Fractured city votes for civic state

WHAT is it that makes democracy so durable despite its myriad loopholes and thousand histories of disappointment? If you believe in what the French political historian, Pierre Rosanvallon, has to say, the answer lies in democracy’s unceasing zest to pose as an experiment. Democracy, he observes, rarely solves anything but makes solutions problematic and derives its energy in this very gesture of making things problematic. It is this power of indeterminacy and flexibility through which it manages its citizens. Thus, if democracy still seems an unsurpassable horizon of political formations even more than two hundred years after the French Revolution, the reason lies here.

The open discontent in AAP leadership is a matter of great sadness and political loss, for what one had witnessed on 10 February 2015 was the latest and a remarkably robust edition of this experiment. The people of Delhi had overwhelmingly voted for the AAP cutting across caste, religion and class lines, paying no heed to the nagging questions that pragmatists have been raising all through: How can so much water be supplied free or electricity provided at half its present price? How can so many schools be set up every year without burdening an already overburdened exchequer? How can Delhi hope to get full control of its police department without changing the Constitution itself? In the face of media grilling, AAP spokespersons would typically cite one or two examples that show how nearly one third of all government expenditures or financial transactions are fraud—sleaze money in the form of cutbacks, bribes, and so on—money that could now be invested to make citizen’s lives better, especially those of the poor. Asked more, they would maintain that all the figures and targets cited have been meticulously calculated and worked out by experts with very credible record in their own fields.

Voters across the board could not care less. They were all seemingly united and galvanized by one common hope: a transparent, participatory and more flexible administration. The extent to which this one dream could inspire so many is also a comment on how much petty corruption has virtually immobilized everyday existence in Indian cities. As a matter of fact, in AAP’s unprecedented triumph, everyday life of the city stands vindicated. Thanks to the innovative and tireless mobilization of AAP cadres, the different segments of Delhi’s population haven’t remained merely a collection of demographic units but, even if for a short euphoric time, taken on the face of a community. It is amazing how the multiple threads of the lives of people in their different locations, diverse professions and beliefs weaved into a singular expression: a demand for clean administration through participatory democracy. For this, the man of the season is Arvind Kejriwal, who in many ways embodies the right combination of paradoxes that ignite the voters’ mind: soft spoken and gritty, slightly aloof and acutely strategic, witty and sincere, ordinary and charismatic. And, finally, no flamboyance—the humble muffler scoring a huge sartorial point against the bizarrely expensive coat with the name of the owner embossed!

Kejriwal’s cadres too are not the usual political faces but young men and women stirred by the ideal of recasting politics itself. The celebration that Delhi witnessed on results day is nothing short of spring thunder in a city that in recent years has seen its doors opened to the world like never before and also been grossly disappointed and wronged by its rulers, causing both hype and frustration in the aspirational class.

Take the case of Delhi University, an institution that has been systematically wounded since the time of UPA II, a trend which has only intensified under the current dispensation. Some of its best teachers have been ‘show-caused’ for no good reason, its curriculum experimented with and appointments tampered. All this has left a restive student body, many of whom poured their energy into campaigning for AAP. In fact, it is the young and educated activists of the party that
helped bring the different segments of population together under one banner. It is to the singular credit of AAP that it could blend the frustration of the upwardly mobile with the with that of the poor, exposed and exploited by the emerging neoliberal economy at its lower end. The stirring must have been truly immense for even slogans with a historical backlog of Muslim resentment like Vandemataram or Bharat Mata ki Jai! were received without any apparent hitch.

The question remains: is the turmoil that the AAP is currently going through either unexpected or unprecedented? But first, what is the nature of new politics that the AAP wants to frame? And just what sort of a political animal is the AAP? It does not seem to have any major quarrel with new capital or, for that matter, neoliberal economy. Its call for making Delhi a world city of today—an agenda it shares with both the BJP and the Congress—amply proves that point. It neither professes to carry out any project of history nor sees itself as a harbinger of a new grammar of society. It merely attempts to set the existing grammar straight and help fulfil the basic promise of clean and caring government.

Is it a civil society movement? Here again the answer is both yes and no. The leadership of AAP comes from members of civil society, as do a fair number of its voters and cadres. But the vast majority of its rank and file live outside the effective reach of civil society. They live outside the protection of the state but are at the same time controlled by the long arm of the law, whose oppressive side is what they largely get to experience. This is the section of population that theorist Partha Chatterjee calls political society. The concept owes its life to democracy which assures everyone a vote, and thus translates the poor’s ‘lack of social marginality into a potent political factor.

It is here that AAP pitches its politics, urging the developmental state that India promises to be, to provide care and welfare to this section of the populace. It does not try to achieve this by changing property relations but by taking up the challenge of establishing a corruption-free administration. It is definitely a rejection of the ‘subaltern politics’ model—that is, politics by and under the leadership of subalterns. In essence, it is not so much the freebies but the promise of a clean and caring administration that won AAP the mandate. This may also explain the coexistence of different classes among its voters. For the middle class voter, Modi at the Centre and Kejriwal at the state is not a bad mix at all; one will look after economic growth, the other will keep the menace of everyday corruption under control.

The section that is hurt most by rampant corruption is of course the poor. But its own livelihood, ironically, quite often lies in fuzzy legal zones. Think of unauthorized vendors, or those who live in squatter colonies, or ply auto rickshaws without proper papers, or come to the city every morning by train without tickets. This is not corruption for greed, like the cops who extort hafta from these people, but corruption for sheer existence.

In his book, Politics of the Governed, Chatterjee narrates the story of the changes a squatter colony, next to the rail lines in south Calcutta, underwent with the arrival of an enterprising schoolteacher who, among other things, started a primary school across the street and also a welfare NGO. At his initiative, the ICDS opened a childcare unit that set up a play school, looked after the health needs of the children and provided other kinds of pastoral care to the children and their parents. Meanwhile, the NGO facilitated collective rental arrangements with the electricity department when strictly speaking the inhabitants were not supposed to get electric connections in the first place. Thus a community developed that could make claims on the state for entitlements and basic rights of habitation and livelihood. As the people organized themselves on the moral expectations of citizenry, the state too extended beyond strict legal limits to help out a community in its struggle for a better life. This is how the state monitors the conduct of its citizens without coercion.

It seems to me that the AAP is aiming at something similar through the different mohalla sabhas and associational politics and bring the people and the state closer through fruitful dialogue. It is not limited governance that it aims for, but pervasive governance. In other words, it wants to work towards a governmentalized state or, if you wish, a civic state. It is not so much on revamping the institutions of representative democracy but care of the underprivileged and security of the citizens through governmental and quasi-governmental agencies that AAP is expected to be invested. Unlike the first time when it challenged the limits of governance, let us hope this time they will try and stretch the limits of possible governance.

The AAP experiment uniquely suits Delhi for one big reason. The poor quarters of the city are not the entrenched bastion of the big political parties, but typically have been under the control of small-time mafia holding adherence to a local political leader. This is in sharp contrast to say, Kolkata or Mumbai. In these cities, it will be virtually impossible for the dedicated groups of AAP’s educated young men and women to
campaign in slums. The Shiv Sena in Mumbai and TMC in Kolkata will almost certainly ensure that this is not replicated in their turf. But who knows? Even mountains move! Electronic and social media knows no boundaries, especially for young people.

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Is the rift in APP leadership mainly due to the clash of interest of Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan with Arvind Kejriwal? Or, is there more to it? Is it primarily a conflict of different political locations? Questions have been raised about Kejriwal’s centricity in the party. Such questions wouldn’t certainly be raised in the Congress or BJP, where such centricity is accepted as a fact of life. It is also not true that these two leaders wielded no power in the party. It was primarily at Yadav’s behest, we are told, that the party went for contesting countrywide polls in the last Lok Sabha. The results were disastrous, though Yadav maintained that Kejriwal’s abortive term as chief minister of Delhi was to be mainly blamed for this. However, last month Kejriwal proved that his charisma, far from diminishing, has soared sky-high. Here, let me point out, much as AAP will work towards becoming an all India political outfit, a name like Aam Aadi Party will not work in a city like Calcutta or for that matter Bengal. The same could be true for the southern parts of the country. Not merely the name, the cultural symbols too have to be reinvented to suit regional specificities. For instance, I am not sure whether the broom and the topi will ignite the Bengali imagination.

Yadav and Bhushan are driven by ideals. One is a Lohiaite thinker and a proven social scientist, the other a competent lawyer of far-left persuasion, both still unreconciled about how to inhabit contemporary modes of capital. On the other side of the spectrum, what became clear during the last election campaign was that this time around Kejriwal would work for a pragmatic, welfarist government within the hegemony of the contemporary economic order. But the basic point is that such discontent is neither extraordinary nor unprecedented. This kind of turmoil is more or less inevitable in the process of a social movement becoming a political party. This happened with the Congress party in the early years of independence when many socialists left the party and Nehru was hoisted as the charismatic, anchoring point of the party.

AAP was born as a political movement with one agenda: corruption-free, transparent governance. It was kind of a glasnost, an open forum for ideas and ideologies. It attracted the idealist youth of Delhi who, fed up with the empty promises and corrupt modes of the big political parties, came forward and offered voluntary service to the AAP. AAP is indeed blessed with a large number of tireless and gifted workers. They, however, should not be confused with the whole-timers of communist parties on a monthly salary. It is the openness of the party which primarily attracted them. It is quite likely that Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan have a better grip on the volunteers and some of them might well leave the party in the near future or just become inactive. Such contestations in the party is the stuff of democracy as long as it does not lead to a capsizing of the party.

In a way what AAP is witnessing is the inevitable disciplining that a political party has to go through in a bourgeois set-up. By ‘capsizing’, I am not merely talking of a possible split in the party; after all, the AAP is committed to redefining how to do participatory politics in our neoliberal times. Yadav and Bhushan’s resentment reveals that parliamentary democratic politics perhaps cannot be recast beyond a point under the prevailing conditions. But it is paradoxically through parliamentary democracy that large-scale, practical transformations are possible. What the party needs is a better worked out and more nuanced mode of balancing the two ends. One only hopes that AAP under the leadership of Kejriwal will, to the extent possible, absorb some of its earlier liberatory promises. Otherwise, it will find itself in the same position as the party it replaced, the Congress. Not so much high ideals of ‘pure politics’, but sticking on to the governmentality agenda of a welfare state will more likely yield rich returns in the long run.

A day after her humiliating defeat, Kiran Bedi made an impassioned appeal to AAP to gain firsthand knowledge of how miserably the Delhi poor live, something that eluded her in the long career as a top cop. With characteristic neatness, she advised AAP to make a list of all those who live in the jhuggi-jhopris of the city and have nice houses built for them, but ‘do not allow... any new entrants anymore’, she said. It is the administration of Tihar Jail that must have occupied her mind, otherwise she would have known that human geography does not follow such neat contours, especially not in a country like India, where agriculture is getting overcrowded and factories need less and less people. Jobless, family-less, shelter-less people come to the big cities, especially Delhi whose population is growing exponentially. How many houses or how many cheap medical centres can AAP after all build; or how many auto-drivers can it give licenses to? All this is perhaps true; perhaps APP is going to sink under its own weight.
Or, it might split even before addressing these issues. But let us not give up hope gazing at a possibly blurred future. ‘Whether it flowers or not/Today is spring’, to quote the Bengali poet, Subhash Mukhopadhyay.

Manas Ray

No country for women

‘Our culture is the best culture. In our culture, there is no place for a woman.’

– M.L. Sharma

THE documentary India’s Daughter that was made as Leslie Udwin’s ‘gift to India’ resulted in an immediate ban amidst various other criticisms such as allegations of a conspiracy to defame India on the international stage, the most ironical of which is that the film insults the dignity of women because it allows a rapist to publicly air his views. The rapist’s tendency to blame the victim for being far more responsible for the rape than the perpetrator is unsurprising for anybody who is familiar with rape culture. But what horrifies equally, if not more, are the statements made by the defence counsel, M.L. Sharma and A.P. Singh.

This documentary is important primarily because it portrays the shocking patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes shared by a vast section of the population; the socio-economic deprivation that often leads to these attitudes as well as the unprecedented and enormous power of mass mobilization for justice led by those sections of the population most expected to submit to patriarchal authority – women and the youth. Genuine efforts by the J.S. Verma Committee to make a difference have been appreciated. In light of the vicious personal attacks on Leslie Udwin, it must be underscored that she has publicly stated that she is herself a victim of rape and that this, rather than propulsion by some White-messiah motive, better explains her choice of subject.

The documentary highlights the perpetuation of rape culture by the educated vanguard of Indian patriarchy. Indeed, M.L. Sharma’s casual objectification of the Indian woman, and the vindictiveness displayed in his language, is appalling – mostly, because it lays bare the fact that in India it is acceptable to air such views and get away by merely being branded as ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’. There is no social ostracism of such people because misogyny has for decades been the lingua franca of a large section of the Indian male population, where ‘modern’ and ‘liberal’ are often used as pejoratives. Equally shocking is A.P. Singh’s proud promise of ‘dousing in petrol’ and setting alight a daughter or sister were she to have premarital sex – surely this is an indication of a criminal bent of mind, completely unacceptable in a member of the judicial system of a state which aspires to attain the status of a ‘developed’ country? The view that a woman has no place in society beyond the home is reflected in the rigid attitude that it is unthinkable for a woman to want to venture outside for any purpose that is not utilitarian for the family. That she might want to fulfil herself independently of her family is repugnant to the Indian patriarchal mind. The equation of brutalization and sadistic behaviour with ‘enjoyment’ as a reward for ‘courage’ is deeply revealing of the incredible objectification and dehumanization of the victims of sexual assault.

Accountability is a major aspect of the many questions thrown up by this documentary – examples are given of jailed rapists who have committed the offence multiple times and received a sentence for only one. Indeed, the accused in the ‘Nirbhaya’ case are surprised that a mere gang rape has garnered so much attention when countless other offenders have gotten away with it. It is perhaps only when rape is considered as heinous a crime as murder, with equally obvious consequences, that a change in the statistics will be seen.

Maria Misra is right when she makes a point about the culture of shame – the rapists believed she would not fight back because she had committed an offence by travelling alone with a male friend at night; that she would accept this ‘lesson’ that had been dealt to her; that they had only taken what they were entitled to. What is especially eerie is the unrepentant comment by one of the accused – that capital punishment for rape would only make things worse for women because now they would not only be raped but also killed – a total negation of the death sentence as a potential deterrent.

In stark contrast to the regressive attitudes portrayed in the film are those of Jyoti’s parents who display enormous dignity and strength and refuse to blame either themselves or their daughter. Their proud insistence on making their daughter’s name public instead of patronizingly labelling her ‘Nirbhaya’ is strikingly progressive as was their support of her vision of becoming a doctor despite financial and societal constraints. It is to this spirit and to that of Jyoti’s that the documentary ultimately pays tribute and the reason why the ban must be repealed.

Inaya Khan
The Dimapur lynching and cultures of public violence

On 5th March, a massive crowd of a few thousand people which included, according to reports, school and college boys and girls, arrived at Dimapur jail in Dimapur, Nagaland. Syed Sarifuddin Khan (or Syed Sharif Khan, as sometimes spelt), arrested two days earlier for alleged rape, was in this prison. The mob foraged the prison, having first broken through the gates and the (token?) police resistance, found Khan, stripped him, beat him and then dragged him chained to a motorcycle for several kilometres, before he died of his injuries. The body was then displayed on the city tower for some time before the police, finally, retrieved it.

The lynching was reported in international media as well: *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera* and *The New York Times*. Many quoted men and women from other parts of the country: ‘That’s the only thing to do, mob justice,’ said one of them. ‘He deserved what he got’ (Ellen Barry, *The New York Times*, 8 March). *The Hindu* called it ‘brutal vigilantism’ (Editorial, 9 March 2015). Responses to this editorial in the web version, while expressing concern over vigilantism, defended the mob violence. But many attributed it primarily to the failure of the legal system in India, as a result of which people have begun to feel compelled to take the law into their own hands. Since then a few arrests of the perpetrators have been made.

Sarifuddin Khan was mistaken to be a Bangladeshi immigrant. Ananya Vajpeyi, in a sensitive analysis, notes how the term ‘immigrant’ serves as ‘shorthand’ to indicate he was an outsider and the fact that ‘he was a Muslim probably made the slide from “Indian” to “Bangladeshi” somewhat easier’. She concludes: ‘What was at issue in Dimapur then was not Khan’s true nationality as a Bangladeshi or an Indian, but the underlying fact that in Nagaland it is possible to see both these identities as being equally foreign and equally likely to be placed at the receiving end of xenophobic violence’ (Vajpeyi 2015).

Sarifuddin’s heinous act of rape is itself now suspected of being either a trumped-up charge (the Nagaland government, if we even want to consider government statements, filed a report stating there had been no rape) or likely consensual sex. Sarifuddin, it is now reported, was not even a Bangladeshi. IBN summed it up when it titled a report ‘An Identity Lynched?’ (Sengupta)

While I am largely on Vajpeyi’s side in her analysis of India’s identity politics, to single out Nagaland as a place where such ‘identification’ is possible is itself a marker of ‘mainland’ India’s cultural xenophobia. Given that in the last few years students from the Northeastern states have been attacked in various cities across India, Africans are constantly victimized and foreign women tourists molested with unfortunate regularity, why single out Nagaland? Is that state or region more xenophobic than cities like Delhi or Hyderabad? Cultural diversity in India seems to breed cultural intolerance rather than understanding, and no city in India is free of this problem.

There are other worrying points to ponder about the Dimapur case, although I might have more questions than answers around these points.

_The instantiation of a cultural fantasy?: Is India (re)turning to a cultural fantasy of instant and extra-legal justice as true justice?_ The extraordinary number of people writing in support of vigilantism indicates the rise and spread of such a cultural fantasy where loss of faith in the notoriously slow legal system – not helped by comments such as were made by the defence lawyers of the Delhi rape case – is accompanied by a sense of “having to do it oneself”.

The cultural fantasy of justice dispersal, let us not forget, has been the subject of any number of popular Bollywood films, whether of the Bachchan ‘Angry Young Man’ phase or the numerous vigilante-policeman films. Extra-legal encounters in these films, as film critic Anustup Basu noted (2010), have long been a part of our ‘entertainment’. So have we finally been able to put these fictional accounts into practice, or is that the fictional accounts merely retraced an unconscious cultural fantasy? I must hasten to add: I am not arguing that ‘life imitates art’ but rather that, increasingly, India now seems to be carrying into practice what has remained its great cultural unconscious. If this indeed is the case, then we have to admit that the ‘will to realism’ (Moinak Biswas 2006, cited in Basu 181) identified in Hindi cinema has folded into a tragic realism of public acts.

Do incidents like Dimapur, then, indicate a shift away from constitutional provisions toward a sense of collectively, informally and extra-legal administered justice? India has always had a history of communal violence, tribalisms, feudal disputes and public violence – and here I take issue with historian Gyanendra Pandey (2012), who has proposed that it was colonial history writing that constructed India as a place of communal violence – that might have slipped into a cultural uncon-
scious and which is now emerging (again). Do incidents of mob violence give the lie to the very idea of Indian democratic processes or do they give the lie to the (myth of) ‘equality before the law’ the colonials tried so hard to instil?

Following from the above, we have to ask if this cultural fantasy of justice, as instantiated in the mob violence that now marks Indian polity and social order, poses problems for our democratic institutions. Jails and the police cannot stop a lynching, just as they could not stop Delhi 1984, Mumbai 1992, Gujarat 2002 and other instances. Does a fantasy assert itself in the face of the collapse of the institutions or is it that, like the British argued – and here I will probably be accused of being anti-nationalist – we are not ready for democratic and constitutional structures? The Hindu’s editorial called for a return to respect for the ‘due process of the law’. Is this ‘respect’ a myth in India’s cultural unconscious? Such questions seem to suggest that we have freed ourselves from restraining structures like the law, ‘due process’ and others so that we can execute – pun intended – our deep-seated cultural fantasies. As I shall propose toward the end, this might be a dangerous state to be in.

Moral justifications: If the comments on the perpetrators of the Delhi rape case and now the Dimapur lynching are an index, it seems we now are able to generate moral justifications for targeting specific populations, ethnic communities and groups. The moral justification hinges on untenable stereotypes: Africans as drug-runners, students from Northeastern states as ‘not fitting in’, and now Sarifuddin as an ‘outsider’ who raped one of ‘our’ women. As early as 1973, Harvard social psychologist Herbert Kelman, analyzing genocidal violence noted that ‘a considerable amount of hostility toward the victims of genocidal violence’ pre-exists the violence (37). Later Kelman adds about the victim of such violence: ‘It is not what he has done that marks him for death, but what he is – the category to which he belongs’ (49-50).

Moral justifications for mob violence seem to proceed from already circulating stereotypes rather than from specific acts the victims are alleged to have perpetrated. Or if they have indeed perpetrated these acts, these have not been proved with any degree of certainty. Some ethnic communities and groups are dehumanized – depending on the historical relations and immediate social dynamics – and thus become expendable. Dehumanization simply ensures that these lives are less than human and, therefore, there is no moral restraint, even if there is a legal one (this last is not proven in India at least, with the numerous instances of mob violence where perpetrators have gone unpunished), in taking those lives.

Moral justifications also rely on historical stereotyping that assumes an essential, inherent and unchanging set of qualities. Writing about the USA’s infamous history of black lynchings, Leon Litwack notes how by the early 20th century the whites had ‘come to think of black men and women as inherently and permanently inferior, as less than human, as little more than animals’ (2011 [2000]: 125). This suggests that moral justifications become necessary for mob violence so that any change in racial and cultural stereotypes is unacceptable: blacks cannot ‘move up’ from being animals. Moral justifications hinge on fixed stereotypes that then fuel continued anger and hatred.

The moral justification thus takes the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy: (i) these people are animals and will always be animals; (ii) we should therefore treat them like animals and; (iii) since we treat them as animals, it is proved that they are unchanging. Branding some groups or individuals ‘monsters’ is not about the individuals but rather the processes through which a culture arrives at definitions such as the ‘monstrous’. Monsters are expressions of cultural fears, anxieties and fantasies. The branding of ‘Bangladeshis’, ‘outsiders’ and ‘foreigners’ as monsters are a society’s projections onto conveniently located bodies. But more importantly, the category of ‘monster’ or ‘animal’ to describe human (even human perpetrators) represents a constructed confusion over categories. When the foreigner is inside our social order, when the migrant lives amongst us, we are troubled by the confusion of categories of us/Them, insider/outside since the borders have suddenly been opened up to these ‘others’. One way of dealing with the confusion of categories is to brand these figures who disturb easy binaries as ‘monsters’ or ‘animals’. They thus become our social order’s ‘internal others’: inside our social order but yet outside it. This is the geography of a Sirafuddin, or the minority group in India: inside but perpetually outside.

It, of course, remains unremarked that the animalization discourse deployed has been in history used primarily within genocidal contexts. It appears as though we in ‘so-called’ democratic India are not only returning to such a discourse but also assuming animal behaviour as inherently unethical and unfair when it is usually about survival.

Cultural anaesthesia: The Dimapur lynching, as also the numerous attacks on minorities – which I see as contiguous – across the country, and the pathetic record of any culprits being convicted in these cases despite...
their faces and identities being recorded on camera (as is the case in Dimapur as well), turns me to the idea of a cultural anaesthesia. Allen Feldman (1994) who coined the term, speaks of the inadmissibility of the pain of the Other into public discourse. This in turn increases the capacity to inflict pain on the Other. While Feldman is speaking of the bodies of ‘enemies’ rendered into statistics or made invisible or insignificant and thus ‘effaced’; the idea of effacement might appear, at first glance, to run counter to the essentializing stereotyping described above.

However, it is possible to see stereotyping also as an instance of cultural anaesthesia because it refuses to acknowledge changes in identity or behaviour in the collective stereotype. It desensitizes us to the pain of being always already the ‘animal’, the ‘other’ and the ‘different’ that particular communities have lived with. Cultural anaesthesia feeds directly into stereotyping and a resultant violence because the killing of these ‘different’, ‘animal’ ‘others’ does not count as genocidal acts at all.

Rendered into the ‘object’ as rapist or outsider, neither of which was proved with any degree of certitude, cultural anaesthesia enables us to not ask for such proof because the nature of this victim has already been identified, established and adjudicated on. It does not matter that he was not a Bangladeshi and may not have been a rapist. Desensitized to all matters about minorities and foreigners, we now are at perfect ease with reports of a purported foreigner and an alleged rapist being lynched.

What is frightening is that cultural anaesthesia in public discourses can always find new targets for such violence, not based on the acts performed by these targets, but because of what they are deemed to be and because we are in a position to ignore anything and everything they say or do. Particular ethnic groups are denied any recognizability except in terms drawn from specific histories.

Cultural anaesthesia is the desensitization process underway in stereotyping and in the embedding of such stereotypes in public discourses so that the latter cannot ever accommodate any other voice.

_Horrorism, torture, spectacle_: Dimapur repeats the lynching scenarios from the American past. The keystone of this horrific arch is the protracted nature of the killing. There is no simple, quick death. Dimapur witnessed the victim being paraded, beaten and dragged eight kilometres tied to a motorcycle. Accounts of lynching from the USA inform us of the mutilation, slow burning, beatings and eventual death – sometimes spread over a few hours – of the black man.

The philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2011) coins the term ‘horrorism’ to speak of the extended process of killing. Death is protracted, so that the punishment (if that is what it is) is in stages of excruciating pain inflicted on the body. The drawing out of pain, the slow dismemberment of the body and the progressive loss of bodily integrity – through mutilation – is not about death but pain.

Lynchings are ritualistic. People gather around, the victim is given centre stage, the stage itself is elaborate (in Dimapur, the motorcycle, the parading, the clock tower), and everybody is both participant and spectator. Indeed in lynchings, to be a spectator is to be a participant because the lynching is intended as an exemplar, a spectacle and an embodiment of a collective ‘sentiment’ (of hatred or anger, as in Dimapur). Finally, there is the cheering, and one sees smiling faces, roars of approval and such in the crowds. In Dimapur the ‘work’ took five hours to finish.

But what makes the lynching a true horrorist ritual is the spectacularizing. Lynching in the USA was always documented: photographs taken, souvenirs (body parts from the victim) sold, and with extensive newspaper coverage. In the contemporary era the cellphone camera does this work, and we see rapists, arsonists and lynch mobs recording their own participation in the dehumanization of the victim. We have not yet recovered – 10 years after the events – from mercenaires and jail wardens torturing inmates and recording these on camera for circulation in Abu Ghraib. The monstrosity of the victim, one would think, diminishes in the face of the cheering on, the celebration and the gloating by the participants in the violent act in all these cases. That the participants are unafraid of documenting their acts is itself suggestive of a culture of accepting violence. What some individuals might have done in secret is now done as a collective and in public, with visual documentation of the acts. Violent acts thus get recorded and transmitted. Specific websites (www.ogrish.com) archive beheadings by IS and others, thus offering an archive of atrocity.

In fact the camera, especially in the hands of the perpetrators, is not a mere mnemonic or recording device. It is part of the methodology of, is integrated into, the torture because the victim is made aware that the act is being recorded for transmission – maybe to be gloatingly exhibited to defame him, the family, and the community. In the contemporary torturescape there is no pain without a camera that ‘shoots’.

The transmissibility of the lynching visuals constitutes a spectacle of torture as well. Elaine Scarry
(1985) writing about torture argued that in torture the law, the foundation of civilization, is overturned. Justice relies on evidence and testimony offered by the victim. Here the victim’s body becomes the testimony endorsing the lynch crowd when it beats or mutilates him. A dead body or a body in pain can be made to testify to anything, even to beliefs deeply at odds with that of the victim when alive. Lynching and torture ensure that the victim is driven to such testimony, and this undermines the process of justice. We cannot, ought not to, prohibit the circulation of such images and visual records because one ought not to separate the images from the violent contexts in which the imagery was produced: lynching. The ethics of circulating such imagery surely cannot be so horrific when we consider the ethics of the acts that produced the imagery in the first place. Let us accept it: what the spectacle, as recorded by perpetrators and ‘passive’ onlookers, shows us is the violent politics that produced pain, and the imagery of pain.

A national culture of public violence: What we should worry about is our absorption, as viewers and readers, into a new public sphere community that watches such violence, turns away from it, condones it, or even vicariously participates in it. Nandana Dutta, writing via Ann Kaplan’s work on trauma culture, argues that the repetition of such acts and their presence on our screens/news pages, ‘immunizes’ reporters and viewers to the effects of violence, even beginning to see such violence as ‘normal’ so that we stop being indignant. Dutta’s point is well taken, but we need to now ponder whether the culture of public violence, embodied in the numerous spectacles of the Dimapur variety, is pushing us toward a public sphere that revels in extra-legal mob violence, cultural xenophobia and genocidal attacks.

If school children can be part of the mob, as seems to have been the case in Dimapur, William Golding was accurate in his account of violence in *Lord of the Flies*, wasn’t he? And all those Hollywood movies about children as horrific perpetrators might then be more an index of social reality in India as well! But perhaps, we have to wonder about the altered nature of childhood, growing up modes in such contexts as well. Do the parents condone, condemn or encourage such ‘extra-curricular’ roles for their children today? Should we then have a chapter on vigilantism as part of the Social Studies textbooks—maybe alongside the Directive Principles of State Policy? Does the incident, where women were part of the lynch mob, also demonstrate an odd form of gender equality? Is this the kind of gender equality India desires or needs?

And in the face of such violence, such atrocities, are we as a culture and as a nation, concerned only with representations—about how a documentary represents India? What about the representations of home-grown violence captured by media on TV and camera? What do rapist and violent videos tell us about ourselves that a BBC documentary cannot or does differently?

Is our sense of a public now governed by a cultural anaesthesia around particular groups, an anaesthesia that enables the enactment-fulfilment of older cultural fantasies of extra-constitutional justice, and the possibilities of genocidal violence based on historical stereotypes even though social dynamics and identities might have changed? Have we begun to define ourselves as ‘tolerant’ in the unfortunate sense that we tolerate these instances?

Is the absence or loss of ‘indig-nation’ the marker of our Nation?

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**References**


