

## Passage in India

*By Joel Kovel*

### 1. Fireflies

Dawn comes slowly to the Fireflies Ashram, the birdsong mingling with the reedy call from the Mosque in the village. It is six o'clock, time to stir and listen. There is more devotional singing; and on days when Sam stops here in the course of his duties as a driver, we hear the sound of his flute. Then, if inclined, one can tramp down the hill to where the water is being heated in a big iron vat over a wood fire, and haul some back in a plastic bucket for the morning's ablutions.

It is January, 2002, and we are near Bangalore, in Karnataka State, in Southern India, far from the Pakistan border and Kashmir. The rattling of sabres in the latest war scare does not penetrate this far. Fireflies also seems a lot further, in its deep calm, than the 30 dusty kilometers separating it from Bangalore, which is India's fifth-largest city, and, as its high-tech center and flagship of a booming software industry, the nation's largest earner of foreign exchange in the regime known as globalization.<sup>1</sup>

Bangalore may be the cockpit of Indian modernity, but nobody will mistake it for Los Angeles. It is, rather, a typical city of the South, and suffers a similar transportation purgatory as a thousand others, of crumbling roads and a great welter of smaller conveyances charging across the virtual center line into each other's path and chaotically

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<sup>1</sup>This essay arose from a trip studying grassroots Indian resistance to globalization, jointly sponsored by Pipal Tree, the NGO that administers Fireflies, and The Other Economic Summit. I am indebted to Siddhartha, Director of Pipal Tree, and Trent Schroyer, of T.O.E.S., for making it possible.

inching their way along the edge of doom. There are few cars, but no end of medium-sized trucks brightly painted with Hindu motifs, along with the open-air Indian bus, legions of the cute but perilous three-wheeled Auto-Rickshaws that remind me of the amusement park bumper-cars of boyhood visits to Coney Island, a vast number of motor scooters, bicycles, men pushing carts laden with coconuts and other produce, strollers, and, yes, the proverbial sacred Indian cow or ox — some pulling carts, others on their own lolling on the narrow centerstrips — plus donkeys and the generic dogs of the South, and even, if one is lucky, as we were one day in Tivandrum, the capital of Kerala state, an elephant. Colorful it is, but since the first five categories of vehicle spew forth vile fumes, and bray their horns and constantly start, stop and lurch, pleasant it is not. It must be said that there is scarce a greater contrast in the world than that between the immemorial placidity of the Indian countryside and the noisome swarm of its towns.

Contrast and continuity are essential categories of human existence, which in India force themselves upon the observer to an especially profound degree. No doubt this is because there is so much there that strikes the senses and challenges the mind. I was only in India for three weeks, which confers the credentials of a flea crawling on an elephant's back to judge of its host. But how much more would a stay of three months bring, measured against Indian immensity? To say, I visited India, is like claiming one visits Europe, nay, more, for India has as great a linguistic variety as Europe, with 15 major languages that divide its various states, along with more than twice as many people as Europe. But it has another distinction which offsets this vastness and heterogeneity, a certain unity-in-difference denied to the West, and stirring to behold.

With its relatively unbroken land mass, India is more of a piece than Europe, with its peninsulas and internally dividing mountains. This helps explain why, despite having had countless political jurisdictions congeal upon its surface for the past four thousand years, there has been little in the way of fixed boundary within the country. More than 50 years after independence, the lines between Indian states are still being redrawn. Associated with the lack of sharp physical boundaries is an overarching continuity within its culture, which extends deeply into time and across linguistic differences. As A.L. Basham wrote in his magisterial study, "the ancient civilization of India differs from those of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece in that its

traditions have been preserved without a break down to the present day.’<sup>2</sup>

Thus the past lives within India, preserved, but scarcely unchanged. Change has come, rather, through inclusion, incorporation and accretion rather than by a beginning anew — as with the West’s Christian mythos of the Fall and Redemption, which we carry over into modernity’s mystique of self-transformation. The Hinduism that defines Indian culture registers this not just in the proliferation of gods — concerning which the term, polytheism, offers only a dim suggestion — but also in the range of behaviors included in its prescriptions, from asceticism to unbridled eroticism, with all dimensions of the practical conduct of society in between. From another angle, Indian religion and culture are remarkable for a lack of persecutory and crusading spirit, and its world-view, for an absence of dualism. There was no Hindu Inquisition, nor is there a Hindu Church as such, with Hindu Mullahs, nor the possibility of a *jihad*; and this lack of centralization finds expression in a sense of continuity and recognition that frames the faith’s deep mystical excursions. This does not prevent, needless to add, any number of barbarisms, including the recent lurch toward Hindu nationalism, with its atrocities and nascent fascism. Nor, however, can it be divorced from the other side of Indian society that strikes the observer: the astounding vigor of its radical protest. I grew to feel during my stay in India that it harbored both the worst and the best in human existence to an especially great degree. This may be the simplest way of describing the endless fascination which the place exerts over the imagination; in any case, it has been an attempt to puzzle out this phenomenon that has generated, however haltingly, the notions of the present essay.

On our first day at Fireflies, there were tree-planting ceremonies to honor the dead — a lovely idea, as explained by our host, Siddhartha, since the trees would take substance from the deceased and thereby acquire equivalent honor. If generalized, the practice could add millions of trees to India’s stressed forest ecology. Two peasant families participated, each commemorating a recently deceased parent whose ashes had been unceremoniously lying in a field. The service was both humble and dignified, with lovely red and yellow marigold displays and matching tumeric paste. The trees — sapling Pipals, the species under which the Buddha sat as he achieved Enlightenment — were set into place and watered. But the ritual was incomplete. Prayers and chants

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<sup>2</sup>A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (New York: Grove Evergreen, 1954), p. 4.

were needed, the skills for which were lacking among the peasants. A kind of priest was required; and we were fortunate to have just such a person at Fireflies on a permanent basis: Jean Letschert, from Poland by way of Belgium and into India as a scholar, artist, once-communist and spiritual seeker of the sixties. Thirty-five years on, after long sojourn in various ashrams of Kerala and Karnataka, Jean has achieved the status of Swami Ascharyacharya — he who walks among the wonders. As such he obliged the people and offered a prayer in Sanskrit, the ancient language that was never theirs, for they are of outcaste status, hence of Dravidian origin, and speak Kannadu, the tongue of Karnataka state, largely unrelated to the Indo-European family of languages for which Sanskrit is a root. Yet as Jean's words rang out, the mourners became rapt, and the children's eyes gleamed at the connection.

The fact of outcaste status — comprising, in general, a mixture of Dalits (a successor name to the now-taboo term, Untouchable) and the so-called Adivasis, or tribal peoples — hovers spectrally over Indian history and culture. Dalits may be hypothesized as descendants of the conquered slaves and otherwise bonded labor of ancient Indian society;<sup>3</sup> while tribals represent those who remained outside the emerging state structures and lived in the forests. What deserves bearing in mind is that Dalits still comprise about 25 percent of India, and tribals another seven percent, which means we are dealing with the astounding number of some 320,000,000 impoverished people who remain “cast out” of the circuits of wealth, modernity and progress, the largest discrete group of oppressed people on earth outside of China.

In the half century since India's liberation from British colonialism, a great deal of fuss has been made over improving the lot of outcastes, with many affirmative action laws and visible gestures such as having the President of the Republic be a Dalit. Yet according to Jean Letschert, the actual force of hierarchical stratification in India has worsened during the 35 years of his residence. As I was told on another occasion, the Dalit president, K.R. Narayanan, while greeting

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<sup>3</sup>The origins of Indian society remain quite obscure and controversial, with two main schools of opinion. One maintains, on the basis largely of linguistic evidence, that an “Aryan” invasion from the Northwest some 3500 years ago set into motion the main axes of stratification; while the other argues that as there is no real evidence for an invasion, the caste system evolved from within Indian society. I am not competent to judge on the merits of these theses, though it is worth pointing out that a nascent Dalit liberation movement argues for the former interpretation, while the dominant scholarship holds to the latter view.

an illustrious assembly of musicians, was refused the courtesy of a handshake from them. I observed a similar phenomenon on a smaller scale during a birthday celebration at Fireflies for Siddhartha's son, Ananda, when the grandmother of one of his classmates, an extremely dignified lady with whom we had been having a spirited chat, visibly blanched upon seeing that some of the peasant women/kitchen-workers had joined us for their afternoon meal, in the emancipatory and egalitarian spirit of the ashram. Her animated and handsome features froze, and with scarcely a word she interrupted her conversation, rose, and departed as soon as they sat down.

The term for caste and that for color are the same in Sanskrit: *varna*; and indeed the outcastes tend to be darker than the dominant-caste peoples, just as Dravidians from the South are substantially darker than the people of the North. However, there are many counter-examples, and the mediation of caste exclusion essentially takes a different path from that of the white racism of the Western nations. Both are carried out in the name of purification. However, what has been in the West a tormented flight from dominated and once possessed black bodies,<sup>4</sup> emerged in India within the context of religious ritual. What tore apart American society because of its direct infusion of desire, guilt and rapaciousness retained in India a moment of social stabilization and cohesion. As Madeleine Biardeau has written of the Hindu epics, the *Mahabaratha* and *Ramayana*:

Thus the dichotomy which, in each epic, opposes one party to another, when it is a question of ensuring the triumph of "good" over "evil" (quotation marks are called for when the notions are so different from our own), is at the same time a total refusal of an Iranian or Manichean type of dualism. In each party the pure and the impure coexist, and the aim of the struggle is to bring about the triumph of an order which is objectively definable in ethico-religious terms in which everyone has his place. It is here that one is sure of finding something of the Hindu mental universe: there is no notion of specifically ethnic oppositions, and in particular none that can be based on the dichotomy Aryan-Dravidian.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>See my *White Racism*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 12.

From another perspective, India's caste system is a marker of a very old, substantially feudal arrangement, with its mutual recognition and reciprocal obligation; while our racism is embedded within a modernizing capitalism, with its ethos of restless change, deterritorialization and aggrandizing accumulation. In the Indian case, recognition and obligation became inscribed in the doctrine of *karma* and the transmigration of souls, extending logically to the souls of animals and all beings, and developed within a context of non-rationalizing inclusion. Dualistic Western notions of exclusion and hierarchy, by contrast, have been tied to abstraction, the postulation of superior, split-off realities and personal entities, and the fragmentation — along with the potent dynamism — of society grounded in the quests of individualized selves. With the Western penetration of India, these two patterns are dialectically interwoven, with furious consequences.

The schema needs to be appreciated in the context of India's present squalor, marked by illiteracy of roughly half the population, horrid poverty extending to pockets of starvation, communal violence, suicides of whole families,<sup>6</sup> atavisms like human sacrifice (reports of which appeared in the press during my stay), dowry murders of brides (see below), and Suttee (where the widow is compelled to throw herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband). Nor can we overlook in this assessment the large scale changes that now afflict the subcontinent: nuclear-tipped militarism, rising jingoism, and a severely threatened ecology, which extends from nightmarishly filthy streets to soils and waterways ravaged by the "Green Revolution" and other wonders of modern technology.

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<sup>6</sup>From the *Deccan Herald* of January 22, 2002, dateline Bangalore: "A young couple and their one-and-a-half-year-old son who consumed poisoned food three days ago were found dead in their residence in Sarakki Garden, J.P. Nagar 6th phase in the City this morning.

The bodies were recovered by the police when neighbours complained of foul smell emanating from their locked house. Police broke open the door and recovered the bodies of Ravi (28), Kumari (21) and Mahesh (one-and-a-half years).

According to J.P. Nagar police, the deceased belong to Lambani settlement in Kanakapura. Police said the couple could first have fed the baby with poisoned food before consuming the food themselves. Poverty drove the couple to take this extreme step, they said.

The bodies have been kept at Kempe Gowda Hospital. The family lived in a rented house belonging to one Sanjeevappa, the police added."

## 2. Invasion

The lushness of India has long proven attractive to outsiders, whose comings and goings have become incorporated into its history. Some episodes, like that of the “Aryan conquests,” lie shrouded in obscurity. Others, like the incursions of Alexander the Great, sputtered at the gates to the subcontinent. Numberless others moved inward by trade and/or conquest, only to become absorbed into Indian identity. Of these, the chief example was the protracted incursion of what has become a powerful Islamic minority. The Portugese and French had their shot at Europeanizing India, but it was the British who finally took charge and brought almost the entire landmass under their control. Barely 40 years after successfully expelling the European colonists, an even more formidable invasion began. This time the agent is capital; and India’s future as well as our own depends on the outcome of struggle. As Arundhati Roy has written:

“Trade not Aid” is the rallying cry of the headmen of the new Global Village, headquartered in the shining offices of the WTO. Our British colonisers stepped on to our shores a few centuries ago disguised as traders. We all remember the East India Company. This time around, the coloniser doesn't even need a token white presence in the colonies. The CEOs and their men don't need to go to the trouble of tramping through the tropics risking malaria, diarrhea, sunstroke and an early death. They don't have to maintain an army or a police force, or worry about insurrections and mutinies. They can have their colonies and an easy conscience. “Creating a good investment climate” is the new euphemism for third world repression.<sup>7</sup>

Nehru and the Congress Party, tilting toward the Soviets and having to contend with appalling poverty and illiteracy as a legacy of colonialism, valiantly attempted a degree of autarky in the period immediately following independence. A series of five-year plans succeeded in implementing a modest degree of land reform and industrialization, while foreign capital was permitted so long as it played by the rules of the Indian state.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, though Nehru’s

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<sup>7</sup>Internet: <[http://www.zmag.org/content/Economy/roy\\_enron.cfm](http://www.zmag.org/content/Economy/roy_enron.cfm)>.

<sup>8</sup>I am indebted to Duarte Barreto, personal communication, for much of the material in this section. Other facts from personal communications with Indian activists and scholars. I am particularly grateful to my colleague at Bard College, Sanjib Baruah, for sharing his knowledge of Indian society.

socialist model prevailed, a portion of the Gandhian tradition was allowed to grow within the interstices of the industrial system, with some 400 products reserved for small-scale and decentralized cottage-industrial production. A motion toward women's rights was encouraged, and the harsh edges were taken off the caste system, without, however, altering its foundations.

This arrangement, in which a strong state regulated accumulation, survived in a global environment defined by superpower contestation and the relative lack of coordination between capitalist powers. However, signs of difficulty began to appear in the 1960s, with a fiscal crisis stemming from weak tax collections, failures in land reform, and an inability to realize enough wealth from agriculture for primary accumulation. In addition, low earnings from exports led to a chronic trade deficit. In 1966, this reached a flash point, with shortfalls in basic food production requiring the import of 11 million tons of grain.

The Indian government turned in desperation to the United States and international agencies for assistance. The outcome was the celebrated and infamous Green Revolution. This has led to a fourfold increase of food production, more than enough to feed the ominous tripling of population since independence, with 50 million tons of grain left over for export each year. But it has proven a Faustian bargain, bringing in its wake the twin spectres of ecological degradation and dependency on foreign sources of seed, fertilizers and pesticides.<sup>9</sup> For instance: so vast an increase in food production requires colossal degrees of irrigation; and since India is dry for most of the year, irrigation of such scale requires tremendous public works to trap and deliver water. Thus has resulted the staggering construction of over 2000 dams from 1971 to 1989, with untold dislocation of local peoples and a grimly growing water crisis.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>In addition, direct foreign investment enabled some of these inputs to be produced domestically. There were some gruesome consequences, most infamously, the World Bank-sponsored building of Union Carbide's pesticide factory at Bhopal, scene in 1984 of history's worst industrial accident. For a summary, see my *The Enemy of Nature* (London: Zed, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>Meanwhile, hunger and pockets of starvation persist in the poorer areas such as Bihar State, as well as among the forest-living tribals. For the dynamics of this, see Francis Moore Lappé, Joseph Collins and Peter Rosset, *World Hunger: Twelve Myths*, 2d ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1998). For a discussion of Indian water politics (see below), see the issue of the *New Internationalist*, 336, July 2001, which concentrates on organizing in the Narmada River valley.



Throughout, the python embrace of capital tightened. We cannot here detail the incremental changes that softened the resistance of the Indian state and strengthened the hand of the transnational bourgeoisie: the persistent deficits and shortages; the IMF packages succeeding one another, leaving behind the residual bondage of “Structural Adjustment Programs;” the “export-oriented zones,” without regulations on labor or the environment — all in context of a global shift defined by a rapidly weakening socialist ideal as the Soviet model collapsed,<sup>11</sup> along with the coordinated restructuring of global capital.

With India approaching default in the wake of the Gulf War, a denouement of sorts came in June of 1991 with the “reforms” instituted by then PM Narasimha Rao. These constituted a major breach in India’s defenses against the market, and comprise one of those moments that deserve to be called a transition of quantity into quality. They opened wide the door to privatization, gave access to foreign stock markets, and greatly enhanced the opportunities for foreign capital to enter India. “Growth” shot up to an average rate of 6.5 percent over the next decade. The invasion was underway.

Four kinds of effects may be singled out from the welter of influences this has brought about.

*Enhancement of export-oriented industries, especially software.* This is the big success story for modernizing India and, unsurprisingly, draws the attention of the liberal media. Along with the \$2.25 billion exports of the giant “Bollywood” film industry to Africa and Asia,<sup>12</sup> the software industries of Bangalore and Hyderabad are supposed to lead the ancient nation into globalization’s Promised Land. With 16 percent of world population, but only two percent of its economic output and one percent of its trade, there is plenty of room for expansion. Software produced by untold thousands of young techno-whizzes and exported to the First World has gone in the last three years from \$2.7 to \$4 to \$6.2 billion. In the heated discourse of globalization, this is predicted to rise to the level of \$50 billion by 2008, at which point it will account for 40 percent of India’s trade with the first world — under the large assumptions that the world economy rebounds, and that the brain drain of India’s technical elites does not upset the applecart.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The delegitimation of the Nehru model was further accelerated by the authoritarian turn taken by Indira Gandhi from 1975-1977.

<sup>12</sup>Now the world’s largest, turning out some 800 splashy films a year to Hollywood’s 600.

<sup>13</sup>Kaushik Basu, “India and the Global Economy,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay, October 6, 2001, pp. 3837-42. In the late 1980s,

*Direct undercutting of domestic production.* Meanwhile, wholesale looting of public assets rages throughout India. The ancient port of Cochin, in Kerala, for example, is due to lose its thriving and profitable shipyards, which just happen to be on shorefront land coveted by transnational developers, who will most likely install a resort complex on the site. In the decade since the breakthrough, some 700,000 indigenous firms have gone under, viz., an entire flourishing soft-drink industry, replaced by Coke and Pepsi. Still more devastating has been the effect on agricultural commodities under the impact of “free trade,” i.e., the removal of protective tariffs on some 1400 commodities. In the past several years, producers in Kerala have seen the prices of their coconuts tumble from 8 rupees/kg to 2; while that of coffee (which costs 30 rupees/kg to produce) has gone from 130 to 24; and pepper from 240 to 130. A rubber plantation that could earn 8000 rupees/hectare three years ago now brings in 2400. It is most bizarre that in this tropical paradise with its numberless millions of coconut palms, the brutal laws of the market should decree the importation of said staple from places like Indonesia and China. But the fact is paradigmatic of the demoralization of an entire economy. The remarkable state of Kerala with its vaunted reputation of having been the demonstration case for peacefully electing Communist governments over the years, now endures a crushing burden of debt, a wave of bankruptcies, the emptying out of governmental treasuries, the unemployment of 4.7 million of the 37 million population, widespread hunger (13 deaths of tribals by starvation having been reported in Wayanand district during the three weeks prior to my visit), and the grim reaping of suicides of whole families, about 100 of these in the past year in the state. Indeed, this proud people, with the highest literacy rate and the lowest infant mortality in India, now adds the distinction of having the nation’s highest suicide rate as well, a phenomenon undoubtedly aggravated by the gap between their dignity as radicals and the reality of global capital’s triumph over them.<sup>14</sup>

*Corruption of the political process.* The breakthrough into globalization signalled also a breakdown of the 50 year hegemony of

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Bangladesh had more Foreign Direct Investment than India. The government is desperately trying to hold onto its technological elites, in some cases providing them with westernized enclaves in which to live.

<sup>14</sup>See Richard Francke and Barbara Chasin, “Power to the Malayalee People,” *Z Magazine*, February, 1998, pp.16-20, for a sympathetic account of Kerala’s direct democracy with forebodings on the reversals now taking place. See also, Govindan Paryil, ed., *Kerala: The Development Experience* (London: Zed, 1998).

Nehru's Congress Party, and the rise of the BJP, a coalition group fostering Hindu nationalism and a regressive fundamentalism in the context of globalization and privatization. We may link these phenomena as poles of a contradiction in which the loss of sovereignty to an alien power is compensated with an outburst of chauvinism and a rallying about the cause of traditional religion. In this respect the regime of globalization — which would be more accurately called the imperialism of capital in itself, detached from the boundedness of nation-states — also becomes an epoch of political reaction, marked by heightened nationalism, fundamentalism, and the violent assertion of identity in the face of its incipient dissolution. Just so does the party of Big Business in the United States assiduously promote the “family values” it is busily destroying. In India, this is called “communalism,” which may fairly be seen as the perversion of the deeply rooted diversification inherent to Hindu culture; thus fluidity and inclusiveness turns to chaotic unreason and authoritarian reaction. In the process, a whole range of localisms and decentralizations are fostered just so long as they do not extend very far into the dimension of popular control. Indeed, decentralized enterprises are that much more easily picked off by larger capitals once democratic forms of resistance are vitiated. Meanwhile, inter-religious hostility is encouraged, in a classic diversionary pattern. Thus Hindu-Muslim violence, having diminished since the surge after partition in 1947, flared again in 1992, directly following the major invasion by capital, with the sacking of the great Mosque in Ayodyha by Hindu mobs holding the delusional scheme to build a Hindu temple to the God Ram on the site. The wave of killings in early 2002 came about as the time for the construction of this edifice approached, and was stimulated on by the national government and directly abetted by the state government of Gujarat, one of the last strongholds of a collapsing BJP. To a considerable degree, the recent surge in hostility along the border with Pakistan follows the same logic, combined with that of militarism and the projection of state power. As in the Cold War, two pathological state formations try to build legitimacy through demonization of the other.

The odd concatenation of globalization and communalist particularism also augments the vast and parasitical bureaucracy inherited from the British Raj. This now becomes even more of a class in itself, which functions at one level as an impediment to liberalization, at another, as a means of preserving local elites, and throughout, as a tenacious brake on getting anything done. For example, 40 separate inspections a year are imposed on small

enterprises, along with 18 separate clearances for public projects.<sup>15</sup> A common thread running through all of this is immense corruption, greatly aggravated by the inroads of transnational corporations.

The chief miscreant in this respect has been the rascally Enron corporation, with its infamous Dabhol power plant inflicted on the people of Maharashtra state. Beginning in 1992, with the ink scarcely dry on the liberalization agreement, the Texas energy giant furiously set about (with the energetic support of the Clinton administration, which saw India as a huge market it could wrest from Japan) to vastly augment and dominate Indian electrical generation. A book-length treatment would be required to do justice to this, the greatest swindle in Indian, indeed, perhaps in world history, marked by prodigious cost-overruns, and bribes of both the Congress Party — which overruled its own experts and even the World Bank's findings on the non-feasibility of the plant — and the BJP, which took over Maharashtra state in 1995 (and the national government the next year) to a great extent on the basis of protesting Dabhol, only to undergo a mysterious conversion as soon as it took office and had a chat with Enron. In the process the entire revenues of the Indian government were pledged to indemnify Enron for its \$3 billion investment and to guarantee it \$30 billion in profits over the life of the plant.

However, Dabhol, just South of Bombay, never went on line, chiefly because of the exorbitant cost of its energy supply.<sup>16</sup> The giant plant presently sits as a cold monument to reckless globalization, but its maleficent shadow is a long one, in both the US and India. This includes serious human rights violations committed in the course of defending the plant from protestors, and which have had the effect of

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<sup>15</sup>There are 24 million pending lawsuits in India, and it takes, on the average, 20 years for each case to be resolved. Even if there were no new cases, it would take 324 years to clear the backlog of the existing ones. Meanwhile the public sector is swollen with vast numbers of unproductive workers whose days are spent in picking things up and putting them down, or performing redundant inspections, as any trip to the airport will confirm.

<sup>16</sup>Costs ran twice as high as the nearest competitor and seven times the cheapest electricity sold in Maharashtra. The plant runs on liquefied natural gas, which had to be shipped from Qatar. A story with enormous geostrategic implications that draw in the US's "war on terror" concerns the prospect of getting LNG more cheaply from Caspian Sea fields, using the proposed pipeline to run through Afghanistan and on into Pakistan and India.

further delegitimizing an Indian state already perceived as submitting to imperialism.<sup>17</sup>

*Cultural destabilization.* Globalization reinforces the emancipatory moment of modernity for those Indians, especially women, who are able to benefit from membership in the 250 million-strong elite granted unprecedented access to the goods of the world. For the 750 million remaining, however, the effects have largely been the opposite. Class differences will widen under the influence of capital, but the hegemonic ideology descends on all, and places the powerless in the grip of a mania for money that can never be had in sufficiency. This chiefly affects those in the middle strata. In contrast to the great mass of the poor who are cast out of capital's social compact and have no hope of attaining the magic stuff in the first place, those within its range are in a state of chronic want, humiliation, envy, and rage.

The curse of indebtedness, the effects of which embrace many suicides of farmers and small tradespeople, is one kind of outcome. Another, more spectacularly destructive, has been the recent plague of dowry-murders. I was informed on a number of occasions that the surge in these killings (which at times takes the form of hounding the young wife into suicide) is largely a contemporary phenomenon. It is compounded from, first, an enhanced pressure toward arranged marriage as a hedge against the alienation of capitalist anomie; secondly, from the destabilizing desires foisted by Western mass culture; and finally, from the bitter avarice that is one of the invader's chief legacies. As a result, an increasing number of brides are seen chiefly as a dehumanized bearer of wealth from their family to that of the groom. If for any reason dowry wealth is seen as inadequate to the latter's needs, there will be a pressure to get rid of her, the way one liquidates a bad investment on the stock market. As shocking as the murders

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<sup>17</sup>Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued extensive reports on these scandalous developments (viz. their websites), which consisted of numerous abuses by local police who, it turned out, were not only in league with Enron, but actually paid by it. See below for more about the protests. As Human Rights Watch cogently argued, this cuts to the heart of a commonly held rationale for globalization, that it fosters democratization. After observing that "India is the world's largest democracy, with a vigorous civil society, a general culture of human rights, legal protections, an active judiciary, and an acceptance of free expression and peaceful assembly," the report asks rhetorically, "If increased investment necessarily leads to improvements in human rights and respect for the rule of law, then how can the human rights violations as a result of the Dabhol Power project be explained?"

themselves has been the inability of the authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. India Fights Back

These grim developments bring to mind Karl Polanyi's insight that to "allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society"<sup>19</sup> Certainly any serious look at India — whether it be at the choked and fouled streets, the signs of hunger and mutilation, the rivers bubbling with an unholy yellow-green froth, the lurch toward nuclear militarism, or the charred bodies of the victims of Suttee or religious massacre — would raise this possibility quite seriously. And yet the visceral impression made upon at least one visitor is not such at all, but rather, the sense of a liveliness that, without transcending the tendency toward annihilation, grows up between its tentacles, like flowers springing forth in a rubble-strewn lot that turn the rubble into background.

The spirit of capitalism sits uneasily on the back of the Indian soul, and is forever sliding off. Perhaps this stems from the healthy distrust engendered by centuries of exposure to the British East India Company and its successors. However, this would not have taken such a shape unless there had been a receptivity at the core of India's historical identity. At the risk of making a facile generalization, let me say that it may have something to do with the Indian/Hindu way of inclusion, which incorporates things without placing them into an abstract and systematising hierarchy. Thus the concrete and the sensuous is always getting in the way of developing the thoroughgoing sense of exchangeability necessary for the proper function of the reigning mode of production.

For whatever reason, there remains a deep unease about capital in India. Children, I have read, are traditionally warned that if they don't study hard, they will grow up to become businessmen. And for those who do grow up to be so, it seems as though things are always getting in the way of the efficient carrying forth of their role. Consider a flyer

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<sup>18</sup>In Pakistan and elsewhere in regional Muslim communities, a similar situation obtains in terms of the "honor" of the groom's family, and the woman's perceived sexual independence. Once again, the murders are carried out with impunity.

<sup>19</sup>Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), p. 73.

handed to me in the streets of Bangalore, the English side of which reads, in part:

First time in Bangalore

Today only

This year Indian weavers Silk Udyog industry faces

A loss of about lakhs<sup>20</sup> of rupees

The prime reason of this huge loss is no business transaction due to unsolved credit issues between weavers and traders.

Weavers are not in a position to offer credit and traders are not willing to buy on cash terms.

Due to this conflict, the order booking display show arranged at Wankhede Stadium had to be closed down.

Considering all these prevailing situations, all Indian weavers had jointly arranged "Direct-to-General Public Retail Sale"

...[at last, following this, a description of the sale]

This is not scrupulousness so much as the unwillingness to set things aside, combined, no doubt, with humiliation at having been forced into the above-mentioned predicament. Try to imagine a comparable merchant in New York going into so detailed an explanation, or being so ill-at-ease with the context and background of a business dilemma — or is it so curious and fascinated by it? — that he must share the information with prospective clients instead of beating them over the head with the coarse facts about how much money they are going to be saving.

If this lack of synchrony with capital were limited to the lower levels of the bourgeoisie, then one would simply expect their orderly replacement by more finely tooled instruments of accumulation. However, the same disposition can also be put in the service of resistance to capital and globalization, where it can be empowering instead of dysfunctional. This can be seen in the spectacular development of oppositional movements in India.

The struggle between forces of life and death, of wholeness and disintegration, is everywhere present, but in different proportions and contours that lend to each historical moment a distinct political profile. One sees a considerable amount of what is worst in human existence in the Indian subcontinent. This has led many to despair about it and, considering the vast size of Indian society and its strategic importance, about the fate of humanity itself. But one also sees a great deal of what

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<sup>20</sup>The word, lakh, refers to the number, 100,000.

is most hopeful and life-giving in India, which lends an aura of high drama to its affairs.

The ordinary Indian knows very well that s/he is being invaded. “What do you think of globalization?,” we asked one man. “It is killing us,” came the swift reply. When a doctor in a Kerala clinic learned that I, an American, was against globalization, his face lit up and he called over his associates to spread the news of this remarkable fact. There is relatively little in the way of “civil society” in the Western sense in India, but a great web of personal ties, along which such an attitude propagates. Here the deep organicity of Indian culture, and its unwillingness to be fit into any mold, becomes an organizing influence for spontaneity and resistance.

Thus it is that even as India falls apart it is being put back together. Space does not permit a listing of the networks of activism, nor am I prepared to take up detailed points of distinction between Indian and Western models. Much of the former is non-violent and neo-Gandhian — which is to say, it uses direct action expressive of core Hindu values in the context of the invasion by capital, as against the preceding one, by Britain. But there are also armed bands of Naxalite Marxist-Leninists who roam the state of Madya Pradesh in the center of the country and attack landlords on behalf of desperate peasants; and there remains a strong alternative legal Marxist-Leninist presence in West Bengal and Kerala, and a significant one elsewhere.

A great deal of contemporary Indian resistance is ecologically directed. There are activists who impede biotechnology through direct actions in the fields, and others who build organic peasant agriculture; and activists who defend women’s rights; and activists who organize fisherpeople, an especially successful group being in Kerala under the direction of an ex-Catholic priest named Thomas Kocherry;<sup>21</sup> and others who work on behalf of forest people. It was the relentless militancy of hundreds of such groups that forced Enron to corrupt the police around Dabhol; and the relentless militancy of other hundreds of groups that stand doggedly in the way year after year to hold back the ecologically devastating Narmada Dam project.

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<sup>21</sup>Among other spiritual badges of honor, India can lay claim to hosting one of the world’s oldest continuously functioning Christian sects, the “Syrian Catholic Church,” founded in South India by the “doubting apostle,” Thomas, some 60 years into the Common Era. Our host, Siddhartha, is a product of this tradition.



Everywhere, women play a leading role, from high-profile activists like Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva and Medha Patkar, to the anonymous ones who hold up the movement and bear much of the burden of its repression.<sup>22</sup> It is important to recognize that the movement towards ecological integrity and that of women's liberation are two aspects of the same life-giving force;<sup>23</sup> and, moreover, that India, bastion of brutal male supremacy as it undoubtedly is, is also a culture whose ancient tradition and mythology are rich in examples of female power.<sup>24</sup> This is undoubtedly a major determinant of the vigor of Indian radical movements.

The ancient ways of India live on in the greater depth of resistance evinced by its radical movements. As bizarre as Indian spirituality can at times be, it also provides an active imagination and a disregard for this-worldly hardships and dangers, as well as an anchor that keeps the mind from drifting off into the swamps of capitalist rationalization. Thus the climate breeds radicalism. As Jaggi Singh writes, citing Sanjay Gopal, the co-ordinator of India's National Alliance of People's Movements, which represents some 125 grassroots groups, the "analysis emanating from diverse sources in the Third World...revolves around the 'Three Aunties.'" These are not "a kindly trio of female

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<sup>22</sup>From the Amnesty International report on Enron and Dabhol: "Women, who have been at the forefront of local agitation, appear to have been a particular target. A People's Union for Civil Liberties fact-finding team that investigated the arrest of 26 women and 13 men on 3 June, 1997, concluded: 'The police targeted mainly women, some of whom were minors, and the arrests were made violently, in violation of the legal, constitutional and humanitarian principles.'"

<sup>23</sup>Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective* (London: Zed, 1999); Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature, op.cit.*

<sup>24</sup>No Eve crushed for her rebellion exists in Indian mythology, nor does any "Blessed Virgin" grace it. Biardeau, *op.cit.*, writes extensively of this powerful distinction (pp. 122-158), asserting the "omnipresent figure in the Hindu pantheon, the goddess, and also the religious movements which tend to give her pre-eminence over the male aspect...of deity." These relationships are too complex for present scope. Gavin Flood summarizes: "Hinduism cannot be understood without the Goddess, for the Goddess pervades it at all levels, from aniconic village deities to high-caste pan-Hindu goddesses...or the wives of male gods....there are essentially two kinds of Goddess representations: a ferocious form such as Kali, and a gentle benevolent form such as Tripurasundari or Laksmi....Indeed, without the Goddess a god such as Siva is a corpse." *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 196-67. See also the female sensuality of temple statuary, or the *Kama Sutra*, which insists on the equivalent *eroticism* of both genders.

relatives who pamper their nephews and nieces, but an analysis of the WTO and related institutions that is ‘anti-imperialist,’ anti-colonial’ and ‘anti-capitalist,’ phrases which are seemingly alien to most mainstream antiglobalization movements in the North.” As put by Medha Patkar, the Narmada Valley activist leader, “The ultimate goal is [not just] to say no to the WTO. We’re against the whole capitalist system.”<sup>25</sup>

To the Indian activist, then, there can be an alternative to capital; and since her/his civilization is grounded in inclusivity and differentiation, the alternative needn’t be relegated to a transcendent beyond but can exist in this world as a set of intermediate forms directed toward social transformation. This constitutes a radical difference from the position of anti-globalization activists in the Northern countries, less because the latter are affluent than because many tend to have internalized the ways of thought integral to the dominant order. Thus they cannot envision one beyond it and often rest content with tepid reformism when the situation cries out for radical change.

We may conclude that the time might have arrived for the North to allow the South to take the lead in changing the world. The framework for this should not be left unstated: that the hope for overcoming global capital lies in building global resistance, a chief component of which is the restoration of female power. This should be seen as the germ of a new planetary society in which the terms “North” and “South” no longer refer to parties in a dialectic of domination but return as points on the compass, orienting the free peoples of the earth.

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<sup>25</sup>Jaggi Singh, “Resisting Global Capitalism in India,” in Eddie Yuen, George Katsiaficas and Daniel Burton Rose, eds., *The Battle for Seattle* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001), pp. 47-50. One may reasonably see the “aunties” (a mode of address common in India outside the family) in this context as reincarnations of Kali.