NANCY ADAJANIA

Akal Baanta Baanti: Experiments in Collaboration

Towards the end of the 1990s, the Bombay-based artist Navjot Altaf surprised many of her contemporaries in the Indian art world by walking away from a successful career in Bombay and retreating to Bastar, in the tribal heartland of Central India. Through her experiments with sculpture, installation and video, Navjot had already extended herself beyond the security of the painted image and marked her commitment to a productive shift in choice of medium. But the larger challenge of calibrating a robustly ethical praxis, through the alignment of an unfolding formal logic with an ongoing ideological renewal, remained to be fully addressed. Certain questions had haunted her since her youthful phase as a Leftist cultural activist: can individuals belonging to different class and ethnic backgrounds communicate, work together, create a political solidarity and produce shared cultural meanings? Could she develop a way of being and making that truly embodied her chosen value of collegiality?

In Bastar, from 1997 onwards, Navjot inaugurated a new life based on the quest for answers to these questions. She began to work alongside artists trained in the rural traditions of wood and bell metal sculpture, sharing in their lives and improvising a mutual pedagogy with them. The transition from Bombay to Bastar was not painless. She and her artist colleagues found themselves working hard to overcome the barriers of class, gender, location, language, education and worldview. After almost two decades of engagement with Bastar, Navjot has been able to evolve new forms of artistic dialogue and co-production. Equally importantly, she has been able to catalyse a process of progressive transformation at the micro-political level of village and district through her collaborative and cooperative projects.

Dividing her time between Bastar and Bombay, she has addressed herself to an endemic socio-political asymmetry that has exercised Indian thinkers for centuries, even before the issues of caste, class and marginality were theorised, variously, from the Gandhian, Marxist, Ambedkarite and subalternist viewpoints. As early as the third century BC, in the edicts of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, we find references to the opposed worlds of the *nagarika* or city-dweller and the *attavika* or forest-dweller. Navjot's attempts to negotiate and dismantle this asymmetry have been manifested in her ongoing collaborations in Bastar. Indeed, I would argue that Navjot has out-Lefted the Left in fundamental ways, using approaches that would be inconceivable to those who believe they can ignore India's complex specificities and simply apply Marx's teachings and specifically Lenin's vanguardist prescriptions to the subcontinental situation. Combining intuitive apprehension with intellectual candour, Navjot has reflected critically and unremittingly on the conditions and outcomes of her practice.

DISSOLVING THE HIERARCHY IMPLICIT IN VANGUARDISM

Navjot has rejected the classical Leftist strategy of 'consciousness-raising', a one-way transmission in which a propagandist provokes the poor and ignorant into an awareness of revolutionary class struggle as a means of overturning the exploitative class order. Instead, she has focused on processes of mutuality, working with a group of interlocutors and collaborators in a manner that transforms all the participants. In doing so, I would argue that she has attempted to dissolve the hierarchy implicit both in the model of the vanguard class (beloved of Communist activists) and that of the avant-garde (beloved of modernist artists). While the political vanguard class represents the ascendancy of intellectuals and apparatchiks, the artistic avant-garde represents suitably conscientised painters and sculptors—each grouping arrogates to itself a guiding, governing and ultimately controlling role in society. In neither model does the self-styled advance guard of political or artistic practice cede the slightest ground to any other constituency or group. And in both models, the revolutionary self is absolute in the belief that it is history's chosen implement of transformation.

At the present time, tragically, while the official Left in India has little more than rhetorical posturing to show for itself, factions of India's Maoist extreme Left—the Communist Party of India (Maoist)—have unleashed unbridled violence in Chhattisgarh, where Navjot works, in the name of an armed struggle against the state. As against these perversions of idealism, Navjot's projects in Bastar have inaugurated a process of self-unmaking and -remaking that is, in its own quiet way, genuinely revolutionary. She has brought about a change that has helped break down prior structures of class and gender inequality, replacing these with more equitable social relationships of production, enabling new modes of growth and idioms of self-representation. Every phase in Navjot's practice has been spurred by a creative scepticism towards her own achieved forms, and the consequent need to investigate a new direction of development. Her periodic and self-critical reassessments of her ideological position have been articulated through a movement from Marxism in the 1970s, through feminism in the 1980s, to a feminist-inflected and a critical Leftward position in the 1990s and 2000s. Correspondingly, she has migrated from paintings and drawings, through sculpture and the sculpture installation, to a conception of art as social project, and new media practice.

PROYOM: DREAMING OF THE REVOLUTION

Let us push back the horizon of Navjot's practice and analyse her role in the Progressive Youth Movement or Pragatisheel Yuva Morcha (PROYOM) during the 1970s. PROYOM was founded by Dev Nathan and Kiran Kasbekar, who were influenced by Marxist philosophy and were sympathisers of the CPI (ML), the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).[1] It brought together people from diverse fields, not all of whom were affiliated to the party. They included Navjot and her artist-husband Altaf, students, academics, writers, journalists and filmmakers who could, in the classic Leftist trope, 'infiltrate the citadel of capital'. Inspired by the student revolts of 1968 in Western Europe, with their apparatus of strikes, teach-ins and sit-ins, the PROYOMites even set up an alternative university during the summer vacation. Their aim was to sensitise youth to workers and peasants' struggles in India and in the world at large. They would work in the slums and also participate in protests to express solidarity with the anti-Apartheid movement, the resistance against the American neo-imperialist presence in Vietnam and Cambodia, and Iranian students agitating in Bombay against the Shah's regime. Navjot and Altaf joined in many of these protests while continuing to develop strategies to bring art closer to the public. They would exhibit posters and paintings at colleges, railway stations, hospitals, labour camps and mobile crèches.

Navjot's posters (c. 1974) from the closing phase of the Vietnam War display acerbic humour: Uncle Sam is choking on Vietnam, having bitten off more than he can chew, and is sending out an SOS. In another of her posters, fighter planes leave the USA for Vietnam while coffins fly back by the same route. Navjot favoured the use of animation techniques in her posters: repetition with variation and play with scale. But she was also partial to the painterly, shaded, textured treatment, for instance, in her poster of a war-crazed American soldier running away from a military cemetery.

While PROYOM gave Navjot the opportunity to interact with workers and intellectuals, she gradually realised that the artistic imagination was being displaced by a program, with little concern for the receptivity or interest of the intended subaltern audience, which was to be edified and improved by the heavy-handed application of utopian ideas. Navjot reminisces ruefully, "During that period, progressive political movements… employed artists for the purpose of propaganda. They neither treated the artist as an individual nor was her specific perception of society taken seriously. In the hope of creating an awareness amongst the working classes, they seemed to have underestimated their aesthetic sensibilities and the artist's sensitivity."[2]

REVITALISATION OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

It was Navjot's first exposure to feminist theory in the late 1980s that jump-started her intellectual development in unprecedented ways. It propelled her not only into gender politics and its relationship to the visual arts through the work of historians and critics like Griselda Pollock and Lucy Lippard, but more significantly, into a study of the interventions that feminist artists like Suzanne Lacy had made in the domains of public art and community art.

Even as Navjot immersed herself in Western feminist art theory, the question of gender had undergone a radical change from the late 1970s onwards in India. The women's movement in India had seen an unprecedented revitalisation since the nationalist struggle. Public rallies were held to protest against dowry, rape, alcoholism and sexual abuse. Peasants and tribal populations, which included a large number of women, had challenged the timber mafia responsible for deforestation and asserted their traditional forest rights.

A new generation of Indian feminist scholars began to publish their studies in the 1980s. They were supported by dynamic imprints such as Kali for Women (the first feminist publishing house in India, its list focused on social protest, law, economy and ecology) and Oxford University Press, with its Subaltern Studies volumes and major historical re-readings in the humanities. Thus a large readership learned about the various people's movements that had emerged in India since independence. The invitation to read the invisible stories of women's cultural expressions and resistance in Navjot's *Images Redrawn* (1996)—her first show of sculpture-installations—is an outcome of the knowledge produced by Indian women scholars, activists and revolutionaries.

WHEN THE POLITICAL IS *NOT* ALWAYS THE PERSONAL

We could plot the transitions that Navjot has made in terms of media, genre and sociality, as a passage from the struggle to achieve a selfhood to another condition: that of expressing the freedom to lose that selfhood and release oneself into the world of the Other. In the process, Navjot has attempted to redraft the economies of art practice and create new solidarities. But this is easier said than done in an Indian context. The Indian feminist cannot privilege the university-educated bourgeois suffragette as her unit of measurement. In this complex and multilayered society, the female self is from the

beginning coded with the markers of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, region and language. To arrive at her own individual agency, a politically conscious Indian woman must negotiate her way through all these pre-ordained markers of identity, which are patriarchally over-determined.

In India, I would contend that *the personal is always the political, but the political is not always the personal*.[3] The question that plagued women artists in the 1970s and 1980s was: how do you make the crises of subjectivities remote from your social position your own, without sounding condescending or being guilty of capitalising on the tragedies of the social other? This could only happen when artists could translate privilege into empathy, by pursuing parallel expressive practices based on a mutuality of commitment across class and regional lines (as Navjot has done in her Bastar project). It is only by sharing spaces of criticality, protest and resistance, that women artists can cope with the postcolonial phenomena of violent identity politics and an endangered public sphere, as well as the pressures of globalisation.

BETWEEN GODDESS AND EVERYWOMAN

In Navjot's exhibition *Images Redrawn*, we enter a transit zone that invokes many different sites: it is part street, part archive and part museum. The floorplan of the exhibition alluded to streets and intersections. Dominating these rudimentary streets or sitting at imagined crossroads were archetypal mother-goddesses that recalled the sacred power and beauty of Mayan and Olmec sculptures from Mexico. These chthonic blue and red figures, displaying conspicuous vaginas, full breasts, flared nostrils and deep-set eyes, appeared to have stepped out of a museum. They drew attention to their hands, which were bereft of fate lines ("I have no fate lines, thank god"), and tried to read an undecipherable script on a mortar long used to grind Indian spices or masalas ("Yes I want to read"). It was a magical experience in visual and morphological translation to see form and meaning slip between goddess and everywoman, between monumentality and feminist rhetoric. The work that best demonstrates this slippage is *Palani's Daughters* (1996), in which an earth- and blood-soiled body writhes in pain among vaginal pods. Made in response to the accelerating statistics of female infanticide, the reference for this sculpture was a Mayan mother-goddess giving birth. In Navjot's handling, Palani's archetypal power gains contemporary relevance. The French feminist Luce Irigaray's celebration of 'sexual difference' had a talismanic effect on her. *Palani's Daughters* speaks to Irigaray's discontent with a society that reduces women to machines of reproduction and further discriminates on the basis of a child's gender: "Women, who have given life and growth to the other within themselves, are excluded from the order of the same which men alone set up. The girl child, although conceived by a man and a woman does not enter society as the father's child with the same status as that accorded the son. She remains outside culture, kept as a natural body good only for procreation."[4]

The sculptures in *Palani's Daughters* were accompanied by panels displaying arrays of rolled paper; each roll had a pull-string attached. Was this an archive of annotations, clues by means of which to decode and understand this strange ensemble? A tug at the string would do the trick. Unravelled, the rolls revealed a lining of photocopied women's literature from India. This included a wide spectrum of texts, ranging from the *Therigatha*, the ancient songs of the early Buddhist nuns, to poems, short stories and novels written by contemporary writers, sourced from Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's pathbreaking two-volume feminist anthology, *Women Writing In India, 600 BC to the Twentieth Century*.

Women's struggles from all over the world found a place in this temporary archive. The lined rolls were meant to transmit what the artist calls "the warmth and strength of women's struggles".[5] The hidden feminist archive needs to be read in parallel with Navjot's sculptural approach, which privileges neither a male nor a female gaze. The eyes of her figures, most of the time, do not have eyeballs, as though they were turned inwards upon a stillness that is a strength. It is the gaze of self-sufficiency, born from a classical sculptural stance. Navjot works mostly in a hybrid register, even using apparently contradictory languages: in this case, she complemented the feminist impulse towards emancipation with the appurtenances of a spiritual quest.

ARTISTIC DEVOLUTION VERSUS EMPOWERMENT

Finally I shall reflect on a long-term collaboration that Navjot has initiated and sustained together with the subaltern artists Shantibai and Rajkumar, among others, in Bastar, a rural district that forms part of the so-called Red Corridor traversing the tribal heartland of Central India. Through the colonial and postcolonial periods, communities in this region have suffered exploitation and been alienated from their natural resources, resulting in widespread disaffection from the state, and today, the region is dominated by Maoist insurgents.

Elaborated over two decades at the time of writing, this experiment embodies a radical displacement of the modes of artistic production and reception from the art world's institutional sites, and their reconfiguration through processes of exchange situated in milieux characterised by socio-economic dispossession, political marginalisation and cultural disadvantage. This experiment has programmatically dismantled single-author models of artistic production and contributed to the formation of rhizomatic cultural infrastructures, collaborative assemblies, or provisional colloquia.

Against the conventional model of empowerment—where the artist-citizen engages in a relational practice with subaltern artists, and is seen to bring a higher level of awareness or a special infusion of skills to a situation that lacks and needs these—I would like to focus on another move that the artist-citizen might make while interacting closely with subaltern artists in the framework of projects that expand beyond the ambit and schedule of the project itself, to become forms of being: I would draw attention, not to empowerment, but to devolution. It is vital to distinguish between these two moves. Empowerment implies that the artist-citizen can help those lacking economic, cultural, or political opportunities and entitlements without giving up any of her own privileges. This gesture betrays a residual paternalism, with its emphasis on the munificence of the donor, and produces no genuine transformation in what remains an asymmetry of cultural, social and political capital. Devolution, on the other hand, implicates the artist-citizen substantially and viscerally in the act of giving. It implies that, as a precondition to the development of a more equitable social relationship, she will give up some of the privileges and claims to expertise that reside with her under an inequitable system, and transfer these to colleagues who lack them; after which redistribution, in full awareness of the potential for failed communication as well as for productive mutuality, she collaborates with them in an as yet unmapped space of praxis. This experiment in the creation of new cultural, social and political value does not take equality as axiomatic; rather, equality is constantly tested, redefined and reformulated in the act.

This devolution of artistic privilege emancipates the artist-citizen from the fossilised or fetishised ways of 'being-artist' that merely sustain and reproduce the self-perception of being a member.

MUTUAL PEDAGOGY AND THE RECLAIMING OF A PERFORMATIVE CITIZENSHIP

While maintaining a presence in the gallery system through periodic exhibitions, Navjot has voluntarily shifted her existential centre of gravity away from the institutional domains of art-making, which are embedded in the Indian art world's elite metropolitan ethos. In the same gesture, she has aligned herself as colleague and interlocutor with people who have suffered civil deficits from the state's peremptory withholding of the entitlements of citizenship. This experiment marks a rupture with existing models of 'intervention'. It cannot be subsumed under the classic NGO paradigm, nor does it constitute an artistic ethnographic project; nor yet is it informed by a classical Leftist politics of "behalf-ism" with the elite activist speaking and acting for the dispossessed subaltern. It overturns the classic donor-recipient relationship based on a one-way flow of resources, a result-driven orientation, and a monopoly on expressive and critical articulation by the donor or initiator. The role assumed by Navjot in this process is catalytic rather than didactic. Among the key modes of exchange shaped during this experiment, I would identify three: a mutual pedagogy, an expanded interpretative multilogue, and the reclamation of a performative citizenship.[6] These modes point to new models of artistic practice as well as of civic participation.

By a mutual pedagogy and an expanded interpretative multilogue, I mean the development of processes of collaboration and cooperation that are integrated into the structure of the interaction, during which hierarchies are overturned, new lexicons are co-authored, and new vocabularies of description and forms of interpretation are compiled. This leads to an unlearning and a remaking of knowledge, and a transformation of consciousness for all participants. In both situations, a local system of social and economic deficits has been broken, and entrenched asymmetries overcome. Navjot, Rajkumar, Shantibai and their colleagues have introduced an enabling conceptual infrastructure into a society like Bastar, which is afflicted by multiple constraints of class and gender inequality.

In speaking of the reclamation of a performative citizenship, I point to the manner in which this devolutionary experiment emphasises self-organisation and has created interstitial, tactical, and improvisational infrastructures beyond and often in opposition to the frameworks laid down by the state. An emergent subjectivity has thus been produced through mutuality, informal association, and imaginative labour in civil space rather than by political statute, bureaucratic sanction, or official institutionality.

CIVIC IMAGINARIES

Navjot, Shantibai, Rajkumar and others engaged with the politics of civic space with its dense interweave of caste, class, and gender relationships by designing and building structures around public utilities such as *pilla gudi*s, playhouses for children (literally, temples for children). Addressing the unhygienic conditions of local hand pump sites in an economical, elegant and organic manner, Navjot and her artist colleagues created *nalpar*s, concrete wraparound perforated screens to shield each pump from garbage, equipped with a channel to drain the outflow of water into a nearby field or watering hole for animals. Since most users of hand pumps are women, the *nalpar*s are ergonomically structured to suit the needs of women's labouring bodies.

Together, the artists built the Dialogue Centre in Kondagaon, a minimalist campus built around a majestic Mahua tree. The open studio and workshop spaces segue into the spaces for colloquia and discussions. Although the Centre is premised on dialogue, it more accurately promotes a multilogue: it acts as a place of assembly for diverse constituents, including local artists, schoolchildren, scholars, municipal officers and teachers. Given the segregations of caste society and

the class order, it is remarkably rare for such a plurality to convene on a single platform. The Centre acts as a stage for what I would term "performative citizenship", which allows for the crossover from symbolic to actual political action, and the production of a newly aware and self-critical community that can transcend the traditional boundaries of group identity. At the Centre, the civic imaginary that has evolved from the interventions of Navjot and her colleagues is articulated through lateral debate rather than vertical dictate. Wide-ranging questions emerge, many of them pushing the boundaries of local political discourse: who has control over land and resources? Why must women remain vulnerable to patriarchy? Is there a difference between artistic labour and more quotidian forms of labour?

REFRAINING FROM A READYMADE WESTERN DISCOURSE ON COLLABORATION

When Navjot received an IFA (India Foundation for the Arts) grant in the late 1990s, there was no readymade discourse about collaborative art in the Indian context to which she could refer. Elsewhere, Grant Kester's essay, 'Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art' had appeared in 1995, and Miwon Kwon was still writing her thesis, which, completed in 1998, was the first incarnation of her 2002 book *One Place after Another*. The participants in the Bastar experiment improvised a vocabulary that would accurately convey the assumptions and trajectory of their work together. They rapidly found that neither English nor the Sanskritised Hindi that is India's national language were flexible enough for the purpose, given prior semantic accretions around usage. At the April 2007 colloquium at the Dialogue Centre, I asked the artists how they had customised terms such as "collaboration" and "cooperation" to produce a discourse that was organic to their practice.

Although Rajkumar used the term "collaboration" during IFA grantee meetings, he was not comfortable with it, as it seemed too remote and abstract to express the variable textures and temporalities of working together, making choices, discussing and solving problems through conversation. The Sanskritised Hindi term *kala sahyog* (art-based cooperation) was equally remote and perhaps even alienating, redolent of government notifications. In answer to my question, Rajkumar observed that the key term *sahyog* (cooperation) was best approximated by the dialect word *baithiya*, embedded in the local cultural and economic context. "We use this term when we ask our neighbours to help us mark a boundary in the fields, or build a house, or fix a roof. People come forward to help, but they are not paid. Instead, they are treated in the evening to a good meal of *bhaat* [rice], *chakhna* [chicken], and *mahua* [liquor]. This exchange is *baithiya*."[7]

During the colloquium, Rajkumar set aside both the bureaucratese of *kala sahyog* and the customary usage of *baithiya* as discursively insufficient. Working towards an active term that would link an experimental practice and its theoretical expression, he bypassed both administrative jargon and barter concepts. Instead, he developed a neologism: *akal baanta baanti*, the "exchange and sharing of intelligence", the term *akal* denoting a range of meanings from self-preserving shrewdness and worldly knowledge to the suffusion of *nous* and the accomplished grasp of *techne*. Rajkumar's discursive exploration, while naming his freshly created conceptual tools, clearly demonstrates his emancipation from preordained community frameworks determined by caste, ethnicity and linguistic group membership.

POLITICS AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

One afternoon during the 2007 colloquium, I found myself in a *pilla gudi* built at Shilpi Gram in early 2000. Its open circular form had the effect of stilling the mind, centering the self. As I looked around the circle of twelve concrete seats, I noticed an anomaly in my count. The twelfth seat seemed to dip away, somewhat—and there, next to it, provisional but no less definite for that, was a break in the pattern, a place of potential: the thirteenth place. Having been a contributor to the discourse on collaborative art as practiced by Navjot and her colleagues for more than a decade now, I would suggest that the thirteenth place signifies the self-renewing internal critique of any formof collective engagement, which rescues participation and collaboration from becoming complacent and institutionalised protocols. The thirteenth place is made possible by changing the rules of collective engagement, by embracing *politics as a form of communication* and not *communication as a form of politics*, which was the leitmotif of Navjot's previous leftist practice.[8]

I would contend that instead of beginning with communication by assuming a vanguardist role and proposing a manifesto prefiguring an emancipatory politics, Navjot chose to begin with the challenges of the politics in which she and her colleagues found themselves, as it were *in medias res*. Through a process of devolution and improvisation, they have developed alternative conceptual tools, vocabularies and practices that literally speak, shape and distribute into the social field a transfiguring practice of equity.

Notes:

[1] The genesis of PROYOM can be traced back to a series of events that rippled out from the Naxalbari uprising of 1967, a "militant peasant uprising" staged in northern West Bengal. Organised by a breakaway faction of the CPI (M) or Communist Party of India (Marxist), India's major parliamentary Left-wing formation, it was led by Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal, who declared themselves in favour of a Maoist line. This group, formally self-designated as the CPI (ML), came to be known popularly as the Naxalites, after the village of Naxalbari, where they had announced their advent and first demonstrated their power

[2] Navjot in communication with the author, August 2009

[3] See Nancy Adajania, 'The Logic of Birds: Points of Departure for Indian Women Artists', *Tiger by the Tail! Women Artists of India Transforming Culture* (exhibition catalogue), Waltham MA: Women's Studies Research Centre, Brandeis University, 2007, pp. 112-125

[4] See Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, Alison Martin trans., New York and London: Routledge, 2007, p. 40

[5] Navjot email correspondence with the author May 2007. These hidden stories remained invisible to most viewers: very few of them cared to open the rolls, not so much out of incuriosity as out of inhibition. They had not been socialised into the protocols of interactivity, and installation art was still in its inception in India

[6] For an elaboration of the concept of "performative citizenship", see Nancy Adajania, 'The Sand of the Coliseum, the Glare of Television, and the Hope of Emancipation', in Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta *et al.* eds, *Sarai Reader 06: Turbulence*, Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2006

[7] This exchange took place during the colloquium, 'Samvad', at the Dialogue Centre, Kondagaon, 6 April 2007

[8] See Nancy Adajania, *The Thirteenth Place: Positionality as Critique in the Art of Navjot Altaf*, Bombay: The Guild Art Gallery, 2016, p. 256