

Savita Singh
Roy Bhaskar
Mervyn Hartwig

Reality and Its Depths

A Conversation Between Savita Singh
and Roy Bhaskar

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Edited by Mervyn Hartwig

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*This is the winter of the world; –and here
We die, even as the winds of Autumn fade,
Expiring in the frore and foggy air.*

*Behold! Spring comes, though we must pass,
who made*

*The promise of its birth, –even as the shade
Which from our death, as from a mountain,
flings*

*The future, a broad sunrise; thus arrayed
As with the plumes of overshadowing wings,
From its dark gulf of chains, Earth like an
eagle springs.*

*O dearest love! we shall be dead and cold
Before this morn may on the world arise;
Wouldst thou the glory of its dawn behold?
Alas! gaze not on me, but turn thine eyes
On thine own heart –it is a paradise
Which everlasting Spring has made its own,
And while drear Winter fills the naked skies,
Sweet streams of sunny thought, and flowers
fresh-blown,
Are there, and weave their sounds and odours
into one.*

Shelley

*Thirst drove me down to the water
where I drank the moon's reflection.
Now I am a lion staring up totally
lost in love with the thing itself.*

Rumi

Author's Preface

I met Roy Bhaskar at the beginning of 2001 in New Delhi. He had been invited to give a series of lectures at Delhi University on critical realism. I was back from studying at McGill then and had joined the Developing Countries Resource Centre, Delhi University, as an associate fellow. In the Centre, there was a group of young scholars deeply engaged with creative critical theory. They wanted to make it contextually meaningful by engaging with philosophy of science and Indian philosophy simultaneously. Roy had the right recipe for this group. Manindra Nath Thakur was in touch with Roy as he (Manindra) was working on the epistemological challenges to Marxism, particularly in the context of understanding religion. In one of the meetings of DCRC, Manoranjan Mohanty spoke about the creative political theory which he was conceptualising at that time. A process of fermentation was going on, and the group was already finding Roy's work quite relevant to it. It had to depend a lot on critical realism, Manoranjan said. Roy expressed his desire to come to India, and the University was intellectually ready to receive him. Neera Chandhike, the then Chair of the Department of Political Science, facilitated the way, and Manindra was able to organise a vibrant afternoon interaction between Roy and the members of the group. Nath Thakur suggested that we should invite Roy to Delhi University to speak. Roy had formed a small group of critical realists in Kolkata already.

This was the beginning of the formation of Creative Critical Theory group and also in a way of the book *Reality and Its Depths*. This group found Roy's ideas quite relevant to the project of decolonising mind, which was necessary for any democratic negotiation between East and West, which was a shared concern. This group has grown since then, and now it organises an annual conference in collaboration with the India International Centre. It dedicated its 2015 Colloquium to Roy Bhaskar as one of those who have inspired it.

Reality and Its Depths was in part our response to the difficulties some younger scholars have experienced in understanding Roy's work, even though his *A Realist Theory of Science* was widely read and admired. One problem was that, except for a very small group of replicative social scientists, positivism was treated with

understandable scepticism in India from the very beginning. Indian modernity, in my view, began on this note of difference. The close connection between colonialism and positivism was always apparent. That is why the intellectual path of interpretation of major philosophical texts was undertaken as a way to realise modernity.

When Roy arrived in the Department of Political Science on the appointed afternoon, his appearance startled some of the older professors. He was wearing a brilliant turquoise blue raw silk shirt and equally colourful trousers, long hair touching his shoulders and a lovely smile on his face. People were expecting a greyish professor; his philosophy had created that expectation, I suppose. But the philosopher Roy Bhaskar was far more celebratory of ordinary life, which he had theorised as multilayered and pregnant with the possibility of emancipation. Ultimately, it had to be achieved effortlessly, he believed, as we continuously live in harmony with our real selves or grounds states. Roy spoke of critical realism's new phase which he was still theorising. He called it the 'metaReality layer' of critical realism. 'Let us break the last taboo practiced in Western thought', he said. 'Let us see how we can theorise or do ethics rationally. Critical realism has come into being by breaking a series of taboos in the Western philosophy. These taboos have constrained the realisation of freedom in thought and in our socio-political lives.' By beginning in this manner, he had already performed critical realism; the professors who were sceptical of his attire and persona had realised that critical realism was about breaking the confidence one reposes in settled ideas. Interestingly, Roy got himself a number of brilliant coloured silk shirts made up in Delhi. He developed a love for raw silk as well and got some trousers made. Some of his clothes remain with me, for when he left Delhi the last time they had gone for dry cleaning and were not delivered on time. When I visited him in London in 2010, I brought him two of these shirts as he had asked me and kept the rest with me. He had hoped to visit New Delhi again. Manindra and I tried to get him here as visiting professor for three years. It was not to be realised, as he was in no position to return due to his failing health.

After Roy finished his lecture that day, the seminar room was a serious place. Everything else had receded into the background. People were amazed at the familiarity of the ideas Roy put forward, except perhaps the philosophical rendering of these ideas, the insistence on ontology and the clarification of the structure of reality, the 'real' being the substratum of all that is actual—contradictory, heteronomous, egoistical, generally the realm of duality. Indian scholars knew their Marx very well, and so it was coming close to them. But Roy did not bifurcate the social world between ideology and reality. He was unravelling the nature of totality quite differently. His understanding of reality was multilayered, and what was comprehended as ideology by others was a layer of reality only. The discussion lasted for almost one and half hours. The critical realist group consisting of Manoranjan Mohanty, Manindra Nath Thakur and Savita Singh thus got formed during the discussion itself. We kept supporting Roy, putting forward our own ideas to make them stick with Delhi scholars. Later on, we made arrangements for him to give

more lectures: one in Zhakir Hussain Delhi College and another in Sahitya Akademi, Delhi. The serious nature of discussions that followed after his talks spoke of the success of his ideas. He even attracted a large number of Marxist scholars including the noted left scholar, activist and a public intellectual Kumaresh Chakravarty, who chaired his Zhakir Husain College lecture; he and Roy planned to work together later on a project titled 'Reflexivity and the Labour Movement'.

But the metaReality part of his critical realism was making people wonder if it was not the Upanishadic articulations of Indian philosophy. There was caution and scepticism and yet a deep desire to understand it. I had read Roy to some extent and had followed his work until *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (Bhaskar 1993), but was quite unfamiliar with the new formulations. After his Sahitya Akademi lecture, I proposed to him that it would be a good idea to edit a reader-friendly volume of his writings. He proposed another model: a meaningful conversation between the two of us. Roy got me all his books within a few days of our deciding to undertake this journey. I had quite a task on my hands. I suggested that the title of these philosophical conversations should be *Fathoming the Depths of Reality*. Roy agreed instantly. Unfortunately, this title later had to be changed, because it had been advertised for publication by another publisher, together with an ISBN, and all the online information about this could not be removed. So, I suggested *Reality and Its Depths*, and that was accepted.

Our first conversation took place in the lounge of the Imperial hotel, Janpath. I suggested that our future conversations take place in the India International Centre, a more congenial space for such intellectual engagement. I was reading Roy at a speed I had never managed before, not even at McGill while pursuing my Ph.D. Roy took a room at the India International Centre, and we started getting to know each other better. I was writing my thesis at the time (much delayed), *The Discourse of Modernity in India: A Hermeneutical Study*, and was very much in that space philosophically. I had travelled with Charles Taylor quite a distance in the dense forest of hermeneutics and had understood the ontological positioning of language and understanding within it. Roy once told me half jokingly that he would be waiting for me to travel with him through metaReality once I had managed to come out of this state of duality sustained by my infatuation with hermeneutics. In *Reality and Its Depths*, we kept trying to work out this movement towards understanding nonduality or the ground state and cosmic envelop. We planned a second book together entitled *Living in MetaReality*, and a third on *New Ways of Being, New Ways of Seeing*. Roy drafted a blurb for *Reality and Its Depths* in which he listed these as our future philosophical endeavours. Neither of them could be realised, however.

Roy knew about my serious engagement with poetry. Whenever I saw him, he would ask me if I had written any new poems, and he would read them. He had such an interesting way of reading poetry that it boosted my confidence in my powers as a poet. He kept telling me poetry was more relevant than anything else. 'You are already in a nondual space. It's the creativity that actually leads to expanded existence. You are an expanded being.' I didn't believe him at first.

He said it would become apparent during our conversation about understanding the depths of reality. And it did. I kept writing poetry along with teaching and other academic writing that one necessarily has to do. He said similar things about feminism. He knew where I was going. It's a pity that the chapter on our discussion of feminism and women's labour is incomplete. The tapes got damaged.

To complete the conversation, Roy returned to New Delhi twice, each time more determined to persuade me to journey through metaReality. I owe him another book, a book of poems that will take Roy travelling with me through his own philosophical journey poetically. I was extremely happy when in 2010 I received an invitation from a literary group based in Birmingham, South Asian Arts and Heritage, to give a series of lectures and do workshops on culture, language and poetry. It was an opportunity to see Roy as well. I wrote to him, and we fixed a date to meet. I was stunned to see him, almost speechless at his state of health, one foot amputated, which he had never told me about. He was living in a room at The Holiday Inn, Kings Cross. I never really asked him why. I guessed it was better there for him. But he had company. A lovely friend, Cheryl Frank, was there caring for him. I had taken white carnations for him along with his two shirts, bright yellow and beautiful crimson, his favourite colours. That was the last time I saw him.

After he passed away in November 2014, I became very restless about the book we had done together. I had sent him the transcript of our conversation in 2005 or 2006. Roy kept thinking that he would add more to this book. He must have had some ideas. He wasn't done yet, I think. He often spoke to me about Mervyn Hartwig, and once suggested I write to him, sending him the abstract of a paper I was presenting at an international seminar on critical realism. He valued Mervyn immensely. That is why I got in touch with him about the status of the manuscript for *Reality and Its Depths*. Mervyn had mentioned this as 'forthcoming' in an introduction to one of Roy's other books. I knew he would be able to do something about bringing *Reality and Its Depths* to publication, which he did. The book can now see the light of the day thanks to Mervyn. I dedicate this book to him as much as to Roy. I consider it a token of love for Roy on Mervyn's part, in fact for both of us, brother and sister, for that is what we became as we progressed towards plumbing the depths of reality.

Thinking of Roy and this book, I see it keeping company with the white carnations I gave him, which he placed in a flower vase on a table near his bed in the room he lived in to the end. These flowers will never wilt, as Roy himself wrote after I returned to New Delhi. 'These flowers are as fresh even today as when you gave them to me.'



Savita Singh speaking in Paris, June 2016



Roy Bhaskar at the Golden Gate, Mumbai, 2001

New Delhi, India
May 2018

Savita Singh

Editor's Preface

Having grown up in an Indian household in the UK and visited India several times with his parents as a child, Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014) returned to India on several occasions in the early years of the new millennium, both in search of inspiration for his burgeoning philosophy of metaReality, the culminating phase of his philosophical system, and to give lectures and seminars to promote his philosophy. One set of his notes for the first trip is headed 'Going home'. The conversations contained in this book were recorded in Delhi on several separate occasions during these trips: September 2001 (commencing two days after 9/11), and January and February 2002. On the first of these visits, Roy met Savita at one of his seminars and sought her out as an interlocutor. They decided to do a book of conversations together. A rough transcript of the recordings was made in Delhi over the next few years, but until Savita contacted me about it in October 2015, the project was taken no further. After 2002, Savita and Roy went their separate ways, Savita pursuing her main vocation as a poet and Roy his as a philosopher.

While *Reality and Its Depths*, like *The Formation of Critical Realism* (Bhaskar with Hartwig 2010), tells the story of the development of the philosophy of critical realism and metaReality, many features mark it out as highly distinctive and valuable. First, Roy's main stated project in these conversations is to expound his philosophy for an Indian audience. This gives the book a distinctly Indian flavour, more so than any other of his works, and also sheds invaluable light on his so-called¹ spiritual turn. While it would be a mistake to view the philosophy of metaReality as the result of a simple transapplication of Vedic ideas—it is arrived at most fundamentally by immanent critique of the prior phases of Roy's thought—the book makes it clearer than his other work that the influence is a powerful one. It brings out a Vedic dimension to Roy's thought that had always been present, but never so palpably. This is seen most graphically, perhaps, in the sense that Roy had throughout his life, recorded here for the first time, that his original ideas were coming, not from his embodied personality as such, but from his transcendently

¹Bhaskar often referred to his spiritual and dialectical turns as 'so-called' because he held that his philosophy was implicitly spiritual and dialectical in all its phases.

real self; but it is also evident, for example, in his conviction that being is at bottom love (he and Savita planned to do two more books about this called *New Ways of Being*, *New Ways of Seeing* and *Living MetaReality*), and more generally in the concept of a nondual zone of being that underpins the dual world that we humans inhabit. This effect is heightened of course by the Indian setting, by the fact that Savita is Indian and by Roy's own Indian background. An array of Indian thinkers and politicians and various other 'local' topics are discussed. Second, the breakthrough to a concept of everyday transcendence,² as distinct from transcendence as peak experience, which is fundamental to the philosophy of metaReality, occurs during one of these conversations (Chap. 3); as nowhere else in Roy's oeuvre, the reader can witness the new concept being born, and share in the mounting excitement of both speakers. Third, there is a recurrent paean to the rich individualism made thinkable, though not in general actual, by capitalist modernity, which has its source ultimately in the diversity and creativity of ground states. The 'bottom line' of the book is that '*you* are a unique, concretely singular individual'. 'There is no authority but yourself. That is true autonomy.' This philosophy has no truck with elitism and substitutionism of any kind. Fourth, in what he refers to as 'a Socratic dialogue', Roy elaborates his views on recognition and immortality, which 'reverse Hegel', and this again is unique to this book, and brilliantly done. Integral to this dialogue is, as Roy puts it, 'a courageous and beautiful colloquy' on failure, in which Savita recounts and discusses her experience in this regard. Finally, thanks largely to Savita's skills as an interlocutor, *Reality and Its Depths* is the most spontaneous, uninhibited and vivid of Roy's productions. 'When I'm talking philosophy', Roy says at one point, 'I don't really have to think, I just do it.' Such 'just doing' reverses the priority of thought over being in the West, and it presupposes a listener you can trust; Savita's practice in this regard elicits from Roy, in the context of a conversation about love, the highest compliment: 'You show great love for someone by listening to them (just very briefly!).'

There are of course many other valuable things that are specific to this book, including Achilles' heel critiques of Nietzsche and Derrida, a reprise of Roy's metacritique of Marx and the Marxist tradition,³ Roy's views on why philosophers have by and large ignored his work and why in contrast many social scientists have found it very helpful, and an account of his identification with women as oppressed, and of the sphere of domestic labour as prefiguring the eudaimonistic society. As Roy remarks in regard of the various ways in which Marx was inspired by Hegel during the most productive periods of his life, 'a really great thinker can provide a continual resource', and he and Savita have team-worked creatively here to provide just that.

²Zen Buddhism has a concept of everyday transcendence, but to experience it one must first attain satori or enlightenment. Bhaskar generalises transcendence to people everywhere as the most fundamental state of their being and activity.

³This in my view is broadly compatible with the critique of that tradition at a less metatheoretical level by Moishe Postone (1993), except that Postone's critique operates with an oversocialised conception of people in capitalist society.

A main reason why the project for the book stalled in 2002 is undoubtedly that both the recordings and the original transcripts are of uneven quality, requiring major investment of effort on the part of a skilled editor familiar with Roy's work. This I gladly made as soon as the conversations became available, working from both the transcripts and the recordings. Some unavoidable gaps in the conversations are indicated by editorial notes (for larger gaps) or by ellipses (for smaller ones). These do not in my view detract significantly from its readability or value. Indeed, they possibly enhance them—as no-one who is familiar with Roy's understanding of gaps (absences) as part of the causal fabric of the world will be surprised to learn. The original recordings and transcripts will be lodged in the Bhaskar Archives, UCL Institute of Education, London. The notes and references are mine.

For epigraphs, I have chosen stanzas by Shelley and Rumi, Bhaskar's favourite Western poet, and favourite poet, period, respectively. Homage is paid to both in the conversation. The stanzas by Shelley capture the essence of Bhaskar's thought in regard of the demi-real and the metaReal, the 'winter of the world' and the 'everlasting Spring' that lies at a deeper level within people—evidence by synchronisation, licensed by the continuity of deep structures, that Bhaskar's spirituality is indeed, as this book claims, consistent with 'no faith' (Shelley was an atheist) as well as 'all faiths'. Oppression or master-slavery, for Shelley, as for Bhaskar, 'is unnatural, so it actually destroys Nature' (Holmes 1974, 398), and the great passion of both was to absent the causes of human suffering/constraints on free flourishing. In both thinkers, a multiply sundered and alienated world is healed by solidarity and love. Like Bhaskar's philosophy, Shelley's poetry was too revolutionary to be widely appreciated in his own day. Rumi's stanza, like his poetry in general, chimes profoundly with the philosophy of metaReality. When the world of duality is dissolved in identity consciousness, there is only being in love with being as such.

London, UK
August 2018

Mervyn Hartwig

About This Book

In the conversations contained in this book, which took place in Delhi in 2001–2002 in the midst of his ‘spiritual turn’, Roy Bhaskar and Savita Singh tell the story of the development of the philosophy of critical realism and metaReality for an Indian audience. The most distinctively Indian of Bhaskar’s productions, *Reality and Its Depths* is also the most spontaneous and vivid—Bhaskar ‘just doing’ philosophy in conversation with an Indian poet and philosopher. The transition to the metaReality phase of Bhaskar’s philosophy takes place before the reader’s eyes; one moment the talk is of transcendence as peak experience, the next it is of transcendence as everyday, the most fundamental state of our being.

The diverse topics discussed include some that are given little or no attention elsewhere in Bhaskar’s work, such as recognition and immortality and the prefiguration of the good society in the characteristic labour of women; or that are here given a new inflection, such as the metacritique of Nietzsche and Derrida, and of Marx and Marxism. Readers of Singh’s poetry, for their part, will gain invaluable insight into her intellectual development and world view. Novices in either department who want to learn more will find this book an absorbing read. Those engaged in building transformative social movements based on good sense will find it an inspirational resource. It is indispensable reading for anyone interested in critical realism and its development, and in the general intellectual story of our times.

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About the Authors

Savita Singh is a distinguished feminist poet (writing in both Hindi and English), political theorist and commentator on gender issues. She has received many awards for poetry and her work is translated in several languages including French, German and Spanish. She has worked in the area of Indian modernity, feminist literature and culture and labour. She is the founding director, currently professor, in School of Gender and Development Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014) was the originator of the philosophy of critical realism and the author of many acclaimed and influential works, including *A Realist Theory of Science*; *The Possibility of Naturalism*; *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*; *The Philosophy of MetaReality*; *Enlightened Common Sense* and (with Mervyn Hartwig) *The Formation of Critical Realism*.

Mervyn Hartwig is founding editor (retired) of *Journal of Critical Realism* and editor and principal author of *Dictionary of Critical Realism*. He has written introductions to all Roy Bhaskar's single-author books, which were reissued by Routledge 2008-2016, and most recently has edited Bhaskar's 1971 DPhil thesis, *Empiricism and the Metatheory of the Social Sciences* for publication (2018).

Chapter 1

Childhood and University



1.1 A Natural Philosopher

Thursday 13 September 2001

Savita: Something very interesting is taking place. We are going on a journey, a conversational journey, and hopefully, we will arrive somewhere. It is such a pleasure to have a conversation with Professor Roy Bhaskar, one of the outstanding philosophers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. People all over the world are interested in his work, and I am one of them.

I will begin, Roy, by asking some questions relating to your personal history. When did it first occur to you that you were going to be a philosopher?

Roy: I suppose I was always in a sense very interested in philosophical issues. I remember before I was in my teens talking with much older boys in my school about freedom and determinism and the arguments for and against them. And I think already at that age I had a good idea of key basic issues. I can't say that I was an original thinker at that age, but I seemed to have some knowledge of the issues and how the debate had been going and where it ought to go. It's a bit extraordinary really, when I was about four I was already reading, mostly the books in my father's house—my *parent's* house (my father was very much the *chief* parent!)—there were lots of books, but they were mainly medical books. When I was very young, I would go into my father's surgery, pull out a book and start thumbing through it. I don't know whether I just thought I was reading, or whether I actually was reading.

Savita: But you got along well with books.

Roy: Yes, and then by the time I was about nine, my father had filled his house (or houses) with books, partly on philosophy and partly on esoteric religion and spirituality. He was a member of the Theosophical Society. Theosophy was one of the attempts, beginning in the late nineteenth century, to modernise Hinduism, but specifically—unlike say Vivekananda—to present it to a Western audience. I

shouldn't say 'unlike', actually: Vivekananda had the same idea, but he was doing it for Indians; the Theosophical Society was aimed primarily at a Western audience.

Savita: Did you ever go with your father to any of their meetings?

Roy: Yes, from about the age of eight or nine I used to go to meetings, and at this age, I was somehow often put in charge of little children. I was probably a bit too young to go to meetings, but I remember going, and I used to look after all the children. And I used to do this at home as well; I seemed to be the oldest child in a group of children of friends that my father had. But soon—by the age of about nine—I graduated from looking after the kids at meetings of the Theosophical Society. I can well remember their quarters in 52 Gloucester Place, a rather impressive Georgian mansion in central London. I graduated from looking after the kids to popping into the library, and the library there was fascinating. There I would read books by Freud and on American history, subjects that my father didn't have books on. Then, I graduated from this to actually going into and attending meetings, and frankly many of them were very boring. Once I got into a meeting, I felt I would never get out. I used to do the time-honoured thing of falling asleep.

Savita: At that time you probably didn't have a clear idea of what these people were talking about, I suppose.

Roy: I think in a funny way I was pretty clear. It's just that they were not engaging me as a potential equal in the conversation. When I was a bit older, my father, who wanted me to be a doctor, said: 'You know, you don't have to worry about being a philosopher or anything like that, because you are naturally a philosopher.' That is one of the true things he said to me. The thing is, from when I was about ten his friends and associates *would* engage with me, because I had a peculiar capacity to make them laugh. I guess I was sort of suppressing in a mask of humour whatever philosophical ingenuity or genius I had at that age.

Savita: What were the kinds of books that interested you at that age? You just mentioned Freud. You seem to have found that books took you out of a very boring world into an enchanting one?

Roy: That's right. Actually, after what I've been saying about my earlier proclivities, you might be surprised to learn that the books that probably interested me most at that age were books on cricket, because I was a very good cricketer. In fact, a number of classy players predicted that I would have a brilliant future in cricket. But at the age of eleven, I developed very bad hay fever and was sneezing the whole time throughout the English cricket season. So that destroyed my cricketering career. So, then, I turned to my second love, which was philosophy. It was very difficult though to find people to talk to about the issues I was interested in, so I suppose I did a lot of reflecting. I was a very lonely child. I liked to go for long walks, and somehow I liked to project my consciousness all over the place, into blades of grass, into the sea, the wind, up to the stars; especially, up to the stars.

1.2 Solidarising with the Oppressed

Savita: Were you still rather vague about the things you related to, or were you always seeking clarity? Were you just relating to things in a nonchalant manner, and at an emotional level feeling good about looking at green grass and blue sky?

Roy: I felt very unhappy about myself and where I was in this world. It didn't feel very good. And that had to do with my immediate family context and the racism that I experienced at school, which was horrendous. Britain in the early 1950s was an extremely racist society, there's no doubt about that, and it didn't matter that I was fair-skinned and spoke English with a perfect English accent. My classmates and teachers immediately knew I was Indian from my name, or if they didn't guess from that then it soon got around. So I was a target for bullying, and I was also bullied by my father—

Savita: You were bullied by your father? What for?

Roy: When I was born, my father immediately saw me as his future partner and his successor as the head of his medical practice. So there was no question of choice of career for me. No way was I to have a choice. I was going to be a doctor, and that was decided. I think the only thing they were waiting for was to know what sex I was. If I had been born a girl, my father might have had second thoughts.

Savita: Perhaps it would have been far easier to bend a girl to his will.

Roy: Well, no, he would not have been thinking of her as a doctor, he would have been thinking of her marrying a suitable husband, probably a medical student. The first son, myself, was destined to be a doctor. The second son was destined to be an accountant. And the accountant, my brother Krishan, would cook the books for the practice, and of course I would do most of the work when I got to the age of twenty-five, or whenever I was qualified fully medically, while my father gradually eased himself out.

Savita: So that made you very unhappy, that somebody else was defining your destiny—

Roy: Oh, absolutely. It made me very unhappy. I remember when I was four or five my father used to take me around with him on his medical rounds, visiting his patients—he was very proud of me. It was terribly boring—he would have a list of thirty to forty patients. I used to try to smuggle a book with me, but he didn't like that at all, because it took attention away from him and his activity. Then, when he wasn't taking me on his medical rounds, he would take me shopping. Imagine how boring this was for a young child. Young children really don't want to go shopping with their parents. But every Saturday morning we used to drive in from our outer suburb to Harrods, and I used to have to traipse around with him; and, of course, to a young child it is an enormously huge world—even though I was tall for my age—and I felt very dislocated. It is not a normal thing for a child, really. I don't think in India

it would be normal. It wouldn't be normal in any *real* context for a child to have to walk around with their father almost the whole the time.

Savita: I would really like to know about your mother. Did she play a marginal role or a central role; what kind of role did she play in your life?

Roy: I should tell you a bit about their marriage and the background first. My father, Raghu Nath Rai Bhaskar, came from Gujranwala, near Lahore, and after his father died he went to England in 1939 to do his FRCS, that is, his postgraduate work to qualify as a surgeon. But he was caught in the Second World War. In fact, all the universities and institutions of further education were shut down, and doctors were put to the war effort. So he, as it were, played his part in the war effort by being a general practitioner in England, waiting for the war to end. In the meantime his brother had very meanly cut off funds for him, and so he was leading a very poor life, first as a student and then as a doctor. And I think in a way this disconnection from funding and from the family wealth, which was there, brought about a certain meanness in his own character. He often said to me: 'You know, you've got to be self-made, like me: I'm self-made.' This was after he had done quite well as a doctor, and as a businessman too. 'You are never going to have any money from me', he would say, 'you are always going to have to work your way through the world.' And that was absolutely true—in that respect, he was a man of his word.

Then, he started dating my mother, Marjorie Skill, and they decided to get married. My mother was English. She had just one living parent, a mother. Her father had died almost as soon as she was born, in the First World War, and she had spent her youth in South Africa, where her white mother had taken her. They had gone back to England when she reached the age of 18 or 19, just before the Second World War. My father was working in Brighton, she was in Brighton, and they met. But both families, my father's Indian family and my mother's English family, took tremendous objection to the marriage. So it was a marriage very much against the odds.

Actually, my mother became almost an ideal-typical Indian wife. She assumed Hinduism totally, she wore saris, she cooked curries, she called herself Khamla instead of Marjorie. Our household was really as Indian as you could get. She even learnt Hindi and how to write Hindi and Punjabi, and when my father's relatives eventually accepted the marriage, she was far more popular than he was. She was a very loving person, but she had one tremendous defect: she loved everyone except herself. She did not love herself, so she was very self-sacrificial. And it wasn't a surprise, in terms of what we are beginning to understand about the aetiology of cancer, that she developed cancer when I was fifteen or sixteen. She had cancer for seven years, and died when I was in my mid twenties. It was a terrible experience for me to see her bear this agony. My father of course got all the best doctors, all the best Western equipment to try and save her. Funnily enough, some India cousins of mine—nieces of his—said: 'Why don't you try homeopathy, why don't you try Ayurvedic recipes?' But no, he refused to budge. Actually, my mother showed me a lot of physical love, but whenever it came to the crunch, she always took my father's side. So in all the struggles I had with my father, which were about me becoming an intellectual, and a social revolutionary in the broader sense, my mother showed the

face of falsity within the family, because she would pretend to be on my side, but she wasn't really. So in my struggles I had with my father, she always sided with him in the end.

And they weren't just struggles about whether I was to be a doctor. I don't know whether to include this in the printed book, but I will tell you. The first girl I fell in love with was an au pair girl. We were very restricted, really, in England. In India, you have big extended families; you have lots of close and loving relationships with your cousins, with your sisters. But in England, going to a boys-only school or series of schools, actually to get to know young girls about my age was quite an unusual thing. So we had this au pair girl come over from Norway. An au pair is someone living in the house, but who is—

Savita: Not part of the family.

Roy: She is supposed to be treated as part of the family, but she does most of the house work, and in exchange for that she gets to spend six months in England in a relatively good home. Anyway, I was more or less seduced by this Norwegian girl when I was about fourteen. My brother was extremely jealous, and immediately told my father—he did exactly the same as my mother, he would only pretend to solidarise with me. And my father immediately gave her the sack, although nothing really had transpired apart from a few kisses and cuddles, and he gave me five pounds to go find a prostitute. This was a very hurtful thing for him to do to me on every score. He was actually identifying my first feelings of love and affection for this girl with the sort of nonfeelings one would have if one went to see a prostitute, equating the two; and of course it was denying me access to someone I thought I was in love with. So for six or nine months, we carried on a secret correspondence. She couldn't write to me at home, so I set up a postal address; I used to go to the post office and collect her letters. Then clandestinely she came back to England, and we stayed in my father's cottage. So instead of being something very light and superficial, it became quite serious, and she even followed me to Oxford when I finally went there, and she was hanging around me one way or other for four or five years. So it was a counterproductive strategy on the part of my father, if he really thought that I was going to fall in love or seriously think of getting married to her, because it just increased my affection for her.

Savita: In a way it was also developing you as an independent person, wasn't it?

Roy: That's right.

Savita: You were taking decisions. I think independence, freedom or autonomy never come naturally, you have to work on them. Or in certain ways, the world makes you work on them, and it's a bit hurtful but it starts at home; I think for most of us it starts at home—

Roy: Yes—

Savita: Our families with their patriarchal structure are replete with hierarchy and power, so we have to fight that. In this process, some people get crushed; and some

develop an inner sadness that continues all through their lives. Even when they grow up they remain very sad. They don't find an exit to enter into a zone of happiness. But I was also interested in knowing this because racism also made you sad, right? And in this process you also became very lonely—lonely in the sense that you couldn't even count on your mother taking your side in a decisive moment for you. Then you found your brother not loving you enough, being rather jealous. So you were finding that in the real world you were alone. Probably you were developing a private self that actually developed into a philosophical one later.

Roy: Yes, I think that's right. From a very early age I was put in a position of really having to fight. And the extraordinary thing about my father is that he was a really ruthless fellow. I think I was the only person who ever won against him. When I was about fifteen or sixteen, his partners plotted against him when he was away on holiday to try and get some degree of equality or democracy within the practice. His partners would say things to me like: 'You know, he's not a terribly good man.' I would say: 'I don't know about that'—I wasn't going to take sides with that. Anyway, he got wind of their plot, and he came back and crushed them. He crushed everyone, everyone he had any kind of struggle with. After my mother died, he married another woman almost immediately. Most people said that she married him for his money—he was quite wealthy by then. She was only a bit older than me and my brother, who were in our twenties. That second marriage went on for the best part of 20 years, but when he died he didn't leave her a penny.¹ So whatever it was, no-one was exempt, really, ruthlessness was very typical of him. He also became the head of any association that he was in, if he wanted to. He manipulated his way into positions of power, often making use of my mother's charm, sweetness and lovability. So all the local Indian Punjabi associations and Hindu associations were controlled by him. So really there was no one except me who ever got the better of him.

But at school there were no other Indians, so there was no question of forming an anti-racist defense. I was the sole Indian, and I was picked on: when I was seven or eight, children who were ten or eleven used to kick my shins. For them it was a game, but for me it was torture. So naturally I didn't like school. My brother, who was obviously in the same category, came to my defense on one occasion and swung a rugby boot at someone and broke their jaw. Also, because I was spontaneously good not only at work but also at sport, I became very unpopular and had my nose broken by someone; I was always breaking bones, and always being beaten up and pushed around. I had only myself to depend and rely on.

Savita: The reason why I'm asking these questions is because your story seems to resemble so much the story of Aurobindo. Aurobindo's father sent him, when he was very young, to England to study. And not just to study, but to become an Englishman. He wanted Aurobindo to flourish and become a successful person in

¹Raghu Nath Bhaskar's will (date of death 20 February 1990, date of probate 23 February 1990) shows that he left shares of unknown value absolutely, and the income for life but not the capital (which went to a charity in India) from the bulk of his estate to his wife Brenda. There was nothing for his sons except a pious wish that his wife (their stepmother) pass on the shares equally to them in her will.

the colonial world of India, where power had changed hands and where the new colonial masters, the British, had almost imposed their values and way of life on the elite Indians, and in a way had succeeded in projecting a view of the Indian self as inferior. So Aurobindo's father was very much caught up by this 'superior' self, this other, which was not his own, leading him to sacrifice his son's life so that he could acquire this other self. He brutally cut him off from all connections with India. In fact, Aurobindo's mother was also in a way like your mother, she completely succumbed to this brutal new regime at home and to that of the colonial state. His father was also a doctor, and Aurobindo was not allowed to come back to India until he completed his studies. He was brilliant, getting 'A' grades and all that in his school, a genius no doubt, but when he grew up his father wanted him to become an ICS [Indian Civil Service] officer, which actually was the measure of success in the new world at that time. Aurobindo didn't want that. If you read his biographies—Ashish Nandy has also written about him in his *The Intimate Enemy*, and I too have written about him (Nandy 1978; Singh 2003)—you find that Aurobindo's story is basically a story of Indian modernity with similar struggles, defeats and triumphs. Aurobindo tried throughout his life to recapture what got lost in terms of his cultural self as a consequence of the colonial intrusion—the genius that he was, the natural self that was being denied to him. Aurobindo became a philosopher. He began to reflect, and did acquire a depth of understanding about his own self—that after all he was a crushed man. This offered him a way out of the internalised self of the colonial master. But all through his life Aurobindo had to cope with a certain kind of darkness that remained always within him, a darkness that was produced by his father's brutality, by the forced life he had to lead, the lie that he had to live. He too had to face racism; he too had to face a lot of negativity. And I believe that loneliness, that sadness, that darkness basically became the springboard for his philosophical journey. And of course, as you know, Aurobindo is an important philosopher of modern India. That's why I am asking you these questions about your sadness, your loneliness, and those darker things in life that you too encountered and endured.

Roy: I think what you say is right. To survive, I had to develop a way of seeing people as structured; people as using a certain mask, a certain face, a certain way of being for ulterior motives. So I had to begin to see people as structured, and to see situations as structured, as complex. I had to be a bit of an artful dodger, I had to know how to get around people, just really to survive. There was no question, really, of me living an authentic existence. The only kind of authentic existence I could have was within myself, or between me and something totally abstract like the stars, or the transcendental; I didn't have ideas of a personal self or anything like that, but just a dream, I suppose. So really, everything authentic I had to find within myself, and it made me spontaneously revolutionary, it gave me a lot of feeling for the injustice of life. I thought my mother's situation was very unjust in relation to my father. Why should she have done all this for him? She shouldn't have, not because he was bad, but because the division of labour was so inequitable and unjust. I actually used to fear for her. Probably a lot of kids when they are young do think that one of their