



A Time to Play Hemant Sareen

In 2014, Gauri Gill reached out to the famous mask-makers of the Kokna and Warli tribes of Jawhar, a tropical idyll nestled in the Western Ghats, with a proposal for a collaboration that was virtually an invitation to play. Every year, the Adivasi community performs at the famous Bohada mask festival, donning their own masks personifying many Hindu and indigenous gods and goddesses to enact scenes from their versions of Hindu epics blended with tribal myths. Gill, captivated by the tribes' artistry, suggested a switch of register of their ritual performances to the secular. Maybe, to reflect their present situation and reality, the masks could express their emotions, or draw from the repertoire of nine *rasas* prescribed in the Indian dramaturgical tradition: fear, loathing, desire, compassion, valor, fury, horror, mirth, and calm. Aptly, Gill recommended the masks eschew idealization of the human face and also show it ravaged by time and illness. Why not animals and birds? The *papier mâché* artists insisted on the inclusion of their oldest friends. They also voted unanimously for everyday objects as befitting subjects for masks, either those they already possessed or those they keenly desired, like the home computer, mobile phone, television set, and camera. Subash and his brother Bhagwan Dharma Kadu, sons of a legendary mask maker Dharma Kadu, led the large team of more than thirty individuals that would interpret Gill's brief guided by their own imagination.

In *Acts of Appearance*, the artists, together with volunteers from the local community, improvise everyday scenes as masked *tableaux vivants*, staged against the familiar backdrops of their village and landscape. The *tableau vivant* also provides the basic template for sacred Hindu iconography: trinities, couples, or a larger soirée of gods who look straight on at the devout standing in front of them in supplication, or just for a *darshan*, a tête-à-tête with gods.¹ Gill frames the tableaux without artifice, as if she were illustrating the alphabet.

IMAGE: Gauri Gill, *Untitled (76)* from the series *Acts of Appearance*, 2015-ongoing, archival pigment print, 16 x 24 in. (40 x 61 cm). Edition of 7 plus 1 AP.

¹ Pinney, Christopher, *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, London: Reaktion Books, 2004, p. 9

Indeed, there is an element of originary in the narrative the tableaux together project. The archaic, with its root *arkhi*, the origin, makes its presence felt.² The separation between man and animal recedes into the hoary past. Time speeds up, as it always does in play. A Freudian, childlike rearrangement of its everyday reality is set in motion by a community and its collaborator animated together in play. There are transformations galore, products of their own and collective volition, unlike those imposed on them by the state and the corporations sanctioned by it. A boy has become a television set, another has turned into a mobile phone. Where man ends and god begins, no one knows. The tribals once haggled with, complained to, sulked at, and heaped calumny on their gods.³ Now, briefly, they can do that again. The tribal identity hungry, like a child after play, one moment accepts a Scottish missionary catechism, at another imbibes a homily from the Brahmin, it takes good from one, accepts evil from another, a story comes its way, it's added to the old one!⁴ A new myth can refresh an old one. Consider the Santhals, from Eastern India, whose "ancestor-story sees the passing of time not through the progressive unification of peoples into a community," an impulse that sustains the historical discourse of the kingdoms, empires, and the nation state, "but as the progressive differentiation and estrangement of a people who were once one."⁵

The Warli and Koknas' calendar-bound annual masked performances are a ritual that keep the tribal myths going; these myths archive the tribes' histories. Now, with Gill's camera present, everything transforms into play. Play, Agamben writes, is when the calendar, "whose essence is rhythm, alternation and repetition," lapses, is struck by "paralysis."⁶ The agrarian almanac, or the migration cycle of a daily laborer to and from the cities, or the temporality assigned to the tribes outside the historical modern, are all suspended in the duration of play.⁷ The lunar and solar cycles take a break too, as the Sun and Moon walk down the street. Play creates its own time, where the past and the present can live together and where "a special relationship between different times" is put to work.⁸ This time-space is also how Agamben frames contemporariness: as an "out-of-jointness" with the present that the Koknas' and Warli's play and the masks together create.⁹

Gill's straight-on compositions depicting staged scenarios conjure up a secular, magical-realist iconography like the ones "painted in defiance of all possible existence... [b]efore the European style of oil painting began to be known and appreciated in this country... pictures of Vishnu as half man and half lion . . . pictures of the god Krishna with his legs twisted and turned into postures in which no biped

² Agamben, Giorgio, 'What Is the Contemporary?', *What Is An Apparatus? And Other Essays*, Translated By David Kishik, Stefan Pedatella, Stanford University Press, California, 2009, p. 40

³ An account from 1841 of John Wilson, the President of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and Scottish missionary, gives a hint of how the tribes coexisted with dominant historical discourses of Brahmanism, Christianity, Colonialism, and industrialization, at times resisting them, at others harmonizing with them. Travelling through the region around Jawhar ostensibly to study the forest tribes of the northern Konkan, Wilson catechizes tribe members he meets, quizzing them about their beliefs thought largely to be centered around forest deities. To his chagrin, he finds traces of tenets of Hinduism, albeit sans its higher precepts, in their responses. Wilson then expounds "the precepts of the law of God" to the tribe members who "confessed that they had acted both unreasonably and impiously in worshipping a devil instead of God." "A subsequent catechising," adds Wilson credulously, "proved that they remembered much of our discourse." Wilson was keen to assign the tribal a pure subjectivity despite evidence to the contrary, just to delude himself that his proselytizing would be the last influence the tribal would embrace. Wilson, John, 'Act. III.- Account of the Wáralís and Kátodís, Two of the Forest Tribes of the Northern Konkan,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1843, pp. 14-31, doi:10.1017/ S0035869X00155649, Published online: 14 March 2011, p. 20

⁴ Wilson, John, 'Act. III.- Account of the Wáralís and Kátodís, Two of the Forest Tribes of the Northern Konkan,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1843, pp. 14-31, doi:10.1017/ S0035869X00155649, Published online: 14 March 2011.

⁵ Banerjee, Prathama, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-writing in a Colonial Society*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2006. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195681567.001.0001, Introduction

⁶ Agamben, Giorgio, "In Playland: Reflections on History and Play," *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, Verso, 1978, page 78

⁷ Banerjee, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives'*, Introduction

⁸ Agamben, Giorgio, 'What Is the Contemporary?', *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, Translated By David Kishik, Stefan Pedatella, Stanford University Press, California, 2009, p. 52

⁹ Agamben, 'What Is the Contemporary?' p. 40

could stand . . .”¹⁰ Likewise, in Gill’s images masked figures come together to create a vibrantly aberrant plurality out of what has been desacralized: a girl-rabbit squats in a tent, a woman-cobra lounges on a couch, a boy-parakeet and boy-owl go for a walk, a man-lizard and man-fish gape out of a window, a boy-mobile phone poses for the camera, a man-television turns his back on a television set, man-sun and man-moon walk down the unfinished road, a grocer-cobra weighs onion on the scales, a buffalo-man leads a herd of Murrah buffalo. The variety of masks playfully assist in creating protean hybrid identities that resist easy classification and control. The advent of the current iris-scanning digital biometrics regime forebodes a faceless system inimical to both identity and citizenship. There are also others who enthusiastically embrace the new digital identity that gives them freedom and visibility.¹¹



Gauri Gill, *Untitled (61)* from the series *Acts of Appearance*, 2015-ongoing.

¹⁰ Pinney, Christopher, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, London: Reaktion Books, 2004, p 20

¹¹ Pinney, Christopher, ‘Civil Contract of Photography in India,’ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol.35/1, May 2015, pp. 21-34, Duke University Press, p. 32-33

Some of the masks portraying human faces seem literal exemplars of what Indian playwright Girish Karnad, known for his incisive deployment of masks in modern Indian theater, calls the archetypal ‘face writ large’ that the mask generally denotes in the Indian dramaturgical tradition, in contrast to the Western theatrical tradition’s mind-body duality of the face and the mask.¹² *Natyashastra*, the ancient treatise on performing arts, recommends masks for a performance to create a spectacle, which was a key element in traditional Indian theatre.¹³ Bathos in Gill’s photographs comes from the mismatch of registers: the unblinking icons performing daily chores.¹⁴ The masks aid in the sardonic depiction of a way of life far removed from the vanished happy life, a “sufficient life” beyond the control of sovereignty.¹⁵ The tribe’s earlier relationships with the elements and with the creatures of the forests are memorialized in the masks depicting birds, animals, and the sun and the moon.

Yet the masks form only a fraction of the picture plane of Gill’s capacious 6 x 9 medium-format frame. Could the masks be the red herrings alerting us surreptitiously to another level of seeing? In the picturesque photograph of three masked women drawing water from a well, one discerns plummeted ground water levels.¹⁶ Jawhar has, in fact, faced acute scarcity and chronic contamination of water.¹⁷ Gill repeatedly draws our attention to water, be it the man wearing a mask depicting a branded bottled-water bottle and standing ankle-deep in a pond befouled with urban waste, or the ubiquitous plastic water tanks. Alongside the material poverty, there are signs of relative prosperity come into lately, some of them in Jawhar town, neighboring the village itself, and as evidenced by leisurely, masked figures in newly-built houses with shiny tiled floors, or the black sedan, or the white multi utility vehicle popular in rural India, the confectionary shop, satellite dish-antennas, and under-construction houses. The haunting image of the couple wearing masks showing deeply creased faces standing at the edge of a hill with the landscape behind them, announces the end of their relationship with the open. Another image depicts two women cutting into a hill, watched over by a supervising male figure squatting on the hill, as well as a donkey-man onlooker. Other images of community members with their plaster-of-Paris statuettes—of a favorite animal of these parts, the spotted Chital deer—reveal a cottage industry thriving on the sylvan fantasies of picnickers and day trippers from nearby urban centers. The Adivasis’ relationship to the forest, its animals, and the water that nourished them together was earlier vitiated by state-endorsed modernity. Now, the hardnosed neoliberal order seals this alienation as manifested in illiteracy, poverty, under-nutrition, lack of access to drinking water, and political exclusion, the effects of which the recent pandemic has laid bare.¹⁸ ¹⁹ The Warlis and Koknas are among the tribal groups in Jawhar whom the pandemic has deeply scarred with death, hunger, malnutrition, and acute financial distress.²⁰

¹² ‘In Search of A New Theatre,’ Girish Karnad, in *Contemporary Indian Tradition: Voices on Culture, Nature, and the Challenge of Change*, Edited by Carla M. Borden, Smithsonian Institution, 1989, p. 103

¹³ Bharata calls those watching the play as spectators, and not audience. Ghosh, Manomohan. (Trans.) *The Natyashastra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics Ascribed to Bharata-Muni Vol.I (Chapters I-XXVII)*. Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1951, p. XLV-XLVI

¹⁴ In Classical Sanskrit, a classification of beings places gods and fish in the class of non-blinking beings, the *animisa*.

Norman Brown, Editor Rosane Rocher, *India and Indology: Selected Articles* by Norman Brown, Motilal Banarsidass, 1978, p. 85

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis/London, p. 113

¹⁶ Sharma, Diwakar, ‘Lack of clean drinking water adds to Palghar’s pandemic woes,’ *Mid-Day*, 19 May, 2021: <https://www.mid-day.com/mumbai/mumbai-news/article/lack-of-clean-drinking-water-adds-to-palghars-pandemic-woes-23173928>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kadu, Yuvraj Bhagvan, Humara Itihas, *Acts of Appearance*, Edition Patrick Frey, 2022

¹⁹ Tribal dominated areas are termed Scheduled Areas in the Indian Constitution, which have been out of the purview of earlier laws on self-governance. In 1996, a historic amendment to earlier laws on self-rule allowing the tribal areas to form their local self-governance bodies. The amendment continues to be ignored by most states of the Indian federation: Choubey, Kamal Nayan, ‘The Public Life of a ‘Progressive’ Law: PESA and *Gaon Ganarajya* (Village Republic),’ *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 3 December 2015

²⁰ Hegade, Sandeep and Kamble, Akash, *Tribal Communities in Jawhar & Mokhada Taluka’s during the Lockdown: A Study Report*, Centre for Advanced Studies in Policy Research, 2020



Gauri Gill, *Untitled (95)* from the series *Acts of Appearance*, 2015-ongoing

The violence of the colonial gaze in Tosco Peppé's much written about photograph of two Juang girls, published as a lithograph in Edward Tuite Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, 1872, comes from Peppé assigning what Achille Mbembe calls, the "perfect Otherness" to the two girls.²¹ ²² Dalton's text glosses over Peppé's coercion and crass negation of the two girls' volition as his "immense difficulty in inducing" the "wild timid creatures" to be photographed. Their demurral is seen as risible and their suffering at the hands of Peppé as self-affliction: "it was not without many a tear that they resigned themselves to the ordeal." The image shows two bare-chested tribal girls in ornaments with a leafy thong, standing against a thatched wall, stiff with fear and shame. The woman in front refusing to meet the camera's gaze makes as if to cover the breast and genitals of another girl, who glares at the camera in defiance with the indignation of a violated person. Colonial modernity is defined by the dominance of the historical, in which the historical tried to become not just one but the only way of acting for the future, essentially monopolizing historical time.²³ Through the duo's rejection of a colonial agent—that is Peppé and his camera—and of the historicizing modernity, they rejected the temporality Peppé had assumed for himself and the temporality he tried imposing on them. Their resistance is registered forever in the "cold scientific racial truth invested in the anthropological photograph," instrumental in banishing them forever from history.²⁴

Did the Juang girls inadvertently become "citizens of photography" — an inclusive political space that Ariella Azoulay contends is created by an unspoken contract that binds the photographic subject, the photographer, and the potential spectator together to exclude the sovereign power via a gesture — before

²¹ The image is also reproduced in *The People of India*, an eight-volume ethnographic survey album of the castes, tribes, religious, and social communities of India initiated by the first viceroy to India and his wife, Lord Canning and Lady Canning

²² Mbembe, Achille, *On the Postcolony*, University of California, Berkeley, 2001, p.188

²³ Banerjee, *Politics of Time*, Introduction

²⁴ Chaudhary, Zahid R., *Afterimage of the Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India*, the University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 6

they could become citizens?²⁵ ²⁶ The continuity between the colonial and the postcolonial state means that the Juang girls are still only citizens of photography as they await deeper involvement in democratic processes, protection of their basic rights, and higher autonomy. Gill, with her keen attunement to the politics of time associated with her subjects, her own, and her camera's location within political economies and their privileged access to global circulation of images, chooses to rearrange time to redress these very sins of misrepresentation and exclusion. Through play, she explores "the subversive and unpredictable potential of photography," and astutely frees herself from the burden of representation, and her camera from the burdens of scientific truth.²⁷ ²⁸ Play creates its own time—a contemporaneity—to question the processes that turned people into 'primitives': an epistemological violence that continues to marginalize people like the Warlis and Koknas. Masked spectacle allows Gill to prefigure a potential spectatorship, and hence visibility and solidarity for the Adivasis, without exposing their individual identities.

What emerges from this ludic mobilization—for there lingers in the word 'mask' a whiff of the Arabic word 'maskhara' or jester—in the masked charade, is the reclamation of their faces and their representation by the community as it participates in the larky problematisation of their own representation. It is through play that the photographer's ethics of engagement and the photographer's civic imperative of enlarging the citizenry of photography are held in fine balance.

²⁵ Azoulay, Ariella, *Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York, 2008, p. 17

²⁶ Pinney, 'Civil Contract of Photography in India,' p. 23

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Can each image of Gill's *Acts of Appearance* be regarded as a *mise en abyme* of icons? How does a mask affect the indexical function of the photograph? Some discussions in the follow could be considered: Krauss, Rosalind, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,' *October*, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 68-81; Kaplan, Louis, 'Photograph/Death Mask: Jean-Luc Nancy's Recasting of the Photographic Image,' *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol 9 (1), SAGE Publications.