



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

**Topic: From Gujarat to West Bengal. A story of the Revival of the Traditional Textiles of India after the “Inglorious Empire“ of the British Raj.**

Shirin Caldwell© 21 February 2021



This talk is an introduction to one story (there are many) of how the ancient arts of weaving and embroidery are being revived amongst the artisans of Gujarat and West Bengal in India. The story is told through my eyes, which were opened on a Traditional Textiles tour to India in 2019.

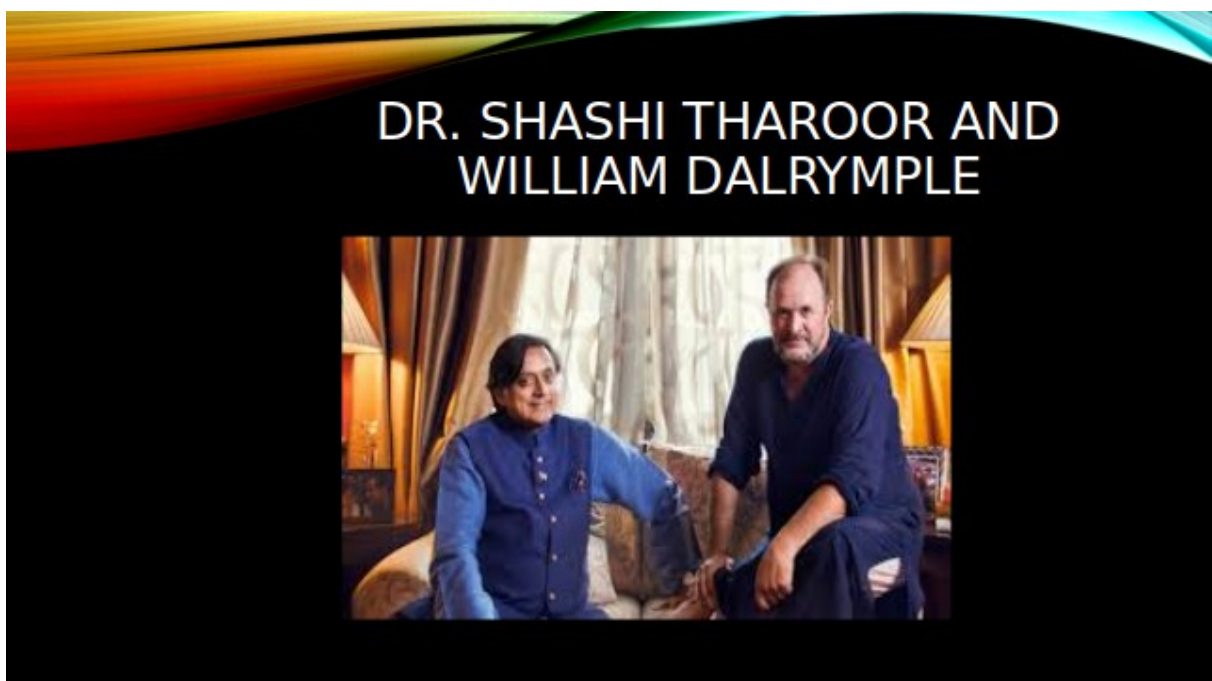
I joined Joji's Jacob's Traditional Textiles of India Tour in October 2019. It was dazzling!

India: drenched in colour, the vibrancy of the people, the fascinating accommodation including the 19<sup>th</sup> century Itachuna Rajbari in West Bengal, or the luxurious Taj Mahal hotel in Lucknow the Terracotta Temples, the idol makers workshops in Kolkata, the stunning traditional weaving and embroideries, the breath-taking ancient step wells whose stories are carved into the stone walls and pillars. And...the

Chambal River ride alive with crocodiles and gharials. All of these will linger long in my memory.

But today, I want to talk about **one** of the major reasons for my choosing this tour over the many others, that was the social justice emphasis on supporting the revival of the ancient weaving and embroidery arts by the artisans of India, that were almost lost due the deliberate, brutal repressive policies of the British East India Company and later the British Raj.

To prepare myself with a little knowledge before the trip, I read William Dalrymple's delightful book *The City of Djinnns: A Year in Delhi* (2003) and Shashi Tharoor's illuminating book *The Inglorious Empire* (2017) that describes the atrocities and cruel governance over the Indian sub-continent during the time of the British East India Company and later the British Raj. Some of you may have attended the interview with Shashi Tharoor at the Writers Festival here in Auckland in 2018. He is an Indian academic, MP and former United Nations Under Secretary General and finished second, behind Ban Ki-moon of South Korea in the 2006 election of UN Secretary General.



This gave me some context to fully appreciate the revival of the artistic skill and intricacies of the traditional weaving, dying and embroideries done by village artisans

and embroiderers we visited across Gujarat and West Bengal. My interest was heightened by getting to know the Indian students our church offered sanctuary to in February 2017, Vikram, Sonia, Khwahishand now ...are now our friends.

Shashi Tharoor Extract from the Oxford Debate -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcWc7WqcS5M>

William Dalrymple on the White Moghuls - [https://youtu.be/zz\\_nNyD6BaE](https://youtu.be/zz_nNyD6BaE)



Our introduction to these Traditional, ancient arts of weaving and embroidery began with a visit to the Calico Museum in Ahmadabad, an awe-inspiring collection of religious textiles, South Indian bronzes, Jana art, royal tents, costumes carpets and furnishings from Mughal courts as well as a range of ethnographic textiles.

## SHRUJAN LLDC MUSEUM KUTCH



The LLDC Shrugan Museum (means creativity in Sanskrit) It is a not-for-profit organisation working with over 3,500 local craftswomen spread over a hundred remote villages in Kutch. The aim is to revitalize the ancient craft of hand embroidery. The museum has a wonderful collection of examples of the women's work showing a huge range of styles and traditions specific to each community.

The women are given a fair price for their work which helps secure a better future for the women and their families. I bought some exquisite work that I will always treasure. A pure silk hand embroidered purse with a fine bead strap I bought here is on the left.





EXAMPLE OF THE FINEST BHUJODI WEAVING BHUJI GURJURAT. SUD E2

**Bhujodi weaving is a traditional craft in Bhuj GURJURAT**

**VANKAR VISHRAM VALJI. INDIGO DYER & WEAVER FROM KUTCH**



**Vankar Vishram Valji, the Indigo dyer & weaver**

<https://www.toothpicnations.co.uk/my-blog/?p=37976>

The image on the left is of the master weaver VANKAR VISHRAM VALI using the traditional spinning wheel also used by Gandhi.

He mixes goat, silk and merino wool that he imports from New Zealand. And weaves the most exquisite shawls, saris and other goods.

On the right is his young son, who demonstrated the slow, traditional process of immersing the shanks of spun wool into a series of indigo dye vats, sunk into the floor.

Many of the traditional weavers still use the ancient natural method extracting the dye from plants of the genus *Indigofera*, which are native to the tropics, notably the Indian subcontinent. Each time the shank is immersed it is hung up to dry. It will go through several of these processes until the exact indigo shade is set.

Indigo, the oldest known fabric dye dates back to 6,000 years ago and was discovered in 2009 in Peru. Many Asian countries, such as India, Japan, and Southeast Asian nations have used indigo as a dye (particularly silk dye) for centuries.

It remained a rare luxury commodity in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, and India was a primary supplier of indigo to Europe, as early as the Greco-Roman era.

Now a synthetic variant it is used to dye the ubiquitous blue jeans



Women's collectives ensure the regular income for the crafts women and men include the Kala Raksha Trust, an artisan initiative where income generated from the exquisitely embroidered products are sold directly by the artisans themselves, thus linking them directly to their market. The cooperative also offers integrated preventative health and basic education programmes

Their work is sold in a delightful complex of traditional round buildings called Bhunga, unique to the Kutch region in Gujarat. The cooperative is a model for community development; is locally managed and operates using solar power.

The photo on the **left** shows Kala Raksha women working on their fine embroidery. And on **the right**, a group of 2 generations of Hodka village women, a 12-year girl and her grandmother selling their wares directly to visitors in their village compound.

**SLIDE 8 SHOWS THE EXTERIOR OF A TYPICAL Kutch BHUNGA**



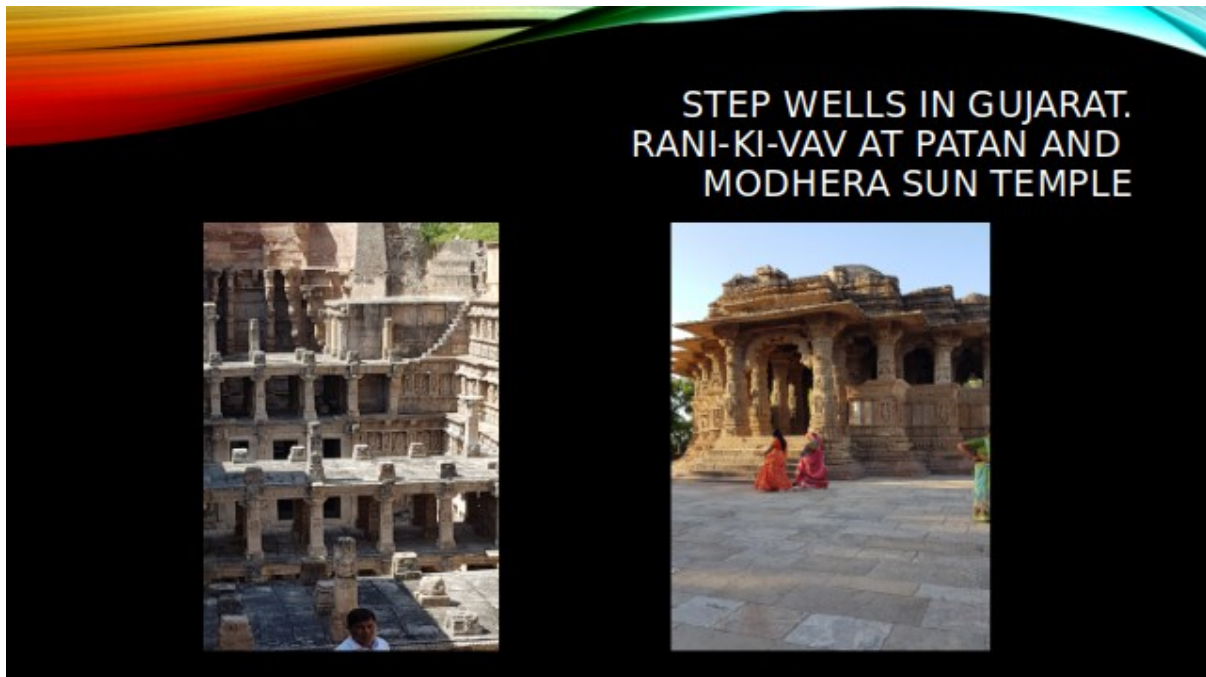
**SLIDE 9 INTERIOR OF BHUNGA AT MAHEFEEL RANN RESORT.**



I was enchanted with the local traditional Bunga architecture and stayed in one at the Mahefeel Rann Resort. After an 1819 earthquake that caused severe damage to the lives and properties, the people of Kutch came up with the circular design of bhungas, which has been in use for nearly 200 years now. Even after the severe earthquake of 2001, it was seen that despite being very close to the epicentre of the earthquake, bhungas stood firm while many other buildings were devastated



## SLIDE 10 STEP WELLS GURJARAT.



### I CAN'T RESIST INCLUDING THE STEP WELLS.

**On the LEFT is the Rani-ki-Vav (means the Queens Step Well) at Patan Gujarat, BUILT on the banks of the Saraswati River.**

IT was initially built as a memorial to a king in the 11th century AD. Stepwells are a distinctive form of subterranean water resource and storage systems on the Indian subcontinent, and have been constructed since the 3rd millennium BC.

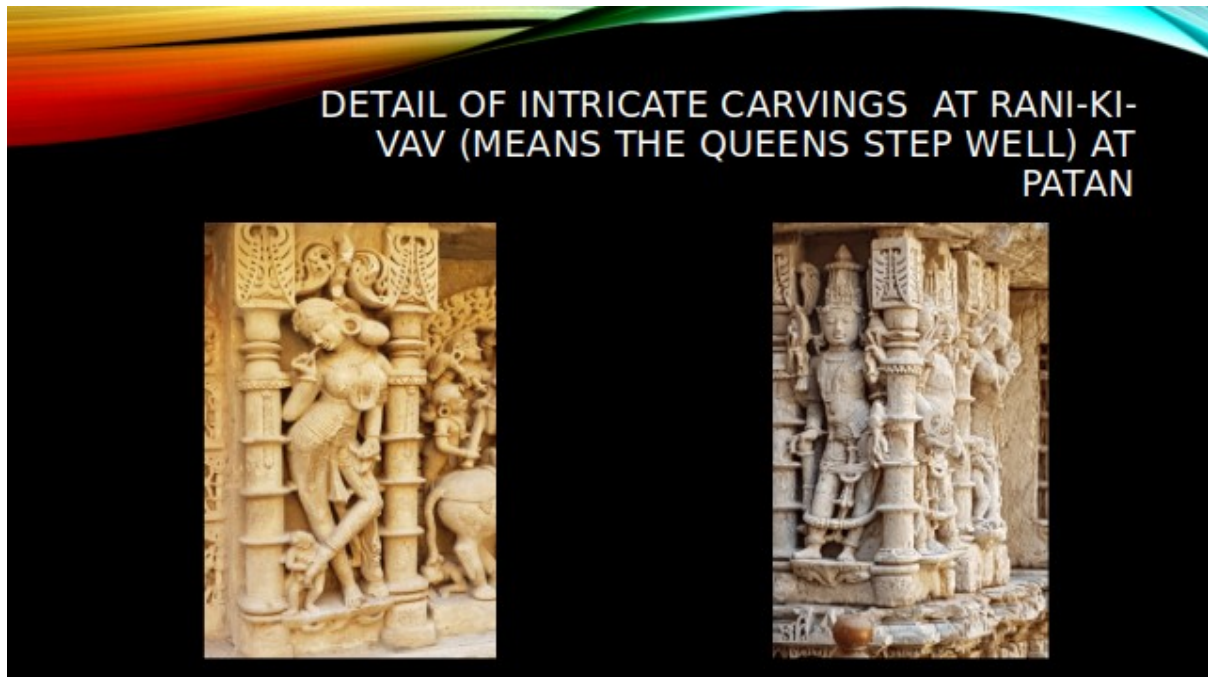
They evolved over time from what was basically a pit in sandy soil to an elaborate multi-storey work of art and architecture. Rani-ki-Vav was built at the height of craftsmen's' ability in stepwell construction.

Designed as an inverted temple highlighting the sanctity of water, it is divided into seven levels of stairs with sculptural panels of high artistic quality; more than 500 principle sculptures and over a thousand minor ones combine religious, mythological and secular imagery, often referencing literary works.

The fourth level is the deepest and leads into a rectangular tank 9.5 m by 9.4 m, at a depth of 23 m.

**On the RIGHT** is the Hindu **Sun Temple** at Modhera, another Step Well dedicated to the solar deity of Surya. And, so we were told, was built by the wife of the King who built the Rani-Ki-Van Step Well on the left.

**SLIDE 11 Detail of Step Well Patan**



On the Left, is an 11<sup>th</sup> century woman applying lipstick (YES), and receiving a pedicure. On the right, is the detail from one of the pillars lining the sides of the PATAN Step Well.

## SLIDE 12. MURA COLLECTIVE NEW DELHI



This women's collective was set up by Prabha Gahtori and her sister Kusum Gahtori Tiwari.

**Mura** was set up to provide a workplace environment of inclusion for marginalised groups such as women as well as those with special needs. "We have a lot of women, especially from migrant families, working for us," said Prabha who described their workplace in Delhi as an 'urban village pocket'. It has enabled many women who cannot leave their homes, with employment and income," says Prabha.

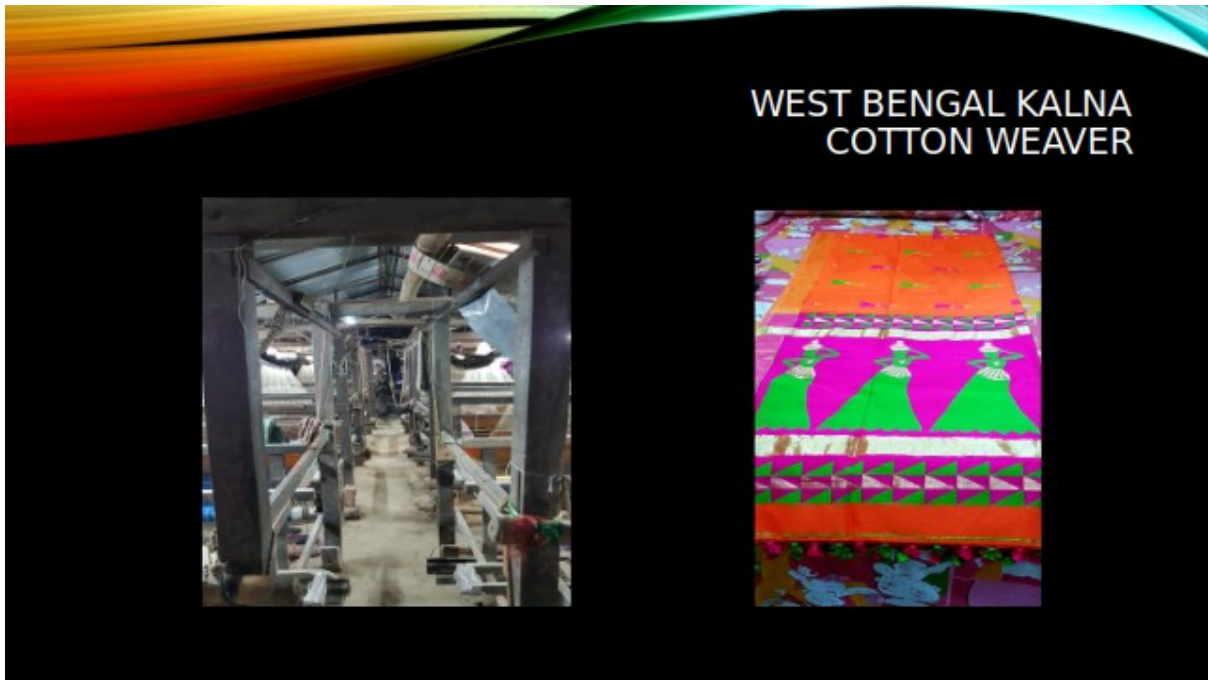
**On the LEFT IS Kusum**, the main designer at the Mura collective. All the crafts women wore the most beautiful colourful traditional saris and Kurtas.

I couldn't resist the beauty of their work and bought a handloom cotton Kurta, (me in on the RIGHT in the foyer of the very grand Hotel Taj Mahal in Kolkata).

**Kusum's** work has earned her venture both the UNESCO Award of Excellence for Handicrafts in 2008, and the UNESCO Seal of Excellence for Handcrafted Products in South Asia 2005.

From New Delhi we flew to West Bengal. Such a different climate to the hot dry deserts of Gujarat

**SLIDE 13. COTTON WEAVER IN WEST BENGAL.**



The interior of his village workshop is on the LEFT and one of his colourful and distinctive designs is on the RIGHT.

**SLIDE 14. WEST BENGAL: REVIVING THE ONCE-FAMOUS MUSLIN INDUSTRY, INCLUDES RABINDRANATH SAHA'S WORK.**



IN THE BRIEF VIDEO CLIP I SHOWED YOU EARLIER, SHASHI THAROOR TALKED ABOUT THE BRITISH RAJ'S CRUEL DESTRUCTION OF THE BENGALI FINE UNRIVALLED MUSLIN WEAVING.

**THE FOLLOWING EXTRACT COMES FROM THE INDIAN JOURNAIST K.R.N. Swamy writing in the Tribune in 2002.**

**I**N the history of textiles, there is no name more famous than that of Dhaka muslin. In 1875, when Edward VII, the then Prince of Wales, came to Bengal, Sir Abdul Gani of Dhaka ordered 30 yards of the most superior muslin as a gift to the prince. One yard of this fabric weighed barely 10 grams! Even today, among aristocratic families of the Indian subcontinent, dresses of Dhaka muslin are considered the ultimate in luxury. The word 'muslin' was derived from the name of the city of its origin, Mosul, in Iraq.

Bengal, became famous for the weaving of this cloth. Their weave was so fine that the Egyptian Pharaohs used them for wrapping mummies. Pliny, the famous Roman historian, refers to one type of Indian muslin known as *jhuna*, worn by Roman women of high rank to show off the contours of their bodies. Imperial Rome imported large quantities of this fabric, with embroideries done in silver or with silk thread and this muslin was known as *kasidah*. The variety known as *sarkar-e-ala*, was used for the turbans of Mughal emperors.

The picture on the Left shows the workshop of Rabindranath Saha, a muslin weaver who has won a national award, the revival of the muslin industry.

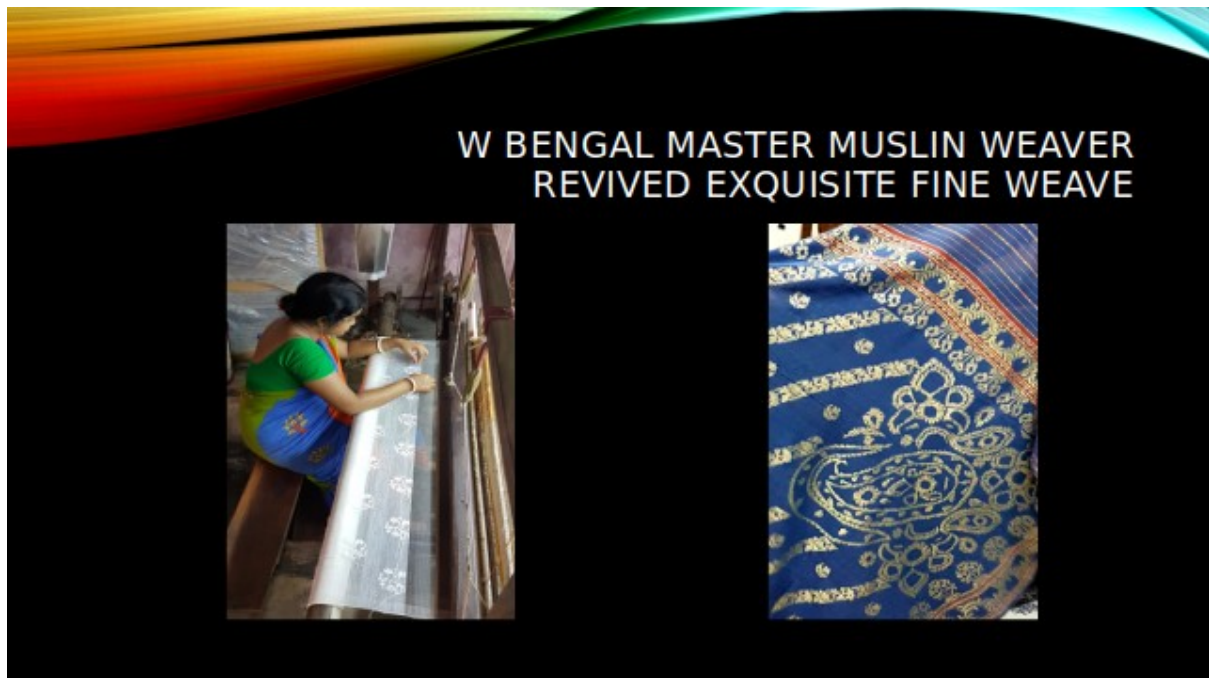
Note Gandhi on the left standing sentinel over his workshop. His grandfather fled the British and gave up the ancient art to avoid having his thumb cut off by the British. After much research, he and his father have re-kindled the ancient Bengali art.

The picture on the right is of an exquisite and priceless natural muslin and gold piece woven by his grandfather. It is over 100 years old.

I bought several scarves from this master weaver, and shall always treasure them.



**SLIDE 15. Woman weaver at work in Rabindranath Saha's**



**SLIDE 16 FREESET**

The last visit just before we all flew home was to Freeset. Freeset *is a group of social enterprises focused on creating positive employment opportunities for women affected by [sex trafficking](https://freesetglobal.com) in West Bengal, India.* " <https://freesetglobal.com>.

**This quote is from their website.**

**Freeset exists for the many women who have never had the choice to be free. We care about the thousands in West Bengal, India who are vulnerable to sex trafficking. These women don't get to choose their occupation, and we want to change that. We make bags, tees, and hand-woven fabrics, and love that we are part of India's long tradition of cotton and jute production.**

Before we left Freeset, I enquired from 2 New Zealand women who worked at Freeset, (which was begun by an Auckland couple) about how I could help support the work at Freeset. The result is that our Peace and Social Justice Committee have agreed to support a fund-raising afternoon tea in my garden. Many of you have already bought tickets to come to a sumptuous morning tea next Saturday made by the loving hands of the good bakers of our congregation.

SLIDE 17. THE FESTIVAL OF Khali. In KOLKATA



**I COULDN'T RESIST INCLUDING THIS. FINAL SLIDE.**

On the LEFT is a statue of Khali in progress. Each artisan does a specific part of the statue, the role being passed down from generation to generation.

The photograph on the right shows one of the many shrines to Khali around the city.

Shirin Caldwell

February 2021

## Discussion / Meditation

When I was a Lecturer in a Faculty of Science, my main subject area was Public and Community Health which is fundamentally about social justice and equity in health care. One of the exercises I gave students was to talk about their own culture and make a small presentation to their fellow Tutorial students. Students from cultures other than NZ pakeha culture knew exactly what to do, but our Pakeha students often felt puzzled and said, "But we don't have a culture".

Sociologists and Human Development theorists remind us that in order to appreciate other cultures we first need to explore our own cultural identity. Last week Rachel asked us to consider what our identities are.

One definition of culture includes family patterns, customs, traditions, the way people act and interact, what they eat, their language, literature, music, art and religion.

Discuss some of those cultural practices learned in your family that helped shape the adult you. What were the differences in your group? What were the similarities?

In their book on Culture and Identity In New Zealand (Eds. Novitz and Willmott), David Novitz questions if we have a New Zealand cultural identity. What do you think?

A suitable Boy by Vikram Seth. About the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> in the series, the Hindu politician visits his friend the Nawab in his palace. This is the same Quilla (or Fort) that we visited in Baraduri which is the ancestral home of the Raja M.A Mohammed the Kahn of Mahmudabad and his Rani (Queen). The once glorious majestic buildings are now black with mould and are gradually decaying. Not because the Kahn want it to decay, but because the Modhi govt forbids any restoration. You may be aware of the dangerous tension between the ruling Modhi Hindu govt and the Muslim people of India who of course have been there for many centuries and were for hundreds of years the rulers .

India had been on the boil for weeks. On December 11, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist government had passed its Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which gave immigrants from three neighboring countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) a path to citizenship on one condition: that they were not Muslim. For the first time in India's long history of secularism, a religious test had been enacted. If some commentators described the CAA as "India's first Nuremberg Law," it was because the law did not stand alone. It worked in tandem, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah menacingly implied—in remarks he has recently tried to walk back—with a slew of other new laws that cast the citizenship of many of India's own people into doubt. Shah, who has referred to Muslim immigrants as "termites," spoke of a process by which the government would survey India's large agrarian population, a significant portion of which is undocumented, and designate the status of millions as "doubtful." The CAA would then kick into action, providing non-Muslims with relief and leaving Indian Muslims in a position where they could face disenfranchisement, statelessness, or internment. India's Muslim population is almost 200 million.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/exile-in-the-age-of-modi/609073/>

### **India Is No Longer India**

Exile in the time of Modi

**AATISH TASEER**

MAY 2020 ISSUE

Most of the small artisan workshops and co-operatives were Hindu but some were Muslim.

It struck me as I was preparing this talk for today I reflected on Rachel's excellent talk she gave last week, about us learning to stand in this place. She said we needed to find our own identity.