

CLONING GODS, READING BAR CODES

discontinuity in present-day india

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for chotabhai

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kumbha mela 2001. it is a cold morning yet undiscovered by the resilient winter sun. a pit littered with chai cups, some made of plastic, now crushed and crumpled, others made of clay, already dissolving under the dew. old and new lie next to one another, mixed and intermingled; the ancient is about to pass away, while the modern is geared for eternity, or at least for a kalpa which seems to us eternal. plastic is of a pure impurity. before use it looks as clean as it can get, but a heap of plastic (bisleri bottles, pepsi cups) by the side of the path seems like eternal pollution, without hope of a redeeming purification. the introduction of plastic cups at the kumbh mela, or for that matter at nearly every railway station in the country, is a radical discontinuity.

today's india (asia, the world) is a discontinuous system, as complex as the latest micro-software operational software, on the verge of the dysfunctional with any given combination of commands and processes, but functioning nevertheless. on the verge of the incomprehensible. defining and refining identity on a daily basis. discontinuity is a central issue in public discourse, in political combat, instrumentalised by people with a 19th century mindset, who believe that the continuous is still an option for us to choose. they – be it hindutva propagandists, shiv sena warriors, vernacular language authors or marxist backwaterists – demonise discontinuity in order to put the blame on an enemy with an invented and projected homogenic identity, be it islam, the western world, the english language or globalisation. the parameters of this combat are one-dimensional and linear, but the combat is held in a system of discontinuity. It is as if you are introducing an abacus into ms-dos.

maha kumbh mela january 2001. the confluence of ganga and jamna. brown waters blue waters have mixed for a very long time, as have beliefs, songs, stories. every twelve years spirituality meets reality on a massive scale, and by now reality means commerce means technology. huge video screens welcome the kalpvasi to the land of amul and rexona (imagine the two million assembled sadhus all using deodorants). the ongoing ads are the undercurrent to the orgiastic frenzy of ritual, of puja, yagna and snaan. they play the role of the underscored information on the news channels, be it cnn or cnbc. while an activist from some ngo is being interviewed, the undercurrent draws your attention to the nasdaq and the dax and the nikkei and the bse. asian paints 295.30 castrol india 199.90 punjab tractors 170.85 the flow is determined by the undercurrent, as we all know. madras cements 4350 nagarjuna fertilisers 6.10. the ngo activist is a beautiful bird perched on driftwood, flowing down the ganga, a delight and comfort to the eye, but of little relevance to the stream of things. pritchard communications 38.80.

this undercurrent is global. philips 98,30. a pure import, in earlier days called colonialism. cadbury 491,90 the bombay stock exchange is a mechanism of international efficiency. gilette 365,75 throw a trader from hongkong onto the floor, give him an hour or so to set his sights and he will be dealing with homely delight. procter & gamble 475,95 no cultural bias here, no traditions, no elements of the village market of the city bazaar. with one exception. trading on the bse is 90% day trading. and day trading is purely speculative. infosys 3790,15 it is prone to collusion, manipulation and front-running. private side-deals are easily made. rayban 54,55 a few people can control the trading and the trading is in a state of nearly perfect lawlessness. no one gets caught, no one gets punished, a case or two aside. kodak 207,05 this system of easy gratification needs to be preserved. So it might be defined as TRADITION, as CORE VALUES, as OURS. then this undercurrent, this reality, can not be opposed. nestle 504,25 even ten years after the begin of liberalisation it is extremely cumbersome for a foreigner to enter the bse and the indian stock market. it might take you two days to get accredited in taiwan and a week in south korea, but in india you will struggle for anything between six weeks and six months. But the international investors are knocking at the gates, the last fortress of purely indigenous power will soon fall. siemens 257,75

the sangam of maha kumbh mela january 29, 2001. juna akhara, the most militant of akharas (an order of sadhus, a thousand years old), occupies the beach, with a hard drumming beat and thousand naked feet. after the bath the naga sadhus swing swords, their wet skin glistening in the morning sun. one of the brigade snatches the camera of a foreign

journalist and throws it onto the ground, spearing it with a trishul like a demon. a comrade accompanies him in an ecstatic dance over the conquered camera. on the other side of the beach a dressed sadhu catches everything on betacam. for posterity? for the in-house movie evening at the ashram? other sadhus are modelling, climbing a fence, posing, showing off their muscles like bodybuilders in a show. they shower the assembled photographers with abuse and vulgar gestures. a policeman throws stones at the photographers. a sadhu throws pebbles at the policeman. there is panic amongst the naked and the dressed, as the sadhus make their way back to camp. an army of saints bridges the ganga.

what is the undercurrent?

where are the banks of the river?

a day's trip down-river, in varanasi, a man called mahantji mishra is trying to save the ganges. as a believer, he says, i have to have my daily snaan in ganga mataji. as a scientist, a professor of engineering, i would not even put my toe into this filthy river. life is like a stream, he says, one bank is the vedas, the other bank is the modern world with all its science and technology. if both banks are not firm, the water will scatter. if they hold, the river will run its course. a surprising metaphor from somebody who has lived all his life at the banks of the ganges. for this river is a master of discontinuity. it changes its course constantly, it floods and it recedes, it scatters its blessings. creation and invention are no longer two opposing banks, two separate realities. carrots are a human invention (the wild carrot, *daucus carota*, is a insipid weed. the famous har-ki-pauri ghat in haridwar is on the banks of a canal, not on the ganga itself! geologists and climatologists foresee the end of ganga because of the melting of the glaciers in the himalayas. other scientists say that the global warning will help us survive for a while longer as the next ice period is around the corner. remember the vedas: the death of ganga foretold. when it becomes overburdened by sin, before the end of kaliyuga.

the kumbh mela is a gigantic web without a spider. webs or nets are ancient concepts of inter-dependency, conceived well ahead of the chaos theory. the net of indra, the world as a web, every being a knot therein, that was an early buddhist idea. there was advaita and other similar philosophies. even late-comers like teilhard de chardin envisioned a collective consciousness. spiritual concepts have materialised thanks to technology: the internet, the most obvious, but also the net of global economy, cyberspace and the deciphering of the dna-structure, spiritually foretold by the buddhist understanding that the individual is made up of non-individual elements. networking is the new method of empowering. no one at the kumbh mela understood this better than muniji, the head of the parmarth niketan ashram in rishikesh, who was more effective than millions of kalpvasi lumped together into a mass – in a discontinuous system masses are impressive in size, but weak in influence. muniji met the bbc, muniji chaired a conference of western ecologists concerned about the ganga, muniji celebrated aarti together with ashok singhal and the dalai lama (who splashed water at the photographers, laughing, seemingly saying: i know it is all a game). muniji has his american jewish secretary send out monthly emails informing those interested about the itinerary and the worldly abodes of mahant maharaja muniji, cybering between the usa and taiwan and japan and france and the cities of india, but spiritually always in touch with the flow of ganga.

the bar code is the closest humanity has come to the net of indra. 5dash099706dash568025dash. Esperanto was an artificial language, developed by a polish humanist to unite mankind by enabling communication between everyone. 9dash788190dash113205dash. in the 21. century esperanto is a losing venture. the bar code is more efficient than esperanto, the bar code is completely cultureless and timeless, and completely comprehensible. we guarantee there will be no misunderstandings. 4dash477739dash378409dash. should the current 13 digits not suffice, the overpopulation of products will only be a mathematical challenge.

in the europe of modernity, god was killed. in the india of post-liberalisation, the gods are cloned. cloning is the ultimate preservation of the status quo. it is more effective than the caste system. god is decontextualised, desocialised, completely individualised, another victim of the manipulative powers of the privileged, who themselves prefer to follow the trinity of wrinkle-free, designer-styled religions: connect to your spiritual energy, have an aarti have a bite, feng shui, art of living and reiki: have an aarti have a bite, rediscovered by a japanese christian minister, a melange of jesus and buddha, purified love – the perfume of the day. have an aarti have a bite. aarti is celebrated every evening, at every ghat and in

every show. in khabhi kushi khabhi gham kajol sways the lamp in every scene, over-pitching values and hierarchy. aarti as light food, as airport art. aarti as the vital symbol of the hindutva forces, who have established themselves as lobbyists for the cloned gods, but who do not care about the living sacred. they do not clean ganga mataji (on the contrary: all the keepers and carers i met were all open-minded, humane and anti-ideological people). but they protect the holy name of varanasi by preventing deepa mehtas film »water«. holiness is an image without a core, it is an axiom. it is the godfather of all cloned gods. It is celebrated through aarti.

a day's trip upriver from the sangam lies kanpur. industrial kanpur, heavy duty, tannery muck flowing into the ganga. for a footfull of guchi. how does a visionary see kanpur? After all, he has founded an association – resurgent kanpur it is called. The business card is elegant. his plan is to attract call centres to kanpur. the daughter of the visionary works in a call centre near delhi. The visionaries of kanpur are impressed by what they hear. 1200 jobs, 1200 indians sitting one next to the other in one large room, all of them staring onto computer screens which transport them across oceans into another corporate net, the net of general electrics. they are on the phone, all day long, they consult the screen while they talk with a customer from a suburb in atlanta who wants his appliance serviced. cash or contract? the cash payer receives preferential treatment. he is given the next free slot, the information is typed into the computer, processed by the software, the technician is automatically informed. thank you very much for calling and have a nice day. indian voices conversing about the weather in the usa (hurricane in florida?, montana snowed in?), small-talking about major political, social issues. thank you very much for calling and have a nice day. indian ears understanding every accent. schooled in intensive courses, in a call centre college, like the one resurgent kanpur wants to set up. the students watch soap operas, serials. they need to demusicalise their speech. thank you very much for calling and have a nice day. bland pronunciation is required. and should the customer inquire: you are not american, are you,? they shall answer with a non-committed »yes«. only if further pressured, shall they acknowledge their indian identity. after work they can go home and celebrate aarti, as if nothing has happened. kabhi khushi kabhi gham.

kumbha mela 2001. every morning we wake up to the screech of 108 godly names, our alarm clock is a suffocating mist of song and sound, a dawn full of clanking crickets. Incantations, each prayer besieged by a multitude of competing prayers. no holiness, no solidarity, no inwardness, no mercy. only noise. and the loudest of all mantras, the ultimate destroyer of sleep – »shanti ohm«.

one of the most successful american entrepreneurs of indian origin is a man called bose. his company produces loudspeakers – he holds a commanding presence at the kumbh mela. bose is a true globalist, a believer in discontinuity, for he enforces every message, every point of view, every shloka. bose enables the soundtrack for the aarti to resonate along the river banks, to flood the ghats. the sound cosmos is constantly changing: levels rising, volumes dropping, speakers faltering. this is a cultural reality of modern india, this seemingly chaotic installation, this synchronicity, every moment identity is made and unmade. identities are exchanged, distinctions erased. the poet, the archivist, the commentator may wish to find words for ganga's flow. no sooner have their words found form, they are outdated by a changed river, by the swirl and whirl, they need to make another effort, which will instantaneously be flushed away by a new reality, which they may want to describe and evaluate. They need to change their language, they start using ulatbansi – but upside-down is also two-dimensional.

when mtv was introduced to india, the people in charge thought that pop music is like coca-cola – you only need to distribute the plastic cups to be successful. the international program was screened in india, the local office was told to focus on marketing. mtv enjoy. but the young indians didn't enjoy it. they found the program uncouth and impolite. the music was too heavy and too black. too much grunge from pearl jam, too much rap from puff daddy. mtv was cornered in a niche of the market. the customer had passed judgement. mtv reacted quickly and boldly. the channel was draped in the indian tricolore, 90% of the videos shown were indian, the vj were told to get rid of the english accent they cultivated so industriously and to get some bambaya masala into their speech. chai boys started advertising for mtv, accompanied by the good old hit: ye jawani, hai diwani. but the mantra remained: mtv enjoy. and on february 14 the program is dedicated to valentine's day. and condom ads are



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shown, warning of aids. and madhu, a peon in an office, a neo-buddhist, buys his mtv-enjoying wife some flowers. and the good indian music is composed and played on synthesisers, and the musicians can't get enough volume on the monitors and the loudspeakers. so while we are swaying the aarti let us mutter: ohm mtv-enjoy ohm. 108 and 1001 times. but let's delegate this task. let's have a software take care of it, or a robot. let our computers seek darshan on the internet, there are enough cyber mandirs and cloned gods to choose from.



Ilija Trojanow (born in 1965, Sofia) grew up in Kenya. In the mid-nineties, he studied law and ethnology in Munich, where he founded the Marino Publishing House for African Literature. In 1998, Trojanow moved to Bombay, where he wrote reportages and essays for *Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, as well as *Along the Ganges: To the Inner Shores of India*. Trojanow's latest novel, *Der Weltensammler (The Collector of Worlds)*, is based on the life of the English adventurer Sir Richard Burton and was awarded the 2007 Berlin Literature Prize, the 2006 Leipzig Book Fair Prize for fiction, and was short-listed for the 2006 German Book Prize. Trojanow's other awards include the Bertelsmann-Literaturpreis, the Marburger Literaturpreis, and the Adalbert von Chamisso Prize. His work has been translated into 18 languages. From February 2008 he resides in Vienna.

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