

The Many Working Words Within

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A Million Mutinies

India's demographic and economic changes are rapidly altering the society's fabric and character—and shaping her polity as well. But the scale and nature of those changes are still to be understood. Much of the Indian success story—if there's one—is attributed to the economic reforms aka economic liberalization that were chosen as an imperative in 1991. Since then, successive Indian governments have pushed the market-driven policies ever more vigorously affecting every strata of the society. Billed as the world's biggest Parliamentary democracy, India is witnessing a steady withdrawal of the idea of the welfare State enshrined in its Constitution with the rapid growth of the private capital that is monopolistic in its character, leading to the expansion of crony capitalism explicit in the way wealth and income is getting concentrated in the hands of a few, pauperizing many. The chosen path is by design.

This shift has to be contextually appropriated with reference to the earlier policy agenda focus in newly independent India which, while setting a modern, progressive trajectory of growth concept, still remained acutely aware of the need to have a range of affirmative interventions. It was thought in the early days of Planning Commission of India, a body with a statutory mandate to organize planned approach for growth that India will have to have robust extension and education services, especially ensuring participation from communities. Indian experience with anchoring faith in communities could be seen in many institutional extensions in the decadal patterns in 50s, 60s and early 70s. These were the days of transformative shifts in favor of social capital. Later this thinking started undergoing another shift of thoughts that gradually oversaw the withdrawal of welfare components in State policy.

Alas, it isn't an isolated India story. The "One versus 99," as it is often called, is now a more global saga. In Asia too it is a stark reality. Japan to some extent has managed to keep inequalities under the tabs, but it is showing signs of bucking that trend. Economic inequality is ubiquitous, policy-driven, and structural. If the world map were to be dotted today with conflicts and crises of different hues—political, social, economic, religious, or even cultural—it would have to be painted in different shades of red. From the so-called democracies to the authoritarian states, from the rich nations to the developing economies to the abjectly poor countries, there is perhaps hardly any place on the planet that is free of conflicts with bitter consequences for humanity. Discounting the sharp ideological expressions, it is now confirmed alarmingly that the human interactive systems dealing with social, political and economic constructs are failing to accommodate and address one of the fundamental challenges of civilized world: inequality.

While reporting from India's heartland for various newspapers on our many crises for the last 18 years, I have witnessed—and am still doing—an unparalleled uncertainty creeping into people's lives, a sense of hopelessness in the lives of peasantry and a widening economic chasm in the society. As much as from casual empirical observations, my attempt to document exclusion is also informed by a time series data produced by many observatories and confirmed by the classical explanations over the “lagging regions of India.” Among the many issues at the hand, if there's one problem that successive Indian governments have grappled with over the last two-three decades it is the raging agrarian crisis, one that is steadily tearing apart the fabric of the Indian countryside and driving sweeping demographic and societal shifts evident in the falling of real income levels, migratory pressures on urban centers and stunt upward economic mobility in marginal agrarian groups.

That crisis is expressed in many of its glaring symptoms. To spell out but a few: Continuing trend of peasant farmers' suicides expressed in the fact that over 300,000 farmers have committed suicide from 1997 to 2014 going by the government data; an unprecedented fall in the number of family farms (in itself, it may not be unwarranted but those quitting farming are not joining services or industry but turning landless, according to the two Indian population census reports of 2001 and 2011); growing silent hunger and malnourishment among the people, particularly children; simmering resistance to land acquisitions; armed resistance in forested tribal hinterland; growing ecological stress in large swathes resulting in conflicts over water and other natural resources; unprecedented rural-urban migrations; deepening health epidemics; ugly crimes against women; an explosive joblessness that is leading to uncertainties and societal unrest; and a disastrous widening of wealth and income inequalities. There is sizeable section of Indians termed as the great Indian middle class who have achieved prosperity unprecedented in India's history, ever since we liberalized our economy; but millions others are left pauperized in a state of perpetual despondency.

Land acquisition is a simmering issue as a consequence of a new growth trajectory of India. While “eminent domain” is not an alien concept to Indian administrative-judicial complex, there is an unprecedented velocity experienced by the contestation for private land under the rubric of public purpose. There is perhaps no district in the country today where struggles and protests over forcible acquisition of land and other natural resources for the private projects are not unfolding. India has over a 100 million development-induced internally displaced people (IDPs)—a little less than the size of Japan—since independence in 1947, by rough estimates, but the Indian Parliament is still besotted with the debates over land acquisitions and resettlement rights. Scale it to Asia, things would be similar.

Michael Levien of the Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University, US, explains the ongoing land dispossession in India by advancing the concept of “regimes of dispossession.” It may indeed be true of what is happening in many other Asian countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, or the Philippines. In a recent paper in the Economic and

Political Weekly (EPW), Levien charts out the various policy-driven processes that are transferring wealth from a people to private entities leading to its accumulation for the few and the cumulative dispossession for the many.

Pointers to those crises exist all over in the societal unrest. Coupled with the growth of intolerance everywhere, uncertainties continue to plague people. It has been consistently observed that the media continue to report the rosy side of the Indian story—the Information Technology growth or the arrival of dollar billionaires on the global stage—neglecting its gloomy side, is not unexpected, given the corporatized nature of today's media, save some noteworthy exceptions. It is therefore the civil society, the people's movements, countless individual voices and emerging new media often described as an alternative media that have kept the narratives of policies-driven inequality and societal disparities alive in the public discourse. They also tell stories of community-driven initiatives. No doubt, the markets are driving the economic shifts in India; these shifts in turn define the societal processes. But so rapid and uncertain the changes and shifts are that it would take more than a common shared concern to answer new questions arising out of the recent economic processes.

Even the media growth story has been one of astonishing proportions. But in the process, the Indian media while being politically free has been dominated by commercial logic and growing pressures for a profit centric approach. This “over-commercialization” in turn dictates its choices—of inclusivity and exclusivity. Indian media today choose not to report the countryside or the poor, because they typically would not be among the “paying classes,” the readers from the upper crust of society.

India still has close to 60% of its nearly 1.3 billion people living in rural or semi-urban areas, fully dependent on agrarian vocations, but there isn't a single media house with a full time rural reporter. A majority of its working classes fall in the category of unorganized labor, and yet there is no media house today with a full time labor reporter. That is why in the media narratives and popular political discourse, there are only few reflections of the many of the country's socio-economic problems.

While the reasons for such raging crises are manifold, experts and commentators of social and economic change almost aver with a great degree of concurrence that the withdrawal of the welfare state and the coinciding growing hegemony of the global capital forces are creating an abyss within the societies. So, though the crisis, such as farm suicides or increasing crimes against women, look social in the nature, they are in fact rooted in the paradigm sudden shifts in their economic structures.

India's story—of good and bad; of prosperity and economic crises; of immense hope on the one and a sense of despondency on the other—is playing out in her hinterland and heartland—way beyond the beautiful metropolitan cities. Even the concepts and practices of democracy are varied in nature within India. Scale it to Asia, and you get very many shades of it. It's time the continent harped on a discourse on what sort of fundamental democratic and

economic structures does a society—as diverse as in Asia—needs, to remain wedded to equality and rationality in addition to keeping its ecological system and climate healthy? Most Asian countries are also grappling with the question of religion and some like India, have to additionally deal with the issue of caste, while delivering its basic obligations to humanity.

The nation states are in different phases of their evolution from pre to post modernity where religions and castes must matter to the extent of their personal choices and beliefs, but communities must take umbrage to constitutionality, which stems out of a rational common goal and promise of equality. In the Asian context, the growing nationalistic identity, a more rigid primordial identity, is at complete variance with the neo-modern need to develop a more civic identity of the human beings. As Professor Yuji Suzuki, the Deputy Director of the National Federation of UNESCO Association in Japan put it before the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) Fellows in September 2015: “Today’s nation states are a collection of many ethnic groups sharing their civic identities and cultures and controlling their own political state.” In such a case, civic identities, or the culture of collectives, are new realities—it heralds the concept of new commons. The religious or ethnic identities therefore are an old hackneyed idea. A new civic or secular identity is a desired future. The narratives of the State or the Market must create space for the narratives of Peoples or the Collectives. In other words, we have to put these new commons, the People’s Collectives, before the Markets and the State; for they create and need both as a “means” and not as the “ends.”

Big Problems, Small Steps

While the problems pile up, what can we do? What needs to be done? Like the trickle-down theory seems a passé, the top-down problem solving too has its limitations. India’s father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi would call people not to implant their ideas, but learn from the communities to evolve the workable solutions. In short, people’s solutions evolve organically.

One thing that could be done, needs to be done, is to discover bottoms-up solutions that are already in vogue. We need to see common ground between what works in India and in Japan, or in Malaysia and in the Philippines, in Indonesia and in Sri Lanka. A pertinent question to be asked over here is where and to what extent it could mutually benefit? While I see and report all that ails India, I have also had the privilege to meet communities and people that respond with their collective wisdom to gigantic ills, despite that they and their responses remain unacknowledged in the face of institutional answers.

In several cases, they are people’s self-driven and self-directed struggles with both, the nation states and the virtual markets. While the institutions of the nation states or the so-called free markets (the latest God that we are told has the ability to fix all of humanity’s problems) put forth unidimensional, often simplified, answers to complex problems further compounding instead of resolving the issues, people’s collectives, howsoever small they may look, at times deal with the challenges before them in a much better and inclusive way. They

may not be an immediate replacement to gigantic institutions or the markets; they nevertheless are like a panorama of small unrelated ideas. While the world lives off a perpetual hope of one big transformative idea to pacify the humanity, a young Indian student, Laya Maheswari, currently enrolled in the MSc program in Social Policy and Planning at the London School of Economics (LSE), put it succinctly in a paper he wrote for an in-house symposium recently. “The next big idea,” he argued diligently, “is a series of small ideas.”

In the functional constitutional political democracies, such as India, they offer a refreshing new way to a plethora of problems: from climate change effects to political conflicts, from managing forests to coping with water stress. There is currently a mushrooming of many such small collectives all over the world, indeed even in Asia, in the times of the surge of big trans-national corporations and their take-over of virtually everything in the free market era. These worlds even if tiny are creating spaces for themselves, between the markets and the states. Are we ready to study and acknowledge their existence?

The solutions to and processes of the global order are taking place in the hinterlands and heartlands far away from the beautiful worlds of the teeming metropolises. We need to discover these as our commons. Be it the protests in Okinawa against the expansion of the U.S. Naval Base or that of Kundankulam against the nuclear power project with sharp socio-ethical positions; be it the protesting commoners on the streets of Malaysia seeking transparency in governance to the countless millions in India wanting an end to the ubiquitous corruption of the rich to the foot-soldiers of the Arab spring revolution, we are witnessing an unprecedented churning of human energies and conflicts between the status-quo-ist and the democratic revolutionaries.

While the armed battles are hogging the limelight for all the wrong reasons, these countless fights that are peacefully being waged for a more just and equitable world are actually triggering the many changes wherever they are happening. India's Right to Information Act (RTI), a transformative open governance law, actually came as a result of that. Or the Forest Rights Act, which seeks to correct a historic wrong by placing small areas of India's state-owned forests back to the communities that lived in them to manage and conserve their eco-systems. Hurdles remain. The hegemonic forces would not give in easily. But the world—certainly the people in Asia, are slowly discovering the powers within the community.

Alongside complex global, Asian, problems ranging from growing religious intolerance to economic and political inequality to violence of all kinds, the communities are trying to work and find solutions within a diverse and multi-polar framework. These small worlds, built by community collectives, are our new and most modern commons: they seek to revive an age-old wisdom, philosophy, and vision for coexistence.

Take some cases for example:

Kamiyama, a small non-descript town, wakes up one day to its loneliness and fast-depopulating alleys and decides to open its doors—though cautiously and keeping the choices in its own hands—to the unknown outsiders, who might also be searching for a common ground, in rural Japan. In its own wisdom, it tries to arrest the specter of becoming a village of lonely veterans. Aging, it says, is a new reality of the villagers, but if that's a reality, they must face it smartly. It is neither market, nor the State that is aiding Kamiyama; but the community itself is waking up to do something about its issue.

In its neighboring town, **Kamikatsu**, people decide to cut their waste to zero, adopt a charter, and follow it collectively. Not only do they cut down on their waste, they also recycle about 77% of it. They follow a philosophy: Reduce; Reuse; Recycle. For small towns, Kamikatsu is a classic working example.

Somewhere in the remote corner of the cosmopolitan crowded world of Tokyo, a university professor and an architect comes up with an idea of sharing his small space, to reconnect with the community and help the community reconnect with itself. It germinates into an idea called "**Share Okusawa**"—a few square meters of space in a beautiful if somewhat old wooden structure comes alive. Professor Horiuchi Masahiro of the Tama Art University and founder of Share Okusawa says of his philosophy: "Optimize the space; share what you already have." Community sharing is the idea. Money, convenience, services—they address the needs of the modern time, but we are distancing ourselves from the humanity. Share Hub: generalize the physical and virtual space into a broader hub. Why? More than economic dividends, Professor Horiuchi says, "I feel very, very happy doing it!"

Hiwre Bazar, a small village of 250 families in the drought-prone and arid region in Maharashtra, a western province in India, decides to do something about its poverty in the decade of the 1990s, driven by despair and lack of government help—and within a decade transforms itself into a model habitat, so very good that the United Nations decides to showcase it for its millennium development goals. "We can't change climate," its leader Popatrao Pawar says, "but we can change our habits."

In the remote tribal hinterland of Gadchiroli district in the same state, where the indigenous people are living on the margins of a modern state, a small hamlet raises a question: why are we outsiders in our own village? And it seeks to take the democracy to an altogether different level. It seeks powers to take its own decisions and forces a mighty Indian state to devolve powers to conserve and govern its own forests. **Mendha Lekha**, the village, has torched a flame for self-governance and questioned the very model of electoral democracy that India sought to become. It took the idea of self-determination to the basic unit of administration or a community: a village and a village panchayat (or parliament).

A wise tribal headman of that village, Devaji Tofa, uneducated, poor, and seemingly out of sync with a fast-modernizing world outside, stood up to the State and held: "Mawa nate

mawa raaj.” In his tribal language of Gondi, it meant, that “we are the government in our village.” “We” meant the collective, the Gram Sabha, or the Village Parliament. The question reverberated across the democratic corridors and rallied all those committed to the ever deepening of democracy and a people’s meaningful participation in the way the societies and economies function. Tofa and his villagers, with the help of the educated friends, articulated an argument that while they elect a federal or provincial government, they—the villagers—are themselves a government in their respective villages and hamlets. They debated the right to self-determination, leaving the extent of it to a wider debate, and the right to self-govern, while calling for a decentralization of power structures and decision-making. It took over four decades and an untiring effort from Tofa and his growing tribe to successfully demonstrate a working model of an idea, which, though small, provided a refreshing new way of a collective action in all its poly-centricity.

Tofa went on to take his fight to the doorstep of the Indian federal government through a sustained dialogue that over the last three-four decades, has sought to question the simplified binary of the governance and economic systems within India, per se, to raise some very fundamental questions about the role of the State, the markets, and a people. Mendha Lekha in the meantime went on to wrest the control over and right to its own forest and its produce from the state’s forest department in the wake of a series of constitutional amendments and legislation that the Indian parliament passed ever since.

Last year, its villagers abolished private individual property and converted it into a community asset. The village went on to chart dos and don’ts to use its common property resources and became rich in a year’s span, its wealth distributed far more equally than it was in the previous system. The village collective has to deal with new set of problems—like the management of capital, which is a new challenge; dealing with growing aspirations of the youth, but it is dealing with those together, just the way it did with the issue of centralization of political power and resource management. As Tofa once told me, “Problems will be there. Old problems will go, newer ones will come up—but our approach of dealing with them must remain in the collective conscience.” Mendha Lekha is but one example of a community-driven collective approach to not only address the issue of managing common pool resources, but also evolve a collective political, economic, social and cultural action to counter the centralized market and state forces, as a far more inclusive way.

While visiting the **Sayama** forests, a little over an hour’s journey from central Tokyo in the neighboring Saitama Prefecture, the parallels of the community’s efforts to conserve and secure patches of perennial green to that of Mendha Lekha’s desperate bid to safeguard its own forests were far too many. Mendha Lekha peacefully and democratically did what several countries and their peoples could not: to get the right to self-determination within the confines of a Constitutional Democracy.

There are literally hundreds of such non-dogmatic, highly democratic, ideas in both rural and urban India, indeed the world over, that are completely independent of each other, but rooted in the post-modern rationality; they have evolved over years through a modern collective effort to address specific regional or topical issues—as diverse as depleting ground water or alcoholism or even religious strife. What is it that makes these ideas tick, despite geographical, cultural and often political differences? Perhaps, a deep inquiry is needed to explain the sociological, political, economic and cultural basis of the commons' modern avatar, through which they address very different, sometimes area-specific issues.

Seen isolated, these small community initiatives look un-replicable; but seen together they form a cohesive narrative—a third way of seeing the world, one that does not conform to the trickle-down or top-down, but the bottoms-up. It is the many worlds that celebrate diversity while seeing to coexist. In the Asian context, we need a share-hub, a kind of realm where we can share our working commons. In a virtual world, it could mean wisdom, accumulated through ages, philosophy, polished through many millennia where love and compassion encompasses the entire universe as an ideological core.

In their meetings at the beginning of the last century, the two Asian legends, Nobel laureate and poet Ravindranath Tagore of India and Okakura Tenshin, the Japanese art historian and curator, held that despite many tensions, friendship and love could and should transcend the frictions of differences in the continent. The two friends essentially defined that “Other Asia,” not self-effacing or competing but cooperating and at ease with itself, notwithstanding the divergence.

During our visit to the town of Narita, under the shadow of the international airport near Tokyo, we met a couple—Hamaguchi Mariko and her husband Arai Norihito—trying to conserve and preserve Japan's native rice seeds through their small organization christened Peace Seed. On their farm plots they have some 350 varieties of seeds, one dating back to as old as over 10,000 years. Around the seeds the two are building a community, a collective of seed-savers, as a prerequisite to nurturing the diverse food systems from the market onslaught. They chose this as their calling, even though the two grew up in a perfectly urban setting of Tokyo. The two looked in sync with the seed savers back in India, or in Pakistan, or other parts of Asia. The seed commons that the two are building here are in tune with the seed commons elsewhere, new unacknowledged processes.

“I feel closer to the Asians than the westerners—we share cultural identity and the philosophy,” Norihito remarked informally during the interaction. His argument: Asians live in a circular time zone, the west in a horizontal line, and both are philosophically vastly different. Norihito was adopted while he was in his teens by a Native American family—an indigenous tribe, which, he says, is similar to Asians. His comment—that he identifies himself with the Asian frame—was set in a philosophical tone. As he later explained: “We

have the philosophy to see and understand the nature in a time zone.” It is this wisdom that binds Asia together despite its diversities: something that Tagore and Okakura conveyed.

While globalization and politics of it is fundamentally centered on the economic processes, in its current form it has undoubtedly led to multiple crises: from social to cultural to political. The narrative, of binding the humanity in a monopolistic and unipolar world, with powerful economic actors with oligopolistic command structures, namely trans-national corporations, holding hegemony over the peoples, it isn't sustainable or just. If the most of the world managed to get rid of the imperial powers in the last century, this one is seeing the steady neo-colonization—a process fundamentally economic in nature, where the global capital and its hoarders are defining the way we live and coexist. Every single human value is now a commodity.

Against this process, the community responses remain area-specific, problem-specific, and sector-specific—but seen together, they form a narrative that is neither governmental nor corporatized. It is somewhere closer to the realm of collective cooperatives, an economic poly-centricity that has not been paid enough attention by the global economic leaders or public intellectuals, perhaps due to its very complex nature of work and tedious arrangements. One of the fundamental differences between the market-driven models and community models, is the latter is not essentially driven by the motive of profit in its approach and modality. In fact, the community-led economic initiatives at times seem to interact better with the Markets and the State than individual and private small enterprise does: they tend to leverage their collective power.

Professor Tanabe Akio of the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies and the Director of the Center for the Study of Contemporary India, Kyoto University, terms Indian growth process as a case of developmental democracy, which stands in sharp contrast with China's developmental authoritarianism. Indian story, he argues, goes beyond the dichotomy of neoliberalism and social democracy, where the society (peoples) transcends both the markets and the state by deepening democracy and economic development by paving the way for the participation of the diverse population. Professor Tanabe calls it a “third path of development” in the continent of Asia, which performs slower than the neo-liberal path of development of the East Asia but is more inclusive in terms of participation of different peoples.

In her scholarly work that won her a Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, late Elinor Ostrom explained in a great detail how communities devise a way in managing what she called the finite “common pool resources” to denote the resources used by many individuals in common, such as grazing land, irrigation systems, or the groundwater etc. Such resources have been overexploited for long. Typical solutions hover around the centralized government regulations or increasingly now the privatization of resources. Ostrom in her work suggested a third approach to resolve the problem of the commons: an institution involving and governed

by the resource users themselves. She called it a cooperative-like structure. “The central question in this study,” she wrote, “is how a group of principals in an interdependent situation can organize and govern themselves to obtain continuing joint benefits when all face temptations to free-ride, shirk, or otherwise act opportunistically.”

Ostrom’s study greatly analyzed several long-standing and viable common property regimes, including Swiss grazing pastures, Japanese forests, and irrigation systems in Spain and the Philippines. She however said that each of these ideas must be evaluated independently since each of those cases was unique in design and structure; she explained the framework of commons’ management by the communities as a dynamic decentralized way. That includes of clearly defined boundaries, monitors who are either resource users or accountable to them, graduated sanctions, and mechanisms dominated by the users themselves to resolve conflicts and to alter the rules. The challenge, she observed in the study, is to foster contingent self-commitment among the members: “I will commit myself to follow the set of rules we have devised in all instances except dire emergencies if the rest of those affected make a similar commitment and act accordingly.”

The mushrooming of people’s collectives or what is increasingly being termed as “Commons” are, to me, a people’s polycentric responses that transcend nationalities and global markets. They are not merely restrictive to the use and management of common pool resources; they also successfully cope and deal with other issues: from caste conflicts to ecological disasters. Within the boundaries of the nation states and the so-called free markets they are the decentralized entities that exist as a means, not as the end—a bottoms-up and not the trickle down approach.