26th April, 2016

V th ROHINI GHADIOK ANNUAL ORATION

India Islamic Cultural Centre

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A Matter of Identity

I never knew Rohini Ghadiok, but I have been thinking about her. Who was she, and how would she like to be remembered? What would she put first - being Indian, be-ing Hindu, being part of a uprooted North-West Frontier family, being a woman, a feminist, an activist, a liberal…? How would she want to define her own image? I suspect, like most of us, she would prefer to be simply herself. Without these labels that both strait-jacket and stereotype one. How strange, just 6 years after her death, she would find this whole tolerance/intolerance, nationalist/anti-national controversy that has engulfed us today.

India's contradictions intrigue and exasperate. For example we invest India in a fe-male form,worship women as goddesses, castigate anyone who will not shout Bha-rat Mata ki Jai, but at the same time we abuse women, negate them, deny them ac-cess to our masjids and mandirs, rape them with impunity.... Casting them always as inferiors and willing victims.

Another anomaly is that despite being such a diverse multicultural country we in-creasingly get stuck with these crude simplistic labels, and are judged by those la-bels, and are also expected to behave like the label.

Take myself, I have no objection to saying Bharat Mata ki Jai, but I do object to it be-ing made a litmus test of my patriotism. Just as I would object to wearing a hijab be-ing made a test of my being a Muslim.

I am ambivalent therefore about this business of identity - linked as it so often to re-ligion or ideological belief. Religion and identity can be powerful tools for transmit-ting cultural values, bonding and sharing; they can be an equally powerful catalyst to create division and distrust.

One of the most maddening things is trying to explain to the majority that the scary stereotype Muslim –fanatic, backward, dirty, violent - with multiple wives and mul-tiple children – is not necessarily the norm, and that most of us are – quite literally – just like you and me!

Pat comes the answer, equally maddening – "But then YOU are really not a Mus-lim…" ie I don't wear a burkha, haven't borne those multiple children, don't believe in reservations or "appeasement", support, like my parents before me, a Uniform Civil Code.

I am liberated, educated, happily unmarried - certainly not oppressed, reactionary, or ghettoised. Nor is my difference from the stereotype entirely due to my social strata or family. In fact, working and living as I have done with craftspeople all over India for the last 4 decades, many of them Muslim, I don't know a single one who fits that scary profile.

Yes, some of the Muslims I know grow beards or wear burkhas, many are uneducat-ed except in their professional skills, quite a number pray 5 times a day and keep the Ramzan fasts, but I have not yet encountered anyone with latent terrorist traits, and even on those intimate evenings round the village fire, where someone from one community will naturally tell jokes or bitch about the other, I have not heard even the most orthodox mullah support the kind of vicious violence now bracketed with Muslims all over the world. Possibly, I am a lucky exception – I like to think I am the rule. Statistics tell one that ISIS supporters form only 0.16% of the world Muslim population.

So, why these myths and bogeys? Mostly it is ignorance. We all think that in this globalised world of instant electronic

communication, we all know everything about each other. Far from it; the increase of so many different forms of media and infor-mation, the mushrooming of local newspapers, magazines, TV channels, websites and blogs in multiple regional languages, each catering to particular interest groups, means that people are even more blocked into their own blinkered mindsets, getting information and images that subscribe to their own world view. There are new social media fatwas - young school kids sending chain WhatsApp messages urging their friends to boycott Shahrukh Khan films because he's a "Bad Man"; a reward to slap Aamir Khan - 5 lakhs to kill Kanhaiya.

In the 80s, I was doing a design workshop with a group of patchwork appliqué women in a re-settlement colony outside Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Three days into the workshop a communal riot broke out in Ahmedabad city. Arson and looting turned into mob warfare. The trouble spread into the slum suburbs. The patchwork women were Muslim; most of their husbands and fathers worked in the city. They drove bicycle rickshaws, sold vegetables and groceries on small handcarts, or were unskilled labour in factories. Now they were trapped: unable to go out for fear of reprisals. I spent a week there, trapped along with them.

Every day people were brought into the community centre, where we sat matching colours and cutting patterns - burnt, wounded, maimed. A child's eyes had been gouged out; the brother of one of the women had been burnt alive in his cycle rick-shaw. The reality was dreadful but the rumours and counter-rumours made it worse. The local Maulvi made a rabble-rousing speech, saying one Muslim was equal to 10 kaffirs. Horror stories abounded; spread and fed by pamphlets, cassettes and the local Urdu radio station.

Just across the road, separated by a line of police trucks, was a Hindu slum. I had worked with some of the women there too, so on a relatively calm afternoon I nipped across. Over cups of tea I heard identical counter-horror stories – with the Muslims as the villains this time (as an educated NGO lady from Delhi my own Mus-lim status was temporarily forgotten!) When I told Vimla ben, one of the women, that Sakina's little son had been killed, her eyes flooded with tears, all animosity forgotten; only shared experiences of working together remembered. She insisted on coming with me to condole. Others followed. That evening the women of both communities got together and swore not to let violence enter Juhapura again. Even after the terrible pograms of 2002 in Gujarat, the women stayed united, traveling together to Bazaars, protecting one another.

It's not a coincidence that those centres of India largely unaffected by communal vi-olence are those where the different communities are economically interlinked and interdependent – Banaras for example, where the silk weavers are Muslim and the dalal wholesalers are Hindu, or Lucknow, where Hindu traders market the chikan embroidered by Muslim karigars. Nor is it a coincidence that Ahmedabad, routinely disrupted by communal tensions, is where Muslims and Hindus share similar profes-sions, incomes, educational levels and aspirations – competitors for the same turf, rather than essential links in an economic value chain.

Kutch is a part of India where for centuries dozens of different tribal and other communities have lived in extraordinary amity together. Shared economies and dif-fering but compatible skills helped mutual bonding and trust – the Muslim Khatris dying and block-printing for the Vankar weavers and Rabari and Jat embroiderers, the Mochi community supplying beautifully worked footwear and saddles. Isolation from mainstream politics helped too. In 2001 a devastating earthquake suddenly put Kutch on everyone's front pages. I was there a few days after the event. The dif-ferent agencies who came into the region for "relief" work each had their own agenda. They attempted to create conflicts between different castes and communi-ties. Rumours of fabricated "incidents" were rife, and both the locals and the outside agencies were playing one off against the other – for everything from tents to spiritual solace. Relief was doled out as per religious denomination or political affili-ation. The BJP under the aegis of Sahib Singh Varma were vying for "adopting" Dhamadka, and dividing it into Muslim, Harijan and upper-caste Hindu camps, World Vision was distributing Bibles, and RSS and Jamaat-e-Islami banners were everywhere. "All we want is the means to stand on our feet again; we will rebuild our own lives ourselves" – said one exasperated ajrakh printer from Dhamadka village. Nevertheless, it created fissures that still exist. Today there are two separate block printing villages – one mainly Hindu, the other Muslim, competing instead of working together. And craftspeople tell us politicians are playing the same games again. This is frustrating and sad.

I come from a family which CHOSE multicultural India over monotheistic Pakistan. Despite our home being attacked and looted, and my father almost killed (a Hindu saved him by gunning down the man who was trying to shoot him). my parents and our large extended family of Tyabjis, Latifs, Alis, and Hydaris, all decided to stay in India. We were proudly Indian,

celebrating its syncretic culture, festivals, monu-ments, music, art, literature, even its gods and goddesses.... (I have a particular af-fection for Ganesh). it was inconceivable we exchange the eclectic vibrance of India for the claustrophobia of an Islamic state. It never occurred to us that for some we were "the other". An occasional snidely ignorant remark by a stranger in a train, a vegetarian village hostess reacting apprehensively to a meat-eating "Mohammed-an", a chronic inability to pronounce or spell one's name correctly, were just funny anecdotes to counterpoise incredible acceptance, sharing and warmth, and an amazing, common yet plural culture. Its richness made every other country seem insipid and dreary.

Then came the Golden Temple attack and the 1984 Sikh killings, followed by the demolition of Babri Masjid – the unthinkable had happened. With these licensed as-saults on religious places, the India of our aspirations and certainties also splintered and broke. Instead of a dream we seemed to be living a nightmare. Breaking the Masjid seemed to free unsuspected venom in the most unexpected people. Even in my sanitised upper middle-class Delhi life, I received a stream of anonymous hate mail telling me to go back to my "dungheap in Pakistan", and threatening everything from rape to extermination; culminating in a box of human turds (disarmingly packed in a Kwality Sweets dabba!) It was easy to begin imagining oneself a victim.

But in the days following 6th December 1992, my organisation Dastkar and I re-ceived countless letters from craftspeople all over the country, deploring the demo-lition of the Masjid as an act against all faiths, and appealing for peace and the brotherhood of man. A typical one came from two Brahmin weavers in Karnataka, written for them by the village "English Speaking" scribe. "God is all wheres", it said; ending "Do not weary, we are praying."

It is these voices, less strident, but mercifully still in a majority, that we must listen to; lest we fall into the fatal mindset of "persecuted minorities" – a ghettoisation of mind and spirit that leads inevitably to further alienation and marginalisation. It would make us truly the second-class citizens some want us to be.

The craftspeople I work with suffer similar forms of disenfranchisement. Seen at best as picturesque exhibits of an exotic but irrelevant India, rather than the skilled professionals they are. There is a funny but sad story of craftspeople taken to a Fes-tival of India in London. It was winter and cold, they all rushed off to Oxford Street, bought bright stripey sweaters and socks, plus big shiny watches to show their forrun-returned status. At the Exhibition Gallery, Indian officials told them to take off their sweaters and watches, put on their turbans and pointy-toed juthis – other-wise they would spoil the photographs and not look like "craftspeople" !

Back in India, the reverse goes. When I ask the Lambani craftswomen why they pre-fer wearing horrid nylon mill-printed saris rather their own glorious mirrored and embroidered costumes, they say it is because as 'junglee" tribals they are not al-lowed into temples or even cafes, The veteran Shilpi, Parameshwar Acharya, indig-nantly spluttered that though he was a master sculptor in the tradition of Vish-wakarma, he was lumped with jharu makers and cobblers rather than as an artist. Craft is a profession that neither gives economic returns nor social status.

When the National Master Craftsperson and Shilp Guru awards are given, the names and photographs of the President, Ministers and Secretaries to Government are listed in the media announcements, the names of the Shilp Gurus and Master Craftspeople being honoured are not. Not a photo, not a mention of the craftspeo-ple's names and skills..... The National Awards, meant to be a prestigious annual recognition of India's extraordinary masters, are lumped together every 3-4 years, awardees hustled onto the stage, told not to speak to the President; robbed of a small moment of glory in their hard, underpaid lives. I feel stricken and ashamed when I think of the pomp, splendour and media coverage of the Padma awards, es-pecially since I got mine on the back of the skills of these very people. No wonder young craftspeople are leaving the sector in droves.

"I have received many awards, but I still work on the footpath," said one. "It's the grave pit, not the loom pit", says another; his grim words borne out by recurring headlines of starvation deaths of handloom weavers.

When we began our Dastkar Ranthambhore project 25 years ago, to create liveli-hood options for the relocated villages around the tiger park, one of the people we encountered was Gendi Lal, a leather craftsman in Kundera village. He had lost his living due to local herders and farmers opting for new plastic chappals, instead of his sturdy but more expensive leather ones.

We helped him and a group of 5-6 other leather workers use their amazing punch-ing, plaiting and cutwork skills to make sandals, chappals, bags, belts and accessories for the urban market. These proved immensely popular. Soon Gendi Lal and his group were travelling all over India, supplying to retail stores as well as selling di-rectly through the Dastkar Bazaars. Gendi Lal was soon able to send his son to a fee-paying school, and the next news was that he had got admission to college! Sadly, college taught the boy to look down on the very profession that had given him his education. When he completed his BA he couldn't get a job, but he didn't want to continue in the leather business. In vain, we told him that his education and literacy would give him that edge to take the family skill to the next entrepreneurial level. These days Puran loiters around Sawai Madhopore town, occasionally getting a part-time job at the village school, generally unemployed – his aspirations far exceeding his abilities. He prefers being an out-of-work BA to being a leather craftsperson. How can we re-establish the social acceptability of craft?

Both urban movers and shakers and rural craftspeople need to break out of the caste system of City vs Village, Literate vs Non-literate, new Western Technology vs Traditional Skill-sets, and cherish the unique knowledge systems that are our herit-age. If we can do it for Yoga we can do it for craft!

In 1985, I went to SEWA in Lucknow to work with a 100 chikan embroidery women. They were black burkha-ed, illiterate; earning about 100-150 rupees a month, house-bound and totally dependent on the local Mahajan to fetch their work - and pay them. Sitting together embroidering, teaching them new skills and designs, we naturally talked about everything under the sun. They were stunned that I, a well-brought up believing Muslim woman, could also be liberated, happily unmarried, earning my own living. Travelling the world, untrammelled by purdah or convention.

Our first argument was when I was furious with them for signing, unread, a petition about the Shah Bano judgment, just on the say-so and biased retrograde interpretation of the Koran by local male chauvinist Maulvis. They listened to all this chat, wide-eyed, slightly disbelieving, slightly envious, slightly shocked. They certainly didn't relate it to the realities of their own lives. When six of them bravely agreed to come to Delhi for an exhibition, the men of the Mohalla threatened to burn down the SEWA Lucknow office, accusing us of corrupting their women's morals.

Today, those 100 SEWA women have grown to over 8000. They travel all over India, happily doss down and sing bhajans in a dharmasala, or cook biryani at the Bombay YWCA. They interact with equal ease with male tribals from Madhya Pradesh and sophisticated buyers from Milan. They march in protest against dowry deaths as well as Islamic fundamentalism; demand financial credit and free spectacles from the Government. They value their own skills, self-confidently refusing to give either Mulayam Singh or Mayawati a discount! They earn in thousands rather than hundreds, have their own savings bank accounts, and have thrown away centuries of repression and social prejudice along with their burkhas.

It has changed their attitudes to society, religion, marriage. Once again, sharing with, and actually knowing "the other" has broken down all the silly phobias. But at the same time they realise that their own cultural identity –represented in their stitches and motifs – is also their strength.

We too need to examine and re-evaluate some of our social myths and misconcep-tions – both about ourselves, and others. To see ourselves clearly and stop our "sen-timents" being "hurt" every time someone shows us the other side of the coin.

Cultural identity too often seems something WE feel proud of, but others use to box us into stereotypes. Jokes about Sardarjis, Gujju bens, and Bongs are legion. We love them, but feel outraged when they are levelled at ourselves. We Muslims talk proudly about our language, culture, tehzeeb, and food – others think beards, burkhas, violence, and multiple marriages. (Saleem Kidwai once told me that homo-sexuality was also attributed to Muslims!) And yet the extraordinary mix of different races, religions, geographies, and cultures India encompasses is our greatest asset – an inheritance that we can shape into an incredible strength, or treat as a terrible liability.

I've always thought the ideal for India is a salad, with each ingredient distinct and differently delicious, blended together with a truly secular dressing. But all too of-ten, we seem set on making it into a soup, all elements pulped into a homogenous, boring bland mush with a single dominating majority flavour. What a loss this would be!

I love India and intend to live & die here, but I also want to be able to freely question its imperfections. Just as I have the

freedom to say that Islam has been hijacked by a gang of demonic and utterly vile hoodlums and that the rest of us Muslims seem helpless to combat this evil. One's religion or political leanings should have absolutely nothing to do with freedom of speech. Nor should 'tolerance' play a part in this equation. Dialogue, dissent, debate are what fuel a working democracy. So do the different voices and identities in our society.

'Intolerance' is a horrible word, even more horrible in practice. But 'tolerance' is only marginally better. I don't want to be 'tolerated' in condescending, rather grudging acceptance - as if I (and other minorities) were something not very nice that won't go away! I want my being here to be taken for granted. I feel an integral part of this nation, and I want everyone else to think so too. 'Tolerance' implies you can just about exist as long as you don't step out of line. An attitude typified by the Haryana Chief Minister's comment that Muslims can stay in India as long as they don't eat beef or our Culture Minister saying Abdul Kalam was a good man "inspite of being a Muslim"! I think we need to do better for our minorities, be they Muslims, Christians, Dalits, transsexuals, tribals, women in mini skirts, people with same-sex partners, artists flying fanciful styrofoam cows in the sky.... None of us want to be 'tolerated'. We want to be ourselves. It's not a favour - its our constitutional right.

68 years after Independence, it still seems difficult for many to understand that, Christian or Tribal, Aamir Khan or Aam Admi, most of us are just thoroughly ordinary Indians, seeking happiness, sanity and security like everyone else. And wanting our own voice. Why can't we all simply 'adjust' to each other and the cultural baggage we each carry - just as we do in our over-crowded trains and buses; amicably negotiating awkward tin trunks, crying babies, and strangely wrapped parcels; miraculously bonding over our tiffins.

It's tedious that ones own patriotism needs constant justification plus a certificate that one doesn't eat beef or critique the nation. I am utterly amazed that Aamir Khan's confession of momentary vulnerability should be termed a "moral offence". The poor guy has just adopted two drought-

affected villages in Maharashtra. But he remains the third most hated man in Goog-le's survey of Indian social media. If women say we feel unsafe on the roads of Delhi, will we suddenly be seen as "anti-national"?

The savage killing in Dadri evoked widespread and vocal outrage, but as incident has followed incident, the assault on freedom of speech in JNU and Osmania, and the subsequent war of words between self-called "nationalist and outraged 'liberals' have obscured the other equally horrific murders, rapes, and assaults on Dalits and tribals, the ongoing civil liberty infringements and killings in Kashmir, Bastar, and the North East, the current callous indifference to terrible drought. I am still haunted by the murder of that 90 year old Dalit, hacked & burnt to death, his only crime that he wandered into a temple. It is difficult to have the bandwidth to react strongly each time. But every time we fail to rise up in outrage it becomes easier for saffron apol-ogists to rationalise these as "unfortunate accident"s stemming from "hurt senti-ments" or 'presstitute" misreporting.

There is so much discrimination in Indian society, with age-old prejudices of caste, religion & gender coexisting with newly coined ones born of education, wealth, power & privilege, even colour of skin - all being expressed in openly aggressive new ways. Some attract more public attention than others. Our own subjective prejudices intervene. People feel strongly about Kashmir but less so for Kashmiris. We need to speak out for all those under threat - be they tribals, women, minorities, Dalits, inter-caste lovers, the LGTB community, rationalist thinkers, activists, even our degraded environment. It's a heartbreakingly long list. But we cannot let out-rage fatigue overtake us.

Equally urgently, we need to find new ways of expressing our dissent & distress at this rapidly fragmenting India. Sharing our pain with likeminded social media 'Friends' is cathartic but ineffective. Violence and entitlement may end with a hatchet or bomb, but it all begins in the head. As our educational and cultural insti-tutions increasingly lose independence and direction, and the media concentrate on sound and fury rather than content, we need the energy of sustained public pres-sure to kickstart the process of healing. Renewing a sense of the joys and benefits of free speech and plurality, and a real understanding of India's past.

At a dinner party, a young America-returned IT executive vociferously rejoiced that "that bloody invader" Aurangzeb had been displaced by Abdul Kalam on a major Delhi road. I said that I held no particular brief for Aurangzeb, whose repressive Pu-ritan policies had damaged his co-religionists as much everyone else, but to call him an invader was mistaken. He was

(like me!) a 5th generation Indian, with more Raj-put blood in his veins than Central Asian. The young man's jaw fell agape. He con-fessed that he had never realised this. He had ignored too, that unlike the British, the wealth Aurangzeb and the other Mughals created remained in India, their chosen country of adoption. Aurangzeb imposed punitive taxes, but also actively promoted Indian industries, publicly pronouncing that his treasury belonged to the nation rather than himself. He was not a very nice man who definitely went a bit wonky at the end, but during his reign India became the world's richest country; its products sought after everywhere.

Like many young Indians, my dinner companion was victim of a one-dimensional version of Indian history. So much of the prejudiced polarisation taking place today is because of incorrect and inadequate knowledge. The standard textbooks ignore the multiple strands that make up our extraordinary country – the knowledge sys-tems, folk lore and legends of tribals; the multiple interpretations of music, art, ar-chitecture, poetry, food, costume and dance that enrich us. There is no single stream of Indian cultural or social practice, When I asked the young man whether he really wanted an India sanitized of all alien un-Hindu influences: without cricket, quawali, the Taj and the Bahai Temple, biryani, shabad gurbani, samosas, the choral North East music that wowed Obama, salwar kameez, Shahrukh Khan, MacDonalds, momos, blue jeans and the gentle messages of the Buddha, he looked a bit sheepish! We need to beware of catchy emotive generalisations. Of stereotyping national identity.

Nehru is not much quoted today – for me he remains an ideal. Let's remember what he said, "Culture is the ability to see the other's point of view." We need to remember that "the other" is just one more quite ordinary, sometimes tiresome, but potentially valuable person – part not just of the past, but also the fabric and future of this nation. The differences between "us" and "them" – of language, food, clothing, social practices - are what gives that fabric its colour, pattern and shape, and makes India so special – our truly incredible India.

When Dastkar started its Project in Ranthambhore twenty five years ago, I lived and worked out of a small one-room hut in Sherpur village. The women crowded round, fascinated by this Delhi "behen ji", while I taught them craft skills as earning for themselves and their families. Initially women of different castes and religions wanted separate timings to come to the room. The first time a Dalit woman came for work she crouched outside the door. It was she herself, not the upper-caste women, who explained - with shocked disbelief at my naiveté - that she could not enter. I had to literally pull her in. When a Muslim child pee-ed on the floor, the Hindu women fled in horror and wanted the whole place lippai-ed! Today, the 500-plus men and women in the Project work, travel, cook, eat and drink together, mar-velling at the folly that kept them separate for so long. At the annual picnic the men make the women sit, and serve them - Hindus and Muslims, dalits and upper-castes alike. Once again, sharing with and knowing each other has broken down previous taboos and fears.

I love India's multilayered multiplicity, its synergies & paradoxes, its many diverging & converging cultural streams, its colour & chaos, the hit-and-miss judaad of past and present, malls and mandirs, East and West; its unexpected but inherent resili-ence .... In any case, good or bad, it is our country. We need to remember it also be-longs to so many others.

There's a poem of– Khwajeh Hafiz Shirazi's: "I once asked a bird, "How is it that you fly in this gravity of darkness?" She responded, "Love lifts me."
Thank you,

LAILA TYABJI
Rohini Ghadiok Annual Oration.
26th April, 2016.