Academic Pilgrimages: What I learnt on studying Banāras

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After ten years of research in Banāras, from 1981 to 1990, I found myself, together with my husband, having set up an organisation, NIRMAN, and a school, Southpoint Vidyashram. I also found myself transformed in my methodological perspectives, my philosophy of life, and my ideology of public work. I questioned more, I had more answers, and then again more questions. For the rash, ecumenical decision to set up a school, and the changes that coloured the rest of my life, I blame only Banāras. What is it about Banāras that influenced me in this dramatic way?

Turning over all the complex things that have taken place during the thirty two years of my pilgrimage to Banāras, I feel that I can best sort out the fruits of that pilgrimage as lessons I have learnt that I call 'Anger,' 'Pain,' and 'Imagination and Love.'

Anger

My long-time informant Tara Prasad was a carver of wooden figures. He would sit on his haunches in a quiet corridor that opened on one side to the courtyard of his home where his wife worked and his daughter played, and on the other side to the lane of his neighbourhood, where an acquaintance occasionally passed. He would look up and speak, and quickly look down again to continue chiselling. He wore a white *dhoti* and *kurta*, and when he was done with work he washed up and changed to a fresh set of dhoti-kurta. Then, as if on a holiday, he strolled out to visit people and places. He always walked. He was at home in the city. Of course he had his flaws like the rest of us, but I found him impressive and likeable because he was so articulate about his philosophy, and so full of humour and irony. His professional and social life was rich and rewarding. He was illiterate and had never been to school. He was dirt-poor.

Another long-time informant, Markande, was a carver of stone boxes and candle stands. He worked in a room with lathe machines that produced a fine white dust. Half a dozen other young men worked with him, all dressed in brief *lungīs*, all coated with fine white dust. When he was done with work, he bathed, dressed carefully in fresh pants and shirt, and went visiting, to look at and watch things, to talk and to listen to music. He was extremely proud of his artistry. He considered himself one of the best kinds of people there could be, intelligent, smart, articulate, creative, and appreciative of the world's beauty. He was somewhat literate, having attended school

for two or three years before dropping out. Once, asked to read a newspaper, he surprised himself and those around him, by reading it comfortably. He was so poor that he and his family often went without meals.

I write about them in the past tense because I did my first round of research with them in 1981–83. Tara Prasad died long ago and his grandson is now a young adult. Markande is no longer a stone carver and, many jobs later, is now retired, almost a *sādhu*. His son is older than he was then and his other three children are also almost adults.

A third informant who I have known for a shorter time than these two and who is still in my life is Wasim Akhtar. He is the much younger brother-in-law of my favourite informant, Shaukat Majid, a sari designer and poet. The men of this family are all weavers. The women prepare the warp, weft, and bobbins, and trim the *zari* or gold and silver thread from the wrong side of saris to make them ready for sale when finished. If they know how to, they do *zardozi* or embroidering, a craft independent of weaving. The men work in little manufactories with four or more pit looms and jacquard machines. They wear only *lungī*s and listen to radios. The women work singly or in pairs on stretched out frames with fabric and bend over with their needles and coloured threads and spangles. Both work at home and get up as they like to attend to whatever they have to do at home, or to talk to a visitor or family member. They are all unschooled, but have all spent about two years each learning to read the Qur'an.

This encounter with the artisans of Banāras taught me a lot. Because of who I was, an educated middle-class Indian, I had not gone to Banāras thinking, 'This is a mysterious, exotic place that I am an outsider to.' Outsider I *was*, but in ways I had never expected. As an Indian, I had assumed I belonged in India and was always a part of India, one with other Indians. Banāras taught me about difference.

There is a discourse of education and of children in India that may be accurately described as 'modernist.' This discourse assumes that formal education, measured by literacy and success in state-regulated schools, is of central importance. Children who do not get this education are 'failed' or 'backward.'[1] Adults who do not have it are a huge problem, and are never spoken of positively. Government and private reports, such as the 'Public Report on Basic Education in India' (PROBE 1999), or the 'Annual Survey of Education Report' (ASER), document the various failures of formal education in India. However, this discourse of the superiority of formally educated adults and children is not shared by everyone in India. It is not shared by artisans, for instance, and because artisans have a high evaluation of their own identities, it may accurately be called an anti-artisan discourse.

When working in Banāras I understood that I shared the premises of modernity, and believed in the assumptions of 1950, that the people of India constitute for themselves a sovereign, democratic, secular republic, with equal access to education for everyone. This faith in the Constitution, together with my research on the artisans

1 'Backward' is a legal term in India. 'Left behind' is a legal term in the USA.

of Banāras, troubled me by the questions it raised. Why are some people considered stupid and even incapable of learning, and others considered to be just what the Constitution ordered? Why is there such a big gap between 'knowledge' as spouted by schooled people and 'knowledge' that is the province of the artisan, between the 'learning' acquired from a textbook and the 'learning' acquired elsewhere ? Who has given the definers of the correct 'knowledge' and 'learning' their power? Why are uneducated people typically poor? Why are they, Tara, Markande, Waseem, happy in their illiteracy? Or are they deceiving us that they are?

My colleague, friend and husband, Som Majumdar, and I, tried to answer the questions with some practical action. We took the predictable steps taken by the nationalists of the nineteenth-twentieth centuries in India – we started a school. Unlike them, I like to think, we did not precisely want 'to build up the nation.' But like them, we were angry with the inequality our informant-friends were subjected to, and the prospect of this continuing to future generations. The solution seemed to lie in schooling. So, if we could educate them, we must.

There is another part to the question, however. While most artisans were left out in the cold by the discourse of modernity, some did subscribe to it. When they said, 'All right, our profession is backward. We will agree to be schooled and move on,' they were unable to move – after years in which the child gave all her time to school instead of, as before, learning her family craft.

When I met those of my old informants' descendants recently whom I had not been in touch with, I was left extremely sad and angry, albeit confirmed in a hypothesis. Ramesh, the son of my good friend Mohan Lal, of *kasera*, or metalworker caste, roundly blames contemporary schooling for their plight. He himself 'studied and studied,' and 'schooled and schooled' his children (as he and his brothers put it), but 'nothing happened.' They could not qualify for any job or competitive examination. '*Bahut* form *bhare* (We filled out many forms,)' meaning that they kept trying for various openings, and got nowhere. Similarly, Markande's two older children studied in private schools and are still blue collar workers like him. Waseem Akhtar's older daughter studied in a private school somewhere and could not fulfil her dream of working. What they shared is the same dream and disappointment as millions of Indians, that schooling is supposed to produce professional and social mobility, but actually does not. It leaves the young person *less* educated than before.

I cannot say this emphatically enough. Today, Markande's two younger daughters go to the school we set up in 1990. One is about to graduate and go on for higher studies. She wants to be a teacher and it is certain that she can be one. Waseem Akhtar's younger son and daughter are about to graduate from our school. They are smart and confident and excellent learners and can choose to study towards almost any profession they like. Tara Prasad's grandson studied elsewhere, in a combination of private and government schools, and could not get a job. He continues in his father's working class job.

This is a more complicated story than simply one of 'artisans have been constituted by modernity as backward and we have to change that.' Yes, they have been so

constituted. But many of them do want mobility. For those who do not, there should be a better place for them in modernity. For those who do, schools should deliver on the promise made by them. I want to emphasise that this is not of the level of 'a good idea.' It is for the *survival* of thousands and millions of citizens. In Banāras, I was brought to tears to see friends malnourished and old before their times, only because they had trusted the promise of schooling and it had failed them. Some crises arouse us to anger because of the ineptness that produces them. Our discourse of modernity and our poor delivery of it is such a crisis. It was very evident in Banāras and taught me anger.

Pain

So I got interested in schools. In 1986 I began a historical and ethnographic project on education in Banāras, and in my ethnographic research on schools, I observed in hundreds of classrooms. There was typically a singular absence of humour and imagination in all of them. It was if teachers were both untrained professionally to think of children as their 'clients,' and had *also* forgotten their own human experiences of what children were and how children's minds worked. We had the worst of two worlds: a modern one with modern-style school systems that did not deliver because the premises of modernity were alarmingly absent, such as individual rights, professional ethics, and systemic management. And a pre-modern one with intimate spaces, flexible rules, fluid disciplining, but which in fact was now without its teeth, seen as backward.

An instance that comes to mind is one in a Kindergarten classroom in Tulsi Vidya Niketan. The subject was 'G. K.,' that is, General Knowledge. The topic of the day was 'India.' The teacher was going through questions and answers, asking the question, giving the answer, and having the students chorus the question and answer repeatedly after her.

Having asked about the main rivers of India and other topics in Geography, she came to the festivals of India. One of the 'festivals' is apparently Children's Day, celebrated on 16th November. The question was 'When is Children's Day?' The answer was 'Children's Day is on 16th November.' It seemed simple enough, and the children already had previous practice with a dozen similar questions. I sat at the back of the class, as always, taking notes. It was afternoon. The children sat in rows on uncomfortable benches facing the teacher. She spoke more vivaciously than usual, my experience told me, because of the presence of a visitor. Yet, her teaching strategy could not be more ineffective. Children like to chorus. So they had been giving resounding answers so far. The activity was wearing thin, however. The children shifted in their seats and gave ample signals of their patience reaching its end. I stifled a yawn.

Suddenly the class came to life. In answer to 'When is Children's Day?' the students obediently chorused, 'Children's Day is 16th November.' Except for one voice. It said '16th *Novembers*.' The teacher paused. 'Who said that?' No one answered. She corrected the mistake and asked the question again. Again a voice said, '16th *Novembers*.' '*Who said that?*' she said, a sharp edge to her voice.

Every time the teacher corrected the mistake and led the question and answer chorus, one little voice hissed '16th *Novembers*.' If a child had been confused in the beginning about the random deployment of 's' in English (as, for instance in 'Children's'), that child had moved from confusion to a deliberate conspiracy against the teacher. Each time the answer included the rogue 's' the teacher was driven to further annoyance. Soon, she approached a level of frenzy. She threatened her class out of all proportion to the misdemeanour. '*Agar kisi ke bhī muṅh se yah śabd sunā, to maiṅ mar ke bahar kar dūṅgī* (If I hear this sound from anyone's mouth, I will beat them and throw them out of the class).' Obviously, she could not keep to her threat. She got more and more furious, and the child was never discovered. It is fair to say that as the period ended, I felt that the child-victor had vanquished the opponent, the teacher, who was lying in a helpless heap on the floor brought to defeat by her own short-sightedness in beginning the tournament at all.

It might seem that such data merely confirms a trivial fact we all know anyway: that Indian teachers have a (painfully) poor sense of what children are; that they are routinely unfriendly to children; that they have weak procedures of teaching; and are humourless and unimaginative. But, *because* I was in Banāras classrooms while all this was happening, the problem was not trivial, but immense, and chronic. The question became: *what would it take to reform the poor technical base and the poor motivation of the teachers? What were their undiscovered strengths and skills to nurture?*

It was a question of prepossessing intellectual challenge, resting necessarily on a holistic understanding of teachers. The question is not simply the technical one of what formal procedures, structures, and disciplinary rules are lacking and need to be put in place. The problem is not simply 'poor teaching.' What we have here is a problem that is historical, cultural, sociological, political, and discursive. The scene sketched by me above is a microcosm that shows us that not only has the teacher failed, but the society, the nation state, and the discourse of modernity have all shown a pathetic inadequacy. What has succeeded is the intelligence of the child and his or her spirit of rebellion that asserts that even if the adults and their system are stupid and boring, reducing themselves (the adults) to anger, *she*, the child, will not give into it so easily.

We may pause here to ask, does not the child revolt always, everywhere? Are not adults unimaginative and humourless always? There are brilliant pictures of the experience of the child in an insensitive adult world, in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in R.K. Narain's *Swami and Friends*, in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office,* and in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. And of course there are thousands of children's stories from the child's point of view. Reading any of these, we may feel resigned to the presence of two worlds, the child's and the adult's, destined to remain distant from each other, the child's represented, at best, only by great poets and authors. But, for better or for worse, thanks to the power of ethnography that brought home the pain of the child to me, the rich fiction on the subject, and – may I say – the child in me, I was not thus resigned. From 1986 onwards I took on as an intellectual,

and also a technical and political challenge, understanding and then fighting against the pain of children in the world adults had created for them.

I also took on the challenge of a new creative anthropology through mulling over my emotions during the research process. I have done some three research projects so far in my professional career as a historian and anthropologist. The first was on the 'Work and leisure worlds of artisan men in Banāras.' The second was on the ''No-work' and 'no-leisure' world of the 'not-artisan' women in Banāras.' The third was on education in Banāras and in India. I became extremely uncomfortable when the pattern that revealed itself.

The pattern was this. In spite of the negative sound of the second topic, "'no-work' and 'no-leisure' of 'not-artisan' women," both the first two topics on artisan men and 'non-artisan' women revealed to me worlds of untold riches. Even though in both cases the people were very poor and insecure, they were rich in manifold ways, from philosophy to humour. Schools and schooling, as my third project revealed, were hugely impoverished by contrast. They had little philosophy that thrilled, and humour only in the sense of painful humour and sarcasm. The first fifteen years of my historical-anthropological practice made me a happy, excited person, not unlike a person in love. I had all the symptoms similar to those of other anthropologists besotted with "their" people, full of thoughts of them, genuinely fond of them and with a high regard for their qualities, anxious to have more intimate contact with them, jealous of others trespassing into their territory. I loved my artisans. I loved their women who apparently had no work or leisure. I loved the daily routines of everyday life in Banāras.

The twenty five years of my next project on education produced novel responses in me. I was unhappy at the data I uncovered, disliked rather than loved what I got to know, and with time grew to have progressively *less* regard for the qualities of my educator informants. I hated the schools I studied. I distrusted the educators I talked to. I began to despise the daily routines of schooling in Banāras and in all other places in India with very rare exceptions. Instead of the usual anthropological and historical approach of respecting the 'culture' you study and professing humility before its riches, I found that in all honesty I would have to adopt the approach of condemning the 'culture' of schools I was studying and to make, however humbly, the claim that my informants lacked certain insights that seemed to me self-evident, and despite a lack of experience in education, that occurred to me regularly. I was getting ready to plunge into this 'culture' in a very serious way by *becoming* one of the very educators of Banāras such as I was studying. This was a risky and troubling step to take that sometimes gave me nightmares, and always made me feel uncertain and on my defensive.

I understand now that it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with the subject of my research. I think that everyday life and work and leisure patterns of people like artisans are *in fact* structured and philosophically informed, and therefore, so to speak, 'beautiful' and 'rich,' 'real' and 'authentic,' not in the sense of unchanging or adhering to some textual model, but in the sense of being exemplars of

people's agency and action. They are of course far from perfect in a political sense, being rife with family and community-based gender, age, and class inequalities and abuses.

Who should I contrast them to in my education research? My informants in education were, in turn, teachers, students, and administrators. They were often in direct or indirect opposition to each other in terms of their interests. What was good for one was bad for the other and vice versa. I would like to claim that my primary informants were the students. If I took the point of view of the students I felt strongly that the school culture I was studying was horrible. It was not intelligent or well planned, and was superficial, manipulative, and painful.

Apart from the shortcomings of teachers, there were two other areas of enquiry that called to me by virtue of their obvious centrality. One was space. Schools in Banāras were called by euphemistic names such as 'Oxford' or 'Cambridge.' They chose to have an English name such as 'Sunny Valley' or 'Moonbeam' or the words 'Saint' or 'Convent.' They professed to have 'CBSE' (Central Board of Secondary Education) recognition or to use 'playway methods.' In reality, they were schools set up by people of little knowledge or experience about children, often in residential buildings with no resources such as playgrounds, library, or teaching materials. The physical spaces were unfriendly and often unsuitable. The claims made were hypocritical and false. The spaces could be excused if the teaching methods had been imaginative. But the combination of blatantly inappropriate spaces plus poor teaching methods was inexcusable.

The third problem area was the curriculum. I understood it finally as 'the school-home divide.' From language, to the use of space and body language, to the very ideas and concepts taught, the curriculum was degrading to the home culture of children. At best it was indifferent and distanced. Formal schooling taught children that they had to become new people who were different to, and looked down upon, their families. Had I not first known the families, I would have perhaps been misled by the monolithic system called formal education and not realised the size of the problem. The problem is not merely one of discourse and power, as to how education despises the non-educated. It is one of content. Our curriculum in schools is so much poorer for distancing itself from the family. The vast resources of techniques, narratives, symbols, systems that exist in children's home lives are not imaginatively used by educators. Their teaching is weaker than it needs to be *and* children do not learn to think of themselves as members, and hopefully, leaders of society.

Imagination

Vārāṇasī is a small city in Northern India. Vārāṇasī is *small* only by today's standards, being without major industry, and only slowly being "developed" with a flyover or two and high-rise apartment buildings – and cafes. In the past it has been understood as *big* by virtue of its sheer importance. It has been the centre of Hinduism and one of the most important pilgrimage sites on the subcontinent. I have used it as a

case of modernity in India, arguing that while it has a distinct history and identity, it is also representative of small-town Indian life.

There is a genre of 'praise literature' called *māhātmya* that tells us about the centrality of Banāras/Kāśī/Vārāṇasī for the Hindu pilgrim. But there is also a secondary literature in History, Sociology, Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Ethnomusicology that tells us about the importance of Vārāṇasī for all kinds of production, service, and consumption, including in education. These studies make a strong connection between the economic prosperity, political stability, urban munificence, and intellectual growth of the city. They document that in late Vedic times, Banāras was a flourishing kingdom with a high level of education and intellectual-cultural transmission. In Buddhist times, it was a Vedic seat of learning that Gautam Buddha preached in. Then it became a place of Buddhist learning through his activities at Sarnath. In the following two millennia, the fortunes of Vārāṇasī went up and down with political processes and commercial activities. The trading centre of a fertile and productive hinterland, Vārāṇasī grew into a cosmopolitan city proud of its merchants, bankers, manufacturers and traders who migrated there from all parts of South Asia. They developed a composite culture called by the epithet 'Banārasi.' Part of its ethos was to spend as liberally as one earned, to revel in eccentricity (*akharpan*), to be full of a *joi de vivre* (*mauj* and *masti*). A businessman or aristocrat's worth was reflected in his patronage of teachers, students, scholars, priests, wrestlers, musicians, and poets.

The long-term 'success' of Vārāṇasī may be largely measured by the fact of its economic and commercial stability in the colonial period. While artisans in Bengal lost their market and their livelihood, landed people lost their land and perhaps their wits, and scholars and teachers were suddenly players in a tragedy where there was no more respect for their learning, Banāras' was a story of stability and even prosperity. Banāras had its crafts manufacture, its trading and banking, its ritual and hospitality services. More wealth flowed in as old aristocrats came to live there on finding colonial rule impinging on their privileges elsewhere. One gilded a temple dome, another endowed a library. One started a scholarship for needy students, another built a hostel. Banāras came to be full of parks, monasteries, hostels, endowed institutions, trusts, Sanskrit schools, Vedic schools, and campuses where many teaching and learning activities go on. Outside these places, merchants still conducted their commerce in old ways and trained their sons to do likewise. Musicians and dancers passed on their specialisations. Ritualists protected their lore by teaching select students.

Banāras' is a case study of economic processes producing strong cultural systems, yet not every part of the cultural systems, if any at all, can be explained by simply the economics. I wrote a piece on the Gaṅgā at Banāras, in the doing of which I had to acknowledge afresh that we were looking at a marvellous feat of the imagination. To conceptualise a river, however benign, as a goddess that was then sung to, danced out, eulogised, and adored, was a feat of the imagination that deserved respect. The particular philosophy of balance that made it possible to have both strong commerce and an imaginative cultural system was doubly impressive.

I came to understand myself better as I came to understand Banāras. Via these two, I came to understand the modernity of India. I was working on the intellectual history of India and struggling to define the nature of the new educated Indian person. Taking myself as a case, I asked, 'What gives me this appreciation for our mythology and epics? Why do I love Indian music and dance? Why is there a continuity for me of the past into the present? None of these things, after all, were part of my curriculum of study. My schools, on the contrary, were adamant that they must form me into a new image through their syllabus of studies.'

I realised that just as Banāras is a lived-in culture that surrounds you and plays itself out, so is India altogether. Growing up in small towns, I had witnessed late-night performances and imbibed their narratives. I had hobnobbed with ordinary people and bridged the gap between the western educated and the masses. I took completely for granted living-in-the-present, 'irrationality,' 'superstition' and mythology. I had understood myself to be a through-and-through product of my formal education, but living in Banāras revealed to me that my imagination was intact.

My grand approach to Indian education was formed, therefore, in Banāras. This approach states that education in modern India is not a singular education, located in the school and college, but has historically been a *plural* education, located partially at home and the neighbourhood/street/city, and in the mother tongue, and therefore located in all the narratives available in these two spatial and linguistic locations. A modern educated Indian person has a comfortable plural identity and has had that for the last 150 years. That this is possible, and indeed enriching and empowering, was the lesson I learnt from Banāras. In the earlier sections I have emphasized difference. This split or difference between the formally educated and the informally educated that I witnessed on the ground, and experienced within myself, had a positive twist. It was also a *plurality* that had historically been empowering and could be made empowering again if applied to education.

My research had already shown that the people considered 'backward' and 'uneducated' were not 'uneducated' at all, but were quite impressively 'educated': they could calculate orally, they knew local histories and folk science, and they had structure in their lives based on complex epistemologies and ontologies. Because educators do not acknowledge this, the burden of backwardness becomes unrealistically increased until it becomes a huge obstacle in the otherwise possible schooling of uneducated people. The discourse of backwardness in South Asia is so overbearing that it has crucial bearing on people's immediate ability to perform, and warps government and activists' ability to think carefully about structural problems.

There is also an element of *resistance* to the state and NGO discourse by the so-called 'backward.' There is enough pleasure in life for people in the provinces, in small towns and villages, to philosophise that they are well off, that cities like Delhi or Mumbai are horrible, that lifestyles of the rich and famous are over-stressful, that they cannot imagine a life without the everyday freedoms and pleasures they have. These might include the most trivial and mundane activities, such as hanging around with friends drinking tea or chewing pan, sitting or strolling by the riverside, eating

fresh home-cooked meals, daily routines and regimes, networks of friends, an overall experience of freedom from office schedules, factory bells, and external control. When we list the pleasures, they seem trivial or mundane only *within* our discourse of progress and backwardness. This very discourse that is supposed to resolve the problem, makes it difficult for us to assess the problem.

Most anthropological literature correctly emphasises, not the love of freedom, but the structure and discipline in people's oral and indigenous knowledge. Rather than being unstructured, the problem with old-fashioned life was that it was *over-codified*, if anything. Each kind of work, each particular life role, has its codes of conduct. Then, more formal training in any knowledge or art is full of rules. Learning the Vedas is perhaps the most structured, learning Sanskrit in general, learning music or dance follows closely, learning a craft or skill comes close after. But all this is stood on its head in the discourse of modernity. Let us look briefly at one familiar discipline of modernity, that of space.

In modernity, space should be specialised and set up with many objects (excepting for the Japanese). A madrasa classroom today is largely organised in an 'Indian' way. It has a mat on the floor, a white sheet, a low floor desk for the teacher and maybe a bolster pillow. Students take off their shoes at the door and sit cross-legged on the sheet. A modern classroom by contrast *must* have desks and chairs, one to each student. It should preferably have things on the wall and things in the cupboard. Everyone keeps shoes on and has a whole attire of a uniform. It is not that this is not justified. It is that because it is considered normative, the other set up becomes *backward*. The two could be seen as two cultural systems each with its rationality. In the history of India, they are not *merely* two cultural systems, however. The modern one dominates over the other. For us, as reflexive moderns who wish to prevail in the interests of people, the domination itself creates a problem. Some cannot give up their preferred system, some will not.

It should be possible to accept that the modern one should not dominate both because it is technically not the best system, and because of the politics of domination. We should develop a third way out of the two dichotomies that have emerged historically, and have the confidence to accept many indigenous practices that presently have the image of backwardness. Among these are sitting on the floor (in modern terms, good for the body) and having few artifacts around in space (in modern terms, good for the environment.)

In short, there has been for a century and a half a plural education for the upper classes in India which has successfully made them both 'traditional' and 'modern.' This plurality was produced by education separately conducted in the home and the school. Lower classes did not experience this because they were mostly unschooled. But today, when they are ready for schooling, it is possible to adapt this model. By bridging the family-school divide and rowing together, we would find a plausible education that actually did justice to our children.

Love

However, are there are not some divides that cannot be bridged and new techniques needed for those? To continue our historical narrative, as colonialism flourished in South Asia, the picture gradually changed in Banāras. The number of universities and colleges grew, and the numbers of those converted to its values increased. Many who had been convinced earlier that they could continue on their familiar paths forever, recognised that the state's support was crucial. The economic, administrative, legal and educational changes affecting the whole country did have a crucial effect on them as well. They could not keep aloof from the change because the very structure they existed within was changing or had changed. We can look at one example.

The Agrawal Mahajani Pathshala (the Accounting School of the Agrawal merchants) taught its old curriculum well into the 1930s. This was a curriculum with its own language and mathematics, and style of teaching. It taught no English and had no truck with colonial education. However, first they had to set up a school building because that was the definition of 'school' now. They had to have a fixed curricula, examinations and salaried teachers because those were all part of the definition of a 'school' now. Finally, they had to have English as part of their curriculum. In this case, it was popular demand. They would simply have been left with no students had they not made this change. The management acted weakly for some time, but figured out what they needed to do to run the school.

Sometime over the last fifty years or so, the inbred resilience in Banāras that oriented the city to commercial, intellectual and artistic success, got broken. The conundrum that has emerged is the following, and I again claim that the story of Banāras, for all its peculiarities, is the story of all of India.

We in India want education for all and we want *modern* education. The history of modernity in India has produced a comfort with certain trappings of modernity, such as capitalism and consumerism, information technology and global commerce. It has not revealed, yet, to Indians the inevitability of the *discipline* of modernity. The same people who want modern education, and some other nice modern things, are not prepared to voluntarily give up certain values and practices. I have an example from NIRMAN.

In my organisation, staff members are late everyday and believe that, because they are loyal, hardworking and *nice* people who have never knowingly hurt anyone and so on, the staff manager and I, the director, will overlook their lateness and not penalise them. Some of these people have been working with us for ten years and have been reprimanded again and again in individual and group meetings. But they still get late. What is going wrong? How may it be corrected?

What is going wrong is that we in this particular organisation, have not decided yet on what we want. We like the innocence of the people who ask personally, politely, humbly, for their lateness to be overlooked. We think, 'She simply did not understand.' The naiveté of her position is surprising, but also charming. Being from the same society, we understand her in unstated ways. We know her home situation, her family setup, her constraints. She may even elaborate on her wrong doing herself

and tell us, 'We have had no water in our neighbourhood for three days. The pipe has burst and not been fixed. Everyone has to bring in water from the hand pump outside. Lines start forming at five in the morning. No matter how early I start, I get late, didi.' We can picture it perfectly. We lecture her, mentor her, advise her. We threaten and cajole. But we do not have strict consequences: half a day's salary cut for the third tardy morning; dismissal upon ten tardy points. Partly we do not do this is because in a city like Banāras, no one does. To just hear of this policy would make staff members jittery and we would have a huge turnover on our hands. But partly we do it out of a vague humanitarianism.

When we think about it rationally, we realise our fallacy. Our whole exercise in running a model organisation is defeated by people like Kanti, the morning cook, coming late. If she is late, she cannot serve breakfast on time. Teachers cannot eat, or they cannot reach their classes on time. The idea of having them ready in good time before their classes is defeated. If we *did* have a staff turnover, the discomfort of training new staff members would be overridden by increased efficiency. But what about the human aspect of recognising Kanti's problems and wishing to support her in some of the structural weaknesses of civic life that she experiences?

Maybe what we need to do is to support her in other ways. We can change her job and her timings. We can offer her ways in which she can subvert or resolve the problems of water and so on. We can do a number of things, *after first ensuring the efficiency that we need to carry on those operations that are the* raison d'etre *of the organisation*. For that, we should make no compromises. For us to compromise on the discipline, and make excuses to the people victimised by *our* incompetence in managing our staff, is to replicate the behaviour of Kanti who feels victimised by the water supply branch of the Banāras Municipality. She feels that we ought to understand if she tells us this story. We in turn feel that teachers should understand about the late breakfast if we tell them Kanti's and then our story.

The cycle can never be broken thus. Our behaviour is like a model of the state of India. In both cases what needs to be done is to make a choice. If we want modern functioning, we have to have impeccable attention to punctuality, a myriad other rules, strict overseeing of them, and consequences when they are broken. We have to have a rule of rules: *make a hard rule and never break it*. In India, just as in our organisation, we have not confronted this harsh choice yet. In a sense we are too intelligent, because to be intelligent is to be flexible. We are too complex and can see the many texts currently playing themselves out, many beneath the surfaces. We are historically and socially sensitive. We can see others' points of view. We know that difference exists. For efficient management, for a modernity that functions, much of this must be sacrificed.

The biggest challenge posed by Banāras is this: how to modernise, to change effectively *in the interest of Banārasīs themselves*, without sacrificing the *joi de vivre*, the profound philosophy of balance, the sheer imagination and creativity of everyday life in the city. All the solutions and strategies that exist are destructive ones that impose one set of norms on another. More, they are all based on distrust and dislike.

I label them colonial, because of the 'us'-'them' divide that is inherent to a colonial relationship. I battled with trying to build strategies that are based on – pardon the mushy connotation inherent in the word – love. The strategies have an institutional home: a *Centre for Post-colonial Education.*

As everyone knows, the secret of true love is to like people for what they are and not in an image of them that we have created ourselves. To this, I add my historian's and anthropologist's perspective. People are 'what they are' in a complex way, in both space and time. In 'space,' they are not the category by which they are usually described. They are not simply their caste or community, their family or background. They are not transparent and predictable because of their education, their clothes or their speech. Rather they are the members of sub-groups and have self-definitions. They have identities defined by gender, class, age, and interest, and they make further voluntary divisions within the larger, more apparent category. Before we like them for 'what they are,' we need to labour to unpeel the covers over their preferred selves.

In 'time,' people are processes, on the way to becoming, rather than fixed entities who *are* something. Again, much labour is needed to understand what someone thinks she is and wants to be and is striving or dreaming to be. The dreams are not necessarily articulated or narrativised in ways known to us to be 'normal.' Quite possibly, when we ask 'What do you want for yourself?' of a non-modern person in Banāras, she will say, 'Nothing!' This does not mean that she has no ideas for her future. It means that she probably is not accustomed to the question-and-answer format we have used, the words in which we have strung our enquiry, or the immediacy of response we demand.

In my humble opinion, everyone wants change and those who seem to resist it perhaps resist the premises, language, or style of it, and not the fact of change. In my view, therefore, the love for a person and her values and lifestyle does not preclude working for change in them. She herself, in my view, is my best collaborator and partner in my pursuit of change. Rather than work *on* her, we have to work *with* her, including constantly mediating and translating, from our type of language to hers, from our familiar normative suppositions to her unfamiliar ideas.

Does it work? In all my writings on the subject, I stress that the process is important and not the result. If it works, it works slowly. If we can accept failure, and still not hate, but love, appreciate, or sympathise with the non-performer or non-cooperator, then we are truer to our goals than if we judge success with simple criteria.

The bottom line must remain love. In Banāras, I moved from the love described in earlier sections above when I say, 'I loved my artisans,' etcetera, to the love that cares enough to probe further as to what they actually are in the many dimensions of their identities and what they want to become. And the love that then dares to interact and interfere, because they want that, and they would do that.

The Post-colonial Centre works simply to provide education, teaching materials, training, workshops, counselling, arts classes, libraries and other resources. It

is itself in flux as projects are tried and dropped. The thrust is twofold: to develop a politics and psychology of one-ness, overcoming the divide of 'us' and 'them.' And to create and provide resources for actually overcoming this divide, be it books or films or camps or research.

This, together with the school, my continuing work in History and Anthropology along evolving, hopefully more imaginative, methodological lines, is the fruit of my long pilgrimage to Banāras.