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Instant-messaging Shiva, flying taxis, *Bil Klinton* and more: children's narratives from rural India

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ABSTRACT ● In this article, story (re)productions by children in rural India are seen as a potential tool for addressing current 'participatory' issues facing development practitioners. A project was implemented to involve children from a rural village in South India in e-literary storybook productions. The intention was to foster online representations of the rural voice through the lens of the child. Drawing on the material of children's stories, multiple subjectivities are revealed that compel us to reconsider relations of the 'rural' with technology and current social contexts. An analysis of these narratives highlights children's appropriation capabilities as they weave the 'urbanness' and 'global' with the 'rural' fabric, moving beyond the traditional discourse of the urban–rural dichotomy. This effort capitalizes on current theorizations of territory as scapes, making the case to harness children's stories to enlighten the adult, well-intentioned development practitioner who seeks genuine understanding of territory and practice. ●

KEYWORDS ● children's narratives ● globalization ● international development ● rural India ● technology

Introduction

In this article, I propose that stories by children from rural areas can function not just as novel knowledge productions serving to expand (and at times contest) the cultural representations of the rural populace, but can simultaneously

offer the development practitioner a glimpse of the complexity of interchange and dynamism that exists in the context at hand. Here, the child acts as a 'bricoler' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), making do with what is at hand within the 'scape' (Appadurai, 1996) of ideas and resources that are local, national and global, coalescing through creative literary output. The child is perhaps a more effective interpreting agent as she or he, by sheer (dearth of) exposure, has less inculcated notions of development politics than the adult.

'Participation' per se is not a novel concept in development practice and in the past decade has become the byword for transnational and translocal partnerships alongside the much-theorized empowerment discourse (Escobar, 1995; Parpart et al., 2002). In the last decade, there has been some promising research on children's participation in policy-making and the shaping of their environments and communities through direct action and self-reflection (Hart and UNICEF, 1997). However, there are few studies that capitalize on rural children's discursive practices for practitioner-based reflective action.

Here, I must preface that I am not replacing the romanticism of the rural with that of the child but rather am proposing a supplementary opportunity for practitioners to coauthor their constructs with novel actors such as the child who has been for the most part excluded as an active agent in the development process (Hart, 1992; Hart and UNICEF, 1997). Particularly, as digital inclusion becomes one of the sacred pillars of neoliberal politics, the 'new' solution to the 'old' problems (Sachs, 2005), attention needs to shift from the adult to the mediator of new technology – the child. Thereby, in interpreting three stories by children from Kuppam, a rural village in South India, I highlight aspects of these stories that intersect technology with the 'rural' in novel ways, making the 'past' as the 'present' (Pollock et al., 2000). These stories are not so much representative as reflective of the (innocent/non-innocent) appropriations of simultaneous diverging and converging aspects that inform the making of the 'rural' for the practitioner who seeks to understand her temporal space of action.

This is important as the age-old rural–urban dichotomy continues to persist as a truism in development, even as the field has achieved the sophistication of denial of such categories and demarcations (Pigg, 1992). Part of this is relational because the 'village' construct for the practitioner is at the mercy of the village informants who in turn often seek to please and feed into misconceptions of the rural idyll, perhaps as a key strategy for garnering support, or else due to years of accustomed relations of (re)presentation, power, knowledge and outcomes (Cleaver, 1999). This circular practice deters genuine participation and allows for the regression of practice into that which is familiar and comfortable.

In making this argument, this article starts with the notion of participation in development, followed by a synopsis of children's narratives with a brief description of Project BookBox which facilitated this endeavor. This follows with a description of Kuppam, the site of research in Andhra Pradesh, South India, before going into a detailed narration of the three children's stories chosen particularly for their 'cosmopolitan' outlook. Having done so, this

article demonstrates *a* way of interpreting these texts, as one possibility of three-dimensionalizing the 'rural' construct for practice. Using this textual engagement as a starting point, this article proposes a child's narrative as a useful tool for development practice.

Participation within the rural–urban construct

Romanticizing the 'rural' has been a favored preoccupation of the well-meaning outsider from the time of colonialism to today. Nostalgic for a past innocent of modernistic and technological mediations and interventions, people have historically sought to preserve the sanctity of the village unit as a discrete and naïve category (Briggs, 1996) Even with its current celebrity status as the new consumer base (Prahalad, 2005), or perhaps because of it, the village continues to be perceived as naïve but wanting publics; in need of a technological and socio-cultural makeover. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ambitious tenets of the Millennium Village Initiative (2006) at a global scale and the Mission 2007 initiative on a more national scale (Garai and Shadrach, 2006) that promises transformation of rural 'mindsets' through new technologies.

There is a commonly shared critique among scholars on the presumed benignity of the urban–rural linkages wherein the socio-cultural and economic flows have been perceived as mutual, reinforcing and/or predicative of the age-old core–periphery designs (Appadurai, 1996; Sassen, 2006a, 2006b; Saxenian, 2006). In fact, these authors argue that the semantics of the geospatial realm has facilitated conceptual and cultural (mis)constructs that falsely determine the flow and shape of units and relations, often rooted in colonial histories of power politics. Raymond Williams in his classic discourse on the city and the country (1973) has argued that this binary code requires us to view each in relation to the other and that the meanings of these domains are entrenched in their unique historicity and present relations to their social and cultural contexts. In other words, they are at once both historically circumscribed and dynamically evolving.

Taking this further, Appadurai enables the substitution of the dichotomy with that of the much-cited '-scapes', a means of constituting modern subjectivity as global flows through the deterritorialization of people, things, ideas and events. In particular, he proposes that 'ethnoscapes' serve as a replacement for 'earlier wholes' like villages, wherein 'its alternative, interactive modernities, should enable genealogy and history to confront each other, thus leaving the terrain open for interpretation of the ways in which local historical trajectories flow into complicated transnational structures' (1996: 64–65). Sassen, while subscribing to this new theorization of moving away from 'wholes', proposes an alternative means of reassembling global–local, urban–rural and other dichotomous processes. She posits a disaggregation of complex institutions and processes into three foundational components: territory, authority and rights (2006a). These foundational components or lens of analysis she

claims has the enabling capacity to capture 'possible shifting across and/or insertions in various institutional domains' (2006a: 5). This, she expounds, can be used to examine different contexts that generate 'different types of assemblages across time and space'.

Interestingly, and perhaps optimistically, the field of international development, exhausted under images of paternalism, colonialism and hegemony, has sought to embrace and theoretically replace the development 'expert' with the village 'expert' in local ways of knowing and doing (Fisher, 1997). This has spawned a general and enthusiastic acceptance of 'participation' of the local in the process of making change by multilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations to local and national governments alike. Exemplary of this new and promising approach is Narayan's design of Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPA) as a tool to enlist the poor in their own empowerment (Narayan, 2000). Using a wide range of open-ended methods of visual aids, unstructured interviews and discussion groups coupled with systematic content analysis, there is a concerted effort to look for the 'multidimensional' nature of poverty through its specificity of issues and concerns. This technique, unlike past efforts at categorizing poverty as a composite of deficiencies, takes a relational stance of understanding interconnections and 'changing relations between men and women, and between individuals and institutions' (2000: 34). As we can see, though, while this approach allows for a significant shift in thinking among development practitioners, the role of the child continues to remain invisible in this dynamic and iterative process. And of course, as with all promising perspectives, there is the constant danger of the 'new' metamorphosizing into reverence and, if deemed primary, into that of the sacred. In fact, Cleaver (1999) warns that participation has come to be regarded as an effective technique in uncovering the realities of the poor people and thereby has become 'an act of faith in development' (1999: 597).

So, in recent years, this golden child of development practice has revealed itself to have blemishes in its embodiment of empowerment and pluralistic representation. While omniscient in policy documents, scholars have accused this participatory process of becoming rhetoric; a formula of inclusion while, in practice, a disguise of imposed agendas and dominant ideologies that continue to impact local realities (Chambers, 1994; Cleaver, 1999; Fisher, 1997). In essence, the problematization of participation lies not in its concept but in its design.

Fundamental to this process is the shaping of a conducive environment wherein the multiple subjectivities and 'disjunctive flows' (Appadurai, 2000)[1] of the 'village' can be grasped and can serve as a critical educational tool for the well-intentioned practitioner. In concern for what Appadurai calls the growing 'double apartheid' (2000: 2) wherein the poor are often distanced and disconnected from what constitutes pressing globalization discourses that impact the lives of the poor, he calls for a 'grassroots globalization' of democratic imaginings through discursive practices. In doing so, the practitioner can reconstruct her or his own framework and approaches in the field that may allow for a more genuine 'situated practice' (Hobart, 1994).

The child's story is one such practice where, when written by the adult, can often be seen as a knowledge commodity produced within a closed system of cultures where the goal is for conservation and preservation of values and norms that the adult aspires to perpetuate. Therefore, examining the child's story produced by the child instead of the adult as explored in this article can allow not so much the supposed purity or authenticity of the rural but rather a certain transparency, plurality and novelty in discursive spaces of authoring 'ruralness' through a child's creative literary output.

Project BookBox

A child's narrative finds center stage primarily in the fields of development psychology and pedagogy and, in recent years, cultural studies (Hebdige, 1991). Serving as windows to the child's mind, narratives have been recruited to give insight into the socialization of a child through linguistic usage and, on a more ambitious scale, the 'universal grammar' underlying this process (Chomsky, 1972). Pedagogically, however, the focus has been substantively on the consumption side where child-oriented content is scrutinized for its 'appropriate' messages: those of nationhood, citizenship, multiculturalism and morality (Hirsch & Kett, 2002). In India, this preoccupation has been no different as scholars have worried over the colonial aftertaste in school texts to the recent concerns of curricula 'saffronization'; that of Hindu fundamentalism infusing national curricula (Demerath, 2004). Interestingly, in spite of the new digital medium, old concerns spill over as parents, policy-makers, advertisers, brand managers and religious groups scramble to make the most effective child's content that engages, localizes and indigenizes their interests (Montgomery, 2000). Here, the child is reminded that he is king. While the consumer here may be right, the rights of the child as consumer have come under heated debate as parents and activists have sought to curtail media on child-directed content as well as to rein in children's consumption of television and the net. Furthermore, there have been innovative efforts to enhance children's reading experiences by harnessing the new affordability of the digital age.

Project BookBox is one such initiative that has moved in to fill the gap in the scarcity of multilingual and international stories on the net. This is part of *PlanetRead,* an international non-profit initiative that won the 2002 World Bank Marketplace Award for its concept of applying same-language subtitling (SLS) to television programming to sustain reading skills among neoliterates in low-income countries (Arora, 2006a). In essence, BookBox entails an online digital space of animated children's stories drawing from authors across the globe. These are made available in more than 15 languages through SLS and audio features. Children's stories from around the world are edited, animated and available for downloading at a small cost for a global multilingual and multicultural audience. In 2004, this idea won the social e-challenge business award from Stanford University. However, these stories, like most published

children's stories, continue to be written by adults for children. The idea of having children write their own stories for production and consumption, particularly from a village context, has much appeal, with the intention that these children can perhaps shape a 'cultural future for themselves and their own communities in the dominant society' (Ginsburg, 1994a: 366).

The silicon village

Kuppam is no ordinary village constituency: strategically located at the confluence of three states in the south of India, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, it has in recent years positioned itself as a candidate for technological and modernistic projects and practices. Partly this is due to the fact that it is the constituency of former chief minister Chandrababu Naidu, and partly it is the location itself, sandwiched between two silicon behemoths of the IT boom, the cities of Bangalore and Hyderabad. In the last few years, it has also served as a 'live laboratory' of technological dissemination for Hewlett Packard (hp), the technology company. In partnership with multilateral and transnational organizations as well as the state and local governments, hp installed high-end technologies across schools and the community at large. The alliance was intended to accelerate socio-economic development in this rural area. In fact, hp sought to create information portals and community information centers that aimed to provide Kuppam citizens with access to critical government, healthcare, education and agriculture services, 'empowering community members to create new livelihoods for the future'.[2]

And then again, Kuppam is much like other villages in rural India. As of 10 years ago, it used to be called the prison encampment area of Andhra Pradesh, where prisoners were sent as punishment to work on its granite quarries. The first government high school came about a few years ago and most schools today continue to lack basic needs like running water, girls' toilets, libraries and teachers (Arora, 2006b). Furthermore, this region has faced severe drought, resulting in suicides by farmers[3] as well as vicious cycles of debt burdening the already poverty-struck populace. While trying to address this agricultural plight, the then chief minister Naidu came up with the Vision 2020 plan which claimed that by the year 2020 there would only be 'knowledge workers' and no farmers.[4] In July 2001 a *prajateerpu* (literally, 'people's verdict') or citizen's jury of 24 predominantly Dalit (formerly known as untouchables) female farmers heard evidence from a variety of witnesses on the ill effects of this plan on ownership of the land and other plights, resulting in a rejection of much that Vision 2020 proposes: 'We desire food and farming for self-reliance, and community control over resources; to maintain healthy soils, diverse crops, trees and livestock, and to build on our indigenous knowledge, practical skills and local institutions' (Ainger, 2003).

On arrival at the Kuppam train platform, you will be welcomed by signage of the i-community project in English: Hewlett Packard's 'hp i-community' embossed at the center while at the bottom of the sign, you will find in small

print the translation of the message in Telugu, the local language of the region. The billboard shows a farmer sitting by a computer accessing crop information while a few clerks in starched shirts look over with curiosity. In fact, the only overt signs of Kuppam being the 'silicon' village are its signage located strategically behind the buses, along bus stops, coffee stalls and school walls, from the main town to the remote villages. Images of women holding cameras, children at the computer, and villagers walking out of the e-health clinics pervade the visualscape of the villages. Also, at the government office, there is a promotional video of a farmer getting on his cycle wearing his dhoti (loin cloth, a common outfit of the men of this region) holding a plough, and in the next shot the same farmer is seen wearing trousers and a clean white shirt, talking on his cellphone while getting into his car.

   While it does not appear to be a technological haven from the surface end of things, it is not a purely bucolic setting either: in the Kuppam center, there is a fair scattering of two-story newly cemented and part-brick buildings with corrugated iron railings, much of them freshly painted in red and black. However, because of recent public–private technology initiatives such as the hp project, many schools, both public and private, have been given computers, which came with their own problems of maintenance and usage and a dearth of technological support (Arora, 2006b). There are some historical monuments, palaces and temples across this constituency that fade into the background either due to overgrowth of the greenery around them or because they have alternative uses, as in the case of a palace near our base, which is used as part fire station and part nursery for the local children. The only other signs competing with the hp signs (at the Kuppam center) are boards of private English medium schools such as 'Cambridge English Medium' and 'Oxford English Medium' primary and secondary schools that have sprung up in the past few years. This contrasts with the government schools that use Telugu as the medium of instruction with English as a subject. Overall, the word 'poverty' will not come to your mind readily as you pass several lush fields of maize and other crops interspersed with coconut trees and marigolds, delicious food stalls and busy yet seemingly tranquil bus stops packed with people.

Implementation of Project BookBox

The PlanetRead team was stationed at Kuppam for one year as part of the hp i-community project wherein it was given a grant to create a jukebox of folksongs for edutainment purposes (Arora, 2006a). To further this opportunity, at the tail end of our stay we announced a creative writing competition across all high schools in Kuppam to collect stories by children for BookBox. The age group targeted was 13–15 years of age. Given that we had multilingual team members and translators, we encouraged the children to write these stories in their language of choice. We went from school to school announcing the competition and spoke to teachers and principals alike to garner their support. By the end of the process, we had collected around 250 stories. As

expected, the stories from the private English medium schools were written primarily in English while the stories from the public schools were a mixed bag of English and Telugu.

While it would be interesting to analyze this rich database along the lines of gender, caste, location of schools, age, religion and proficiency of language, the scope of this article lies primarily in demonstrating how a child's story can be used as a springboard for practitioners, particularly in the understanding of technology interfacing with social norms as a means to revisit the 'rural' construct. In other words, unlike most narrative analysis that seeks to understand the producer of the narrative in terms of identity construction (Berman, 1998), the act of narrative production itself (Labov, 1972) or quantitative and/or thematic analysis related to a specific sociocultural phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), this article is about performing an exercise of interpretation that can highlight alternative modernities and imaginaries for triangulated practice.

The prime purpose here is not so much to draw comparisons or detect patterns for generalizations or to presume any kind of representational analysis, but to highlight certain appropriations of technology with social contexts to reveal a complex and contested 'rural'. Taking inspiration from Narayan's PPA methodology, this article is concerned less with generating quantified counts of words or themes than with identifying and locating juxtapositions of past and present, old and new, rural and urban, and other expected dualities. The idea is to start with one's preconceptions of how much do rural people know and use technology, their relations of religion with current social life, of what kinds of technology are integrated into the rural area and so forth. In doing so, the search is on to be 'surprised', to look for conundrums, challenges and intrigue that can be a starting point for venturing into a new terrain with hopefully better inquiries.

This serves to empiricize recent theorizations of alternative modernities (Gaonkar, 2001), scapes and global disjunctives (Appadurai, 1996) and cosmopolitanisms (Breckenridge, 2002) where local narratives and plots are seen through 'a subtext of interpretive possibilities that is the direct product of the workings of the local imagining of broader, regional, national and global events' (Appadurai, 1996: 153). With this current scholarship, there are no predictive starting points but rather a host of platforms to launch from and, unlike the classic inductive and iterative process of Glaser and Strauss (1967), of refining one's inquiry based on what emerges from the data, here we have to accept a fractured existence of narratives that are meant to serve as an assemblage of ideologies, events, relations and things. This article seeks to highlight the practitioner's world-view to him/herself by making evident the contradictions that surround them.

Not quite Jungle Book

This article uses three stories, particularly chosen for their diverse and innovative take on technology and other cosmopolitan revelations. These three

stories have been written by two boys and one girl, all from the 9th grade. They happen to come from private schools, which, although this implies a privileged status, are in fact populated for the most part with a 'lower class' and 'rural backward caste' student body (Arora, 2006b). In fact, a decade ago, there were almost no high schools in the area but within the past few years, Kuppam has experienced a growth in private English medium schools that serves the underclass who are desperately seeking social mobility. Also, due to recent digital divide initiatives, many of these schools have been given computers and related facilities.

The first story by Manish is called 'Drama in Heaven'. It is about the kidnapping of Ganesha, the son of Lord Shiva in heaven. It starts with Lord Shiva being notified about his son's kidnapping:

> When Mr. Shiva was drinking coffee and chating with his brother Brahma in internet about Ganeshas disappearance, he suddenly heard the ring tones of his cell phone Airtel
>
> 'Hello, here lord Shiva, who is on the line?' asked Shiva
>
> 'Shut up, you are lord means I am God, one important message to you, we are kidnapped your son Ganesha'.
>
> 'Are you' shouted lord Shiva
>
> 'Yes, Do not confident on us, we will phone you again' said the unknown voice and dropped phone.

Parvati, the wife of Shiva, orders Shiva to contact her brother Vishnu for help, first by phone and then by email

> 'Parvathi, our son had been kidnapped by some one'
>
> 'Oh! Man, Is it? Phone immediately to Vishnu, my brother' said Parvati.
>
> Lord Shiva had phoned to Vishnu
>
> But: 'All lines to the vaikunta is busy. Please dial after some time' replied phone.
>
> 'Oh! Shit! The lines are busy', said Shiva
>
> 'Send email to lord Vishnu, Immediately' said Parvati
>
> Lord Shiva had sent email to Vaikunta and next moment appeared before them lord Vishnu.

Shortly after Lord Vishnu arrives, the kidnapper calls again, this time asking for a ransom to be dropped at the forests of Karnataka, a state in South India. They claim to be 'followers' of Veerappan, the real-life notorious bandit in Karnataka

> 'I am lord Vishnu, who is on the line' said Vishnu

'we are kidnappers of mr. Ganesha, we are follower of Veerappan' said voice on other side

'what do you want?' said Vishnu god

'send your tri chakra, shivas trisulum, veerappan and 5 crores cash (or) cheque (or) credit card. Immediately'

'Where do you want to get it?' said Vishnu

'Near Karnataka border forests before two days' dropped again the phone

When the kidnappers get off the phone, Shiva and Vishnu use a tracking device in the hope of locating them but that doesn't work. They think of calling the 'heaven police service' but are told that they all 'went to Sankar dada MBBS film at earth', a big Bollywood hit. They then ask for Naradha to help but he claims that 'Sorry sir, I am busy, I should chat with my friend and also has appointment with Indra'. When he leaves, a fax arrives telling the gods of the location to which the money should be delivered. Meantime, Shiva is able to locate Ganesha and immediately notifies his people to go down and get him:

'yes, I found it Paravathi' shouted lord shiva 'I was in India at the near Arabian sea'

'Take our Granites and Dynamites, and clothes to wear for comfort and safe' said Vishnu lord.

They had went very quickly on Deva II satellite and landed on Karnataka forest.

By then Ganesha is at home safe and to celebrate his rescue, there are festivals all over heaven. But nobody realizes that this whole drama was staged by Ganesha and Naradha who have a good laugh at the end.

The second story, by Salman, is about a man, Mangappa, who gets married to Mangamma at the age of 25 in his village and after two years, they have two children. He meets with an accident when traveling on his bicycle and goes into a coma. Seventy-two years later, he wakes up to find his wife still by his side.

After 72 years he came out of coma stage. By coma he was mentally upset. His wife came and given the juice to him. he asked who are you. Mangamma shocked by hearing the words of her husband. She show the evidence of her children But he could not remember any thing he said OH! You are my wife they are my childrens. How can I believe those ok, I am getting hungary give me any thing to eat. Mangamma gave a small tablet with spoon im a big man – mangappa told what is this I asked to bring eatables I didn't asked you to give me a tablet his wife answered this is not a tablet this is our food. It's a food? I can't believe it. Ok, then I am going out to search my food.

When he steps outside, there are flying cabs and children playing in the sky with the stars. A cab comes by and asks him if he wants a lift, 'immediately a Jet came and the driver told "come in sir" for a taxy'. While standing in the sky, still trying to digest his new environment, he gets hit by a flying cab and goes back into a coma.

The third story, by Jayanti, is about an American who comes to India to join the hp i-community. On his arrival, his luggage gets stolen at the airport. He asks people on how to get to the hp office but he is unable to understand them. He eventually finds a police officer who interrogates him with questions:

1) Question – where's Australian continent in the world. He tells answer that 'Australian continent is near my house' when you come I will show you.

2) Question – You tell any some four leg animals. He tells answer that 'horse'. The officer asks another four leg animal, he tells that 'other horse'.

3) Question – Why bil klinton will not sit if you tell sit. Because he did not know Telugu language.

After answering these questions, the police officer orders a boy to bring coffee and, as a joke, tells the boy to pour the coffee on the American's face. Instead, the 'supplier really pour's the coffee on the officer's face'. The story abruptly ends with the American finding the hp i-community where he 'lives a happy life'.

Interpreting the interpreter

It is no coincidence that all three stories are steeped in 'modernistic' technological utterances that are seemingly foreign and alien to what often gets constituted as 'rural'. In fact, the choice of stories as such is to demonstrate 'ruralness' as the rogue that departs from its conventional definition, mocking the neat parameters within which it is often confined. In searching for an understanding to 'ruralness', it would perhaps be most useful to parallel it with the analogy of 'novelness' as offered by Bakhtin through his discourse on the novel (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981). According to Bakhtin, the shaping of 'novelness' is a process that steps outside the genre and enters the complex matrix of dialogism with the 'center' – the dominant literary genre or, in this case, 'modernity/urbanity'. In doing so, Bakhtin reveals his preoccupation with the non-canonical fluidity of the novel as it defines itself in opposition to any strict formalism or essentialism that he claims occupies the other genres. In contrast to the 'epic', a genre that he looks upon as embalming of the past, he sees the 'novel' as a parody of other genres where 'it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them' (1981: 5). Thereby, the genre

of 'ruralness' as organic poetics teases out and plays with the sobriety of modernity as that which is stoically viewed through the lens of technology and secured within the camps of urbanity. And as Gaonkar (2001) astutely points out, even when adhering to the notion of alternative modernities, to think in these terms is to admit that modernity is inescapable.

When in the 'Drama in Heaven', Manish writes about Lord Shiva 'drinking coffee and chating with his brother Brahma in internet', we see the live corruption of the sacred that makes mortals of the heavenly subjects. It is arguably the *birth of a new genre* in the sense that it receives and incorporates new forms of social life (e.g. chatting on line) with the persisting fashions of the past (evocation of gods). Interestingly, though, it can also be seen as a *rebirth of the old genre* (religious/mythological text) because the anthropomorphizing of the gods has been a common occupation within the Indian Vedic text (Bailey, 1979). In fact the gods addressed in Manish's story (Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, Parvati, Naradha) are the most famous and popular of gods of the classic Vedic texts where their contesting and complementing interactions fall under a larger narrative of shaping ideologies and value systems that has pervaded through centuries. Thereby one can argue that in Manish's story, the parody of this grand narrative of gods and men can be seen as both in harmonious interaction with the great Vedic texts as well as in conjunction to 'reality itself in process of its unfolding' (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981: 7).

What needs to be remembered here when permeating 'ruralness' is its multiple coordinates or what Appadurai refers to as its disjunctive flows: the *dominant* structures (mythology and/or urbanity) and the *predominant* social, economic and cultural realities in Kuppam including the hp project, computers in schools, omniscience of 'Airtel' cellphones branded on to the child to Tollywood (Bollywood of the south)/'MBBS movies' to rituals of the current time. What is interesting in seeing the use of 'chating', the 'internet', 'faxes' and 'satellites' in this story is that we gain a glimpse of the fringe of the *possible* in spite of the chronic physical and social constraints of Kuppam life where electricity is a novelty and where computer access, usage and maintenance seem more a rarity than the norm (Arora, 2006b).

We also gain a glimpse of the *probable* as Parvati, while not directly interfacing with technology, nevertheless does instruct Shiva to email and call Vishnu, reminiscent of gender usage of technology discourses of rural areas where in spite of illiteracy and other social constraints, women continue to access and use computers through their children and husbands (Warschauer, 2003). These constraints need to be seen as inclusive in the making of media and its 'comparative political economies of media production and consumption', suggesting the 'persistence of difference and the importance of locality while highlighting the forms of inequality that continue to structure our world' (Ginsburg et al., 2002: 25).

We should recognize here the deliberate juxtaposition of mythology (that considered old) and urbanity (that considered new) with the implicit assumption that technology lies within the urban camp. These demarcations start to corrode as mythology continues to be used in current time and urbanity loses

its firm grasp on technology as it parades itself through these stories. Technology therefore is not the prerogative of the urban but the instrument of time. It marks the calendar of the novel but not the nature of its genre. In essence, it is as much the property of the urban as it is of the rural. Or differently put, in capturing the cosmopolitanism of the narrative, 'it is not simply that we are going forward into the past; we are going into a past that is at the same time somehow new, a grotesque caricature of the past where the propositions of Western modernity, now catastrophically universalized, are being re-enacted' (Pollock et al., 2000). Therein, one can argue, lies a congruity between cellphones and gods, between the predetermined, the undetermined and the determining.

In the second story, what seems most interesting in Salman's narrative is not so much the artistic production of flying cabs and food pills and 'children's playing with stars by picking the stars in the sky', but rather the grounding of this story where norms of social life casually lie. For instance, while we get engrossed in the future of Mangappa, we should not miss that Salman starts his story by telling us that Mangappa was married in the village at the age of 25 and that 'in two years they got two childrens'. Also, when Mangappa encounters the flying taxi cab, the 'driver' addresses Mangappa by 'sir'. Of course, we cannot necessarily deduce that the child buys into these class relations or whether this connotes a class or cultural issue in itself but rather, the child as the artist can be seen as acknowledging and harnessing the materials of social life in his story. In other words, the child, 'speaks not only *with* things … but also through the medium of things' (Lévi Strauss, 1966: 21) and that 'medium' is an ever-changing and dynamic entity.

And then again, the class relations, if we may see them as that, within this text can be seen as a display of a larger dynamic between social groups within Kuppam where the dominant institution (e.g. government/hp/elites/upper castes) impacts that which gets produced and consumed and that which is estranged. Much like Raymond Williams earlier on, Miller (1988) explores the process of making 'alienable goods into inalienable culture' (1988: 353) where at times people fail to accomplish this goal. Here, he claims that while institutions make alienation an intrinsic condition, consumption takes on a creative process of 'appropriation, as understood as a re-socialization, of the artefactual environment' (1988: 354). In essence, by referencing historical and social realities, be it technologies, mythology and in the more obvious case Jayanti's hp i-community, Miller would view it as a creative appropriation that ingests (in altered and unaltered forms) the (pre)dominant conditions of the time.

A good example of this creative act is in the play of authority in Jayanti's story wherein the peon, while evidently of a lower rank in the pecking order, does the unthinkable and defies his superior. When the officer 'asks the boy to bring coffee and pour on his [the American's] face as a jock', the peon 'really pour's the coffee on the officer's face'. This kind of 'cultural modernity' (Gaonkar, 2001) defies the conformities and banalities of hierarchy, rationality, pretensions, hypocrisies and complacencies in want of a more

liberated ethos. We see more of these creative instances as the 'Other' imagines the 'American' as struggling and naïve, and in want of settling in the 'hp i-community' in Kuppam, reversing the much-written-about rural–urban migration imaginaries (Appadurai, 1996). Yet of course, the American 'lives a happy live' not in the village but in the Western recreation in the village, that of the hp i-community. Even fantasy here continues to be cautious.

It is important when talking of the 'rural child' as the artist, to talk of 'ruralness' as a system of *aesthetics*, bringing to the fore the artistic production and consumption that lies beneath it. Ginsburg (1994b) writes about the dangers of fetishizing the local where she writes of how the definition of aboriginality is defined against that which is non-aboriginal, trapped in a reductive colonial construction/representation. Therefore, she explores some of the complexity involved as aboriginal media-makers self-consciously embrace a set of *embedded aesthetics* that 'draw attention to a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations' (1994a: 368). Crossing a mixed audience, she states, demands a negotiation of multiple cultural perspectives that lends itself to a strategic empowered definition of group representations.

Therefore, it is only appropriate to look at such narratives against or as extensions of first- and second-hand accounts of current events and fieldwork encounters: farmers using Coca-Cola as pesticide for their crops (John, 2004), devout Muslims positioning themselves in the direction of Mecca with the aid of cellphones (Biddlecombe, 2004) to Chinese families burning paper images of cellphones, laptops and flat-panel televisions alongside basics to ensure a good life for the dead (Intel, 2007). Fieldwork encounters thicken this perspective with a Kuppam boy sending me an electronic Christmas card in June, an eunuch on the train to Kuppam talking on her cellphone, to a Kuppam school teacher who, when applying for the Fulbright exchange program, states that on arrival in the US, he intends to 'meet with Ophra Winfary TV anchor, will smith, Hollywood actors interested in education field'. This is framed by the emigrations and migrations of people to and from Kuppam – people from Dubai setting up private English medium schools in Kuppam, local priests attending a conference in Singapore, and those who commute daily to IT parks in Bangalore to work as security guards.

Williams (1973) proposes the concept of 'typicality'; that which renders 'universals: the permanently important elements of human nature and human condition' (1973: 101). He argues for a more expanded definition of the universal to encompass not just the religious, metaphysical or idealist forms of thought but also historical and secular human social situational forms. This allows for reflection to mirror 'reality' without the trappings of the static nature of materialism, given that what constitutes as 'reality' is but the constantly changing and dynamic definition of 'typicality'.

As we see here, we have come full circle in the 'ruralness' of things. In seeking for a rich understanding of the rural, we have drawn parallels with 'novelness', 'aesthetics' and 'typicality'. Therefore, through this lens we can view the

technological, the mythological and the sociological of these stories not as distinct and categorized units of analysis but rather as composites that shape 'ruralness'.

Conclusion: the myth holders

The cornerstone of development lies in the modernization of the rural. While theoretically modernization theory has been debunked and is on the lookout for a post-post-modern analysis, in the field of development, modernization continues to provide life support for this field. The need to digitalize rural areas, the need to change the psychological mindset of the rural citizen through new technologies and thereby presumed opportunities can be seen as a rights-based act of the digital divide, the new egalitarianism; but again, for such democratic urges, the benchmark continues to be that of the urban, the global, the city. In development today, we cannot escape the globalization rhetoric as it serves as critical fuel in policy-making. Development practitioners continuously confront a double bind: that of building urgency through a victimhood discourse and with the new participation rhetoric, a promise of these victims as superheroes *if* given a chance; yet, in doing so, sustain the dependency notion that often carries over to practice.

   Through this admittedly over-interpreted exercise of these stories, while in pursuit of the 'rural', the 'non-rural' has come forth. We find the compartmentalization of the outsider, where the 'American', 'the Australian', 'Bil Klinton' and 'hp' get fused together. While amusing to some, it does draw attention to the two-way trafficking of these rural–urban flows. Of course, in terms of consequences, while the reductionism or falsification of the outsider by a person from the rural area is often of little consequence to the social life of the dominant, unfortunately one cannot apply the same attitude in reverse thinking. Thereby, it becomes contingent to the outsider to gain a multidimensional view of 'ruralness', particularly its temporality and dynamism. Far from altruism, it becomes a matter of pragmatics wherein through the understanding of the rural, we detect mismatched boundaries of perception on, for example, the role of technology where the dominant organization (Indian government, hp) sees it as primarily functional for village life while through these stories, as in the employment of chatting on line and the searching of Veerappan on the internet, it can be argued to be more a tool of leisure.

   On the whole, while the techniques of participation have progressed from the time of perceiving the rural as savage to now social entrepreneurs, we still need a genuine reminder or a pinch of the arm to allow for the richness of rural life to permeate our perceptions. Therefore, if the well-intentioned practitioner persists in the role of the myth-holder, there is the danger of her becoming the myth-maker herself. Of prime importance is the notion that the practitioner be at ease with the incompleteness of 'ruralness' as a definition, a code, and instead gain the taste of the 'stew' that will remind her to reflect, mediate rather than react within situated practice.

Acknowledgements

Notes

All children's names used here are fictional names for the sake of privacy.

1 Arjun Appadurai summarizes this term effectively as follows: the paths or vectors taken by these kinds of things have different speeds, axes, points of origin and termination, and varied relationships to the institutional structures in different regions, nations or societies.
2 HP-i-communities, retrieved on 15 July 2007 http://www.hp.com/hpinfo/newsroom/feature_stories/2005/05kuppam.html
3 *The Hindu* (May, 2004) 'Five more farmers commit suicide'. Retrieved on 15 July 2007 from http://www.hindu.com/2004/05/21/stories/2004052114100100.htm
4 *The New Internationalist* (February, 2003) 'The market and the monsoon'. Retrieved on 15 July 2007 from http://www.newint.org/issue353/part3.htm

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