

This book records a double journey of inquiry: into the symbolism of Tyeb Mehta's 'Shantiniketan Triptych', painted in 1985, and the deeper meaning of 'Svarāj', which is self-realisation. The journeys overlap, illuminating one another because, as Ramchandra Gandhi has attempted to show, 'Shantiniketan Triptych' as a three-panelled portrait of the distortion of self-awareness necessitated by exclusivist self-identities, individual and collective, secular and religious, and the recovery of the integrity of selfhood in inclusive self-realisation: the realisation that we are all things, and nothingness too. The inquiry inevitably throws light on the flawed independence of India in 1947, self-realisation distorted by exclusivist communal self-identities, and on the ongoing, annihilationist war between secular insensitivity and religious fundamentalism, fueled by exclusivist ideological self-identities. The author has sought to bring to his understanding of a great work of contemporary Indian painting, and its historical context, the perspective of Indian philosophical spirituality, especially Advaita Vedānta.

# SVARĀJ

A Journey with Tyeb Mehta's  
'Shantiniketan Triptych'

Ramchandra Gandhi

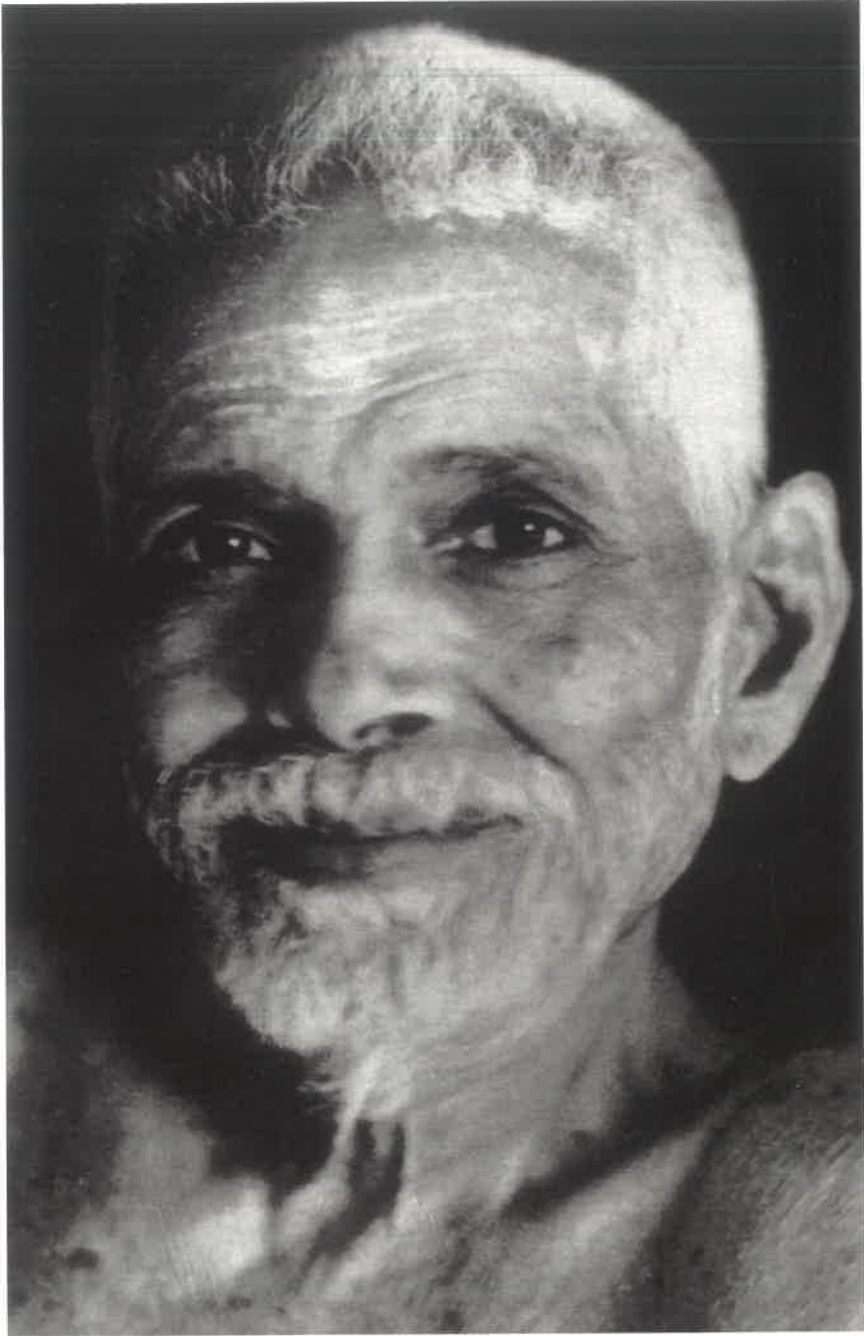
For Anjali



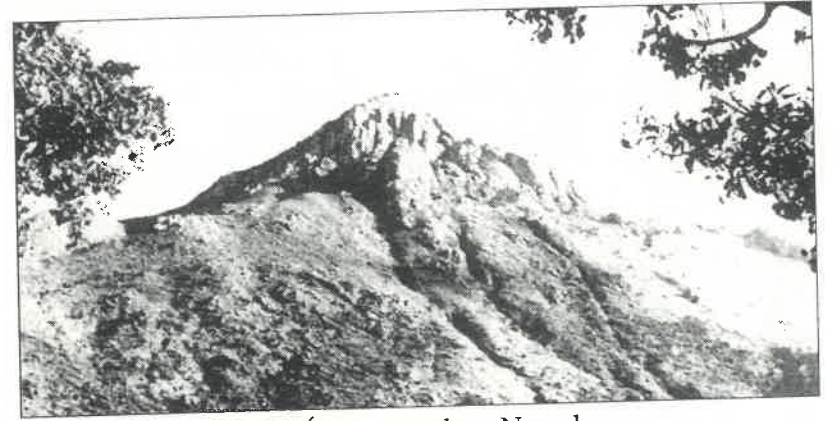
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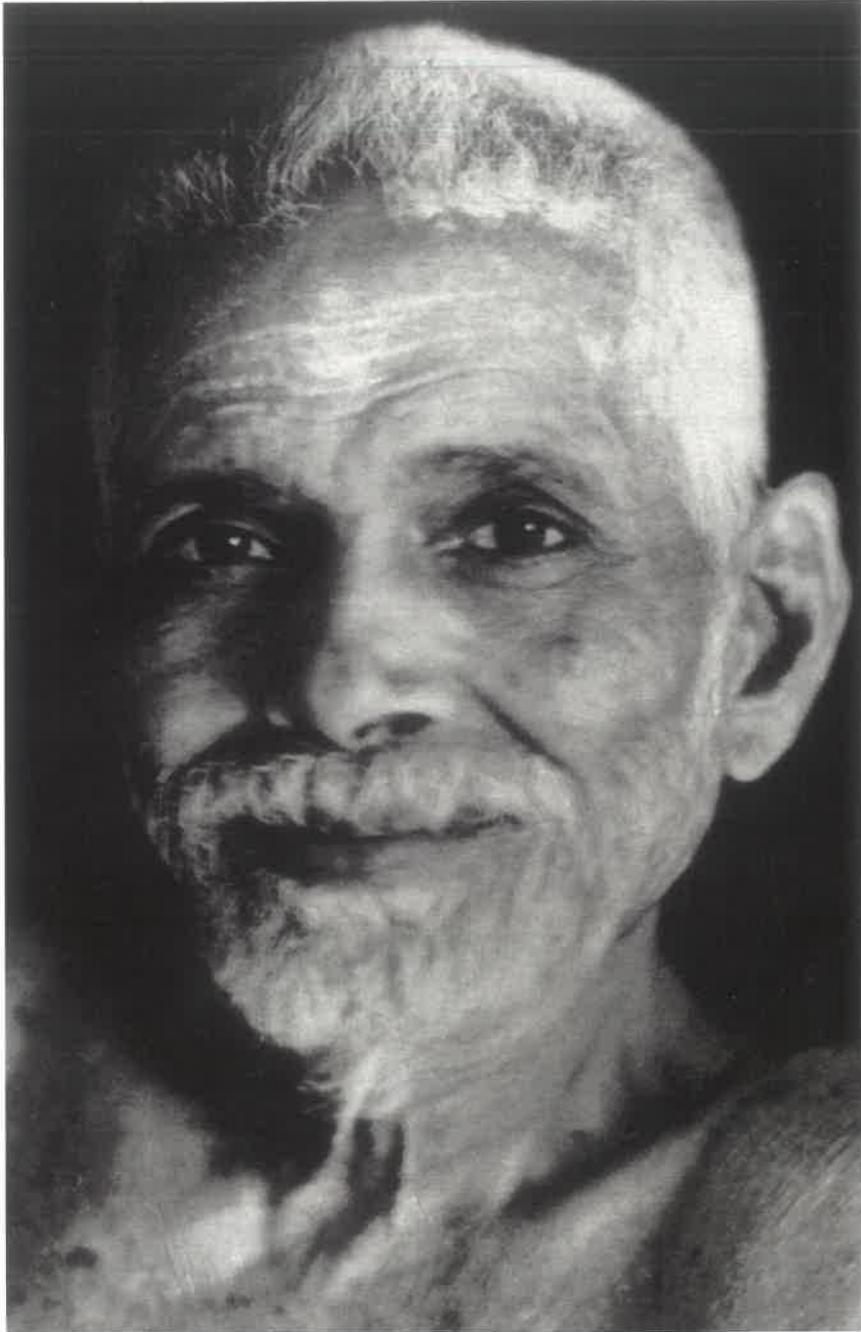
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Om Śrī Ramaṇāya Namaḥ



Om Śrī Aruṇācalāya Namaḥ



Om Śrī Ramaṇāya Namaḥ

## ERRATA

1. For "... 'Shantiniketan Triptych' as a three-panelled portrait ..." (dust jacket back cover, and unnumbered page facing page i), please read "... 'Shantiniketan Triptych' can be seen as a three-panelled portrait ...".
2. For "... San Francisco, on the west coast" (dust jacket back flap, and unnumbered page facing page 236), please read "... San Francisco".
3. For 'Mahisasura' (pages 109, 110, 111, 113, 114, 119, 121, 158, 231), please read 'Mahiśāsura'.
4. For 'Kārma-Yogī' (pages 29, 39, 41, 230), please read 'Kūrma-Yogī'.
5. For "The triptych' turtle-Yogī ..." (page 175), please read "The triptych's turtle-Yogī ..."

6. Page 95 : please ignore the quote-mark (") before the first line.

7. For 'Guernica's' flower (pages 68, 221), please read Guernica's flower.

8. For 'Mahishasura' (pages 110, 119), please read 'Mahiśāsura'.

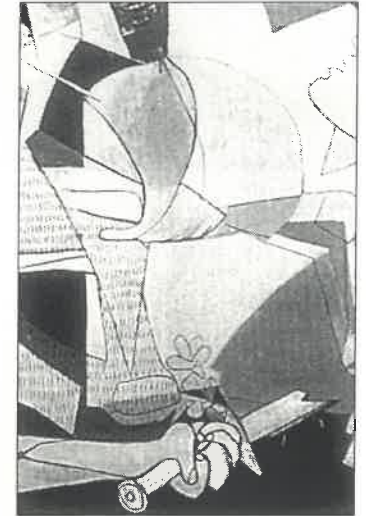
9. The pair of images bearing the title 'LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS', crucial for this book's comparative study of Tyeb Mehta's 'Shantiniketan Triptych' and Pablo Picasso's 'Guernica', are imperfectly printed on page 68. These images are reproduced below with greater clarity.

The phrase 'light in the midst of darkness' is borrowed from Mahatma Gandhi's hope-giving statement "In the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in the midst of darkness light persists".

Shantiniketan Triptych (detail)  
Tyeb Mehta



Guernica (detail)  
Pablo Picasso



LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS





*God laughs, Śrī Rāmakrishna Paramahansa says,  
when two brothers draw a line on the ground, and  
one of them says, "The land on this side of  
the line is mine", and the other says, "The land  
on this side of the line is mine".*

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Tireless engagement with the dualities of life, relentless probing of its mystery and meaning, unwavering austerity in relation to the physicality of art's communicative power, these are what make Tyeb one of the finest minds in Indian Contemporary Art.

Sixteen extraordinary years have passed since Tyeb Mehta painted the astonishingly sublime and evocative ‘Shantiniketan Triptych’. Vital to understanding this triptych, one of the three Tyeb has painted so far, is the astutely conscious effort behind it. It was painted in Shantiniketan, the unique habitat of learning founded by Rabindranath Tagore, while Tyeb was there as a visiting artist. His stay in Shantiniketan was to make a tremendous impact on his later works.

The philosophical seriousness and animated solemnity of the painting dramatise Tyeb's ascetic, almost yogic, and yet celebratory, orientation towards form and colour.

The painting registers nuances of Indian Contemporary Art, and plumbs the depths of culture and consciousness, Indian and universal, and the mystery of life, not only human life.

It gives me great satisfaction to present this study of what is, arguably, one of Tyeb's most important works, by Ramu Gandhi, philosopher and cultural thinker and storyteller, whose ardent research and devoted inquiry have given us this insightful text.

The book will present itself in many ways to different readers and I am quite certain much will manifest, change and surprise on re-reading. The significant aspect of the book is, of course, that it deals with a single work of art. But does it? Does it not extend its curiosity beyond the triptych, seeking intimate understanding of self and culture? But even the triptych is not only

about ādivāsīs.

Professor U.R. Ananthamurthy, distinguished Kannada writer, who was the first reader of the manuscript of the book, has responded to it in the following words in a personal communication to Ramu Gandhi.

“Dear Ramu, I just finished reading ‘Svarāj’. I felt as if you were talking to me as well as to Anjali. And I could hear your passionate, concerned voice with all its subtle inflections. It is also a meditation which I had the privilege of overhearing. And as you talked to yourself and to me (any sympathetic reader) and to Anjali (who stands for all of us listening to you), I was also seeing the figures in Tyeb Mehta’s triptych.

“You lingered and blinked at the figures as in a pooja. When we blow the arati with all its flames on different parts of the deity, the arati lingers and moves here and there and above and below several times, lighting up the vigraha. Each part we see is different from what it seemed like the first time we saw in the arati flames. And we use different aratis – single flame ones in the beginning and several flamed aratis as we go on. This is my experience of the village temple pooja as a boy. The temples didn't have electric bulbs in those days.

“It was semi-dark, and cool, and sandal-paste smelling, but as you blinked and stared, the moola vigraha in the garbhagundi became visible and during arati after arati the deity got lighted up and sunk in our mind.

“That is how you describe what you see, and come back to it several times and thus let us see what you also grew up seeing, using more of your light. It is an enactment of your own process of knowing and divining.

“My notion of advaita - I was brought up a dvaiti and later the Marxist influence confirmed the dvaita view of the world in Hegelian dialectics which I vaguely understood - was that advaita makes you believe that paramarthika satya is different from lokaika satya which is also the lower, and lesser, truth. But you have opened my eyes; your advaitic comments on our present day

communal conflicts, etc., are very powerful. You made me wonder: why didn't I perceive as you do perceive them?

“This is truly an attempt at akhanda prajna - and there is no touch of the sarvajna ego in anything you say. The few pages on how you see yourself in a mirror are most moving. The tone of the whole dialogue is influenced by this perception of the existential reality of your own self...

“What you have done is a pravachana: it is in the oral tradition. It is a journey with many arrivals. There are many bylanes on the path and you take us through all your thoughts - pravachana and harikatha are like that. There is place for a news item of today in a prasanga of the past - of Ramayana and Mahabharata times. Arjuna and a contemporary minister can coexist in a pravachana. It is the most inclusive form and the fiction of today which tries to be inclusive can't match this form, as you innovate and use it. That it is in English makes for a lot of freshness and novelty. With warm regards and admiration, Anantha.”

I am sure the book will be compelling reading for its readers, as it has been for Professor Ananthamurthy, and an enjoyable and instructive journey with its author and with Tyeb's triptych. I would like to thank Tyeb and Ramu Gandhi who have given me the opportunity to publish this book. I would also like to thank Ms Bina Sarkar Ellias for designing this publication. I also wish to thank all my colleagues for their help and understanding.

Arun Vadehra

## PREFACE

### I

When Tyeb Mehta arrived in Shantiniketan in 1984 as a resident artist, my stint at the university as a professor of comparative religion was coming to an end. Tyeb was in reasonable health, wonderfully looked after by his wife Sakina, and there was time enough for long conversations and walks in the countryside and visits to Santhal villages scattered in the area.

I had no idea that 'Shantiniketan Triptych' ('the triptych', hereafter) was being conceived at that time, and that Tyeb would complete the epic work during the period of his residence at the university, in 1985. (Visiting academics manage nothing remotely comparable to such a feat of creative accomplishment).

It was only during a visit to Tyeb and Sakina in 1985 in their Juhu flat in Mumbai, when Tyeb showed me photographic negatives of the triptych, that I realised to what great purpose the painter had turned those walks in the countryside near Shantiniketan. (And I can also see now a possible link of inspiration between his post-triptych Kali and Mahishāsura figures and a rural Durgā Pūjā which I had attended with Tyeb and Sakina in 1984 near Shantiniketan, the pūjā images a bold advance beyond the genteel iconography of Kolkata).

It was again during our shared time at Shantiniketan that Tyeb had screened *Koodal* for a small group of friends in a cramped studio, his award-winning 1970 short film-exploration of the violence which simmers in the aimless lives of unemployed youth in a metropolis like Mumbai, their maidan congregations ('koodal' is a Tamil word for the idea of a "congregation" or "assembly") turning all too easily into confrontations.

A diagonal (trademark Tyeb), recurrent, shot in the film shows antagonists chasing one another in a circular formation ('circularity', futility), like a dog chasing its own tail: compelling attention by its compositional, tragic, elegance,



in the way in which the exhausted revelry of the triptych's panel 1 also does.

A eunuch's bridal "make-up" ritual, śṛṅgāra, and a bull readied for slaughter, are two other images of the film that have stayed with me: suggestive, I would like to think, of the sterility and slaughter invited by the Indian sub-continent's heartless partition in 1947. Over the years since I first began to reflect on the triptych, I have come to realise that its meanings cannot be unravelled without reflecting on the distortions of svarāj (self-rule, self-realisation) implicit in the partition of India in 1947; and, more timelessly, in the ceaseless partition of self-awareness by ego (individual and collective) into exclusive Self and excluded not-Self ("others", "otherness").

This book seeks to locate representations of the distortion of svarāj, self-awareness, and of the possibilities of a recovery of its integrity in reorientated life and consciousness, i.e. in self-realisation, in the details and the drama of the triptych: bringing to this task the perspective of Advaita Vedānta, especially as taught in our age by Śrī Rāmāṇa Maharshi, of which I had begun a serious study in the early 1980s, shortly before encountering the triptych and its challenge of interpretation. The book is a double journey, therefore, to the heart of the painting's symbolism, and to the core of advaitin conviction and realisation: the two journeys of inquiry illuminating one another, at any rate for me. Let me explain.

When I first saw the triptych in the flesh, in 1988, shortly after its acquisition by the National Gallery of Modern Art, it became immediately evident to me (having seen photographic negatives of the work in 1985 helped) that the theme of the singularity of Selfhood, central to Advaita, was central also to the painting. And not only because of the gender-crossing androgynised standing figure of the central panel, and the shared, species-crossing, anatomy of the woman and the she-goat at the foot of the flagpole.

More subtly evocative of the idea of non-duality was the apparently ethnic-Indian-ādivāsī huddle of dancers and drummers in the triptych's first

panel, whose faces, however, were not ethnicity-specific, but wide-ranging in design: Japanese-Tibetan, European-Indian, and also, of course, ādivāsī Santhal. Ethnic antiquity was also contemporary "selfhood". Sheer "otherness" was delusion. Such painterly advaita was upaniṣad material, and the work in its totality and divisions massively and intricately visually pleasing (flat expanses of blue and grey, uncluttered skies, unbearable heaviness of the void, compositional harmony of puppet cut-outs on either side of a centring bamboo, minimalist expressions on their '0+1'-dimensioned faces deepening their vulnerability and mystery, the whole action laid out on rich, angled, thick layers of brown and gravel-red ground).

However, it is precisely this overwhelming beauty of composition and hauntingness of colouring that manage to hide from our view the untransparent and yet disturbing symbolism of some of the triptych's commanding images (the heavily-bandaged, flying, falling, umbilically connected figure of panel 1; the pole-hoisted, doubled, green figure of panel 3, and the frenzy of the work-gang wielding the hoisting ropes; the tortured face and the raised left arm of the inverted figure under what looks like a guillotine blade, marking the base of the flagpost as a sacrificial site; the sets of seated women, ādivāsī contemplative witnesses, in panels 2 and 3, who invite us, the viewers of the triptych's action, to a conversation with them, reassuringly).

What do these images mean? How do they connect with the advaita-affirming, gender and species crossing forms, and the diverse contemporaneity of the ādivāsī celebrants of panel 1? What is the action, the drama, of the work?

But is there any drama in non-duality? Within the consciousness of the conviction that Self alone is, that not-Self cannot be, is there any internal dialectic, any apparently irresolvable conflict of forces, any dramatic, unexpected, dissolution of contradictions? If the triptych is a testament of advaita, as its central panel powerfully suggests, the answer to the above question must be "Yes!", because the central panel is high drama, theatre of truth and an

experiment with it.

The triptych led me, in this way, to look at self-awareness and selfhood with new but nervous curiosity, because received wisdom in relation to these emphasises quiescence, not action, let alone dramatic action. Counting upon the grace of sadguru Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi, I have not censored curiosity and have been led back to the painting and to a non-dualist reading of its symbolism and action which, I think, also throws light on major pre-triptych and post-triptych works of Tyeb Mehta: notably, 'Trussed Bull' (1956), 'Falling Figure' (1967), 'Falling Figure' (1994), 'Figure Dancing' (1994), 'Rickshaw-Puller' (1982), 'Kali' (1986), 'Celebration' (1995), and 'Mahishasura' (1998), among others.

And this range of works, with the triptych illuminating them retrospectively and prospectively, has enabled me to see self-awareness as vibrant with the drama of the daily round of wakefulness, dream, and sleep: with the tension between the thought "I am only this bodily form" (strengthened by wakefulness) and the thought "I am not a bodily form at all" (strengthened by sleep), and the resolution of this tension in the thought "I am neither only a bodily form, nor am I not a bodily form at all: I am Self self-imaged in all forms (lucidly or obscurely), including bodily forms, and also in formless nothingness as the not-thingness of Self, which is not something as opposed to something else". (This reconciling thought strengthened by dream).

The triptych seems to me to unfurl this root drama of self-awareness in images suggestive of the raging battle of our times between world-dominating secular humanism (panel 1), and earth-abandoning religious fanaticism (panel 3); and of the possibility of an overcoming of this potentially all-destructive ideological opposition in a radical, non-dualist, reconstitution of consciousness (panel 2) which would see Self not as a thing apart from other things, but as our own most intimate reality self-imaged in all things and in nothingness too, within the framework of pervasive self-awareness.

True to its title, Tyeb Mehta's 'Shantiniketan Triptych' locates *śānti*,

peace, in a three-dimensioned līlā, sport, of apparent, annihilationist, antagonism resolving itself in a revisioning of apparent Self and apparent not-Self as Self's self-images, a release of consciousness from the bondage of self-distorting, exclusivist, self-identity, into the freedom of inclusive self-realisation.

## II

A non-dualist vision of self-identity cannot, however, see self-awareness as imbued with drama or līlā alone, which are action; but also with the stillness of witnessing contemplativeness, the stillness deepened by conversational interludes. Extraordinarily, the triptych does not let this expectation down. There are in panel 2 and panel 3, distanced from the action but not detached from it, seated women who look like mirror-reflections of viewers of the drama of the painting: awed, silently chanting, conversing, inviting conversation, in the way in which serious viewers of art do during show openings. And without this inclusion of an audience on the stage, this particular play would be impossible to watch without risk of a 'cardiac arrest' of hope in the prospects of life and faith in the integrity of self-awareness, so ruthlessly honest is the triptych's unmasking of the "trussed bull" character of congealed self-identities, destined for the slaughter-house of mutual annihilation.

Until three years ago, when I began writing notes towards this book, many of the triptych's images were still untransparent to me, and my understanding of advaita inadequate to the task of unravelling them. I prayed to sadguru Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi for help, and this helped to the extent of providing me with an opportunity to give a lecture on the theme 'Self and Emptiness', for which the then Director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Anjali Sen, permitted me to borrow the triptych for use as a stage-setting.

However, even as I was delivering the lecture, I was aware that perspicuous understanding of the meaning of the painting lagged behind my intuitive conviction regarding its revolutionary relevance to self-understanding in our

times. I went into depression and a writing block stopped all further attempts to realise the project of this book. Meanwhile Anjali, who was very supportive of the idea of the book, left Delhi to take up a new assignment in Mumbai. I felt I had let her and NGMA down, and also Tyeb and the triptych, and wrote and told her so.

And then, rather like one of the triptych's contemplative witnesses, Anjali initiated a postal conversation with me on the triptych (which continues), and I found my way back into the movement of writing and thinking about the painting. This was a slow process, but it gathered momentum when I noticed Anjali's actual resemblance to many of the women of the triptych! With her permission, I have imagined her as an interlocutor in the text, often indistinguishable from the triptych's own forms. I was able in this way to talk to the painting, and I hope this book will enable some readers of it to do so too.

As an expression of gratitude for her special contribution to its genesis and communicative form, this book is dedicated to Anjali.

The non-duality of the triptych sheds its grace beyond the painting's parameters to include real people in the sweep of its imagination. Mystery and gratitude are deepened for me by the coincidence that my daughter, Leela, bears a striking, Modiglian-esque, resemblance to Anjali. Perhaps, when a novel anatomical design is created by an artist (like long, oval, heads of women by Modigliani), the design is reflected in works of nature and art by reason of some evolutionary or revolutionary necessity.

"I wonder", says Anjali, as the first of the three contemplatives of panel 3; hand raised to chin in a classic, Aristotelian, *mudrā* of questioning, made famous by 'The Thinker', Rodin's sculptural portrayal of the Greek philosopher.

### III

At the time of a special commemoration of Mahatma Gandhi in 1991/1992 in Delhi at Gandhi Smriti, the museum established at the site of his

martyrdom, I had the privilege of organising a small exhibition of contemporary Indian paintings in the museum's premises. The works shown were a Ram Kumar landscape (1977), Tyeb Mehta's 'Kali' (1986), Vivan Sundaram's 'Big Shanti' (1982-85), and a few drawings of the late Nasreen Mohamedi (mid 1980s and mid 1970s). The works had been chosen for exhibition because of their evocation, in different ways, of "the persistence of light in the midst of darkness" of which Gandhi had spoken, and which he had exemplified in his refusal to endorse communal vengefulness during the holocaust of India's partition in 1947, leading to his assassination.

It was inevitable that I should recall this exhibition, and its works, in writing about the triptych's portrayal of the possibility of hope in the midst of annihilationist desperation.

I am grateful to Ram Kumar and Vivan Sundaram for letting me reproduce in this book their paintings shown at the Gandhi Smriti exhibition, and to Vivan Sundaram and Geeta Kapur for help in locating the Nasreen drawings.

I have also found myself thinking about Arpana Caur's paintings '1947' (1999) and 'Water Weaver' (2001) in the light of my growing understanding of the triptych's engagement with the theme of partition as the self-distortion of consciousness, and its vision of freedom as the integrity of self-realisation. I am grateful to Arpana for letting me reproduce her works in this book.

My journey with Tyeb Mehta's 'Shantiniketan Triptych' has permitted many detours, from which I have always returned refreshed to the task of divining the painting's meanings.

### IV

With profound gratitude to Tyeb Mehta for encouraging me to engage in the inquiry of this book, and to Arun Vadehra of Vadehra Art Gallery for offering to publish it, I would now like to conclude this Preface by making specific acknowledgements of the varied help I have received in preparing my text for

publication, and in sustaining myself during the long period of its conception and development.

I would like to thank family and friends, who do not wish to be named, for their prayers and good wishes for this book.

For permission to photograph the triptych, I am grateful to Rajeev Lochan, Director of the National Gallery of Modern Art. For the loan of some of the pictorial material reproduced in this book, I am grateful to Sakina Mehta, Geeta Kapur, Vivan Sundaram, and Arpana Caur.

For help in scanning and designing pictorial material on the computer, I am grateful to Ramesh Bharti. For typing and retyping my manuscript with patience and cheerfulness and editorial alertness, I am grateful to Indira Eswaran. For editing and research I am grateful to Jehanara Wasi. Arpana Caur and Rakhshanda Jaleel dug out information regarding some art works which had seemed impossible to obtain; my gratitude to them for their help.

For asking me to talk about the triptych in 1988 at Art Heritage Gallery in Delhi, my very first serious exercise in loud thinking about the work, I am grateful to Roshan Alkazi. I am grateful to Tibet House and its Director, Reverend Doboom Tulku, for asking me to deliver the 1999 Padmapani lecture on the theme 'Self and Emptiness', a decisive experience during my journey with the triptych, to which I have already made a reference. For being the first reader of *Svarāj*, and for the encouragement of his response, I would like to thank U.R. Ananthamurthy.

This book is but one possible way of understanding an extraordinary, many-layered, work of art, and I make no claims to conclusiveness or exhaustiveness in my reading of it. But I have the strong feeling, Anjali, that the painting has sometimes spoken to me.

Ramchandra Gandhi  
June 9, 2002

## DON'T STARE, BLINK !

I do not now recall whose work it was, Henry Moore's or Barbara Hepworth's, nor details beyond its figure-of-eight form and see-through features; but from where I sat in the garden-restaurant of Edinburgh's Museum of Modern Art, I could not take my eyes off the sculpture installed in the garden. I had travelled to Edinburgh from Oxford where I had recently arrived from India to study contemporary analytical philosophy, not long after the end of British rule in India.

It was a radiant summer afternoon, and as I reflected on the freedom of art and the freedom, svarāj, of India, I could not have foreseen that something was about to happen which, decades later, I would recall as a teaching of the meaning of svarāj: self-rule and self-realisation, freedom and enlightenment.

I had noticed that sitting at a table close to mine was a white woman, although it was not she, but the garden sculpture, which was the object of my awed attention. So I was astounded when I heard the words, "You are quite a starrer!", which emanated from her and were clearly addressed to me, as there was no one else in our vicinity.

Now I was familiar with the widespread belief in British society that all coloured men, including Indians and Pakistanis, were given to staring lustfully at all white women, and deeply resented the generalisation and selectivity

implicit in that belief. Provoked, I turned to face the author of the suspect remark, ready to retort with some withering words like, "You do fancy yourself a lot, don't you?" But the disturber of my peace had read my mind and shook her head vigorously in disavowal.

"No, no, no," she clarified, "I am an eye-doctor, I noticed that you don't blink at all. Blinking is good for the eyes, not staring." And then the lady left, before I could say anything like, "Thank you, doctor, but must you prescribe healthy eye-habits so provocatively?" I felt put down, although I was glad no altercation took place and good manners prevailed.

Older and, I hope, wiser now, I wish the Edinburgh oracle and I had been able to laugh at my Third World touchiness and her island faith in the harmlessness, ahimsā, of eccentricity: and celebrated the maxim "Don't stare, blink!" as a maxim of advaita, a battle-cry of svarāj.

The figures of Tyeb Mehta's 'Shantiniketan Triptych' (especially the women with their lowered, contemplative, eyes) make eye-contact with us, as if to say: "We are you, Self, and its self-imaging. A journey of self-realisation, glimpses of svarāj: Stay with us."

Completed in 1985, the triptych is part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, NGMA, in New Delhi. Oil on canvas, the three-panelled painting is close to 209 cm in height and 444 cm in width, the central panel wider than the other two which are of equal width.

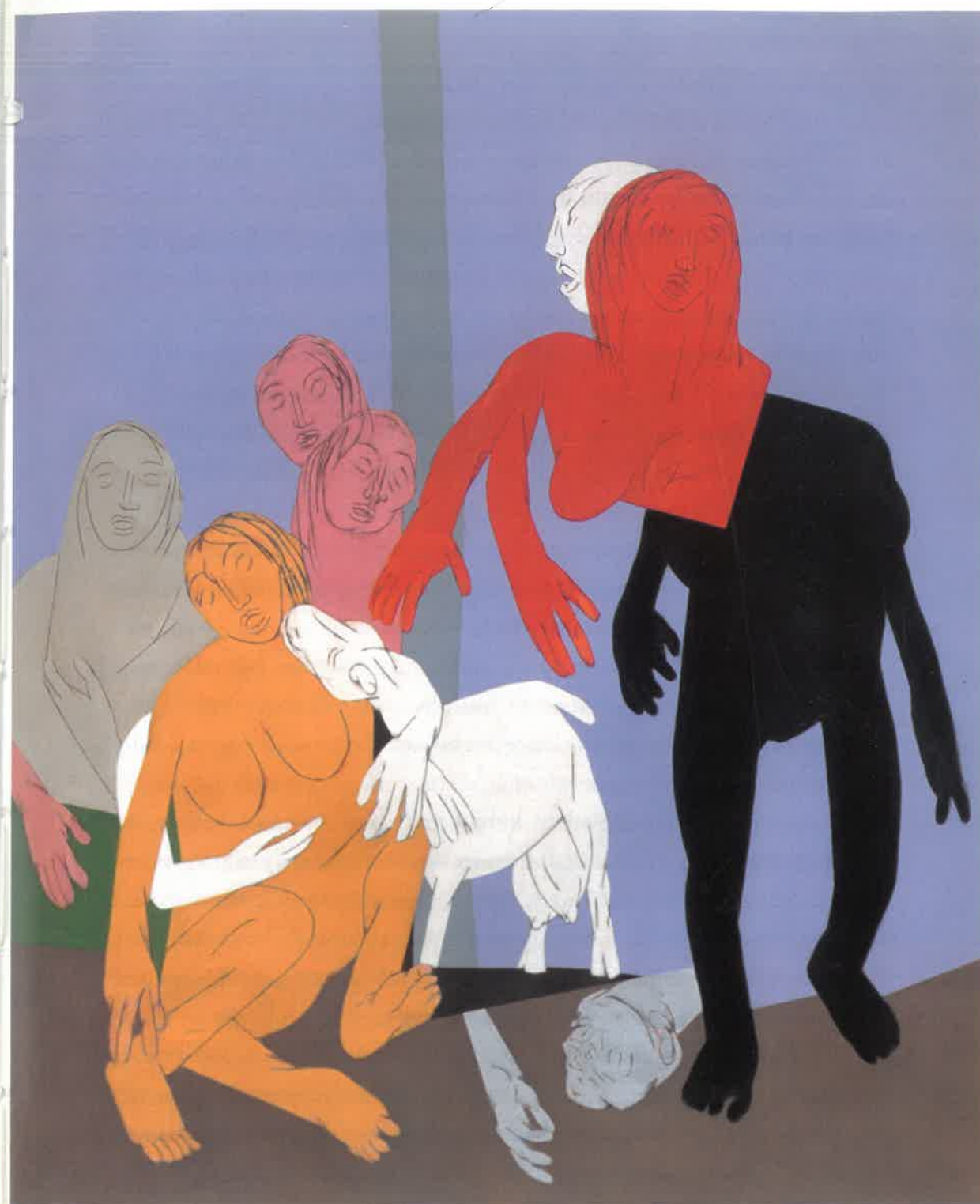
## TURTLE-YOGĪ

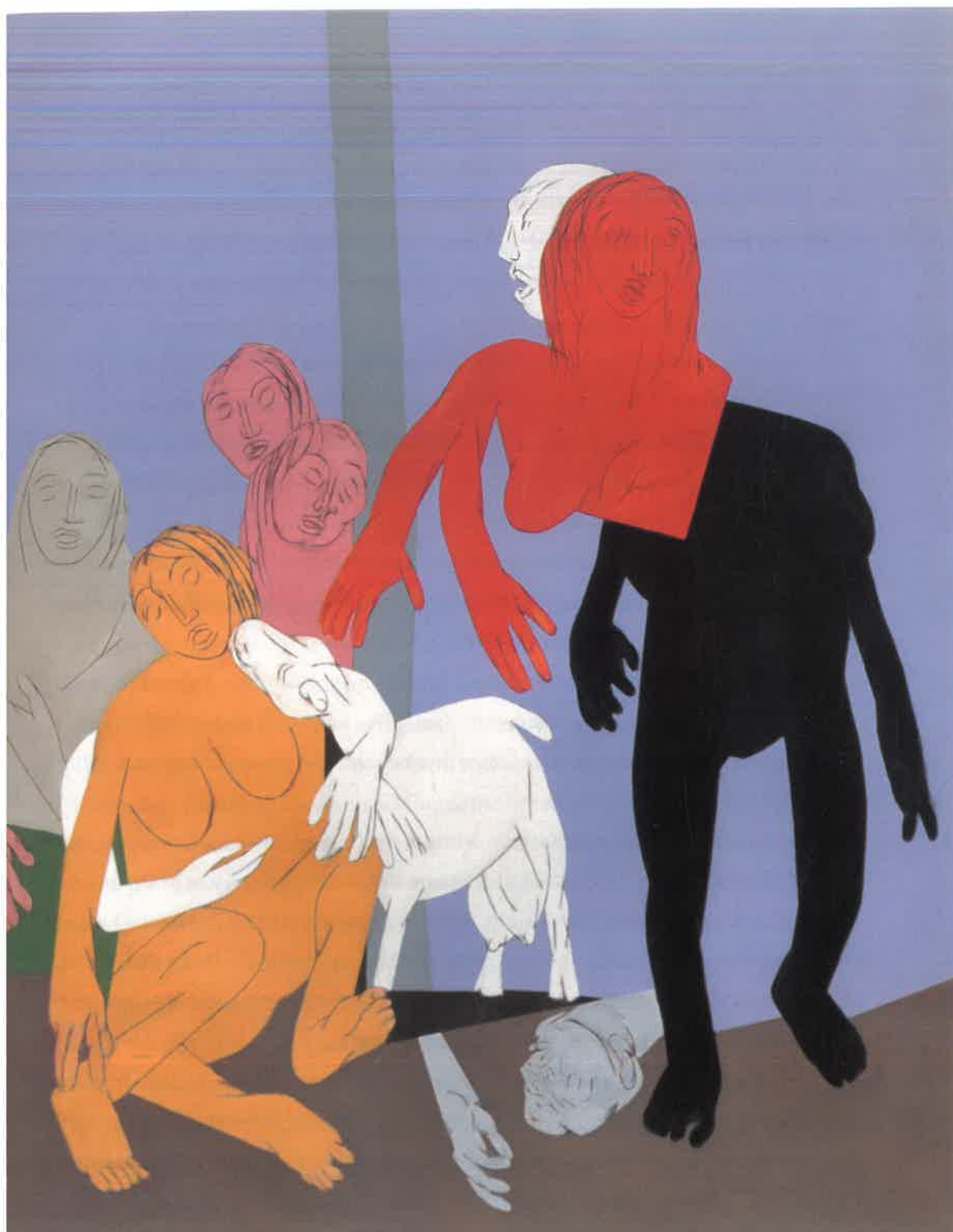
Sharp-edged lengths of brick-red (Shantiniketan earth, this) and mud-brown and a menacing wedge of black (which looks like a missile, or an axe-head, or a guillotine-blade) are the high ground (plateau of attainment and vulnerability) upon which, and against a background of clear but severely shortened skies, the triptych mounts what are, I suggest, portraits of bondage as self-distortion (panels 1 and 3); and of freedom, svarāj, as self-realisation, the sovereignty of Self (panel 2).

A bamboo pole (deviating slightly from straightness) rises from the axe-head or guillotine-blade to the top of the central panel, where it is abruptly terminated.

If the bamboo is a flagpole, it is unlikely to be flying the limitless sky of nothingness or emptiness as its flag, the all-accommodatingness of space which is not a thing as opposed to other things (Self's vast self-image, the circumambience of its sovereignty, i.e. svarāj). The darkness around the base of the pole suggests the unfurling of a narrower self-identity: an "I" or a "We" identified with a given form of individuality or collectivity, as opposed to other forms of individuality and collectivity, other "I"'s or "We"'s, threatening them or threatened by them. And at the foot of the flagpole, as at a sacrificial site, the triptych situates what look like a severed hand and head, remnants of a sacrifice







*Shantiniketan Tryptich, 1985. 170x445 cms. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

of “not-Self” by “Self”: a familiar, recurrent story?

Intervening strongly at this point, the Edinburgh eye-doctor would urge us to beware of staring, merely, at the seemingly macabre details beneath the bamboo, instead of scrutinising the scene more searchingly. Let us heed her warning, but un-self-deceivingly.

Slicing the bamboo neatly at the bottom, and the long hand above the wrist, the tapering guillotine-blade terminates at the point where the bodiless head’s neck emerges from its turtle-collar, unscathed: the rest of the body hidden by the sky curtain. Contrary to first and frightening impressions, then, the triptych’s central panel does not confront us with a severed head. But why is its face twisted in pain, mouth gasping for air, a barely open left eye taking leave of the world and us, unheeding spectators? And what about the detached hand?

A she-goat rests her three legs on the blade, her fourth leg metamorphosed into a long human arm wrapped around a woman sitting on the ground near her. One of the woman’s arms, which has turned goat-white, is thrown around the animal’s neck in reciprocal affection. The woman, her full breasts a counterpoint to the goat-madonna’s teats, has acquired and stretches out a third leg in ecstatic, non-dualist, empathy, beyond the arrogance of bipedality and humanity.

Three women contemplatives witness this miracle of self-realisation, the interlimbed anatomy of svarāj, but they are not willing merely to stare in awe at it. Catching our eye, blinkingly, they urge us to return to the awkward question of the apparently severed hand and the undoubtedly tormented head, before even looking at the panel’s mysterious, gender-crossing, double-headed, standing figure on the other side of the bamboo.

If the blade-like surface upon which the triptych installs a goat were intended to represent a real, and not merely an apparent, guillotine-blade or axe-head, the creature’s celebratory waltz of compassion with her woman partner would be a conceptual absurdity at the heart of the painting. The work faces

no such problem because the surface where the goat takes her stand is only a shadow-likeness of an instrument of slaughter, not the real thing. The missing portion of the arm above the wrist can safely be supposed to be hidden in the shadow and connected to the rest of the body, veiled by the sky, to which also belongs the head. But who is this mercifully undismembered, but tortured, being? And why is he where he is?

Is he merely a do-gooding, would-be, substitute-sacrifice, who is contemptuously spared by the annihilationist executioner? To witness in humiliating helplessness the slaughter of motherhood?

A signature of despair, Tyeb’s falling figure’s gasp of death?

A prophecy of doom?

I do not think so at all.

The descending being is the ray of hope in the darkness of the painting which makes the triptych a powerful intervention of illumination in our sunless age.

Let us give the being a name, let us call him “Kārma-Yogī” (“Turtle-Yogī”), KY, because of his turtle-neck which is suggestive of a yogī’s ability, like a turtle, to withdraw his senses and mind into the secure centre of his being, Self (this is not escapism, the withdrawal symbolises the yogī’s refusal to see apparent “otherness” as real otherness; and his resolve to resurrect, from the depths of his being, the self-images of Self, reality, obscured and caricatured by appearance).

KY is also entitled to yogic status because of his inverted form, roots above and branches below, like the aśvattha tree, drawing his sustenance from the sky above and scattering all the fruits of his austerities here, on this earth, below: raising his left hand in benediction in the mayūra, peacock, gesture of valorous generosity, thumb and ring finger joining to anoint all things (acknowledge the many-centredness of Self, awaken self-knowledge). Left-handedness and invertedness are no disqualification for the work of yoga





KEEP AWAKE, KEEP AWAKE ARTIST... YOU ARE  
ETERNITY'S HOSTAGE AND PRISONER OF TIME.  
— ANDREI TARKOVSKY

(joining, of Self and apparent not-Self), they are corrective of the conceit of upstanding, unchallenged, right-handedness.

KY is special, though. Look carefully at the long, chimpanzee hand, and you will find that its little finger is just a stub. There is black humour here (the guillotine-blade may be a toothless shadow, but there is loss of limb, the painting says, tongue-in-cheek). And the hair on KY's head is also virtually gone, but for a strand or two. We are dared to read the symbolism of these disfigurements caused by exposure to radioactivity, to read the shadow.

It cannot be that the shadow-blade is merely a scare-device of the triptych, as in a magic show: terrifying us at first into thinking that the head and hand at the foot of the bamboo have been severed by a blade of slaughter, and then revealing (with the aid of the vulnerable, yet unharmed, goat-figure) that the blade is but a shadow, and that no one has been hurt! This is no doubt an experience of virtual terror which the painting imposes upon us, but a shadow

*Still from Tarkovsky's Stalker*

guillotine-blade at the foot of a bamboo pole surely has a deeper significance, if only because the shadow survives the discovery of its unreality as a cutting instrument. The reality of its menace is reflected in KY's pain-distorted face and mutilated hand, and the persistence of hope in the undeterred gift of benediction made by that hand.

KY has poured himself out of a sky drain, laying out his limbs on the embattled ground at the foot of the bamboo where narrow and mutually exclusive self-identities wage war against one another and the earth and the sky. Trusting the earth and bearing its wounds, blessing all life, KY reminds us of the protagonist in Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*.

A priest-like figure, whom the film calls "the stalker" (one who leads hunters to their prey), leads a writer and a scientist to a prohibited area in the former Soviet Union, referred to in whispers as "the zone", a sacred site which has been sought to be bombed out by the state, but which survives and where the faithful can experience a liberation from the constraints of space and time and causality (and, presumably, also from greed and fear and hate). A few strands of vegetation on ruined land is all the life that is visible (like the strands of hair on KY's head) in the zone.

The stalker rolls on this wasteland, embracing it and celebrating its sacred power of survival and renewal. The scientist and the writer, on the other hand, are troubled by the site's blasphemous testimony against the materialism and cynicism of their world-view, and they have brought with them a portable nuclear bomb with which they plan to destroy the zone and its challenge to their authority; and they are willing to die and eager to cause the death of the stalker in the process.

"We are willing and ready to destroy you, to end your life and reproductivity, even if this should involve the sacrifice of all life on earth, even if a cloud of ashes were to rise from that funeral pyre and the sky was sawn off." Bearers of mutually exclusive self-identities are able to say this to one another



IN THE END EVERYTHING CAN BE REDUCED... TO THE ONE  
SIMPLE ELEMENT WHICH IS ALL A PERSON CAN COUNT UPON  
IN HIS EXISTENCE: THE CAPACITY TO LOVE.  
— ANDREI TARKOVSKY

Still from Tarkovsky's *Stalker*

today not only because of the availability of weapons of mass destruction and genetic mutilation. What facilitates annihilationist wishing and willing much more fundamentally is the “otherness” of adversaries, and of non-human life, presumed by exclusivist self-identities. Doomsday’s time-bomb is ego.

Holocaust-promising ill-wishing cannot be a significantly lesser evil than its fulfilment. Like KY, all of us already bear stigmata of the threatened crucifixion of life (many hands in the triptych are without all five fingers in place).

In *Stalker*, the scientist switches off the portable nuclear bomb and throws it into a pond clogged with industrial junk (and life quickens even in these waters, fish appear from nowhere), his mind changed by the stalker’s unselfish, passionate love of the earth (the scientist and the writer have only known selfish, manipulative attachments in their world of jealousy and lying).

Like the stalker, KY brings us to the zone, the earth, the triptych’s sacrificial flagpost site with playful, reproductive life (symbolised by a she-goat) standing directly under it: positioned for slaughter by the strangulating hands and stomping feet of the black executioner figure (I am here exploratorily blocking out of our view the woman sitting near the goat and her – and the goat’s – metamorphosing limbs, and the androgynous aspects of the standing figure: but not the contemplatives, who must witness all experiments with truth).

KY has stuck his neck out and interposed his head between endangered life (eager, like a frisky goat, to jump out of the prison of congealed identities into the limitless playground of Self’s *līlā*, sport) and ego’s advancing jackboots.

“We’ll be back after a short break,” the contemplatives of panel 2 announce, and scamper down NGMA’s corridors to distant facilities, as tension mounts.





*Shantiniketan Triptych, panel 1, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

### SIGNS OF SVARĀJ

(It's October 2, Anjali, your birthday shared with a KY figure. Many happy returns of the day!)

While those witnesses are out, let me quickly tell you who I think the triptych's figures really are (besides the fact that several of the women, with their Modiglian-esque slant of being, look like you and my daughter, Leela, to me).

They are metaphors of Self, singular reality and diversity of its self-images: signs of svarāj.

Let me explain.

Certain features of their bodily forms (shuffling feet, glove-like hands) prompt one to think that the triptych's figures are wearing "up-to-the-neck" body-suits over their regular bodies (the heads and faces are too sharply etched and lucidly expressive to presume to be covered even by skin-tight veils). However, this impression does not survive a closer look at the bodily-contours. The torsos are smoothly continuous with shoulders and heads and the idea cannot be sustained that the triptych's figures are literally, although partially, costume-covered. What then could be the purpose of the "body-suit"-suggesting features of the forms?

The features invite us to think of the unhidden bodies of the figures (including heads and faces, mind and personality) as being themselves



*Shantiniketan Triptych panel 1. Tyeb Mehta*

metaphorical “body-suits”: i.e. “images”, not things, Self’s self-images “worn” by the triptych’s figures, who are not other than ourselves.

Anjali, the witnesses have been back for a while, slipping quietly into their places in the painting. (Look at the one on the extreme left, now that’s you!). Look, without staring, and listen:

“We are you, Self”, they seem to say to us, “We cannot think of ourselves as being identical with a given form, exclusively, i.e. our bodies: and think of all other forms as not-Self. To do so would be to rupture the limitless field of Self’s self-awareness, to imagine that Self could be aware of not-Self without ceasing to be self-awareness. (Gloss: within the boundless expanse of Self’s self-awareness – symbolised by the clarity of the triptych’s skies – we cannot encounter not-Self as reality, but only as appearance; and we can regard no given form, exclusively, as Self, but only as apparent Self. Courage, compassion, curiosity – work, rest, and play – unravel apparent Self and apparent not-Self as Self’s self-images, portraits of svarāj).

The triptych’s figures are ādivāsīs in this fundamental sense of being source-dwelling, self-questing, human and non-human forms, datelessly ancient and contemporary; and not because of any resemblance (intended or incidental) to Santhals whose festivities Tyeb Mehta had observed near Shantiniketan in 1984, a year before the completion of the painting; and notwithstanding the rich evocation of the spirit of these festivities in the work.

Yes, there is an unmistakably ādivāsī rhythm to the manic-depressive, alcoholic-melancholic, huddle-dance of panel 1; and to the heaving intensity of panel 3’s work-gang. But look at panel 1’s monastics in mainstream saffron and red and tāntrika black, Anjali. These may be foreign students in Shantiniketan “going native”, but they are not Santhals; the drummers are. (The tāntrika in black is a source-rer. Do you hate that pun?)

And the distanced, seated, women contemplatives of panels 2 and 3 have simultaneously the puzzled curiosity of Indian ādivāsīs and the poise of sages

of all times and places. Edinburgh eye-doctors all of them, they are the blinking, alerting, light of self-questioning at the heart of Selfhood.

I must return to the torments of panel 2: the fate of KY and the goat and the terror of the executioner (still viewed, exploratorily, without the androgynous halo above him).

(I'll talk to you later, Anjali).

## PŪRṆA AND ŚŪNYA

Talking of metaphorical body-suits, KY wears the sky as his body – self-imaged as emptiness, not a thing as opposed to other things – and it is as this non-competing not-thingness that he interposes himself between unsuspecting life and uncaring hate.

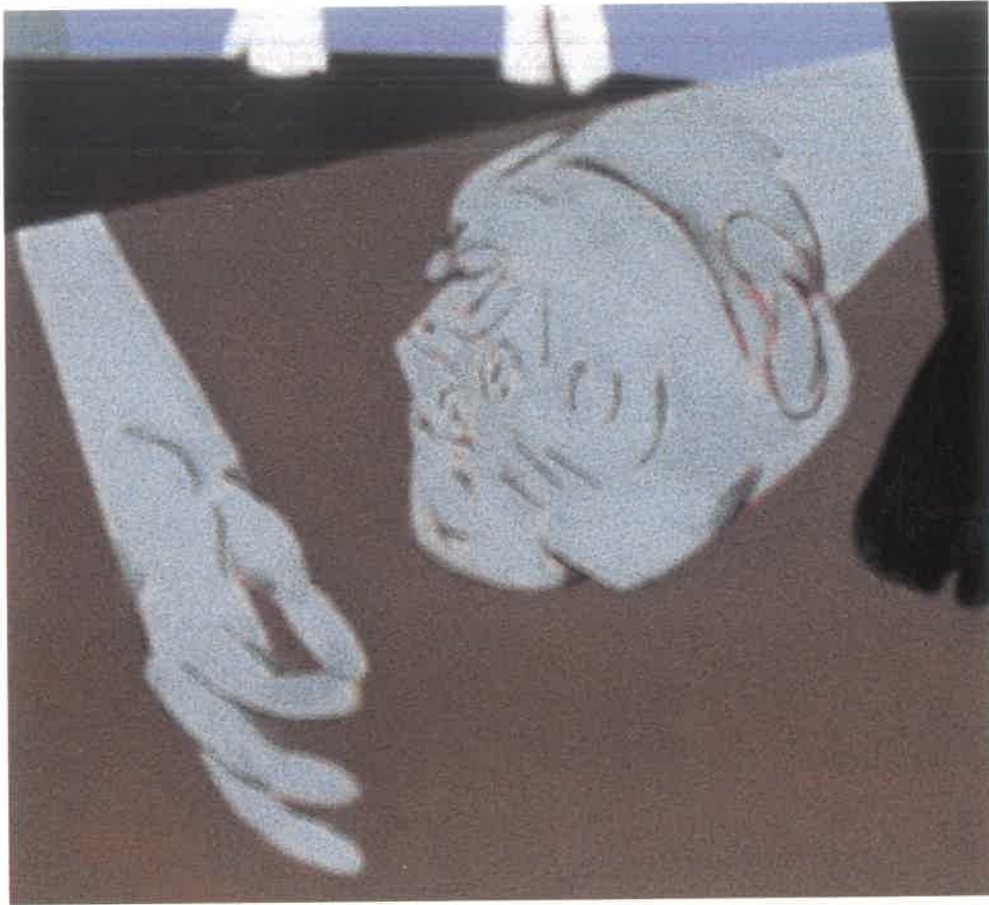
Not as some divinity as opposed to other divinities, an avatāra or a prophet as opposed to other avatāras and prophets, a scripture or revelation as opposed to other scriptures and revelations. But as the limitlessly accommodating space of self-awareness (“If you are down, you can see the sky better,” he consoles us: digambara – “sky-clad” – karmayogī, DKY, now).

However, bearers of closed self-identities (“stockinged” like the executioner) do not see emptiness or not-thingness as anything but the Nihil, the graveyard of life. Threatening “others” with banishment into it, the banishers are willing to enter the void along with the banished in a tantrum of all-destructiveness.

“If only you could see that, like you, I am already nothingness, you wouldn’t want to thrust me into it and rush into it yourselves,” the goat says to us on behalf of life taken hostage by terror.

DKY’s is an amphibious embrace of sky and earth, of nothingness and everythingness, śūnya and pūrṇa. Self is not something as opposed to something





else, it is śūnya. We are also all things, self-imaged in all forms, well or badly, not exclusively or exhaustively in any. Self is pūrṇa. DKY's face bears the pain of the distortion of self-awareness involved in our double denial of ourselves as sky and earth. Our pain.

## THE MAYŪRA MUDRĀ: YOU ARE THAT !

We can think of DKY (digambara karmayogī, lest we forget) as a Buddha or a Christ or (no theological or spiritual comparison intended) a Gandhi figure, offering himself as a substitute sacrifice to rescue life from annihilation by ego.

But we, the executioner, are on a suicide-murder march of rage against what we take to be the fundamental iniquity of the order of things (that we should be but a given, vulnerable, body, or a collectivity of bodies, and all other forms not-Self, not us, against us); and pity or compassion or respect for an individual, however noble, are not likely to deter us from our mission of honour.

With the two fingers that remain on our left hand (this is unappetising, Anjali, but look at the executioner's form), three having been claimed by the "other's" malignant ill-will, we will pluck out his eyes. And with our right hand, curled into a claw, we will strangle all life that stands in our way (which it does, simply by being "other").

All-directed destructiveness is the implicit orientation of our exclusivist self-identities. It is not a weapon external to us, like the scientist's portable nuclear-bomb in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, which we can throw away. Ego makes terrorists of us all, individuals and collectivities. What can we do?

Imagine DKY's thumb and ring finger joining in a "mudrā", ring, of blessing precisely at this moment in response to that plea of helplessness (the

picture is more hopeful now, Anjali, let me assure you).

DKY's anguished face has not moved us. Our outrage (at being vulnerable beings thrown into an ocean of not-Self, as we perceive our condition) is more important to us, and we remain poised to strike. But the Yogī's thumb-and-finger hand-stance can seem dangerous to us (is this a new resource in hand-to-hand combat? we might anxiously ask ourselves). And we might want to compare our hands with the turtle-ascetic's to assess our chances against him in a close encounter, not allowing ourselves to be lulled into complacency by the fact that he appears to be without a right arm and hand. And that his left-raised-hand is without its little finger.

Our – the executioner's – left hand is also without a thumb and two fingers, but the strike-power of its remaining two fingers raring to go into action seems formidable. And our right hand is a bared claw with thumb and all four fingers in place, although set apart from one another. Who is afraid of DKY? (he "raises" his hand, not to strike, but to bless, pathetic pacifist!)

Looking at you among the contemplatives, looking somewhat indignant at this point, I hear this: "Examine your own hands, first, the orientation of the fingers and the neglect of the thumb, before you spurn the blessing of the mayūra mūdṛā, the 'peacock ring'." Quite an admonition, that, Anjali, so here's a hand-appraisal.

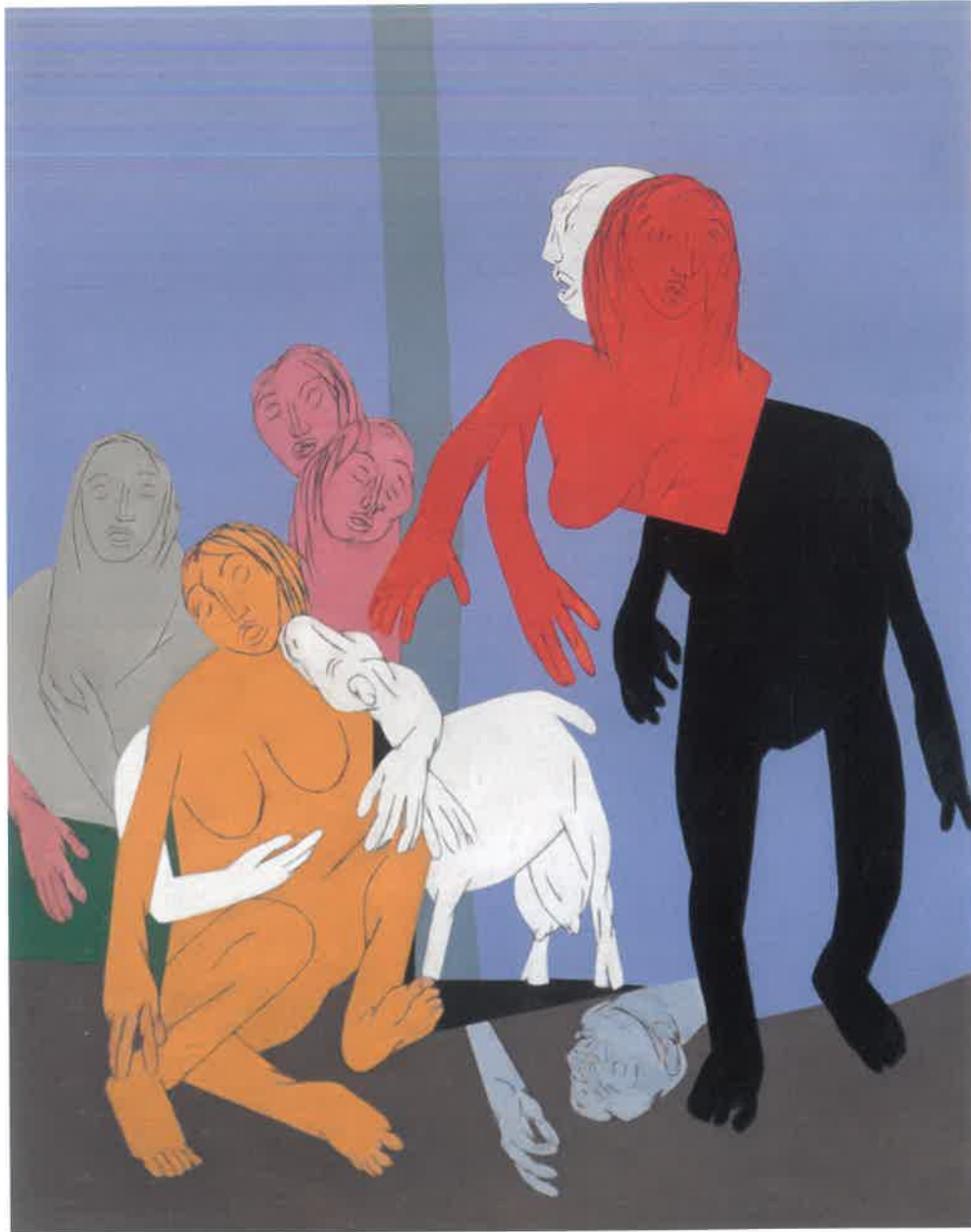
We have no distinctive use for the thumb in place on our right hand: poised, as it were, merely as an extra, pointing, finger (We can have no sympathy for low-born Ekalavya, who was made to sacrifice his right thumb by his guru Droṇācārya to ensure that Arjuna – the guru's favourite pupil – remained unexcelled as an archer). "Shame!", "Shame!", now who said that?

Unlike the fingers of our hand, the thumb doesn't point towards anything at all. It seems to symbolise being, Self, not being this or being that: emptiness, Self's endless expanse of self-awareness, not a thing as opposed to other things (the Upaniṣads speak of Self or Ātman as the "thumb-sized" being lodged in



*Shantinektan Triptych, panel 2, detail. Tyeb Mehta*





*Shantinektan Triptych, panel 2. Tyeb Mehta*

our heart: the “heart” of consciousness, self-consciousness). And just as there can be no effective archery without the use of the thumb, we cannot identify the world and ourselves correctly with our pointing fingers alone. We need our “Self”-symbolising thumb to rein-in the readiness of our fingers to identify our bodily form alone as Self, and all other forms (the world), consequently, as not-Self; even that which is without any form, environing nothingness.

Ranged against itself, pointing both towards and away from our bodily form, our hand is like a cornered animal, at once vulnerable and dangerous: image of consciousness pretending not to be self-consciousness but consciousness now of friendly, now of hostile, objects, never of itself. The ground of our festivities is darkened by this delusion, and we are in agony even as the lord of the sacrificial site, the executioner. Let’s look at his head, releasing it (alone) from the exploratory veiling we had imposed on the composite, standing, figure.

The doomsday-defying head (there is a resemblance to Picasso here, and a correspondence with ‘Guernica’s’ shrapnel-showering electric light of ego at the top of that other work of illumination) has turned goat-white in the transmuting heat of self-realisation. The pain of self-distortion (ego-entrapment) is still etched on the face, overlaid though it is by the deeper anguish of compassion for all forms struggling to stay afloat in the ocean of delusion (not-Self).

The mayūra-mudrā, like a hand-grenade of light, has exploded in the executioner’s face, painting it in the colour of his intended, four-footed, victim. What do you think might have triggered the explosion, Anjali? “Think for yourself!”, you seem to say, all three of you, slightly exasperatedly. “I am tired of thinking,” I plead. “All right, listen, then,” you say, comfortingly. “Listen to what DKY is saying, what his mudrā is saying, to the terrorised terrorist, to all of us.” Let us, indeed.

The hand-gesture does not point towards anyone or anything. The thumb joins with a pointing finger to make a ring or circle, symbolising emptiness or Self (not something as opposed to something else). And in and through this act

of symbolisation, the mudrā suggests that that (Self) is what we are : “tat tvam asi”, “You are that”, is the upaniṣadic mantra of the mudrā. Speech itself speaks to speakers through these words. (Hear them in your own voice, Anjali!).

The mantra challenges the authority of exclusivist identity, which says, “I am this (bodily form), not anything else”, and we are constrained to pay attention to it. Unhappy as we are with the “only this”-ness of our self-identity, we are curious to know what “that” might be which the Yogī says we are.

Might “that” in “You are that” indicate a non-material entity, a soul, which the mantra perhaps maintains we really are, as opposed to physical bodies, heaven not earth being our true and enduring home? Such a view of who we are is chiefly associated with theistic religious traditions, although it is not exclusive to them; but this view cannot be the message of the mantra “You are that”, the meaning of amphibian DKY’s embrace of sky and ground, heaven and earth, form and formlessness.

The “soul” view of ourselves is not fundamentally different from the “bodily form” view; it merely replaces the “I am only this bodily form” distortion of Self-awareness with the “I am only this non-material entity” distortion, freezing Selfhood and projecting an alien environment of “otherness”. Immortal souls in heaven must, as apparent Self and apparent not-Self, be as ferociously locked in battling one another as are perishable bodily forms on earth.

And there is an unfortunate invitation to annihilationism built into the “soul-in-heaven” idea of self-identity. If we are not bodily forms at all, but a soul which is only temporarily lodged in these forms, and whose true and enduring location is in heaven, why should we not arrive there as quickly as possible, even if this involved mass-murder-and-suicide? Even if we refrain from taking this extreme step, the “soul”-view of self-identity would still anchor much cruelty to bodily forms and gender-discrimination and suspicion of life-energies. The turtle-Yogī’s mudrā blesses all, and his mantra does not invite annihilation or cruelty or iniquity.



And yet the executioner may doubt the attention-worthiness of DKY’s intrusion into his embattled consciousness. “Doesn’t the ‘Self’-view of reality imply the illusoriness of the world and bodily forms?” he might ask. And he may draw the dark conclusion that the destruction of apparent not-Self and apparent, exclusive, Self, can only end illusion, and not harm reality. “The mudrā and mantra of Self do not discourage annihilationism, they are no more protective of the earth and life on it than the ‘to heaven, hasten!’ call of the soul,” he might declare triumphantly, and reassuredly: and take another step towards the brink. But he might pause again, deciding to take a closer look at the Yogī’s hand to make sure that there isn’t an explosive concealed there which might blow him up before he has blown up the world.

The hand holds nothing (except emptiness and fullness!), its little finger symbolically sacrificed to cancer (mindless mutual killing and multiplication of one’s own kind). The ring finger joins the thumb to make a circle of continuity between Self and apparent “otherness”. The two remaining fingers are not in



ANDROGYNOUS ADVAITA

the pointing, targeting, “not-Self”-projecting mode (the executioner notices this). Nor are they withdrawn, like the ring finger, to be absorbed into pure self-awareness symbolised by the thumb: they don’t dismiss the world and bodily forms as illusion (the executioner notices this too). An arc of blessing, they are an acknowledgement of the reality of all forms as Self’s self-images (evolved or evolving, lucid or obscure), not as not-Self or exclusive Self. “That” is what we are, says the Yogī: Self’s art-work of self-imaging located within the wallless and limitless gallery-space of self-awareness.

The double-liberation offered by the mantra of DKY’s mudrā – from the shackles of frozen Selfhood and the terror of imagined, pervasive, not-Selfhood – is the grenade explosion of light, the illumination which enables the executioner to see that his intended victim, the goat, is as much a self-image of Self (himself) as is his human form: a “goat-whitening” of his face which reveals the suppressed pain of self-distortion turning into the suffering of compassion. Face to face, now, Anjali, DKY and the executioner are reflections of one another in the light of self-realisation.



*Guernica*, 1937. 11'6" x 25'8". Oil on board. Pablo Picasso

## GUERNICA'S MAYŪRA MUDRĀ

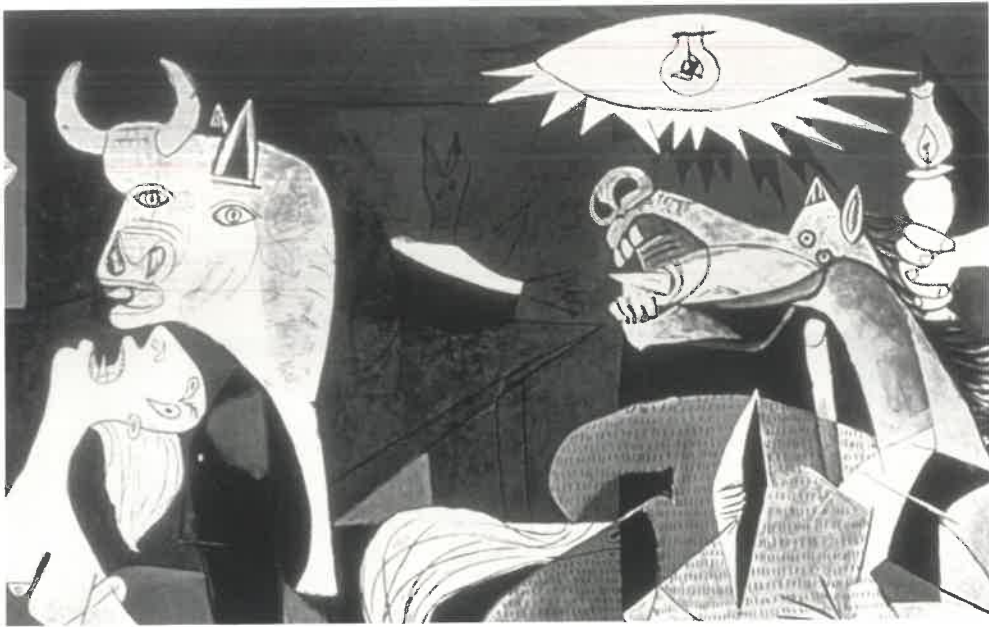
Let us now lift the exploratory veil from the figures of panel 2, entirely; and celebrate the full range of the magic of svarāj, self-realisation, wrought by the turtle-Yogī at the foot of the sacrificial post.

But not without taking leave of 'Guernica' and the executioner's agonised 'Picasso' face. You must have seen the painting in the flesh, Anjali. I have only imagined what it must be like to stand in front of it through reproductions. My journey with Tyeb's triptych has helped me to see the work, completed in 1937, as much more than a lamentation of the devastation inflicted upon the Spanish township of Guernica by the Nazi Luftwaffe as a trial run for the air-violence of the Second World War: and to see the triptych as a fuller explication of the symbolism of 'Guernica'.

Flames above walls suggest a raging fire outside and encircling 'Guernica's' dark interior chamber of convulsed forms. The burning backdrop documents the historical fact of the unprovoked Nazi air-attack on a semi-rural, traditional-modern, township. But the interior, the painting at the heart of historical fact, is dramatically universal in its cataloguing of the consequences of all exclusivist self-identity, and not only its Nazi version of German racial individuality and collectivity.

The electric ceiling lamp at the top of the painting spits daggers of light





*Guernica*, 1937, detail. Oil on board. Pablo Picasso

in all directions, paranoid fingers targeting all as not-Self: stunned kaliyuga bull standing on one leg (The figure's formal four legs are shadowily indicated, but a length of white invites the thought of a one-legged bull. Picasso is Hinduism-literate), screaming horse (Vedic cosmic form), heaven-turned forms of mother-and-dead-child and Job-like father, a Florence Nightingale angel above with ineffectual candle-light, a second angel on the ground supplicating the usurper light of ego, a fallen warrior clutching a broken sword in one hand.

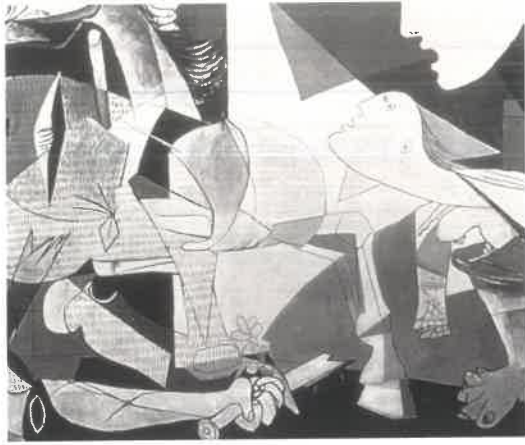
No violence towards these tormented beings is explicitly shown. The imputation of not-Selfhood hurled at them by the detonating lamp of racist self-identity is the root violence which cripples and castrates (bull and horse, power and rhythm) and threatens the continuity and integrity of life.

Anjali, seven out of ten viewers of 'Guernica' don't notice the symbol of hope in the portrait of gloom, but I am sure you do. There is a little flower near the hand of felled gallantry (the traditional soldier), tossed into position by the bowling hand of the never-say-die angel on the ground. (Who is she?)

The warrior is urged by you to let go the broken sword, not in exchange for an AK 47, but to free his hand to pick up the flower and hold it as a mudrā, a ring signifying the blossoming of consciousness from within our being, encompassing all forms as Self's self-images. Now imagine the triptych's executioner form projected over 'Guernica', his (pre-illumination) black-hooded head replacing the electric ego-lamp, the fallen warrior on the ground replacing the turtle-yogī sprawled on the triptych's floor.

"Flower, don't freeze!" would be the missile-mantra of the soldier's resurrected hand of blessing in the interwoven 'triptych-Guernica'. Piercing into his hardened heart, the mantra would bring the glow of self-realisation to the executioner's Picasso face (with eyes closed): revealing both his anguish at the bombing of Guernica the town, and its transformation into the compassion of 'Guernica' the painting.

The face also bears the anxieties of a species-confined, merely human,



self-identity, the identity which Picasso's politics would have favoured: but which cuts us off from non-human life and non-living matter and nothingness. Proletarian rāj, or any other form of merely humanist sovereignty, would still not be svarāj: it would congeal self-identity and convulse awareness in the pain of self-diminution, the terror of disappearance into nothingness (the immortal painter was terrified of death). Screaming 'Guernica' confronts and overcomes the terror with the aid of a little, barely noticeable, flower: the triptych with a mutilated left hand's inauguration of an installation of self-images of svarāj, more explicitly and elaborately.

## ANDROGYNOUS SELF-REALISATION

The executioner's realisation, precipitated by the symbolism of DKY's mayūra mudrā, that the vulnerable goat – his intended victim – is as much his – Self's – self-image as his own upright, authoritarian, bipedality, and that unseen "others" could throw him down at the foot of the flagpost like the sacrificial goat, is what draws his – and our – attention to the goat's secure quadrupedality, svarāj. Not svarāj as isolated autonomy, but interlinked/interlimbed with the squatting madonna: the goat's fourth leg becoming a human arm holding the woman as a dancing partner, and the woman growing a third leg and throwing a goat-white arm of comradeship around the quadruped. (This scene is the warmest embrace in painting that I am aware of. A clean break with the tradition in European art of portraying the goat as satanically salacious; and not only because the triptych's goat is female. Endangered life cannot be more powerfully and poignantly portrayed than by the maternal feminine, human and other, awaiting slaughter at a sacrificial site, witnessed by three women, ādivāsīs who have fostered and honoured life down the ages. The sniffing togetherness of the woman and the goat breathes the eroticism of self-awareness present in both, the ecstasy – even in the midst of grave danger – of the multiply-self-imaging sovereignty of Self: svarāj.

The svarāj-situated, grounded, feminine forms, including the goat and

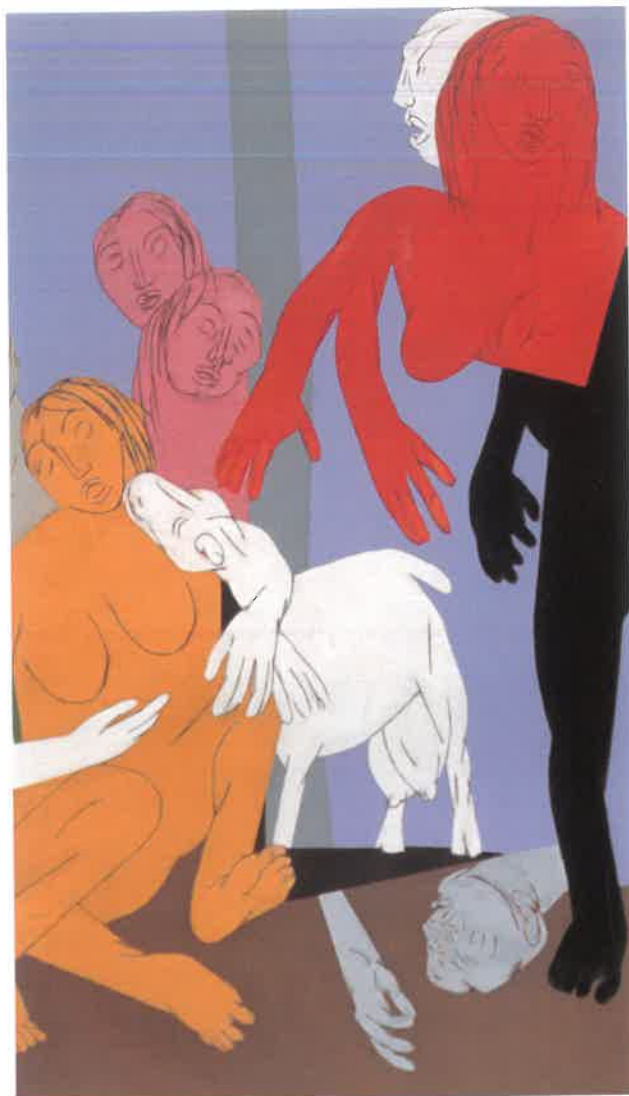


COMPANIONSHIP



*Woman with Goat, 1987. 150 x 120 cms. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*





SELF REALISATION  
BETWEEN THE OBSCURITY OF BIRTH AND DEATH

the contemplatives (svarāj is no fundamentalist activism, it is also sanmati, truth-sensitive goodwill) are joined by the sky-clad, ground-hugging, battered yogī: not as a group member or an outsider, but as the unity of emptiness and fullness which reveals all forms, including formlessness, not as things as opposed to other things, but as self-images, or self-images-in-the-making, of Self. It is this comprehensive vision of the sovereignty of Self and its śakti of self-imaging which halts the executioner's advance towards annihilation and liberates him from the bondage of exclusivist self-identity, the sovereignty of apparent not-Self.

The liberation is represented by the invasion of his torso by a feminine head and breasts (or the surfacing of reality repressed within his congealed heart) and swinging arms, one of which blesses the goat and the other restrains the ex-executioner's still clenched hand and taut right arm.

In this dawn of svarāj as self-realisation, the ominous sacrificial post can be seen as linking śūnya and pūrṇa, nothingness and everythingness, like the column of light which rises skywards from the summit of Aruṇācala hill, Ramaṇa Maharshi's playground: a beacon of hope for all lives trapped in the delusion of separatist self-identity.

In the light of the Śiva-Śakti tradition of Advaita Vedānta, the composite, androgynous, figure of the triptych's central panel can be seen as the restraining invasion of Śakti into Śiva's form to prevent pralaya, world-dissolution: the manifestation of the grace of Ardhanārīśvara, or Ardhanareśvarī.





Above: Tyeb looking out of his window at a man being stoned to death during the communal carnage of 1947. Lehri House, Mohammedali Road, Bombay. Ink drawing. Tyeb Mehta.  
Below: *Falling Figure*, 1967, detail. Tyeb Mehta

## FROM A WINDOW IN MUMBAI

The fulcrum of the triptych as a whole, and not only its central panel, is the tormented head at the foot of the flagpost with its long left hand's thumb and ring finger joined in a ring formation, the mayūra mudrā or peacock ring, symbolising valorous generosity towards all apparent otherness and renunciation of all claims to the exclusive selfhood of bodily forms, revisioning all forms as self-images of Self. There is a special redemptive quality to this fallen figure, which invites a look at the significance and development of the fallen and falling figure in Tyeb's work.

Widespread communal violence followed the partition of India in 1947; the vivisection of a living body as Gandhi saw it, a price for svarāj extracted by a retreating imperial power from a nation riven by Hindu-Muslim discord. From a high window of an apartment building in Bombay (Mumbai, now, renamed after Mumbā Devī, a form of the Divine Mother), Tyeb Mehta (who was then twenty-two years old) witnessed the brutal killing of a helpless young man by a frenzied crowd because he belonged to the "other" religious community.

Recalling the incident, Tyeb has said, "The crowd beat him to death, smashed his head with stones, I was sick with fever for days afterwards and the image still haunts me." The painter's 'Falling Figures' (1967, 1994) seem to fall headlong out of that fateful window from which the young would-be



*Falling Figure*, 1967. 183.5 x 122 cms. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta



*Falling Figure*, 1994. 150 x 100 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta

painter had hoped to witness a celebration of Indian independence by a people united by their distinctive spiritual orientation in the modern world, and not divided by religious, exclusive, identities.

The 'Falling Figure' of 1967, conceived around the time of the 1965 war between India and Pakistan which Tyeb witnessed as a member of a government-sponsored group of artists visiting the front – a gigantic inverted human form with a disproportionately small head, hurtling down through empty space – can be seen as the collapse of a merely humanist faith: our bloated, high-flying, species-specific or culture-specific self-identity boomeranging on the earth and endangering all its life (prophetic, in the light of current convulsions).

The (at least) self-destructive descent of the massive falling figure would appear to be precipitated by fear of the apparent "not-Self-hood" of all forms other than the figure's presumed Selfhood, especially the "formless" otherness of nothingness which threatens all forms with extinction; and, as time, visits bodily existence with disfigurement and decay and disease (the gargantuan flesh of the crashing figure is brutally torn and twisted). Bearing in mind Tyeb's residence in London for five years between 1959 and 1964, the nihilism and screaming bodily forms of Francis Bacon may plausibly be supposed to have exerted an influence on the Indian, post-partition, painter's 1967 portrait of the humbling inversion and plunge of the human form into oblivion.

A post-triptych (1989) work of Tyeb's, 'The Play', dramatises his compassionate liberation from Baconian despair, not into self-deceiving bodily aestheticism and ideals of physical incorruptibility and immortality: but by allowing an ādivāsī male drummer's symbolic womb to receive into its protective space a falling, Baconian, adult male foetus. Ādivāsī forms are a post-triptych appearance in Tyeb's corpus of paintings; and as I have earlier argued, they are not representations of ethnic Indian ādivāsīs, such as Santhals, they function as metaphors of Self, Ātman, the source of all forms and laboratory of their transformation into Self's self-images.



THE SCREAM OF CONGEALED SELF-IDENTITY

In this unprecedented portrayal of Self's acceptance of homosexuality's tortured fantasy of male child-bearing capability into its womb of transmutation, there is more than a gesture of compassion towards Francis Bacon's homosexuality. There is here a more fundamental suggestion: that the generation of "Self"-symbolising humanity and its nurturing in the womb of self-awareness cannot be the biological function of women, merely, but the spiritual responsibility of all human beings, male, female, eunuch, of whatever sexual orientation.

I haven't spoken to you for a while, Anjali, as you sit there amongst the contemplatives, hoping that I would get on with this writing more quickly! The triptych reveals its mysteries testingly, and I have to wait upon it a lot to read it well. But here is a thought for you, a comparative comment on 'Guernica', Tyeb's 1967 'Falling Figure' and Francis Bacon's screaming figures

Above: Fragment of panel 2, Shantiniketan Triptych. Tyeb Mehta  
 Left: Pope II, 1951. 198 x 137 cms. Oil on canvas. Francis Bacon  
 Right: Study for Portrait, 1949. 58" x 51.5". Oil on canvas. Francis Bacon

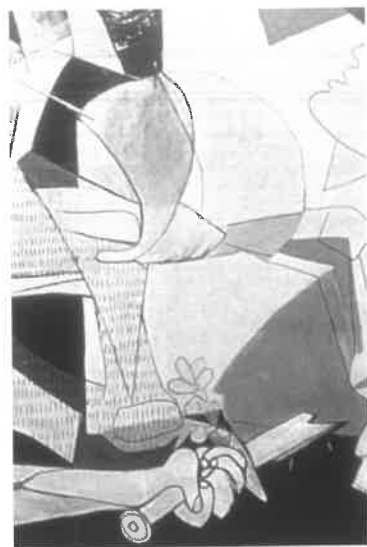




*The Play, 1989. 150 x 120 cms. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*



*Figure on Bed, 1972. Francis Bacon*



LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS

(a pope on his throne, an executive in his glass cage, the former hidden by protocol, the latter exposed to public gazing, both in torment), to reassure you that I haven't fallen asleep.

The flower near the hand of 'Guernica's' fallen warrior is a seed of hope in the howling darkness of the canvas, a promise of freedom from the closure of collective (racial, tyrannical) self-identity. Tyeb's 1967 'Falling Figure', and Bacon's screaming figures, are apparently unredeemably trapped in their identification of Self, themselves, with their bodily-cultural forms: uncompromisingly something as opposed to other things and nothingness, terrifyingly faithful mirror-images of ego, despairing and destructive. With this difference, perhaps, that Tyeb's mountain-mass of crashing flesh has also a more explicit political (life-and-civilisation-threatening) dimension than Bacon's more personalised, though no less disturbing, prototypes of self-identity. Tyeb cannot fail to bear witness to the madness of exclusivist self-identity which he witnessed in 1947.

'Guernica's' flower and the triptych's mayūra mudrā are what make their

fallen figures symbols not of the eclipse of self-awareness by self-obscuration, but of the irrepressibility of self-realisation: the persistence of "life, light, and truth in the midst of death, darkness, and untruth," of which Gandhi spoke.

The falling figure of 1994 has a liberating comicality to it, a tumble-down though it also is from the 1947 window of disillusionment with the duality inherent in Indian independence: savour it, Anjali!

The bright-costumed padded-bottomed falling figure wears an anxious clown-face with a swagger of stylish hair, and has a set of balanced limbs steering him towards a soft landing. Two white, wing-like, hands surprise him with the supportiveness of empty space (an image of Self, not anything as opposed to something else) and he is flying not falling. A querying hand held to his chin asks the question: "Am I only this bodily clown form? Am I not also upholding nothingness, and the trapeze-net-like ground of all forms, Self's self-images like me, my field of work and stage of play and place of rest?"

The free-wheeling explorer of the limitless range of self-awareness (with no sense of exclusive Selfhood and a projected paranoid environment of not-Self) is a bōdhisattva on his way to the foot of the sacrificial post to incarnate as DKY, losing his hair and a finger to cancerous vibrations of holocaust-hate, anxious to take the place of the goat positioned for slaughter by the executioner, and to bless all present with his appearance-acknowledging, but otherness-denying, hand-gesture.



*Dancing Figure, 1997, detail. 150 x 120 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

## FAST FORWARD

I haven't forgotten panels 1 and 3 of the triptych, Anjali, I promise you! There are dancing figures in panel 1, men and women (and you again there in more than one place), as are the madonna and the playful goat in panel 2; and seated women contemplative-witnesses in panels 2 and 3, not to mention the airborne figures in panels 1 and 3, the one in panel 3 bearing an eerie resemblance to the executioner figure of panel 2 without the androgynous transmutation; and a brown hand from panel 1's medley of hands intruding into panel 2, seeking the first contemplative, you! So there are intricate interconnections between the three panels and lingering a while longer with the central panel of self-realisation can only open doors of entry into the other two panels, not block them out from the decoding gaze of exploration. Not to worry!

Just as the falling, flying, clown figure of 1994 moves backwards in time to elucidate the fallen Yogī of 1985 (illustrating something like Godard's conviction that a film must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order), the 'Dancing Figure' of 1997 looks retrospectively at the 1985 triptych's squatting, metamorphosing, dancing partner of the frolicking goat, oblivious of the approach of the slaughterer.

The 1997 dancing figure is once again a post-triptych interrogation of identity. The dancer points to her bodily form with the fingers of her left hand,





*Two Figures*, 1984. 150 x 110 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta

as if it were exclusively she, Self, herself: and is convulsed with anxiety about the freezing of self-identity implicit in such circumscribing of selfhood, and the consequent encirclement of presumed selfhood by an environment of "otherness", the negation of the free movement of dance in celebration of the omnipresence of Selfhood. The dancer's right hand addresses a poignant question to us: Is this bodily form, alone, what I am? How can I become all other things in abhinaya, expressive movement, if I am not already these things in the range of my, Self's, self-images?

The "Two Figures" of 1984 are taunting, threatening, ideologues of exclusivist-identity, demonesses in Aśōka Vātikā imposing upon Sītā (the dancing, or would-be dancing, figure of 1997) the imprisonment of a frozen, dance-denying, self-identity. Perhaps threatening to reduce her to the condition of the trussed bull (1956), Self's vibrant self-imaging vitality fastened by ropes of Self-diminution into a fixed form of bodily identity, object of possession and subordination, not subject of freedom (Sītā spurned such imprisonment of spirit both in Lankā and Ayōdhyā).



*Trussed Bull, 1956. 101.6 x 127 cms. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

### THE TRIPTYCH'S TRINITY

"...the very first image that I painted with a great deal of thought and feeling was that of a trussed bull," says Tyeb, and that "as the discovery of an image, the trussed bull was important to me at several levels. As a statement of great energy... blocked or tied up. The way they tie up the animal's legs and fling it on the floor of the slaughter-house before butchering it, you feel something very vital has been lost. The trussed bull also seemed representative of the national condition... the mass of humanity unable to channel or direct its tremendous energies. Perhaps, also, my own feeling about my early life."

The young man flung on the ground and butchered by a crowd would have looked like a trussed bull to the young artist watching the street reality of svarāj in 1947; and later, during the triptych period of ātma-jijñāsā, self-inquiry, the remembered murderous crowd and the isolationist security of his own apartment-fortress would also have been seen by Tyeb as the reduction of the bull-Self to an outlined, fixed, trussed, physicality: omnipresent freedom reduced to localised identity, individual and collective.

It is during his period of residence in Shantiniketan and its Santhal environs in 1984 that Tyeb would have encountered the goats led to slaughter in tāntrika ritual, untraumatised unlike the trussed bull, playfully trusting life; and the self-inquiring squat dancing figure of 1997 is surely a recollection of

"the essential inspiration" of the triptych: "A short, stout woman in white at the (Santhal) festival. She came and poured some water near the pole and she disappeared. I don't know where. There was a shifting temple-like thing, it never occurred to me that she might be sitting inside a hut. I saw her only from the outside because I was not allowed in and she was sitting inside silently."

I suggest that the nourisher of the pole (not a sacrificial post but a column of light connecting earth and sky), the short, stout woman (transmuted into the 1997 self-questioning dancer), is the triptych's sensuous madonna companion of the threatened but unsuspecting goat: woman and quadruped, sage and life, suffering the miracle of shared limbs and imaging a svarāj that is "on all fours", secure in humble multipedality, unlike the insecure bipedality of the self-frozen executioner. Who is this sage, Anjali, this goddess comrade of the goat?

"It's about time you asked," the contemplatives, including you, say; adding the advice "Think, blinkingly," in the voice, possibly a Christian voice, of the Edinburgh eye-doctor, as an afterthought.

At the foot of the cross of the triptych is Christ as a she-goat, the vulnerable playful spirit of life as a whole, threatened with extinction. God, as the first person of the trinity, is both father and mother, and comes to the aid of their she-goat child, descending from the sky of emptiness (formlessness), as the male Yogī, and surfacing from the depths of the earth as the madonna witnessed by the third personality of the holy trinity, the three ādivāsī women-magi.

"Father" and "Mother" are metaphors of Self, source of all manifestation, womb of self-awareness, in which no 'not-Self' can manifest, nor any exclusive selfhood, but only self-images of Self. God or Self as father sees no not-Self and is willing to substitute for the goat marked out for slaughter, and demonstrate to another child of his (a deeply camouflaged, obscured, self-image), the executioner, that annihilationist anxiety and pervasive peace both literally lie in our own hands: in our failure or ability to bring our "otherness"-imputing fingers into alignment with our "Self"-symbolising thumb, a reorientation of

consciousness whose felicity is reflected in the beauty of the hand-gesture which represents it.

And God or Self as mother does not merely suffer for others but actively identifies herself in play with her goat-self-image, her Christ-child, in a mutually-metamorphosing embrace which manifests the continuity of Self, in self-exploration, with self-image; and of self-image, in self-realisation, with Self.

And the mindful magi, God or Self as limitless self-awareness and field of self-imaging, are Śūnyatā, Emptiness, the screen of timelessness on which is projected the cinema of self-imaging, self-distortion and self-realisation, the drama of time and history.

So, Anjali, the reunion of Śiva-Śakti and Śūnyatā is resurrection as self-realisation, svarāj. Spiritual traditions are also Self's self-images; and may my exploration of their interconnectedness have the blessings of Srī Ramaṇa Maharshi and your good wishes and prayers.

But my exploration of the madonna-sage is not yet complete. Look at her presence in Tyeb's pre-triptych 'Rickshaw-Puller' (1982); Kolkata inspired, I think, where there are still hand-pulled rickshaws, and yet perfectly universal in image and meaning. But take a look first at a later rickshaw study (1994), which retrospectively illuminates the 1982 work.



*Trussed Bull on Rickshaw, 1994. 150 x 120 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

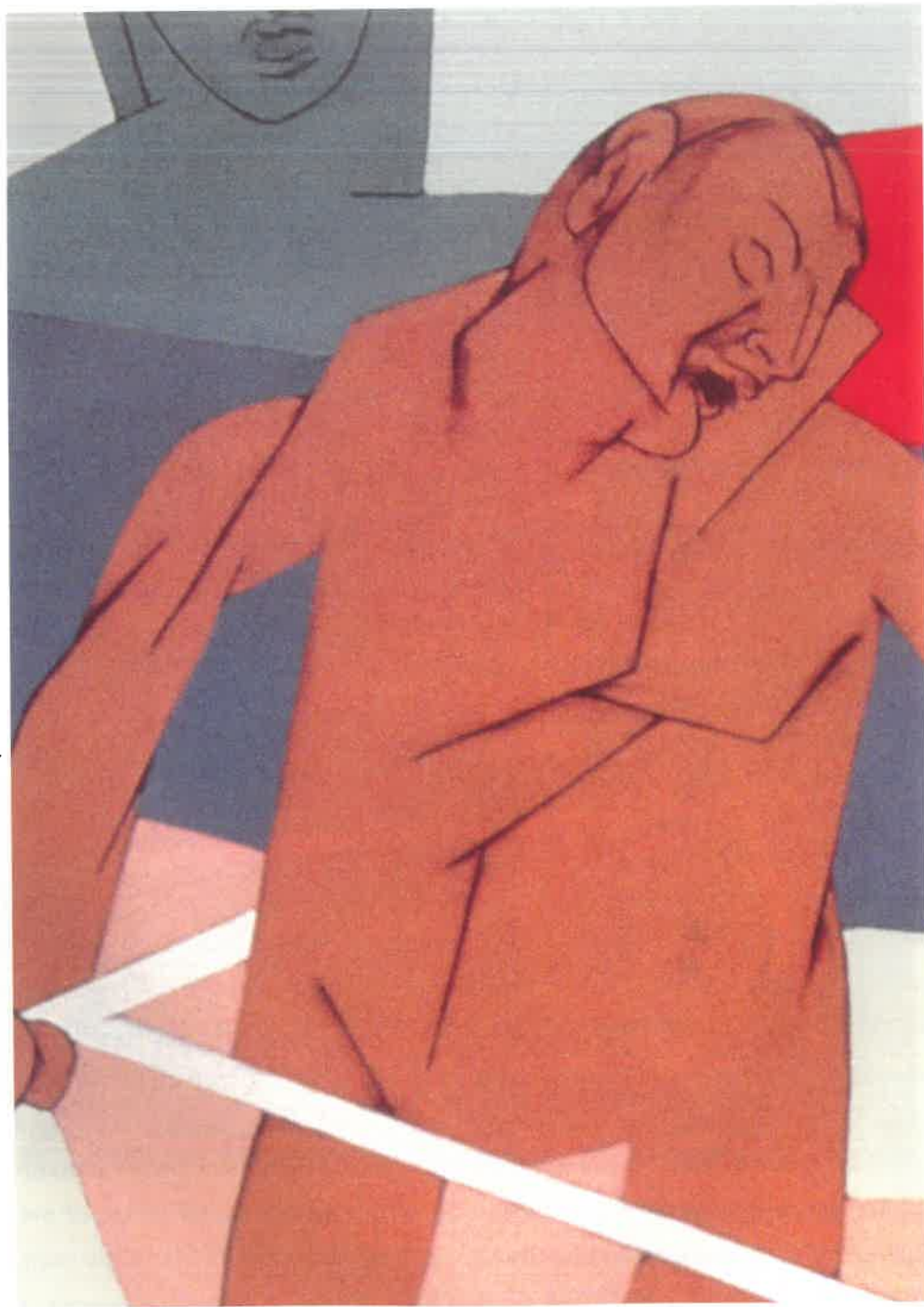
## THE TESTAMENT OF A RICKSHAW-PULLER

A rickshaw carrying two or more bulky well-fed passengers hand-pulled by an emaciated, barefoot, man is, or was, until recently, a familiar and outrageous sight in the streets of Kolkata, capital of socialist-administered West Bengal! Like many other visitors to this extraordinary city, Tyeb must have been shocked by the sight. His first rickshaw-puller study appeared in the 1950s, around the time of the trussed-bull, already alluded to; but Anjali I want to draw your attention to a post-triptych "rickshaw" work (1994), 'Trussed Bull on Rickshaw', where there is a rickshaw but no rickshaw-puller, only a passenger – a trussed bull!

In the light of the "ādivāsī", "source-seeking", "Self-oriented", non-dualist exploration of identity which I believe is explicitly inaugurated in the triptych and post-triptych works of Tyeb, the trussed-bull-carrying-and-carried rickshaw can be seen as symbolising a profoundly disturbing and yet instructive truth of ourselves.

A village-migrant in Kolkata forced by poverty to operate a hand-pulled rickshaw is of course a victim of social exploitation and technological uninno-vativeness; but even more fundamentally, of the dominant self-image of our age, especially, which would identify him, Self, exclusively with his bodily form, drained of the limits-crossing buoyancy of life and space-filling consciousness: a





*Rickshaw-Puller, 1982, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

trussed bull, endangered, chained life, dead Christ, awaiting the resurrection of self-realisation by the grace of the dancing, limbs-transposing, Mary (or Śārādā, sage-spouse of Śrī Rāmakrishna) at the foot of the triptych's slaughter-site: a reorientation of consciousness which releases the rickshaw-puller and his exploiters from congealed self-identities towards wider and deeper self-revisioning with egalitarian and ecological responsibilities and existential sensitivity.

Grace is at hand in the 1982 rickshaw-puller study. The labouring figure has acquired the shyness of a noble horse's head, turned aside, bull-strength restored (not screaming as in 'Guernica' or crippled and trussed as in Tyeb's 1956 and other studies: in apparent control of his life, in svarāj). "Who are you?", we ask him, put him in the dock. His profile, and that is what he shows, is a testament, perhaps the following:

"In the light of self-awareness symbolised by She who stands by me, and awakens in my heart, I see myself not as a thing opposed to other things, but as a self-image of Self, both singular and intermeshed with all other self-images. Despite being a victim of a socially exploitative practice, my bipedality (under the strain of passengers who have abdicated their bipedality and thrown the weight of their bodies upon me, deepening my "I am only this bodily form, a thing among other things" misconception) is yet a proud self-image of Self ("self-supportiveness", "standing on one's own feet".)

"The light of self-awareness in my heart (and as a tangible Śārādā Mā walking with me, as Christ walked with his disciples on the way to Emmaus) reveals to me that all other hand-pulling rickshaw-operators are a fraternity of my own self-images, and our solidarity in protest not only against poor wages for burdensome toil, but on behalf of the integrity of our bipedality as a lucid image of Self, ourselves, which is undermined by our demeaning drudgery, will be understood by the exploiters of our poverty; and the conscience of the general public will be moved to alleviate our condition and restore to an insulted image of Self (theirs as well as ours, indivisibly, for they are also my self-images)





*Rickshaw-Puller, 1982, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

its dignity and perspicacity.

"An ethically bonded human community where individuals and constituent collectivities are equally honoured as Self's self-representations, will be a powerful picture of the sovereignty of Self, svarāj; but not isolatedly.

"My horse-demeanour reminds me of all our non-human self-images. The passionate and yet ecologically restrained (no devouring violence beyond the necessities of hunger) life of non-human living beings is a dramatic self-image, or a series of dramatic self-images, of Self's self-sufficiency. How deeply we disfigure these self-images in our cruelty towards these unsurpassably beautiful forms of life; even as the violence of human beings against one another, individually and collectively, vandalises humanity's Self-mirroring art-works of peaceful interdependence and mutually respectful and coexisting separateness.

"And the roundedness of the earth, non-living reality, portrait of Self's completeness, suffers the pounding of my bare feet, even as it is battered by missiles from flying machines: and its mountains denuded of trees, its rivers and oceans and protective sky of emptiness fouled by our thoughtless greed.

"Forgive me, ocean-clad, mountain-breasted, Mother Earth, we trample upon you! Obeisance to you, consort of (self-image of) pervasive self-awareness, emptiness, forgive us!", the rickshaw puller seems to say, echoing an ancient Devī prayer, as he takes his first steps in freedom. Weightless emptiness is his passenger, limitless self-awareness, Self, his guiding divinity. Taking a left turn, in conformity with the spirit of our times, he is poised to extend the left turn into a circumambulation of the Self-Śakti watching over his destiny, in search of self-realisation, svarāj, not world-domination.

Anjali, the radiant woman-divinity-sage (Śārādā or the triptych madonna) above (but not astride) the rickshaw has a role similar to the Statue of Liberty, post-revolutionary France's gift to the then new world of America, in inviting persecuted humanity to the shores of freedom: but without the legitimisation of vengeful violence (witness Delacroix's 'Liberty').

The 'Rickshaw-Puller' (1982), Tyeb's near-triptych exploration of self-identity, is closer to the bhūmi-sparśa (ground-touching or blessing) statue of the Buddha installed by the Dalai Lama in the Buddha Jayanti Park in Delhi a few years ago. You know the context.

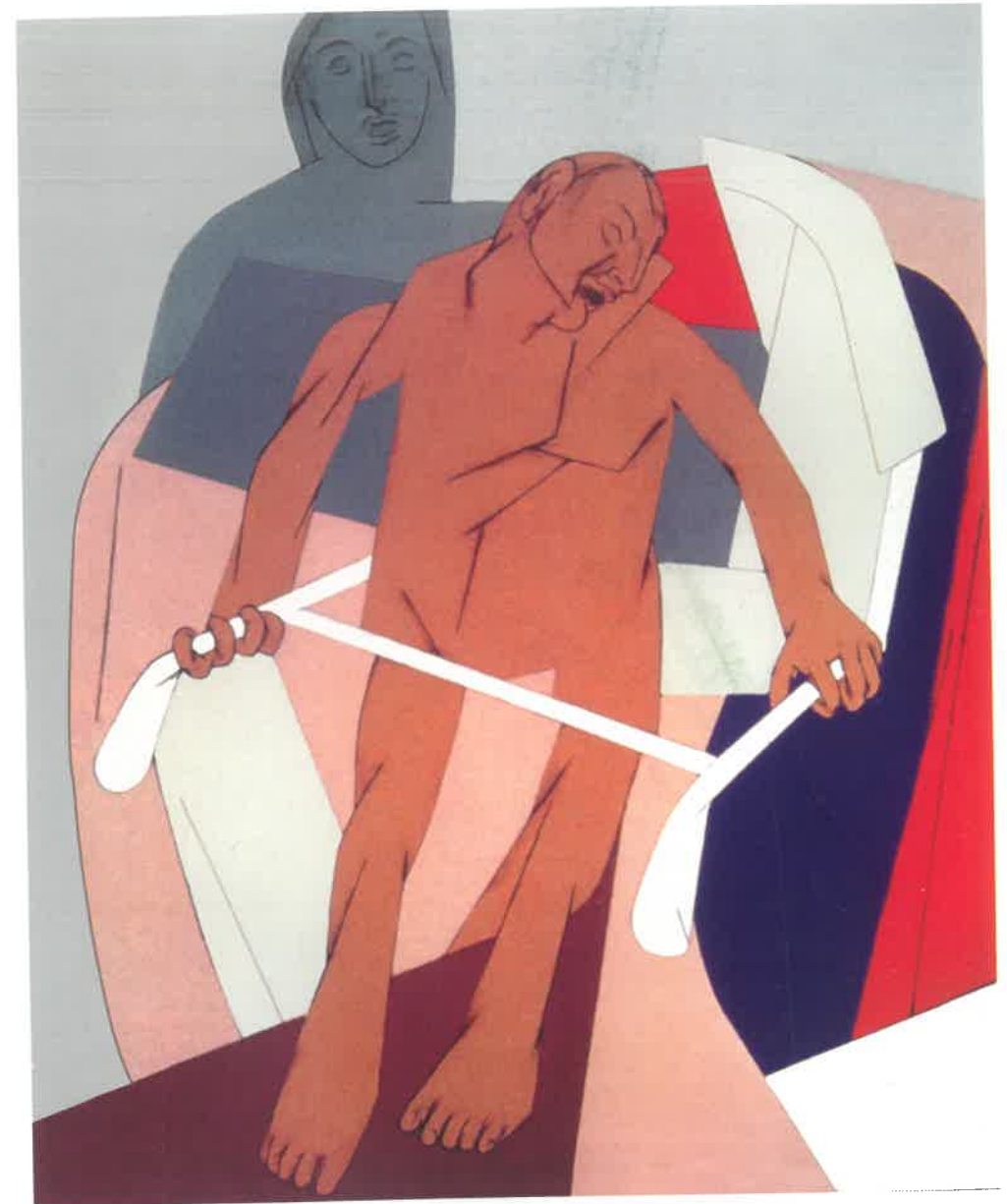
The Buddha has won enlightenment sitting under the Bodhi tree. Māra the tempter (sceptic, scoffer, triptych's executioner – Angulimāla, in a plausible variation of the story?) demands of the Buddha that he produce a witness of his enlightenment. The Buddha touches the earth, She is the witness, the Buddha's way is no burden on her and all her life. Emptiness is no burden on fullness.

The emptiness which the 1982 rickshaw-puller carries around is the weightless fullness of Self's Śārādā-Madonna face, a blessing not an encumbrance, enlightenment not exploitation.

And a final comparison with one of the most instructive photographs of our times, on display at the Gandhi Smriti Museum to which I have promised to take you as a guide.

Gandhi is crossing a narrow bamboo bridge in Noakhali, alone, during his mission of commiseration and consolation and empowerment in that holocaust-visited area of Bengal, now in Bangladesh, after India's partition. He holds a walking stick in his right hand which is taller than himself (a yardstick, Brahmadāṇḍa, vaster than exclusivist self-identity–Hindu, Muslim, even human). His gaze is fixed on his feet, measuring his steps on his way from bondage to svarāj with the yardstick not of ego but of all-inclusive identity represented by his high walking stick. He is not looking at the goal. The abandonment of ego-identity in favour of enlightenment-destiny is itself svarāj, a poignant picture of the sovereignty of good which guides him along the straight and narrow path to martyrdom in Delhi.

On August 15, 1947, the day of Indian independence, Gandhi was in Kolkata and travelled incognito in the city in a car to see with his own eyes the celebration of the flawed, but spiritually urgent, svarāj of India.



*Rickshaw-Puller, 1982. 150 x 120 cms. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*





"IS THIS SVARĀJ" GANDHI IN NOAKHALI, 1947



GANDHI IN NOAKHALI, 1947. MEASURING HIS STEPS



Above: *Falling Figure*, 1994, detail. Tyeb Mehta  
 Below: *Turtle-Yogi*. *Shantiniketan Triptych*, panel 2, detail

Anjali, I would like to fantasise that he got out of his car and urged a rickshaw-puller to let him ply the vehicle for a while. Chanting the mantra “Rāma” with each breath (a spiritual practice into which he was initiated by a household midwife, Rambha, during his childhood), old Mohandas Gandhi must have experienced a lightness of feet, a burdenlessness, a glimpse of self-realisation, and possibly felt the presence of Rambha around and within him, deterring him from starting an unstoppable civil war to try and sabotage the partition of India, thus saving the honour of India’s spiritual traditions and answering Christian critics of Hinduism by achieving martyrdom in the cause of human fraternity, not of Hindus alone.

There is a chilling Noakhali photograph of a traumatised Gandhi standing near a well; no doubt looking at slaughtered bodies, as did Tyeb in Mumbai around the same time.

In the painter’s 1994 ‘Falling Figure’, and in the triptych’s fulcrum figure of the turtle-Yogī, there is a glimpse of the consummation of Gandhi’s tireless sādhanā of love: the lightness and compassion of liberation.



*Woman on a Rickshaw*, 1995. 150 x 100 cm. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta

### IS SVARĀJ IRREVERSIBLE?

Tyeb's hand-pulled rickshaw is a powerful image of our "dehātmabuddhi", our identification of ourselves, Self, with our bodily forms. As passengers, and as the rickshaw-puller, we launch a raging battle between presumed Selfhood and projected not-Self: class, caste, race, gender, species, and other wars. Two extraordinary rickshaw-related works (both entitled "Woman on a Rickshaw"), both done in 1995, both illuminate our rickshaw condition of bondage and suggest a way towards freedom without abandoning the rickshaw, our physicality.

That these works are not sketches of Kolkata rickshaw-pullers is established by the fact, if I am not mistaken, that there are no women rickshaw-pullers in the metropolis. The women are resting (I) and asleep (II) in the rickshaws, as their men pullers often are in the heat of the afternoon or for want of a bed at night. The yogic symbolism is unconcealed, as in the triptych's androgynised executioner and mudrā-manifesting turtle-man and the jivātman-paramātman mutual metamorphosis of goat and madonna.

In the "I am exclusively this bodily form" orientation of consciousness embedded in our rickshaw-embodiment, there lies a sleeping, half-awake, śakti, the "I am" (not "I am this or that") consciousness, pure self-awareness of Self: the sleeping beauty of self-realisation deeply buried in the frozen heart of the "I am hounded by not-Self, I will destroy it along with myself" self-understanding of





*Woman on a Rickshaw*, 1995. 150 x 100 cm. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta

the executioner, ourselves.

It takes the frog-prince, DKY, turtle-sādhū scarred by the wounds of dualism, to awaken the dormant devī-śakti in the hooded slaughterer's terrorised and terrorising heart, the reconciling magic of the blossoming flower of the mayūra mudrā.

And the sleeping women in the rickshaws, full breasted, feet-multiplying, are the enduring form of the triptych-madonna. Ātman-Brahman in mutual embrace with the goat-jīva, merging into one another, poignant prayer and immediate response. Radiant light of self-realisation, svarāj, causing the witnessing contemplatives to blink in deference to the Edinburgh doctor's prescription. Is svarāj irreversible, are the causes of self-distortion removed? Is annihilation averted enduringly? Have we not wounded the Divine Mother unforgivably? Will She alone, without Śiva, wind up the sport, līlā, of Self on Earth? Let's look at 'Kali' (1986) for help, and 'Mahishasura' (1998).



*Kali II*, 1988. 170 x 137.5 cm. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta

IN BENGAL, I COULD FEEL THE PRESENCE OF KĀLI EVERYWHERE.

"The triptych's central, second panel, with its truncated skies and sawn-off flagpole casting a guillotine-blade shadow around its foot, and gathering around it a maternal woman and she-goat and a battered Yogī, all marked for slaughter by a paranoid executioner figure willing to be a suicide-murderer of all life on earth, is a stark vision of apocalypse, mutely witnessed by ādivāsī contemplatives. However, the androgynising transmutation of the executioner by the flowering symbolism of the Yogī's mudrā and the metamorphosing, limbs-sharing, embrace of the woman and the goat can prematurely suggest that all is well, that time and false-identities have been redeemed in timeless self-realisation, enduringly.

Without denying the possibility of such an invasion of darkness by light, death and untruth by life and truth, the triptych warns us, through its blinkingly un-self-deceiving witnessing contemplatives (like you), that panels 1 and 3 are without such consolation, requiring their sceptical presence in panel 3 and a participatory, subversive, role in panel 1. Apparently troubled by this existence of darkness in the midst of light (inverting Gandhi's metaphor), Tyeb turns to Kali, raging divinity of time, in supplication, it would seem.

"I have always been attracted to the mother goddess... It's a primordial image...at Shantiniketan in Bengal I could feel the presence of Kali everywhere,"

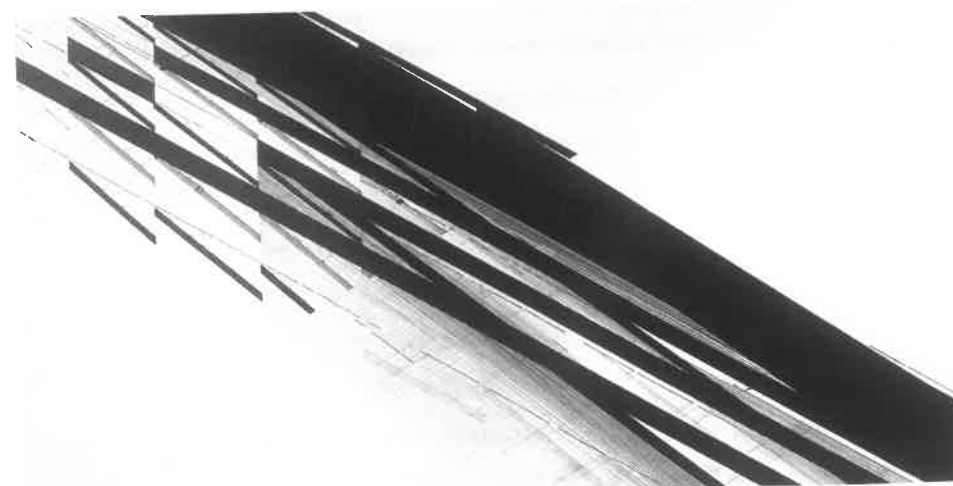
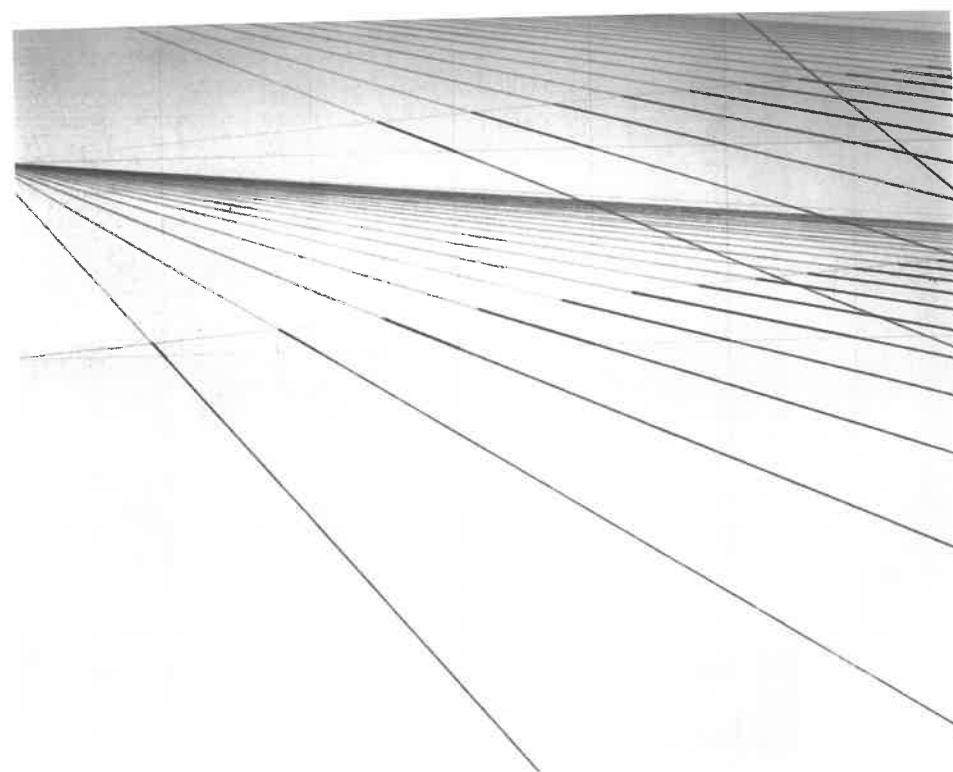
the painter has confessed.

Parenthetically, Anjali, I want to tell you of an exhibition of some contemporary Indian paintings which I had the privilege of organising at 'Gandhi Smriti' in Delhi in 1991, the memorial museum at the site of Gandhiji's martyrdom. Tyeb's 1986 'Kali' was one of the works in the show. Vivan Sundaram's 'Big Shanti', a landscape painting of Ram Kumar and a set of Nasreen Mohamedi's drawings were the other works. The exhibition was part of a commemoration of Gandhiji's martyrdom during that time of communal tension generated by the Ayodhya 'rathayātrā'.

Large numbers of people from all over the country, many of them non-literates, and children, visit the 'Gandhi Smriti' every day and they also came to the show of contemporary paintings. Functioning as their guide, explaining the significance of the works to them in Hindi, has been one of the most fulfilling communicative experiences of my life.

Nasreen's triangles and lines, triangles within triangles and parallel, divergent, and convergent lines, are a cardiography of emptiness, a central concern of her meditative art. A surprising number of viewers of these austere and yet uplifting "drawings-out", unfreezings, of "points" in space and time and biography and history where we find ourselves, were familiar with "ECG" patterns, and were quick to see the similarity of these patterns and Nasreen's geometry; and when I suggested to them that the drawings reflected "the compassionate heart-beats of the sky above our troubled and divided land", I felt that they were consoled by the art of Nasreen Mohamedi, and not merely intrigued by it; as they are when a doctor informs them that the ECG report of an ailing family member is "essentially normal". Faith had survived the holocaust of partition.

Likewise, the dislocated scattering structures swept along a landslide or flood suggested by Ram Kumar's large abstract painting were easily correlated (with a bit of prompting) by a curious group with the disintegration of communal



Above: *Untitled, mid-1980s. 7.5 x 7.5 in. Pencil on paper*  
Below: *Untitled, late 70s. 20.25 x 28.25 in. Ink on mountboard. Nasreen Mohamedi*

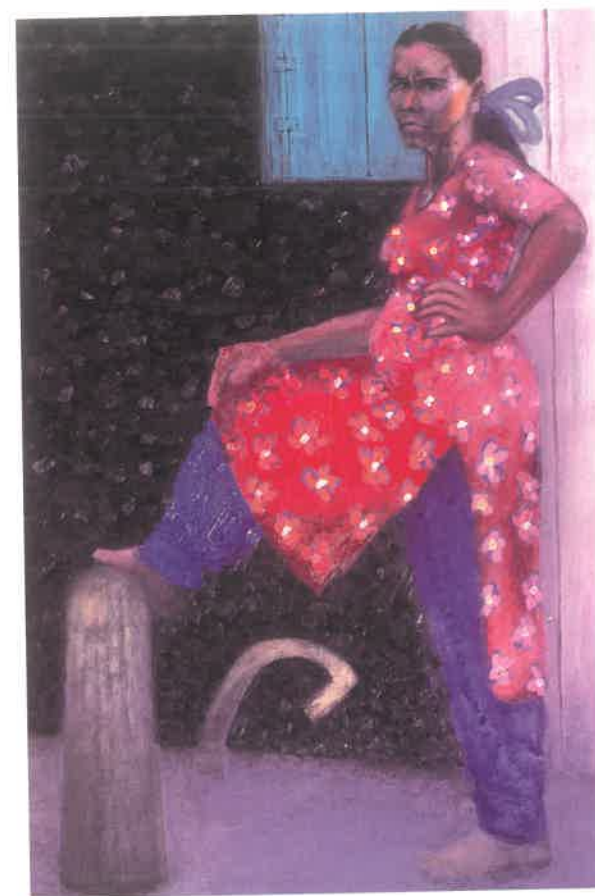


harmony and solidarity heaped upon the subcontinent by its ill-thought-through division along religious-majoritarian lines.

And the intrusive length of gold steadying the collapse of interwoven life, a yardstick of truth awakening conscience and defying fanaticism, was readily identified with Gandhi's resolve, aborted by assassination, to rebuild shattered lives and restore shaken faith in life's goodness and the divine's greatness in all its diversity of manifestation.

"Sanmati", a favourite word of Gandhi's, meaning goodwill infused with truth-mindedness, is a name I have suggested to Ram Kumar for his evocation of hope in the midst of despair.

*Landscape, 1977. 70 x 50 in. Oil on canvas. Ram Kumar*



Huddled onlookers surrounded Vivan's 'Big Shanti' (a many-dimensional embodiment of Śānti, peace, a 'Shantiniketan' evocation in its own way). A eunuch-figure(?) standing guard on the pavement outside her 'kotha', house of prostitution, during a street riot (Ardhanārīśvara's bold self-image, not available to genteel fanaticism). Wearing a salwar and kameez dotted with large printed flowers which look like embers, Big Shanti's face is a picture of defiance (Śrī Rāmākṛishna would have seen Kali in her). Her right foot rests on the probably only water-pump in the neighbourhood, like Durgā's foot on an asura: an extraordinary isomorphism with traditional iconography, but with a difference.

Big Shanti is not subduing an asura, but protecting a water-pump, source

*Big Shanti, 1982-85. 200 x 110 cms. Oil on canvas. Vivan Sundaram*



of life-sustaining water and, symbolically, of soul-nourishing resources of sacred tradition to which she is as much heir as pillars of society. And she seems to be saying something, perhaps this: "Don't you dare try and vandalise this common source of life and wisdom. You will have to deal with me. I am a victim of datelessly old exploitation and I could set this street on fire. But I will put out fires, not start them." A woman leader of the group, I think from Maharashtra, took her flock aside and whispered her response to Big Shanti's challenge to misguided orthodoxy and its compromise with fanaticism.

This is Christmas time, Anjali, and the following thought crosses my mind, too late to express to the exhibition crowd. "Some are eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake," Christ had declared, renouncing sexuality as a gesture of atonement for the victims of sexual and social exploitation and compassion for them and for sufferers of sexual deprivation, as I would like to think. Human sexual responsibility is founded on the example of the joyous celibacy of saints and sages; even as the spiritual impulse of communion with divinity, conceived as God or Self or Emptiness, is founded on the example of the ecstasy, however imperfect, of erotic coupling.

Tyeb's Kali drew large crowds.

"Mother Kali is angry with us," I explain in a whisper, gravely; and the women repeat the words to one another, troubledly. "Someone has stabbed her in the back with a sword, which has pierced through her chest, possibly close to the heart," I add, and draw attention to the vulnerability of her pregnancy (the future of life). Screaming, wounded, pregnant tigress, Kali yet raises her left hand in abhaya mudrā, gesture of reassurance, boon of fearlessness.

She has hoisted earth's exhausted feminine form on her shoulder, protecting the generativity of life and its supportive environment from our ceaseless assaults upon them. Will the earth survive our violations of them? Will Kali give birth to a safer future? "Forgive us Mother, forgive us," we pray.

"Perhaps She is initiating us, as Rambha initiated the child Mohandas,

into Rāmanāma, She will surely forgive us and there will be a chance again for Kṛṣṇa's līlā of love and the Buddha's way of restraint," I console, wishfully.

The silent blessing of the group (their tour-organiser hurrying them along) moves me to tears.

Recalling them from the door, I shout, "Look at the crumpled piece of cloth near her left foot, marked with the features of a human face! It is not an asura's or human being's head. It is the mask of humanity as our exclusive Self with which we have concealed our limitless self-awareness, our identity with formless emptiness, with all self-images of Self. Kali has removed this mask, which we had taken to be reality, starting an unceasing battle between imagined Self and projected, perceived, not-Self. Can't we love all forms, including the human form, as our own self-images, and not fear or seek the nothingness of death, which also images Self as undeniable reality (of self-awareness), not something as opposed to something else? We are forgiven, saved, liberated, we are free! Are we? Say yes or no, contemplatives!"

No, Anjali, these are not the precise words I spoke as the group departed. I did draw their attention to the crumpled cloth near Kali's foot, and the unmasking of the human species as the demon of our age: but I did not use all this vocabulary of apparent, exclusive, selfhood, and projected, perceived, "otherness". This vocabulary has evolved gradually during my journey with the triptych and the teaching of Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi and the Buddha, and with you in the writing of these pages! Be patient, elegant ādivāsī contemplative witness! I have a long way to go yet, and beyond this journey, before I can say that I have understood the magic of the mayūra mudrā, and the meaning of blinking, and screaming Kali's phallic tongue seeking to penetrate our minds with seed-sounds, mantras, of self-realisation.



*Kali, 1988, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

# FAST FORWARD: MAHISHASURA 1998

I am now troubled by the 1986 (and 1988) *Kali*, Anjali. Arguably, we are liberated by her from the dangerous pretension of exclusive, merely human, selfhood, and released into formless emptiness, limitless self-awareness. But there lurks here the fear that we might disappear into the Nihil, non-existence, the suspicion that “self-awareness” and “emptiness” are mere euphemisms for annihilation: that the exhausted feminine form on Kali’s shoulder, earth’s life, is a corpse and we, responsible for ‘geocide’, have been annihilated by time’s divinity, Kali. The distorted, deranged, form of Kali is the distortion, disfigurement, of time by self-warping self-identity.

I can see philosophically that we must be the limitless field of Self’s self-awareness: that Self cannot identify itself with something, e.g. a human form, as opposed to all other things, without suffering a contraction of consciousness (Kali’s howling disfigurement) and projecting an environment of “otherness”, becoming aware of not-Self and ceasing to be self-awareness, ourselves.

The doctrinaire suggestion in unguarded Vedānta that all forms are illusion, and the doctrinaire suggestion in unguarded Buddhism that no form is Self, (or Self’s self-image), make the teaching of self-realisation (limitless self-awareness) and the unconditional ground of all transitoriness that is nirvāṇa or emptiness, unavailable to anxious, struggling, self-consciousness.



*Kali Head, 1996. 75 x 61 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*



*Kali Head, 1997. 75 x 61 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

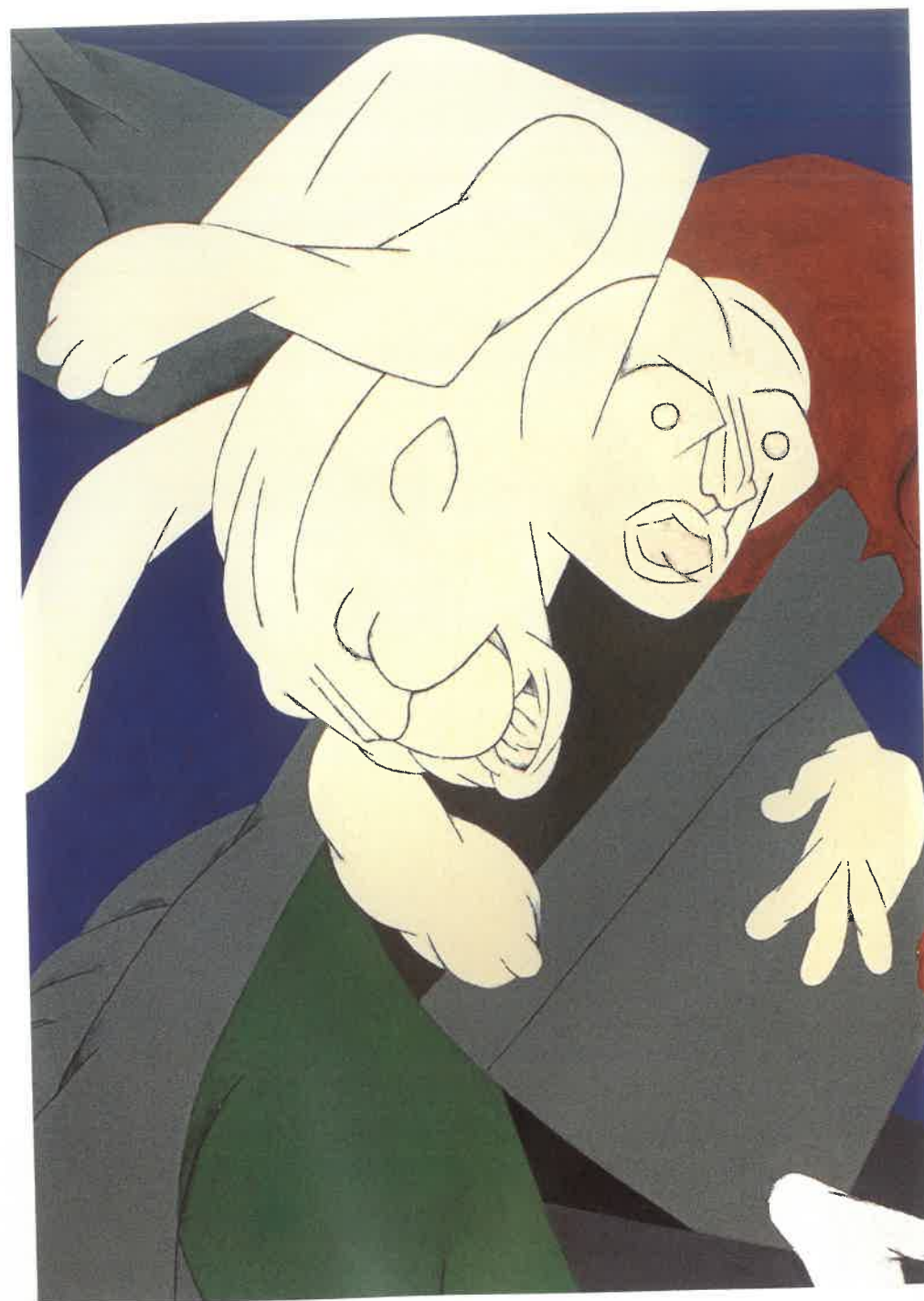
Not only 'Kali', 1986 (and 1988), but also 'Kali' (head), 1996 (and 1997), for instance, fails to reassure us that release into limitless self-awareness and unconditioned emptiness are simultaneously, or indistinguishably, also an envisioning capability which enables us to see all forms as Self's (or Emptiness's) self-imaginings; and not a dissolution into detailless formlessness, a vibrant blankness, which is neither the pūrṇa of mokṣa nor the śūnya of emptiness. Fear continues to stalk hope, and svarāj as self-realisation in the triptych's panel 2 is insufficiently supported by panels 1 and 3.

It is in 'Mahishasura', 1998, that I think Tyeb resolves this difficulty in a bold extension of conventional iconography. But let me compound the difficulty first (philosophy has an ancient spoilsport tradition and obligation!).

Our identification of ourselves, Self, exclusively with a human bodily form manifests both as the singular "I am this (bodily form)" and the collective "We are these (bodily forms)" mode of self-envisioning. (Let's call these modes of self-envisioning E1 and E2). E1 would be our self-identification as individuals, and E2 our self-identification as groups.

An E2 collectivity preserves its identity even when individuals constituting it die, so long as similar individuals replace them, and such structures have often extraordinary longevities. However, the apparent not-Selfhood of "other" E2 formations, and "other" entities and collectivities, always threatens conflict, and the possibility of the total disappearance of E2 envisionings can never be entirely ruled out (genocide, cultural annihilation or transformation, e.g. past-identity-denying religious or secular conversion, mass death, etc.). Wider modes of E2 self-envisioning – "globalisation", if you like – are probably grounded in this inherent vulnerability of any limited E2 construct, and not only in the allegedly ethically attractive and progressive character of processes of hegemonic unification and expansion. (Spoilsport thought, this, Anjali).

A fantastical-seeming E2 possibility suggests itself here: an exhaustive entitative ego-collectivity, founded on the idea of the "We" form of the totality



*Mahishasura, 1998, detail. Tyeb Mehta*





*Mahishasura, 1998. 260 x 175 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

of existing things with which egoistic "I" could identify itself: all humanity, all life, all matter, all energies, in the world. The universe itself a gigantic "We", the widest conceivable exclusivist self-identity: nothingness alone refused admission into this comprehensive congregation of things.

And such a "universe of existence" need not be a monolithic mass; it could be characterised by finely-differentiated individualities, sensitive togetherness of separatenesses and continuities. Individual angst associated with the thought of dissolution into nothingness would be reduced in such togetherness to the least conceivable magnitude.

With growing ethical-ecological sensitivity and inter-cultural understanding, and given the impact of a computational technology equipped to detail all the contents and capacities housed in the universe, such a totality of self-identity, or self-identity of totality, is not entirely a figment of the imagination: the subsumption of all apparent not-Self (barring nothingness) under a ubiquitous "We", i.e. maximally expanded ego (Alexander the Great's wish-fulfilment).

Who is this "We", this Self? Mahisasura, I think! "Mahiśa" is the vehicle of Yama, death, i.e. all forms that are exclusivist self-identities, dead in what is not them, not-Self. Death rides them. Mahisasura, the demon slain by Durgā, had the capacity to assume all forms: this is surely the idea of malleable matter which, with the aid of its energies, "forms" all things, all composite entities. The totality of these formations of matter-energy is the universe of materialism, the massive being – conglomeration of all formations – with which the tyrant in each one of us would identify, amassing identity, excluding only nothingness.

Self-consciousness which harbours such a gigantic falsehood ((the massed being as putative Self is still aware of projected not-Self (nothingness), and is not, therefore, self-awareness)) must constitute the deepest distortion of self-awareness conceivable (the wrath of Durgā, fortress protective of the integrity of self-awareness). Mahisasura is the remainderless solidarity of matter's formations, liable to crush all constituents of it, should they rebel

against the tyranny of nothingness-denying totality (One is here thinking of rebellion and dissent regarding the supposed self-sufficiency, autonomy, svarāj, of entitative totality, not internal differences, however serious.)

Self-inquiry, Self-realisation, Self-trusteeship, Durgā, must inevitably battle this caricature of Selfhood. And so She does in Tyeb's 'Mahishasura' (1998). In this work of raging luminosity, Durgā's lion-vehicle grapples with Mahiśa (the word 'Mahiśa' also denotes a buffalo, unfortunate metaphor of stubbornness, "massed-materiality" pretending to be the security of Selfhood, in reality a vehicle of death – deepest self-forgetfulness).

The buffalo, Mahiśa, representing the inflexibility of congealed self-identity, false autonomy, caricatured svarāj, contrasts with the lion, "Simha" (the word means that which, like the lion, looks in all directions, the many-directionedness, limitlessness, of self-awareness).

(Anjali, the lions supporting the dharma-cakra, Aśōkan symbol of India's faith, are the foundation – this all-directioned glance of self-awareness – worthy of "dharma", that which holds all things, including nothingness, in place.)

A shift in paurāṇika imagery, a change of spiritual metaphors, will help us better to understand what is at stake in the battle between Durgā and Mahisasura, and not only between their vāhanas.

Rāvaṇa, many-headed (entity-amassing) demon-king is naturally the sovereign of "Lankā", which means "island", the "thinghood" of ego, separate or massed, which excludes nothingness.

Sītā is Self's (Rāma's) śakti of self-awareness. She cannot be imprisoned in an isolated world of things, even if this world housed all the things that there are, if nothingness is excluded (Rāvaṇa's refusal to die) as not-Self, which would make Sītā aware of not-Self and cause her to cease to be self-awareness, herself, Self.

It is deeply instructive that it is on Vijayādaśamī, commemorating the slaying of Mahisasura by Durgā, that Rāvaṇa is killed by Rāma. Rāvaṇa is but

a version of Mahisasura.

Durgā was fashioned by the combined energies of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, the energies of creation (bringing into manifestation), sustenance, and dissolution (withdrawal from manifestation). These energies also correspond to the waking state (jāgrta) where we encounter forms, the dream state (svapna) where forms encountered during the waking state are preserved or sustained but in a way which reveals that they are self-images of ours, and the deep sleep state (suṣupti) where all forms are dissolved into apparent nothingness.

And Durgā was fashioned by these combined energies to destroy Mahisasura. Do we have here merely the idea of the necessity of a coalition of Gods to destroy a powerful enemy, a superterrorist? I don't think so at all, Anjali.

The bringing together of the energies of the three states of waking, dream, and sleep for whatever purpose can only draw attention to the centrality in consciousness of the dream state and its energy of self-imaging, because the waking state is no less an exercise and consequence of Self's self-imaging energy than the explicit dream state. And the deep sleep state is Self's self-image of not being a thing as opposed to other things but an emptiness, not-thingness, dream-like again (If this were not so, we would not be self-awareness in the waking and sleep states, i.e. cease to be ourselves, which is not the case). Brahmā's creativity is no less Brahman's, Ātman's, self-imaging, than Viṣṇu's sustenance of manifestation; nor Śiva's winding up of manifestation in a cosmic equivalent of deep sleep.

The coalition of Gods is, therefore, nothing less than Self and, inseparable from it and one with it, Self's self-imaging śakti, self-awareness as a ceaseless exploration – awareness – of its own being-meaning ("I"-"I"). A wallless fortress within which all forms are secure, as is formlessness: "Durgā" – meaning "fortress" – is feminine because of the "womb-like" accommodatingness of Self-awareness, and the diversity, like that of children, of Self's self-images located within the space of Self-awareness.



*Mahishasura, 1997. 150 x 120 cms. Acrylic on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

And Durgā's adversary is the darkness of a colossal, nevertheless exclusive, self-identity, a "thinghood" – magnified maximally by an amassment and appropriation of all things as a monolithic "We" – which, like the moon (massed materiality, ego), during a total solar eclipse, seeks to shut out entirely the light of Self-awareness: casting a shadow upon the earth, the field of variety – of separateness and togetherness – and brings to them the terror of extinction and suspicion of one another and the impulse to throw annihilationist tantrums, such as we have been witnessing in these times also.

Mahisasura is the eclipsing, annihilationist darkness of what could be called materialist fundamentalism.

There is also a Mahisasura 2, suggested by Mahisasura 1, an annihilationist darkness of the elect who don't identify themselves, Self, with human bodily forms, but with a subtle-substance, a non-material soul which supposedly survives the death of the bodily form it temporarily tenants. This soul, and an elect community of souls, are convinced that a place is reserved for them in their proper home, heaven, and are willing, in the face of perceived injustice towards them on earth, to risk the destruction of all life and civilisation on earth. Selfhood of their conception is also a thing (albeit non-material) as opposed to other things (both material and non-material), a congealed self-identity programmed to undermine self-awareness by confronting it with not-Self, not with self-images in all forms. Mahisasura 2 is the eclipsing darkness of religious fundamentalism – massed-believers the moon, this time.

Let's look at 'Mahishasura', 1998, now. In no other Durgā-Mahisasura engagement that I have seen in sacred art does the Devī extend an uplifting hand to the fallen demon, whose hand is also raised in the hope of a compassionate response from Durgā.

Durgā is clad in a white body-suit (suggestive of her form being a luminous self-image of Self, as does the white body-suit of the goat in the triptych's central panel, the white-gloved right arm of 'Kali', 1986 and 1988, and the white wings

of the 1994 'Falling Figure', and so on); and so is her "simha" vāhana. The luminous blue sky above Durgā, the field of self-awareness, emptiness, is an invitation to Mahisasura not only to enter nothingness instead of excluding it from the reach and grasp of all individualities and solidarities; but to be recast as an image of Self in its laboratory of self-realising sādhanā: Mahisasura's (1 and 2) readiness for such an experiment is indicated by the bone-whiteness of his form.

It is in this respect that 'Mahishasura', 1998, especially, is an advance beyond 'Kali', 1986 and 1988, and 'Kali' (head), 1996 and 1997, in a direction which strongly suggests that self-realisation is not a euphemism for disappearance into the Nihil, or into detailless, featureless, mokṣa or nirvāṇa: but a drama or cinema of adequate self-imaging of Self within the abiding field of limitless self-awareness (I am, or I am that I am).

Anjali, 'Mahishasura', 1998, is a sort of "lotus-sūtra". The sun's invitation, Buddha's illumination, is what enables the lotus of understanding to blossom out of mud or muck. Likewise, Mahisasura, ego sunk in the darkness of massive exclusivist self-identity is lifted up by Durgā's extended hand of compassion. This becomes possible because "being sunk in darkness" is analogous, perversely, nevertheless analogous, to "being sunk in light", i.e. self-awareness, the reflexivity of selfhood. And more. Emptiness fashions the lotus as its self-image of receptivity to light; and self-realisation is imaged by hand-gestures such as the mayūra mudrā in the "inward" turn of "otherness"-imputing fingers and their realignment with the "Self"-representing thumb, and as "hand seeking hand" in 'Mahishasura', 1998. Consistently with its extraordinary inversions, the triptych's Yogī, DKY, is illumination itself entering into the hardness of the sacrificial ground, an underground Sun inviting "uprighteous" bipedality to embrace gender-diversity, species-diversity, stance-diversity (standing, sitting down, participating, witnessing) and blossom into self-realisation, svarāj.

And the winged, clown figure ('Falling Figure', 1994), Sūfī-Vedāntin, is



floating down to take the place of the young man about to be battered to death by a crowd because of his religious "otherness": a variant of DKY who descends from the sky to offer his head at the sacrificial site, and much more, in the triptych. It seems to me that it is in the 1994 falling figure that Tyeb has most fully exorcised the ghost of despair which entered his soul when he witnessed from his Mumbai window the collapse of his vision of Indian svarāj. One doesn't have to rush to take sides, but without plunging into the heart of darkness with light, street-reality is not likely to change from bondage to freedom.





*Diagonal, 1974. 150 x 125 cms. Oil on canvas. Tyeb Mehta*

## AN AUDIT OBJECTION

Anjali, I bet you want to know when I am going to start looking at panels 1 and 3 of the triptych, and to remind me that I am reconstructing a journey with the triptych as a whole, and not only with its stunning, challenging, central, panel 2. Rightaway, and concentrating on the falling figure in the sky in panel 1, heavily white-bandaged, suggestive of the figure's status as a self-image of Self, an umbilical chord connecting him to the earth and drawing him back into its life of strife and high promise: a counterpoint to the grounded Yogī of the central panel, whose wounds are bared, not bandaged.

The twenty-two-year-old aspiring artist who witnessed the stoning to death of an "alien" by a frenzied crowd was also clearly scarred and wounded by what he saw, and tormented – as was a whole nation – by his inability to jump out of his boxed-in security and intervene in the battle of apparent Self and apparent not-Self and rescue selfhood's unity and variety of manifestation from narcissism and paranoia: to undo Self's apparent partition reflected in the partition of India, in painting, in consciousness, to unravel the tangled web of self-distortion.

Tyeb may or may not have seen the problem of painting – for himself – in quite these terms at the time. But the fact that he discarded all his earlier work when he visited London and Paris for the first time in 1954 for five years,

producing the 'Trussed Bull' (1956) and conscience-awakening 'Rickshaw-Puller' images during, or around, this time, powerful images of the congealment of exclusivist self-identity and the cruel toil of isolationist self-identity, suggests that the problem of the integrity of selfhood and its vulnerability to disorientation was an energy of disquietude deeply at work in the painter's psyche, and has never ceased to be.

The 'Diagonal' (1974) has evoked a deeply-felt response from Geeta Kapur (1976): "The limbs of the figure dislocated with an extraordinary formal precision as though in an act of ritual dismemberment. The figure becomes a face with a displaced mouth; a body with a humped shoulder; compressed thigh, flexed hand; hoof-like foot. The limbs are suspended together on the picture surface in a series of gestures. If we read them separately, the gestures convey doubt; although the image adds up to terror."

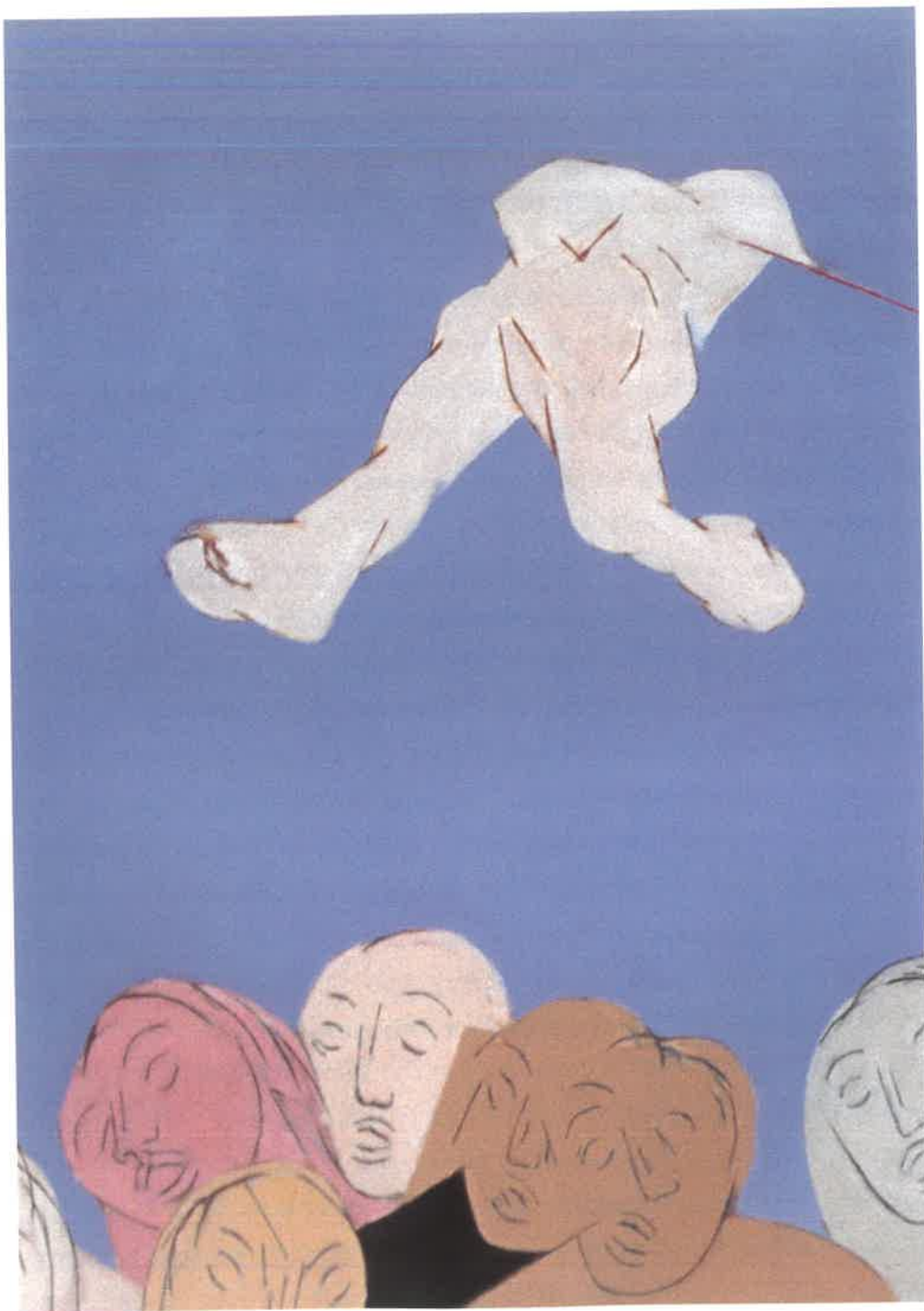
A bent band of lightning (if you like) slices the frame and the figure (falling again) diagonally, extending from the bottom left corner of the picture to the top right corner. The bottom triangle of the figure, less obviously body-suited than triptych and post-triptych figures, but white-surfaced, is a woman with a right hand gesture which aspires to be an *abhaya mudrā* but not convincingly (unlike 'Kali' II, 1988's and 'Kali', 1986's unmistakable left-handed boon of fearlessness). Apparent, would-be Self: not indivisible self-awareness.

The top triangle is many-limbed-many-footed, as apparent not-Self seems to be, "more", "majoritarian", unlike the singular, "minoritarian" face of apparent Self. One and many are bifurcated and the triptych's resolution of the problem of exclusivism and otherness in terms of the notion of Self's self-images is still a long way away. The lightning is an audit-objection to any sort of entitative amalgamation, hegemonic or democratic, of apparent Self and apparent not-Self, as a possibility of svarāj, selfhood's sovereignty, stability, autonomy. Excluded nothingness is what causes this humpty-dumpty to tumble down. (Anjali, does the absence of a 'zero' in expenditure or income figures

raise an auditor's eyebrows?)

The audit-objection is annulled in 'Mahishasura', 1998, where embattled Durgā and Mahisasura (the ultimate amalgamator/amalgamation of entities against nothingness) are set apart by the diagonal formation of her lion's engagement with his buffalo. Reduced to isolated "thinghood" (amalgamations of entities are overwhelmed by nothingness seen as not-Self) in the bottom right-hand corner, Mahisasura raises his right hand in supplication, and Durgā extends her offer of an uplifting hand across the apparent Self/apparent not-Self boundary, and the hope is held out not only of the demon of thinghood seeing the deep blue of nothingness adorning Durgā as a halo, as a primal self-image of Self (a not-thingness, not a thing as opposed to other things), but also all things as diverse self-images of Self that do not have to amalgamate in fear or separate from one another in suspicion. 'Diagonal' (1974) is a stark confession of the apparent impossibility of overcoming dualism in svarāj; 'Mahishasura', 1998, is a post-triptych revelation of an iconographical composition which transmutes this apparent impossibility into a standing invitation.

The pre-triptych trussed bull and the early rickshaw-puller (burdened with his own exclusivist oppressed-human-self-identity) images are transfigured in the triptych's playful goat, vulnerable but freed from the burden of an exclusive goat-identity; and in 'Rickshaw-Puller' 1982, where the left-leaning toiler is guided by enlightenment (self-imaged as Devī) into a realisation of his chariot-teering Kṛṣṇa self-image of Self, starting him on a sourceward journey (a metaphor for post-cold-war socialism's inward turn).



*Shantiniketan Triptych, panel 1, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

## ELEGANT SORROW

Why is a heavily-bandaged figure, propelled by an umbilical chord connecting him to the earth (the twenty-two-year-old helpless witness of the inhumanity of a crowd?) plunging into a closely-knit, 'Mahisasura', group? The 1994 'Falling Figure', with his comical, winged, capability, is doing the same. But the seeds of that playful intervention must lie in the bandaged falling figure of panel 1.

We'll have to look at panel 1's extraordinary group to decode the falling, flying, concealed figure ("At last!", isn't that what you are saying Anjali? So is your lookalike, the second standing figure from the left).

They certainly don't look like the murderous crowd Tyeb saw in action in 1947. They don't look like Mumbai people of any particular religious persuasion. There is an Indian ādivāsī, "stoned", rhythm to the amalgamated form and movement of their multifooteedness; the drummers look like Santhals; but the women – such as your look-alikes – look like metropolitan actresses (from Mumbai or Melbourne); and some of the figures are in mainstream Hindu-Buddhist saffron-red cloaks, one of the monastics in a tāntrika black robe; and on the extreme left, is a ghost-like old ancestral figure, huddled with contemporary partners in a generation-transcending gesture (he is more ominous, as I realise later).

It is their body-suited-forms which identify their “ādivāsī” identity, source-seeking-inhabiting-consciousness self-imaged, costumed, in a variety of forms: and not as ethnic Indian ādivāsīs, exclusively. The band of dancing revellers (I am writing this on New Year’s eve) are thus not an amalgamation of representative human ethnic identities, a global anthropological pop-group, but a pattern of Self’s (ādivāsī reality’s) self-images as human beings who tread lightly on the ground in a shuffle-dance, unburdensomely, unexploitingly. Do they? (I take a less cheerful view of them later on, I must warn you).

The thick, angled, brick-red Shantiniketan earth is, of course, a place-signature of sheer genius, Anjali. And if you were to ask me to identify one feature, or one set of features, of the triptych as a whole which could be said to symbolise “Self” itself, other than the conventional thumb in DKY’s mayūra mudrā, I would draw your attention to the running, angled, band of brick-red and mud-browns which grounds all these panels: the border of Mother Earth’s sārī, Self’s manifest field of play for its self-images, playground of Mahādevī’s children. Pūrṇa, in Sunya’s embrace: vibrant stillness, Aruṇācala, sadguru Ramaṇa Maharshi’s refuge, āshrama. Om Śrī Ramaṇāya Namaḥ.

Panel 1’s celebrants look like puppets, but not in the sense of inherently inert objects manipulated by an external operator. The flying, falling, bandaged, figure (let’s give him a name, ‘Triśanku’, the ‘neither here nor there’ character in the Viśvāmitra story, adapting it to the needs of our journey: but more of this later, Anjali, all right?) is also connected by a string to the earth; a puppet, if you like, animated by its own Self, limitless self-awareness symbolised by the rounded perfection of the earth: and such is also the puppetry of all the other figures of the panel. Is it? (I doubt this later on, I must confess).

Compositionally, even as an uninterpreted painterly text, panel 1 is stunningly beautiful. More flat-blue sky than in the other two panels, elegant cylindricality resting on deep gravel red. The flat blue expanse (like colour-expanses generally in Tyeb’s work) is “zero”-dimensional in that it is suggestive



of not-thingness, emptiness; its closedness like the boundedness of the sky suggestive of the limitless and yet “curved” intimacy of self-awareness that such emptiness must be, the reflexivity of Selfhood.

The white flying-figure with an eagle-beak kicks away two-dimensionally in the depths of the void, held like a kite by a string which, if extended, would lead into the white hand of the central contemplative sitting witness of panel 3, earth-symbol (the earth had borne witness when the Buddha had been challenged by Māra to produce a witness of his enlightenment. So the triptych’s contemplatives are the earth, of course!) And gathered together on the red-border beneath the blue are nine heads, male and female and one ghost-shaped, attached to torsos (bare and cloaked in saffron, red, and black) and swaying arms and drumming hands and dancing legs and shuffling, bare, feet. The intense painterly pleasingness of panel 1 has only deepened for me during the many years I have devoted to reading it and unravelling its meanings, in the light of the teaching of Advaita Vedānta as revived for our age by Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi.



A thought on the “cut-out” character of many of the triptych’s figures, and of other works of Tyeb’s. Given the “zero” dimension of Tyeb’s colour expanses – blue, yellow, pink, etc., i.e. their flatness and directionlessness, and a luminosity more “after-image” than surface, highlighting the non-entitateness of Self’s field of self-awareness, its emptiness, Self’s self-images wrought from the substantiality of awareness need not be more than ‘zero + 1’-dimensional: i.e. representable as cut-outs and costumes which restore to the apparent otherness, or exclusive Selfhood, of the contents of self-awareness their proper self-image-status; and to consciousness, the integrity of non-duality, limitlessness of reach, not the contraction and clotting of self-distortion which is ego.

The world is the unveiling meaning of being and nothingness, Self’s self-images-in-the-making: rich and austere.

I haven’t told you a story for a long time, Anjali, so here’s one which illuminates panel 1’s congregational face, and is illumined by it, adapted from the Nāṭyaśāstra.

Brahmā desired to create a fifth Veda, accessible to all beings, regardless of caste or class or gender or whatever, which would also entertain all, bring joy all around (Already one can see that this is a metaphor of Self and its self-awareness which cannot be hidden from anyone, the source of the joy of being): and he thought of nāṭya, drama, as capable of fulfilling this end. The playing of all roles by actors, all actors, in principle, exemplifying the diversity of Self’s self-imaging, the not-thingness not only of environing nothingness but of all forms as self-images.

Towards this end of making the performance of plays available to all (as a mirror of Self’s play of self-imaging in consciousness), Brahmā fashioned from within himself a hundred actors, and ordered his engineers Nala and Nīla (‘lotus’ and ‘blue’ being the evocative meanings of these names) to construct a playhouse, the first in time, perhaps the cosmos itself. All its entrances and exits had to be guarded by black-cat gandharvas against the possibility of terrorist

sabotage by champions of inflexible thinghood, congealed self-identity, as opposed to the accommodating flexibility of self-images. At last the theatre was ready for the first show.

Demons, asuras, and humans, men, women and children of all sections of society formed the excited audience. The primal actors offered a performance of a play depicting a battle between devas and asuras, gods and demons.

Blinded by the footlights of awed attention, the actors (a special order of manifestation different from the categorial fixity of gods, demons, humans, and others) allowed their self-image-status to be frozen into the rigid dazzlingness of deva or god-identity: and instead of offering a play, with the role-playing ambiguity of acting, they merely reproduced in narrative and action a victory of devas against asuras.

The asuras were furious and smashed the primeval playhouse, vandalising its stage and wings and green-rooms and conveniences and seats and aisles and the box-office and foyer and parking lots.

Troubled though he was, Brahmā ordered a reconstruction of the playhouse, conceding the asuras’ objection that the integrity of the play was compromised by the actors’ retreat into congealed, albeit godly, identities. Entrances and exits and all facilities were guarded by representatives of all categories of beings: and a play was performed in which identities were not frozen, victory and defeat were symbolic of possibilities of deeper self-imaginings of Self, a kaleidoscope of the limitless līlā (play) of Self’s anjali (offering): of its meanings, explorations, experiments, and risk-taking capabilities.

This extraordinary myth, which I have only modified very slightly in the retelling, is trivialisingly regarded as the acknowledgement of the importance of rehearsals in theatrical productions. Now there must be no doubt an element of truth in this reading of the myth: but the myth is a profound allegory of a fateful “fall” of self-awareness. From a condition of aboriginal (in the source-self-situated sense) felicity where self-identity is not an individual or collective

identification of selfhood with a favoured bodily form or collectivity of bodily forms; but the seeing of these forms, and all forms, as more or less adequate or inadequate self-images of Self. And through the meditative pressure of a shared, singular, self-awareness, to seek in individual and interdependent human (at least) life a movement towards more faithful and more beautiful and more awesome picturings of Self's autonomy (in ethical conduct, ecological sensitivity, individual forbearance and enjoyment). The Nāṭyaśāstra allegory hints at a fall from this height of felicity to a condition of forgetfulness of the self-imaging role of forms, and a collapse of self-revealing playfulness into the rigidity of self-diminution, self-distortion: the "thingification" of magical self-representation, open to change and connectedness and conservation, into the hardness of exclusivist self-identity.

"Others" immediately suffer a similar fate and the world becomes a dangerous place. Resentment launches destruction of the conditions (theatre, playhouse) and environment of fluent life. The allegory of the playhouse records that there is a realisation of the enormity of the fall from aboriginal felicity, and a restoration of it; but relapses are recurrent and it is in one such phase of fallenness that we find the congregation of panel 1, like our times.

Look at each of their faces and forms: sadness and guilt and fear are slowing down their dance of victory over others (the victory, it would seem, of a global human order over all other orders of life, human and other). Look at the first figure on the extreme left. A ghost-like head, a death-image, stalks the group like a curse upon their festivity of domination, invited by their exclusion of nothingness as not-Self from their self-conception announced by the drummers: "I am this, as opposed to that, We are this, as opposed to that."

However, even as the drums announce the group's self-understanding, the drummers and the others seem aware of the "I am" or "I" sound of silence – again excluded from their animation – which fills the void above and steadies their hearts, with a sadness descending upon all their faces, the sadness of the

realisation that their singularity has been compromised not by their plurality, but by the adulterating addition of an exclusive specificity to its limitlessness of self-awareness. "I am this, We are this" will be opposed by a clamouring force of "I am that, We are that" within and outside the group.

Look at the black-robed tāntrika or technological wizard. Is the feat of being suspended in the sky (like Triśanku), an alternative human habitation founded on another planet, through tāntrika capability (aided by science and technology) or futurist space-engineering and transportation, more miraculous than dancing bipedality on earth? Are we sure Triśanku doesn't want to return to earth?

Triśanku, Anjali, was a king shunned by all, including his subjects, because of his leprosy-stricken body (surely a metaphor of the contagiousness of exclusivist self-identity). Yet so attached, self-identified, was he with his body that he didn't want to die (be nothingness, which he couldn't believe was a self-image of himself). So he approached the sage Viśvāmitra who was vulnerable to flattery, and proclaimed him the greatest living sage and pleaded with the now mightily pleased sage that he should help Triśanku ascend to heaven without losing his leprous (exclusively self-identified) body.

Viśvāmitra's austerities enabled Triśanku to rise to heaven, but the gatekeepers of that realm of eternal happiness (where exclusivist self-identity was undermining its foundations) found Triśanku a likely spreader of such identity and sent him hurtling down back towards the earth. Shouting in mid-air for help, his desperate cry was heard by Viśvāmitra, who commanded him to remain suspended in the sky and began to build an alternative universe around him, but the gods dissuaded him from carrying his plan through because that would only multiply the earth's problem of supporting the catastrophic consequences of exclusivist self-identity.

The tāntrika-technologist is aware of Triśanku's unenviable condition and his face bears anxieties regarding a dominant human group of exclusivist



TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

individualities and collectivities achieving a worthwhile existence in another corner of the universe without self-realisation, i.e. the realisation of Self's ubiquitous self-imaging everywhere, including our much-maligned earth.

Look at the stunning (although sad) women in the group now, Anjali, at least three of them your clones. Theirs is a contemporary, even futurist, shoulder-to-shoulder stance with the men, a stance of perfect gender equality. But their sadness, reflected in their sporting monastic robes, has to do with their realisation that while mutually respecting closed self-identities can ground working equality, they cannot initiate them into the alchemy of mokṣa, the discovery of gender-diversity as the variety of self-images of Self, singular and identical everywhere, not merely "equal": gender-variety as their, i.e. gender-transcending Self's field of manifestation.

The absence of any non-human life in panel 1 also shows up the inadequacy of mere gender-equality for svarāj, sovereignty of Self, which cannot exclude non-human life and non-living matter and non-entitative nothingness: generativeness self-imaged beyond human life. Bandaged Triśanku, connected

by an umbilical string to a contemplative in panel 3, is becoming transformed from royal frigidity into self-imaging fluidity. His transformed return seems to be the secret prayer of panel 1's ambiguously victorious huddle of humanism.

Triśanku's ambition to reach heaven without any fundamental transformation of his self-conception (i.e. that he, Self, is a given embodied form of personality) need not be understood merely metaphysically: it also suggests the hope of humanist ideologies to hasten the arrival of a utopia (promising liberty, equality, fraternity), or of religious ideologies to hasten the arrival of a religion-specific global order of human civilisation, without any radical change in the self-understanding of human individuals and groups.

Panel 1's face of disenchantment can also be seen as a response to these temporal, historical-ideological aspirations. The manifestation of a disillusioned secular/religious utopianist, open to a truly revolutionary transformation of self-identity (seeing himself/herself/Self, not as any thing – material-mortal or non-material-immortal – nor as nothing, but as both, as Self's self image), could also be understood as a "landing", "grounding", of Triśanku, in reality, an end to the "neither-here-nor-there" vacillation of humanity between forms of delusion.

## SELF-DISTORTION I

If the bandaged, kicking, flying, falling, returning figure in panel 1's sky could be hidden, exploratorily, and also the melancholic, disillusioned, faces of its many-limbed puppet-dancers doing a shuffle-number that would make Michael Jackson or Hrithik Roshan jealous, one would think that the panel was an explicit portrayal of the inter-linkedness of self-images of non-exclusivist self-identity.

But how can one want to hide, even exploratorily, the surprise wrapped in full body-bandages, the kicking foetus of svarāj seeking birth, manifestation, revelation? (Or mutilated Triśanku being returned to earth by a hostile heaven?)

And the face of enlightenment cannot be melancholic, Anjali. It can be sorrowing or breath-holding or anxiously chanting (Nam myoho renge kyo) as are the faces of the contemplative witnesses in panels 2 and 3, but not hope-abandoning as even your likenesses in panel 1 seem to be (only to teach you never to be like that!) And as DKY's face shows, the face of svarāj can suffer torture or pain (migraine?) without ceasing to be compassionate. But no, panel 1's faces (and the faces of the fundamentalist work-force in panel 3, more of that later) compel one to look again at the swaying limbs and strumming fingers and moving feet: and recognise that they are in paralysis, the shuffle a sensationless dragging of post-stroke feet. In bondage, not freedom. Self-distorted, not self-realised.

## BUT WHERE, IN THE TRIPTYCH, IS JOY?

I can hear you ask an exasperated question at this point: "Where, but where, in the triptych is there a face of joy, pleasure, never mind enlightenment, without which no portrait of life, never mind svarāj, can help life to survive in the midst of darkness, delusion, and destruction?" Let me take a little break of thought, a sip of water, before venturing an answer to that un-self-deceiving, unsettling, unblinking question. The third of panel 2's seated witnesses whispers words of comfort: "My thoughts are with you, Ramu, you will find an answer to Anjali's question, but I am glad she asked."

Look at the madonna form in panel 2, a Renoir nude-costumed (suggestive of nudity as a self-image of Self, its unmediated accessibility) woman, a Botticelli Venus, no less, a ripeness of sexuality which has no use for the life-denying executioner. Look at her face, Anjali, the sensuous mouth finding in whispered words of gender-identity addressed to the female goat a hushed pleasure of sympathy which is erotic without being sexual, terrestrial not bestial, a breath-holding, breathing, breath-taking pout of self-realisation: a face of joy and pleasure, certainly, an encounter with love beyond the agenda of desire and reproduction and species-centredness.

The goat-madonna's sniffing seal of comradeship takes Venus by surprise, the shrinking of hesitation (etched on her face in zero + 1 dimensionality)



yielding to a shudder of species-transcending self-discovery. The enwrapment of the woman by the she-goat's foot turning into a goat-white human arm, and the woman's reciprocating arm turning goat white, are a metaphorical multiplication of the pleasure of widening self-identity, as is the tripedality of the woman as a variant of bipedal and quadripedal svarāj.

There's your help to life's survival against separatism and hegemonism. DKY's anointing mayūra mudrā seeks the double woman-goat-madonna foreheads for the acknowledging inscription of a pair of "third-eyes". (Imagine Modigliani's hand in mayūra mudrā shaping a visionary "bindī" on your – and Leela's – wide foreheads!)

And there is one more place where there shines a deep answer to your point-blank query.

Look at the white-heat-transmuted head-and-face of the post-illumination executioner figure in panel 2, invaded by the red torso and head and breasts and swaying arms of a feminine form. This miracle of self-realisation has been wrought by DKY's "otherness"-dissolving mayūra mudrā, and the species-crossing manifestation of inclusive self-identity in the metamorphosing embrace of the woman and she-goat at the sacrificial site. Look at the open-mouthed expression of wonder on the doubled-face of the transfigured standing form – his and her mouth – and on the seated madonna, Śārādā's, face. (Tyeb's cut-out faces have a restricted repertoire of expressions, unlike dimensioned representations, but they are more "inscribed" or "radiating" for that very reason, yielding depths of encounter in the way in which still-photography's faces do to the expectations of staring, liberated from the Edinburgh oculist's censorship: a blinking reining-in of blinking).

The parted lips of amazement are an utterance, a "stutter"-ance, in the case of the executioner: "I am – Self is – self-imaged in all forms, all forms are my self-images, not only my frozen, executioner, excluding, form! Male and female, both are my, Self's, self-images, my self-representations!" This realisation



GOAT MADONNA



must be distinguished from the dualist acknowledgement, or perhaps from a qualified dualist acknowledgement, to the effect that each of us has both male and female dimensions of personality and even embodiment, Anjali, if we are fully to encounter the faces of ecstasy which the triptych's central panel unveils for us: allaying your anxiety (the parted lips of panel 1's melancholic victors are a sigh of disillusionment; those of the witnessing contemplatives are a ceaseless chant of obeisance to the lotus sūtra, a prayer for the blooming of the lotus of enlightenment from the murky depths of the heart's disorientation of self-identity).

"I am both female and male self-images of Self, in conjugal togetherness or celibate separateness, in joy or sorrow". But "being both male and female self-images" constitutes an abiding conjugality, symbolising singularity, which underlies all the diversity of self-imaging: layering an expression of unbelievable bliss, a shudder of joy, underneath all the pain of the world borne on our

shoulders, our pain.

The Picasso head of the executioner is in ecstasy-upholding agony, his feminine form more serene and shy about it, unshaken by the joy in her protective, restraining, work of compassion with swaying hands.

Black, the colour of the executioner's body-costume, is the colour of *tamas* in Hindu spiritual psychology, unthinking obduracy; the colour red of the blossoming, supplementary, feminine form, is the colour of *rajas*, tireless engagement; and the ashen-white head of the original black-hooded suicide-slaughterer is the transmuting work of the heat of self-realisation, the colour of *sattva*, cross-bearing purity.

Self-exploration; witnessing, waiting, chanting; the revolutionary, potent, non-violent activism of the symbolism-wielding turtle *Yogī* and the miracle-working madonna; harmony of red, black, and white – *rajas*, *tamas*, and *sattva*; the "etched" '0 + 1' dimensioned expressions of wonder at the invasive power of self-realisation – these are life-supporting refusals to compromise with defeat, darkness, and destruction, Anjali. But I know your question was intended by you to spur me to more inquiring thinking. Before I return to panel 1's problems once more, an important consequence of demographic discipline entailed by panel 2's images of self-realisation demands attention.

## THE DEMOGRAPHY OF SELF-REALISATION

Look again now at the first contemplative in panel 2, you; and the second squatting – there are only two such in the triptych – figure in panel 3 (the squatting, miracle-working Śārādā is the first), again designed by Tyeb with ādivāsī austerity and Modiglianesque elegance, you again. Notice, Anjali, that both have an enfolding (with a “may I be yours too ?” pleading power), “other”-looking arm around them.

The triptych is centrally a portrait of svarāj, freedom, as self-realisation. The realisation on the part of the androgynous standing figure (which annuls the sacrificial ceremony getting under way at the foot of the flagpost) that they, Self, are self-imaged by (also, but not only) all human forms, all are the children of Śiva-Pārvatī; and that they are no less self-imaged by formless nothingness, i.e. they, Self, can also see themselves as without any progeny. The balance of these two self-conceptions of self-realisation has to be a restrained (numerically, and in other ways too, i.e. ecologically) human species: both in totality, and in its segmental sub-divisions.

Sovereign Self (Svarāj) will be poorly self-imaged by an altogether too small population of human beings who, in their vulnerability to collective death, cannot credibly image Self’s immutability. Likewise, an exploding human population (in totality, and segmentally) could hardly be suggestive of



“CAN THIS BE RIGHT?”  
CONTEMPLATIVE ĀDIVĀSĪ WITNESSES

the singular self-sufficiency (requiring not a plurality of selves, but a vision of itself as a limitless diversity of self-images, including nothingness) of Selfhood. Self-realisation is the generativity of self-images (the joy of sexuality) and it is the thinglessness of Self's field of self-awareness, the expanse of emptiness (the joy of celibacy, brahmacarya). Indeed, the sexuality and celibacy of self-realisation are both brahmacarya ('the way of the Vast'), inseparable ecstasy and sorrowing compassion: this combination of modes of consciousness can be read by blinkingly staring, or staringly blinking, at the Śiva-Pārvatī faces and the Śāradā-goat set of heads.

Now, Anjali, I can explain the significance of the enfolding "other"-suggesting arms (brown against yellow-grey and white against significant grey) around you in panels 2 and 3. These are ways in which the triptych's contemplative figures are saying that we, Self, can regard ourselves as doubled in self-imaging reproductivity without ceasing to be single people. "Other" people are also "us", "their" children also "ours". (It is in this sense that, for me, you are both you and also Leela).

## NO, THE TRIPTYCH IS NOT ETHNOGRAPHY

Let us indeed return to panel 1 now, and let me put out of the way a lingering thought which some viewers of the triptych, especially of its first panel, may still harbour: that what we are offered in the work are reconstructions of ādivāsī ritual life, specifically Santhal modes of it around Shantiniketan.

Panel 1, one might think, is a ritual of mourning for a community member who has died, the drums both an announcement of the passing and an invocation of divinities for the safe passage of the deceased. The painter has included the death-masked ghost figure amongst the mourners to highlight the eschatological character of the occasion (so the thought would unravel), and the falling figure could consistently be seen as representing the reincarnating return journey of the departed one from the realm of the dead to the reality of the living.

Plausible, but trivialising thought, this, Anjali. How can we forget the non-Santhal monastic robes of some of the figures (saffron, red, tāntrika black), suggestive of some contemporary film's exotic party-scene, the ritual-transcending depth of disappointment, as opposed to merely ritual-appropriate lamentation, the finely etched individualities, the meaning-holding "heavy-bandaging" of the falling, kicking, foetus in the sky-womb, the body-suitedness of the forms, distancing them from mere ethnicity, and inviting reflection on the meaning of the word "ādivāsī" (source-inhabiting), the unbearable lightness of being (the



ground) and the no less unbearable heaviness of nothingness (the sky), drawing universality and specificity out from one another, and so on and so on ?

No, the triptych is not anthropological field-work in the Birbhum environs of Bengal. Choreographed though it is in Santhal movement and rest (labouring activists and witnessing contemplatives), the work is wholly without the voyeuristic gaze of the "civilised" directed towards the "savage" which afflicts even, for instance, Gauguin's hauntingly beautiful studies of Tahitian women. Tyeb is neither civilising nor trivialising the savage. He may be (to use Ramachandra Guha's felicitous title of his biography of Verrier Elwin) "savaging the civilised": surfacing the holocaust-wish lodged like a time-bomb in the self-distorted self-identity of secessionist and hegemonist humanity, enslaved by narcissism and paranoia.

## SELF-DISTORTION II

A recurrent argument in these pages against exclusivist self-identity has been this: that when we identify ourselves, Self, exclusively with a given form (for instance with our human bodily form, designating all other forms, including formless nothingness, as not-Self), our self-conception coerces us into imagining that we are not self-awareness, that Self becomes aware of an extensive expanse of not-Self: and we are pushed into a paranoid cage, cornered like an animal (like the executioner, isolated and "framed" even in victory against not-Self, as are panel 1's humanists). I may here and there have carelessly suggested that Self can, in this way, actually cease to be self-awareness and become "not-Self"-awareness. This is, of course, impossible, Self cannot be Self (the reflexivity of "I") without being self-awareness.

The experientially paramount fact, however, is that our exclusivist self-conception casts a shadow on our mind (like the shadow of the earth – here, the "I am this body" conception – cast on the moon during a lunar eclipse, partial or total, when the earth comes between the sun and the moon; distorting, even concealing, the moon, the mind). This is bondage, self-distortion, bondage as self-distortion. ("Self-distortion", again, is a phrase I use in the experiential mode, without suggesting that Self, as such – primal, self-grounded, immutable reality – can actually become distorted. An enduring nightmare is



*Shantiniketan Triptych, panel 3. Tyeb Mehta*

not the cessation of light, but it does claim the status of darkness).

This might be an appropriate place and time to break the silence I seem to have observed so far in relation to panel 3, which bears the same title as panel 1, "Bondage as self-distortion" (for me; Tyeb hasn't given titles to the panels, they are together 'Shantiniketan Triptych'); but is a different portrait, another face of self-distortion's svarājlessness, unfreedom.

We know the moon's light is borrowed form the sun, like the mind's from Self; and so when the appearance of the moon becomes distorted during a lunar eclipse, we worry about the wholeness of the sun itself. Likewise when exclusivist self-identity distorts the mind, making us imagine that we are without self-awareness, we worry about the wholeness of Self and can be fairly described as self-distorted and in bondage to the encircling world of "otherness" projected by such self-distortion.

Now (Yes, Anjali, I am making a transition to panel 3!) think of a solar eclipse, the alignment of sun, moon, and earth where the moon comes between the sun and the earth, blocking out the sun wholly or partially, casting dark shadows upon the earth at midday and read its symbolism carefully.

In the picture of the lunar eclipse, the moon is the mind and the earth, which comes between the moon and the sun, the "I am this bodily form exclusively" idea which comes between the mind and Self, and the mind becomes distorted and darkened by it. In the imagery of the solar eclipse, the moon which comes between the sun and the earth, casting dark shadows upon the earth, is the "I am a soul, pure rationality of mind, exclusively, not the body at all" idea which abandons, or seeks to abandon, the body and its field of life, earth, plunging it in darkness. The moon is also, during a solar eclipse, in "the same place" as the sun: as the 'soul' in the "I am a soul..... not the body at all" idea is imagined to be in the same place as God, i.e. in heaven.

Panel 3's perspective is the exact opposite of panel 1's view of Self being exclusively our embodied personality, our bodily form: it is the passionately



"TO HEAVEN, NOW, EARTH BE DAMNED!"

held conviction that I am not at all, we are not at all, this material, mortal, decaying, body, but another thing (a thing nevertheless, as opposed to other things!) altogether, non-material, immutable, immortal, its proper residence being not earth but heaven.

Those who hold such a view (associated chiefly, but not exclusively, with traditions of dualistic theism) see themselves, Self, and its habitat in a place elsewhere than here on earth and its life-forms: and commit themselves to regarding their bodily forms and all that is this side of heaven as not-Self, which coerces them into thinking or imagining that they, Self, are aware of not-Self, and are not, therefore, self-awareness. Self-distortion again, and bondage to the realm of not-Self in which they are currently trapped. ('Self' on this view becomes 'soul', a non-material thing imprisoned in forms and conditions of physicality, materiality: a palpable "shrinking" of Self by head-hunting not-Self!) The pictorial rendering of this species of self-distortion (as I see it) in panel 3 is chilling, Anjali, and would be unbearably so but for the redeeming, questing, non-committal presence of the contemplatives, you among them. We'll look at the picture soon.

Panel 2 of the triptych, addressed at length in these pages, shows how we can be released from the bondages of self-distortion by seeing all forms, including our bodily forms and possible non-material forms, as Self's, our own, self-images, playfully engaged with one another or sulkingly separated in the lap of limitless self-awareness: the Divine Mother's red-earth-bordered sky-blue sārī of emptiness. But it's time we looked once more (at least) at the sad richness, the tragic elegance, of panel I. I am sorry this journey is turning out to be so stop-go-ish. Not an express train experience. The slowness of mail trains is compensated by the extraordinary variety of passengers who keep coming on board at every station, like thoughts on this fifteen-year-long journey with the triptych. Don't leave!



*Celebration, 1995, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

## THE STORY OF THE MISSING FRIEND

Let's begin with the many-coloured assemblage of "costumed" dancing feet and legs, gliding along the red earth, smooth proscenium for the representative group of humanist human beings victorious over the apparent not-Self-hood of other human beings, not necessarily humanist in ideology but life-upholding in a non-anthropocentric way, for instance; and apparently protected against non-human life perceived as not-Self and excluded from the party; and confident of the subservience of non-living materiality beneath their feet; and with their backs turned against emptiness, wishfully, the celebrants are unaware that death – the figure on the extreme left – has joined them as a representative of uninvited nothingness.

Bipedality, like quadrupedality, powerfully images the idea of svarāj (coming into one's own, being on one's own feet, self-supportiveness), as does group multipedality for the group: and panel 1's dancing feet and criss-crossing legs do this, and more.

Dance-movements of legs and feet as opposed to stationary standing or even linear, or conformist, marching, are suggestive of being present in many places at the same time, the many-centredness of Selfhood, a more dynamic dimension of svarāj than "standing on one's own feet." (It's interesting that Tyeb's large 1995 work 'Celebration', whose figures include many triptych figures,



including the goat, is a more convulsed and ecstatic portrayal of svarāj as dance, and bears the title that it does. More of this later).

Intermeshed legs and feet, many-coloured, their swaying animation bringing a forward-movement to their formation suggestive of the confident advance of a victorious order on earth's stage. Swinging arms with large, long-fingered, hands, flocking together; and the huddle of troubled heads above the torsos, male and female, with entangled monastic robes – saffron-red-black – boasting, perhaps, the induction of spiritual energy into secular, humanist, progress; interloper, spoilsport death rubbing shoulders with the living (the chipping away of being by nothingness); two drums, many drumming hands; a picture of self-consciousness, many-centred as “we”, singular as “I”: the two sounds of the two drums. A rare, painterly invocation of embodied, self-imaged, Selfhood, Anjali.

But why are all of you sad? Because you have excluded non-human life from your celebration, turned your backs on nothingness. Lost the sense of being something and also nothingness, i.e. self-images of Self. Congealed into thinghood, sophistication of individuality and coherence of collectivity notwithstanding; bodies as body-suits forgotten, you are now beginning to trip over one another: the drums are without the pure notes of sa and pa (the first and fifth, unalterable, Self-symbolising notes of the octave), “I” and “We”, the sound and silence of Self; you are petrified, anxious, dangerous. You feel insecure, as though you had lost a group member, and could do with a replacement. Death affects grief. The beauty of self-imaging self-awareness has yielded to the bondage of self-distortion. I could take a break here, I bet you could too, Anjali; and be back with a well-known, but less well-told, Vedāntic story which throws light on panel 1's loss of the undistorted light of self-awareness. May Śrī Ramaṇa help me tell it insightfully.

A group of ten close friends are crossing a river in spate. Their boat capsizes and everybody has to try and swim ashore to safety. Arriving there

one by one, when they think all have crossed over, each swimmer does a group-count to make sure that all ten have survived the fury of the torrents. Each, however, is only able to count nine persons, and all are convinced that one of them has drowned, that they are not the invincible ten that they were, and start wailing in loud lamentation for the one they fear they have lost.

A wandering holy man hears their wailing and, moved by compassion, approaches the group and asks them what has caused them to be in such grief. In a chorus of distraught voices they tell the sādhu what happened to them in their attempt to cross the river in spate (Count yourself lucky, Anjali, I am not going to repeat the entire sequence of events, although the canons of classical story-telling permit me to do so!) The sage laughs, raising his walking staff as if in readiness to punish the adult wailers for their child-like behaviour. He does no such thing, of course, but asks them to stand in a line next to one another. Stepping behind them, he starts a group-count by thwacking each person's back with his staff less gently than they would have wished, and simultaneously uttering the numerals “1”, “2”, “3”, etc... Ten thwacks add up to ten bodies, and he announces irately that the group hadn't lost any member at all, that each of them had failed to count himself when counting the lot, thus counting nine and not all the present ten! His demographic duty done, the holy man disappears as mysteriously as he had arrived. The received story reports that the group were suitably reassured and crossed rivers in spate happily ever after! (this last bit is an interpolation, of course).

In its above form, which is (more or less) the received version of the parable, it is not clear why the members of the group whose irrational grief was assuaged by a sage would not revert to their habit of not counting themselves in a group-count in the kind of emergency which is the context of the parable. In the standard mode of reading the parable, the failure of each member of the endangered group to count himself reveals self-knowledge, our realisation that we are not bodies that can be counted and a plurality of selves established,



OPENING NIGHT AT BRAHMA'S

RECONSTRUCTED PLAYHOUSE

contrary to the revealed and self-realisable truth of Self's singularity. May Śrī Ramaṇa have mercy upon me, but the parable seems to demand a deeper reading. (As does the Mahābhārata episode of the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and the Yakṣa, a celestial being, in which, in answer to the Yakṣa's question, "What is the most amazing fact of life?", Yudhiṣṭhira answers, "The fact that I see people dying around me, but I cannot believe that I will also die.")

Given our exclusive self-identification with our bodily forms, and the hostile environment of apparent not-Self which such self-identification projects, I would not, as a surviving member of a group threatened with extinction, readily count myself among the survivors but rather among the dead, as would every other improbable survivor: and our group counts would tally, showing the loss of one person. The thwacking of our backs by a sādhu's counting staff would awaken us into a realisation of our bodily presence (reinforcing our bodily self-identity), not into self-realisation.

Varying the parable (help me, Ramaṇa!), one could think of a sage approaching the lamenting group, and on learning from them what they think has happened, saying this: "Why do you worry so much about the missing person? Seek Self, yourselves, self-imaged in all things and in nothingness." Simultaneously, the wailing ones would awaken into a realisation of their bodily presence and into self-realisation, the realisation that they, Self, were self-imaged in all forms, living and non-living, in the drowned no less than in the saved, in the few no less than in the many. Anjali, let us look at panel 1 in the light of this variant reading of the Vedāntic parable of 'the missing one'.

Excluding the death-form, there are eight figures (four women and four men) in panel 1's crunch of dancers, victorious humanists in the clash of civilisations, gender-crossing, race-crossing, egalitarian folk, filled with dread. It is not only death they dread (cessation, void, the Nihil), but also all other apparent not-Self, over whom and over which they have scored a thundering victory. And yet so stressful has been the struggle (the perceived not-Selfhood

of even "backward" adversaries can dramatise the ever-possible extinction of apparent Self which is already "non-existent" in the perceived form of not-Self; and loss of svarāj, self-supportiveness, inflicted by microbiological virulence and the injurious impact of materiality on the soft flesh and brittle bones of the strongest of us, and the degenerative consequences of the passage of time itself, can rob us of security and unaided sleep forever), that the humanists are not individually convinced that they are alive or around and are, as in the Vedāntic parable, in a state of unstoppable mourning. (Dualist life is an unceasing, shell-shocked, condition of consciousness). Somebody is missing, without a replacement for whom we cannot be secure even in victory.

Panel 1's portrait of anxiety is not normal life's replenishment of the loss of death with the gain of new birth. The face of normal life may often be banal, but it is not in this respect anxious (except in the case of dwindling, poorly reproductive groups, families, etc., but these can't be said to be victorious in the way panel 1's conclave is).

World reality has a way of catching up with philosophical writing and influencing its imagery and perception of the images of its subject-matter. So I began to see, suddenly and for the first time, that the mysteriously wrapped flying-figure in panel 1's sky could be regarded as the anti-missile shield (SDI) America wishes to install in its skies to destroy missile-weapons launched by "others", "outsiders", targeting American cities. But a post-September 11 scepticism regarding such supposedly defensive measures against enemy attacks can be read into all the faces of the dancing group on the ground. And, in this new scenario, the death-face that has sidled up to the celebrants looks like a resident terrorist who has organised the murder-suicide crash of the flying-figure-machine, disguised or revealed as bandaged, wounded, vengefulness. The danger is not confined to any one country, of course, and we in India have lived with it longer than any other contemporary country.

Anjali, the instructiveness of panel 1 is not confined to recent traumatic





'BHUMISPARSHA MUDRA'  
BUDDHA JAYANTI PARK, NEW DELHI  
(STATUE INSTALLED BY HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA)

happenings in India or elsewhere in the modern world. The deeper import of it clarifies for me a doubt that had troubled me for years about the story of Siddhārtha, before he became the Buddha, encountering an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a sādhu who had found peace in renunciation: and being stirred by this sequence of encounters to renounce the pleasures of the world and go out in search of enlightenment.

My doubt was this: In addition to old age, sickness, and death, and before encountering the sādhu who was at peace with himself, ought not the troubled Prince Siddhārtha have witnessed an instance of the cruelty of human beings towards one another, and towards non-human life (the cruelty of injustice, violence, and supposed superiority), which bring a special dimension of suffering (moral suffering, as it has been called) to life? In non-Buddhist Indian spiritual traditions also, the three "burnings", *tritāpa*, are old age, sickness, death: moral suffering is again left out. This had caused me much spiritual anguish. By the grace of Guru Rāmāṇa, my doubt is resolved: and the triptych's panel 1 (unlike panels 2 and 3 where moral suffering is strongly suggested) dramatises the resolution.

Even if, fantastically, all moral suffering were to cease to be inflicted by us on one another and other life, "old age, sickness, death" would still be there. And given our stubborn, exclusivist, bodily self-identity, we would be without a sense of the worthiness of life in the midst of its inevitable decay and extinction (our decay and extinction as our self-identity would insist): and envy of those who are younger than us, farther from debility and death than we are, seeing them as "others", not-Self, would launch us again on paths of cruelty and injustice towards one another in subtle self-loathing and life-hatred and lack of charity.

Anjali, now look at panel 1 yet again, as if for the first time, in the light of the above reflection, and with belief in reincarnation. The continuity of life through birth and reincarnation cannot be unmixed blessings if the fate of life, again and again, is degeneration and extinction. Panel 1's dancers are humanists



who have established ethical and ecological sensitivity and conduct by example and legislation throughout the world (we are playing a fantasy game, don't forget), but without abandoning exclusivist bodily self-identity in consciousness, i.e. in a condition of continuing self-distortion (the monastic robes now suddenly signal the acceptance of ethical-ecological-restraint and of reincarnation in the way many in the modern world do as a defence against the terror of annihilation). This ambivalent dance (celebratory leg and foot movement, anguished faces) reflects precisely this ambivalence towards life, reproductive continuity and reincarnational reassurance notwithstanding.

The falling figure, connected umbilically to the earth, is birth-as-reincarnation, already wounded and bandaged, his/her arrival announced mechanically, but not convincingly or unconditionally, by self-distorted celebrants. The birth is feared to be a fall into the bondage of self-distortion.

This side of mokṣa and nirvāṇa, life-affirmation cannot be unambivalent. This is the unsentimental teaching of all enlightenment traditions of Indian spirituality, their evaluation of the prospects of self-distorted and self-distorting exclusivist self-identity. ((When the birth of his son is reported to Siddhārtha (who is not yet the Buddha), the un-self-deceiving, unsentimental prince says "Rāhula (a fetter)" is born.))

The triptych's panel 1 is a painterly, masterly, evocation of this evaluation, Anjali. The elegance and stunningness of form and colour combine with the sorrowing, doubting, abhinaya of beautiful people to undermine both secular and religious complacency regarding who we are.

Siddhārtha wanted to do better than merely add ethical and ecological commitment to the falsehood of our dominant self-conception. Enlightenment alone can bring credibility to good intentions.

Reading panel 1 now in the light of the retold Vedāntic parable of "the missing one", one could say that it is not any thing, as opposed to other things, which the anxious huddle of humanists have lost. They have lost a sense of

themselves as nothingness, emptiness, the limitless field of Self's self-awareness, self-imaged as all forms.

The bandaged, falling, flying, figure is the Buddha being born, to teach that our suffering can be healed by enlightenment. The sky, emptiness, is the new playhouse promised by Brahmā: inverted mountain which locks into Aruṇācala, embodied self-awareness.

## A CLOSED-DOOR REPERTORY

Another lingering look at the stained-glass-like window that is panel 1. The many-limbed-many-hued-many-headed ensemble of performing artists (death making a guest-appearance) are a lotus struggling to open more widely to the sky of possibilities, to receive into its heart the śakti of enlightenment symbolised by a bandaged Buddha. The lowered heads, their lustre dimmed by self-distortion (how your look-alikes suffer in the picture, Anjali!), cannot bloom without the transmutation of consciousness which overwhelms the much tougher head of panel 2's executioner: the realisation precipitated by the dualism-dissolving hand-gesture of the turtle-Yogī (grey like the clothes-combination I have suggested you manifest on your visit to Hiroshima) whose light spreads across the full body of the triptych, a grounded, fallen, sun though he is.

The artists of panel 1 look like a closed-door repertory, each member distinctively acknowledged, and acknowledging himself/herself, as an "I" ("I am this, not that"); and the collectivity acknowledged by all members as a "we" of sensitive amalgamation ("We are this, not that"), a Mahisasura company, capable of amalgamating all actors, all entities, under its banner; but still not opening its doors to nothingness. The widening of self-identity, as opposed merely to corporate enlargement, is not amalgamation or harmonisation of interests, merely: it is self-realisation, the realisation that "I am", and that I am



self-imaged in all things and nothingness. Racial and cultural homogeneity or plurality alone are not such a realisation; their anthropocentrism, republicanism, is still terrorised by nothingness and non-human and non-living reality and remains vulnerable to disintegration, wilting like panel 1's lotus-faces. And this can cause a reversal of the androgynising transmutation of the suicide-murderer-executioner of panel 2. The witnessing contemplatives of panel 2 (like your refusal to let appreciation become exaggeration, Anjali) remain supportive, but cautious.

The triptych's panels are subtly interconnected (and not merely because of a shared cast of figures). The falling sky-form is connected by a red-string like length which extends (by its direction, not visibly) all the way, I think, up to the self-supportive (the work is replete with metaphors of svarāj) white hand of the central, squatting, witness of panel 3: Yaśodharā's guiding hand acknowledged in the Buddha's "on-call" availability to self-inquiring suffering. A brown large hand infiltrates into panel 2 across the border of panel 1 and panel 2 (a hesitant but unwithdrawn, arthritic, hand of frozen identity, seeking flexibility). And the black-sheathed executioner it is, in a doubling, regressive, greener avatāra, who is spun round and round on exorcising ropes in panel 3.

### WHAT IS THE MOST AMAZING FACT OF LIFE?

Anjali, let me not move from panel 1 to panel 3 without pausing at panel 2; and, fulfilling a promise made a few pages earlier, let me offer a rereading of the Mahābhārata episode in which Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest and wisest of the Pāṇḍava brothers is asked by a Yakṣa (a celestial being who inhabits both sky and land, nothingness and everythingness) to identify the most amazing fact of life. The context of this encounter of wisdom and mystery is tragic.

All the four younger brothers of Yudhiṣṭhira lie dead around a pool of water owned by the Yakṣa. They had ignored the celestial being's warning not to drink water from the pool before answering his questions, and paid the price by dropping dead. Yudhiṣṭhira too was warned, but he agreed to answer the Yakṣa's questions before quenching his thirst. The question regarding the most amazing fact of life was one of a large number of questions, but let us concentrate on Yudhiṣṭhira's answer to this question, because it clarifies and becomes clarified by the meanings of the triptych's images as they reveal themselves to me after much staring and corrective blinking, much blinking and corrective staring, by the grace of Śrī Ramaṇa and your patient good wishes.

First a gloss on why Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva – mighty brothers of Yudhiṣṭhira – had died. The Yakṣa had addressed them, called upon them. In being addressed by somebody, in being called, as opposed to being

referred to, merely, or described as something or someone and not something or someone else, we are stirred to limitless self-awareness (however unenduringly) and find our bodily forms and the world within Self, ourselves, not the other way around: as Self's, our own, self-images, more or less faithful or freewheeling. Spurning this invitation to source-dwelling, ādivāsa, and impatiently quenching their thirst, the brothers had imaged svarāj, self-sufficiency, very poorly; and their bodily forms presented themselves as apparent not-Self to the Yakṣa (whose omnipresence makes him a lucid metaphor of self-consciousness), and were as good as dead, non-existent; because Self cannot encounter not-Self and still be self-consciousness or self-awareness.

Yudhiṣṭhira responded to being addressed by the Yakṣa by letting that everyday initiation into vastness and intimacy, Brahman and Ātman, locate him at the heart of self-awareness, and answered the mysterious being's question as follows: The most amazing fact of life is this, that while I see people die around me, I cannot believe that I ("I") will also die. (Remember, Anjali, that Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers are literally lying dead around him).

The received mode of understanding Yudhiṣṭhira's extraordinary answer is that he does not identify himself with his bodily form, which alone can die, not he, Self, which is birthless and deathless. This answer being canonically correct, the Yakṣa is pleased to restore his dead brothers to life and lets them all drink water from his lake. There lies an important clue regarding how to understand the canonical teaching more insightfully than in the received way.

In the light of self-knowledge (self-awareness, self-realisation), bodies and forms and even nothingness cannot be seen as not-Self, because not-Self cannot be an object of self-awareness; nor can they be regarded as pure, detailless, self-awareness. They are "restored to reality", as Self's self-images, which are undeniable contents of consciousness without being things as opposed to other things (they are in this sense both something and nothingness, ontologically amphibious like the Yakṣa, or panel 2's turtle-Yogī, DKY). Resurrection of the



*Shantiniketan Triptych, panel 2, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

dead has this deeper meaning, Anjali, share this thought with Christian friends!

Now imagine the Yakṣa's question being addressed by the executioner to the madonna-goat pair, with the warning that an unsatisfactory answer would guarantee their slaughter. The executioner is not DKY or the Yakṣa, and he is very suspicious of body-and-world-denying metaphysical spirituality. The setting of such an interrogation, a sacrificial site, is no less chilling than the fatal pool of water in the Yudhiṣṭhira-Yakṣa encounter (the executioner as Kāṁsa, serial slayer of Devakī's children, the madonna-goat pair as the possibility of Kṛṣṇa, irresistible attraction of self-realisation).

The answer (perhaps in the bleating notes of a Kumara Gandharva rendering) would be: The most amazing fact of life is that while we know that you can slaughter us, we cannot believe that "I", Self, can die: what will die, our forms, are also your forms, Self's self-images. (Tyeb Mehta as the Kumara Gandharva of contemporary Indian painting).

This answer, like DKY's mayūra mudrā acknowledges the world without accusing it of "otherness", "not-Selfhood"; and sees it as a kaleidoscope of our self-imaging journey of self-exploratory self-realisation. The transmutational, androgynising, revisioning consequences of such appearance-sensitive advaita is what the triptych's central panel 2 unveils as a possibility of ending the tyranny of frozen, isolationist, self-identity. (Not irreversible as the cautious, but undespairing, faces of the contemplatives suggest, archetypically Anjaliesque).



## ADDRESSING: A GLOSS

A gloss on “addressing”, Anjali, a notion, to understanding which I have devoted many years of effort now, and which plays a crucial role in the way in which I have presented the teaching of advaita in these pages and also elsewhere. Let me do this well, Ramaṇa!

If somebody were to ask me who the director of NGMA was when I was permitted to borrow the triptych for use as a stage-setting for a lecture on “Self and Emptiness” which I gave in August 1999, I would say “Anjali”; and “Anjali” in this context would refer to you as the person who held a certain position of responsibility in a national institution in Delhi in 1999 (starting in 1994), etc. However, if, in conversation with you in your NGMA office (I am imagining we are in 1999), regarding the importance of the triptych for the theme of my lecture, I suddenly address you as “Anjali!”, preparatory to emphasising some aspect of the project for which I am seeking your assistance, I do not refer to you, identify you with a description or biographical detail.

Nor do I seek to attract your attention to what I am saying, or about to say, by uttering your name to which you (like everybody in relation to their names) are conditioned to respond by paying attention to the source from which the sound of your name emanates: because I already have your attention (notwithstanding telephone calls and the comings and goings of staff). So what



do I do when I address you? I *mean* you, without referring to you. I identify you non-referentially, non-descriptively, non-dualistically.

You are brought to think the thought: “He means me, I, not that I am this or that, and certainly he is not informing me that my name is ‘Anjali’.” You think of yourself as “I”, you are reminded of your, Self’s, self-awareness, and its limitlessness. In self-awareness, your consciousness is not limited by the walls of your office or the campus of NGMA, by your bodily form, by any thing or collection of things. Self-awareness coincides with circumambient emptiness, beyond the India Gate circle, Delhi, earth, stars, and galaxies. All these, the world, including the person Anjali, are you, Self, not the other way round.

And none of these things can be not-Self, other than you, because then you will not have been reminded of, you would not be, self-awareness, which cannot, even partially, be anything but awareness of itself. But these things, e.g. your bodily form, are not detailless nothingness, blank self-awareness. They have to be your, Self’s, self-images, meanings of being inseparable from being, self-conceptions of Self inseparable from Self. You don’t identify yourself, Self, exclusively with your embodiment and design as the person Anjali, but with all designs and forms of embodiment: and with the emptiness of the canopy.

Addressing is a revelation of our reality and its self-manifestations. Yudhiṣṭhira did not spurn the Yakṣa’s attempt to address him, and was brought to self-awareness and enabled to see that he, Self, is self-imaged in all things and nothingness and could not be destroyed. (Here ends my gloss on addressing).

## THE EMPTY CANOPY

We are still in August 1999, Anjali, in your office, and close to the anniversary of Indian independence. (You see how important addressing you in this way has been in this exploration of the triptych's *advaita*?) Let me ask you to step out of your office with me and stand at NGMA's main gate, looking out. Directly ahead of us in the India Gate gardens, not much more than a hundred yards away, is located the "empty canopy" which had been occupied during the British Raj by a statue of King George V. The statue was removed some years after independence in deference to popular sentiment. The canopy, an exquisitely designed traditional Indian sandstone structure symbolising sovereignty, is now unoccupied, "empty", suggesting that true sovereignty can only be of Self, *svarāj*, the sovereignty of Self's limitless self-awareness, emptiness, not-thingness, Self not being something as opposed to something else, although self-imaged in all things.

It would be a tragic error to install a statue of Gandhi under the canopy vacated by the statue of George V of Britain, as is being demanded by many sections of Indian political opinion, not only because such an act would dwarf a saint under an imperial roof: but even more importantly because such a substitution would suggest that Indian independence is a continuation of imperialism, not a break with it. And most importantly, because the empty



canopy's unintended but undeniable highlighting of the meaning of *svarāj*, sovereignty of self's not-thingness, would be sacrificed ironically in the process of honouring Gandhi who was chiefly responsible for bringing the concept of *svarāj* into the vocabulary of modern Indian political thought and action.

The statue of George V under the canopy had its back turned towards the east, from where the sun rises, symbol of Self self-imaged equally in all races and peoples, indeed in all existence and even in emptiness. If this was (intended or not) a racist rejection of Indian spiritual symbolism, Gandhiji's statue with its back turned towards the sun would be an inexcusable, avoidable, reenactment of British imperialist insensitivity in free India. As in a solar eclipse, it would like the moon (deluded mind) stand between the sun and the earth and cast long shadows over it: as George V's statue did, ill-wishing shadows that exacted the price of partition from Indian freedom.

Anjali, the empty canopy is a work of contemporary art fashioned by history, an installation of the meaning of *svarāj* visible, almost touchable, from within the precincts of NGMA. If I had understood all this clearly when I sat in your office discussing the triptych's relevance to the theme of self and emptiness, I would have proposed that the gallery should persuade civic authorities to let it include the empty canopy as an item in its permanent collection without

disturbing its present location. The triptych, already in the collection, would then find a companion item of comparable symbolic power.

As an NGMA installation-item, the empty canopy could be called "Svarāj": and in conformity with the practice of "tent-photography" which flourishes at our historic sites, secular and sacred, like the Red Fort, Taj Mahal, Tirupati, Ajmer Sharif, Varanasi, etc., simple sandstone steps should bring under the canopy the poorest children of our country for a few moments at a time, and only one at a time (the singularity of children, like the modesty of Self, Ātman, is ever eager to be lost in a gang of giggling self-images, and should be given opportunities of self-awareness more often than we, adults, permit). And as a little girl or boy (in rags or expensive clothes) shouts "Mein hoon Dillī kī rānī" / "Mein hoon Dillī kā rājā" – "I am the queen of Delhi" / "I am the king of Delhi" – a hidden camera should produce an instant photograph of that high moment and present it to the children, at a nominal charge of Re one/1.

As far as I am aware, there are no figures of children in Tyeb's work. There is of course the teenage madonna of the triptych (worthy of Christian adoration of Mary the teenaged mother of God), and the matchingly young mother-goat companion of hers. But I mean children, like Picasso's child with a pigeon; or Modigliani's little-known "Alice", a portrait of what looks like a seven-year-old Italian girl (with Leela's face and features archetypically determined; and possibly yours, too, I would think, although I haven't yet seen childhood photographs of yours, Anjali). Such child-portraiture or picturisation has not, I think, been attempted yet by Tyeb (I could be factually in error here, but such portraiture or picturisation is not emphatically visible in Tyeb's oeuvre, even if it is present, is all I wish to draw attention to: and not omission-seekingly, but philosophically exploratorily).

I am aware of Tyeb's deep love of children (his own and other people's), and so the absence of children in his work cannot be traced to a possible lack of interest in children: there is no such lack. We need to think this question through

more deeply in the context of his painterly journey and autobiographical hints (I am tired of thinking, Anjali, show me a more intuitive route to a helpful answer to my query!) "Yes, I will, but you must persist with thought a little more," is what you, as the first contemplative of panel 2, are saying, somewhat hard-heartedly; but quickly, and perceptively, add "Take a break, start a new section, you are on a new page!".

## SCARRED SECOND-BIRTH

Salman Rushdie has spoken of "midnight's children", those who were born "at the stroke of the midnight hour", on August 15, 1947, India's moment of birth into freedom from the rule of self-proclaimed "others", the not-Selfhood of British racism and imperialism and exploitation, administrative and legal efficiency under such bondage notwithstanding: and towards *svarāj*, self-rule, without the expectation of such freedom being isolationist, unattainable, self-sufficiency in all respects of national life. The self-understanding of modern, independent, India, would be analogous to the autobiographical understanding of Indian children born on August 15, 1947. But there is, in terms of chronology, another equally interesting category of Indians, which includes Tyeb Mehta, whose life connects with the birth-date of Indian independence.

Around that time many Indians, like Tyeb, had attained the age of majority, they were around twenty-one (Tyeb was twenty-two) years of age. This age marks the substantial end of our dependence (physical and social) on parents and other significant adults of our early life, the end of childhood's nursery and the beginning of adult autonomy (not in some unqualifiedly absolute, culture-invariant, irreversible or unmodifiable sense, of course): corresponding at the national level to the end of infantile dependence on alien rule and the unfolding of *svarāj*'s adult autonomy. If, at this time of transition from conformity to

opportunity, a major upheaval takes place in our world which sours the idea of adult independence and the helplessness of childhood endures as an unshakable adult memory, the representation of childhood in our life's self-understanding will be inevitably anxiety-laden and self-censoring.

The twenty-two-year-old blossoming adult who witnessed from a window a street scene of brutality which dramatised the vulnerability of individuals in a world of group-hatred (created by the partition of India) would not, in his life-work of painting, be willing or able to portray children than whom there is perhaps no more powerful symbol of individual vulnerability: and whose adult figures would always bear the stigmata of an emergence from childhood terrorised by malign circumstances. Giant adults falling down (not able to "stand on their own feet", having been coerced by violent reality into forgetting the primary childhood capability of bipedality. Big, trussed, bulls, looking like still-born life, aborted fetuses.

The moral and political horror of hand-pulled rickshaws reflecting the nightmare possibility of children pushing their own prams. Diagonally sliced figures and canvases destroying the idea of paintings as secure playpens. Puppet-bondage (children led by alien, adult, strings). Missing fingers of extra large adult hands (birth-defects, mutilation of children by beggar-gangs). Flat colour expanses (sudden loss of literacy, the disutility of unobstructed space for crippled life, the mockery of clear, stunning, skies for wingless birds).

Yes, Anjali, I can see the way ahead more intuitively clearly now, but I need your prayers to read signposts on the journey more accurately.

Unaborted childhood is our first birth, and this too need not be undamaged. The magic of even handicapped playfulness is, nevertheless, a blessing of childhood which no misfortune is able entirely to annul. The inauguration of young adulthood is a second birth, no less hazardous than birth into childhood. Tyeb's wide-angled window-view of the perversion of *svarāj* in 1947 was a near abortion of his second birth as a young man, as was India's second-birth (the





first, datelessly old, felicitously playful despite the mutilations of cruelty and history) into modern nationhood. Both have survived, but not without a sense of life's handicappedness and the self-distortion of consciousness.

Tyeb's pre-triptych (pre-1985) works can perhaps be seen, therefore, as representations of scarred second-birth in the imagery of flawed first-birth, in the ways hinted at above: some of this imagery finds its way into post-triptych works also, e.g. and powerfully poignantly, in the 1994 'Trussed Bull on Rickshaw', already noticed earlier on this journey.

This work is later than the 1982 'Rickshaw-Puller' (the "lightening of the yoke of the labourer toiling against exclusivist self-identity by the presence of the Devī – Śārādā – behind him, left-leaning anthropocentrism portrayed as a shy horse continuing his leftward turn to make a circumambulation of Śārādā, symbol of self-realisation. The word "light" in Christ's saying, "My yoke is light", can be heard in the punning double sense of "light", i.e. not-heavy, and "light", i.e. that which dispels darkness: so here in the Kolkata scene rolling

*Trussed Bull on Rickshaw, 1994, detail. Tyeb Mehta*



Śārādā and Teresa into a composite figure of luminous compassion, unpartitionable, unlike Bengal and India in 1905 and 1947).

The trussed bull in the 1994 work could be light-rejecting, ungrateful, humanity insisting on rushing to the slaughter-house. Or it could be that other trussed bull, Narendranath, transported by destiny all the way to Dakṣiṇeśvara to be unbound into freedom by Śrī Rāmakrishna Paramahansa.

Anjali, I want to make a bold statement at this point, not intended as a piece of empirical biography, and yet in the hope of making contact with a consciousness which cannot be located only in the works of the painter beginning with 'Shantiniketan Triptych' (and still pouring forth) in 1985, but also in the engagement of the artist with the challenge of these works despite an almost unending series of serious health problems.

What I want to say will become easier for me to express and will be more easily understood, if we look again at the immediately post-triptych (1986) 'Kali', and in juxtaposition with the triptych's central panel's squatting goat-

*Left: Kali, 1986, detail. Tyeb Mehta  
Right: Shantiniketan Triptych, panel 2, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

madonna. They have profound similarities.

They are not anthropocentric forms. The triptych figure is both woman and goat. Kali is a tigress woman. Both are pregnant. The triptych-figure in a shy, teenaged-Mary way, the witnessing contemplatives anxious about the fate of her pregnancy. Kali in a roaring way, her procreativity manifest not only in the bulging stomach, but also in the phallic tongue, androgynously. They are both threatened.

Of course we have here the fear of an aborted birth, the anxiety of the young man at the window of 1947. But the fear is not of the loss or mutilation of biological birth alone, first or second or third (Anjali, I feel strongly the pangs of my birth into old age, I don't want this third birth to be annulled or distorted!). These representations of endangered pregnancy are at least of course a powerful painterly expression of the danger of the destruction of all life on earth in some holocaust of nuclear and other kinds of explosion and conflagration. But it is clearly much more than this fear that Mary's and Kali's vulnerability manifest in Tyeb's evocations of them.

The birth that is promised by them is entry into self-realisation, a consciousness of our not being identifiable with our bodily forms alone, an awareness of all forms, including formless nothingness, as being our own, Self's, self-images: a sense of nothing being merely a thing, but also nothingness, in the way images are. Without this birth into fullness and nothingness, pūrṇa and śūnya, we are programmed by our separatist, entitative, identities to terrorise and annihilate more than one another. The endangering of this salvational rebirth by ego – Self's caricatured, self-distorted, form – is what 'Kali' and the triptych draw attention to.

The great devotee of Kali, Rāmakrishna, had suffered grievously from throat-cancer before he succumbed to it in 1886, in Kolkata; about a hundred years before Tyeb's stint at Shantiniketan as a resident artist, where, in his own words, "... (at Shantiniketan in Bengal) I could feel the presence of Kali everywhere."

But to return to Rāmakrishna's agony. Cancer had virtually clawed out his throat, he wasn't able to drink even a few drops of water. "Why are you doing this to me, Mother?" he prayed, "Heal my throat!", he cried, "Won't you?", he pleaded, and went into samādhi where he must have had a heart to heart chat with Kali on the subject of cancer of the throat. When he emerged from samādhi, his anxious disciples, who had heard his heart-rending prayer to the Devī, asked Rāmakrishna if she had responded to his entreaties. "Did she speak to you?" they asked him, pityingly.

"Yes, she did! Yes, she did!", Rāmakrishna reported. "She said to me, 'Why are you worried about that one diseased throat of yours, Rāmakrishna? You have millions of other healthy throats to be grateful for. She has answered my prayer,'" he said. The answer was the gift of the realisation that he, Rāmakrishna, Self, was not exclusively the bodily form photography has made posterity familiar with. All forms, including that form with its affliction, were his, Self's, Kali's, self-images.

Tyeb has suffered from throat-afflictions (not cancer, though) for years, and other troublesome health problems. Wouldn't his prayers for relief have reached Kali (whom he saw everywhere in Shantiniketan), and might she not have blessed him with the understanding that he, Self, was in all forms, and not only in the form so frequently visited by ill-health? The triptych's rich symbolism of non-duality is ground for thinking that he may around the time of his residence in Shantiniketan have been being born again into this consciousness of inclusive self-identity. The 1986 'Kali' is pregnant with such possibilities. Tyeb's anxiety about new beginnings, new births, is not absent in the work's vulnerable anatomy. What is also there is the assurance that this time what is sought is not mere linear continuity or augmentation of the life or powers of a given bodily form, but an explosive identification with all things and nothingness too. The triptych' turtle-Yogī is a plausible Tyeb correlate, Anjali, blessing all with the gratitude of the blessed.



The triptych is not, as I have often stressed in this study, a painterly piece of anthropological field-work, or a romanticist, evasive, mythologisation of the harsh realities of Indian ādivāsī life in modern times. The work's "group photograph" (panel 1) has many non-ethnic-ādivāsī dimensions to it, but it does poignantly capture the "huddle" of a marginalised people, and also the craning neck of individuality seeking visibility apart, but not away, from the crunch (that's you, Anjali, on the extreme right): and in this the painting makes contact with the advaita of the "one" and the "many" exemplified still in Santhal body-language: the sense of being being, not being this or that, many or few. But it would not have been possible for a metropolitan Indian painter to avoid the pitfalls of anthropological voyeurism and romanticist fantasisation, and to honour the datelessly old non-dualist sādhanā of ādivāsī life, if it had also not been his own sādhanā: begun in Mumbai in 1947 and assisted by Kali and the heritage of her devotees, ādivāsī and non-ādivāsī, in Bengal, many years later: and quickened by sickness.

In Giorgio de Chirico's "The Child's Brain", an adult figure with a



moustache and bare torso stands at an open window looking out, but with eyes closed to the apparent not-Selfhood of the world which his child's brain (steeped in non-duality) confronts. Tyeb's sādhanā all the way up to the triptych and beyond is an attempt on the part of the Chirico figure in him to open his eyes – outer and inner – to find apparent not-Self and apparent, exclusive, Self transformed into Self's self-images. To let the child's brain flower into a lotus of self-realisation, in the way in which the first prototype-form of Vināyaka was transformed by Pārvatī and Śiva into the luminous elephant-form of Gaṇeśa.

"But what about the closed book on the window-ledge, and the interior world of architectural stability revealed by the open window? What do they signify in the Chirico painting?" I am glad you asked, Anjali, because in thinking that thought about Gaṇeśa, these important details slipped out of my mind.

The features of architectural stability are surely the fixity of a favoured, exclusivist, self-identity: the clear demarcations of the shape of apparent Selfhood, adulthood's rejection of childhood's fluidity of self-envisioning.



The closed book on the window-ledge is, I would like to think, the painter's invitation to the viewers of his work to "read" it, and not merely see it. And also, perhaps, the self-realising (childhood-resurrecting) adult figure's symbolic resolve to regard appearance – strange and familiar – as a "text" of reality's, his own, self-imaging self-exploration: without fear or favour, paranoia or narcissism.

Before starting a new section to take a closer look at the third panel of the triptych, let me recall another "window" painting, René Magritte's "The Return", which also, like Chirico's "The Child's Brain", illumines Tyeb's 1947 "window encounter" and its resonance in his work. And also because "The Return" makes an extraordinary "anjali", offering, from its window-ledge.

The viewer is – formlessly – in the interior space of an open window in this work, looking out. Tops of trees are visible (are they from your eighteenth floor Mumbai window?) under a blue (not dark) late evening sky already dotted with stars.

The intimacy of human reality (you are somewhere inside the sky-room,

gathered into yourself, chanting) extending into Self's limitless space of self-awareness, the circumambience of emptiness.

And on the window-ledge of faith (in the meaningfulness of existence at the farthest limits of sceptical inquiry) is a nest which has three eggs in it. Diagonally across the witnessed sky is a gigantic bird with transparent wings (stars and clouds can be seen through it) who is returning to hatch the eggs she has laid in that nest of self-awareness, the heart of our selfhood, the possibility of a three-dimensioned self-realisation:

1. the realisation that apparent, exclusive, Self, i.e. our bodily form, is not something as opposed to something else (not-Self), but only one among many possible self-images of Self, ourselves.

2. the realisation that forms other than our own bodily forms, i.e. apparent not-Self, are also not something as opposed to something else, but equally Self's, our own, self-images.

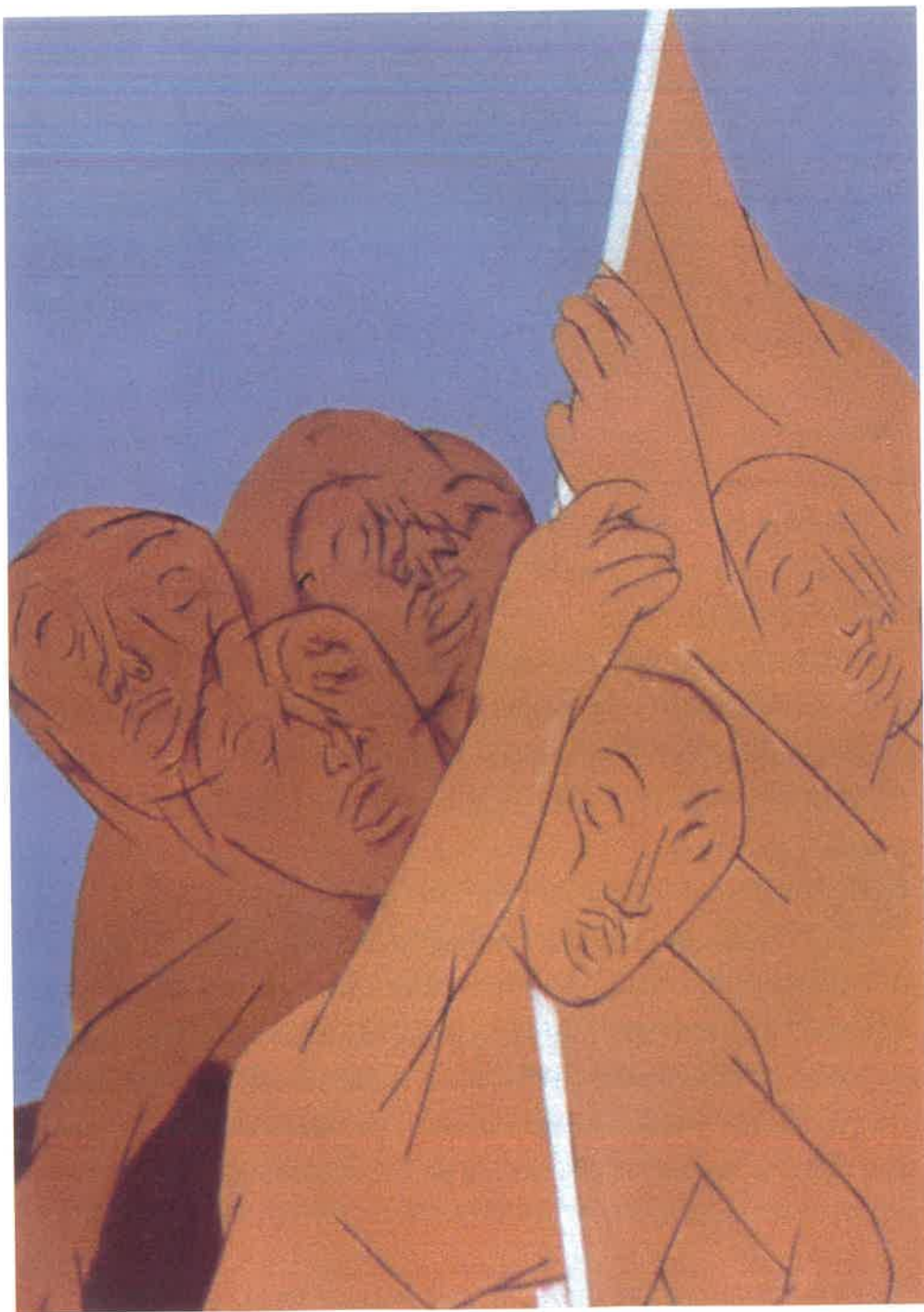
3. the realisation that environing nothingness is not the face of annihilation, but the limitless space of self-awareness, emptiness, not non-reality: Self's, our, primal self-image of non-entitateness, not-thinghood.

The non-duality of being and nothingness, mokṣa and nirvāṇa, is stunningly portrayed in "The Return" as the transparency of the bird in the sky, her coextensiveness with the expanse of emptiness.

So that's Magritte's "anjali", offering, of self-awareness for the miracle of self-realisation at the edge, the window-ledge, of isolated self-identity: Tyeb's sādhanā at least since 1947, the struggle for liberation in painting from the bondage of self-distortion invited by a living reality's attempted self-vivisection.

Look out for that sky-bird from your window, Anjali. You are her self-image in the hatching intensity of your chanting: Nam Myoho Renge Kyo.





*Shantiniketan Triptych, panel 3, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

### MISLEADING SYMMETRY

I know, Anjali, that as the pivotal contemplative in panel 3, you and your two companions (a stunning trimūrtī) are exasperatedly waiting for me to look at this panel too, and closely, without further circumstantial fuss. So let me begin with some painting-specific fuss.

Leaving aside the infiltrating death-figure, and the airborne-camouflaged-form, panel 1 has eight figures in its shuffle-huddle: four women and four men. (Ten, if yama and the bodhisattva are also included).

Panel 2 has three contemplatives, the madonna and goat, DKY (digambara kūrma yogī, if you have forgotten), and the double androgynous standing figure: that adds up to eight figures (Ten, if the sacrificial flagpost and the guillotine-blade as unignorable forms are included).

Panel 3 has three contemplatives again, five easily distinguishable members of the rope-wielding work-gang, and a doubled strung-up figure (Ten figures, again).

This parity – or rough parity – of form-distribution brings to the work a powerful compositional elegance and symmetry.

Symmetry and gender sensitivity might, however, be ruffled by the fact that while there are four separately countable women-figures in panels 1 and 2 (leaving aside the androgynous figure), there are only three women figures –

the seated contemplatives – in panel 3. But the large goat-white arm enfolding the central contemplative here, you, is surely singular enough to represent a fourth woman, the madonna of panel 2 herself, perhaps.

But this restored sense of the parity of “things” can lead us away from what I have argued is a foundational insight of the triptych: that we are not things as opposed to other things, and as opposed to nothingness. Because if this were the case, we, Self, would be an exclusive, favoured form, and we would be aware of all other forms, including formless nothingness, as not-Self: i.e. we would not be self-awareness, but not-Self-awareness, which is impossible, but can appear to be the case in self-distorted consciousness. We are liberated from this self-delusion only when we are able to see all forms, including formless nothingness, as our own, Self’s, self-images: we are able, then, to see that if we are things, we must be all things, including nothingness, Self’s comprehensive repertoire of self-images housed in its limitless space of self-awareness.

Our fear of nothingness, annihilation, is dramatised in the triptych’s stunted skies, bringing a dimension of terror into its elegant distribution of forms and the uncluttered flatness of its colours. And the work’s implicit “image”-ontology (that we, and all else, are not “things”, this as opposed to that, but a complex and evolving togetherness and separateness of Self’s self-images) is highlighted by the presentation of its chief “teacher” figure, the turtle-Yogī, in the textures of a reflection (pun-intended) on the ground, flatter than the customary flatness of Tyeb’s forms, pouring out of the sky’s emptiness.

What should enable viewers to enter into the heart of panel 3, Anjali, is the interesting equidistance of DKY from both panel 1 and panel 3, his equal inaccessibility to the un-self-questioning exclusivism of consciousness represented by the configurations of these panels: in sharp contrast to his tumbledown intervention at the foot of panel 2’s sacrificial post where annihilationist resolve still secretly longs to be reversed by a power greater than violence, and ego’s narcissism seeks a securer self-love.

The un-self-questioning exclusivism of consciousness represented by panel 1’s huddle is the conviction of each member of the group that he/she, Self, is exclusively a given human bodily form (“I am this, not that”) and also an exclusive collectivity of such forms (“We are this, not that”). Fear of not-Self (non-human life, non-living matter, and especially non-entitative nothingness) freezes their victory dance (dramatising frozen self-identity). Death joins the group mockingly, even as new life descends reincarnatingly to allay the group’s insecurity regarding its strength and size. Our identification of ourselves, Self, with a vulnerable, mortal, body, is the theme of panel 1, as I see it, a portrait of the bondage of self-distortion implicit in such a self-conception.

What is the distinguishing feature of the un-self-questioning exclusivism of consciousness, as I have maintained, represented by panel 3, which is as far removed as panel 1 from the complacency-upsetting, self-liberating, magic of DKY’s mayūra mudrā, the hand-gesture of valorous generosity in the language of classical Indian dance and drama?

Yes, yes, I hear the contemplative leader, Anjali: She is saying, in that blunt October 2-born way of yours, that I can hardly hope to answer the above question without a fuller description of what is happening in panel 3. The point is well taken. Thank you.



## EXORCISM AND ESCAPE

The ground here, mustard and dark brown, is wider and higher than in the first two panels: a high theological ground, I would say. Panel 1 is a dance of victorious feet on earth, the dancers' self-identity that of human beings aware of their vulnerability to degeneration, disease, death, but who have, or they think they have, dominated all other life and non-living matter on earth. Self-distorted in consciousness, exclusivist in self-identity, their residence, nevertheless, is earth, not a "higher" world, earth the site of victory or defeat, survival or annihilation. The separatist humanism of the party is sophisticated, egalitarian, gender-sensitive. But if pushed to the wall by not-Self (rebellious or differently self-organised human communities, conceivable ecological and environmental degeneration which would make life not worth living), each of the charmed circle of panel 1's human beings can harden into the sheer "thisness" of the suicide-murderer/executioner of panel 2. The bringing forward of inevitable individual or collective death will not seem morally or philosophically outrageous to them.

Panel 3's figures are not a unity, a coherent collectivity. Three women contemplatives seated on the ground are clearly gender-separated from a rope-wielding party of men: two actually pulling a rope, and three standing behind them in awe, not physically joining in the hoisting ritual, but possibly





Above: *Shantiniketan Triptych*, panel 3, detail. Tyeb Mehta

chanting mantras to bring effectiveness and sanctity to the rite. We will look at all this richness and complexity of form and movement more blinkingly in a short while, Anjali, but I want to draw attention to the first of panel 3's contemplatives, on the extreme left, and the expression of dismay on her face and the raising of her hand to her chin in a gesture of concentrated inquiry reminiscent of Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker" (possibly Aristotle), where immersion in the labour of philosophical thinking (exhausting work, Anjali!) is portrayed in exactly the same way. The contemplatives of panel 2 are also in deep thought, but the classical European *mudrā* of thought, hand raised to the chin, is only initiated by the first witness of panel 2, not brought to completion. So what are the distanced trinity of women thinkers thinking in panel 3? What's happening?

A doubled (male and female) green figure fastened to a horizontal bamboo is being spun round and round with the aid of a rope by a group of men, some wielding the rope and others behind them sanctifying the ritual act with chants. Three women distance themselves from this performance, or are forbidden to take part in it, and seem to be asking the question "Is this right?"

The ritual has the form and feel of a spirits-exorcising act. Perhaps a couple have been caught in some forbidden sexual engagement, judged to be possessed by a malignant spirit, and are being sought to be released from this spirit in the public realm somewhat punitively, as a warning to others. Familiar story. Three excluded and sceptical women thinkers are asking themselves and us, "Is this right?" A plausible *ādivāsī* ritual "flattened", i.e. "textualised", as a stance of self-identity inviting contemplative reading. I think this is the triptych's way of making contact with Santhal ritual life and organising what is observed as a painterly philosophical position or speculation.

Reading panel 3 as such a text, it seems to me to invite attention to the firmly held (as the rope is by the exorcists) conviction of many religious traditions that we are not, Self is not, any given bodily form, female or male, generated



sexually, subject to decay and destruction: but a soul, a non-material, immortal substance, trapped in a bodily form, which finds release when this imprisoning form dies, and proceeds to its true home, i.e. heaven. And the panel also hints that in these traditions the body and sexuality, and women as the supposedly principal cause of our obsession with these, are treated with much cruelty and suspicion. The high ground upon which panel 3 situates its action is suggestive of the presumed proximity of the faithful to heaven and the haughty exaltation of soul-identity.

Like panel 1, panel 3 is devoid of non-human life. Interestingly the panel's top left corner is a patch of brown visible behind and beyond the blue sky of emptiness: the special place reserved for the gathering of souls after dropping their bodies and departing from the earth, the reality of heaven's landing strip. The doubled strung-up body is heavy and tilts towards the ground. The rope-wielders would gladly climb their way up to heaven, their feet are above the ground. The central contemplative sits firmly on her patch of earth, legs stretched out and happy to be held down by the force of gravity. That's you, Anjali, and you seem a little disapproving, as if you were saying: "Rightly, you read panel 1's dancers as representing anthropocentrism of a sophisticated, egalitarian, kind. Don't be unfair to panel 3's transcendentalists, they are not jacks-in-the box waiting to jump out of their bodies and land in heaven. Theirs is a refined traditionalism, as is the humanists' modernity. Don't be unfair." That's timely, Anjali, there is nothing to be gained by setting up men of straw in philosophical inquiry. The painting hasn't denied panel 3 the sophistication of delineation demanded by its stance of self-identity, and we must bring a matching refinement of understanding to its text.

Panel 3's men do not identify themselves, Self, with their bodily forms, but-and-exclusively with their "soul", supposed non-material reality lodged in their bodies. However, in the thought of the many philosophical and religious traditions where the "soul"-view of ourselves is developed, the human body is

recognised not as a crude box-cage of the soul, but as a self-image of the soul (Wittgenstein, probably echoing Thomism, said, "The human body is the best picture of the human soul"). But each body is a self-image of a particular soul, all bodies – let alone all forms – are not self-images of singular Self, Ātman. So if I am a particular soul self-imaged in a particular bodily form, all other bodily forms and forms in general are not-I, including, of course, all other souls self-imaged in their respective bodily forms. The picture of self-identity here is the same as in the case of humanist bodily self-identity: Self is identified with an exclusive soul-entity-and-its-bodily-image, and an overwhelming environment of apparent not-Self is projected around apparent-Self.

And self-awareness is again strictly unavailable. Each soul would have to be aware of itself and a limitless range of "otherness", not-Selfhood. But the notion of self-awareness cannot allow for these "black holes" of not-Self-awareness within its domain. So the transcendentalists can only be coerced by their fundamentalism into imagining that their consciousness is self-consciousness, self-awareness. Such coercion is self-distortion. The agony of forced self-belief is evident on the faces of the exorcising gang: and their rope-pulling is marked by a desperation to hoist themselves up to heaven. This only really means their readiness to become the congealed, exclusivist-identity-tight, suicide-murderer-executioner of panel 2. Secular separatism and religious exclusivism are not programmed to resist the temptation of annihilation.

To be sure, unguarded Advaita and Buddhist teaching can look dangerously like annihilation-permitting systems of humanist or transcendentalist exclusivism. Loosely dismissing all forms as not-Self, illusion, and regarding Self or Emptiness as uninjurable by the destruction of forms, these traditions of non-duality can encourage a costly flight of humanity from the responsibilities and opportunities of life amidst forms, life in saṃsāra: and quiescence in the face of the injustices of tradition and the excesses of modernity which is not warranted by the teachings of Self and Emptiness, pūrṇa and śūnya. The doctrinaire rigidity of misunderstood

non-duality can also come to be well-represented by the frozen, unmoved, form of the executioner. DKY's mayūra mudrā can make non-duality appearance-sensitive and self-image-upholding, without compromising the reflexivity of self-awareness or the non-foundationalism, not-thingness, of emptiness.

## TURTLE-YOGĪ TO THE RESCUE

Panel 1 is a call for augmentation and expansion of humanist self-identity, for increased vigilance and greater security against not-Self, for greater "weight" to accrue to humanity on earth, even for an evolutionary mutation which would transform ordinary humanity into superhumanity: and a simultaneous confession of the burdensomeness of ceaseless vigil against not-Self (even if all humanity is united under the umbrella of panel 1's anthropocentrism, fear of non-human life and non-living matter and environing nothingness would remain.) The falling, flying, figure is the answer to panel 1's call for recruits, but not an enduring end to its anxiety as is evidenced by the drooping heads of the dancers and the slowing-down of their dance. Pressured into imagining that they were aware of not-Self, globalised humanity would be in bondage to self-distortion, not in svarāj.

Panel 3 is a search for weightlessness, non-corporeality, release from the pull of the flesh and the limitations of flesh: a purification of soul which would survive the death of the body and come into its own in another realm with other souls, and in intimacy with the supersoul, God. The sceptical women contemplatives are not convinced that this would resolve any problems of existence. Souls would still see one another as "other", as "not-Self", and subtler attachments and afflictions than what the body is subject to might enslave



souls. The supersoul, God, would also be seen as not-Self and souls might, like Lucifer, rebel against God and seek the companionship of flesh again. Self-propelled into imagining that they were aware of not-Self (other souls, God, nothingness, abandoned corporeality), souls would be without lucid self-awareness and in bondage to self-distortion, not in svarāj.

The raging battle we are witnessing between expansionist secular humanism and expansionist religious transcendentalism is probably a tantrum of self-awareness coerced into self-distortion by exclusivist self-identities. The possibility of mutual annihilation is not a deterrent in the battle because such an eventuality would be seen, at a deep level of unconsciousness, merely as an advancement of the inevitable hour of entropic death by the humanists, and as the moment of transition to heaven and purity of soul by the religious transcendentalists.

Ideological secular humanism sees non-duality and the idea of self-realisation or svarāj as rooted in infantile fantasy, and ideological transcendentalist religion sees them as heresy deserving damnation, which is why DKY, the triptych's sage and his "otherness"-dissolving and "appearance"-saving hand-gesture is hidden from panels 1 and 3, as is the transmutation of consciousness wrought in the executioner figure and the woman and goat at the site of sacrifice.

Secreted from the sky of emptiness as a "reflection", DKY's "peacock" hand-gesture reveals the possibility of a reining-in of all our "otherness-imputing" pointings by our fingers, but not entirely. They form an arc in alignment with the joined thumb and forefinger; not withdrawing the appearance-acknowledging capabilities of the fingers, but constructing a symbolic invitation to all percipients to see the world as a gallery of Self's self-images. The executioner's bullet head reflects the compassionate pain of DKY's face, and the invasion of his chest by a feminine form brings to a frozen face an open-mouthed curiosity regarding his, Self's, many-centredness. The invasive woman's long arms extend in a gesture of protection towards the madonna and the goat, towards all forms, Self's self-images, threatened by self-distortion.

## THREATENED PREGNANCY

On an extended journey with a work of epic proportions such as the triptych, major events in the public realm are bound to impact on one's understanding of the work, even as our deepening insights into the meanings of the work are bound to affect our understanding of public upheavals.

Tyeb's 'Kali' (1986), portraying an enraged (and yet abhaya-offering) Kali whose pregnancy (harbouring future life and humanity's self-realising capabilities) is threatened by hidden hands drew my attention to the delicate pregnancy of the triptych's grounded madonna and the threat to it from murderous exclusivist self-identity. And the recent terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament building in New Delhi on December 13, 2001 found myself thinking of a pregnant Mother India (there is a bulge to the Lok Sabha building, Anjali) threatened by malevolent hands. The Indian Parliament houses elected representatives of one billion people whose lives embody respect for the totality of humanity's spiritual traditions in a living, and not a museological, way, and also open-mindedness in relation to the most daring explorations of the arts and sciences and philosophical explorations of the mind of modern times. The possibilities of a revolutionary transmutation of human consciousness with which the Indian democratic experiment of secularism and spirituality is pregnant are momentous, all the poverty and illiteracy of the masses of the country and the

greed and short-sightedness of their political leaders notwithstanding. Humanity is not understood anthropocentrically in Indian consciousness, and Indian parliamentarians must be seen as representing all life and existence in the country, not excluding circumambient emptiness now powerfully reflected in the empty canopy of India Gate. (Such a transmutation of the semantics of the architecture of imperialist-racist-colonialism could only have been possible in 'tāntrika' India, 'tantra' in its root sense being the transformation of circumstantial adversity into spiritual advantage.)

It would be truthful to designate the coming-together of the streams and dimensions of consciousness which is the Indian Parliament (in its inner insistence of self-understanding) as a "satsanga" (the conventional meaning of that Sanskrit word being "the company of sages", which might not be an accurate description of the cacophonous gatherings there, but the deeper etymological connotation of the concept is "association with reality", which well captures the fullness of representation of the house). And unfurling, as it does, emptiness too, the limitless range of Self's self-awareness, such satsanga symbolises non-exclusivist self-identity: consciousness whose "thumb"-impression (Self-seal) is "I am" or "We are", as distinguished from "I am this, not that" or "We are this, not that."

Exclusivist Islamic self-identity in Pakistan and its unappeased separatism are the source of the December 13 attack on Indian satsanga, the self-imaging possibilities with which the non-dualist consciousness of Mother India is pregnant in the new millennium as blessings for the earth and all its life. We in Delhi watched this attack happen recently as Tyeb had watched a murderous assault on individuality by communalism in Mumbai in 1947.

Hindu historical vengefulness against religious minorities in India will not deter such attacks. Hinduism and Islam have been brought together by providence on this subcontinent so that the whole world may benefit from their peaceful coexistence and creative cooperation. Without this perspective of destiny,



the defence of India and the honour of its spiritual traditions is impossible. And it would be suicidal for Pakistan to wage war against its own subcontinental inheritance of integral spirituality.

Are we going to watch a trussed Lok Sabha hurtling in a rickshaw to a slaughter-house? ('Trussed Bull on Rickshaw', 1994).

A dormant śakti rests in the hand-pulled rickshaw of Indian life ('Woman on a Rickshaw', 1995). Will it sleep till doomsday?.

Or will an awakened consciousness of inclusive self-identity lighten and enlighten our toil, making it a playful circumambulation of mokṣa, freedom? ('Rickshaw-Puller', 1982).

Is a torn India going to fall into a bottomless abyss of communal hate and licenced murderousnes? ('Falling Figure', 1967). Gujarat?

The slashing of the canvas and its many-limbed figure (the comprehensive humanity of undivided India) in 'Diagonal' (1974), like the slaughtering of a bull in Tyeb's short-film *Koodal* (1969-1970) are powerful symbolisations of the vivisection of the organic unity of India by its partition in 1947. Pakistan and India have, in relation to one another, the status of alien, apparent not-Self. Forced belief that each is aware of the not-Selfhood of the other is a massive self-distortion of Indian and Pakistani self-awareness: a chaining of their energy of consciousness. The celebration of Indian and Pakistani independence in these circumstances is like the 'sṛṅgāra', the bridal make-up, of a eunuch in *Koodal*, a ritual of impotence which will not lead to the consummation of the joy of svarāj, self-realisation, the realisation that apparent Self and apparent not-Self are both Self's self-images.

Twenty lakh, two million, innocent human beings were slaughtered during India's partition, who were the citizens, the children of subcontinental India, not truncated Indians or Pakistanis. Their souls cannot rest in peace because they do not have valid passports to land in any world. They are rather like the trussed, camouflaged, flying figure of the triptych's panel 1 who cannot join

## KOODAL

grey – slight movement – a flicker – underneath  
row of human bodies, pressed one against another – lie asleep  
heads piled vertically – smoke  
from the dust bin –  
the animated eye –  
environment –  
plate of rice –  
people move in closed street –  
the circular movement –  
loss of identity –  
caught in inactive situation –  
helpless – unaware – group of people,  
mostly children and elders watch  
the mating of bull and cow,  
flight of birds –  
bull – relax – ruminating – suddenly  
the resistance – as if someone has tied its legs –  
metamorphosis of fear –  
the pull – the friction –  
struggle to make loose –  
the thud – then bleeding – agony –  
silence – the carcass –  
meat in the shop –  
the flagellation – the dance –  
women in windows –  
eunuch – the gesture of vulgarity.  
the gesture without meaning.  
disorderly crowd – march –  
the procession –  
the ritual –  
marriage of Shiva – Parvati  
late night – burning oil –  
the home of Gods –  
guarded by Nandi.



### Films Division Production

Produced by – G.P. Asthana  
Photographed by – M.S. Pendurkar  
Edited by – N.N. Vernekar  
Sound recorded by – A. Visvanatham  
Music directed by – Narayana Menon  
Music performed by – K.V. Narayanaswami  
– Palghat Raghu  
Written and directed by – Tyeb Mehta  
Length – 446.5 metres  
Running time – 16 mins. – 16 secs.  
Year – 1969-70

the flawed celebration on the ground. Indians and Pakistanis have not yet performed the last rites of two million ancestors of theirs.

Unless they do so, they cannot expect forgiveness in heaven where they are so anxious to migrate, like the work-gang of panel 3.

Divided Kashmir, like divided India, is like the triptych's panel 1 and panel 3, with panel 2 missing, the miracle of self-realisation, svarāj, which alone can heal the pain of self-distortion: unfreeze the executioner figure, transform his impotent rage (no longer impotent, what with nuclear virility) into the creativity of androgynous, comprehensive, Śiva-Pārvatī whose marriage is witnessed by Nandī, the undying bull-vehicle of Śiva. "Ardhanārīśvara", meaning "God or Lord who is half-woman" seems to me to be an inadequate description of Śiva-Pārvatī who are "pūrṇanaranārī", the wholeness of maleness and femaleness, together and separately.

Without disturbing the sovereignties (presumed svarāj) of Pakistani and Indian administered territories in the area (panels 1 and 3 of a would-be triptych of peace, areas of self-distortion), can't there be installed in Jammu and Kashmir as a whole a dimension of subcontinental reality in the form of an interfaith, intercultural, assembly to which members would be elected not only from 'J and K' but also from the subcontinent as a whole, to serve that piece of world heritage? This would be the missing panel 2 where life threatened at the foot of a sacrificial post would be liberated by the wisdom of all traditions willing to descend, like DKY, from the sky to mine-infested ground.

A threefold abode of peace, a 'Shantiniketan Triptych', literally, would come into being. The first task of such an assembly (satsanga, a mehfīl-é-haq?) would be to seek the forgiveness of partition's two million stateless dead and their blessings for peace and goodwill in the composite territory of 'J and K', administered politically by Pakistan and India and served culturally and ecologically by representatives from the subcontinent as a whole, men and women of compassion and courage of all faiths and none.

My preferred site for the inauguration of such a triptych would be the sacred shrine of Kshīra Bhavānī in the valley where, in 1898, Svāmī Vivekānanda had offered prayers to the Divine Mother and then asked her in anguish why She had let Muslim invaders destroy her images and temples repeatedly. Svāmījī has recorded Bhavānī's answer to his question, which he heard as a feminine voice from the sky (not from an image, please note, Anjali). "What is it to you, Vivekānanda, if I have permitted this? Do you protect me, or do I protect you?" Divine mercy has permitted all faiths to flourish in the subcontinent, it is the faithful who have failed to protect one another. Two million in our own times were slaughtered by ungrateful zealots. May we be enabled to help their souls rest in peace by declaring all of Jammu and Kashmir a cultural inheritance of the subcontinent as a whole, administered within present sovereignties by India and Pakistan. Are we to spurn the voice from the sky heard by Svāmī Vivekānanda, (probably the first recorded feminine voice of divinity in history), the voice of Īśvara and Allāh as a compassionate mother?

Perhaps the turtle-Yogī, representing the slaughtered and unmourned dead, is a shadow of guilt and shame which will always cross our path. We can put the shadow behind us by facing the sun, unlike King George V who turned his back to it. The "sun" here is not the golden disc politely urged by the upaniṣads to step aside, so that the face of truth could be seen, but the un-self-distorted light of Self's self-awareness which enables us to see our own favoured bodily and communal forms, and all forms, including formless nothingness, as Self's self-images, lucid or obscured, familiar or strange.

In 'Celebration' (1995), again a triptych, all the figures are feminine, and all of them (including you, Anjali, right at the top of panel 1), and the goat-mother, are in a frenzy of dance as omnipresence and outreach and interdependence: shattering the rigidity of passive location (please note, Rāmājanmabhūmi hardliners) and racially even more varied than the cast of the 'Shantiniketan Triptych': an all female cast of Brahmā's new play, the all-male cast having been sacked after

their playhouse-endangering departure from acting into boasting (this is an interpolating fantasy of mine). Large patches of light (dark brown, black, bright red, maroon, and green) highlight the līlā, but cannot imprison it. Svarāj is on the rampage.

### THE TRIPTYCH: A QUICK SCAN

Anjali, there is a singularity, a memorableness, to all the forms and figures of the triptych. To do a quick scan:

The heavily bandaged kicking flying adult foetus of panel 1's elegant blue-cylindrical sky, tied to the earth by an umbilical red string; full of mystery, being and nothingness.

The sweeping, slowing-down, shuffle of legs and feet on undulating brick-red Shantiniketan earth, upholding the sky-jar.

The flock of hands, flapping like the wings of a bird too large to be able to fly, the row of sorrowing heads acknowledging the heaviness of exclusivist self-identity, even sophisticated, differences-sensitive, humanist identity. Your look-alikes among them. Death's shadowy infiltration amongst the dancers exhausted by the labours of victory and the vigil of security. Individuality-respecting, differences-accommodating, species coherence and consciousness may be a necessary condition of human freedom, svarāj, but they are not sufficient for its realisation.

Panel 2's gallows, guillotine machine, sacrificial site, fallen, jagged, black-lightning. This alone, without the forms, with the fog-blue sky upon muck-brown earth, is unforgettable enough, menacing enough to wipe out silly notions of the joys of arrival at the summit of the hill of contention



between apparent Self and apparent not-Self.

The executioner figure (his pre-illumination form easily imaginable) merely fills out the suggestion of menace conveyed by the site itself (Yes, the missing fingers and claw included). The black and red and white form of androgynised bipedality – harmony of *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva* – is frighteningly beautiful, yes, but precariously poised on a summit stabbed by a stunted flagpole without a flag under a missing sky.

The trinity of witnessing women contemplatives sitting near the flagpost are a stroke of genius, bringing air-borne theology down to earth. Leaving *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu* and *Śiva* to look after the higher reaches of reality, *Sarasvatī*, *Laksmī*, and *Pārvatī* come down to earth to witness its mysterious *līlā* of self-obscuration and self-realisation.

I don't have words, Anjali, to describe the unprecedented (in painting, as far as I know) embrace of kinship and non-dualist identity in which the young madonna and the she-goat hold one another, the minimalist lines with which the teenager's astonished breathless compassion is established, and the sniffing trust of the goat-mother, the interanatomical comradeship across species awaiting the fate of endangered, indivisible, life on earth.

Without the turtle-Yogī's intervention between life's poignancy and



death's resolve, however, panel 2's transmutation of terror into the *ahimsā* of androgyny would look like a feat of futurist biotechnology, merely, and not a metaphor of self-realisation, a seal of *svarāj*, which it is.

The situation of the contemplative trinity on the high ground of panel 3 is masterly, again, doubt and dismay and inquiring concentration etched on their faces with sensuous attention, as is their embodied presence, in contrast to the heaven-seeking etherealisation of the transcendentalist labourers. The doubling green male-female figure representing physicalist identity sought to be exorcised by the rope-climbers in a hurry, is a disturbing picture of body-torture. Extraordinary, yes. *Svarāj* is not escape into a higher region established in the sky of nothingness, but an acknowledgement of the whole canvas of nothingness as the limitless space of Self's self-imaging self-awareness, unobstructed by "thinghood" of any kind and scale. The point is driven home, powerfully.

It is the fallen, sprawling, amphibian turtle-Yogī – inhabiting both sky and ground, nothingness and manifestation, with an appropriate turtle-neck pouring out of the blue like a severed head – who takes my breath away. Neither fixed into the ground like the flagpost, nor invisible and retreated into the sky, DKY is both everything and nothing. Self's self-image in all forms and



formless nothingness: representing the fraternity of existence and emptiness which alone is svarāj, the sovereignty of Self. Amphibian, like a turtle, like a layer of subcontinental reality running through Pakistani and Indian administered territories in Jammu and Kashmir which alone can atone for the murder of two million innocent human beings at the sacrificial flagpost of independence.

Bearing, already, the marks of mutilation by radioactivity, and reflecting the pain of self-distortion which is visited on all life by exclusivist self-identity, DKY raises his long chimpanzee left hand to manifest a gesture of generosity, the mayūra mudrā. The ring finger is joined to the thumb to manifest a circle of emptiness. And the other fingers form an arc of alignment with the circle of emptiness: their propensity to impute selfhood to a favoured form – and not-Selfhood to all other forms – withdrawn, but not entirely, so as to save appearances from nullity, to see all forms as Self's self-images. Svarāj is this impartial, transmuting, generosity of Self towards ambivalent appearance.

The isolationism of panels 1 and 3 of the triptych requires the corrective inclusivism of panel 2. Just as the splendour of panel 2 is heightened by the candour of panels 1 and 2.

And, for me, the high point of the painting is this: the turtle-Yogī's hand-gesture is located in the triptych's body as a fulcrum of hope, corresponding to the flower (near the fallen soldier's hand holding a broken sword) in 'Guernica'. Both symbols of the awakening of self-realisation within self-distorted consciousness, the promise of svarāj.

Anjali, it is because of this crucial correspondence that I think of Picasso's 'Guernica' and Tyeb's 'Shantiniketan Triptych' as companion paintings of the twentieth century, paired like the triptych's madonna and goat, Picasso's child and pigeon, bearing witness to the truth of inclusive self-identity in an age of separatist self-obscurance.

## EVERYTHING IS ON FIRE

Journeying with the triptych has been a many-dimensioned learning experience for me, Anjali, and I found myself looking at two recent paintings of Arpana Caur in the light of my encounter with the triptych. I want to share with you my understanding of these works (1) '1947', 1997; (2) 'Water Weaver', 2001, as we would talk of friendships formed during a long train journey in India.

1947 is, of course, the year of India's vivisected independence, the year of the twenty-two-year-old Tyeb Mehta's confrontation with the brutality of exclusivist self-identities. And the year 1997 when Arpana's '1947' was painted was the fiftieth anniversary of India's self-distorted entry into the svarāj of political adulthood. And the year 2001, the year Arpana's 'Water Weaver' was painted, inaugurates the already deeply troubled twenty-first century. Everything seems to be on fire, as the Buddha declared in his 'Fire Sermon'. But the water weaver makes a difference, as does the turtle-Yogī, DKY, in the triptych. As does the Buddha. And the contemplatives, you among them.

Informed by her own grandfather's flight from Pakistan to India during partition, Arpana's '1947' has a grave, pious, Sikh framed against a background of red patterned with ādivāsī lion-figures, vehicles of Śakti, protecting the peasant ousted from his ages-old habitat as he runs for his life, with a cloud slung over his shoulder (rain to grow food for his body) and a pedestal on his



Above: *Water Weaver*, 2001. 5' x 6'. Oil on canvas. Arpana Caur  
 Below: *'1947,'* 1997. 5' x 6'. Oil on canvas. Arpana Caur

head bearing his holy scripture (sacred words to nourish his soul). Suspect "other" banished by presumed "Self", exclusively identified with a favoured cultural-religious form of humanity.

A poignant portrait of faith in the midst of devastation. Head not burdened but blessed by the weightlessness of the sky of Self, which is not a thing as opposed to other things, heavier or lighter than them (wholly invisible though the sky is here, not merely truncated as in the triptych), but all-accommodating emptiness, the limitlessness of Self's self-awareness. Heart filled with hope of a resurrection of agriculture's self-imaging of Self (the self-sufficiency of land, blessed with emptiness' compassionate tears, rain), mind not resigned to absorption into detailless self-awareness nor life to annulment in extinction. Not unlike the never-say-die compositeness of the triptych's madonna and goat at the foot of the sacrificial post is the togetherness of toil and faith and blessing here. The uprooted farmer is walking on water, miraculously (two million perished), but it is a river of blood he is crossing. (Everything is on fire, started by friction between apparent, exclusive, Self and imputed, feared, not-Self. News on the radio as I write this confirms the Buddha's judgement, India have lost to Zimbabwe).

Even as DKY in the triptych is ready to take the place of pregnant life at the sacrificial site, the 'Water Weaver' has a squatting woman weaver (without a loom, without anything external to herself, reminiscent of Tyeb's 1997 'Dancing Figure') who is ready to weave a transformation in self-identity sitting under the tree of fire: eyes wide-open in acknowledgement of the world as art, or art-in-the-making, the fingers of both hands aligned with the thumb, their "otherness"-presuming accusation withdrawn.

Water flows out of her weaving gesture of self-realisation, to cool the fire of life-threatening antagonisms, to manifest self-images of Self, exemplifications of inclusive emptiness, to show a middle-ground between separatist thinghood and vacuity: the reality of celebratory, enlightened, living. (Kṛṣṇa līlā and

Buddha dharma).

The fleeing Sikh is really trying to go round the world in circumambulation to return, hopefully, to a subcontinent without exclusivist self-identities. The weaver of water is making the world go round, to let the sun of self-realisation illumine its darkest places, by staying where she is, in undistorted self-awareness, her wide-open eyes alert to the awakening of self-inquiry in the most congealed self-identities, in all worlds, her weaving hands tirelessly showing the way. A powerful Buddha self-image for our times, a Śrī Ramaṇa self-image, feminine like the voice from the sky which assured Svāmī Vivekānanda in Kashmir in 1898 that she protected all spiritual traditions, not the other way round.

As I write these concluding words of an extended meditation on Tyeb Mehta's 'Shantiniketan Triptych', I am aware that the painter has recently been seriously ill in Mumbai. I pray to the turtle-Yogī and the madonna goat, to the contemplative witnesses, Anjali, to bless him with many more years of healthy life and active work: and peace and the realisation of the many-sidedness of the impact of his art on his contemporaries and the inevitability of his discovery as a modern master by future generations around the world.

Thank you, Tyeb.

# "ANJALI"

After breakfast at Nathu's in Bengali Market, I quickly returned to my room to work on the lecture on "Self and Emptiness" which I was scheduled to give at the India International Centre in the evening, with the aid of Tyeb Mehta's 'Shantiniketan Triptych' – the original canvas – as a stage-setting for the occasion, promised to be made available by Anjali who was at the time the Director of NGMA.

Working frenziedly on my notes all day, I decided around 5 pm to make a move in the direction of IIC. Getting into a sturdy-looking threewheeler, I was soon hurtling down Copernicus Marg. Halfway down the road the empty canopy of the India Gate circle became visible, as it always does, but it had a special meaning for me that day and I couldn't take my eyes off it. (And recalled the words of the Edinburgh eye-doctor, "You are quite a starrer!", and blinked, inquiringly). It would be absurd to install a statue of Gandhi under the canopy, I thought, insulting a faḳīr who lived under the sky by putting him inside an imperialist cage, suggesting that he inherited the mantle of George V to rule India like a princeling of the British Empire. Given the fragility of communal peace in India at all times and the continuing fallout of the Rāmājanmabhūmi movement in Ayodhya, there was also the possibility of Hindu zealatory whipping up a campaign for the installation of a Rāma image under the canopy, with the





GANDHI'S FUNERAL PROCESSION AT INDIA GATE  
IN FRONT OF THE CANOPY OF KING GEORGE V, 1948

Sūryavamśī divine sovereign's back turned towards the sun! Or away from the responsibilities of governance.

The scooter coursed along in its circular movement around the India Gate area, but I stopped and released the vehicle near the canopy (Anjali had arranged to have me picked up from there), so as to take a closer look at it as homework for my lecture.

Childhood memories welled-up of Gandhi's mammoth funeral procession swirling like flood waters around the canopy (George V's statue was in place then) and, in a moment of anger at the way the British Empire had "split India" in retaliation for Gandhi's call to the alien Raj to "quit India", threatening to flow up Raisina hill to overwhelm the seats of power of the recently vanquished Empire: the Viceregal Palace, the secretariats of an alienated bureaucracy which had ruled India with an iron hand or with the patronising indulgence of presumptuous racial and civilisational superiority. Nothing of the sort had happened. The tide of mourners paused for a while and then flowed eastwards to the banks of the Yamuna to cremate the saint-martyr, to return him to the bosom of Eternal India. I felt faint.

And then I thought I heard the noisy brakes of a bus bringing it to a halt not far behind me, and Anjali's familiar voice from the driver's window (she was at the helm), saying, "You will get late for the lecture. The triptych is with me – all three panels – in the bus (NGMA's vehicle). Hop in." I thought her suggestion was wise and climbed into the passenger's seat next to her driver's seat. Her yellow kurta, worn over white churidars, glistened in the late afternoon sun. She wore a white cricket cap on her head.

"Which route to IIC would you like me to take?" she asked, matter-of-factly. "I wanted first to visit the Ramaṇa Kendra for the sage's blessings for the lecture, near the Sai Baba temple off Ramaṇa Maharshi Marg," I said, truthfully. "Certainly", was her immediate response, and the bus roared away towards the Sujana Singh Park area from where Ramaṇa Maharshi Marg proceeds



in a southerly direction. Wielding the bus-steering with strong arms (kurta sleeves rolled up), she asked me what the guiding idea was for the lecture. The “mayūra mudrā”, I said, demonstrating the gesture with my right hand. She copied it with her right hand, holding the steering under her left arm: and then it happened.

The NGMA bus – with the triptych’s panels in it (supported by panel 1’s black-robed tāntrika monk who had duplicated himself as a flesh-and-blood person) and Anjali at the wheel and the evening’s lecturer in the seat next to hers – quietly took off like an aircraft from Pandara Road and was soon airborne high above Golf Links. “Where are you taking me, Anjali?” I asked. “Why, to Ramaṇa Kendra, or is it Āshrama, in Tiruvannāmalai,” she said, and laughed explosively. “If it is your Guru’s will, we’ll still be back in time for the lecture at IIC,” she added, without ceasing to laugh.

Southward bound, we were racing through space, the rolling fields of Hindustan disappearing beneath us like a fast-flowing river. Over the Vindhya magically quickly, it began to get dark, and we were soon hovering above Aruṇācala hill. “Om Śrī Aruṇācalāya Namaḥ,” I chanted, and noticing what looked like the flickering lights of Ramaṇāshrama below, I added, “Om Śrī Ramaṇāya Namaḥ.” Courteous pilot, Anjali dipped the bus in salutation towards the Āshrama, causing the triptych’s panels to fall over one another, but they were quickly enough held back in place by the sturdy monk. “Sorry about that!”, Anjali said, smiling at the monastic, who was blinking like a pigeon.

A mass of light emanated from the Āshrama and rose towards our bus rapidly, enveloping it in a mist of gold, dematerialising the vehicle (alone) entirely. The panels floated away, followed by Anjali’s cricket cap, followed by the monk as in a scene in some space-travel science-fiction film. Anjali and I stood suspended in mid-air, defying gravity, dimly visible to one another in the fast-fading light of the Āshrama missile.

“Show me how to make a mayūra mudrā again,” Anjali said, characteristically

unflappably. I made the mudra and she did too. Suddenly we found ourselves behind the push-bar of a large hand-plied rickshaw in the sky. The monk sailed back (comically, like the 1994 ‘Falling Figure’) to stand behind the bar to the left of Anjali, I stood to her right. The cricket cap returned like a homing pigeon and landed snugly on Anjali’s head. The panels – luminous rotating obelisks – glided into the rickshaw safely: one, two, three.

Guided by their firefly-light, we pushed the rickshaw effortlessly and with shuffling feet towards the summit of the sacred hill: and when we were quite close to it, we made a slow pradakṣiṇā (circumambulation) of it.

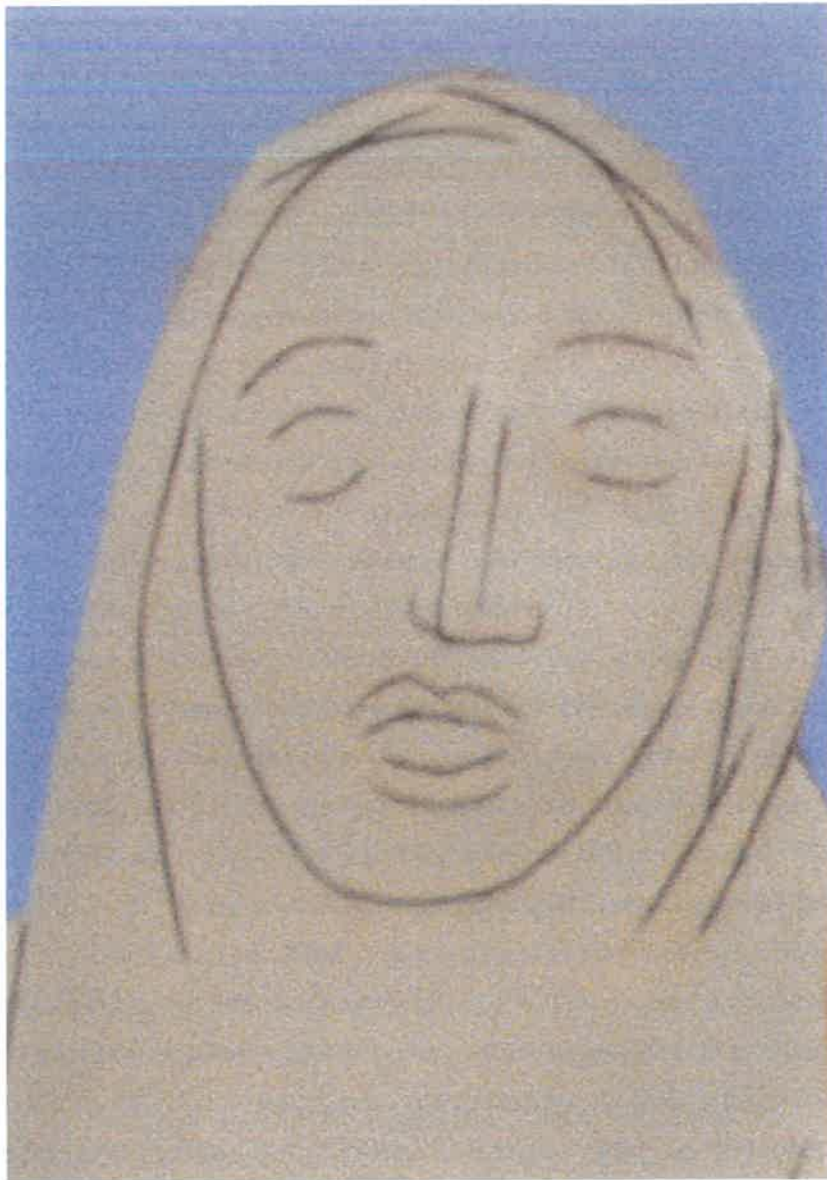
A cloud of light raced towards us from the Ashrama, bathing us in its goat-white luminosity. I lost consciousness.

The next thing I remember is Anjali’s voice, saying, “Wake up Ramu. I thought you had dozed off on the grass and I didn’t want to disturb you. But you are to lecture at IIC in half an hour. Pick up your notes on the empty canopy and get into the bus. The triptych’s there, all three panels, with NGMA staff to help you set it up for the talk.” We sat together on a passenger seat behind a regular driver. There was no sign of the tāntrika monk. He must have returned to the cloth-covered panel marked (1). Anjali was wearing a grey khadi silk sārī and blouse. Where did the cricket cap go?

As our bus pulled into Pandara Road, Anjali asked me what my guiding idea was for the lecture, and would I like the driver to take a slightly different route to IIC, down Ramaṇa Maharshi Marg to seek the blessings of the sage for the lecture. “The mayūra mudrā is my guiding idea, but let’s go straight to IIC,” I said, nervously.

I didn’t show Anjali how to make the mayūra mudrā until our bus was safely inside the IIC parking lot. After that lecture, I stopped making notes on the triptych and started work on this book, and avoided bus rides to lecture venues.

My journey with Tyeb Mehta’s ‘Shantiniketan Triptych’ began in 1985,



*Shantiniketan Triptych, panel 2, detail. Tyeb Mehta*

when I visited him and his wife Sakina in Mumbai in their Juhu flat, and Tyeb showed me photographic negatives of the triptych. I didn't get to see the work in the flesh until shortly after it was acquired by NGMA in Delhi in 1986: and I have not ceased to learn from it during all these years, which have also been for me a period of sustained inquiry into the teaching of Advaita Vedānta, especially as transmitted to our times by Śrī Rāmāṇa Maharshi. The painting and the teaching have illumined each other for me.

I don't know where I have arrived, Anjali, but I have the sense of a journey coming to an end, no doubt to be resumed again as yātrās are. A long journey, it would also have been very lonely without your presence in the writing of this book: and mysteriously also in the triptych as a Modigliani design of haunting loveliness which is also exemplified in my daughter, Leela. Bless you both.

## POSTSCRIPT

“Wait a minute, you have given the name ‘svarāj’ to your journey with Tyeb Mehta’s ‘Shantiniketan Triptych’ and the teaching of Advaita Vedānta and Śrī Rāmāṇa Maharshi. You should conclude this journey, or this edition of the journey, with a reflection on svarāj, and a Rāmāṇa Maharshi story. Sorry, but you have work to do!” So says Anjali, vigilant like her clone on the extreme right in panel 1’s huddle of truthful anxiety.

I’ll try, Anjali, to fulfil that legitimate expectation. Om Śrī Rāmāṇāya Namaḥ.

Saints and faḳīrs in India sometimes give their followers a “talisman”, a sacred mantra to chant, or a sanctified amulet to wear, to assist them in their search for happiness and peace and freedom. Gandhi also offered a talisman, a reflection and a reminder, to his compatriots when they began to lose all hope of attaining svarāj, of at least liberating India from the racism – the alleged right of one race to rule over other races – implicit in the British conquest and control of India. Here is what he said, the substance of his prescription, not his precise words.

“When, in your search for svarāj, you lose heart or lose your way, do this exercise in imagination: recall the face of the most miserable, downtrodden, human being you have seen, and ask yourself if your way of life is likely to bring that person any closer to a measure of control over his life, closer to svarāj. You will find your doubt and despondency melting away, your journey towards svarāj will have resumed.”

A potent talisman, that.

But Anjali asks me to offer a reflection on svarāj, not information, merely, on Gandhi’s or anybody else’s conception of it. So I am going to try and add a footnote to Gandhi’s talisman in the nature of a meditation on the spirit of his advice. (Help me Rāmāṇa!).

The most miserable person I know is the person I see when I look in the mirror, the person I take to be myself, exclusively: my favoured self-identity. He is not hungry or homeless or ostracised, his condition is worse. He is self-distorted in his thought “I am this, as opposed to that. We are this, as opposed to that.” He is in bondage. He is the figure in the Magritte painting, self-identified with his human and well-groomed cultural form, who looks in the mirror to find not his face but his back. He has lost his face of self-awareness. (The painting is appropriately called ‘Not to be Reproduced’. A species without self-realisation cannot endure).

If, in this situation of bitter self-acquaintance, I find the grace and strength to enter the mode of self-awareness represented by the thought, “I am Self, limitless self-awareness. All humanity, including the human being that I am, all life, all non-living materiality, and also environing nothingness, are Self’s self-images, or self-images-in-the-making”, I will make a healing, liberating, contact with the misery of saṁsāra, and enlist in all struggles for svarāj, self-realisation. Not until then. I will not feel wretched, or wretched in vain, any more. I may even begin to look like the turtle-Yogī!

Now the Rāmāṇa story. As the sage of Aruṇācala lay dying in his hut in Tiruvannāmalai in 1950 (having steered India to independence!), his favourite disciple, a white peacock, had perched himself on the roof of his master’s hut and screamed away in sorrow and lamentation at the likely imminent passing of the luminous teacher. Among Rāmāṇa Maharshi’s last recorded words are a solicitous inquiry about his peacock disciple (ego, the most recalcitrant but intimate disciple of Self, whose caricature it is). “Have you given that bird his dinner?” he asked. Ego, individual and collective, needs the nourishment of self-knowledge, not the euphoria or disillusionment of self-distortion.

So that’s it, Anjali, script and postscript, for you.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

Biographical information about Tyeb Mehta incorporated in this book is taken from the catalogues of Vadehra Art Gallery, as also Tyeb's autobiographical statements and the chronology of his paintings.

## SECTIONS

1. Both classical and popular Hindu iconography often represent divinities and sages and saints with half-closed, "blinking", eyes, e.g. Śiva, Guru Nānak, and as highlighted in a nineteenth century photograph reproduced in this book, Śrī Rāmakrishna. Reality is Self, ourselves, not something else we need to stare at in awe. Nor, for the same reason, can we "lose sight" of it, be blind to it. Blinking is a striking image of the security of self-knowledge; and half-closed eyes of the ecstasy of Self's ceaseless self-imaging, play. (Sexual pleasure, with its implicit self-knowledge of reproductive capability, i.e. biological self-imaging, reflects the structure of spiritual ecstasy, not the other way round). The androgyny of Śrī Rāmakrishna's maternal breasts is piously unconcealed in the photograph.

2. The line from Boris Pasternak and the words of Andrei Tarkovsky quoted underneath images from the film *Stalker* (released in 1979) reproduced in this book are taken from Andrei Tarkovsky's treatise on cinema, *Sculpting in Time*, Faber and Faber, 1986. When, at the end of the film, the stalker returns home to his estranged wife, disillusioned with the scientist and the writer, "who want to be paid for every breath they take", he says to her, "I'll never take such people to the zone." "But you must have compassion even for them", is her amazing response, and she goes on to ask her husband when he is going to take her to the zone.

There is here not only Buddhist compassion, but also a gentle questioning of male-monopoly in spiritual trusteeship. The triptych's women contemplatives,

especially dramatically in panel 3, question the legitimacy of gender-segregation in esoteric ritual and ideological inquiry.

A dog has followed the stalker all the way back from the zone. The final shot of the film shows the stalker and his family (the handicapped child on his father's shoulders, seeing far ahead) walking with their new dog-companion to heaven or hell (the zone or the Gulag), powerfully suggestive of the final, Himalayan, journey of the Pāṇḍava brothers and their wife Draupadī, accompanied by a mysterious dog.

The triptych's madonna is likely to refuse an offer of ascension to heaven without the goat-mother being allowed to accompany her, rather in the way Yudhiṣṭhira refuses the offer of transportation to heaven in a celestial chariot without his canine fellow-pilgrim.

The scientist and writer in *Stalker* would gladly destroy the zone – a devastated earth – with their nuclear device. The stalker would rather restore it to its proper status as Self's self-image: of the ground of the sport, līlā, of all forms and formlessness.

5. It is in the Kaṭhōpaniṣad (II. 1. 12, 13) that a being no larger than a thumb, "anguṣṭhamātraḥ", is said to inhabit the centre of our being, Self.

This is likely to be regarded as evidence of the "pre-philosophical" character of upaniṣadic thought, or at most as an occult vision of yogic concentration. The latter is plausible, but not the former supposition. One of the happiest thoughts that has come my way by Guru's grace is that the imagery of the thumb in this characterisation of Selfhood must clearly serve the purpose of drawing attention to the non-referential mode of self-identification (not the way of "finger-pointing") implicit in Self's self-awareness. The Kaṭhōpaniṣad verses (II.1. 12,13) should be obligatory reading and object of reflection for philosophy of language and ontology.

"Tat tvam asi", "You are that", is a staggering revelation of the Chhāndogya Upaniṣad (VI. 8. 7). A pupil, an inquirer into Brahman, the Vast



(all-inclusive consciousness), Śvetaketu by name, is directly addressed by his sage preceptor and told that he, Śvetaketu, is himself what he is seeking, Brahman, the Vast, all-inclusive consciousness. That, which is the vastness, limitlessness, of Self's self-awareness, and also each of its self-images, including the human forms that are Śvetaketu and his preceptor. Addressing is what reminds us of this habitually neglected dimension of received Vedāntic teaching: restoring to it the ambience of conversation and dialogue (into which addressing leads us) which are no less fundamental than solitary meditation as modes of self-inquiry.

The triptych has its face and its faces turned towards us as in an act of addressing, and not only the profile of its awesome executioner form (androgynously again turning towards us in initiatory conversation). Talking to you throughout the text of this book has this philosophical justification, Anjali: it enables the writer – and, hopefully, the reader – not to lose sight of his face-to-face relationship with the painting, as with a friend who restores him to self-knowledge in the midst of self-obscurity, hope in the midst of self-doubt.

The aśvattha tree, its roots in the sky of emptiness or the limitless field of Self's self-awareness, its fruits scattered all over the earth, is a Bhagavadgītā image (15.1), and grounds the triptych's inverted turtle-yogī's compassion in scriptural authority; and also, surely, the comically descending clown-avatāra in 'Falling Figure' 1994.

6. 'Guernica's' horse, especially, amongst all its figures, calls upon us, addresses us, screamingly. The Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (I. 1. 2) opens with a symbolic portrait of Brahman as a horse. The self-distortion of exclusivist self-identity is, then, the scream of the flowing horse of consciousness tortured into fixity by self-diminution, e.g. racism. The horse-shyness of the rickshaw-puller in Tyeb's 'Rickshaw-Puller' (1988) is a healing of 'Guernica's' Brhadāraṇyaka agony.

'Guernica's' one-legged bull, symbolic of kaliyuga's (the present epoch's) precarious self-groundedness, svarāj), is etched within a receded and darkened

background form of four-leggedness, satyayuga on all fours, secure sovereignty of self-realisation. (Satyayuga is a primal epoch of truth, followed self-diminishingly by the tretā and the dvāpara yugas, and most compromisedly by kaliyuga, the age of iron as opposed to the gold of satyayuga).

Meditation on this scheme of epochs throws light on features of 'Guernica' and the triptych.

Satyayuga is the secure location of wakefulness, dream and sleep (Self's līlā, play, of self-imaging) within the reality of limitless self-awareness: the harmony of work, play, and rest within the freedom of self-realisation, the complementarity of wealth, (artha), pleasure (kāma), and righteousness (dharma) within the framework of mokṣa (freedom from duality). Satyayuga is four-dimensional in svarāj.

Kaliyuga, our age, is exclusively founded on the idea of wakefulness, the fixity and fragility of forms and their feared passage into devouring nothingness: the extreme absence of svarāj, self-rule, self-confidence. Narcissism and paranoia in annihilationist friction, with dream and sleep, play and rest, inducted into the ambition of accumulation, conquest, progress.

The triptych's exploration of many-footedness, human and non-human, is an exploration of the possibilities of svarāj in the all-out war between presumed Self and not-Self that is kaliyuga. The upside-downness of the turtle-yogī, his willingness, would-be self-sacrificingly, to descend from a height of spiritual safety to the ground-reality of an assault on life's integrity and diversity, is a redemption of 'Guernica's' one-legged bull: kaliyuga by the brown-muck (not gold) of the lotus's possibilities, the mayūra mudrā's ego-annulling power of alignment of narcissist-thumb and paranoid-fingers. Not other than the little flower tossed into 'Guernica's' Kurukṣetra by an Anjaliesque angel, the flower of self-realisation, a seed of light sown in the heart of darkness.

11. It is in Rajmohan Gandhi's *The Good Boatman*, Viking 1995, Chapter 9, Page 352, that I found reported the extraordinary episode of Gandhi's anony-

mous car-journey on August 15, 1947, through the streets of Calcutta, to see how his compatriots were celebrating independence.

20. *Savaging the Civilised* is the brilliantly-inverting title of Ramachandra Guha's biographical study of the English missionary-anthropologist-turned-Indian-ādivāsī Verrier Elwin, published by Oxford, 1999. The title and the book are cognate with the triptych's exposure of humanity's delusions: but the painting is more optimistic in its glimpses of non-anthropocentric (beyond the duality of 'savage' and 'civilised') self-realisation.

24. The episode of Yudhiṣṭhira's encounter with the Yakṣa and the questions he is required to answer by the celestial being, figure in Chapter 20 of the 'Vana Parva' of the Mahābhārata. The context is instructive and helpful in reading the triptych's text of forms and figures.

Pleased with Yudhiṣṭhira's answers to his questions, the Yakṣa reveals that he is Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira's father. And that it was he, in the form of a deer, who had absconded with the araṇī sticks of the Brāhmaṇa who had sought the Pāṇdavas' help in hunting the deer down and restoring the araṇī sticks to the pious householder (araṇī sticks light household fire – controlled fire, passion – for sacred and secular purposes and symbolise instruments of power whose self-restrained use is what makes civilisation possible and enduring). Dharma returns the sticks to Yudhiṣṭhira, who restores them to the Brāhmaṇa household. Humanity is once again in possession of the capability not to start unstoppable conflagrations. A representative human being is found who has the wisdom to understand the significance of such capability and the power to protect it. The Pāṇdavas pass a qualifying test before the great war with the un-self-restrained Kauravas starts.

The Yakṣa's questions are numerous, but three among them, and Yudhiṣṭhira's answers to them, illuminate some of the triptych's figures:

Q1. What is heavier (more substantial) than the earth?

Yudhiṣṭhira's answer: the Mother is more substantial. (She is one in

many forms, her own and her children's, not a fixed, un-self-imaging mass like the geologically conceived earth.)

The triptych madonna and goat-mother are this poignant substantiality.  
Q2. What is taller than heaven?

Yudhiṣṭhira's answer: the Father is taller than the sky. (He does not lord it over all in some heaven at the top of the sky. As the turtle-yogī, he pours himself down the sky to emerge as a would-be substitute for the madonna and the goat-mother at panel 2's sacrificial site. Such compassionate availability makes the father yogī taller than the sky.

Q3. What is the most amazing fact of life?

Yudhiṣṭhira's answer: that while I see people die all around me, I do not believe that "I" can die.

The defiance of the fear of death etched on the faces of the madonna and the goat-mother and the yogī spring from such a realisation of the many-centredness of Self.

29. "The human body is the best picture of the human soul", says Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, Section (iv). The crucial element in this aphorism of Wittgenstein is the idea that the human body is a picture (the best, he thinks) of the human soul (the real me, you, he, she, etc.). It is not clear what precisely Wittgenstein takes the "soul" to be. It could be that he is sympathetically recalling (or independently discovering) the Aristotelian-Thomist teaching that the human soul is the "form" of the human body, without committing himself to the notion that the soul, thus conceived, could exist independently of the living human body, and whose real home is heaven and not the earth. Such a view would, as I have urged, undermine the integrity of Self's self-awareness, as souls "other" than mine would be "not-Self" which I could not become aware of without ceasing to be self-awareness: and, besides, it could strengthen the "earth-abandoning", "heaven-seeking" motivation of types of religious violence. One can't associate Wittgenstein with

such opinions and orientations of life.

It seems to me more likely that Wittgenstein might be communicating a thought such as the following by means of his aphorism: "Don't try to imagine something like a non-corporeal entity as your soul, the real you. Your body is the best image, 'imagination', of your inmost reality.

Such a reading of Wittgenstein's aphorism would be cognate with the conviction of this book that our bodily forms are our, Self's, self-images: that we are not something as opposed to something else.

In the context of the triptych, however, one would have to disagree with the Wittgensteinian aphorism in respect of another dimension of it: that the human body is the best picture of the human soul.

The gender-species-crossing and many-limbed images of human beings in the triptych suggest that an adequate picture of Self, the real you and me, would be svarāj, adequate self-groundedness, and the anatomically singular human body cannot be regarded as portraying svarāj, self-realisation, at all satisfactorily or ideally.

The idea of the real me or you being a "human" soul falls short of the notion of Self, Ātman, which is self-imaged in human as well as non-human forms, and no less in the formlessness of nothingness. The triptych's "body-suited" human forms draw attention precisely to the human form being but one "garment" worn by Self in a show of limitless shapes of self-imaging.

31. Verse 15 of Īśa Upaniṣad prays for the removal of the golden disc (the sun construed entitatively) which hides the face of truth, so that one may see truth face-to-face. Self-awareness is such seeing of truth, Self, by itself, face-to-face. The sun as an entity is not self-luminous. The "removal" of the entitatively conceived sun is its replacement by a symbolically conceived sun, a self-image of Self, its face-to-face reflexivity. So conceived, the sun is worshippingable, and turning one's back to it wilfully (as by the statue of George V under his India Gate canopy) is insensitive and catastrophe-inviting.

34. Anjali, the triptych is light in the midst of darkness, but fearlessly traverses the darkness. Like 'Guernica'. If I call upon you again and again in imagined conversation in journeying with the painting, it is partly because I am afraid to walk alone in the dark, and have needed your pathfinding presence, even as Tyeb's 1982 'Rickshaw-Puller' needs a guiding light to walk with him.

And to share with you the light of the triptych's non-dualist communion with sky and earth, bipedality and multipedality, action and contemplation, genders and species, being and nothingness: intimations of svarāj.

## GLOSSARY

- abhaya mudrā:** boon of fearlessness, represented in classical dance and Hindu iconography by a divinity's or sage's raised right palm facing the devotee.
- ādivāsī(s):** aboriginal person or people in the deep sense of those who dwell in the beginningless source of all manifestation, i.e. Self: and not a mere ethnic category of humanity.
- advaita:** non-duality, the faith and realisation that there is only Self and its self-images, no real not-Self, otherness.
- Advaita Vedānta:** classical Indian school of non-dualist thought drawing its inspiration and authority from the concluding portions of the Vedas, the body of esoteric teaching designated as "the upaniṣads".
- ahimsā:** the practice of "non-injury" or "non-violence" towards all life seen as the diversity of Self's self-images.
- Allāh:** God in Islam, one without a second.
- anjali:** offering of devotion.
- ardhanārīśvara, ardhanareśvarī:** God who is half woman, Goddess who is half-man, designations in Hindu iconography and theology of Śiva-Pārvatī, or Śiva-Śakti.
- Aristotle:** Greek philosopher of antiquity, successor of Plato and Socrates, whose influence on European-Christian and Islamic philosophy has been profound.
- Arjuna:** the most heroic of the Pāṇḍava brothers in the Mahābhārata, intimate friend and devotee of Kṛṣṇa.
- Aruṇācala:** sacred hill in South India regarded as the embodiment of Śiva, identified as such by Ramaṇa Maharshi also.
- Aśoka(n):** associated with Aśoka, ancient Indian monarch who embraced Buddhism and renounced violence.
- Aśoka Vātikā:** a forest grove where Sītā, consort of Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa, was

- held captive by the demon-king Rāvaṇa.
- āśrama:** hermitage of a sage, place of "refuge" for seekers of self-realisation tormented by the dualisms of worldly life.
- asura(s):** demon or demons.
- aśvattha:** inverted tree in sacred myth whose roots are in the sky and whose branches shower blessings upon the earth below.
- ātmajijñāsā:** impulse to self-knowledge or self-realisation.
- Ātman:** Self, not Ego.
- Ātman-Brahman:** the non-duality of Self and God (the Vast, than which no greater is conceivable).
- Ayodhyā:** literally "unbattleable", capital city of Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa.
- Bhavānī:** Divine Mother, Pārvatī, Śakti.
- Bhīma:** the strongest of the Pāṇḍava brothers in the Mahābhārata.
- Bodhi tree:** tree of enlightenment, the tree under which Siddhārtha attained enlightenment and became the Buddha.
- Brahmā:** God as creator in Hindu theology.
- brahmacharya:** literally, "the way of the Vast"; more limitedly, celibacy.
- brahmaṇḍa:** yardstick, measure of the Vast.
- Brhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad:** the "great forest" upaniṣad or esoteric teaching of Vedānta.
- Buddhadharma:** the way of righteousness taught by the Buddha.
- Buddhajayanti Park:** a park in New Delhi which commemorates the birth of the Buddha, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama has installed a statue of the Buddha in the "bhūmiśparsa", "ground-touching", mudrā or expressive hand-gesture.
- churidars:** tight-fitting trousers, usually white, worn by women under long, flowing shirts: increasingly also by men, in India.
- Dakṣiṇēśvara:** the complex of temples near Calcutta where Śrī Rāmakrishna Paramahansa lived and gave spiritual instruction to all who came to him.



**dehātmabuddhi:** the “I am only this body” orientation of the mind of exclusivist self-identity.

**deva(s), devī(s):** God or Gods, Goddess or Goddesses.

**Devakī:** mother of Kṛṣṇa.

**dharmacakra:** the wheel of dharma, set in motion by the Buddha, perhaps a metaphor for the revivification of ossified tradition.

**digambara:** literally, sky-clad; a member of a sect of Jaina monks who wear no clothes, only the sky, as their garment. Metaphor, I believe, of the not-thingness of limitless self-awareness, i.e. Self, which “clothes” all things, i.e. fashions them as its own self-images.

**Dillī-kī-ranī/Dillī-kā-rājā:** queen of Delhi, king of Delhi.

**Droṇācārya:** preceptor of the Pāṇdavas and the Kauravas in the Mahābhārata.

**Durgā:** literally “fortress”; Divine Mother, Pārvatī, slayer of Mahisasura, Ego in its most extended, massed, form.

**dvāparayuga:** the second of the great time cycles of Hindu cosmic chronology, where only half of truth’s lustre is visible.

**Ekalavya:** low-caste devotee of Droṇācārya in the Mahābhārata who is asked to cut off his right thumb by the archery-master, who does not want his favourite disciple, Arjuna, to be excelled in archery by anyone. A poignant symbol of the disempowerment of the lower castes by the prejudices of high-born pride.

**faḷīr:** saintly person in a shared Hindu-Islamic tradition in India who chooses a life of poverty.

**gandharva(s):** celestial, musically and artistically gifted being or beings who can live in mid-air and also on land.

**Gaṇeśa:** elephant-formed first born son of Śiva and Pārvatī. Symbolic of unforgettable self-knowledge (the elephant’s trunk, his nose, is proof of his power of self-remembrance).

**Gandhi Smriti:** Gandhi museum located in New Delhi at the site of his martyrdom.

**Gujarat:** a western state of India recently witness to savage communal killings.

**Hritik Roshan:** contemporary Indian film star who has a special flair for dancing.

**India Gate:** a high gateway built by the British during their reign in India to commemorate the valour of Indian soldiers of the British Empire who died in its defence. The name also designates the site of the former empire’s structures of power, now of independent India.

**IIC:** India International Centre, a prestigious cultural centre located near the India Gate area.

**Īśa upaniṣad:** literally, “the Lord’s secret”, an ancient Vedāntic text of esoteric spiritual instruction.

**Īśvara:** Lord, God, sovereign of all.

**jāgrta:** the waking state in Hindu spiritual psychology, as distinguished from the dream and sleep states of consciousness.

**jīva(s):** living being or beings.

**jīvātman-paramātman:** apparently finite, limited self, inseparable from limitless, supreme, Selfhood.

**Kali:** Divine Mother as Time, destroyer of ego.

**kaliyuga:** the fourth cycle of cosmic time, when but a fourth part of truth’s lustre is visible to fallen life, symbolised by a bull standing on but one leg. We are in kaliyuga in modern times.

**kameez:** shirt, often richly embroidered, worn by Indian women over billowy trousers, the salwar.

**Kaṁsa:** tyrant uncle of Kṛṣṇa, slain by his nephew.

**Kaṭhopaniṣad:** ancient text of Vedānta which tells the story of a boy, Naciketas, who elicits from Yama, death, the secret of immortality, self-realisation. A story amazingly reenacted in 1896 when sixteen-year-old Ramaṇa (who was later to become renowned as Ramaṇa Maharshi) inquired into the question “Who am I?” while in the grip of the fear of death, the intensity of his inquiry precipitating self-realisation.

**King George V:** British monarch whose statue was installed under a specially erected canopy in the India Gate area, the monarch's back turned towards the east, the sun, spelling the doom of the British Empire in India by this supremely culturally insensitive act, I would venture to suggest.

**Kolkata:** present, indigenised, name of Calcutta.

**koodal:** a Tamil word signifying 'congregation'.

**Kṛṣṇa:** divine incarnation who guided the Pāṇdavas to a bare victory against their cousins, the avaricious Kauravas, in the Mahābhārata.

**Kṛṣṇa's līlā:** the sport (līlā) of Kṛṣṇa, the self-imaging art-work of Self, play often deeply camouflaged as toil and tragedy.

**Kṣīra Bhavānī:** a temple of the Divine Mother in the Kashmir valley made memorable by Svāmī Vivekānanda's pilgrimage to the shrine in 1898. In answer to his anguished cry "Why, Mother, why did you permit the Islamic invader to destroy your own temples and images?", Vivekānanda heard a feminine voice from the sky, which said, "What is it to you, Vivekānanda, if I have permitted this. Do you protect me, or do I protect you?". (See *The life of Svāmī Vivekānanda, by his Eastern and Western disciples*, Advaita Ashram, Kolkata, 1974, 'At Kshira Bhavani', p. 578)

**Kumara Gandharva:** renowned twentieth century Indian classical singer whose voice (possibly because he had only one functioning lung) often had a goat-like bleating poignancy, especially in his devotional singing.

**Kārma-Yogī:** literally "Turtle-Yogī", a phrase by which the central, inverted, figure at the sacrificial site in the triptych is identified in this book: because he appears to be wearing a turtle-necked garment, or actually has a turtle's neck, which he sticks out interveningly, and does not withdraw, along with his head, into a safe shell of indifference.

**Kurta:** loose, long, shirt, white or coloured; its handspun, handwoven, variety a great favourite with the young, men and women, in India today.

**Lakṣmī:** Consort of Viṣṇu, the preserver of the cosmos, in Hindu theology.

Symbol of abundance.

**Lankā:** literally, "island", i.e. Ego. Mythic island-kingdom of the demon Rāvaṇa in the Rāmāyaṇa.

**līlā:** divine sport, play.

**Lok Sabha:** India's house of representatives elected by nearly a billion people, situated in the India Gate area of New Delhi.

**Lucifer:** fallen angel, Satan, in Christian theology.

**Mahābhārata:** Indian epic poem of immense length and depth which narrates the story of the Kuru dynasty and the fratricidal battle between two wings of it, the Pāṇdavas and their cousins, the Kauravas. The work is a complete manual of Hindu philosophical and spiritual wisdom and political and ethical thought. The celebrated *Bhagavadgītā* is a part of the Mahābhārata.

**Mahiśa:** a buffalo.

**Mahisasura:** a demon camouflaged as a buffalo.

**maidan:** a large park in Indian cities.

**mantra:** sacred syllable or utterance in spiritual chanting

**māra:** demon temptor who tries unsuccessfully to cause the Buddha to fall from enlightenment.

**mehfil-é-haq:** a council or congregation of truth.

**Michael Jackson:** contemporary American pop musician and dancer.

**mudrā:** hand or face or bodily gesture in the expressive language of classical Indian dance. Literally, "a ring" (the "mayūra mudrā" or the "peacock ring", is the expressive hand-gesture of bringing the tip of the ring-finger into contact with the tip of the thumb.)

**Mumbai:** present, indigenised, name of Bombay.

**NGMA:** National Gallery of Modern Art, located in the India Gate area of New Delhi.

**Nakula:** one of the Pāṇdava twins, the other being Sahadeva, the fourth of the Pāṇdava brothers.

**Nala, Nīla:** celestial builders, officers of Brahmā the Creator.

**Nam Myoho Renge Kyo:** Buddhist mantra, chant, which offers obeisance to the Buddha's Lotus Sūtra.

**Nandī:** bull-vehicle of Śiva, virile foundation of renunciation.

**Nāṭyaśāstra:** classic treatise on drama in the wide sense which includes all performance arts, believed to be written by Bharata Muni in fulfilment of Brahmā's wish.

**nirvāṇa:** the blowing out of all fires of craving, the state of enlightenment attained by the Buddha.

**Noakhali:** district of Bengal, now in Bangladesh, where Gandhi and a few associates of his travelled unarmed to assuage the grief of those whose loved ones had been massacred in the fury of India's partition, and to establish communal harmony.

**Om (or AUM):** sacred syllable of the Vedas, the utterance of which with faith integrates the waking, dream, and sleep states within the singularity of self-awareness in self-realisation.

**Om Śrī Aruṇācala Namaḥ:** mantra of obeisance to 'Om' which is seen as none other than the sacred hill of Aruṇācala.

**Om Śrī Ramaṇāya Namaḥ:** mantra of obeisance to 'Om' which is seen as none other than Śrī Ramaṇa.

**paramahansa:** literally "supreme swan". Swans in Mānasarovar, sacred Himalayan lake, are credited with the ability to separate milk from water in adulterated milk. Likewise, some sages who are immersed in the waters of self-realisation are able to separate the real from the unreal in the most difficult of circumstances. Such a sage was Śrī Rāmakrishna, and he was honoured with the designation "paramahansa".

**Pārvatī:** Divine Mother, consort of Śiva, herself also supreme Brahman, one without a second.

**paurāṇika:** teller of sacred stories and interpreter of myths.

**pradakṣiṇā:** circumambulation of a sacred image or object or a sage.

**pralaya:** the dissolution of the world.

**Rāma:** incarnation of Viṣṇu, divine sovereign in the Rāmāyaṇa.

**Rambha:** maidservant in Gandhi's childhood home who initiated the nascent saint in the chanting of the name Rāma.

**Rāmajanmabhūmi:** disputed site of Rāma's birth in Ayodhyā, bone of contention between Hindu and Muslim communalists, the former insisting that the site is the precise spot where a Rāma temple was destroyed in the 16th century by the Mughal invader Babur and a mosque in his name (the Babri Masjid) constructed (felled in 1992 by Hindu zealots), the latter insisting that the mosque built by Babur did not involve the destruction of any temple. The conflict has claimed hundreds of lives in riots and seems no closer to resolution than it ever was.

**Rāmakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886):** sage and devotee of Kali whose influence on modern Indian, especially modern Hindu, spirituality, is overwhelming.

**Ramaṇa Maharshi (1880-1950):** sage and inaugurator of self-inquiry in our age (the persistent asking of the question "Who am I?") Supreme exemplar of non-dualist enlightenment in modern times. Om Śrī Ramaṇaya Namaḥ.

**Rāmanāma:** the name "Rāma", the spiritual practice of chanting the sacred name.

**Rāvaṇa:** demon king of Lankā in the Rāmāyaṇa; abductor of Sītā, slain by Rāma.

**sadguru:** reality as guru, teacher. A self-realised sage is also often called 'sadguru'.

**sādhana:** spiritual practice.

**sādhū:** holy man.

**samādhi:** spiritual realisation.

**sanmati:** "goodwill", colloquially, "the mind of reality", more philosophically. A favourite word of Gandhi's.

**Santhals:** ethnic ādivāsīs of Bengal, settled near Shantiniketan also.

**Śāradā:** wife and spiritual consort of Śrī Rāmakrishna, herself regarded as sage and an embodiment of the Divine Mother.

**sārī:** length of unstitched cloth draped around the body by vast sections of Indian women as a dress of universally acknowledged elegance.

**Sarasvatī:** literally “unbroken, continuous”, metaphor of Self. Also Goddess of learning and the arts. Brahmā’s daughter.

**satsanga:** the companionship of sages, literally “being with being”.

**sattva:** attribute of purity, light.

**satyayuga:** the first, unflawed, epoch or cycle of time, marked by the undiminished lustre of truth in all spheres of life.

**Shantiniketan:** experimental school and university established by the poet Rabindranath Tagore in rural Bengal in the early years of the twentieth century.

**Siddhārtha:** the Buddha’s name prior to his enlightenment.

**Sītā:** Divine Mother. Rāma’s wife in the Rāmāyaṇa.

**Śiva-Śakti:** the indivisible reality and power of Śiva and Pārvatī, the divine androgyny of self-awareness.

**ṣṛṅgāra:** the process of an artist’s or a woman’s “make-up”, the heightening of beauty.

**Sūfī:** Islamic mystic and devotional singer, often as philosophically non-dualist as sages in the tradition of Advaita Vedānta.

**śūnyatā:** emptiness, Buddhist notion of not-thingness which, I believe, rediscovers and reidentifies the nature of Self as not something as opposed to something else; but as non-entitative self-awareness, self-imaged in all forms.

**sūryavamśī:** sovereigns of the solar dynasty, such as Rāma.

**suṣṭi:** the state of dreamless, deep, sleep, where self-awareness is yet not extinct, as is evidenced by the fact that we awaken from such sleep with the thought “I slept soundly”.

**Svāmījī:** a popular designation of Svāmī Vivekānanda

**svapna:** the state of dreaming.

**svarāj:** self-rule, self-realisation, freedom.

**tamas:** the attribute of dullness or inertia.

**tāntrika:** much maligned category of spiritual seekers who transform adversity of circumstances into spiritual advantage and attain realisation.

**Tiruvannāmalai:** South Indian temple town of great antiquity renowned for its Śiva temple and the adjoining hill of Aruṇācala which was home to Rāmaṇa Maharshi from 1896 till his death in 1950.

**tretāyuga:** the third cycle of time where truth’s lustre is reduced to a third of its original power of illumination by the darkness of ignorance.

**Triśanku:** mythical royal figure of antiquity who tried to persuade the easily flattered sage Viśvāmitra to send him to heaven in his living, human, body. The unfortunately unsuccessful efforts of Viśvāmitra resulted in locating Triśanku neither in heaven nor on earth, but insecurely, somewhere in-between. The name “Triśanku” has thus acquired the sense of “unbalancedness”.

**tritāpa:** the three “burnings”; sickness, old age, death.

**upaniṣad:** literally, “seated close to truth”, a body of esoteric spiritual instruction which “concludes” the Veda.

**vāhana(s):** vehicle or vehicles of a divinity, such as the eagle for Viṣṇu (“hawk-eyed” ruler of the cosmos), or a little mouse for elephantine Gaṇeśa who is “light”.

**Vedānta:** the “concluding” portions of the Vedas seen as a coherent body of teaching.

**Vedic:** of the Veda, the most ancient and sacred scripture of Hinduism.

**Vijayādaśamī:** the mythic day when Durgā slays Mahisasura, the most powerful manifestation of Ego conceivable.

**Vināyaka:** the first-born son of Śiva and Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa.

**Vindhyaś:** mountain range that divides North from South India.

**Viṣṇu:** God as sustainer of creation or manifestation.



**Viśvāmitra:** sage of antiquity who struggled heroically and long, eventually successfully, to attain self-realisation and be counted among the “Brahmaṛṣis”, the “sages of the Vast”.

**Vivekānanda, Svāmī (1863-1902):** foremost disciple of Śrī Rāmakrishna and pioneering preacher of modern Vedānta, a father figure in the reawakening of Indian spiritual and national self-confidence in modern times.

**yakṣa:** celestial being gifted in dance and music.

**Yama:** death, personified.

**Yamunā:** sacred Indian river associated with Kṛṣṇa.

**Yaśodharā:** wife of Siddhārtha who became the Buddha.

**yogī:** spiritual practitioner who seeks “yoga” or union with ultimate reality.

**Yudhiṣṭhira:** the eldest of the Pāṇḍava brothers (leaving out Karṇa who was abandoned by his mother, Kunti) in the Mahābhārata.

**yuga:** epoch, cycle of time.

*Ramchandra Gandhi*, born in Chennai, India, in 1937, studied philosophy at Delhi and Oxford, receiving doctorate degrees from both universities. He has taught philosophy in colleges and universities in India, Britain, and the United States. He was professor of philosophy at Hyderabad University, professor of comparative religion at Vishvabharati in Shantiniketan, and professor of comparative and south Asian philosophy at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, on the west coast.

Author of several books, his *‘Sita’s Kitchen: a testimony of faith and inquiry’*, published by SUNY Press in 1992, was a fictional and philosophical exploration of a Buddhist story in the context of the not yet abated Ayodhya crisis in India, somewhat analagously to his exploration of Tyeb Mehta’s *‘Shantiniketan Triptych’* in this book, this time in the wider context of escalating civilisational violence throughout the world.

In recent years, Ramchandra Gandhi has written, directed, and staged plays on the lives of sages of modern India – such as Śrī Rāmakrishna Paramahansa, Svāmī Vivekānanda, Śrī Ramaṇa Maharshi, and Mahatma Gandh, in collaboration with the renowned Kathak dancer Shovana Narayan. He lives in Delhi.

*U.R. Ananthamurthy*, noted Kannada writer and educationist and Padma Bhushan, has been President, Sahitya Akademi, and Vice-Chancellor, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. Author of several works—novels, drama, poetry, criticism—his first novel, *Samskara*, has been translated into several Indian and European languages. U.R. Ananthamurthy lives near Mysore.

*Anjali Sen*, who is the interlocutor ‘Anjali’ in this book, was Director, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, from 1994 to 2000, and has held positions of responsibility in the Ministry of Culture of the Government of India in areas of arts and culture policy. A member of the Indian Audit and Accounts service, she is currently based in Mumbai as the principal director of audit, Western Railway.



Photo: Rafeeq Elias

## TYEB MEHTA

Born in 1925.

He joined Sir JJ School of Art in 1947 where he studied drawing and painting under Shri SP Palshikar and received his diploma in 1952.

After a short stay of four months in London, he returned to India and held his first solo exhibition in 1959.

The partition of India and the violence that ensued in 1947 left a permanent mark on his sensibility. This took the shape of his major painting "Trussed Bull" and the "Rickshaw-Puller".

He went to London again in 1959 and stayed there with his family until 1964, painting, visiting museums and art galleries.

He had a solo exhibition in London and Oxford and participated in several group shows.

He was awarded the JD Third Rockefeller Fellowship in 1968 to work and live in the USA for one year.

In 1970 he wrote and directed a 16-minute B/W film: *Koodal* for the Films Division which won him the Filmfare Critic Award.

Invited to Shantiniketan as Artist-in-Residence where he painted the 'Shantiniketan Triptych' - 1984-1985.

On his return to Mumbai, he painted 'Kali' and thereafter a series of works on Mahisasura.

He has held several solo exhibitions in Mumbai and Delhi and exhibited in Kolkata.

Apart from several solo exhibitions, Mehta has participated in several international shows like Ten Contemporary Indian Painters in Trenton, USA, in 1965; Deuxieme Biennial International de la Menton, 1974; Festival International de la Peinture, Cagnes-Sur-Mer, France, 1974; Modern Indian Paintings at Hirschhorn Museum, Washington, 1992; and Seven Indian Painters at Galerie Le Monde de l'art, Paris, 1994; India Myth and Reality, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1982; Contemporary Indian Art, Festival of India, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1982; Tryst with Destiny, Art of Modern India, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, 1987.

Tyeb was awarded the National Award, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1965; First Triennale India Award, Gold Medal, New Delhi, 1968; awarded Kalida Samman, Bhopal by the Madhya Pradesh Government in 1988.

Tyeb Mehta now lives and works in Mumbai.