



JUST ANOTHER FELLOW
KIRAN NAGARKAR

Kiran Nagarkar (born 1942) is an Indian novelist, playwright, film and drama critic and screenwriter both in Marathi and English and is one of the most significant writers of postcolonial India. Amongst his most known works are *Saat Sakḥam Trechalis* (Seven Sixes Are Forty Three), 1974; *Ravan and Eddie*, 1994; the epic novel, *Cuckold* (book), 1997 for which he was awarded the 2001 Sahitya Akademi Award in English by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters; and *God's Little Soldier* (Gottes kleiner Krieger), 2006. – Address: 75, B. Desai Road, Mumbai, 400026, India.

E-mail: knagarkar@gmail.com

Note for Wiko

We hereby give notice to the authorities at Wiko that a group of former Fellows and I are about to write to the Bundestag complaining about certain highly objectionable practices in the Institute. More importantly, we're going to ask the German Parliament to change the Charter of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

Every ten months, the current Fellows are asked to leave their quarters unceremoniously. Their monthly grant is discontinued and those who are from the Indian subcontinent and other Asian countries find that they have no alternative but to return to their country of birth. This is patently unfair. At the very least, the ten-month term should be enhanced to ten years; and in the case of social parasites like me, Wiko owes it to us to raise the limit till death do us part.

In addition, considering our advancing age – and unless we are mistaken, the reverse phenomenon is altogether unknown – we should not be saddled with responsibilities like attending colloquia or giving talks. Instead of being forced to attend lunch and dinner sessions, the choicest

meals along with a select range of wines, whiskeys, cognacs and liquors should be sent to our apartments. ("Choicest" as in what we like and choose and not what the catering service or Wiko likes to serve.) The authorities would be well advised never to underestimate the paramount importance of victuals. They might recall that during 2009–10, there was something like a serious revolt brewing amongst the Fellows. Far be it from us to suggest that the Fellows are not a civil lot, but it would not be out of place to remind all parties that the belly precedes the intellect and, as we have learnt the hard way, most scientists, intellectuals, social scientists and artists seem to come with highly developed gourmet palates.

Needless to say, the Fellows' stipends should not keep pace with inflation, but be way ahead of it.

Oh, one last thing. For those Fellows who come unaccompanied by husbands, wives, companions and/or mistresses and vice versa, an advanced and enlightened institute like the Wiko should set a long-overdue precedent by making the current equivalents of Hollywood heart-throbs like Valentino, George Clooney, Michelangelo's David in the flesh and the celestial hours available. Frankly, not only for the lonely hearts' club but on a need-based equitable system.

A suggestion for an amicable settlement. We are sure Wiko would prefer that the Bundestag did not interfere and bring the full weight of the German people to bear upon its private affairs. Why not change the Charter of the institution and inform all former Fellows of the progressive steps undertaken and thus avoid all that unwanted publicity?

As you surely have realized by now, it has not been easy to part from Wiko, the companionship of the Fellows and the extraordinary warmth, hospitality and helpfulness of the staff there. It's too soon and too close an experience for one to gain distance and perspective on the institution, its strengths and benefits and one's relationship with it. Wiko, like almost any other organization or academy, is a microcosm of the world and as such it would be hypocritical and unfair to its high traditions to praise it uncritically. There's no escaping that each of the Fellows brought his own vision, agenda and baggage. And of course individual expectations.

I like to eat but unfortunately I'm not a "foodie" as the Americans call connoisseurs of (high-class) cooking. So the heated discussions about meals at one point were a trifle alien to me. It might be worth bearing in mind, however, that if Wiko had catered to every taste then it would have been an academy of fine cooking and not a home of intellectual ferment. The same would hold for other areas. So five or ten years down the road, call me up and we can talk about just what Wiko meant to me.

For the moment let me tell you about a place ten minutes from Wiko, *Gleis 17*. Or rather why it is one of the iconic keys to my understanding of the role of memorials, sculpture and art. I am not an artist, art historian or theoretician of art. As such my views will be seen for what they are: naïve, uneducated and simplistic, if not downright wrong. In 2008 Sunil Khilnani was visiting Wiko, where he was about to host a seminar on, I think, political and sociological theory. I was not part of this programme but had gone over to meet him before his work started in earnest. I owe Gleis 17 to him since he suggested that I walk over to Grunewald S-Bahn station and see the place.

My sense of geography is unique. I have a sixth sense for places and I am unerringly wrong. You can give me foolproof and failsafe directions. You can hand me a GPS. Rest assured I will still manage to get lost. I didn't know what *Gleis* meant. Yet after some searching, I was able to locate the Grunewald station where this thing called Gleis 17 was. It was unlike any of the old magnificent railway stations. It was picture-postcard pretty and very small. There was a bakery there and a doener kebab place that led to a tunnel. The first fork was to the right, while the rest were all to the left. There was a small board outside the former announcing Gleis 17. I climbed up and found myself on a long-abandoned railway platform. It was a mystery why Sunil would send me to see a platform with gravel and tracks with dense shrubs and grass and rather lovely tall birches growing along the tracks and sometimes inside them. Accidentally I caught sight of the lightly rusting, perforated-iron sheets covering half the length of the platform. Every now and then someone had placed a single rose or a small, black stone on one of the iron panels. At the edge of Gleis 17 just before it dipped down to the rail track, each latticed iron sheet had an embossed caption in the same unobtrusive rust colour. The steel legends enumerated the precise number of Jews sent off from this station and this platform.

Between October 1941 and March 1945, Gleis 17 was a busy place. Every few days, sometimes daily, anywhere between sixty to over a thousand Jewish families and individuals were forcibly taken away from their homes and deported to Lodz, Riga, Theresienstadt and some time later directly to Auschwitz. Grunewald was one of the three stations that transported 55,000 Jews from Berlin on these death trains.

That was it, slab after iron slab with the same grill pattern even after you took a u-turn till you reached March 1945.

Step out of Gleis 17 and you were face-to-face with another memorial. A rough wall of concrete had been gouged out at the centre with giant fingers. Six million Jews extirpated from life and extinguished. One of the axioms one is taught in school is that the

universe cannot tolerate a vacuum. Maybe so in physics. But some hiatuses in history can never be filled.

The second memorial too was a powerful one. But the one that gutted one's innards was the Gleis. It was low-key, so low-key that you could almost miss it. Even when you discovered the reason why it was such a major marker in the German psyche, what struck you was that there was no fanfare, no breast-beating, no heavy symbolism. It was elliptical and it hit you in the solar plexus and you crumpled. It left you bereft of words and the easy emotion.

Some years back, the British artist Aneesh Kapoor did a major show in Munich. The major installation there was also about the Holocaust. An empty wagon that carried a burden of red goo-like wax was dragged almost imperceptibly on rail tracks and at the end of this laborious journey splattered the red sticky muck on the walls. Art, to repeat a threadbare platitude, is subjective. The critics found it a memorable and outstanding contribution to Holocaust art. My friends found it moving. I must be perverse. It was so obviously contrived, its symbolism so loud and clear and fake (most of the Nazi death camps were lethally efficient and bloodless), it left me cold and angry. One of the qualities of great art is that it can be ambiguous and ambivalent and you can read it any way you want. But this installation by Kapoor was just heavy-handed and pretentious.

It was Oscar Wilde who said all great art lies in concealing art. Gleis 17 has a simplicity and directness to it that are almost artless. They leave you to sort out your own thoughts and face up to the fact of our collective guilt. For we've learnt nothing. The genocide committed by the Serbs against the Muslims in Bosnia, the Israeli persecution of the Palestinians, the endless atrocities and massacres conducted by the Taliban, Al Qaida and other jihadis in the name of God, the utterly barren Indo-Pak conflicts that bleed both nations, the holier-than-thou Americans with their Abu Ghraibs and renditions, the slaughter and carnage in so many countries in Africa ... nothing has changed.

Gleis 17 was an eye-opener as was the monument to the burning of the books on Bebelplatz near the Berlin State Opera on Unter den Linden and the Käthe Kollwitz sculpture "Mother with her Dead Son", dedicated to the victims of war and tyranny.

I am sure my debt to Wiko is much bigger but only time and distance will help me understand it.