

Erasure, Displacement, Obsolescence: The Socio-Drama of the Eventless Event

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What I'd like to do is to first pay a tribute to what I heard yesterday; especially from Devi and Dakxin and what I heard today from Sainath, by being ironic.

Everybody loves a good Sainath. Specially if you're in the mass communication industry. I say this as a tribute to Sainath, the power of his idealism, and the career of his commitment. What I want to do is to show you that the standard secular political economy approach is not enough. Because evil and violence are much more innovative than the idealism and the drama provided here today. Drama is brilliant. But socio-drama can stifle drama. And the asymmetry within the power of socio-drama and the eloquence of what you heard today is what I want to examine.

I'm not an activist, I'm a lazy sociologist. But I've spent the last twenty years following trails of violence, from Bhopal to the Gujarat riots. The politics of violence is about the politics of narration. And social scientists, as you know, make poor story tellers. But I'm not sure that dramatists make better ones.

I

Let me begin with Gujarat. What strikes me about Gujarat is not the violence, but the fact that violence is no longer a pathology. When you normalize pathology into a banal, ordinary, everyday act, pathology becomes normal. Narendra Modi claims Gujarat is normal. Here is a man who understands the political drama of India. He's utterly evil, thoroughly banal. But look at what he does! Let's just take a simple **event** to see what normalcy means in Gujarat.

I'm not going to cite the sentimental statistics of victims, because statistics is basically sentimental. I work for a newspaper on the side. I sent a few journalists to Godhra. And the first thing we found out was that the BJP was all over Godhra, in the Muslim areas. The Congress was nowhere to be seen. What was happening? The Muslims there were actually negotiating with the BJP. A lot of the young men in the area had been arrested after the carnage. They'd been arrested for violating curfew orders. They've spent the last few years in jail. There was no prospect of their being released till they negotiated with the BJP. In fact many of them voted for the BJP. But they said, "*Kya karein? Normalcy toh chahiye*" ("What do we do? We need normalcy, after all"). The search for normalcy demands that you negotiate with evil. This normalcy is pathological. This normalcy extends through the structure of **varieties** of violence that we're **confronting** today. It is the question of the politics of narration and the politics of memory. The nature of pathologies lies in the way we've constructed memory.

II

One of the first things I worked upon was the Bhopal gas tragedy. In fact literary critics would object to the word tragedy. It is a disaster which has not yet acquired the grounds of a tragedy. What happened in Bhopal? The event itself was eloquently communicated by a whole generation of journalists and photographers. The aftermath is something no one talks about. It is the aftermath of violence that lacks the storyteller. In the aftermath of violence we see is a new kind of erasure of memory, obsolescence.

When the disaster happened, the “victim” had a halo and you could talk of Bhopal as equivalent of Hiroshima. So we had Bhoposhima. But then what happened? A few years later the “victim” becomes a “survivor.”

The halo is gone, it’s a more secular term, more open to interpretation.

Few years later if you go down the streets and slums of Bhopal, talk to the doctors, the victim is now a “patient.” This is a lovely legalistic term. A patient is someone legally adult, who has the permission of a doctor’s certificate, not to assume the responsibilities of adulthood which includes work. But a patient who refuses to return to work is a “hypochondriac.” So very soon the survivors of Bhopal, from being patients, are hypochondriacs. And if some of them die, the standard response is, “Oh, this amount of death is statistically normal for a population like that.” You can use statistics both ways. And then eventually you say, “*Woh to bekaar hain*” (“They’re vagrants”)!

What Bhopal did was something brilliant in the annals of disaster, but something that other people are learning from India. We converted a victim into a vagrant. It is a form of the structuring of memory that violence carries with it.

III

Let’s take a third event. Orissa. I went there after the cyclone, naively thinking I’m going to spend three days there. I came out three-and-a-half months later. Two months after the cyclone, there were still dead bodies all around. Salt water pickles dead bodies brilliantly – until you touch them, when they flake away in a different sense. But what I found there was stunning – people who survived, living and cooking among the dead. They don’t bury the dead, they don’t cremate them. You realize there is an inability to mourn here. You have a disaster where people are unable to mourn for the dead, grieve for the dead. So in a way there is no closure of the violence.

But you also find something more. The narratives of Orissa don’t include several hundred thousand people. Because they are not there within the official census. Nomads, migratory groups, do not enter into the categories of suffering and poverty because they are not within any official revenue register. You have a whole structure of vulnerability. Pregnant women, children, who all disappear because they don’t have the objective status of being enumerated through a census.

So here we are facing another de-structuring of memory. The story of violence is the story of how you erase acts of violence. The politics of memory is the second politics of violence. And the innovativeness of this in India is something that we have to understand.

The poor at least have a Sainath to tell their stories. But many of the dead have no stories, no acts of mourning, no forms of story telling to remember them. The census of those who are not remembered is demographically staggering.

IV

The fourth event is something very controversial. I am referring to the debate on biotechnology.

I think it is stunning, brilliant and eloquent to talk about farmer suicides. But let’s look at the reverse of what cotton has meant in India. Cotton is the evocation of agricultural desire. Cotton is the metaphor of commercialization. Cotton embodies social breakdown. Come on, let’s not forget our history.

It is around cotton that you built the idea of desire. It is around cotton and the Green Revolution that you built a different kind of farmer – the farmer who doesn't want to farm and is in fact the world's greatest pesticides junkie! Sympathy is nice, but understanding helps more.

I think what we've got to understand is, here we're facing a different kind of violence. What we're facing is not farmer suicides. You can tackle that. You can demonize that. You can point a finger at Chidambaram or what have you. You got a whole generation of morons in Delhi to identify.

But what we are not ready to face is the slow death of the small farmer. There is an effort to eliminate small landholdings in India, systematically, instrumentally, through genetic engineering. This is a slow genocide. It is a form of triage because the small farmer is seen as inefficient. Why is it that **people** are not looking at the language of elimination? Statistics don't plead as much as languages do. Why is it we're not looking at that?

The secular language of political economy is not enough. Drama demands literature. Literature demands metaphor. And text demands new ideas of suffering. Of evil, of erasure, of memory.

And till you create these we're going to produce standard discourses. Powerful, idealistic, but which don't understand a Narendra Modi. Or what happened in Bhopal. Or what happened in Orissa. Millions of people die and there is no tribute to them. Because we have no categories for understanding the violence of obsolescence, the violence of erasure, and what happened in Gujarat – the violence of amnesia. Because today everyone thinks in Gujarat, that Gujarat is normal. Forget the reports from outside. Inside Gujarat, the middle class wants to go on.

Narendra Modi has created something brilliant. He has created a new imaginary of Gujarat; around the idea of a powerful, middle class, developmental Gujarat. And not all the theatre that we do, and not all the articles we write are able to dent this. Narendra Modi can turn around and say, "I want to thank English language journals and the critics for guaranteeing my electoral success." We're facing the language of a different kind here. We're facing the inventiveness of evil. The devil is a better sociologist than all of us. It is that nature of evil that we have to understand.

V

I began with the idea of obsolescence, then moved to the idea of erasure, then came to the idea of amnesia in Gujarat, and then to silence.

Hundreds of atrocities, many of us here have actually fought on these issues. But what is an atrocity? Look at the sheer asymmetry of violence. A Dalit picks up a glass tumbler, or wears a different kinds of dress and he threatens the entire paradigm of stratification in India. So a small ritual act of ordinariness, brings a sheer asymmetry of violence on the person. Rape, destruction, fire, beatings, torture – every act of violation and spoliation we can think of. And then a small movement of hope we call democracy. You get news about this in the mass media for two or three days, and then silence. The political drama that we all talk about is that intermediate period, that moment of protest, which doesn't have a shelf life of even a week.

We have no words, not even in absurd drama, for the politics of erasure, amnesia, silence, obsolescence.

These are impersonal forces which can't be demonized. We don't have a language for them and **in fact** if we look at social science, we're caught between the spectacle and the specimen; and the absence of drama. We **objectivize** them. We give them a reign of quantity, we pathologize them, we greet them in terms of new social science terms.

But we're not able to create a drama around them. We couldn't do it around Bhopal despite the best efforts of a whole leftist generation of professionals. We couldn't do it around Orissa. We can't do it around Gujarat.

Modi is able to speak a language, orally and on TV. Look at the new TV mobile games Modi is creating. Fantastic! So all Gujaratis are sitting around and playing these things happily. But that quality we're not able to beat. Because unfortunately in places like Gujarat and elsewhere, you and I can love a Sainath, but people love a Modi better.

And I think the politics of our drama, does not have the guts to respond to that.

We're shaken by poverty, when we should be shattered by violence and the normalization of violence that Modi has created. Because the untold part of this entire story if you look at the record before the Nanavati Commission, in the 13 districts for which we have data, 75000 Muslims haven't returned to their homes. You have no narrative for that! You have no narrative for dissenting policewomen. One of them objected because she saw a child being tossed into the flames. And when the child ran screaming out, the 6 year-old kid was picked up and flung back into the fire. It's there in the Nanavati Commission records. And of course the woman who objected was what's the bureaucratic term? transferred.

But look at the violence of a transfer, in its ability to erase protest. Look at the governmentalization of violence, why aren't we confronting these things?

Marx is nice. And it is a request to those doing political theatre and drama, that we add to Marx, not diminish. You add to the imagination by looking at the quality of these things beyond the imaginative structure of the political economy that you've created.

VI

Finally, we have to look at desire. Everyone here seems to hate malls. I spend a lot of time in them. And I must say, in Gujarat, it's the national sport! What's cricket, next to visiting a mall?! First floor - discount sales; and by jove, if you happen to be in the wrong position you could get run-over by the crowd that goes there. But what is more interesting is, hundreds of poor people, including domestic servants, dress up in the Sunday best, on Sunday, and come to malls and watch it like a museum of desire.

You talk of poverty, you condemn the millionaires, but you don't confront middle-class desire, and the logic of violence it entails, because that middle class is us.

You can sympathize with the poor, you can have contempt for the Ambanis. I do a pretty good job, sitting at the Ambani Institute of Technology, but this idea of middle-class desire and the violence it entails and the logic of that economy, demands an understanding of pathology as normalcy.

And that we don't have. And that the politics of a drama, doesn't yet capture. It creates a simple demonology. All of us love simple demons, they're personal, they're human, they're almost humane. Let's capture the impersonal demons. That requires a different quality of language. That calls for a different kind of literature. That makes a different demand on the imagination of democracy. And till you do that, we've got a lot lovely stories to tell each other, but the theory behind the story is missing.

And as long as you laugh at theory, let me defend my academic profession; storytelling alone wont do, because storytelling needs theory as a structuring narrative.