernity, is in truth a victim of the most feudal relationship of oppression that is being reissued in contemporary form.

Thus, the political surrogacy that televisual assemblies offer is operative only at the level of cathartic wish-fulfilment. It may at best articulate the feelings of an alienated citizenship that is mainly urban and middle-class; but it certainly cannot express the wishes of the vast, disenfranchised multitudes that occupy the swollen margins. Nor can such televisual assemblies propose a serious alternative to the established; even if fossilised or distorted; processes of democracy. A truly vibrant alternative would have to base itself on a sustained systemic critique of the polity, and a consequent activation of the public sphere by more critical and inclusive means. Media corporations and their programming experts cannot possibly deliver this mandate; it has no commercial resonance for them.

II.

I now move on to the possibility of transforming the figure of the *homo sacer*, who is constructed as an object by other people's discourses, into a self-empowered *subject*, an autonomous agent who can express her/his needs and wishes. For this, we have to move from the mediatic coliseum to those points of intersection where contemporary Indian artists have formed solidarities with colleagues active in disciplines such as new media, documentary filmmaking and activism.

Some Indian artists have attempted, through efforts of collaboration, to probe and disclose systemic hegemonies and distortions; they have made interventions in areas where citizens are not in a position to perform their citizenship. They have deployed a vocabulary that plays across a spectrum of modes ranging from irony to radical critique, through methods that are oblique and allusive but never lose sight of their objective.

I will concentrate on two collaborative projects: namely Sarai-CSDS + Ankur's Cybermohalla, where young adults in urban slums interact with new media practitioners to create ongoing streams of expression, and the interventions initiated by the artist Navjot Altar with local art practitioners in rural areas. Both projects are concerned with subjectivities that emerge from below the line of visibility, both in socio-political and art-historical terms. Both projects propose an art outside the conventional parameters of art history; they also point to a recovery of the public sphere by possibly utopian means, by the use of novel forms of dialogic pedagogy and democratic communication. These are vibrant examples of material empowerment and imaginative emancipation through collaborative processes across the lines of class and cultural assumptions.

Significantly, in these projects, the device of intervention does not replay the donor-recipient relationship enshrined in conventional NGO activity. Both in Cybermohalla and in Navjot's project, communication is lateral rather than hierarchical; and the specificity of location is not emphasised to entrench victimhood or oppression, but instead serves as a basis for a synergistic exploration. The basis of interaction is a mutuality of commitment.

The Cybermohalla project (<http://www.sarai.net/cybermohalla/cybermohalla.htm>) can be seen as a process of self-empowerment generated through the socialisation of technology in a particular ethos. Five years ago, Sarai, a new media initiative and a programme of CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) along with the NGO Ankur/Society for Alternatives in Education, set up five media labs in Delhi's urban slum clusters. In these media labs, young practitioners belonging to different social and educational backgrounds have been exploring the phenomenology of the technological act, as performed in the interstices between pedagogy and creativity. Through their various expressions; computer animations, digital photography, sound recordings, online discussion lists and texts, broadsheets, collages and posters; they examine the web of everyday life in urban neighbourhoods (*mohalla*, in Urdu), creating a richly detailed architecture of the colloquial. Their online and offline conversations are presented not as neutral information describing urban Indian reality, but as technologically-enabled cultural production that is inventive and idiosyncratic.

Imagine a *mohalla*, a neighbourhood where news filters in at different velocities and frequencies, where rumours are artworks, where secrets are shared, where intimacy is both cloying and comforting, where communitarian identities are maintained yet creatively bent^a The cellular structure of a *mohalla* would be an instructive metaphor for the variousness of the conversations that take place among these practitioners. How does one enter into this meta-site, a place that is invisible both to the mainstream art world and to quick-fix NGOs working on issues related to the digital divide?

As if anticipating this question, a set of texts by the practitioners is titled, *Before Coming Here Had You Thought of a Place Like This?*^f Here, Yashoda writes: But what can be said of glances that are not from strangers, but well-wishers? They seem unfamiliar sometimes. What are these looks? They leave a trace of suffocation in my life which otherwise seems to be going on just right. Even if I want to tell others about these looks, I can't. Because I don't understand them myself. Because in the courthouse of glances, there are no eyewitnesses^f⁷.

Yashoda's poetic take on the eyewitnesses^f of urban anthropology proposes a scenario where the glance is itself under investigation. Indeed, whose testimony can be trusted when every eye is culpable? Where no glance can be judged or vindicated, privileged or debarred, a conversation among equals takes place: a *samvad*. But even in such a conversation, Sometimes things flow in relationships, and sometimes they become still. Many relationships don't even have a name^a^f⁸

The tone of these texts or broadsheets is reflective, never forced or contrived. The literary pace is one of teasing out the nuances of a situation by intuitive means. The subject speaks with pride, dignity, heartbreak, humour and folk wisdom, but never as a supplicant or a victim waiting to be heard. The writers of the Cybermohalla speak for themselves, and not for some imaginary public that may or may not listen to them. This is a far cry from the predetermined framing of the subject in a mediatic coliseum. These speech-acts are veined with the responsive and responsible tonality of confidence that only a participant can bring to a conversation ; as against a passive consumer, or a deluded monologist, or a puppet playacting to a script. These speech-acts have the unmistakable quality of the performative as it thinks itself into the critical mass and specific gravity of existence. The quality of observation, inquiry and phrasing in these texts is remarkably fresh: it avoids the aridity of the statistical, the sloganeering of newly raised consciousness and the baroque flourishes of literary excess. As Shamsher Ali writes: ^ato go into the depths of thinking, we need a pass, and the name of that permit is QUESTION^a^f⁹

This project produces an archive of knowledge and insight, a primer of recall and foresight. Local histories are unlocked, street maps are redrawn from memory, desire and accident. The young practitioners enter the subjectivity of the survivor ; whether it is the cable operator or a sewage cleaner or a girl about to be married, all of whom are trying to crack the code of the urban condition, walking the tightrope of systemic imbalances.

Apart from becoming available as the residue of internal communication among the locality media labs, this project material has also found avatars in the world beyond the

project's sociality. It has been deployed in artworks, in multimedia installations where the archive becomes the found material. Consider the digital photographs of mirrored reflections, portraits and inanimate objects in the neighbourhood. By zooming deep into the image, the boundaries of legibility are pushed until the pixelated squares of differing tones create a definitional blur, an abstraction. This dodge in representation holds a parable for the viewer: by moving closer into an image or a life-world, we do not necessarily comprehend it better. Distance and discernment are equally important tools towards understanding.

The creativity of the Cybermohalla project is in a very material and immediate sense an act of resistance in the face of oppression. Even as texts are written and circulated in the media labs, we hear the grinding jaws of bulldozers and see the build-up of police formations. Delhi's squatter settlements are being destroyed, families are being uprooted; bricks are being recycled for a handful of coins. And yet, the Cybermohalla practitioners continue to write, make images, dream and resist.

Indeed, in times of crisis, the participants in the Cybermohalla project speak in voices that are sure and certain, not allusive or hesitant. During the recent slum demolitions in Delhi, one of Cybermohalla's media labs at Nangla Maanchi was demolished. The young practitioners began to share information about this crisis through broadsheets and ongoing blogs. They became, in that much-favoured term of today's TV journalism, citizen journalists. They questioned the role of the State and its agencies, the judiciary and the police; they have created a series of powerful vignettes describing the losses incurred by the inhabitants.

One of the blog entries records the statement made by Justice Ruma Pal, while dismissing the stay petition in the Supreme Court against the demolitions at Nangla Maanchi: Desperation does not mean they will do something illegal^a In India we have three weather conditions ; heat, rain and winter. If we accept your argument, there will be no appropriate time to demolish illegal structures^a nobody forced you to come to Delhi^a Stay where you can. If encroachments on public land are to be allowed, there will be anarchyf.

When the rural hinterland is submerged in debt traps and crop failures, when the urban future has been mortgaged to the big real estate and housing developers, where are the marginal to find a home ; the *makaan* in the trilogic promise of *roti, kapda aur makaan* (food, clothing and shelter) that the ruling Congress Party has held out like a talisman to the poor in its election manifestos through the decades? The poor leave their village homes because the countryside has been destroyed by rapacity and indifference; to send them back there is to push them into the blasted heath where Lear's unaccommodated man must take his chances.

As against the judge's summary reduction of citizens to the condition of *homo sacer*, Shamsheer writes movingly in the blog, discussing the legal/illegal status of the slum-dwellers: Inside all those places, which are termed illegal by the government, is a different story. The government plants the stake of its stamp on a place ; This is government

property. And in response, we place our small bundles of receipts and papers gathered from past time till today. But still, we are shunned, because the world moves on the basis of documents^af¹⁰

Such mature, authentic articulations of performative citizenship are far more valuable than the tokenistic posturing of the mediatic coliseum or the lazy and irresponsible rhetoric of blogger s parks, as the now-technologised battle to renew the foundational pledges of the republic continues.

III.

Cybermohalla symbolises a politics of belonging, of finding purchase ; a foothold, however small ; for oneself in the polity, or of vocalising one s position in a collective conversation. In interpreting this phenomenon, I would stress that the coalitions represented by the Cybermohalla project and Navjot s activities have in different ways emplaced themselves in relation to the coalitions of the powerful, which maraud and encroach upon the rights of the marginal. These projects have demonstrated that, instead of retreating into the charity-seeking modes of victimology, those in resistance can transform the circumstances of their marginality into a coign of vantage.

This is achieved when the more privileged collaborators in the project assist their marginal, subaltern, hitherto voiceless and unheard colleagues to position themselves in a location of articulate engagement ; one that takes them outside the circumscribed political and cultural possibilities attendant on their normal location in the social configuration. Thus emplaced, these newly empowered agents can forge strategic alliances with new disciplines and renew the frameworks by which they are viewed; they can also re-negotiate the terms by which their role is read, by which value is assigned to them, and by which the history of their old and newly chosen positions is represented.¹¹

Navjot Altaf s art is not founded on the creation of individual masterpieces. It has been premised, instead, on the act of searching, plotting and re-structuring the course of meaning through a life of projects ; where her riskiest wager is placed not on achieved style or finished product, but on that tricky shape-shifter, the self. Over the last 30 years, Navjot has worked in a diverse and impressive array of media ranging from painting and sculpture to inter-media installations comprising elements of sculpture, video, sound and text. During the 1970s, she played her role as a member of the first generation of artists who sought out a viewership beyond the art world, in mill-worker neighbourhoods, mining towns and railway stations. Since the early 1990s, she has worked in collaboration with artists from other disciplines and other milieus; these experiments have resulted in gallery-based sculpture and also in site-specific cooperative or collaborative installations with artists of rural background.

The consistent updating of her ideological stand has been reflected in periodic alterations in her choice of media and form. Her changing relationship with Marxist praxis illustrates this theme. While the leftist imperative to demonstrate solidarity with the working class impelled her to show art in public spaces in proletarian neighbourhoods in the 1970s, she gradually came to realise that orthodox Marxism constrains its exponents with certain

limitations. Operating from a consciousness of her womanhood through the 1980s, she outgrew her orthodox Marxist orientation, which privileged questions of class while denying the equal significance of caste, ethnicity and gender.

Navjot's engagement with rural reality and artists of tribal background in the 1990s marks yet another interrogation of her early Marxist position, which had foregrounded urban proletarian reality over other subaltern lifeworlds, and situated the vanguard of resistance in the metropolis rather than the village. This constant political alertness has sensitised Navjot greatly to the problems of working together: while working on projects with artists of subaltern background, she always remains aware of the asymmetries of entitlement and opportunity that inform all such relationships.

In the late 1990s, Navjot initiated a project to interact with artists of tribal background in Kondagaon, in Central India's Bastar district, where she was concerned with the problematics of collaboration, not its celebration¹². She did not immediately push for a collaboration with them; instead, she tried to locate their practices of stone, metal and wood carving against the larger contexts of State patronage for the crafts, social hierarchies and patriarchal biases, as well as the possibility of an intervention made by a metropolitan artist (with a fine-arts background like herself) who had been taught to dismiss the crafts as a hereditary skill. The project began with the redefining the terminology of art/craft and artist/craftsperson in the context of art history¹³.

The tribal artists have made individual sculptures at the workshops facilitated by Navjot, while site-specific projects between her and her colleagues have resulted in cooperative works such as *Pilla Gudis*, (Temples for Children), and Nalpar, the redesigning of public utility spaces from women at hand-pump sites. The *Pilla Gudis*, designed by Shantibai, Rajkumar, Gessuram and Navjot, became extra-curricular spaces where children could interact with one other, and with visiting musicians and artists. Rajkumar designed one at Kusma in 2000. A structure based on the wooden temple form, without the omnipresent divinities, it has mirrors placed between the rafters. The children have only to look up, to amuse themselves with their own multiple reflections. Apart from the sheer pleasure it provides, this structure is, metaphorically, a way of opening oneself to unexpected stimuli while retaining one's cultural balance.

One of the strongest works to emerge from this project is Shantibai's sculptural self-portrait, posing as a sculptor, holding a hammer close to her heart. Shantibai gradually vacated the socially ascribed identity of a pushover wife or underprivileged tribal woman, and won for herself a position of artistic agency. But Shantibai's personal growth does not register easily in the Indian art world, which still sees her as a puppet of destiny rather than as an agent impelled by her own will. This has not dejected her; their dialogue was never meant to be limited to the sale of artworks. Such solidarity has already achieved a movement away from the circumscribed art world, and towards a more engaging lifeworld. Neither a user nor a do-gooder, Navjot has entered into a symbiotic relationship with the rural community and its environment and emplaces herself as artist-activist in the full awareness of the differences that are inherent in all such collaborations.

When the sculptures of Navjot's colleagues were first shown in mainstream art galleries, some viewers ridiculed them for copying Navjot's style of sculpture-making. To which Navjot had responded, but my own work takes from Adivasi, Mayan and African sources. It is strange that, after a considerable passage of time and Navjot's courageous struggle in figuring the conceptual abstractions inherent in the representation of the other, her own video installations seem to be exploring a poetics of abstraction. Her videos are layered, blurred testimonies of many beleaguered voices, but they are also contained in mathematically precise rhythmic structures. In this tense, vulnerable moment; mapping her own long-unspeken interests as an artist, interests that do not necessarily coincide with her more overtly political concerns; a new poetics has emerged in Navjot's work. This records the triumph of a genuinely dialogic process, in the course of which Navjot has emancipated herself as an image-maker from the dominance of the political; without compromising her commitment to the mutuality and solidarity that sustain her project in Bastar. The connection between the artist-as-interventionist and the *homo sacer* comes full circle; emancipation is a feedback loop, it transforms all who perform and participate in it.

NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998, Stanford).
2. See Barkha Dutt, Remote Control (The Hindustan Times, Mumbai, 8 July 2006, p. 8). Dutt, managing editor of the channel NDTV 24 x 7, comments on the proposed Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill (2006). A draft of the legislation was scheduled to be tabled in Parliament at the time of writing this essay.
3. See Nancy Adajania, Anchored Illusions, Floating Realities: Two Mediatic Claims on the Public Sphere (text of lecture presented at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, September 2003). In an electoral setting where conventional political mobilisation has degenerated into the securing of a mass base by appeal to retrograde ethnic/religious/regional sentiments, an ambiguous proposal is made through the programming of media corporations; they propose what I will read as forms of televisual assembly, in which media corporations assert their ability to provide a true representation of the public will and therefore set themselves up as an alternative to the constituted fora of a democratic discussion and governance. In fact, what is brashly offered as an alternative is a surrogate.
4. See T.K. Rajalakshmi, Televised Trauma, *Frontline*, 22 October 2004; see also Poornima Joshi, The Media's Toy, *Outlook*, 4 October 2004.
5. In this context, see Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed, The Fatwa in Journalism, Sarai Reader-list posting, 3 July 2006. <https://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/>
6. See Prafulla Das, A Step Too Far, *Frontline*, 2 June 2006.
7. Yashoda. Dilli Gate. In *If We Were to Stand in Front of a Crowd, What Would the Eyes of the Crowd Say to Us?* Cybermohalla booklet (2003). <http://www.sarai.net/community/cybermohalla/book02/pages/pdfs/eyescrowd.pdf>
8. Neelofar. Relationships. In *Conversations in Questions and Answers and Conversations without Questions and Answers*. Cybermohalla booklet (2003). <http://www.sarai.net/community/cybermohalla/book02/pages/pdfs/conversation.pdf>

9. Shamsheer Ali. The Edges of Questions. In *Method Is That Heavy Thing Which Makes Everything Light?* Cybermohalla booklet (2003).
<http://www.sarai.net/community/cybermohalla/book02/pages/pdfs/questions/pdf>
10. Shamsheer Ali. A Place to Dwell [The Journey After]. Blog entry, 10 June 2006.
<http://nangla.freeflux.net/> (English); <http://nangla-maachi.freeflux.net> (Hindi)
11. See Nancy Adajania, Another look at Displacement: Emplacement versus Emplacements. Catalogue essay for Navjot Altaf's exhibition *Displaced Self*, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, 2003.
12. Nancy Adajania. Dialogues on Representation. In *The Hindu*, 16 February 2003.
13. Ibid.