

## CONFLUENCE 7TH ANNIVERSARY KEYNOTE ADDRESS

### *Creating the Story of Everywhere: Connecting Cultures, Understanding Others* Sanjukta Dasgupta

The title of my keynote address has been inspired by a visit to my hometown Kolkata by a global writer who writes of local issues. I have referred to this significant visit at various seminars that addressed issues of the diaspora.

On 9th December 2004, when the much awarded, controversial and flamboyant India-born writer Salman Rushdie, long time resident in the UK, presently living in the USA, visited the city of Kolkata, he defined in a public lecture, the motivational agenda of migrant writers, who have increasingly evolved into having transnational identities, that is a blended consciousness of a home of one's origins, and a home away from home. The identity of such a migrant writer is the representative identity of being a translated person, an intermediary between several cultures. Rushdie therefore observed that writers were no longer caught in their regional

spaces of comparative insularity. He remarked in the Kolkata address, "the new subject that is emerging—not just for me but for very many writers—is the question of the shrinking world, which is of course given to me by a life of successive acts of migration which have brought me into collision with a number of different kinds of life in parts of the world—India, Pakistan, England, America. The story of everywhere is now part of the story of everywhere else". Rushdie explained his viewpoint further—"There was a time when a story in India could take place here and a story in America could take place there and you didn't have to make any echoes or connections between them, because you could fully and profoundly explain the lives of your characters without that kind of transcultural reference, or without any kind of historical or political reference". (*The Telegraph*, December 20, 2004)

Four years after Rushdie's visit, recently on 17th October, 2008 the British Council held a poetry reading programme by a young "British Asian poet". The title of his published book of poems was "Look we have coming to Dover". The grammatical horror was a deliberate validation of the fact that the erstwhile empire had invaded the fortress of the imperial power and such linguistic violence or violation would force the prestigious cultural symbol of the empire, the Oxford English Dictionary to re-invent itself. Significantly again, it was the British Council that had facilitated the visit of the poet Daljit Nagra to Kolkata. I state all this without irony, rather asserting the way in which cultures need to re-invent themselves by developing social engineering skills for remaining creative and connected. The reading by Nagra was followed by another path-breaking event, a poetry

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KASHMIR, A NUCLEAR FLASHPOINT WATCHED BY WEST AND EAST

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identity became wider. Despite its tenacious hold on secular principles, the National Conference found itself gasping for breath in the quagmire created by the maharajah's duplicitous policies. The communally oriented polices created a rift between the Muslim leadership of the National Conference and their Hindu colleagues.

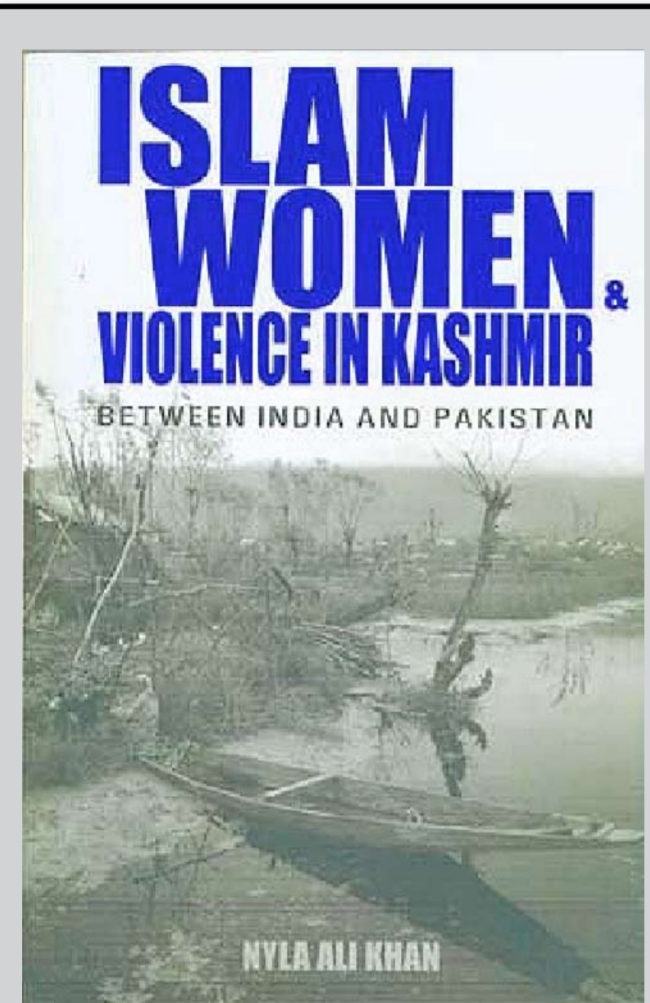
The rift within the organization was further widened by Mohammad Ali Jinnah's insistence that Abdullah extend his support to the Muslim League and disavow every principle he had fought for. Abdullah's refusal to do so sharpened the awareness of the Muslim League so much that it would be unable to consolidate its political position without his support. Initially, the Congress ardently supported the Quit Kashmir movement and reinforced the position of the National Conference on plebiscite. The Congress advised the maharajah to gauge the public mood right up to 1947 and accordingly accede to either India or Pakistan. Nehru's argument that Kashmir was required to validate the secular credentials of India was a later development. Jinnah refuted the notion that Pakistan required Kashmir to vindicate its theocratic status and did not make an argument for the inclusion of Kashmir in the new nation-state of Pakistan right up to the eve of Partition. The Congress' unrelenting support and furtherance of Partition, however, eroded the notion of a united India.

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, on the contrary, was ambivalent about the Partition because he didn't agree with the rationale of the two-nation theory. He was equally ambivalent about acceding to India because he felt that if that choice were made, Pakistan would always create juggernauts in the political and economic progress of Kashmir. As for the idea of declaring Kashmir an independent state, he recognized that "to keep a small state independent while it was surrounded by big powers was impossible." But Abdullah did categorically declare that, "Neither the friendship of Pandit Nehru nor that of Congress or their support of our freedom movement would have any influence upon our decision if we felt that the interests of four million Kashmiris lay in our accession to Pakistan."

On 27 October Abdullah told a correspondent of an Indian newspaper, *The Times of India*, that the tribal invasion was a pressurizing attempt to terrorize the people of the State and, therefore, needed to be strongly rebuffed. On 2 November, 1947, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, reiterated his government's pledge given not only to the people of Kashmir but to the international community to hold a referendum in Indian and Pakistani administered Jammu and Kashmir under the auspices of a world body like the United Nations to determine whether the populace preferred to be affiliated with India or Pakistan. Nehru emphasized this commitment several times at public forums over the next few years.

The United Nations reinforced Nehru's pledge of holding a plebiscite in Kashmir and in 1948 the U.N. Security Council established the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) to play the role of mediator in the Kashmir issue. Abdullah made some controversial observations in an interview with the London *Observer*. He voiced his concern over the increased vulnerability and instability of J & K between two countries that were

hostile toward each other. Abdullah expressed his solicitude over the political and economic hardships that the location of the state would cause its populace. The only viable option, according to him, would be for J & K to



**ISLAM, WOMEN & VIOLENCE IN KASHMIR, BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN**  
AUTHOR: NYLA ALI KHAN.  
PUBLISHER: TULIKA BOOKS, NEW DELHI, 2009 ISBN: 9788189487577  
PAGES: 185pp PRICE: 395 RS.

"Probably the first time a Kashmiri woman rises above herself and her unfortunately limited role (particularly in these last two decades of violence, destruction and mayhem) and attempts to voice her opinion so emphatically. You will come to clearly understand through Nyla Khan's instructive style that a journey into Kashmir symbolizes a strange exaltation that is an undefinable quest but, like a torrential rainstorm, both cleansing and destructive." — *Agha Ashraff Ali*

have a neutral status *vis-à-vis* both India and Pakistan. However, because of the ruptured politics within J & K given the diverse political, religious, and ethnic affiliations within it, the sovereign and autonomous status of the state would need to be acknowledged and guaranteed not just by India and Pakistan but by the United Nations and world powers as well.

Rather than demand a pulverization of the insurgency and a cessation of infiltration, the people of Indian and Pakistani administered Kashmir would favour resumption of dialogues with the militant groups in the state. In order to protect the autonomy of the state,

Article 370, which, has undergone steady erosion, would need to be bolstered to guarantee Kashmiri autonomy. The autonomy option is a lot more complex than it is made out to be by the plethora of tantalizing proposals laid out by the Indian intelligentsia. As opposed to various autonomy proposals, the notion of independence for either part or all of the former princely state is derided as impractical, economically destructive, and dangerous in terms of arousing the monstrous passion of communalism in the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Robert R. Wirsing sums up the repugnance of independence for part or all of Jammu and Kashmir in both India and Pakistan: "Kashmiri self-determination... has never meant for Pakistanis that Kashmiris had a right to anymore than a bifold choice of destinies. The seeming unpopularity of the independence option among both Indians and Pakistanis leaves the Kashmiri Muslims as its only consistent advocate." Would such seemingly non-negotiable antipathy expressed by politically and militarily powerful players allow for the implementation of UN resolutions by holding a free, fair, and internationally monitored plebiscite in the state? But that, to me, is the option worth fighting for.

The insurgency in Kashmir, India and Pakistan's ideological differences, their political intransigence could result in the eruption of a future crisis. The atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust is exacerbated by the frightening attempts of Hindu fundamentalist groups to rewrite Indian history and the recasting of Pakistani history by Islamist organization, which are efforts to radically redefine Indian and Pakistani societies in the light of ritualistic Hinduism and Islam, respectively.

Such propaganda to further narrow agendas makes it impossible to hold informed debates in issues of political and religious import. Jingoistic textbooks and biased interpretations negate the possibility of reaching a national consensus regarding the Kashmir conflict.

In the wake of Benazir Bhutto's assassination in December 2007, the politically chaotic climate of Pakistan, the belligerence of the military, and the tenacious control of fundamentalist forces basking in the glories of a misplaced religious fervor stoked by a besmirched leadership, India and Pakistan need to produce visionary leaders capable of looking beyond the expediency of warfare, conventional or otherwise. The emerging leadership in Pakistan cannot douse the conflagration that threatens to annihilate the entire region by flippantly shelving the Kashmir issue for future generations to resolve. The besieged populace of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir cannot remain beholden to a leadership that doles out valueless crumbs to lay-people while dividing the spoils amongst themselves. Our only feasible future is the reclamation of our own space-political, cultural, and economic. If East Timor and Kosovo have been able to carve their own space, why not Jammu and Kashmir? Plebiscite is still a viable option.

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HER STORY - A CAPTIVATING PERFORMANCE.

*The dancers' expressive talent—the abhinaya—and their power as a duo gave the performance its finesse —Daya Narayanan*

"The world may have laughed at me...but I knew myself, and that was enough. This is my story." The words were clearly those of an American twenty-something but what I heard, and felt, buried under the modern intonation, was the voice and sentiment of a 800 A.D. Hindu saint. I eagerly braced myself for yet another poignant episode from ancient Indian mythology to be retold through the perspective of today's youth. I inhaled sharply as the music picked up speed, as if in response to my anticipation. I wasn't alone; the rapt attention of the packed auditorium was palpable. We watched, eyes widening every moment, as *Her Story*—a Bharatanatyam duet commenced yet another episode.

This Indian classical dance duet—choreographed and performed by Srinidhi Raghavan and Sahasra Sambamoorthi, both dancers based at New York—premiered



in the U.K. on July 4th at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in West Kensington and on July 5th at The Lowry in Salford Quays, Manchester. Both performances were under the auspices of Kalasagara. U.K. and Milapfest.

The episodes captioned as *Her Story* staged by the dancers were those of Kaikeyi from the Hindu epic Ramayana, Devaki from another Hindu epic Bhagavatham, Kannagi from Silappadikaram, a Tamil literary work (200 A.D.) and Andal a female Hindu saint and poetess (800 A.D.). The four women characters featured in the episodes go to some extreme to show their attachment to their loved ones. The dancers exhibited great skill in portraying the emotions and spared the audience from making any judgment of the characters.

Beautifully interweaving theatre with dance, the two-hour production chugged along seamlessly from the beginning invocation piece to the closing *thillana*, pulling the viewer through a range of dark emotions and tongue-in-cheek humour. One of the more unique aspects of the show was the use of English monologues—told in the voice of each protagonist—that not only previewed what was to come later in the episode but also allowed the audience to understand the reasoning behind each character's legendary and life-altering choices. Be it the story of "the mother that never was"—Devaki—who gave up her son to save his life, or the young and innocent Kannagi who transformed into a furious woman thirsting to avenge her husband's

wrongful execution, the show brought to life tales of yore and allowed us to relate to them in a twenty-first century context. The dance was so captivating that the viewers were spared from branding Kaikeyi as an evil self centred queen for claiming Kingship for Bharatha or for that matter Andal's stubbornness in seeking Lord Krishna as the only one worthy of being united in holy matrimony, as nothing more than religious hallucination..

While their technique was crisp and flawless, it was the dancers' expressive talent—the *abhinaya*—and their power as a duo that brought the show its finesse. The audience—from young children to connoisseurs—certainly loved it, for I could see all around me tears during the sadder parts of the show and chuckles during the comedic solos. I saw people

"BEAUTIFULLY INTERWEAVING THEATRE WITH DANCE, THE TWO-HOUR PRODUCTION CHUGGED ALONG SEAMLESSLY FROM THE BEGINNING INVOCATION PIECE TO THE CLOSING *THILLANA*, PULLING THE VIEWER THROUGH A RANGE OF DARK EMOTIONS AND TONGUE-IN-CHEEK HUMOUR..."

quietly sitting on the edge of their seats, unblinking eyes glued to the stage; I even overheard one small child telling the dancers after the show that they had given her goose bumps!

In a performance like this the choice of Ragas for the musical score is very vital to portray the emotions more effectively by the dancers. In this context today's performance reached the acme of perfection. With a specially commissioned musical score that, in the words of one of the audience members, "transports us into a spiritual realm", and under the superb artistic direction of the distinguished guru and artiste Usha Raghavan, *Her Story* is currently on global tour after a sold-out Manhattan premiere last year. As I think back to the two hours I spent at the Bhavan last month, I must admit, *Her Story* is certainly unique—both in concept and performance. In fact, it is not simply a dance performance, but rather an experience—one that is not to be missed!

For more information, please visit: <http://navatman.org/herstorytour/>  
You tube trailer available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le20CXGeGyM>

Daya Narayanan a retired Environmental scientist was born in Chennai and describes himself as "brought up in a strongly cultural atmosphere."

