

# Fear in Neo-*Kaliyuga*

## Epistemic Troubles in Techno-*Smṛti* Times

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The modular *qasba* towns of Asia and the *bazaars* within them are a residue of the speeds of Islamic expansionism between the 9th and the 13th centuries, and are thus marked by ecstatic enunciations of the experience of speeds, by a frenetic pace of production, by a relentlessly fast stylisation of all matter, of everything (including phenomena such as voice, bardic poetry, perception of birdsong, lovers' orgasms and so on). Much of material culture here is an involuntary expression of wonderment at what speed can do to the body. But such a reflex excitation of the senses by speed is also remarkably suited to meet the material demands of a fast-expanding imperial order that consumes goods and instigates markets at the same remarkable rates. The eye is always looking askance towards the next horizon of conquest that will bring in new demands that will require skills to adapt fast, very fast indeed, as they did in the mediaeval era to keep up with the perceptions of change that the venture of Islam was producing the world over. The Islamic totalisation of speed had re-worked *techrne* to a new pitch of productivity that would make the *bazaar* approach the machine in no time. As the historian Marshall Hodgson points out, the one significant thing that distinguished Islam from preceding world-system hegemonies was the extraordinary freedom it allowed for people to choose their social and life destinies. This unique freedom became translated into the speeds with which people rushed to take advantage of it, and emanated also in a quickening of the transaction of goods and bodies as the world became more accessible to personal drives without the earlier sanctions of a hierarchical access to material resources. Hodgson's point about the rising fortunes of the mercantile class and the burgeoning of trade under Islam makes sense in the entanglement of the freedom to access the world, to do new things with it and also to spread across the world in search of new destinies of prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

However, it could be argued that the totalisation of speeds introduced by Islamic world conquests was not just about engendering the *bazaar* as a space of production. The *bazaar* also enlarged into a competitive system for creative labour, encompassing domestic life, literature, music, knowledge systems and aspirations for social betterment, of which the *bazaar* was merely a revelatory representation. By the 18th century, this logic of competition in speed that began in the epochal Islamic urban revolution had seeped into the villages of India from Kashmir to the Malabar. The volume of cultural production brought forth in the Islamic phase of Indic history that lasted until the 1920s is mind boggling, an index of the logic of speed that ran the regimes of cultural production. Additional acceleration, produced by such factors as the twist colonialism gave to the speed dial of productivity, population expansion and finally the bottling-in of the explosive forces of creativity by the nation-state, has merely intensified the *bazaar* order into the organics of everyday Indian life. The material emanations of the oral and the textual orders of knowledge, seen in the logic of productivity, are shot through with the febrile vibrations of the competitive speeds of the *bazaar*.

The terms of *bazaar* competition have now changed. The Indian *bazaar* is today one of the biggest sweatshops serving the global economy, which in turn seems to be converging on a voracious, hyper-consumerist *bazaar* model more than ever before. If the *bazaar* competition of Islamic times was carried out in the name of the glory of the emperor/empire and Allah, its modern manifestation is mobilised in the name of the advancement of the Indian nation. These shifts in register of the hegemonic ideologies that cap *bazaar* regimes of productivity in the Indic have important bearings on the manner in which fear is felt and expressed in 21st-century *bazaar* India. The cultural material that frames sensory experience in the *bazaar* has changed, leading to new registers in which fear is felt and to popular cinema becoming the prime location through which fear in this competitive order is expressed.

### Epistemic Orders of the *Bazaar* and Expressions of Fear

Three distinctive knowledge orders reside in the Indic *bazaar* – the textual, the oral and the sensory reflexive. One can point out that these are co-extensive and by one or the other means inform one another, at least from the sensory reflexive 'upwards' towards the textual. Culturally, the Indic *bazaar* is a space dominantly marked by a mnemonics of skill recall employed to carry out various forms of labour tasks. Textuality is minimal, and the collective memory of labour combines remains the main repository of skill recall techniques. The sensory reflexive is the most pervasive literacy medium that underpins both the religious ritualism of *bazaar* and household spaces as well as the world of informal labour that fabricates, transports and distributes material goods through the Indic everyday. The telescoping of different kinds of hierarchical orders – brahmanical, Islamic and modern, translating roughly into caste, communal and class divisions – has ensured that labour in the *bazaar* proceeds across either silence and/or mutual mistrust between patron and labour or in ecstatic master-slave devotional relationships across cultural taboo lines. These translate into complex symbolic myths of power and domination that use materiality and sensory feels of environment to express themselves. Caste being the dominant reality of labour in

India also ensures that there is a complex mapping on to the social of primordial cosmic fears emanating from a fear of environmental forces, something that cuts across class. The synergies between hierarchy and cosmic fear provide the frame for a slave labour regime in a hyper-capitalist context, allowing sweatshop conditions and the acceptance of exponentially expanding high demand orders. The expansion in demand, in turn, makes the market more hectic and unstable, an instability that runs across the psychic worlds of owners and workers alike.

The endless return to the sensory reflexive after a passage through the three epistemic orders thus becomes the base for, to put in a certain Indic register of classifying knowledge and culture, *smṛti* forms of knowledge, forms of knowledge learnt by rote memory. Bodily reflexes can inspire rote learning as can oral enunciations. Oral enunciations in their turn can form the base of a textuality that retains the basic repetitive incantatory logic of orality. Needless to say, the sensory-reflexive base of life and culture that marks the co-extensiveness of cultural expressions spanning 'textuality', in the largest sense of the term, is also the reason for the inter-infusion of *bazaar* and everyday in India – with the instability of the sensory-reflexive in labour and materiality forever promising to blur the lines seeking to classify reality in symbolic and hierarchical dimensions towards seamless flows of textures of materiality. We notice this in the creative logic of *ragmala* paintings, where colour is used in such a way that the shapes of delineated forms dissolve into the feel of the temperatures on our skin that the colours elicit and, by extension, into an 'environmental' feel of the scene depicted.

That such an epistemic order is structured by a basic instability at its core due to the relentlessness of demands to productivity is only to be expected. The emphasis on the interconnectedness of the various levels of economy and society merely points out the all-pervasive quality of *bazaar* instability structuring the Indic. Fear, from Islamic times, had always structured the modern *bazaar*. This, after all, was the lynchpin of the military-fiscal order, as the ritual loot of the *bazaar* during conquests made very clear. Stories of hauntings by spirits, attacks by dacoits and desecration during invasions or natural calamities form the bedrock of oral lore emanating from the *bazaar*. An obsession with miracles abounds in this literature as does the obverse: an earthly, pornographic emphasis on sex and other worldly pleasures, extracted as costs of the relentless order of productivity that the *bazaar* is. In a lot of love poetry, the miraculous revelation of the woman's body and sexual explicitness act as mutual enforcers of sensory intensities. The same pre-occupations have from the beginning framed cinema in India, from the manic enjoyment of imported action adventure serials to the relentless paranoid action of the Fearless Nadia films. And, indeed, the vast popularity of a certain kind of performative cinema that made the sensory reflexive basis of the *bazaar* explicit can only be explained by the intensities of pain and desire produced in a system that pushes labour so easily under the demands for productivity to the edge of human fortitude – the sensory reflexive itself.

The instability of existence in the *bazaar* lies opened up to the eye in 1970s Indian cinema. Wide-angle shots and an excessive use of zooms and track outs to present dramas of extreme competitive violence expressed the instability of the self as having crept up into

the eye itself. Amitabh Bachchan's iconography of the haunted and hunted hero on the run expressed itself mainly through tormented and over-stressed eyes. The burden of labour holding up a vast system of demands was taking its toll, and neither emperor nor god nor nation could help sublimate this strain in any symbolic register of idealism. And not only does this instability mark the site of labour, but the entire social fabric seems to have been shaken up by an incredible paroxysm of material greed through and through. Social explanations for grasping behaviour in terms of class or caste have been abandoned. From this point on, cinema that already was largely in the hands of *bazaar* mercantile capital – serving the interests of entertaining the subaltern masses and the young lower-middle class single male as its main economic dynamic – changed over to a *bazaar* cinema that, extraordinarily enough, began to serve the middle classes as well. The effects of unemployment, disaffection against tradition and India's population explosion were driving the middle-class young into earning their living for the first time in direct links with the *bazaar*, the source of the cheap commodity production regimes that allowed them their jobs. Two decades on, cinema, with its capacities to directly catch the sensory basis of life and fear in the *bazaar*, becomes the *lingua franca* of a literate middle class living in or on the margins of *bazaars*. The difficulties and the perils of labour in an inflation-ridden, hyper-competitive middle-class labour market become coded in this cinema as *metaphorically* equivalent to the kinds of tensions that the *bazaar* has traditionally been defined by.

The obliteration of textuality, or the symbolic linguistic, from the registers of expression of fear points as much to the secularisation of the senses in the mayhem of the economic wars of productivity waged in the *bazaar* as to the logic of the *bazaar*, shifting under such pressures towards the sensory reflexive and away from the symbolic. And violence at this reflex level of the unconscious, joining the sensory and the motor without any symbolic mediation, is bound to be extreme and visceral to the core. Not only do the stakes of the visceral realism of cinematic violence keep spiralling through the decades, but so does the obsession with eviscerating the sexual in increasingly explicit forms. And over the years, by the time we reach the film, *Satya*, we find the domestic, that last bastion of symbolic coherence for the senses, whittled away under the pressures of a relentlessly competitive economy. The death of the domestic as a site of repose from the sensory reflexive seems to have spurred on popular cinema to ever more daringly 'explicit' representations of the sensory reflexive without any symbolic respite. Elements such as the earlier expression of the density of erotic passion in a certain lyricism of word and music in the Hindi film song stand discarded. Dance becomes more frontal and more explicitly expressive of sexual needs, yet at the same time more mechanical. Gone is the mediation of the sweeping movements of dance of an earlier cinema that denoted seduction in duration, mediation.

Inasmuch as the sensory reflexive base of the *smṛti* knowledge of social rituals and modes of behaviour is what runs the *bazaar*, hyper-emphasised performative scenes of great sensory camaraderie between bodies that learnt in silent rote from each other could alternate with scenes where such bodies could also kill one another with equal performative verve and intensity. Ecstasy and reflex violence reside side by side in an atmosphere of what

the psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, calls thalamic fear, a fear where the slightest error or even doubt in carrying out tasks always elicits a fear of letting a cosmic order down, so high are the stakes of productivity in the *bazaar*. And, sift through the entire range of production order films coming out of Bombay, no order of production is left untouched by the approach of the sensory reflexive in *smṛti* – the corporate as much as the military or the police or the artistic. Or, for that matter, we also see the sensory reflexive enter the oral and the textual, say in the form of the violence depicted in televisual soaps, in the retelling of religious myths, in the increasing vogue of the dystopic comic book form or in the violence of consumerist imagery and writing that marks news today. Technology has only made *smṛti* knowledge more paranoid, technology being almost always introduced into the contemporary Indic in the name of increased productivity and not creative formal play in duration and contemplation.

### The Touch of Speed and the *Dharma* of the Gambler

As speed touches an order of production, it drives the order towards the logic of productivity that destabilises desire and skill towards the sensory reflexive rather than the textual and epistemic. The pressure of the system falls upon senses forever 'ignorant' of the reality of the pressures of productivity, given the inherent fragility of the senses in a sensory-reflexive confusion ultimately rooted in fears of cosmic imbalance. A labour order forever uncertain of its sensory articulation in space is driven by increasing productivity towards paranoia about the 'fatal' error that will bring the techno-cosmos down. This is nothing but the fear of the evacuation of the symbolic from the sensory, under the pressures of labour demands that only accelerate the operation of all kinds of social and cosmic fears circulating in the senses from beforehand.

The flipside of such extreme anxiety and uncertainty is that the fearful senses hit back by rendering speculative all productive gestures through and through, and thus add a paranoid dimension to competition. Earlier rituals of competition and confrontation in the symbolic meant that status in the imperial order rooted speculative instability in the system in temporary stasis. In the modern age, the coming together at once of the persistence of vestiges of cosmic fears of environmental forces and the secularisation of the senses by the forces of history threatens to push *smṛti* forms of experience and expertise into an exponentially spiralling, speculative competitive order. In this order, unending in the one sense and fascist-apocalyptic in the other, history is made to end by making bodies evaporate in a drama mimicking the forces of history, a re-enactment of the death of the self fantasised under labour pressures.

For the moment, we see the reflex reaction to the threat of the secular in the carnival of blind speculation on all fronts of life – commercial, consumerist and epistemological (including the political) – in a rise in apocalyptic spiritualism of all forms in the *bazaar* (that, in its *yogic* quest to use the entropy of the sensory to calmly accept a violent death, becomes the flipside of the fascist-apocalyptic) and in a mind-boggling variety of 'syncretistic' *bazaar* commodity production. Coded in this 'syncretistic' production is the sensory confusion of being suddenly 'outed' from earlier hierarchical certainties into the challenge of the approach

of a value-free, secular sensory. The terror faced at the approach of a value-free infinity of sensation into the material is signaled by the hyper-material nature of *bazaar* kitsch today, which is very different from the organic, 'syncretistic' nature of the *bazaar* commodities of the pre-modern, although the latter too is included in the hyper-material of contemporary commodity production. New 'syncretisms' can range from a coming together of clashing textures of materiality in fashion, architectural styles or other forms of cultural production such as song or cinema or even 'traditional' *bazaar* products such as sweetmeats or *paan*. We are in neo-*Kaliyuga*, where the inversion of symbolic hierarchies is the order of the day as speculation in sensory panic drives textures of materiality into one another in the hyper-material. Cinema, with its unique capacity to capture the intimacy of terror and the projection of spectacle into the mass, thus becomes the favoured medium to catch the polarities of experience described above.

Speculation thus becomes a way of eliciting the potential of cultural forms in materiality, in productive action, to buy time to transit from the symbolic to the secular of value-free sensation. But speculation is also about letting the automatism of the senses in the sensory-reflexive arrange the emergent materiality of the world in the secular in aesthetically just directions of flow, letting in new configurations of the material in the approach of the secular. In transition, speculative dreams of empire building and the destruction of empires of the senses float around in the civil war of consumerism, and its equal mix of intensity and entropy of the senses, that today's *bazaar* is. Rationality seems to lie on the side of the arch-gambler, a Yudhisthira, the pattern recogniser of social history, posited as the ideal emperor of Hindustan by the Mahabharata, the paramount summation of the *smarta yuga*. He is the fantasised 'political' gambler, thrown up in the virtual political-fiscal speculative regime, who out-waits smalltime speculators in the symbolic to let history mature towards the edge of Apocalypse. In that calamitous hour, the final sacrifice can be held to strike the fine balance between intensity and entropy that is the sublimation of thalamic fear in sensory conflict. This, then, is the solution posited by a text faced with rationalising the unruly histories of the equally unruly forces of history – snakes, semen, the senses (especially hearing), the mind and its various emanations and horses, amongst other things it seeks to control within its diegetic ambit.

And beneath all this lies the flow of desire in textures of pure sensation symbolised by Krsna, the instigator of all gambles, the one who knows all but whose gestures seem as bizarre gambles to the bystander, the destiny of the text, the one to whom all must return in flow once the turbulence of history is over. The passage from the symbolic to desire in the secular, in pure sensation, it seems can only happen in the 'political' reaching the edge of Apocalypse to flip over into desire. This eventuates when it is realised that it is the intensity of desire that has been 'misread' as the rising intensities of 'political' ambitions in the symbolic. The Bharata text flows out to us at the edge of the apocalyptic snake sacrifice as does *dharma* from the edge of Apocalypse in battle, a battle that sums up all possible civil wars of its times. Only the political-aesthetic gambler would know such limits. And much of modern Indian culture has flowed from the move effected in the Shi'a-Vaishnava ethos of Wajid Ali

Shah's court, from the apocalyptic edge of the end of Islamic power in the Indic. With its disintegration were all the energies of the commodity in empire let out to flow through the popular cultural productions of *bazaar* India for the next hundred years. Of these, the popular cinemas of India were the most powerful form, the form that caught most accurately the sensory stakes of Indic history in the 20th century.

Speed destabilises perception, causes materiality to multiply or creates the illusion of materiality cracking up into multiplicities. Textuality retreats to the *smṛti* of the sensory-reflexive. Yet in times of great material flux, it might be useful to posit the textual as just another form of materiality – and await its re-emergence on the other side of flux, alongside the emergences of other forms of expression. Patience in the sensory-reflexive – capable of reading patterns in chaos, of letting the material content of desire flow through contradictions – can insert *dharma*, even if momentarily, into the *Kaliyuga* of the carnival, where all values come under threat from insurgent desires arriving from all sides and in many cultural forms. There is no one form of the sublimation of the touch of speed in the reverse touch of sense – the way of the Buddha, Gandhi, of cultural superstars, revolutionaries or the ones who opt out of historical memory, all gamblers in the senses, eliciting sublimation from their constituencies, internal and external, according to the historical specificities of the materiality of sensory fear they share. Whether these lead up to some kind of new way of thinking through a democracy of the senses – in the cutting edge of the technologies of the senses at play in the consumerist wars of the *bazaar* (and given the vicissitudes of the political struggles of our times, it might be apt that we merged what we conventionally call war and techno-consumerism) – only time will tell.

## Note

1. Marshall GS Hodgson. "The Role of Islam in World History". In Marshall GS Hodgson, (ed.) *Edmund Burke III, Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993, Cambridge), pp. 97-125.