



5-5-2015

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.24.06>

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Recommended Citation

Joshi, Saakshi (2015) "A Town Without a Market," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 24, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.24.06>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol24/iss1/6>

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Cover Page Footnote

My sincerest thanks to Prof. Subhadra Channa and Prof. Ann Kingsolver for their continued guidance, encouragement, and involvement in my doctoral research. A special thanks to Jasper J. Waugh-Quasebarth for discussions on material agency, and to Linda Luiz and Neha Naithani for their editing acumen.

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The intense heat has made the waters recede a little, exposing the ruins of a few submerged villages. They hide again once the rains arrive, but I envy their time in the sun and the air.

A silhouette appears in the sun. I squint at it through stagnant reservoir water as I sit here on the silt at the bottom of the lake. It is a human standing near the dam, observing the trail of recent landslides on the mountain slopes. Another one appears next to it and points at the center of the dam reservoir, somewhere above me.

“You see this area, around a hundred meters from the landslide? This is where the rivers converged before the dam.” The sounds are a little distorted, traveling through muddy waters to reach me. *“This is where the market was, surrounded by the town. We all miss that market. It was the heart of our community.”*

I gaze at my friend and companion, the town, resting tiredly beside me beneath these decaying waters, the mountains our sentinels. We both hear the same sounds and are engulfed in a similar bittersweet nostalgia. They say a new town has been built in my companion’s name, with a new market which is but a single, narrow road. We indulge in a sad laugh. As if giving a new place an old name makes it the same place. As if some cement and bricks can easily be called home. As if a bunch of shops opened along a stretch of road can suddenly transform into a market.

Hello there! I am the town market. Or *was*. Which town, which market, you ask. As tragedies grow more universal and more towns gather stories underwater, does it even matter? I can be any market and this can be any town and this might be your story- already happened, happening, or waiting to happen.

“You would never believe how crowded the market used to be! When I was a kid, I would come home only to keep my bag and change my clothes. Then off I would go, to meet my friends at the market.”

This makes me smile. They are talking about me, again.

“All the shopkeepers knew us. Some of them were either mine or my friends’ relatives. The market was a part of our daily lives. Just like the school

playground. As kids it was a gathering place, during the teen years it was the place to sight your crush and attempt a blushed conversation. ”

Those were some halcyon days alright; when I was up there. Now I am here, dissolved. Bereft of air and breath, but alive nonetheless.

Nobody asked me if I had wanted a dam. And nobody bothered telling me the unsure future. For a long time, many human years I suppose, I only heard people trying to avoid talking about it. Their deliberate silences resonated with my mute witnessing.

Those chatterbox radios in the shops started it all. They were the initial source of information about a dam being built. These humans laughed it off, as if brushing aside a bad joke. They would gather around those radio sounds, over some chai and snacks, mocking even the faintest possibilities of water engulfing them. Then there were times they discussed the dynamite blasting for the dam between coughs, as the entire town lay covered in clouds of dust and smoke.

Eventually I transformed into a gathering place for chants, slogans and protests. Increasingly the shops remained more shut than open. The people came, not to linger at the shops, but to sit on the road. Their faces stern and stony. Chanting, shouting, crying. For us, for the unbridled river, for the wise mountains, for a hopeful world. I also started discerning some new humans. They looked out of place, the way they spoke, the way they walked. They felt different and temporary. The way they toured me, or their interactions with the river. Later I would recognize these new ones painting large ‘X’ on shops, putting locks on the shutters, transforming the familial waters into an alien entity.

And how can I forget the mayhem following the violent shaking of the earth on a nearby mountain! Blasts for another dam had caused it, leading to many deaths. It triggered panic here, I remember that well. The humans collected fiercely to oppose the dam here, to protect their lives. To save *our* lives. Who would have thought death would follow here. Not human, but of a social kind.

Just before my drowning, I would see some of the new humans herding the last known human figures away. Then the dam tunnels shut down and the waters rose. The inception of a deathly decay.

I wonder if they never believed the dam would be built, or if their performances were a denial of the impending inevitable.

A human throat clears itself above me.

“The market comes up in almost all the conversations I have with people

here. It definitely was integral to your lives.”

“You see, you are from the city,” responds the other voice, a familiar baritone. “Your markets are more detached and impersonal. That is how the new market is turning out to be. We smile when we meet, but that warmth is lacking. We talk but don’t really converse. Our old market cannot be recreated. It provided for everything we needed. Look around now, what do you see? Now people have become more scattered and withdrawn. We are becoming strangers, if we haven’t already.”

I look up to follow winged creatures against the blue sky. These flying shadows can see so much more than I do. What sense do they make of what they see below? Against the giant mountains these soaring solitary beings give me a sense of uselessness. I wish to know what they see and how they interpret it. Each day when I hear the people, I want to see what they see now.

Do they see me as they walk through the new roads?

Do they still see the familiar bends, potholes, and street corners?

What about that old banyan tree the humans revered?

Or the ghosts some of them encountered each night?

Do people still carry out processions through the new market?

Do they still gather around the radios with chai to share the daily gossip and debate politics?

Does the new market have all the shops – open and covered, as I did?

Are the dogs still being lazy near the carts? Are the shopkeepers feeding them?

Do people still loiter around after their purchase?

How does the weather feel on the slope?

Or the water from this reservoir which imprisons me?

Do the humans think of me as much as I think of them?

I want to think they do. Their conversations make me hopeful. Neither the town nor I wish to be forgotten. It scares us, this thought.

“There used to be a bridge connecting the town to the surrounding

villages. Every morning, people from the villages would come to the market to sell their farm produce. They shared camaraderie with the townsfolk. People knew who was from where, about their families. The market wasn't just a place to earn money. It provided for the poor. The sellers would give something or the other to them free of cost. Nobody would go hungry. People looked out for one another."

I can't shut myself away from this eavesdropping. The way these humans talk turns me to water. I don't want to be just a topic of nostalgic conversation; I want to be an active participant.

I want to join in, to tell them how daily lives were shaped around me - when I would open or close, when I would be crowded or deserted. I was the heart of everything, I was secure comfort.

Lovers have chanced upon one another walking through me; I have been a haven for stolen glances in the rambling crowds. For the elderly I was a bridge to meet their friends, to once again be those young girls and boys. To me the children would come with their grandparents and walk around. I was a playground for youngsters, a rest stop for weary travelers. For daughters who were married away, I was the vessel of maiden memories. For the villagers from nearby areas, I was a second home. I was the last stretch through which the dead would pass before they transformed to ashes.

I was also a reliable broadcaster. Any news (or gossip) that had to be spread just needed to be said here once. Rest assured it would travel to and reach the entire town population in no time.

I was the medium through which news about the dam spread. I was the center of the panic about an uncertain future, the stream through which the humans marched and chanted their slogans about saving their sacred river.

I was also a space where human divides would blur significantly; where the poor could take away food without money, where people would return to you your dropped bag.

And I was also a witness to my own demolition and subsequent ending by humans- some known, many unknown.

My own death from the land is etched deep within me. I remember it well, and sometimes I remember it over and over again. When the first wave of water had touched me, I had felt a coldness quite different from the one during monsoons or winters. I heard cries, human cries, worse than the screeching of the radio sets on bad days. I also saw humans dragging humans away. On boats. The water spread its lair on my territory, gradually turning it into a stranger. I was a host about to be destroyed by a parasite. That final day when that huge, huge rush

of water ate me up, I was an unarmed soldier, deserted by its battalion, facing a firing squad. No last minute changes happened, no secret notes to halt the execution. There were many bystanders, and it was over in a flash.

As that terrible memory erupts again, I turn to the town for solace. I try observing it in its entirety. I try making sense of myself, relative to my confidante. In one of the town ruins, what was once a temple is now a story of a few remaining stones. I can see the contours of terrace farms, a faded green. I see empty houses with hollowed doors and windows, like gaping eyes and mouths, weeds growing where people thrived. The dam reservoir casts shadows upon us, blue-grey and cold.

Lying here now, with nothing but the town and the past as anchors, I erode into worldly oblivion, few bits each day.

(The baritone breaks in again).

“The new market... it is lifeless. People just sit around idly, play cards, sleep in the sun, or wait in their empty shops. Or we talk about how our lives have turned out after all those years of protestations and compromise. It is so much more difficult for villagers to reach the market. We have to travel more since the bridges were blown to make way for the dam and the roads.”

(A damp pause).

“I wish I could show you what I am saying. So that you don’t think I am making it all up only for your interview.”

“No, I understand” says the other, lighter voice. *“Please, continue”*.

“What are we left with? The dam led to such a large scale uprooting and displacement. Many people have been re-located to distant regions. There is no business to speak of. You have seen how deserted the new market remains. The town is limp. I see more birds in the sky than people on the roads. The bus stand is always deserted. Nobody wants to come here anymore. Many of us are thinking about heading to the plains. This is the future the dam gave us.”

I can only listen and ache as I hear this. Human whispers, thousands of them I have heard till now. Small words, big words, stretched words, murmurs, howling words. How good it all was, until *it* happened. Something they called ‘development’. The people are still confused about what they were promised and what they received. And what they lost.

I hold onto those spoken words which linger long after they have been

said and persist with my existential crisis at the bottom of a reservoir. I muse about a weather when I was pleasantly warm and full, when the river sang to me from the sides. I talk of days when people were mostly satisfied with what was *there* - families, long walks under the moonlight, laughter which echoed, sorrow that was shared, mountains and rivers that were worshipped, grandchildren who held their grandparents' hands, money which had not yet blinded anyone...

That was the town with the market. That was me.