

Rustom Bharucha
India

From Bones to Sky: Thinking aloud on what we hold in common through differences

The invitation to reflect on the weighty environmental category of ‘The Commons’, lightened by the simpler gloss of ‘what we hold in common’, brought us to the magical island of Paros. Here, in the midst of the Cyclades, the clarity of light and water and the incessant chirping of birds contributed to the sparkle of conversation between strangers from different parts of the world. Undeniably, the invitation was seductive, but it also came with a sense of obligation, an expectation that ‘we’ would have something in common, when, in actuality, we discovered our affinities through deep differences in our relationships to the world and its pressing problems. Like all invitations, which have the aura of a gift that cannot be refused, it was necessary in the course of the symposium to respond to its generosity, as well as to question its premises in a more reflexive mode. Inevitably, we were compelled to travel back to the roots of the word ‘common’, which has been derived in one of its etymological avatars from *com*, ‘together’, and *munis*, ‘under obligation.’

In the elegant formulation of the invitation, there was a turn to universals, to the ‘shared interests of humanity’, which compelled us to re-visit—and circumvent—the somewhat moribund premises underlying the discourse of humanism and the utopian rhetoric of One World. Not unsurprisingly, we were guided towards the reassurance of an apparently common ‘inheritance’: not financial or economic, but elemental. This inheritance of ‘sky, water, public lands, and the airwaves’ was somewhat too expansively linked to ‘culture, science, customs and laws, rituals and rites’,

and later extended to encompass the ‘the public square’ and ‘the Internet.’ Even as these diverse phenomena were subsumed within the continuum of the commons, it was more problematically assumed that they could be passed on ‘undiminished to our heirs’.

Nothing, I would propose, passes on undiminished. All tradition is flux, forever on the point of disappearing even as it persists. Within the rigor of rules informing any inheritance, the laws of mutation—and possible extinction—prevail. Or else, there would be stasis, dogma and frozen truths. In the desperate onus to ‘protect’ the commons, we run the risk of forgetting the death-in-life of creation itself. Moreover, at every step of the way in this web of connections constituting the commons, there is an elision at work. What is being passed off as elemental, universal, and therefore, shared, is, in actuality, subject to more individuated, class-ridden, nationally and racially determined norms and laws of ownership. What is being presented as normative is not representative of the real.

From my location in India, for example, I know that water is not something that ‘we’ (the people of India) share in common. Not only are vast sections of the population denied the right to water through the sheer lack of its availability on a regular basis—and not just in emergency states of drought and famine—the more cruel fact is that low-caste communities, the so-called untouchables, continue to be denied access to water. This includes children in rural schools who may be prevented from drinking water from a

common tap out of fear of pollution. The problem, therefore, does not merely concern the transformation of 'nature' into 'natural resources' through different processes of commodification, by which water is now sold in vast quantities through the sale of bottled mineral water. In addition to the exclusionary power of commodification, whereby vast sections of the population can afford to buy water, there are other more locally determined taboos on the free access to water enforced by religious sanctions and fundamentalist pressures.

Contextual differences, I would emphasize, have to inflect any reading of 'what we hold in common' before we can arrive at a respect for differences. For what would be the point of upholding the commons if this respect did not exist? Wouldn't the commons then be another form of coercive submission to what is incontrovertibly right? At times the differences being elided in the name of the commons appear to be merely sociological: the public square, for instance, drawing on European concepts of civil society and the public sphere, cannot be readily translated into notions of community that continue to prevail in many cultures of the South. In these cultures, pre-modern/anti-modern religious and cultural practices may still be dominant, defying the civic norms determined by the democratic uniformity of citizenship and the dictates of the State.

Yet another difference underlying the ostensibly shared benefits of global modernity can be linked to the indeterminacies of access. The much-hyped ubiquity of the Internet, for instance, is a hoax, even in technologically savvy countries like India, where barely 1 to 2 percent of the entire population has access to the Net. Underlying these global 'commonalities' is the stark reality of inequalities, inequities, and imbalances *within* the borders of specific regions and nations: those who have access to education and technology, and those who don't; those who

are surfing the Net and those who have to yet to obtain electricity in their homes.

Perhaps, these differences would become more evident if we chose to speak about the commons in more than one language, namely English. Even within English, which is the language we shared in our symposium, I would point out the inadvertent dissonances underlying our discourse, as, for example, when 'the tradition of robust communal dialogue' in Greece is invoked as a common point of reference. To my ears, unavoidably tainted by the discourse of Partition and religious violence in the Indian subcontinent, the word 'communal' cannot be separated from 'sectarian.' There's blood in this word, and therefore, I cannot readily associate it with dialogue, but rather with the breakdown of dialogue into irreconcilable differences.

In what language, therefore, can a discourse of the commons be envisioned that does not camouflage these differences? Even as one accepts that no one language is superior to another, and that we are compelled to use English as the language of global convenience, we need to be more alert as to how we *think* within its shifting contours and usages. In this regard, it would be useful to remind ourselves that universals do not just drop out of heaven: they are grounded and emerge out of specific cultural and historical particularities. Indeed, what is interesting is not so much the fact that universals exist, but that one arrives at them through significantly different routes and modes of signification.

So, for example, when one thinks of elements like water or the sky, one is not expected to ask: What is water? What is sky? These elements are taken for granted; they are the givens out of which an exchange of thoughts can materialize. But, what happens when a man from the Bavari tribe in the Rajasthan desert, for instance, is asked this very question, '*Akash kya hain?* (What is sky?)' He points to an earthen pot and traces his finger

on the inner rim of the pot's periphery: For him, this interstice of space between the circle made by his finger and the rim of the pot is *akash* (sky). In this gesture, we are compelled to *see* the sky differently. It is no longer that canopy on top of our heads, which is, in actuality, controlled by the surveillance of national governments.

The sky evoked by the Bavari man from the desert is a symbol, I would suggest, of something that is not readily designated, marked, or prescribed. Indeed, its signification is left somewhat open, and in this regard, his sky is not just a compilation of politically correct attributes, which is how the sky normally gets legitimized in the economic and developmental languages of the commons. In these languages, the sky's benefits are calculated in terms of its maintenance of the earth's temperature, its production of oxygen, its absorption (within limits) of exhaust fumes, and its seemingly infinitesimal capacity to transfer radio signals. As Peter Barnes puts it so succinctly, 'It's not oil we're running out of, it's sky.'

However, the sky that he identifies becomes not just a depleting resource, but also something that needs to be owned, claimed, bought, and sold, rather like any other commodity in the business world over which one can set limits, claim rights, and thereby protect what is in the process of being destroyed. Working unabashedly within the logic of capital, Barnes is clear that unless the sky can be owned on the basis of a *trust* with all the requisite payments, penalties, and dividends, it will no longer be the nourishing force of our lives. This argument, indeed, is grounded in the pragmatics of survival and scarcity, and would seem to be antithetical to the more open-ended gestural envisioning of the sky by the Bavari man from the desert.

And yet, I wonder whether these positions need to be quite so diametrically opposed. Perhaps, Barnes does not sufficiently work

through the discriminations of his multiple understandings of the sky—for instance, between the 'sacred trust' of the sky, and its more material manifestation in a 'nationwide trust' (more specifically, a U.S. Sky Trust). These 'trusts', I would submit, are not easily reconciled. Likewise, while acknowledging that there is 'intrinsic value' to the sky, he is unable to work out in the language of economics and business what form this value could assume. By the time the Sky Trust is mapped out, it is an eminently 'extrinsic', pragmatic business proposal that hinges on the premise that the 'use' of the sky implies 'ownership'.

Invoking Wittgenstein, I would counter this premise and suggest that 'use' is unavoidably linked to 'meaning', but not necessarily to ownership. If I partake of the benefits of the sky or, for that matter, any aspect of nature, I cannot claim to own it. Ownership needs to be further differentiated from the modalities of belongingness. If I belong to something, or more specifically, to someone, as in the state of love, that doesn't mean that I own that someone or some thing. Belonging is about sharing, about losing one's self in a state of imagined affinities, where, in the best of possible worlds, as envisioned by John Donne in *The Good Morrow*, 'each hath one, and is one.'

In short, I see no reason to uphold the commons on the grounds of ownership if only to 'save capitalism from itself', which is Barnes's specific plea. I hold no such brief for capitalism. My interest would be in seeking other ways of envisioning the commons outside the logic of capital. Indeed, the agencies of capitalism, whether in the forms of real estate, genetic engineering, or the mechanization of agriculture, could be the greatest sources of destroying the commons, both at ideational and practical levels. To turn to capital for its rejuvenating possibilities and to disarm it of its negative potentiality through some kind of mimicry of its operative

functions is to play into a dubious logic. Indeed, this logic is not dissimilar from the rationale of deterrence fuelling the race for nuclear power, in which the accumulation of nuclear missiles is viewed as one way of ensuring world peace.

To offer a different understanding of the commons, not anchored in the logic of capital, let me take you to vast stretches of grasslands in Rajasthan called the *oran*. Here, in these empty stretches of the desert, marked by clumps of grass and stubbly plants, studded with wells and small shrines of folk deities, with lizards and insects glistening in the desert sun, one is alerted to a very specific *ethos* of the commons going back many centuries, but which continues to resonate in contemporary India. This is not a history that has its roots in the enclosure movement of medieval England, destroyed by the capitalist greed of feudal landowners and the incursion of new agricultural technologies. Nor is the *oran* a repository of customary laws or common sense affirming a pristine rationality. More emphatically, it is not the surviving remnants of what some bigoted critics of the commons have viewed as primordial competitiveness, which has divided individuals over centuries, driven by their dog-eat-dog vested interests in property and wealth.

I do not wish to romanticize the social and political context surrounding the continued existence of the *oran* in contemporary Rajasthan, where there is no dearth of greedy and venal landowners, steeped in upper-caste notions of entitlement. Clashes between agriculturists and pastoralists over the grazing rights of animals, for instance, continue to be virulent, provoking bloody feuds that defy the laws of the State. How then does the *oran* continue to exist, seemingly oblivious to all these problems and tensions? I would suggest that it has a spiritual sanction which withstands the very real attempts to appropriate the land within its territory. Even

as so-called religious trusts and State agencies like *panchayats* (courts) have attempted to claim the *oran* in many dubious ways, its ethos remains resilient. At a psychological level, one could claim that the guardian deities protecting the *oran* are feared, so much so that no one would presume to exploit its resources for profit without facing dire consequences. Such is the weight of belief invested in this taboo that it begins to function like an irrevocable law.

At a less mythic level, the *oran* is at once similar to and yet different from western environmental models of the commons. For a start, it is not so much a free space as it is a fertile wasteland. The fact that it is not functioning to its maximum capacity does not mean that it ceases to be significant. In its refusal to be other than what it is, it rejects the imperatives of productive utilitarianism. Instead, it teaches us a profound humility that goes beyond the logic of John Locke advocating ‘enough, and as good left in common for others’. The *oran* does not valorize ‘enough’ or even what is ‘sufficient’. It does not legitimize either scarcity or abundance, existing in its own right as much for nature and animals as for human beings, reminding us of the interconnectedness of life itself.

One should qualify at this point that the commonality of the *oran* is something understood within the boundaries of a specific region or locality. It does not have any larger national significance as such. Most people living outside of its precincts may not be aware of its existence. However, this does not stop the State from using the land of the *oran* for the most violent purposes, notably nuclear tests. India is not alone in this regard. It is said that the vast majority of nuclear tests in the world have taken place on the commons, at times in the breathtakingly beautiful islands and atolls of the Pacific Ocean. Just imagine: If Paros had to be subjected to nuclear tests, what would we feel?

Some years ago I remember witnessing the trauma inflicted on local people living in the vicinity of Moruroa following the nuclear tests of the French government on this island. I encountered this disturbing evidence in a video documentary screened in the ethnographic museum of Dahlem in Berlin, more precisely within its panoramic collection of Oceania. Here, surrounded by a vista of fishing nets, hooks, boats, and large National Geographic portraits of islanders fading into sepia tones and staring out into the wilderness, I confronted the ‘commons’ of the museum: a collection made available to the public at large, but which, like other such collections, is not easily separated from the legitimization of colonial loot. Against this eminently civilized commons mediated by the institution of the museum, I was alerted to the harsher destruction of the natural commons in Moruroa.

Is it less violent if nuclear tests take place not in beautiful sites like Moruroa but in the barren interior of the Sahara desert, which is where the French government had first conducted its tests before infiltrating the sanctity of the Pacific Ocean? In Rajasthan, the nuclear tests were conducted in a bleak part of the desert in a place called Pokharan, where life is harsh and poverty omnipresent. When these tests were shown on Indian television, the villagers in this area were interviewed, and, for some of them, it was a matter of pride that Pokharan had finally been recognized in the world map. The irony is savage, compelling ‘us’ (the global interlocutors of the commons) to think harder about our assumed sensitivities. Of what use, one could add, is all this talk about the commons, if it fails to recognize those marginalized sectors of the world’s population that appear on our television screens only in times of disaster? Indeed, does it even matter that one should feel a rush of moral indignation in response to the insidious words, ‘The Buddha is Smiling’, which is the

official Indian mantra announcing the ‘success’ of nuclear tests?

With this perverse reminder, one is compelled to return to the logic of deterrence that I had mentioned earlier to recognize its lucrative benefits. Today, after the nuclear tests in Pokharan and all the appropriate noises made by the ‘big boys’ in the nuclear club not wanting to accept a Third World encroacher, India is more widely accepted as a ‘global partner’ precisely because it has proved its credentials as a principled nuclear power. Finally, we have joined the club, another kind of ‘commons’, but arguably at the expense of respecting wastelands like Pokharan and the people living there. In the larger considerations of geopolitical security, they simply do not exist.

Shifting the emphasis of the commons from universals (and the destruction of universals) through experiments in nuclear power and other such atrocities, we might be better off calling attention to a more productive reading of the commons in relation to what is ordinary. If the ordinary doesn’t always get named or recognized, it could be that it is too common to matter. Relegated to the margins and the vanishing points of everyday life, it does not appear to warrant attention. And yet, perhaps, it is in these very undistinguished areas of ordinariness that one can begin to arrive at a new understanding of the commons, incorporating what we can potentially hold together through an embrace of differences.

The ordinary is not to be equated with the homely, with what is comfortable and capable of warming the cockles of our hearts. At times the ordinary is harsh, even terrifying in its capacity to survive and struggle for existence. Keeping this truism in mind, I would like to share a story with you now that has some elements of harshness and terror, but which can illuminate the vital differences encompassing the commons.

I am standing in a wasteland on the edge of the desert in the border region of Jodhpur, Rajasthan. This is not an *oran* stretching in front of me. What I see for miles and miles is a field of bones. Animal bones: Bones of buffalo, cow, camel, goat, sheep, and other unrecognizable creatures. Bleached under the sun, these bones have acquired the colour of dust. Surveying these bones, it is hard not to imagine a battlefield signifying the end of life itself, from the ancient sites of Armageddon and Kurukshetra to the contemporary killing fields in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Bones: What we hold in common. The common denominator of what remains after death, in different states of disintegration.

Suddenly I notice colour: pinpoints of bright blue and shocking pink, surreal dots and patches punctuating the monochromatic dust of the bones. I realize that these colours are pieces of plastic wedged within the skeletal remains of the animals. A daunting thought: In the absence of food, these animals have eaten plastic in their lifetimes, and some of them have died with the plastic intact within the cavities of their stomachs. Even in death, plastic remains non-biodegradable.

Plastic: what we hold in common. This anachronistic but still lingering menace of modern technology accumulates in noxious piles in different parts of the world, contributing to disease and pollution. No amount of grassroots resistance, official bans by environmentally sensitive governments, or biodegradable alternatives, has been able to banish plastic from the surface of the earth. We seem destined to live with it.

Back to the bones, I am alerted to yet another dimension of what we have in common, but in a singularly uncommon context. My travelling companion and guide is a seer of the desert, who has spent many years in close contact with tribal and nomadic communities,

whose knowledge systems he has closely investigated. He is not content to stop with the observation of mere bones and plastic. He urges me to look more carefully. ‘See,’ he instructs. ‘Are the horns and the hooves of the animals intact?’

I am unable to see the difference. Why is he asking me see something that is so obviously macabre, if not grotesque? Better not to see such meaningless minutiae in the remains of the dead: aren’t the bones enough? Then I realize that he is asking me to make a connection between the bones and the larger world of trade and commerce. The buying and selling of animals doesn’t end with their deaths. Their bones can be used in the local glue and pharmaceutical industries, where they earn a lot of money for shrewd speculators in the bone industry.

Trade and commerce: what we hold in common. If not in animal remains, then in the body parts of human beings—kidneys, hearts, livers, and skeletons: these too are part of a roaring global trade, with the detritus of the Third World contributing to the health of First World consumers.

Returning to the bones, my seer-companion is in no mood to stop his reflections on material culture. I am duly reminded that there are skills involved in severing bone from bone, horns and hooves from the joints of skull and feet. These unrecognized surgical skills belong to the most downtrodden of scavengers. In India we have many words for them: untouchables; *harijan* (‘children of God’). This patronizing category popularized by Gandhi has now been replaced by *dalit*, the more dignified and proud designation of the low-caste oppressed.

Untouchability: what we hold in common. At first glance, this seems like an exaggerated reflex, if not an insult to the laws of democracy and civility, guaranteeing equality of citizenship, hygienic disposals of the dead and sanitized

garbage clearance, which are the *sine qua non* of developed countries. No bones of animals are to be found in their public spaces or urban hinterlands. Indeed, more often than not, there are no animals in sight in their social landscapes, everything squeaky-clean and neat, in place. But, a closer look at the interstices and undergrounds of global cities would reveal the scavengers at work: those untouchable non-citizens, the toilers and laborers, who keep the city clean. More minutely, in the cosmopolitan sectors of the global metropolis, untouchability is reaffirmed as the citizens avoid staring into the eyes of strangers, walking past them as if they do not exist. The Other, in its proliferating avatars of suspicious Muslims and grubby immigrant workers, pollutes the gaze of the citizenry, even in the most disciplinary regimes prohibiting eye-contact.

In the midst of these dark thoughts, I turn to my seer for guidance. But he is silent, munching betel nut with equanimity. Then I remember what he has told me many times: these scavengers are not just bone-collectors. They are also singers of the most prodigious and metaphorically rich songs. One could call these songs the epics of the downtrodden, far less recognized than those of Homer and Vyasa. These epics incorporating ancestral genealogies encompass the sky, earth, water, fire and ether: the *panchabhuta* or the five elements constituting life itself. Rich in cosmic allusion, these songs are also inseparable from the actual struggle and survival that go into the degraded practice of bone-collecting.

Songs: what we hold in common. But who is listening to the songs of the downtrodden? How can they be heard? Would it not be better if there were no such songs so long as they continue to be linked to debased actions like scavenging and garbage collecting? Our readiness to answer these questions with an emphatic denial is jeopardized by our absence of exposure to the realities of the

downtrodden. These realities seem to annihilate the possibilities of ‘commonality’, even while sustaining the livelihood of entire communities.

From bones to sky, the antinomies and injustices of the universe are interwoven into the contradictory songs of the downtrodden that cry out to be sung and shared. Perhaps, this too we have in common: the need to share stories and narratives, and to listen to forgotten or marginalized histories, as we attempted to do so, in a spectrum of registers and cultural contexts, in our meeting in Paros. Back in Calcutta, speculating and thinking aloud on what we could still have in common through our articulation of differences, I face the New Year with the growing realization that we need a commons, more urgently than ever before, for our survival, sanity, and peace of mind. The lessons of Paros linger with continuing doubt, inner dissent, and an openness to positive failure.

January 1, 2007

*All references to Rajasthan in this essay are drawn from my book **Rajasthan: An Oral History** (Penguin India, 2004), which is a compilation of conversations with the late Komal Kothari, the ‘seer’ addressed in the latter part of the essay.*

*