

The Digitalia of Everyday Life:

Multi-Situated Anthropology of a Virtual Letter by a ‘Foreign Hand’

Raminder Kaur

In May 2012, a letter was written collaboratively by activists in Britain, agreed to and signed off by supportive British politicians including the current leader of the Labour party, Jeremy Corbyn and the Green Party’s co-leader, Carolyn Lucas, and sent digitally to the office of the then prime minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh, and the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr Selvi Jayalalithaa alongside the Indian media. The public letter pertained to a south Indian nuclear power plant in Kudankulam (also spelt Kudankulam). The plant had been under construction since 2001 for which public concerns were expressed about the following of mandatory procedures and democratic and human rights abuses. In view of the sensitive subject matter, a carefully worded letter was composed and corroborated with respect to supporting sources. It listed a series of rights violations and the lapse in mandatory procedures for the construction of the plant in a tsunami and earthquake zone with limited emergency water supplies. An abridged form of the digital letter went as follows:

We write to express our deep concerns regarding human rights and environmental violations around the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in south India.

More than 300 people have been on hunger strike in protest against the construction since May 1st, and a relay strike continues since last year. Several hunger strikers have been admitted to hospital, and other protesters threatened with arrests. The Indian

government has reacted to the protests by deploying thousands of police and paramilitary forces in order to commission the reactor in a military style operation. This will have serious consequences for the life and ecology of the whole of peninsular India, as well as the international reputation of India as the world's largest democracy...

We believe that these draconian measures are not in the interests of a democratic country such as India, and immediate amends should be made to drop these charges and impositions. In a country that has led the world as to non-violent protest which has had enormous impact in South Asia as well as countries such as the USA, South Africa amongst others, we appeal to you to not denigrate the legitimacy of such movements...

We urge you to:

- Withdraw sedition and 'war against the state' cases amongst other false charges filed against members of Kudankulam People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy who have been protesting non-violently and that Section 144 be lifted from the region.¹
- Ensure that international safety regulations with respect to the above points are stringently followed.
- Ensure that all reports, reviews and information related to the nuclear plant are made transparent and accessible to the public.

¹ Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (1973) prohibits assembly of more than four people in an area.

People's basic human rights and environmental safety procedures in the construction of a major nuclear power plant have been abused. Paying short shrift to these mandatory procedures can have mammoth consequences of global proportions.

We fully appreciate that energy needs and security are of a priority for a growing economy and implore that alternative measures be investigated and invested in, rather than resorting to nuclear power plants in ecologically unsound circumstances.²

The dispatch accompanied a protest outside the High Commission of India on the Strand in central London (Figures 1 and 2), and was reproduced in part or in full by the Indian media, including the English language *Hindu* and *Times of India* as well as Tamil dailies such as *Thina Karan* and *Thina Malar*. When doing a Google search on Kudankulam and London the next day, the news reportage amounted to some eight pages of separate entries. The coverage played a sizeable part in reigniting and lifting the struggle onto another level with boomerang velocity at the time (see Keck and Sikkink 1998). Even though national and global solidarity networks have been instanced in earlier cases in India, most notably by the movement against the construction of the Narmada River dams and displacement from the 1980s and justice for the victims of Bhopal's Union Carbide industrial disaster in 1983 (Fisher 1995, Rajan 1999, Fortun 2001), this was the first time that an Indian anti-nuclear power plant protest had gathered phenomenal transnational strength on an issue that was deemed of high national security. Such transnational support owed largely to the fallout of the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster in March 2011 as it did to the increasing use of social media in 'cybercultural politics' and the imaginings of a virtual global community (Riberio 1998).

² <http://www.dianuke.org/text-letter-to-indian-pm-and-tamil-nadu-cm-from-british-mps-and-leaders/> Accessed October 23, 2012.

In this article, I consider the emergence and effects of the digital letter as it travelled across different constituencies in a computational and on-ground complex – ‘onlife’ as Luciano Floridi (2015) describes a correlate synergistic phenomenon. Onlife encompasses ‘the new experience of a hyperconnected reality within which it is no longer sensible to ask whether one may be online or offline’ (Floridi 2015: 1). The digital letter is a nomadic and onlife node of intensification. It presents less a case study on a particular *site* and more of a temporally contingent *situation*. The situation here is not bounded, localised, or objectified, nor is it focused on human agents alone. Rather it is dynamic, action-dense yet open, and interlaced with the spaces and temporalities of other kinds of subjects, organic and inorganic. The imponderabilia of everyday life’ that Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) famously emphasised with the development of participant-observation in order to fully appreciate a different cultural context need also embrace the social’s entanglement in *social* media. Digitalia has become a core part of the everyday imponderabilia of our increasingly datafied lives, and, accordingly, its many braided aspects need be examined with modified methodologies. Rather than simply foregrounding a ‘digital turn’ in methodologies, I emphasise the need to attend to meshed onlife interactions with a much more rounded and multifaceted approach with what I elaborate now in terms of multi-situated anthropology.³

Where and What is our Field?

³ Tim Ingold’s (2007) observations on the distinction between ethnography and anthropology are well-taken. However, there is a great deal of overlap in what I propose here for the multi-situated that encompasses method, analysis as well as broader theoretical implications.

The ethnographic field has been cast a critical eye since at least the 1980s: briefly, critiques were in terms of representations of bounded and holistic cultures in distinct field sites (Wolf 1982, Gupta and Fergusson 1997, Olwig and Hastrup 1997), consequently, their objectification and Othering (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Fabian 2002), and in light of the literature on the effects of globalisation, transformations of the field due to translocal flows, connections and disjunctions (e.g. Miller 1995, Fardon 1995, Gupta and Fergusson 1997, Pink 2009) where locality was reconceived as more about ‘the relational and contextual rather than...spatial and scalar’ (Appadurai 1995: 178-199).

The methodological notion of multi-sited ethnography emerged out of such challenges with George Marcus’ call to move away from the:

single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the “local” and the “global,” the “lifeworld” and the “system” (1995: 95).

An itinerant investigative framework was proposed to enable the study of social phenomena that could not be limited to one single site by following specific people and connections across space as in migration, commodity chains, or the circulation of objects, metaphors, narratives or ideas. Correspondingly, the ethnographer(s) moves physically beyond the ‘situated subject of ethnography toward the system of relations which define them’ (Marcus 2005: x) across the spatially dispersed fields.

A decade later, Marcus reviewed his earlier proposal for multi-sited ethnographies, moving beyond multiple places alone to consider the significant factor of temporality and a focus on what he calls a ‘paraethnography’ of ‘distributed knowledge systems’ (2005: 14). With this reformulation, he emphasised how fieldwork might be framed (historically,

culturally, institutionally, politically) as well as pursued on the ground for creating ethnographic theory with 'a more theoretical rethinking of fieldwork itself' (2005: 9).

Altogether, he notes three aspects of multi-sitedness that I revisit below:

the objective relations of a system which can be studied independently of ethnography (e.g., a network); the relations set into play as an artifact of a research design (...this is the reflexivity of the fieldwork); and the paraethnographic perspective, the clockwork or 'native point of view', which is always spatio-temporal, that the ethnography works within for its own purposes and produces results in conversation with (2005: 23-4).

Related to Marcus' point about spatio-temporal specificities is the focus on encounters and happenings such as events that can sharpen ethnographic analyses. Neatly summarised by Bruce Kapferer (2010): he draws a lineage to the Manchester school of event-focused anthropology and situational analysis where the 'stress was not merely on the presentation of practices but also on the process of analytical unfolding in the course of ethnographic presentation' (2010: 4). In what he calls an 'anthropology of generic moments,' Kapferer raises pertinent questions about overreliance on the case study to describe or set up a problematic about everyday social life - a practice that has long been the mainstay of conventional anthropology. Instead, borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kapferer elaborates on the temporality of the multifaceted event with a need to explore its part in social change in what he describes as 'the critical site of emergence, manifesting the singularity of a particular multiplicity within tensional space and opening toward new horizons of potential' (2010: 15).

To add further nuance, Laurent Berlant prefers to distinguish the drama of an event from *situation* as a 'genre of unforeclosed experience' (2011: 5). She elaborates on the situation as

a contingent space of potentials: ‘a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event’ (2011: 5). For Jarrett Zigon, the situation lies somewhere between the particularity of the local and the expansiveness of the global. With reference to the drug war and brief allusion to other transnational phenomena such as trafficking, global warming, and global capitalism, Zigon details how a situation emerges from translocal and nontotalisable ‘shared conditions’ (2015: 501-502). Due to this translocal multiplicity, the situation exceeds particularity (see Pink et al. 2015: 1). In comparison, the term, situation or situated, has more often been used by anthropologists to refer to a sense of rootedness and/or time-space particularity: for instance, ‘situated knowledge’ dependent on individual positionality and orientation (Haraway 1988), the phase, candidacy and context of the ‘commodity situation’ (Appadurai 1986: 13), and ‘situational surround’, a more discursive understanding of text-in-context (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73).

Multi-situated combines both lineages - the grounded and the uprooted - not just in terms of how ‘texts’ are *embedded* in everyday social behaviours and practices (the situated in the classic sense of a case study), but also how they are *enfolded* in other texts themselves (the situated across dynamically shifting systems). As Gilles Deleuze elaborates: ‘The multiple is not only what has many parts, but also what is folded in many ways’ (1992: 3). Multi-situated takes account of the multi-part and multi-folded aspects of digital-corporeal entanglements, moving beyond dyads such as offline-online, human-posthuman, and sociocentric-mediocentric perspectives. It does not just concentrate on media as embedded entities and processes, nor does it just prioritise the enfolded nature of media networks and the materiality and effects of messages as in much media, cultural and communications studies. Instead it looks to both, orientated by the investigation of

digitalia, in this case, with respect to the onlife activities on and around the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant.

The embedded might be visualised through the metaphor of a sink into which entities are immersed and transformed. Human cultures are the main drivers here in determining interiorities and exteriorities such as appearance and meaning, surface and depth, text and content. The enfolded indicates a tangle of chain reactions or feedback loops that, rather like a glutinous mix, show no definitive inside or outside, object or vessel, human or non-human. Inside the fold is nothing more than a fold of the outside that itself might be unfolded and refolded *ad infinitum* (see Pinney 2014: 86).

It is the former that has received most attention in digital anthropology where media is investigated when embedded in the social (e.g. Miller and Slater 2000, Horst and Miller 2006, Coleman 2012, Madianou and Miller 2011, Juris 2012). Indeed, even though Marcus makes reference to the system or the network, it has not been adequately examined and, more often than not, in the adoption of multi-sited fieldwork, has been set apart from ethnography. The majority of anthropologists remain locked into seeing ethnography as the holy grail into which media is immersed or embedded. While they might acknowledge, as Kapferer puts it, post-human ‘forms of agency, effect, or constructional impetus other than those created by human beings’ (2010: 18), they are still tied to the ‘I was there’ of classical fieldwork. The ‘been there’ trope needs to be reappraised in light of other ways of being-in-the-world, one that is not just about a somatic sense of place but also traverses other topologies (see Csordas 1997). More complex considerations need to be taken on board that can accommodate the materiality of message as well as trace its para/social effects across a diverse range of agents, ‘systems’, and sites for creating ‘sociality nearby’ as well as ‘sociality at a distance’. Such perspectives have received attention with regards to digital socialities formed through new media (e.g. Green *et al* 2005, Hansen 2006, Juris 2008, Kozinets 2009, Coleman 2010), as it

has with regards to digital diasporas (Brinkerhoff 2009), long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1992, Conversi 2012), direct action and global justice movements (Juris 2008, Maeckelbergh 2009, Graeber 2009, Berkovitch and Helman 2009), and more generally, the literature on space and place (e.g. Soja 1989, Agnew 1989, Lefebvre 1991, Massey 1994, Augé 1995, Bonnemaïson 2005). But not enough has been done to further examine the multi-ontological character of onlife entanglements.

A succinct example of the synchronous and asynchronous effects of information flows and how they interact in multiple ways, at multiple times in multiple environments, on- and offline, is exemplified by considering a person with a smartphone with inbuilt GPS navigation unit. As Sally A. Applin and Michael Fisher note, the person is ‘simultaneously in specific physical places (due to the physicality of their bodies and the planet) and ‘everywhere’ (network space)’ (2011), and this phenomenon is part of a constantly shifting set of patterns. Such a ‘multiplexing of...mutual blended realities’, as the authors put it, transcends the immediate physical space of the local locale to take on board the geolocal context – that is, a locality created alongside a constellation of physical places elsewhere through and with a digitally connected network, an else-here perhaps. Digitally enabled social change, as goes the eponymous book by J. Earl and K. Kimport (2011), is most vividly displayed in activist movements where people move fluidly between on- and offline worlds. Memorably this transpired during the Occupy movement (Petrick 2017) and the ‘Arab Spring’ (Nardi 2015): a phenomena that while not triggered by technology could not have reached the extents that it did without the affordance of new media such as Twitter and Facebook in legion with energised collectives (Tufekci and Wilson 2012).

Combining the insights of Christine Hine (2000) and Tom Boellstorff (2008), who maintain that fieldwork need not just entail a physical movement to a physical site, I would like to propose that it is the temporally contingent and Moebius combination of on- and

offline perspectives, embedded and enfolded, that mark out the significance of social media in our lives. Sometimes where we implant the media in the everyday, but other times where the intertextuality of digital forms take precedent and proliferate across other digital sites and disembedded coda as part of distributed knowledge systems - as is most apparent in the use of pseudonyms, new avatars, and those users whose main remit is to dominate and influence 'socio-digital worlds' (Pink et al. 2015: 102).

More now than ever, there is a need to encompass aspects of digital anthropology not as a *subdiscipline*, but as an integral part of core anthropological focus and method to examine multiple onlife spheres (see Miller and Horst 2012). Our being-in-the-world is not through the corporeal body alone, nor is the digital another realm outside material culture; rather it is through corporeal, multissensorial interfaces with regimes of what Bonni Nardi describes as virtuality (2015: 16, see Vivaldi 2016).⁴ Despite the fact that there remain areas in the world unconnected with electricity and Wi-Fi, in an era of expanding Web 2.0, digital worlds do not refer to separate regions, fields or domains of society, or simply technologies that are then merely *embedded in context*.⁵ As Bonnie Nardi notes: 'Huge swathes of human activity have migrated to digital venues where we work, play, study, love, rear children, form relationships, take care of ourselves, and, essentially, exist through digital technology (2015: 16). Accordingly, the task is to generate 'rich accounts of the affordances of technologies of the virtual and how they are mingled with, and affect, human activity' (Nardi 2015: 25) –

⁴ Indeed, an argument about virtuality might be made with regards to pre-digital forms of representation as well (see Axel 2006). But there is something qualitatively different in the accelerated intensification of media-enabled time-space compression (Harvey 1989).

⁵ Web 2.0 refers to the availability of websites that allow users to interact and collaborate more effectively than Web 1.0-era websites.

where, in one instance, the social might encapsulate the media (embedded) or in another, where media might take on primary force over the social (enfolded).

Situated therefore need not just be about the *context of* media alone, but also how they interconnect with the *context in* other media as for instance with ‘remediation’ noted by Jay David Bolter and Robert Grusin (2000) to refer to when one media refers to and refashions other media. It is in this embedded and enfolded way that I refer to as multi-situated. Modifying Marcus’ triumvirate therefore, multi-situated anthropology accounts for: first, temporally localised and interlinked situations, which themselves are not exclusively physical sites, in the attempt to learn about how moments effect, transform and constitute social realities; second, the reflexive relations set into play by composite onlife entanglements on sliding scales that might be nearby and at a distance; and third, the paraethnographic where the clockwork or ‘native point of view’, whether it be physically grounded or digitally mediated, leads to new kinds of dialogues and dynamics.

Con/texts

So what is the nature of the ‘text’ or document and its relationship with ‘context’ when it comes to the digital letter? Several attempts have been made to move away from reified and positivist understandings of context that depend upon a ‘false objectivity’ (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 68). The context or site is not separate from ‘text’, nor do they just reflect realities but they also transform and internalise them. Matthew S. Hull (2012) notes how documents are not simply representative of bureaucratic contexts but ‘rather are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, even

the organizations themselves' (2012: 251). However, while he alludes to electronic mediation, his focus is largely on the office-orientated and paper-mediated document.⁶

By virtue of its public and multiplex transfer across an uneven, unstable and nested series of physical and network spaces, the digital letter as a 'technology text' (Hine 2000: 39) does not have a clear point of origin nor destination, nor even distinct author(s) or recipient(s). Rather, the letter is not from or to the field, but *becomes* an integral part of the field – a nomadic and porous terrain that is informed by and intended for larger publics who intermittently cast their responses on it as well as take it as a springboard for other departures. Here, the groundedness of the conventional field is unearthed and distributed so as it spans a cyber-field, although it is not entirely sucked up into cyberia (see Escobar 1994) as might be the implications of Boellstorff's (2008) landmark anthropological enquiry of the 'virtually human' world of *Second Life*. A simple transference of concepts from offline to online ethnography upon which Boellstorff's cyber-ethnography depends, misses significant shifts that might occur in the process.

In order to take stock of the increasing cross-cutting of cyber-communications with the physical world, Post-Actors Network Theorists (ANT) have developed the concept of 'social topologies' that are not fixed by a given set of coordinates or standard axes (X, Y and Z, for instance), but differential, emergent, and unfinished spatialities (Mol and Law 1994, 2001, see also Law and Singleton 2005). Derived from mathematical understandings of space, topology provides a metaphor for thinking of other kinds of spatialities and interactions, embedded and enfolded. While Mol and Law reserve their analysis for the travel

⁶ On the PDF document, see Lisa Gitelman (2014). In the vein of petitions or 'political letters' (Stotsky 1987, Cody 2009), the analysis here could also contribute to an anthropology of letters (e.g. Ahearn 2011, Barton and Hall 2000, Mead 2002).

of techniques and technologies, I extend their focus to include letters, words or documents transmitted in these journeys. Accordingly, the field site is not of a single spatial type, but several kinds of space in which different ‘operations’ occur (Mol and Law 1994: 643). The social topologies could traverse the three-dimensionality of Euclidean space (the classic field), the non-proximate connectivity of network space (enabled by the internet), and the continuity of fluid space that moves both in regional and network space changing form, defying inside and outside and the demarcations of one place to another (Law and Mol 2001: 657, see also Coleman 2014). Additionally, Law and Mol later proposed ‘fire space’, characterised by an abrupt and discontinuous sense of flickering. Unlike fluid space, fire space changes between presence and absence in network space while staying in place in any one terrain. The interruptive fire topology that alludes to both what is present and absent sparks off a myriad of other conjoined and contradictory dynamics.

Such a multi-ontological approach to a digital letter compels a multiplex consideration of on-the-ground and digitally mediated protests and debate in India and Britain. While the digital letter flows and is adapted without major rupture through Euclidean and network spaces, as I will show below, it is also a fiery journey in its abrupt discontinuity between actual and imagined senders and recipients. For those commentators in India in particular, it intermittently sparks off flickers of memories and actualities to do with the ‘foreign hand’ and colonial ‘ghosts in the machine’ rearticulated for a postcolonial neo-liberal present, and thereby sustaining ‘a relation of simultaneous presence and absence’ (Law and Mol 2001: 618).

Whether they be singled out as in and around the Kudankulam nuclear power plant, central London for the protest and a subsequent parliamentary hearing, or through exchanges with digital interfaces, I have been entangled in all of them at different points in 2012 with a longer fieldwork history in the Kudankulam region that goes back to 2006. While these

generic situations are fuzzy and span different time-spaces, in the rest of this article I outline a few that relate to the digital letter and protest against state repression around the Kudankulam nuclear power plant with myself as a physical-digital participant-observer. Before I go on to detail the implications of these social topologies for the digital letter, I provide a very brief background on the main obstacles that lay in the way of the attempt to build a transnational anti-nuclear movement on the Kudankulam issue.

The Nuclear Postcolony

Arguably, the nuclear is firmly coded as national; and the national has virtually hijacked the political horizon of possibilities (see Abraham 1999, Ramana 2009).⁷ This phenomenon is even sharper in the postcolony. Consequently, transnational alliances and grassroots collaborations become a very fraught endeavour in India. The grip of ‘nuclear nationalism’ (Bidwai and Vanaik 1999) – that is, the prevalent belief that nuclear development is essential to the growth and sovereignty of the postcolonial nation-state - is unyielding. deeply locked in a double-grip. This double-grip is first, in terms of a heavily statist developmentalist discourse that sees techno-science as the future means with which to ‘catch up with the west’ (Gupta 1998); and, second, in terms of the particular legacies of colonialism that have been described by Achille Mbembe (2001) as a ‘technology of domination’ - one that enables a space of authority and subjectitude but not of citizenship. After India’s nuclear tests in 1998, national security is increasingly seen in terms of nuclear deterrence and civilian nuclear energy development. Simultaneously, actions under the umbrella of national security legitimate the excesses of state conduct.

⁷ For other perspectives on the national-nuclear, see Hecht (1998), Gusterson (1996), Kuletz (1998), Petryna (2002), and Masco (2006).

With such a scenario, there is hardly any space for critique against nuclear developments in India without being cast aspersions of being anti-national, seditious, under the enduring ‘menace of the west’, and funded by ‘agents of hostile foreign interests’ – a toxic mixture that coalesces and corrodes the independence and prosperity of the nation with the spectral force of the ‘foreign hand’, both actual and invisible.⁸ The foreign hand thus conceived is not simply a register of threats from so-called enemy nation-states but also highlights postcolonial or neo-colonial asymmetries and anxieties.⁹ Ambiguous yet sturdy and duplicitous, the foreign hand is a chameleon beast that refuses to go away. It emerged most markedly in the 1970s when the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, denounced anti-Congress activities as funded or propelled by the USA (Kalugin 2009). Such allegations gathered mileage with the Cold War imprint of US-bashing in the subcontinent where the western superpower represented the supreme symbol of capitalistic imperialism. Recently, in very different geopolitical and national political economies, the foreign hand discourse has received a boost with the former government led by the United Progressive Alliance as a means with which to undermine anti-nuclear movements in India.¹⁰ Government strategies fell along several intersected lines. There was the Janus propaganda drive to valorise some as patriotic figureheads and demonise others as anti-national. Mainstream media outlets are monopolised by state-supporting rhetoric in this endeavour. Digital avenues such as email, websites, online petitions, and Facebook, provide potential to navigate and even undermine some of these hurdles, but have also been under surveillance and face regular internet attacks

⁸ http://www.udayindia.org/content_31March2012/cover-story.html Accessed September 23, 2012.

⁹ On ambiguities of the term, postcolonial, see Hall (1996).

¹⁰ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/kudankulam-row-prime-minister-blames-foreign-countries/1/175007.html> Accessed September 23, 2012.

with spam and hacked accounts. An anti-nuclear protester associated with the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE) based in south India wrote in a Facebook message to me:

phones are being tapped and mobile calls are monitored emails are being hacked regularly and obscene mails are sent from the email and facebook profiles of key persons...it is creating a wrong msg [message] among the general public....and sometimes creating a wrong image on the leaders of the [PMANE] movement as there were phishing of porn mails and post to others FB [facebook] account from the leaders account.¹¹

In addition, there was the state apparatus that was used to harass or intimidate anti-nuclear protesters including the filing of criminal charges, detentions and arrests. Despite their non-violent tactics, anti-nuclear campaigners had been levelled with trumped-up charges of 'war against the state', 'sedition', 'conspiracy', 'manslaughter' and 'rioting with lethal weapons' amongst other criminal allegations. Since the escalated anti-nuclear struggle at Kudankulam from September 2011, more than 55,000 people had been accused in about 170 First Information Reports, charges of a cognisable offence, from the nearest police station to the KKNPP in Tirunelveli district.¹² Typically, a few names would be mentioned in any allegation with the added number of 2-4,000 supporters. Many of them came from Idinthikarai, a coastal village adjoining the plant deemed the 'epicenter' of the anti-

¹¹ Personal correspondence, 17 May, 2012.

¹²<http://www.dianuke.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/AP-Shah-Jury-report-Final1.pdf>
<http://www.theweekendleader.com/Causes/1201/quiet-resistance.html> Accessed October 23, 2012.

Kudankulam struggle where PMANE co-ordinators resided (Figure 3). It was with concerns about such oppressive measures that the digital letter was composed.¹³

To converge with the letter, a protest was organised in May 2012 outside the High Commission of India in London. Momentarily, this geolocal patch of transnational India became the place for a combination of visiting Indians, those of Indian descent including myself, and anti-nuclear organisations based in Britain.¹⁴ The latter included the South Asia Solidarity Group, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and other activist and Indian diasporic groups such as Globalise Resistance, Foil Vedanta, South West Against Nuclear (SWAN), Kick Nuclear, Campaign against Criminalising Communities (CACC), Stop the

¹³ Journalists, activists, scholars, other notable personalities, and human rights groups based in other parts of the world had also written to the Indian prime minister, with similar points of redress. <http://www.dianuke.org/Kudankulam-open-letter-from-international-scholars-to-the-indian-pm/> <http://www.dianuke.org/solidarity-pours-in-from-across-the-world-for-the-indian-antinuclear-protests/> <http://www.dianuke.org/Kudankulam-german-anti-nuclear-groups-express-solidarity-at-chernobyl-vigil-in-frankfurt/> <http://www.dianuke.org/jaitapur-french-organisations-statement-areva/> <http://www.dianuke.org/Kudankulam-german-anti-nuclear-groups-express-solidarity-at-chernobyl-vigil-in-frankfurt/> <http://www.dianuke.org/Kudankulam-letter-to-iaea-nuclear-regulators-and-human-rights-organisations/> <http://www.dianuke.org/three-Kudankulam-protestors-face-arrest-amnesty-action-alert/>, <http://www.dianuke.org/end-intimidation-of-peaceful-protesters-at-Kudankulam-human-rights-watch/> Accessed October 30, 2012.

¹⁴ Rashmi Kohli (2012) '[Protest in London to Stop Kudankulam: Report and Pictures](http://www.dianuke.org/protest-in-london-to-stop-Kudankulam-report-and-pictures/)' <http://www.dianuke.org/protest-in-london-to-stop-Kudankulam-report-and-pictures/> Accessed October 23, 2012.

War Coalition, Tamil Solidarity and Stop Hinkley referring to the EDF nuclear project earmarked for Somerset in west England.

Journeys

Wary of stoking accusations of the ‘foreign hand’ and interference, the letter was written carefully and collectively through group email including the input of activists and a couple of politicians. Organisers were keen to involve British politicians, not because they particularly revered them, but because it was hoped that this strategy would ensure wider media attention and possibly constitute a serious engagement with officials in the subcontinent. In addition to Jeremy Corbyn and Carolyn Lucas, other politicians who signed the letter included Labour’s John McDonnell (currently the shadow chancellor), Mary Glendon, Paul Flynn as well as a member of European parliament, Keith Taylor and an Australian Greens Senator, Scott Ludlum.

Digital discussions emphasised the need to focus on the lack of transparency and abuse of mandatory procedures and democratic and human rights as opposed to an explicit critique of India’s nuclear development plans. There was a felt need to corroborate each statement with footnoted recourse to other reports and media sources to ward off accusation of neo-colonial interventionism (see Hull 2003, Maurer 2005). Yet, in the shape of a petition, the final letter oscillated between the representation of ‘facts’ to an element of affect (‘we believe...we implore...we fully appreciate...’).

Once all were satisfied with the letter’s content, the letter was electronically signed and transmitted through the architecture of network spaces to a number of media and Indian activist sites. The letter either appeared in its entirety on other online sites or was fluidly

edited as part of newspaper reportage. An authorised response to the letter from Indian officials did not materialise. Nevertheless, discussion and further activities were ignited as is clear in newsreaders' comments and subsequent actions. In contrast to the collective and conscientiously composed tone of the digital letter, which aspired to be rational, cautionary and precise, and the Indian reporters' coverage that aimed for objectivity while trying to hit a sensational note as has been noted in much news media (Udupa 2015), readers' responses were much more idiosyncratic, dialogic, dashed and truncated. Their comments on the digital letter indicated 'a differentiated genre' (Bazerman 2000): content mattered little next to what the letter represented (see Hetherington 2008, Gitelman 2014). It presented more of a flickering springboard for self-expression, sometimes with the use of very colourful language when alluding to wider historical and socio-political grievances - the absent presences of fire space triggered here by the im/materiality of the foreign hand and colonial legacies.

With requisite typographical errors intact, examples of Indian readers' comments to the newspaper articles in the vein of the former sentiment included the following:

Dr. Singh should shred it [the letter] and Mail back [to] Mr. Cameron. It is India's internal affair which no [one] should meddle in.¹⁵

The talismanic presence of a paper letter remained, where the digital letter appeared to have transformed into material that due to its British provenance was only fit for the shredder (see Hull 2012: 261). The phenomenon recalls Kevin Hetherington's discussion about *praesentia*

¹⁵ Hasan Suroor (2012) 'U.K. MPs sign anti-Kudankulam letter to Manmohan', *The Hindu*, May 17, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/article3429248.ece> Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent quotes in response to news of the letter's contents are taken from the 46 comments section on this web page. All were accessed June 5, 2015.

or presence of mind (2003: 1941), something absent that can attain a presence. Simultaneously, Otherness hovered in the vicinity - the fact that the letter was written by quite literally a 'foreign hand' made its contents for some readers, however detailed and corroborated, specious at best: 'The spooky "foreign hands" that our prime minister saw behind the protest against KKNPP has now come in full public view' wrote another, giving evocative form to suspect interventions.¹⁶

The attendant discourse of national sovereignty was closely tied with a suspicion of any detractor as reiterated in the following statement:

to all foreigners (anti-nuclear) it is my humble submission that we are sovereign state, and we will decide the energy alternative keeping our resources and demand in mind. i think that you have funded those anti nuclear NGOs, people of India know about their needs. let me tell all anti nuclear agents that it is the best nuclear power plant in the world.

Perceived attacks were met with proud defense of India's techno-developments. Content did not matter so much as the foreign genesis of the letter, in response to which several comments recoiled into a self-justifying nationalism, often ending their opinion with '*Jai Hind!*' (Glory to India!) The counter-shot sparked off by the digital letter manifest itself in a critique of anything British and drew upon age-old colonial arguments. Despite the involvement of migrant Indians, one reader wrote mocking the British colonial-cockney accent: 'Manmohan must send a strong message saying "Mind your own business". There

¹⁶ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/British-MPs-write-to-PM-Manmohan-Singh-against-Kudankulam-nuke-plant/articleshow/13262940.cms> This is one of 91 comments to this newspaper.

ain't british raj in india any more [sic].'¹⁷ Allegations of neo-colonial ambition became tied to other atrocities and disasters in which Britain's role was impugned:

...They may better look into their archives and learn more about the autrocites committed in India when they colonized it. All those treasures looted from us including the Kohinnor, Tippu's sword etc are to be returned to India...Their own prime minister vouched for the presence of wepons of mass destruction in Iraq. Spoiled the future of thousands of Iraquies by telling lies. India can be taken care of by Indians. Whether it is due to the influence of church or genuine wish to keep Indians in perpetual poverty, your getting involved in this is not correct [sic].

Fire space raged as the letter stoked the ghosts of colonial history that fed into a resurgent Indian nationalism and accusations of a number of misdemeanors not immediately linked to the nuclear topic at hand. For some, the letter also smacked of a 'Christian conspiracy': signatories, viewed as all Christians, were deemed to have dubious connections with the Christian fishing communities around the Kudankulam nuclear power plant. Even though protests were supported by British (or South) Asian people of all creeds, anti-nuclear organisations and non-Conservative politicians based in Britain, detractors cast the letter as coming from people in a singularly monocultural country particularly – that is, a nation of white, Christian 'Cameronites'. This alleged transnational alliance in some cases triggered another set of more home-grown Hindu-Christian antagonisms that took on their own

¹⁷ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/British-MPs-write-to-PM-Manmohan-Singh-against-Kudankulam-nuke-plant/articleshow/13262940.cms>

rhizomatic narrative arcs quite incidental to the contents of the letter, almost as if the letter was populated by hyperlink triggers that themselves sparked off more fiery exchanges.¹⁸

By contrast, other striking sides of this multiscopic assemblage revealed an imagining of an impartial and just British, along with which came a cutting critique of irresponsible Indian politicians with regards to plans for nuclear power plants:

The people who don't even belong to our country can understand the consequences faced by people if something happens at kundakulam nuclear power project...but why dont our politians understand the problems occurs due to these plants [sic]

Faced with views from abroad, some readers took up the letter in a more fluid sense, and were compelled to be globally reflexive. Out of this emerged a certain alternative 'wisdom' against the national hegemonic view on nuclear developments emerged. Another commentator wrote:

Even though Britain has not given up nuclear power, she has come forward to recognise the gross violations of our government in suppressing peaceful protests and refusing to part with vital information. With nuclear power programmes the world over from year to year being only gigantic consumers of high quality energy, with none forthcoming to society outside the nuke industry, it is legitimate to pause and reexamine the wisdom of nuclearisation.

¹⁸ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/British-MPs-write-to-PM-Manmohan-Singh-against-Kudankulam-nuke-plant/articleshow/13262940.cms>

Support of the letter also came in the form of recognising the nexus of what might be called contemporary corporate colonialism:

If Bhopal culprit Dow chemicals [linked to the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster] is sponsoring the London [Olympic] games, Chernobyl culprit ASE [Atomsroyexport] is vending the Kudankulam nukes. Both mean only business and nothing else. Both are loggerwoods of the same pond. Before criticizing the protest, Can anyone show a concrete proof that it is powered by foreign funds?...Christianity triggering, Foreign Funds, Naxalism link [militant Maoist groups in north east India], False sedition charges. All these managed to remain only at levels of allegations...Thanks for your condemnations. Protests just got bigger. GOD IS GREAT!!!!!!!!!!!!

From this perspective, the digital letter was cast almost as a godsend. Fluid topologies took on a fire trajectory of a different order. Whatever the intention, a carefully written letter with the stamp of officialdom was quickly recontextualised (Barton and Hall 2000: 9), reinterpreted and displaced so as a multiplicity of readers' interests transformed the letter's content.

Some of these discursive and discordant effects of the letter are of course familiar – we need only consider, for instance, national and international opinions that circulated around the preparations and proceedings of the XIX Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010 where neocolonial aspersions became a burning issue.¹⁹ Some of the comments are conceivably part of the stock-in-trade of government-sponsored bodies for 'online nationalism' to dominate social media as they appear in similar form on other sites (Udupa 2016). Others registered a very particular strain specific to the Kudankulam issue where protesters, deemed as all

¹⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8256127.stm Accessed 26 June, 2017.

Christian, were accused of anti-nationalism. Altogether the digital letter and its responses instantiated an assemblage of consensual, ambiguous and contradictory opinion and imaginaries - a letter that was either lambasted by some readers for being interfering and suspect, or on the other end of the spectrum, welcomed by others for its supposed attack or 'condemns' of the Indian nuclear authorities and occasionally received almost like a divine intervention to further embolden the anti-Kudankulam nuclear plant struggle. People took from the coverage and feedback what they wished. The detractive messages in the comments did not deter activists and even a few foreign politicians from pressing ahead with their campaign. Indeed, due to the sheer coverage of the issue online, and despite the fact that less than a hundred people turned up to the protests outside the High Commission, the campaign was seen as 'a success' as one protestor put it. Even though indicative of symbiotic relationships in multi-situated spaces, more weight was given to virtual plateaus of intensification in the manner of enfoldments rather than just corporeal commitment to the cause in the manner of embedded contextualisation. Subsequently, anti-nuclear campaigners in both India and Britain were buoyed to pick up the trails of the digital letter with more onlife engagements.

Onlife Horizons

Despite the enduring weight of colonial legacies and nationalist discourse, 'outer-national' nodes of solidarity (see Gilroy 1993:16, 17) opened up relatively closed parameters between the nuclear and the nation - not a mean feat considering that prior to 2011, while some people may have been unsure or critical about nuclear weapons, they were in the main pro-nuclear energy in view of India's electricity needs. Subsequently, an Idinthikarai resident wrote to me in a Facebook message:

i am very happy and hats of to you ppl [people]. when even our local MP's have disowned us the MP's signature from london is god sendpls let them know that i thank them with whole heart [sic].²⁰

Shortly after the digital letter was publicised, a Skype meeting was organised with activists based in Britain and those based in the south India village of Idinthikarai who cautiously congratulated each other, and discussed what possible next steps could be taken on a transnational platform. Due to a surge of multiple situational forces, discourses of national sovereignty, nuclear nationalism and the ‘foreign hand’ discrepantly dissolved into common grounds about environmental violations, democratic and human rights in recursive mirrors of outer-national reflections. Indeed, when those from other parts of the world took up the cause, the peculiar relationship between Britain and India could no longer provide an anvil to grind an anti-colonial axe. The digital letter from Britain was further deterritorialised and fluidly adopted by sixty people based mainly in Australia and Canada under the lead of the environmentalist, John Seed, the founder and director of Australia’s Rainforest Information Centre.²¹ This was shortly followed by another similarly worded letter of support signed by 168 people from 28 countries including many from Japan and other countries from the south such as Indonesia and Taiwan who themselves had their own nuclear anxieties.²²

Encouraged by transnational interest, Indian journalists such as Sam Daniel from the Chennai-based NDTV news channel could confidently write:

²⁰ Personal correspondence, May 19, 2012.

²¹ <http://www.dianuke.org/stop-Kudankulam-project-it-involves-abuse-of-democracy-ecology-and-human-rights/> Accessed October 23, 2012.

²² <http://www.dianuke.org/Kudankulam-168-international-organizations-from-21-countries-urge-the-indian-govt-to-stop-the-reactor/> Accessed October 23, 2012.

Now the world is watching how India, the largest democracy would tackle this logical and understandable opposition being expressed by local communities. It's for the leaders now to establish that India is a democracy in letter and spirit...Democracy is precious and priceless. Let's not allow a nuclear plant [to] kill it.²³

Undeterred by readers' allegations of interventionism, those based in Britain continued to run with the baton of their beliefs. Steps were pursued to organise a parliamentary committee meeting in Britain's Houses of Commons at the behest of the Green Party's then MP and now co-leader, Caroline Lucas, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the South Asian Solidarity Group. This transpired in a committee room a few months later in Westminster. To a room full of predominantly British, British Asian and Indian attendants, Lucas began proceedings by stating:

Global solidarity between those who are resisting nuclear power is absolutely essential. We can all benefit from the strength of knowing that we're part of a wider global movement, to actually sharing expertise and information in how to campaign against multinational corporations who...are out there intent on making as much money as they can out of whatever technologies that they can without bothering about paying much attention to the safety, health and effects on the environment of what they're doing.

The PMANE co-ordinators could not of course be present for living in what they called an 'open prison'. So we requested the main spokesperson, Dr S.P. Udayakumar, to send an

²³ Sam Daniel (2012) 'Blog: Democracy in Peril at Kudankulam', 6 June, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/south/blog-democracy-in-peril-at-kudankulam-228251> Accessed November 23, 2012.

audio-visual message from Idinthikarai in view of the possibility of technological problems with a Skype connection on the day (Figure 4). This he did with the help of a local photographer (Figure 5). In the transmission to the packed room in parliament, Udayakumar stated:

We live in a kind of military camp, totally isolated from the rest of the world. Police come and knock on our doors of our houses, ask obscene questions to our women, arrest anyone indiscriminately, and we are not able to resist this. Many political parties and politicians support this ruse...the normal life in our area has been completely paralysed...we are living in a total banana republic. We need the solidarity and support of the international community....We also request the people of Britain to put pressure on the British government to not engage in nuclear deals with our country.

For the first time on terra firma, voices from a south Indian coastal fishing village could be heard in British parliament. Even though mediated through virtual means, the room was charged with an enhanced sense of purpose. And despite the militarisation and surveillance of the village that curtailed their movements, digital activities continued unabated. Residents in Idinthikarai were able to forge political bonds through network space across geopolitical locations. The 'local' was implanted in a transnational elsewhere that momentarily became a 'translocal else-here' as those in London listened intently to Idinthikarai residents.

Indian petitioners called for global solidarity, not aid or intervention as might be the postcolonial concern. They negotiated the treacherous terrain of the foreign hand but with an attempt to rewrite the familiar script of hand-outs and foreign intervention. Udayakumar's transmission was then followed by a speech in the committee room by Amrit Wilson from the South Asian Solidarity Group who read out a paper note from Melrit, that too had been

initially transmitted digitally (Figure 6). A former small-time clothes retailer who lived in Idinthikarai, Melrit had joined a large group in boats that surrounded the nuclear power plant on an anti-nuclear day of action in 2012. Recalling the day, she stated:

I forgot the desecration of the village church by the police. I forgot the anguish of the wives and mothers of all who were taken away brutally that day. I forgot thirst, hunger...As I stood on the boat, I remember the demands we have put across...to let go of the sisters and brothers locked up on unfair charges since September 10 [in 2012 when police and paramilitary raided the village and attacked the protesters] to withdraw all police forces from the villages and reinstate normal life, to close Kudankulam nuclear power plant and convert it into a nature and people friendly energy production plant.²⁴

While committee room attendants listened, they were urged to put themselves in the position of those struggling with a nuclear development on their doorstep: it was as if the sounds of struggles of a south Indian coastal community against a nuclear power plant on their doorstep were crashing around the Victorian edifice of British politics. Even though media was embedded in a particular place, it still pointed to other spaces and relations in a series of enfoldments. Social imaginaries went beyond categories of place, ethnicity, race or nationality as passionate debate on like-minded issues ensued. The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant issue was connected to others such as the Fukushima-Daiichi reactors in Japan and the reprocessing plant planned for Hinckley Point in Britain. Their discussion in the hallowed chambers of a former colonial heartland registered a move away from the historical-particular and the national-nuclear, to couching the construction of a nuclear power plant in international rights discourse and concerns about environmental violations. For a

²⁴ On women's narratives in Idinthikarai, see Santhi (2012).

moment at least, it seemed as if the particularities of distant places, and the weight of nuclear-nationalism and national security borders could be unravelled (Figure 7).

Transient New Horizons

What if we were to construe the digital letter as the one with ‘social force’ as much as, if not more so, than its writer/s and readers/s? After all, this is in tune to decades of anthropological enquiries into the social life of things and metaphors (Mauss 1925, 2005, Appadurai 1986, Lakoff and Johnson 2003, Hull 2012). The emphasis here is not simply on ‘the human transactions and calculations that *enliven things*’ (Appadurai 1986: 5, my emphasis), but also on our entanglement with im/mutable things, in this case, digital transmissions that *enliven people* whether they manifest themselves in the corporeal or digitised sense. Correspondingly, the digital letter was thingified, chopped, changed and variously interpreted taking on fluid and fiery - continuous, discontinuous and star-like - trails of its own. It was not just a mode of communication to be embedded in situ so as to appreciate its import, but enfolded as an integral part of multi-scalar and multipolar socialities on- and offline, through which and with which relations and opinions were imagined and instantiated. Digitalia mattered and became matter when traversing Euclidean and network spaces most markedly through, first, the emergence of the letter out of a mesh of corporeal and post-human activities; second, the fluid and flickering reception of the letter that had its on- and offline effects made evident through newspaper comments, further communication, and emboldened anti-nuclear protest; and third, the proceedings of the parliamentary committee with its onlife clockwork mediations from those based in Idinthikarai that enabled a reorientation of India-Britain relations and imaginaries on the nuclear issue. The sociality that emerges may not be one that has a specific constituency or place. Nor need it endure as flows trickle away, and

sparks and fires are extinguished. Nevertheless, the multi-situated perspective remains significant as it tempers the individuals' evaluation of their relational position and context, thereby instantiating 'extended parasocial relations' (Hopkins 2014: 5) and enabling, however momentary, a glimpse of other horizons of possibilities.

The focus on digitalia as part of contemporary transnational cyberpolitics demonstrates the emergence of positions and perspectives on the national-nuclear dyad and India-Britain relations, old, new and ambivalent: to recall Kapferer, ones that reveal a 'tensional space and opening toward new horizons of potential' (2010: 15). The analyses also highlights how resistive conjunctures do not just lie in horizontal alliances outside of or peripheral to mainstream institutions and networks as elaborated in much of the literature on direct action and global justice movements, and on resistance in general (see Kaur 2013). Witness, for instance, the comparison of strategic dynamics associated with the elites and tactical dynamics connected to vernacular groups as is apparent in Michel de Certeau's (1988) work and those influenced by him, as well as the literature more generally on cultures of resistance (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1986; Ong, 1987; Raheja and Gold, 1994). Instead, we see the utilisation of state representatives and/or structures where required, sometimes with unpredictable consequences, pointing to an inherent instability even within supposedly established political hierarchies. The conjunctures hinged on a digital letter and non-proximate people - students and others from India living in Britain, to those with diasporic connections to the subcontinent, to those who were anxious about nuclear irregularities as well as disasters in places like Britain and Japan, to those who expressed a concern for environmental and social justice and the right to dissent across the democratic world, to those who lived in an 'open prison' in a coastal village, and to others who tried to rally around on land and sea in order to publicise their cause. This in itself compels the development of multi-situated enquiry, which need not always striate the subaltern or vernacular from the elite

(Guha 1983), the tactical from the strategic (de Certeau 1988), the rhizomatic from the arborescent (Deleuze and Guattari 1980), the established from the emergent, or indeed the digital from the corporeal.

My account does not provide an ethnography, or indeed paraethnography of multiple sites conceived as isomorphic planes in a supplementary or additive manner in a system of relations as might accompany Marcus' multi-sited anthropology. Rather the enquiry is multi-situated in that its primary focus lies in tracking partial chains of discursive situations constituted by, reflected in, and triggered by a digital letter. Movement and reception in this space is constantly reflexive and generative: it is characterised by a complex of non-identical vectors to do with space, time and relational positions with regards to happenings and surroundings that continuously change. So whereas multi-sited anthropology prioritise the Euclidean determination of multiple sites, specific locales, places with names, and, even if viewed as part of a system of networks or relations, entities to be filled, multi-situated becomes part of a mesh of physical and cyber-space moments of emergence between the placed and non-placed, spatial and temporal, self and Other, substantive and ethereal, absent and present, flowing and flickering, committed and ambiguous – a multidirectional web of situations that have real-life and methodological implications in order to better grasp the unstable embedded and enfolded dynamics of everyday digitalia.

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