

Ardhakathanak: A Commoner's Discovery Of The Mughal Milieu



Ills.: Victoria and Albert Museum, London Mughal painting from 1615-1618

Abstract

The *Ardhakathanak* by Banarasidas is often considered the first autobiography in Hindi. Completed in the year 1641, the book provides us with a commoner's understanding of the Mughal world. Often subjected an imperial bias, the book is a wildly neglected source of history. The study attempts to highlight various societal norms and ethics as evidenced by the *Ardhakathanak*. It undertakes a thematic division in understanding medieval Indian society, focusing on merchant practices, societal norms and Jain religion. Various aspects of a middle class man's life are unraveled through the course of this study, including education, business decisions, wealth, family, domesticity, religious assimilation, rationality and self-discovery.

The study also embarks on an analysis of the Varanasiya sect of Jain religion briefly. Finally, emerging trends of individuality are highlighted. The study culminates with a brief account of how underutilized this primary source remains despite obvious merits to it.

Keywords: Banarasidas, Ardhkathanak, autobiography, merchant practices, religious pursuits, cultural history.

1. Introduction

The development of the literary genre of autobiography is a fairly ancient one, with St. Augustine's autobiographical work 'Confessions' written in 399 CE. However, the understanding of the term autobiography to be a form of 'self life

writing' is a recent phenomenon. The Oxford English Dictionary credits Robert Southy to be the progenitor of autobiography in the year 1809. However we find a reference to autobiography or self-biography being used by William Taylor in the Monthly Review of 1797.[i]The motivations for committing one's life to writing are often religious in nature, to record stages in an individual's life by which they lose their own identity to celebrate God's divine power.[ii] Today, these works have become a prominent source of history and are extensively researched to arrive at a deeper understanding of the period it was written in. The earliest known biographical work that was produced in India is the Harshacharita written by Banabhatta in the 7 th century CE. However, truly autobiographical accounts only appear in India with the advent of Mughals. Among these, Baburnama was the earliest, and records Babur's life between 1483 to 1530.[iii] The autobiographies written during this period were meant to preserve a person's family history and good deeds for posterity. Thus, the representation of the subject is in light of the reader's judgement. Therefore, we may conclude that these writings often lack a humanizing touch that can relate the subject to the reader.

One such piece in the ocean of Mughal writings is Banarasidas's *Ardhakathanak*. It was first discovered by Nagari Pracharini Sabha and published by Dr. Mataprasad Gupta in 1943.[iv]

Banarasidas was a Jain merchant who lived during the Mughal Era in India. The title of his autobiography translates to 'half a tale'. The book was completed in the winter of 1641 in the imperial capital of Agra, when Banarasi was 55 years of age. In Jain philosophy, a full life is considered to be of one hundred and ten years. Thus, the title of Banarasi's book 'Half a Tale.' Although, the tale began to be the story of half a life, Banarasi met his demise only two years after the completion of his book, implying that the story covered his entire life. Written in the language of the Indian heartland, Braj Bhasha. Ardhakathanak is considered to be the first autobiography in Hindi.[v] Much to the contrary to other Mughal works, Banarasidas's tone throughout the book is that of unabashed candor. Over the course of the book, Banarasi establishes a rapport with the reader and slowly but surely becomes a friend. By the time, we reach Banarasi's close of life, a feeling of a long and fruitful companionship lingers on with the reader. We know Banarasi's secrets, sorrows and soaring moments. Unlike other autobiographical works of the contemporary period the emphasis is not on making a perfect man devoid of any flaws, fit to govern the territory of India, but to lay bare before the reader the heart and soul of subject, good or bad.

It is evident from the content of the book and style of writing that Banarasi did not expect his autobiography to be read nearly 400 years later. In fact, there was an understanding that it would only be read by limited audience of friends and kinsmen.[vi] In Banarasi's own words, the only reason he ventured into the business of recording his life, is 'let me tell you all my story'.

A Jain from the noble Shrimal family,

That prince among men, that man called Banarasi,

He thought to himself, let me tell my story to all [vii]

As is evident from the pretense set above, Banarasi's account of his life was a commoner's perspective of the Mughal Era. He was unconcerned with the political happenings of the Empire and did not occupy himself with it. But what was important to Banarasi, and thus what makes its way into his book are matters of business, religious practices, customs and the changing ideas that manifested into his own life. Although, Ardhakathanak can rival any other source of Mughal history in terms of the information it provides us. It does not supplement the information presented with quantifiable data, as is seen in works like Akbarnama. All the same, works like Ardhakathnaka can be monumental in filling the gaps between the 'imperial-sanctioned' view of history that is prevalent towards more subaltern approaches that weigh the subjects of the Empire directly into account. Furthermore, being an account that is written not for a political patron but oneself, it can overcome one of the major drawbacks associated with royal sanctioned works. Banarasidas represents not what others would want to see, but he saw himself, without fear of censure. It also becomes one of the few sources through which we can take the bottom-up approach of reconstructing history instead of the common top down approach. Ardhakathanak follows a chronological writing style beginning from a brief history up to the 55 th year of Banarasi's life. Another interesting aspect of this account is that all events in his life are described along with the precise time of their occurrence helping us reconstruct a more organized form of Mughal history from a middle class merchant's eyes.

2. Merchant Life in Northern India

Banarasidas's Ardhakathanak is a major source for understanding mercantile practices and ethics in Northern India during the medieval period. Banarasi, right at the outset informs us that he is a Jain of the noble Shrimal family.[viii] Despite his Rajput lineage, the family took to a Bania life after conversion to Jainism. It

was his grandfather Muldas, who first started a business.

Muldas Biholia, pursuing a bania's way of life

became steward to a Mughal officer, and went away to Malwa [ix]

Businesses were usually dominated by the Hindu and Jain communities. In order to maintain this hegemony over the market, children were instilled with a sense of business tactics and ethics from an early age. It would not be wrong to assume that the kind of education being provided was tailored to meet future work requirements depending on the community one belonged to. Education began at the age of eight, and usually lasted for four years but could be completed earlier as well. Banarasi mentions that after his father completed his schooling, he could assess the quality of gold and silver, tell counterfeit coins from real ones and he could balance account books along with a basic understanding of Sanskrit language. Although, we can conclude that a higher premium was placed on practical learning as compared to theoretical knowledge. This becomes evident from the fact, that Kharagsen, Banarasi's father, started a small business of his own as soon as he finished school.

When eight years old the boy became, he was sent to school.

At school he learnt quickly and soon became skilled at assaying gold and silver

He understood how to keep the books and write debits and credits correctly.

In his grandfather's shop, he began learning the business of dealing in gold and silver.[x]

We also find information pertaining to the various kinds of markets that were in place. The general market was referred to as the bazaar. We also find evidence of other specialised markets such as mandis, where grains were sold; *nakhsas*, markets in Agra that sold goods including cotton and cattle; *katras*, enclosed markets usually found in large cities. Mentions of *hats* and *faris* are also found. These were daily markets and were often places where children went to practice trade.[ix] Banarasi also goes as far as to provide us with the number of sarais, bazars and mandis in Jaunpur to be 52. Furthermore, storage hubs were available, where one could store goods at the payment of a fee.

Within the city were fifty-two sarais; Fifty-two parganas surrounded it.

In the city were fifty-two marketplaces, And fifty-two great mandis. [xii]

We also find mentions of 36 pauni or shudra subcaste that offered their services in the markets. However, contemporaries like Abd ur-Rahim Khankhanan mention even more in his poem 'Nagar Shobha.'[xiii] Here one observation must be made,

the prevalence of various markets in a single city necessitates a huge number of shopkeepers, traders and moneylenders within the market for its upkeep. One possible reason to explain this can be the meagre amount of capital required to open a business owing to the cheapness of goods. We find evidence of Banarasi restarting his business with two hundred rupees only.

*Her mother replied, 'don't lose heart, I have two hundred rupees
Which I shall give you in secret, so that he can go back to Agra'. [xiv]*

We find detailed information about the business of jewellers from Banarasi's account. The lure of business probably stemmed from the fact that one could make huge profits in this business. The items traded included rajat (silver), sauvann (gold), hira (diamond), lal (ruby), moti (pearl), manik, chuni and mani (precious stones).[xv] During the time, there was a common tendency to hoard wealth in underground safes. In extension to this, men in businesses did not disclose how much wealth they possessed. Frugality was considered an important trait for businesses, and money was only spent on lavish affairs like marriages.[xvi]

From the above account we can assume that trade was flourishing during the seventeenth century. Moreover, it was a profitable business. Thus, it is certain that various rules and regulations would have been put into place to ensure the proper functioning of the markets. Loan facility with interest was available as is evidenced by the presence of moneylenders. However, the repayment was usually manifold times the principal amount, not due to extortion by the moneylenders but out of obligation for lending under dire circumstances.[xvii]

We also find evidence of partnerships being entered into for business purposes. Although partnerships were more prevalent within the same caste, those outside were not prohibited either. Kharagsen also entered into a partnership with Muldas, an Agarwal, in his early days in Jaunpur.

*Ramdass, a wealthy bania, an Agrawal of good temper,
Had entered into partnership with Kharagsen, looking upon him as a friend.
It was a union based on affection, trust and understanding [xviii]*

The partnership was a highly organised form of business. Both the partners had equal share in the profits and losses, and proper accounts for all transactions were maintained. Furthermore, both partners had one copy of the accounts. The dissolution of the partnership could only be initiated when both the partners were

present and in agreement. All prior credits and loans had to be paid off before dissolution. We also find evidence of a mediator to find solution to disputes.

It was Samvat 1670, when the necessary paperwork was completed.

Banarasi parted with Dharamdas and ended their partnership. [xix]

All decisions regarding the business practices and well being of the community were taken by a council. This council can be dubbed as the 'business council'. It consisted of representatives belonging to a particular trade. They conferred among themselves and decided upon plans of action whenever an adversity befell them. For instance, when Nawab Qilich flogged all the jewellers in Jaunpur, the council decided to leave the town.

Upon returning, they conferred among themselves and decided to run away,

Taking with them their personal belongings, after all who would walk into the jaws of death? [xx]

Finally, one of the most important unwritten rules of the Banias was their secrecy. A bania would never divulge his business secrets to anyone lest they take advantage of this. This also becomes evident from Banarasi's account of the nine subjects that must not be talked about including age, wealth, affairs of the household, deeds of charity, glory, infamy, measures taken for health, escapades and plans for future.

He established a successful business, this is a secret matter which must not be told.

One's age, income and household matters, acts of charity, honour and dishonour, the medicines one takes, sexual escapades and future plans, are nine matters that must not be revealed. [xxi]

The merchants of Northern India belonged to a distinct section of commoners in the Mughal society and often possessed large quantities of wealth. This, in turn, threatened the power dynamics of the Mughal countryside. Suffice to say, Mughal administrators often tried to establish their control over the merchants and extorted money out of them. One instance where this becomes increasingly evident is when Qilich Khan, the city's governor, put all the jewellers of the town in jail and demanded a huge amount from them. When the jewellers refused, he flogged them with thorny whips till they were dead.

One day he arrested all jewellers and threw them in prisons.

He asked for huge amounts of wealth, that the jewellers did not have.

He chained them and lined them up like thieves,

And flogged them with thorny whipped till they almost died. [xxii]

Roads were infested with robbers and dacoits. Valuable material often had to be carried hidden in underwear or around waistband. Merchants sometimes also made use of disguise to fool robbers. Other problems also included weather inclements and overcrowded inns.[xxiii]

Customs, Traditions and Changing Notions

The social settings as highlighted in Ardhakathanak are distinct from any other source that we come across during this period. The merit of Ardhakathanak being that it is a householder's account, and we are able to witness customs and practices at the grassroot level. In the early medieval period, occupation based groups had crystallized and caste lines were becoming more fluid among the business communities. However, caste continued to play an important role in the life of a commoner. The importance of this hierarchised division can also be inferred from Banarasi's account. Like we saw earlier, Banarasidas was a Jain Shrimal, he firmly establishes himself to be of Rajput descent. Although Rajputs were Kshatriyas and were prescribed to indulge in administrative or war activities, Banarasi's family had a jewellery business. Two explanations can be offered for this, either the author lied about his ancestry which was prevalent among lower castes to elevate their status[xxiv] or since his family were converts to Jainism, and the precepts of Jainism prohibited harm to any living creature they couldn't practice agriculture or indulge in war.[xxv] Other instances that hints towards the rigidity of caste is the insistence of Banarasi's family on giving up learning. They believed it to be the profession of a poor Brahmins.

Learning is meant for brahmins and bards, The sons of merchants sit in the marketplace.

Those who spend all their time in learning go hungry. Listen, son, to what your elders tell you.[xxvi]

Despite these admonitions from his family, Banarasi continues to pursue learning. Later he achieves the true goal of his life and also authors numerous books. From this account, we can infer that it was possible to change one's profession irrespective of class. However, we must also note that Banarasi was already a Kshatriya who pursued a Brahman's profession. This can indicate that mobility was mostly possible only for the privileged castes. Furthermore, one could only jump from one rung to the next.

Another important social aspect of middle class life that we witness is the importance of family in one's private and public life. The family dynamics make an important part of Banarasidas's book. Familial obligation makes its way into Banarasi's account in many instances. One example of the same is when Kharagsen's father died, he and his mother were evicted from their house. So, they made their way to the house of Madan Singh, Kharagsen's maternal grandfather. Madan Singh accepted them as their own daughter and son, he also provided them with immense riches and comfort.

Daughter, think of it no more. Joy and sorrow are as transient like shadows.

He embraced them and gave them fine clothes and jewels to wear.

They lived in peace and contentment, unaffected by the passage of time.

Three years went by in this manner, in harmony, in affection, happiness and peace. [xxvii]

We find another instance where familial obligation had to be met. Here Kharagsen entered into a partnership with Sundardas, after he and his wife died. Kharagsen took it upon himself to get his daughter married in a grand fashion. This was perhaps a show of gratitude towards Sundardas for being a fatherly figure.

Sundardas's daughter was unmarried, Kharagsen got her married with great ceremony.

He gave her both honour and gifts, golds and riches too. [xxviii]

We also find evidence of involvement of the elders in the personal matters of family members. They often act as a moral compass and advise the members on the desired course of action. This also hints at how important the family is in a householder's life. Further, we can also infer that the family, including distant relatives, functioned as a single social unit.

Banarasi returned to Jaunpur city. The members of his family sat him down

And the elders lectured him on the error of his ways. [xxix]

From the above, it is evident that a huge premium was placed on family life. Thus, the age of marriage for both men and women was quite low. We come across a reference to Banarasi getting married at the age of nine, for women this age might have been even lesser.

Meanwhile, Banarasi turned nine years of age.

In the town of Khairabad, lived Tambi Parbat and his son Kalyanmal,

Who had one daughter.

He married Banarasi with her, with a tilak on his forehead. [xxx]

Domesticity is an essential pillar in any householder's life. Thus, it becomes a topic of prime concern in our understanding of Ardhakathanak. Provided that feminist studies are trying to recover the role of women in public spheres, it is also equally important to recover role of men in emotional intimate spheres that are denied to men in a patriarchal structure.[xxxi] Although, Banarasi was married thrice in his lifetime, his account is strikingly quiet about his wives. The only description we get is of Banarasi's first wife, when she provides him with emotional support after a business failure. One possible reason for this quietude, it the notion that personal matters must only be discussed outside the public sphere at night. Within the patriarchal framework, men are often denied the pleasure of expression. They are seen as unemotional and rational, standing in stark contrast to traits attached to females. Throughout the story, we do come across instances when Banarasi has indulged in emotional excesses upon hearing news. One such instance is when Banarasi hears the news of the death of his son and wife, and his engagement to his wife's sister in one go. We see Banarasi overcome with grief and a sense of happiness, unable to process this emotion, he breaks into a crying fit with his friend Narottamdas.

She had given birth to a third son, and attained both happiness and sorrow.

Fifteen days after his birth, mother and son both died.

Banarasi's wife had a sister, to her a marriage proposal was then sent,

Kharagsen accepted this proposal at an auspicious hour. Reading both the news together,

Banarasi and his friend fell into a crying a fit,

and with much effort he pulled himself together. [xxxii]

Finally, we will look at the portrayal of women in Banarasi's account and analyse the spaces that were made available to women. The very first observation that we must make, is that men continued to have control over women even in the realm of domestic decision making. Here we must note, the gendered division of spaces where women are limited to the domestic household and men have access to public spaces. This becomes evident from one instance when Banarasi was seeking shelter during rain. A woman offered him a place to rest, however her husband admonished her and threw Banarasi out.

It was a dark night, in the winter month of Agahan.

A woman offered him shelter, but her husband picked up a stout stick. [xxxiii]

Although the general condition of women was that of meek subjects, we find instances when they appear as formidable characters in the story. This can hint towards a possible change in currents and upward mobility in the status of women. One such instance is that of Banarasi's grandmother who makes her way to maternal house bereft of a husband and all her wealth. This also stands in stark contrast to the general outlook of women being seen as weak and easily overcome by emotion.

*For the home of Madan Singh, jeweller, Kharagsen and his mother searched,
asking people for directions,*

Till at last, Destiny determined by their karma, Brought them to his house. [xxxiv]

The movement from domain of erotic love to the comforts of family life was of course available to men and not to women.[xxxv] This is evident from the fact that Banarasi after having an extra-marital affair could still go back to his wife. That being said, we must not

mistake this to be a situation where the wife had no control. In the same instance, Banarasi's in laws refused to send their daughter back with Banarasi on account of his affair. Thus, we cannot perceive women to be powerless figures within the household. In addition, it can also be concluded that extra-marital affairs were not perceived in a positive light within the society. As we pointed out earlier, Banarasi's elders admonished him and suggested he go fetch his wife from her home.

Banarasi went to Jaunpur, to get his wife back.

But her parents refused to send her back.

Banarasi then fell on his father's feet and cried,

His mother beat her chest seeing her son so distressed.

Kharagsen, ashamed of his son, called him many names.

Banarasi wept and wept, he could not say a word. [xxxvi]

Women also had access to personal wealth and property. They could even undertake small business ventures. We find reference to Banarasi's wife lending him 200 rupees to restart his business. Furthermore, upon Sundardas's death, his daughter inherited all his wealth. These instances hint at economic involvement of women at some level, alternatively it could also mean that women handled finances within the household and had a degree of authority over how it was used.

For Sunadardas's property, he followed the ruling of the panchayat.

He gave everything to his sister, keeping nothing for himself. [xxxvii]

4. Religiosity and Rationale

Throughout Banarasi's account we find examples of religious expression. Suffice to say, religious identity was an essential part of one's being and played an important role in determining the lifestyle of a person. This is evident from Banarasi's identification of himself as a Jain, devotee of Parshav and Suparshav at the very beginning.[xxxviii] This can also be indicative of a progressive religious policy that was enacted by the Mughals, particularly Akbar. The fact that the emperor did not segregate the people into 'true' and 'false' believers of God and accepted all religions as valid pathways to God, was bound to please the Jain community. This mutual respect is also visible in Banarasi's account of Akbar's death when the entire city was in a state of mourning. We also come across certain tenets of Jain philosophy such as the conception of death as the ultimate end for everyone who existed in the material realm[xxxix], the presence of multiple realities that one achieves after death [xl], eight virtues of a Jain [xli] and the philosophy of relativity of reality i.e. the non- absolute nature of existence.[xlii] Another peculiar teaching we come across in this aspect is the vow that Rai Dhanna took to never build a house, despite being a rich diwan in Bengal.

He practised the Jain rites of prosadh and pratikraman

And had taken a vow never to build a new house. [xliii]

Here we must consider how religious teachings may have had an impact on how business was conducted. There is a general understanding that religious tenets impinged on trade, however it is a wise merchant who refrains from building a house.[xliv] From the above instance we can suggest that Jain teachings had evolved over time to include the virtue of frugality, provided that much of the Jain community indulged in business activities. This can also be corroborated from the eight virtues of a Jain that include abstinence from alcohol, honey, meat, the five forbidden fruits and not eating after dark among others.

Banarasi's account of Jain practices becomes even more important to us when we place it in historical context of the growing influence of Hinduism. This process has often been referred to as the 'Hinduisation' of Jainism.[xlv] We find many instances that suggest Banarasi was caught in the middle of this process. We find recurring mentions of pilgrimages to holy sites that were likely organised by affluent men.[xlvi] Furthermore, we also find instances of fasts, vows and applying of *teeka* (vermillion) before a journey which are predominantly Hindu concepts. Another instance in this regard is the worship of Sati Aut and Lakshmi.

Banarasidas's family prior to Banarasi's birth visited the temple of Sati Aut, hoping for a son. A similar trip was made after his birth, asking for a long life for Banarasi. The myth of Sati, as a virtuous wife, who sacrificed herself at her husband's insult can be found in Puranic Hindu traditions. Additionally, we also come across instances of Lakshmi being worshipped before starting a business venture in the account.[xlvi] Although, Jainism does not have a concept of caste based division, we see that every character mentioned in Banarasi's account is introduced as a member of a particular caste. Thus, it is evident that caste-based identities had gained traction even within the Jain fold. Perhaps, the best depiction of this process is visible in a pilgrimage Banarasidas himself undertook, where he first took a dip in the Ganga and then offered his prayers to Parshav and Suparshav in a temple. This instance is extremely telling, as we can actively witness the process of assimilation.

Upon reaching Kashi, he first took a dip in Ganga.

Then he worshipped Parshav and Suparshav, with devotion in his heart. [xlviii]

It is evident then, that a process of Hinduisation was active during the 17th century. This was bound to produce a certain degree of discontent among the practicing Jains like Banarasi. Banarasidas's account is an illuminating account of a person's discovery of self through religion. It is brought to our notice that Banarasi was a Jain Shwetambar, however through the course of his journey he has a stint with Shiv Bhakti before finally returning to the Jain fold again. We find many instances that underline this brewing discontent within the protagonist. The very first time that we encounter a dissatisfied Banarasi is after a sanyasi cons him, distraught about his own gullibility Banarasi seeks the help of Bhanchand, his religious guru. Bhanchand explains to Banarasi that such godmen and their tricks are false and illusory, and one must not get occupied with them. This is perhaps the beginning of Banarasi's quest for the ultimate truth.

He told Bhanchand of his dilemma. When Bhanchand explained that-such matters are false and illusory, Banarasi realized the truth.[xlix]

We find many such instances that indicate towards Banarasi's saturation with religion as he knew it. This is evident in the way various rituals are described in the text. At one point after Banarasi offers prayers to Shiva by blowing a conch shell, he describes himself as a shell too. Here, he implies the superfluous nature of such ritualistic worship.

Shivdev in the form of a shell, And the great shell Banarasi,

Both came together, The Lord and his servant, alike. [1]

Yet another instance highlights Banarasi's conception of worship to be transactional in nature, where worship is only offered in expectations of a reward. Additionally, various fasts and vows are observed as penance for having strayed away from the Jain path to God. After the conclusion of Banarasi's short period of Hindu worship, he decided to give up all his vices and observed the fourteen vows of Jainism and offered prayers twice every day.[li]

Finally, we can see the story coming to an obvious conclusion with Banarasi discovering Adhyatma through Arathmal Dhor. We can find a change in Banarasi's understanding of religion. He says that he no longer believed in rites and rituals, and scorned image worship.

He also gave up his clothes. This is also highlighted at the end of Banarasi's account where he identifies himself as Banarasidas who is an Adhyatmi and a contented man, as opposed to the beginning of his text where he calls himself a worshipper of Parshav and Suparshav.

*Residing in Agra. A Shrimal of the Jain faith,
Banarasi Biholia Is an Adhyatmi, and a contented man. [lii]*

During this time, he wrote various treatises such as the Gyan Pacchissi, Dhyam Battissi and a translation of the Samaysar Natika. It was during period that he fully understood the meaning of worship. He soon became a prominent figure among the Adhyatmis. In fact, we find mentions of a sub sect called the 'Banarasiyas' or the 'Varanasiyas'[liii], who were followers of Banarasi. His doctrine involved questioning one's faith to come to terms with it and giving up all forms of ritualistic worship. It was a general understanding that the relationship between a devotee and God cannot be mediated and a true devotee achieved fulfilment by himself. The sect was popular among both Shvetambars and Digambaras (two schools of Jainism), however the radical nature of this doctrine attracted a lot of opposition. Meghavijay's Yuktprabodh begins with a critique of the Varanasiyas accusing them of being heretics.[liv] He believed that the Varanasiyas did not even stay true to their Digambar scriptures. The Samaysar Natika, however, also acts as a compilation of Banarasi's ideas and views on worship. This text underlines Banarasi's doctrine of self-fulfilment distinct from Digambar scriptures. Thus, we can classify the Varanasiyas as Neo-Digambarites. Despite the presence of such a rich body of literature, the Varanasiyas did not survive for long after Banarasi's death and the movement

only gained traction in the 17th century.

Here we can witness a pattern emerging in terms of religious reformations. The medieval period is replete with instances of movements that aim to purify religions of official intervention by the priestly class. We can cite examples of the Reformation in Europe, that was triggered by priestly excesses, or the Bhakti Movement in early medieval India. We can argue that a general understanding was reached during this period that one's religion is private and should remain outside the ambit of regulation. A greater emphasis was also placed on inclusion of sections of society that were earlier prohibited from access to certain religions by anchoring new doctrines around self-effort. This hints at a broader historical process that had its roots in the socio-cultural and economic underpinnings of the medieval world. Although, the reformers also wanted to cleanse the religions and revert them to their classical forms, the real meaning of these changes was to adjust the religions to the reality of the medieval world.[lv]

5. Conclusion

The Ardhakathanak upon first reading may not appear to be a very intriguing tale. However, as we delve deeper into the world presented to us through Banrasi's writing, we encounter many complexities of human nature and society. At the outset, it looks like a story of a simple man, but it is indeed an account of a devotee's religious pursuit. Here, we should look back to one of the first premises we established, the purpose of writing an autobiography is often religious. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this text is its astonishing ability to collapse the centuries, and to make 17th-century experiences seem not merely vivid but also entirely understandable to the reader of today. If the Ardhakathanak is a unique witness to a particular time in the history of India and the world, it is equally a remarkable statement about the timelessness of human experience, as felt in such moments as the cloying taste of remorse, the beauty and strength of friendship, the frustrating difficulty of making one's way in life, and the unbearable—yet somehow borne—tragedy of parental bereavement.[lvi]

We also come across the development of 'individuality' as a trait. This is evidenced from the numerous autobiographies that are produced during this period. We find an emphasis on the 'cult of individual', that is commonplace today. This particular cult of individual, however, is not based on a seemingly exalted definition of a perfect man but it hinges on being relatable. This is evidenced by a list that Banarasi presents at the close of his book. He highlights

his vices and virtues as they were when he completed the book, diminishing the concept of an ideal human. The development of such autobiographical texts marks the coming of modernity to the Indian subcontinent. A similar trend is also seen in religious reformation that hinged on individuality and private worship. Thus, Banarasi's life story illustrates important changes in medieval Indian society and culture, of which the most important were a growing interest in personality, in the development of individual aspects of literature and culture, and the individualisation of creative activities and culture itself. We can infer Banarasi too had a hint of vanity to be able to present his story to the world. The Indian novel has always had a symbiotic relationship with its own modernity. They are reflections of the environments that they are produced in and the social relations that the protagonist has with the world.

It is abundantly clear at this stage that Banarasidas's Ardhakathanak holds a mirror to the backdrop that it is situated in. We have also established the validity of the source for understanding the Mughal milieu by providing glimpses into the socio-cultural and economic context of that time. The text describes these situations not as a stranger, but someone who is very well situated within them. Thus, we can suggest that the information that does come across in the text is a peek into the insider's world. This peek is free of bias and elucidates in a manner that is true to the core. The instances we find where Banarasi refuses to divulge certain information can also be explained, when Banarasi wrote the Ardhakathanak, he knew that it would be read by his friends and associates, people he came into contact with daily. Revealing the secrets of his business success or confessing to the details of an indiscreet or unwise act, may not, in such circumstances, have been the wisest thing to do.[lvii]

The text can be an extremely rich source not only for historiographical contributions, but also in the field of literature and the arts. Despite this, Ardhakathanak remains an extremely under-utilised source. In fact, Dr. RC Sharma dubs it to be a 'neglected source of Mughal history'. We can thus conclude, that an entire body of research can be conducted on Banarasi's life along with the supplementary literature that he produced in his life such as the Samaysar Natika to unveil further intricacies of the Adhyatmi lifestyle in the medieval period along with the development of Hindi literature and its interaction with Persian cultures. Banarasidas too leaves us with a similar remark. At this juncture, I am obliged to caution, we are all now a part of Banarasi's cult of

individual.

He has told us his entire tale in the doha and chaupai metres, In six hundred and seventy-five stanzas.

Those who recite it, hear it, read it, To them, his good wishes. [lviii]

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Angela Saini - Superieur. De terugkeer van de Rassentheorie



Angela Saini Ills.: Joseph Sassoon Semah

Superieur van de wetenschapsjournalist Angela Saini is een verslag van het uitgebreide onderzoek naar de biologische feiten rondom het begrip ras.

Bestaat er een verband tussen ras en IQ? Welk ras is het beste? Zijn wij één mensensoort of niet? Wat kan het moderne wetenschappelijke bewijsmateriaal ons echt vertellen over de menselijke verschillen, en wat betekenen die vervolgens?

Deze vragen zijn allerminst gedateerd. De rassentheorie beleeft een zorgwekkende comeback, in wetenschap en politiek. Angela Saini onderzoekt in *Superieur* pseudowetenschappelijke beweringen en theorieën over ras, en toont aan waarom ze onhoudbaar zijn. Angela Saini komt tot de conclusie dat de biologie deze vraag niet kan beantwoorden. Als we de betekenis van ras willen begrijpen, moeten wij begrijpen hoe macht werkt. Een onderzoek van de Verlichting via het negentiende-eeuwse imperialisme en de twintigste-eeuwse eugenetica naar de revival van de rassentheorie in de eenentwintigste eeuw.

Saini toont in *Superieur* aan hoe macht het idee van ras telkens weer opnieuw vormgeeft, hoe macht de wetenschappelijke feiten beïnvloedt. De betekenis houdt verband met de tijd.

Lang hebben witte mensen van Europese afkomst zich aan de top van de machtshiërarchie bevonden en bouwden hun wetenschappelijk verhaal over de menselijke soort rond dit geloof. Maar geen enkele regio of volk heeft recht op een claim op superioriteit.

‘Ras is het tegenargument. Ras komt in de kern van de zaak neer op het geloof dat we van geboorte anders zijn, diep in ons lichaam, misschien zelfs qua karakter en intellect, en in onze uiterlijke verschijning.’ Het is het idee dat bepaalde groepen mensen bepaalde aangeboren kwaliteiten hebben. Ras, gevormd door macht, heeft een eigen kracht verkregen. Witheid werd de zichtbare maatstaf van de menselijke moraliteit. Sinds de Verlichting hadden veel Europese denkers zich verenigd rond het idee dat de mensheid één was, dat we dezelfde gemeenschappelijke vermogens deelden. Ook al was er een rassenhiërarchie, ook al waren er mindere mensen en betere mensen, we waren allemaal nog steeds menselijk. In de volgende eeuw vroeg men zich weer af, of we echt wel tot hetzelfde soort behoorden: want waarom zagen wij er niet hetzelfde uit en gedroegen we ons niet op dezelfde manier? Het is geen toeval dat de moderne ideeën over ras zijn gevormd tijdens de hoogtijdagen van het Europese kolonialisme, toen de machthebbers overtuigd waren van hun eigen superioriteit. In de VS werd dezelfde verwarrende logica gebruikt om de slavernij te rechtvaardigen. En de wetenschap voorzag het racisme van intellectueel gezag.

De rassentheorie heeft zich altijd op het kruispunt van wetenschap en politiek opgehouden, en van wetenschap en economie. Ras was niet alleen een middel om fysieke verschillen te classificeren, het was ook een manier om de menselijke vooruitgang te meten, en om te kunnen oordelen over de capaciteiten en rechten van anderen, aldus Saini. Ook Hitlers ideologie van rassenhygiëne had geen kans van slagen zonder wetenschappers, zij zorgden voor het theoretisch kader en droegen bij aan het klaren van de klus zelf. Degenen wier ideeën het regime goed te pas kwamen werden gepromoot en gevierd.

In 1950 formuleerde UNESCO, vlak na de Tweede Wereldoorlog, zijn eerste verklaring over ras, waarin de eenheid tussen mensen werd benadrukt in een gezamenlijke inspanning om een einde te maken aan wat wordt gezien als het gevolg van een ‘fundamenteel anti-rationeel denksysteem.’ Alle mensen behoren

tot dezelfde soort 'Homo sapiens'. Het grootste deel van de zichtbare diversiteit is cultureel van aard. Een cruciaal moment in de geschiedenis. Racisme was niet langer aanvaardbaar. Wetenschappers en antropologen gingen grotendeels achter UNESCO staan.



We denken dat de verschrikkingen van de Holocaust en eerdere genocides, de slavernij en het kolonialisme tot een andere tijd behoren. Dat eugenetica een vies woord is. Saini definieert eugenetica als is een berekende manier van denken over het menselijk leven; mensen worden gereduceerd tot louter delen van een geheel, die hun ras omlaag- of omhoogtrekken. Bijna alles wat we zijn is al beslist voordat we geboren zijn. Maar er zijn weer nieuw wegen gevonden om raciale verschillen te onderzoeken, en dat sommige rassen iets beter waren dan de andere. Na de Tweede Wereldoorlog hebben intellectuele racisten nieuwe netwerken opgezet met

het doel racisme weer respectabel te maken. De eugenetici en rassentheorie waren niet verdwenen met de ondergang van het naziregime. Ras werd herpositioneerd voor de eenentwintigste eeuw. Ze noemt als een van de voorbeelden de Indiase regering, die in 2018 een commissie in het leven had geroepen om de geschiedenis te herschrijven. Een mythische versie van de geschiedenis zou worden gepropageerd waar in Indiase dominante geloof, het hindoeïsme, in het hele Indiase verleden centraal zou worden gesteld.

De hindoe-superioriteit zou sommige Indiërs de kans bieden hun zelfrespect terug te winnen, collectieve trots te laten gelden, en een nieuw gevoel van nationale identiteit bouwen.

We blijven steeds maar terugkomen op ras omdat we er vertrouwd mee zijn. Onze moderne ideeën over ras zijn nauw verbonden met hoe we eruitzien. In biologische termen lijken echter de verschillen niet verder te gaan dan de huid. Het is een vergissing te denken dat de interne verschillen even groot zijn als de externe verschillen lijken. De opkomst van nationalisme en racisme heeft velen van ons verrast. Identiteitspolitiek heeft velen in de greep. Het doel is hetzelfde: het benadrukken van de verschillen ten bate van politiek gewin.

Zij doet geen beroep een gedeelde menselijkheid. Alles om maar 'superieur' te zijn.

Angela Saini - Superieur. De terugkeer van de Rassentheorie. Uitgeverij Ten Have, Amsterdam, 2020. ISBN 9789025907174

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Eerder verscheen bij Uitgeverij Ten Have *Ondergeschikt: Hoe kennis over vrouwen ons misleidt en wat we daaraan kunnen doen*.

Linda Bouws - *St. Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten*

The Art Of Cooking - Hummus With Minced Meat



Hummus in Israel can be comparable to Pizza for Italians!

Normally the Hummus can be enjoyed plain or with some extra.

One day in Israel me and my dad visited Caesarea as a couple of tourists, and to our surprise we tumbled upon this Hummus dish topped with warmly spiced minced meat.

That moment left a strong impact on us and I have been making it ever since. The smooth texture of the Hummus combined with the savory bites of the minced meat creates a balanced taste at the moment you scoop as much as you can with a small piece of pita bread.

Trust me, this is the way to eat Hummus, scooping as much as you can with a small piece of pita bread - but do not get it on your fingers, there's a limit!

Hummus Ingredients:

1 Large Can Chickpeas

Tahini (a paste made from sesame seeds)

2 Cloves of garlic

Lemon juice
Olive oil
Coldwater
Salt

Ingredients for the minced meat:

200-gram Minced meat (you can choose either lamb or beef)
2 Cloves of garlic
Paprika powder
Cumin powder
Salt & Pepper
Cooking oil

Toppings:

Olive oil
Pine Nuts
Fresh Parsley

Making the Hummus:

Inside a blender add the chickpeas, two tablespoons of tahini with the garlic, a pinch of salt, a squirt of lemon juice, and a drizzle of olive oil.

Now it is all about finding the perfect texture and flavor that you want! Keep tasting by adding a small amount of cold water to make the texture smoother.

Add more salt if it tastes too bland, as well as lemon juice if you want to put more zing into it!

There are many types of Hummus out there - however, it is up to you to balance the ingredients to become a favorite of your own taste!

Making the minced meat:

In a cold frypan add the minced meat with a bit of cooking oil, turn on the heat to medium-high and start breaking the meat apart, make sure you don't keep big lumps. Once the minced meat is almost cooked through, add the minced garlic and all the spices (a teaspoon of cumin and a teaspoon of paprika, as well as, a pinch of salt and pepper). Keep stirring until all the minced meat is covered with the spices, that is until it turns brown and slightly sticky!

Serving:

Place the Hummus in a plate with a dent in the middle, then put the hot minced

meat on top!

Top with pine nuts and fresh parsley and a drizzle of olive oil, you can also add some paprika powder on top.

Serve with pita bread, and of course, you may add some raw onion slices, boiled eggs, and pickled spicy peppers.

This is not the most traditional way to eat Hummus, but please give it a try. So, to go back to the comparison between Hummus and pizza, at the end the toppings are up to you.

However, if you want to make a *Hawaiian Hummus* go for it, but please let me know how this worked out.....

Anaclept en cento: de kunst van het herdichten



*Drs.P. 1969 - Foto:
en.wikipedia.org*

Buiten de limerick en het sonnet, het ollekebolleke en het Sinterklaasgedicht kent de letterkunde nog veel meer versvormen, waarvan de meeste zich verborgen houden in de nevelen der eeuwigheid.

Een ondergewaardeerd genre is het herdichten. Sommige dichters hebben namelijk niet genoeg aan hun eigen werk, maar vieren hun inspiratie ook bot op andermans verzen, niet zelden zo intensief dat dat hele bundels vol persiflages en parodieën, parafrases en pastiches opgeleverd heeft. Drs. P vulde, als Coos Neetebeem, de bundel *Antarctica* ('s-Gravenhage, 1980), waarin hij bijvoorbeeld de kern van Willem Kloos' bekendste sonnet terugbracht tot

Ik ben een God in `t diepst van mijn gedachten
En zit in't binnenst van mijn ziel ten troon
Maar verder ben ik helemaal gewoon
Met haaruitval en spijsverteringsklachten

en die van A.C.W. Starings' Oogstlied ('Sikkels klinken; Sikkels blinken; Ruisend valt het graan. Zie de bindster garen! Zie, in lange scharen, Garf bij garven staan!) tot

Sikkels klinken
Sikkels blinken
Ruisend valt het graan
Als je iemand weg ziet hinken
heeft hij't fout gedaan

Gerrit Komrij publiceerde een bundel met de alleszeggende titel *Onherstelbaar verbeterd* (Amsterdam, 1981), waarin hij een aantal gedichten compleet herschreef. 'De Dapperstraat' van J.C. Bloem, althans het eerste kwatrijn daarvan,

Natuur is voor tevreden en legen.
En dan: wat is natuur nog in dit land?
Een stukje bos, ter grootte van een krant,
Een heuvel met wat villaatjes ertegen.

werd bij Komrij

De Kalverstraat

Cultuur is om m'n reet mee af te vegen.
En dan: wat is cultuur nog in dit land?
Een steekje los, een stukje in de krant,
Gekeuvel met wat prietpraatjes ertegen.

Het leukste voorbeeld van een volledige herdichting leverde Kees Stip, die J.W.F. Werumeus Bunings *Mária Lécina* (1932) parodieerde tot *Dieuwertje Diekema* (1943), dat alleen al herinnerd dient te worden omdat het Werumeus Bunings regels

Honderd klokken van Londen doen Londen bonzen
en vier kathedralen Genua
Maar geen brons kan zo in het donker bonzen
als het hart van Mária Lécina

verbeterde tot

In Huizen suizen de buizen en de waterleiding in Amsterdam
maar geen buis kan zo in het duister suizen
als het suisde in zijn hersenpan.

Anderen stellen zich een nog zwaardere taak, het schrijven van een anaclept. Battus definieert in zijn *Opperlandse taal- en letterkunde* (Amsterdam, 1981) het anaclept als 'een gedicht dat alle woorden van een ander gedicht, in andere volgorde, bevat'. (De term 'anaclept' is opgebouwd uit *ana-*, Grieks voor terug, opnieuw, dat wij kennen uit woorden als analoog en analyse, en *klèptein*, Grieks voor stelen, vooral bekend van kleptomanie. Je zou anaclept dus bijvoorbeeld kunnen vertalen met 'geretourneerd jatwerk'.)



Het verschijnsel moge onbekend en zelfs onbemind zijn, het is te leuk om ongenoemd te laten en, belangrijker dan dat, het bestaat, al was het maar omdat Rudy Kousbroek het beoefend heeft (en, voor zover ik kon nagaan, niemand anders).

Zijn bundel *De logologische ruimte. Opstellen over taal* (Amsterdam, 1984) is een boek over tal van aspecten van taal, dat niet genoeg geprezen kan worden. Er staan, onder het hoofdstuk 'Verborgene wijsheid van de poëzie', enkele anaclepten in. Het sonnet 'De Zee' van Willem Kloos (u weet wel: 'De Zee, de Zee klotst voort in eindeloze deining', de Zee waarin mijn Ziel zichzelf weerspiegeld ziet') werd herdicht tot een 16 regels tellend vers dat begint met 'De menselijke ziel kent duizenderlei belustheid En klotst zichzelf af in eindeloze

vreugd'. Zo'n herordening is geen geringe taak, althans als de anacleticus het gedicht een rudimentaire toegankelijkheid wil laten behouden (wat overigens, zoals bekend, geen vereiste voor poëzie is).

Ter illustratie dat het wel kan, volgt hier een gedicht van Vasalis

Tijd

Ik droomde dat ik langzaam leefde...
langzamer dan de oudste steen.
Het was verschrikkelijk: om mij heen
schoot alles op, schokte of beefde,
wat stil lijkt. 'k Zag de drang waarmee
de bomen zich uit de aarde wrongen
terwijl ze hees en hortend zongen;
terwijl de jaargetijden vlogen
verkleurende als regenbogen...
Ik zag de tremor van de zee,
zijn zwellen en weer haastig slinken,

zoals een grote keel kan drinken.
En dag en nacht van korte duur
vlammen en doven: flakkrend vuur.
De wanhoop en welsprekendheid
in de gebaren van de dingen,
die anders star zijn, en hun dringen,
hun ademloze, wrede strijd...
Hoe kan ik dat niet eerder weten,
niet beter zien in vroeger tijd?
Hoe moet ik het weer ooit vergeten?

en het anaclept dat Kousbroek daarvan gemaakt heeft

Vroeger droomde ik van welsprekendheid:
Ik leefde niet om drang en tremor,
Alles was wat langzamer, niet dat ademloze,
En de dingen van de dag zongen beter
Dan eerder. Hoe kon ik ooit weten
Dat de regenbogen duur zijn?

Hortend en flakkrend drinken ze zich
Weer hees als vlammen in de keel. 'k Zag
Hoe de nacht haastig vuur kan doven:
De strijd moet stil zijn, of anders
Star zien, zoals die korte wanhoop
Waarmee de jaargetijden uit de bomen vlogen;
En hun slinken en dringen lijkt
Een verschriklijk zwellen, terwijl
Wrede gebaren mij hun verkleurende
Steen in de schoot wrongen...
De zee van tijd schokte het grote vergeten
En terwijl ik langzaam beefde
Zag ik de oudste heen en weer op aarde.

Een tamelijk nieuwe ontwikkeling is het samplen (van het Engelse *to sample*, letterlijk: een steekproef nemen), een term die stamt uit de muziek, waar het tegenwoordig zeer gangbaar is fragmenten (gitaarsolo's, basloopjes, een pianoakkoord) digitaal op te slaan en niet zelden elektronisch onherkenbaar te vervormen. Daarmee wordt een nieuw nummer samengesteld, bij voorkeur ondersteund met een dreunende housebeat, en onder eigen naam uitgebracht, en zo kan de eerste de beste computerfanaat die geen noot muziek kan lezen en geen twee regels Engels op elkaar kan laten rijmen toch een wereldhit scoren.

Hoewel, tamelijk nieuw, sampling bestaat in de letterkunde al langer. Veel langer zelfs. Een tekst die samengesteld is met regels uit bestaande werken, heet een *cento*, wat Latijn is voor lappendeken of, poëtischer, bedelaarsdeken en dus niet, zoals ik jaren gedacht heb, betekent dat het werk 100 regels moet beslaan.

Voor de Grieken en Romeinen mochten zich er graag mee bezighouden. Klassieke voorbeelden zijn de pikante *Cento Nuptialis*, door Ausonius (310-395) samengesteld uit regels van Vergilius, en de uit werk van Homerus bijeengejatte *Homerocentones*. De Romeinse keizerin Eudoxia schreef een leven van Christus eveneens met regels van Homerus en de Romeinse dichteres Faltonia Proba deed dat in *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi* met verzen van Vergilius. In de twaalfde eeuw schiep de monnik Metellus christelijke gezangen met behulp van regels uit de Oden van Horatius. En het Italië van de renaissance kende het Petrarcento.



De bekendste cento in het Nederlands is wellicht 'De Keesiade', geschreven door J.J.A. Goeverneur (1809-1899), die later in zijn leven bekend werd met buitengewoon zoete poëzie, maar in zijn studententijd in Groningen een heel andere kant had laten zien. Hij betrapte de hoogleraar Cornelis de Waal bij het bezoek aan een bordeel en schreef daarover met enkele medestudenten het gedicht 'Minerva's vloek'.

De Waal, in eer en goede naam aangetast, achterhaalde dat Goeverneur een van de makers was en het universiteitsbestuur legde de ongemanierde student veertien dagen huisarrest op. Die tijd benutte hij om zijn werk uitgebreid over te doen. Het resultaat was 'De Keesiade' (zo genoemd naar De Waals voornaam), een 'Heldendicht, door verschillende dichters' in vijf zangen en tal van talen, waar hij voor het gemak van de lezer meteen maar de bron bij vermeldde. Het verhaal wil, dat hij zijn ballade schreef zonder ook maar een boek te raadplegen. Het naderend moment van De Waals ontluistering luidt:

Daar zit hij nu (Rotgans)
En kust het lieve wicht
De roode koontjes warm, (Bellamy)
Und zupft ihr, um nicht lass zu seyn,
Die Busenschleifen los, (Hölty)
En... (Bilderdijk);

O giustizia del ciel, quanto men presto.
Tanto piu grave sovra il popol rio! (Tasso)
Hij waant zich onbespied; (Vondel)
Doch ach, das Verrtheraug schlummerte nicht! (Burger)
Rumor venit... (Terentius)
Studenten zijn't (Frank van Berkhey)
Hör's näher und näher brausen! (Körner)
Hoor, welk een blij geschater
En vroolijk juichen! (Antonides)

Een onverwacht gebruiker van de cento was Frater Venantius, een creatie van Wim Sonneveld die, gesouffleerd door Michel van der Plas, in zijn meezinger 'Zeg maar ja tegen 't leven' klassieke Nederlandse versregels naar eigen inzicht aaneenreeg

Ziet de lelies rustig dromen
Ziet hoe 't dartel bijtje doet
Zie de maan schijnt door de bomen
Schittert in de zonnegloed
Moeder de kat heb jongen gekregen
Oh, als eieren zo groot
Bij de muur van 't ouwe kerkhof
Schoon zijn vader het hem verbood

Laat een lied uw hart doorklinken
en uw hart verliest zijn steen.
Sikkels blinken, sikkels klinken,
vliegen als een schaduw heen.
Niets te mokken, niets te maren,
niets te druilen van verdriet.
Uren, dagen, maanden, jaren
mist men een, twee pruimpjes niet.

Een alternatief slot, van enigszins obscure herkomst, luidt

Niets te mokken, niets te maren,
alleman van Neerlands stam.
Uren dagen maanden jaren,
't is weer naatje op de Dam.

Een van de recentste Nederlandse cento's is van Dr. Who (pseudoniem van de anglist Dr Wiebe Hogendoorn), die een sonnet, inclusief de titel, geheel samplede uit de Nederlandse poëzie.

Ach, herinnert u zich zelf even welke regel uit welk gedicht stamt?

Mathilde

In't huis mijns vaders waar de dagen trage waren
(En dan: wat is natuur nog in dit land?)

Staan wetten in de weg en praktische bezwaren -
Ik heb een ceder in mijn tuin geplant!

Er loopt een kind met lange ruige haren.
Zij kent de onderkant van kast en ledikant.
Men meet de dood soms na bij vol verstand
En wat zij zong hoorde ik dat psalmen waren.

'k Ben Brahman. Maar we zitten zonder meid,
Zoo zeker als de bloemen wederkomen
En voor den uchtend van haar bloei vergaan.

Ik houd het meest van de halfland'lijkheid.
Een tent werd door de stormwind meegenomen:
Voor de avond nog bereik ik Ispahaan!

—

Robert-Henk Zuidinga (1949) studeerde Nederlandse en Engelse Moderne Letterkunde aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam. Hij schrijft over literatuur, taal- en bij uitzondering - over film.

De drie delen *Dit staat er* bevatten de, volgens zijn eigen omschrijving, journalistieke nalatenschap van Zuidinga. De boeken zijn in eigen beheer uitgegeven. Belangstelling? Stuur een berichtje naar: info@rozenbergquarterly.com - wij sturen uw bericht door naar de auteur.

Dit staat er I. Columns over taal en literatuur. Haarlem 2016. ISBN 9789492563040

Dit staat er II, Artikelen en interviews over literatuur. Haarlem 2017. ISBN 9789492563248

Dit staat er III. Bijnamen en Nederlied. Buitenlied en film, Haarlem 2019. ISBN 97894925636637

If Trump Had Followed Vietnam's Lead On COVID, US Would Have Fewer Than 100 Dead



Prof. Robert Pollin

As the coronavirus pandemic rages on, exposing to the fullest the glaring weakness of our inequitable health system, and as the unemployment situation goes largely unaddressed, it's becoming more than obvious that the U.S. is in dire need of fixing. An advanced social welfare state, with a full employment agenda, is the way out, argues world-renowned progressive economist Robert Pollin in this exclusive interview with *Truthout*. Pollin is distinguished professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and co-author (with Noam Chomsky and me) of the forthcoming book *The Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet*.

C.J. Polychroniou: Bob, the coronavirus crisis is wreaking havoc on the economy, but it has also revealed how poorly equipped the United States is in dealing with major economic crises. In fact, as economist Joseph Stiglitz has pointed out, "We built an economy with no shock absorbers." With that in mind, and with millions of Americans unemployed and even struggling to meet basic needs, can you offer us a straightforward assessment of the Trump administration's economic response to the coronavirus crisis?

Robert Pollin: The short answer is unequivocal: The Trump administration's response has been nothing short of disastrous. Let's begin with figures on lives

that have been needlessly lost in the U.S. due to Trump's toxic combination of indifference, hostility to science, and racism. As of August 17, we are approaching 170,000 deaths from COVID in the U.S., more than triple the total U.S. death toll from fighting in Vietnam. We have no evidence that the death rate will be declining significantly anytime soon. This level of U.S. deaths from COVID amounts to 514 per 1 million people. By comparison, Canada's death rate is less than half that of the U.S., at around 239 deaths per million, even while Canada itself is also a relatively poor performer. Germany's death rate, at 110 per million, is 80 percent lower than the U.S., but Germany is still only a middling performer. Among the strong performers, the death rates are 15 per million in Australia, 9 per million in Japan, 6 per million in South Korea and 3 per million in China, even though the virus first emerged in China. If the U.S. had managed the COVID pandemic at the level of, say, Australia, fewer than 5,000 people would have died as of today as opposed to nearly 170,000.

Vietnam is the most extraordinary case. It has experienced a total of 22 deaths in a country of 95 million people, which amounts to a death rate of 0.25 per million. This is for a country in which the average per capita income is about 3 percent of that in the U.S. It is also a country, of course, that U.S. imperialists tried to destroy a generation ago. If the U.S. had handled COVID at Vietnam's level of competence over the past eight months, then [fewer than 100 U.S. residents in total](#) would be dead today from the pandemic.

In terms of managing the pandemic-induced economic collapse, the massive \$2 trillion (10 percent of U.S. GDP) stimulus program that Congress passed and Trump signed in March, the CARES Act, did provide substantial support for unemployed workers. Fifty-six million people — 35 percent of the entire U.S. labor force — [filed unemployment claims](#) between March and August. For the most part, they all received \$600 per week in supplemental support, which more than doubled what most would have received otherwise.

The CARES Act did also deliver huge bailouts for big corporations and Wall Street. Adding everything up, it was clear even at the time of passage that the CARES Act was not close to meeting the magnitude of the oncoming crisis. Among other features, it provided only minimal support for hospitals on the front lines fighting the pandemic, and even less support for state and local governments. The Upjohn Institute economist Timothy Bartik estimates that state and local governments are staring at upward of [\\$1 trillion in budget shortfalls](#)

through the end of 2021, equal to between 20-25 percent of their entire budgets. If these budget gaps are not filled in short order, we will begin to see mass layoffs of nurses, teachers, school custodians and firefighters. Of course, these budget cuts will only spread and deepen the ongoing economic crisis.

The Democratic majority in the House of Representatives did pass a second, and even larger, \$3 trillion stimulus measure, the HEROES Act, back in May. It included \$1 trillion in support for state and local governments. But Trump and the Senate Republican majority have blocked action on this for the past three months. Meanwhile, 16 million workers have now lost their \$600 per week in supplemental benefits and state and local governments are teetering on collapse. Trump appears to want to make unemployed workers and public sector programs starve, perhaps so he can appear to swoop in and bail them out right before November's election. Trump has held out a "compromise" proposal with Democrats. This would feature a payroll tax cut that would permanently decimate Social Security and Medicare. Trump also wants any new stimulus program to also incorporate his current top priority, which is to [destroy the U.S. Postal Service](#) in time to prevent people from voting against him through mail balloting.

The U.S. and Europe have addressed coronavirus-induced unemployment in fundamentally different ways, with the European approach seeking to maintain a stable work environment through subsidies to companies and by effectively nationalizing payrolls, while the U.S. approach seeks to foster a flexible labor market, and in fact, encourage workers, as Ivanka Trump put it, to "[find something new](#)" because old jobs are not coming back. The end result is that while unemployment levels have skyrocketed in the U.S. due to the coronavirus pandemic, many European countries have seen an increase of less than 1 percentage point in the jobless rate. Isn't this strong enough reason why the U.S. needs a European-style social-welfare state?

Back in April, Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal of Washington, a leader of the House Progressive Caucus, introduced the Paycheck Guarantee Act. Under this proposal, the federal government would provide grants to all private- and public-sector employers of all sizes to enable them to maintain their operations and keep all of their workers on payroll, despite the falloff in revenues these entities will have experienced resulting from the pandemic and lockdown. Through this program, there would not have been significant increases in unemployment.

Workers would also not have lost their employer-based health care coverage. This plan was similar in design and scope to policies that were in place in [several European economies](#), including Germany, the U.K., Denmark and France.

Four months later, the results of the failure of the U.S. to pass the Jayapal proposal are before us. As of the most recent figures of this past June and July, U.S. unemployment was at 10.2 percent, while the rates for countries that had Jayapal-type programs in place included the U.K. at 3.9 percent, Germany at 4.2 percent, Denmark at 5.8 percent and France with the highest rate, at 7.7 percent. The [average](#) for the full European Union was 6.2 percent. For the U.S. economy, the difference between having an unemployment rate of 10.2 percent versus 6.2 percent translates into 6.4 million people without work — i.e. more people than the entire populations of Los Angeles and Chicago combined. In addition, a minimum of 15 million people — including unemployed workers and their family members — lost their employer-sponsored health insurance as U.S. unemployment rose.

So yes, certainly, on average, Europe has handled the unemployment crisis much better than the U.S. But this is not the time to be making sweeping endorsements of recent policies [and] actions in Europe. In terms of managing the COVID crisis, the U.K., France, Italy, Spain and even Sweden have death rates comparable to that in the U.S. Unemployment is 15.6 percent in Spain under a Socialist government, and is at 9.2 percent in Sweden under the Social Democrats.

In fact, European policymakers have been undermining their welfare state policies for 40 years now, since the ascendance of neoliberalism, beginning with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. in 1979. It is a valuable exercise for us to envision what the late, great economist Robert Heilbroner used to call “slightly imaginary Sweden.” But in doing so, we need to recognize that egalitarian policies in Sweden today bear only a weak resemblance to the [robust welfare state](#) that operated 40 years ago.

According to many health experts, coronavirus may never go away even when vaccines arrive, and the coronavirus recession may indeed become a long depression. In such a case, how can we best combat cyclical unemployment and ensure that there is no precipitous decline in the standard of living for working-class and middle-class Americans?

I am certainly no expert for assessing how long it is likely to take to bring COVID-19 under control in the U.S., or assessing the likelihood that it could remain as a public health threat indefinitely. But in the event that we are faced with a virus that we cannot adequately control, even through universal vaccinations, then I would say it is time to start learning from Australia, Japan, South Korea, China, and — in a great historic irony — maybe especially Vietnam about how to create a public health system that minimizes the spread of the illness. Step one would be to establish Medicare for All, so that every U.S. resident has access to good-quality health care, without having to fear financial ruin should they get sick with COVID or anything else. Creating something resembling a minimally effective public health system through Medicare for All would, in turn, enable us in the U.S. to advance a sustainable recovery on the foundation of a Green New Deal.

Over the longer-term horizon, the Green New Deal can equally serve as the foundation for building a full employment economy. As a technical matter, it is not hard to figure out a policy framework that can deliver full employment. The Western European countries, after all, ran near-full employment economies from roughly the end of World War II to the mid-1970s. Indeed, the main accomplishment of neoliberalism in Europe, starting with Margaret Thatcher, was to break the back of this then-dominant full employment policy framework. To sustain full employment over the long-term, we first and foremost need government policies committed to maintaining levels of public investment that will be sufficient to create an abundance of decent jobs at all levels of society. It is also obvious that, at this historical juncture, we desperately need large-scale public investments for at least a generation to build a green economy. As such, the full employment policy framework merges fully with the matter of saving the planet.

Should the Biden-Harris ticket win in November, do you expect that we will see fundamental changes in government response to the quadruple crises of health, climate change, racial injustice and a ravaged economy?

It is no secret that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are both corporate- and Wall Street-friendly Democrats. If we are going to wait for them to enact fundamental changes in U.S. government policies, it is going to be an awfully long wait. But it is also clear that the Democratic Party can be pushed to the left — or, to put it more accurately — the Democrats can be pushed to support, among other things,

a public health system that can save lives and deliver quality health care at much lower costs than we now pay, and a Green New Deal program that can prevent a climate catastrophe while also serving as the foundation of a full employment economy. Stamping out racism and sexism will also have to be central to any such agenda. Making progress in fighting racism and sexism will, in turn, also be greatly strengthened within a broad agenda advancing equality and ecological policy.

We know that the Democrats can be pushed in this direction by comparing the official platform they are enacting this week relative to what they passed in 2016. The current platform is far more progressive than the 2016 version under Hillary Clinton. It's true that such platforms are almost entirely ignored the day after they become ratified at the party's conventions, if not sooner. But that brings us to the real question, which is: Who is capable of effectively pushing the Democratic Party to embrace the truly progressive features of the party platform? It will have to be the range of organizations and people that have been committed to such projects for a long time — including grassroots groups, such as the Labor Network for Sustainability, Jobs with Justice, and many more, as well as progressive groups, such as Progressive Democrats of America and the House Progressive Caucus. If we are going to succeed in building a transformative political project emerging out of our current historic moment of multiple and severe crises, grassroots and progressive groups are the ones who will make it happen — certainly not Joe Biden or Kamala Harris.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.

My Arabic is Mute & Not to be afraid to say the word nostalgia



Almog Behar - Ills.: Joseph Sassoon Semah

My Arabic is Mute

Strangled in the throat
Cursing itself
Without uttering a word
Sleeping in the suffocating air
Of the shelters of my soul
Hiding
From family members
Behind the shutters of the Hebrew.
And my Hebrew erupts
Running around between rooms
And the neighbors' porches
Sounding her voice in public
Prophesizing the coming of God
And bulldozers
and then she settles in the living room
Thinking herself
Openly on the edge of her skin
Hidden between the pages of her flesh
one moment naked and the next dressed
She almost makes herself disappear
In the armchair
Asking for her heart's forgiveness.
My Arabic is scared

quietly impersonates Hebrew
Whispering to friends
With every knock on her gates:
"Ahalan, ahalan, welcome".
And in front of every passing policeman

And she pulls out her ID card
for every cop on the street
pointing out the protective clause:
“Ana min al-yahud, ana min al-yahud,
I’m a Jew, I’m a Jew”.
And my Hebrew is deaf
Sometimes so very deaf.

Not to be afraid to say the word nostalgia

Not to be afraid to say
The word nostalgia
Not to be afraid
To feel longing
Not to be afraid to say
I have a past
Placed in a box
Of locked-up memory
Not to be afraid
To buy myself some keys
To press my eyes to keyholes
Until it all opens
Until I can steal a glance
Into me
Not to be afraid to say
I’m a forgetful man
But I have a memory
That wouldn’t forget me.

Translated by Dimi Reider