

Raqs Media Collective

# Stammer, Mumble, Sweat, Scrawl, and Tic

01/05

e-flux journal #0 — november 2008 Raqs Media Collective  
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To be legible is to be readable. To be legible is to be an entry in a ledger – one with a name, place, origin, time, entry, exit, purpose, and perhaps a number. To be legible is to be coded and contained. Often, when asked an uncomfortable question, or faced with an unsettling reality, the rattled respondent ducks and dives with a stammer, a mumble, a sweat, a scrawl, or a nervous tic. The respondent may not be lying, but neither may he be interested in offering a captive legible truth either to the interrogator or to his circumstances.

An insistence on legibility produces its own shadow, the illegible. Between the bare-faced lie and the naked truth lies the zone of illegibility – the only domain where the act of interpretation retains a certain ontological and epistemic significance.

We read each other for signs, not because we are opaque, or necessarily wish for opacity, but because our desires, fears, and experiences still require the life-giving breath of translation. The transparency that brooks no translation also requires no engagement.

The tree of life, and therefore of art, would be barren were it not for the fruit of occasional misunderstandings.

## 1. Stammer

Two performers, Mahmood Farooqui and Danish Husain, tell stories in Delhi as part of an attempt to revive a traditional narrative form called Dastangoi (story-speech).<sup>1</sup>

Among the stories they tell are accounts of people, incidents, places, and facts frozen as notes and jottings in the archives related to the Indian Subcontinent's partition in 1947. In telling these stories, they attempt to work through what it means to be poised on the hyphen between the terms "Indian" and "Muslim," in whichever order the two are read, when they are read together. Sometimes this exercise takes the form of a meditation on the conflict between life and the ledger.

The partition of India was meant to give rise to a new "homeland" – Pakistan – for "Muslim-Indians," who, of course, would cease to be so the moment they moved to Pakistan. The new Indian state, however, maintained that India was the only proper homeland for "Indian-Muslims," who were Indians as much as they were Muslim. In this tug of war over how the "Indian-Muslim" or the "Muslim-Indian" could be made legible as present or future subjects of two states, some strange things were bound to happen.

A person who had been a "Muslim-Indian" before partition ceased to be an "Indian-Muslim" the moment he became a Pakistani. And if he became a Pakistani, then he could no longer easily revert to being an Indian. To the Indian

state, Pakistan was an enemy, and all Pakistanis, who had once been Indians, were actual or potential antagonists.

On the other hand, after a certain date, the state of Pakistan, the homeland of those who hitherto had been “Muslim-Indians,” was no longer willing to accept any more “Indian-Muslim” emigrants from India. They were beginning to be seen as a burden, as outsiders, and at worst as potential fifth columnists from India in the new Pakistan.

This meant that those “Indian-Muslims” who had crossed over to Pakistan but subsequently wanted to return to India could not do so, while those “Muslim-Indians” who had stayed on in India, but subsequently wanted to cross over to Pakistan could not do so either. India would not let the first kind return, and Pakistan would not let the second kind enter. Both of these desires became obstacles to those who governed the two new states. The “Indian-Muslim” and the “Muslim-Indian” came unstuck between the powers who claimed the terms at either ends of the hyphens that joined them. Their lives, and the claims that their lives made on history, were no longer seen as valid. The legibility of the law that classified people as either “Indian” and “Pakistani” now produced its own illegible shadow – of the movements of people who did not quite fit into either category, and who, by their actions and by the articulation of their desires, refused to “fit” into either India or Pakistan, but stayed on as the stubbornly illegible marginalia of the unfolding of two grand narratives of new nationhood.

Farooqui and Husain’s performance, which takes off from the investigations of historians like Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, comes to a head with the story of someone we like to think of as the “uncontainable man.” Here is his story.<sup>2</sup>

There was once an uncontainable man. Let us call him Ghulam Ali. That is how he is named in the files and the correspondence that surround his strange but unremarkable story.

In the aftermath of the Partition of India, in 1947, this man, like thousands of others, could not offer a clear, concise reading of his self. He had not yet learned to be legible to himself as a citizen of either nation. Neither India nor Pakistan could hold him in place.

This uncontainable man wanted to stay on in India, but went to look for a missing relative in Pakistan. His decisions were sound; his timing was awry. Straying to search for someone, and then staying to search for someone – falling sick, tarrying, confusion – all this meant that in a few months’ time he became a Pakistani. People were still figuring out how to spell Pakistan, and how to tell it apart from India. Ghulam Ali read himself with a stammer. The book that became

his passport had already told a new story.

Caught between petitions, jottings, and files, Ghulam Ali tried to read himself – sometimes as an Indian, at other times as a Pakistani. But all he could say with confidence was that he had learnt to play the Kettle Drum in the British Indian Army Band. Kettle Drumming is not a legible nationality. You can’t just rat-a-tat-a-tat your way through two new warring nations as if it were a parade. Not if you are an ordinary decommissioned soldier with nothing to your name but a quest for a missing relative. Your petitions may travel, but you stay where you are written into history. Over time, even the inscription in the file, overwritten many times over, becomes as illegible as the acts of travel that it sought to contain. Legibility, when it eats its own tail, digests itself into illegibility.

## 2. Mumble

In Ritwik Ghatak’s *Jukti, Takko aar Gappo* (Arguments, Reasons, Stories), a Bengali film set against the backdrop of the first wave of Maoist rebellion in the India of the late sixties and early seventies, an old man, Nachiketa, played by Ghatak himself, falls in with a group of “underground” Maoist insurgents in the course of his eccentric picaresque adventures.

His conversations with one of his indulgent hosts, which cover a large historical remit, inevitably end in his admission, “I am confused, young man, I do not understand anymore.” He travels with the band of rebels, and yet, it is they who are all conformists in comparison to his awkwardly exhibitionist display of ambiguity. Caught in the “crossfire” between the certainties of the state and the insurgents, Nachiketa (with a name that packs in a throwback to Nachiketa, the death defying practitioner of the “via negativa” – *neti, neti, neti/not this, not that, not the other* – of the *Katha Upanishad*), is a celebrant of the mumbled doubt.

Nachiketa’s insistence on inhabiting his confusion has other ramifications as well. In addition to its awkward evasion of definitive articulation, it also outlines a position based on a refusal to be an informant. The owning-up to not being able to “understand” is as much an assertion of a stance of deliberate reticence as it is a tacit admission of ignorance. Often, in the course of cultural transactions, a demand is placed on the artist, curator, and critic to be a model “interpreter.” This demand is usually underwritten by the assumption that the place, biography, history, predicament, relationship, or situation that the “interpreter” is being asked to translate is available to him as a transparent template. Nachiketa, by holding on to his confusion, questions the imperative of transparency.

Nachiketa's prevarication offers neither redemption nor rejection. Rather, it holds out hesitant incomprehensibility as a reason to keep going. Nachiketa "keeps going" until he is finally undone by the assurance of gunfire in one of Indian cinema's first depictions of the now commonplace "encounter," a form of contact between the state and its more recalcitrant subjects which takes place through the medium of a well-placed bullet lodged in an insurgent head. A doubting body is an uncomfortable sprawl of questions. A dead body is a legible statistic in a police ledger. The transformation of the doubting body into the dead body is another kind of translation. It happens far too often, and though forensics is one way of looking at the dead body, especially in search of well-writ answers, it has not as yet yielded its own hermeneutic science, or the kind of interpretation that stays on the ball with the questions that continue to haunt the record, much like the confused ghost of a confused man.

### 3. Sweat

A judge in the western Indian city of Pune recently convicted a woman for murder based on the results of a Brain Electrical Oscillations Signature (BEOS) test.<sup>3</sup> This technique, developed by a Bangalore-based neuroscientist, claims to act as an efficient instrument for determining culpability in crime through brain mapping.<sup>4</sup> The accused, who is said to have poisoned her fiancé with arsenic at a local McDonald's, was subjected to an electroencephalogram. Thirty-two electrodes were placed on her skull while she sat in silence and listened to a series of statements read out mainly in the first person, some of which were neutral, such as "The Sky is Blue" while others made assertions which could be connected to the crime, such as "I bought arsenic" or "I went to McDonald's."

Unlike other neural investigation and prognostic techniques used in forensic psychology, BEOS does not rely on an evaluation of skin texture (as in a lie detector) or brain images (as in Narco Analysis) associated with the making of "true" or "false" statements by the suspect in response to a set of questions, often fielded while the accused is made suggestible through strong pharmacological intervention. BEOS does not rely on the accused having recourse to speech, but on what is supposed to be revealed by the colors of her silence. It "maps" what happens in the accused person's brain while she "listens" rather than when she speaks. This silent cartography of the brain divides the cerebral cortex into areas corresponding to "concepts" and "experiences." In this theory, should the area of the brain

devoted to the storage of "experiential" data light up in response to stimuli pertaining to the scene or particulars of a crime, the suspect is taken to be someone who has actually participated in the unfolding of the events in question. The brain is taken to preserve within it a legible impression of the crime, much as a roll of film contains an emulsion on which a scene may be imprinted through the action of light.

The question is: is a dream, an act of the imagination, a response to a murder in a film, an "experience" or a "concept"? If the life of the imagination is rendered indistinct from the life of actions then all of us are criminals, or have been, at least some of the time. We have all experienced the fear and rush of violence, in dreams, in recollections, or through recounting.

What if we did not commit a murder, but obsessed about it instead? What if we went over, again and again, the real or imagined details of a conspiracy in our minds? Would we then be conspirators or witnesses, or both – in turns, and all together?

Would it then make sense to say that if you are not an eligible victim, you must be a legible perpetrator? What would it make better sense to be?

### 4. Scrawl

In looking at traditional land deeds and documents that encode customary titles, one is struck by the scrawls that thicken the task of reading. The research of Solomon Benjamin, a scholar of urbanism based in Bangalore, involves looking at the changing ways of registering legal and customary claims to land.<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin's work takes the form of a series of digressions into the meanings of signatures and countersignatures. To him, the story of a land deed or other such documents, is told by the marks and annotations that overlay each other on paper to form a palimpsest of claims – here reinforcing, there overruling exclusive rights – erecting, dismantling, and shifting the boundaries between enclosures. Claims touch claims, infect claims, mate, proliferate. Relationships to land become both more and less than being simply about "property." The rights of ownership are read against the claims of custody. Usage, usufruct, usury, uxoriality, estates, and estovers all shade off into discussions about different kinds of entitlement. Habits and habitation yield to each other, and the thin fabric of legal legibility often buckles under the overlay of ink on ink on ink on paper.

Jane Caplan, historian of information processes and identification techniques, takes a close interest in the evolution of the signature. To her, the signature is an "equivocal artifact deeply mired within the terrain of legibility/illegibility."<sup>6</sup>

Citing historians who claimed that an illegible hand was seen as a mark of gentility in the 16th century, Caplan points out that “legibility” and the penmanship that produced it was closely tied to what was once seen as the “vulgar” commercial activity of accountancy. This view reversed itself in 19th century Britain and its empire, when good handwriting came to be associated with gentility.

The signature, however, remains an exception to the cult of legibility. Even now, legal opinion customarily holds that a “normal” signature is an “illegible” signature, i.e., that illegibility is a defining feature of the signature, “which is not a piece of writing intended to convey a meaning, but a graphic, symbol, or device.”<sup>7</sup>

Illegibility, in other words, is the hallmark of individuality. Children learning to write their name legibly soon realize that growing up involves the transformation of a readable name into an illegible scrawl. The consistency of this illegible scrawl through time then becomes the identifier of a well-formed adult’s ability to represent him or herself on paper.

How can the knots and scrawls of human relationships, especially as they get entangled over generations, be read in anything other than their illegibility? What does an “illegible” reading amount to? Would hearing such a reading amount to listening to the rustling glossolalia of aging paper? In such situations of universally diminished legibility, disputes over land would often end in long, drawn-out negotiations that in their durability acted as tacit instruments of compromise. So someone owned, someone ploughed, someone grazed, someone camped and someone lived, and all of them quarreled and all felt that they were as much in the right as they were in the wrong.

Today, however, property claims are hard-coded with digital signatures. Barcodes don’t scrawl into each other the way that inked inscriptions could. A patch of land is no longer a field of interpretation, guarded by a picket fence with many gaps and holes. As land becomes transacted on a global scale, and as traditional claims and claimants are erased in neat satellite-imaged cadastral records, information – not habitation – becomes the key to property. A right to land is no longer a dispute to be settled by reading a layer of ink under another layer of ink. It is instead a piece of information protected by a firewall, amenable to entrance only on the pronouncement of a password, and only legible to its owner.

## 5. Tic

The jagged peaks of stock market fluctuations are legible, apparently, to sharp punters on good

days. The nervous tics on the faces in the crowds that gaze with rapt attention at the scrolling news of the day’s highs and lows on the electronic murals that wrap themselves around the glass facades of the citadels of finance are eloquent testimonies to the affective intensity of capital.

It is possible, some say, to read despair, skepticism, hope, and euphoria in the glyphs formed by these crests and troughs. If so, then news of investment is as sentimental as the chapters of a pulp romance. The promise of romance and the hope of eventual recompense on risky bids are the eventual trophies for which both speculators and sweethearts vie. Yet each lover, and each stockbroker, is a prisoner of a private language. Every man (and woman) who has laid a wager on the possibility of a return in love or money has done so knowing that the object of their attentions may not even hear, let alone care for, the intensity of their longing. How many have squandered their dreams on Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, and to what little avail?

Sentimental poets declaim that “to love is to lose.” Addicted market players see the losses of some as the opportunities for a win on the “rebound.” And so, victory and defeat, pursuit and being pursued, blur into each other such that it begins to be difficult to tell losses from gains. If the legibility of loss lies in recognizing the state of being bereft, then it becomes equally necessary to know that bereavement can render us speechless. Within silence lies another, keener illegibility. And who would dare edit the lexicon of a wordless language with a million entries for only two sets of meanings: intangible hope and opaque despair?

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Rags Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, Shuddhabrata Sengupta) has been variously described as artists, media practitioners, curators, researchers, editors, and catalysts of cultural processes. Their work, which has been exhibited widely in major international spaces and events, locates them squarely along the intersections of contemporary art, historical inquiry, philosophical speculation, research and theory – often taking the form of installations, online and offline media objects, performances and encounters. They live and work in Delhi, based at Sarai, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, an initiative they co-founded in 2000. They are members of the editorial collective of the *Sarai Reader* series, and have curated "The Rest of Now" and co-curated "Scenarios" for Manifesta 7.

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1

Dastangoi Blog  
<http://dastangoi.blogspot.co.m/>

2

See Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

3

Anand Giridharadas, "India's use of brain scans in courts dismays critics," *International Herald Tribune*, September 15, 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/09/15/asia/15brainscan.php>

4

Lawrence Liang, "... And Nothing but the Truth, So Help Me Science," *Sarai Reader 07: Frontiers* (2007): 100-110. <http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/07-frontiers>

5

Solomon Benjamin, "Occupancy Urbanism: Ten Theses", *Frontier, Sarai Reader 07*, 2007 <http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/07-frontiers>

6

Sensor-Census-Censor, *Investigating Circuits of Information, Registering Changes of State*, 2007 <http://www.sarai.net/publications/occasional/sensor-census-censor>

7

ibid.

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