

THE CARNIVAL IS OVER

Sadanand Menon

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Third world culture is rarely seen by us in its own terms. If seen at all, it is generally as an adjunct of our own preoccupations. This article, dealing with the politics of culture in India was originally published in the *Indian Express*. The supplementary footnotes are by Manup Bannerji.

In our epoch the State appropriates culture only to make a barrier out of it. In December, barely two weeks since an admitted Rs 7 crore¹ were blown on a cultural carnival advertised as the wonder glue to stick together our national consciousness, the capital was back to the comfortable savagery of its *mohalla maidans*,

the macho gangsterism of its *madhya maidans* and the cynical power brokerage of its *mukhya maidans*.²

Despite the fancy terminology, we knew we had been had. Apna Utsav remained an exercise in transmitting "given" culture - a culture with all its violence and injustice and inequality - that perpetuated deeply felt national differences. It could not have been otherwise. They are naive who will not understand that culture too is

part of the repressive apparatus of the potentially absolutist State and can be invoked at will, in a multi-national, multi-ethnic society like ours, as an instrument to keep people divided and distracted.

The realm of culture has constituted a special battlefield in post-colonial India. Colonial rule siphoned off not just our raw materials and surplus, generated and accumulated over centuries of development; it also laid its hands on our cultural wealth - the authentic modes of living, reproducing, relationing and transmitting. What it essentially eroded was "identity", insidiously supplanting it with a "counterfeit identity." Like robbing food of its natural taste to irradiate it with synthetic flavours. The new State that emerged with decolonization inherited a strange cultural amnesia. It had alienated itself from its sources and so could no longer trust peoples' creativity. This was one of the reasons why it quickly arrogated to itself the task of "reculturing" Indians according to its own requirements.

The early attempts were, no doubt, tentative though clear in their intention. Increasingly the Indian State, composed of special institutions far removed from the public realm - the Akademis and Parishads and Councils, not to speak of official media - took over the production of the

vital "ritual value" where, earlier, it was the function of the ensemble of social processes. It is worth reflecting why, in a society so rich in peoples' festivals, the only festive contribution the government has been able to make is the Republic Day parade. And yet, the State does not hesitate to posture as if all positive cultural manifestations in India are a direct consequence of its own beneficence. It has only generated a spurious set of premises of bogus cultural nationalism which are, in reality, anti-people and conspire to discredit healthy cultural diversity in favour of a uniform and conformist mode of being.

Even 40 years after Independence, the Indian elite class is still on the path of self-discovery, gushing over the latest and still are, a culturally versatile society. But a State that is fast on the way to centralizing all ideas and institutions and symbols of power, cannot tolerate the notion of communities having the freedom to generate their own specific cultures. It is an area of autonomy that can prove a dangerous impediment to their design for total control.

This explains the concerted attack on culture from the Indian State today. Until now the attack was on peoples' livelihood and on their fundamental rights. Now the attack is on their dignity itself. Until now the State

only plundered people's freedom and privacy. The next step is to plunder the sphere of autonomy.

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Photomontage: Brian Scott

only plundered peoples' hearths and homes and privacy. The move now afoot is to plunder their last remaining sphere of autonomy - their culture.

Ideologically, the new shift in emphasis at the base of artistic/cultural production - from ritual to politics - is profoundly disturbing. It indicates the related shift in cultural concepts from the realm of integrative processes to the theatre of disjunctive conflicts and power equations.

All early forms of artistic and cultural expression in India were clearly rooted in social and work processes and were an attempt to integrate human beings with nature. Ritual was the mediatory mode whose pristine function was to humanize nature. To that extent cultural expression was an organic and authentic communal wealth. But when this cultural autonomy is abdicated in favour of the State, the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable. Culture now stands opposed to people.

There also seems to be a vigorous attempt in official concepts to separate culture from the totality of life and reduce it to an artifact. This is typical. From artifact to archetype is but a short step and standardization is the magic formula of social harmony that the authoritarian State conceives.

This conception also reduces culture to a commodity, a plaything of market forces and consumer caprice, delinked from life as lived and experienced and organised in the multiplicity of social exchange. It inevitably generates the syndrome of cultural warehousing - a stockpiling of cultural resources and products (divorced from their processes) on the shelves of privileged and exclusive godowns, to be bought at leisure, as from a department store, by men of means.

For the ruling elite in India, cultural monopoly has become as important a task as capital monopoly. Culture, which is essentially in flux and always in-the-making, is being suddenly deep frozen and hoarded as avariciously as property. On the other hand, for the vast majority of the dispossessed victims of the era of colonialism, and of "freedom", culture remains an additional front on which the struggle has to continue. For them the evidence of any past existence of cultural riches only confirms the present oppression of the system. The evidence of the past glory of an Aryan or Dravidian civilization does nothing much to appease the hunger of the Bihari or Tamil peasant today.

The conceptual implications of the emerging "culturalism" in Indian politics are devastating. On the one hand are naked formulations like *Dilli mein desh ka pravesh* (as the inaugural style of Apna Utsav was styled), which doesn't even attempt to mask the underlying ideological thrust for centralising culture at the power centre. At the same time, the *thekedars* of the new "culturalism," who constitute an illegitimate, extra-constitutional locus of power without any accountability to a democratic base, have also not been shy to proclaim how they conceptualize culture.³

Critics are sternly warned, in mock Gandhian terms, not to write "gutter inspector" reports. But this is only an admittance to the existence and proliferation of gutters into which vast amounts of public funds are being drained. Their most alarming pontification has been: "Culture is an arm of diplomacy and politics." Now, this is just too dangerous and it is surprising such an admission of chicanery has gone by unchallenged.

An arm of politics indeed! It is as crude as saying culture is an instrument for waging war. But that would be admitting a fact. All this new cultural smoke for India is undeniably a screen for robust war-mongering. It is also not a coincidence that all State-

Local festivals denote the repressed side of society's consciousness, a side which returns with fixed regularity to haunt established culture with all it does not wish to acknowledge about itself.

Even the concept paper of Apna Utsav was an object lesson in terminological aggression. The laboured clichés of its being a "participatory" event were so patently a mask to disguise aggressive formulae of the coterie that cooked up the scheme. "Culture in the service of the party", they would have liked to proclaim it in true fascist style, but had to cloak it in syrupy jargon. They ended up devising ludicrous terms like *bharat milan*, *manthan (Dilli se desh tak)*, *goonjte patihar*, *bhanwara*, *jeevan chakra*, *kavya bagh*, *nriya bagh*, etc. which only generated laughter. In their burden to sound "desi" and authentic, they can really go to insulting lengths.⁴

For the dispensation that believes in giving people, not their right, but a chance to express themselves, spontaneity has to be countered with public choreography. Gigantic exhibitions, carnivals, urban planning and mass calisthenics regulated centrally become the modes through which a powerless population is allowed to applaud a social order that keeps them as sub-humans.

There is one contradiction in all this that we need to scrutinize. The inaugurations of the India Festivals in France and the United States were "designed" and "exhibited" as *melas*.⁵ The inaugural of the India Festival in Moscow this year is being designed as an *utsav*.⁶ The absurdly labelled "National Cultural Festival" also lifted this concept and called itself Apna Utsav. Now, *utsavs* and *melas* are not uncommon to us and are a periodic feature of Indian community life from micro to macro levels. Despite this, one has yet to hear of any local *utsav* that was a "failure". The notion itself is anachronistic. Yet Apna Utsav has gone down as a resounding failure. It is imperative to understand why.

Utsavs, *melas* and *poorams*, apart from being linked to cycles of economic production and distribution as well as seasonal and ritual demands, perform a few larger functions.⁷ They provide a specific ambience for amusement and entertainment. They help break the monotony of daily routine and work, and create a counterpoint to a life of travail. And, more importantly, they introduce into the given, fixed world of conditioned normality the experience of negativity and otherness.

This negativity is a powerful social mechanism as it helps to pose before society, positively, the image of its own underside as well as creative potential. The traditional *utsavs* and *melas* integrate into them the entire residual flakes of the culture which normally would not fit in elsewhere. Being peoples' celebrations, these constitute the meeting-place of types not easily socialised - mendicants and quacks, soothsayers and con men, acrobats and wrestlers, snake charmers and dealers in aphrodisiacs, prostitutes and performers, craftsmen and balladeers - a talented, floating, quasi-criminal, marginalized population of the social fringes, even the acceptance of whose existence is embarrassing for the elite.

Conversely, for the middle-class moral rules of behaviour in the realm of the seasonal. *Melas* and *poorams* repressed side of society, a side which with regularity to haunt established culture with all it does not wish to acknowledge about

But what we are witnessing is the carnivalisation of the American sense. The India Festival varied State sponsored carnival disavowal of all liberal experience. At their a rigid, controlled confrontation with the open-ended conditional experience. mental scrutiny and authoritarian prudential creative side of the flattened out and areas of duality are offered to the population for consumption which provides the glimpse of liberation instead, only increment. These government inevitably reproduce exploitative attitudes culture to an extent, no longer negotiation.

This is one reason "failures". Luckily memory of the large people still retains authentic. But they to last. The rapidity the State's *blitzkrieg* mobilized financial Rs 100 crore for 1987 bound to litter our the debris of what edifice of peoples' their spontaneous national ordering.

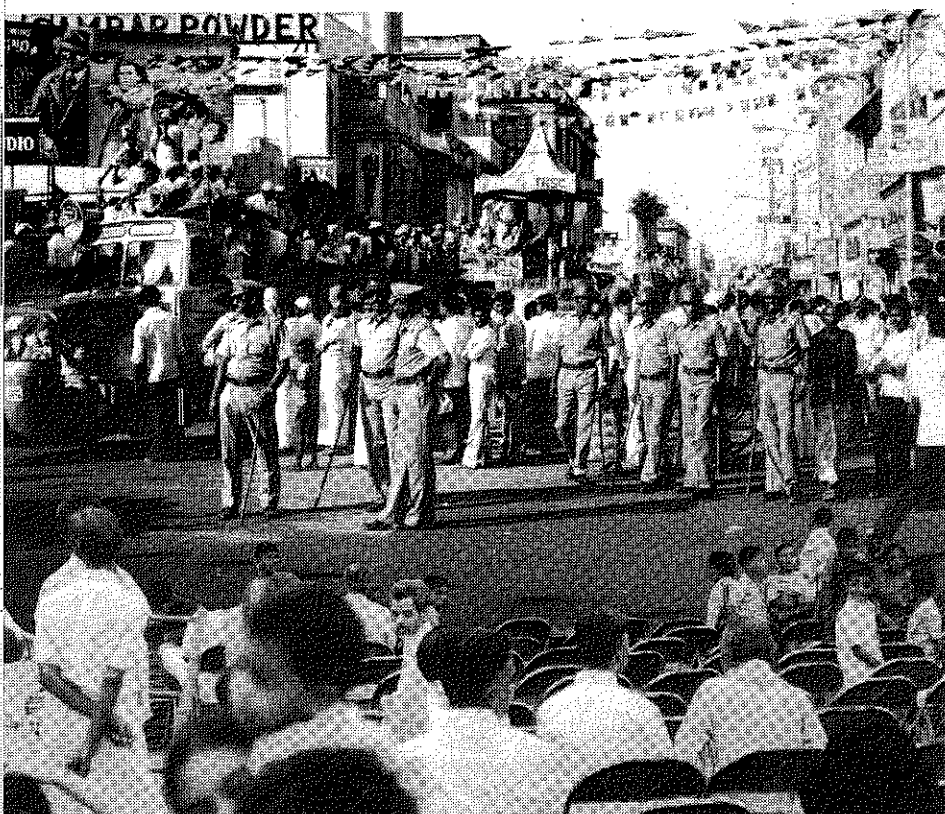
The area of peoples' and multi-layered is probably the last autonomy left to them with their dehuman of life. By infiltrating appropriating this narrow and immediate State and the political process that could the culturally imposed a political monster culture and its cosmogony the grim sign of the gangrene it seeks to

Besides, the very opening of the "Concept Guideline" for the Utsav is unmatched for its pomposity: "An unprecedented cultural event is being planned for the people of Delhi, which may well provide the crucial direction required in the nation's ongoing task of rediscovering and nurturing its heritage." They don't even wait these days for being complimented, but even conceptualise in self-congratulatory terms. Neither can one afford to overnote the "we-know-what-is-good-for-you" tone. They never say "let's have a discussion on

this"; they just say, "The following is the excellent thing we are going to do for you, and you better accept it."

History has shown therefore that aggrandizement is the logical culmination of efforts to render politics aesthetic. It is the ultimate in population manipulation on a mass scale. The military parade and the political pageant (and Apna Utsav was certainly one) disguised as a cultural event are obverse sides of the same coin. Their urgent and fatal fascist appeal has repeated itself enough times around the world in the last 50 years for us to ignore it when it sprouts in our own backyard.

orchestrated cultural extravaganzas are taking on the aggressive spectacularism of war. No one has yet told us the full story of the massive arms deals carried out under the benign cover of the Festival of India in Britain, the United States and France and the still more massive arms deal linked with the impending Festival of India in Russia this year. Neither has anyone told us about the covert militarization of Delhi under the pretext of providing a security net for Apna Utsav. The artists have returned, but the soldiers stay on.



Conversely, for those not shackled by middle-class morality, these are occasions for the suspension of ordinary rules of behaviour and an entry into the realm of the sexual and the irrational. *Melas* and *utsavs* denote the repressed side of society's consciousness, a side which returns with fixed regularity to haunt established culture with all it does not wish to acknowledge about itself.

But what we are witnessing now is the carnivalisation of the *utsav* in an American sense. The Apna Utsav and India Festival variety of politicized, State sponsored carnivals are an open disavowal of all liberating areas of experience. At their core they represent a rigid, controlled and embarrassed confrontation with otherness, unlike the open-ended character of traditional experience. Under governmental scrutiny and motivated by authoritarian prudery, the anarchic, creative side of the peoples' festival is flattened out and sanitized, and all areas of duality are standardized. It is offered to the population as a pure avenue for consumption and voyeurism, which provides them no flashing glimpse of liberating deviance but, instead, only increases their passivity. These governmental *utsavs* inevitably reproduce the existing exploitative attitudes of the dominant culture to an extent that they represent, no longer negativity, but cooptation.

This is one reason why they end up as "failures". Luckily for us, the cultural memory of the large majority of our people still retains images of what is authentic. But they cannot be expected to last. The rapidity and the scale of the State's *blitzkrieg* with freshly mobilized financial resources (over Rs 100 crore for 1987 alone) are bound to litter our cultural arena with the debris of what was once the living edifice of peoples' innate wisdom and their spontaneous resistance to external ordering.

The area of peoples' expression, so vast and multi-layered in Indian society, is probably the last vestige of creative autonomy left to the people to cope with their dehumanizing conditions of life. By infiltrating and appropriating this charged preserve for narrow and immediate gains, the State and the political apparatus is bound to trigger off a brutalizing process that could eventually convert the culturally impoverished State into a political monster. The plunder of culture and its cosmetic use is always the grim sign of the political gangrene it seeks to hide.

1 Roughly \$10 million in Canadian funds.

2 It is amazing how blatantly the organizers of Apna Utsav (Our Own Festivals) created a hierarchical space where they bred jealousy, distrust and aggressive competitiveness among the participants through the concoction of a three-tiered performing arena: mohalla maidans (peripheral or local), madhya Maidans (central), and mukhya maidans (principal). Who would decide who performs where? How would one decide whether the folk art of one state is better than another state? With so much money and fanfare involved, one immediately realizes how insecure, threatened, humiliated or disgraced the participants must have felt. If a group is put on a peripheral (or lower) stage, it immediately wrecks the group's honour and prestige with all its future plans and works. It is like the mark of death if you are not allowed to perform on the principal stage. However naive they were at first to get roped into it, their dislocation is complete with all the disastrous hang-ups growing from it.

3 Dilli mein desh ka prawesh. The country enters the capital, Delhi. Thekadors, or agents for contractors, came up with this slogan, perhaps unknowingly, that the country had always been absent in the capital, even with the existence of Bhavans, or state houses.

4 Bharat milan. union of Indians/ Indian states.
Manthan. upheaval (or churning - as the legend says).
Dilli se desh tak. from Delhi to the whole of India.
The remaining terms refer to (in order): singing stones, song and dance, the wheel of life, the garden of poetry and the garden of rhymes. All of these slogans express the packaging of art and culture and the dislocation of the arts from their socio-economic ties and environment - as if one cannot have cultural expressions anywhere else except in these clogged and controlled spaces.

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5 Carnival.

6 Festival.

7 Pooram. Fun fest.

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