

Remembering Komalda

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I remember Komalda talking to me with matter-of-fact calm about his father's death rites and ceremonies, which he had observed with meticulous rigor. Acknowledging the family as a vital site for his research, he punctuated his observations with intimate details—for instance, if three people travelling by train are taking the ashes of a dead person to Hardwar, then they will always buy four cups of tea. One cup of tea for the dead person. However, when the relatives of the dead return home, they will buy only three cups of tea. Measuring his words, Komalda said, 'If you are capable of treating a dead person as a living being, then he or she can live for eternity. The dead can be with you forever.'

These words resonate for me as I reflect on Komalda's death—a death that, on the one hand, was anticipated, but which has yet to sink in. The loss is immeasurable. In this context, how can one commemorate him today? No *shubraj* or panegyric verses, I can hear him mutter, just get on with the work. The 'work' in question is the building of a museum, which he had envisioned and to which I have been attached as the Project Director. What I would like to share here is not an inventory of the museum, which has been provided in the contents of this website, but some glimmers of my first encounter with it. Komalda's personal introduction to the museum was also the last time that I saw him alive.

'Why a museum?', I remember asking Komalda, thinking of all those moribund edifices in India which attempt to preserve the past, even as the past lives and mutates on our streets and in the chaos of our everyday lives. 'This museum,' Komalda emphasized, 'will have no walls, no permanent collection. It will simply provide a space for documenting and reflecting on traditional modes of production and processes of work.' At the heart of his imaginary of the museum was an object that would inaugurate its existence: the *jhadu* or household broom.

Till the end, Komalda's homage to ordinariness was profoundly real. As any of his friends can testify, he had a vast knowledge of the material bases of culture relating to

land, water, agriculture, irrigation, and livestock. He could name the different kinds of animal dung used as preservatives to bind clay, and if he talked about *Heer Ranjha*, it was not to relish its poetry but to point out its use as an indigenous quarantine practice when it is sung during epidemics of foot-and-mouth disease.

Similarly, the *jhadu*, for Komalda, opened up a wealth of knowledge relating to its rich biodiversity of materials, broom-making communities, techniques of production, and myths. In certain households, as I learned from him, this most innocuous of objects is actually worshipped as the goddess Lakshmi. And, in some communities—this detail is particularly tender—when the broom becomes old, it is not simply thrown away as garbage. Rather, it is set aside gently, unobtrusively, with muted respect.

While listening to Komalda narrate the cultural history of the *jhadu* on my first trip to the museum site in the rural wilderness of Arna-Jharna, I remember us passing a dumping site for animal carcasses. It was a grim and surreal sight—miles and miles of bones, bleached under the sun, with vultures hovering in the sky. Within the skeletal remains of the animals, I could see plastic packets wedged between the bones. A ghastly reminder of the ubiquity of plastic, which has proliferated in India as virulently as the *vilayati bambul* shrub, appropriately branded as *angreji* or foreign by rural people.

Tellingly, Komalda did not use the example of plastic—eaten, but undigested, by the animals—to launch into an anti-modernity diatribe with which we are so familiar today in contemporary Indian debates around development. Steeped as he was in the minutiae of rural cultures, and critically aware of the hazardous destruction of traditional water-harvesting systems, among other manifestations of people's science and technology, Komalda was neither an anti-developmental nor an anti-modernist.

In many ways, he was a down-to-earth realist who recognized the extraordinary courage and tenacity embodied in cultures of survival. With this in mind, I remember him peering into the field of bones and asking, 'Look carefully, are the horns and hooves of the animals intact?' He then turned to me and rattled off figures relating to the market price of these bones sold to the glue and pharmaceutical industries. If bone-collecting is a viable business, it is not surprising that there should be communities of bone-

collectors from the most downtrodden sections of society. Komalda was the kind of grassroots researcher who did not merely document or commiserate with such communities; rather, he recognized their skills and contribution to society at large.

Scavengers, as he often reminded us, prevent our cities from being buried in garbage; nomadic communities like the Kalbelia contribute to the removal of locusts; the Ghattiwal repair and maintain the *chakki* or grinding stone. This fundamental respect for the technical skills of the downtrodden extended to their music and genealogies, their narratives, performances, and epics. Far from instrumentalizing people's knowledge, Komalda recognized the cultural dimensions animating it.

If there was one leitmotif that ran through his discourse, at least in my experience as a listener, it was the primacy of knowledge. Komalda was at once the most ardent seeker of several systems of undocumented knowledge, and the richest repository of its interconnections. In him we have lost a vital link with living traditions on the ground because he was our most precious and reliable point of reference.

And yet, if we listen carefully, Komalda is still talking to us. He is urging us not to lose sight of ground realities as we theorize our respective disciplines. Above all, he is telling us to be serious but not to lose our sense of humour or the human dimensions of scholarly research. In our internalization of his many hours of conversation, punctuated with his inimitable digressions and transitions, intuitive leaps and startling logic, I do believe that he is still with us. Like an oral epic, with no fixed beginning or end, Komalda lives forever.