



# AROOP

**A Journal of Arts, Poetry and Ideas**

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## FAILURE

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## Contents

Foreword <i>Ashok Vajpeyi</i>	05
Editorial <i>Ananya Vajpeyi</i>	07
Slouching toward an Aesthetics of Failure <i>Brinda Bose</i>	15
On Failure and the Experience of Divinity: A <i>Noha</i> in Prose <i>Nauman Naqvi</i>	21
<i>Satya</i> and <i>Karuna</i> : A Critique of Reason in Indian History <i>Manash "Firaq" Bhattacharjee</i>	27
After the Civil War <i>Prasanta Chakravarty</i>	33
Un Trou <i>Vivek Narayanan</i>	41
Snafu <i>Bhuchung D. Sonam</i>	67
On Failure: The Venice Paradox <i>Jane Da Mosto, Carolyn Smith, Kasia Ruszkowska</i>	71
Civilisational Failure and its Discontents <i>Ashish Kothari</i>	81
Poems <i>K. Satchidanandan</i>	91
An Old Poet's Suicide Note	91
Distances	93
Letter from a Soldier	95
My Motherland	96
Questions from the Dead: An Essay on Nationalism	98
On Failing to Write About Sadness <i>Sumana Roy</i>	101
Notes on (Un) failing Language <i>Mithu Sen</i>	105

Kokoro: Imagining Japan in Santiniketan <i>Nilanjan Bandhyopadhyay</i>	113
Eyes Wide Shut <i>Devina Dutt and Pepe Gomes</i>	129
The Night Stalker <i>Rani Neutill</i>	143
Anomaly <i>Parthiv Shah</i>	149
The Limits of Universalism <i>Umar Khalid, Banojyotsna Lahiri, Anirban Bhattacharya</i>	153
Interview <i>Astad Deboo</i>	159
The Responsibility of Failure <i>Kavita Krishnan</i>	169
Lakshmi, the Goddess, Doesn't Walkout Anymore <i>Manu Devadevan</i>	173
Doing Justice to Past and Future <i>Aranyani Bhargav</i>	179
'Yeh kahan aa gaye hum': How our Present Dystopia Fails a Bygone Utopia <i>Maya Joshi</i>	187
When the King Fails: Stories from the Hindu Epics <i>Arshia Sattar</i>	193
Act of Mind <i>Samit Das</i>	201
The Man Who Failed to Die <i>Tridip Suhrud</i>	205
A Stitch Between Insights and Obscurity: The Ontology of Contested Failure <i>Madan Gopal Singh</i>	211
CONTRIBUTORS	215

# Civilisational Failure and its Discontents

Ashish Kothari  
*(dedicated to Smitu)*

If the tight slap that the COVID-19 crisis has given us is not enough to wake us up to the civilizational crisis humanity faces, I don't know what will. Dramatic images of wildfires in Australia and the collapse of ice sheets in the Arctic should have already done this, but it did not. Nor did the 2008 global financial crisis. And here in India we still don't seem to have connected the dots; floods, droughts, farmer suicides, air pollution related deaths, socio-religious conflicts, labour distress, and much else is taking place around us but we think they are just anomalies, soon to be sorted out if we simply go about business-as-usual. Well, now that b-a-u has been rudely crushed by a tiny virus, can we reflect a bit on how we reached where we are ... what failed?

## We fail to respect our own home

I started working on environmental issues in the late 1970s, helping initiate the group Kalpavriksh ([www.kalpavriksh.org](http://www.kalpavriksh.org)). While on a steep learning curve travelling to Tehri Garhwal to the Chipko Movement villages, to Goa's mining areas, and to the Narmada Valley to study the impacts of several mega-dams, my



Malanjkhand

brother Smitu showed me a photo he had taken that has remained stamped in my memory. The devastation caused by copper mining in the Malanjkhand region of (then) Madhya Pradesh. This is the only image I'm using in this essay that is not mine, in memory of someone who taught me so much ... including the essentials of photography ... and left us all too soon.

Since those early years I have remained astounded by how we abuse our only home, sully our own bed: the earth (eco = oikos = home; ironically, economics has become an exercise in mismanaging our home!). In nearly every part of India I've seen the horrific scars of open-cast mining, such as this one extracting coal in the forest-rich region of central India, also home to the country's biggest adivasi concentration. Across the world mining is one of the biggest sources of conflict, and the direct cause for the murder of hundreds of environmental and human rights activists.



Coal Mining in Vidarbha

Land is not the only one to be scarred, so is the air. One of Kalpavriksh's early campaigns was against the horrendous pollution from the Indraprastha Power Station; I took this image in the early 1980s. And then in the mid-1980s, helping the village of Molad Band raise a voice against the Badarpur Power Station that was raining down coal dust on their houses and fields. As evidence of the high levels of respiratory illnesses and deaths amongst children in Delhi piles up in the late 2010s, these early images remain vivid. It is no comfort that Delhi is amongst the 15 Indian cities figuring in the 20 most polluted cities of the world!



IP Power Station



Molad Band

## We've failed the land, the air ... and also the water

Two-thirds of India's rivers, lakes, and other water-bodies are badly polluted, drained out, or diverted- in other words, killed or being killed. It has to be one of our civilisation's biggest ironies that rivers, considered holy and revered in every religion, are also violated in all sorts of ways. In 1983, I was part of a team that walked, boated, and bussed the length of the Narmada river. Our quest (other than sheer adventure and fun!) was to learn what we can about what a series of



HE project, Reni



proposed mega-dams would do to the river basin and its inhabitants. What we found was shocking: in the name of ‘development’, an ancient river valley with rich forests, agriculture, archaeological and cultural history, was in the process of being drowned. Lakhs of people were to be uprooted or dispossessed of their livelihood resources. Since then I’ve seen many more sites where rivers are being blocked, diverted, and in other ways converted, from being the arteries of the earth to becoming deadened, power-generating factories. This one at Reni, Uttarakhand, was particularly distressing, gashing the hillside just below the village where the iconic Chipko Movement to save Himalayan forests was born.

### **We fail to respect life ... or do it in elite ways**

Amongst my earliest passions was animal rights, and wildlife; birding has remained a favourite activity. I remember the horror of going into a room full of skins, bones, antlers, skulls, and other remains of wild animals confiscated by the wildlife officials in Delhi, and being struck by the sheer length and breadth of a python skin, pictured below. And of course heads of leopards, tigers, gaur, lions, and myriad other ‘game’ animals killed even up to very recent times for ‘trophy’. Coordinating India’s National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan in the early 2000s, I learnt that up to 10% of India’s wildlife is threatened with extinction; in 2019, I read that about a million species could be pushed into oblivion by human activity. The Pinkheaded duck is already gone; the photo here is one of the few dead specimens left, preserved at the Bombay Natural History Society. Whatever happened to all our religions and indigenous faiths enjoining us to respect all of life; where during our rush to modernity did we forget that?



Illegal Skins



Pinkheaded Duck

Of course, we pretend to care by establishing laws protecting wildlife, setting up national parks and sanctuaries. Still, biodiversity loss continues apace, as we log or 'divert' forests for industries and dams and mining, treat grasslands and wetlands as wastelands, spread invasive alien species, and illegally hunt for global markets. It does not help that we create enemies of the communities that have co-existed with wildlife for millennia, pushing them out in the name of the tiger, dispossessing them of essential livelihood resources, and ignoring their own sophisticated ecological knowledge. Since the early 1980s I've been part of advocacy on changing conservation paradigms to be community-led and inclusive, but even as this is happening in many other countries, and despite a glimmer of hope from laws like the Forest Rights Act, India's conservation policy remains stubbornly colonial.



Deforested Hill, Kashmir



Periyar Gate

Conservation also remains highly elitist, as areas blocked off to villagers are opened up to tourism. I've been repeatedly shocked by how, on any given day, tiger reserves (like Bandhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh, pictured here) are likely to have many times more tourist vehicles than tigers! And this is not just with wildlife areas; tourism has become the bane of many an area, causing ecological and cultural disruption on a mass scale. Bollywood films add their bit to this; after '3 Idiots', the number of tourists to Ladakh jumped manifold, with tons of garbage (as here at Tsokar lake in Ladakh) being just one consequence.



Tsokar Garbage



Bandhavgarh Vehicles

There is another crucial way in which we've failed life. Modern agriculture has swept aside the incredible diversity of crops and livestock generated through an equally impressive diversity of agricultural practices and knowledge across India. It has replaced tens of thousands of rice varieties, for instance, with a small handful; and monocultured the land so badly that millions of hectares have lost their fertility. The only way to sustain these is pumping in tons of fertilisers and pesticides, as with this tea plantation in the once-thriving Western Ghats landscape.

## Development as Violence

All this raised the basic question- is 'development' the biggest failure? Since World War II it has been the single most seductive concept for the whole world, dividing it up into 'developed' and 'undeveloped' using narrow economic criteria. Collapsing the complexity of life into one single digit so that a country that has far worse family relations and has destroyed much of its original natural habitats is considered 'developed' because it has higher income levels and more cars per capita, compared to one that is lower on these economic criteria but much deeper social and cultural relations, is simply stupid. But dangerously so, because such 'development' is such a holy cow, anyone questioning it (or its roots in patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism, and anthropocentrism), is considered anti-national and even some form of terrorist!



Dodsai Ad



Child Amidst Garbage

What the last 40 years of work has shown me however, is that development is violence. Violence against nature (as in the Dodsai ad below), against communities and cultures (over 60 million people physically displaced by ‘development’ projects!), against each of us as individuals. As we destroy nature-based livelihoods and replace them with mechanical jobs in mass production systems (including in modern sectors like IT), we move towards ‘deadlihoods’. And we magnify inequalities to abysmal levels, with the rich 5% earning as much as the rest 95%, and over 90% of the workforce unorganized or informal, now horribly hit by the government’s draconian measures in response to COVID-19. The child forced to play in a garbage depot does not belong to a ‘good-for-nothing’ family, as India’s elites prefer to believe, but rather a victim of the country’s shameful caste-class-gender inequities.

And meanwhile corporations laugh their way to the bank, spinning out doubletalk meant to convince us they are in the business of doing ‘public good’. The advertisement below by Vedanta in Bhubaneswar airport is a classic example of this duality (though inadvertently they may have been very honest about how they are *undermining* Orissa’s happiness!). I have been a couple of times to the Niyamgiri hills where Vedanta wanted to do bauxite mining; their subsidiary Sterlite already have a refinery at the foot of the hills, displacing adivasis and polluting their water and air.

## Resistance and Alternatives: Undoing Civilisational Failure

Fortunately the 'primitive' Dongria Kondh adivasis (does the photo of them dancing below suggest they are backward and need 'development?') refused to allow the mining proposal. And in fact it is this kind of resistance that provides hope; it starkly brings out the failures of 'development' and its structural roots, and provides counter-narratives and worldviews. I can never forget this rally of 300 adivasi villages (with people like Baba Amte present) at Hemalkasa in the mid-1980s, forming a human chain across Indravati, declaring that as 'our mother, we will protect the river'. Nor my involvement in the inspiring Narmada Bachao Andolan, connecting me to our 1983 *yatra*.



Dongria Kondh Dance



Hemalkasa Rally



Tosamaidan Group



Vinodamma

Along with resistance, I've been privileged to have witnessed or supported a range of incredibly innovative solutions to human needs by 'ordinary' people. One of these is at Tosamaidan, a breathtakingly beautiful Himalayan grassland scape in Kashmir which a local movement (some members pictured below) managed to free of an army firing range in 2014-15. The movement is now propagating a model of community-led ecotourism and local resource-based livelihoods. Similarly there are thousands of these across India (and millions across the world), and my current journey as part of Vikalp Sangam ([www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)) and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (<https://wiki.globaltapestryofalternatives.org>), is to document and help network them, building collaborations and greater critical mass. In response to the COVID-19 and other global crises, can we slowly begin to turn our collective failures around, establishing co-existence with the rest of nature, and harmony within ourselves? Can we be inspired by Nadimidoddi Vinodamma of Deccan Development Society below, growing 40 kinds of crops on her 2.5 acres of dryland in Telangana, quietly transforming her life as a Dalit woman into one of dignity and self-reliance, re-asserting the sanctity of life?



Narmada

Brinda Bose | Nauman Naqvi | Manash “Firaq” Bhattacharya  
| Prasanta Chakravarty | Vivek Narayanan | Bhuchung D.  
Sonam | Jane Da Mosto | Ashish Kothari | K. Satchidanandan  
| Mithu Sen | Nilanjan Bandhyopadhyay | Devina Dutt and Pepe  
Gomes | Rani Neutill | Parthiv Shah | Umar Khalid, Banojyotsna  
Lahiri, Anirban Bhattacharya | Astad Deboo | Kavita Krishnan |  
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