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“State is a like a piece of Wood”

Well known photographer and human rights activist **Ravi Agarwal** speaks to **JohnyML** prior to his forthcoming participation in a Residency program based on the global politics of Water at the Khoj International Studios, New Delhi on 7th January 2007. In this crisp interview Ravi Agarwal speaks about his art and activism. Excerpts:



Ravi Agarwal

JohnyML: When did you start engaging with the river Yamuna? Was it a part of your activism or something else called you to the banks of the river?

Ravi Agarwal: For this, my engagement commenced in early 2004. It was trying to find a personal space in the city, in which I grew up in and found myself to be increasingly alienated from a space I could relate to and recover some sense of self, and in this case which drew me to it recurrently to itself over two years.

JML: Is Yamuna a metaphor for you, a metaphor that could connect with the dying rivers all over the world?

RA: If a metaphor then it is about our disconnect with nature and what I call our essential being, or the 'ecology of the self.' I believe we are all deeply interconnected, to everything around us, and struggle between our 'individual identities' and collective lives.

JML: I find your pictures and writings are driven by a sense of urgency. At the same time you stand like an onlooker who wails at the peril of the people and the river. Why is it so?

RA: While there is a sense of 'one must do something' at another level all what seems to be taking place is also in many ways inscribed in our collective human history, where it seems to be predicted, like in a pre-written script. The duality which you see is that. In my 'activist' life I must act, since that is all I know how to react to what I see, but also I am aware of other layers and live in them as well.

JML: Could you please connect your Yamuna project with the NBA (Narmada Bacchao Andolan- Save Narmada Movement)? How do you find your paths converging and diverging?

RA: The NBA is a powerful national movement about people's rights and our developmental model. My work on the Yamuna is an individual, miniscule engagement at a very personal level so hence not very comparable. Yet both the NBA and the Yamuna work is based on realizing

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comparisons for both the NDA and the Yamuna work is based on reasoning that this type of 'progress' is not very equitable or environmentally friendly. We seem to be caught in a bind with 'no-escape.'

JML: Despite the involvement of the celebrities in the NBA movement, people are still stranded and dispossessed along the banks of Narmada. What will happen to Yamuna?

RA: It is about ways of thinking, and celebrities who do not seem to follow the same ideas as the 'mainstream' are not very 'effective.' However these present critical discourses map out our futures in ways we cannot predict, since they are based on real lived histories of people's lives. The Yamuna will be (is being) reconfigured to reflect global capitalism in Delhi. We do not know what this will mean in the future. We will have to wait and live to see.

JML: How are you planning to take this Yamuna project further? Your engagement is aesthetical or activism oriented?

RA: While in an organization like Toxics Link we do research and intervene, as a photographer or artist I have other ways of reacting and expressing myself. The first I can map out and predict through my training, but the latter is a mystery even to me. It unfolds itself. Aesthetics and activism are intertwined and not separate for me. The outcome is a whole not separate. What it is going to be is hard even for me to say when I begin.

JML: In your writing you sound like a bemoaning lover as well as Hemingway's old man. Who is your choice, the lover or the old man?

RA: If you put it like that then a bit of both maybe. As the old man stoic to a point, in a way, but persistent and determined, doing only what he must, but also longing as well.

JML: You have aptly used Walter Benjamin's observation on the progress using the metaphor of an angel who is called back to the heavens. Do you identify with that existential angel?

RA: Life passes, time is defined when life is there, but then what is time and what is progress, when we are not there as a witness to it? We have within us our own debry as well. Benjamin's angel is ever-present.

JML: I could see a T.S.Eliot and a James Joyce in your narrative. How is your literary orientation?

RA: "Shantih shantih shantih," or the epic of the Ulysses, by two greats who were each other's contemporaries! Maybe they are both there, maybe Eliot I find easier to engage with.

JML: How did people respond to your book and the photographs?

RA: Again what they say to me is nice, though some have been more frank and constructively so. Many liked the way I did the Shroud, while others were taken aback by its deathly pall. Some wanted my documentary photographs more prominence. Almost most people liked the book, except book distributors who felt that the cover image is too 'morose' for the book to sell- not positive enough. I am not sure how true it is. However this is what I wanted to do and that is that.

JML: You have made a contrasting picture of the dispossessed people and the arms of law in the form of a pot bellied police constable. Who is the ultimate winner, the people or the apparatuses of state?

RA: Only people lose, since it affects their lives, the state or its apparatus is faceless and impersonal and losing or winning has no meaning for it. The state is like a piece of wood when it chooses not to act. People are flesh and blood! While individual life passes on, the state was (and will be) always there and can wait indefinitely.


See the Book Review Section for a detailed review of Ravi Agarwal's book titled 'Immersion Emergence' »

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