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Interview

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"The natural landscape has either become a repository of waste, or the provider of capital." Ravi Agarwal in conversation with Gayatri Sinha on the interface of art and ecology.

23 Jan 2018

Gayatri Sinha: Your early work was centred around the ecology of the river Yamuna and its degradation. Your recent exhibition titled *'The Familiar is Always a Stranger'* also shows works of a broader nature, such as the closure of the Indraprastha Power plant. Are these works on a continuum of degradation and dysfunctionality?

Ravi Agarwal: The idea of 'nature' since long has been that it is a 'free gift,' to be used in the service of man. It has been exploited endlessly. The natural landscape has either become a repository of waste, or the provider of capital. In urban settings, this has come to the fore since the city is an abstract, technologically constituted space, which draws upon the hinterland for its survival, but becomes the place for trade and commerce to the world outside it. This is replicated today as we now speak of cities as "engines of economic growth." However the city has a massive ecological footprint, even today not recognised in urban planning, in terms of labour, energy, food, waste, and even clean air.

The eco-sphere is where most people have always lived, in complex cultural, social and economic relationships to the land, rivers or the sea. These relationships have constituted an underpinning of life, as can be seen in festivals, dances, music, mythology and memory everywhere, but of course dependant on social hierarchies of class but also less recognised on gender and caste. These now stand broken, fractured, fragmented and even extinct. When the relationship to the land and its dependence breaks down, everything else starts crumbling. The scale of this demolition is larger than ever before as highly populous nation states now embark on this kind of model of development.

I see this degradation in that larger sense. There has for long been an ambiguity about technology, who owns it, who controls it, and its promise for the future. To me these are not neutral questions but questions of power structures, marginalities and erasures. Who dreams, who imagines, and who delivers.

The works have this common underlying thread, as a hope of recovering something which is of value to me. It is a search.

GS: In recent times you have done much of your work with the fishing community in Tamil Nadu, and invoked the concept of the Anthropocene. Can you speak about what took you so far, why Tamil Nadu?

RA: The sea happened to me, it was not a plan. A chance encounter with the sea, became a longer term investigation, and a fascination with its ebb, flows, moods and reflections. Is the sea I saw, the sea the fisherman saw? That was a question I sought to answer as I got to know the fishermen more and more. Nature is as much a construct as we are, and how we construct it changes from communities and in time frames. Their 'sea' was not entirely my 'sea.' They lived it, I saw it.

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- The geological time of the Anthropocene, as a marker of a planetary ecological crisis is also to my mind an assertion of power and its resultant displacements. The Anthropocene is not caused by 'humanity,' per se, but by those few who could convert the Amazon forests into timber, rivers into water channels, the polar ice cap into oil drilling sites, people not like them into 'tribal and uncivilised,' ...the list goes on. The dominance is complete, as the systems through which it is asserted is global and powerful. The erasure is cultural, linguistic, material and of complex relationships.
- I am interested in what happens on the ground, to the small fisherman, the small farmer, the artisan, and the animals in the forest. All kinds of life on the planet has been relegated to a marginality, with a chimeric promise of some future. The global debates on the environment pay lip service to the marginal but have no real relationship to it. The abstraction is complete. Like capital has been abstracted from nature, 'value' has been abstracted from its physical embodiment. And this is only the beginning, as life forms increasingly become 'data points' in the digital world of big data. In Tamil Nadu, and elsewhere I only seek signs of deeper moorings.
- The work that I do with ecology, nature etc. is also becoming academic. I am co-editing a book with Mahesh Rangarajan on young scholars doing work on nature and I've also written some academic papers for some books. You realize that the way nature is inhabited is so complicated, because it's got deep political, colonial, historical roots but also has deep cultural ideas of what is your sense of self in the world. This is when I went to Sangam poetry because I found the sense of self to be little different from elsewhere.
- GS: You must explain this...
- RA: Sangam poetry dates to 300 BC. All these characterizations were done more recently, several centuries later. As this is discovered poetry written on classical palm leaves, it is written without full stops and commas because you cannot put full stops in palm leaves. What has been left in parchment has been left because it's been copied. Some 2000 poems of 400 poets have survived. One section which is called Akkam poetry is about interior landscapes. It describes five landscapes of Tamil Nadu or Tamil land. Those landscapes describe different kinds of love encounters. So if you are in the hills, it will be fertile and will be about meeting a lover, if you are in the agricultural fields then it will be about marriage, jealousy and possessiveness, concubines and prostitutes because now you have been legally bound and you have property to hold on to. If you are in bereavement, then it becomes a desert but there is no desert in their landscape. The way the language changes from the landscape to the self is very fluid and very relational.
- Unlike Sanskrit poetry it doesn't have any flourish, it's very straight and very descriptive but it has a certain metre to it.
- GS: Are you using the version by Ramanujan?
- RA: There are four translations I know of. Ramanujan is of course the most beautiful. There is also Thangappa, a Tamil scholar who used to live in Pondicherry, he died recently. His is more floral, Ramanujan is more modern and western in that sense. There is a translation by Hart who was a scholar at the French Institute in India, and his translation is very direct. The same poems flow very differently. They have a different sensibility to them.
- GS: The reflection on Sangam poetry also implicates a broader landscape in your work, creating another ground if you like for us to measure the age of the Anthropocene. Is this the function of text in your work, to function as a kind of backdrop for critical physical and social change?
- RA: Sangam love-landscape, or Akkam poetry contains a human-nature relationship which is everyday, embedded and unconscious of any divide. It is from a time when this was possible, and a far cry from what it is today - where the idea of 'nature' is produced much like 'patriarchy' has been - to act upon. . It is an example of how the flat world the Anthropocene proposes is surficial, but which in reality has major inflexions The literary philosopher Timothy Morton contests the idea of 'nature' itself. The nature of our

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- relationship with the world outside is about how we inhabit the world and our selves. It has deep implications for how we understand and relate to the animate and inanimate world we live in. I use text to layer the complexity, to annotate it.
- GS: But the instrument is always love...
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- RA: Yes it is...the interior feeling is always about sexual love.
- GS: Yes sexual love and nature is the site of encounter, the backdrop and the beloved.
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- RA: And if you speak longer to the Tamil speaking people you find them very animatedly energetic. The play of energy and sensuality in them is very strong.
- GS: As you are speaking I am thinking of the temples one goes to in Tamil Nadu. Of course they are Brahminical. The Chola sculpture with their imagery is to a level of exaggeration that is not possible. In the north we seemed to have had a Bhakti movement which flattened out individual and human contour. We become not like wastelands but become like landscapes of the imagination whereby the text can supplant the physical landscape. All of those movements are interesting - if you come onto Sufi poetry it's ungendered. The male and the female voices which are so pronounced in Sangam poetry for instance are eradicated. For instance, in Sikh banis or the Bhakti cults or right upto the later reform movements the erasure of gendered identity is strong.
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- RA: When you bring gender into the world of knowledge everything changes, you have to reread your knowledge in terms of a gender bias. Similarly this idea of nature especially in post Enlightenment history you find that nature is a free resource, to be vanquished and conquered. In the Christian world it is believed it is for the service of man.
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- For me the idea of nature becomes a very expanded idea...Its looking at power relationships historically and in the present. Within power relation, to look at culture becomes increasingly difficult.
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- This brings the question back to ourselves as the starting point of the idea of sustainably and futures. It is not about technological solutions, but about identity, relationships, social positions, and ethics. It changes the current trajectory and allows for the entry of other knowledge and knowledge systems which we have left out in the post enlightenment world. Texts of these systems suggest alternate trajectories of futures and we need to think about those implications. I propose it not as a confrontation but as a dialogue for the future, that which might produce a more equitable and ethical society.
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- GS: I am very interested in what you are saying because you are working from a position of a contemporary thinker in this space referencing geopolitical economies and so on. All your referencing is now drawing you more into a more philosophic and cultural landscape. I am interested to see what kind of bridges you are going to make in terms of knowledge systems.
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- RA: That's a really complicated question. As an artist you don't always have to make bridges but you can also evoke a knowledge system. As a discussant you can make an evocation. That is a liberty an artist can take. Building bridges is a very important contemporary question for future ideas of where this discussion should lead. This has been a very important theme in the Anthropocene debate; in fact I brought it up in the last Berlin conference. It's not about how you invite other knowledge systems but with what questions and how do you leave that space...
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- GS: There is a past, of ways of worship and the aesthetic field. If you look at the "pindi" or a single round stone as a form of worship in wild areas of Himachal or Uttarakhand, you'll still find just the stone. It's what you have in Vaishno, Una, Chintapurni, those are the smallest shrines and there's just a stone. Compare these with the great havelis of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Mathura, etc. which are highly urbanised, so systematic and then the notion of
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darshan in which they open the curtain and then close it, there is this fleeting glimpse, there is a great seduction in the momentary gaze. The whole notion of time, seduction, distance, these are very interesting concepts.

Krishna in the Pushti marg, is a baby and he is so domesticated. You can play with him, feed him five times a day. So, both systems are simultaneous and different forms of address of nature, of poetry, and you could have both these ways of organizing and disorganizing your own energies.

RA: We subtly inhabit many of these things without realising its inhabitations.

GS: The changes in our physical environment seem to be echoed in our political condition. In the last three or four years how would you describe the role of art? Do you believe art in the present circumstances can create an alternative narrative?

RA: Our cultural and physical landscape is in great flux, and many people on the ground are under stress. The shifts are being made on a promise of new futures but are violent, and really have only delivered displacement, livelihood loss, fear and insecurity. These changes are dividing society. Artists must respond. Unfortunately there has been a reluctance to do so. It could come from a denial, a fear of retribution, or possibly even an acquiescence to it. However what we do now will be marked for all times to come.

GS: You have been quoted saying "the fertility of capital has over taken the fertility of the land." How does your artist self-address the crisis in agriculture - the crisis in the landscape, in a sense?

RA: The price of land has to be more than its productivity, it is an ecology of the past and present, and part of larger biological webs. The only way we have been able to incorporate the otherness of nature is to put a value to it, which is like defining a person by her biometrics. Agriculture and land are being lost to new capitalistic imaginations and valuations. I have constantly explored the complex ways in which landscapes are inhabited. It is still true in India, where everything has not been flattened as yet, physically as well as metaphysically. The local flower growers on the Yamuna or the 'Kattumaran' ploughing fisherman in Tamil Nadu have more in common than we realise. They are different but still inhabit landscape in multiplicities. I feel that the more we can see and reveal these, the more we can appreciate and learn from them. The alternative can be the political.

GS: We have to create a space for an Indian aesthetic field, so that was really my question to you that when you look at these areas of separation, whether you're looking at the economies or you're looking at the aesthetics, because of course there has been a huge aesthetic separation and you have to embrace the Indian aesthetic field to understand all of these things better.

RA: It's a slow process, I also grew up in a certain time and I grew up with a certain kind of aesthetic and with a certain exposure which makes me very modern in my aesthetic idea or what constitutes the aesthetic. So, it's a relationship with the traditional aesthetic in a certain way but not in a deep way that I can take it on as my own.

GS: Can we talk a little about your exhibition, the work about the decrepitude of the factories?

RA: Yes, that is something I had shot in 2011, in this closed IP power station. This was a place made by Nehru. And there is Nehru's voice in it, in the middle somewhere.

GS: A fragment from the Tryst with destiny speech...

RA: Because, it's also Nehru's idea of India, and I see today an end of that Nehruvian idea of the very flat India that he had hoped it might be. There's also a slogan on the Narmada movement. Then there is an audio of a forest that I had audio recorded once of a brook running in the forest. So, it doesn't lead to anything very straight forwardly. To me a space

which is a witness in the last sixty years of many kinds of things which have happened in the landscape. I thought people can watch the imagery on its own even if they don't deeply think about what the audio is. But I wanted to put it there as my idea of what the audio should be.

GS: I'm interested in the fact that we tend to equate shifts in the landscape with shifts in politics. Is that how you see it? That there is a Nehruvian landscape industrially, socially and certainly culturally and then there would be now a right wing kind of a manifestation?

RA: It's hard to say but there would be inflections on the landscape. It's hard to say whether the right wing is Hindu right wing or just right wing when it comes to how the landscape is treated. Then that right wing could be an economic right wing where Trump might have destroyed the landscape in a similar way. The right wingness of the landscape is not limited to this government, it has been there for long. It's not only about people's rights in the landscape like what Amar Kanwar talks about, it is also about the flattening of the landscape for what Arundhati Roy calls a greater common good. That is very much a greater phenomenon and that is very much part of how capitalist based modernity is funded. Because, ultimately all capital is nature, it comes from some resource or the other. Now what cultural imaginations you put into that space, you take that space over from its complex inhabitations to a certain other kind of landscape.