

ARUNA DEVI

Essays allow a degree of argument, arguments that suffer from personal belief and acquired knowledge. What if I would declare to be an atheist, and then not confirm it by adhering to rituals my grandmother instilled as practice through a sense of belief? Belief is something irrational not clinically measured but at times it holds emotional measures necessary for life. An erasure of rationality is seen across a vast political landscape that stretches from the Philippines until it finds its crescendo in the United States of America drawn from an ideological belief and line described as fascism. Yet fascism used clinically through farcical trials to prove racial superiority, through the idea of belief, derived power through the superiority of science, exterminated millions through the use of lab produced chemicals, a holocaust based on an assumption of superiority backed by scientific standing, study of race etc. Their descendants use 'Belief' drawn from various religions that include Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and now even 'Buddhism' if you take the case of Burma, to bring about complete annihilation of human syncretic coexistence.

Religion emerged as a threat the minute it became codified in books as it gathered the interpretations of some men or a group of them, it could never be interpreted again or adhere with the urgency of human emotions in the times to come. This codification created castes, promised lands, crusades and ownership of women. The rituals that help us find solace in death became widow burning bon-fires in medieval India. How could a land that celebrated 'Mother Worship' metamorphose into the land of complete female foeticide and rape? The architect of India's republican

constitution Dr. BR Ambedkar famously said "*Hinduism is not a religion; it is a disease.*"

I would have called myself an 'Ambdekarite' had I evolved myself out of the hypocrisies that define my being, even though it is in Ambedkar I find solace and hope. I rather adhere to a syncretism of philosophical belief etched out by Iqbal Ahmed, Cheikh Anta Diop and Dr. BR Ambedkar. Politically I align with his quest of aspirational human dignity that called for all means towards the annihilation of caste, which required the complete rejection of caste.

"Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognised that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious." – Ambedkar.

I was born into deep religiosity, one that was syncretically based on Hinduism though also drawing heavily for solace from 'mausoleum visiting Sufi Islam' and 'fasts for Christian saints'. A faith that was typical to immigrant Bombay families that intermarried and interdined. Though such acts did not erase our caste privileges or our deeply embellished upper-caste consciousness. We were also rational in the personal space when it came to food, drink and friendships. We were aspirationally occidental and sought betterment through education. We mimicked the departing colonial class in norm and behaviour. Both my grandparents were desperate to escape the village – a social structure Ambedkar described as an amalgamation of small minds. The love my grandparents shared and the lives they wanted were way beyond the scope of their families, their castes and religions.

My grandmother found solace from the detachment to her family she had willingly orchestrated through deep devotion to Goddess Durga. Kali, the Goddess of War, is a clan and village deity across the 'Mithila', the low lying wetland region south of Nepal in Bihar, a part of eastern India. Our religious life thus revolved around her festivals when an agnostic occidentalism would give away to an ethereal rural belief that would somehow define us in a city where the term 'Bihari' was a racial and class slur.

Deep ritualism was essential to her belief and not akin to the faith my Christian friends at school kept. She identified with colours, particularly red and certain foods to be eaten on particular days. This was accompanied by a liberal consumption of meat and alcohol that was frowned upon at the homes of my Hindu friends from other regions. She mixed it up with visits to Muslim sufi saints and soothsayers and complete devotion to Mother Mary. The occult fascinated her, she is a woman who tore down mores of society when it came to clothing, the love lives of her children and the lives she wanted us to lead. A deep sense of affection and grounding is what she has instilled in me.

I was a decade long atheist and my personal habits cannot be defined as a person of religion. I have never read a religious doctrine, except of excerpts and shy away from doing so as I feel I would be somehow polluted. Though honestly, boredom with philosophy is the real drawback. I believe Ambedkar's criticism is sufficient to understand the flaws of major religions. His writing style witty and intelligent to keep my attention.

I have often cooked as a form of tradition, my grandfather cooked each night for my grandmother, a promise he kept when he eloped with her to Bombay. I continue the tradition as a ritual, but like him, I have never cooked a recipe, I have never learnt how to cook, but learnt to observe and cook from the memory of taste. I am considered a very good cook but even I have never eaten something that I have repeated, but I cook each day as a form of ritualistic tradition. It takes away my fears and instills a sense of productive existence. Eating together creates familiarity and friendships that are special and intimate.

The last few years have also seen me read Ambedkar and Diop as a tradition, an act I do with religious compulsion and each time they present truths a new convert arrives with a book of his religion. The quest for enlightenment is addictive. The love for the writer sycophantic.

The young artist and architect Amir Bahan Jahanbin says that he doesn't like the ritual of religion and would rather go with the ritual of design. Why does a craftsman make a cane chair the way he does? What are the rituals of architecture? His father Mohammed Reza Jehanbin says that higher mathematics always innately becomes a conversation about religion because the energy of the cosmos becomes greater and larger defining the infinite measure of space, that one becomes to wonder about 'God'. Chaos in religion is undesirable and in science it is the driving force. But ritual in mathematics, art or science allows us to deal with the inherent uncertainty of the limits of knowledge. We hit a menopause of knowing.

I write a personal account of an internal conflict I hold with religion to write about the works and practice of Swedish artist Åsa Ersmark. Ersmark makes it a ritual to draw mushrooms using her menstrual blood as ink. The colour scapes are beautiful and carry a vocabulary that changes with each cycle. You can denote pain, anger, love, happiness and other myriad emotions with the wanes of the colour red. They sit light on the paper floating like animations. She displays them with a backset of 16mm film and in rows reminding you of the ritual. Each month is a wait into when the pigments flow allowing her to return to her drawings.

Are they watercolours? Gouache? We have never talked of blood in the context of conceptual art where it has not been an act of violent bloodletting through performance or the use of animal blood. Actually blood from anywhere is seen honourable, a signature to pacts, a sacrifice and full of connotations that erase the dread rather than associate it with bravery and pain. Pain is good. But how do we recognize the mind numbing pain women feel through menstrual cycles? I come from a culture where women were isolated during their periods and not allowed to enter temples or participate in religious and cultural functions. We are the children

of the blood represented in those paintings, so why did society fear its existence?

Recently the movie 'Pad Man' made famous Arunachalam Murugunathan, a man from southern India who made affordable menstrual pads for rural Indian women, first by conducting an extremely brave survey asking women what they wanted in a country where the mention of the completely natural biological happening is banished from public view. The use of old cotton rags etc and the prohibitive cost of mega-corporation made pads had resulted in one of the largest populations of women facing medical issues born out of hygiene or their movements severely restricted during their cycles. As a man I can never fathom the pain, relief and happiness a menstrual cycle brings. But I have observed with keen amazement, as a hypochondriac, the bravery women face their bodily functions with.

I have seen cousins stay away from religious functions during their periods when we were young, it was never explained, but their absence always flummoxed me. The social stigma I learnt through reading about it when I was much older. About 7 years ago I visited Guwahati, the city of the 'Eastern Light'. Here stands the imposing temple of Kamakhya Devi. 'Kamakhya' the goddess who yields us all our desires. She is an incarnation of Shakti, the mother goddess who forms the divine feminine cosmic energy from where the world emanates. The belief gives rise to the 'Shakti' tradition in Hinduism that often takes form of a religion in its own right.

Tradition declares that the temple was built when Shiva was carrying the corpse of his wife Sati. Her vulva fell at Khamakhya which is the centre of the 108 Shakti temples across India that contain parts of her corpse. It is also said that the site of the temple is where Shiva and Sati consummated their love. The site is famous for tantric occult practices such as animal sacrifices and even though the Supreme Court banned that in the 21st century it is continued hidden from the public eye in nearby compounds. The red vermillion from a particular rock pigment is given away to devotees as the red vermillion worn by deities.

The temple resembles a passage into the body of a woman. The entrance is wide then narrows into a

hot, smooth curved passage that reveals a shallow depression that alight into a small flight of steps, here your head is dipped into water that surrounds a stone structure that represents the yoni, the vulva. This is the core of tantric belief and the point of all cosmic energy. Ambedkar warned of the many myths of Hinduism that had stolen the right of India's people from accessing a spiritual system that would allow them spiritual advancement. The history of the temple is thus obfuscated in rich myths.

The indigenous people of the hills that surround Guwahati are the Khasis and the Garos. It is they who began worshiping the stone formation as a fertility goddess. They would sacrifice pigs and still do as a yearly ritual to Kamakhya, pigs stand closest to humans in biological form, the yelp of a dying pig to me sounds much like that of a human. They were driven away by Brahminical interests that wanted to control the site. They are matrilineal tribes that maintain their traditions even today and their state in North-Eastern India is one of the most advanced when it comes to the safety and rights of women's participation in secular life. The denial of their right to the site of their mother goddess forced them to seek redemption in Christianity. Like among other people in the Western Sahel or Equatorial Sudan, where Abrahamic religion became erasure of nature oriented animist cultures before the onset of slavery, India erased its own before the apartheid of caste set in.

A legend goes about the particular days in the year the temple of Kamakhya remains closed when she goes through her menstrual cycle, and only a lucky few are given the cloth used to dry the shallow depression that contains her menstrual blood. The cloth is to be kept as a symbol of fertility, hope and prosperity. Another temple of Shakti nestled in the Himalayas, in the contested state of Kashmir, where indigenous practices have been completely sanitized, a relic of an earlier more esoteric remains in the form of the morel mushroom called 'Guchchi Mushroom'. It is an expensive mushroom and rivals in taste and quality to the ones found on the slopes of the French Alps. The mushroom is consumed and distributed as a 'prasad' or offering from the Goddess. When I encountered the works of Ersmark in Stockholm, a certain link was made to a past of

the temple and suddenly the association between mushrooms and fertility and long lost rituals was clear.

We discussed, I told her of my anxiety of being someone who comes to believe in the rituals, the poems, the songs and obsession my grandmother holds towards her goddess. Acts I aid and help in as she becomes older, a ritual that allows a passage of right no priest or book would allow me. Rituals that allow intimacies between me and my grandmother that are precious. As she grows older unable to do many of the rituals, I step in as a proxy. Recently a friend and artist Jehangir Jani, with whom Ersmark showed in Bombay, went on a proxy pilgrimage for his aged and ailing mother to the Iraqi city of Najaf and the resting place of Shia Islam's most noteworthy Caliph Ali. The mushrooms, in Ersmark's menstrual blood on paper, laid my anxiety about participating in rituals to rest and allowed me to make Hinduism void and see the rituals as a long cycle of acts that have been snatched away from us through organised religion.

Ersmark comes together with many thinkers in Northern Europe and the Baltic states who have begun the decolonisation of the Pagan North from the clutches of Christianity, we must remember the advent of Rome to the North was accompanied by long crusades, blood letting and numerous accounts of annihilation. The Sami escaped the tirade only to have themselves oppressed under the false idea of Scandinavian rationality. A society that has championed egalitarian equity has continued to depress people who are devoid of their rationality making them outsiders in their own land. A recent interest in European Paganism often revolves around mother worship. This is inherently a necessary utility in cold winters, blown away by Arctic winds, a deep faith in nature is more essential than sins of mankind. Women here look towards the act of nurturing with equity.

Ersmark writes a poem: 'Hekate Rising'. Hekate arises and appears. She is the Goddess of the occult and the Moon in the Greek religion. I respect her. I refuse atheism because it comes from a Greek philosopher Thales who challenged the Greek belief system of Gods, where a clientism existed

between them and their believers, a form of political subjugation. Thales learnt to challenge this assumption while studying under African philosophers, his atheism was based on his opposition to Greek Gods, but not to a supernatural energy. Hinduism similarly like Christianity, Judaism and Islam accepted Greek logic. In opposition stood a vast Africa that rejected such blatant rationality that was scripted on political power. Voodooism was based on an intimate relationship with mother nature much like European paganism and the cults of the mother in India.

Chiekh Anta Diop, the Senegalese Polymath and Philosopher, proposed the idea of Africa as a matriarchal society based on an intimate study of the West African tribes and their rituals. Specially how voodoo uses witchcraft and a third dimension in the imagination of this earth. It is he who carbon dated melanin in the mummies of Egypt to prove scientifically that the Nile civilization was Black. He talked about the sacredness of the 'Mother Goddess' among the Igbos, and the cults of fertility in West Africa. He talked of an African industrial renaissance once the African had understood the sophistication of their visual imagery. Picasso derived a lot from Africa, drew from that very sophistication. Diop challenged the ancient linkages between Greece and India and the celebration of the Indian civilisation as a derivative of ancient Greece. Rather he proposed the 'Out of Africa' thesis to talk of a vibrant African civilization existing among the Dravidians of South India that found its crescendo with Buddhism, a religion that celebrated the epitome of African philosophies of humanity. India's spiritual past in Africa is evident in our food and the proximity by sea that rubbishes the possibility of it arriving through mountains covered in snow with Tundra-like conditions.

But in Africa a return to paganism has happened through art, posters of Kali are repainted on village walls of Ghana to celebrate fertility goddesses. Like in the northeast of India or in the Baltics, the visual culture related to religion carried the memory and history of people. Modern religion has always annihilated its public presence by relegating it to practices within home carried on by women who were also pushed away from public life. Ersmark's acts

of drawing draws from those very traditions of resistance that women have kept up against the misogynistic onslaught of religion.

Not far from where I write in New York, on the far end of Brooklyn, a group of Guyanese Hindus celebrate a creole concoction of Voodoo and the Mariamma cult from India's Tamil Nadu. Descended from Tamil Labourers indentured to cut sugarcane in Guyana during the late 19th century, they returned to the cult of the Goddess from Christianity when a child died of high fever and they were socially not able to access colonial medicine. During the plague in India, the cult of Shitala grew across India, before the plague she was a Goddess to Tribals. The Guyanese Hindus, like the Dalits of Kolhapur have been segregated by an appropriation of their animist beliefs. The Goddess Temple in Kolhapur, a city in western Maharashtra, has been sanitized from its indigen-ous past through architecture and sculpting. But acts such as that of Ersmark speak of a return.

In the 1960s when Mithila, the region of my grandmother, faced a drought, a cultural bureaucrat Pupul Jayakar proposed to provide employment to

the women of the region by encouraging them to draw on handmade paper the murals they painted on walls. It was a simple act of modernist assertion on a form considered primitive. Tribal or Vernacular is what we often describe such practices as if the people engaged are disconnected from the contemporary and our timelines. A little resistance was seen in the early years for an art form that is now debased into a handicraft called 'Madhubani Painting'. Lower cast women made abstract forms of the Goddess and not of narrative mythological epics, thus making their paintings unsaleable in an India where the majority of Hindus see Kali as a representative of the occult. They were guaranteed purchase through a government subsidy but remained unsold until 2014 when I found 700 of them being sold at the price of recycling paper at the handcrafts shop in Patna, the capital city of Bihar. Time had preserved the beautiful bouquet of drawings saved from a state obsessed with a modernist urge to author visual history. Ersmark marks this resistance.

My grandmother is called Aruna Devi which means the 'Goddess who radiates like the rays of the sun'.

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