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Poverty and the Imagination of a Future: The Story of Urban Slums in Delhi, India

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How do the poor see themselves? In their daily struggles, how do they use creative imaginings to withstand various stresses and their seemingly never-ending effort at subsistence? In this paper, Veena Das explores the many revealed ways the poor exercise creativity, boldness and enterprise in their attempts to cope and transcend, even for brief moments, daunting states of deprivation and the destitute roles that both experts and society seemed to have consigned them to.

In this lecture, delivered as part of York University's 50th anniversary celebration, Dr. Das shares with her audience insights from her ongoing multi-year research on the residents of New Delhi slums including the not often assumed ability of the poor to think, feel and act in ways that are all-too-human – both spontaneous and rational.

Equally insightful responses are provided by Vanessa Rosa and Mark Ayyash, PhD Candidates in the Graduate Program in Sociology at York University.

Thank you very much for those wonderful introductions. I

want to start by saying what a great privilege it is to be here, especially for York University's 50th anniversary celebrations. I am very grateful to Dean Martin Singer, to Professor Lorna Wright, to Professor Susan Henders, and my dear friend, Michael Nijhawan, for making it possible for me to come and participate in this event at this vibrant university, on this day.

I am also very grateful to be given the opportunity to share with you thoughts that have not fully crystallised in my mind in terms of a well-defined research topic. A couple of years ago, one of my graduate students told me this story that made me a little nervous. He was giving a talk on religion and forms of pleasure in one of the villages in Rajasthan. Somebody from the audience said, "If your supervisor is Veena Das, will she allow you to work on anything else except suffering?" And I thought, "This is a terrible challenge." So, even if I haven't made my way to pleasure, what I'm going to try to present here expresses some hope coming out of an intimacy with people living in low-income neighbourhoods where for the last nine years I have been working along with a team of researchers and a research and advocacy organization called the Institute for Socio-Economic Research in Democracy and Development.

During those years and along with a team of researchers, I have been engaged in a longitudinal study of 10 neighbourhoods in New Delhi, India. Most of these places are low-income or middle-income neighbourhoods. In this lecture, I want to talk about the life forms that the poor inhabit. There is no lack of discourses on poverty, but the category of the poor is often constructed to serve the needs of the particular academic disciplines from which the discourses originate. We rarely understand what it is to be poor in phenomenological terms. What are their experiences, what are their hopes?

As an example, let me start by thinking of aspiration.

In 2003, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, in a volume composed of essays by economists and anthropologists, wrote that discourses of development must be reoriented from asking how people mired in a tradition were to be freed from the shackles of tradition in order to develop to forms of cultural expression that orient them towards the future. Appa-

durai contrasted this approach against those of others within the anthropological literature that focused on tradition and inheritance which are very important topics in their own right but which, he thought, had limited the ways in which people looked toward the past. Further, he thought, they neglected to inquire into the question of what kind of futures ordinary people try to imagine for themselves. So the question becomes: If, indeed, aspirations are not purely matters of individual dispositions towards the future, but are socially determined, how do we think about the relation between an individual and her culture?

Obviously to talk about the future is to also take into account forms of temporality. The first question was, “Can the poor be oriented to the future?” A lot of research on the poor, especially those who are very poor by the World Bank definition—those who live on less than two dollars a day, (to exclude those who are on the edges of survival living on less than one dollar a day)—focuses on how terrible their lives are. This may be so; and, in some cases there are obviously many privations that the poor suffer from, but the question is how do they manage to live on such meagre sums? How are they managing to survive? A couple of creative economists, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, both of MIT, tried to produce systematic data about the kinds of economic activities poor people engage in. One of their interesting findings was that contrary to what we might imagine, the poor are making significant choices. This might seem quite startling because we often imagine that securing survival needs must be all consuming. So the question now morphs into another issue: How do we think about pure subsistence versus collective maps of aspiration? If aspiration is not purely an individual disposition, then what kinds of maps of aspiration might a given community whose members are living on so little generate?

And as Arjun Appadurai has put it, “aspiration is something that happens in the thick of social life.” The economist Debraj Ray says, “there is a kind of aspiration window to which we should be giving attention.” Both authors are, in effect, saying that aspirations need to be understood within the social contexts in which the poor live. In the economist’s understanding, if aspirations were just vague desires on which it would

be impossible to act, they would have little relevance for our understanding of development, or for the formation of social policy. We need to narrow the concept to give it substance. Thus, we have Ray's notion of the "window of aspiration," in which he basically argued that what was important was not aspiration per se, but aspiration gaps; and that normally, it is when we relate to people similar to ourselves that we can use the idea of "aspiration gap" in a productive way.

Ray gave an interesting example. As an Indian economist living in New York, it made sense for him, he said, to relate to other economists living in New York or to other Indian economists, but it didn't make sense for him to compare himself to Madonna or Bill Gates. At the surface this looks like another very well argued proposition. But, I will try to argue his notion that a connected society is one in which there are observable paths between the poor and the rich—so that the poor can aspire to be rich through clear pathways to their goals - is not how the poor often imagine what it is to aspire. Ray feels that if the aspiration gap becomes too large and the poor cannot see how they could move from their present conditions to a better future, they are likely to become attracted to violence or fundamentalism, or all those dangers that Ray sees as alternatives for failed aspirations.

I would argue that the movement Ray makes from the facts of unfulfilled expectations to becoming willing recruits to the cause of violence and fundamentalism is rather hasty. At one level, economists are dedicated to hard data, but it is amazing how at certain points in their arguments they can take recourse to what they consider to be self-evident facts. There is no hard data that would show that the ranks of fundamentalists or of participants in violent social movements are filled with the poor who have failed to find ways of becoming rich. This is merely a hypothesis, but it takes the place of hard data. Nevertheless, it raises an interesting issue about what we mean by a connected society and whether in defining our aspirations we are guided only by the obvious connections between human beings, or if we can think of imagination as providing a way of connecting with the non-human beings who also populate our worlds.

At the heart of this issue is, first, the question of

whether aspiration is totally bound to social position. How do we establish the objects in the world with which one can establish intimacy? Are the poor so bound by the pressures for survival that they cannot define aspirations that go beyond the social maps created by social positions allotted in the social structure? By this, what I mean is that intimacy may be forged with mythological creatures that might be in my world and also of my world, in the neighbourhoods that I work in—it's not just human beings that inhabit human neighbourhoods. All kinds of other creatures, such as the *jinnns*, gods and goddesses and deities that live in these places or pass through them, also define the social world. While it is not a commonplace event to find someone who has a very good *jinn* friend who happens to be a descendant of, say, Chiang Kai-shek, it is also not considered a fantasy or an impossible claim. So, what role does this kind of imagination play in the lives of people? I would not rule out the fact that intimacy is established with creatures that we cannot anticipate from our common sense notions before we have actually examined what kinds of intimacies are found in various kinds of worlds.

So the larger question for me is, "How is one's social world made?" And in this context, I am very interested in the relationship between the human and the non-human, whether that is the relationship one has with inanimate objects like televisions or cell phones, or with non-human forms of being such as gods and deities. From the outside, these [supernatural beings] look like imaginary creatures, but they also inhabit these [social] worlds, although they inhabit them in different ways than how humans inhabit these worlds.

When thinking about orientations to the future, it might be interesting to think about what kind of future we have in mind. Thus, one kind of future that many term as "near future," is what seems contained in the present. In Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous formulation, to say something like "the sky looks threatening" is actually a statement both about the present and future, which is contained in the present. I am very interested in the question of what kind of future is contained in the present.

But the future is also an anticipation of contingencies; that is, I want to present the idea that for the poor, it is not as

if the world is entirely predictable. On one hand, one encounters what might be called “calculations”. I will try to show what the role of these calculations might be in the lives of the poor. On the other hand, one also finds people expressing a gambler’s faith—that maybe something will come my way that will allow me to escape this world completely. In the formulation of subjectivities, what is the relationship between these careful calculations about how I put food on the plate this evening given the fact that I live on less than two dollars a day versus a kind of gambler’s faith? The latter means that people are on the look out for what kinds of opportunities might suddenly become available. The role of contingency, rather than calculated risk taking, defines many of the outcomes in the lives of the poor.

Whether you loved or hated the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, what is very interesting to me is that although I do not know of a single person in whose life *all* those incredible events depicted in the film could have happened, I do know several people in whose life one such strange event might have actually occurred. In some ways, we can think about the orientations to the future in terms of material life, citizenship and aesthetics. But then it seems to me that there also arise some completely unpredictable ways in which material life, citizenship and aesthetics come to be connected. Such anticipation of unlikely conjunctions also constitute an orientation to the future.

So, I ask very simple questions in relation to the future that touch on both of the above registers.

First, take the simplest of questions: how are houses built? Do we know what is it like to build a house, a shanty, a shelter, in a very poor locality? Second, what is the relation people have to commodities? Often, you can go to a slum area in Delhi where people are living in shanties and find that inside that little shanty there is a colour television. The television does not last for very long. The pride in possessing an object such as a television or a cell phone also does not last long. It’s not like people can say, “Oh, yes, now I actually possess this,” because very soon they know that an object bought because you could not resist it will have to be sold off to meet an economic contingency. Objects and commodities pass through

poor people's lives, and we should be interested in what they come to mean even as these objects are destined to be sold or mortgaged in due course.

So, what is the relationship the poor have to commodities?

The next question one might ask is, "How is citizenship acquired?" I have argued that citizenship is a claim—it is not a status that you have or you do not have. One of the ways people imagine their relation to the state is through the possession of documents. What documents express paths toward citizenship? That is, in every house that you go into, you'll find people producing documents all the time. If they think that you are a government servant or somebody who has come to do a survey, one of the first things they will do is say, "Look, I'll show you my ration card", "Look, I'll show you my worker card", "Look, I'll show you my BPL card", which is used to apply for Below Poverty Line rations. There is a way that documents circulate in these circumstances that seems to me to be very interestingly related to questions of citizenship, paths towards citizenship and the paths that imagination opens up. I don't want to reveal more about that right now because I have a very nice story about it later. I merely want you to think that the ephemeral character of objects that one encounters in the houses of the poor is not merely evidence of their irrationality and the urge to spend, but rather that objects possessed for however short a period are testimony to the role of imagination and of desire that open up towards the future. Similarly, the manner in which documents are kept and displayed are aspirations about what it is to belong to the state even as they are necessary to claim certain rights such as the right to vote or to receive a welfare benefit.

Let me show you the slide of a house in one of the areas where I work in (see Figure 1). One thing that I have observed is the fact that the house is never fully finished. In some ways the house is made up of a lot of waste. There is, first, a question of how materials are strategically collected from discarded waste. It is very important to remember that nobody in the slum areas ever thinks that he is going to complete a house in one go. If one has been lucky enough to occupy a bit of land or buy it in the informal transactions

Figure 1: A house in NOIDA shanty settlement, with brick walls and a tarpaulin roof held up by bamboo sticks.



Figure 2: A completed house. See how tiles from different places have been gathered to cement the entrance, as well as pictures on the wall. This was the household which first installed a septic tank for solid waste.

that are fully recognized by the community, even if their legal standing is ambiguous, one might begin by just putting up a roof, a few bamboo poles and settle down under it. Then one slowly builds around it as opportunities arise, as the family grows or when other things happen in one's life. The different stages in which houses are found in slum areas show how, in some sense, one is always oriented to the future. The house is this today, but it will be that tomorrow. Someone had enough money to make the walls of bricks and to cement them, but then the money ran out and a tarpaulin was used for a roof—that roof will be built when some money comes their way. It could be next month, it could be next year or years later. But the present occupation of space and of walls built is a gesture toward a more stable dwelling in the future (see Figure 2).

In the case of one of the shanty settlements in the New Okhla Industrial Development Area (NOIDA), where migrants from the nearby state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) came in search of work in 1976, the shanties they built were initially all mud houses. Slowly many had been able to convert these with one wall made of bricks or a door added. Then in 2003, suddenly, almost all houses had build brick walls. The event that triggered this development was as follows. In preparation for the elections for the State Assembly, the U.P. government decided that investment in infrastructure was necessary and that roads needed to be improved. Since there had been many accidents

on the main road that ran outside the shanty settlement, one of the projects was to convert the road that was paved in bricks to a cemented road. The job was then contracted out to a firm. After the bricks were dug out and piled for removal, the contractor had planned to auction off the bricks to the highest bidder. However, people from the area told me that the residents had organized themselves so that at night they went into those areas where the bricks were piled and, overnight, the mud walls were replaced by brick walls.

The brick walls are in fact part of this orientation in which one is constantly watching for what opportunities might become available. As Figures 1 and 2 show, houses are in various stages of completion and might remain so for several years. In some cases a tarpaulin and old rags are used as a cover instead of a proper roof. In other cases, bamboo poles support an added floor under construction. The added level is not complete, but people can use ladders and climb up to it so they can sleep or dry clothes or engage in other activities. Then there are discarded tyres that are saved on the roof for later use because these can be made into chairs or could even be used by children to play with. Every object, in that sense, has multiple uses. Also, every object opens up a particular moment—what I called the gambler's faith—that something will actually come up and afford one the chance to continue the construction of one's house.

Now, if I look at commodities, my first proposition is that the relationship to commodities is not that of possession, but of temporariness. After years of doing budget surveys, asset surveys and so on, what I find very fascinating is the fact that one always finds a certain kind of commodity that one would not expect to find in the house. One of the things that my team of researchers and I have been doing is to actually track commodities that come into the house. When is it that the first television came into this locality? When is it that the first air cooler came into this locality? When is it that the first motorcycle came into it and how long did it last?

What is interesting is the ways in which commodities come in the lives of a household. Somebody is very lured by the idea that colour televisions are available and goes into debt to buy a colour television. Within maybe four to six

months, a child falls sick and there is a sudden requirement for money. A particular kind of risk arises. Then one sells that commodity (the colour television) and, then, if one can, one goes on later to buy a different commodity.

I'll give you one example. In one of the poorest households in my study, there was a man who was an auto rickshaw driver. We have tracked main financial events in households by maintaining something akin to financial diaries for each household. In this case, the wife had to have an emergency caesarean surgery, and her husband had to sell off his auto rickshaw to pay for the expenses incurred. She survived, but the newborn child died. After that, they were paying off their debts in several directions. Visiting them one day, I found that there was a refrigerator, a brand new refrigerator in the room. I asked the wife if I could please look inside. She said, "sure". I opened it, and there was nothing in it except water. I said, "Kamlesh, why did you buy this refrigerator? Are you going to buy food items and store them?" I asked this because given the small amounts of cash to which the household had access, the typical strategy they use for buying food is to purchase small amounts every other day. Even subsidized food items such as sugar and wheat were not bought for the whole month. This is why one finds many small shops, usually store fronts run by some households that are a little more affluent, where staples can be bought in small amounts to last just a day or two. Yet she had gone into further debt in order to get the refrigerator. She said, "Well, you see, I feel very hurt because another neighbour has a refrigerator. When the weather is very hot and the children want cold water, they have to go and ask that household for cold water. I just feel very humiliated by that because though they give the water, they speak roughly to the children, and so I brought this refrigerator to be able to give cold water to the children. They then do not have to interact with that particular household, which I find humiliating."

Every commodity also shows new sensibilities which might turn up. For example, last year in the locality where the house I showed you was located, there were different levels of basic facilities available. In that particular locality, there were no toilets in the house. A famous NGO called Sulabh Suchalaya

tried to build public toilets in the areas. Some organization gave them the advice that in order for the toilets to be kept clean, people must pay a very nominal fee of one rupee per use. For the women, that was important because they often find it very hard to go to the fields for daily ablutions during the day. Fields in this context doesn't mean the village kind of fields, it means the park next door. They have to go in the early morning or in the evening, so if somebody has diarrhoea or if they feel sick it becomes a very major problem. Men have no problem at all. A very interesting "division of labour" arose. No household would pay for the children to use the toilets. Nor was anyone willing to pay for the men to use the toilet. But for women, they preferred to use the toilets when they had one rupee to spare. In some cases people had dug a hole within the *jhuggi*, and waste was collected there until they could call a street sweeper to remove it by a per service payment. What is very interesting is that some new neighbours moved in two years ago who initiated the installation of the first septic tank in the area. This was because this family was more respectable than the other families in the area. It will be very interesting to see who can in fact afford to install septic tanks later and how sensibilities might change on these issues.

So it is very interesting how commodities and their circulations in the households become a way of understanding the time orientation as that of temporariness or of the origin of a new sensibility in these households. Nobody really expects to retain a commodity for very long, but there is nevertheless the desire to possess it even if for a very short time. It can signal the emergence of new sensibilities.

Here is one of the tables on financial transactions relating to debt of a number of households (See Table 1). You can see that there are several complex financial transactions in which even the poorest people are involved. This is data collected over four years from 40 households. It covers a total of 124 episodes, but though the number of transactions is quite large, the amount of money raised varies a lot. Illness is quite interesting especially why illnesses become emergencies. It is not inherent that illnesses will become emergencies. It's the actual medical environment in which the poor live that sometimes transforms treatable illnesses into life-threatening

Table 1 Debt Episodes: 2001-2005 N=40

Reason for debt	No. of episodes	Average Amount	From relatives	From friends	From moneylenders	By instalments	Missing Observations
Illness	36	10222	11	12	7		6
Housing	7	10500	2	3	2		
Social Expenses	23	17652	9	8	6		
Business	1	20000	1		1		
Consumer goods	16	12144	2	2	1	10	1
Religious Events	3	2677	1	1	1		
Food	32	3481	5	8		16	3
Drinking	1	11100			1		
Village Related	3	2000	2	1	1		
Total	124	89776	33	35	20	26	10

emergencies. There is a very high use of practitioners, but it might take a practitioner anywhere up to six months to actually diagnose somebody as having tuberculosis. Normally, they think these are just small episodes of fever or cold or something else until it becomes an emergency. When it does become an emergency, large amounts of money have to be borrowed. For example, an undiagnosed stomach ache might lead to the rupture of an appendix requiring immediate surgery, or in the absence of prenatal care the event of childbirth might end up requiring hospitalization.

So catastrophic illness accounts for debts of large amounts. On the other end of the transactions, there are 32 episodes of borrowing for provision of food. These debts occur in the same small cluster of households that are the poorest within the cluster. This is a crucial point. When a household is so short of money that it has to borrow for food, then it becomes very hard for it to escape the debt cycle. These are the households that, over a period of time, will probably have to go back to the village or send the wife and child back to the village. You will notice that half these episode of borrowing come from instalments taken from the ration shop. But after some time, the credit through this source dries up so that, if a regular source of income is not found, the man will send the wife and children to the village until he can find better ways of making a living.

Equally interesting is the fact that there is only one episode for borrowing for alcohol, although alcohol use is

rampant. In this case, the man had borrowed so much from the money lender that his house was in danger of being mortgaged and his wife had left with the children to go to the village of her parents. There are 16 episodes of borrowing for consumer goods. These are new kinds of commodities such as television sets that some households bought by raising debt. There is also some borrowing for housing, though the amounts are relatively small. The need for such debts arises from a particular contingency. For example, a household in which a theft occurred decided that they needed a door. Given the circumstances, it became an urgent issue that they install a door, though until then they had managed quite well without it. They might then borrow money to do so, but they would also return the money before long. The other kind of borrowing is for village-related expenditure such as to participate in a village goddess festival or to pay for the marriages and funerals of close relatives back in the village. One can see that loans might be divided into two categories. Some loans are urgent and have to be raised immediately because the household faces a danger such as life-threatening illness. Other loans are related to the desire for consumer goods or for participation in religious festivities or for visits to the village of origin.

Many scholars have written about the high interest rates that the poor have to pay to informal money lenders because they do not have access to formal lending institutions. Indeed, I have observed that interest rates can be as high as 60 per cent. But people don't realize that they are paying such high interest rates on their loans. The reason is that no one borrows money from the same lender for more than a few months. In fact, when we annualize the interest rate, people will often exclaim that they had not realized that the interest rate was so high. But because they combine loans from various sources ranging from interest free loans from kinsmen and friends to very high interest loans from money lenders to meet an emergency, debt repayment happens through a series of cycles where one borrows from somebody, returns the money borrowed by him by borrowing from one relative, and then probably ends up going to another relative or a friend for borrowing again. In some ways, the temporality of loans is

enmeshed with forms of sociality that privilege the immediate future. They don't privilege a longer future—not what will happen at the end of the year, but what it is that will happen the next day or month or the next few weeks. So usually, when they borrow, they say they will return it in two weeks. But sometimes, of course, it happens that a borrower cannot repay on time. In my survey, there are only four households out of 40 that have fallen into the kind of situation where they have not been able to return the money they borrowed for more than a year. These are the households that have fallen slowly into a situation where they are now borrowing money for food. In one case, a household had fallen so much in debt that they simply ran away to the village, abandoning their rented shack in order to avoid the lenders.

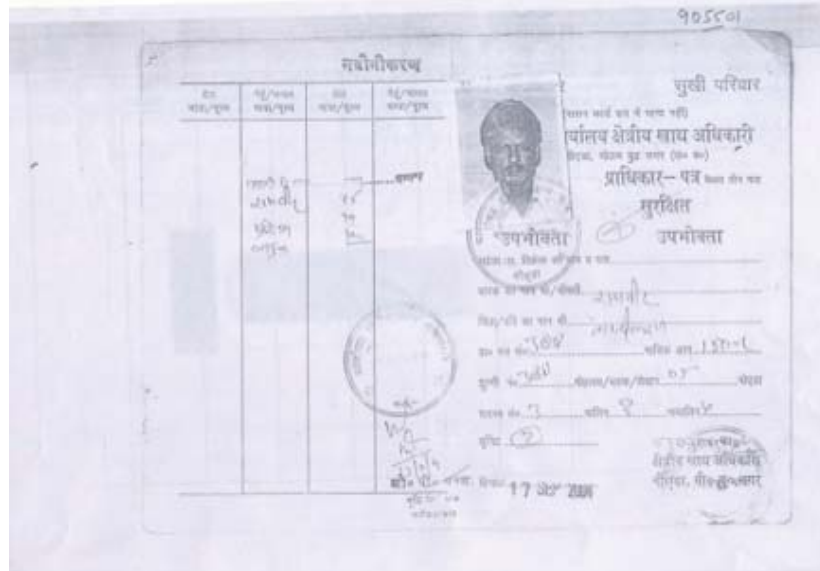
The next form of emergent sociality that I want to look at is “emergent citizenship.” This is because the aspiration of full citizenship is very marked. Much of the literature on citizenship has traced the evolution of citizenship from that of political rights to social and economic rights. Recently, scholars such as Paul Rabinow and Nicholas Rose have introduced the idea of biological citizenship corresponding to the evolution of the State as the biopolitical state. What I find important is not so much the types of citizenship, but the modalities through which citizenship is claimed. What are the ways in which one learns to claim citizenship? I think that this is very intimately related with the fact that the state is present in the form of what I call “unnamed laws,” after Julia Eckert. Now, I realize that to some scholars this concept will seem like a contradiction of terms. How can there be a law that is not named? But this is precisely the kind of realm of ambiguity that surrounds the law. The neighbourhood that I am describing, along with many other localities, are in fact not *recognized* colonies. Within NOIDA, these are typically clusters of shanties that came up beginning in 1976 (in the 1960s, some households say) in order to meet demands for labour with the location and expansion of industries. The demand for labour created opportunities for people from villages in the state of Uttar Pradesh to migrate, and they first raised this settlement by occupying government-owned land and building shanties on it. The government encouraged such migration

or at least did not actively remove them from these lands because labour was needed. Further streams of migrants have come from U.P., Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. The land that the early migrants occupied was called *qabza land*, which simply means “occupied land.” Due to a complicated set of legal proceedings and the development of case law since the 1980s, *jhuggi*- (shanty-) dwellers have been able to get stay orders from the High Court that stipulated that those who can show continuous residence for 12 years cannot be evicted from their land unless alternate residence has been provided to them. There is an important tension in the legal domain between the illegality of occupation and the constitutional right to life that in the 1980s was taken to mean the State’s obligation to create conditions in which the rights of the poor to preserve life could be sustained. The law is not consistent, but it opened a way for people to hold on to the lands that they had occupied.

The “unnamed law” through which transactions are carried out in the shanty settlements means that a market for *jhuggis* has developed in the area. Even though ownership over their *jhuggis* is not a settled fact of law, the community recognizes the transactions of buying and selling, and people who own *jhuggis* by these criteria are able to rent them out. In some ways, as I will show you in a minute, exception plays a very different role than the idea of exception in the Schmitt-Agamben kind of model, where the sovereign has a right to declare an exception because he is the source of law. The exception in Agamben’s model reduces the subject of the law to bare life. There is a completely different conception of exception and life in the context in which I am working, where the assumption is that the obligation to preserve life overrides a strict interpretation of law pertaining to property. Therefore, exception is precisely the understanding that there is some obligation on the state to preserve the life of the community. This does not mean that the state always follows this model, for there are whole areas where the poor have been evicted from the lands they occupied to make a place for state-related projects. However, it seems important to realize that electoral politics and the legal impulses of the 1980s have created a possibility for a different notion of exception to be operative.

Let me offer an example. This is a picture of a ration

Figure 3: This document serves as a ration card and is used for establishing proof of identity. Yet the text says that it is an authorization and is not to be honoured as a ration card. Entries show that people continue to buy provisions on subsidized rates from government-sponsored ration shops, beyond the period of validity of the document.



card (see Figure 3). On one side, it says “Happy Family” at the top and it has a picture of the person to whom it was issued. It is equally interesting that, where you can see the star, it says “this is not to be recognized as a valid ration card.” The government is giving out this official document, and people have been getting kerosene, rice and sugar for more than five or six years on this ration card. Yet, the government also says this is not to be recognized as a ration card. So clearly, in some ways this card falls in the domain of an exception, but it is an exception in relation to preservation of biological life. It is not about the bare life. It’s not a reduction of the person into nothing else but the biological life for which the state has the legal and police apparatus to take away—an apparatus it uses, as evident in many human rights violations. But the question is how we acknowledge the fact that the state also draws on other registers of what we might call the moral life, as evident from the fact that many clusters of shanties continue to be located on *kabza* land and that residents continue to use legal and political strategies to either get their colonies recognized or to make claims for alternative accommodations.

Seen from the perspective of the poor, citizenship is a complex concept, a concept in formation rather than one given once and for all. It is not a matter of either you having citizenship or you not having citizenship, but rather a matter of what kinds of claims you can make about access to housing, food, water and electricity? What kind of

temporalities operate in relation to the state and in relation to structures of anticipation? The other point that I want to briefly mention is that citizenship is also claimed over local publics. Though the residents are living in neighbourhoods that are not administratively “recognized” and thus cannot claim public services as a matter of right, there is a certain kind of belongingness that is asserted within these local publics. I offer an example. I was walking around one of the neighbourhoods one day in summer when I saw a computer-generated notice in Hindi stuck on a wall that said: “*Manav rupi kutte—unke bhonkne ki na koi seema hoti hai na samay.*” I translate it as follows: “*Dogs in the forms of human beings, there is neither a limit to their barking, nor a time*”. As any anthropologist would, I tried to track how this kind of notice came to be generated in this place. I found the following story. It seems that Prem Singh, a man who used to work in the Malaria Department of Municipal Corporation and who had recently retired (dismissed according to some), had got entangled in a dispute with a neighbour about the cleanliness of their street. When I tracked him down, he said that people were throwing garbage on the street and children were using it as an open toilet. He started pouring on the street buckets of water infused with phenyl (a cleansing agent). His neighbour and some others objected saying that this act made the street slippery and that children playing on the street could easily fall and injure themselves. This morphed into a major dispute to the point where two possibilities emerged. One, the daily squabbles could turn into a major *danga* or riot. As Prem Singh described it to me, “... at that stage I withdrew but I was fuming, and I wanted to somehow make everyone feel how stupid, how uneducated, this neighbourhood is. Then my thought turned to the idea that I would have this poster printed and put it up in various places so that everyone could know what kind of uneducated (*jahil*) neighbours I have to live with.” Thus the conflict was diffused and did not morph into direct violence. The notice became a container for his anger, but did not lead to making his neighbours laughing stocks either. And then it took a new turn, at least for Prem Singh. Those were the days when President Bush had waged the Iraq war, and pictures of Bush proclaiming that he was

“leader of the free world” were constantly telecast on various TV channels, including the Hindi channels. Prem Singh saw these news items and got very inspired to the extent that that he wrote a letter to the White House explaining the dispute in the area, and had his letter translated into English by a local shop owner. A few months after he had posted the letter, he received a response from the White House to the effect that President Bush was “pleased to have received his support.” Prem Singh then went around showing this letter to one and all. He became a celebrity for some and a mad man for others. I asked him why he had sent this letter to President Bush. He said, “Well, he (Bush) said he was the leader of the free world, so he has an obligation to come and settle the dispute over here.” Some years later, looking through my notes, I realized that the form of a petition to a distant authority was a well-known form and that many in the neighbourhood had written petitions to the god *Hanuman*, whose icon in a neighbouring temple is famous for receiving such petitions and fulfilling the desires of devotees.

That takes me to the fact that citizenship is also an imaginary concept. In Prem Singh’s neighbourhood, many people asked, “Is he mad? Does he really think that the President of the United States is going to come over here and settle this dispute?” Others said, “Who knows?”, because sometimes indeed they have gone to the High Court and put up petitions about being evicted and, in the age of judicial activism, in one case at least, a lawyer had actually stopped and asked them to go get themselves registered as a society so that she could take their case up as a public interest litigation. I said earlier that there is a certain kind of gambler’s faith that people combine with the everyday careful calculations that they have to make. Sometimes one might lose completely as the gamble does not pay off, but there are occasions when you might also win getting rights such as ration cards for everyone or scholarships for children in school. Such an imagination animates many activities that people engage in. But these activities are not visible from above at all. If you had seen the house with the garbage and sewage, you would say it is a terrible place to live in. You would even attribute the term “inhuman conditions” to these settings of life. I understand the

deprivations and the sorrows they face only too well, but I also want to bring out the characteristics of these places as vibrant with ideas about how they can be citizens of the country and of the world.

Let us now look a little more closely to the question of the imagination and the future. What kind of aesthetic of the self might we invoke here? I want to suggest that one cannot limit the capacity to aspire to a given social structure merely because it is unable to account for the work of imagination and the creating of other notions of the self.

Let us look at the picture of a Muslim man, living in a different locality to which his family was relocated after old houses and *jhuggis* in Turkman Gate in Old Delhi were “cleansed” during the national emergency in India in 1976. It might be recalled that under the combined beautification and forced sterilization campaign of Sanjay Gandhi in 1976, the poor living in shanty settlements were displaced to the peripheries of the city and Muslims in some parts of Old Delhi were especially targeted. Beautification during the Emergency entailed the moving of the poor and their dwellings to the peripheries of the city, since the dirt and squalor that they lived in were seen as spoiling to the face of the city. However, one might ask, what did people do with their lives, though

Figure 4: Haji Mian wearing his Arabic head dress at the local celebration of *Id-ul-Nabi*. Photograph displayed on the wall of his *baithak*.



these lives were disrupted by authoritarian state actions?

It is very interesting what this man, Haji Mian, has done with his life. Here is a picture I took of one of the walls of his



Figure 5: Experimenting with the persona of a *nawab* according to his own description.

small sitting room, the *biathak*, separated a bit from the rest of the house where he receives many people who come seeking cures, for he is a Muslim healer, and also receives many others who need a favour, for he is also a minor political leader. You can see his hand pointing to where the various pictures are displayed on the walls of his room (see Figure 4). In one of the pictures, you can see him wearing an *achkan* (long coat) and a cap much in the fashion of an aristocratic Indian Muslim *nawab*. There are various pictures of him in presumably different kinds of political gatherings. It may not be obvious, but the pictures are a *mélange* of photographs of local political events and computer-generated pictures in which he is shown with various national level leaders (achieved by a process of grafting photographs with each other). In all these pictures, he experiments with costume. In one of the pictures he imagines himself as a minor prince. This is a phase, he told me, in which he experimented with being a Rajput, for he tells me he is a descendant of Jodha Bai, the Hindu Rajput wife of the emperor Akbar (see Figure 5). After the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1984, he said that he felt more inclined toward an Arab identity. He performed the haj and

Figure 6: Picture on the wall, showing Haji Mian in his younger days with a prominent Congress national politician. Clearly the picture is generated by a grafting of pictures together, but his clients usually take it to be an evidence of his access to senior politicians in the party.



since then he often dresses as an Arab sheikh, with an Arab headdress that he wears on important occasions. He does not wear the headdress all the time, but he has insisted that his pictures would be taken wearing an Arab dress. But he is still

completely committed to the Congress Party and can show many certificates about how much work he has done for the Congress, hoping that some day he will get a party ticket, will compete in elections and become a major political leader (see Figure 6). Meanwhile, he has been able to use his connections to get contracts for his son, who provides locally stitched leather jackets made with leather imported from China to an import-export dealer in the Jama Masjid area, where his father has many contacts.

To conclude my thoughts for today, my attempt has been to move out of categorical definitions that define the poor as a generic category—a population on which policies of state can be enacted. I do not deny that for some purposes this strategy might be useful, but such an aggregation cannot give us any sense of the richness of the texture of these lives.

Second, I struggle with the question of what is it to give a voice to the poor. I want to write an ethnography in which there is no nostalgia for the life of the poor that I see in the writings of scholars such as Ashis Nandy, who have also questioned effectively the representations of the poor in policy literature and now claim that there is an organic unity in the communities that the poor form. Well, I have seen too much heartbreak, too many betrayals, oppression within the kin groups, indebtedness and death in the last nine years to be able to portray the poor as inhabiting organically well-knitted communities. But nor should the poor be rendered as creatures defined by the needs of survival alone because there is a very rich imaginative life which I've also tried to capture.

Then, are there ways of rendering the lives of the poor that are respectful, are free from patronizing condescension, and yet are not indifferent to their suffering? And here are other parts of my thoughts. These are two questions where I thought I might address major theoreticians (Pierre Bourdieu and Gilles Deleuze) about how the experiences of the poor should be integrated into social theory. To Deleuze, I would ask, "How do different expressions of life unfold in different spaces?" It is not as if space is a container of subjectivities, but space does provide a ground on which some stories can grow and not others. Second, space in a Deleuzian analysis has neither a centre nor a realized intention. But then how might

we think of life as simultaneously striving for the material and the moral together, where it is profoundly influenced by space? To Bourdieu, I might suggest that we need to turn away from general reproductive machines in which people are being processed. Instead, let us look at ways in which a social theme is constantly retraced in the lives of the poor. If you can imagine life as something like a tracing paper on which you trace designs that do exist independent of your imagination, but when you retrace these designs by the kind of practices I described, social life becomes different since it is still anchored to the reproduction of the social within the dominant modes, but yet is not defined by it. In recent papers, I have gone further and argued that the labour that the poor have put in trying to become part of institutions such as courts and political parties has provided the impetus to the political culture to experiment with questions about thresholds of life, as Bhri Gupta Singh puts it in his work, so that both the successes and failures of democracy in India become open to new descriptions.

I am very grateful that you have given me the opportunity to speak about the everyday within which one engages in the life of the other and that, however poorly executed at this moment the project might be, these thoughts might grow in a way that might enrich our understanding of the lives of the poor such that we can evolve languages that can be truly attentive to their aspirations and the work they do to make life inhabitable.

Thank you very much.

Two York University graduate students respond to Veena Das's lecture.

Spatiotemporal Openings: Reflections on "Poverty and the Imagination of a Future"

Vanessa Rosa, PhD Candidate, Graduate Programme in Sociology, York University

Given the many contemporary representations of the racialized poor in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, one might easily fall prey to the presumption that the aspirations of the poor are limited, at best. Such representations are not only highly racialized and portray ahistorical explanations of poverty in Haiti, they are also dependent on the idea that Haiti needs to be saved by the West due to its inherent poverty and inability to achieve self-sufficiency. While Veena Das does not analyze poverty in the context of a natural (and social) disaster, she does challenge limited representations of the poor that do not capture multiple possibilities of being.

In York University's Centre for Asian Research Inaugural Asia Lecture, "Poverty and the Imagination of a Future: The Story of Urban Slums in Delhi, India," Veena Das explored how the multiple life forms inhabited by the poor do not necessarily correspond with traditional studies on poverty. Such studies are often dependent on generic definitions of poverty, preoccupied with how to measure poverty or presenting poverty as a cultural problem. Instead, Das moves away from approaches that either exoticize poverty or quantify it, in her attempt to capture the frequently missed intricacies of everyday life. Das recovers such intricacies by tracing the relationship between poverty, imagination and orientations to the future. For the past nine years, Das has been conducting a longitudinal study of 10 low-income and middle income slums in New Delhi, India. Her research investigates the different "life forms that the poor inhabit." In this response, I will begin by mapping out several of Das's propositions and arguments. I will then reflect on the implications of her argument for rethinking the relationship between spatiality and temporality.

First, Das examines the making of aspirations and one's orientation to the future. In Das's lecture, she asked a series

of interrelated questions: “How are our social worlds made?” Can “the poor” be oriented to the future? Is aspiration bound to social position? Finally, if we know that the poor make choices and that aspirations are not completely defined by social structure, then what kinds of maps of aspiration can we find in a given community?

As Das highlights, much research on poverty focuses on one’s limited financial means, how one “makes ends meet” or can afford basic needs. In her study, she argues that even though financial means may be extremely limited, important choices are still made regarding future prospects. What is interesting about aspirations in this context is that one’s orientation to the future is short term. In Das’s study, she tracks the flow of commodities in and out of households. If, for example, one purchases a television or refrigerator, it is not a long-term investment or a permanent possession. Instead, these commodities only stay in the household until there is a need for something else, in which case the television would be sold. Not only does this call attention to and examine the seeming peculiarity of finding an “expensive” commodity in a poor household, which is not out of the ordinary according to her research, but it also makes the point that this is a privileging of the immediate future. The commodities only stay in one’s possession for a short period of time until another need arises. Das argues that this form of temporality can “signal the emergence of new sensibilities.” The tracking of such sensibilities and aspirations opens up new possibilities of being in what is ordinarily constructed as a limited and bound slum space. Further, what is unique about Das’s research is that it provides insight into how imagination and future orientation create multiple possibilities of being that are not bound by one’s social status. In other words, social structure does not necessarily determine aspiration or orientations to the future.

Moreover, if aspirations are not solely determined by social structure, then how does our understanding of the social world shift? How are intersubjective relations fashioned and refashioned with this possibility? I am cautious of the danger of romanticizing “the poor” or understandings of “aspirations of the poor.” There is also a risk of exoticizing

poverty and overshadowing the structural production of poverty. However, Das's exploration presents a challenge to such representations with a nuanced account of how poverty does not limit aspirations or intimacy with objects and commodities in the way that many accounts portray. Importantly, this is a rejection of "the poor" as a "generic category defined by policies of the state." We have much to learn from an account of living in poverty that both names the violence and suffering, but also captures imaginations and multiple ways of being in the world.

So, what are the overarching links between Das's questions and propositions? As Das points out, the question of aspiration and orientation to the future is a question of modes of temporality. However, the spatial segregation of slums and their residents is equally important in this formula. Representations of "the poor" are dependent on these constructions of space and subjectivities. It is the case that slums are spatially segregated and, thus, subject inhabitants to violence and hunger as well as lack of access to healthcare and education. Nevertheless, what is significant about Das's line of questioning is that it moves beyond understanding slums as solely spatially bounded. By tracing different orientations to the future, the question becomes one of spatiotemporal relations and, thus, moves beyond the boundedness of a slum and an understanding of its residents as being without aspiration and limited to the present.

This brief reflection is only a glimpse into this intricate analysis. By exploring different orientations to the future, it is possible to map relations of aspiration. Her research has serious implications for rethinking generic categorizations of poverty by policy, the relationship between time and space and how we understand aspirations as temporal openings. This is perhaps the most important contribution of Das's argument. Considerations of temporality in this context must move beyond understandings of the poor that are limited to development and an ushering in of modernity. Such prescriptions are dependent on produced ideas about "the poor" that emphasize lack and underdevelopment, and explain poverty as a cultural problem. However, by considering aspirations as complex spatiotemporal phenomena, it is

possible to move beyond limited understandings of being in this world. If we take seriously the proposition that time and space work together in curious ways, then temporal aspirations can actually open up possibilities of being that are not spatially bound.

The Formation of Subjectivity: Commentary on “Poverty and the Imagination of a Future”

Mark Ayyash, PhD Candidate, Graduate Programme in Sociology, York University

In her lecture, Veena Das presents us with what may seem like a new direction to her work. Those familiar with Das's writing, rightly or wrongly, will tend to place her work under the general categories of “violence” and/or “suffering”. And from that angle, her present area of inquiry, which focuses on poverty in New Delhi, India, will indeed seem “new”. If, however, we view Das's past works as concerned with the manner in which subjectivity is formed in/through/against violence and suffering, then the connection between her new and past work is better illuminated. While it is certainly premature to talk of such connections and/or fissures in Das's *oeuvre*, I tend to take the latter view, which would take into account the common theme of the ‘formation of subjectivity’ running throughout Das's work.

It seems to me that the overarching theme of the lecture is this sense of wonderment at how it is that people form their subjectivities in wholly unpredictable manners, in the most unlikely of places, producing the most surprising assemblages of seemingly contradictory or opposite ideas and conceptions we may have of a range of experiences and social institutions (e.g., citizenship). Generally speaking, a similar sense of wonderment marks Das's previous work on violence and suffering, and if that is indeed the case, then her work on poverty will certainly offer some fruitful and penetrating insights into the formation and work of subjectivity in 10 low-income and middle-income neighbourhoods in New Delhi. The main concept with which Das explores the lives of the poor in these localities is ‘aspiration’. Unlike the approaches

we often find in policy and certain academic circles (e.g., economics), where the concept of the 'poor' serves specific functions which, for example, work to promote a certain kind of policy formation or support a certain kind of theoretical paradigm, Das wants to explore the manner in which aspiration unfolds in the everyday lives of the poor and, consequently, what this unfolding can tell us about the life forms that the poor inhabit.

For Das, the question of aspiration is tied to notions of temporality, or that aspiration involves certain kinds of orientations towards the future. She points out two interrelated sides of the poor's orientation: one side involves the calculable aspect of the future (e.g., what do I need to do to put food on the table this evening given that I live on less than two dollars a day?); the second side involves a 'gambler's faith' in the future (e.g., perhaps this or that will happen or come my way, and I escape this poverty someday in the future). These two sides and their interrelation are often missed in academic analyses that either maintain that social structures completely determine the kinds of aspirations the poor may have or that reduce the question of aspiration to a matter of individual dispositions towards the future. Instead, Das undertakes an ethnography that is attentive to the manner in which aspirations are formed in a complex social world that includes not only the relationships between the human beings who inhabit this world, but also the human/non-human relationships that are just as much a part of this world as people's everyday face-to-face relationships.

These human/non-human relationships may involve people's relationships with gods, goddesses and deities and/or relationships with objects such as televisions, refrigerators, VCRs, etc. For instance, some of the households that were part of Das's on-going nine-year study would view tyres as objects with direct and immediate uses (e.g., as an object for the children to play with), but they are at the same time kept for potential different uses in the future (e.g., should this family come upon other objects, the tyres may then be used differently to further improve the construction of one's home). In other words, these households may view certain objects as having specific calculated uses at the same time that these

very same objects are viewed as possessing certain potential uses that may help these households escape their poverty in the future. Now this interplay between calculability and a gambler's faith suggests that the time orientation in these cases is that of temporariness and not that of permanence. Households in these neighbourhoods do not strive to attain and maintain the objects with which they form a certain intimacy, the objects with which they form relationships and as such their social world, but they often view these objects as temporary acquaintances, as it were. From these temporary relationships, new sensibilities are constantly emerging, sensibilities which reach beyond the human/non-human relationships and seep into the various human relationships within these neighbourhoods (e.g., Das gives the example of the household that bought a refrigerator that is rarely used, is not likely to last, and that the household could not really afford. But this refrigerator nonetheless plays an important role in the formation and shaping of the relationship between this household and another household that already owned a refrigerator).

Das also explores aspiration as it relates to the question of citizenship. Das asserts in the lecture that there exists a strong aspiration in the poor to attain full citizenship. Similarly as before, Das explores how relationships with documents (e.g., ration cards) can show us how it is that citizenship is claimed by various groups and individuals in these poor neighbourhoods. What Das has found is that it is not a question of whether one has or does not have citizenship, nor it is a question of what form of citizenship the poor have, but it is rather a question of how it is that people in these neighbourhoods find very imaginative and creative ways to *claim* their citizenship. Once again, Das points us towards the intricate relationship between calculability and a gambler's faith, where seemingly outrageous efforts are undertaken (and sometimes successfully) by these communities as a collective or by individuals to claim citizenship, which is otherwise seemingly beyond their reach. Finally, Das discusses the manner in which imagination and the two-sided orientation towards the future work to develop notions of the self that cannot be reduced to what the social structure imposes on the

poor. Here, Das gives us the example of the person who uses computer-generated images to present a different picture of what he may be and what he hopes to become in the future.

Ultimately, the crux of Das's contribution to the study of poverty, which too often maintains a parochial and patronizing disposition towards the poor, is to present us with the rich texture of life that is present, but often over-looked, in these poor localities. A disposition such as Das's is certainly needed to, among other things, oppose the patronizing disposition found in certain kinds of academic analyses and in discourses that are prevalent within policy-making circles, whether local, national or multinational. But we are still left wondering about what all of Das's disposition actually entails. Surely, part of the reason is the unfinished status of the work she presented in this lecture. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it may be worth asking at this point the following question: what does the concept of the 'poor' in Das's work illuminate, and as is the case with all concepts, what does it conceal? In other words, if the concept does indeed open up a viewpoint through which we can gain a glimpse of how it is that the poor interact (sometimes creatively, sometimes ordinarily, sometimes successfully, etc.) with each other, with non-human entities and objects, with their social world, with their social position, and with their social/political/cultural/economic institutions, then does this not necessarily shut out a viewpoint which may allow us to ask why it is that the poor are often asked to prove themselves as people who feel, think, act in the first place? In other words, why does the concept of the 'poor', by its mere appearance, often ask people who fall under it to prove themselves as worthy of membership in "normal" (i.e., not poor) human localities?

Das's presentation will surely shock most social scientists working on poverty by her simple claim that the poor can think, feel, act in ways that are all-too-human. That is, she is apt at showing elite thinkers and artists that their creativity is not absent in the slums that such elite groups either look down upon or view only through the prism of pity. Das appears to be telling elite entrepreneurs that their daring spirit is not absent in the slums that they view only as potential sites for their charity; and I can go on and on here.

This shock to such elite sensibilities is important in itself, but I wonder if it is enough on its own to justify the claim that Das's approach contributes something 'new' to the study of poverty. And here, I go back to that question and phrase it somewhat differently: In such elite, parochial and patronizing discourses, is the concept of the 'poor' marked first and foremost, not by an ignorance of the rich texture of lives in these poor localities, but by a drive (leaving aside the question of whether or not this drive is intended or not) to constitute and maintain the 'poor' as a concept of 'lack'? And as such, to continuously place the 'poor' in a constant chase after that which the 'poor' supposedly lack?

If I may use the following imagery, would it be fair to say that the patronizing discourse that cannot see the richness found in the lives of the poor from 'up-above' is akin to an observer of a foot race who sets the expectations for the runners and who also happens to hold the starting gun. And when the countdown is underway, the observer fires the starting gun at the feet of the runner that is deemed 'poor' and says, "Now run!" Where is the problem here? Is it that the observer deemed a specific runner as 'poor', as lacking something the other runners supposedly have? Is it that the observer actively delays this runner and puts the runner in a posture of a chase? Is it not that the observer is simultaneously an observer, a race starter, a judge, or a combination of the three? Is the problem such that it is a race where someone will inevitably be left chasing someone else? Or is it a combination of all these questions? It seems to me that Das addresses the first question only. Granted, this is not her imagery, and she may very well reject it from the outset, but I hope that I have managed to raise the general gist of my question adequately.

My second question concerns the human/non-human relationships. Das talks about deities and objects in her lecture, but what about the relationship between humans and animals? Not only people's relationships with their pets, livestock and stray or wild animals, but also the manner in which human beings often rely on certain animal behaviours or features to express themselves and, in a way, form their subjectivities. Das, for example, offers a great example in

her lecture when she shows us the sign on the street where someone makes of his human form, his very body, a mere vessel for the dog that is really inside it. This is not only a powerful political statement within the context in which it arises and operates, but it also reverses conventional and mainstream notions of 'reincarnation' or, more properly, human-animal symbioses: the dog is reincarnated in a human form, and not the other way around. When faced with a seemingly impossible obstacle, an obstacle that is constructed by human beings, this person announces that the dog, not the human, is the one that is capable of accomplishing astonishing transgressions with the human body and in the human world that it now inhabits. I am not very familiar with the different cultural expressions of animal-human symbioses, so I am not sure if I am going astray with this interpretation, but generally speaking, this seems a potentially fruitful avenue for inquiry. I hope that Das explores it in her future work.

Finally, I am not certain that Jacques Derrida or Jean-Luc Nancy would find troubling, agitating or all that surprising the two-sided orientation towards the future that Das finds in these localities. Much of Derrida's work, it seems to me, involves the introduction of a sort of gambler's faith (an incalculable, unpredictable and unnameable element) into academic (mainly philosophical) texts that pretend to operate on calculable, predictable and stable foundations. Derrida's famous discussion on the interplay between calculable law and an unnameable, incalculable justice is one example of this. So I wonder in what sense Das posits some of her findings in opposition, if that is the right word, to Derrida or Nancy?

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