

## *The Sky in the Palm*

**SHAILESH B.R.**

### **Harvesting Spirit**

To learn from our ancestors is to see existence as a sacred relationship between the self, others, earth, and sky. This balance is the axis of life itself, sometimes co-opted by faiths and newer belief systems. But we must remind ourselves that the sky and the harvest come from our cosmic and climactic universe. The rains fill beds of earth to nourish seeds that become food to nurture our mortal lives. Across many cultures, we pray to the skies to bring us clouds and when the monsoon arrives, we nurture the very beds, delicately placing grain and a prayer in its warm embrace. As they grow and mature, in some places we sing to the slender stalks as we harvest. Grains of rice are sustenance, fertility, life, and prosperity.

A handful of rice is both food and the meaning of our lives; of holding the sky in the palm of our hands. For children as they transition to solid food from milk and harvest festivals where we celebrate communities tied to ideas of labour and nourishment. It is divine and our essential every day.

Our mothers have for centuries reminded us how everything is alive – the rivers, trees, mountains, stones, and even the wind. As gatherers and seed-keepers, healers, and storytellers, this sacred is our foundational faith in nature; a continuity, cyclical and reaffirming.

### **Not to Ask, But to Seek**

Play becomes a language in Shailesh B.R.'s works and extends his interest in challenging belief systems with everyday life and experiences. He is interested in dismantling the dogmatic and humanizing our constant need to resort to something 'more than us' in an absolute way to fix our lives. These rituals that were once free of specificity and tied to a language of gratitude are narrowed by 'the ask' and the prayer. It comes from a long history of gestures and acts of understanding nature.

Amongst the many acts he takes on is the *Handful of Rice* machine, where we are invited to sit and wait, while the device scoops a handful of rice and showers us with grains. An interpretation of 'showers of blessings' perhaps that echoes amongst many things a wish for abundance of food and prosperity.

### **Digital Divine**

The kinetic installation *Prayer Machine 2.0* reimagines the intersection of automation and the metaphysical in an age marked by alienation, othering and division. The work enacts sacred rituals including ringing bells, making offerings, etc. without consciousness or belief. In perfecting prayer with mechanical precision, we are introduced to the tensions of faith as between conviction and embodied practice. As we grapple with an increasingly algorithmic, automated world, *Prayer Machine 2.0* reflects how human gestures of care, empathy, and reverence may have to contend with systems of efficiency and control.

Thus, the machine becomes a philosophical provocation asking us to reconsider the peripheries of intelligence, emotion, and belonging. In times of xenophobia, when difference is treated as threat, the work asks whether the capacity for devotion, be it human or mechanical, might offer a new ethics of inclusion. Can a machine's unprejudiced repetition of sacred acts remind us of our shared vulnerability and our yearning for connection beyond identity?

It questions whether enlightenment, compassion, or transcendence can survive when both faith and otherness are filtered through mechanical systems whether divine or digital.

### **Agency Anew**

*Swayamvara* takes the ancient 'ideal' of supposed choice, agency, and self-determination and 'celebrates' the individual's right to select a partner, perhaps a radical notion of autonomy in its time we may think. Yet, within its structure lies a subtle paradox where the chooser acts within predefined boundaries, selecting from a curated set of 'worthy' candidates who must demonstrate excellence through performance and competition.

In bringing philosophy and technology into dialogue, Shailesh uses the *Swayamvara* to question how freedom is framed and mediated across social customs and/or digital systems. In an age when algorithms pre-select our options, the ritual is reframed anew. In critiquing the *swayamvara*, the work remains with it being a meditation on agency. It invites reflection; perhaps freedom has never meant the absence of limits, but the awareness and wisdom to choose meaningfully within them.

### **Thinking Machines**

Philosophy can be narrowly understood as an instrument through which humanity interrogates its own being. It has relied on the considered tools of reasoning, introspection, and dialogue, processes inseparable from consciousness, doubt, and language. In the era of artificial intelligence, however, these instruments are being re-forged in silicon. The question now is no longer what it means for humans to think, but whether thinking itself can be automated.

*Philosophers* stages this question as an encounter rather than a statement through a machine that uses an AI-generated portrait of a philosopher, a silicon ear, and speakers to talk and/or respond in real time. This conversation is prompted by audience questions and unfolds endlessly in a recursive, unresolved, sometimes eerily fluent manner.

In *Philosophers*, the machine's speech gestures toward understanding, yet remains a choreography of data without consciousness. Thought itself might be slipping from being a private act of reflection to a public automation of reasoning, where language, stripped of ambiguity and doubt becomes a function of pattern recognition and classification.

And yet, there is also tenderness in this machine's attempt to speak. In their ceaseless dialogue, the artificial philosophers echo the open-ended nature of human inquiry. *Philosophers* does not mourn the contamination of human thought by AI but uses it to remind us that what remains distinctly human in our desire to reason, to argue, to reach beyond certainty.

Its dialogue loops endlessly, not to simulate understanding but to expose the spaces where meaning falters, the silences between words, the hesitation before response. *Philosophers* reminds us that thinking, whether human or mechanical, is continuous, evolving and never complete. It unfolds in the tension between knowing and not knowing where intelligence, empathy, and uncertainty coalesce.

### **Spillage. Seepage.**

*Koopamanduka* reimagines the idiom 'the frog in the well', transforming a moral allegory about ignorance and insularity into a meditation on ecological confinement. In classical thought, the *manduka*

in the well is a creature of limited knowledge unable to perceive the extensive world beyond. The frog's futile life within the well echoes both a Sisyphean repetition and an ecological stagnation. In Shailesh's rendition, the well itself has dried so what once symbolized an 'ignorance of the world's vastness' now becomes a symbol of the world's degradation. The frog is no longer the ignorant one but the survivor of human ignorance.

From a critical ecological perspective, *Koopamanduka* positions the nonhuman as agentive yet trapped, participants in a shared entanglement where survival itself becomes performative. The frogs' endless striving is perhaps our life in the Anthropocene. We keep moving, yet the idea of moving forward feels suspended, as if the future itself were on hold.

By merging an allegory with climate discourse, *Koopamanduka* performs a decolonial gesture of reclaiming a classical South Asian metaphor as a living, adaptable ecological language. The 'well' is no longer the site of ignorance but of memory, a cultural and ecological archive where remnants of the past echo against the void of the future.

Shailesh remains with the possibility of interpretation and the (occasional) situational humour. In Kannada, '*Hamsa Ksheera Nyaya*' narrates the swan's ability to separate milk from water. It represents the wisdom of discretion and the ability to tell good from bad, much like how a swan is believed to drink only the milk, leaving the water behind. *Milk will be Milk and Water will be Water* takes on a mechanical interpretation of this phrase to enunciate the need for our discernment in these evil, polarizing times.

Across Shailesh B.R.'s practice, the sacred and the speculative converge in acts of questioning. His machines, myths, and metaphors do not offer certainty but open thresholds between the human and the more than human; the ancient and the algorithmic. Shailesh recalibrates the inherited as critical sites of reflection on belief, agency, and survival in this age of extreme exhaustion. Thinking, like faith, is not a closed circuit but a constant, alive process of attunement.

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