







Death Becomes Us  
By Manoj Nair

Many of my favourite things are broken. — Mario Buatta aka ‘The King of Chintz’, interior designer

The shifting sands of time and situations change so frequently that it is often all too difficult to deal with. Until, of course, one is an artist like Riyas Komu who has dealt with the changing contours of a nation's history in his art practice. In his body of works he sees the reciprocity between works of art and between art and the world as showing a way beyond the deadlock of archetypes that are the result of conceptual art's single-minded attention towards ideas. His use of various mediums demonstrates a tradeoff between systems, which are capable of unblocking art's path. Therefore, his works occupy a very political space addressing contemporary issues, particularly those of identity politics, and the utter hopelessness of said outcomes. In his most recent works, like in *Stoned Goddesses*, he introduces pieces of evidence into the narrative to hint at an explanation for past events, very tragic ones and related to one of the most difficult questions confronting the idea of India as a democratic nation: that of identity politics. In the process, he also re-establishes the contingency--uncertainty of the present versus the apparent inevitability of the historical fact. In his novel *Cards of Identity*, author Nigel Dennis writes: *Personal identity is, indeed, the creation of memory, and because memory is fallible and subject to infinite distortion, so is the personal identity always a false creation .... The prime, demonstrable point of this discovery is that a man so rests upon his memories that he can be changed almost out of recognition if these memories can be edited—if new memories can be put in the place of old ones.*

So it is only natural that divisive forces appropriate the memories of individuals so that they become assertive about their identity—which hitherto they had not been so uncertain about. Identity politics is also the construct of late capitalism. And they are more prevalent in liberal states. Notions of surveillance, panopticism (one of Riyas's work *Mr Panopticon* explored the idea of people being imprisoned and being constantly watched by hidden eyes), simulacra, deterritorisation, post-modern hyperspace, borderlands, marginality and nationalism are derivatives of such devious forces so that societies remain divided and in confinement. In the catalogue essay for *Stoned Goddesses*, Riyas writes that “the legacy of a fractured society has been the basis of my quest to understand the colour of prejudice as an artist. That is one of the primary reasons why in this work, *Stoned Goddess*, I have attempted to capture my understanding of the nation's history through important events that marked it and also shaped my identity.” An identity that he claims has been the cause of several moments of anguish “but has been at the heart of much of my work”<sup>[1]</sup>. He has tried to come to terms with that identity in two of his important shows, *Faith Accompli* and *My Father's Balcony*. “Coming from Kerala,” he says he is “someone who has admired the legacy of Raja Ravi Varma, perhaps the first practitioner of visual arts to migrate from Kerala”. So migration and displacement are also at the centre of his conceptual art. What is it that makes states, political groups or individuals aggressive? Are there not deeper reasons for aggression, as there may be for collective crime? Are riots simply the result of rational calculation, or are there more profound instinctive reasons buried deep in the human psyche? Given the amount of violence evident today—at a level which has seldom been seen before in civil society—this seems a fair question. If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then it explains the ambiguous nature of the politics governing India. It also explains the ambivalent nature of our governments and the political party/ies governing the state. But though the occasion for societal violence may be purely rational, the manner in which it is conducted, and the atmosphere surrounding it, is not. Whatever may be the cause of rioting—and India has witnessed several instances of mob violence—we still bring to it a repertoire of emotional responses which turn it into an alternative realm of human experience, as far removed from daily life as those things we call sacred, which Barbara Ehrenreich in her book *Blood Rites* calls “dread, awe and the willingness to sacrifice”<sup>[2]</sup>. This in turn rubs on to the political parties who respond with uncertainty and inaction. In *Charred Lullabies*, E Valentine Daniel points out how violence continually sabotages attempts at restraining it, because it operates in a domain of constant excess<sup>[3]</sup>.



Creator, curator, collaborator, collector

In a sense, therefore, Riyas's works are placed within the framework of palpable existential compulsions. Yet they can be seen as heretical epiphanies: his artistic pilgrimage. They are arresting, thought-provoking, ageless, sensitive without being sentimental, and impossible to dismiss. It is every bit the work of a rebel whose cause is to be irreducible as an artist and man. Which is what brings him to the current work in question: *My Grave*. The dual meaning of the title is not lost on the viewer. As a noun a grave is a hole dug in the ground to receive a coffin or corpse, typically marked by a stone or mound. And as an adjective it alludes to a matter of serious concern. We may all recall that in the not so distant past about 2,730 bodies were discovered from unmarked graves in all parts of Kashmir. This horror of a human rights violation found little space in the Indian media. “Bored with unending tales of human rights violations in Kashmir, our media saw Anna Hazare's fast and even Aishwarya Rai Bachchan's pregnancy as more newsworthy,” wrote Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar in *The Economic Times*. In that context, Riyas's new work is grave in both senses of the word. Mass graves should have been an obvious matter of concern. *My Grave* is a container 16 ft long x 8 ft tall x 8 ft wide. A container is as ambiguous and anonymous an object as you can think of despite its enormity. It is taken for granted because of its innocuous character and ubiquitous presence. One can see them at railway stations, shipyards and on roads. They can also be seen on abandoned plots. Sometimes people live in this windowless object. They are so common, they don't exist like a coffin buried in a grave. Around this container made of plywood and wood, Riyas has used some of the photographs from his collection and some borrowed from artists and two videos. He has used photographs by Richard Bartholomew, Pablo Bartholomew, Vivek

Vilasini and a news photograph. These are all powerful images that add to the narrative of *My Grave*. The photograph of Richard Bartholomew who migrated to India from Burma in 1962 is that of M.F. Husain, who himself died in exile in London, Husain speaking on a corded rotary dial Ericofon (Cobra model) at the WHO office, New Delhi, in 1962. Richard's son Pablo Bartholomew's photographs span the history of violence encompassing a decade. One of them is a grotesque image of a dog nipping away at the carcass of a Sikh murdered during the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi 1984. Sikh houses in Delhi and other parts of India were looted and burnt in the riots that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh security guards on October 31, 1984. Nearly 2,000 innocent Sikhs were killed in the riots which broke out after her death. Many current members of the ruling Congress Party were implicated for their role in the riots, the courts are yet to convict the key perpetrators of the mass murder. The second photograph taken in 1990 is that of Indian army soldiers pausing near a motivational poster en route to their positions overlooking the Line of Control (LoC) between Pakistan and India in Uri sector of Baramulla district, Kashmir. Kashmir, once a tourist paradise in the Himalayas, has been the key to the dispute between India and Pakistan since independence from the Brits in 1947. India's occupation of Kashmir has become total during this period, followed by rampant human rights violations. The third photograph captures one of the ugliest events in Indian history, of Hindu fundamentalists at work razing the Babri mosque. On October 30, 1990, VHP and Bajrang Dal members along with other Hindutva supporters had marched towards Ram Janmabhoomi/Babri Masjid with a view to demolish the mosque and build a Ram temple in its place. An attempt which failed due to police intervention but the culmination was the Babri demolition on December 6, 1992. The images by Vivek Vilasini capture the other end of the Indian tragedy: discarded, prone and broken statues of Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar shot between 2006 and 2008. It is as if the nation doesn't care anymore for the two architects of the idea of India.

Grave Concern

It is against this backdrop that Riyas Komu places his work. In the past, he had addressed the issue of the marginalised in his works *Systematic Citizen* in which he made large-size portraits of migrant workers in Borivili, Mumbai, where he lives and works. Again he showed photographs of Indian footballers who often live in obscurity and have to contend with an existence in the shadows of cricket, which is a religion for many Indians, in *Mark Him*. His show *Left Leg* was also inspired by footballers in which he used players' booted legs to depict the imaginary march of civilians. He has been persistently questioning the ideas of identity and the role of political parties and fringe groups in defining those ideas. It is in this history of ideas that we can locate the appropriation of the language of civil society by politicians. It is precisely because of this hybrid postmodern idea of India that the marginalized (read common man) has lost trust in the political establishment and electoral democracy. And trust is indispensable in modern societies. Trust, however, says Adam B. Seligman, is not a solution to the generically human problem of maintaining order in modern societies: “It is a bond between people that develops in modern societies, in which individuals have acquired the ability to move between roles and accommodate each other.” Much of Riyas Komu's works addresses this erosion of trust that has its roots in exploitation and disconnect. The recent emergence of new socio-political/activist groups is a pointer to the loss of trust among individuals. Once again Seligman has a valid enough reason for this state of affairs. And it is best reflected in their success. He says that many people classify themselves and others as part of social groups irrespective of their lifestyle and economic status. “What matters,” he says, “is that the predominant relationship between human beings in late modern societies is often that of individuals who trust (or fail to trust) one another.” Often it is a relation of status and bargaining in which trust has little place. The recent turn of events in Indian politics is an after-effect of this credence for bargaining power that marks the politics of these socio-political groups.

“We may have to force the limits of the social as we know it to rediscover a sense of political and personal agency through the unthought within the civic and the psychic realms. This may be no place to end but it may be a place to begin.”<sup>[4]</sup> — Homi Bhabha

In 2010, Riyas brought out a newspaper, *Brick*, which was freely distributed, to highlight the massive displacement effected by the state government of Delhi as part of the overhauling of the city and construction of stadiums, the games village and flyovers to prepare the city for the Commonwealth Games. His anxiety was not misplaced. Whenever a city in India revamps itself, the first people to be evicted are slum-dwellers and other ‘squatters’. It is a ‘necessary’ part of the urban Indian reality as perceived by the ‘builders’ of the nation. In that respect, his works are as contemporary as any work of emotional urgency must be. They articulate his sense of social and emotional deprivation. Yashodhara Dalmia describes his *Red Blood* series as “expansive assemblages of red crosses which seem to overpower any resilience, we have an overt act of religious fervor crossed with the passion of an activist to redress the abyss of deprivation”<sup>[5]</sup>. He is looking for light through the fog of battle. In the essay for *Stoned Goddesses* Riyas observes that in the mid-80s India made a clear departure towards communal politics with the emergence of two new narratives, the Hindutva strain of Hindu communalism riding the Ayodhya movement and Mandal politics triggering a re-alignment of political forces in northern India. The OBCs and Dalits under the Bahujan Samaj Party challenged and replaced the traditional ruling castes. Also, it was the decade of Sikh extremism, anti-Sikh riots, Bhagalpur blindings, Assam movement, the Nellie massacre and the flare up in Kashmir. Anti-minority politics is the third main political narrative of this decade: It becomes anti-Hindu in Punjab and Kashmir, anti-Muslim in large swathes of northern India, anti-non Assamese in Assam etc. All of that divisive politics led to one big event that shook the nation in the ‘90s: Advani's Rath Yatra in 1990 and the Ayodhya movement culminating in the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Mumbai riots. He then painfully lists out the bloody events in the history of India, several of which had their genesis in the assertion of an identity or suppression of another. The Keelvenmani massacre where 58 Dalit agriculture workers were burnt to death in Tamil Nadu; anti-Dalit violence in Laxmanpur-Beth in Bihar in the 1980s; the hundreds of Muslims reported to have been killed when the Indian army entered Hyderabad to annex the Nizam's kingdom; the Nellie massacre in Assam where hundreds of poor settlers were massacred by a tribal group. The army killings in Nagaland and Manipur; the bombing by the IAF of Mizo villages in the late 1960s; Kashmiri Pandits being forced to leave Kashmir Valley in 1989 by Islamist groups; targeting of Hindus through the 1980s by Khalistani groups. All the way to riots in Gujarat in 2002, which historian Mushirul Hassan termed as the second Partition of India<sup>[6]</sup>.



Then the news photograph from Riyas's collection is of the Congress Working Committee meeting. Add to this his own shots of the Borivili slums. It is through this thread of thought that Riyas strings the beads of his idea, one that arrests and brings out the conflict he grapples with. This is where it takes an interesting turn. A container has always elicited a kind of curiosity about what lies inside as it passes by or is lying idle in a decrepit location. It is a symbol of globalization too. According to the geographer David Harvey, containers play a critical role in the changing nature of our cities, our politics, our labour, as well as our shopping habits. Therefore, one wonders what lies inside them and is intrigued by its ambiguity. What lies inside Riyas's *My Grave*? It is a near static video that only shows the conflicting emotions of the common man represented by the actor Naseeruddin Shah. As you peer inside, you realize that Riyas has reshuffled the narrative deck without disturbing his holistic idea of contemporary India: the plight of the displaced and marginalised, the communal tensions pulling the country in contradictory directions, the notion of the common man making an assertion or resurgence and the convenient loss of memory.

But before your eyes fall on any of the above, it has to negotiate another video called *Still*. This is a combination of painting and performance art in which the artist squeezes and crumbles a portrait that he did of an Everygirl running in a loop.

*The dead—so quickly—become the poor at night. And the poor? They are the dead so soon by night*<sup>[7]</sup> — Agha Shahid Ali

It is an old elegiac dilemma projected inside a container. *My Grave* as the title also reveals a contemplation on death. It is, to borrow a title of Damien Hirst's work, the physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living. Death becomes us all eventually, and a container, which is in a permanent state of transit, has no specific loci until, of course, it is consigned to dereliction or in other words meets its death. Riyas Komu is someone who has been haunted by death, his own and those of others who can't call the spaces they inhabit their own. They are a disjointed cumulative of the dislocated. His works since the Karachi Series to Watching the other-world Spirits in the Gardens of Babylon to BALLAD OF THE DISTRACTED vs Cult of the Dead and Memory Loss addressed or were informed by death and dying. In a sense, an inevitable departure from mortality has been an aesthetic entrapment for him. In his own words, Riyas has been “living and believing in the conception that I am chasing my own death.” *My Grave* is an extension of that thought of trying to understand the colour/s of death. The container is symbolic of a spiritual continuum that is in transit between life and death over the gulf of irresolution. It is difficult for his work to find a resolution as that would mean betraying the aesthetic. It is, in fact, impossible because his works reflect his self-doubt and self-awareness. Through this work, Riyas conclusively affirms that he is playing a permanent game of chess with death just as life (the knight) did in Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*. Riyas's confusion about the banal is lifted by the vivid emotional and physical geographies that pepper his works. He has taken his work and contemporary art practice into a new direction where he is the creator, curator, collaborator and collector. Both Pablo and Vivek are at once enamoured and excited by the possibilities such a project offers. They agree that this could be the future of how an artistic collective is forged. “It is after all Riyas's work and his concept but it is interesting that one could be part of a novel experiment,” says Pablo Barthlomew. “I have been looking forward to something as new as this,” echoes Vivek Vilasini. It is a precursor of what could come in the future where an artist uses or borrows art works from his or other collections to take his idea forward. It is an alchemy of curation and creation from a collection that may develop a new language of expression.

*Where should we go after the last frontiers, Where should the birds fly after the last sky*<sup>[8]</sup> — Mahmoud Darwish

(The author is a senior journalist, cultural commentator and writer based in New Delhi)

[1] Riyas Komu, *Stoned Goddesses Catalogue*, self published; 2014 [2] *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*; by Barbara Ehrenreich; 304 pp; Published by Henry Holt; 1998 [3] *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*; by E. Valentine Daniel; Princeton University Press; 272 pp; 1996 [4] *Interrogating Identity: The Location of Culture*; by Homi Bhabha; Routledge Taylor & Francis; 408 pp; 1994 [5] *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan*; by Yashodhara Dalmia and Salima Hashmi; Oxford University Press; 226 pp; 2007 [6] *Making Sense of History*; Mushirul Hassan; Manohar; \$18 pp; 2003 [7] *The Fourth Day from Rooms Are Never Finished*; Agha Shahid Ali; Permanent Black; 106 pp; 2002 [8] *The Earth is Closing On Us*; poem by Mahmoud Darwish

