Sage | India International Centre | Council for Social Development
An Institute Recognised by ICSSR

SOCIAL CHANGE

8th Social Change Annual Lecture

The Female Voice
Reinstituting Life

Veena Das

5 February 2026

Social Change

Social Change, founded in 1971 with Kamla Mankekar as its first editor, is a multidisciplinary social science quarterly. It carries full-length research articles, brief write-ups, and book reviews focussing on issues related to social change and development in India. It welcomes contributions on social change and development in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and is open to relevant contributions on European, North American, and other contexts. It also disseminates scholarship on emerging concerns through its special thematic issues. Its book reviews and review articles aim to inform its readers of important and current trends in global scholarship. Sponsored by the Council for Social Development, *Social Change* has a global readership in the academic, activist, and policy circles. Published by Sage, it carries contributions from established as well as emerging scholars from India and abroad.

8th Social Change Annual Lecture 2026

The Female Voice: Reinstituting Life

Veena Das

5 February 2026

Council for Social Development

The Council for Social Development (CSD) has functioned, for decades, as a non-profit, non-partisan, vibrant research and advocacy institution engaged in issues of social development, especially the welfare of the marginalised. A brain-child of the legendary freedom fighter and social worker Durgabai Deshmukh, CSD had its faint origin in 1962 in the form of an informal study group at the India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi. The transition from being an informal study group to having a formal existence took about two years. In 1964, in view of the study group's track record of noteworthy activities, the IIC resolved to set up CSD, which was to have its own constitution and almost complete autonomy. This marked the formal beginning of CSD. Subsequently, with a view to expanding the reach of CSD's activities, its Southern Regional Centre (SRC) was established in Hyderabad in 1967.

CSD was formally registered under the Societies Registration Act in 1970, with C. D. Deshmukh as its President and Durgabai Deshmukh as its Executive Chairperson and Honorary Director. Presently, Padma Bhushan awardee, reputed cardiologist, and Founder (Past) President of the Public Health Foundation of India, Professor K. Srinath Reddy, is CSD's President. SRC is governed by a managing committee and presently, the eminent educationist and child rights expert, Professor Shantha Sinha, is its Chairperson.

8TH SOCIAL CHANGE ANNUAL LECTURE 2026

The Female Voice: Reinstituting Life

Veena Das

Abstract

This lecture argues for a renewed understanding of the project of anthropology and the anthropological tone in philosophy not through the super concepts of the knowing subject, but through an acknowledgement of the vulnerability of life and the constant work of reinhabitation and reinstitution it requires. My claim is that the blind spot in classical theories of society is the cunning exclusion of the work done by women in reinstituting life through a contempt for the ordinary and the quotidian repetitions within which women find and nourish improvisations, newness, and expression. The constitution of the subject as the male subject and a sexualisation of language itself marks the texture of abstract theorising in the social sciences. Against this vision of theory, I offer the work of women writers in the vernacular, with Krishna Sobti as the exemplar who shows a method and theory through the female voice honed from the streets and born in the domestic that can address the violence seeded in everyday life. The constant work of repair women do by treating life not as an object that is external to the subject but as that within which the subject evolves, not so much in the moment of dramatic conversion of self but through a transfiguration that can only be shown in attention to detail.

As dusk was falling on the evening of Saturday, the 13th of December, a news item flashed on my phone that a man with a gun was firing randomly at the campus of Brown University and that the shooting had resulted in two deaths and several injuries. I made frantic phone calls first asking my granddaughter if her elder brother, a freshman at Brown, was okay (meaning not among those hurt or worse, but unable to actually say these words), then tried to check on others. After sheltering in one of the buildings on campus for the whole night, when the students were cautiously moved to the dorms with the gunman still at large, I called my grandson and asked if he was doing okay (that indefinite word again). He seemed (to me) suspiciously in control, citing 310 mass shootings this year alone with four or more people killed in each, and 76 school shootings. 'Somewhere, sometime this was bound to happen' – that was the general feeling. It was the normalisation of such terms as Sandy Hooks, and the routine of drills every morning in schools where five-year-olds know what to do in the event of finding a random shooter in their midst in the school, and the calmness of his response that completely unnerved me. Ideas such as pathology producing its own norms, that I knew well, and had placed at the centre of my own work on affliction (Das 2014) appeared in large letters as they moved through my dreams.

Meanwhile, images proliferated of starving children in Gaza, in Sudan, cities bombed to rubble, Facebook posts on Muslims attacked, burnt alive, maimed, lying on improvised hospital beds with arms brutally chopped off by 'a group' of Hindu men whose individual names were withheld because these might reveal too much about their caste and might cause revenge. Even writing in this vein creates a nausea in me now because the language has become too standardised, too contaminated by abuse. Its redescriptions such as casting targeted bombing of schools and hospitals as 'collateral damage'. Rhinehardt Koselleck (2020) in his book on possible histories, tells us that the disposition to kill should be seen as natural to the human; Cavell, the writer of Emersonian perfectionism, himself calls human life as

a crime scene and the inhuman as a possibility of the human, not its aberration. Together these writers show the absurdity of a vision that would make anthropology as the science of variation of the 'human condition' or provide a correction to new versions of the civilising mission through which Western thought manages to cast historical failures of other societies as if the violence encountered in these societies, was their ontological condition, whereas the violence of the West was merely a temporary aberration. I do not look for very subtle formulations of this claim but, instead, cite the philosopher Emmaneul Levinas, who has no hesitation is saying that while there are many cultures, whose "national literatures" contribute to ontological pluralism, "it is Europe, which alongside its numerous atrocities, invented the idea of 'de-Europeanization', which in turn 'represents a victory of European generosity." He adds that "Europe has many things to be reproached for, its history has been that of blood and war: but it is also the place where this blood and war have been regretted and constitute a bad conscience, a bad conscience of Europe which is also the return (*retour*) of Europe" (cited with admiration in de Vries 2006, 121). I do not dismiss the many philosophical achievements of Levinas, but I also feel a compulsion to ask if we can go beyond an expression of indignation and explore what enables this kind of formulation of European superiority, especially since Levinas can also claim that "there is a kind of envelopment … of all thinking by the European subject" and that he says this "without knowing anything of Buddhism."

Without being able to fully justify the paths I take to address this issue, perhaps because of the mood in which I write, given the moment, I think one aspect of the diagnosis of the arrogance of the claim that all thought is enveloped by Europe, I wager, is that the history of the subject in Europe shows that the modern subject emerges by painful exclusions of certain kinds of negative figures, particularly the criminal and the mad (Foucault 1984) through the forms that legal and medical norms take. My concern here is not to trace the slow

shifts from the making of the subject through subjection, to that of care of the self-defined as *government* of self and other —and finally to the culture of confession, as the mode through which the subject as having access to his own truth emerges. I am interested in another aspect of the problematic of exclusion. A figure that seems to me missing in the conceptual formation of exclusion in Foucault is the figure of the woman. I do not mean to say that women are completely missing: they are very much present in the story of the government of the household—but what I mean to say is that they do not appear in the story of the history of the subject—it is as if their confinement to the domain of the household somehow disqualifies them to be protagonists in Foucault's story of the history of the subject. Now it would be obvious that the kind of dividing practices through which the figure of the criminal or that of the mad person could be excluded from the social body could not be applied to women. After all, their participation in the making of life, sustaining forms of life, providing the labour of care for others, is not in question if it comes to what the experience of living, falling sick, meeting the misfortunes of life might be; and one could go further and say that Foucault also encounters the cruelties perpetrated by some women on children in *Abnormal,* or in what he calls the disorders of the family, as well as the cruelties women are themselves subjected to. Yet, the only move he makes toward the question of subjectivation is to suggest that it is the criminal acts of some women which make them available as subjects for the knowledge projects of psychiatry as a discipline. The only other avatar in which we encounter women is in the figure of the hysteric woman where he feels that the coupling of power and resistance becomes frayed because the hysteric woman through her excess of expression is capable of continuously producing new symptoms (Zerilli 2015). Thus, two pictures emerge here for what place is made for women in the theory of the subject. The first is that absorbed within the household, the woman's presence is unremarkable, too quotidian, to be of theoretical interest. The head of the household should learn to govern women as he learns to manage wealth, cattle,

lands; but she seems to leave no other traces in the archive. The second picture is of the woman who has committed a crime (often against children) who remains unintelligible and hence is a subject of interest to psychiatry; or the hysteric who also defies the psychiatrist by her ability to constantly produce new symptoms of her condition. As Cavell had articulated this issue, on one side is the suffocation of the woman's voice and on the other side is the excessive expression. Underlying both conditions is the evasion of life as it is lived, both when it is being sustained through the labour of women against the many misfortunes and tragedies to which the living are subject; and when the fragile networks of things and people that sustain life get broken, when relations fade, neglect and abandonment seeps in the everyday leading to small and large defeats. My claim is that a response to the violence secreted in everyday life, demands that life be reinstituted, but that project leads us, if we are attentive to it, to a radical redefinition of the place of the woman, not as an abstract figure of thought but through singularity of life as encountered in individual men and women.

If anthropology had once prided itself for showing the empirical unfolding of the sheer diversity of life forms that could be again gathered through the application of theory under such abstractions as variations of the same human condition, or the acquisition of culture as 'second nature', (see McDowell 1996 and the critique by Donatelli 2025), this project could be accomplished only at the cost of imposing concepts from above that masked a pernicious epistemic domination under the guise of theory.

But let us step back for a moment and ask, can we change the ground of these discussions by not so much refuting these arguments and thus placing our faith once again in reason to correct itself, but by asking, what might help us loosen the grip of the demand that we move from the particularity of our encounters with real human beings, to the generality of concepts that can be then stamped with what Foucault (2005) called the Cartesian moment in the career of thought. I am

not advocating an escape from reason into some other realm, call it the realm of imagination or emotion, or resorting to a sentimentality and nostalgia for times past, but proposing that we arrive at our own inhabitation of reason through other routes. As Jonardon Ganeri (2014a and 2014b) has forcefully argued, once we historicise the forms that reason took in philosophical arguments, we cease treating it as some special movement of the spirit that saw it as embodied in the special destiny of Europe. But whereas, Ganeri and his interlocutors look at Sanskrit texts for seeing modes of philosophising and indeed, Ganeri brings to light texts from 14th to 16th century that have not been read, leave aside translated, for 300 years, an intellectual labour I deeply respect, my direction of argument here takes a different path. I strive to make a shift in the weight assigned to the ordinary, specially through the female voice, and how it might establish different norms on how life is sustained through the female subject that invests authority in speaking and writing of the ordinary. (see specially Laugier 2020)

Life as Reinhabitation

In a remarkable commentary on the project of anthropology as a description of life as a reinhabitation, through a descent into the ordinary (Das 2007, 2025) Jocelyn Benoist (2025) considers the implications of taking 'life', not primarily as an object that one can see from the outside as if it had boundaries that separated it from other things in the world, but something we render only through a mode of participation, or accompaniment. The passage from my book, *Life and Words* that he found most compelling for this vision (he calls it one of the peaks of the book), is the following:

> There is a complex relation between *a* life and life so that how one lives in relation to one's own and others' deaths turns out to be a project of how one protects not only a *form* of life over disputations, criticisms, and recognition in the fact of change — but also how one protects the institution of *life as lived in the singular* (Das 2007:92).

For Benoist, this passage should be read in the background of my claim that anthropological work is at its best when it can acknowledge the limits of the knowing subject, and our disappointment with knowledge, or rather our disappointment with a *picture of knowledge* in which the expertise of the anthropologist is laid on the messiness of lives to make it speak to the universalising project of determining answers to such metaphysical questions as 'what is life?', or, 'what is the human condition?'. In Benoist's words:

> Something, anyway, may still remain of the philosopher's arrogance in the posture of the anthropologist: that is to say the position of the one who knows. The agents do not know why they do what they do and, thus, who they are, but the scientist knows. It is not so much an achievement as a definition.

Although many anthropologists make similar appeals to 'lived experience', the next steps they take either lead them into a labour of the negative; or in the creation yet again of new boundaries between 'experience near' and 'experience distant', 'reason' and 'emotion', and so on. Underlying both these stances is a masking of the real problem at hand, that we cannot substitute our own disappointment with expertise by assuming that someone else, in this case 'the natives', would somehow have a better grasp over 'their reality'. My claim is that attention to the ordinary and the everyday asks for an acknowledgement that in ordinary life people might not act on the basis of anything but fragmentary knowledge; they might not be masters of their situation or have a god's eye view of the world in which their actions unfold as Austin's (1961) essay on excuses and Laugier's (2025) interpretation of the vulnerability of our knowledge show. Yet concepts, that Wittgenstein called 'humble' rather than the super concepts scholars long for, are born and enable actions to be taken within these situations of uncertainty, contingency and the force of sheer accidents. As Wittgenstein famously said, 'For such is life!' . It is not a reason for distrusting the work done in the everyday, but

acknowledging, that everyday life is indeed lined with skepticism but that reestablishing life in the everyday is not a matter of a dramatic once for all event but something that is undertaken repeatedly, quotidianly, in the thick of things falling apart as women know. To the poet, (Faiz), who bemoans "*Ik bakhiya udheda, ek siya, yun umr basar kab hoti hai*" [undoing one stitch, stitching another- how can a lifetime be passed thus] my interlocuters in the field would remind me, if not through words then through their actions, that it was precisely within that mode that life was lived.

Let me step back here and try to decipher why such a vision of life is seen as threatening to so many founding figures of anthropology. Here is Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose majestic work on mythology showed an underlying logic in primitive thought, rescuing it from the charges of emotivism, but of-course on condition that ethnography does not cede the task of thinking through myths to the conceptual formations that the natives have of it.

He writes:

> We would risk committing sociology to a dangerous path: even a path of destruction, if we then went one step further and reduced social reality to the conception that man—savage man, even—has of it. That conception would furthermore become empty of meaning if its reflexive character were forgotten. Then ethnography would dissolve into a verbose phenomenology, a falsely naïve mixture in which the apparent obscurities of indigenous thinking would only be brought to the forefront to cover the confusions of the ethnographer. (Lévi-Strauss 1950: 57–8).

It is not accidental that in deciphering logical thought in the mythology of the so-called primitive societies, Lévi-Strauss, speaks not of 'life' but of 'social reality' as if reality confronts us from the outside as objective, impersonal, with a thing like quality standing in a frontal relation to us.

The implication is that what we as anthropologists or ethnographers see, is reality as something solid, but what 'they' the natives see is only 'putative' reality. This adjectival modification of reality is not from Lèvi-Strauss but from McDowell (2008), who uses it to say that some experiences, such as feeling wounded by the cruelty done to animals, because for some people animals may feel like companions, are not hallucinatory, but their reality does not qualify as reality for everyone; it is, indeed, *their* reality, but for purposes of analysis it only reaches the level of putative reality. Social reality then qualifies as 'reality' when it stands closest to natural categories as the concept of 'second nature' implies in relation to what is assumed to be 'first nature'. A recent 'amicus curia' petition filed in the US courts by forty renowned philosophers argued to the effect that transgender identities were, indeed, fake identities, (fake currency as the petition says) because they departed from the natural categories of male and female.[1]

My own argument on what is at stake as I hinted in the opening paras of this lecture, is to shift the weight from reality (social or natural) to the hosting of life in defining the subject of anthropology because it allows me to see how violence and forms of death are secreted within forms of life. Rather than taking 'reality' as the object of analysis and then cutting it into 'social', 'natural' 'putative' – something that confronts one from the outside as in the famous wall that blocks you as you try to walk through it as if it were a curtain. Again and again, in the history of anthropology 'life' has emerged as a candidate, and then, has been set aside in favour of such abstractions as 'social reality', or submerged within other concepts such as society as a *sui generis* reality, through which the anthropologist seeks to tame the challenges posed by the question of how to render ordinary life in relation to the pressures of immediacy and the knotting of different durations present at any moment through memory, imagination, and anticipation? The answer to the challenges of observing and writing the everyday is not to flee from the everyday but to acknowledge the limits of human knowledge and to act nevertheless.

As an example of the withdrawal from the everyday as a condition for anthropological thought to arise, consider, the difficulties that Durkheim confesses to when he seeks to arrive at the notion of collective consciousness by merging of the individual consciousnesses. Although his subject in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* is religious *life*, as the title announces, he cannot quite tame the idea of life within the larger framework of society as a force, *sui generis,* through which individuals learn moral obligation. Here are telling examples of the elusiveness of life in his writing.

> ' …how is it possible to find the common foundation of the religious life underneath the luxuriant vegetation which covers it? (Durkheim 1995, p. 28)'

> 'The product of this synthesis (i.e. of individual consciousnesses into a collective consciousness) is a whole world of feelings, ideas, and images that follow their own laws once they are born. They mutually attract one another, repel one another, fuse together, subdivide, and proliferate; and none of these combinations is directly commanded and necessitated by the state of the underlying reality. Indeed, the life thus unleashed enjoys such great independence that it sometimes plays about in forms that have no aim or utility of any kind, but only for the pleasure of affirming itself. I have shown that precisely this is often true of ritual activity and mythological thought (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 426).'

The question for Durkheim, despite his 'synthesis' of individual consciousnesses into a single collective consciousness is that of determining how does the individual come to be attached to the collective? For Durkheim this attachment to the collective has a quality of a kind of delirium in which women are afforded very little participation (except in the piacular rites that lament the dead). 'Stimulated by the collective experience of congregating amidst the sacred, participants

are 'pulled away from … ordinary occupations and preoccupations' and moved to the point of delirium akin to 'the religious state' (*Ibid)*.

In his work on suicide, Durkheim makes this exclusion of women from collective life even more explicit: 'As she lives outside of community existence more than man, she is less penetrated by it: society is less necessary to her because she is less impregnated with sociability. She has few needs in this direction and satisfies them easily (*Ibid, p. 215).*

'Penetrated'? 'Impregnated'? The imagination of the social and the abstract society as *sui generis,* turns out, after all, to be another version of a masculine creation, a sexualisation of the social in language in which women have no position as embodied subjects, except as bodies to be penetrated and impregnated. The quotidian and the mundane which at one point Durkheim recognises to be necessary for men to endure life [her devotion is indispensable to man to help him endure life (*Ibid*, p. 215) finds no recognition at the level of theorising society. This flight from the ordinary and from the mundane activities that sustain everyday life and the soul's search for its society through the labour of care performed by women, stands in need of serious correction. And for that correction to occur, the picture of knowledge that permits such language to be used against not only women but also against other modes of subjectivation needs to be not just amended but *abandoned*. In the last section of this paper, I will give one detailed example of the project of what it is to reinstate life in the female voice through the work of women writers such Krishna Sobti (and in a longer paper by Arundhati Roy.) But before that let me briefly say what I mean by 'instituting' life in the work of repair.

In the passage from *Life and Words* with which I began I speak of how the 'institution' of life is sought to be protected in the work ordinary men and especially women do. This repair through reinstitution, is not simply restoring ordinary life after its catastrophic destruction by spectacular violence. Instead, it refers to my sense of pervasive violence in human life as not only spectacular and catastrophic but also seeded in

the everyday. This means that there is no domain or sphere of life that remains untouched from violence. The work of *dalit* writers in India and race theorists in the US has shown that 'atrocities' are not necessarily announced loudly. They are instituted as part of learning where you can stand, in which cases you must wait to be addressed, and thus in unremarkable habits learnt through the hierarchies instilled in everyday life (see especially, Gopal Guru, and Sundar Sarukkai 2018). Which are the words survivors of sexual violence refuse to utter because they are the words that were used by perpetrators to mock them? A boycott of a dalit caste in the village need not be announced. Sandhya Fuchs (2024) tells us as she follows several cases filed by dalit activists – the punishment of a defiant dalit, who had dared to build a small balcony on his house might lead to an implicit boycott of the whole caste, with every shopkeeper in the village refusing to sell anything to them. These prohibitions are not proclaimed through statements with illocutionary force—pressing the question as to how dalits can bring their own experiences of such exclusions under the legal definition of atrocity? I use the notion of instituting life, not just giving it form, because the restitution of life is not simply a matter of sentiment and emotion within an enclosed domestic sphere; it is a matter of how to describe the ways the singularity of a life, extends outward into rules, prohibitions, taboos, that must be engaged in modes that arise from the everyday experience of generating concepts that count for, have meaning and importance for these lives. Simultaneously each life in its singular ways absorbs the milieu of rules, institutional apparatuses through which different forms of power have shaped its trajectories — a dialogue with the milieu as Canguilhem formulates this issue (see Han and Das 2015)

Where might we find examples of such description of everyday life once we have freed ourselves from the snares of the wiles of the metaphysical question: 'what is life?' by asking instead, in what context does such a question arise in the singularity of life being lived. I turn to the audacious writing of Krishna Sobti as offering the concepts with which she shows how life might be lived even when it seems to challenge

our given notions of reality – and second, demonstrating a body of writing in which the relation to the male voice is recrafted in a way that it becomes an aspect of the female voice in a body of writing rather than penetrating it or impregnating it with a dominant masculine voice. The four volumes that I take from Krishna Sobti's writing are called, *Hum Hashmat,* and I claim that they provide the finest example of a rendering of life that is both a critique of the sexualisation of language, and a striving toward a different kind of 'we' that does not efface the 'I'. It is perhaps a version of moral perfectionism in the female voice.

'हम हशमत' [We Hashmat]: the 'We' in the 'I'

Krishna Sobti, has described how one day in her study as she was writing, she sensed the presence of Hashmat, a male presence, but not with any sense of being alien to her. She explains that: 'When within the same writer emerge two personalities, two colors, two idioms – I saw this situation when I sensed the presence of Hashmat. I was taking his measure not as of someone else but as of myself. The linguistic idiom through which his visage unfastened was neither new, nor indeed that of a stranger or an outsider.' (Sobti and Vaid 2007) That Hashmat is not an imaginary, but a literal presence, impresses on Sobti and she allows herself a touch of surprise. As she says, 'I did not find in Hashmat's writing anything new or out of the ordinary. His thought was not borrowed from somewhere else, nor were the character of his words alien. Perhaps Hashmat was the form that the many layers of the city took.' This was also not a reinvention of Sobti. Yes, there was one event that was wonderous for Sobti, and she expands: 'With the first line that Hashmat wrote, her writing became different from Hashmat whose letters tilted from left to right, distinct from Sobti's rather straight fall of the letters.'

While I do not have the space within the confines of this lecture to elaborate all the details, grammatical and aesthetic, that go into the compound word (*samas*) of Sobti-Hashmat, the bold vision of bringing

the self towards a completion lies precisely in her being able to accept Hashmat in an undramatic way, as if his appearance was as natural and as ordinary as the sun rising in the sky every morning. I relate here three scenes. First is the scene of Sobti's writerly self finding itself in the voice of Hashmat as street orator, whose roughness of voice punctures the pompous prose of the writer-bureaucrat who wants to crush the speech of the ordinary—a mélange of words from Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, old Rajasthani, Punjabi. While the bureaucratic imagination of Hindi as a national language is to purify Hindi of this mélange of words, sounds, tone, for Sobti these admixtures are its life-blood received through streams of experiences brought in through the migrant, the refugee, the foreigner. Second, is a scene in which a character in Sobti, flows into Krishna[2] as she is confronted with the normative voice of settled domesticity that casts her as the bearer of unruly desires and despised forms of female speech. The third scene is what I would like to call Hashmat's gift, in which an accidental encounter (imaginary or real, we do not need to know) with a visitor from Lahore allows reclamation of a voice lost to Krishna, even if this restoration is momentary – a glimpse of an unrealised possibility.

Hashmat Speaks: The Street Orator

Hashmat's mode of initiating a critique is to greet his addressee (usually a writer or editor) through terms of address that I heard many times when I was young, during meetings on street corners, in election rallies, and in less refined circles of street level poets during *mushairas* (poetry recitations) in the *bastis* (localities) where part of my childhood was spent. For examples, Hashmat might say, *doston* (friends) *pyarayo* (my beloveds), janab (sir), *aji sahib* (officer, master, friend), *brather* (brother with an exaggerated Indian accent, the **a** stretched out and stressed) followed by phrases that are dripping with sarcasm or affection depending on whether he is addressing an adversary or a friend.

The simple but powerful grammatical device of the vocative is one indication we have that Hashmat is a male entity, adept in Urdu, though

also proficient in highly Sanskritic Hindi with words used like stones thrown in some calm waters.[3] Let us savor the first example of Hashmat's confrontation with Rakesh Vatsa, a politically well-connected Hindi writer whose column urging the purification of Hindi by expelling all words from other languages, especially Urdu and Farsi, was published in the influential Hindi magazine, Sarika, in 1985. Hashmat's rejoinder published in the same magazine is called, '*Samp ka Pitara*' (The Basket for the Snake). The use of the term *pitara* hints at venomous speech, (the poisonous bite) the covered basket containing the dangers that can be let loose on the world. This is a small example of how a *practice* rather than simply a nominal reference to which one can point, is embedded in the word.[4]

Let us return to the Snake's Pitara. The first line, the self- introduction by Hashmat, fixes the persona of the addressee (Rakesh Vatsa), more than it introduces Hashmat. The first line by Hashmat is a battle cry 'In the service of the street performer and the crowd pleaser (majmebaaz) R.V.', Hashmat offers his greeting (*aadaab*). Since by profession you are a street performer, you should have no objections being called a majmebaaz – You object to this appellation? Never mind, we will call you with another. Rest assured, we do not intend to trouble you or unmask you. Where can we have the audacity to sully your reputation. In your enlightened mind there burns a 30-vault milky bulb, and here, in our minds, just a bulb with zero power.

The speech of Hashmat here is highly performative and an example of what Krishna Baldev Vaid called a Hashmatayi *tukda an adjectival fragment* – another way in which the masculine voice is absorbed as an aspect of Sobti, not by its capacity to penetrate her being, but giving her voice a different tenor and texture. Hashmat lashes out against R. V's mission to purify Hindi. How is it, asks Hashmat, that the language of everyday use would suddenly become incomprehensible to the very people who use it? 'If Punjabi, Braja, Hindi, Apabhransha, have all left their impressions on Hindi and a new ground has given it space to move forward, why is your wrong eye, twitching?' (*aap ki ghalat aankh kyon*

phadak rahi hai?) The language here is a kind of street oratory often used in parodies of the rich and the powerful in street corner events

These matters come up in a dialogue between Sobti and Krishna Baldev Vaid (2007) but remain unresolved. There is Vaid's insistence that Sobti's literary language is not really the ordinary language of everyday talk, that there is a literary craft there. Sobti, on the other hand, insists that her craft itself is the gift of the swirls of different languages that change and absorb new experiences and that she experiences each word that emerges in her writing as endowed with its own reality, its own costume, its own lineage; each has its sound, its speed, fast or slow, finds its roots as it moves into a sentence, and knocks at the minds and hearts of the reader. Words change as new experiences are added: How can we claim, she asks, that Hindi has acquired its final shape?

A compelling example from Sobti is the reference to how different her characters are in each novel, and how much the little ditties, the snatches of songs or the calls of the hawkers, the water carriers, the kulfi-seller with his starched clothes are different in their cadence and how they give reality to the city. Some of the floating verses in her novels are what she had heard even as a child and has been unable to forget,

Ek chavanni jai-ram ji ki	[A four anna bit for the greeting evoking the name of Rama]
Ek chavanni aadaab arz	[A four anna bit for the Urdu greeting – aadaab arz]

This is the Hindi that is honed out of the habit of going out for a morning walk in one of the sprawling Mughal gardens of Delhi, carrying two four anna bits, one for the beggar who greets you with Jai Ram ji ki — hail to Lord Rama; and another one who lifts his right hand a bit, gestures to bring the palm towards the forehead but arrests it half way and releases the aadaab *arz* in the refined Urdu of the old city. Somehow her voice absorbs these signs she gathers as she surrenders herself to

the compulsion of the story that is arising in her. This bundling of habit and the cadence of the words, the mixtures of different languages in her writing are what she calls her craft. There is an uncanny resonance with Wittgenstein's (2019) analogy to the city and the multiplicity of language as the condition for speaking of a form of life.

> *Wittgenstein PI*, § 23. But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: …And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.

**

Sobti Meets Hashmat: Inheriting Negation

In introducing herself to Hashmat, thus:

> A thousand times did we bow before time
> This time, a 'yes'?
> Every time the same voice returns – 'no'

She comments: 'Friends, if in our inheritance we received a "no", then what is to be done?'

My own sense of this inheritance of a negation through which Sobti introduces herself is that it has something to do with how Sobti's writing emerges, only when she recedes and yields instead to a force, a compulsion coming from yet another way of making her hands an instrument for another. She writes when there is no option left. She writes, succumbing to a moment that is stubborn in its insistence to be there (*honi*); it installs itself before her and refuses to move and then, defeated, she picks up the pen. The truth is, she says, that the soul of the writer and the soul of the story both hover around the table. Suddenly

you become someone other – Each word a body. A soul. A smell. It is your hands that are moving but you feel the presence of someone other who is writing. If you claim that it is *you* who writes, the characters line up and warn you, it is not you Sahib, it is we who are making you write.

The Normative Domestic: The Scene of Reproach

In general, Sobti says she remains vigilant in maintaining a distant civility between herself and her characters. She does not seem to need this caution with regard to Hashmat. Yet sometimes a female character from her novel seems to slip into her life.

I will relate here one example she gives of such a slippage. Krishna was quite aware of how her mode of dressing, or her own visage sets her apart from others. She has been described by some of her biographers as dressing like a Mughal princess; flowing *gharara* and tunic with shimmering brocade or silver or gold borders, head always covered with a flowing scarf; huge dark glasses. At least this was the attire she supported (with shoes of two inches heels) at the time that the incident she describes here occurred — later when she moved from her Mall Road apartment to Mayur Vihar across the Jamuna at about age sixty, she shifted to a self-designed, equally striking but more practical attire[5]. About the incident relating to her character Mitro, she writes:

> In a party (in Delhi), reacting to my way of dressing and my gestures, a respectably married woman, hit me with a (metaphorical) flowery stick. With eyes, washed in milk, dripping with sweetness, she took my measure with the eyes of a concerned mother, and said in a very gentle voice, you seem to be the kind who is fond of music and dance, As soon as I discerned her meaning (the implied insult), I handed her my own eyes for use as her camera. I meekly submitted myself to the pictures, present, past, that she began to click. That evening, the clearest photograph that emerged was this. I am all decked up, with a *surahi* (wine jug) decorated with intricate enamel

designs (*meenakari*), from which I am pouring out something (where, do not ask).

I cannot resist giving a fragment of the scene from Mitro Marjani, that comes closest to the image of Krishna Sobti as a *saqi* (the literary figure of the enticing wine-pourer of Persian literature), carrying a wine jug as the image of Mitro suddenly flashes before us. The kindly woman might not have directly called her style and mode of being as taken from the *kotha* (the cordoned off space of the courtesan) but in her dream image Krishna shows how the image of Mitro was being fused with the image of Sobti. So here is the point of denouement in Mitro Marjani when away from the conjugal home Mitro dares to enact the courtesan and her husband Sardari responds, not by the disciplining of desire he has always tried to impose on her, but by accepting that he could indeed be the one who caused such pleasure to awaken in this earthy beauty. Abandoning the hold of the image of the 'good' Hindu wife allows Sardari to experience the life of fantasy within (and not outside) the domestic. Here is a brief snippet from this scene.

> Seductively, with the wine jug in hand, as she walked in with the gait of nymph, Sardari felt she was some heavenly beauty from Basrah[6]. She kept the jug on a stool and looking into the eyes of her husband said, 'You do not recognize your own Mitro? Forget for tonight my *bhole balma* (unworldly darling) that Mitro is your ritually wedded wife … let yourself imagine today that Mitro is Lal Bai, the famous courtesan of Sangroor….' Spreading his arms, he said, so come here then, you, Lal Bai, let's take your measure too.

Fantasy is not expelled from the everyday nor does it dissolve into the skepticism of the male subject, am *I* really the cause of this pleasure in this woman? Instead Sardari learns to trust this fantasy. Sobti has said in an interview that she was disappointed and surprised that Mitro seemed to have accepted the bounds of the domestic as evidence that the author cannot direct where the character will go. True.

Hashmat's Gift

My last example of a different register of speech from Hashmat is the occasion when through a chance encounter, he meets Amjad Bhatti, the young editor of the magazine *Panj Dariya*, from Lahore. Through a meandering path, that I will skip, Sheela and Hashmat, both find themselves invited to the home of Amrita Pritam where Imroz, her care giver and perhaps lover, and they spend an evening reminiscing over the city of Lahore. Sobti is present only through the voice of Hashmat – yet it is a blended voice of Hashmat, Sobti, and Krishna.

There are some moments I wish to capture even if they will appear as just details scattered here and there. Hashmat starts, 'what timing !…' when Amjad interrupts him, 'this man (referring to himself, *banda*) is coming from Lahore, let us talk in our own language …' Imroz stretches the talk, Hashmat Miyan, this man is the authentic Lahori man— today at least let us use our own tongue – talk to him not in Hindi or Urdu, but in Punjabi.

There is at this moment the famous silences that Sobti has repeatedly said she wants to preserve in her writing. One assumes that the conversation moved forward in Punjabi (whether in the story or in the actual meeting) but the written account does not bear any mark of that. There is an exchange on popular authors in Pakistan, how has Lahore expanded? Hashmat's heart started yearning for Lahore – Anarkali, Mall, Jail Road, Nisbet Road …but when he looked at Amjad there was not even a shade of recognition of this yearning. Hashmat wishes, he could have belonged to this generation, with nothing fracturing the old and the new. Hashmat learns that Amjad's family was uprooted from Amritsar. His grandfather was a famed Sufi poet. On Hashmat's request, Amjad reads out his own poetry from a diary, he carries with him. This and the other poems he recites, are the only strings of words we hear in Punjabi in the whole four volumes of Hum Hashmat. All kinds of talk pervade, letting us imagine the sounds of Punjabi, more poetry is recited. Then at one point, they return to Lahore.

The splendor of Lahore?

Very much there.

The cool breezes?

They flow as ever, make us well.

And those warm hearts of the Lahoris, brimming with passion?

As always, they are there, Hashmat Sahib.

We (Hashmat) wanted to ask more but then suddenly the flag of the new nation began fluttering between us.

In utter confusion, Hashmat asked, are the *sarson ka sag* and *makki di roti*, there too…?

Amjad Bhatti seems to grow ten years older, 'Hashmat Sahib, what you want to know, I understand well. Let it go. But yes, I can tell you that mustard greens and corn roti is cooked the same way; and smeared with ghee the same way, on that side as on this side.'

The last glimpse is of how Hashmat gets up, shakes Amjad's hands (this Amritsari-Lahori boy). All right, Your Highness (*badshaho*), go make your country prosperous. If you can remember, give them our salaam — tell them, there was a time when we too were the inhabitants of that same nation…

Reading this essay, I thought this was the most complex rendering of voice I have seen. Nowhere does Sobti allow her voice to be marked as female, not through grammar, not through any dramatic cues, the encounter in this way is possible because it is Hashmat who speaks. Yet the texture of the text is suffused by the swirling affects of Krishna and of Sobti. Krishna had never allowed herself to speak in Punjabi; Sobti resolutely kept to the half tones of Punjabi but refused to be seen as a Punjabi writer. Through Hashmat she now participates in a conversation in Punjabi though she will not allow her reader to hear the sounds of

Punjabi coming from her mouth[7]. We as readers do not hear the Punjabi but we can read the poems aloud and relive the scene of Amjad reciting his poems in Punjabi and through the mediation of Hashmi, see Krishna allowing herself to participate in a Lahori evening. The last question that stumbles out of Hashmat's mouth on whether the *sarson da saag* and *makki di roti* is made in the same way there as here; it could only have been a woman's question.

Conclusion

In the recent surge of writing on Wittgenstein and feminism, Laugier (2025b) makes an important intervention in arguing that a line runs from Wittgenstein to Austin to Cavell that consists not in applying concepts from ordinary language philosophy to feminism, but in showing how the vulnerability of human action aligns with ethics as the care of the ordinary form of life in both traditions of thought. In the writing of Krishna Sobti and her quiet acceptance of Hashmat as a male presence within her own body of writing, we find her fierce defense of a Hindi energised by many tongues, and her weaving together of domestic, erotic, and political scenes that all demonstrate how the female subject can absorb the masculine voice without being overtaken by it. Hashmat's street oratory, his confrontation with language purifiers, his encounter with a young Lahori editor—all are, at one level, episodes in a male voice. Yet they are composed, sustained, and given their ethical pitch by Sobti's own investments in the ordinary: the cadence of street calls, the taste of mustard greens and corn bread, the remembered rhythms of Partition cities, the figure of the courtesan smuggled back into the domestic.

It remains for us to ask if anthropology, and by implication social science can receive this gift of thinking in the feminine mode from literature and thus find a joining of ethics and politics in the reinstitution of life. The female voice in the movement of thought as a descent in the ordinary is not to shun reason but recognise other paths to it.

Acknowledgements

I owe a huge debt to Andrew Brandel, Piergiorgio Donatelli, Sandra Laugier, Jocelyn Benoist, and Ranen Das, for intellectual stimulation and for lessons in perseverance.

Notes

1. In a stringent critique of this amicus curia petition Donatelli (unpublished) writes, When the brief states that 'the distinction between males and females is not gerrymandered,' it refuses to consider what humanity has made of this distinction, how imagination has taken hold of it, how it has come to shape our sense of reality, in miserable or happier ways. It is not merely a matter of philosophical terminology; it defines the texture of our lives, the way we see and respond to the world. Can we discuss the organisation of sports without concern for the immense transformation that is occurring around the very 'naturalness' of the distinction between men and women? If we do so, we align ourselves with those who choose not to see the change taking place, the struggles, the immense suffering. We can, of course, decide to do this—to remain neutral investigators of natural kinds such as 'gold' and 'mammal'—but that choice already marks a moral failure.
2. I move between the names Sobti and Krishna to indicate the complex relation between the author (Sobti) and the suggestion of the voice as the autobiographical voice. Krishna Sobti keeps what she calls a civil distance between her characters and herself; she indicates in some places that the relation between author character, and the autobiographical self is a complex one – and in shifting among the names Sobti, Krishna and Hashmat we can get a sense of this complexity in which these three figures overlap without ever being completely absorbed into each other.
3. I often find myself squirming at the deafness to the beauty of Sanskrit in both Sobti and Hashmat, but then the advocates of a more sanskritised Hindi themselves are equally deaf to its delicacy and the dependance of Sanskrit on softer sounds from the literary languages of Prakrit and its vast treasures of Prakrit gathas, stories and poems that provided the examples of figures of speech or of dhvani (resonance) in canonical Sanskrit texts on poetics.
4. Sobti's writing is well-known for her fierce devotion to words and many of her political battles have been over a certain kind of Hindi that draws its energy from the life of each street, each mohalla or kasba (types of neighborhoods). She famously withdrew her first novel Channa at the proof stage from Bharati Publishing House because she could not bear the way the editors had 'refined' her words substituting the more refined sagai for her word, kudmai to refer to the ceremony of engagement,

or made shahni into shahpatni to refer to the Shah's wife without consulting her in the matter. The publisher's reasoning was that words like sagai and shahpatni would retain the Punjabi half tones but would be more comprehensible to the Hindi reader. Sobti forcefully argued against this urban refinement of her language because, for her, these words were particular to the region where Shahpur, the village where her novel was located as part of British India, and the words she used drew their energy and force from the very soil and the water of the rural life. Sobti pointed out that in Chandradhar Guleri's short story set in the beginning of the First World War, it is the word kudmai which indicates that in this region, that was the appropriate term for the ceremony of engagement and not sagai. .

5. Dolly Rockwell described this attire as follows: Thus evolved the self-designed attire of her later years: a shiny, brightly colored flowing kameez, matching billowing shalwar, and golden brocade-bordered over-vest, with tassel-tie across the bust-line, and a matching diaphanous (sheer) dupatta.
6. Basrah is the famed port city in Iraq from where Sindbad, the sailor was said to have embarked.
7. Sobti allows her sense of sadness to be deposited in some stories as well as the critique from the street in such ditties as a refugee child - shoulder and arm wrapped in bandages singing and trying to gather money by begging at the Red Fort where Independence was being celebrated.

   Jay Jay Jawaharlal -tumne kar diya kamal-dharti phad Punjab ki– tumne de diya hamein rumal. [Hail to you Jawaharlal- you made a miracle- tearing apart the land of Punjab- you gave us a handkerchief- go wipe your tears.

   Krishna says, she does not remember how she felt then, but years later she wrote the story Azadi Shammojan ki.

References

Asad, Talal. 1986 "The Concept of Cultural. Translation in British Social Antropology" in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: ed. James Clifford & George Marcus*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, pp. 141-163

Austin, John L.1961 "A plea for excuses." In *Philosophical Papers.* New York: Oxford university Press

Benoist, Jocelyn 2025. The Subject of Anthropology. Paper presented at Conference on "Penser face aux désastres avec Veena Das", University of Nanterre, November 13 and Nov. 14

Das, Veena. 1979. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press

Das, Veena, (2007). *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Berkeley; University of California Press

Das, Veena. 2015. *Affliction: Health, Disease, Poverty*. New York: Fordham Univ Press.

Das, Veena, 2025. “The Female Voice and the Movement of Thought” in, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Wittgensteinian Feminism*, ed. Sandra Laugier, Isabel G. Gamero, *et al,* London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp 141-164.

De- Vries, Hent 2006. “On General and Divine Economy: Talal Asad’s Genealogy of the Secular and Emmanuel Levinas’s Critique of Capitalism, Colonialism, and Money” in *Powers of the Secular Modern,* ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind*,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp., 113-133

Donatelli, Piergiorgio, 2025. “Ethics and the Details of Life,” in *A Matter of Detail: Anthropology, Philosophy and Aesthetics,* ed. Andrew Brandel, Veena Das et al, Toronto: Toronto University Press, pp.61-80

Donatelli, Piergiorgio, in press, “The Ordinary as Ceremony: Wittgenstein on Language and Religion” *Philosophie*

Durkheim, Emile, 1995 The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, tr. K. E. Fields, New York: The Free Press

Foucault, Michel. 2005. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the College de France, 1981-82*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Fuchs, Sandhya. 2024. *Fragile Hope: Seeking Justice for Hate Crimes in India*. Stanford University Press,

Ganeri, Jonardon. 2014. *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450-1700*. Oxford University Press.

Ganeri, Jonardon 2014b, Reply to Jay Garfield 2014 *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 64, Issue 255, pp.346–347, https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqt051

Guru, Gopal, and Sundar Sarukkai. 2018. *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Han, Clara and Veena Das. 2015 “Introduction: A Concept Note” *Living and dying in the contemporary world: A Compendium*, Ed. Veena Das and Clara Han, Berkeley: Univ of California Press, pp1-38

Koselleck, Reinhart. 2020, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*. Stanford University Press, 2020.

Laugier, Sandra. 2020 “The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary.” *Care Ethics in Yet a Different Voice: Francophone Contributions* (2020): 29-58.

Laugier, Sandra 2021. “Vulnérabilité de l’ordinaire”, in *Concepts de l’ordinaire,* ed. Pierre Fasula et Sandra Laugier (dir.), Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, pp.165-187

Laugier, Sandra. 2025, “Wittgenstein, Austin, Cavell: Some Roots of a Feminist OLP” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Wittgensteinian Feminism*, ed. Sandra Laugier, Isabel G. Gamero, *et al,* London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp.113-140

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1950 *Introduction à l’oeuvre de Marcel Mauss*. Presses Universitaire de France, \

Levinas, Emmanuel. 2001. Is it righteous to be? Interviews with Emmaneul Levinas, (ed. Jill Robbins). Berkeley University of California Press

McDowell, John. 1996. *Mind and World.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

McDowell, John. 2008 “Comment on Stanley Cavell’s ‘companionable thinking’.” *Philosophy and Animal Life*: New York: Columbia University Press127-138.

Sobti Krishna, 1977-2019, *Hum Hashmat*, Vol. 1-4, Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan

Sobti Krishna, 2018, *Marfat Dilli*, Delhi: Rajkamal Praksahan.

Sobti Krishna and Krishna Baldev Vaid, 2007. Sobti-Vaid SamvadL *Lekhan aur Lekhak,* Delhi: Rajkamal.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations,* 4th ed. Edited by Gertrude Elisabeth Margaret Anscombe, Peter Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell (Referred in the text as **PI**).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2018. “Remarks on Frazer’s The Golden Bough. In *The Mythology in Our Language: Remarks on Frazer’s The Golden Bough*. Edited by Giovanni da Col and Stephan Palmié. Translated by Stephan Palmié. Chicago: Hau Books, pp. 29-74.

Zerilli. Linda 2015. The hysteric, disciplinary power, and resistance, Foucault 13/13 Blog

Https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/foucault1313/2015/10/30/foucault-413-linda-zerilli-on-the-hysteric-disciplinary-power-and-resistance/

Social Change Annual Lecture*

Year	Speaker	Topic
2025	Krishna Kumar	Social Change as an Object of Educational Inquiry
2024	Barbara Harriss-White	Gold in India's Social Development
2023	Madhav Gadgil	Ecosystem People, Biosphere People, Ecological Refugees
2022	Bina Agarwal	Gender, Presence and Representation
2021	G. N. Devy	Thinking of Crime: The State, Migrant Population and the Missing Justice
2020	Uma Chakravarti	From the Home to the Borders: Violence Against Women, Impunity and Resistance
2019	Gopal Guru	Migration: A Moral Protest

*Previously known as the Social Change Golden Jubilee Lecture, this lecture series was started in 2019 to mark fifty years of *Social Change*'s publication.

Veena Das is Professor Emerita in Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. She is the recipient of honorary doctorates from several universities and numerous other prestigious awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship awarded in 2009. She taught at the Delhi School of Economics for more than thirty years and at the New School before she joined Johns Hopkins University in 2000. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and in 2019 was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. Her research interests range across anthropology, philosophy, and literature. She is particularly interested in how the textures and contours of everyday life can be rendered, with the everyday and the event conjoined in the making of the ordinary and the critical. Among her many books are, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary (2007), Affliction: Health, Disease, Poverty* (2015), *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein* (2020), *Slum Acts* (2022); and the most recent co-edited volume, *A Matter of Detail* (2025). Her writings have been translated into many languages including, Chinese, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, Hindi, Bangla, Japanese, and Korean.

Council for Social Development
Sangha Rachana, 53 Lodi Estate, New Delhi – 110003
T: +91-11-24615383, 24611700, 24693065
E: csdnd@csdindia.org

www.csdindia.org