

Thickets

Raqs Media Collective

It may seem piquant to talk about density at a time when the rule of keeping distance inflects all encounters. But that is when thickets matter most of all.

A scatter of roughly drawn circles on the tarmac indicate the distances at which people must stand while waiting their turn in front of a neighborhood grocery store in Delhi. Queues stretch. Lines curve. Patience ebbs and flows. Thickets form, thin out and thicken again. The meaning of proximity and the experience of contiguity changes.

Another time, another gathering.¹

In early March 2020, a protest that had begun at the end of 2019 at one edge of Delhi (and rapidly mushroomed elsewhere) to protect the future of citizenship rights in India on an equitable basis wound down in response to the alarming beginning of the awareness of the Covid-19 pandemic. The big tents that hosted the vigils were marked, in the end, by circles signaling stations for protestors to sit in, at appropriate distances to each other, spelling an alphabet of slightly, and steadily increasing, isolation that seemed at first to be the very opposite of the warming huddle of solidarity that had been sustained for months until just days before. It seemed that a virus had forced apart a tangled flourish of organic links and bonds of human co-presence. The protest is now a memory. A very active memory, but a memory.

Another time, another scatter.²

In a few months, humans striate the landscape in long lines. Migrants pushed out of Indian cities by a cruelly conceived lockdown created a thicket that took the form of long, snaking, walking skeins—lines made by feet on tarmac, moving hundreds of kilometers, visible from the air.

And then another tussle, another thickening.

Exactly a year later, another crowd is growing at other edges of our city. Thousands of farmers are gathering. This time

¹ Shaheen Bagh
In December 2019, the passage of a law titled the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 by the Indian parliament fundamentally challenged the right to equality as inscribed in the Indian constitution. The law proposes to grant Indian citizenship to non-Muslim emigrants from India's neighboring countries, and to withhold it from Muslim emigrants. Correspondingly, it implies that many Muslims in India would have to have their claims to citizenship validated by the agencies of the state through the presentation of 'documents' that can prove that they are Indian. This accompanied a judicially mandated setting up of 'detention camps' for people who would be found to be 'illegal' by their very presence.

This legislative affront to the principle of equality before the law was interpreted by millions of Indian Muslims, and many of their non-Muslim co-citizens, as an attack by the state on the very basis of a life of dignity, equality, and fraternity. Student demonstrations against the law were repressed with intense state violence,

which in turn led to a more than three-month-long sit-in, led primarily by Muslim women, blocking an arterial road near a Delhi neighborhood called Shaheen Bagh ('Falcon Garden'). Shaheen Bagh soon became symbolic of a robust citizen-led and completely peaceful wave of resistance that swept through the entire country. Soon, there were many 'Shaheen Baghs' in Delhi, and many 'Shaheen Baghs' in cities outside Delhi. A combination of intense violence against the inhabitants of neighborhoods where some protest sites were located in North-East Delhi at the end of February, instigated by ruling party politicians, and the beginning of the public anxieties around the Covid-19 pandemic led to the protests being wound up, voluntarily. Since then, many of the activists—mainly young people—involved in organizing these non-violent protests have been arrested and imprisoned on false charges. Shaheen Bagh continues to be invoked often, even in the current turbulence, as an inspiration and a beacon.

2 Farmers Protests
In mid-September 2020, nine months after the CAA became law, another instance of legislative violence occurred. A hurried passage of three laws—the by now infamous 'three farm bills'—in the Indian parliament, caused a wave of disaffection to sweep across farming communities in North India. Agriculture, already in crisis—through indebtedness and high outlay costs—was rendered

to stake their claim to a form of life that is being bulldozed by legal instruments that accelerate dispossession of land. A thicket has to be cleared for the beginning of a fresh cycle of heightened productivity. Circles and lines appear again, to mark distances between protestors and the tractor-trolleys that constitute the growing stationary caravan of a farmers' upsurge at the gates of the city.

Zoom up and away from the ground, and what seems a scatter at one magnification, or the waning of a surge, becomes a thicket—a waxing crest of presence—at another time. Daily necessities, whether of gathering provisions, of survival, or of staking a claim to life processes, become the fluid ends of human presence. An impromptu exhibition of images comes alive on a walkway overhanging a highway. Libraries form and dissolve again. Bodies carry ideas from one gathering to another, seeding other concentrations. We live in the time of thickets.

A thicket is a concentration of living matter. In forests, gardens, and fields, thickets rise where different plant species find it possible to thrive together in a wild celebration of life. Conversations too can have thickets, points of intersection of lines of force. So can concentrations of culture and instances of artistic action.

Beginnings and Ends

Thickets are already in the air, and make their way into a witnessing consciousness, without their necessarily being aware of a point of origin. Thickets are like that. They don't necessarily begin, anywhere, or anywhen; and often, no one can quite tell where and when they taper off. The point of the invisibility of a thicket may be exactly where it goes underground to become a subterranean tangle of roots that radiate adventitiously, and it emerges elsewhere, unexpectedly.

The thicket has no ordinary gesture of seeding, no emptiness where it was not already present, if not vividly, then in latency, waiting. Even a clearing in the thicket marks its own

history. Read this way, the thicket, and the world in which it breathes, is itself a counterpoint alternating between thickets and clearings.

Encountering a thicket then, is not entering virgin ground. There is no tabula rasa. What we find ourselves on is a tangle of paths, and going forward within a thicket is making just one more path amongst many that already exist, while anticipating many more that will exist after our sojourn. But something else, something far more significant is staged in thickets, than the simple act of making one's way through them.

What happens in a thicket is a revelation made possible by forking paths about loops of time, about the fact that time is not an arrow; that there can be no singular pattern denoting progress in any one direction. This is 'cruxial,' in the sense that it is both at the crux, and is crucial, to understanding what happens in thickets. Being anywhere inside a thicket means having to deal with a tango between tenses, between the consequences of what yesterday has done, and what tomorrow will bring, and what the present proposes, all at the same time. This induces a dilation of our sense of time, and an awareness of time's tenorial density, where infinite acts of usage produce a 'thicket' of claims to attention and care; a cross-hatched, striated, contrapuntal, rhythm of presences, some rapid, some slow, some striking off-beat pulses, as opposed to a cluster of mono-temporal, proprietorial, clean-slate entitlements to tabula-rasa parcels of time.

Infrastructure

We are living on a planet of seven billion humans, which we share with many other forms of life and intelligence. The most crucial question for our survival as a species is that of attending to the planet as an infrastructure for present and future forms of life.

Soon, we will be living with, and witnessing, acts of culture undertaken by extra-human forms of sentience. Machines will become artists and poets, not just by design but also by accident, and who knows, perhaps as a result of shadowy concentrations of will that we have no idea about as yet. We

vulnerable through these 'three farm laws' which seek to control terms of trade in farmers' markets in a manner advantageous to large agri-business corporations.

A little less than a year after the Shaheen Bagh phenomenon, caravans of protesting farmers reached the outskirts of Delhi—in tens of thousands on their tractors—from the rural hinterland, especially, but not only from the neighboring provinces of Punjab and Haryana. In sheer numbers, this protest is probably the largest the world has seen.

These farmers have been maintaining a peaceful vigil at border sites of the city for close to two months now, and on the 26th of January—observed in India as 'Republic Day' in commemoration of the promulgation of the Constitution—embarked on a 'tractor march' to Delhi, which was met with barricades and police violence in several places. Some of the protesting farmers cut through barricades and reached Delhi's Red Fort, the historic seat of Imperial power, in Delhi's old city.

In both instances of protest, those who kept the vigil did so against terrible odds, facing a litany of lies in the media and the hostility of a mighty state. In both instances, the protestors are fighting to maintain a basic minimum of dignity in existence that they feel is being taken away from them by a hostile sovereign. In both instances, resistance has been joyous, gentle, imaginative, and constitutive of new forms of sorority, fraternity, and life.

need to build the infrastructure that will allow it to grow and ripen. And it's not just a matter of repair and extension to the house that is the earth. It is also a matter of rethinking what a home means. Because the most interesting guests are the ones who come uninvited. We have no idea about what the culture of the future will be. But we could take steps to keep our doors open for the guest when she arrives. What do we need to do to prepare ourselves to listen, fearlessly, to the future's knock on our door, when it comes? Perhaps it has already arrived and we never heard it ring our bell because we were too busy with all our repairs. Maybe our house already has new inhabitants, awaiting welcome? Maybe the thicket is already thickening.

A plurality of our sources for the thicket-to-be lie waiting to be discovered—some of these may be fictive, invented, and some may be activated even as they lie hibernating, in wait. Just as the forest floor does not parcel out the benefits of its layers of compost according to the apoptosis of individual fallen autumnal leaves, so too, we recognize that the fertility of our time is not distributed in bins marked by date, territory, and theme.

We return to sources. To many sources. To the thicket.

This is crucial, a question of infrastructure. Because a thicket lives as long as it is maintained. Given that the basis of the topology of a thicket lies in its dispersal, it requires a distributed infrastructure of energy. So that if any one tendril at any outpost is exhausted, its functions can be re-assigned rapidly elsewhere until it is replenished. This means that it requires the undertaking of care and maintenance by collectives, and by collectives of collectives even. No single agency can undertake the custodianship of an organism as tangled, as dispersed, and with as many different origins in time and space as a thicket.

To help thickets thrive in art, we will need to rethink how the institutions that take custody of art and culture live and function. Do they only have front doors that lock and open with one set of keys, or do they also have side entrances,

antechambers, passages, vestibules, rooms within rooms, cellars, and attics where things that cannot grow in the central halls can flourish? Are there connections between these spaces? Does the conceptual architecture of an institution permit acts of seepage between its interior and exterior? Can the roles of host and guest in the institution change, can they be exchanged, do they permit for alterations in the script that is written for their enactment? Can the institution have recourse to calendars that can act at a temporal tangent to its schedule? All these impact on the health of a thicket and its surroundings. All these questions are open to interpretation.

The thicket lives as long as these questions are alive.