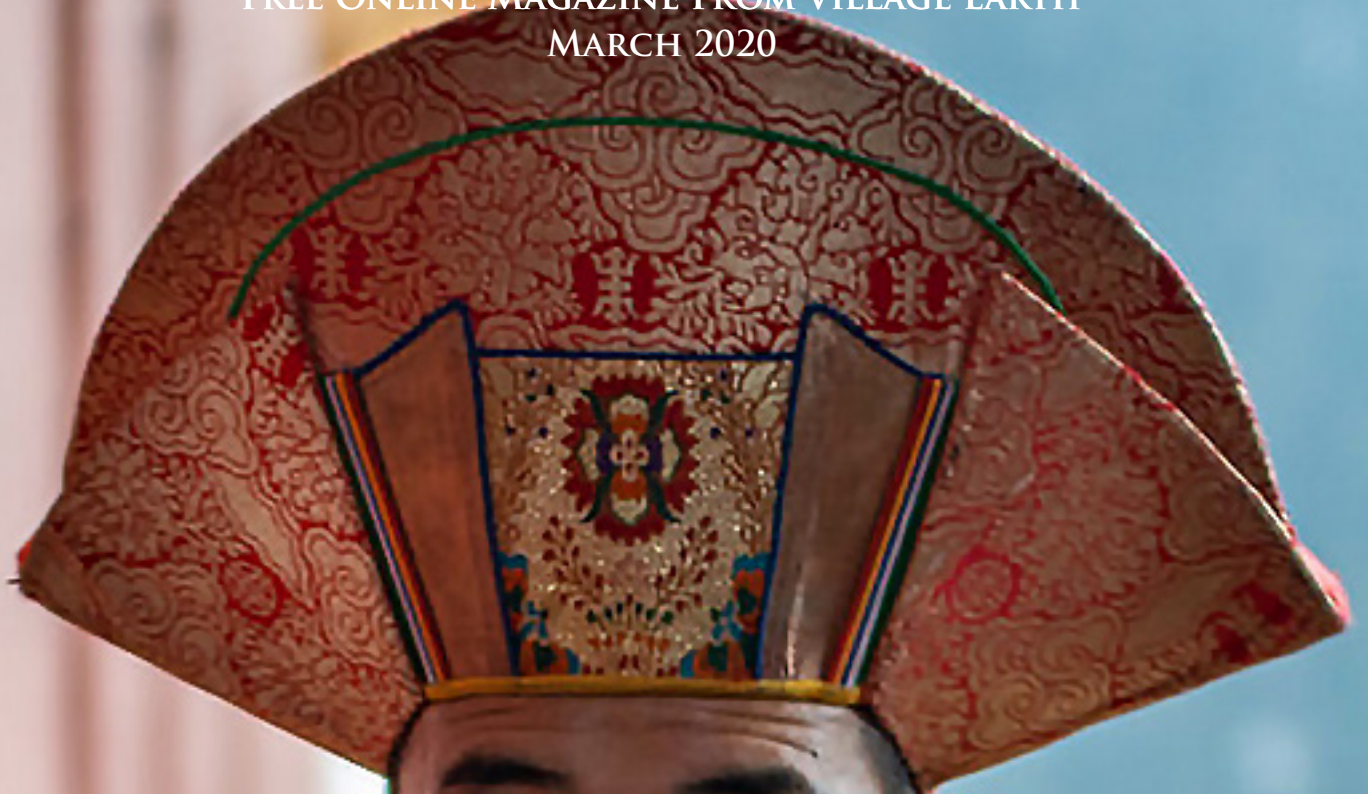


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MARCH 2020



ELEANOR MOSEMAN SIX DHARMAS OF NAROPA TIBETAN PLATEAU

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY ELEANOR MOSEMAN



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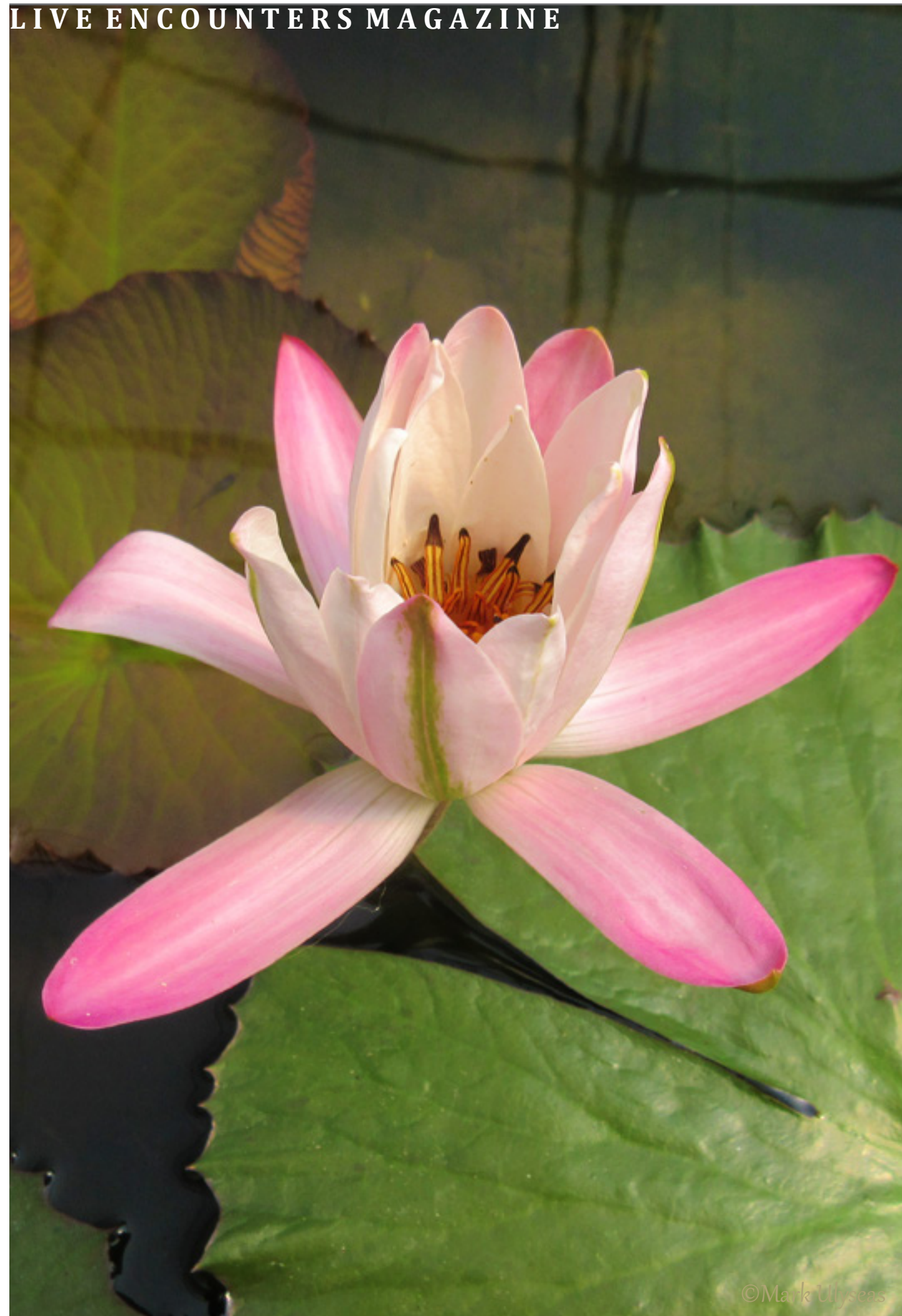
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Eleanor Moseman

Based in China since 2008, American photographer Eleanor Moseman focuses on social and cultural narratives involving women and ethnic minorities of Tibet and Xinjiang. Striving to create stories that seek resolutions for the oppressed while sharing the voices of the unknown and persecuted. Eleanor has been using her photography and storytelling skills to contribute to the work of anthropologists, historians, conservationists, and activists. Her pictures are often used to supplement work published on the cultural genocide taking place in Xinjiang and Tibet, and the environmental changes occurring on the Tibetan Plateau.

<https://www.eleanormoseman.com/>

ELEANOR MOSEMAN

SIX DHARMAS OF NAROPA

TIBETAN PLATEAU

Text & Photographs

On the 15th day and first full moon of the Lunar New Year, the Six Dharmas of Naropa ceremony is performed at Palpung Monastery located in the eastern region of the Tibetan Plateau. Historically this day coincides with the eve of Chunga Choepa (the Butter Lamp Festival) that celebrates the victory of Sakyamuni Buddha over his opponents in a religious debate. This ceremony signifies the end of the “Practitioner of Six Dharmas of Tummo”; a three-year, three-month, three-day monastic retreat performed by the monks of the monastery. The monks conclude the retreat by exiting their dormitories in the mountains to return to the monastery where they will continue their studies and practice.

On the eve of the 15th day of the Lunar calendar, the monks chant in the monastery and eventually reside to a small room where local Tibetans can observe, pray, pay their respects and make offerings to the monks and monastery. The monks have disrobed from their traditional burgundy cloths and wear a simple white cloth to cover their bodies as they chant throughout the night. Graduating from the burgundy cloths, the white robes represent the meditation practice of “Tummo”, or “Inner Fire Meditation”, and brings the practitioner closer to enlightenment. These monks are recognizing light as their essence and will generate a clear white light throughout their lifetime, ending the wait for death and accepting the union and oneness with divine nature in this current lifetime. (To come closer to ending their cycle of Samsara.)

During centuries past, the monks would retreat to the caves of Babang where they would meditate in solitude behind walls of stone, wood, and mud. Locals would climb up the mountains after the three-year, three-month, three-day retreat and tear down the walls to allow the monks to exit and return to the monastery where they would live out their remaining days. Now, during more modern times, this ritual is represented by an activity at the rear entrance of the monastery.



Palpung is a Tibetan monastery dating back to the 12th century. It is located at the center of Babang, a village nestled high in the Chola mountains of Kham in the Eastern Tibetan kingdom.



Local Tibetans watch the procession of the Six Dharmas of Naropa, which is led by the Lama of Palpung Monastery. A Tibetan Lama is translated to “chief” or “high priest” and the title is given to highly respected monastic teachers of the Dharma (teachings of the Buddha). The Lama who resides on the grounds is responsible for overseeing and supervising all spiritual activities of the hundreds of monks that study Buddhism at the monastery.



As the final Six Dharmas of Naropa practitioners enter the front entrance of the monastery, a monk records the procession and ceremony with his mobile phone. Historically, there is very little visual or written information about the Six Dharmas of Naropa celebration at Palpung Monastery. With an increase of personal mobile devices, these events will be documented and preserved for future generations, researchers, and academics to understand.



During the Six Dharmas of Naropa ceremony, boys look over yak butter lamps to watch and listen to monks chanting sutras. Sutras are oral teachings of the Buddha that have been transcribed into religious texts. There is a high illiteracy rate in Tibet so often laypersons rely on monks to share the Buddha's teachings. This event takes place during the final days of a study retreat in which selected monks lived in isolation for three years, three months, and three days.



A Rinpoche (far upper left), a reincarnation of a Buddha, leads chants of Sutras as monks hand each participant a 10 RMB note (equivalent to one and half US dollars). The money is an offering from observers (audience/laypersons). The Sanskrit name for monks is “bhikku” and means “beggar” or “one who lives by alms”.



A monk performs an offering of blessed water at an altar surrounded by yak butter lamps and symbolic sculptures built from “tsampa”. Tsampa is a food staple of Tibetans that consists of ground barley, tea, and yak butter. The reason tsampa is used during religious ceremonies pre-dates Buddhism. Before the spread of Buddhism from India into Tibet, the region practiced Bon; a form of Animism mixed with Shamanism. Tsampa was offered to the gods and spirits who as scripture told, took on animal form.



Tibetan women adorn their heads with braid extensions made of real human hair, turquoise stones, yellow amber and red coral beads. These traditional headdresses are heavy, expensive and represent a family's wealth and class.



Monks lead a procession out of the main hall of Palpung Monastery with a slow beating tempo of drums and the clashing of cymbals.



A young monk yawns as he holds and stabilizes two “dungchen”, or dharma horns, for his elders. Musical instruments and ceremonial items can only be handled and used by monks.



Leading the kora, monks tune their horns as boys studying at the monastery carry flags along the outer walls of the Palpung Monastery. A kora means “circumambulation” or “revolution” and it is a type of meditation practiced around holy sites or during pilgrimages in holy lands.



As the kora encircles the outer walls of the monastery, a ceremonial incense holder blesses and cleanses the air along the path. Authentic Tibetan incense is regarded as a way to treat illness and is made in traditional monasteries or medical colleges.



Elder monks that belong to the Palpung Monastery lead the kora with musical instruments such as drums and horns. Spectators arrive to honor the monks who have completed a three year, three month, three day retreat of Buddhist studies in isolation



A monk wears a yellow cap that represents the dominant Tibetan Buddhist school of “Gelug”, and carries incense with a white scarf that has been blessed by a Lama. The Gelug School was founded by Je Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) and is the newest school of Tibetan Buddhism.



At the first sign of daylight, the monks participating in the Six Dharmas of Naropa exit the small prayer hall inside the monastery. They wear a simple white cloth that is part of the meditation practice of “tummo” which involves heating the body under extremely cold temperatures.



Two Tibetan women watch the procession and hold onto each other to stay warm during the frigid morning temperatures.



After midnight, the rear-entrance to Palpung Monastery is locked and young monks peak through the cracks of the doors to revel in the spectacle of the crowd growing behind the heavy doors. During the ensuing six hours leading up to sunrise, young men and a few women, will try to break through the doors and enter the walls of the monastery. The reenactment of laypersons beating open the doors to see the monks, represents ancient traditions where monks retreated to the mountains to find respite and to meditate away from the public. Later, after the Chinese occupation, the monks would retreat to the mountains and be barricaded into caves to avoid Chinese kings and lords. At the end of the three year, three month, three day retreat, locals would return to the monk's cave, remove the barricades to allow them to exit.



As part of a reenactment of ancient traditions where laypeople removed barricades from a monk's cave, young people crowd at the rear entrance of the monastery and beat against the door to break it open. Occasionally, they will succeed and a few people will manage to enter through the doors.



Monks carry sticks to encourage all laypersons and spectators to exit the interior of the monastery without misbehaving or acting like an excited mob. They will be locked out until sunrise when the final procession is performed around the exterior of the monastery.



Women, children, and elders step to the side for safety as the crowd rushes through the threshold of the prayer room to observe the chanting of Buddhist sutras.



In a small prayer room flanked with yak butter lamps and statues of Bodhisattvas, Tibetans enter to observe the chanting of sutras. Some use this as a social event while others pray and make small offerings to the monks who are ending their three year, three month, three day isolation retreat in the mountains.



Monks participating in the Six Dharmas of Naropa ceremony are granted numerous breaks from chanting and are served tea by monks of the monastery.



A monk lights yak butter lamps that surround a prayer alter. These lamps will be used throughout the Six Dharmas of Naropa ritual.



Before the final kora around the exterior of the monastery, young monks hold decorative flags that are hand embroidered on traditional Tibetan silk fabrics. Over recent years, the Communist Party of China has placed tighter regulations on Tibetan monasteries, prohibiting boys under the age of 18 to live and study as monks. Since the festivities are held during the Chinese Lunar New Year holiday, public schools are closed and the young monks are allowed to live and participate in activities at the monastery. After the holiday, many of these boys must return to Chinese schools or go study at remote monasteries that are removed from monitoring by the Chinese government.



Sutras are chanted by the monks to conclude the final rites of the Six Dharmas of Naropa rituals. The monks that completed the retreat away from society will now return to living and studying within the village of Babang, Sichuan.



The Six Dharmas of Naropa festivities end as the sun sets behind the Chola mountains. This day also coincides with the eve of Chunga Choepa, the Butter Lamp Festival. This holiday celebrates a demonstration of miracles attributed to the Buddha and in some parts of Tibet, represents the official conclusion of “Losar”: the Tibetan New Year.



Born in Munich 1954. 1973 studied with Ernst Fuchs and Salvador Dali. 1970 he painted *still-lives* in Switzerland introducing curved mirrors which reflect objects in most surprising ways and led to a proposal for the –elegant Universe. Moving to Tuscany in 1980 landscape and atmospheric effects crystallized to intense, portraits of nature. Since 1984 living in Bali. In his search for the- abstract. Papua New Guinea – Warriors combine the archaic with the futuristic. Wolfgang's motto – aesthetic = ethic – points to places where humans experience the Good, the True and the Beautiful.

GEISHA

ARTWORK BY

WOLFGANG WIDMOSER

*“We lead our lives like water flowing down a hill,
going more or less in one direction until we splash into something
that forces us to find a new course.”*

— Arthur Golden, Memoirs of a Geisha

My father had visited Japan a number of times, and as an architect
I would look at all the books in his library.
Once I came across a book that featured black and white photographs
of Geishas in the mid-1920s.

The following artworks are influenced by those beautiful photographs.

Wolfgang Widmoser



Geisha - Detail



Geisha 1 - 85 x 130 cm



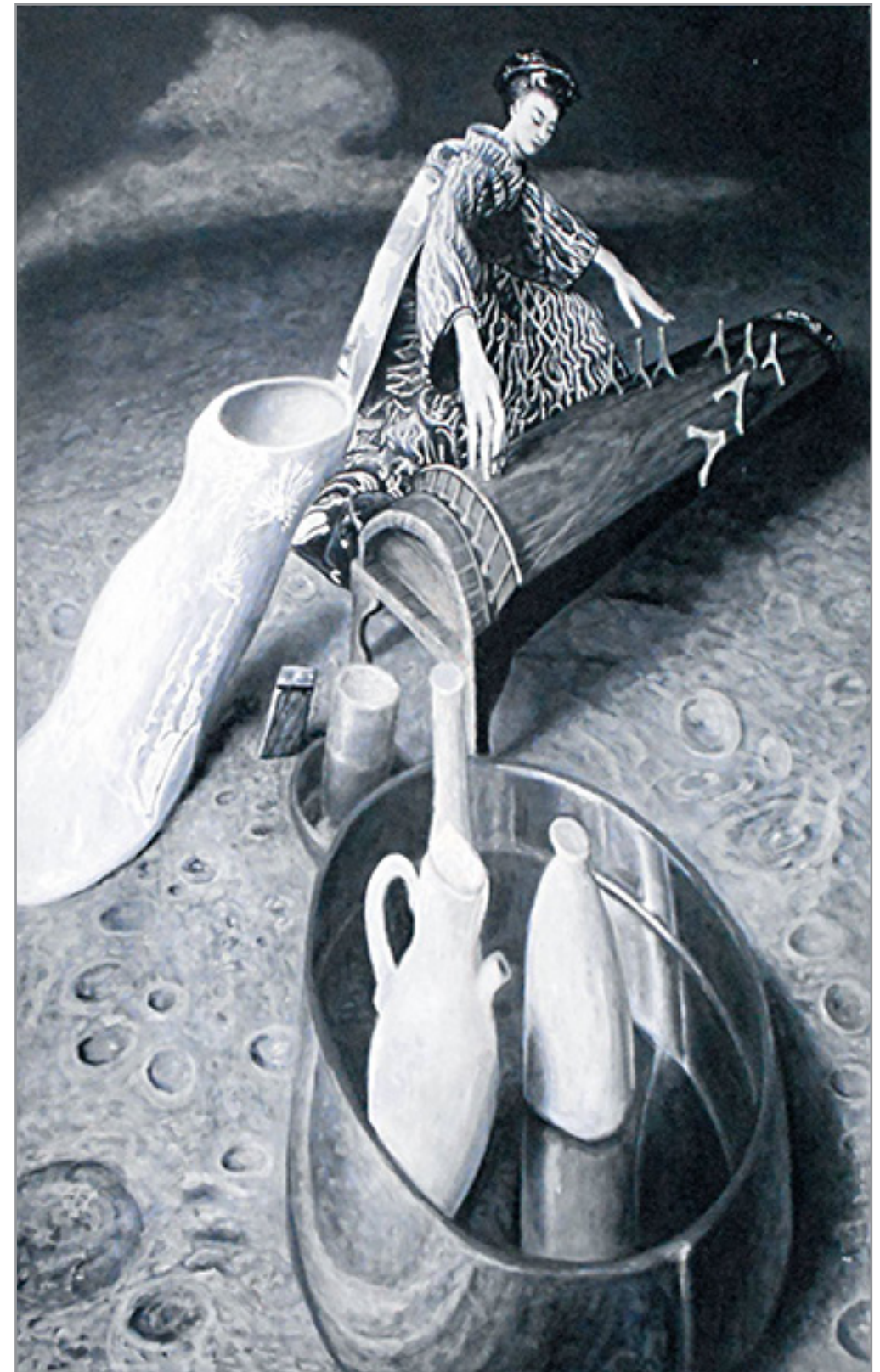
Geisha - Detail



Geisha 2 - 112 x 180 cm



Geisha 3 - 85 x 135 cm



Geisha 4 - 85 x 130 cm

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INDIA YATRA

PHOTOGRAPHS & TEXT BY

JILL GOCHER

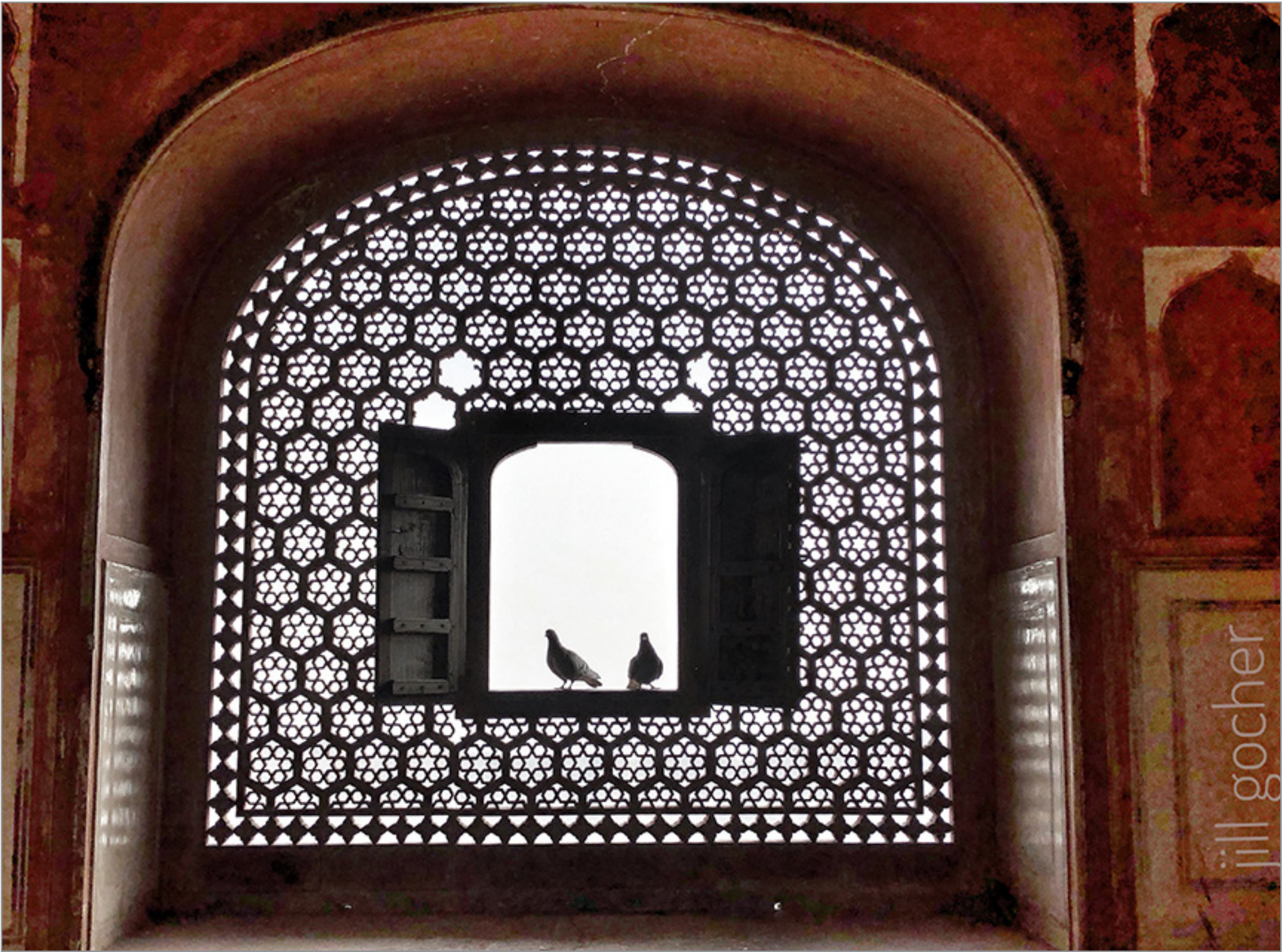
Glimpses of my journey across Mother India.

This is a country that confronts you with yourself, that stretches you and leads to introspection.

It's a country that will make you grow - if you let it.

India is so vibrant, so alive, so real! It is a country that you will fall in love with instantly or perhaps dislike, but you can never ignore the life ethos that is reflected in its people - their tenacity and joie de vivre.

Jill Gocher









Tina Claffey is an award winning nature photographer and author of 'Tapestry of Light-Ireland's bogs & wetlands as never seen before' released in October 2017. For almost 10 years, she lived and worked in pristine wilderness areas in Botswana, and this experience awakened in her an appreciation of the natural world of Ireland. Her observations and unique perspective of the flora and fauna of the unspoilt raised bogs and wet woodlands of the Irish midlands are celebrated in her work. <http://www.tinaclaffey.com/>



Tina Claffey

SPHAGNUM MOSS THE BOG BUILDER

PHOTOGRAPHS & TEXT BY
TINA CLAFFEY

Sphagnum moss in all of its beautiful varieties is the most extensive plant on the bog. This rich beautiful living carpet is a wonder of nature and a feast for the senses. They are exquisitely beautiful in detail, when viewed through the macro lens. One of the most interesting and lesser known facts, is that sphagnum mosses created our bogs!

The low level of plant nutrients and waterlogged conditions, inimical to most plant life, is a godsend to moss.

It grows unceasingly and when it dies, it does not rot, because the organisms that decompose plants cannot survive the sterile bog conditions.

This gradual build-up converts into peat and this process repeats itself over millennia to form our wonderful bogs.

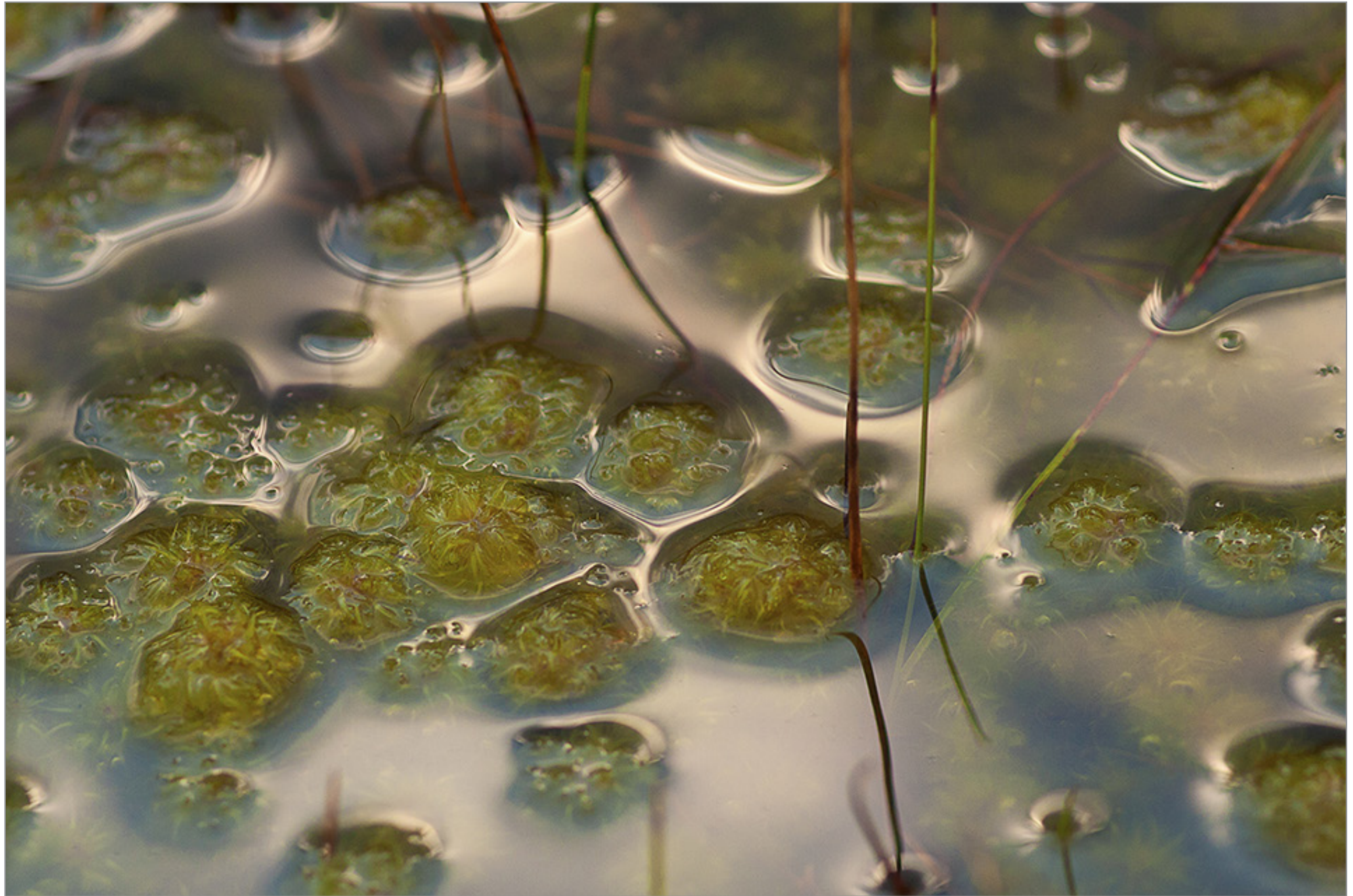
Accumulations of Sphagnum can store water, since both living and dead plants can hold large quantities of water inside their cells; plants may hold over 20 times as much water as their dry weight, a natural sponge, preventing floods



Sphagnum capillifolium rubellum



Sphagnum Branch



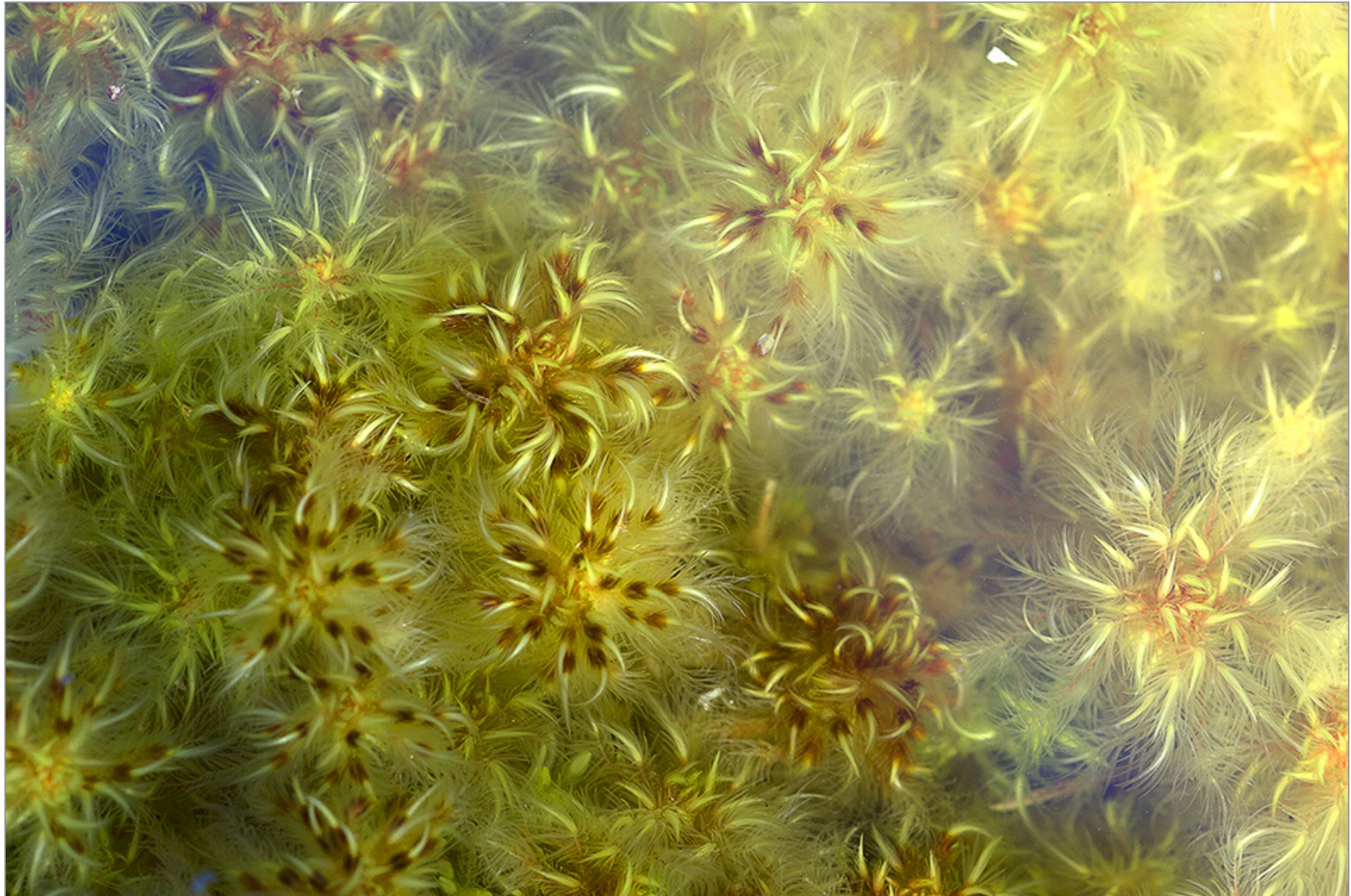
Spaghnum Dusk



Spagnum Underworld



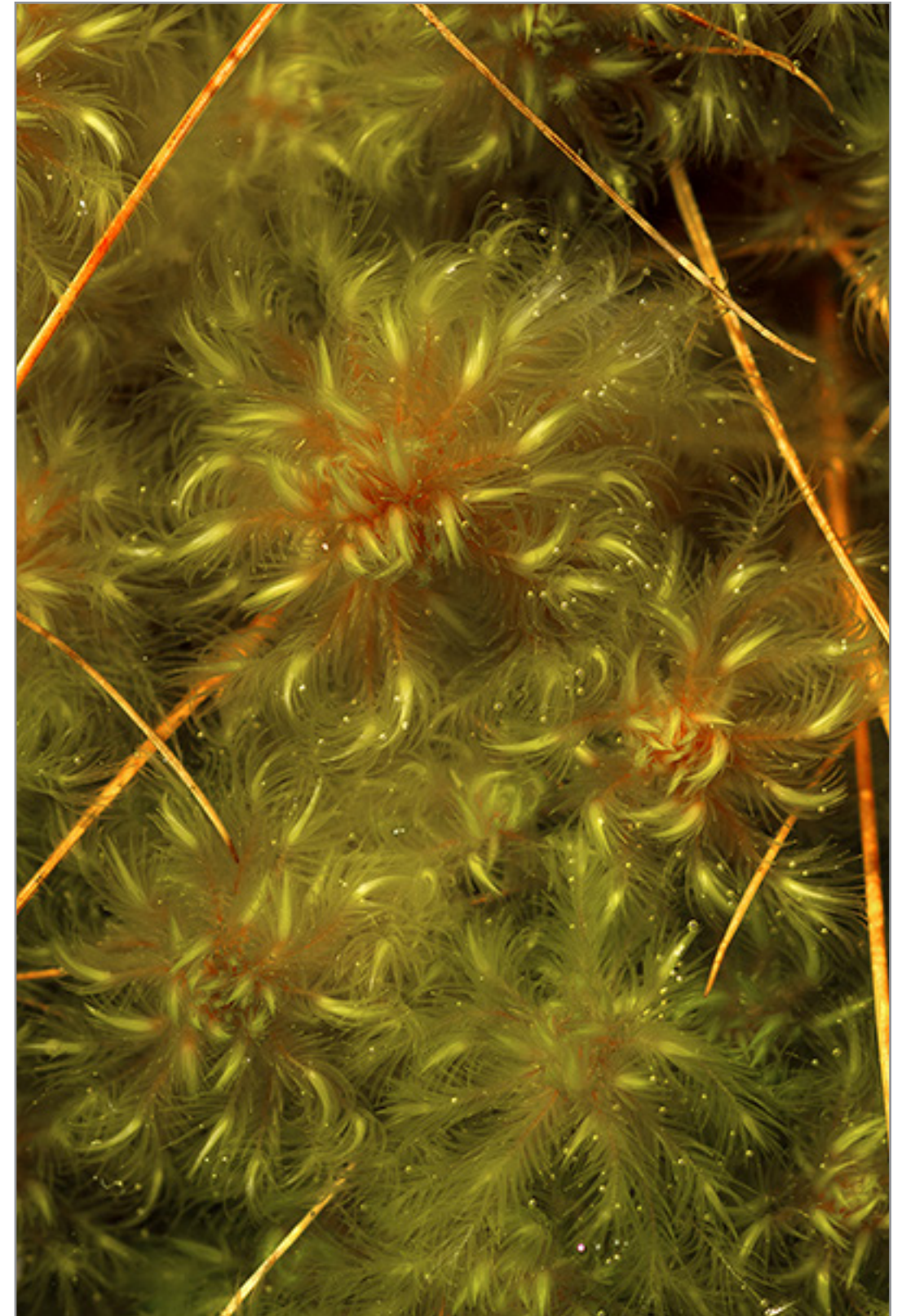
Sphagnum Bouquet



Sphagnum Cuspidatum and Sky



Sphagnum Depths



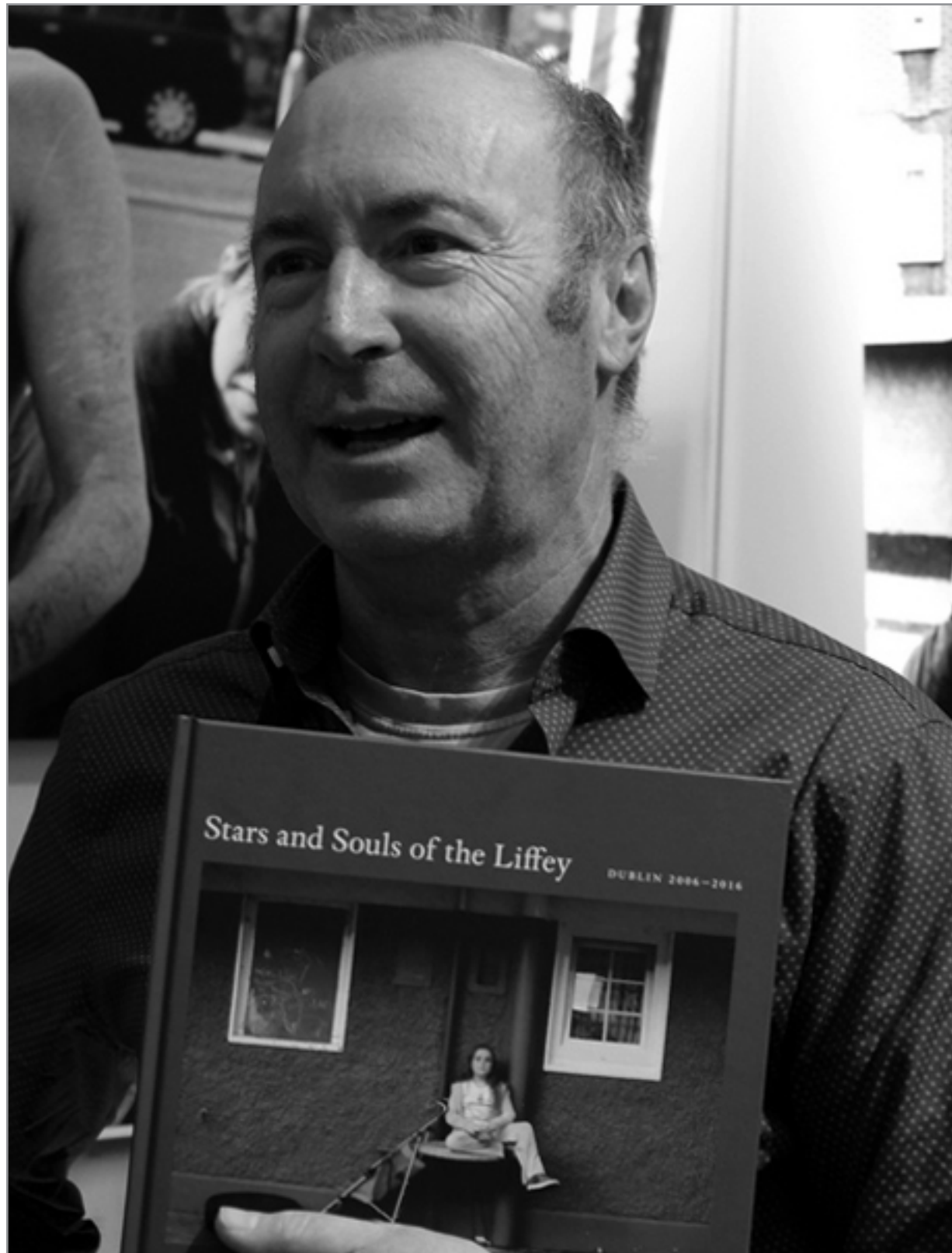
Suspended Sphagnum cuspidatum



Suspended Sphagnum cuspidatum



Emerging *Capillifolium divinum*



Barry Delaney is inspired by the colour, energy and DIY attitude of punk. He fled the grey Dublin of the early 80s, to travel the world and fell in love with film photography. Eked a living doing various manual and technical jobs. Twenty years later, Barry began taking pictures again. It started on the streets of Dublin, his home town, and moved on to other parts of Ireland and across the pond to his second home - America. In 2008, Barry won the TG4 Irish photographer of the 21st Century. Barry has had 4 solo exhibitions in Dublin, whilst also self-publishing three books on Blurb (including Americans Anonymous which this photo essay is based on). Last year he completed a retrospective of his inner city Dublin work in the historic GPO, Dublin. along with his debut Dublin book <https://www.hitonebooks.ie/stars-and-souls-of-the-liffey>

AMERICANS ANONYMOUS

PHOTOGRAPHS & TEXT BY
BARRY DELANEY

All my adult life I have had a passionate obsession with America – the Empire of our time, the roadmap for our Western ways – Apple, Facebook, Hollywood, Rock n’Roll, Chevrolets and Hip-Hop – America introduced me, a teenage dropout, to the Arts – the writings of Kerouac, the films of Scorsese, the music of the Stooges and New York Dolls, the poetry of Dylan and Patti Smith, the magical bliss of John Coltrane and Billie Holiday, the paintings of Rothko and my favourite photographer Robert Frank (*The Americans*). I began taking photographs in New York many years ago - In 2016 (election year) I returned armed with my film camera to picture modern America, and re-trace the journey’s of my youth, a land that I loved - Wondering what was happening as Trumpmania took hold - I travelled all over, from Port Authority in New York to San Francisco, down through the rust belt into Mississippi, riding buses with released ex-cons from the over-crowded jails, getting their story - Looking to see the hidden America, the South side of Chicago down to Ferguson, Missouri - places of the tourist map - but the real America - I was there for election night, in Times Square as a city went into shock and mourned, a few days later I was back in the rust belt, a broken place that helped me to understand what really was going on. I have put these pictures together into a self published book on Blurb.com - *Americans Anonymous*.

Barry Delaney



Election week - Bristol, Virginia.



Day after election - Trump Tower NYC.



Clarksdale, Mississippi.



Freedom - Memphis, Tennessee.



Freedom - Baton Rouge, Louisiana.



Englewood, Southside Chicago.



Bourbon street dancers - New Orleans.

Tenderloin, San Francisco.





Dr Namrata Goswami

Dr. Namrata Goswami is an independent strategic analyst, author and consultant on space policy, great power politics, and ethnic conflicts. After earning her Ph.D. in international relations, she served for nearly a decade as Research Fellow at India's Ministry of Defence (MOD) sponsored think tank, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, working on ethnic conflicts in India's Northeast, counter-terrorism and China-India border conflict. Her research and expertise generated opportunities for collaborations abroad, and she accepted visiting fellowships at the Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway; the La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia; and the University of Heidelberg, Germany. In 2012, she was selected to serve as a Jennings-Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Washington D.C. where she studied India-China border issues, and was awarded a Fulbright-Nehru Senior Fellowship that same year. Shortly after establishing her own strategy and policy consultancy in 2016 after relocating to the U.S., she won the prestigious MINERVA grant awarded by the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense (OSD) to study great power competition in the grey zone of outer space. In 2017, she was awarded a contract with Joint Special Forces University (JSOU) to write a monograph on ISIS in Asia. The monograph has since been published and can be found here: <https://jsou.libguides.com/c.php?g=83714&p=5622417> Currently, she is working on a book on "Great Power Space Resource Ambitions in Outer-Space" to be published by Lexington Press, an imprint of Rowman and Littlefield.

DR NAMRATA GOSWAMI MY LATEST BOOK ON THE NAGA ETHNIC MOVEMENT IN NORTHEAST INDIA

My venture into understanding the Naga ethnic movement for a separate homeland in Northeast India started in an official capacity in April of 2006 when I joined as Associate Fellow, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi. This was a year after I completed my doctorate from Jawaharlal Nehru University.

While my doctoral work was on international relations, norms and conflict framing, a version of which is now published,¹ I had a special interest in Northeast India due to the fact that my family is from Assam. I grew up in Haflong, Assam, and spent part of my teenage years in Diphupar, in Nagaland. I credit my father, Tarun Chandra Goswami for his pioneering work on ethnic folklore and tradition,² that gave me access to understanding the context of ethnic societies and cultures, from a very young age. I travelled and trekked to remote villages with him, as he collected data on music and folklore, and watched him work. That memory lingered long after he was gone (1999) and is part of my inspiration for my decade long research work on the Northeast, specifically the Naga ethnic conflict.

Throughout those years of research (2006-2019), I had to first acquaint myself with the literature on these conflicts, dig deep into my own formative years, and connect to several communities via field work. During my work on the field (2007-2015), sometimes traveling to very remote areas, I realized how difficult it is for a women researcher to conduct such field work. In one instance, members of a local armed group got into my taxi without my permission in a remote area, close to the India-Burma border, and took our taxi to an unknown location.

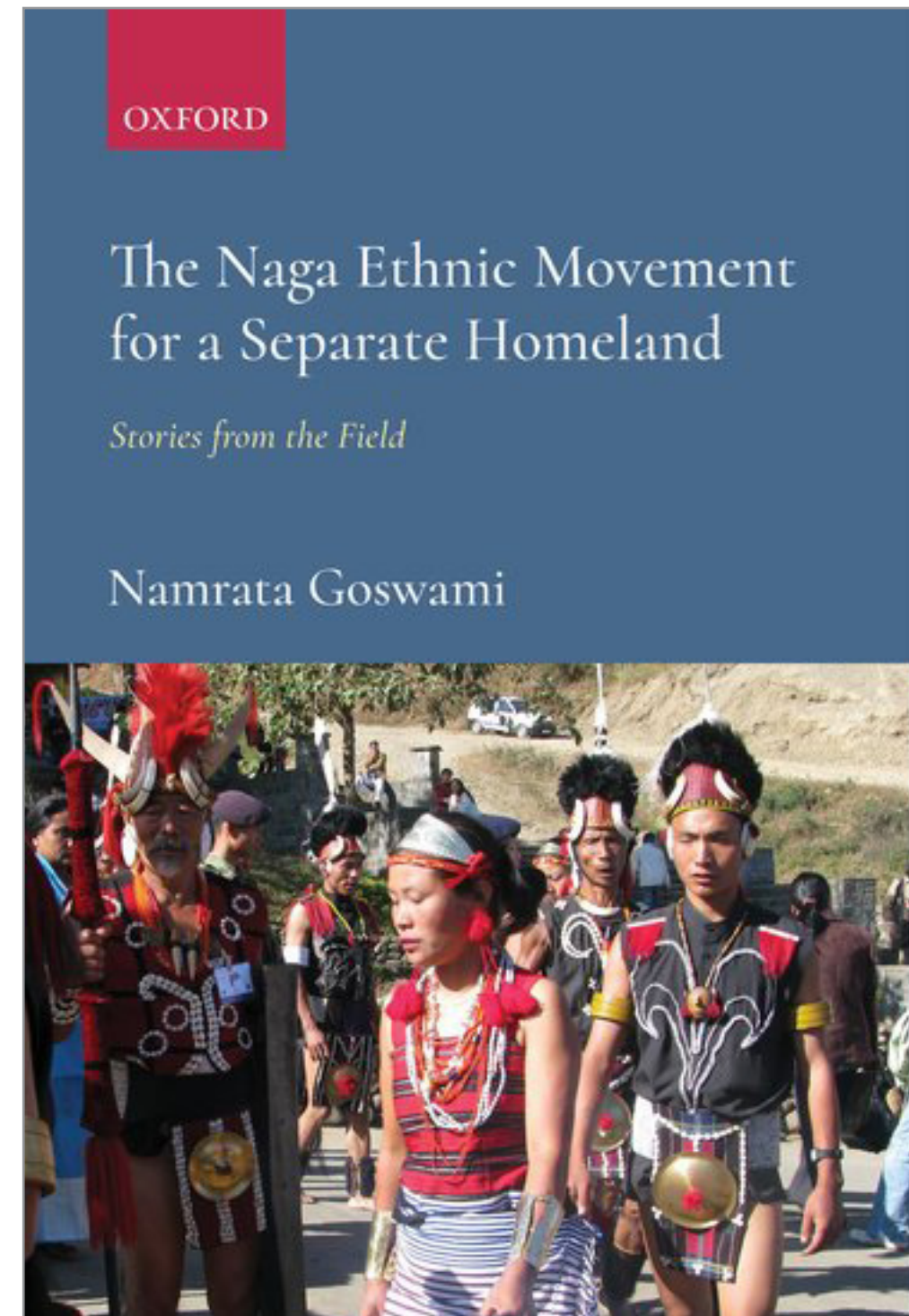
I offer perspectives on the lives of Naga armed group leaders like Muivah, the late Swu and the late S.S. Khaplang, as well as the founder of the movement, Phizo. The book explores their discourses on the conflict, and examines the decades long engagement to find a peaceful resolution with the Union government.

It was a tense field experience for me (though no harm came to me or the driver), and I ended up discussing the local conflict as well as my father's ethnographic work with the group's leader. Despite such experiences, I stuck to my gut instinct, to think, travel, collect field data and write on this area, and henceforth, this book materialized: my lifework.

What is the Book About?

The Naga Ethnic Movement for a Separate Homeland Stories from the Field published by Oxford University Press, 2020 is a unique book in the sense that it is a book of narratives; it tells stories and offers insights on the group situation. This book reflects my conversations with local communities, armed groups, Indian security personnel, civil servants, local politicians, children, who live in these conflict zones. *The Naga Ethnic Movement for a Separate Homeland* offers readers a journey into the historicity of the Naga conflict. It identifies key local context; moments that resulted in an armed movement led by A Z Phizo. The experience of the Nagas in the European battlefield during the First World War, the local context of the Second World War, where Naga areas, especially Kohima played a decisive role in ensuring allied victory in the famous Battle of Kohima (1944), designated the greatest of British battles during World War II by the National Army Museum;³ Phizo's participation with the Indian National Army led by Subhas Chandra Bose,⁴ all played a part in the development of a Naga ethnic movement. I dwell in the book, on the difference of leaderships and ideologies between members of the Naga National Council (NNC) that led to separation and new groups emerging like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland. As a reader, you will travel with me to villages in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland, and get to read stories of local communities affected by this decades old conflict.

I offer perspectives on the lives of Naga armed group leaders like Muivah, the late Swu and the late S.S. Khaplang, as well as the founder of the movement, Phizo. The book explores their discourses on the conflict, and examines the decades long engagement to find a peaceful resolution with the Union government. Ceasefires were signed between the Union Government and the NSCN led by Muivah and Swu and the NSCN led by S S Khaplang, between 1997 and 2001, though the cease-fire between the NSCN-Khaplang was abrogated in 2015. This was followed by violent attacks by the group on an Indian army convoy in Manipur.



Book is available at - <https://originindia.oup.com/product/the-naga-ethnic-movement-for-a-separate-homeland-9780190121174>

The reader will travel with me to Burma, across the India-Burma border, and hear the perspectives of the Naga inhabited areas in the Naga Self-Administered Zone (NSAZ). The book deals squarely with the connection of the ethnic group to land. The issue of territoriality that animates the conflict is discussed: be it a separate homeland, an autonomous zone, or a unified homeland across several states and the resistance to that idea.

I reflect on historical events like the entry of the British into the Naga hills in 1832 and what that signifies; and the impact on Naga folk memory of the fierce battle of Khonoma against British expansion into their homeland in 1879. Fast forward a hundred years or so, the book offers an analysis of events like *Oinam* and *Operation Bluebird* (1987) and their lasting impact on Naga societal memory. More importantly, the book offers deep insight into what it is like to grow up in a remote village in a conflict affected area; the perspective of the young men and women, who live the conflict, participate in the local discourse, and some go on to join the rebel groups. What are their lives like? What do they aspire for? What effect does the overarching discourse of the Naga ethnic movement, that most of them are born into, have on their process of identity formation in a framework of ‘us versus them’.

The reader will travel with me to Burma, across the India-Burma border, and hear the perspectives of the Naga inhabited areas in the Naga Self-Administered Zone (NSAZ). The book deals squarely with the connection of the ethnic group to land. The issue of territoriality that animates the conflict is discussed: be it a separate homeland, an autonomous zone, or a unified homeland across several states and the resistance to that idea.

At the time of writing the book and its publication (January 2020), the Naga ethnic conflict was at a final stage of resolution guided by the spirit of Isak Chisi Swu and the Naga Framework Agreement signed in August 2015. As is wise, the Naga peace talks were widened in 2017, to include groups besides the NSCN (IM), functioning under a Working Committee of the Naga National Political Groups (NNP-Gs). Groups included were the four different representations from the NNC – Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN), NNC-Parent Body, Non-Accordist faction of NNC/National People’s Government of Nagaland (NPGN/NNC-NA), and Government Democratic Republic of Nagaland /NNC-NA (GDRN), the NSCN–Neokpao-Kitovi (NSCN-NK), Khango Konyak led NSCN-Khaplang (NSCN-K) and NSCN-Reformation, (NSCN-R). Nagaland Chief Minister, Neiphiu Rio announced on February 10, 2020 that

We are at a crucial juncture in our history, because during such times, insecurity may prevail in the minds of people, or misconceptions and confusions based on hearsay may be spread by mischief-makers ...nowhere has it been mentioned that the peace process has concluded. Only the talks have concluded on a positive note, which signifies that the negotiating parties have arrived at meeting points on the various topics of the negotiations...

Nagas are tired and in a stupor and if violence breaks out we may say, ‘What to do its come again’. But this time we must say no to any violence. Ordinary people have just suffered and accepted things in despair and dismay but with deep bitterness.

Negotiations had been going on for the last 22 years and the talks had to be concluded so that an agreement can come about. No pact can be signed unless the points of contention are hammered out between the parties involved.⁴

R.N. Ravi, the Governor of Nagaland, as well as the Naga peace interlocuter indicated that talks have concluded, and hoped everyone support the final resolution. Sticky issues are the demand for unification of Naga inhabited territories, a separate flag, and a Naga constitution. More importantly, are all armed factions on board, with the NSCN (IM) playing a lead role? We do not want a repeat of past agreements like the Shillong Accord of 1975 that divided the NNC, and created the seeds for decades of continuing armed conflict. This situation of violence in the midst of societies is detrimental for long term health and survival. The peace agreement has to be durable. This perspective is well understood and internalized by Niketu Iralu, who has worked tirelessly to bring a peaceful resolution to a violent conflict by building consensus through his Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR). This is what he has to say:

Nagas are tired and in a stupor and if violence breaks out we may say, ‘What to do its come again’. But this time we must say no to any violence. Ordinary people have just suffered and accepted things in despair and dismay but with deep bitterness.⁶

A final resolution should dawn upon us soon. My hope is that this book helps the reader, navigate the Naga conflict and offer insights from the field.

End Notes

1 Namrata Goswami, *Just War Theory and India’s Intervention in East Pakistan*, 1971 (New Delhi: Knowledge World Publishers, 2014).

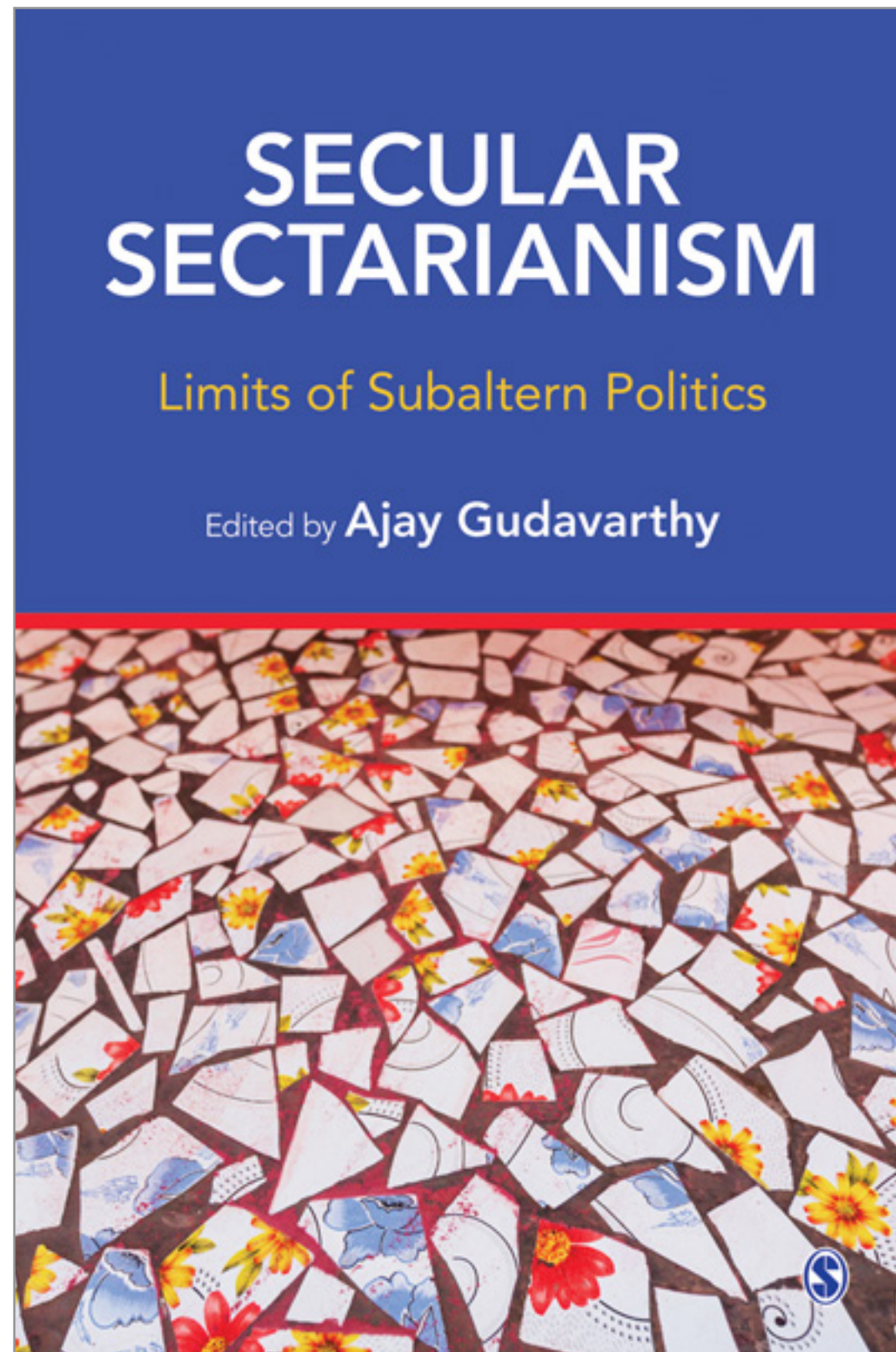
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3 Angus McSwan, “Victory over Japanese at Kohima named Britain’s Greatest Battle,” Reuters, April 21, 2013, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-battles/victory-over-japanese-at-kohima-named-britains-greatest-battle-idUKBRE93K03220130421>

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PROFESSOR ANINDYA SEKHAR PURAKAYASTHA
SUBALTERN AND ITS FRAGMENTS:
APORIAS OF IDENTITY POLITICS
REVIEW OF DR AJAY GUDAVARTHY'S BOOK
SECULAR SECTARIANISM.

<https://in.sagepub.com/en-in/sas/secular-sectarianism/book271597>

The very idea of the subaltern as a category and subalternity as a discourse, therefore is under the scanner. There is an impending need, Gudavarthy says, to ‘re-frame the [subaltern] question...’ as subaltern social groups based on caste and religion, and class politics are also structured or inscribed within the same logic of power which they claim to critique. In other words, they and their politics of identity is ‘accrued by the same social structure that also marginalizes them.’

... Secular sectarianism is a specific social condition that allows for incremental mobility for itself while actively arresting the same for social groups that are placed well below them. (Ajay Gudavarthy)

The rise of majoritarian politics has capitalized on existing fissions and rifts within ‘minorities’ or infighting among various subaltern groups and Ajay Gudavarthy’s new book *Secular Sectarianism: Limits of Identity Politics*, 2019) rightly addresses this issue of intra-subaltern rivalry to understand the inadequacies or loopholes in existing discourses of subaltern politics. This is indeed a timely intervention as the menacing rise of majoritarian nationalism necessitates a re-look at current forms of identity politics or class based politics which were projected and practiced over the years as the right course of progress. Political outfits of different hues in India have mostly premised their ideological claims on being the vanguard of various disenfranchised sections of our society. Post 1947 subaltern political ideologies rallying around the causes of Dalits, Muslims, Tribals and even class based proletarian politics have occupied major spaces in the Indian political spectrum, asserting their representative claims as the true hallmark of their political credentials. But of late this burgeoning presence of subaltern groups are being questioned as subaltern politics while arguing for its emancipatory optics across the board, is mired in intra-subaltern conflicts, various groups at logger head with each other.

The very idea of the subaltern as a category and subalternity as a discourse, therefore is under the scanner. There is an impending need, Gudavarthy says, to ‘re-frame the [subaltern] question...’ as subaltern social groups based on caste and religion, and class politics are also structured or inscribed within the same logic of power which they claim to critique. In other words, they and their politics of identity is ‘accrued by the same social structure that also marginalizes them.’

Gudavarthy makes use of two conceptual terms, ‘unequal and ‘uneven’ to argue his point of systems of hierarchies within subalternity or subaltern politics, an issue which they claim to resist but obviously have failed to actualize through their reification of subaltern identity. Their fundamentalist focus on identity has blinded them to emphasize questions of justice and ethicality within their own reflexive restructuring. Put differently, subaltern-politics is ossified or over-glorified to the extent of preempting all forms of auto-critique. Questioning the hegemony of the dominant does not mean the perpetuation of rivalry or ‘unevenness’ within the dominated groups and this is what practitioners of subaltern identity politics forget.

Political practices in India, post-1947 was ‘always already’ precariously situated between moving towards a more inclusive secular ethos, and a deeply sectarian marginalization of the ‘other’. Secularism, therefore, as a lofty idea or political principle is not, what is popularly viewed, as mere separation of state and religion but it should essentially refer to a ‘social ethos of the ability to trust the stranger: trust as a social condition for mobility’.

They use the secular rubric as an ethical category that promises justice across the board but they retain hostility or unevenness within themselves in the name of identity politics. This is secular sectarianism according to this book which rightly argues that

social power is both uneven and unequal. It is not only gravely unequal when compared to the traditional social elites but also uneven in the very constitution of subaltern social groups. Political mobilization, strategies and the question of agency are split between questioning the unequal and preserving the uneven...Thus, social conflicts in India, mostly, have questioned the hegemony of those above them, much more than empathizing or extending solidarity with those below them in social hierarchy.

Political practices in India, post-1947 was ‘always already’ precariously situated between moving towards a more inclusive secular ethos, and a deeply sectarian marginalization of the ‘other’. Secularism, therefore, as a lofty idea or political principle is not, what is popularly viewed, as mere separation of state and religion but it should essentially refer to a ‘social ethos of the ability to trust the stranger: trust as a social condition for mobility’. In the Indian context, according to Gudavarthy, the “very groups identified as harbingers of ‘secular upsurge’—Dalits, Muslims, women, OBCs and the Left—have initiated a process of sectarian ghettoization. Political alliances did not result in social reform of hierarchies. Reified social hierarchies and expanding political representation are the constitutive conditions of secular sectarianism.” This is an exact analysis of what is happening in India right now as it explains the participation of Dalits and Adivasis in communal riots against Muslims and other minority groups. Reified social groups became the norm of our political practices and such norms have justified expanded political representations through identity group-based politics banking on reified social subjectivity.

As a result, subaltern social groups carry the logic of their ‘internal’ social power (they often say this is an internal matter of their specific community that disallows external intervention) into the larger secular–democratic political process. Constitutionalism or constitutional morality in this process are laughed at as impractical liberal ways of looking into politics. According to this book this epistemic normativity has controlled Indian political wisdom for years and ‘much of the liberal and post-colonial scholarship in India suffered from this epistemic limitation and, therefore, by default belonged to the same ‘epistemic community’.

However Gudavarthy is alive to usual critiques of such ‘Western liberal critical theorizations’ and he takes on board the necessary caveat of whether replacement of differences with deconstruction undermines the very specificity of culture itself. While acknowledging the merit of such critiques, this book agrees with Frasers’ view that identity not only reifies but becomes a tool of social elites internal to such group differences— Muslims, Dalits, traditional Class-politicians amongst others.

Having diagnosed the problem, this book offers new epistemes or a new critical theory of subaltern politics, referring to contemporary critical thinkers such as Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler and Axel Honneth among others.

Nancy Fraser has floated the idea of formulating the question of justice as the possibility of reconciling recognition(identity), redistribution and representation. According to Fraser, the ‘recognition–redistribution dilemma’ posits that ‘recognition requires differentiation, redistribution requires de-differentiation.’ Gudavarthy replicates Fraser’s critique of identitarian model of recognition that ‘instantiates the problems of ‘reification’ and displacement.’ Fraser argues for a deconstructive cultural politics, which she views as the only way to reconcile the politics of ‘recognition’ with redistributive class politics. This sounds really interesting as Fraser’s hypothesis aims to ‘make all identities, historical, fluid, unstable and beyond the limits of binarized signification’.

However Gudavarthy is alive to usual critiques of such ‘Western liberal critical theorizations’ and he takes on board the necessary caveat of whether replacement of differences with deconstruction undermines the very specificity of culture itself. While acknowledging the merit of such critiques, this book agrees with Frasers’ view that identity not only reifies but becomes a tool of social elites internal to such group differences— Muslims, Dalits, traditional Class-politicians amongst others. For Fraser, “essentialization naturalizes historically constituted identities by claiming the identities as those that cannot be breached...This dialectic between naturalization and historicity is significant in understanding how subaltern politics can congeal power to conceal internal exclusions.”

This aporia of subaltern identity politics poses a serious roadblock and Judith Butler offers a way out. Her model of unity not as synthesis but as a mode of sustaining conflict in productive way does have merit according to Ajay Gudavarthy. Butler refers to this as ‘equivalence without becoming each other’, where ‘one social movement comes to find its condition of possibility in another’ and

Difference is both the condition and limit of identities. Identities gain specificity in difference but the same difference also constitutes the limit on its final realization (Butler 1997). She refers to it as ‘conflictual encounter’... While difference as solidarity refers to the possibility of secular ethos, difference as distance imbricates a sectarian social process. When difference is seen to break naturalized readings of subaltern, exclusion is, in contrast to difference, opening the possibility of naturalizing historically produced identities.

The core argument of the book reflected through the introduction, various chapters and the Afterword on different forms of identity politics in India reiterates that sectarianism is a condition of approaching justice without the idea of inner self and good life and here even the Class politics of the party Left is also not spared because that too is bedeviled by narrow rigidities as it ‘undermined the potency of cross-class agreements and reduced politics to bare materiality, in the process producing a sectarian logic that undermined the very conditions necessary for class-based collectives.’

The introductory chapter of the book reminds us that in the current neoliberal times, while recognition and the accompanying corollary of victimhood have become the new templates of aspirational politics, ‘Hyper-recognition marked by separation, rather than emphasis on shared ethos, holds wider appeal.’ The solution according to this book, is a ‘turn to common humanity needs an ethical project of self-limiting subjectivity.’

The question that still remains in uneven and unequal social conditions is whether social groups hold the same kind of social power to declare themselves as sovereign selves. Can moral or human equivalence replace unequal material positioning? Would it not be true to argue that the difficulty of imagining deconstructive politics in real concrete also holds true for actualizing the ideal of ‘common humanity’. This also leaves us with the question of the equation between justice and secular sectarianism.

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DR SHANTHIE MARIET D'SOUZA & DR BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY SURGING JIHADIST WAVE IN WESTERN AFRICA: CONFLICT SPILLOVER

Abstract

The Sahel region in Western Africa is witnessing a massive surge in terrorist attacks. Three countries- Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso- reported 4000 deaths in 2019 and the trend of staggering casualties in attacks by al Qaeda and Islamic State-linked outfits continues in 2020. The governments and militaries of the affected states are ill prepared to deal with the upscale in violence. With the United States of America considering pulling out its troops, 5000 French troops may not be able to contain the Jihadist wave in general and the resurgence of the Islamic State in particular, which may engulf the entire Sahel region causing deaths and producing thousands of IDPs.

Spate of Attacks

On 1 February 2020, unidentified heavily armed men on motorbikes arrived in Lamdamol village in Seno province of Burkina Faso, north of the capital Ouagadougou and massacred 20 civilians.[1] The attack took place a week after a similar carnage in the province of Soum. Suspected Islamist terrorists had rounded up the villagers, executed the men and asked the women to leave the village.

In early January, 36 people had been massacred at two villages in the northern Sanmatenga province. Jihadists also kidnapped and killed a Canadian mine worker and abducted two other humanitarian workers in December 2019. These incidents are the latest in a series of attacks that have taken place in this West African nation. A day before the 27 January attack, the prime minister of Burkina Faso and cabinet had resigned taking responsibility for the slide in security situation.



Flag draped body of soldiers killed during a Jihadist attack in display in Niger in December 2019.
Image Courtesy: [Global News](#)

According to the United Nations, over 4000 people were killed in 2019 in extremist attacks, making Sahel one of the most violent regions across the world affected by Islamist extremism. In comparison, three years earlier, only 770 deaths were reported from the region. According to a recent briefing at the United Nations Security Council, the geographic focus of terrorist attacks has shifted eastwards from Mali to Burkina Faso and is increasingly threatening West African coastal states.

Along with Burkina Faso, other West African nations such as Mali and Niger have experienced a significant surge in terrorist attacks in recent months. On 26 January, 20 gendarmes, or paramilitary police officers were killed in central Mali in an attack by Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) – an umbrella group of al Qaeda affiliates. On 9 January, at least 89 soldiers were killed in a jihadist attack on the Chinagodrar base military camp in Niger along the western border with Mali. More than 60 militants were also reportedly killed when the army responded backed by French air strikes. In December, another 71 soldiers were killed in an ambush claimed by an affiliate of the Islamic State group in the region. Especially with regard to the attacks on the security forces, the militants appear to work on a twin objective strategy: one, to break the morale of the forces and second, to steal their weapons and equipment.

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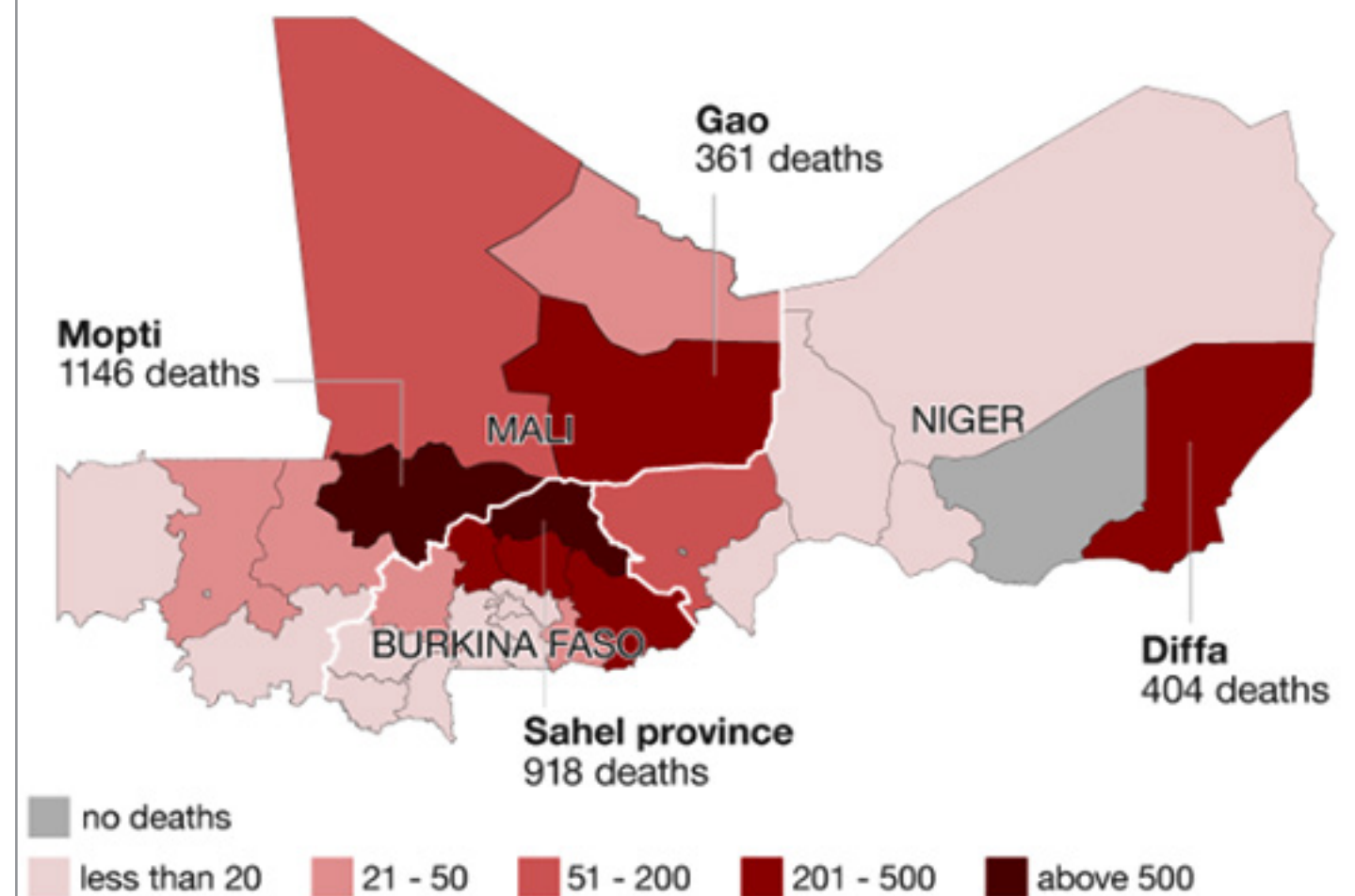
Multiple Complex Insurgencies

These insurgent groups have adopted the branding of international terrorist organizations like the Islamic State and al Qaeda. However, their focus remains local. They thrive in areas bereft of governance exploiting local conflicts. Islamist ideology is used by the groups to bridge different ethnic groups, convincing them to fight for Islam rather than over smaller tribal conflicts.[2]

Most of these groups trace their roots to the Algerian civil war that began in the early 1990s and spanned a decade. Islamist fighters from Algeria fled the country, seeking refuge in the deserted areas of northern Mali. Violence began in 2012, when a political crisis in Mali sparked a rebellion by ethnic-based movements and jihadist groups in the north of the country. The uprising was eventually quashed and the territory seized by jihadists was reclaimed by French forces. But these groups and the ideology they support was far from defeated. For a while, militant violence was confined mostly within Mali's borders, but violence is increasingly spilling across borders.

Sahel crisis casualties from 2019 attacks

Worst-hit regions



Source: acleddata.com Image: BBC

BBC

In 2014, leaders of Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Chad created the G5 Sahel group, a French-backed taskforce of 5000 personnel to fight the militants. However, that clearly has failed to deliver. The reason is to do with their extremely small size which makes their mandate to police over a very large region extremely difficult to execute. Moreover, the military response to the upscaled terrorist attack is clearly falling short due to a variety of reasons including availability of resources.

Though once considered resistant to the phenomenon of Islamic extremism, Burkina Faso has suffered a rapid rise in Islamist extremism in recent years. The number of deaths has risen from about 80 in 2016 to more than 1800 in 2019. Half a million people are currently displaced and continuous attacks are forcing thousands more to flee their homes.

In recent months, Islamist groups, some with links to the Islamic State and al Qaeda, have been waging larger, more sophisticated attacks and are expanding into new territory. Al Qaeda, weakened in many parts of the world, has strong branches in both East and West Africa. The al Qaeda linked JNIM is still the most dominant jihadist actor inside Mali and large parts of Burkina Faso and Niger. In addition, recent Islamic State attacks in the region have demonstrated its growing capabilities. In January, AQ released a two-page statement praising the jihadists in Mali and Somalia. The Islamic State, on the other hand, has released photographs and videos claiming responsibility for the attacks in Niger.

Regional Counter terrorism Response

Rising extreme inequality, despite impressive economic growth in the past two decades, feeds insurgencies in the region. Nearly 70 per cent of West Africa's population depends on agriculture and livestock for a living. That way of life continues to be threatened by persistent droughts. As a result, a lot of young men have found a career in terrorism. The combination of poverty, weak state presence and under-resourced armies has allowed jihadist groups, criminal networks and ethnic armed groups to thrive in the region, despite regional and international efforts.

A seven-year campaign led by French troops starting 2012, deployment of hundreds of U.S. special forces, massive aid for local militaries and a billion dollar-a-year United Nations peacekeeping operation have been unable to decisively weaken the multiple overlapping insurgencies in the region.

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In February 2020, the JNIM released three sets of photos highlighting its recruitment campaign titled, “Go forth in the cause of Allah”, Image Source: TwitterImage

Burkina Faso's meagre 6000 Army personnel are ill-equipped and poorly trained to deal with assaults that usually involve hundreds of highly mobile, lightly-armed militants travelling on motorbikes or in pickup trucks. In response, the government is considering developing a people's militia by providing weapons to civilians above the age of 18. The BBC reported that members of Burkina Faso's parliament have 'unanimously voted in favour of arming civilians in a move they said would help combat the armed groups. It is due to be signed into law.' [3] It is difficult to foresee how these civilians supposed to be trained for 14 days will be able to put up a better resistance than the professional military.

Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou has reorganized the leadership of military in order to reformulate its strategy. [4] The new military leadership has also announced a new offensive to begin against the Islamic State in the region, though it is unclear when or how it will progress. Past offensives have so far failed to stymie the spread of jihadist violence.

Violence in the coming months, therefore, could spread even farther south and destabilize the region. It can possibly spillover into the northern part of Guinea, Benin, Togo, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Sahel indeed could be close to a tipping point that could see an irreversible slide into violent chaos that will strengthen extremist groups and send a new wave of migrants to Europe.

Mali's prime minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita has announced plans to increase the numbers of its army by 50 percent (10,000 soldiers) this year.[5] At the same time, he wishes to hold negotiation with the Jihadists.[6] It is not clear how much would the exercise of increasing the size of the military cost and if Mali would be able to bear the expenses alone. Frequent attacks on the soldiers in the West African nations by the Jihadists as a tactic to deter young men from joining the army could also pose problems for new recruitment by the government.

Prognosis/ Future trends

The present spate of violence appears to take place as the Islamic State affords more attention to its growing branch in Sahel. In 2019, the Islamic State's central leadership renamed its 'Islamic State in the Greater Sahara' wilayat (province) into 'West Africa Province'. This adds to the specter of violence in the region where the al Qaeda affiliated groups such as the JNIM are almost enjoying a free run and are expanding fast. Amid concerns that domestic or regional response may not be sufficient, there are additional reasons to worry. The U.S. plans to withdraw a significant proportion of its troops deployed in Africa. The U.S. currently has 6,000 military personnel in Africa, though only several hundred are deployed against militants in the Sahel. A Pentagon proposal revealed that the U.S. is weighing the option of military cuts in Africa. The US decision is necessitated as it redirects resources to address challenges from China and Russia after two decades focused on counter-terrorism operations.

Apart from 14000 UN peacekeeping forces in northern Mali, France has 4500 troops in Mali who are dependent on logistical as well as intelligence inputs from the U.S., which also maintains a drone base in Agadez town in Niger from where it launches air operations. France announced in January that it would deploy 600 additional troops to the region, despite rising anti-French sentiment in some countries[7] and criticism at home that its forces are bogged down. The move came after President Emmanuel Macron sought support for the French military from the G5 countries and threatened to withdraw his forces in its absence.[8] This token increase, however, is unlikely to make much impact on the ground.

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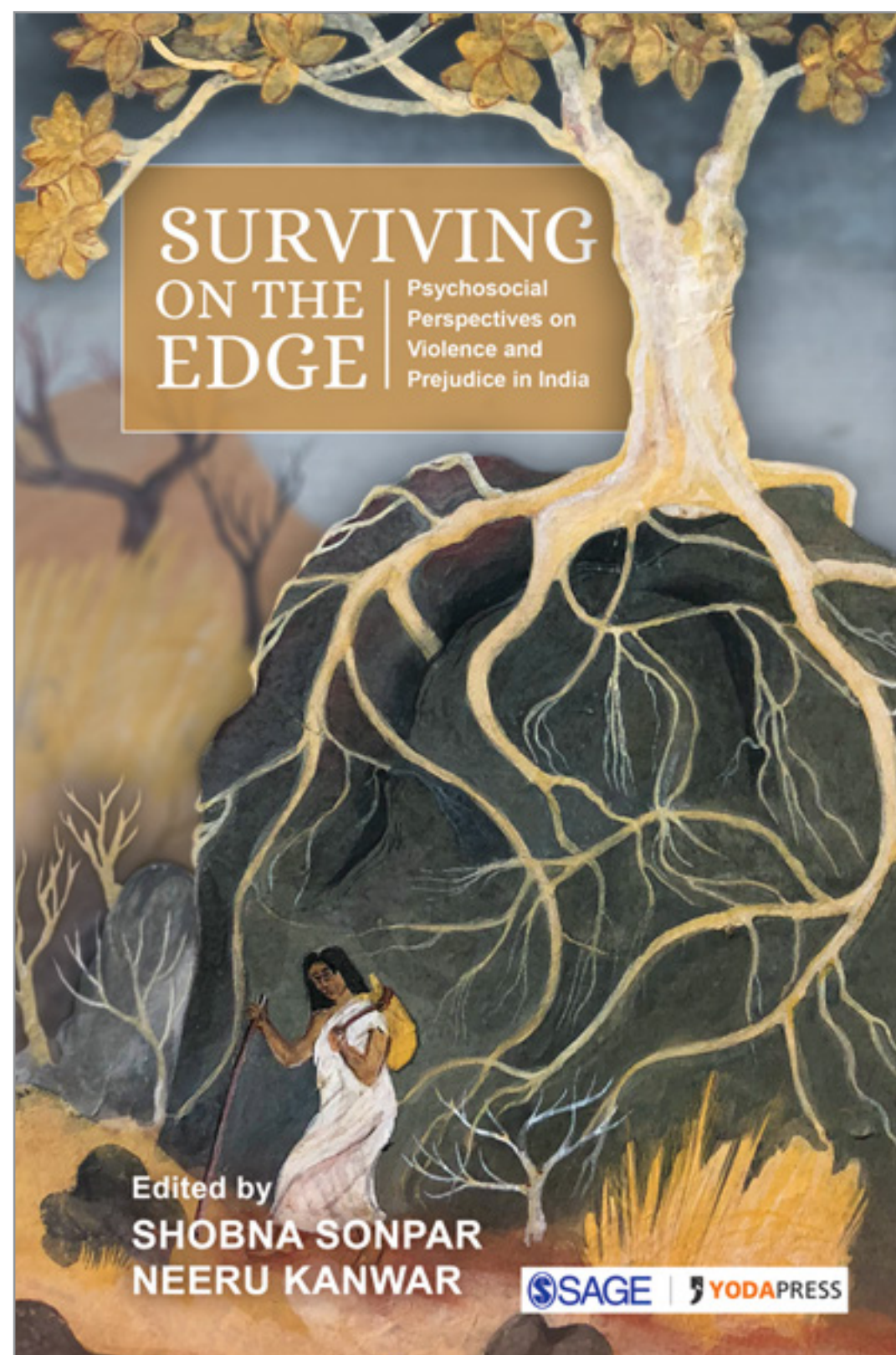
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SHOBNA SONPAR & NEERU KANWAR PSYCHOSOCIAL LENS ON PREJUDICE AND VIOLENCE

A plural society inevitably faces challenges to harmony arising from contestations over issues of resources, power and identity. In the midst of rapid social and technological change with the world becoming globalised, with increasingly porous borders between people and ideas, with traditional hierarchies of gender, class, caste and ethnicity being upturned, there is the paradoxical rise of groups and movements that are more 'localised' and insular. Seeking to assert their distinctiveness and superiority, they espouse attitudes and behaviours that reject, exclude and vilify persons perceived to be outsiders to their community or nation. Often they lay claim to power in ways that are regressive and violent. At its worst this xenophobia manifests in hate crimes.

The tension between belonging to a plural and diverse whole while sustaining a cherished sense of distinctiveness is a ubiquitous challenge based on the opposing human needs for belonging and for differentiation. The theory of optimal distinctiveness posited by the social psychologist Brewer holds that we identify with groups which satisfy our need to assimilate and belong but which are also sufficiently distinct from other groups to satisfy our need for distinctiveness. The clarity of boundaries between the two serves to secure both inclusion and exclusion. One way that such boundaries are maintained is through the beliefs and practices that govern norms of social distance. Another layer to the tension described above is how individuals construct sameness and difference in order to affirm their own identity. Othering, the process of perceiving and portraying something as fundamentally different and alien to oneself, enables people to differentiate Self from the Other, the in-group from the out-group, in ways that affirm and protect the Self. Self-regard can come to depend on the denigration of the other group even as the despised group becomes the receptacle of qualities disavowed by the Self. These processes result in various forms of exclusion. It is evident at the resource level where many are excluded from sharing material resources to the extent of poverty and deprivation. It is evident at the social level in the practices of social distance, the operation of stereotypes, prejudice and stigma.

Prejudiced attitudes and beliefs about other groups and norms for conduct towards them that are discriminatory, devaluing and exclusionary form the base of a pyramid of violence. The stereotypes and prejudices that make up the base are often culturally congruent and normalized and therefore not acknowledged as forms of violence. At the top of the pyramid are actual acts of physical violence - acts of murder, rape, mutilation, lynching. Perceived threat is the central factor in escalating prejudiced attitudes to acts of violence such as hate crimes.

Significantly, social exclusion also determines the boundary of our moral community, those whose suffering is recognized and who fall within the scope of justice. Moral inclusion is characterized by considerations of fairness for those falling within the community, sharing resources with them and extending efforts for their well being. Moral exclusion is characterized by lack of concern and responsibility towards those outside, positioning them as undeserving and inferior. This sets the grounds for dehumanization. Race, gender, caste, class, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, ethnicity, religion have all served as markers differentiating those within from those outside the moral community.

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The book *'Surviving on the edge: Psychosocial perspectives on violence and prejudice in India'* is a collection of essays, experiential accounts and case studies originally published in Psychological Foundations - The Journal. These articles are written primarily but not exclusively by psychologists and other mental health practitioners. While it is sometimes thought that the particular interest that psychologists take in the voices of individuals and their inner reality implies a disregard of social and cultural influences, it is to be noted that the stories of suffering heard in the clinic are also a reflection of the discriminatory and violent world in which we live. What is within the individual psyche is also 'social' because people internalise social norms as a part of their subjectivity and such 'normative unconscious processes' evoke thoughts, feelings and behaviours consonant with social norms. Hence the use of the term 'psychosocial' which explicitly recognizes that all behaviour results from the interaction of factors lying within individuals, within their interpersonal and group relations and also within the larger, social, political and cultural context.

The book is in two sections. The first section maps some of the terrain marked by violence and prejudice and the second section considers the impact of prejudice and violence on wellbeing and the amelioration of such impact. Gender-related discrimination and violence are well researched areas especially from feminist-led understandings of power and gender inequities. The related contributions in this volume suggest that the complexity of real life warrants exploration into other dimensions that feed into discrimination and violence as well as the ways in which oppressive gender socialisation is escaped.

The volume does not offer a comprehensive account of theory and research, nor is it exhaustive of all categories of prejudice, discrimination and violence. What it does provide is a stance that is experience-near, a position that deepens understanding by making the subject a human one. It also tends towards a process view looking at the ways in which the base of the violence pyramid - prejudiced and exclusionary attitudes and behaviours - is constructed and the sites of such socialisation including the family.

The book is in two sections. The first section maps some of the terrain marked by violence and prejudice and the second section considers the impact of prejudice and violence on wellbeing and the amelioration of such impact. Gender-related discrimination and violence are well researched areas especially from feminist-led understandings of power and gender inequities. The related contributions in this volume suggest that the complexity of real life warrants exploration into other dimensions that feed into discrimination and violence as well as the ways in which oppressive gender socialisation is escaped. The theme of ethnicity and religion is another area addressed by some papers in the volume -the tensions between the personal self and socio-cultural identity, the ways in which our location in particular class, caste, race and ethnic identity blinds us to how we participate in discriminatory and exclusionary practices, and the way that social-religious identity becomes hyperconscious when under attack. Disability, mental and physical, is another sector where stigmatisation and consequent devaluation operate. The articles in the volume interrogate the legitimisation and perpetuation of stigma of disability through society's ideological systems and institutions.

The second section of the volume addresses the impact of prejudice, exclusion and violence. The idiom of trauma is often used to talk about the nature of suffering following situations of prolonged deprivation and victimization as well as extreme situations of disaster and violence. The articles span the issue of trauma and ameliorative interventions in contexts of sexual violence, political conflict, terrorism, and riots. The articles also underline the abundant evidence of resistance, resilience and even 'adversity-activated' personal development. While liberation from the tyranny of prejudiced ways of relating to the world can lie in the practice of self-reflexivity and the development of personal aspects of selfhood, several illuminating examples of work on the ground demonstrate the range of interventions possible to deal with such trauma.

Taken together, the essays in this volume offer a psychosocial perspective on prejudice and violence that is close to the complexity of lived experience and ground realities.



Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photographer. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 179 publications (upto March 2020). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY – My friend & Philosopher*, *Seductive Avatars of Maya – Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*. www.amazon.com/markulyseas <https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas/>

MARK ULYSEAS

SUICIDE, FAST TRACK TO NEVERLAND?

Is suicide an act of cowardice? Or, is it a divine right that is given to us to exit life at the time of our own choosing?

The dark and light worlds often collide in one's life and glimpses of futility and ecstasy churn the soul blending the absurd and the spectacular, throwing up cross roads of existence offering choices that lead anywhere and everywhere. Some take the road that leads out of the living.

Suicide is a much maligned action. Religion has its exclusive form of damnation. Morality is subjective. And the question of who owns one's life remains unanswered.

Is life all that beautiful?

And what is beauty - The sight of a new born calf resting next to its mother in a green field on a warm summer day? Or the lamb, lying on its side, being held down by the faithful, as a priest slits its throat as he prays?

Life is beautiful is a chant that subdues our senses and keeps us in trance-like animation. The harshness, the disease, the violence is accepted as a test from the Divine; A test that we must pass to get a ticket to another world. This is what the faithful believe.

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas

But why do we need a ticket? Can't we travel ticketless into oblivion, the nothingness that cloaks the soul from all light, light that brings an existential dilemma of ownership of one's soul?

Why does one have to suffer the harshness of life to fulfil one's destiny, one's karma, in the belief that one has lived past lives and this life is retribution, debts to be paid by *living*?

And if we have, as many believe, lived past lives, how come the numbers of people keep increasing? Why are more souls being manufactured? Is there a Divine reason?

Artists of all hues, unwed mothers, children et al have taken the road out of town. Some have committed suicide *live* on social media. It is as if they are taunting the living with death. And it continues unabated. Some are eulogized by their act, others simply buried and forgotten.

But why do those that remain behind in the turgid waters of the *living* feel abandoned, betrayed? And does this betrayal originate in the living's own selfish needs?

Some who have attempted/survived suicide have gone on to contribute productively to humanity. But what is the point when humanity has a built-in self-destruct mechanism that continues to drag itself into a quagmire of filth and deadly violence.

Isn't mindless warfare a form of suicide; the knowing that a gun in hand on a battle field would potentially endanger one's life? Isn't the stock piling of weapons of mass destruction an act that precedes suicide on a massive scale, tens of millions? Or, is this just murder?

So what is the value of the life of one that walks into an oncoming train? A few tears, a news snippet? Funeral ceremony? Old pictures on the wall? Then forgotten, until the next one dies.

Euthanasia (killing me softly) is the scientific term for suicide. Palatable. Acceptable. Some countries permit 'assisted death' for terminally ill patients. Isn't this 'assisted' suicide? Or, are we now splitting our morality – those who don't deserve to take their own lives and those that are unaware (mentally) that their lives are being taken away from them – one is quite simply suicide and the other, is, perhaps, murder? Who decides who lives and who dies? Those with a religious conscience? Or, those with a scientific *bent* mind?

Why do we always say, 'Life is Precious', is sacred, when everything that we do is done to enhance our own personal welfare at the expense of other sentient beings on earth. Arrogance is instilled in us from the time we are breastfed by our mothers; arrogance towards the preciousness of life. This is reflected in our inherent violent nature in both mind and body. There is no sacredness; it is the delusion of the ape within us.

From the moment we are born we begin dying (aging) so life is death and in death, we attain life.

Perhaps the Divine has a scary sense of humour?

There is great unease when a person commits suicide; the fear of Divine retribution; the fear of a terrifying reception on the other side when in fact suicide is nothing more than the act of forcing open the door that connects the two worlds; and not waiting for it to be opened at the scheduled time.

Or could it be that living itself is an act of suicide?

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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