



On Finitude

LIFE AND DEATH UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

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The works in this book were produced in the twenty-first century, a period in India that has witnessed the passing of post-independence Nehruvian dreams of a secular nation¹ and the continued success of right-wing religious populism, a populism that seems comfortably at home with ongoing economic liberalization. Such liberalization is a part of a larger neoliberal project of bringing previously non-economic spheres under the influence of a guiding economic logic, specifically: everything under the sun is potentially monetizable, most importantly any surviving residue of the commons. People are no longer mere citizens, but a set of capacities that can be put to work as responsabilized human capital.² In India, the brave new world of speculative finance capital, the growth of the digital economy, and the conversion of previously non-economic spheres into economic ones does not conflict with the imagination of an increasingly homogenous and militarized form of Hindu nationalism that has become hegemonic. The photographs and installations in *INDIA / Contemporary Photography and New Media Art* record the traces of these material realities in a wide array of aesthetic registers, including melancholia, irony, scientificity, allegory, and the documentary.

Take, for example, Nandini Valli Muthiah's works. In *Seated 1* the divine presence in the foreground refuses the frontality we have come to expect from the tradition of calendar art and also from mythological and devotional films. No *darsan* (or mutual recognition between oneself and the divinity) is possible here because, even if the figure were looking at us, the rose petals of devotion hang midair, interrupting for the captured instant a view of the divinity's face, and thereby impeding a reciprocal gaze. The god-made flesh seems interested in looking at a loftier place than the one from which we peer at him, making that other spot where we are not, the ideal location to be seen by the divine. This imaginary location, like the ideals

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru was India's first prime minister, committed to an inclusive and secular republicanism in a socialist key. For decades after independence, the Congress Party saw itself as the steward of such Nehruvian principles.

² This understanding of neoliberalism comes from Michel Foucault and Wendy Brown. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (New York: Picador, 2010); and Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2017).

NANDINI VALLI MUTHIAH

Seated 1, 2003

From the series *Definite Reincarnate*.

2003-2006

Inkjet Print

Courtesy of the Artist

of all religious demagogues, is a point impossible for us to inhabit. The bejeweled, tactile, and sensuous appearance of the god-made all-too-human flesh is rendered ironic by the figure of the real deity behind him who looks directly at the viewer. This slightly out-of-focus figure, though overtaken by the lavish figure before it (on whom all the devotion of petals is about to fall), does not refuse our gaze. The divine presence is available but obscured. There is a tension in this photograph between being a god and performing divinity, between the false and the real, between divine recognition and empty, pseudo-divine authority. By means of irony and humor, but also through the use of seductive, hyperreal colors and textures of the exceptional but ordinary god/actor, Muthiah critiques religious nationalism, with its promises of gratification and immediacy.

The darker side of such religious nationalism can be seen in Asif Khan's photographs from Muzaffarnagar, where in 2013 communal violence led to the death of 62 people and the displacement of 50,000. The violence was directed toward the Muslim minority population who were camped out in relief tents and feared returning to their villages. Communal violence in India has intensified since the early 1990s, when the destruction of the Babri mosque so shocked the secular dreams of most Indian intellectuals. In 2002, under the leadership of Narendra Modi as chief minister of Gujarat, a violent pogrom against Muslims resulted in the death of over 2,000 people and the displacement of an additional 150,000 Muslims. Modi is now India's prime minister, and unlike contemporary populist leaders in other countries, he enjoys a clear mandate from India's middle classes, including from diasporic Hindus. The politics of minoritization within India are complex, and this exhibition explores such politics through the subtle work of photographers such as Asif Khan, Vinit Gupta, Arun Vijai Mathavan, Vicky Roy, Chandan Gomes, Anita Khemka, and Imran Kokiloo. Within India, minoritization operates by means of religious, caste, and regional differences, or some combination of these axes of social differentiation. Outside of India, the Indian diaspora has been an important force in the rise of right-wing politics within India by means of the support this wealthy diaspora has lent to institutions and politicians back



ASIF KHAN

Signs of domestic households, such as dish antennas, were a rare sight. Where sighted, they conveyed a desperate attempt at achieving normalcy in daily lives, December 2013, Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, India
From the series *Muzaffarnagar*, 2013–2014
Archival Inkjet Print
Courtesy of the Artist

home. Benedict Anderson referred to such attachments to the home country as “long-distance nationalism.”³ Long-distance nationalism invests in a form of politics back home without the possibility of taking responsibility for what happens there or without suffering the direct consequences of living under its rule. If citizenship and democracy are already undermined through neoliberal rationality in India and elsewhere, this global trend is a simple continuation of that logic: citizenship (or at least civil participation) takes the form of a monetary transaction. Asif Khan’s black-and-white photographs of people working and living in relief camps show the human cost of a politics in which some are deemed less than human.

If the well-heeled members of the Indian diaspora are partially responsible for right-wing nationalism at home, this does not protect the diaspora from being at the receiving end of forms of minoritization in their adopted countries. The works of Annu Palakunnathu Mathew, Pablo Bartholomew, and Max Kandhola explicitly take up questions of racism and class differentiation in the United Kingdom and the United States. In Bartholomew’s photograph *Napa Valley*, “ethnic” laborers, including an elderly Sikh man, sort fruit in a field. The other members of the group may be Latin Americans or South Asian, the point being that their ethnic origin is not entirely certain, but in the world of this photograph they exist as laborers. While their specific ethnicities are beside the point, where their labor is concerned, the *fact* of their ethnic difference from a majority white culture is precisely the point. In *Napa Valley*, the Indian is racialized and minoritized like any other brown person. Anna Palakunnathu Mathew pushes this point further by juxtaposing Native Americans with South Asians, revealing “Indian” to be a word fraught with confusion and, in a humorous vein, showing the made-up nature of identity categories, the falsity underscoring minoritization. Max Kandhola makes a similar point in his portrait photographs of British Asians, all of which, though depicting different people, bear the same title: *u fucking paki*. Kandhola demonstrates how racism renders diversity into sameness, a process that is itself connected to the operations of capitalism in which the social being of people is abstracted in order to be made useful for capitalist production.

The intensification of the processes of minoritization goes hand in hand with the operations of a neoliberal order and the cleavage between democracy and capitalism that attends it. Michel Foucault addressed this confluence of minoritization and neoliberalism in his Collège de France lectures in the 1970s. Foucault argues that in modernity, sovereignty shifts from being a right of the sovereign over life and death to a dispersed sovereign power to “make live” or “let die.”⁴ Regulating the conditions of life

³ See Benedict Anderson, *Spectres of Comparison: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76* (New York: Picador, 2003), 241.

becomes the primary objective of sovereign power, a power that is practiced jointly by state and non-state agents: the neoliberal imperative to invest in oneself, to cultivate and standardize those tendencies in oneself that would better dispose one to becoming human capital; the regulation of birth rates and conditions of living; the disciplining of unruly tendencies in the social field, and so forth. Crucial to a neoliberal ordering of power is that power increasingly takes life itself as the sphere over which it rules; life is both the object *and* the objective for sovereign power. Of course, exercising power over life (or rather on its conditions) necessarily implies a judgment on what kind of life deserves to live and what life can be exposed to danger or exterminated altogether. Forms of social differentiation, such as racism but also caste and religious differences, solve a critical paradox for this new form of power-over-life (biopower): it authorizes the power to kill even though power ostensibly takes the flourishing of life as its objective. The destruction of certain forms of life, of certain groups of people, can be adduced as helping the superior race or superior group. While such social segmentation existed before biopower, Foucault argues that it becomes reorganized when power begins to hold sway over life itself – it inscribes itself in fundamental institutional and regulatory mechanisms of the state. Crucial to its functioning is the notion of a certain norm, whether that be cultural, sexual, national, etc. Foucault elaborates:

“If the power of normalization wished to exercise the old sovereign right to kill, it must become racist. And if, conversely, a power of sovereignty or in other words, a power that has the right of life and death, wishes to work with the instruments, mechanisms, and technology of normalization, it too must become racist. When I say ‘killing,’ I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death by expulsion, rejection, and so on.”⁵

It is not that social differentiations (or racism) did not exist in the body politic before modernity, but the meaning, regulation, and consequences of social differentiations have dramatically altered. The exposure to precarity that comes with minoritization is clear; certain populations are left exposed to danger while the protection of others is seen to be a vital interest of state institutions. Communal violence, in this frame, is not mere hatred toward a political enemy, but an attempt at eliminating

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Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 256.



CHANDAN GOMES

Untitled

From the series

There are Things I Call Home, 2009–2012

Inkjet Prints

Courtesy of the Artist and PHOTOINK

Gallery, New Delhi, India

degeneracy and abnormality from the sphere of life: your death contributes to my own flourishing, not as my own individual self, but to my flourishing as a superior group, or so goes this logic.

In this context, the work of Chandan Gomes, documenting the quotidian and banal scenes and objects of everyday life, takes on a political character: the Christian subject's home is no more remarkable than any other. The traces of a person's habitation, the choice of everyday household commodities, all contribute to an individual's sense of home (the series is titled *There Are Things I Call Home*), a singularity that is no less special for being quotidian. In this photographic series, the makeshift domestic altar to Christ becomes one among other pieces of home, demystifying the ostensible social difference even while paying homage to its singularity. In Gomes's photographs, life is revealed as a set of habitual acts that leave behind traces: the depression in a cushion, the still fan reflected in a broken mirror, the wires of a charger strewn on a bed, the remote control dropped near the pillow, and the clothes crumpled and momentarily set aside. These are visions of a person's sense of home, and they are also views into scenes of anonymous life, life whose anonymity is itself consoling. Not to be singled out as a Christian first, in other words, preserves the self's heterogeneity.

A distinct counterpoint to this vision of life is Vinit Gupta's documentary series *Where They Belong*, which records the protests and portraits of indigenous people in the Mahan forest fighting against the expropriation of their lands for coal mining. This series, too, takes up the question of home and belonging, and the emphasis here is on an agrarian form of life threatened by capitalist expropriation, the ongoing project that Karl Marx called "primitive accumulation." The series includes many portraits, including an image of women protesting with signs indicating their claim to the land. The image that encapsulates the whole series, however, shows no human subjects at all but water buffaloes by a river with an industrial complex on the horizon spewing smoke into the air. Here the notion of life expands. Beyond picturing

a particular form of life threatened by industrialization, the image demonstrates that life itself, all life, is threatened by impending ecological disaster. The series title, *Where They Belong*, comes through most powerfully here as two water buffalos (a parent and calf) in the foreground seem to belong fully to the landscape, and the industrial blight on the horizon seems a portent of a tragic end. This image is allegorical, with the animals standing for all life. The photograph refuses the social differentiation that makes possible the theft of land and resources in the first place. That particular theft and expropriation, whose mark of accumulation is the pictured industrial complex, are threats to life itself. We have come a long way from the classic scene of a pastoral Indian village confronted with technological progress in post-independence representations of this drama, as in Satyajit Ray's 1955 film *Pather Panchali*. There, the young sister and brother witness the spectacle of a powerful speeding train barreling through their village lands. Juxtaposed to that ambivalent symbol of terrifying progress but also of escape and adventure, Vinit Gupta's somber image of water buffalo already anticipates all that will be lost and ruined. If the mid-twentieth-century narrative of development also implied progress, in the twenty-first century we are left considering ecological catastrophe.

Finitude is a preoccupation for many of the artists represented in this exhibition. Dhruv Malhotra's nocturnal scenes of the new planned city of Noida (New Okhla Industrial Development Authority) just outside of Delhi, hailed as the ultimate in modern urban development in India, posit this enterprise as already ruined. A rabbit-shaped lawn ornament overlooks a field made uncanny by its nocturnal setting. In another photograph, statues or monuments or perhaps monumental street lighting arranged in an arc around an obelisk are covered with cloth to be unveiled at a future time; yet the scene foregrounds the makeshift housing and construction yard, lending the view



[TOP AND ABOVE]

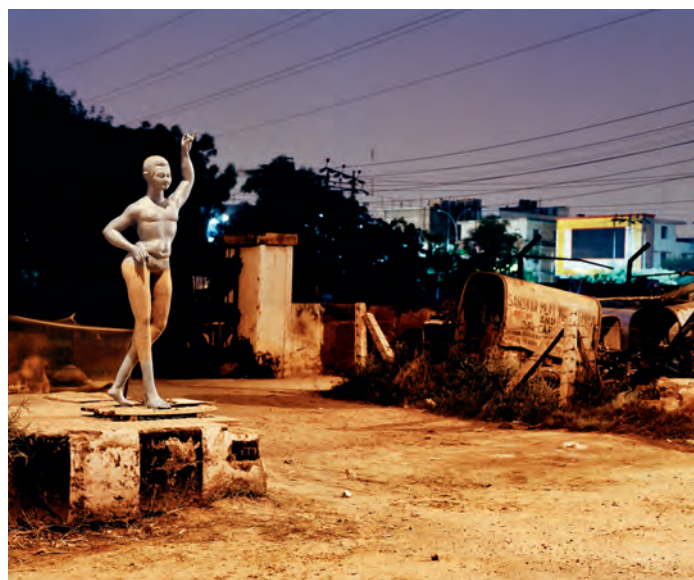
VINIT GUPTA

From the series *Where They Belong*,

2013-2017

Inkjet Prints

Courtesy of the Artist



[ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT]

DHRUV MALHOTRA

Untitled

From the series *Noida Soliloquy*, 2007–2010

Inkjet Prints

Courtesy of the Artists and

PHOTOINK Gallery, New Delhi, India

[BELOW]

ARUN VIJAI MATHAVAN

From the series *Millennia of Oppression*,

2016

Inkjet Print

Courtesy of the Artist

an uncertain air, leading us to wonder: Are these new and shiny city elements yet to be displayed, or are they failures best covered over and concealed? The most novel element is rendered in these photographs in the idiom of ruination, and the saturated colors only heighten the unreality of a moment, equivocating between the radically new and the abandoned ruin. For both Vinit Gupta and Dhruv Malhotra, finitude, which includes death but is best understood as a limit to the forms of neoliberal life they depict, is a matter of the lived environment. In the chiaroscuro image of the water buffalo with the industrial complex in the background and in the eerie and surreal nocturnal scenes from Noida, the photographs seem to ask: What kind of life is possible here? What are the limits to such a life?



In Arun Vijai Mathavan's work from Ahmedabad, in a series titled *Millennia of Oppression*, finitude takes the form of the corpse of a burn victim, the humble worktime meal for a worker, and the close-up of a worker's feet upon a bloodied floor. His images show the so-called untouchable caste of people engaged in the labor allotted to them (and to their descendants), including the preparation of dead bodies. As Mathavan writes in his artist statement: "Official identity cards designate the men as 'Sanitary Workers.' Much like other stigmatized work in caste society, such as handling all manner of waste including human excreta, the cleaning of sewers, or the skinning of animal carcasses, this modern work too has become hereditary." Life conjures its death – or rather these are images of life confronted with death; at the same time, they are images of a kind of social death for the living subjects, the workers caught in the snare of caste differentiation. Mathavan's work looks unflinchingly at the necropolitics that underwrite contemporary forms of neoliberal minoritization, suggesting that millennia-old systems of prejudice and contempt for certain groups is continuous with the most contemporary social organization. Caste synchronizes into forms of primitive accumulation, turning a group of people into a standing reserve to be exploited. Thus, a regularly available supply of labor power may be expropriated at the lowest cost.

Mathavan's photographs depict social relations by means of shock (the worker handling the burned body), distancing (the laborer eating on the floor turning away and upward during a lunch break as if called by a superior), and allegory (the close-up of a laborer's feet against the background of

ATUL BHALLA

Mumbai Walk, 21 July 2007
 10:20 AM to 12:54 PM
 Archival Pigment Print
 Mounted on Dibound
 Courtesy of the Artist and
 sepiaEYE Gallery, New York



a bloody floor that suddenly represents the socius itself). These images attest to the emptiness of the nationalist fantasy of a diverse people united as equals in a single nation-state. While Mathavan's work tacitly critiques this fantasy, Atul Bhalla's *Mumbai Walk* attempts to rethink collectivity outside of easy nationalist narratives. In a photograph that initially comes across as abstract, he has assembled all of the drains along Mumbai's famous Marine Drive on one side of the road, from Chaupati to Nariman Point – that is, all of the drains along the city's central cornice. This is a liminal area where the heart of Mumbai meets the sea. One can see that the bumpers of some of the parked cars near the drains have made their way into the image. This artwork is an ingenious way of representing a megacity in all of its diversity and complexity – through an abstract patterning of the openings through which the city passes its waste. This waste is literal since we are looking at street drains, but the abstraction of the image suggests multiple valences for “waste”: human lives deemed to be waste; the exponential increase in trash that is a direct result of ravenous consumption habits; bodily waste that indexes basic biological processes; the wasting of the environment which will result in excess runoff water and flood these drains. In other words, against the modern regime of minoritization and social differentiation, these drains represent an *undifferentiated* social whole. This social reality includes the circuit of collective need and collective waste. The obsessive assemblage of an everyday detail like street drains – perhaps the most overlooked element of Marine Drive – highlights the interface between habitation and the environment, an interface largely taken for granted, a signpost for a collective repression. The drains are the city's excretory orifices, indices to a collective infrastructure and a shared material world whose limits are consistently tested. Bhalla's assemblage shows a vision of how one might imagine collectivity in the contemporary moment: not as a triumphant march of a united people, but as the undifferentiated and indiscriminate existence of its waste. This existence is an objective reality with its subjective correlates, and most importantly it relies on a shared world. As social differentiation, neoliberal rationality, and communal politics animate the city above, there is an objective collective reality that is simultaneously repressed. Nationalism, too, appeals to a shared collectivity, but *Mumbai Walk* rejects the nationalist narrative of ceaseless progress and dubious ideals, without, however, giving up on the possibility of collectivity which it reveals to be all too real and yet, also, too easily ignored in the pernicious narratives of populist nationalism and of the brave new world proclaimed by contemporary economic futurism.