

Editorial Note

A legacy or heritage is most often a gift, bequeathed from the past with overlapping tangible and intangible dimensions. It is not a static Archimedean point with powers to determine and influence the course of life, whether human or cosmic. A legacy is not an entity that can be preserved without change, nor is it a piece of objective information known or knowable solely through cognition. Rather than being handed down mechanically, a legacy exists through the process of being made relevant in the present, which changes it, while at the same time references it as emanating from the past. Yet in the course of reconstructing a legacy in a contemporary manner, one cannot undermine its integrity. Thus, one has to actively engage with legacy and do things' with it. Inheriting a legacy requires interpreting it and even reinterpreting it, while understanding its relevance. In this the process, both incomplete and ongoing, but which nevertheless

enriches the very idea of legacy, there is a critical dimension as well. Critique, not simply as the act of criticism or interrogation, in the sense of finding fault (though this critical shade matters). Rather, critique in this context comprehends the conditions that made the legacy possible in the past, alongside discerning the contemporary conditions for its pertinence and reconstruction. Critique consists in exposing the circumstances, limits and conditions of engaging with the legacy, while reconstructing it² Thus, the critical aspect (in the spirit of Immanuel Kant) is a safeguard against speculative flights of the mind.

The Indian context is populated by diverse legacies encompassing heritage as “objects, ideas, practices” (Thapar 2018, 45). They envelop materialities of monuments, artefacts, artworks, texts and archaeologies, as well as, intangible cultures of poetry, philosophies, music, spirituality, performatives, oral narratives... and much more. A cursory glance at the Sramana traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, Vedic and Upanishadic texts, Islamic cultures, Sufi/Bhakti and Christian literatures (to illustrate on a very minuscule note) reveals a constant give and take between them. The process of renewing legacies tends to be syncretic (especially in the Indian context)³. As an intermingling of diverse (and even opposed) beliefs, syncretism emerged in the course of engaging with religious difference. Thus, the Hellenistic period saw the fusion of Greek and Christian perspectives (their tensions notwithstanding). In India, the horizons of Shaivism and Vaishnavism were fused in the Warkari Sampradaya⁴, while religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Islam were integrated in Sikh, Bhakti and Sufi traditions. Yet the process of bringing together diverse legacies is not bereft of domination and struggle, since it is also frowned upon. Hierarchies and power struggles do influence their complex interactions, where the dominant legacy attempts to hegemonize through majoritarianism that nevertheless have hints of the less dominant traditions. But there is also plenty of evidence of reciprocal and egalitarian interface between

diverse traditions, whose conversations create new material/cultural legacies. Under myriad forms of inflictions, confrontations, exchanges, negotiations or dialogues, the coexistence of diverse legacies are also reflections of syncretism. They cannot be homogenized without falling prey to simplistic reductionisms, even with reference to majoritarian hegemonic traditions. Nor can they be understood along a singular axis. Diverse syncretic legacies are often renewed through the lens of critique that unravels the fault lines of exclusion (of caste, gender, class, ableism...) that undergird them. Such renewals also create new legacies of writing and art from critical perspectives of those who are not a part of the mainstream such as women, tribals and Dalits.

Engaging with the past is especially difficult in the contemporary context because as Hannah Arendt observes, “our inheritance was left to us by no testament” (1961, 3)⁵. A testament hands over the past possession as an inheritance or legacy to heirs who are chosen, determined, marked, named and instructed. It connects the past with the present and future in a continuous way by naming and instructing the value of the treasure that is handed down. Testaments govern legacies and inheritances in the personal domain of property. However, the public domain of artistic, poetic, philosophical, spiritual legacies differ in that their value is not fixed and nor are their heirs; for there is no legal testament governing their relationship as past to the present (Arendt 1961, 5-6). They are without will or testament to govern their relationship to the future. Yet they depend upon memory to be recollected periodically, with effort from a few individuals, in fragmented flashes. As relics from the past, they are forces to which human beings are driven through actions anticipating the future. The past in this sense is not a freight that human beings have to faithfully carry or stave off. On the contrary, human beings are positioned in a rupture between the past and future, wherein the past does not determine the future in a continuous linear mode. Human beings are situated in the temporal “gap” (Arendt 1961, 12) between the past and future, “a

parallelogram of forces” (Arendt 1961, 12), rather than an interval. A third force emerges through the infinities of the past and future; it is a diagonal force that originates in the tension between the past and the future. The diagonal attempts to mitigate the tension, but it is without teleology, a set goal to move towards. Adding to Arendt, there is an entanglement of diverse legacies in the past contributing to the “parallelogram of forces”. Consequently, the various interpretations, reinterpretations and reconstructions of the past are crystallizations occurring at the diagonal between past(s) and future. There are no human intentions governing these fragmented engagements with past(s). Following Arendt’s reading of Benjamin’s “Task of the Translator” (1992a) one could define such fragments as attempts to create meaning (1992, 52). For “No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.”⁶ The audience receiving legacies is often unpredictable and contingent with no access to ready-made meaning or causal connections between the past and the present. The fragments in question are quoted or envisioned or named from memory, often accidentally in instantaneous flashes (Benjamin 1992b 247) that have the potential for stepping into uncharted territories. To quote the past is also to deconstruct it, reconstruct it and critique it. The past is quoted, at times out of a despair with the present, or without any motive even, and not always in coherent ways or in appropriate contexts by predictable readers (Arendt 1992, 43).

The turn to fragmented past(s), as one moves into the future through momentary insights at present can be best captured by Benjamin’s interpretation of Paul Klee’s 1920 painting “Angelus Novus” as the angel of history (1992b, 249). It depicts an angel who is surrounded by a heap of fragments from the past. The angel’s wings are spread out to indicate that although he (or indeed, she) would like to fly, the wings cannot close in. There are forces beyond the angel’s control that impact the wings. The angel’s fixated gaze also indicates the desire to look away and the open mouth is

perhaps an attempt to enunciate word and meaning. The angel's face is tilted towards the past without anchor, whose fragments lie in a heap before him/her. The angel cannot restore these fragments into a homogeneous whole. Nor for that matter can he/she put together the past in a sequential notion of time. For the angel is flung into the future, despite not facing it as the fragments from the past continue to pile. The angel looks back at the past, while being forced ahead into the future. Yet it is in such a moment that the fragmented past acquires meaning, albeit tenuous.



Klee, Paul 1920. Angelus Novus - The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25188355> (accessed on June 15, 2021)

On this Benjaminian note, this double issue (January-March, 2021 and April-June, 2021) of Sambhāṣaṇ brings together a set of diverse essays and disciplines that engage with the question of

“Syncretic Legacies in India: Critical Perspectives”. The foreword by T.M. Krishna regards the past as living through embodied experiences in ways that are dynamic. He likens it to a river at a delta, where the diverse streams have their identities and do not coalesce into the sea. The various essays in this issue, in such a tenor of syncretic living pasts, emerge from multiple disciplines and preoccupations, both within and outside the academy. The issue begins with a focus on the ancient/early Indian time frame. Shalini Shah’s paper asks whether there is anything like a homogeneous Indian culture, from the analytical category of gender. With meticulous textual evidence, she shows how gender neutral, misogynist ideologies are upheld in monolithic cultural contexts. These have been contested by cultural pluralism and syncretism to open up egalitarian possibilities. Pradeep Gokhale argues for the “interplay” of concepts from Sankhya and Buddhist philosophies in Patanjali’s Yogasutra. He especially focuses on the difficulties of a hermeneutics that reads the Yogasutra from the perspective of diverse philosophical influences such as Vedanta. For the latter could inflict its own point of view on the text. Kamala Ganesh engages with the multiple receptions that the Alvar saint-poet Andal continues to generate in the 21st century. These “afterlives” as she puts it are not necessarily in harmony with each other. They have a tendency to conflict in the course of criss crossing. They also pose the question of the true meaning of Andal.

The section on the medieval period explores Sufi/Bhakti traditions. Irfan Engineer gives an overview of Sufi philosophy by bringing out its selfless and social critical perspective in spiritual seeking. He illustrates these abstract themes with insights from Sarmad Shahid and Rumi. Mehru Jaffer dwells on the abiding theme of friendship and love in the poetry of Nizamuddin Aulia and Amir Khusro. She reveals how their bond and verse from the 13th/14th century has immense relevance in the troubled times in which we live. Divya Jyoti’s essay brings out the dimension of anti-caste egalitarianism in Kabir’s poetry. She delineates Kabir’s impact

on Ambedkar to show how their critiques were directed to the same orthodox frameworks of religious institutions. She dwells on the notion of bhakta as a significant normative framework for critiquing power hierarchies. Abhiruchi Ranjan defends Ravidas's humanism and status of satguru or teacher against hegemonic appropriative tendencies that reduce him to a follower. She explores the potential in his writing for critiquing dominant mainstream masculinities of extreme right.

The last part of the issue explores the reinterpretations of the past in contemporary figures such as Shivraj Mahendra, Rahul Sankrityayan, Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, Hansda Sowvendra Shekar, Ustad Nizamuddin Khan and Sambhaji Bhagat. Namrata Chaturvedi, thus, examines the impact of Hinduism on Christian devotional poetry such as that of Shivraj Mahendra and Sarojini Arya. She explores the space for intermingling of languages and cultures opened by Christian bhakti. Viplov Dhone investigates diverse contemporary Marxist receptions of Buddhism in the works of Rahul Sankrityayan and Debiprasad Chattopadhyay. He asks whether the Buddhist notion of dialectic is the same as that of Western Marxism. Rashmi George examines the modes of agency and autonomy of the Santhal community depicted in Sowvendra's novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupa Baskey*. Their objectification through the colonial gaze is countered through narratives of their making choices such as contributing to the freedom struggle. Elroy Pinto articulates the myriad influences on the tabla player Nizamuddin Khan and his son Kamaluddin with reference to his film *Kaifiyat*. The interface between Buddhism, Bhakti and Sufi thought, among others, show ways of negotiating this diversity while creating great art. Putul Sathe delineates the emergence of Dalit cultural public spheres of resistance and critique through an analysis of Sambhaji Bhagat's *Bhim Geet*. She deftly weaves theory and practice in her attempt to flag syncretism. Mangesh Kulkarni reads Namdeo Dhasal's poetry as "deterritorializing" following Deleuze and Guattari. Dhasal, he upholds, draws upon

diverse pasts such as Marathi saint compositions, modern poetry and thinkers such as Ambedkar and Marx, while simultaneously rupturing with hegemonic pasts in envisioning an emancipatory future. Ramu Ramanathan's poem "A Warkari in Pandharpur" poignantly dwells on the angst of the contemporary Warkari pilgrim whose digital era worries remain in discord with memories of Saint Dnyaneshwar and Saint Tukaram. In the afterword, Sambhaji Bhagat ponders over Kabir as social critic and poet embodying the hopes and aspirations of oppressed castes and classes. He believes that Kabir's message of love has a relevant meaning. Madhavi Narsalay's obituary to Pandit Ghulam Dastagir Birajdar a Muslim Sanskrit scholar and her book review, along with, Kamala Srinivasan's and Sachchidanand Singh's extend these critical discussions of syncretism with reference to India's "contemporary pasts"⁷.

This collection of essays embodying a Benjaminian relationship with Indian pasts, legacies and heritage of syncretism saw the light of print due to the creative energies of the authors and feedback of peer reviewers to whom we remain obliged for their knowledge, perceptiveness and expertise. We are grateful to T.M. Krishna and Sambhaji Bhagat for generously sharing illuminating insights emerging from their artistic practice, despite their overwhelming busy schedules. We put on record our thanks to the translators Saumitra Joshi and Sonalee Gujar for their accessible translation. Grazie to Biraj Mehta for her timely help. Shukriya to Indra Munshi for her motivating dialogues on bhakti syncretism that go back to 1997 and continue into the future. Our gratitude to Kamala Ganesh for her invaluable substantive guidance.

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A note on diacritical marks: Non-English words are in italics, except for well-known words. Only the first two essays from the discipline of Sanskrit, use diacritical marks. The others use popularly accepted spellings.

Notes

1. This phrase is culled from Austin's work (1975) in which he shifts from a static to a dynamic understanding of language.
2. This account of critique is influenced by Immanuel Kant (1965, 9, 26-28)
3. Muslim poets such as Ras Khan have composed idealizations of Krishna, which are a repertoire in Hindustani music (Thapar 2018, 32). Gandhi's reinterpretation of Jainism, Pandita Ramabai's articulations of Indian Christianity, Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Gita through the Buddhist lens, as well as, his appreciation of Sankhya rationality in his neo-Buddhism moment are all contemporary continuations of syncretic legacies on a critical note. See Thapar (2018, 12-44) for a detailed overview of the Indian context.
4. The notion of "fusion of horizons" is derived from Gadamer (2006)
5. She quotes René Char.
6. Benjamin quoted by Arendt (1992, 52). Also see his 1992a.
7. This phrase is culled from Thapar's book (2018).

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