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CULTURE REVIEW

## Disruption

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The newly resurgent term ‘disruption’ has its theoretical genesis in the field of eighteenth-century technical communications which incorporated ‘disruptive spectacles within their instructional texts to destabilize accustomed beliefs and advance the unfamiliar perceptions, principles, practices and objects emerging from the nascent scientific community’.<sup>1</sup> It has experienced recent come-back in the start-up business sector to explain innovative technology use; e.g. AirBnB and Uber are touted as disruptions in the hotel and taxi services industry.<sup>2</sup> It has also appeared in unexpected quarters, like in a recent article on Extinction Rebellion’s (XR) strategies and stagings of organised voluntary activism and citizen performance to intensify attention to climate change:

*Critics of XR often argue that citizens are free to protest, as long as they are not disruptive. But, the very point is to be disruptive. ‘The key lesson about all structural political changes is this: disruption works,’ wrote Roger Hallam, one of the co-founders of Extinction Rebellion. ‘Without disruption, there is no economic cost, and without economic cost the guys running this world really don’t care... You have to hit them where it hurts: in their pockets’.<sup>3</sup>*

My use of disruption is at variance from such an understanding, even if my politics may be in alignment with XR’s causes. Trying to fight economic world domination by ‘hurting’ the market is acceding to the terms on which Mammon operates: civil society action has to refuse the very idioms of engagement through which the inexorable march of capital perpetuates fundamental inequality and exploitation. Instead, I trace the idea of ‘civil disobedience’ back to its anti-colonial and anti-racist roots. In the anticolonial sphere, Gandhi’s ethic of non-violence was a disruption to colonial technologies of force and coercion, a counter to Fanonian violence; Audre Lorde’s dictum of the master’s tools never being able to dismantle the master’s house is the disruptive mantra that riffs off Rosa Parks’ insubordination. Perhaps the most powerful visual of disruption in the global world today is that of Hong Kong protesters

following Bruce Lee's dictum to 'Be Water' to counter the unbending will of Chinese Goliath power.<sup>4</sup>

We know from a genealogy of disruption that its uses in the industrial-technological world were prompted by ideas of human progress and advancement, a feature that is reflected in current uses of the term in digital and entrepreneurial spaces. Disruption employs rhetorical strategies such as amplification, improvisation and opposition, to critique extant knowledge traditions and subvert audience expectations. Millennial predictions about the end of civilisation as the Western world knows it, by the likes of Francis Fukuyama (*The Great Disruption: human nature and the reconstitution of global order*) and Paul Gilding (*The Great Disruption: how the climate crisis will bring on the end of shopping and the birth of a new world*) both hone in to a teleological 'Third Wave' conceptualisation of human progress determined by capital and consumption.

In the contemporary hegemonic Indian state's triumphalism that partakes of the bombast of an Asia Rising, disruption arrives through the voices of those who have been comprehensively written out of its elite postcolonial mobilities and avid fellowship in the dream of naturalised funds, or fortunes-without borders. The charge has been led, partly by Dalit and tribal creators who challenge the established *savarna* pieties of an aspirational third-world country's meteoric arrival into transnational, neoliberal marketized spaces of supposed prosperity for all, and partly by those who can only be termed the anti-spotlight 'observers' of a vanishing present. In the last decade, these writers, directors and commentators-at-large have projected their revolutionary socio-political salvos not only on to their intended audiences, but have also found undetected global resonance in the context of a wider, and increasingly rapidly-violently-continually imperilled, fourth world.

The subjects of my ruminations here are disinvested, or divested, from corporate politics and the movement of global goods in the free market. While they use the tools that the world wide web has made available, in order to achieve some of its much-vaunted free movement, they operate in a *non-cooperative way* because they are neither reliant on these technologies for the inspiration behind their work, nor do they achieve the so-valued dissemination due to these networks. I bring to attention three projects that can be read together to compose what Sumana Roy, founder of the web journal *Antiserious*, labels 'a visual archive of contemporary India.' Juxtaposing Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's collection of short stories, *The Adivasi Will not Dance* (2015), against Mayank Austen Soofi's *The Delhi Walla*, the 'Longtime Blog of the World's First Self-Proclaimed Hyperlocal Homer' and P Sainath's living archive, PARI (People's Archive of Rural India), this musing argues that these expressions and exhortations go beyond grand narratives of a secular pluralistic India to methodologically excavate the meanings and continued existence of the same rhetoric, as well as bearing witness to vital lives at the perpetual edge of precarity.

Hansda's text spotlights *adi/original-vasis*/inhabitants who have lived for millennia on lands replete with resources, and therefore are the prime targets of state and central governments for extraction, while the custodians of those lands are subject to unceasing atrocities and abjection: yes, the same story everywhere. In the coal-rich terrain of Jharkhand, long lines of story-telling repressed, the *adivasis* are 'plunged into a life of black rice, blackened streams, a spate of respiratory diseases without cure and near complete destruction of profitable local produce such as mangoes and mahua flowers'.<sup>5</sup> Expected to turn up at official visits for the edification of politicians on yet another round of wheeling and dealing, Hansda's Santhal farmer-musician, Mangal Murmu refuses to perform:

*Johar Rashtrapati-babu... You will now start building the power plant, but this plant will be the end of us all, the end of all the Adivasi. These men sitting beside you have told you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced us out of our homes and villages. We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy? Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance? We Adivasis will not dance.<sup>6</sup>*

Again, not a new story; at least as old as Noongar writer Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*.

Soofi is the anti-flâneur, wandering the world of have-nots in India's capital, 'trying to profile one percent of Delhi's population,' cultivating intimacy with its most neglected denizens and creating an idiosyncratic portrait of a city, having published 3000 blog posts and as many Instagrams in the last 13 years<sup>7</sup>. Too many blogposts start with mourning an artist, a craftsperson, an antiquated chef of ancient recipes, who is no more, and with the demise of such a person, an entire library vanishes into thin air. Others present a stark picture of globe-trotting cosmopolitans whose footprints are too large for the space and oxygen they snatch from the others. On a much grander scale, Sainath's PARI is a digital conglomeration of an unimaginably diverse rural India with all content free to access under Creative Commons and seeking to establish a public resource and living record of a breathing, heaving society at the edge of disappearance. Anyone can contribute a story, anyone can capture with their lens a picture before it dematerialises. Its landing page declares, 'Our journalism is completely independent of governments and corporations—and is funded by readers like you.'

These are archival projects that demolish the first principle of archiving, i.e. historical record keeping. Instead, these projects try to fleetingly capture the today, the here and the now, the daily and the mundane, which narrate the most weighty and punchy stories of our times, and which are indubitably at the verge of extinction at the very moment of their enunciation. They provide critical vocabularies of disruption to create sites of uncertainty and inconvenience through their incommensurable lenses of reading a resurgent national space being swallowed up by the inexorable global.

Will we be disrupted?

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